

## Being a *Gaijin* in Japan

No matter who you are, being a *gaijin* in Japan is a challenging experience. You may have never before felt like such an oddity and a celebrity at the same time. Japanese tend to have a fairly narrow expectation of what a foreigner looks like; many people assume that *gaijin* have blond hair and blue eyes. Because of this, we would like to provide the following information and advice:

### For the African American and Latino/Latina *Gaijin*:

- Exposure to African Americans and Latino/Latinas is limited and very often the ideas that Japanese have about African Americans and Latino/as are usually based on Western stereotypes and myths. These are portrayed and perpetuated in the media.
- While sometimes all foreigners are regarded with suspicion and fear, African Americans and Latinos/Latinas may encounter it more often or expressed more covertly than do other *gaijin*.

### For the Asian American *Gaijin*:

- One of the biggest advantages of *looking Japanese* is not standing out **in public**.
- People who don't know you will assume a lot of things, expecting you to be able to speak or read Japanese and to know Japanese etiquette. If your Japanese is less than fluent, you will surprise, if not shock, them! Some may wonder why you speak English so well or why you are so "American" looking.
- They will be astonished when you say you are American-the assumption is that all Westerners have blond hair and blue eyes!
- You may be asked to act as an interpreter for the other *gaijin* in your group, or you may receive information or pamphlets in Japanese at tourist sites while your peers receive them in English.

### For the Vegetarian /Vegan *Gaijin*:

- While there are not many vegetarians /vegans in Japan, it is possible to maintain vegetarianism (depending on how strict you are).
- Be honest with your host family immediately-we can send a list of foods you cannot eat to them before you arrive.
- Your vegetarianism will provoke a lot of interest and some people will be unable to comprehend the situation. It may be easier to say that you are a vegetarian for religious reasons or because of allergies. This may seem like a cop-out, but these are reasons that people will respect and take very seriously. It also makes it easier to refuse food without offending people.
- If you decide to give ethical or personal reasons, be prepared to be asked about them. Do research on vegetarianism in the USA (how many people, why people choose this lifestyle, etc.)
- Be positive and give people lots of examples of what you CAN eat!

### Advice for all *Gaijin*:

- Don't take people's ignorance personally
- You know who you are; what others say and think won't change that
- You can't control how people will react to you. What you do have control over is how you perceive and deal with them.
- As with everything in Japan- Patience is Key!