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Can Shangri-La ever be all it's cracked up to be?

by Nigel Bowen

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Most of us like to believe there is a paradise on earth somewhere. But should you take the risk of visiting it?

Humans seem to be hardwired to believe the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Is your own society irredeemably consumerist/shallow/hierarchical/sexist/ageist/corrupt/bland/violent/backwards/sterile/ordered/chaotic? No problem – just go somewhere else where people really know how to live!

This phenomenon is hardly unrecognised or unexploited. The tourist commissions of tropical nations put posters of sun-drenched beaches up in European train stations during winter, while publishers make good coin marketing books that feature frustrated suburban housewives from countries such as Australia ditching their inattentive husbands and taking up residence in a Tuscan villa. Once there, they immediately become a highly acclaimed novelist and embark on a passionate affair with Enzo, the brooding stablehand who writes poetry whenever he's not mucking out the stables.

(Just to prove the grass-is-greener argument, it's not uncommon to encounter expat Italians who'll say that as lovely as their homeland may be, they can't deal with the craziness involved in living there and much prefer residing in blander but better-run nations.)

Needless to say, different types of people have different Shangri-Las they aspire to. Spiritual types often fantasise about backpacking through India. Type-A personalities may pine for the 24/7 buzz of New York. Intellectuals might daydream about spending their days debating post-structuralist philosophy in the cafés of Paris.

When it comes to Shangri-La fantasies, there are two options: either attempt to make the fantasy a reality or keep it a fantasy. The consequences with the first option are not unlike trying to live out a sexual fantasy – either you'll end up having the time of your life or you'll end up disappointed and possibly suffering from a strange disease.

Since my early teens, my Shangri-La has been Japan, something I put down to reading a series of potboilers about the country written by Eric Van Lustbader and revolving around, from memory, honour-obsessed ninjas, inscrutable femme fatales and some sort of weird martial-arts-based mysticism. (Funnily enough, years later I read that Van Lustbader had never actually been to Japan when he wrote his best-selling series of novels largely set in that country.)

I pretty quickly grew out of my interest in ninjas, but I've never lost my fascination with Japan – its mix of Buddhist and Shinto religion, its paradoxical veneration of nature and love of technology, and its incredibly homogenous and harmonious society.

Yet I've never been there. I might have studied haiku poetry, attended Zen Buddhist meditation retreats and embraced a very Japanese minimalist aesthetic when decorating my home, but I've never seen a cherry blossom tree in Kyoto, had a *Lost in Translation* moment in Tokyo or even gone skiing in Nagano. Visiting the Land of the Rising Sun is one of the items on my bucket list, but I don't feel any rush. I figure that in a very imperfect world there is something to be said for having one place that can remain as magical as you imagine, without reality having to intrude.

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