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Alone in a Foreign Country

Ohayōgozaimasu. As the plane landed, we got off at Haneda International Airport in Japan. The staff greeted us in Japanese as they did a slight bow. I replied with a slight bow of my own but more like a head nod, if anything. While walking around the airport and looking for my way out, I was excited, knowing I was about to meet new people and experience a new culture different from my own. Before leaving, friends and family members advised me that traveling alone to a foreign country is dangerous and unsafe. That in the news, there was a story highlighting some unfortunate travelers who were victims of a robbery or even harmed while abroad. Moreover, that's understandable. Despite these warnings, I was determined to travel alone and experience what it is like to be completely alone in a different country.

Critics of solo travel often say traveling alone is lonely and unpleasant. That it would make the experience less enjoyable than if I were to travel with a friend or two. However, I say going solo is a highly unique and wonderful experience. I learned new things, like being on my own, improving my social skills, and meet new people. The year before my trip to Japan. I was in England, traveling with one other friend. Navigating and getting around London was relatively easy. If I wanted to get from Chelsea to Piccadilly by subway, it was easier because everything was in English, and obviously, the locals spoke English as well. In Japan, it was a different

experience because, this time, I was alone, and almost everything was new to me. There was a language barrier, making it harder for me to communicate with locals. Although it was a significant factor, it did not bother me in the slightest. That was probably the exciting part where I got to adapt to them and figure out ways to communicate with locals whether that be using Google Translate or practicing some common words or phrases.

The first few hours were a bit overwhelming not being able to connect to my E-sim that I purchased from an app called Airalo. Barely anyone spoke English, and me not knowing any Japanese also didn't help, but that didn't stop me from asking the locals around for directions. Fortunately, most of the time, they could understand some of my questions and tried their best to answer them as best they could, which I was grateful for, but when they couldn't answer them, I never took it personally, and to be honest, I thought that was the fun part. After making my way through customs, I walked over to the information desk to ask the receptionist for directions and to know the best transportation to get me to Shinjuku, where I had booked my Airbnb. As a first-time traveler in Japan, she recommended the bus would be the easiest since it was a straightforward process to understand, so I took her advice and purchased a bus ticket to Shinjuku, which was about 1200 yen or about 8.16 USD. I personally found experiences like these fun while I was traveling alone, filled with unexpected challenges and the need to quickly solve them.

In addition, my family informed me that traveling alone would be dangerous and unsafe compared to traveling with one or two more friends. They said that safety concerns are a reason not to travel alone and that one might get robbed, swindled, or even harmed. I can't entirely agree. I believe that it is not the case that it solely depends on the location and area of the destination someone chooses to travel to. For example, if we compare Brazil and Argentina as

potential travel destinations for solo travelers, the safest option would be Argentina. Although both countries have beautiful mountains, tropical jungles, and waterfalls. When someone sees on the news about Violent crimes, such as murder, armed robbery, and others, they might be deterred from traveling there, whereas Argentina. The crime rate is lower and not as high as Brazil's. Of course, no country is perfect. One can avoid dangerous travel destinations. From my own experience, when I traveled abroad to England a little over a year ago and even to Japan, I would walk back to my hotel at late hours, at times walking through dimly lit areas, never once feeling unsafe or in danger in either of those countries. But, of course, as a solo traveler, you have to do your part and always keep yourself safe. Being on your own, thousands of miles away from home, it's crucial to be aware of your surroundings whenever you are out sightseeing and not get careless or too comfortable. Even if the country you're visiting is known to be safe.

My friends would often tell me that traveling alone would be less enjoyable than it would be if you were to travel with others. To a certain extent, I would agree that having others along is fun. However, going solo allows you more flexibility. While traveling alone, I was able to explore the different city nightlife, from walking through the tight streets of Shinjuku to the famous Shibuya crossing, where when all the stoplights in the intersection turn red, hundreds of locals and tourists move in all sorts of directions, a fascinating sight to see in person, especially from an aerial view at the top of Scramble Square Tower. Going solo, also allowed me to spend more time shopping at places ranging from high-end fashion to thrift stores or eating at any restaurants I randomly came across or, as they call it, "hole in the wall ramen shop" that served delicious ramen for around the price of 900 yen or Six USD or even the time I was in Kyoto. I spent a lot of time going around visiting famous Shinto shrines like the Fushimi Inari Shrine, which had thousands of tori gates lined up, creating a hiking pathway to the top of the mountain

where the "Okumiya" or "inner shrine" is located. I also visited the famous Kiyomizu-dera Buddhist temple. The Buddhist temple is 1 of 17 UNESCO World Heritage sites in Kyoto. Traveling alone, I never once felt rushed I was on nobody else's time. Being alone allowed me to move at my own pace and do activities, try new foods, and sightsee different temples and shrines for more extended periods of time than if I were to travel with friends or family who may have wanted to do other activities or explore other areas that I would not be interested in.

They say solo traveling is for people that are loaded with cash or have rich parents who pay for their trips. I say that is not true. I believe that with proper planning, a reasonable budget, and logical thinking anyone could travel alone. After purchasing my flight to Japan in February, I had about 6 months to create my itinerary, from activities I wanted to do to places and foods I wanted to try. Scrolling through TikTok and Instagram, seeing what people had to say about certain restaurants and activists. I spent several hours browsing through hotel websites and Airbnb in cities; I was interested in staying. By planning months ahead, I was able to find reasonably priced hotels and Airbnb's in Shinjuku and Shibuya, where I was planning to stay during my time in Tokyo before heading over to Kyoto, where I would spend four days before heading back up to Haneda to board my returning flight home.

My arrival at Haneda International Airport in Tokyo, Japan, marked the beginning of a new solo adventure where they said I would be lonely and not enjoy the experience to the fullest alone. They said being alone in a different country was not safe and could be dangerous. They said traveling alone would be expensive. But by being thousands of miles from home, I learned to be on my own. Finding ways to get around language barriers by picking up the most common Japanese phrases I would hear throughout my time there. Going solo allowed me to enjoy the

vibrant nightlife of cities like Shinjuku, Akihabara, and Shibuya. I was also able to explore the beautiful temples and shrines in Kyoto, even participating in a ceremonial prayer. Being alone I never once felt rushed. I say that with enough planning and preparations, anyone could travel solo, and I would highly encourage anyone to at least try it once.