

The Land of the Rising Brick (I)

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Whenever I go on holiday I try to include some small LEGO® related activity, mainly to enjoy it, but always trying to find an interesting topic to be able to tell you..

Last summer I had the great fortune to be able to visit Japan, a country and a culture that have attracted me for many years and that I had not had the chance to visit before. Taking advantage of the incredible patience of Delia (my wife), I decided to investigate the world of LEGO in Japan. To this end, aside from visiting the “public” options the country offers (basically the stores and the Discovery Center in Tokyo), I had several meetings with relevant people in the LEGO and AFOL community in the land of the rising sun.

Normally there is no problem in contacting AFOLs in Europe or the USA. There is an extensive network of AFOLs that allows you to reach the person you want more or less easily. But how to organise a series of meetings in Japan from Barcelona without knowing anyone there?. Once again the CEE Team, specifically Jan Beyer, lend me a hand in this complicated task. He put me in contact with Nathan Bryan, an American who is passionate about Japanese culture and who, on one of his trips, decided to never go back.

Nathan was an excellent host and he organised a meeting with fans in Osaka, coordinated another meeting with fans in Tokyo as well as a meet up with Kazuhumi Okazaki, Marketing Manager for LEGO Japan.

Since I was surprised to find an outsider who was so integrated in the LEGO fan community in Japan, I asked him to answer a few questions to get to know him better and get a perspective of how people experience their passion for the LEGO brick.

HispaBrick Magazine: How did you start with LEGO?

Nathan Bryan: I started with some basic sets in the early 70s and loved them so much that my Dad took me to Denmark in the late 70s to visit Billund to visit LEGOLAND. We met a LEGO employee and he took us on a special trip to visit the LEGO Factory. I still have the Minifig that they let me pick out parts for to build!

HBM: How did you come to Japan?

NB: Along with LEGO I had been interested in Origami (paper folding) from an Origami book my Grandfather gave me when I was 5 years old. As a teenager I got very interested

in Japanese history and martial arts and came over the first time in 1985 as a High School Exchange Student. I came back during college and then after graduating came back the third time and have stayed ever since.

HBM: Is LEGO a recognized brand in Japan?

NB: Yes very much so.

HBM: How did you get in contact with the LEGO Community in Japan?

NB: Over the years I had always picked up a LEGO set or two to build with but when I had sons it gave me a whole new reason to buy more LEGO (for them of course!) When I started seriously building I started looking on the internet for LEGO topics and found a whole worldwide community of LEGO fans! I found out about BrickJournal and contacted Joe Meno to see if he wanted any articles written about LEGO in Japan. He was very supportive and from that I started contacting many people in the LEGO community here to conduct interviews for writing articles.

HBM: Which is your current involvement?

NB: I still write articles (although not as many as I need to find time to do!) and have also translated many articles that other Japan AFOLs have written for BrickJournal.

HBM: What is the objective of brickzen.com?

NB: I started that to provide information about LEGO in Japan in English and worldwide LEGO news in Japanese, but I haven't been updating it much.....

HBM: Could you tell us something about the AFOLs in Japan?

NB: There are many solo builders that just build and post pictures of their models on the internet. Recently some user groups have started to form to put together small events. LEGO theme and Toy Theme Cafes have opened and become meeting places. Hopefully there will be some larger events in the coming years to really show people what you can do with LEGO blocks.

HBM: Which are the main differences between American and Japanese AFOLs?



NB: I haven't met many American AFOLs, but I think a main thing is that in Japan as I mentioned above there are many builders that like to build alone and just post pictures of their work. AFOLs in other countries seem more interested in gathering in groups to build and display their MOCs. I think that is changing here in Japan though and more people are building together and meeting in person.

HBM: Is it difficult for an occidental AFOL to become integrated with Japanese fans?

NB: Not at all. All of the Japan AFOLs that I have met are very open and welcoming. And in any large group there are bound to be a couple of people that speak English, and even if they don't, having a Love of Building with LEGO® is more than enough to become friends and even communicate!

After many emails during 6 months (thank you for your patience Nathan), we managed to organise an agenda that fitted my needs and didn't interfere excessively in the plans Delia and I had for visiting the country.

Our trip started on August 6. We flew to Tokyo-Narita by way of Moscow. I was fortunate enough to be able to buy the 2012 airlines set (4442 - Glider) on the plane, which I think is rather nicer than the 2013 set. the trip had started well :)

The first two days of our trip were spent doing some serious tourism, completely unconnected to LEGO bricks. Kyoto is a very recommendable city. It is relaxing to walk through Gion, the most traditional neighbourhood of Kyoto, as well as exciting to meet a Geiko or a Maiko (Geiko apprentice), which is becoming harder and harder to see. When we least expected it we saw a Maiko and (discretely) enjoyed seeing her clothes, hair and exquisite walk while she interacted with others.

ENCOUNTER WITH AFOLS IN OSAKA

On the third day of our trip we went to Osaka. The contrast with Kyoto is total as Osaka is a modern commercial city. As a matter of fact it is the ultimate shopping city in Japan. We





had arranged a meet-up with Nathan on August 9 at 5pm and he was going to take us to an AFOL meeting of the Osaka University LEGO® Club.

The Osaka University LEGO Club has 40 members, 10 of whom are university students whereas the other 30 are amateur builders. Kanna Nakayama explained the activities they carry out.:

“We do mainly two types of activities:
We organise construction lectures at the Science Café for the general public. We (the university students) take some LEGO models and we plan lectures to teach the audience about mechanics, mathematics, programming, etc... These sessions at the science café are called “LEGO-Café”
We exhibit MOCs during the University Festival. The university students are backstage personnel and the amateur builders are exhibitors and interpreters.”

Kanna also explains how the group got started and how they are organised:

“First, my partner and I were included in the official project of the University of Osaka and we got a lot of money! the project is the Science Café using LEGO bricks in order to teach mechanics and electronics..
After organising several lectures the public wanted to not only learn, but also see some LEGO models. Then my partner and I got the University and the LEGO Community together. Some voluntary amateur builders joined us to help out.
Now the relationship between students and builders is a win-



win relationship.

The students can exhibit their LEGO bricks, learn how to build and buy and they learn how to explain mechanics with LEGO bricks (communication skills).

The amateur builders can show their work periodically to many more people than they can online.”

Nathan came to pick us up at our hotel and we went to the meeting place, a bar dedicated to LEGO that had opened just a month earlier in Osaka. The bar is on the first floor, which is quite common in Japan. Due to the massification and the lack of space you can find many shops on different floors in any building.

When we came in there were already some fans talking to each other. We were received very cordially and started to talk as if we had known each other all our lives. As far as LEGO is concerned, the first thing that drew my attention was a small table at the back of the bar with many MOCs. That is when I discovered the first characteristic of the Japanese AFOLs. Since they don't have a place for their club nor tend to have event like the ones we know in Europe, they take their MOCs to their meetings to share them with the others..

The models were very diverse and extremely detailed. The construction techniques they use maximise detail compared to size, especially due to lack of space in their homes. They built a small model to celebrate our visit: the reproduction of two football players, Shinji Kagawa and Fernando Torres, with a Japanese and Spanish flag respectively and the outfits of their national teams. All the models were interesting for different reasons, because they represented Japanese culture, because they represented comic or movie, or simply because they were excellent reproductions of everyday objects, like a watermelon, or musical instruments. I added my little grain of salt to the exhibition by bringing along my microscale reproduction of the Sagrada Familia, which later gave to Nathan to thank him for all his efforts which made our visit possible.

There were a total of 14 AFOLs at the meeting. On the Japanese side: Kanna Nakayama, Tomoyuki Wakata, Moko Lego, Nobuo Miki, Takuya Harajo, Ryota Fujikawa, Kozue Watanabe, Shota Ushiba, Keisuke Yoshida, Satoshi Yagi, Satoshi Ohsako, Hisashi Nagai y Nahtan Bryan. On the Spanish side... :)

After chatting for a while we saw food was being served. Any good meeting, accompanied by good traditional food becomes a luxury. Unfortunately we couldn't enjoy the meal 100% as our stomachs were still suffering from the Jet lag, but I can assure you that everything we tasted was delicious.

During the meal I noticed another curious detail that I absolutely loved. In order to distinguish the drinks of the participants, they build small models which they place on their glass to set them apart. What a simple and efficient method!!! We talked to one after another of the AFOLs and we learned about the many differences in how we live our hobby.

We spend a little over 2 hours with the fans in Osaka. A short time to be honest. We had to leave in mid meeting and we were really sorry since we really felt comfortable among these AFOLs, but our friend Megūmi Nakashima was waiting for us at the Osaka station to take us to our next ‘compulsory’ visit: the Clickbrick shop. Of course we took a group photo before we left and Keisuke Yoshida (the AFOL who made the musical instruments) was kind enough to give me a musical note made with LEGO, to identify my glass (it is now part of my treasures). From my side, and to thank the AFOLs for their kindness I



gave them each a small traditional gift from Catalonia (the region I live in): a “Caganer”, a Christmas stall figure in a somewhat scathological pose, which is supposed to bring good luck.

THE CLICKBRICK SHOPS

Megūmi was another of the “sufferers” who helped us prepare our trip and she organised a visit to Clickbrick for our first

encounter after which we had dinner in the same shopping mall. We took a train at the station and after a transfer and some 25 minutes on the train we arrived to the shopping mall. It wasn't very hard to find the shop as it had a large white sign with the Clickbrick and LEGO® logos that stood out among the other signs.

We went into the shop and our first impression was that that it wasn't much different from a LEGO Store, with the collection of available sets, minifigs and “pick-a-brick” elements, keyrings... The only thing that was different up to that moment were the maxifigs used to decorate the place. These are different from the ones we know here. The proportions are somewhat different and there are many more models. It all changed when we arrived at the “wear” zone. The Clickbrick shops have unique t-shirts that cannot be bought anywhere else in the world. The designs go from very simple extremely complex and colourful. The problem is the sizes. In general, Japanese sizes are smaller than the European ones. It took quite some effort to find my size (L-XL), but I finally managed to buy a couple of them and Delia also got one (little by little she is coming over to “the dark side of the brick” :D). There was also keyring engraving service so we made our respective keyrings engraved with our names in Japanese and Megūmi in European characters...

Next up was dinner (white rice and a salad, to stabilize our stomachs) and then back to the hotel where I started to organise my purchases of the day.

After this intense day we had a rest of four days, as far as LEGO was concerned, during which we visited Osaka, Kobe and Itadori-Seki, a small rural village where the parents of another Japanese friend, Maiko Nagaya, run a small hotel.

This is where the first part of this article ends. In the next issue of HispaBrick Magazine I will tell you about the different activities we did in Tokyo, like a visit to the LEGOLAND Discovery Center, and the Japanese LEGO offices, or a marvelous encounter with AFOLs in the capital of Japan.
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