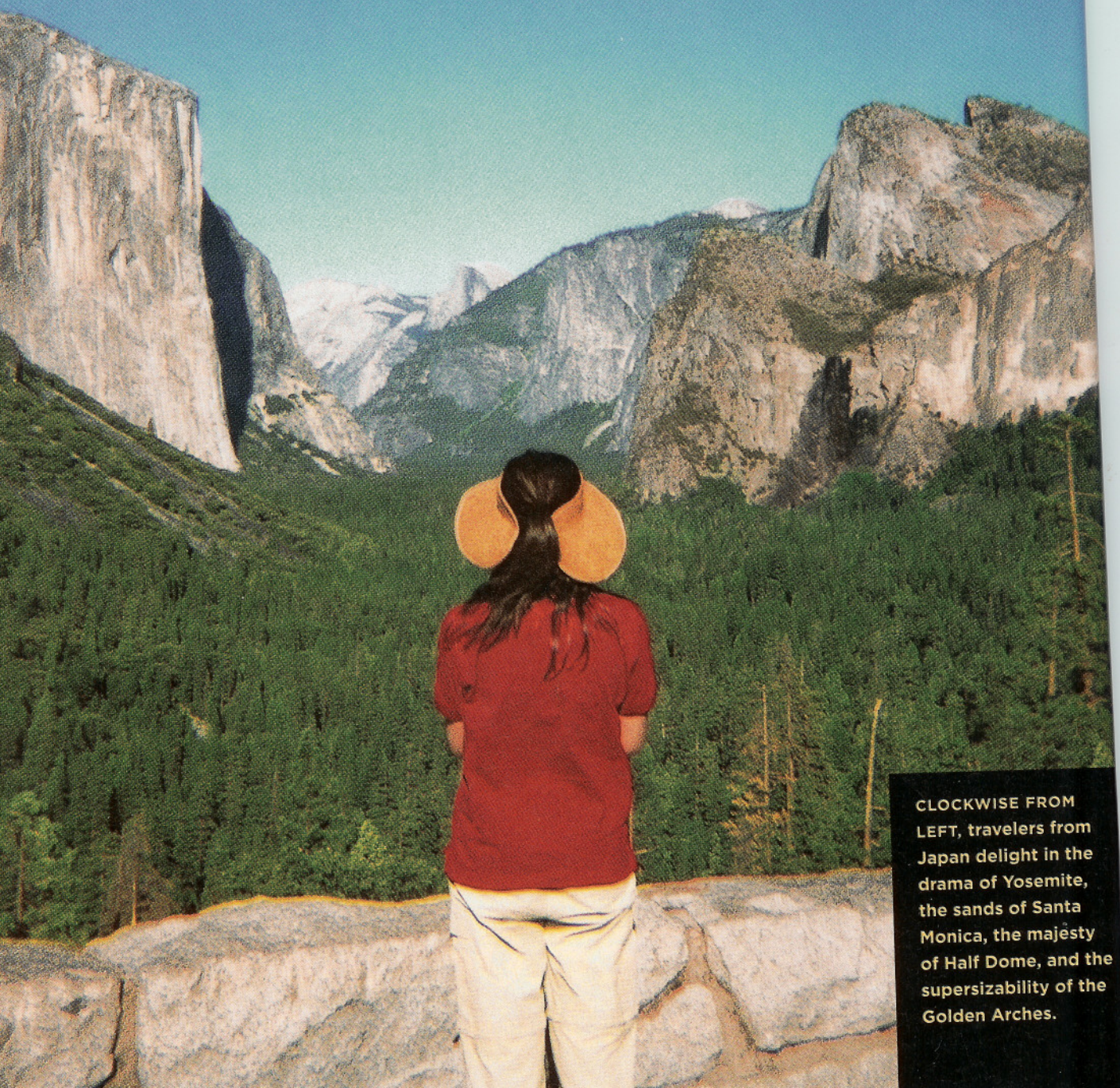
How does California look to Japanese tourists? Writer *Don George* went on four bus trips and handed out cameras at each stop so we'd all get the picture.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, travelers from Japan delight in the drama of Yosemite, the sands of Santa Monica, the majesty of Half Dome, and the supersizability of the Golden Arches.

カリフォルニア ドリーム*

As the tour bus emerged from the Yosemite tunnel, the gray granite glories of El Capitan and Half Dome erupted into view. ✿ "*Sugoi!*" Wataru said. ✿ "*Subarashii!*" Arisa exclaimed. ✿ "*Kirei da ne,*" Tetsuo said, leaning toward his wife. ✿ Even if I didn't speak Japanese, I would have understood the emotions surging through the bus. Like millions of travelers before them, these visitors from across the Pacific had been transported by Yosemite's grandeur. ✿ The emotion intensified at Glacier Point as we savored the wide-angle panorama of waterfalls, meadows, Half Dome, and the snowcapped Sierra. ✿ "Ah," Wataru Yoshimura said with a sigh. "This gives me hope. Man's lifetime is so small. It shows that whatever harm humans might do to nature, nature will overcome and survive." ✿ These enraptured travelers

*California Dreaming

The huge expanses Americans enjoy simply don't exist in Japan. Scale is a defining difference.

A camera-toting traveler pursues a shaded subject through the Devil's Golf Course in Death Valley.

DON GEORGE

were part of a group of 18 Japanese tourists I had joined on a three-day bus tour of California national parks. I'm not Japanese, but I lived in Tokyo from 1977 to 1979, and during that time I fell in love with the country—and with my wife of 26 years, whose family draws us back to Japan every other year. I've learned that the Japanese are probably the best group travelers in the world. Since their country's economic boom in the 1980s, they have ventured around the globe, and as citizens of an intensely group-oriented culture, they have raised the bus tour to an art. So I had joined this group to test a belief that there are two ways to travel. One is to go somewhere new; the other is to stay where you are and see it through someone else's eyes. This was my quest: to see California with Japanese eyes.

That's how I came to find myself in the lobby of the San Francisco Hilton in late August, standing among a group of Japanese people clad in a mix of weekend attire and hiking gear. In that group of 18, almost two-thirds lived in the United States, most on two-year rotations from their companies in Japan. As we headed off to Kings Canyon National Park in the southern Sierra, our first stop was at a produce emporium called the Orchard, which sells a variety of locally grown fruits and vegetables right off Highway 132 in the tiny San Joaquin Valley town of Vernalis. Like any group of tourists, the passengers trooped off the bus and queued up for the toilets, but soon they were eyeing the almonds, peaches, nectarines, plums, and walnuts—bounties Californians tend to take for granted—with excitement.

"Look at this!" Tadashi Sekine called out to me. "These melons are so cheap! These would cost at least $40 in Japan."

Hiroko Natsume couldn't decide between dried apricots, nectarines, and kiwis, but finally settled on the kiwis. "I can't get this where I live," she said.

At our first meal stop, a strip mall in Fresno with a variety of fast-food outlets, Hiroko, a 39-year-old accountant, and her niece, Arisa Kondo, a 19-year-old college freshman, decided they wanted pasta. I went with them to Tutto's Pizza. After they ordered at the counter, the proprietor said, "We'll bring the food to the table."

Hiroko stared at her, incomprehension clouding her face. "*Chippu?*" she asked, thinking that the woman was telling her she had forgotten to leave a tip.

As Hiroko dug in her purse, I intervened. "No, no. She said they will bring the food to the table."

"Aah," Hiroko said, relieved.

My companions' fascination with the tip was one of the surprises of my travels. Diners don't tip in Japan. Ever. At one of my first restaurant meals there, I left a

tip and the waiter chased me down the street, thinking I had forgotten my money. So tipping was an exotic and somewhat intimidating custom for these travelers.

I asked the duo what their first impressions were.

"The sky is so big here," Arisa said.

"And there are so many different kinds of people," Hiroko added, "so many different colors and sizes. And everyone's clothing is so different too."

Their comments recalled my first take on Tokyo, which when I arrived in 1977 seemed a surreally homogeneous sea of black hair and dark blue business suits. Just as five Americans would consider it desirable to look different and think individually, I quickly learned, five Japanese would generally consider it desirable to look and think like their compatriots. In a compact country, as the Japanese proverb notes, the nail that sticks up gets hammered down. Ethnic minorities (chiefly Korean, Chinese, and the indigenous Ainu) make up roughly 1.5 percent of the population in Japan; in California, minorities account for 57 percent. I could imagine how startling an average U.S. shopping mall, with its kaleidoscope of people in all colors and sizes, might be to most Japanese.

Around midafternoon we reached Kings Canyon, where we set out on the loop trail to the General Grant Tree, a 268-foot-tall giant sequoia with a circumference of more than 100 feet. "This is wonderful," Tadashi said. "Do you know bonsai? That is how I think of Japanese trees—twisted and low. Look at how straight and tall these trees are."

Our guide had informed us that some of the sequoias in the grove were as old as 2,700 years, and as we kept walking, Seiichi Ishii, a New York–based banker, said, "Two thousand seven hundred years ago. That's the Jomon period in Japan. That's prehistory. Some people were still living in caves, and farming was just beginning. Seeing these trees gives you such a different sense of time. It makes your lifetime seem so small."

At dinner that night, I asked Seiichi and his wife, Yumi, why they had chosen to visit California. "I wanted to experience the scenery of the California spirit," Yumi said. When I asked her to explain, she replied, "I wanted to experience the original nature-spirit of California."

This seemed like a wonderfully Japanese reason for visiting California—and touched on the reasons I love both Japan and my home state.

The next day our group journeyed to Yosemite. After our aaah-inspiring tunnel glimpse of Half Dome and El Capitan and our epiphanic encounter with Glacier Point, we stopped at Yosemite Lodge for the night. Over hearty steaks and salads at the Mountain Room, Wataru said of Yosemite, "It gives you a different sense of the world. I am so surprised by the size of things here. Look at this steak and potatoes I'm eating! This would serve three people in Japan. And then think of the size of all the mountains and meadows we saw today. Of course we have nature in Japan, we have national parks—but nothing like Yosemite."

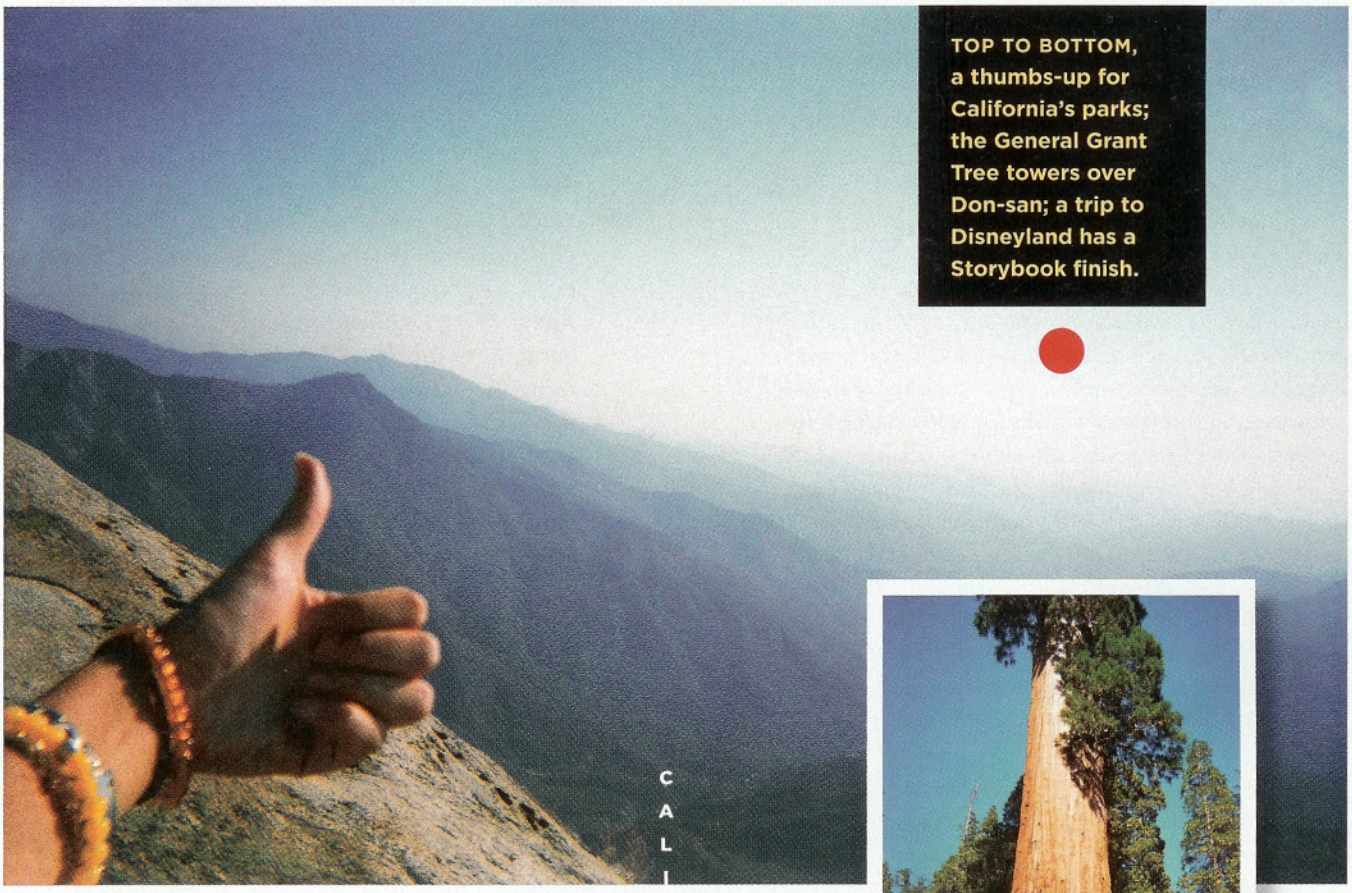
Wataru had highlighted another defining difference between Japan and the United States: scale. The huge expanses we enjoy here simply don't exist in Japan. The Japanese excel at doing small things beautifully, from wrapping a gift box of red bean sweets to crafting an efficient car, and I have often thought that they have an interpersonal attentiveness and sensitivity that is sometimes lacking among Americans.

Americans, on the other hand, color outside the borders. We sprawl—because there's room to sprawl. This can lead both to breakthrough innovations and to gross misuse of resources: the boon and bane of large scale.

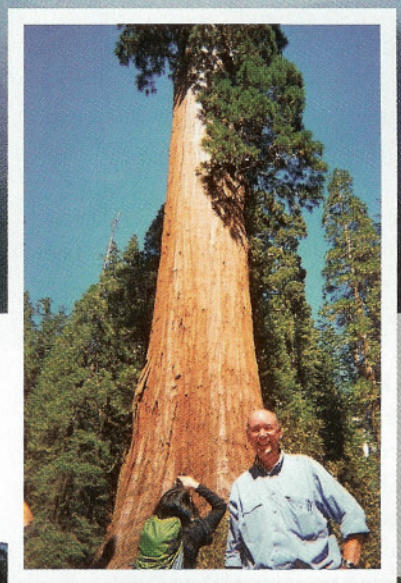
The park tour showed me one version of the California dream. To see another, I arranged to take three one-day tours in and around Los Angeles with a company called HIS, which specializes in budget tours for Japanese. Most of my companions on these trips were in their 20s and were interested in the material aspects of California: the beach culture, clothes, cars, and mansions.

This was especially clear on the second of my Southern California adventures, a half-day tour that started in downtown L.A. and proceeded to Santa Monica, West Hollywood, and the Farmers Market before ending up at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. There were 16 travelers on this tour, and half of them had landed at Los Angeles International that

TOP, Badwater, 282 feet below sea level, is a high point of any trip to Death Valley. BOTTOM, Melons! Only $3 each!



TOP TO BOTTOM, a thumbs-up for California's parks; the General Grant Tree towers over Don-san; a trip to Disneyland has a Storybook finish.



CALIFORNIA DREAMING

morning, groggy but exhilarated.

As we cruised Beverly Hills, our Japanese guide pointed out many highlights, including the Peninsula Hotel, the Hummer limos, and the fleet of Mercedes-Benzes in a Budget Rent A Car lot, each of which drew a prolonged and appreciative "*Ehhhhhh!*" When we stopped to window-shop on Rodeo Drive, the guide told us we could get much better bargains at the brand outlets, and indeed, two of the most popular HIS tours are all-day shopping excursions to such places. I asked a tanned, dyed-blonde, miniskirted traveler how she liked the neighborhood. "I love it!" said Ari Hiramatsu, an event producer in her early 20s. "I want to be rich and live in Beverly Hills!"

At the Farmers Market, Takahiro Tanabe asked, "Do you know if there's a McDonald's here? I want to say," —here he switched to English—" 'Supersize me!' "

That night I had dinner at a venerable downtown L.A. eatery, the Original Pantry Cafe, with Takanori Hanzawa, 28, and Kana Sugimitsu, 27, both customs investigators from Tokyo. When I asked them what impressed them the most about Los Angeles, Kana said, "Well, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but it's very dirty here. Everything is just a little more—um—unkempt than in Japan." Then her face brightened. "There's so much diversity," she said, "so many different kinds of people."

Takanori later chimed in, "The other thing is the warmth of the people; many people are so outgoing and friendly!"

Outgoing and *friendly* are not adjectives always associated with the reserved Japanese, but my fellow tourists had been unfailingly friendly to me, and I was lucky enough to reencounter two of the friendliest the following day. For my last California adventure I had chosen the Disneyland one-day tour. Serendipitously,

TOP TO BOTTOM: ARISA KONDO; HIROKO NATSUME; DON GEORGE

Takahiro "Supersize Me" Tanabe and his girlfriend, Aya Hashizume, were on the same tour bus. I asked the two if I could tour Disneyland with them, and they graciously welcomed me.

We had a wonderful day riding Space Mountain, Buzz Lightyear Astro Blasters, Star Tours, and the Indiana Jones Adventure. As proof that Disneyland brings out the child in all of us, Takahiro said he really wanted to do the Storybook Land Canal Boats ride, and he and Aya exulted as we cruised past re-creations of Pinocchio's cobblestoned village, Cinderella's gold-spired castle, and the Little Mermaid's underwater world.

After our cruise, Takahiro confessed his other great goal: "I want to leave a tip," he said.

"You want to leave a tip?"

"Yes, I want to eat at a restaurant where you leave a tip," Takahiro said. "I've never left a tip before and I was too intimidated to do it here. But now, with Don-san with us, we can leave a tip!"

So we set off to find a restaurant in Disneyland with table service—which is not as easy as it might sound—and finally settled on Cafe Orleans. We sat on the outside terrace and tucked into creole ratatouille, chicken Caesar salad, and pommes frites as we talked about my friends' California dream.

"I want to go to a house party," Takahiro told me.

"Yes!" Aya exclaimed. "Like in the movies. We want to go to a house with a big backyard and a barbecue."

Remembering Japan, where square footage is always at a premium and yards are difficult to come by, I could understand the exotic allure of a backyard barbecue—and how such taken-for-granted things in one culture could seem unattainably alluring to another.

I couldn't produce a house party on this trip, but I could help with the tip.

TOP TO BOTTOM, a big shot greets visitors at Palisades Park; tip for tourists: simply double the tax; a Japanese film fan leaves herself in Marilyn's hands.

When the check came, I passed it to Takahiro. "How do I do it?" he said.

I showed Takahiro the tax amount and told him to double that. He calculated what each of us owed, double-checked his figures, carefully collected our money, and then with a nervous flourish neatly arranged all the bills in the folder that held the check.

When our waitress came to pick it up, he hesitantly stopped her. "Excuse me," he said in English, then thrust the folder into her hands. Mustering his courage, he looked at her and said, "Keep za chenji."

"Thank you," she said with a little curtsy.

Takahiro looked at Aya, and his smile was as wide as any in Disneyland.

As our day danced to its end, I felt inexpressibly happy—and sad. I had set out to see the Golden State through Japanese eyes, but I realized that my travel companions had shown me much more. I had gained a new appreciation for the natural grandeur of the state and revisited the urban riches that define us in the minds of many Japanese. But the greatest gift of all was something I hadn't been looking for: the bow of kindness that had been extended to me time and time again.

Takahiro and Aya walked me to the turnstiles. The Japanese rarely hug in public, but we hugged, and then Takahiro took a bag out of his pack. "This is for Don-san," he said. There were two crepe-wrapped bulges inside. The first held a *Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas* coffee mug. "To keep you awake when you do your research," Takahiro said. The second was a Tim Burton pen. Aya smiled. "So you'll remember us when you write," she said. ●

DON GEORGE is the former global travel editor for Lonely Planet Publications. He also edited *The Kindness of Strangers,* a collection of travel stories.