

Helpful book on life in Kobe also a great read



A Bit of Kansai

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Bubbling over with humor, the updated edition of "Living in Kobe" is too good to be true. Overtly for newcomers (but indispensable to veterans as well), LINK is so engrossing that you'd hardly know it was a reference book. It would serve equally well as an outline for an anecdotal talk on life in Japan to schools or clubs overseas.

Conversely, LINK would make a thoughtful gift to loved ones left behind who wonder (or worry) about potential for happiness in this land of Oriental differentness.

LINK is the brainchild of Community House and Information Center, a non-profit, foreign-managed facility which assists internationals settle into Kobe life. Its four main activities are updating LINK, staging an annual all-day newcomer orientation program, offering culture and language classes, and maintaining daily office hours for

phone or drop-in inquiries on absolutely any sort of problem.

While guides to living in the Kansai area have burgeoned in recent years, LINK is probably everyone's favorite. While most other guides stem from governmental organizations and have that dry, statistic-loving feel, LINK is chatty (though never irrelevant). Better yet, it's full of sympathy for the trials and tribulations of new residents. As a plus, LINK's delightfully fun phraseology (seemingly unintentional) pops up to greet the reader at every turn.

Cases in point: I loved the originality of referring to Kobe's two famous, man-made offshore developments as "handy islands in the harbor." Then there's the reference to our "five distinct seasons" which local umbrella manufacturers will appreciate. And instead of simply

pressuring arrivals to have *meishi* printed up quickly, the LINK team illuminates why, suggesting that they "confirm in the Japanese mind that you actually exist." (It's the best apology for the custom I've encountered to date.)

LINK's table of contents covers all the faces of life here, from the less enjoyable medical scene and red tape of all sorts to dining and recreation opportunities for big and little folk alike. This new edition strives even harder than its predecessor to lay out the survival basics in simple, often pictorial presentations.

The housing communities section, to give an idea, physically lays out each residential area along Kobe's urban sliver from Suma in the west to Shukugawa on the Osaka side. The pluses and minuses of each are suggested.

Train travel is equally clear. While most guides stop with a map overlapping Kinki railway lines, LINK walks the reader through the timetable, ticket purchase, and ticket wicket procedure, each step with its own picture and relevant nihongo. Even the media section has a welcome sketch of a radio dial with intros to the major stations and their offerings.

In fact, "Living in Kobe" thinks of everything. It explains the difference in Western and Japanese swimming pools, for example. And it serves up precious nuggets of information like the absence of fluoride in local water (plus how to compensate).

LINK reflects with brutal honesty the ups and downs of the neverending adjustment

process. It'll generate groans in the drivers license section and chuckles as it barrels through the list of uninvited weekly visitors to one's home.

The publication's oversights are so inconsequential as to hardly merit mention. Occasionally, descriptions seem too narrowly defined. LINK reports that day-care centers are only open a half day on Saturday, which is not universally the case. Also misrepresented is parental provision of lunch at these facilities. Morning service, the coffee shop's version of a discounted breakfast, is by no means limited to toast and a boiled egg. Many places creatively offer A, B and C plans. And for a really obscure objection, don't believe that mattress pads are unavailable in Kansai!

In sum, LINK writers are extraordinarily understanding of the needs of their international brethren. Hard-to-find facts on official procedures for cars, insurance, visas, banking and rent/utilities are laid out. Beyond that, LINK delves into the soul of the city and its international inhabitants. It fulfills its raison d'être by suggesting where to go for answers to most any problem. Exhaustive information on kiddie entertainment, an oblique reference to Japan's finest wine cellar, plus the good word on indoor and outdoor activities abound. Educational options are happily updated, including playgroups, an area of increasing interest.

LINK is not only a secret weapon as you battle the cultural hydra, it's simply a great read.



Special Exhibitions of Traditional Crafts at the Japan Traditional Craft Center (closed on Thursdays)

Jan. 8 (Fri.)-Jan. 20 (Wed.): A collection of *Tosa-washi*, handmade paper from Kochi pref. Wakasa lacquer ware and agate works from Fukui pref. and *Ogatsu-suzuri* ink stone will be shown.

Jan. 22 (Fri.)-Feb. 3 (Wed.): An exhibition of *Oitama-tunugi* pongee from Yamagata pref. You will enjoy watching new casual suits and evening dresses made of the pongee at the floor show twice on Jan. 23 (13:30-14:30, 15:30-16:30). Please call for reservation.

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