

Imabari – An Industrial City of no Interest?

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In March 1993 I came to Imabari to get married and, along with family members, two friends came over for the wedding. One of them looked

up Imabari in a travel guide and was a little dismayed to find the place described as ‘An industrial city of no interest.’ Immediately after getting married, myself and my husband went to live in Tokyo because of his work, so Imabari was quite far from my thoughts. After a year, however, we came back to live here and it was only then that I took a good look at the place.

It was a culture shock, to put it mildly, as Imabari seemed as different from Tokyo, as Tokyo was from England and, to cut the story short, I simply could not live here. I felt the town was oppressive and, although on an individual level people were often very kind, I felt incredibly isolated. So after about ten months we went back to the UK, staying there until September 2017 when we made the decision to come back here once again.

The Imabari that we have come back to is very different to the one we left 24 years ago. One of the biggest things is that people, and particularly children, no longer stare at me. This may sound like a very trivial thing to highlight, but when I lived here it was the thing I hated most. One particular memory was being in the old Imabari Library when a large class of seven or eight year olds came in with their teacher. There were at least 30 of them, all in yellow hats, and they immediately crowded around the table I was sitting at. They didn’t say anything, just stared. I tried smiling and saying hello but there was no response, just more staring. After what seemed like a very long time the teacher intervened, albeit too late to prevent me from feeling like a freak.

The difference now is enormous; hardly anyone stares and the children greet me cheerfully. I also notice that people speak to me much more than they used to and seem to accept me as an individual instead of seeing me just as a foreigner - a change I am very grateful for.

In terms of the City, there have also been huge changes. I am a very keen runner and one of my frustrations used to be the lack of roads with pavements, since other than the busy main spine roads there were few places to run safely. How different now! Probably because of Shimanami Kaido and Imabari’s place as a cycling ‘Mecca,’ running in this City is an absolute joy, with wide smooth uninterrupted pavements looking out to the changing landscape of the hills. My favourite routes are through Shimanami Hills and into the Earth Park and along the Shimanami Kaido itself. New pavements are constantly being constructed which

also means that walking is now a much safer and more pleasant experience than it used to be.

Possibly because of Shimanami Kaido and possibly because of bigger changes taking place in Japan, the town now feels much more open and international than it did previously. There are more foreigners, different types of restaurants, bigger and better shopping and generally much more going on. The amount of available housing for rent has also vastly improved and there is now a huge array of apartment blocks to choose from, as well as some really lovely houses. The new Library is a fantastic facility and it’s great to see how Imabari Towel is now a recognised brand for quality. This was not the case 25 years ago and I recall when working in Tokyo a gift of towels was made to a colleague getting married. The box was marked ‘Paris’ but having been given a towel of exactly the same unusual design I, possibly foolishly, pointed out that they came from Imabari. The purchaser of the towels scowled at me aggressively – a face that suggested she would not stoop so low as to purchase towels made there!

Another great change for me is FC Imabari. I have always loved football but in 1993 the J-League was just starting and football still felt like a minority sport. To be able to watch live football here so easily is a real bonus and I am aiming to be a regular next season and (hopefully) watch FC Imabari’s promotion into the J-League.

Having said all that, there are some things about the old Imabari I miss. Imabari Ginza used to be full of shops selling just about everything. They were complimented by the big Daimaru store opposite. My approach was ‘look in Daimaru, buy in Ginza’ and I am sorry to see that both of them are now all but gone. I love the new shops, and I am a regular at both Aeon Mall and Fuji Grande but nonetheless I hope that in the future a use can be found for Ginza and that it will recover some of its former glory.

So although it’s only been three months I can say I feel much more comfortable here than I did in 1993. Of course the changes in communication mean that news from home is easy to come by and that helps dispel any feeling of isolation. It’s hard to believe now that I used to rely on a short wave radio to get news from home and if the weather was not good, I heard nothing! The only other alternative was the Japan Times and that didn’t arrive until three days after publication.

All of these things together make living here now a totally different experience. Over the period of almost 25 years there have been many changes but the really big difference is in the overall atmosphere of the City. Whereas before it felt closed in and oppressive, it now feels open, spacious, thriving and welcoming. It certainly no longer fits the description of ‘an industrial city of no interest.’