



International Man of Mystery

How J.P. Fritz honorably tired himself out in Japan BY JESSICA P. OGILVIE

It was 1999 and J.P. Fritz was stepping off the plane in Japan for his junior year abroad. Having studied Japanese for two years at Tufts University, he figured he'd be able to get by reasonably well.

"I barely made it from the airport to my hotel," says Fritz, now 38 and a recent partner at Levene, Neale, Bender, Yoo & Brill in Century City. "I got into a taxicab, and I remember thinking, 'I don't know how to tell him to go straight. *What am I doing?*'"

Eventually, he found the hotel—and his footing. So much so that he returned to Japan after college as part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching program. At the time, JET employed about 5,000 young foreigners. He estimates that 90 percent were foreign language teachers. The rest, including Fritz, held the job title "coordinator of international relations."

Fritz worked at a government office whose name loosely translates to "International Exchange Center." A 9-to-5 gig, the office was open to the public Monday through Friday to provide information about visiting Japan, living there, adjusting to the cultural differences—such as how to pass the country's notoriously difficult driver's license test—and more. Fritz worked in an open area with about five Japanese employees, near a small library of foreign books.

"It was a spot to help out the foreign community in any way that it needed," he says, "and also to promote internationalism with the local communities."

He didn't just talk cultural differences, he lived them, grappling with Japan's highly complex system of etiquette.

"When you leave at the end of the day," he says, "you're supposed to say something that roughly translates to, 'Please excuse me for being so rude as to have left before you.' The response is, 'You have honorably tired yourself out.'"

Occasionally, Fritz was tasked with being a public face for the agency on the radio or television. "The very first [interview] I did on TV was live," he says. "I'd only been living there for a couple months. It was extremely stressful. After that, everything that was done on TV, luckily, was taped."

Fritz came by his wanderlust, and his fascination with Japan, early. His father, an oil and gas attorney, worked overseas doing contracts for a global oil company; when Fritz was in first grade,

his family lived in Holland, then moved to Jakarta, Indonesia for the next two years. Near the end of his father's tenure in Jakarta, the family took a week-long trip to Kyoto.

"As a 9-year-old, I probably fell in love with the samurai swords and the castles," he says. "But Kyoto is an area untouched by war, and in a lot of ways it's like stepping back in time. It's just a beautiful place."

At the time, Fritz was attending school with children from all over the world, in both The Hague and Jakarta. He grew so accustomed to multiculturalism that after returning to New Orleans, "I spent my time, from the age of 9 until 18, thinking, 'Somehow I'm gonna get back there—into the international world.'"

His bankruptcy practice happened somewhat by accident. After graduating from Southwestern Law School and doing one year of litigation, a classmate tipped him off to an opening as a clerk for bankruptcy court Judge Maureen A. Tighe. Through that position, he came into contact with Levene, Neale, Bender, Yoo & Brill.

It was a busy period for bankruptcy law, following the global financial meltdown. "I was seeing them on a weekly basis," he says. In 2009, the firm offered him a job.

Fritz has found that his background in Japan helps shape his practice.

"The Japanese culture is very much geared towards consensus-building and mediation," he says. "I think a lot of that translates well into bankruptcy work. You're trying to gradually build consensus and reach resolutions where people can get along and live with the outcome." ❶



John-Patrick M. Fritz

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