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When Apollo Went to Japan

AT EXPO '70, I WAS THE HAPPY AMBASSADOR FOR THE U.S. SPACE PROGRAM

by Beverly Gray

TSUKI NO ISHI WA DOKO DESU KA?

That's a question I heard, and answered, hundreds of times every day. The year was 1970. I was one of 56 young Japanese-speaking American guides who'd been hired to staff the U.S. Pavilion at Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. It was the first World's Fair to be held in that country, and 78 nations contributed exhibits intended to exemplify the theme of "Progress and Harmony for Mankind."

Ever since Neil Armstrong had taken that giant leap for mankind in the previous summer, the Japanese public had become passionate about space travel. More than anything, they wanted to see a genuine piece of the lunar surface. They'd



The author in her red, white, and blue minidress in 1970, patiently explaining to Expo '70 visitors that the American spacecraft on display, unlike those of our rivals, were real.

willingly tolerate waiting in line for three hours to enter our doors, so long as they could gaze upon our pavilion's pride and joy. Hence the urgency of the question: Where is the moon rock?

We U.S. Pavilion guides came in all colors, shapes, and sizes. Unlike the so-called hostesses of other pavilions, we were chosen not for our cuteness but rather for our ability to handle the Japanese language in a public setting. Some of us were scholarly types who had studied the language out of personal interest (that was me); others had been raised by American parents in Japan and taught to speak Japanese from childhood. Still, to talk about the space program we needed to learn

a whole new vocabulary: the correct Japanese terms for “astronaut,” “command module,” “lunar excursion module,” and the like. And we had to be geared up for Japanese space nerds (most of them male and very young), who quickly overcame their shyness to pepper us with questions about the whole phenomenon of manned space flight.

Of course, ours was not the only pavilion toured by the 64 million overwhelmingly Japanese visitors who attended Expo '70 during its six-month duration. The mammoth USSR Pavilion, a sickle-shaped red and white edifice that towered over the fairgrounds, was chock-full of reminders that, in that Cold War era, the Russians were first to put a man in space. Dominating the Soviet pavilion's main hall was a giant photograph of the first cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, cradling a dove. And dramatic lighting accentuated the gleaming white surfaces of the space vehicles on display. But we Americans knew the Russian secret: Their space exhibit featured nothing but life-size models. Because uncrewed Russian spaceships burned up during re-entry into Earth's atmosphere, they could not possibly have been shown off at Expo '70. And there was no way the majestic but hollow craft suspended overhead could have flown anywhere.

The U.S. Pavilion was vastly different. Where the Russians went high, we went low. Our more modest pavilion was largely underground. Though not designed to wow casual onlookers, this structure proved something of a subtle engineering marvel. It was topped by a translucent fiberglass dome held aloft entirely by air pressure. Because of this air-supported roof, visitors to the pavilion were forced to awkwardly divide into three separate lines, so as to enter our airlocks by way of revolving doors, something most Japanese had never before encountered. (Guards patiently helped them figure out these oh-so-mysterious contraptions.)

Having conquered the doors, visitors were naturally desperate to see the moon rock as quickly as possible. That's why anyone wearing one of our spacey red, white, and blue uniforms (minidresses and berets for the women; jackets and ties for the men) was bombarded with questions about the whereabouts of our star—or rather lunar—attraction. *Tsuki no ishi wa doko desu ka?*

Just inside the U.S. Pavilion, there was nothing connected with outer space to be seen. Instead,

visitors could experience some large and surprisingly candid photographs, curated by New York's Museum of Modern Art, revealing diverse slices of life in America. Bruce Davidson's photos of squalid Harlem tenements and Diane Arbus's off-beat shots of middle-American grotesques raised the hackles of some American visitors and baffled most Japanese, who were far more accustomed to

MOST OF OUR VISITORS WERE IN A HURRY TO GET TO THE SPACE EXHIBIT. THEY Poured DOWN A WIDE STAIRCASE TO THE PAVILION'S LOWER LEVEL, WHERE THEY WERE GREETED BY SUCH WONDERS AS THE ACTUAL APOLLO 8 COMMAND MODULE, THE FIRST SPACE VEHICLE OF ANY NATION EVER TO LEAVE EARTH ORBIT AND CIRCLE THE MOON.



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the unfailingly happy scenes presented in other pavilions' photo displays.

To the credit of our bosses in the United States Information Agency, we guides were allowed to engage visitors in frank conversations about the strengths and quirks of our country and system of government. The Vietnam War was then raging in Southeast Asia, and American college students had taken to the streets in protest, so there was a lot to discuss. Most of our visitors, though, were in a hurry to get to the space exhibit: Even a sports section featuring Babe Ruth's locker only rarely tempted visitors, though baseball was (and still is) hugely popular in Japan. Instead, the crowds poured down a wide staircase to the pavilion's lower level, where they were greeted by such wonders as the actual Apollo 8 command module, the first space vehicle of any nation ever to leave Earth orbit and circle the moon. To the guide strategically placed in front of that slightly battered module, its burn scars well evident, it was like watching the approach of an unending tidal wave. The visitors (some of them in silly hats doled out by their tour group leaders) just kept coming, with their cameras and their questions, goggling at all the space-age



contraptions suspended over their heads.

Another of our guides was always stationed in front of a simulated lunar surface depicting astronauts in spacesuits, an American flag proudly planted, and a Lunar Module, or LEM. This was a tricky posting for all of us because it required us to explain that our landing vehicle was not a model, as in the USSR Pavilion, but a *honmono* (“real thing”). The language barrier made these fine shades of meaning more complex. No, we admitted, our lander had not been on the moon, because of course the LEMs that landed on the moon in the Apollo lunar expeditions had remained there. This was, though, an operational LEM, one that had served as a back-up for the recent Apollo 12 mission. We offered this explanation over and over, not only in Japanese but in any other languages we’d previously studied, and in some we hadn’t. I personally found myself desperately trying to give my spiel to an Italian couple, who finally grinned and exclaimed, “Ah! Gemello!” “Yes!” I said, making a triumphant mental connection to Gemini and the French word *jumeaux*. “It’s the twin of the LEM that’s now on the moon.”

Such was the drawing power of the U.S. Pavilion in 1970 that we recognized famous faces from showbiz, sports, and international politics almost every day. As a native Angeleno and an English major, I was excited to meet Californians like funnyman Danny Kaye, singer Andy Williams, and author Irving Stone, along with some of my



The USSR’s pavilion at Expo ’70 towered over its neighbors. The (externally) less imposing U.S. pavilion was on the other side of the fairgrounds.

favorite sumo wrestlers. Imelda Marcos, imperious First Lady of the Philippines, came through with a large entourage, as did a group of well-lubricated U.S. governors and the cranky crown prince of Sweden. But it was extra-special to see the 69-year-old Hirohito, Japan’s emperor both during and after World War II, pay a historic early-morning visit. And I won’t soon forget his grandson, Naruhito, who arrived for a tour of his own. Though he wore shorts and had a bowl haircut, this 10-year-old already projected dignity. (In 2019, he would become Japan’s *Tenno Heika*, or reigning emperor.)

The biggest buzz came with the arrival of the triumphant Apollo 12 crew: Pete Conrad, Dick Gordon, and Alan Bean. Two of them had walked on the lunar surface mere months before Expo ’70’s March 15 opening ceremonies. The three posed cheerfully for photos on the steps of our LEM, engendering much good will.

But at no time were the good wishes of the Japanese people more in evidence than in April 1970, after the launch of the ill-fated Apollo 13. When this new lunar mission seemed headed for disaster, everyone assumed we guides had special inside knowledge of what was going on. In that pre-Internet time, those of us who couldn’t comfortably make sense of a Japanese newspaper account were in fact far more in the dark than our Japanese visitors. Nonetheless, the Japanese were quick to tell us they were praying for the crew’s safe return home. When astronauts Lovell, Swigert, and Haise splashed down safely, fair-goers congratulated us and shook our hands as though we personally had had something to do with their rescue. We accepted their congratulations gladly.

I have yet to describe the moon rock, our pavilion’s holy grail. Mounted on prongs like a large diamond and set in a glass case well out of visitors’ reach, it looked like nothing so much as a misshapen chunk of overcooked hamburger. Of course the mere glimpse of it generated tremendous excitement. But what can you say about a rock, even one that came from outer space? Early on, a member of the Japanese press corps asked me which I’d rather have: this moon rock or a diamond engagement ring. I pondered for a moment and then replied, “It all depends on who gives me the ring.” I have since had no reason to change my answer. ■