

# Peace Boat: A Floating University



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The Japanese are coming. On a dawning Sunday morning, it is pouring rain as the ship docks in the Istanbul harbor. It is nine stories high, white and majestic. The Turkish police are already waiting on the wharf. A cruise ship that looks so luxurious but is called the Peace Boat ... that sounds like trouble. Furthermore there are 650 Japanese on board, who have called for demonstrations against the Turkish government. Is this a joke sent all the way from Asia, or are they political activists? Are they spoiled cruise guests or crusaders on a mission for peace?



Protest and party at the same time. The Peace Boat departs on a long trip three times a year and offers a very mixed program. The unusual cruise is organized by a volunteer organization in Tokyo. The 200 meter long ship offers every comfort of a commercial cruise, but what is so unusual are its harbors and highlights. The participants discover that on the other side of the world, there is more to see than just Pyramids, Disneylands and German beer gardens. "Rather there are also problems and conflicts, and things that we as Japanese should think about," said Yoshioka Tatsuya, one of the founders of the Peace Boat.



At each destination, the passengers meet with trade unionists and artists, with conscientious objectors and with women's rights activists. If the ship is near a war region, representatives from all parties come on board and give lectures. On neutral soil, these professed enemies can talk to each other in a way which would not be possible in the tense atmosphere in their own countries. Israelis meet Palestinians; Indians meet Pakistanis; and Columbian Guerillas meet government representatives. The hosts take advantage of their unique position. The open sea creates open conversations, and outside of the twelve-mile zone, many are more willing to speak.



It also helps that such serious topics do not lead to depression on board. Relaxing and enjoyable activities are always part of passengers' daily routines. At six o'clock in the morning, there is tai chi on the top deck, followed by belly dancing at 8 in the Windjammer Bar. At ten o'clock, passengers can try their hand at kodo drumming near the swimming pool. Afterwards they can learn sign language. In the afternoons, there is karate for women and in the evenings, the Global University on board offers a seminar on "The Future of Iraq."



The Peace Boat team usually limits itself to organizing the rooms and the equipment. The rest happens by itself. "I am always thrilled about what people come up with," said Ai Onodera. She belongs to the 80 personnel on board the ship. They collect donations, counsel passengers or travel on the cruise to prepare for the program ahead of time. Although she is only in her mid-twenties, together with her team, she is responsible for the well-being as well as the worries of hundreds of passengers. In addition, the team must coordinate a 200-person crew and make sure that any mix-ups are not drastic.



The Peace Boat Organization created a unique system for financing the cruise. In Japan, young volunteers raise money or hang up advertisements, when they book a trip for themselves. The price for the trip costs around 10,000 dollars. This is about three times cheaper than what a normal cruise charges. By raising this money, the activists have to prove their entrepreneurial skills. The Peace Boat can make the trip so affordable because most passengers book the complete 90-day trip, and so there are usually no free cabins. Some say that the activists work for the cause of peace, while the tourists on board fill up the boat. Nevertheless, the spirit of activism on board is infectious. The educational events are for everyone, and for this reason, even the lectures in the late evening often still have several hundred people in the audience.



Mr. Toshi, a swordplay teacher and author, believes the trip broadens passengers' horizons each and every single day. He is wiry and is in his early 60s, making him one of the youngest old people on board. "We Japanese know far too little about the world. Our school textbooks fail to mention, for example, what our country did during the Second World War to Korea and China. We have no idea how other people see us – that is so terrible!" They eat spaghetti in Eritrea? Italy has active volcanoes? Europeans get six weeks of vacation a year? His time at sea has brought him one exotic insight after another.



The Japanese are coming. 30 passengers go by bus from Dubrovnik to Mostar. They want to visit the Bosnian city and meet with a local peace group. They have heard about Mostar's fate even from far away Tokyo and Kobe. They have learned about a wonderful historic stone bridge, which was targeted and destroyed during the civil war. What will Mostar look like today, many years later?



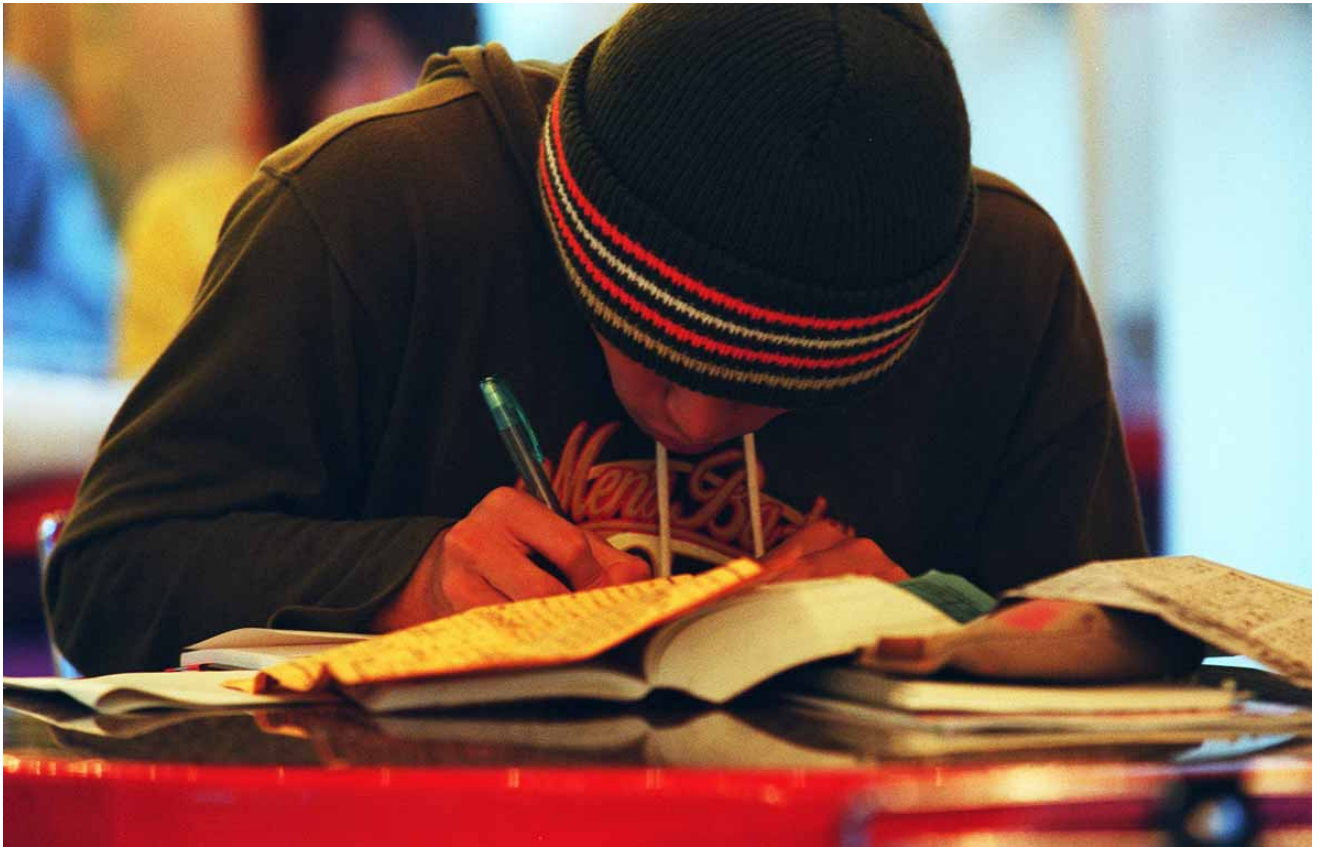
Nobuko (32 years old) and Mashiba (22 years old) are here to learn. A delegation from the organization Mladi Most and its reconciliation project “The Young Bridge” receive the guests. Everyone is friendly, but also self-conscious. As they walk through the main street together, there is a sense of mistrust in the air. During the war, this was the front. Mashiba discovered a bathtub, which stuck out of the wall of a house like a sculpture. Something terrible must have happened here. Mashiba lost her desire to take a picture. The young city tour guide told them about Mostar when it was a divided city. Nobuko wrote down that even long after the soldiers had left, the hate between Croats and Bosnians remained. The Bosnian looked astonished by the sight of Japanese who write down notes while on vacation instead of taking group pictures.



The two friends are going to spend the night with a guest family for the first time. They follow Senada, a 28 year-old Muslim, and together they tromp over the uneven sidewalk and pass by ruins. The three girls climb an uncovered stairway, which lets in the cold rain. Finally they reach the top floor. Senada's sister opens the door. Inside, everything is suddenly different. A wood stove glows in the living room where it is bright and warm. There is even a television. With the help of a little English and a language computer, the family and the guest understand each other. Later when she is snuggled under thick blankets in bed, Nabuko writes in her notebook: I have sailed thousands of kilometers over the sea. Of all places, here in Bosnia, the ground is beginning to sway, and I imagine that it has nothing to do with the sea. We start to question our convictions while at sea. It was only when she had been back on board for quite some time that Nobuko noticed this.



Jingjing, a Chinese student, also has a similar story to tell. She was on board half a year after Nabuko and Mashiba, but the 22 year-old is completely confused. “I don’t know,” was how she started many of her sentences. She left her home for the first time in her life in order to board the Peace Boat in Tokyo. Since then, she has been in Taiwan, China’s archenemy. She has also seen Vietnam, which used to be just a strange neighboring country. In Singapore, everyone seemed to be in a shopping frenzy. In Eritrea, “all the people are poorer than in the Chinese countryside.” Every port led to a culture shock, and on board, she is confronted with Japanese who also act differently.



Her compass, which Jingjing always used to orient herself, seems to be broken. The Party in China is responsible for making the decisions. Although the student has criticized this, she never called the government's basic existence into question. And now? "I don't know," she said, "when I am back in Beijing, I need to check some things." The officials claim, for example, that almost all Taiwanese long to be taken back into China. Nevertheless, Jingjing met Tarko from Taipei, who is her age. He told her a completely different version of the story. Except for a pair of die-hards, almost everyone else is praying for independence on the island. Which version of the story reflects the truth?



There are also other international students on board, besides Jingjing and Tarko. The Palestinian student, Iba; the American, Tyler; and the South Korean, Narae. They are all in their early 20s. The program uses scholarships to recruit young people from conflict zones (yes, the U.S. makes the list). Four days before the beginning of the trip, Jingjing's father died. Her mother and two sisters suddenly had lost their bread-winner. Nevertheless she still did not cancel the trip. "This trip is the chance of my lifetime," she said quietly with a light tremble in her voice. Her mother forced her not to throw the ticket away. Her mother plans to make ends meet by baking and selling bread in Beijing.



When the seminars discuss hefty topics like democracy, human rights and non-violence, she sometimes looks like she is somewhere else. Then she thinks of home. Will she have to stop studying English and political science because the university is too expensive? Her dream to become the mayor of her city one day “because we have to replace the unscrupulous and corrupt cadre that’s in power now” recedes into the distance. She often abruptly breaks out into tears, and then the other students try to comfort her.



Even those people from rich countries can now better understand the daily realities of poverty. In Sri Lanka, the Peace Boat delegation visited a village which the civil war refugees had rebuilt. Tyler, who studies Communication in Minneapolis, felt the physical difference. He noticed: "You can see the horrible effects of war and flight whether you see it on television or whether you are standing in the middle of it. But here you can also feel it, touch it, hear it, and smell it." The students met a family who collected bonbon wrappers in order to iron them out and to glue them to the walls of their house as a replacement for wall-paper. This overwhelming desire for creating beauty, even in the middle of the conflict, greatly impressed the students. Since then, they constantly bring up the subject of the refugees as a topic for their discussions.



Jasna Bastic, the course leader and initiator of the study program, has experience with crises and conflicts on board. "Our motto 'peace is possible' does not mean that there are no conflicts." She teaches the students how to analyze the causes, the patterns and the main actors in order to propose possible solutions. Jasna herself learned the hard way. She was born and raised in Sarajewo, trained as a journalist, and then had to flee the Serbian attack during the Bosnian war. Because of her personal history, she has become a trusted person for the students on the Peace Boat. From her deep understanding of these topics, she asks the right questions. With her care-free tenderness, she is like an older sister who praises and also comforts the students.



“The ship is like a microcosm,” she says, “just like a small copy of the larger world, which we circle around on our trip.” Researchers have determined that a civil war lasts on average seven years. The gale in the seminar, however, lets up after only a few hours. On the open sea, it is easier to talk honestly. In a small ceremony near the railing of deck 9, the misunderstandings are wrapped up in small packages and thrown overboard. Peace? Peace. Until something else comes up. Everyone has learned new things about each other. It is like the sea: the greatest dangers do not lie at the surface, but rather in the deepest parts of the water.