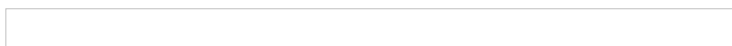


By

Jonathan Evans

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My family and I recently took a trip to Japan. It was a gift for my wife, although people have questioned how much of a gift it was since we brought our one- and four-year-old girls. Sure, it was a crazy time, but we're a pretty crazy family. And it did prove to be the right kind of crazy for us.



The Evans family on the Narita Express train

Japan is such an incredible country and culture. From a user experience perspective, it contains so many features I feel like we should adopt into our culture— from the street crossing signs to the toilets. But for this post, I wanted to focus on how we survived in a land where we could very easily have gotten lost, but found our way through technology.

The thing is, we don't know Japanese. At all. We went through the motions of trying to learn some phrases before we left, but we completely failed on that front. So how do you travel around a country where you don't know the language and can't even recognize the symbols? For us, the solution was Google Maps.

Before entering Japan, we rented a portable Wi-Fi device. From all the research we'd done, this was cheaper than working something out with our cell phone company or getting a SIM card or phone while there. This way, we were thinking we could Skype people as necessary. We didn't realize that we'd be using it mainly for finding our way.

Portable Wi-Fi device we used around Japan

## Traveling around Japan

We also got a Japan Rail Pass before entering the country and we only traveled by train our entire time there. However, there are a LOT of train options in Japan and the Japan Rail Pass does not cover all of them. That meant a bit of plotting and planning was required as we went along. While the many resources to learn about the different train services are not too overwhelming, it can be when a four-year-old is screaming at you and a one-year-old is jumping on your head. So while we figured out locations we wanted to visit, we didn't always take time to map out how to get there.

## Enter google maps

We started relying on Google Maps while in Tokyo. Like any addiction, it started with one good experience: we wanted to see if we could take the Tokyo monorail. Sure enough, according to Google Maps we could walk to a station and it had the road names in English for us. Sure, most Tokyo signs give both the Japanese and English options, but it was nice to have English front and center for us. Moreover, when we reached Osaka, English wasn't everywhere. Having a semi-interpreter of street signs was very convenient.

### Temple and Tokyo Tower

Temple and Tokyo Tower

Looking at Google Maps, we saw that the Tokyo Tower was walkable from one of the stations. After going to the top of the Tower, we got to thinking we could do a bunch of side jaunts using Google Maps. We left our tour books behind and relied on our notes within OneNote for places we wanted to go. We then plugged them into Google Maps as we headed out the door for the day.

One of the best side trips we took was to a restaurant we ate at in the Ginza neighborhood in Kyoto. We were about to head back for the day, but did a quick search on Google Maps and found a review in English that enticed us. Of course, relying on Google Maps like this wasn't without its difficulties. We found that restaurant after we had gone to another one that ended up being closed for dinner.

In fact, Google Maps actually led us astray twice. One time it definitely complicated our trip. We were on our last day in Kyoto, and had several hours before our train to Osaka. We had an appointment to get a tour of the Imperial Palace (which I highly recommend), and then were planning on going to Sanjusangen-do—a temple with 1000 Buddha sculptures (which, again, I recommend. But I'd recommend everything we did. Like I said, an amazing trip). According to Google, it was close to the Palace. A perfect outing for our day.

Google Maps was insisting that the temple was inside Kyoto City Hall. We did check, but it clearly wasn't there. We were able to figure out where the temple was by typing in the actual address. As it turns out, it was right close to where we had been staying, so we could have gone to it at the beginning of the day. Still, we made the best of this alternative location. We got to try an amazing bakery right there and watched the installation of this crazy astronaut/robot/music note statue. Then we made our way to Sanjusangen-do. We didn't have

much time to spend there, but at least we were able to see it.

## Kyoto City Hall

Kyoto City Hall

The second time Google Maps led us astray was not as rewarding. We arrived in an area called Hakone, and looked at Google Maps for where the ryokan (a type of hotel) we were staying at was located. It told us it was a few blocks away, which surprised us since we thought it was close to the train station. But away we went, following the mostly-reliable Google Maps. As I lugged bags with two weeks' worth of stuff for four people up several very steep blocks, I began to understand the term "luggage," and I began to lose faith in Google Maps.

And sure enough, when we reached our destination, it was wrong. Google Maps led us to a condemned building, stating that was our ryokan. I was very thankful when my wife was able to explain our situation to someone nearby and discover where the ryokan truly was: across the street from the train station. When we finally got to the ryokan, we really appreciated being able to relax.

## Relaxing at the ryokan

Relaxing at the ryokan

So did we stop using Google Maps after that? No, but we were definitely more guarded, double-checking things in guidebooks before heading out the door. And fortunately, it didn't lead us astray again, although it didn't really work in Tokyo Disneyland. Get on those amusement park maps, Google!

## Mickey Mouse statue at Tokyo Disneyland

Mickey Mouse statue at Tokyo Disneyland

# Conclusion

In my younger years, I travelled significantly using my trusty travel guide books and maps. Now I'm an old man with kids, and I'm thankful to have technology I can rely on to be able to travel in lands where I can't communicate well. The only problem is when that technology lets you down. It's easy to get mad at Google Maps, but to be quite honest, I used to get lost when I used the travel guides. And the percentage it let us down was low. As long as you can make the best of it when you get led astray, like with a giant astronaut robot with a music note for a head, it's all good. Just hope there's not a really big hill along the way.

Oh, and if you get the chance, take a trip to Japan.

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*Jonathan is both an Interaction Design and User Research pro, as well as the semi-official tie-wearing Blink UX mascot. When not considering switching to a modeling career, Jonathan can be seen playing with his ridiculously cute family.*