



OVER THE HORIZON: ON THE ROAD IN JAPAN 2017

IAN HUGHES

AN UNANTICIPATED JOURNEY

One doesn't need to think too deeply to come up with labels for our four trips to **Japan** to date.

The first, back in 2008, was *Hughesy's introduction to Japan and some of Japan's greatest hits*.

We followed it in 2012 with the *two-week Rail Pass trip* and probably decided that two weeks on the tracks was *just a tad* too long.

2013 was the *Elvis Costello Spinning Songbook trip* while two years later we had a week on the rails *heading south from Sapporo*.

This time, it's *the trip that wasn't going to happen or the trip that wasn't going to happen that way*.

Under *Hughesy's aim for a visit every eighteen months to two-and-a-bit years*, we were due to go, but the Tour Organiser was not overly keen.

If we were going at all, we were going later in the year.

Sometime in the first half of 2017 *Someone* needed to renew her passport, which was best done over there rather than through the **Consulate** in **Cairns**.

Someone wasn't inclined to pack *Hughesy* with the luggage.

It would be a *catch up with friends and family without having to worry about non-Japanese speakers* trip.

And if 2017 ever took place at all, it was going to be a different kettle of fish from previous visits.

Previous trips all involved the **JR Rail Pass**, and the word from over there was that expatriates were no longer able to access the pass's very generous concessions.

How generous?

We'll get to that in a minute.

Taking the **Rail Pass** out of the equation didn't mean that we wouldn't be going.

Some sectors of the **Japanese** rail network offer similar passes valid within their own theatre of operations, and they may still be available to expatriates.

The terms and conditions vary, but they're worth investigating further.

So that was one possibility.

Alternatively, having flown into **Kansai International**, we could fly to **Sapporo** again, spend a week also exploring **Hokkaidō** on buses and local rail lines and fly back to **Kōbe**.

Another option would involve catching a ferry to **Shikoku** or **Kyūshū** with the same sort of *bus and local lines itinerary* around the island.

Then again, we could vary our point of arrival, fly into **Narita**, base ourselves in **Tōkyō**, and work day trips around the city and out into the surrounding countryside.

Or, having landed at **Kansai International**, we could confine ourselves to the region.

Since that embraces **Kōbe**, **Ōsaka** and **Kyōto**, you're not going to run it out of things to see and places to go.

Temple freaks who limit themselves to **Kyōto** are looking at something like two thousand different religious sites – around four hundred **Shintō** shrines and sixteen hundred **Buddhist** temples. Add a wealth of palaces, gardens and examples of traditional architecture in one of the best-preserved cities in **Japan**, and there's plenty to keep *Hughes* occupied.

The average visitor, not needing to go *quite* that far (*just the best bits, thanks*) is not going to run out of options.

Then, in the unlikely event that you do, the obvious workaround involves a return visit to the places visited in spring or the *sakura* season later in the year for the *coloured leaves* in autumn.

So there were plenty of options for the future, and they don't all involve long sweeping *shinkansen* swoops from **Kōbe** to **Kitakami** or **Kagoshima** to **Ōsaka**.

Shinkansen travel, under normal circumstances, is not cheap.

That's where the **Rail Pass** is handy, but, we thought, that was a thing of the past.

Two phone calls changed all that.

I wasn't privy to the first when *Madam* called one of her acquaintances to catch up on travel plans.

She had the passport to renew and had spotted an attractive fly over for this much then fly back free of charge package in a Jetstar sale.

The phone call revealed an interesting, previously unrealised, point about **Rail Passes**.

Expatriates could still acquire one before the end of March and use it before the end of June.

The second phone call reached me in Perth, where I was following the Bruce Springsteen tour.

News that *Madam* could still access a **Rail Pass** and we could fly to **Japan** for \$499 return was followed by an almost rhetorical question.

Did I want to go to Japan in the first half of 2017?

It was, almost, the ultimate no-brainer. Of course I wanted to go.

Another week spent riding the rails zooming up and down **Honshū**. Why not?

So I spent the next three weeks of the Bruce Odyssey safe in the knowledge that we were slated (and booked) for an unanticipated trip to **Japan** in May.

A further surprise followed my return. I'd only been back in Bowen a day or two when the next no-brainer arrived. *Which way did I want to go with the Rail Pass? One week? Or two?*

After all, it would probably be the last time we will be able to access one.

On that basis, two was the *obvious no need for consideration answer*, but subsequent suggestions of changes in policy mean that it might not quite be the last time. It seems the authorities may relent in cases where a **Japanese** national has been living overseas for a significant period.

One suspects that *Madam's* twenty-plus years will prove *long enough*, but the devil lies in the yet to be revealed detail.

While *Madam* was firmly in the *two weeks is a week too long camp*, I reside in the *too much is barely enough* school of thought.

The decision to go for the fortnight *this time around* probably represents a reasonable compromise.

Given a week, and starting from **Kōbe**, I would probably have pushed for starting with the same leg that appears on the schedule below as Travel **Kōbe** > **Aomori**: **Kōbe** to **Tōkyō** before lunch; **Tōkyō** to **Aomori** in the afternoon.

My Day Two would have taken us to and fro under the **Tsugaru Strait** on the new **Hokkaidō Shinkansen**, with some time in the uplands behind **Hakodate**.

I would have followed that on Days Three, Four, Five and Six making swoops along the main *shinkansen* lines down through, **Nagano** and **Okayama** to **Kyūshū**, and back to **Kōbe** on Day Seven.

That would have been maxi-train, minimal sightseeing.

A fortnight means we can take things a little easier, and the front end is heavy on the *what Hughesy initially preferred*.

The corollary is that the rest of the trip covers places *Madam* hasn't been and couldn't manage without the pass, filtered through enough content to keep *Hughesy* interested.

Apart from the odd *Which would you prefer*, and the odd *How would you like* The Author's input into the itinerary that appears below has been minimal.

And, finally, there's the small matter of what all this costs. Thanks to variations in exchange rates and such, that's tricky.

But according to [Wikipedia](#), a fourteen day pass officially costs ¥52,000.

We managed to find ours for ¥46,000 each. In the course of collecting detail that would be needed for **Travelogue** purposes I acquired a timetable for each of leg where we were travelling on something that required a specific date and time.

When we get there we'll just catch a local train to such and such doesn't enter into that side of things.

[HyperDia](#), the timetable website I consulted, includes the fare along with the options for getting from A to B, so I made a note of how much each leg cost, added it to the spreadsheet and came up with a total of ¥78,610.

So it's probably safe to say that our ¥46,000 delivered around ¥80,000 worth of travel. Quite a saving.



So, the itinerary:

May 7, 2017 Travel **Bowen** > Cairns

May 8, 2017 Travel JQ 15 Cairns > Kansai International; Transfer Kansai International > Kōbe

May 9, 2017 Trip Preparation

May 10, 2017 Travel **Kōbe** > Aomori

May 11, 2017 **Aomori** > Oirase > Aomori

May 12, 2017 **Aomori** > ShinHakodate > Mori > ShinHakodate > Aomori

May 13, 2017 Travel **Aomori-** > Tsuruoka

May 14, 2017 Tsuruoka > Mt Haguro (Dewa Sanzan) > Tsuruoka

May 15, 2017 Travel Tsuruoka > Ginzan Onsen > Yamagata

May 16, 2017 Travel Yamagata > Nagano > Obuse > Nagano

May 17, 2017 Travel Nagano > Narai > Nagoya

May 18, 2017 Travel Nagoya > Kōbe > Okayama

May 19, 2017 Travel Okayama > Matsue

May 20, 2017 Travel Matsue > Kokura > Moji > Shimonoseki > Kokura

May 21, 2017 Travel Kokura > Yufuin

May 22, 2017 Travel Yufuin > Hakata

May 23, 2017 Travel Hakata > ShinKōbe

May 24, 2017 **Kōbe**; Travel JQ 16 Kansai International > Cairns

May 25, 2017 Arrive **Cairns**; Travel Cairns > Bowen



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THE PRELIMINARIES

[Bowen > Cairns](#)

[Cairns > Kansai International > Kōbe](#)

[Preparation Day in Kōbe](#)

[Kōbe > Tōkyō > Aomori](#)

BOWEN > CAIRNS > KANSAI

Sunday 7 May 2017 Bowen > Cairns

After circumstances had caught us out on each of the last few excursions, quiet, methodical preparation, in my case with the assistance of checklists was certainly the way to go.

Packing is certainly easier when you're able to work from precedents.

I looked at the last three packing lists, made allowances for spring rather than autumn or almost winter and sorted accordingly.

As a result, there were minimal calls to remove items from the *Coppertone Container*.

In the end, I ended up getting more than I bargained for, once *Hughesy's wear these inside the hotel shoes*, the aeroplane blanket and the *rest your neck* pillow went into the other side of the *Coppertone Container*.

That is, of course, the piece of luggage that will accompany us on the two-week train leg.

Suitcases were, by and large signed, sealed and delivered on Saturday night and the only issue before Departure Day was the absence of the *Cat-Feeding Neighbour*.

He had been home earlier in the afternoon and had then skipped in and out before we could catch him with the extra packet of *Mr P's Special Diet*. There were a few other requests to go with it, so it wasn't a matter of just leave it at the front door.

Sunday dawned with *Hughesy* in **The Office** making a final check of the **Trip Spreadsheet**, with copies sent to my brother and acquaintances who had expressed an interest in seeing where we were going this time.

Too easy, I thought.

As it turns out, I should have thought to convert it from **Numbers** to a **PDF** file before we left.

That wasn't an insurmountable issue, given the likely availability of wi-fi in **Cairns**.

There was also a minor administrative issue with a letter that needed to be sent from **Cairns** since I'd forgotten to post it on Friday.

Once *Madam* surfaced, we worked through the next hour and a half systematically and methodically, and it looks like we got out of the house without issues with things we've left behind or forgotten to check.

We also managed to relocate two cats from their preferred indoor environment without too much drama.

No *drama*, but obvious signs of *feline resentment and dissent*.

The People's Republic of The Little House of Concrete is not, however, a democratic institution where feline issues are concerned. And the non-democratic nature of the interactions is a two-way process.

We might even have managed the planned seven-thirty departure if we'd caught up with *The Neighbour* on Saturday, but it would probably have been a close-run thing.

The clock on the multifunction box on the top of the dashboard is several minutes fast, so it wasn't *really* 8:08 when we backed out of the driveway.

When *Madam* glanced at her watch as we ran past the **Rio Don**, it was eight o'clock, and the dashboard reckoned it was 10:23 when we hit the **Ring Road** in **Townsville**.

That made it two and a quarter hours out of the driveway when we started on the **Townsville avoidance loop**.

The only issue as we ran into **Townsville** was the location for a possible toilet stop.

It's not as if there was a shortage of candidates.

We knew full well that there were a couple of shopping centres north of the **Bohle**, rest areas at **Bluewater** and **Francis Creek**, and another possible stop at the **Frosty Mango**.

Francis Creek was probably too far, but the consensus was that we had plenty of options and would grab the first convenient one.

We didn't, however, realise that substantial roadworks had reconfigured the northern end of the **Ring Road**, and we reached **Yabulu** without laying eyes on a shopping centre.

Maybe the fact that the last stretch of **Ring Road** didn't show up on the **GPS** should have alerted us.

But since the rest area at **Bluewater** was still operational, that one wasn't an issue.

The state of the road, however, was, so we pulled over again at the **Frosty Mango** to check whether the tyres looked OK.

Then, a few more clicks along the way, a little sticker over the number of kilometres to **Francis Creek** suggested the rest area there was closed for renovations.

Which it proved to be, though the closure was not an issue.

And discussions about the possible trauma suffered by *The Rowdy Niece* when news of *Hughesy's* impending arrival and last-day appointments took us past the scene of the accident back in 2013.

Rowdy had been in the car that day.

So the pre-lunch portion the northward leg wasn't free of things to remark on, but they were hardly matters of great importance.

Except for *Rowdy*, who finds the imaginative ramblings of *Mad Uncle Hughesy* utterly incomprehensible.

She wouldn't be the only one.

She may have switched her musical allegiances from **One Direction** (*a.k.a. One Dimension*) to **Justin Bieber**, and may well have moved on again, but certain notions persist in the *Hughesy* cranium.

Japanese university students have almost certainly moved on beyond the sixties student radical days and **Japanese Red Army Factions**.

Anyone familiar with Australian nicknaming practice will realise that *Rowdy* probably denotes the exact opposite. In a previous incarnation, *The Rowdy Niece* (*a.k.a. Rowd*) was characterised as *Quiet, Observant and Studious Girl*.

Throw those previous notions together, and you end up with *Hughesy's* concept of a bunch of late teenage **Japanese** students plotting the overthrow of **the Establishment**, with **Herbert Marcuse's One Dimensional Man** as one of their key manifestoes.

The aim, of course, would be to establish *the dictatorship of the One-Dimensional proletariat*.

Anyone, let alone a *Rowdy Niece* would find all that almost incomprehensible.

Hughesy finds it more than mildly amusing.

Once we'd zoomed through **Ingham**, and crossed the **Cardwell Range** we could, I suppose, have veered away from crab snags for lunch in **Cardwell**, but chose not to.

Chose not to refuel there, either since the trip indicator suggested we had enough juice to get us all the way to **Cairns**.

Intermittent drizzle between **Tully** and **Gordonvale** mightn't have suited *The Driver*, but it did wash various bits of bird poop off the exterior of the vehicle.

The other point of post-**Cardwell** interest involved our first serious use of the inbuilt **GPS** navigation.

While it might not be her real name, we've dubbed the helpful voice, whose activity to date had been mildly irritating repeated warnings about town entry points and school zones, *Karen*.

But she is more than a minor irritation that pops up around **Bowen** and on the occasional road trip.

Up to this point, of course, we haven't needed the navigation side of the **GPS** because (by and large) we've known where we were going.

Now, with the destination at **89 Lake Street Cairns** entered into the navigation system, she informed us that would be following the highway until we turned left at somewhere called **Mighell**.

That rung a bell, but I couldn't, for the life of me, remember why.

As it turns out, it's the road junction just before Innisfail.

Turn right, and you'll loop back under the way you came on your way to **South Johnstone** and **Paronella Park**. Turn left, and you're all set for Innisfail and points beyond.

Still, the exact identity and general location of **Mighell** gave me something to think about between the **Cardwell** and **Tully**.

After that, the celestial carwash and assorted reminiscences took over, right up to the point where we looped around **Gordonvale** and headed for **Woree**, where we were slated to take an exit on the left. That would have brought us into the **Cairns CBD via Portsmith**.

Given the number of traffic lights on Mulgrave Road I reckoned it was the way to go, but *Madam doesn't like that way*.

Karen, up to this point, had been almost entirely silent and since we hadn't utilised her very often neither of us was aware of her *modus operandi* and the accuracy thereof.

As a result, we turned off thirty metres before the exit, had *Karen* recalculate the track, missed that because the driver was disinclined to *turn right here*, and headed for **Mulgrave Road**.

That didn't quite fit in with *Karen's* expectations, but we ignored repeated requests to *turn around immediately* until she eventually recalculated the route and got us right to **89 Lake Street** without major hassle.

Our accommodation, however, was at **189 Lake Street**, and if we'd entered the data correctly, *Karen* might have been inclined towards the **Mulgrave Road** track anyway.

We will at the **Comfort Inn** slightly before three, and headed out for a social call to the *Ex-Cat Feeder* just after ten past.

And that, boys and girls, was where we started to appreciate *Karen*.

Hughesy's days of giving navigational directions seem to be well and truly over.

Make one turn, get the what to do next information, and then get a clear and concise and double-barrelled set of instructions from the time you're about three hundred metres out.

Magic.

Far better than *Hughesy's* tentative suppositions, followed by *Madam's Are you sure?* and the subsequent hesitation or snap judgement that results in subsequent failure to take the right turn.

We reached our destination just before the anticipated 3:30 arrival time then left just after five, headed for an appointment with an old acquaintance from University days who had the singular misfortune to be *Hughesy's* first post-graduation flatmate.

We were about halfway back to the motel when realised that I'd left my sunglasses behind but fortunately decided against turning back to collect them right now.

We were still well short of the destination when *The Ex-Geologist* rang to advise that he was on the doorstep a tad earlier than anticipated.

Since the relatively cramped motel room with a single chair isn't the ideal place for three people to sit and chat, allowing two old acquaintances to catch up, it made sense to head straight out for dinner.

A lengthy ramble brought us to a reasonable *pizza trattoria* on **The Esplanade**.

Along the way, *Ex-Geologist* was able to point out several points of local interest, including a local identity busking on a street corner. *Johnno's* rendition of *Too Much Monkey Business* wasn't a chapter and verse reading of the **Chuck Berry** original, but it was close enough for a rock'n' roll.

The sighting prompted lengthy reminiscences about the **North Queensland music scene** once we were seated and had the ordering out of the way.

But it wasn't a late night.

An early rise and a long drive, coupled with the pre-trip nerves meant *Madam* was ready for an early night, though she wanted a relaxing soak in the bathtub before she retired.

For my part, I was out like a light just after eight.

Monday, 8 June 2017 Cairns International > Kansai International > Kōbe

On the fifth time around, you wouldn't expect the overseas travel leg to spring too many surprises.

You've done it before, more or less around the same time of day, aboard the same carrier, into the same destination.

Provided nothing goes drastically wrong, that shouldn't be too much to remark on.

That's more or less the way it panned out, at least as far as the actual travel was concerned.

Reception was closed by the time we returned last night, and I had two questions that needed answers.

The first, the significant administrative matter of a **WiFi password**, could've been dealt with if I had bothered to look on top of the phone beside my side of the bed.

The second was not quite as straightforward.

I'd neglected to send away all the relevant pages relating to a post-cyclone insurance claim, and forgotten to take the rest of them with me when we headed to the **Post Office** on Friday.

So I brought them with me.

Posting them back to Australia from **Japan** might have been interesting, but it made more sense to send them from **Cairns**.

So I needed an envelope and stamp.

The first item was easy.

There was one in **Reception**, and I was directed towards a news agency two blocks away which sold stamps and had a convenient mailbox nearby.

But a walk around the two blocks revealed that the newsagent had departed, though the remaining signage on the door indicated that it had in fact sold stamps.

Back at the motel, I called into **Reception**, working on the principle that local knowledge was probably better than online investigation, but that's not quite the way it turned out.

The response to direct me towards obvious generic choices: the **Post Office** or a convenience store, but failed to deliver anything more definite than that.

Back in the room, a squiz at **Maps** and **Google** offered a couple of possible prospects, though the nearest, a service station down towards the defunct newsagency, was always going to be a long shot.

But it was significantly closer than anything else and seemed to be worth investigating on that basis.

It probably comes as no surprise to learn that service station convenience stores don't sell stamps.

There was a cluster of alternatives over towards last night's dinner venue, and I wasn't inclined to wait until the **Post Office** opened so I set out for what looked like developing into the **Cairns** equivalent of the regular Monday morning walk.

If it was no surprise to learn that service stations don't sell stamps and that newsagents that feature in **Reception's** local knowledge have been known to close it probably comes as no surprise that convenience stores mentioned in a *Google Maps* search aren't always an ongoing viable entity.

That's the way it turned out at the first contender in **Abbott Street**.

Talking myself towards **The Esplanade**. I hadn't quite reached the intended destination when I came to **Tourist Information**; I figured I might as well ask there as well.

"it may be a stupid question," I began.

"And you may get a stupid answer," was a predictable response.

But the "No" that followed the question was in turn followed by the solution to my little problem.

A block back from **The Esplanade**, *down there on the corner*, a tobacconist sells stamps.

And there was a big red post box right outside his front door.

So there it was.

Problem solved at the only place in downtown **Cairns** (at least, according to the proprietor) that sells stamps if you're not willing to wait for the **Post Office** to open.

So the letter was on its way, and the ramble brought me back to the hotel around the time we were scheduled to start preparations for the next leg of the journey.

The final pack and check bit took a little under fifteen minutes, and we were slightly late ending over the keys at **Reception** on the way out.

Karen adroitly delivered us back to the rendezvous with *Hughes's* sunglasses and repeated the process on the way to **Betta Airport Parking**, so we were on the ground at **Cairns International** just before ten.

While Check-in for **JQ15** hadn't opened, there was a significant queue that turned into a substantial one over the next ten minutes or so.

We had a slight glitch when we checked in, a request for a look at our itinerary on the basis that **Passport Control** might want to see it when we landed in **Kansai**.

That wasn't a drama since *Madam* had it on her phone, but she and her phone wouldn't be with me when I fronted the **Foreigners** section, would she?

There was an itinerary somewhere in *Hughesy's* email, but she sent another one before we entered the **Australian Exit Procedures** so it would be sitting on the top of my *In Box*, just in case.

As it turned out, of course, it wasn't needed.

But without that email, it probably would have been.

What came next, around two and a half hours before boarding, and seven and a half hours in the air passed without significant interruption once breakfast had gone down, and the mid-air paperwork gave way to *a semi-reasonable when your expectations aren't very high* lunch.

The cabin lights went down after that, and *Madam* dozed while *Hughesy* alternated between a light snooze, the odd hard **Sudoku**, and passages from the latest instalment of **Matthew Condon's** investigative recount of corruption in and around the **Queensland Police Force** through the period covered by the **Fitzgerald Inquiry**.

I might have been able to get all the way through a relatively slim volume if the author hasn't decided to venture into a detailed analysis of what appear to be well-organised paedophile rings that seemed to have reached well up into the upper echelons of the Queensland establishment.

And seem to have been quite brazen about it.

It's disturbing stuff, and I found it difficult to read more than a couple of pages before I needed a break from the sordid detail.

And, all the while, I kept an eye on our steady progress across the vast expanse of the Pacific on the flight information screen.

From time to time there was also the chance to check on the approach of nightfall, a line creeping westward that seemed to belie the fact that what I could see, looking westward through a darkened window, looked awfully like dusk had come and gone some time ago.

That impression changed when the window in front of mine lit up, though I couldn't, for the life of me, get mine to do the same thing.

That wasn't a problem as we began the descent into **Kansai**, though.

Round the point where you're told to stow the tray table, ensure your seat is upright *et cetera*, the windows magically cleared themselves.

Not that there was very much to see.

One of the things I'd been looking forward to was checking the coastline north of **Cairns** from a window seat on the left-hand side of a northbound flight, but the seat was right over the wing, and there wasn't much to see in the early afternoon sunshine as the aircraft climbed.

That changed on the descent with the shades of night well and truly descended as the lights of **Shikoku** and points beyond came into view.

While I did my best to reconcile what I could see with the data on the information screen, *Madam* was quite adamant about some of the detail despite the fact that what she was saying didn't match the evidence to hand.

If your aircraft has its nose pointed north-west, and the arrow on the screen reckons **Kōbe** is more or less north from where you are I don't see how **Mount Rokkō** could be almost exactly at right angles to your line of flight.

But what would I know? I'm not a local.

Once we were on the ground, the usual mad scramble took us through to **Immigration**, where the processing proceeded smoothly enough to bring us to the baggage carousel well before the luggage arrived.

How much that contributed to some of what ensued is hard to say, but I think it had some underlying bearing.

Despite the fact that we are waved straight through **Customs**, there were things to do before we boarded the **Airport Limousine Shuttle** to **Kōbe**.

Two things, in fact.

One involved the purchase of a **prepaid SIM card** for *Madam's iPhone*.

Once it was in place, she'd have access to data and **Skype**, and we wouldn't have to borrow *The Mother's* mobile.

I was left to guard the luggage in front of the **Arrivals** board while *Madam* headed off to buy the SIM card, but the shop wanted a credit card rather than cash.

Not having been there, and not speaking the language anyway, I'm not sure *why* that should be the case, but that's how it was.

But there was an alternative.

Somewhere over on my left (the shop was on the right) there was a vending machine that dispensed **SIM cards**, didn't want to know about credit cards, and only took cash.

But only in ¥1000 notes.

Madam, having arrived with her hard currency in large denominations, was light on for ¥1000s, and the machine wasn't big on those large denominations.

Didn't, in fact, *want to know about them at all*.

She could, however, buy what she was after in **Sannomiya** tomorrow.

As a result, buying the **SIM card** at the airport went into the *Too Hard* basket, and we set off to get the shuttle tickets that would get us into **Kōbe**.

Then, having bought the tickets, *Someone* had the ¥1000 notes to feed the vending machine, but there was a bus ready, waiting and about to depart.

That looked, to me at least, to be the way to go.

As we turned to head that way, a semi-open backpack deposited a package on the ground, and while *Hughesy* wheeled two suitcases and *Madam's* carry-on across to the bus, she set about making sure nothing else liberated itself from the backpack.

That, in turn, meant that when she arrived the carry-on, which contained important material including **Rail Pass** vouchers, was bound for the luggage compartment rather than coming on board with us.

Snap judgements when the bus is about to leave and all that.

So, once the bus was underway, *Someone* had plenty to ponder as *Hughesy* attempted to get himself into a composing the **Travelogue** frame of mind.

I was groping towards some statement about the mindset that comes with knowing where you are and what's on the immediate horizon while *Someone* fretted about the various possibilities that *Hughesy* was inclined to relegate to the imponderables.

One of those was the possibility that we were headed towards **Rokkō Island** before **Sannomiya**, which might allow some ne'er-do-well to make off with the carry-on.

For my part, I reckoned the old dude who handled the baggage would have told me **Rokkō Island**, then **Sannomiya** rather than confirming **Sannomiya** when I gave it as our destination (without, of course, a **Japanese** speaker within earshot).

But, as it turned out we were headed straight for **Sannomiya**, and just after we alighted, I had something along the lines of what I'd been looking for.

After we'd collected the luggage, handing back the label stubs that identified us as the rightful owners of these three pieces we headed down to the nearest set of traffic lights.

Looking across the road, **Sannomiya Station** itself lay over on my left.

I knew that because the bus depot, where we would have been catching the courtesy shuttle to the **Okura** or **Meriken Park Oriental** was almost right in front of us on the other side of the road.

Just to the right was the **Lawson Station** where I could have bought beer or snacks if we'd been staying at either of those establishments.

You don't find vending machines in flash 4.5-star hotels.

I reckoned I was pretty right when I identified the side street that leads up from the **Lawson** towards the train lines as the route we'd be taking to the hotel.

There would be a zigzag around a couple of blocks, and we'd be at the **Villa Fontaine Sannomiya**.

*It was either that street past the **Lawson** or the next one down.*

There were vague traces of that one in the memory bank as well.

And I was right.

We passed the convenience store, and a downstairs bar, reached a somewhat familiar intersection at the end of the block and turned right.

That's when I found the statement I'd been groping towards.

If I'd been right on the ball, I would have stopped right there and then to grab a snapshot, but *Madam* was setting a fairly solid pace in the vanguard, so I wasn't going to stop.

And if I had, the result would have been an image of a relatively nondescript **Japanese** street in a commercial conviviality and convenience quarter.

There are thousands of them scattered through the cities across the islands, all of them very similar to what was in front of me.

Up to this point, *Gentle Reader*, apart from the people and signage around me, there was nothing that stood out and said ***Japan!***

Kansai International might be in **Japan**, but the inside of one international air terminal, once you remove the vernacular signage is much like most of the others I've passed through.

Nothing distinctive there, folks.

Once we were aboard the **Airport Limousine Shuttle**, once again, if you take out the electronic signage, there's not much to distinguish one nighttime urban landscape from another one.

And after we alighted, the immediate landscape was another reasonably busy city street.

But once I turned that corner I knew I was in **Japan**.

Thinking about it, later, I had thoughts of going back to the same order the following evening, snapping an image and pretending that was the one I should have taken, but circumstances intervened.

Trundling the *Coppertone Container* beside me, I kept going through an intersection, down another block and, *bingo!*

There's the supermarket. We're turning left and, sure enough, Villa Fontaine Sannomiya is up there towards the end of the block towards the carpark.

Turning into the lobby, there were the Union Jack chairs in front of the lifts that take you up to **Reception** on the fifth floor.

The first four are car parks.

Ten minutes later we were checked in, and *Hughesy* was thinking in terms of liquid refreshment after a quick consultation revealed we didn't need anything solid.

We'd had a late brunch, an airline catering chicken or pork lunch not that long after takeoff and a *party pie and TimTam snack* an hour and a half out from **Kansai**, so there weren't any gaping holes.

But I reckoned a beer or two while I perused the digital realm and *Madam* treated herself to another bath would be an ideal wind-down.

By this stage, it was after ten, and the supermarket was shut, but just along that familiar street, a convenience store yielded two cans of **Yebisu**, one standard and one super for less than ¥800.

They had intriguing packets with little tokens inside attached to the groove at the top of the tin that *Madam* subsequently informed me related to trains.

Over the course of the next fortnight, I might wind up with the full set.



PREPARATION DAY

Tuesday 9 May 2017 Kōbe

Or, **Administration Day.**

Madam had three tasks to complete while *Hughesy* had only one, though the first of *Madam's* trio required my presence.

We needed to start by converting the **Rail Pass Exchange Order** vouchers into usable travel documents.

That's a lengthy process that will tie up an operator in a **JR ticket office** for five to ten minutes, so it's best to do it outside of the rush hour and other busy periods.

Six o'clock seemed about right to us, and that's more or less when we found ourselves making our way across to the ground floor of **JR Sannomiya**.

There were plenty of people around at that point, but nothing like the population pressure you'd be feeling an hour or two later. Fortunately, there was no one at all in the **JR ticket office**, where a single operator had drawn the short straw for the early morning start.

He was a very pleasant young bloke who seemed to be happy to have something to do.

While there are plenty of automatic vending machines and such, *person to person interaction* in the ticketing system is a thoroughly bureaucratic process.

That's understandable when you're looking at something like a **Rail Pass**, where the voucher you bought overseas needs to be converted into something you can use.

Documentation needs to be checked, even if you're obviously *a foreigner with a non-Japanese passport*.

After all, you might be a **permanent resident**, and therefore ineligible for the cheap rail fares.

Yesterday I had been under strict orders to ensure that my passport had the appropriate visa stamp.

I couldn't see why it wouldn't. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been allowed to enter the country.

But, apparently, there are difficulties if you pass through an automated entry point.

Fortunately, the entry point at KIX is 100% human operated and *Hughesy's* passport sports a sticker advising I'm allowed to remain in the country until **6 August 2017**.

But it took our friendly ticket clerk a few seconds to find it in *Hughesy's* well-traveled passport.

After that, we had the printed card with its highly visible use by date laminated onto the actual pass document just below the personal details section of the form I'd just filled out.

Looking at it as I type, you can see the pen marks that indicate where our friendly clerk has verified all the details: *Title; Given, Middle and Family Names; Nationality; and Passport Number* with a pen stroke over each letter or digit.

Bureaucracy writ large, folks.

After that, with our **Rail Passes** transferred to our hot little hands, we would have been right to start buying tickets.

But another customer was waiting, so we let her through first.

Because buying a ticket is not as straightforward as it might seem.

It's not a matter of just rocking up and asking for a ticket from *Point A* to *Point B* on *such and such a date*. There are vending machines that (presumably) look after that sort of request.

But vending machines don't handle **Rail Passes** or requests for strings of linked tickets on a multi-stage journey.

Having presented the pass, one then reels off a series of services, complete with the train ID (*Hikari 464*, *Hayabusa 23* or *Limited Express Super Hokuto 7*) while your ticket clerk records the details in writing.

Once the list is complete, he or she turns the attention to the computer terminal, determines whether what you're after is available, then prints out the actual tickets, which are duly checked against the written record.

And, of course, if it turns out there are no reserved seats left on a particular service, you then move on to discuss the alternatives.

Finally, having completed the ticketing process, the results are presented to you, in the order you requested them, with the details duly repeated so you can check that these are exactly what you requested.

Given the intricacies of a time-consuming process, it should come as no surprise to learn we took care to allow whoever was waiting to get what they were looking for before we asked for the next leg.

Still, we managed to get our tickets for the vital second-last leg in **Kyūshū**, followed by Wednesday's **Kōbe > Tōkyō > Aomori shinkansen** leg, Friday's return trip under the **Tsugaru Strait**, and the next couple of legs from **Aomori** to **Tsuruoka** and on to **Yamagata**.

We could probably have done more, but by this point there were two operators, three people waiting and the third one was an *obvious foreigner carrying a QBD Bookshop bag and a Lonely Planet Travel Guide*.

It seemed reasonable to assume he'd be holding one of the operators up for quite a while, so it was obviously time to head back to the hotel for showers and breakfast.

After breakfast *Madam* headed off to the wilds of **Myodani** while I did my best to wrangle first drafts of the last few days into a something approximating a final version.

The last thing we want is to find ourselves back in downtown Bowen wrestling the early part of the odyssey into shape while more recent details slip from the memory.

So that's how I spent the next four hours.

Madam was gone just after nine and reappeared just before one with news that everything had gone according to plan.

The Red Suitcase was securely lodged at **Myodani**, the passport process had progressed satisfactorily, and we were off to lunch with *The Mother*, who was waiting over in the **Sannomiya** shopping complex.

Someone's plans for lunch suffered a significant setback when the preferred option was closed, but there were any number of alternatives in the same complex, let alone the surrounding neighbourhood.

We ended up upstairs in the rooftop **Tooth Tooth Garden Restaurant**.

It's reputedly very popular, and the fact that we claimed the only available space in an alcove beside the entrance would tend to support the notion.

But it's difficult to see why.

Maybe it's the setting, or *the buzz* because what we ended up with, while reasonably adequate, didn't dance, sing or blow its own trumpet.





Maybe the *a la carte* is better, but the salad was salad, the pasta with *vongole* was average, and Hughesy's steak was *a minimalist exercise in cheffy presentation*.

And the glass of **Californian Cabernet** poured in front of us was about the size you get when you're given a sample to approve before you proceed on to the rest of the bottle.

Good **Cabernet**, niggardly portion.

But it was obviously popular.

A steady stream of new arrivals, many of whom must have booked because they seemed to outnumber the outgoing, appeared to verify the notion.

After lunch, much to *The Mother's* concern, I was left to navigate back to **Villa Fontaine** on my own as the others continued the passport process.

Under other circumstances, the concern might be justified, but following the curve of the footpath around the building brought me to last night's bus stop and from there the rest as easy peasy.

And from there, after an afternoon *nana nap*, the story was much the same as before.

I alternated between tapping and dictating **Travelogue**, got told about the afternoon developments on the passport front and went back to tapping and editing until dinner time.

That rolled around a little before someone who'd had a busy day would have preferred, but if we were going to **KoKoRoYa** we probably needed to get there reasonably early.

There was, however, one more administrative detail we needed to deal with.

While we had already collected some of the tickets we'd be needing over the next fortnight (with the most important being the ones that got us onto the very popular *Yufuin-no-mori* on Sunday week), there were still a swag of seats we needed to book.

We've been caught that way before.

While there are a couple of legs where there's no alternative to the non-reserved seating on the *shinkansen*, and local lines don't need reservations anyway, it's better to be safe than sorry.

So we were always going to be making a second visit to the ticket office before dinner to fill in some of the gaps.

The rest, we figured, would be caught up on Saturday, when an hour and a quarter in **Akita** should take care of whatever remained unbooked.

The visit yielded an unexpected bonus.

The efficient girl behind the counter was part way through the process when a chance remark on our side revealed that we were travelling with a large suitcase, rather than the carry-on items the traveller can stow in the overhead racks.

Large luggage needs to go into the space behind the last row of seats in the carriage.

So, despite the fact that Efficient Girl was already about half way through processing our requests, she went back and ensured that our seats on all the legs we requested were *at the back of the carriage with the luggage space just behind us*.

There were, however, no reserved seats left on the leg in **Hokkaidō** that would deliver us back from Mori to **ShinHakodate**.

That was all right: it's not a long trip, there are non-reserved carriages on that service and, if the worst comes to the worst we may have to stand.

That would not be a problem.

So, with the next round of tickets stashed with their cousin-brothers in the ticket envelopes, we headed off to dinner at **KoKoRoYa**.



This little *izakaya* under the railway lines around the corner from the hotel was, believe it or not, the #1 rated restaurant in **Kōbe**, according to *TripAdvisor* back in 2015.

While that ranking might have slipped, the food was as good as I remembered from our last visit.

And good enough to lift someone who had been busy all day and wasn't overly keen to paroxysms of pleasure (almost).

The *pan fried slivers of corn on the cob* that arrived first off were different, interesting and definitely tasty.

The chicken dish that followed (*slices of breast with cucumber in a chilli-based sauce*) was superb/

The *two different sets of dumplings* that arrived after that as good as anything I've encountered anywhere else.

And I've been to a couple of very highly rated dumpling operations.

All this in two spaces under a railway line in **Sannomiya**.

Similar spaces in the same neighbourhood are home to bus garages and storage facilities for various enterprises.

There's also the odd *izakaya* scattered across the landscape.

A local who could visit any of them at any time would probably share his or her custom around.

But for a traveller who only lobs in the area every eighteen months to two years, it seems pointless to spend your only night in the area trying something different.

In this case, semi-familiarity hardly breeds contempt.

It's more a matter of *Hughesy's* determination to return next time we're staying at what looks to be the first night hotel of choice.

After dinner, I might have looped around the triangular block for a night time shot of that street, the one I'd neglected to take the night before.

But, on the other hand, it was drizzling, the evidence of previous precipitation would have been visible, and it would have been difficult to pass it off as *one I'd done previously* and both of us were tired.

And we had a big rail day in the morning.



WEDNESDAY 10
MAY 2017

Kōbe > Tōkyō > Aomori

And so we arrived at the first day of the rail trip.

A 10:29 departure from **ShinKōbe** meant we could take our time, and the *regular body clock factor* meant *Hughesy* was up and hitting the keyboard just after five.

Two hours on the **Travelogue**, showers, breakfast downstairs, a further session on the keyboard and a departure just after nine was the consensus game plan.

I got myself Into the shower just after even without getting quite as far as I would have liked thanks to **Grammarly** declining to save the final version of yesterday's tapping.

There was also the possibility that I might be able to pad out yesterday's details and add the bare bones details of the first

shinkansen leg during the two three-and-a-bit hour stints that would deliver us into **Tōkyō** and from there to **Aomori**.

After all, we've done the same run along the same stretch of the **Tōkaidō Shinkansen** three times around the same time of day heading north, and four times in the afternoon in the opposite direction.

It's not as if we're encountering much in the way of new territory, but, as will be seen, things didn't quite pan out that way.

With breakfast out of the way we still had a good hour before it was time to move, and at that point, *iBooks Author* had a close to final version of everything up to Monday night, and *Pages* had the beginnings of Tuesday, with the rest to be nussed out aboard *Hikari 464*.

The transfer from hotel to subway and subway to **ShinKōbe** took place without anything approaching an interesting incident.

There was, however, one point of minor interest.

Midway along the series of escalators that deliver you from the bowels of the subway system to the lofty heights of **ShinKōbe**'s *raison d'être* I spotted the *obvious foreigner with the QBD bag* from the ticket office yesterday morning.

It looked like he was wearing the same clothes he had sported yesterday morning (*fair enough, so was I*) but he was headed in the opposite direction.

Away, in other terms, from the *shinkansen* lines.

What he was doing, and where he had been was, of course, none of *Hughesy's* business but it did point out one important tip for foreigners who would prefer to remain inconspicuous.

Avoid carrying items or wearing an outfit that will make you stand out any more than you already do.

Some old dude with a QBD shopping bag will probably pass without notice in Brisbane or the Gold Coast. Here, he stood out like the proverbial *canine genitalia*.

And regardless of how many times you've been somewhere, there's always the likelihood that something you don't recall noticing before catches your eye.

We'd made our way to the level below the trains when I spotted the greenery on the other side of the big picture windows on that level.

I wandered over for another look, decided it wasn't worth a snapshot, but resolved to keep my eyes open when we headed upstairs.



When we did, I was able to verify that we were right on the edge of the hills behind downtown **Kōbe** just north of the city centre at the foot of **Mount Rokkō**.

I snapped something to illustrate the contrast between the two sides of a hillside station that sits in a small space between two tunnels (the **Rokkō** and **Kōbe** Tunnels, if you're into extraneous detail).

From its location, *The Interested Reader* may have guessed **ShinKōbe** was purpose built for the **Sanyō Shinkansen** line that morphs itself into the **Tōkaidō Shinkansen** once you hit **ShinŌsaka**.

But regardless of how you choose to label it, you're sitting on the edge of a major railway corridor.

While we waited, two things underlined how busy this stretch of *shinkansen* track is.

In the space of about fifteen minutes, four southbound trains passed through **Platform One** before anything arrived on our **Platform Two**.

When something did, it was the 10:26 *Nozumi* bound for **Tōkyō**, and its minute-long stop concealed the arrival of a fifth train across the way.

Three minutes later, *Hikari 464* had arrived, we were aboard, and the train leg had commenced.

Twelve minutes after that we were pulling up for a brief stop at **ShinŌsaka**.

Unlike **ShinKōbe**'s hillside location **ShinŌsaka** is close to the centre of a city in the middle of a broad plain. It's the western terminus of the **Tōkaidō Shinkansen** line from **Tōkyō**, and the eastern terminus of the **Sanyō Shinkansen**.

The station is about three kilometres from the city's real transport hub, the much older **Ōsaka Station** which dates back to May 1874.

If you want to be pedantic about it, **Ōsaka Station** is only served by JR's **Tōkaidō Main Line**) and the **Ōsaka Loop Line**.

On the other hand, it's next door to **Umeda** (servicing the **Hankyu**, **Hanshin**, and **Ōsaka Municipal Subway Midosuji Lines**), **Nishi-Umeda** (**Ōsaka Subway's Yotsubashi Line**) and **Higashi-Umeda Station** (the subway's **Tanimachi Line**), with the JR **Tōzai Line's Kitashinchi Station** a short walk away.

Throw that little lot in together, and you have a complex that's the busiest station in **Western Japan**, serving around two and a half million passengers every day.

It's the world's fourth-busiest railway station and also houses a terminal for overnight bus services to other centres in **Japan**.

So it's no wonder that when the authorities were looking for somewhere to put a *shinkansen* station in 1964 the engineering difficulties of running the line into the city centre weren't the only consideration.

If you alight at **ShinŌsaka**, JR's **Kyōto Line** or the **Ōsaka Subway's Midōsuji Line** will get you to the actual city centre.

And from **ShinŌsaka** another sixteen minutes saw us spotting the hotel beside **Kyōto Station** where we'd stayed in the post-concert leg of 2013's *Costello Concert trip*.

Through those twelve and sixteen minute intervals that brought us into **Ōsaka** and **Kyōto**, I'd been busy extracting digital devices from the backpack.

As we departed from the **former Imperial Capital**, I set about wrangling further text into shape as the train passed across a reasonably familiar landscape.

But even if it was familiar, the increasing tendency to glance to my left was a distraction from **Travelogue** duties and they were never going to last much beyond **Nagoya**.

We arrived there an hour and five minutes after leaving **Kōbe**, and it wasn't long after that when the *MacBook Air* cover was flipped down.

The machine remained in *sleep mode* until **Atami**, when I shut it down and stowed it in the backpack.

Everything else would go back after **ShinYokohama**, but I needed to rid myself of distractions.

First, it was time to sit back and indulge in some fascinating landscape gazing without the perceived need to take notes.

Second, on the next stretch of line, there's an iconic mountain, though you don't always get to see it.

I have often referred to the *Frockster Factor* when the subject of **Mount Fuji** emerges from the ruck, and, for those unfamiliar with the concept, it's quite simple.

Before our first trip in 2008, the *Frockster* in his inimitable fashion directed us to *plant a Bowen mango tree on top of Mount Fuji*.

On that journey, we passed **Fuji-san** twice on the *shinkansen* and spent most of one day and a fair chunk of the following morning in **Hakone**, *a prime Fuji-viewing precinct*.

We went up and down ropeways, sailed on pirate ships across scenic lakes and even went as far as asking whether we were in the right place and looking the right way.

But we didn't see as much as a hint of an iconic mountain.

The only explanation I could find at the time worked along these lines: *the spiritual guardians of the mountain were preventing this sacrilegious action by keeping it shrouded while we were around*.

You can't plant a mango tree on something you can't find.

The Casual Reader may believe that notion is a complete fabrication of *Hughesy's* fertile imagination.

Which it may well be.

But, on the other hand, we've been along this stretch of track twice in 2008, once in 2012, and twice in 2013 without managing a sighting.

And, when I finally set eyes on the almost perfectly triangular cone in 2015, it was *almost too big to ignore*.

So how come it seems to be swathed in cloud almost every time we pass?

Simple, Hughesy, The Critical Reader responds. *It's almost always shrouded in cloud. The peak is often obscured. It's part of the iconic appeal.*

But it's not quite like that either.

We're not talking a recognisable shape with a band of cloud obscuring the summit. We could see that from a hotel room in **Yokohama** back in 2013.

What you have here, on almost every occasion we've passed **Fuji-san** is a set of weather conditions that conceals the fact that, reasonably close to the *shinkansen* line, there's a substantial mountain in the vicinity.

The *Frockster* looks after the mail from the Post Office box while we're away.

He called around to collect the key last Friday, and before I could issue a cautionary warning was riffing off on the need to *check the status of the mango tree* we had supposedly planted there.

Back on one of those occasions when we couldn't even see the mountain, you dig?

And, in The *Frockster's* fertile imagination the ensuing sapling must be *around this high*.

Cue image of Adolf Hitler indicating My plants are this high as displayed on a popular range of t-shirts in the seventies.



The sacred guardians relented last time but in the face of renewed threats...

So there you have it, folks.

Another train leg past an invisible mountain, thanks to an over-egged imagination.

But if you can't catch a glimpse of **Mount Fuji** there is plenty of other visual interest between **Lake Hamana** and the leafy outskirts of **Yokohama**.

Before **Lake Hamana** you're largely on the flatlands with a mix of urban, semi-urban, industrial land in a sort of patchwork quilt spread across the landscape.

It's an impressive landscape, but it's also an hour of more or less the same thing, which is why I felt safe hitting the keyboard rather than looking out the window.

Still, regardless of the setting, there's always something interesting to notice, and the first thing that sprang to the eye after I put the *MacBook Air* to bed were the solar panels.

Now, nothing is surprising about solar panels *per se*. You'll see them all over the place.

What I found interesting were the little clusters of panels, sitting on top of a block of dirt that might, in an earlier incarnation, have been rice paddy or vegetable plot.

Given the fact that we know that we can run **The Little House of Concrete** from twenty panels with a substantial surplus heading into the grid, I suspected that there'd be some interesting snippets if I chose to investigate further.

I'll certainly be keeping an eye out for anything that pops up about small-scale solar in **Japan**, but three possibilities immediately sprang to mind.

One was that generating solar power off an allotment previously used for growing things delivered a better return than small-scale farming. Especially if there were subsidies on offer for those looking to buy panels and contribute to the green energy target.

The second was that, having come into possession of a block of dirt previously dedicated to growing things, a younger generation with no interest in getting a little dirt on their hands might be tempted to either flog it off to someone who wanted to whack some panels there, or invest in the panels themselves while keeping the ground in the family.

Those matters gave me something to ponder while we waited for the *Fuji-viewing or non-Fuji-viewing* scenario played itself out.

And, once it had, we were passing through an attractive hilly landscape, where the rises and falls on the surface weren't enough to go under (as in a tunnel) but needed to be cut through.

On the other side of the railway cutting, of course, things continue as before.

The result, as you zoom past, is a *melange* of pockets of farmland with rice paddies and vegetable plots, chunks of low-rise residential, slopes covered with tea bushes (the area is a well-known producer of tea) and hilltop forest.

That took us through **Hamamatsu**, **Shizuoka** and into **Atami**, where I started stowing away bits of electronic paraphernalia before we alighted in **Tōkyō**.

Twenty minutes later, we were pulling up at **ShinYokohama**, having left the variegated landscape behind once we entered the urban sprawl that stretches all the way to the other side of **Ōmiya**.

It's an area where one might be tempted to haul out the keyboard and resume the tapping out, but after **Yokohama** there was a ten minute stretch to **Shinagawa**, and seven minutes from there to **Tōkyō** terminus.

And there's still plenty to see along the way, even if most of it is buildings.

In situations like this, I like to keep my eyes peeled for interesting signage.

The quirks of *Japanese applications of English nomenclature* have been a source of interest to me ever since I saw a photo a cake shop/bakery operation on the internet.

That, *Gentle Reader*, was **Pumpkin Poo**, and there have been plenty of subsequent examples if you're into eccentric terminology.

Pumpkin Poo, along with cautionary signs about *not touching doubtful things* had been an interesting topic when we met The Interpreter at **Tōkyō** Station back in 2008.

That had been over pizza in the station complex itself.

In 2011 we'd even had time to venture away from the restored station frontage to an Italian restaurant in a nearby high rise.

But not this time.

There might have been a big enough window to say hello to someone who happened to be in the vicinity on other business, but forty minutes on the ground in the hustle and bustle of the country's major transport hub would only permit a very brief *Hello, how's it going?*

And not much more.

On the other hand, it was long enough for a comfort stop, a transfer from one platform to the other (separate lines since the **Tōkaidō Shinkansen** terminates there and the **Tōhoku/Hokkaidō** version starts) and investigate the options for lunch.



We'd managed another substantial breakfast at **Villa Fontaine**, and *Hughesy* had specific intentions about **scallops** for dinner, but the consensus was that we needed something.

In *Madam's* case, *something* was *some things*: two little morsels, just to keep her going. *Small appetites and all that.*

I could have possibly have done without the BLT sandwiches (two, three-layered), but reckoned I could need something solid to go with two large cans of **Yebisu Premium**.

Questions about *two* can be answered with the point that *I'm collecting the tokens* (see above).

Back aboard the *shinkansen* (*Hayabusa 23* this time), we were bound for the **Deep North** *via* **Ueno**, **Ōmiya**, **Sendai**, **Morioka** and **Hachinohe**.

Had we been inclined to stop, **Ueno**, five minutes north of **Tōkyō Station** in the city's **Taitō Ward**, is home to many cultural sites, **Buddhist** temples and relics of the **Tokugawa shōguns**.

It's part of **Tōkyō's Shitamachi** (*low city*) district, a working-class area that is also home to much of **Tōkyō's** homeless population. **Ueno Kōen** (*Ueno Park*) one of the country's first Western-style parks, dating back to 1873, sits next to the station.

It was originally the site of **Kaneiji**, the ruling **Tokugawa clan's** family temple back in the **Edo Period**. The temple itself was almost entirely destroyed in the wake of the **Meiji Restoration** during the **Boshin Civil War**, and today the former temple grounds are home to museums and **Japan's first zoo**.

The park is also a prime **hanami** (*cherry blossom viewing*) location, with more than a thousand **sakura** trees lining a central pathway.

But, of course, with **Tōhoku** right in our sights we were never going to be stopping there.

We weren't stopping in **Ōmiya** for any longer than the regulation minute-long stop either, though we had spent time on the ground there previously (2012 and 2015, to be precise, and would be back there the following Tuesday, *en route* to **Nagano**).

An hour or so north of **Ōmiya**, **Sendai** is the effective capital of **Tōhoku-chihō** (literally, the *Northeast Region*) though the relatively remote and ultra-scenic region consists of six prefectures (**Akita**, **Aomori**, **Fukushima**, **Iwate**, **Miyagi** and **Yamagata**).

By this point, we were around three hundred and twenty kilometres north of **Tōkyō**, with a two-minute stop just over an hour after leaving **Ōmiya**.

That's a reasonable indication of the speed we'd been notching up once we were out of the massive conurbation.

It had taken twenty minutes to cover the thirty kilometres to **Ōmiya**, but from **Sendai** we were looking at thirty-nine minutes to **Morioka** (over five hundred and thirty kilometres from the capital), twenty-seven to **Hachinohe** and a further twenty-four to **ShinAomori**, 713.7 kilometres or three hours and nine minutes out of **Tōkyō**.

That's motoring, folks!

And at those speeds, it made sense to sit back and soak up the sights rather than engaging in more or less futile attempts to record what we were zooming past.

The area formerly known as **Azuma** when it was occupied by the Indigenous **Ainu** became the provinces of **Dewa** and **Mutsu** (a.k.a, **Michinoku**) after the ancestors of today's **Japanese people** started to move into northern **Honshū** between the seventh and ninth centuries.

As the last indigenous stronghold on the main island and a fiercely-contested frontier, the region has experienced an understandable degree of autonomy from **Kyōto** throughout its turbulent history.

Although there has been significant development over the years, **Tōhoku** has traditionally been one of the country's less developed areas, but it's no longer the wilderness that inspired *haiku* poet **Matsuo Bashō** to write *Oku no Hosomichi* (*The Narrow Road to the Deep North*) describing his travels there.

Despite a climate that restricts farmers to a single crop of rice every year, the region is traditionally considered **Japan's granary** since it supplied **Sendai**, **Tōkyō** and **Yokohama** with farm produce.

In more recent times, the region's population has collapsed in a process that predates the catastrophic earthquake and *tsunami* in March 2011.

Sendai, however, has managed to keep its head above water.

More than that, in fact, as the largest city in the region, it's the second largest city north of **Tōkyō**, with a population of more than a million.

The city dates back in 1600 when the *daimyō* **Date Masamune** relocated there from his previous stronghold in **Iwadeyama**, which lay to the north of his territories and was hard to access from the **Tokugawa Shōgun's** headquarters in **Edo (Tōkyō)**.

In contrast, **Sendai** was located right in the middle of **Masamune's** territories, close to the coast and sat, as it still does, on a major transport corridor.

Masamune started work on **Sendai Castle** in December 1600 and the castle town followed shortly after that. It has always been one of the country's greener cities since the residents were encouraged to plant trees in household forests (*yashikirin*) and was an early beneficiary of post-**Meiji** reform.

The **Tōhoku Main Line** opened in 1887, the region's first university, **Tōhoku Imperial University**, followed thirty years later.

The city's progressive credentials were strengthened when the campus admitted female students in 1913. It was the first university in **Japan** to do so, and the city's **Senseki Line** to **Sendai Station** was **Japan's** first underground railway segment, completed two years before **Tōkyō Metro's Ginza Line**, which is generally regarded as Asia's first subway line.

Sendai remains the transportation and logistics hub for the **Tōhoku region** thanks to major arterial links including the **Tōhoku Expressway** and **Tōhoku Shinkansen**.

And if we hadn't already eaten, that might not have been an issue.

Sendai Station is reputed to offer more types of *ekiben* than any other station in **Japan**, though we would have needed a bit more than the two-minute stop to make a selection.

Just under forty minutes later we were in **Morioka**, the capital of **Iwate Prefecture**, located in the **Kitakami Basin** at the confluence of the **Kitakami**, **Shizukuishi** and **Nakatsu Rivers**.

Morioka is noted for riverside walks, traditional shopping streets, the looming presence of an active volcano, **Mount Iwate** northwest of the city and no less than three distinctive styles of noodle.

The *Three Great Noodles of Morioka* deliver significantly different culinary experiences.

For a start, there's the *all-you-can-eat Wanko Soba*, delivered in mouthful-sized serves until the diner calls a halt, possibly after forty or fifty bowls with a variety of toppings.

Contrast that option with *Morioka Reimen*, reputedly an attempt to recreate the childhood diet of a **North Korean expatriate**; glassy noodles in a chilled broth topped with sliced meat or hard-boiled egg, kimchi, slices of fruit or cucumber.

Alternatively, there's *Jajamen*, originally a **Chinese** variant of *udon* noodles, served dry with meat *miso*, sliced green onions and cucumbers, accompanied by ginger on the side and seasoned with vinegar, chilli oil or garlic.

Knock over the noodles first, then crack a raw egg into the plate to create a soup made from the leftovers on the plate.

On that basis it's no wonder we haven't stopped in the city.

Exploiting the **Rail Pass** to the max doesn't permit extended stays in slightly out of the way locations, and it looks like **Morioka's** noodles would require three separate sittings over at least two days.

We did, however, have a slightly longer stop than usual. Four minutes, no less, thanks to the need to split off the *Komachi* service, which was on its way to **Akita** two minutes after we arrived in **Morioka**.

After another two minutes we were off on the way to **Hachinohe**, **Aomori Prefecture's** second largest city, where the *brief stop's* duration returned to the regulation one minute.

Today, the **Edo Period** castle town serves as a regional commercial centre and an important port for the deep-sea fishing grounds off southeastern **Hokkaidō**, but the former capital of the eponymous domain had higher ambitions during the administrative reforms that followed the **Meiji Restoration**.

As the authorities looked to merge the former **Hachinohe** and **Tsugaru Domains** into a new entity, there was the predictable argy-bargy over where the capital should be located.

It ended up in a new city in a more central location (that would be **Aomori**) leaving **Hachinohe** and **Hirosaki** to lick their respective wounds.

The fishing industry, however, started to hit its straps in the late 19th century, and the years after **World War Two** saw significant industrial development.

Hachinohe was designated as a new industrial city in 1964, and subsequently became home to factories producing a diverse range of products including cement, chemicals, fertilisers and steel;

The city's port infrastructure and fishing industry suffered significant damage from the *tsunami*, generated by the severe earthquake off **Sendai** in March 2011.

The area around the city had been under the control of our old friends the **Northern Fujiwara** from **Hiraizumi** back in the **Heian Period** and ended up in the hands of the **Nanbu** clan after **Minamoto Yoritomo** defeated the incumbents in the **Kamakura Period**.

The new proprietors established fortified settlements and properties to breed war horses during the **Edo Period**, and the region was split from the **Morioka Domain** in 1664.

It's eighty kilometres and just under half an hour from there to **Shin-Aomori**, and a ten-minute interval on to the prefectural capital once the *shinkansen* has sped off to **Hokkaidō**, but that was okay with me.

I had an urgent appointment with *significant quantities of scallops*.

We'd been to **Aomori** before, back in 2012, when I described dinner as a *healthy in one sense but unlikely to attract a tick from the Food Police serve of deep fried scallops, accompanied by the usual trimmings in the form of rice, miso soup and assorted garnishes*.

I had also noted that next time (and there would be a next time) the game plan would involve *maxing out on the scallops with no accompaniments at all except, possibly, a beer to wash them down*. and I'd noted a degree of uncertainty about the beer.

At **ShinAomori**, we headed downstairs to join the throng waiting for the local service into **Aomori** itself.

It's another example of the common practice of setting local lines at right angles to the *shinkansen* line.

While the direction the train was coming from threw me momentarily, it only took a second or two to realise it was probably coming from **Hirosaki**, which had to be *down that way*.

Six minutes into town, once everyone had managed to clamber aboard, is no time at all, and at five-forty-five (give or take the odd second) we were back in **Aomori**'s waterfront CBD.

A loop around the bus terminal in front of the station brought us onto what I assume is the city's main drag, and two blocks from the station a right-hand turn brought us to our accommodation for the next three nights at **Hotel Sunroute Aomori**.

But given *that scallop appointment*, we weren't there too long.

We retraced our steps most of the way back to the station and moseyed on into the same eatery we'd patronised five years earlier, and there was very little departure from the anticipated agenda, at least as far as *Hughesy* was concerned.

Madam was more conservative, working towards some version of a balanced diet while I headed straight for the *hotate* (*Giant Ezo scallops*), slightly seared and utterly delicious.

Back at the **Sunroute**, the vending machine yielded up a nightcap that resulted in the *Hughesy* sawmill kicking in big time comfortably before eight-thirty.

It needed to. The physical activity quotient was going to be kicked into overdrive in the morning.





2

AROUND TOHOKU AND HOKKAIDO

[Aomori > Oirase Stream > Aomori](#)

[Aomori > Hakodate > Mori > Hakodate > Aomori](#)

[Aomori > Akita > Tsuruoka](#)

[Tsuruoka > Mount Haguro > Tsuruoka](#)

[Tsuruoka > Shinjō > Ōishida > Ginzan Onsen >
Ōishida > Yamagata](#)



THURSDAY 11
MAY 2017

Aomori > Oirase Stream > Aomori

We were downstairs tucking into the buffet breakfast reasonably early, far too early to have *Hughesy* caught up on **Travelogue** details from yesterday, but that was all right.

I figured that whatever I needed for a familiar route could be gleaned easily enough and there hadn't been any significant developments along the way.

One thing was, however, obvious.



Unless things changed along the way, *Hughesy's* headset wouldn't be seeing much action, and **Travelogue** content would need to be *typed rather than dictated*.

And the content that was typed would need to be *in note form* rather than an attempt to describe *the whole kit and kaboodle in graphic detail*.

All I needed to do was to jot down enough to trigger the memories later, and the eventual return to **The Little House of Concrete** would see the dictation side of things kick into overdrive.

And, at this point, typing well and truly after the event *Hughesy* feels obliged to point out that the relevant **Japan 2017 Dot Points** file ended up weighing in at around sixteen thousand words.

Those issues gave me something to think about as I made my way back and forth from the breakfast buffet, where the first platter delivered another go at the regional speciality.

Hotate for breakfast? *Don't mind if I do, thanks very much.*

I was also conscious of the need to stack up carbohydrates on a day where significant footslogging was a major part of the agenda.

That was all right with me. I could do with a bit of exercise.

But first, we needed fuel and the breakfast buffet at the hotel delivered a generous supply, down to the last couple of *croissants* that accompanied *Hughesy's* second cup of coffee.

We also needed something in case we started to feel peckish along the way as well as bottled water. We found both at the convenience store just across from the station and the bus terminal.

The water was water, and nothing to write home about. The sustenance wasn't either but ended up doing the job very nicely, to the point where the pack of salmon rice wrapped in green seaweed is *Hughesy's convenience store snack of choice*.

With those supplies tucked away in the *out and about for the day backpack*, we headed over to the bus station to catch the 7:50 bus to **Oirase Stream**.

At this point, after all the fuss in earlier chapters about **Rail Passes**, *The Puzzled Reader* may well be scratching his or her head at the apparent disregard for the railway. That's easily explained.

The trains don't run to where we were going. But **JR** operates buses that do, and the ¥2470 each way fare is covered by the **JR Rail Pass**.

We'd paid just over ¥46,000 each for fourteen day passes, and today's jaunt (¥4940 return) coupled with the ¥9290 fare from **Kōbe** and the ¥10150 from the national capital to **Aomori** meant we were well on the way (at ¥24,380, more than halfway) to recouping the outlay with another twelve days to go.

The bus terminal was almost deserted when we arrived, and as *Madam* headed off towards the conveniences, I exchanged greetings with the only figure insight, who was obviously not **Japanese**.

An American accent responded to the salutation, and the predictable question about his point of origin delivered **Washington DC**, along with comments that he was *a Beltway kid* who'd spent most of the last nineteen years living in **East Asia**.

Beltway Brendan, as we subsequently labelled him, was also doing the **Rail Pass** thing on his way back from his homeland to his current residence in **Hong Kong**.

He was obviously a seasoned **Rail Pass** user and was, in fact, making a return visit to our destination.

He'd been there last year in the autumn and was planning to take a lengthy stroll in the opposite direction this time around.

And he slotted squarely into *Hughesy's Ideal Version of the American Tourist*, quietly spoken, unassuming, well informed, but not inclined to share his knowledge at high volume with anyone who happened to be within unwitting earshot.

In short, *Beltway Brendan* was almost ideal company on the three-hour bus journey that would get us to the day's destination, which fell into three clearly defined segments.



From **Aomori Station**, the first took us on a rush hour circuit of **Aomori**, calling in at **ShinAomori** on its way to **Kayanochaya**, an interesting place to stop, nestled in the foothills that specialises in, among other delicacies, a special blend of tea.

There was a brew already prepared on the little stand in front of the stall, and, given the accompanying blurb, it was almost impossible to ignore. And free, too.

*Drink one cup of this brew, according to the publicity, and you'll add three years to your life span. Repeat the dose, and you'll double the extension. Go for a third, and you'll **enjoy long life until death**.* Faced with the inevitable scepticism, *Hughesy* felt bound to keep a photographic record, and the evidence is here to prove it.

According to the timetable, once we were out of there at 8:59, we had a couple of rapid-fire stops as we made our way over the range between **Aomori** and **Lake Towada**.

The first was the **Ropeway Station** eight minutes later, a dead giveaway as far as one of the region's main attractions are concerned.

It's a prime area for hikers and cross-country ski buffs.

The **Ropeway** travels to the top of a peak named **Tamoyachidake**, one of the dozen that make up **Mount Hakkoda**. From there, a circular hiking trail leads around the mountain, with additional trails branching off to **Hakkōdasan**'s other peaks and running down to the base of the *massif*.

But not for this little black duck, thank you very much.

So that's part of the attraction.

The other half of the equation is evident from the syllables on the end of the next couple of stops at **Jogakura-onsen** (9:13), **Sukayu-onsen** (9:18), **Sarukura-onsen** (9:28), **Yachi-onsen** (9:32) **Tsuta-onsen** (9:58) and **Towadako-onsenkyo** (10:10).

There are times when one is inclined to suspect that *Japan is one huge onsen resort*, and this was certainly one of them.





But each of them sits in its particular niche.

Jogakura-onsen has the only year-round outdoor hot spring in the area, with waters that are said to be good for nerve, muscle and joint pain and poor circulation that will also assist the bather's recovery from exhaustion.

Sukayu-onsen is noted for its ***Senninburo***, a large mixed gender public bath with an area equivalent to one hundred and sixty ***tatami*** mats that can hold a thousand bodies.

Yachi-onsen has been operating for four hundred years, and its single ***ryokan*** boasts two baths: the warmer (42°C), white water ***Kaminoyu*** and the slightly cooler (38°C), clear and colourless ***Shimonoyu***.

Visitors are encouraged to compare the two as they seek relief from fatigue, nerve and joint pain and cures for skin diseases, haemorrhoids and digestive disorders.

They're also reputedly good for the skin.

Each of those was, however, a fleeting visit as far as our bus was concerned: a case of *pull in, check if anyone was waiting, deposit inbound visitors and on to the next one*.

We had a longer stay at **Tsuta-onsen**, where the documented use of the waters for therapeutic purposes dates back to 1147. The *ryokan*, established in 1909, is a more recent development.

It was a welcome opportunity to get out and stretch the legs.

We were in the process of making our way across (or around) **Mount Hakkoda**, a set of more than a dozen volcanic peaks (**stratovolcanoes**) and lava domes ranked among **100 Famous Japanese Mountains**, a book by mountaineer and author **Kyūya Fukada** that appeared back in 1963.

His work, meant for use by alpinists and climbers followed on from an earlier work from the **Edo Period** by **Tani Buncho**.

That one, written by a painter, covered ninety peaks, chosen for their visual interest, while **Fukada's** list worked from the climber's viewpoint, with the selection based on grace, history and individuality.

According to the *Wikipedia* entry ([here](#)) there's no particular pecking order, and the peaks are listed in alphabetical order, region by region while [Peakbagger.com](#) has a ranking that has **Hakkodasan** sitting towards the bottom at #92.





There are, of course, no prizes for guessing #1.

That relatively low ranking may be because the highest peak, **Mount Ōdake**, can be climbed from **Sukayu-onsen** in a mere four hours.

It is not, however, an area to be trifled with, particularly in winter.

On 23 January 1902, a group of **Imperial Japanese Army** soldiers were caught in a blizzard *en route* to **Tashiro Hot Spring**.

One hundred and ninety-nine died in the world's worst mountaineering disaster in modern alpinism.

Sukayu-onsen is reputed to be *one of the snowiest inhabited places on Earth*, with an average yearly snowfall of 17.6 metres.

The winter record is 23.7 metres, and it can also boast *the highest snow depth recorded at a certified weather station* (566 centimetres on 26 February 2013).

Despite all the snow, the **onsen** is accessible by road all year round.

But here we were in early May with the snow still deep on the ground. No wonder the area is a prime destination for cross-country and mountain skiers and adventurous trekkers.

It's not the sort of place for someone who likes his snow a kilometre or two *up there on a majestic peak*, rather than *down here, up close and personal*.

I was, however, interested to note hollows around the tree trunks that presumably stem from heat generated within the tree trunks.

Maybe that comes from the fact that **Hakkodasan**, along with **Zao ski resort** in **Yamagata Prefecture**, is one of two places in **Japan** with the right conditions to develop **snow monsters** as super cool water droplets gradually adhere to evergreen conifers, forming unique shapes and spectacular scenes across the mountain slopes.

Still, *trees that seem to melt snow. Who knew?*

So that was the second hour of the two and a half hour trip.

Once we left **Tsuta-onsen**, we headed down towards **Lake Towada**, stopping at **Yakeyama** at the foot of **Hakkodasan** (10:13) and **Shimeikei** (10:16) at the end of the fourteen-kilometre gorge that was our destination for the day.

But we weren't out to do the whole thing.





We alighted at **Ishigedo**, six minutes later, leaving *Beltway Brendan*, who planned to head in the opposite direction, on the bus.

We would, however, probably be encountering him again somewhere along the track that runs alongside **Oirase Stream** (*Oirase Keiryū*), the picturesque mountain stream that's rated as one of **Japan's** top autumn coloured leaves destinations.

It's rather decent in spring, too, with a green-tinged luminosity as sunlight filters through new leaves.

It's not just the light.

In 1996 the sound of flowing water from the stream became one of the hundred selected **Soundscapes of Japan**.

But the water and the light were only part of what we were there for.

You can start at **Yakeyama**, if you want a longer workout, but the section from **Ishigedo** is reputedly more interesting in the visual sense, and you could do it downhill from the other end, but the 8.9-kilometre hiking trail from **Ishigedo** to **Nenokuchi** on the shores of **Lake Towada** would do us very nicely.



It's a two to three-hour walk, and there is plenty of visual interest along the way, though there are also a few things one would prefer not to encounter.

The rest centre, shop and snack bar at **Ishigedo** is quite particular about one of the dangers.

The best way to avoid bears is, reputedly, to have bells attached to the backpack or whatever, so you tinkle as you go, giving the larger forms of wildlife timely warning of your approach.

Alternatively, one has to assume there's a degree of safety in numbers as you make the descent from the rest stop to stream level.

I also assumed that the danger, such as it was, would be greater around dawn and dusk.



Bears, I suspect, are nocturnal creatures who would prefer to be left alone to *do their ursine thing untrammelled by human activity*.

And while the presence of a sealed road beside the walking track, with traffic passing back and forth along it even in the low season, has been described as a distraction from the visual side of things it must also help keep the larger forms of wildlife at bay.

So we headed down the stairs so we could then head upstream to **Towada**.

It might be uphill, but it's (mostly) a very slight incline. It's around two hundred metres on the vertical side of things, but that's over the full fourteen-kilometre course, all the way down to **Yakeyama**.

And it seems there's more visual interest when you're approaching the numerous waterfalls and rapids rather than looking back the way you've just come.

In a way, those issues reminded me of a drive along the west bank of Tasmania's Tamar River back in 2007.



That time we were headed downstream, so it wasn't quite the same, but each bend delivered a new, almost invariably breathtaking vista. Going that way, the views were on the right, and left-hand bends opened vistas in front of you, some of them were jaw-dropping.

We enjoyed the outward leg so much that we drove back the same way, but the views were, by and large, on the left and the visual excitement was significantly lower.

I suspect the same thing applies here.

And if *The Sceptical Reader* doubts that suspicion, let me put it this way.

Looking at photographs of rapids and white water hereabouts, where do you find greater visual interest?



Looking upstream with the water coming towards you? Or looking downstream?

The other aspect that comes through in the photographic record is the interaction between the light and the new, ultra-light green new leaves, which delivers an ambience that I had expected would be hard to capture and confine.

But it's there, maybe not as pervasive as it is when it's all around you, but it's still, definitely, there.

It's not the lush green you encounter as spring turns into summer, and nothing like the brilliant shades of red, yellow and orange that will emerge through late October and early November, but there's a translucent aspect to things that is quite magical and utterly entrancing.

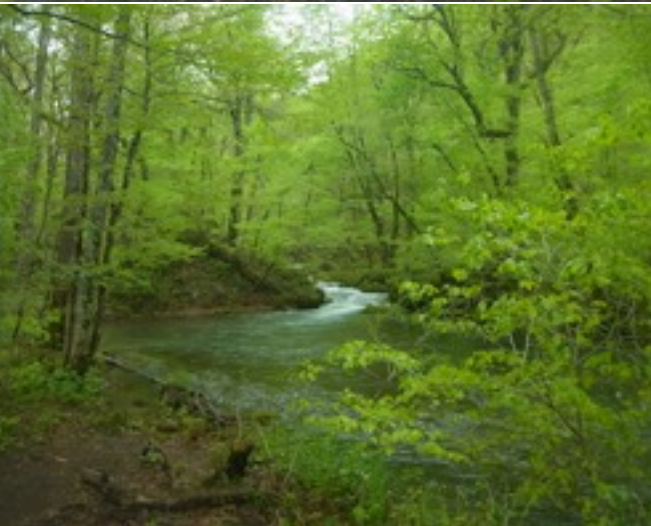


It makes for a leisurely walk as you head upstream, and while *The Non-Photographic Walker* might fret as his or her companion dallies along the way to focus on the detail, I found myself quite happy to mosey along.

I tried, as far as possible, trying to keep just out of sight of *Madam* as she took her time snapping away, revelling in the translucent ambience.

It's not just pale green luminescence and white water. There are little scenic points of interest along the way.

While there's only one significant waterfall in the stream itself, more than a dozen waterfalls cascade into the creek from the walls of the gorge, and they're not always easy to spot.



Madam called me back several times after I'd wandered past a cascade tucked away somewhere in the background.

Some of them are, predictably, signposted, but there's plenty of **Japanese signage** along the way, *all of which was Greek to me*.

A couple of the more significant falls and other points of interest have an **English** explanation of what's there, but most of them are reasonably well hidden and easily passed by someone who's lost in thought. *Madam's* photographic interests, predictably, deliver more focus and do it in more than one sense.

Among those with **English** signage, the 25-metre-high ***Kumoinotaki Falls*** stood out, but I passed a number of the more colourfully named falls without registering the significance.



Some of the accompanying images may show *Soryu* (*Two Dragon*), *Tomoshiraga* (*Happy Marriage*), *Kudan* (*Nine Stairs*), *Shiraito* (*White String*), *Shirakinu* (*White Silk*), *Tamadare* (*Bead Curtain*) or *Shimai* (*Sister*) falls, but without the requisite labelling information there's no way to tell them apart.

And, of course, I missed some of them.

There are interesting rock formations as well, some signposted, others not. *Fudo* (*Immovable*) Rock near *Ishikedo* is held in place by a single tree, and the stream is home, in various locations, to clusters of moss-covered boulders.

There's the odd elevated vantage point as well, so there's plenty of visual interest to keep the visitor going along the close-to-nine kilometres.



If the visitor isn't inclined to go that far, the buses run back and forth, picking up and dropping off all the way to the floodgates near **Nenokuchi** that regulate the outflows from **Lake Towada**.

And despite the odd adverse comment about the busy road that runs beside the stream, crisscrossing it at intervals, I found it a relatively non-intrusive presence.

The sound of the water blocks out much of the traffic noise, or at least it does in spring.

Things may well be different during autumn's peak tourist season when things have been known to become severely congested.

Apparently, in recent years, there have even been times when the road has been closed to cars on specified days.

That, however, does not seem to apply on a Thursday in spring.

And the buses apparently don't run between early November and mid-April.

But eventually, if you're heading in the direction we were, you'll arrive on the shores of **Lake Towada**, the largest crater lake in **Honshū** that straddles the border between **Aomori** and **Akita Prefectures**.

At that point the visitor is around four hundred metres above sea level, gazing across a sixty square kilometre body of water that's over three hundred metres deep.

The lake is more or less circular, with two peninsulas extending from the southern shore about one-third of the way into the middle.

They make the lake a double caldera since the space between the two peninsulas (the *Nakaumi*) is all that is left of a secondary *caldera* that erupted and collapsed some 5400 years ago.

The popular destination is still an active volcano.

Its last recorded eruption occurring as recently as 915 devastated **Tōhoku** with **pyroclastic flows** that reached **Aomori** and covered much of the landscape with volcanic ash.

That, in turn, brought about crop failures, famines and significant climate change.

There were larger eruptions around 55,000, 25,000 and 13,000 years ago.





The steep, forested rim rising several hundred metres above the lake's surface is the main reason the area remained largely undeveloped until the end of the **Edo Period**, and except for **Nenokuchi** and the regional transport hub at the small town of **Yasumiya** things have stayed that way.

Yasumiya has a few minor attractions, including a nature museum and the **Towada Shrine**, and offers sightseeing cruises on two courses. One crosses the lake backwards and forwards between **Yasumiya** and **Nenokuchi**, while the other follows a circular route starting and ending in **Yasumiya**.

Both take about fifty minutes and represent the only public transport option in the area apart from the buses, which only operate between **Yasumiya** and **Nenokuchi**.

And the boats don't operate in winter.

While the ¥1400 cruise might have been an option if it fitted better with the bus timetable, fifty minutes across the lake and a subsequent wait for the next bus didn't suit in the middle of the afternoon on an overcast day.

Not when you're faced with another three hours or so on the way back to **Aomori**.

But *Madam* was semi-happy when she found a cherry tree that still sported some *sakura*, and *Hughesy* was quite content to sip on a rather decent sample of the local brewery's product while we waited for the next bus.

The trip back along the valley underlined the notion that you can see a fair bit of the river from the bus, though it's better to be able to get up close and personal.

Since we'd spotted *Beltway Brendan* before we reached the half-way point on the riverside trail, it came as no surprise to find he wasn't there when we pulled into **Ishigedo**.

I hadn't paid too much attention when we stopped at **Yakeyama** on the outward leg, but since I was on the lookout for amiable Americans the presence of a couple of small museums, a bicycle hire facility along with a few guest houses and inns in the village registered this time around.

And when a girl from the souvenir shop indicated there was still one more passenger for the return journey, we had a pretty fair idea who it would be.





But it had been a longish day, the weather was steadily closing in, and we could look forward to another two hours to **Aomori**.

The consciousness did not register too much that was new on the return journey, but one thing I did notice among the foothills of **Mount Hakkoda** was the **Aomori Contemporary Art Centre**, a combination of residence, workshop and exhibition space set among the trees that caters for talented artists from around the world.

It might have been a drawcard for someone else, but, with an appointment with a washing machine on the agenda once we were back at the hotel we were never going to stop there.

We were never going to be heading too far from base for dinner, either.

Once we'd farewelled *Beltway Man* at the bus stop a couple of beelines got us back to the **Sunroute**, up to the room and back down to the laundry.

From there, we moved on to a minimalist, functional dining room disguised as a hotel restaurant. It looked like the sort of place that would appeal to salarymen on a strict budget, but there was a *hotate* curry on the menu, decent beer on tap and more of the same in the vending machine on the way back to the room while we waited for the laundry facilities to do their thing.

And, just after ten, *Hughesy*, at least, was out like a light.



FRIDAY 12 MAY
2017

Aomori > ShinHakodate > Mori> ShinHakodate > Aomori

I hadn't placed too many items on the *must-do* list this time around, but this little jaunt on the **Hokkaidō Shinkansen**, back and forth under the **Tsugaru Strait** was there, more or less from the word *go*.

Now, with the 20/20 perspective that comes with hindsight, I'm not so sure I should have.

But if I was insisting the new *shinkansen* line that opened in March 2016 had to go on the itinerary there was a certain logic behind the argument.

We'd been to **Hokkaidō** twice, and both times in between **Hakodate** and the tunnel under the strait you could see the signs of *shinkansen* work in progress.

So a determination to ride the line on what may well be our last **JR Rail Pass** excursion is entirely understandable, though I really should have conducted a little more research.

With the train ride on the itinerary, additional details needed to go into the plan for the day.

Riding the **Hokkaidō Shinkansen** may have been the top priority, but what were we going to do while we were over there?

What about something in **Hakodate**? We'd already visited the most obvious suspects, though there was probably still plenty left to see. Particularly on the other side of the *historic foreign quarter* (**Motomachi**) between the **Higashi Honganji Temple** and the **Foreign Cemetery**.

We'd skipped that part of town last time because we had intentions about **Mount Hakodate**.

Or what about **Ōnuma-Kōen**?

Knowing the **Hokkaidō Shinkansen** would shortly come into the equation I'd pencilled it in as a possibility on the way down from **Sapporo** last time. It looked like a suitable area for a bit of a ramble for someone into photography.

And *Madam* had come up with another possibility. We'd been through **Mori** last time without paying too much attention, but a rumoured possibility of *sakura* slotted the seaside town into the vacancy in the itinerary. So that was the days itinerary and done and dusted.



Take the local train service from **Aomori** to **ShinAomori**; zoom across the landscape and under the strait on ***Hayabusa 95***; hook up with **Limited Express Super Hokuto 7**; spend a couple of hours on the ground in **Mori**, then **Limited Express Super Hokuto 10** and ***Hayabusa 26*** on the way back.

The only negative was the lack of reserved seats on ***Hokuto 10***, but that was not a significant issue.

The first two cars in the five-car train set have non-reserved seats, and if they were all gone, we'd have to stand up for half an hour or so. That was no big deal.

An 8:22 departure from **Aomori** to catch ***Hayabusa 95*** at 9:05 was no big deal either. There was plenty of time and another excuse for someone to indulge in ***hotate*** for breakfast.

So we were upstairs at **ShinAomori** just before nine, waiting for the train from **Tōkyō**, and, at this point, it's time for a little background detail.

Up to this point, the line is, officially, the **Tōhoku Shinkansen**. From here, it's the **Hokkaidō Shinkansen**, running through the **Seikan Tunnel** to **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto**, which will remain the terminus until **JR Hokkaidō** open the extension of the line to **Sapporo** sometime around March 2031.

Work on the first section started in May 2005, and the **ShinAomori** to **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto** sector began operations on 26 March 2016.

Eleven years is probably pretty good going as far as building a ***shinkansen*** line is concerned, but they got things relatively easy for eighty-two out of the one hundred and fifty-odd kilometres.

That's the bit that passes through the **Seikan Tunnel** on the former **Kaikyō Line**, which had to be converted to dual gauge operation.

The existing line, which remains in use in both directions, is narrow gauge (3 feet 6 inches or 1,067 mm), while the ***shinkansen*** requires standard gauge (4 feet 8 and 1/2 inches or 1,435 mm)

And that, folks, is where *Hughesy's* failure to conduct adequate research kicks in because the new line doesn't quite operate at full ***shinkansen*** speed.

It takes just over an hour to cover the 148.8 kilometres because the maximum speed on the dual-gauge section of the line is 140 km/h.

The restriction comes because about fifty freight trains use the dual-gauge section each day and limiting them to times when the ***shinkansen*** services don't operate is not an option.

But ***shinkansen*** services aren't just about high speed (although it's still an important factor).

The fastest journey between **Tōkyō** and **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto** is just over four hours, and you can do it without changing trains.



The same factor kicks in on some of the other minor *shinkansen* lines.

The **Akita** and **Yamagata Shinkansen** might not exactly *rocket along* once the trains leave the **Tōhoku Shinkansen** line, but they'll deliver passengers into **Akita**, **Yamagata** or **Shinjō** on the same train.

Fly **Tōkyō** to **Hakodate**, and you're looking at getting to the airport, checking in, boarding, flight time, the time it takes to disembark, and however long it takes to get from the airport to your destination.

On that basis, four hours from central **Tōkyō** to **ShinHakodate** looks pretty reasonable and significantly more civilised.

You'd have more leg room, for a start, and an almost complete absence of queueing.

The line's current arrangements have ten *Hayabusa* services running back and forth between **Tōkyō** and **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto** every day along with one return *Hayabusa* service between **Shin-Aomori** and **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto**, along with a return *Hayate* service between **Morioka** and **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto**, and another between **Shin-Aomori** and **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto**.

The rail authorities are in the process of doing something about those speed issues.

By 2018, they should have one daily *shinkansen* service travelling at 260 km/h through the tunnel.

That can only happen if they can ensure no freight trains are moving in the opposite direction.

They are also looking at an automatic system that would slow the *shinkansen* services down to 200 km/h as they pass narrow-gauge trains, or piggybacking freight trains onto reinforced standard-gauge trains built to withstand the shock wave of a full-speed oncoming *shinkansen*.

Doing that would cut the time from **Tōkyō** to **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto** to three and three-quarter hours.

Things will speed up once the extension of the line from **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto** to **Sapporo** opens.

Around 76% of the 211.3 km extension will be underground, and speeds of up to 360 km/h in the new tunnels will mean the journey from **Tōkyō** to **Sapporo** should take roughly five hours.

That, however, is a long way off. In the here and now, *Hughesy* was getting to ride the **Hokkaidō Shinkansen** as far as it goes.

And even if the experience bordered on the sub-optimal, that was all right with me.

If we hadn't been planning on doing our share of walking, I might have been tempted to bring the *MacBook* and spend the time in the tunnel on **Travelogue** duties, but with the uncertainty that comes with an unspecified amount of footslogging, I reckoned I was better off using the *iPad* to record impressions.



I wasn't sure how long it would take to get from **ShinAomori** to the tunnel and figured that the first bit, at least, would involve zipping along at something approaching the regular speed.

The former line from **Aomori** followed the coastline for much of the way, but it also needed to serve the farming and fishing communities along the way.

The *shinkansen*, freed from those responsibilities, could take an inland route, and it was soon apparent that much of it would be underground.

After our 9:05 departure, the pre-tunnel section of the line gave sweeping views across the **Tsugaru Plains**, a rich agricultural area where the rice planting was getting underway with many flooded paddy fields and visible preparations well and truly in place.

By 9:12 we were in a tunnel, but a matter of a minute or so later it was evident that this particular subterranean bit wasn't the big one.

But, from that point, since you're in tunnels more often than you're out of them it doesn't matter.

I cranked up the *iPad*, reasoning that we were going to be moving too fast to catch anything other than a glimpse of what we were passing, and started tapping.

Around 9:18 it seemed obvious that we'd be without outside distractions for a while, so I turned my thoughts to the backlog.

A minute later there we were, momentarily in sunlight again.

And so it went as we alternated between light and dark outside.

We were back in a tunnel when I noted the time at 9:23, and from there the brief spells of outside illumination became increasingly intermittent.

By 9:32, with darkness outside and the occasional flash of light as we swept past, it was evident there was a lot of water over our heads if *The Intuitive Reader* catches my drift.

And at 9:48 we were back on the surface, though we weren't quite done with the subterranean bit.

As it turned out, as far as the scenery is concerned you might rate the **Hokkaidō Shinkansen** a fizzer, and, in any case, we were on the wrong side of the train if you were hoping to look towards the sea.

So the *shinkansen* ride was slightly disappointing.

There was no announcement (at least, not in **English** anyway) that we were entering the **Seikan Tunnel** and nothing that resembled the informative chart on the back of the chair we'd been able to use for reference purposes the other times we had passed this way.



But that was predictable: after all, the train had come all the way from **Tōkyō**.

Once you're back above sea level you spend most of your time below the surface, and the brief intervals between tunnels flash past, just the way they did on the other side.

After the tunnels, as we passed the slopes I gazed across a much more wooded landscape, though the flat lands are mostly given over to agriculture.

The barriers along the railway line provided a baseline for any photos I managed to snap.

But when you're out of the tunnels with a reasonable stretch until the next one, they've put up barrier walls to protect the neighbours from the ***shinkansen*** noise.

That makes snapping the odd scenic vista a *touch and go* affair. The attempts didn't last very long.

Things might, of course, have been better if we'd had seats on the seaward side of the line, which would be *Number Whatever A, B or C* both ways.

I had some thoughts about the scenic side of things, but with the opening of the **Hokkaidō Shinkansen**, what I thought might have been the more attractive option has gone as well.

With long tunnels on either side of the strait, if you were just after the tunnel experience, it would make sense to take the old line if it was still operational.

Speaking from experience, it came with a couple of added advantages.

It left **Aomori**, so there was no wait at **ShinAomori**, and since it took you right into **Hakodate** rather than depositing you on the outskirts of the city there was no wait at that end either.

The scenic options were better since the old line serviced communities along the way.

But we had *been there and done that* (three times, in fact) and, in any case, the line no longer exists as a passenger option.

If you want to get from **Naka-Oguni**, one of the stations on the **JR Tsugaru** section of the narrow gauge line, to **Hakodate** you're not going to be doing it directly.

You're now required to catch one of five local services (two in the morning, three after lunch) to **Tsugaru-Futamata**, walk ten minutes to the *shinkansen* station at **Okutsugaru-Imabetsu**, board a bullet train and then transfer from **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto** to your destination.





In the old days, it was just over two hours from **Aomori** to **Hakodate**, so you'd probably have been looking at somewhere about an hour and three-quarters from one of the stations *en route* in **Honshū**.

Now, the 11:49 from **Naka-Oguni** will deliver you into **Hakodate** just after three in the afternoon, and if that's a tad too late, the alternative involves catching the 7:12, which will get you there just before half past nine.

Ain't progress grand?

But we debouched at **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto** on time and took ourselves across to the **JR Hokkaidō** non-*shinkansen* line for our link to the day's second activity - *the search for surviving sakura*.

That took us downstairs, the way it so often does when you're making a similar change.

It's straightforward, routine stuff, and can be almost carried out with your eyes closed.

But, of course, you need them open to register the information on signs and such, and to avoid bumping into things and people.

What you don't need, in most cases, are your ears.

At least, *Hughesy* doesn't since the auditory content will probably be unintelligible anyway.

And, it seems, *Madam*, along with much of the populace, *tends to tune out as well*.

We were downstairs on the platform where **Limited Express Super Hokuto 7** was due to appear in around a quarter of an hour when I caught an announcement in **English**.

Something about *remembering to check the monitors for information regarding your Hokuto service*.

Which, of course, we hadn't.

So, having mentioned this to *Someone*, rather than heading back the way we came, *Madam* took the obvious step in such circumstances.

Ask someone.

In this case, *someone* was a harried-looking platform official, probably a *Guard* in his official designation, who had probably been asked a similar question dozens of times in the course of this, and every other recent morning.

He responded with something along the lines of *Which carriage?*

The response, **Go (four)** brought forth the name of an animal (*Pig*, if I recall correctly) and a gesture towards an animal painted on the platform surface.

It looks like **JR Hokkaidō** have set out to solve the seemingly confusing jumble of data on station platforms with a simple solution.

Different train services may have different numbers of carriages, but when they stop, Car 4 on a **Hokuto** service will always stop with the back entrance to the carriage *here*.

Seven-car **Super Hokuto Limited Express** services are sometimes lengthened to eight cars during busy periods.

The platform also deals with three-car **Hakodate Liner** services that shuttle back and forth between the **shinkansen** line and the city, as well as *all-stations-from-here-to-whenever* local services.

So there's room for a certain degree of confusion, and it seems that someone has come up with a *simple, and (in his or her view) elegant solution*.

The northbound platform has pictures of animals; with foodstuffs featuring on the southbound line.

All you need then is to train the passengers to check the monitor upstairs to equate the carriage indicated on the ticket to the appropriate logo, and everything should run smoothly.

Except, as we have seen, it doesn't.

The advisory announcement failed to register on the way down, and we weren't the first to ask our harried official. We wouldn't have been the last either.

It would have been interesting to ask him what he thought of the new arrangements.

A couple of things became glaringly obvious, soon after we boarded the train for the next stage.

The first was almost immediate.

We were on the wrong side of the train if we were looking to maximise the scenic quotient.

We were on the left side when the best views (as we knew from last time, coming down from **Sapporo**) were on the right. That wasn't a major issue since there were vacant seats on that side.

It's just ten minutes from **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto** to **Ōnuma-Kōen**, where I'd originally envisaged a half-day ramble across a pleasantly attractive landscape.

As noted above, news of cherry blossoms at **Mori** put paid to that notion.

Maybe that was just as well since there were signs of significant logging on the leg between **ShinHakodate** and the uplands.

As I gazed across the devastation, the first reaction was to blame the forestry industry for what certainly looked like the clear felling of large areas of forest.

A little further on it looked like they had something resembling an excuse.

There were wide stretches of what should have been a verdant and upstanding forest that looked like it had been hit with *the arboreal equivalent of a bull in a china shop*.

The clear fellers hadn't got that far, and it was evident that, despite the fact that what was being hewed and cut up further down would probably end up in a sawmill or piles of woodchips, what was happening back there wasn't an act of environmental vandalism.

Or not *entirely* an act of environmental vandalism.

Around a month after **Cyclone Debbie** decided to pay Bowen a visit, what I was seeing had an awfully familiar look.

Then I remembered reports of a typhoon, late in the season, that had made landfall in **Hokkaidō**.

Given the northern island's winter, there wouldn't have been time to start clearing up before the snows, and yesterday's experience suggested it had been a long winter.

So it was probably better that we hadn't decided to spend the day at **Ōnuma-Kōen**.

Later, back in **Aomori**, I did some checking.

What hit this particular stretch of south-east **Hokkaidō**'s coastline wasn't a single storm.

There were three of them (**Typhoons Chanthu, Kompas** and **Mindulle**) in the space of six days in August last year.

Chanthu came first, making landfall over **Cape Erimo** at peak intensity on 17 August.

While the next, **Kompasu**, made landfall further south in **Honshū**, it caused extensive flooding in **Hokkaidō**, with a motorist killed while stranded in his car.

The third, **Mindulle**, also came ashore further south but delivered another dose of destructive winds and further downpours in **Hokkaidō**, where floodwaters covered roadways and damaged homes.

And, I guess, trees that *just* held their own against **Chanthu** went over when **Kompasu** came calling, and any that survived that came unstuck when **Mindulle** rolled by.

So it was just as well we were travelling on to **Mori**, where the most recent *sakura* intelligence suggested there might still be *blossoms on the trees rather than petals on the ground*.

But when we arrived, things didn't look very promising.

A map at the station pointed us towards two locations where *Madam* thought we might be in luck, but it had been raining very recently, and what applied two days ago may not be the case now.

And the weather wasn't promising. It was gloomy and overcast.

On a positive note, it wasn't *actually* raining, but it looked like precipitation wasn't too far away.

All we could do was *follow this road, turn left at the second or third set of lights and hope for the best* at the first location.

And if that didn't work out it wasn't too far to the other likely suspect.

Our first stop, the venue for the town's **Sakura Festival** was a major disappointment, though the two-week festival in the park still had two and a half days to run.

Looking back on it after we moved on to the second venue, a wine analogy came to mind.

As *Madam* made her way around the new location, the analogy strengthened.

Imagine taking a good bottle of wine you've cellared for years.

So long that the back panel has liberated itself from the bottle. And, for some reason, the label on the front is long since gone as well.



But you know more or less what it is since you've gone to the trouble to cellar it.

The capsule identifies the maker, you've tried it earlier and marked it down as a keeper. Some of the details still lurk in the memory bank.

When you finally open it, the zing isn't there.

You can taste remnants, but the bottle is, not to put too fine a point on it, *past*. It should have been opened a while back before it hit the slide.

Then you remember there's another bottle from the same maker still irking in the cellar.

If the one you just drank was past, that one should be too.

But if you leave it, it will slide further.

On that basis, you open the second and are surprised to find it's everything the first bottle wasn't.

Bottle variation under cork? That would be a reasonable hypothesis.

Then, however, you read the back label, which has somehow managed to survive.

What you've had, you're not entirely surprised to learn, were two different grape varieties.

Our day in **Mori** was like that.

The first venue (**Aobagaoka Park**) had about a thousand standard *sakura*, along with the paraphernalia associated with the town's **Sakura Festival**.

It was, not to put too fine a point on it, disappointing.

The blossoms on the trees around the point where we entered the park were gone. While things improved as we made our way to the festival venue, it was obvious the trees hadn't long to go there.





The second (**Oniushi Park**) was home to some five hundred trees drawn from around twenty late blossoming varieties, including *Yoshino*, *Horii* and *Komami* cherry trees.

And, at this point, it's worth pointing out a few details about the **Japanese cherry**, *Prunus serrulata*.

The **cherry blossom**, after all, is widely considered to be **Japan's national flower**, though the **chrysanthemum** is also a contender.

For a start, these trees, grown for their floral display are drawn from over *two hundred ornamental cultivars that do not produce fruit*.

Edible cherries are generally *Prunus avium* or *Prunus cerasus*. Related, but cousin-brothers rather than direct family members.



The practice of *Hanami* (*enjoying a picnic under a blooming tree*) is reputed to date back to the **Nara Period** (710–794), though at that point it was the plum blossoms that was the main draw card.

The eighth-century *Nihon Shoki* chronicle records *hanami* festivals back as far as the third century.

Cherry trees came into their own during the **Heian Period** (794–1185), and from there *hanami* became synonymous with *sakura*.

The practice was initially limited to the **Imperial Court**, but gradually spread into *samurai* society and the aristocracy.

The warlord **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** held an extravagant *hanami* party at **Kyōto's Daigoji Temple** for feudal lords and their followers in 1598, but the practice had not spread to the everyday people at that stage.

But eventually, the commoners were in on it as well, encouraged by extensive plantings by the likes of **Tokugawa Yoshimune**, the eighth **Tokugawa shōgun**.



While he is best known for his financial reforms, attempts to revitalise traditional **Japanese swordmaking** and lifting the regulations banning the import of foreign books **Yoshimune** is credited with the decision to plant the cherry trees in **Tōkyō's Asukayama Park** in 1720

Today, thanks to the **Japanese Meteorological Agency** it is possible to track the northward progress of the ***sakura zensen*** (*cherry blossom front*) along the archipelago.

Nightly bulletins are tacked onto the weather segment of the TV news as the blossoms spread north from **Okinawa**, usually arriving in **Kyōto** and **Tōkyō** towards the end of March or early in April and moving into **Hokkaidō** a few weeks later.

And, thanks to the late-blossoming cultivars planted in **Oniushi Park** (the name means *a forested area* in the **Ainu** language) *Madam* was able to snap away to her heart's content.



Working on the principle that it was best to leave The Photographer to do her thing undisturbed and undistracted, I looped around the park in a clockwise direction, developing my wine bottle analogy along the way.

There's a pavilion at the eastern end that looked like it might be our lunch venue, but with the other half of the party well and truly out of sight somewhere on my left, nothing was definite.

I ended up on a seat near the fountain in front of the pavilion and, some twenty minutes later, the lunch issue was settled.

We headed into the building for lunch, opting for fried scallops (*Hughesy*) and scallop *ramen* (*Madam*) ahead of the local signature dish, *ikameshi* (*squid cooked with a rice stuffing*).

The local delicacy is credited to **Abe Bentōten**, Mori Station's *bentō* vendor, who got around wartime food rationing by exploiting plentiful supplies of **Japanese flying squid** in 1941.

Mori sits on the east coast of the **Oshima Peninsula** overlooking **Uchiura Bay**, which is rich in squid.



But we weren't letting the locals down.

The bay also supports extensive scallop aquaculture.

While archaeological sites suggest the area was settled early in **Japanese history**, the official record goes back to the 15th century, when fishermen operating out of **Hakodate** established a settlement to exploit an abundant herring fishery.

Mori is also noted for its agricultural produce (including melons, tomatoes, pumpkins and prunes), thanks to volcanic ash from **Mount Komagatake**.

The active **andesitic stratovolcano** to the east of the town that can also claim the credit for **Lake Ōnuma**, the centrepiece of **Ōnuma-Kōen**, our alternative destination for the day,



Ōnuma and nearby **Lake Konuma** are shallow ponds at the southern foot of **Komagatake**, created when mudflows from the volcano dammed the **Orito River**.

Once lunch was out of the way, that was most of the agenda done and dusted, so we headed off to the station.

Fortunately, time wasn't an issue since *Hughesy's* choice of route brought us back onto the outward track and amounted to *the long way around*.

It did, however, take us past a **Hotto Motto** outlet, which was duly snapped.

The photographic result will end up in a **Facebook** post tagging a well-known Bowen identity.

Back at the station, we were confined to the waiting room until we were allowed onto the platform just before the train arrived.

As it turned out, given what was to come that was probably just as well.



It was definitely warmer inside.

And, when **Limited Express Super Hokuto 10** arrived, we had the good fortune to land prime non-reserved seats that corresponded to where we sat on the way up, but the run back to **ShinHakodate** was disappointing for same reasons as the outbound leg.

But things had definitely worked out for the best.

We had caught the *sakura*, and when big crowds boarded the train at **Ōnuma-Kōen**, the consensus was that we'd pulled the right rein when we decided against spending the day there.

But by the time we were back at **ShinHakodate**, I was starting to feel disoriented.

That didn't deter me from buying beer, a limited edition **Hokkaidō-only Sapporo Premium** before we headed head to the *shinkansen*, which was ready and waiting.

Hughesy's original game plan involved setting things up for a big writing effort on the way through the tunnel, but I found it difficult to focus.

Questions about dinner didn't help, but the cause was deeper than that.

The solution was straightforward.

Take two panadol, pack things away and shout myself a post-beer nanna nap on the way through the **Seikan Tunnel**.

That was just as well, since the *semi-comatose bit* through the tunnel recharged the batteries just enough to allow a visit to the **Nebuta Warasse Museum** when we arrived back in **Aomori**.

The unique red building on **Aomori's** waterfront district almost next door to **Aomori Station** is a must-do. Incredible.

The museum attempts to capture the spirit of to the six-day ***Nebuta Matsuri***, one of the ***Tōhoku Sandai Matsuri*** (*Three Great Festivals of Tōhoku*) which is held from August 2 to 7 every year.

While there are two other two major events, ***Kanto Matsuri*** (**Akita**) and ***Tanabata*** (**Sendai**) more than thirty other villages and cities across **Aomori Prefecture** hold similar festivals.

We'd encountered displays relating to one of them in **Hirosaki** last time around, and those had been impressive enough, but reports suggested **Aomori** 's, which attracts the most tourists of any of the country's nebuta festivals, was the *sine qua non*.





The festival was designated an **Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property** in 1980 and became one of the **One Hundred Soundscapes of Japan** in 1996.

The museum gives visitors a taste of the festival's history and traditions.

The festival's highlight is a daily parade of enormous lantern floats through the city during the evening on the first five days, and in the afternoon on the final day.

After that, some floats take to the water before a two-hour fireworks display to wind up proceedings.

Audience participation in the parade is encouraged, although participants are required to wear the traditional dancing costume.

That, however, should not be a significant deterrent.

Costumes sell for about ¥7000 (\$A85) at grocery and convenience stores.

Alternatively, you can rent one for about ¥3000 (\$A36).

As the floats make their way around the festival they are accompanied by large *taiko* drums, musicians and dancers.



The museum's entrance corridor features recordings of the musical accompaniment along with photos and images from the festival's three hundred year history.

That's impressive enough, but the main attraction is the collection of five floats from earlier festivals in the museum's darkened main hall.

They represent a selection of the best of each years' two dozen floats, which are constructed by local teams with painted *washi* paper stretched over a wire frame and can take a year to design and build.

Floats measure up to five metres tall and nine wide and tend to depict **Chinese** or **Japanese** gods, demons, historical and mythological figures and, more recently, notable regional personalities or television identities.



The floats were originally built on a bamboo frame, illuminated by candles inside the structure.

Nowadays portable generators and rechargeable batteries power incandescent or fluorescent light bulbs placed inside a wire frame in a manner that ensures they don't cast a shadow.

Quite ingenious.

It's a different matter as the massive structures bob and weave their way through the streets, but inside the museum, visitors can *get up close and personal* to admire the craftsmanship that went into them.

Several displays show the how the floats are put together and how the designs have evolved.

If we'd been there on a weekend or holiday, we might have been able to catch a dance performance accompanied by the usual *taiko* drums and flutes.

That might have been a bonus, but the floats were sufficiently gobsmacking by themselves.



The museum also features a restaurant and a well-stocked shop selling souvenirs and local specialities, though we managed to resist its siren song.

Once we were done there, a rapid move back to the hotel preceded a good hour's power nap that worked a treat, while *Madam* assessed the dinner options.

We headed off to dinner through the back streets, with an appointment with **Jamaican**, rather than **Japanese curry** at a place named **Marron**.

As it turned out, the vibe was *French and chestnuty* rather than *reggae and rasta*, which was probably just as well.

Had they been going the [Cimarrón](#) route the curry would have been *vegetarian* rather than *chicken*.



But while things weren't quite what one might have suspected, the curry was subtle and mild with plenty of ginger and allspice.

It might even have suited *chilli-averse Madam*, but after the *ramen* at lunchtime, she opted for sandwiches.

From **Marron**, given the fatigue issues, we headed straight back to the hotel, where a surfeit of teenage volleyball teams delivered a possible explanation for the previously unexplained decision to upgrade our accommodation when we checked in on Wednesday.

Not that I objected, of course.

Upstairs, although everyone concerned set out for an early night, reading email *et cetera* until around eight o'clock meant that while it was still early it wasn't as early as it might have been.



**SATURDAY 13
MAY 2017**

Aomori > Akita > Tsuruoka

After three days crossing familiar or semi-familiar territory, **Rail Pass Day Four** took us onto new ground, though we had passed by several locations before.

We'd done **Aomori** to **Hirosaki** last time around and headed from **Takanosu** to **Higashi-Noshiro** back in 2012, after our little jaunt on the endangered rail line from **Kakunodate**.

But the rest was new and promised plenty in the way of visual interest along the way.

The day's itinerary involved a little over two and a half hours on **Limited Express Tsugaru 2**, from **Aomori** to **Akita**, followed by a break for lunch and the rest of the tickets we needed and another hour and three-quarters on **Limited Express Inaho 10** to the destination for the day at **Tsuruoka**.

A 2:46 arrival time meant we probably had time for a bit of a look around before dark, but things failed to pan out that way.

It's a matter of pacing yourself, and a 9:05 departure from **Aomori** looked like doing just that.

It was late enough to allow a relatively leisurely breakfast rather than a variant on the *gobble and go show*, and boarding the train at the point of departure ensured we weren't in for a mad scramble during a one-minute stop.

That leisurely breakfast involved another go at the **Sunroute Inn Breakfast Viking**, which may not be one of the great ones but did offer plenty of gustatory interest, particularly in the *hotate* department.

We'd been hitting the road well before nine on the previous two mornings, and the early departure meant I wasn't inclined to be messing around with anything that could chew up valuable time.

It's not as if there was a shortage of provender.

Over the past two mornings I'd been intrigued by a little *cook it yourself* operation involving *hotate*, and this morning I had a chance to try my hand at it myself. It's sitting in the top right-hand corner of the photo below, just waiting for the egg to go into the *hotate* shell after the fire down below has got the scallop juices in the shell to a nice simmer.

While the result didn't quite align itself with *Hughesy's* favoured flavour spectrum, it was an interesting exercise, and I was glad I'd tried it.





With breakfast done, dusted and making its way through the digestive tract, we finished packing, checked out and made our way to the station with the regulation convenience store stop for bottled water.

The **Limited Express *Tsugaru 2*** that was ready and waiting when we arrived at the platform is another service that has been affected by the shakeout associated with the arrival of *shinkansen* services to the northern end of **Japan's** main island.

The ***Tsugaru*** designation, of course, stems directly from the eponymous peninsula, plain and strait on the way to **Hokkaidō**.

The original use, at least as far as rail services bound in that direction, applied to an express service from **Tōkyō** to **Aomori**, initially *via Niitsu* and **Akita** (from October 1954), then *via Fukushima* and **Akita**, from 19 November 1956 until December 1993.

The label was revived as a limited express service between **Hachinohe** and **Hirosaki** *via Aomori* from December 2002, superseding a limited express service between **Morioka** and **Aomori** that was rendered obsolete when the **Tōhoku Shinkansen** reached **Hachinohe**.

Things changed again on 4 December 2010, when the next extension of the **Tōhoku Shinkansen** from **Hachinohe** to **Shin-Aomori** opened. **Tsugaru** services were rerouted to run between **Aomori** and **Akita**, which is the way things have stayed.

Aboard the train, I had enough time to haul the *MacBook* out of the backpack and set things up to record impressions on the fly as we made our way across what I thought would be an attractive landscape.

Not that I expected too much of interest on the first five-minute leg to **Shin-Aomori**, but it pays to be ready.

Just in case.

Being ready allowed me to note that there were plenty of people waiting on the platform when we arrived there, which probably wasn't surprising at 9:10 on any day, let alone on the weekend.

One thing, however, was sure. Whatever brought the crowd onto the platform, no one had come all the way from **Tōkyō**.

As far as I could ascertain, the earliest *shinkansen* out of the national capital leaves just after six-thirty in the morning and doesn't arrive until just before ten.





Some of them, of course, could have started their journey over on **Hokkaidō**, catching the 7:34 out of **Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto**, but whether they were headed off to an *onsen* or taking a day trip to **Hirosaki** was one of those things we'll never know.

But they were definitely headed somewhere.

The skies were grey and overcast as we passed across the broad expanse of the **Tsugaru Plain**, crossed the **Hirakawa River** and headed into the former regional capital, **Hirosaki**.

There was no shortage of passengers waiting there either, though some of them were probably there for one of the lines operated by the **Kōnan Railway Company**.

The **Kōnan Line** runs from **Hirosaki** to **Kuroishi** while the 13.9-kilometre **Ōwani Line** links to a station on JR's **Ōu Main Line**, which also happened to be the **Tsugaru's** next stop.

But we were only passing through a single station at **Ishikawa** over the next 11.8 kilometres.

The private line stops at a dozen.

There was a local train waiting on the other side of the platform as we arrived in **Hirosaki**, though there was no way of knowing where it was bound.

It could well have been the equivalent of the *all stops local service* that got us back from **Hirosaki** to **Shin-Aomori** last time around, or may have been bound for the **Gonō Line**, which officially terminates in **Kawabe**, though most services continue to **Hirosaki** to make transfers easier.

We'd ridden that line back in 2012 on our run along the coastline from **Higashi-Noshiro**, the last stage of the day that started on the *endangered service* out of **Kakunodate**.

While that detail is probably irrelevant to *The Average Reader*, it's nice to be able to piece these things together, which is what I was trying to do in the course of the two-minute stop at **Hirosaki**.

We'd been here before, so where was the castle?

Somewhere over to our left? Madam wasn't sure, but as we pulled out of the station, the right-hand side looked more familiar.

Sure enough, when I checked on **Maps** much later in the piece, that's where it was, though the bits I *thought* I remembered should have been on the other side of the train.

As we pulled out of **Hirosaki**, the mountains over on the right looked impressive while the plain looked to stretch away on the left.





We were still within **Hirosaki**'s city limits as we passed through **Ishikawa**, where the apple orchards were in bloom, and the mountains over on the right were getting nearer.

We were actually in amongst their foothills as I snapped a couple of photos, and by this point, we were well into the hills with actual mountains nearby and much apple blossom before the next stop.

That was **Owani-onsen**, where one might have expected some of the passengers aboard to alight, working on the *onsen* in the name, but these days it seems to be a ski resort rather than a hot springs operation.

On the other hand, the waters are there, and the village has a history of hospitality stretching back some eight hundred years, thanks to baths that are reputed to relieve chronic rheumatism, back pain, haemorrhoids and neuralgia.

But these days maybe the money's in the ski business, which might explain why there didn't seem to be that many getting off.

There were, however, hints of pink on the mountain slopes, though distance and *Hughesy*'s lack of botanical *nous* meant I couldn't make out whether I was looking at a patch of mountainside **sakura**.

Eight minutes later we were in **Ikarigaeseki**, another *onsen* location and an old customs point.

I'm not sure where I gleaned that last point, but it looked like the village may have been right on the border of the old **Tsugaru realm**.

It seemed to be on the edge of a mountain pass, and we went under rather than around the range, which reinforced that *frontier* hypothesis.

We emerged from the tunnel into a forest and ran through a village called **Jinba** on the other side of another big tunnel.

By this point, we had passed into **Akita Prefecture**, with mountains all around, although rice paddies proliferated on the flatlands in the valleys.

It was a landscape that delivered interesting contrasts, including some intriguing hill shapes just on the other side of place whose name I missed since I figured the station and associated signage was on the left-hand side of the train.

It wasn't **Shirasawa**. I managed to catch that one.





Since the *Wikipedia* listing of stations on the **Ōu Main Line** has nothing between **Jinba** and **Shirasawa**, it was probably somewhere around **Nagahashiri** and **Tamotegi Shrine** that wasn't significant enough to warrant a station.

But that's hindsight and *Google Maps* kicking in.

Neither **Nagahashiri** or **Tamotegi Shrine** seems to have warranted a mention in the *Wikipedia*.

By this stage we were in **Ōdate City**, though (as is so often the case when you're away from the big smoke), the urban designation seemed to be something of a misnomer.

Ōdate is tucked away in a basin with the **Ōu Mountains** to the east and surrounded by substantial peaks. Part of it lie within the **Towada-Hachimantai National Park**, and much of it is covered in forest.

Add all the location factors together (inland, northern **Honshū**, mountains) together and news that the city is noted for its heavy winter snowfall could hardly be described as earth-shattering.

Reports that the local economy is based on agriculture, forestry and winter tourism are equally unsurprising.

On the other hand, one might expect human settlement in the northern end of the former **Dewa Province** that covered much of the present-day prefectures of **Akita** and **Yamagata** is a relatively recent development.

After all, it's not far from **Hokkaidō**, where large-scale settlement goes back to the late nineteenth century.

One would, of course, be wrong. Around forty minutes south-east of **Ōdate**, the concentric **Ōyu Stone Circles** that were, effectively sundials, date back four thousand years to the late **Jōmon Period**.

While it certainly feels like frontier territory, the process of colonising the region and dispossessing the indigenous **Ainu** and **Emishi** peoples goes back as far as 658, when **Abe no Hirafu** defeated the **Emishi** tribes on the sites of contemporary **Akita** and **Noshiro** and built a fort on the **Mogami River**.

The eighth century saw **Japanese colonists** gradually spreading across northern **Honshū**, building settlements with wooden palisades.

One of them, later named **Akita Castle**, dates back to 733.

The **Emishi** tribes fiercely resisted attempts to build a road from there to connect with the **Pacific Coast**. An uprising in 767 prompted five expeditions to pacify the region between 776 and 811.

Subsequent rebellions and disturbances included the **Ganki Disturbance** (878), the **East Japan War** (*Tengyō no Ran*, 939), the **Gosannen War** in the late 1080s and the **Former Nine Years War** (a.k.a. the **Zenkunen War**, *Zenkunen no Eki* fought from 1051 to 1063).





The wild and woolly frontier derring-do continued after forces from the **Kamakura Shōgunate** destroyed the **Northern Fujiwara** clan in 1189 as **Fujiwara** partisans fled into the mountains and continued to resist the imposition of central authority.

Towards the end of the **Sengoku Period**, the **Mogami** clan controlled the southern portion of **Dewa Province**, with the **Akita clan** as the dominant force towards the northern end.

Both sided with **Tokugawa Ieyasu** at the **Battle of Sekigahara** but were dispossessed during the early **Edo Period** with their territories broken up and shared among less influential players.

While the various domains combined to support the **Tokugawa shōgunate**, the defeat of the pro-**Tokugawa** forces saw the new **Meiji** government reorganise **Dewa Province** into **Ugo** and **Uzen** Province in 1868.

They, in turn, became **Akita** and **Yamagata Prefectures** in August 1876.

With snowy mountains with snow away to the left, we stopped in **Ōdate** at 10:14, moved on through **Shimokawazoi** and **Hiyaguchi**, spotted an old guy whipper-snipping grass between rice paddies and wound up at **Takanosu** at 10:30.

The town forms one terminus of the **Akita Nairiku Line**, the *endangered train line* from 2012. It is also home to a very decent French restaurant, though lunch there was never part of the equation.

From there, travelling *via* **Maeyama** and **Futatsui**, we stopped at **Higashi-Noshiro** on the flat coastal plain, also familiar from 2012 and headed on through **Kitakanaoka** to **Moritake**, where wetlands just after the station caught my eye.

I spent next part looking for a decent shot of a rice paddy vista, like the ones that had repeatedly turned up just after I switch off camera, but now, with the battery low there was nothing I wanted, even though I sit was perched there with the camera ready.

That got us into **Hachirogata** on the broad coastal flatlands which ran away to the **Japan Sea** coastline on the right.

You couldn't see it from the train at that point, though it couldn't have been far away, over in the other side of what's left of **Lake Hachirōgata**, **Japan's** second largest lake until a land reclamation project saw it drained between 1957 and 1977.

Bearing that in mind, considering the project was probably intended to boost the rice crop it was a little strange to see extensive stretches of solar panels over what would likely be productive paddy fields just north of **Oiwake**.





By that point, it was after half past eleven, and we were on our way into **Akita**'s city centre, passing through **Kami-Iijima** and **Tsuchizaki**, neither of which seem to possess any particular claim to fame.

On the ground in **Akita** we had two jobs, and an hour and a quarter in which to knock them over.

First, *Madam* needed to replenish the cash reserves, which is always an issue in a country where people tend not to use credit cards to pay for accommodation, meals and other incidentals.

Madam did the cash replenishment bit in the new department store complex next door to the station, while *Hughesy* stood and watched the passing parade.

The second, however, required my presence, or at least my **Rail Pass**.

We needed to pick up reserved tickets for the post-**Nagoya** leg of the odyssey and managed to get them for every leg where they were needed.

There was one *shinkansen* leg between **ShinYamaguchi** and **Kokura** where we reckoned we could to take a chance in a Non-Reserved carriage for an eighteen-minute ride in a week's time.

So we walked out of the ticket office with everything else covered, having contributed something to an aspiring ticket clerk's training.

At least, I assume the youngish woman standing behind the clerk and observing the procedure was a trainee. The odd remark that passed between them seemed to be elucidation from the expert.

A trainee probably wouldn't be faced with a couple of **Rail Pass** carrying travellers looking to book nine sets of assorted *shinkansen* and limited express tickets every day.

We emerged to find a traditional song and dance performance outside the ticket office.

It was part of the opening celebrations for this section of the station complex, but there was something slightly better to come.

We were unaware of that minor detail as we set about buying *bentō* boxes for lunch, along with **Sapporo Black** to wash *Hughesy's* beef *bentō* down.

Since it was a tad too early to move on down to the platform, we found somewhere to sit for ten minutes or so. A matter of minutes later a couple of slightly out of season apparitions appeared.

You can; I guess, put their emergence down to the afore-mentioned opening celebrations, with their focus on local traditions and idiosyncracies.

These days, the demonlike **Namahage** appear around **Akita** on New Year's Eve, working door-to-door in pairs to seek out lazy, sooky or badly behaved children (usually, from what I could gather *naughty boys*).

While aspects of the tradition have changed over the years and there are variations in the legends associated with them, the **Namahage** seem to have started out as five demonic ogres brought to **Japan** from China by **Emperor Wu of Han**.

They set up their headquarters on two peaks, (**Honzan** and **Shinzan**) on **Akita's Oga Peninsula** and promptly set about doing their demonic thing, stealing crops, abducting young women and generally making nuisances of themselves until the locals were at their wits' end.

Finally, in desperation, the villagers came up with a solution in the form of a bet. If the demons could complete the task, they would win and would have a young woman delivered to them every year.

Lose, and they would be expected to move elsewhere or change their demonic ways.

The details vary from place to place, but the task was to build a flight of a thousand stone steps from *here to there (insert names of appropriate local landmarks to suit the setting)*.

As usually happens in these tales, the task is almost complete when the demons are outwitted.

With nine hundred and ninety-nine steps done, they're about to start on the last one when one of the villagers imitates a rooster, which convinces the demons that they have failed.

So they depart in haste, without bothering to check whether dawn was actually breaking. One assumes that, like the trolls in **The Hobbit**, they had to be underground when the sun came up.

Or maybe the terms of the wager saw their role in the community redefined and they became bogeymen, reduced to going door to door at New Year's, seeking out naughty boys, wayward infants and anyone who isn't living up to expectations.

Newlywed women whose cooking isn't up to scratch, for example.

Wearing their diabolical masks and clad in their straw capes, the **Namahage** burst in, roaring, growling and creating enough mayhem to terrify small children.

Then, having delivered the required admonitions (parents apparently provide the information recorded in the **Naughty and Nice book**), the **Namahage** accept refreshments (usually **sake**, along with nibbles) before moving on to the next target.

According to *Madam*, the two in the accompanying photo were *looking for naughty boys and found one*, but now that I've managed to fill in the background, *Hughesy* is inclined to believe I was subconsciously applying for an audition.

It sounds like my kind of gig.





After that bit of excitement there was nothing for it but to take ourselves, our *bentō* boxes and the beer down to the platform, where the train was ready to leave.

First of all, however, *Madam* needed to get those photos onto *Facebook*, which meant the *bentō* boxes were not quite finished when the train left at 1:58.

This leg of the day's journey took us onto the **Uetsu Main Line**, which runs parallel to the coast from **Akita** to **Niigata**, although we were, once again, on the landward side of train, looking out over a landscape misty wet with rain as we departed.

It was a grey, uninspiring outlook, and while I suspected there were mountains over that way, nothing was visible through the drizzle.

But the vista was pleasant enough although nothing out there made me inclined to place the camera on standby. We could catch glimpses of the sea on our right early on, but hills and farmland took over as we moved away from the coast.

To the left, mountains emerged from the misty drizzle just before the next stop at **Ugo-Honjo**, where the sea back, but only briefly, on the other side.

But the rain seemed to be lifting.

We passed through a couple of secondary stations (**Araya**, **Katsurane** and **Shimohama**, places that were far too insignificant for a limited express to stop at) on our way out of **Akita** into **Yurihonjo**, another one of those administrative entities formed by merging a significant city (**Honjo**) with a number of neighbouring towns.

That happened back in 2005, and it's interesting to note that just after the merger the new city assembly had 126 representatives, more than were needed in the national capital.

Michikawa, **Iwaki-Minato**, **Ugo-Kameda**, **Oriwatari** and **Ugo-Iwaya** continued the *too insignificant to warrant a stop* theme, and even though our *Inaho* service may have stopped at **Ugo-Honjo**, the station in itself was unattended and has been since October 1981.

Having rattled through **Nishime**, on our way out of **Yurihonjo**, we did stop at **Nikaho**, the city with a population of around 25,000 and a significant **TDK factory** sitting right beside the station.

By that point the rain had lifted, the windows were clear, and photography came back into calculations, but there was not much to catch the eye on my side.

Still, it was a pleasant enough landscape if you're inclined to do a **Small Faces** and *rest your eyes in shades of green*.

Konoura, **Kisakata**, **Kamihama** and **Kosagawa** took us out of **Nikaho** into **Yuza** and somewhere along the line there was a sudden flurry of photographic activity as snow-clad mountains appeared on my left and made me wonder what we might have missed in the drizzle.

Around **Kisakata** we seemed to be running along the coastline or not too far inland from it.

From where I was sitting it didn't look like a particularly interesting coastline, though mileages may well vary. The view on the landward side was no great shakes either, once the intervening terrain blocked out the mountains.

These things, however, are subject to sudden change.



I was musing on what I might be missing over on my left when an *Oh, it's a nice view*, saw *Madam* head for the vacant seats on the other side of the aisle.

I, however, stayed right where I was.

I was rewarded at 2:07, somewhere before **Yuza** itself, when the mountains came back into view with hints of more behind them and yet more away to the south.

As the weather lifted, this was not the leg to be taking a postprandial snooze, though cloud obscured much of the upper levels and photography remained a touch and go affair.

But that didn't prevent me from trying.

At **Yuza**, I gazed out over newly planted rice with the heads barely above the water and hills away to the left with hints of mountains beyond.

There was more of the same through **Minamichōkai** and **Mototate** on the way into **Sakata** as we continued the run along the flat between the mountains and the coast.

The ancient provincial capital of **Dewa Province** was located somewhere nearby, although archaeologists are yet to unearth its precise location.

That seems to have something to do with the mouth of the **Mogami River**, which flows through **Sakata** and has, more than likely, changed its course from time to time.

There was definitely a port at the river mouth in the **Kamakura Period**, though siltation brought about a decline during the **Muromachi Period**.

It was back in business as a major centre for the coastal trade during the **Edo Period**, though the precise geographic and topographic details remain obscure. There's a good reason for that.

While the early **Meiji Period** saw a family of local merchants, the **Honma** clan, emerge as **Japan's** largest landholders the **1894 Shōkai Earthquake** and the fires that followed the quake destroyed around 80% of the town.

Another fire on 29 October 1976 gutted 22.5 hectares of **Sakata's** city centre, destroyed more than seventeen hundred buildings, killed one citizen and injured nearly a thousand more.

No wonder there's not much trace of historic locations in the vicinity.

Today, with a population of more than a hundred thousand, **Sakata** is a centre for commercial fishing, agriculture and light manufacturing, producing concrete products, chemicals and cosmetics.





The electronics firm **Seiko Epson** is a significant player in the local economy.

From **Sakata**, we continued along the **Uetsu Main Line** to **Amarume**, though we could have switched to the **Rikuu West Line**.

That wouldn't, however, get us all the way to **Tsuruoka**, which was going to be our base for the next two nights.

But we would be back in **Amarume** on Monday to take the **Rikuu West Line** across towards the Pacific coast.

A 2:46 pm arrival in **Tsuruoka** would, under normal circumstances, have left us with time to do something in the afternoon, but it was not to be. That had nothing to do with the visit to **Tourist Information** that revealed bad news for tomorrow.

For a start, the weather forecast indicated rain, and on that basis our planned activities were not recommended.

I was patiently biding my time outside the office at the time, but it seems inquiries about our plans or the morrow produced a very firm **DON'T**.

That, I guess, is understandable when climbing thousands of wet steps is concerned. Still, there were alternatives, and we were well equipped with tourist information.

Despite the uncertainties about tomorrow, we moseyed over to the hotel, which was conveniently next door to the station, fully expecting that it would be too early to check in.

That would not have been a problem under normal circumstances, but it was drizzling, and we were tired.

At first, the word was that we were, indeed, too early to check in, but as we set about preparing for an hour out in the cold and drizzle a gentleman arrived in **Reception**, overruled the previous advice, and we were cleared for arrival so to speak.

Questions about **WiFi** revealed it was available in the lobby, but we were given a free router as we headed off towards the room.

General tiredness was underlined after we reached the room, which was a sort of *Holiday Inn minimalist affair*, and considered our options.

No one had any desire whatsoever to head out into the drizzle for a walk round.

The emerging consensus was that this was an afternoon for staying in the room and catching up on sleep and internet matters, so I took a look at the router, which seemed to have an ethernet connection on the end, and realised that my *MacBook Air* doesn't do ethernet.

And *iPads* require another, different, non-ethernet or USB connection.

Under the circumstances it took no time at all to consign internet matters to the too hard basket, and once they were out of the equation, it was time to catch up on sleep.

We were back on deck after six, looking for something to eat and disinclined to venture too far, so the options around the station would have to do.

There was, reputedly, one place in the vicinity that does fried oysters, so that would be all right with me.

And, on the way out we decided we might as well hand back the router.

We arrived at **Reception** to find the girl who had been on duty when we arrived and had given us the router had been replaced by a security dude who pointed out that **WiFi** doesn't require a physical connection.

That, when you look at it objectively, should have been bleeding obvious.

But it hadn't been, and as *Madam* headed back upstairs to return the device to the room, *Hughesy* reflected on what this obvious fact said about our state when we arrived.

On that basis, afternoon naps were obviously the way to go.

Still, we weren't out of it yet. There was confusion outside the eatery as *Madam* ran through options that looked very limited and didn't contain references to oysters.

So we were at cross purposes.

I wanted something to eat and was reasonably confident I would be able to find something inside.

Madam seemed to expect me to find something I would like and actively wanted to eat.

I just wanted something to fill in empty space.

The problem was solved once we were inside and seated at the bench in front of the kitchen.

That's where we found an illustrated menu with a much wider range of options than had been listed outside.

And crumbed oysters were included, along with fresh oysters natural.

That would do very nicely for *Hughesy* and ticked the boxes beside like and actively want to eat.

For *Madam*, there was *sashimi* and fried *aji* (horse mackerel).

Once the order was, I perused the menu carefully and spotted at least three further possibilities which would all do if the weather prevented us from roaming too far tomorrow night.

Pitchers of beer washed everything down, and *Hughesy* left the premises entirely satisfied and close to replete.

Not quite replete, though.

A right hand turn out of the eatery took me into the station convenience store, which yielded a tin of **Asahi Super Dry** to consume while I caught up on the digital side of things.

It might not quite have equated to an early night, but the omens were good as far as a big sleep was concerned.



SUNDAY 14 MAY
2017

Tsuruoka > Mount Haguro (Dewa Sanzan) > Tsuruoka

While I woke up at regular intervals through the night, when I emerged from the most recent doze I was surprised to find that it looked like full daylight outside.

It didn't seem to have been that long since I last surfaced, so I checked through the curtains: definite daylight.

So I checked the time.

On a non-travel (or non-**Rail Pass** travel) day, 4:40 was far too early to be starting the day, so I headed back to bed.

But not for long.

Since I was more or less wide awake, with the brain kicking into composition mode, it wasn't that long before I was up and into the **Travelogue** notes.

Thanks to that early start, I had caught up on that side of things before we began moving for the day.

Before we headed down to what would probably be a perfunctory breakfast we needed to kick around the possibilities and figure out the day's agenda.

On a travel day, regardless of the weather, there's a fair chunk of the day's activities more or less set in stone. Here, while we wanted to head to **Mount Haguro**, there were possibilities to consider and alternatives that needed investigating.



The first decision was whether to go at all.

If we didn't, since **Tsuruoka** is one of the major cities on **Yamagata Prefecture's Shōnai Plains** and flourished as a castle town built around the **Tokugawa family** stronghold there were bound to be significant buildings and historical sites from the **Edo Period**.

The area produces one of the best rice crops in **Japan** and is one of **UNESCO's Creative Cities of Gastronomy**, so there was bound to be something worth investigating on that front as well.

But the three mountains of the ***Dewa Sanzan*** (**Mount Haguro**, **Mount Gassan**, and **Mount Yudono**) were what had brought us there, and the initial plan had been to do the sightseeing bit first, and see what we could manage after that.

Yesterday's visit to **Tourist Information** had yielded specific advice, based on their weather forecast, which predicted rain: **DON'T**.

Madam's weather source suggested it would be cloudy, but clearing.

A look out of the window revealed actual sunlight, even if it was early in the morning.

On that basis, we figured we might as well go.

Maybe the cloud had already gone, and the clearing was already done and dusted.

So we put ourselves through the minimalist rain room and headed down for a perfunctory breakfast based on bread and pastries.

It had to be *based on* because there wasn't anything else.

Having made the decision to have a go at the planned excursion, we needed water and salmon rice before we set off.

With a bit of time up our sleeves, we headed for a convenience store a few blocks away rather than the **New Day** at the station because we needed to scope out the neighbourhood.

We were back at the station with time to spare before the bus left, and encountered a strange old dude in sailor suit riding a ladies' bike while we were waiting.

He was, according to *Madam*, something of a local identity (at least according to comments she'd seen on the internet) and he certainly got himself around.

We sighted him a while later about half-way across the city as the 9:47 bus took us on a meandering course through the town with frequent glimpses of the mountain chain to the east.



Once we were away from the flat, there was a steady climb until we reached the bottom of the mountain.

Visiting the **Mount Haguro** portion of *Dewi Sanzan* you have a number of options.

If you have limited time, you can catch the bus to either the top or the bottom.

If you have plenty of time, along with an appropriate degree of fitness you can arrive at the bottom, climb the 2,466 stairs and catch the bus down from the top.

If your level of fitness rules out the climb, take the bus to the top and head down from there.

Or, alternatively, you can get off at the bottom, proceed as far as the foot of the big staircase, head back and catch the next bus to the top and take a look around there, giving the stairs a big miss.

We had already decided that yesterday's fatigue factor, regardless of the weather conditions, ruled out the climb. We needed to pace ourselves to get through the next ten days and tiredness was already a factor, so the idea was to do as much as possible but don't push it.

So we alighted at the foot of the mountain, where the village of **Toge** is home to the [Ideha Cultural Museum](#) and temple guesthouses line the streets.

Mount Haguro is the lowest of the *Dewa Sanzan* (*the three sacred mountains of Dewa*), standing at 414 metres, and the only one accessible throughout the year.

The other two, **Mount Gassan** (1,984 metres) and **Mount Yudono** (1504 metres), also attract their share of pilgrims who come to venerate the **Shintō** kami-sama (deities) of the mountains.

Each of the mountains also features in the **Buddhist** iconography. **Haguro** is said to symbolise the present, transient world, **Gassan** the past, posthumous world, and **Yudono** the future.

The traditional pilgrimage, referred to as *sankan sando*, began with the ascent of **Haguro** and continued through ascetic practices representing death, resurrection and renewal on the other two peaks.

It was referred to as the *eastern pilgrimage*, an epic journey that was believed to be a significant rite of passage for fifteen-year-old boys and drew the famed *haiku* poet **Matsuo Bashō**. He described his experience there in **The Narrow Road to the Deep North**.

Bashō's visit was in 1689, over a thousand years after **Prince Hachiko**, the first-born son of Emperor Sushun, opened *Dewa Sanzan* as a religious centre in 593, and the mountain was probably venerated well before that.





Hachiko had renounced his title and position after his father was assassinated, taken the name of **Kokai**, and recast himself as a hermit. From a beach in **Dewa Province**, an enormous black bird with three legs is said to have led him first to **Haguro-san** and on to the other two peaks.

He was the first of the mountain's ***Yamabushi*** (*ascetic priests*) and reputedly saw an apparition of **the Buddha**. His grave on **Haguro-san** is maintained to this day and the mountain's name, which translates as *black wing* refers to the black bird that brought him there.

While it was sunny outside, once we were through the **Zuishin Gate** conditions underfoot confirmed yesterday's advice.

The weather hadn't turned out as predicted, but there was no way we would have been looking at climbing these irregularly placed flagstones when they were wet.



There's a reasonable descent from the gate before you start the big climb and I, for one, was glad when it was over.

Australian-style workplace health and safety doesn't apply here, so there were no yellow markers to indicate the edges of the steps, and it is hard to judge where one step ends and the one below begins.

We made our way cautiously down a relatively short flight of stairs, and that was enough for this little black duck. But the descent was worth it thanks to the cluster of shrines at the bottom.

From there one moves on to the *Suga-no-taki* waterfall and the red-lacquered *Shinkyo*, or *God's Bridge* over the **Harai River**, where pilgrims purify themselves before they start the ascent of the *sando*, or shrine approach.



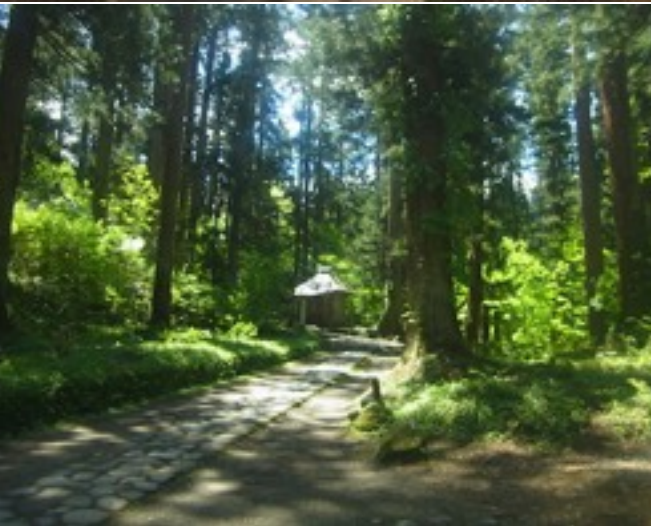
The 1.7-kilometre stone-lined *Ishi-Dan* path climbs past hundreds of ancient cedar trees.

The staircase, constructed over a thirteen-year period after 1648 by the fiftieth chief priest, **Tenyu Betto**, has thirty-three figures carved into the steps.

Find them all, and you will have your greatest wish granted.

Searching for the figures will add to the climb's duration, usually stated as somewhere between an hour and ninety minutes, but provides plenty of opportunities for climbers to catch their breath.

The first part of the climb takes pilgrims past the twenty-nine-metre *Gojū-tō* (*Five-storied Pagoda*), said to be the oldest tower in the northeast.

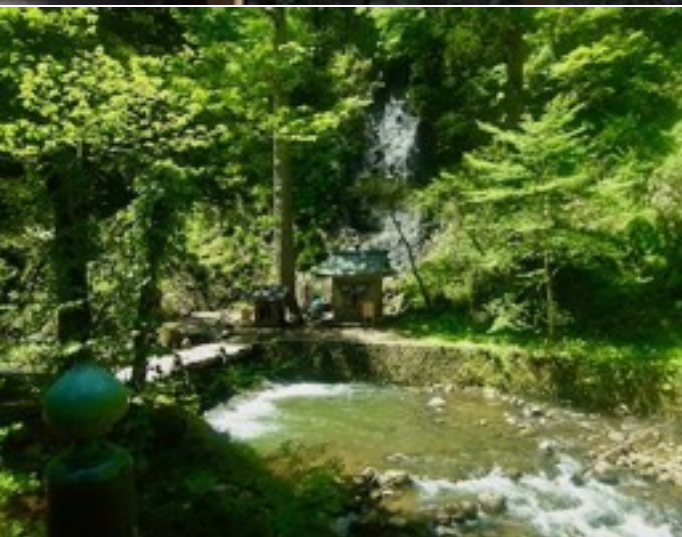


The structure was built from unpainted wood and shingles without using nails on the orders of military commander **Taira no Masakado** between 931 and 937.

A court noble, **Fujiwara no Ujiie** rebuilt the pagoda in 1372, and there was another restoration job in 1608 by **Yoshiaki Mogami**, the feudal lord of **Yamagata Domain**.

Nearby, marked by a sacred rope a tree known as ***Jiji-sugi***, the *Grandpa Cedar Tree*, is said to be 1,400 years old.

A circumference of ten metres suggests it has certainly been around a long time, and there's a certain amount of luck in the survival.



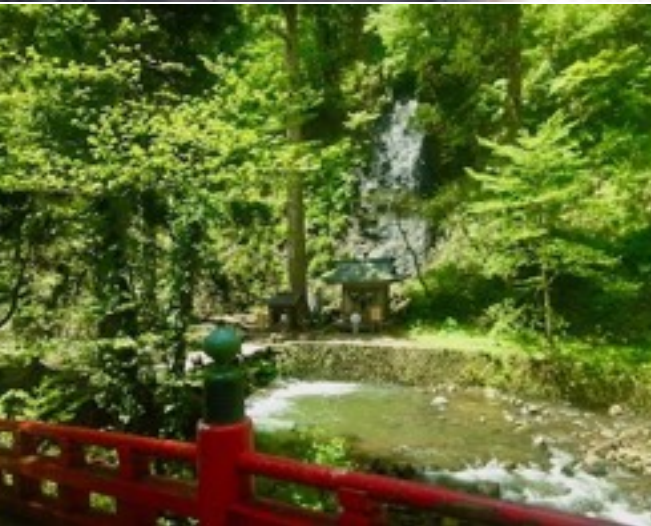
The tree was part of a couple until lightning destroyed its partner.

The staircases take pilgrims up three slopes (*Ichino-saka*, *Nino-saka* and *Sanno-saka*) to the red *torii* gate that marks the entrance to the shrine at the summit.

Nino-saka (Second Hill, a.k.a. *Aburakoboshi* or *Spilling Oil*) is the steepest.

The nickname dates back to the end of the **Heian Period** when the steep slope caused a monk, **Musashibo Benkei**, to spill the dedication oil he was carrying due to the steep slope to the temple at the summit which venerates **Tsukiyomi-no-Mikoto**, **Oyamatsumi-no-Mikoto**, and **Ideha-no-Mikoto**, the deities of the three sacred mountains.

But we weren't going that way.



We took ourselves on a circuit around the stream, the grandfather tree and the five-storey pagoda to the bottom of the big staircase, moving reasonably quickly because we did have a bus to catch and a climb to avoid.

There were, however, plenty of candidates for the ascent.

One might have been tempted to join them if yesterday's fatigue factor hadn't delivered an important message.

Both of us figured that climbing a couple of thousand steps in the space of just under two kilometres fell well outside the usual definition of *pace yourself*.

But once we'd done the circuit at the bottom, things were more leisurely on the way back.

Climbing back up to the **Zuishin Gate** confirmed initial impressions. It wasn't raining, but there was no way you would want to clamber up this one, or its big brother, in the wet.



Attempt to do that, and you're looking at a definite possibility of a broken arm or leg if you slip, and slips would be almost inevitable.

That, at least, is our excuse, and we're sticking to it.

Back in **Toge**, we had a little time up our sleeves before the 11:20 bus to the summit, but not enough to take in the displays at the **Ideha Cultural Museum**.



When the bus arrived, we had a steep climb past ski facilities through verdant cedar forests to the top of the mountain.

It might be a sacred peak, but at a tad over four hundred metres it has to rate as a modest summit when compared to the mountains that surround it.

There were, however, great views across to the right going up, and we alighted at the top to find the predictable commercial outlets and a dirty patch of unmelted snow outside the temple precinct.

The main shrine is the *Sanjin Gosaiden*, home to *Dewa Sanzan*'s three main deities.

At just over twenty-eight metres tall, tall, twenty-six wide, and twenty front to back with a thatched roof over two metres thick it's the largest wooden building in **Japan** with a thatched roof.

While its exact age is indeterminate, we do know that the priest **Betto Kakujun** rebuilt the main building in 1818.

The huge iron bell nearby, however, dates back to 1275, when it was reputedly donated by the **Shōgun** after a Mongol fleet from China had been repulsed the year before.



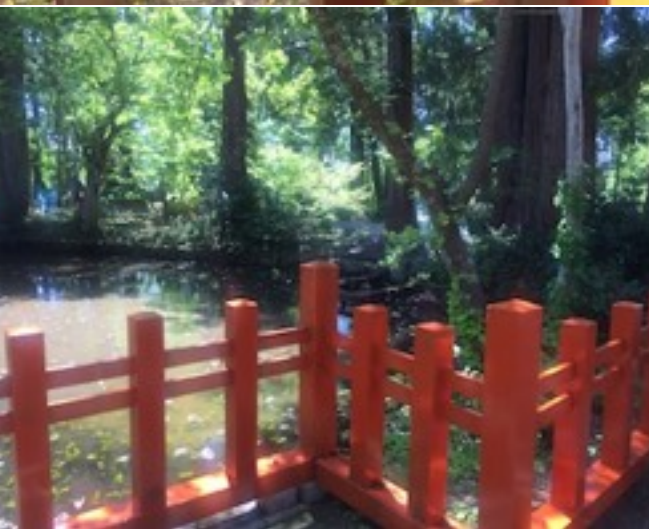
The ten-tonne bell, more than three metres tall and 1.85 in diameter is the country's third largest cast bell and the biggest in northern **Japan**.

There are other **Buddhist** temples and **Shintō** shrines scattered around the summit, and we spent twenty minutes or so taking a ramble around them.

They're impressive enough as a collection, but as far as atmosphere was concerned, both of us preferred the bottom end, possibly because of the stream in the forest side of things,

Up here we encountered larger crowds and, of course, no running water.

But there was **Kagami**, the mirror lake where reflections of the spirits of the three deities can allegedly be seen.



The name stems from the days when women were forbidden to make the climb to *Gosaiden* and sent mirrors with their menfolk, who threw them into the lake as an offering to the temple deities.

From there, of course, in the old days the pilgrim moved on to the shrines atop **Mounts Gassan** and **Yudono**, but since they're not always accessible, pilgrims can worship the deities of all three in one central location.

It's also noted for *shojin ryori* (vegetable dishes made from mountain produce) served at the *sanrojo* (priests' retreat), but that was never part of our agenda.

We might have dawdled a bit longer, but, while *Madam* took herself into the temple looking for photographic detail.

I took a spell beside the lake, where the distinctive orange fence seemed bereft of signs in **English** advising the unwary visitor that the paint was wet.

While the orange paint incident marred the experience, bit didn't affect the overall impression.

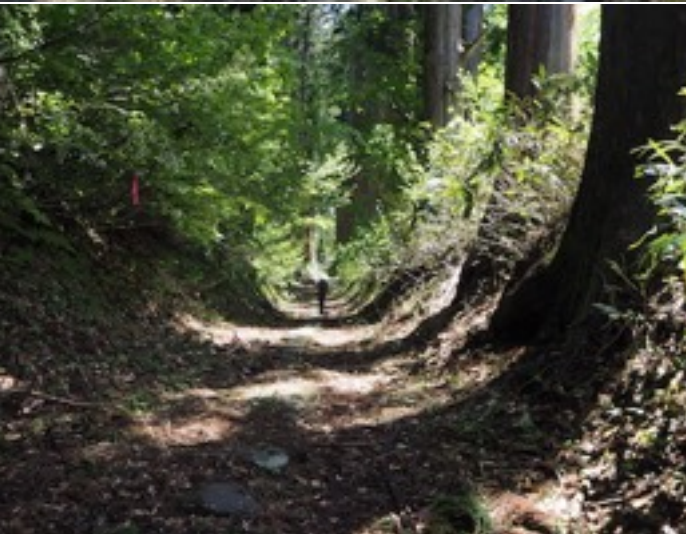


If you're visiting the mountain, and you've only got time for one stop, do the bottom and maybe take yourself off to the museum just up the road while you wait for the next bus down to the city.

So I took myself off to the nearby conveniences, managed to wash the orange paint off and headed back to see what we were up to next, grateful I hadn't decided to lean on the painted structure,

Since we had a little time up our sleeves, *Madam* decided she wanted photos of the mountain range to the east.

She reckoned the car park down the road associated with ski facilities would deliver that, so we set off to walk down the road.



Traffic wardens stopped us from proceeding too far that way and pointed us towards a walking track that would supposedly get us there.

Supposedly, because although we gave it a go, with a bus to catch, we decided to turn back. With hindsight, we could probably have gone on and caught the bus from the ski facility, but no one thought of that at the time.

Back at the top, there was enough time before the one o'clock bus to sit down and devour a serve of convenience store salmon rice, *Hughesy's preferred take away to eat on the go* option.

After the failed attempt to capture images of the surrounding mountains, it seemed diplomatic to give the photographer the window seat on the way down.



While the accompanying pictures are reasonably impressive, they don't quite capture the awe-inspiring majesty of a serious range of genuinely high mountains.

We're talking serious mountains here, folks, ones that are high enough to maintain their snow cover well into summer. It's even, according to a conversation the following day, possible to ski some areas well into June and July.

And they stretched about 180° of the full three-sixty.

That's not exactly easy to capture in an image and doesn't quite come up on a single page with four small slots for photographic input.

But at least I tried.

As we get the flat on the outskirts of **Tsuruoka**, thoughts predictably turned to the agenda for the rest of the day.

Since the tiredness factor had ruled out a look around the city, that was an obvious candidate.



We briefly pondered the possibility of alighting somewhere downtown and hoofing it from there, but *Hughesy* was definite.

I needed a half-hour power nap before I went anywhere, thank you very much, and, as things turned out, that was just as well.

So we headed all the way back and alighted at the station, where *Madam* headed off to the cake shop, leaving *Hughesy* to mope around the plaza in front of the station. That's more or less inevitable when you have two people, a single room key and a power nap on the horizon.

One notes these things because they present an opportunity to slot in some snaps taken earlier in the day.



Still, we were upstairs just after two, *Madam* had something to nibble on, and *Hughesy* had a good half hour to recharge the batteries before we headed back out about forty-five minutes later.

It wasn't quite on the way, but we stopped to check out a French-Italian place I'd spotted in the morning as a dinner option.

From there, we took ourselves through downtown **Tsuruoka**, with a couple of stops to try and capture the notion those ranges to the east really dominate the neighbouring skyline.

A navigational error once we were back on the main road into the city centre gave us a longer walk than we'd anticipated, but delivered an unexpected benefit on the way,

We had passed a couple of *samurai* houses that might, under other circumstances, have been worth a visit but weren't inclined to pay for admission and decided to miss the **Catholic church** as well. **Tsuruoka Park**, as far as we were concerned, was where it was at.

A turn down an unpromising street with a vacant block on the right-hand side heading towards our primary goal.

We were most of the way along that block when *Madam* spotted wine bottles in a window across the road.

This was obviously something we needed to investigate before we headed on to the park. It looked to be a rather promising eatery that could well be pencilled in for dinner.

In the park, we cooled our heels in a shelter near the iris ponds while *Madam's iPhone* conducted a *Google* search.

The restaurant we'd just spotted had favourable reviews and would be open for dinner 5:30.

It looked to be a better option than a return to last night's venue which would have done at a pinch.

Since it looked like dinner was sorted, we sortied through the castle grounds past the **Shōnai Shrine** built in the 1879s to honour **Lord Sakai Tadatsugu** to the **Taihokan Museum** in the former city library.

Entry to the small museum is free.





There are exhibits concerning notable local figures, interesting to cast the eyes over, but largely incomprehensible.

With everything in **Japanese**, *it was all Greek to me*.

I assume things would have been the same next door in the **Fujisawa Shuhei Memorial Museum**, devoted to the life and works of a noted author of historical fiction, and just down the road in the **Chido Museum**.

But the museum did deliver an unexpected opportunity for comic relief thanks to some sword-shaped balloons that struck *Hughesy's* eye as we entered the premises.



While there was no issue if we wanted to take one with us, it wouldn't have survived the homeward journey, would it?

And the sight of a sixty-plus foreigner carrying a luminous green semi-phallic item through the streets of **Tsuruoka** would almost certainly result in suppressed giggles and the occasional howl of derisive laughter.

As I struck a suitable pose a line from Randy Newman's *A Wedding in Cherokee County* sprang to mind: *They will laugh at my mighty sword*.

But it was another worthwhile contribution to the key part of the exercise, which involved killing time until 5:30.

So we took a leisurely walk around the museum, conducted a casual inspection and moseyed on along the edge of the former castle's moat to the nearby **Chido Museum**, which was either closed or in the process of shutting up shop.

Under other circumstances it would have been a prime candidate for a lengthy visit.

It's a private museum located in the relatively recent (1863) retirement residence of the **Sakai Lords of the Shōnait Domain**, founded in 1905 to promote local culture. Displays include folk materials from the area, traditional calligraphy, woodcraft, ceremonial *sake* barrels and the Lord's arsenal.

There's an attached garden, officially designated as a **Place of Scenic Beauty**, along with some relocated buildings and a three-story farmhouse with a thatched roof.

But it would be closing at five, and we wouldn't have time to do it justice.



The same issues would have applied back down the road at the school set up in 1805 to tackle corrupt practices within the **Shōnai clan** by teaching its sons, along with high-achieving children from the lower ranks of society, more appropriate **Confucian principles**.

Students entered **Chidokan** at the age of ten and progressed through five levels: *kutosho* (primary), *shujitsuzume* (secondary), *gaisha* (matriculation), *shishasei* (university) and *shasei* (graduate school).

Students moved on to the next level by passing a formal examination, and the whole process from elementary school to the equivalent of a Masters degree would take around twenty years.

The campus catered for around three hundred and fifty students and closed in 1873. Recovery and restoration work commenced in 1983, and today it acts as an open air museum that rates as a **National Historic Relic**, the only remaining example of a **domain school** in **Tōhoku**.

So that would have been worth a look as well, but by the time we arrived the doors were closed and the photographic opportunities limited.

Looking back on things, based on the above we'd have had an enjoyable afternoon (or rather, a couple of afternoons) if we'd arrived in **Tsuruoka** with a little more vim, vigour and vitality.

If we'd managed a ramble around where we'd just gone yesterday, we could have come back for a much closer look today, and could probably have slotted the *samurai* houses into the agenda as well.

On the other hand, we probably wouldn't have ended up dining at **Gozaya**, and would certainly have missed the next little episode.

We'd taken ourselves back to the park and resumed our seats in the shelter beside the iris pond. It seemed like a pleasant enough spot to sit and watch the sun go down as we waited for dinner.

No one would have expected a chatty old dude to rock up on his bike and engage *Madam* in an interesting conversation about bamboo shoots.

But he did, and *Madam* picked up a few interesting snippets about someone who was obviously quite a character.

He'd spent most of his working life in **Tōkyō**, apparently had his wife and offspring predecease him, and had inherited a house in **Amarume**.

That's about fifteen kilometres from **Tsuruoka**, and he was going to cycle back there after he'd stopped for this chat.

Or rather, we assumed he was.



He also expressed an intention, weather permitting, to *pedal the treadley* the dozen or so kilometres from **Amarume** to **Sakata** tomorrow.

The ten-minute conversation probably did something to brighten up his day, and certainly provided an entertaining interlude while we waited for dinner.

Between bamboo shoots, luminous green balloon swords and the odd bit of what I assumed was *double entendre* beside the irises, the afternoon was taking on distinctly R-rated undertones.

And, almost right on five-thirty, we took ourselves off for dinner, though **Gozaya** wasn't quite open yet.

That situation remedied itself about thirty seconds after we arrived.



The restaurant itself presented as Italian, slips in the odd French/Continental undertone and offered a selection of bottled wine, though there was no wine list as such.

Given a choice between **Chianti**, **Spanish** and **Japanese red**, a **Chardonnay** from somewhere and two **Japanese** whites, based on the food order, we ended up going for a **Japanese *Soleil Levante*** white.

While it seemed, at the time, to be muscat-based, but dry I'm increasingly inclined to suspect it may have derived from the mysterious and indigenous **Koshu** variety.

Either way, it was surprisingly good.

As I remarked about half way down the bottle, I've drunk plenty of Australian wines that weren't as good, and while it certainly wasn't stellar, I'd have no qualms about going again if there were no other choices.

If that sounds uncharitable, please note that I've tried this one, didn't mind it, but might be inclined to try something else that was unfamiliar.

Adventurous palate and all that.

So the wine was acceptable, and the food was good,

The salad was salad, and while I quite enjoyed the pasta with prawns, asparagus and cream sauce I could have skipped dessert.

But then, of course, I usually do.

Madam was quite happy to knock over the rest of mine.

And it looked like we were lucky we arrived there early.

It seemed like the place was booked out.

A couple who turned up a quarter of an hour after us had to eat at the bench rather than a table.

After dinner, a brisk ten to fifteen-minute walk got us back to the hotel, with a stop at the station's New Day for **Yebisu Premium**.

That gave me something to sip on while I dealt with digital matters and *Madam* dealt with the washing.

With what I'd been wearing through the day in the laundry basket, I'd changed into hotel issue in-room pyjamas and was therefore unable to assist.

That's my excuse anyway.

Hotel guests didn't need exposure to *Hughesy* in hotel pyjamas, just as my **Facebook** friends didn't need to *laugh at my mighty sword*, though the line provided a source of ongoing hilarity.



MONDAY 15
MAY 2015

Tsuruoka > Shinjō > Ōishida > Ginzan Onsen > Ōishida > Yamagata

And so we come to a day where the agenda prompted mixed feelings and delivered mixed reactions.

The mixed feelings?

Madam's anticipation of an enjoyable *onsen* contrasted with *Hughesy's* more reserved approach.

The mixed reactions?

We'll come to that later.

So it was a day for visiting an *onsen* town, weather permitting and a 9:29 departure delivered a chance to sleep in.

I surfaced around six with about nine hours' sleep under the belt and felt we were pacing ourselves well as I sat down to tap out **Travelogue** notes until seven-fifteen.

Showers and packing preceded the descent to breakfast, where the weather report on the radio suggested rain, possibly heavy rain and, perhaps, thunderstorms.

That set Tabby loose among the pigeons since this particular itinerary involved a three-stage journey with two of them on local lines and a stop in the middle where there wasn't a wet weather fallback.

It also raised some questions about how close to waterproof *Hughesy's* backpack was.

With the prospect of a wait before the last train leg, I wanted access to the *MacBook Air*, which therefore needed to go into the backpack rather than being consigned to a coin locker inside the big luggage.

So I would need to carry it.

I would also need to take a poncho to provide an outer, waterproof layer just in case and ensure the machine was turned off rather than merely sleeping.

And if things looked serious it would go into the coin locker with the big luggage.

We'd cross that bridge when we come to it, along with the one that involves getting *Hughesy* into the *onsen*.

That one's straightforward.

I'll go if we have access to a private bath. There's no point in my going into a large communal tub since I won't be there long. While I'll admit there's a certain amount of prudery there, seriously, I never feel clean enough before I get in.

But before either of those bridges appeared on the horizon we needed to get ourselves to **Ōishida**, the dropping off point for **Ginzan Onsen** and were looking at a three stage journey through the back blocks to get there.

The first two were both (effectively) on local lines, and even if the last involved a one-stop leg on the **Yamagata Shinkansen**, it's still very close to the *Japanese equivalent of the Black Stump*.

After we'd boarded the bus in **Ōishida** the route to **Ginzan Onsen** crossed the track that had brought us there.

When it did, I couldn't help asking myself whether they actually ran an actual *shinkansen* along that.

An extensive check on *Google Maps* and *Maps* and half an hour of my life that I'll never get back revealed that, yes, coming from **Shinjō** to **Ōishida** there's one single track, and it has to be the one we crossed at that particular level crossing.

But that was still some way down the road.

We started by retracing some of Saturday's last leg on the **Uetsu Main Line**, back through **Fujishima** and **Nishibukuro** to **Kita-Amarume**, a fifteen-kilometre run that took us around sixteen minutes.

Once we were there, we crossed the pedestrian bridge and changed to the **Rikuu West Line**, which actually starts back in **Sakata**.

For once, there was no need to flash the **Rail Pass** along the way since the station is unmanned.

It isn't *quite* in the middle of nowhere, but there's nothing much in the vicinity apart from rice paddies and the odd passenger changing train lines. It does, however, represent the start of a fifty minute, forty-three kilometre run through the mountains to **Shinjō**.

The ride took us through what would have been strikingly attractive scenery in better weather, passing through places (**Minamino**, **Karikawa**, **Kiyokawa**, **Takaya**, **Furukuchi**, **Tsuya**, **Uzen-Zennami**



and **Masukata**) where the stations were mostly unattended, and passengers were few and far between.

Most of them look to be in slow decline.

Furukuchi, for example, has seen the average number of passengers departing the station every day fall from 107 in 2000 to just 39 in 2012.

While there wasn't much to remark on as we passed, it was still attractive, but in *a moody agricultural essence of Japan sort of way* on the passage through the mountains to the terminus of the **Yamagata Shinkansen**, which also lies on the **Ōu Main Line**.

That line starts where we did yesterday in **Aomori** and runs all the way down to **Fukushima** on one of the main rail corridors through **Tōhoku**. But that's for through traffic.



At **Shinjō**, while we'd reached the terminus of the **Rikuu West Line**, we could have transferred to the **Rikuu East Line** and ended up on the **Tōhoku Shinkansen** line at **Furukawa**.

But we were here for the **Yamagata Shinkansen**, even if it was a very short ride.

So we queued for non-reserved seats in Car 17; which would have been the first one if we'd been heading in the opposite direction.

We managed to snaffle seats eight at the front of the carriage, which meant limited views from the aisle seat, but that was OK.

It was only one stop on a fourteen-minute, twenty-one-kilometre leg.

If *The Curious Reader* thinks that's hardly *shinkansen* speed, he or she is right on the money, but we're talking *shinkansen* rolling stock on a regular line, and therefore, vastly reduced velocities.

We were on the *shinkansen* service because it was probably the first train out of **Shinjō**. If it wasn't, the earlier service would have pulled over at **Funagata** or **Ashisawa** to let the bullet train through.

Even if it wasn't travelling at bullet train speed.



We alighted at Ōishida, deposited the luggage in the coin lockers and noted an interesting anomaly.

Out in what amounts to the boondocks, you'd expect to pay at least as much for your coin locker as you would in the big smoke, but here it was actually 25% less; ¥300 is a significant drop on the seemingly standard ¥400.

That gave us something to ponder as we set off to wait for the bus. It was better than considering the possibilities of a weather outlook that lay somewhere between *ominous* and *threatening*.

But it wasn't actually raining, so I took a look at the signs portraying the area's attractions.

For a start, there seemed to be a **Bashō** link reflected in the **Bashō-Seifu History Museum**, located in nearby **Obanazawa**. That hardly surprising. After all, we knew he had been in the area.



And the casual observer may be inclined to suspect he was there for the same reason as we were, with a visit to **Ginzan Onsen** on his itinerary.

The casual observer would, however, be wide of the mark.

While the poet may well have taken the waters while he stayed at **Obanazawa** as a guest of a merchant named Mr Seifu. *but relatively free of the vulgarities of the merchant class*, he was actually bound for **Risshaku-ji**, an ancient temple northeast of **Yamagata** founded in 860.

It was, according to **The Narrow Road**, a must-see.

After he'd visited the temple, **Bashō** was *"delayed at Ōishida, for decent weather. "This is haiku country," someone told us, "seeds from old days blooming like forgotten flowers, the sound of a bamboo flute moving the heart. With no one to show us the way, however, local poets try a new style and old style together." So we made a small anthology together, but the result is of little merit. So much for culture."*

From there, **Bashō** moved on down the **Mogami River**, riding the rapids in a tiny rice boat on his way to **Mount Haguro**.

Having checked out the map, we headed into a deserted waiting room until the bus arrived, figuring that it was best to be out of the weather though it wasn't actually raining at the time.

The deserted waiting room scenario, it probably comes as no surprise to learn the when the bus arrived we were the first on board, though it gradually filled in the course of the ten minutes or so before departure.

One suspects there was a smattering of people on their way to the *onsen*, but most of the passengers of looked to be local residents,

Although it presents as a vintage vehicle intended for and patronised by, tourists headed for *Ginzan Onsen*; it also serves as a local bus.

The locals hop on and off along the way, seemingly without having to pay;

Tourists do, and need to have the right amount on hand since the driver doesn't carry change.

The bus was close to full when we left and stayed that way for most of the journey.

The local service side of things was reflected in the route, which took us *via* shopping centres and such into a rural landscape that gradually transformed itself into the foothills of the cordillera that runs through the heart of **Tōhoku**.

We eventually alighted around five minutes walk from the main attraction, though there's a substantial *onsen* hotel right beside the bus stop.





There was obvious pedestrian traffic going up and down from where the bus pulled up and nearby car parks to the village.

We joined the downhill flow, heading towards the **Tourist Information**, which for some reason was shut, though there seemed to be no obvious explanation for the closure.

There was no shortage of visible visitors in the vicinity, and there were people in outfits that suggested they might have worked in the office.

But they were, it seemed, there for tour groups rather than individuals or couples.

Information would have been useful when it came to the finer details and might have secured *Madam* her *onsen*-fix, but the nuts and bolts of the place were relatively straightforward.



Ginzan Onsen (*Silver Mountain Hot Spring*) is a secluded hot spring town in the mountains of **Yamagata Prefecture** that takes its name from a silver mine founded in 1456.

And the village wouldn't have been on **Bashō**'s itinerary. He died in 1694, while the hot springs were not discovered until 1741.

These days it is better known as an attractive *onsen* town in a steep sided river gorge, with historic *ryokan* that became nationally famous as the setting for the television drama *Oshin*.

There's a single line of buildings along the footpath on either bank of the stream, with its several bridges to take pedestrian traffic back and forth across the waterway.



Vehicular traffic can get in across the first bridge to disgorge passengers, but from there on it's all shanks' pony;

Most of the dozen or so *ryokan* are traditionally styled three and four storey wooden buildings though *Fujiya* in the centre of town has a more contemporary design that tends to stand out in the daylight.

While purists see it as out of place in a traditional townscape, the design does include traditional elements and the same exposed wood and white plaster as the surrounding buildings.

Interestingly, its neighbours were allegedly in a western style and then slowly renovated to deliver *a more Japanese look and feel*.

The town's pedestrian zone with its eateries, bars and souvenir shops is reputed to be at its best in the evening when the *ryokan* are lit up, and gas lights illuminate the streets and bridges.

Add heavy snow to the rooftops and walkways in winter, and the results are said to be spectacular.



There are two public baths (admission fees apply) and a free *ashiyu* (foot bath), and many of the *ryokan* will open their indoor bathrooms to daytrippers for a fee.

But it's not a big place. You can walk from one end of the village to the other in around five minutes, and just beyond the far end, a twenty-two-metre waterfall gives the place an attractive backdrop.

From there, walking tracks lead further up the gorge past the old entrances to the former silver mines.

So it's a picture postcard setting that comes up quite attractively when lit up at nighttime.

It's rather attractive in the daytime, too, but the clear light of day shows up recent restoration work that would probably merge into the background at night.



Madam was slightly disappointed, given the prominent recent work while *Hughesy* was less critical.

Dated authenticity is all very well, but the *onsen* business would be rather competitive, and the operators would want to maximise the appeal without allowing *old and authentic* to deteriorate into *rundown and shabby*.

We strolled stalled up and down, there and back again snapping away before our thoughts turned to lunch and hot baths.

Since it was after one-thirty and the restaurants closed at two we headed for lunch first.

But that didn't quite work out. We tried a curry place, but it turned out to be firmly closed, and our custom was definitely declined.

That seemed odd since the sign outside suggested they were open until two. The fallback option was *curry bread*, a sort of doughnut with a beef curry filling, that proved to be quite toothsome.



It was good enough, in fact, for *Hughesy* to back up for seconds while *Madam* went for sweets.

But as we returned to do the Oliver Twist bit, the woman behind the counter seemed to accept compliments as part of the natural order of things and seemed to feel no need to respond.

Now, *Hughesy* might be too a little harsh here, but there seemed to be a theme emerging.

Business operators at *Ginzan Onsen* didn't seem inclined to go out of their way to boost the old revenue. That seems strange in a country where there's an emphasis on service and attention to detail.

The notion was reinforced when *Madam* went inside the place that seemed to offer private baths for individuals and couples through the day.

Now, I don't know whether the passing trade just after lunch time is significant, but there was no one on hand to take advantage of this portion of it.

As a result, *Hughesy* escaped or rather evaded the *onsen* question.

Madam was still considering her options as we headed back through the village and on to the waterfall since rain continued to threaten.



Put it off, and you may not get there at all if *The Astute Reader* catches my drift.

So we headed along the right-hand bank of the stream, snapped away and strolled back to the middle of town pondering what to do next. *Madam* favoured a walk, while *Hughesy* was not so keen with impending rain and (presumably) stone steps.

After all, slippery conditions had been occupying a position in the forefront of my mind after yesterday

But we headed along the left bank to the track that starts beside the waterfall and pointed our noses uphill.



That didn't quite work out, either. We made our way around a bend to a second waterfall, but after that, the track was closed.

We paused to snapshots of a small shrine and took ourselves back down the hill with huge sighs of relief on one part.

They were about to become bigger.

We had intended to catch the four o'clock bus, but there was an earlier one at 2:35 and *Madam* was increasingly inclined to catch that one instead.

She headed off to soak her feet in the *ashiyu* (the free foot bath) while *Hughesy* opted to wait in a nearby shelter.

I could have gone for the old foot bath myself, of course, but I thought it was best to allow *Someone* to take their time.

So she did, and returned to advise that the water was *very hot* (underlying hint: *maybe too hot for Hughesy*).

From there we headed uphill to the bus stop, passing a number of pedestrians on the way.

When the bus arrived, however, we were the only passengers, which gave *Madam* a chance to have a long talk with the driver.

It was more like an opportunity for the driver to expound on various matters of local interest with occasional interjections and observations from his one-woman audience.

And he dropped some interesting snippets of information including the fact that you can ski in your shirt sleeves on a nearby mountain at least up until July.

So it was an interesting conversation for *Madam* while *Hughesy* took in the scenery through the windscreen wipers.

The rain had started almost as soon as the bus set out, and was slowly gaining intensity. It looked like we had timed it just right.

I was on the lookout for rail lines as we came back to the station, but there was only one leading in. It branches after the road, so there are two lines at the station, but only the one going in from **Shinjō**.

Still, it seems hardly seemed suitable for state of the art high-speed *shinkansen*.

I figured there must be some political influence at play, and maybe there was, but the explanation seemed to be much more mundane.

While the trains couldn't operate at full speed on this stretch of track, passengers who boarded at **Shinjō** and **Ōishida** were assured of a reasonably rapid transfer to **Yamagata** without a dozen or so stops along the way (though *shinkansen* tickets aren't exactly cheap).

And while they mightn't be looking to disembark between **Yamagata** and **Fukushima**, you'd get to the junction on the **Tōhoku Shinkansen** fairly quickly.

Most significantly, passengers can go all the way into the centre of **Tōkyō** without needing to change trains.

We were not, however, taking the *shinkansen* for the next bit, basically because there wasn't one that arrived in **Ōishida** before the next *stop at all stations* local service.

As a result, while there was a lengthy wait at the station until that local service, it was dry, and there was beer and free **WiFi**.

When that local service arrived, the train was literally carrying three men and a dog, though most of the passengers seemed to be high school students of the female persuasion.

The high school student quotient increased significantly a couple of stops along and stayed that way for the duration.

It would have been a reasonably scenic ride, but we'd chosen the wrong side of the carriage.

The mountains were behind us, and by the time we'd twigged to what was going on all the seats *over there* were taken.

Once the train dropped us off in **Yamagata**, we didn't waste too much time finding our way out of the west exit to the hotel and didn't hang around too long after we'd checked in.

It was a case of straight up to the room, deposit the luggage and almost straight down again looking for recommendations for dinner.

Madam had found a number of possibilities, but most seemed to be closed on Monday.

Still, **Reception** provided a map with a couple circled options, and the best was **Cho-Ji**, an Italian operation just down the road on the other side of a **7:11** which could be a beer stop on the way back.

Once again, we seemed to have arrived just in time.

While we had no trouble getting a table for two in an otherwise deserted restaurant a young couple found themselves turned away shortly after our order went in.

I opted for **French Sauvignon Blanc** to go with **scallop carpaccio** while *Madam* ordered **Pescatore Rosso** pasta. She got it with **vongole** instead of fish.

It wasn't the only slice of confusion.

I thought I'd ordered **bolognese with mushrooms**, but what arrived was **chicken with mushrooms** and a touch of **beef ragu**.

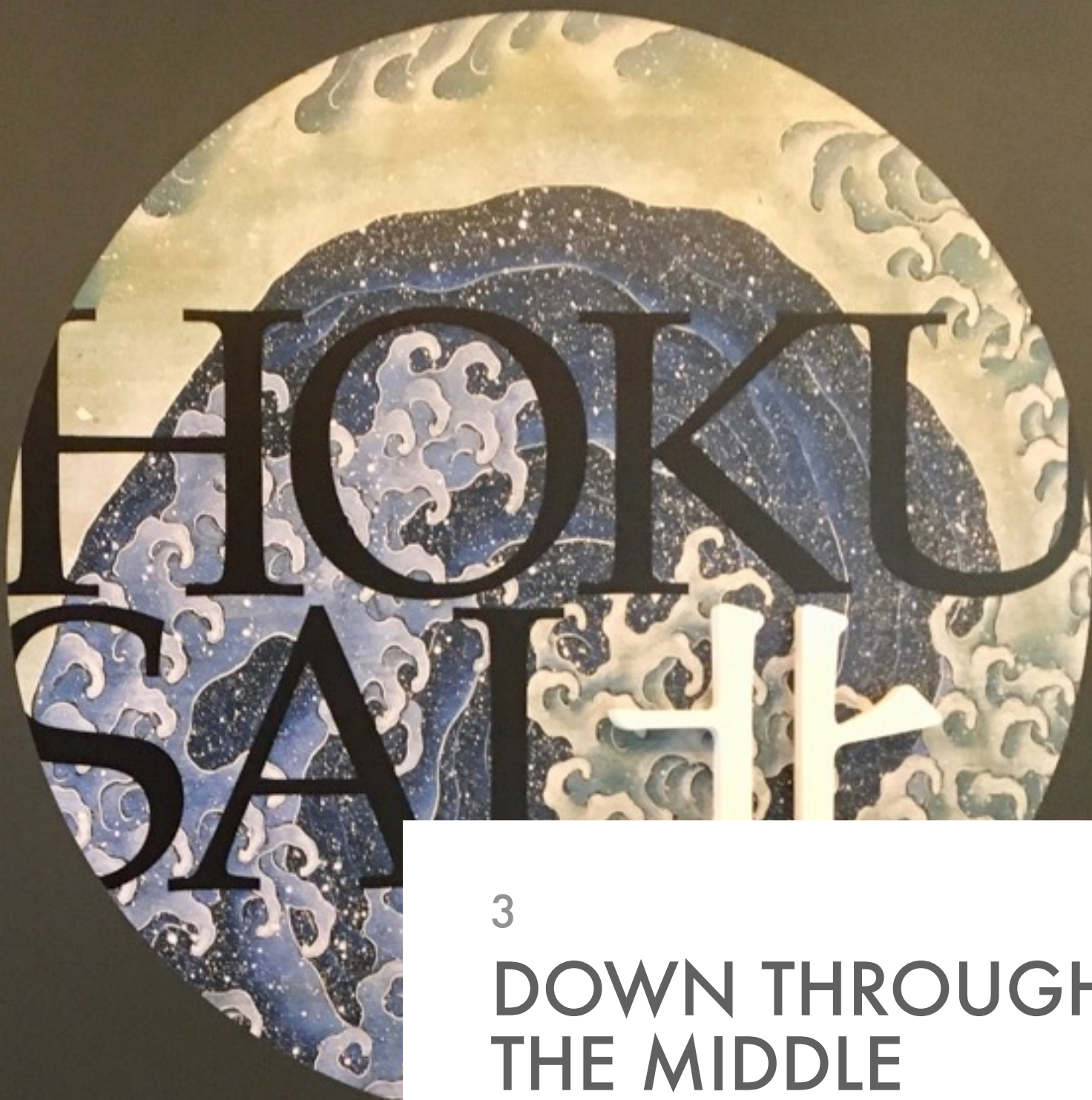
Something seemed to have been lost in translation, and the someone who'd provided the translation was very tired.

There were, however, no complaints.

Once we'd finished the meal, we headed straight back to the hotel with a slight diversion that delivered **Yebisu Premium** and a sighting of **Clare Valley Shiraz**, but I wasn't in the market for a bottle.

Upstairs, *Madam* was straight off to bed with *Hughes* not that far behind.

That **Yebisu Premium** didn't last long at all.



3

DOWN THROUGH THE MIDDLE

[Yamagata > Nagano > Obuse > Nagano](#)

[Nagano > Shiojiri > Narai > Kisofukushima > Nagoya](#)

[Nagoya > Kobe > Okayama](#)

[Okayama > Matsue](#)





TUESDAY 16 MAY
2017

Yamagata > Nagano > Obuse > Nagano

After a restless night that nonetheless delivered a reasonably deep sleep once I nodded off, I finally surfaced just after five, reasonably well rested.

Maybe I didn't need to be on a day where the itinerary included two significant *shinkansen* rides and two locations associated with the painter and printmaker **Katsushika Hokusai**.

Hokusai is best known for a woodblock series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (c. 1831) which includes the iconic print, [*The Great Wave off Kanagawa*](#).

It hadn't been that late when I crashed the night before, and although I had surfaced two or three times, I was reasonably well rested as I set about tackling the backlog of **Travelogue** notes.

That, in turn, meant that I was just about up to date (until bedtime last night) by the time I went for a shower just after seven and headed downstairs for breakfast.

As usual, I was the only visible foreigner in a breakfast room heavy on regional dishes and **Japanese** options and light on for Western items like scrambled eggs and chipolatas.

Interestingly, it was also light on for continental pastries.

Croissants and the like present an almost invariable fallback in situations like these, but here they were conspicuous by their total absence, though I did manage to locate a cache of double chocolate muffins just before I did my best to lose the room key while fetching the first cup of coffee.



We'd been almost packed before breakfast, but were still slightly late out of the room (around 8:40 rather than 8:30) as we checked out and headed across to the station for the 9:03 to **Tōkyō**.

That underlined the point about *shinkansen* train sets running on standard non-*shinkansen* compliant railway lines.

It might take us a little over an hour to cover the eighty-seven kilometres to **Fukushima**, but once we were out of there at 10:13 there were two stops (**Kiriyama** and **Utsomiya**) before we alighted at **Ōmiya** at 10:22.

All up, two hours and nineteen minutes to cover 329.6 kilometres.

Not too shabby at all.

So we set out on a scenic run through flat lands fringed on both sides by mountains at speeds slow enough to allow for photos.

We were probably on the wrong side of the train as far as the scenic side of things was concerned.

But plenty of spare seats across the aisle allowed *Madam* the chance to capture images on the sort of bright sunny day that had been conspicuous by its absence over the past few.





It was a mere nine minutes to the first stop at **Kaminoyama-onsen**, the former castle town for **Kaminoyama Domain**, situated on the strategic **Ushū Kaidō** highway that connected **Edo (Tōkyō)** with northern **Honshū**.

The area at the base of **Mount Zao** has been a noted hot springs resort since the **Muromachi Period**, and the strategic location means there's a turbulent (and complicated) as different clans vied to control the contested territory.

The actual castle town emerged after the **Tokugawa shōgunate** created **Kamiyama Domain** in 1622. It became **Kaminoyama Domain** in 1698 and stayed that way until the **Meiji Restoration**.

While the original castle was demolished as the wave of reform crossed the country, a 1980s reconstruction that may not be entirely accurate stands a little bit further down the hillside than the original structure and four houses in the former *samurai* district (**Bukeyashiki Street**) mean the town retains some of the **Edo Period** atmosphere.

Kaminoyama is also known for its cherries, pears and grapes and has *one of Japan's oldest wineries*.

Another twelve minutes down the track brought us into **Akayu**, another *onsen* town that takes its name from an incident in 1093, when the feudal chief of **Mutsu Province** took a wounded warrior to a hot spring.

While his blood turned the water red, the healing waters closed the wound, and the town got its name, which translates as *red hot water*.

The town is also an internationally recognised hang-gliding venue, while **Eboshiyama Park** rates as one of **Japan's Top One Hundred Cherry Blossom (*hanami*)** locations.

Ten minutes further down the track, **Yonezawa** is another former castle town on the **Mogami River** with a complicated history that came to be rated as the epitome of a well-governed domain in 1830 after years of hardship and economic upheaval.

The regulation one minute stop there saw us moving on from there at 9:37, bound for **Fukushima**.

We were into mountains or at least foothills around 9:43 looking out over a landscape that offered good photographic material, but the carriage had filled significantly at the last stop, so from here on the options on the other side were limited.

Maybe that was just as well.

Some gorgeous views needed a wider lens to do them justice.

They were wonderfully easy on the eye as we travelled along at a relatively leisurely pace.





It was not scenery for sitting on the edge of your seat waiting for that exceptional image, more a case of sitting back and letting your eyes luxuriate in the vista rather than the particulars.

There were also frequent tunnels as we moved into upland terrain with steep slopes beside the line, which seemed to be following a steep-sided river valley that crossed back and forth across the line as we worked our way in and out of the underground shortcuts.

A look on *Google Maps* suggests it was the **Matsu River**, a tributary of **Tōhoku's** second longest river (the **Abukuma**) that debouches onto the plain around **Fukushima** right beside the rail line.

That would tie in nicely with a note about *a wide plain across to the left (10:03)*.

It wasn't long after that when we started to hit the residential areas around **Fukushima**, and around ten minutes later, while we were still riding the **Yamagata Shinkansen** we were on the **Tōhoku Shinkansen's** *shinkansen*-specific tracks.

And at that point, the driver's foot went down, and we had much higher speeds over the next hour into **Ōmiya**.

A twenty-eight minute stop in **Ōmiya** allowed us to grab *bentō* boxes and beer before we headed up to the platform to board **Hakutaka 56** for the next *shinkansen* leg to **Nagano**.

That was a much better option than *Madam's* original notion, which would have had us making a mad eight-minute dash to catch **Asama 607**, and would land us on the ground in **Nagano** just four minutes after the earlier service.

A much better option, thanks to *Efficient Ticket Office Girl* back in **Kōbe**.

Either service would have taken us over familiar territory, but that didn't detract from the visual enjoyment along the way.

We were into **Nagano** at 12:52 and immediately off to the hotel where it might have been too early to check in, but we could leave the luggage there while we made our afternoon excursion to the **Hokusai Museum** in **Obuse**.

That, however, delivered its own little difficulty when *Madam* reckoned it was best to relocate the *MacBook Air* into a more secure (read lockable) location.

I figured I might as well throw the *iPad* in there as well, but while we were fussing over those details, *Madam* managed to leave her red camera bag on a seat near **Reception**, though we didn't, of course, realise that at the time.

So we hustled ourselves back to **Nagano Station** and descended into the bowels of the complex, where the single line still operated by the **Nagano Electric Railway** (a.k.a. **Nagaden**) has its terminus.

Since it's a private line, the **JR Rail Pass** didn't enter the equation.

We bought our tickets at a vending machine, and, in the usual run of things would have fed them into one of those machines that spit your ticket out the other end while it opens the barrier for you.

But while there were a couple of them, none were operational at the time. When we waved our tickets at the woman in the office beside the gate, she responded with a question.

Did we want to upgrade to the Limited Express?

It was about to leave, made fewer stops and would get there quicker. On that basis, it was a no-brainer, but when we arrived at the platform, we found it was a decidedly shish option.

With three stops to **Obuse**, we hadn't reached the first when *Madam* realised the camera was missing.

Understandably, the discovery prompted much fretting, but there were only two possible hypotheses.

Maybe she had left it at the ticket office while we were being upgraded.

Otherwise, it was probably back at the hotel.



By the second stop, a very quiet phone call had revealed it was the hotel, prompting huge sighs of relief all round.

Once we were on the ground in **Obuse**, we were faced with two very straightforward questions.

Start with the temple, then head for the museum or vice versa?

And once we've decided that one, *do we walk or wait for a bus?*

They produced equally straightforward answers. The temple closes earlier, so we would head there first.

And if we decided to walk rather than ride that should get us there sooner.



So we set out on the two-kilometre walk, and the odd bits of visual interest along the way had *Hughesy* reflecting that it might be just as well the big camera is back in **Nagano**;

Actually, for once *Madam* was moving slightly quicker than I was and the photographic pauses gave me the chance to catch up and, eventually pass her.

Once I hit the lead that was not a problem since we knew the destination.

And the decision to walk revealed an additional benefit when we arrived.

Apart from a trio of elderly women, one of whom was Catholic nun there was no one there but us chickens as we took our shoes off, paid and headed inside to view one of the masterworks by **the first Japanese artist** to gain international recognition.

So who was this **Katsushika Hokusai**, and what brought him here? And where does the temple fit Ito the narrative?



The short version (there's much more detail [here](#), and [here](#), in the [Wikipedia article](#) and at the [Boston Museum of Fine Arts website](#) is that he was a prolific **Edo Period** artist, [ukiyo-e](#) painter and printmaker

Born in the **Katsushika** district of **Edo** (**Tōkyō**) around the end of October 1760, his father may have been a mirror maker named **Nakajima Ise** and his mother may have been a concubine.

In the course of a long life, he changed his name with a frequency that may seem bewildering until one considers his particular circumstances.

Hughes's impression, admittedly the result of a skim across the basic sources and a listen to a BBC podcast, is that he was a commercial artist who changed his name whenever he picked a new gig or started working in a new style.

He is known to have used more than thirty different identities over a career spanning seven decades.

He started painting and drawing around the age of six, worked in a bookshop and lending library when he was twelve, was apprenticed to a woodcarver in his mid-teens and entered the studio of *ukiyo-e* artist **Katsukawa Shunshō** when he was eighteen.

Shunshō produced woodblock prints, and painted images of courtesans and *Kabuki* actors and his pupil's first collection of prints that appeared in 1779 covered much the same subject matter.

Hokusai worked in **Shunshō**'s studio until his master's death in 1793.

After that, he began to explore other styles of art, fell out with **Shunkō** (**Shunshō**'s chief disciple) and moved on from his previous subject matter into landscapes and images of daily life, producing brush paintings and book illustrations.

By 1800 he was working as **Katsushika Hokusai**, combining the name of the suburb where he was born with *North Studio* and was attracting students of his own as he developed a reputation for his artwork.

He was also, it seemed, a master of self-promotion.

He is reputed to have produced an 180-metre portrait of the **Buddhist** priest **Daruma** using a broom and buckets of ink at a festival in his hometown and to have won a competition in front of the **shōgun** in **Kyōto**.

On that occasion he is alleged to have painted a blue curve on a large sheet of paper, then dipped a chicken's feet in red paint and chased the bird across the sheet.

The result was described as a landscape depicting the **Tatsuta River** with red maple leaves.

He seems to have been somewhat pernicky, falling out with collaborators, insisting on attention to stylistic detail as his designs went into print and writing off everything he produced before 1830 as worthless.

While he is best known for *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (which set the iconic landmark in a variety of contexts and ended up numbering 146 thanks to ten prints added to the original collection and the supplementary *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*), he produced a vast body of work.

The Interested Reader will find an exhaustive listing, period by period, on the [Hokusai Museum website](http://www.hokusai-museum.org) and an extensive database of his work at <http://www.hokusai-katsushika.org>.

That work transformed the *ukiyo-e* form from a style of portraiture focused on courtesans and actors into a broader style depicting landscapes, plants, and animals.

Abroad, his influence also stretched to nineteenth century European **Art Nouveau**, and his woodcuts were collected by (among others) **Monet**, **Renoir**, **Degas**, **Gauguin**, **Manet** and **van Gogh**.

He was eighty when a **Kouzan Takai**, who owned a chestnut sweet shop and a *sake* brewery, invited **Hokusai** to **Obuse** the year after a fire destroyed his studio and much of his work.

Hokusai would have walked there, following the *Nakasendō*, the inland route from **Edo** to **Kyōto** or the *Kōshū Kaidō*, another road that connected with the *Nakasendō* near **Nagano**.

Apart from his business interests, **Kouzan Takai** was an accomplished artist.

The pair of them seem to have got on well, and **Hokusai** spent much of his later life in **Obuse**;

Under other circumstances, one might be inclined to refer to this part of the artist's life as *his declining years*.

The brilliantly coloured thirty-four square metre work on the ceiling at *Gansho-in* is hardly the work of someone whose skills have started to slide.





And there is no way the man himself saw it that way.

On his death bed, **Hokusai** reputedly begged heaven for the five or ten more years he needed so he *could become a real painter*.

So that's what brought us to ***Gansho-in***, a temple of the **Sotozen** school of **Zen Buddhism** that also has links to the poet **Issa Kobayashi**, who composed a famous ***haiku*** beside a pond there.

But the **Hokusai** masterpiece on the ceiling of the main temple building is the main drawcard.

The colours are still dazzling almost one hundred and eighty years later. Any attempt to render it into a manageable reproduction (such as the 93 KB reduction of the [1.5 MB original public domain image here](#) that appears on the previous page) can do it justice.

Cameras are forbidden inside the building, as is lying down to look up at the ceiling, but photography is allowed in the temple grounds, so we took a brief snap-away wander around the premises.

A tour bus disgorged a tour group as we made our way outside, and that reinforced the wisdom of the decision to make our way there by ourselves, on foot.

Outside, a quick consultation established the fastest way back into town, which turned out not to be the case at all.

Having agreed that we were going back to the last set of traffic lights, on the way I spotted what looked like a handy shortcut, but it was hard to tell.

In any case, *Madam* was snapping away about a hundred metres behind so I proceeded on to the traffic lights, stopped and waited.

There are no prizes for guessing what came next.

Madam, map in hand, reached short cut, realised it is was a quicker option, and decided to take it while *Hughesy* stood waiting at the traffic lights,

There was an ever so slight dogleg in the road just before the shortcut, so from where I was standing I couldn't see but can't see someone turning off the agreed path.



Eventually, having decided something was wrong, I decided I'd better go back and check.

By this stage *Madam* had reached a point down the road from the lights, looked that way and there was no *Hughesy* in sight.

Hughesy, of course, was back at the shortcut with no *Madam* on the horizon.

So I headed back to the lights, figured I'd better look along the road that way and an eventual reunification came with a degree of recriminations on both sides as we headed off to the **Hokusai Museum**.

After the confusion, we ended up covering extra ground but still arrived with plenty of time in hand.

Once we'd paid to enter, a quick check on rules regarding photography revealed that cameras were allowed in certain sections.



We took seats in the Media Hall for a short introductory video that dealt with **Hokusai** and his links to **Obuse**, and then made our way around the exhibits, which were less than they might otherwise have been.

An exhibition at the British Museum (**Hokusai: Beyond the Great Wave**) meant much of what would normally be on display here was over on the other side of the world.

The spaces those works had left behind had been filled with British landscapes.

I gave them what was probably unjustly short shrift, but they held minimal interest for someone who was there for striking and significant **Japanese art** not the subdued notes of nineteenth-century European landscape artists.

So I may have missed something, but it's my loss, but there was enough **Hokusai** on display to justify the visit and it probably doesn't matter whether you see the real thing or an accurate replica when you get to the festival floats at the end of the circuit around the premises.



Once we were through the museum, we moved on to the shop, where there's an impressive range of merchandise.

While various options were ruled out due to size, practicability, or utility, we still escaped having dropped about ¥3500 on merchandise.

Outside, we headed down to the main street in search of chestnut products.

It was late in the afternoon and most of the marron operations were in the process of shutting down.

Taking a wrong turn and the subsequent need to turn around and retrace our steps reduced the options even further.

One place was completely sold out, so we headed back to a place we'd passed and decided to skip where we did manage to pick up what *Madam* was after.

From there we set out to explore other options but soon exhausted the possibilities.

That raised an interesting question.

Do we eat here, as *Madam* thought we might, or head back to **Nagano**?



Heading back looked like the way to go and we managed to miss one train as we made our way back to the station.

That meant a half hour wait for the next slow stop-by-stop service back to downtown **Nagano**, where we took ourselves over to the hotel to check in.

Madam was joyfully reunited with her camera, and once we were upstairs, it was time to explore the dinner options.

There were two obvious candidates: **Cho Bali Bali** (Indonesian) or **Rioja** (Spanish).

The Indonesian option was closer but turned out to be closed on Tuesdays so we took ourselves off to **Rioja**, which sits on one floor of a six-level complex.

We ended up in one of those curtained cubicles typical of **Japanese** *drinking with snacks establishments*, but it was definitely Spanish.

A carafe of **Spanish Sauvignon Blanc** went nicely with *serrano* ham, **croquettes**, and **Spanish pizza** in a solid repast that ticked all the boxes.

After dinner, things looked to be following the regular pattern as we headed back to the hotel *via* the convenience store.

Upstairs, *Madam* prepared herself for a visit to the **onsen** facilities, while *Hughesy* turned his attention to the digital world, beer and, eventually, to bed.

Bedtime, however, was postponed for half the party after *Madam* discovered free laundry facilities in the **onsen** area.

At least it was free to wash. You had to pay to use the driers but that, in turn, meant a longer spell taking the waters.

Hughesy was pushing up Zs by the time she returned.



WEDNESDAY 17
MAY 2017

Nagano > Shiojiri > Narai > Kisofukushima > Nagoya

Although I was pushing up Zs by the time *Madam* returned from the *onsen* with the laundry things didn't stay that way, and the result was a relatively late night.

It was after ten by the time everything was sorted, and that, in turn, meant the morning amounted to a relative sleep in.

I surfaced just after six and conducted a quick check of email while I finished waking up, while *Madam* pointed herself straight at the *onsen* the way any self-respecting fan of the experience will when given half an opportunity.

I had the **Travelogue** notes more or less complete up to the **Hokusai Museum** by the time she returned, but subsequent progress was limited due to interruptions concerning possible wet weather and alternatives.

They were important considerations on a day that would see us leave the main line, head out and back on local services and then return to the scenic route down to **Nagoya**.

And there was an added complication due to a lack of coin lockers at the day's prime objective. It seemed we could leave the luggage at the local **Tourist Information**, but it looked like *Hughesy* would be left holding a heavy backpack.

But most of the things, including last night's laundry, were stowed away by the time we headed down to the breakfast buffet.

What greeted us there was not one of the great **Japanese Breakfast Vikings**, and, in fact, may not have qualified as a **Viking** at all. But there were plenty of **Japanese** options along with the basics of a Western breakfast.

Since we were in **Nagano**, and the city definitely sits on the beaten track, I wasn't the only obvious foreigner in the room.

Back upstairs, we finished packing and took ourselves downstairs to check out at 8:35 for a 9:00 departure.

Predictably, **Limited. Express (Wide View) Shinano 6** was ready and waiting when we arrived at the relevant platform with time up our sleeves.

With seats towards the middle of the carriage that gave us time to sort out questions about where to stow the *Coppertone Container*.

Up to this point, thanks to our friendly and efficient ticket clerk back in **Kōbe**, we'd had seats at the back of the carriage, with space right behind us where we could tuck the suitcase away.

The obvious alternative was to stow it in the overhead luggage rack, which handles your standard aircraft carry-on bag with ease.

When the *Coppertone Container* went up there, however, it didn't quite fit.

Looking at it from below, safely out of the way in the window seat, you would probably figure it was OK, but it did protrude uncomfortably over the aisle seat below.

On that basis, it seemed best to head to the back of the carriage and stow it behind the last seat.

Having done that, I could spend the remaining time before departure polishing off yesterday's notes

Once we were underway, the laptop was shut down reasonably promptly, since there was probably nothing of note to add about a line we've traversed twice before.

From that experience, we knew that the scenery is attractive almost all the way from here to **Nagoya**, beautiful at irregular intervals and occasionally stunning.

So it's not the sort of landscape to sit and take notes and if the train is travelling at any speed, not a great place for the casual photographer.

Snapworthy features pop up all along the line, but by the time they register on the consciousness, they're usually past. It's genuine now you see it, now you don't territory.

Prior knowledge, however, has its drawbacks.

One little upland stretch has caught my eye every time we've passed, a hillside with tiered paddy fields surrounded by forest.

It's the sort of place you initially miss but mark down as *one to remember for next time*.

Then, when next time comes around, you've forgotten it, right up to the time it appears again.





At that point, having missed it again, you mark it down, once again, as *one to remember for next time*.

The highly-rated views back to **Nagano** kicked in just before we got there, but the images I managed to capture don't do justice to the well-earned reputation.

The run took us through **Shinonoi**, **Akashina** and **Matsumoto** before we alighted at **Shiojiri**, the wine barrel place I had noted on previous occasions.

And as we made our way towards the waiting room there they were over on the main platform.

[Wikitravel](#) will inform *The Interested Reader* that **Shiojiri** is noted for its wineries, though developed or sophisticated palates *may not find the local vintage to their liking*.

It's also the point where the line we'd been following, branded the **Shin'etsu Main Line** between **Nagano** and **Shinonoi** and the **Shinonoi Line** from there to **Shiojiri**, merges with the **Chūō Main Line**, the major trunk line that connects **Tōkyō** and **Nagoya**.

Officially, the section from downtown **Tōkyō** to **Shiojiri** is the **Chūō East Line**, operated by **JR East**, while the rest of the way to **Nagoya**, imaginatively labelled the **Chūō West Line** comes under the jurisdiction of **JR Central**).

While the **Chūō Main Line** moniker might sound impressive, and it carries plenty of traffic in the urban areas at either end, the central section (the bit we were about to embark on) between **Shiojiri** and **Nakatsugawa** only warrants twice-hourly or hourly services.

It does, however, run parallel to the route of the old **Nakasendō** highway, which is what had brought us here.

Relatively infrequent services account for the fifty-minute wait that lay in store for us.

I didn't have the itinerary in front of me as we disembarked, so I asked how long we would be there.

I could have sworn *Someone* said *fifteen*, and it took about twenty minutes to rectify the matter.

Still, half an hour was about all I needed to bring the **Travelogue** right up to the moment.

The next leg, which would take us to the day's primary destination at **Narai** involved a local service, and it didn't take long to realise how local the service was.

An announcement about exiting the train informed us that at most stations the only egress would be *via* the door behind the driver, who will check your tickets, **Rail Passes**, *et cetera* as you leave.

Since it came in **English** after the initial **Japanese** version, it seemed safe to assume the local services attract their share of foreigners.

From that, one might expect **Narai**, being a significant attraction (or large enough to attract us, anyway) to be the exception to the *egress through the door behind the driver* rule.

Wrong again.

We had a while (twenty-three minutes to be precise) to find that out as we passed through **Seba**, **Hideshio**, **Niekawa** and **Kiso-Hirasawa**, but the familiar announcement came over the PA just after 11:10 and we were making our way out of the single door around two minutes later.

We weren't the only ones to alight there, but *Hughesy* was the only dude manhandling something the size of the *Coppertone Container* up the stairs, over the pedestrian bridge and down the other side.

We were able to leave it in the ticket office for a relatively modest ¥300 before we set off for a walk around a historic post town.



Narai-juku goes back well before the **Edo Period**, although that was when the *Gokaidō* system of centrally administered routes connecting the **Shōgun's** capital in **Edo** (now **Tōkyō**) with the outlying provinces was formalised.

The first **Tokugawa shōgun**, **Tokugawa Ieyasu** started the process as he set about consolidating his control of the country in 1601, but it was his great-grandson **Tokugawa Ietsuna**, who formalised them as major routes.

All five started at **Nihonbashi** in **Edo**.

Two (the *Ōshū Kaidō* and the *Nikkō Kaidō*) headed north, following the same route as far as **Utsunomiya**, where the latter branched off, heading west to the *Nikkō Tōshō-gū* shrine in **Nikkō**.

The *Ōshū Kaidō* continued to **Mutsu Province** and modern day **Shirakawa** in **Fukushima Prefecture**, before branching off into subroutes that went on to other locations in northern **Japan**.

Two of the remaining three linked **Edo** with the **Imperial Capital** in **Kyōto**, with the *Tōkaidō* running along the Pacific coast and the *Nakasendō* (a.k.a. the *Kisokaidō*) passing through central **Honshū**.

The fifth, the *Kōshū Kaidō* ran across central **Honshū** from **Edo**, connecting with the *Nakasendō* at **Shimosuwa**, around fifty kilometres from **Nagano**.

Post stations along the routes allowed travellers to rest and obtain supplies while a system of check stations controlled and regulated the movement of people and goods.

The policy of *sankin-kōtai*, where the regional *daimyō* were required to travel to **Edo** every second year helped ensure the post stations had plenty of customers.

About half way along the *Nakasendō*'s 534 kilometres, **Narai** was the thirty-fourth of sixty-nine stations and the second of eleven along the *Kisoji*, the earlier trade route along the **Kiso Valley** between **Niekawa** in **Nagano Prefecture** and **Magome** on the way to **Nagoya**.

Travellers going all the way from **Edo** to **Kyōto** would have been about ten days into the journey when they reached *Narai of 1,000 buildings*.

It mightn't have been the highest post town along the *Nakasendō*, but it was the loftiest of the eleven on the *Kisoji*.

Since it sits at the foot of the **Torii Pass**, the *Nakasendō*'s most difficult pass with the most strenuous climbs, **Narai** prospered in ways that many of its peers didn't as travellers rested and stayed before or after crossing the pass.





Kyōto-bound travellers would be inclined to rest up and make offerings in the local temples before they set out to make the crossing, while anyone headed in the other direction could stop to recuperate after the rigours of the climb and offer thanks for a safe passage.

Today the town is an **Important Preservation District for Groups of Historic Buildings**, so it retains a line of historic buildings along the one-kilometre main street.

The structures are maintained by the **Japanese government grant system** and have been kept much as they would have been in the **Edo Period**.

Although the authentic look and feel are enhanced by structural peculiarities (the second floors tend to overhang the first, with the eaves sloping further to overhang the entire building), there are anomalies along the way.

For a start vehicular traffic is allowed along the street, and the omnipresent vending machines are out in the open rather than tucked away in alcoves or alleyways.

Looking back, both of us agreed that **Narai** offers a better heritage experience than **Ginzan Onsen**.

It definitely felt more authentic.



While a nitpicker could pick up any number of incongruities apart from the vehicles and vending machines, the overall vibe works better in the old post town because no one seems to have felt the need to obviously tart things up.

Admittedly, the road surface is probably not what it would have been back in the day, and *that concrete over there* is definitely out of place, but...

While you could keep on picking nits as you make your way along the street past the restaurants, gift shops and food stalls there's a consistency that runs along the thoroughfare and far outweighs the invasive modern elements.

That's the way it worked for me, anyway.

The station lies at the northern or **Edo** end of **Narai**, so we started in the downtown, *Shimomachi* area.

Our slow progress along the main (but not the only) street took us through the midtown *Nakamachi* section, where the thoroughfare is widest, and the feudal heavyweights were inclined to stop.



The *daimyō* went into the *Honjin*, while their subordinates stayed in the *Wakihonjin*, and while neither has survived, there are shrines at both ends of town and interesting shrines and temples along the way.

While there's an overall peaceful, low key old time vibe that delivers an excellent visitor experience I'm not sure that today's laid back feel matches what it would have been like back in the day.

Along the way, six fountains that supplied water to the locals, as well as passing travellers, continue to dispense fresh spring water to passers-by.

They're a nice touch.



We could, I guess have gone a little further than the *Shizume Jinja* shrine, which lies at the far end of uptown Kanmachi.

It's not quite at the entrance to the **Torii Pass**, but it was the spot where travellers stopped to pray for a safe journey or to give thanks for a successful transit of the pass.

Just beyond the shrine, the **Narakawa Museum of History and Folklore** has exhibits about the lifestyle and customs of the **Kiso Valley** area.

The displays include painted combs, traditional crafts, wooden furniture and articles from the *Shizume Jinja* festival, but we weren't inclined to shell out the ¥300 admission fee.



Instead, we headed back down the hill into *Kamimachi* to *Nakamura-tei* (the Nakamura residence), a preserved Edo Period townhouse with a small garden at the rear that's rated as a prime example of a typical **Narai** residence.

It opens from nine to five, seven days a week (with slight variations between December and March).

Your ¥300 gets you into a **Tangible Cultural Property** where artefacts belonging to the original owners are displayed.

It's an interesting touch of old **Japan** in a residence *cum* business house rebuilt after a fire in 1837.

Rihei Nakamura (1830-1844) was a wealthy comb wholesaler who entertained customers in the building, which now functions as a museum.

On the way back down the slope, we passed the town's *kosatsuba* notice board, where decrees from the **shōgunate** and other rules, regulations and bylaws were posted.



A third museum, the *Kamidonya Shiryokan* has more than four hundred artefacts including manuscripts and historical documents, pottery and lacquerware in a building where travellers could hire guides and horses.

Add on the town's five temples and two shrines, and there's plenty to see and investigate.

The *Taihoji Temple*, built in 1582 and dedicated to **Jyuronin**, the deity of wisdom and life contains a statue widely believed to be a headless **Virgin Mary**. The official version is that it's the **Buddhist** deity **Jizo**, the guardian of pregnancy and childcare, but the **Tokugawa** authorities weren't buying that.

After **Christianity** had been banned in 1614, the statue was seen as evidence of *hidden Christians* in the area and decapitated.



By this point, it was more or less lunchtime. **Soba noodles** and other local delicacies for lunch didn't do all that much for *Hughesy*, and neither did the drizzle that greeted us when we emerged.

Under other circumstances, we might have been more inclined to investigate some of those other options, but given the conditions and what we suspected was on the way we moved much more smartly along the street than when we were headed in the other direction with time and sunshine on our hands;

We weren't quite gathering pace as we went, but we weren't hanging around either.

We did, however, hang a right-hand turn and head for the underpass that would get us to the ***Kisho Ohashi***, the thirty-metre wooden bridge over the **Narai River**.

Shaped like a **Japanese drum**, it might be relatively recent (it only went up in the 1990s), but it is one of the longest wooden bridges in **Japan**, was built without using any bridge piers and was constructed from three-hundred-year-old cypress (***hinoki***) wood.

Needless to say, it probably deserved more attention than it received.

On the other side of the stream, the vast grass field in **Mizube Park** is illuminated by lights at night between April and November, and the effect is said to be magical.

But it was mid-afternoon, it looked like there was a downpour just over the horizon and the station looked like it was the place to be.

We arrived there around twenty past two with our original travel plans, which involved a 3:19 departure intact, While there had been some discussion of catching an earlier train if we finished in time, the 2:09 had passed us when we were on the way to the bridge;.

So we had the best part of an hour to kill, and the weather ruled out any further rambling.

The Casual Reader won't need to be Einstein to figure out how *Hughesy* passed the time

Faced with the need to wrestle the *Coppertone Container* up and down the pedestrian bridge, we set out for the platform well before the advertised departure time.

I was most of the way down the other side when there were signs of a dog somewhere in the vicinity, but it turned out it was merely some high-spirited Junior High student, one of a bunch on an excursion or sporting engagement that had brought them into the area.



Their numbers and their tendency to coalesce in the middle of the entry point made boarding slightly more challenging than it should have been, but the train wasn't going anywhere in a hurry.

The advertised departure time was still a couple of minutes away as we settled into our seats, grateful that we were out of the kid-wrangling business.

We had an uneventful run down to **Kisofukushima**, where we ensconced ourselves in a waiting room for the 4:30 *Shinano* into **Nagoya** and our evening appointment with *Freedom Girl*.

Back on the rails, seats on the left-hand side were less than optimal, with the best views to the right on the way down, but that changed often enough to have an avid photographer on his or her toes.

There were, however, no avid photographers in the neighbourhood at the moment.

Madam was feeling the worse for wear and suspected she was coming down with something.

Back in **Kisofukushima**, the temperature on the platform had been somewhere between nippy and downright chilly.

Take two panadol and go into a doze seemed the way to go for her.

For his part, *Hughesy* was feeling the lack of the regular *nana nap*.

Along the way, news that *Freedom Girl* would be joined by *The Matriarch* raised some interesting issues. One of them involved paying the bill wherever we end up. We suspected that *The Matriarch* would insist, and would probably refuse to be gainsaid.

Second, outnumbered three to one by **Japanese speakers**, *Hughesy's* contributions to the evening's conversation would probably be limited.

Both were more or less how things panned out, but there were things that needed to be done before dinner.

In **Nagoya**, we alighted from the train, descended into the disturbed ants' nest maelstrom of **Japanese** rush hour in a major centre, extricated ourselves from the station complex and crossed the station plaza to a very conveniently located hotel.

Check in was followed by a power nap for *Madam* while *Hughesy* took the time to investigate digital developments before we headed off to dinner in the new **JR Tower** complex.

We were heading for a rendezvous in the station's central plaza, either under or near the gold clock.

As is so often the case with **Japanese** transport hubs, it's a popular meeting place.

So while you might start off saying *under* when you make the arrangements, the actual meeting point may end up being somewhere *in the vicinity of* rather than *near*.

It all depends on the time and crowd density.

The actual point of rendezvous would have been around twenty-five metres from *under*, so I'm not sure that *near* fits the bill either.

From there we were off to twelfth floor where there are a plethora of dining options to choose from.

The most obvious, in the prime position straight across from the lift is **Paul Bocuse**, which would have done *Yours Truly* very nicely, thank you.

The other options don't quite ring the same high profile bell, but *Madam* had set her eye on **Din Tai Fung**.

The other half of the quartet weren't familiar with the name, so we were able to spring a surprise on them in their hometown.

And while *Hughesy* would have pointed the nose straight towards high-end French, I love **Din Tai Fung's** work.

So do plenty of others.

A request for a table for four resulted in us taking seats outside until one was available.

Once we were inside a flurry of ordering delivered enough to give *Hughesy* something to do while the primarily **Japanese language** conversation flowed around him.

Sauvignon Blanc from somewhere in **California** and a **Robert Mondavi Pinot Noir** worked nicely with a variety of different dumplings and an assortment of other dishes.

By rights, I should have kept a photographic record, but after the first round of dishes, the table was littered with the detritus of previous deliveries.

That doesn't detract from the group snap taken by an obliging staff member significantly later in proceedings.

By that point, much of the clutter had been cleared.

And the snap had me wondering whether proficiency with a smart phone camera is now a prerequisite for contemporary wait staff.

It was well after nine when we allowed *The Matriarch* to settle the bill.



Standing around outside while that happened, I remarked that since *Freedom Girl's* mother was paying I should have had an extra glass or two.

Freedom Girl was surprised I didn't.

She obviously knows me better than I thought she does.

We parted ways at the gates that lead to the local lines, and a brisk walk back to the hotel through a slightly less turbulent maelstrom to the hotel was followed by a visit to the vending machine so I would have something to commune with while *Madam* communed with her inner water nymph.

My half of the communing process, however, was done and dusted just after ten at the end of the northern loop of the **Rail Pass** journey,



THURSDAY 18 MAY
2017

Nagoya > Kobe > Okayama

Predictably, late to bed meant a late rise, though I didn't realise quite how late it was.

Madam had been checking her *iPad*, catching up on the news etcetera before I surfaced. I'd been aware of a firm rectangular object near my head on my left, but reckoned it was still too early to surface;

News that it was well after seven came as a considerable surprise

That was not a significant issue on what amounted to **Transfer and Administration Day**, with nothing on the sightseeing agenda.

Or maybe that's not entirely accurate.

We would be catching the sights inside the **Sannomiya** shopping precinct and the **Passport Office**.

When we headed down to breakfast what we found was, thankfully, minimal since there was a substantial lunch on the horizon.

Back upstairs we had to pack and run the iron over one item,

The latter only became significant when *Hughesy* was directed to deposit the iron and ironing board in the corridor. I didn't have my key with me and lost a minute or two while I waited for *Someone* to readmit me to the inner sanctum.

Downstairs, *Madam* negotiated herself through an automated checkout procedure and headed off to the station.

We passed a gaggle of smokers outside a video store on the way to the intersection and pedestrian crossing. It was the third time I'd noticed the group and marked it down as a local social phenomenon.

There seemed to be an ever-changing cast gathered in the same spot, and halfway across the plaza in front of the station, I discovered the reason.

There were signs all over the place indicating that *smoking is strictly forbidden*, and I guessed that the rule was strictly enforced.

Strictly enough, at least, to push all the smokers in the area into one single open air ghetto.

But I'm not entirely sure that this is an effective public health measure, at least as far as the rest of the population was concerned.

Hughesy's nostrils, admittedly, may be over-sensitive but I picked up the distinctive aroma from the gaggle of gaspers from a distance of around twenty metres on the other side of the intersection.

We headed towards the ***shinkansen*** tracks behind a **Chinese** couple who were apparently unaware of **Rail Pass** protocols.

Stop before you get to the gate, extract the pass from wherever it's secreted, and hold it so that the all-important expiry date is visible is the way to go. Once you've done that, move smartly to the gate, flash the pass and keep moving.

You'll almost invariably be waved straight through. One even suspects, at times, that the expiry date doesn't even register on the official's senses, but you follow the apparent protocols.

Don't arrive, stop and block the thoroughfare, which can get quite busy while you rummage around for the document.

The couple stayed ahead of us as we moved up onto the platform and launched a compass and cut lunch quest for the right gate for Car 15.

On the way, *Madam* picked up something she claimed not to have noticed before.

There was a somewhat forceful admonition from the platform supervisor to a passenger waiting for Car 13. I couldn't catch the terminology, of course, but the tone of voice was unmistakeable.

It was the **Japanese** language equivalent of *That boy! Cut that out!*

It seemed that the **Chinese** couple, who were still ahead of us and were not, therefore, the offending party, were not the only ones failing to follow the protocols.

In this case, the protocols relating to people taking photos.

Aboard the train, seats 14B and C and the direction of travel meant no window seat, and, therefore no pictures, but along this familiar stretch of the track there was probably nothing new to capture as *Hikari 463* did its high-speed thing.

Hughesy had the **Travelogue** notes right up to this point as we slowed down into **Kyōto**, thirty-six minutes out of **Nagoya**.

That was the signal to pack away the *MacBook* and revert to listening to *Hughesy's Top 5000*, which, in turn, was closed down after **Ōsaka** on the twelve-minute run into **ShinKōbe**.

On the ground in *Madam's* hometown we were straight off to the coin lockers, where it was ¥700 for the big one, thank you very much, as compared to much more reasonable prices remarked on earlier.

We couldn't quite fit the blue bag into the same space, so that was another ¥400.

But we had no choice about the matter.

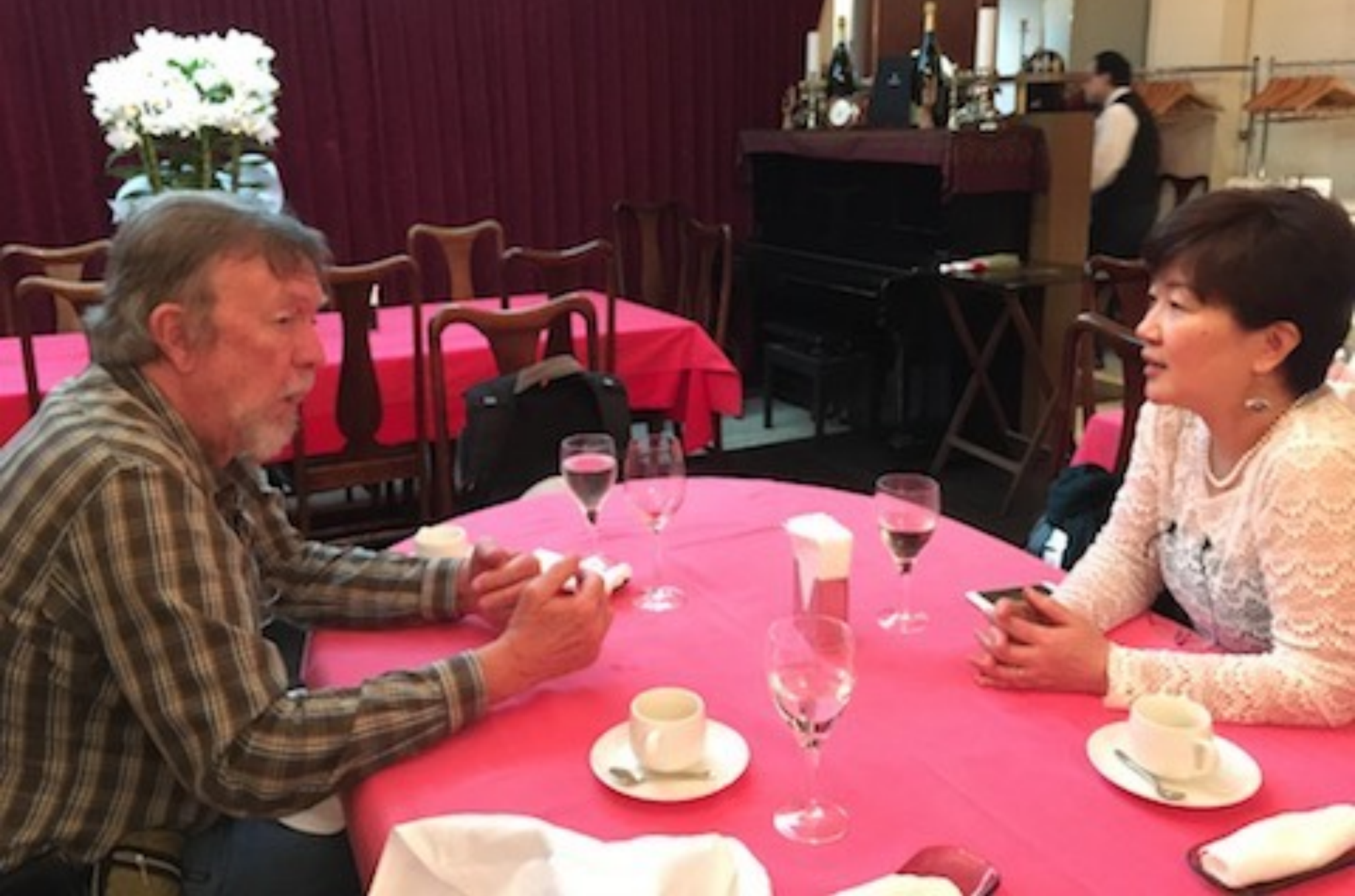
From there we headed off from to rendezvous for lunch and an important item on *Hughesy's Japan trip agenda*.

I needed to replenish supplies of **Donna Hot** chilli oil, so having lunch at the source made sense.

That, in turn, meant we were in for a bit of a walk, but it was worth it.

The rendezvous, when it arrived, meant I finally got to meet *Madam's* old friend *Sakai-san*.

That was originally supposed to happen at the top of the tower on the last night back in **Kōbe** back in 2008. Illness prevented that one and assorted other issues intervened over the next three trips.



For lunch, I worked through the set menu Option A with a glass of **Valpolicella** which ticked all the boxes. Option B had choices, and the ladies seemed to have gone with each alternative, so we ended up with three people and three different dishes throughout proceedings.

Having been among the first to arrive around 11:45 we were among the last to leave just before two;. There'd been a wide-ranging conversation in between, as you'd expect when old friends meet up after many years.

Occasional opportunities to include *Hughesy* in the conversation eventuated from time to time, but I wouldn't have been worried if they failed to materialise.

With four bottles of **Donna Hot** in hand, we moved on to **Sannomiya**, where we bade farewell to *Sakai-san* and made our way around to the passport office.

That raised two interesting points.

While I'm used to being the only obvious foreigner in the vicinity, this was somewhere you wouldn't expect to see aliens in the first place.

That, in turn, meant that I felt even more conspicuous in a way that I usually don't if *The Astute Reader* catches my drift.

I found myself looking around to see if there were any other prominent suspects. In the ordinary run of things you know you're the only one, so you don't bother about looking.

Second, having negotiated my Australian passport through the Post Office in Bowen and the mail, I was surprised to see how busy the **Passport Office** was.

But, regardless of the volume of traffic, *Madam's* new passport arrived with minimal fuss, and we headed off to replenish the cash reserves before the subway ride back to **ShinKōbe**, where we retrieved the luggage by accessing QR codes.

We were already moving smartly to claim unreserved seats on the 3:24 *shinkansen*, but an announcement over the PA system had us moving much faster.

A service heading in the right direction was ready to depart, and we managed to snaffle A and B in the last row in the back of the first non-reserved carriage on *Hikari 471*, having broken the protocol about not running to catch a *shinkansen* on the way.

But it might not have been the right move.

While we left bang on time at 3:15, lengthy stops at **Nishi-Akashi**, **Himeji** and **Aioi** along the way had us on the ground in **Okayama** at 4:19.

Following those protocols, while moving smartly towards *Nozomi 33*, which left a mere three minutes later, would have delivered us into **Okayama** at 3:50.

Regardless of all that, it was around 4:45 when we found ourselves upstairs in Room 907 at **Okayama's Kooraku Hotel**, and I, for one, was disinclined to venture too far for dinner.

Madam would have substituted *anywhere* for *too far* in that previous sentence. Three courses of Italian lunch tends to do that to her.

Having had my share of *Good Paddock Syndrome* over the past week, I was in much the same territory.

I took my time over things, scoped out the odd possibility, in hope rather than anticipation, and when *Madam* remained steadfast in her resolve to avoid dinner, ventured as far as the convenience store beside the hotel's entrance lobby.

It yielded a beer and potato chips, which, in turn, translated to a not quite elegant sufficiency.

While it mightn't have been elegant and didn't tick any dietician boxes, a packet of chips was a definite sufficiency.

Beer, on the other hand, was a necessity.



FRIDAY 19 MAY
2017

Okayama > Matsue

A big night's sleep for *Madam* saw her considerably refreshed when she rose around six with plenty of time before the almost regulation nine o'clock departure on a leg that would take us into entirely new territory over on the western side of **Honshū**.

The day's destination was the old castle town of **Matsue**, the capital city of **Shimane Prefecture** on the banks of the **Ohashi River**, sandwiched between **Lake Shinji** to the west, the saltwater **Lake Nakanoumi** to the east and the **Sea of Japan**.

No wonder it's often dubbed **Japan's City of Water**.

And while it's the smallest of **Japan's** forty-seven prefectural capitals, **Matsue** is one of **Japan's** three **Cities of Culture and International Tourism**.

The other two are **Kyōto** and **Nara**,

So the city offers historical and cultural attractions and the prospect of a sunset across the water.

All that was something to look forward to and, of course, we had to get there.



Getting there involved a two and a half hour journey on **Limited Express Yakumo 5** across totally unfamiliar territory.

The first leg took us through the coastal plain along the shores of the **Inland Sea** to **Kurashiki**.

That's where **Hakubi Line** services move off the **Sanyō Main Line**, which continues to **Hiroshima** and points beyond.

Kurashiki, on the **Takahashi River**, developed as a river port after the **Heian Period** and ended up under the direct control of the **shōgunate** towards the end of the **Edo Period**.

The white-walled, black-tiled 17th-century warehouses built to store rice, sugar and other goods give the city its name (***Kurashiki** translates as **town of storehouses***).

The city came out of **World War Two** more or less unscathed, and the **Bikan Historic Area**, the former merchant quarter where the warehouses have been converted into museums, boutiques and cafes is a significant drawcard

It's a ten-minute walk from **Kurashiki Station** to the buildings, which line the banks of an old canal. It gets lit up at night and reputedly accounts for the overambitious tagging of **Kurashiki** as *Japan's Venice*.

The area's museums might also have something to do with that.

The **Ohara Museum of Art**, with a collection that includes major works by **El Greco**, **Gauguin**, **Picasso**, **Renoir**, **Monet** and **Matisse**, exhibitions by contemporary **Japanese** artists and a small sculpture garden was **Japan's** first museum for Western art.

Points of interest in the neighbourhood include an **Archaeological Museum**, a **Rural Toy Museum** and the **Museum of Folkcraft**, along with others devoted to local artists, identities and interests. **Okayama**'s iconic *Momotaro* (*Peach Boy*) even gets a guernsey with a *museum of mystery*.

Closer to, and just north of, the station, **Tivoli Park**, a theme park replicating the eponymous operation in **Copenhagen** opened in 1998 and operated until massive debts forced it to close in 2008.

Head in the opposite direction for two minutes and a green building houses **SWLABR**, a combination of coffee shop, clothing store and pub that takes its name from the flip side of Cream's *Sunshine of Your Love*.

So even though we didn't stop in **Kurashiki**, there's more than one reason for the inclusion if it turns up on a future itinerary.

The wide river we on our left as we moved out of town and turned inland was the **Takahashi** and the next section passed through what could well have been dormitory suburbs for downtown **Kurashiki** and **Okayama** though there was plenty of light industry along the way.

That took us on through **Soja** into the mountains (or at least foothills). Typing notes about what I sighted along the way was not easy since the ride was hardly *shinkansen* smooth, but I persisted as we made our way in and out of tunnels, following the valley of the **Takahashi** into **Bitchū-Takahashi**.

From there it was single line stuff for a while, which probably explains a long stop at what I can only assume was a minor station along the line.

The timetable had us out of **Bitchu** at 9:40, so I guess we were in **Kinoyama**, **Bitchū-Kawamo**, **Hōkoku**, **Ikura**, **Ishiga** or wherever to allow another train to pass in the opposite direction.

Wherever it was, the other train took its time, but we were off again at 9:58 and on our way **Niimi**.

Since we were in and out of there at 10:11, it seemed safe to assume the stop was closer to **Bitchu** than **Niimi**, which had been an important centre of inland trade thanks to its location in the river valley.

From there it was up into the uplands through **Nunohara**, **Bitchū-Kōjiro**, **Ashidachi**, **Niizato** and **Kami-Iwami** on the way to **Shōyama**.

By this stage we'd crossed into **Tottori Prefecture** and had swapped the **Takahashi** for the **Hino** as we made our way down towards the west coast through **Kamisuge**, **Kurosaka**, **Neu**, **Muko**, **Ebi**, **Hōki-Mizoguchi**, **Kishimoto** and **Hōki-Daisen**, where the **Hakubi Line** terminates;

From there, we were on the **Sanin Main Line** which mostly runs parallel to the **Japan Sea** all the way from **Kyōto** to **Shimonoseki**, although there's no single scheduled service to take an enthusiastic rail freak from one end to the other.



We'd be covering around two hundred and fifty kilometres of **Sanin Main Line** tomorrow, but this time around we were just there for the thirty-odd kilometres between the minor transport hub in Yonago and the day's destination in **Matsue**.

There was one stop along the way, in the old steel-making centre of **Yasugi**, though the line took us past minor stations (**Arashima**, **Iya** and **Higashi-Matsue**) on the way into the castle town established by **Horio Yoshiharu** between 1607 and 1611.

That was, however, a relatively recent development.

The area around the city has been the political, economic, and cultural hub of the region for more than two millennia, back at least as far as the **Iron Age Yayoi Period** (the six centuries after 300 BC) into the **Jōmon Period** (14,000–1,000 BC). Wetlands associated with a large inland sea covered much of the area at that stage, so archaeological sites tend to be found on higher ground towards the city's southern edge.

The local domain and the new castle town were initially ruled by the **Horio** family, but a succession of early deaths and childless heirs saw both pass to the **Matsudaira** clan in 1637.

Contemporary **Matsue** has a reputation for hospitality, which may explain a slightly surreal encounter not long after we disembarked.

Madam had headed for the Ladies' leaving *Hughesy* standing, along with the *Coppertone Container* and *Madam's Blue Bag*, in front of a large map of the city and environs.

I'm not sure what prompted what came next.

Maybe it was the bemused foreigner trying to make sense of the minimal **English** content map.

Perhaps it was a case of someone who looked like he was lost.

Or it might have been the result of a thorough school-level indoctrination that says *you should always try to assist disoriented foreigners*.

Alternatively, someone might have wanted a chance to practise her **English**.

Whichever was the case, something prompted an attractive high school girl to ask whether I was OK.

The unlikely concept of *Hughesy* as chick magnet can be dismissed as totally risible almost immediately, so I guess it was probably a mixture of helpfulness and desire to practise rudimentary **English** skills.

She seemed reassured when I said I was waiting for someone and headed on her way.

But she returned a couple of minutes later to ask if I'd be in a photo to commemorate the occasion.

The possibilities of facial recognition on FaceBook or somewhere similar gave me something to ponder through the rest of the day, though nothing seems to have materialised in the wonderful world of social media at the time of writing.

But it'd be useful to have proof that it happened.

Madam, for one, was amused by my account of the incident but seemed to be operating in semi-sceptic mode.

Meanwhile, there were other fish to fry, starting with a visit to at **Visitor Information** to check out the sightseeing options and scope out the logistics.

From there we took ourselves down the road to the hotel, another **Dormy Inn**, but this one had **Express** attached to the moniker. I wasn't sure what that meant at the time, but the building seemed significantly newer than the last one we'd stayed in, so maybe that was it.

There are a string of **Dormy Inns** across the country, and it's more than likely there's more than one in larger cities so that **Express** would denote the new one.

At least, that was the notion being considered while we deposited the baggage and moved back to the station.



Subsequent testing of the hypothesis by entering **Dormy Inn Matsue** revealed a total absence of anything other than the **Express** variety. So maybe it's a **Dormy Inn** until it's renovated when it turns into **Express**.

But I soon had other things to consider after we'd stocked up on water and salmon rice.

Madam had opened her water before I opened mine.

Lucky: it seemed we had landed ourselves with two bottles of yoghurt-infused water.

That wouldn't be a problem. She would drink both along the way. A return visit to the convenience store produced a bottle of stock standard for *Hughesy*.

That was just as well since convenience stores were few and far between out where we were headed, though the landscape featured the occasional example of the ubiquitous vending machine.



An eighteen-minute ride on a regular bus service from **Matsue Station** (the **Ichibata Bus** bound for **Yakumo**) delivered us into the environs of **Kamosu-Jinja Shrine** on the outskirts of the city, though we were faced with a ten-minute walk from the **Fudoki-no-oka Iriguchi** bus stop to get us there.

But I wasn't objecting to that.

It was a pleasant enough walk, and I was in the mood for a bit of exercise. We hadn't exactly been idle over the past few days, but *Good Paddock Syndrome* is evident in the photographic record.

Our first destination for the afternoon was founded in the middle of the **Heian Period** (794-1185), and the primary structure is **Japan's** oldest **Taisha**-style shrine.

It was designated as a **National Treasure** in 1952.



Kamosu-Jinja enshrines **Izanami-no-Mikoto**, the mother of the gods and her husband, which, in turn, underlines an important point about **Matsue** and surrounding districts.

The area might appear to be tucked away in a relatively low-profile part of the archipelago, but it features strongly in the national mythology.

Many of the myths that make up **Japan's** oldest collection of myths (the 8th-century *Kojiki*) are said to have taken place hereabouts.

In the nearby city of **Izumo**, **Japan's** oldest **Shintō** shrine (*Izumo Taisha*) is said to be the venue for an annual convention of **Japan's** deities, who supposedly pass through **Matsue** *en route* to the meeting.

The area also boasts *Yomotsuhirasaka*, the entrance to the Underworld, ruled over by **Susanoo**, the **Shintō** god of sea and storms although the door itself has been sealed off by a large boulder placed there by the god **Izanagi**.



If we'd alighted from the train in **Iya**, a five-minute taxi ride could have delivered us there.

Legends associated with ***Kamosu-Jinja*** are also tied up with the development of **sumo wrestling**.

From there we took ourselves on a casual stroll across the pleasant semi-rural countryside to ***Yaegaki Shrine***, passing some semi-swish residences along the way.

While there was no way of telling who they belonged to, it seemed fairly certain the owners weren't the people who looked after the rice paddies that covered the rest of the flat land in the vicinity.

Or, if they were, farming wasn't their primary source of income. They were expensive looking properties on what looked like prime real estate.

There can't be that much money in rice farming.

We stopped at a shelter along the way, where we knocked over two portions of salmon rice and a fair slug of *Madam's* yoghurt-enhanced water.

I wasn't in the market for more than a mouthful of the regular version as I noticed a couple of items of litter left behind by someone or other.

It was the sort of thing that would probably go unremarked in an Australian school playground, but here, where things are usually kept ultra-neat and almost invariably tidy it stood out like a sore thumb.

When we were back on our feet, I spotted a bottle that seemed to have been carefully stashed among some bushes a little further along.

It lay there in the exact way that something that's been thrown doesn't. If it was the work of a litterbug, he or she might well have been an environmental hooligan with OCD.

After the quiet ramble through the backblocks and across a section of wooded upland we had to cross a fairly busy main road to get into **Yaegaki Shrine** (*Yaegaki Jinja*, formerly *Sakusa Jinja*), a **Shintō** shrine dedicated to marriage and matchmaking, which under other circumstances, might not have registered on the radar.





But we were in the neighbourhood, and there are a couple of quirks associated with the site where **Susanoo**, the god of sea and storms built a house for himself and **Princess Kushinada** to live in.

She was the youngest daughter of a couple who had lost seven of their eight daughters to the *Yamata-no-orochi*, an eight-headed serpent.

It would have made off with the last one, too, if **Susanoo** had not arrived to save the day by ingeniously slaying the serpent to win **Kushinada's** hand in marriage.

Still, I couldn't quite see why we'd been drawn to a shrine where the punters come to pray for a suitable marriage partner, blissful marital relations and domestic harmony, pregnancy and healthy child-bearing.



But, once you've made your way down from the main site, across an extensive car park with signed parking lots, you're on the way to the mirror pond, where the quirks kick in.

Assuming you haven't noticed the large wooden phallic symbols scattered around the grounds.

Down at the **Mirror Pond**, one places fortune papers purchased at the shrine on the surface and a divining coin on top of the paper.

What happens from there seems to depend on whether you're still looking for *Mr or Miss Right* or, having found someone, you need an indication about the likely longevity of the relationship.

If you're *still seeking*, the time it takes for the paper to sink indicates the relative length of time it will take you to find a suitable marriage partner.

On that basis, if it sinks immediately, that's a good sign.

On the other hand, if you're *looking at longevity*, if the paper sinks quickly, your relationship is doomed, so the longer your offering stays afloat, the better. At least that's the theory.

Cynics have been known to mention that you may only end up serving seven years for murder.

So while we mightn't have fitted the desired demographic, being past the age where most of those matters are a cause for concern, the shrine's role in addressing family and relationship issues ensured a steady flow of visitors while we took our turn around the buildings and the mirror pond.

We were back up to bus stop in time to catch the 2:55 bus back to the station.

And, once were aboard the bus we made a significant discovery.

This particular bus travels along a route that passes **Matsue Castle** after it pulls into the station.

Not all of them do, but this one does, so, therefore, there was no need to alight and catch another bus to our next destination on a day where the sightseeing schedule was cramped (to say the least).

One would have to assume that it would be cheaper, too, since you would avoid the bus equivalent of flag fall.





So we alighted at the castle and made our way to the top for the advertised panoramic views across **Matsue**, the surrounding area and **Lake Shinji**.

Matsue Castle (*Matsue-jo*), a.k.a. *the black castle* or *plover castle* is one of the dozen remaining **Japanese castles** that have not fallen victim to fire, war or overzealous **Meiji-era** reformers.

Plenty of others have been reconstructed, but of the original, authentic dozen it is the sixth oldest (1611) with the second largest donjon keep. *Himeji-jo* has the largest).

At thirty metres it's the third tallest and provided a vantage point from which the **Matsudaira** clan's sentinels could keep a watchful eye on the city below.

I'd seen a quotation from **Lafcadio Hearn's** *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* that summed things up nicely:

From under the black scowl of the loftiest eaves, looking east and south, the whole of the city can be seen as a single glance, as in the vision of a soaring hawk; and from the northern angle the



view plunges down three hundred feet to the castle road, where walking figures of men appear no larger than flies.

So the views from the top were impressive and certainly justified the ascent

And we headed more or less straight for the top, where I left *Madam* snapping away while I started on what promised to be a lengthy descent.

It was the sort of situation where you don't want to be standing around displaying signs of apparent impatience.

But as we'd noted on the way up, three of the tower's six storeys have been given over to displays of arms and original artefacts from the **Matsudaira** clan including armour, swords, and *samurai* helmets.



It was obviously something that was worth a look, and the extensive museum displays were visually impressive.

The Inquisitive Reader will, however, need to take *Hughes's* word for it.

It was an environment that would be an obvious candidate for intensive camera work, but bright lights in a darkened environment don't make for an ideal photographic environment.

Although I spent a good twenty minutes browsing the three floors, the displays certainly deserved more time than I gave them.

But the total lack of **English** language signage was an issue.

Couple that with an absence of background knowledge and the resulting tendency to skim over the contents should be understandable.

The displays certainly looked like they contained a wealth of interesting detail for those with the appropriate language skills and background knowledge, but one thing for was definite.



The ferocious warlords and *samurai* warriors whose armour was on display were short: somewhere around jockey size in height, but probably stockier.

Historical dioramas portrayed the city at various stages and underlined the castle's role in keeping an eye on the neighbourhood.

And once we were finished there, we were faced with any number of options, and not much time to allocate to any of them. Several, predictably, relate to **Matsue's** noted adopted son, an Irish journalist and author who lived in the city in 1890 and 1891.

Patrick Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), son of an Irish surgeon who served in the British Army, and a Greek mother, was raised in Ireland by his great-aunt after Mum headed back to Greece and Dad packed up and headed to India.

Hearn emigrated to America when he was nineteen and worked as a French translator.

From that, he moved on to journalism, working as a reporter for **The Cincinnati Enquirer**.

The newspaper sent him to **New Orleans**, where he produced a cookbook.

La Cuisine Creole was *A collection of culinary recipes from leading chefs and noted Creole housewives, who have made New Orleans famous for its cuisine.*

From there, he moved on to **Martinique**, and then to **Japan** in 1890 to work as a teacher in **Matsue**.

Although he only spent fifteen months there, while he was in the city, he married a *samurai's* daughter, adopted a new identity (**Koizumi Yakumo**) and took out **Japanese citizenship**.

His writings detailed life in **Meiji Era Japan** chronicled local legends and recounted ghost stories. Hearn became one of the West's best-known interpreters of contemporary **Japanese** life and culture.

The **Hearn** connection to **Matsue** continues to be celebrated through an annual **Irish Festival** and parade held around **St Patrick's Day**.

The small *samurai* house where he lived from May to November in 1891 is open to the public as **Lafcadio Hearn's Former Residence** (*Koizumi Yakumo Kyūkyo*).

It sits next door to the **Lafcadio Hearn Memorial Museum** at one end of *Shiomi Nawate*, the old *samurai* residential street along the northeast side of the castle moat.





So we could have headed to the building where **Hearn** wrote most of **Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan** and large chunks of **Kwaidan**, his collection of **Japanese** ghost stories, and then moved next door to look at original manuscripts, his desk, writing implements and pipe collection.

Getting there would have taken us past some other museums and historical attractions, including the **Matsue History Museum**, **Tanabe Art Museum** (tea ceremony bowls and utensils), **Meimei-An Teahouse** (dates from 1779) and **Buke Yashiki**, a former *samurai* residence which dates back to 1730.

Alternatively, we could have stayed in the castle grounds (**Jozan Park**) and visited **Jozan Inari**, **Hearn's** favourite shrine, with hundreds of ceramic and stone fox statues.

The shrine is the starting and finishing point of the three-day **Horanenya Festival** when colourful boats with dancers and *kabuki* actors accompany a portable shrine around the castle moat.

But that only happens once every twelve years, with the next due in May 2021.

The castle grounds also include **Kounkaku Palace**, a western style guest house built in 1903 to accommodate **Emperor Meiji** if he happened to drop by.

Throughout the course of his reign, the emperor conducted six grand tours of **Japan** and **Matsue** wasn't the only place that built special accommodation on the off-chance of an imperial visit.

These days it's a venue for special events with *Kamedayama Tea Room* on the ground floor.

So it's not as if we were short of choices as we made our way out of the castle. But a familiar factor was rearing its ugly head.

I, for one, would have been quite content to catch a bus back to the station and check in at the hotel.

That would at least provide an opportunity for a rest before we set out to catch the sunset, but we would probably have frittered away the rest time with digital distractions.

So when *Madam* pointed out the canal cruise, the opportunity to sit down sounded pretty good to me.

At ¥1200 adults, it was already reasonably priced, and there's 33% discount for foreigners.

.Horiwaka Sightseeing Boat Tours operate from nine to five, seven days a week from a pier beside the castle's car park, and the forty-five-minute cruise that followed served a couple of useful purposes.

For a start, it took the weight off the feet and gave people who'd missed their *nana nap* a welcome breather.





Of course, as the tourist brochures will point out, it delivers a different water-level view of the city., and it probably comes as no surprise whatsoever to learn that it's a shoes-off operation,

And it's not just a circuit of the castle moat, which only comprises half of the route.

Around three-quarters of the way around the walls, a right-hand turn takes your vessel onto another section of **Matsue's** grid-like canal system.

There are four low-level bridges along the way.

Passengers get an unusual experience as the boat's awning is lowered onto them to allow the vessel to pass underneath them.

We shared the ride with a **Chinese** quartet who *Madam* suspected were from **Hong Kong**.

They certainly seemed to be in high spirits and would turn up unexpectedly a couple of hours later.



Along the anti-clockwise tour around the circuit, we met several very similar vessels headed in the opposite direction so that it may be a case of one goes *this way*, and the next goes *that way*.

Alternatively, we may be looking at two separate, but rather similar operations.

The left-hand turn at the castle grounds' northeast corner took us along ***Shiomi Nawate***, the waterside ***samurai*** residential street.

So even if we didn't a look inside the **Hearn Residence** and **Museum** and the other places mentioned as possibilities a page or two back, we've seen them from the outside.



A right-hand turn at the castle's north-west corner took us on a down and back run to the *Fureai Hirobi* boarding point, where we could have alighted if we had the **Matsue Horikawa Microbrewery** on our itinerary.

From there, the leg around the rear of the castle took us along a quiet, free-lined waterway that seemed to be miles away from the bustling city you knew was just over n the other side of the green belt across the moat from the castle grounds.

But the turn away from the moat itself took us into a more obviously urban environment, though there was still plenty of nature content on offer in the visual department.

The banks of rivers and canals tend to be like that.

Of course, looking at the houses and commercial premises up there from down just above the waterline delivers a marginally different perspective on things that might otherwise be a little too familiar.



That leg took us past the other on or off option, the *Karakoro Hiroba* boarding point, where we got waves from the trio who look after the facility.

But no one was getting off there, either.

The *lowering the awning* bit as we went under the quartet of low bridges meant it was it easier to lie back rather than sit up.

That, in turn, meant that by the time we were back on *terra firma*, we rested to the point where we opted not to catch a bus back to the station.

Instead, we set off on a walk that was slated to be 1.3 kilometres long, but the hotel was on the way, which took a couple of hundred metres from the distance.

But the decision underlined the recuperative value of the cruise.

We crossed the river, which brought the predictable photo pauses and made our way back through the eating and drinking quarter, passing any number of possible dinner options *en route*.

There was distinct olfactory evidence that seafood is a speciality hereabouts, which would, given the location, hardly come as a surprise.



I noted one place that apparently specialised in oysters, but *Madam's* stomach issues would have militated against that one.

Back at the hotel, we finished the check-in procedures, discovered an unexpectedly late checkout time in the morning (11:00, just before the train as due to leave) but learned that the expected *onsen* facilities appeared to be non-existent.

That didn't tie in with *Madam's do the washing and luxuriate in the soothing waters* scenario, but, in the meantime, we had a sunset to catch.

So we were almost straight back out the front door, turning right onto the street that would take us down to the lakeside.

It was a popular venue for those looking to capture a spectacular sunset, or just enjoy the evening views across the lake.

That's not exactly a surprise. Sunset over **Lake Shinji** is ranked at #2 on the national list.

The setting sun over the floating *torii* at **Miyajima** rates as #1.



There's a special sunset viewing platform (**Yuuhi Spot**) at the best place to see the sunset behind **Yomegashima Island** on the headland that houses the [Shimane Art Museum](#), and I settled down on a handy seat to allow *Madam* to do her thing.

Once the sun was gone, and the thoughts turned to dinner *Madam* fancied an *izakaya* but suspected it might be booked out.

She'd already spotted it, just down the road and virtually across the street from the hotel, but if we couldn't get in, there were plenty of alternatives in the neighbourhood.

One alternative could have been **Miss Agatha**, which seemed to offer grilled beef skewers, but looked to be a *drink first, blotting paper second* venue.

It piqued my interest, but when asked for an opinion I suggested we follow *Madam's* nose.

As we headed on, I noted a place named **Marco** on the opposite corner which *Madam* decided to *Google* while *Hughesy* wandered, semi-aimlessly, ahead.

But I knew, more or less, where we were going, and getting there produced a predictable outcome.

At the *izakaya*, the *House Full* sign was up, so we doubled back, and ended up at **Marco**, which, at first, seemed to be a girl-oriented business.

But maybe that was just downstairs.

There was a *tatami* room upstairs, with the odd bloke passing through headed that way.

Seated at the counter, we ordered beers, potato salad, chicken and what *Madam* read as an *oyster baguette*.

That sounded interesting to *Yours Truly*, who had visions of something along the lines of a **New Orleans Po'Boy**.

When the meals arrived, the potato salad was potato salad, but the *baguette* turned out to be a *bucket* containing eight or nine of the biggest oysters I've ever seen.

After those babies, and the potato salad and chicken that were surplus to *Madam's* requirements, *Hughesy* didn't need anything further in the solids department.

Back in the hotel, after we'd sorted out laundry matters, I headed off to the convenience store across the road for a brace of beers.

I might have been *full up to the muzzle*, but beer can percolate into spaces, and I needed something to sup on while the laundry process ran its course, didn't I?

There was something vaguely familiar about the quartet I passed on the way into the convenient beer emporium, and they were waiting at the traffic lights as I made my way back to the hotel.

Mutual recognition ensued half way across the street. It was the high-spirited **Chinese** quartet from the afternoon boat ride, and they were staying in the same hotel.

One couple was even on the same floor. Coincidences!

Back in the room, with a late checkout in the morning, I sat up relatively late, browsing, perusing, and communing with the **Yebisu** sprites before the ritual draping of not quite dry apparel across the landscape within the room.

Since we had a slightly larger than usual room with a separate entry annexe, there was plenty of room to do that.

It was well after ten-thirty when I finally hit the hay.



4

AROUND NORTHERN KYUSHU

Matsue > Kokura > Moji > Shimonoseki >
Kokura

Kokura > Ōita > Yufuin

Yufuin > Hakata > Dazaifu > Hakata



**SATURDAY 20
MAY 2017**

Matsue > Kokura > Moji > Shimonoseki > Kokura

A late night, an eleven o'clock checkout and a relatively late train departure meant the pair of us slept in big time, though there were several occasions when I thought I might surface;

I eventually bit the bullet just before eight and sat down to attack the **Travelogue** notes after a brief scan of email *et cetera*.

An hour and a half later the word count was tipping over the 9900 mark, and it was time to shut things down and pack things up.

We headed down to the station around a quarter to eleven to catch **Limited Express Super Oki 3**, which was slated to depart at 11:09, but things didn't quite work out that way.

Our departure was delayed due to a local train that had, in turn, been delayed by a smoke hazard.

The initial run to **Tamatsukuri-onsen** and beyond took us along the southern shore of **Lake Shinji**.

With a circumference of forty-seven kilometres, an area of eighty square kilometres and a total volume of almost three-quarters of a cubic kilometre, it's **Japan's** seventh largest lake and a significant tourist attraction.

The Astute Reader can put that down to those sunsets across the water, an abundance of **onsen** along the southern shore and an active fishery based on the **Shijimi** clam and the rest of the **Shijni-ko Shitchin** (*Seven Delicacies of Lake Shinji-ko*).

The other six are carp, eels, sea bass, shrimp, smelt and whitebait; quite a variety.

There were frequent reminders of the region's unique place in **Japanese mythology**.

Our first stop, **Tamatsukuri-onsen**, the ancient hot spring where the gods are said to come to bathe every year was mentioned as early as 733 in the **Izumo Fudoki**.

The lake delivered excellent views across the water to our right, but seats on the left-hand side of the train militated against photography as far as *Yours Truly* was concerned.

But there were vacant seats over on the other side so *Madam* could move back and forth if anything over that way caught her eye.

In the meantime, the outlook on the left-hand side was pleasant enough: a mixture of woodlands, farmland and residential landscape, but it was more of the same as we'd experienced over the preceding week and a half outside the dense urban townscape.

Once again it was a matter of sitting back and letting it roll past, and once we'd left the lake behind things, predictably, were much the same on both sides.

Somewhere before the outskirts of **Izumo**, I spotted stone steps on the left leading to hilltop temple or something similar, though there was no way of telling what it was.

But it wasn't the **Shintō** shrine that's widely believed to be the oldest in **Japan**.

Izumo Taisha is well over on the other side of the city, well away from the station.

There's no accurate record to indicate when the shrine was established.

According to **Japan's** two oldest chronicles, the ***Kojiki*** (*Records of Ancient Matters*) and ***Nihon Shoki*** (*Chronicles of Japan*), **Izumo** was the realm of gods, and the land of myths.

The main structure enshrines **Ōkuninushi**, the guardian of happiness and healthy relationships who is considered to be the creator of **Japan**.

A **Heian Period** record compiled around 950 describes the shrine as approximately forty-eight metres tall, higher than the **Great Buddha Hall** at ***Tōdai-ji*** in **Nara**. So it would have been the largest wooden structure in **Japan** (and, quite probably, the world) when it was originally built.

Reconstructions during the **Kamakura Period** (around 1200) and 1744 shrank it considerably.

In its current incarnation, the shrine is twenty-four metres high and eleven square at the base.

Izumo has a couple of claims to fame apart from the shrine and **Izumo soba noodles**.

An archaeological site at **Kirara Taki** beach on the shores of the **Sea of Japan** yielded the oldest stone tools found in **Japan** in 2009.

The twenty-odd tools were dated to 120,000 years BP, extending estimates of human occupation of the **Japanese archipelago** by about 80,000 years

An ancient cluster of tombs south of the station is believed to go back to the 6th century with unusually sophisticated construction methods for that time, while the **Izumo Dome** just north of the city centre is modern **Japan's** largest wooden building.

It's forty-nine metres high and one hundred and forty-three across and reputedly visible from the railway line, but, again, we were on the wrong side of the train.

As we zipped along, I spotted another set of stairs leading, presumably, to another hilltop temple and I guess I could have missed any number of others since the train's speed only gave the would-be temple spotter a second or two for the telltale signs to register.

Although I had the distinct impression that we were comfortably inland once we moved away from the lake, I'd been catching occasional glimpses of water to the right, and since the coastline changes direction after **Izumo** (or more specifically after **Mount Hanataka**) 11:48 saw us back running along with water on the right.

A seemingly unscheduled stop at **Tagi** had **Oda** as the previous station, and **Hane** as the next along with a pleasant view across the water.

There was probably nothing out there over that way between here and Korea, but I was looking forward.



Madam's snapshot looks back towards where we'd come from.

We were still on the coast at the next scheduled stop in **Odashi**, an old silver mining area with a mountain national park in the hinterland.

Iwami Ginzan was Japan's largest silver mine for almost four hundred years between 1526 and 1923. As the most important source of silver for the **Tokugawa Shōgunate** the mine was directly controlled by the government during the **Edo Period** and it remains a popular tourist destination.

While **Odashi** and **Shizuma** are away from the water, it was back on the right at **Isotake** and **Nima**.

We could have stopped at the latter to visit the **Sand Museum** featuring what is claimed to be the world's largest hourglass (although it does not get a guernsey in the *Guinness Book of Records*) and six crystal glass pyramids.

Maji was just about on **Kotogahama Beach**, where the sound that the sand makes as you walk over it is said to resemble notes produced on a *koto* (*Japanese harp*),

Yusato and **Yunotsu** were inland, **Iwami-Fukumitsu**, **Kuromatsu** and **Asari** more or less on the coast, and we crossed the **Gono River** on the way into **Gōtsu**, at the foot of **Hoshitaka** or *Star Mountain*.

There's probably a more prosaic explanation, but according to legend the star pattern carved into the mountain's face was formed by a meteor many years ago.

Whatever the origin of the shape, winter snowfall and spring azaleas make it stand out.

And in the summer, with nothing white to make it stand out during the day, it is lit up at night for the **Obon Festival**.

We were in and out of sight of the coast through **Tsunozu**, **Uyagawa** and **Hashi**, but the line was far enough inland to conceal the white sand beaches that are one of the area's major attractions.

They start around the **Hashi Beach Resort** and continue past **Mount Ohira** and **Kushiro** to **Iwami Seaside Park** and **Aquas**, the largest aquarium in this part of **Honshū**.

With around ten thousand fish covering four hundred species it's a significant attraction, though performing Beluga whales are the main drawcard, along with the adjacent amusement park.

There's a break at a headland, then another beach resort (**Kokufu**) on the way into **Shimokō** on the outskirts of **Hamada**.





As the line tracked away from the coast for a bit with hills and such between us and the coast it looked like a suitable time to demolish the contents of the *bentō* boxes we'd bought back in **Matsue**.

Unfortunately, the combination of a rough ride over standard lines and *Hughesy's* rudimentary chopsticks skills meant there were significant leftovers, grains of rice and other morsels too small and discrete to pick up.

They came from larger clusters of beef, rice and onion jolted apart in a way they wouldn't have been on the much smoother-riding *shinkansen* tracks.

At least, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.

Hamada is **Shimane Prefecture's** third largest city (after **Matsue** and **Izumo**).

Thanks to those beaches, it's a popular tourist destination with an expressway connection to **Hiroshima** as well as the railway line that runs along the coast.

It's also significant as the area's only deep water shipping port.

It was a castle town, though **Hamada Castle** was destroyed by the local pro-Tokugawa *daimyō* in 1866 to prevent it falling into the hands of pro-**Meiji** forces.

The gate, some stone walls and the castle's foundations remain at the top of a hill near the middle of town overlooking the harbour.

The ruins are a popular attraction during the cherry blossom season, and the vantage point delivers extensive views across the city and the coast.

The next few stations we zipped past (**Nishi-Hamada**, **Sufu**, **Orii**, **Miho-Misumi** and **Okami**) were all within **Hamada**'s city limits, but when we reached **Kamate**, we were on the outskirts of **Masuda**, though we had to pass through **Iwami-Tsuda** to get there.

Masuda, right on the border between **Shimane** and the neighbouring **Yamaguchi Prefecture** is another of those places that would have been well worth stopping at if we had time on our hands, which, of course, we didn't.

There are a couple of important castle towns (**Tsuwano** and **Hagi**) with the regulation *samurai* houses and merchant quarters nearby, and the **Gran Toit Performance and Exhibition Centre** is said to be worth a look.

On top of that, the town has some interesting shrines and temples with significant **Zen gardens** created by **Sesshū Toyo** in the late fifteenth century.

The town is also the birthplace of the seventh-century court poet **Kakinomoto Hitomaro**, thought to have been the greatest of **Japan**'s ancient poets who ended up as governor of his home province after he backed the wrong side in a disputed Imperial succession.

It's also the junction where the **Yamaguchi Line** splits off from the **Sanin Main Line**. If we'd kept following the coastal line, we'd have found ourselves in another interesting castle town.

Hagi, a city with a population just over the fifty thousand mark might not seem too significant, but appearances can be deceptive.

The castle town and its environs became important when the **Mōri** clan became the *daimyōs* of **Chōshū Domain** at the beginning of the **Edo Period** and transferred the capital from **Hiroshima** to **Hagi**, which remained the political centre of the domain for the next two hundred and fifty years.

While the city was a major player in events around the **Meiji Restoration**, the industrial development largely passed it by, and the population declined steadily.

But it's hardly a backwater.

The **Chōshū** clan provided the first five **Japanese students** to smuggle themselves out of the country and study abroad when it was still illegal to do so.

All five rose to prominent positions when they returned home: **the country's first Prime Minister**, one **Foreign Affairs Minister**, one **head of the National Mint**, one **president of the Japan Engineering Society**, and the man known as **the father of Japan's railway system** (Inoue Masaru).

Not too shabby.

And after that since that first Prime Minister, there have been three more born in the one seemingly insignificant city.

But we weren't going that way.

From **Masuda**, the **Yamaguchi Line** runs inland, through the sort of landscape that would be a significant drawcard if it lay between two significant centres and **JR West** was inclined to go the full picture window treatment on reasonably swish trains.

Further down in **Kyūshū** they run special services on lines like this one, but those end in an important centre like **Kagoshima**, and pass *onsen* resorts along the way in an ideal scenario for day-trippers or short-stay *onsen* enthusiasts.

Looking back on it, you could probably say the same about any one of a number of local lines that cut through **Japan's** central *cordillera*.

Again, unfortunately, we were on the wrong side of the train, reinforcing the notion that you need to check these matters in your pre-trip research and make an explicit request for the appropriate side of the train when you book your tickets.

On the other hand, that scenario would have the keen photographer on the edge of his or her seat for several hours, snapping away at a succession of interesting and quite attractive vistas.

Sometimes the suboptimal option turns out for the best, and that may have been the case here.

Honmataga and **Iwami-Yokota** were still inside **Masuda's** city limits, but when we reached **Higashi-Aohara**, we'd crossed into **Tsuwano** in **Shimane Prefecture's Kanoashi District**.

We were following the valley of the **Takatsu River** as we made our way up through **Aohara**, crossing onto the **Tsuwano Valley** into **Nichihara**, through **Aonoyama** and on to the former castle town of **Tsuwano**.

It's another popular tourist destination, and, under other circumstances, we might have been tempted to alight there and caught the steam locomotive *Yamaguchi-gō*, which runs on weekends, the rest of the way down to **Shin-Yamaguchi**.

A steam train with heritage carriages would have piqued *Hughesy's* interest if the prospect had been raised earlier, but we had an appointment with a pedestrian tunnel between **Honshū** and **Kyūshū**.

A 3:19 departure from **Tsuwano** would have got us down to the *shinkansen* line just after five, too late for the tunnel, although it would have given us an hour or so on the ground in the *Little Kyōto of San-In*.

That would probably have been long enough to take in **Tsuwano**'s picturesque main street, *Tonomachi*, lined with **Edo Period** buildings and *koi* carp ponds but there's more than one attraction to draw the visitors in.

Throw in one of the oldest horseback archery ranges still in use, the ruins of **Tsuwano Castle**, and a mountainside *Taikodani Inari* shrine with vermilion *torii* gates like **Kyōto**'s *Fushimi Inari* and an hour or so is not going to be enough.

So we stayed on the train.

Funahirayama, the next station on the line, put us into **Yamaguchi Prefecture**, right on the toe of **Japan**'s main island.

While we would be passing through the eponymous capital in the centre of the prefecture, the prefecture's largest city, thanks to post-**Meiji** industrialisation, is **Shimonoseki**.

The run into **Yamaguchi City** took us, largely, across broad, flat, agricultural country, through a string of little places where the stations would have been unmanned.

We did stop for a minute at **Tokusa** but rattled through **Nabekura**, **Jifuku**, **Nagusa** in the **Abu River** valley before another one-minute stop at **Mitani**.

Watarigawa, **Chōmonkyō**, **Shinome** and **Niho** all lie within the **Yamaguchi City** boundaries, and by the time we hit **Miyano** we were in the built up urban part of a surprisingly small city, given that it's the capital of the eponymous prefecture.

The Critical Reader may be inclined to quibble about whether a city with a population around the two hundred thousand mark could be described as small, but these things, after all, are relative.

And those two hundred thousand souls are scattered over more than a thousand square kilometres, so we're not talking high-density population.

We are, on the other hand, talking significant history and important religious and cultural sites.

If we'd alighted at **Miyano** a fifteen-minute walk would have got us to *Joeiji*, a Zen temple noted for its *Sesshūtei* garden, commissioned in the 15th century by the feudal lord **Masahiro Ōuchi** and designed by the monk, painter and garden designer **Sesshū**.

The temple and garden are part of the reason for **Yamaguchi** being tagged as the *Kyōto of the West*, and while there are *Kyōtos of the* and *Little Kyōtos of the* scattered across the archipelago, in this case, the descriptor seems more than justified.

The city was founded in 1360 by **Hiroyo Ōuchi**, who set out to match **Kyōto**'s elegance. The **Ōuchi** family ruled the **Nagato (Chōshū)** and **Suō Provinces**, did rather well for themselves and their fiefdom and its capital flourished.

That tendency was especially pronounced when the **Ōnin War** devastated **Kyōto**, and **Yamaguchi** became, in effect, the alternative capital.

Sesshū wasn't the only one who arrived in **Yamaguchi** looking for refuge.

He designed the garden as a live representation of one of his paintings, and the temple grounds have several other **Zen temple** features, including a couple of **raked pebble Zen gardens**.

But it wasn't to last.

The **Sue clan** succeeded in ousting the **Ōuchi** and were, in turn, defeated by the **Mōri family** who came to dominate the **Chūgoku region**.

Yamaguchi was part of the **Mōri clan** domain through the **Sengoku Period** until **Tokugawa Ieyasu** defeated **Mōri Terumoto** in the **Battle of Sekigahara** in 1600. **Mōri Terumoto** was forced to give up much of his land and moved his base to **Hagi**.

Downtown **Yamaguchi** has two other significant religious sites.

Northwest of the station on a hill in **Kameyama Park** the **St. Francis Xavier Memorial Church (*Sabieru Kinen Seido*)** is a late twentieth replacement for the Gothic-style structure built in 1952 to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of **Xavier's** arrival in **Yamaguchi**.

The original burnt down under mysterious circumstances in 1991.

Below the church is a museum covering the life and times of the man who introduced **Christianity** to **Japan** in 1550.

Slightly further afield, **Kozan Park** contains the **Rurikoji Temple** with its five-story pagoda that dates from 1404 and is rated one of the top three pagodas in **Japan**.

Nearby **Toshunji Temple** has the graves of **Mori** lords including **Mori Takachika**, who helped overthrow the **Tokugawa Shōgunate** and was the first *daimyō* to hand over his fief to the **Meiji Emperor**.

Yamaguchi, in other words, is another one of those places that could easily justify a stop but you can't visit them all.

Two and a half kilometres down the track we made another stop at the historic hot springs at **Yuda-onsen**.

They're not the only hot springs in **Yamaguchi**, but they do go back some eight centuries and have the distinction (according to local legend) of having been discovered by a wounded white fox.

The alkaline waters are reputedly good for the skin as well as injuries to wild animals.

From **Yuda-onsen**, it is not that much further to **ShinYamaguchi**, a matter of ten minutes and the same number of kilometres.

But delays along the way caused concerns about missing the next train as we skipped through **Yabara**, **Ōtoshi**, **Nihozu**, **Kamigō** and **Suō-Shimogō**.

Those concerns would have been significantly greater if we had booked tickets for the next *shinkansen* leg, but it's an eighteen-minute run into **Kokura**, and *Madam* had deemed we would be right to go the non-reserved option.

With the delays, of course, we'd find more people in the queue ahead of us with a greater chance we'd end up spending the next twenty minutes or so on our feet.

As it turned out, we found two seats towards the back of Car Two, along with space to stow the *Coppertone Container*, which was just as well because it ended up being significantly more than the advertised eighteen to twenty-minute journey.

At first, I thought the delay was another sit here while a faster service races along the next stretch of line situation, but a couple of incomprehensible announcements revealed that was not the case.

It seemed someone in **Car Three** had taken ill, there was a request for a doctor if one happened to be aboard, and the train wasn't going anywhere until the matter was resolved.

Given the likelihood that there'd be people aboard who were looking to make connections in **Kokura** or further on I couldn't help wondering why, if they'd located a medico, the train didn't head on to **Kokura** where they might have been able to arrange a waiting ambulance.

While we didn't have a pre-booked connection, the delay had implications for our own plans, and once we'd alighted we moved fairly quickly, heading to check in at the hotel and, almost immediately, heading back to the station to catch a local service to **Mojikō**

Booking in came with the highly unwelcome news that we'd scored a smoking room, and initial exposure to an environment where we'd be spending something like twelve hours wasn't favourable.

The place stank, in a manner that suggested the previous occupant, who must have been a chain smoker had pushed checkout time right to the limit earlier that same day.

As a result, *Hughesy's* side of the next bit was decidedly sub-optimal.

We were heading for **Mojikō** (*Moji Port*), one of the five locations that merged in 1963 to become **KitaKyūshū** city. The others were **Kokura**, **Tobata**, **Yahata** and **Wakamatsu**.

Strategically located right at the narrowest point of the **Kanmon Straits** that separate the southern island of **Kyūshū** from **Honshū**. **Mojikō** developed into a major port at the end of the 19th century.

Initially, it was used for shipping coal and bringing in bananas from **Southeast Asia**, but became an open port for trading with **Britain** and the **United States** in July 1899.

Although there's still plenty of shipping traffic passing through the **Kanmon Strait**, the port facilities have been moved to a newer location, **Shin-Moji Port**;

The old port precinct has been rebadged as **Mojikō Retro**, a tourist destination with well-preserved buildings from the **Meiji** and **Taishō Periods**.

A local service from **Kokura** brought us into **JR Kyūshū's Mojikō Station**, reputedly a Neo-Renaissance replica of Rome's **Termini Station** and officially an **Important Cultural Property of Japan**.

It is undergoing major renovations and the exterior will remain shrouded in scaffolding until 2018.





Built in 1914 it is one of the few large wooden stations in **Japan** that have survived into the twenty-first century and was the first station to be listed as a **National Cultural Property**.

Just across from the **JR station** there's a little private line that claims to be **Japan's** slowest; at fifteen kilometres per hour it's a considerable contrast to the *shinkansen* speed we'd been experiencing an hour earlier and takes ten minutes or so to cover the 2.1-kilometre journey.

That, in turn, delivered us to the jumping off point for the tunnel under the **Kanmon Strait**, the world's longest underwater exclusively pedestrian tunnel.

The signs in the area claim it's a four hundred metre walk from the train to the tunnel, but that's probably *as the crow flies* rather than *as the photographer and accompanying personnel walk*.

The tunnel itself is around seven hundred metres long, and it's accessed at either end by lifts.

One assumes that's why it's only open between six in the morning and ten at night.

But it's free of charge as long as you're walking.

They'll slug you ¥20 to wheel your bike across, but that's probably less than the toll to cross the **Kanmonkyo Suspension Bridge** that joins **Kyūshū** and **Honshū**.



And they probably don't allow bicycles (or pedestrians, for that matter) up there anyway.

So after you arrive at the southern end, lifts transfer you down to the tunnel itself.

From there, once you're on your way, there isn't a whole lot to seem, and you wouldn't expect it.

Maybe the only point of real interest other than the fact that you're *en route* from **Kyūshū** to **Honshū** is the boundary line between the cities of **Kokura** and **Shimonoseki**, which one presumes marks the half-way point in the crossing.

Back on the surface on the other side, *Madam* snapped away while *Hughesy* mused on the volume of small-scale coastal shipping passing to and fro out there.



I was surprised these vessels remain viable in the twenty-first century, but maybe that has something to do with logistics in and around the **Inland Sea** and the island of **Shikoku**.

There are not too many road and rail crossings between **Honshū** and **Shikoku**, so maybe these little coasters were the only way of getting some supplies to relatively isolated locations.

A look at the map suggests the island has a considerable number of relatively remote areas, so that's the hypothesis.

All that remains is taking a week or so on **Shikoku** to check it out.

When *Madam* had finished snapping, we took a bus down to catch the ferry back to **Mojikō**, where we took a brief stroll around the retro buildings before heading over to the to station.

It was another of those situations where things probably received less attention than they deserved, but it was late in the afternoon, the sun was going down. One suspects museums and such were either in the process of shutting down or actually closed, and *Hughesy's* thoughts were turning towards dinner.



But it would have been interesting to check out the **Kyūshū Railway History Museum** in the two-storey redbrick building that formerly housed the headquarters of **Kyūshū Railways**.

It's over near **Mojikō Station** with model railways, dioramas and simulators inside and full sized locomotives and carriages outside.

There's also a shop selling railroad memorabilia where *Hughes* would probably have dropped a significant number of yen.

The Critical Reader might suggest that's an unfounded assumption, but I'm working on the presumption that **JR Kyūshū** has their marketing and merchandising well and truly sorted out.



Put all that together, and you don't have to be Einstein to figure out why *Madam* didn't suggest the rail museum as a possibility.

And, speaking of Einstein, we could have visited the former **Moji Mitsui Club**, a guest house built in 1921 for important visitors.

Dr and Mrs Einstein stayed there the following year. The building has a small museum commemorating their stay.

We may well have passed it, along with the **Mitsui OSK Line Building**, the **Old Moji Customs Building**, the unique pedestrian 106-metre **Blue Wing Drawbridge** or the more modern ***Kaikyo Dramaship***.

That one's a museum covering all aspects of the **Kanmon Straits**, including the natural and cultural history of the locality.

Put all those together, and you're probably looking at a good couple of hours to do the area justice.

Having reached that conclusion, one throws in a *But wait! There's more!*

The **Chinese Eastern Railway Office** is a reproduction of a Russian building in the former Russian sphere of interest in China.

The building went up to commemorate fifteen years of friendship between **KitaKyūshū** and the port of **Dalian** (a.k.a. **Port Arthur**) at the tip of the **Liaodong Peninsula**.

Add the **Idemitsu Museum of Arts**, the **Matsunaga Library** collection covering the history of theatre and film in **Japan** and a visit to the **Mojikō Retro Observation Room** atop a thirty-one storey apartment block and you may well be looking at all afternoon rather than a mere good couple of hours.

Madam wanted to capture the exterior of the station, but no one had told her about the restoration work in progress.





Since the structure was obscured by scaffolding, we headed off to seek dinner a little bit earlier than might otherwise have been the case.

We found it across the street in a seventh-floor establishment with views out across the water if you're on the right side.

We weren't, so I consoled myself by ordering a local beer, a **Japanese curry** and pointing out (with some considerable amusement) that the menu included a *Grass Wine List*.

The curry was good, but nothing really out of the bag but the beer was moreish, so I downed another.

We were both bemused by a strange container behind my right shoulder that turned out to be a device that had something to do with the risotto ordered by the couple at the table next door.

The exact details, however, were lost in translation.

So, with dinner out of the way, we took the train back to **Kokura**, stopped at the regulation convenience store for supplies and paused to take a snap of the **Hotto Motto** on the corner.

Upstairs the smoke triggered something that made me glad I'm not asthmatic, but the **Yebisu** deadened the pain a little.

Still. I managed to doze off eventually, but what followed was eight hours of very broken sleep,





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Kokura > Ōita > Yufuin

Given the circumstances, it will hardly come as a surprise to learn that there was no thought given to any attempt to sleep in.

In fact, if I'd managed to nod off earlier I would have been up and about well and truly before six.

But that was when I surfaced, and immediately set about tackling the **Travelogue** notes.

With three days to go on the **Rail Pass** leg and at least two more on the way back to **The Little House of Concrete**, I was determined to keep things up to date.

And, indeed, that was the case by 6:58 with a word count past that had passed the eleven thousand mark.

Every one of those words was something that didn't have to be typed later, and every detail that was recorded was one less that might need exhaustive research afterwards.

With that out of the way, I took a shower before an early, rather light breakfast with a view to escaping the room asap.

The lingering traces of smoke were really getting to me.

Downstairs, the breakfast room should have been recognised as a sign of things to come.

After all, it was Sunday, and people who would otherwise have been off to work were off for a day out and about.

We didn't waste any time after breakfast and were checked out and down to the station well and truly before the scheduled 9:48 departure, even if that meant a spell sitting and killing time while a throng of day-trippers and weekend excursionists ebbed and flowed around us.

Madam sighted the **Kokura Monorail** perched above one of the main hubs in the complex, so *Hughesy* headed over to investigate the timetable and related matters.

Not that we were considering a ride, you understand, but there was time that needed killing, and this was one way to do it.

Subsequent research reveals that it's the **KitaKyūshū** rather than the **Kokura Monorail**, a single line operation that runs 8.8 kilometres between **Kokura Station** and **Kikugaoka** in **Kokura's Minami** ward and takes about eighteen minutes to do it.

While *The Astute Reader* might think the monorail was a natural fit for a railway station transport hub, the assumption would be wrong.

When the line opened in January 1985, it ran between the second station (**Heiwadori**) and the terminus in **Kikugaoka** and failed to return a profit until the three hundred metre extension to **Kokura Station** opened.

Somehow it seems appropriate to note that happened on **April Fools' Day 1998**.

So I noted the single line, and the thirteen stations, watched the monorail set off and thought about **Kokura Castle** on the way back to where we'd plonked the luggage down and snaffled a couple of seats.

Under other circumstances, we might have taken the ten-minute walk to **Kokura-jō**, the flatland castle originally built by the **Mōri clan** from western **Honshū** in 1569 and awarded to **Hosokawa Tadaoki** after the **Battle of Sekigahara** in 1600.

He enlarged it in 1602, and his family held the castle until they were transferred to **Kumamoto** in 1632.

The **Ogasawara clan** took it over and held it until fire destroyed the keep and attached tower in 1837.

While it was partially rebuilt afterwards, that section went up in flames during the struggles associated with the **Meiji Restoration** in 1866.

The concrete reconstruction completed in 1959 isn't entirely accurate, but that's not the reason we declined a visit to the only castle left standing in **Fukuoka Prefecture**.

Put that one down to a disinclination to shell out for a coin locker and question marks attached to the small matter of time.

We headed down to the platform round 9:30 working on the principle that this was probably the terminus/starting point for **Limited Express Sonic 9** and the train may have been there, ready and waiting.

It wasn't.

Sonic services operate between **Hakata** and **Ōita** *via* **Kokura** and **Beppu** on the **Kagoshima Main Line** and the **Nippō Main Line** running every half hour at speeds up to 130 km/h.

But there was already a queue.

That was another sign of things to come.





Still, it was not all that crowded in the non-**Green Car** end of **Car 1**, where, once again, we'd probably scored seats on the sub-optimal side of the train.

That *probably* is due to passengers on the other side drawing the blinds down, so there was no way of telling what we were missing over to our left.

But we knew there was water over that way,

To the right, where we could see, there was an initial run of hills with urban development at their feet.

As the rural landscape took over from the townscape, the hills receded up to the point where they were too far off to offer photographic interest.

Then, as we neared the end of the **Sonic** leg, the townscape returned, and the slopes came back into prominence. That explains the lack of photos hereabouts.

In the meantime we'd had just over an hour and a quarter of **Sonic** travel, covering around one hundred and thirty kilometres along the way, with stops at **Yukuhashi**, **Nakatsu** and **Beppu**.

We'd passed **Nishi-Kokura** and **Minami-Kokura** on the way out of **Kokura**, and, for once *Hughesy's* station by station **Google** to see if there's anything interesting about the place yielded results other than *the station is unmanned* or *this one's where the such and such line branches off*.

Minami-Kokura's claim to fame is that someone made a pornographic film on the station platform and their effort resulted in arrests and prosecutions.

For **Jōno**, **Abeyamakōen**, **Shimosone**, **Kusami**, there's a dearth of interesting detail though I did learn four local all-station services per hour in either direction at **Abeyamakōen** handle between 2500 and 3000 passengers a day and **Kusami** is the closest station to **New Kitakyūshū** Airport.

Track the line on *Google Maps*, and you'll find most of them lie well and truly within **Kitakyūshū**'s urban sprawl, so that lack of interesting detail should come as no surprise.

After that, we were out of the **Kitakyūshū** city limits, into **Kanda**, an independent municipality where a majority of the forty thousand residents are, according to *Wikipedia*, resisting calls for a merger with the much larger neighbour we'd just left.

But the urban sprawl means it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins, so one suspects an eventual merger is inevitable.

We skipped past the stations at **Kanda** and **Obase-Nishikōdai-mae** before the first scheduled stop at **Yukuhashi**, another of **Fukuoka Prefecture**'s satellite cities.

We could have alighted there to take the third sector **Heisei Chikuho line** if we had intentions regarding the former coal-mining centres of **Tagawa** and **Nōgata**. It's the same company that operates the **Mojikō Retro Kankō Line** we rode on yesterday.

Minami-Yukuhashi and **Shindembaru** both lay within the **Yukuhashi** city limits, **Tsuiki** and **Shiida** were within **Chikujō**, and, as we passed **Buzen-Shōe**, **Unoshima** and **Mikekado**, we were into the mostly rural municipality of **Buzen**.

But we weren't stopping at any of those, or at **Yoshitomi** either.

But half an hour out of **Kokura** we did stop at **Nakatsu**, the former castle town that was the hub of the **Edo Period Nakatsu Domain**.

At that point, we'd moved from **Fukuoka** into **Ōita Prefecture**, famous for its hot springs and geothermal energy.

A major tectonic line runs through the prefecture towards **Kumamoto**, and there are several smaller fault lines running east-west.

Couple that with a volcanic belt (the **Kirishima Range**) runs north-south and you have a situation that's ready-made for hot spring sources.

On that basis, it probably comes as no surprise to learn that the *onsen* and associated *ryokan* are popular tourist attractions.

Ōita is, however, the prefecture with the most hot springs in the whole archipelago.

That's no mean feat in a nation that, as noted several times through this narrative, often seems like one huge *onsen* resort.

And it's not just about *onsen* tourism.

About a quarter of the prefecture's energy comes from geothermal sources, and visitors can enjoy being buried in steaming volcanic sands as well as more conventional *onsen* experiences.

Then there's the scenic aspect.

Mountainous terrain means that seventy percent of the prefecture is covered with forests, and where you find mountain ranges you can also expect gorges and river valleys.

Around the 6th century, today's prefecture was part of **Toyo Province**, which was subsequently split into upper and lower sections, **Bungo** and **Buzen Province**. Districts from both were merged to form **Ōita Prefecture** after the **Meiji Restoration**.

In the meantime, since the two former provinces were divided among local *daimyō* large castle towns were few and far between.

But at 10:18 **Limited Express Sonic 9** made a brief stop at one of them.

Nakatsu Castle (*Nakatsu-jō*) is one of the country's three *Mizujiro*, or *Castles on the sea*, along with **Takamatsu** in **Kagawa Prefecture** and **Imabari** in **Ehime Prefecture**.

Kuroda Yoshitaka started building the castle when he was appointed the governor of the region in 1587, but it was still incomplete when **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** rewarded **Kuroda** with a larger domain after the **Battle of Sekigahara** in 1600.

Slow progress on the construction work may have something to do with local resistance to their new overlord.

According to local lore, rebels attacked the work in progress, and the assault was so gory that the bloodstains on the walls continued to show after they'd been painted over, so **Kuroda** solved the problem by having them painted red.

His replacement was **Hosokawa Tadaoki**, who finished **Nakatsu** and set about building **Kokura Castle**. When that was finished, **Tadaoki** moved there. **Nakatsu** went to his son **Hosokawa Tadatoshi**.

The **Ogasawara clan** subsequently displaced the **Hosokawa** and held the area until 1717 when the **Okudaira family** took it over and held the castle until the **Meiji Restoration**, but abandoned it in 1871.

The castle went up in flames during the **Satsuma Rebellion** of 1877, but the descendants of the **Okudaira clan** had it rebuilt in 1964, using **Hagi Castle** as a template.

While the current incarnation may not be entirely accurate in a historical sense, it may be worth a visit since it houses a significant collection of *samurai* weapons and armour and the observation deck on the top floor offers views across the **Seto Inland Sea** and the castle town's hinterland.

The castle also houses the **Okudaira family shrine**.

As *The Astute Reader* will surmise, **Higashi-Nakatsu** also sits within **Nakatsu's** city limits, as does **Imazu**, and at **Amatsu** we'd crossed the border into **Usa**, in the former **Buzen Province**.

At least, it seems safe to assume it is since we passed **Buzen-Zenkōji** and **Buzen-Nagasu**, with **Yanagigaura** in between the two, on the way into **Usa**.

We could have stopped off there to visit ***Usa Jingū***, a.k.a. ***Usa Hachimangū***, the first **Shintō** shrine dedicated to ***Hachiman-jin*** (the tutelary god of warriors), though it's well away from the railway line and a fair step from the station.

The shrine reputedly dates back to the early 8th-century **Wadō era** (708-714) and appears in the Imperial chronicles during the reign of **Empress Shōtoku**, who allegedly had a fling with a **Buddhist** monk named **Dōkyō**.

There were suggestions that the monk should be made emperor and an oracle at **Usa** was consulted, but the empress died before a verdict was delivered.

The 16th century saw the shrine razed after repeated attacks by **Ōtomo Yoshishige**, the **Christian**-sympathiser *daimyō* of **Funai Domain**. The present structure is a **National Treasure** that dates back to the middle of the 19th century.

But there was no stopping this time around.

We passed **Nishiyashiki** on the way out of **Usa**, and **Tateishi** and **Nakayamaga** on the way into **Kitsuki**, another former castle town towards the southern side of the **Kunisaki Peninsula**.

We'd had the 721-metre **Mount Futago** on our left as we made our way across the peninsula, which offers plenty of interest to the temple and shrine enthusiast.

The region, known as ***Rokugo Manzan*** (*Six Towns Full Mountain*) has dozens of temples and some shrines that reflect a unique local fusion of **Buddhism**, **Shintō** and mountain worship.

The problem, however, would be getting around.

You might be able to alight at **Nakayamaga** and catch a bus from there, but they run infrequently, and it would be difficult to synchronise transfers.

So it's a case of rent a car and drive from **Ōita Airport**, Usa or **Beppu**, charter a taxi from **Ōita Airport** (¥9,000 to ¥15,000 depending on the itinerary) or take the bus tour that leaves from departs from **Ōita Station**.

It stops at **Beppu** and Usa on the way to the shrines and temples, returns to **Ōita** *via Ōita Airport* and **Beppu** and will set you back somewhere between ¥3000 and ¥6000 depending on where you get on and off.

So it's one for the too hard basket that's likely to remain there.

Which is a pity.

Futagoji, close to the summit of **Mount Futago** goes back more than 1300 years and covers a wide area of forested slopes, with stone and gravel paths connecting the various halls and shrines.

Around fifteen kilometres to the south-west, *Fukiji*'s late **Heian Period** main hall is the oldest surviving wooden structure in **Kyūshū** with one of the top three *Amida Buddha* halls in **Japan**. The *Konjikido* at *Chusonji*, one of the highlights of our 2012 odyssey is one of the other two.

Five kilometres south of *Fukiji*, *Maki Ōdō* has wooden images of *Amida Buddha* and other deities rescued from a fire that destroyed the original structure seven hundred years ago.

Around the same distance south again, a twenty to thirty-minute walk along a gravel path and up a steep flight of stairs takes the visitor to late **Heian Period** stone carvings on the walls of a cliff.

The *Kumano Magaibutsu* Stone Buddhas are the largest of their kind in **Japan**.

They're about five kilometres northeast of **Nakayamaga**, and those distances (around thirty kilometres from the train line to *Futagoji*) underline the logistical difficulties if visitors don't take one of the standard options.

Logistic considerations mightn't apply in the *sandwich castle town* of **Kitsuki**, with its two *samurai* districts on hills to the north and south of the commercial district in the middle.

The historic districts have been kept free of jarring contemporary elements like power lines, and *samurai* residences are open to the public.

Kitsuki Castle, a 1970 reconstruction of the 1394 original lost during the **Meiji Period**, is said to be **Japan's** smallest castle with views across the **Seto Inland Sea** and a small museum.

From there the line took us through **Ōga**, **Hiji**, **Yōkoku**, **Bungo-Toyooka**, all of which lay within the borders of Hiji, and on to **Beppu**, another noted *onsen* location and the terminus of the *Yufuin-no-mori* train that would take us to **Hakata** tomorrow.

The intermediate stations within the **Beppu** boundaries were **Kamegawa** and **Beppu Daigaku**.

Reading around after the eventual return to Australia as I attempted to make sense of where we'd been left me even more regretful about having bypassed another intriguing location.

It also underlined the oddball ingenuity of sections of the **Japanese** tourist business with *a couple of red ticks and gold stars* thrown in for good measure.

Visitors can, of course, just book themselves into a *ryokan* and take the waters.

The initial question would be which one?

Beppu, at the west end of **Beppu Bay**, has no less than eight major hot spring areas (the *Beppu Hattō*). **Beppu Onsen** is conveniently close to the station with **Kankaiji**, **Kamegawa**, **Shibaseki**, **Kannawa**, **Myoban**, **Horita** and **Hamawaki** further afield.

Each of those has a number of separate *onsen* facilities, some of which rate higher than others.

Then there are the *eight hells (jigoku)* of **Beppu**, eight locations in two clusters, places to visit rather than bathe since the waters are around 100°C, but worth enumerating to illustrate the variety of experiences on offer.

Six of them are found in **Kannawa Onsen**:

- *Umi Jigoku* (sea hell), a boiling pond of blue water.
- *Oniishibozu* (monk head) where bubbles emerging from boiling mud pools resemble the shaven heads of monks.
- *Shiraike* (white lake) with boiling, milk-like water
- *Kamado* (cooking pot) has several boiling ponds, a demon statue to allegedly do the cooking and snacks cooked or steamed by the spring waters on sale.
- *Oniyama* (monster mountain) takes advantage of high-temperature spring water to breed crocodiles. Feeding on Saturdays and Sundays at 10 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., and on Wednesday mornings. Eighty-four saurians in a hot spring environment along with *onsen*-steamed snacks and crocodile-related souvenirs.

Yama (*mountain*) moves away from big lizards into other exotic tropical creatures (hippopotamus, peacocks, flamingoes and monkeys) you would not expect to find in temperate **Japan**. And for ¥100 you can buy food for them.

The other two ate closer to the coast in **Shibaseki**:

- **Chinoike** (*blood pond*) has boiling, red water and a souvenir shop
- **Tatsumaki** (*spout hell*) has a geyser that erupts every half hour or so for somewhere between six and ten minutes, though a stone plate above the blowhole prevents it from reaching its full height.

Beppu is not just about **onsen** bathing. A fifteen-minute bus ride from the station delivers punters to **Beppu Kaihin Sunayu Ashiyu** (*Beppu marine beach sand and foot bath*), where you can don a **yukata** and have the staff bury you in sands that are hot enough to raise a decent sweat.

They manipulate the temperature by mixing hot sands from deeper down with the cooler layers on the surface. A woodblock goes under your head, a towel acts as a cushion, an umbrella keeps the sun out of your eyes, and you can push yourself out of the sand when you've had enough.

Japan has more than ten thousand **onsen** operations, but fewer than fifty **sunamushi**, or *sand baths*. Visitors to **Takegawara Spa** in **Beppu Onsen** can treat themselves to both.

Then there's the **Jigokumushi Kōbō Kannawa** (*Jigokumushi Kobo Steam Cooking Centre*).

It's on the way from the station to the **Kannawa Onsen** hells, and more or less *en route* between there and the other two, where visitors can experience **Hell Steam Cuisine** in a *cook your own* mixture of restaurant and public kitchen.

It's a *bring your own or make a selection from the range of prepared plates* operation in an alcohol-free environment where you rent a steam chamber (510 for 30 minutes and 150 for each additional ten minutes) to do the cooking.

Away from the thermal side of things, sightseeing options include **Shidaka Lake** and **Otobaru Waterfall**.

Entertainment options include **Wonder Rakutenchi** amusement park and **Umitamago Aquarium** (performing sea otters, archer fish, octopus, penguins, dolphins *et cetera*).

Uphill from the aquarium **Mount Takasaki Monkey Park** where **Japanese macaques** visit feeding stations established to entice them away from the region's fruit trees.

English language travel guides tend to skim past **Japan's** sex museums, but for anyone after details about the **Hihokan Sex Museum** (which may have closed down), your internet search engine of choice is, of course, your friend.

Then, in late July there's the **Beppu Fireworks Festival**, with the pyrotechnics set off from boats out on **Beppu Bay**. And if you're not travelling by train or driving, **Beppu's** passenger port has ferry links through the **Inland Sea** to **Ōsaka** and **Kōbe**.

Put that little lot together, and *The Astute Reader* will see where *Hughesy's red ticks and gold stars* around the *oddball ingenuity of sections of the Japanese tourist business* come from.

The ***Aquarium*** and ***Monkey Park*** lie between **Higashi-Beppu** and **Nishi-Ōita** on the ten minute run from **Beppu** to **Ōita**, which is the end of the line for **Sonic**.

We'd be changing to the **Kyūdai Main Line** to head on to **Yufuin** without doing anything resembling a look around the capital city of **Ōita Prefecture**.

It's also the prefecture's most populous city with a population around the half million mark and a significant industrial centre with factories operated by, among others, **Toshiba**, **Nippon Steel**, **Canon**, **Texas Instruments**, **Sony**, **Daihatsu Motors**, **NEC** and **Matsushita**.

Agriculturally, the region is noted for tomatoes, leeks, strawberries, scallions, ***kabosu*** limes, galingale, greenhouse tangerines, pears, saffron, dried ***shiitake*** mushrooms and **Bungo beef**.

Notable forest products include seasoned timber (particularly **Japanese cedar**) and ***madake*** bamboo, and there's an almost inevitable multiplicity of cultured and wild-caught fish and seafood.

Predictably, the prefectural name is a strong selling point with nationwide recognition.

The geothermal power output ranks #1 in **Japan** and, behind the USA's **Yellowstone National Park**, #2 in the world.

Historically, **Ōita** was known as **Funai**, the capital of **Bungo Province**.

The 8th century ***Chronicles of Bungo (Bunگونokuni-fudoki)*** describe **Emperor Keikō** visiting **Kyūshū** and describing the area as ***Okita-Kuni!*** (*Land of the Great Fields*), later abbreviated to **Ōita**.

Alternatively, due to the local terrain's complexity, ***Okita*** may be read as *many fields*, rather than *vast* or *great* areas.

Whatever the origin of the contemporary moniker during the **Sengoku Period** **Funai** was a significant port, trading with **Portugal** and **Ming Dynasty China** and ruled by the **Ōtomo** clan.

Ōtomo Sōrin (1530–1587), the group's twenty-first leader, embraced Western culture, invited **Francis Xavier** to the city to promote **Christianity** and was subsequently baptised as *Don Francisco*.

He is also credited with building the first western style hospital and putting together a **Japanese** choir.



But we were there for the railway, and **Ōita Station** is the junction of JR Kyūshū's Nippō, Kyūdai and Hohi Main Lines. The luxury *Aru Ressha* train runs a daily round trip between Ōita and Hita through the summer (April and September), then operates between Sasebo and Nagasaki in the low season.

So, with the **Sonic** leg done and dusted, we headed to the platforms devoted to services on the Kyūdai Main Line.

We arrived on the appropriate platform to find two moderately disturbing elements.

The first was an indication that the next leg was aboard a no reserved seating single carriage outfit along with queues that had already formed for both points of entry to the carriage itself.

That meant there was no alternative to joining a queue and standing up, rather than waiting somewhere where there were seats.

I was already dog-tired after a bad night and needed to pace myself, so the prospect of an hour-long ride into the hinterland standing in a crowded carriage had next to no appeal.

And, since we had large luggage, the seating and, therefore, the sightseeing options would be limited. When boarding time rolled around, we found space on a bench towards the back, opposite a family group where a little girl seemed to find large foreigners a subject of significant interest.

The rest of the neighbourhood was occupied by teenage girls who devoted the journey, according to *Madam*, whose linguistic heritage allowed her to eavesdrop, discussing the means through which relationships could be established and maintained.

Those conversations are rarely carried out at discreet levels when teenagers are concerned, and if there'd been viable photographic distractions, maybe one would be able to tune out from the neighbours' conversations.

For my part, I was trying to avoid running down the energy levels any further and had zonked straight out into semi-comatose mode.

The weight of the backpack ensured I remained reasonably close to vertical, propped up against the suitcase and its handle.

So that was the situation as we made our way up a twisting and turning track to **Yufuin**. We passed through **Furugō**, **Minami-Ōita**, **Kaku** and **Bungo-Kokubu** within the **Ōita** city limits and **Mukainoharu**, **Onigase**, **Onoya**, **Tenjinyama**, **Shōnai**, **Yunohira** and **Minami-Yufu** once we were across the border as we followed the **Ōita River** valley into **Yufu**.

Our destination, **Yufuin**, is a popular *onsen* resort town, about ten kilometres inland from **Beppu** as the crow flies or twenty-five as the road twists and turns.

The town sits in a flat river basin surrounded by mountains with the twin-peaked **Mount Yufu** (*Yufu-date*, 1584 metres) dominating the skyline.

Visitors can climb to the summit in about ninety minutes, assuming their energy reserves are much higher than *Hughesy's* were.

We alighted at the station and were immediately gobsmacked by the train that was sitting on the other side of the platform.

Our single carriage driver only service was clean and tidy, well-maintained and entirely acceptable.

But you'd hardly be awarding it more than a star or two. Two would be generous.



The luxury train that occupied the other side of the platform, [Seven Stars Cruise Train](#) provided a complete contrast. *Seven stars*, from what I could see through the windows, might have been stretching things a little,

But, in railway terms, it was definitely five stars, and when one added the pampering and service factors for those aboard you'd probably be getting close to seven.

Or at least six-and-three-quarters. Mind you, at the prices quoted on the website it would need to.

We weren't the only ones gazing at the high end of the railway spectrum, but the pause did give most of the passengers from our service time to make their way up and over the pedestrian bridge before *Hughesy* turned his attention to getting the *Coppertone Container* across to the station building.

Once I had, *Madam* turned her attention to sorting out the luggage logistics and sightseeing options at **Tourist Information**.

The first was straightforward.

Head across the road to **Yufuin Chikki**, and they will deliver your bags to any of the town's accommodation facilities for a quite reasonable ¥500 each.

And they'll pick them up again on your way out for the same relatively modest charge.

They also offer a baggage storage service for day trippers at ¥300-500 per bag, depending on size.

Given the figures quoted elsewhere for railway station coin lockers, that's pretty reasonable, and they look to do a thriving business.

So, having arranged for the luggage carrier to drop two bags at accommodation *Hughesy* was left with the backpack as we turned our attention outside into what looked suspiciously like a tourist trap.

The place was fairly obviously set up as a destination for day-trippers and weekend away types, and the main street struck me as a charmless eyesore.

Later information did nothing to dispel the notion, suggesting that most of the places along the street were owned by the same individual or group, and competition among them was actively encouraged.

Presumably, that was meant to keep costs down and profits up.

There was definitely a pushy, rather than a laid-back vibe, and on that basis, **Yufuin** compared unfavourably to most of the other *onsen* towns we've visited.

Madam had characterised it as a *girly place*, and there was certainly plenty there for the young female day tripper.

Subsequent research suggests that might have been a careful piece of niche market differentiation from a much bigger neighbour.

Beppu, according to some sources, has always been oriented towards male visitors with a red-light district and sex museum. **Yufuin**, from the onset, seems to have promoted itself as a clean and healthy destination for women and young families, with an emphasis on cultural activities, galleries, cafes, boutiques and museums.

So it's more *trendy shopping precinct* than *traditional onsen setting*, and in recent years, the town has become popular as a coach tour destination for senior citizens.

Which is fine if those sorts of things float your boat, but we don't fit into any of the targeted demographics.

On the other hand, you don't need to go too far to get away from the maddening crowd.

Away from that main street and its immediate environs, the area is predominantly rural, and the *ryokan* and hotels are spread out across the landscape rather than clustered along the main street.

You don't need to go too far out of town to find yourself in the middle of rice paddies, farm houses, upmarket *ryokan*, with the odd temple or shrine dotted across the countryside.

But we weren't quite ready to wander, and some of us weren't keen on walking too far.

First, we needed lunch, which came in the form of hot dogs with all the trimmings and a Chuck Berry soundtrack.

After that we head off, veering away from the main street, looking for a quiet location where *Hughesy* could sit and rest.

I was fading fast due to extreme fatigue, and while it was not quite high noon of the walking zombies, it wasn't too far off it

Fortunately, a mere matter of a block or two off the main drag a quiet stream presents an almost total contrast. It gave me the desired location to sit and rest while *Madam* had somewhere to snap away.





And when it was time to move on, we took our time, following walking track beside the stream until we came to a point where the stream branched.

There was a bridge across the river, and the path continued around to the left, which would get us back onto the main street if we went that way.

Across the bridge what looked like a continuation of our path should get us to **Lake Kinrinko** at the end of the town's main drag and about a kilometre and a half from the station.

It did, but the track morphed into a parking area for tour buses.



Some of the people they'd delivered into **Yufuin** may have headed into the [Kyūshū Yufuin Mingei Mura](#) (*Folk Craft Village*), or one of the nearby art galleries and museums or taken themselves off for a walk along the main street it seemed like a fair proportion were headed for the lake.

While **Kinrinko Lake** is a noted beauty spot (that's obvious from the number of *onsen*, restaurants and cafes in the neighbourhood), it's not a place that handles crowds.

Unless, of course, you're one of those masochistic souls who like having your views regularly impinged on by inconsiderate people who barge in while you're obviously taking a photo and think the back of their head will enhance your image.

So I could have included an across the lake shot of the 1930s vintage *Kamenoi Besso Ryokan* - rated one of the of the best and most expensive in the country - after two attempts I gave up the notion as a total waste of time and effort.

Madam, focussed on other details and with some fuel left in the tank, was inclined to wander but I was looking for somewhere to sit for a spell.

Unfortunately, seats that weren't part of a commercial operation were few and far between, and most were already occupied.

It took slightly longer for the crowds to get to *Madam*, but when they did we looped around the lake to a small shrine on to a semi-deserted back road.

While that eventually took us back into commercial zone, a leisurely pace meant that it was reasonably close to check in time, with the night's accommodation comfortably close.

So that was that for the time being, at least as the sightseeing department was concerned.

Once the check-in formalities had been completed, *Madam* was headed straight for the *onsen*.

With news that there were three separate bathing facilities on the premises and only two sets of guests (ourselves and a mother/daughter duo), there was never going to be any queueing.

And, assured that a spell in the waters would do wonders for the fatigued traveller, there wasn't going to be any argument from someone who really needed a rest.

Mind you, there may have been some competition over the two outdoor facilities, but we ended up in what was, arguably, the lesser, two-roomed affair.

The other one was slightly larger, and probably flashier it was a one tub affair.

Where we ended up had an inside tub that was hot enough for *Madam* and an outside one that was just right for *Hughesy*.

After a good long soak I was upstairs just after four to catch up on the sleep deficit.

That lasted until just before six, and we headed down to the pre-booked steak dinner at half-past.

The **Country Inn Fumotoya** has a French restaurant attached to the B&B premises, but the three-course meal that emerged had much in common with the standard **Japanese ryokan** banquet.

Sure, the presentation was French, but the main course, an excellent piece of beef, char-grilled and sliced, came with **Japanese condiments** and an array of seasonal produce on the side in much the same way as your more traditional repast will arrive surrounded by local delicacies and seasonal specialities.



I washed it down with a local wheat beer and took another upstairs for afters.

We were back up in the room by seven-thirty, the beer was gone by ten to eight and Mickey's big hand would have been nudging the eleven when I crashed.

Madam, in the meantime, with eyes on the *onsen*, had gone out with our hostess in search of fireflies,



**MONDAY 22
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Yufuin > Hakata > Dazaifu > Hakata

Based on yesterday's experience, one thing was obvious.

If we wanted to avoid crowds, we needed to be out and about early, before the tour buses started to arrive and overnight visitors emerged from the waters.

That meant we were back on deck just before six; up and out the door by five past in an effort to get to the best bits of the neighbourhood before the tour groups did.



The lake, with its waters warmed by the volcanic springs, gave off a delightful mist, and the experience was a significant improvement on yesterday's experience.

Magical would have been taking things a little too far; *charming* and *picturesque* don't quite do it justice;

Neither, probably, do the photos, which can't quite digitise the calm serenity of the early morning.

That, however, was always going to be short lived.

There were literally two men and an old lady beside the lake when we arrived, with no sign of the proverbial dog.

That meant plenty of room to move, and no one to intrude as you lined up your image to catch the reflection of trees and mountains on the water.

But it didn't last, and as the numbers gradually grew, for some reason, the new arrivals all felt the need to talk.



The situation reminded me of an acquaintance from the School Cricket fraternity who liked his students to be quiet and on task.

If you can't improve the silence, Granty was wont to remark to his charges, please don't break it.

And, when it happened, the transgressor would receive a *Did you improve the silence, Daniel* (or whoever)?"

Faced with an increasing influx that did absolutely nothing to improve the silence, we headed back to the accommodation for a morning session in the **onsen**, then headed down to breakfast.

That turned out to be interesting as well, and not just because of the unexpected combination of salad, **minestrone** and bread rolls.



For some inexplicable reason, my thoughts had turned to *minestrone* recently as I pondered the eating options after we return home.

The Italian staple would, I reckoned, be ideal winter lunchtime fare and counter criticisms of the *Hughesy* vegetable-light diet.

Now, here it was in front of me. For breakfast.

Check out was at ten, but we were downstairs by nine-thirty working on the principle that the carrier would need time to make sure our bags were collected before the train left just after twelve.



As it turned out, they were on the doorstep before we'd finished checking out, and the bags were probably down in the office opposite the station by the time our host finished the farewell snaps.

Once we were off the premises, we were straight into killing time mode, with crowd avoidance as a significant subsidiary theme.

The fact that we called into the shop at the **Marc Chagall Gallery** might seem to contradict that last point, but as we emerged five minutes later, it was obvious there was no point in revisiting the lake.

The tour groups were already out and about, and while they weren't quite as thick on the ground as they had been yesterday, we'd already decided we were bound for the backstreets.



The consensus worked around heading towards *Bussanji*, the temple we would probably have targeted yesterday if fatigue hadn't been a factor and making our way back into town across the countryside rather than tracking along *Tourist Trap Road*.

But when we arrived outside, scaffolding over the structure suggested it was undergoing renovations.

On that basis there seemed to be no point in investigating further, so we continued onwards, passing rice paddies and houses in a peacefully bucolic setting.

It wasn't the first time I'd picked up on the contrast between the hustle and bustle you find with any significant drawcard in **Japan** and the area immediately outside the drawcard's perimeter.

In many cases, it's just a matter of turning a corner and wandering down a street.

We'd found that at **Miyajima**, for example, and here it was again.

That's not to say there was no sign of the tourist-orientated activity.



Near the temple, we passed a horse drawn wagon seemingly devoid of occupants.

I guess it was one of the horse carriages (*tsujibasha*) that depart from **Yufuin Station** every half hour between nine in the morning and four in the afternoon on a fifty-minute circuit that takes in *Bussanji* and *Unagi-hime Jinja Shrine*.

That'll set you back ¥ 1500 (children over four years, ¥ 1000, infants travel on the parents' knees).

With the old 20/20 hindsight, it seems that, despite the scaffolding, the temple was, indeed open to visitors, but we didn't realise the significance of the carriage at the time.

In any case, I prefer my temples without tour groups, even when there's a maximum of ten in the party.



A little further on we ran across a rickshaw pulled up by the roadside, presumably, so the driver could point out some scenic point of interest.

It seems safe to assume that the driver came from **Yebisuya Rickshaw's Yufuin** branch.

Through the course of five journeys around **Japan**, I'd noticed that the rickshaws *here* looked pretty much like the rickshaws *there* but until the time of writing hadn't twigged to the existence of a busoness with branches across the country.

The local version operates from the plaza in front of **Yufuin Station** and at the parking lot at **Lake Kinrinko**, has two-seater vehicles with your driver acting as your tour guide.

Prices work in sections (one kilometre = ten minutes at ¥2000 for one, ¥3000 for two) with discounts for longer bookings (¥9000 or ¥15000 for an hour).



But, for the most part, there was no one else on the road, although the neighbourhood continued to throw in interesting little touches along the way.

While neither of us was in the market for a high-end wedding, we passed one establishment that could have covered one from *go to whoah* (or, in this case, I guess ceremony to honeymoon).

Even if it didn't offer post-reception honeymoon accommodation on the premises, there were plenty of places along the same stretch of road that would fit that particular bill.

And while I'm not sure whether the vehicle I sighted on the outskirts of downtown **Yufuin** was an actual **Goggomobile**, it was occupying about the same amount of parking space.

Tourist-oriented establishments became increasingly prevalent as we neared downtown **Yufuin** and paused for a while on the outskirts of the CBD so *Madam* could sneak off in an attempt to photograph an uncooperative heron.

That was all right with me.

There was a convenient spot to sit, and the movements of a bird that seemed to have a conscientious objection to being captured on film gave me something to look at.

From there we headed on, collected the luggage and found ourselves inside the station with an hour to fill in before a 12:09 departure.

So we filled it in with nervous fretting.

The initial concerns involved slotting the *Coppertone Container* into the limited space at the back of the carriage.

That's usually not a problem, but there was cause for significant concern since the waiting room was packed, and quite a few of those waiting had substantial luggage.

We took ourselves out of the waiting room early enough to be at the head of the queue at the barrier, before the inbound train arrived. It took a while to disgorge passengers, and then had to be cleaned.





Once they allowed passengers onto the platform, we found ourselves at the head of the queue again, but the cleaning process seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time.

In the meantime, what would have been an orderly queue in a less confined environment looked to be verging on chaotic.

There was a certain amount of restlessness, and a definite likelihood of jostling, particularly from impatient individuals who seemed to be part of a tour party.

Maybe they just wanted to get inside and sit down, but I figured they'd be looking to snaffle the luggage space on the way through.

I'd even begun to ponder using the *Coppertone Container* as an offensive weapon, should the need arise, but when boarding commenced there was a hostess on hand, and everyone behaved themselves.

Yufuin-no-mori (*Forest of Yufuin*) is another swish JR Kyūshū service, and the company is obviously on a winner.

Most services out of **Yufuin** on the day were already booked out, and the remaining spaces on the others looked to be going fast.

And while our seats were 12C and 12D in Car 5, as things panned out we weren't too far from the front of the train.

Heading in the opposite direction we wouldn't have been, but here we had a chance to see where we were going as well as what we were passing.

Aboard the train, the first leg took us through the mountains, with great views through the big picture windows, but photographic conditions weren't the best, and on a jam-packed train switching seats and/or sides was not an option.

It wasn't long before we were out of **Yufu City**.

The next station after **Yufuin**, **Noya**, is in **Kokonoe**, a small nine-*onsen* town in the mountains that boasts **Japan's** longest and highest pedestrian bridge.

By the time we'd passed through **Bungo-Nakamura**, **Hikiji** and **Era**, we were in a broad upland river valley, with plenty of flat over to my left, with substantial mountains behind.

After **Bungo-Mori** and **Kita-Yamada** we were back among them as we passed through **Sugikawachi**. Those three were part of **Kusu District**.





Amagase, **Bungo-Nakagawa** and **Bungo-Miyoshi** took us into **Hita**, where the current population of 67,000, spread over 666 square kilometres, is a far cry from the district's heyday.

Hita sits on an upland plain at the confluence of westward-flowing **Kufu**, **Takase** and **Mikuma Rivers**, in the far west of **Ōita Prefecture**, bordering **Fukuoka** and **Kumamoto Prefectures**.

We're not quite talking central **Kyūshū**, but the city certainly occupies a strategic location.

While the surrounding landscape is mountainous, and the geographic boundaries make it part of **Ōita Prefecture**, **Hita** has a closer historical connection with **Fukuoka**.

The local dialect has close links to the **Hichiku dialect**, used in **Fukuoka** and **Nagasaki**.

You don't need to go too far back to reach a point during the **Edo Period** where **Hita** was the seat of government for the whole of **Kyūshū**, under the direct control of the **Tokugawa Shōgunate**.

On that basis, it might not be surprising to learn it's another *Little Kyōto*, modelled on the **Imperial Capital** and its merchant culture, and became the centre for a money-lending practice known as *Hita-kin*.

After the **Meiji Period**, it was **Hita Prefecture** before being assimilated into **Ōita Prefecture**.



We had a minute there after 1:04 before passing through **Teruoka** and **Yoake**, where the **Mukuma** joins the **Chikugo River** on our way out of **Ōita**.

Somewhere along the line *Madam* took herself and camera for a walk along the train, or at least, as far as the **Hospitality section**.

She returned, insisting I should take a turn through the swish interior myself, and I would have done so even if she hadn't mentioned the magic word.

If our position in **Car 5** hadn't been so good, I might even have stayed down there, but the views were better when you had the frontward aspect as well.

One could, of course, have gone back and forth, running the cutter, but the beer was on tap, the cups were plastic, there were one and a half carriages between us and the distribution point, and the line didn't deliver the smooth ride you'll experience on the *shinkansen*.

So I limited myself to *the one* as I gazed out across the landscape to the south and wandered back to resume my seat.

At Chikugo-Ōishi we were into Fukuoka, where Ukiha might rate as a city but didn't warrant a stop.

After that, we crossed into Kurume, and once we hit the broad lowlands there seemed to be another smoke haze issue.

All in all, it was another day to sit back and let things wash over the onlooker while a string of stations (Tanushimaru, Chikugo-Kusano, Zendōji and Mii) on our way through a patchwork of farmland and clumps of what would have been suburbia in another setting.

Kurumedaigaku-Mae was the station for nearby Kurume University, and, by that point, we were well and truly into an urban landscape.

After Minami-Kurume and Kurume-Kōkōmae we looped under the *shinkansen* line and joined the Kagoshima Main Line.





That took us into **Kurume** itself, where the sixty-two-metre *Jibo Kannon*, Japan's sixth highest statue dominates the skyline.

It's located within the grounds of *Naritasan Temple* away to the south of **Minami-Kurume** facing away from the railway line.

But, if you've got the time and inclination it may be worth a visit,

A spiral staircase inside the concrete statue takes visitors up to a cramped viewing platform where the views across the **Chikugo Plain** are said to be good.



If you're after a similar view from an elevated vantage point that's a five-minute walk from **JR Kurume Station** and aren't inclined to pay a ¥500 entrance fee, the top of the twenty-storey city hall tower is free, but doesn't have an animatronic **Buddhist hell** in the basement.

After we left **Kurume** at 1:45, although the rail corridor we were heading along from there aligns itself with **Fukuoka Prefecture**, the next station, **Hizen-Asahi**, is inside **Tosu's** city limits within **Saga Prefecture**.

Tosu is, however, one of the major transportation hubs for all of **Kyūshū**.

The station is the junction of the **Nagasaki** and **Kagoshima Main Lines**, and regardless of administrative jurisdictions, the former post town is part of the **Fukuoka** metropolis with about 5% of the population commuting to **Fukuoka** to work or study.

Tashiro and **Yayoigaoka** also fall within the city boundary

While **Kiyama** has its own municipal administration and falls within **Saga Prefecture** (along with **Keyakidai**), at **Haruda** we were back in **Fukuoka**, in **Chikushino City**.

Not that there was any way of distinguishing where things start and finish.

Tenpaizan and **Futsukaichi** were part of **Chikushino**, but **Tofurōminami** lay in **Dazaifu**.

We could have alighted there since we had *Dazaifu Tenman-gū* on the itinerary later in the afternoon, but that would have entailed coin lockers and such.

But *Yufuin-no-mori* doesn't stop there, so the point was moot.

We continued through **Mizuki**, **Ōnojō** and **Kasuga** in **Fukuoka**'s southern suburbs, and by the time we reached **Minami-Fukuoka** we were into **Hakata** though we still had **Sasabaru** and **Takeshita** on our way into **Kyūshū**'s largest and busiest station.

We'd been there before, since the **Sanyō Shinkansen** from **Ōsaka** terminates at **Hakata**, though you probably wouldn't notice the difference if you're travelling further.

Through services on the **Sanyō** morph into **Kyūshū Shinkansen** and just keep going.

After the regulation brief stop, of course.

But on those previous occasions, heading to and from **Kagoshima** in 2012, we hadn't been stopping.



This time we were, and the itinerary had time in the rebuilt station complex pencilled in once we'd done the temple bit.

The multiplicity of location names in and around major **Japanese** conurbations tends to be confusing, as you get your prefectures, cities, wards and such jumbled.

That had been the case back in **Kokura**, where we were talking a section of the larger administrative entity (**KitaKyūshū**).

Here, **Hakata** is a ward on the eastern edge of **Fukuoka City** that happens to have much of the city's top-level government, commercial and retail infrastructure, along with **Fukuoka's** central train station, **Fukuoka Airport** and a terminal for international passenger liners.

And if you're still scratching your head, the explanation is reasonably straightforward.

We're looking at one of the oldest cities in **Japan** and a base for merchants trading with **China** and **Korea**, but as an obvious avenue into the country **Chikuzen Province**, as it was labelled attracted repeated attention from would-be invaders.

It was where **Kublai Khan** chose to land his forces when he set about invading **Japan** in 1274 and 1281, but, on both occasions, fierce resistance held the invaders off long enough for the *divine wind* of a timely typhoon to finish them off,

And so the notion of **Kamikaze** was born.

At the start of early **Edo Period**, the **Kuroda clan** arrived to take over **Chikuzen Province**, having fought on the right side at the **Battle of Sekigahara**.

They were originally from **Tōtōmi Province** (around modern **Shizuoka**) and arrived *via* **Harima Province** (present-day **Hyōgo Prefecture**), where they had been serving the **Oda** and **Toyotomi** clans.

When they arrived, **Hakata** was a compact settlement bounded by defensive walls along the **Naka River**, the **Boshu Canal**, and the **Mikasa River**.

Most of the *daimyō's samurai* vassals lived across the **Naka River** in **Fukusaki**, and the first **Kuroda daimyō** changed the renamed the area after his hometown (**Fukuoka**, near **Okayama**),

He had older castles at **Tachibana** and **Najima** dismantled, and used the materials from the demolition to build a new castle in **Fukuoka**.

And that's the way things stayed until the **Meiji Period** when **Hakata** and **Fukuoka** merged in 1878.

The new prefectural government named the new entity **Fukuoka**, despite the fact that before the merger **Hakata** had been slightly larger.



A referendum to choose between the two names in 1889 went fifty-fifty, so it stayed as **Fukuoka** while a train station under construction was badged as **Hakata**.

Administrative rearrangements in 1972 saw the current entity emerge when one of the city wards that included the former **Hakata** area was named ***Hakata-ku***.

So hopefully that's a little clearer.

On the ground in **Hakata** just after 2:15, we took our time extricating ourselves from the station, and we weren't the only ones taking the opportunity to capture snaps of the business end of ***Yufuin-no-mori***

Once we had, we took ourselves over to the hotel, which lay over on the other side of a complex array of pedestrian bridges and ground level traffic lights.

It wasn't that complicated in the end but could have been a significant delaying factor if an unwary traveller happened to choose the wrong option at a crucial juncture.

That would have been *Hughesy*, but *Madam* is hardly an unwary traveller and spots the detail on the ground in her home country better than I do.

Maybe because she can read the signs.

But the time it took us to get there also took us into that twilight zone before check-in time when they'll let you in if they're feeling sympathetic.

Which, as it turned out, they were.

So, having checked in we headed straight back across to the bus terminal for a bus out to **Dazaifu Tenman-gū** via **Fukuoka International** terminal.

At this point, I was still unclear about the **Fukuoka** and **Hakata** as separate entities thing.

All I knew was that both names applied to parts within an extensive conurbation.

An interesting variation on Australian practice distracted me from further musings on those matters.

I was surprised to find the bus fare from the bus terminal to Airport Departures was a reasonable 260.

You'll pay ¥500 to go all the way to **Dazaifu Tenman-gū**, but I guess that's what happens when your airport lies along a regular bus route rather somewhere out on the periphery where the punters don't have the privilege of making a choice and privatised infrastructure corporations can extract their fees *via* the nose.

Our destination for the afternoon lay in **Dazaifu** another urban administrative entity located within **Fukuoka Prefecture**, that's entirely separate from the eponymous city within boundaries that are almost impossible to discern.

But it is towards the edge.

[*Wikipedia*](#) will inform you that the city is *mostly mountainous*, though it *does have arable land used for paddy fields and market gardening*, and it *has been important historically* since the imperial office governing **Kyūshū** was moved from a location in modern-day **Fukuoka City** back in 663.

Officials in **Dazaifu** didn't just to supervise the affairs of **Tsukushi** (present-day **Kyūshū**).

They also hosted emissaries from **China** and **Korea** in *Kōrokan*, a special guesthouse that also served as a point of departure for outbound diplomats.

So, from the **Nara Period** through to the **Kamakura Period**, **Dazaifu** was one of the country's key military and administrative centres.

As we shall see, it also served as a place of exile for high-ranking courtiers.

But the **Mongol invasions** delivered an acceleration of **Dazaifu's** decline, which was already underway thanks to rebellions against the central government by disgruntled noblemen who didn't like being relegated to the periphery.

Fujiwara Hirotsugu rebelled in 739, and it took a force of seventeen thousand troops three months to restore imperial authority.

Fujiwara Sumitomo allied himself with pirates in 939, landed in **Kyūshū** in 941, defeated the garrison at **Dazaifu**, then sacked and pillaged the state buildings. Things were never quite the same again.

The political centre of **Kyūshū** moved to **Hakata** in the **Muromachi Period** and that was that.

The bus deposited us a couple of blocks from the target, and we made our way there along a street predictably lined with businesses offering shrine-oriented and associated spin-off merchandise.





At that point, tiredness decided to kick in big time, and half of the party was not really in a position to take things in properly. The other half may not have been much better, but at least had the background knowledge to form a reasonable appreciation.

Hughesy had the gist of things reasonably well but needed more alertness to pick up on the interesting detail in the **Shintō** shrine built over **Sugawara no Michizane's** grave.

Born in **Kyōto** in 845, **Michizane** came from a family of scholars with a long tradition of service to the Emperor.

He seems to have been something of a prodigy, composing poetry from an early age, developing a reputation as a scholar and going on to an Imperial Ministry before he fell out with the **Fujiwara** clan.

He was, apparently, too significant to be done away with altogether, so he was exiled to **Dazaifu**.

Despite hardship and misery, he remained stoic, continuing his studies undeterred until a relatively early death at the age of 59 in 903.

Along the way, he had gained a reputation as a devoted scholar, pure in heart and deed and incapable of hatred.

Strange things began to happen after his death.

While his body was being transported to the designated burial place, the ox carrying it stopped near a **Buddhist monastery** and refused to go any further.

As a result, **Michizane**'s follower, **Umasake no Yasuyuki** buried him there, and the location developed into today's shrine after subsequent developments.

The statue of the ox near the entrance commemorates the story.

Give it a good rub as you go past and you will, so the local lore suggests, be rewarded with wisdom and sagacity.

Some of us need all the wisdom we can get.





According to legend, the plum tree known as ***Tobiume*** that stands to the right of the main hall uprooted itself in **Kyōto** and flew to **Dazaifu** to be reunited with **Michizane** after his death.

It is allegedly the first plum tree to blossom in **Japan** every year.

Michizane's lifelong affection for plum trees and their blossoms is reflected throughout the temple grounds, which contain some six thousand trees representing well over one hundred and fifty different varieties.

After ***Tobiume*** kicks things off in early January each year, thousands of other trees follow, resulting in an incredible sight as the landscape around the shrine is covered in pink and white flowers.

The strange events didn't stop with flying plum trees.

Not long after **Michizane** passed away in **Dazaifu** five members of the **Fujiwara** clan died.

One of them was killed when lightning struck the family castle.



A wave of natural disasters followed.

Since the calamities were believed to have been caused by **Michizane**'s wrathful spirit raging against his unjust treatment it needed to be appeased.

As penance, **Michizane** was posthumously reinstated to his former his position and rank, deified as **Tenjin**, the deity associated with literature, education and wisdom.

The first incarnation of today's **honden**, or main shrine went up over his grave in 905.

The **Fujiwara** replaced it with a larger structure in 919, but that went up in flames during a civil war.

Today's **Momoyama-style** shrine dates from 1591 and remains, alongside **Kyōto**'s **Kitano Tenmangu** one of the main shrines dedicated to **Tenjin**.

Once you've made your way up the shop-lined approach and passed through the **torii** gate at the entrance, a path takes you across two arched bridges and islands representing the past, present and future to the walled courtyard that contains the **honden**.

And that's, basically, as far as we went, though the grounds include auxiliary and branch shrines devoted to many other deities, the **Dazaifu Tenmangu Museum**, with many of the shrine's treasures and the **Kanko Historical Museum**, which displays events from **Michizane**'s life in small dioramas.



So we made make our way to the main shrine, and headed back out, not wasting too much time on the first part of the outward leg past the shops selling education related charms that supposedly help students pass their exams or *umegae mochi*.

The latter are **grilled azuki bean cakes** stamped with a plum tree flower pattern that were, reputedly **Michizane**'s favourite snacks.

We wasted even less time when we turned the corner and found there was a bus sitting there about to go.

About twenty seconds later, two breathless passengers claimed what looked to be the last two seats.

That was just as well.

For a start, I'm not sure the regulations allow passengers to stand. Second, seated with the curtains drawn, so the forty-minute ride presented a significant opportunity to recharge the batteries.

If it hadn't, we wouldn't have got through the next bit.

Because it was shopping time, boys and girls.

Once we were off the bus we headed across to the station complex in search of an electronics store. I needed to buy a new *iPhone* holder to sit on my belt after the current one broke a belt loop back somewhere after **Nagano**.

It wasn't something I noted at the time, other than remarking that I needed a replacement.

We'll do that in Hakata was the response, back at a stage where I didn't realise just how extensive **Hakata** and environs were.

I'd half expected we'd be doing the replacement bit back in **Kōbe** but was promptly informed that the shopping options in **Hakata/Fukuoka** were more extensive.

Then, having worked out how I planned to tackle a huge writing job when we're back in **The Little House of Concrete**, I reckoned I needed a dictation headset that fits snugly on the head.

The current one had done its job fairly well, but with what looked like being a forty or fifty-thousand word narrative I want to have finished by the end of June, I wanted something that fits over the ears and, basically, stays in place the way the incumbent doesn't.

As far as the first matter was concerned, the store we landed in had an extensive range of decorative cases and such, but a limited number of options that slip onto the belt.

Eventually, I managed to find something that was almost exactly what i was looking for.

A metal loop goes on the belt, and the phone hangs off that rather than sitting flush on the belt.

Madam wasn't convinced, since the link between loop and case may be a weak point, but we'll have to wait and see.

While that was reasonably tricky, the headset proved a tad trickier.

We started by looking in the section of the store devoted to headphones.

Zilch.

When we asked, the invariably polite assistant pointed us towards the basement, where we eventually found a range of options.

Once we'd located it I was able to select something that looks like old style stereo headphones with attached microphone that looked like it will do the job.

From there off to **UNIQLO**, where *Madam* wanted to look at clothing.

After the time we'd spent on the specifics of *Hughesy's* requirements there was no avenue for complaints, but, in any case, I was a reasonably happy and reasonably refreshed camper.

That spell on the bus had worked wonders.

A further recharge awaited when we turned our attention to dinner.

Madam had selected **ramen** as the preferred option, and *Hughesy* was in no position to object.

As a pasta devotee, I like the concept of noodles although mileages might vary when it comes to their composition and what they're served up in (or with).

But that applies to pasta as well.

In any case, once we were seated, there were three basic options; two of them were **Hakata** specialities, so, in a sense, I should have gone that way, but from the time I was apprised of the third, chilli-heavy alternative, there was never any doubt/

The only question was the level of heat; ended up going for a *four on a five-point scale*; when it arrived, the bowl proved to contain one of the best hot dishes I've had in a long time.

It was, in a word, incendiary, to the point where the sweat glands and sinuses went into almost immediate overdrive but, at the same time, nicely balanced with the other elements in the broth still in evidence alongside the heat.

That's a tricky thing to balance, and this one did it very well.

I washed it down with two pitchers of beer and followed it a serve of pan-fried dumplings.

Between the two dishes, it was an excellent repast, but not heavy enough to send me off into *carpet snake mode*.

That was just as well since *Madam* hadn't finished the **UNIQLO** quest.

There was another, presumably larger outlet with a wider range somewhere in the station complex or its immediate environs, though it took a fair bit of footslogging to find it.

But, eventually, we did.

On the way back to the hotel, the almost ever-present neighbourhood convenience store was much easier to locate.

Two cans of **Yebisu Premium** helped keep the fires down below under control until I decanted myself into the cot around ten.



5

THE LAST LEG

[Hakata > ShinKōbe](#)

[Kōbe > Kansai International](#)

[Cairns > Bowen](#)



TUESDAY 23 MAY
2017

Hakata > ShinKōbe

Back to Kōbe (or Ōsaka, or Kyōto) Day invariably provides the last big *shinkansen* ride for the Rail Pass leg, which, in turn, raises an associated dilemma.

By this point on the trip, there's always a backlog of **Travelogue** material, so the temptation is always there; sit down and tap out the details while they're fresh in the mind.

Or worry about that a little further down the track?

The almost inevitable result is a compromise, and that's the way it panned out here.

Directing the downward leg through **Matsue** rather than along a corridor we'd passed twice already helped determine the outcome.

By the time we'd passed **ShinYamaguchi**, I'd just about had enough of the typing caper and sent the *MacBook* to sleep, sitting back and letting the landscape flow past, while the *iPad* shuffled through *Hughesy's Top 5000* and I mused on matters relating to landscapes

Or, more specifically, the intersection between *shinkansen* lines, landscape, and human activity.

Now, it should be fairly obvious that your common or garden railway line, built to a budget, is going to follow the path of least resistance.

That's what makes many local lines much better scenic options than the *shinkansen* routes, which tend to follow the closest possible thing to a beeline between two points.

Local lines can ramble, twist and turn, linking places that might not be along the most convenient track and, in many cases, following the course of a river.

That's where you get the scenic options.

Shinkansen lines, on the other hand, tend to cut across rivers and through obstacles. In areas where you might get a view if you were willing to work at right angles to the beeline, you get tunnels instead, but even tunnels have their momentary points of visual interest.

Those come at the points where the train emerges, even briefly, into the open, and they're usually delightful little vignettes that are hard to capture on camera.

There's no warning that they're about to appear, and, at these speeds, limited time to react.

But they make for rather enjoyable eye candy.

After we had alighted at **ShinKōbe**, *Madam* headed for the facilities, leaving *Hughesy* to watch the passing parade

Much of it consisted of Junior high school students who had obviously been on an excursion to somewhere significant quantities of red cordial were dispensed.

There was a great wing of 'em, all in uniform, but seemingly without adult supervision.

There were more on the subway platform as we started moving towards **Sannomiya**, two of them in sufficiently high spirits to attract a rebuke from *Madam*, delivered in what certainly sounded like a vehement **Kansai** dialect;

Off the subway, we headed for the bus terminal at **Sannomiya**, where we would eventually be catching the shuttle bus to the **Meriken Park Oriental**.

It was, however, too early to book in, so I was left in the waiting room reading Scottish crime fiction while *Madam* headed off to do some of the shopping that usually gets carried out on the last day.

This time around we had allocated the last day to a rendezvous with *The Sister* and *The Rowdy Niece*, so the shopping had to be slotted in a day earlier.

It made absolutely no difference whatsoever to me since, whenever it happened, I was going to be left sitting down and reading to kill time.

Madam returned just in time to miss the three o'clock shuttle bus, but there's one every twenty minutes until well into the night time, so we settled down to wait.

From there, things flowed smoothly. By four o'clock we were hunkered down in room 728, ready for a spell to recharge the batteries although there were administrative tasks that needed to be done first.

Hughesy had the predictable mountains of email to sift through as well as a couple of digital jobs I could undertake now that we found ourselves in a location with a secure Wi-Fi connection.





At least, what assumes it was secure since we logged into a server that was room-specific and required a nine or ten-digit password.

For her part, *Madam* investigated various options for dinner in and around **Sannomiya** and **Monomachi**.

Once those matters been dealt with it was time for the old *nana nap*;

It was well after six when we both surfaced and proceeded to get our things together before the next shuttle bus back into downtown **Kōbe**.

That one, as it turned out, was fully booked.

Faced with a wait until 7:10 when the next shuttle would arrive, we sat down to consider our options.

Fortunately, there were a number of them just across the water in the **Mosaic** complex.

We'd eaten there before, but the complex had slipped under *Madam's* guard this time around.

Admittedly, it was a bit of a walk, but we were in for one of those anyway wherever we headed. We shared the walk with numbers of **Chinese** who may or may not have been in an organised tour party.

If they were, the organisation was minimal.

There was no sign of anything resembling a tour guide on the way across, or maybe they had all gone on ahead, leaving their charges to dawdle across in their own sweet time.

It certainly seemed like no one apart from *Hughesy* was in anything resembling a hurry.

And that's not suggesting there was anything approaching urgency. I moseyed, some of them dawdled and many of them stopped for the odd snap or three.

Mosaic offers plenty of options, but it didn't take much more than a cursory glance and a single remark to deliver *Hughesy* his preferred option.

The only question was whether there would be anything on the **Oyster Bar** menu for *Madam*, and, since it was only just over there, investigating the possibilities was a straight forward task that produced immediate results.

Madam wasn't hungry, so an entree size portion of crumbed oysters and a glass of **Prosecco** would do her to a T.

Three oysters natural, a plate of pasta with the requisite shellfish quota and a glass of white did me *very nicely, thank you*.





And the views weren't too shabby either.

And with dinner done, we turned our attention once more to **UNIQLO**.

There was another outlet in the retail two-thirds of the **Mosaic** complex, where *Madam* managed to track down one of the items she was chasing.

After that, we could, in turn, turn our attention towards the regular search for a convenience store. There's almost always one in the vicinity, but this one took a little finding.

Once it had been found, it yielded the almost regulation two cans of **Yebisu Premium** that provided the nightly nightcap.



**WEDNESDAY 24
MAY 2017**

Kōbe > Kansai International

Airport Day saw *Hughesy* surface very briefly just before 6:30. An hour later I was fully awake and into **Travelogue** mode on a day that needs to be negotiated carefully.

For a start, there was no chance of a nap through the day before a nine o'clock flight, seven and a half hours in the air and an early arrival in **Cairns**.

In those circumstances, the almost invariable plan is to top up the batteries as far as possible and then run them down enough to zonk yourself out once airborne while still having enough in reserve to get all the way home, if possible, on Thursday.

The room was in darkness as I tapped away with breakfast at least an hour away, engaged in the retrospective filling in of details of the past two days in a narrative that managed to reach the point when we arrived in **Hakata**

But, just after nine-fifteen, that was as far as it got.

Having slept in, with an 11:30 rendezvous with *The Sister* and *The Rowdy Niece*, we needed to attack the **Breakfast Viking** before it shut up shop at ten.

It had been a while between drinks as far as *Hughesy* and the venue that provided my introduction to the **Breakfast Viking** were concerned, and I was interested to note that it looked like the facility was slightly larger than it had been last time we were in the vicinity.

That may or may not have been the case, but I was reasonably sure that the **Chinese** selection, with its tasty selection of *yum cha* items, hadn't been there last time.

I'm a sucker for dumplings, particularly those little soup filled pillows that **Din Tai Fung** does so well, and I'm sure I would have noticed if had they had been there on our previous visit.

As it was, I took myself to the western section, diverted into *yum cha* territory, polished off that little lost and headed across for a freshly made omelette.

After that, it was time for coffee and *croissants*, having taken on board enough sustenance to keep me going until we arrived at the airport sometime around six-thirty for our nine o'clock flight.



There were in the process of clearing up the Viking when we left around 10:15, heading upstairs to finish packing for an eleven o'clock checkout.

Things moved at a leisurely pace until we realised *Madam's* yellow watch was running around ten minutes late. That put some recent incongruities into perspective and ensured we didn't muck around exiting the room.

The next bit was operating on a relatively tight schedule, based around the 11:10 shuttle, an 11:30 rendezvous and the inevitable subway excursion to **Myodani**.

Once we arrived there, I was slated to entertain *Rowdy*, and possibly her mother, while *Madam* did the rounds and stocked up on various **Japanese comestibles** that don't appear on Australian supermarket shelves.

Or, at least, not on Bowen supermarket shelves.

I am reliably informed that the situation has improved markedly in more cosmopolitan centres, and it seems that flying back to the Gold Coast could well do away with this little exercise in stocking up.

Or maybe not.

You can never tell with availabilities.

As it turned out we were slightly early for the shuttle, though there were only a couple of seats left to claim in the **Meriken Park Oriental's** allocation of seats on board the bus.

And, having avoided the need to shell out for a taxi fare (it wouldn't have done to leave a *Rowdy Niece* and her mother waiting another twenty minutes) we hopped off the shuttle around a hundred metres from the rendezvous almost right on time.

Over the previous few weeks, the prospect of what I had been describing as *Rowdy's Ordeal* had provided a source of considerable amusement, and the subway journey provided an opportunity to add a few more vocabulary items to the third-year language student's repertoire.

Her act in seating herself on the other side of the quartet once we boarded the carriage, with the other female members of the party between her and her *Mad Uncle* was fairly described as *cunning*, with *like a fox* appended it to the descriptor.

I was tempted, for a moment, to offer *dumb like a fox* as an additional enrichment of a limited vocabulary, but decided against it on the grounds the references to individuals from the 1980s AFL would require more explanation and risk greater in comprehension than they were worth.

Dumb like a fox was, if I recall correctly, the title of the presumably ghost-written autobiography of one Mark 'Jacko' Jackson.

Not that I've read the work in question, but the wordplay in the title caught my eye at the time.

Once we're delighted at **Myodani**, we made our way into the shopping complex beside the station, where *Madam* left the other female members of the party with me while she made her initial foray around the shelves.

That took a good quarter of an hour, but her return was followed by another disappearance, this time with *The Sister* in tow, leaving her niece to suffer as *Hughesy* struggled to come up with suitable conversational topics.

That was pretty much how things panned out over the next few hours, with *Rowdy* relegated to the tender mercies of *Hughesy's* unconventional conversations, though we did manage to find a certain amount of comprehensible common ground, particularly when it came to countries to put on the traveller's bucket list.

Italy, it seemed, had been impressive, and **Finland** was possibly slated as her next destination, largely because of the *Aurora Borealis*.

Suggestions that the *Southern Aurora* would be visible from Tasmania weren't entirely welcome, however. Tasmania, it seemed, was slightly too close to *Mad Uncle* territory.

I had, however, landed a good one when I explained the *Mad Uncle* bit in some detail, along with references to **P.G. Wodehouse** that brought an intriguing realisation as I outlined the notion behind the title of **Aunts Aren't Gentlemen**.

Wodehouse aficionados will, of course, be familiar with **Bertie Wooster's** formidable **Aunt Agatha**, *the one who wears barbed wire next to the skin*.

The next few hours delivered opportunities to remark on *Evil Aunts* who leave *Poor Suffering Rowdy Nieces* to deal with *Mad Uncles*.

It all, along with the odd can of **Yebisu Premium**, helped pass the time up to the scheduled 4:40 departure quite pleasantly.

We ticked off each chronological milestone along the way at around thirty-minute intervals, and with half an hour to go, we added a new phrase to *Rowdy's* vocabulary of **Australian English idioms**.

Time flies when you're having fun.

The exposition associated with the phrase included the possibility of using it to label a less than enjoyable experience.

Still, I'd like to think that the preceding five hours hadn't been an overwhelmingly agonising experience.

I enjoyed it, anyway.

It was around four-thirty when I suggested it might be a good idea to keep the eyes peeled for the airport shuttle taxi, which had been known to be running ahead of schedule.

Five minutes later, there it was, prompting a hasty departure as it sat at the kerbside blocking the passage of a much larger bus.

It's just over an hour from **Myodani** to **Kansai International**, with the first stretch running through the hillsides behind **Kōbe**, and it might have been nice to take the opportunity to grab a slice of shut eye.

But there were a variety of reasons that ensured that wasn't to be.

Slotted into a seat behind me, *Madam* might have drifted off from time to time, but as far as *Hughesy* was concerned, nodding off was not a viable option.

For a start, the whole *Entertain Rowdy* exercise meant there was still a fair bit of adrenaline flowing through the veins, along with the component you expect at the beginning of a journey, even if the trip itself is the final stage of a two-and-a-half-week odyssey.

Then there's the stop-start exercise that takes you through downtown **Kōbe**.

Up in the hills, it's mostly freeway, with occasional deceleration to pass the toll gates, but before too long we were back in **Sannomiya**, dealing with traffic lights and changing lanes when circumstances encouraged the driver to change his line of approach.

Eventually, of course, we were back on the freeway, passing slower vehicles in an environment that might have encouraged some of us to nod off if we hadn't been wide awake.

But we solved one minor issue.

Madam has vociferously denied identifying a castle structure near **Kansai International** as **Ōsaka Castle**, but *Hughesy* has clear recollections of a lit-up structure on the way into **Kōbe** back in 2008.

This time around, *Madam* spotted a castle round about where we must have been nine years before.

Hughesy's subsequent research suggests it was the reconstructed **Kishiwada Castle**, a.k.a. **Chikiri-jo**, which dates back to 1597, went up in flames after a lightning strike in 1827 and was rebuilt as a three-storey structure in 1954.

The original version had five storeys, but its twentieth-century reincarnation now serves as a folk museum. Further details can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

It wasn't long after the sighting when we made the ninety-degree turn onto the 3.76-kilometre bridge that takes you out to the artificial island in **Ōsaka Bay**, thirty-eight kilometres south-west of downtown **Ōsaka** that took over as the city's international gateway back in September 1994.

The former **Ōsaka International Airport**, which is much closer to the city now handles domestic flights.

The new airport was one of a number of developments that aimed to revitalise **Ōsaka** and regain some of the economic and cultural ground lost to **Tōkyō** over the previous century.

It was originally slated to be built near **Kōbe**, but the city's authorities rejected the suggestion, so the site was moved to a more southerly location where it could operate twenty-four hours a day.

Work on the four by two and a half kilometre artificial island started in 1987, involved some ten thousand workers, required nearly two hundred million cubic metres of fill and ended up costing close to twenty billion US dollars, making it the most expensive civil works project in recent history.

When the work was finished, it had expanded **Ōsaka Prefecture's** land surface by just enough to move it past Kagawa, which became the country's smallest prefecture as far as its terrestrial footprint was concerned.

The operational statistics ([here](#)) are equally impressive, as is the fact that the terminal survived the **Kōbe** earthquake on 17 January 1995.

Although the quake's epicentre was a mere twenty kilometres away, everything, including the massive glass windows, remained more or less intact. No wonder the **American Society of Civil Engineers** rated the airport one of ten **Civil Engineering Monuments of the Millennium** in 2001.

But it hasn't all been plain sailing.

The original plans anticipated the artificial island would sink by just under six metres as its weight compressed the silt on the seabed below it, but by 1999 it had gone down more than eight and was attracting widespread criticism as a geotechnical engineering disaster.

The current rate of sinking is supposedly down to around seven centimetres a year.

The airport is also deeply in debt, losing massive amounts of money every year and requiring massive government subsidies to stay afloat financially.

But there was no sign of any of that as the driver deposited us at **Departures**.

Despite the fact that **KIX** handled just under 120,000 international flights and something like seventeen and a quarter million passengers in 2015 I've always found it a relatively low-key operation.

Admittedly, there was the regulation queue in front of the **JetStar** counters once we were inside, but once we'd been there, done that and pocketed the boarding passes things remained more or less the way we've found them every other time.

Downstairs in the food hall, population densities were low, and in the Italian operation where I ordered a ***bolognese ragu*** with spaghetti and a glass of red, the only waitress on duty seemed to spend most of her time chatting with whoever was lurking in the kitchen.

The kitchen staff weren't exactly rushed off their feet either,.

The same seemed to apply to most of the eateries I passed.

Madam, predictably, opted for sushi, and once we'd rendezvoused a brief stop at the *crafty gift outlet* was followed by the customary exit procedures when you're on your way out of the country,

The departure lounge at **Gate 27** had the regulation thin spread of population when we arrived and didn't fill up too much until just before boarding.

When it did, the throng was processed reasonably smoothly.

By the scheduled nine o'clock departure we were comfortably tucked away on board, and though we were slightly late into the air, there weren't any untoward delays.

At that point we can probably draw a curtain over the narrative, noting that the flight crew took their time handing out the paperwork that would get us into Australia.

It must have been around ten when blinkers went over the eyes, and the blanket went under the chin.

Not that either of us was inclined to check on that relatively minor detail.



THURSDAY 25
MAY 2017

Cairns > Bowen

A couple of things were obvious as I began to surface around three o'clock in the morning.

The first was that though I was just emerging from a reasonably deep and seemingly dreamless slumber, a mere five hours or so would not be enough.

The second was that *Madam*, in the seat next door, was still, apparently either out to it or pretending to be.

Either way, she was solidly in *Do Not Disturb* mode.

Thirdly, when I glanced at the screen in front of me, it looked like we were somewhere around **Port Moresby**.

Maybe not quite *over PNG's* capital, since it's hard to get an exact handle on the finer details, but *somewhere in the vicinity*.

And I had a fair idea what that meant.

We were around the point where we'd be tucking into a late lunch if we were headed in the opposite direction later in the day.

That meant we were just under two hours out of **Cairns**, and that people who were slated to receive something approximating breakfast would be getting it reasonably soon.

Having figured that out, while more sleep was desirable, various issues associated with the descent into **Cairns** rendered it highly unlikely.

Finally, *Madam* was in *Do Not Disturb* mode, so reading or any other activity was out of the question.

As a result, the eye mask went back on, and *Hughesy* drifted in and out of consciousness for the next while, up to the point where it was evident that drifting out was no longer a possibility.

On the left side of the aircraft, right over the wing, with the predawn gloom draped over everything in sight, there was nothing to look at until we were almost on the ground and the lights of **Cairns'** northern beaches indicated a landing was imminent.

We were on *terra firma* around five to five and disembarked shortly after that.

Inquiries revealed *Madam* had, in fact, slept reasonably well, but the duration had been sub-optimal.

That had implications for later in proceedings, so we took our time getting off the aircraft.

Once we were out of the airport, we wouldn't be going very far in a hurry, so it made no sense to hurry off the aircraft.

In any case, previous experience suggested the automated passport procedures didn't like either passport, so we were going to end up in a queue.

After that, I suspected the passage through **Customs** would bring a would you mind stepping over this way?

With every possibility that we would be opening bags that needed inspecting, I reckoned we'd be lucky to get out of **Arrivals** much before six-fifteen.

With subsequent delays involved with picking up the car and refuelling, it would be getting close to seven before we started refining the day's game plan.

You could have knocked me over with a feather when a relatively uncomplicated passage through the procedures saw us outside just before six, and a quick call to **Betta Airport Parking** revealed the shuttle bus was right outside the terminal.

Throw all those factors together, and you have us on the way out of a **Caltex servo** calling the *Ex-Cat Feeder* around six-thirty.

As it turned out, she was (just) up and about, so *Madam* had somewhere to lie down and (hopefully) grab a long enough power nap to get us on the road and a fair way along the five hundred and thirty-five-kilometre road trip later in the morning.

For my part, I figured I might as well sit down with a coffee and chat for a while.

That way I wasn't getting in *The Driver's* way, and she could take her time about making up her mind.

She was back on deck around eight-thirty, making noises about hitting the road, and *Hughesy*, predictably, wasn't going to demur.

But we didn't last that long.

Hunger pangs forced a detour into **Babinda**, where the bakery yielded breakfast, and **The Boulders** seemed like a decent location to catch a bit more shut-eye.

We headed back onto the highway just after ten, made a comfort stop at **Cardwell** and were looking at the options for another rest stop once we'd made our way through **Ingham**.

The choices in that department, however, seemed to be rather thin on the ground.

There were roadworks on the way out of **Ingham**, and the rest area at **Francis Creek** was closed.

It was either undergoing renovations or had been turned into a depot for the roadworks, but, either way, it was out of the equation and, as far as *Madam* was concerned, on the wrong side of the road.

So, for that matter, was the only other rest area we knew of to the north of **Townsville**.

That was at **Bluewater**, but if that was the only option, that would be where we were heading.

But things changed.

Substantially.

For the better.

We were almost at the scene of the 2013 accident when a sign indicated another rest area on *Madam's* preferred side of the highway.

That couldn't be **Bluewater**, which was a fair bit further down the track than the signage indicated.

As far as I could figure out, the sign was pointing us towards somewhere around **Rollingstone**, but I wasn't sure where.

But we found out soon enough.

Another sign took us off the highway, and subsequent navigational aids took us to an **RV-friendly rest area** tucked away near the creek, just on the other side of a place that looked to be the cheap petrol outlet advertised on the highway.

We'd been unable to locate that one on three previous attempts, and it was fairly obvious why.

You didn't need a compass and a cut lunch, but it was well off the beaten track.

It would, on the other hand, have probably done fairly well with owners of **Recreational Vehicles** fuelling up after a stay at what looked to be a very comfortable, well-shaded rest area, popular with the freedom campers and an ideal spot for *The Driver* to recharge her batteries.

And it's one to tuck away in the memory bank for next time.

Forty minutes or so on the ground there was enough to take us through **Townsville** and the shortcut that bypasses Ayr.

And although we were required to make the regulation comfort stop at **Home Hill**, where the **Freedom Campers** weren't quite as thick on the ground as *Hughesy* had anticipated, when we were down around **Inkerman**, *Madam* was making noises regarding *fish and chips for dinner*.

That was a definite plus as far as *The Passenger* was concerned.

The alternative would have had him doing something along the lines of tuna pasta when olives and garlic would have been thin on the ground and chilli was not an option.

We were pulling in to the driveway at **The Little House of Concrete** just before six, and off to the fish and chippery around thirty minutes later, around the time *Hughesy* would have been putting the pasta pot on the stove.

So, all in all, the dinner option was a much better time and motion option.

Fitted in better with a somewhat less than grunted *Lik Lik*, too, though *Ninja* staged a one-cat protest after an unwanted ordeal, staying out of sight until the next morning.

And that, folks, was **Japan 2017**.