




OVER THE HORIZON: ON THE ROAD IN JAPAN

IAN HUGHES



JAPAN 2008: THE INTRO

Here's where we begin debunking the notion that *Hughesy* is, or was, travel-averse.

I'm not suggesting there wasn't apprehension.

Looking at a couple of weeks in an environment with no prospect of immediate escape if you don't like what's going down you're bound to feel uneasy, but from the moment we touched down at *KIX* I had a great time.

I would head back quite happily at any opportunity, despite the possibility of earthquakes, *tsunamis* and aftershocks.



THE ITINERARY

Tuesday 1 April: ***Bowen > Townsville***

Wednesday 2 April: ***Townsville > Cairns***

Thursday, 3 April ***Cairns > Kansai International > Kōbe***

Friday 4 April: ***Kōbe > Osaka > Kōbe***

Saturday 5 April: ***Kōbe > Himeji > Kōbe***

Sunday 6 April: ***Kōbe > Kyoto > Kōbe***

Monday 7 April: ***Kōbe > Kyoto > Kanazawa***

Tuesday 8 April: ***Kanazawa > Toyama > Takayama***

Wednesday 9 April: ***Takayama > Nagoya***

Thursday 10 April: ***Nagoya > Hakone***

Friday 11 April: ***Hakone > Tokyo > Kitakami***

Saturday 12 April: ***Kitakami***

Sunday 13 April: ***Kitakami > Tokyo > Kōbe***

Monday 14 April: ***Kōbe***

Tuesday 15 April: ***Kōbe > Kyoto***

Wednesday 16 April: ***Kyoto > Nara***

Thursday 17 April: ***Nara > Kōbe***

Friday 18 April: ***Kōbe > Kansai International***

Saturday 19 April: ***Brisbane > Gold Coast***



BOWEN > TOWNSVILLE > CAIRNS

Tuesday, 1 April 2008

Heading out of downtown **Bowen** just after lunchtime, the journey to **Townsville** passed uneventfully, accompanied by selections from the *Latin* playlist on the *iPod*.

Once we'd booked into the **Aitkenvale Motel**, it was time to head off to the **Lolly Shop** for a couple of **Campbell's Rutherglen Tokay** to use as gifts in **Japan**. We also needed a couple of bottles to accompany dinner at **The Golfer's** bijou establishment (a **Campbell's Bobbie Burns Shiraz** and a **McWilliams' Mount Pleasant Phillip**).

Arriving at **The Golfer's** residence, we settled back and feasted in not-quite-baronial style with our genial host, the **Dalby Doyle** and **Miss Behaviour** - roast lamb with the usual trimmings and the obligatory mint sauce.

From the time we arrived on the doorstep until the **Muscat** went into circulation several hours later, the conversation covered a predictably wide range of topics from primary school cricket to

overseas travel via excursions into the cooking techniques of celebrity chefs and other arcane ephemera.

Periodic telephonic interruptions allowed the *Doylamo* to dispense culinary tips regarding the correct ingredients for a successful batch of scones to serve at the morning tea break for the monthly board meeting of a leading *Australian cultural organization*.

As usual, where the *Doylamo* is concerned, as soon as you think you've heard him expound on every conceivable subject from his considerable range of expertise he pulls another rabbit out of the hat.

No kidding. *Doylie's* baking tips. Wonders will never cease.

The *Bobbie Burns Shiraz* was acclaimed as the wine of the night though the consensus was that the *Mount Pleasant Phillip* was not too shabby either.

A phone call the next morning to organize a transfer from the motel to *Townsville Airport* attracted background interjections of *Hope the ninjas get ya!*

And since you're reading this, it should be obvious that the *Doylamo's* desires remained essentially unfulfilled.

Wednesday, 2 April 2008

Once we'd alighted from *The Golfer's* Taxi and checked in at the *Townsville Terminal*, there was the usual delay while we awaited the *boarding call* for *QantasLink Flight 2300*.

Having avoided weighing myself down while packing (supervised by someone who ensured there was no risk of incurring excess baggage charges) my suggestion that I was going to wander across to the newsagent's stand induced a momentary look of concern.

After all, *Someone* knows from bitter experience the drastic consequences that tend to follow letting *Hughesy* loose in a book shop.

In a magnificent display of self-restraint, I managed to spend a whole ten minutes in the area without spending a red cent. This amazing development occurred despite the presence of the *April* edition of *The Monthly*, which I thought might be interesting reading on the Flight Over, a new *Peter Corris Cliff Hardy* novel and various *Detective Inspector Rebus* yarns that needed to find a niche on *Hughesy's* bookshelves.

As I explained when I had finished browsing and returned to where *The Supervisor* sat, I'd packed a book to re-read while we were away. *Joe Boyd's* *White Bicycles* would also provide me with something to write about while we're in transit on the *Shinkansen* (assuming there's nothing interesting in the scenic department outside).

A *Cliff Hardy, Rebus, Inspector Montalbano* or *Aurelio Zen* is something I'm likely to knock over in twenty-four hours or so and I'd then have to lug the thing around.

While I was tempted to buy something else to read it was better to stick with the *Boyd* and meditation on the musical matters he discusses.

There's also the matter of a significant addition to *Brownie points* resulting from the aforementioned display of self-restraint.

There was still plenty of time that needed killing, so I wandered over to the coffee shop to check out the brunch options.

We were likely to get a sandwich or something on the flight, but something concrete in the craw was preferable to the vague possibilities associated with or something.

In the event, or something was an apple.

Call me a *Philistine* if you will, but I've never really been a coffee shop *aficionado*.

One cup of Industrial Strength Moccona in the morning keeps me going all day, thank you very much.

While I have been known to opt for the *Coffee Club Big Breakfast*, I don't usually pay much attention to what's on offer at the coffee shop. A couple of beers and a pizza has, up to the present, been the preferred option.

This time, however, it was too early for a strong drink, the pizza option was on the other side of security, and I went to investigate what was on offer at **Aromas** without expecting anything much.

The sight of a couple of interesting variations on the standard meat pie (*Chicken & Leek* and *Madras Beef Curry* were two that attracted my attention) prompted me to place an order.

'**Er Indoors** joined me for an orange juice and sampled a small portion of the Chicken & Leek variety, which I'd pronounced *good*, and she considered *not too bad*.

Having sighted the beer options available at the same venue, it looks like *Bye Bye Eagle Boys*.

And not before time.

And since **Madam** has pronounced the Chicken & Leek acceptable, maybe next time I can try the spicier option.

The 45-minute flight from passed without any excitement whatsoever apart from **Madam's** sighting of *Palm Island*, which she identified by the presence of an airstrip, and *Orpheus Island*, an upmarket tourist destination that had featured from time to time on TV.

By the time we were level with *Hinchinbrook Island* the aircraft was passing through fairly dense cloud, and once we were above that further sight-seeing became an academic issue.

We'd opted to overnight in **Cairns** rather than an early transfer from **Townsville** the next morning, and our overnight accommodation at *Queens Court* was close enough to walk downtown for afternoon shopping, stroll back to the room for a rest and then set off again towards the Esplanade for dinner.

We've enjoyed eating at *Villa Romana* in **Melbourne's Lygon Street** and on our last visit I'd spotted a reference to a *Cairns branch of the operation*, so the venue for dinner was a no-brainer, particularly when the prospect of *Spaghetti alla Scoglio* loomed on the horizon.

We arrived shortly after five-thirty, half way through the *20% off food only* window. From the menu, we opted for a loaf of bread with roast garlic, pesto and olive oil as an opener, the *Scoglio* as a shared main and were able to go as far as squeezing in a *risotto* to fill in any remaining gaps in the gullet.

We washed the meal down with glasses of **Nugan Estate King Valley Pinot Grigio** and **Wirra Wirra Sauvignon Blanc** which hit the spot nicely.

A brief stroll back to Queens Court got us there just in time for the seven o'clock news and an hour later we were pushing up Z's in anticipation of our overseas odyssey.



CAIRNS > KOBE

Thursday, 3 April 2008

Six o'clock saw us surging into action, and by half-past we were showered, shaved (at least I was) but not shampooed and ready for the Continental breakfast downstairs.

It's hardly a scientific approach, but checking the levels of the spreads available for the morning toast revealed a preference for orange marmalade with, believe it or not, [Vegemite](#) sneaking into second place ahead of strawberry jam.

Peanut butter finished a distant (and, in my humble opinion quite understandable) last.

A survey of adjacent tables showed a similar level of depletion in the stocks of ***Vegemite***, scotching any suspicions that the table we were occupying had already attracted an unusual number of ***Australian chauvinists*** eager to indulge in leftover brewers' yeast.

This posed an interesting question to ponder while waiting for a ***boarding call*** for the flight to ***Japan***.

I assumed supplies started at around the same level when the bistro opened for breakfast.

Presumably, the sole employee in sight filled the receptacles to the top each morning as part of her duties. I couldn't see that there was all that much she would need to do apart from that.

I felt that it was also fairly safe to assume that there wouldn't have been too many dinkum Aussies in the crowd that had passed through the breakfast area before us.

More than likely, the previous clients would have been backpackers or tourists grabbing a bite to eat before heading off on a day tour of the Daintree or a white-water rafting expedition in the mountains between *Cairns* and *Tully*.

Anyone partaking in these pastimes might be looking at *maximising their Australian experience*, but observations of overseas reactions to *Vegemite* suggests that, for most foreign visitors, once is more than enough.

So what happened to all the *Vegemite*?

I had visions of overseas visitors surreptitiously sneaking sachets of the substance into their pockets, intending to smuggle them back home as evidence of the *Australian lack of sophisticated taste*.

And, Muriel, can you imagine? They spread THIS on their morning toast! What strange people...

It gave me something to ponder while we were waiting.

By seven-thirty, we were on our way to *the airport* and *Hughesy's* first encounter with the vagaries of international travel.

Arriving at the *International Terminal*, I was mildly bemused by the lack of activity.

A few people were being checked in, a tour guide was marshalling a group of *Japanese tourists* outside the *check-in area*, and there were a couple of terminals occupied by staff waiting for the arrival of customers.

No waiting, no delay.

'Er Indoors, being quite the experienced traveller, must have been looking forward with considerable amusement to watching the fun as *Hughesy* tackled the various administrative procedures before embarkation.

That was more than likely her motivation for allowing me to hand over my passport first.

And everything went smoothly.

Once the *Japanese passport* came into play, matters became somewhat more complicated.

Our operator required assistance, first from the terminal next door, and then a supervisor appeared on the scene, followed by further assistance from higher up the echelon.

In the end it was, we gathered, some minor glitch or typographical error - a zero entered as letter O or some such.

Several years ago I took great joy in describing my version of what happened when a lone traveller on her way back to *Japan* left an unattended bag in the midst of a *Japanese tour group* while she made use of the conveniences. She returned to find the group had moved on, and an unattended bag was the subject of serious scrutiny from the security staff.

However we've been warned about the inadvisability of joking about security issues in areas like *check-in counters*, so I was forced to give the flick pass to such potential rib-ticklers as *That's funny. It should have worked. Surely the ink's dry by now.*

Once we were passed that little hurdle, it was a case of up the stairs, round the corner and through Immigration where my previously pristine passport received its first exit stamp.

There was still ninety minutes to kill before boarding, and the area was almost totally deserted when we walked through Security and *'Er Indoors* once again attracted the attention of the guy with the little wand that scans you for traces of explosives.

Over the last dozen times, when we've passed through a security set-up I've walked straight past the individual in question while the strike rate where *'Er Indoors* is concerned is something like 50%.

Lack of crowds meant that we were the only customers in sight when we walked into the duty-free store, making a predictable beeline for the wine department.

It wasn't as if we were necessarily looking to buy anything. There were three bottles of *Rutherglen Tokay* tucked away as presents, and I didn't fancy the prospect of lugging extra weight around as we made our way around the *Land of the Rising Sun*.

On the other hand, I thought it would be interesting to see what was on offer.

While I suspected *the usual Aussie wine icons* would feature prominently, I suspected that we might encounter a couple of items that you wouldn't normally be able to find at your local liquor outlet.

When we visit the *Lolly Shop*, we are usually looking to restock the wine rack with value for money wines, and when we do venture into the quality section, we tend to head towards areas where we'll find something from a winery we've visited.

I have no idea if *Jacob's Creek Steingarten Riesling* is widely available or if it's a label that has somehow managed to slip past without attracting my attention.

The **Steingarten** vineyard was something I remembered reading about back in the mid-seventies when I was just starting to get interested in wine, Steingarten being a relatively high-altitude vineyard with a gravelly soil (**Steingarten** translates as *stone garden*) which had been developed and planted to produce something approaching a German-style Riesling.

Interesting, I thought, and proceeded with further investigations.

Since the first night in **Kōbe**'s accommodation was a 4.5-star establishment with water views, I started to think perhaps a nice bottle of red might be a suitable way of celebrating our arrival as we looked out over **Kōbe**'s harbour.

A bottle of **Steingarten** in the backpack wouldn't be that much extra weight.

I'd run across references to **Heathcote** as one of the emerging wine regions in Victoria but hadn't (as far as I can recall, and **Hughesy**'s memory can be a most unreliable conveyance) tasted anything from there. I selected a **Brown Brothers Heathcote Shiraz**.

From the *Limited release* label, it wasn't a wine I'd be likely to run into at the local bottle-o.

From there I found myself a comfortable seat and devoted myself to writing up the previous twenty-four hours while **'Er Indoors** indulged herself with a wander around the shopping options.

Once the call came, boarding went smoothly, but some difficulty in the luggage compartment downstairs meant that the load needed re-stowing, delaying our departure by half an hour or so.

While we were taking stock of this development, an announcement - first in **English**, then in **Japanese** - advised the temperature on the ground at **Kansai** was a far-from-comfortable eight degrees Celsius. Obviously, the majority of the passengers, being **Japanese**, either tend to zone out while the **English** version of such announcements goes across, preferring to wait till they can get the information in their preferred tongue or else they just don't understand **English**.

If that sounds like I'm being uncharitable, the **English** announcement had concluded, **'Er Indoors** and I had finished discussing the need to adjust our luggage to counter extremes of temperature when the **Japanese** version of the same information went across, resulting in a noticeable shudder from the majority of the plane's population.

Looking back on it, we decided the announcement was a tactical move to provide those on board with something to talk about, or if travelling alone to occupy their minds while the rearrangements were happening down below.

Once we were in the air, there was nothing for it but to sit back and try to find something to occupy the mind over the flight's seven and a half hour duration.

Under normal circumstances, I'd have a book to read and with the **iPod** supplying a suitable soundtrack that would be quite sufficient.

But since I was carrying one book that needed to last me for a bit over two weeks, the time from take-off to touch-down was spent toggling between various modes.

Customs paperwork, reading, writing the *Travelogue*, eating, meditating on various subjects, listening to the *iPod* - and despite predictions from certain quarters, I found enough variety to prevent the time from dragging unduly.

Once a wave of excitement went through the group of homeward-bound home-stay students in front of us as land came into sight we were able to spend the rest of the flight trying to figure out exactly where we were.

That wasn't as easy as you might think, given the haze that covered most of the visible countryside. We were looking towards the afternoon sun, which didn't help matters much, but as we approached ever closer to *Kansai International* (*KIX* in *Airport Code* - *KAN* was probably allocated to *Kansas City*) 'Er *Indoors* spotted more and more familiar landmarks until eventually we were over *Osaka Bay* on final approach.

Once we landed, a lengthy taxi took us around three sides of the terminal to the disembarkation point. The air bridge delivered us into the building and, by the straightforward approach of following those in front of us we ended up on the monorail that carried us down to the inevitable encounter with *Customs and Immigration*

Among *Hughesy's* circle of acquaintances, it's frequently been noted that when you wander into the local *Post Office* to find yourself on the end of a very long queue, by the time you've made your way to the counter and concluded your business you almost invariably discover that the previously lengthy queue is now totally non-existent.

In most cases, apart from the *Post Office* staff, you tend to find you're the only person in the building.

I had no idea the same principle applied in *international airports*.

Arriving in the *Immigration Hall*, 'Er *Indoors* (of course) headed for the *Japanese-passport-holders'* section, where her entry to her homeland proceeded without incident. Then she settled down to wait for *Yours Truly*.

For my part, I attached myself to the end of a queue comprising, at a rough guess, several hundred people. Part of the problem was the fact that our flight was half an hour late. Had it been on time, I guess I would have found myself in front of many of the people who were now in front of me.

As the serpentine line inched towards the processing area, we passed large notices advising that, as of late last year, all foreigners entering *Japan* needed to be fingerprinted and photographed.

In some cases, the procedure seemed to take a couple of seconds, but by the time I found myself second in line from the processing point and was looking forward to whatever lay on the other side of the barriers the guy in front of me seemed to encounter all sorts of obstacles.

If I didn't spend five minutes waiting for the opportunity to move into another spot presented itself it certainly felt like five minutes.

Over forty-five minutes or so standing in line it seemed there only had been a single international flight arrive. I watched as a handful of passengers who'd arrived after me disappeared towards the baggage carousel while I waited for a vacancy to allow me to shift to another line.

Eventually, I found my way through another processing point, headed down, collected the luggage and passed straight through the rest of the process in no time flat.

Faced with revealed form one would have expected further delays from *the airport* to the hotel, but we arrived at the shuttle bus departure point with about five minutes to spare. Since the rush hour was well and truly past the scheduled sixty-five minute trip to downtown *Kōbe* took more or less the advertised time span.

'Er Indoors, for some reason, decided to install us on the port side of the bus, generously allowing me the window seat. That meant the first half of the journey had us passing dock-lands, skirting industrial estates and crossing waterways on the port side while the other side looked over the fairyland twinkle of a major conurbation.

In fact, it was some forty minutes after we started when I spotted the first obvious residential building on our side of the bus.

I was just reflecting that one dockland/industrial area around the world must look just like any other one when you removed the neon signs (and the neon signs were conspicuous by their absence at the time) when a voice from beside me said:

Look over there - that's Osaka Castle.

At which time I sent an important email to myself.

Self. Next time we take this trip we sit on the starboard side of the bus.

Alighting from the bus at *Sannomiya*, *Kōbe*'s main rail terminal and the hub of a number of transport options it took us a few minutes to locate the departure point for the next shuttle bus, which would transfer us to the *Meriken Park Oriental Hotel*.

Since the next bus was due in about five minutes, that gave us time for a brief debate about the night's eating arrangements.

There were a couple of options close at hand, but I felt that if we went for a look, we might well miss the bus and face a half hour wait.

In any case, after a substantial meal the previous night and snacks on the plane (*beef rendang* and a pastrami sandwich, both of which were considerably better than my limited experiences with airline food suggested they were likely to be) it wouldn't do us all that much harm if we failed to find an acceptable snack option at the hotel.

And if we were going to go hungry there was a bottle of *Heathcote Shiraz* to deaden the pangs.

Once the shuttle had delivered us to the hotel, we were checked in, offered an impressive explanation of the breakfast options and handed over to a porter, who conducted us to our room.

Arriving outside the door, our friendly porter embarked on a lengthy demonstration of the correct use of the key card.

That might have been understandable if the explanation was in *English* and directed towards a hairy foreigner, but it was in *Japanese*, directed at '*Er Indoors* who'd been privileged to receive a similar, somewhat shorter, explanation downstairs.

It seemed somewhat pointless, except as an exercise in repeated bi-directional courtesies.

Once inside the room, he proceeded to repeat at length the explanation of the breakfast options we'd already received at the *check-in counter*, before graciously withdrawing.

Throughout this process, I was left alone to ponder that this guy bore a remarkable resemblance in the mannerism department to a certain ex-pupil known in *Year Four* circles as *Harry Houdini*.

When I mentioned this resemblance to '*Er Indoors*, the look I received in return suggested further significant evidence had been added to the prosecution brief in the case of *The Crown versus Hughesy's Sanity*.

After a few minutes taking in the view across the harbour, a chance encounter with the room service menu revealed the availability of various reasonably-priced snacks. So we ventured downstairs and ended up with a *club sandwich* and a *fruit parfait* which provided the stomach lining we needed when we attacked the *Shiraz*, which we'd left quietly breathing upstairs.

And very nice it was, too.

Lights Out was some time after eleven, but with a midday checkout and the prospect of a substantial buffet breakfast in the morning, the lateness of the hour was never going to be an issue.



KOBE > OSAKA > KOBE

Friday, 4 April 2008

When I'm safely ensconced in *The Little House of Concrete* one of the problems that recur in the day to day cycle is the relatively early rise.

Except in exceptional circumstances, when the sun rises, so does *Hughesy*.

Not that I'm averse to sleeping in.

The lack of blackout curtains in the bedroom means it's difficult to remain asleep once the roseate glow of morning sunlight starts to seep into the room, assuming you're in a state of consciousness higher than totally comatose.

Which means when I awoke fully refreshed to find the room in darkness at eight a.m. I was impressed.

Hughesy's hotel ratings have tended to deal with the presence of abundant hot water (an important criterion).

But if I had to specify one thing that raises hotel accommodation into the top bracket (at least in my book) it's the possibility of sleeping in until the body tells you that it doesn't want to sleep in anymore.

And I found that to be the case in almost every hotel we stayed in over the next fortnight.

Having completed the morning preliminaries, just after nine we wandered into the larger of the two restaurants offering breakfast for my first encounter with the *Japanese Viking* (which is, essentially, a much easier way of spelling *Smorgasbord*).

After a light supper the previous night, faced with the prospect of taking on enough fuel to keep us going until dinner time that evening, I attacked the range of delicacies on offer with alacrity.

One plate of more-or-less-*Western-style* breakfast, a plate of the *Japanese* version, a return to the *Western* side and an omelette.

The final selection stemmed from an urge to relieve a chef without anything to do at his station, you understand, rather than any inclination towards gluttony. '*Er Indoors* suggested two individuals rostered onto the scrambled eggs/omelette detail looked bored. *Hughesy* did something about it.

Bookmakers fielding in the *What're the first two things Hughesy adds to the plate when he reaches the buffet stakes* would have lost heavily.

The first things added to the plate?

Cod roe spaghetti and parmesan cheese.

The alert reader will possibly have noted I previously referred to more-or-less-*Western-style* breakfast.

Once we'd eaten, packed and checked out, we emerged into the outside world to find conditions were much colder than anticipated. That prompted several extra layers of clothing added while we awaited the arrival of the shuttle bus.

Back at *Sannomiya*, I had my first encounter with a subway system designed to move the maximum number of people with the greatest possible efficiency.

For a start, lines indicate where the doors will be when the train stops.

So, if you anticipate wanting a seat for your journey, you not only join the queue at one of the clearly marked boarding points. You can always decide to wait for the next train, assuming you can afford the time, should the queue be too long this time around.

That should, of course, place you at the front of the queue.

Once the train arrives, passengers alighting from the train leave through the middle of the doorway, passengers boarding do so from the sides.

Aboard the train, we were headed, together with the totality of our luggage for *The Mother's* apartment out in the dormitory suburbs at *Myodani*, where the quantity of luggage meant that we took a taxi from the station to the apartment rather than catching a bus.

'Er indoors had carefully worked out the logistical arrangements. What we needed for the next day and a half would fit in my backpack.

After that we'd be lugging one piece of luggage for the following week or so, replacing it with an overnight bag for the final *Kōbe > Kyoto > Nara > Kōbe* leg.

Everything surplus to our immediate requirements would remain with *The Mother* at *Myodani*.

Once the luggage had been sorted out, a bus took us back to the station, where we diverted towards an electrical store to pick up an improved set of ear pieces for the *iPod* and a 2 GB memory card for the camera.

From there, we headed back downtown to the evening's accommodation at the *Urban Hotel*.

On the way, I learnt another important lesson.

When leaving the station, make sure you choose the correct exit.

There were plenty of them, but only one matched the map *Madam* had printed off the internet, and it wasn't the one we chose.

That was a significant issue since the hotel was discreetly tucked away on a side street and took quite a deal of finding.

But, on arrival, we found a spacious room that would do very nicely.

A perfunctory attempt to find the establishment through a *Google* search while completing this entry failed to return an *English*-language result, which is why the reader won't find a web-site link.

Once we'd showered and changed it was back to the subway so we could head over to *Osaka* for our appointment with the *Office Manager* and the *Cereal Queen*.

We left the hotel, turned right (we'd come in on the left-hand side) walked around the block and found, lo and behold, the exit we should have taken an hour or so earlier.

In other circumstances, I might have been tempted to pause for a browse the bookshops that line the entrance to that section of the station complex.

Having plenty of time on our hands before seven o'clock, *'Er Indoors* decided it was advisable to stop off along the way for a spot of cherry-blossom appreciation.



It wasn't till we were off the train and heading along the banks of the stream that I started to realise why cherry blossom time was such a big deal.

You can't tell from the photos since I positioned myself to photograph flowers rather than crowds, but we arrived just before five o'clock.

There was a sizeable crowd already on hand, and while we went for a wander, the crowd grew.

To a certain casual hairy foreign observer, it seemed what we were seeing was as much about social interaction, an excuse to get together with friends and relatives to eat, drink and enjoy the scenery, as it was about the aesthetics of the cherry blossoms.



As the crowd built up, we decided to leave them to it, resume the journey to *Osaka* and arrive at the rendezvous with plenty of time to spare.

The meeting point was *Kinokuniya Bookstore* at the entrance to *Umeda Station*.

That's where the complications set in.

For a start, there isn't one entrance to the largest bookstore I've ever seen.

There are at least two, on either side of the concourse that formed the conduit for thousands of people heading downtown from the suburbs in search of their *Friday* night entertainment and further thousands of people heading in the opposite direction.

We had enough time on our hands to sneak inside the bookshop, where I found an *Inspector Rebus* novel ([*Resurrection Men*](#), just in case you're interested) brand new for eight-hundred and something yen (around eight Oz dollars).

It served to point out, yet again, that *Australian readers* are paying through the nose for their literary entertainment. I weakened and bought it.

Back outside we were faced with a difficult choice.

If we placed ourselves outside either entrance to the bookshop, there was no way we could keep an eye on the other one. And if we tried to place ourselves in the middle we'd more than likely be swept away by the rushing tide of humanity and wouldn't have been able to monitor either side effectively.

Around us, people were talking animatedly into mobile phones as they attempted to establish the whereabouts of the people they were supposed to be meeting. We decided to alternate between the two sides and put our faith in digital technology.

In the end, we didn't need to.

I had a height advantage over *'Er Indoors* and knew we were looking for two people arriving from opposite directions, one slightly above average *Japanese* height, one slightly below.

I sighted them before they'd finished ringing *The Mother's mobile*, which had been entrusted to *'Er Indoors* for the duration of our stay.

From there it was a case of finding the selected eatery, which wasn't quite where our guide thought it was, necessitating the use of digital technology as an aid to navigation.

Once we'd arrived at *Kitchen Stadium* (I'm not kidding, that's what it's called, and I gather the *Iron Chef* is far enough back in *Japanese TV history* to have removed threats of legal action for copyright infringement) it was time for the ritual exchange of gifts.

'Er Indoors had bought packets of dried mango for gift-giving purposes. *Office Manager* was thrilled to receive some while the *Cereal Queen* went into rapture at the sight of a packet of *Just Right*.

Your actual common or garden breakfast cereal is a rare commodity in the *Land of the Rising Sun*. When that was done, we settled down to exchange news, eat and drink.

Kitchen Stadium is a New York style restaurant and bar serving pasta, pizzas, rice, steak, chicken, seafood and vegetable dishes prepared in an open kitchen easily visible from the booth where we were sitting.

The four of us worked our way through a multitude of tastes though the task of splitting some platters four ways presented a slight problem.

Still, you don't *always* want to try *absolutely* everything.

One dish arrived with an accompanying bottle of **Tabasco**, and when the waiter learned that I was partial to a spot of hot sauce, he returned bearing a range of bottles from **Belize**.

Very nice, but extremely hot and a perfect example of why **Hughesy's** taste buds don't detect delicate or subtle flavours.

Still, my appreciation of the sauces on offer was rewarded with a sample of an incendiary number from **Okinawa**, home to our friendly waiter and the group sitting at the table next to ours.

They were chain-smoking, celebrating of a win in the grand final of the nationwide **High School baseball championship** that we'd spotted on various TV screens in the course of our afternoon's travels.

Hughesy's photo albums from the **Australia** filming in **Bowen** also attracted a deal of interest from two girls who'd spent six months helping out *'Er Indoors* and **Bowen High's Japanese teacher**.

Our train back to **Kosoku Kōbe** was crowded when we boarded just after ten o'clock, which made finding seats a matter of good luck rather than good management.

The population had thinned considerably by the time we arrived, well and truly ready for another good night's sleep.

That wasn't looming on the immediate horizon since the convenient entrance to the station we'd discovered had been closed, presumably, around the time the book stalls had closed.

However, earlier attempts to locate the hotel had left us with some knowledge of the neighbourhood and, once we'd found our way out of the station, the task of navigating back to the accommodation wasn't all that difficult.

Much easier than it would have been if we'd selected the right exit in the afternoon.

In other words, *what you lose on the roundabout you make up for on the hurdy-gurdy*.



KOBE > HIMEJI > KOBE

Saturday, 5 April 2008

Since we had swapped the suitcases for a backpack the day before, there was no need to do anything about the luggage once we'd checked out of the *Urban Hotel* the next morning and prepared to head for *Himeji*.

Since we'd eaten well the night before also meant there was no immediate need for breakfast, so it was a case of straight onto the train and off for further *sakura*-viewing.

We managed to find two seats opposite a *Cub Scout troop* on their way somewhere, prompting *Hughesy* to reflect that nine-year-old boys tend to be much the same the world over.

Having finished work two-and-a-bit years ago, I don't remember much about *Year Four school excursions*, but the behaviours I was watching on the seats across the aisle looked uncannily familiar.

Once we reached *Himeji* crowds heading down the avenue from the station to the castle should have warned us that things were about to become crowded.

I didn't realise how many people use *sakura* and a sunny *Saturday* as an excuse for a day out.

Subsequent information suggests a figure somewhere more than seventy thousand.

We took a break to grab breakfast at a noodle outlet, and a successful attempt at using chopsticks.

That's an achievement I was, for some inexplicable reason, unable to repeat.

Nourished, we felt ready to join the queues forming at the entrance to the castle grounds.





Alarm bells should well and truly have been ringing at this point, but once we'd passed into the extensive grounds within the castle's outer walls the presence of vast areas of blue tarps under the trees and musical entertainment in the background suggested it mightn't be too bad once we'd paid the admission fee and passed into the castle proper.

The castle dates back to 1609 and is considered *Japan's* most spectacular structure of its kind, largely because it has survived for four hundred years without falling victim to fire, earthquake or enemy action.

James Bond fans will recognize it as the secret *ninja* training school and rocket centre from ***You Only Live Twice***. *Tom Cruise* wandered through artificial snow and the castle grounds in ***The Last Samurai***.

Inside, we followed the tour path through the ***West Bailey***, past a long store house where rice and salt were stockpiled in case the castle was besieged and into the main ***donjon***, noting the population density seemed to be increasing gradually.



Once we'd started the ascent to the upper levels of the main structure we found the reason.

While there was a steady stream of people being admitted to the grounds and embarking on the walk through the buildings, this was reduced to a single line as they attempted to reach the upper levels of the castle.

Faced with an almighty squeeze and, more than likely, a lengthy wait, we bailed out of the tour as soon as the opportunity arose and headed for the tranquility of the gardens next door.

Himeji Kokoen was constructed as recently as **1992** to commemorate the centenary of the local municipality, and while they may have been there for less than twenty years, nine separate gardens in the complex look like they're much older.



While the gardens might have been better with autumn leaves, they were quite spectacular, and while plenty of people passed through, relatively uncrowded compared to the crush in the castle next door.

From the gardens, we had to hurry to meet up with *Minnie*, *one of Madam's* High School friends, who presented '*Er Indoors*' with a piece of work that's gracing the living room as I write.

There wasn't too much time for them to catch up on old times.

We had to find our way back to the station, stop off at *Myodani* to pack the suitcase that would carry clothes for the next (week-long) stage of the trip, return to downtown *Kōbe*, check in, change and meet up with two more of *Madam's* High School friends by six-thirty.

Which didn't leave us a whole lot of time to catch our breath.

Once we'd alighted at *Sannomiya*, it was a matter of moving as fast as possible.

We checked in, changed, and then made a brief subway journey got us to the rendezvous on time.

I'd been warned the couple we were meeting knew their way around **Kōbe**'s restaurants, but I wasn't expecting the high-class **Chinese** establishment where I found myself sipping beer and wondering how we were going to work the ordering.

In the long run, we entrusted ourselves to the chefs and were rewarded with a succession of tasting plates covering a range of tastes and textures, though I must admit that the jellyfish starter had a texture that I, for one, wouldn't have expected.

Jellyfish, you may be surprised to learn, *is*, if *not quite crunchy*, much firmer in texture than I would have expected.

Comments about **Hughesy**'s liking for a splash of **chilli** produced one extra-hot dish featuring a dried **chilli** that, it was suggested, I might prefer to avoid sampling.

The dish itself was wonderfully warm and faced with the lone dried **chilli** that remained on the plate I abandoned any thought of discretion.

I certainly needed the two beers that were necessary to quell the flames, but it was very tasty.

As previously indicated, **Hughesy**'s taste buds don't do *subtle* but throw a bit of **chilli** their way...

And the witnesses seemed impressed.

Once the meal was over we faced a ten-minute walk back to the hotel, so we bade farewell to **our hosts** for the night and headed back to recharge the batteries before the next day's excursion to **Kyoto**.



KOBE > KYOTO > KOBE

Sunday, 6 April 2008

Reflecting on the previous day's adventures, and bearing in mind this was the only hotel where we were booked in for two nights I decided to lighten the load in the backpack.

I placed the bottle of *Steingarten* in the fridge before we shut the door and set off for *Sannomiya* en route to *Kyoto* where, on a sunny *sakura* season *Sunday*, one could go, so I was informed, *to look at the people*.

Even after the *Himeji* episode, I didn't appreciate just how many people were likely to be involved.

Prior experience also suggested breakfast might be a good idea so when we reached the station, we found a suitable eatery and placed our orders.

I thought a hot dog might be a non-controversial selection and was bemused when it arrived accompanied by a salad and a dab of mashed potato.



By the way, it's surprising how often mashed potato turned up over the next twelve days.

We managed to snare seats on the train out of **Sannomiya**, but we had to change trains *en route*, and the second train must have been packed to the gunwales when it left **Osaka**, so we were forced to stand for the second leg.

Once we'd arrived, '**Er Indoors**' announced her knowledge of the local geography left something to be desired, and we needed a map.

That resulted in a search for information that seemed to take an hour and involved enough changes of direction to leave me completely disoriented.

Even if I'd known where we'd started.



Which, of course, I didn't.

Once we had a map we wandered out in search of a bus and found queues meandering away from close to a dozen points. Buses appeared, in what seemed totally random order, from time to time, so we attached ourselves to what we thought was the right queue (it wasn't) and settled down to wait.

Close by, some out-of-towners managed to attract the attention of one of the officials wandering around the area.

While I had no idea what the conversation was about it was enough to direct us towards a completely different location where we would find a more appropriate and marginally less crowded alternative that would deliver us to a point close to our main objectives, *Ginkakuji* temple and the *Philosopher's Path*.

The bus delivered us to the foot of the road leading to *Ginkakuji* (and one end of the *Philosopher's Path*), and we joined the throng headed uphill.



Ginkakuji, the *Temple of the Silver Pavilion*, at the foot of the mountains east of *Kyoto* was built in the fifteenth century as a place of solitude for *Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimasa*.

The main building was going to match his grandfather's *Kinkakuji* (*Golden Pavilion*).

Plans to cover it in silver were delayed by the *Ōnin War*, which ravaged *Kyoto*, and were abandoned after *Yoshimasa*'s death in 1490.

The villa was converted into a *Zen* temple and trees, plants and mosses from all over *Japan* were planted in gardens designed by the landscape gardener *Soami*.



We didn't get into the main building, which is being renovated, but I was totally blown away from the time we walked through the entrance, where magnificent high hedges line both sides of the approach to the temple.

Inside the courtyard, the first thing you run across is the *Ginshaden* (*Sea of Silver Sand*), with a smooth cone of sand that represents *Mount Fuji*.

From there, following the pathway, you eventually end up looking back over the city of *Kyoto*.

The notes in my journal read *don't write, just show pictures* though I can't leave the subject without mentioning that I particularly loved the moss.

Until that day, if I thought of moss at all, it was something you find on rocks in pools and damp environments, attractive if you like that sort of thing, but nothing to write home about.

I emerged with totally unrealistic ambitions to incorporate moss into the grounds around *The Little House of Concrete*.



But, in the end, it was all about the sand.

Heading back downhill, we stopped for ice creams and set off on the *Philosopher's Path*.

It's a thirty-minute walk beside a canal, with heritage buildings, tea shops and art stalls beside the path, and a constant flow of people in both directions.

Put that way it doesn't sound all that fantastic, but add the cherry blossom, which is the reason most people are there, and you've got something else entirely.

Eventually, the crush got to us.

We bailed out before the trail finished, and wandered downhill towards the city centre through quiet streets lined with old-style houses.

Eventually, we ended up at a very impressive shrine, but we'd had enough of crowds, thank you very much.

Working our way back towards downtown **Kyoto**, we crossed a bridge and dived into alleys lined with bars, restaurants and dens of iniquity.

With a couple of hours' walk under the belt, having landed on a major thoroughfare, we stopped for lunch (a hamburger plate and tuna cream *spaghetti*) which was enough, as it turned out, to keep us going for the rest of the day.

Back at **Kawaramachi Station**, we decided we'd had enough for the time being, boarded a train and managed to find a seat.

That might seem a minor detail, but it was enough to persuade us to travel all the way to **Osaka** rather than change trains as we had in the morning. That would give us a better chance of a seat on a **Kōbe**-bound train and be assured of a seat.

It had been that sort of day.

Back in **Kōbe**, we decided we hadn't quite got the full value out of the three-day **Kansai passes**, so we took a ride on the **Portliner Monorail** out to **Kōbe Airport** and back, which gave us a mariners' eye view of the city.

Once we'd finished that little jaunt, it was time to organize the next stage of the odyssey.

First up, we had to convert a couple of **Japan Rail Pass vouchers** into actual tickets, and with that accomplished we were able to book ourselves onto the **Shinkansen** from **Kōbe** to **Kyoto** and the slower train that would carry us from **Kyoto** to **Kanazawa**.

To be quite honest, I'd more or less had enough by the time we got back to the hotel, located in the downtown business district, which meant dining options in the immediate neighbourhood were few and far between.

Instead, I opted for a takeaway snack, a couple of beers from a convenient vending machine and the chilled bottle of **Steingarten** while bringing my travel notes up to date as **'Er Indoors** slipped in and out of the room to monitor the progress of a load of washing.

The **Steingarten** with its lemon/lime characters on the nose and palate provided a wonderful wind-down after what had been a rather wearing, and at times quite chaotic, day.

Several days later I heard **Madam** use a word that sounded like **Kyotic** to describe the day's events, adding a new word to our personal dictionaries.

Kyotic: (adjective) *State of utter chaos as experienced in Kyoto on a sunny **Sakura** Sunday.*



2

JAPAN 2008: THE RAIL PASS



KOBE > KYOTO > KANAZAWA

Monday, 7 April 2008

It was a case of rise and shine relatively early for the first day of the *Japan Rail Pass* big travel week. *'Er Indoors* checked out, a process entirely devoid of human influence on the business end and we were heading off in search of the subway station that would begin the day's journey.

I hadn't actually seen the crowding that people associate with rush hour *Japanese subway travel* up to this point. You know what I mean, those images of *solidly built railway staff on hand to push a few extra passengers into a sardine-packed carriage*.

Solidly built people pushers were conspicuous by their absence when we arrived on the platform, joining a dozen people waiting for the next train.

The arrival of the train, however, suggested they'd been needed further up the line.

The carriages were packed, and it was difficult to make our way towards the carriage against a flood tide of black-suited salary-men.

Once the previously packed compartments had emptied, we found ourselves almost alone in a strangely deserted carriage.

Of course, we were headed out of the city centre, towards *ShinKōbe* Station, which is, like many of the *Shinkansen* depots, located slightly away from the main commercial and business area of *Kōbe*.

We arrived with plenty of time to spare, which allowed us to enjoy a leisurely breakfast before it was time to board the 8:25 service to *Kyoto*.





Having grown where trains operate much less frequently I'd been warned that the 8:25 train means the one that actually leaves at 8:25.

That one will arrive, more or less at eight-twenty-three and a half, being a completely different conveyance to the 8:22 which leaves the same platform for a completely different destination.

I'd become accustomed to guidelines on commuter platforms, but ***Shinkansen*** stations have barriers with gaps where the doors will open. Amazingly, that's exactly where they do open, and you've got about a minute and a half (if that) to get on board and locate your seat before you're off.

There are three levels of service on the ***Tokaido/Sanyo Shinkansen*** lines. The fastest, ***Nozomi*** (*hope* or *wish*) are express affairs, stopping at a handful of stations.

They aren't covered by the ***Rail Pass***. That's a pity since they cover the 515 kilometres between ***Tokyo*** and ***Osaka*** in two and a half hours.

The intermediate ***Hikari*** (*light* or *ray*) services stop at a few more stations, usually to allow the faster ***Nozomi*** to pass.

The slowest ***Kodama*** (*echo*) services stop at all stations allowing faster services to pass through.

Once aboard *Hikari 364 Thunderbird 7* (impressive name, or what?) the first section of the journey took us through a tunnel, emerging onto a viaduct comfortably above the surrounding conurbation. Faced with obstacles like hills, *Shinkansen* services go *through* rather than *over* them.

If the obstacle is a built up area, the solution is to go *over* rather than *through*.

Despite the elevation, however, there wasn't a lot to see because of the barriers on either side of the track. There was, predictably, even less when we met with trains heading in the opposite direction.

I did, however, manage to recognize the river we crossed on the outskirts of *Osaka*, which we reached a quarter of an hour after leaving *Kōbe*.

While we were travelling much faster than I'd become accustomed to on the commuter services, things seemed much less blurred as we went past, presumably because the buildings were below us rather than flashing past at eye-level.

And very peaceful travelling it was, sitting back in airline-style seats with the sort of leg room you might get in business class (if you're lucky) with something pleasant to listen to:

five minutes out of Kyoto on Shinkansen

timeless rice paddies amidst scattered timber houses

john fahey steamboat gwine 'round the bend

on iPod.

Fourteen minutes after *Osaka*, we were disembarking in *Kyoto*.

The next service would carry us on to *Kanazawa*, wasn't *Shinkansen*-flash but was comfortable enough, with comparable leg room.

Once we'd boarded, I watched as a supervisor (I assume the guard was at the rear) performed some arcane bi-directional ritual to indicate our departure.

Underway I realized what I'd been missing all morning.

There was none of that click-clack *Australian rail commuters* experience as the wheels cross the gaps between one section of rail and the next.

Mind you, if they did exist, at *Shinkansen*-speed, they'd probably sound *more like machine-gun fire*, which probably explains why they don't (*exist, that is*).

On the way out of *Kyoto*, we ran into the patchwork landscape I'd noticed before, a quilt of factories, houses, light and heavy industry, an occasional farmlet, and the odd timeless graveyard.

Interestingly, almost every stream we crossed seemed to have been carefully channelled, and as I looked back over the previous couple of days I couldn't remember seeing a stream with banks that weren't lined with bricks, stone or concrete.

I was also bemused by the fact that many seemingly old, traditional houses were sporting *reverse cycle air-conditioning units* and even *satellite dishes*.

As we moved into forested slopes above farmland, the villages became scattered pockets between flooded paddy fields. By ten-thirty, we had glimpses of mountains away to the right, more or less in the direction we were headed the following day.

As we neared **Kanazawa**, we'd passed through the central *cordillera*, and it seemed considerably cooler than on the other side of the divide.

I guessed the weather on this side was influenced by colder air emanating from the depths of **continental Asia** whereas the eastern coast was, I suspected, influenced by a warmer ocean current, much as the **Gulf Stream** moderates temperatures along the **eastern coast of North America** as far north as **Newfoundland**.

It may have been the haze I'd noted throughout the past few days, but the air looked colder, particularly as I gazed off towards the mountains where we were headed tomorrow.

Once we'd arrived and found our way out of the station, we had a slight problem finding the hotel, passing the street where it was located and thinking it was a lane-way too insignificant to feature on the street map.

But eventually we realized we'd gone way too far, backtracked, found it, deposited the suitcase and headed off in search of lunch before we set off seeing the sights.

Between the hotel and the station complex, the **Forus shopping centre** featured a floor of restaurants, so it seemed the right place to direct our attention. After completing a circuit of the floor in question, we opted for the **G&O (Gumbo & Oyster) Bar**.

It was around this time that I realized that **Madam** wasn't kidding when she said you could find any style of food in **Japan** if you knew where to look.

I wouldn't, however, have thought of setting out in search of **Louisiana cooking** in **Kanazawa**.

'**Er Indoors** selected a set menu with a variety of New Orleans-style treats, which she reported was *good* while I ordered a couple of **oysters natural** and a bowl of **seafood gumbo**.

It obviously pays to be a foreigner eating early.



When the oysters arrived, there were four of them, plump, juicy and wonderful. The bowl of *gumbo* also went down well, washed down with a glass of good *Chablis*.

Suitably fortified we set off to locate the tour bus that does a clockwise circuit around twenty sites of interest, skipping the first couple of sites before alighting at the stop closest to the *geisha quarter*.

As it turned out, we'd misheard the bus driver's directions. We should have headed left along the river bank rather than turning left straight off the bus and turning right at the *sushi bar*.

Instead, we headed along the river and turned left just after we'd spotted a couple using a camera, a tripod and a timed delay to get a photo of the two of them against a background of cherry blossom.



I took a couple of photos from the same spot before the guy with the tripod asked us whether we'd like a photo of the two of us against the same backdrop they'd used.

We accepted, passed over the camera and the reader can see the result.

By this time, we realized we'd taken a wrong turn, but knew where the *geisha quarter* had to be, and headed off in that direction.

A very helpful old gentleman also helped to put us on the right track.

We stopped at a building set up as an *information centre* and based on the information received there we retraced our steps to a place where we could tour a recreated *geisha house*.

The camera battery decided to pack it in as soon as we walked through the door, so we didn't walk away with a complete photographic record of an establishment set up the way things would have been.



Anyone with a mind to sample *geisha entertainment* might be interested to learn there are still eight houses in the quarter offering the traditional treats, but be warned - it doesn't come cheaply.

A ninety-minute session would set you back \$US 1500...

From there, we headed to the bus stop, boarded the next bus and headed off to *Kanazawa Castle* and more *sakura*.

No sooner had we alighted than the rain, which had been threatening for a while, decided to do a bit more than *threaten*.

So we walked through the drizzle, managing to complete a loop around *Kenrokuen* before deciding that enough was enough and heading back to the hotel to check in, rest and recharge the camera.

We figured with a break of an hour or so we could head off on the second-last bus for the day, get a couple of photos and catch the final bus back to base.

We emerged from the warm and dry hotel to find that conditions were cold, drizzly and miserable. When we'd boarded the bus earlier in the afternoon, it had been crowded.

Now, three or four hours later, it was, practically deserted.



Since we knew where we were going, we were looking forward to snapping a couple of photos of the *sakura* in front of the castle before doing a quick lap of the garden.

But as soon as we embarked on the exercise, the camera decided to inform us there was no more space on the memory card, which was just as well since we only just managed to catch the last bus back.

At the station, we booked our seats for the next stage of the trip, then headed back to *Forus* for dinner.

We opted for a *Korean* eatery that wasn't quite what the doctor ordered, and eventually returned to the warmth of the hotel hoping things would turn out better on the morrow.



KANAZAWA > TAKAYAMA

Tuesday, 8 April 2008

A week into the trip and starting Day Two of the Rail Pass Week, a 7:09 departure from ***Kanazawa*** precluded thoughts of breakfast before heading to the station.

On the way out of the city, on a bleak morning that presented no chance to see whether recent precipitation had managed to clear the ever-present haze, there were obvious signs of recent and fairly substantial rainfall, which, given our experiences of the day before was hardly earth-shattering news.

Kanazawa has a well-deserved reputation for wet weather.



After we'd left the outskirts of the city, we passed through an agrarian landscape, with a misty haze covering the forested hilltops.

Suited salary-men boarded the train at some stations, and I couldn't help noticing that there were upmarket homes scattered through the villages.

Conditions made it difficult to see the snow that I was sure capped the mountains away to our right. As we moved away from the coast the land on the left-hand side started to rise, though again, it wasn't possible to get a clear view of the peaks.

At *Toyama*, we had difficulty finding *Platform 3*, which wasn't well signposted, but eventually discovered the next leg of the journey involved an upmarket version of the old-fashioned rail motor.

When we took our seats in the first carriage, it was obvious, given picture windows that gave a generous view to the front and both sides that we were travelling a particularly scenic route.





The misty conditions were far from ideal for sightseeing but gave a feeling of travelling in an enclosed world as we headed past streams boosted by recent rainfall.

Despite the rain, many trees held cherry-blossom, which suggested steady drizzle rather than the sort of downpour that would knock the flowers off the branches.

We climbed into the mountains as the mist closed in more tightly, and pylons suggested nearby hydroelectric stations as we passed through some tunnels, skirting sudden canyons and waterfalls.

A lengthy stop at *Inotani*, where I looked out over mist and forest-clad mountains, evoked images of hermits and *Zen* poets in the mist.



Moving on through **Sugihara**, we passed into an area where there were patches of snow on slopes not far above the line.

By this point, we were following the river valley, almost at river level with the highway on the other side of the stream protected by a roof supported by lines of pillars.

As we rolled through **Sakakami**, I gave up on writing in the journal because scribbling the odd observation was getting in the way of enjoying the scenery.

Approaching **Takayama**, the houses looked to be of much the same construction as those further down. They'd have to be very well insulated if the occupants were going to make it through harsh winters.



My suspicions about temperatures were confirmed as we alighted in *Takayama* just after nine o'clock in conditions colder than a mother-in-law's kiss.

We deposited the suitcase at the hotel, then headed back to the station to catch the bus to the *Hida Folk Village*, where we spent a couple of hours wandering through buildings that had been rescued from river valleys flooded to provide water for hydroelectric schemes.

The houses weren't all that old, not going back much beyond the middle of the eighteenth century, and came from a variety of sources, representing a range of occupations and social classes.

There were farmhouses with upper storeys devoted to the raising of silkworms, a priest's home, a village head man's house where the walls could be removed to make a room large enough for meetings, and a woodcutter's hut as well as a way-station from a main road.

And one building erected as a residence for a wealthy landowner.



Casual onlookers might be inclined to get sniffy and dismiss the place as a tourist trap, but it looks like a genuine attempt to preserve aspects of the area's traditional lifestyle, with streams of melt-water flowing downhill to power water mills.

Here and there patches of snow remained in hollows protected from the springtime sun.

Each building, for example, was heated, if that's the right word to use for a few burning coals in the living area, by fire rather than electricity.

I couldn't help wondering how the occupants coped with temperatures that reached below minus twenty with two metres of snow on the roof.



It is not, however, the sort of place to take kids who can't tie up their shoelaces since venturing inside almost every building involves removing the footwear.

In hindsight, I wished I'd invested in a pair of Velcro-equipped joggers.

Two hours of wandering on an empty stomach meant that we weren't going to wait till we got back to town to eat.

Outside, we found a restaurant serving noodles with *char siu pork*. I washed it down with half a litre of *Asahi* before we headed back to the bus stop for the return trip to town.

Having just missed one bus, we thought the next one that pulled up might deliver us to downtown *Takayama*, and it turned out that it was the next bus back to the station.

There was one minor technicality. It wouldn't be setting out on that route for another twenty minutes since it had to complete a different loop around the town's attractions.



The driver, thankfully, decided that although we were going to be heading back in twenty minutes, we might as well board the bus now, rather than stand around for the intervening period.

Which is what we did.

Once we'd returned to the station precinct, it was still too early to book into the hotel.

We took a stroll to *Takayama Jinya*, the government official's residence and administrative centre from the *Edo Period* and a very interesting place it turned out to be, although there wasn't a great deal of information available in *English*. The *English-speaking guide* was unavailable that day.

We were, however, there at the same time as a group of *Japanese* with an own-language guide.

From the audience reaction, if the *English-speaker* is half as good as the *Japanese* counterpart, his guests would be in for an entertaining time.

From *Takayama Jinya*, we headed across the river to the *Sanmachi Traditional Buildings Preservation* area and old private houses.

Unfortunately, straight after we arrived, the camera decided it had had enough for the moment, prompting us to use the current visit as a preliminary reconnaissance and to wander back in the morning with a recharged camera for a few photographic memories.

Back at the hotel, we took it easy until dinner time, when we faced a minor dilemma.

Takayama is famous for *Hida beef*, and we decided that was the preferred option for the evening meal. The only problem was deciding which particular venue to choose.

We took a wander around the area west of the hotel, found a couple of possibilities, and eventually chose *Yamatake-Shōten*, the one closest to home.





Although it didn't seem like it straight away, it was an inspired choice, a retail outlet for a beef-raising operation with a sideline offering a cook-it-yourself service.

Once we'd selected the parcel of beef we'd like for dinner, we picked out a range of vegetables to accompany it and moved over to our table, where hot coals had been placed under the metal grill in the middle of the table.

The proprietor got us started on the cooking process, then left us to it with a bottle of *2006 Cotes du Rhone* to keep us occupied while we cooked our dinner piece by piece. Definitely delicious.

The beef, however, would never pick up *a heart smart tick in Australia* and definitely wouldn't appeal to anyone fanatical about *trimming the fat off their steak*.

We were finishing off the bottle when the proprietor returned to check everything was under control.

It was.

Other customers were conspicuous by their absence, so he stayed to talk to *'Er Indoors* (his *English* being effectively non-existent).

He's obviously someone with pride in his hometown and its culture and proceeded to bring out and unroll posters about the forthcoming *Takayama Festival* the following week.

Although I was an uninvolved bystander unable to catch the commentary the next ten minutes or so were one of the absolute highlights of the fortnight.

Each poster had been rolled and unrolled countless times and showed signs of wear and tear.

Someone who was doing this sort of thing for a living, or as a regular part of his business would have gone out, gathered a collection of these posters, had them laminated and would have worked up a *PowerPoint presentation he could leave running on a laptop while he attended to more pressing matters.*

Our host, on the other hand, excused himself while he attended to other matters, returning after each interruption to talk about something he obviously takes great pride in.

One interruption involved getting a *young Spanish couple* at the next table started on the cook-it-yourself caper, attempting to communicate with them in extremely limited *English* (I presumed his *Spanish* is about as good as mine, which is non-existent) while commenting over his shoulder to *'Er Indoors* in *Japanese*. Amazing.

After that, there was nothing for it but to stroll the fifty metres back to the hotel, pick up a couple of cans of beer from a vending machine and retire for the night.





TAKAYAMA > NAGOYA

Wednesday, 9 April 2008

At breakfast, I was surprised to notice the people sitting at the next table were the ***Chinese*** couple with the tripod from ***Monday*** afternoon in ***Kanazawa***. At the time, we thought they were from ***Hong Kong***, but as we exchanged pleasantries we learned they were, in fact, from ***Melbourne***.

They'd spent most of the last fortnight based in ***Osaka***, heading out to wherever the cherry-blossom was good each day. They were doing a loop through the mountains before heading home.

It is, as has frequently been remarked, a small world.

And it seems to be shrinking.

Given our relatively loose schedule for the rest of the day we took our time packing and checking out, and still had two and a half hours to kill before catching the train for the next leg of the trip.

Having missed some serious photographic opportunities the day before, we retraced yesterday's route in reverse, taking our time



as we strolled through the morning markets and doing a little *saké*-sampling.

We ended up outside *Takayama Jinya*, where I overheard a couple of Americans discussing the lack of an *English-speaking guide* to the building in front of them, which they assumed to be a *temple or something*.

I did my best to encourage them to venture in, *despite the lack of English content*, but they remained unconvinced.

I wandered away wondering why you'd set out to walk around a strange town without a map to guide you.

It wasn't as if there's a lack of *English-language material* in *Takayama*. When we arrived, I'd been surprised to discover tourist information came in *Japanese, English, French* and *Italian*.

At least it gave me something to think about as we headed back to reclaim the suitcase and set off for the 11:35 train to *Nagoya*.

Seated further back than the day before we didn't have quite the same view to the front.



That's not to say the views to the side were disappointing. We passed through forests and paddy fields, climbing back into the mountains and crossing the divide between the westward-flowing *Miya River* and the eastern-bound *Hida*. We linked up with the *Hida* at *Kugano*, surrounded by forested slopes before moving downstream through the fringing forest, past hydro schemes and mountain villages with the highway on our right-hand side.

As we headed towards the lower reaches, we passed sections of bare-branched forest amid swathes of green foliage.

At first glance, it seemed these were belts of dead vegetation, but closer glimpses suggested they were deciduous trees amidst hardier evergreens and hadn't redeveloped their foliage so early in the spring.



We stopped at **Nagisa** to let a train headed in the opposite direction pass.

While we were there, lunch arrived in an **eki-bento** (*station box*) of **Hida Gyumeshi** (*beef, rice and vegetables*). The handy pamphlet on the train said these came from **Nagoya**.

I assumed the pause to let the other train, which came from **Nagoya**, pass along the single line might have something to do with loading lunch.

In any case, I enjoyed the box of lunch and the **Kirin Lager** I used to wash it down.

Eating kept us occupied as far as **Gero**, one of **Japan's Top Three Hot Spring Resorts**, where boarding passengers filled most of the vacant seats.



It's a popular destination with a history stretching back a thousand years.

We were also back among the *sakura*, conspicuously absent higher up in the mountains.

Passing through forested hills *Neil Young's Be The Rain*, with its call to arms in the fight to defend wilderness in *Alaska*, turned up on the *iPod* playlist; a neat piece of serendipity.

By the time it had ended we were down on the river flats, travelling round sweeping curves beside what looked like a broad stream but was, in fact, a dam with the train on one side and the highway on the other.

As we came out onto the river flats, we started to pass low green mounded rows of a crop that I guessed was tea, as the track moved away from the stream.

Twenty minutes out of *Nagoya*, we were up above ground level as we headed into *Gifu*, heading back out of the station in reverse



as we headed back to ground level with our backs to the driver, who I guessed had either swapped ends on the rail motor or been replaced.

With a bit over a quarter of an hour till we reached our destination, I thought that was unlikely.

Following the usual routine, once we'd alighted it was a case of straight to the hotel though this time we were late enough to check in before heading back to the station to meet up with the first of our two appointments for the day.

It was just under two years ago that *'Er Indoors* and I had headed off to *the Whitsunday Coast airport* to pick up an assistant teacher, a slightly surreal experience as a city girl from *Nagoya* got her *first taste of rural Australia*.

Three months later three members of her family had come to visit her, and we'd met her mother and two sisters on *Hamilton Island*.

Now, outside the store where she worked before coming to *Australia* (quite upmarket it was too, as far as I could tell) we met up with her mother and one of the sisters, who whisked us up to the 14th floor for a panoramic view southwards across the city towards *Nagoya Castle*.

From there we went on to the tea rooms on the 52nd floor of the *Marriott Hotel*, where we spent two hours chatting, with the flow dominated by *'Er Indoors* and *The Matriarch*, with occasional comments from *The Daughter* and *Yours Truly*.

My sporadic attempts at humour produced polite laughter all round though I was unsure whether the majority of the audience actually got the joke.

We finished with the ritual exchange of gifts as I reflected that the reason the suitcase never got any lighter was because everything you brought with you as a gift was invariably replaced by whatever they've given you in return.

We headed back to the hotel for a short rest before dinner.

With the batteries recharged we headed down to the lobby to meet up with three more of *Madam's* old high school and university chums, then headed across to the station complex again in search of a dinner venue.

The first option, a nice-looking *brasserie*, was ruled out through an inability to handle a party of five, so we ended up in an eating and drinking establishment where we worked our way through another interesting variety of small platters with a wide-ranging conversation before drawing stumps around ten.



NAGOYA > HAKONE

Thursday, 10 April 2008

The next morning we awoke to be confronted by bleak drizzly weather. When *'Er Indoors* checked the weather forecast of *The Mother's Mobile*, it wasn't promising.

Seemingly, indoors was the place to be for the next twenty-four hours or so, with rain and wind forecast for *Odawara*, where'd we be alighting from the *Shinkansen* on a day where the planned agenda included a lot of walking.

We discussed matters over breakfast, as you do, and headed upstairs to tackle the increasingly difficult task of fitting everything into the suitcase, adding items acquired since yesterday morning.

We managed to stay dry by taking the underground route to the station, arriving in plenty of time in spite of an initial mild case of panic.

On the platform, I started to realise how many *Shinkansen* services run every day along the *Tokaido* corridor. The track next door to our platform had trains departing for *Tokyo* at 9:10, 9:19 and 9:27. Our train, also to *Tokyo* (though we were disembarking at *Odawara*) left at 9:22.

In other words, four trains to the same destination leaving in the space of just under twenty minutes.

When we'd booked the day's seats we'd been told that there were no window seats available (we'd landed *Car 12 Seats 13 B&C*) but, as it turned out, there was no one in *13A*. No one arrived to claim it, so we managed to end up with the window seat since the train was travelling express from *Nagoya* to *Odawara*.

That solved a slight luggage problem on a crowded train.

While there are the predictable overhead racks for hand luggage, on *Shinkansen* there isn't a designated space for large luggage. That's hardly surprising.

Making those provisions would create space constraints in other ways.

Once the handy places most people use to stow such items have been filled there isn't much choice but to squeeze the item into the space between your legs and the seat in front of you.

Fortunately, they've allowed plenty of leg room.

I moved to *13A*, *Madam* occupied *13B*, and the suitcase had the whole space in front of *13C* to itself.

Despite the acquisition of the window seat, there wasn't much to see in a landscape misty wet with rain, so I devoted the time to writing up the previous day's leg of the journey.

Outside, the landscape was pretty much as it had been the last time we were on the coastal plain though I noticed some structures that seemed to be greenhouses.

Surprisingly, there also seemed to be a little more forest than usual. Before we moved back into the familiar urban sprawl we reached the bridge across the brackish *Hamana Lake*, a drowned river valley with its mouth blocked by sand banks.

There were, predictably, plenty of *Shinkansen* headed in the other direction.

One minute you're looking across the landscape, then there's a jolt against the window as a silver and blue blur obscures the view, which reappears almost before you've had time to blink.

We were seated on the starboard side of the train, but away to the left, we had views across to the **South Alps** on the left as *'Er Indoors* scanned that side hoping for a glimpse of **Mount Fuji**.

Though spring had well and truly sprung on the lowlands, there was plenty of snow on the peaks.

We passed tea plantings on slopes where rice cultivation would have been out of the question, as well as on flat ground.

It was probably a case of totally-misguided optimism, but it seemed that the weather away to our right was lifting though there was still heavy cloud over the mountains away to our left.

Still, there was plenty to ponder. Passing through an urban area, I was surprised to see what looked like a cathedral towering above the surroundings. That might have been in **Shizuoka** though it's impossible to tell for sure.

There are very few stations on this section of the **Shinkansen** line and, even if there were, from a train travelling at express speed, you're flat out reading the signs as you whiz past.

The other standout, apart from the odd cathedral-like structure, was the increasing number of tunnels as we headed towards **Atami**, a coastal hot spring resort that has been attracting travellers since the 8th century.

We'd just alighted from the train in **Odawara** and were looking for the most appropriate exit when a southbound **Shinkansen** rocketed through the station, showing how fast 200 kilometres per hour is when you're standing nearby.

It was literally a case of *now you see it; now you don't*.

'Er Indoors lead us off the platform thirty seconds later, single-mindedly heading off in search of the window where she could pick up a pair of **two-day Hakone passes** and leaving *Yours Truly* struggling down a flight of stairs juggling the suitcase.

About half way down I felt a twinge in my right leg, which didn't help the mobility on a day when we'd planned on doing plenty of walking.

Once we'd bought the passes, we caught a local train, which carried us to **Hakone-Yumoto**, and a bus to the **Quatre Saisons Hotel** at **Tonosawa**.

The bus dropped us off in a car park a hundred metres down the road from the hotel, leaving us with a rather scary walk along the side of a narrow winding road with traffic passing in both directions.

It was about eleven when we dropped the luggage off and walked back to the bus stop in the rain as cars rolled past in alarming proximity. I don't mind sharing the road with the odd car, but I'd prefer to have the cars passing by somewhere beyond an arm's reach.

Back in *Hakone-Yumoto*, we caught the train to *Gora*, an amazing zigzag ride that had switch-backs galore as we headed up into the mountains. The views on a fine, sunny day would have been spectacular, but the journey through the misty drizzle created a mood of primeval mystery.

From *Gora*, we took the cable car up the hill to *Sounzan*, just missing the chance to investigate a Swiss restaurant just down the road from the station.

The next stage of the quest involved the *Hakone rope-way* that would end up depositing us on the shores of *Lake Ashi*. We decided to stop for lunch at a rope-way station, *Owakudani*, one of the top spots for viewing *Mount Fuji*.

A glance at the accompanying photo shows we had *as much chance of viewing the mountain as a wheelchair-bound double amputee has of taking out the triple jump gold medal at the Olympics*.

Our plans, in other words, were never going to get off the ground.

On the other hand, it was lunchtime, and while *Madam* fancied a fried sweet potato from the lobby. I leaned in favour towards a *Japanese curry* from the restaurant upstairs, so I set off in solo mode to find my own lunch, a thousand-yen note in hand.

Seated in the restaurant, I learned that I could have the curry *by itself* for ¥850 or *with egg* for 950.





Opting for the egg, I ended up with a plate of curry and rice with a black-shelled soft boiled egg that I peeled and incorporated into the curry and rice mixture.

I don't know if that's the way it's supposed to go, but, lacking any expert guidance regarding the correct protocol, that was what I did.

Downstairs, informing '*Er Indoors* about my action, I was bemused to learn consumption of the *seven-year egg* had added seven years to my life span.

She pointed to handy packs of five similar eggs, but I decided that an extra thirty-five years on *Hughesy's* life span would probably be *too much for the superannuation fund* to handle.

An extra seven would have to do.

Back on the rope-way, we set off once again into the mist, finishing at *Togendai* on *Lake Ashi*, where we boarded what appeared to be *a replica of a pirate ship* for a sight-seeing cruise to *Moto-Hakone*.

The cruise supposedly offers one of the best *Fuji*-viewing options, but we were flat out seeing past the shores of the lake and, from *Moto-Hakone* it was impossible to see the other end of the lake, let alone any majestic mountain that might be lurking above it.

In ***Moto-Hakone*** we decided discretion and a chance to get warm was the better part of valour, so we boarded a bus that would take us straight back to the hotel, braved the traffic between the bus stop and the front door, and checked in.

When we entered the room I'd, not to put too fine a point on it, just about had enough for the day.

Then we opened the curtains, and the view that greeted us was spectacular.

The hotel is situated right on a bend in the stream that flows down to ***Hakone-Yumoto*** and, from the rooms on the stream side you have views up and down the steep-sided, heavily-forested river valley.

I would have been quite happy to spend the next hour or so sitting and gazing out the window at the views while the camera battery recovered from the day's ordeal.

'Er Indoors, on the other hand, was adamant that I take a trip downstairs to the ***onsen***, the hot-spring spa that was the reason the hotel existed.

It was difficult to argue with the notion that it would be good for the muscle that had been troubling my right leg.

On the other hand, the cleansing procedures yiy needed to carry out before you take the dip into the waters were intimidating, to say the least.

Eventually, I decided that I may as well surrender to the inevitable and traipsed off downstairs.

Under different circumstances, I could have spent longer soaking in the warm water, which does wonders for tired muscles, but the siren song of the view from an upstairs window proved much stronger than the solitary enjoyment of a giant-sized bathtub.

That pleasure could have been interrupted at any time by the arrival of other guests, so I emerged after ten minutes.

All up the ***onsen***-visit had taken twenty minutes out of premium canyon-gazing time.

I had barely settled back into a relaxed gaze across the stream before a phone call informed us that our evening meal - four or five courses in the ***classic French style*** - awaited us in the restaurant.

A bottle of ***Cuvee Quatre Saisons*** disappointed on first taste but improved considerably:

(a) with breathing (as a red wine should), or

(b) as the level lowered.

I tend to ascribe the improvement to the effects of oxygen on the contents of the bottle rather than the effects of the contents of the bottle on the drinker, but your mileage might vary.

Back upstairs, *'Er Indoors* attended to various administrative matters while I looked out across the dark stream with the *iPod* and a can of *Asahi Super Dry* for company.





HAKONE > TOKYO > KITAKAMI

Friday, 11 April 2008

A nudge in the ribs summoned me back into consciousness around 5:10 the following morning. *'Er Indoors* was quite keen for the two of us to make an early morning visit to the *onsen*.

A check revealed the facilities were closed for maintenance from 5:30 to 6:00, so we spent a few minutes discussing *Fuji*-viewing options.

Our train to the *Deep North* was due to leave *Tokyo* after three in the afternoon, and our only other commitment was a lunchtime appointment with *The Interpreter*.

That effectively gave us the whole morning to mount an attempt to glimpse the mountain.

Eventually, we decided a repeat of the *train > cable > ropeway routine* was preferable to a bus trip to *Moto-Hakone*, which would be likely to prove fruitless if the weather was cloudy.

If the weather improved, even if we didn't see *Fuji* we'd see views we'd been unable to enjoy yesterday.

Since we could save some time if we caught the train from the station at **Tonosawa** that gave me an excuse, after I was back from the **onsen**, to go for a walk and attempt to locate a station we knew had to be located higher up on the slope on the other side of the stream.

Since there were two suspension bridges across the stream, one on either side of the hotel, I guessed one or both must lead to the station, Theoretically, I should be able to complete a circuit, crossing one bridge on the way to the station, and crossing the other one on the return journey.

I planned to confirm my hunches by inquiring at **Reception**, but the area was deserted when I passed through, so I was left to trust my own instincts.

Which, of course, turned out to be totally wrong.

I turned left, on an anticlockwise loop around the route I'd visualised, crossed the downstream bridge and encountered a private residence without an obvious path towards the station.

If **The Casual Reader** is wondering how come **Hughesy** was so certain there was a station there, yesterday's train had stopped at a station clearly labelled **Tonosawa**, and I'd glimpsed a train from my stream-gazing position in the room in the evening.





Fine, I thought. It's the other bridge. Should have gone that way, since I saw cars crossing yesterday afternoon.

Heading to the upstream bridge took me past the hotel.

I checked **Reception** on the way, in the hope of gaining guidance, but the area seemed deserted, so I carried on over the bridge and followed the road from there.

The road took me to another small hotel, and there seemed to be a path that looped around behind the buildings, so I followed that.

Side tracks branched off the main path, but I figured that the route to the station would be fairly well-trodden.

I followed what looked like the best option, which gradually became less and less promising.

In fact, the further I went, the more it seemed that no one apart from the odd adventurous foreigner used the track at all.

Backtracking, I tried various paths that branched off my main track, but each of those seemed to lead to a section of pipe I assumed was associated with the spa business.

Back at the hotel, I found someone at **Reception** and was told I should turn left once I'd passed through the front door and *left again at a group of vending machines*.

At the downstream bridge, there were no vending machines, so I followed the road downhill, crossed the bridge that took the main road over the stream, and found the machines.

They were situated close to a sign bearing the words **Tonosawa station** and an arrow.

Fine, I thought. Shouldn't be too far.

Unfortunately after a couple of hundred metres, I was faced with a multitude of paths with signs in **Japanese** and unintelligible to large hairy **non-Japanese-speaking** foreigners.

Had I received the same directions when I started out I might have been inclined to explore just a tad further, but thoughts of breakfast prompted me to head back to the hotel.

The best option seemed to involve a bus back to **Hakone-Yumoto** and catching the train from there.





Breakfast involved a ***croissant***, juice, and a plate with scrambled eggs, sausages, a hash brown salad and a serve of pasta with mayonnaise, as well as the predictable tea or coffee.

Once we'd finished eating, packing and checking out we headed back to the bus stop and caught the bus to ***Hakone-Yumoto***, where we missed the train by a matter of seconds.

Never mind, we thought, the next one goes at 9:03 and the weather seems to be improving all the time, and we should be up at the cable railway before ten.

The train ride was disappointing after the previous day's misty mystery. If we were experiencing it for the first time I'm sure the reaction would have been different.



Once we were on the rope-way we started to realise that the *Fuji*-viewing prospects were virtually nil, though we were able to get a good view of the sulphurous hell of *Owakudani* on the way.

When we reached yesterday's lunch stop, we headed off in the direction in which, as far as we could make out, *Mount Fuji* must lie.

Since all we could see was a massive bank of white cloud, *Madam* ventured into a souvenir shop to verify that we were heading in the right direction.

She was informed that we were in the right place for a good view of the mountain *but not today*.

In that case, there was nothing for it but to head back down the rope-way and cable car and catch the train to a spot where we could link up with a bus.

That would take us to the hotel, where we could reclaim the luggage, cut our losses and take a taxi back to the station.

A local train should deliver us to *Odawara* in time to take our seats on the 12:35 service to *Tokyo*.

As we headed away from *Hakone*, I reflected on our friend *Triple-F* (*Frockster, Former-Fishmongrel*)'s frequent suggestions that, should we decide to visit the *Land of the Rising Sun*, it was imperative that we plant a *Bowen* mango tree on top of *Mount Fuji*.

As *'Er Indoors* scanned the scenery on our left, these words came back to haunt me in the wake of an unsuccessful day-and-a-half's attempted *Fuji*-viewing.

It was obvious these sacrilegious sentiments had come to the attention of deities guarding the mountain.

As a result, they'd decided to mask the peak behind a veil of cloud for the duration of our visit.

As the train left *Hakone*, we looked back. The cloud was slowly lifting.



駅構内禁煙

No Smoking

請勿在車站裡吸煙。

역 구내는 금연구역입니다.



不審物を発見した際は、お手をふれずに
駅係員・乗務員までご連絡ください。

Do not touch doubtful things

發現可疑物品時，請不要觸摸，立即告知車站職員或乘務員。

의심스러운 물건을 발견하셨을 경우에는 다치지 마시고 먼저 역의 직원 혹은 승무원한테 연락 주십시오.



火薬類多量のマッチ揮発油、その他法令に定められた
危険品を車内に持ち込むことはできません。

No Open Flame

禁止攜帶火藥類・大量火柴・汽油及其他法令所定の危険品上車。

화약류, 대량의 성냥, 휘발유 및 기타 법령에 규정된 위험물을 가지고 차에 오르는 것은 안됩니다.

It seemed the deities had been mollified, though from where we sat on the *Shinkansen* the summit remained shrouded by cloud, so I turned my thoughts to prospects for the next stage of the trip rather than dwelling on the past.

As we headed towards *Yokohama* and *Tokyo*, we moved into a belt of urban development, but as we pulled into *ShinYokohama*, I was surprised by the amount of greenery close to the station.

It was hardly surprising to find it was impossible to tell where *Yokohama* ended, and *Tokyo* started.

Just after one o'clock the train pulled into *Tokyo*, and we set off in search of *The Interpreter*.

Once contact was established, I found myself on the wrong side of a stream of students on an excursion as *'Er Indoors* threatened to turn a corner and disappear from view.

With disaster narrowly averted, we set off to find lunch, eventually settling for pizza before spending about an hour discussing language-related matters and wordplay in general.

I'd been bemused by the *Do not Touch Doubtful Things* signs we'd sighted around *Hakone* and had amused myself trying to figure out which of an object's properties would render it *doubtful*.

Discussion of such issues with someone whose job involves instantaneous translation from *English* into *Japanese* and *vice versa* was an interesting way to pass the time, particularly when we touched on the matter of a cake shop I'd seen references to on the internet.

It was called, believe it or not, *Pumpkin Poo*.

By 3:40 we were back on the bullet train bound for *Bashō* country.

A lengthy tunnel took us to *Ueno station*, where I sighted the new *double-decker Shinkansen* before we plunged into another tunnel.

We emerged looking out over the sprawl of *Tokyo's* northern suburbs and had hardly gone any distance before two overalled females moved through the carriage collecting rubbish, something I found odd. We'd been kept waiting on the platform while the train was cleaned before departure.

Or do travellers bring their rubbish on board with them?

After we'd passed *Omiya*, we encountered farmland once again, though there was still plenty of medium-density housing.

And in the middle of one urbanised belt, sighting *Hotel Valentine* I couldn't help wondering what sort of establishment it might be.

There's every possibility the establishment in question could attract the majority of its business from the honeymoon trade. Of course, there are some other possible explanations, and the name could originate from somewhere right over on the other side of the further reaches of left field.

The blinds on the western side of the train had been drawn to keep out the afternoon sun, and I was glad to have something to look at as we passed patches of forest interspersed with urban areas.

About ten minutes past *Utsomiya* we were finally in more or less open country stretching away to the eastern horizon as we gradually moved into serious forest in between villages and farmlands.

We passed through lengthy tunnels as the land became hillier and banks of dull grey cloud started to develop overhead.

Glancing across, someone on the port side of the carriage had raised their sunshade.

I caught sight of snow-capped mountains.

The mountains away to the east must have been considerably lower or under the influence of warmer conditions near the coast since there was no snow to be seen in that direction.

We also noticed that we were moving back into areas of cherry-blossom, and on the edge of *Sendai*, I caught sight of one of the few freight trains I'd spotted since I'd first boarded a train in *Japan*.

The high-speed commuter lines are obviously separated from the corridors that carry the quantities of freight that an economy the size of *Japan's* must generate.

We arrived in *Kitakami*, our base for the next thirty-six hours comfortably after dark and immediately settled into the routine of booking the next leg of the trip.

That took some time since *Sunday's* travel involves two changes of train on the long haul back to base in *Kōbe*.

An additional complication reared its head as *'Er Indoors* requested a starboard-side window seat on the final leg, a final attempt to catch a glimpse of *Mount Fuji* in the wake of *Triple-F's fantasising*.

The only available reserved seats were in the smoking section of the train, so we decided to cut our losses and declined.

While these negotiations were in train, someone I guessed was *our host* for the next day and a half arrived, mobile in hand, obviously looking for someone.

Having established that she was looking for us, we all waited till negotiations had been concluded and the tickets processed before greetings had been exchanged and then headed off for my first encounter with a modern *Japanese house*.



Apart from visits to *The Mother's apartment*, which is some forty years old, I'd only seen the external aspect of the *Japanese house*.

We arrived outside a small two-storey house occupying a small block and guarded by a small hairy dachshund named *Kotaro*.

Inside, the canine was transformed from watchdog to lapdog as he attempted to protect the property through an attempt to lick all and sundry to death.

The new nickname of *Grog Dog* seemed like the way to go when faced with a creature that is obviously a *major league Licker*.

With the preliminary pleasantries done, we sat down to supper, and talked till ten, while a small brown dog embarked a strategy of *subjugation by dissolution*.



KITAKAMI AND ENVIRONS

Saturday, 12 April 2008

Don't let anyone try to tell you that it's impossible to get a good night's sleep on a *futon*.

Not the *futon* they'll sell you in your local downtown furniture store, *one with four legs, a metal frame and a basic mattress* - I'm talking the *mattress on the floor* routine with a good layer of insulation over the top to keep out the *Kitakami* chill.

I slept like a log (and probably sawed a few) before rising ultra-fashionably late on a day when the first item on the agenda was attending to *the laundry*.



Once we'd arranged the washing on the upstairs balcony, the thoughts turned to sightseeing.

It was around eleven when two *Japanese* women, one large hairy foreigner and one small hairy dog found themselves *en route* to the gorge at *Genbi* where we would, I was informed, be having *flying dumplings* - which I assumed would be lunch.

I wasn't too sure what was in store since I'd heard a variety of pronunciations, *flying*, *frying*, *dumplings* and *dungo*.

And I was kept in suspense since, immediately after parking we plunged into the *Sahara Glass Hall*, a store selling glass objects in multitudinous forms.

This, I gathered, was a stratagem to avoid paying for parking.

Having established our status as at-least-potential-customers, the *Grog Dog* was retrieved from the car, and we set off for the gorge, which was a short stroll away.

A bridge took us over the stream, and a right-hand turn had us headed directly towards flying dumpling territory.

I had assumed *flying dumplings* were not, as the name suggested, something resembling a food fight, and '*Er Indoors*' suspected we were headed somewhere we would be throwing items, possibly as some sort of ritual.

Neither of us was any the wiser when *our host* knelt down, placed some money in a small basket and used a wooden mallet to tap a wooden object (twice).

The basket, attached to a device resembling the flying fox familiar to *Boy Scouts* the world over, then zoomed across the river to a small shelter high on the opposite bank, returning a matter of moments later filled with a double serve of *dumplings and green tea*.

The dumplings were *dungo*, a dough made from rice flour and water, rolled into a ball, boiled, grilled and served, three to a stick, dunked in sweet sticky soy sauce, red bean paste with sugar and soy sauce with mirin.

I found them an acquired taste and one which I have, to date, failed to acquire, but the *green tea* went down well in the conditions.





Back in the car, we headed across country, past a *Buddha's* face etched into a stone cliff on the way to *Motsuji*, a temple complex near *Mount Toyama*.

The main feature is a garden from the *Heian Period (794 - 1192)*. The site dates back to *850* and grew to an enormous complex with five hundred dormitories for monks spread around forty places of worship before fires destroyed the original buildings.

One building, *Jogyoda Hall*, was reconstructed in *1732*, but most of the buildings on the site are much more recent.

The fires did not destroy the *Pure Land Garden*, the real centre-piece of the site and is the venue for various festivals and ritual observances in *January* and *May* each year.

From *Motsuji*, we planned to go for lunch, then head to the nearby *Golden Buddha*, but drizzle set in while we were eating.

The *Buddha*-visit, which would have involved an uphill walk through the forest was a late scratching from the program.



Instead, we took our time driving through the sort of countryside I'd been looking at as our train whizzed past.

Back in *Kitakami*, we found the washing, given the prevailing weather conditions, had hardly dried at all.

After rearranging *the laundry* in more favourable drying conditions,

I fled to the warmth of the *futon* for a power nap while the girls, who hadn't seen each other for something like a dozen years, continued catching up on old times in the warmth of the living area.

I wandered back downstairs around five, spending an hour working on the *Travelogue* as the others flicked through photo albums, warm and comfortable in the radiated output of the electric heater while the temperature outside plunged well into the single-figure range.

It was warm enough in the living room, but venturing away from the heated area reinforced my sense of wonder at how the people who occupied the wooden buildings we'd seen at *Takayama* managed to survive the sub-zero winters.

Around six, there was movement at the station, and various costume adjustments were made while a taxi was ordered.

It must have been peak hour, or maybe we didn't peek out often enough (there was no way we were going to stand outside for any longer than was necessary) because it required a second call and a further wait before the cab arrived.

Hadori, a *yakiniku* place in the downtown entertainment quarter, is a small operation with the feel of a local/neighbourhood eatery, though I was assured that there were probably other people sitting around the eight or nine tables who'd travelled at least as far (a ¥900 cab fare) as we had.

We sat down at a table with a gas-fired grill in the middle, and plates of meat and related products varying in price according to quality were delivered for us to cook to our liking.

The recipe from there ran something like this:

*Dip cooked portions in soy sauce before wrapping them in lettuce leaves (**chilli** optional).*

Accompany the lettuce parcels with rice and wash the lot down with copious quantities of draught beer.

In short, my kind of place...

After dinner, while we could have walked home, bearing in mind that you can't see approaching rain after dark, wiser heads prevailed, and we decided that a cab was the drier and warmer option.

Once I decided to call it a night, I managed another good night's sleep on the *futon*.

I suspect this was largely due to the human equivalent of hibernation.

Once under the covers, it seemed the body shut down completely and, despite having consumed large quantities of high-quality amber fluid I didn't emerge from the warmth until absolutely necessary, which was well over nine hours later.



KITAKAMI > TOKYO > KOBE

Sunday, 13 April 2008

After surfacing shortly after seven, we had enough time for a shower and a leisurely breakfast before packing and preparing for the long haul back to home base in *Kōbe*.

When I looked outside, the weather offered a pleasant contrast to the day before, being fine and sunny rather than cold and overcast.

That prompted an ill-considered and overoptimistic decision.

We consigned the warmest clothing to the suitcase, although we did consider wearing it to the station, then switching it to the backpack.

If we'd risen half an hour later, what came next might not have been a problem.

Once packed, we had about half an hour of spare time between when we finished packing and the optimum time for arriving on the platform at the station.



Our host suggested a detour to enjoy some *sakura* since there was a nice spot more or less on the way to the station and the flowers were just starting to appear.

Of course, we hadn't stuck our noses outside at this point.

Still, it *seemed* like a warm sunny day.

The astute reader can guess what came next.

First up, it was much colder than anticipated.

Second, once we'd reached the spot on the banks of the *Kitakami River*, preparations for the cherry blossom festivities were well underway.

Although optimum viewing time would be much later in the week, snow-capped peaks to the west were a spectacular sight, so we just had to leave the warmth of the car and take a stroll to the optimum (and, predictably furthest) spot for a photographic memory of the sight.

Once we'd made it back to the car, reached the station, bid farewell to *Our Host* and *Grog Dog*, and climbed the stairs to the platform it was only a matter of a few minutes before the train arrived, and we were on our way again.

Once again we found ourselves on the starboard side of the train, and since this time we were headed in the opposite direction that gave us a good view of the mountains to the west.

As the **Shinkansen** rocketed along we reached the places we'd visited the previous day in less than half the time the road trip had taken. By the time we passed **Kurikoma-Kōgen** the mountains had receded, and we were travelling over wide plains with extensive farmland and some hills.

The train we'd boarded in **Kitakami** was a local **Shinkansen**, stopping at all stations, and with a long haul ahead of us, we were going to change to a limited express at **Sendai**.

That was a prospect that evoked visions of a frantic rush up and down escalators, of mistaken platforms and all sorts of potential disasters.

The reality?

We alighted, walked no more than twenty metres, and we were standing at the relevant embarkation point for the next train which was due in about seven minutes.

The weather had become bleak and overcast after blue skies further north, and the platform at **Sendai** was colder than **Kitakami**, which we'd left an hour and a half earlier and had been *quite cold enough, thank you very much*.

After **Sendai**, the mountains (or reasonably large hills) were much closer to the line, and in some places we passed virtual oceans of **sakura** though the trees were not yet totally in bloom.

At the same time, the weather closed in, bringing drizzly rain, weather that in the hills around **Hakone** had seemed mystic and mysterious, but in the lowlands was merely dreary and dismal.

I noted with interest that in some areas we passed through where there weren't too many buildings over two storeys high the landscape was dominated by *towering net-like structures*. It turned out they surrounded the golf driving ranges, protecting innocent passers-by from flying golf balls.

Once we'd alighted in **Tokyo** we ran into the couple we were meeting for lunch, more by good luck than good management, wandered off for a decent **Italian** lunch at **Papa Milano**, beside the station, and returned for the final **Shinkansen** leg to **Kōbe**.

The major question was the possibility of sighting **Mount Fuji**, and we had thoughts of trying our luck and seeing if we could grab a starboard side window seat in one of the non-reserved carriages.

That would have involved queuing in conditions that were even colder than we'd experienced further north at **Kitakami** and **Sendai**, so we took the soft option, standing in the heated waiting room on the platform while the cleaners prepared the train for departure.

We had seats 15B&C in car 14, with 15A vacant, but, given the number of passengers it seemed highly unlikely our luck would last.

The spare seat remained vacant when we pulled into **Shinagawa**, and as we left the **Tokyo** high-rise behind, looking away to the right, there was no sign of any mountains whatsoever away to the west.

At **Yokohama**, the vacant seat was occupied, and **Madam's** interest was sparked as mountains came into view to the west, but the conditions limited visibility as we sped past **Odawara** and into **Atami**.

The mountain gods, it seemed, had still not relented.

As we continued southwards the weather improved as we passed what could have been (judging by the angle of the lower slopes) the bottom of **Mount Fuji**, though the top was shrouded in the sort of mist that meant we couldn't be sure.

Never mind, we told ourselves. Gives us something to look forward to next time.

Back in **Kōbe**, we made our way to the **Crowne Plaza Hotel**, conveniently situated right next door to **ShinKōbe**, checked in and headed into the neighbouring shopping complex for dinner before heading back to the room.

Free access to the internet from within the room (in most other places you had to stand at a terminal in the lobby) gave me a leisurely opportunity to clear some of the backlog of email that had accumulated since we'd left home.



3

JAPAN 2008: THE LAST BIT



KŌBE

Monday, 14 April 2008

After the previous day's long haul, *Madam's* detailed research paid off big time with a leisurely morning, a midday checkout time and no appointments until the evening.

I kept plugging away at the email mountain, a slow process since most of it was only accessible through *Telstra webmail*, which is hardly the speediest of conveyances.

From the 28th floor of the hotel, which is on the western edge of downtown *Kōbe*, we had a view away across the long narrow city wedged between mountains to the west and the *Inland Sea*.

Once the preliminaries were complete, and the suitcase packed, it was time for *a brief review of options* for the next hour or two.

This amounted to a choice between going straight to lunch at the *German bakery* or working up an appetite by taking a stroll around the *interesting houses* in an area beside the hotel (on the southern side, our outlook was to the north) which was, however, a bit hilly.

Bearing the jobs that needed to be carried out later on in the day in mind, I thought walking up hill and down dale would take up time that could be more profitably spent getting these activities out of the way, so my preference was an early lunch.

Once we left the hotel and surveyed the topography, I was sure I'd pulled the right rein.

The slopes leading to the interesting houses, while not *quite* vertical were not all that far off it.

Freundlieb is located in a converted church on a quiet back street a short walk away from the hotel.

There is a downstairs retail section we walked straight past, and a stylish cafe on the first floor.

We ordered the *Monday sandwich special* for 'Er Indoors (soup, salmon and vegetable sandwich, drink and ice cream for ¥1080) and a *roast beef sandwich* (¥1600) for me.

If I'd been on the ball I could have ordered a half bottle of *Valpolicella* to go with it, but the sun wasn't quite over the yardarm, so I opted for a *cappuccino* instead.

Both meals were substantial enough for a satisfying brunch though *Madam* claimed she had difficulty tasting the *salmon* in hers.

With brunch out of the way, we rolled back to the hotel, collected the luggage from the cloak room and boarded the subway, *Myodani*-bound. A quick taxi transfer took us to *The Mother's* place.

A quick report on our activities over the previous week preceded a rearrangement of luggage for the next couple of days (*Kōbe > Kyoto > Nara > Kōbe*).

Having arrived with two large suitcases, we'd transferred to one (mine) for the *Kōbe > Kanazawa > Takayama > Nagoya > Hakone > Kitakami > Kōbe* leg we'd just completed.

Figuring we only needed a couple of changes of clothes for the next three days we packed what we thought we'd need into a smaller overnight bag.

The casual observer might be puzzled by frequent relocations, particularly when we were staying in *Kōbe*.

So, initially, was I. Once we were on the ground, however, things made a bit more sense.

The first night in **Kōbe** had been somewhere to crash after the flight, a place with a good view, an easy transfer from the **airport shuttle** to the hotel, and, most importantly, a **smorgasbord** breakfast.

Those factors were irrelevant for the rest of the stay, and the location on the edge of the harbour was a little out of the way.

And **'Er Indoors** had found a good deal for one night.

The second place had been chosen for ease of transfer to and from the train to **Osaka**, remembering our return was probably going to be rather late.

The third spot gave easy access to trains to **Kyoto** (both the local service that delivered us into the *Kyotic* cherry blossom **Sunday** and the **Shinkansen** that was the first leg of the big loop journey.

Back in **Kōbe**, we'd stayed next door to **ShinKōbe** for **Sunday** night, close to somewhere we could eat and more or less on the way to **The Mother's** place.

Where we were headed for the night might have been a fair step from **Sannomiya** but offered a substantial **Viking** breakfast that we thought would fit in with the following day's travel plans (in other words we probably wouldn't need to eat until the evening).

Once we'd booked in for the night, it was off to meet **Gomi-san** and **Sakai-san** (or so we thought, a late email *en route* to the rendezvous advised that **Sakai-san** was a late scratching). Once we'd arrived at the building, it was a case of into the lift, up to the 28th floor, and negotiating the important matter of **free drinks** for the night.

Actually, the use of the term **free drinks** is misleading.

There was a one-off charge (¥1200 for males, ¥900 for females), but a bloke who can't knock over **twelve Australian dollars' worth of grog** in three and a half hours doesn't qualify as a serious drinker.

Faced with a choice of beer, **saké**, basic spirits and wine we stuck with the wine, where there was a selection of four reds and four whites (**Rosemount Estate Jigsaw** labels included).

Out of the **Italian and Californian wines**, there was nothing to match what we'd come to expect around the **Rosemount Jigsaw** price point.

Dinner was another **Viking** affair, and while it wasn't the greatest spread I've ever seen, there was plenty to eat and quite good value for money.

Having eaten, we sat chewing the fat and savouring the **Sangiovese** that we'd agreed was the pick of the non-Oz wines on offer until the management called *Time*. At that point, predictably, we drew stumps and decanted ourselves into the darkness.



KOBE > KYOTO

Tuesday, 15 April 2008

Two weeks down, one week (more or less) to go.

We headed downstairs to the *Viking* breakfast just after eight, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and in need of substantial nutrition to carry us through a walking-oriented day.

And, if the range of goodies didn't match what we'd encountered at our previous *Viking* breakfast at the start of the sojourn, the quality was, we thought, better.

From there it was a hike to *Sannomiya* and an hour's train journey to the outskirts of *Kyoto* (*Hankyu Arashiyama* station).

We placed the baggage in a coin locker, wandered over the river through the cherry-blossoms and caught a bus into the hills, with a basic plan to walk back downhill from *Toriimoto*.

The first part of the walk took us along a *traditional Japanese street* lined with houses before we stopped in at *Kyoto Municipal Preservation Museum of Saga Toriimoto's Streets and Structures*, an impressive title for an impressive little establishment.

The museum is a reconstruction of a *Meiji Era* townhouse, with photographs and an interesting model of the district as it was in the early twentieth century. But we got the most benefit out of talking to the attendant, who was keen to point out details we mightn't have noticed.

Toriimoto is spectacular in autumn, and, with tree-covered hills surrounding the area, it would be a fantastic spectacle.





But we were there in spring, and, unless they'd been pointed out to us, would probably have walked straight past the tiny and delicate maple flowers if they had not been brought to our attention.

We eventually found ourselves at *Gioji* temple, and wandered through the garden, marvelling at the translucent beauty of newly formed leaves as the morning sun filtered through the canopy over our heads.

It's the sort of scene you just don't experience in areas where all the trees are evergreens.

The effect was utterly magical, and, again I was fascinated by the mosses that covered the ground under the trees.



The sight was almost enough to make me want to relocate somewhere temperature and rainfall would encourage the development of moss in the garden.

From *Gioji*, we went on to *Nisonin*, which dates back to the first half of the ninth century.

The main hall was reconstructed in 1521 after being destroyed by fire.

From there we strolled along the bamboo path.

Our final stop for the day's temple tour was *Tenryuji*, a *World Heritage* site dating back to **1339**.

Most of the buildings on the site are more recent due to destruction associated with internal conflicts over the years.

Although fire destroyed the buildings several times over, the landscape garden, one of the oldest of its kind, dates back to the founding abbot, who designed the layout.



We took our time walking around the garden, stopping for a rest at the bamboo grove near the *North Entrance*, and strolling back through the cherry-blossom.

By this stage, we were just about templed-out, so it was back to the station, retrieve the luggage, and *Ho!* for the night's accommodation, which turned out to be an economy room with an economy-sized bathtub to match.

Right at the time when a lengthy soak in a warm bath would have been wonderfully restorative.

And it was important to rest up before the evening, when we would catch up with *The Sponge* and *Lighting Dude*, two members of a theatre troupe that had passed through *Bowen* about eighteen months ago.



They were doing an *Arts Council* gig around the district's schools on their way to the *Pacific Edge Arts Conference* in Mackay.

We'd caught up with *The Interpreter* in *Tokyo*, and prior experience suggested the evening would be a rather fluid affair.

A flurry of e-mails established the plan for the night.

Meet at Karasuma Station and then head somewhere to eat, and, what is more important, drink.

The Sponge is as the nickname suggests, partial to a drink.

And so, of course, am I.

Once at the station, we found two familiar faces along with a third member of the troupe who'd been enlisted for the night because she was *a good drinker* and knew her way around value-for-money eating and drinking establishments in downtown **Kyoto**.

We stood around chatting for a while waiting for the final member of the party to arrive.

Once she had, we set off on a route march that turned to the left and headed into a basement just as I was about to ask why we'd set off on a lengthy excursion *without a compass and a cut lunch*.

We removed the shoes, placed them in a locker, and were ushered into an alcove where we set about organising copious quantities of food and drink.

Beer seemed to be the logical starter, and there was a discussion (in **Japanese**) about appropriate sizes of drinking vessels.

Sponge, having spent a day on the promotional trail, was not in a mood to drink out of a tooth glass. He uttered what sounded like **Dynamo**, but I heard it as **Dynamite**.

And, given the size of the thirst, nothing less than **Dynamite** would suffice.

When the first round arrived, I discovered **Dynamo** denoted a vessel containing substantially more than a pint glass.

For the next couple of hours, **Hughesy** and **The Sponge** washed down another array of assorted dishes, nothing in the high-class-gourmet category, but good solid blotting paper to soak up copious draughts of **Dynamite** before changing to **saké**.

Along the way, we discovered **Lighting Dude** needed a change of nickname, due to an aversion to flying. He was now to be known as **Chicken**.

It didn't, however, stop there. Before much more time had elapsed, we learnt he was also one of the very few people in **Japan** who *doesn't own a mobile phone*.

In fact, there are probably two people in the whole of the country who don't own one of the ubiquitous devices and they both work in the administrative section of a certain children's theatre company.

Which explains why he is now known as **Double Chicken**.

As **Hughesy** and **The Sponge** demolished the **Dynamite** the third member of the troupe kept up, decided beer lacked *oomph* and switched to **Shōchū**, earning the title of **Double Sponge** due to her capacity for strong drink.

She also expressed a desire to visit **Australia** to demolish large quantities of steak.



Later, I switched to *saké*. *The Sponge* is an expert on the subject, with an interest in smaller regional producers.

On a future visit he's supposed to act as the guide on an intensive *saké*-appreciation course.

It was some time after ten-thirty when we paid the bill (a reasonable ¥1500 per head to cover food and drink for six people, including three very thirsty ones) and set off for the station to see the others off on their way home before wandering back to the hotel feeling no pain whatsoever.



KYOTO > NARA

Wednesday, 16 April 2008

After the previous night's excesses, a basic breakfast was all we needed before setting off once again on the temple circuit.

Alarm, bells should have been ringing when we walked out of the hotel and boarded a bus heading towards our initial destination since there were an inordinate number of high school students out on the streets when (just before nine o'clock) they should have been in class.



Our first stop, *Rokuonji* (Deer Garden temple), but usually referred to as *Kinkakuji* (Golden Pavilion temple) dates back to the late fourteenth-century.

In keeping with its reputation, the *Golden Pavilion* was spectacular but, on a day when half the High Schools in *Japan* seemed to have organized a cultural awareness excursion, extremely crowded.

We started our tour beside the *Mirror Pool* where the crowd meant hundreds of digital cameras were pointed at the three-storey structure with its gold-leaf covering.

From there, we made our way through the strolling garden that makes up the rest of the temple grounds, past the pond of *Anmintaku* enjoying the foliage along the way.



Outside, we followed the road down to *Ryoanji* temple, thinking, by the lack of high school students on the ground, we might just have given them the slip, but as we neared the temple, there they were in swarms again.

The best way to experience *The Temple of the Peaceful Dragon* would involve a lengthy gaze at the temple's famous dry landscape rock garden, with its fifteen boulders placed on a sea of raked gravel and dating back to the late 1400s.

And, in the best of all possible worlds visitors would have the time and space to verify for themselves that the stones have been placed so that only fourteen are visible at one time.

The sheer weight of numbers in a confined space limited most people around us to a couple of hurried photos to remind themselves of the visit.



Away from the rock garden, on the other hand, there was room to move, and we took our time walking around spectacular picture gardens, with masses of *sakura* over the moss-covered ground.

Outside, we followed the road to *Ninnaji* temple but, faced with another swarm of school-kids and a *sakura* display that didn't look as impressive as what we'd just experienced, decided we'd head downtown for lunch.

A definite case of total sensory overload, though the crowds didn't help.

In the city, we found a cafe near the hotel that reminded *Madam* of the places she used to visit in her student days.

Perusing the menu, I decided to go for something called *taco rice*, which turned out to be a *chilli con carne* remarkably similar to the one I throw together whenever I get the chance while *Madam* opted for *spaghetti with vongole*.

With lunch out of the way, we collected the luggage, walked back to the station and caught the train to *Nara*.



Once we'd arrived and checked in, we could have headed out for a stroll but decided to take it easy in the room until our dinner appointment with *The Sister* and family.

I'd just finished running a hot bath when a phone call advised *Madam* that *Her Sister* and *The Niece* had arrived downstairs, so I took my time in a soaking bath and left them with the opportunity to chat without having to worry about amusing a *large hairy non-Japanese-speaking foreigner*.

Out of the bath, with those considerations in mind I took my time heading downstairs.

I'd made it downstairs just before six so, once the preliminary pleasantries had been completed there was nothing for it but to head off towards the restaurant where we'd be dining that evening.

After the now-familiar shoe-removal ritual upon arrival, we were ushered to a private dining room to be joined shortly afterwards by *The Brother-in-Law*, a very busy middle-level executive who simplified what could well have been a lengthy ordering process by glancing at the list of the restaurant's *Top Ten dishes* and ordering the first six.

The *roast beef* was particularly good and, in a moment of weakness I was persuaded to try the *Korean-style raw tuna*, which wasn't bad either. In fact, the whole six dishes were all excellent, it was just a matter of those two sticking in the memory.

I enjoyed a good *Spanish Tempranillo* as we discussed *Australian real estate prices* and other matters of interest before the walk back to the hotel, where we didn't quite manage the usual good night's sleep in a very cramped room where the bed was only accessible from one side.



NARA > KOBE

Thursday, 17 April 2008

When we headed downstairs in the morning, we were surprised to find the breakfast room contained a higher foreigner quotient than we'd become used to sighting.

That gave us something to discuss once the final run-through of the plans for the day had been completed.

I suspect the phenomenon had something to do with the fact that the hotel was part of a ***Western-style*** chain (***Comfort Inn***) rather than one of the privately owned ***Japanese business hotels*** we'd previously booked.

It was difficult, given the overall level of ambient background noise to detect where all these westerners had come from.

The couple at the next table were definitely speaking ***French***, and there was a young ***American*** woman on the other side of the room expressing very definite opinions about the relative virtues of the different sight-seeing options on offer around ***Nara*** in a voice that carried right round the room.



Don't get me wrong.

There's a possibility that *Miss America* had qualifications that entitled her to express the forthright opinions she was putting forward.

But as I listened I couldn't help contrasting her attitude with the older *Americans* we'd passed during our wanderings around the picture garden at *Ryoanji*.

Their expressions of joy, pleasure and wonder made me half-inclined to approach them to inquire if they'd been to *Toriiimoto* (our destination the day before) and suggest a trip there would probably be something they'd find enjoyable.

But, for some reason I didn't, and as I listened (not that I had much choice in the matter) to the advice being dispensed from the other side of the room I was glad, in a way, I hadn't foisted my *ultra-novice opinions* on an unsuspecting audience.

The reader might suggest I'm doing exactly that right here, but anyone who has read this far can hardly be described as *an unsuspecting audience*.



With the now-familiar *we're leaving the hotel* ritual (pack, check out, cloakroom ticket) negotiated, we headed to **Todaiji** temple, the home of the eighth-century **Vairocana Buddha**. Once we'd boarded the bus, numbers of vaguely familiar-looking students in school uniforms suggested a repeat of the **Kyoto** crowd scenes was on the cards.

That is more or less how things panned out once we joined the throng moving through the drizzle down the tree-lined avenue towards the temple.

Along the way, we encountered the first of the famous **Nara** deer.

I found myself, for some reason, humming a bastardised version of Tiny Tim's minor hit (*Tiptoe through the deer poop with me*) as I watched an attendant sweeping up the detritus while some teenagers tried to work out a strategy to deal with demands for food from a particularly insistent deer.



Inside the complex, we headed towards the *Great Buddha Hall*, which, 57 metres across, 50 metres back and 49 metres high, is the *largest wooden structure in the world*.

Impressive figures.

All the more impressive when you learn the structure is 33% smaller than the eighth-century version. It was rebuilt after the first and second incarnations were destroyed by fire in **1180** and **1567**.

Inside the building, the fifteen-metre *Buddha*, which had almost bankrupted *Japan's* economy by the time it was completed in **751** takes your breath away as it towers over you, surrounded by smaller statues of other *Buddhist figures*.



Outside we took an extended ramble around the complex with structures dating back as far as the seventh century before moving through *Nara Park* to the nearby *Kasuga Grand Shrine*.

By the time we finished, we'd had close to three hours of temple and shrine-viewing, so we headed back to the city centre, where we found a teppan-style eatery for lunch.

Madam had a pancake, and I settled for beef noodles, both cooked on an iron hot plate in the middle of the table.

We were seated on the *Western-style* right-hand side while opposite us people sat at low *Japanese style no shoes* tables.

From there, we passed through alleys lined with small shops, becoming more than a little disoriented as we attempted to find our way back to the hotel to reclaim the baggage.

It took us an hour to make our way back to *Kōbe*, with the last leg a very fast limited express after a change of train in *Osaka*.

Arriving at the *Okura Hotel*, we opted for a rest before the night's appointment with *Diamond Chef* and *Drinker Dude*.



We caught a shuttle back to *Sannomiya*, and *Madam* headed off to replenish the finances at the *Post Office* while I went for a browse in *Tower Records* hoping I'd find the new album by the reformed, but sadly Stanshall-less *Bonzo Dog Band*.

As she headed off towards the *Post Office*, *Madam* expressed the opinion that I was highly unlikely to find what I was looking for because it was *far too obscure* an item for a *Japanese music emporium* to have in stock.

As it turned out, the Bonzos album was nowhere to be found. But a brief browse through what was on offer revealed (I'm not making this up) the equally-obscure *Doctor Strangely Strange*, the first album by the *J. Geils Band* and an album by *Ed Sanders* called *Beer Cans On The Moon*. I seem to recall the latter met an almost universal thumbs down when released in *1973*.

Given the time for a careful survey, I would have managed to uncover even more weird and wonderful obscurities.

As it was, however, the browsing was interrupted by the arrival of *'Er Indoors* who announced the night's dinner and drinking companions were waiting for us under the railway.

That set us off at a fair clip towards the area in question, and when the rendezvous had been made, we plunged into the maze of alleys and side streets that make up the downtown eating and drinking quarter.

Arriving at an almost inconspicuous *Chinese* restaurant, *Diamond Chef* looked after the order while the rest of us directed our attention to beer, fortunately available in *Dynamo*-sized glasses.

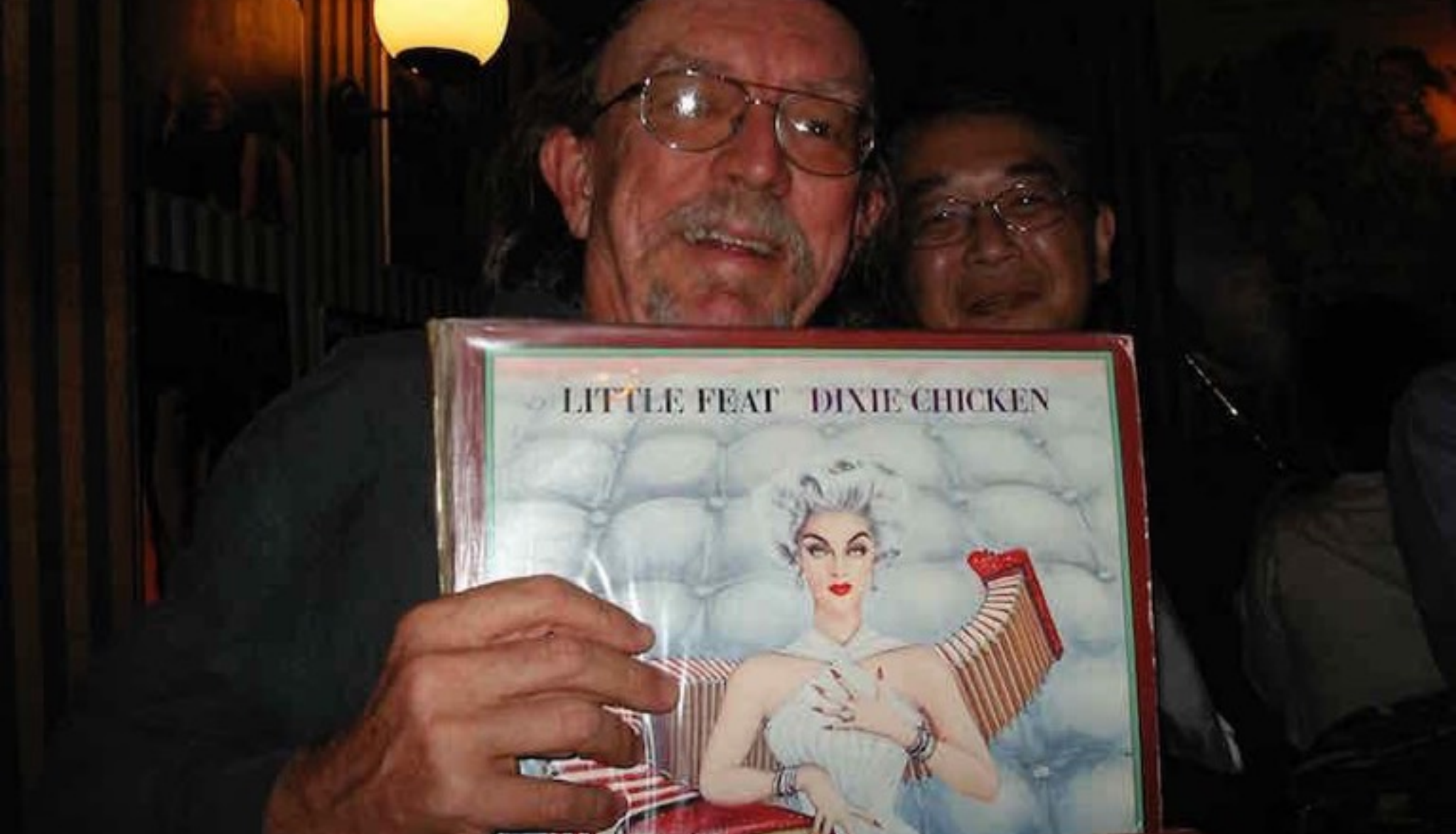
What followed was a range of dishes, all of them excellent, including the without-a-doubt-best *lemon chicken* I've had in a long time (actually the only *lemon chicken* I've had this century but much better than any version I'd encountered previously).

Interestingly, when the first platter of appetisers arrived, and I'd had the presence of jellyfish pointed out, once I'd sampled one of the surprisingly-crunchy little morsels no one seemed inclined to partake in any of the remaining supply.

I'll be happy to avoid jellyfish in the future, but another item on the same platter, a *pickled cucumber*, was easily the best preparation of that particular vegetable I've encountered.

Once dinner was out of the way, it was back to the side streets and back alleys on the way to *Piccolo*, an interesting bar that had been described as *somewhere I would love*.





The only identification in an obscure back alley is an illuminated sign. A narrow staircase with a U-turn midway leads to an ultra-small cramped area with seats for no more than a dozen drinkers and a total capacity of about twenty.

There's almost as much room behind the bar as on the drinkers' side, but I guess that amount of space is needed to provide access to the shelves of vinyl LPs that the bartender, an obvious survivor of late-60s or early 70s time warp, will play on request.

My request for Little Feat produced copies of ***Dixie Chicken*** and ***The Last Record Album***, and we even managed to get a couple of tracks in before the Feat were superseded by other requests.

After we were well and truly settled in, having scored four seats at the bar, ***Diamond Chef*** and ***Drinker Dude*** were keen to learn my rating of the place.

My response?

I came all the way from Australia to drink at this bar.

Which was, more or less, true.

We managed to drink and talk till well after eleven. By that time the last shuttle bus back to the hotel had well and truly left, so we were forced to catch a cab back so we could crash for the last time on this venture onto ***Japanese soil***.



KOBE > SOUTHPORT

Friday, 18 April 2008

When I awoke just after 7:30 without any daylight seeping into the room it took a few moments to register that we were well into our last day of the overseas portion of the trip.

Not that this had anything to do with the events of the previous evening, you understand.

Absence of daylight when I woke up was something I'd noticed everywhere we stayed.

Curtain or shutter arrangements guaranteed unless you set an alarm you were not going to be aroused before you were well and truly ready.

We had intended to head downtown for breakfast (a free shuttle bus encourages things like that), but a glance out of the window prompted a revision to the planned activities for the day.

It was raining, and while we could probably have stayed dry if we stuck to *Plan A*, we decided to opt for a leisurely morning, a late

checkout, lunch and a spot of shopping before we headed out to *Myodani* to pack and wait for the shuttle service that would ferry us to *the airport*.

Poking my nose out the door, I discovered that the morning *English language paper* had arrived, and I settled down for a chance to catch up on events in the world at large.

We'd managed to avoid news bulletins for the last two weeks, and anything we had heard was in *Japanese* (which meant, of course, *that it was Greek to me. Thank-you William Shakespeare*).

You wouldn't expect much *Australian news* in the *International Herald Tribune*, in association with the *Asahi Shimbun*, but a front-page article with the headline *Australian drought dooms rice farms* dealt with the international ramifications of the collapse of *Australia's rice production*.

After I'd taken my time over the paper, there was time for a long soaking bath while *Madam* took a phone call from *The Sister* before we packed and checked out just after eleven.

That allowed us to take the 11:15 shuttle to *Sannomiya*, where an early lunch seemed to be a good idea.

'Er Indoors had spotted references to a couple of possible options, including an Indian curry house somewhere nearby. We'd initially planned to head in that direction, but she mentioned a nice bread place as an alternative before making a major strategic mistake.

I'd completely forgotten the existence of a *Kōbe* equivalent of the *Gumbo & Oyster Bar* where we'd had lunch in *Kanazawa*, but when she pointed out that it not only existed but happened to be located right in this very building decision was easy.

The order, once we'd arrived and been seated, was equally straightforward. Oysters and *gumbo* for *Hughesy*, the lady's set for *Madam* plus the obligatory glass of *Chablis* to go with the oysters.

Unfortunately, the oysters arrived as ordered rather than the double helping we'd had in *Kanazawa*. But they were big, plump and excellent *au naturel* with a touch of *chilli* and tomato sauce.

I enjoyed the *gumbo*, and *Madam's* set (salad, a platter of Cajun/Creole nibbles including *ceviche*, seafood pasta and a slice of chocolate cake) looked as good as the few morsels I managed to sample tasted.

If I had a complaint, it would have concerned lack of *New Orleans music* in the background.

But you can't have everything, and it would be unreasonable to expect it.

Both the *Kanazawa* and *Kōbe* establishments are part of a nation-wide chain, so I have a feeling I'll be revisiting *G&O* from time to time over the next few years.



After lunch, I headed to *Tower Records* to pick up a couple of items I'd spotted, then headed across to buy *Madam's* new suitcase and a book about translation matters then it was down to the subway and off to *Myodani*.

A visit to the electrical store for a digital camera was the next item on the agenda, and I sat with the luggage and geriatric *Japanese* while *Madam* completed the purchase.

From there, we caught a cab to *The Mother's* and got stuck into the final packing, which was straightforward as far as I was concerned.

Clean clothes in the upper compartment, everything else except for the things I needed for the flight down below.

Madam's procedure was more complicated.

While she continued packing, I got out of the way, wrote up the notebook and finished the half bottle of *Brown Brothers Patricia Noble Riesling 2000* that had been sitting in the fridge for the past three or four years (and very nice it was, too).

Once the packing was out of the way, there was nothing to do but sit back and wait for the taxi shuttle that was due to collect us at 4:50. It arrived on time, giving us just under two hours to enjoy the views as the driver navigated his way through various pickup points and eventually deposited us outside the departures section of *Kansai International*.

Checking in involved a lengthy queue since two flights were scheduled to depart simultaneously, one to *Cairns*, the other to *Brisbane* and *Sydney* - and both seemed to be rather heavily booked.

Then, once the luggage was off our hands, it was a matter of killing two hours before boarding.

The first bit was fairly straightforward.

A stroll through the duty-free shopping, a survey of the meal options and a decision that *Madam* would head for the *sushi/sashimi* outlet while I wolfed down some pasta with a glass of red.

Since we had eaten, there was not much else to do but head for Departure Lounge 6 and settle down to wait for boarding. Both of us had something to read, and I had the *iPod*, so the wait didn't present any major problem.

For some reason, the *initial boarding call* was in *English* rather than *Japanese*, which gave us a head-start on most of our fellow passengers.

Not that it did anything to expedite our departure, but, at least, we were seated with hand luggage safely stowed well before the majority of passengers made their way onto the aircraft.



The flight itself was relatively uneventful, and sunrise saw us tracking down *Australia's east coast* with *'Er Indoors* in the window seat trying to catch a glimpse of *Bowen* once I'd pointed out that we'd be passing fairly close. Admittedly close is a relative term when you're travelling at 38000 feet.

She claimed to have been successful though our position over the wing made it difficult for someone sitting one seat away from the window to verify the sighting.

We were on the ground in Brisbane on schedule when the fun and games, such as they were, began.

Unknown to the majority of those on Flight *JQ 1*, during the descent into Brisbane, the auxiliary power supply decided to pack it in. Not that anyone would have noticed since it was the kind of incident that didn't pose any problem (as far as I could gather) while we were in the air. In fact, if the pilot hadn't brought the matter to our attention as the aircraft taxied to the terminal, I doubt than anyone other than the aircrew would have been any the wiser.

Unfortunately, the failure meant that, once the engines were turned off the aircraft would be plunged into darkness unless they could arrange for some other source of electrical power.



Which, in turn, meant the engines wouldn't be switched off in a hurry, and that, in turn, meant no one was going anywhere anytime soon.

No sooner had they made alternative arrangements than another gremlin appeared in the system. There was a problem, believe it or not, opening the doors, which meant that everyone who had stood up when the engines were switched off stayed standing for quite some time.

Eventually, of course, they succeeded in opening a door, and we filed off through the front doors hoping that nothing else would go wrong.

Then, for some reason possibly related to the previous difficulties, unloading the baggage seemed to take an inordinate length of time, but eventually, some operator flicked a switch, and the conveyor belt surged into action.

Eventually, our baggage emerged, and we were free to head through *Immigration and Customs* and make transit arrangements to get us to the Gold Coast for rest and recuperation before heading home.





4

JAPAN 2012: THE INTRO

I'd been once, and was eager to get back, but the *Global Financial Crisis* managed to put the kibosh on that notion for a while. Once we were out of the woods there, the aftermath of the *tsunami* and the continuing aftershocks meant the consensus over there was that *Hughesy* wouldn't handle things, so an *autumn coloured leaves extravaganza* was put back twelve months.

But you can see why we were going...



PLANNING THE TRIP

You might think a lengthy diatribe about the factors you consider when planning a trip to *Japan* is a bit rich coming from the bloke who doesn't do a whole lot of the actual planning.

On the other hand, I've been known to expound on all manner of subjects where there isn't a whole lot of experience to back things up.

But this is how the planning process looks from where I'm sitting.

There have been numerous discussions about possibilities, so I do have some base for my assumptions.

It mightn't be 100% accurate, but it gives some explanation about the itinerary that's tacked onto the end of this little ramble.

The first thing you need to realise when you're planning a three-week jaunt around the *Land of the Rising Sun* is that you can't go everywhere and see everything.

Take a place like *Kyoto* and you'd need a good fortnight to get beyond a fairly elementary scratching of the surface.

Live there for a year and you probably find things you've missed that you really shouldn't have.

And that's just *Kyoto*.

Second, it helps to have a theme, or possibly two.

When we went in *April 2008* we weren't sure how I'd go, so we had two. One was the *sakura* season, and the second was *some of Japan's greatest hits*.

The two of those combine rather nicely because most of *Japan's greatest hits* are at their best in when the cherry blossoms are in bloom.

Since we've done that (and we could easily do another trip based on the same seasonal factor), the logical extension was to go to the coloured leaves time and catch the trees in their multicoloured autumnal glory.

The second theme you could throw in this time around is trains, based on the principle that we've got two-week *Japan Rail Passes*. There's no way we're going to limit ourselves to the *Shinkansen*.

The seasonal theme has the added advantage of delivering a direction to work within.

In spring, the *sakura* blossoms start in the south and gradually make their way up to *Hokkaidō*.

In autumn, the process is reversed.

Trees start to lose their leaves in the colder regions first, and the colouring gradually makes its way towards the *Equator*, not that it's ever going to get there.

So, this time, around we start in *Kansai*, make our way north and then loop back to the centre, ending up at the other end of the country.

Third, when you've got virtually unlimited rail travel, you're obviously going to travel *because you can*.

Without the rail pass, you might be inclined to spend time in *Tokyo*, but other considerations mean that on the last trip, and on the one I'm looking down the barrel at as I start typing in a *Cairns* hotel room, *Tokyo* is somewhere to stop for lunch on the way to somewhere else.

Well, you can't go everywhere and see everything, can you?

See point #1 in that regard.

That *Rail Pass* travel factor brings in another element, namely the presence of two basic arrival and departure points and the fact that there's no designated space for large pieces of luggage on a *Shinkansen*.

There's space behind the last seats in the carriage where you might be able to stash a suitcase provided no one has snaffled it already, but you're pushing your luck if you try to take two.

That means if two of you arrive with a suitcase each, you need somewhere to stash one after you've shifted what you need for the rail odyssey into the other. Anything that's surplus to requirements for the next bit goes into t'other one, which then goes into storage somewhere.

There are also possible cases where the big one gets deposited in a coin locker or cloakroom, and the backpacks get used for a day or two.

So it's not just a case of pack up and go.

So the long and the short of it is that the lengthy rail leg bit needs to start and finish in **Kansai** or **Tokyo**, which is another reason for using the capital as a lunch stop if it doesn't represent a viable overnight stay on the route.

It didn't last time, and it misses out again here. Maybe next time.

The next thing to consider is variety.

You've got limited time, a fair bit of travelling to do, and while you could spend a week sitting on **Shinkansen** and zooming all over the place, there are interesting little local lines tucked away around the islands.

One of the highlights last time around was the rail motor journey from **Toyama** on the west coast up to **Takayama** and down to **Nagoya**. Similarly, you could spend the whole train trip looking at **sakura**, autumn leaves, temples or gardens.

But even when you combine leaves and gardens (a natural fit) or leaves and temples you'll need a break to spare yourself the risk of sensory overload.

Last time the mix was heritage buildings and gardens (**Kanazawa**), a heritage village and buildings (**Takayama**), social call (**Nagoya**), trying to see **Mount Fuji** (**Hakone**), social call (**Tokyo**) and another plus temples (**Kitakami**) and back to base in **Kansai**.

That got us to **Kyoto** and **Nara**, where there were significant temple and garden components.

All of that was carried out against a backdrop of **sakura**.

This time, we've got a different mix and next time will be different again.

On that *variety of rail experiences*, it's worth remembering you can do a leg from **Kagoshima** at one end of the archipelago to **Kansai** in a comfortable day.

We already know the same applies from somewhere around the north of *Honshū* (the main island) back to *Kōbe/Kansai*.

That means you can make a substantial shift in location quickly, and you can travel comfortably from the north of *Honshū* to the southern end of *Kyushu* in two days.

Given that consideration, a two-week rail pass gives you time to get out into the back blocks.

So with this time dedicated to coloured leaves, we start at *Kōbe* and head up to *Kitakami*. That's a day, with lunch in *Tokyo* and a meeting with The Translator.

With the coloured leaves in all their glory, we do a bit of exploring around the north, ending up in the bottom of *Hokkaidō* after a train trip through a tunnel under the *Tsugaru Strait*.

Another big jump brings us into the *tsunami* area, where *Matsushima* is one of the must-see views. Then it's up into the mountains for more leaves, *onsen* hot springs and a temple before another jump down to the *Seto Inland Sea*.

A trip across the rail bridge to *Shikoku* and straight back will be followed by another must-see, the temple island at *Miyajima*, then *Hiroshima* and on to *Kyushu*, where castles, gardens and local rail lines come into the mix.

That will use up most of the fourteen-day rail pass, so the final day delivers us to *Kansai*.

We spend the next six days doing the big city bit in *Osaka*, the temples and gardens bit in *Kyoto*, catch up with acquaintances and end up in *Kōbe* to reunite the suitcases and wing our way back home.



THE ITINERARY

Wednesday 24 October: **Bowen > Cairns**

Thursday 25 October: **Cairns > Kansai > Kōbe**

Friday 26 October: **Kōbe**

Saturday 27 October: **Kōbe > Tokyo > Kitakami**

Sunday 28 October: **Kitakami > Hiraizumi > Kakunodate**

Monday 29 October: **Kakunodate > Dakigaeri Valley > Kakunodate**

Tuesday 30 October: **Kakunodate > Aomori**

Wednesday 31 October: **Aomori > Hakodate**

Thursday 1 November: **Hakodate > Sendai > Matsushima > Sendai**

Friday 2 November: **Sendai > Unazuki Spring**

Saturday 3 November: **Unazuki Spring > Nagano**

Sunday 4 November: **Nagano > Nagoya > Okayama**

Monday 5 November: **Okayama > Seto Bridge > Okayama > Onoura**

Tuesday 6 November: **Onoura > Miyajima > Hiroshima**

Wednesday 7 November: **Hiroshima > Kumamoto > Kagoshima**

Thursday 8 November: **Kagoshima > Yoshimatsu > Hitoyoshi > Shinyashiro > Kagoshima**

Friday 9 November: **Kagoshima > Osaka**

Saturday 10 November: **Osaka**

Sunday 11 November: **Osaka**

Monday 12 November: **Osaka > Kyoto**

Tuesday 13 November: **Kyoto**

Wednesday 14 November: **Kyoto > Kōbe**

Thursday 15 November: **Kōbe > Kansai International**

Friday 16 November: **Cairns > Bowen**



BOWEN > CAIRNS

Wednesday, 24 October 2012

We've done the *Bowen* to *Townsville* bit so often this year that there's practically nothing that would surprise you other than a major spanner inserted forcefully into the works.

For a brief moment, it looked like that had happened. We got to the roundabout near *Maidavale School* and found the road we wanted to follow restricted to residential and roadworks traffic.

Earlier we'd methodically gone through the packing process, much to the concern of three furry felines who mightn't have been totally sure what was going on but wanted admission to their daytime quarters in *The Extension*.

The regular cause for concern came into play with a question about the fridge which could have raised feline issues if they hadn't decided we were *persona non grata* for the time being.

Where they'd got to was uncertain, but we were on the road by eight fifteen with a rendezvous with the *Ukulele Lady* scheduled for around six, so we were able to take our time along the way.

Road closed at **Maidavale** might have prompted a retracing of the steps if we hadn't been using the *iPad* to find the shortcut through the back locks to bypass **Ayr** and **Brandon** a while back.

It had been twenty years since I'd been that way. Our first attempt to track that way ended with great confusion that took us on a massive dogleg that came out at the servo near the **Burdekin Bridge**.

I'd done a bit of subsequent research, had nussed out the route in the opposite direction and had, in the process, established that one arm of the four that lead off the roundabout heads straight to **Brandon**, so that was where we found ourselves rejoining the **Bruce Highway**.

The run to and through **Townsville** was uneventful. A stop at the **Frosty Mango** north of **Rollingstone** provided a break, and we were in **Cardwell** for lunch.

The only major interest came when **Madam** decided she wanted a shot of the **Cardwell Jetty**, and was prevented from crossing the highway by a steady stream of traffic in both directions.

Smartarse Hughesy was on the point of suggesting I'd head back into the cafe for another round of *crab sangas* when the break in the flow came, but the fact that I hadn't actually made the remark didn't mean I escaped the consequences of the thought.

Madam had decided we were refuelling there, and I sat in a hot car as the fuel dribbled into the tank seemingly drop by agonising drop.

The payment process was equally glacial while the temperature in the parked vehicle rose. Still, I can afford to *sweat off a bit of the old avoirdupois*.

Back on the highway we ran in through **Tully**, **Innisfail**, **Babinda** and **Gordonvale** through threatening cloud cover, and had a minor hiccup when faced with a choice of routes into the **Cairns CBD**.

I chose the one that would have a much better traffic flow, but it was a case of varying mileages and dissenting opinions when we arrived at the destination just after four-fifteen.

Given the time you need to check in, shift gear, survey the surroundings, assess things in general and an hour and a half's rest we were off to put the car to bed just after six, returning about half an hour later after being dropped off by a **Car Carer** on her way to *ukulele practice*.

There was never much doubt about where we were headed for dinner since the **Cairns** operation of the **Roma Trattoria** probably had *Spaghetti alla Scoglio* on the menu.

They did, so that was it, the judge's opinion was final, and there was no correspondence to be entered into.

There was, however, a bit of discussion over a suitable wine to go with the heaping plate of seafood and *spaghetti* that was on its way.

There were a good half dozen by the glass offerings I would have been happy to go for, but we ended up choosing an unwooded *Chardonnay* and a *King Valley Pinot Grigio*. Both were quite tasty though the *Chardonnay* finished about half a length ahead of the *Grigio*.

No prizes for guessing who ended up with the *Grigio*.

Before the arrival of the platter itself, a helpful server delivered a pair of finger bowls and another pair of receptacles for shells and other detritus before a more practical colleague decided two of each was slightly over the top and halved the allocation.

As it turned out we could have used another finger bowl, but that was the only possible subject to gripe about.

On the way back to the *Cairns Plaza Madam* reckoned what we'd just had almost matched her first encounter with the dish in their *Carlton* operation.

I'd had a *risotto* that time around, but we'd had another go on a return visit in *Carlton* and again four and a half years ago, and I was inclined to agree that this one was the best of the last three.

Back at base I wandered into the bar downstairs for a cleansing ale before the regulation tapping out of *Travelogues*, with about two-thirds of the *Prelude* completed by the time I decided to call it a night around nine-fifteen.



CAIRNS > KOBE

Thursday, 25 October 2012

Getting a good night's sleep before a major excursion isn't as easy as you might think.

I was awake, if the old memory serves me well, at one-thirty and three before I emerged from a dream where the cast included *old High School acquaintances, degenerate cricketers* and an *Elvis Costello concert*.

That was around around five-thirty.

But I slept better than *Madam*, who ascribed inability to get a good night's sleep to a combination of factors you can probably figure out without being told.

Given the number of things that could go wrong over the next three weeks you'll probably be running over the possibilities, and that sort of thing isn't exactly conducive to deep and undisturbed slumber.

In any case, once I was awake I was back on the *Travelogue* and had the *Prelude* largely knocked over before the pre-breakfast shower.

There had been some consideration of a walk to find breakfast but intermittent drizzle put paid to that theory, and we headed down for a *Spanish omelette* (*Hughesy*) and a bowl of fruit (*Madam*) before we completed the packing and the regulation reshuffle of bits and pieces.

The *Ukulele Lady* had kindly offered to drop us at the *Airport* (she was working somewhere over in that direction, so it was more or less on her way), and we were downstairs around half an hour before the time she'd indicated on the off chance she might be running early.

We didn't want to be keeping anyone waiting, did we?

Check-in and *departing the country* procedures ran smoothly, producing a state of illusory well-being that was disrupted by an announcement half an hour before we were scheduled to begin boarding.

Technical issues, they said, *were going to delay boarding by an hour*, and while I wasn't happy about the delay I'd rather they found things that were likely to go wrong *before* takeoff.

In any case, with things up to date almost right on the originally scheduled boarding time it was a case thumb-twiddling with the *iPad* battery around 83% and the *iPod* taking over the workload.

There was one major departure from revealed form this time around.

Faced with the prospect of an early morning arrival back in *Cairns*, *Madam* thought it might be worth investigating the cost involved and the extra benefits obtained in *Business Class*.

The original motivation was more legroom and the chance of a better night's sleep, but *an extra ten kilogram luggage allowance* is a significant factor for *Someone* who'll be looking to bring a quantity of delicacies and other odds and ends she *can't buy in Australia* back with her.

We were, by the way, entitled to *sixty kilograms of luggage* on the way over, so the fact that the scales registered thirty-five in *Cairns* probably means *Someone's* credit card will be reeling by the time we make our way back.

I'd heard rumours of better quality food and drink in *Business Class* as well.

Not that I was expecting anything spectacular in the *Jetstar* version thereof, *but you never know, do you?*

When the *boarding call* came around an hour late we were the first through the *Business* queue.

That gave us plenty of time to acquaint ourselves with the extras, which started with the zipper bag of goodies and the blanket to keep you warm *en route*.

The offer of *a glass of bubbles* to start off before we started moving was a nice start, particularly when the *glass of bubbles* I started lunch with *seemed awfully familiar*.

Fine, but there was better to come when the menu arrived, along with the wine list.

The *bean curd appetiser, with marinated Japanese leek and dressing* didn't quite sound like my scene, but the chance of a glass of *Jansz Premium Non-Vintage Rose* bubbles with it sounded like a good way to take the edge off the *tofu*.

Given the rest of the lineup the *Tinpot Hut 2011 Sauvignon Blanc* is probably a classy drop, but take a look at what followed it on the list. *Stella Bella 2009 Chardonnay*, *Innocent Bystander 2010 Syrah* and *Cape Mentelle Cabernet Merlot*? Count me in.

So the entree, a choice of *Chicken rikyu-yaki* or *Beef ginger teriyaki* for the main and a chance of a bit of cheese for afters, along with very decent wine? *No problems*.

As it turned out, of course, airline catering is airline catering.

The food was about what you'd expect under the circumstances, but the glass of *Jansz Sparkling Rose* seemed suspiciously similar to something I'd tried not that long before.

Madam had gone for the *Stella Bella Chardonnay*, and ended up with a glass of *seriously good new style Oz chardy*, which was impressive, and when the flight attendant delivered a glass of *Innocent Bystander Syrah* I wasn't *quite* in seventh heaven, but I was a very happy camper.

If we'd been sitting further back we'd have been looking at a choice of an *SSB* or a *Shiraz* from some offshoot of the *McGuigan* dynasty, but here we were with a choice of wine you'd expect to pay around \$10/glass in a restaurant. On that basis, *Business Class* has got me.

The point behind all this is that on your average budget airline *Economy* starts with a price and you start adding on the extras, starting with minor details like luggage, meals, drinks and blankets.

The *Economy* wine options had kicked in at \$7/airline serve bottle. The *Business* glasses were slightly smaller than that, but you'd have been looking at \$14 for the alcoholic equivalent of what arrived gratis on *Business*.

On the other hand, you can start by looking at the business price and start counting the things that'd cost you. Somewhere around \$20 worth of wine by the glass is a bonus on top of the *extra leg room*, the *increased baggage allowance* and the fact that *down the back you're paying for the meal*.

There's still a differential, but if you look at it that way it diminishes rather substantially.

Of course, it helps to have picked up the seats on sale, but every little bit helps...



With lunch out of the way a predictable torpor descended over the area as we settled in for the long haul without much to look forward to in the way of scenery *et cetera*.

I'd noted green jungle below us during lunch, and guessed we were over the *Owen Stanley Range*. There was a highly distinctive river system that brought the name *Markham* to mind, something that needed to be confirmed, and a recent check on *Google Earth* and the *National Geographic Atlas* app failed to deliver a definitive answer, but for the next couple of hours it was a case of a semi-dose with something quietish on the *iPod*.

Madam took advantage of the offered *iPad* to watch *Madagascar 3*, which filled in the time rather nicely, and in terms of battery usage I'd have been better off doing something similar.

As the snob in me sniffily dismissed the audio, visual and reading options available on their *iPad*, I tapped away on mine, running down a battery that was seriously depleted by continuing to read the *Neil Young autobiography*.

When they roused us with just under two hours to go, I sampled the *Cape Mentelle Cabernet Merlot*, declining an offer of more solid sustenance, which was of the *noodle in a cup or packaged snack persuasion*, looking forward to the chance to watch the passing light show once we made landfall.

Last time that had been somewhere around *Kyushu* or the southern end of *Shikoku* and there had been a run along the coast with the *Seto Inland Sea* visible, but we were following a different flight path this time around, and the lack of precise geographic awareness in the darkness threw me.

Looking at it in the cool clear light of reality I can see (with the aid of the **National Geographic Atlas** app) that we must have made landfall around the eastern end of **Shikoku**, probably around **Tokushima**, which I managed to confuse with the **Kōbe-Osaka** conurbation around the time the *final landing instructions* came over the **P.A. System**.

They're leaving that remarkably late, I thought, under the impression we were on our final approach.

In reality, we were still somewhere around two to three thousand metres up and the lights on my left that would have represented a fairly large urban and industrial centre that looked reasonably close must have been an extensive conurbation that was probably twenty kilometres away.

Still, even if I didn't know where we were the lights gave something to occupy the attention once we'd been told to *turn off all electronic devices*.

Once we'd landed there was a lengthy around the terminal building before we reached the designated air bridge, where another of the benefits of business came into play.

I'd stashed everything I didn't need except for the **iPad** and whatever I could fit in my pockets in the backpack, which had been stowed in the overhead locker, so once the **seat belt sign** went off and **Madam** moved into the aisle retrieving it was easy.

When the doors opened we were in among the first to disembark, which brought us to the first door on the shuttle that carries you towards the **Arrivals** processing area.

Moving swiftly, **Madam** and I had hit the lead of the pack through the temperature check.

I arrived at the **Foreigners** section of **Immigration** (there was a bevy of her compatriots following **Madam** to the **Japanese passport** section) to find there wasn't a queue at all.

Hand over passport and immigration form, place the index fingers on the fingerprint machine, get the facial recognition bit done, and I was through something that mightn't have actually taken an hour last time around but certainly felt like it.

In fact, the process this time round needed less time than I took to type that last paragraph.

Things didn't go quite so smoothly in the **Baggage Claim** area since the baggage handling process doesn't seem to be class conscious, but once we'd done the retrieval and whisked our way through **Customs** we were on the lookout for the shuttle bus and looking pretty good.

I'm not sure exactly what happened, but having been directed to the stop (#6 if I recall correctly) I joined the queue with the bags and **Madam** headed off to get the tickets from the relevant machine.

We'd checked our bags, the bus had arrived, and the driver refused to accept what we wanted to hand over.

Instead of two tickets and two receipts from the machine we had one ticket, the requisite number of receipts, and a driver who wanted *actuals rather than apparent evidence*.

There was some flustered to-ing and fro-ing that ended up costing an extra ¥2000, but we ended up on the bus at 8:35, a better result than we'd expected when we heard about flight delays back in *Cairns*.

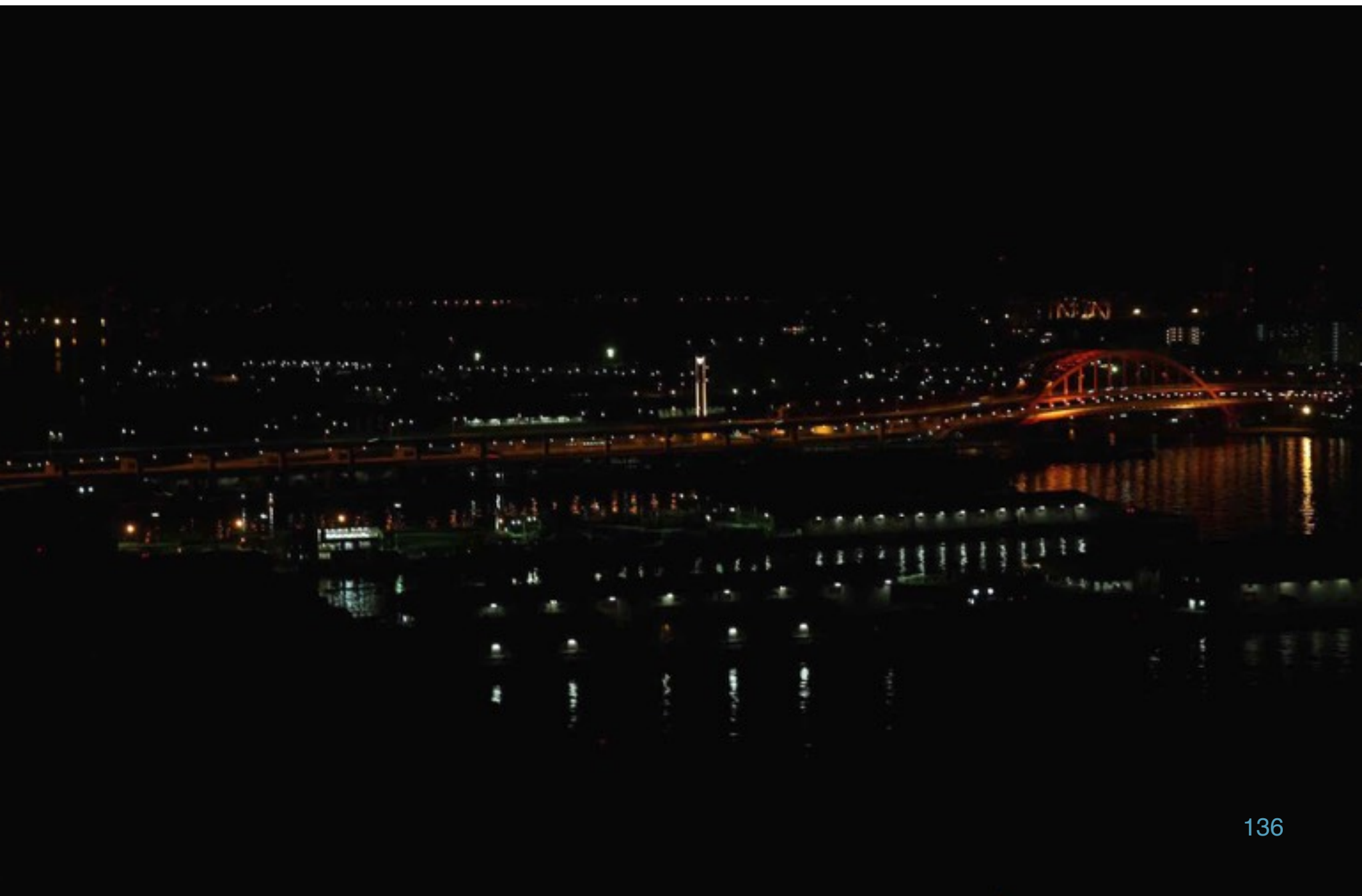
Last time around I'd made a mental note to sit on the right hand side of the bus because it seemed the view of the city lights was better on that side.

This time, *Madam*'s attempts to figure out what had gone wrong proved a significant distraction and I didn't see a lit-up *Osaka Castle* this time either.

The run along the freeway from the *airport* to *Kōbe* takes an hour, and we were in time to catch the 9:50 shuttle to the *Okura* and *Meriken Park Oriental* Hotels

Last time around we'd started at the *Oriental*, but this time it was the *Okura* for the first two nights.

Checking in proceeded with the regular courtesies and rituals, and we were conducted to our room on the twenty-fifth floor by a bellhop who was nowhere near as over the top as the *Harry Houdini* clone we'd encountered at the *Oriental* last time around.





KŌBE

Friday, 26 October 2012

Late nights often result in late mornings, but there was plenty on the agenda on ***Admin and Organizing Day***, so despite effective blackout curtains, we were up reasonably early after what had been a late night at the end of a longish and eventful day.

Still, it was after eight when we stepped into the elevator on the way to reacquaint ***Hughesy*** with the slightly strange but very civilized custom of the ***Breakfast Viking***.

We were off, in other words, for a ***smorgasbord*** breakfast.

The day's agenda included:

- ***converting the Rail Pass purchased in Australia*** into an actual usable document,
- ***buying tickets*** for the first few days' rail travel and anything else ***Madam*** thought might be booked out,
- ***chasing up*** computer specific reading glasses with a focal length of 85 centimetres for ***Hughesy***,

- *transferring* the clothing and other items *Madam* was going to need for the rail pass leg from her (blue) suitcase to my black one (*The Black Monster*), and
- *stashing everything else* into the other one, which was going to be spending the next couple of weeks with *The Mother*. That took things like neck cushions, airline blankets, changes of clothes for the return leg from *Cairns* to *Bowen* and other odds and ends out of the *we're going to have to lug all this around the countryside for about three weeks equation*.

Downstairs at the *Viking* I was tucking into a freshly made (as opposed to here's one we made a little earlier) omelette when I had a momentary vision of the inimitable *Frockster* and his likely reaction to the scene before me.

There were, for a start, the regulation number of efficient and courteous hospitality workers, showing guests to seats, clearing tables, delivering tea and coffee and a couple of people who were there to supervise, ensuring that everything was being done just right.

The guests were quietly going about their breakfasts, and the whole scene had a barely audible hum of activity. I figured you'd be able to hear *The Frockster* before he came through the door.

He'd be demanding a table next to *Hughesy and the Kōbe Carnation* and riffing off a variation of the theme that prevented us seeing *Mount Fuji* last time around.

Then, I figured, he'd sight the breakfast options.

Now, I'm not suggesting the man has steak and eggs for breakfast, or sausages, or some specific form of cereal, but the first thing he'd have noticed was an absolute lack of anything resembling *Corn Flakes* or *Coco Pops*.

The eye would have run along what would serve as a perfectly adequate continental breakfast buffet and noted the presence of the standard varieties of fruit juice and the varied selection of pastries, but would have pulled up short where you might expect to find the cereal.

Instead, he'd have sighted a variety of very *Japanese* breakfast options, none of which *Hughesy* is familiar with because of what lies on the other side of the open space.

There are two alcoves *over that way*, the first containing a variation on the old salad bar, with a nice array of mesclun leaves, a tray of cherry tomatoes, the assorted fruits and melons you'd expect to find at the breakfast table, a rather tasty variation on a *peperonata* (which probably explains the grated Parmesan cheese) and a couple of salad dressings (which in *Hughesy's* universe would tend to explain the *croutons*).

I mean, if you're going to have something approximating a *Caesar salad* for breakfast you're going to need *croutons*, *n'est ce pas?*

The other alcove delivered variations on bacon and eggs, with a chef on hand to do you an omelette on the spot in a non-stick pan and another doing what looked like perfectly done fried eggs without any hint of frizzle around the edges.

I wasn't 100% sold on the sausages, but a fresh omelette, some bacon and a few other bits and pieces from the other alcove and a ***croissant*** or two made up a pretty solid first go at breakfast.

I ventured back for seconds from the salad bar and a bit more from the pastry department.

Expecting a fair bit of hoofing, I reckoned I'd need the carbohydrates.

Back upstairs we finished sorting things out and caught the 9:55 shuttle into ***Sannomiya***. That got us to ***the city's transport hub*** around five minutes later, and after diverting to investigate replacement options for watch batteries headed off to a ***Japan Rail booking office*** for what was probably the most important part of the whole trip.

I've been referring to a ***voucher***, but the ***JR information booklet*** calls it an ***Exchange Order***, and you need to have bought the little devil before you land in the country.

You lob at the ***JR Office*** with your ***Exchange Order*** and your ***passport***, fill out the form you get at the office and after a bit of peel, paste and laminate action you have the document that looks after the majority of your ticket purchases.

It won't get you on to the ***top level Shinkansen services***, and the Pass doesn't work on railway lines that aren't part of the ***JR Group***, but it does cover some ***bus and ferry services***.

Once you've accomplished the exchange the fun really begins.

Given the nature of the beast and the likelihood you'll be sitting in a booking office with a queue of people looking for their own tickets, this is something best done over a couple of sessions rather than all in one fell swoop.

So you get the tickets you ***absolutely must have*** first.

If there's no one waiting you go for more.

If it looks like you're holding up the queue you head off to do something else, and come back for another go, or find yourself another quiet office and proceed from there.

We were looking at a leg from ***Kōbe*** to ***Kitakami*** with lunch in ***Tokyo*** the next day, so we needed those tickets for a start.

Having got that batch we set off for the optometrist for a pair of computer-specific reading glasses and stopped in at ***another JR booking office*** and filled in the ticketing for another couple of stages.



Once the glasses had been dealt with, we noted there was no one in *that JR office*, so we headed back in for another go.

That might seem like an excessively cautious approach until you consider the process involved.

Bear in mind that this is when you know where you want to go and when you want to do so.

Lob up and say you want to go from *here* to *there* on *Thursday*, and it's a lengthier process because there'll be a number of options.

Madam's pre-trip research was very detailed, and we already knew when we wanted to leave most places we were going, and we had all the connections along the way nussed out already.

So you start by telling the person you're dealing with what you want and when you want to go.

The operator fills out a requisition form, and when you've finished requesting, they start processing the requests, which involves some fairly solid touch screen action and the odd point of clarification.

That process eventually delivers printed tickets, which are then checked against the requisition form and then checked with the purchaser to make sure you're getting *exactly what you asked for*.

So it's a slow process, and requests for the tickets you'll need to cover a fourteen day pass could occupy one particular operative for a fair chunk of a morning.

That's a significant consideration when you're tying up one of three operators while a queue has formed. Which is why you start with the most important and gradually work your way through the rest.

In any case, with the most pressing ticket issues dealt with, we headed back to the **Okura**.

There was the odd issue to be dealt with *en route*, and we wandered upstairs to collect **the Blue suitcase** just in time for **Madam** to miss the 1:55 shuttle.

The miss was largely made possible by refusal to accept **Hughesy's** logic that *the hotel's over there, there's a road that runs right in front of the hotel and this ramp looks like it'll run down to the roadway*.

It turned out I was right on all counts, but we completed a circuit around the **Kōbe Maritime Museum** and ended up gaining access by the route I'd suggested was there all along.

In any case, there was another bus twenty minutes later.

I'd get in the way *en route* to **Myodani**, so I remained in the **Okura**, and three days' **Travelogue** are more or less complete, up to date about two hours before we head off to rendezvous with one of **Madam's** old school friends and dinner.

With the writing up to date, I decided to follow suggestions and repair to the lobby overlooking the **Japanese garden** behind the building and settle back into reading **Neil Young**.

I'd been happy upstairs, tapping away and listening to **Toumani Diabate** and **Bert Jansch**, which wasn't an option downstairs, but I thought I'd be spotted when **Madam** returned.

It was her suggestion and I didn't want to be a philistine, did I?

As it turned out, of course, **Someone** sailed through the lobby while I wasn't looking, failed to notice I was there, had a minor panic attack when the realisation struck and then didn't exactly rush down to ensure everything was OK, and I hadn't been abducted by strange females (or something).

We were due to rendezvous at *Motomachi Station*, which is equidistant from the *Okura* and *Sannomiya*, so we eschewed the shuttle and walked around the edges of the *Old Foreign Settlement* and Chinatown (*Nanking-Nachi*) before making the rendezvous slightly ahead of time.

From there we headed across the road to a *Korean* eatery in a basement at the bottom of a rather steep set of stairs.

There was nothing I could see advertising the place, no prominent display board with the various menu options, no one spruiking what's on offer downstairs.

But when you're that small (it's not the largest eating space you've ever seen and wouldn't hold much more than thirty diners) and that good you probably don't need the shill.

Mind you, there was probably some form of signage outside that I failed to notice.

Dinner came in a variety of small serves in a variety of styles, including some steamed chicken with *kimchi* that I wasn't expected to like, but did, barbecued beef, and a seafood omelette.

There were enough of them to cover the middle of a smallish table with *help yourself* bowls and such in front of each diner.





As the two old school friends chatted away in *Japanese* and the dishes kept coming I did my best to clear space in the middle of the table where everyone could reach things more easily.

One of the things I wasn't particularly eager to reach had arrived with an *I'll tell you what it is later* which is the proverbial dead set give away in the *probably oh yuck* department.

Whatever it was turned out to be chewy, not particularly interesting, and not much to my taste. Subsequent inquiries as to the identity received a single word response.

Guts.

There was a bed of noodles as well, which was more to my liking, and I pecked at it intermittently.

Interestingly, no one else seemed concerned to finish *I'll tell you what it is later* off.

A suggestion to this effect will be met with a denial, but I suspect there's a bit of the old *let's see what the foreigner reckons about this one* operating here, much like two exposures to the *surprisingly crunchy jellyfish* last time around.

There wasn't any hint of a wine list, but *Korean* goes better with beer, so I managed to knock over (figuratively, of course) several pitchers while we made our way through the platters.

It wasn't all that late when we wandered back through *Motomachi*, guided by *Old School Friend*, who'd parked very close to the *Okura*.

Madam suspects the deals they're offering at the **Okura** and **Meriken Park Oriental** are related to an inconvenient location.

If you know where you're going, are willing to walk, **Motomachi** is only a hop, skip and a jump from the **Okura**.

Cross the road at the zebra crossing, through the car park and over the pedestrian bridge and you're a bit over a stone's throw from **Motomachi**, and with shuttle buses to **Sannomiya** for most of the day and well into the evening isolation is a relative thing.

Still, if they're going to offer deals like the one we were enjoying we'd be mugs to knock them back. We'd picked up an impressive deal (two nights with **Viking** breakfast for ¥23000, remarkably good value when you work on **Madam's** easy conversion rate of ¥100 to the Aussie Dollar.

It's still pretty good value when you do the sums at the actual conversion rate operating on the day concerned.

By comparison, I'm looking at \$229 as the base rate for my preferred accommodation option when I head to catch an **Elvis Costello** concert in **Sydney** early next year.

Back at the **Okura** we finished most of the preparations for **Travel Day One** and clambered into the cot just after eleven, looking forward to whatever the morrow might bring.



5

JAPAN 2012: RAIL PASS WEEK 1

The plan was to head out of *Kōbe*, heading north towards the coloured leaves, looping through the *Tohoku* area *en route* to *Hokkaidō*, then back down to *Sendai*. Cross the country back into the *Japanese Alps* and the week ends in *Unazuki Onsen* on the way to *Nagano*, former host city to the *Winter Olympics*.



KOBE > TOKYO > KITAKAMI

Saturday, 27 October 2012

The *Tokyo Express* wasn't leaving until 9:25, but I was awake around the regulation *back home* time.

That meant (a) *the body clock was still operating in **Australian mode*** and (b) *we had time*, once we'd risen around six *for a leisurely movement through the shower and a casual check of the final packing arrangements*.

So casual, in fact, that when we made our way downstairs at the scheduled starting time for the *Viking*, we neglected to *grab the two vouchers on the way out*.

Back upstairs, minor panic when they weren't quite where we thought they were.

It was a timely reminder that you don't want to take things too easy.

There was a single pass through the buffet for *Hughesy*, and *Madam's* return visit brought back a single serve of a single item.

We were back upstairs by 7:40 loaded and locked and checking out comfortably before eight, with intentions towards the 8:05 shuttle. It delivered us to **Sannomiya** in plenty of time to take the one stop underground leg to **ShinKōbe**, arriving a good three-quarters of an hour before the scheduled departure.

The frequency of **Shinkansen** services along the **Tokaido** line was underlined by the fact that our 9:25 **Hikari** was the third train headed for **Tokyo** after nine o'clock, and followed almost immediately after a faster **Nozomi**, which left at 9:22.

Once aboard, the **Black Monster** went into space behind the seats at the back of the carriage; the backpacks went onto the overhead, and we settled back for the three-hour haul to **Tokyo**.

As is so often the case, as soon as the train started moving we were straight into a tunnel, and when we emerged a minute or two later we were zooming along above rooftop level.

We'd landed **Car 7 Seats 10 B&C**, which meant we didn't have access to the window seat, which seemed to be vacant. I could have been tempted to snaffle the spare seat, but, with **Osaka** and **Kyoto** coming up in quick succession it might not be a good idea.

Just as well.



A couple of minutes later we were in **Osaka** where a flood of passengers filled up most of the vacant seats, leaving 10A teasingly empty as we set back off.

That brought us onto the flat land between **Osaka** and **Kyoto**, passing houses intermingled with agricultural plots, assorted commercial premises, apartment blocks, a stretch of forest, a real patchwork of land use.

We came up into **Kyoto** in a hurry.

One moment I was checking we hadn't passed it without my noticing because *I thought we'd be there by now* and the next, there we (quite literally) were.

Another flood of incomers failed to fill 10A, so as we emerged from the regulation tunnel on the way out of **Kyoto** I took advantage of the window seat. With half an hour until **Nagoya** I might as well.

Again, the land between **Kyoto** and **Nagoya** is mostly flat, with the same patchwork of land use.

We weren't quite in **Nagoya** when the news ticker at the front of the carriage revealed **Silvio Berlusconi** had been sentenced to four years, and the stop delivered an occupant for 10A.

The presence of a head between **Hughesy** and the window had me looking around a bit more than would have been the case otherwise, something that underlined the cambering of the tracks on the **Shinkansen** lines.

Queensland has the *tilt train* that heads along on the regular railway tracks, but if you want *real speed* and *extremely rapid transit* you want to be travelling on a train that *leans into a cambered curve*.

We'd done the **Nagoya > Tokyo** leg last time around, admittedly in two legs, one as far as **Odawara** en route to **Hakone** and the second the rest of the way a day later, so it wasn't new territory.

That was just as well since the sunshine on that side had the occupants of 9A and 10A sliding down the shades, and directing the sightseeing side of things to the left-hand side, which was, of course, the quarter where you'd expect to be sighting **Mount Fuji**.

Predictably, between the camber and the weather conditions, **Fuji**-viewing prospects weren't looking too flash, but heading out of **Hamamatsu**, when the camber permitted the sight of mountains away on the left (partially obscured by haze, but definitely mountains) made me much more hopeful.

By the time we pulled up in **Mishima**. However, it was obvious that the *Curse of the Frockster* that had prevented us catching sight of **Fujisan** had kicked in again.

For several years, well before our **2008** journey, the **Frockster** had babbled on about trips to **Japan** and the possibilities of planting a **Bowen Mango** tree on top of **Mount Fuji**, a prospect so sacrilegious that *the deities guarding the mountain kept it shrouded in cloud and drizzle* while we were there.



It was an obvious case of ensuring we couldn't locate the sacred peak on the off chance we might return with plans to fulfil *Eylesy's* suggestion, and it seems to have kicked in again.

10A was vacated at *Mishima*, on the edge of the *Yokohama-Tokyo* conurbation.

Apart from the improvement in the sightseeing aspect, there was a handy electrical outlet that allowed a slight recharge of the *iPad* as we thundered towards *Tokyo*. It would only be a tad over half an hour, but every little bit helps.

Everything needed to be packed away the stop before *Tokyo* itself, and once we were off the train, it was a case of seeking out *The Translator*, which was remarkably easy, given the number of people who were in and around *Tokyo Station*.



Once the rendezvous had been made, we wandered off to check out recently completed restoration work that brought the ground level entrance back to the facade built just under a century before.

After a couple of photos of the dome at the entrance, we were off across the station square for lunch.

We had around two hours to spend over lunch, and a glance around the immediate vicinity revealed queues just about everywhere.

Fortunately, we spotted a table in the corner of an *Italian place* that seemed to belong to the *eat at the counter persuasion*, and grabbed it *tout suite*.

It turned out to be a very handy stroke of lunch.

The pasta was made on the premises, the accompaniments were quite acceptable, and there were a couple of *Italian wines* on the wine list.

After lunch, with another hour to kill, the options were to order extras and stay where we were or head off and find somewhere we could sit and talk. If the dessert menu had included *cassata* I'd have ordered one, but it didn't, and I had to settle for a *Nebbiolo* instead.

After lunch we headed to the station, moving through the subterranean redevelopment.

That proved to be quite fascinating.



There wasn't much, surprisingly, until we'd flashed the *Rail Passes* and passed into the *Station proper*, where we found a rabbit warren of retail outlets, some of them more upmarket than you might expect in the setting, including a liquor operation that was offering wine tasting.

I tried two versions of *an indigenous red grape*, something that mightn't sound too promising, but the early drinking style was good, and the other, which had a little bottle age was quite acceptable.

I've tasted *worse wines* made by *better-known makers* from *much more traditional varieties*.

We'd dawdled along the way until we spotted a clock showing 2:44. We were due to depart at 2:56, so it was a case of a scramble to find the seats and, more importantly, claim a bit the all important space behind the seats in the rear of the carriage to stow the *Black Monster*.

That space was almost all gone, but I managed to claim the remaining bit, something that may come in handy when we make the mad scramble off the train in **Sendai**.

We were headed to **Kitakami**, which isn't a stopping point for the faster services and veered away from *the stop everywhere all the way from Tokyo* option that would have meant a reduction in the time allocated for lunch.

Tapping out the **Travelogue** update took us out of greater **Tokyo**, through a stop at **Omiya** and on into the **tsunami** zone.

We'd been over this section before, around the same time of day four and a half years previously, and we were on the right-hand side of the northbound train again.

The countryside is flat, and while there isn't a whole lot of actual visual interest along the way the patchwork is easy on the eye, and the urban stretches have plenty of green scattered among the buildings.

The run towards **Sendai** proved simultaneously easy on the eye and mildly disturbing, largely due to the amount of greenery across to the horizon.

We'd arrived this time with hopes of sighting hillsides full of autumnal colouring. But apart from the odd russet patch here and there the foliage, on the southern side of **Sendai**, at least, remained a dark green that was, as suggested, rather pleasing as a vista but wasn't what brought us there.

Still, we weren't that far into the **Deep North**.

Perhaps things would be more promising as the latitudes rose and altitude kicked in.

A red signal (or something) brought us to an unscheduled stop at **Fukushima**, where there was no sign of the nuclear power facility that attracted attention in the aftermath of last year's *tsunami*, largely, I guess due to the mountain range that lies between the city and the coast.

That isn't the case at **Sendai**, where we were scheduled to change trains.

The **Shinkansen** was around five minutes late coming into **Sendai**, and our slower up country train was due to leave five minutes after the scheduled arrival time of the **Shinkansen**, but it was waiting on the other side of the platform when we arrived, and we managed the switch without difficulty.

The up country train doesn't use the same tracks as its more sophisticated sibling, and from the time we pulled out of **Sendai**, that was rather obvious.

That's not suggesting we're talking the old *clickety-clack* of the **Queensland rattler**, but we moved into the gathering dusk at a noticeably slower speed with much more frequent stops.

The first of those was at *Furukawa*, but not far past there we were into a relatively solid wall of forest, at least on the left-hand side of the train, which is where we found ourselves this time around.

I may well be wrong about the woods, but as we rattled along at a fair old sub-*Shinkansen* clip, there weren't too many lights out there until we started to slow down for the stop at *Kurikoma-Kogan*.

While we were pulled up there, a passing *Shinkansen* reminded us of the pecking order.

Madam remarked that we must be starting to climb, and we were probably moving into coloured leaves territory. Given the fact it was now entirely dark outside there was no way to verify the notion, but I hoped she was right.

The carriage hadn't been crowded when we boarded, but there was a steady flow of departures that continued at *Ichinoseki*, And again at *Kanegasaki* so that by the time we reached *Kitakami* there was practically no one left and most of us chickens alighted there.

A check on the ubiquitous *Google* won't give you that much on *Kitakami*, but in any case, we weren't necessarily there for tourist attractions or sightseeing.

Madam and *Our Host* go back far enough to warrant a visit whenever we're passing, so it's a matter of catching up and conversing after an evening arrival, with the option of taking a squiz at the sights the next day.

Located at the confluence of the *Kitakami* and *Waga Rivers* in *Iwate Prefecture*, *Kitakami*, with a population around 95,000, sits on the *Tohoku Shinkansen* and the *Tohoku Main Line*, both operated by *JR East*, connecting *Tokyo* and *Aomori Prefecture*.

That makes it a convenient and reasonably accessible resting spot for people looking to catch up with old friends.

It's three hours north of *Tokyo* on the slowest of the three versions of the *Shinkansen*, which delivers a fair indication of the population pecking order where the bullet trains are concerned.

The trip will set you back around ¥12,500 (a tad over \$A145), which underlines the value of the JR Pass (7 days \$335.00; 14 days \$535.00)

The fastest *Shinkansen*, Nozomi, only stop at major centres like *Tokyo*, *Nagoya*, *Kyoto* and *Osaka*, hurtling between destinations at maximum speed, a *now you see it, now you don't* proposition when you're standing on the platform at one of the lesser stations.

Japan RailPass holders don't get to ride on those, but that's understandable given the premium service and the demand for seats.

Below that there's a variety of fast and semi-fast versions, depending on the actual line you're taking, including the *Hikari* and *Sakura* (*Tokaido*, *Sanyo*, *Kyushu*), the *Hayate* and *Yamabiko* (*Tōhoku*) that stop more often, but bypass smaller centres.

Kitakami, with a population that's heading towards a hundred thousand, still isn't big enough to warrant being included on those services.

We were there in the wrong season since the city's chief claim to fame lies in over ten thousand cherry trees planted along two kilometres beside the *Kitakami River* in *Tenshochi Park*.

You get another sense of pecking orders in the *sakura* department since the fortnight or so in late *April* when the trees are in full bloom might attract a rating as one of the *Tōhoku Region's* three best cherry blossom spots. *Hirosaki Castle* and *Kakunodate* are the others, but it's only regarded as one of the hundred best places nationwide to view cherry blossoms.

Other attractions (mentioned since you might be passing by) include summer festivals including the *Michinoku Traditional Dance Festival*, and *Michinoku Folklore Village*, with thirty preserved farmhouses and other buildings from around *Tōhoku* restored and arranged around forested walkways, ponds and fields.

I guess it's something similar to what we saw in the *Hida Folk Village* in *Takayama* and something that would certainly be a candidate on a less crowded itinerary.

So would *Kitakami City Folklore Museum* (included in the admission fee for the *Folklore Village*) with exhibits of *Buddhist art*, and displays relating to the natural and cultural history of the area.

The *Kitakami River*, coincidentally, being one of the region's most significant geographical features is the fourth largest river in *Japan*. It drains an area of 10,150 square kilometres in the rural areas of *Iwate* and *Miyagi Prefectures* and, interestingly, has no dams from its mouth to the *Shijūshida Dam* north of *Morioka*, which results in a spectacular salmon run every autumn.

We'll be referring to the river again when we talk *Hiraizumi* in tomorrow's *Travelogue*.

Having alighted from the train, we made our way through the station into the car park, where a brief conference saw *Madam* and I back inside buying tickets for the next day's leg after they'd conferred about what it was going to be.

Our Host is a teacher, and has plenty to do, so we figured we'd get on a train somewhere along the route we followed on our day's ramblings and then leave her to get on with the rest of her weekend.

Extracting the tickets from an official in the ticket office who seemed to resent people carrying *Japan Rail Passes* in general, or *Japanese-speaking people* carrying *JR Passes* in particular, took a couple of minutes more than you might expect.

But we emerged, tickets in hand, to head off for the evening's accommodation, where we reacquainted ourselves with **Grog Dog** and introduced ourselves to his *canine confrere*, **Red Cordial Dog**, who seems to have fallen into *a vat of hyperactivity inducer*.

We didn't hang about too long and were soon off after a quick discussion of the dinner options.

We got a *sorry, house full* at the first, and a similar response at a second, but a phone call and a brisk walk through the eating and drinking area near the station got us a booth at the third, a **vaguely Italian-themed place** whose trademark dish was **Buffalo Chicken**.

That turned out to be bony chicken pieces with a barbeque sauce, so I'm not sure where the *Buffalo* bit originated.

Still, it was cheap; there was plenty of it.

The Chilean red wine with a title that seemed to translate as **The Devil's Castle** was quite quaffable though I exercised a modicum of restraint.

The bill, which I managed to catch a glimpse of on the way out, ran to around ¥7200, which seemed pretty cheap for a variety of plates of nibbles, a fair sized pizza, a drink each for the girls and around half a dozen glasses of red for **Yours Truly**.

Back at base camp, there was coffee, conversation and a couple of performing dogs to fill in the time until one felt inclined to crash.



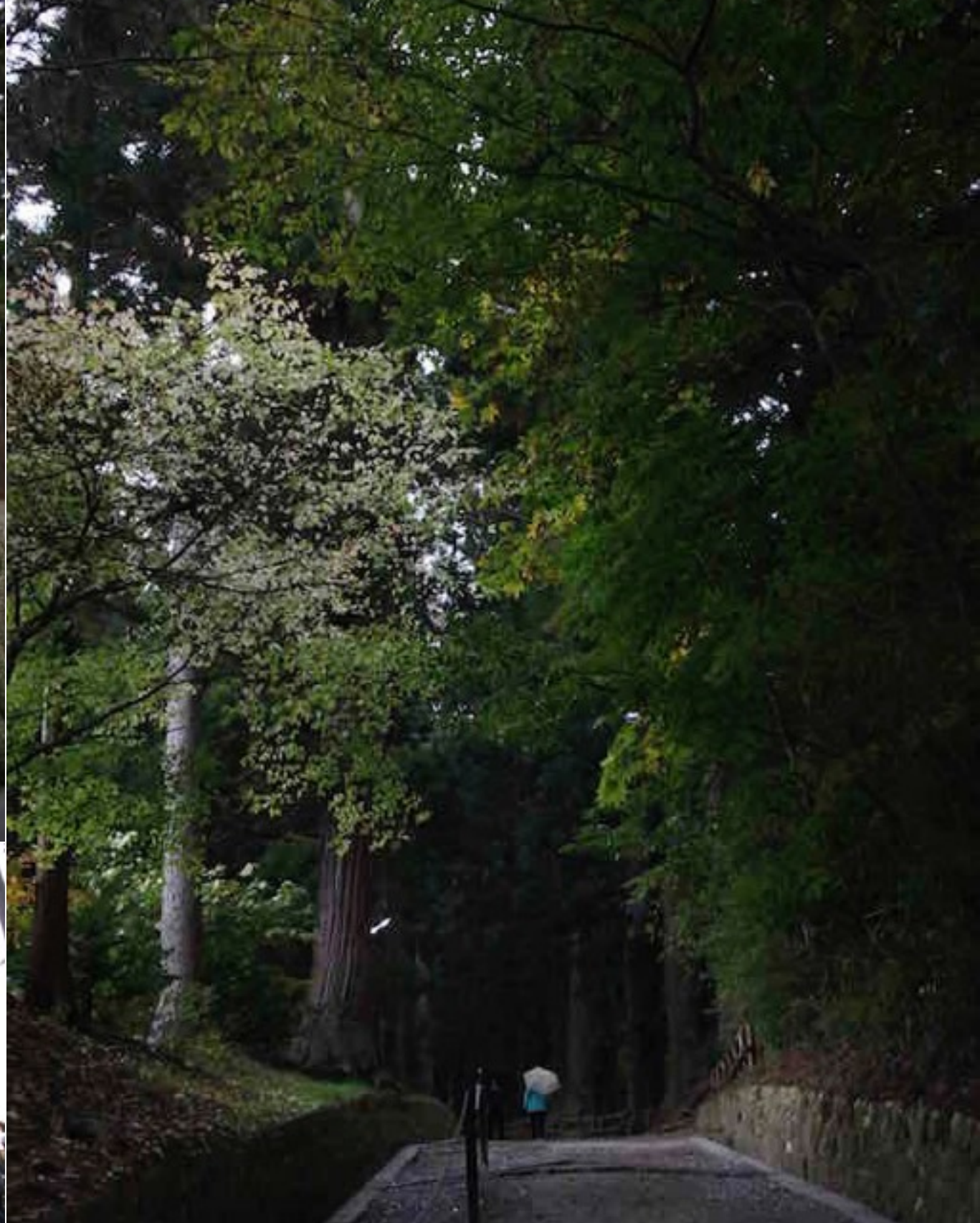
KITAKAMI >
HIRAIZUMI >
KAKUNODATE

Sunday, 28 October 2012

Given the circumstances when I woke, seemingly the first human to have emerged from slumber, I did a quick calculation.

If I was going to sit with the *iPad* on the knees and continue to tap out *Travelogue*, it was a case of finding the niche at the top of the stairs and ignoring the piteous whining emanating from the living area below.

If I'd ventured downstairs, there would have been two insistent canines demanding attention. Until someone else surfaced and took up the running that would make the writing bit impossible.



I hadn't been at it too long before *Our Host* surfaced, and I caught up with the rest of the previous day before venturing into the *maelstrom* for a shower and breakfast.

Readers may suspect hyperbole when I use the word *maelstrom* to describe a living area inhabited by two smallish dogs, but given nonstop hyperactivity (*Red Cordial Dog*) and frenzied demands for attention (*Grog Dog*) no more suitable term springs to mind.

It's equally difficult to come up with a single word to summarise the venue that occupied the bulk of the day, the town of *Hiraizumi* and its premier attraction, *Chusonji* temple.

We set off just after nine, heading south to a place we'd visited last time around. Persistent drizzle had sent us indoors for lunch rather than up the steps to the temple. We had taken a look at the town's other main drawcard at *Motsuji*, and maybe, if I'd done some homework I'd have been more



inclined to venture into the drizzle rather than sit inside and shovel curry down the gullet.

This time, around I'd done detailed research, so strap yourselves in for a somewhat lengthy exposition, boys and girls.

There was a degree of concern on *Our Hostess'* part as to whether I *really* wanted to go to *Chusonji*, but I produced the handy PDF with a *walking around the town map*.

That seemed to quell most of her concerns.

There were some places I wanted to go, even if *going* constituted a brief glance and a photo.

On the surface, driving through the town, there's nothing to differentiate *Hiraizumi* from a myriad of other small *Japanese* country towns.

If you reach the car parks outside the major attractions, you'd soon realise there's something special in the vicinity.

So, the back story.



A population around eight and a half thousand is a far cry from the late *Heian era* or the *Kamakura Period*.

Back then when *Hiraizumi* was the home of the *Fujiwara*, the most powerful clan in *Japan*, and was the *de facto* capital of an area that covered nearly one-third of the country. The population was between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand. The city' almost rivalled the national capital, *Kyoto*.

The oldest structure in *Hiraizumi* seems to be *Hakusan Shrine* at the summit of *Mount Kanzan* (*Barrier Mountain*), described in **1334** as seven hundred years old. The shrine has been rebuilt several times, but its latest incarnation still stands in the same strategic location.

That location, at the junction of the *Kitakami* and *Koromo Rivers*, prompted *Fujiwara no Kiyohira* to move his home to *Mount Kanzan* around 1100. The *Koromo River* was the boundary between the *Japanese heartland* to the south and the territory of the northern *Emishi* peoples.

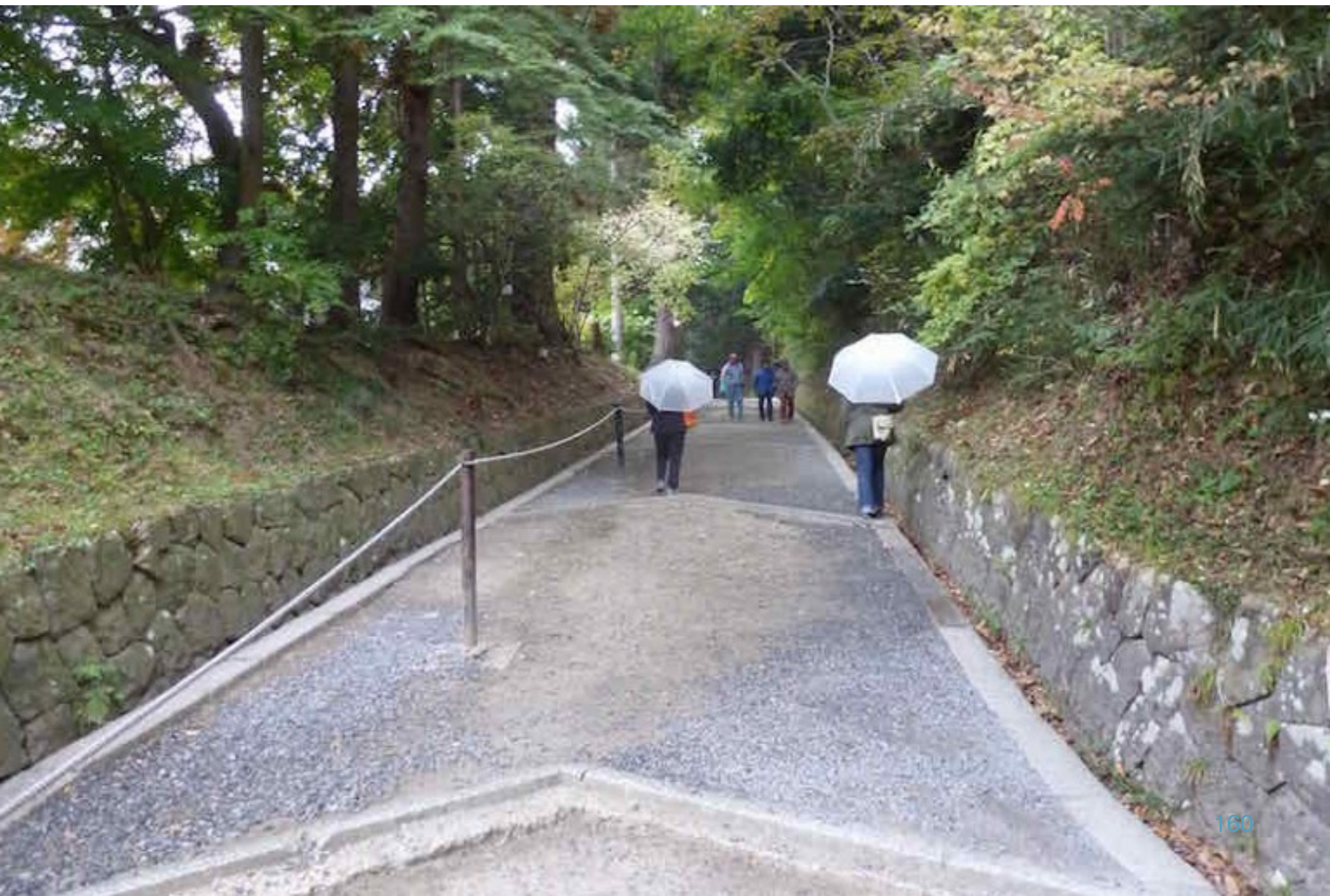
Japanese hunters, trappers, settlers and missionaries had been in contact with the *Emishi* since the early eighth century, with a *Buddhist priest Gyōki* establishing *Kokusekiji* temple in the mountains east of the *Kitakami River* in 729.

Military expeditions to subdue the *Emishi* were repelled in 776 and 787. A scorched earth policy, burning crops, capturing and resettling women and children prompted *Emishi* leaders to surrender in 802. They were subsequently beheaded.

It's one thing to defeat your enemies but another to keep them subdued. The territory ended up as half a dozen semi-autonomous districts along the *Kitakami River* that came under the control of a powerful *Emishi* clan, the Abe family.

Semi-autonomous is the operative word.

Abe no Yoritoki refused to send taxes to *Kyoto*, led raids south of the *Koromo River* and acted as if he was an independent ruler. He obviously needed to be subdued.





The result was the *Zenkunen* or *Early Nine-Years War* (1050-1062) where the *Abe* were defeated by *Minamoto no Yoriyoshi* and *Kiyohara no Takenori*.

The six districts were handed to *Kiyohara no Takenori*. That didn't work out, and corruption resulted in the *Gosannen* or *Latter Three Years' War* (1083-1087).

Thirteen years later, *Fujiwara no Kiyohira* moved to *Hiraizumi*, on the old border, planning to rule an area stretching from the *Shirakawa Barrier* in the south to present day *Aomori Prefecture* in the north. His new base was located almost exactly in the centre of the *Tōhoku* region on the main road leading from *Kyoto* to the north (the *Frontier Way*).

Kiyohira built *Chūsonji* at the top of the mountain and other *pagodas*, temples and gardens followed through *Hiraizumi's* golden age, one that lasted a mere three generations.



In **1189**, the city was razed by *Minamoto Yoritomo*, who was soon to become *Japan's* first *Shōgun*. He was in pursuit of his brother and rival *Yoshitsune*, who was being protected by the *Fujiwara* leader. After the *Fujiwara* had fallen, the town sank into obscurity, with most of the buildings destroyed.

When *Matsuo Bashō* visited the area in 1689 he reflected on the impermanence of human glory:

Ah, summer grasses!

All that remains

Of the warriors dreams

It was the contrast between the former glory and contemporary reality that prompted the desire to visit and take a look around a few places where there didn't seem that much to see.

But, first, there was *Chusonji*.

We arrived in the car park to find the place close to chockers with *not one, not two, but three baton-wielding traffic wardens* guiding incoming cars and buses into slots in the parking area.

Expecting to pay the regulation couple of hundred yen to fund maintenance and upkeep we were surprised to find there was no charge.

We made our way up the hill, through a magnificent avenue of ancient trees, passing a variety of smaller structures. Apart from being *Hiraizumi*'s most famous temple, *Chūsonji* serves as the head temple of the *Tendai* sect in *Tōhoku*, but it is best known for its *Golden Hall (Konjikidō)*, a mausoleum that contains the mummified remains of the leaders of the clan who ruled the area in its 12th-century heyday.

The *Tendai* sect says the temple was founded in 850, but scholars believe *Chūsonji* was founded around 1100 since there's *no archaeological or historical record of Buddhist activity* in the area before that time.

Similar to *Kyoto's Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion)*, the *Konjikido* is a hall completely covered in gold, dates back to 1124, one of two buildings that survive from the original compound. The other is the *Kyozo Hall*, which was a repository for *Buddhist scriptures (sutra)*.

It mightn't be as impressive as the gilded *Konjikido*, but it predates that building by sixteen years.

The *Konjikido* initially sat in the open air, but successive measures to protect it from the elements saw it housed in a wooden building that still stands on the site, and then moved inside a concrete building and placed behind thick glass, so it's only visible from the front.

Dedicated to *Amida Nyorai (Buddha of Infinite Light)* it measures five-and-a-half metres on the sides and stands eight metres high, contains altars for the first three *Fujiwara* lords. Apart from the roof, the whole thing is covered with gold leaf, decorated with gold lacquer and mother-of-pearl, studded with gold and silver, and includes three *Buddha* images.

Beneath the statues on the central dais the body of the first *Fujiwara* lord, *Kiyohira* is interred. The left holds the body of his son, *Motohira*, and the right holds the body of *Motohira*'s son *Hidehira* and *Hidehira*'s son, *Yasuhira*'s head.

Walking around the network of paths that reach a kilometre into the forest that covers the mountaintop there's more to *Chusonji* than the golden hall, though that is, of course, what draws the crowds.

Other buildings on the site were built in the *Fujiwara* period, including the *Hondo* (main hall), where rituals are performed, a *Treasure Hall* and a *Noh* theatre stage.

Having made our way around the temple, it was time for something in the way of sustenance.

Given the number of tourists and sightseers in the area, you'd probably expect a lengthy delay.



I hoped the majority of those inclined to seek out lunch were being delayed by the booming drums and the Noh theatre performance we'd bypassed.

We were on a side track, separate from the path we'd followed on the way up when we passed a seemingly innocuous building with some *Japanese signage* out the front.

I'd have wandered past, but **Our Host** pulled us up, took a squiz at the sign and suggested we head inside. The description of what we'd be getting inside wasn't the sort of thing that would prompt an immediate *Yes!*

On the other hand, if we could get in that took the lunch issue off the agenda.

Which it did, and rather tasty it was.

The meal was punctuated by frequent updates on the score line from a soccer semifinal, where **Our Host's** school were battling the local equivalent of *Argentina* for a spot in the final.

At two-nil down things did not look promising.

Back in the car as we headed off in search of places associated with former glories frequent updates on the soccer saw the score line move from two-nil down to two-all by full time.

An own goal had the opposition ahead, then came the equaliser before the team hero slotted in the penalty that won the game.

And there's a little side story that goes with that.

The star footballer, apparently not a scholar, had been looking at avenues of employment once he's finished his schooling and wasn't a candidate for tertiary education.

He had, according to *Our Host*, applied for a job as a fireman, and had been scheduled for an interview that very day. With a morning match against *Morioka* and a morning job interview, it looked like something would have to give, and you'd probably assume that a career path would take precedence over temporary sporting glory.

At the same time, the *Japanese* take their school sport seriously.

The first full day of our last visit coincided with the grand final of a *High School baseball competition* significant enough to generate nationwide TV coverage. I know because I saw it, and we ended up sitting at a table next door to a bunch of Okinawans, chain-smoking and toasting their home town's success later that evening.

The semifinal was a big enough event to have *the Mayor* order the *Fire Brigade* to reschedule the interview so the star striker could play.

They lost the Grand Final, but he got the job.





But as far as the locations associated with former glories were concerned, the weather put paid to plans to wander around the place on foot, but we managed to find the ruins of *Kanjizaiōin*, which once boasted a *Pure Land's style Jōdo garden*, built by *Fujiwara Motohira's* wife.

Fire destroyed it in the 16th century, and today, all that remains is a park and a pond.

Across the road, a sign near a cluster of houses is all that's left of the part of the old *Frontier Way* that used to be *Hiraizumi's* main street.

Back in the day, it was an area that would have had blocks of shops, as well as storehouses and commercial premises.

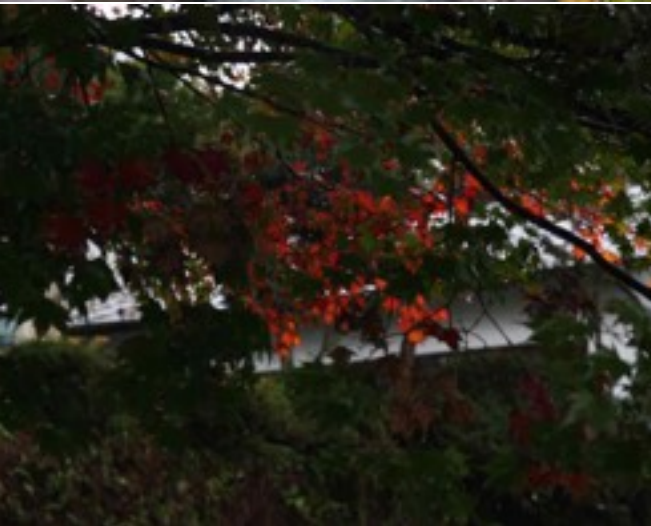


From there, we made our way to the site of *Muryokōin* temple, once modelled after *Byodoin* in *Kyoto*, but apart from the sign that identifies the site all that remains is the temple's pond, along with a larger sign that gives you an impression of the magnificent structure that once stood there.

We also made our way towards the summit of *Mount Kinkeisan*, where *Buddhist sutra* were once buried.

Under more favourable conditions I might have been tempted to take a stroll down the paved path, but I'd dictated the agenda for long enough and passed over the reins to *Our Host*.

It wasn't long before the train left, and there were other fish to fry in an environment of coloured leaves.



The quest for coloured leaves brought us back to the *Genbi Gorge*, home of the *flying dungo*, though you'd have expected the weather to have stifled the *dungo* trade.

We parked at the *Sahara Glass Park*, again pretending to be paying customers before heading for the gorge.

The coloured leaves weren't quite at their best but weren't too far off.

From there it was on to *Ichinoseki*, farewell to *Our Host*, and on to a *Shinkansen* that took us to *Morioka*, where news of the soccer semifinal defeat didn't seem to have reached the platform.

We made our way across to the right line for the *Akita Shinkansen* and were on the ground in *Kakunodate* in *not quite* pitch dark and light drizzle just after five-fifteen.

Fortunately, the hotel was located next door to the station, the rain wasn't falling that heavily, and the dash across open space was a mere cricket pitch or thereabouts.

Better, an investigation revealed *a coin laundry*, which solved a slight predicament. We'd been on the road for five days, and *the laundry backup* wasn't anywhere near *the critical stage*.

But with two nights in *Kakunodate*, a late arrival into *Aomori* on *Tuesday* and an evening appointment in *Sendai* on *Wednesday*, it made sense to get *the dirty laundry* we'd accumulated clean, and push the crisis point back another week or so.

With the washing machine doing its thing, the hotel restaurant did a perfectly acceptable job of filling a yawning gap without threatening to hit any heights.

Afterwards, we retreated to the room, free *WiFi*, the necessary checks on the washing machine and a couple of healthy slugs out of the bottle of *saké* that had been donated to the *keep them warm in the mountains* campaign.

Needless to say, there was no question of needing any rocking.





KAKUNODATE > DAKIGAERI VALLEY > KAKUNODATE

Monday, 29 October 2012

The big issue when I stirred on *Day Six* of the trip involved the weather conditions outside, and an initial glance out the window was hardly something you'd describe as promising.

While there was no way of telling whether there was *any actual precipitation* without wandering outside there was visible mist and a murky gloom that didn't bode well as far as the light was concerned.

There wasn't a definite plan for the day's activities, more a wish list, weather permitting.

After showering and discussing what we needed in the clothing department, we headed down for a very *Japanese breakfast*, returning to see signs that the weather might be lifting.

The first thing was to scope out options for *Tuesday's* departure.

The preferred option was *a non-JR rail motor operation* that couldn't be booked online, and we also needed to check for a more definitive outlook on the day's weather forecast.

The endangered rail scenario looked good, but we were advised to be first in the queue if we wanted to be sure of a seat. That wasn't likely to be an issue since the hotel is on the other side of the plaza outside the station.

The girl in the *Tourist Information Centre* had promising news on the weather front.

By the time we were waiting for the shuttle to the *Dakigaeri Valley*, I was thinking of removing the corduroy shirt and doing the walk in a t-shirt. That represented a remarkable turnaround from earlier, when I was advised to ditch the corduroy in favour of the merino thermal underlay and the padded insulator.

The t-shirt bit was probably never a viable option, but the fact that it was even considered shows how much the weather prospects had improved.



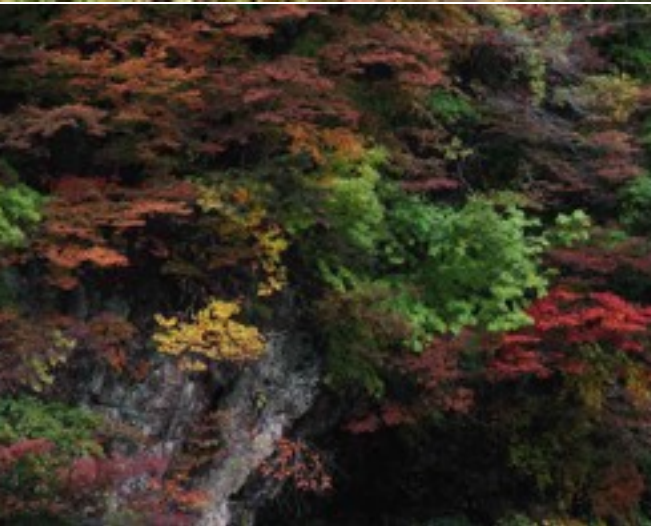


The bus shuttled off on time at 10:15, stopping at the *Tazawaka Art, Spa, Brewery and Theatre Resort* along the way. It's a twenty minute run through the countryside, and while you can do it by taxi, which may be quicker, the free bus is the way to go if you're not inclined to shell out for a cab fare.

The bus runs during *October* and early *November*, so there's no choice for the rest of the year.

Reputedly one of the most beautiful valleys in *Japan*, the *Dakigaeri Valley* runs along the banks of the *Tamagawa River*, and it's obvious from the time you pull into the car park that you're in for something special.

The mountains that surround the valley would be an attractive proposition any time from spring onwards, but are at their best as the autumn leaves start to turn.



The mail we'd received in town suggested they were somewhere between thirty-three and fifty per cent.

If the lower estimate was a correct assessment, I don't think my eyes could stand the full glory at the height of the season.

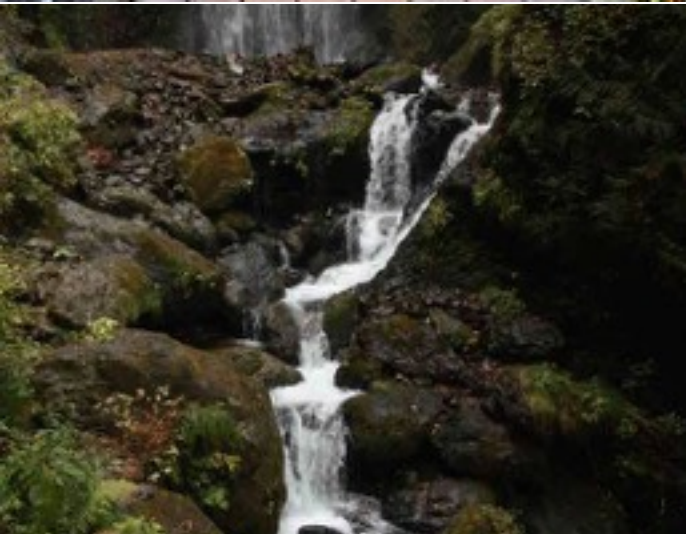
You make your way in past the predictable array of stalls offering snacks and regional specialities.

The trail that takes you into the valley starts at a *Shinto* shrine devoted to the god of rain before the *Kaminoiwahashi suspension bridge* leads you onto the path along the river valley.

The path was initially a railway used by timber getters.

Wagons loaded with cedar logs were carried to *Jindai*, the nearest station on the main line.

Unsurprisingly, given the rail origin the track winds through the valley with tunnels and bridges, but only the first four kilometres (out of twelve) were open to the public when we were there.



That stretch was enough to get us to the *Mikaerinotaki waterfall*, which was the thirty-metre highlight of an incredible stroll through forests where the leaves were around seventy-five per cent (according to *The Supervisor*, who's more *au fait* with these things than your narrator).

I also noticed the waters of the *Tamagawa River* are a cobalt blue, much like the water in *Bluewater Creek* north of *Townsville*. The explanation, in that case, was, if I recall my *High School Geography*, *copper sulphate*. Whether that applies, in this instance, is uncertain. I must check on that, but *English language material* is thin on the ground.

Had the trail been open for more than four kilometres we may well have failed to make it back for the 12:45 shuttle bus, which would have raised issues with lunch and would have limited the time available to look at the *samurai quarter* of *Kakunodate*.



Enclosed by mountains and the *Hinokinaigawa River*, the castle town of **Kakunodate** is famous for its *samurai* tradition. The town was founded in **1620**, with two distinct areas, the *samurai district*, once home to eighty families, and the merchant area.

Hundreds of cherry trees line a two kilometre stretch of the river and make it one of *Tohoku*'s most famous *sakura* viewing spots and the town has been tagged the *little Kyoto of Tohoku*.

Lunch was a curry and a flavoursome product of the local brewery that went down well enough to have me dropping into a bottle shop on the way back to the hotel to pick up further examples of the local brewer's art.

The eatery was an outbuilding of a residence in the merchants' quarter, and a wander through that part of town allowed us to have a look around before heading slightly uphill to the autumn leaves in the *samurai quarter* in the northern part of town.

Kakunodate is, by all accounts, a prime example of a *Japanese castle town* although the castle hasn't survived.



Several of the *samurai houses*, privately owned by descendants of the warriors are open to the public and are said to offer some of the best examples of *samurai architecture* in *Japan*

We didn't see many foreigners while we were wandering around, but the town is high on the pecking order as far as the scenic side of things is concerned.

Given the coloured leaves on display, it wasn't difficult to see why.

We took a turn through a *samurai house* and received a definite reminder of just how tough things must have been in winter.

With the prospect of moving on the morrow, we were tucked away in the cot reasonably early.



That isn't too difficult to do when nightfall comes in well and truly after five in the afternoon.

We'd explored most scenic options around town, enough to know there'd be a case for returning in the *sakura* season though that would probably be an overnight stop *en route* to somewhere else. If we do, there'll be a stroll through the riverbank tunnel of cherry blossoms, designated as a *Place of Scenic Beauty*.

And there's the prospect of spring leaves as an additional treat.

Accommodation could, however, be an issue.

Kakunodate is big on festivals, and you'd assume the town will be booked out for *Sakura Matsuri* in spring. There's a lion dance with drums and flute (*Sasaramai*) in summer, and *Yamabuttsuke Matsuri* in early autumn (*samurai*-themed floats). The sequence wraps up with *Hiburikamakura* to ward off evil spirits and improve prospects for a healthy New Year in winter.

You might think a return is unlikely, but given the experience on *the endangered railway* the next day, you can never tell.



KAKUNODATE > TAKANOSU > AOMORI

Tuesday, 30 October 2012

If *Monday's* effort seems in direct contradiction to *Hughesy's if you've got the rail pass you might as well use it* principle, the next three days were going to deliver rail travel in abundance.

The schedule for the first day, on the other hand, underlines the *variety* side of things, starting with a morning ride on an ancient rail motor on what *Madam* christened *the Endangered Railroad* up to *Takanosu*.

A stop for lunch at a *French restaurant* would be followed by a leg on a JR local line down to the coast and the main line service looping around the northwestern coast of *Honshū* to *Aomori*.

If you're looking for details regarding the *Endangered Railroad*, the official moniker is the *Akita Nairiku Jūkan Railway*. It's what's termed a third sector company (the *Japan Rail* consortium being *the first sector* and *the major private lines* the second) that took over *two former JR lines* in *1986*, and added a new line to link the two in *1989*.

Since the line runs across a sparsely populated region, it's never going to be a big money spinner, and since it faces what you might term *severe business challenges* you don't need to be *Einstein* to figure out the origin of the *Endangered* bit.

Seats on the *Endangered Rail* are on a first come, first served basis, and we weren't sure whether the carriage would have room to stow the *Black Monster*. So we were into breakfast at the hotel just after seven, packed and booked out around eight and second in line for tickets in the booking office.

So far so good.

We were second on the train as well, which gave us plenty of time to scope out possible luggage space.

As it turned out, there were a couple of bench style seats towards what we presumed must be the front of the rail motor, where there was a useful space for the *Monster* and the prospect of a view to the front on what promised to be an ultra-scenic route.

The cabin wasn't quite full when we started off, but there wasn't an abundance of spare seats either, and there was no way of knowing how many of the passengers were there for the long haul to *Takanosu* and how many were destined for a stop somewhere along the way.





As soon as we started someone plonked themselves in front of where I was sitting, blocking the view through the front of the rail motor, which was, why I'd plonked myself there in the first place.

We started off across farmland, with stops at little places called *Ugo-o-ota* and *Saimyoji*, which lead to the conclusion there was likely to be an amount of picking up and dropping off along the way

I wasn't clued into the back story and wasn't sure whether we were talking *a tourist operation* or *a genuine local line serving relatively isolated communities*.

As time went on, it was evident local traffic was the primary *raison d'être* for the line, but tourists in the spring and autumn allow the business to keep its nose above water.



There was a delay at the third stop (*Yatsu*), where the platform sat beside a siding, to allow a motor headed in the opposite direction to pass.

We were off again at 9:18.

Subsequent research revealed there's a nearby park where *Japan's* largest *Saimyoji* chestnuts are grown, and a vast *katakuri* violet field said to be the largest in *Japan*. That's another reason for tourists to step off the train for a bit.

Next time, maybe we will, but, this time, around we had serious ground to cover.

From *Yatsu*, the line threads its way through mountains and forests.



The mountain leg began with a rapid-fire sequence of three or four tunnels, before opening onto flat farmland again.

Heading upwards through a landscape where the leaves were well and truly on the turn, particularly on the slopes, we reached *Matsuba*, the old terminus when the line was part of the national railway system.

From there, you could head across to the country's deepest lake, *Lake Tazawa*, or relax at one of the *onsen* resorts.

By *Ugonakazato*, whole slopes had gone multicolour.

A thirteen-minute delay at *Kamihinokinai* gave people a chance to stretch the legs and grab the odd photo.

It also gave the opportunity to ascertain that I was, again, the only foreigner in the vicinity.

The delay was to allow an express, a rail motor of roughly equivalent age, to pass. Once it had, we were off again at 9:56.

We hit a tunnel at *Tozawa* at 10:03 emerged, and then another, then a third and a fourth in the space of two minutes, a fifth at 10:05 and a minute later we were in for a long dark haul, moving steadily higher, and emerging five minutes later.

We were only just out of the tunnel when we reached a station platform lined with *a tour party* happily clicking away as the train approached, and clambering aboard once we'd ground to a halt.

They were obviously aboard for the most scenic section of the route, which took the train slowly across a couple of bridges, and were gone again a few stops further down the track.

I hadn't sighted too many other travellers getting on, but there were a couple of instances where the train stopped to set down the odd passenger one assumes came aboard at *Kakunodate*.

Along the way we passed *Ani-Matagi*, one of the top hundred stations in *Tohoku*, where there's also a bear pasture, *Utto Onsen Matagi no Yu* resort, *Yasunotaki Falls*, reputed to be the second most beautiful waterfall in *Japan*, and a museum where displays cover the history of the bear hunters of northern *Japan*.

Not that we were getting out to check out displays that would probably have lacked *explanatory material in English*, you understand.





The population was thinned out considerably there, and we seemed to be well into the uplands, following a broad river valley.

Once the tour party and *onsen* set were gone, there was a noticeable change in the coloured leaves that I'm inclined to ascribe to a preponderance of evergreens rather than deciduous species.

The last leg into *Takanosu* took us across a broad expanse of upland paddy fields.

Overall it was another spectacular tick in the box for *Madam's* research skills.

Comments from people she'd spoken to on the train suggested we'd managed to lob there on the very best day. Given my lack of experience with seasonal leaves, I'm inclined to take their word for it.



Once we disembarked in *Takanosu*, there were of two and a half hours to kill, and the research skills kicked in once again.

Three streets down from the station, a right-hand turn takes you onto a quiet back street with a rather good *French restaurant* that operates under the moniker of *Boire un Coup*.

Of course, we were there for lunch, which doesn't marry well with full *a la carte* and an extensive wine list.

There were two *plats du jour*, a chicken confit and a pasta marinara, both of which were quite delicious, and we tried a *Chardonnay* and a *Cabernet*, both from *Languedoc*, and both good varietal examples of wine from varieties not usually associated with the region.

I had the *Chardonnay* with the pasta and thought it was in much the same flavour profile as *new wave Australian* takes on the variety.

With lunch concluded we still had an hour to kill. An inquiry about origins of wine had the proprietor proudly hauling bottles out of the wine fridge.

He had a right to be proud because, for a restaurant in a small provincial town in *northern Japan*, it was an excellent range.

That turned into a conversation about wine that could have gone on for a while, but when a couple of customers who'd eaten in the private room on the other side of the entrance turned up to pay their bill we took the advantage to escape.

The rest of the waiting time passed in the waiting room at *Takanosu station*, a spell long enough to bring the narrative more or less up to date.

The next leg involved a connection on a local line that brought us down to *Higashi-Noshiro*, where we boarded the rather splendidly named *Resort Train #5*.

Looking at the train itself you'd think there wasn't that much different or unusual about it.

Once you're aboard, however, two things become apparent.

The first is that you've got leg room over and above what you'd reasonably expect.

I suspect this has something to do with the *Resort* in the train's name since you'd expect holidaymakers to be carrying a bit more baggage than the average traveller.

The second is the *not quite ceiling to floor* windows.





Looping around the northwest of *Honshū* we'd be looking across the *Sea of Japan* towards the setting sun, and windows stretching from just below the overhead luggage rack to below the armrest maximise the viewing options.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the way things panned out.

The sun was shining, albeit rather reluctantly, when we left *Higashi-Noshiro*, but the cloud cover had kicked in big time before we hit the coast, and although the fat old Sun was out there somewhere, he was lurking behind a bank of clouds that ruled out anything that resembled an actual sunset.

Although that was the case the views out across a strangely tranquil ocean that presented a contrast to obvious anti-erosion work taking place along the actual coastline.

The railway line hugged the coast, sometimes with a road in between wheels and water, sometimes, quite literally, looking from the picture window almost directly down onto the beach.

Twice, along particularly picturesque stretches of coast, the train slowed to a crawl to allow maximum photo opportunities.

There were frequent stops along the way, as befits a train servicing a resort area, with comings and goings as passengers moved from one venue to another.



After the Sun had slunk below the horizon, there wasn't much to see, so I settled back to read, tossing up between the *Neil Young autobiography* and the latest issue of ***Uncut***, downloaded in *Kakunodate*.

An announcement over the train's P.A. System brought an unexpected flurry of action at ***Kawabe***. The ***Resort Special*** took itself forward one more station, then retraced its path *en route* to ***Aomori***.

The announcement advised the impatient aboard our train to switch to a local train at the next station, which would get us into ***Aomori*** some twenty minutes earlier than originally planned.

Needless to say, a mad scramble ensued, hastily stowing the ***iPad*** in the backpack, and then a frantic hauling of the ***Black Monster*** up the station stairs, across the bridge to the neighbouring

platform and back down again. It was a situation where you'd have been reluctant to use the escalator even if one had been available.

The line into **Aomori** seems, on the evidence available, to be a single line, given lengthy delays in a number of stations to allow trains higher up the pecking order to travel in the opposite direction.

The second last stop was **ShinAomori**, the **Shinkansen** stop, located well out of the city to allow easier construction of the next stage of the network, a new underwater connection to **Hokkaidō**.

Back on the ground in **Aomori**, there was a spell of confusion as to the location of the hotel, which was a bit further away from the station than we'd thought.

Once we'd checked in we checked out **the laundry facilities** on the way to dinner, which comprised 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.

You couldn't have complained about the quantity or the quality, but after around a week of three hearty serves a day **Hughesy** wasn't keen on the bulk.

I made as big a hole as I could in everything else, but was careful to ensure there wasn't *a skerrick of scallop* in evidence on the plate.

Next time I intend, as I pointed out to **Madam**, maxing out on the scallops with no accompaniments at all except, possibly, a beer to wash them down.

And I'm not even sure about the beer.

Back at the hotel, a washing machine in **the laundry** was available, though it required ¥400 to operate so you can't say it was free. Since it was a neat combination of washer and dryer, it meant we could avoid the *up and down checking to see if the dryer needed another cycle or two* routine.

Still, that meant a two-hour cycle, so **Madam** poured herself a full **Japanese bath** of the *fill almost to the brim and then immerse yourself* variety, spent a good quarter of an hour therein and insisted **Hughesy** do the same.

There's a fair bit more body mass where **Hughesy's** concerned, and I was fairly Clancy conscious as I set about the immersion process.

Still, regardless of the substantial overflow (**Japanese bathrooms** seem to be constructed to cater for it), it was a rather pleasant way to relax.



AOMORI > HAKODATE

Wednesday, 31 October 2012

The day kicked off with the close to regulation reasonably early (8:24 isn't up there with the sparrows at first light, but isn't exactly late either) departure from a station that the cool, clear light of day showed to be right beside ***Aomori***'s waterfront.

A ferry that transports cars and passengers over to ***Hokkaidō*** was clearly visible from the footbridge *en route* to Platform 6).

Aomori Prefecture has a number of tourist attractions, mostly nature related, though historic ruins including ***Sannai-Maruyama*** (***Japan***'s largest, said to date back to 4,000 to 5,000 BC), ***Korekawa*** and ***Kamegaoka*** would have their share of appeal to the interested observer.

Hirosaki Castle is a well-known cherry blossom venue.

Given our schedule (arriving around seven-twenty in the evening, off to take the tunnel under the ***Tsugaru Strait*** before eight-thirty the following morning) we were never going to be doing much looking around.

The city is a relatively recent development, dating back to the *Edo Period* when the *Hirosaki clan* began building a port and used woods nearby as landmarks for inward-bound shipping.

Aomori either translates as *blue* or *green forest* and the name did not come into use until after 1783. A counter theory attributes it to an *Ainu* word. Either way, there's no doubt the town was an important stepping stone in the *Japanese colonisation* of *Hokkaidō*.

Human occupation of the area goes back a ways, and it was part of the region ruled from *Hiraizumi* by the *Northern Fujiwara* clan during the *Heian Period*, although it was mainly inhabited by hunting and gathering *Emishi* people.

Around the start of the *Edo Period*, *Aomori* was a minor port but in the administrative reforms that followed the *Meiji Restoration* various feudal domains were abolished and replaced with prefectures, a process that brought about the inauguration of *Aomori Prefecture* on *23 September 1871*.

Aomori, however, wasn't designated as a city until *1 April 1898*.

You can't help thinking those developments were related to the *Japanese* aim to bring the whole of the archipelago under Imperial rule and restrict foreign incursions.



Within a year of the creation of *Aomori Prefecture* the *Hokkaidō Colonization Office* was operating a ferry service from *Aomori* to *Hakodate*.

Twenty years later the *Tōhoku Main Line* connected the area with *Tokyo* by rail. The line we'd used to reach the city is slightly more recent, dating back to *1908*.

Modern *Aomori* owes much of its status (apart from lurks and perks from being the prefecture capital) to its position at the terminus of those two rail lines and role as the port for the *Seikan Ferry*, which opened in *1908*. It sailed between *Aomori* and *Hakodate* nearly three-quarters of a million times, carrying 160 million passengers until the *Seikan Tunnel*, the longest tunnel of its kind in the world, came into service.

The *Tōhoku Expressway* connected *Aomori* to *Tokyo* in *1979*, and the city is currently the northern terminus of *Japan's Shinkansen* service though that will change in the not too distant future when the new bullet train line goes in under the *Tsugaru Strait*.

We saw signs construction of that line is well and truly under way.





Sighting the ferry on the way to the morning train was a reminder of those matters,

From *Aomori*, the line followed the coast, with views across the water to *Hokkaidō*, though what I thought was the northern island turned out to be the northeastern arm of *Honshū*.

Blue sky and sunshine meant it was sunglasses weather, not conducive to *iPad* typing. That could be caught up on the half hour haul under the *Tsugaru Strait*.

We were running beside the beach as we came into *Kanita*, but from there the line started to move inland, with deep green forests on either side, with broad swathes of multicoloured leaves interspersed with the evergreens, though there were paddy fields closer to the line itself.

By 9:03 we were starting to run into tunnels, the first of them relatively short, and by 9:05 we'd reached a longer one, emerging again by 9:08, when we were supposed to be hitting the big one.

The train came to a halt at *Tsugaru Hamana*.

When we were underway again, with water clearly visible on the left at 9:11 we were in another tunnel. It was not quite the one that meant our next sighting of daylight would have been on *Hokkaidō*, and there were more as we made our way under coastal ridges running down to the sea, which was still over there on our left.

The false alarms meant I wasn't sure whether the tunnel we hit at 9:14 was the big one, but given the fact that we were still hurtling through the darkness two minutes later, I guess it was.

We were supposed to hit the bottom at 9:22, two hundred and forty metres down in a tunnel that's ten metres wide and eight metres high, though there was no way of assessing dimensions in the Stygian gloom outside.

It was an outstanding engineering feat, some forty-two years in the making.

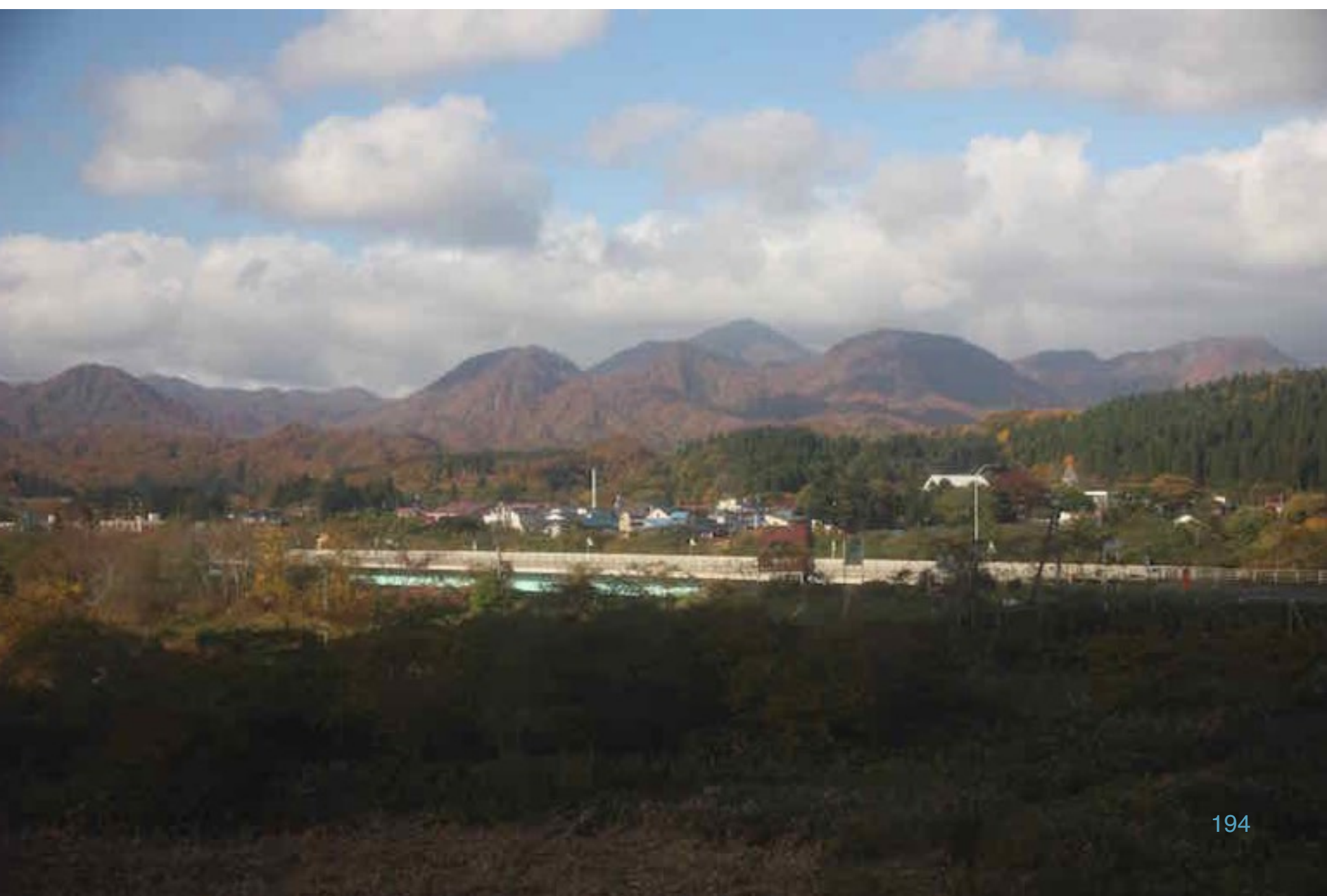
At 9:40 we were onto *Hokkaidō*, emerging with a heavily wooded hillside area on our left as the train pulled into the station at *Shiriuchi*. We were back in a tunnel shortly after that, presumably prompted by the same engineering concerns that applied on the other side.

We were on the eastern side of the train, so it was sunglasses weather as we passed what looked like the in-progress construction of the *Hokkaidō Shinkansen* line.

The water in the Strait was like a mill pond, and it was a case of sitting back and enjoying the view for the rest of the journey.

The last stage took us on a sweeping loop around the harbour that brought *Hakodate* to prominence, so at this point, it's time for another diversion into historical and geographical background.

After it opened to foreign trade in **1854**, *Hakodate* was the major port in *northern Japan* and until the *Great Hakodate Fire* of **1934**, it was the northern island's largest city.



It now ranks third behind *Sapporo* and *Asahikawa*.

The city's origins date back to **1454**, when *Kono Kaganokami Masamichi* built a manor house in an *Ainu* fishing village called *Usukeshi* (a bay in *Ainu*).

We're talking frontier lifestyle and issues with indigenous people here, and an *Ainu* rebellion drove *Masamichi*'s son, *Kono Suemichi*, and family out of *Hakodate* in **1512**.

There isn't much in the way of recorded history for the next century with a recurrent conflict between the *Ainu* and armed merchants like the *Kono* family, who set out to establish trading posts and control trade in the region.

Given the frontier experience elsewhere you'd tend to assume people weren't interested in keeping records for posterity, and you'd guess there wasn't a great deal of government supervision either.

In any case, there was an *Ainu* uprising led by a warrior called *Shakushain* between **1669** and **1672**, that resulted in defeat and suppression for the *Ainu* and laid the foundations for modern *Hakodate*.

By the nineteenth century, the settlement was flourishing, and there was rapid development after, the *Tokugawa Shōgunate* took direct control of *Hakodate* in **1779**. A magistracy was established in **1802**.

But the big change came in **1854** when a fleet of five U.S. ships surveyed the harbour under the terms of the *Convention of Kanagawa*, negotiated by *Commodore Matthew Perry*.

The port was completely opened to foreign trade on **2 June 1859** as one of *five Japanese points of contact* with the outside world. Visitors can see evidence of that status in the *Old Foreign Quarter*, which hosted several overseas consulates.

On the ground in *Hakodate*, the priority was, as usual, dropping the *Black Monster* at the hotel, but there were a couple of logistical and administrative details that needed to be sorted.

Madam needed to book the next batch of train tickets, and the travelling funds needed to be replenished, so a rendezvous with an ATM was also a priority.

We could have accomplished those things before we hit the hotel, but railway ticket offices and *Black Monsters* aren't a good match, so we took the item in question to its overnight lodgings, where we found our room was ready for us.

That, at least, took another piece out of the equation since there was no need to get back to check in.

Downstairs we had a chat with the very helpful gentleman on the front desk and headed back to the station for tickets and cash replenishment.



There were three main items on the agenda, and discussion at the hotel had done a fair bit to sort them into a workable sequence.

We started with a trip to the star-shaped fortress at *Goryōkaku*, the first European-style fortress built in *Japan* and a relic of the era when the country was being opened up to the West.

Ironically, it was built to defend the city against imperialist threats from *Western powers* and was completed in *1864*.

That was just in time for the fortress to become the headquarters of the *Ezo Republic* after *Enomoto Takeaki* fled to *Hakodate* with the remnants of his Navy and a handful of *French advisers* in *1866*.



They established the *Republic* on *Christmas Day* and attempted to gain international recognition through foreign legations in the city, but government forces defeated the secessionists in the *Battle of Hakodate* in **1869**, and the city and fort surrendered peacefully.

After the fort had lost its military significance, it was turned into a park, with 1,600 cherry trees planted around the moats, making it one of *Hokkaidō*'s best cherry blossom spots.

The best views come from the nearby *Goryōkaku Tower* though you're likely to wait up to three hours to make the ascent at the height of the *sakura* season.

A hundred metres up looking towards the fort, you can see why.

The area around the castle and the tower is a noted eating area, and we had already picked up two recommendations for lunch.

With a choice between curry and *ramen*, the noodles won, partly due to the number of encounters I've had with curry over the past week.



Ramen was always going to be *Madam's* preference, so there is an element of diplomacy in there as well.

The *ramen* arrived in a large bowl of stock.

Having once again left *Hughesy's* fork at the hotel I had no choice but to have a go with chopsticks.

As it turned out, I could have asked for a fork since my unorthodox, but highly effective chopstick technique prompted one of the waiters to deliver one.

By that point, I'd demolished about 90% of the noodles, so the fork remained where it had been placed.

From there, we headed to the *Tower* for panoramic views across the city, then made our way downstairs and headed for the fortress itself, where the *sakura*-covered defensive walls could have prompted an extensive photo session.

We had, however, other fish to fry, so we made our way back to the tram line and headed for the old *Foreign Quarter*.

As one of the first ports opened to foreign shipping, you could have tipped great things for *Hakodate*.

Relative isolation (I suspect that was one of the reasons the port was selected in the first place) meant the city was bypassed by more centrally positioned rivals.



That means much of what was built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is still there, if it wasn't destroyed in the **1907** fire, and much of what fell victim to the flames seems to have been rebuilt in a similar style.

Interestingly, the area near the foot of *Mount Hakodate* is known as *Motomachi*, which translates as *an original town*. That explains the presence of the *Hakodate Public Hall*, which housed the local government in the early twentieth century.

Equally interesting is the fact that *Kōbe*, *Nagasaki* and *Yokohama* all have districts bearing the same name.



We took a ramble through the area, passing *Russian Orthodox*, *Roman Catholic* and *Episcopal Churches*, the *Russian* and *British Consulates*, and the *Higashi Honganji* temple, then made our way downhill to the *red brick warehouses* along the waterfront.

They've been developed into a shopping, dining and entertainment complex that's a prime example of the sort of shopping you'll find in a tourist area of a gift-oriented society.

It's also the hub of *Hakodate's* eating and drinking options.

We also passed *Japan's* first concrete electricity pole and located the *Spanish eatery Madam* had selected as a possible dinner option.

By this time, we were waiting for sunset.

The third leg of the *Hakodate* trifecta involved an ascent of *Mount Hakodate* for one of the *Best Three Nighttime Vistas in Japan* (alongside *Nagasaki's Mount Inasa* and *Kōbe's Mount Rokko*), rated the equal of the evening views across *Naples* and *Hong Kong*.

The rambling had just about run out of possibilities around four, so with a good hour and a half to wait for the bus that would take us to the summit we headed back to the hotel for a brief spell.

The helpful advice we received on arrival hadn't quite turned out to be on the money.

We'd been advised against buying a day long tram ticket, which seemed to cost more than the likely total of fares between the railway station and the fortress and back to *Motomachi*.

But we both agreed that if we'd shelled out for the day pass, we might have headed further around to the *Foreigners' Cemetery* rather than moseying back to the accommodation.

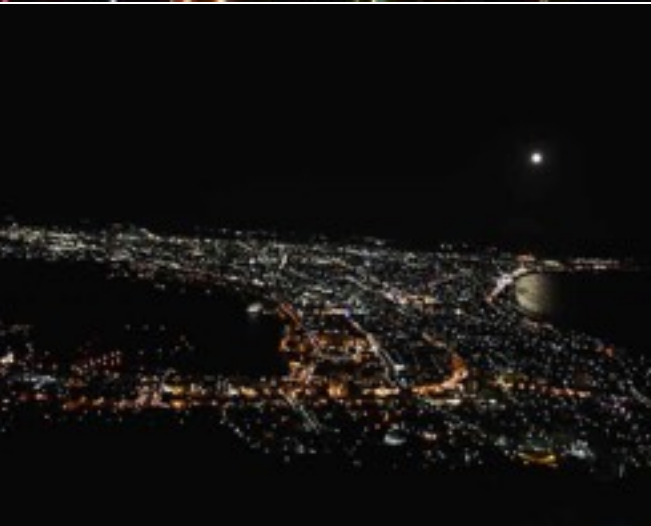
In any case, rugged up to the best of our ability we were back out around 5:10, heading for the bus terminal, where a 5:30 service would take us up to the top.

As it turned out, it was just as well we were on the spot early.

Our position in the queue that formed after the *Motomachi Gourmet* bus left landed us seats rather than standing room.

Mount Hakodate is a lumpy, 334-metre wooded mountain at the southern end of the peninsula on which *Hakodate* is located.





The mountain is the local nickname of *Gagyūzan* (*Mount Cow's Back*) since the mountain allegedly resembles a resting cow.

Facilities at the summit include observation platforms, souvenir shops, a cafe and a restaurant.

Advice at the hotel suggested the bus (¥360 return) rather than the ropeway (¥640/1160 one-way/return).

The ropeway would provide a continuous vista along a single line of sight where the bus, twisting and turning on its way, offered spectacular views on both sides of the vehicle.

Hint: If you take the bus, try to wangle seats on the same side for both legs of the journey. There are good views from both sides, and if you swap you'll end up seeing the same thing both ways.

The bus was packed to the gunwales on the way up, but once we were there, the mob dispersed to all quarters, with many opting to descend on the ropeway.

Bus one way, ropeway t'other seemed to be the preferred option since we found ourselves sharing the downward bus with a bunch of stylishly dressed hipsters who alighted in *the gourmet quarter*, evidently out for a big night.

I guessed they made the ascent via ropeway, and with the sightseeing done were off to make merry.

We took ourselves around to a vantage point overlooking the city for snapshot action where capturing the full moon over the city lights was a priority.

Once we'd accomplished that we made our way into the summit complex, with its array of gift shops, tea houses and restaurants and a rooftop area that might have offered the best views but was also, predictably, packed.

In any case, we were out to get a seat on the **6:20** bus and found ourselves occupying the same seats we'd had for the ascent, thus locking in the *both sides of the view* aspect.

Back on the ground, we headed back to the hotel since the camera bag was surplus to requirements, and the plan for the rest of the evening involved *chicken yakitori* and a couple of cleansing ales.

That plan came unstuck when we stopped to chat with the helpful front desk man, who informed us the proprietor of the eatery next door was *inclined to be difficult*.

Really? A chef with quirky personality issues? Who'd have thunk?

He directed us instead to a little warren of eating and drinking places a couple of hundred metres away on the other side of the major intersection near the railway station where we'd boarded the bus.

Now, you might take this next bit the wrong way.

So it's important to emphasise that while I was keen to hit the *yakitori chicken* with a couple of beers for the evening meal, the key issues were avoiding a big meal.

Specifically, avoiding the rice, salad and *miso* soup that invariably accompanies a set meal in *Japan*.

In short, I was looking for *a little bit of something tasty that didn't require chopsticks*.

We arrived in a maze that contained about fourteen assorted eateries, most of them of the *sit at the counter and drink while you snack on the nibbles you can order off the blackboard menu persuasion*.

There weren't any spaces at the *yakitori* place, but there were alternatives.

The problem was, initially, deciding which one, and then when we'd settled on one establishment, avoiding *Madam's* natural inclination to try as many as possible of the yummy alternatives.

Personally, I would have been happy to have another couple of goes at the scallops we started with, simmered in a little stock on top of a small stove, with a large shell as a cooking vessel.

I wasn't keen on the sight of raw scallops, but once they'd simmered away atop the little cooker the result was quite superb.

Once they were gone, I could have gone another, probably another and quite possibly a fourth serve, turning the pieces in the broth and taking hearty swigs of beer in between turns.

Madam, on the other hand, couldn't help but order *sashimi*, which I'm sure I would have done had I been *Japanese*.

There was a dish of potatoes where you were supposed to hollow out space on the middle and insert raw squid and a dab of butter. This, I gather, is a *Hokkaidō* delicacy, and it wasn't bad, but, as the reader might guess, it involved chopsticks to do the hollowing out, something I was hoping to avoid.

I was also hoping to avoid suggestions that I might like to try bits and pieces off the platter of *sashimi* that followed the platter's arrival.

Like I said earlier, I was after a small feed that didn't involve chopsticks and wanted to avoid concern about whether I was enjoying myself.

Because, actually, I was.

We're talking *an eating and drinking environment you're not going to find in Australia*, and if there weren't the old language issues, I'd have been joining in the badinage.

We were in there following a chat with the proprietress, whose son acted as the barman while she did a bit in the room at the rear that served as the kitchen.

When we arrived, a married couple was finishing up before heading elsewhere and a couple of girls apparently on a quiet night out.

Conversation ebbed and flowed back and forth, aided, abetted and redirected by the barman, who was a pretty classy operator.

After the couple had left, a rotund and jovial gentleman arrived, settled in to simmer scallops and engage in repartee, much of which seemed to concern the relative merits of *Hokkaidō* and *Tokyo*, which was, as far as I could gather, where the two girls were from.

All in all, a very enjoyable little session, except for the fact that the bloke over there was sitting down to what I'd have preferred to be eating rather than the other bits and pieces that seemed to be deemed necessary to broaden *Hughesy's* gustatory horizons.

Those attempts were something I could have done without, as was the consequence of moving the venue from staggering distance of the hotel to a much more remote location.

We'd been snug enough in the little eatery, and when we hit the side street outside things weren't too bad, but as we stood at the intersection near the bus terminal waiting for the lights to change the wind chill factor kicked in big time.

It's fair to say I've never been colder in my life.

One minute I was fine, but as the core body temperature plunged, **Madam** looked in my direction, noted that I seemed to be having trouble and asked whether I was all right.

An anguished **No** produced an offer of the scarf she'd been using to insulate her neck, which, in turn, created a minor thermal crisis on that front.

Needless to say, once the lights changed there was a frantic scramble across the intersection, along the main street to the side street that housed the hotel.

Though that cut out a large part of the wind chill it took a good five to ten minutes to restore the equanimity once we were safely inside.

A warm bath for **Madam**, a hearty slug of medicinal **saké** for **Hughesy** and by nine thirty both of us were snugly pushing up Zs, with the prospect of an early rise on the morrow, when temperatures were bound to be a major cause for concern.



HAKODATE >
 SENDAI >
 MATSUSHIMA >
 SENDAI

Thursday, 1 November 2012

If you're going to visit *Hakodate*, four items fall automatically into the *must do* category.

We'd managed three of them the day before, but if we wanted to fit in the fourth we were going to have to be up and about around sparrow fart, and the appropriate layering of clothing was going to be a major issue.

I'd nearly frozen on the way back from the alley full of eateries the night before and wasn't keen to repeat the experience.



We were off to the *Morning Fish Markets*, and I wasn't sure we were going to make it.

I'd seen a fish market in Sydney, and that is something to behold. In this case, on a crisp autumn morning since a picture is worth a thousand words we might as well let pictures do the talking.

There are more than three hundred and sixty stalls in the daily market (*Hakodate Asaichi*) near the railway station, and the action kicks off at five in the morning (six in winter), but there's no hurry.

The markets cover four blocks, operate through the morning, close at noon, and offer an incredible variety of cold water seafood, including crabs, salmon eggs, sea urchin, squid, scallops and many other kinds of fresh fish and shellfish, as well as fresh produce.



And you don't have to cart your selection back to base to cook it.

There are plenty of restaurants and cafes in the area and stalls that serve up a breakfasts, such as *uni-ikura domburi* (seafood-topped rice bowl).

Apart from *Hokkaidō* crabs, *Hakodate's* signature fish is squid, and the signature dish is *shio ramen*, noodles prepared with squid stock instead of the pork stock you're likely to be served elsewhere. Not really my cup of tea.

Neither is *ikameshi* (rice-stuffed squid), but I'll be back to gorge on shellfish and crab...

On a leg of the trip where being on time mattered, we were seated on the train a quarter of an hour before departure.

If we were going to fit everything into the day's itinerary we had to be on the 8:08 *Limited Express Super Hakucho* and would need to be pretty smart about moving to the *Shinkansen* that would drop us at *Sendai* in time to head on a scenic sail around the bay at *Matsushima*.



We were on the left-hand side of the train this time, which meant another view across the water while we made our way towards the tunnel.

The views across the bay were, again, spectacular, though they'd lost some of the wow factor after the trip to the top of *Mount Hakodate*.

While there were the same false alarms, we'd experienced on the northward journey, this time, we were running on time/.

There was a helpful diagram and cheat sheet on the back of each seat in the carriage.

We were slightly behind the 8:56 on the back of the seating schedule when we hit the tunnel, passing the deepest point around 9:08 and the *Tappi Undersea Station* at 9:15.

It wasn't easy to tell which of the lights we passed were station and which belonged to a train in the opposite direction.

My money was on station to the left and train to the right but without a way of verifying the guess...

We were back on the surface at 9:21, and the run to **ShinAomori** proved uneventful.

A lengthy stay at **Aomori** was followed by a change of direction (nose into **Aomori**; rear end leads the way to **ShinAomori**).

That would have left us with our backs to the engine, but there's a facility that allows you to swing your seats through 180 degrees, so you're facing the front. Neat, eh?

We probably didn't need to do that. It was only a matter of minutes before we were extricating ourselves from the carriage, onto a convenient elevator and heading towards the **Shinkansen** section, which was another floor above the intermediate level where we flashed our tickets and rail passes.

The train was ready and waiting, set to go, and the baggage space at the rear of Carriage 2 was conveniently empty.

Once I'd shed the merino undergarment that had been a vital cog in the *keep Hughesy warm arrangements* over the previous couple of days it was time to settle back with the **iPod** shuffling through the playlists and enjoy the bits of new territory I was able to glimpse between tunnels as we made our way towards **Morioka**.

That was where we'd left the **Tohoku Shinkansen** line *en route* to **Kakunodate** four days earlier.

From there it was on to **Sendai**, where there wasn't a mad scramble to get from the train to the hotel to a local line for the afternoon jaunt to **Matsushima**, but we moved at a pretty fair clip.

It wasn't as if we needed to hurry, but there's a fundamental issue when you're not familiar with the actual lie of the actual land and lunch was waiting at the other end of the suburban rail leg.

Even if there wasn't any urgency, it made sense to get to the right station on the right line ASAP.

Things would have been much easier if we'd paused and looked around the corner at the **Lottery agency** on the corner, as per the directions we'd been given at **Reception** when we checked in the luggage.

But we didn't look, didn't find the handy subway entrance we emerged from on the return journey subsequently almost went *via the Cape*.

Once we'd arrived at the station, **Matsushima Kaigan (Beach)** as opposed to **Matsushima**, the first job was to find lunch.

Matsushima sits on the *JR Tohoku Main Line*, a ten-minute walk away from where people who are visiting the scenic bay actually want to go, so don't go that way...

We could have looked around for other options, but just along from the station, there was a funky little place offering oyster burgers, which seemed like the way to go. *Matsushima* is, after all, a prime oyster producing area as was evident once we hit the water.

The oyster burger went down a treat, and I could have opted for another, but there were places to go and sights that needed to be seen, so I had to be content with the prospect of a grilled oyster and a glass of white wine once we'd been out on the briny.

I was intrigued, to say the least, by what variety of white wine a funky little operation like this one would be able to rustle up.

From there we set off in search of the cruise terminal, wandering through a park along the way, and arriving in time to be hustled onto an earlier cruise, which turned out to be handy from a post-cruise perspective.

The bay and the two hundred and sixty pine-clad islands and islets known as *Matsushima* (*Matsu* = pines, *shima* = islands) is one of the *Three Views of Japan* alongside *Miyajima* and *Amanohashidate*.





There's an apocryphal haiku often attributed to *Bashō* that supposedly suggests the great poet was at a loss for words when he visited the place, stopping off on his way to or from the *Deep North*:

Matsushima ah!

A-ah, Matsushima, ah!

Matsushima, ah!

But he would surely have been able to come up with something better.

A number of companies offer cruises, and most are based at **Matsushima Pier**, a five-minute walk (ten if you take your time) from **Matsushima Kaigan**. Others operate from **Shiogama Pier**, a short walk from **Hon-Shiogama** Station, three stations ahead of **Matsushima Kaigan** on the **JR Senseki Line**.

We'd opted for the *all-Matsushima* experience, though if you've got time on your hands, it may pay to shop around.

When you've only got a couple of hours in the afternoon, your choices are relatively limited. Of the time on the water, there's not much that needs to be said, apart from invoking the *one picture = a thousand words* principle, noting the water resembled a mill pond, the oyster beds were obvious, and it was a very pleasant way to spend an hour.

Back on dry land, we were inclined to head to **Godaido**, a small temple hall on an islet next door to the pier.

It mightn't be the most historical or architecturally impressive temple, but the site does date back to 807, and it was founded by the same priest who founded nearby **Zuiganji**.

The structure on the site is a 1604 reconstruction paid for by feudal lord **Date Masamune**, decorated with carvings of the twelve animals of the lunar calendar, three on each side.





Its prominent location means it has become one of the key symbols of *Matsushima*.

More impressive, although we didn't have time for an exhaustive look is *Zuiganji* temple, currently undergoing renovations. It'll stay that way until **2018**.

Although the grounds are open, the main hall will be closed until **March 2016**. If you're visiting in the meantime, they've opened alternate buildings, which aren't usually open to the public.

It would be natural to suspect the work is related to the *tsunami* on **11 March 2011**, but *Matsushima* escaped significant damage thanks to its location inside the island dotted bay.

The islands blunted the impact of the waves.



Most tourist attractions, shops and hotels reopened within a few weeks or months of the earthquake, but there was some structural damage.

Though the *JR Senseki Line* is open for business, after *Matsushima Kaigan* you can only go one stop further. If you're looking to get to *Matsushima* by train, you'll have to head through *Sendai*.

Founded in *828* by the *Tendai* sect, *Zuiganji* became a *Zen* temple during the *Kamakura Period (1192-1333)* and was restored, after years of decline, by the same feudal lord (*Date Masamune*) who restored *Godaido* as his family temple in *1609*.

Today it's one of the region's most prominent *Zen* temples, known for its gilded and painted sliding doors (*fusuma*), which we didn't get to see, but there's every chance we'll be back sometime.

As you enter the grounds, there's a straight path flanked by cedar trees leading to the Main Hall, the *Kuri* (the kitchen where meals were prepared in the past) and the *Seiryuden*, also known as *Zuiganji Art Museum* displaying some of the temple's treasures as well as artifacts of the *Date* clan.

As you head in, an interesting path veers off to the right of the main avenue that takes you towards some caves used in the past for meditation.

Today they contain moss-covered *Kannon* statues.

Madam had wandered in on the way to *Godaido* while I was putting my feet up and was struck by the long straight path that leads to the main hall, but it was what she sighted on the side path that had her hauling me in for a gander on the way back to the station.

As it turned out we didn't stop off for a grilled oyster and a glass of white on the way, though there would have been plenty of time.

Madam wasn't keen, and I didn't insist, knowing we were meeting up with some of her old friends for dinner.

Back in downtown *Sendai*, we finished the *check-in procedure* and hit the free *WiFi* until six, when we wandered downstairs to rendezvous with a couple who we, I was told, wine lovers, although *she* was forced to refrain, having drawn (or possibly chosen) the designated driver short straw.

A brief chat in the hotel lobby had us heading back through the *Sendai Station* complex in search of a funky little *yakitori* place that boasted a rather decent wine list.

That, by the way, is an unusual combination.

Yakitori usually gets washed down with beer or *saké*.

We started with beer before moving onto the red, and at that point I'm inclined to draw a discreet veil over proceedings, noting that the food was plentiful and quite excellent.

The vinous proceedings started with a very acceptable *Barbera* and concluded with an equally enjoyable *Nebbiolo* though my liver would have preferred to have done without the *Koonunga Hill Shiraz Cabernet* my learned colleague insisted on inserting between the two.



SENDAI > OMIYA > ECHIGO-YUZAWA > OUZU > UNAZUKI SPRING

Friday, 2 November 2012

I wasn't a well boy when I surfaced on *Friday* morning, but that probably comes as no surprise under the circumstances.

Given my 'druthers, I'd have given last night's middle bottle a miss, but the other party doing the drinking wasn't familiar with *Australian wine*.

It was, as far as we could tell, the only *Australian red* on the list.

That's my excuse, and I'm sticking to it.

Fortunately, after a big night, this was a big travel day and one that, initially, didn't involve a great deal of humping the **Black Monster** up and down staircases.

If it had, I suspect there may have been fatalities.

If you are seriously hung over there are definitely far worse places to be than a speeding **Shinkansen**, and the transfer from **Sendai** to **Omiya** was relatively painless.

Omiya kicked in a novelty factor since we were boarding one of the double decker **Shinkansen**.

Madam's concerns about stowing the luggage were probably real enough but weren't the sort of thing you wanted to think about when you've got what **P.G. Wodehouse** was wont to describe as a *morning head*.

Sure enough, once we'd boarded and made our way up a tricky curved stairway that would have posed no difficulty at all for a teetotaller unencumbered by **Black Monsters**, there was the regular space behind the back seats in the compartment where **Monster** could be stowed.

Apart from worrying about luggage space, **Madam** had organized lunch, which, predictably, came in a *bento* container and, somewhat less predictably was completely demolished with chopsticks.





I'd only actually managed to do that once before but am currently disinclined to get myself back into the state that seems to have made the feat possible.

After the *Shinkansen*, we progressively downgraded.

First to a *Hakutaka*, which was still rather *shmicko*, then onto a local line operated by *Toyama Regional Railways* (*Toyama Chihō Railway*) a third sector company obviously doing it tough in an environment where travellers are increasingly likely to head where they want to go by car or bus.

The company operates the railway, tram, and bus lines in the eastern part of *Toyama Prefecture*, with their main line running from *Toyama* to *Unazuki Onsen* (which was where we were headed).

It's part of a mere 93.2 km of lines to hot springs and the mountainous region of *Tateyama*.

The *Hakutaka* dropped us at *Uozu*, and I wasn't keen on an *up the staircase and across the bridge and lump the Monster back down the other side* to access the private line.

Madam scoped out an elevator on the JR side though there was no escaping the old *heave-ho* as we climbed the stairs to access the local line.

Being a local line we were up for the fare since the *JR Rail Pass* wasn't valid on this section.

The sight of the train that rolled into *Uozu* didn't do much to inspire confidence.

From the look of the trains that passed in the other direction, it seemed the company's rolling stock comprised whatever weatherbeaten items they'd managed to spare from the scrap heap.

There was no standard livery pattern, and most of the rolling stock wasn't far off its last legs.

Or, rather, I guess, its last wheels.

Although they mightn't look that flash, they work.

We arrived at *Unazuki Onsen* late in the afternoon, with *Madam* enthused about hot baths and *Hughesy* after anything that would reduce the pain.

Developed as an off-shoot of hydroelectric projects that brought people into the previously inaccessible mountain region along the *Kurobe Valley* in *Toyama Prefecture*.

Unazaki is rated as one of the purest hot springs in *Japan*.

It's at the entrance to the *Kurobe Gorge* and marks one end of the sightseeing train route that runs through a deep V-shaped valley to *Keyakidaira*.

The Hot Springs are the main attraction, drawing their water from *Kuronagi Onsen*, upstream on a tributary of the *Kurobe*, where three thousand tons of water per day gush out of the ground at temperatures around 91°C.





It cools down over the seven-kilometre journey but is still 60°C when it reaches the two-metre fountain in front of the station at *Unazuki*.

The waters are said to be effective if you're suffering from rheumatism or neuralgia, and they're said to help sports injuries and nervous disorders as well.

Today, *Unazuki* is a modern hot spring resort town full of *ryokan* inns and hotels, with the one where we were staying (*Feel Unazuki*) offering the unusual combination of *Japanese-style rooms* (complete with *tatami* matting), flat-screen TV and free *WiFi*.

More or less the best of both worlds.



You get your own toilet, which, predictably is of the *washlet* persuasion, but if you're looking to bathe you'll be doing it in the *onsen*.

No sneaking into the *Western-style shower* here, folks, and you can forget the beds as well.

It's a *futon* on the floor, quilt over the top and that's it.

Pretty spartan, but I can vouch for the quality of the night's sleep, which was sorely needed.

It is, on the other hand, reasonably priced (¥6,000 per head for a two person room, no price differential on weekends and holiday periods).

There's a *Natural Observation Bathroom (Sky Spa)* on the top floor giving you the *onsen* experience along with views of the *Kurobe Gorge*.

It's the closest hotel to the *Kurobe Torokko* railway terminus, and a shortish walk from the regular train station, which is also the terminus of its line.



There are plenty of alternatives if you're chasing accommodation.

You can get some idea of the scale of the *Japanese* passion for the hot spring spa routine from the fact that resorts in this particular location employ four thousand people.

If someone had revealed that factoid in the afternoon, I'd have been loath to believe it, but that was before the following day's experience.

Apart from the abundant waters (if you don't believe abundant I will point you straight towards the hot spring baths where weary travellers can soak their aching feet, built to commemorate the resort's eightieth birthday) the other attraction is the local beer. It's brewed using water from the *Kurobegawa* River and local barley from *Unazuki*.

After a session in the *onsen*, I sampled the local brew over dinner with a curry, and it lives up to its reputation.

Since I'd been suffering from the after-effects of overindulgence all through the day it probably comes as no surprise to learn I was on the *futon* under the *doona*, sawing logs like it was going out of style soon after seven-thirty.



6

JAPAN 2012: RAIL PASS WEEK 2

Having looped around the *Deep North* and given the leaves further down the archipelago time to start turning, the second week of the rail pass leg takes us out of the *Alps* and all the way down to the very end of the island chain.

Kagoshima, here we come, with a final leg all the way back to *Osaka*...



UNAZUKI SPRING > NAGANO

Saturday, 3 November 2012

The hot spring *onsen* experience might be one of the major draw cards to the area, but there's no doubt that most of the visitors are there, at least partly, to ride a rather wonderful little railway that runs out of *Unazuki Springs*.

Operating from mid-*April* to *November* every year, the *Kurobe Torokko Electric Railway* was originally used to carry workers to the construction sites for the hydroelectric dams in the Gorge.

It's just over twenty kilometres from *Unazuki* to the terminus at *Keyakidaira*, and the trip takes around eighty minutes each way.

On the way, the railway passes through the steepest V-shaped gorge in *Japan*, crossing twenty-one bridges and snaking through forty-one tunnels.

It passes several *onsen* locations hot springs, including *Kuronagi* and *Kanetsuri*, and *Keyakidaira* offers scenic options including the *Sarutobi Ravine* and the *Man-eating Rock* and *Meiken Hot Spring*.

That, however, is getting ahead of the developing narrative.

We bunked down early the night before, with *Hughesy* claiming fatigue as a major contributory factor to *Friday* morning's condition.

It was a good eleven hours from when I drifted off to when I emerged from a deep slumber but I wasn't looking forward to what I was likely to find when daylight arrived.

I'd been warned this was the day when the entire array of warm clothing would be called into play.

The best scenario I could hope for was a maximum around ten at *Unazuki* in the afternoon and a temperature that would probably be in the low positive range when we hit the train and made our way into the mountains.



Breakfast was another take on the **Viking** but featured almost nothing recognisable to the **Western** eye apart from the pastry and coffee options.

I managed a hearty enough start that fuelled the day's activities and got me to dinner time without the need for anything else.

With breakfast done, we dropped the **Black Monster** and **Madam's backpack** at **Reception** and made our way a couple of hundred metres along the street to the **Kurobe Torokko Station**.

The presence of some traffic wardens directing private vehicles and tour buses into their respective parking areas confirmed we would be dealing with significant numbers of keen sightseers.

We were booked on the morning's second train, departing at 8:18, and the crowd for the 7:57 were queued behind the barriers as we arrived.

There's an interesting variation on the booking side of things on the **Torokko**, in that your reservation gets you a seat in the carriage. As far as *which* seat is concerned, it's a case of *first in, best dressed*.

They open the barriers about ten minutes before the scheduled departure time, and what follows isn't *quite* a stampede, but by the same token it isn't the casual stroll you'd be taking if you knew you had a pair of guaranteed seats.

The journey starts with a climb through the first of many tunnels, emerging just before the 166-metre long **ShinYamabiko Iron Bridge**, the longest bridge on the route and the red painted structure they use in the publicity material. From there, the track passes the **Unazuki Dam**, the first of the structures that brought the line into existence.

As you proceed, there's a castle-like structure that presumably fulfils some role related to generating electricity, though just what that purpose might be remains a mystery to this observer.

Other structures *en route* are predictably utilitarian.

Apart from autumn leaves, which were the main reason for the crowds being there, and quite magnificent they were, there are plenty of items of interest to catch the keen observer's eye.

Branches and tunnels that run off the main line, for example, and a long tunnel to allow workers to get down when winter snows remove trains from the transport equation.

Suspension bridges across the gorge at a couple of points allow workers and, presumably, trekkers, to cross from side to side though one of them doesn't have handrails.

That one is for the monkeys.



High above, snow-capped mountains tower over the line, uncomfortably close to the travelling observer. I prefer my snow clad peaks in photographs, not clearly visible through the windows on a day where the temperature's hovering unpleasantly close to zero.

The mountains climb higher after you cross *Moriishi Bridge*, and the line passes isolated *onsen* resorts on its way to *Keyakidaira*, where walking tracks allow you to get up close and personal with the coloured leaves.

Given the threat of rain and the temperature, I wasn't the most enthusiastic participant in the up hill and down dale ramble that followed

In any case, my eyes weren't handling a continuous display of coloured leaves all that well.



They're a magnificent sight, but after a couple of hours, the visual richness becomes overwhelming.

Still, the walk gave me one of the stranger sights I've come across in a country where there's no shortage of items guaranteed to baffle and bemuse a **Western** observer.

I rounded a corner to find a **Japanese father** doing up an eight-year old's shoe laces.

Maybe the kid wasn't quite eight but certainly looked old enough to manage to tie up the laces without assistance.

The incredible bit was while Dad got the laces in order (*we don't want anyone tripping now, do we?*) the kid was nonchalantly playing a computer game.



I'd passed the camera over to *The Supervisor* because I didn't think I'd be needing it. Just as well. I suspect an attempt to snap the scene would have produced an ugly incident.

As we made our way back, construction work tricked us into a detour that took us down to a platform just above the river bed where there were more coloured leaves to see and a thermal foot bath for tired feet.

Not being in the market for a foot bath and not looking forward to the climb to the station, I wasn't impressed at all by the situation.

The *definitely not grunted, but not quite disgruntled* factor continued as we made our way across the bridge, headed towards the Man Eating Rock.



The trail looked like it was going to meander along for quite a way, the weather continued to threaten, and the backpack was a bit of a load.

The key point was no obvious turn back point on the map, and I dreaded the prospect of *let's just see what's around this corner*.

I *knew*, more or less, *what was around the corner*, and was sure there was a similar view *around the next, the one after that and the one after that*.

I was sure they were *all quite magnificent spectacles*, but I was *more or less spectacted out*.

I would have liked to check if we could switch to an earlier train for the descent.

The switch to **Nagano** involved moves between connecting trains. As it turned out, we'd just missed one that may or may not have had room.

The next was a workers' train, so we had to stick with the plan that gave us six minutes to alight in **Unazuki**, collect our luggage,



and make it to the station, up one flight of steps and down another onto the platform, negotiating the purchase of tickets along the way.

Had it been a **JR line**, the ticket purchase would be unnecessary. *Wave the rail pass and you're fine.*

In any case, after a rest and drink, the descent was as spectacular as the ascent.

We were first in the carriage, which got us the best position for alighting quickly at the other end, the bloke in **Reception** at the hotel produced our bags as soon as he sighted us and we made it to the ticket office at the station just as the train was about to depart.

A couple of tickets from a friendly conductor upstairs, *a mad scramble down the stairs and we just (literally) made it as the train door closed.*

There was another train we could have caught half an hour later, but that would have produced the same mad scramble at the other end when we transferred from **Toyama Regional Railways** to the **JR platform**.

As it turned out, we sighted the later service while we were waiting on the platform at **Ouzu**.

Our **Hayate** service was running late.

Once we'd boarded, there was a stretch retracing part of the previous day's route, followed by a switch to a local service that delivered us into **Nagano** just after six.

There was some confusion about the location of the hotel, which seemed to have changed names, but nothing major.

By seven, we were booked in and back downstairs scoping out the eating options.

Given the number of options in the area and the lack of commitments, deciding on a particular eatery wasn't as easy as it might sound.



In most other places along the way, there was either an obvious choice, or some other factor that made things a done deal, but here we had some options, and it was down to what we felt like sampling.

Madam had flashed through a couple of options on the *iPad* before we left, and we'd decided the best option was a *Japanese-Italian drinking place* (drinks with nibbles), with some other possibilities as a fallback.

Complications set in when we found other options just down the road from the hotel, including a meat on skewers barbeque operation and a pricey *French restaurant*.

We pressed on, locating the preferred option only to discover it was full except for a couple of places at the bar, which might have suited someone else, but didn't appeal to us.

Across the road, there was a Vietnamese place, where the menu in *Japanese* and unfamiliarity with the ins and outs of the cuisine meant we weren't sure, so we were off in search of others.

Having recognised another fusion place from *Madam's iPad info* we were about to head inside when **Madam** noticed the *Closed - Private Function* sign, so we ended up in another place that was, as far as she could make out, a young people's drinks and nibbles hangout.

If that was the case, I found the all-Beatles soundtrack bemusing, to say the least.

What followed was a succession of little platters - Vietnamese style salmon and prawn spring rolls, pasta *marinara*, *char siu pork* finished off at the table with a blowtorch were three of them - that added up to a substantial meal and went down rather well with a couple of Suntory Premium Lagers.

We meandered back to the hotel, not quite replete, but definitely in a neighbouring postcode, and for me, at least, it was a matter of another early night, followed by an early morning catching up on the *Travelogue*.



NAGANO > OKAYAMA

Sunday, 4 November 2012

With the *Travelogue* backlog caught up, thanks to a couple of hours on the train the day before and a two-hour stint earlier in the morning *Sunday*'s proceedings were rather straightforward.

We'd take a walk around the city in the morning, return to collect the *Black Monster* and head to the station for a train to *Nagoya* and thence to *Okayama*, where we had an evening appointment with some combination of *ramen* noodles and *tapas*, though probably not in the same sitting.



The venue for the *1998 Winter Olympics*, *Nagano* is surrounded by 3000-metre summits.

A morning glance through the window revealed snowcapped peaks comfortably removed from the immediate vicinity.

The Prefecture, of which *Nagano* is the capital, is known as the *Roof of Japan*, and since it lies between the *Kanto* and *Kansai* regions, local customs have been influenced by the cultures of both eastern and western *Japan*.

As the regional capital, *Nagano* serves as the hub for the surrounding snow resorts, with handy road and rail links to most of *Japan's major centres*, including *Tokyo*, *Nagoya*, *Kyoto* and *Osaka*.



It's an hour and a half from *Tokyo* by *Shinkansen* on the *Hokuriku Line*, also known as the *Nagano Shinkansen* or *Asama*, a legacy of the *Winter Olympics* with two or three departures per hour from *Tokyo Station*.

There is also a scenic approach; the *Wide View Shinano Limited Express* runs hourly from *Nagoya*, a three-hour journey that takes you through the central *cordillera*.

It follows a route that's almost as stunningly scenic as the line from *Toyama* to *Nagoya* via *Takayama* and was a highlight of our *2008* trip.

If you're heading to *Nagano* from anywhere in *western Japan*, and *Kyoto* or *Osaka* in particular, it's the best option, with one *caveat*.

The *Shinano* is notorious for running late and had us scurrying to get to the right platform when we arrived in *Nagoya*.

If you're headed into *Nagano* and planning to spend the night there, of course, difficulty making connections won't be an issue.



Originally built around a **Buddhist temple** that's the largest wooden building in eastern **Japan**, **Nagano** attracts over a million tourists every year, drawn to snow resorts, golf courses, a variety of sights and natural hot springs found throughout the mountain areas.

Nagano is also noted for a variety of culinary products including *soba* noodles, apples and **saké**, *oyaki* dumplings, *gohei mochi* snacks and bamboo leaf-wrapped **sasa-zushi**.

Founded in the seventh century, **Zenkoji** is one of the most popular temples in **Japan**, and while it sees a stream of visitors the most significant feature of the temple is only shown to the public for a couple of weeks every six years.

Zenkoji houses the first statue brought into **Japan** when **Buddhism** arrived in the sixth century.



The original is hidden away permanently and what will be on display again in **2015** is a replica.

You approach **Zenkoji** (or at least we did) along a street lined with shops that sell local specialties and souvenirs, passing through a couple of gates along the way.

The outer **Niomon Gate** has a pair of impressive **Deva Guardians**, which protect the temple from enemies of **Buddhism** while the **Sanmon Gate**, dates back to 1750 and offers views of the temple and its approaches from the second storey.

The main hall, rebuilt in 1707, contains several significant statues. If you pay a fee, you can enter the inner chamber, view the altar, and descend into a basement where a pitch-dark passage holds the key to paradise, attached to a wall.

It's believed to grant salvation to those who touch it.

Had I done my research before we set out I would have visited **Yawataya Isogoro**, just outside **Zenkoji's** main gate.

It's a 280-year-old store specialising in *shichimi* (*seven flavours*), a condiment made of ground *chilli* peppers, sesame, citrus, and other spices, and commonly sprinkled on *soba* noodle soup.

But I didn't do the research, so my collection is one condiment poorer.

Predictably, the main item on the agenda before the rail leg to *Okayama* was a visit to the temple, an exercise that took us on an extended ramble past last night's dinner venue.

It was a fair step from the hotel, but I was up for the exercise and once we'd done the temple bit there was the prospect of *oyaki* dumplings for brunch.

With the temple out of the way, and *oyaki* consumed (I opted for mushroom filling at the first place we tried, and mushroom with radish at the second) we diverted in search of *croquettes* to round off brunch.

After that, we made our way back to the hotel through the back streets rather than retracing the route we'd followed on the outward journey.

Once we'd reclaimed the *Black Monster* and made it to the station, since we were boarding at the point of departure there was a ten-minute window before the *Shinano Express* started moving. I used the time to keep working on *Travelogue* material.



That brought a sharp rebuke once we started off and the *iPad* was slotted into the backpack, and the *iPod* provided the soundtrack.

At first, it was a case of fairly broad plains filled with the regular signs of economic and agricultural activity backed on both sides by majestic snowcapped mountains.

Then, as the train climbed into the foothills things closed in on either side as we travelled through deep forest-clad gorges where rocky riverbeds were the order of the day and slopes that were closer to the vertical than the horizontal showed an impressive array of autumn leaves. There was, however, one issue that means this leg is underrepresented in the photographic record.

We were on the left-hand side of a service that departed at midday on a line where the western sun seemed to remain in a fairly steady position. It was a source of continuing annoyance and prevented significant photographic action. Things got so bad towards the end of the journey that we were forced to draw the curtains.

Fortunately, the views on the other side were magnificent, the glare issues ruled out typing, and there was nothing for it but to sit back and enjoy two and a half hours of magnificent scenery.

We spent a fair section of the last bit, heading across the plain into **Nagoya**, pondering the outcome when a train is six minutes late, and your connection leaves ten minutes after the scheduled arrival.

An announcement over the P.A. System advised us to speak to the conductor, which, of course, we duly did, but one couldn't help suspecting the normally reliable and *on time almost to the second* service wasn't going to be kept waiting to allow a couple of stragglers to make the connection.

The **Shinano** is a regular train, rather than a **Shinkansen**, which meant, once we'd alighted and found our way off the platform we had to find our way onto the relevant platform in another section of the station. That mission had both of us moving at a fair clip down an escalator, along a passageway and up another escalator to find...

Miracle of miracles, a Shinkansen was just coming to a halt, easing into the station just in time for us to board.

The train we boarded was going to our overnight stop at **Okayama**, but we changed in **Osaka**, boarding a much more luxurious **Sakura** that would get us there quicker than the train we'd just left, which was one of the *stops at all stations* variety.

The reasons for stopping where you do vary.

We were in **Okayama** because of its location, which makes the city an important transportation hub. It's the spot where the main **Shinkansen** line joins the only rail connection to **Shikoku**, which we were going to be visiting briefly the following day, crossing the **Seto-oteshi Bridge**.

Had that detail not been part of the equation we could well have continued to *Hiroshima*.

Okayama's most famous attraction is *Korakuen*, one of the best landscape gardens in *Japan*, along with *Kanazawa's Kenrokuen* and *Mito's Kairakuen*.

The black *Okayama Castle*, located across from the garden, is another attraction, but the single item that dominates the city's cultural environment is a fairy tale.

Momotaro delivered, I must admit, a certain degree of wry amusement, due to the coincidence of the mythical hero and a culinary delicacy of which I'm not too enamoured.

In the fairy tale, an elderly childless couple find a peach floating down a river. When they investigate further, they find it contains a baby boy. As is invariably the case in such instances, the couple adopt the child, and given the circumstances in which he was found, name him *Momotaro* (*Peach Boy*).

The fully grown *Peach Boy*, announces his determination to rid the neighbourhood of the demons from *Onigashima* (*Demon Island*), who've been terrorising the villagers.

He'll need something to fuel his quest, so his aged adoptive mother makes *kibi-dango* (sweet millet-flour dumplings) to take on the journey.

He'll also need allies, which he finds in the form of a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant.

He enlists the trio to the cause by bribing them with the *kibi-dango*.

Predictably, the demons are defeated; their treasure makes the old couple rich, and everyone lived happily ever after.

Okayama's main street, predictably, is *Momotarō-Odōri*, or *Peach Boy Street*.

I'm thinking of writing my version of the story, the adventures of *Frock-Star, the rum ball boy*.

The plain on which the city is located produces rice, eggplant, and *Chinese* chives and the uplands behind the city produce grapes and (surprise, surprise) white peaches.

Proximity to the *Seto Inland Sea* contributes to several of the area's signature dishes, including the takeaway *matsuri-zushi* (*sushi rice with vinegar, egg and seafood*), sold in a peach-shaped box.

Other specialities include *mamakari*, which resemble herring and *sawara*, a fish whose name is rendered into *English* as *trout* or *horse mackerel*.

And, of course, there's always *kibi-dango*.

Which explains why we ended up at a *Spanish tapas* place that adjoined the hotel.



OKAYAMA > HIROSHIMA > ONOURA

Monday, 5 November 2012

It's at this point, after ten days of hauling the *Black Monster* up and down staircases, in and out of elevators, on and off assorted trains with the associated worry about somewhere to stow the thing, that we bid farewell to the aforementioned encumbrance.

It's presence had, up to this point on the trip, been inevitable.

We had a week on the road, heading up into the cold country, with no idea how much warm clothing was going to constitute enough, and an understandable degree of caution as far as wet weather was concerned.

Having passed *Kōbe* the day before we were back in territory where it was theoretically going to be warmer, so it made sense to take the cold weather gear and despatch it, along with everything else deemed surplus to requirements, off to *The Mother's* place.

Despatching that material, of course, requires a container, and since the *Black Monster* is the only one on hand that's big enough it's a case of *Bye Bye Monster, see you on the final day*.

That's when we'll be re-sorting the possessions and loading *Madam's* suitcase with *Japanese comestibles* and reading matter.

There's a certain amount of economic sense in the move.

Over the next two days, we'd have been looking to stow the *Monster* in a coin locker at ¥600/day, thank you very much.

At an anticipated cost of ¥1600 to ship it back to *Kōbe*, we're actually ahead if a third day in a coin locker turned out to be necessary.

As it turned out, we ended up with change out of ¥1500, so we were slightly further ahead, and a quick squiz at the coin lockers at *Okayama Station* suggested the *Monster* may have been too wide to fit in.



Of course, having made that decision and bundled things up, *Madam* checked the weather and found what looks like an extremely nasty cold front heading in our direction, having just killed two *Japanese tourists* on the *Great Wall of China*.

The day's agenda, this time, involves a train ride over the *Seto-Hashi Bridge* to *Shikoku*, followed by a couple of hours in *Okayama* before heading down through *Hiroshima* to an overnight stop on the doorstep of *Miyajima*, so we're back in history and geography lesson time again.

Officially they might refer to the *Seto-Hashi Bridge*, but there are actually six bridges spanning five islands that connect *Kojima* in *Okayama Prefecture* on the main island of *Honshū* with *Sakaide* in *Shikoku's Kagawa Prefecture*.

Built between *1978* and *1988*, the thirteen-kilometre stretch connecting *Hitsuishijima*, *Iwagurojima*, *Wasajima*, *Yoshima* and *Mitsugojima* in the *Seto Inland Sea* and the larger islands on either side operates on two levels.

The upper level carries the *Seto-Chuo Expressway* with two lanes of traffic in each direction while the *JR Seto-Hashi Line* and a lesser road share the lower level, and there's room to accommodate a *Shinkansen* line in each direction. Of the six bridges, three are suspension bridges, two are oblique suspension bridges, and there's one truss bridge.

The statistics associated with the *ten-year US\$ 7 billion project* are impressive.

The construction needed over *three and a half million cubic metres of concrete*, and almost *three-quarters of a million tonnes of steel* before the bridge opened on *10 April 1988*.

Today, the bridge is one of three routes connecting *Honshū* and *Shikoku*, though it's the only way to get to *Shikoku* by rail.

Having breakfasted and handed over the *Monster* it was time to light out for the station, where we were booked into the prime seats on the train that crosses the bridge, but that was a one-way arrangement.

In an economy where space is at a premium and efficiency is prized, *Japanese trains* can be driven from either end.

They arrive at the terminus and it's simply a case of the driver changing ends, and then they're set to go on the return journey.

The same thing operates on *local services in Australia*, but we still, from what I can gather, do *the old switcheroo bit* with something like the *Sunlander*, taking the locomotive down to the other end of the train for the return journey.



The astute observer will note *Shinkansen* invariably have a power unit at either end and, more often than not, one more somewhere in the middle, which explains why *Car 1* is always at *that end* of the train, regardless of the actual direction of travel.

If you're in the right place at the turn around point, you'll see something more interesting.

We all like to travel looking in the direction we're going don't we?

So what happens when it's turnaround time for the *Shinkansen*? Well, you have the seats turned to face the new direction, don't you?

These factors hadn't registered until I sat down to ponder the return journey across the bridge.

We'd been told there was no point in holding the same seats for the return journey because they'd be looking backwards.

Until the train pulled in, I'd thought we'd be in some sightseeing bubble, up above the body of the train, which meant, when you look at it that way, the preceding bit makes a certain amount of sense.

We got to the platform just as the train arrived, disgorging the regular crowd of salarymen and office workers, and once the flood had passed, set off to find our seats, which were tucked way just behind the driver's compartment at the very front of the train.



There are four seats, tagged *1 A, B, C and D*. One assumes there's a similar compartment at the other end of the train where the seat labels start with a 2.

They are, by the way, the only reserved seats on the train.

A word to the wise, if you're looking to do the bridge trip.

Japanese engine drivers sit in consoles on the left-hand side.

If you're in 1 A or B on the outward leg, your panoramic view to the front will feature the back of the driver's head.

Presumably, the same thing applies to C and D on the way back.

In any case, with a clear view to the front and away to the south, and a pretty clear view over to the left we set off, starting with a sharpish left hand turn out of the station, heading off through the usual edge of a large *Japanese city landscape*.

That's a mix of residential blocks, light industry and scattered paddy fields.



You'll find something similar all across the country, with rice paddies gradually gaining the upper hand as you head away from the city.

The eager bridge-crosser will, of course, scan the horizon for signs of bridges, which are singularly lacking for the early part of the journey.

Then you hit a series of tunnels, predictably expecting you'll emerge from this one with a sight of the sea, and, hopefully, a bridge.

You don't sight the water until **Kojima**, the last station before **Shikoku**, and still comfortably short of the bridge itself.



Given the weather conditions we were expecting to be a tad disappointed, but as we made our way onto the first bridge, it was obvious we were getting a magnificent sight on a less than optimal day.

While the spectacle could have been better everything was, under the circumstances, rather more than merely satisfactory.

The research I'd done suggested a series of bridges since the material was careful to enumerate and identify half a dozen components, more than likely (so I theorised) touching down on intervening islands before launching off and upwards onto the next.

That might be the way we'd approach these matters *in Australia or elsewhere*, but the *Japanese* like big statements when it comes to things like technology and engineering, so *the components merge into a contiguous whole*.

A couple of times on the way across you'll register the presence of an island as you pass. There's one spot where you can see trees around eye level, but apart from that, there's no way to tell where one of the component bridges ends and the next begins.

And it wouldn't be a good idea to try.

Looking down to identify starts and finishes will draw attention away from a view that was, even on a day when conditions were less than optimal, magnificent.

It had me pencilling in a return trip in the future, hopefully with better weather conditions and more than likely as part of a longer exploration of *Shikoku*.

Assuming there's a rail pass involved) we'd get two bites of the cherry a couple of days apart.

Once we'd crossed and alighted at *Sakaide* there was a twenty-minute wait before we made our way back on a common or garden commuter train, not that it diminished the view in too many ways.

Back in *Okayama*, the big question was what to do for the next couple of hours.

My preference was to head for *Okayama Korakuen*, rated as one of the three best traditional landscape gardens in *Japan* alongside *Kenrokuen* in *Kanazawa* and *Kairakuen* in *Mito*, an option that would give us a good sight of nearby *Okayama Castle*.

Bearing the weather, and particularly the threat of rain, in mind, *Madam* was inclined to opt for the nearby town of *Kurashiki*, so we set off for the *Tourist Information Centre* in the station complex to check whether there were further options and sort out the issue.

The woman we spoke to was fairly insistent *Korakuen* was the way to go. A glance at the leaflet about *Kurashiki* suggested we'd be spending a bit of time in the open there, so there wasn't a great deal of advantage in that direction.

Forced to make a choice I went for the garden and the castle rather than the neighbouring town.





After all, if things got too bad, we could always retreat to the station complex.

Once outside, it was a case of umbrellas up, and a choice between a walk down the main street, *Motomaro-Ōdōri*, named after the city's legendary *Peach Boy*, a character who'd been the subject of some discussion on the preceding day or two, or taking the tram along the same route.

Given the weather, you could easily have opted for the tram, based on the fact that you'd get there quicker and wouldn't be walking through the drizzling mizzle.

As it turned out, that was the way to go.

We arrived at the point where garden and castle were both visible as the sun threatened to break through the clouds.



Although the umbrellas were unfurled for most of the next hour and a half, the weather was better than you'd have expected when you've started out with a forecast of rain developing.

With the weather looking like it might be starting to clear we paused long enough to gather evidence we'd been there.

Widely known as *Crow Castle (Ujō)*, the castle acquired the nickname from its black exterior.

Japanese castles, like the nearby *Himeji-jō*, tend to be white.

Completed in 1597 in the style of the *Azuchi-Momoyama Period*, destroyed in a bombing raid in **1945** and replicated in concrete in **1966** (except for a single turret that survived the bombing) the reconstruction is much more accurate than most *Japanese replicas* since it was done from original blueprints.

The castle houses a museum documenting the history and development of the castle that might have sounded like a handy wet weather venue, but I knew *English explanations of the contents* were few and far between.



With the evidence gathered we headed across a bridge that took us to the south gate of *Korakuen*, paused to considering whether to use that entrance and then headed for the main entrance, which turned out to be much further around than we'd thought.

The admission charge is ¥400, but *Madam* had picked up a leaflet at the tourist information place that delivered a twenty percent discount.

That, coincidentally, was the reduction offered to groups.

I'm not sure that a duo counts as a group within the meaning of the act, but there you go.

We'd only just made our way inside and were paused considering the right direction to head in when we were approached by a woman obviously canvassing for candidates for something or other.



I suspected a *tea ceremony* and was attempting to decline politely when she turned to **Madam**.

I suspect if it had been a *tea ceremony* she'd have declined too.

As it turned out, a group of enthusiasts were demonstrating a traditional game involving a fan and a target, and **Madam** was inclined to give it a go.

The aim of the particular exercise was to project the open fan so it knocked over the target on top of the stand.

They tried to get me involved as well, but experience with *tatami* mats in **Unazuki** suggested there'd be issues with the posture.

I politely declined, using *dodgy knees* as an excuse.

Outside, **Madam** said she had enjoyed the exercise, so that was fine, and we spent the next little while in a clockwise stroll, snapping away and admiring an extensive garden that is, as you'd expect, spectacular, but in a rather understated manner.



Korakuen was constructed on the feudal lord, **Ikeda Tsunamasa's** orders with the work carried out between 1687 and 1700.

There have been changes over three centuries, but the garden is still much the way it was in the days when it served as a venue to entertain the ruling family and a location for receiving important guests.

Korakuen wasn't the original name. It was originally called **Koen** (*later garden*) since it was built after the nearby castle.

Built in the spirit of **senyukoraku** (*grieve earlier than others, enjoy later than others, a Confucian quote stating that a ruler must attend to his subjects' needs first and only then attend to his own*), the name changed to **Korakuen** in **1871**.



The garden is in the *Chisan Kaiyu* (*scenic promenade around a large pond*) style which presents visitors with a new view at every turn of the path that connects lawns, ponds, hills, tea houses, and streams.

It suffered flood damage in **1934** and was bombed during *World War Two*, but was restored to its original state thanks to accurate records kept by the designers, *Edo Period* paintings and *Ikeda family* records and documents.

It's spacious with a hill that serves as a lookout point.

Unlike most gardens of this type, it has *extensive lawns* (18,500 out of an area of 133,000 square metres), *groves of plum, cherry and maple trees*, *tea and rice fields*, as well as *an archery range* and *a crane aviary*.

Having taken our time strolling through the gardens, we wandered back out the main entrance, crossed the bridge and looped back to the nearest tram stop. A tram back to the station seemed like the way to go since we hadn't booked seats for the next leg to *Hiroshima*.

Time in these matters is of the essence, and efficiency of movement a key factor, so we headed back to the hotel, grabbed the *Little Red Travelling Bag* and *Madam's backpack*, and arrived at the station to find the reserved seats on the train we'd been planning to catch had all been sold.

That might seem like a hassle, but there was a *Kodama* about to depart, an eight car *Shinkansen* where six cars are non-reserved seats.

We dived downstairs, snaffled a couple of seats in a mostly empty *Car Seven* and arrived in *Hiroshima* a good hour earlier than planned.

Having been caught once, the first move when we arrived was to set in concrete the remaining unbooked sectors, and it was lucky we did.

The final leg, a long haul from *Kagoshima* back to *Osaka* couldn't provide adjoining seats, so we had to settle for *either side of the aisle*.

That's a timely reminder that window seats are highly prized, not so much for the view as the presence of an outlet to recharge your laptop, *iPad* or whatever.

In any case, more than likely those window seats won't both be occupied for the entire duration of the haul from *Kagoshima* to *Osaka*.

With those details looked after we headed for the local line that would take us two stations past the ferry port that delivers passengers to the next day's destination, *Miyajima*. We alighted at *Onoura*, where *a courtesy bus* was waiting to deliver us to the *onsen* hotel where we were spending the night.

I don't know how I formed the impression, but I was expecting *a boutique operation*, possibly with a handful of rooms and was slightly alarmed to note the presence of a tour bus in the car park.

Given the *Japanese passion for communal hot bathing*, I had visions of a packed hot water tub, full of purist connoisseurs of the *onsen* experience.

That's likely to prove rather intimidating to the average *overweight and out of condition Westerner who's not totally up to speed on the correct rituals and protocols when it comes to mass bathing*.

But I'll return to that point in a minute.

As it turned out, and as I should have figured, given the proximity of *Miyajima*, a prime venue for flag bearer-led tour parties), the buses were there while the tour party was elsewhere and would shortly head off to collect the party from the pier.

Once we'd checked in, we were shown to our room by a young girl who felt obliged to lug *Hughesy's* backpack and the *Little Red Travelling* pack while I looked after *Madam's backpack*.

I tried to change the arrangements, but no, she was determined to do her duty, regardless of the fact that we'd arrived with a fair bit more luggage than the *average Japanese tourist*.

We were shown into our room, which had a very similar layout to the one in *Unazuki*, *tatami* mats on the floor, a table in the middle, two cushions to sit on and a section near the window with a table and two *Western* chairs, fridge *et cetera*.

The alcove at the entry provided just enough space to take off the shoes, spaces to stow them, room for minimal luggage and the toilet facility, with the regulation *Washlet*, which you'd see as a key ingredient in keeping the *onsen* waters *clear of claggy matter*.

The *Washlet* is the device that sprays water on your hindquarters in a strategic manner after you've evacuated the bowel area.

In any case, *Madam's* inquiries had revealed the *onsen* was unlikely to be heavily occupied until around five (and it was just after four) so I headed off immediately to the enjoyable experience that I wasn't altogether looking forward to.

When I got there the place was deserted, so I doffed the gear and went through the regulation pre-immersion cleansing procedures.

I probably carried them out to an extent that might be labelled as obsessional to a *casual Japanese onlooker* and spent a good ten minutes soaking luxuriously in a large tub looking out towards the island we were headed to in the morning.

So far, so good.

Clambering out of the bath I moved back into the antechamber, where I dried off, and dressed.

Then one of those interesting issues of etiquette hit me. You arrive with two pieces of fabric, a towel and a washcloth that's a key part of the cleansing procedure.

There was a container containing a couple of used examples of each near the door.

What to do? Leave my two there? Or carry them back to the room?

When in doubt, call, and there was a handy phone, so I did, established that it was OK to carry them back and was almost out of the door when the first of the evening's bath enthusiasts entered.

There was free *WiFi* access in *the Lobby*, so that was where I was bound shortly afterwards, looking to catch up on the email while she took her first extended turn in the *onsen*.

From my seat in the lobby, I could see a steady stream of gentlemen headed for the male baths, though there didn't seem to be any irate customers arriving at *Reception* with complaints about polluted bathwater...

We were booked in for a full *Japanese banquet* from seven o'clock, and, much to my relief it was going to be served in the room rather than in some more formal setting, so we were back upstairs around half an hour beforehand, where I discovered the *Free WiFi* wasn't limited to the *Lobby*.

That meant I had something to keep me busy in the interim.

Around seven, a discreet tap on the door announced the arrival of the first instalment of dinner, which was laid out on the table and replenished twice as we moved through a staggering array of dishes and bits and pieces.

At this point, I should take a moment to consider the *Hughsoid* reaction to *Japanese cuisine*.

I'm the first to admit that I'm not a big fan because the flavours *tend to fall outside the parameters my palate is accustomed to*, but that's just the first factor.

A second, and it's a very significant second, lies in the fact that my palate, as anyone who's sampled my preferred options would be all too aware, doesn't do *subtle*.





Strong on *chilli*, heavy on the *garlic* with concentrated flavours is the way I like it, and that's not the flavour profile you get with *Japanese cuisine*.

When you're looking at something like this display, however, the variety and contrast of the different flavours and textures work a whole lot better than an isolated serve of *sashimi* or *sushi* does.

In other words, while I don't do (as in *not enamoured of, would prefer not to sample and will go out of my way to avoid*) *sushi* or *sashimi*, serve it in this context, and I'll have a go.

That's not to suggest, on the other hand, that I *liked*, or *managed to finish* everything on offer.

There were a couple of things I tried but couldn't stomach, and the cumulative quantity served up would have defeated anyone who wasn't *an extremely dedicated trencherman*.

And, unsurprisingly, having dined extremely well it wasn't long before I was doing the *carpet snake who's just swallowed a wallaby and slunk off to sleep it off* routine.



ONOURA > MIYAJIMA > HIROSHIMA

Tuesday, 6 November 2012

The first *Tuesday* in *November 2012* will go down in history as the day *Green Moon* won the *Melbourne Cup* and *Barack Obama* was re-elected *President of the United States*.

In my iconography, on the other hand, I mightn't remember the date but I doubt I'll forget the experience of visiting *Miyajima*.

We were downstairs at seven looking for breakfast and directed to the third floor, where we found a table with our room number laid out with a variety of *Japanese breakfast comestibles*, most of

which I would have avoided under other circumstances, such as a *Viking* breakfast layout.

Here, on the other hand, with a variety of platters, things that I wouldn't have gone for under other circumstances *worked off each other rather well, in much the same way as the previous evening's banquet had done.*

With breakfast out of the way, we were back upstairs packed and contacting the front desk to arrange a shuttle bus to *Onoura* station. The 8:37 train would deliver us to the ferry terminal at *Miyajima Port* just after nine.

What we found after we'd deposited the *Little Red Travelling Bag* and *Madam's backpack* in a coin locker was an example of the sheer weight of numbers drawn in by iconic sites when you're talking *Japanese heritage tourism.*

The JR ferry we boarded wasn't quite packed to the gunwales but wasn't far off it, and the ferries we saw headed across in the late afternoon were almost as crowded.

With three ferries running across and back throughout the day that's an awful lot of people headed to a significant site on a weekday when there was nothing obvious (*apart from autumn leaves*) to draw them there.





Admittedly, a significant portion were high school students in excursion mode, and many of the remainder were elderly *Japanese* formed into largish tour groups, but it was still a fairly significant number of travellers visiting the sacred island.

As the ferry neared the shore, there was a predictable movement of seated passengers towards the port side railings for a first glimpse of the famous *torii*.

From what I could gather the ferry's course would deliver a better and closer view on the starboard side, so that was where I was headed, determined to find the optimum viewing spot for the closest approach.

Needless to say, I was subsequently joined by most of those who had previously migrated to the port side railings, but, at least, this time, I had the premium viewing spot.



Once we'd docked there was the inevitable exodus headed towards *Itsukushima shrine*, which lies right behind the *torii*.

It had been low tide about half an hour before, and most of the stretch between the temple and the gate was *not quite* dry land. There was plenty of camera action going on from the headland and across the exposed beach, but we were headed elsewhere.

Miyajima means *shrine-island*, a reference to *Itsukushima*, a *World Heritage Site*.

The image usually associated with the island is the shrine's floating *torii* gate set in the *Seto Inland Sea*.

The red-lacquered complex of halls and pathways and the *torii* gate, built over water seem to float in the sea at high tide.

The buildings, the prayer hall, main hall and a Noh theatre are connected by boardwalks on stilts, built so commoners could visit without defiling the ground by walking on it.



The arrangement is based on the idea that the island itself is sacred, and, as a result, the shrine represents the threshold between the sacred and the profane.

Before mass tourism kicked in, commoners approached the shrine by water, steering their boats through the *torii* on their way in.

Away from the boardwalks, paths take visitors around the inlet to the other shrines and temples, and to the island's highest peak, *Mount Misen*.

The buildings have been destroyed and rebuilt many times.

The current design dates back to 1168, when *Taira no Kiyomori*, the most powerful man in *Japan* at the end of the *Heian Period*, selected the island as the site for his clan's family shrine.

Retaining the purity of the shrine is important and since **1878**, there have been no deaths or births near the shrine. Pregnant women are supposed to head to the mainland as their time approaches, as are terminally ill or the very elderly. Burials are still forbidden.

That was the origin of *Itsukushima*.

The present shrine dates from the middle of the sixteenth century but follows the twelfth-century design. Near the main shrine a *Noh* theatre stage, built by *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* in the late sixteenth century, is used to honour to the gods, and act out key events in the mythic history of *Shinto*.

The *torii* and the view of the gate in front of *Itsukushima* with *Mount Misen* in the background is one of the *Three Views of Japan* (along with the sand bar *Amanohashidate*, in *Kyoto Prefecture's Miyazu Bay* and *Matsushima* near *Sendai*).

There has been a gate in place since the twelfth century, but the current sixteen-metre high gate, which dates back to **1875**, is built from *decay-resistant camphor wood* with an extra leg before and behind each main pillar.

It reflects the style of *Ryōbu Shintō*, a school of *esoteric Japanese Buddhism* associated with the *Shingon* sect.





Though the shrine and its *torii* float above the water at high tide, when the tide falls the water drains out of the bay and the *torii* can be approached on foot.

Visitors take the opportunity to walk out, view the gate from close quarters, place coins in the cracks of the legs, make a wish and gather shellfish to add to their *miso* soup.

That had been happening as our boat approached.

Given the numbers involved in an era of mass tourism you'd figure that shellfish would be few and far between these days

I'd done my research before departure, pencilling in a walk around the temple precinct, starting at *Senjokaku temple*, passing the *Five-Storey Pagoda* and a couple of lesser shrines, taking us around



the mountainside *Nature Walk*, then looping back to the main temple area.

Madam was determined to make for *Mount Misen* via the ropeway, but the morning weather conditions made that idea a bit iffy, so we started with *Senjokaku*, where there were obvious preparations for something or other under way.

Senjokaku (*Hall of One Thousand Tatami Mats*) is the colloquial name for *Toyokuni* shrine, originally built by *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* (one of the three unifiers of sixteenth century *Japan*) in 1587 but left incomplete after his death.

The nickname is an apt description of the largest structure on *Miyajima*, which doesn't contain much apart from empty space.

According to a letter from *Ankokuji Ekei*, head monk of *Ankokuji* temple, the intention was to build a library where the chanting of *sutra* every month would honour those killed and wounded in times of war.



The structure was left unpainted, and since the year it was built is known, the weathering of its pillars and floor boards can help determine the age of other wooden structures on *Miyajima*.

Senjokaku is, however, a slight exaggeration.

The area of floor space is equal to 857 *tatami* mats.

From there, once we'd reclaimed the footwear we'd removed so we could enter the temple, we made our way past the *Five-Storey Pagoda* (*Gojunoto*). It was built in 1407 and restored in 1533 and enshrines the *Buddha of Medicine* and *Buddhist saints Fugen* and *Monju*.

From there we headed into the back streets that took us past *Zonkoji*, *Tokujuji* and *Shinkoji* temples on the way to a road the map labelled the *Nature Walk*.



Given the coloured leaves theme, it seemed the way to go.

It was evident that the further you went from the main tourist areas, the less crowded things became, and by the time we hit the *Nature Walk* we had things more or less to ourselves.

The ramble through the foothills was a contrast to the bustling conditions a few hundred metres away, and the foliage was definitely on the autumnal turn, giving *Madam* a considerable degree of heartache due to the sunlight's continued refusal to play nicely and deliver optimal conditions for coloured leaves photography.

That meant once we reached the point where a decision regarding the ropeway needed to be made, the consensus was to head *back into the throng rather than up the mountain*.

Still, once we were back with the crowd, we tended to work away from the mob, heading for *Daishoin* rather than the main temple complex.



Located five minutes' walk from *Itsukushima* shrine at the foot of *Mount Misen*, *Daishoin* is one of the most important temples of *Shingon Buddhism*.

Founded in 806 by the founder of the sect (*Kūkai*, known posthumously as *Kobo Daishi*), the temple was the first *Buddhist shrine* on *Miyajima*.

It features a variety of buildings, statues and religious objects including the *Kannon* Hall, the *Maniden* Hall, a sand *mandala* made by visiting monks from Tibet and a tea room.

There's also cave filled with eighty icons representing the temples of the *Shikoku Pilgrimage* and a flame said to have been burning since the temple was founded.



From the temple grounds, a hiking trail leads to the summit of **Mount Misen**, but the climb takes about an hour and a half, which ruled it out as a serious possibility as far as *Yours Truly* was concerned.

In the middle of the steps leading into the temple, there's a row of spinning metal wheels inscribed with **Buddhist sutra** can be turned as you pass.

That is believed to have the same effect as reading the **sutra** so, without any knowledge of **Japanese**, you can benefit from the blessings the reading of **sutra** is believed to deliver without doing the reading.

Given those considerations, I was giving the cylinders a good swirl on the way up.

Up to this point, the emphasis had been on staying away from crowds, and we only made our way into the really congested area when the prospect of lunch came to the fore.



On the way across there'd been a notable abundance of oyster beds, so even if I hadn't already been told the area around **Hiroshima** is famous for its oysters on the evidence I'd sighted earlier I'd have been looking for oysters for lunch.

After ten days of **Japanese specialities** and *try this you might like it*, there was one thing I was definite about.

I wanted oyster, the whole oyster and (almost) nothing but the oyster.

On a multiple basis.

We sighted an uncrowded restaurant when we hit the main temple area on the way back from **Daishoin**, and I must admit on the first impulse I was inclined to stop there and get lunch out of the way.

Madam, on the other hand, had sighted references to a couple of places that specialise in oysters.

The problem was their location, bang in the middle of the bustling and almost overcrowded central shopping area.

We passed one, noting a sizeable queue waiting to get in while oysters in the half shell were being grilled at the front of the eatery.

We came to a second, where there was also a queue, but a marginally shorter one that, I decided, would do, and as it turned out it did very nicely, thank you.

Madam did her best to talk me into half a dozen in a variety of settings, but I was steadfast.

I went for four grilled on the half shell, with another three crumbed and deep fried, along with a glass of *Chablis*.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the oysters I got were (a) *huge* and (b) *bloody magnificent*.

Don't believe me?

Here's the evidence.

With lunch out of the way, we were left balancing two options.

Madam wanted to get to the top of **Mount Misen**, and we'd avoided **Itsukushima** earlier in the piece because of the low tide.

Since it was around one, with a good hour and a bit until high tide it seemed like the ropeway up to the top (well, not quite the *actual* top, but close to it) seemed like the way to go.





We made our way through the back streets to the point where you pre-purchase tickets, did that, noted the crowd waiting for *the courtesy bus*, figured we wouldn't fit on the next one and decided, in that case, there was no choice but to hoof it to the bottom station.

It's a ten-minute walk (*seven*, we were reminded along the way, *if you run a bit*) but with the backpack, in the wake of the morning's up hill and down dale ramble, there wasn't going to be much running.

In any case, most of it is uphill and most of the uphill involves stairs that aren't spaced to make them easy to climb when you've got my stride pattern.



Still, we seemed to have arrived at the base station before *the courtesy bus*, joined the queue, and eventually found ourselves in a gondola with *four Japanese girls*, some of whom, as *Madam* informed me later, weren't too good on heights either.

Hughesy isn't particularly good on heights, but that had nothing to do with having my back to the view for the ascent.

When you're the last one in, you're not given much choice on where you sit.

Rope ways don't handle curves, and subsequently need to work in straight lines, so there's a station three hundred and fifty metres up a fairly steeply pitched slope where you change for the next stage, which involves larger gondolas with the majority of passengers standing up.

With my back to the view, I hadn't been able to see much and though, for the first bit I'd tried to turn around and admire the view that had everyone else marvelling, but the girth made rotating the trunk difficult.





Those considerations didn't apply to the second stage, which travels above the ridge that leads to the summit.

The view on the other side of the ridge to the *Seto Inland Sea* was breathtaking.

Earlier in the piece, *Madam* had been talking about *the circuit to the summit*, where there are a number of temples and places of interest.

Mt. Misen's ascetic status as a holy mountain site dates back to the autumn of 806.

The sites scattered around the summit add another dimension to the panoramic views across the *Seto Inland Sea*, though we weren't going to be visiting them this time around.



A return visit without the lengthy ramble around the *Nature Walk* would probably allow us to get around the *Seven Wonders of Misen*, including the *Eternal Fire (Kiezuno Reikado)*, said to have been burning for over 1,160 years and believed to be effective to cure all illness.

It was used to light the *Flame of Peace* in the *Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park*.

As stated, *Madam* was keen to go the extra forty minutes or so that would have taken us around the summit, but given the state of both pairs of legs, she decided to give that a miss.

After a photo session around the observatory at the ropeway station, we made our way back down, well and truly in time to catch *Itsukushima* at close to the best tidal conditions.

We didn't, however, get there in a hurry.

The way up had taken us through *Momijidani Park*, with a striking contrast as the red of the maples shows up against the deep green of the surrounding evergreen forest.



We'd been intent on getting to the base station before *the courtesy bus* on the way up, but on the descent, with the urgency out of the equation, I dawdled as *Madam* took her time snapping away.

Back at the main shrine, we found ourselves sharing the space with some school groups, and a throng of *mainly Japanese visitors*, and were mildly bemused by the reaction to the *No Photographs* sign where you pay your admission.

Less than five metres from that point a bunch of high school boys were blithely ignoring the message, but a glance further on revealed the flouting of instructions wasn't a generational thing.

Everyone else was doing it, so we did it too, figuring the *No Photographs* applied to the people in the ticket booths .

They were about the only thing that wasn't being photographed.



I limited my shots to the *torii*, and the general shape of the building, avoiding anything that might be sacred.

It seemed like a common sense compromise.

From there, we could have continued around the bay to other temples and points of interest, but by this stage the feet were aching, the muscles at the back of the legs were indicating that they'd had enough, and the crowds were getting to me.

When *Madam* suggested we head back to the mainland and move on to *Hiroshima*, there weren't going to be too many objections.



We'd been on one of the earlier ferries in the morning and with three separate services operating from *Miyajima Port* and a fourth bringing passengers from *Hiroshima* the flow of visitors had probably continued unabated through the day.

By mid-afternoon, many of the visitors were thinking of heading in the other direction, so the ferries making the return trip were always going to be crowded.

I realised, as we stood at the end of a lengthy queue and watched another flow of incoming visitors leaving the vessel we were about to board, and another carrying a considerable contingent coming in to dock, that the flood of visitors might rise and fall through the day.

But from the first service in the morning until the last one in the evening there's a steady stream coming in.

People arriving towards the end are presumably booked into one of the island's *ryokan* or *onsen* and are presumably there for the sunset.



Day visitors, on the other hand, are going to want to stay as long as possible and leave with enough time to reach their evening destination before dinner time

Which means that regardless of how crowded the boat was on the way over, it's going to be packed on the way back.

We're not talking absolutely packed.

Not to the extent you see in news footage from *Bangladesh* or *Indonesia*, where images of crowded ferries crop up in news bulletins, usually in the wake of some disaster involving severely overcrowded vessels.



But it's a situation where, assuming the capacity of the ferry involved is 1250 passengers, the crowd, and the queue situation means they won't stop admissions to the vessel before 1249 and won't allow it to reach 1251.

I had momentary visions of the capacity limit being reached as *Madam* was allowed aboard with *Yours Truly* left for the following service, but we both passed the checkpoint and headed aboard.

Madam wanted to take a few more photos, so I found a seat as she headed upstairs. There was one spare beside me, but it was gone by the time she made her way downstairs.

Back on the mainland, with the *Little Red Travelling Bag* retrieved from the coin locker we headed across to the platform we'd arrived on and waited for the commuter train that would deliver us back into *Hiroshima* a good twenty-six or seven hours after we'd arrived.

That got us into the station complex, and a shortish walk delivered us to the *Hotel Urbain Executive*, where we were spending the night.

Don't be deceived by the title, though. It might have been *Urbain*, rather than *Urbane*, but it was another in the string of places we'd stopped that cater to the travelling salaryman trade, but it had one significant difference from the standard version.

Once you left the security of the lift that brought you to your designated floor you were in the open air, and *remarkably crisp, fresh and breezy open air* it was as we made our way to the room.

It was sort of like a multi-storey version of the standard motel, with the units warped around a central space in a more or less triangular manner with open space looking down into the lobby where the car parks would otherwise have been.

Such establishments offer a variety of enticements to attract the business trade, and in this case, the variants included *free drinks* (of the non-alcoholic variety, of course), *for guests only*, downstairs and a *free laundry* rather than the standard *coin laundry*.

We had a load of washing that needed attention so that solved the issue nicely, but the fact that *Madam* was outdoors as soon as she left the warmth of the room meant she won't be booking us in there again.

With *the laundry* done and dusted we headed off to dinner.

Madam was determined to sample one of *Hiroshima's* trademark dishes and steered us past some other possibilities into the station complex.

We found her preferred option was packed, and it's *cousin brother further down the corridor* was the same with a few more thrown in for good measure.

I wasn't over keen on what I saw as we'd gone past the first time, but if *TheTour Director* has set her mind on one particular format for dinner experience suggests it's futile to resist.

We inquired about a table for two and ended up with a space at a bar at the rear of the premises, right beside (actually, *left* beside from the seated point of view) the cash register.

So if what follows appears to be a little jaundiced, consider my situation.

Having spent the day doing a lot of walking, much of it involving stairs and sloping paths, I was leg-weary but not overly famished.

The lunchtime oysters had left room in the stomach, but not enough to require a significant refill.

I was seated in a crowded eatery on a stool that had my knees uncomfortably close to the eating surface.

Every thirty seconds or so something said to my immediate left had me automatically turning my head in that direction (coincidentally, the one from which the food would be coming), and I wasn't keen on what I'd seen in preparation.

The meal, when it arrived, turned out to be a sort of pancake turned into a parcel containing noodles and whatever theme ingredient (beef, chicken, pork, tofu or, in this case, oysters) the diner chooses.

It came with a healthy serve of a variant on soy sauce that is apparently widely enjoyed in *Japan*, but has *very limited appeal as far as Hughesy is concerned*.

Madam suggested if I didn't like the sauce, I should try a bit of *this hotter variety*, adding some to the platter. I chose not to respond since the response would have contained variations on the desire to get the sauce *out* of the dish rather than adding any more.

The addition was a *Chilli enhanced* variation on the other one.

Same flavour profile, but more heat.

And the oysters were small, with the taste overpowered by the sauce.

There were places where we could stop for a drink on the way back, but I'd had enough.

We passed two wine bars where the offerings seemed to be aimed at the segment of the market that was disinclined to spend and was after effect rather than taste.

While I *could* have weakened, I want to drink *something interesting* in the wine department.

If I can't, there's always beer, but in this case, I wasn't inclined that way either.



HIROSHIMA > KUMAMOTO > KAGOSHIMA

Wednesday, 7 November 2012

Mention the largest city in the *Chūgoku* region of western *Honshū* and capital of *Hiroshima Prefecture* and the first thing that will spring to mind is what happened at a quarter past eight on the morning of ***6 August 1945***.

And so it should.

Because when American B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped the bomb they'd nicknamed *Little Boy* it didn't just kill around eighty thousand people directly.

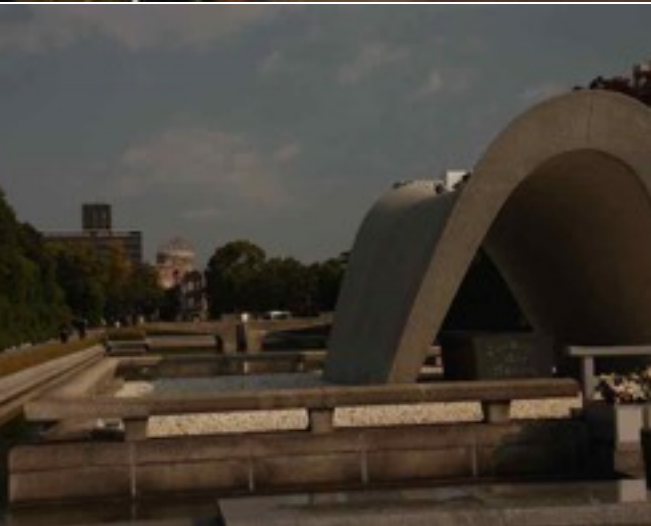


That figure rose to somewhere between ninety and one hundred and forty thousand as the effects of injury and radiation took their toll. The blast changed the world forever and made the world a very scary place indeed for the next quarter of a century or so.

We weren't as concerned about these matters as the end of the twentieth century rolled around, with the *Cold War* a distant memory.

But for a small boy who went to bed each night as the *Cuban Missile Crisis* and surrounding events saw *Soviet Russia* and the *United States* engaged in nuclear brinkmanship the possibility of a global repetition of what happened that morning was terrifying.

It's not as if I *wanted* to visit the city, but if the opportunity arose *I had to*.



Here's where it happened, here's where things changed, and we have to ensure that this never happens again.

The spectre of *Hiroshima* and *Nagasaki* was a major factor in the mindset that shaped the culture of the fifties and early sixties.

But *Hiroshima* has a long pre-atom bomb history and presents a remarkable story of recovery and hope for the future.

Provided, of course, *we don't allow it to happen again.*

The name means *Wide Island* and *Hiroshima* was founded on the delta of the *Ota River*, in 1589.

Warlord *Mori Terumoto* made it his capital after leaving *Aki Province*, built *Hiroshima Castle* and moved there in 1593.

He was on the losing side in the *Battle of Sekigahara*, the beginning of the *Tokugawa Shōgunate*.

Tokugawa Ieyasu gave control of the area to the *Asano* clan of *samurai*, who ruled the area until the *Meiji Restoration*. Under their rule, the city prospered and expanded.

Their descendants were strong supporters of modernisation through the *Meiji Period*,

Hiroshima became an industrial centre and a busy port as the *Japanese economy* shifted from *predominantly rural to urban and industrial*.

The *Sanyo Railway* reached *Hiroshima* in *1894*, and the city was a *major military centre* during the *First Sino-Japanese War* with the *Japanese government* temporarily based there.

Emperor *Meiji* made his headquarters at *Hiroshima Castle* from *15 September 1894* to *27 April 1895*, and the first round of peace talks to end the war was held in *Hiroshima* in early *February 1895*.

Hiroshima was a *major supply base* during the *Russo-Japanese War* in *1904* and, just over ten years later, a *focal point of military activity* when the *Japanese government* entered the *First World War* on the Allied side.

The *Hiroshima Prefectural Commercial Exhibition Hall*, constructed in *1915* as a *centre for trade and the display of new products* was the closest surviving building to the atomic detonation, designated the *Genbaku* or *Atomic Dome*, as part of the *Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park*.

The city was a major military base again during *World War Two*, with *large depots of military supplies*, and was *a key hub for shipping*. While there was widespread destruction in *Tokyo* and other cities there had been no air raids in *Hiroshima*.

Students aged eleven to fourteen had been demolishing houses and creating firebreaks to protect against potential firebombings, but no air raids.

Until 6 August 1945.

Just over a month after the bombing, the *Makurazaki Typhoon* (*Typhoon Ida*) killed and injured more people, destroyed more than half the remaining bridges in the city and added further heavy damage to roads and railroads.

Hiroshima was rebuilt with help from the national government that provided financial assistance and land donated previously used for military purposes.

There, in a nutshell, you have the *Hiroshima* story.

When you walk (or, in our case, travel by tram) through the downtown area on your way to the Atomic Dome you see a remarkable recovery. It's proof that, if such an event were to happen again, on a small scale, and at the same intensity of blast, recovery might be possible.

On the other hand, as a guide addressing a tour group about ten metres to my left pointed out as I stood dabbing at my misty eyes and gazing at the Dome, today's nuclear weapons are much larger and infinitely more powerful.

There's a mist over my eyes as I type this, and reflect on a time when a small boy lived in dread that *Hiroshima* was about to be repeated on a worldwide scale.

But it's a place that needs to be visited, an event that needs to be remembered and is remembered in a mid-city environment that has been shaped to deliver serenity and quiet dignity that's impressive given the awful magnitude of the event it commemorates.

We could have gone further, and made our way into the *Peace Museum*, but chose instead to walk slowly through the parkland, reflecting on events and trying not to think about events on the other side of the world that will shape the way things go for the next four years.

We were booked on to the 10:51 *Sakura 549* service that could have taken us all the way to the day's eventual destination in *Kagoshima* if we hadn't decided to break the journey in *Kumamoto*.

We were going to take a walk around the *Castle* there, and as it turned out it was just as well we hadn't opted to visit the *Peace Museum*.





There were other places that could well have been worth a visit on a less crowded schedule.

Just north of the city, *Fudoin* temple on the east bank of the *Ota River* is one of the few structures in the area to survive the atomic blast and the *Kondo* (Main Hall) is the only designated national treasure in *Hiroshima City*.

It seems the *Kondo* was originally built in *Suo Province* and moved to the present site, but based on statues of the *Buddha of healing and medicine* within the building, it is assumed a temple had already been built by on the site by the end of the *Heian Period*.

The *Kondo* is the largest remaining structure in the *Kara style*, brought from China in the *Kamakura era* along with *Zen Buddhism*. It boasts beams spanning 7.3 metres and 5.5 metres and *irimoya* (a combination of gable and hip roof) with *mokoshi* (an extra roof).

Inside, the dedication suggests *Fudoin* was built around 1540.

We could also have visited *Shukkeien* garden (literally, *shrunk-scenery garden*), which dates back to **1620**, was started after the completion of *Hiroshima Castle*.

It features a miniature representation of a variety of natural formations and scenic views, depicting valleys, mountains, and forests. Tea houses around the main pond offer visitors views of the surrounding scenery and a path that winds around the pond passes through all of *Shukkeien's* miniature scenes.

It would probably have been an ideal place to destress after the atomic bomb sites, but we had other fish to fry down **Kagoshima** way

By the time we'd made our way back to the station, hoofed it back to the hotel, where the checkout time was a very convenient eleven o'clock, collected the backpacks and the **Little Red Travelling Bag** and made our way back to catch the train we had all of five minutes to spare before departure.

On board and underway, I was tempted to leave the tapping and enjoy the scenery since we were on the left-hand side and there were issues with solar glare coming into play.

But frequent tunnels made the sightseeing bit difficult and by the time we'd passed through the intervening stops and had hit the tunnel that takes the **Shinkansen** line onto **Kyushu** I was well and truly in *tap it out mode*.

Once we'd made our way through **Hakata**, however, I was inclined to sit back and enjoy the scenery.

Once we were out of the urban sprawl at the top of the island, it tended towards forest-clad ridges with the odd bit of residential and farming activity in the valleys and not much of anything in the steep-sided gorges.

We tend to think of **Japan** as a highly urbanised country, a *teeming ants nest* kind of place where they employ people to pack passengers into overcrowded commuter trains.

But 73% of the land is mountainous and relatively safe from urban development. And 70% is forest.

In fact, *natural*, as opposed to *planted*, forests account for 50% of the country's surface area).

Madam and I had spent much of the preceding week and a half working our way around that sort of landscape in the **Deep North**, the relatively recently colonised **Hokkaidō** and the mountainous centre of the country around **Nagano**. I'd expected **Kyushu**, being in the south and relatively warmer would have been fairly closely settled.

The **Shinkansen** line, of course, is going to avoid, or go over, urban areas, so the bullet train corridor might well be seen as the exception to the rule.

Our experience the following day, however (he wrote, two days after the events he's chronicling) suggested that forested ridges are the rule rather than the exception in the centre of the southern part of the island.

The original plan had been to conclude the day's travels at **Kumamoto**, move on from there through the back blocks to **Kagoshima** on **Thursday** and do the big leg back to **Osaka** on the last day of the *two-week rail pass*.



But some complication ruled that one out, and Plan B had a three and three-quarter hour stop in *Kumamoto* before we moved on to *Kagoshima*.

The main purpose of the stop was to look at *Kumamoto Castle*, and although only a few structures date back to the castle's construction in 1607, the reconstructed castle is one of the most impressive in *Japan*, rated alongside the white-walled *Himeji* and black-walled *Matsumoto*.

With around eight hundred cherry trees, the castle is a popular *sakura* venue in late *March* and early *April* each year. Although the keep and most other buildings are reconstructions, the work is high quality and new buildings are continually being added.



Building the castle, which was designed and supervised by *Kato Kiyomasa*, the *daimyō* who ruled the area, took seven years following the *Battle of Sekigahara*, though its foundations date back to **1467**.

Kato had been awarded what was known as *Higo Province* for service to *Tokugawa Ieyasu*. The castle was part of efforts to unify and develop the region.

Kato built fortifications that were highly regarded for their defensive capabilities. Castles he designed in *Korea* during the *Imjin War* were able to repel much larger forces because of their effective design.

Kumamoto Castle was considered almost impregnable thanks to its defensive features, with curved stone walls and wooden overhangs incorporated in the design as protection against the *ninja*.

Fifty years after it was completed the castle and surrounding area were given to the *Hosokawa* clan who ruled the *Kumamoto* region for the next two centuries.



Following the *Meiji Restoration* (1868), the castle played a pivotal role when *Saigō Takamori* led the *Satsuma Rebellion* against the new government. *Kumamoto* was the main government garrison in *Kyushu*, and *Saigō* attacked the castle in 1877.

Despite being outnumbered, the government forces were able to withstand a two-month siege, forcing the rebel forces to retreat.

The original castle keep burnt down just before the siege.

A 1960 reconstruction re-created the exterior and a recreation of the *Honmaru Goten Palace* opened to the public to celebrate the castle's 400th anniversary in 2008. They've gone to great lengths to use authentic materials and methods. The result looks like an accurate recreation of the opulent rooms in which the *daimyō* would receive guests.



I'm not a fan of reconstructions, but when they're done this well...

Apart from the walk through the interior reconstruction, there was a *highly choreographed samurai show*, evidently designed to keep the younger set happy, but a pretty good time was had by all.

The city's other attraction is *Suizenji Koen*, a landscape garden built in 1636 by *Hosokawa Tadatoshi*, the second lord of *Kumamoto*, as a private retreat.

A network of gardens spans an area of sixty-five hectares that reproduces *fifty-three post stations* of the *Tokaido Road*, which connected *Edo* with *Kyoto* during the *Edo Period*, in miniature form.

Three and a quarter hours with most of them spent exploring the **Castle** ruled out a visit to the **Garden** this time around, but ongoing reconstruction at the **Castle** and the prospect of a walk through that landscape is the sort of thing that could well draw us back to **Kumamoto**.

Back on the **Shinkansen**, it was an hour and three-quarters to **Kagoshima**, where the accommodation was further from the station than I would have preferred if we were still lugging the **Black Monster**.

With the **Little Red Travelling Bag** in hand, we found our way to the tram stop, alighting three stops later to head off into the **eating and drinking quarter** in search of the **Sunn Days Inn**, which lay right in the heart of the quarter, a prime destination for the hungry and thirsty salary man.

Having checked in, we were out again in fairly short order looking for a particular venue that deals in one of **Kagoshima's** specialities, **black pork**.

Previous stops, having been fairly close to the station concerned, had mostly been away from prime eating and drinking areas, and when we'd ventured into such territory, we were headed for a place where **Madam** had, more or less, a fair idea of the place's location.

We found ourselves wandering along a backstreet, down another, then onto one of the city's major thoroughfares, and back a block before we located the place she was seeking.

Given the fact that this was, apparently, **a highly rated purveyor of prime pork** you'd expect it to have been a bit easier to find.

Tucked away at the back of a basement collection of eateries (two of them apparently **French**) on the edge of the **Eating Quarter** you'd have expected it to be doing things a little tough, but while we were there a steady stream of customers made their way through the door.

Not bad, one would have thought, *relatively early on a Wednesday night*.

We ended up in a *tatami* mat cubicle, at the chef's suggestion, rather than seated at the bar.

I was glad we did since we'd ordered the prime version of the pork, which was cut thicker and took longer to cook. I downed a substantial pitcher of beer while we were waiting, and I wanted another with the meal, a request that was overruled by the wait staff because *the meal was substantial, and I wouldn't be able to manage both*.

We'd learnt of **Obama's** re-election in the States on the last leg of the train trip, and I was in a mood to celebrate, so I was \certain that I could, but **Madam** advised caution and the avoidance of scenes.

So we had to do with the meal, which mightn't have been the largest I've ever tackled but was certainly in the running for the top five.

A substantial piece of high-quality pork had been crumbed and deep fried, sliced into substantial chunks and came on a platter with a generous serve of sliced cabbage, slices of cucumber, a bowl of rice and the seemingly obligatory *miso* soup.

I'm not *miso*-friendly, so that was never going to enter calculations, but I made pretty fair work of the pork and my serve of rice.

Around a third of the way through we were visited by the chef, who demonstrated the correct way of seasoning the pork.

He started with a healthy sprinkling of sauce that wasn't too dissimilar to the one I'd disliked the night before and had been avoiding to date, then added a fair-sized dollop of *hot English mustard*, which I had been indulging in, though not in the quantity required.

The combination worked rather well, and by the time my serve of pork and rice were gone, there was only a skerrick of the mustard left, which was a problem when *Madam* advised she'd been beaten by quantity.

There was about a third of her serve left, and a fair quantity of rice which the chef had described as a high-quality product from *Akita Prefecture* in northern *Honshū*.

Under those circumstances, I felt obliged to finish both pork and rice, but there was no way I was going to manage the cabbage and still leave room for a celebratory ale or two.

Having completed the repast *Madam* wasn't inclined to hang around for pitchers of beer, and who could blame her, since she didn't have the capacity to join in the celebrations.

We wended our way back to the hotel, turned on the TV in search of updates on the *Obama* situation, found we were on the end of the relevant bulletin and settled back to watch a panel discussion about dieting as I downed a couple of *Asahis* to celebrate the result.

Predictably, by around nine-thirty the sawmill was in full production.



KAGOSHIMA >
YOSHIMATSU >
KAGOSHIMA

Thursday, 8 November 2012

At least three times during the night I lay half asleep trying to work out what that noise was.

It certainly sounded like rain, a possibility I dismissed as absurd first time around.

When it reappeared, with some emergency vehicle passing by, siren engaged, I considered the possibility a little further.

We're on the thirteenth floor (out of fourteen) and on a corner of a rectangular building, so perhaps rain, driven by a strong wind might account for it.

The trouble was, there was no sound of wind.

On the third, or possibly fourth or fifth occasion the penny dropped. *It was the air conditioner.*

On other days, with walking around as a significant part of the agenda, rain would have been a problem.

But given the morning's schedule, a rail-based loop through southern *Kyushu* that was going to involve some pretty smart movement given an interval of three minutes between trains at the last changeover, rain wasn't likely to be too much of an issue.

The loop should bring us back into *Kagoshima* around a quarter to one, giving us the afternoon and most of the following morning to take a look around the city that has been tagged *the Naples of the Eastern world*.

A bayside location, an impressive stratovolcano (*Sakurajima*, *Kagoshima*'s equivalent of *Vesuvius*) and a mild climate that's largely related to a position as *Kyushu*'s southernmost major city combine to deliver that moniker.





It's the capital of the local prefecture and its largest city by a fair distance.

On the southern tip of *Kyushu*, *Kagoshima Prefecture* stretches around six hundred kilometres, as far as the boundary with the neighbouring *Okinawa Prefecture* in the *Ryūkyū Islands*.

Its territory takes in *Yakushima Island*, a *World Natural Heritage Site*, the twelve *Tokara Islands* and *Amamioshima*, the second largest isolated island in *Japan*.

Dating back to the fourteenth century. *Kagoshima* sits on the *Satsuma Peninsula*, facing *Kagoshima Bay*.

As the political and commercial centre of territory controlled by the *Shimazu* clan of *samurai* through medieval times into the *Edo Period*, it was the capital of the *Satsuma Domain*, one of the wealthiest and most powerful fiefdoms.

Although international trade was banned for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the city remained prosperous. It served as a link to the semi-independent vassal kingdom of *Ryūkyū*, whose traders and emissaries frequented the city.

Kagoshima had also been a significant centre of Christian activity before the religion was banned in the late sixteenth century.

The *Royal Navy* bombarded *Kagoshima* in *1863* after the *daimyō* refused to pay an indemnity for the murder of *Charles Lennox Richardson* on the *Tōkaidō highway* the previous year. The city was the birthplace and last stand of *Saigō Takamori* at the end of the *Satsuma Rebellion* in *1877*.

More significantly in the long term, nineteen young men from *Satsuma* broke the *Tokugawa Shōgun's* ban on foreign travel, travelling to *England* and the *United States* to study science and technology, an adventure that did much to kickstart *Japan's industrial revolution*.

There's a statue outside the train station paying tribute to them.

Kagoshima was also the birthplace of *Tōgō Heihachirō* whose role as *Chief Admiral of the Grand Fleet* of the *Imperial Japanese Navy* in the *Russo-Japanese War* produced startling victories in *1904* and *1905*, destroying Russian naval power in the East, and contributing to the failed *1905* revolution in Russia.

The city's status as *a significant naval base* and position as *a railway terminus* saw a mass bombing raid on the night of *17 June 1945* that deposited over eight hundred tonnes of incendiary and cluster bombs destroying over forty per cent of the built-up area.

Today, *Kagoshima* produces a wealth of agricultural and marine produce, is home to sophisticated electronic technologies and is the only prefecture with a rocket launching facility.





In *March 2004*, the city became the southern end of the *Shinkansen* network, with services terminating at *Kagoshima-Chuō*.

Recent upgrades mean *Kagoshima* is eighty minutes from *Fukuoka* (*Hakata* if you want to split hairs).

It's around two and a quarter hours to *Hiroshima*, just under three and a half to *Okayama*, just over four to *Osaka* in the heartland of the *Kansai* region and between seven and eight hours to *Tokyo* depending on the particular service you choose to use.

To get that far, you'd be using a combination of the *Tokaido*, *San'yo* and *Kyushu Shinkansen* lines, so there are a variety of permutations and combinations.

There isn't a single service that runs straight through.

The day's travel proceedings involved, *in Madam's* words, *a big train day*, though given our location at the very end of the *Shinkansen* network you might question how that was possible.

The answer to your question, of course, involved local lines.

While I knew this was the case, there was nothing in the lead up to departure to suggest there was anything much out of the ordinary.



Had I been a bit more thorough in my research I might have known I was in for something special once we partially retraced our steps on the *Shinkansen* network and alighted at *Shin-Yatsushiro*.

Even *Madam*, who'd planned the day's route and only had us doing this leg since it would deliver us to *Hitoyoshi*, was gobsmacked by what came next.

It wasn't, by all admissions, the most promising of starts.

Once we'd alighted at *ShinYatsushiro* and made our way from the *Shinkansen* section to the much more prosaic surroundings of the local line the first train that appeared was a *local stopping at all stations conveyance* that was as run down as you might suspect under the circumstances.

We weren't quite in the back blocks, being on the main *Shinkansen* line, but if you were bound for the boondocks, this was the train that would get you there.

And it certainly looked the part.



When the *Trans-Kyushu Express*, arrived it was only a cut or two above its predecessor.

But once we'd looped under the *Shinkansen* line and headed up into the hills you weren't inclined to pay much attention to your surroundings on board the train.

Your gaze is drawn to the passing landscape, *forest-covered ranges with almost vertical slopes that towered above the train as it wound its way along a river valley*.

It wasn't quite as spectacular as the ride between *Toyama* and *Takayama* and back down to *Nagoya* or the run from *Nagano* down to *Nagoya*, but those are well known scenic routes. This one, a mere transitory stage before what was to come was, however, *bloody magnificent*.

We pulled into *Hitoyoshi* after an hour to find the next train waiting for us.



You don't take a heritage train, give it a full restoration and then run it through an ordinary setting that won't attract a clientele.

This section of track, as was the case with the next one, was obviously being niche marketed as a trip for train freaks.

If the *prelude* was *bloody magnificent*, these next two stages were *absolutely stunning*.

Given the niche marketing, there were stops guaranteed to maximise that appeal.

The first was at a heritage station that came before a switchback, a loop up into the mountains and a second stop some five or six minutes later that had you looking back at the station you'd just visited.

I stayed on board for that one, but *The Photographer*, as you'd expect didn't.

Her report, once back on board, had *Hughesy* alighting at every subsequent stop.





One was at a place where the name translates as ***Eternal Happiness***. You struck a bell a certain number of times according to *your relative degree of absolute contentment*.

One for happy, two for very happy, three for verging on the ecstatic.

Another stop was the oldest station in ***Kyushu***, though how that works when you're in the uplands in the centre of the island didn't quite compute.

There was a stop at ***Yatake***, which dates back to ***1909***.

An impressive locomotive was stabled in a largish shed beside a stall selling fresh produce (***Madam*** invested in some freshly dried mushrooms).



In front of the locomotive, a hostess was holding a train driver's cap and a board bearing the date, a handy combo for photographic purposes, and offering to take the photo for you.

There was a fair bit of that sort of silliness along the way, and it was difficult to abstain.

On a more serious note, the track was following the route that brought the first trains to *Kagoshima*.

There had been a fair bit of logging and land clearing along the route.

In recently cleared areas there seemed to be a significant spread of invasive vines, creepers and other weeds that made the foreground, on frequent occasions along the journey, an eyesore.



Whether forests will eventually return and overrun the invaders is, of course, one of those *only time will tell* scenarios.

When the weeds took over the foreground, of course, the natural response was to lift up the eyes to the magnificent backdrop.

That stage took us from 10:08 to 11:21. I'd been expecting some difficulty when we got to *Yoshimatsu*, but it was obvious the next train wasn't going anywhere until the connection was made.

The next stage, from 11:24 to 12:48 was on a similarly restored rail motor, though the interior decor was, as you'd expect, slightly different. There were a couple of stops at seemingly out of the way *onsen* to pick up passengers.



Eventually, as we found ourselves approaching *Kagoshima*, the focus shifted to *Sakurajima*, the volcano that is to *Kagoshima* what *Vesuvius* is to *Naples*.

Conditions throughout the day had been hazy, the view across the water wasn't the greatest, but the sight had camera enthusiasts snapping away with *Hughesy* happy to leave the snapping to those who had a fair idea of what they were doing.

Back at *Kagoshima-chuo*, I was satisfied with the day's activities, and would have been quite happy to head back to the hotel.

But *Madam* was determined to get a couple of scenic shots across the bay to *Sakurajima*, so we headed off on one of the bus services that offer a scenic loop around the city.

I suppose we could have got on and off around the circuit. The first stop commemorated *St Francis Xavier*, but there wasn't much of interest once we dismissed *Senganen* garden as a possibility.

We'd passed the garden on the train as we headed along the coast just north of *Kagoshima*, and were probably doing ourselves out of a major spectacle since the garden's most striking feature is its use of *Sakurajima* and *Kagoshima Bay* as borrowed scenery.

But by this point on the trip, we were in scenic sensory overload.

Senganen dates back to 1658 and owes its existence to the *Shimazu* clan, who ruled *Satsuma* and were early adopters of *Western science and technology*.

Their influence can be seen in the long stone building that stands just outside the main garden area.

It was one of the earliest *Western* factories in the country and houses a museum with exhibits about the *Shimizu* and the early stages of *Japan's nineteenth-century modernisation*.

As far as *Madam* was concerned *Shiroyama Observatory* at the summit of *Mount Shiroyama* would do us very nicely, thank you, and I wasn't inclined to dissent. The mountain was the site of a castle and *Shiroyama* means *castle mountain*.





The castle's ruins at the base of the mountain are now the site of the *Reimeikan Museum* and were one of the stops we skipped on the way up to the *Observatory*.

Shiroyama Observatory is famed for views across the city of *Kagoshima*, the bay and *Sakurajima*.

In fine weather with good visibility, you can see as far as the *Kirishima Mountains*, but the haze that had been a nuisance in the distance all day really made its presence felt, and there wasn't a great deal of joy for the photographic fraternity.

The park at the *Observatory* is of interest to students of *Japanese history*. It was the site of the last battle in the *Satsuma Rebellion*.

Saigō Takamori made his last stand at *Saigō's Cave*, another site we passed by on the way up.

A couple of bus services will take you around the sights of *Kagoshima*, but opted to head back to the hotel.

This travel bit can tend to become wearing.

Dinner that night was in a *French establishment* on the other side of the main road from the previous night's pork emporium, and rather impressive it was.

That'll have to do as far as the narrative is concerned because *Hughesy*, for some reason, missed completing this particular bit of *Travelogue* promptly, and now, close to a month later the details have vanished from the memory.



KAGOSHIMA > OSAKA

Friday, 9 November 2012

The last day of the two-week rail leg dawned a little later than my regular waking hour.

It was around six thirty-two when I surfaced from a rather weird dream involving *catering for wedding receptions while obviously working as a primary school teacher* and resumed work on the *Travelogue*.

Madam surfaced shortly after that, announcing an intention to hie herself off to the nearby public *onsen*.

That delivered close to an hour's uninterrupted tapping until her return shortly after eight.

With the train scheduled to depart at 11:32 we weren't inclined to do much in the way of pre-departure activity, happy to wander downstairs for a late breakfast, back to the room to finish packing and check out just before ten.



That scenario gave us a leisurely move to the station and a bit of looking around before departure time.

The day before we'd headed down for breakfast just after six-thirty, and found the place close to chocker.

Madam's trip out to the *onsen* had started with an elevator ride that stopped at almost every floor on the way down as salarymen and other guests sought to indulge in the ¥500 breakfast that seemed to be the *Sunn Days Inn* gimmick to attract the business clientele.

If it is, then it seems to work, because when she returned and headed to the elevator to take her back upstairs the breakfast room had progressed to the point where there wasn't an actual queue but a waiting list had the next prospective breakfaster being called by name.

On that basis, my decision to tap away rather hurl myself at the shower once she'd been gone more than half an hour could be deemed to be a smart move.

We only had one room card key, and I needed it to keep the lights and electricity running, and I wouldn't be able to hear someone knocking at the door while I was in the shower, would I?

In any case, a leisurely morning was the order of the day, and I lobbed myself gently towards the shower rather than hurling myself into the *Rain Room*.

Breakfast on both days was a good deal for the ¥500, and you could see why most of the occupants of the hotel's three hundred and fifty plus rooms would be inclined to eat there.

Still, it was relatively uncrowded when we made our way downstairs, hit the breakfast options and wandered back up, passing the impressive display of bottles associated with one of *Kagoshima's* other claims to fame, the sweet potato *shōchū* (*imo-jochu*).

Typically distilled from barley, sweet potatoes, or rice, though it can be made from brown sugar, buckwheat, sesame and chestnut, *shōchū* is a completely different beast to *saké*, though if you're in *Kagoshima* and ask for the latter, you'll almost certainly be served *shōchū* instead.

There are, by all accounts, hundreds of brands, and a fair few were represented in the display.

Kagoshima is the only prefecture that doesn't brew any *saké*, and the spirit dates back to at least the mid-16th century.

It seems to have been introduced to the country through *Kagoshima* from *China* or *Korea*.

The earliest reference to *shōchū* appears in temple graffiti written by a carpenter in 1559. It seems the abbot at the particular shrine was less forthcoming with the spirit than his workers would have liked.

Madam had intentions of sampling the local product, but she hadn't managed to do it over the last day and a half.

With plenty of time till the train left she could still have fitted a taste in, right up to the time we boarded the train since the *Shinkansen* platforms at *Kagoshima-chuo* have bars offering more than a hundred varieties.

Instead, having made our way over to *Kagoshima-chuo*, I set off in search of the statue commemorating the fifteen young men from *Satsuma*, who broke the *Tokugawa Shōgun's* ban on foreign travel, travelling to England and the United States to study science and technology.

The adventure helped kickstart *Japan's industrial revolution*.



I'd spotted the item in question while *Madam* was scoping out transport options between the station and the hotel, had promptly forgotten all about it the following day but now, with the best part of an hour left till the train departed looking for it was a decent way of killing time.

Had I done a head count I'd probably have found only fifteen there, though the party included a recruit from *Tosa* and another from *Nagasaki*.

Apparently a couple of supervisors went along for the ride as well.

They studied at *University College London*, and many went on to *Oxford* and *Cambridge* before they returned home.



Among their number was *Mori Arinori*, the first *Japanese ambassador to the USA* and, subsequently, *Minister for Education*, *Godai Tomoatsu* (founder of the *Osaka Chamber of Commerce* and the *Osaka Stock Exchange*) and *Terashima Munenori*, who went on to become the country's Foreign Minister.

With that done there was still time to kill, so we loitered around the station's shopping precinct, noting a rather interesting poster advertising a newspaper and sending *Madam* off to perambulate through the local delicacies on sale to the travelling public.

As stated elsewhere, this kind of thing is an important consideration in a gift-giving culture, and she didn't return empty-handed.

Once she'd made her way back with a selection of goodies I took a turn around the same area, somehow managing to arrive in the *Shōchū* store, though they didn't seem to be offering samples.

Aboard the train, we were seated on either side of the aisle rather than in contiguous seats, which coincidentally meant we didn't have access to the handy electrical socket that comes with said seats.

I'd been hoping to be able to access the power point *en route* since I figured there'd be a turnover of seats, but while next door was vacant when I boarded it was occupied at the first stop by a bloke who appeared to be an academic rather than a salaryman.

When he got off in **Okayama**, the seat was immediately claimed by another dude who remained aboard until **Kōbe**.

Still, although it ran down the batteries on the **iPad** and the **iPod**, I was able to tap away and listen to my personal playlist, so the four hours passed remarkably quickly.

Arriving in **Osaka** the contrast with where we'd been was noticeable.

It was more than noticeable; it almost amounted to a fair sized clout around the ears.

There'd been plenty of room to move in **Kagoshima-chuo**, and the **Shinkansen** is a fairly tranquil means of transfer, but having grabbed the **Little Red Travelling Bag** and made our way to the door, two steps later we were in the ant bed turmoil of **ShinOsaka**.

Fortunately, there was a mere one stop train ride and a single stop subway transfer to get us to the night's hotel, so we had an opportunity to catch the breath before the evening's appointment with the inimitable **Diamond Chef**.

That started with a visit to an establishment that delivered a range of little platters that went rather well with beer, and a visit to a jazz club where **Madam** found the featured vocalist was an alumni of her old university.

From there we were on to a single malt club, and things start to become blurry.



7

JAPAN 2012: THE LAST BIT

With the rail pass bit out of the way there's still plenty to explore in the *Kansai* region, between *Madam's* home town, the *Osaka* conurbation and the old Imperial capital in *Kyoto*.

We started in *Osaka*...



OSAKA DAY 1

Saturday, 10 November 2012

After two weeks on the road, *Madam* had designated the two-day stay in *Osaka* as a rest and recreation spell.

After the previous night's indulgences, rest and recreation were what I needed. It started with a long soak in a warm bath, which did some good, but it was never going to be enough to overcome the after-effects.

After breakfast at the hotel coffee shop, I would have been happy to roll the rock across the door and hibernate, but we had an eleven o'clock checkout and a move to fresh quarters.



This hotel was chosen with an eye to convenience (and very convenient it was), but it had one major drawback.

It didn't, as far as *Madam's* initial research could make out, offer *a coin laundry*. After the two weeks on the road, we'd have a pile of washing that would need to be done.

That prompted the relocation, and neither of us was happy when she found that the first stop did, indeed, offer such a service.

Had it been evident when the bookings were made we'd have stayed put, I could have taken further recuperative baths, and the washing could have been started much earlier, giving *Madam* the chance of a longer rest before we set out to dinner with *The Principal*.

As it was, we left the checkout as late as possible, took ourselves out for a walk with the baggage in the cloak room at the old hotel, located the new one and attempted to kill time before we could *check-in*.



We headed to the middle of the business section of *Osaka*, an area that would have been much busier during the week.

While things were pleasantly quiet, my head throbbed after the overnight overindulgence.

My right knee was doing something similar as a result of something I'd presumably done just before we'd shipped the *Black Monster* back to *Kōbe*.

The knee had been troubling me for the previous couple of days, not to any great extent, just enough to make things uncomfortable.

Now, when a long walk might have served to remove the toxic elements from the system through exercise, the knee was saying, *Hang on there buddy boy, this thing needs some rest.*

So I rested.

In a park on the banks of a river while the knee delivered constant reminders that it was there, and the head pleaded for somewhere to lie down and quietly expire.

Eventually, on the off chance that we might be able to check in early, we headed over to the new hotel and made polite inquiries.

A stroke of good luck or astute management saw us into the room well before the regular time.

I slept.

Madam ran *the laundry routine* and still managed a bit of a spell before the evening appointment.

That proved to be a much more restrained affair than the previous night's exercise, with a rendezvous that took us straight into *Japan's longest shopping arcade*, *Tenjinbashi-suji* shopping street.

I've seen an arcade or two in my time, but not too many that stretch over two and a half kilometres.

The roofed arcade grew out of a vegetable market associated with the *Tenmangu* shrine during the *Edo Period*, and today contains six hundred stores selling day to day items including groceries, clothes, snacks, used books, medicine, and assorted odds and ends. It's not high-end shopping and, by all accounts prices tend to be low, and goods are of average quality.

Not the place to go looking for *Gucci* handbags and the like.

But since it's an everyday shopping environment for everyday people it offers a range of eateries and cafes. There are plenty in the arcade itself, and there are more in the streets and alleys that open off the main thoroughfare.

You might be inclined to question *Hughesy's* description of a shopping arcade that's packed with a bewildering variety of eateries, and in a common or garden arcade, you'd possibly have a point in any other society.

But a stroll through the eating and drinking quarter of most *Japanese cities* would sort that issue once and for all.

Many of them are *izakaya*, small bars that offer food to accompany whatever you're drinking, casual places often based on after-work drinking. *Izakaya* were originally *saké* shops where customers could drink on the premises.

They were sometimes called *akachōchin* (*red lantern*) since paper lanterns are traditionally placed in front of such establishments. Nowadays the term usually refers to small, non-chain *izakaya*.

As the astute reader might suspect, *Hughesy* is a big fan of this concept, and would be a bigger fan if I was able to read the language and decipher the captions underneath the picture menus you find outside.

Somehow we never managed to find ourselves in *nomi-hōdai* (*all you can drink*) or *tabe-hōdai* (*all you can eat*) places where, for a set price per person you can order as much food or drink as you can hold.

They do, however, tend to be careful to impose a time limit of two or three hours.

On arriving you'll invariably find yourself being given an *oshibori* (*wet towel*) to clean your hands and possibly an *otōshi* (in the *Kanto* region) or *tsukidashi* (in *Kansai*) a snack or appetiser charged to the bill instead of an entry fee.

From there, the food quotient will vary according to the particular establishment, and food and drink are ordered throughout the session. Food items are usually shared by everyone at the table.

It took a while to get used to the fact that the closest platter wasn't specifically mine, but the practice allows you to pick and choose.

One thing you will notice is that such places tend to be light on for rice, which also threw me at first until I learned that you're getting your rice quota through the *saké*, which is, of course, rice wine.

Even if you're drinking beer.

Yakitori (grilled chicken skewers, often grilled in front of you go particularly well with *Japanese beer*, and I'm also quite partial to the *cook it yourself Korean barbecue places*

The Principal guided us into a *Korean* place of the *cook it yourself on the hot plate in the middle of the table* variety.

We put several platters of marinated meats through the cooking process as various matters were discussed, and a couple of quiet beers were indulged in, then we wandered off to a *Chinese* place in a side alley.

The food there was good, a pleasant change from the *seasoned Korean meats* and the combination as a whole worked rather well.

Given busy schedules for *Japanese high school principals* and the need for weary travellers to rest we weren't up too late.

A farewell two stops onto the return train journey saw us heading back through the dark, semi-deserted but quite tranquil streets to the hotel, which this time wasn't as quite as conveniently located as far as the railway station was concerned.



OSAKA DAY 2

Sunday, 11 November 2012

There were no breakfast arrangements in place for *Day Two in Osaka* and in a way that was just as well.

Given the way things had turned out over the preceding thirty-six hours a sleep in, a late checkout, a move to a third hotel and a rendezvous with *The Sister* at a *French restaurant* provided a painless way of filling in the morning.

We'd already planned to catch up with *The Former Secretary* sometime during the day, so when it transpired she didn't have

anything else on her plate, we suggested she join us for lunch at the *Bistrot des Mauvais Garçons*.

There was a slight degree of confusion regarding the actual location of the *Bad Boys' Bistro*, but we arrived more or less on time, just before *The Sister* lobbed on the scene.

There was no sign of *Former Secretary*, it was drizzling, and we were standing in front of the door of another establishment (*Bad Boys* go upstairs), so we decided to follow the *Bad Boys* and head up, expecting *Former Secretary* to find us upstairs.

As it turned out, *FS* had done been there and gone to check on something when we weren't there well before time. She made it back late, by which time we were upstairs, and she was scratching her head wondering where we'd got to.

A quick text message, one of a couple she sent without *Someone* noticing, sorted that out, and we were set for a lengthy, leisurely lunch, with a bottle of *Pinot Noir* from your actual *Burgundy*.

The wine went down well, the lunch (salad, cream of pumpkin soup, squid in a tomato sauce, beef slowly cooked in red wine, dessert and petit fours) delivered a pleasant combination of tastes though the portions weren't over-generous.



The conversation kept things rolling along, and having been the first customers to arrive, we were the last to leave.

The attempt to find the lunchtime venue had delivered us onto the famous *Ebisubashi* bridge across the *Dōtonbori* canal, just underneath the legendary *Glico Man* billboard. The bridge was originally built to provide access to the nearby *Ebisu* shrine and is associated with a legendary curse on the *Hanshin Tigers*, *Osaka*'s baseball team.

Given the familiarity of the *Glico Man* and the fact that it lies between the *Shinsaibashisuji* and *Ebisubashisuji* shopping districts the bridge is a popular meeting place.

It's known as *nanpabashi* (by foreigners) and *hikkakebashi* (by native *Japanese*). Both translate as the pulling bridge due to the alleged ease with which girls can be picked up in the vicinity.

We went back and forth across the bridge several times through the course of the afternoon and evening, which was largely spent in the *Ebisubashisuji* shopping district.

The district opens off the street that takes its name from the *Dōtonbori* canal, which means it's time for another excursion into the realms of history.

While it's the main destination for food travel in *Osaka*, *Dōtonbori* owes its origins to a decision back in 1612, when entrepreneur, *Dōton Yasui*, decided to connect the two branches of the *Yohori River*, which run north to south, with a canal to increase trade and commerce in the region.

Before the canal was finished, *Dōton* became caught up in the *Siege of Osaka* and died helping to defend *Toyotomi Hideyori*.

His cousins finished the project in 1615 and the new ruler in *Osaka Castle*, *Tadaki Matsudaira*, named the canal and avenue beside it *Dōtonbori* (*Dōton's canal*) even though he'd been on the wrong side of the result in the siege.

Six years later the *Tokugawa Shōgunate* designated *Dōtonbori* as *Osaka*'s entertainment district and by 1662 the street had six *Kabuki* (classical *Japanese dance-drama*) and five *Bunraku* (traditional puppet) theatres, and the *Takeda Karakuri* mechanical puppet theatre.

The theatres were so popular they encouraged numerous restaurants and cafes to open, catering to the flood of tourists and entertainment-seekers who poured into *Dōtonbori*.

While there has been a decline in support for traditional forms of entertainment and *Dōtonbori*'s five remaining theatres were bombed and destroyed during *World War Two* it remains a prime attraction for culinary tourists.



Today *Dōtonbori* is famous for shops, restaurants, and the neon and mechanised signs that line the canal and feature in the shopping areas. For a start, there's snack and candy manufacturer *Glico*'s runner crossing the finish line.

He's just one part of a formidable barrage of electronic advertising.

In *Ebisubashisuji*, a six and a half metre crab that dates back to **1960** moves legs and eyestalks to promote a crab restaurant called *Kani Doraku*. It spawned a string of similar creations, including a squid that puffs steam.

We took a leisurely ramble along the arcade that leads to *Namba station*, where *The Sister* bade us farewell.



The remaining trio headed back through an electronics store and *Tower Records*, looping into the hotel to check in and looping straight back out to chase up *WiFi* hotspots and dinner.

The pursuit of *WiFi* and the need to contact the *Kyoto*-based *Sponge* meant we neglected to book seats at the preferred destination (*Pieno*, just off the arcade-type thoroughfare).

We'd planned to land on their doorstep around five, but *WiFi* matters delayed things to the point where we could either spend a lengthy wait in the drizzle waiting for space to become available or look elsewhere.

Predictably, we looked elsewhere, but only as far as the *Mar Bar*, which was conveniently celebrating a fourth birthday and supplied us with complimentary *Cava* as we surveyed the menu.

That's not quite accurate, of course. The two girls surveyed the menu, passing comments and requests for guidance across the table.

I wasn't particularly concerned about the actual dishes involved. We were in *tapas* territory, and if I didn't like one I'd be right with the next as long as no one headed off into anything too radical.

Everything, however, proved quite toothsome, and while the glass of white that followed the *Cava* was a little on the sweeter side of what I'd prefer, an unidentified fuller bodied red was quite tasty, to the point where I ended up with a third glass.

Having seen *Former Secretary* off at *Namba* we made our way to the hotel, making a final pass past the psychedelia alongside the canal.

Along the way, we made a diversion to take a look at *Hozenji* temple, all that's left of a major 17th-century site after the main hall was demolished during *World War Two*.

Decorated with paper lanterns and tucked away in a quiet neighbourhood in an alley paved with stones and lined with old-style restaurants and bars.

It's one of those places that's worth a revisit, preferably when tiredness is removed from the equation.





OSAKA > KYOTO

Monday, 12 November 2012

Tired. That was the key word about two-thirds of the way around the day's exercise routine, and with one final day's exertion to go as I sit typing on a Tuesday morning where the forecast says cloudy in the morning, later turning to rain, that's just as well.

The day's assignment was straightforward on the surface.

A late rise after a big sleep made sense since we wanted to avoid the morning press of salarymen and other workers making their way into central *Osaka*.

A morning transfer to *Kyoto* made sense since it would leave the afternoon free for sightseeing. An evening without appointments would probably leave us fresh to face a more adventurous schedule on *Tuesday*.

After that, it was all a downhill run, so to speak, with *Wednesday* taking us back to *Kōbe* and *Thursday* devoted to preparations and packing before the return *Down Under*. That's pretty much downhill all the way from here, folks.

Of course, there were complications along the way.

The first came when *The Mother's Phone* started making buzzing noises. Given the linguistic issues involved I passed the Incoming message to *Madam*, who was otherwise (naturally, in an expression of *Murphy's Law*) engaged in the bathroom.

Equally, given the fact that it was probably a text rather than a voice call, it wasn't that urgent, so *Someone* had time to complete the morning ablutions.

Checking, she established it was a message from a concerned *Sponge*. His communications had been overwhelmed by spam, and he had been waiting to hear from us.



We had been away from email access for the best part of a week, so there wasn't much we could do regarding contacting him.

In any case, the flurry of texts following that initial contact established that he was off to *Himeji* early on *Tuesday* morning, which ruled out *Monday* night, and whatever happens on *Tuesday* is going to depend on how he feels at the end of a longish working day.

Still, that meant we 'd managed to shine a bit of light on the last issue that we needed to resolve, so we duly packed up and set off for *Kyoto*.

That wasn't such a major operation after the transition from lugging the *Black Monster* to carrying the *Little Red Travelling Bag*, but we were reminded of the way things could have been as we made our up and down staircases and in and out of subway carriages.

Around ten in the morning, things weren't quite as hectic as they would have been an hour and a half earlier, but we made the subway transition to *Umeda* and the *Hankyu* connection to *Kyoto* without too much difficulty.

I hadn't quite been on the ball the night before when we were headed into the *Spanish eatery* and the party space across the road was operational, but we passed that particular side street on the way to the subway station, so I grabbed a quick photographic record of an in-joke along the way....

Things got a little messy once we'd made our way out of the railway station and set off for the hotel, which turned out to be a bit further from the station than expected, and on the opposite side of the street.

Still, things could have been worse.

The initial influence that brought things unstuck was lunch.

That might seem like a minor matter, but, for some reason, *The Supervisor* set her mind on a particular *Italian* option that came highly rated and wasn't that far from the hotel.

It was a bit further than expected (there's an emerging theme here) and was, when we eventually found it, booked out.

I'd suggested I wasn't particularly concerned about lunch, provided it was conveniently close, and we'd already passed some places I thought might have been perfectly acceptable.

When a decision was called for, I pushed us towards a curry place that wasn't that far from the booked out place.

The meals, while they weren't anything to rave over, were perfectly adequate and reasonably cheap.

With lunch out of the way, we set off for the afternoon's sightseeing.

That involved a visit to *Kiyomizu* temple, which is, and I really should have picked up on this earlier, *Kyoto*'s major temple attraction.

As a result, it is almost invariably packed.

As it happens, it's on the same side of the same river as the places we'd visited on the *Sakura Sunday* four and a half years before, and I really should have been looking at a map before I ventured an opinion on *walking* as opposed to *catching a bus*.

Given a slightly better grasp of the geography, I would have voted to *go as far as possible by bus*.

Given a slightly better grasp of our current location *vis a vis* the river and the city's major transport axes, I would have undoubtedly elected to *go as far as possible by bus*.

Given an awareness of the number of steps and uphill paths involved, I would have undoubtedly elected to *go as far as possible by bus*.

From which the astute reader will no doubt have inferred, we walked.





Now, it doesn't really matter whether you catch a bus or not.

The bus doesn't get you that close to the actual temple, so you're going to be doing a fair bit of walking and walking wouldn't have been a problem, except for the fact that it was a bit further than either of us expected.

We'd made our way across town to the river, crossed the appropriate bridge and started the gradual ascent towards the temple precinct when I looked ahead and realized that we were headed for *them there hills* and *them there hills* weren't as close as you'd have liked.

Still, the walk wasn't too bad in the early bit.

The footpath wasn't that crowded, but as we headed uphill all roads, it seemed, lead to the temple.

Each road was delivering its share of pilgrims and sightseers.

Founded in 798, *Kiyomizudera* (*Pure Water Temple*) isn't the only temple in *Japan* operating under that title.



There's also a *Kiyomizudera* in *Yasugi* in *Shimane Prefecture*, on the 33-temple route of the *Chūgoku 33 Kannon Pilgrimage* through *western Japan*.

But the one under consideration here gets its name from the *Otowa waterfall*, which runs off nearby hills and splits into three streams whose waters are supposed to bring long life, ensure success at school and guarantee a successful love life.

Visitors use cups attached to long poles to drink the water, but drinking from all three is considered greedy. You can't have everything, but if you could manage two of them you'd be singing along with the *Meatloaf* song.

Kiyomizudera dates back to the early *Heian Period*, but the main structures on the site were built in 1633 when the capital moved to *Kyoto* and were constructed without the use of nails.



Given the size of the *Hondo* (*Main Hall*) and the veranda that opens off it, that's a very impressive achievement.

The veranda, supported by thirteen-metre pillars, juts out above a precipice, offering impressive views across the city, and cherry and maple trees on the surrounding hills in spring and autumn.

Similar structures were erected at many sites visited by pilgrims during the *Edo Period*.

According to tradition, jump off the verandah and survive the fall and your wish will be granted.

That's the origin of the phrase that's the *Japanese equivalent* of *taking the plunge*, *to jump off the stage at Kiyomizu*.

Two hundred and thirty-four people are supposed to have tried it during the *Edo Period*, and, allegedly, 85.4% survived.

I did the maths to figure out an actual number and came up with a figure of 199.836, which probably shows how rounding off affects your calculations. Multiplying by 85.5 comes to a tad over 200.

In any case, you're not allowed to do that anymore.

The temple precinct contains fifteen buildings classified as *Important Cultural Properties*, including the *inner Temple (Okunoin)* a smaller scale version of the *Hondo*, *Amida Buddha Hall (Amidado)*, and a vermilion three-tiered pagoda and several other shrines including *Jishujinja*, dedicated to *Ōkuninushi*, god of love and good matches.

Visitors who manage to walk between a pair of stones with eyes closed are supposedly guaranteed to find love or their perfect match.

Attempt to do so with a bit of help and you'll still find it, but will need the assistance of a go-between or matchmaker. There is also a hall dedicated to the historical *Buddha* and another that contains close to two hundred statues of *Jizo*, the protector of children and travellers.





A visit to a structure at the southern end of the temple grounds is said to bring about easy and safe childbirth.

Like most of its peers, the complex has an assortment of talismans, incense, and *omikuji* (paper fortunes) for sale. When I spotted one that's supposed to protect travellers on the road I thought of the inimitable *Staggster*, and bought it.

We'd seen our share of temples and religious sites over two and a bit weeks, and there's a possibility that I was more or less templed out, but *Kiyomizu* struck me as a bit of a disappointment.

There's no denying there's a great view across the city.

The verandah, with its sheer drop, is impressive when you're up there, and very impressive when you're standing on the bottom looking up, but the crowds were getting to me, and a fair part of the complex was closed and undergoing repairs.

Anyway, with the walk through the temple out of the way it was a matter of making our way back to the hotel, which should have been a matter of making our way down to a bus stop and proceeding from there.

Unfortunately, the way down from the temple takes you through the steep, busy lanes of *Higashiyama*, winding streets lined with shops and stalls, and this is where the failure to take the bus on the way up kicked in big time.



The actual *Higashiyama* District (*Higashiyamaku*, or *east mountain*) covers the eastern part of *Kyoto*'s city centre along the lower slopes of the *Higashiyama* mountain range. It extends a fair bit further than the section we traversed, as far as the *Philosopher's Path* and *Ginkakuji* temple, which was one of the *sakura* season highlights last time around.

Fortunately, it's the sort of place we'll be heading back to, hopefully with tiredness taken out of the equation.

It is one of the best preserved historic districts and a genuine reflection of traditional *Kyoto*.

That's especially true of the section that lies between *Kiyomizudera* and *Yasaka* shrine.

Narrow lanes, wooden buildings and traditional shops invoke a feeling of the old capital.

They've even gone as far as removing telephone poles, doing away with the spider web of cables and wires you find above

most *Japanese streets* and repaving the roadway to maintain the traditional feel of the district.

Streets in *Higashiyama* are lined by shops, cafes and restaurants that have been catering to tourists and pilgrims since the 14th century, selling local specialties such as *Kiyomizuyaki* pottery, as well as gift culture staples like sweets, pickles, crafts and other souvenirs.

The walk through from *Kiyomizudera* to *Yasaka* shrine is around two kilometres and could be done in half an hour or so, but you could easily spend much longer visiting the temples, shrines, shops, cafes and restaurants along the way.

Maybe next time around we'll be walking beyond *Yasaka* past *Chionin* and *Shorenin* temples to *Heian* shrine, and possibly even further via *Nanzenji* temple, with a collection of architecture and artwork from the late 16th century *Momoyama Period*.

The area also contains the *Kyoto National Museum*, and I expect we'll be back, but next time we'll be getting there by bus, won't we?

The businesses along the way gradually morph from establishments catering to the temple visitor/sightseer trade into a network of interesting streets in a neighbourhood that gradually, in turn, morphs into the *Gion District*.

The further we got away from the temple the more the crowding eased though there's rarely any danger of finding tranquility and solitude in any *Japanese city*.

That's particularly the case when you're in one of the *must visit* areas of *Kyoto*.

Kyoto's most famous *geisha district*, *Gion* dates back to the Middle Ages.

Shops, restaurants and *ochaya* (teahouses) around *Shijo Avenue* between *Yasaka* shrine and the *Kamo River* originally catered for travellers and visitors to the shrine, but by the *mid-18th century*, the area was *Kyoto's* premier pleasure district.

From there, the district evolved to become one of the most exclusive and well-known *geisha districts* in the whole of *Japan*.

There are actually five *geisha districts* in *Kyoto* where *geiko* (*Kyoto* dialect for *geisha*) and *maiko* (*geiko apprentices*) entertain clients, and since *geisha* are entertainers, not prostitutes, *Gion* is not, despite popular misconceptions, a red-light district.

If that sort of thing floats your boat research suggests you head for *Shimabara* instead.

Traditional wooden houses called *machiya* (townhouse) are a major draw card in *Gion*, and since property taxes were based on the width of the street frontage, they tend to have narrow facades but stretch up to twenty metres in from the street.

Some of them are *ochaya* (tea houses) where patrons have been entertained for centuries.

As expert hostesses, *maiko* and *geiko* engage in conversation, serve drinks, conduct drinking games and perform traditional music and dance. Preserved *machiya* houses now function as restaurants, serving *Kyoto*-style *kaiseki ryori* (*Japanese haute cuisine*).

Having made my way through *Gion* I was ready to get away from the crowd, and boots that had seemed so comfortable back when we'd bought them before the *Cooktown* trip were starting to squeeze the feet.

That was probably the result of having been worn solidly for a fortnight, with a pinch of prolonged exposure to wet weather thrown in for good measure.

I suspect that having got wet the outer layers didn't dry out completely and had shrunk marginally. Hopefully further wear will push things back into shape, but it's very much a case of *wait and see*.

Having made our way through *Gion*, we were off to the hotel, and hose factors involving unfamiliarity with the public transport system and lack of knowledge of the local geography kicked in again.

And they kicked in big time, along with a pigheaded reluctance to say *That's enough, my feet need a rest*.

After all, I figured, *it wasn't that far*, and, off course, following up on that emerging theme, it wasn't a bit more than we expected (*May as well walk*, as I recall were my exact words, *it's only a few blocks*).

But it was considerably further than I'd bargained for.

Back at the hotel where any sane man would have had the boots off and laid back for a well-earned rest, someone had to check out the *WiFi* situation in the lobby.

While it was there, it was painfully slow until *Madam* joined me with her *iPad* and ventured into the territory of the bleeding obvious and went over to the *Front Desk* to ask about minor administrative details like passwords.

Things sped up considerably after that.

A spell upstairs after that gave the feet a welcome respite, and around six-thirty we started making Dinner noises, at which point lunchtime's failure to get in where she'd wanted, along with *Hughesy's* suggestion we opt for a curry place kicked in big time.

Madam had located another *French/Italian wine bar* sort of place and pointed us in that direction.

It wasn't as highly rated as the first one, but that, hopefully, meant it wouldn't be full either.

There were two (actually, three) major surprises when we arrived on the doorstep of another basement eating and drinking establishment, which meant signage above the steps going down.

The first surprise came in the business name. *Cheers* isn't the first name that springs to mind when you're looking for a *French/Italian wine bar*, but maybe the American sitcom never made it to *Japan*. They probably serve beer, but given the quality of the wine I sampled I don't think I'd be bothering.

Surprise #1 had a significant addendum since *Cheers* seems to be aimed pretty solidly at the female market. That mightn't be quite accurate, but it's hard to avoid the conclusion based on signage and a Girls set section of the menu.

Surprise #2 kicked in when we walked inside to find the place was practically deserted.

Maybe *Monday* nights are quiet, maybe the crowds arrive later, but when we walked in there were two tables occupied. One emptied while we were there, and no one else came in. Strange.

Because the food and wine quotients there were rather good.

We did the sharing a variety of small plates thing, and everything was very good, from the oyster and shallot gratin that arrived with the salad to the pizza that finished the main courses side of things.

Madam finished with a *chocolate mousse* that was *very tasty* and had me wishing I'd done the same. Full marks on that front.

Even better was the wine selection.

There were other *by the glass options* that didn't appear in the *by the glass* section of the menu, but I limited myself to the official version, and the results were very satisfactory.

There was a *Prosecco* that might have been a tad on the sweet side but worked nicely as an aperitif. A *Sauvignon Blanc* from *Touraine* was obviously SB, obviously in the mould the Kiwi exponents of the variety are seeking.

A *Chardonnay* from *Burgundy* would have got ticks of approval from the *New Wave Oz Chardy* crew, and an *Italian Primitivo* (a.k.a. *Zinfandel*) wrapped things up nicely.

Madam limited herself to the SB while I had the other three, but glasses were passed back and forth, and if she'd weakened I'm sure the result would have been another interesting wine and an excuse for *Hughesy* to go one more beyond that.

All in all, a very pleasant little evening, and *the perfect prelude to a good night's sleep* before an early start in the morning.



KYOTO

Tuesday, 13 November 2012

Anyone familiar with the *standard Japanese operating procedure* as far as sites of national significance and coloured leaves are concerned would know it's a good idea to get in early before the crowds start to arrive.

Given the fact that the two sites *Madam* had pencilled in for our only full day in *Kyoto* lay around nine and a half kilometres from the CBD it should come as no surprise to learn we were queuing for the *Number 8 bus* outside *Karasuma Station* well before the scheduled 7:22 departure.



The crowds were going to increase as the day went on, and it seemed logical to assume a fair swag of them would be travelling out on later services on the same route.

The journey out through the regulation urban landscape was mostly uneventful though it took a while to pass through a particularly notorious intersection, Shortly after that, we were winding our way up into the foothills, alighting from the bus around 8:15 and turning our thoughts towards the morning's route march.

Madam has had plenty of time to figure out the paths down which *Hughesy*'s mind is likely to wander. Having landed close to the temple at *Jingoji*, a venue that would, I was told, involve an unspecified degree of climbing, the first thing on her agenda was to determine whether a walk to the other option (*Kozanji*) was doable.

The maps and other data available on the ground weren't particularly helpful as far as administrative details like distances were concerned, so she went for the nearest available human source, a middle-aged woman, obviously a local, sweeping up leaves.

No problem, she was told. *It's a fifteen-minute walk*. At least, that's the version I was given.

Since the conversation was in **Japanese**, she could have decided to recast any information that had been given, and I would have been none the wiser.

But a fifteen-minute walk certainly seemed doable, and while there were concerns expressed about the state of my feet I was determined to soldier on and cover whatever distance was required.

It was, after all, the last bit of sightseeing for the trip.

We set out along a relatively deserted back road that provided a pleasant and surprisingly tranquil stroll through autumn tones across the river and up and down the slopes on either side of the stream.

Eight-thirty was a trifle early for people who operated the various sightseer-oriented businesses along the way to be starting the day's business, but there were signs along the way that they'd be starting to set up in the not too distant future.





As I walked, in between stopping to enjoy the views while **Someone** lagged along behind capturing the interplay between light and leaves, I meditated on something approximating **Zen** and the art of walking with sore feet.

If you walk long enough, I figured, you're going to end up with sore feet. It's part of the deal.

The more you think about your feet, the worse they'll feel, particularly in situations where you can use them as an excuse to get out of walking any further.

So the answer is to avoid thinking about the feet at all. Focus on the walk, the act of walking and the scenery you're walking through.



So I did, and had a thoroughly enjoyable time up to the point where the riverside back road joined the main road just before *Kozanji*.

That meant a few minutes' careful treading along the side of the road while the traffic moved past within arm's length.

That sort of thing worried me four and a half years ago when I'd been heading to and from the hotel in *Hakone*.

After two weeks of negotiating backstreets where the traffic comes and goes this time around I merely exercised a bit of caution and waited for a break in the traffic flow if it looked like things were getting a little too close for comfort.

In any case, it was only a couple of hundred metres before we hit the entrance to *Kozanji*, another of those uphill tree-lined avenues completely bereft of vehicular traffic.

I'd just settled back into *Zen and the art of walking* when a god almighty racket from over on my right cut into the tranquility.



A bus full of *elderly Japanese sightseers* had pulled into the car park and was busily disgorging its load.

Fortunately, I thought, *this would mean they'd have to go down to the entrance we'd used to get us off the road to maintain a comfortable degree of separation between myself and the racket.*

Of course, it didn't work out that way. I rounded a curve that brought me within sight of the booth where you pay your ¥500 admission fee, looked to my right and there they were, heading towards the same point along a converging track.

I was pretty quick about paying the admission fee once *Madam* had caught up, and was pretty smart about getting comfortably ahead of the chattering mass.



The walk up to the temple complex itself, once they'd been left behind, was a pleasant ramble.

Once I got there, and we were comfortably removed from the clamouring crowd we were right into the full *Zen monks in the forest* ambience.

Hardly surprising since the mountains around *Togano*, which are justly famous for their autumn foliage, have a tradition of mountain asceticism, and there are many small temples among the ancient cedar and maple trees in the back woods.

Temples in the area are said to date back to imperial orders issued by *Emperor Kōnin* in 774, but *Kōzanji* (formally *Toganōsan Kōsanji*) was officially founded by scholar and monk *Myōe* (1173 – 1232) who served at nearby *Jingoji* before he was granted the land to construct a temple by Emperor *Go-Toba* in 1206.

There may already have been a temple on the site with *Myōe* doing a restoration job, but a diagram housed at *Jingoji* drawn in 1230 shows the thirteenth-century layout of the temple.

It shows a large gate, the main hall, a three-storied pagoda, halls dedicated to *Amitabha* and *Lohan*, a bell tower, a scripture hall (originally the residence of a member of the Imperial family), and a *Shinto* shrine.

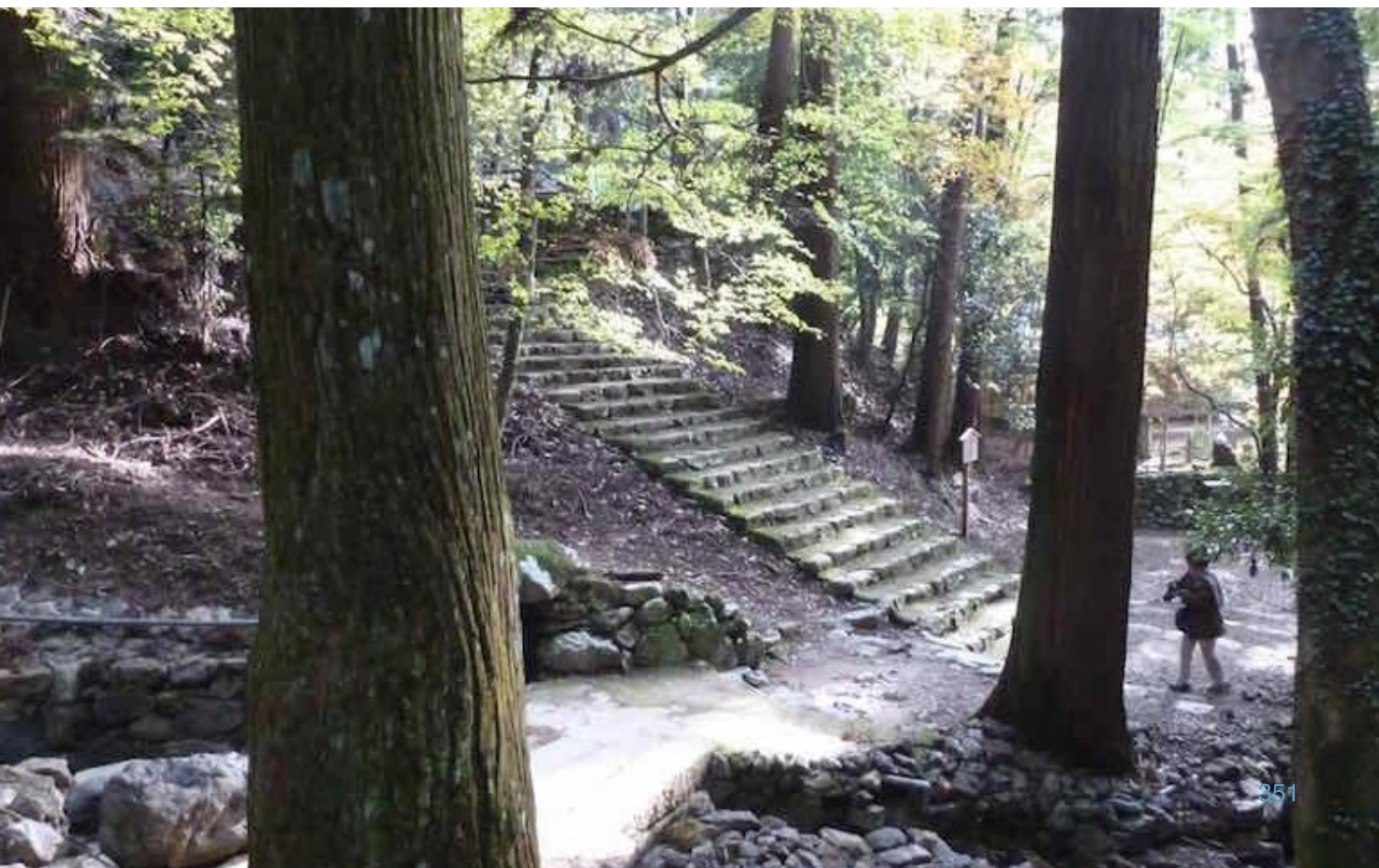
Structures on the site have been destroyed numerous times by fire and war, and the oldest buildings standing today are the scripture hall, now known as *Sekisuiin* and *Myōe*'s residence, two of the few remaining examples of *Kamakura Era* architecture, with roofs of thatch and shingles.

The grounds also hold the oldest tea field in *Japan*, planted by *Myōe* with seeds brought from China by the *Zen* priest *Eisai*. Tea helped monks stay awake during late-night meditation.

Kōzanji is home to numerous national treasures and important cultural properties though most of them are currently on loan to museums in *Kyoto* and *Tokyo*.

The *Chōjūjinbutsugiga* (*Scroll of Frolicking Animals and Humans*), four picture scrolls of ink paintings from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, sometimes described as *Japan's first comic*, takes the mickey out of human foibles by showing frogs, monkeys, birds, and rabbits engaged in worldly pursuits.

The original is housed in *Tokyo National Museum* but apparently there are precise replicas on display on the site.





I say *apparently* because I was more interested in the ambience among the towering cedar trees and moss-covered ground than checking out areas that were likely to attract a crowd.

Heading back down the hill I wasn't exactly looking forward to our other temple visit.

The morning was getting on, and there were obvious expectations of substantial crowds among the roadside merchandisers.

Most of the stall holders had just about finished setting up as we retraced our tracks along the riverside side road, and when we made it back to the original starting point, it looked like we were in for another experience in crowded sightseeing.



Fortunately, the monks who set about establishing these temples were careful to locate them in places where visitors would need to make a bit of an effort.

Whoever founded *Jingoji* must have liked his peace and quiet because he positioned the place at the top of a series of fairly steep climbs.

The first one was enough to sort out the sheep from the mountain goats and would, I thought around the halfway point, be enough to deter most of the *Kozanji* chatterers.

Those that weren't put off by the incline would be having issues with breathlessness by the time they made it to the top of that particular climb.

The top of that climb featured a little eatery affair where sightseers could stop for refreshment.

There was another fairly steep set of steps after that, with refreshment stops thoughtfully provided along the way before a



sharp turn revealed another set of steps that needed to be negotiated.

Sore feet and straining leg muscles are likely to kick in with a vengeance in such circumstances, but a combination of *Zen and the art of walking* and the conscious decision to focus on the mechanics of the stride pattern kept those issues in the background.

Along the way, I passed a TV camera crew filming an elderly woman in a yellow top and black tights and a much younger female making their way up the final incline to the temple complex.

This, questioning revealed once *The Photographer* had caught up, was a *Japanese actress* from the generation before mine making a *filmgrimage* around the best spots in the country for coloured leaves on one of those holiday shows.

That means there's a possibility, albeit a very slight one, of a black-capped hairy foreigner, head down in *Zen and the art of monitoring your stride pattern* mode in the act of passing the filmgrimage turning up on *Japanese network TV*.

There's the equally absurd possibility of a sighting as he cowers beside the ticket booth waiting for his native-speaking accomplice to catch up.

From there I must admit the presence of the crew dampened my enthusiasm as I tried to stay out of shot.

I worked around where they were filming, passing impressively weather-beaten structures before I found myself at the foot of another set of steps leading up to the *Kondo*, where the main attraction is an image of *Yakushi Nyorai*, the *Buddha of Healing*.

Sitting on top of *Mount Takao*, *Jingoji* dates back to 824, when *Wake no Kiyomaro* instituted the merger of two temples. One was *Jinganji* from *Kiyomaro*'s home province in present-day *Osaka Prefecture*, with the other being *Takaosanji*, founded on this site in 781.

The new temple was *Jingokokusoshingonji* (*Shingon temple for divine protection of the country*) and *Kukai* (774-835), the founder of the *Shingon* sect, was named as the head priest.





Like most other significant sites, buildings at *Jingoji* have been destroyed by fire and war over the years.

The original structures were rebuilt in **1184** after they had been burnt down, but most were destroyed again in the *Onin War*. Only the *Daishido* survived.

Several of the buildings date from reconstruction ordered by *Itakura Katsushige*, *Kyoto shoshidai* in the *Tokugawa Shōgunate*, in 1623.

Another reconstruction took place in the **1930s**.

Madam was having the time of her life, clicking away at the coloured leaves,.

By the time she'd caught up with me the camera crew, who'd skipped the structures I'd just passed, were making their way up the stairs before me.

Madam was all for heading up that way herself, but the prospect of further climbing along with camera-dodging had me deciding to make my way back to the approaches to the temple and spend the time gazing at the multicoloured hillsides.

If you're calling me a sook on the strength of that last decision, it's *Mister Sook*, thank you very much.

If I'd done some research, I would have taken myself to the **Jizo** hall, located above the **Kiyotaki River** where you can buy clay cups (*kawarakenage*) to throw off the adjacent cliff (*kin'unkei*) and rid yourself of bad *karma*.

At ¥100 for two, that seems a rather economical way to do it, but it only works (or so the on-line research suggests) if you can get the disk all the way down to the river. Flick the discs gently, convex side up, like a Frisbee.

If only I'd known...



It took a while, but eventually **Madam** made her way back to where I was standing, and we began the descent.

Predictably, that was quicker than the uphill journey, though there were delays along the way as images worth capturing presented themselves in the changing light.

There were a couple of places where the conformation of the stairs permitted a rapid descent, with a single stride covering the whole of a step that needed a stride and a bit on the way up.

Things were tempered by the frequent need to stop, look around and ascertain how far **Someone Else** had progressed.

Back at the bottom I paused yet again, and when the touring party had again attained a quorum inquired whether there was anything else on the agenda.

No, I was told, there wasn't, unless I was inclined to eat.

Since we'd set out before breakfast and hadn't managed to find it along the way, the prospect of food was definitely tempting, but there was one more ascent needed to get us back up to the bus stop, and I wasn't sure how frequently the buses ran.





We had a packet of raisin bread rolls we'd bought the night before in the backpack which would, I figured, have to be eaten some time, so my take on the situation was get ourselves up the hill, check, out the bus times, and eat if possible.

That packet of raisin rolls would have to be eaten somewhere, and it was highly likely we'd have a lengthy wait once the ascent had been made.

That was, as it turned out, close to the situation we found when we arrived.

There was about half an hour until the next *Kyoto Bus*, but a *JR Bus* would be heading up from *Kozanji* in about five minutes.

There was a fair sized queue for that one, and since it had started elsewhere there was no guarantee we'd get a seat on the forty-five minute trip back into the city.

That was the way it turned out once the bus arrived, so we headed over to the rival stop, positioned ourselves at the front of the queue and lunched on the packet of raisin rolls.

Once the bus arrived we picked up the same *Hughesy's legs friendly* seats we'd had on the way up and, incidentally, sailed straight through the difficult intersection that had slowed things down significantly on the way up.

The bus dropped us off just past the hotel, and once we were there the thoughts, predictably, turned to lunch.

It was around one by this stage, and updates on the *Sponge* situation suggested we'd be eating late when it came to the evening meal, so lunch was a matter of some urgency.

A packet of raisin bread rolls is all very well, but after significant exercise with the prospect of a night on the turps you need something substantial in the way of lunch.

There was a *ramen* place marked on the *Eateries around the neighbourhood map* *Madam* procured from the *Front Desk*, so we headed off in that direction.

There was, however, a perfectly acceptable alternative just around the corner that did exactly what was required.

Back at the hotel, *Madam* needed to head off to do a bit of shopping while I sat in the lobby, doing what needed to be done online before heading back upstairs for further *Travelogue* tapping.

We weren't expecting any *Sponge* updates until well after six-thirty, since the day's show in *Himeji* had involved road, rather than rail transport, which in turn meant they had to drive back, unpack the van, head home and make subsequent arrangements once they'd touched base there.

Eventually the rendezvous was arranged for the *East Gate* at *Karasuma station*, so we headed along there around eight.

By twenty past were headed off for a return visit to the place we'd spent the equivalent evening four and a half years earlier.

This time around the *dramatis personae* were the inimitable *Sponge*, the young lass we'd christened *Double Sponge*, and Take, an enthusiastic young bloke who announced himself to be *Triple Sponge*, but didn't quite manage to live up to the self-proclaimed status.

Mind you, given the capacity of his colleagues, most people would experience a degree of difficulty in that department.

By the same token, it was a late start, and with the regulation array of platters on the table things flowed along nicely without hitting any great heights in the alcoholic consumption department.

The trio's need to catch the final train for the evening meant that most of us probably ended up in bed in much better shape than would otherwise have been the case.



KYOTO > KOBE

Wednesday, 14 November 2012

Which is where tying up loose ends and preparing for the return trip kicks in, folks, though there was one major long-term issue that needed to be addressed before we departed from *Kyoto*.

It wouldn't have been an issue if we hadn't been able to access *WiFi*, but news that the pre-sale for dates on the *March 2013 Neil Young with Crazy Horse tour of Australia and New Zealand* started at noon local time in the various states produced a quick bit of calculating.

Japan is an hour behind *Eastern Standard Time*, and two behind *Sydney* with *Daylight Saving Time* factored in, so that meant both *Brisbane* and *Sydney* looked doable provided nothing went wrong with the connection.

With *Sydney* going on sale first the suggestion that I might see two shows on the tour wasn't immediately torpedoed.

Neil tends not to vary the set-lists once he starts a tour, so things mightn't vary much from show to show, but it is *Neil*, and it is *the Horse*, and I haven't had the benefit of seeing the man in any format before.

Madam had a bit of end of trip running around to do while I chased up that show, so she headed off, leaving me in the lobby checking email and tapping out *Travelogue* details.

Five to ten saw me logging in to the presale website. After a bit of toing and froing by ten past I had a seat for the Sydney show, which meant I had time, once *The Supervisor* returned, to head upstairs, gather up the goods and chattels while she completed the checking out procedure.

After that, I settled back to catch *Brisbane*, which was, predictably, being sold through a different agency. That was a fact that *Hughesy*, equally predictably failed to notice.

A bit more subsequent toing and froing once I twigged to the change produced a seat, and though it mightn't have been the best you might have hoped for I reckoned I'd done pretty well.

Particularly when you consider that I could well have been away from *WiFi* when the presale started and would probably have either missed out completely or ended up sitting way up in the nosebleeds.

Once that mission had been accomplished it was time to head off to *Kōbe*.

There had been a couple of options kicked around earlier, but the most straightforward involved a couple of blocks' walk to the subway station, followed by a two-station transfer to *JR Kyoto* and a train that would land us at *Kōbe's Sannomiya* without the need to transfer trains in *Osaka*.

We could have said *Thank you to Hankyu*, but that would have involved a transfer somewhere like *Umeda*, and no guarantee of seats on either leg.

Once we reached the relevant platform in *Kyoto*, of course, there were already queues formed for the next train, which wasn't that far away.

We both found seats with *Madam over there* and *Hughesy* perched on half a seat beside the carriage door. Those matters resolved themselves just outside *Osaka* when the other seat *over there* became vacant.

By the time we'd left *Umeda* the population had thinned considerably, which was a big help when it came to retrieving the *Little Red Travelling Bag* and *Madam's backpack* from the overhead luggage racks as the train slowed into *Sannomiya*.

From there it was a short stroll to the bus terminal to catch the free shuttle that delivers customers to and from the *Okura* and the *Meriken Park Oriental*, which was our destination this time around.

It was far too early to check in, but once the luggage had been consigned to the cloak room we were free to set off on the first leg of the final shopping odyssey, though the question of lunch needed to be resolved first.

On the other side of the inlet from *Meriken Park*, there's a complex labelled *Mosaic*, with a number of eating options, and we ended upstairs at an *Italian place*.

Deceived by the weather into taking table beside a window, by the time the meals arrived the cloud cover had seen fit to relocate, and we were sitting in fairly strong sunlight.

That's a bit of an issue when you've rugged up for early winter, but there was nothing that could be done about it.

A *Primitivo Novello* mightn't have been the ideal match for a pasta dish with salmon and mushrooms, but each of them worked in their own way without actually managing to converge.



The pasta dish had its share of interest in the shape and variety of mushrooms in the sauce, and the wine was easy to drink and flavours one in a style that was obviously meant to be *food friendly* though *not necessarily with this particular dish*.

It didn't work that well with *Madam's* fish-based pasta sauce either, but there were other issues at play in that department.

A couple of things, starting with a position away from direct sunlight, would have improved matters on the other side of the table considerably.

The sauce, in terms of aroma, reminded me of my favourite anchovy, tomato and garlic sauce, though the chunks of aromatic fish were visible, rather than dissolved into the rest of the sauce.

After lunch, the next step was to pick up *Hughes's* *tailor made with a focal length of 85 centimetres* computer glasses, which worked quite brilliantly.

Then we set out on the process of acquiring stuff *Madam* needs to take back with her, either as presents for friends and acquaintances or for her own consumption back at base.

Heading back to *Meriken Park* to check in broke up that process, and we had a couple of hours' break between instalments, largely spent catching up on email and *Travelogue* tapping once certain connectivity issues had been ironed out.

By six, it was time to head out on Stage Two, which took us back into *Sannomiya* and the nearby shopping arcades and department stores in search of *Japanese language magazines*, *green tea* and other comestibles.

In the age of the internet *English* might, in effect, be the world language, but there's no sign of that phenomenon in your average *Japanese book shop*.

Sure, there's a section of titles in *English* in places like *Kinokuniya*, but in the places we visited in search of magazines that aren't exactly easy to find there might have been the odd semi-familiar title but everything under the *English* masthead was *solidly Japanese*.

I couldn't help thinking there wouldn't have been much correlation of content between the seemingly girl-oriented *Oz* magazine and the underground magazine of the same title that attracted more than its share of attention in the early seventies.

From there it was on to the very impressive food section at *Daimaru*, where *Madam*, as we entered, jokingly remarked that they'd be conducting a wine tasting downstairs.

At least, I *thought* she was joking.



We were in the *green tea* section with what appeared to be the wine section barricaded off behind a temporary facade, so that, I thought, was it for the tasting department.

But after a visit to the cookie counter I was steered towards another discrete wine display where, yes, there were tasting options available.

There were red and white versions of *Burgundy*, the red very obviously *Pinot Noir* and the white equally obviously *Chardonnay*, as well as a couple of *Italian styles*.

Much of what had been available for sampling was gone since it was late on the second last day of the promotion, but the *Frascati* and *Trebbiano* I tried would both have been quite acceptable, with the *Frascati* being, to borrow a phrase I picked up at *Rockford*, *the sort of wine that invites itself to lunch*.

I left with a bottle of the *Pinot Noir* as we left in search of dinner in *Chinatown*.

We'd walked through there on the evening of our first full day of this trip without surrendering to the shills of the spruikers outside the various establishments, largely because we were elsewhere bound as far severing meals were concerned,.

We passed most of them by again this time because, basically, neither of us was particularly hungry.

A decision, however, had to be made, and after repeated *What do you feel like eatings* from **Madam** we settled on a place where the spruiker (*or, in this case, the spruikess*) was marginally less pushy than her neighbouring *confreres*.

I settled for a sweet and sour pork and a pitcher of draught beer, which was just the right quantity and combination while **Madam** opted for a small platter of dumplings that were rather tasty.

The sweet and sour, by the way, bore scant resemblance to the **Australian version**, largely due to a total absence of pineapple. It made for a rather welcome change.

Outside, making our way back to **Sannomiya** it was obvious winter had set in, with **December** weather coming a good three weeks early.

The conditions forced us into the underground maze that sits under most **Japanese transit centres**, and that took us through passages lined with eating options and other small businesses and delivering us to the bus station just in time to see the shuttle bus heading off.

It wasn't too much of a disaster, but time spent going up and down stairs was probably the difference between catching that bus and the twenty minute wait for the next one. Back at base **Hughesy** was ready for bed while **Madam** had a last opportunity to enjoy a lengthy **Japanese style bath** this time around.



KOBE > KANSAI INTERNATIONAL

Thursday, 15 November 2012

And so we come to the end of the overseas leg this particular time around.

With the sightseeing over and the shopping exclusively *in Madam's* court, there wasn't a great deal for *Hughesy* to do apart from transforming himself into a beast of burden once the morning's *Viking* breakfast had been devoured.

There wasn't a great deal of a hurry in that department since the *smorgasbord* stays open until eleven, so it was after a quarter to nine when we made our way downstairs.

We stayed at the *Oriental* on the first night of the first trip, and I remember the *Viking* with considerable affection.

This time the spread seemed smaller, though still quite adequate and I am, after all, trying to cut down on the dietary intake.

The verdict of the bathroom scales at home isn't something I'm looking forward to.

The *Viking*, however, offers traps for young, and even not so young, players.

I started lining up for a freshly made omelette and found that what I had supposed to be fairly finely chopped mushrooms was, in fact, finely chopped octopus.

Not bad, but not *quite* the taste I had in mind.

From there it was back upstairs to pack, and the only remaining items on the agenda came in the form of a spell in the shops at *Sannomiya*, a train transfer to the dormitory suburb where *The Mother* lives, another run through the shops after arriving there and the ritual restoring of the various goods and chattels after we'd been reunited with the *Black Monster* and *Madam's Blue Portmanteau*.

The only excitement along the way, at least from where I was sitting, came when I was redirected from my position inside the shopping centre.

I was poised, waiting for one of the people occupying the public seating to move and create space for a large hairy foreigner minding two backpacks, the *Little Red Travelling Bag* and *Madam's camera bag*.

There was, I was informed, much more seating available outside.

And there was though there was also the threat of drizzle, a rather nippy wind. Still, I managed to get a bit more *Travelogue* tapping out of the way, a process that continued once the luggage had been sorted.

The result, at 3:29, with nothing to do but lock the *Black Monster* while we wait for the *Socialist Taxi* to whiz us over to *Kansai International*, is that the *Japanese territorial trip* is almost, as I tap this out, to all intents and purposes, over.

Unsurprisingly, apart from a rather spectacular sunset, the trip to the *airport* proved unexciting, apart from interest provoked when a driver attempts to direct a minibus into back streets where it's going to be a tight squeeze.

The check in process ran as smoothly as you'd want it to, passing through *Immigration* on the way out was a no paperwork breeze and half an hour before boarding the head count in the *Departure Lounge* ran to less than two dozen.

Or more if you count the cabin crew.

Predictably, the place filled up substantially in the final bit, but still, once we were aboard there was an abundance of vacant space.

After the excitement associated with *Business Class* on the way over, the return leg was, to put it bluntly, a bit of a disappointment, not that there was ever any likelihood of substantial *wow factors* on an overnight leg.

Before we were seated with seat belts fastened, there was a little change of routine that would have implications about eight hours later when it came time to disembark.

I'm the first to admit I'm a creature of habit.

I like to get myself organized, so I know where everything is. I was planning to do a bit of reading and tapping on the *iPad* while we waited for dinner, and once the *seatbelts sign* was off I'd be looking to enjoy a soundtrack on the *iPad* until it was night night time.

With that in mind, I was going to stow the backpack under the seat in front, but *Someone* made the helpful suggestion that I stow the thing in the overhead locker after removing the things I wanted. She'd stow anything that needed to be stowed in her bag, which was going under the seat.

I removed *Pad*, *Pod* and earbuds from the backpack and assumed they'd all gone into the *Little Red Travelling Bag*.

As it turned out, I didn't get around to needing the *iPod* or the ear buds, and that was the cause of a little confusion after we landed.

In the meantime, having seated ourselves, I took a squiz at the menu and accompanying wine list, not planning on a hefty session, but interested to see what was on offer this time around.

The wine options on the way over had me salivating in the manner of *Pavlov's dogs*, but the return leg was, to put it bluntly, disappointing.

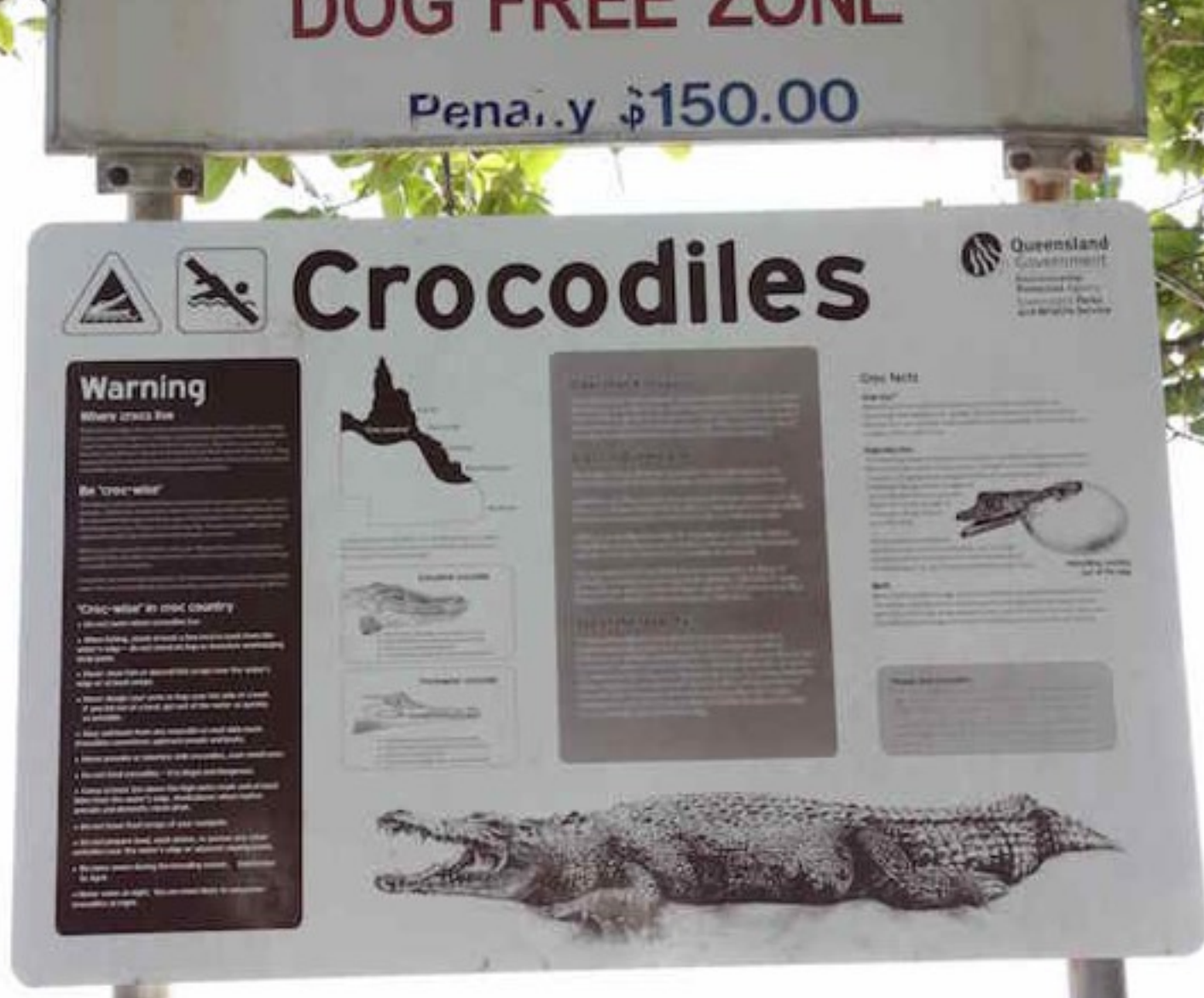
There was a *Tempus Two Chardonnay*, which looked like a reasonable match for the sweet and sour on the menu, but that, as far as I was concerned, was it.

With the relative lateness and all, a single glass of wine was quite enough, but it would have been nice to be left on the horns of a vinous dilemma once I'd checked the *Halliday Companion* app on the *iPad*.

The *Chardonnay* was the only item out of four that rated a 90 or better, so the *Chardonnay* would have to do, wouldn't it?

And the sweet and sour, thanks to the presence of pineapple was much more familiar than the previous night's version, which was, by the way, a far better option...

In any case, it wasn't that long after dinner that I found myself in a darkened cabin pondering how much sleep would be possible under the prevailing circumstances.



INTO CAIRNS AND ON TO BOWEN

Friday, 16 November 2012

It seemed like one moment I was pondering whether sleep was possible and the next I had my arm gently shaken with inquiries about coffee and breakfast.

Three-thirty in the morning, when you're passing over *New Guinea*, mightn't be the optimal time for breakfast, but when it's on offer, and you're not sure about the arrangements that were going to come into play later you tend to accept.

Once you have, it's over to the *iPad* for a bit of a read.

What I should have done was reach for the *iPod* and a soothing soundtrack as well, and some of what followed might have been averted.

As it was, I didn't, remaining blissfully unaware of the fact that I was sitting on the item in question, and the little package holding the earbuds had wedged itself into the crack between the seat and its upright brother.

I'm not sure why I didn't go for that, possibly because deep down I knew I wouldn't have long before the **seatbelts sign** came up along with the request to turn off the electronic devices.

But as far as I was concerned the **iPod** was safely stowed in **Madam's** hand luggage (the **Little Red Travelling Bag**) rather than my backpack, which was lurking overhead in the locker.

It was when we stood up to disembark that a question regarding the location of the device brought a **No**, and a subsequent investigation revealed where it was. I don't know why I didn't check for the ear buds as well, but there you go.

I'm not sure how much of what followed could have been avoided if I had, but there you go.

We'd disembarked and were heading towards **Immigration** when the penny dropped, and since we weren't allowed to head back, I had to wait for the cabin crew to finish doing their thing after a message was passed back.

As it turned out, the search was successful, but I didn't realise that was the case until they'd walked past and I doubled back to the checkpoint where I found the item in question.

In any case, that got us to **Immigration** where I discovered that incoming couples with one **Australian passport holder** could go through the same checkpoint, which would have been handy, and would have delivered us to the head of the **Customs** queue if the **iPod** incident hadn't occurred.

I was fairly flustered by the whole string of events, and when the bloke from **Customs** scrutinised the relevant slips and asked whether we were carrying foodstuffs, I reflexively answered that we weren't, when I should have said / wasn't.

Madam, of course, was, and pointed out that she was, and we were motioned over to the *having your bags inspected* queue.

Again, I don't know what difference it would have made, because when filling out the **Customs** slip I ticked the box about *having been out in the countryside over the preceding week*, which we had been.

Without the earbud bit, of course, we would have been at the top of the queue.

So when the phone rang, and the **Ukulele Lady** asked whether we were through Immigration, the response was that we were in a queue and weren't sure how long we'd be there because there were a few people in front of us and no one seemed to be in a hurry.

Eventually, however, we got the *all clear* and made our way to the front of the building, where a lengthy wait ensued.

Under other circumstances, when the call came we'd have been just about through the reentry process and would probably have been told the *Ukulele Lady* would be right over.

Still, it was early in the morning, so when *Ukulele Lady* and *Sushi Chef Husband* arrived in two cars and offered to show us the quickest way out of town there wasn't a great deal of traffic about, and we made our way onto the *Bruce Highway* without too much difficulty.

And here's where the little things started to add up.

The first issue involved the sunglasses that are *de rigueur* when driving in bright sunlight.

They were in *Madam's* luggage, and we needed to pull over somewhere so they could be retrieved. That took place in a rest area on the banks of the *Mulgrave*, where we could also have had a toilet break, but, as in so many other instances through the course of the morning, the penny refused to drop.

As we neared *Innisfail*, two things were obvious.

First, we needed something more substantial than *croissants* and coffee for breakfast.

Fine.

On the other side of *Innisfail*, there's a good bakery at *Mourilyan* where the pies are excellent.

Second, it was obvious that *Madam* needed to take a break and catch up on some sleep.

She'd remarked on the difference between *Economy* and *Business Class* the night before while we'd been waiting for dinner, pointing out that she'd probably already be asleep if we were sitting further back.

Of course, had we been sitting further back we wouldn't have had the three-thirty wake-up call.

Still, we made it to the *Bakery*, and when an inquiry about rest areas nearby proved unsuccessful I asked about *Etty Bay*, which produced an answer along the lines of *yes, you could go there. Lovely spot.*

And it was.

Unfortunately, it's a lovely spot without toilet facilities, so once we'd demolished breakfast, there was an issue that needed to be addressed.

We needed sleep, but *Someone* needed the facilities, and until that came the sleep bit wasn't going to happen.



What did come, however, was a cassowary, and an adrenaline rush while the photographic evidence was being obtained.

We'd heard *Etty Bay* was a good location if you're looking for cassowaries when we'd been on the *Cooktown* trip earlier in the year, and here, in the course of a twenty-minute stay, was the verification.

We were heading towards the highway not too long after that.

The Sugar Museum at *Mourilyan* delivered the comfort stop, so we headed off in search of rest areas. There aren't any between *Mourilyan* and *Tully*, but I figured we'd be able to turn off there and find a shady spot.

Maybe a suitable one exists, but if it does, it wasn't anywhere we looked. Back onto the highway...

There was, however, a rest area midway between *Tully* and *Cardwell*, and an hour's stop there was a significant battery recharger.

After that, we passed through *Cardwell*, where extensive post-*Yasi* roadwork nudged stopping into the too hard basket, and over the *Cardwell Range*, where we ran through the massive realignment of the highway very smoothly and on to *Ingham*.

By this point, I was thinking we'd be making our way home rest area by rest area, but *Madam* wasn't needing a break at *Francis Creek*, so we continued onwards.

By the time we'd reached *Rollingstone* she reckoned she did, but knowledge from *Hughesy's* teenage years meant I could point us to *Bluewater*, where the shady spot was found, and an hour's break ensued.

We could have passed through *Townsville*, stopping to pick up a resupply of cat tucker at *The Domain*, but opted to turn off and take the *Ring Road*, which immediately became the default option when a stop in *Townsville* on the way to or from points further north wasn't required.

Another two and a bit hours got us safely to *Bowen*, where we weren't concerned by the presence of two out of three furry felines since the other was fond of nearby drains and would probably be back around supper time.

That theory was shot down in flames shortly after that when the neighbour with whom we share the cat contingent and had been feeding them while we were away arrived to let us know TeeTee was missing and had been for close to a fortnight.

He had apparently (aural evidence, nothing physical) been involved in a disagreement with a wandering dog.

And, after an interval of more than a month there's no sign of him, so we presume the worst...





8

JAPAN 2013: THE FIRST BIT

I was reading email in a *Cairns* motel room in *August* when I found out about four *Elvis Costello Spinning Songbook* concerts in *Tokyo* and *Osaka* in *December*.

What better excuse to fly over and spend a little more time riding around on trains?

THE FROCKSTER FACTOR

Ever since the early stages of the *Hughesy-Madam* scenario, our acquaintance, the inimitable *Merry Frockster* has consistently babbled various *non-sequiturs* about *Madam's Swedish origins*, *Kobe carnations* and the desirability of *planting a Bowen mango tree on the summit of Mount Fuji*.

People who know *The Frockster* as well as we do will, in these circumstances, roll their eyes and mumble something about *Bloody Eylesy* and probably voice a mental opinion that he's *dribbling again*, but we know the gentleman and his quirks and foibles.

The deities and spirits who guard *Japan's sacred mountain*, on the other hand, have been denied the pleasures of *The Frockster's* mental ramblings and imaginative gymnastics.

It appears (or appeared) they seemed to believe suggestions the two of us should commit an act of sacrilege might equate to two travellers arriving *at the foot of the actual Mount Fuji* with an *actual mango sapling* or seed.

Caring for a national symbol would be, one suggests, the sort of responsibility that would make serious inroads into your sense of humour, assuming you happened to have one in the first place.

One suspects a certain humourlessness would be one of the key qualifications for a *Guardian of National Treasures*, so you wouldn't regard an affinity towards practical joking and *wizard japes* as desirable traits for anyone interested in the position.

That, in any case, is the theory that emerged after two days in *Hakone*, and a subsequent rail leg between *Tokyo* and *Nagoya* failed to deliver a sighting of *Fuji-san*.

Hakone, for a start, boasts a number of locations regarded as prime spots for *Fuji* viewing.

Promotional photographs show a speeding *Shinkansen* with a snow-capped *Fuji* in the background, but throughout our visit in *2008* the mountain was concealed under a blanket of cloud.

While it took us four and a bit years to bring *Hughesy* back to the *Land of the Rising Sun*, it seemed guardians of sacred mountains have long memories.

We passed the mountain on the way north to *Kitakami* and points beyond, and again on the way back, and, on each occasion, the weather forecasts seemed to suggest a reasonable chance of catching a glimpse (at least).

But, again, no dice.

On that basis, *Hughesy* wasn't exactly hopeful the *2013* visit would deliver anything different.

The way north runs through *Nagoya* and *Matsumoto* rather than *Odawara* and *Yokohama*, and I'm almost willing to bet that the route from *Tokyo* to *Osaka* on *14 December* will take us through sleet and snow, or, at least, enough of it to obscure the mountain yet again.

But maybe, just maybe, the actions of a contrite, penitent and respectful *Hughesy* in tapping out this little *mea culpa* in the lobby of *Kobe's Okura Hotel* might propitiate the guardians.

Something needs to...

THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES

Thursday, 5 December 2013

If I hadn't been to that *Elvis Costello* concert at the end of *January*, I wouldn't be writing this in early *December*.

Costello came up with the *Spectacular Spinning Songbook*, toured with it in the late eighties and revised the methodology, which almost guarantees the audience a substantially different show each night, in the Noughties.

I'd enjoyed *Sydney* so much that I announced, on my return, that next time he brought *The Wheel* back to *Australia* I was going to all the shows.

Fast forward six months or so and I was sitting in an apartment in *Cairns* checking the email when a message announced *Costello* would be playing four *Songbook* shows in *Japan* in *December*.

Significantly, it was right at the time when we were in overseas traveller mode, and the presence of *Madam's sister and niece* was what had brought us to *Cairns*.

So I'd blame them if *blame* wasn't too strong a word.



It was more a case of the penny dropping, and having allies on hand to push the idea forward.

I told *The Sister* about the four shows, three of them on successive nights in *Tokyo*, and suggested they might be doable, flying from *Cairns*.

She agreed, *Madam* was persuaded, and here I am tapping this out in a hotel room in *Cairns* at five-thirty in the morning.

It's actually *Day Two* of the trip, having driven up from *Bowen* on *Wednesday*, and the plane leaves in just under seven hours. I could well have started this a couple of days ago, but I was in the throes of finishing the *Travelogue* for our *second Tasmanian Odyssey*, and, anyway, I knew that early risers need something to do when further sleep is ruled out of the question.

So, having explained the basic *why*, we turn our attention to the *where*, which breeds an interesting set of destinations under the particular circumstances, which in turn requires further explanation.

So we start with the four concerts, three on successive nights in the *Roppongi* district of *Tokyo* (*Wednesday, Thursday, Friday*) followed by a fourth in *Osaka* on *Sunday*.

That brings the *JR Rail Pass* issue to the fore, with the key question being whether to buy the seven-day or fourteen-day version.

The flight from *Cairns* deposits us at *Kansai International*, and the rail journey has to start in *Kōbe* or *Osaka*. Given the seasonal factors, with the last show being on *15 December*, we need to make the *Tokyo > Osaka* leg on the *14th* the final leg of the rail trip.

We've only been back from *Tasmania* for a month, so a fortnight on the road, or rather the rail, is too long, so the *rail pass* goes for seven days.

And if we'd opted for the fortnight on the railways we'd have to leave a week earlier, which would have ruled out the *Leonard Cohen* concert in *Townsville* last *Thursday*.

That seven-day spell runs from *Sunday* to *Saturday*, with the flight in arriving on *Thursday* evening, and *Thursday* night spent in *Kōbe*.

Booking the train tickets for the week takes a chunk out of a morning or afternoon, so that takes care of *Friday*, with certain other logistical factors needing to be attended to, and on *Saturday* we move to wherever the train leg of the journey kicks off.

So where do we go?

To look at that side of things you focus on the other end of the rail leg and work backwards.

We want to be in **Tokyo** on **Wednesday** afternoon so we can book in and scope out the route between the hotel and the theatre, so whatever we do on **Wednesday** morning needs to be done somewhere around the capital.

Kamakura isn't that far south of **Yokohama**, which in turn abuts the south of the **Tokyo** conurbation, and our friend **The Interpreter** lives in **Yokohama**. That means dinner with **The Interpreter** on **Tuesday** night, which in turn translates to an overnight stay in **Yokohama**.

So we've got **Sunday** and **Monday** nights to look at, and a rail route that ends in **Yokohama** to nut out.

The concerts are **Hughesy's** part of the trip, so the days and nights leading up to **Yokohama** are **Madam's** reward for doing the organising. She loves the **onsen** experience, it's coming into winter, and there are any number of options, but the best seem to involve hot springs, mountains and snow, so that's where we're headed.

One night in **Matsumoto**, the other up in **Niigata**, both in **onsen** resorts, which in turn means **Japanese banquets**, probably served in the privacy of the room.

If that looks fairly straightforward, it is still the result of extensive and very detailed research, with most possibilities investigated and worked over with a fine tooth comb.

So it's **Thursday** as fly over day, **Friday** for sorting out tickets and such. **Saturday** should be an easy day, with a transfer to the northern side of **Osaka** in the afternoon.

Sunday morning has the transfer to **ShinOsaka** and a transfer from there we're off to **Nagoya** along familiar territory. We've been up and down that section of track every other time we've been in the country, and there isn't much choice about it. You're talking the **Tokaido line** that links **Osaka** and **Tokyo**.

From **Nagoya**, we're also on a track we've covered before.

Last time around we did **Nagano > Nagoya**, a spectacular run through the autumn mountains. This time, with winter on the way in, we won't get the coloured leaves, but the scenery as we head in the opposite direction should still be spectacular.

And I can keep track of things through the new, **camera-equipped iPad**, which has taken over the **Travelogue** role. I'm anticipating a much richer visual record this time around.

But we're not going all the way to **Nagano**.

Matsumoto is half an hour or so down the line from the city that hosted the **Winter Olympics**, and when we alight we'll be heading to **Matsumoto Castle**, one of **Japan's Top Three Castles**.

Japan's big on **Top Threes** and such, and this visit will mean we've been to all the castles.

After the castle, it's off to the *onsen*, and the *Japanese banquet*.

Monday's much the same, though the rail leg involves changes that might require split second timing, but given the punctuality of the rail services we should be right.

Monday ends in *Niigata*, another go at the hot springs and the banquet, and *Tuesday* brings us down through *Tokyo* to *Yokohama*.

Wednesday morning has been set aside for temple and shrine viewing at *Kamakura* before we head back to *Tokyo* for the first of the *Costello* triple-header.

Thursday has visits to art galleries and viewing platforms in Roppongi pencilled in before *Hughesy* takes himself to the *Costello* show, and on *Friday*, we take a look at the *Imperial Palace* before I toddle off for a third go.

Given the nature of the concerts, there's a slight possibility that I might be grabbed and hauled onto the stage to spin the wheel, but I'm not holding my breath.

Night One and *Osaka* are probably the most likely ones since we'll be there as a couple, but I guess hairy foreigners might attract attention on the other two.

I suspect that I'm in the wrong demographic and probably the wrong gender, but you never know. Maybe I'll get to request *Beyond Belief*, what with living next door to the *Great Barrier Reef* and all.

Saturday will be the *zoom down the Tokaido line on the Shinkansen* day, followed by the final concert on *Sunday*. In between we're having lunch with *The Sister* and *The Rowdy Niece*, before transferring to *Kyoto* for more temple and shrine viewing on *Monday* and *Tuesday*.

Wednesday afternoon will see us back in *Kōbe*, ready to prepare for the return flight, which arrives in *Cairns* around sparrow fart on *Friday* morning.

The experience last time around suggests driving all the way back to *Bowen* that day is not a good idea, so we'll overnight in *Mission Beach* and take our time getting there, stopping off for a pie at the *Mourilyan Bakery* along the way.

On *Saturday*, it's either breakfast at the accommodation or brunch at *Vivia Cafe* in *Cardwell*, followed by the run through *Townsville* back to *The Little House of Concrete* in time to prepare for the silly end of the silly season.

That, in a nutshell, is the plan. How it pans out forms the content of the next eighteen entries.



BOWEN > CAIRNS

Wednesday, 4 December 2013

Practice, they say, makes perfect, and we've probably had enough practice to get most things right when it comes to heading off for a week or two.

There are, of course, issues, many of them relating to two furry felines who are deprived of their regular indoor comforts when we head off, and tend to display a degree of resentful disdain when we return.

On this occasion, we've enlisted the help of a feline friendly volunteer and expect to return to find *LikLik* and *Ninja* are much more welcoming of strangers, having been feted with food and an appreciation of feline sensitivities over a period of just over a fortnight.

Or maybe not, but we did try.

On previous trips away we've questioned whether the hot plate on the stove has been turned off, had *Hughesy* fail to switch off the air-con before the cheap tariff down time kicked in, and have

been known to make the odd U-turn just to make sure whatever concern has just been raised has, in fact, been addressed.

Each time we do that, of course, we find another thing to add to the pre-departure checklist, and repeated practice has delivered a routine that should ensure all eventualities have been covered.

That was the way it seemed, anyway.

Both of us threw in suggestions that were met with a *checked that* from the other side, and it gave us something to do on a two hundred kilometre leg that has been done so often there's practically nothing short of major disaster that would provide anything out of the ordinary to remark on.

And we don't want major disasters, do we?

That doesn't mean there's nothing in the pipeline as far as things to comment on are concerned.

As usual we hit the shortcut just south of Ayr, where I was again foiled in my desire to have us pull over so I can get a photo of the sign advertising an entity called *Ayr Boring Company*.

When I've got the image I've got the caption (*The conversation's not that much better on the other side of the river either*) to go with it.

The short cut isn't that much shorter, but avoids traffic issues in downtown *Ayr*, and for the past year or so has delivered the added advantage of avoiding much of the road work going on to the north of *Brandon*.

For a good year before that it skirted past roadworks to the south of *Brandon* as well.

Those concerns delivered what amounted to a trouble free run from *Bowen* through *Townsville*.

We got a chance to liven things up with a momentary panic when *Hughesy's* reading glasses went missing after we'd checked the air pressure in the tyres at *the Servo near the Townsville race course*, but that resolved itself when they dropped out of my shirt.

We took the *Ring Road* after refuelling, and were crossing *Ross River* shortly after ten thirty, having left *Bowen* just before seven forty-five.

It was, as indicated, a clear run through, with a minor delay at the roadworks just north of *Brandon*, and things continued in the same vein as we headed towards *Ingham*.

We identified the scene of the accident that could have been infinitely worse on the last trip to *Cairns*, sailed through *Ingham* and over the *Cardwell Range* and were pulling up outside the *Vivia Cafe* in *Cardwell* shortly after twelve fifteen.



The **Vivia** has been the standard stop in **Cardwell** for a while now, and that's not likely to change after a minor incident last time we were passing that way. Somewhat shaken by the accident we'd just been involved with, I'd failed to notice my mobile drop out of the lap when we pulled up in **Cardwell**. It ended up in the gutter, where the management of the **Vivia** had found and held onto it.

Next morning, not realising what had happened, we tried the usual trick when you can't locate the mobile.

Call it and wait for the ring tone.

That didn't work, because we were in **Mission Beach** and the phone was in **Cardwell**.

The attempt resulted in a call back from **Cardwell**. When we got home I found a message on the answering machine as well.

So we got the phone back, and the very least we can do in the way of thanks is to call in for a meal when we're passing. This time the meal amounted to a Tex wrap for **Hughesy**, *crab sangas* for **Madam**, and a couple of coffees.

We were back on the road before one, having bought the loop that will hold the reading glasses around the neck, and preventing a repetition of the servo incident in **Townsville** on the way up.

On the leg between *Cardwell* and *Cairns* the only item of note was the discovery that *Hughesy's* new *iPad*, with *WiFi* rather than *3G* technology, lacks *GPS capability*, which is a pity since I was looking at it as a navigation aid in *Japan*.

We might still be able to use it in cases where we've got access to *WiFi* along the way, but the lack of the helpful blue dot indicating your actual *GPS-located position* limits the value as a navigational aid, and on that basis it looks like the old model will still be in use when we're travelling in *Oz*.

There were a couple of minor delays on the highway north of *Tully*, and we found ourselves rolling into the main conurbation at *Cairns* just after three.

With nothing on the agenda apart from checking into the accommodation at *Bay Village Tropical Retreat*, we made a booking for the restaurant at seven and eventually managed to squeeze *The Possum* into the parking space.

You'd reckon it should be easier to get it out again in the morning, but these predictions seem to have a habit of coming unstuck..

With five hours' complimentary *WiFi*, we settled down to read email, checked the odd link out of there, and, having passed that particular baton over to *Madam* I set about jotting down the start of the *Travelogue*.





The complimentary *WiFi* came with a few quirks that seemed to prevent two devices accessing the same connection simultaneously, so a tag team approach seemed the way to go.

In any case, after the drive *Madam* wanted a rest before engaging in brain-related activity.

We wandered through to the Balinese restaurant on the premises that had been the motivation for making the hotel reservation, and while dinner wasn't as gobsmackingly scrumptious as it was the previous time one suspects that might have something to do with the fact there were just the two of us this time around.

Our previous visit had *The Sister* and *The Rowdy Niece* with us and was, therefore, a matter of four shared dishes between us rather than the one each time around.

But the food was good, the service attentive and the *Mitchell Watervale Riesling* the way it usually is, so *Hughesy* went to bed a happy camper.



CAIRNS > KANSAI INTERNATIONAL > KOBE

Thursday, 5 December 2013

While it's nice to sleep in, disturbing dreams involving intricate manoeuvres across a landscape that bore a resemblance to a rectangular *Tonle Sap* are something you're not keen to go back to after you've got up for the regular early morning drink of water.

I tried, but around four-thirty, with no sign of somnolence I turned my thoughts to *The Whys and Wherefores* of this little excursion. Sometimes it works, and you find yourself nodding off again, but when it doesn't at least you're in a position to deliver a coherent narrative.

Tapping that out, once I'd surrendered to the inevitable around five, took me past six-thirty on a morning where the early agenda was based around reallocating the contents of two suitcases around a backpack, a carry on bag and the two items that had previously carried everything.

From there, having liberated the travelling clobber from the backpack and replaced it with a jumper and a travelling pillow it was

time to take a turn through the shower and wait until **Madam** had done the same.

A bit more moving and stowing and fussing over detail wasn't enough to get us to departure time, so a tag team approach to the complimentary **WiFi** was needed before we checked out.

The Possum had been booked into a medium term car park, and we were supposed to lob there around nine-thirty, which explains the need to kill a bit of time. We started to head out around five past, starting by ferrying everything to the car, checking out and negotiating our way out of a rather tight fit in the car park.

From there we set off to head along **Lake Street**, having forgotten the detour we'd encountered the previous afternoon. That produced a one block readjustment to the route, but failed to create any problems whatsoever when it came to finding the long term parking.

There's always a suspicion **Fate** is lurking around the corner fitting the lead into the boxing gloves, so when you've had no hassles booking **The Possum** into temporary accommodation, and an immediate shuttle bus transfer to the **airport** you have to expect something's going to interrupt the steady flow from point to point.

The theory expounded on the way up by **The Driver** was that we'd avoided the worst of the **Japanese School Excursion** traffic, but once we walked into **Departures**, it was obvious we hadn't.

They were checking in passengers to **Darwin** and points beyond, **Kansai** and **Tokyo's Narita** and the area was chockers, with a hefty queue in the **Japanese section**, many of them seeming to represent the rump of the homeward bound school excursion parties.

You need something to occupy the mind while you're standing in a lengthy queue.

Madam attempted to kill some time figuring out whether the welter of teenage school kids were on our flight by trying to pick up the use of either **Kansai** or **Tokyo** dialect. As it turned out they were on the 12:05 flight to **Narita** rather than the 12:25 to **Kansai**, but that didn't mean there was much room to spare on our flight.

Once we had checked in the process of passing through **Passport Control** and **Security** ran pretty smoothly, and we killed the waiting time by setting out in search of a merino jumper for **Yours Truly**. Once we'd accomplished that, shelling out *a substantial number of ducats* for a rather stylish number, a light brunch filled in a bit more time.

It also filled in a big of a nutritional gap, working on the principle that our arrival time in **Kansai**, the shuttle bus transfer to **Sannomiya** and *the courtesy bus* run across to the hotel would mean we weren't going to be having dinner.

The *boarding call* came on schedule, and once we filed into the fuselage I found myself in a window seat on the left, or *Cape York*, side of the aircraft, which meant I would have something other than *Coral Sea* to look at while we ascended to cruising altitude.

I was looking forward to watching the coast through *Cooktown* and beyond, but was distracted by the arrival of *Customs and Immigration* paperwork.

An attempt to fill them out and keep an eye on the passing coastline resulted in a need for another set of papers after one too many mistakes in the original lot.

Still, while I missed *Cooktown* and the *Endeavour River* I managed to catch a decent glimpse of the extensive dunes being mined for silica sand at *Cape Flattery*, around two hundred kilometres north of our point of departure.

News that lunch was on the way diverted my attention away from the *Travelogue*, and an anticipated post-prandial nap failed to eventuate. There was a further snack served as we headed past *Taiwan*, though we were well east of the island, and the overall result was that we were more or less sated as the aircraft approached the *Land of the Rising Sun*, which was, given the onset of winter, hidden by the shades of night as we neared.

As far as I've been able to figure out *JetStar* (or the aviation authorities) must have changed the flight path between our *2008 visit to Japan* and the follow up in *2012*.

The first flight made landfall somewhere along *Shikoku* and then ran along the archipelago, but in *2012*, and again this time we made the approach over the bay rather than along the archipelago, so there were no lights *et cetera* right up to the final approach.

It was hard to tell where we were in the dark, and the approach was across the water, but there was a spangled display of twinkling fairy lights over on the left as we descended into *Kansai International*, where an uneventful landing was followed by the regular lengthy taxi to the terminal.

Disembarkation, the transfer from air bridge through the terminal shuttle towards *Immigration* and *Customs*, and the administrative procedures that grant you entry all ran smoothly and totally without complications, though once we were through *Customs* an attempt to phone *The Mother* to advise of a safe arrival was unsuccessful because the pay phone *Madam* was used to wasn't there any more.

There's no use crying over spilt milk, so we headed outside to catch the *Limousine Bus* transfer to *Sannomiya*, had no hassle getting the tickets this time around. There were issues last time, and since the actual bus hadn't materialised *Madam* headed over to a nearby external pay phone for another attempt at the phone call.

That meant the bus arrived right on cue, though once we were aboard it took its time departing.

That time, of course, could have been used for the phone call, but there you go.

Or not, as the case may be.

The signs say sixty-five minutes for the trip to **Kōbe**, but that must take the volume of daytime traffic into account because we were disembarking at **Sannomiya** after about fifty minutes, heading across to join the queue for *the courtesy bus* to the **Okura** and the nearby **Meriken Park Oriental**.

It was relatively late, the queue was substantial, and the possibility of picking up a beer or two was floated while we were waiting.

There was a vending machine just over there, and the **Okura** is the sort of place where those handy devices are conspicuous by their absence. That doesn't mean you can't buy a drink there, but there were likely to be issues with dress standards and substantial mark ups.

Did I want beer? was a tempting question, but I was starting to fade, and the bus arrived while I was still being tempted.

Once we'd landed on the doorstep the check in procedure was accompanied by the regular formalities, though once we were in the list heading upwards the **Trainee Porter** turned out to be rather chatty, having spent a holiday on the **Gold Coast** when she was little.

Remarkably (or probably unremarkably, given the courteous service that's par for the course in the country) she was on duty and remembered us when we checked back in just under a fortnight later.

As it turned out I didn't need a beer, hitting the hay while **Madam** took a long soaking bath, and while the night's sleep could best be described as fitful I wasn't up with the larks the following morning.



KŌBE

Friday, 6 December 2013

After a rather large day that started early and ran well past the regular bedtime, you'd plan on sleeping in, and though I only managed a fitful sleep, at least it lasted until around six-forty-five.

Once I'd surged into action and resumed recharging the *iPad*, with the cable plugged in to the power point on the desk, while I plugged away at the *Travelogue* I ran into a couple of significant interruptions.

Madam delivered a copy of the *English-language Japan Times*, and I took time out to scan the contents.



At times like this you realise how insignificant certain domestic issues are on the world stage, and how little of the world's attention is directed towards matters that tend to occupy *Australian minds*.

The most important matter Down Under was, of course, the *Adelaide Test*.

I hadn't seen or heard a word or whisper about vital matters like the toss or a progress score since I'd woken up the previous morning.

Still, you'd reckon it just might rate a mention in a *Japanese English language newspaper* not least because there'd be a certain number of *Australian and English expatriates* among the readership.

As it turned out there was some cricket content, but it was limited to a report *New Zealand* batsman *Lou Vincent* was under investigation for match fixing.

My interest piqued, and I use that term deliberately, I turned my attention to other avenues.

I turned on the TV after checking the hotel compendium and learning there was an *English language BBC World Service* available, and discovered that we wouldn't be getting an Ashes update due to the overnight news that *Nelson Mandela* had died.

I spent the next while tapping away with one eye glancing over to the TV in the hope the ticker tape scroll across the bottom of the screen might have some news, but was still none the wiser when I was ordered into the shower.

After the ablutions it was time to head down to reacquaint ourselves with the *Breakfast Viking*, yet another example of the way the *Japanese* take a *Western* concept, rework and relabel it.

And *Viking* is, of course, a much easier word to work with than the *Smorgasbord* they've redefined it to mean.

We were about to turn into the *Camelia Restaurant*, which is where we'd been able to look out over the tasteful *Japanese garden* between forays to and fro between the table and the extensive array of foodstuffs, when we were redirected to the hotel's other catering space, usually reserved for wedding receptions.

We weren't sure why we were redirected, and the consensus was that it probably had something to do with the *Luminarie* that was currently lighting up a section of downtown *Kōbe* between *Motomachi* and *Sannomiya*.

On the way back to the room I noticed signs directing anyone connected to *Minamoto* jewellery to the *Camelia Room* so the people filing into breakfast may not have been the *Luminarie*-attracted overflow that wouldn't fit into the former venue.

The spread for the *Viking* didn't seem quite as extensive as it had been, but that was possibly because it was spread out across a far more extensive space.

After we'd been ushered to our table we set off in search of fruit juice to serve as a starter.

Right next door to a couple of jugs of tomato juice I spotted a bottle of vodka and another containing *Hughesy's* condiment of choice.

Yes, in a relatively confined space we had vodka, tomato juice and *Tabasco*, the key ingredients in a *Bloody Mary*.

Japan, of course, is a drinking culture, but you don't expect to find ingredients for a restorative hair of the dog alongside the fruit juice in the breakfast servery.

The two breakfast trays we ended up with made an interesting contrast, but things didn't quite head on from there without some crossover. *Madam* informed me that the salmon was particularly good, and when I headed off to verify the suggestion I found out she was right.

For her part, once the *Japanese breakfast comestibles* were done with, she was over to sample the selection of continental pastries.

There was a steady flow of *Japanese* looking to break their fasts, which raised another interesting point. Most of them headed straight towards the *Western* end of the catering, filling plates with hash browns, bacon and *chipolatas* rather than the *Japanese options* further down the room.



Now, it may be that they weren't familiar with the layout, or thought that what they saw straight in front of them was all that was on offer, but I don't think so.

Madam, initially bemused by their refusal to do what she'd just done, and head for the *Japanese staples*, probably hit the nail on the head.

Her suggestion that they'd gone for the *Western* side of things stemmed from the same source as her own determination to head for the *Japanese side of the catering*.

It all depends on what you can get in the course of your day to day existence.

Hughesy's breakfast tends to run towards *Weet-Bix* or toast and *Vegemite* during the week, which is why I go towards egg dishes on the weekend.

Madam's regular breakfast at home sits towards the standard Western cereal-based version, and the chance to *go Japanese* represents a welcome change and one suspects the people who were going for bacon, eggs and hash browns were probably enjoying a welcome treat.

A substantial breakfast will usually go close to keeping us going all day, which sits well with plans for the day. *Madam* took the subway out to *Myodani* to leave the blue suitcase with *The Mother, Hughesy* got to sit in the lobby at the *Okura*, tapping out a couple of hours worth of *Travelogue* that should have things pretty well up to date by the time she gets back.

We've re-sorted the luggage, whacking everything that's surplus to current requirements, like airline blankets and neck cushions into the bag that's on the way out to *Myodani*, and we've sorted the things that are going with us into the *Red Suitcase*, the *Red Travel Bag* and *Hughesy's* back pack.

The first two went into the cloakroom after the porter caught us as we stepped out of the elevator, the backpack is sitting beside me as I type. In around two hours *Madam* will be back to steer us towards *Sannomiya*, where we'll deposit most of what we're carrying at the next hotel and set out to sort out tickets for the week's worth of rail pass action.

As it turned out I had three and a half hours to catch up on the *Travelogue* and fill in details of *The Frockster Factor*, which will be the explanation if we fail to catch a glimpse or anything approaching a decent view of *Mount Fuji*. That was more than enough time to fill out the details, and with things more or less up to date (at, coincidentally, the end of the previous paragraph) I decided to head into *Settings* and check out the *WiFi* situation.

I'd attempted to do the same thing the previous evening, and failed to turn up as much as a hint of a network, but that was up in the room on the 13th floor. Here, down in the lobby there were signs of a couple with the little closed lock beside them and one called *Hydrangea*, which looked to be free.

And it was, which meant by the time *Madam* had made her way back from the wilds of *Myodani* I'd checked the email backlog and caught up on the cricket score from *Adelaide*. I'd tried to access the video feed, but it was geoblocked.

By this point *Australia* had progressed from an overnight 5-270 odd beyond the 550 mark on the way to a declaration on 570 and I was quietly jubilant, since, at this stage, it looks like the worst scenario has *Australia* going in to Perth leading 1-0 in the five Test series.

I wasn't going to be able to follow much more as the *iPad* went in the backpack, and we reclaimed the baggage and headed off to wait for the shuttle bus. That got us back into the heart of downtown *Kōbe*, and a brief stroll took us to the next night's accommodation at *Daiwa Roynet Sannomiya*.

The Perplexed Reader will possibly be scratching the noggin at this apparently wilful relocation, but you can sum it up, in one word: *Luminarie*.

I still wasn't sure what it was, but it seemed to be the explanation for a number of things, including changed traffic flow from *Sannomiya* to the *Okura*.

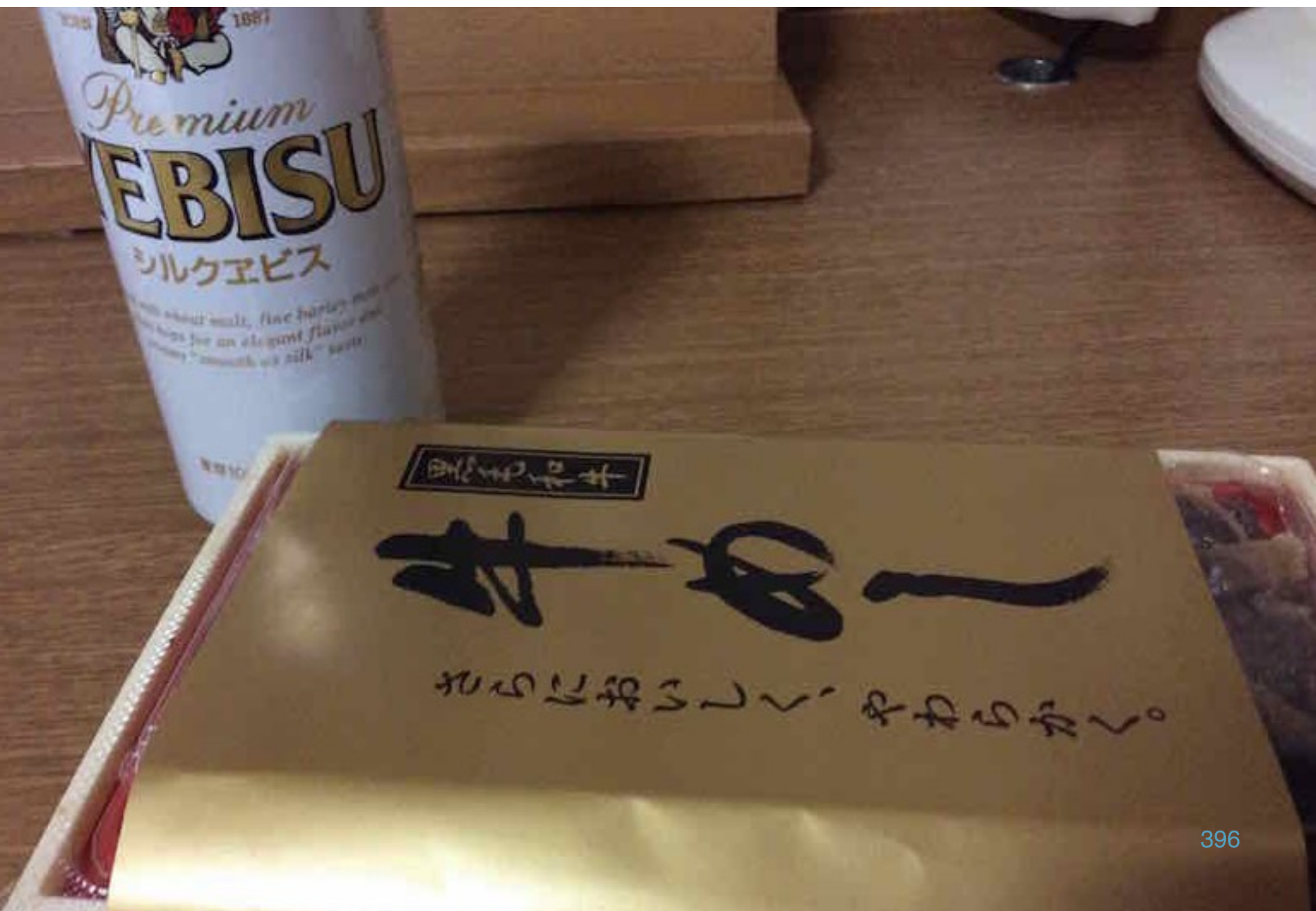
In any case, while the *Okura* is expensive and booking ahead allows you to access any bargains on offer, it was probably booked out on *Friday* night anyway. With the *Luminarie*, in town, you'd expect any specials on offer had long since been grabbed.

The *Luminarie Factor* meant we weren't going to be spending *Saturday* night in *Kōbe* since even a relatively modest establishment like the one I'm sitting in tapping this out on the *Friday* morning was already booked out when *Madam* went looking.

Once we'd checked in there was a spell of trying on the new layers of insulation before we headed back to *Sannomiya* to sort out the *Rail Pass* and tickets side of things.

That wasn't quite feasible at the time, given a queue that almost reached out the doors of a relatively small ticket office, and hunger pangs starting to kick in, so we headed off in search of sustenance.

We'd sighted a trattoria that opened at six a few doors down from the hotel, so that was an option, but we headed to the food hall at the *Sogo department store*, where I was told we could possibly taste some wine, and pick up dinner if there was something that caught the eye.





I'd left the reading glasses back in the hotel, so the wine shop we wandered through failed to deliver anything other than an obvious conclusion that *Australian wine* is, to *the Japanese observer*, pretty much a non-event.

Plenty of labels from *France* and *the Americas*, judging by the little flags on the price tags, and a smattering from a variety of other sources, with *Australia* being one of the also rans.

We weren't carrying a corkscrew, so that was one reason for avoiding a purchase, didn't know what was for dinner (*yet*, so that was another) but, most importantly, didn't know where to start.

I'm not inclined to head off and buy a bottle of something familiar just to have something to drink, and we were going to the *Luminarie* after dinner, so that was a fourth reason to stick to beer.

In the food hall there were a number of *I want to eat that* items that caught *Madam's* eye.

That was game, set and match in the decision making process.

I ended up with a *bento* tray with *Kōbe* beef, rice and pickles on the side.

The convenience store beside the hotel provided a tin of excellent *Yebisu* beer, so that was dinner.

After dinner, rugged up, we hoofed it over to the perfect example of the way *Japanese authorities* handle events that attract significant crowds.

Your average Australian, in situations like this, would wander towards the event looking for a way in.



That's fine if you've got around a hundred thousand people looking to get into the *Boxing Day Test* at the MCG, a venue where there are a number of entry points.

With 183 000 people queuing up to file under a spectacular light display on the first night, there are procedures that need to be put in place. That was the first night of the *Luminarie*.

This was *Friday*, guaranteed to attract an even larger crowd.

We headed towards the actual display, found the barricades put in place to direct the flow of pedestrians, and were directed towards the point where we could join the flow.



That involved making our way back, almost as far as the station at *Motomachi*, passing a steady flow of people headed in the opposite direction and wondering how much further the entrance to the queue might be.

We found it, and eventually made our way back to where we'd been redirected, which was, effectively, the first curve on an extended and reverse letter S.

The Inquisitive Reader should, at this point, grab a pen and paper and start a printed S.

Never mind the reversing bit, we're just looking at the concept, not the actuality.

Stop at the first curve. That's the point we were redirected. The start of the letter is the point of entry, and would have to be a good kilometre away. Now, continue your S, adding another loop at the end.



The last half of the last line contains the couple of hundred metres of spectacular illumination that probably pulled in around two hundred thousand people that night, and had booked out the hotels in *Kōbe* on *Saturday* night.

If two hundred thousand people are going to file through, you can rest assured there'll be an orderly progression to deliver them there, and that explains our letter S with the extra loop.

Getting those numbers there means streets have been blocked off to traffic, and that in turn creates issues if people want to cross the street.

An opportunist gatecrasher would probably rate one of these crossing points as a place to jump the queue and join the flow, but each crossing point had a wall of uniformed police on either side of the pedestrian flow, which could be halted when there were enough crossers to justify the disruption.

And, from a distance, I saw the disruption in action.

A placard was carried into the middle of the flow, the uniforms presumably moved across the flow, quite possibly moving the barricades as well.

The crossers crossed.

After a minute or two things were moved back the way they were and the progression towards the display resumed. If this seems too regimented and orderly, as you approach the display instructions from uniformed officers carrying megaphones exhort you to keep moving, which I suppose has to be said.

You're not, however, going to get a decent photo, or a series of decent photos, while you're moving, so everyone stops.

But not for very long.

You might be ignoring the bullhorn instructions, but you know why they're being issued and follow the spirit rather than the letter.

After all, there are a huge number of people behind you who are patiently waiting for the opportunity to do what you're doing.



Once you're through the illuminated arcade there are stalls and outlets offering a range of food, drink, lotto tickets and commemorative stamps, but we started to wend our way back towards **Sannomiya**, which raised the interesting question of what to do about the rail passes and tickets for the first few days' train travel.

What turns up in the mail when you've bought one online isn't your actual rail pass.

It's an order form that has to be converted into the document that gets you your actual tickets, so the first thing that needs to be done is the conversion.

You hand over the order and your passport, and, initially, you get a form to fill out.

Once you've done so, that gets checked against your passport, and part of it is attached to the Pass, which features a laminated ticket detailing the document's validity.

Once you've got that, you can collect your tickets.

As *The Astute Reader* will realise, this process is somewhat time consuming, and when you're in a crowded ticket office with a queue behind you, a sensitive soul will avoid buying the tickets for an extensive itinerary.

We collected tickets that would take us from **Osaka** to **Matsumoto**, and on to **Niigata**, and made room for other travellers with, possibly, more urgent needs.

From there, with everything that needed to be done duly done we headed back to the hotel, pausing *en route* to pick up more beer, and that, effectively, after a little more tapping and perusing of email, was that.



KOBE > OSAKA > KISHIBE

Saturday, 7 December 2013

When you're looking for a good night's sleep you need the right equipment, and *Hughesy* likes two pillows, thank you very much.

Maybe the lack of a second pillow accounted for a fitful slumber, but I managed to sleep in until around six-forty-five, and started by checking email and such before resuming *Travelogue* duties.

We don't want to get too far behind because we'll need all the time we can manage to fill in historical detail when we get home.

I've pencilled in a day by day web page process once we're back, but there will be external disruptions (*Christmas/New Year*, cricket) and quite a lot of historical material to be trimmed and edited, so we want to have the nuts and bolts of the travel side of things as close to complete as we can get them.

It was around eight-thirty when I took my turn in the shower as *Madam* investigated the tea and coffee facilities in the room.

A subsequent discovery that check out was at eleven rather than the anticipated ten meant we left the *Daiwa Roynet Sannomiya* with the day to day up to date, as of 9:16 am.

Once we'd checked out we set out in search of breakfast.

That came at *Boulangerie Comme Chinoise Honest Cafe*, a bakery on the first level of the way into the network of below ground level arcades beneath *Sannomiya*.

I didn't need a huge breakfast, just something that would keep me going. The *prosciutto and gorgonzola baguette* certainly did that very nicely.

From there I was after a cap or hat, something warmish to swathe the top of the head in situations where a beanie wouldn't be appropriate.

The felt cap that had been used for such purposes was sitting back in *Bowen* after it hadn't taken too kindly to being washed.

We found exactly what I was looking for by sheer luck rather than good management and with my requirements attended to I found a comfortable sofa and grabbed the *iPod*, figuring a *Kinks*-based soundtrack was the way to go.

Dedicated Follower of Fashion and all that.





I was able to riff slightly on the same theme as we made our way through the arcades.

I spotted a couple of outfits in trendy menswear outlets that would have most of my acquaintances rolling around in hysterics, first at the sight and then at the price paid.

There was one stunning little cashmere ensemble priced around the equivalent of \$A1200...

We were on our way into the upper levels of the station complex when I spotted that little gem.

The spotting may or may not have influenced *Madam's* move to steer me into a book shop on the seventh floor of a department store complex, pointing me towards a small, but rather wide ranging selection of *English* titles.

Surveying the selection produced a couple of titles I might actually have looked at buying if I hadn't sworn off further hard copies.

They were the sort of thing that should be useful for my **Interesting Times** project when I return to it.

From there it was time for lunch, and, with the luggage sitting back at the hotel, it seemed logical to eat at the little *trattoria* a couple of doors down, and the logic of the logistics forms a fair part of what follows.

Lunch was pasta and salad, a tomato based fish sauce for me and a fish and *Japanese basil* sauce the other way.

Mine wasn't *quite* authentic, with an odd flavour element that was noticeable but didn't intrude.

Based on the logical possibility that I might be enlisted to help **Madam** finish hers I had a taste, and it was immediately obvious that she was on her own in that department.

Having reclaimed **The Red Suitcase** and **The Red Travelling Bag**, we headed to **Sannomiya** and boarded a local JR express to **Osaka**, changing trains at **ShinOsaka** and arriving at the overnight stop, three stations along the line, just before two.

If you were to locate **Kishibe** and **Station Hotel**, you might find the decision to stay here strange, but there are a couple of things that kick in here.

For a start, with tomorrow being **the first Travel Day**, you want to be up and away reasonably early, and you don't want to miss that first train where there are connections involved.

Second, while we're heading off on a **Sunday**, there will be issues with subways and sets of stairs if we stay in downtown **Osaka**.

ShinOsaka is towards the edge of the city, as **Shinkansen** stations tend to be due to issues associated with putting new lines through densely populated areas.

Stay in **Osaka** and you're going to be doing a bit of crosstown travel.

The **Station Hotel** at **Kishibe**, on the other hand, is right beside the station, which is three stops from **ShinOsaka**, where a lift or escalator will deliver us up to the relevant platform for the train to **Nagoya**.

There's also **a coin laundry**, and that allows a load of washing.

Those jeans I'd been wearing since **Cairns** needed a wash, and there were socks and jocks and under layer items that needed the same treatment.

The laundry wasn't available until four, but there was free **WiFi** in the lobby, so I checked the email and the cricket score.

England had been bundled out for 176 on what was supposed to be a flat drop in track in **Adelaide**, with the supposedly unreliable **Mitchell Johnson** taking 7 for 40.

From there it was back to the **Travelogue** and a read before we headed out to dinner. **the dryer in the laundry** hadn't quite delivered, and there were items of clothing with varying degrees of dampness draped over everything that could accommodate something in the room when we left.

While progress had been made when we returned we left everything *in situ* rather than doing a check and rearrange thing in the evening.

On the evidence to hand things should be right by the morning.

There were a couple of possibilities for dinner:

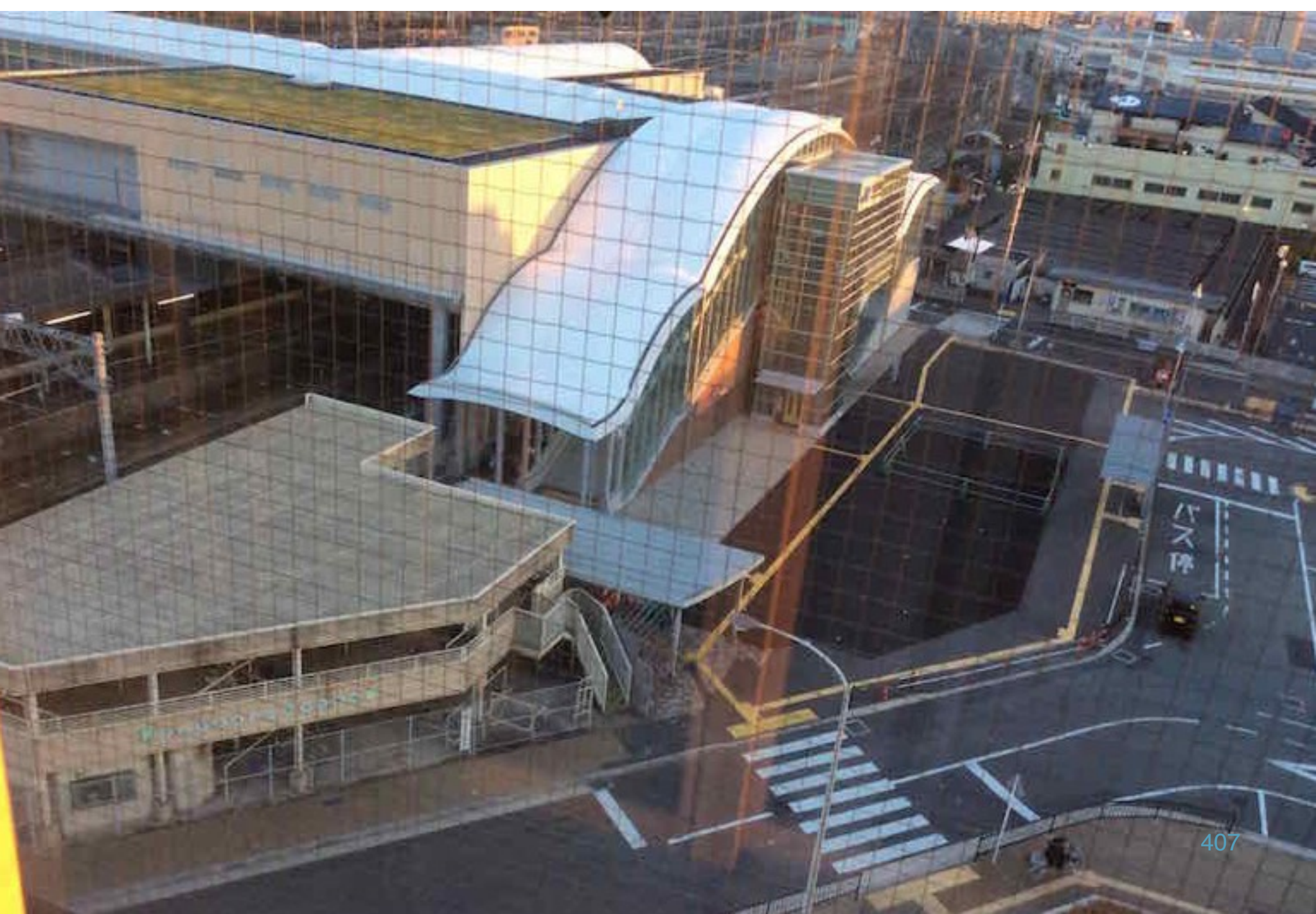
- a place near the hotel specialising in octopus balls,
- a sort of family restaurant chain operation,
- a *teppanyaki* establishment that might have served the purpose if we were up for a substantial meal, and
- a fourth place, which I was informed served fried oysters.

The Astute reader might sense *Madam's* logic in those descriptions, but the four also lay in a logical progression from the hotel to the other side of the supermarket that fronts onto the station parking lot.

I'm not a big fan of octopus, though I don't mind calamari.

The description of the second place suggested *Someone* was disinclined to eat there.

While we could have gone for the cook at the table option, I sensed the fried oyster place had some particular appeal, apart from the fact that *Hughesy* likes oysters and is quite happy to eat them fried.



I had a platter of four oysters, another of crumbed, deep-fried pork, both of them served on a bed of cabbage with chicken rice.

Before I'd selected anything, however, **Madam** had grabbed a plate that held a whole fish, something akin to a cross between a gar and a sardine that had been given a steroid treatment.

Long enough to be one of the gar family, but fleshed out along the body.

Obviously, I'm not a fisherman.

Madam, on the other hand, is a big fan of whatever it was, and announced that she'd been looking forward to this as the self service trays hit the table.

I was looking forward to an early night, but that didn't quite eventuate. A visit to the supermarket on the way back revealed large cans of **Yesibu** for ¥288 each.

At that price I couldn't have just one, could I?



9

JAPAN 2013: THE RAIL PASS



KISHIBE >
SHINOSAKA >
NAGOYA >
MATSUMOTO

Sunday, 8 December 2013

It was just after six when I eventually returned to the waking world, and after a spell tapping away at the *Travelogue*, it was time to *sort out the laundry*, repack the bags and try to answer the key question for the day.

How cold was it likely to be in Matsumoto?

There was, of course, a significant supplementary question along the lines of *how well Hughesy was going to handle it*.

Given the uncertainties those questions produced I ended up with a pair of insulated pants, the new merino jumper and a handy scarf in the backpack, having donned several layers of new thermal clothing to keep the upper portions cosy.

The insulated pants were there in case the jeans I was wearing failed to live up to the task.

The load included a couple of bottles of water since a man is not a camel, but in this case, with the backpack on I must have looked like one.

There was, however, one significant element that seemed to be missing.

A visit to the **Kathmandu** store in **Townsville** yielded a pair of gloves since I knew we were heading up into the mountains where the hands might need protection.

Now, with the prospect of temperatures in the low single figures, they were nowhere to be found. I was sure I'd packed them but was forced to concede that I may have left them on the living room table a couple of thousand kilometres away.

Still, there wasn't a great deal I could do about it when the time came to head down to the conveniently located **Kishibe station**. The gloves question gave us something to occupy our minds while we were waiting for the train upstairs in **ShinOsaka**.

We could probably have done something about breakfast in **Kishibe**, and we needed something to tide us over through lunch before the **Japanese banquet** in the **onsen** resort that evening.

I ended up with beef sandwiches, which were *interesting*, and there was something *more traditionally Japanese* for **Madam**.

Armed with breakfast supplies, we made our way up to the platform, where the **Shinkansen** was as punctual as you'd expect it to be.

Aboard the train, the fifteen-minute leg to **Kyoto** provided a window to get breakfast out of the way.

The **iPad** came out as we left **Kyoto** en route to a change of trains in **Nagoya** and notes for the first part of today's report were finished by the time we hit relatively open country for the next part of the fifty-three-minute run.

Outside the window, the countryside was greener than I expected.

The stubble from the last rice harvest in the paddy fields and the familiar jigsaw pattern of farmland, housing, commercial and industrial operations filled out the landscape.

At one point, we headed into a tunnel through a mountain range with an extensive quarry operation and a zigzag roadway ascending the range, something I thought I might be able to locate through **Google Earth**, but subsequent attempts haven't yielded results.

I need to make a more accurate assessment of where the **Shinkansen** line runs.

We alighted in **Nagoya**, and, initially, headed for the wrong platform in search of the connection that would take us up into the mountains. Once we'd been redirected, we arrived on the right platform to find ourselves beside the **Toyama** train that takes you through **Takayama**.

It certainly brought back memories.

The train that pulled in a couple of minutes later, so the Public Address system informed us, wasn't ours. A troop of cleaners swarmed aboard, set about their duties and were changing the seats around to face the other way when the train pulled out to make room for the **Shinano Limited Express**.

You'd reckon over three visits to the country I'd have sorted out issues relating to headroom, but as I pushed **The Red Suitcase** into a space designated for such objects, I managed to bang the top of my head against an inconveniently placed divider.

We hadn't been underway long when we made a brief stop at **Chikusa** in the northeastern suburbs of **Nagoya**, home to a number of university campuses.



Once we were under way again, on the sunny side of the train there was an excuse to remove my jacket.

I couldn't, however, hang it up the way you can on one of the *Shinkansen* services, where there are handy hangers provided. On the other hand, with the picture windows giving generous views as we headed into the evergreen mountainside forests, I wasn't in a position to complain.

Mostly, however, we passed through tunnels with spectacular little bits in between that promised spectacular things to come.

Once we were through the tunnels, it was back into the urban sprawl at *Tajimi*, a city in *Gifu Prefecture* best known for ceramics and pottery, and a temple (*Eihōji*) belonging to the *Nanzenji* faction of the *Rinzai* school of *Zen*.

There's also a *Catholic monastery* famous for its wine.

The train stopped there, and we were back in the tunnels again as we continued the northward journey.

Once we were out of them I reclined the seat to take in the view as the river valley we were following started to narrow, and the built landscape gave way to a natural one.

We got our first glimpse of snowy mountains came around 11:42.

There was another stop at *Nakatsugawa*, a former post town on one of two routes that connected *Edo* (modern-day *Tokyo*) to the old imperial capital of *Kyoto*.

That's a minor claim to fame alongside the city's latter-day status as the home of chestnut delicacies, including *kurikinton* (boiled and mashed chestnuts, mixed with sugar and reshaped into their original shape) and soft-serve chestnut ice cream.

As we wound our way up into the mountains, I started to get a tad drowsy, but not drowsy enough to miss the bands of bare deciduous trees running down the sides of the slopes interspersed with bands of evergreens.

Shiojiri, the last stop before our destination in *Matsumoto*, seemed to be a grape-growing centre.

Hughesy tends to notice things like barrels stacked on railway platforms.

The city's name apparently translates as *Salt Butt*, due to the fact that it marked the end of the road for salt merchants travelling inland from the *Sea of Japan*. It was the point where the mountain passes became too treacherous to cross in winter, and those on the other side of the range tended to draw their supplies of salt from the *Pacific Ocean* side.

Once we'd arrived in *Matsumoto*, the priority was to lock down the final train legs, from *Niigata* to *Tokyo* and, most importantly, from *Tokyo* back to *Osaka* on *Saturday*.

From there, we headed to the tourist information to grab a map, guide book and any other materials that might seem relevant, then off to a second intermediate stop to drop off the baggage.

Our accommodation is out on the edge of the city, and I'm tapping this out looking over the lights of *Matsumoto* towards the *Japanese Alps*, which were a magnificent sight before the sun went down.

Elsewhere you'd start looking for a coin locker, but here it was a case of heading to a hotel near the station hotel dropping the bags there.

The next time we saw them was in the lobby of the night's hotel.

I still had the backpack, however, working on the basis that the other stuff could go missing, but there was no way I was letting the *iPad* out of my sight. Some might quibble about the weight, but it was only a fifteen-minute walk over to *Matsumoto Castle*, and, in any case, I needed the exercise.

The walk took us through what seemed to be the outskirts of downtown *Matsumoto* before a left hand turn onto the street that leads up to the castle, but unlike some other places, the approach doesn't have the castle looming at the end.





We crossed the river, having passed a CD shop called *Beatniks*, which seemed strangely appropriate given the *Beat Generation* affinity with *Zen Buddhism*.

It was about a block from there to the approaches to the castle, and as we headed across the final intersection with the castle over on the left, I was bemused by an incongruous modern building.

Quite a big one, in fact, and something that didn't quite fit into the vibe of an old castle precinct.

Subsequent investigation using a sitemap *Madam* had failed to notice revealed it was the *Matsumoto Museum*, with displays of artifacts documenting the city's history and the ticket that got us into the castle was good there too.

Matsumoto (unsurprisingly, given where we were headed) is an old castle town that had grown into a modern city with a population around a quarter of a million, built up like other centres by gradually merging the old city with surrounding villages.

Surrounded by mountains, the city is noted for its apples, *soba* (buckwheat noodles) and *saké*.

A nearby wasabi farm is reputedly the world's largest and the area boasts a number of *onsen* resorts.

Matsumoto Castle (*Matsumotojō*, also known as *Crow Castle* or *Karasujo* due to its black exterior) rates as one of *Japan's Top Three Castles* alongside *Himeji* and *Kumamoto Castles* and houses a comprehensive exhibit on the *history of firearms in Japan*.



Given a lack of *English language signage*, that might not be such a big draw card, but *Matsumoto* is largely intact, unlike other sites that have been reconstructed in ferroconcrete.

It also differs in being a *flatland castle (hirajiro)* built on a plain beside a swamp rather than *on a hilltop* or *a river crossing*.

This lack of natural defences meant the castle ended up with three concentric moats and an extensive system of inter-connecting walls and gatehouses with an outer earthen wall almost around three kilometres in circumference designed to deaden cannon fire.

What you're looking at today, however, is the five-tiered, six-storied main castle keep (*tenshukaku*) and smaller, secondary *donjon*, built between 1592 and 1614 as an upgrade to a previous fortification (*Fukashi Castle*) which dated back to 1504.



In **1872**, after the *Meiji Restoration*, the site, along with other castles, was sold for redevelopment.

News that it was about to be demolished caused locals to start a campaign to save the building, and it was acquired by the city government.

It had been used as an aircraft factory during *World War Two*. but managed to avoid being damaged by American bombers. If it hadn't done so you'd probably be looking at a ferroconcrete replica.

Your tour of the interior reinforces the idea that seventeenth-century *samurai* weren't big strapping blokes. There are suits of armour on display that make that point, but as you make your way up and down the steep wooden stairs, it's obvious that conditions inside when the castle was under attack suited short, agile types.

You'll also pass openings that could be used by archers and musket bearers, along with others used to drop stones onto those trying to make their way into the building on your way to the observation deck which gives extensive views over the city.

I didn't make it all the way up there, given the size of the backpack and the single narrow staircase that was supposed to handle traffic in both directions, but the view from the fifth floor wasn't too bad.

The whole thing would probably be at its best in spring and autumn since there are hundreds of cherry trees in the grounds, but in prime **sakura** season it would certainly draw massive crowds. It's not recommended for people with dodgy knees either.

Once **Madam** made her way back down, we headed back towards the exit, taking in views across the courtyard. Back at ground level, there were still two hours before the bus to the hotel.

Making our way around the grounds we ran across a **samurai** in full regalia, there to provide photo opportunities.

Given the wearer's height one had to suspect the regalia was modern replica rather than genuine seventeenth-century relic.





With time up our sleeves, we made a quick visit to the *city museum*, which wasn't that impressive but provided familiar items in the twentieth-century section that were enough to make us feel, well, *old*.

We headed back to the station, veering left when we reached the river to head along an interesting street of shops selling antiques, second-hand books, foodstuffs and knickknacks.

There are frequent, and quite clever, references to frogs.

The street's mascots originate in the river, but it's also a pun on *kaeru* (the *Japanese* word for *return*).

Frogs were given as a charm to bring loved ones back home safely, and to encourage money and goods to make their way back into the shopkeepers' premises.

We made our way along the other side of the river, hooking back onto familiar territory on the way back to the station, where the shuttle was sitting, quietly waiting for passengers.



Once we were under way, the twenty-minute bus trip had more to do with traffic conditions than the actual distance.

The distance we travelled was considerably longer than a crow would have taken, but I wouldn't want to be walking it without a cut lunch and, more importantly, a compass or a good mud map.

Hotel Shoho is an impressively large structure on the eastern outskirts of **Matsumoto** that operates on a considerably larger scale than some **onsen**.

The girl who showed us to the room after we'd been reunited with the luggage stressed we had to use this particular lift on our way travelling between room, restaurant, lobby and **onsen** facilities.

I'm not the world's greatest fan of the hot spring experience, but I invariably surrender to the inevitable expectation, donning the bathrobe and making the obligatory excursion to the steamy facilities.

Interestingly, on my way there I observed a vending machine right beside the elevator.

Once I'd done what was required and made it back to the room, I thought a couple of beers would constitute a suitable reward.

Dinner involved a semi-private booth in the restaurant rather than the room, and arrived with the usual wide variety of dishes where I'm often unsure about the exact identity, but in a *damn the torpedoes* full speed ahead approach end up having a go at them.

There's the odd item that's obviously, and definitely, one to avoid and they're usually identified as such.

But by and large, I've found that if you're willing to give it a go the item you're not overwhelmed about works well with others around it.





In most cases they're bite-sized pieces, so it's down the hatch. There was *sashimi* to follow.

I'm not usually a fan, but the salmon and tuna were *good*, and the octopus, which I'd generally avoid, worked with *wasabi* and soy.

The attendant had fired up the hotpot bowl while we were working through the first courses, and things would have been better if we 'd got to it a little bit earlier.

There was a hot plate arrangement in the middle of the table that was less than satisfactory (as far as I was concerned) because the *wagyu* splattered fat across the rest of the area.

Frankly, it wasn't the best I've encountered and seemed to be fatty offcuts rather than prime steak.

Or maybe *extremely well marbled prime steak*.

It was something *Hughesy* and his shirt sleeves could have done without.

There was rice and assorted other tidbits to follow, and I had a sporadic go at them but, basically, I was pleasantly sated with what I'd had and didn't need any more.

Like most things, it'd probably be different if I was *Japanese*.

The local beer they were serving was good (I suspect a wheat beer), and I tried a red wine (*Concord*) that was semi-acceptable.

I was interested in identifying the variety, so we stopped by the retail section on our way back to our room on the eighth floor.

I was carrying the *iPad* and managed to locate *WiFi* in the lobby along the way, caught a cricket score and headed upstairs for a go at the massage chair, a bit more *Travelogue*, and polished off the other *Asahi* before heading to bed.

Madam claimed the in-room (or rather on-balcony) bathtub for a hot bath in the private enclosure overlooking the city and had her go looking out over the city lights.

For my part, I was happy to leave her to it, looking forward to using the facility to watch the Alps appear as the sun rose in the morning.





MATSUMOTO > NIIGATA > NIIZU > TSUGAWA

Monday, 9 December 2013

On what was going to be a significant travel day I knew I needed an early start, and was out of bed shortly after five-thirty, tapping out the next tract of *Travelogue*.

Hardly surprising, really.

If I was awake, that was the default task, but in this case, there was an extra element that needed to come into play.

The right side corner of the balcony at the front of the hotel room contained a bathtub, and I had visions of giving myself a long hot

morning soak and watching the sunrise hit a fairly spectacular view across *Matsumoto* towards the *Japanese Alps*.

On that basis, I definitely wanted to be on deck early, and the *Travelogue* tapping served to fill in time until it was time to fill the tub.

It was just after six when I roused *Madam*.

If that sounds a bit rough, I was under strict instructions not to set out on the operation without assistance or supervision.

I'd managed to get the *Travelogue* (note form, detail to be padded out later) up to date before that, and with the horizon still in darkness, I resisted the temptation to get an early start on the tub task and let sleeping partners lie.

I'd been intrigued by vinous matters the night before and wandered into the resort's retail section looking for the red and white they'd been serving in the restaurant. I'd managed to identify them as *Concord* and *Niagara*, and having shelled out for an expensive and authoritative reference tome thought this was the perfect time to bring it into play.

And, of course, it meant *Madam* got a good ten minutes extra sleep.

Ten minutes might seem an overgenerous time allocation, but while I could remember the *Concord*, the search was complicated by the fact that I couldn't remember the name of the other variety.

The *Jancis Robinson* tome, however, had the grape varieties listed in various configurations, including country of origin, and I had vague memories that the white definitely sounded American.

As it turned out t'other one was *Niagara*, which fitted nicely with those vague memories.

My research revealed both were grown for the table as well as the wine press, and the process brought back memories of references to something called *Sparkling Concord* somewhere back in the seventies or early eighties.

For some reason, the name had lodged itself in the memory bank in the exact way that the much shorter term recollection of *Niagara* hadn't.

And while I managed to sort that out the process lasted a little longer than it should have, so the day had already started dawning outside when I roused *Madam* to assist with the bath.

As it turned out I could have managed quite well on my own, but we were on the eighth floor of a large establishment, and there was, I guess, a significant possibility of creating a minor disaster if I turned something the wrong way.

Or something.

In any case, once the water was in the long slow soak was wonderful and could have been better.

*Hang on there, **Hughesy**, I hear **The Critical Reader** interject. You can't have both.*

Actually, I can and tender photographic evidence, m'lud.

Had I been able to watch this magnificent spectacle emerge from the darkness it would have been better, but the alignment of the bath in its little cubicle along with a wooden structure outside meant you couldn't quite catch the best of the view from the bathtub.

What you could see from there, under ordinary circumstances would have been magnificent, but the late start, when it came to filling the bath, meant I knew there was a better view tucked away on the other side of that inconveniently located wooden structure that I couldn't quite see.

From the chair where I sat while I was tapping this out, yes, fine. But not from the bathtub itself.

Still there was plenty to look at and ponder on.

Across **Matsumoto's** sprawling suburbs, there were plumes of what at first seemed like smoke.





*Possibly some round the clock industrial operation, you might suggest if you hadn't seen wisps of steam emerging from the enclosure beside me when **Madam** had her long soak the previous night.*

*No, I reckoned they were **onsen** plumes, and when **Madam** returned from her early morning dip in the communal facility, she confirmed it.*

We headed down for the breakfast **Viking** shortly with **Madam** suggesting a **heavy Japanese bias** in what was on offer and expressing concerns as to whether I'd be able to eat.

On the ground, however, tucked away behind an almost bewildering display of breakfast options were bacon, scrambled eggs, Vienna sausages and a couple of interesting possibilities.

There must be people out there who are up for *Japanese curry* for breakfast, but much as he likes the stuff, *Hughesy's* not one of them.

In any case, we had other fish to fry. They mainly involved packing and getting ourselves down to the lobby to access the *WiFi* once the checking out procedure was completed.

There wasn't anything of particular note in the incoming, and we headed out to *the courtesy bus* around ten to nine for the twenty-minute run into *Matsumoto station*.

With a 10:07 departure that left us with plenty of times up our sleeves and we killed the first couple of minutes by getting tickets *Madam* had forgotten. We're stopping for lunch in *Nagoya* on the way back from *Tokyo* on *Saturday*, and she'd forgotten about the *Nagoya > Osaka* leg.

There were a few other time-killing strategies employed when we got to a rather crowded waiting room with a good half hour to spare. The air outside was chilly, so no one seemed inclined to wait out on the platform, and the result was a waiting room where seating was at a premium.

Madam went looking for souvenirs, returned and directed me to *New Days* to check out some local wines. Not that there was any tasting or purchasing involved, you understand. It was all about taking a look and killing a little more time.

The investigation produced sightings of the aforementioned *Concord* and *Niagara* as well as *Black Queen*, another variety that had piqued *Madam's* interest when she'd gone looking.

Checking *Black Queen* in the handy *Jancis Robinson* reference tome revealed a *Japanese variety*, and showing the details demonstrated that *Hughesy's* birthday present (a \$50 *iTunes voucher*) had been put to good use. *Score one for diplomacy in the course of killing time.*

With the train due to leave at 10:07, we wandered out just before ten, and I managed to create a little drama on the escalator heading down to the platform as an attempt to coordinate feet, steps, hands and red suitcases sent me sprawling.

I'm still not sure exactly how I managed it, but it seemed to take place in slow motion.

The train we boarded was, effectively, the rest of the service that had brought us up to *Matsumoto* from *Nagoya*.

It was only thirteen months since we'd done the trip in the opposite direction, but an early onset of winter delivered impressive displays of snow on the highest peaks, and a dandruff-like sprinkling lower down.

From *Nagano*, we were back on a *Shinkansen* line that would take you into *Tokyo* if you were going that far, which of course, we weren't.



Yet.

We'd also done the bottom part of this leg travelling between *Sendai* and *Kurobe* on our last trip, and we'd disembarked to change trains at *Echigo-Yuzawa*. There were plenty who did the same this time around since the stop represents the intersection of the line to *Tokyo* and another that delivers you to *Toyama*, *Kanazawa* and points of interest in between.

That might change when the *Kanazawa Shinkansen* line commences operation in *2015*.

We changed trains a little further along, once again on a *Shinkansen* line that took us up to *Niigata*, higher up the west coast. It was one of the five ports opened for international trade in the *1858 Treaty*, though shallow water in the port delayed the actual opening until *1869*.

Niigata also served as a base for salmon fishermen who roamed as far north as *Kamchatka* and was one of four cities picked as targets for the atomic bomb.

Weather conditions and its distance from the bomber bases in the *Marianas* meant it was removed from the list of targets. *Nagasaki* was bombed instead.

Dominated by the steep snow-capped *Echigo Range*, *Niigata Prefecture* is liberally sprinkled with ski and *onsen* resorts and is home to a number of *saké* breweries due to the availability of high-quality rice and clear, fresh water.

From *Niigata*, we moved on to the local lines, first to *Niitsu*, and then to a line that wound its way up into the mountains to *Tsugawa*.

As you'd expect there were spectacular views along the way, given the coincidence of high mountains, snow, a clear day and an expansive river valley.

Earlier legs on *Shinkansen* lines included more than their share of tunnels, but here, heading into the back blocks there wouldn't have been the budget to go through things unless it was really necessary.

Twists and turns as the line snakes up the river valley towards the source have obvious scenic benefits.

In *Tsugawa*, we were met by someone from the *onsen*, who might have taken umbrage at *Hughesy's* surprise at the presence of traffic lights at an intersection just across the river from the station.

The place hardly seemed big enough to warrant them, but the station is actually on the wrong side of the river from a fairly substantial town that must generate its fair share of traffic.

Not that there was too much of it on the roads as we went through.

The *onsen*, when we arrived, was a classy establishment, with breathtaking views across the river towards snow capped mountains.

It offers outdoor baths, one for the gents, one for the ladies and one for family groups that look out at the same vista as the one we could enjoy from the room.

That spares you the effort of dragging the camera along to the *onsen* to record the view.

The view from the room, and I speak from experience, is clearer due to the absence of rising steam.

We had two items on the agenda for the rest of the day.

One was the predictable session in the *onsen*, which in this case was slated for eight, a private go at the family outdoor one, which would come after the *Japanese banquet*.



That, of course, was the other and promised to be similar to last night's, a set of localised variations on a well-established theme.

While I say we had two items on the agenda, *Hughesy* had three, *Madam* had four, and a fifth lurked around the corner.

I'd been close to nodding off a couple of times *en route* and wanted a chance to take a power nap, which sat nicely with the first of *Madam*'s additional intentions, which was, of course, to get into the heated waters ASAP.

The second, of course, was to get *Hughesy* into the same setting as many times as possible.

She returned with the news that the gentlemen's outside *onsen* seemed to be vacant, and suggested I could go there and enjoy the place on my own if I looked sharp about it.

There was, I was told, no need to change into the standard robe etcetera.

Bowing to the inevitable I was led down to the relevant chamber, which turned out to be empty.

You could tell by the absence of slippers outside.

So, in I went, and got the mountain view along with a fifteen-minute soak in the soothing waters.

It probably wasn't actually fifteen minutes - probably more like ten or possibly even five, but it certainly *felt* like fifteen.

In any case, I had been there and done that, so I was justified in asking about wireless broadband. *Madam* checked, and it seemed to exist, but only in the lobby.

We headed down to check, couldn't connect to the server though the network seemed to exist and headed back upstairs, where I attacked various electronic issues in non-network mode.

There were issues to settle as far as dinner was concerned.

The most important involved what *Hughesy* was likely to eat, or, more accurately, what I wouldn't be inclined to have a go at.

I explained to the helpful maid, who had *reasonably good English* thanks to a year working in New Zealand, that I would have a go at most things, which seemed to be the most appropriate and a reasonably accurate answer.

With a session in the outdoor *onsen* booked for eight, we weren't going to be drinking much before we went, but the *100% French wine list* had a half bottle of *Chateau Reysson* from the *Haut Medoc*, a *Merlot* that was definitely interesting.

We pottered about until dinner, which came with the familiar spread of little plates for starters, followed by more of the same through to the centrepiece, a *shabu-shabu* hot pot where the simmering liquid was soy milk rather than water or stock.

A more assiduous recorder would have captured all this on camera, but we were too busy interacting with the maid to do so before we started eating.

Once we started, and the array had been spoiled, there were used plates that hadn't been removed, so the photographic evidence is limited to the first course.



We needed to kill a little more time before the *onsen*, and one could have been tempted to sample the *Merlot*. It had been opened and was quietly breathing in the annexe near the bathroom, where it wouldn't cook the way it would have done in the heated main room.

Madam came up with one possible time killer, in a suggestion that with dinner underway the network was probably experiencing less traffic than it had been earlier, so we might be able to access it if we wandered downstairs.

We did, but we couldn't, so we headed upstairs.

I noted an anomaly after we'd had our turn in the *onsen*, where the contrast between the external chill and forty degrees in the water was interesting, to say the least.

We were booked in for three-quarters of an hour but barely managed fifteen minutes, which accounts for earlier remarks.

Given the darkness outside I'd changed seats and was in between switching apps on the *iPad* when I suddenly noticed forty emails that hadn't been there when we went downstairs.

A bit of further investigation revealed that, everything seemed to work, but only in that spot.

Strange.

In any case, having scanned the backlog it was time to pour a glass of *Chateau Reysson*.

It turned out to be deep-coloured, fairly straightforward, fruit-driven, full-bodied and pleasantly balanced without hitting any high notes. No wow factor and I definitely wasn't expecting any, but perfectly acceptable late night drinking, poking out into the inky blackness that had swamped the view across towards the mountains.



TSUGAWA >
KORIYAMA >
TOKYO >
YOKOHAMA

Tuesday, 10 December 2013

Despite the absence of a convenient bathtub on the balcony and an unwillingness to head down to the baths to take in the sunrise, there was another early morning rise to watch the sun play over the snow-capped peaks while I kept hacking away at the backed up *Travelogue*.

I probably could have been up slightly earlier, since I wanted to get the first rays hitting the snowy summit.

Although I was a tad late the view was still spectacular as I tapped away with regular pauses to enjoy the interaction between rising sun, snowy peak and cloud.

I suspected it was snowing up there, and the peak seemed to have acquired an extra coating overnight.

Madam, of course had another go at the *onsen*, and I had a shower once she was back in the room.

Three visits to the heated waters in two days was enough to be going on with and, in any case, water and electronic devices don't mix all that well.

Breakfast started arriving just before eight, and it was something I'd had reservations about, but I was OK once I sighted the *salmon*. Between that and the rice I was sure of enough to keep me going for an hour or three, but I picked at various other bits and pieces, none of which were impressive enough to have me eschewing the *Western* end of future *Breakfast Vikings*.

And if the *Western* end doesn't exist as long as there's *salmon* and rice I'll be cool. I'm acquiring a penchant for the orange coloured fish that'll go close to matching *Madam's*.





We headed back upstairs to pack, and, predictably back down to the lobby to check out and wait for the shuttle transfer to *Tsugawa station*

The transfer to the station came with a history lesson delivered by the driver that was incomprehensible to *Your Correspondent*, so I came to the conclusion that I'd have to do my own.

The attempt to do so, once I was reunited with the desktop machine, proved singularly unsuccessful, and delivered a timely reminder that the entire sum of human knowledge hasn't found its way onto the *Web*, and there are aspects of *regional Japanese history* that aren't accessible to *English-language Google* searches.

Contrary to expectations, we were travelling onwards from *Tsugawa*, which I'd been led to believe was the end of the line.



Our train the day before had terminated there, but the line did go on, taking a line through *Kanose* on the other side of the river from last night's *onsen*, then diving into a tunnel and emerging at *Hideya*.

From there, it passed through equally obscure localities: *Toyomi*, *Kaminojiri*, *Nozawa*, *Onobori*, *Ogino*, and *Yamato* as we moved from *Niigata Prefecture* into the nuclearly-known *Fukushima Prefecture*, but we were a comfortable distance from the troubled and troublesome reactor.

At least, I hoped we were.

The run to *Aizuwakamatsu* took the best part of an hour and a quarter, weaving its way along river valleys between snow capped ranges.



It wasn't quite spectacular scenery with constant **Wow!** factors, but a constantly changing vista with significant spots where the view was breathtaking.

Madam reckoned it was going to snow tomorrow, but I was glad we were there when we were there.

Once we'd changed trains in **Aizuwakamatsu** it was more of the same, though the weather started to close in halfway through the second hour long section.

By the time we disembarked at **Koriyama** it had closed in completely, a grey misty wall that meant there wasn't going to be much to see.

But we'd seen been along this next section of **Shinkansen** line a couple of times before, so that wasn't an issue.

Lunch, on the other hand, was definitely an issue, since I needed something and the first *bento* stall we ran across had run out of my preferred option.

I grabbed a spicy chicken roll and a can of *Yebisu Red* on the way to the *Shinkansen*.

Predictably, after we made the purchases the route to *Platform 13* took us past two stalls where I'd probably have found what I'd been looking for in the first place.

In any case, I wasn't worried.

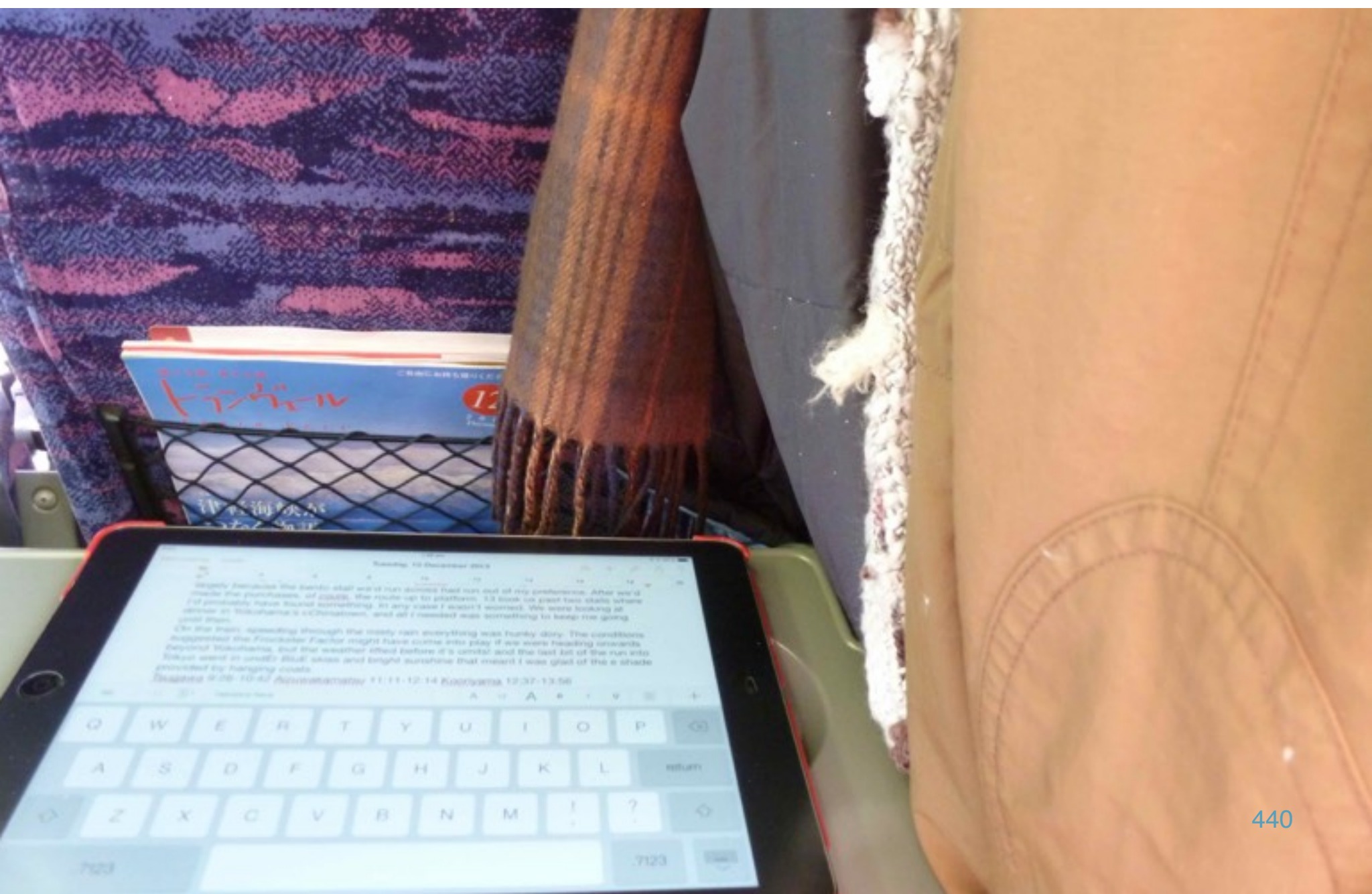
We were looking at dinner in *Yokohama's Chinatown*, and all I needed was something that resembled a snack to keep me going until then.

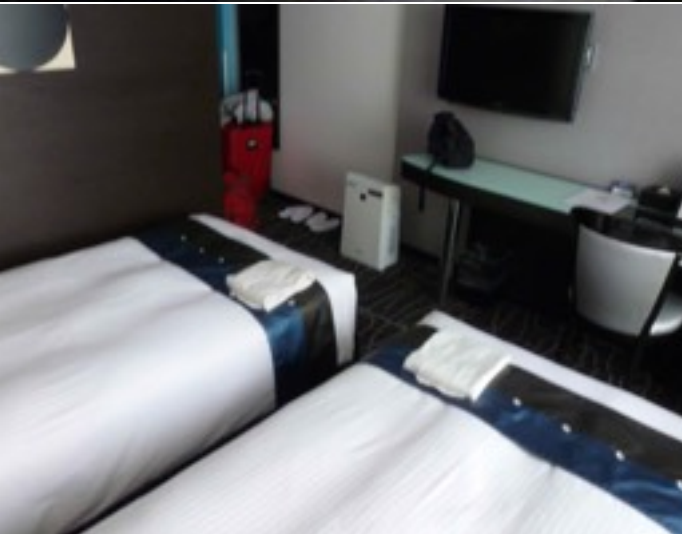
And, of course, *Yebisu*.

On the train, speeding through misty rain everything was *hunky dory*.

The conditions suggested that the *Frockster Factor* might have come into play if we were heading onwards beyond *Yokohama*, but the weather lifted before *Utsomiya* and the last bit of the run into *Tokyo* went in under blue skies and bright sunshine that meant I was glad of the shade provided by hanging coats.

Once we'd made our way into *Tokyo* and disembarked, the next issue involved finding the right line to *Yokohama*.





There are three of them, constructed at different times along different corridors with different numbers of stops along the way.

That last bit delivered the rub.

We ended up on the line that delivered the quickest transfer, switched lines in *Yokohama* and got off a stop later to take the brisk walk to the *New Otani Inn Yokohama*, a proper flash new turnout perched atop a retail complex, with further shopping, sightseeing and entertainment options proliferating around the environs.

It was an impressive locale, and while there was a degree of disappointment when we found that the room wasn't on the seaward side of the structure, that was soon alleviated by discovery the view from the window included the distinctive shape of *Mount Fuji*.

Not all of the mountain, as it seemed the deities hadn't been totally mollified.

Clouds covered the summit, but they'd relented enough to show us the distinctive shape.

Cloud and afternoon sun meant evidence to prove what we'd just seen wasn't quite forthcoming, but the chance of a look at *Fuji* shaped plans for after we'd accomplished two tasks we'd set ourselves for the next day.

It was a while before we were due to meet *The Translator* for dinner, and we killed part of the waiting time in the room before venturing out for a walk around the vicinity.

As soon as we were downstairs it started to threaten us with rain, so it was a case of back upstairs to grab the umbrellas before we went too much further.

That, at least, killed off a bit more time before we headed back to the station for the two-stop journey that landed us on the fringe of *Yokohama's Chinatown*.

The text message correspondence had arranged a meeting under the gate nearest the station, but those decorated gateways aren't exactly scarce in and around a *Chinatown*.



Yokohama's version is larger than most, and the supply of likely gates is correspondingly confusing. I reckoned we'd reached the right one as soon as we walked outside the station.

There was, however, no sign of our friend, and we knew she was already at the rendezvous, so the nearest gate to the station wasn't actually the nearest gate to the station, if you catch my drift.

It all, as it does so often when you're making your way out of a station with multiple exits, *depends on taking the right exit*.

Once we'd made the rendezvous it was a matter of finding somewhere to eat, a process that involved a lengthy wander through labyrinthine streets that seemed to have us going in circles.

I may well be wrong in that assertion, but we kept passing familiar-looking signs that were a little more common than you might have thought.

We eventually landed in a place where the food was good, and demolished a plate of stir fried greens, another of beef done the same way, *won ton soup* in between them and fried rice to finish, washed down by draught beer.

All in all, the substantial meal was nothing out of the ordinary but was quite satisfactory and reasonably priced.

It would have taken a cross country forced march to work off what we'd consumed, and while *cross country* was out of the question, a further wander covered a fair slice of *Chinatown*.

A wrong turn delivered us to the station between the one beside the hotel and the one where we'd disembarked on the way to dinner.

That meant, with everyone heading in the same direction and a train waiting and ready to go, that farewells were a fair bit more abrupt than they would otherwise have been, and within a couple of minutes of boarding the train we were back on the doorstep of the *New Otani*.

A glance around the neighbourhood had *Madam* keen on an excursion to look at the shopping centre's *Christmas lights*.

But I'd had enough for the day, declining a nightcap and settling down for a brief read of the *Leonard Cohen* biography before it was time for lights out, with the prospect of a view of *Fuji* in the morning.



10

JAPAN 2013: THE CONCERT LEG



YOKOHAMA > KAMAKURA > TOKYO

Wednesday, 11 December 2013

The Argumentative Reader might question *Hughesy's* use of the term *sleeping in* when you're talking a 6:40 rise, but by that time, under normal circumstances at home, I'm half way around the morning walk, after at least half an hour's computer time.

Being on the western side of the building helps, of course, but having emerged from a deep sleep, I raised the blinds to reveal distinctive snow on a distinctive shape veiled by a band of cloud half way up.

The deities, it seemed, hadn't quite forgiven us.

So it was straight onto the *Travelogue*, followed by the regulation showers, then, once again, the *Viking* breakfast.

I wasn't looking for it, but when I noted tomato juice in the array on offer I scanned the surroundings for vodka and *Tabasco*, both of which were conspicuous by their absence.

Two nights of *Japanese banquet* had *Madam* expressing a lack of desire for *Japanese food*, but that statement still didn't prevent a hearty breakfast that refused to go anywhere near the bacon and eggs end of the spectrum.

After breakfast, we piled the belongings back into *The Red Suitcase*, went down to check out, and once the luggage was consigned to the cloakroom, headed off to *Kamakura*.

The day's itinerary was centred around the *Elvis Costello* concert in the evening, but we weren't going straight back to *Tokyo*, and we needed something to fill in the morning and early afternoon.

Back on the rails, it was one stop back to *Yokohama*, and a change of lines that took us to *Kamakura*, a coastal town an hour south of *Tokyo* that was *the political centre of Japan* after *Minamoto Yoritomo* chose it as the seat of his military government in *1192*.

The *Kamakura government* went into decline in the 14th century as the focus shifted to *Kyoto*, but the city remained the political centre of *Eastern Japan* for some time.

Today, *Kamakura* is a popular tourist destination, sometimes labelled the *Kyoto of Eastern Japan*, with temples, shrines and other historical monuments as well as beaches that attract large crowds during the summer.

The historical significance stems, in part, from the fact that it sits in a natural fortress, surrounded to the north, east and west by hills with the open water of *Sagami Bay* to the south.

If you weren't coming by boat, in the days before modern engineering delivered tunnels and cuttings access over land was only possible through narrow passes.

The seven most important were tagged *Kamakura's Seven Entrances* or *Kamakura's Seven Mouths*.

Kamakura has some significant *Buddhist* temples and *Shinto* shrines, far too many to visit in a day, but much of the city was devastated by the *Great Kantō Earthquake* of *1923*.

The epicentre was deep beneath *Sagami Bay*, close to *Kamakura*, and the tremors devastated *Tokyo*, *Yokohama*, and the *Kantō region*. The combination of quake, *tsunami*, and fire destroyed many sites, and what's on view today is often a replica of what was formerly there.

We had two sightseeing options pencilled in, with the first involving a bus from *Kamakura station* to the vicinity of *Hokokuji*, where the signage on the main road was slightly misleading.

We've had the same problem before, but eventually we'll get these things sorted out.

We headed down the same road far enough to establish a total lack of temples within the designated distance, cast back to the signpost and had another go, heading the other way and crossing at a set of traffic lights to find another sign that pointed us in the right direction.



When we reached *Hokokuji*, we found a quiet shrine with its own charm. The temple, which dates back to **1334**, is best known for the bamboo grove behind the main hall.

The grove fills the space where founder *Tengan Eko* (posthumous name - *Butusjo Zenji*) meditated and wrote poetry.

It was the family temple of the *Ashikaga* and *Uesugi* clans, but most structures were destroyed by the *Great Kanto Earthquake*. The main attractions are strolling gardens and a grove of two thousand *moso* bamboo, *Phyllostachys edulis*, the world's largest growing and hardiest bamboo, which grow to a height of around 28 metres.

Maybe it was the time of year, but the temple lies slightly off the beaten track, which makes a visit a quieter and more enjoyable experience than you'll find in more easily accessible locations.

Visit in prime *sakura* season, or when the coloured leaves are at their best, and you'll probably find yourself being jostled.



But in early *December* there were still coloured leaves on the trees and the red, yellow and brown carpet around the base of the trees prompted a meditation on the subjects of transience and regeneration.

We could have taken the bus back, but *Madam* preferred to walk. I guessed this was meant to defer *Someone's* inclination to do the circuit and then keep moving to *Tokyo* and concert time.

The walk itself was reasonably straightforward, and quite pleasant tramping, and the exercise was, in the light of recent indulgences, overdue.

On the way, we diverted into *Kamakura's* main *Shinto* shrine, *Tsurugaoka Hachimangū*, which sits at one end of the city's main street, a thoroughfare just under two kilometres in length that runs up from *Sagami Bay*.



We paused for the inevitable photographic evidence that we'd been and were on our way back to the station when we were accosted by a polite elderly gentleman on a bicycle who asked whether I spoke *English* and proceeded to insist that I accept a couple of documents he'd prepared to practise his *English* composition skills.

We sighted him again at the station, obviously making his way around a regular circuit where he'd find opportunities to practice his foreign language skills, which were, in fact, quite impressive.

The main purposes from here, however, involved a visit to the monumental bronze statue of *Amida Buddha* at *Kōtokuin*, which involved a switch to a local tram line and a bit of a hike once we'd alighted.

There was also the possibility of catching a view of *Mount Fuji*, though as the tram made its way along it wasn't easy to see how we were going to manage it.

The landscape on that side of the vehicle seemed to be dominated by hills.



While *Madam* was certain there were views she wasn't sure where you needed to alight and how far you had to walk to avail yourself of them.

Once we were on the ground it was obvious the *Daibutsu* is a major crowd-puller, and when we arrived, while the statue itself is impressive and represents one of the standard *images of Japan*,

I must say I preferred the peace and tranquillity you get with a less readily accessible location.

The statue was originally housed in a temple that must have been an impressive structure, something along the lines of *Nara's Todaiji*, but probably not quite as large.

But the temple was destroyed by a fifteenth-century *tsunami*, and the *Great Buddha* has remained outdoors ever since.



Still, despite the crowd, I was glad we'd been, though I don't see any reason to call again.

Crowds, on the other hand, bring some benefits, and the road leading up to the *Daibutsu* was lined with shops selling souvenirs and such and, more importantly, refreshments.

Madam stopped for a drink at one of them, which turned out to have an impressive array of local beers to go with the softer options. There was a pear juice for *Madam*, an impressive *India Pale Ale* for *Yours Truly*, and a range of other options I could have tried.

Maybe we need to call back, after all, possibly diverting off the roadway to the hilltop site that had been suggested as a possibility.

But the day was getting on and *Hughesy* was experiencing a decided itchiness in the pedestrian equipment.

From there it was a question of using the tram to deliver us to the rail connection that would get us back to *Tokyo*.

If there was a decent view of *Fuji* on offer along the way, so much the better.

We headed a few stops further along and alighted at *Eni* when it looked like we weren't going to be unsuccessful.

On the platform at the tram stop, however, it seemed that the next tram to the terminus at *Fujisawa* was a better, and far closer option than heading all the way back to *Kamakura*. From *Fujisawa* we'd be able to catch a train on the *JR Tokaido* line, where the services were probably more frequent than on the line out of *Kamakura*. In any case, once we'd made our way there it was obvious conditions were too hazy for *Fuji* viewing.

Riffing on the theme that the gods were teasing us, trying to get us to show our hands provided a theme to fill in time while we waited for the train to leave.

We'd pulled the right rein as far as the *back to Yokohama* options were concerned, with the train pulling in within seconds of our arrival on the platform.





That got us to *Yokohama*, where we made the switch of lines that got us back to the hotel, followed by the trip back once we'd collected the baggage.

We switched lines again in *Yokohama*, and while we'd hit the right platform, we ended up on the wrong train, necessitating a further switch that got us onto on the right line, but created an issue with a falling red suitcase and someone's knee.

We got off at *Ebisu*, switching to the subway for the two stop ride to *Roppongi*.

There, it was a case of taking the western exit, turning right, and before I knew it, we were walking past the *Ex Theatre*, the concert venue for the next three nights. *Madam's* immaculate research had us booked into *Hotel S*, just a few hundred metres further along the same road.

Checking in revealed a rather trendy establishment, and it was obvious that we didn't sit anywhere near the target demographic.

Still, there was plenty of room in the room, and they'd provided most of the regular amenities.

Interestingly, that didn't include pyjamas, though there were bathrobes.

In any case, a relatively early arrival gave us the chance to take it easy for an hour or so before we headed out to find somewhere to eat before the concert. It was already dark at five, and a walk back along *Roppongi Street* towards the subway station didn't reveal much on the hotel side of the theatre.



There were undoubtedly plenty of interesting options in the back streets and side alleys, but at this stage of proceedings, a lengthy exploration of the options was not the name of the game.

We continued beyond the *Ex* as far as the *Oyster Bar*, which I figured would do *very nicely, thank you*. It wasn't as if either of us needed a huge meal.

An order went in for an *oyster puttanesca*, an *oyster and Japanese basil risotto* and a draught *Yebisu*, which looked to be the right combination to keep us going.

The *puttanesca* was very good, but I'm not a fan of *Japanese basil*, which worked its evil way through the *risotto*, overpowering everything else.

Different strokes for different folks but the draught *Yebisu* was, predictably, just what the doctor ordered.

From there, we headed back to the hotel, with *Madam* wanting to take her time.

For my part, I was only interested in one thing, namely getting to the venue and finding my way inside. Once I was there I was happy to wait, but you (or, I guess, I) want to be there and ready.

With the doors open at 6:30 (the *Lounge*, whatever that was, opened at five) we headed off just before half past and got there to encounter decidedly odd entry arrangements.

For a start, where you'd expect to be making your way into the venue, there was a sign advising this was not the point of entry for the general public and directing us towards a staircase.

That took us up to a space on the rooftop, where we were ushered towards a staircase that led back down to a point less than ten metres from the sign that sent us on the cross country ramble.

It didn't stop there. Once we'd descended, there was a fairly brusque demand for an extra ¥500 for what seemed to be a compulsory drink. *Madam* was not impressed, and while I wasn't totally pissed off by the demand, I prefer to exercise my discretion when it comes to buying things.

And neither of us impressed by marshals barking highly amplified instructions over bull horns.

It seems the conventional wisdom when dealing with crowds in *Japan* is that you can't organise large groups of people in an orderly manner without the high volume instructions, which is fine in open spaces like the *Luminarie* in *Kōbe*, where the same organising principle applied.



There had, after all, been around 180 000 people the night we were there.

Here, in a confined space, with a crowd that wouldn't reach two thousand, things were definitely over the top. You almost got a sense of an attempt to make the punter suffer for turning up since he or she was obviously incapable of making his or her way inside without specific instructions.

Having taken the tokens, we collected beer and white wine, drank and headed inside, one grumbling and t'other looking forward to two and a half hours of prime *Costello and The Imposters*.

There had been some concern about the rather idiosyncratic system used to get seats in the pre-sale, which seems to have impinged on a lottery.

Suggestions we'd get better seats if we waited until they were released to the general public were countered with a fairly definite *I don't care* on my part, *largely because I wanted to get to all four shows, thank you very much*.

A glance at the seating arrangements as published online suggested there probably weren't any bad seats.

When we made our way into the auditorium, our seats were on the balcony, more or less dead centre, three rows back.

From where we were it looked like I'd been right, and there were no bad seats, but things may have been different on the floor if you're not inclined to stand up.

The front section was standing from the start.

When I checked the following night, there was a slight camber towards the back, but you'd probably have ended up on your feet once those in front of you were on theirs.

As predicted, the show was excellent.

One can find all the gory details, along with another exposition of gripes about bullhorns and compulsory drinks, here, but, if you're not into the arcane aspects of *Costello* fandom, here's a brief explanation that semi-justifies *Hughesy's* four concert agenda.

For a start, with the proverbial *extensive back catalogue* to draw on, *Costello* tends to vary the set list quite a bit, so you're not going to get the same show night after night.

He'll prepare a set list before a regular show, largely for the benefit of the guitar technician who needs to know which particular instruments will be required, when they're likely to be required and what key they need to be tuned to.



But that's Elvis operating in regular mode, and while there's no guarantee he'll stick to what he's listed, it isn't exactly random either.

Which is where the *Spectacular Spinning Songbook* comes in.

Take what amounts to a gigantic chocolate wheel, replace the numbers you'd use to decide who wins the prize with the names of songs from the old *extensive back catalogue*, and you've got an interesting way of randomising what gets played.

Fill some of the slots with jackpots and bonuses (*Time*, *I Can Sing a Rainbow* or *Imperial Chocolate*) and you've added a further randomiser.

Time would produce two or three songs that include *Time* in the title, or, possibly, songs about the passage of time if you feel like going that way.

I Can Sing A Rainbow would give a little bracket of songs about colours (*Red Shoes*, *Green Shirt*, *Blue Chair* or even, I guess, *Yellow Submarine*) while an enigmatic combination like *Imperial Chocolate* would yield a song from the *Imperial Bedroom* album and another from *Blood and Chocolate*.

And, just to spice things up a little further, throw in a leggy blonde assistant in a gold *lame* minidress (*The Mysterious Josephine*).

Bring up a selection of punters from the audience to spin the wheel, and a performer with unfulfilled ambitions in the realm of stand-up comedy, and you've got an interesting package.

So that, in a nutshell, explains the all four shows scenario.

Some two and a half hours after *Elvis* and *The Imposters* took the stage the house lights came up, and that was that.

We headed more or less straight out through a side exit that delivered us into the path of the exodus headed towards the subway station.

We skirted around that and wended our way back to *Hotel S*, where the first task was translating scrawled notes into a typed up set list to go to the *Facebook Costello-L* group.

That, along with a *preliminary draft of a review*, took things up to eleven-thirty, which is when I turned in, expecting an earlyish start in the morning.



TOKYO

Thursday, 12 December 2013

Strange.

We're in a hotel room fronting a busy three level roadway, and I'm woken a couple of times through the early morning by traffic noise and other sounds from outside.

You wake, thinking it's around six or seven, comfortably before peak hour because there's no noise outside, check the time, and it's already twenty past eight.

Put a tick in the box alongside *Unexpected Sleep-In...*

After a shower, and a check of *Costello-L Facebook* comments where I discovered errors in the set list I posted the night before,

I corrected my copy, then headed down to a healthy breakfast with no sign of eggs, bacon or other mainstays of the standard *Western* breakfast.

I wasn't overly upset since it was relatively late, we were looking at a substantial lunch and I'd pencilled in a visit to the oyster bar before the night's concert.

Back upstairs, recent comments on *Facebook* suggested that *Costello-L's Japanese correspondent Ayako* made it into the show, and may have gotten to spin the wheel.

But there were more important fish to fry aside from wondering whether *Wheel-Spinning Ayako* and *Costello-L Ayako* are one and the same.

As it turned out, they were.

But after four days on the road, there were *laundry issues* that needed to be addressed.

That meant it was time to pack up the washing, and head off to *the coin laundry*.

A check at the front desk produced a set of directions that seemed rather complicated, an up hill and down dale and into side streets affair, but *Madam's* research has located a place in the basement of a building on the opposite side of the main road the hotel faces.

Far simpler. *Score one for Thorough Research.*

You could also *score one for inability to check pockets were empty* as an issue with tissues caused a delay in the drier proceedings.

Still, with the washing done and semi-dry, we headed back to *Hotel S*, where the room hadn't been made up, so there was no chance to drape the almost dry over every available surface.

Never mind, we weren't going that far.

When we headed back out reckoned there'd be plenty to see on a short walk around *Roppongi* With one major commercial development across the road (*Roppongi Hills*) and other a couple of hundred metres down the street past the Ex (*Tokyo Midtown*), we headed for the latter, intending to visit t'other on the way back.

You'll possibly conclude we're talking shopping centres here, and in a way we are.

But they're more than just a couple of retail developments in the sense that *Australian consumers* have become accustomed to.



There's a significant difference in size and scale..

Tokyo Midtown is a \$3 billion (¥370 billion) mixed-use development with more than half a million square metres of floor space on a 7.8 hectare (19.4 acres) site formerly occupied by the *Japan Defense Agency*.

Completed in *March 2007*, it's a mixture of office, residential, commercial, hotel, and leisure space, the tallest office building in *Tokyo* (the 248 metre *Midtown Tower*) and the new location of the *Suntory Museum of Art*.

So it's not just a shopping centre, though there's plenty of high-end shopping action available in the five-floor Galleria complex, along with a variety of restaurants and a wine bar *Coppola's Vinoteca*) dedicated to the wines of *Francis Ford Coppola*.

Office space tenants include *Fujifilm*, *Fuji Xerox*, *Yahoo! Japan* and international law firms, as well as a medical clinic affiliated with the *Johns Hopkins Hospital*.

The 250-room *Ritz-Carlton Hotel* occupies the 47th through 53rd floors of *Midtown Tower*, complete with a \$20,000 per night *Presidential Suite* and an authentic 200-year-old *Japanese teahouse*.

And if you're after a little peace and quiet after you've given the credit card a thorough working over, the complex includes *Hinokichō*, formerly a private garden attached to an *Edo Period* villa, reopened as a public park, and the cherry tree-lined *Midtown Garden*.

Less than a kilometre away, the older, but similarly scaled *Roppongi Hills* offers more of the same.

We weren't there for shopping. *Madam* was scoping the place out before an evening rendezvous with an old friend, and *Hughes* was up for something along the lines of lunch.

After a week on the road, I didn't need something substantial.





The lunch venue was a matter of debate, hardly surprising with the range of options.

We ended up at an *Italian eatery* where mozzarella was the main focus.

Lunch, as it turned out, was a fairly basic pizza and a *panini* with glasses of red and white that did the job quite nicely, and from there we wandered back towards *Roppongi Hills*.

Like where we'd just left, you can throw around impressive statistics about *Roppongi Hills*.

It's older (opened in **2003**), slightly larger (109,000m²), and a tad more expensive, constructed at a cost of \$4 billion on more than four hundred separate lots amalgamated by developer *Minoru Mori*.

The plan was to build an integrated development, an all-in-one live, work and play environment.



We weren't there for the shopping, heading more or less straight for the upper levels of the 54-storey *Mori Tower*, where we had an appointment with the *Tokyo City View*.

I don't have a great head for heights, so I wasn't keen on shelling the extra ¥500 that'd get us onto the open-air *Sky Deck* on the top level once we'd paid ¥1500 for the basic package.

That included admission to the *Moro Art Museum*, something I wasn't keen on given the fact that the featured exhibition was devoted to *The Art of Peanuts*.

Once we'd taken in the views, I'd sneaked in a *Trappist ale* before we went into the gallery to check out an exhibition that focused on new ideas from around the world.

It allegedly keeps the art accessible to the public, rather than making it overly obscure or esoteric.



That may be much the same territory as *MONA* in *Hobart*, where we'd been in the recent past, but I have to say this display didn't do a whole lot for me.

Back downstairs, we headed back to the hotel, where after ten minutes the room looked as if it had been the target of a major panty raid.

It would probably have made a decent display piece in the *Art Museum* if we'd been able to come up with a suitably postmodern metaphor for *airing not quite dry laundry*.

Madam had a six o'clock appointment with a friend from University days but left at five.

I walked her as far as the *Oyster Bar*, stopped for four of *Japan's* best prime oysters and a *Yebisu*.

I popped into the nearby gourmet store on the way back to pick up a half bottle of nondescript *2011 Bordeaux* (¥925, and you get what you paid for).

I had half an hour upstairs at the hotel, then headed down to the restaurant for dinner (*pasta con vongole bianco* with a glass of *prosecco*) and rocked off for *Night Two*, where the show was, again, highly enjoyable.



The concert itself is reviewed [here](#).

When I got back to the hotel just after ten-thirty *Madam* had reports of spectacular Christmas lights that I'd missed, what with the concert and all.

I took my time typing up the night's set list, sipping on a *French red wine* that was OK without hitting any altitude whatsoever.

As I said, you get what you pay for.

If you haven't paid much, you tend not to have great expectations.

And so to bed...



TOKYO

Friday, 13 December 2013

As we headed down for the *Ridiculously Healthy Breakfast*, I found myself musing on a seemingly incongruous matter.

I'd woken up a couple of times during the night and heard noises somewhere in the vicinity, yet, once the sun had risen I'd slept soundly despite the presence of a major arterial road carrying substantial traffic outside the window.

I'd crashed with intentions of knocking over *the review of last night's concert* before breakfast, but the late night and what seemed like impervious soundproofing had allowed me to sleep in until well after seven o'clock.

Yet, in the still of the night I'd heard things going on.

Strange.

I knocked breakfast over quickly, working on the principle that it wouldn't do any harm to cut back on the dietary input, and headed upstairs to knock over the rest of *the concert review*.

That took a bit longer than it might have done since *Madam* was intent on doing something during the daylight hours.

As a result, it became a question of *Where do you want to go?*

Actually I'd have preferred to go nowhere, maybe taking a walk through the back streets of *Roppongi* in daylight, looking for second hand collector CD stores and generally taking it easy.

That, it seemed, wasn't an option.

So, while I finished the *review*, *Madam*, being helpful, set out on a *Google* search for CD stores, which ended up sending us on a loop through *Tokyo Midtown* that failed to produce any results whatsoever.

Once I'd finished *the concert review*, of course.

Japanese neighbourhoods and back streets being what they are there's no guarantee I'd have found what I was looking for anyway.

You'd need local knowledge if you're going to conduct a successful search sortie in that sort of environment.

Since no one had wandered up to ask if I was the bloke from *Costello-L* who'd been posting on *Facebook* local knowledge was almost nonexistent.

Having drawn a blank on the music shops it was a case of heading off to the *Imperial Palace*.

Not that I'm a fan of royal families and their residences, you understand, but there were reports of rather impressive landscaped gardens, which are always worth a look.

That took us underground, to negotiate the intricacies of the *Tokyo Metro*.

We ended up at a station that, according to *Madam*, who had *Japanese commoner* background knowledge, should have been close to the iconic double bridge that forms the main entrance to the *Palace*, located on the site of *Edo Castle*, the seat of the *Tokugawa Shōguns* who ruled *Japan* from *1603* until *1867*.

When the *Shōgunate* was overthrown in *1868* the capital, along with the *Imperial Residence*, moved from *Kyoto* to *Tokyo*, and over the next twenty years a new *Imperial Palace* was completed.

That version went up in flames on the night of *25 May 1945* in a firebombing raid, but it wasn't the first time structures on the site had been razed,



Previous fires had destroyed the area containing the old *donjon* and the night of **5 May 1873** saw the *Nishinomaru Palace* (the former *Shōgun*'s residence) reduced to ashes.

The new *Imperial Palace*, a wooden construction incorporating a *traditional Japanese exterior* with a fusion of *Japanese* and *European* elements on the inside, went up on the same site.

Wartime destruction meant the new main palace and residences were constructed on the western portion of the site while the eastern part was renamed *East Garden* and turned into a public park in **1968**.

The current Palace has a number of interconnected steel-framed reinforced concrete structures, completed in **1968**, with two storeys above ground level and one below.

Having alighted at ***Nijubashi station***, we made our way across ***Kokyogaien National Garden***, the large plaza in front of the Palace that leads to the main entrance to the Palace grounds at the ***Nijubashi (Double Bridge)***.

The stone bridge in front is called ***Meganebashi (Eyeglass Bridge)*** while the one in the rear, formerly a wooden bridge with two levels was apparently the actual ***Nijubashi***.

As it turned out, despite sharing a name with the bridge ***Nijubashi station*** wasn't that close.

Once we'd hiked across the plaza and taken the photos to prove we'd been there we needed a guide book or map that would give us an idea of what we wanted to look at.

It wasn't as if we were going to gain admission to the actual ***Palace*** grounds.

They're only open to the public on ***2 January*** (the New Year's Greeting) and ***23 December*** (the Emperor's Birthday).

There was a policeman on duty, and he wasn't entirely sure about maps, guide books and such either.

He did, however, point us back the way we came, suggesting there were restrooms over that way, and, possibly, an information booth.

As it turned out, he was right, though the whole thing was a bit further than expected.

Once we'd investigated, got our bearings, checked out the options and made a decision we headed off towards the section of the complex that was open to the public, the old ***Honmaru, Ninomaru, and Sannomaru*** compounds that now comprise the ***East Gardens*** of the ***Imperial Palace***.

There was, however, a slight technical difficulty.

The East Gardens are open to the public throughout the year except on ***Mondays, Fridays*** and special occasions.

Predictably we'd made our way all the way along the outer moat to the bridge that takes you to ***Otemon Gate*** before we found that out.

I suppose we could have consoled ourselves by continuing around the moat towards the ***Kitanomaru National Garden***, where we could have checked out the ***Budokan Hall***, the ***Science Museum*** and the ***National Museum of Modern Art***, but lunch somewhere in the ***Tokyo Station*** complex sounded like a far better idea.

That turned out to be just as well, because when we retreated for lunch the two of us hit a surprising nutritional wall, becoming suddenly ravenous.

That happens from time to time, but in this instance it was a case of feeling fine as we descended the escalator into the underground complex that houses a myriad of eating options then feeling ravenous within the space of a further two minutes.

There were plenty of places to choose from, more than we actually needed as the hunger pangs made a decision imperative, but the proliferation of eateries made it difficult to choose.

After considering various *Italian* and *Japanese* options, we end up going for *Vietnamese*.

Pho and fried rice for *Hughesy*, chicken soup and salad for *Madam* and the problem was solved.

Better still, it was solved in a location comfortably close to the station, and from there we made our way back to *Hotel S*, arriving around three.

Back in the room after checking email and other matters, I managed a power nap until five, which was probably what got me through and beyond the evening's concert.

It was just after five when I suggested we head out in search of a post concert half bottle.

Rather than going straight to the gourmet supermarket where I bought last night's bottle, we ended up heading across the road into *Roppongi Hills*, where *Madam's* research suggested there was a pretty good bottle shop.

And as it turned out (hardly surprising, the only time she'd failed to deliver was the morning's CD shop question) the research was right, and we found our way into an upmarket operation, where I managed to sight a range of half bottles.

Closer inspection, however, revealed them to be *Bordeaux* first growths at around ¥14500 a throw. Given *Madam's* notional conversion rate of a hundred yen to the dollar a \$145 half bottle of claret doesn't seem like the sort of thing to sip on while you're typing out the evening's setlist.

So, back to the drawing board.

I needed wine and dinner, *Madam* had her own agenda, and we split up as she headed off to a cake shop somewhere in the *Hills* and I made for familiar territory across *Roppongi Street*.

The quest for the gourmet grocer turned out to be a bit harder to find than you might think since I wasn't paying attention to the surroundings as *Madam* led the way in.

Still, I was only thoroughly bushed for about thirty seconds and managed to find my way back by heading into the *Roppongi station* complex and casting around for a familiar looking exit.

That worked, and I was stowing a half bottle of *Medoc* in the room around ten to six.



There was a slight further complication when I made my way downstairs for dinner, and was ushered into the *shoes off* section adjoining the restaurant, which was set up for a catered event.

Not that it was a problem, but you'd guess they would have preferred not to have to deal with old hairy foreigners intent on pasta with clams and a glass of *prosecco* when they're readying things for a Christmas party.

Back upstairs to brush my teeth before heading down the street to the *Ex*, I found *Madam* battling with the corkscrew I'd borrowed the previous evening.

It was obvious she wasn't familiar with the old *waiter's friend*, but the bottle had plenty of time to breathe once we'd managed to extract the cork.

Predictably, having made my way into the venue twice and confident I had things under control, when I got to the concert, they'd changed the entry procedures slightly.

Not that it was a problem, but the changes produced a massive queue for the compulsory drink.

Maybe the changes had something to do with the fact that the night's show was going live to air on *Japanese pay TV*, which may in turn have had something to do with a great show that ran slightly longer than the others. Further details [here](#).

In any case, I was back upstairs at *Hotel S* around 10:40, around half an hour later than previous two days, tapping out the setlist, sipping red, and drafting *the concert review* until the 375ml had been polished off.

At which point it was time for bed.



TOKYO > NAGOYA > OSAKA

Saturday, 14 December 2013

On the last day of the seven-day rail pass, the agenda involved getting back to *Osaka*, with lunch in *Nagoya en route*.

The key question, however, involved views of *Mount Fuji*, and as I typed this, heading out of *ShinYokohama*, the omens looked favourable.

It seems the *Frockster Factor* has finally been overcome.

Breakfast downstairs at the hotel had offered the usual healthy array, but significantly omitted the chicken salad which had been the highlight the previous two mornings.

Just when I was starting to regard it as something to look forward to amidst the array of *Disgustingly Healthy Offerings*.

Upstairs, we packed and headed off to *Roppongi Station*, thence to *Ebisu* and *Shinagawa*, where we joined the *Shinkansen* line.

It's not that far from *Tokyo* to *ShinYokohama*, we'd shortened the distance by boarding at *Shinagawa*, and we already knew you could see *Mount Fuji* from a westward-facing room at *Yokohama's New Otani Inn*.

On that basis, it should come as no surprise to learn it wasn't long after we left *ShinYokohama* when the *Frockster Factor* was finally overcome.

That initial sighting of *Fuji-San* was the signal for *Hughesy* to put the *iPad* to rest while we enjoyed the view and worked through the difficulties associated with taking a decent photo from a speeding *Shinkansen*.

Variations in the surrounding landscape, and, particularly, power lines and such strung along the train line added to those difficulties.

So the photos mightn't be the best, but they're there to prove a point.

Actually, two points.

First, we actually did get a good clear view of the mountain, far better than I'd been hoping for.





That's because of the second, *Frockster*-related point.

These photos show exactly how close the mountain is to the main *Shinkansen* line.

I'd seen photos that suggested it was, but was aware they may have been *Photoshopped* or otherwise digitally modified.

We'd been along this stretch of railway three or four times and the mountain had been, to all intents and purposes, invisible.

Maybe there was something in that *Frockster Factor* after all.

Eventually, with *Fuji-san* receding, I turned back to the *iPad* to finish off *last night's concert review*.



The job needed to be wound up while details were fresh in my mind.

In any case, the run into **Nagoya** across the central plain doesn't offer a lot of visual interest once you've been over it a couple of times.

Still, it's pleasant to recline the seat, and just let the visuals wash over you once you've got more pressing matters, like **concert reviews**, out of the way.

We stopped in **Nagoya** for the dual purposes of lunch and catching up with one of **The Notorious Drinking Girls**, who **Madam** hadn't seen for twenty years.

This dynamic duo, on their travels around the **Australian countryside** apparently had a penchant for soaking up the amber fluid that would have amazed and impressed **the average Aussie**, but these things invariably go on the back burner when you acquire husbands and young families.

The presence of young kids in these circumstances, apart from cramping your drinking style, tends to influence your choice of lunch venue.

We ended up in an outlet of a chain that caters for ankle biters by offering buckets of plastic wrapped toys to amuse kids while their parents eat and drink.

I watched a six year old absorbed in what appeared to be a rather basic mobile phone video game, and a five year old explore the possibilities of a plastic crab while *Madam* and the *Former Drinker* chatted away and I waited for my serving of fried oysters and *Yebisu*.

Back on the train I jotted down a few further notes and settled back to let the landscape wash over me on the hour and a bit run into *Osaka*.

Once we were off the *Shinkansen* and onto the subway system, what we encountered reinforced the notion that you need a three level understanding of *a large Japanese city's* geography if you want to get around.

You need to have a fair idea of the physical geography, the various districts and what you're likely to find in each.

That interacts with the infrastructure that operates on the surface, the bus routes and train lines.

Those, in turn, intersect with the third element which is, of course, the subway.

Once you know where you are (physical geography) and determine where you want to go (ditto) it's the intersection of the last two that delivers you from point A on the surface, which in this case was *ShinOsaka*, to Point B, the night's hotel in *Kitahama*, the old merchant district and from there to point C, the former working class area of *South Osaka* that *our host* for the evening is keen to promote to all and sundry.

That meant off the *Shinkansen*, down into the subway, two stops along this line, change, and one more to *Kitahama*.

We'd stayed at *Brighton City Kitahama* last time, were very impressed by the rooms (large, with good bathroom and an actual tub) and look like making it the default stop in *Osaka* if the price is right and other factors don't intervene, which, of course, they do.

Which is why we stayed at *Kishibe* on the night before the rail pass leg began.

During *The Principal's* guided tour of *South Osaka* we learned there are several hotels in the neighbourhood that offer conveniently located accommodation (one stop from *ShinOsaka*) at very reasonable prices, but the area has, over the years, acquired a reputation.

That reputation might have been justified in the past, he explained as a less than supple and overweight foreigner tried to come to terms with the on the floor seating in a popular side street hotpot eatery, *but the population that created the reputation is ageing, and the area has become heavily populated by backpackers and Chinese* (both mainland and Taiwanese).



Walking the streets between locations suggested a rundown area that has seen better days and is probably on the verge of gentrification, the same way so many equivalent districts in cities around the world have gone.

The contrast between tradition and the new generation was reinforced at the next stop, an eatery specialising in deep fried things on skewers that featured a *VW Kombi van* as part of the decor.

And, yes, you can eat in the van.

That was about it on the food side of things, though there were nibbles along the way as we made our way through a couple of *Chinese karaoke* bars in the district.

Our Host is s learning *Chinese*, and the *karaoke* interactions with the people behind the bars seems to help.

The *karaoke* places we visited weren't quite what I'd become accustomed to in *Australia*

Not that I frequent such places, but I've been to enough to get a good idea of the *standard Australian version*, which tends to employ someone who can sing and fills in when no one in the audience is game to get up and have a go.

Fair enough if that sort of thing floats your boat.

The places we visited here were a case of being handed a microphone as you sit on your bar stool, singing along to a radio station selected by the customers.

No stage, no queue, just indicate you feel like a sing, select a song and away you go.

Hughesy's take on *The House of the Rising Sun* went down well with the clientele, though things came unstuck on *You've Lost That Loving Feeling* since I just don't have the range.

Maybe I should have gone for *I Was Born Under a Wandering Star*.

We wouldn't have got to the second place if *The Principal* hadn't picked up on a potentially nasty vibe and got us away from the first venue fairly smartly, but the whole experience delivered a very pleasant night.

I could have done with one or two fewer beers, and a more comfortable seating arrangement at the hotpot stop, but interesting.

Very interesting, and no one needed much rocking once we were back at *Brighton City*.



OSAKA

Sunday, 15 December 2013

It's always good to sleep in, and as previously noted *Japanese hotels* tend to have quite effective blackout curtains.

We'd had a late night, so there was a late rise and we set out for a light breakfast at a nearby *patisserie* though we could have done reasonably well at the hotel coffee shop.

Gokan patisserie was just around the corner and down the road in a former business house in the merchant district.

I've been in similar buildings elsewhere, with a large central space and an assortment of what were probably offices around the central space on two levels.

The central space housed the bakery retail operation and people after nibbles and coffee are ushered upstairs into one or other of the former office spaces.

The service is predictably attentive and the nibbles excellent.

The coffee wasn't bad either.

So that was breakfast done, and once we'd reclaimed the baggage there were three items on the agenda for the rest of the day.

The first was the inevitable relocation to the next hotel, which was just around the corner (okay, two) from **Zepp Namba**, which was the venue for item #3 on the agenda, the fourth **Costello** concert.

In between we had to meet up with **The Sister** and **The Rowdy Niece** for lunch, which didn't seem like a major source of difficulty, but we got ourselves into one of those circumstances where you don't quite manage to get the intersection of the physical geography and the underground infrastructure right.

We made our way to the right underground station in what should have been plenty of time to find the hotel, check in and then rock over to meet up with our visitors from **July/August**, who'd done more than their fair share of making sure this little odyssey had

(a) *happened* and

(b) *turned out well on the concert front.*

Tickets for four concerts came *via The Sister*. I wanted to reassure her that the local convenience store lottery (you'll find a **Family Mart** on every second street corner, or at least that was the way it seemed) had delivered good seats.

Having arrived at the right station your next task is to select the correct exit and have a fair idea where you're going. We weren't very strong on the second, and totally messed up the first, so it underlined the need to find your way to the correct exit and have a sense of where you're going from there.

We didn't have it quite nailed, and, consequently, we were late for lunch.

I've never been quite sure how late you need to be to qualify as *fashionably* late, but we were late to the point where it morphs into *surely they ought to be here by now?*

That had **The Sister** out on the footpath scanning the horizon.

Meanwhile, **The Rowdy Niece** did her usual non-disruptive thing upstairs in a very good restaurant, turning out very good food in the **French-Italian mode**, although the portions as limited in size as you tend to find when you head over towards fine dining.

The food went well with a **Gamay Pinot Noir** blend and the combination fuelled lengthy conversation.

After lunch was out of the way we wandered off into the streets around *Dotonburi*, which provided an opportunity for a little subtle ribbing of *The Rowdy Niece*, who was obviously itching (*not*) to head off and let out her inner bullhorn wielder as a demonstration about something to do with *Korea* made its way along a busy street a couple of hundred metres ahead of us.

You might attribute the fact that we found ourselves in interesting side streets rather than on major thoroughfares to the need to keep *Rowdy* from expressing revolutionary tendencies.

But it a desire to browse in an interesting shopping environment would be closer to the mark.

I happened to chance on a music shop along the way, the sort of place where I could easily indulge in an extended browse and probably part with a substantial sum of money.

When you've got people waiting outside on the footpath, and you're not familiar with the local geography that's not an option.

It wasn't long after that when we bade goodbye to our hosts on another footpath, outside the store where we were looking to buy pens to interact with our respective *iPads*.

Once we'd accomplished that task we made our way back to the hotel, landing there as much by good luck as good management.

Actually, if we hadn't spotted a familiar looking hotel on the other side of the road to reassure us we were headed in the right direction finding the place could well have been tricky.

We knew we were headed in the right direction, but weren't sure whether this was the right road.

But spot a familiar landmark, or, in this case, a name lodged in the memory bank, and everything's relatively cool.

We booked in, settled into the room, and *Madam's What time does the concert start?* produced a check of tickets and a much earlier departure than I'd anticipated.

If the question hadn't been asked we might have rocked up at least half an hour after the show started.

A lunchtime question about starting time had been answered with a *seven-thirty*, omitting an *I think* and failing to note the expression of surprise from someone who's rather more *au fait* with the way things run over here than her sister, who has spent the last twenty-odd years in *Australia*.

The conversation was, predictably, in *Japanese*, so I didn't pick up *that's late for a Sunday* (or words to that effect).

We'd also learned that the *¥500 drink charge* is, in effect, standard operating practice in these parts.



In any case, *Madam* checked at around four-thirty, we were out the door shortly thereafter and around an hour later we were seated in row G, enjoying the different ambience at a different venue.

Once we were inside it was obvious that *Zepp Namba* is a far more relaxed environment than the Ex in *Roppongi*.

The entrance was entirely devoid of people yelling instructions through bullhorns, and there were no PA announcements reminding us that photographs were forbidden.

I joined a stream of punters getting photos taken in front of the iconic item and was on my way back to the seats when I noted a familiar-looking bearded gentleman thanking someone who'd taken a happy snap.

Strange, I thought. Looks like Steve Nieve. Must be his brother.

As the figure who bore a remarkable resemblance to *Costello's* longtime keyboard playing associate headed off I remarked on the resemblance, and *Madam* pointed out that he'd been stopped by a couple of *Japanese girls* and was in the process of signing autographs.

Obviously, *Steve*...



And, a couple of hours, after yet another highly enjoyable concert we headed not quite straight back to the hotel.

There were other matters that needed attention, namely a search for beer, public phones and *gyoza*.

And so, eventually, with the set list typed and the *concert review* commenced, to bed.



11

JAPAN 2013: THE LAST PART



OSAKA > KYOTO

Monday 16 December 2013

There comes a time on every trip when mundane issues impinge on the travel arrangements.

Where such issues are concerned, they don't come much more mundane than the question of *laundry*, with particular reference to clean supplies of jocks, socks and other undergarments.

We had a relatively late check out at eleven the morning after the final *Costello* concert, *a coin laundry* on the site and breakfast to slot in between the commencement of *the laundry cycle* and the check on whether things were dry enough.

As it turned out, they weren't. *Quite*. That was the result of a slightly later than perfect start and a phone call from *The Sister* that ran right up towards checkout time.

We managed to negotiate a little more dryer time out of the front desk.

That wouldn't have required any negotiation at all if the lift didn't demand a room key to operate, but it did, and the front desk obliged with continued access after we'd officially moved into ex-guest status.

Some things weren't quite dry, but the haul to *Kyoto* was relatively short, and we were able to check in immediately after we arrived at the hotel beside *Kyoto* station around one-fifteen.

There was one other task that needed to be attended to after *the laundry* was done, and that was the now routine matter of shipping *The Red Suitcase* back to *The Mother*.

With three days to go and a couple of layers of warm clothing in use, what we needed for *Tuesday*, *Wednesday* and *Thursday* morning could go into what amounted to carry on luggage, so *The Red Suitcase* was temporarily surplus to requirements.

We were in the process of packing *Hughesy's gear* into the blue bag when we found the gloves I thought we left behind in *Bowen*.

Just in time, as it turned out because conditions on the ground in *Kyoto* were bitterly cold.

Not quite *freezing*, but cold enough to have you glad of an effective layer of pinkie protection.

There was a courier depot just around the corner from the hotel, so we resumed our peregrinations much lighter in the luggage department.

The switches between hotel and subway station, subway and *JR* line and between *Kyoto Station* and the *Century Hotel* ran like clockwork and, having checked in we found ourselves with a couple of hours we could devote to a temple visit.

Just across the river, definitely within walking distance, we had *Sanjūsangendō*, one of the leading attractions if temples are the kind of thing that floats your boat.

A little further up the road, *Chishakuin* offers another option, and a national museum is straight across the road but was undergoing renovations.

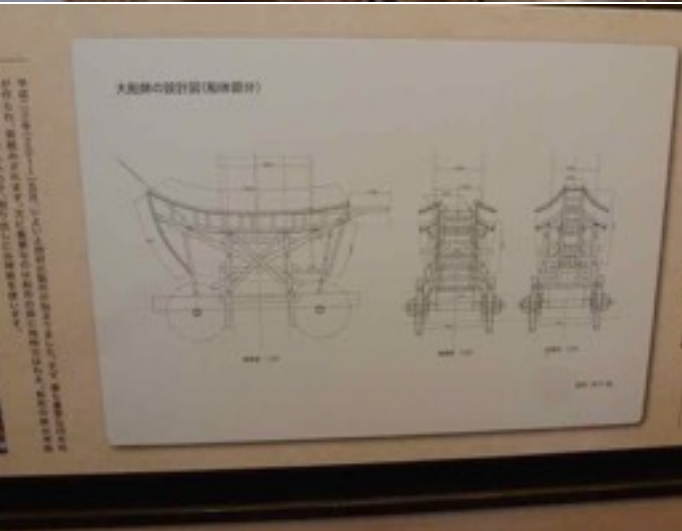
In any case, we've adopted a policy of limiting ourselves to one (or two if they're reasonably close) sightseeing options per day.

And as far as *Sanjūsangendō* is concerned, one is almost definitely enough.

Go anywhere else afterwards and the second site will probably pale in comparison, head elsewhere first and then on to *Sanjūsangendō* and you'll probably end up consigning the earlier visit to the dark recesses of vague memory.

Here's a prime example.

Until I went back to look at the photographic record, I'd forgotten all about this...



Walking gives you the opportunity to pick up on other things along the way.

An old guy on the footpath and a reference to a free display caused us to turn left into a ground floor shop front in downtown **Kyoto** where we found a group of people intent on reviving aspects of the city's cultural heritage promoting a project to restore traditional procession floats.

Or floats for traditional processions, either way, you probably catch my drift.

The recreated float is impressively huge, and should present an imposing sight as it makes its way through downtown **Kyoto** once it is finished.

Across the river and up the hill we had a choice of entrances when we reached the destination, but we looped around the perimeter fence rather than going in through what turned out to be the exit.



Predictably, where we were going is not *Sanjūsangendō* (*Hall with thirty-three spaces between the columns*) at all.

That name describes its most notable feature, the 120-metre main hall, which is either *the world's longest wooden building* or *Japan's longest wooden structure*.

Possibly, both. Either way, it's a truly monumental structure.

Counting the spaces between the supports was a traditional measure of a building's length.

The temple's official name is *Rengeōin*, *Hall of the Lotus King*.

Founded in 1164, destroyed by fire in 1249 with the main hall rebuilt in 1266, the temple's reputation is based on one of the most impressive assemblies of statues in the world.

You might be tempted to use *collection* instead of *assembly*, but with a thousand life-size statues of the *Thousand Armed Kannon* in fifty columns ten rows deep around a seated *Kannon Bodhisattva* (*Sahasrabhujaarya avalokiteśvara*) that dates back to 1254 *assembly* seems the way to go.

If a thousand and one *Kannons* aren't enough, the assembly is surrounded by twenty-eight statues of deities who guard the *Buddhist universe*.

They're *Kannon's* disciples and embody various virtues.



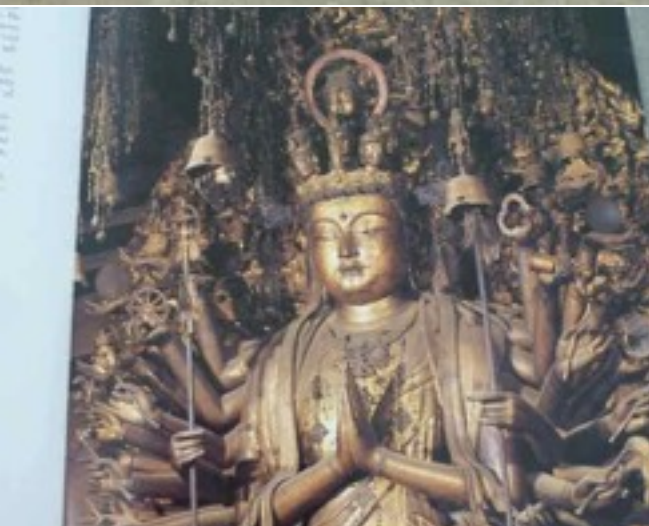
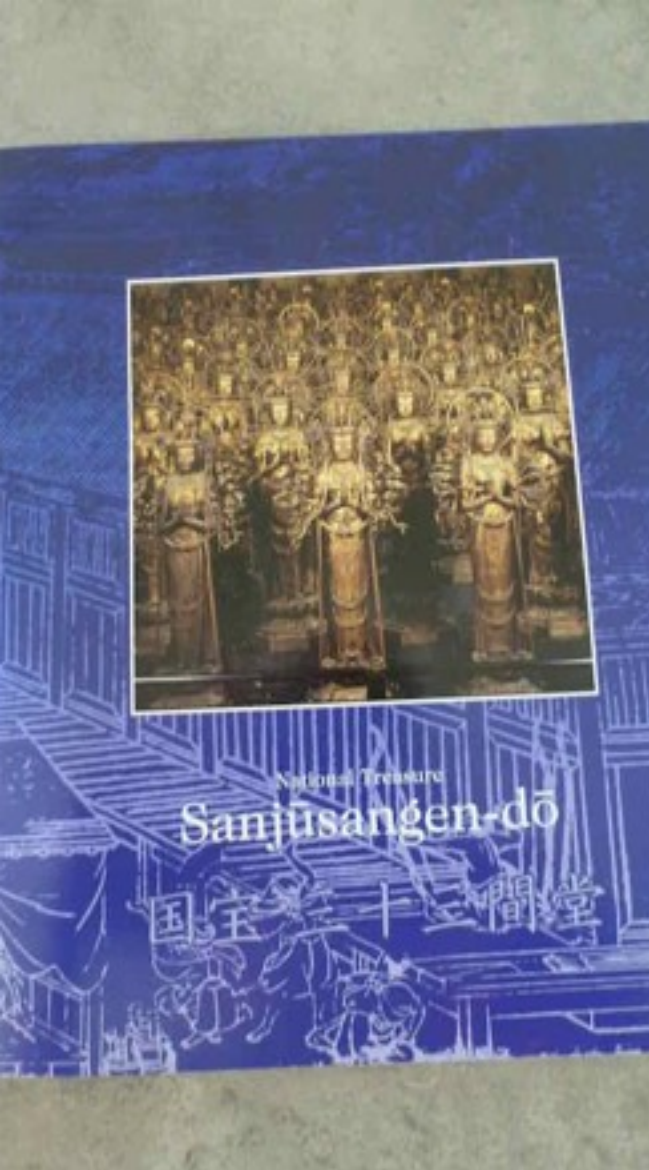
The collection is rounded out by two traditional *Buddhist temple guardians*: *Raijin*, god of thunder, and *Fujin*, god of wind.

Kannon is the *Bodhisattva of compassion*, and the statue radiates a peaceful and benevolent attitude.

The mathematics involved with the thousand arms takes a bit of explaining.

The sculptures show *forty-two arms* along with *eleven heads* that will give them a better grasp of the extent of human suffering.

The arms, according to *Buddhist* teachings, fight off suffering on twenty-five planes of existence. Two of them are required for everyday purposes, and *forty suffering-fighters* across *twenty-five planes* comes to *a thousand*.



Simple, once you accept the multi-plane notion.

Of the thousand statues, one hundred and twenty-four were rescued from the fire that destroyed the original structure.

The others, along with the centrepiece, were carved from *Japanese cypress* and covered with gold leaf as part of the reconstruction.

The temple is a venue for archery contests (*Tōshiya*) on the west veranda and the *Rite of the Willow*. Worshippers are touched on the head with a willow branch to cure and prevent headaches. Both take place in *January* each year.

The Inquisitive Reader could have been muttering *This verbiage is all very well, Hughesy, but where's the photographic evidence?*

if I hadn't taken steps to avoid the question. TIR might not be staved off with a statement about *cameras and video equipment being forbidden*.

But that's the way it is.



Anticipating the problem, I shelled out for the official booklet.

The possible breaches of copyright will have to do, along with the assurance it's something best experienced in the physical dimension rather than as a two-dimensional image.

The weariness factor was starting to set in as we left the temple, but there was a bus stop half way along the northern perimeter wall.

A bus appeared within minutes to whisk us back to *Kyoto station*.

When we checked in, we'd received a *voucher* that could be used in the hotel coffee shop.



After the walk, coffee and cake seemed like a good idea. The coffee shop turned out to be a stylish affair, and the delicacies served up were quite adequate for people who'd skipped lunch and needed something to keep them going until dinner.

Given the weather conditions we weren't inclined to venture very far in search of dinner, but a hotel located conveniently beside *Kyoto Station* meant there was no need to.

Like most operations in *Japan's* cities, the station encompasses a dizzying array of retail options, with a range of eateries covering most of the likely options of interest.

If you're after *Peruvian-Californian fusion food* you're probably out of luck.

But if you're looking to any of the variations on *Japanese*, along with *Chinese*, *Korean*, *American*, *French*, *English* or *Italian* you'll more than likely find something that offers *a Japanese take* on your fancy.

As it turned out, *Madam* had done the usual research.

She pointed us towards a niche section of the restaurant options where, along with the *French*, *Italian*, *Chinese* and *Japanese* operations, there was a *Spanish* eatery.



It delivered a quite tasty *tortilla* (the *Spanish omelette* rather than the *Mexican corn bread wrap*).

We also enjoyed a a creamy seafood stew and a seafood *paella* that went rather well with a bottle of *Spanish White*.

There was still enough room for half a litre of *Kirin* that I from the vending machine when we got back.

Actually, figuring on the regular consumption pattern, I bought two, but there was definitely no room for the second.

That, I reasoned, would do to celebrate reclaiming the Ashes the following afternoon.



KYOTO

Tuesday, 17 December 2013

An earlier night started a shift back towards the old body clock cycle, and while I'm usually awake comfortably before 6:15, that's usually the result of an earlier bedtime.

As it was, I crawled out of the cot, spent a bit of time on the *Travelogue* and promptly crawled back to the cot for another spell that lasted until I was told it was my turn for the morning shower.

After that, we were off to the *Number Three Breakfast Viking in Japan*.

We'd been in the coffee shop the previous afternoon and had the chance to get a glimpse of an impressively large serving area.

News that this was *#3 in the country* meant I wasn't going to be taking my time with the ablutions.

Downstairs, I was disappointed to note the lack of *vodka* in the area around the tomato juice.



The *Viking* offered the standard options but added a touch of luxury in the form of *foie gras*, *caviar* and *extremely rare roast beef*.

And *desserts*.

Yes, if you were that way inclined you could opt for sweets at the end of your breakfast.

I'd loaded up in the interests of avoiding lunch, and by the time the topic of dessert was raised I was at a point where I couldn't eat another thing.

I'd responded to a couple of remarks about the morning's intake with an *oink*.

I reckoned I was justified because I knew I'd need the fuel given the day's game plan, which involved a bus across to *Ginkakuji* temple, which we'd been to before and weren't planning to revisit.

We were, however, planning another walk along *The Philosopher's Path*.

Unlike the previous attempt, where crowds made us bail out before we'd completed the length of the canal-side stroll, this time, we were planning on doing the lot, and visiting a few temples.

One definite, possibly a second and, should we feel like more there were some possibilities we could visit on the way to the *Gion* district, where *Madam* needed to do some shopping.

With breakfast duly demolished we headed off, looking for a bus to get us to *Ginkakuji*.

There were a number of possibilities, involving a variety of routes.

When we asked the old bloke at the bus station, he didn't clutter us up with options. *Number One!* was the direction, in a tone that suggested there really weren't any alternatives.

There's nothing like a definite opinion.

We joined the appropriate queue, which wasn't that long when we arrived.

By the time it did, there was a good bus load of people behind us, along with the people in front who looked like they might have gone close to filling all the seats on the bus that pulled up.

Still, we wangled a seat, and as the rest of the queue piled on it was a definite case of squeezing room only. Quite literally, the bus was chocker.

It was a limited express affair, running straight from the station to *Kyoto's* most famous temple.

That's a significant statement when you consider the number of famous temples in *Kyoto*, but when we arrived, I figured I knew why the old guy had been so sure that this was the bus.

Quite simple. Everyone was going to *Kyomizu*.

Even if we'd boarded at the end of the queue at the station and suffered the sardine treatment on the first leg, there'd be no problem grabbing a seat after the first stop.

We alighted at *Ginkakuji* and headed off, enjoying the contrast to the earlier visit, which was slap bang in the peak of the *sakura* season.

The Philosopher's Path (Tetsugaku no Michi) runs beside a canal in the northern part of *Higashiyama* district and takes its name from philosopher *Nishida Kitaro's* habit of using the path for his daily walk on his way to work at *Kyoto University*.

With hundreds of cherry trees lining the canal, which was built during the *Meiji Period* to revitalise the local economy, and also powered *Japan's first hydroelectric plant*, the path is one of *Kyoto's* most popular *hanami* (*cherry blossom season*) locations.



The two-kilometre walk has more than its share of restaurants, cafes, and boutiques along the path, as well as a number of temples and shrines.

Last time there were thousands of visitors revelling in the *sakura*.

This time, we weren't quite on our own. If you wanted to be jostled, you'd have to go out of your way to find someone to bump into, but for a leisurely walk and quiet contemplation, this was the way to go.

Most of the leaves were gone, but you get a better view of the canal and surrounds without the mass of pink to distract you.

Do the walk in peak season and you'll be one of the thousands.

Here we were two out of what might have been a couple of dozen, at least until we diverted to *Honenin* temple, where the tranquility was only broken by a passing group of Junior High students and a subtle blast of punk rock emanating from someone's music player earbuds.



Things would be different in peak season, but it was quiet contemplation and enjoyment of the subtly landscaped scenery.

Back on the path, we moved on downhill, planning to end up at **Nanzenji**, but made a brief detour when we reached the end of the **Philosopher's Path**, sidetracking into a temple and graveyard that's not significant enough to feature on the city map but was nonetheless quite charming.

If you're into crowds and being jostled, then go for the obvious attractions, but **Kyoto** has thousands of sites, and some of the less acclaimed aren't that far short of the headliners as far as the aesthetics are concerned.

It's also down to the time of year when you visit it.



On our first visit, at one of the iconic *Zen* temples on a sunny *sakura Sunday*, we'd headed through the grounds with a couple of hundred other visitors.

It was the sort of environment where you want to take your time, but if you wanted to sit, gaze and ponder you had to wait for someone who was seated to get up,

When he or she did, it was a case of first in, best dressed.

Our primary destination, this time, was *Nanzenji*, one of *Japan's* most famous *Zen* temples, head temple of a school within the *Rinzai* sect of *Zen Buddhism*.

That's the one that emphasises the use of *koan* (*paradoxical puzzles*) to help the aspiring student of *Zen* to overcome the boundaries of logic.

Nanzenji dates back to 1264, when *Emperor Kameyama* built a retirement villa there and converted it into a *Zen* temple in 1291.

The buildings were destroyed during the *Onin War*.



Most of the present structures were erected after the seventeenth century.

Given the direction we were coming from, and unfamiliarity with the actual lie of the land we entered the complex from the side, rather than through the *Sanmon* entrance gate constructed in 1628 by *Todo Takatora* in memory of the soldiers who died in the siege of *Osaka Castle* in 1615.

The temple was affiliated with the *Tokugawa era Shōguns*, and it has been suggested the massive gate, with an excellent view across the city, served as an observation post to monitor imperial activity.

From the balcony on the gate's upper level, you can take in the same view, but you'll pay ¥50 to do it. The top floor also has statues and paintings, but the main attraction seems to be the view.



In the end, we ended up deciding to save the money, but if we're back, I'd be tempted to take a look and evaluate that observation post theory.

The gate was on our right as we came in, and we diverted from temple-viewing to investigate what must be the most recent construction within the temple grounds.

A brick aqueduct built during the *Meiji Period* is part of the canal system that was constructed to carry water and goods between *Kyoto* and *Lake Biwa* in neighbouring *Shiga Prefecture*.

In other words, a continuation of the *Philosopher's Path* canal.

We could have gone further, on to *Nanzenin*, one of *Nanzenji's* sub-temples located on the location of *Emperor Kameyama's* original villa.

With the emperor's mausoleum, a temple hall and a moss and rock garden, it might be worth ¥300 they charge for admission, but we had other fish to fry.



We headed on past the *Hatto* (a lecture hall not open to the public), to the *Hojo*, the abbot's quarters, where we were only too happy to hand over the ¥500 for admission to the former imperial palace building donated to the temple in 1611.

The building's chambers are separated by sliding doors (*fusuma*) with impressive wall panels, but the main attraction is the *Zen garden*.

It's in much the same style as the gravel garden at *Ryoanji* with its large rocks set against a plain white wall behind the raked gravel. The rocks are said to resemble tigers and cubs wading through water.

Regardless of whether you see the resemblance, the sight is something that needs to be taken in at leisure and was one of the highlights of this trip to *Japan*.



There are a dozen sub-temples on the grounds where American poet *Gary Snyder* (*Japhy Ryder* in *Kerouac's The Dharma Bums*) underwent *Zen* training.

Apart from *Nanzenin*, *Konchiin* and *Tenjuan* are noted for their gardens, and, predictably, they are said to be particularly attractive in autumn. They're lit up at night, so expect crowds if you're headed that way in peak season.

We'd managed to sidestep that one rather adroitly, thanks to the *Elvis Costello* scheduling.

When we got to *Nanzenji*, we were two out of a couple of dozen scattered around the extensive site.

After we'd paid to walk through the sand gardens, there were a handful of other visitors, all of them careful to avoid cluttering up everyone else's photographic record.

Predictably, you're asked not to photograph interior panels that wouldn't have shown up well without lighting, which is probably why the instruction is there.

Turn your attention towards the immaculate gardens of carefully raked gravel and you can snap away to your heart's content and preserve a record of quite sublime landscaping.

That, once we made our way back to the shoe-wearing zone, was enough for the day, at least as far as the temple bit was concerned.

But *Madam* had landmarks to look at, and gift shopping that had to be slotted in.

I had a headache, a drink of water was a high priority, and after a traipse through the back blocks to water pipes that had piqued *Someone's* interest, I managed to find a vending machine.

Managed to find might seem to be overdoing it since you'll find vending machines almost everywhere, but the particular section of back blocks and main urban thoroughfare we traversed was almost entirely bereft of them.

It wasn't exactly rolling in public transport options either, or at least, none that would take us where *Madam* wanted to go, so we hoofed it.

Our path took us past significant temples (*Shorenin* and *Chionin*) and through the grounds of *Yasaka* shrine. All would have warranted further investigation if we weren't effectively templated out.



We weren't that far from *Kodaji*, *Entokuin*, *Kenninji* and *Rokuharamitsuji* if those aren't enough next time around.

All of which underlines the point.

Kyoto has enough temples and other attractions to keep the visitor very busy for a very long time, so don't expect to do the lot in one or two visits.

Take a year, ensconce yourself in the city, familiarise yourself with the topography, seasonal variations and infrastructure and head out every day, weather permitting, and you'll probably still have things on the bucket list twelve months later.

We ended up on the verges of *Gion*, the *geisha district*, but *Madam's* focus was on gift shopping, which left *Hughesy* standing on the footpath watching the passing parade.

There was plenty to watch.

You might have hypothesised some occasion in the offing given the number of *kimono*-clad passers-by, but a check with *Our Resident Authority On These Matters* suggests it was just *business as usual* in the temple precinct and surrounds.

From there, with one bit of gift shopping complete we crossed into downtown *Kyoto*, diverted into an arcade, got things finished and took the *Number 5 bus* back to *Kyoto Station* and the hotel.

Madam's cash reserves needed replenishing, and I had plenty of *Travelogue* to catch up on, but once I'd managed to let myself into the room, there was more important business to be attended to.

A quick switch to *Safari* revealed the Perth Test had reached a satisfactory conclusion, with a five-nil drubbing of *The Old Enemy* a distinct possibility.

Under the circumstances, a celebratory ale seemed obligatory.

The *Travelogue* catch-up was postponed until the morrow, which promised to be bleak, drizzly, and unsuitable for walking anywhere where the views were the primary consideration.

We headed out for dinner just after six, not sure where we were going, but pizza had been installed as an odds-on favourite.

The best option seemed to be *Salvatore Cuomo*, an operation in the upper levels of the station complex with views across the city.

That was the first option we checked, and when it offered what looked like exactly what we were after there was no need to look any further.



An order for two pizzas produced a question from the waitress about our capacity to handle that quantity of pizza. As it turned out, we did it on our respective ears.

Hughesy would have been lining up for dessert if *Cassata* had appeared on the menu.

It had been there on the incarnation before last, and may well be included in the next one.

But it wasn't there this time around, and I headed back to the room via the vending machine, which yielded a post-prandial tin of *Asahi Super Dry*.

Nine o'clock saw the regular sawing of logs as *Madam* indulged in a hot bath.

It was well after the scheduled time to rise when I hit the new day the following morning.



KYOTO > KOBE

Wednesday, 18 December 2013

There are times when news that wouldn't be welcome under other circumstances comes as something of a blessing.

A bleak *Kyoto* morning, when checkout time is late, and the only item on the must do list is a transfer to *Kōbe*, is one of them.

Madam had pencilled in a visit to *Fushimi Inari Taisha*, which sits conveniently close to *Kyoto Station* and the hotel, but, to be frank, I wasn't that keen.

Leaden skies and drizzle, if not actual rain was enough to kill off whatever enthusiasm I could muster, and, in any case, I'd had my fill of temples and shrines this time around.

You can, after all, have too much of a good thing.

There was, however, one slight issue that could have been raised in the wake of the morning's descent to the lobby for another go at *Japan's Number Three Breakfast Viking*.

After two goes at it, we probably need something like a twelve-hour route march every day for the next week to work off the excess poundage.

That substantial intake every morning has, on the other hand, significant advantages since it keeps us going until dinner time and makes things like the previous day's temple ramble possible.

Part of the reason we covered as much territory as we did lay in the fact that we didn't have to divert for lunch.

In any case, something like this morning's selection will keep you going all day.

Admittedly, I went back for *smoked salmon* and pastries (two *croissants* and a *chocolate Danish*), but I had the self-control to avoid visiting the sweets section of the buffet, except for a passing snapshot just to point out that, yes, you can have dessert for breakfast.

Madam couldn't resist, and though she suggested I might enjoy the *chocolate mousse* that was on offer I was able to resist its siren song.

We headed back upstairs, where I busied myself with the *Travelogue* until around eleven-fifteen.

That seemed to be the right time to gather up the goods and chattels, bundle as much as possible into *The Blue Bag* and prepare for the two-leg trip to *Kōbe*.

Madam had purchases that needed to be made *en route* in *Osaka*, and we needed to kill some time. I added a sure fire time killer with a suggestion that I'd be interested in tracking down a copy of the remastered and vastly expanded *Rock of Ages*.

After we'd checked out, we made it over to the station without needing to bring out the umbrellas.

It was a brisk fifty-metre walk between the hotel and the nearest overhead protection from the station complex, and describing the weather conditions as mizzle was probably being overgenerous.

On the other hand, it was cold, and if you stayed out in it for a while, you would get wet.

We packed ourselves onto an *Osaka*-bound train, and after we'd alighted and joined the crowd at *Osaka Station* the first job was locating the coin lockers.

From there we were off into one of the new retail precincts, descending into the basement for the *World Beer* facility, where *Australian brews* were conspicuous by their absence in the display.

I needed something to keep me occupied while *Madam* headed off to make a few purchases and take the odd photograph, so she left me there with a draught wheat beer, which was eminently drinkable, but at the price (¥900) you won't be getting a skinful in a lengthy session.

I nursed one and was just finishing the dregs when she returned.



It wasn't so much the absence of *Australian beers* that prompted my inquisitiveness, more a matter of seeing which, if any, had secured a spot.

Looking at, for example, the *American beers* in the highly decorative sales pitch, I couldn't detect anything I'd heard of apart from the ubiquitous *Budweiser*.

I've seen suggestions that *Bud* hardly qualifies as beer at all...

A careful scan of the *all-in-Japanese* listing at the back of the folder revealed *three Australian brews* listed as #s 176, 177 and 178, and with the most likely translator away with the shoppers I was still no wiser as to what they were.



She returned with news that she'd found a wine place, and a **Subway** outlet that appeared to be growing its own healthy greens, so we went for a squiz at that.

I was cut loose to commence my search for the **Rock of Ages** rerelease if I could find the **HMV store** at the very top of the building.

It took some time, and I drew a blank, but I did locate an impressive railway modelling shop offering scale models of **Japanese rolling stock** at prices that translated into the several hundred dollars.

Not a hobby for school kids on a limited allowance.

We made our way back down the levels, with **Madam** stopping off to buy a belt along the way, then crossed the **JR Station** complex in search of **Tower Records** and a couple of used CD operations that eventually produced results, though the ¥14500 they were asking for what I was after seemed a little steep.

Subsequent research revealed it was available through **Amazon** for a tad under \$US62 though the freight impost would probably be substantial.

In any case, despite the relative lack of success, we'd walked a couple of kilometres and worked off some of the morning's breakfast.

When we returned to the station and made our way to the relevant platform, it seemed there had been some disruption to the network.

The express to **Kōbe** was running a whole three minutes late, prompting profuse apologies for any inconvenience caused on the PA and misgivings about whether we'd manage to find seats.

But we did, and we decanted ourselves at **Sannomiya**, moving smartly over to the bus terminal, where the shuttle bus for the **Okura** and **Meriken Park Oriental** was just pulling in.

That, in turn, delivered us to the hotel just after three-thirty, and we found the same girl who'd enjoyed a holiday on the **Gold Coast** when she was little on hand to convey our baggage to the room.

You don't need to be **Einstein** to figure out how the next hour and a bit was filled in, but just before five I put the tapping to one side as we made our way towards the evening's dinner rendezvous.

The notion **Madam** might head out by herself to pick up supplies of **green tea** with **Hughesy** to follow on a later shuttle for a six o'clock rendezvous had been floated earlier, but I ended up tagging along for the shopping expedition.

Which is just as well, because it turned out I didn't know the route between the point where the bus deposited us and the **JR ticket office** as well as I thought I did.

The shopping bit took us into the basement of **Sogo**, a major department store, and **Madam** left me to peruse the shelves at a convenient wine store.

The subject of **Australian wine** and an apparently low profile in what I've seen of **mainstream Japanese society** was something we returned to over dinner, and given the fact that the subject impinges on one of **Hughesy's** primary obsessions it's worth going into here.

Now, I have to admit I haven't done extensive research on this, but I've kept my eyes open as we've moved around, and sightings of familiar labels have been on the *very occasional* side of *extremely few and far between*.

In the wine shop whose shelves got a reasonably thorough perusal, they identified countries of origin by flags on the price tag, and I didn't sight a single **Australian flag**.

Before our cousins across **The Ditch** start gloating, while I did spot a **Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc** it took a very careful and rather lengthy search to locate a second.

A couple of hours later I was jotting down the names of a couple of **Australian wineries** that would be worth looking for, but I wouldn't be holding my breath as far as finding anything from **Cullen**, **Grosset**, **Rockford** and **Coldstream Hills** is concerned.

It was more an exercise of hope rather than an expectation of success, but you never know.

Our Hostess might do better with **Brown Brothers**.

I suppose *Jacobs Creek* is always a likely sighting, but based on very basic research I wouldn't be holding high hopes of success.

Once we'd been ushered into a shoes off private booth, I was relieved to find there was space for legs under the table.

The next couple of hours were comfortable with the food arriving in a steady flow of little dishes.

I managed to attack most of them with chopsticks, reserving the fork that was delivered just in case for the bits that were too tricky when it came to basic chopstick skills.

All in all, a very pleasant evening, with good food, wide-ranging conversation, and a steady stream of good draught beer that kept the inner beast satisfied.

It was shortly after nine-thirty when we decanted ourselves out of the eatery, and in what seemed to be par for the course arrived at the bus stand to find the shuttle ready and waiting, seemingly slightly ahead of schedule.

After several beers through the evening, there was no need to find a vending machine.



Not that such a device would be found in an establishment like the *Okura*.

On the other hand, I was out to get a photo of the Christmas lights at the front of the hotel, and once the bus deposited us, we headed down through the mizzle to fulfil that modest ambition, passing our friendly baggage handler on the way.

As a trainee, she'd obviously drawn the short straw as far as pavement guest greeting duties were concerned, and our brief exposure down there and back in the cold, with wind blowing the mizzle into places it wouldn't normally reach, suggested a need for warmer clothing for the designated guest greeters.

On the way back, I remarked that she deserved *a medal as big as a frying pan* for sticking to the task, a comment that produced a laugh.

Maybe, on some future visit when the trainee has moved up into senior management we might find ourselves recognized and upgraded to the penthouse.

Not, I hasten to add, *that there was anything wrong with the room we had*, but one can always aspire to greater things, without real expectations.

And, in any case, people who are sent to stand out in the cold need cheering up *n'est ce pas?*



KOBE > KANSAI INTERNATIONAL

Thursday, 19 December 2013

Flight day started around 7:40 with the *Japanese hotel room blackout* once again proving ultra effective.

Downstairs for another go at the *Viking*, we found ourselves back in the *Camelia Room*, where the spread was far more compact than our earlier visit, but just as extensive if you catch my drift.

They'd moved us into the wedding reception room last time, and the options were somewhat more spread out.

As I made my way towards the fruit juice, the tomato juice was again in evidence, along with the bottle of vodka and the handy batch of *Tabasco*. I refrained from the temptation to start with a *Bloody Mary*, opting for a dash of *chilli* in a common or garden tomato juice.

After two days attacking *Japan's Number Three Breakfast Viking*, I felt we were qualified to make a comparative assessment and, for mine, the *Okura* mightn't quite match the variety but definitely has the edge as far as quality is concerned.

Plus, of course, the possibility of a *Bloody Mary* should one be required.

We were back upstairs around nine-fifteen, and I was back in the lobby shortly after that, accessing the *WiFi* and filling in time before an eleven o'clock checkout.

We've got the final day routine down pat, with a transfer to *Sannomiya* followed by a subway trip out to *Myodani*.

That, in turn, melds into a foray into the shopping centre while *Madam* stocks up on things she can't buy in downtown *Bowen*.

This can take anything up to an hour, and as long as I can bring the *iPod* into play while I take up a seat, I'm reasonably happy.

There's plenty of passing parade to watch, and the soundtrack is better than what gets delivered over *the shopping mall PA*.

On this occasion, like every other time we've been out in public over the past fortnight the PA was ringing out the seasonal bells, and the *iPod* was a welcome variation.

The shopping process can take anything from thirty minutes to an hour and a bit and is followed by the taxi transfer into the high-rise dormitory suburbs.

Once we're there, and the time of arrival varies, so restowing and rearranging what we've been carrying has to be the first task.

It's a case of incorporating what's been recently added, what we've been hauling around with us and what was dispatched to the suburban wilderness earlier on into the two bags that will be checked in once we get to the *airport*.

At this point, we need to pause to consider the logistics of these trips, which explains a lot of detail I had thought was overly fussy but am increasingly inclined to view as entirely necessary.

There are, for a start, things that come with you that you won't be needing again until the homeward leg, and one of them is the second suitcase.

Given the need for speed when you're in transit and switching train services *two suitcases is one more than necessary*, and I'm increasingly inclined to put a large question mark over the other one.

In any case, anything that won't be needed until the return leg goes into the other suitcase, which then gets put out to pasture until it's home time.

From there, you cram everything you need into the other suitcase, a travel bag and a backpack, which is what gets lugged around up to the point where what you need for the rest of the travel leg can fit into the other two bags. *That's when the suitcase, loaded with everything else, is dispatched by courier to join its brother.*

By this point, we're usually back in a major centre, and increasingly using the subway to get around.

After a day or two of lugging a suitcase up and down flights of steps, you're quite happy about not having to do it anymore.

It would be easier if you could fit everything you need into one airline size carry-on bag, but we haven't quite managed that.

Yet.

Much of that comes down to how often you want to wash, access to coin laundries along the way and the effect taking a morning or evening to do the washing will have on your travel arrangements.

In any case, with the roaming done everything needs to be rearranged for the homeward leg. That *Australian mobile phone* that doesn't work overseas will be required after we disembark, and pillows and blankets needed for the night flight come into play as well.

Then, with everything stowed away, it's time to sit down and wait for the taxi to the *airport*.

That might seem like an extravagance but works better than the alternative, which would be a taxi back to *Myodani* station, a struggle with the stairs at *Sannomiya* and the *airport shuttle* the rest of the way.

You book *the cab*, which is actually a coaster bus, in advance, and they call you back with a pickup time. Experience suggests we're usually the first of at least two pickups along the way.

Hit the *airport*, and it's the regular processes that go with international travel. You proceed through the check in, the meal before we head off, the move through immigration on the way out, the wait in the departure lounge and, finally, the seven-hour flight that will deposit you in *Cairns* around five in the morning.

And that arrival time creates its own little kettle of fish.



CAIRNS > MISSION BEACH

Friday, 20 December 2013

There's absolutely no doubt about the undisputed nadir of a trip from *Cairns* to *Japan* and back.

It comes around three o'clock in the morning, not all that long after you've managed to nod off, when the cabin crew start doing their thing prior to a scheduled 5:10 arrival in *Cairns*.

Part of the problem, as far as I'm concerned, comes because the scheduled arrival time doesn't coincide too closely with the time the tyres hit the tarmac.

It'd be okay if they were late, or consistently late, anyway.

If five-ten managed to consistently creep towards six they mightn't need to start rousing people around three o'clock.

Last time, in *Business Class*, it was worse.

They'd plied us with dinner and wine, which meant it was that much later when you started the attempt to nod off.

Then, *since you might like something for breakfast*, they tapped us on the shoulder around three.

This time, in cattle class, when you're not looking for anything they more or less left us alone, and you could put the travel blindfold back over the eyes and attempt to drift off.

I think I managed to do that, but if I did, it wasn't a very long doze and wasn't deep enough to qualify as a power nap.

And when you're awake, looking out into the predawn gloom on the seaward side of the aircraft there isn't a whole lot to see until you're well into the descent and the street lights of **Cairns'** northern beaches appear beneath you.

We were on the ground at 4:30, and even with disembarking and formalities associated with entering the country it was still before six when we found ourselves in front of the **International terminal** giving the **Airport Parking** shuttle bus a buzz.

They weren't quite as quick out of the blocks as they could have been, but it was still well before seven when we hit the road, scratching our heads and trying to figure out what to do next.

We knew what we weren't going to be doing.

There was no way we were going to attempt the six hour road trip back to **Bowen**.

Tried that last time, thank you very much, and it could have been a total disaster.

We managed to pull over for a break a couple of times, but there's not much chance of a decent rest on the front seat of a **Corolla** when people who arrived in the rest area before you have snaffled the shady spots.

On that basis we'd figured we'd take a break somewhere handy like **Mission Beach**, stay overnight, and do the final leg in the morning, having had a decent chance to rest and refresh.

So we'd booked ourselves into **Licuala Lodge** at **Mission Beach**, advised them we were likely to be early, been told to call when we arrived in the vicinity.

We'd decided eight or nine in the morning was just a little too soon to do that.

Which explains the repeated use of the phrase *it was still* in the preceding narrative.

There wasn't a great deal of traffic about, but we were still inclined to head out through **Portsmith** rather than **Mulgrave Road**.

That decision produced some results as far as time killing was concerned when we passed **Rusty's Markets**. Since it was **Friday** morning they were open and since **Madam** has a penchant for fruit we stopped.

I'd have preferred to stop somewhere I could sit, but you can't have everything, and we managed to kill around half an hour.

We'd also identified a likely spot to stop in the form of a rest area on the banks of the *Mulgrave River* just south of *Gordonvale*, and it wasn't that long after seven-thirty when we arrived there, and not much before nine when we decided to hit the road again.

Put a tick beside *shade*, but a cross beside *comfortable place to rest in the front seat of a Corolla*.

That meant there was still a good three hour time span before we could reasonably expect *Licuala Lodge* to be available and as we hit the highway we ran into another little issue.

The skyline of the range that *Yarrabah* is nestled behind had a veil of grey drawn over it, and the veil was headed our way.

As we pulled out of the rest area the game plan had been to turn off at *Babinda* and take another break there.



It's a right hand turn that would involve issues with oncoming traffic and *Madam* didn't fancy it in the conditions that prevailed as we passed through *Fishery Falls* and *Deeral*.

It started to lift around *Bellenden Ker*, so there were no visibility issues, and we negotiated the right-hand turn and pulled up in the middle of the street outside the *Babinda Bakery*.

If I had my druthers we'd have been breakfasting at the bakery in *Mourilyan*, where the pies are excellent, but I've got to say the *Babinda* versions are almost as good.

We still have to get to the bakery in *Wangan*, which according to *Mad Mick* produces the best pies in the North. They'd want to be very good to beat the ones we had in *Babinda*, which were possibly as much as a short half-head behind *Mourilyan*.

I'd had *Babinda* on my list of places worth a visit since I started work on **Hughesy's North Queensland**.

[A website](#) had revealed the town gained a government sugar mill in **1915** and *benefited from the reformist Ryan Labor government's price control and state enterprise policies, and became a largely government town: residential and business sites were occupied under government lease, the freehold hotel was closed ... and the State Hotel established, the sole manifestation of a short-lived Labor policy to monopolise and eventually end liquor supply in the state. The hotel, the sole*





government enterprise established during this period of Labor government to turn a profit, is listed on the Queensland heritage register and boasts one of the longest bars in Queensland.

On that basis, you'd have to reckon the place was worth a look, and after breakfast we took a lap around the main street, past the ***State Hotel***.

When we'd finished the loop we figured we might as well head out to ***The Boulders***, the swimming spot at the foot of the ***Bellenden Ker Range*** with a reputation as a trap for unsuspecting swimmers.

A cat nap while the drizzle mizzled after we'd taken a walk around the area killed a bit more time.

But we were back on the highway around ten-thirty, looking to stop in ***Innisfail*** after ***Madam*** discovered an issue with the footwear that had spent the last fortnight tucked away in the car.

Innisfail's shoe shops failed to deliver what was desired, but the process of looking killed more time and we were pulling into the car park at the shopping centre at **Wongaling Beach** around a quarter to twelve, figuring there might be something suitable there.

And, in any case, we could probably handle some lunch.

Cafe RickKenJacs looked after that department quite adequately, and by the time we were finished a leisurely lunch it was around time to ring and check if the accommodation was ready for us.

As it turned out, it was, and by two we were checked in and comfortably pushing up Zs.

Just, in fact, what the doctor ordered, though I might have been slightly happier if the doctor had thrown in *airconditioning* as well.

I was back on deck about three hours later, considerably refreshed and inclined to start thinking about dinner.

Not that dinner was something I needed, you understand, but I figured if I didn't get something down the gullet I'd be waking up somewhere around three in the morning suffering from food withdrawal.

There was a fair wrap on the nearby **Spicy Thai Hut**, and we were there shortly after six-thirty, but the place was booked out.

We settled for takeaways and rolled around to the **Mission Beach Resort** bottle shop, where a bottle of **Semillon Sauvignon Blanc** looked like a good match for **Thai**, and a boutique beer seemed like something that would go with a spell in front of the TV screen in the guest lounge at **Licuala Lodge**.

As long as no one objected to **Hughesy** watching the first round of the **Big Bash**.

The wine and food did their thing very well, the cricket kept me awake until eight thirty, and the beer meant I wasn't feeling any pain when I toddled off for a serious spell of shut eye action.



MISSION BEACH > BOWEN

Saturday, 21 December 2013

The Argumentative Reader might be inclined to question whether we really need these *all the way back home* slices of narrative, but they are, in fact here for a purpose.

Firstly, as far as I'm concerned, a journey starts when you leave home and finishes when you return and writing one up that way delivers a sense of symmetry.

The departure marks a temporary end to your mundane, day to day existence while the return signals the resumption.

Second, there's the actual purpose behind these narratives, which, really, has nothing to do with *The Argumentative Reader* and his/her ilk.

It's all very well to gallivant around the countryside and catch all sorts of interesting and intriguing sights, but you need a way to remember them, and the discipline involved in sitting down and doing the writing is an enjoyable part of the process.

There'll be somewhere down the track when some vaguely-remembered happening comes up in conversation. *Cassowaries*, or *unusual multi-national couples*, perhaps, in a conversation that runs something like this:

That time we saw the cassowary in the yard.

Yes, that was on the way back from Japan. The Costello concert trip.

Not the coloured leaves trip?

No, that was the cassowary at Etty Bay. We bought pies in Mourilyan and needed somewhere to rest...

So the cassowary in the yard was Licuala Lodge.

That's the one. With the attractive Swiss-Brazilian couple...





And, of course, there's a third reason for including the back home leg in the narrative.

It gives you a chance to try a different tack when it comes to the actual write-up.

We weren't quite sure whether it was time to head across for breakfast.

I was biding my time waiting for **Someone** and doing something with the *iPad* when I noticed a movement down there on my left.

Not much of a movement, just the sort of thing that catches your eye.

Turning my attention that way, I wasn't entirely surprised to spot a **cassowary** picking its way across the driveway. They are, after all, one of the area's distinctive forms of wildlife.

What did surprise me was the emergence of **a dun-coloured chick**, which wasn't as remarkable as the apparent lack of concern on both parts when the gentleman who'd been cleaning the pool made his way back to the house.

I'd noted him heading that way a bit earlier, which was one of the reasons I wasn't sure whether it was breakfast time.



A cassowary in the vicinity, of course, is of great interest to the photographic fraternity, and I'd been careful to deliver a low volume advisory that **Someone** needed to come out on the verandah pretty quickly, and having the camera handy would be advantageous.

Both of us were ultra careful not to spook either of them, and I was just recalling advice about *what to do if you're confronted by a cassowary in the rainforest* when, lo and behold, here comes pool cleaning bloke and his presence is greeted with apparent and almost total indifference.

Still, I gave it a good few minutes after the feathered denizens of the rainforest disappeared into the undergrowth before I made a rather careful move across the space on the way to breakfast.

We'd settled into the breakfast rations when the other couple staying on the premises lobbed at the table.

I'd have been inclined to favour **Scandinavian or similarly Nordic** if asked for a national identity, which would have been reasonably close to the money in one case.

He was **Swiss**, probably **German Swiss** rather than **French** or **Italian**, but I'd never have picked **Her** as **Brazilian**.

Swedish with a good suntan, quite possibly, but not **Brazilian**.

The wry sense of humour got me as well.

Apparently she's not allowed to drive the hire car and expressed a degree of disdain for the sexist assumptions of *Australian hire car companies*.

Or maybe it was his fault, and he'd selfishly asserted a chauvinistic position when it came to driving long distances on the highway.

They were bound for *Airlie Beach* later that day, and from there had around a fortnight to get themselves down to *Sydney*.

Discussions about sights along the way had *our host* producing a self-prepared pamphlet about things to check in the area, including the *Bikini Tree* and the *Big Gumboot* in *Tully*.

I'd remarked on the fact that they'd be seeing *plenty of nothing* on their way between *Rollingstone* and *Airlie* and again between *Sarina* and *Rockhampton*.

That got us onto the subject of places to refuel, a matter that suggested a certain degree of paranoia on the part of our blonde *Brazilian*, who seemed to have a dread of roads where petrol stations were few and far between based on some experience of driving across the *Mato Grosso* or somewhere similar.

We were away from *Licuala Lodge* before they were, but an attempt to have us rejoin the highway at *El Arish* rather than *Tully* had us doing a U-turn to get back on the more appropriate route.

Having hit it, I thought the car ahead of us looked familiar (as in the one that had been parked next to ours five minutes before).

That, in turn, prompted speculation about whether they'd turn into *Tully* to check out the *Gumboot* that distracted me from keeping an eye out for *Bikini Trees*. As it turned out, the car did turn off at *Tully*, but since we didn't do the same I've got no idea whether the *Gumboot* was on the agenda.

With breakfast under the belt, there was no need to stop in *Cardwell* and by the time we were half way between *Euramo* and *Kennedy* we were driving through drizzle.

That raised the question of whether we'd stop at the lookout at the top of the *Cardwell Range*.

The *on again, off again, will it be raining when we get there* discussion took us through the town and much of the way to the final run up to the crest of the recent reconstruction.

We went through a patch of almost sun, reached the turn off without any spatters on the windscreen and pulled up to find it wasn't raining.

At the moment.

But it was by the time we left five minutes later.



So we'll be back because the photographs don't do justice to what used to be a quite magnificent view.

It probably still is, but we need to be back on a sunny day to make sure.

Once we were through *Ingham* the question of a route through *Townsville* raised its head.

Discussions about stocks of cat food at home took us past the spot where we had our accident back in *August* without The *Driver* noticing.

Seated on the passenger side I did notice the turnoff where the police car was sitting, but the cat food discussion meant I couldn't remark on it at the time.

The question of cat food, of course, brought with it the question of which way through *Townsville*, and since we reckoned stocks would last for a while there was no need to stop in at *The Domain*.

That, in turn, gave us the all-clear to loop around the *Ring Road*, giving a swifter transition between the wilds of *Deeragun* and the residential developments opposite *Lavarack Barracks*.

We did, however, stop to refuel at *Fairfield Waters* and made the obligatory comfort stop at *Home Hill*.

The return to base an hour or so later brought a sniffy response from a pair of felines who obviously felt they'd been neglected and subjected to unfair treatment as far as rations were concerned.

Feline memories, on the other hand, appear to be somewhat more ephemeral than human ones.

Perhaps it would help if they could write it down.

A photograph of an older man with a white beard, wearing a dark cap and a light-colored long-sleeved shirt, sitting on a stone torii gate. He is holding a small book or map in his right hand. The background shows a dense green forest and a blue sky with white clouds. The text '12' is visible in the bottom left corner.

12

JAPAN 2015: THE FIRST PART

THE PRELIMINARIES

Once we've sorted out a few basic parameters, *Hughesy* tends to stay out of the planning procedure, especially on *Japanese trips*. Things are a little more involved for other destinations but the basic parameters as far as *Japan* is concerned are *when to go* and *how long for the Rail Pass*.

The *When* isn't too hard. It's either *April/May*, which lands you in the *Sakura and new leaves* season, or Autumn. That can be anywhere from *mid-October to early December* depending on the destination.

Sakura and new growth start, as you'd expect, from the south and gradually spread north. The approach of winter has the leaves changing colour in the opposite direction.

There's also a crowd factor that comes into play here, but that doesn't quite account for the fact that three of our four visits have been in the autumn.

Last time, we were there in *December* for *four Elvis Costello concerts*. With the same circumstances (*Costello* and a run of *Spinning Songbook* shows), *Hughesy* might even be tempted to brave the heat and oppressive humidity of a *Japanese summer*.

Fortunately, Mr *Costello* has more sense than that.

Sakura season, as one might expect, is relatively short-lived, as the flowers are only at their best for a couple of days. Factor in a sunny day on a weekend and you can find sixty thousand people gathering in the grounds of *Himeji Castle*.

As we did.

And things were even more crowded in *Kyoto* the following day.

Autumn leaves, on the other hand, stick around for a while longer.

The other factor in the *When* side of the equation comes with *Jetstar*. Having decided to go, one waits for a *Japan Sale* and works from there.

This time around, *Madam* sighted another, subsidiary, sale that would get us to *Sapporo* cheaply, and that, in turn would have implications for the *Rail Pass* side of things.

So the timing isn't all that complicated.

The *Rail Pass* question is rather straightforward as well.

The choice is either *seven* or *fourteen days*.

Having maxed out a fortnight on the second trip, *Madam* is firmly in the *one week is enough camp*, and given the tiredness factor, *Hughesy*'s inclined to agree.

The only way I can see us doing a fortnight again would be if we chose to base ourselves in *Tokyo* for (say) three nights and use the pass to shuttle back and forth to various locations that aren't too far away.

Find a hotel near a major station and that shouldn't be a problem.

So the *Rail Pass Question* is pretty straightforward.

But surely, I hear *The Critical Reader* interjecting, *you could be a little more proactive*.

Well, I reply, *I could. But it's better if I don't*.

While I could probably work out a reasonable fortnight around the archipelago, it would be heavy on *Obvious Suspects* and *repeats of familiar routes*.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, and would probably have coincided with some bits of this itinerary, but what we are looking at here is, *IMHO*, *far superior*.

And, in any case, having come up with a suggested list, I'd probably learn *this leg wouldn't quite work*.

And *that leg* would take you *right past such and such*, which is really worth stopping to look at, *but wouldn't allow you to get all the way to there, so you'd have to...*

No, better to leave it all to someone with a better grasp of the geography, the configuration of the railway system, and a lifetime's worth of background knowledge.

So, where are we off to on this one? And, as an aside, how closely does it coincide with what *Hughesy* might have done?

After the regulation day sorting things out in *Kōbe*, as previously intimated, we fly to *Sapporo*.

After two days on the ground there, the *Rail Pass leg* kicks off. That takes us to *Hakodate*, and under the *Tsugaru Strait* to *Aomori*, which would probably have been *Hughesy*'s stopping point for the night.

I have unfinished business with sea scallops there.

Instead, we head on to the castle town of *Hirosaki*, and then head on to *Furukawa*, where I wouldn't have dreamed of stopping.

That, of course, is because I would have been blissfully unaware of *Naruko Onsen* and its gorge, which means we can (hopefully) get out into the autumnal countryside the following morning before moving on to the *five lakes* at *Goshikinuma*.

I wouldn't have thought of them either, choosing to head on to *Sendai* or somewhere around Fukushima.

I wouldn't have thought of the next leg to *Bessho Onsen* either, though I'd have been thinking in terms of *Kanazawa* after *Sendai* or wherever. Last time we were there the weather kicked in and abbreviated a visit to *Kenrokuen* and *Kanazawa Castle*.

The following day takes us on to *Amanohashidate*, one of the *Three Great Views*, and the rail leg finishes in *Himeji*, via the old port city of *Onomichi*.

From there we're in *Kansai*, so the remainder ticks off a few more must-dos and removes several items from the bucket list.

So, with the preliminaries done and dusted, it's on to the main event.



BOWEN > CAIRNS

Sunday, 11 October 2015

It was just on 8:12 when we hit the *Don* on the way out of *Bowen* after a smooth start to *the Odyssey* and almost bang on ten-thirty as we turned left onto the Bruce after the *Ring Road*.

With a pause at the *Comfort Stop* in *Home Hill* and a slow down onto the shortcut around *Ayr*, that's pretty good going.

The slow down allowed me to fulfil a long-held ambition to capture an image of the sign features above.

It will end up on *Hughesy's FaceBook Timeline*, along with a remark along the lines that *the conversation's not all that brilliant across the river in Home Hill either*.

Along the way, we managed to sort out the question of *whether the shortcut actually saves any time*.

That had exercised our minds repeatedly on journeys up and back. I don't know why I hadn't turned to the obvious solution.

Monitor the progress on the iPhone.

I was checking the email when **Someone** returned from the **Comfort Stop**.

As she popped into the driver's seat I rather smugly pointed out that nearly eight months after I bought a ten gig chunk of data I still had 80% of it left.

On that basis, I reckoned, I was totally justified in tracking our progress along the route today.

Not necessarily monitoring it carefully with a beady eye, but maintaining interested observer status.

So we slowed down to snap the **Ayr Boring Company** sign and with that in the bag, I switched over to Maps as we continued along **Giddy Road**.

And there was the proof, if any proof was needed.

The Bruce was there as a clear green line.

Since I hadn't zoomed in to get the detail I could track the progress of the blue dot while keeping the highway in view.

I didn't need a close-up view.

The twists and turns as we exited **Giddy**, made our way past **MaidaVale School** and banked left onto **Ivory** would only have muddied the waters.

I reckoned I could see where we were going to rejoin the highway, and if we were, we had what amounted to a **capital D**.

The U-shaped loop was, believe it or not, the track the highway takes through **Ayr** and **Brandon**.

The short cut, more or less (and more rather than less) equates to the downstroke.

Which means it has to save time. It's considerably shorter.

I reported this to **The Driver**, who expressed the expected scepticism.

I'll show you when we get to Cardwell, I responded, and promptly forgot all about it.

We were finished lunch at the **Vivia** and turning our attention to the onward journey when the matter was brought to my attention.

And, twenty seconds later there was agreement.

Which underlines the notion that not much of interest happened on the increasingly mundane northern leg of the odyssey.

Even the rain we hit out of **Cardwell** that continued right up to the edge of the **Cairns CBD** was more or less par for the course.

It cut out from time to time, but only for a kilometre or so, and built up beyond a drizzle often enough to have the windscreen wipers switch up to maximum for thirty seconds or so.

But we were pulling into the **Royal Palms Villas** right on three o'clock with **Hughesy** pondering dinner at the now-regulation **Bayleaf Balinese**. Did we need to book?

With the **Day One Travelogue** complete up to this point, that's a definite *Wait and See*.

We didn't, however, wait too long, heading out around five forty-five and landing on the doorstep just before the doors opened.

And just as well, as we rounded the corner out of **McLeod Street**, **Hughesy's** stomach started transmitting ravenous rumblings I've come to label as **Need Food Right Now Syndrome**.

Evidently, the round of crab a gas and the quarter of **Madam's bagel** I'd downed in **Cardwell** a mere five hours earlier hadn't been enough.

It was almost spot on 5:58 when we arrived, so the doors weren't quite open.

Madam took a look at the menu board while we waited, but I already knew what I wanted.

A **sate lilit** (seafood sate with fresh lime, \$19), **sambel udang** (prawns with chillies, lime and tomatoes in coconut cream, \$27.50) and a bottle of **Mitchell's Riesling** looked like the way to go.

That plan went out the window under the influence of **Madam's** intentions, **NFRN Syndrome** and a change in the wine list.

A suggestion that **Someone** felt like a different selection (**sate** and **sambal kacang**, a mixture of chicken, beef and pork with sate and peanut sauce) took care of the entree, but the actual wine list was utterly bereft of **Mitchell's**.

Never mind.

The **satay sticks** came in two options, regular (\$14) and large (\$19), so the choice was obvious once you factored the **NFRN Factor**.

Madam expressed an interest in the **Josef Chromy Sauvignon Blanc**, which would have put paid to the bottle, but the website wine list had the **Riesling** by the glass, so that wouldn't have been a problem.

But with that option withdrawn, a glance further down the list revealed a **Pikes Pinot Grigio**, which wasn't **Riesling**, but wasn't an unacceptable substitute.

And a glass meant I could try something else.

Madam had been right on the money with **Mr Chromy's SB**.

Mark **Tasmania** down along with the **Adelaide Hills** if you're over the flood of Kiwi products from the same variety.

And the food was excellent.

There isn't much you can do with deep fried prawn crackers except mess up the frying and providing a substandard dipping sauce.

The ones that arrived to fill in the waiting time were done right and came with a **chilli** dip that might have been too hot for **Madam** but ran out before the last cracker went down the **Hughesy** gullet.

The **mixed satay** was just what the Doctor ordered as far as the **NFRN** was concerned, and the peanut sauce that arrived with them was just right.

*Possibly not **quite** divine or exquisite, but the combination ticked all the boxes and rated a couple of gold stars.*

I might have been able to polish off the last of **Madam's nasi goreng** (\$21.50) if I hadn't been busily mopping up the last skerrick of sauce that came with the seafood curry.

Cut and paste the description of the satay sticks here, folks, and make it *at least three gold stars*.

Put that all together and you've got a decent gustatory send off on a trip where food and eating are going to be significant agenda items.

Which was another reason not to finish off that leftover fried rice.



CAIRNS > KOBE

Monday, 12 October 2015

We hadn't headed straight for the cot when we got back to *Royal Palms*, but it wasn't long after eight when we did.

Factor in seven or eight hours and *Hughesy's* regular home routine, and I was probably due to surface around three-thirty or four in any case.

That was just about on the money, but I maintained a semi-doze until five in the interests of domestic harmony and all that.

Let sleeping drivers lie.

She surfaced just before six, around the time I started on *Monday's Travelogue*, which gave us a comfortable two hours before departure time.

That's enough to turn the attention to *The Preliminaries* and should mean we finish a seven-hour flight with close to a final version of **Japan Travelogue 2015**.

With **Europe 2014**, **Southeast Asia 2015** and last month's **Northern Odyssey** still in the production and formatting pipeline, that's an important consideration.

And *The Narrator* takes up the tale just under two hours into the flight.

We managed, for once, to get ourselves all the way through to boarding with *a single hiccough*.

That, to the best of my recollection, is a first.

Once we realised one pair of slip on shoes intended for use in *Japanese inns* and *onsen* were still sitting beside the door at *The Little House of Concrete* and shrugged the shoulders everything else ran reasonably close to plan.

Drop the car at the car park. Check.

Transfer to International Departures and get details about the arrangements when we return in eighteen days' time. Check.

Complete check-in and collect boarding passes. Check.

Exit through Immigration. Check.

Security. Check, but I was caught for a full body scan.

And there we were with around an hour and three-quarters to kill.

I had passing thoughts about a bottle of *Liqueur Muscat* or *Topaque* and diverted to take a squiz at the *Duty-Free* options.

This didn't quite sit with *Madam's* intentions, but it only took a moment to scan the *Port and Fortified* section of the display to render the point moot.

There was plenty of what we used to call *Port* in 750 mL bottles, but not a single example of *Rutherglen's* finest in a 500.

Cue vision of another scheme going down in flames.

From there we found a seat, and I set off to find something to keep me going to lunch.

We had skipped breakfast since it didn't come with the accommodation and weren't inclined to venture out in search of same.

I could have skipped the morning meal, but yesterday's *Need Food Right Now* episode suggested it might be a good idea to grab something.

In any case, *Madam* was still replete from the night before.

A quick perusal of the **WiFi** options revealed an hour's free time for a single device if you spent \$15 at the nearby cafeteria, which sounded semi-tempting.

Things looked fairly tempting too, with a roast beef baguette at \$11.30.

That wasn't quite the \$15, so I looked at the drinks options.

It was too early for beer. I could grab a long black for \$3.60. Lattes and flat whites were over the \$4 mark, but I'm a black man these days.

Falling ten cents short of qualifying for the **WiFi**, I went for a *pepper pie* instead.

Would I like anything to drink with that?

The question received a polite reply in the negative.

While I had been away, **Madam** had been cornered by an older dude doing one of those customer surveys that seem to be *de rigeur* these days.

I got back just in time for *Is there anything that's lacking in International Departures?*

Free WiFi was the utterly predictable response and elicited a rueful *We get that one quite frequently.*

The next question concerned items **Someone** might have bought if they were on sale at the airport.

I refrained from interjections about **Liqueur Muscat** but was sorely tempted.

From there, with the pepper pie downed it was off to the **Departure Gate** and another perennial gripe. With the proliferation of digital devices, there's a need for electrical outlets to recharge the things.

And, of course, airports around the world are increasingly offering facilities to do just that.

But not at **Cairns International Departures**.

So while we waited, I managed a bit with the **iPad** hooked through the **iPhone** as an Internet hotspot, but that seemed to be running both devices into the ground, so it didn't last long.

So it was a case of sit, take the occasional wander and wait.

Boarding seemed to be on time, and while we were a little late into the air, it wasn't a major concern.

I had visions of taking in the view as we ran along the coast north of **Cairns**, but a relatively solid layer of cloud put the kibosh on that notion.

I filled out the immigration paperwork instead.



That got us well into the *Coral Sea*, where a temporary patch of blue sky revealed a sandy island, possibly something on the outer reef though identifying a likely suspect will prove difficult.

Trying to reconstruct these things a couple of weeks later with the assistance of the digital *National Geographic Atlas* failed to reveal anything much apart from the strong likelihood that it was one of the coral atolls scattered across the eastern part of *Torres Strait*.

There are plenty between *Murray Island (Mer)* in the east and *Saibai* off the *New Guinea* coast.

The river mouth I sighted shortly afterwards might not have been the *Fly*, but it was substantial.

There are a swag of them between *Saibai* and *Cape Blackwood*, all emptying into the *Gulf of Papua* and all of them likely suspects.

Massive cloud banks kicked in as we hit the New Guinea coast which put an end to the view out the window, but lunch would have accomplished the same feat when it arrived a few minutes later. Clearing that away took time, and catching up on the interim details brought us to this point.

Two hours and fifty-two minutes after departure, with 2353 km under the belt, four and a bit hours to go and *Palau* over somewhere on the left, it was time to run the *iPad* battery down a bit more with some AV content.

It was down to 60% when *Madam* drew my attention to some food and wine freebie content in the onboard video system. Nothing particularly new or absorbing, and I had other fish to fry, but the sidetrack did point me towards having a squiz at what else lurked in the free section apart from the handy where your aircraft is content.

That squiz revealed that the *USB connection* could be used to power digital devices.

It didn't seem to charge them, as the top right-hand corner of the *iPad* pointed out, but it should allow you to run them without further running down the precious battery reserves.



That allowed me to get a fair chunk of the new *Matthew Condon* account of the *Bjelke-Petersen era* out of the way before we were advised the *seat belt sign* was about to be turned on.

I could probably have continued reading for a while, but took the opportunity to stow things away ready for disembarkation in anticipation of a spell looking at the coastline on the way into *Kansai*.

That didn't quite work out either, thanks to a mix of the afternoon sun, patchy cloud. Still, it meant we were going to be all set up and ready to go when the time came to get ready to disembark.

We seemed to be making a looped, rather than a straight-in approach this time, and while the viewing conditions weren't the best, there was still something to look at on the way down.

The taxi around the terminal seemed shorter than usual, too.

We got to *Immigration* without anything approaching a hassle, found the configuration down there slightly different as well, but negotiated the formalities without a hint of a hitch.

Just, in other words, *the way you want it*.

We encountered a slight holdup at *Customs* but found ourselves outside in almost record time.

Better still, as soon as *Madam* bought tickets a *Sannomiya*-bound bus pulled up right in front of us.

The run into *Kōbe* seemed to pass quickly as well. That may have had something to do with the discussion that drew the attention away from the array of lights outside the window.

We were 't far into the bus leg when I sighted what looked like a lit up *Japanese style castle* among the fairyland array of lights.

It reminded me of something from the first time we made this trip, when we sat on the other side of the bus. *Someone* pointed out something on the right-hand side that was, allegedly, *Osaka Castle*.

I hadn't even managed a glimpse of the alleged structure, and the incident meant I resolved to sit on the other side next time.

So we did, and although we had managed to do so, I failed to sight anything resembling a castle.

But there was something there, so I thought I'd ask. The response was a somewhat terse negative, delivered in a tone that suggested the whole notion was absurd.

After I explained the reason for asking, I got a strenuous denial the previous sighting had occurred at all.

That, in turn, prompted a bit of to and fro that killed a bit of time, and it seemed no time at all before I spotted a building lit up with a sign saying *Kōbe Something Or Other*.

It took a few minutes to work down from the freeway to ground level, and the drop off point at *Sannomiya*, but we were still remarkably early into *Madam's* hometown headed for a hotel in the heart of downtown *Kōbe* rather than the waterfront periphery.

Admittedly, where we were headed was a slightly less glamorous operation, but it was almost brand new and was very handily located.

I've always sung the praises of the *Okura* and the *Meriken Park Oriental* as a smooth entry to a *Japan trip*, but I now have a new benchmark.

We were booked in and ready to think about dinner just before a quarter to eight, and *Madam's* researches had revealed a highly rated eatery just around the corner from the hotel.

That sounded good to me.

I had visions of a couple of beers, a couple of grilled chicken skewers and a good night's sleep to follow, which ticked all the boxes in my personal agenda.

KoKoRoYa wasn't quite where she thought it was, but proved reasonably easy to track down.

It doesn't look like much from the outside, and there's not too much about the interior to set it away from the run of the mill small scale *Japanese backstreet eatery*.





It's not exactly on a back street, tucked in underneath the railway line running into *Sannomiya*, but subsequent research reveals we were sitting in *TripAdvisor's #2 rated restaurant* in *Kōbe*.

I didn't believe it either, but it's there [on the TripAdvisor website](#).

And I'm not inclined to argue.

The food was excellent, the beer was cold, and the wine list should have given the game away. It wasn't what you'd expect in a place that size, which would be flat out seating twenty, but there you go.

I know where my preferences now lie, and despite the lack of a substantial breakfast *Viking* at the *Villa Fontaine*, I know where I want to start the gustatory side of proceedings in the future.



KŌBE

Tuesday, 13 October 2015

Although it tends to be a day when not much happens, *Day Two of the Japan leg* of the trip is one of the most important.

For a start, it's usually the day when *Rail Pass vouchers* are exchanged for workable documents, even if the *Rail Leg* doesn't start on *Day Three*.

More significantly, it's the day when two suitcases become one.

There's limited room for luggage on your average *Shinkansen*, and you'll always take the extra leg room for passengers ahead of space for stowing suitcases at floor level.

The Coppertone Container might fit into the overhead racks, but I'm disinclined to try.

And there's no way *Madam's Blue Behemoth* is ever likely to fit up there.

So it goes off to the wilds of *Myodani*, along with travel pillows, blankets and anything else adjudged to be surplus to requirements over the next fifteen or sixteen days.

So with breakfast out of the way and *the laundry options* reconnoitred, we turned our attention to sorting out the luggage.

The breakfast *Viking* at the *Villa Fontaine* isn't what we've become accustomed to at the *Okura* or *Meriken Park*, but delivered a perfectly sound foundation to fuel the first part of the day's activities.

This time around, the arrival time in *Kōbe* was a good hour and a half ahead of the usual.

Those other places where we've tended to stay on the way in might be flashier, but they're expensive.

And they don't have a nice little *Izakaya* tucked under the railway lines a hop skip and jump away.

So a couple of little omelettes, a splash of salad with thousand island dressing, a cup of minestrone and assorted pastries got the day off to a solid start.

No tomato juice, but it's not the sort of place where you're going to be expecting the chance to make a Bloody Mary for breakfast. So no vodka either.

Upstairs, with the contents of *B. B. the Blue Behemoth* sorted, it was time to tackle the toothbrushes and head for the ticket office at *Sannomiya*.

That's good. It also provides a chance to reorientate oneself.

Two chances, in fact. We started by sorting the *Rail Pass* side of things and managed to hit the *Sannomiya JR* ticket office at just the right time.

We arrived to find ourselves shooting straight through to one of the operators, and were too absorbed in paperwork to notice the *party of Italians* next door who were doing much the same as we were.

So we set about filling in the paperwork, the clerk set about doing the transformation, and *Madam* set about maintaining a wary eye on proceedings.

For my part, with nothing much to contribute to anything, I acted as an interested observer.

The Italians next door had sorted out their questions by this time, and were ready to start booking.

The bloke who must have been the tour guide handed over a wad of *Rail Passes* and the clerk started counting.

Hughesy, as an interested observer, counted as well. It was a round dozen.

This was just after our *Rail Pass* processing had been completed.

Madam took a glance at the non-existent queue and decided to go ahead with the booking.

The long and short of it was that we walked out of the ticket office ten minutes or so later with tickets that would cover every major leg of the first six of the seven-day duration.

There are a couple of legs that aren't ticketed, but they're local services or *non-JR sectors*.

For local services without reserved seating you just present your *Rail Pass* and you're on.

For *non-JR services*, we'll have to buy the tickets at the station.

But, basically, with one fell swoop, there we were with tickets to cover everything bar Day Seven.

By the time we'd done that the queue had materialised, but *the Italians* had departed with whatever tickets they required, and another operator was dealing with the customers, so we weren't holding things up too much.

In any way, once you've started and put the request for these however many legs in, I guess there's no going back.

We had a minor hiccough on the first service we were after, which was full, but that was solved by taking an earlier train that would give us an extra hour and a half in *Hakodate*.

And with all that sorted, how could *Hughesy* object to being dragged along for a bit of shopping?

I came out of it with *a new lightweight umbrella*, so I could hardly object anyway.

And there were enough places to sit and plenty of things to look at, including a passing parade that's substantially different to the one in downtown *Bowen*.

So, for example, *Madam* got her tea while *Hughesy* browsed the wine shop.

And we were back at the *Villa Fontaine* around eleven, with *Housekeeping* still to arrive on the doorstep, though they were just down the corridor.

With *B. B. The Blue Behemoth* sorted, it made sense to accompany *Madam and suitcase* as far as the station precinct, wheeling the suitcase beside me and picking up a bit more of the local geography.



Having seen the *Myodani*-bound party off I headed back along a slightly different route, via last night's *Izakaya*, since I hadn't picked up an external shot.

Predictably' when I made my way back to the hotel, *Housekeeping* was in full swing inside the room, so I took myself for another loop around the neighbourhood, managing to complete it successfully without resorting to the *GPS* aspect of *Maps* on the *iPhone*.

But the process was somewhat draining, and a *nana nap* was required soon after I got back.

I thought about lunch, too, but decided that the nap was a better option.

Assuming *NFRN Syndrome* doesn't kick in over the rest of the afternoon, that means I should be right for a serious go at the *Korean barbecue operation* we're reportedly headed for tonight.

And later in the afternoon, with *Madam* still somewhere *en route* between *Myodani* and *Sannomiya* I took a bit of time to expand the existing notes from *Monday* afternoon and then turned my attention to further tales of *Queensland corruption*.

There wasn't much in there that surprised me.

And there wasn't much that surprised me when *Madam* wandered in just after five, either.

The rendezvous with one of her oldest friends was set for six, which maximised the catch-up time, and we would have to get ourselves to *Motomachi*.

The only question was when to leave.

Since *Motomachi* is the next station along from *Sannomiya*, I guess you could take the train.

Practical citizens of Kōbe, however, would walk to avoid wasting money. *Madam's a practical citizen of Kōbe*, so we hoofed it.

For a start that gave me a little more on the ground local geography.

Previous essays towards the same destination had been from the *Okura*, so it was effectively new territory as far as I was concerned.

The walk took us past the stop where tomorrow's bus to *Kansai Domestic* would depart, so that was handy info for a start.

But not long after that we diverted into the narrow shopping arcade that runs under the railroad tracks.

Given the nature of the *Japanese cityscape*, it should come as no surprise to learn that railway lines tend to run above or under the ground and over or through anything that gets in the way.

That, of course, means there's space under the above ground lines.



On my earlier diversion towards last night's dinner destination, over on the other side of **Sannomiya**, I'd seen a variety of uses for the space, which is useful real estate.

You could fit an eatery in there, for a start, and a couple of businesses had.

Most of it *over that way* seemed to be devoted to storage.

Lots of roller doors, one of which were open, and a variety of materials and substances stashed away where they were simultaneously easy to access and relatively out of the way.

Fair enough, it's on the edge of the CBD, with what looked like residential development between the railway line and the mountains.

On this side of **Sannomiya** on the other hand, on the other side of the line, we were on the edge of the downtown shopping precincts.

That's prime real estate, and would, one guesses, attract fairly hefty rents for space in a high profile location.

Here, under the railway lines, someone had run a shopping arcade down the middle.

Makes sense.

The result is what looks like low-rent space for businesses offering products that hit niche markets and wouldn't be viable in a major shopping centre.

We'd headed out just before five-thirty, figuring we'd have time to spare when we got here, but when **The Mother's Mobile** rang, we were only about two-thirds of the way there.

Predictably, the call was informing us that the other participant in the evening's festivities had arrived at the rendezvous and was checking on our whereabouts.

I'd taken a quick look on **Maps** earlier in the afternoon, aiming to see if my recall from last time was accurate.

Mind you, given the nature of the thoroughfare we were following, I wasn't sure where we were *vis a vis* **Motomachi station**.

When we turned left out of the arcade, there was a familiar looking corner on the other side of the intersection, with **Madam's friend** bang in front of it.

And, having made the rendezvous we headed straight downstairs for a couple of hours worth of discussion, beer and an array of dishes.

Predictably, the gustatory side of proceedings started with a salad.

Beef steak and guts followed, and things got blurry from there as dishes arrived in a flurry and got rearranged on the table.

And the discussion romped across a variety of topics, at first largely in *Japanese*, but once the old friends had finished the old friends catch up bit, things changed.

We spent a good half hour on sport, largely *Rugby in its two versions vs. AFL* with diversions onto the *comparison between cricket and baseball*.

It was well after eight-thirty when we decanted ourselves from the basement eatery.

Given the hour, it made sense to divert to see *Our Host* safely to the car park, before proceeding back to base.



KOBE > SAPPORO

Wednesday, 14 October 2015

Although we weren't exactly back early the night before, we were up and about reasonably early to tackle one of the perennial issues when you're on the road.

Laundry.

On *Day Four*, having packed clothes for around seven, it mightn't have been strictly necessary, but we knew we had access to *a coin laundry* here.

The next known availability was on *Sunday*, which would be stretching things a tad.

So there was a definite case for *doing the laundry while you have the chance*.

While the washing machine was doing its thing, *Hughesy* tackled *Travelogue* duties and *Madam* crawled back to the cot until it was time to make the switch to the dryer.



With that accomplished, the *Breakfast Viking* was a logical step, with a check on the dryer's progress on the way back upstairs.

Madam had a bottle of wine to send to a friend, but apart from that, an afternoon departure for *Kansai Domestic* and an eleven o'clock check out the agenda was entirely empty.

We'd need lunch, and it didn't take long to find an appropriate time killer.

Kōbe isn't overendowed with sightseeing options, and since we were heading to *the airport* in the middle of the afternoon rather than later in the piece we didn't want to travel too far afield.

On that basis, it was a case of ruling out options rather than counting them in.

We decided to take a walk around the hillside *Kitano* district at the foot of the *Mount Rokko* range.

We'd canvassed it as an option right after the rail leg of our first trip in *2008*, and promptly added it to the too hard basket, opting for brunch at the *Freundlieb Bakery Cafe* in the former *Kōbe Union Church* instead.

From a hotel beside *ShinKōbe*, the slopes looked a little intimidating. This time around I figured we/d get a gentler introduction to the terrain.

In any case I didn't mind heading back to the *German bakery* for lunch.

Kitano-chō or *Kitano Ijinkan* is the part of town where foreign traders and diplomats settled after *Kōbe* was opened to international trade.

Hakodate and *Shimoda* were the first ports opened in **1854**.

Kōbe, along with *Yokohama*, *Nagasaki*, *Osaka*, and *Niigata* was added to the list in **1858**.

More than a dozen former mansions (*Ijinkan*) remain in the area, open to the public for an admission fee that tends to range between ¥550 to ¥750.

There are *Ijinkan* districts in other locations (most notably *Hakodate* and *Nagasaki*), but *World War Two* and natural disasters have wreaked havoc in most of them.

The district is rated as a pleasant location to visit, with views out across the port and a range of cafes, restaurants and boutiques.

That meant we weren't necessarily bound for the bakery for lunch though the midday repast would be needed.

We weren't due on the ground in *Sapporo* until 8:35 in the evening.

Since we were walking, rather than catching a bus, there were a few points of interest along the way.





One of them was *Ikutajinja* shrine, possibly one of the oldest *Shinto* shrines in the country.

According to the **Nihon Shoki (The Chronicles of Japan)**, the shrine dates back to the 3rd century.

It is said to have been founded by the *Empress Jingū* to enshrine the *kami* (deity) *Wakahiru-me-no-Mikoto*, who was either the peaceful spirit of the *Sun Goddess Amaterasu-Omikami* or her sister.

Other temples in the area that date back that far include the city's *Nagata Shrine* and the *Hirota Shrine*, in nearby *Nishinomiya*.

According to legend, when diplomats from *Korea* arrived in *Japan* in the *Heian Period* they were served rice wine brewed by the shrine's head priest from rice drawn from each region in *Japan*.

A smaller shrine (*Matsuno*) within the *Ikuta* precinct dedication to the deity responsible for brewing *saké* commemorates the legend.

The vicinity also saw parts of the *Battle of Ichi-no-Tani* during the *Genpei War* of **1184**, commemorated by markers in the small forest behind the shrine, though the growth of the city of *Kōbe* around the site makes it difficult to determine precise locations for skirmishes and events.

Since it sits right on the edge of the *Sannomiya* district, these days *Ikutajinja* serves as a neighbourhood shrine for the residents of downtown *Kōbe*.



Two *Noh* plays, *Ebira* and *Ikuta Atsumori*, which retell aspects of the *Genpei War*, are performed every year at *Ikuta's Autumn Festival*.

The shrine has suffered significant damage over the years, most recently as the result of massive flooding in **1938**, *World War Two* air raids and **1995's Great Hanshin Earthquake** but has repeatedly been rebuilt.

You're not looking at an ancient structure, but it is worth a visit if you're in the area.

And there are echoes of the *saké* brewing story in the bars and restaurants in the nearby drinking quarter centred on *Higashimon Street*.

It was too early for those establishments to be opening their doors as we headed along the street and up the hill, pondering how much actual climbing we felt like doing.



We had a ready-made point of comparison after our *2012* visit to *Hakodate*, where the *Ijinkan district* shares much of the same architecture.

The *Hakodate* version, however, offers much better views since the city hasn't quite prospered the way *Kōbe* has.

Still, there wasn't too much to complain about.

The views would have been quite spectacular without the high rise development between the hillside and the port, which is a bit further away than it is in *Hakodate*.

One also suspects the northern city was chosen in an attempt to minimise disruptive influences from foreigners, and the relative isolation put the dampeners on prospects for substantial growth.



So, of course, did the development of *Sapporo* as a more centrally located administrative hub for the northern island of *Hokkaidō*.

In the end, we were forced to do a fair bit more climbing than might otherwise have been the case. Increased elevation delivered better views across the harbour.

Not necessarily *great* views, but they were there, and getting there worked off some of the kilojoules.

And, of course, the old merchant houses were well worth a look in themselves, though we weren't tempted to pay and head inside.

Another time, perhaps.

But the need for sustenance to keep us going until tomorrow was looming large on the horizon, so we started to work our way downhill with one key question in mind.

Where did we want to go for lunch?

We had a readymade option, but there was always the possibility of striking an interesting option on the way to the *German bakery*.

Take a look [here](#) and *The Inquisitive Reader* will find some interesting possibilities (*Caribbean and Chilean cuisine, really?*) but, as you do, we ended up somewhere else.

Interestingly, *Ristorante Donnaloia* is not in **TripAdvisor's** Top 150 restaurants.

That's what I found when I went for a look to get the spelling right. It rates **#359**, which probably says more about *TripAdvisor reviewers* that it does about the restaurant.

It deals in *very old style Italian*, possibly *a tad too traditional* for some, but that's the way I like it.

Of course, the presence of an aged gentleman who could be reasonably described as *Richie Benaud's shuffling doppelgänger* might have something to do with the fact that I liked the place a lot.

But it's all about the food.

Pasta with marinara sauce (the tomato rather than the seafood version), and *chicken breast with salad* mightn't sound overly awe-inspiring, but everything was done just right (in my estimation), and there was a sting in the tail.

There was a small bottle of pepper oil (actual *chilli*, and quite superb), and a smattering went into the *marinara sauce*. That, I think, was what won me.

It needs to go on in small doses (or *will need to go on in small doses* from the bottle I took away with me) but has a stunning depth of flavour..

One of the best things along those lines I've ever encountered.

As we paid the bill and collected the bottle I was taking with me, I said *I'd be back to eat properly*.

We will be waiting, was the response.

We'd spent longer than we planned to linger over lunch, and the result was a rapid transit back to the hotel.

Once we'd reclaimed the baggage, we moved on to *Sannomiya*, where there was a potentially alarming development.

There was an exchange in *Japanese* as an elderly worker stowed *The Coppertone Container* in the luggage compartment. It was enough to leave *Someone* worried and *Yours Truly* wondering what was going on.

Then we got to the door.

The Driver was the definite bearer of bad news.

Even though I had no idea of the contents of the conversation, it was evident this was Not Good News.

Mere capitalisation in the manner of **1066 And All That** doesn't quite fit the bill here.

Italicise it, and the portent isn't quite delivered either.

It needed full-on bold face. This was **Not Good News**.

In a nutshell, the situation was this: *There were roadworks on the freeway between **Kōbe** and Kansai International and an accident somewhere had complicated matters further.*

There was, we were informed, no guarantee of arriving at the scheduled time.

Now, you might think, as I did, that with around four hours until the flight departed, and a one-hour trip, things should be okay, but, I guess you never know.

Madam, who has a much better grasp of the nature of **Japanese traffic snarls**, was worried, but we hadn't considered other options and nervously hopped on the bus.

It was one of those situations where, even without direct **WiFi** access, **Maps** on the **iPhone** delivers a degree of reassurance.

The app had our current position, and, fortunately, the data that was already on board extended past **Kansai International**.

Once we were under way, one nervous passenger worried while the other monitored the progress of the blue dot on the screen as **Maps** continued to deliver without **WiFi** connection.

It was fairly obvious, based on previous experience, where we should have been heading.

*The freeway runs more or less along the shoreline all the way to **the airport**.*

As we headed off the highway and down to ground level, it was obvious we weren't going *that way*.

We headed up again, and down again as the driver sought an alternative route, but, at least in my eyes, things looked promising.

Firstly, the bus kept moving.

Admittedly it slowed down almost to a crawl here and there, but at least it was moving.

And the general direction of movement was **towards the airport**.

Finally, when we looked to be just about through the **Osaka** conurbation, there was an announcement that we would be arriving at four.

That was a mere half an hour late, but it could have been far worse and the delayed arrival wasn't a problem for us.

And we had still managed to arrive before *check-in* was open.

That allowed me to set about pinching power from a convenient power point to replace what I'd used monitoring our progress *en route*.

Once we'd checked in there was still a fair time gap to fill.

Others might have looked further afield, and I went about ten metres past the wine bar I found on the edge of the eatery quarter, but that was always going to do me.

It was fairly obviously associated with *the Pieroth group*, and while I've had no dealings with the German-based marketer, I knew it offered selections from a worldwide portfolio that were, predictably, dominated by wines from their home country.

But I know people who've dealt with them, and I knew their business model runs on premium lines at premium prices.

On that basis, since I was just going to savour one time-killing glass, ¥1100 for a dry *German Riesling* didn't seem too far over the top.

And it was an interesting drop, contrasting nicely with the lime dominant *Clare* and *Eden Valley Rieslings* I've come to know and love.

More akin to some of the *Tasmanian* takes on the variety, I thought.

But over to my left, *an American couple* obviously wasn't aware of a few basic points of information.

At least, I *assume* it was an American couple. He had *a definite Stateside accent*, but I didn't hear a word from her as her better half asked, somewhat forcefully about .beer at happy hour prices.

I took my time savouring my *Riesling* before returning to where *Madam* was sitting and turning the attention to the inevitable passage through *Security*.

That got us into a relatively deserted *Departure Lounge*, but any thoughts of spare seats and sparse populations on the flight evaporated just before the first *boarding call*.

It was preceded by a massive influx of (we suspected) *Chinese* tourists.

Things proceed smoothly through boarding, but we were slightly behind schedule when we finally departed.

The flight path involved a sharp right hand turn over city lights followed by almost total darkness, which you can put down to altitude, cloud, an engine in the way and the fact that we would have been crossing the mountains that run down the centre of *Honshū*.

So I turned my attention back to the *Condon iBook*, with occasional glimpses out the window.

As we begin the descent into *New Chitose*, lights on our right could well have been *Hakodate* which looked like it should be close to the flight path.

The shape of the coastline certainly seemed to match a higher altitude equivalent of the view from the top of *Mount Hakodate*, but it's hard to be sure.

The looping descent banking around to the left revealed a patchwork of lights with some odd anomalies.

That mass of lights over on our right was probably *Sapporo*, and the cluster that followed a few minutes later may well have been *Chitose*.

Once we were on the ground, it was obvious *New Chitose* is a massive operation, though, surprisingly, when we disembarked the luggage carousel is right in front of us.

Five kilometres south-southeast of *Chitose* and about fifty kilometres south-east of downtown *Sapporo*, *New Chitose Airport* (CTS) is not the only air facility in the area.

Right next door, the *Self-Defense Force Chitose Air Base* is the old *Chitose Airport*, a joint-use facility that catered for passenger flights between *1963* and the opening of *New Chitose* in *1991*.

The two facilities are interconnected by taxiways, which allows *Old Chitose* to handle additional traffic when the weather intervenes to close down runways and delay incoming flights and departures.

The *Japanese military* handles air traffic control duties for both facilities.

A more centrally located airport, at *Okadama*, serves a small number of flights within *Hokkaidō*.

Since *1994 New Chitose* has operated 24/7 though noise issues restrict the number of flights to a mere half dozen between ten at night and seven in the morning.

Predictably, it is *the largest airport in Hokkaidō*, in land area, facilities and passenger numbers.

It has to be.

After *Tokyo's Narita* and *Haneda*, it's *Japan's third busiest airport* and ranked #64 in the world in terms of numbers of passengers.

Every year around nine million of them travel between *New Chitose* and *Haneda* on the world's busiest air route.

Since it sits along the *great circle route*, it is an ideal stop to refuel *heavy cargo flights between Asia and North America*.

International services are mostly restricted to *Asian destinations* though there were formerly long-haul services to *Amsterdam* and *Cairns*.

International flights to *Honolulu* resumed in *2012*.

While we were too late to take in the facilities in the terminal, they're rather impressive on paper.

There's even a hot spring *onsen* bath house (*Onsen Manyonoyu*) alongside a playground and amusement park (*Doraemon Wakuwaku Skypark*), *Royce' Chocolate World* and a range of over two thousand plush toys and collectables at *Steiff Nature World*.

Throw in the cafes, restaurants and souvenir shops that are par for the course at *Japanese transport hubs* on top of two themed food zones (*Hokkaidō Ramen Dojo* and the *Streetcar Dining District*) and you have a very substantial commercial operation.

If that's not enough shopping and souvenir action for you, there's also the *Rera Chitose Outlet Mall* with hundreds of local and international and brands just outside the airport complex.

It's a ten-minute ride on the free shuttle bus or a short walk from *Minami-Chitose Station*.

Not that we'd be alighting at the first stop on the spur off *JR Hokkaidō's Chitose line* that takes passengers on the thirty-five minute run between *New Chitose* and *Sapporo Station*.

It costs ¥1,070 for a one-way ticket, with four trains every hour.

Reserved seats cost an additional ¥310 but the services are *JR* and *Hokkaidō Rail Pass* friendly.

So while the luggage carousel for our flight might have been *just there*, it was a fair step to the train station, and we didn't hang about to check out the shopping and dining options along the way.

And once we were aboard, it was hardly surprising to find the service passing through *ShinSapporo*, though it would be another couple of months before the *Hokkaidō Shinkansen* kicks into action.

When it does, one suspects the trains will run all the way out to *New Chitose*.

After all, the station under the terminal is labelled *ShinChitose-Kūkō*.

Once we'd decanted ourselves at the terminus, and made our way out towards where we reckoned the hotel had to be, we were faced with a thorny question.

Where do we go from here?

More precisely, *do we head out the doors in front of us, or venture down these stairs that look like they should connect to a subterranean network?*

Since it didn't seem to be that cold outside, we walked out the main doors and spotted the hotel building just over on the right.

It wasn't that chilly along the way, but when you're checking in well on the way to eleven at night you're not going to waste too much time along the way.

Or between the front door and the cot.



SAPPORO

Thursday, 15 October 2015

Reporting a latish rise would hardly seem surprising after a late night, and the chance to sleep in made for a welcome break from the day to day routine.

In any case, even if we hadn't been up well past *Hughesy's* regular bedtime, the *Travelogue* notes were pretty well up to date, and I reckoned I'd have time to catch up on the backlog while *Others* were in the shower.

To facilitate the task I set about piecing together a narrative from boarding time to the present while I took my turn in the *Rain Room*.

If I hadn't turned the thoughts in that direction, other matters might have attracted the attention, like the toiletry labelled *Mystic geranium*.

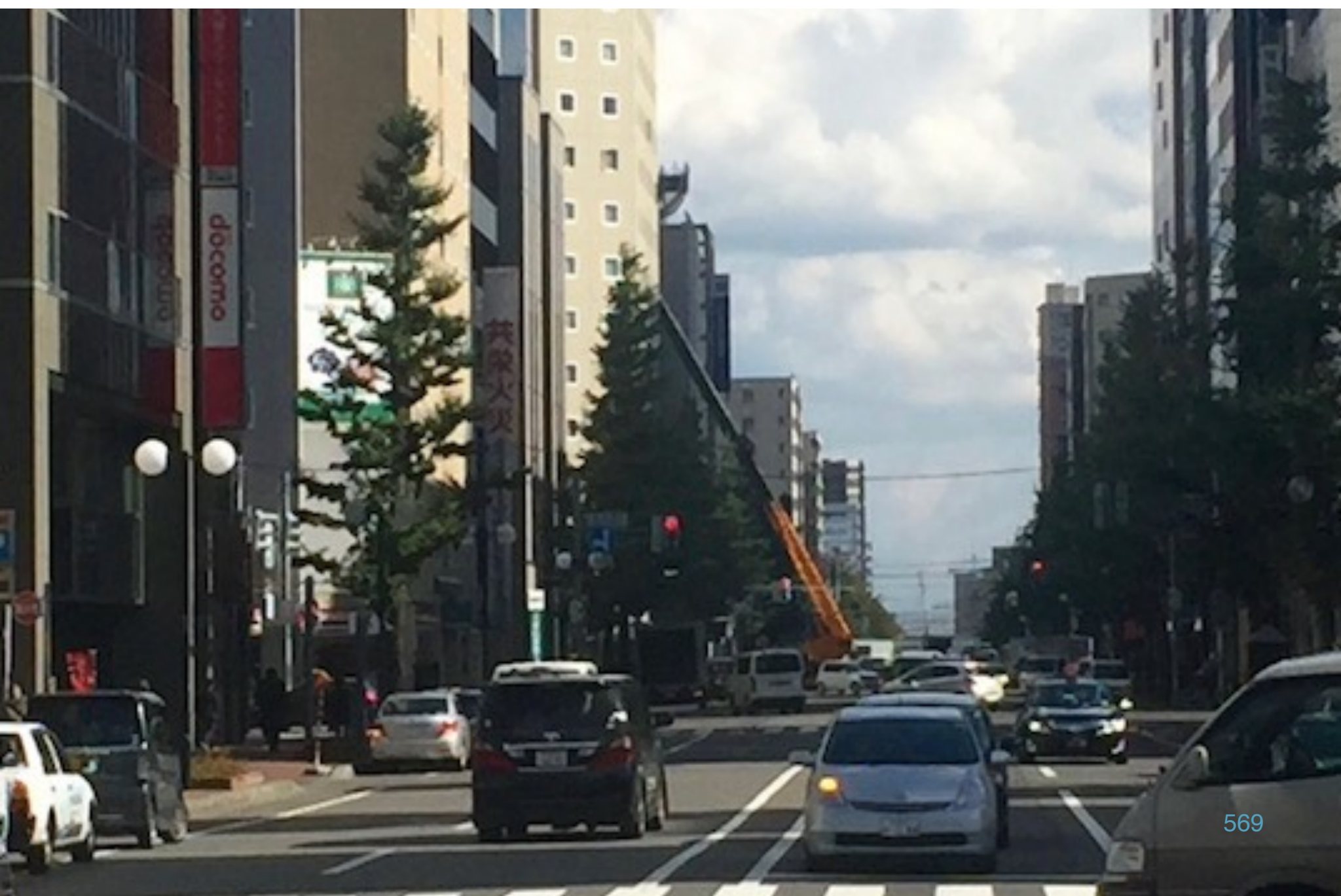
Sounds like something from the Age of Aquarius, I noted in passing, before directing the thoughts back towards *Kansai Domestic*.

In any case, I managed to bring things up to date before we ventured downstairs to raid the very impressive *Breakfast Viking*, which included an extensive range of *Hokkaidō delicacies*.

Many of them, predictably, flew right under *Hughesy's* gustatory radar, thanks to unclear labelling or a disinclination to try something I could more or less decipher.

In most cases, the labels were rather small, and there were enough people around to leave you disinclined to peer myopically through the reading glasses for too long.

But there was a very *Hughesy* friendly supply of venison and a supply of the island's softest water.



Overall, it might not have been the best *Viking* I've encountered but it was almost certainly the most extensive, thanks to an abundance of small platters of *niche Hokkaidō options*.

Back upstairs the big question involved external temperatures, with a predicted maximum of 15 and an itinerary that was likely to involve heights as we set out on the first of two full days in and around a city that, surprisingly, isn't as old as *Hughesy's* current hometown.

I'd been riffing on that topic with this bit of overnight doggerel.

Sapporo.

It's impressive, and colder,

But Bowen is older.

With *Tokyo* in a class of its own, *Sapporo* is *Japan's fourth largest city* (after *Yokohama*, *Osaka* and *Nagoya*) with a population nudging two million.

That puts it around half a million ahead of the next contenders (*Kōbe*, *Kyoto*, *Fukuoka* and *Kawasaki*).

Hokkaidō's next largest cities, *Asahikawa* and *Hakodate*, slot in at #58 and #80 on the list of the country's largest cities, with populations under four hundred thousand.

So, predictably, it's the capital of *Hokkaidō Prefecture* and the island's transport hub.

Located on the *Ishikari* flood plain on the alluvial fan where the *Toyohira River* flows into the *Ishikari*, *Sapporo* is a new city *by Japanese standards*, so traditional architecture, historic temples, imposing castles and ancient shrines weren't going to be part of the itinerary.

On the other hand, the location on the northern island right next to *Siberia* makes it a prime spot for coloured leaves in the early autumn and the long winter with substantial snowfalls makes it a mecca for *skiing and winter sports*.

The city hosted the *Winter Olympics* in *1972*, and the facilities that went in then are still in regular use for similar, lower-profile events.

The *Sapporo Snow Festival* (*Yuki Matsuri*) held in *February* draws more than two million visitors from around the world each year.

The festival's ice sculpture competition in *Sapporo's* central park, attracts artists from around the world. They produce artistic sculptures and elaborate large-scale replicas of well-known structures and landmarks from ice and snow, and the spectacular displays attract worldwide media attention.

There had been hunting and fishing settlements in an area the indigenous Ainu people named *Sari-poro-netsuke* (river running along a plain filled with reeds) before the *Tokugawa Shōgunate* established an official trading post there in **1821**.

As *Japanese interests* spread into the northern island, at the end of the *Edo Period* work began on a canal through the area. That, in turn, encouraged further settlement,

In **1868** the *Meiji government* decided *Hakodate*, the existing administrative centre, was poorly located, and they needed a capital in a more central location. The *Ishikari Plain* provided an unusually large stretch of flat, well-drained land in mountainous *Hokkaidō* and was, therefore, the logical location.

Once the decision had been made, outside assistance was called in to lay out the new city, and the result was a well laid out grid of wide tree-lined streets with ample public parklands on a strategic plan drawn up by *American urban planners*.

Construction began around *Ōdōri Park*, which remains as a twelve block (1.5 kilometre) ribbon of green parkland bisecting downtown *Sapporo*. It is flanked by *Ōdōri Street*, which forms the east-west axis of the street grid.

Addresses are expressed as *North* or *South* of *Ōdōri* and *East* or *West* of the other axis, which follows *Sōseigawa* (Creation River) Canal, flanked by *Ekimae-dōri* (Front of the Station Street).

Landmarks, such as *Tokeidai* clock tower (N1W2) are identified on the grid, but those addresses cover the whole block, so businesses will provide maps to assist with more precise navigation.

But compared to other, older cities it's relatively uncomplicated.

Still, we didn't get to explore the grid too much when we headed out.

The first stop the *Tourist Information Centre* in *Sapporo Station*.

That was a straightforward almost mirror-like retracing of our track the night before. But the mirror, if *The Attentive Reader* catches my drift was the surface.

We'd tracked above ground from station door to hotel the previous evening.

Now, in the morning, we followed what must have been very close to the same route from hotel basement to the stairs where we'd stood and debated which way to go in the evening.

It probably comes as no surprise if the subterranean thoroughfares match the streets and footpaths on the surface. Most of the buildings, after all seem to have basements.



Once we'd arrived at the *Information Centre*, two very helpful ladies delivered useful information and a bit of cause for concern that turned out to be wrong.

But the first part was spot on, as you'd expect it would be.

They had the logistics of getting ourselves out to *Okurayama* exactly right.

We would have been following the written advice to the letter if a warning about likely hilltop temperatures hadn't sent us scurrying back upstairs to pack extra layers in case we needed them.

As it turned out, we didn't, but a couple of minutes up and down meant we just missed the particular bus we'd been pointed towards.

We might well have made it if we'd proceeded to *Ōdōri Station* without stopping along the way to take photos of the *Old Hokkaidō Government Office Building*.

It's an obviously American-style red brick structure known locally as *Akarenga* (*red bricks*).

It dates back to *1888*, built to replace the former headquarters of the *Kaitakushi*, the commission established to supervise the development of *Hokkaidō*.

The commission's central office moved to *Sapporo* in *1871* and the original *Hokkaidō Development Commission Sapporo Main Office* (*Kaitakushi Sapporo Honchōsha*), was built in *1873*. At that point, it

was *one of the largest buildings in Japan* but was gutted by fire in **1879**. There's a restored version of the original incarnation in the *Historical Village of Hokkaidō*.

After some administrative restructuring, a new building went up on the site in **1888**.

Another fire in **1909** gutted the interior but left the external walls relatively undamaged.

Restoration work saw the building back in use two years later, but it took until **1969** to get the building registered as an *Important Cultural Property*.

The octagonal dome on top is based on a similar feature atop the *Massachusetts State House* in the United States, and these days the structure houses historical exhibits, conference rooms and libraries. Admission is free, and the building stays open until 6:00 p.m.

We were satisfied, however, with a look at it from a block away, *en route* to *Ōdōri Station*.

The couple of minutes we lost there might have been the difference between catching this train or the next one. Even if it was, we may still have made it if we hadn't stopped to ponder which of the entrances would take us to the right subway line.

As it turned out, they both did.

This one took you to the one we wanted and a platform on another line going one way.





That one took you to the one we wanted and a platform on the other line running in the opposite direction.

And, of course, *this one* meant a slightly longer walk to the relevant platform.

Those things combined to have us hearing a departing train as we headed down the last flight of steps. I assume that train was headed where we were going since the platform was devoid of passengers when we arrived a few seconds later.

At the other end of the short excursion to **Tozai Subway's Maruyama Koen** Station, we stepped into the bus terminal to find we'd just missed the bus that featured on the written directions.

They run every half hour, so we had a bit of a wait.

Never mind, there'd be another one in a while. There wasn't that much on the agenda.

When it arrived, **Hughesy** had a stress free reminder about the ticketing system on **Japanese buses**.

You grab a numbered ticket as you board and then watch the electronic board at the front of the vehicle. Assuming you joined the service at the terminus, your fare will be the first figure shown, and will gradually increase as the sectors pass.

When you alight you place ticket and money in the box beside the driver, and you set out to have the right amount since they don't give change.

If you need to break down a note to get the right change, there's a machine to do that, too. But you do it before you get to your destination while the bus is stopped at traffic lights or whatever.

So it was a handy reminder about the way things work on a trip that wasn't hurried.

We alighted, along with most of those on board, at *Okurayama Kyogijo Iriguchi* bus stop, the nearest stop to the *Okurayama Ski Jump*, which will have *The Puzzled Reader* scratching his or her head if he or she is aware that winter sports don't rate highly on *Hughesy's* sporting interests.

TPR, however, would have had his or her bewilderment answered if he or she had been on the ground with us.





Admittedly, we were headed for the venue for the 90-metre ski jump competitions in the *1972 Winter Olympics* but nowadays, when the stadium is not being used for ski jump events, the *Observatory* on the top of the hill can be accessed by chair lift for spectacular views of *Sapporo*.

So the stop wasn't just about the ski jump.

In a way, it wasn't about the ski jump at all, apart from the fact that the top of the jump is where you head for your *excellent panoramic views across Sapporo*.

Getting there involved a bit of a hike, and those who alighted from the bus started off as a relatively substantial group.

There was a party who seemed to be travelling together and appeared to know where they were going, so we followed them.

Another trio, a mother and her two daughters, apparently weren't sure of the way, started well behind and passed up around the half way point.

By that stage we were lagging behind the other party, taking our time to take in the autumn foliage.

But it wasn't that far until we were looking up at the ski jump.

We walked around a corner, and there it was, towering above us. The 50,000 seat *Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium* (*Ōkurayama Janpu Kyōgijō*), a. k. a. *Ōkurayama-Schanze* on the eastern slope of *Mount Okura* has hosted a number of winter sports events apart from the *1972 Winter Olympics* and is still in use today.

It wasn't there by itself, of course.



International sporting facilities are rarely stand alone structures. In this case buildings around the bottom of the jump house, among other things, the *Winter Sports Museum* and the *Ōkurayama Crystal House*, which houses a restaurant and a souvenir shop.

The three-storey *Winter Sports Museum*, completed in *December 1999*, and open to the public since *April 2000* has exhibits about the *1972 Winter Olympics* and winter sports in general.

There are a variety of simulation games (ski jump, speed skating and hockey) included in the ¥600 entrance fee.

It probably comes as no surprise to learn we didn't venture inside.

For those who might be inclined to do so, it's open 9:00 to 18:00 (*May* to *October*) and 9:30 to 17:00 (*November* to *April*), and most of the content is in *Japanese*, with *minimal English content*.

We headed past the entrance on our way to buy tickets for the chairlift to the top at the shop in front of the *Crystal House*, then took a while gazing upwards, and indulging in the odd flight of fantasy.

From the foot of the slope, it's predictably awe-inspiring, even if you're not into winter sports.

We snapped a couple of photos from the bottom, then headed on to the ski lift for the ascent to the viewing platforms some 300 metres above sea level.

The chair lift runs 8:30 to 18:00 in summer, basically *May-October* and 9:00 to 17:00 from *November* to *April*, with a spell for maintenance in early *April*.

If you're not inclined to pay the ¥500 for the return trip on the chairlift, there's a trail leading to the viewing platforms on second and third floors of the *Observatory*, but it's a steep climb.

And for those of us with vertigo issues, the ground remains reassuringly close to your feet. *Hughesy's* shoes brushed the tops of the odd clump of grass.

Officially, the ski jump is classed as a large hill jump with a total height from top to bottom of 133 metres. The current record is 145 metres, achieved by *Japanese jumper Yūsuke Kaneko* in *2005*.

The venue opened in *1931* after *Emperor Hirohito's* brother *Prince Chichibu's* first visit to *Hokkaidō* in *February 1928*.

He had promised to assist the head of the *Hokkaidō University* ski team with a ski jump facility for the *Winter Olympics* with hotel magnate *Baron Kishichiro Okura* providing the funds.

Major General Olaf Helset, the captain of the *Norwegian team* in the *1928 St. Moritz Olympics*, provided technical and design assistance.



Construction cost more than ¥50,000 and the facility was donated to the city of **Sapporo** when it was completed.

The stadium was remodelled into an 80-metre jump in **1952**, and further renovations in the lead-up to the **Winter Olympics** saw the change to 90 metres.

In the process, seats for 50,000 spectators went in. The work cost ¥770 million, and control of the facility was transferred to the **Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology**

The first ski lift went in **November 1982**, reducing the time to the summit from twenty minutes to four. With fifty-five carriages traversing a diagonal length of 285.25 metres, it could move 450 people an hour. Total cost was around ¥180 million.



Rule changes saw modifications to the landing slope and borders in **1986**, and the arena was remodelled again at a cost of ¥2.6 billion ten years later. In the meantime, ownership had been transferred from the national government to the *City of Sapporo* in **March 1995**.

Further tinkering saw the ski lift extended, and lighting for night competitions installed in **1998**, when the old ski lift was dismantled and an upgraded sixty-seven carriage lift installed with a travel time of five minutes per 346.39-metre one-way-trip.

The current incarnation can move 900 people an hour and cost approximately ¥250 million to install.

There weren't *quite* nine hundred people up at the top when we arrived, but it was still a decent crowd under the circumstances.

While the autumn leaves were in the turn between standard green and the range of reds, browns and yellows you expect in the fall, they were on the way.

Give it a couple of days and there'd probably be a queue down below.

Still, the view to either side delivered a fairly decent autumnal vista, and, for some reason most of those gathered on the level below the observation deck were enjoying ice cream cones.

I was slightly less than half inclined to join them and put the question to *Someone*.

That, you understand, was on the basis of being just below the tipping point.

But *Someone* was more interested in heading upwards, so upwards we went.

On the way up we encountered a woman in a wheelchair with an old bloke who was probably the husband. They were getting assistance with the stairs





Any offer of help from *Yours Truly* would have raised language issues, and the situation looked to be under control, but it did raise an interesting question.

We knew how she got up there.

With assistance, in the two seater chair lift gondola. Same as the rest of us.

But what about the wheelchair? Did they stop the whole box and dice and strap it into another one?

That was the likely scenario, and I would have liked to have been a spectator when it happened.

But we carried on upwards and were rewarded with magnificent views from a position that looked straight down *Ōdōri Park*.

At least I assumed it was *Ōdōri Park*. It was long and narrow enough to fit the bill.

On the other hand, my knowledge of *Sapporo*'s geography is on the vague side of sketchy so I couldn't be sure at the time.

I confirmed the suspicion the next day as our bus turned across the park. There was a ski jump over to the west, and a quick check on *Maps* suggested it was the right ski jump.



We also had a minor diversion in the form of a couple of black birds on the edge of the lookout.

Rather tame ones, too, if their failure to be fazed by the proximity of photographers and kids was any indication.

They may have been crows, but *Hughesy* was more inclined to identify them as ravens. There's a bit in **The Hobbit** when *Bilbo Baggins and thirteen dwarves* arrive at the *Lonely Mountain* on the verge of winter and gain some assistance from ravens.

So if there's any misidentification there, *The Pernickety Reader* can attribute it to seasonal and literary factors that meant *The Author* wasn't inclined to look too closely.

And from there, with the photographic record attended to, the only way was down.

The only option in that department was the way we'd arrived. While the trip in the opposite direction was slightly more intimidating the ground remained reassuringly just underfoot.

You could, however, see where you'd be rolling if you separated yourself from your gondola.

Maybe that explains the next five minutes.

Madam headed off for further photographic action while I indicated I was heading indoors to find a seat.

There was a cafeteria behind the **Sports Museum**, and there were chairs nearby.

But it seemed a little rude to barge in and claim a seat, even though there were plenty to spare.

A glance at the cafeteria revealed a choice of beer or ice cream for those looking to justify grabbing a seat. And ice cream had already been ruled out.

I was just about to take a seat and wait when **Someone** strolled into view on the other side of the picture window. There was a definite *Sprung* on the face, but there was no way I was feeling any guilt whatsoever.

It wasn't my fault that the outlook over that way had failed to pique **Someone's** photographic interest. If it had, and the result was a half hour wait, I could always have another **Sapporo**.

But the purchase gave **Someone** time for a quick phone call.

Information back downtown suggested the bus service we were planning to catch tomorrow had been affected by upcountry snow. That was something we needed to check out. Her inquiry brought a somewhat curt response to the effect that *it was, indeed, running and had been all week*.

Once the beer was gone there wasn't much to hold our interest in the immediate vicinity, and a brief discussion ensued. There was no choice about walking the first bit, and it was all downhill.

But once we arrived at the bus stop there was a choice to make.

Wait for a bus? Or walk?

It took all of about five seconds, what with the downhill bit and all.

And maybe it was just as well.

We took our time on the descent, sighted a single up bound bus, and failed to notice anything resembling a bus sailing past us in the right direction. And it's not as if we were moving downhill at a fair clip.

As far as I was concerned I was taking my time as I took in the autumn leaves, which mightn't have been quite at their peak, but still delivered a range of hues in the red to yellow end of the rainbow.

Somewhere along the way the sound of a public address system in action seemed suspiciously like something you'd hear at a school sports carnival. Sure enough, as we passed *Sapporo City Maruyama Athletic Field* something along those lines was in progress.





I wasn't inclined to investigate the actual details, just like I wasn't inclined to investigate *Sapporo Maruyama Zoo* (*Sapporo Maruyama Dōbutsuen*), which lies across the road. It's *Hokkaidō*'s oldest zoo, heavy on animals indigenous to the island including bears, eagles and wolves. There are around a thousand animals on the 22.5 ha site, and admission is a reasonable ¥600.

But I had other priorities, and they lay just a little further along the road.

The *Hokkaidō Shrine* (*Hokkaidō Jingū*) in *Maruyama Park* dates back to the early days of *Japanese expansion into the northern island*.

It was originally established in *Tokyo* in **1869** on the orders of *Emperor Meiji* to enshrine three *kami* (*Shinto deities*) associated with the development of *Hokkaidō*.



The three deities (*Ōkunitama*, *Okuninushi*, and *Sukunahikona*) were moved to a temporary shrine in *Sapporo* in **1870** and relocated to the current site the following year.

At that stage, the shrine was known as *Sapporo Jinja*, but when the soul of *Emperor Meiji* was enshrined there In **1964**, the name was changed to the current moniker.

Some those who contributed to the exploration of *Hokkaidō* and the lands to the north of the island, including *Mamiya Rinzō* are also enshrined there.

Fire destroyed the building in **1974**, but it was restored in **1978**.

The shrine's 180,000 square metres adjoin *Maruyama Park* and the nearby Zoo, and 1,500 cherry trees make it a popular destination for blossom viewing parties during the *sakura* season.

The shrine draws substantial crowds for *Hatsumōde* (the first visits of the New Year to shrines and temples) and a number of festivals.



The main festival, between **14 and 16 June** is *Sapporo Matsuri* (*Sapporo Festival*), one of *Japan's ten biggest*, attracting over a million people each year.

Three festivals in *February* commemorate the *beginning of spring* (*3 February*) and the *founding of Japan* (*11 February*) and *prayers for industrial prosperity and the fertility of crops* (*17 February*).

Other festivals and ceremonies through the year involve self-purification and recharging the spirit (*30 June*), pioneers of the settlement of *Hokkaidō* (*15 August*), *the three enshrined deities* (*1 September*), the birth of *Emperor Meiji* (*3 November*), the *first rice crop of the year* (*23 November*) and *the present Emperor's birthday* (*23 December*).

There are also monthly festivals on the **1st, 10th, 15th** and **20th** of each month.



We diverted across the road after that, since that section of the park looked semi-interesting, and it got us away from the road for a while, but didn't waste much time on the way to the station.

There comes a time when you need to rest your eyes after exposure to autumn leaves.

We mightn't have been quite there yet, but with the prospect of more of the same tomorrow it made sense to give it a break.

At the station, a choice between a ¥200 ticket back to *Ōdōri* or a change of line and ¥250 to *Sapporo* was a total no-brainer, but not only for the proximity to the hotel.

Madam wanted to visit a camera store since the new camera needed a bag, and there was one just on the other side of *Sapporo Station*.

A slightly shorter walk, of course, meant we could get back to base a tad sooner and squeeze in a bit more rest before we set off for our evening appointment.



Uncertainty about temperatures later in the piece saw extra layers go on before we headed out to rendezvous with *Local Travelling Lady*, and that brought a straightforward question.

Seibu department store runs right across the block near *Sapporo Station*, so the question was, *Which side of the store?*

Obviously, given the fact that we were catching a bus, *it's the one with the bus stop*.

Since there was no sign of one on the first side, it must be t'other one.

The *Loop 88 Factory Line* is the one you're looking for if you're bussing it to the *Sapporo Beer Museym*, with departures every twenty minutes and a flat rate ¥210 for the trip.

Alternatively, you can walk it in twenty-five minutes from *JR Sapporo* and risk getting lost on your way to *North 7, East 9*. Another alternative is a fifteen-minute walk from the *Toho Subway Line's Higashi-kuyakusho-mae* Station.

But the bus is straightforward.

The bus also takes you past the *Sapporo Factory* (*Sapporo Fakutori*), the old *Sapporo Brewery* that has transmogrified into a complex that includes a shopping mall, offices, a movie theatre multiplex and a museum.

The original brewery building dates back to **1876** and remained in use until the brewery operations were moved to a new location in **1993**. But that's not where we were headed.

Our goal was the *only beer museum in Japan* operated by *the country's oldest brand of beer* though it's obviously not located in the original premises.

We'd just gone past those.

The red-brick building that houses the *Sapporo Beer Museum (Sapporo Bīru Hakubutsukan)* was originally built as a factory for the *Sapporo Sugar Company* in **1890**.

We're talking beet sugar rather than cane sugar here, and a project that had its origins back in the *Meiji Era* days of the *Kaitakushi Development Commission* which set about establishing business enterprises on the island as it was incorporated into the *Japanese Empire*.

William Clark, the president of *Massachusetts Agricultural College* and an expert on beet production, was hired to help establish beet cultivation in *Hokkaidō* in the late **1870s**.

When Clark went back to the U. S, the *Kaitakushi* delegated the task of supervising beet cultivation to *Sapporo Agricultural College*, the predecessor of *Hokkaidō University*.

They built a *sugar factory* on another site in **1879**, and the enterprise was privatised in **1888**.

The new *Sapporo Sugar Company* established the factory that later became the *Sapporo Beer Museum and Beer Garden*, but competition from *Taiwanese sugar* after the end of the *First Sino-Japanese War* in **1895** saw the company liquidated.

The *Sapporo Beer Company* bought the sugar factory in **1903** and remodelled it as a brewery.

The Interested Reader may have surmised that beer, which requires hops for the brewing process, isn't indigenous to *Japan* though its history in the country goes back to the *Edo Period*.

Dutch traders in *Nagasaki* opened a beer hall to slake the thirsts of sailors on the route between *Japan* and the Dutch East Indies.

As *Japan* was opened to foreign trade during the *Meiji Period*, imported beers became available in limited quantities in the foreign settlements, and trained brewers from overseas arrived to establish a local industry.

Spring Valley Brewery in *Yokohama*, set up by a *Norwegian-American* named *William Copeland* in late **1869** went on to become *Kirin Brewery Company*.

The country's largest producer, *Asahi Breweries* traces its founding heritage to the start of the *Osaka Beer Brewing Company* in 1889, and the launch of the *Asahi* brand in 1892.

The history of *Sapporo Beer* dates back to the *Meiji Period* when the *Kaitakushi* established a number of breweries.

The first wasn't even located in *Hokkaidō*.

In 1875, the *Kaitakushi* constructed a brewery at their *Aoyama garden* in *Tokyo*, created in 1871 to cultivate imported plants and vegetables before transporting them to *Hokkaidō*.

There were doubts about the chances of *European plants* surviving the northern island's growing conditions unless they were allowed to acclimatise first.

Kaitakushi officials also set out to acquire modern agricultural technology in much the same way as the *Japanese military* set about reorganising itself along *Western* lines. The *Royal Navy* provided the template for *a Japanese version*, and the *Army* was modelled on *Germany's*.

And if you were looking to brew beer it made sense to head in the same direction.

Seibei Nakagawa, who studied brewing in Germany, was appointed chief brewer in *Aoyama*, with *Hisanari Murahashi*, one of the *Satsuma students* who travelled to *England* in 1868, in charge of the garden.





Nakagawa knew ice was an important part of *German brewing techniques*, and that led *Murahashi* to request that the brewery be relocated to *Hokkaidō*. As a result, the *Kaitakushi Brewery* opened for business in *Sapporo* on *23 September 1876*.

At that point in time, the population of *Sapporo* was only around 2,500.

The first building was a wooden structure but was later enlarged with a red brick facade as *Sapporo beer* gradually became popular throughout the country.

Financial difficulties saw the *Kaitakushi* disbanded in *1882*.

The brewery ended up with the newly established *Hokkaidō Prefectural Government*. It was privatised shortly afterwards, and the *Sapporo Beer Company* was founded in *1888*. The brewery operated until *1993* when the company opened a new facility in *Eniwa*, and the site was redeveloped as a commercial complex (the *Sapporo Factory*).

As one might suspect, *Sapporo Beer* is not necessarily brewed in *Sapporo*.

The company owns *five breweries in Japan* (in *Sapporo*, *Sendai*, *Chiba*, *Shizuoka*, and *Kyushu*) as well as the *Sleeman brewery* in *Ontario*, and *Sapporo Brewing Company* in *Wisconsin*, which cater to North American markets. There's also a subsidiary in *Vietnam* with a brewery in *Đức Hòa, Long An*.

And the company doesn't just make *Sapporo Beer*.

The company acquired the *Yebisu* brand (*Hughesy*'s personal favourite out of the *Japanese beers* I've sampled) after a complicated series of mergers but left it dormant until it was resurrected in **1971**. *Yebisu*, brewed initially by the *Japan Beer Brewery Company* in *Tokyo*, dates back to **1890** but now serves as *Sapporo*'s luxury line.

Much of the history is, predictably, covered in the *Sapporo Beer Museum* displays which, equally predictably, are light on for *English language content*, but a leaflet delivered the guts of it in *English*. While that was a slight drawback, there was plenty of visual interest, with an especially effective display of historical advertising material.

The Museum, which opened in **1987**, operates six days a week (closed *Mondays*, or *Tuesday* if *Monday* was a public holiday) from 10:30 to 18:30 though the doors close half an hour before closing time.

That half hour allows the management to clear the punters out of the *Tasting Room*, which is where the three of us found ourselves after *the Japanese contingent* had their fill of the content in the *Museum* itself.

It probably comes as no surprise to learn that *Hughesy* opted for three samples for ¥ 500, rather than one of the three at ¥200. Incidentally, I had paid ¥550 at the ski jump, but that came in a larger glass.

So, with my three samples and a glass each for the girls, we found a table and sat down to talk about, among other things *High School French*. I'm not entirely sure how we got there, and we didn't remain in the vicinity very long.

When the conversation veered off into the local lingo I was quite happy just to sit, sip and ponder.

As the tasting room moved into closing down mode we moved off to sample one of the region's top-rated food items, the oddly-named *Jingisukan* (*Genghis Khan*).

There are three venues offering variations on the same theme in the *Sapporo Beer Garden*.

Despite the name, the *Beer Garden* seemed to be an all-indoor affair, but with the climatic conditions that pertain in these parts that isn't a particularly surprising discovery.

We were pointed towards the popular one, the second floor *Kessel Hall*, where we were seated and issued with the regulation bibs that protect most of your clothing from flying fat.

We're not talking fine dining here, folks, just robust tastes delivered in largely carnivorous bulk.

It's based on the *Mongolian barbecue* concept, which helps explain the moniker, and is also said to be popular in *mainland China* and, oddly, *Thailand*.



In *pre-war Japan*, it was widely assumed that *barbecued lamb* was the staple diet of *Mongolian soldiers* as they ravaged their way across the countryside. This take on the concept probably didn't originate in *Hokkaidō*. *Tokyo*, *Zaō Onsen* in northern *Honshū*, and *Tōno* in *Iwate Prefecture* are the prime suspects).

There's also a stew that shares the name (recipe [here](#)).

The first *Jingisukan* restaurant, *Jingisu-sō* (*Genghis House*) opened in *Tokyo* in 1936.

That's almost twenty years after the *Japanese government* planned to increase the national flock to a million animals and established five sheep farms to achieve the goal.

Only two of the properties survived, and both of them (*Takikawa* and *Tsukisamu*) are in *Hokkaidō*. That factoid may have something to do with the prevalence of lamb and mutton across the northern island when neither are widely consumed further south.

The *Jingisukan* concept is simple enough.

There's an odd-shaped a convex metal skillet in the middle of the table with gas burners below. It looks to be a non-stick surface, but would have been cast iron in the original incarnation.

You do your own cooking with a pair of chopsticks, which was presumably about all the *Mongols* would have had at hand out on the steppes. The dome-shaped skillet represents the soldiers' helmets that served as barbecue plates when they settled down to bivouac for the night.

In an unusual touch of local flavour, they've managed to include an outline of *Hokkaidō* on the helmet.

While the *Mongol hordes* were probably *carnivores* rather than *omnivores*, and would have been cooking with *slivers of lamb or mutton*, the platter of meat arrived with a selection of vegetables.

The menu included other options, including *venison* and *scallops*, which might have been interesting alternatives, but we were there for the sheepy side of things.

That came with a variety of choices, including an all you can drink option, assuming you were going to be sticking around for a hundred minutes.

At ¥1700, compared to the regular ¥500 a throw it obviously pays to buy in bulk.





The combination of barbecued lamb, the odd vegetable and quantities of draught beer could hardly be described as *haute cuisine*, but it worked nicely enough.

But it's not the sort of place to go if you're averse to smoky lamb fat laden air, *but there you go*.

Or, if you don't fancy the smoke and the aroma you end up carrying away with you, *there you don't*.

I'm not a hundred per cent inclined that way myself, but I've done it once.

If I'm back, I might be heading upmarket and going for something slightly leaner.

Venison or scallops have definite appeal in that regard.

Once the hundred minutes were up, and we'd demolished the lamb and vegetables we paid and headed outside for obligatory commemorative photographs and the bus back to the downtown area.

Local Travelling Lady walked us back to the hotel with a stop along the way at an unusual mailbox.

It's allegedly the only one of its kind in the world, and the photograph doesn't quite do it justice, but we were back for a daylight snap later in the piece.

And, before we parted, *LTL* gave a glowing review to the eatery we happened to be standing outside, right there in the hotel basement on the underground passage that takes you back and forth when the snow lies piled deep up there on the surface.

It sounded like a viable alternative.

Upstairs, *Madam* decided she needed a bath, and I could probably have done with a shower. Sleep, however, was singing its siren song.

Nine-thirty meant three days well past the regular bed time, and I suspected the body clock would be doing its normal thing in the morning.





SAPPORO > JOZANKEI >SAPPORO

Friday, 16 October 2015

At three-fifteen, that's how it seemed, but after a drink of water I managed to crawl back into the cot and drift back off until just before six.

At that point, when consciousness returned, it was time to start filling in the *Travelogue* backlog until it was time for showers and breakfast.

Breakfast threw up a potentially thorny issue.

The Century Royal offers not one but two ***Breakfast Vikings***.

There's one on a lower floor that we'd visited yesterday, and I'd found thoroughly satisfactory.

But there's another, with ***a more Japanese approach*** and a view on an upper floor.

Madam was inclined to head that way. Understandable. There'd be plenty of choices that mightn't be available under normal circumstances.



On the other hand, with lunch as a doubtful starter, I was inclined to head for familiar territory.

The solution was obvious, but there was, for a brief moment, a significant question.

Was *Japanese language deficient Hughesy* capable of looking after himself in the *Breakfast Viking* situation?

I reckoned I could, being *au fait* with the protocols and all.

Madam didn't seem so sure, but the lure of the delicacies that awaited her upstairs looked after those concerns, thank you very much.

I was escorted as far as the entrance to the lower *Viking* and left to fend for myself

And I fended rather well.

While there were lunch options that could have been investigated it was well after five in the afternoon when the thoughts turned to the next meal.

That was the result of *Hughesy's* standard two tray approach to the *Viking*.

The first go around delivers the staples that'll fuel you through to lunch time and, hopefully, beyond. The second fills in spaces and provides the possibility of getting through to dinner time if lunch fails to materialise over the horizon.

In this case, the second tray was dominated by some of the *Hokkaidō delicacies* I'd skipped yesterday. There's a certain *je ne sais quoi* about venison for breakfast.

And there were the inevitable pastries to round things off.

I was thoroughly replete when I handed the docket to the *maitre d'* and headed for the agreed rendezvous in *Reception*.

Our first destination on the day's itinerary was *Hokkaidō University* campus, which, for a variety of reasons was not my preference.

Given my druthers, I'd have headed for the *Hokkaidō University Botanic Garden (Hokkaidō Daigaku Shokubutsuen)* which was significantly closer to the hotel. *North 3 West 8* is three blocks south of *JR Sapporo*, five blocks west and considerably closer to the *bus station* than the *University campus*.

It's a large garden spread over fourteen hectares and incorporated in *1886*. With two rock gardens, a rose garden, a lilac display, a greenhouse, and various other odds and ends I figured it would kill an hour or two fairly well.

Not, perhaps, one of the country's great gardens, but a worthwhile time killer.

There's also a section devoted to the *Ainu* equivalent of bush tucker though it doesn't come with *English signage*.

And if it didn't quite kill enough time, the various other odds and ends include *Batchelor Kinenkan (Batchelor Memorial Museum)* named after Rev. John Batchelor, a *19th century English missionary* who spent decades researching the *Ainu* in *Hokkaidō* and *Siberia*.

With a collection of artefacts dating back to the *Meiji Period*, the museum doesn't charge for admission, so if you're looking to kill a couple of minutes it doesn't raise financial issues.

But, instead, we were off to the University.

I'm not suggesting that there was nothing to see there, but, on the other hand, *Hughesy's* not strong on unfamiliar academia.

But the institution is one of the country's leading universities and has an interesting back story.

Hokkaidō University (Hokkaidō daigaku, or Hokudai) began its career as *Sapporo Agricultural College (Sapporo nōgakkō)* in *1876*.



The founder was an American, *William S. Clark*, president of the *Massachusetts Agricultural College*. It started life with five faculty members and twenty-four students.

It became the *Agricultural College* of *Tohoku Imperial University* in *1907*, a year before *German* teacher *Hans Koller* introduced the *Western two-blade ski* to *Japan* on the University campus.

Another transformation saw it turn into *Hokkaidō Imperial University* in *1918*, one of seven *Imperial Universities* established by the *Japanese government*.

A diversification of academic pursuits resulted in the establishment of schools of *Medicine* (*1919*), *Engineering* (*1924*) and *Science* (*1930*).

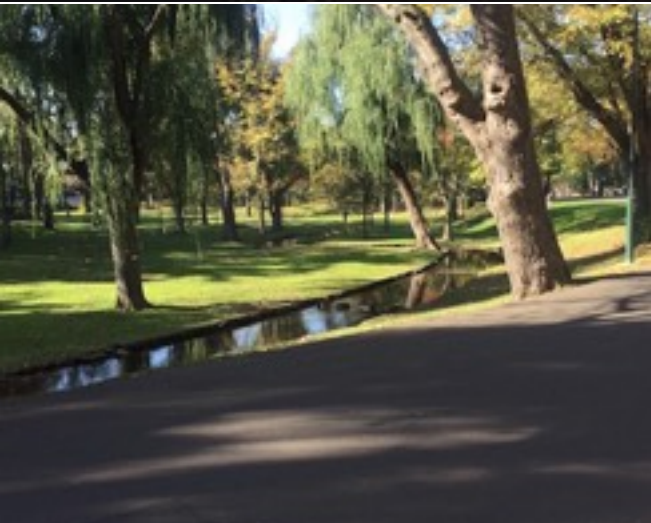
A new campus in *Hakodate* saw the *School of Fisheries* transferred there in 1935. Research institutes included one devoted to *Low-Temperature Science* (*1941*) and *Catalysis Research* (*1943*).



Postwar developments saw the institution renamed *Hokkaidō University* in **1947** and a further reorganisation in **1949** produced schools of *Law and Letters*, *Education*, *Science*, *Medicine*, *Engineering* and *Agriculture*, along with the *Fisheries Sciences* school in *Hakodate*.

Diversification through the fifties through the nineties resulted in a myriad of other schools, graduate schools, and research institutes. They cover areas including *Tuberculosis Research* (**1950**), *Veterinary Medicine* (**1952**), *Pharmaceutical Sciences* (**1958**), *Dental Medicine* (**1967**), *Environmental Science* (**1977**), *Slavic Research* and *Isotope Science* (**1978**), *Molecular Genetics* (**1985**) and *Quantum Integrated Electronics* (**1991**).

One could go on at length about such matters, but that's probably enough to point out that what we're looking at was pretty much your typical highly rated large scale university located on a campus



that includes some *American style buildings* that may date back to the **1890s** and, possibly, beyond.

So, while it might be of interest to *University* freaks, there wasn't a whole lot that floats the *Hughesy* boat in the neighbourhood.

Things picked up a little after the first couple of buildings as we made our way onto the *Poplar Avenue*, planted as a wind break in **1912**. That delivered an attractive vista that would, *In My Humble Opinion*, have been far better without the buildings that flanked it on either side.

It would also have been much better without the masses of inconsiderate students who parked their bikes all over the footpath.

But don't get me wrong.



As we made our way between the poplars, I was enjoying myself, playing an elderly curmudgeon role that would have been thoroughly familiar to *Bowen State School's* Year 4H back in *2004*.

And there were a couple of highlights on the scenic and sightseeing side of things.

Slotted in between the *School of Engineering* and the *Faculty House* on the west side of *Poplar Avenue*, made our exit, *Ono Pond* is a relatively recent (*August 2008*) development. T

The pond is part of the *Eco-Campus Promotion Project* that reflects the natural surrounds of the area before buildings the *University's* buildings arrived on the scene.

Maybe that explains its appeal to someone who thought, only half in jest, that the place would be better without the buildings.



This was (supposedly) what it was like before the buildings when a spring flowed into the nearby *Sakushukotoni River*, which flowed southeast to northwest across this part of *Sapporo* from a source on the northern side of the *University's Botanical Garden*.

There's not much of the river left, and the spring supplied water for horses and cattle in the *Faculty of Agriculture's Model Barn*, which was our eventual destination on this little jaunt.

The animals drank there until the *School of Engineering* and assorted research facilities went in around the watercourse in the fifties and sixties.

The area gradually deteriorated into a degraded dump site until *Professor Kazuo Ono* from the *School of Engineering* set about restoring the devastated pond to something approaching its original, pristine, state in the *1970s*.

And he succeeded, delivering a location that provides quality recreational open space for staff, students and visitors.

So we took a break beside the pond before heading off to the nearby *Model Dairy*, which was the one part of the campus that had piqued my interest. *Ono Pond* was a bonus.

It was, officially, the *Sapporo Agricultural College Farm No.2*, established in **1876** by the College's first principal *Dr. William Smith Clark*.

The plan was to introduce up to date, *large-scale Western-style agriculture and livestock production* to immigrants to *Hokkaidō*, who would have had no experience with that method of farming and, quite possibly, no background in dealing with the northern island's climatic conditions.

Clark wanted a facility where students could gain practical experience in managing livestock.

The buildings, most of them dating from the period between **1877** and **1911**, weren't all in their current locations when they went in.

The centrepiece is the so-called *Model Barn*, designed by the College's second principal W. M. Wheeler, who modelled it on a barn at Massachusetts Agricultural College.

Completed in **1877**, the two-storey wooden building had cattle and horse stalls on the ground floor, hay storage above and a total floor area of 555 square metres. The balloon frame structure building has no supporting beams and similar lightweight, practical buildings spread across the *American Midwest* around the same time.

There probably isn't that much difference between winter in *Minneapolis*, *Milwaukee* or *Lake Wobegone* and conditions in *Hokkaidō*.





The *Model Barn* was registered as an *Important Cultural Property of Japan* in **1969**.

Since it is the oldest, most symbolic building in the farm, the *Model Barn* became the common term to describe the whole group of buildings.

All up there are about ten buildings in the area between the *University administration office* and the *Graduate School of Environmental Science*, with the earlier structures moved to their present positions in **1910**.

The facility was the university farm until **1969**, when the buildings were renovated by the *Agency for Cultural Affairs*. They currently serve as exhibition facilities displaying hundreds of farm implements imported since the start of the *Meiji Era* and other tools donated to the University. The buildings are open to the public daily between 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.

By this stage, we were close to the northern end of the campus, two kilometres from our starting point and rather further from the location where we needed to catch a bus in the very near future.



That prompted a mad scramble back to the station, where we needed to get ourselves to the bus terminal's *Platform 12* by around eleven-fifteen

It wasn't *quite* a *skin of the teeth* job, but when we arrived there was a lengthy queue and a definite demonstration of the value of pre-booking your excursion in these circumstances.

We were off to *Jozankei*, an *onsen* resort area that sits southwest of downtown *Sapporo*.

It's a little more than an hour by bus, and the area is rated as a prime destination for coloured leaves, so you have three factors that are bound to attract crowds kicking in together.

Proximity means you can decide *it's a nice day for it* and take yourself off to the bus terminal, more or less on spec.



Jozankei has a number of *onsen* resorts that will open their doors to day visitors.

That's probably enough to pack the *it's a nice day for it* crowd in anyway.

And then there's the coloured leaves factor.

If you haven't booked it's a case of *first in, best dressed*, and it looked like there were large numbers of punters who may well be missing out.

That number didn't, however, include us.

Madam left me on the end of a queue that must have had a good forty customers and headed off to investigate.

She was back about a minute later with a *Follow Me*, and we were aboard in time to grab the last couple of regular seats at the back of the bus.

Some of the queue we'd just passed managed to clamber aboard and claim the jump seats in the aisle, but there was a substantial number left in the line waiting for the next departure when our bus departed.

And there was a substantial scrum outside the ticket office.



It looked like the sort of situation that could turn ugly if you had the odd cluster of impatient hotheads in the area, but *Japanese people*, by and large, seem remarkably patient in these circumstances.

While our destination lay to the southwest, a question about the direction of travel would have brought an *East* from *Yours Truly*.

Maybe I was out of breath and disorientated after the mad scramble that got us to the bus station.

But I wasn't disoriented enough to fail to note the presence of the *Okurayama Ski Jump* in the distance as we crossed *Ōdōri Park*.

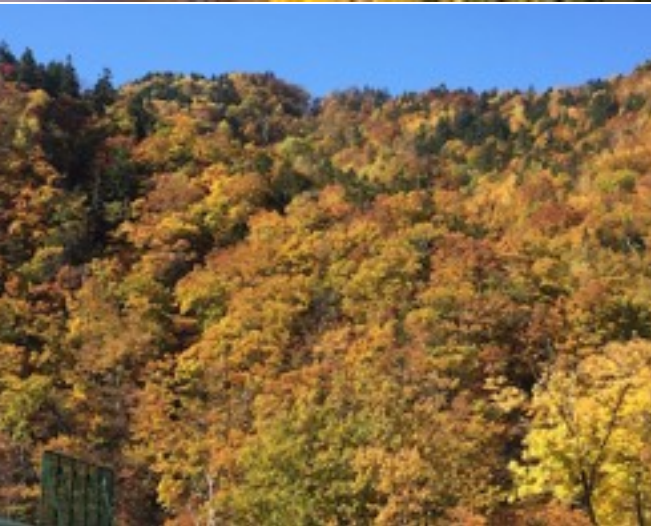


It wasn't long until we were into the foothills and the autumn leaves, on our way to an *onsen* area that dates back to the early days of *Sapporo*, when an ascetic monk named *Miizumi Jozan*, discovered the springs and opened a spa on the upper reaches of the *Toyohira* River. That was in *1866*.

If the notion of a spa operation doesn't quite sit neatly with ideas of asceticism, the intention was to use the waters for *healing* rather than *recreation*.

While *Jozan* put a great deal of effort into setting things up for the injured and sick to take the waters by building roads and bridges, the spa's reputation spread.

Mining and timber getting brought more people into the area.



In **1918**, when a mine opened in **Toyoha** thirty kilometres of railway line opened things up further and the area now boasts dozens of **ryokan**, restaurants and shops catering to **onsen** tourists.

A location between the high cliffs of the **Toyohira** valley inside **Shikotsu-Toya National Park** just an hour outside central **Sapporo** certainly helped.

As a result, **Jozankei** is more developed than smaller **onsen** towns elsewhere in **Hokkaidō**.

Many **ryokan** are open to day visitors for a nominal fee (usually in the vicinity of ¥1000). If you're disinclined to shell out for the full **onsen** facility, there are **free foot baths** around the town for footsore travellers.

In a cave next door to one of those free foot baths, the **Iwato Kannondo** temple commemorates road workers killed while building a tunnel. The 120-metre cave contains thirty-three statues of **Kannon, the Bodhisattva of compassion**.



Interestingly, the temple has a vending machine selling towels for users of the neighbouring foot baths.

People soaking their feet for free may well have been trekking around nearby *Lake Toya*, the scenic *Hoheikyo Dam*, or the *Shikotsu-Toya National Park's active volcanoes*.

Mount Usu erupted as recently as *2000*), and *Showa Shinzan* is *Japan's youngest volcano*, formed between *1943* and *1945*. The lake's *Windsor Hotel Toya Resort & Spa* was the venue for the *G8 summit* in *July 2008*.

So there's plenty to draw the visitors in apart from the waters. *Hughesy's* categorisation of the place as *an obvious onsen resort, with plenty of high rise* should come as no surprise.



Having arrived just after midday, we had a couple of hours to spend in the vicinity, not long enough to take in the lake or the dam before we headed back just after three.

Still, there was sufficient time for a ramble along the river valley among the autumn leaves. While there mightn't have been a lot of action or activity, I was quite content to wander in a leisurely fashion and enjoy the seasonality.

We didn't go all that far either, crossing a handy bridge before heading uphill, and looping back to the *onsen* development.

Once we were back, it was a case of killing time, with the *foot baths* as an obvious avenue for doing so.

We could have stopped at the first one, which was set in an attractive garden setting, but it seemed uncomfortably crowded.

As a result, we hoofed it a little further, taking ourselves through the town centre and past the bus stop on our way to the *foot bath facility beside the temple*.



There was plenty of room there though it started to fill up about half an hour after we'd settled ourselves in.

That seemed like a reasonable excuse to whack the shoes back on and head back downhill looking for a snack and, possibly, beer. That didn't quite work out, and I ended up killing time in the little park beside the river while *The Photographer* snapped away.

Not that I was objecting. It was very restful.

Since we were booked to go back at 3:09, we started moving again around half an hour before the scheduled departure time. With the benefit of hindsight, we could have stayed longer, since the shop that *Madam* steered us into had absolutely nothing of interest to *Yours Truly*.

There wasn't much to interest *Madam* either, so she headed back towards temple for more snaps while *Hughesy* joined the bus queue, although I didn't actually need to.

Madam was back just before the bus arrived though there wasn't a great deal in it. There wasn't a great deal of room in the bus either, which proved the wisdom of making a definite booking.

With a vehicle that was almost chocker when it arrived, *Hughesy* got to claim the last seat while *Madam* ended up on a jump seat in the aisle.



That put her on a par with the first half of the queue. Everyone else was left to wait for the next bus.

I managed to doze off on the hour and a bit run back to downtown **Sapporo**, regaining consciousness just before we alighted and walked back to the hotel to drop the backpacks.

From there, with **Someone** feeling peckish, we took ourselves off to the sweet shop, where **Someone** needed to pick up gifts for family members. Asked whether I felt like an ice cream, I wasn't going to respond in the negative.

I wasn't, however, expecting to be ushered to a seat in the upstairs cafeteria. Neither, I guess, was **Madam**, who had no interest in any of the flasher options on the menu presented to us..

Both of us just wanted an ice cream, something to tide us over until dinner time, when we probably wouldn't be looking for anything substantial. Explaining the circumstances saw us pointed to the appropriate area near the entrance to the cafeteria, where the product was obviously of rather high quality but not to my taste.

It was one of those situations where you *know* something sits *at the top of the range*, but you *aren't fussed about it*.

And once **Someone** had stocked up on gifts for the family it looked like it was time to turn the thoughts to dinner. There didn't seem to be much in the way of alternatives.

Madam had floated the possibility of *a very good ramen place*, but it was a good ten-minute walk, and neither of us felt like making that much effort.

In any case, *Japanese fare* would be featuring over the next few days, so both of us reckoned we'd prefer something else. In any case, we needed an early night after three late ones with another one looming just over the horizon.

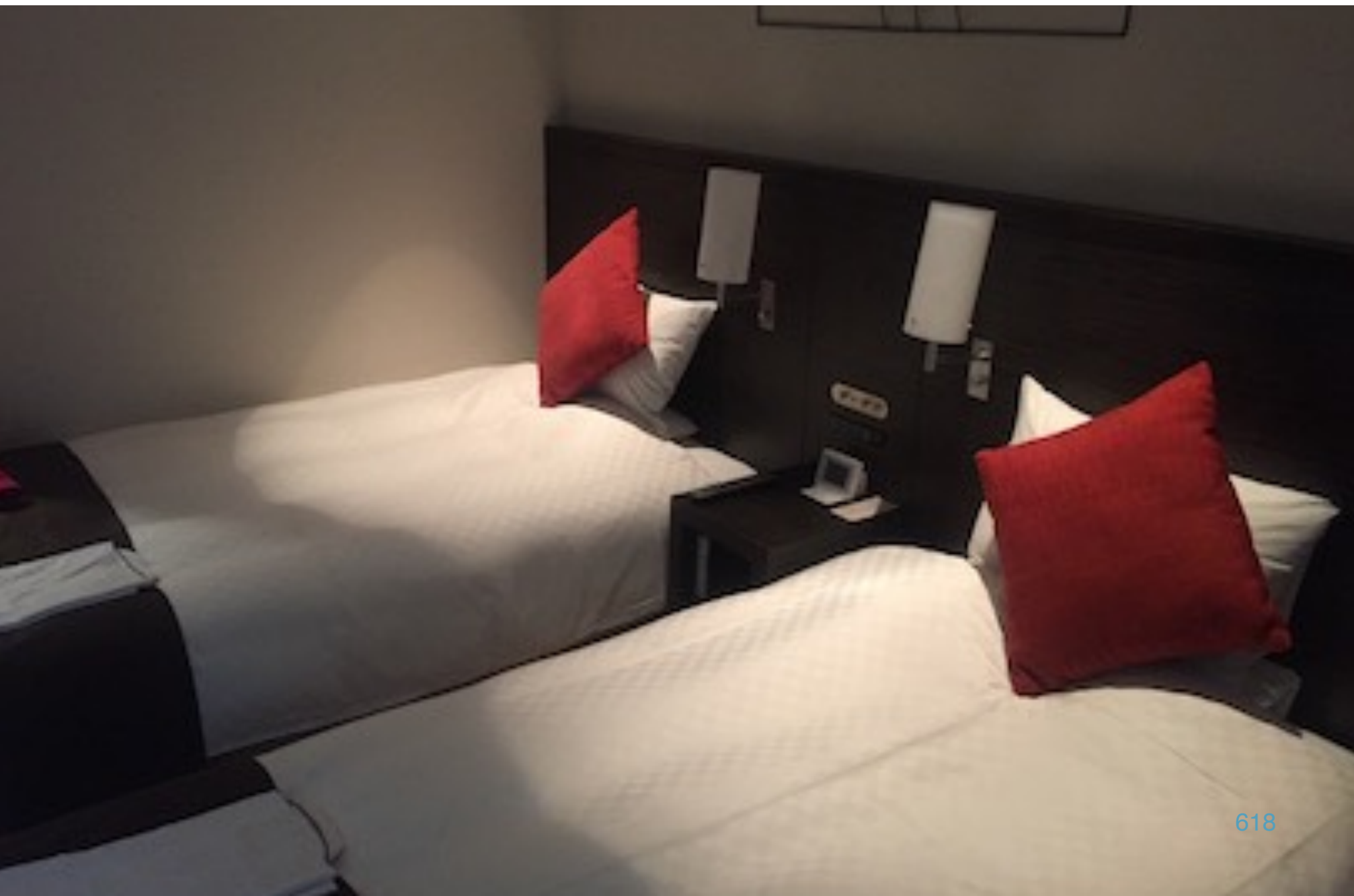
We took a quick circuit around the lower levels of the station complex to scope out the options but quickly came to the conclusion that the *Belgian beer cafe* that had been pointed out to us the previous evening sounded just right.

And it was. We opted for draught beer, roast chicken and *salad liegeois*, and found the quantities just right. I washed my portion down with a second beer while *Elmore James* or his almost identical cousin brother played in the background.

But even with a quality soundtrack, neither of us was inclined to stick around.

Once we 'd paid and made our exit, it was a case of heading straight upstairs.

Juggling the charging of digital devices delayed the actual bed time, but *Hughesy*, for one, was well and truly ready to crash by eight fifteen





13

JAPAN 2015: THE TRAIN LEG



SAPPORO > HAKODATE > HIROSAKI

Saturday, 17 October 2015

A good nine and three quarter hours of pretty sound sleep, punctuated by strange dreams involving the *Australian Senate* and overseas travel saw some of us up and about around six on *Day One* of the *Train Leg*.

That gave a bit of *Travelogue* tapping time before *The Supervisor* rose and we set about packing before the first rail sector. It was a substantial travel day, and while there wasn't a great likelihood of missing the train you do tend to be ultra-cautious.

Especially when you're leaving a little earlier than the original game plan. The preferred option was all sold out when we booked the tickets back in *Kōbe*, and we were leaving a good hour and a half earlier.

Miss this one and we'd miss the connection in *Hakodate* as well.

So we were all ready to go by the time we headed down to breakfast just after seven.

Under the circumstances, a queue outside the dining room was probably something you'd prefer not to encounter, but the wait was minimal. In any case, once we'd gained admission and attacked the buffet it was obvious there was plenty of room to spare inside.

It seemed fairly obvious that the queue was a case of managing the crowd around the food options. I'd thought of sneaking a quick photograph of the spread on each of the three mornings I'd been there but invariably felt like I'd be getting in the way.

Unfortunately, after the previous day's effort, the buffet was light on for venison, and I was forced to take it easy on the variety side of things.

I didn't *quite* fill the first tray, and there was no thought of going on to a second.

But I engaged in a minor pastry pig out, just in case I needed it later on.

And we were back upstairs around 7:34 with an hour until departure time. That gave me a chance to continue on the *Travelogue* backlog.





But I didn't get too long at it. After half an hour *Someone* was getting restless, and so we took our time pottering around and taking our time on the way out, which should mean we had everything.

Experience suggests you can't be too careful in that regard.

In any case, it got to the point where there was nothing for it but to collect the goods and chattels and head downstairs to check out.

Once we were out of the foyer, the station was the obvious destination, but we diverted ever so slightly to see *Thursday* night's unusual *Post Office* letterbox, which didn't seem quite so attractive in the cold hard light of *Saturday* morning.

From there, the path took us into the regulation massive station complex, the sort of affair you come to expect in *a major Japanese city*.

Since we were at the terminus, our *Hokuto 6*, Car 4 was there, ready and waiting as we ascended to the platform, with our carriage, *Car 4*, conveniently positioned right beside where we left the escalator.

We weren't, however, the first passengers to board, and we weren't the first with large luggage either.

That meant we had to address the question of where to stow *The Coppertone Container*.

As things turned out, it fitted into the overhead luggage rack. *Just*.

But it fitted, so there was an obvious alternative next time space behind the last seats at the back of the carriage had been claimed.

On-time departures are par for the course on *Japanese railways*, and we were on time, crossing *Odori Street* and heading into the *regular urban Japanese cityscape*. Nothing remarkable there, but around ten minutes later the cityscape had given way to an industrial area. That, in turn, morphed into light industry with residential towers on the way into *ShinSapporo*.

With services commencing in *2016*, there was a fair amount of promotional material for the *Hokkaidō Shinkansen* in and around *JR Sapporo*, and while the trains mightn't have quite reached there yet, the infrastructure seemed to be in place.

As far as I could see, anyway.

Our stop at *ShinSapporo* was at your average common or garden station platform. It seemed safe to assume that the *Shinkansen* station will be a proper flash turnout, and entirely separate to the existing station facility. It will be interesting to see whether the *Shinkansen* has any effect on the busy air corridor into *New Chitose*.

With no visible sign of actual *Shinkansen* line, it seemed safe to assume it will probably sit above ground level, the way such lines superimpose themselves over the existing landscape.

When, that is, they're not running through the landscape.

By 8:48 we were into the autumn foliage, which I noted would probably be the theme for the next three and a half hours. Letting those elements wash over me as we headed towards the coast through familiar elements spread a little more than on the main island with more vegetated space.

There's room to move and expand in *Hokkaidō* though the structures remain much the same as elsewhere.

We were beetling along just a little too fast to pick up station names but stopped long enough at *Minamichitose* for *Hughesy* to tap out the name in the travel notes.

From the name I figured that put us almost out at *the airport*, and shortly afterwards I could make out what looked like a control tower over on the horizon.

Or it maybe it was a *high rise airport hotel*. But as it turned out, by 9:10 we were passing right beside *the airport*, which meant that the building must have been something else.

It was just over a quarter of an hour afterwards when we stopped in *Tomakomai* the fifth largest city in *Hokkaidō* with a population around 180,000.

The station came after a belt of light industry and sat close to a golf driving range where, for once, I managed to glimpse the facilities. *The Observant Traveller* will notice the netting rising above the cityscape, but usually that's as much as you can make out.

By this time, we were on *Hokkaidō*'s east coast. *Tomakomai* is an important ferry port, but we were on the wrong side to catch glimpses of water though it couldn't have been far away.

Unfortunately, people over on that side have blinds drawn, and someone has decided to run the line slightly inland, so there are buildings in the way too. One thing that was totally obvious, looking at the map, was that the *Shinkansen* won't be coming this way.



The line, when services start up, will be coming from *ShinAomori* and passing under the *Tsugaru Strait* because it has to. For the same reason it will pass through *Hakodate* on the way to *Sapporo*, but that's it.

Massive construction costs will see it following the closest possible approximation to a beeline between the two centres.

Not an actual beeline, however. There's a substantial body of water (*Uchiura-wan*) in between, and the line will have to go *around*, rather than *under*, it. At the same time, technological advances since the line we were on went in will allow the new line to pass *through* and *under* anything substantial that geology has thrown up along the way.

And if *Tomakomai* is the island's fifth largest city with a population below 200,000 there won't be too many centres large enough to justify a *ShinStation* and a diversion from the shortest practical route.

The politics of *Shinkansen* routes and any possible relevance to the question of *Very Fast Trains in Australia* provided food for thought as we headed off.

Until, that is, 9:35, when I noted large arrays of solar panels and maybe sea over there on the left. We were passing through a rural landscape, with mountains in the distance, complete with what may be snow but is probably bare rock.

There are some things you can't help noticing, assuming you're on the appropriate side of the train. Two perfect examples appeared as we made our way into *Noboribetsu*.

Just before the station, a large fairground caught the eye, but what really got the brain cells working was an impressive approximation of a *French chateau* that almost screamed *Onsen Resort*.

At least, it seemed safe to make an assumption along those lines. Elsewhere, an alternative hypothesis might have involved a winery, but *Hokkaidō*'s hardly wine grape territory.

Noboribetsu, as it turns out, is *Hokkaidō*'s most famous hot spring resort thanks to the waters from springs in the *Jigokudani (Hell Valley)* just above the town, which sits within *Shikotsu-Toya National Park*.

There are actually *nine different waters*, containing varying quantities of minerals including *sulphur*, *salt*, and *iron*. The area is apparently ranked among *the world's most exceptional hot springs*.

The *Jigoku Valley*, where yellow-grey volcanic gas seeps out of the rocks is a 450-metre-wide mouth of a volcano, which delivers three thousand litres of hot water every minute, times sixty, times twenty-four, times three hundred and sixty-five and a quarter.

That's a lot of water, and there's plenty more of it on the other (seaward) side. That was around 9:54.



It was around ten minutes later when we hit *Higashi Muroran* and another twenty to *Datemombetsu*, part of a city (*Date*) established around **1869** by the clan who had been the dominant force around *Fukushima* and *Sendai* (*Miyagi Prefecture* and the southern part of *Iwate Prefecture*) on the main island from the **12th century**.

They had been one of the most influential *daimyō* clans by political changes associated with the *Meiji Restoration* forced a branch of the family to relocate to the south coast of *Hokkaidō*.

Nearby, *Mount Usu* an active stratovolcano in *Shikotsu-Toya National Park* has erupted four times since **1900**.

The **1910** eruption created the *Meiji-shinzan cryptodome*, forty-five craters on the northern side of the volcano, and a number of hot springs. The activity was triggered by magma intruding into a shallow area where groundwater was abundant, so the *onsen* side of things doesn't come as any surprise.

Another eruption between **28 December 1943** and **September 1945** formed the *Shōwa-shinzan*, the country's youngest volcano as earthquakes shook the area around *Lake Tōya*. Some days there were up to two hundred tremors, though the authorities kept the news to themselves, fearing it might be seen as an omen of impending wartime doom.

A local postmaster *Masao Mimatsu*, however, kept detailed records as wheat fields were uplifted and fissures started to appear. One of them was six hundred metres long.

On a single day (**22 June**) in **1944**, there were 250 tremors as the ground rose one and a half metres. Lava flows broke through the surface over the next two days, and a pyroclastic surge on **7 July** reached the northern shore of **Lake Tōya**, destroying houses and forests along the way.

By the end of **October**, the postmaster recorded seven craters, seventeen major and countless minor eruptions as volcanic ash landed up to a kilometre away from the vent and the ground continued to rise by up to two metres a day.

The activity continued until **September 1945** when the birth of 398 metre **Shōwa-shinzan** was complete though it continues to emit smoke.

Subsequent eruptions in **1977** and between **March 2000** and **September 2001** suggested things haven't settled down. The most recent activity forced the authorities to evacuate 13,000 residents.

Still, **Mount Usu** and **Shōwa-shinzan** are significant tourist attractions within **Shikotsu-Toya National Park**. A ropeway takes visitors up to viewing platforms that look out over **Shōwa-shinzan** if that sort of thing floats your boat.

We; of course, weren't stopping for any length of time and by 10:32 we were looking at **Toya Station** in the town of **Tōyako** on the western shore of **Lake Tōya**.

The ten-kilometre volcanic caldera is nearly circular and is reputed to be the country's second most transparent lake and the **northernmost lake in Japan that never freezes over**. You can probably put that down to the volcanic activity.

The water wasn't always in sight as we looped out way around the bay to **Oshamambe** (10:59) and **Yakumo** (11:19) That left us with about an hour to go and an expectation that we about to divert inland after following the coastline around the bay.

But it didn't quite work out like that. At 11:33 we still had water out there on the left as we slowed and seemed to be starting to climb. Actually, we weren't. Each time I sighted water we seemed to be about the same height above it

The Casual Observer might not consider that particularly strange, but **TCO** wasn't hearing the sound of an engine that seemed to be straining.

Rather like something going up a hill, in fact.

Except, it seemed, we weren't, though we were definitely slowing down. The reduced speed might have been more conducive to photographs, but the light had become an issue.

At 11:44 in **Mori**, settled by the **Japanese** as a herring fishing base as far back as the 15th century we still had still water over on the left side. The fishermen came up from **Hakodate**, and the town was administered from there.



The town played a minor part in the *Boshin War* (1868 – 1869) at the end of the *Tokugawa Shōgunate* when naval commander *Kōbō Abe* (1836 – 1908) fled from *Edo* with the remnants of the *Tokugawa Navy*. His fleet of eight steam warships called in *en route* to a new base at *Hakodate* and the town joined the *Republic of Ezo*.

But that didn't last long. *The Republic* was defeated in the *Battle of Hakodate* in 1869, and *Hokkaidō* ended up under the rule of the new *Meiji central government*.

A few minutes later at 11:50 we were finally away from the coast, and it definitely felt like we were starting to climb though I seemed to recall something along those lines a while back.

Still, there were embankments where there used to be water, and the note of the engine suggested the strain that comes with climbing.

Five minutes later we had *Ōnuma Quasi-National Park* coming up on the left. The 90 square kilometre park is the smallest *Hokkaidō* includes the *Hokkaidō Komagatake*, a 1131-metre stratovolcano that kicked back into activity in the *early 17th century* after around five dormant millennia.

The renewed activity delivered mudflows that dammed up depressions at the foot of the volcano and, in turn, created the *Ōnuma* and *Konuma* ponds, which abut the western slope of the mountain.

And with the mountain over there, between the train and the water, we were away from the coast.



We hit the water again on the way into *Ōnuma Kōen*, some twenty-five kilometres north of *Hakodate*, where a semi-flash station is evidence of the town's role as the coastal city's mountain and lake playground. Three lakes, *Ōnuma*, *Konuma* and *Junsainuma* all draw their share of daytrippers.

International visitors have been calling there since the early days of the *Meiji Era*. At that point, with *Hakodate* as one of the few ports open for foreign trade, members of the *German and Italian royal families* visited the area.

Things took off after the *Emperor Meiji*'s visit in *1881* attracted national attention.

It wasn't difficult to see why.



Birch and maple forests surround the lakes, and there are impressive vistas away to the left across towards what may well have been *Hakodate*.

There were mountains, or at least hills, too, with motorways to the right, along with farmland and patches of woodland. There was an extensive plain, or perhaps water beyond that, but it was hard to tell with glare and haze over in that direction.

It wasn't long until we found ourselves coming in through suburban *Hakodate* from the north.

Once we'd manipulated *The Coppertone Container* down from its eyrie and alighted from the train, the next question involved ways to kill the next ninety minutes.

Anything in the sightseeing department was going to be hampered by time constraints and *The Coppertone Container* though it could always go in a coin locker.

But we'd done most of the obvious things close to the station last time around, and anything else brought there and back travel time into the equation.

As it turned out killing time wasn't that difficult when you have a series of seemingly insignificant tasks that all add up.

For a start *Madam* needed to queue for the toilet.

That successfully took care of a couple of minutes. Then, with the cash resources running low, *Madam* headed upstairs to replenish the reserves, which took care of a couple more.

When she returned, she asked if I wanted to head outside to get a photo of something.

I didn't, particularly, but figured a snap or two would be handy.

So I headed out to get a couple of *in Hakodate* shots to insert in the *Travelogue* hereabouts. It only killed ninety seconds at the outside, but every little bit helps.

And when I got back, the ticket office beckoned.

We still needed tickets for the last day. of the train leg. The process of queueing and purchasing what we needed killed ten minutes or so, but no one was counting. But there was still time to kill.

Madam felt peckish, but I wasn't hungry at all.





Thirsty, definitely, but solid food held no attraction whatsoever. So I found a seat and waited while **Someone** inspected the *bento* options. She returned with references to **scallops**, which was enough to pique a degree of interest.

That lasted until it was obvious that **scallops** come with *rice* and *pickles*.

That was too much for this little black duck. But we managed to reach a compromise. If **Someone** bought a *bento* box, **Hughesy** could eat a **scallop** or two while **Someone** gets the rest.

That was the right quantity as far as I was concerned.

But we'd be eating later, on the train. I was left holding the *bento* while **Someone** headed outside for photographic purposes.

She returned via the via sweets shop with an entirely unnecessary question.

Did I want a beer?

Ridiculous question.

But it was followed by something more specific. *Did I fancy sampling a special Hakodate brew?*

This wasn't something that really needed to be asked either, but I was directed over there to inspect the options. They looked good and certainly hit the spot very nicely when the time came to knock one over arrived.

But the to and fro, along with *Someone* picking up the things she wanted, killed much of the remaining time. I ended up with a bottle of *Hakodate Ale* and a *Sapporo Classic*, the *Hokkaidō*-only brew that you can't buy elsewhere.

That whole process got onto the train with about seven minutes to spare. I wouldn't have minded about twenty minutes writing time before departure, but with those two brews to console, me no one was suffering.





The train departed, entirely predictably, right on time and there was nothing remarkable about the first leg since we'd passed this way before.

But as we hit the choke point before the tunnel we encountered obvious ***Shinkansen*** construction.

We were on the wrong side of the train for views across the bay, and ***Shinkansen*** structures tend to fit into a pattern when you look from the outside. ***26 March*** next year is the scheduled opening day, and certainly looked like things are under control at this end.

Interestingly, it seems like the ***Shinkansen*** tracks will coincide with the regular ones through the tunnel, at least at the start. It certainly looked like there was an intersection as we pulled out of the last stop before the tunnel.

With not much to distract inside the tunnel, I was able to tap out ***Travelogue*** notes up to this point.

I had the basics in place by the time we hit the deepest point. That gave me ten minutes before we hit the surface on the *Honshū* side to work back over things and add a little padding. *Handy*..

And we were back on the surface almost right on schedule, though the clock might have ticked over to 3:15. That left us around forty minutes until *Aomori* and what was possibly going to be a tight little switch of services.

Three minutes was about all we had up our sleeves though one suspected they'll hold the *Aomori > Hirosaki* service if we're running late. We probably weren't the only ones looking to make the changeover. Hopefully, the connecting train will be on the other side of the platform.

After all, *Aomori*'s not that big. Still, in the interim, there was nothing to do but sit back and enjoy the trip as we made our way in and out of frequent tunnels.

We were into *Kanita* at 3:33, and the stop brought thoughts of changing to a seat towards the front of the carriage to expedite that change in *Aomori*.

We had water right beside the track on the left, but we were sitting on the right, where the afternoon sun created some issues.

There was a definite haze towards the mountains on that side, with the *Tsugaru Plain* in between.

Numerous irrigation canals running from the *Iwaki River* provide water for irrigation, and the area is a noted producer of quality rice and apples.

There was evidence of the *Shinkansen* line over on the right as we made our way into *Aomori*, but that was hardly surprising.

ShinAomori lies south of the city, and the new line would have to loop around its outskirts o the way to the tunnel under the *Tsugaru Strait*.

And when we pulled up at *Aomori*, things ran relatively smoothly.

Until, that it, *Hughesy* was delegated to deposit *The Coppertone Container* in the space at the back.

The train was moving before I could do that, and things were complicated by a flood of incoming geriatrics who weren't looking fo stash luggage there but were intent on finding seats further along..

The new train was bound all the way to *Akita*, but we were alighting at the first stop after *ShinAomori*, just under half an hour down the track.

As we moved off it looked like the plain didn't last that long as we moved into hillier terrain and the sun hovered above the horizon just far enough up to cause an issue if the hills dropped out of the equation.



The conditions weren't ideal for a photographic record, but the speed factor and a bit of jolting would have rendered the camera inoperative anyway.

So, he wrote, *there was nothing to do but sit back and enjoy the view.*

And, predictably, we immediately hit a tunnel. On that basis, **Hughesy** packed away the *iPad* and prepared for what promised to be a rapid alightment at our overnight stop.

Predictably, as soon as I did the terrain flattened out and we were back on the flat. **Tsugaru Plain** obviously stretches well inland.

The stop in **Hirosaki** was predictably brief and deposited us on a platform that seemed to have more than its share of uniformed **Junior High** students, both on the platform and up in the station itself.

We needed a map to get us to the hotel, which was around a kilometre from the station, so we stopped into **Tourist Information**. While the directions to the hotel wouldn't have been that difficult and might have got ourselves to the hotel without it, it was a handy acquisition.

The railway station is well away from the sights, which fall into two distinct geographic areas. The **Hirosaki Park Hotel** sits in the middle of the three, seemingly equidistant from the **Castle Park**, the temple district and the station.

With all morning and a fair chunk of the afternoon to explore the sights the next day, there was the prospect of a decent walk in the morning.

That might, in *The Speculative Reader's* mind, have prompted suggestions about taking on sustenance the night before. Fuel for the morning and all that, but I was definitely in *Good Paddock territory* and wasn't looking for anything substantial at night.

What I was looking forward to was a *Tsugaru shamisen* performance around dinner time.

Inquiries, as we booked into the hotel, produced a suggestion that it might be crowded on a *Saturday* night, but a phone call got us a table.

Along with a warning.

With the *Saturday night* crowd, the view might not be all that flash.



That didn't faze me at all, as long as I could see enough to get the gist of the instrument and the manner in which it was played. The sound, after all, is what matters.

On the way up to **Room 810** I suspected the room would be compact. Noting the spaces between the pairs of doors along the passageway. I hoped our position at the end of the hallway might give a little more breadth (it didn't), and that the room might be somewhat longer than expected.

It was, but not by much. The bed was one of those *up against the wall climb in on one side or clamber over the end* jobs that I prefer to avoid, but there was nothing we could do about it.

Not on a **Saturday night**, anyway.

There was, however, a more significant issue. Despite the sticker in the room that gave the password for the **Free WiFi** I couldn't find any sign of a network.

Madam was keen to do some shopping and left me to my own devices, which meant I managed to recharge both **iPhone** (camera) and **iPad** to close to 100% before we headed out for our **shamisen** show.

Before she did she contacted **Reception** about the **WiFi** issue and received a noncommittal response along the lines that *it was probably best in the lobby*.

On that basis, I copied the password into **Notes** before we departed.

It wasn't that complicated (nine digit numbers tend not to be) but I wasn't going to trust the memory on this one.

Despite the warnings, the room downstairs was about half full when we moseyed in just after six-thirty, but the tables were well spaced and even tucked away at the back of the room we got a clear view of proceedings. Not that there was a lot of action in the performance.

As you might suspect, given the nature of the performance, the food fell into the **Japanese regional traditional sphere**, and **Madam** went to some lengths to ensure that I was adequately fed.

She really didn't need to.

A small snack and a couple of beers constituted an elegant sufficiency.

That might come as a surprise, but my share of a beef and onion dish and a deep fried ball of minced squid were all I needed.

And before **The Critical Reader** starts speculating about filling up with beer, the count was *three*. Glasses, not jugs, and probably around the old ten-ounce mark.

The performance started at seven and didn't last very long, which was also the way I liked it. There are apparently a number of venues across *Hirosaki* where the eager listener can catch *Tsugaru shamisen* at length, but I'd already decided we would probably be needing an early night.

And that's the way it turned out. A small meal, three beers, one of which came after the show, and an early night saw *Hughesy* hitting the sack just after eight.

From which *The Inquisitive Reader* might suspect the performance was something of a non-event.

It wasn't.



I'd already encountered the instrument in a *Kyoto* context, where it provides the accompaniment to vocal performances in *geisha establishments*.

What we encountered here was a horse of an entirely different hue.

I suspect the instrument had been modified a tad as well, with a larger sound box at the base of the neck. The first few notes, in fact, had much the same *timbre* as your common or garden *banjo*.

The first selection had me intrigued since there were echoes of something familiar, and those matters clarified themselves in the second.

The performance pieces were interspersed with lengthy explanations of the how, when, where and why of the *Tsugaru shamisen*, and although *Madam* did her best to provide a running translation, I figured I could catch up with the stylistic details online somewhere.

What intrigued me half way through the second piece were elements that sounded rather like *John Fahey*. Now, I'm not suggesting *Fahey* as an influence on this particular player.

As a musicologist, I suspected *Fahey* encountered some forms of *Japanese music* along the way and incorporated elements into the playing.

I'd already managed to establish a working connection to the Internet and was in a position to check these things out.

So while the player delivered his spiel and *Madam* tried to render it intelligible to a not overly interested listener, I was doing a *Google* search for *John Fahey* and *shamisen*.

And, unsurprisingly, I got a match.

Not a conclusive one by any means, but something that suggested a connection that I plan to follow up. *Fahey's* recordings tend to be heavily annotated, so I have a definite agenda item for when we return to base.

On that basis, hunger assuaged (if it had been there in the first place) and comfortably sedated after three beers, I headed upstairs. *Madam* wasn't quite ready to hit the sack and opted for a bath.

But before she'd finished filling the tub I suspect *Hughesy* was pushing up Zs.



HIROSAKI > FURUKAWA

Sunday, 18 October 2015

The *iPhone* was showing 5:57 when I grabbed it on the way out of the cot.

It took a casual hour or so to fill in details while *Someone* showered and headed down to the Lobby to check out internet matters. I headed into a very compact *Rain Room* around seven-fifteen, reflecting that whoever designed this exercise in compact to the max could have made it smaller.

But only by a matter of a few millimetres.



Once I emerged, the weather report suggested minimal layering for a maximum of 22.

That prompted some rearranging of the backpack as we readied ourselves for departure after breakfast.

And breakfast was something of a mystery. One suspected a semi-*Viking* arrangement, heavy on the *Japanese options* and light on for anything that might tempt a foreigner's taste buds.

As it turned out, I was wrong.

The *Western options* weren't abundant, but they were there.

In any case, I have yet to encounter a *Viking* that's light on for *croissants*. And, if you need space filler, there's always the ubiquitous *rice*.

So I managed a *substantial*, rather than *excessive* breakfast that would probably keep me going through a day where the agenda involved a pleasant walk around interesting destinations before a 3:42 departure for *ShinAomori*.

That gave us around six hours to get a look at the castle town that had been the power base for the *Tsugaru clan*, the former rulers of most of *northern Tohoku's* northern parts.

The Kyoto of the North is said to have the *most elegant (or most difficult) dialect in Japan* and (allegedly) the country's *most beautiful women*.

I probably wasn't going to be in a position to judge the veracity of either allegation.

The city sits in southwest *Aomori Prefecture*, south of *Mount Iwaki* on the border of *Akita Prefecture*, flourished during the *Edo Period* but went into a slow decline as political power shifted to *Aomori*.

These days it remains the cultural and educational centre of *Aomori Prefecture* and a significant drawcard, thanks to cherry trees, the city's *Cherry Blossom Festival* and the remains of *Hirosakijo*.

Lightning destroyed the main castle keep 16 years after it was built. A replacement dates from **1810** contains a *samurai museum* with swords, suits of armour, historical documents and historical items from the *Edo Period*. The castle grounds were donated to the government in **1894** and were opened to the general public a year later.

Substantial plantings of cherry trees after **1903** saw the park develop as a prime *sakura* site.

The *Hirosaki Sakura Festival* is held in late *April* and early *May* every year.

Today's 49.2-hectare *Castle Park* includes three concentric moats, earthen fortifications, five gates, three corner turrets (*yagura*) and the three-storied *Tenshukaku* tower built to replace the original structure, along with more than 2500 cherry trees.





The history of the area around the castle town has been the usual *to and fro argy-bargy* you associate with *Japanese history*.

Controlled by the *Northern Fujiwara* in the *Heian Period*, it went to the *Nambu clan* early in the *Kamakura Period* after *Minamoto Yoritomo* defeated the former lords in *1189*.

The *Sengoku period* saw one of the *Nambu's* local representatives, *Ōura Tamenobu*, declare his independence in *1571*.

He sided with *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* at the *Battle of Odawara (1590)*, had his independent status confirmed, and saw his revenues bumped up substantially. Increased status allowed him to change his name to *Tsugaru*,

His rise continued after he picked the right side (*Tokugawa Ieyasu*) at the *Battle of Sekigahara*.

That increased his revenues again and allowed him to set about building a castle in present-day *Hirosaki*. He died in **1607**.

Work on the castle was suspended until his son *Tsugaru Nobuhira* resumed the project in **1610**. *Nobuhira* finished the structure quickly by cannibalising materials from nearby castles in *Horikoshi*, *Daikoji* and *Ōura* and work was completed in **1611**.

A lightning strike in **1627** started a fire that reached the main keep's gunpowder magazine and prompted a massive explosion. Ninth *daimyō*, *Tsugaru Yasuchika* rebuilt the keep as a more modest three-storey structure in **1810**.

The *Tsugaru clan* picked the right side again in the *Boshin War* during the *Meiji Restoration*, took another slug of additional revenue from the new government.





But they lost out when *Hirosaki Domain* was replaced by *Hirosaki Prefecture* in *August 1871*.

Two months later the entity was renamed *Aomori Prefecture*, and the capital went to *Aomori*. *Hirosaki* remained the commercial centre for the southwest of the region.

Apple trees were introduced to the city in the *1870s* by an American teacher at a local school and today the area produces *20% of Japan's apple crop*.

The game plan involved a departure after checking out around nine, but the best-laid plans ran astray again. It was around a quarter past when we hit the road and a slight difference of opinion.

Hirosaki has *a church district* that *Someone* wanted to have a look at, something *Hughesy* felt was completely surplus to requirements.



Especially if it restricted the number of temples that we could visit later in the piece.

But it wasn't all wasted.

The *Protestant* structure looked solid, but not much more. It seemed to have a school attached, judging by the number of uniformed high school aged students seemingly rocking up for the *Sunday* service.

The Catholic church was rather nondescript, and, in my reading of things, hardly worth the diversion, but on the way towards the day's main objective we passed the *Aomori Bank Memorial Hall*.

Built in *1904* the building was the headquarters of the *59th National Bank*, and was impressive enough to blow away lingering criticism of *Someone's* priorities.

And it got better from there.

Just around the corner we found some of *Hirosaki's* original *Western-style buildings*, including the *Former City Library*, constructed in *1907*.



To save you a walk, and give you a better perspective, there were a cluster of miniature buildings surrounding a full sized structure that might have provided a lunch venue if we were passing back that way.

Even better, and not just because the price was right, was the *Parade Museum*.

There are two museums devoted to the annual *Neputa Matsuri*, the city's biggest event, held in the first week of *August* each year.

It's s a lower-key equivalent of *Aomori's Nebuta Matsuri*, with extravagant illuminated floats accompanied by dancers.



On the other side of the castle on the edge of the *samurai district*, *Tsugaruhan Neputa Mura* displays floats used in *Hirosaki's* famous festival and introduces some of the city's other specialties, including the *shamisen*, local handicrafts and toys.

There is also a *19th-century teahouse*, a *Japanese garden* and a ¥550 admission charge.

But we were at the *Otemon Square* outside the castle's main entrance at the usual starting point for visitors.

Since that's the case, it probably comes as no surprise to find an *Information Centre* offering pamphlets, maps and advice about the city's attractions.

There is also the *Festival Float Pavilion*, constructed in *1994* as part of the *Municipal Tourist Centre* with floats from towns and neighbourhoods in and around the city, representing festivals that have been held since the *Edo Period*.



Also on display is *Joppari-Daiko (Big Stubborn Drum)* Japan's largest drum, 4.5 metres in diameter, and big enough for fifty people to pound on as it is hauled through the streets during the *Neputa Festival*.

Admission is free, and based on this experience, the display's big brother might be worth paying for.

But this was quite enough to do us for the time being.

From there we headed through a used clothes market into *Hirosaki Castle Park*, which was expected to provide the day's highlight.

The *South Gate* took us into the botanic gardens section, where a variety of activities associated with the *Hirosaki Chrysanthemum and Maple Leaf Festival* were set up to cater to the crowds drawn in by the autumn foliage.

For the kids, there was a train that ran around a rectangular circuit, but this big kid train freak managed to stave off the temptation to take a ride.

We made a leisurely circuit around the rest of the gardens and ended up back at a collection of models and dioramas displaying aspects of the *Hirosaki Castle* story.





That might have been of interest for someone with a slightly better background as far as the personalities of the historical figures were concerned, but I had a somewhat different priority.

And an almost total lack of the requisite background.

From there we progressed into the castle grounds where there was the prospect of an unusual sight.

Major renovation work that began in **2013** and were slated to take a decade to complete has seen the castle moved, lock, stock and barrel and three storey barrel while work is carried out on the foundations.

They started by draining the moat to allow the workers to get at the stone retaining walls.



Then, beginning in *May 2015* the keep was gradually moved seventy metres to allow the workers to get at the foundations.

The moving process took around five months and had just been completed when we got there.

While the structure was being relocated, the castle museum was closed to the public, but now that the moving process is complete it will reopen in the new location in *2016*.

Things will stay that way for five years while the renovation work is carried out.

Then, when they're done, they'll do it all in reverse as they restore the structure to its rightful place.

Looking at it that way, it's an impressive feat of engineering, though one suspects the gradual progress from the original location to the temporary site wouldn't have offered a lot of in progress action.



With the museum removed from the equation, there wasn't much to keep us there once we'd snapped the obligatory record, and we headed off to take in the rest of the castle grounds.

Views of nearby mountains would have been better without the haze we'd noted the afternoon before.

We made our exit and looped around the outside edge of the *Castle Park* on the way to lunch.

Madam's research had pointed us to a small cafe near *Fujita Kinen Teien* garden, just across the road from the *South Gate*.

It's a fairly obvious site near a major attraction, and it was lunchtime on a *Sunday*, so it probably comes as no surprise to find the place was packed.



But we weren't going anywhere else, so they pointed us to a waiting room, where we could sit and cool our heels.

That was fine with me, and the wait, as things turned out, was minimal.

Knowledge of local specialities saw *Someone* headed straight for apple pie. My consultation with the menu got as far as *pasta with a meat and chilli sauce*.

I'm not sure cider was the right match for that, but I went for it.

It mightn't have been right, but it was an exceedingly nice drop, bone dry, refreshing and thoroughly enjoyable.

I was quite happy with the meal too.



Madam, on the other hand, hadn't read the menu carefully enough.

As things turned out, she could have sampled *four different apple pies*, but only ended up with one.

From all this, *The Astute Reader* will have picked up a significant fact. *Hirosaki* is famous for apples.

After lunch, we headed into the *Fujita Kinen Teien* garden, commissioned back in **1919** by entrepreneur *Kenichi Fujita*, the first chair of the *Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry*.

The *Edo-style stroll garden* was designed by a gardener from *Tokyo* and went in around *the Fujita residence*. *Hirosaki* city took over the property in **1991** and opened it to the public.

Covering more than two hectares, it's the second largest garden in the *Tohoku region* and works on a couple of levels.

If we'd scouted around a little, we might have tackled things in a slightly different order.

We probably should have gone to the upland garden first, then descended to stroll around the pond that forms the centrepiece.

If we had, we could have walked out on ground level *en route* to the next destination rather than making a reasonably steep ascent into the uplands.



As it was, we went down for our stroll around the pond, then back up the hill to the uplands, and gradually downhill again on our way to the *Temple Quarter*.

Actually, there are two temple quarters, one for the *samurai* and a separate area catering to the devotional requirements of *the general population*.

Zenrin-Gai (*Zen Forest Street*) is a lengthy, tree-lined avenue that would have taken us to *Choshoji*, the *Tsugaru* clan's family temple.

It was built in *Ajigasawa* in 1528 but moved to the present location in 1610 to protect *Hirosaki Castle*, which was under construction at the time.

Given the destruction of the keep in 1627, it doesn't seem to have been an effective insurance policy, but there is another explanation.

While the *Shōgun* and the *daimyō* were nominally *Buddhists*, the clergy were potential rivals for political power and influence and



temples were often forced to relocate to *teramachi*, or *temple quarters*, where the *daimyō* could keep a watchful eye on their operations.

And it wasn't just *Choshoji*.

Temples from all over the entire *Tsugaru region* were relocated as the new *head honcho* consolidated his power.

Thirty-three *Zen* temples line the avenue, starting with the *Sazaedo*, an octagonal tower donated by a wealthy merchant named *Nakata Yoshibei* in *1839*.

Octagonal temples are relatively rare; There are only two of them in the entire *Tohoku area*.

Once you're past the octagon, the most prominent feature of the temples that line the avenue are their cemeteries, extensive forests of black and grey marble monuments that discouraged us from going much further.



It might have been different if we hadn't diverted into the Church quarter in the morning.

That might have left us with a bit more time up the sleeve. *Hughesy's* bellyaching about the diversion probably didn't help either.

But here we were, looking along a lengthy avenue lined with graveyards with limited time on our hands, other places to go and additional sights to see

So we didn't end up at *Choshoji*, built on a bluff overlooking the surrounding plain and *Mount Iwaki*.

The temple features a sixteen-metre gate meant to repel *greed* and *complaints*, a bell that dates back to the *Kamakura Period*, and five hundred polychrome statues depicting the *Buddha's* disciples.



The naturally mummified body of the twelfth *Tsugaru* lord is on display in the main hall.

But, disinclined to do the *down and back again the same way* thing, we didn't go. Instead, we turned ourselves to the *ordinary folks' temple quarter*, and accidentally on purpose picked the right one for last.

We turned right out of *Zenrin-Gai* and made our way along a quiet thoroughfare, across a bridge and made a left turn onto another street that was quite liberally sprinkled with temples.

Along the right-hand footpath, I stopped to peer in at *Shorenji*, *Tokuzoji*, *Saikoji*, *Jugenin*, *Honjakuin* and *Jotokuji* but didn't get to do too much else.

Someone was hustling towards a definite destination.

One quiet little temple along the way did cause a brief diversion, but time and distance factors kept us moving fairly smartly.

That meant we didn't spend as much time at *Saishoin* as I would have liked, but we had long enough to get a decent look at the



five-storey pagoda, built around 350 years ago to commemorate those who died in battle during the 17th-century disturbances that shook the *Tsugaru clan*.

So while a longer stay could have been justified, the distance and time factor involved with getting back to the hotel would have been an issue if we happened to take a wrong turn on the way back.

But we didn't.

I'd been scanning the skyline for the distinctive shape of the high rise structure with the restaurant on the top, and then, suddenly, we turned the corner and there it was.

From there it was a solid kilometre to get us to the station, but we knew the way and arrived to find the local service to *ShinAomori* sitting there waiting.



And filling steadily.

We hopped straight on, found seats and settled back for the forty minute run to the first ***Shinkansen*** leg of the trip.

Under other circumstances once we'd arrived on the elegant platform in ***ShinAomori*** I'd have snapped a memento to sit somewhere around this point in the text, but we hustled on board, and that didn't happen.

It didn't happen when we alighted in ***Morioka*** either, but that was a function of a cross platform switch from the *faster only stops here and there* ***Hayate*** service to the *slower all stops on the way* ***Yamabiko*** service.

As noted elsewhere, all stops services call at relatively insignificant locations with a population of a mere hundred thousand or so.

It was darkening when we hit ***ShinAomori***, and fully dark at ***Morioka***.



I had a bit of a tap at the *Travelogue*, finished the relevant section and left the next bit for later, which wasn't the smartest string to pull.

That's because a combination of factors hit preconceived notions out of the ballpark.

Furukawa was a designated washing stop, and that was going to involve *the coin laundry* at the *Route In Hotel*.

We arrived, checked in and learned that, since it was *Sunday*, the restaurant was closed.

Not that we had any great expectations in the gustatory department.

But it would have meant we could start the washing, eat and check on *the laundry* from time to time.

With that option ruled out we would have to *eat out now and wash later*.

Further problem. **Hughesy** wasn't hungry.

Wasn't even remotely interested in a substantial feed.

The notion of a *bento* box had been floated on the train, but that was way too early to warrant even a brief consideration.

Now, with time as a factor I was inclined to just grab something but the question was what to grab.

We should have grabbed something from the nearby convenience store, but opted for an *isakaya* where we had to order a couple of dishes that arrived in a staggered flow in the **Japanese eat and drink** manner.

And, not being sure how hungry I was, and respectful of local custom **Madam** over-ordered and the resulting spread was more than was strictly necessary.



With the staged arrival, that maxed out the delay to *the laundry process*.

I was determined to stick around and offer what assistance I could (largely in the peering into high mounted dryers department) but that notion went down in flames as well.

The *Route Inn* offers *onsen* facilities, one for men and one for women.

And two coin laundries.

Guess where those are located?

So *The Astute Reader* will realise that *Madam* couldn't use the one outside the Men's, and *Hughesy* couldn't enter the space outside the Women's.

So he might as well go to bed.

And there was a further complication.

The *onsen* facilities were slated to close down at ten.

An inquiry revealed that you could still use *the laundry* after that, but things didn't quite get dry.

And that, folks, was *Sunday*.



FURUKAWA > NARUKO GORGE > GOSHIKINUMA

Monday, 19 October 2015

I surfaced just after six to learn that the washing was finally under control. On a morning when there wasn't a lot of time to spare, that meant it was time to shower, pack and discover that one pair of jeans were not quite dry.

That, under other circumstances, might not have been an issue, so the safest workaround involved a change of costume.

It pays to be flexible.

We headed down to breakfast just after 6:44, but were back in the room almost immediately to rearrange an upper layer by adding a warm jacket.

That meant we were slightly late into the breakfast room, but when we arrived the place was close to full.

And most of the crowd were seated so the slight delay may have been for the best.

The breakfast options were limited, but time was at a premium.

While breakfast might have been short on variety the quantities on hand were quite adequate, and we were out just after seven, gathering pace as we went.

It was a case of straight up, collect the gear, head down and check out, a process that may have taken about five minutes all up. It was about the same to the station, and we needed to be there by 7:27, so there wasn't going to be any messing around.

We'd scoped out the geography the previous evening, and headed straight for the omnipresent coin lockers you'll find in every station.

Stowing *The Coppertone Container* and the *Little Blue Number* set us back ¥900 all up, thank you very much. And that's just for a couple of hours' secure storage.

Nice work if you can get it, I thought as I wondered who had the nationwide JR coin locker franchise.

Probably cost them an arm and a leg to set it up, but you'll almost invariably find someone storing or removing their goods and chattels. It must be a reasonable money spinner, disguised as a valuable public service. You'd reckon they'd have recouped the outlay long ago.

Those thoughts were enough to occupy the mind on the brief descent to **Platform 1** on the lower level since we were catching a local train for the short excursion to **Naruko Onsen**, where we had an appointment with autumn leaves and a gorge.

Like most similar operations across the country, **JR Furukawa** works on three levels.

The **Shinkansen** facility sits sit on the top layer, with facing Platforms 11 and 12 facing each other across the four **Shinkansen** lines.

In places like **Furukawa** you need the four lines so the faster services can rattle through at speeds approaching 300 kilometres an hour. The **JR main lines** are on an intermediate level, with the **local lines** tucked away on the bottom.

We had around five minutes to spare when we arrived down there, so we wouldn't have wanted to lose any significant time *en route*.

When the train arrived it disgorge a mass of incoming school students and workers, which threw me for a minute.

A subsequent check revealed that **Furukawa**, a relatively insignificant location, is home to factories owned by two major corporations.

One of them, **YKK**, is the world's largest manufacturer of zippers. The other, **ALPS Electric** produces around 40,000 components, including **switches, sensors, and touchpads** used in the electronic and automotive industries.

So you'd reckon they'd need the odd worker or three.

As we boarded, I remarked that we *seemed to be going in the right direction to avoid a crowd*, which meant we experienced a significant influx of school students at the next stop.

I wasn't sure where they were heading since I hadn't managed to unearth a great deal of information on the city of *Furukawa*.

That's hardly surprising. Although the trains stop in *Furukawa*, that city doesn't exist anymore.

Back in *2006*, *Furukawa*, along with the nearby towns of *Iwadeyama*, *Naruko*, *Kashimadai*, *Matsuyama*, *Sanbongi* and *Tajiri* was merged into a new municipal entity called *Ōsaki*.

Those nearby locations provide part of the workforce for the factories in *Furukawa*, and the city of *Osaki* includes significant chunks of farmland.

Modern-day *Ōsaki* was part of the ancient *Mutsu Province*, with a human history that goes back to the *Jomon period*.

The *Emishi* people were the original inhabitants.

Gold was discovered there during the *Nara Period*, and it ended up under the control of the *Northern Fujiwara* towards the end of the *Heian Period*.



The *Sengoku period* saw various *samurai clans* vying for control of the region, with the *Date clan* from *Sendai* emerging as the dominant force during the *Edo Period* and the *Tokugawa Shōgunate*.

While *Furukawa* is substantial in comparison to its neighbours, settlement in the area is well spread, and it's a low-rise environment, surrounded by rice paddies. Some of the fields are close to the CBD, so it doesn't feel like a place with a population around the 80,000 mark.

As we headed off, there was no shortage of rice paddies on a plain that gradually narrowed as we reached the foothills. The *JR East Rikū-Tōsen Line* took us more or less along the valley of the *Oyagawa River*, with forested slopes on either side.

The leaves were starting to change at the lower levels, with the colour increasing as we ascended towards *Naruko Onsen*, which was where we were getting off.

It's not the end of the line, which runs almost fifty kilometres further to meet up with the *Yamagata Shinkansen*, and the lesser *Ōu Main Line* and *Rikuu West Line* at *Shinjō*.

The next train going beyond *Naruko Onsen* wasn't until 10:40, so once we were on the ground around 8:18 we were on the bus for the next stage to *Narukokyo Gorge*.

The location we were leaving is *one of the largest onsen resorts in Japan* with a history stretching back to the *Mount Naruko* eruption of 837. Any area that has been around that long would have attracted many significant visitors over the years.

Minamoto no Yoshitsune, probably the *most famous Japanese historical figure* of the late *Heian Period*, and *haiku* poet *Matsuo Bashō* are two of the most notable visitors to *Naruko*.

There's even a possibility that the location's name can be traced back to *Minamoto* though it was well after 837 when the fugitive *Yoshitsune* passed through the area after an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow his brother, the first *Kamakura Shōgun*.

Pursued by his brother's soldiers, *Yoshitsune* wandered for several years, often disguised as a monk. When he reached *Kamewari Pass*, his wife is said to have given birth to a boy (*Kamewaka-maru*) who was unable to cry until he was bathed in the waters of *Kawarayu* hot spring. Since that time, the area was supposedly called *Nakiko* (*crying baby*), which gradually morphed into the current *Naruko*.

Eventually, *Yoshitsune* found refuge under the protection of *Fujiwara no Hidehira*, head of the *Northern Fujiwara* clan in *Hiraizumi*. When *Hidehira* died in *1187*, his son had promised to protect *Yoshitsune* but feared his brother.

There are various versions of what happened next.

The generally accepted one has the son sending soldiers to force *Yoshitsune* to suicide.

His head was then preserved in **saké** and sent to his brother, but **Yoritomo** wasn't placated and went on to bring all of **Japan** under his control, destroying the **Northern Fujiwara** in the process.

Another version has **Yoshitsune** faking his death and escaping to **another part of Japan** with the woman he loved. That, according to **Ainu** legend brought him to **Hokkaidō**, where he acquired the name of **Okikurumi** or **Oinakamui** before sailing to the Asian mainland and morphing into **Genghis Khan**.

Still, it's a good story.

With **Matsuo Bashō**, the details are more definite.

Travelling with his disciple Sora, he called in on the journey described in his masterpiece, **Oku no Hosomichi (The Narrow Road to the Deep North)**. In the book there is a sentence that reads (in translation) *Passing Mizunokojima in Ogurogasaki, I proceeded to the barrier-gate of Shitomae from Narugo hot springs, aiming to enter the country of Dewa.*

During the **Edo Period**, **Naruko** was an important location at the intersection of the **Dewakaido** and **Ugokaido** roads. One of the **Four Tamatsukuri Post Stations** (**Shitomae**, **Kajiyasawa**, **Nakayama** and **OniKōbe**). **Shitomae** provides another link back to **Yoshitsune**.

Shito translates as *urine* and according to legend **Yoshitsune's** son **Kamewaka-maru** took his first pee at **Shitomae**.

When **Bashō's** party visited, they are said to have had a hard time explaining their presence to suspicious border guards.

Although the original post stations are long gone, approximately nine kilometres of road between **Shitomae no Seki** and **Sakaida** in **Yamagata Prefecture** have been preserved as the **Oku no Hosomichi (Walking Trail)** through the forests.

There's a bronze statue of **Bashō** at the start of **Oku no Hosomichi** and a stone tablet inscribed with one of his noted haiku *Nomi-shirami Uma-no-barisuru Makuramoto. (Flees and lice, Horses urinating, Close to my pillow.)*

The statue dates from eighty years after **Bashō** passed through the area.

Naruko is also one of the many places claiming to be the original home of the **kokeshi**, cylindrical wooden dolls made on spindles and then painted. The **Japan Kokeshi Museum**, located towards the eastern end of the nearby gorge, displays about seven thousand of them, drawn from the various prefectures of **Tohoku**, highlighting regional differences in shape and design.



And for more than 350 years the area has been the source of ***Naruko lacquerware*** with shops offering a wide variety of lacquer-painted goods ranging from traditional eating utensils to high-class lacquerware.

Several ski resorts operate in the nearby ***Kurikoma*** mountain ranges in winter.

So the area has a number of claims to fame apart from the ***onsen*** waters.

There are five ***Naruko Hot Spring Villages*** (***Naruko***, ***Higashi-Naruko***, ***Kawatabi***, ***Nakayamadaira*** and ***OniKōbe***) that draw water from four hundred separate water sources based around nine distinct springs.

In most ***onsen*** towns, the ***ryokan*** and hotels draw their water from a common source, but in ***Naruko*** each has its own source. The waters cover eight of the ***eleven different types of water found in Japan*** with varying mineral composition and different healing qualities.

Treating nervous tension is a specialty and waters with a high sulphur content are reputed to be good for ***high blood pressure and hardened arteries***. Alkaline salts are said to remedy ***skin diseases***.



And it is not just hotels and *ryokan*. Public baths like *Takinoyu*, have a history stretching back a thousand years. That one opens between 7:30 and 21:30 and charges a modest ¥150 per adult customer.

There are also free public foot baths.

We, however, weren't there for the waters.

Northwest of the town, the hundred-metre-deep *Naruko Gorge* stretches for three kilometres along the *Otani River*. It's one of *Tohoku*'s most scenic gorges, offering a picturesque landscape all year round.

But it becomes breathtaking in late *October* and early *November*.



A location just seventy kilometres from *Sendai*, with a *Shinkansen* stop in *Furukawa* and *National Highways 47 and 108* passing through the area.

A reputation as one of the best spots for coloured leaves in Miyagi Prefecture is always going to pack them in.

Even before nine o'clock.

We could have walked it in twenty minutes or so, but with a limited time available we took the bus to the best area for viewing autumn leaves, around the *Narukokyo Resthouse* near the western end of the gorge.

On the way in the bus took us across a bridge packed with a crowd of photographers all set up and waiting for that 10:04 train.

Or perhaps an earlier one running in the opposite direction.

Off the bus, we headed to the extensive car park and the nearby observation deck, where the focus for most of the attention was the *Ofukazawa Bridge* (the one with all the photographers)



.A few steep paths lead down from the road to the bottom of the gorge, and from there a walking trail runs the length of the ravine.

It would probably be the best way to see the whole of the gorge, but it's currently closed due to the danger of landslides and falling rocks

But the bridge we'd come across was the centre of attention. It was hard to ignore it, sitting in the middle of an autumnal array where the colours looked to be just about hitting their peak.

So we headed along the lookouts, snapping away.

And even though the signs said the walking track is closed until further notice there wasn't a barrier across the way.



With plenty of people around us making the descent, we joined them, but only for a little way.

Knowing the path was probably blocked somewhere down there we went down far enough to get decent snaps of the bridge from a few different angles, and then headed back to the observation deck.

From there the logical move seemed to involve crossing the bridge.

There's a walking track on the other side that loops around to the west of the main road and comes out on the other side of the bridge at the *Narukokyo Resthouse*.

It supposedly takes forty-five minutes to complete the loop if you're inclined to go that way.

We, however, didn't have forty-five minutes to spare, and needed to get ourselves to *Nakayamadaira Onsen*, the next station on the line after *Naruko Onsen*, and we needed to be there by 11:10 to catch the train back to *Furukawa*.



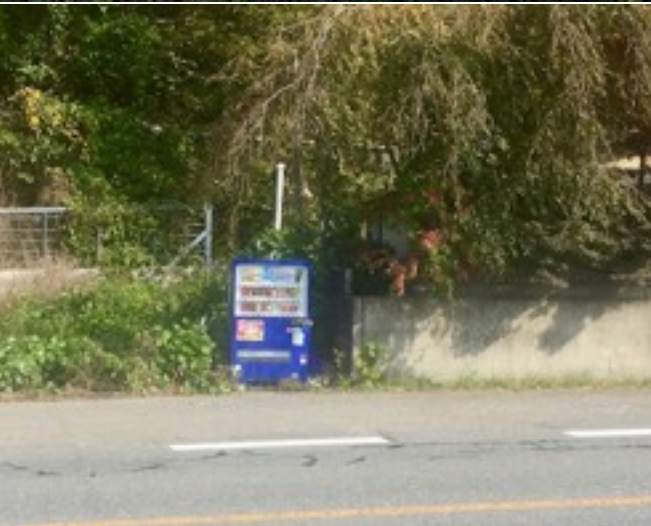
Things might have been slightly different if it had looked like we might be following in *Bashō*'s footsteps, but the trail obviously didn't go all the way to *Yamagata Prefecture*, so it probably wasn't the poet's road.

It would probably be a pleasant stroll if you have all day, but we didn't have all day.

That meant we headed back across the bridge and walked on towards *Nakayamadaira*.

I had thought we would be walking through the forest, but as it turned out our path ran along beside the highway. Still, there were stops along the way for photos, so it was probably just as well we were not surrounded by trees and interesting subjects.

So we made our way into *Nakayamadaira* past sulphurous *onsen* fumes riding from pipes.



That, I guessed, was par for the course in an environment where the *onsen* water bubbles up at temperatures around 80°C and has to be diluted.

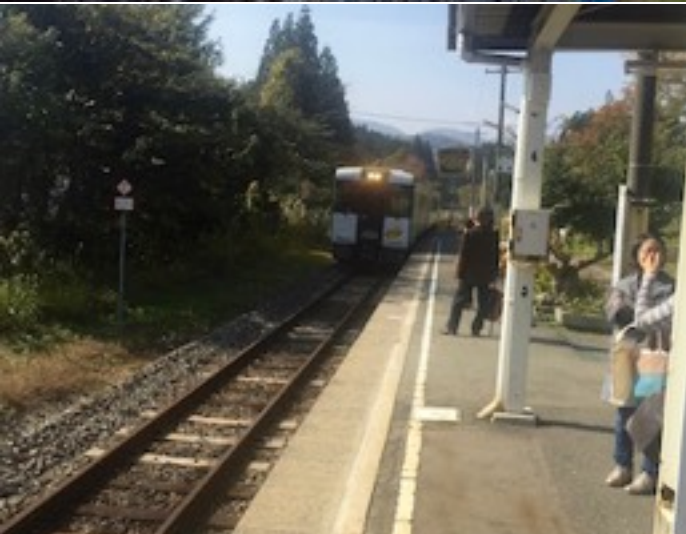
You'd reckon they'd also need to let the air get at it to cool things down a little.

But that was understandable. I failed to comprehend the positioning of a particular vending machine in what you would have thought was a most unlikely position.

We headed on to the station, turning off the main road down into what would have been a tranquil little village if it wasn't for a couple of car loads of political campaigners.

They hit us on the bridge just before the village first up, blaring past us with a message that echoed around the hillsides, so loud that *The Photographer* failed to register the presence of an old dude on his bike.

But he waited patiently until she was finished, seemingly aware that any sound that tinkled out of his bicycle bell would have been drowned by the passing racket.



We reached the station, but couldn't get away from the sound of political spruiking.

It continued to echo off the slopes as the little caravan made its way around the village before looping onto the street past the station and heading off to harass another corner of the electorate.

It was certainly annoying but seemed to be very effective.

Repetition seemed to have etched the candidate's name into *Someone's* skull, even though she wasn't going to be voting in the election. It probably would have etched itself into mine as well if I'd had any idea of what was being spruiked.

When the train after a fifteen-minute wait, it turned out to be much more crowded than either of us expected, with much of the throng on board belonging to an obvious tour party.



That underlined the drawing power of things like *sakura* blossoms and autumn leaves to the average *elderly Japanese* who doesn't have to clock on from nine to five.

Weekends would have packed the crowds in as well but on a *Monday*...

And there was no doubt about why people were there. The train stopped on the rail bridge down below the photographer laden *Ofukazawa Bridge*.

At least, I assume there was a crowd up there on the bridge to photograph the train.

It was a little too far to make out the finer detail as the people around me snapped away, looking up. It seemed reasonable to assume there was another crowd up there doing the same in reverse.

The situation reminded me of an old R&B track, the one with the chorus that runs: *I was looking back to see if she was looking back to see if I was looking back at her*.

Then the train moved off. The tour party alighted at *Naruko Onsen*, where they presumably piled onto a bus so they could head up to the bridge to do the other half of the photographic thing.

In any case, things were much less crowded once they were gone.

As we wound our way back down onto the plain, the haze we'd noted yesterday was noticeable, but the focus was entirely on the transfer from the basement to the *Shinkansen* line.

We had thirteen minutes to do it, assuming the local train ran on time, but the rest of the day's movements worked around getting this one tight.

As it turned out, the whole thing ran sweet as a nut. We found our way towards the front of the local as it pulled into *Furukawa*, and managed a smooth and seamless transition back in *Furukawa*, that must have taken all of about ninety seconds.

That covered alighting from the local, moving through the barrier flashing *JR passes*, ascending to the coin locker level, retrieving the luggage, flashing the passes again on the way up to *Platform 12* and the ride up the escalator that got us there.

We arrived just in time to catch the whiz of a northbound super express.

Our southbound train arrived a couple of minutes later, and the leg from *Furukawa* gave me a chance to catch up on some *Travelogue*.





It was less than an hour from *Furukawa* to *Koriyama*, and there wasn't much point in gazing out across reasonably familiar countryside.

After all, we'd passed back and forth across this particular stretch in *2008* and again in *2013*.

And the haze did a rather thorough job of blotting out the mountains over on the left.

Our *Yamabiko* service was one of the non-power outlet variety, but the *iPad* was on 100%.

Typing up the day's notes up to this point drained it to 94, and, once I was up to date, there wasn't much to do except look out the window.

The haze was still in evidence as we slowed down into *Fukushima*.

With *Koriyama* as the next stop, it was time to pack *iPad* away, so there wasn't going to be much more in the way of *Travelogue* tapping for the next little while.

At this point, we can underline, yet again, how far off the beaten foreigner track we were heading.

Disembarking at *Koriyama*, we headed almost straight to the local train that would take us to *Inawashiro*.

Feeling a bit peckish, *Someone* suggested we pick up some chips to snack on along the way, but, as we sat on the train waiting for it to head off it was obvious I was the only visible foreigner.

That had applied for much of the day already, and to a lesser extent through our time in *Sapporo* and *Hirosaki*, but there was a slightly different vibe hereabouts.



Maybe it was the presence of the Visible Foreigner with the Big Luggage. *The Coppertone Container* stood out like *the proverbial canine genitalia*.

And we were getting into the back blocks, relatively speaking, on the half hour run to *Inawashiro*.

Then it was going to be another half hour on a local bus to our overnight stop, with nary a visible foreigner to be seen.

And if *The Argumentative Reader* wants to query the back blocks, relatively speaking, I would respectfully point towards a forty minute wait for the bus. We weren't quite out in territory where the buses don't run.

They do, but only once an hour.

But there are ways to kill time even if you're not inclined to tap out *Travelogue* given an initial lack of seating space.

Aboard the bus at three, we headed into the uplands, stopping to pick up kids just coming out of school along the way. The route took us across broad farmlands before we wound up into the slopes below *Mount Bandai*.

Located just north of *Lake Inawashiro* in western *Fukushima Prefecture*, the dormant 1816-metre tall, dormant stratovolcano *Mount Bandai* (a.k.a. *Bandai-san*, *Aizu-Fuji* and *Aizu Bandaï*) is one of the hundred most famous mountains in *Japan*.

Aizu-Fuji used to refer to a neat conical shape that bore a remarkable resemblance to *Mount Fuji* until an eruption in **1888** drastically reshaped the mountain and the surrounding landscape. It was the most devastating volcanic eruption in *recent Japanese history*.

Formerly known as *Iwahashiyama* (*a rock ladder to the sky*), these days *Mount Bandai* is used to refer to the central peak along with subsidiary peaks including *Akahani* (1,430m) and *Kushigamine* (1,636m) in the *Bandai Asahi National Park*

The *Fuji*-like profile stemmed from an eruption in **806**, but its history goes back a long way.

It was inactive until the influence of *Nekoma*, which was somewhere to the west (active 1.1 million to 350,000 years ago).produced two scoria eruptions about 290,000 years ago. Further eruptions of pumice and volcanic ash after that ran through to a period of continuous pumice eruptions forty to fifty thousand years ago.

In between, thanks to the *Okinajima* (90,000) and *Zunashi* (50,000 years ago) pyroclastic flows, the river that had flowed through the *Inawashiro basin* south of the mountain was dammed, the water level went up, and *Lake Inawashiro* was the result.



While the *Fuji*-shaped cone that emerged in **806** was relatively recent in geological terms, it seems to have developed from similarly-shaped earlier features.

But that changed in *July 1888*.

There were three small earthquakes on *July 8, 9, and 10*, and stronger, but still moderate, tremors on *July 13 and 14*. But earthquakes are a common occurrence *all over Japan*, so no one was unduly concerned.

Then, *around seven a.m. on the 15th*, there was another earthquake, followed by the actual eruption, with fifteen to twenty explosions every minute, three-quarters of an hour later.

Hot groundwater had undermined the north side of the mountain, which collapsed in a *phreatic* or *steam-blast eruption* about one hundred metres above the *Kaminoyu hot spring resort*.

That, in turn, produced a *pyroclastic flow* that buried five villages and devastated the eastern part of the region. Then, around ten o'clock, hot rain started falling, transforming volcanic ash into *lahar mudslides* with the consistency and density of *wet concrete*.

Lahars can move large quantities of material, carve their own paths and destroy virtually anything that happens to be in the way. Think of a wall of hot wet concrete moving at a speed that may reach **100 km/h**.

In this case, 1.5 cubic kilometres of the mountain had collapsed and flowed northwards.

The flow locked existing rivers and created three large lakes (**Hibara**, **Onogawako** and **Akimotoko**) and hundreds of ponds and marshes.

When the ash fall ceased around four in the afternoon, at least 477 people were killed with hundreds more injured or left homeless.

The eruption was very similar to **1980 Mount St. Helens** eruption in the United States, and the infamous **1883** eruption of **Krakatoa** that created the biggest bang in recorded history.

While the damage could have been much worse, the eruption still destroyed hundreds of square kilometres of farmland and forest, claimed hundreds of lives and transformed the area around the mountain into a wasteland with an entirely different topography.

It was the **worst volcanic disaster in recent Japanese history** and the first major disaster the **Meiji government** and the newly established **Japanese Red Cross** had to deal with.

Visitors keen to learn more about the **1888** eruption can do so at the **Mount Bandai Eruption Memorial Museum** in **Urabandai**. Most of the content is reported to be **in Japanese**, but the **body sonic simulation** that recreates the blast when the eruption occurred would probably be language-neutral.

Across the street is the **Mount Bandai 3D World** theatre a three-dimensional film about the mountain. plays twice an hour on a circular screen 4.5 metres high and 42 wide. The **Japanese language narrative** focusses on the sights and seasons around the mountain rather than the eruption.

Twenty years after the disaster, a local merchant family began a tree-planting campaign, and since then the district known as **Urabandai** or **Bandai-kōgen** has become a tourist destination.

The major attraction, the multi-coloured lakes of **Goshikinuma**, were what brought us into the area.

The bus eventually dropped us at **Goshikinuma**, and a five-minute walk wheeling **The Coppertone Container** took us to the night's accommodation at **Pension Frasier**.

With another day where we'd need to be on our toes and out and about early, we stopped there just long enough to check in and headed back to the **Tourist Information centre** since we needed a map and a final check on logistics for the morning.

From there we could have headed into the countryside, or more particularly the wetlands near the **Visitor Centre** but two factors intervened.



For a start, it wasn't that long until dusk.

We were in the semi-back blocks, without much in the way of street lighting or knowledge of the local geography. In circumstances, that might have produced an *OK, but not very far. It's getting dark.*

But, lurking in the lower levels of *Pension Frasier*, there were *onsen* facilities.

That, effectively, settled the question.

We headed back and once we were there *Madam* was bound straight to the *onsen*. I was a less enthusiastic participant but managed a good soak and three-quarters of an hour tapping away before dinner.

And, at seven we were downstairs, ready for serious eating.

We'd done our share of walking in the morning after a lightish breakfast with a packet of chips in the middle, so *a four-course Italian spread* with wine was just what the doctor ordered.

It was a set menu affair, exquisite and definitely *Italian-Italian* rather than *Japanese-Italian*, the work of someone who was out to deliver authenticity rather than an approximation.

We had a lengthy talk with the cook after the meal, as I slowly worked my way down an excellent *Montepulciano*.

Madam got an hour-long discussion with *our hostess*, which was *conducted entirely in Japanese*, but I got the gist of it later.

Our host was conversing with another couple so that probably put the kibosh on anything resembling a nightcap.

And I didn't mind at all. *Madam* doesn't get much chance to talk in her native tongue, and when the opportunity arises I'm not inclined to get in the way.

Put together, it all meant *Hughesy* was well and truly ready to crash when we headed upstairs just after nine.

Madam, of course, took herself off for another go at the *onsen*.



GOSHIKINUMA > BESSHO ONSEN

Tuesday, 20 October 2015

After a night of strange dreams, I surfaced around six to be greeted with the news that we were *onsen* bound.

That didn't quite fit in with my plans since I'd figured *Madam* would take another leisurely turn through the spa, and I'd get a good hour's *Travelogue* tapping.

But I was back in the room by six-forty-five and managed to fit in half an hour before it was time to pack before breakfast.

And, of course, you pack before breakfast when you're making your departure immediately afterward on a day when switches between different modes of transport need to be co-ordinated with a fair degree of precision.

At that point, the *Travelogue* notes had progressed as far as back in *Furukawa* after *Naruko*, which didn't leave much of a backlog, but you don't want to let it grow.

After all, I'm looking to have a full note form summary of the whole trip that can be expanded and worked into a final draft when we get back to base in *Bowen*.

There was another reason *Hughesy* wasn't inclined to quibble about being left out of conversations the night before.

It related directly to breakfast, the morning activity and the bus back into *Inawashiro*.

Breakfast at the *Pension Fraasier* was pencilled in for *seven forty-five*, which was pushing it a bit when you're looking at catching an eight-twenty bus where we alighted yesterday. You have to allow five minutes to get there, and *a quarter to for breakfast* would probably be cutting it pretty fine.

Fortunately, *our hostess* had moved breaky time for us forward to seven-thirty, and it's just as well she did. In the haste to knock things over I failed to take a photographic record, but it came in no less than three courses with toast, and was probably the best non-*Viking* morning repast I've had in donkeys' ages.

And better than your run of the mill *Viking* as well.

It was just after eight when we headed off to the bus stop.

We needed to be back to check out at ten to catch a ten-thirty bus after a walk that was slated as *a good ninety minutes*.

That meant there was not much time to mess around.

Fortunately, there was one major factor in our favour.

When the bus reached *Kitashiobara*, it decanted two other walkers along with the two of us.

We hit the trail with practically no one else around, and for the first part of the walk we ran across the odd hiker or couple headed in the opposite direction.

And while there was a definite time limit, the purpose of the exercise was primarily photographic.

So we alternated spells of fairly brisk walking with pauses for camera action, passing the occasional individual or couple with a bit more time on their hands.



We were, as *The Attentive Reader* will have noted, walking through the aftermath of the **Mount Bandai** eruption in **1888** which disrupted the previous course of the **Nagasegawa** River and created a group of different sized lakes and ponds on the highland plain north of the volcano.

There are three big lakes (*Hibarako*, *Akimotoko*, and *Onogawako*) as well as some relatively large ponds (*Nakasenuma* and *Oguninuma*), and extensive areas of marshes and wetlands. We'd flirted with the notion of exploring some of them, close to the *Urabandai Visitors' Centre*, the previous afternoon.

With over one hundred ponds and lakes in the **Bandai-Asahi National Park**, we obviously didn't have time to cover them all but were focussing our attention on the jewels in the crown, the *five coloured ponds and lakes* known as *Goshikinuma*.



While the name translates as *five* (*Bishamonnuma*, *Akanuma*, *Midoronuma*, *Rurinuma*, *Aonuma*, *Ryunuma*), the 3.7-kilometre nature trail we were following takes you past *a dozen or so*.

It's not the only route we could have taken.

The *Nakasenuma Promenade* starts near the *Urabandai Site Station* and takes visitors around one of the substantial ponds.

The area can also be accessed by the *Bandaisan Gold Line*, a sightseeing road that circles the southwestern side of the mountain and then descends into *Urabandai*.

It has branch trails for hikers who are out to reach the summit of *Mount Bandai* or some other vantage point.

Other trails start from the western end of the *Goshikinuma* walk we were taking (three to four hours to the summit, slightly quicker on the downhill return), *JR Bandaimachi Station* (seven hours to the top), and there are trails from most of the *ski resorts*.



Depending on where you go and how you count them, you may pass *five ponds*, or *dozens of ponds*, as many as *forty different lakes and ponds*, or, if your path takes you up the mountain, none at all.

As far as the ***Five Coloured Lakes*** are concerned, the visual interest is due to volcanic material dissolved in the water, giving each of them their colour, ranging from *cobalt-blue* through *emerald-green* to *reddish-brown* that changes with the weather, and the time of day.

But the predominant colour (***Aonuma***, ***Rurinuma***, ***Bentennuma***, ***Ryunuma***, ***Midoronuma*** and ***Bishamonnuma***) is a bluish-white, thanks to a mineraloid called ***allophane***.

It's a substance mainly composed of ***aluminum*** and ***silica*** that leached into the lakes and collected in the sludge at the bottoms of the lakes. The combination of ***allophane*** and other chemicals gives the waters their ***distinctive dark blue*** that changes subtly with the changes in light through the day.



Iron dioxide sediments adhering to the roots of reeds growing in the water and *thick reddish-brown moss* deliver a reddish tinge that's particularly evident in *Akanuma (Red Pond)*, which, despite its name, is *predominantly light green*.

But with red tints.

So each lake or pond is slightly different, all are unusually vivid in colour and the day to day changes throughout the year make the seventy-minute walk a popular destination for a distinctive section of the *Japanese tourist market*.

That's particularly applicable in spring, when the trees are covered with fresh leaves, and in autumn as the leaves begin to change colour.

In between, *June* is said to be the best month for birdwatchers.

Given the demographic that's most likely to emerge from the tour buses as they arrive at the *Urabandai Visitors' Centre*, it comes as no surprise to learn that the trail is wheelchair friendly with very slight gradients (a maximum of 5%) with large sections of boardwalk around *Bishamonnuma*.

It's the largest of the five ponds, an attractive cobalt-blue with views of *Mount Bandai* to the south, and facilities to go boating on the *mere*.



That, along with proximity to the *Urabandai Visitors' Centre*, accounts for the fact that it's probably going to be the most crowded.

But we were starting from the other end and were starting early.

The odd walker or couple was heading in the opposite direction, and we passed the odd couple or individual bound to the same destination we were heading for with a bit more time on their hands.

Alternating periods of brisk walking with pauses for snapping got us more than half way along the trail before *Madam* uttered the fatal comment about *being up early enough to beat the tour groups*. As soon as she did, sure enough, around the next corner we encountered the first of many, a *shambling crocodile of elderly Japanese* out for a day in the countryside.



But there was space after them.

They must have been from somewhere relatively close. It was a couple of minutes before we encountered a second, and a bit less before the third appeared.

By the time we reached *Bishamonnuma*, there was an almost continuous stream of them.

It made heading in the opposite direction along a relatively narrow boardwalk an exercise in getting ahead where you could and waiting for a break in the flow.

Use the occasional wider bit or places where there was a bit of footing off the path to the left and you could still get ahead.

In the meantime, it was a case of polite right of way and greetings of *Ohio gozaimus* (*Good morning*).

One of those, *according to Madam*, saw the waiting foreigner identified as one Chuck Wilson. Another geriatric female asked her companion if he was *that foreigner on TV*.



From which *Madam* concluded these particular parties were from some unsophisticated corner of the back blocks, where encounters with aliens were few, far between, and largely confined to the television screen.

We reached a point, about half way along *Bishamonnuma*, where the trail branched, with one path, we guessed, heading off to wetlands near the *Visitor Centre* and the other running along the shore. We followed the shore.

That's where the crowded boardwalk factor maxed out, with numbers stopped to take in the views across the water and the carp that surfaced almost at their feet.

One suspects there was a degree of anticipated feeding involved there.



Once we reached the end of the trail and headed towards the car park, it was obvious what we had already encountered was merely the vanguard of a host of day-trippers out for a look at coloured ponds and autumn leaves.

You couldn't blame them.

The combination made for a memorable experience, even if it was one largely enjoyed with a multitude of fellow travellers.

We, however, had other fish to fry as we made our way back to the Pension, collected the luggage and bade farewell to *our host and hostess*.

There was a further bit of chat, but we were gone just after five past ten and back at the bus stop with what we assumed was a good quarter of an hour to spare.

It didn't, however, quite work out that way.

Madam was just asking why I was standing on the wrong side of the shelter when the answer became obvious.



From where I was standing you could see the road and there, heading towards us, was a bus with its blinker on heading to pick up passengers.

Of course, it could have been the wrong bus, so *Someone* asked.

But it was going to the right destination, so we piled on, with no idea whether we'd misread the timetable. Personally, I don't think we did, but you never know. Some imponderables are better left unpondered.

The trip back was, of course, a mirror reverse of the run in, but in slightly better light.

Under other circumstances, you might have tried to gather a bit more in the way of a photographic record, but the battery on the *iPhone* was running down, and *Hughesy* was forced to use one hand to keep hold of *The Coppertone Container*.

Back in *Inawashiro*, we would have had a wait in any case, but now we had a slightly longer one.

The train, when it arrived, wasn't as crowded as we'd anticipated and we had no trouble finding a seat across the way from a mother and son combination who popped up on the radar a couple of times between here and the *Shinkansen*.

The half hour on the train was much the same as the half hour on the bus.

A mirror reverse excursion across yesterday's landscape with better light but *The Attentive Reader* will have grasped the reason it's unrepresented in the photographic content.

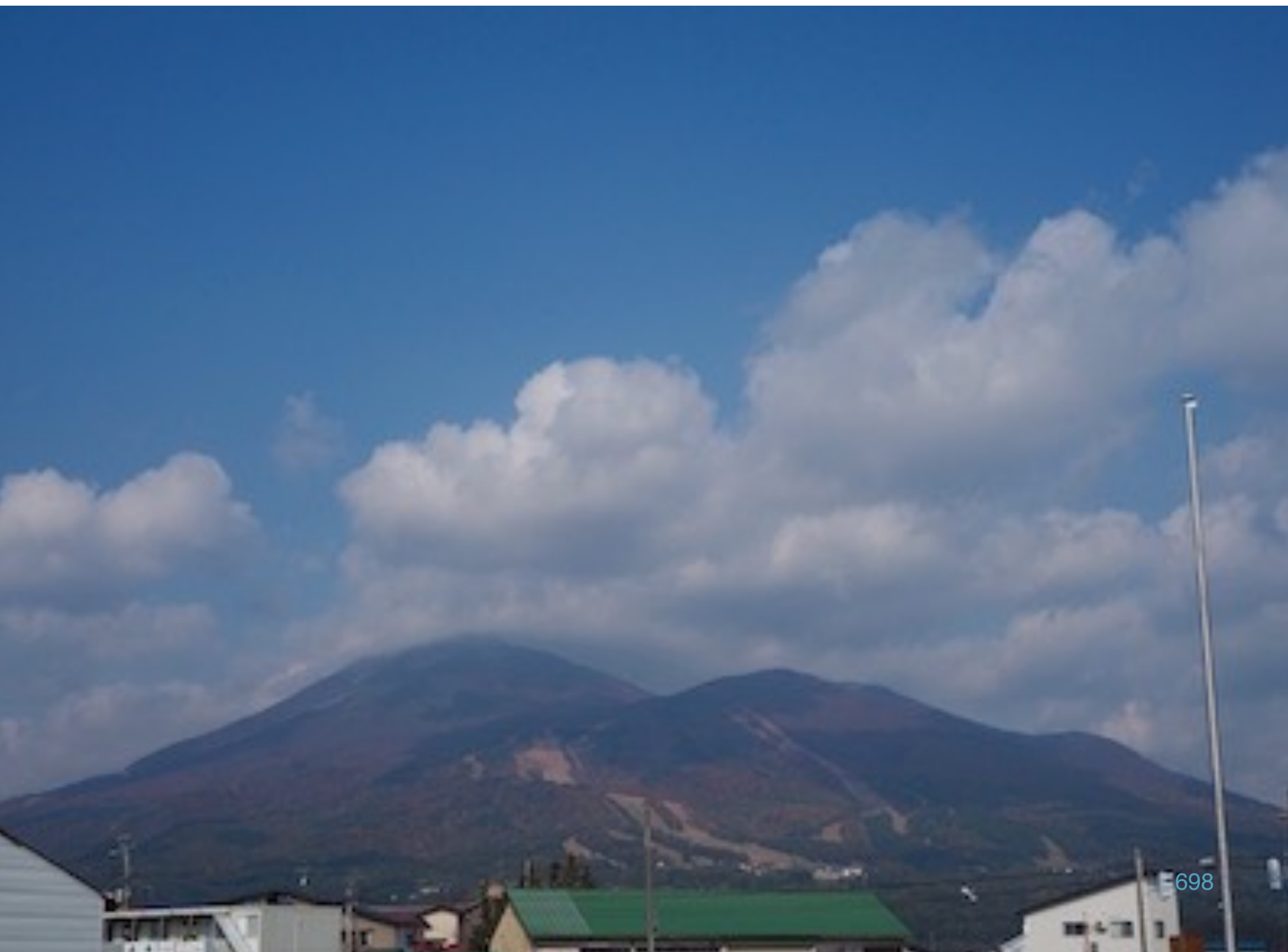
We grabbed some sandwiches at *Koriyama* before heading up to the *Shinkansen platforms*, and, lo and behold, at the head of the queue for *Car Six* on the next service, were the mother and son combo from the train. You couldn't put a figure on the probability of that sort of thing occurring.

When it came to boarding time, it turned out they were a little further down the carriage.

The *first Shinkansen leg* was across familiar territory, so we sat back with the sandwiches and watched the landscape zoom by.

The haze noted earlier was there again, and gazing out towards where you knew the mountains were, the horizon, or what passed for it, was a blurry nothing.

There's always a bit of a haze in these parts, but I couldn't remember anything thick enough to almost block out substantial mountain ranges.



We had two intermediate stops on the day's *Shinkansen* leg, the first of them at *Ōmiya*, about twenty-five kilometres north of downtown *Tokyo*.

Omiya station is a major interchange station for *JR East*, and the associated infrastructure helps make the city *Saitama Prefecture*'s commercial, transport and business hub.

Ōmiya translates as *great holy house or shrine*, a reference to the *Hikawa Shrine*, which dates back (according to tradition) to *473 BC* and the reign of *Emperor Kōshō*. More recently, *Emperor Meiji* made it the main *Shinto* shrine (*ichinomiya*) in the *Kantō region*, with fifty-nine branch shrines in *Tokyo* and one hundred and sixty-two in *Saitama Prefecture*.

More contemporary claims to fame include the *Omiya Bonsai Village* in neighbouring *Kitaku*, a *Mecca for bonsai enthusiasts from around Japan and overseas* with ten *bonsai* gardens relocated from *Tokyo* after the *Great Kantō Earthquake* in *1923*.

There's also a *Railway Museum*, the multi-purpose *Saitama Super Arena* and the *Tobu Zoo* which also offers amusement park, swimming and equestrian facilities.

Local culinary specialities include *Higashi Matsuyama Yakitori*, a porcine variation on the widespread grilled chicken skewers, a variety of offerings based around the *satsumaimo* sweet potato and *Zeri Fry* (*deep fried potato and tofu lees with a dipping sauce*). The name, however, translates as *fried jelly* though there's no jelly or gelatin in them,

Omiya Bento, sold only at JR Omiya, features *unagi* (freshwater eel), *ayu* (sweetfish) and *miso*-pickled salmon and tea-steamed rice, aesthetically arranged with a special treat of red-bean *ohagi* (sweet rice balls) for dessert.

We changed trains at *Omiya* without stopping to pick up a *bento* and headed on to *Ueda* on a section of the old *Nagano Shinkansen* line that doubles as the new *Hokuriku Shinkansen* to *Kanazawa* and beyond.

We would be back on that line just after midday tomorrow for the leg to *Kanazawa*, which explains the lack of *Ueda* content hereabouts but first we needed to move off the main rail system *en route* to the night's stop in *Bessho Onsen*.

That took us onto a rather swish private line with newish rolling stock and a route that passes through villages at close quarters with everyday life. We've done a fair bit of third sector rail travel, and *Ueda Electric Railway (Ueda Dentetsu)* with its single line between *Ueda* and *Bessho Onsen* is definitely the most impressive we've encountered as far as the rolling stock is concerned.

Looking for obvious reasons, you'd have to go with easy access to *onsen* facilities in an area that's a popular summer holiday spot for well-heeled *Tokyo* residents.



At least that's how it seemed.

Bessho Onsen village is one of the oldest *onsen* areas in *Nagano Prefecture* and *one of the oldest in all Japan*.. It's a compact locality, where are at least four hot springs within easy walking distance of each other, along important cultural monuments including three temples (*Anrakuji*, *Jorakuji* and *Kitamuki Kannon*), a collection of cultural assets that made the village the *Kamakura of Nagano*.

That stems from the actual *Kamakura Period* when the mountain town was the headquarters of the governor of the *Shinshu Region (Nagano Prefecture)*. He built the temples, brought *Kamakura* culture to *Bessho Onsen* and made it a significant centre for education and religion,

The healing and restorative powers of the waters, however, are what brought the dignitaries there, and its sulphurous waters are even said to have healed arrow wounds after medieval warriors.

As an aside, since the springs well up between *Megami (Goddess Peak)* and *Ogami (God Peak)* they are also known as *matchmaking hot springs*. *Aizenkatsura*, a 1200-year-old *katsura* tree in the grounds of *Kitamuki Kannon* is also said to have matchmaking powers that might prove beneficial for a good marriage.

The *Takeno Nobori (banners festival)* held every summer to pray for rain has been designated as intangible national treasure.

There are a number of separate hot springs, each with its individual properties and small traditional public bath houses (*Ishiyu*, *Daishiyu*, and *Oyu*) offer visitors a chance to experience them all at a very reasonable ¥150 a throw.

Aisome, no Yu public bath house, near the railway station at the entrance to the town, is larger and offers ore facilities.

Arriving at the terminus, we were pointed towards a shuttle bus, where *Madam*'s name was on a list along with our destination. With *The Coppertone Container* in tow we doubted we'd fit on board, but we managed it, thanks to a helpful driver.

If we'd tried to walk, we'd have been walking for quite a while.

That's assuming we didn't manage a single wrong turn along the way.

When we arrived at our particular *onsen*. *Ryokan Katsuraso*, a lengthy discussion about logistics delivered some very useful information that padded out tomorrow's itinerary. There's nothing like well-informed local knowledge.

But once the *check-in* was complete and *The Coppertone Container* had been heaved upstairs, we were straight back our again, headed for the *Kitamuki Kannon Temple*, located right next door.





Maybe we didn't quite have to (it's open **24x7x365**) but it's right on the way to the other points of interest and free to enter, so you may as well.

The main object of veneration in the temple is a statue of **Kannon**, the **Bodhisattva** of mercy.

Buddhist temples usually face south, but this one faces north with the statue aligning directly with the **Buddha** statue in **Nagano's Zenkoji**.

The **Kitamuki Kannon** is also said to answer prayers to avoid misfortune in this life rather than requests regarding the hereafter.

It's a **Tendai sect** temple founded by the ninth-century monk **Jikaku Daishi**, who is said to have bathed in the waters of **Daishiyu** while the temple was under construction.



That might have been enough for some people, but there are another two significant temples in *Bessho Onsen*, so we headed off to take a look at one of them in the afternoon.

The other could wait until morning.

And there was a little surprise along the way.

A shop that seemed to specialise in cat-related images and statues had an item that bore an uncanny resemblance to a certain *LikLk* on display out on the footpath.

He was, however, a little too large to come home with us, so we continued on our temple-viewing mission, crossing the stream that flows through the village and making for the hills.



That involved a little dog leg once we'd passed through the temple gate that brought us to the foot of a simple, but utterly elegant, entrance,

Anrakuji belongs to the *Sōtō* school and is the oldest standing *Zen* temple in *Nagano Prefecture*,

It is said to have been founded in the *8th or 9th century*, and at its peak in the *Kamakura Period* was a centre of learning and culture.

The highlight of the complex is *Hakkaku Sanju no To*, built in the *13th century* in the *Chinese Sung* architectural style during the *Kamakura Period*.



Japanese pagodas are usually square, but this one, built faithfully in the original *Chinese* architectural style is octagonal. Eaves known as *mokoshi* (*lean-to*) on the first floor, make the three storey 18.75-metre structure appear to have four stories.

It stands in the graveyard in the back of the temple and as the *only example of its kind in Japan* it was designated as a *National Treasure* in 1952.

Other significant buildings in the complex include the Main Hall (*Hondō*), with an image of *Sakyamuni* flanked by *Manjusri* and *Samantabhadra* and the *Denpodo* hall.

The latter enshrines two prominent priests. *Isen Osho*, who went to study in China and returned in 1246, and *Enin Osho*, a *Chinese* monk who *came to Japan* with *Shōkoku Isen* and became the second abbot of *Anrakuji*.



The two are depicted in realistic wooden seated statues made in **1329** by a carpenter named *Hyobu*. Both have been designated as *Important Cultural Properties*.

The complex also includes a two-storey bell tower (*shōrō*) built in 1769 that is one of the largest in the area.

While the original *Edo Period* bell ended up as scrap metal during *World War Two*, a replacement was cast by *Katori Masahiko* in **1957**.

There is also a *Buddhist library* (*Kyōzō*) built after 1784 to store *sutra* copied by the priest *Tetsugen* purchased from *Mampuku-ji* in *Kyoto*.

The 5.4-metre square building contains an octagonal revolving shelf (*rinzō*) said to have been designed by *Fudaishi*, the *Chinese* monk later deified as the patron deity of libraries.

Revolving *sutra* shelves offer a combination of ease of access to the stored texts and the ability to revolve the library shelves.



That was thought to deliver visitors and pilgrims the same benefit as actually reading the sacred texts therein, but the visitor needed to be in prayer mode while the wheel turned.

The library went in well after the temple's heyday, which ended when the *Hojo clan* in *Kamakura* was overthrown in **1333**. And while its importance may have waned during the *Muromachi Period*, it was rebuilt in the **1580s**

These days it's open 365 days a year from 8:00 to 17:00 (16:00, **November** to **February**) for a modest ¥300 (extra for an *English pamphlet*, with the money going to a charity in *Cambodia*).

But that, and particularly the climb to the cemetery and the octagonal pagoda was about enough for the day.



We took our time on the way back, and the footsore and leg weariness factor saw us heading straight to the *onsen* facility.

Ryokan Katsuraso isn't a large operation.

Along with the ten *Japanese-style tatami* mat rooms, there are gender-specific hot spring baths and a *family bath* where you hang a sign outside to show that it's occupied.

The sign wasn't there when we arrived, but went up shortly afterwards.

A good soak restored and refreshed muscles and feet.

There was a short spell afterwards that might have been used, under other circumstances, for a bit more *Travelogue*, but a half-hearted attempt saw inspiration sadly and totally lacking.

We were downstairs for dinner at seven.

That meant the odd restorative ale as a helpful hostess pointed out the details of an extensive multi-course spread based on fresh seasonal produce.

It would have helped if I'd been able to record what we had, but I'd left my phone upstairs.

In any case, even with the photographic record you'd still need to remember what each little platter contained.

But I do remember a *shabu shabu* affair with marbled beef as one of the highlights along with a *sashimi* of what could have been trout or something similar.

Both were quite wonderful

And, as usual, in our absence the room had been transformed.

With the *futons* spread out in front of us, I was always going to be heading straight to bed.

I figured *Someone* would have been heading back to the *onsen*, but learned that overindulgence at the table ruled that one out.

And if that situation had changed I wouldn't have known.

Once the head hit the pillow, *Hughesy* was out like a light for close to the regulation eight hours.



BESSHO ONSEN > KANAZAWA

Tuesday, 20 October 2015

After surfacing very briefly at four, I managed to extend the snooze to almost nine hours before getting up for a session that brought the *Travelogue* notes right up to date.

An almost undisturbed hour-long session finished right on the dot of six and allowed *Hughesy* to drop a minor bombshell.

I was ready for another session in the *onsen*.

At this point, we probably need to turn ourselves towards *Hughesy*'s attitude to the *onsen* experience, which is very much a two-edged affair.

Sure, it's enjoyable under comfortable circumstances, which the private family baths certainly deliver. I'm still not comfortable with the public version.

Put that down, if you like, to the fear of an unclean foreigner polluting the pristine waters.

While I'm not necessarily averse to a dip in the waters, it's still not something I go out of my way to get to if *The Astute Reader* catches my drift.

And if there's something that rates higher on the list of priorities, like *Travelogue* tapping when there's a substantial backlog that needs reducing, that gets the priority.

But, in this instance, I was done, there was a private bath, and the room lacked shower facilities, so why the hell not?

And, of course, there are a certain amount of *Brownie points* available to those who volunteer..

Back up in the room by six forty-five, we completed the preliminary tidying up before departure. Breakfast was slated for eight thirty, so we were out the door by seven to catch up on the remaining temple.

We stopped off along the way to catch *Kitamuki Kannon* in the early morning light.





The afternoon sun had been an unwanted element yesterday. In the early morning, the surrounds were tranquil, the sun was yet to climb over the mountains to the east.

The morning mist, if that's what it was, added to the mysticism.

The view out towards **Ueda** had been hazy yesterday, and seemed to be misty this morning, which was what prompted the *if that's what it was*.

So we took our time getting to the junction where the paths to **Anrakuji** and **Jorakuji** diverge.

There were a few locals out and about, but one suspects the **onsen** tourists were enjoying the waters or settling down to breakfast rather than wandering the streets.



Jorakuji dates back to the *Kamakura period* and ties in closely with *Kitamuki Kannon*.

The two temples share the same founder, the *Tendai Sect's Jikaku Daishi*, the head priest at *Enryakuji* in *Kyoto*. It may come as a surprise to learn that this one is the head temple of the *Kitamuki Kannon* complex, but there you go.

Maybe that's the appropriate response when the name translates as *free from worry*.

The temple was rebuilt a number of times most recently three hundred years ago. One of the main features is a famous 2.8-metre *Kamakura Period* stone tower that stands in cedar trees on the hillside at the back of the premises.

Predictably, it's an *Important Cultural Asset*.

Apart from the temple, which has a thatched roof (unusual) the complex includes *Jorakuji Art Museum (Jorakuji Bijutsukan)*.



It's a small museum with *ema* (wooden plaques) painted by **Hokusai** along with old roof tiles collected by former head priest **Koukai Handa**, statues, and images of **Buddha** and **Ukiyoe**.

The temple doesn't open its doors until 9:00, so there was no question about whether we should pay the ¥100 admission fee for the main hall.

The ¥500 for the museum was another moot point, but the combination of relative solitude, almost total silence and the early morning light made for a minor highlight of the whole trip.

And if you're looking for a summary of the experience, it's right there in my notes.

Tall cedars and elegant simplicity.



We roamed as far as the National Treasure on the hillside, then headed back down and around to the entrance to *Anrakuji* on the way back for breakfast.

It was a leisurely stroll that took most of the hour and a half we had to spare.

Back at the *ryokan*, we were upstairs for as long as it took to stow the gear in the room before we headed back down for *a very Japanese breakfast*.

The walk meant the camera needed recharging, but it really should have come down to record some of the detail of what arrived on the table.

There was absolutely no sign of bacon or eggs in any recognisable format though they were there, and toast was equally conspicuous by its total absence.

Rice filled that slot, but the rest of the meal came in an array of little dishes with a variety of tastes.

As stated (repeatedly) elsewhere, *Hughesy's* not good with *Japanese food* in a restaurant setting where you order one of these and one of these, but put him into this environment and he'll have a go at most things.

Sometimes it helps not having prior knowledge of what's about to go down the gullet.

In any case, once again the amount that managed to disappear out of the different bowls surprised myself and *Someone Else*.

Upstairs we finished packing and headed back down to check out.

Given the steep flights of stairs and the wooden environment, large clumsy foreigners were always going to be asking for assistance with the luggage, but neither of us expected assistance down to the station.

But it was there, seemingly as a matter of course.

Our hostess hustled us into a courtesy vehicle and would have dropped us off there if a lively discussion about rail passes and similar matters hadn't intervened. It lasted a good ten minutes or so, and only concluded when it did because the train arrived.

The conversation was the second one along the same lines within about thirty-six hours and underlines the fact that details of the *JR Rail Pass* are *unfamiliar to many Japanese*.



Both conversations began with a *where have you been* and continued with a *so what's after this* and in both cases the reaction was a fair degree of amazement.

At this point, the answer to the first question had read *Sapporo > Hakodate > Hirosaki > Morioka > Furukawa > Naruko > Furukawa > Goshikinuma > Omiya > Ueda > Bessho Onsen*. You'd have to describe that as a reasonably impressive itinerary.

And the second question elicited a response of *Ueda > Kanazawa > Amonohashidate > Kyoto > Onomichi and back to Himeji, Osaka and Kyoto*.

Faced with that evidence, *your average Japanese* would be inclined to look at you and think you *must be rather well off*.

Or, at least, *well-heeled*.

Oh no, we respond. *It's nothing like that. We have this Rail Pass, and it works like this*.

It is fair to describe the reaction to the details as *gobsmacked*.

That's hardly surprising.

The rail authorities wouldn't be shouting the details of what they're giving away to foreigners from the rooftops, and there's been at least one adverse reaction to someone who is *obviously Japanese* picking up large numbers of expensive rail tickets.

But the different passes on offer to foreigners are obviously *an essential element in the overseas tourist market*. I hadn't noticed so many people clutching items with the familiar panel attached to the back on previous trips, but *this time I spotted them all over the place*.

Many of them seemed to be *Chinese*, particularly from Taiwan and *Hong Kong*.

While the train cut the conversation short by arriving, it took its time leaving on the run down to *Ueda*. It was a thoroughly enjoyable little ride on a train company that was obviously doing rather well.

I had previously remarked on the newish or recently refurbished rolling stock, and *Madam* noted that the ticket machines are new too.

Car parks at stations along the way seemed to hold numbers of commuter vehicles, which suggests part of the answer. You could live in the country, and take this line into *Ueda* if you worked there.

Beyond that, *Nagano* is the next stop on the *Shinkansen* line, and you could just about commute to *Tokyo* if you had to.

The other third sector lines we'd used, being more out towards the back blocks, wouldn't have had the same customer base.



Once we'd made our way into Ueda, there was an obvious first stop.

With just over two hours to kill before the 12:18 to **Kanazawa**, we needed to locate the coin lockers, stash the luggage and make our way to Tourist Information.

Based on information from *our hostess up the road*, we thought we ought to take a look at what remains of **Ueda Castle** and needed at least a mud map to get us there.

Our inquiries pointed us towards a pleasant little circuit that would serve to kill two hours very nicely, thank you.

But we didn't head straight to **Ueda Castle**. A slight diversion gave us a look at a gate in the grounds of a high school that was a remnant of the former lord's residence.



While the castle was his power base, this was the entrance to where he lived.

From there we moved on to the castle park and surprising crowds of tourists.

Surprising, that is, if you don't know **Ueda** is the setting for a prime time historical drama that will be going to air next year. It will run all through **2016**, and the civic authorities hereabouts are obviously out to maximise the benefits.

Blind Freddy would have spotted the evidence of a very active volunteer program.

So, at this point, we turn our attention to the **Ueda** story.

Around two hundred kilometres from **Tokyo**, **Ueda** has seen its status rise gradually through the **20th century**. The current entity stems from a merger with neighbouring towns and villages in **2006**.

Old Ueda city dates back to **1919**, and it was designated as a town back in **1889**.

With a population around 160,000 (158,187 in **June 2011**) it's hardly a big place.

It's the fifth largest city in **Nagano Prefecture** and certainly seems like a *go ahead* locality, with a healthy economy that started out based on the **silkworm** and diversified from there.



Ueda was one of the country's top silk producing areas until silkworm eggs were exported around the world. The *Uedatsumugi* silk weaving tradition goes back three hundred years to the *Edo Period* and is rated as one of the *top three traditions in Japan*.

By the *Meiji Period*, *sericulture* was a major industry and *silk* accounted for 60% of the country's exports. Rapid industrialisation changed that, and production gradually declined.

But it's making a slight comeback.

The *Faculty of Textile Science and Technology* at the Ueda campus of *Shinshu University* is working to build on tradition through research into fibre technology and the technology of textiles.

There's also a drive to establish *Ueda* as a multimedia city and there's a strong *IT sector*, centred around the *Ueda City Multimedia Information Centre*, which opened in *1995*.

But the city owes its existence to *Ueda Castle (Ueda-jō)*, the power base of the *Sanada clan*, built by *Sanada Masayuki* in *1583* during a turbulent era when the *Tokugawa* and *Toyotomi* families fought for control of the country.

It wasn't long before *Ueda Castle* found itself in the front line.

The castle was besieged by *Tokugawa forces*, in *1585* and again in *1600*.

The defences held up both times, and the second siege, when 2500 defenders repelled 38,000 *Tokugawa* warriors meant *Tokugawa Hidetada* failed to arrive in time for the *Battle of Sekigahara*.

That didn't change the outcome, which brought about *a unified Japan* under *Tokugawa* rule.

Members of the *Sanada* clan fought on both sides of the conflict, and the castle ended up in the hands of *Sanada Nobuyuki*, who was ordered to demolish it and relocate to *Matsushiro Castle*.





Once *Tokugawa* rule was consolidated across the country, *Sengoku Tadamasa* was transferred to the area and started rebuilding the castle in **1622**. The moat was excavated again but *Tadamasa* died during the reconstruction, and the castle remained unfinished.

And that's the way it stayed.

The castle was abandoned in **1871** and sold off in **1875**, with various bits and pieces removed and relocated. The North and South Turrets ended up back in their original locations after being reclaimed in **1949**, but once you've made your way through the rather impressive gate, there isn't a lot to appeal to dyed in the wool castle freaks.

The grounds, on the other hand, have been developed into a prime spot for cherry blossom viewing in the *sakura* season and contain community and sporting facilities.



We didn't get as far as the baseball ground or the athletics field though with a bit more time on our hands there would have been a couple of interesting possibilities.

Ueda City Museum (Ueda Shiritsu Hakubutukan) has exhibits that go right back to the Stone age, along with *samurai armour* used by members of the *Sanada clan*.

Next door, the *Kanae Yamamoto Memorial Art Museum (Yamamoto Kanae Kinenkan)* celebrates the works of an artist who worked in oils and woodblock prints, pioneered a peasant/agrarian art movement (*Nomin Bijyutsu*) inspired by the *Russian Farmers Art Movement* and developed a radical *Art Education method for children*.

Visitors can access both, along with the *South Turret Museum* on the same ticket (¥250)

The castle grounds also contain the *Sanada-jinja shrine*, which commemorates and enshrines *Sanada Masayuki* and his son, *Yukimura*, who built the castle.

So there's a bit to see within the castle grounds if you've got the time.

Other attractions within the city limits include the 8th century *Shinano Kokubunji Temple* with its *15th-century three-storied pagoda* and *19th-century main building*.

Slightly further afield, *Utsukushigahara Kogen Highlands* in central *Nagano Prefecture* sit 2,000 metres above sea level with panoramic views across *Matsumoto* and Ueda and an open-air art museum, *Sugadaira Heights* is *one of Japan's largest ski resorts*. It's an hour by bus from Ueda Station.

So tourism is big business in an area that draws in around 2.2 million visitors annually.

It certainly looked like the city authorities were gearing up to handle an extra influx after that TV show starts going to air.

We only walked as far as the remains of the castle, and given the time constraints, with not much to see after the gate and the pagoda decided to keep moving.

There was a great deal of refurbishment going on in the area, and we passed tour groups halted while a guide expounded on what they are seeing or might have seen in the site's heyday.

But, of course, it was Greek to me.





Back outside the castle gate, we set off on a loop through the streets to ***Yanagi Street***, a merchant street that seemed to be in the process of being *recreated* rather than *restored*.

That's the way it appeared to me.

Having seen similar areas in other centres that have either been restored or remain as they were, I knew where they were coming from, but the street seemed relatively artificial.

Still, one suspects it will look authentic enough when the TV associated promotion of the city kicks into overdrive. One also notes that it rates #8 out of 36 *things to do in Ueda*, so my reaction might have been influenced by obvious work in progress.

And if we'd headed across the intersection at the other end we could have visited ***Ueda Daijingu shrine*** or the ***Okazaki Brewery*** but time was getting on, and we turned our heads back towards the station.

By this stage of the proceedings it was unseasonably hot, and we were on the sunny side of the street, so we weren't inclined to waste any time.

And when we reached the station there was an opportunity for a little photographic silliness on the way to the coin lockers.



Once we'd reclaimed the baggage, we headed straight up to the *Shinkansen* platform, where it seemed there weren't that many headed to *Kanazawa*.

Aboard the train, the first priority involved recharging the batteries on various *iDevices*.

Since I was sitting in the window seat with a power point beside me, I started on the process. *Madam* needed to recharge her camera battery, and since I was hogging the outlet on this side, she headed to the vacant seats across the aisle.

That was just before the helpful trolley made its way past and I picked up a little thirst quencher. I was about half way down the tin of *Asahi* when *Madam* discovered these *proper flash new Shinkansen* sets have additional power outlets in the backs of the seats in front of you.

As far as either of us could tell there seemed to be one per passenger, which eliminates one of the minor irritants when you end up with an aisle seat.

She had just moved back to complete recharging the camera battery when the ticket inspector passed through looking for people in spaces where they aren't supposed to be.

That, I figured, was easier than checking everybody's tickets. I was mulling over those matters when the combination of exercise, heat, beer, the early afternoon sun and tunnels delivered a pleasant drowsiness.

I consciously shut my eyes in one tunnel, was roused by the warmth of the sun as we left it, then did it again and dosed almost all the way to *Kanazawa*.

We'd been to *Kanazawa* back in *2008*, but this time we were staying somewhere different, slightly further from the station. On that basis, it made sense to stop at *Tourist Information* for directions before *Madam* headed for an ATM to cash up.



Outside, as we set off in search of the accommodation it was obvious the past seven and a half years had brought significant changes.

Much of that must be due to the new *Shinkansen* line, but *Kanazawa* has always been popular with *Japanese travellers*.

The city now appears to be well and truly on the radar for foreigners.

It would be fair to describe the walk to the *Kanazawa City Hotel* as a compass and a cut lunch affair, but since we were too early for *check-in* we needed another navigational device and a separate prepared meal for the hike back to the station.

The game plan for the afternoon involved catching a bus to *Kenrokuen Garden*, and we had a particular service in mind.

Unfortunately, as we found when we arrived at the bus station, *Madam's* watch had stopped for some reason.

So we weren't catching that one. Never mind, the JR buses to the garden run fairly frequently, and the wait wasn't *that* long.

When the bus dropped us across the road, it was obvious we were going to be joining the throng.

Last time around the weather had been overcast, and it was threatening to rain late in the afternoon in the *sakura* season, so people had their attention focussed elsewhere. Here, we were in the middle of the coloured leaves in the middle of a sunny afternoon.

So it's no wonder there were a few more people around.

There were other changes too.

Last time admission had been free because it was cherry blossom time. This time, we were paying to get in. Last time, apart from being late, overcast and rainy, we also had issues with camera batteries. This time, the afternoon sun was an issue.

On that basis, we may have to come back again.

Actually, we need to come back again because the *Kenrokuen* complex is too big to take it all in.

Not in a single visit. There's only so much *Wow factor* the average body can take and *Kenrokuen* has lots of subtle *Wow factor*.

As it should.



Along with *Kairakuen* (in *Mito*, capital of *Ibaraki Prefecture*) and *Okayama's Korakuen*, it's is one of *Japan's Three Great Gardens* and probably the most famous sight in all of *Kanazawa*,

The name translates as the *Garden of Six Attributes*, the qualities desirable in gardens: *spaciousness*, *serenity*, an air of *antiquity*, scenic *views*, subtle *design* and abundant *water*.

That's not the sort of thing that can be achieved in a hurry and it comes as no surprise to learn the outer pleasure gardens where the *Maeda Lords* strolled developed over a couple of centuries and gradually expanded to take over the entire block across from *Kanazawa Castle's Ishikawamori Gate*.

Work on what became *Kenrokuen* began in the *1620s* and was not completed until the last years of the *Edo Shōgunate*. The garden was opened to the public in *1871*.

The grounds are open *365 days a year* during daylight hours (7:00 to 18:00 from *March* to mid-*October*, opening an hour later and closing an hour earlier through the rest of the year).

Early birds can get in free up to three hours before the official opening times but have to be gone before the paying customers start flowing in.

The ¥310 entrance fee doesn't apply through the *sakura* season.

The garden seem to have developed in stages (as you'd expect with a two-century time span), with the first significant development coming when *Maeda Toshitsune*, third *daimyō* of the *Maeda clan* completed the *Tatsumi water channel* in *1632*.

Gardening, however, probably didn't feature in the decision to draw water from the upper reaches of the *Saigawa River*, ten kilometres from the castle.

A fire in *1631* had destroyed the castle, along with a thousand other buildings in *Kanazawa* and *Toshitsune* didn't want to see his stronghold burn down again.

The water flows downhill past *Kenrokuen* and is then drawn up to the castle through a reverse siphoning arrangement.

It was a remarkable feat of engineering, with a very gentle gradient (4 in 1,000) one-third of the channel passing through an underground tunnel and completed very quickly using wooden pipes. They were replaced with stone channels at the end of the *Edo Period*.





So *Kanazawa Castle* gained water for fire-fighting purposes.

A water supply for an elevated garden's ponds and streams (*Kenrokuen* is 53 metres above sea level and looks out over the surrounding city) was a side benefit.

Then, around forty years later, the fifth *daimyō*, *Maeda Tsunanori* built a the house on the slope facing the *Kanazawa castle*, called it *Renchiochin* and named its garden *Renchitei*, or *lotus pond*.

Given the presence of a *Renchimon Gate* on the castle side of the garden, I guess that's roughly where the house was. That was in *1672*

Most of *Renchitei* was destroyed by another massive fire in *1759*, but documents suggest the garden was used for banquets, tea ceremonies, viewing the moon and enjoying the coloured leaves in autumn.

But it wasn't totally destroyed.

The *Shiguretei teahouse*, built in *1725*, miraculously survived the fire and continued to be used until it was relocated and completely restored in the *Meiji Period*. It still sits in its new position in the *Renchitei* section of the garden today.

Another, older structure that survived the 1759 fire is the *Kaisekito Pagoda*, which sits on an island in *Hisagoike Pond*. The structure is reputed to have been built by the third lord, *Toshitsune*, which means it would have predated *Renchitei*, but there are a couple of theories about its origin.

One suggests it was part of a *13-tiered pagoda* in *Kanazawa Castle's Gyokusenin* garden.

Another suggests it was brought back from a military incursion into Korea and presented to *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* who passed it on to the first *Maeda daimyō*.

Both theories, of course, could be true, with the structure within the castle relocated to its current location by a later *daimyō*.

That may have happened after the 1759 fire, but if it did, the pagoda would have needed to survive the earlier fire that took out the castle and prompted the construction of the *Tatsumi water channel*.





After the fire, restoration work began in **1774** with the eleventh *daimyō*, *Maeda Harunaga*, adding the *Midoritaki Emerald Waterfall* and *Yugaotei teahouse*.

Water from the *Tatsumi channel* came into play in **1822** when the twelfth *daimyō*, *Maeda Narinaga*, installed the garden's winding streams.

His successor, *Maeda Nariyasu* added more streams, expanded *Kasumi Pond* and brought the garden up to its present 11 hectares.

That, you might figure, makes it a little too large to register as a *garden*, and there are those who'd claim it's *more like a park*.

In a way it is, but it's *a park that's comprised of a series of interlinked gardens*. That's my take on it,

Following the changes the *Meiji Era* rang in, *Kenrokuen* was opened to the public in **May 1874**.

The grounds also include the *Ishikawa Prefectural Museum for Traditional Products and Crafts* covering thirty-six types of traditional arts and crafts for an additional ¥250 entry fee (¥200 for seniors, and ¥100 for children). In an interesting exercise in consumer education, the displays feature examples of lacquerware, dyed silk, pottery, musical instruments with price tags attached.

But they're not for sale. The labels indicate what consumers should expect to pay for something similar elsewhere.

Right next door at the southern corner of the garden, and rather more expensive at ¥700 is the *Seisonkaku Villa*, built in 1863 by the thirteenth *daimyō*, *Maeda Nariyasu* for his mother, *Takako*.

It was originally known as *Tatsumi Goten* (*Tatsumi Palace*), and though much of the structure has been dismantled, there's apparently enough left to give a fair indication of traditional *daimyō* palace architecture.





The lower floor has formal receiving rooms with walls coated in gold dust, and the paper doors have Dutch stained glass insets, but upstairs things are significantly less formal and far more colourful. The grounds include a teahouse, a garden and streams that meander underneath the veranda.

But we didn't go in.

Didn't venture out the *Zuishinzaka Gate* to the *Prefectural Museum of Art* and the *Prefectural History Museum* and *Honda Museum* either. Or out the *Mayumizaka Gate* to the *21st Century Museum*.

There's only so much you can do in half an afternoon.



After paying our money at the *Katsurazaka Gate*, our path took us past the iconic two-legged stone lantern known as *Kotojitōrō* because it is shaped like the bridge of a *koto* and the *Karasaki pine tree*, planted from seed by the thirteenth *daimyō*, *Maeda Nariyasu*.

Depending on how you look at it, the eleven stones of *Gankoubashi*, the flying goose bridge, looks like a squadron of geese flying in formation or a more earthbound arrangement.

The shapes of the stones resemble turtle shells, so it's a matter of what works best for the beholder.

We continued past the *Meiji Monument*, the statue of *Yamatotakeruno-Mikoto* dedicated to the soldiers who died in the civil war that followed the *Meiji Restoration*. Erected in *1880*, it is believed to be the *first bronze statue installed in Japan*.

There's a monument to the great haiku poet *Bashō* at the northern foot of *Yamazakiyama hill*, with a haiku from **The Narrow Road to the Deep North** inscribed on a stone tablet.

Bashō visited *Kanazawa* on his famous journey and wrote this particular *haiku* on the road to a village called *Komatsu*, southwest of the castle town.

These days *Komatsu* has *the main airport* for *Ishikawa Prefecture*, but the name is probably most familiar from the construction and mining equipment company named after the city.



Back in *Bashō*'s day it was best known as the site of *Maeda Toshitsune*'s retirement castle. The castle is long gone, but its garden is one of the prefecture's best spots for viewing *sakura* blossoms in spring.

Bashō's thoughts were turning to autumn when he wrote

Aka aka to

Hiwa tsure naku mo

Aki no kazu



The Inquisitive Reader will find various translations of the *haiku*, but I liked this one from my copy of **The Narrow Road** (Shambhala, Boston & London, 2012, translation by Sam Hamill):

*Intense hot red sun,
heartlessly - but already
autumn in the wind*

That was back in *July 1689*.

The haiku was inscribed at the foot of the hill by local poet *Sakurai Baishitsu* in *1846*.

The *Komatsu* earthmoving connection seems strangely fitting since we moved on from the gazebo at the top of the hill past a five-tiered stone *pagoda* at the bottom towards *Shichifukujinyama* (*Seven Lucky Gods Hill*), created from material excavated when the nearby pond went in.

From there, we looped around the bottom of *Hisagoike Pond*, the second largest of *Kenrokuen*'s four ponds, ninety metres from



east to west and forty-five from north to south with a circumference of 270 metres and (probably) a remnant of *Kenrokuen*'s predecessor, *Renchitei*.

The *Kaisekito Pagoda* sits beside a weeping cherry tree on an island in the middle of the pond.

By that time we'd had enough for one day and were more or less ready to head straight out but it was difficult to tear ourselves away.

We stopped to photograph the *Midoritaki* waterfall, which was in place as far back as **1774**, as does the nearby *Yūgaotei* teahouse, the oldest building in the garden that survives in its original form.

Headed for the exit, we passed crowds of foreigners in a tour group clustered beside the fountain.

It was not, in itself, a particularly impressive fountain with a jet that shoots a mere 3.5 metres high, but it's the *oldest fountain in Japan*.

It operates by natural water pressure with no assistance from mechanical pumps thanks to the drop in elevation from nearby *Kasumigaike Pond*.

But if we'd stopped to take in the fountain, something else in the surroundings would have caught the eye, and after that...

So we headed out and crossed the bridge to **Kanazawa Castle**, heading in through the rather impressive **Ishikawamon**, but we didn't have the time or energy to explore too far.

Kanazawa Castle may have been *one of the largest in feudal Japan* but another fire destroyed most of it. Only the armoury and the rear gate we'd just come in through survived the blaze.

In the meantime, the castle had become the property of the **Meiji government**, who weren't overly concerned about symbols and relics of the outmoded feudal system and tore a lot of them down.

Kanazawa Castle became the base for the Imperial Army's Ninth Division and any buildings deemed surplus to requirements were torn down. Most of the rest perished in the fire in **1881**.

After World War Two, the site became the new campus of **Kanazawa University**, which stayed there until operations were transferred to a new campus in the hills that surround the city in **1998**.

The castle site is now a public park. Sections of the castle were partially restored as of **2001** and there are long term plans to re-create much of the original castle grounds.





So we weren't going to stick around very long.

Still, what we saw was only a small part of what's there on the ground, so *Hughesy* has to pencil in another excuse for a return visit to **Kanazawa**. In any case, we need another look at **Kenrokuen**.

We made our way back down to the bus stop, but the timetable suggested there wouldn't be a JR bus for a while.

Given a choice of waiting or shelling out for a leg on the **Kanazawa Loop Bus**, which runs clockwise around all the city's key sights. It charges a flat fee of ¥200 regardless of where you get on and off and offers a full day pass for ¥500.

Unsurprisingly, we went for immediacy of service and made a mental note about further options for a return visit.

Back at the station we set out on the hike to the hotel, which didn't seem quite as far as it had earlier when we weren't sure how far it was.

That's hardly a remarkable phenomenon, has been remarked on before and almost certainly will be again.

Once we'd checked in and headed upstairs to the room I had guessed we were in for a decent sized room.

You can predict things like that from the spacing of doors along the passageway, but I wasn't expecting something as big as what we found.

Some Japanese people live in apartments smaller than this big space with twin beds. There was a generous bathroom too, and a desk well away from beds so I could tap away without disturbing *Someone Else*.

Entirely satisfactory, with the only possible reservation relating to the distance from the station.



We were slated to meet up with one of **Madam's** old friends, and were expecting a phone call or text message, but, on the other hand, we knew she was probably busy.

Since there'd been no contact leading up to dinner time, it seemed safe to assume that it would come later, and the meet-up would come in the morning.

That meant we were looking after ourselves for dinner, and the distance from the railway station kicked into considerations once again. We knew there were plenty of possibilities down that way, and I could easily have been inveigled into heading to **Forus** over on the other side of the station.

On the other hand, we'd done the station and back leg twice in the space of a couple of hours, and weren't inclined to tackle it again.

On the way back to check in, however, we'd spotted a drinking place on the corner.

That', we decided, would do, and we managed to time things just right. A large party had arrived just before us, and there were no unoccupied tables.

Would the counter be all right?

Actually, it turned out to be very handy.

We ended up tucked up in a corner beside unfinished bottles of **saké** with direct access to the busy chef in the kitchen. It would have been interesting to have had a mirror on the wall behind him because we couldn't see over the counter.

Or maybe not.

There are things you're better off not knowing, and some of them may involve busy people pushing out large quantities of snack sized plates for thirsty customers.

We weren't looking at *haute cuisine* or *its Japanese equivalent* by any stretch of the imagination, but **Madam** got her favourite cheap fish, and **Hughesy** could have snacked away on repeated batches of fried oysters rather than the variety of platters that arrived.

And three beers washed it all down very nicely

Back in the hotel, **Madam** had eyes on the onsen.

Hughesy had eyes for bed and was just dozing off when **The Mother's Mobile** buzzed, signifying something.

I managed to clutch onto consciousness until **Someone** returned but awoke in the morning completely unaware of the outcome of the incoming data.



KANAZAWA > KYOTO > AMANOHASHIDATE

Awake just before five, I moved directly into *Travelogue* mode without passing *Go* and had things up to date by 6:10 with *Madam* in the shower.

Last night's late night calls had modified *Someone's* plans for the morning, which were centred around the *samurai quarter*.

The original intention had been to catch a bus, but subsequent developments suggested it would be easier to walk.

That phone call while *Hughesy* slept had arranged a rendezvous for 8:10 outside the hospital. That sounded good.

Our train was leaving at 9:53 so everything looked to be dovetailing nicely.

Checking in yesterday had revealed the presence of a *Viking* if we were willing to shell out another ¥700, so that had the breakfast department covered.

But only just.

When we headed down to sample what we'd paid for we found an ordinary spread that lacked quite a few of the things that seem more or less *de rigeur* in such operations.

There was, however, plenty of what was there, and that meant there was no need to stop and pick up something for lunch.

Having demolished the breakfast and packed before we went down, a flying visit upstairs looked after the fang polishing, and we were on the way to the rendezvous by ten to eight. Our path took us into the back blocks, which can prove disastrous, given the nature of *Japanese laneways* and questions like *how many intersections is that?*





But the directions were clear, the track reasonably straightforward and we arrived at the entrance to a large hospital comfortably before eight-fifteen.

The *Nagamachi Samurai Quarter*, despite being promoted in tourist brochures as the *samurai area*, presents some interesting anomalies, as I found when I dug a little deeper.

For a start, the overwhelming majority of the houses we walked past are not *samurai houses*, but modern housing built since World War Two.

That doesn't mean there are no *samurai houses* left in *Kanazawa*.

There are, but there aren't many of them. And they're not where we were.

On the other hand, there's no doubt that people made a great deal of effort to recreate the feel of *a samurai housing area*.

Even though none of the *original samurai houses* remain the tourists still flock in.

As they should.

It mightn't be *authentic*, but it *looks that way*, and it's *certainly picturesque*.



Add it to an itinerary that includes the *Higashi Chaya geisha district* and *Kenrokuen* and visitors will probably leave *Kanazawa* reasonably happy.

But if *The Pernickety Reader* wants to mumble about *lack of authenticity*, here's how it panned out.

Kanazawa was the capital of the old *Kaga fiefdom*, shielded from outside influence by a location between the mountains and the sea and reasonably prosperous thanks to an ample yield of rice.

When the authority of the *Shōguns* in *Kyoto* started to wane in the *fifteenth century*, their regional governors set about assuming even greater powers and carving out their own personal, semi-independent fiefdoms.



That might have been the intention as far as the hereditary regional governors, the *Togashi*, were concerned, but their power was on the slide, and there was a new player in the area.

A priest named *Rennyō*, from the *Jodo Shinshu* sect, arrived to proselytise a brand of *Buddhism* that spread rather quickly among the *samurai* and peasants. His followers were known as the *Ikkō*, or *Single-Minded* sect and managed to increase their political influence to the point where the last *Togashi* governor suicided in **1488**.

For the next hundred years, the area was ruled by the *Ikkō-ikki* peasants, who created an egalitarian republic known to history as *The Peasants' Kingdom* in the southern part of modern-day *Ishikawa Prefecture*.

Their main stronghold was a natural fortress located on the top of a ridge, backed by high hills, flanked on two sides by rivers.

It was the site subsequently occupied by *Kanazawa Castle*.

A fortified temple town grew up on top of the ridge, with priestly residences and religious buildings in the centre, surrounded by merchant areas that have survived to the present day, even if only in name. It would have borne a fair resemblance to similar towns in *mediaeval Europe*, with a church in the middle, enclosed by a high wall and surrounded by a moat.



That arrangement lasted until **1580**, when ***Sakuma Morimasa***, one of ***Oda Nobunaga***'s generals, overthrew the ***Peasants' Kingdom*** and set about turning the town into a military base.

Then, in **1583** ***Toyotomi Hideyoshi*** arrived on the scene and incorporated the area into his territory. ***Maeda Toshiie*** commanded his advance guard and was appointed the new ***daimyō*** of ***Kaga***, adding it to his own power base in the nearby ***Noto peninsula***.

The ***Maeda clan***'s stewardship lasted nearly three centuries thanks to a combination of diplomacy, strategic marriages and an awareness that the family were sitting on the largest domain outside the ***Shōgun***'s lands and would be carefully watched.

Maeda Toshiie's grandson and his successors carefully avoided any hint of military ambition and channeled their wealth into cultural pursuits rather than military activity.

That may explain why all the ***samurai*** in the domain, rather than living on their own estates scattered across the countryside, lived



in *Kanazawa*. By the late 17th century, more than three-quarters of the city was *samurai* housing.

A major reorganisation in **1611** had seen the richest families moved out of the castle onto massive estates scattered around the city, with their retainers, in turn, housed nearby.

As a result, *Kanazawa* was filled with huge mansions with the estates of the *Eight Houses* (the chief vassals) closest to the castle and there were another dozen families whose income warranted a similar status. Those families all had their own men, in some cases hundreds of them, in houses that usually adjoined the primary residence.

That situation lasted until the *Meiji Restoration* when the *samurai* lost their traditional income.



Many were forced to sell off their estates, which were subsequently redeveloped as modern housing in the years before *World War Two*.

In the process, astute investors would have seen the benefit of building something that resembled one of the *former samurai residences* or restoring one that came into their hands.

Nomura House is one example, restored by a shipping magnate, who added part of a *samurai house* he owned in his hometown to the structure in *Kanazawa*. The restored house is open to the public (¥500) and has a garden of rocks and watercourses rated as a masterpiece of miniature landscaping.

A purist might grumble and give the area a big miss but although it might be historically dubious, it is a pleasant area to walk around and, for the reasons outlined above, there aren't *that many samurai districts left in Japan*.

The city has relocated and restored two houses formerly owned by *ashigaru* (the lowest ranked *samurai*), which are open to the

public (and free), and they seem to have gone to some trouble to make sure the tourist facilities fit in.

While we were rambling through the area, I noticed *a particularly swishy looking toilet block*.

Regardless of actual historical accuracy, I thought the area *looked to be authentic, in a way that the reconstruction in Ueda yesterday didn't*. Even relatively new elements like the toilet block seemed to have been given enough time to pick up a bit of a *patina* and blend in with the existing components.

In these cases, it's all about *consistency of look and feel*.

And it pays to get there early so you can avoid the tour parties. Remember that since the *Shinkansen* came to town *Kanazawa* is well and truly on the radar for foreign tourists.





It has always been on the radar for *Japanese tourists*.

So we walked along, usually with *Hughesy* ahead of the others, snapping away while two old friends caught up. It had apparently been something like thirty-five years.

Somewhere along the way we passed the *Nagamachi Kaga Yuzen Silk Centre*, a former *samurai house* set up to produce *Kaga Yuzen* silk for formal *kimonos* using a resist dyeing process.

Given the relatively tight schedule, it was probably just as well we were there early in the day.

We continued to ramble through the back blocks until we reached a string of lanes that would take us almost right back to the hotel. That's where we parted company with the old acquaintance after getting pretty clear directions.



Follow this street until you find yourself back at your hotel seemed to be the gist if it when I asked.

But we didn't quite manage to do that.

There was a point where you might have thought we'd come far enough, and that street down there on our left certainly looked like the Main Street where the hotel was situated.

But there was another alley straight ahead. I thought it was *that one*, but **Madam** thought we should head for the road.

As it turns out, we were both right.

I'm guessing here since we didn't follow the alley to see where it debouched, but the route we took ended up following two sides of a right-angled triangle.

Following the hypotenuse might have been shorter, but not by that much.

It took all of about five minutes to make our way up to the room, collect the baggage and check out.

The hike to the station seemed to be shorter again though I can't figure why.

Last time we'd headed that way I hadn't been wheeling a *Coppertone Container*.

Given the fact that I knew *Kanazawa* is the current terminus of the *Shinkansen* line, and we were headed onwards to *Kyoto* I can't figure why *Someone* headed for the *Shinkansen* platforms when we reached the station either.

But I guess it's understandable.

The *Shinkansen* line will eventually hook through to the *Tokaido* line, although the actual route is yet to be determined. You would guess it will go to *Osaka*, via *Kyoto*, but details are still to be finalised.

Those considerations and the politics of *Shinkansen* routes gave me something to think about on the first part of the two-hour leg to *Kyoto*, the reverse of the first big train leg from our first trip, passing attractive countryside, though that haze continued to cloud details in the distance.



Having passed this way before, I wasn't inclined to worry too much about taking notes until we encountered **Lake Biwa**, the country's largest freshwater lake.

From memory, last time we were on the other side of the train, heading north. This time, headed in the opposite direction I had this very substantial body of water over on my left and made a note to find out more about it.

And when you look into it, there's often plenty to find.

Just northwest of **Kyoto**, the lake turns up in all sorts of contexts, with a fourteenth-century monk named **Kōsō**, linking it to the goddess **Benzaiten** who reputedly lived on an island in the lake.

Her choice of residence may have been based on the similarity between the lake's shape and her favourite musical instrument, *a short-necked fretted lute* called a **biwa**.

The consensus seems to attribute the lake's name to that resemblance though it was also known as the **Awaumi** (*Freshwater Sea*), the **Chikatsu Awaumi** (*Freshwater Sea Near the Capital*) and **Nio no Umi** (*Little Grebe Lake*).

The four-million-year-old 670 square kilometre lake is the result of tectonic uplift and is reputedly one of the world's twenty oldest.

It collects the runoff and meltwater off the surrounding mountains and lets it out into the **Seta River**, which merges with other streams and eventually discharges into the **Seto Inland Sea** at **Osaka Bay**.

At that point the **Seta** has morphed into the **Yodogawa**, the large stream we cross on the freeway between **Kansai International** and **Kōbe**.

That's not the only time water from **Lake Biwa** have crossed our path. We've probably encountered it coming out of a tap in **Kōbe**, **Osaka** or **Kyoto** since the lake provides the drinking water for around fifteen million people in the **Kansai** region.

We'd also encountered the terminus of the **Lake Biwa Canal** when we visited **Nanzenji** back in **2013**. The canal delivered the water that drove **Japan's first public hydroelectric power station** and did much to revitalise **Kyoto's** industrial sector, which had been in the doldrums after the national capital was transferred to **Tokyo** at the start of the **Meiji Era**.

The lake is also a breeding ground for freshwater fish with a diverse ecosystem that includes over a thousand species of fish, molluscs and aquatic insects, not all of them **native to Japan**.

Introduced species including the **black bass** and the **bluegill** have threatened the lake's biodiversity and environmental legislation has been needed to counter the oversupply of nutrients from agricultural, industrial, and household sources.

With large population centres less than an hour away by train, you'd expect the lake to be a popular destination for day trippers and holiday makers, and there are some popular beaches.

Lake cruises depart from *Otsu*, the capital of *Shiga prefecture* just over the range from *Kyoto* and the old castle town of *Hikone*, further north on the route between *Kyoto* and *Nagoya*.

That, of course, means the visitors don't just come from *Kansai*.

And they're not just there for the swimming boating and water sports.

The lake attracts scores of birds, so birdwatching is another drawcard.

Hikone has *one of Japan's twelve remaining original castles*, while *Nagahama*, towards the northern end of the lake, boasts many historical attractions including *Japan's oldest preserved railway station*, a reconstructed castle and some important shrines and temples.

At the other end, not that far from *Kyoto*, *Sakamoto* has two prominent temples, the *World Heritage* listed *Enryakuji* and *Ishiyamadera*, and serves as the gateway to *Mount Hiei*, home to the *Tendai* sect of *Zen Buddhism*.

Across the bay, *Omiachiman* has a restored historic canal and museums while out in the middle *Chikubu* and *Takeshima* are popular pilgrimage destinations.

Throw in sunsets, best viewed across the water from the eastern side with the sun setting over the mountains behind the other shore, and hot springs and *onsen* resorts around the lake and you've got a regional destination that offers plenty of attractions to *Japanese and foreign visitors*.

But I found all that out much later in the piece.

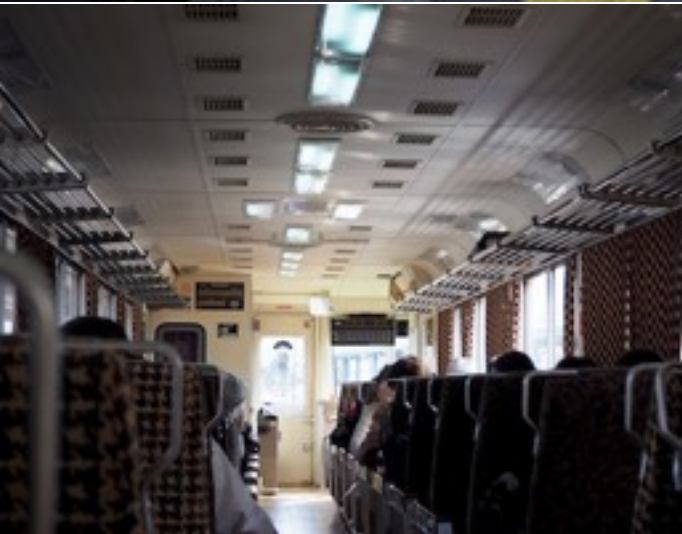
At the time, I was quite happy to spend the long run along the shoreline gazing across the waters and pondering whatever it was I happened to be considering at the time.

The tranquil views across the lake contrasted nicely with the hustle and bustle as we decanted ourselves into *Kyoto station* and set out transferring ourselves up, along and down to the very minor lines in what amounted to the basement.

With sixteen minutes to do it, we weren't pushed for time, but at the same time you didn't want to get held up along the way.

The run along the *Sanin Main Line* on the way to *Ayabe* in the northern part of *Kyoto Prefecture* took us through the mountains that ring *Kyoto*.

Then we diverted onto the *Maizuru Line* for a twenty-kilometre run to *Nishi-Maizuru*.



The line was built to transport troops and war materiel to the naval base and port at *Maizuru* during the *Russo-Japanese War*, and the port is still a significant transport hub. The *Shin-Nihonkai* Ferry runs from *Higashi-Maizuru* to *Otaru* in *Hokkaidō*, though it takes twenty hours to get you there.

The naval base dates back to *1901* and played a key role in the *Russo-Japanese War* since it's right beside the *Sea of Japan*. These days it's still a significant district headquarters for *Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force*.

But we weren't going quite that far. We alighted at *Nishi-Maizuru* and transferred to the third sector *Miyazu Line* operated by the *Kitakinki Tango Railway*, which would get us to *Amanohashidate*.

It's very much a local line, winding along the coast after *Higashi-Kanzaki*, passing through *Yura*,



Nakatsu and *Miyazu*, picking up and dropping off passengers *en route* to one of the *Three Great Views of Japan*.

A big influx of high school students, a couple of stops before our destination, underlined the local service aspect of things, and there wasn't that much to indicate we were headed for a significant tourist destination.

At *Amanohashidate Station*, which is actually in *Miyazu City*, but gets a clear identity for branding purposes, we headed up and down the stairs and, predictably, then noticed the elevator at the other end of the platform.

Outside the station, I guess we could have stopped for information, and it might have saved time if we did, but *Madam* was determined to head straight to our *ryokan* accommodation at *Amanohashidate Taikyourou*.

Very Kyoto, she remarked when we arrived.

It was a comment that seemed to relate to *Hughesy's* failure to follow *strict Japanese etiquette* in the shoe-removing department and suggested an expectation that things would be done *just so*, in a very formal manner.



That's fine, as long as you know your *just so*, which, of course, **Hughesy** doesn't.

But those concerns dissipated when we reached our room, with a pleasant view of the southern end of the iconic sand bar across the swinging bridge.

Then, having checked in and dropped the luggage, we headed back to the station for a couple of concession tickets to the local facilities.

Once we had those in our hot little hands, another loop took us back past the accommodation.

At that point, you couldn't help thinking that we might have saved a bit of time if we'd done things a little differently.

Still, it didn't matter.

It wasn't a lengthy hike, and we'd have abbreviated it significantly if **Madam** had followed my suggestion about a back alley that looked to debouch at a clearly visible landmark just on the other side of our *ryokan*.

I guess **Someone** hadn't spotted the landmark.



Still, in the end we managed to do just about everything we wanted to do in the afternoon, and a few more minutes in hand wouldn't have made that much difference.

In *Japanese mythology*, the four-kilometre sand bar we were about to cross is the spot where the gods conceived *the Japanese islands*.

According to the ancient **Ko-Fudoki**, the deity *Izanagi no Mikoto* built a ladder to allow him to climb down from the heavens to visit his lover *Izanami no Mikoto* on earth.

But there was a catch.

While he could slip down to the terrestrial sphere for a bit of divine dalliance, he had to be back up the ladder before nightfall.



The Astute Reader will have guessed where the story heads from there, and would probably add a bit of prurient detail.

Temporarily shagged out, in *Hughesy's* version of events, *Izanagi no Mikoto* dozes off, misses the deadline and fails to make it back upstairs.

The ladder falls to the ground, the link between heaven and earth was sundered, and we ended up with four kilometres of sand spit and the *Japanese archipelago* to which *Izanami no Mikoto* gave birth a while later.

So *Amanohashidate* translates as *bridge of heaven* and the pine-studded landform separates *Miyazu Bay* on the *Tango Peninsula* from *Asoumi lagoon*. It's all part of the *Tango-Amanohashidate-Ōeyama Quasi-National Park*.

As one of *Nihon Sankei*, the *Three Views of Japan* (the others are *Matsushima* and *Miyajima*), you might expect *Amanohashidate* to pack the visitors in (and, in a way it does), but it's a slightly different kettle of fish when you compare it to the other two.

Matsushima lies just outside *Sendai*, accessible by local train from a major station on the *Tohoku Shinkansen*. It's easily accessed, and you could do it easily on a day trip from *Tokyo* if you leave early enough in the morning and don't mind getting back to base in the dark.

Miyajima is a local train ride from *Hiroshima*, another major city, and while it isn't quite as day tripper friendly if you're not in the area, it's not really out of the way either.

In both cases, you can tack the view onto other things that may have brought you into the area.

Amanohahidate, however, requires you to go out of your way to take in the view.

Foreigners, as a result, are relatively thin on the ground, though it's firmly on *the Japanese itinerary*. That was evident when we sat down to dinner at the *ryokan* later in the evening.

The area is famous for its traditional *saké* with two distilleries open to visitors. The *Hakurei Shuzou Saké Brewery* is the more famous of the two while the *Ine Shuzou Saké Brewery* produces coloured brews, including *saké* made from red rice.

At the southern end of the spit, the train station sits in the village of *Monju*, which offers *ryokan* inns as well as the predictable shops selling noodles, dried fish and touristy knickknacks.

The standard *modus operandi* when visiting the area involves a walk across the sand bar, combined with a boat ride across the lagoon.





The jetty on the southern side sits beside the *Chienowa Toro*, a granite monument that symbolises wisdom and has been adopted as the town's emblem.

On the other side, in the village of *Fuchu*, *Konojinya*, guarded by a pair of *Kamakura Period* stone dogs, is the oldest shrine in the area .

A nearby cable car at the base of *Kasamatsu Park* takes visitors to its hilltop lookout on the lower slopes of *Mount Nariai*.

From there, assuming you've got time (we didn't) a shuttle bus can take you on to *Nariaiji*, founded in **704**, dedicated to *Kannon*, one of thirty-three temples on the *Saigōku Kannon* pilgrim route.

But the hilltop section of *Kasamako* is the main lookout point.

While you're there, you're supposed to turn your back to the spit, bend over and take in the upside down view from between your legs.

That way, the land bridge appears to be floating up to heaven.



The equivalent view on the south side is from *Aminohashidate View Land*, which has a chair lift and a monorail that ferry visitors up and down the hill. There is a small amusement park up there as well if you're into that side of things, but, really, it's all about the view.

So the standard itinerary works around the hilltop view from either side, the boat ride across the lagoon and a walk across the spit itself.

That will take you past the *Isoshimizu* fresh water well which dates back to the *Heian Period* and was selected as *one of the hundred best springs and rivers in Japan* by the Environmental Agency in *1985*.

The spit also has the attractive wooden *Amanohashidatejinja*, a *Shinto* shrine depicted on a scroll dated from *1251*.



It was originally located inside of the nearby *Buddhist temple* of *Chionji*, and dedicated to *Hashidate Myojin*, a local deity.

And the sandbar is liberally dotted with around eight thousand pine trees.

It makes for an enjoyable one hour stroll, or twenty-minute bicycle ride if you're inclined to shell out at one of the numerous bike rental places.

If you've got all day, there are reasonable swimming facilities, including beach showers, as well as toilet facilities, picnic benches and covered rest areas.

At the southern end, the rotating bridge has a middle section that turns through ninety degrees to allow boats to pass through.

We started with a brisk stroll across the two-kilometre sand bank with frequent pauses along the way.

Really, I reflected at one of them as *The Photographer* snapped away, *what had brought us here was just a glorified sand bar.*



But it was a sand bar that has been treated with a bit of respect and maintains a natural look and feel.

In Australia, I mused as I moseyed along, some developer would have plonked high-rise units on this bit of prime real estate.

If that hadn't happened, I went on, the local authorities would have turned it into a park, with lawns regularly whipper snipped, and some bastard laying poison to kill off the weeds.

When we reached the other end there were a couple of blokes with *whippersnippers*, but one hoped they steer clear of the *Roundup*.



From there we made a hurried cross to the cable cars, which run every quarter of an hour.

With the next one due to leave at five-thirty we had a couple of minutes to wait.

Not long, but long enough to ponder whether we might have made the previous one if we'd saved a bit of time along the way.

I wasn't sure about that and suspected we'd probably have arrived just in time to see the doors closing as the 5:15 headed off up the hill.

Up at the top, when we got there, the view was as great as the advance publicity suggested though the *upside down camera between the legs* view didn't seem to be working out the way it was supposed to.

And from there, under other circumstances, we could have gone on further, but the daylight was fading fast and time wasn't going to permit even a preliminary consideration.





We would probably have needed a good half hour, at least, so those minutes we could have gained back through the afternoon didn't make that much difference.

And that would have applied if we'd caught the 5:15 cable car as well.

So we headed down on the 5:45, having caught the view from the northern side and made our way back to the boat terminal through the grounds of *Kono Shrine* (*Motoise Kono Jinja*).

It's the most important shrine in the region and the former shrine of *Shinto*'s most venerated deity, *Amaterasu the Sun Goddess*.

She was enshrined there, along with a local deity (*Toyokehime*) responsible for clothing, food and housing.



Both were subsequently relocated as the main deities at *Isejingu* in *Mie prefecture*.

Since that was the case, and the shrine is believed to date back to the age of the gods, *Kono* frequently carries the tag *Motoise* (*Origin of Ise*).

The shrine's main hall closely resembles *the Inner Shrine* at *Ise* and smaller shrines on the site are dedicated to deities including *Ebisu*, *Inari*, *Sarutahiko* and the *Kasuga* gods.

Within the grounds a garden ornament (*suikinkutsu*) produces sounds that resemble a *koto* as water drips into a cave.

The shrine deserved more attention than it got from us as we snapped away and kept ourselves moving towards the ferry terminal, where buying two tickets on what looked to be the last service for the day was a straightforward affair.

But the service wasn't quite ready to depart yet.



I spent a few minutes outside, largely undisturbed while *The Photographer* roamed slightly further afield, snapping away, and the boat operators gradually shut up shop for the day.

I could see her heading back around the time I detected signs of life within the terminal, so I headed inside.

Working on the principle that the presence of a customer might make sure they didn't leave before *Someone* managed to get back, you understand.



There was a young bloke there, patiently waiting to collect tickets. I politely declined to hand mine over, pointing out that I was *waiting for **The Boss***.

Regardless of the guy's *English vocabulary*, I reckoned ***The Boss*** would work.

Better, at least, than ***The Supervisor***.

There was a delay of something like thirty seconds before ***Someone*** hove into view, delivering reminders that certain people who had got there earlier needed to make sure they stayed behind the yellow line.

I turned back to Ticket Dude.

*See? I said she was **Boss**.*

I understand, came the reply, delivered in a tone that suggested familiarity with the phenomenon.

As it turned out, late in the day we had our own personal ferry across the bay., just like we'd had our personal cable car up and down the hill just beforehand. It made for a pleasant cruise in the twilight.

We headed back to the *ryokan* by way of the shrine, but it was only a fleeting encounter.

Having taken a gander at the outside, it was obvious things would look much better in the morning.





So we headed inside, with *Hughesy* a little more careful in the shoe removal department. Maybe the concentration on making sure everything was done in the *correct Kyoto-style* was what made me lose track of where the room was.

But once we were safely upstairs in the correct quarters, I could take it easy.

Madam took herself off to the *onsen*, as you do when you're a fan, and the facilities are there just waiting to be used.

Those of us who *weren't exactly fans* were quietly hoping we'd be able to give it the flick pass, but returning bathers arrived with the news that *Hughesy* would be required to change into appropriate *ryokan* attire before we went down for dinner.

And since I was going to have to change, I may as well have a dip in the *onsen* as well.

Having reluctantly conceded defeat I set off and managed to get through the proceedings without doing anything that was obviously disgraceful.

I think. But there was no one around to notice if I had done.

It was straight to dinner from there, and when it arrived there was a predictable and entirely understandable orientation towards dishes featuring seafood.

Madam had chosen the smaller of the two menus, and probably just as well as far as **Someone** is concerned. I was fine.

There was **Yebisu** on tap, and I could pick away at most of what arrived.

Someone managed to tuck in heartily, which was why the smaller option had been the way to go.

The **shabu shabu** side of things, for those who are interested in the details, was *octopus*, thank you very much.

It came with regular warnings about *what happens when you overcook calamari*, which took a bit of an edge off things as far as **Yours Truly** was concerned.

Back upstairs, **Someone** headed straight to bed and while I tapped away for a bit and had a read for a couple of minutes I wasn't that far behind.





AMANOHASHIDATE > ONOMICHI > HIMEJI

Friday, 23 October 2015

And so we arrived at the *last day of the rail pass*, a day where *maxing out the mileage* was the name of the game.

I could have surfaced earlier, but lay semi-doggo until at 5:58, snapped a quick photograph out the window and sat down to catch up on the *Travelogue*.

There are some jobs you can't postpone because it's going to be a big travel day, and I figured that a good run at the notes would keep the narrative reasonably close to where we were.



That plan got a kick along when *Someone* headed off to the *onsen* without any suggestion that *Hughesy* should do likewise

There were shower facilities in the room, which was the basis for yesterday's hope that I could skip the *onsen* before dinner.

I tapped away until I reckoned the *onsen* contingent would be close to emerging and prepared to hurl myself at the shower facilities after they had returned.

Someone, after all, needed to be available to open the door.

There had been suggestions that we might get to the temple down the road before breakfast, but we didn't quite make it, thanks to the need to repackage and rearrange the baggage to stash additional items that needed laundering.

Ordinarily, that wouldn't have been much of an issue, but the attempt was complicated by a lack of room to move in an area where *tatami* mats were a significant consideration.

A *traditional Japanese breakfast* saw *Hughesy* filling up on rice, with enough bits and pieces to pick at to pad things out. Relatively ample padding around the waist suggests there was no need for a massive intake.

Diplomacy suggested I try and sample as much as possible and leave an impression of having had a good go at most of it.

That's not as hard as you might think when there's someone across the table who volunteers to clean up a few odds and ends that she knows aren't quite to my taste.

Teamwork is a beautiful thing.

Back upstairs we finished the preparations for departure and checked out.

The bags could come down later after we'd done a lap around the southern end of *Amanohashidate*.

The train wasn't leaving until 10:39, so we wanted to be back around twenty minutes before that.

On that basis, we had just under two hours to hit the temple, zoom up to *Amanohashidate View Land* when it opened and would probably end up killing time on the sand spit.

We got part of the timing right, arriving at the temple before the first tour groups arrived on the scene.





I'd been admiring *Ogonkaku*, the temple gate just along from our *ryokan* since I set eyes on it.

It's an impressive piece of work, on a par with similar structures elsewhere, though I'm disinclined to believe that it was *the result of seven years labour by 8780 carpenters*.

According to that story ([here](#)) they finished the work in **1767**, which makes the gate one of the newer features of a temple that dates back to the 9th century.

Chionji was originally built in 808 during the reign of *Emperor Heizei*. It formerly belonged to the *Shingon* sect but ended up in the hands of the *Rinzai* after the *Namboku period*.

The temple is home to one of *Three Important Statues of Monju Bosatsu* (a.k.a. *Kiredomonjyu* or *Kusetomonjyu*), the *Bodhisattva* of wisdom and intellect.



He is often depicted holding the sword of wisdom in his right hand.

He uses it to cut through illusion, shed light on unenlightened minds, destroy mistaken ideas, evil thoughts and actions, correct ignorance and delusion, dispense wisdom, and deliver joy to the human race.

That's a significant set of responsibilities, but pilgrims to the temple tend to seek more direct assistance.

Students and other visitors to the temple purchase *omikuj* (personal fortunes shaped like folding fans), which they leave hanging from the branches of pine trees in anticipation that they'll deliver wisdom and, more particularly, academic success when exam time rolls around.

He is also believed to help with your calligraphy.

Other structures around the temple a two-storey *tahoto* style pagoda, built in the *1500s*.



It's the oldest remaining structure in the temple grounds and the *oldest pagoda of its kind in Japan*.

The temple grounds also hold the tomb of [*Izumi Shikibu*](#), a *Heian Period* poet, courtier and courtesan.

She is also memorialised at *Seishinin* temple in downtown *Kyoto*, but her tomb here is rated as an important cultural asset.

The visit to the temple killed enough time to have us at the head of a non-existent queue when we arrived at *Amanohashidate View Land*.

The cable rail ride up a steep slope delivered us to a vantage point that provided a better view of the sand bar than yesterday's lookout on the other side, but that may be a function of morning rather than afternoon light.



Still it seemed to be a trifle higher and significantly closer to the sand spit.

With plenty of time on our hands, both of us indulged in the upside down photo between the legs routine, but thanks to the wonders of modern technology, today's digital cameras self-correct, so what's the point.

I guess you can always use your image manipulating technology to fake the shot.

Then again, if your camera auto-corrects you don't have a choice about it.



There's more up at the top of *View Land* than the view itself, but the variety of hilltop attractions had limited (*i.e.* zero) appeal, so we headed back down for a wander around the southern end of the sand spit.

It was a pleasant little stroll in the area where tour groups aren't likely to tread. While we were there, a sign advising the public about gardening-type maintenance work and apologising for any inconvenience left *Hughesy* with the impression we were looking at *petty criminals doing Community Service orders*.

At least until *Someone* provided an accurate translation.

And that took us nicely up towards departure time.

It was around 10:15 when we headed back to the *ryokan* to collect our bags, and from there we headed straight on to the station.

Well and truly early for the third sector line, we ensconced ourselves in a shady spot on the platform and settled down to wait.

In fact, we were so early that they hadn't started checking tickets for the third sector service we were waiting for.

That meant we had to go back inside to show the tickets before boarding the train for a reverse of the previous day's two legs out of *Kyoto*.

The change of trains at *Nishimaizuru* required a bit of slick footwork, scrambling up the stairs and back down again to catch the connecting train.

It was much the same story in *Kyoto* though that exercise involved a sprint to get ahead of the pack followed by a dodging and weaving move through crowds headed across our path from Platforms 30 and 31 right down on ground level to *Platform 6 or 7* on the intermediate tier.

The *Shinkansen* platforms (11, 12, 13 and 14), of course, are on an entirely separate plane.

So we barrelled down the escalator and hit the *Thunderbird 16* in time, so that had the most significant issues covered. We had five legs to go, but the major disrupters had been passed.

The *Thunderbird* took us into *ShinOsaka*, where we needed to move reasonably smartly up to the *Shinkansen* platforms but had a little more time to do it.

Our *Sakura* service was bound for *Kagoshima* and was still in the hands of the cleaners when we arrived at the relevant door.

I had time to head off to buy beer while they did their thing, and when *Madam* had picked up a bottle of water, we joined a motley queue of passengers, all bound for somewhere on a *Friday* afternoon.

There weren't many of them bound for *ShinKōbe*, the first stop along the way, and there weren't many unoccupied seats when we stopped there.

There were even fewer when we left.

The *Sakura* sailed straight through *Himeji*, a city of a mere half million and too insignificant for a rapid service to concern itself with before a stop at *Okayama*, which mightn't be that much larger (what's around two hundred thousand between friends) but serves as an important transport hub.

I spotted the line that takes you off to *Shikoku* as the train picked up speed out of the station.

Our intermediate destination on the way to the historic port town of *Onomichi* was *Fukuyama*, on the *Ashida River* towards the eastern end of *Hiroshima Prefecture*. The city is known for an annual *Rose Festival* in *May*, the Prefecture's *Museum of History*, and *Fukuyama Museum of Art*.

It's a commercial, industrial and communications centre producing machinery, rubber products, electronics, textiles, processed foods and *koto* (*Japanese harps*), about an hour from *Osaka*, with a population nudging the half million mark.

Fukuyama started as a castle town in *1619* when *Mizuno Katsunari*, cousin of *Tokugawa Ieyasu* needed a new castle-town as the capital of *a territory in western Japan* that included southern *Bingo Province* and southwestern *Bitchu*.

Fukuyama became a prefectural capital after the *han system* was abolished in *1871*.

Fukuyama Prefecture was renamed *Fukatsu*, and then merged with *Kurashiki Prefecture* in *1872* to form *Oda Prefecture*. Three years later that entity was merged into *Okayama Prefecture*, and when the border between *Okayama* and *Hiroshima* prefectures was re-aligned in *1876*, *Fukuyama* became a part of *Hiroshima Prefecture*, which is where it has stayed.

Attractions in the city include *Fukuyama Castle*, *Myōōin temple*, which dates back to *807* and the *Nara Era Bingo Kokubunji Temple*.

The medieval town of *Kusado Sengen* near the *Ashida River* was a minor port on the *Seto Inland Sea*. That was back in the *Kamakura* and *Muromachi* periods, and after that, it quietly disappeared. Evidence of the port's existence was unearthed in *1931* while engineers were re-routing the stream. The site was buried by a sandbank, but excavations after *1961* have revealed wells, garbage pits, ponds, graves, ditches, and a wide range of objects used in daily life.

The fishing port of *Tomonoura*, fourteen kilometres south of *Furukawa*, has some impressive temples and shrines including *Taichōrō*, with a hall on the hill built at the end of the 17th century to house *Korean* delegations.

The town is also noted for a traditional red sea bream netting display held in *May* and *Homeishu*, a sweet liqueur, made in the area for a thousand years.

We alighted at *Fukuyama* and headed back down to the lower levels for the next service to *Onomichi*, about midway between *Okayama* and *Hiroshima*.

Today, *Onomichi* is a relatively nondescript industrial port on the northern shore of the *Inland Sea*.

But go back eight hundred years and you would have been looking at a significant commercial port established in *1168*.

The port prospered from trade with *Ming Dynasty China* during the *14th century* and remained an important centre for shipping agents and ferries to *Shikoku* until the end of the *Edo Period*.

Wealthy merchants flocked to the port during its prosperity, building temples on the steep slopes overlooking the sea to celebrate their wealth.

All up, there were eighty-one of them in the town's heyday.

Twenty-five of them remain today, forming the route of *Onomichi's* famous *Temple Walk*, which was my main point of interest hereabouts.

But there's also quite a view, stretching across the neighbouring islands and the *Shimanami Kaido*, a sixty-kilometre series of bridges linking the city with *Shikoku* passing over small islands in the *Inland Sea* along the way.

It's the only land connection between *Japan's main island* and *Shikoku* that can be used by cyclists and pedestrians. As a result, it's a popular cycling route, and bicycles can be rented at various points along the way if you don't have one with you.





But we wouldn't be doing that. *Madam* isn't bicycle-friendly.

Ferries operate between *Onomichi*, *Shikoku* and the nearby islands, adding to a nostalgic port town atmosphere.

The city's decline started when the first railway lines in the region were constructed.

They passed further inland, and the town's trade stagnated as other centres went ahead.

Still, that's a two-edged sword.

Relative obscurity meant American bombers also passed by.

When the *Shinkansen* route was mapped out, *Onomichi* did get a guernsey, but *ShinOnomichi* lies on the outskirts of the city rather than in the CBD and is only served by *all-stops Kodama* trainsets.

That's why we opted to alight in *Fukuyama* and take the twenty-minute ride on the *San'yo Main Line* to the more centrally-located *JR Onomichi*. We'd have needed a bus to get to and from *ShinOnomichi*.

But despite its slide into relative obscurity, *Onomichi* has retained much of its pre-*Meiji Era* heritage.

Today the town economic base is primarily industrial, with a shipyard and a motor factory.

Ships and ferries shuttle back and forth to *Shikoku* and islands in the *Inland Sea*, but although that activity is down from the pre-*Meiji* heyday, the former status as a temple town has left a legacy.

The city has been favoured by writers and intellectuals since the *early 20th century*, and some of *Japan's more famous authors* have lived there.

Since it is better preserved than most towns of its vintage and retains a retro ambiance, *Onomichi* has also been the setting for numerous movies and television dramas.

That history is celebrated in the *Onomichi Motion Picture Museum* in a renovated warehouse along the eastern seafront.

The literary side of the city's heritage is celebrated in the *Bungaku-no-Komichi* (Path of Literature) which winds its way downhill from *Senkōji Park*.





There are twenty-four stones along the way, each carved with quotes from *Japanese authors* linked to *Onomichi* exalting the views out across the bay.

Or so I've been lead to believe.

The quotes are, unsurprisingly, *in Japanese*, and they'd be Greek to me.

On a less savoury note, the city is the headquarters of the *Kyodo-kai* *yakuza* syndicate, the second largest *yakuza* group in the region after the *Hiroshima's Kyosei-kai*.

The first thing we needed to do, once we were on the ground, was to deposit everything in a coin locker. We found a large economy size one for a mere ¥700, around 200 less than we'd had to spend elsewhere for two.

And it fitted my backpack, which was handy since the next bit was going to involve a fair bit of up and down climbing.

According to the *iPhone's Health* app, I walked 9.86 kilometres during the day.

Most of it was yet to come.



The climbing didn't kick in immediately, though. Inquiries at Tourist Information produced a handy map and an indication of an old shopping street that was more or less along the way to the chair lift.

That was *Ichibangai Shōtengai*, a classic covered shopping arcade that runs for about a kilometre parallel to the shoreline.

It was probably going to contain an interesting mixture of shops, and other circumstances I'd have been giving a *Why not?* If someone suggested, we would head that way.

Shopping streets, however, can turn into time sinks because you never know what you're likely to find.

But while it didn't quite fit in with *Hughesy's* temple viewing aspirations, when *Madam* decided the shopping street was the way to go there wasn't much I could do about it.

On the way out of the station, I spotted a pizza place that was *Someone's* preferred dinner destination, and we sidetracked to have a closer look and verify that it seemed OK to me.

We took a sidetrack about half way along for a look at the harbour, something I regarded as a waste of time since the view would be far better from the heights where we were bound.

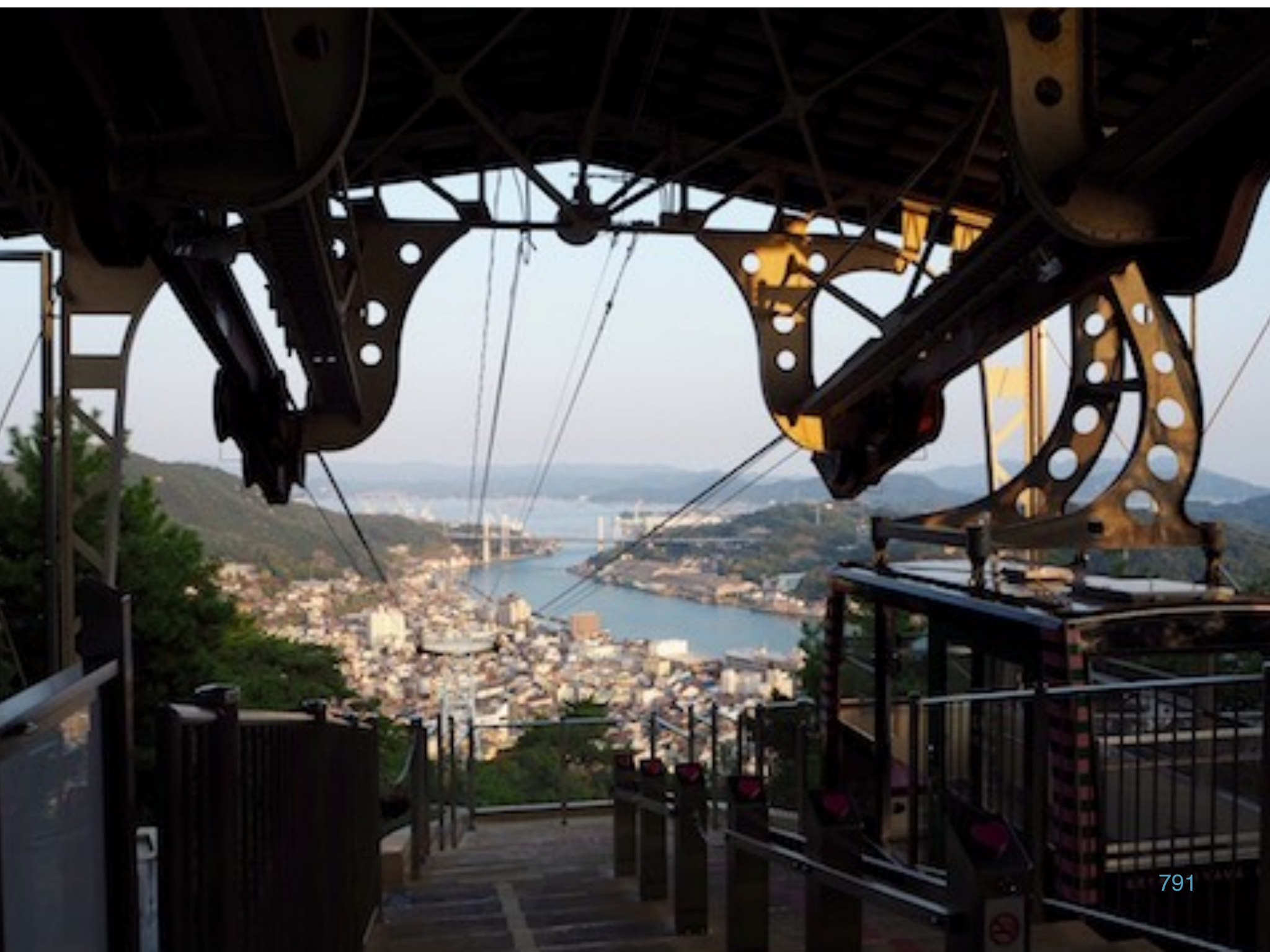
But the shopping street was interesting in itself.

It's a remnant of the days when lengthy covered arcades were features of *most Japanese cities*.

Most of the smaller ones have succumbed to competition from shopping malls and similar developments, but where they survive they almost invariably make an enjoyable experience provided you've got the time to take it in properly.

A fair number of businesses were closed though *Madam* hypothesised they were on their *off day*. That makes sense given the likelihood of optimum business on weekends.

There was a museum about half way along where we could have sunk a bit more time, but I have to admit I was growing impatient because there wasn't much daylight left.





We exited the shopping street at the right point and made our way to the ropeway that would take us up to the view. That had always been our destination, but I would have preferred a more direct approach. I figured we could have followed the shopping street on the way back.

The 361-metre ***Senkōji Ropeway***, operated by the city government, opened for business in **1957**.

While the destination (***Senkojiko*** park) isn't that high at around 115 metres above sea level, it has a couple of things going for it.

It's famous for cherry blossoms and azaleas in the right season, but the view out across the water will bring the tourists and sightseers in three hundred and sixty-five days a year, so you'd have to reckon the ropeway would be a definite money spinner.



Having done the descent, I wouldn't advise anyone to hoof it up the slope.

So the view's one thing.

As it turned out a couple of shots as we made the ascent were the last contribution to the photo archives from the *iPhone*.

We reached the top, where the views were truly magnificent, and I found a phone that was, effectively, completely frozen.

I couldn't open the **Camera** app or any of its brothers or sisters, and I couldn't switch it off.

And it was fairly obvious what had happened.

*With less than 500MB of space left on the device, **the system software** had decided to shut up shop.*

A brief consideration of relevant matters produced the conclusion that I would probably have to wait until I got home to fix the problem.

The solution would probably involve plugging the phone into my **iTunes** on the desktop machine and deleting enough material to restore the device to working order.



And, based on that conclusion, it seemed that all I could do was to sit down and take in the view while *Madam* snapped away in the sunset.

That produced *allegations of sooking*, by the way, though the actual reason for sitting and looking rather than standing and doing the same thing was that it *kept me out of other people's shots*.

Apart from the lookout, the extensive parklands contain *Senkoji* temple, founded in **806**, the first year of the *Daidō era*.

The temple is the tenth site of the *Chūgoku Thirty-Three Kannon Pilgrimage* route, which includes thirty-three sites sacred to the *bodhisattva Kannon* stretching across the *Chūgoku region* from *Okayama*, *Furukawa*, *Onomichi*, *Hiroshima* and *Miyajima*.



From there it follows the coast all the way around to *Tottori* on the northern shores of the island more or less north of *Himeji*.

The route is a relatively recent development (*1981*) and lacks the historical aspects of *similar courses elsewhere in Japan*.



Nearby *Jōdoji* (#9) a two-storey *pagoda* with a *Zen* garden and tea ceremony room transported from *Fushimi Castle* in *Kyoto* and *Kōjōji* (#11), a complex of vermilion buildings that date back to 616 on one of the offshore islands are also counted in the thirty-three.

Saigōkuji, the temple with giant straw sandals on either side of the entrance thought to have been built about 739 isn't counted among the thirty-three, but is one of four *special sites* added to the list.

We'd already determined that we'd make the descent on foot, and started out along the *Path of Literature*, which we probably followed all the way down.

If we didn't, it was because *diversions to look at temples and shrines* saw us figuring out the way on from there rather than heading back to resume the downward track we had been following.

Reconstructing the path we followed and identifying the places we'd passed would have been easier if I could locate the footbridge that got us over the main street, but the satellite view on *Maps* has buildings casting shadows across the road.

With the *iPhone* in action, there's the slight possibility that the *built-in GPS equivalent* might have delivered data about photographs that might have helped.

But it wasn't, so the actual path remains something of a mystery.

The temples and such *en route* also remain significantly under-documented since *Hughesy* wasn't the one operating the camera.

Things that attract my attention don't always catch *Madam's* eye.



But the downhill ramble as night fell around us was enjoyable enough, with the odd cat minding its own business along the way.

In the end, our route got us down the hill, across the major thoroughfare, and back to the shopping street.

And that brought us back to the pizza place, where the product was excellent, and a glass of perfectly acceptable *Sangiovese* deadened the pain associated with non-functioning *iPhones*.

The proprietor, according to *Madam's* thorough research, had learned his trade in Italy, so this *relatively small Japanese city* has a legitimate pizza operation.

We'll be back if we're in the neighbourhood again.

The music, which may have been Marcia Ball, wasn't bad either.

We could have gone a second pizza if *Hughesy* was willing to devour most of it, but my share of one had been just about enough.

I could have finished another slice or possibly two.

But there was no way I could handle five after a fortnight's *Good Paddock Syndrome*.

Back at the station, we emptied the coin locker and joined the *Friday* night commuters on the local line to Fukuyama, where we managed to get seats. I suspect there were a few resentful locals though no one said anything.

A *slower Shinkansen service* brought us back to *Himeji* on the last leg of the Rail Pass Week. It wasn't our preferred destination, but *Kōbe* was booked out on *Friday* night, and a two-night stopover in *Himeji* provided an excuse to take another look at the castle.

And possibly something else.

If we had time.



14

JAPAN 2015: THE LAST LEG



HIMEJI

Saturday, 24 October 2015

We'd been to *Himeji* before, back in *2008* when *Madam* had hauled me along to join around 60,000 people who'd decided to use the grounds of *Himeji Castle* for a spot of *hanami* (*cherry blossom viewing*).

Well, it *was* a ***Saturday***, and the blossoms were at their best.

But it had been a crowded couple of hours, and there were things that we'd missed. We hadn't been able to make it all the way up to the top of the central *donjon* keep, for a start.

So when *Madam* floated the notion of staying in *Himeji* for two nights at the end of the *Rail Pass leg*, *Hughesy* was 100% in favour.

The city had been an important centre since the *Nara Period*, initially as the heart of *Harima Province*. The castle dates back to **1333**, but the current incarnation goes back to **1580** when *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* added a three-layer castle tower.

That was enlarged thirty years later by *Ikeda Terumasa*, who was awarded the castle after his father-in-law, *Tokugawa Ieyasu*'s forces defeated the *Toyomi* armies in the *Battle of Sekigahara*.

Apart from adding the castle's central five-storey *donjon* and three smaller *donjons* and building up the surrounding town, *Terumasa* established *Himeji Domain*.

That administrative entity became *Himeji Prefecture* (later *Shikama Prefecture*) after **1871**, but the subsequent rearrangements saw the prefecture merged with *Hyōgo* in **1876**.

The city of *Himeji* was established in **1889** and was considered as a candidate for a relocated national capital after the **1923 Great Kantō Earthquake** hit *Tokyo*.

Since the city had an important rail terminal and contained two significant military zones, it was targeted by the *American XXI Bomber Command*.

One hundred and seven aircraft dropped 767 tons of incendiary bombs on *Himeji* in a raid on **3 July, 1945**, destroying almost two-thirds of the built up area.

Miraculously, the single firebomb that landed on the top floor of the castle failed to explode.

The castle also remained intact throughout the **1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake** and a number of typhoons.

Other attractions in the city include the *Engyōji* temple, *Mount Seppiko*, a safari park, *Himeji City Tegarayama Botanical Garden* and the *Kokoen* garden.

And at this point we should underline the importance of expert local advice, even when we're carrying our own reasonably local semi-expert and master researcher.

Himeji is the second city in *Hyogo Prefecture*, after *Madam*'s home town, so you might be inclined to go along with her priorities.

They revolved around a return visit to the castle, a walk around the **17th century complex** of moats, walls, keeps and corridors, a climb right up to the top and, from there, a decision about what else we had time for.

I'd managed to ditch the backpack before we set out, and replaced the *iPhone* with *Madam's Other Camera*, which had been almost entirely unutilised to this point of the trip.

Early morning inspiration had me sitting down and deleting a lot more email on the *iPad*, continuing a process that I'd started the night before.

Miraculously, when I tried the *iPhone* after an hour or so, it kicked back into life, so I spent the next hour deleting photos and email there so that it stayed that way.

It wasn't going to be getting a lot of photographic action, but I could use it if I needed to,

And I had *Madam's Old Camera*, with an empty SD card that would more than handle any photographic action over the rest of the trip.

Win-win.

Breakfast in a chain operation in the station was more like brunch, thanks to the delay brought on by dealing with *a week's worth of laundry*. We ordered a couple of omelettes and salad with toast and tea for one, coffee for t'other.

Good Paddock Syndrome meant it was almost enough to keep *Hughesy* going until dinner time.

From there we hit the Tourist Information for a map.

That was all we were looking for, but we received two matching pieces of very sound advice from two elderly volunteers.

Save the Castle for later. Hit the ropeway and head up to Enkyoji.

We'd had the temple in the plan of attack, but *as an additional activity, if we had time.*

It was, we were told, *a good three-hour round trip*, which was why we were advised to do it first.

In the end, we were away for five and a half, returning just before the Castle shut down for the night.

The most convenient way to tackle this little excursion involved taking ourselves off to the ticket counter at the *Shinki Bus Terminal* in the *Sanyo Department Store* in front of *Himeji Station*, where we shelled out ¥1300 each for tickets that covered *the return bus trip and the up and down on the ropeway.*

Alternatively, I guess you could pay separately.

The return fare on the ropeway is ¥900 (¥500 one way if you're going to walk back down).

You could skip the ropeway altogether though you'd want to be fit with plenty of time on your hands.

The climb is said to take at least three-quarters of an hour though it would undoubtedly be quicker on the way down.

But you'd still be up for the ¥270 fare each way to and from the *Mount Shosha Ropeway* terminus on the Number 8 bus. They depart every fifteen to twenty minutes, and it's a half-hour ride, so you probably don't want to walk that one.

The half hour journey through *Himeji*'s suburbs to the foot of a mountain on the edge of the city wasn't the most inspiring experience of the trip, but it's one of those things you have to do, so you do it.

Being a *Saturday*, the bus was fairly crowded, as was the ropeway car that took us up the slope.

The cable-car ride lasts a couple of minutes, and comes with a description of what you can see as you look out over *Himeji*, with the *Inland Sea* beyond the city limits and mountains to left and right.

The story, of course, was completely unintelligible as far as *Hughesy* was concerned, but I'm led to believe it delivers a potted history of *Engyoji* as well.





The views on the way up would have been better in a less crowded conveyance, but you'd need to do away with the oft-noted haze if you were going to get a good view across the cityscape.

As is so often the case, regardless of crowds on the journey, once you arrive there's room to move.

There certainly was in this instance as we headed across to pay the admission fee for the temple complex.

After all, there's a whole sprawling complex spread across a spacious, densely forested mountain top for the crowds to disperse cross.

That was evident as soon as we'd paid the fee and set out on a gravelled, hilly path that would be disappointing to people who like their temple approaches smooth and paved.

Rough and ready wasn't quite the right pair of descriptors, but the path conveyed a timeless feel as we ascended through the pines and passed a succession of statues.

Behind us, the bell tolled though *Hughesy* wasn't sure the frequency was entirely appropriate.

There was a *Chinese* couple there when we passed the bell.

From what I could gather, they were still there, probably making repeated attempts to get the right photo.

When I tracked down the detail a little later, I found it probably wasn't *quite* that way.

Possibly *was*, *partially*, but not *quite*.

The bell's name is *Jihi no Kane*, the *Bell of Compassion*, which *The Attentive Reader* may recall is the principal attribute of the *bodhisattva Kannon*, who appears here in the form of *Nyoirin*, or *Wish-granting Kannon*.

Pilgrims are encouraged to ring the bell, and when you do, you are supposed to make a wish for *world peace and compassion*.

One can't help suspecting, however, that an inability to get the shot just right means you have to strike the bell again, on the principle that *the world needs all the peace and compassion it can get*.





From the top station on the ropeway, it's a ten to fifteen-minute walk to the ***Niomon Gate***, which marks the demarcation between the spiritual world of the temple complex and the secular world outside.

From there, it's another ten to fifteen minutes to reach the ***Maniden*** at the centre of the temple complex.

We'd have gone close to doubling that as we stopped every few metres to snap a memory of one of the statues that line the eastern path into the temple complex, which is ***Number 27*** on the ***Kansai Kannon Pilgrimage*** trail.

There are ***thirty-three temples*** on *that* trail, and ***thirty-three images*** on *this* trail leading into ***Number 27***. Each image, as far as I can gather, is a replica of the main image in one of those temples.



In another bit of *one-stop merit building*, passing each image is believed to convey the same benefit as visiting the temple it represents.

On that basis, having stopped to admire and photograph each of those images, *Hughesy* would have done himself a power of good.

After all, *you can never earn enough merit*.

On the way, we were also passing small trees donated by pilgrims and believers.

As we progressed, with a relatively steady trickle of passers-by passing us in both directions I realised it was just a well the *iPhone* decided to throw in the *iOS* towel yesterday.



If it had happened amid this wealth of visual interest, the consequences would have been disastrous.

And I wouldn't have had *Madam's Other Camera* with me as a backup.

If you're not up for the walk, there's a minibus shuttle that runs back and forth between the ropeway station and the *Maniden* every twenty minutes if you feel like shelling out ¥500.

But if you do that you're going to miss out on the little details along the way.

And, when you've got a temple complex (or, more accurately, a complex of temples) with a thousand year history, there's a lot of little detail.





Shoshazan Enkyoji was founded in 966 by the ascetic monk *Shōkū Shōnin*, who comes with his own story.

He is said to have turned to religious pursuits relatively in life after an incident at the *Fujiwara* court. At that stage, he was known as *Kotaro Chuta* and was employed in the service of *Fujiwara no Tokihira*'s young son.

When *Chuta* broke an imperial ink stone that had been in a *Fujiwara* family heirloom the son took the blame and was beheaded by his father.

So, at the age of thirty-six, *Kotaro Chuta* became a hermit, intending to achieve enlightenment by purifying himself through ascetic austerity.



In the process, he reputedly hoped his efforts would help the unfortunate youngster attain *Buddhahood*.

According to the stories, there was *a degree of predestination* involved,

It is said that he was born with a clenched fist.

When his parents eventually succeeded in prising his fingers open, they found the infant was clutching a needle, which was interpreted as a connection to the the *Bodhisattva of Wisdom*, *Fugen* a.k.a. *Kongoshin (Diamond Needle)*, and a sign *Shoku* was fated to direct people onto the right path.



For the next sixty years, **Shōkū Shōnin** lived an ascetic existence intended to loosen his attachment to his six senses (*his eyes, ears, tongue, nose, body and mind*).

He went to the mountains where he practised **shugyo** (*an intense study of Buddhist scripture*) austerity,

Then, when he came to **Mount Shosha** he found a sacred cherry tree inhabited by a spirit and carved it into the six armed **Nyoirin Kannon** housed in the **Maniden**.

That may have been the avenue through which he received enlightenment from the **Bodhisattva of Wisdom and Intellect**.

The mail was that anyone who climbed the mountain would be purified in body and spirit, and that prompted him to establish the temple.



As the location's fame spread and people climbed the mountain seeking divine favours the temple prospered and it developed into an important training centre for priests in the western *Kansai* district.

When *Shoku Shonin* died at the age of ninety-eight his image was enshrined in the *Maniden's Founder's Shrine*. A lantern in the shrine lit after his death has reputedly burned for more than a thousand years without being extinguished.

The path took us past *Juryoin*, a sub-temple set uphill from our path where we could have stopped for *shojin ryori*, a vegetarian meal served in traditional red lacquerware.

Put the reluctance down to *a surfeit of Japanese tucker* over the past couple of days if you like, but it was still rather soon after breakfast. And, it seems, they only cater for parties of five or more.



But I was definitely peckish.

If we'd turned left and headed downhill at the intersection where the shuttle bus track crosses the path we would have passed *Myōkōin*, another sub-temple noted for its *shōjin ryōri*.

It's another set menu based on seasonal ingredients and natural ingredients. But a turn there would have had us on the way out, heading away from what we were there for.

Just after the intersection we encountered *Jūmyōin*, another sub-temple and *Important Cultural Property* built in **1558**.

That listing comes thanks to the *fusuma* paper doors decorated with Kano school *Chinese-style* landscapes by *Einō Kanō* (1634 – 1700).

We turned a corner and found ourselves at the foot of the steps leading up to the temple's main structure, the *Maniden*.

The massive support pillars that underpin the structure mean that it bears a more than passing resemblance to *Kiyomizudera* in *Kyoto*.



It's the site where the *Nyoirin Kannon* is enshrined, but the original building, constructed in **970**, burned down in **1472**.

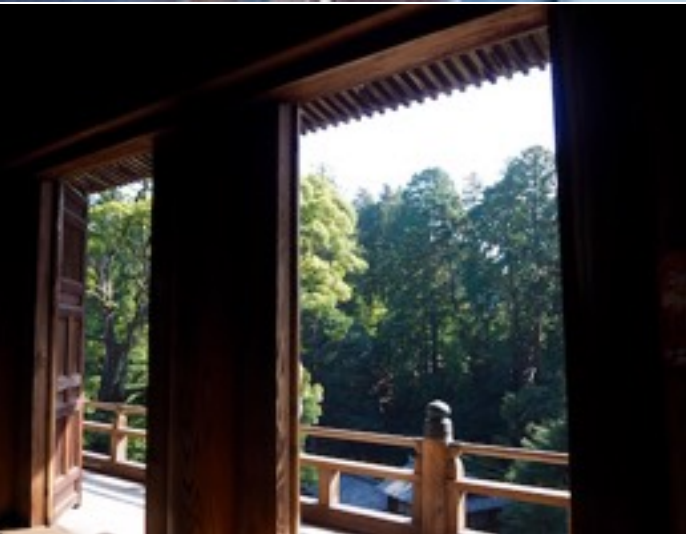
When it did, a spring appeared where the cherry tree had stood, and (I'm guessing here) that's probably the source of the water features at the bottom of the slope.

The structure was, of course, rebuilt, as it has been every time fires or war destroyed it over the intervening centuries.

The present incarnation dates from **1933**.

Inside the hall, you will not see the *Kannon*, unless you happen to be on the spot on **18 January**, the only day of the year when it goes on display

So the *Maniden* towers above you on the steep hillside, while down below the shops and stalls do a



steady trade while people, most of them eating ice creams, stand around admiring carp in the pond.

I joined them.

After all, *when in Rome you do as the Romans do* and I was feeling slightly peckish.

After that spot of refreshment, we climbed up to the **Maniden**, which might be relatively recent but had a definite *patina* that delivers an impression of age.

Maybe it's just old (or oldish) timber.

That was the way it looked on the somewhat weather-beaten exterior. Once we were inside the *patina* was almost non-existent, at least to my inexperienced eyes.





From there, we continued on our way around the mountaintop, making our way towards the cluster of buildings that form the heart of the monastic complex.

Another five minute walk along the forest trail that passes the graves of *Himeji Castle*'s feudal lords brings you to three massive temple halls, the *Mitsunodo*:

- the *Daikodo* or lecture hall, where the monks studied *sutra* and learned about the *dharma*;
- the *Jōgyōdō* or gymnasium, built around **1330** and used, among other things, for a meditation practice that involved monks circling the enshrined *Amida Buddha*, chanting the *Nembutsu* (the *mantra* associated with the deity) for up to ninety days;



- and the *Jikido*, a two-storey hall where the monks lived and ate, which is now a museum which displays treasures of the temple complex.

All three are *Important Cultural Properties of Japan*, built in the *Muromachi period* and used as sets for *The Last Samurai* movie in 2003.

It came as no surprise to learn that the mountaintop complex is regularly used as a location for films and TV drama.

The combination of authentic heritage listed buildings, scenic backdrops and an almost total lack of modern infrastructure that would need to be moved or covered make it an obvious choice for a director taking on historical content.

We exited the *Mitsunodo* by making our way along the track between the *Daikodo* and the *Jikido*, looping around past the *Fudōdō* and the *Gohōdō*, dedicated to the memory of *Shōkū Shōnin* and the two deities who are said to have helped him.



Throughout the founder's life two beings, *Wakaten* and *Ototen*, the *Shinto* gods of treasure and fire, frightened away any encroaching evil spirits through their extreme ugliness.

Readers troubled by the overlap of *Buddhist* and *Shinto* entities (you shouldn't, the borderlines are vague and it happens all the time) can be reassured.

The duo are said to have been incarnations (*keshin*) of two *Buddhist* deities *Bishamonten*, chief of the *Four Heavenly Kings*, and *Fudō Myō*, the *immovable deity* who *converts anger into salvation* and *seeks to frighten non-believers into accepting Buddhist teachings*.

That brought us to the *Gohōdō haiden*, rebuilt in 1589 and *Kaizandō*, another *Important Cultural Property of Japan* rebuilt in the *Edo Period* where a helpful monk went to some trouble to point out the finer points of the intricate carvings and such above our heads.



In Japanese, of course, so the content shot straight over the *Hughesy* cranium.

But at the same time, it's not all genteel antiquity.

As our learned friend expounded at unintelligible length (not that I'm knocking, more wishing I had access to a **Hitch-hikers' Guide Babel Fish**) a sign over there on the wall invited visitors to like the temple complex on **FaceBook**. Don't believe me? Click [*here*](#).

From there we looped around to the south, passing the Muromachi period *Kongodō*, another *Important Cultural Property*, the *Kamakura Period Yakushido*, which is the oldest building on the site, the *Hokkedō Lotus Sūtra hall* and the *Shōrō bell tower*, yet another *Important Cultural Property*.

There were other side tracks we could have taken.

We might have headed further into the forest to check out the *Hakusan Gongen* shrine further up the mountain, tucked away



along a stony path with the *torii* gates that identify it as a *Shinto* shrine despite the *Eleven-headed Kannon* on the premises.

By that stage, however, we were ready for a change and I was prepared to acknowledge that you can't do everything, even if you might be inclined to try.

We still had some ambitions as far as *Himeji Castle* was concerned.

The downhill leg, however, had its moments.

Just as we passed the bus road, a crocodile of schoolkids appeared. I gave them a *konnichi-wa*, as you do under such circumstances.

Apparently the delivery elicited a *You speak very good Japanese* in response, though, of course, *Hughesy's Japanese vocabulary* doesn't extend far enough to allow me to register, or, indeed to acknowledge the compliment.

We were moving pretty smartly downhill through the *Niomon Gate* but broke into a run as we approached the *Ropeway terminal*.

It was getting late, and we weren't keen on waiting for another quarter-hour.

Back at the bottom, we were moving rather smartly towards the bus stop as well.

You don't want to spend a half-hour bus trip on your feet. But the crowd in the ropeway gondola managed to disperse between the bottom terminal and the bus depot, so finding a seat wasn't an issue.

And the ride back to downtown *Himeji* gave plenty of time to muse on changing priorities and complete reversals of intentions.



We alighted at the castle at a quarter to four, so we had around fifteen minutes until the castle closes its doors.

Once you're in, of course, you have another hour to do the circuit, but we'd been there and (mostly) done that, so we contented ourselves with a couple of shots of the renovated castle and headed back towards the hotel.

But, having gathered the detail, we can expound a little on the history of *Japan's finest castle*, which was, at one point towards the end of the *1500s*, *the biggest castle in Asia*.

It's rated as the most impressive surviving example of prototypical castle architecture out of the dozen such structures that have survived into the twenty-first century.

The Studious Reader may have encountered references to the castle as *Shirasagijō (White Heron Castle)* or *Hakurojō (White Egret Castle)* thanks to a brilliant white exterior and a theoretical resemblance to a bird taking flight.

As the largest and most visited castle in the country, it was designated as a national treasure in *1931* and went onto the *World Cultural Heritage* list in *1993*.

Predictably, it features extensively in film and television productions where an *archetypical Japanese castle* is required. A partial list of places where *The Viewer* may have sighted the castle includes the *1967 James Bond You Only Live Twice*, Akira Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* and the *Shōgun* television miniseries.

The sprawling complex of eighty-three keeps, turrets, storehouses, gates and corridors, has a circumference of just over four kilometres, covers 233 hectares and measures between 900 and 1700 metres east-west and north-south.

It's fifty times as large as the *Tokyo Dome*, which, when you look at it, explains why they can fit sixty thousand people in there to view the *sakura* on a *Saturday*.

Of the eighty-plus buildings, no less than *seventy-four* (eleven corridors, sixteen turrets, fifteen gates, and thirty-two earthen walls) are designated *Important Cultural Assets*.

So, apart from the *sakura* in season, there's plenty to look at. It comes as no surprise to learn that it draws in over 820,000 visitors every year.

The castle's story goes as far back as *1333*, when *Akamatsu Norimura*, ruler of *Harima Province*, built a fort atop the 45-metre *Himeyama* hill.

His son *Sadonori* demolished that structure and built *Himeyama Castle* on the site in *1346*.



That incarnation lasted until **1545**, when the **Kuroda** clan took over the area.

Kuroda Shigetaka remodelled the existing structure into **Himeji Castle**, finishing the work in **1561**.

Kuroda Yoshitaka handed the castle over to **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** in 1580 and the new owner set about remodelling the castle, adding a three-story keep.

After the **Battle of Sekigahara** in **1600** **Tokugawa Ieyasu** awarded the castle to his son-in-law **Ikeda Terumasa**. The new proprietor demolished **Hideyoshi's** three-story keep and completely rebuilt the castle between **1601** and **1609**.

He added three defensive moats in an expansion program believed to have required *twenty-five million man-days*.

After **Ikeda** died in **1613**, the castle passed to his son.

When he passed on, **Honda Tadamasa** inherited the castle, and added several buildings to the complex in **1617** and **1618**, including a tower for his daughter-in-law, **Princess Sen**.

And that's more or less the way things stayed for the next four centuries, despite typhoons, the bombing of the surrounding in *World War Two*, and the *Great Hanshin Earthquake* in *1995*.

Over the years, *Himeji* was home to forty-eight successive lords until the *Meiji Restoration*.

Through the *Meiji Period*, the new government was in the business of ridding itself of relics from the feudal past, so many castles were sold off and destroyed.

Himeji Castle was abandoned when the feudal system was abolished in *1871*. When the site went up for auction a local resident bought it for the relative pittance. The buyer wanted to demolish the castle and develop the site, but demolition would have cost far more than he could afford.

So it's still there, and rates, along with the castles in *Matsumoto* and *Kumamoto* as one of *Japan's three premier castles*.

It has been renovated twice since the War, with work that started in *1956* requiring 250,000 man-days to complete at a cost of ¥550 million.





A recently completed five-year restoration set the authorities back *24 billion*.

After that little lot, the castle was reopened to the public on *27 March 2015*.

The work removed decades of dirt and grime from the exterior, restoring the roof to its original brilliant white colour.

It certainly looked much whiter.

But, all things considered, we decided to leave the interior for next time.

And there was a vital piece of research that needed to be carried out.

We hadn't noticed anything obvious as far as the eating options were concerned on the way to the hotel the night before.

Since we'd skipped lunch today, we were definitely in the market for a reasonably substantial dinner, but the question was *Where?*

So we took a side track just outside the station complex to scope out the dinner options.

There were plenty of them in the basement of the department store on the castle side of the station complex. It didn't take long to decide that the ***Beer Cafe*** looked to be the most likely prospect.

But it seemed just a tad early as far as eating was concerned, so we turned our steps towards the hotel.

Maybe it was the extra little bit of foot action, but almost as soon as we were back at the hotel. ***Madam*** decided she was hungry, so, after a quick turnaround, off we went again.

And maybe it was just as well.

For a start, we were seated in time to fit in two beers at happy hour prices.

A plate of skinny potato chips, a steak, something for ***Madam*** and a couple of items from ***a drink and nibble oriented menu*** mightn't have been a topic of homeward correspondence, but they did the job quite adequately.

We were out the door soon after seven, heading back for yet another early night before a relatively easy day on the morrow.

The Critical Reader might question the early night bit, but we had (according to the ***iPhone***) covered 9.45 kilometres and climbed the equivalent of 24 flights of stairs through the day.

On that basis, one might be entitled to plead leg weariness.

In any case, the judge's decision was final, and there wouldn't have been any time for correspondence between the time the door opened and the time ***Hughesy*** was pushing up Zs.



HIMEJI > KYOTO

Sunday, 25 October 2015

It was around 5:57 when I surfaced on a day that didn't offer much on the sightseeing front but had the prospect of significant socialising over an *Italian lunch* with *The Sister* and The Rowdy Niece.

We'd been late for the last rendezvous, so *Madam* wasn't taking any chances this time.

An eleven-forty-five appointment might permit some sort of sightseeing under other circumstances, but we had to get ourselves from *Himeji* to *Kōbe*.

That would be a good forty minutes now that the *Rail Pass* seven days were up and the *Shinkansen* had exited the equation.

And there was no choice about using a local service between **Kōbe** and the shopping centre at **Kitaguchi** where we were making the rendezvous. It's most of the way to **Osaka**, so there's a fair chunk of another hour.

After lunch, we were on the local services again on the way to **Kyoto**, where we'd be back on **WiFi** after being without connectivity for most of the last week.

No prizes for guessing what we'd be doing once we had it back.

So that ruled out sightseeing, now that we'd covered the major options in **Himeji**.

The first priority, however, was shedding **The Coppertone Container** from the goods and chattels, along with anything that wasn't strictly necessary for the next three days.

A courier service would be looking after delivery from the hotel in **Himeji** to **The Mother's** place on the outskirts of **Kōbe**.

We'll see it again, along with **B.B. The Blue Behemoth** around lunchtime on **Wednesday**.

We were slowed down a little when it turned out **Madam's** preferred breakfast option didn't open on **Sunday** but heading back to where we broke the fast on **Saturday** only lost a bit of extra walking time.

After checking out, things worked smoothly, and we looped through **Sannomiya** on the way to **Kitaguchi** without incident although one might have preferred to sit down along the way.

But standing probably comes with the territory unless you board a service at the point of origin.

We didn't, not at **Himeji**, and definitely not in **Sannomiya**, where there could have been an issue getting onto this particular train.

At the head of the queue, we would have been right for the next one, but we were determined to be early.

We ended up with a good forty minutes to kill once we'd disembarked and made our way into the **Ishinomiya Gardens** shopping centre at **Kitaguchi**.

I managed to kill most of it in **HMV Records**, while **Madam** browsed the bookshop next door, discovering once again that the stock on the shelves at **Japanese chain CD** stores throws up some interesting anomalies.

Multiple editions of Kevin Ayers albums in a clearly marked section of the shelves. Really?

Once the rendezvous had been made we were off to **an Italian restaurant**, following a winding route through the back streets.

Lunch wasn't the greatest version of *culinary Italiana* I've encountered, but the bottle of Aglicianico that arrived with it was rather good and washed away any sense of disappointment.

But in any case, these occasions aren't so much about food. They give two sisters a chance to catch up, and *Hughesy* gets an opportunity to indulge in a bit of teasing *The Rowdy Niece*.

Last time we were *in Japan*, she'd been a high school student with a fervid devotion to One Dimension, and now she's at University you might have expected a change.

Hughesy, however, had conflated the notion of sixties student radicalism with One Dimension fandom and posited the existence of *radical groups* out to destroy *Western hegemony* and replace it with *the dictatorship of the One Dimensional proletariat*.

Most of it flew over everyone else's heads, but I enjoyed it almost as much as floating the notion that *her next visit to Australia* would see The Rowdy Niece riding *The Savannahlander* to the wilds of *Einasleigh* and *Forsayth*.

All of which reinforced the notion of *Mad Uncle Hughesy*, who is, of course, *far madder than anyone else's mad uncle*.

We took ourselves back to the shopping centre after lunch for more of the same, and eventually headed our separate ways around three.

Getting to the right part of *Kyoto* from there was a two-stage process, with a change of trains.

Fortunately, the *Hankyu* station at *Shijo Karasuma* was a mere hundred metres from the *Daiwa Roynet* hotel, and we were safely checking out the email and Facebook backlogs by four.

After the substantial lunch, the old *Good Paddock Syndrome* saw notions of dinner go out the window. The best part of a litre of beer kept the *Hughesy* stomach filled and prevented any disturbing rumblings through the night.

All told, the result was nine hours of solid sleep and a significant recharging of the batteries.



KYOTO

Monday, 26 October 2015

It was around six when I surfaced and set about filling in the gaps in the *Travelogue*, which had mysteriously managed to acquire a two day gap since the last time it was fully up to date.

That gap wasn't entirely closed when I hurled by self at the plumbing around seven and wasn't going to be closed any further.

Not if we were going to reach *Kyoto's Number One Destination for Foreign Tourists* before the pack arrived.

And we needed breakfast, which *Madam* had pencilled in at a cafe not far from the railway station that would get us to *Inari station*, a short walk from *Funami Inari*, the *Shinto* shrine with the *thousand and one* wooden *torii* arches.

No, make that the *ten thousand and one torii* arches.

There are *forty thousand shrines* dedicated to *Inari*, the *Shinto* deity of rice and *saké*, *around Japan*, but this one, said to have been founded in the eighth century, is the head shrine of the *Inari* cult.

It sits at the foot of the 233 metre *Inariyama* hill in southwestern *Kyoto*, covers a substantial area and includes a four-kilometre maze of trails that lead up the mountain to smaller shrines dedicated to other deities.

It's a two-hour walk if you're inclined to cover the whole circuit.

As you head towards the upper reaches, you pass under thousands of red *torii* gateways presented to the shrine by devotees past hundreds of statues of foxes scattered across the landscape, many of them carrying the key to a rice granary in their mouths.





Foxes, in Japan, are regarded as sacred, generally helpful but mysterious figures, capable of bewitching humans (with the magic spell entering the victim's body under their fingernails).

On that basis, if you're superstitious it might be best to avoid Inari shrines around, or after, sundown. Of course, the late afternoon light will also impart an air of mystery, and it's just possible the crowds will have started to thin.

So, assuming you're up for it, a superstitious visitor might be inclined to encourage a friend to tag along.

Just to be on the safe side.

Foxes are also believed to be the messenger of *Inari*, who might have started looking after *rice*, *saké* and *plentiful harvests* but has morphed into the *patron of business and wealth*.



Merchants and manufacturers traditionally worshipped the deity.

A Japanese firm donated each of the ten thousand or so vermilion *torii* gates on the site.

Each *New Year* millions of worshippers (reputedly 2.69 million over three days in *2006*) pray at the shrine for good fortune in their commercial enterprises. The shrine's *Sangyo-sai* festival on *8 April* sees prayers, offerings and dances to ensure prosperity for industries across the nation.

It's one of *Kyoto's* oldest and most revered shrines and predates the relocation of the national capital to *Kyoto* in *794*. The shrine's earliest structures were built on the top of the hill by the local *Hata clan* in *711*, but the shrine was relocated to the current site at the foot of the mountain in *816*.

The shrine's main building (*go-honden*), built in *1499*, is comparatively recent.

When we made our way into the compound through the *Rōmon Gate*, donated to the shrine by leader *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* in *1589* there was already a decent crowd in the courtyard, so we didn't hang around long before we started on the ascent.

Making your way uphill along the *torii*-covered hiking trail comes with a substantial *wow factor* that expresses itself (at least it did in my case) in a repeated urge to stop and snap away with the camera.



On *Saturday* I'd remarked that it was probably just as well the *iPhone* had decided to spit the dummy the day before. The same considerations came into play here.

And, unlike *Saturday*, where the people were scattered across the countryside here, within the confines of the trail, there was a continuous stream of people headed up and down.

At one point, having reached a T-junction I spent a good five minutes waiting for a clear shot at one particular image that had caught the eye.

I wanted a clear run, without anyone in between the camera and the target, but it just didn't happen.

Fortunately, I gave up.



If pigheadedness had persisted, I'd probably still have been there in the witching hour with *foxy influences seeping in under the fingernails*.

And the flow continued through the morning. It actually seemed to be increasing when we made our way out of the temple precinct around three hours later.

That T-junction came just before the density of *torii* gates started a gradual decrease.

That really kicks in around the *Yotsutsuji* intersection about halfway up, where you can stop and enjoy a rather decent view across *Kyoto*, *Inari sushi* or *Kitsune Udon* (Fox Udon).

Both dishes feature fried *tofu*, so *Hughesy* was forced to have a cleansing ale instead.

From there, the trail forks into a circular route to the summit.

You don't actually *need* to go on from there, and many visitors don't.



But, assuming you're there to do the whole thing, the smart visitor will do the circuit travelling anticlockwise.

That way you get a relatively gentle climb to the top followed by some rather steep descents along rather impressive flights of stairs.

Climbing them is only recommended for those who are determined to ramp up their exercise quotient.

After the crowds we needed a bit of a break from people, and took ourselves for a walk through the side streets to *Tokofuji*, the *Zen* temple founded back in 1236 and the headquarters of the *Rinzai* sect's *Tofukuji* school.



If we'd headed a further mile or so north we'd have been back in, the middle of the crush at *Kiyomizudera*, which packs them in twelve hours a day, seven by fifty-two

If we'd arrived at *Tofukuji* a couple of weeks later the crowds would have been there, too.

The view from the platform over the ravine behind abbot's quarters (*hojo*), looking down on the *Tsūten-kyō* bridge is rated one of the most delightful views in a city that has more than its fair share of spectacular views.

It was evident, once we'd paid the admission and made our way onto the bridge across the gorge, that it was going to be a prime spot for autumn leaves once the colours of the *Momiji* (*Japanese maple*) leaves set in through mid- to late-*November*.

It was, as the evidence suggests, rather spectacular as it was, and thoroughly worth a visit at any time of year.



But you don't have to stretch the imagination too far to visualise what the man-made mini-valley in the ravine would be like when the green turns to red and gold.

At that point, of course, the hundred-metre walkway and the bridge *down there* would both be packed with visitors drawn from all over *Japan*.

The grounds are also noted for their hydrangea in summer.

The temple was founded in 1236 under the auspices of the *Fujiwara* clan's imperial chancellor *Kujō Michiie* (1193-1252).

The *Kamakura Period*'s great statesman wanted a temple to honour the soul of his late grandfather. He was after something that would match *Tōdaiji* and *Kōfukuji* in *Nara*, and named his project by taking the starting *kanji* character from one and the concluding *kanji* of the other.

The chancellor designated *En'ni Ben'nen* (1202-1280), who had studied in China under *Wuzhun Shifan* as the founding priest in 1243.



The construction work was completed in **1255**, but most of the buildings went up in flames in a succession of disastrous fires in **1319**, **1334**, and **1336**.

The temple was rebuilt from the original plans, and several structures remain from that time, with the *Butsu-den* (*Buddha hall*) completed in **1347**.

It was rebuilt again after another fire in the late *Meiji Period*.

The two-storey, twenty-two metre *Sanmon Gate* was also rebuilt soon after the fourteenth century fires. Completed in **1425** it is the oldest example of *Zen* gate architecture still standing and was designated *one of Japan's National Treasures* in **1952**.



It has seen some minor restoration work over the centuries, and an extensive refurbishment between **1969** and **1978** saw the structure taken apart, fixed, and reassembled at a cost of 2.5 million dollars.

Behind the gate, the *Hondo* (main hall) is larger but is a recent reconstruction.

Another blaze in **1881** destroyed the *Hojo* (Abbot's quarters), *Buddha hall*, *Hatto* (lecture hall) and *Kuri*.

The *Hojo* was reconstructed in **1890**, with new gardens laid out by *Mirei Shigemori* in **1939**, while the *Kuri* was rebuilt in **1910**. Work on the the *Hondo*, which doubles as *Butsuden* and *Hatto* commenced in **1917** and was finally completed in **1934**.

The other temple buildings that surround those two structures, the *Zendo* (meditation hall), *Yokushitsu* (bathing room), *Tosu* (lavatory) and *Shoro* (belfry) are also survivors from the early *Muromachi period* and are rare examples of *Zen architecture* from the era.

The complex also includes a number of sub-temples,

There are currently two dozen of them though in there have been as many as fifty-three.

But we were there for the gardens, particularly the ***Zen sand gardens*** and the valley that runs up to the up to the ***Kaisando*** (founder's hall, the mausoleum of the first head priest).

A small stream, (***Sengyokukan***) runs through the valley, spanned by three bridges.

They're the focus of attention when the autumn leaves to draw the crowds in.





The most famous of the three, *Tsūten-kyō*, features in a *ukiyo*e by the artist *Hiroshige* now [held in the Library of Congress](#).

While much of the complex is accessible for free including the areas around some of the largest, most impressive buildings, you'll have to pay to access the main attractions.

It'll cost you ¥400 to enter the *Hojo* and surrounding gardens and the *Tsutenkyo Bridge* and *Kaisando Hall* will set you back another 400, but both are worth the relatively modest admission fee.

Rock gardens alongside a temple's *Hojo* (are relatively common, but here the gardens surround the building on all four sides.

The gardens take their names from the cardinal points.

Each has its own character and design, featuring pebbles, large rocks, moss, trees and checkered patterns.

The *karesansui* gardens are relatively modern creations designed by landscape architect *Mirei Shigemori* in the late *1930s*.



They are rated as excellent examples of *contemporary Japanese garden design*, blending the simplicity of *Kamakura Period Zen* with modern elements and abstract shapes in the moss and gravel.

The eastern garden, representing the *Hokutō Shichisei* (the seven stars of Ursa Major) has seven cylindrical rocks previously used in the foundations of some of *Tofukuji's* buildings.

In contrast, the *Kaisando* and its gardens are more traditional and were last reconstructed during the *Edo Period*.

As one of the *Kyoto Gozan* or *great Zen temples of Kyoto*, *Tofukuji* ranks beside *Kenninji*, *Manjuji*, *Nanzenji*, *Shokokuji*, and *Tenryuji* in the *Kyoto* version of the *Five Mountain System*.



The Observant Reader, having done a quick count, will have been muttering about six names on the list, but *Nanzenji* sits in a separate classification to its supposed peers.

Opening times vary through the year (9:00 to 16:30 from *April* to *October*, 8:30 to 16:30 pm in *November* and early *December*, and 9:00 to 16:00 from late *December* through to the end of *March*).

Although we only spent a fraction of the time at Tofuku-ji, both of us enjoyed it as much, if not more than the considerably longer visit to *Funami Inari*.

Outside, the fundamental question involved how to get ourselves across to *Kyoto Station*.

It didn't look that far on the map, or that complicated, but the network of alleys and backstreets and some construction work combined to throw the navigator off course.

With the benefit of hindsight, of course, we should have taken ourselves back to the station and caught a train.



Later on, we realised there was a subway option as well, which just underlines the complexities of navigating in an environment where several layers of transport intersect.

Still, we reached the station eventually and descended to the subway for a two stop trip that brought us back to ***Shijo Karasuma*** and a late lunch.

Looking at the quantities on ***Someone***'s plate made me a little dubious about the dinner prospects, but the fact that she demolished the lot underlined reports that ***Someone*** was feeling very hungry.

By contrast, my plate of *spaghetti Napoletana* was enough to fend off hunger pangs for a while, but there was still room for something later.

And with lunch out of the way, we took a walk back to the hotel for a bit of a break.

Still, I wasn't feeling overly hopeful when we sat down to discuss the options for dinner.

Predictably, ***Someone*** wasn't up for a meal as such, just something to nibble on over a glass of wine.

A careful perusal of *tapas* type options revealed a wine bar called ***Deux Cochons***, which attracted good reviews and looked to be a perfectly viable option.

Getting there involved a bit of a hike, but that would help work up an appetite.

We arrived to find the place almost deserted, but you'd put that down to the relatively early hour.



We worked our way through a *Sauvignon Blanc* from the *Loire*, a *Cotes du Rhone* blend of *Viognier* and *Roussanne*, salami and prosciutto, a *Gamay Chaudenay*, which *Hughesy* misread as *Chardonnay*, vongole in white wine., a lamb and tomato dish, a *Carignan Grenache* blend and a *Cabernet Franc*.

Not bad, when you take *Good Paddock Syndrome* into account, and I'm definitely in for a return visit.

The walk back to the hotel took the day's tally to a rather impressive 17.85 kilometres (according to the *iPhone*) with a substantial up and down element in the form of 53 flights of stairs.

No wonder we were both able to handle a couple of substantial meals, and, of course, someone was pushing up Zs rather soon after the return to base.



KYOTO > KOBE

Tuesday, 27 October 2015

Having made three previous trips to the *Land of the Rising Sun*, one tends to settle into a routine around the beginnings and ends of trips, and we've found ourselves with a fairly simple itinerary as we come to the tail end of the journey.

The day before an evening departure could be reasonably categorised as *Back to Kōbe Day*, but that's an afternoon activity, so the morning was free.

These matters had been looked at well before we left *Australia*.

The *Kyoto* accommodation tends to fit in with the last day's morning activity (you don't want to go too far afield), and that needs to tie in with relatively easy access to the transport network that will end up delivering us back to *Sannomiya*.

So we needed something close at hand that would fill in a morning, follow it with a decent lunch if we're not catching up with anyone in *Kōbe*, and then do the *Kyoto > Osaka > Kōbe* train leg.



Nijojo looked to be just the ticket to fill the bill.

Being in *Kyoto*, of course, one expects crowds, and, therefore, plans for an early departure but various issues saw us checking out about half an hour later than we would have liked.

By the time we arrived outside the castle, the tour buses were lining up to disgorge their tour groups.

It was a significant contrast to the quiet back streets along the way.

Breakfast needed to be fitted in along the line and came in the form of pastries bought from *a neighbourhood bakery* and consumed sitting down rather than on the move.



The castle consists of two concentric rings of defensive stone walls, the *Ninomaru Palace* and the ruins of the *Honmaru Palace* along with various support buildings and several gardens.

It covers 27.5 hectares, with 8000 square metres of buildings.

It is one of seventeen *Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto* designated by *UNESCO* as a *World Heritage Site*.

They might call it *Nijo Castle*, and classify it as a *hirajiro* (plains, rather than *hilltop*, *castle*) but the complex we were here to see was *more palace than fortification* and a relatively under-utilised one at that.

We've run across places with a link to the *Battle of Sekigahara* at various points over the past week, and here we were again at a location that relates to the victory that ushered in the *Tokugawa Shōgunate*.

Tokugawa Ieyasu's ally *Oda Nobunaga* started work on a castle on the site back in 1569, and with the *Tokugawa* ascendancy, the new overlord wanted something to demonstrate his dominance.

With the *Shōgunate* based in *Edo* (*Tokyo*), the *Shōgun* naturally spent the majority of his time there but needed an official residence and reception area during his visits to *Kyoto*.

He also seems to have wanted something *to remind the Emperor where the power and authority actually sat*.

That, one often reads, explains the opulence that went into *Nijojo's Ninomaru Palace*.

It seems to have gone a little beyond *not-too-subtle reminders about the pecking order*.

The victorious *Ieyasu* assigned the *daimyō of Western Japan* to start work on the site of *Oda Nobunaga's Nijō* palace in 1601. The work took twenty-three years and was completed during the reign of *Ieyasu's* grandson *Tokugawa Iemitsu*, with the *daimyō* footing the bill.

Nijojo was never attacked and, indeed, was rarely visited by the ruling Shōgun.

Ieyasu made three visits to the castle and used it as his headquarters during the *Siege of Osaka*, which destroyed the *Toyotomi* clan and wiped out the last significant resistance to the *Shōgunate*.





Iemitsu visited the castle twice and made substantial modifications from **1624** to **1626**.

He ordered the removal of the original five-storey *tenshu* (central tower), which went to *Yodo castle*, with the *tenshu* from *Fushimi Castle*, along with a few other odds and ends from the same location, taking its place.

Much of the work tied in with *Emperor Gomizuno's* visit to *Nijojo*, which seems to have been more *command performance* than *social call*.

Iemitsu and his father, former *Shōgun Tokugawa Hidetada* were still consolidating the pecking order.

Forcing the *Emperor* to leave his palace for the first time since **1588** served to signify the submission of the *Imperial family* to *Tokugawa* authority.

The five-day visit in *September 1626* was a lavish affair, with elaborate entertainments and sumptuous meals.

Iemitsu was back in *Kyoto* eight years later with a force of three hundred thousand men to remind the western provinces, and the *Imperial Court* who was in charge. It must have worked because it was another two hundred and thirty years before a *Shōgun* set foot in the place again.

Ironically, another royal visit, from *Emperor Meiji* in **1867**, saw the last *Tokugawa Shōgun* resign

Still, although he was going to spend most of his time elsewhere, the cautious *Shōgun* was disinclined to take chances with his personal security.

The *Ninomaru Palace*'s buildings were connected by corridors with creaking floors (*uguisubari*) as security against intruders, sneak attacks and assassins.

The floor was suspended above the building's framework, held in place by special iron clamps so it would move up and down when someone walked across them. The movement underfoot produced a tell-tale sound said to resemble the song of a nightingale.

The distinctive sound is different to the creaking you would hear in an older houses, so the security detail would not be able to dismiss the noise with a *forget it, it's just the building*.

All the floors, from the entrance to the *Ohiroma*, the *Shōgun's audience chamber*, have this built-in security feature. Concealed chambers and hidden alcoves allowed bodyguards to monitor proceedings, and the *Shōgun's* living quarters were a restricted area staffed by female attendants.

While the *Shōguns* were conspicuous by their absence, the castle served as the headquarters of their man on the ground, the *Shoshidai* (*Governor of Kyoto*), who was responsible for monitoring the thirty-three western provinces under his control.

That was his official job description, but the governor's real function was to keep the *Imperial family* under control and prevent them from interfering in national politics.

Members of the court had to apply at *Nijōjo* for permission to leave central *Kyoto*, where they were otherwise obliged to live.

So while the military government operated out of *Edo*, the castle remained an important centre of power. Hiring the finest artists to fill the premises with sumptuous golden screens, elegantly decorated ceilings and beautifully painted *fusuma* (sliding doors) in the best *Momoyama style* reminded an increasingly impoverished emperor, his court and hangers-on, and the *daimyō* of the western provinces who had paid for it, where the real power lay.

The castle fell into disuse after the **1626 Imperial visit**, with many of its buildings and structures donated to local temples.

An earthquake took its toll on what was left in **1663**; the five-storey keep was destroyed by lightning in **August 1750**, and most of the *Honmaru* compound went up in flames in **January 1788**.

That part of the castle remained empty until a princely residence was transferred from the *Imperial Palace* in **1893**.

With *Tokugawa Iemochi* turning his attention back towards *Kyoto* in the early *1860s*, the *Ninomaru Palace* got some maintenance and restoration work before the *Shōgun* entered the city in *1863*.

He stayed, and his successor, the fifteenth *Tokugawa Shōgun*, was installed in the castle's grounds in *1866*.

He didn't last long. In *October 1867* representatives of forty clans gathered in the *Ninomaru Palace* to hear *Tokugawa Yoshinobu* announce the *Taisei hokan* (*restoration of imperial rule*).

January 1868 saw the *Dajokandai* (*central government*) take up residence in the palace, which became the seat of the *Kyoto* prefectural government in *1871*.

The castle was renamed *Nijo Rikyu* (*Nijo Imperial Villa*) in *July 1884*,

The vacant space formerly occupied by the *Honmaru Palace* was filled when *Katsuranomiya Palace* was relocated from the grounds of the *Imperial Palace* as a home for *Prince Katsura* and rebadged as today's *Honmaru* in *1893*.





Four years later the *Ninomaru Palace* was given a makeover while the *Minamimon Gate* was added in **1915** in conjunction with the coronation of the *Emperor Taisho*.

Ownership was transferred to the *City of Kyoto* in **1939**, and the castle was opened to the general public in **February 1940** as *Onshi Nijo Castle*.

As one of the best surviving examples of *feudal Japanese castle architecture*, *Nijojo* went onto the *UNESCO World Heritage List* in **1994**.

When you arrive on the doorstep, you're looking at two concentric rings of castle walls, each with its own moat.

There are three gates in the outer wall, with the **East Gate** serving as the primary point of entry, and two in the inner wall, which contains the **Honmaru Palace**, its garden and the foundations of the five-storey keep that burned down in **1750**.

Ninomaru Palace, along with the kitchens, guard house, several gardens and groves of cherry and **Japanese plum trees**, sits between the two rings of fortifications.

We made our way into the Castle, along with the predictable crocodiles of tour groups being disgorged from a steady stream of coaches, through the **Higashi Otemon** (*East Gate*).

The tour groups take a while to organise themselves, so there wasn't too much congestion as we made our way around to the left, where the ornately carved **Karamon Gate** takes you into a courtyard in front of the **Mikurumayose** (*Carriage House*), the entrance to the castle's main attraction.

The five buildings that make up the 3300 square metre **Ninomaru** (*Second Palace*) are built almost entirely of **Hinoki** cypress and date back to the original **17th century** construction work.

The five are staggered along a curved northwesterly line, connected by covered corridors with thirty-three rooms, around eight hundred *tatami* mats and elegantly decorated ceilings.

You enter through the **Kurumayose** (*entranceway*), passing through the **Tozamurainoma** (*Samurai Hall*), effectively the guard house and waiting room for **daimyō** visiting the castle.

There are several chambers, which were related to the visitor's status including the **Chokushinoma** (*Imperial Messenger's Chamber*), **Yanaginoma** (*Willow Room*) and **Wakamatsunoma** (*Young Pine Room*).

Sliding screen doors (*fusuma*) allowed the rooms to be reconfigured and rearranged as necessary.

Once the incoming visitors had been sorted, they might have progressed further, to the **Shikidainoma** (*Reception Hall*) with three chambers where the visiting **Shōgun** might greet members of his council of elders and accept gifts.

The next building, the **Ohiroma Yonnoma**, has four main rooms as well as the **Mushakakushinoma** (*Bodyguards' Chamber*), **Sotetsunoma** (*Fern-palm chamber*) and the audience hall where the **Shōgun** would meet with visiting **daimyō**. It has spectacular screen paintings by **Kano Tanyu** and was the room where the fifteenth **Tokugawa Shōgun**, **Yoshinobu** announced the restoration of imperial rule.

One of the chambers became audience seating for a **Noh** stage built in the garden for **Emperor Gomizunoo's** visit in 1626.

Next comes the **Kuroshoin** study where the Shōgun could meet **daimyō** from feudal domains that belonged to the **Tokugawa clan** or one of the family's long-term (pre-**Battle of Sekigahara**) supporters.

It's a small room, elaborately decorated with black lacquer and sliding doors with pictures of birds painted by *Kano Tanyu's* younger brother, *Naonobu*.

Finally, the modern day visitor makes his way into the *Shiroshoin*, which contained the *Shōgun's* private apartments, his living room and bedroom with paintings of landscapes, lakes, and mountains with a snowscape mural by *Kano Koi* showing sleeping sparrows in a bamboo grove.

The Astute Reader will, of course, have picked up one significant point.

Back in the day, you and I wouldn't have gotten anywhere near this far into the palace complex. There's a definite progression involved.

The only visitors permitted to progress beyond the *Reception Hall* were high-ranking individuals, and how far anyone proceeded from there was directly related to how close they were to the *Tokugawa*.

The highest ranked non-*Tokugawa* visitors would have been ushered into the main audience hall where the *Shōgun* or his representative sat on an elevated floor, flanked by bodyguards.

Lower ranked visitors got as far as the adjoining rooms without direct access to the main hall.

There's also a fairly obvious restriction on photography and a determination to keep *Important Cultural Properties* safe.

The screen paintings and such you see on your way through *Ninomaru* are replicas. The original screens can be viewed in a separate gallery to the north of the *East Gate*.

But it's totally obvious what was going on here.

The lavish decorations, the gold leaf and elaborate wood carvings are there to underline the power and wealth of the *Tokugawa Shōguns* and to amaze and to impress visitors.

Still, having seen palaces that set out to perform the same function in *Europe*, here there's an understated elegance and a refreshing degree of flexibility.

Having made our way through the first complex in the *Second Palace* we looped back around the outside, stopping for a short shopping interlude.

After *Madam* had done the rounds of the stalls and I had been inveigled into a *saké* tasting, we headed onto the path through the *Ninomaru Garden*.

We were on our way to the inner defensive wall that encloses the *Honmaru Palace* and the ruins of the five-storey keep destroyed by lightning in *1750* but took our time getting there.

The garden design was the work of landscape architect and tea master *Kobori Enshu (1579-1647)*, a seminal figure in *Japanese garden design*.



The garden contains a large pond with three islands, topiary manicured pine trees and carefully placed ornamental stones.

The grounds were formerly treeless since falling autumn leaves are said to have reminded the *Shōgun* and his *samurai* warriors of the transience of life.

It's rated as *one of the most beautiful traditional gardens in Japan*.

The palace that originally stood inside the two-hectare *Honmaru* (main circle of defence) enclosure was very similar to the *Ninomaru Palace*, with a five storey castle keep tucked into the southwest corner of the enclosed space.

Both went up in flames in the *18th century*, and neither was rebuilt.

But there's a structure in there now, the former residence of *Prince Katsura* relocated from inside the *Imperial Palace* compound to this site from *1893* to *1894* and renamed.

In the original location, the palace had fifty-five buildings, but most of them remained *in situ*.



Unlike *Ninomaru*, the *Honmaru* is only open to the public on special occasions, although visitors are quite welcome to walk around the gardens and climb the stone foundation of the former castle keep for views over the castle grounds.

The original five-storey *tenshu* (keep) on the site was relocated during the **1624-26** renovations, and replaced by the *tenshu* from *Fushimi Castle*.

Around it, in the lead-up to the **1626 Imperial visit**, the compound was expanded with buildings for guests added, including accommodation for the *Emperor*.

After that, however, with the *Shōgun*'s attention focussed elsewhere and with the immediate agenda accomplished the area went into decline.



Earthquakes, fire, lightning strikes and donations of its buildings to other locations within **Kyoto** gradually emptied the grounds, which were virtually empty when the Imperial family set about relocating **Prince Katsura's** residence.

That job meant the rest of the enclosure needed landscaping, and the result makes for a pleasant stroll, even if you can't enter the palace building.

We exited through the **western gate**, crossed the bridge and looped around to the north on the way back to the main entrance through the most recent addition to the castle compound.

The **half-Japanese, half-Western-style Seiryūen** garden was constructed in **1965** in the northern section of the outer compound as a facility for tea ceremonies, civic receptions and a venue for cultural events.

Seiryūen has two tea houses and over a thousand carefully arranged stones.



Tree-lined paths within the outer walls include hundreds of maple, *ginkgo* and other trees that offer brilliant autumn colours through the second half of **November** and hundreds of late-blooming cherry trees that mean the *sakura* season at **Nijojo** usually lasts from late **March** right through **April**.

There's also a plum orchard, which kicks off the springtime colour from the end of **February** to early **March**.

Combine the historic **Ninomaru**, the landscaped grounds and gardens, autumn leaves and springtime *sakura* and it's obvious why **Nijo Castle** is one of **Kyoto**'s major tourist attractions.

If we'd been inclined, we could have turned southwards after we exited the castle grounds and made our way to **Nijo Jinya**, formerly the home of a wealthy rice merchant and subsequently used as an inn by visiting *daimyō* looking for accommodation close to **Ninomaru**.



To guarantee the safety of distinguished guests who might be the targets of an assassination attempt, the building was fitted with a variety of avenues for guests to escape or hide and a plethora of disguised staircases, trapdoors, false walls and ceilings, escape hatches and *nightingale floors*.

These days it's a private house owned by the **Ogawa** family, designated as a public cultural asset in **1944**.

If you book, it's possible to have a **Japanese-language one-hour tour** conducted by a family member or by a tour guide. [Their website](#) has a facility for foreigners to arrange for an interpreter.

But we hadn't booked, so **Nijo Jinya** will be one for next time.

In any case, it was getting close to lunch time, and **Madam** had booked us a table at a highly-rated **French restaurant** that was close at hand.

Leaving the castle grounds we headed eastwards rather than south, found ourselves on the wrong street and made

inquiries.

As you do when you're lost.

But even when we'd found our way onto the right street the restaurant wasn't easy to find.

It's not easy to find on the *English language side of the Net* either, and it took a fair bit of subsequent searching to pin it down on **Google Maps**.

Still, at lunch on a **Tuesday**, the place was almost full.

It wasn't difficult to see why.

Given a choice of two set menus, **Madam** went for the smaller A and pointed me towards the slightly larger four course B.

She opted for a glass of white, which was obviously **Chardonnay**, but my glass of red threw me.

Given the multiplicity of appellations, varieties and other complications there are significant gaps in my knowledge of **French** and other *European wines*.

There was something familiar about the red that I couldn't quite place.

When we asked, it turned out to be **Montepulciano de Abbruzzi**. Hence, I guess, the familiarity and inability to line it up with something **French**.

It took a while for the first glass to arrive, which was just as well since it wouldn't have gone with the entree, a trio of seafood-based mouthfuls.

It mightn't have been a great match for the sweet potato soup, either, but by the time the salad had been and gone, so was the glass.

Ordering another brought the information about the identity, and it arrived almost simultaneously with the main, which was obviously wagyu with a smattering of trimmings.

I took an evaluatory mouthful of dessert, and followed it with another so **Madam** would only have to eat a bit over one and a half of them. *Creme brûlée* isn't my thing.

But it was obviously an excellent *creme brûlée*, in line with the standard of everything else that crossed the table.

Quantities were just right, and neither of us needed much topping up later in the day.

From there we headed back to collect the luggage, with a couple of diversions along the way.

The first was another temple where there's a discrepancy between the official name and the one everyone uses.



Located just south of **Karasuma-Oike Station**, right in the very centre of downtown **Kyoto**, the temple is officially known as **Shiunzan Chōhōji**, but the hexagonal shape of the **Hondo** has prompted the nickname **Rokkakudō**.

The temple's most significant claim to fame lies in its status as the birthplace of the art of **ikebana** (flower arranging) and a hexagonal stone known as the *navel stone* south of the main temple is said to mark the centre of **Kyoto**.

It's also the eighteenth temple on the **Saigōku 33 Temple Pilgrimage**.

But, like most such structures it comes with its share of stories and legends.

For a start, it's believed to be older than the city that surrounds it today, which would seem to sit comfortably with that notion of a navel stone.

Traditionally, the foundation date for the temple is given as 587, when **Shotoku Taishi** (*Prince Regent Shotoku*) visited the area looking for suitable timber to build **Shitennoji** temple in **Osaka**.

According to legend, when the prince was a child he found a small **Chinese** chest that had floated ashore on **Awaji Island**. Inside he found a 5.5 cm gold image of the **Nyoirin Kannon** (our old friend the **Bodhisattva of Mercy**), which he decided to keep as an amulet.

In his prayers to the **Kannon** for success in his future endeavours, he promised to build **Shitennoji** temple if things worked out the way he hoped.

They did, and his quest to pursue those obligations brought him to a pool on a scorching day.

Needing to cool off, he decided to take a swim, stripped off his clothes and placed the amulet beside them.

When he dressed after his bath, he went to put the **Nyoirin Kannon** back in his pocket but, for some reason, it had become too heavy to pick up.

Since he wasn't going anywhere without the amulet, he decided to stay put overnight and see how things panned out in the morning. It had, I guess, been a long hot day.

Then, while he slept, **Nyoirin Kannon** appeared in a dream, announcing a desire to remain in this location enshrined in a six-sided temple where people could come to be healed.

So, predictably, **Prince Shotoku** built the **Hondo** and enshrined his **Nyoirin Kannon** amulet within it.



And, since the temple already existed when the decision to relocate the capital from *Nara* in *794*, it probably made sense to build the new capital around the site.

The status as the birthplace of *ikebana* stems from the floral offerings the temple's *Buddhist priests* made at the altar each morning and evening.

The priests lived near the pond (the *Japanese* for *pond* is *ike*) in a small hut (*bo*), so the locals referred to them as *Ikenobo* with the artistic manner in which they arranged their floral offerings being labelled *ikebana*.

So the temple grounds feature several monuments to the birthplace of *ikebana* and a building north-west of the temple on *Karasuma Dori* serves as the headquarters of contemporary *ikebana*. It's the location for the *Ikenobo Ikebana Spring Exhibition* held in *April* each year.



Rokkakudō also played a role in the foundation of the *Jōdo Shinshū* sect of *Buddhism* after the movement's founder *Shinran Shonin* spent a one hundred day retreat there after coming down from *Mount Hiei's Enryakuji* Temple in *1201*.

He was on the ninety-fifth day of seclusion when *Prince Shōtoku*, who had come to be regarded as an incarnation of *Avalokiteśvara*, the *Bodhisattva* said to embody the compassion of all *Buddhas*, appeared to him in a dream.

The *Bodhisattva* directed him to forego his vow of celibacy, marry, seek out a monk named *Hōnen* and found a new sect of *Buddhism* based on clerical marriage and family life. There are two statues of *Shinran* at *Rokkakudo*, one seated in a dreamlike trance and the other standing with a walking staff and beads.

And while the temple goes way back, the structures you see at *Rokkakudo* today are relatively recent, dating from a *Meiji Period* reconstruction in the *1870s*.

The compact temple grounds include large stone lanterns, willow trees, a couple of *Shinto* shrines and a reconstruction *Shotoku Taishi's* pond with *koi* carp swimming in the water.

The bibbed statues lined up outside the *Ikenobo* Headquarters are *Jizou*, the *Bodhisattva* said to look after children who have died.

We didn't spend that long at *Rokkakudo* because there's not a lot there, and, in any case, the real objective lay a little further along the street.





Running between *Teramachi* and *Shinmachi*, a block north of *Shijo*, *Nishiki Market (Nishiki Ichiba)* is a longish, narrow, five block four hundred metre *shotengai* (shopping street) that specialises in food-related products. It's *Kyoto's* largest traditional food market with more than a hundred shops and restaurants, *Kyoto's Kitchen* and the place to go for seasonal foods and regional specialities.

On that basis, it comes as no surprise to find the market pencilled into the itinerary at this point. It was more or less on the road back from *Nijojo* to the hotel though a slight diversion was necessary.

More significantly, for *Someone*, with the train trip back to *Kōbe* as the next item on the agenda, she wasn't going to carry whatever she's stocked up on very far.

Under the circumstances, when *Someone* has a shopping list, *Hughesy's* job is to tag along and not get in the way too much.

That's a little tricky when you look at the crowds than are bustling up and down the arcade, but it means I didn't have a lot of scope to investigate or pursue my own agenda. I'm not that big on *Japanese speciality foodstuffs*, and what might pique my interest probably won't be on *Madam's* shopping list.

And time was, after all, limited.

And some things were out of the question.

Regardless of *Hughesy's biases* and *Madam's* tastes, fresh produce, particularly fresh seafood was out of the question as far as we were concerned.

It's a great place to find seasonal foods and *Kyoto* specialties that would tickle *The Mother's* fancy.

But fresh seafood is for today or this evening or tomorrow morning at the very latest, so *Someone's* focus here was always going to be on sweets, pickles, dried and preserved items, most of which would be lugged back to *The Little House of Concrete* rather than seafood and *sushi*.

The stores along the way range in size from narrow stalls to two storey shops but most specialise in a particular item, and almost everything is locally produced or sourced.

The operation started as a wholesale fish market as far back as **1310**, and many of the businesses have been operated by the same family for generations.

Over the centuries, the focus has changed from wholesale to retail, and from fish to food in general. While souvenir shops and other non-foodie operations are starting to infiltrate the focus is still on ingredients for traditional *Kyoto* cuisine: *tsukemono* (pickles), *Kyoyasai* (*Kyoto* vegetables), *wagashi* (sweets), tea, *tofu* and fresh fish and shellfish.

If you're after takeaway tucker, there are stalls selling *yakitori* skewers or *sashimi*.

But it was just after lunch so we weren't in the market for either.

We weren't in the market for hand-crafted knives either, although I did stop for a glance at *Aritsugu*, founded by swordsmith *Aritsugu Fujiwara* in 1560.

And, with a bit more time, I might have been tempted by *Dintora's Japanese spices* or *Mochiyaki Sembei's* fiery red *chili* pepper *osembei* (rice crackers).

But under the circumstances, I was better off just tagging along and trying to keep out of everyone's way, which wasn't as easy or straightforward as it sounds while *Madam* stocked up on gifts and items to lug all the way back to *Bowen*.

And when she was done, we beetled back to the hotel, collected the luggage, and made for the subway. It was a two-stop trip to *Kyoto Station*, where the plan was to switch to JR because there'd be a better chance of getting a seat.

While we were out of rail pass territory, there were still cheap ticket options.

Madam set off to find an outlet that offered reduced fares, and with the luggage in tow,

Hughesy was directed to wait in an out of the way position just outside the JR gates.

That was fine, and provided an opportunity for people watching, although that started to pall after awhile. I thought about going over to look at a map over towards the middle of the thoroughfare but decided against it.

I'd probably be getting in the way of someone who was in a hurry.

So I waited..

Madam returned with tickets, and we made our way onto platform to find large queues.

After we'd attached ourselves to the end of a line, when the train arrived, it was almost chocker.

Still, we managed to squeeze on.

I was standing, minding my own business as the train pulled out of the station when an elderly gentleman grabbed the jump seat behind him and indicated that I should do the same.

So I got to sit all the way from **Kyoto** to **ShinOsaka**, where the crowd thinned a tad, and onto **Osaka**, where the train emptied and **Kōbe**-bound passengers could claim a pair of regular seats.

Once we alighted at **Sannomiya**, we weren't quite done with the shopping, though most of the unfinished business could wait until tomorrow.

What couldn't involved overnight supplies, which were minimal and mainly wine-based.

On other trips, the final night in **Kōbe** has been an eat out and meet up with people affair, and we'd booked ourselves into a reasonably swish hotel close to the downtown dining districts, somewhere that was either walkable or had a half-hourly shuttle bus or similar operation in place.

This time, there meeting up for dinner agenda wasn't an issue, so we were staying out on **Port Island** in the **Portopia Hotel**.

There was, predictably, a shuttle bus operation. There had to be. Otherwise, we would have had issues getting there, but we wouldn't be doing a *back in and back out* for dinner.

Which was part of the logic behind the **French restaurant** lunch.

Madam wouldn't need anything much, **Hughesy** would be quite happy with wine and nibbles, and we could probably manage an early night in congenial surroundings that would deliver a hefty chunk of solid snooze.

So I needed wine and nibbles, and found the first in a familiar bottle shop outside the equally familiar gourmet section of a **Sannomiya** department store.

I was flying almost blind in an area where the only things I was familiar with were items I wasn't going to be purchasing, and wasn't going to be making lengthy deliberations.

A *2012 Gamay Noir* from *Burgundy* ticked a couple of boxes and looked to fit the bill reasonably well.

Since *Madam* didn't need anything in the food department, and, realistically, neither did I, the quantity of bread and cheese we ended up buying was probably just a tad over the top.

But it's better to be safe than sorry where replenishments involve a twenty-minute shuttle bus ride there and back, or, alternatively, expensive room service or dine on the premises options.

Neither of us saw any value in that.

Armed with the evening's provisions we reached the bus stand in time to see the *Portopia* shuttle pulling out of the parking bay, but it was only a twenty-minute wait until the next one.

And, when it arrived, another twenty minutes saw us out at a reasonably swish and sprawling hotel complex that would have to be the largest operation of its kind I've ever encountered.





Check [the website](#) and you'll find a complex with around seven hundred and fifty guest rooms, three dozen banquet and meeting rooms, the 1,702-seat *Portopia Hall*, and no less than thirteen different restaurants and bars.

And they had us booked into the *South Wing*, which almost involved *a compass and cut lunch job* just to get to the elevator.

Upstairs, on the *14th floor*, we encountered what was possibly the largest hotel room we've met anywhere. And a scenic view of the nearby *Ikea* store.

If we'd been on the other side of the building, we'd have had views across to the city or out over *Osaka Bay*, but would probably have been paying significantly more for them.

But that was fine.

All that I needed was wine and an easy night.

Which I managed comfortably after a spell of *Travelogue* tapping, a bit more reading and the odd *Sudoku*.



KOBE > KANSAI INTERNATIONAL

Wednesday, 28 October 2015

And if parts of yesterday were relatively routine, the last day of the trip slots into a rhythm that's almost entirely predictable.

After we've done the ritual visit to the ***Viking*** breakfast, everything else fits the same pattern as it did last time and the time before. That, at least, is the intention, and any variation is likely to be the result of a nasty surprise.

And we're not in the market for nasty surprises, thank you very much.

Anyone inclined to question ***Hughesy***'s assessment of the Portopia as the largest hotel I've encountered should take heed of the range of breakfast options on the premises.

There were three buffet arrangements to choose from, and there may well have been other possibilities around the place.

Madam could have opted for the *Japanese breakfast* in [*Kōbe Temura*](#) and left me to a *Viking*. But that, of course, would involve setting *Hughesy* free in an unfamiliar environment.

So scratch the *seasonal Japanese option*.

On the *Viking* side of things, there were two possibilities.

The *Italian-themed Dining Cafe SOCO* might, given *Hughesy's* Italian-flavoured tastes, have seemed a logical likelihood but it sits down on the second floor.

But why confine yourself to the lower levels when the alternative is the [*Sky Lounge Plein d' Etoiles*](#) up on the 30th floor with panoramic views, a full range of *Western options* and a variety of *Japanese dishes*.

And, with not much on the morning agenda, when we made our way up there, fashionably late, we were able to snaffle a window-side table with excellent views across the bay to *Kōbe* and the mountains beyond.





If we'd been on the other side, we'd have caught the morning sun and the activity in and around *Port Island* and *Kōbe Airport*.

Since we weren't anticipating lunch, I took the regulation three goes at the *Viking*.

The first delivers the bulk so that you won't be feeling peckish for a while.

The second fills in the gaps with delicacies like a freshly made omelette, while the third, the pastries and coffee, is there to round things off nicely.

After that little lot, *Hughesy* wouldn't be needing lunch.

We headed back to the room, and since we had an eleven o'clock checkout, there was plenty of time to bring the *Travelogue* notes more or less up to date and scroll back to add extra detail.

Just after eleven we were checked out and on the bus back to *Sannomiya*, where it was time for *Someone* to start the serious shopping.

Everything up to this point was something we had to lug around with us.

From here it was a subway ride, a taxi and an *airport shuttle*.

So the first stop was a rice store near the hotel where we'd spent the first night of the trip.

Madam bought rice, and **Hughesy** sat in the courtyard outside the **Library** tackling a **Sudoku** and then watching pigeons fighting over what may have been scraps of a potato chip.

It made for moderately entertaining viewing until an intruder frightened them off just before **Someone** returned.

From there we took the subway out to the wilds of suburban **Myodani**, where an enclosed shopping centre kept the pigeon quotient down to zero.

That meant I had no choice but to sit and read while **Madam** continued stocking up and the **Japanese version of the world** went on around me.

I had time to finish the Matthew Condon title I'd been tackling through the trip and turn my attention towards the parts of **Bill Gammage's The Greatest Estate on Earth** that relate to **North Queensland**.

And when **Madam** returned it was time to take a taxi to **The Mother's Apartment**.

When we got there, we still had a good two and a half hours to kill.

Having rearranged my portion of the baggage, I was left without a great deal to do.

Someone was much busier, with another excursion to the shops to stock up on odds and ends.

She returned with **Yebisu**, so that was **Hughesy** looked after thank you very much, along with an unspecified quantity of other odds and ends.

I didn't know the precise details of what was being stowed into **The Blue Behemoth** and was cagey enough not to ask.

Madam has been through Customs enough times to have a fair idea of what's allowed and what is strictly verboten.

After changing into the outfit I'd be wearing on the flight, I was left without much else to do except turn my attention to **Yebisu**.

We headed outside to wait for shuttle taxi a good fifteen minutes early, which turned out to be just as well since it was a good ten minutes early.

We were the only passengers, which may explain why the pickup time was around an hour later than usual.

The transfer to **KIX** ran smoothly with no traffic holdups and reminiscences about the similar trip a fortnight earlier.

Even though the pickup was much later than usual, we were still into *Departures* comfortably before the check in opened. When I went over to investigate *F6-12*, the queue was already forming. We moved over to join them once I'd changed into the *DVT socks*.

That only took a couple of minutes, so the queue was only slightly larger than it was, moving in fits and starts.

There were apparent complications with some parties seemingly unaware of baggage limits.

One couple ahead of us were shunted off to the sidelines to sort things out, and they were still there, laptop open, obviously logging on to something, after we'd farewelled our luggage for the next twelve hours or so.

Presumably, they were purchasing additional capacity or something since there was no way they were going to rearrange everything they had with them into two standard checked baggage plus standard carry on allocations.

So we headed off to eat after checking in.

That involved going our separate ways though the contents of the meals consumed would have had similarities. It would have been ramen for *Madam*, spaghetti for *Hughesy*.

Mine came with a creamy prawn sauce that contained exactly three prawns.

When I made my way back to the agreed rendezvous, a bloke was hogging the middle of the couch, which was the only seat within coo-ee. *Not the most considerate of individuals*, thought *Hughesy* as he stood around, trying to stay out of the way on a reasonably busy thoroughfare.

Still, I didn't have to wait that long.

After a short detour through the souvenir section for gifts etc. and the obligatory exit through *Passport Control*, we headed on to Gate 35.

When checked the boarding passes, 35 turned up again, but this time with a B and a C after it.

That begged the obvious question. *Will there be anyone in 35A?*

That was something to ponder as the lines started to form, but we weren't in any great hurry.

We joined in as soon as the relevant when the call came, and there were still plenty of people behind us, but we had, I reckoned, given anyone allocated to 35A a decent chance to get in before us

But no one there when we claimed our seats.

Watching the flow of incoming passengers for signs of a claimant gave us something to do until the doors closed. And when they did, no one had appeared to claim the vacant seat.

At that point, I should have made the switch to the empty seat, but decided to wait until the ***seatbelt sign*** went off.

I could probably have still done it after the long taxi from the terminal to the runway commenced, but ended up waiting.

As it turned out, after takeoff there was a brief view of lights over towards ***Kōbe***, or over in that direction, but when the ***seatbelt sign*** did go off I realised it wouldn't have made a great deal of difference if I had moved earlier. That window offered a scenic vista right over the middle of the wing.

So I filled out the ***Border Protection*** paperwork when it arrived. Once I had, there was nothing to do but put on the blindfold and attempt to sleep.

I was not hopeful about the prospects.



CAIRNS > BOWEN

Thursday, 29 October 2015

I was awake just after four, which suggested around five and a half hours of reasonable quality slumber. Whether that would be enough to get me through the slings and arrows the next thirty-six hours were likely to throw our way remained to be seen.

I checked with *Madam* to see how she was travelling after it was obvious she had surfaced too.

That's a significant consideration, given the likelihood that we'd be on the highway by seven.

On the approach to *Cairns* through the darkness, there was never going to be much to see when you're sitting on the seaward side of the aircraft.

And, of course, I had my scenic view of the wing as we started the descent into *Cairns*, so that blocked out the Northern Beaches as we made our first and final approach around twenty to five.

That got us into Arrivals around five. but managed to get ourselves separated at Passport Control, where things never seem to operate in the same manner as they did last time. Maybe it's down to the different person who's on point duty where the passenger stream divides into *Australian Passport holders* and the rest of humanity.

Still, I found myself processed through re-entry relatively quickly and sighted *The Coppertone Container* almost as soon as I arrived beside the baggage carousel.

Then, as you'd come to expect despite the fact that the two pieces of luggage were sitting beside each other when we farewelled them at *KIX*, there was a lengthy wait for *The Blue Behemoth*.

Long enough for *Madam* to make her way through the mass of people in the Other Passport Holders queue and divert into the toilet as well.

But BeeBee appeared eventually, and we took ourselves over to *Customs*, where it was fairly obvious they were checking things today.

The standard response to the question about foodstuffs got a Well, let's just have a look.

Everything, as far as either of us could make out should have been cool, but we ran across an unexpected hitch.

Brown rice is a problem, thanks to the bit of husk that remains on the grain. .

Madam wasn't happy, but there was nothing that could be done about it, and it's not as if she'd shelled out big time on the prohibited item.

The packet of brown rice had been given to *The Mother* as a present, and she doesn't eat the stuff. So *The Daughter* had generously and very helpfully offered to *take it off Mum's hands* and see it didn't go to waste.

But that was the only hitch and a couple of minutes later we were outside phoning the *off-site airport parking* and letting them know we'd be where they'd asked us to wait for them.

WE'd been waiting for a bit longer than you might have labelled a reasonable time when my mobile rang. It was the off-site parking person calling to advise that previous arrangements hadn't panned out the way they were supposed to, and we needed to meet him on the other side of the terminal.

So we headed over that way and made the predictable polite inquiry when we got there.

The explanation, which seemed to be evidence of extreme anti-competitive practice on the part of *the airport's on-site parking operation*, was enough to have us assuring our driver that he would be getting our business for the foreseeable future.

It seemed that new fobs to get his vehicle through the gates into the bus parking area ere a good week late, the old ones no longer worked and there was a hefty fine if he attempted to pick anyone up right in front of the terminal.

That was the explanation we got, anyway. And given other income-grubbing arrangements involving airline passengers and on-ground transport arrangements (like train fares to *Brisbane* and *Sydney airport terminals*), it rang pretty true.

It wasn't long, however, before we were back in the car and contemplating the best road out of town.

Given a choice between *Portsmith* and *Mulgrave Road*, *Someone* chose *Mulgrave Road* and then asked about the difference once we were headed that way.

I wasn't sure but suspected there might be fewer traffic lights if you head out through *Portsmith*.

Two trips back *Ukulele Lady* and her husband had collected us from *the airport* and guided us back that way, and I reckoned that was based on local knowledge since they lived out that way.

In any case, we managed to hit every set of lights between where the question was asked and *Edmonton*. We would probably have continued to hit them if we hadn't run out of them at *Edmonton*.

And, sure enough, we encountered another red light just before the *Mulgrave River* at *Gordonvale*.

We turned off the highway on the other side of the river, looping around down to a rest area where *The Driver* wanted to stop for a snooze. I couldn't quite manage to doze right off, but *Someone* managed a good fifteen minutes of audibly sound sleep.

Back on the road, we were feeling peckish and turned off at *Babinda*, where the bakery yielded a *hot chilli and beef pie* for *Yours Truly* and an apple turnover. Then, under my understanding of the general game plan, I suggested we head across to *The Boulders* for another rest break.

Our first trip, back in *2008* when my father was still with us had taken us back to the Gold Coast rather than *Cairns*, but we'd had two versions of this trip since then. The first time we'd done the *Cairns* to *Bowen* bit in a day, and there were issues with drivers threatening to nod off. Not good.

So last time we'd stopped at the Mulgrave rest area, *Babinda*, *The Boulders*, *Innisfail* and pulled up at *Mission Beach* around lunch time. Booking into a *B&B*, a solid snooze in the afternoon and a good night's sleep after dinner had worked out pretty well that time, so the game plan here was somewhat similar.

We'd make multiple stops along this stretch of highway, stop for lunch at lunch in *Bingil Bay* and go as far as an overnight stop at *Mission Beach*.



Or so we thought, but it was soon evident that plan was headed out the window since *Someone* didn't feel like stopping at *Innisfail*, *Mourilyan* or *Etty Bay*.

Or turning off towards *Bingil Bay* and *Mission Beach*. We continued to *Cardwell*, where rest was indicated, but it was hard to find a shady spot.

Maybe, if we'd found one and stuck around until we could think about checking into some form of accommodation, we might have had lunch and overnighted there.

But there was no shade, the sun was kicking the temperature into the thirties, sleep was out of the question, so on we went, over the range to *Ingham*. I guess if we'd taken the time to look we might have found a shady spot in *Ingham* away from the main drag and the traffic noise.

But my *Herbert River* geography isn't that flash, so we kept going until the rest area at *Francis Creek*, where we were pretty sure of shade, and the prospect of a decent break.

Whether or not you class half an hour as *a decent break* is, at this point academic. Half an hour there seemed like enough at the time and turned out to be enough to get us through another three and a half hours on the road. We took another short stop in *Home Hill* for a late lunch, but as far as the rest of the trip goes, that was that.

Back on the road after the bakery and ultra-flash new **IGA** in **Home Hill** and the regulation visit to the **Comfort Stop** sighting a familiar caravan from well before the shortcut that bypasses **Ayr** underlined the time save by turning off just before **Brandon**.

Of course, they probably stopped somewhere on the way as well, but they probably only did it once.

So there we were, counting off the ten-kilometre blocks along a thoroughly familiar highway.

Lake Eyles a.k.a. **The Frockingdam** was totally empty, but there was not much else to remark on.

A cautious inquiry about dinner plans around **Guthalungra** revealed an inclination towards fish and chips. That suggestion wasn't going to prompt any argument from me.

We pulled into home around three-twenty to find absolutely no sign of two cats. That was hardly surprising given the likelihood that one of them had taken himself off into the stormwater drain, but the absence prompted a phone call to our friendly **Neighbourhood Cat Feeder**.

That produced an answering machine rather than a human response, so the process of unloading the car and opening up the house continued apace.

So there we were, unpacking and getting things back up and running when the phone rang. It wasn't, as you might have expected, **Cat Feeder** answering the earlier call. That one came ten minutes later and brought an *I'll be right down*.

This one was **Warbo**, who'd driven past on his way back from the boat, spotted the car was back and was making a polite inquiry about the trip.

And about a quarter of an hour later we were getting a cat report that indicated *I'll be right down*, which might have been cause for concern, was more about catching up on the news on other fronts.

Ninja reappeared just after five, but with no sign of the presumably drain-dwelling **LikLik**, the notion of fish and chips looked to be headed for the back burner.

We obviously couldn't head out for takeaway until he was back, but the interval did provide the chance to introduce ourselves to the new neighbours.

But there was, I reckoned, a sure-fire way to lure the rover back. I announced that fish and chips was bound for the too hard basket, and was halfway through peeling two cloves of garlic to go into the old standby **pasta con tonno** when an *Oh there you are!* restored fish and chips to the agenda.

And it wasn't long after **Hughesy** bundled the wad of fish and chip paper into the wheelie bin that two travellers were nodding off, bringing **Japan Trip #4** to a conclusion.

AKITA SHINKANSEN

The Akita *Shinkansen* line serves the Kantō and Tōhoku regions, linking Tokyo and Akita, the capital of Akita prefecture with hourly services. Akita *Shinkansen Komachi* trains have all-reserved seating and stop at Ueno, Omiya, Sendai, Morioka on the Tohoku *Shinkansen* line, travelling at speeds of up to 320 km/h.

Up to Morioka, trains come in two sections, an Aomori-bound *Hayate* and a 7-car *Komachi* which turns off the Tohoku line for the rest of the run to Akita. From Morioka to Ōmagari uses the Tazawako Line, then the Ōu Main Line from Ōmagari to Akita. Since neither line was engineered specifically for *Shinkansen* services, the maximum speed is significantly reduced (to 130 km/h). Stations on the latter section of the route are Shizukuishi, Tazawako, Kakunodate, Omagari, and Akita. Trains reverse direction at Omagari as they change from the Tazawako Line to the Ōu Line.

The trip from Tokyo takes four hours, costs about ¥17,000 and is fully covered by both the Japan Rail Pass and JR East Pass. Since all seats require reservations there's a chance of getting in the wrong half of the train in Tokyo.

Route details and maps: <http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/routemaps/akitashinkansen.html>

Related Glossary Terms

Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen

Index

Find Term

ASHINOKO LAKE

The scenic Lake Ashi, often referred to as Hakone Lake but formally Ashinoko Lake, in Hakone lies along the southwest wall of the caldera of Mount Hakone formed after the volcano erupted 3000 years ago. The name means "lake of reeds."

A popular tourist destination, the lake is known for views of Mt. Fuji and pleasure boats that traverse the lake, providing views of the surrounding mountains and the floating torii of the Hakone Shrine. The Hakone Detached Palace Garden delivers the best panoramas across the lake with Mount Fuji in the background but clouds and poor visibility often block the view. Visibility tends to be better during the colder seasons in the early morning and late evening.

But even if you can't catch a good view of Mount Fuji, the cruises on the lake link to the Hakone Ropeway, which will take the visitor from Togendai on the northern end of the lake across The Great Boiling Valley to Sounzan. The Hakone Tozan Cable Car funicular railway in turn connects to the Hakone Tozan Line mountain railway which delivers you to Odawara.

Hakone Sightseeing Boats and Izuhakone Sightseeing Boats both operate cruises between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-machi at the lake's southern shores and Togendai and Kojima. A round-trip cruise from takes roughly 30 minutes and the Hakone Free Pass is only valid on the passenger ship shaped Hakone Sightseeing Boats.

Related Glossary Terms

Hakone, Mount Fuji

CHŪŌ SHINKANSEN

Construction work on the *maglev* Chūō *Shinkansen* was due to commence in autumn 2014, with 86% of the initial 286 km route running through (as in under) the Japanese Alps from Tokyo's Shinagawa Station to Nagoya. The line will extend the existing Yamanashi research track and should connect the two cities in less than half the time taken by services on the Tokaido line, with trains running at speeds of up to 505 km/h.

That section is slated to open in 2027 with the next section to Osaka completed by 2045. The journey to ShinOsaka should take sixty-seven minutes (currently a minimum of two hours and nineteen minutes). The project is expected to cost ¥9 trillion, but the economic impact of reduced travel time between Tokyo and Osaka has been estimated at between ¥5 and ¥17 trillion over the line's first fifty years of operation.

The project is as an alternative to the Tokaido *Shinkansen*, where tight schedules leave little room to add extra services, and there's a need for cover if that line is blocked by a natural disaster. With the underground sections passing through soft bedrock earthquakes are an issue, but JR Tokai claims tremors will not affect levitating trains and shocks are supposedly less severe when you're underground. Plans include forty-seven emergency exits from the tunnels, spaced about 5 kilometres apart in urban areas, with high-strength concrete and bolts attached to bedrock bolstering resistance to tremors. Still, the Chuo *Shinkansen* will run across several active fault lines.

There are other concerns. Excavations will produce over 62 million cubic metres of material that will need to be disposed of, environmental geologists suggest tunnelling will affect the above-ground environment and maglev technology requires much more electric power (35,000 kilowatts compared to 10,000 kilowatts for a single run on the Tokaido *Shinkansen*). Concerns with possible noise pollution will see above-ground sections of the line covered by concrete hoods, but JR Tokai will consider allowing open views of Mount Fuji and the Southern Japan Alps from the scenic Kofu basin in Yamanashi Prefecture.

The initial 18.4 kilometre test track between Ōtsuki and Tsuru in Yamanashi Prefecture was extended by 25 kilometres in June 2013. JR Tokai is considering opening services from a station in Kōfu on a 6 kilometre extension of the existing track to carry tourists visiting Japan for the 2020 Olympics to experience the train ride through the Yamanashi mountains.

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Maglev Trains, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen

EKI-BENTŌ

Google *eki-bentō* (as I did, looking for material for this note) and you'll find any number of links to commercial operations, restaurants and the like. That's because *eki-bentō* represents a subset of a much larger entity (*bentō*, the single portion meal, usually rice, fish or meat with pickled or cooked vegetables in a box-shaped container) sold at railway stations (*eki*) or on trains. If you're at an airport and want something to sustain you on the flight it will be *sora-bentō*, and you'll have the same problem with Google.

Produced in a number of styles and packaged in a variety of containers from mass-produced disposable packages to hand-crafted lacquerware. *Bentō* boxes are, essentially, convenience food. The word originates from a Chinese Southern Song Dynasty (twelfth and thirteenth century) slang term that translates as *convenient*. The earliest forms of *bentō* can be traced back to the late Kamakura Period, when cooked rice was dried (*hoshi-ii* or *dried meal*) eaten in that form or reconstituted by boiling in water.

Wooden boxes with the contents eaten at a tea party date back to the sixteenth century Azuchi-Momoyama Period. Edo Period travellers and sightseers often carried a *koshibentō* of *onigiri* rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves or stored in a bamboo box. Theatre-goers consumed makuno-uchi bentō between acts of *Noh* and *Kabuki* performances and similar packages were prepared for *Hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) or special occasions such as *Hinamatsuri* (Doll's Day or Girls' Day).

Eki-bentō date back to the In the Meiji Period, with the earliest version (two *onigiri* and a serving of daikon wrapped in bamboo leaves) possibly sold at Utsunomiya station on 16 July 1885. Schools did not supply lunch teachers and students took *bentō* to school, a practice that lasted until schools started providing lunches after World War Two. Aluminium *bentō* boxes became popular during the Taishō period since they were easy to clean and looked classy.

Contemporary *bentō* may take the form of a home-prepared lunch box, but the term usually refers to commercially prepared boxes sold in convenience stores, specialised takeaway outlets such as the Hokka Hokka Tei and Hotto Motto franchise chains, railway stations, and even department stores. Varieties of bentō include:

- Chūka bentō* (Chinese appetisers or snacks);
- Hayaben* (*early bentō*), eaten before lunch with another lunch afterwards;
- Hinomaru bentō*, plain white rice with *umeboshi* (*Japanese salt plums*, pickled *ume* fruit) in the centre in an arrangement that resembles the *Hinomaru* or Japanese flag;
- Hokaben*, freshly cooked hot rice served with freshly prepared side dishes sold at takeaway *bentō* shops;
- Kamameshi bentō* sold at stations in Nagano prefecture, cooked and served in a clay pot with the pot as a souvenir;
- Kyaraben* (*character bentō*) decorated to look like characters from *anime*, *manga*, or video games;
- Makunouchi bentō* with rice, pickled fruit, broiled salmon etc;
- Noriben*, with *nori* (seaweed) dipped in soy sauce with cooked rice;
- Oekakiben* arranged to look like people, animals, buildings, flowers and plants;
- Saké bentō* (broiled salmon);
- Shidashi bentō* prepared in a restaurant and served at funerals or social gatherings;
- Shōkadō bentō* in a traditional black-lacquered box, the inspiration for IBM's ThinkPad;
- Tori bentō* (cooked chicken with rice).

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

GEISHA

When I sighted a distinctively clothed woman in Kyoto's Gion district and placed a mental tick in the box beside *geisha*, I was immediately wrong on at least two fronts. First, I was in Kyoto, where they're *geiko* in Kansai dialect. Second, the white make-up, elaborate *kimono* and hairdo that form the popular image of *geisha*, usually signifies a *maiko*, or apprentice (alternatively *hangyoku*, or *half-jewel* since they are paid at half the rate of a full *geisha*). Fully fledged geisha only wear the characteristic makeup for special performances.

Regardless of the label we are talking about traditional entertainers who act as hostesses. during meals, banquets and special occasions The word *geisha* is drawn from two *kanji*, *gei* (art) and *sha* (person or doer) so an accurate translation would be *performing artist*, one whose skills covered a range of traditional Japanese arts including music, dance and games, trained to make guests feel at ease with interesting conversation, drinking games and artistic performances.

The *maiko* apprenticeship does not appear to be strictly necessary, since women over the age of twenty-one are deemed too old to go through it, but it seems a year's training (formal or informal) is the minimum needed before a *maiko* or *geisha* can make their debut in the community. Completing the apprenticeship, however, is said to yield greater prestige later a *geisha's* career.

While modern labour laws prohibit girls from beginning an apprenticeship until they are eighteen (though fifteen-year-old girls can become full-time *maiko* in Kyoto) the training process used to start much earlier, progressing through stages as *shikomi* (servant) and *minarai* (watching apprentice) as they developed communication and hospitality skills and techniques.

Elements that combined to develop the *geisha* culture started to coalesce after the imperial court moved to Kyoto in 794. By 1617, there were designated walled-in pleasure quarters (*yūkaku*) that offered sex, along with accomplished performers who entertained customers with dancing, singing, music, poetry and calligraphy.

The early *geisha* who appeared around the eighteenth century were men who entertained customers while they waited to see the courtesans (*oiran*). The female equivalent of the original *geisha* were teenage *Ôdôri ko* (dancing girls) in unlicensed districts that sprang up all over Japan, unrestricted by the strict etiquette associated with the pleasure quarters. Many such areas developed close to shrines and temples, and offered refreshments and entertainment to pilgrims. As teahouses became regulated, the services they were allowed to offer were defined and became ritualised.

The first known female *geisha* was a singer from Fukagawa, who appeared around 1750, the first of a number of women who worked as entertainers rather than prostitutes, often alongside male *geisha*. They were forbidden from sexual activity ith the customers, which would have encroached on the business of the *oiran*. As the courtesans dealt with sexual matters, *geisha* created their own niche as artists and cultured female companions.

The distinction blurred after World War Two, when prostitutes began dressing in *kimono* and imitating the *geisha's* appearance to attract customers from American servicemen, referring to themselves as *geisha girls*. Since their clients could not tell the difference between the legitimate *geisha* and the fancy dress imitations, *geisha girl* became a general term for prostitutes, bar hostesses and streetwalkers.

Today, *geisha* still live in *geisha* houses (*okiya*) in "flower towns" (*hanamachi*), during their apprenticeship, though successful *geisha* may choose to live independently. They are hired to attend parties and gatherings in *ochaya* (tea houses) or traditional Japanese restaurants (*ryôtei*), with the venue providing the *tatami* room where the entertainment takes place. Food and performers are ordered in. Traditionally, *ochaya* were exclusive venues that did not bill guests at the end of the night, but ran a tab that covered all costs (down to taxi rides) and billed the client's bank account every month.

Changing times have modified the standard practice. Tourists and other interested parties can now, apparently, book *geiko* dinners through travel agencies and hotels. The customer can expect (again, apparently) around ¥50,000 for each *maiko* or *geiko* and somewhere between ¥10,000 and ¥30,000 per head for the meal. Since the entertainers probably won't speak English or any other foreign language, interpreters are an additional expense. The highlight of the evening will be a seasonal dance, accompanied by a *shamisen* played by second *geiko*, so the bill will probably start around the ¥100,000 mark.

Related Glossary Terms

Hanamachi, Shamisen

GERO

The *onsen* town of Gero on the banks of the Hida River in Gifu Prefecture is the centre of a larger entity, the city of Gero, established in 2004 by merging of the former town of Gero with the towns of Hagiwara, Kanayama and Osaka, and the village of Maze, all of them from Mashita District. As a result, the city has eight railway stations (Hida-Kanayama, Yakeishi, Gero, Zenshōji, Hida-Hagiwara, Jōro, Hida-Miyada and Hida-Osaka) along a stretch of JR Central's Takayama Main Line.

Located between Nagoya and Takayama, Gero is about forty-five minutes by limited express or an hour on a local service from Takayama, which makes it a possible alternative during the Takayama Festival, when accommodation is at a premium in Takayama. From Nagoya, it's about 90 minutes on the JR Wide View Hida limited express. Those trips are fully covered by the Japan Rail Pass.

One of Japan's Three Famous Springs (along with Kusatsu in Gunma Prefecture and Hyogo Prefecture's Arima) as listed by Confucian poet Hayashi Razan, not to be confused with the Three Great Springs or Three Old Springs (see http://wikitravel.org/en/Japan's_Top_3) the town has been drawing in visitors since the Engi Era (901-923) and while tourism is the city's major industry, attracting more than a million Japanese visitors every year, forestry and agriculture play significant roles in the local economy.

Predictably, there are many hotels and *ryokan*, most of them on the northern side of the river (the train station lies to the south of it) and most including their own bathing facilities, and there are a number of inexpensive, convenient *onsen* near railway stations, residential areas, and shopping centres along the valley, as well as three public bath houses in the town itself. The southern end of the Gero Bridge has a large (free) *rotenburo* (open-air bath) if you don't mind bathing in full view of people crossing the bridge.

Visitors can sample three baths of any of about thirty participating ryokan by purchasing a *Yumeguri Tegata* spa pass, a wooden amulet sold all over Gero at the tourist information office, ryokan, souvenir shops and convenience stores which is valid for six months.

There are also numerous free foot baths, which may offer welcome relief after a hard day's walk. The mountainous backdrop attracts sightseers in both *sakura* and coloured leaves seasons, and the hillside Onsenji Temple for a view across the city and Hida River.

Another attraction is Gassho Village Open Air Museum, located just above town with steep roofed houses *gasshozukuri* farmhouses, traditional folk art and a museum of *komainu* (guard dog statues used at shrines).

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

GIFU

Located on the northern edge of the Nōbi Plain in southern Gifu Prefecture. Gifu prospered as a castle town during the Kamakura Period and serves as the prefectural capital. The Nagara River runs through the city from the northeast to the southwest and much of the city lies on the river's flood plain and is consequently susceptible to flooding when typhoons or heavy thunderstorms affect the area. Dykes and levees help control the excess water. The rich soil of the river valley is prime farmland

The city played an important role in Japan's history because of its location in the centre of the country. *Control Gifu and you control Japan* was the catchphrase during the Sengoku period, when various warlords attempted to unite and control Japan.

The region had been under the control of the Toki clan until 1542, when Saitō Dōsan took control of Mino Province and built the first incarnation of Gifu Castle atop Mount Kinka. Dōsan's daughter Nōhime married Oda Nobunaga, who unified half of Japan under his rule. After consulting with a Buddhist priest, Nobunaga renamed the castle, the surrounding Mino Province and the mountain in 1567.

Gifu continued to flourish as a post station along the *Nakasendō* highway connecting the capital at with Kyoto via central Honshū (modern-day Saitama, Gunma, Nagano, Gifu and Shiga prefectures). The local economy also benefited from its location at the centre of Nobunaga's sphere of influence.

Gifu was officially established as a city on 1 July 1889, a small city that grew as Japan industrialised despite earthquake damage (the Mino-Owari earthquake on 28 October 1891). The city's first industry was textiles, and it rivalled Tokyo and Osaka as a leading fashion centre.

During Japan's military buildup in the 1930s, the city became an industrial centre, aided by nearby Kakamigahara's status as the country's aeronautical centre. During World War Two, Gifu was the home of paper-based fire balloons that were supposed to use the jet stream to traverse the Pacific Ocean and bring terror to the continental United States. The city's status as an industrial centre made it a firebombing target, culminating in the Gifu Air Raid of 9 July 9, 1945.

Gifu remained prosperous in the post-war years. While the fashion industry declined, the city's industrial facilities support automotive plants and heavy industry in Aichi Prefecture. A construction boom has improved the economy and the city serves as a satellite of Nagoya.

JR Central's Tokaidō Main Line connects Gifu with Tokyo (around two and a half hours) and Nagoya (twenty-five minutes). The city is just over an hour from Kyoto and Osaka. Limited Express trains on the JR Takayama Line run from Gifu to Gero and Takayama. There are also JR connections via Maibara to Kanazawa and Toyama and a rail link to Chōbu Centrair International Airport. An alternative link to Nagoya is the private Meitetsu Railway, which also services Kakamigahara and Takehana from Meitetsu Gifu Station.

In addition to modern industries, the city also has a range of traditional products, including fans, lanterns and umbrellas, *Mino washi* paper and foods created from the *ayu* sweetfish (river trout), which have been caught using cormorants for more than 1,300 years.

Cormorant fishing is a tourist attraction, with visitors watching six fishing masters from boats or the banks of the river most nights until nine o'clock between 11 May and 15 October each year. Visitors who have watched the spectacle include haiku poet Matsuo Bashō and Charlie Chaplin.

The Nagara River is the venue for two firework festivals, sponsored by rival newspapers, which attract large crowds to the river's banks. The ***Chunichi Shimbun*** Nagara River All-Japan Fireworks Festival is held on the last Saturday of July, with the ***Gifu Shinbun*** Nagara River National Fireworks Display a week later. Approximately 30,000 fireworks are set off at each event.

Mt. Kinka, the 329-metre peak next to Gifu Park, provides a backdrop to the fireworks. The summit, accessible via a ropeway or hiking trails, delivers a 360-degree panoramic view across the Nagara River and the city below and is home to Gifu Castle, a castle museum, and a squirrel park.

Oda Nobunaga used the castle as his headquarters when unifying Japan, but the castle was destroyed in 1601, after the Battle of Sekigahara. The current castle only dates back to 1956. At the foot of Mt. Kinka, Gifu Park, contains a three-storied pagoda, the Gifu City Museum of History, the Kato Eizo-Toichi Memorial Art Museum, the Nawa Insect Museum, and the boarding area for Kinka-zan Ropeway.

Gifu City Museum of History, predictably, focuses on Gifu's past, with a model of the castle town as it was in the Warring States Period and a recreation of the *Rakuichi-ba* Free Market established by Oda Nobunaga to promote the town's economy by drawing in merchants. Associated with the history museum, the Eizō & Tōichi Katō Memorial Art Museum, founded in 1991, is dedicated to works by Eizō and Tōichi Katō, well-known Japanese artists who were both born in Gifu. The Yanaizu Folklore Museum in the Yanaizu-chō area of the city is the other branch of the Museum of History. The Nawa Insect Museum, founded in 1919 by Yasushi Nawa, Japan's *Insect Man*, provides a closeup look at rare and attractive species from around the world. Other museums include a Science Museum, with a planetarium and rooftop observatory, the Museum of Fine Arts, devoted to local art and artists although it does contain pieces from around the world and the Sanko Art Museum houses tea utensils and paintings by Renoir, Chagall, and Ryuzaburo Umehara.

Gifu is also home to a number of other festivals through the year:

- The Dōsan Festival and Gifu Festival on the first weekend in April, both of which include street vendors, flea markets, and floats paraded through the city.

- Gifu Nobunaga Festival on the first weekend in October with a procession of horses and warriors through the city's main streets.

- Tejikara Fire Festival on the second Saturday in April at Tejikarao Shrine and the second Sunday in August at Nagara River Park. Portable shrines are carried aloft amidst a rain of falling sparks.

- Near the end of August Takigi Noh, a traditional form of Japanese theatre takes place on the banks of the Nagara River, lit by bonfires and the fires aboard cormorant boats.

Other attractions include:

- Bairin Park, with over fifty types of plum trees which form a popular springtime attraction.

- Onsen* and *ryokan* inns located along the Nagara River. Springs with a high iron content are thought to be beneficial for a variety of ailments.

- Mount Dodo, north of the Nagara River, is the tallest mountain in the city, with numerous hiking trails. At the mountain's southern base, Matsuo Pond is a popular autumn coloured leaves attraction.

- The ruins of Kanō Castle, built after the Battle of Sekigahara, and designated a National Historic Site.

- The ruins of Kawate Castle, used as a meeting place for the cultural and social elite from Kyoto during the Muromachi period.

- Inaba Shrine, Kogane Shrine, and Kashimori Shrine, considered to be a family since the god at the first is married to the goddess at the second, and they're the parents of the deity at the third.

- Kanō Tenman-gū shrine, built to protect Izumii Castle (predecessor to Kanō Castle).

- Tejikarao Shrine in the east of the city, dating back to 860.

- Buddhist temples include Jōzai-ji, Zuiryō-ji, Jōdo-ji and Shōhō-ji, home to the Gifu Great Buddha, the first and largest basketwork-style dry-lacquered Buddha in Japan, and one of the three largest Great Buddha images in Japan.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

GINKAKU-JI

Officially *Jishō-ji* (Temple of Shining Mercy), *Ginkaku-ji* (Temple of the Silver Pavilion) is an elegant Zen temple associated with the *Shokoku-ji* branch of the Rinzai sect. Located in the foothills of Kyoto's eastern mountains, the temple is an outstanding example of Japanese landscape architecture.

Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1435–1490), the eighth Muromachi *shōgun*, built his retirement villa on the site of an abandoned monastery in the grounds of today's temple. He modelled it on *Kinkaku-ji* (Temple of the Golden Pavilion), his grandfather's retirement villa at the base of Kyoto's northern mountains. The villa was converted into a Zen temple in accordance with his will and named *Jishō-ji*, taken from his Buddhist name, Jishōin, after Yoshimasa's death.

Plans for the villa date back as far as 1460, and the intention to built it was announced in 1465, when orders went out to find materials of the highest quality for his new home. Shortly afterwards the Onin war (1467-77) reduced much of Kyoto to ashes. Yoshimi's home went up in flames as well, and when the war was over he set about building a new residence on the site. He moved there formally when construction was completed in 1483 and the villa served as his home from 1484 until his death on 27 January 1490. He had become a Zen Buddhist monk in 1485.

Ginkakuji is famous for the main building on the site, the two-storey Kannon Hall (*Kannon-dono*), the Silver Pavilion, which is said to take its name from Yoshimasa's plan to cover the pavilion with silver leaf in imitation of *Kinkaku-ji*, although no silver was applied, possibly due to financial considerations or the increasing severity of the Onin War.

Alternatively, the nickname may have evolved as a reference to the silvery appearance of moonlight on the black lacquer which made up the building's exterior.

The building's lower storey contains the room where Yoshimasa practised meditation while the upper storey holds a gilt statue of Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy,. The interior of the building is not open to the public.

The nearby *Tōkudō* (Buddha Hall) served as Yoshimasa's home and private chapel.

Yoshimasa spent much of his retirement pursuing the arts, including the tea ceremony and the northeast corner of the building has a tearoom, reputedly the oldest in Japan and the prototype on which future tea ceremony rooms were based. It overlooks a moss garden that was originally modelled on *Saihō-ji* temple built by Muso Soseki (1275-1351) in Kyōto's Nishikyō Ward. The garden was redesigned during the Kan'ei Period (1624-1644).

According to temple records, *Ginkaku-ji* originally consisted of twelve buildings, but only two, the Kannon Hall and the *Tōkudō* survived a disastrous fire in the Tembun Period (1532-1555). By the start of the Meiji Period (1600-1868), the temple had fallen into disrepair but was restored with municipal support assisted by private donations.

Today, *Ginkakuji* consists of the Silver Pavilion and half a dozen other temple buildings. Walking a circular route around the grounds takes the visitor past the meticulously maintained Sea of Silver Sand and the massive sand cone said to symbolise Mount Fuji.

Beside the sand garden the *Hondo* (main hall) displays paintings on its *fusuma* sliding doors but is off-limits to visitors. After passing by the *Tōkudō*, the path takes visitors through Ginkakuji's moss garden and then climbs the hill behind the buildings which delivers views of the temple grounds and the city beyond.

Related Glossary Terms

Philosopher's Path

HAKONE

Located less than a hundred kilometres from Tokyo in the mountainous southwestern part of [Kanagawa Prefecture](#), Hakone is part of the volcanically active [Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park](#), centred around [Lake Ashinoko](#). Noted for hot springs, natural beauty and views of nearby [Mount Fuji](#), Hakone is a popular destination for Japanese and international tourists.

During the Edo Period, *Hakone-juku* was important checkpoint to control traffic along the [Tōkaidō highway](#) between Edo (Tokyo) and Kyoto. The checkpoint formed the border of the Kantō region.

Travellers on the Tōkaidō had their travel permits and baggage examined under laws that restricted the travel of women and weapons. A short, cedar lined section of the highway and a [reconstructed Hakone Checkpoint](#) with gates, housing for officers and soldiers, a prison chamber and a lookout tower are located between [Moto-Hakone](#) and [Hakone-machi](#) on the southern shore of Lake Ashinoko. The nearby Hakone Sekisho Shiryokan museum has related exhibits.

Some of the original highway between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-Yumoto. remains today, with the best preserved section running from Moto-Hakone to Hatajuku via the Amazake Chaya, a tea house serving *amazake* (hot, sweet rice wine) and Japanese snacks. It's a bit under a two hour walk, just under half way to Hakone-Yumoto, but from there the modern road runs over the old highway and there's no footpath for pedestrians.

There are half-hourly buses along the route, so it seems you can still walk the good bit of the ancient highway and use the bus to get you the rest of the way.

The traveller's most likely way into Hakone is through [Odawara](#), and Hakone-Yumoto.

Personal experience (weather conditions permitting) suggests an anticlockwise progress through the area. Odawara, on the main Tōkaidō *shinkansen* line, is an obvious starting point, though the private [Odakyu railway](#) offers services from Tokyo's Shinjuku station all the way to Hakone-Yumoto, including the [Romancecar limited express](#).

From Odawara, the [Hakone Tozan Line](#) runs along the Hayakawa River valley on the way to Gora, with switchbacks as it makes its way up the steepest gradient on a Japanese railway line. From Gora, the Hakone Tozan Cable Car goes up the mountainside to Sounzan, at one end of the [Hakone Ropeway](#), which carries visitors on a thirty minute two leg journey to Tōgendai, on the shore of Lake Ashinoko.

With ropeway cars departing at one-minute intervals, given the right weather conditions, visitors can enjoy views of Mount Fuji as they cross the Ōwakudani geysers in the [Great Boiling Valley](#).

A stop at Ōwakudani provides a chance to try the black eggs, boiled on site, with the shells turned a mottled black by to a chemical reaction with the sulphurous water. According to legend, each one you eat will add seven years to your life..

From Tōgendai sightseeing cruises cross Lake Ashinoko (the crater of the Hakone Volcano) in highly decorated Disneyland-style pirate ships pass the lakeside [Hakone Jinja](#) Shrine, with *torii* gates in the water, *en route* to Moto-Hakone and Hakone-machi. A clear day will deliver views of Mount Fuji but they're not guaranteed.

From there, a Hakone Tozan bus can deliver you back to Hakone-Yumoto or Odawara.

Other attractions in the area include:

- [Hakone Detached Palace](#), a summer palace for the Imperial Family, on the southern shores of Lake Ashinoko between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-machi. surrounded by a park with walking trails and views across Lake Ashinoko towards Mount Fuji.
- [Hakone Botanical Garden of Wetlands](#) in the highlands of Fuji Hakone Izu National Park with over 1700 varieties of marsh and alpine plants native to Japan and boardwalks through different types of marshland. The gardens are accessible by bus from Gora, the terminus of the Hakone Tozan Railway.
- [Hakone Open-Air Museum](#) with a variety of sculptures and artwork in a parkland setting and a substantial collection of paintings, prints, sculptures and ceramics by Picasso
- [Pola Museum of Art](#) with paintings, sculptures, ceramics and glassware by Japanese and European artists and rotating displays from the permanent collection which includes works by Cezanne, Monet, Picasso and Renoir.
- [Hakone Museum of Art](#) in Gora with displays of Japanese ceramics from prehistoric times through the Edo Period, a moss garden and the Sekirakuen landscape garden (only open on weekends, national holidays and through November).
- [Hakone Komagatake Ropeway](#) from Hakone-en on Lake Ashinoko to the summit of Mount Komagatake, where a mountaintop shrine (Mototsumiya) is an attraction. The ropeway's main claim to fame are the views it offers towards Mount Fuji and back towards the coast.

The area's main claim to fame, however (apart from the Fuji-viewing side of things) lies in the numerous *onsen ryokan*, traditional Japanese inns with hot spring baths. Facilities vary, prices are relatively high due to proximity to Tokyo, and if your accommodation doesn't have its own onsen, something nearby can be arranged. T

here's even a hot spring theme park ([Hakone Kowakien Yunessun](#)) at Hakone-machi, a Mediterranean-style public bath divided into two sections (with or without a bathing suit) with unique baths including a coffee bath, a wine bath and a cypress bath.

Getting around is made easier through the [Hakone Free Pass](#), which delivers unlimited use of most forms of transport for two or three days as well as discounts at many hot springs, museums, restaurants, and other locations.

The Free Pass can be bought at a number of outlets, including Tokyo's Shinjuku Station, the stations at Odawara, Hakone-Yumoto, Gora, Sounzan and Togendai Station, and the ports at Moto-Hakone Port and Hakone-Machi. Japan Rail Pass holders are best off traveling to Odawara on a JR service and picking up the Free Pass there.

Related Glossary Terms

Ashinoko Lake, Mount Fuji, Odawara

HAMANA LAKE

With an area of 65.0 km² and a circumference is 114 km, Lake Hamana, near the southwestern end of Shizuoka Prefecture is Japan's tenth largest lake. It was a fresh-water lake until an earthquake in 1498 cut the sandbank that had closed it off from the Sea of Enshu.

A 16th century tsunami opened the mouth of the lake further, and the result is a salt lake with an intricate shoreline that is a significant source of cultivated eels, oysters, nori and soft-shelled turtles along with wild caught sea bass, whiting, blowfish (*fugu*), pike, conger and flounder. The region is also known for strawberries and mikan oranges.

The lake has been developed as a resort area, with the major drawcards concentrated around Kanzanji-onsen Hot Spring, a relatively new hot spring resort on the northeast of the lake with more than a dozen hotels and *ryokans*. Most of the baths are found in hotels, and many are accessible to day trippers for a small fee. Kanzanji also attracts wind surfers, sea kayakers and parasailers in summer.

Since the Tokaido *Shinkansen* crosses the southern end of the lake, it is easily accessed from Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka, but the fastest *Nozomi* do not stop in Hamamatsu. Using the next fastest option (*Hikari*) it is around an hour and a half from Tokyo, slightly less from Osaka and roughly half an hour from Nagoya. From Hamamatsu it's a 40 minute bus ride to Kanzanji Onsen (frequent departures at least twice per hour) but the bus trip is not covered by the Japan Rail Pass.

Nearby attractions include:

- Kanzanji temple, believed to have been founded in 810 by the famous monk Kobo Daishi (Kukai). The grounds extend over the forested peninsula with walking tracks through the forest, a large statue of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy and views across the water.

- Hamamatsu Flower Park, with some 100,000 plants covering 3,000 different species. There is a western garden with a fountain, a rose garden, lawns, a western garden with glass houses, Balinese and Mexican gardens, as well as a Japanese garden with pine forest and a stream.

- Hamamatsu City Zoo, with over 450 animals including gorillas, orangutan and other monkeys in one of the largest collections of primates in Japan.

- Hamanako Pal Pal Amusement Park with a Ferris wheel, roller coasters, merry go rounds and water slides and merry-go-rounds.

- Kanzanji Ropeway, connecting Hamanako Pal Pal with the summit of Mt. Okusa-yama, which offers a free observatory and Hamanako Music Box Museum.

- Sightseeing boats offer thirty minute or one hour cruises out of Kanzanji's inlet. Boats can be boarded at Kanzanji Temple or the entrance to Hamamatsu Flower Park.

- Bentenjima island, where the sea meets the lake, was originally a small peninsula of the lakeside, and was formed by cutting off by the earthquake in 1498. It is a popular spot for fishing, digging clams and water sports.

- Former Arai Checkpoint on the Tokaido route between Tokyo and Kyoto, located on the southwest side of the lake 700 metres west of JR Arimachi station. The buildings were rebuilt in 1855, making it the only remaining Edo Period checkpoint. The historic Kinokuniya Inn is close by.

On weekends, a free tourist bus (the Flower Go) connects Kanzanji Temple, Hanasaki no Yu public baths, Pal Pal Amusement Park, Hamamatsu Flower Park and Okusa-yama's upper ropeway station, running hourly. It operates every day during peak tourist season.

Attractions slightly further afield include:

- Maisaka Shukuwaki-honjin, an inn for *samurai* and commoners, the only such inn left on the Tokaido.

- The Nakamura Residence, a preserved samurai house north of Bentenjima over the Ufumi Bridge.

- Makayaji Temple, dating back to the Kamakura Period with Heian-style garden and historic wooden statues, short walk or shorter taxi ride from Mikkabi Station on the private Tenryu Hamanako Line, which runs from along the north coast of the lake between Kakegawa and Shinjohara.

- The Sakichi Toyoda Memorial House, the birthplace of the founder of the Toyota company with a museum that includes Toyoda's shed, where he worked on his inventions.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

HANAMACHI

Hanamachi or *flower towns* are the *geisha* quarters of Japanese cities, containing *okiya* (*geisha* houses), *ochaya* (teahouses where *geisha* entertain customers) and a *kaburenjō* (meeting place, including a theatre, rooms where classes can be held, and offices that deal with payments and regulations).

Hanamachi are separate from and not to be confused with courtesan districts (*yūkaku*, pleasure quarter or red-light district) where prostitution was the name of the game. There were originally three such districts, established in the 17th century: Shimabara in Kyōto (1640), Shinmachi in Ōsaka (1624–1644) and Yoshiwara in Edo (modern day Tokyo, 1617). While the *geisha* culture, which emerged in the mid-18th century, may have started there, the practitioners weremoved into separate areas.

Kyoto has five *hanamachi*, referred to as *kagai* or *gokagai* in the local dialect, mostof them clustered around central Kyoto (Gion Kōbu and Gion Higashi, Miyagawachō and Pontochō) with Kamishichiken, separated from the others, near Kitano Tenmangu Shrine in the northwest of the city. Shimabara, the courtesans' district in the west of the city, dating back to before the *geisha* culture emerged, is now defunct but remains as a tourist attraction.

Of the five districts, Gion Kōbu, Pontochō and Kamishichiken have the highest status and are subsequently the most expensive, attracting powerful businessmen and high-ranking politicians (Gion Kōbu seems to have the very highest ranking).

Kyoto *hanamachi* stage annual public dances (*Ōdōri*) by *maiko* and *geiko* over several weeks, usually in the spring. Tickets are relatively inexpensive (¥1500 to ¥4500) with a number of performances. *Miyako Ōdōri* , in Gion Kōbu, runs through April and has the greatest number of performances. *Kitano Ōdōri* in Kamishichiken covers the last week of March and first week of April, *Kyō Ōdōri* in Miyagawachō runs through the first half of April with *Kamogawa Ōdōri* in Pontochō running through most of May. *Gion Ōdōri* in Gion Higashi is much later in the year, in early November.

The five districts combine for special performances on a weekend in late June at a larger venue, and tickets for these are significantly more expensive.

Tokyo *hanamachi* include Shinbashi, Akasaka, Asakusa (the city's oldest *geisha* district), Yoshichō, Kagurazaka, Mukojima and Hachiōji, with the latter about 40 kilometres west of central Tokyo.

There are three *hanamachi* in Osaka, Kita Shinchī, within walking distance of Osaka Station, and famous for nightclubs, bars and late night restaurants, Minami Shinchī (only one teahouse) and Shinmachi, the city's first licenced pleasure quarter.

Kanazawa, second only to Kyoto as far as active *geisha* are concerned, has three well preserved *hanamachi*, Higashi Chaya (Eastern Teahouse), Nishi Chaya (Western Teahouse) and Kazuemachi. Higashi Chaya is the largest and best known, with many houses used for high-class entertainment and others converted into speciality shops and cafes. Shima and Kaikaro Teahouses are open to the public. Nishi Chaya is smaller, effectively a single street, and Kazuemachi is smaller again.

Related Glossary Terms

Geisha

HIMEJI

With a population over half a million, Himeji is the second largest city in Hyogo and was reportedly considered as the site of a relocated national capital after the Great Kantō earthquake struck the region around Tokyo.

If that notion sounds far-fetched, you can probably ascribe it to the city’s centre where sits the widely considered Japan's most beautiful surviving feudal castle.

Designated both a national treasure and a UNESCO world heritage site, Himeji Castle remained intact for over 400 years, miraculously surviving a bombing raid that destroyed sixty per cent of the city on 3 July 1945. Travellers on the Sanyo Shinkansen from Osaka, Okayama and Hiroshima can catch a decent view of the castle since Himeji station is so close.

Other attractions in the city include Engyō-ji temple, Mount Seppiko, Tegarayama Park and Kokoen Garden in Tegarayama Central Park and Kokoen Garden.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

HOKURIKU *SHINKANSEN*

With the first 228km section scheduled to open in March 2015, the Hokuriku *Shinkansen* is an extension of the Nagano *Shinkansen*, opened on 1 October 1997 in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics, branching off the Jōetsu and Tōhoku lines at Takasaki. The first extension from Nagano to Kanazawa will be followed by a second extension to Fukui and Tsuruga. Work on that section started in 2012 and should be completed by 2025.

The section between Nagano and Kanazawa will include stops at Iiyama, Jōetsu-Myōkō, Itoigawa, Kurobe-Unazukionsen, Toyama and ShinTakaoka while the second extension will add Komatsu, Kagaonsen, Awaraonsen, Fukui, Nan'etsu and Tsuruga to the *Shinkansen* network.

A further extension looping back to Osaka is planned, but the route is yet to be decided. There are three possibilities, linking to the Tokaido *Shinkansen* at Maibara, Kyoto, or Shin-Osaka, and they're worth a look because they provide insight into issues surrounding the routing of *Shinkansen* lines.

The Maibara route, with a standard *Shinkansen* track to Maibara is the shortest, with good access to Kyoto and Nagoya but mean a longer travel time to Shin-Osaka along existing, Tōkaidō *Shinkansen* tracks that are already running at close to maximum capacity. That may become less of an issue when the Chuo *Shinkansen* opens as far as Osaka in 2045.

The Kyoto option would upgrade the Kosei Line to Kyoto, by regauging the line to support *Mini-Shinkansen*, or using Gauge Change Trains. With no new construction to *Shinkansen* standards that would be the cheapest option, but would limit train speeds to a maximum of 160 km/h so the trip would be slower.

The Wakasa route would involve building a *Shinkansen* track along the shortest route to Osaka, but would bypass Kyoto. With all-new construction it would be the most expensive.

The Hokuriku line will offer four levels of service: *Kagayaki* (Tokyo - Kanazawa, limited stops), *Hakutaka* (Tokyo - Kanazawa, all stations) a shuttle between Toyama and Kanazawa (*Tsurugi*) and a continuation of *Asama* services from Tokyo on the Nagano *Shinkansen* line.

When the first part of the new line opens, travel time between Tokyo and Kanazawa will be cut from 3 hours 47 minutes on the existing route (take the Joetsu *Shinkansen* to Echigo-Yuzawa and switch to a narrow gauge train with a maximum speed of 160km/h) to 2 hours 30 minutes.

JŌETSU SHINKANSEN

Built to connect Tokyo and Niigata and to *promote regional development* the Jōetsu Shinkansen seems to have been the brainchild of Niigata-born Prime Minister Tanaka. Tanaka allegedly drew his proposed route on a map in red pencil. Tanaka's preferred option was the way into Tokyo, terminating at Shinjuku, but economic forces forced the railway authority to a line branching off the existing Tōhoku Shinkansen at Ōmiya. Services began in November 1982.

JR East operates two categories of train on the line: the faster *Toki* and double-decker *Tanigawa*. *Toki* services run between Tokyo and Niigata while the slower all-station *Tanigawa* and double-decker *Max Tanigawa* only travel as far Echigo-Yuzawa, with a winter only branch line to the nearby ski resort of Gala-Yuzawa.

From Tokyo, the services call at Ueno, Ōmiya, Kumagaya, Honjō-Waseda, Takasaki, Maebashi, Kōgen, Echigo-Yuzawa, Urasa, Nagaoka, Tsubame-Sanjō and, finally, Niigata, providing tourists with access to onsen hot spring and ski resorts in Gunma and Niigata.

Route details and maps: <http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/routemaps/joetsushinkansen.htm>

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōkaidō Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen

Index

Find Term

KAMAKURA PERIOD

The Kamakura Period saw Japan ruled by the Kamakura Shōgunate, established in 1192 by Minamoto no Yoritomo. Japanese politics was refashioned as the emperors and their scholar-courtiers in Kyoto lost power and a feudal system built around the *samurai* warrior caste emerged. The period lasted until the emperor Go-Daigo revolt against the Shōgunate in 1331. The brief reestablishment of imperial rule became the Ashikaga Shōgunate.

Conflict between the Minamoto and Taira clans over dominance of the Imperial court (the Gempei war) ended when the Taira were defeated by Minamoto Yoshitsune in 1185.

Minamoto Yoritomo's headquarters in relatively remote and easily defended Kamakura, about 50 km south of Tokyo, became the effective centre of government. While the emperor reigned as the cultural and religious figurehead in Kyoto, Yoritomo created his own military administration (*bakufu*, or tent government) and reorganised the country, appointing local governors and officials and demanding absolute loyalty from his vassals.

His authority was confirmed when he was granted the official rank of *Shōgun* in 1192. After Yoritomo's sudden death in 1199, his son Minamoto no Yoriie was unable to control the other warrior families. Yoritomo's in-laws, the Hōjō clan, took over. By the early thirteenth century, a realignment within the *bakufu* saw the Hōjō establish a regency, with the head of the clan wielding real power while the *Shōgun* became a powerless figurehead in a direct reflection of the changed relationship between emperor and *Shōgun*. The arrangements did not go down well in Kyoto. Tension between Kyoto and Kamakura saw the Jōkyū War, also known as the Jōkyū Disturbance or the Jōkyū Rebellion, break out in 1221.

Retired Emperor Go-Toba sought out allies from the Taira, other enemies of the Minamoto and the monasteries and set out to overthrow the Shōgunate. There was a battle outside Kyōto, which the Hōjō forces won and the imperial court came under the direct control of the Shōgunate.

The Hojo installed two of their own military governors in Kyoto, seized the imperial court and manipulated the imperial succession. Toba was exiled, and Toba loyalists forfeited their estates which were redistributed to Hojo allies. The result bolstered the transformation of Japanese society, which was further strengthened in 1225.

Third regent Hōjō Yasutoki set up a Council of State to exercise judicial and legislative authority at Kamakura. In 1232, the Council adopted the *Goseibai Shikimoku*, a new legal code that underlined the shift towards a concise statement of duties and punishments that remained in effect until the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

These arrangements brought peace, which lasted until the Mongols turned their attention to Japan. Having established the Yuan Dynasty, Kublai Khan looked to expand China's sphere of influence and demanded that Japan pay tribute, threatening reprisals if they failed to do so. In rejecting the demands, Kyoto cited Japan's divine origin, dismissed the messengers, and prepared to deal with the threatened reprisals, which came in 1274.

Six hundred ships carrying more than twenty thousand Mongol, Chinese, and Korean troops reached Kyūshū and engaged the Japanese forces at Hakata, but were forced to pull back when a typhoon, the *divine wind* (*kamikaze*) decimated their fleet. Kublai launched a second invasion in 1281, which saw seven weeks of fighting in northwestern Kyūshū before a second typhoon took out the Mongol fleet.

Kyūshū remained on alert for a possible third invasion, but the Mongols had problems closer to home to worry about. Still, years of preparations to defend the country were a drain on the economy. New taxes levied to maintain preparations exacerbated financial stresses and inheritances divided family properties. As landowners were forced to turn to moneylenders Kamakura loyalists who had fought the invaders turned to the Shōgunate looking for rewards that failed to eventuate.

The end of the Kamakura Shōgunate came about through its own attempts to hold on to power by allowing other clans to increase control of their own regions and alternating the throne between different lines of the imperial family. The scheme worked until Emperor Go-Daigo defied the arrangement by naming his son as his successor.

The Shōgunate responded by exiling Go-Daigo in 1331. Loyalist forces rebelled, and the siege of Kamakura saw Nitta Yoshisada conquer the city, but the rebellion was an anti-Kamakura rather than pro-Imperial movement.

When Go-Daigo set out to restore imperial authority and reassert the throne's political power, Ashikaga Takauji, from the Minamoto clan, drove him from Kyoto, set the Northern Court contender on the throne and established the Ashikaga Shōgunate, which, despite sixty years of struggle between the Northern and Southern Courts (the Nanbokuchō period) lasted until 1573.

The Kamakura Period saw changes in Japanese society and culture as Buddhism, which had been limited to the elites in the imperial court, spread through the wider community. New sects were introduced as Zen, with its emphasis on self-discipline, concentration, and simplicity found followers among the samurai and the *Jōdo* (Pure Land) sect which assured salvation to commoners found followers among the wider populace.

KANAZAWA

With a population that's nudging towards half a million, Kanazawa, apart from its status as the capital of Ishikawa Prefecture, ranks as the biggest city in the Hokuriku region, which takes in Toyama Prefecture and Fukui Prefectures as well.

Ruled by the Maeda family, the second most powerful feudal clan after the Tokugawas through the the Edo Period, the former castle town's cultural achievements almost rivalled Kyoto and Edo (Tokyo). Like Kyoto, the city escaped Allied bombing during World War Two, so parts of the old town, including the *geisha* entertainment district, have survived and the city boasts many historical attractions and museums.

Kanazawa's main attraction is, however, *Kenrokuen*, one of Japan's three best landscape gardens, located directly opposite Kanazawa Castle in the centre of the city. It was originally the castle's outer pleasure garden and comprises ten hectares filled with trees, ponds and waterfalls.

Kenrokuen, along with the city's historical attractions, traditional handicrafts and performing arts and its proximity to the Japan Alps, Hakusan National Park and Noto Peninsula National Park makes the city a major tourist destination, attracting around seven million travellers every year.

With castles regarded as symbols of the feudal system during the Meiji Period, Kanazawa Castle became the base for the Ninth Division of the Imperial Army, with many buildings torn down and much of what remained destroyed by fire in 1888. After World War Two, the site became the main campus of Kanazawa University until a new site was developed and opened in 1998. The *Ishikawa Gate* and the *Sanjikken* Longhouse survived all that, and part of the site has been rebuilt with plans to recreate much of the rest.

Also known for traditional cuisine, high-quality gold leaf and lacquerware, the city isn't easy to reach from Tokyo (despite the seven million tourists), but that should change when the Hokuriku Shinkansen commences operating in 2014.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

KANSAI

The Kansai in the south-central region of Japan's main island Honshū is centred on the cities of Osaka and Kyoto and stretches west along the Seto Inland Sea past Kobe, Himeji and Kōbe. To the east it reaches Japan's largest freshwater lake, Lake Biwa.

As a cultural and historical entity, the region is often contrasted with Kantō (Tokyo and surrounding areas). Kansai people are seen as pragmatic, entrepreneurial and down-to-earth (the influence of Osaka merchant culture) with a sense of humour, as opposed to the more sophisticated, formal and reserved Kantō people.

The Kansai region can claim to the earliest beginnings of Japanese civilization, the country's first capital in Nara, Kyoto's shrines and temples, and traditional forms of art that evolved in Kyoto (*Noh* and *Kabuki*) and Osaka (*Bunraku* puppet theatre).

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

KINOKUNIYA

The Kinokuniya chain of bookstores, the largest in Japan, dates back to 1927 and the Great Kanto Earthquake prompted a lumber and charcoal dealer to move to a new building in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The business was refashioned into a book store and opened on January of five in January 1927 with an art gallery on the building's second floor.

That building burnt down during an air raid in May 1945 but reopened in December of the same year. Postwar growth saw the business expand to the point where the chain now has 56 stores around Japan as well as branches in the United States, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates.

The Sydney branch was originally located in Neutral Bay but subsequently relocated to George Street in the Central Business District.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

KITAKAMI

Australians might be disinclined to call a city with a population nearing 100,000 *a small place*, but if Kitakami, a city located in Iwate Prefecture was a more significant location the faster *Shinkansen* services would stop there, wouldn't they?

Kitakami, at the junction of the Kitakami and Waga Rivers, is on the Tōhoku *Shinkansen* and the Tōhoku Main Line, both of which connect Tokyo and Aomori Prefecture.

But even small places have their attractions and claims to fame. Kitakami is famous for the *sakura* that bloom in the riverside Tenshochi Park, one of the best hundred places in Japan to view cherry blossoms.

There are more than 10,000 cherry trees planted alongside the Kitakami River, and they come into blossom for one to two weeks towards the end of April. The result is a tunnel of cherry blossoms that earns the park a rating among the Tohoku region's best three cherry blossom locations alongside Hirosaki Castle and Kakunodate.

During the *sakura* season, visitors can stroll along a two kilometre riverside path, enjoy the vista from one of the sightseeing boats that operate from a jetty at the south end of the park, sample the wares of food vendors at both ends of the path and enjoy *sakura*-related festival events.

Other attractions include the Michinoku Folklore Village, an open air museum next door to Tenshochi Park where thirty preserved farmhouses and other buildings are set up to display aspects of traditional life in the Tohoku region, the nearby Kitakami City Folklore Museum, with displays of Buddhist art, and the region's natural and the cultural history, and Kitakami Michinoku Traditional Dance Festival, held in the summer.

Kitakami also boasts a site reputed to be the grave of the Heian Period *waka* poet Izumi Shikibu.

Related Glossary Terms

KŌBE

The capital of Hyōgo Prefecture, Kōbe is the fifth-largest city in Japan, thirty kilometres west of Osaka on the north shore of Osaka Bay, stretching onto the lower slopes of Mount Rokko. Part of the Kyoto-Osaka-Kōbe conurbation, the city has a population around the 1.5 million mark but did not officially exist until 1 April 1889.

Hyōgo Port was opened to foreign trade at the same time as Osaka on 1 January 1868, and had earlier links to the outside world as one of the ports from which imperial embassies to China departed. During the Kamakura Period, it was an important hub for trade with China and other countries.

Much of the shipping activity is centred on Port Island and Rokkō Island, reclaimed islands developed to give the port room to expand.

The main transport hub is Sannomiya Station, with Kōbe Station to the west and ShinKōbe Shinkansen Station to the north. Kōbe has two subway lines, with the Kaigan Line running along the coast, and the Yamate-Seishin Line towards the mountains.

The city is the point of origin of Kōbe beef, a noted centre for saké production thanks to nearby mountain water, and the site of one of Japan's most famous hot spring resorts, Arima Onsen.

The Great Hanshin Earthquake on 17 January 1995 killed thousands of people, rendered over two hundred thousand homeless, flattened tens of thousands of buildings, destroyed much of the city's transport infrastructure and diminished much of Kōbe's prominence as a major port though it remains Japan's fourth busiest port for container shipping.

Kōbe's recovery from the 1995 quake is celebrated every December with the *Luminarie*, where the city's commercial centre is decorated with illuminated metal archways.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

KYUSHU SHINKANSEN

A logical extension of the Sanyō *Shinkansen* linking ShinŌsaka with Hakata in Fukuoka, work on the Kyushu *Shinkansen* that runs parallel to the Kagoshima Main Line began in 1991 with the section from Kagoshima to ShinYatsushiro opening on 13 March 2004. That brought a reduction in travel time despite the need to change to a narrow gauge train for the rest of the journey to Hakata. Travel time between Kagoshima and ShinYatsushiro went from 130 minutes to 35, and the four hour trip between Kagoshima and Hakata was halved. When ShinYatsushiro to Hakata opened on 12 March 2011 the trip was further reduced to an hour and 20 minutes.

A line from Fukuoka to Nagasaki, the Nagasaki *Shinkansen*, was included in the 1973 Basic Plan but was renamed the Nagasaki Route and then the West Kyushu Route. The plans were modified after concerns over the need to duplicate existing narrow-gauge Nagasaki Main and Sasebo Lines, and local opposition to the final section in Nagasaki. Construction of the 45.7 km section from Takeo-Onsen to Isahaya began in 2008, and work on the 21 km section from Isahaya to Nagasaki commenced in 2012. The line is due to open by March 2023, with Gauge Change trains running on the narrow gauge line between ShinTosu and Takeo-Onsen and standard gauge *Shinkansen* lines either side of it.

The 1973 Basic Plan included an East Kyushu *Shinkansen* line from Hakata to Kagoshima, and a Trans-Kyushu *Shinkansen*, from Kumamoto to Ōita connecting with the proposed Shikoku *Shinkansen* to Matsuyama, Takamatsu and Osaka. Those plans have been shelved and are unlikely to be reconsidered until lines under construction have been finished.

Stations on the Kagoshima Route are Hakata, ShinTosu, Kurume, Chikugo-Funagoya, ShinŌmura, ShinTamana, Kumamoto, ShinYatsushiro, ShinMinamata, Izumi, Sendai and Kagoshima-Chūō.

Three levels of train run on the line, with *Tsubame* (named for the former Hakata-Kagoshima limited express service) running once or twice hourly stopping at all stations between Hakata and Kumamoto. Some services go on to Kagoshima-Chūō.

Sakura services run hourly throughout between ShinOsaka and Kagoshima-Chūō making the journey in 4 hours 10 minutes, with one or two additional services an hour between Hakata and Kumamoto or Kagoshima-Chūō.

The fastest *Mizuho* services operate a limited number of services between ShinOsaka and Kagoshima-Chūō, stopping at Hakata, Kumamoto and Kagoshima-Chuo. Although *Mizuho* cannot be used with the Japan Rail Pass, the JR Sanyo-Shikoku-Kyushu Pass and Kyushu Rail Pass are valid.

On the West Kyushu or Nagasaki Route construction of stations at ShinTosu and Saga is on hold but when the line is completed in 2023 trains will stop at Takeo-Onsen, Ureshino-Onsen, ShinŌmura, Isahaya and Nagasaki.

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen

LUMINARIE

Reputedly Japan's best display of lights, Kōbe *Luminarie* runs through early to mid-December, attracting large numbers of visitors (between three and five million every year over the past decade) and raises, according to **Wikipedia**, \$1.3 million in donations and \$6.1 million in sponsorship and merchandise sales.

Luminarie is the plural of *luminaria*, which my **Dictionary** app defines as: *a Christmas lantern consisting of a votive candle set in a small paper bag weighted with sand and typically placed with others along a driveway, sidewalk, or rooftop as a holiday decoration or, in New Mexico a Christmas Eve bonfire.*

The flamboyant light displays began in 1995, a bare eleven months after the Great Hanshin Earthquake devastated Kōbe in January that year. Two hundred thousand individually hand painted lights were donated by the Italian Government and the installation was produced by Valerio Festi and Hirokazu Imaoka.

The original intention was a one-off display that would be a symbol of hope, recovery, and renovation and run through December, but popular demand has seen it become an annual event, scaled back to twelve days covering two weekends in early December.

Each light is said to represent a life lost during in the earthquake, and the whole display is powered by electricity generated from biomass in order, so it's environmentally friendly.

Corporate sponsors include JR (Japan Rail) West, Hankyu Corporation, Nestle Group Japan and Hanshin Electric Railway.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

MAGLEV TRAINS

The spread of shinkansen-like services across the globe means a number of countries are looking towards using magnetic levitation rather than conventional wheels and axles to drive the next generation of Very Fast Trains. With vehicles levitated above a single track (guide way) by magnets creating lift and thrust, maglev trains should prove faster and quieter than wheeled systems and deliver a smoother ride. They should be able to accelerate and decelerate more quickly, should be unaffected by weather and would be more energy-efficient. The big plus lies in the fact that the system is relatively quiet, with minimal noise impact and no air pollution in a dense urban setting.

However, while maglev technology negates wear and tear on tracks and rolling stock in conventional systems, maglev tracks are much more expensive to build, requiring completely different infrastructure along the entire route.. On the other hand, they require less maintenance and have lower operating costs. Maintenance schedules, in fact, are more akin to those applying to aircraft, based on hours of operation, rather than speeds reached and distance travelled.

Still, it is hardly a new technology. The earliest patents for a train that ran along these lines were awarded to German inventor Alfred Zehden in 1905 and 1907. There have, however, only been a handful of practical commercial applications. The first was a low-speed shuttle that ran 600 metres from Birmingham International Airport to the nearby railway station between 1984 and 1995, when obsolete electronic systems made it increasingly unreliable.

Preceding it, and considerably faster, were pilot projects built in Hamburg (a 908 m track for the first International Transportation Exhibition in 1979) and a 31.5 kilometre test track in Emsland where trains regularly reached speeds approaching up to 420 kilometres per hour. The company's licence for the latter facility expired at the end of 2011. Similar demonstration systems went in at Expo 86 in Vancouver and West Berlin, and trial versions of maglev technology have been installed in the USA.

But despite widespread activity and investigation there are currently only two maglev systems in full-time commercial operation, with two under construction. Shanghai's high-speed Transrapid system began operations in April 2004, linking Pudong International Airport with Longyang Road Metro station on the eastern edge of the city. The system operates over a hundred services every day, covering the 30 km line in 7 minutes at a top speed of 431 km/h. Plans to extend the line to Shanghai Hongqiao Airport (35 km) and then to the city of Hangzhou (200 km) have proved controversial and subject to repeated delays.

Just under a year later, in March 2005, the low-speed HSST Linimo line commenced operations in time for the 2005 World Expo in Japan and carried over 10 million passengers in its first three months. With a top speed of 100 km/h, but on a 9 km line with nine stations that was never the main issue. Similar systems are under construction in Beijing and at Seoul's Incheon Airport.

The most interesting project as these pages are concerned, however, is the Chuo Shinkansen maglev. Slated to take some of the pressure off the Tokaido line by cutting tunnels at an estimated cost of US\$82 billion to build, it's subject to the usual pressures associated with shinkansen routes in Japan. A maglev line along the existing Tokaido corridor would be much cheaper, but there are issues with noise pollution and speed-related technical difficulties. Eventually, the trip between Tokyo and Osaka may be reduced to an hour. Trains would travel via Nagoya at speeds up to 500 km/h, but the Tokyo-Nagoya link is not slated to open until 2025 with another twenty years needed to complete the line to Osaka.

Related Glossary Terms

Chūō Shinkansen, Shinkansen

MERIKEN PARK

Apart from the Hotel Okura Kōbe and Kōbe Meriken Park Oriental Hotel the reclaimed parkland area known as Meriken Park home to some of Kōbe’s most iconic contemporary structures including the Kōbe Maritime Museum, the red Kōbe Port Tower and the Peace Memorial Museum to victims of the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake that preserves a section of damaged waterfront as a reminder of the earthquake's destruction.

Half of the Kōbe Maritime Museum building is devoted to the Museum itself, with exhibits covering the port’s history and role as a connection between Japan and the outside world while the remainder of the building houses the corporate museum of Kawasaki Heavy Industries, with exhibits devoted to the history of the company and its products.

To the west of the Maritime Museum the 108-metre Kōbe Port Tower offers a restaurant, a rotating cafe, with three observation decks that offer 360 degree views of the city.

Sightseeing cruises depart from the nearby Nakatottei Chuo Terminal.

Meriken Park takes its name from a rendering of *American* into Japanese, and refers to the eastern or seaward side of the Old Foreign Settlement.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

MISHIMA TAISHA SHRINE

Eight hundred metres east-southeast of JR Mishima Station, the Mishima Taisha Shinto shrine is reputed to be the grandest shrine on the Izu Peninsula. According to tradition and Nara period records, the shrine was originally located on Miyakejima and transferred from place to place before being moved to the present site in the mid-Heian Period. With the building repeatedly destroyed by fire and earthquakes the current structure dates from 1866, rebuilt after the 1854 Ansei Tōkai Earthquake. The shrine consists of three parts: the Haiden (oratory), the Honden (sanctum where the shrine deities dwell), with the Heiden in between.

In his youth Yoritomo Minamoto (1147-1199) had been exiled from Kyoto to Nirayama, ten kilometres south of Mishima and is reputed to have worshipped at Mishima Taisha seeking divine assistance in the war against his arch-rivals, the Taira clan. After nearly twenty years in exile, he rose up in arms against the Taira in 1180 and went on to establish the Kamakura Shōgunate in 1185. Since he believed he had won the war thanks to the deities of the Mishima and Hakone Shrines, he made annual visits to both on New Year's Day and rebuilt the Mishima shrine, which was extensively patronized by the Odawara Hōjō, Imagawa and Tokugawa clans.

During the Edo Period, Mishima Taisha and the post town of Mishima-shuku was a famous pilgrimage stop on the Tōkaidō highway, with travellers about to cross or just down from the 15 kilometre stage through the Hakone pass resting there.

The temple precinct includes a 1,200 years old fragrant olive tree designated a national natural monument, monuments engraved with haiku by Bashō and Wakayama Bokusui. A small museum holds significant cultural items including a lacquerware casket donated to the shrine by Masako Hojo (1157-1225, wife of Yoritomo) containing cosmetic utensils and articles from the late Heian Period listed as one of the National Treasures of Japan.

Related Glossary Terms

MOUNT FUJI

One of the country's Three Holy Mountains and, at 3,776 metres the country's highest peak, Mount Fuji's almost perfectly symmetrical cone is arguably the most common symbol of Japan. Situated 100 kilometres southwest of Tokyo Followers of Shinto have worshiped Mount Fuji since at least the 7th century. To Japanese people it's *Fuji-san*, but the apparent honorific (-*san*, as in ***Hughesy-san*** or *Suzuki-san*) translates as *mountain*.

Call it Mount Fujiyama and you're committing tautology (literally *Mount Fuji Mountain*).

There are a number of explanations for the name, including suggestions that it translated as *immortal*, *without equal* or *never-ending*. Edo Period scholar Hirata Atsutane favoured *a mountain standing up shapely as an ear of a rice plant*. As a national symbol, the mountain appears in countless artworks, with Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige producing collections called ***36 Views of Mt. Fuji***. Hokusai also managed ***One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji***.

The mountain itself is an active stratovolcano 50 kilometres in diameter at the base, rising to a summit crater 500 metres wide and 250 metres deep, the result of four phases of activity. The first, *Sen-komitake*, provided the mountain's core, followed by a basalt layer (*Komitake Fuji*) several hundred thousand years ago. *Old Fuji* formed over the top of that around 100,00 years ago with New Fuji believed to date back around 10,000 years. The volcano sits above the junction of three tectonic plates (the Amurian/Eurasian, the Okhotsk/North American and the Filipino)which form, respectively, western Japan, eastern Japan, and the Izu Peninsula.

Its most recent eruption (16 December 1707 - 1 January 1708) deposited volcanic ash over the Kanto plain, Tokyo, and as far as the northwest Pacific coast 280 kilometres away. The eruption formed a new crater halfway down the mountain's east flank. While there has been no activity for three hundred years recent activity, including the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and *tsunami*, has prompted some concern.

As the focal point of the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park the mountain is the most popular tourist site in Japan. More than a quarter of a million people make the ascent every year, most planning to catch the sunrise (*goraikō*, or *arrival of light*) by making the ascent during the night or staying in huts scattered along the four major access routes to the summit. Peak climbing season is from July to August. Visitors are discouraged from attempting the ascent at other times due to extreme weather conditions and the risk of avalanche.

The ascent passes through ten stations, with the first located at the foot of the mountain and the tenth at the summit. There is, however, no need to climb all the way.

Sealed roads go as far as the fifth station, predictably around halfway up the mountain, around 2,300 metres above sea level. There are four, with four routes to the summit: the Lake Kawaguchi, Subashiri, Gotemba, and Fujinomiya routes and four more from the foot of the mountain to the fifth stations (Shojiko, Yoshida, Suyama, and Murayama).

Assuming you're not interested in climbing all the way, the most popular fifth station takes you on to the Kawaguchiko route. It's not the closest to the summit (that is on Fujinomiya) but it has a larger car park, is most easily accessed from Tokyo and has the most mountain huts where climbers can rest or stay. Depending on your starting point, the ascent from the fifth station takes between three and eight hours with from two to five hours needed for the descent. It takes about an hour to get around the crater and its eight peaks.

Assuming you're not interested in the climb and possible issues with altitude sickness, popular Fuji-viewing locations include the Fuji Five Lake (*Fujigoko*) region on the northern side of the mountain.

Slightly further away, Lake Ashi and the Hakone region also provide highly rated views of the mountain. In favourable conditions it can be seen from Yokohama, Tokyo, and as far away as Chiba, Saitama, Tochigi and Lake Hamana.

It can also be seen from trains travelling between Tokyo and Nagoya (and thence Osaka and Kyoto) with the best view around ShinFuji Station. But there's no guarantee. Clouds and poor visibility often obscure the mountain, even from the relatively close *shinkansen* line (speaking from experience). Visibility is said to be better during the cooler seasons than in summer, and early morning and late evening are reckoned better prospects than the middle of the day.

MYODANI

Dormitory suburb of Kōbe, home to a shopping centre adjoining the subway station. It is one of four campuses of Kōbe University.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

NAGANO SHINKANSEN

Built to connect Tokyo and Nagano in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics the Nagano *Shinkansen* forms the first section of the planned Hokuriku *Shinkansen* that will extend to Kanazawa, Tsuruga and eventually Osaka. *Asama* services, named for an active volcano alongside the line take a minimum of 79 minutes to complete the journey, travelling via the Tohoku and Joetsu *Shinkansen* to Takasaki before branching off onto the first stage of the Hokuriku *Shinkansen*. The services replaced the Shinetsu Main Line limited express services which took 2 hours 50 minutes from Tokyo's Ueno Station to Nagano.

After leaving Tokyo, trains stop at Ueno and Ōmiya on the Tohoku *Shinkansen*, Kumagaya, Honjō-Waseda and Takasaki on the Joetsu *Shinkansen*, then Annaka-Haruna, Karuizawa and Sakudaira on the run into Nagano.

The Hokuriku *Shinkansen* extension from Nagano to Kanazawa should open in March 2015 with the 113-km extension from Kanazawa to Tsuruga, approved for construction in December 2012 scheduled to be completed in 2025.

Route and maps: <http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/routemaps/naganoshinkansen.html>

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tohoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen

NAGOYA

Located in the centre of the fertile Nōbi Plain plain at the head of Ise Bay, around two-thirds of the way between Tokyo and the Kyoto/Osaka conurbation, Nagoya is the industrial hub of Japan's third largest metropolitan region, the Chūkyō Metropolitan Area (population over 8.75 million). Just under two and a half million people live in the city, which dates back to 1610 and Tokugawa Ieyasu's decision to move the capital of Owari Province from Kiyosu, around seven kilometres away, to a more strategic location.

Nagoya Castle was constructed as the seat of the Owari branch of the Tokugawa clan and the town of 60,000 people, complete with shrines and temples was relocated to the new site. Around the same time, the nearby Atsuta Shrine was designated as a way station on the Tōkaidō road linking Kyoto and Edo (modern Tokyo) and Nagoya developed as a combination castle and shrine/transit town.

The second-most venerable shrine in Japan, Atsuta dates almost two millennia and houses the sacred *Kusanagi no mitsurugi* sword, one of the three imperial regalia of Japan. Not something that you'd put on public display, but there are over four thousand other artifacts on the grounds and the shrine hosts around seventy festivals every year.

Geographic position coupled with political clout saw the city develop as the hub of the surrounding region. At first it was cotton, ceramics and timber that drove the growth, but when Japan started to transform during the Meiji Era, Nagoya became an industrial centre.

A local company that made looms for textile mills moved into the automobile business in the 1930s. That was Toyota, and Honda and Mitsubishi grew up in the same area.

World War Two saw the city's manufacturing infrastructure turn towards military hardware, with around 25% of its workforce working in factories that produced almost half of the country's combat aircraft. That would have been enough to ensure U.S. Army Air Force attention, but the area also produced machine tools, railway equipment, tanks and military vehicles. The result was a series of bombing raids that destroyed much of the city and had almost half the population flee to the countryside.

Most of the city's historic buildings were destroyed, but the firebombing resulted in wide streets bulldozed through the rubble that make modern Nagoya a remarkably car-friendly city. That also means the city's public transport infrastructure isn't as highly developed as it is in other major centres (notably Tokyo and the Kansai region).

Nagoya Castle was hit on 14 May 1945, but postwar reconstruction of the main building was completed in 1959, and the concrete replica even has lifts. Other attractions include the Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology, built on the site of one of the company's original loom factories near Nagoya station, the Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Tokugawa Art Museum and surrounding Japanese garden, Nagoya City Science and Art Museums, and Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, where the collection includes works by Picasso, Matisse, Paul Klee and an assortment of Expressionists, Surrealists and postwar US and Japanese artists as well as Edo-period paintings and traditional crafts.

Temples and shrines include *Kōshō-ji*, founded in the 17th century by the Tokugawa family, *Shiroyama Hakusan* Shrine, formerly Suemori Castle, sixteenth century *Togan-ji*, where a huge wood block is said to purge sins if you touch it, *Nittai-ji*, *Arako Kannon* (the oldest building in Nagoya, with *Tahoto* pagoda intact after 472 years) and *Osu Kannon* Temple, which dates back to the Kamakura era but was moved to its current location in 1612.

Home to the head offices of, among others, Toyota Motor Corporation, Brother Industries, Makita, Suzuki Motor, Noritake, Olympus Optical and Yamaha, the city is also known for incredibly hot and humid summers, the fifteen-day Nagoya Sumo Tournament, the World Cosplay Summit for fans of Japanese animation, *miso* sauce, shrimp *tempura*, broad flat *kishimen* noodles and an eel dish called *hitsumabushi*.

ODA NOBUNAGA

Oda Nobunaga (23 June 1534 – 21 June 1582) was a powerful warlord from the Fujiwara clan. Through a combination of strategic alliances and military conquests, he overthrew the Ashikaga Shōgunate and unified half of Japan at the end of the Warring States period. He restored stable government and established conditions that allowed Toyotomi Hideyoshi to become the first ruler of the whole country since the Ōnin War. Tokugawa Ieyasu went on to establish the Shōgunate that ruled Japan until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Oda Nobunaga was the second son of Oda Nobuhide, a deputy *shugo* (military governor) in Owari Province. In 1549, he succeeded to his father's estate. Though Nobunaga was Nobuhide's legitimate successor, the clan was divided into many factions. The clan was technically under the control of Owari's *shugo*, Shiba Yoshimune, but Nobuhide's brother Oda Nobutomo used Yoshimune as his puppet. He challenged Nobunaga's succession, then murdered Yoshimune when he supported and attempted to aid Nobunaga.

Nobunaga persuaded another uncle, Oda Nobumitsu, to join his side, killed Nobutomo in and then formed alliances with Shiba Yoshikane, Yoshimune's son, the Imagawa clan from Suruga Province and the Kira clan of Mikawa Province to ensure his borders were secure.

He still had internal rivals in the form of his brother Nobuyuki and his supporters, who rebelled, were defeated, and then pardoned when Nobunaga's mother intervened. They planned another rebellion before Nobunaga faked illness to get close to Nobuyuki, and then assassinated him in Kiyosu Castle. By 1559, Nobunaga had eliminated opposition within his clan and province.

Then, in 1560 he defeated Imagawa Yoshimoto, who was moving towards Kyoto, allegedly planning to bolster the Ashikaga Shōgunate. His forces outnumbered those of the Oda clan, but a mixture of enemy complacency, cunning and helpful weather saw Imagawa defeated and the clan's influence on the wane.

Nobunaga strengthened his position by forging an alliance with Tokugawa Ieyasu, *daimyō* of the neighbouring Mikawa province and leader of the Matsudaira clan.

In 1567, Nobunaga moved north, capturing Inabayama Castle and renaming both castle and the surrounding district Gifu. It became his centre of operations as he became involved in Ashikaga Yoshiaki's quest for revenge after his brother, the thirteenth Ashikaga Shōgun was murdered. Nobunaga marched on Kyōto and made Yoshiaki Shōgun.

But the new Shōgun had no intention of being anyone's puppet. Yoshiaki set about secretly forging an anti-Nobunaga alliance and persuaded Takeda Shingen to move on Kyoto through Tokugawa territory. Ieyasu was defeated at the Battle of Mikatagahara, but night raids caused Takeda to pause. He died shortly afterwards, victim, according to different sources, of an old war wound, a sniper's arrow or pneumonia.

With their leader dead, the Takeda forces retreated, which left Nobunaga free to deal with Yoshiaki. Nobunaga deposed him and sent him into exile. That was the effective end of the Ashikaga Shōgunate, although it officially lasted until Yoshiaki died in 1597. Around the same time Nobunaga destroyed the Asakura and Azai clans, leaving the Takeda clan, now led by Takeda Katsuyori as the centre of resistance to his ambitions.

Nobunaga destroyed them in 1582 and was about to launch invasions into Echigo Province and Shikoku when one of his allies, Akechi Mitsuhide, ambushed him on an overnight stay at Honnō-ji temple in Kyoto. Nobunaga committed *seppuku* in one of the inner rooms, but the coup d'etat was short-lived. Eleven days later Mitsuhide was killed when his army was defeated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi at the Battle of Yamazaki.

Nobunaga instituted a number of changes in Japanese military and economic customs which, in turn, contributed to his success in bringing the country towards reunification.

Military victories stemmed from tactical innovations, new technologies and developments in castle fortifications. He built up the warrior class, appointing officials on the basis of ability rather than social status or personal relationships. Many of his innovations went on the form the basis of practices by the Tokugawa Shōgunate.

Other changes moved the economy from a rural base with the growth of castle towns linked by roads that facilitated trade and also the rapid deployment of military forces. International trade was encouraged and expanded. A move towards a market economy saw monopolies and tolls abolished and closed guilds and associations opened.

Nobunaga's headquarters at Azuchi Castle beside Lake Biwa was reputedly the greatest castle in Japanese history, and practices inside the complex established the tea ceremony as an environment to where business and politics were discussed. An interest in Western art and weaponry extended as far as support for Jesuit missionaries and the first Christian church in Kyoto, though Nobunaga was not a convert himself. That support reflected a long-standing rivalry with the Tendai Buddhist sect, a powerful force in traditional politics, and the Ikkō sect, who formed a major obstacle to his ambitions to unify the country.

Related Glossary Terms

Sengoku period

ODAWARA

Located on the Ashigara Plains, in the far west of Kanagawa Prefecture, with the Hakone Mountains to the north and west, Odawara is a logical point of entry to Hakone hot springs resorts and Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park. The Yugawara area within the city boundaries is a well-known hot spring resort.

Five railway lines pass through Odawara, with the Tokaido *Shinkansen* offering a 35 minute trip from Tokyo Station on *Hikari* or *Kodama*, though the fastest *Nozomi Shinkansen* does not stop there, Rail alternatives are the regular Tokaido Line, with a 100-minute journey passing through Shinagawa, Kawasaki and Yokohama or the private Odakyu Line, where the Odawara Express from Shinjuku takes two hours to make the journey. From Yokohama Station, it's 16 minutes by *Hikari* or *Nozomi* or 56 minutes on the JR Tokaido Line, transit times that make it possible to live in Odawara and commute to Tokyo or Yokohama.

A castle town, Odawara was the capital of the Hōjō clan during the Sengoku period. After the Hōjō had been defeated in the Battle of Odawara in 1590, the territory came under the control of Tokugawa Ieyasu. Odawara flourished as a post town on the Tōkaidō highway connecting Edo (Tokyo) with Kyoto.

After the Meiji Restoration, Odawara Domain became Odawara Prefecture, which was in turn merged with Ashigara Prefecture and incorporated into Kanagawa Prefecture in 1876. As the economic and political focus in Kanagawa shifted north to Yokohama, Odawara went into decline, a situation that was exacerbated when the original route of the Tōkaidō Main Line bypassed the city.

The Great Kantō earthquake of 1923 devastated Tokyo and the surrounding prefectures (Chiba, Kanagawa, and Shizuoka) and caused widespread damage. Ninety percent of the buildings collapsed, and fires in the rubble took care of most of what survived the quake.

Things started to revive when the Tanna Tunnel brought the Tōkaidō Main Line through the city in 1934 and on 15 August 1945, Odawara was the last Japanese city to be bombed during World War Two.

As suggested above, visitors are most likely to pass through Odawara *en route* to Hakone, but Odawara Castle is rated as the best example of a castle in the immediate area around Tokyo. It is a popular sightseeing spot, with the castle tower offering views over the city, and a highly-rated venue for *sakura* viewing in spring.

Odawara is known for *kamaboko* (steamed processed fish), *himono* (dried fish made from a type of horse mackerel) stockfish, *umeboshi* (salted plums), traditional herbal medicines, paper lanterns, and lacquerware.

Related Glossary Terms

Hakone

ŌNIN WAR

Although it only lasted a decade and was largely restricted to the Kyōto region the Ōnin War (1467–77) ushered in *Sengoku jidai*, the Warring States Period (1490–1590), a struggle between the *daimyō* houses that ended when Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu managed to unite Japan towards the end of the sixteenth century.

Triggered by a disputed succession to the Shōgunate, the war resulted from longstanding factional rivalries between Hosokawa Katsumoto, prime minister (1452–64) for *Shōgun* Ashikaga Yoshimasa, and his father-in-law Yamana Sōzen. The Onin War was thus a conflict between the two most powerful *daimyō* families, the Hosokawa and the Yamana.

Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimasa's rule had seen cultural developments known as *Higashiyama Bunka* (the Culture of the Eastern Mountain) including the tea ceremony and developments in flower arrangement, noh theatre, poetry, garden design and architecture.

Yoshimasa was just fourteen when he succeeded his elder brother, Yoshikatsu, and by age twenty-nine he seems to have had enough. He planned to retire (which may not have been unusual in itself) and give up real authority (which, it seems, was), a decision that may have been prompted by another succession dispute between the Hatakeyama and Shiba clans which had drawn in the Hosokawa and Yamana. His desire for a quiet life, based around the tea ceremony, poetry and meditation, may have been understandable but was never a realistic prospect.

The problem was that he didn't have an heir, and he adroitly solved the problem by appointing his younger brother Yoshimi, who had taken monastic vows, to the position in 1464. That would have been fine if his wife Tomiko hadn't adroitly produced a son, Yoshihisa, in 1465. Naturally, mother wanted son to take over from father and, predictably, father seems to have changed his mind.

Younger brother Yoshimi was allied to the Hosokawa, so their Yamana rivals supported the infant's claim to the Shōgunate. In 1466 Yamana Sōzen and Hosokawa Katsumoto began to gather troops near Kyoto. Both called for support from their relations and vassals, with the Yamana lining up 80,000 supporters against 85,000 on the Hosokawa side, armies that were the largest seen in Japanese history up to that stage.

But no one wanted to be held responsible for starting the war, and Yoshimasa remained as Shōgun. As the clans raised their armies and marched them to Kyoto, he issued a decree in an attempt to defuse the situation. Whoever attacked first would be declared a rebel, which carried with it the threat of execution and, more seriously, the confiscation of all the clan's property.

Yoshimasa may have been weak, but this was a powerful threat when the two sides were closely balanced and still in the process of recruiting allies. The threat was never going to be enough to defuse the situation as the niggling between the two sides intensified. Raids were followed by retaliation, retaliation by raids.

A Hosokawa mansion burned to the ground. A Yamana rice shipment was intercepted.

Rumours that Yamana Sozen was going to attack the Imperial Palace prompted the removal of the Emperor and the Imperial family to the Shōgunate's headquarters in the Muromachi District. Yamana attacked the Imperial Palace,

Hosokawa supporters burned a Yamana general's mansion, along with the block in which it was situated, to the ground.

By July, northern Kyoto was in ruins in a medieval equivalent of the Western Front in World War One. By September anyone who could get out of the city was gone as reinforcements for the antagonists flowed in.

A realignment in 1468 when Yoshimi broke with his brother, who duly declared his son the favoured successor, did nothing to stop the fighting, which continued unabated.

Katsumoto scored a political victory when he convinced Shōgun and Emperor to denounce the Yamana as rebels, but the carnage continued, unaffected by the deaths of Hosokawa Katsumoto and Yamana Sozen in 1473.

Two years later Yoshimasa emerged from seclusion and began to order feudal lords on both sides out of Kyoto. Many obeyed and began to disengage, but the fighting continued until 1477 when Yamana leader Ouchi Masahiro agreed to leave. He burned the section of Kyoto he'd controlled, the last one that had remained reasonably intact, on the way out.

In the end the war finished because no one had the strength to carry it on.

In the meantime, Yoshimasa had been planning *Ginkaku-ji*, the Silver Pavilion that would match his grandfather's *Kinkaku-ji*. His complacent attitude to what had been going on around him effectively sanctioned private wars and skirmishes between the *daimyō*. As they made their way back from Kyoto, no part of Japan escaped the violence. Fighting in the provinces continued for another century until Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu were able to reunite the country in the late 16th century.

Related Glossary Terms

Sengoku period

ONSEN

Although *onsen* is the word for hot springs in Japanese, the term usually refers to facilities and inns around the springs as much as the springs themselves. Volcanic activity means there are thousands of *onsen* across the archipelago, a key element in the domestic tourist market.

Onsen come in many forms, with outdoor and indoor baths operated as public or private concerns, with the latter often part of a hotel, *ryokan* or bed and breakfast operation. While *onsen* are often found in the countryside, there are establishment that offer similar facilities in many major cities. They are a major attraction for Japanese couples, families or company groups who want to relax.

Traditionally, *onsen* were located outdoors, using water from geothermally heated springs, as opposed to *sentō* (indoor public bath houses where baths use heated tap water). Water in an *onsen* must contain at least one of nineteen designated chemical substances and be warmer than 25 °C before any reheating takes place. Major resort hotels feature themed spa baths and artificial waterfalls. An *onsen* may have separate baths with different waters offering differing mineral compositions and healing properties.

Men and women bathed together until gender separation was introduced during the Meiji Restoration. Mixed bathing persists at some *onsen*, which usually also provide the option of women-only baths or different hours for the two sexes. Bathers are not usually allowed to wear Swimsuits are not permitted in most *onsen*, though some require guests to wear a swimsuit in mixed baths.

Guests are expected to wash and rinse themselves at bathing stations equipped with stools, hand held shower heads, wooden buckets, and toiletries before entering the water and entering the *onsen* with traces of soap on the body is unacceptable.

Guests usually bring a small towel with them to use as a wash cloth and set the towels off to the side of the baths, or fold the towels and place them on their heads. It is unacceptable to place a towel in the water, or to wring a wet towel into the baths.

Many *onsen* ban tattoos, which are associated with the Yakuza and the rule is often strictly enforced, foreigners included.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

PHILOSOPHER'S PATH

The two-kilometre-long Philosopher's Path (*Tetsugaku no michi*) in the northern part of Kyoto's Higashiyama district follows a canal lined by hundreds of cherry trees, making it one of the city's most popular *hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) spots.

The canal the path follows is a branch of the Lake Biwa Canal which tunnels 20 kilometres through the mountains to nearby Shiga Prefecture. The canal dates back to the Meiji era and was used to power Japan's first hydroelectric power plant. The aqueduct in the grounds of *Nanzenji* is part of the canal.

The path begins just down the hill from *Ginkakuji* and ends at *Nyakuoji Jinja Shrine*. Along the way, it passes two temples (*Honen-in* and *Anrakuji*) and *Otoyo no Kuni Shrine*. With the temples at either end and nearby Eikan-do Zenrin-ji, a total of five temples and two shrines makes the path a popular attraction for sightseers at any time of year. It is particularly spectacular (and crowded) in spring and autumn. That popularity is reflected in the number of restaurants, cafes, and boutiques along the way.

The path gets its name due to Kyoto University professor Nishida Kitarō's habit of using it as part of his daily stroll to work from the time he was appointed to the philosophy faculty in 1910 until he retired in 1928.

Related Glossary Terms

Ginkaku-ji

Index

Find Term

SANNOMIYA

The name of a district as well as the station that acts as the transport hub of the Sannomiya is, in effect, downtown Kōbe, having superseded Motomachi and Sannomiya which lie just to the west of Sannomiya. The district's rise to prominence began when the Sogo Department Store moved to a new location beside the existing station.

JR West, Hankyu Railway, Hanshin Electric Railway, Kōbe Municipal Subway, and New Transit (the Port Island monorail) all use the station facilities, with two subways on the Seishin-Yamate and Kaigan Lines.

The area to the north of the station is a noted eating and drinking district. On the edge, Nankinmachi is the only Chinatown in western Japan and to the east, towards the port, the Old Foreign Settlement has a number of luxury brand shops and fashion. Center Gai Shopping Street runs west from Sannomiya through Motomachi and is an arcade lined with shops selling almost anything the average consumer is likely to want.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

SANYŌ SHINKANSEN

In the wake of the Tōkaidō *Shinkansen*'s success, it was extended westward to connect Shin-Ōsaka with Hakata Station in Fukuoka, a project that was completed in 1975, bringing Kōbe, Himeji, Okayama and Hiroshima onto the system. The fastest (*Nozomi* and *Mizuho*) services on the line can take passengers from Hakata to Osaka in less than two-and-a-half hours, and with the right connections the trip to Tokyo can be done in under six hours.

From Hakata, the Kyushu *Shinkansen* continues south to Kagoshima.

After Shin-Ōsaka, *Kodama* (the slower, all-station) services stop at Shin-Kōbe, Nishi-Akashi, Himeji, Aioi, Okayama, Shin-Kurashiki, Fukuyama, Shin-Onomichi, Mihara, Higashi-Hiroshima, Hiroshima, Shin-Iwakuni, Tokuyama, Shin-Yamaguchi (formerly Ogori, renamed in October 2003), Asa, Shin-Shimonoseki and Kokura, before arriving in Hakata around five hours later.

There are usually three *Nozomi* services per hour (two Shin-Osaka > Hakata and one Shin-Osaka > Hiroshima) with most northbound trains providing a through service to the Tokaido Shinkansen. The other super express service (the *Mizuho*) provides a through service to the Kyushu Shinkansen to Kagoshima with six round trips per day in mornings and evenings. *Nozomi* and *Mizuho* trains cannot be accessed by Japan Rail Pass holders but they are covered by the JR Sanyo-Shikoku-Kyushu Pass and JR West Sanyo Pass. A *Hikari* service from Tokyo continues as far as Okayama every hour, serving all stations between Shin-Osaka and Okayama, while *Sakura* operate between Shin-Osaka and Kagoshima-Chuo stopping at a few more stations than the faster services.

In practical terms, the Tokaido, Sanyo and Kyushu lines run more or less as a contiguous southbound line. Services run between the Tokaido and Sanyo lines, so it is possible to travel from Kagoshima to Osaka, for example, though you'd need to change trains if you're going on to Tokyo.

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen

SENGOKU PERIOD

Lasting from the Onin War (1467-77) to the reunification of Japan at the end of the sixteenth century, the Sengoku period was marked by social and political upheaval until political power was consolidated under the Tokugawa Shōgunate. A century and a quarter of almost-constant civil war mean it is also known as the Warring States period.

The aftermath of the Onin War saw a weakening of central authority, with regional *daimyō* including the Shimazu, Takeda, and Imagawa, establishing independent domains to fill the vacuum. While some clans were able to expand their spheres of influence, others were weakened and toppled by more capable underlings in a process termed *gekokuujō* (literally, "low conquers high"). With the Emperor a marginal ceremonial and religious figure and the Shōgunate less powerful than it had been everyone else was out to secure their own niche in the pecking order. At the same time, despite political instability there was economic growth as the *daimyō* built up their armies and their support base through flood control and land reclamation. Agricultural production expanded, and harvests increased substantially. New gold, silver, copper, and iron mined fostered the development of foundries. Cultivation of cotton, which had been imported, started in Mikawa Province and cotton became the principal fabric. Those advances produced surpluses that generated trade with China and Korea and the domestic economy developed as the use of currency became widespread.

Commercial considerations saw the rise of centres where commodities were exchanged and distributed. Kyōto resumed its role as the country's industrial and commercial hub, and powerful merchants attained a degree of autonomy as towns grew up around the castles of influential *daimyō*. The desire for freedom also saw peasants weary of debt and taxes unite with monks from the Pure Land sect in uprisings (*Ikkō-ikki*) seeking to set up independent domains, with the most successful, in Kaga Province, remaining independent for nearly a century.

But despite the positive aspects of these developments, it was obvious someone needed to reimpose central authority. Oda Nobunaga re-established the Muromachi Shōgunate after his armies entered Kyōto in 1568. Nobunaga's attempt to unify the country ended when he was assassinated by one of his generals in 1582.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi continued the process, conquering Shikoku and Kyushu, and while he united Japan in 1590 by defeating the later Hojo clan in the siege of Odawara he died in 1598 without leaving an adult successor.

After Tokugawa Ieyasu's victory at the battle of Sekigahara in 1600, it took another fifteen years to finalise the process with the end of the Siege of Osaka. The ensuing Tokugawa Shōgunate lasted until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Paradoxically, over a century of civil war, Confucianism, classical Chinese poetry and ink painting and the Japanese classics diffused across the country, spread by Zen priests and poets invited to the provinces by the new Sengoku *daimyō* and wealthy merchants. Zen-influenced poetry and art flourished, along with landscaping and the tea ceremony in an era that brought a transition from a decentralized feudal system to a centralized state.

Related Glossary Terms

Kamakura period, Oda Nobunaga, Ōnin War

SHAMISEN

The three-stringed *shamisen*, a plucked instrument played with a plectrum (*bachî*) can be played solo, or in ensembles with other *shamisen*, flute, *ko-tsuzumi* (a small, hourglass-shaped shoulder drum or large floor drum (*taiko*) as an accompaniment to *geisha* dances and Japanese dramatic forms, notably *kabuki* and *bunraku*.

The *shamisen* derives from the Chinese *sanxian* introduced to Japan through the Ryūkyū Kingdom (Okinawa), where it became the *sanshin* around the sixteenth century.

The instrument was introduced to *geisha* culture in the mid-eighteenth century, and *geisha* are expected to learn to play the instrument, which takes years to master.

The instrument is similar in size to a guitar or banjo, with a fretless neck and strings stretched across a resonating drum-like rounded rectangular body (the *dō*), which amplifies the sound of the strings. The *bachî* is often used to strike both strings and skin, creating a highly percussive sound.

The *sao*, or neck of the instrument is usually divided into pieces that fit together, since most *shamisen* can easily be disassembled and stowed away. The pegs used to wind the strings were traditionally fashioned out of ivory, but are increasingly fashioned out of wood and plastic. The three strings were traditionally made of silk (more recently, nylon) stretched across the *dō*, raised from it by a bridge, or *koma*, which can be made of bamboo, ivory, ox-bone, rosewood, buffalo horn, *kōki* wood or plastic and rests directly on the taut skin. The lowest string is laid lower so that it buzzes, creating a characteristic timbre similar to the buzzing of a sitar). Rather than working from a set tuning, as with a guitar or a violin, the *shamisen* is tuned according to the register of the singer, or the player's personal preference.

Related Glossary Terms

Geisha

Index

Find Term

SHINKANSEN

You might think *Shinkansen* translates as *bullet train*, but the term means *new trunk line*, and applies to a network of high-speed lines operated by the Japan Railways (JR) Group of companies. All services except the Akita and Yamagata *Shinkansen* run on tracks built for and exclusively used by high speed trains.

Services on the main routes operate at three levels:

- **fast**, stopping only at major centres, badged as *Nozomi* (Tokaido and Sanyo), *Mizuho* (Sanyo and Kyushu), *Hayabusa* and *Hayate* (Tohoku)
- **semi-fast**, stopping at intermediate centres, *Hikari* (Tokaido and Sanyo), *Hikari Rail Star* (Sanyo), *Sakura* (Sanyo and Kyushu), *Yamabiko* or *Max Yamabiko* (Tohoku)
- **local**, stopping at all stations on the Shinkansen line, labelled as *Kodama* (Tokaido and Sanyo), *Tsubame* (Kyushu), *Nasuno* or *Max Nasuno* (Tohoku)

Services on other lines run as *Komachi* (Akita), *Tsubasa* (Yamagata), *Toki* or *Max Toki* and *Tanigawa* or *Max Tanigawa* (Jōetsu) and *Asama* or *Max Asama* (Hokuriku/Nagano)

Shinkansen services have carried nearly 10 billion passengers, but the only injuries and the single fatality have been caused by closing doors. Passengers have, however, suicided by jumping both from or in front of moving trains. There are also issues with noise, particularly with the problem of tunnel boom, caused by trains coming out of tunnels at high speed.

For convenience, frequency, punctuality and passenger comfort *Shinkansen* services are hard to beat. Trains depart with split second punctuality, carriage interiors are spacious, seats usually face forward but can be turned 180 degrees to create a group of seats facing each other. Most trains have both non-reserved seats and reserved seats in two classes, but reservations are required for *Hayabusa*, *Hayate* and *Komachi*.

Regular seats are laid out in threes on either side of an aisle and offer generous leg room. The equivalent of airline business class on airplanes comes in Green Cars, with two seats on either side of the passageway, foot rests, reading lights, electrical outlets for both seats and a seat warmer. The newest trains on the Tohoku *Shinkansen* offer the equivalent of first class with single seats and additional amenities.

Trains have overhead shelves that handle airline carry on baggage and there is space for two or three suitcases behind the last row of seats in each carriage on a *first in best dressed* basis. There's probably enough room to fit a suitcase into the space in front of your seat, though it's not the most comfortable solution.

For travellers who live outside Japan discounts offered by the Japan Rail Pass make *Shinkansen* travel an extremely cost effective means of travel on all services except *Nozomi* and *Mizuho*, but you can only access regular seats.

Most trains are served by food carts with a selection of snacks, drinks and boxed *bento* meals. WiFi is available on some trains between Tokyo and Shin-Osaka, but requires a subscription or a one-day pass that has to be purchased before you board the train.

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Maglev Trains, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen

The *Shinkansen* network dates back to a pre-War proposal for a standard gauge railway line between Tokyo and Shimonoseki. There were plans to extend the line to Korea through an undersea tunnel and on to Beijing, connecting with the Trans-Siberian Railway, possibly even extending to Singapore. Those plans were abandoned in 1943, but there had been some construction work and some tunnels on the network date back to the original project.

As the post-war Japanese economy rebuilt, traffic on the Tōkaidō Main Line grew steadily and by the mid-1950s, the line was operating at full capacity. The Railway Ministry decided to revisit the standard gauge *Shinkansen* project after a newly introduced train set a world speed record of 145 km/h for a narrow gauge train. A standard gauge line would deliver higher speeds and government approval in December 1958 allowed construction of the first segment of the Tōkaidō *Shinkansen* to begin in April 1959 at an estimated cost of ¥200 billion. The final cost was nearly double that figure.

Completed in time for the Tokyo Olympics the line began service on 1 October 1964 and had an immediate impact, carrying one hundred million passengers up to 13 July 1967, and passing the one billion mark in 1976. As a result, it was extended to connect Shin-Ōsaka with Hakata (Fukuoka). That line, the Sanyō *Shinkansen*, was further extended when the Kyushu *Shinkansen* from Hakata to Kagoshima was completed in 2011. A West Kyushu route to Nagasaki running Gauge Change trains capable of running on an existing narrow gauge line between is under construction and should open by March 2023.

Work on the Tōhoku *Shinkansen* connecting Tokyo with the north of Honshū commenced in November 1971, and the line opened in stages from June 1982. The line reached Aomori in December 2010. An extension passing through the Seikan Tunnel should reach Shin-Hakodate, on Hokkaidō in March 2016 and Sapporo by 2035.

Branch lines of the Tōhoku *Shinkansen*, the Yamagata *Shinkansen* (Fukushima – Shinjō) and Akita *Shinkansen* (Morioka – Akita) run on the Tohoku line from Tokyo, then branch onto lines where the original narrow gauge has been upgraded. Since these are not purpose built Shinkansen lines the maximum speed is limited to 130 km/h, but travel time is reduced since passengers no longer need to change trains at Fukushima and Morioka.

Planning for the Jōetsu *Shinkansen* connecting Tokyo and Niigata was initiated in 1971 by Niigata-born Prime Minister Tanaka, and services began on 15 November 1982, branching off the Tōhoku *Shinkansen* at Ōmiya.

Completed in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics, the Nagano *Shinkansen* branches off the Jōetsu and Tōhoku lines at Takasaki and forms the first section of the Hokuriku *Shinkansen*, with an extension from Nagano to Kanazawa scheduled to open in March 2015. From there, the line should proceed on to Tsuruga and will eventually loop back to Osaka.

Work on the Chūō *Shinkansen*, a *maglev* (magnetic levitation) line from Tokyo to Osaka via Nagoya was due to commence in 2014, with the line following the shortest route through (as in under) the Japanese Alps from Shinagawa to Nagoya with 86% of the 286 km route underground.

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen

SHIZUOKA

Shizuoka, centrally located between Tokyo and Nagoya along the Tokaido Corridor is the capital of Shizuoka Prefecture and the prefecture's second-largest city. The prefecture is wet by Japanese standards, but Shizuoka is the sunniest of Japan's major cities due to the absence of summer fog and a location that shelters it from northwesterly winds off the Sea of Japan. The name is made up of two *kanji*, *Shizu* ("still" or "calm") and *oka* ("hills").

Shizuoka Domain was created out of the older Sunpu Domain in 1869, and the name was retained when the city was incorporated. The area has been inhabited since prehistoric times, and the Toro archaeological site indicates a significant Yayoi period (400 BC-300 AD) settlement in what is now the central city.

Shizuoka is on the Tōkaidō Main Line from Tokyo to Osaka and is served by the Tōkaidō Shinkansen, limited express and regional trains.

Since the modern city was founded in 1889 Shizuoka has seen its share of misfortune.

The day the Tōkaidō Main Line connection opened (1 February 1889) a fire destroyed most of downtown Shizuoka. Post-typhoon floods in 1914 inundating the downtown area and the city had been rebuilt after a 6.4 magnitude earthquake in 1935 when another fire destroyed much of the central business district. Since there were few significant military targets in the area, the city was largely unaffected by air raids until a firebombing raid on 19 June 1945 inflicted high casualties and significant destruction.

The city is known for high-quality green tea, strawberries grown on inclined stone walls, wasabi, citrus fruits especially Satsuma, lotus roots, roses and peaches. Local delicacies include *oden* (boiled eggs, *daikon* radish, *konnyaku* and fish cakes stewed in beef stock and dark soy sauce), *zōni* soup (rice cakes cooked with vegetables in broth) and *tororo* (grated yam soup). A *tororo* restaurant named Chojiya in the Mariko-juku area of Shizuoka dates back to 1598 and was depicted by Hiroshige in his prints of the fifty-three stops along the Tōkaidō.

Scenic attractions include:

- Nihondaira, a scenic plateau in the centre of the city, with views of Mt. Fuji, Southern Alps, Izu Peninsula and Suruga Bay.

- The Nihondaira Ropeway connecting Nihondaira to Kunozan Toshogu Shrine.

- The ruins of Sunpu Castle, built in 1599, destroyed in 1869 and subsequently turned into a park which is a popular venue for hanami (*sakura* viewing).

- Kunōzan Tōshō-gū shrine, the burial place of Tokugawa Shōgun Tokugawa Ieyasu, might have lost a number of structures but thirteen remain. The Honden and Heiden, built in 1617, are protected as Important Cultural Properties. The museum has displays, including *tachi* (Japanese swords) and suits of armour.

- Shizuoka Sengen Jinja, a group of three Shinto shrines that enjoyed the patronage of the warrior clans who dominated the area through the Kamakura and Muromachi: periods. The complex burned down in 1804 and was subsequently rebuilt in the Momoyama style, with extensive lacquer, wood carvings, and gold leaf.

- Mariko-juku, the twentieth of the fifty-three stations along the Tōkaidō road in Suruga Ward, was one of the smallest post stations on the Tōkaidō. It's a 30 minute bus ride from JR Shizuoka Station, with row-houses from the Edo Period and the aforementioned long-established Chojiya tororojiru restaurant. The post station is the subject of [a classic ukiyo-e print by Ando Hiroshige](#). The neighbourhood is also home to Sumpu Takumishuku, a try-it-yourself facility for traditional crafts and can be previewed [here](#).

- The Toro archaeological site in Suruga Ward dates back to the late Yayoi period in the first century. The remains were discovered in 1943 by workers constructing a World War Two munitions plant, excavated in 1947 and 1948 and re-excavated between 1999 and 2004. Today, the site has reproductions of ancient pit-houses and high-floored granaries as used as far back as the 3rd and 4th centuries B.C., along with reconstructed rice paddies and associated canals and waterways. The site is preserved as a National Historic Monument with a museum displaying artifacts unearthed in the dig.

- Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art at the foot of Nihondaira includes [a Rodin wing](#) with a collection of the sculptor''s works along with other European sculptures.

- A 25-minute walk from JR Yui Station, Tokaido Hiroshige Art Museum features Utagawa Hiroshige's ***Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido*** ukiyo-e woodblock prints.

- The Miho Peninsula in city's Shimizu Ward features *Miho no Matsubara*, a seven-kilometre stretch of seashore is lined with pine trees designated as one of New Three Views of Japan and added to the World Heritage List in 2013.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

SHIZUOKA PREFECTURE

Shizuoka Prefecture in central Japan halfway between Tokyo and Osaka stretches along the Pacific coast between Suruga Bay and the Minami Alps and east to the Izu Peninsula, a resort area sometimes referred to as Japan's Riviera. Shizuoka has a subtropical climate, hot and humid in summer and, being close to the warm Kuroshio Current, wet by Japanese standards.

The Fuji volcanic belt extends to Izu Peninsula, so an abundance of hot springs makes the prefecture a tourist attraction, alongside features, including Suruga Bay, the Sea of Enshu and Lake Hamana. Tea is the prefecture's most famous product.

The province of Suruga dates back to the early Nara period. Early in the eighth century, the capital was relocated to a more central location on the Abe River at Sunpu, which became the capital of the Imagawa clan during the Muromachi period.

The city changed hands several times after the Imagawa clan were defeated at the Battle of Okehazama, and ended up being controlled by Tokugawa Ieyasu, who made Sunpu the site of a secondary court after he retired from the Shōgunate in 1606.

For the next two hundred and sixty years, Sunpu was *tenryō* (directly administered by the Shōgunate), ruled by the *Sunpu jōdai*, the Shōgun's nominee, officially based in Sunpu.

In 1869, after the end of the Tokugawa Shōgunate, Tokugawa Iesato was assigned the short-lived Sunpu Domain, which became Shizuoka Prefecture in 1871, and expanded to absorb Hamamatsu Prefecture and the western part of Ashigaru Prefecture in 1876. The merger brought the city of Hamamatsu and the Izu Peninsula into Shizuoka.

Scenic and tourist attractions include Mount Fuji, Lake Hamana, the sand dunes in Hamamatsu and Omaezaki and the rickety suspension bridges in Sumatakyo Gorge.

Oigawa Railway operates one of a handful of steam engines operating in Japan between Kanaya Station in Shimada and Senzu Station in Kawanehon on a line built to carry workers and materials upstream to a dam construction site. The line runs through a mountain area with no cities or towns. Most passengers are tourists visiting one of the *onsen* resorts along the way, hikers bound for the Southern Alps, train enthusiasts or photographers. The line operates a variety of historic locomotives and period carriages. From Senzu, the company's Ikawa Line is the only rack-and-pinion railway in Japan, running north as far as Ikawa, at the foot of the Southern Alps with 61 tunnels and 51 bridges in just 25.5 kilometres. Both lines are highly rated scenic routes during the *sakura* and autumn leaf seasons.

The prefecture is host to a number of festivals and special events

- During the *sakura* season on the first weekend in April the Shizuoka Festival recreates Tokugawa Ieyasu's custom of taking daimyō to view the cherry blossoms at Sengen Shrine. A flower-viewing procession with four hundred performers, a cherry blossom dance in the evening and costumed merchants selling food to visitors are some of the highlights.

- In Shimoda, the southern-most city on the Izu Peninsula the three-day Kurofune Matsuri (Black Ship Festival), held on the third weekend of May, is the city's major tourist attraction. The festival commemorates the arrival of Commodore Perry and the Shimoda Treaty which opened Shimoda and Hakodate to American ships in 1854 with a parade of marching bands and naval officers in period costumes. Events emphasising Japanese art and culture feature *origami*, *ikebana*, martial arts, Japanese Tea Ceremony and *taiko* drums.

- Shizuoka City's Abekawa Fireworks display on the banks of the Abe River upstream from Abekawa Bridge on the last Saturday of July features 15,000 aerial fireworks and fifty ground-based set pieces.

- *Shimizu Minato Matsuri* (Shimizu Port Festival) on the first Friday, Saturday and Sunday in August commemorates the opening of Shimizu port to international trade with mass dances featuring 30,000 performers on the first two days and a seaside fireworks display on the Sunday.

- The biggest event on the calendar, however, is the Daidogei Street Performance World Cup, an annual international busker's festival held in November in central Shizuoka City. The competition attracts over two million visitors each year to watch street performers from around the world in performance spaces around downtown Shizuoka City, with a main stage in Sunpu Park (*Sunpu kouen*).

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

SŌAMI

Painter, art critic, poet, landscape gardener, and master of the tea ceremony Sōami, also known as Kangaku Shinsō (1472-1525) was the last of three generations of connoisseurs who served as artistic custodians of the Ashikaga Shōguns' art collection.

As the son and grandson of painters and connoisseurs (Geiami and Nōami, respectively), he is a significant figure who specialised in landscapes painted on screens and sliding doors in Muromachi-period mansions and temples. Some of his greatest pieces covered over twenty *fusuma* panels, depicting Japanese landscapes using Chinese techniques.

As a critic, in 1511 he revised his grandfather's famous catalog of Chinese paintings, the *Kundaikan sayū chōki* (compiled in 1476).

Sōami's work was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Zen and his landscape work can be seen in two of the most celebrated Zen temple gardens in Japan, *Ryōan-ji* and *Daisei-in*, both in Kyōto, and both outstanding examples of *kare sansui*, dry landscape combinations of stones and sand used to suggest mountains and water. He is also believed to have planned the garden of Ginkaku-ji, the temple on the site of the villa built by his patron, Ashikaga Yoshimasa.

Daisen-in also holds a set of landscape *fusuma-e*, but with the paintings done on sliding doors in environments where flash photography is forbidden there are few examples of his work available to view away from their original setting. The reader can get a sense of his work from the *Landscape of the Four Seasons* (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/41.59.1,2>).

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term

TAKAYAMA

The name means *tall mountain*, and in a mountainous country, predictably, there's more than one of them. To avoid confusion, the Takayama in the mountainous Hida region of Gifu Prefecture is commonly labelled *Hida-Takayama*. With a population around the hundred thousand mark, Takayama is a compact city with a downtown area that's easy to cover on foot, though some attractions (Hida Folk Village, for example) are best accessed by bus. Interestingly, a series of local government mergers since the mid-1930s have made Takayama the largest city in Japan as measured by surface area.

Located in the heart of the Japanese Alps, Takayama is the major transport hub for the Hida region, and the surrounding ski resorts and *onsen* have delivered a high (three star) rating in the **Michelin Guide**. The city is well worth visiting for its beautifully preserved old town, festivals held in spring and autumn, *sakura* (mid- to late-April, around three weeks after Nagoya) and autumn foliage (late October into the first week of November).

Takayama is part of the heavy snow area with snowfall on most days throughout the winter. The annual snowfall comes in at around five metres between the end of November and early April.

The city rose to prominence during the feudal period as a source of high quality timber. Skilled carpenters from Takayama are believed to have worked on the Imperial Palace in Kyoto, and many temples in Kyoto and Nara and the city was important enough to be placed under the direct control of the Tokugawa *Shōgun* in the seventeenth century.

As a result, in spite of relative isolation, it was a prosperous centre that developed its own regional culture over a period of some three centuries.

Takayama is famous for its well-preserved merchant quarter (*Sanno-machi*, three narrow lanes lined with wooden buildings housing *saké* breweries, boutiques and museums), *Takayama Jinya* (the building from which the *Shōgun*'s representative administered the area), *Takayama Yatai Kaikan* (Takayama Festival Float Exhibition Hall, where the festival floats are stored), the Hida Folk Village (an open-air museum that recreates a traditional mountain village), *ramen* noodles and Hida beef.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

TŌHOKU SHINKANSEN

Construction work on the 674 km Tōhoku *Shinkansen*, connecting Tokyo with Aomori on the northern end of Honshū, commenced in November 1971, and the line opened in stages from June 1982. The line runs through a more sparsely populated region of Japan's main island and reached Aomori in December 2010. An extension of the line passing through the Seikan Tunnel should reach ShinHakodate, on the northern island of Hokkaidō in March 2016 and Sapporo by 2035.

Branch lines running off the Tōhoku *Shinkansen*, the Yamagata *Shinkansen* (Fukushima – Shinjō) and Akita Shinkansen (Morioka – Akita) are labelled mini-*shinkansen* routes.

Services on both lines run on the Tohoku Shinkansen line from Tokyo, then branch onto lines where the original narrow gauge has been upgraded. Since these are not purpose built *Shinkansen* lines the maximum speed is limited to 130 km/h, but travel time is reduced since passengers no longer need to change trains at Fukushima and Morioka.

Planning for the Jōetsu *Shinkansen* connecting Tokyo and Niigata was initiated in 1971 by Niigata-born Prime Minister Tanaka, and services began on 15 November 1982, branching off the existing Tōhoku *Shinkansen* at Ōmiya.

Completed in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics, the Nagano *Shinkansen* branches off the Jōetsu and Tōhoku lines at Takasaki and forms the first section of the Hokuriku *Shinkansen*, with an extension from Nagano to Kanazawa scheduled to open in March 2015. From there, the line should proceed on to Tsuruga and will eventually loop back to Osaka.

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōkaidō Shinkansen

TŌKAIDŌ SHINKANSEN

Government approval of the *Shinkansen* project in December 1958 allowed construction of the line between Tokyo and Osaka to begin in April 1959 at an estimated cost of 1.5 billion yen. The final cost was nearly double the original figure.

Completed in time for the 1964 Olympics the 515.4 km line began service on 1 October 1964, cutting the trip between Tokyo and Osaka from six hours and forty minutes to three hours. By 1965, it was down to just over three hours, and the service had an immediate impact, carrying one hundred million passengers up to 13 July 1967, and passing the 1 billion mark in 1976.

Today, with up to thirteen sixteen car 1,323 seat trains per hour in either direction, the *Tōkaidō Shinkansen* is the world's busiest high-speed rail line.

As a result of the line's success, it was extended westward to connect Shin-Ōsaka Station to Hakata Station in Fukuoka (the *Sanyō Shinkansen*).

Related Glossary Terms

Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen

Index

Find Term

TOYAMA

Capital of Toyama Prefecture, located on the coast of the Sea of Japan coast in central Honshū, Toyama is about 200 km north of Nagoya and 300 km northwest of Tokyo.

Traditionally an agricultural area, modernisation after the Meiji Era saw Toyama become an important industrial region, initially producing medicine and paper, then moving into heavy industry and chemicals as power generated by hydroelectric projects in the mountainous hinterland became available.

The city's importance as a centre for aluminium, ball-bearing and steel production saw an air raid that destroyed 99.5 percent of the city in August 1945. Postwar reconstruction, based around a plentiful water supply, a well-developed drainage system and agricultural forestry, fishery, commercial and manufacturing activity has seen Toyama become one of the most influential cities on the Japan Sea coast.

Attractions in the city include the Botanic Gardens, Toyama Castle, the Museum of Modern Art, Toyama Folk Village and Gohyaku-rakan, the Hills of 500 Buddhas.

Rail access will become easier when the Hokuriku (Nagano) Shinkansen line is extended to Toyama in 2015. Current access from Tokyo involves taking the Joetsu Shinkansen to Echigo-Yuzawa and transferring to the Hakutaka limited express train. Rail access to and from Osaka and Kyoto is delivered through a spectacular service that crosses the central cordillera by way of Takayama.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

UMEDA

The station complex comprising the JR Osaka Station and facilities shared by four railway companies is one of Osaka’s two transport hubs.

As a result, it forms the centre of a bustling district with an abundance of shopping and entertainment options in the world’s largest network of underground shopping malls, as well as above ground redevelopments in a former freight rail yard in northern Osaka. Recent developments include Osaka Station City, Grand Front Osaka, and Umeda Sky Building. The 2.6 kilometre Tenjinbashisuji Shopping Street is located nearby.

Above ground level, the station complex takes in the JR Osaka Station and Hanshin Station, with Hanshin Railways, Umeda Station, Midosuji Subway Line’s Umeda Station, Yotsubashi Subway Line’s Nishi-Umeda Station and Tanimachi Subway Line’s Higashi-Umeda below ground level.

While more than 2.3 million passengers pass through the facilities every day, Umeda only ranks as the fourth busiest station complex in Japan.

The equivalent on the south side of the city is Minami, centred around Namba Station.

Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

Index

Find Term