日本国

Sharing the Land of the Rising Sun

2013 | April 7th to 18th

RICHARD G RUSSO

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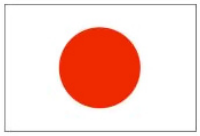
Sharing the Land of the Rising Sun



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"'日本国 ; Sharing the Land of the Rising Sun' -- Reflections of Life" is a journal depicting real-life events. Names, places, and events are real and have not been fabricated.

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「Tobu Narita Airport Hotel」

Sunday | April 7, 2013

"This bed is hard as a rock, but the pillows are divine!"

After a long and rather trying fourteen-hour flight from the United States, it's my pleasure to finally declare that we've made it to Japan safe and sound. To that end I wish I could announce that we're now settled in at Homeikan Daimachi Bekkan (鳳明館), 12-9-Hongo-5-Chome, in Bunkyo-ku enjoying its fantastic *ryokan* (旅館) atmosphere – sliding doors, *tatami* (畳; flooring made of rice straw) mats, slippers, *yukata* (浴衣; a casual robe) to wear, and a comfortable *futon* (布団; traditional Japanese bedding consisting of a *shikibuton* (敷き布団; bottom mattress) and a *kakebuton* (掛け布団; thick quilted bedcover)) to sleep on – but, alas, we aren't. Not even close. We're currently at the Tobu Narita Hotel for the night; staying because our fight into Tokyo-Narita arrived much too late for us to take advantage of our real accommodations tonight.

But what can you do but roll with the punches?
We've been doing so throughout our planning process anyway.

First, it was simple changes in our itinerary, as new ideas would come to replace the old (as they invariably do). This meant entire planned days would flip around while other days would be rewritten entirely, such as when we entertained catching a performance of The Lion King at the Shiki HARU Theatre in Tokyo. Only two performances were scheduled during the time we'd be in the city: a 6:30pm performance on Tuesday the 9th, and 1:30pm on Wednesday the 10th. Since both of those days held other endeavors, in order to accommodate I swapped our first Day in Tokyo (the 8th) with the Disneyland Day (the 9th) so we'd visit Disneyland first (the 8th), then sight-see in Tokyo (the 9th) and then visit Kamakura after that (the 10th).

Secondly, I'd been monitoring the cherry blossom forecasts with bated breath, hoping beyond hope they'd open around the same dates they peaked last year (early-to-mid April). The first forecasts suggested blossoms might arrive early; however, updated forecasts just weeks later suggested blossoms would open according to their average schedule in most of Japan, except in parts of Western Japan where they were predicted to open earlier than usual. This didn't impact our plans much, but then the mid-March forecast cut me to the quick…"Temperatures in recent days have been far above average across the country, causing a dramatic speed-up in the pace of the cherry blossom season. As a result, the Japanese weather association revised many of its forecast dates by as many as six days from last week's forecast. The weather is expected to generally remain mild in the upcoming weeks, which is likely going to result in an early *hanami* season this year. In Tokyo, the representative tree started opening on March 16, the earliest date on records!"

Sakura Forecast

Location	Opening	Best Viewing
Tokyo	Opened	Mar 23 – Apr 2
Kyoto	Mar 26	Mar 31 – Apr 9
Nara	Mar 26	Mar 30 – Apr 7
Yoshino	Apr 4	Apr 7 – Apr 17
Matsumoto	Apr 6	Apr 11 – Apr 17

We'd lost the blooms.

Even though there are various late-blooming varieties for us to see we've still missed the main season – the whole purpose for choosing this time of year to visit. Alas, our only saving grace will be at Yoshino, where the mountainous region should keep the blossoms cooler and thus closed until we get there. To hedge our bets, however, just before we departed I decided to add in a day-trip to Matsumoto, a castle town about two-and-a-half-hours north of here (by train). We'll be right on the cusp of its best viewing period so the decision wasn't too hard to make. Although doing so has added in more complications and changes to our itinerary than I would have wanted, it's what we have to do in order to see these blossoms now.

And then today happened…

Challenge Accepted

Our flight was originally scheduled to leave at 1:30pm, but a call from the airline earlier in the morning (while we were still lounging about) pushed take-off to 2:30pm. By the time we'd gotten to the "new" Maynard H. Jackson Jr. International Terminal (F-Gates) at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (quite an undertaking by the way; a shuttle from the MARTA station to the new terminal is required since airlines using the new terminal don't necessarily allow baggage check-in on the domestic side – it's a fifteen minute ride), we'd discovered our takeoff time had been pushed back even further – to 5:00pm.

Thus we arrived here – at Narita (成田市) – by 8:30pm, a full four hours later than originally scheduled. It took about an hour to get through Immigration and Customs and by then it was too late.

Narita International (成田国際空港) is the primary airport serving the Greater Tokyo Area. Located 57.5 km (35.7 mi) east of Tokyo Station, it takes about an hour on the N'EX (成田エクスプレス; a direct express train that traverses the distance between the airport and Tokyo station), fifteen minutes on the Tokyo Metro Marunouchi Line to reach Hongo-sanchome station (three stops up), and then another ten minute walk or so through the Bunkyo neighborhood to arrive where we're staying. With reception closing at 10:00pm there was absolutely no chance we'd be able to do so before they closed up and went to bed (Homeikan is a family Ryokan – the family actually sleeps on site). Thus we were faced with a scary option: finding a new place to stay for the night. The question was: where? Do we take the N'EX into Tokyo anyway and attempt to find something near Tokyo station (as I knew there were a number of hotels nearby) or do we stay where we were and try and find something a little closer to the airport?

We chose to stay and find something near the airport.

But that choice didn't come without reservations, and not of the room kind. By now even the terminal's Hotel Reservation Desk had closed! After a brief moment of panic, we found the Information Desk was still open (thankfully), and an inquiry there provided a list of about fifteen nearby hotels that might be available to us to billet the night.
The catch: we had to call them ourselves. They pointed us over to where the pay-phones were located then left us to our own devices. At first I felt incredulous that they would be unwilling to help us in our time of need (being foreigners in a strange land and all), but then a stray thought crossed my mind: that's exactly what would happen back home if anyone asked for assistance. They'd be given only what they needed – the hotel list in our case – and left to work it out themselves.

Challenge Accepted.

There are four types of public payphones in Japan recalling from previous visits: a pink colored phone that only accepts ¥10 coins (generally used for local calls and nothing more), a grey colored phone that accepts coins and cards (but only certain provider's phone cards, but you can at least make international calls from it), an orange colored phone that takes coins, phone cards and IC cards (IC, or "Integrated Circuit" for short are rechargeable "smart cards" embedded with an electronic memory chip, used for financial transactions, identification, as a key, etc.), and a green colored phone (the most common found throughout Japan), taking coins, telephone cards – but not IC cards – and allows for international calls to be made.

We stared at our first green phone and pondered what to do next.

Neither of us had the change to make a local call although we each had a pocketful of yen in bills – (yen, denoted with the Latin symbol ¥, comes in paper denominations of ¥1,000, ¥2,000, ¥5,000 and ¥10,000, and coin denominations of all shapes and sizes in ¥1, ¥5, ¥10, ¥50, ¥100 and ¥500 increments) – never-you-mind knowing how much said call would cost. So we did the next best thing: used a bill to grab one of the ubiquitous calling cards and hoped for the best! As soon as we had the card in hand I lifted the phone's handle from the cradle, inserted the calling card (silently hoping it would be enough for more than one call) and picked the first hotel name from the given list, a name I recognized – Hilton – and gave their number a ring. A pulsating sound of a ring followed (somewhat different from our ring tone) and a few moments later someone on the other end picked up and announced themselves in Japanese. I responded with a "Hello, do you speak English?" and then they repeated themselves in kind.

Great!

Unfortunately they didn't have any rooms for the night, so I called the second number on my list – a Marriott – but they too were booked solid. The third hotel I called – Tobu Narita – had availability and I immediately signed my name to the room. All we had to do now was get there. But how would we do that? Simple: the hotel had a shuttle – "look for green bus" – that would pick us up from and could later return us to the airport, twice an hour.

Hooray, we were saved!

Armed with pseudo-reservations (unpaid) we made our way outside to find which stop the hotel bus would make (bus stop #16 from Terminal 1), and then waited outside for its arrival. And you know what? It was cold and windy! This thanks to the storm that blew across the country while we were in flight. The very same storm that was responsible for our late departure – a typhoon-style squall that, because it wasn't circling around a bout of low-pressure, wasn't being called a typhoon. Either way its presence here was unwelcome, but before long the green Tobu bus pulled up and we hopped on as quickly as we could. We were quite lucky with the bus too because other than this particular time (now 10:10pm), the bus would only run twice more before it ceased. Could you imagine if we'd gotten in any later? Perish the thought!

Within just a few minutes we pulled into our hotel's lot – Tobu Narita Airport Hotel (成田東武ホテルエアポート) – checked in officially, then came up to our room, which is where you can now find us. Nicole has already taken stock of the accommodations… the bed is hard as a rock, she said, but the pillows divine. It's so frustrating though… Tokyo is so close!

Tokyo: Across the Bay

Tokyo was originally known as Edo, a small fishing village, in what was formerly part of the old Musashi Province. Its name was changed when it became the imperial capital in 1868, in line with the East Asian tradition of including the word "capital" (京) in the name of the capital city. Edo was first fortified by the Edo clan, in the late twelfth century, hence its name. Tokugawa Ieyasu made Edo the center of his nationwide military government when he became shogun in 1603. During the subsequent period, Edo grew into one of the largest cities in the world with a population topping one million by the 18th century. A lot of the cultural attractions we'll be seeing in Tokyo will be related to the Tokugawa Shogunate, which rose to power in what is known as Feudal Japan. This period of Japanese history was dominated by powerful regional families (*daimyo*) and the military rule of warlords (*shogun*), and stretched for almost 700 years from 1185 to 1868, when the Emperor regained command of the country in what is called the Meiji Restoration (thus returning Japan to an Oligarchy rule, rather than Imperial.)

Today, Tokyo (東京, Tōkyō, tō (east) + kyō (capital), "Eastern Capital"), officially Tokyo Metropolis (東京都, Tōkyō-to), is the capital of Japan, the center of the Greater Tokyo Area, and the largest metropolitan area in the world. It is the seat of the Japanese government and the Imperial Palace, and the home of the Japanese Imperial Family.

Tokyo is in the Kantō region on the southeastern side of the main island Honshu.

To put that into perspective: Japan consists of four main islands. They are from north to south: Hokkaido (北海道), Honshu (本州), Shikoku (四国) and Kyushu (九州). The islands are sub-divided into eleven Regions (地方; *chiho*): Hokkaido (海道; *island*), Tohoku (東北; northern Honshu, including Sendai), Kanto (関東; eastern Honshu, including Tokyo and Yokohama), Chubu (中部; central Honshu, including Hakone and Mt. Fuji), Hokuriku (北陸; northwestern Chubu), Koshinetsu (甲信越; northeastern Chubu, including Nagano), Tokai (東海; southern Chubu, including Nagoya), Kansai (関西; also known as Kinki (近畿); including Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto), Chugoku (中国; western Honshu, including Hiroshima), Shikoku (四国; island) and Kyushu (九州; island, including Fukuoka and Okinawa.) These regions are further divided into Prefectures (都道府県; *todōfuken*), which are the country's sub-national jurisdictions.

There are forty-seven (47) of these Prefectures in four flavors: a Metropolis (都; *tō*), Tokyo; a District (道; *dō*), Hokkaido; an Urban Center (府; *fu*), Osaka and Kyoto; and 43 other prefectures, or (県; *ken*). This system was established by the Meiji government in July 1871. Initially there were over 300 prefectures, but this number was reduced to 72 in 1871 and again to the current number of 47 in 1888.

Prefectures of Japan

Aichi	愛知県	Miyazaki	宮崎県
Akita	秋田県	Nagano	長野県
Aomori	青森県	Nagasaki	長崎県
Chiba	千葉県	Nara	奈良県
Ehime	愛媛県	Niigata	新潟県
Fukui	福井県	Oita	大分県
Fukuoka	福岡県	Okayama	岡山県
Fukushima	福島県	Okinawa	沖縄県
Gifu	岐阜県	Osaka	大阪府
Gunma	群馬県	Saga	佐賀県
Hiroshima	広島県	Saitama	埼玉県
Hokkaido	北海道	Shiga	滋賀県
Hyogo	兵庫県	Shimane	島根県
Ibaraki	茨城県	Shizuoka	静岡県
Ishikawa	石川県	Tochigi	栃木県
Iwate	岩手県	Tokushima	徳島県
Kagawa	香川県	Tokyo	東京都
Kagoshima	鹿児島県	Tottori	鳥取県
Kanagawa	神奈川県	Toyama	富山県
Kochi	高知県	Wakayama	和歌山県
Kumamoto	熊本県	Yumagata	山形県
Kyoto	京都府	Yamaguchi	山口県
Mie	三重県	Yamanashi	山梨県
Miyagi	宮城県		

Furthermore, each Prefecture is further subdivided into Districts (郡; *gun*). And each District contains Cities (市; *shi*), Towns (町; *chō* or *machi*) and Villages (村; *son* or *mura*). Although you have to have a population of 50,000 or more to be designated a City, like everything else in Japanese society, the burden of government is shared, based on population, in an effort to be the most efficient. This sharing of administrative duties (and cost) is done through special designations – Special, Core or Designated – each level granting more and more autonomy but also more responsibility. Special Cities (特例市, *Tokureishi*), like Odawara, Matsumoto and Fuji, are those with populations of at least 200,000; they are delegated a subset of functions reserved for Core Cities. Core Cities (中核市, *Chukakushi*), like Himeji, Nara and Otsu, are those with populations of at least 300,000; they receive an even greater subset of functions, but not as many as Designated Cities. And "Designated Cities" (指定都市, *Shiteitoshi*), like Kyoto, Yokohama and Chiba, are those that have a population greater than 500,000. I mention these cities because we'll either be visiting them or traveling through them on our journey here.

Designated cities are delegated many of the functions normally performed by prefectural governments in fields such as public education, social welfare, sanitation, business licensing and urban planning. The city government is generally delegated the various minor administrative functions in each area while the prefectural government retains authority over major decisions. For instance, pharmaceutical retailers and small clinics can be licensed by designated city governments, but pharmacies and hospitals are licensed by prefectural governments. Designated cities are also required to subdivide themselves into wards (区, *ku*), each of which has a ward office conducting various administrative functions for the city government, such as *koseki* (family) and *juminhyo* (address) resident registration and tax collection.

Believe it or not, Tokyo is comprised of 23 of these wards, which includes 26 cities, 5 towns and 8 villages. And each of these is governed as an individual city, but shares some governing powers with the united Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

To that end Tokyo is often thought of as a city but is commonly referred to as a "metropolitan prefecture". Tokyo Metropolis was formed in 1943 from the merger of the former Tokyo Prefecture (東京府, Tōkyō-fu) and the city of Tokyo (東京市, Tōkyō-shi). The Tokyo metropolitan government administers the 23 Special Wards of Tokyo, which cover the area that was formerly the City of Tokyo before it merged and became the subsequent metropolitan prefecture. The metropolitan government also administers 39 municipalities in the western part of the prefecture and the two outlying island chains.

Wards of Tokyo			
Adachi	足立区	Nakano	中野区
Arakawa	荒川区	Nerima	練馬区
Bunkyo	文京区	Ota	大田区
Chiyoda	千代田区	Setagawa	世田谷区
Chuo	中央区	Shibuya	渋谷区
Edogawa	江戸川区	Shinagawa	品川区
Itabashi	板橋区	Shinjuku	新宿区
Katsushika	葛飾区	Suginami	杉並区
Kita	北区	Sumida	墨田区
Koto	江東区	Toshima	豊島区
Meguro	目黒区	Taito	台東区
Minato	港区		

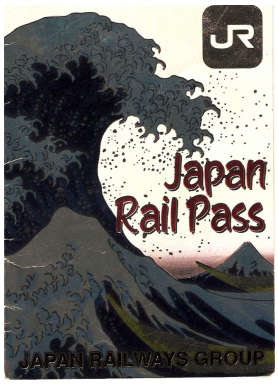
The population of the special wards is over 9 million people, with the total population of the prefecture exceeding 13 million. The prefecture is part of the world's most populous metropolitan area with upwards of 35 million people and the world's largest urban agglomeration economy with a GDP of US$1.479 trillion at purchasing power parity, ahead of the New York metropolitan area in 2008. The city hosts 51 of the Fortune Global 500 companies, the highest number of any city.

Alas we'll have to wait until the day after tomorrow to dive in to most of Tokyo, but don't worry… we will! We'll be touching upon a great many of these wards in our time here… such as Chiyoda, Minato, Nakano, Shibuya, Shinjuku and, of course, Bunkyo. Until then we'll be here until morning whereby we'll catch the hotel shuttle back to Narita, pick up our JRail passes & N'EX Round Trip ticket and then head into Tokyo.

Next Steps: SuICa & N'EX

The rail pass we've already paid for; The Japan Rail Pass (ジャパンレールパス, also commonly called JR Pass) is a very cost effective rail pass for long distance train travel throughout Japan. It can only be used by foreign tourists, and offers unlimited use of JR trains for one, two or three weeks at a cost that residents of Japan can only dream of. But do get a voucher before you leave because the Japan Rail Pass must be purchased before your arrival – it's not for sale inside Japan!The pass comes in two flavors: ordinary and green. The latter is valid first class cars ("Green Cars") that offer more spacious seats than ordinary cars, but it's highly unnecessary in day-to-day travel.

I chose the regular seven-day pass, just like before, which comes at a cost of ¥28,300 each. What you get for that price is a voucher in the mail, which is then exchanged for the real pass upon arrival, and only at special JR Pass offices, which Narita has one of.

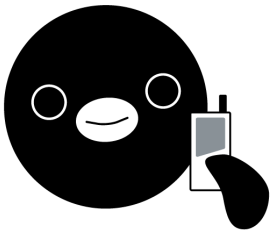


JR Rail is a private holding group of seven different companies operating rail services in six regions throughout the country: JR Hokkaido (JR 北海道), JR East (JR 東日本), JR Central (JR 東海), JR West (JR 西日本), JR Shikoku (JR 四国), JR Kyushu (JR 九州), and JR Freight (JR 貨物). Only the JR East operates in the Kanto and Tohoku regions (the region existing of Tokyo and surrounding environs). The pass is valid on almost all trains operated on the nationwide network of JR (Japan Railways), including *shinkansen* (新幹線), limited express, express, rapid and local trains, so it's really handy to have when you're traveling around the country. Naturally there are some exceptions – the pass is not valid on Nozomi (のぞみ) Shinkansen (the fastest category) trains along the Tokaido/Sanyo route; however, pass holders can use Hikari (ひかり) and Kodama (こだま) level trains along the same line. The same goes for Mizuho (みずほ) services on the Sanyo/Kyusho Shinkansen system and for JR trains using non-JR tracks (which does happen but is rather infrequent, so I don't worry about it.)

If you're not following along that's okay… we'll be using *shinkansen* trains later on and I'll explain in more detail then.

As for SuICa & N'EX, it is a discount ticket package for foreign travelers arriving at Tokyo's Narita Airport. It provides transportation from the airport into the city by the Narita Express train (N'EX) and a Suica prepaid card – valued at ¥2,000 – for use on urban transportation at a highly discounted price. The ticket can be used on the JR Narita Express train (N'EX) from Narita Airport to Tokyo, Yokohama or Saitama. After getting off the Narita Express, ticket holders can use the ticket to transfer to other JR trains (except limited express and *shinkansen* trains) to reach any JR station in the Greater Tokyo Area. The ticket can only be used from Narita Airport in the direction of Tokyo and is valid only on the day of purchase. The roundtrip version of the package additionally contains a ticket for travel back to Narita Airport, which has to be used within two weeks of purchase. I'm quite looking forward to using this for the first time too – who knew there was a discount?

The SuICa Card itself is a pre-paid card that many people within Tokyo use not only on the subways but on JR train platforms so that individual fares and other passes don't have to be purchased. You swipe the card over a sensor and viola you're allowed to walk through. Suica (スイカ) stands for "Super Urban Intelligent Card", and the pronunciation is also a pun on the Japanese word for watermelon: "*suika*". In the logo, the "ic" is highlighted, standing for the initials of integrated circuit in "IC card", which in turn is common Japanese vernacular for smart card. An additional meaning comes from the idiophone "*sui-sui*" which means "to move smoothly", intended to highlight the smooth simplicity of using the card compared with traditional train tickets. Since penguins can also swim smoothly through water, a penguin is used as a motif. The Suica prepaid card initially has a value of ¥2000, which is made up of a refundable deposit of ¥500 and an initial balance of ¥1500 that can be used on virtually all JR and non-JR urban transportation in Greater Tokyo (and JR trains in several other areas of Japan). The card can be recharged at ticket machines. So it seems like a great deal, doesn't it?



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Of course we'll have to deal with Tokyo-eki first-thing upon our arrival.

To newcomers the station is huge and daunting – a "megatroplis" underground maze of passageways, shopping (there's a huge mall inside), offices, train links (regular train and shinkansen, bullet trains) and platforms (dozens of platforms). There are nine different lines (denoted 線) serviced there: Chūō Line (中央線), Keihin-Tōhoku Line (京浜東北線), Keiyō Line (京葉線), Sōbu Line (総武線), Tōkaidō Main Line (東海道本線), Tōkaidō Shinkansen (東海道新幹線), Tōhoku Shinkansen (東北新幹線), Yamanote Line (山手線), and Yokosuka Line (横須賀線), not to mention the Narita Express and the Maranouchi Metro line; with each line having many different ports of call throughout the city. I don't think there's an appropriate word to describe this underground behemoth – enormous, massive, mammoth, or colossal just doesn't seem to fit. One could easily get lost in the dozens of exits, tunnels and platforms and invariably I do.

We'll have to wait until tomorrow to find out whether navigation around the station has gotten any easier. In either case, if all goes well tomorrow morning the only thing we'll need to do is find the Marunouchi Metro line. Once we get into town we'll check in with Homeikan, drop off our luggage, and then make our way out to Tokyo Disneyland.

At least, that's the plan.

This isn't how I wished to start this trip but so far it's been an interesting story, hasn't it? Well… it's getting late and we have quite an early morning ahead of us. So… goodnight Narita!

「Tokyo Disneyland: The Happiness Year!」

Monday, April 9, 2013

"Wow, would you look at that!"

Philosophers say a new day brings with it new opportunities and new wonders, a chance to begin again despite any troubles one might have faced the day before – a fresh start. We found a little truth in that axiom this morning, especially in the category of wonders. Despite the hiccups of last night's arrival, Japan saw fit to treat us to a wonderful glimpse of Mount Fuji (富士山), as plain as if we were mere feet (meters, sorry, they do metric here) from its base, all the way from Chiba! Although it is not unheard of to spot Fuji-san all the way from Tokyo, it is generally rare to see him so completely revealed. The skies, unusually clear thanks to the storm that blew through the night before, has allowed the peeks and everything else about the mountain) to be on full display for everyone to see.

And that, fellow travelers, is something magical to behold.

Having Fuji-san bless our journey into Tokyo this morning, washing away the grumbles of last night, was certainly welcome and helped. It helped to set the tone for the rest of the day's activities out at Tokyo Disneyland Resort, which we managed to accomplish in spite of the hurdles placed before us. We're back at Homeikan for the night now, of course. You'll find us in room #264 – *Kaede* (楓; the Japanese word for "maple"), showered and in our pajamas, ready to call it a day.

Nicole is settling in here nicely, having taken a trip through the communal baths (and getting acquainted with them), sitting comfortably now on her own futon, marveling at its comfort. And I too am feeling at ease now, ready to wiggle under the comfortable covers and drift off to a well-deserved sleep.

Before I do that though, here's how our day went…

Soko kara koko e (そこからここへ)

Spotting Fuji-san along the N'EX was certainly a treat, one we relished as we chugged along the tracks into Tokyo proper, but reaching that point (getting from there to here) proved to be an exercise in both patience and quick-thinking. Sure, we rose early enough (about 6:00am) to be prepared to tackle any hurdles ahead of us: locate the JR office in the terminal for the Rail Pass voucher exchange, purchase the SUICA/N'EX combo card, and, of course, get on the train bound for Tokyo station – all as quickly as we could muster. However, what we (or, rather, I) didn't account for was that we'd arrive back at the airport a little too early. The JR office at Narita didn't open until 9:00am – we were at least an hour early. Unwilling to waste our precious time I resorted to buying a regular one-way ticket on the N'EX via the automatic kiosk, giving up on the SUICA card deal in the process, and then looked to exchange our vouchers at Tokyo-eki instead.

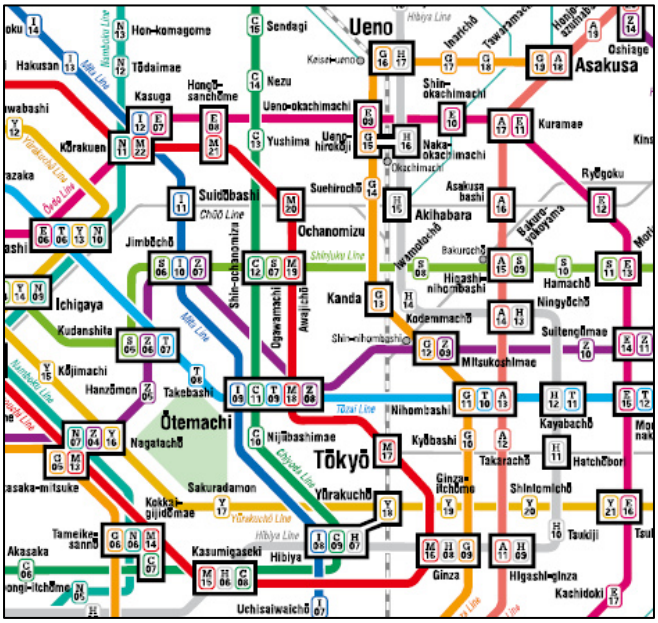
Alas I couldn't even do that right.

Imagine my surprise when we tried to go through the ticket gate and – *eeeeeeerp! Access denied.* Seems I'd only purchased the reservation fare through the kiosk, not the base fare; I tried using the automated machine again to purchase the remaining fare without success, so, I hopped in line at the smallish ticket counter with just about everyone else trying to get into Tokyo proper this morning. By the time we were helped at the ticket counter though the original train upon which we'd purchased passage was in danger of departing – not only did we require a base fare ticket but also totally brand new reservations (as the N'EX is a reservation-only train). But that's okay… representatives took care of everything without batting an eye. By 8:15am we were on our way to Tokyo.

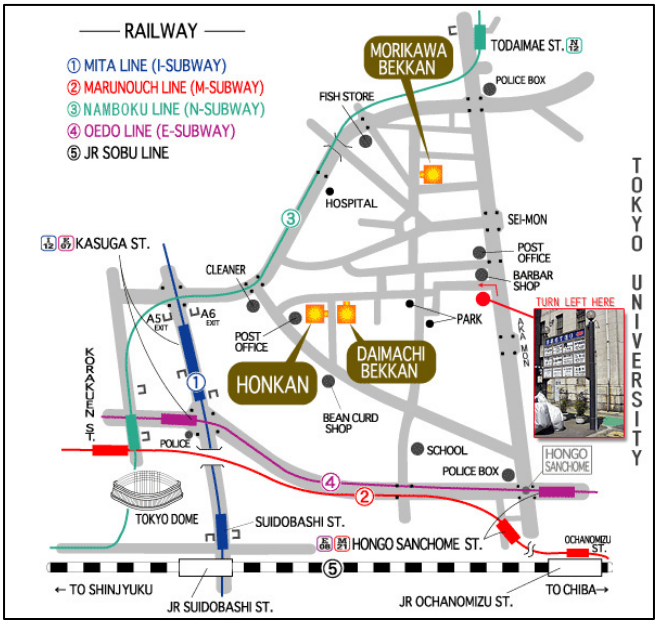
It's along this journey that we were treated to such a fantastic view of Fuji-san.

Pulling into Tokyo station about an hour later we made haste to find the JR office within. This is always problematic for me as signage to this office is usually non-existent and I spend what seems like hours roaming the floors because they enjoy moving the office every time I come. This time was no different. The good news here is that we walked right up and within a few minutes passes were in hand (as were some sight-seeing brochures), then we made our way to the Metro, Nicole in tow.

Distance	Fare
1 – 6 km	¥160
7 – 11 km	¥190
12 – 19 km	¥230
20 – 27 km	¥270
28 – 40 km	¥300



It took only a few seconds to decipher the map and the machine (the beauty of having been to Japan three times before is familiarity with what you're looking at, even when you can't read Japanese. That and knowing the ticket machines have an "English" setting), and we were off on our first metro ride with the locals. The hardest part was parting the sea of people making their transfers! Thankfully we didn't have too far to go. Our station, Hongo San-chome, is the fourth stop going toward Ikebukuro (the terminating station in this particular direction), which takes us through Otemachi (大手町), Awajicho (淡路町), Ochanomizu (御茶ノ水), and finally Hongo San-chome (本郷三丁目). The 'san' in san-chome means "three" in Japanese; therefore, the station is in the 3rd city district (or –chome) of this part of Tokyo (the before-mentioned Bunkyo-ku).



Coming into Bunkyo-ku that time of day was interesting, as it's not something I generally find myself doing. Usually I'm well on my way out of the area by then; off to whatever I have planned for the day and returning only when the sun has long since slipped behind the horizon. Coming into the neighborhood in the middle of the morning, with the sun fully overhead, was certainly different to say the least, but everything was still recognizable to both the eyes and the nose. In one long breath you can sense the wonderful textures of delicious foods cooking and a subtle trace of incense burning mixed in with the putrid stench of rotting fish, discarded garbage and, yes, sewage. This might be a strange cocktail of scents that could give anyone the impression that Tokyo is an urban nightmare, but together they concoct a wonderful soup-de-jour that my olfactory sense has become acquainted with and, to a degree, expects here. Yes, Tokyo has a scent of its own – sometimes inviting and other times nauseating – but this is my neighborhood and that of hundreds of Japanese. I find it exotic and comforting all the same.

But even for all the differences, I could take refuge knowing that some things felt exactly the same. The pachinko parlor and McDonald's were still on the corner, just where I left them. The roadway that split off from them and turned up the hill looked exactly the same as it did five years ago. My cats – a sign for the Yamato Transit Company that told me I needed to turn right up the hill toward Homeikan – were unfortunately not waiting for me at the turn (but the company itself was still there). There were the smells – both spicy and sour – in the air as we made our way to Homeikan through the neighborhood that is Bunkyo-ku (文京区). And there's Homeikan itself, sitting behind its stone walls, right where I left it. We were welcomed with open arms and a number of bows as we entered through the ryokan's sliding glass doors; they knew exactly who we were and were prepared to show us to our room – on the first floor – immediately.

We didn't stay long, though. Once check-in was complete and we were given our key to the room, we grabbed our day packs and headed out to Tokyo Disneyland Resort…

To The Edge of Nowhere: The Keiyo Line

Of the many ways of getting to the park – rail, car, taxi, and bus – I could only champion one: the rail. But while there are many rail-lines throughout Tokyo interconnecting the city's wards, there isn't a single metro line that runs all the way out to Tokyo Disneyland. Only a JR Railway line (the Keiyo line) connects the resort with the main city. In fact, Tokyo Disneyland Resort isn't even in Tokyo; it's located in Urayasu, Chiba prefecture some 13 kilometers (8 mi) from downtown. And there's only one place to catch the Keiyo line – you guessed it: Tokyo-eki, one of the busiest and most massive underground and aboveground stations in all of Tokyo. There's only one station in the city larger – Shinjuku – and both Shinjuku and Ikebukuro (another of Tokyo's "Super Downtowns") handle more passengers on a daily basis – but that still means Tokyo ranks third; hence the adventure.

Find the Keiyo line after a long walk across the station's main floor, down a flight of stairs, across yet another long hallway, then down another staircase before arriving at two unsuspecting and rather deserted platforms. Well, one platform really, with dual tracks; one on each side. Only an illuminated sign above pointed out the platform number and the train's destination. I've come to know this as "the walk to the edge of nowhere" and warned Nicole about this as we made our way through the station. Nicole didn't let this pass her by, saying "when does it end!" about half-way through our trek, but we got there in good time never-the-less. Since the Keiyo Line terminates at Tokyo-eki, all platforms (and thus trains) lead to the same destination – toward Soga, in Chiba Prefecture (its other terminus). The Keiyo trains have a reddish exterior and one was waiting, vacant, just as we stepped onto the platform. We wasted no time in boarding it and before long we were on our way.

It's a peaceful and beautiful twenty-minute train ride to the bay – destination: Maihama.

The sun, which had been rising since 5:30am (it rises very, very, early in Japan), now fully reared its head for all to see, casting its white glow on everything below. As the train pulled into Maihama station, and the doors opened to omit us onto the platform, we were greeted by two things: the wonderful cool breeze blowing in from the bay and the rush and noise of patrons trying to get into the park ahead of us. We pushed through the masses, rode the escalator down to the next platform (which contained the platform for the Disney Line Monorail and a Guest Services building), shuffled by Bon Voyage (a giant suitcase and hatbox shaped store full of Disney souvenirs) and passed through the gates of Tokyo Disneyland unceremoniously. (Or rather we would have entered without delay except it seems the bank didn't like the fact I'd used my credit card to settle the bill with Tobu Narita this morning. They'd already blocked the card from use! It was a minor setback, however, as I reached for my debit card instead. The charge for tickets went through then without a hitch and we entered the park. Of course now I'll need to find some way to contact the bank …)

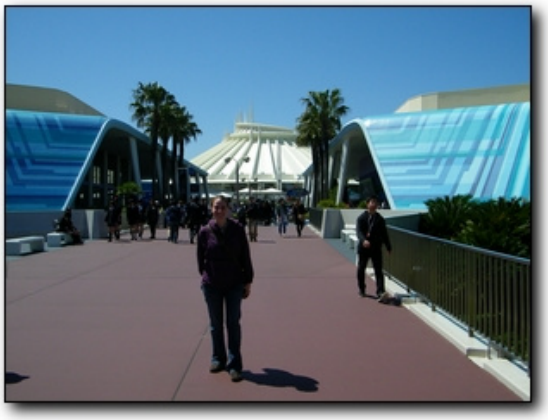
Tokyo Disneyland

> *To all of you who come to this happy place, welcome. Here you will discover enchanted lands of Fantasy and Adventure, Yesterday and Tomorrow. May Tokyo Disneyland be an eternal source of joy, laughter, inspiration, and imagination to the peoples of the world. And may this magical kingdom be an enduring symbol of the spirit of cooperation and friendship between the great nations of Japan and the United States of America.* —E. Cardon Walker, April 15, 1983

Tokyo Disneyland (東京ディズニーランド) opened on April 15, 1983 and became the first (of many) Disney parks to be launched outside the United States. Its theme is licensed by the Oriental Land Company, which developed the land and resort into a magnificent destination consisting of the two parks: Disneyland and DisneySEA, a plethora of hotels: two that are Disney's own – the Ambassador Hotel and Miracosta Hotel – and five other non-Disney brand hotels (Sheraton Grande, Hotel Okura, Hilton Tokyo Bay, Tokyo Bay Hotel Tokyu and the Sunroute Plaza), Ikspiari: a multi-level shopping mall similar to Downtown Disney, and an AMC Theater (which seems to be a staple of all Disney parks). The park is virtually the same as its brethren around the world; it's divided up into several themed lands: World Bazaar (which takes the place of Main Street USA), Adventureland, Westernland, Critter Country, Fantasyland, Toontown, and Tomorrowland. And just like its otherworld-wide counterparts, many of the attractions known and loved are found here:

In Adventureland, for example, there are versions of "Pirates of the Caribbean", the "Jungle Cruise" and "The Enchanted Tiki Room." In Westernland, we have the "Diamond Horseshoe", "Big Thunder Mountain Railroad", "Tom Sawyer Island", and "Country Bear Theater". In Critter Country, there is "Splash Mountain" and the "Beaver Brothers Explorer Canoes". In Fantasyland we have all the favorites, including "Peter Pan's Flight", "Snow White's Adventures", "Dumbo the Flying Elephant", "It's a Small World", Alice's Tea Party", "Pooh's Hunny Hunt", "Pinocchio's Daring Journey" and even the "Haunted Mansion". Mickey and the gang can be found over in Toontown (although Roger Rabbit's Cartoon Spin was closed today). And in Tomorrowland, you'll find "Space Mountain" (one of the best I've ridden!), "Star Tours" (currently preparing an upgrade to 2.0), "StarJets", "Buzz Lightyear's AstroBlasters", the "Grand Circuit Raceway" and the new "Monster's Inc. Ride & Go Seek" attraction.

Of these rides we only found time to ride a couple: The Haunted Mansion and Pirates of the Caribbean (of course, these are classics!), and "Buzz Lightyear's Astroblasters" and the relatively new "Monsters Inc Ride & Go Seek". Since both Haunted Mansion and Pirates are virtually the same as their Walt Disney World counterparts (give or take), little needs to be said about them. But the other two I wish to expound on further because they are either exclusive to this particular park or different enough to warrant mention.



Buzz Lightyear's Astroblasters

In Buzz Lightyear's Astroblasters, you're a raw cadet being sent out to defeat the Evil Emperor Zurg who is attempting to steal the "crystallic fusion cells" (i.e. batteries) used to power all space vehicles throughout the known universe. Since Buzz Lightyear is a toy, the queue area is awash in the chartreuse, white and bright hues he's known for, and the attraction is cleverly scaled to give the illusion that one has just been reduced to the size of an action figure, featuring such detail as giant, exposed Philips screw heads, and an explanation of the interactive phase of the ride that resembles a toy's instruction sheet. Additionally, "Astro Blasters" is equal parts shooting gallery and classic Disney dark ride. Visitors board an Omnimover space vehicle featuring two laser pistols and a joystick. The joystick allows full 360-degree rotation of the vehicle to assist in aiming. The pistols are used to shoot laser beams at targets of varying point values (a digital readout on the dashboard shows the player's score), which is similar to the Disneyland and Walt Disney World versions of the ride.

Here there are 4 different shaped targets which award a different amount of points – circle (100 points), square (1,000 points), diamond (5,000 points), and triangle (10,000 points) – which is inherently different than the point system at Walt Disney World, the version we both are so familiar. The Magic Kingdom's version (which is the very first incarnation of this ride concept, by the way) awards a set of points based on the target's assigned difficulty and placement, rather than its shape. One target could be worth 1,000 points while another 25,000, 50,000 or even 100,000!

The thing is you never know (unless you're savvy repeat players like us), but here at Tokyo Disneyland you know exactly how many points you're likely to score based on the shapes of the targets… which kind of takes some of the fun out of discovery those sweet spots, don't you think? That and the fact that TDL's laser-zappers didn't seem to be as powerful, or connect with the targets as often as I would have liked. I mean, both Nicole and I are "Galactic Heroes" – hitting 999,999 points or more in one round at the Magic Kingdom – but here we were barely "Planetary Pilots" (a score of 10,001 to 100,000). But the ride and its differences were fun to experience.

But Ride & Go Seek was even more so.

<u>Monsters Inc Ride & Go Seek</u>

Like "The Laugh Floor" attraction at Walt Disney World, the Scare Floor has been turned into "The Laugh Floor", as "It's Laughter We're After" is the new coda. Various posters posted along the exterior inform guests about "Flashlight Tag," an upcoming activity that is fun for the whole family, and something likely to award laughter rather than screams. An instructional video, narrated by Mike Wazowski, details this premise (in Japanese, of course); afterward guests are then sent to security vehicles, which will take us through the inner sanctums of the Laugh Floor factory so we can play too. However, Sully has brought Boo back to Monstropolis in hopes that she will join in the flashlight festivities too. Although it seems Boo is interested, she giggles naughtily, intending to go exploring rather than play. Sulley warns her not to go off too far, but Boo simply responds by giggling more. And the ride begins!

Turning a corner, guests find that Randall has returned from the human world still determined to capture Boo to extract scream. As Randall's evil laugh echoes through the factory, the vehicles turn and face a window overlooking all of Monstropolis at nightfall. Mike stands nearby at the switch of a power generator, that supposedly gives power to all of Monstropolis. Mike kicks flashlight tag off by turning off the generator, causing the entire factory and the city to go dark. Entering the boy's locker room next, the flashlights turn on, allowing riders to shine them upon the factory's logo wherever found for a surprising monster reward! Several tiny monsters pop out of the lockers, while other objects simply pop out from underneath floor tiles and benches. Turning into the bathroom, Sulley can be seen searching for Boo with his flashlight; Boo's giggling is heard from an unseen location, while Randall hides nearby.

Pulling onto the laugh floor, guests find several of M.I.'s top comedians joining in on the game: Sulley searches for Boo underneath tables while Mike is stuck in a jam between a hanging door and the arms of another monster, both pulling him back and forth. Randall is there too, hiding behind a door with a large crocodilian monster, laughing evilly. Leaving the factory and entering the streets of Monstropolis, the game is in full force with many monsters hiding in objects such as mail boxes and television sets, making an appearance only when your flashlight flushes them out.

Our lights shine upon Boo, standing in the center of a dark alley with Randall mysteriously behind her with a net. Luckily Sulley pops out from a manhole beneath Boo, hoisting her up in the air, saving her from capture. We're whisked along, however, into Harryhausen's sushi restaurant then, finding the octopus-like chef popping in and out of several different take-out boxes in search for Boo. Several odd fish can be found throughout the store, which also react to the flashlights. Mike and Celia are here too – and you can dunk her in water by using your flashlight to activate her tank! After tagging several more monsters, we leave the restaurant and find Sulley up ahead, worried that he has lost Boo again. He calls her name out in fright, but she is nowhere in sight. Entering the factory once more, we find Boo playing with some garbage outside of a large compacting machine, unaware that Randall is directly behind her, raising his net.

Randall mutters to himself about his success, and when the power is suddenly returned to the factory, Mike emerges from a grate in the floor, knocking Randall backwards and into the garbage compactor.

Following the trail of the garbage compactor, guests witness Randall roll down a treadmill, only to be crushed by a spike-lined wheel, pressed repeatedly by large iron poles, spun across another large wheel while changing skin colors, be chopped up by a large wall-like contraption, and emerge from the compactor in the shape of a cube, much like several other compacted cubes of garbage around him. Randall's eyes roll dizzily as he groans in pain.

He's been thwarted yet again!

We leave Mike, Sulley and Boo then, outside Boo's door, waving goodbye and then pass into the filing room where Roz awaits her paperwork… and the end of the ride. It was so much fun!

<u>Happiness is Here!</u>

This year Tokyo Disneyland is celebrating its 30th Anniversary and we just so happened to be in the park a few days before the celebration officially kicked off. Do you know what that meant? Soft openings of the new parade! "Happiness is Here", following on the resort's 30th anniversary tagline – "The Happiness Year" – spans thirteen floats in seven segments celebrating Disney's classic music and characters from all over the spectrum.

- Opening: While the songs “Whistle While you Work” and “Casey Junior” punctuate the air, Goofy leads the way on a pink horse, the Three Little Pigs pull an oversized Mickey Mouse drum toy, Pinocchio drives a magical train with Sleepy and Grumpy as passengers, and even Clarabelle, Horace, Snow White and the remaining dwarfs shuffle by. Following the opening segment

  you’ll find Marie from the Aristocats plucking an oversized violin with Berloiz (her brother) by her side, while Toulouse hangs about on the back of a purple piano. Everybody wants to be a cat!

- Joy of Friendship: Lilo and Stitch lead this unit riding pastel-colored seahorses! Nemo and Gill from Finding Nemo follow and Marlin and Dory appear in the mouth of Nigel as they make their way through. The Toy Story pals conclude the unit aboard their own float; Slinky and Mr. Potato Head pedal an enormous bicycle (with Jessie and Rex sitting in its basket), while Woody and Buzz dance atop a “Woody’s Roudup” record player. You definitely got a friend in me! (*You’ve Got a Friend in Me”* / *“He Mele No Lilo”* / *“Woody’s Roundup”* / *“Hawaiian Roller Coaster Ride”* / *“Strange Things”*)

- Wish: The Genie from Aladdin (on a horse no less) precedes the main unit (designed to look like a stylized camel), and is followed by Aladdin, Princess Jasmine and their pages carried by Abu, transformed into an elephant. A small band of Arabian-dressed dancers round out the unit.

- The Princesses & Fairies (Beauty) unit features Rapunzel on a gorgeous white horse followed up by the Ugly Duckling and a few pink flower dancers. Cinderella, Belle and Aurora follow on an ornately-decorated swan float; this is attached to the fairy garden float, featuring Tinker Bell and her fairy friends.

- The Alice in Wonderland unit fulfills the "mysterious" element and in the same vein of the previous horse and camel floats, Alice rides a butterfly version of her film's curious caterpillar. The Mad Hatter and a number of tea party guests follow her; the hatter pushes a small float featuring paper-cutout versions of himself and the March Hare. The King of Hearts leads a procession of various unique characters, including an enormous float version of the Queen of Hearts, her playing card subjects, and Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum.

- The Dream segment is full of Winnie the Pooh! Rabbit kicks off the unit aboard a pink and yellow Woozle. A rather large Heffalump leads a small procession of honeybee dancers while Tigger and Winnie the Pooh ride atop honey jars overflowing with Pooh's favorite snack – Piglet and Eeyore float beneath them.

- Who's the leader of the club that's made for you and me? The parade culminates in a tribute to Disney's classic characters (including the 1964 film "Mary Poppins". Mary and Bert lead the final unit on identical carousel horses followed by a few penguins. Donald, Daisy, Pluto, Chip and Dale follow in a second float, an enormous vista featuring a carousel, canopies and an oversized doll of Minnie Mouse. A squad of chimney sweeps led the way for the final float, featuring Mickey and Minnie Mouse aboard a giant hot air balloon (made out of Mickey Mouse balloons). The balloon is held aloft by an oversized Goofy!

Disneyland in Pictures

Following the parade we made another circuit around the park and then took our (after shopping of course) for seven ports of call – DisneySea.

Tokyo DisneySea

> *Welcome one and all to a world where Imagination and Adventure set sail. Tokyo DisneySea is dedicated to the spirit of exploration that lives in each of us. Here we chart a course for Adventure, Romance, Discovery and Fun and journey to exotic and fanciful Ports of Call. May Tokyo DisneySea inspire the hearts and minds of all of us who share the water planet, Earth*. —Michael D. Eisner.

Tokyo DisneySEA (東京ディズニーシー), which is a take on DisneyLAND, opened next to Tokyo Disneyland Park on September 4, 2001 at a cost of ¥338 Billion, and is divided up into seven "ports of call", or themed lands: Mediterranean Harbor (offering the old-world charm of a romantic southern European seaport as its backdrop), Mysterious Island (a very foreboding, rocky and devoid place set within a South Pacific volcanic caldera of the 1860s – "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" and "Journey to the Center of the Earth" attractions are here), Mermaid Lagoon (a whimsical "under the sea" world of fun and play with Ariel, the little mermaid), Arabian Coast (a harking back 10 centuries to the mysterious enchantment of Arabian Nights – "Sinbad's Seven Voyages", "Caravan Carousel" and "Aladdin" are here), Lost River Delta (the foreboding jungles of Central America in the 1930s on the shores of El Rio Perdido, the 'Lost River' – "Indiana Jones and the Temple of the Crystal Skull" and "Mystic Rhythms" attractions are here), Port Discovery (the marina of the future as inspired by the futuristic writings of Jules Verne as seen from the 1800s – "StormRider" and "Aquatopia" are here), and American Waterfront (which recreates two distinct American harbors at the dawn of the 20th Century – New York and Cape Cod; "The Tower of Terror" and "Toy Story Midway Mania" are here.)

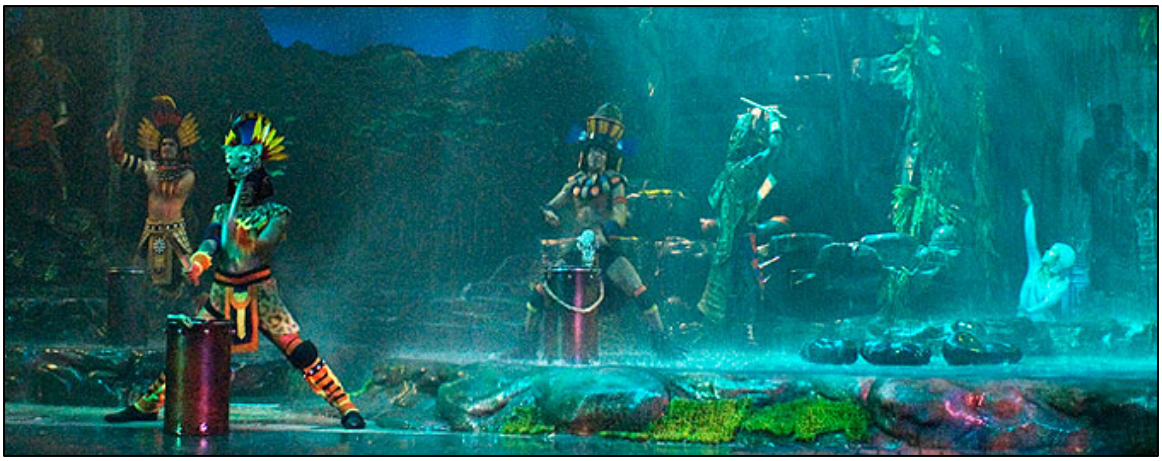
Styles, themes, attitude, atmosphere and ambiance of each land are all richly invoked and distinctly themed to the likes I've never before seen in a Disney Park. You'll literally lose yourself within it. I know I have, and enjoyed every moment doing so. Every time I've come to Japan I've also spent time here at Tokyo DisneySEA, even if I don't visit its sister park. As such I have explored this park from stem to stern (if you'll pardon the nautical parlance), describing much of its seven themed lands and the attractions found within when I was first here in 2004.

The purpose for being at both parks here today was to give Nicole – who has toured Walt Disney World with me multiple times – a peek into the differences and similarities into the parks here in Japan. But enough poetic waxing; we really didn't have all that much time here so I'll just touch upon those areas we did get a chance to experience today…

<u>"Mystic Rhythms" in Lost River Delta</u>

The moment you step into Lost River Delta you are immersed in a brand new world: river boats, wooden shacks, rope fences, rickety rope bridges, and an overgrowth of vines and trees. The only thing that reminds you of where you are is Mount Prometheus, the most prominent feature of the park. It stands out as a backdrop for all the "ports of call" - your eyes can't help but be drawn to it.

"Mystic Rhythms" is one of those attractions that I almost bypassed for other attractions the first time I came to the park; however, the heat of the day and the pain in my feet dictated I sit for a spell, thus I chose this show, located in a converted hanger supposedly far, far from civilization as a place to rest. I wasn't sure what to expect, as the brochure didn't describe the show well enough, but once the show began I was completely blown away. It's a story about the powerful elements of wind, water and fire coming to life in a rainforest, such as the one we are located in at Lost River Delta. The theater is reminiscent of that found for the Tarzan Rocks! Show in Animal Kingdom at Walt Disney World (now replaced with Finding Nemo-The Musical), but with a distinctly Japanese flair. Vines hang about, criss-crossing the theater walls, ceiling and various other locations… growing wildly just as real vines would. The performance stage is curtained off by what appears to be an old canvass cloth. Water trickles from somewhere. Noises of the jungle begin to slowly fill the space. And then the theater explodes with dance, music and special effects. Animals, characters and elements of the rainforest come alive in this 25-minute production that is truly one-of-a-kind. One doesn't need to know the language of the land to understand the actions here, for "Mystic Rhythms" speaks to us in a universal language – the language of survival.



"Aquatopia" in Port Discovery

Port Discovery lies across the horizons of time in what is said to be a marina of the future; at least in the eyes of Jules Verne. Port Discovery is yet another great example of theme and sea merging into one distinct port of the park. Mount Prometheus is ever present in the backdrop, and yet instead of taking the dark, gritty approach to Jules Verne as seen in Mysterious Island, Port Discovery takes the shiny, futuristic look of a future that the great visionaries dreamed could be. Reds and golds appear more prevalent here, suggesting that exciting look of the future seen in the late 1800s. In Port Discovery, we're invited to "celebrate the thrills, adventure and excitement of new frontiers!

Port Discovery is also home to the Center for Weather Control and their scientists have been quite busy building every one of the contraptions one sees futuristic port of call. In "Aquatopia," the scientists invite you aboard one of their newest navigational marvels, a watercraft of the future. Your boat twists, twirls and whirls through a labyrinth of fountains, rock formations and whirlpools. If "Aquatopia" sounds familiar, it should, as this attraction borrows its namesake from Disneyland's Autotopia, which features cars on a track instead of boats. But don't let that fool you: Aquatopia is a technical marvel. Not only do you have zero control over the watercraft, neither do the operators… at least not directly. "Aquatopia's" ride mechanism is guided completely by a series of laser beams, which the boat's systems use to navigate themselves through the various terrain conditions in the shallow lagoon. Although that might not sound special enough, but when you consider those boats don't go off course, you'll see it's the first of its kind and something unique to see, and ride!

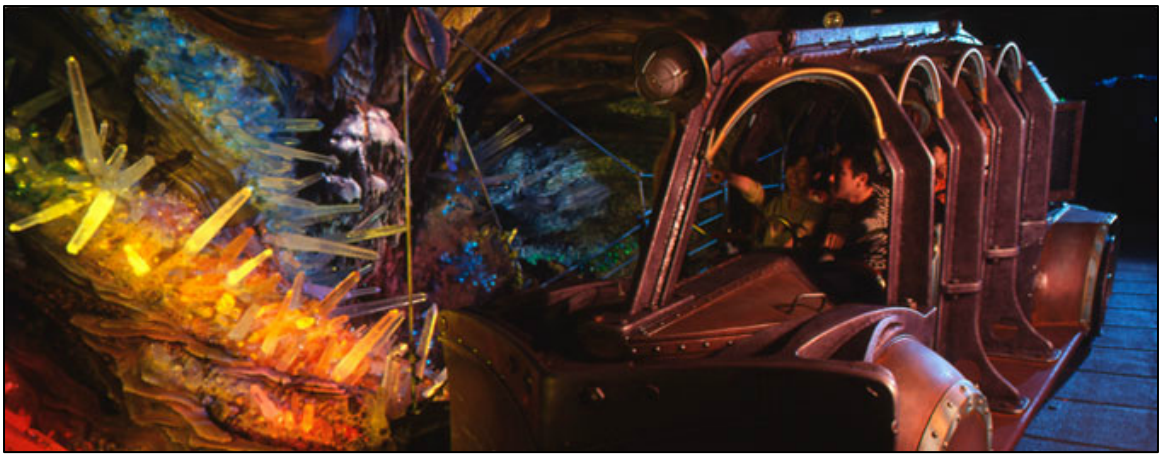
Aquatopia was fantastically fun in its outward simplicity. Nicole loved it so much we rode it again, and again, and again!

"Journey to the Center of the Earth" in Mysterious Island

Mysterious Island, set within a South Pacific volcanic caldera of the 1860s, draws its inspiration from the writings of Jules Verne, bringing much of his adventurous world to life. Mysterious Island is a very foreboding place and such a stark contrast to the colorful and lively Mediterranean Harbor. The landscape here is confined; rocky and devoid of natural plant life of any kind and yet alive with unforeseen energy bubbling just below the surface. Steam rises out of the rocks and waters, creeping out of the cracks in Prometheus, the resident volcano. Waters churn below, at times violently, as whirlpools appear and disappear at will and geysers actively shoot their waters dozens of meters into the air. Consequently the name Mysterious Island is somewhat of a misnomer. While it is mysterious (the walkways are metal mesh and it's suspended above a pool of water), it is hardly an island. Yet this island, or structure (whichever you'd prefer), features two of Tokyo DisneySEA's signature attractions: "Journey to the Center of the Earth" and "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea".

We only had time for Journey to the Center of the Earth…

"Journey to the Center of the Earth" is one of the most unique attractions I've seen at the various Disney Parks I've visited as of this writing (Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney Studios, and Animal Kingdom at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, USA; Disneyland Paris and Disney Studios Paris at Disneyland Paris Resort in Paris, France; and of the two parks in Japan). The ride is based on the Jules Verne novel of the same name and takes you on an expedition of discovery deep into the earth's core. Along the way the novel comes to life with expansive crystal caverns and strange unearthly creatures. And just when you think your ride is going to be a slow one, your vehicle speeds up and sends you hurdling through one of Prometheus' lava tubes in order to make your great escape! "Journey to the Center of the Earth" is a very thrilling ride, but it isn't for everyone. Those who do not like dark, cramped spaces and/or sudden changes in velocity will not enjoy this attraction. But for those who do… look for the opening to Mysterious Island as you whiz by – you're circling around the volcano!



But… whoops! Nicole didn't like this attraction one bit, as she's not one for dark, cramped spaces and/or sudden changes in velocity. I'd hoped that because she enjoyed "Dinosaur" at Animal Kingdom and "Test Track" at EPCOT in the past, this one – which combines the best of both in my opinion – would be easier for her to take. My bad!

"Fantasmic!" in Mediterranean Harbor

Mediterranean Harbor is considered the gateway to Tokyo DisneySEA, offering the old-world charm of a romantic southern European seaport (Porto Paradiso) as its backdrop. The spirit and beauty of old-world Europe comes alive and shines as the sunlight dances off richly detailed buildings reminiscent of those found in Florence, Venice, Paris or Prague. Look closely and you'll find the famous top of the Duomo and a replica of the Ponte Vecchio Bridge found in Florence.

Look even closer and you'll see those detailed edifices are actually wings of the Hotel MiraCosta, Tokyo DisneySEA's posh resort that adorns the entranceway of this port of call. If anything, Mediterranean Harbor is a distinct reminder of Epcot's World Showcase in ambiance, but vastly different – almost ten-fold better. I can't quite put my finger on it, but this part of the park seems shiny, grand and classy.

You really are in another world here and it seems as if this is where I belong. Besides the MiraCosta front and its picturesque lagoon, Mediterranean Harbor also features "Fortress Explorations," a place where one can have a little fun by becoming immersed in a Renaissance style stronghold, filled with nooks and crannies for even the most seasoned explorer to discover. Unfortunately we didn't have time to explore the fortress as we needed to stake out a good spot for Fantasmic, the park's newest night-time show.

Fantasmic is a night-time show featuring fireworks, live actors, water effects, pyrotechnics, music, several boats, decorated rafts and projections onto large mist screens featuring reworked Disney Animation. The show premiered on the shores of the Rivers of America in Disneyland in 1992, a new version featuring new animated and live action scenes was ported to Disney's Hollywood Studios (formerly Disney-MGM Studios), at Walt Disney World in 1996, and now a third version of the show – arguably the most different – began playing on April 28, 2011 here at Tokyo DisneySEA, replacing BraviSEAmo. But I can't say I'm a fan of the change…

The show begins with Sorcerer Mickey emerging from a tower of stars (in representation of a comet, I believe), while "Sorcerer's Apprentice" accompanies. Later, as Mickey begins to conduct the water fountains the new theme song – "Imagination" – plays while images of different characters swirl on the tower (chock full of LED Lights). The music shifts into the traditional "Fantasmic" theme and then weaves back into "Sorcerer's Apprentice" as Mickey conducts the stars and sea, and calls upon the Magic Brooms. The waters rise and Ariel enters vocalizing "Part of Your World"; Crush and his sea turtle pack from Finding Nemo swim in the background. The dancing fish from Fantasia's "Nutcracker Squite" also appear, as does Jiminy Cricket stuck in his bubble, which pops and fills with water (like it does in the WDW version).

Mickey's eyes appear confused in the dark and the show progresses into a jungle environment. While Tarzan and Jane Porter appear swinging on the projection tower, floats featuring giant inflatable versions of Baloo, King Louie, and Kaa (from the Jungle Book) along with Pumbaa and a young Simba (from the Lion King) appear. A medley of music from Tarzan, the Jungle Book, and the Lion King plays on, eventually building into "The Circle of Life" song and scene. However, as Rafiki is about to hold up Simba, Stitch appears instead (similar to the "Inter-Stitch-als") and the music transitions into an electric guitar version of "Hawaiian Roller Coaster Ride" with Stitch conducting the water (from the tower) while Angel pilots Stitch's red speeder shooting plasma blasts on the projection screen. Mickey eventually reappears, accompanied by the show's theme song and "When You Wish upon a Star", setting the stage for an appearance by Genie singing "Friend like Me" with the "Whole New World" scene from Aladdin following. As Aladdin and Jasmine fly off, the music segues into Cinderella and a sequence based on the Disney Princesses.

Mickey encounters the Magic Mirror immediately following the Princesses medley and asks the Mirror if he's the greatest sorcerer of all. The Mirror tells him to look closer and deeper. The Mirror and the Evil Queen then cast a spell trapping Mickey inside, allowing the Villains to take control, each one appearing within the mirror.

The Queen (now as the Old Hag) calls on the assistance of Ursula (singing "Poor Unfortunate Souls"), Chernabog (whose appearance is accompanied with a composition of "Night on Bald Mountain" and "Hellfire"), and Jafar from Aladdin. The Queen laughs at the power of Mickey's imagination and the last villain emerges from the mirror: Maleficent, who shows the power of her imagination by becoming a menacing dragon.

Mickey falls back into his sleeping body and with a wave of Tinker Bell's wand, the show moves into the finale. Sorcerer Mickey reappears on the tower, clad in a glowing, white, fiber-optic reflecting robe to conduct the final movement – the music builds, fireworks fly and the waters gush. Mickey then remarks: "Some imagination, huh?" and disappears. The tower takes on the appearance of the Sorcerer's Hat and the show comes to an end.

You know, this was to become the nighttime spectacular for Tokyo DisneySEA's 10th Anniversary Celebration – "Be Magical!" However, the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011 delayed the opening of the celebration for six weeks. All of the character dialogue was recorded in Japanese by the characters' respective Japanese voice artists. This is also the only version of Fantasmic not to have a stationary stage. Since Mediterranean Harbor is located in the center of the park, most of the show takes place on barges and boats. In conclusion, the performance is so very much different… unique in that very quintessential Japanese way. Weird would be another way to describe it but I don't wish to offend. It's just not the Fantasmic I've come to know and love!

* * *

We left the resort area soon thereafter, since it was blistery and cold, but most of all, fatigue was weighing heavily upon us. A too early morning coupled with a hectic time of getting there, plus the exploration of both parks in a rushed time frame wiped us both out. But it wasn't a bad day! The purpose was to give Nicole the chance to experience both parks and that we accomplished. I never thought or expected we'd get to see all the attractions anyway!

According to our itinerary we're scheduled for a day in Kamakura, but with all that happened getting us here today I think we're going to forgo the day trip, sleep in a bit, and stay in the Tokyo area. With the blossoms virtually gone there's little need to head to Kamakura anyway (I've been), so I'm not really all that saddened by it. We will, however, still go to Matsumoto on the 10th.

So with that I bid you adieu and goodnight.

Ja ne!

「Tokyo, the Eastern Capital」

Tuesday | April 9, 2013 ‹part 1›

より多くのものは、より多く、彼らは同じまま変更。
(*Yori oku no mono wa, yori oku, karera wa onaji mama henko*)

It's an old adage, that. Yes, the *more things change the more they stay the same* and nothing is truer here than in Tokyo. In once glance I've seen many changes here in five years, but many more things have remained the same. Take the time the sun rises here for instance: it still peaks very, very early! How early you might ask? Try climbing above the horizon just after 5:00am and beginning to light up the room around thirty minutes later! It makes for the sleeping in we'd planned to do this morning very difficult. We made it all the way until 8:00am in fact, but both of us were pretty much awake for some time before that - but it was nice just being able to lay there, nice and warm in our futons, without really a need to get up and go anywhere in a hurry. We did, of course… get up and go I mean.

And what a great time we had on the streets of Tokyo too!

Tokyo Metro

Toei

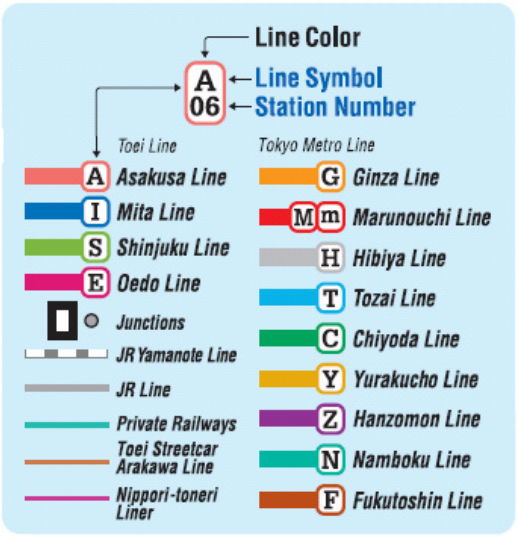
If yesterday was an intimate lesson in the JR Rail system, with its many different (and colorful) routes, today was a study in the city's other major transportation alternative and perhaps the most important for us – Tokyo's Metro system. We used a little of both yesterday getting to and from Tokyo station and Hongo Sanchome, and also to and from Tokyo Disneyland, but that usage was rather fleeting. Today we'd be using the Metro system exclusively, using a half-dozen different lines or more, so getting Nicole familiar with the metro system was top priority. As there are rival train lines – Japan Rail and other local companies – there are also competing metro systems: Tokyo Metro Network is a conglomerate of two subway companies and a handful of private railways. The most prominent of these companies is the Tokyo Metro (東京メトロ) and Toei (都営), each operating a network of trains and lines that crisscross Tokyo prefecture.

The Toei system is operated completely by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. In fact, the name itself reflects this: (ei) meaning "operated," and (to) meaning "Metropolis". Put them together and you get Toei. The Tokyo Metro, while a private company, is actually a joint effort between the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and the Japanese National Government.

So it's no wonder the two services are linked and yet remain separate entities (so you still need to buy a transfer ticket if you plan to transfer between the two systems, as an example.) The system can be identified by its logo: either a stylized "M" for Tokyo Metro lines or an exaggerated green "T" symbol (it's the symbol of the prefecture of Tokyo; supposed to represent a ginkgo leaf) – for Toei lines. You'll often see a combo insignia (a standard looking subway train symbol) which identifies that both systems are available at that particular station. Furthermore, you can get around purchasing transfer tickets if you buy into a one-day fare pass for ¥1000, which allows the bearer unlimited passage on both the Tokyo Metro and Toei lines for a single day.

Buy these; they'll definitely come in handy and will save a bundle in transportation costs, especially if you plan to utilize the metro/subway system multiple times a day like we did.

Tokyo Metro operates the Ginza Line (G), Marunouchi Line (M), Hibiya Line (H), Tozai Line (T), Chiyoda Line (C), Yurakucho Line (Y), the Hanzomon Line (Z), the Namboku Line (N) and the Fukutoshin Line (F). Toei Subway operates just four of them: the Asakusa Line (A), Mita Line (I), Shinjuku Line (S) and the Toei Oedo Line (E).



We descended the steps at Toei Oedo's Hongo Sanchome station and took the line eastward toward Kuramae (E-11), switched to the Asakusa Line platform (A-17) and rode it one stop north to Asakusa (A-18), exiting there.

And the adventure began…

<u>ASAKUSA: Nakamise-dori & Senso-ji</u>

Siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip.
Ahhhhhhh.

That's the stuff right there! Sorry for the slurp; it's just that I'm rather enjoying my first can of kohi (コヒ), or coffee, this morning. I had little time to grab anything near Homeikan so as soon as I saw a vending machine here I had to grab one. These Japanese vending machines are so great, aren't they? And convenient too! But I'm sure you're not interested in hearing about the vending machines, not with Asakusa all around us, right?

Asakusa (浅草) is on the north-east fringe of Tokyo at the eastern end of the Ginza subway line, and for most of its history, has been the hub of the city's entertainment offerings. The area blossomed when Tokugawa Ieyasu (Shogun) made Edo (a.k.a. Tokyo) his base of operations in 1603, which transformed Edo into the 17th century equivalent of the city that never slept; Asakusa was ground zero. Asakusa became a pleasure quarter in its own right with stalls selling toys (not that kind), souvenirs, and sweets; acrobats, jugglers and strolling-musicians wandered the narrow streets; and sake shops and teahouses – where the waitresses often did provide more than just tea – were set up on every corner. Eventually the Kabuki theaters came, followed later by the cinema; the two forms establishing Asakusa as the entertainment quarter of the city – a reputation it held virtually unchallenged until World War II. Though much of the area was destroyed during the war, Asakusa is still Tokyo's oldest actively working *geisha* district, and much of what we associate with Japanese culture sprang from these grounds and can still be found here.

One of those peculiarities is the harmonious blending of Shinto and Buddhism, and you'll find no better representation of this covenant than at Senso-ji. It was here, according to legend, along the banks of the Sumida River, two brothers fished out a small golden statue of Kannon, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy in 628 AD. Having recognized the sanctity of their find, the village's chief (Hajino Nakamoto) converted his house into a small shrine so that the villagers could bestow their prayers upon the Kannon. The diminutive shrine was later converted into a full-fledged temple (by 645 AD) and through the years its fame, wealth and overall size grew. Its popularity further matured after Senso-ji became the tutelary (protectorate) temple of the Tokugawa clan. Over the years Senso-ji survived the last shoguns, the Meiji Restoration, and the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 (関東大震災), but not World War II. Continued firebombing of Tokyo throughout the early 1940s resulted in much of its destruction. Therefore most of the main buildings you see today are relatively new. Even with that being said, Senso-ji (金龍山浅草寺; *Kinryu-zan Senso-ji*) is still an amazing sight.

I came to explore this area of Tokyo for the first time during my second trip (in 2007); the discovery of Senso-ji (and its approach arcade Nakamise-dori) during that outing too me quite by surprise. I not only found my visit here satisfying but tremendously enjoyable, making visiting Asakusa one of my top priorities since. Repeating this exceptional jaunt only made sense; it is an ideal area to introduce Tokyo to a new-comer. It has a little of the hustle-and-bustle of super clusters like Shinjuku, Shibuya, and Ginza with a touch of old-Japanese charm and kitsch. Asakusa has life, it has history, and it has shopping without many of the hassles found elsewhere.

The moment you step out of the station and round the street corner there's no mistaking that you've found this magnificent temple's grounds. The 11.7m tall and 11.4m wide **Kaminarimon** Gate (雷門), with its bright-red color and huge 1500-pound paper lantern, stands defiantly amidst the modern world to greet you warmly. But beware: the god of thunder (*Raijin*, sitting left) and the god of wind (*Fujin*, right) guard this path and they don't take kindly to evil-doers. Kaminarimon means "Thunder Gate" for a reason; besides the gods of thunder and wind guarding the path, the massive lantern (a *chochin* that is 4m tall, 3.4m in circumference) hung below its main loft is dramatically painted in vivid red-and-black tones to suggest, some say, the wind, thunderclouds and lightning associated with its protective gods. The original gate, built by military commander Taira Kinmasa in 942, stood just south of here. It was erected in its present location during the Kamakura Period (1192-1333), whereby the statues of *Fujin* and *Raijin* came to rest at either side. People initially offered prayers to these two statues for the protection of the temple against natural disasters. Over time, they became the subject of prayers for the benefit of the people, such as for a bountiful harvest and for peace in the world.

Just beyond Kaminarimon is **Nakimise-dori** (仲見世通り), a 250 meter long colonnade, lined with scores of shops, offering an abundance of traditional (and non-traditional) wares to those making the pilgrimage here. Among these include, but are not limited to: obi sashes, hair combs, fans, dolls, *ukiyo-e*, *kimonos*, sweets, ice cream, t-shirts, toys, *yakitori*, and cell phones. A virtual mélange of anything and everything imaginable, and quite a treat to browse!

When I brought my friend here I wasn't sure how well he'd receive the kitschy nature of the shopping arcade approach, as I wanted to be sure he'd enjoy visiting its historical confines – like shrines and temples – since most of the rest of our itinerary would be spent doing just that. So you could say Asakusa was an experiment of sorts. Would you believe he liked the kitschy shopping arcade better than exploring the temple? But then all girls love to shop! So I knew exactly what to expect when I brought Nicole through here this morning: she was all over the shopping arcade!

On the opposite end of the arcade is **Hozomon** (宝蔵門), or "Treasure House Gate", marks the entrance to the inner complex. Built in 1964 of reinforced concrete, this two-story gate has a treasure house upstairs holding a number of 14th century Chinese sutras (or sacred texts), but it's not as if you're allowed to see them. It stands 22.7 m (74 ft) tall, 21 m (69 ft) wide, and 8 m (26 ft) deep. Beyond that is the courtyard and the familiar trappings of a Buddhist temple: a multi-level pagoda (in this case five stories), a belfry (which used to ring every hour), and the Hondo, or main hall.

The **Hondo**, a national treasure re-built by third Edo shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu, was unfortunately obliterated in the March 1945 Tokyo air raids; what you see here is a ferroconcrete reconstruction.

One immediately apparent characteristic of the hall though is its dramatically sloping roof, one that is quite a bit taller compared to that of other temples, such that it can be seen from a great distance. The 1,150 square-meter hall is divided into the *naijin* (inner sanctum) lain in *tatami* mats and the concrete-floor *gejin* (outer sanctum). Senso-ji's principle image, the Bodhisattva Kannon, sits on the *zushi* (miniature shrine) called the *gokuden* in the center of the *naijin*. The *gokuden* houses both a secret statue and a duplicate carved by Ennin. It also holds images of Kannon once worn by persons of high rank including Edo period shoguns and ordained members of the royal family. To the left and right of the *gokuden* sit the protector deities Bonten and Taishakuten. To the rear left of the *naijin* is a statue of Fudo Myo-o, and to the right is Aizen Myo-o, attendants of Bodhisattva Kannon.

Off to the right (if you're standing on the steps of the Hondo) is the **Five-storied Pagoda**, built in 942 along with the main hall. It later fell under disrepair and was rebuilt by Tokugawa Iemitsu in 1648. It lasted in that form until it burned to the ground during the air raids. Though many structures in the temple complex did not survive the horrific fire-bombings, a small number did and are as original as they can get. The largest of these structures, to the right of the main hall, is a Shinto shrine to the Hikonuma brothers (the brothers Hamanari and Takenari) and their master (Naji Nakamoto) – the putative founders of Senso-ji. The shrine, built in 1649, is also known as the shrine of the **Three Guardians** (Sanja Sama) due to the role the brothers and their master played in its founding.

Near the main hall is another survivor of WWII: the eastern gate, **Niten-mon**, built in 1618. This gate originally stood further inside the Senso-ji complex. Known then as Yadaijinmon Gate, it was dedicated to Japan's ancient Shinto gods. The Tosho-gu where it stood was destroyed by fire in 1642, and this gate, along with the stone bridge located in front of the Yogodo (more in a moment), were the only structures to survive. Today the gate is named for the two protective Buddhist deities (known as *ten*) that flank it left and right – Zochoten and Jikokuten respectively – according to Buddhist practices; hence Nitenmon or "gate of two ten." The two statues guarding the gate come from Genyuin Hall (the gravesite of Tokugwa

Ietsuna, the fourth Edo shogun) of Kanei-ji, the family temple of the Tokugawa's at Ueno Park. (The originals, decimated by WWII, came from Tsurugaoka Hachimangu in Kamakura.)




And these are just the structures in the main part of the complex. Others such as the *Yakushido*, *Rokkadio* and *Yogodo* (with its nice water feature), the *Zenizuka Jizo-do hall*, monuments in memory of three haiku master poets, the tomb of *Toda Mosui* and the "*Shibaraku Statue*" are located to the left of and behind the main hall.
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The **Yakushido**, a space of some 30 square meters, was built in 1649 by third Edo shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu, making it one of the oldest structures of the complex. Originally known as Kita-yakushi (*kita* means north) because it faced north, the name was changed to Hashimoto Yakushido ("Yakushido near the bridge") by Iemitsu for the small bridge located next to it. In addition to its principle image, the Buddha Yakushi (Medicine Buddha), the hall also houses the Twelve Celestial Generals, who are said to have appeared in the world to answer the 12 requests of the Buddha Yakushi to save the people, as well as the Ten Judges, who weigh the misdeeds of the deceased.

The **Yogodo** houses the Yogoshu, a group of Buddhas that follow the teachings of Bodhisattva Kannon and support his enlightened activity. (*Yogo* refers to the ability of the Buddhas to temporarily disappear and reappear in the world). Inside, on a platform at the center of the *naijin*, or inner sanctum, sits a statue of Bodhisattva Kannon. To the Kannon's right and left are seated eight Buddhas, each of which protects one or two animals of the oriental zodiac cycle. In this cycle each year is represented by one of 12 animals; therefore, each person is protected by the Buddha who's holding their animal.

And there's an image of Bodhisattva Jizo is enshrined at the **Zenizuka Jizo-do** that comes with an interesting story: one day in the early 18th century, a certain housewife happened to dig up a jar full of coins from her garden. Worried that she and her husband would become lazy due to reliance on this new-found wealth and lose what they had, she decided to put it back into the ground. This mind-set brought the family prosperity and so the couple placed a statue of Jizo on that very spot. Here. The coins are said to be buried under the stone pagoda housing six statues of Jizo in the center of the hall. The hall gets its name from two things: first, Jizo, the Bodhisattva, and second in the story; *zenizuka* literally translates to "mound where the treasure is buried". The current Jizo-do Hall was reconstructed in 1964. Visitors to the hall offer salt, incense and candles to the images of Jizo. Because of the salt used to purify the Jizo images, the statues here are also known as Shioname-jizo (Salt-licking Jizo).

There's also the tomb of Mosui Toda (1629-1706), a samurai, *waka* poet and Kokugaku scholar (but unfortunately there wasn't too much about him there), and the "Shibaraku", a copper statue of the 9th Danjuro Ichikawa (1838-1903), a famous Kabuki actor, dressed in part of the play he enjoyed the most: the Shibaraku. *Shibaraku* is a short drama (roughly 50 minutes) inserted during interludes or in between full plays to provide variety and maintain a certain level of energy and interest on the part of the audience. The plot centers on the figure of Kamakura Gongoro Kagemasa, who has become the stereotypical bombastic hero of the kabuki stage, with red-and-white striped makeup and strong, energetic movement. The historical Kamakura Kagemasa is famous for his bravery for having continued to fight after losing an eye in battle in the Gosannen War (1083-1087).

And, last but not least, over in small corner is where you'll find the **Sansho** monument, a stone tablet in memory of three master haiku poets (known collectively as "sansho" – Nishiyama Soin, Matsuo Basho and Enomoto Kikaku). It was erected in 1809 and moved to this resting spot in 1894. According to a sign next to the monument, the inscriptions can be read as follows:

- ながむとて花にもいたし頸の骨　　宗因
  Nagamu tote hana nimo itasi kubi no hone　　*SOIN*
  Having seen them long, I hold the flowers dear, but ah, the pain in my neck.
- 花の雲鐘は上野か浅草か　　芭蕉
  Hana no kumo kane ha Ueno ka Asakusa ka　　*BASHO*
  Sounding through clouds of flowers is it the bell in Ueno or Asakusa?
- ゆく水や何にとどまるのりの味　　其角
  Yukumizu ya nani ni todomaru nori no aji　　*KIKAKU*
  Can running water impart its taste to nori?

There's never a loss for something to see (or learn) here!

Senso-ji is certainly a great place to sit and watch the masses. From the worshipers wafting smoke over themselves from the temple's incense burner (called a *jokoro*) or rubbing the small statue of the Nade Botokesan Buddha (both done for good luck and to keep the body healthy), to those paying respects at the main hall by throwing coins and lighting candles or trying their hand at getting divine answers to questions via *omikuji* stalls, it's quite a bustling place and worth the visit.

My advice: pick up some kind of food item from one of the vendors at the start of Nakamise-dori and stroll along from stall to stall, what's the rush? I highly recommend the tempura-battered and friend fruit-flavored bean paste buns at the temple end of the arcade (they're called *manju*). Both the pumpkin and cherry blossom flavors Nicole and I sampled were *oishii* (delicious!) Also try the rice crackers dipped in warm (temperature wise) soy sauce (¥100 for 1) – they're great! Oh, and pick up a red bean paste pancake doll or two along the way (¥60 for 1) – you won't be sorry. They're yummy too! How about some banana and green-tea flavored ice cream? Or a…

UENO: Ueno Park

Whew! The park is a lot bigger and a lot fuller than I imagined. There's a cozy looking rock wall here near the "frog fountain" at the southern end of the park; let me sit for a moment (preferably upwind from the drunk guy), grab a snack, and I'll tell you all about Ueno Park…

After popping into a few stalls to see what goodies were for sale (and buying a few), we took the Ginza line from Akasuka to Ueno – about three stops down – for a stroll around Ueno Park (上野公園, *Ueno Koen*), a rather large green-space established in 1873 as one of the country's first public parks. Here, a couple of weeks ago, the park would have been crowded with folks having *hanami* parties in celebration of spring and the Cherry Blossoms. However, with Tokyo's season coming early there wasn't too much going on, although there were still quite a number of people milling about (and the park's *sakura* lanterns were still hung). And we were in luck – a tree or three was still in bloom for us!

The park occupies lands formerly belonging to the temple Kanei-ji, which used to be one of the city's largest and wealthiest temples (and a family temple of the ruling Tokugawa clan during the Edo Period. Kanei-ji, founded in 1625, stood in the northeast of the capital (the "demon gate") to protect the city from evil, much like Enryaku-ji temple does in Kyoto (I visited there in 2008). During the Boshin Civil War, which followed the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Kaneiji suffered nearly complete destruction in a battle between the victorious forces of the new Meiji government and loyalists of the overthrown *shogunate* (known as the Battle of Ueno). After the battle, the temple grounds were converted into one of Japan's first Western style parks and opened to the public. A statue of Saigo Takamori, one of the generals in the Battle of Ueno, stands near the park's southern entrance. Remnants of the original temple complex, such as its five storied pagoda and Toshogu shrine, are scattered around the park. The current Kaneiji is a relatively unremarkable, small temple located in the northwest corner of the park.

We exited Ueno station via the Shinobazu exit, which placed us right at the southern end of the park. Our plan: walk north through the main thoroughfare, and see Kiyomizu Kannondo, Tosho-gu, then backtrack to Bentendo in the middle of Shiobazu Pond. We did take that route but discovered much, much more! Such as:

Kiyomizu Kannondo – Inspired by the magnificent Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto, Ueno Kiyomizu Kannon-do was established by Abbot Tenkai Sojo, who was also the founder of the Kanei-ji Temple. Built in 1631, the architecture is similar but structurally is a much smaller scale compares to its model. Miraculously, this Buddhist temple made it through the battles of civil war and air bombing raids. Today, Ueno Kiyomizu Kannon-do is recognized as the national treasure and one of the oldest temples in Tokyo. The principal image of this temple is the figure of Senju Kannon or 'Thousand Armed Goddess of Mercy', similar to the original temple in Kyoto. Another image of worship enshrined here is or better known as 'Goddess of Child-rearing'. She receives a greater homage and is sought after by the women whom have difficulty in conceiving. To those whom had their wishes fulfilled, they would return with a doll for offering as a gesture of thanking and at the same praying for good health of their children. Every year on September 25, a ceremony is conducted to burn all the dolls accumulated in the year.

Gojoten Jinja & Hanazono-inari-jinja – are two Shinto shrines next to each other, but existing on different levels. The one above is a shrine called Hanazono Inari Jinja (花園稲荷神社) is dedicated to Inari, the Japanese *kami* (god) of foxes, of fertility, rice, tea and Sake, of agriculture and industry, of general prosperity and worldly success. The entrance to an *Inari* shrine is usually marked by one or more vermillion *torii* and some statues of *kitsune* (foxes), which are often adorned with red *yodarekake* (votive bibs) by worshipers out of respect. You'll find that and more here. A staircase leading further in (and down) reaches the shrine below called Gojoten-taisha (五條天神社) – dedicated to another popular *kami*, though lesser-known in the west: Okuninushi (大国主). Okuninushi is often associated with match-making and marriage, due to the myths surrounding his love of Susanoo's daughter. So, this shrine specializes in helping with love, or keeping marriages strong.

Okuninushi's most famous shrine is coincidentally Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto where the two love-stones are, and the myth that one can find true love if they can walk from one to the other in a straight line (We'll be visiting this temple much later on in our trip). As they are 18m apart this is not trivial. The home shrine of Okuninushi though is none other than Izumo Taisha Grand Shrine, one of the oldest and most venerable in Japan, and well-known in its own right among Japanese.Gojoten shrine also houses a much lesser-known kami named Sukunahikona no Mikoto (or Sukunabikona, 少彦名命) who in turn is one of the three Kami of Cultivation (*kaitaku sannin* 開拓三神): Okunitama no Mikoto (大国魂命), Onamuchi no Mikoto (大己貴命) and Sukunahikona no Mikoto (少彦名命).

Ueno Daibutsu – At the *chedi*, or *stupa*, in the middle of the park is where you'll find the Ueno Daibutsu (上野大仏), an Edo-period giant seated statue of Shaka Nyorai. Made of bronze and dating to 1631, it was restored after earthquake damage in 1640, a fire in 1841, and another earthquake in 1855. Heavily damaged during the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake, when its head was toppled, much of its bulk was then melted down for reuse during WW2. In 1972, the face, which had been stored in Kanei-ji, was put on display in its former location, here in the middle of the park.

Ueno Toshogu – A Tosho-gu (東照宮) is any Shinto shrine in which Tokugawa Ieyasu is enshrined with the name Tosho Daigongen (東照大権現). Ieyasu was the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868), the third and last of the shogunal governments in Japanese history. Tosho-gu shrines are found throughout Japan. The most famous Tosho-gu is located in Nikko in Tochigi Prefecture (I visited this location in 2007). Ueno Toshogu Shrine was built in 1627 by the warrior Todo Takatora, *daimyo* (lord) of Iga and Ise. Todo Takatora was considered a shrewd and courageous leader, a highly capable administrator, and skilled castle architect. Once a vassal of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, he decided to align himself with Tokugawa Ieyasu before the battle of Sekigahara in 1600 (the decisive battle that set up the Tokugawa *shogunate*). That success was rewarded, and by 1627 Todo Takatora had become a vassal of Tokugawa Iemitsu (Ieyasu's grandson and the 3rd Tokugawa Shogun).

The deification of Tokugawa Ieyasu began early, particularly amongst key supporters and those who had a stake in maintaining the existence of the political and economic privileges they derived from *shogunate* rule. Raising the spirit of Tokugawa Ieyasu to the status of a deity meant that opposition to the *shogunate* took on more than just a political dimension. The building of shrines to Tokugawa Ieyasu began in earnest though when the imperial court in Kyoto (economically dependent on the *shogunate* for provision of the needs of the imperial family and associated chamberlains and servants) conferred the title "Toshogu" on Ieyasu posthumously in 1646. Literally translated, *Toshogu* means "Light of the East" or "Sun god of the east".

One of the most interesting things about this temple is its garden of lanterns. There are 50 large copper lanterns in front of the Karamon, many of them lining the path approaching the shrine. Each of these lanterns was made as offerings by daimyo making their official visits. If you look carefully at the base of each lantern, you will see the name of the daimyo who donated the lantern. The copper lanterns are not used for lighting, but are instead used as part of the religious ceremonies (purification and for sacred fires). The Ueno lanterns are a little unusual since most Toshugu lanterns are carved from stone. On the left, before the main *torii*, stands one of the three largest lanterns in Japan.

Other items of interest are:

- Haiden - the main structure and the hall of worship. This is where the priests and shrine maidens participate in the ceremonies. Surrounded by open air corridors, you can walk around the building taking a good look at the intricate carvings and lacquer work. All of the pillars and doors are covered in gold foil, the wood dyed red using vermillion, a natural pigment. Also inside the Haiden, one interesting artifact is a large mirror dedicated to the shrine by Matsuura Takeshiro, one of the explorers and pioneers of Hokkaido. The mirror is actually a large map of Japan as it was in the Edo period – if you have trouble reading it please remember than on this map south is at the top, north at the bottom.

- Karamon – This Chinese-style gate was an architectural style favored by the Tokugawa. Graceful curves and ornate decorations are the key feature. This Karamon has open-worked carvings of flowers and birds on both sides of the gate and makes extensive use of gold foil. Also worth examining are its two exquisitely carved dragons. These are said to have been carved by Hidari Jingoro, a noted Edo period sculptor. They are popularly known as the Noboriyu (ascending) and Kudariyu (descending) dragons.

- Mizu-Gaki – is a beautiful wooden wall about 170 meters long that surrounds the Haiden. You can see through the wall, which ornately decorated with carvings of flowers, birds, fishes etc. It is the only wall of its kind remaining in Tokyo.

You'll also find an interesting monument here entitled "**The Flame of Hiroshima and Nagasaki**", a beautiful marble and stone structure marking the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. A plaque next to the monument helped bring it into perspective.

On August 6, 1945, US forces dropped the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and another a few days later on Nagasaki, claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in an instant. In the aftermath of the fallout, Tatsuo Yamamoto went to Hiroshima in search of his uncle, finding a flame from the atomic bomb burning in the ruins of his uncle's house. He brought the flame back to his village as a memento of his uncle and an expression of his resentment. Over the years the meaning of the flame turned into a symbol of his desire for abolition of nuclear weapons. The village built a structure and transferred the flame there on August 6, 1968. It has been keeping the flame lit ever since.

In 1988, a flame was taken from this torch and merged with another from Nagasaki and carried to the Third Special Session of the UN General Assembly for Disarmament taking place in New York City. In April the same year, members of the "Shitamachi People's Association" put forward an idea of lighting a peace flame in Ueno, at Tosho-gu. The chief priest warmly welcomed the proposal and in April 1989 construction of the monument began. A little over a year later it was complete. On August 6th, in commemoration of the 45th Anniversary of the Atomic Bomb tragedies, flames from Hiroshima (taken from the Hoshino village spoken of above) and from the Nagasaki spark was dedicated.

Last, but not least, is the **Benten-do** in the middle of Shinobazu.

The structure was originally built by a daimyo named Mizunoya Katsutaka. The first priest is said to have been Tenkai. Early in the 17th century when Edo became the political capital of Japan under the Tokugawa Shogunate, Mizunoya ordered the construction of a man-made island in the marshes adjoining Ueno hill, where Tokugawa Hidetada (son of Ieyasu and second shogun) had founded Kaneiji temple, to protect Edo from the plague and pestilence thought to come from the unlucky northeast. Seemingly floating in the middle of the waters, this temple is dedicated to Benten (also known as Benzaiten), the goddess of the arts, knowledge and wisdom. The bronze Biwa instrument (a string instrument used in China that resembles a medieval lute) is associated with her.

Early visitors to the temple made their way across by boat, but sometime late in the 17th century a stone bridge was constructed, reducing the cost of visiting and greatly increasing the popularity of the temple. The modern causeway developed around the foundations of this stone bridge.

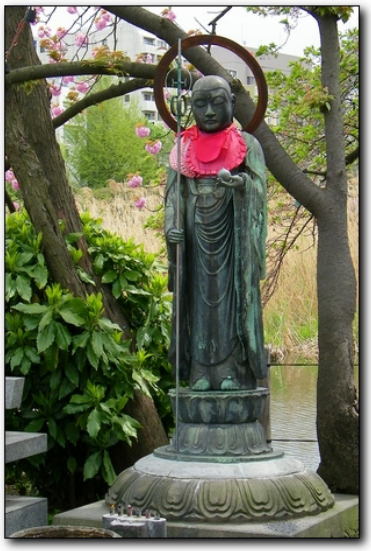
The current hall is a reconstruction.

Built in 1958, it replaced the original which had been protected as an important cultural asset but was destroyed during the air raids of 1945. It is believed that the current hall is as close to an exact replica as possible. Inside the hall if you look up at the ceiling, you can see a painted Kinryu (golden dragon). This work is also a replica, one of the most difficult of arts, and was painstakingly finished by the painter Kodama Kibo.

Of course there are many other items of note and attractions within the park, such as: the Tokyo National Museum, the National Museum for Western Art, the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum and the National Science Museum. It is also home to Ueno Zoo, Japan's first zoological garden, and more. We walked the short circuit. Along the route to Benten we did stumble upon a number of food stalls – from Soba to yakitori and all points in between; we didn't indulge but we came really close! Nicole did find a new cold drink from one of Ueno's vending machines.

We're not quite sure what it's called, but it tastes really yummy – like a smoothie! It's a combination of banana, peach, milk and yogurt and who knows what else, but it's really good. She's already lamenting liking something she probably won't be able to get back home!

Though I imagine the park would have been much busier a couple of weeks ago, there's still plenty of people going about their business to make it an interesting study of Japanese behavior. Some of the people here are just taking a stroll down the main thoroughfare of the park, while others seem to mill about aimlessly, confused as to where they were and where they might be going. There are some, like us, who have stopped to indulge in a little picnic lunch (even though the weather isn't the best) and even those who've come to the park to drink – heavily. Like the guy sitting just down the wall from us. He's stayed mostly to himself, though, bellowing out once or twice as we've been here, but he's just broken his bottle of scotch (or whatever it is he's drinking) and he's becoming a little more agitated… so it's time for us to pack up and move on!



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「Taking the Pulse of Tokyo」

Tuesday | April 9, 2013 (part 2)

Siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip.
Ahhhhhhh.

Yeah, yeah... Our stomachs started grumbling so we picked up a few sandwiches and onigiri (おにぎり; rice balls) at one of Tokyo's ubiquitous convenience stores as soon as we were above ground again. The plan was to have a nice picnic at the park – the Imperial Palace East Gardens – alas now that we've arrived it's not looking like such a good idea. So, we're having a nice to-do under a pleasant shade tree a few steps from the garden's gates instead! While we finish up here I'll fill you in on Nihonbashi…

NIHONBASHI: The Five Routes of Japan

From Ueno we took a little jaunt down the Ginza line to Mitsukoshi-mae in the middle of the Nihonbashi district.

Nihonbashi (日本橋, literally Japan Bridge), is a business district that grew up around the bridge of the same name, linking two sides of the Nihonbashi river at this site since the 17th century. The first wooden bridge was completed in 1603 (under the Tokugawa Shogunate); the current bridge dates to 1911. The district itself covers a large area to the north and east of the bridge, reaching Akihabara to the north and the Sumida River to the east. Otemachi is to the west and Yaesu and Ginza to the south. The Nihonbashi district was a major mercantile center during the Edo period: its early development is largely credited to the Mitsui family, who based their wholesaling business here and developed Japan's first department store – Mitsukoshi. The Edo-era fish market formerly located here was the predecessor of today's Tsukiji fish market.

In later years, Nihonbashi emerged as Tokyo's (and Japan's) predominant financial district. As such you'll find Bank of America Merrill Lynch Japan, HSBC Japan, Nomura Holdings, Takashimaya, TDK, IBM Japan, Honcho, Hakozakicho, Mitsui Group, Shinsei Bank, and Daiichi-Sankyo offices here.

The purpose of our visit here, though, was for two things: the bridge and mileage marker (known as kilometer zero) and the Mitsukoshi department store.

The bridge first became famous during the 17th century, when it was the eastern terminus of the Nakasendo and the Tokaido roads, which ran between Edo and Kyoto. During this time it was known as Edobashi, or "Edo Bridge", and was made of wood. In the Meiji era, the wooden bridge was replaced by a larger stone bridge, which you see today. Unfortunately much of the bridge's charm is stained by a rather large expressway built overhead for the 1964 Summer Olympics. It not only obscures the classic view of Mount Fuji from it, but tarnishes the area's historical significance (not to mention covers up the river below… which I can only imagine is a polluted mess.) There's nothing like looking up at the sky only to find the underpass of a concrete bridge! However, it is the point from which Japanese people measure distances: highway signs that report distance to Tokyo actually state the number of kilometers to Nihonbashi! And that's because the country's famed "five routes" roads emanated from this very spot. A marble monument – called Kilometer Zero (日本国道路元標, *Nipponkoku Doro Genpyo*) – marks the very spot just before you cross the bridge. Just think… back in Edo times this was the crossroads of the Shogunate.

The Five Routes (五街道, *Gokaido*), were the five centrally-administered routes, or *kaido*, that connected the capitol of Japan at Edo (now Tokyo) with the outer provinces during the Edo period (1603 – 1868). The most important of the routes was the Tokaido, which linked Edo and Kyoto. Tokugawa Ieyasu started the construction of these five routes to increase his control over the country in 1601, but it was Tokugawa Ietsuna, the 4th shogun of the Tokugawa *shogunate* and Ieyasu's great-grandson, who declared them as major routes. Post stations (called *shukuba*; 宿場) were set up along the route for travelers to rest and buy supplies (and where travelers had to present traveling permits if they wanted to cross).

The five routes were:

- The Tokaido (東海道), or East Sea Road, was the most important of the five as it directly connected Edo (modern-day Tokyo) with Kyoto. Unlike the inland and less heavily traveled *Nakasendo*, the *Tokaido* traveled along the sea coast of eastern Honshu, hence the name's route. Today the JR Tokaido Main Trunk Line (regular rail and shinkansen) roughly follows this path. In fact a number of the road's original "stations" (*-juku*) have corresponding rail stations today, such as: Shinagawa, Fujisawa, Oiso, Odawara, Hakone, and Hamamatsu – some of these we'll be visiting later on in our trip.
- The Nakasendo (中山道), also called the Kisokaido (木曾街道), was the second to connect Edo and Kyoto. Unlike the coastal Tokaido, the Nakasendo traveled inland, hence its name: "central mountain route". There were 69 stations between Edo and Kyoto, crossing through Musashi, Kozuke, Shinano, Mino and Omi provinces. In addition to Tokyo and Kyoto, the Nakasendo runs through the modern-day prefectures of Saitama, Gunma, Nagano, Gifu and Shiga, with a total distance of approximately 534 km (332 mi). Because it was such a well-developed road, many famous persons, including the haiku master Matsuo Basho, traveled the road. Many people preferred traveling along the Nakasendo because it did not require travelers to ford any rivers.
- The Koshu Kaido (甲州街道) was third, built to connect Edo with Kai Province in modern-day Yamanashi, Japan. The route continues from there to connect with the Nakasendo's Shimosuwa-shuku in Nagano Prefecture. Many feudal lords from Shinano Province made use of the road during *sankin kotai*, including those from the Takato Domain, Suwa Domain and Iida Domain. The Koshu Kaido's route is followed closely by the modern Route 20. Shinjuku, Hachioji, Ohara, and Yoshino are more recognizable stops along this line.
- The Oshu Kaido (奥州街道) was the fourth and was built to connect Edo with Mutsu Province and the present-day city of Shirakawa, Fukushima Prefecture.
- The Nikko Kaido (日光街道) was the fifth and it was built to connect Edo with the Nikko Tosho-gu, which is located in present-day city of Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture. It was established in 1617 by Tokugawa Ieyasu, in order for him to have a smoother route to the shrine. With only twenty-one stations, the Nikko Kaido was the shortest of the five routes, but it shares seventeen stations with the Oshu Kaido. Part of its route can be traced with Japan's Route 4.

Well, I think it's fascinating.

Although we were here for the bridge and mileage marker, we also couldn't resist browsing a few floors of the Mitsukoshi department store (株式会社三越), which, conveniently enough was right on the corner. The store was founded in 1673 with the *yago* (shop name) Echigoya (越後屋), selling kimonos. Ten years later, Echigoya took a new approach to marketing: instead of selling by going door-to-door, they set up a store where buyers could purchase goods on the spot with cash. And they thrived into a multi-billion yen world-wide conglomerate! Nicole and I are most familiar with Mitsukoshi from EPCOT at Walt Disney World (having shopped and dined there many times over the years), whose store and restaurant are owned by the very same people. I've visited Mitsukoshi's sister store in the Ginza in my previous visits to Japan, but never have I had the privilege to call upon the flagship store, until now. We weren't looking for anything in particular, just browsing, ending up at the CDs, DVDs, Books and Kids department before taking our leave.

This place was huge… and it was only the annex building!

Also, passing through the Mitsukoshi-mae station, you may notice a huge paper scroll, over 17 meters long, displayed on the wall of the corridor connecting the station with the Mitsukoshi department store. This scroll is called **Kidai Shoran**, Excellent View of Our Prosperous Age [in Edo] and it was painted in 1805, by an unknown artist. Kidai Shoran illustrates, with amazing detail, scenes from the Edo period taking place along the Nihonbashi main street, more exactly between Nihonbashi and Kanda Imagawabashi. You'll find 1671 people in the painting (of which 200 are women), most are merchants or regular citizens, but you will also find several *samurai* and a few mendicant monks. There are also animals: a monkey, twenty dogs, thirteen horses, four cows, and two falcons. And amongst the day-to-day activities depicted on the scroll, there are a number of other interesting characters: there's a man wearing a *tengu* mask, a man in a wheelchair, two *komuso* (monks, with their *tengai* "basket" hoods on), a samurai with a large hat and various merchants doing their trade.

It's really quite interesting! The sad thing is it's tucked away and people rush by it. We found it fascinating; it showed not only an *ukiyo-e*-like print of Edo-era Nihonbashi, but also two aerial photographs of the area: one taken in the 1940s and another most recently – the development of the area between those years is astounding.

Nicole's gone into a little toire (トイレ; toilet) kiosk here along Uchibori-dori and I have a feeling that they're all Japanese-style units, as those in the men's room were. It'll be interesting to hear how well she faired with it. They're not like western toilets at all; they're rather squatty-looking things set into the floor. Of course "squatty-looking" is an apt way to describe them since you actually have to squat over one to use it! Remember: face the front of the toilet (where the lip is) and squat! As soon as she's done we'll move right along…

CHIYODA: Imperial Palace Gardens & Plaza

SUCCESS! Nicole would like to report that she has successfully mastered the usage of a Japanese-style toilet, and that they weren't as scary as she first thought they might be. Chalk one up to expanding cultural horizons! Speaking of cultural horizons, we're now at the opposite end of the Imperial Palace promenade, on a small wooden bench a few steps away from Nijubashi, the picturesque double bridge that leads directly into the Imperial Palace grounds. Although we're not invited to go inside (it's open to the public only once or twice a year), we can at least feast our eyes on it…

Chiyoda (千代田区, Chiyoda-ku) is one of the 23 special wards in central Tokyo; it lies at the center of what was old Tokyo City. The area consists of the Imperial Palace, Gardens, and environs extending out about 1 kilometer. It inherited the name, literally meaning “field of a thousand generations” from Chiyoda Castle (the other name of Edo Castle). Many government institutions, such as the Diet, Prime Minister’s residence, and Supreme Court are located here, as well as Tokyo Station, the Budokan (a performance hall), and fifteen embassies. But our reason for being in Chiyoda today was for the Imperial Palace East Gardens (the only part of the palace open to the public on a regular basis) and for the Front Plaza to get one of the iconic glimpse’s of the Palace and its bridge. Mitsukoshi-mae to Kudanshita via the Hanzomon Line (Z) and a transfer there to the Tozai Line (T) got us to Takebashi and the back entrance into the Imperial Palace East Gardens.

The Imperial Palace East Gardens (皇居東御苑, Kokyo Higashi Gyoen) are a part of the inner palace area. They are the former site of Edo Castle's innermost circles of defense, the *honmaru* (“main circle”) and *ninomaru* (“secondary circle”). None of the main buildings remain today, but the moats, walls, entrance gates and several guardhouses still exist. The history of the Imperial Palace dates way back to the end of the Heian period (794-1185; a period in Japanese history when Buddhism, Taoism and other Chinese influences were at their height. The Heian period is also considered the peak of the Japanese imperial court and noted for its art, especially poetry and literature) or the beginning of the Kamakura period (1185–1333; a period of Japanese history that marks the governance by the Kamakura Shogunate. The period is known for the emergence of the samurai, the warrior caste, and for the establishment of feudalism in Japan.)

In the 1400s the grounds came under the tutelage of Ota “Dokan” Sukenaga, a monk and architect, who is charged as founder of the castle and town that grew up around it, Edo. The castle was then taken over by the Houjou clan, who left it after the Seige of Odawara in 1590. Tokugawa Ieyasu made it his residence after he was offered six eastern provinces by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Later, after Ieyasu became the shogun, Edo Castle and Edo itself became the military capital of Japan and the center of his Tokugawa administration, which lasted from 1603 to 1867. Emperor Meiji also resided there from 1868 to 1888, following the Meiji Restoration (the return of Imperial Power to the Emperor). In the beginning, the Nishinomaru area was at the sea shore and present-day Hibiya was a beach. The land was filled to enlarge the castle. Most of the construction was done between 1593 and 1636, completed by Ieyasu's grandson Tokugawa Iemitsu for a total perimeter of about 16 kilometers. Edo had grown from a small fishing village to a city with a population of about 150,000 people by then.

Naturally all this construction cost a lot of money. The first phase alone is said to have involved at least 10,000 men, which grew to roughly 300,000 workers by the end. In order to cover costs the Daimyo were required to supply the Tokugawa Shogun with finances or building materials. Depending on the wealth of the Daimyo large or smaller granite stones were moved to the site from all over Japan. The richer Daimyo’s were ordered to contribute the most. The less affluent ones had to provide laborers. Hills were flattened, moats dug, and land reclaimed from the sea. By the end of it all, the castle had walls that were 12 meters high and ramparts of nearly 20 meters, some of which are still standing today. The Kanda river and the sea provided access for ships, while moats reached far inland to serve as further protection. Although the castle has never been under siege, it has not been spared from calamities. Since the buildings were made out of wood, several fires destroyed or damaged parts of the castle.

During the Meireki Fire of 1657 the old dojo was destroyed. On the night of 5 May 1873, a fire consumed the Nishinomaru Palace (formerly the shogun's residence), and the new imperial castle was constructed on the site in 1888.

From 1888 to 1948, the compound was called Palace Castle (宮城, Kyujo). And on the night of 25 May 1945 most structures of the Imperial Palace were destroyed in the Allied fire-bombing raids during the war. The present buildings were rebuilt in the 1960's. A wide lawn and the remaining foundation of the former castle tower can be found on top of the hill, where the castle's innermost buildings once stood. The castle tower was completed in 1638 as the tallest castle tower in Japan's history. But only a few years later in 1657, it was destroyed by citywide fires and was not rebuilt. In place of the former buildings in the secondary circle of defense (*ninomaru*) at the foot of the hill, a nice Japanese style garden has been created. The entire area itself covers 210,000 square-meters (or 2,300,000 sq ft).

After a brief stop for lunch (sandwiches and onigiri), we entered the grounds. Entry here is free, but the number of visitors at any one time is limited, so it never feels crowded. And it really wasn't! It was quite the pleasant retreat from the grinding hustle and bustle of Tokyo. A number of flowers in species I could never name were in bloom here, including a cherry tree or two. Nicole took quite a liking to the Japanese iris blossoms found in one corner of the park, a pretty yellow, white and blue. The rest of the gardens contain a number of Japanese species of ferns and pines and maples, some of which I recognized from previous visits and others I had no idea. All in all it was quite a wonderful stroll, and peaceful. There weren't many people around (unlike at Ueno) and during our stroll the skies decided to clear – and the sun came out!

When you enter the East Gardens, an attendant at the gate will hand you a plastic tile. As I mentioned the admission into the park is metered so that it doesn't lose its peaceful nature. Unfortunately you have to give this tile back to the attendant at the exiting gate; I was a little sad at that. It would have made a great memento of our visit to the park.

In either case, we exited at Ote-mon (the original castle's gate; also destroyed many times by fire and earthquake), then eschewed the subway for a walk down through the Imperial Palace Plaza – a huge open space filled with gravel and topiary. I didn't originally plan to walk this, but it really wasn't a bad stroll. It probably would have been worse to search for Otematchi station, go below, then ride down the Chiyoda Line (C) to Nijubashi-mae and walk from there. Just getting down to some of the platforms can be a brutal affair. The walk was nice anyway. And seeing Nijubashi – the two arched bridge that marks the entrance into the Imperial Palace Grounds was a treat.

Nijubashi (二重橋, literally "double bridges") is the traditional entrance into the Palace Grounds. The bridges were once wooden and arched, replaced with modern stone and iron cast structures in the Meiji era. The bridges were once buffered by gates on both ends, of which only the Nishinomaru-mon has survived, the main gate to today's Imperial Palace. The bridge in the foreground used to be called Nishinomaru Ote-bashi (西の丸大手橋), while the one in the back was called Nishinomaru Shimojo-bashi (西の丸下乗橋). After their replacement in the Meiji era, the bridge is now called Imperial Palace Main Gate Stone Bridge (皇居正門石橋, kokyo-seimon-ishibashi) and Imperial Palace Main Gate Iron Bridge (皇居正門鉄橋, kokyo-seimon-tekkyo), respectively. The stone bridge is also called Meganebashi (眼鏡橋, literally "Spectacle Bridge") because of its shape. Today both bridges are closed to the public except on January 2 and the Emperor's birthday, so don't expect to walk across them.

We also didn't see the royal family but who expects to?

Consequently, many place names in Tokyo derive from Edo Castle. Otemachi (大手町) literally translates to "the town in front of the great gate (Ote-mon), Takebashi (竹橋) is "the bamboo bridge", Toranomon (虎ノ門) translates to "Tiger gate", Uchibori-dori (内堀通り) and Sotobori-dori (外堀通り) are "Inner" and "Outer Moat Street" respectively, and last but not least, Marunouchi (丸の内) translates to "within the enclosure". Who knew?

I think we're done resting for now… time to get off our duffs, pack up, and head off via Sakura-damon gate (under heavy renovation) to Shibuya to close out our day. Getting there should be an interesting hop: we'll have to take the Yurakucho Line (Y) to Ginza-Itchome, and then pop out there for a brief walkabout the Ginza to Ginza station, a block or two down. That'll get us back to the Ginza line and a direct route into Shibuya, not to mention a nice stroll through the Ginza. So… Allons-y!

GINZA: All That Glitters is Gold

The Ginza (銀座) is unlike any place else on earth.

It was founded during the Edo period by the Tokugawa Shogunate, in 1612, and is named after the silver-coin mint established there at the time. This is reflected in the *kanji* used in the districts name: 銀; *gin* = "sliver", 座; *za* = "mint". Modern-day Ginza was founded after a devastating fire in 1872 and is now part of what is called the Chuo ward (中央区) of Tokyo. The area is considered the most exclusive and coveted in all of retail; space in the Ginza commands the utmost highest price. As such you'll find an array of neon signs displaying the names of the most expensive department stores in all of Japan, including the likes of Wako and Mitsukoshi.

Finding your way to the Ginza is generally easy and trouble-free. In the heart of this neon district is the enormous underground Ginza station, connected by three Metro lines: The Marunouchi (M16), Ginza (G09), and Hibiya (H08) lines. You can also reach the area on Toei: Higashi-Ginza station on the Asakusa (A11) line or the Ginza-Itchome station on the Yurakucho (Y19) line. And also on foot by using the JR Shimbashi or Yurakucho stations.

When you arrive, you'll want to egress onto the Ginza 4-chome intersection, which is the crossing of Chuo-dori/Ginza-dori (中央通り / 銀座通り) and Harumi-Dori (晴海通り). You really don't understand how huge the Ginza metro station complex is until you're there. Usually the stations, the larger ones anyway, may have up to eight exits labeled A1, A2, A3 and so on. For Ginza, not only did they have A1-13 (or more, I lost count) but a dozen “B” and “C” exits. And not only that, but two other lines share this underground behemoth and getting lost, while not a real reality since there are signs about, is definitely on your mind. I know it was on mine.

At the heart of the Ginza is the 4-chome intersection; a neon paradise fans out from this cross-section in all directions. The landscape here is dominated by the iconoclastic San-ai “Dream Center” building, a towering glass cylinder which has become one of the most oft-photographed buildings in the world and thus you’ll find it pictured on countless post cards around the world. The building is instantly recognizable - it's round for goodness sake - and is crowned by a gleaming red-and-white neon sign featuring the logo of British mobile phone company *VODAPHONE*. There are many other buildings that encircle the crossing too, including the Wako (和光) department store, which is considered to be one of the most exclusive and prestigious department stores in all of Japan, and the Mitsukoshi (三越) department store, one of the first western-style department stores in Japan.

Beyond the glamour and glitz of the exclusive shopping establishments, you’ll also find history here. It bears noting that the building Wako occupies is one of the few left standing in the district after the Second World War. Its famous Clock Tower is world-renown and plays the famous *Westminster Chimes* on the hour.

Just down Harumi Street, next to Sukiyabashi crossing (すきやばし) is the colorful, post-modern Sony Building (銀座 ソニービル). Many of the earliest towered buildings were constructed here and the Sony Building is ranked amongst one of the earliest examples of such buildings in all of Japan. It’s a multi-leveled paradise for SONY fans and other gadget aficionados; every level has the very latest Sony gadgets and gizmos on display.

You'll find the latest digital camcorders and high-tech digital cameras, music players, cell phones, gaming platforms and many other personal devises; there's also a theater and a broadcasting studio on other floors. And like many other buildings in Tokyo, the space is shared, and in this case with a BMW showroom.

On the opposite end of the district, up Chuo-dori at the crossing of Matsuya-dori (松屋通り) is Apple Store Ginza. Interestingly enough, Apple Store is not generally translated into Japanese, but you will find Apple translated into Katakana - アップル. Irregardless, this pearly-white cube is seven stories of Apple goodness; you'll find all varieties of Apple products here – the latest iPhones, the latest iPods and even the newest MacBooks.

And there's a lot of hustle and bustle on these streets. During the evening hours and certain days of the week, the streets of the main strip are courted off from automobile traffic to allow pedestrians free reign. And take over they do! It's so crazy down there I can hardly explain it; it really is an experience that has to be had. Our walk through was brief today, though, and during the day-time. Since the Ginza comes alive at night I'll look to bring Nicole back through when it's all lit up. Hopefully we'll be able to swing back through later in the week but if no at least she got to see this unique area of Tokyo in the day time.

SHIBUYA: Hachiko & Center Gai

Although you don't see any sights being mostly underground, if you ever want to get the pulse of the city, I suggest a ride through the Ginza line from one terminus to the other: you won't be sorry. The differences that can be seen – albeit minute – of those entering and leaving the train as it traverses through the heart of Tokyo, is fascinating indeed. From types and styles of dress and age of travelers to how much traffic the line receives from various points in between reveals much. The line is super busy from Asakusa (G-19) to Ueno (G-16), again from Ginza (G-9) to Toranomon (G-7), then again at Aoyamaitchome (G-4) and Omote-sando (G-2) before we all disembark at Shibuya (G-1).

The terminus is, of course, Shibuya station and if you thought you had the pulse of the city by now I'm sorry say you're sorely mistaken. The ride provides a glimpse but Shibuya puts it into perspective. And one cannot prepare for the chaos that is Shibuya – I love it. The first time I stepped into this world of fashion, flash and fast-pace in 2004 I thought I was more than equipped to experience this chaotic expanse of urban Tokyo life, but I was wrong. This place ebbs and flows to the tune of the latest J-POP craze and changes just as quickly. And it does; what was hip one minute is last decade's news the next and somehow something new is always around the corner.

The populace keeps on chugging along with the changes without missing a step – or stepping on each other as they cross the zebra stripes.

Shibuya (渋谷区) is one of the most complex and busiest stations in all of Tokyo, ground zero for a huge commercial and entertainment district the likes of which completely ensnares the senses. You'll find various department and specialty stores right outside the station gates, including Tower Records, an Apple and a Disney Store, with many, many more just within reach on foot, down various avenues that fan out from the central behemoth. The most infamous of these is Shibuya 109, with its unmistakable round tower thrusting itself skyward almost in defiance of those (square) around it. A homegrown fashion statement is 109; it's a hangout of young Japanese girls and teens alike. Here a techno fashion culture has been cultivated that is largely responsible for the girls of Harajuku (原宿): young ladies who dress in outlandish and eccentric clothing with equally bizarre accessories, makeup, and hair. You'll hear them referred to as Harajuku girls because they tend to gather in and around Harajuku station, which is not far from Shibuya. You'll know when you meet one; I've met several at Harajuku itself and in some of the various shops here in Shibuya on previous trips. They'll definitely catch your attention, so if you see one: admire, but don't gawk.

In addition to Shibuya 109, one of the other most famous buildings here is the one that Starbucks occupies. It sports a giant video screen, which gives the crossing – also reportedly the world's busiest – its distinctive glow (two other are attached to nearby buildings). While the neon, the flicker of the big screens and flashing lights will dazzle (even in the daytime), nothing will frazzle more than a mass of scurrying Japanese crossing this 4-way intersection at one time. For 30 to 45 seconds every 2 to 3 minutes, the intersection of Dogenzaka, Bunkamura-dori (文化村通り) and Koen-dori (園通り) comes alive and opens up to the pedestrian; hundreds upon hundreds of them, all rushing to get to the other side, whichever one that may be. It can be a daunting experience to be in the middle of it all and if you get a chance, and you will if you want to browse any of the stores, I highly recommend doing it. There's not a lot of pushing and shoving, but being in the midst of such a crowd of people isn't an experience to be missed.

Besides shopping and café's, you'll find a wide variety of other "sites" in Shibuya to explore – "Love Hotel Hill" is just down the block (home to the infamous establishments for those who need a quick rendezvous.); there's "Condommania" down the central "gai" or road (they specialize in condoms of all shapes, sizes, colors, flavors and uses); and many, many other establishments foreigners probably shouldn't attempt to peek into. And if you're looking for a place to meet, look no further than the statue of Hachiko at the square named in his honor. The plaza, right in front of the Shibuya station, is dedicated to and named after an Akita dog that faithfully saw his owner off every morning and greeted him at the end of the day. Even after his master's death (in 1925), Hachiko (忠犬ハチ公) returned every day to wait for him and reportedly did so for the next eleven years until he died. The story so touched the people of Tokyo (and all of Japan) that he was honored with a statue, which exists today and is one of the better known meeting spots in all of Tokyo!

Consequently, yesterday was “Hachiko Day” – each year on April the 8th, Hachiko’s devotion is honored with a solemn ceremony of remembrance there at Shibuya station. Hundreds of dog lovers often turn out to honor his memory and loyalty. So we paid our respects, then plunged head strong across the zebra stripes (taking note of all the people at Starbucks snapping our pictures – I waived) and dove into Center Gai along with everyone else. We walked up one side and down the other, then up one more, and down another.

We even found a Disney Store to poke into!

* * *

Before too long Nicole’s eyes had completely glazed over and getting a coherent sentence out of her was becoming harder and harder to accomplish; therefore, we called it a night and made our way back here to Homeikan (we’ll definitely be back to Shibuya for another stroll – Nicole really loved Shibuya even if she had wide, starry-filled eyes the entire time!) All it required was one transfer – at Akasaka-mitsuke (from the Ginza to Marunouchi Line), a brief stop at the Sunkus on the corner for some provisions, then a walk up through the neighborhood and home. Now that we’re done eating I think it’s time we grab a shower and tuck in. It’s been a busy day!

P.S. Does anyone know why Akasaka-Mitsuke is called Akasaka-Mitsuke?

「Hanami in Matsumoto」

Wednesday, April 10, 2013

誕生日おめでとう!
(Tanjoubi-omedetou!)

There are a number of dates throughout a person's life in which time is taken to celebrate, but perhaps none is more important than the anniversary of one's birth. In many cultures a birthday is often celebrated with a gift, party, a specially made sweet of some kind (such as a cake), and may be observed through entertainment, a special toast, a speech by the birthday celebrant, or other rite of passage. Although Eastern and Western cultures are fundamentally different, since World War II it has become more and more common for the Japanese to embrace Western practices – including birthday celebrations. Today you're just as likely to hear "ハッピー ・ バースディ" – "Happy Birthday!" – as you would the traditional: 誕生日おめでとう! (Tanjoubi-omedetou!)

I gladly took either – today's my birthday!

Did you know that Japanese children used to celebrate their birthdays on January 1st rather than on the actual date of their birth? Traditionally all Japanese would celebrate their birthdays, or more correctly growing one year older, at the turn of the new year. This meant that on New Year's Eve (*omisoka*), all Japanese used to consider themselves as having aged one year. In other words New Year's (*oshogatsu*) was everyone's birthday! Although orderly, this practice made for some strange situations to say the least, especially considering that babies were traditionally considered to be one year old at the time of birth (called *kazoe-doshi*). Thus a baby born two weeks (or even two days) before the new-year would be considered to be two years old on the new-year, although they were in fact only weeks old.

While that practice is no longer the case today, there are still a number of traditions the Japanese do still adhere to when it comes to birthdays.

One of them is called *Hatsu Tanjo* (初誕生) and in the days of high infant mortality rate, a child surviving his or her first year was something truly special to celebrate. In its most common form an *issho mochi* (一升餅) celebration is performed whereby one *sho* (升, about two kilograms) worth of rice is pounded into *mochi* (rice cakes), wrapped in a *furoshiki* (a type of cloth) and then tied onto the child's back. The parents hold the child up to see how long he or she can stand. The length of time shows the child's strength and determination. It is also said that the discomfort brought on by the sudden yoking of the child signifies an introduction to the future challenges which lay in store as it grows older. And when the child falls down on his/her backside after having stood for a second or two, it can be said that the child's impurities are washed away. (Ridding one's self of impurities is called *yaku otoshi* (厄落とし). *Otoshi* also means "to drop, or fall", thus when falling down with the purifying rice cakes, one is said to be spiritually cleansed.)

The heavy weight making it difficult for the child to stand has another significance: it is an expression of the parent's desire that the child not grow up to soon. In fact they hoped the children *wouldn't* grow up too soon. It was commonly seen for children who could walk before their first birthday to be called *oni ko* (鬼子), or demon children. Such kids were feared and avoided. So if a child started to walk before his/her first birthday, parents would knock them down! On the other hand, it was believed that children should start walking right after their first birthday and thus the *issho mochi* ceremony would be the last time that children would be discouraged from walking on their own.

Another tradition surrounding birthdays is one called *Shichi-Go-San* (translated as seven-five-three), a Shinto tradition (turned festival), celebrated on November 15th, whereby all three year old children, as well as five year old boys and seven year old girls take a sojourn to the village shrine, dressed in their best *kimono*, to receive blessings, for their parents to express joy in their children's survival, and to pray for their continued wealth and happiness. (The ages 3, 5 and 7 are consistent with East Asian numerology, which claims that odd numbers are lucky.)

Shichi-Go-San is said to have originated with court nobles during the Heian Period (794-1185) who celebrated the passage of their children into middle childhood. Over time, this tradition was adopted by the samurai class who added a number of rituals of their own. Children—who up until the age of three were required by custom to have shaven heads—were allowed to grow out their hair, for example. Boys of age five could wear *hakama* (traditional clothing) for the first time, while girls of age seven replaced the simple cords they used to tie their kimono with the traditional *obi* (belt).

By the Meiji Period (1868), the practice was adopted amongst commoners as well, and included the modern ritual of visiting a shrine to drive out evil spirits and wish for a long healthy life. The tradition has changed little since then. While the ritual regarding hair has been discarded, boys who are aged three or five and girls who are aged three or seven are still dressed in *kimono* — many for the first time. Three-year-old girls usually wear *hifu* (a type of padded vest) with their kimono. And Chitose Ame (千歳飴), a long, thin, red and white candy, which symbolizes healthy growth and longevity, is handed out. It is given in a bag decorated with a crane and a turtle, which represents long life in Japan.

And last, but not least, there is *seijin-no-hi* (成人の日), or coming-of-age day, which is held to congratulate and encourage all those who have reached the age of majority (twenty years of age, or *hatachi* (二十歳)).

Although I didn't get the opportunity to observe my birthday with special candies, a trip to the local shrine, or even with a party, Nicole and I did celebrate today, albeit unofficially, with a *hanami* in Matsumoto. Reaching Matsumoto from Tokyo (or conversely Tokyo from Matsumoto) can be done via the Azusa (あずさ) and Super Azusa limited express services, which run between Shinjuku and Matsumoto via the Chuo Main Line from Shinjuku station. (The name Azusa is taken from the Azusa River, which flows near the town.) Although we're on our way back now (*clickity-clack, clickity-clack, clickity-clack*), getting to Shinjuku early this morning proved to be an adventure all on its own…

Getting the "White Glove" Treatment

Kipping off early yesterday after such a busy day touring Tokyo meant the old saying "early to bed, early to rise" would apply this morning – and did it ever. We stirred just about the time the sun began peeking through our window, and though we fought the good fight for about an hour, it was still relatively early by the time we pulled ourselves together (7:00am). But this gave me a little time on Homeikan's computer (after the staff figured out how to but it up that is) in an attempt to solve my credit card crisis, which you may recall had arisen out at Tokyo Disneyland the day before.

An attempt to chat with someone from the bank's credit card department the previous morning didn't work out (their online services were experiencing an outage), so I dispatched an email detailing my problem with the hope someone would be able to help while we were out sight-seeing. I should have checked for a reply last night, but, as I alluded to, we were so tired we barely left the room once we settled in. Checking on it this morning netted me a canned response to the problem: we acknowledge, we sympathize, here's our toll-free number, so call us, maybe? (Didn't they know I wouldn't be able to dial a toll-free number from Japan?)

Pera, pera – ぺらぺら – pera, pera! (Blah, blah, blah, blah!)

Undaunted, I tried chat services again and spoke with a – surprisingly – rather helpful person regarding my situation. Though it took a little back and forth (I advised them to check the account for prior purchases that would show I was indeed in Japan), she advised the blocks would be removed. Hooray! With the card situation seemingly under control, we left Homeikan for Shinjuku station, the launching point for JR's Azusa train service to and from Matsumoto.

Getting there would require a couple of jumps on the metro system, jaunts I've never made in the years I've come to Tokyo: Hongo-sanchome to Ikebukuro, Ikebukuro to Shinjuku-sanchome via the Fukutoshin (F) Line (the newest of the metro system lines, built since I was last here – I was geeked to be riding it), then Shinjuku-sanchome into Shinjuku station proper. Hopping the Marunouchi Line (M) from Hongo-sanchome to Ikebukuro was no sweat, though it felt very weird to be traveling away from Tokyo station; we ran into a problem at Ikebukuro however – a wall of people! The Fukutoshin Line was equally crowded, as was the Marunouchi Line to Shinjuku station.

"My God," Nicole exclaimed. "What is going on?"

MORNING RUSH HOUR!

We think of rush hour as an affair by which roadway traffic comes to less than a crawl, puttering along at a snail's pace, as we attempt to get to work (or home) every day. Those fortunate enough to have access to public transportation (and use it) would see an uptick in ridership during these times as well and might think a couple dozen people in their rail car (or bus) constitutes quite a crowd.

If you're one of those people I invite you to come to Japan and experience rush hour on the rails here: an average of 8 million people use the Tokyo subway system each day for a total ridership of 3.1 billion – that's right, billion – people per year. For comparison the New York Subway system only handles about 1.7 billion riders annually – roughly half of what Tokyo's subway system handles. Everybody else is just peanuts!

These figures don't even take into account those funneling in via the Shinkansen, JR Rail lines or any number of the half-dozen private lines criss-crossing the prefecture. In fact, outside central Tokyo (the perimeter that is formed by the JR Yamanote line, which connects Ueno, Tokyo, Shimbashi, Shibuya, Shinjuku and Ikebukuro stations in one big circle) there are a number of commuter rail services out there bringing the masses into and out of the city daily. Tobu (東武), which I've previously mentioned, has most of its 463.3 km of track-service out of Asakusa, running north-east of the city (though there is the Tojo line (denoted TJ), running north-west, but that's the only one), to as far away as Nikko. Seibu Railway Co (西武鉄道), with about 179.8 km of track, runs a line out of Ikebukuro (denoted SI, which offers thru service on the Tokyo Metro Yūrakuchō Line) and another out of Shinjuku (denoted SS) – both head due west. And Tokyu (東急), with 99.5 km of track, runs a number of lines south-west of Shinjuku, its base station, many of which running to and from Yokohama. You might run across the Tokyu Toyoku (denoted TT) line, Tokyu Toyoko (TY), Tokyu Denentoshi (DT), Tokyu Oimachi (OM), Tokyu Ikegami (IK) or Tokyu Meguro (MG) lines there.

Guess which are the two busiest stations in Tokyo?
Shinjuku and Ikebukuro of course!

You'd think the station's platforms would be utter chaos with all the people about, but you'd be wrong. Although we ran into an insane number of people, everyone was very orderly and calm. The entire function of disembarking trains, queuing up (the Japanese have this down pat) to boarding the train was all orchestrated with precision. To help with this function are a number of white-gloved station attendants whose sole task in the morning (and evening) is to facilitate this concerto to the best of their ability. Thankfully, the Japanese predilection to conform has helped them survive in this urban jungle. They understand the need to queue, no one gets angry and there's rarely any pushing and shoving within them. Occasionally you'll find one who wishes to buck the system – usually someone who is a little late – but with this being a daily occurrence to many Japanese workers they've just accepted it as the norm.

For visitors like us… holy hell!

It's hard to explain to someone who has never experienced such a thing, but, to come close: imagine the busiest and most crowded place you've ever been in then multiply the number of people by 10 and you might come close to understanding how rush hour in Tokyo feels. And those white-gloved attendants? Part of their job is to push you on the train so the doors can close. Talk about getting up close and personal with the locals!

Despite the pandemonium of morning rush hour, we arrived at Shinjuku in one piece… Shinjuku (新宿) is one of the twenty-three wards of Tokyo, but the name commonly refers to just the large entertainment, business and shopping area around its massive station, which is a bustle of everything Tokyo has come to be known for: tall skyscrapers (including the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building and leading hotels such as the Keio Plaza, Hilton, Hyatt Regency and Park Hyatt (featured in Lost in Translation)), red light districts (Kabukicho; named after a kabuki theater whose construction plans have never been realized, the district features countless restaurants, bars, nightclubs, pachinko parlors, love hotels and a wide variety of red light establishments for both sexes and sexual orientations), and wild, winding alleyways filled with eateries by the score (Omoide Yokocho – "memory lane" – also known under its more colorful nickname "Piss Alley"; a small network of alleyways filled with dozens of tiny eateries serving *ramen*, *soba*, *sushi*, *yakitori* and *kushiyaki*).

It certainly is a mélange of urban life, one that I've never really fully explored. Even the station, which is the world's busiest railway hub (look it up, it's in the Guinness Book of Records; it handles more than three million passengers every day), is somewhat mysterious to me – I try to avoid it as much as possible. With it being served by about a dozen railway and subway lines, and is a major motor coach depot for the city's many bus lines, it's too hectic for me. If you think navigating Tokyo station takes guts, wait until you try and maneuver around here. With thirty-six (36) platforms and over 200 exits, this is one behemoth of a station!

It took a while but eventually we located the JR side of the station and found our train to Matsumoto: the Super Express Azusa via Track 9 – with only five minutes to spare before departure. And after a brief bout of getting in the wrong car (we stepped onto a reserved seat car at first), we found a seat in the unreserved section and began our journey northward. The entire 225.1 kilometer journey takes about 2 hours and 40 minutes and winds through the mountainous center of Honshu (where the peaks of the Akaishi and Kiso as well as Mount Yatsugatake can be seen in full glory), stopping at eleven (11) stations along the way – Tachikawa (立川), Hachioji (八王子), Kofu (甲府市), Nirasaki (韮崎市), Kobuchizawa (小淵沢町), Fujimi (富士見町), Chino (茅野市), Kami-suwa (上諏訪), Shimo-suwa (下諏訪), Okaya (岡谷市), and Shiojiri (塩尻市) – but there's little to do on the train but sit and stare out the window and wonder what there is to do in the cities, towns and villages that we pass through.

According to my guidebook, **Shiojiri** is the location of the Hiraide ruins, one of the three largest ancient ruins in Japan. Artifacts from the Jomon period through the Heian period have been discovered there. Or, **Okaya**, which at the turn of the twentieth century was one of Japan's largest producers of export-quality silk. Today it's known for the manufacturing of products such as watches and cameras (brands such as Seiko Epson, Olympus and Kyocera are based there), in addition to being the birthplace of modern-day skating and *unagi* (eel) dishes. Or, **Shimo-suwa**, a town famous its Onbashira, a festival held every six years (in the years of the Tiger and the Monkey), whereby the city's grand shrines – Harumiya (春宮) and Akimiya (秋宮) – is symbolically renewed.

The Onbashira festival consists of two segments – Yamadashi (traditionally taking place in April) and Satobiki (May) – and is reputed to have continued, uninterrupted, for 1,200 years. "Yamadashi" literally means "coming out of the mountains." Before this portion of the festival, huge trees are cut down using axes and adzes specially manufactured for this single use. The logs are decorated in red and white regalia, the traditional colors of Shinto ceremonies, and ropes are attached. During "Yamadashi", teams of men drag the logs down the mountain's rough terrain. Young men prove their bravery by riding the logs down the hill in a ceremony known as Kiotoshi. "Satobiki" festival involves the symbolic placement of the new logs to support the foundation of the shrine buildings. The logs are raised by hand, with a ceremonial group of log bearers who ride the log as it is being raised and sing from the top of the log to announce the successful raising.

Anyway, approximately two-and-a-half hours later we pulled into Matsumoto station and made our way through town – on foot – to Matsumoto castle.

Matsumoto (松本城), Crow Castle

Matsumoto Castle, also known as “Crow Castle” (烏城) because of its dark exterior and roofs that looked like spreading wings, is one of Japan’s premier historic castles. You’ll find it, of course, in Matsumoto (松本市), a city surrounded by nine out of the twelve highest mountains in Japan. Acclaimed for its beautiful views, the city features hiking and climbing, and besides the castle, has several historic features: the Kaichi School Museum, Temari, its Soba, and just north of the city: the world’s largest wasabi farm. In addition, Matsumoto, like many areas in Japan, is home to abundant *onsen* (温泉, or hot springs). It also is host to a number of summer festivals, including the Bon-Bon Festival on the first Saturday of August, which features its signature dance. Matsumoto is part of Nagano Prefecture (長野県), the prefecture which is bordered by the highest number of other prefectures (if you’re looking for trivia) and it contains the location which is the furthest point from the ocean anywhere in Japan. Nagano (both the city and prefecture) gained world-wide attention as the host of the 1998 Winter Olympics should you be wracking your brain trying to figure out why “Nagano” sounds so familiar. (In fact, the *Satobiki* is such an integral part of this area that the rite was performed as part of its opening ceremonies.)

The origin of Matsumoto-jo traces back to what is referred to as the *Sengoku* period (1568-1603; the “Period of Warring Kingdoms”). This period, from what I understand, was one of intense internal warfare that had arisen in the years following the fall of the Ashikaga *bakufu* (足利幕府), which ruled the country for more than two hundred and thirty years prior (from 1333-1568). With the shogun deposed, many *daimyo* jostled for position, hence the label; however, by the period’s end, the military reunification and stabilization of the country under a single political ruler was accomplished by a triad of pre-eminent leaders: Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. (Don’t worry; when we reach Kyoto later on in the week I’ll be able to put Imperial and Feudal Japan in better perspective).

It was during those troubled times that the head of the Ogasawara clan (who had once controlled this area) moved his manor here, calling it Hayashi Castle. Sometime later Shimadachi Sadanaga, also of the Ogasawara clan, built a fort in front of Hayashi-jo (in 1504) as means to protect the *daimyo*; he called his establishment Fukashi Castle, and for a time it did its job. By 1550 the castle came under the rule of the Takeda clan; after the Ogasawara retook the castle, the name was changed to the present Matsumoto-jo. Many more notable changes came when the Ishikawa were tasked with the castle’s charge.

Norimasa and his son Yasunaga built its three towers: the *tenshu* (donjon tower), *inui-kotenshu* (small tower in the northwest) and the *watari-yagura* (the connecting tower); the *goten* (residence); *taikomon* (drum gate), *kuromon* (black gate), the *tsukimiyagura*, the *hori* (moat), the sub-floors in the castle, much as they are today, and was also instrumental in laying out the castle town and its infrastructure.

It is believed much of the castle was completed by 1593–94 and for the next 280 years, until the abolition of the feudal system during the Meiji Restoration, the castle maintained some level of importance.

Today much of the castle's grounds are public parkland, but in the late 16th century and for most of its history, the castle was surrounded by a triple moat and strong ramparts. The inner citadel and the secondary citadels served as retrenchments, while the tertiary citadel formed an outer fortification. All told the castle covered an area of 390,000 square meters (39 hectares / 96 acres). Within the retrenchment were the facilities for the fiefdom and its daimyo, including the donjon, main residence of the daimyo and numerous storehouses for munitions, valuables and records. In the less secure outer fortifications were the homes of elite *samurai* – those who formed the daimyo's personal guard and his advisors. This area was surrounded by another earthen wall (designed to withstand cannon fire) that was some 3.5 kilometers in circumference. Adding to these defenses was another moat, which completely surrounded the ramparts The only way to enter or leave the castle grounds was through two heavily fortified gates, called Masugata and Umadashi, which are no longer standing today.

After a grand look at both areas of the castle from its former outer walls, we returned to the Masugata area of the grounds and crossed over into the inner bailey. Here much of what you see are mere shadows of the *honmaru-goten* and *ninomaruo-goten*, remains in outline form only. The most interesting part of the castle is the main donjon/keep which rises above these ruins in grand form. We'd explore the main keep soon enough, though. We came for the *sakura*… and what blooms they had!

Sakura Hanami

Hanami (花見, literally “flower viewing”) is the Japanese traditional custom of enjoying the beauty of flowers, “flower” in this case almost always meaning cherry blossoms (“*sakura*”) or (less often) plum blossoms (“*ume*”). With Matsumoto’s climate a little different than Tokyo’s, its cherry blossom season is generally one to two weeks behind. So while Tokyo’s (and most of the rest of Japan’s) cherry blossom season had concluded before we’d even arrived (much to our chagrin), Matsumoto’s was in full bloom; hence the reason for our last-minute change in itinerary before embarking this trip. The cherry trees here were in full bloom just as predicted! We stumbled upon a few on our walk down to the castle area from the JR Station, and a horde on and around the castle grounds. They were amazing. But did you know there is more than one variety?

There are over one hundred cherry tree varieties here in Japan. A few of them are wild varieties native to Japan’s forests, such as the *yamazakura*, but the large majority of them have been cultivated by humans over the centuries for decorative use in gardens and parks. There are about 200 cultivars of the blossom, but the most popular by far is the *Somei Yoshino*. There are several characteristics differentiating the tree varieties. Some of the obvious ones are the number of petals, the colors of the blossoms, when the leaves appear, the blooming time of year and the form of the tree itself.

Most wild trees, but also a lot of cultivated tree varieties, have blossoms with five petals. However, some species have blossoms which consist of ten, twenty or more petals. Trees with blossoms of more than five petals are called *yaezakura*. Examples are: the *Somei Yoshino* variety, which has five petals, *ukon* with about 10, the *ichiyo* variety with 20 petals, *shogetsu* with 20-30, *fugenzo* with 30-40, *kanzan* with up to 50, and the *kikuzakura*, which has about 100 petals! Most varieties produce light pink to white blossoms, but there are also cherry trees with dark pink, yellow or green blossoms. Some “weep”, like the *shidarezakura*. Weeping cherry trees have drooping branches and are among the most common and beloved cherry trees in Japan. There are two types: trees with blossoms of five petals and trees with blossoms of more than five petals. The latter are called *yaeshidarezakura* and bloom about a week later than the 5-petaled ones.

Furthermore, the color of some varieties' cherry blossoms may change while they are in bloom. For example, a blossom may open as a white flower and change color to pink over the course of a few days. As an example: *shogetsu*'s are white, *kanzan*'s are pink, and *ukon's* are yellow.

Most cherry tree varieties carry blossoms in spring (hence our reason for being in Japan at this time of year). *Yaezakura*, the cherry trees with blossoms of more than five petals, are typically the last ones to open their blossoms, with blooming periods about two to four weeks after most five-petaled species. Some extreme varieties bloom in late autumn and during the winter months. The most important factor in determining the blooming time of cherry trees is the geographical location. Generally, the milder the climate, the earlier the blossoms open. On Japan's southern, subtropical islands of Okinawa, cherry blossoms open as early as January (the dark-pink bell-shaped *kanhizakura*), while on the northern island of Hokkaido, they bloom as late as May. In most major cities, including Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, the cherry blossom season typically takes place in early April.

Furthermore, the blooming time of cherry trees differs from year to year depending on the weather. If the weather during the months and weeks proceeding the cherry blossom season is mild, blossoms will open early. If it is cold, blossoms will open later. From year to year, the start of the blooming season typically varies by plus/minus one week, but larger deviations are also possible (as has occurred this season – the earliest openings yet!) The cherry blossom season is relatively short. Full bloom (*mankai*) is usually reached within about one week after the opening of the first blossoms (*kaika*). Another week later, the blooming peak is over and the blossoms are falling from the trees. Strong wind and rain can cut the blooming season even shorter (which also happened this season). Some, like the *jugatsuzakura*, even blossom in fall and winter (these kind are also called *fuyuzakura*).

We didn't need to know all this to enjoy our first *hanami* picnic there under a set of cherry blossoms looking over Matsumoto-jo's famous black-colored keep. We didn't have much – some egg sandwiches, a cookie or two, and a drink between us – but we didn't need much. Just each other and the *sakura*! (And we weren't the only ones!)

Exploring the Keep

Following our *hanami,* we made a circuit around the outside walls, and then turned inward for a tour of the keep, which we went through pretty quickly. One, there were a lot of people there; two, it was quite cold at the top today. To enter you first pass through a separate minor keep called *Inui Kotenshu* (because it stands *inui* or northwest of the main tower) that from the outside appears to have three stories but actually has four, the hidden floor conceals defenses. This minor keep is structurally independent of the main tower (standing 16.8 meters) but is connected via a roofed passage (the *watari-yagura*). Look closely at the round wooden pillars here; these were rough hewn by a hand tool shaped like an axe (the entire castle being made by impressed labor) from hemlock, spruce and fir trees. There are 10 round pillars supporting the 1st and 2nd floors, 12 pillars support the upper floors. They're notable for being over 400 years old.

The roofed passage is level with the floor of the *Inui Kotenshu*, but you will notice that you need to descend about 1 meter as you go through the "warrior running passage" or *mushabashiri*. This is due to efforts to conceal defenses and confuse infiltrators. Entering the main keep, the first floor of *Wataru-yagura* is 1.4 meters lower than the "warrior running passage".

You may also notice that it is wider than other passages in the castle, as it was designed to allow *samurai* in full armor to run, carry and reposition weaponry, and redeploy. If the passageway is not crowded with other visitors have a careful look at the pillars made of hemlock, cypress and pine supporting the outer wall – notice that the wall is slightly curved. This is because the wall follows the stone foundation below, strengthening the structure against earthquakes. Holes in the pillars allowed the room, which covers an area of 12.95 meters (42 feet) by 10.9 meters (36 feet), to be divided into different storage bays for food, gunpowder, projectiles and other weaponry as required.

Speaking of the holes, as you walk through the donjon you'll start to notice holes carefully positioned in the walls, through which you often get wonderful views of the moats and the surrounding mountains. Matsumoto Castle was built some 50 years after the introduction by Portuguese traders of firearms into Japan. For this reason the walls of the turrets (*Nurigome-zukuri*) are thick enough to withstand bullets, and the defenses were built en masse. As firearms were also used to defend the castle, the donjon has 55 square holes called *teppozama*, from which matchlock muskets (and in some cases small cannon) could bring fire to bear on an assaulting force.
Look closely at the *teppozama* as you will notice that on the inside they can be pivoted slightly, enabling a *samurai* to swing the barrel at a wider angle to cover fire lanes and bring enfilade fire upon attacking troops. Some were positioned to maximize the use of *hazama* guns, which have a longer barrel and could be fired with a more powerful charge, providing effective fire at ranges of 300 meters.

In addition there are 62 long rectangular loopholes called *yazama* – positions from which *samurai* could fire arrows at an enemy. These days the *teppozama* and *yazama* are mostly used by visitors for "aiming" cameras – a time-honored tradition I sheepishly partook in. The only holes that do not provide good camera angles are the ones called *Ishiotoshi*. This does not mean that the holes are useless – far from it.

They were designed to enable defenders to drop rocks onto enemy attempting to scale the walls – smashing their ladders (and no doubt their heads) and sending them plummeting into the moat below. You can try to get a picture through these holes if you wish, but, all you'll see is the ground beneath your feet… how picturesque is that?

Staircases abound inside; watch your head as you climb them. The *samurai* were generally smaller in height than today's populace, so hitting your head here is a real threat. You'll also notice that the staircases are not connected to one another and are randomly located about each floor. They are also extremely steep (55-61 degree incline) and quite narrow. This is deliberate – making it more difficult for someone to quickly ascend the floors and providing more security against infiltrators. Think about it: decentralizing your staircase makes it harder for invaders to scale the *donjon* and detain the *daimyo*.

The second floor has identical dimensions to the first, and can be partitioned into eight rooms. This time it's not for storage (weight would have caused a problem for the floors) but for *samurai* to stay in during emergencies and alerts. These days it is host to an interesting gun museum, the *Teppo Gura*. All of the guns, armor and other weapons you will see here were the personal collection of Akahane Michishige, a local citizen, who built the collection with his wife Kayoko over a period of more than 30 years. Akahane was a member of Japan's Firearms and Swords Inspection Board of the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the Society of Firearms History of Japan, and an expert in the field. Most of the weapons are in working order, as Akahane was a skilled rifleman and a member of the Rifle and Muzzle-loader (Matchlock) Shooting League and maintained the weapons personally.

The main articles in the collection are matchlocks manufactured in the period from 1543 (when guns were introduced by the Portuguese through Tanegashima island) through to the late Edo period during the long Tokugawa peace. In total there are 141 guns of different design, caliber and period, and 230 pieces of armor. Of particular importance in the collection are the "Tanageshima Matchlock", and the "60 Momme Zutsu", which played an important role during the massive battle for Osaka Castle in 1615.

Also on the second floor, have a look at the lattice windows. Called *mushamado* or warriors windows, they are hinged so that they can be easily opened or closed – either by pushing outwards or pulling them in. Streams of light pour through the lattices during the day, illuminating the dark interiors and creating beautiful designs on the floorboards. This is in stark contrast to the third floor, which is actually called "dark" floor (*kurayamijuu)* because it has no windows. This is a hidden floor, invisible from the outside and used for storing food and munitions for the floors above – making resupply easier through the two staircases leading upstairs than if all stores had to be brought up from the first floor. The lack of windows is why the castle tower appears from the outside to have only five floors instead of six.

The fourth floor is a completely different style to all to the others. It has fewer pillars, more windows and light, and a higher ceiling to give it a spacious feel. Even the pillars have been carefully selected (cypress wood) and planed smooth – in contrast to the rough hewn timbers below. The lintels, curtains and screens suggest that the large space could be divided into three rooms and a surrounding corridor if need be. In fact, as the goza-no-ma (or private residence), the daimyo stayed here during emergencies, hence the exquisite nature of the room. The fifth floor was designed for the leaders of the castle garrison to use as a conference room to coordinate defenses and decide on tactics.
It has 30 pillars (all are original) and windows on all sides, to provide observation of the defenses and better views of signals. The staircase leading up to the sixth floor would have been particularly busy, for during a battle the garrison commanders would have communicated with the daimyo himself – who commanded from the top floor. The sixth floor is 22.1 meters (72.5 feet) above the entrance and commands wonderful views.

Discovering Temari

After making the rounds at Matsumoto-jo, and hitting up the gift shop, we took our leave and began walking back toward the station. On the way we discovered quite a unique souvenir – *temari*. Temari (手まり) balls are a folk art form that originated in China and was introduced to Japan around the 7th century A.D. "Temari" means "hand ball" in Japanese, as such embroidered balls may be used in hand ball games. *Temari* are highly valued and cherished gifts (becoming a *temari* artist in Japan today requires specific training, and one must be tested on one's skills and technique before being acknowledged as a crafter of *temari*), symbolizing deep friendship and loyalty. Also, the brilliant colors and threads used are symbolic of wishing the recipient a brilliant and happy life.

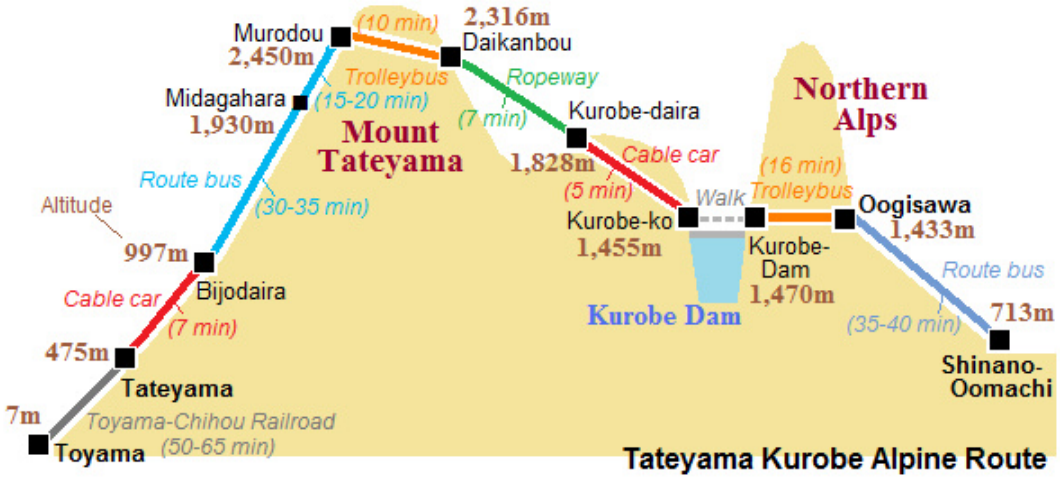
Historically, *temari* were constructed from the remnants of old kimonos. Pieces of silk fabric would be wadded up to form a ball, and then the wad would be wrapped with strips of fabric. As time passed, traditional *temari* became an art, with the functional stitching becoming more decorative and detailed, until the balls displayed intricate embroidery. With the introduction of rubber to Japan, the balls went from play toys to art objects, although mothers still make them for their children. *Temari* became an art and craft of the Japanese upper class and aristocracy, and noble women competed in creating increasingly beautiful and intricate objects.

Traditionally, *temari* were often given to children from their parents on New Year's Day. Inside the tightly wrapped layers of each ball, the mother would have placed a small piece of paper with a goodwill wish for her child. The child would never be told what wish his or her mother had made while making the ball. Alternately, some balls contained "noisemakers" consisting of rice grains or bells to add to the play value. It is said that traditional *temari* were wrapped so tightly they would bounce.

Regardless of their past or present uses, Nicole became quite enamored with the *temari* – so much so that she bought one (which you'll only find in Nagano prefecture.)

* * *

Seeing the *sakura* in and around Matsumoto-jo was our top priority and once we'd had our fill, our *hanami*, and toured the keep, there was little desire to stay in the area. With another 2 hour 41 minute train ride back to Shinjuku waiting for us, we decided there was no reason to wait and departed post-haste. So far the ride back hasn't been terrible; it has allowed me to contemplate our future endeavors.



A little further north of Matsumoto is where the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route can be accessed. This route, which is an unique and spectacular path through the Tateyama Mountain Range (part of the Chubu Sangaku National Park – also known as the Japanese Alps), is particularly famous for the high snow walls that line its roads in spring (which can reach a height of 20 meters!) Transportation along the Alpine Route is not covered by the Japan Rail Pass, however, and a one way journey along the entire route costs roughly ¥10,000 – so this gives us pause. That and the logistical effort it would take to get our luggage through the pass, although I've been advised there's a luggage forwarding service available (Yamato, anyone?) so that might help lessen the worry should we attempt it on the return.

But we'll see how the rest of the trip goes before we fully commit.

We'll be pulling into Shinjuku station shortly, so I think I'll end things for now. Unfortunately it will be rush hour again (evening this time instead of morning), so we're once again going to be in the thick of things. That's okay, though, because Nicole and I consider ourselves veterans of the experience now and we have a plan: rather than return to Homeikan we'll make our way to Shibuya for another walk about.

If you can't beat them, join them!
Ja ne!

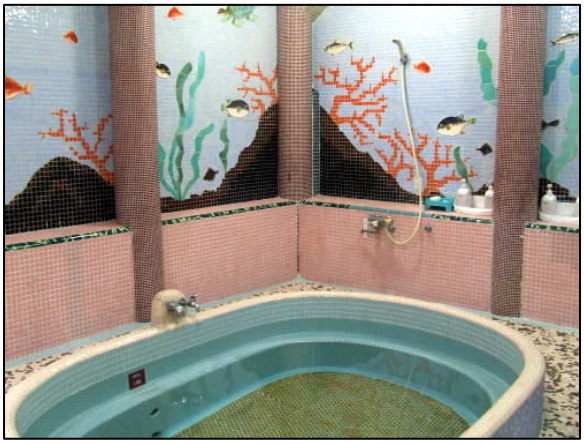
「Nin! Nin! 我々は忍者です!」

Thursday | April 11, 2013

Ahh… all clean!

Bathing in Japan is a singular experience. Here the bath has been elevated to a serious endeavor; taken not just to cleanse the body, a bath in Japan is also used to purify the soul, to allow for the stresses of the day to ease away into the warm, spring waters.

Therefore, the typical Japanese bath consists of two rooms: one that is used to undress and prep, and a second where the tub itself is located. As with everything in Japan there is proper etiquette that must be strictly adhered when using a bath of this nature. Failure to do so could find the bather a lot of disgusted stares and lead to embarrassment of all parties, which should be avoided at all costs. To take a Japanese bath: you must first undress completely in the disrobe room then discretely enter the bathing area (taking care to cover any matters of privacy). Next, rinse your body thoroughly using a washbowl, a rag, and water from the tub (but don't mix the waters). Once you've carefully rinsed, you may then submerge and soak in the tub's hot waters. Cleaning does not take place in the tub; leave the bath when you're ready to soap up and be sure to rinse thoroughly before returning. The Japanese frown on soap bubbles in their bath. When you're done soaking, simply get up and leave – never drain the tub yourself nor attempt to modify the temperature of the bath water as others will use the water for their baths.



Although it sounds like quite the enterprise and could potentially lead to some embarrassment for those unfamiliar (I was almost interrupted by a naked Japanese man as I emerged from the shower room), it's actually quite simple. Alas, someone didn't bother to explain to the Australian tour group how to behave themselves. They completely destroyed the girls' bathing area, Nicole lamented. They not only wore the toilet slippers down to the disrobing room (a major *faux-pas* all of its own), they left the door open between the changing room and the bath area (letting out all the steam and heat in the process), and splashed the bath water all over the floor. Therefore I've had the opportunity to bathe tonight, but Nicole has not.

Did You Know?

It is no secret that the Japanese people think of the ground as the most disgusting place there is. It is why shoes are taken off upon entering a dwelling (to keep the filth outside from spreading inside.) It is also why special bathroom slippers are provided when using the facilities. Floors there, obviously, are even more undesirable. Thus it is a huge social miscue to wear them anywhere else but inside the toilet.

Alas, I digress…

"We are Ninja!" is what the kanji in today's title exclaims, and for all rights and purposes we are now exactly that following tonight's dinner at Ninja Restaurant Akasaka-Mitsuke: masters of disguise, stealthy and well trained assassins. A *ninja* (忍者) or *shinobi* (忍び) was a covert agent or mercenary in feudal Japan who specialized in unorthodox warfare. The functions of the ninja included espionage, sabotage, infiltration, and assassination, and open combat in certain situations.

Their covert methods of waging war contrasted the ninja with the samurai, who observed strict rules about honor and combat. Ninja have been remade in modern times as the epitome of cool but in reality some were just thugs. In the unrest of the Sengoku period (1568-1603; a time of intense internal warfare following the collapse of the Ashikaga *bakufu*, or shogunate), mercenaries and spies for hire became active in the Iga Province and the adjacent area around the village of Kōga, and it is from their ninja clans that much of our knowledge of the ninja is drawn.

Following the unification of Japan under the Tokugawa shogunate (1603-1868), the ninja faded into obscurity, being replaced by the Oniwabanshū body of secret agents. By the time of the Meiji Restoration (1868), the tradition of the *shinobi* had become a topic of popular imagination and mystery in Japan. *Ninja* figured prominently in folklore and legend, and as a result it is often difficult to separate historical fact from myth. Some legendary abilities purported to be in the province of ninja training include invisibility, walking on water, and control over the natural elements. As a consequence, their perception in western popular culture in the 20th century was based more on such legend and folklore than on the historical spies of the Sengoku period.

Ninja Akasaka-Mitsuke plays right into that perception. You see, Ninja is one of Japan's themed-restaurants, where diners enter the secret world of the ninja as soon as they step inside its darkened entrance.

Costumed waiters appear out of nowhere to lead the hungry through a labyrinth of twisting passageways, over perilous moats, and through cavernous passes to private dining nooks. There a master course of foods is paraded before you, skills of the ninja taught at every turn, and even entertainment is provided by way of “ninja magic” – it was all great fun! We have our friend Sugawara Rie to thank for it, but more on our fantastic dinner experience and how we were inducted (abducted?) into the shadowy world of the ninja later on.

What did we do in the meantime?

Of all the things to see and do in Tokyo (and all of Japan really), the Studio Ghibli Museum in Mitaka was the one attraction Nicole unequivocally wanted to visit without fail, so we made very sure tickets were in hand well in advance. And with the museum’s operating hours starting at 10:00am each day, it meant we could see something in the city before making the trek out there, about twenty-to-thirty minutes due west of Shinjuku station by rail. With Tokyo’s itinerary out of whack since we’d skipped out on Kamakura the day before, most of what I had originally planned to see today we’ve already seen, including this morning’s visit to the Imperial Palace East Gardens. My solution: improvise, obviously, and head to *Shinjuku-gyoen* first, rather than after Ghibli as originally planned – the park opened at 9:00am. So that’s what we did!

SHINJUKU: Lord Naito’s Garden

At 58.3 hectares in area with a circumference of 3.5km, Shinjuku National Garden (新宿御苑, Shinjuku Gyoen) is one of Tokyo’s largest and most popular parks, and for good reason. The eminent garden’s spacious lawns, meandering walking paths and tranquil scenery provide a relaxing escape from the busy urban center around it. Originally the residence of the Naito family, a *daimyo* during the Edo period (1603-1867), the grounds were later converted into a botanical garden prior to its transfer to the Imperial Family in 1903, which used it for recreation and the entertainment of their guests. The park was almost completely destroyed during the later stages of World War II, but was rebuilt and reopened into the public park we can see today not long after the armistice. Any of its three access gates – Shinjuku gate (west), Okido gate (east) and Sendagaya gate (south) – are located just a short walk from JR Shinjuku or JR Sendagaya rail stations, and from the Marunouchi Shinjuku-gyoemmae or Fukutoshin Shinjuku-sanchome subway lines.

Shinjuku-gyoen blends three distinct styles of gardens: the oldest is the traditional Japanese landscape garden. Well manicured shrubs and trees surround large ponds dotted with islands and bridges together with several pavilions and the Kyu Goryotei (also called the Taiwan Pavilion due to its accurate reproduction of Southern Chinese Min-nan architecture often seen on the tiny island nation), built there to commemorate the wedding of the Showa Emperor, Emperor Hirohito in 1928. The views from here are spectacular. The park's other main gardens include a symmetrically arranged formal French garden and an English landscape garden featuring wide, open lawns surrounded by flowering cherry trees. The rest of the park consists of forested areas, lawns and several structures including a restaurant, an information center and an art gallery. There is also a beautiful greenhouse with over 1,700 tropical and subtropical plants and flowers.

It might be hard to imagine, but the gardens have more than 20,000 trees on site, including approximately 1,500 cherry trees of more than a dozen different varieties, blooming at different times of year: from late March (*Shidare* or Weeping Cherry), to early April (*Somei* or Tokyo Cherry), and on to late April (*Kanzan*). The cherries turn the lawns into one of Tokyo's most popular and pleasant *hanami* spots, drawing large crowds during the peak of the season (this morning, however, the crowds were a little subdued; so were the *sakura*, but what we found still in bloom were very beautiful.) Other trees found here include the majestic Himalayan cedars, which soar above the rest of the trees in the park, tulip trees, cypresses, sycamores and plane trees, which were first planted in Japan in the Imperial Gardens.

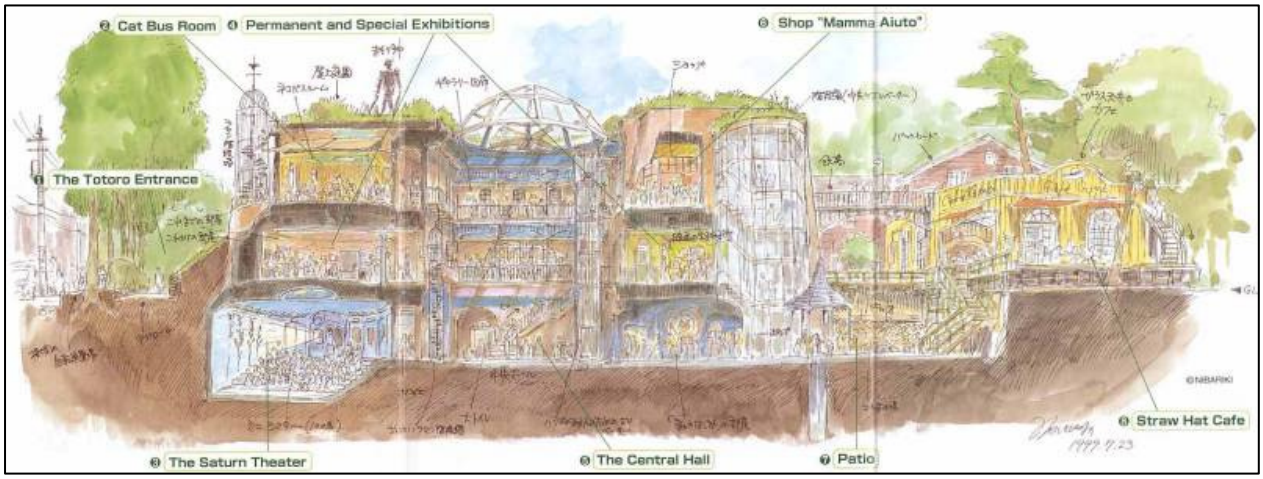
“From the cherry blossoms in spring to the soft greens of summer, the chrysanthemums and colorful leaves of autumn and the snowscapes of winter, Shinjuku-gyoen is an ideal place to get close to nature and enjoy the changing seasons, the perfect oasis for metropolitan and short-term visitors alike.”

We rather agree; we enjoyed it!

MITAKA: Museo d'Arte Ghibli

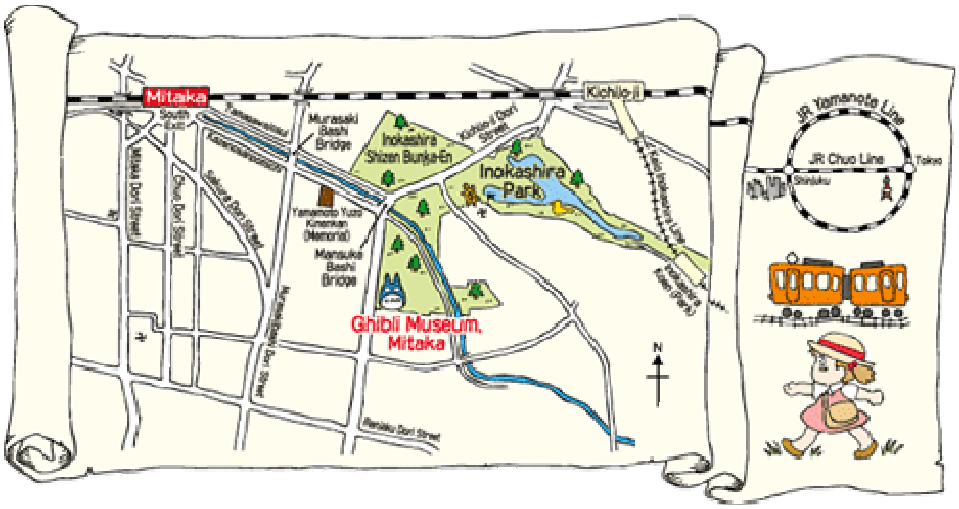
Studio Ghibli films by Miyazaki Hayao		
1984	Nausicaä	風の谷のナウシカ
1986	Castle in the Sky	天空の城ラピュタ
1988	My Neighbor Totoro	となりのトトロ
1989	Kiki's Delivery Service	魔女の宅急便
1992	Porco Rosso	紅の豚
1997	Princess Mononoke	もののけ姫
2001	Spirited Away	千と千尋の神隠し
2004	Howl's Moving Castle	ハウルの動く城
2008	Ponyo on the Cliff	崖の上のポニョ

Following our circuit at the gardens we returned to *Shinjuku-goemmae* station and rode the Marunouchi Line back to Shinjuku, which was quite a bit less busy than we'd experienced yesterday (thank goodness), found the JR Chuo Line platform and train that would take us to Mitaka without too much trouble, and hopped on without delay (we do seem to be cutting these things closely!) In about twenty-to-thirty minutes, we arrived. The Ghibli Museum (三鷹の森ジブリ美術館, *Mitaka no Mori Ghibli Bijutsukan*) is the animation and art museum of Miyazaki Hayao's Studio Ghibli, one of Japan's most famous animation studios. Located in Inokashira Park in Mitaka, a western suburb of Tokyo, the museum is a must-see for fans of these fantastic films. The museum is a fine arts museum, but does not take the concept of a usual fine arts museum. Centered around the motto "Let's become lost children together" (迷子になろうよ、いっしょに, *Maigo ni narō yo, isshoni*), or "let's lose our way together", the museum is whimsically designed in the distinct style of the studio's films, with many features that are child-oriented and a sprawling and occasionally mazelike interior.



In thinking about what a museum showcasing his creations would be like, Hayao Miyazaki wanted to create a space that was both interesting and relaxing to the soul, one that made the visitor feel more enriched when they left than when they entered. Planning for such a museum began in 1998 in the same way Miyazaki plans his films: by storyboarding every inch of the space. Two years later construction started and by October 1, 2001, the museum was officially opened for visitors.

But beware; the museum has quite an interesting visitation requirement: you can't actually purchase entry at the museum. Another of Miyazaki's design elements: in order to allow for a more dynamic visit, admission is restricted to a small number of people per day, therefore, all tickets must be purchased in advance. There are two ways to accomplish this: either locally through LAWSON convenience stores (via special kiosks found within) or through a travel agency (especially if you're a foreigner.) What you'll get then isn't a ticket, but rather a voucher (much like we got for the JR Rail Pass) that you exchange at the museum's box office for a wonderful souvenir – a ticket featuring film cells from one of Studio Ghibli's works!

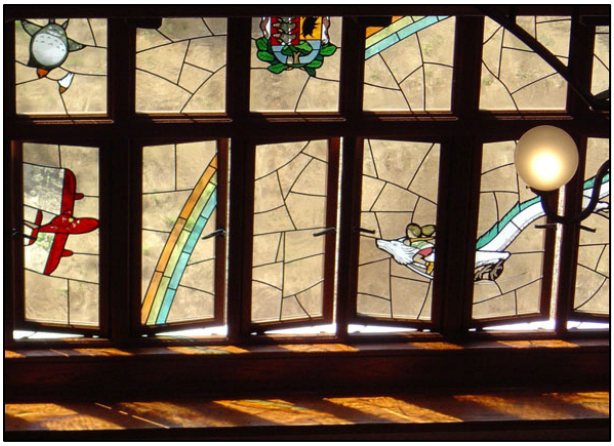


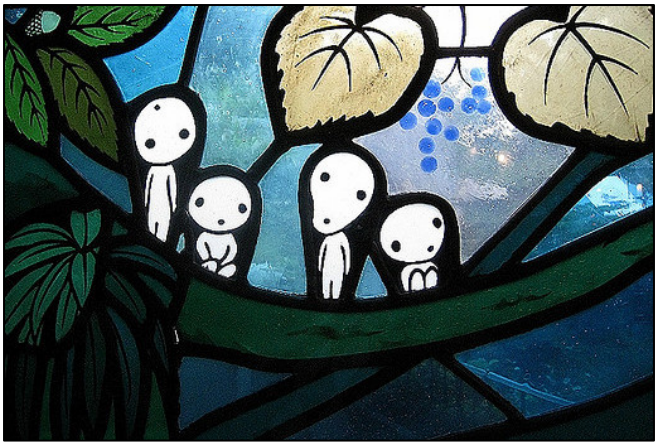
Though we had our vouchers in hand well in advance, it took us a moment to determine which of the station's four exits was appropriate for the museum. But once we found the right door, passage and escalator down, it was just a 1200 meter, twenty minute walk to Miyazaki's front gates along Kichijoji Avenue.

Standing proud amongst Mitaka's Inokashira Park's tall green trees is the most whimsical building – the museum. Miyazaki's aim was to make the building part of the exhibit, and he succeeded brilliantly, which seems to bubble out of the forested park with its gorgeous curves, and brilliant colors, contrasting starkly with the prefabricated buildings that exist across its street. Standing in front of a sign that says "Ghibli Museum, Mitaka", a very large Totoro welcomes you.

Below him are portholes full of soot-black Dust Bunnies from “My Neighbor Totoro” and “Spirited Away”. But this is not the real entrance… look where Totoro is pointing. Open the doors around the corner and welcome yourself to Ghibli wonderland!

Every window and lamp is lovingly hand-crafted with beautiful and colorful stained glass using Ghibli characters, pretty plants and flowers, and forest animals. And when the sun is shining, your way is blanketed with the glass’ vivid colors as they splash along the stone floors below them. Looking up, you’ll find the ceiling covered in a fresco featuring a shining, smiling sun in the center of a rich, blue sky. Trees stretching up toward that sky are filled with grapes, melons, deliciously ripe fruits, and beautiful blossoms. And if you look carefully, you may see Kiki (from “Kiki’s Delivery Service”), zooming around on her broom, Nausicaa on her jet glider, or other characters zipping through the sky above you. Tickets are given over to visitors here in exchange for reservation coupons. These tickets are made of pieces of the actual 35mm film prints that were shown in theaters.





Upon receiving your ticket you’re beckoned into the central atrium of the museum. Here a towering open space extends up through the entire height of the facility. In the glass dome at its center, a yellow whale swims in the ocean and the blades of a giant fan rotate overhead. Taking in the whole room from bottom to top, you will discover a maze of spiral stairways (which you’ll find shining marbles of colored glass fitted into the ironwork), bridged passages, overhanging terraces, a giant fan rotating overhead, and in the glass dome at its center, a yellow whale swimming in the ocean. This marvelous space instantly transports you into the world of Hayao Miyazaki, and the strange buildings which often appear in his films. Shall we explore?

Bottom Floor: Bouncing Totoro

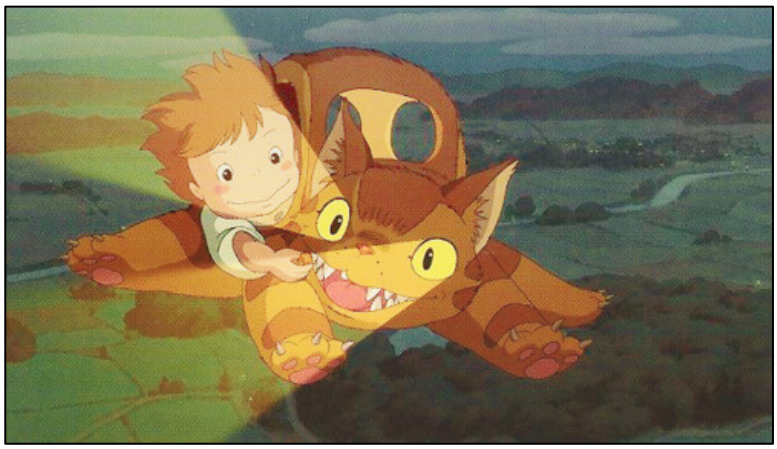
The history and science of animation is on exhibit on the bottom floor, featuring a three dimensional zoetrope as its centerpiece. A flickering stroboscope flashes in time with the rotating modules of the Cat Bus, Satsuki, Mei and various Totoro, each in a slightly different pose, arranged in rings, illuminating each as they pass the same spot (counter-clockwise), creating an illusion of movement (clockwise) that shows how animation works as a series of quick-timed shots. You'll also find the "Saturn Theater" located here, where Studio Ghibli showcases some of its short-films – the only place in the world these can be seen! Shorts on the reel are: Koro's Big Walk (コロの大さんぽ), Water Spider Monmon (水グモもんもん), Mei and the Kittenbus (めいとこねこバス), The Day I Harvested a Star (星をかった日), The Whale Hunt (くじらとり), Looking for a home (やどさがし), A Sumo Wrestler's Tail (ちゅうずもう), Mr. Dough and the Egg Princess (パン種とタマゴ姫), and Treasure Hunt (たからさがし).

What these were all about neither Nicole nor I had any clue, but each guest is only permitted to watch one short film during their visit – which would we get? The only one Nicole had any inkling of was "Mei to Konekobasu", or "Mei and the Kitten Bus", a thirteen-minute sequel to "My Neighbor Totoro", written and directed by Miyazaki himself. Would you believe that's the one we were lucky enough to see?!

"**Mei and the Kittenbus**" concentrates on the character of Kusakabe Mei from the original film and her adventures one night with the Kitten-bus (the offspring of the Cat-bus from the film) and other cat-oriented vehicles, such as Granny Catbus (Neko Ba-chan) – a huge "superliner" cat-bus ferrying various spirits away – and the "Shinkatsen" (self-named) – a long, slender, quick catbus – it's so cute! Fans of Ghibi productions will find the animation and hart is as high quality here as any full Ghibli production and the short benefits from a new score from the original film's composer, Joe Hisaishi! The characters seem like they've never been away, Mei's as adorable as ever and you do get a genuine thrill to see the Cat-bus again (not to mention Totoro!)

The adventure begins with Mei outside enjoying a bright, sunny and breezy day, sneaking a caramel candy from her pocket.

After she unwraps and places the sweet in her mouth, a small whirlwind works up, snatching the wrapper from her hand. As she goes to unwrap a second, the whirlwind turns into a full-blown gust, scaring Mei and so she runs off, back toward her home to escape the onslaught – only it's following her! She just barely makes it inside her home, shutting the door behind her forcefully, but not soon enough – the small whirlwind has made it inside and it appears to have a mind of its own. Mei suspects something extraordinary about this spit of wind, and grabs it when it gravitates a little too close to her. Instantly the whirlwind is gone, replaced with a cute, cuddly koneko-bus in her arms. Surprised, she lets him go, and he whirls about the enclosed space, looking for a way out. Unable to find one, he hides, becoming still and invisible as a mouse. Mei knows he's there, though, and entices him out of his hiding spot by offering him one of her caramel candies, which she places on his tongue. His reaction to the caramel is cute (ever seen a cat eat anything sticky?), but before Mei can give him another, Neko-bus appears outside her window. Mei opens the window and Koneko-bus rushes out; off the two cat-buses go!



Although she thinks this is the last she's seen of the cute, little Koneko-bus, much to her surprise it returns later that night, offering to give her a ride inside its fluffy confines. Asking him to wait a moment, she collects her shoes and purse (with more candies) then crawls inside, giggling with childish elation. And then they're off! Hauling Mei is no problem for the little bus and soon they are soaring higher and higher, farther and faster, from her family's homestead. Soon they pull along-side Koneko-bus' father, himself full of travelers, rushing toward an as yet unknown destination. As the two push into the forest, they (and we) encounter all kinds of cat-bus creatures from vintage-looking busses to fast-traveling "shinkatsen" varieties. They all seem to be traveling to a shrine in the middle of the forest; Koneko-bus with Mei follows.

When Koneko-bus reaches their destination, he drops Mei off and disappears!

Mei comes to rest at what appears to be the traveler's destination, in front of a rather gigantic cat-liner, loading her seats with ranks and files of Totoro-like spirits. Mei, a little intimidated at first, finds her courage and fishes out a caramel candy for the Granny Cat-bus to try. Her reaction to the confection is equally hilarious. She has quite the trouble getting it down! At first poor Mei thinks she's killed the cat and later, after she's able to swallow the sticky confection, she braces for a fatal bite. But one never comes. Instead, the granny-catbus extends her tongue and gives Mei a lick of affection. She giggles and returns the affection with a lick of her own (right on the cat's nose). But then something behind her catches her attention – it's Totoro! – and Mei cannot resist the urge to run and jump into his furry chest. When she does so, Totoro stops for a moment, unsure what has happened, but sports a huge grin when he sees it's Mei in his plumage.

Eventually all those who are prepared to be spirited away are aboard the super cat-liner and off they go. Koneko-bus returns to transport Mei and they follow for a little while before Koneko-bus returns Mei home safely. It's such a great short! Chika Sakamoto, who voiced Mei in Totoro, returned to voice Mei in this short. Hayao Miyazaki himself did the voice of the Granny Cat, as well as Totoro. It was cute and a treat to see – it's just too bad you can't get it anywhere except in storybook form!

First Floor: Where a Film is Born

Following the movie we continued our exploration. On the first floor is "Where a Film is Born", a room that belongs to someone who was sketching at the desk just a few minutes ago. The room is filled with books and toys (references used in making the films), the walls are all covered with illustrations and sketches (actual storyboards from a wide variety of their most celebrated films), and hanging from the ceiling are models of all sorts, including airplanes and something called a Peterandone. Yep, it's a place where the owner of the room has come to store his favorite things. This room provides lots of inspiration for what will eventually go on to that blank piece of paper on the desk!

With a little bit of an idea and a flash of inspiration, after walking through its five rooms, you should have a firm idea how a film-maker struggles with his work and ultimately completes the film (from sketching, storyboarding, key-framing, cleanup, coloring, background painting, and more.) You'll learn from the masters here!

Next door is the temporary exhibit room and here on display is "The Gift of Illustrations – A Source of Popular Culture" described thusly: more than a hundred years ago, the Scottish folklorist Andrew Lang released a children's storybook bringing together a collection of oral literature and folk tales from around the world. From princesses and princes, to dragons, giants and monsters, and to witches, fairies and wizards, the original forms of many mythical and familiar characters find their origins in the illustrations in this book. This exhibition presents illustrations from Lang's books in enlarged formats to showcase the imagination, broad subject matter and master artistry of the illustrator. Also on display are the works of Ivan Bilibin, a Russian painter of the same period whose techniques still inspire modern animators. It sounded nice, but, it's rather unfortunate there were no signs in English describing this to us… we didn't even know what we were seeing as we meandered through.

Besides these exhibit halls, other features of the museum include:

- **Straw Hat Café**, is the only sit down restaurant in the museum. Hayao Miyazaki wanted the café's food to be "a kind of home cooking"; therefore, the café was created with the help of a housewife who is also a mother of four. The café uses fresh ingredients and all fruits and vegetables used in the café's food are chopped by hand. Surrounded by some of Mitaka's rare red pines and set off against the bright orange wall and red window frames of the building that houses it, the deck of the Straw Hat Cafe provides you with an open outdoors atmosphere where you can relax and enjoy the natural setting of Inokashira Park.

- **Tri Hawks**, a pun on the name of the city Mitaka, which literally translates to “three hawks”, is a reading room and bookstore. It was created to communicate the Museum’s wish to have children see, touch, and feel strange and mysterious things through books. Many of the books available for casual reading here are also available for purchase, so the fun and adventure found in reading them can be taken home to be enjoyed.

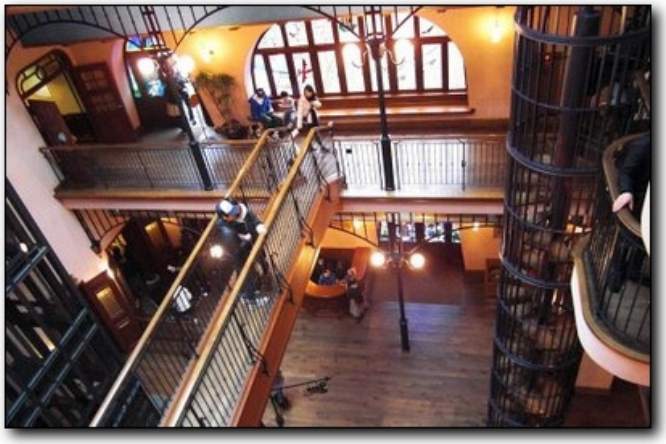
- The **Cat Bus** is waiting for you in a room on the second floor. “It must be everyone’s dream to touch and ride in the Cat Bus,” the museum’s guide book muses. “So in order to make this wish come true we made a room with an actual Cat Bus!” And they have! This room is phenomenal; a slightly downsized version of the Cat Bus from “My Neighbor Totoro” fills the room while a bunch of soot-black Dust Bunnies accompany, just waiting to be played with. Unfortunately only those twelve and under can take a ride here… we adults had to be content to watch from the sidelines. Awww, right? Mei, written in hiragana, is on the cat bus’ destination board too…

- From the terrace off the Cat Bus Room, a spiral stairway leads to the roof, and there you will find the museum’s grassy **Rooftop Garden**. From this lofty post, a serene five-meter tall Robot Soldier (from “Laputa: Castle in the Sky”) looks down on Inokashira Park. But have no fear – the Robot Soldier is the Guardian of the Ghibli Museum! The Robot Soldier was made by Kunio Shachimaru, is bronze and took a year to create. Passing behind the Robot Soldier you will find yourself in a patch of wildly growing vegetation which makes you forget that you are on a building and not in the park itself. The keystone from the movie “Castle in the Sky” can also be found here. The keystone is a replica of the control room stone found in the floating castle, Laputa.

And last, but not least, the museum’s gift shop…

- **Mamma Aiuto,** named after the sky pirates in “Porco Rosso” (meaning “Mama, help me” in Italian) is a shop where you’ll find all your favorite Studio Ghibli character products and exclusive items only found here at the museum. We certainly did – a Koneko-bus plush to take home with us! (Not to mention a poster depicting the museum’s storyboard we intend to frame…)

The museum was certainly a treat and well worth the added hurdle of procuring tickets: picking a date well in advance and having vouchers mailed to us. It was simply one of the best museums ever. A total treat and one I recommend you visit if you're ever in the Tokyo area – but perhaps only if you're a fan of animation, and especially if you're a fan of Studio Ghibli films. You can't let it pass you by! (And say hi to Totoro out front for us!)



NAKANO: An Otaku's Great White Way?

Bidding a fond farewell to the Ghibli Museum was hard – it was so much fun! – but we did and made oru way – on foot – back to Mitaka station (in the drizzling rain), and hopped the Chuo Express toward Shinjuku. With still quite a few hours left until we planned to meet Rie for dinner, we decided to make a last-minute stop at the Nakato Broadway arcade to check out what they had to offer, located in – you guessed it – Nakano (中野区, *Nakano-ku*), one of the 23 special wards of Tokyo. Nakano Broadway (中野ブロードウェイ) is famous for its many stores selling anime items and idol goods, including more than a dozen small Mandarake stores, which specialize in manga and anime related collectibles to satisfy any otaku (おたく; the equivalent of "geek", but mostly reserved to describe those with obsessive interests, which generally we geeks have.) The shopping complex is a short walk from Nakano Station, which is just a five minute train ride from Shinjuku.

There are four levels of shopping at the Nakano Broadway. The second and third levels are where the many anime and idol related shops are located. Here, shoppers can find manga, magazines, collectors' items, animation character figurines, idol merchandise, game consoles, video games, animation/idol related CDs, as well as little souvenirs to take home, such as idol playing cards or key chains. The ground level of the Nakano Broadway has shops selling clothes, shoes, tidbits and second hand goods. Leading to the Nakano Broadway from Nakano Station is the Nakano Sun-mall, a 225 meter long, covered shopping street with a wide variety of shops, including food joints, cafes, watch dealers, jewelers, fashion boutiques, pharmacies, game centers, book stores and others. On the side streets branching off from the shopping street are food alleys with various restaurants, including many *izakaya* (居酒屋; Japanese style pub/eatery), that serve all different kinds of food.

Nakano Broadway is very much an arcade similar to Nakamise-dori in Asaksua, without any of its charm. Basic chain stores were found along here, which then lead into the mall complex that just confused the hell out of us both, so we left within minutes of arriving – not even making it to any of the otaku booths – and caught the next Chuo-line train into Tokyo station (rather than Shinjuku), where we could return to Homeikan for a couple hours rest and regroup. Returning to Homeikan turned out to be quite the boon! My feet were already killing me, even with all the mole skin applications, so putting them up for a couple of hours was quite the treat. Catching a nap was even better, but a small contingent of neighbor kids playing outside our window eventually woke me up, so we decided to get ready a bit early and head out to Akasaka-Mitsuke, find the restaurant and wait for Rie.

MINATO: Becoming Ninja at Akasaka

I've been through Akasaka-mitsuke station many times on my way to and from various ports of call. And though I've stopped at the station to change trains (Ginza to Marunouchi line, for example), I've only actually gone above ground here once – my first visit to Japan – for, strangely enough, the exact same reason: to have dinner with Rie. It's quite a huge section of Tokyo but I've never felt the urge to explore the area. That being said I've often wondered why it doesn't have as a commanding name as places like Asakusa, Ueno, Ginza, Ikebukuro, Akihabara, Shinjuku, Shibuya or Roppongi. While we awaited Rie to show I had the opportunity to discover a couple of things about the area, answering my previous query: why it is referred to as Akasaka-mitsuke rather than just plain 'ol Akasaka:

Did You Know?

Architecturally speaking, most Japanese buildings – be they shrines or castles, businesses or homes – traditionally place importance on a space that leads you from the street into the building or space proper (i.e.; an approach).

Come to find out popping out of Akasaka-mitsuke station will find oneself on a major road called Sotobori-dōri, or Outer Moat Street (外堀道り). This street's name comes from – if you recall from our visit to the Imperial Palace area the other day – the outer moat of Edo Castle, in which this road now runs. "Mitsuke" is generally translated to mean "approach", as in the approach to a castle, and thus the area's name. From a military perspective though, a *mitsuke* was a defensive installation. The approaching roads were defended by look-out guardhouses and required a clear field of vision from the guardhouse. In pictures of such approaches, you will see a lack of trees, no buildings and a moat and a bridge. The *mitsuke* provided the guards a clear view of approaching guests (or enemies), and provided the guest with an imposing view of the might of the shogun's castle.

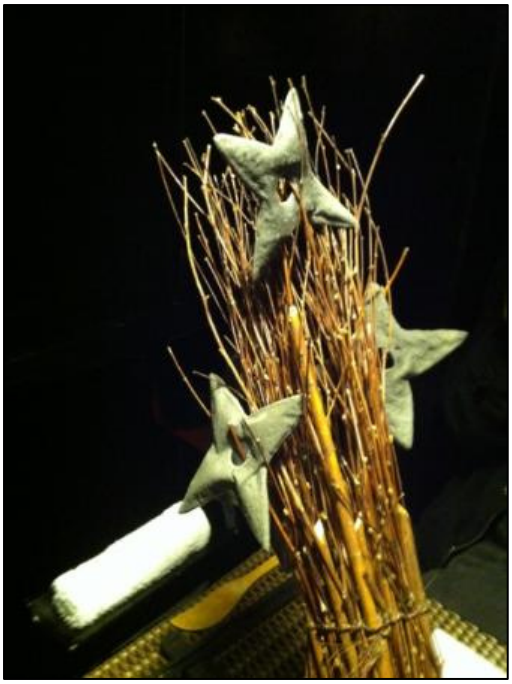
Today Akasaka (赤坂, literally meaning "Red Slope") is one of Tokyo's central business districts, full of corporate headquarters and expensive hotels. The area is directly adjacent to *Nagatacho*, one of Tokyo's prime concentrations of bureaucracy (to the east), north of the Roppongi nightlife district, and only a stone's throw from the Imperial Palace in Chiyoda. It's all part of the Minato ward (港区, *Minato-ku*, meaning "harbor"), one of the twenty-three special wards of Tokyo. There are 49 embassies hosted here as well the headquarters to these recognizable companies: Honda, Mitsubishi Motors Corporation, NEC, Sony, Fujitsu and Toshiba. Being business-like, tourists have little reason to sweep through here; tonight, however, we came for an experience: Ninja Restaurant.

Our only clue to tonight's meal was the name of the restaurant and its location, but knowing Rie and her sense of humor (she fed me deer and horse when I came one time because the kanji that make up those dishes, when pushed together, make the word for food and thus she could tell everyone that she gave me "food" while in Tokyo) it was going to be something. Although I had a general knowledge of where the restaurant was located, I wasn't really sure how to get there from the platforms, or how far it might be from the station. So we arrived early – just avoiding the heavy part of rush hour (thank goodness). We shouldn't have worried – Tokyu Plaza (where the restaurant was located) stood just across the street from one of the station's exists (#8).

Finding the exit number was the easy part – locating just where in the station it was, was at first a little more difficult. And the door to Ninja? Even more elusive – but it is a Ninja restaurant after all. A ninja's presence must remain unknown. The element of surprise and the art of disappearing are the tricks of the trade, right? Eventually we found where we should be (the door is inconspicuously set in the building's wall) and waited there for Rie. She showed a few minutes later, followed a few minutes after that by one of Rie's female friends – Michiko – whom I've met on all previous visits to Tokyo. All together now, we descended into Ninja's dark and mysterious doorway and down its narrow staircase into what we didn't know. But one thing was clear by this point: we were in for an adventure!

Fortunately the staircase didn't go down too deeply and before long the four of us assembled at the restaurant's reception podium for "ninja training". Here we were briefly instructed on the ways of the ninja and then set about a test of our resolve: getting to our table. Traveling down narrow, low passage ways only lead to dead ends and then, pits we could not cross. But these only gave us an opportunity to use our skills, calling upon our ninja powers ("Nin! Nin!") to lower a drawbridge for us to cross. Then rise again so we couldn't be followed. Ninja's live for war our labyrinthine fortress had to stay hidden after all. And then the Ninja lair opened up, although I say that loosely, as it was dark and vaguely claustrophobic.

Once accepted as a member of the clan, we were led to a table (named Dragon) in the back of the establishment and had a wonderful multi-course meal that included Ninja star-shaped crackers (called Shuriken; 手裏剣) with butter-like spread, a “shoe cream” puff-like thing (which had quite the interesting texture, but I wouldn’t eat it again), yummy chicken wings and cashews served amongst spicy chili’s (you don’t eat the chili’s), angel hair pasta served cold, then vegetable & pork soup with miso broth and greens chopped at the table with kitchen shears, then boiled in front of you with two hot rocks. Our main course followed all that – a choice of fish (salmon) or pork. Everyone ordered the fish, except me, and boy was the pork delicious! It was tender and juicy and spiced just right. I couldn’t have made a better, more satisfying choice! The main course was followed up with a sushi plate consisting of a salmon roll, sweet-egg bread over rice ball, and three shrimp rolls wrapped in a tofu sheet around red bean rice. I managed to get down the salmon, the egg and one of the shrimps before throwing in the towel. The salmon one had one hell of a salty piece of seaweed on it too! Desert was a yogurt-pudding fruit mixture that was pleasant even if the texture and taste was a bit weird. Overall the meal was enjoyable!



A little entertainment, in the form of ninja magic, was also part of the experience: a few slight-of hand tricks performed for our amusement. The first set – coin tricks – was pretty standard but very fun to partake. Our ninja magician was quite a good showman too, happy and engaging. Card tricks rounded up his set; these were awesome. Nicole was asked to pick a card and, of course, he'd find it or rather pop it to the top of the deck. At first the trick was basic manipulation, but they got more amazing as he went on. Two in particular: He had Nicole write her name on a card, then bent it, and we watched it "pop" to the top of the deck after he inserted it in the middle (How did he do that?!). n another, he placed her card back in the deck and after a few ninja magic words, revealed her card was not in the deck but inside a sealed envelope he took right out in front of us and opened. Amazing! And Nicole got to keep the card and envelope as a souvenir of the night!

* * *

All in all dinner was great fun; such a good time amongst friends. Even Doug Metzger got in on the act, as Rie photo-shopped his head onto a leprechaun print-out and placed him on the table for multiple pictures with our food and drink as the night progressed. At the end of our meal we exchanged gifts – we got sweets from Rie; we gave her a T-shirt from Atlanta – and Michiko surprised us with chocolate covered peanuts. Unfortunately we didn't know she was coming or we would have brought her something too!! We rode with Michiko on the subway home, parting at Tokyo-eki, and coming straight back to Homeikan.

You know, Ninja Akasaka is but one of a number of themed-restaurants in Tokyo; Rie has been to two others: one that plays up the imprisonment motif (whereby you are arrested upon arrival and thrown into a cell, locked in, and served just like a prisoner would be) and a second where you a mad scientist (or medical student?) and your utensils are surgical equipment (and you perform an autopsy on your food!). Maybe we'll try one of those the next time we come!

Or perhaps not…

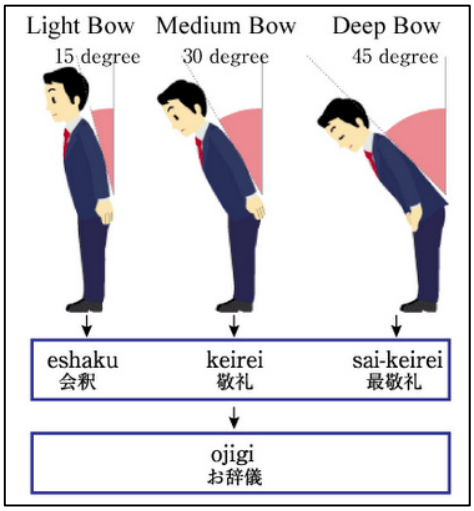
In either case it has come time to wind down these blathering and hit the futon for some shut-eye. We're all packed for tomorrow's adventure; tomorrow we're up very early to begin our journey to Kyoto for the next part of our trip.

お休みなさい！ *Oyasuminasai!* (Goodnight!)

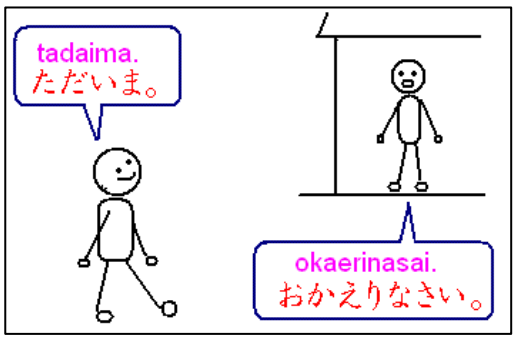
「Kyoto, the Western Capital」

Friday | April 12, 2013 (part 1)

おはようございます!
(Ohayo Gozaimasu!)

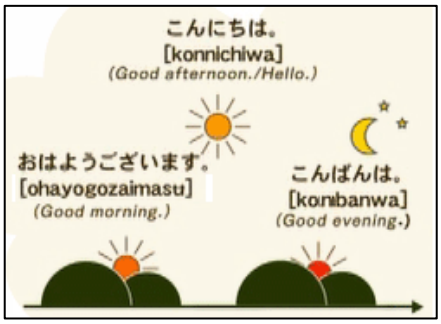


I've said before that Japanese culture is replete with a number of customs and habits that can seem, to the uncultured eye, as if they border on the ritual. Though they may seem empty and rather routine to outsiders, these traditions (regardless of how habitual they may seem) make up the general thread of the Japanese. It helps to define who they are as a people, keeping them connected with each other and civil to one another. Take bowing for example: in Japan, people greet each other by bowing instead of a handshake. A bow ranges from a small nod of the head to a long 45-degree bend at the waist. When bowing to someone of higher social status (such as a boss), a deeper, and longer bow indicates respect. Conversely, a small head nod is casual and informal. It is also common to bow to express thanks, to apologize, to make a request or to ask someone a favor. At first it can seem a little strange to westerners but you get used to it quickly enough and even find yourself partaking even when you don't realize it. Consequently, if a formal greeting takes place on a *tatami* floor, most Japanese will get on their knees in order to bow (*ogigi*).



Of course bowing isn't the only way to greet someone or announce your presence. In fact, depending on the circumstances you're expected to follow a different set of protocols, such as the announcement of your comings and goings to those around you. Although we *might* announce our arrival home before setting down our bags and complaining about the awful trip home (traffic, people, etc.), in Japanese culture it is customary, polite and quite expected to announce yourself upon leaving from and returning to the homestead *before* doing anything else.

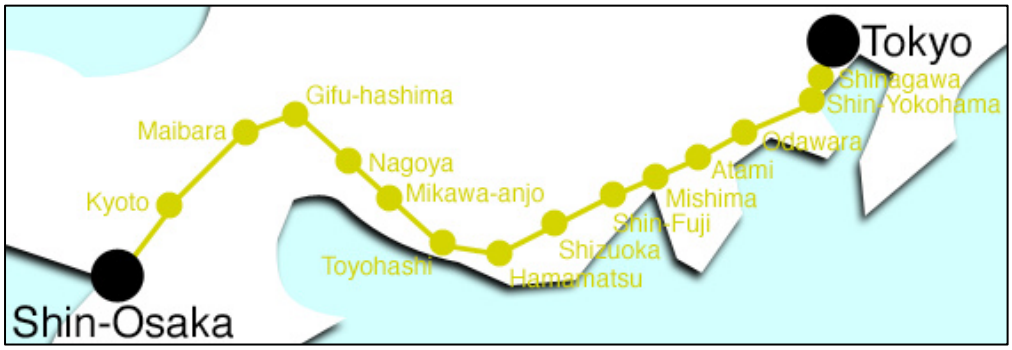
“Tadaima” (ただいま) is employed to declare your return back home; it literally translates to “I am home” and despite the use of an exclamation point, it doesn’t need to be yelled out. In fact, depending upon a wide set of circumstances (intoxication, sadness or other general malaise), you might not be in a good enough mood to announce proudly to the household you’ve returned, but that shouldn’t keep you from saying the word – it is expected, after all. It is equally expected to receive the customary response of “welcome home” – “Okaerinasai” (おかえりなさい) or “Okaeri” (おかえり) – either formally or informally depending upon the personal relationship to the one returning, if anyone is there waiting for your return (and/or heard you).



And then there’s your everyday *gashi* – good morning, good afternoon and good evening. The phrase I used above – *ohayo gozaimasu* – means good morning, but said in a more formal way (*gozaimasu* is used to express formality in this case). Since greetings are given great importance in Japan (it is considered rude to fail to greet someone or even to greet them in a lazy or offhand manner), it is crucial that you learn these. Besides good morning there’s also *konnichiwa* (こんにちは; which doubles as a meaning of good afternoon, and a general greeting), *konbanwa* (こんばんは; which means good evening), and *oyasuminasai* (お休みなさい; which, from last night, means goodnight). If you do it right you might get asked the following: *genki desu ka*? (元気ですか？) or *hajimemashite* (はじめまして), which asks: how are you? Of course how you’re doing dictates the response, so… *ohayo gozaimasu, genki desu ka?*
Boku mo genki desu! – I am doing well too!

And why shouldn’t I be? It’s just a few minutes before 7:30am and a HIKARI (ひかり) train on the Tokaido Shinkansen (東海道新幹線) has finally pulled away from Shin-Yokohama (新横浜駅) station. We, of course, are one of its many passengers on a westward journey toward Japan’s ancient capital of Kyoto. It’s not the fastest train, this HIKARI – the NOZOMI (のぞみ) train is the fastest on the Tokaido route, reaching speeds of over 300km/h (186 mph) – but it’ll get us there just the same. Leaving Shin-Yokohama finally brings us out of the cityscapes of Tokyo bay and thrusts us into the mysterious realms of the country-side. There are only three more stops we have to make on this crossover journey, Shizuoka (静岡市), Hamamatsu (浜松市), and Nagoya (名古屋市), before we’re due in to Kyoto, at a little before 10:00am.

For some (like me), a journey along the Tokaido Shinkansen is a fairly regular part of life and being in Japan, but for others (such as Nicole), this will be a once in a lifetime experience, one we're going to get as much enjoyment out of as we can!
At least we're not on a Kodama (こだま) train, the slowest of the *shinkansen*. Kodama trains stop at each and every station along the way – thirteen of them between Tokyo and Kyoto (see below).



So what's a Shinkansen? Shinkansen (新幹線) literally means new trunk line, referring to the tracks, but the name is widely used inside and outside Japan to refer to the trains themselves as well as the system as a whole. You'll also hear it referred to as the "bullet train" due to the high-speeds it reaches, due to the train's bullet-like shapes, and due to the WOOOSH-BOOM sound it makes as it passes through stations along its way – which I guess sounds like a bullet passing by. Starting with the Tokaido Shinkansen in 1964, the network has expanded from 515.4 kilometers of track to currently consist of 2,387 km (1,483.6 mi) of lines with maximum speeds ranging between 240-320 km/h (149-199 mph), with another 283.5 km (176.2 mi) of track on what is referred to as "mini-shinkansen" lines (trains with speeds up to 130 km/h or 81 mph), and even spur lines with shinkansen services. The network presently links most major cities on the islands of Honshu and Kyushu, with construction of a link to the northern island of Hokkaido and spurs from Nagoya to Kanazawa (and through to Kyoto or Osaka) underway.

Line	Start	End	Length	Opened
Tokaido	Tokyo	Shin-Osaka	515.4 km	1964
Sanyo	Shin-Osaka	Hakata	553.7 km	1972
Tohoku	Tokyo	Shin-Aomori	674.9 km	1982
Joetsu	Omiya	Niigata	269.5 km	1982
Nagano	Takasaki	Nagano	117.4 km	1997
Kyushu	Hakata	Kagoshima	256.8 km	2004

The Tokaido Shinkansen is Japan's busiest high-speed rail line, carrying 151 million passengers per year. It has transported more passengers (over 5 billion; entire network over 10 billion) than any other high speed line in the world. Between Tokyo and Osaka, the two largest metropolises in Japan, up to thirteen trains per hour with sixteen cars each (1,323 seats capacity) run in each direction with a minimum headway of three minutes between trains.

It's quite busy!

Besides Nozomi (のぞみ), Hikari (ひかり) and Kodama (こだま) services (which run along the Sanyo and Tokaido shinkansen lines), you'll also find Hikari Rail Star (レールスター), Sakura (さくら), and Mizuho (みずほ) services along the Sanyo lines; Tsubame (つばめ) in Kyushu, Hayabusa (はやぶさ), Hayate (はやて), Yamabiko / Max Yamabiko (やまびこ), and Nasuno / Max Nasuno (なすの) on Tohoku; Komachi (こまち) on the Akita route;Tsubasa (つばさ) in Yamagata; Toki / Max Toki (とき), Tanigawa / Max Tanigawa (たにがわ), and Asahi / Max Asahi (あさひ) along the Joetsu route; and Asama / Max Asama (あさま) in Nagano. And it's still expanding…

By 2015 an entire new branch – the Hokuriku Shinkansen – will extend from Nagano through to Kanazawa on the northern coast with further plans to connect the line at Maibara, or at Kyoto, or at Shin-Osaka sometime in 2025. A second line, referred to as the *Chuo Maglev Shinkansen*, is in the preliminary stages of development now and its first stage is expected to connect Tokyo and Nagoya in 40 minutes, and eventually Tokyo and Osaka in an hour, running at a maximum speed of 505 km/h. JR Central aims to begin commercial service between Tokyo and Nagoya in 2027, with the Nagoya-Osaka section to be completed in 2045.

Did You Know?

Tokyo station is considered mile zero for the *shinkansen* system (similar to how Nihonbashi is considered mile zero for all roadways). You'll find a star-shaped marker dedicating this fact between platforms 16 & 17, near where care 8 comes to rest. You'll also find a memorial plaque to Shinji Sogo at the western end of platforms 18 & 19. Sogo was the JNR president responsible for developing the *shinkansen* concept.

I can't wait to travel along that line! Can you imagine? In what takes about three hours today on the fastest *shinkansen* would take a mere hour on that maglev train. Although I suspect the JRail pass-holders won't be allowed on it perhaps it could mean pass-holders like us could finally ride the Nozomi trains to and from Tokyo. Wouldn't that be lovely? Let's both contemplate that while I break here for some breakfast. Oh, it's not much, mind you, just a few munchies we picked up at the KIOSK before embarking, but it's all I have at the moment.

Itadakimasu!
(いただきます; "I humbly receive this food!" - The phrase is similar to "bon appétit", "Let's eat!" or saying grace to give thanks before a meal. It is said to express gratitude for all who played a role in preparing, cultivating, ranching or hunting the food.)

Fuji-san (富士山)

We've just passed through Odawara and we're getting magnificent views of Mount Fuji from our windows!

Mount Fuji (富士山), located on Honshu Island (the main island), is the highest mountain in Japan at 3,776.24 m (12,389 ft). It is what those in the business call a strato-volcano, also known as a composite volcano – a tall, conical volcano built up by many layers (or strata) of hardened lava, tephra, pumice and volcanic ash. Unlike shield volcanoes, strato-volcanoes are characterized by a steep profile and periodic explosive eruptions and quiet eruptions, while there are some with collapsed craters called calderas. The lava that flows from strato-volcanoes typically cools and hardens before spreading far due to high viscosity. Fuji-san is considered to be an active volcano; it last erupted in 1707-1708 though various sources suggested that the magma chamber pressure could lead to an eruption "in early 2015 or sooner" of VEI 5 or 6 (which I take to mean a significant eruption) depending on how the pressure is released, so travelers beware.

It's quiet this morning though, but looking quite regal!

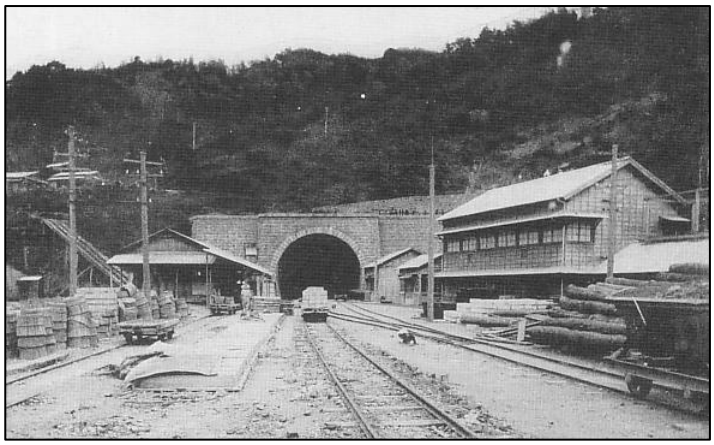
Mount Fuji lies about 100 kilometers (62 mi) south-west of Tokyo. Mount Fuji's exceptionally symmetrical cone, which is snow-capped several months out of the year, is a well-known symbol of Japan and it is frequently depicted in art and photographs, as well as visited by sightseers and climbers. According to my guidebook it is one of Japan's "Three Holy Mountains" (三霊山, *Sanreizan*), along with Mount Tate (located in the southeastern area of Toyama Prefecture) and Mount Haku (located on the borders of Gifu, Fukui and Ishikawa prefectures); it is a Special Place of Scenic Beauty, a Historic Site, and has been submitted for future inscription on the World Heritage List as a Cultural (rather than Natural) Site.

The current kanji for Mount Fuji, 富 and 士, translate to “wealth” or “abundant” and “a man with a certain status” respectively. However, these characters are *ateji*, meaning they were selected because their pronunciations match the syllables of the mountain’s name not because they carry a meaning related to the mountain. Therefore, the origin of the name Fuji is unclear. “Tale of the Bamboo Cutter”, a tenth-century text, says the name came from the word “immortal” (不死, *fushi*, *fuji*) and also from the image of abundant (富, fu) soldiers (士, shi, ji) ascending the slopes of the mountain. An early folk etymology claims that Fuji came from 不二 (not + two), meaning without equal or nonpareil; another claims that it came from 不尽 (not + to exhaust), meaning never ending. But who really knows for sure? Ahh, but enough about Fuji-san now; we’ll hopefully be getting a closer look when we head up to Hakone later in the trip, but it’s not the only thing to see here. Most riders don’t realize, or probably don’t care, that in the journey between Shin-Yokohama and Odawara they’re taking part in shinkansen history. How is that? They’re doing so by using the original test track from the 1960’s. That’s right: after crossing the Sagami river the tracks that are used are those from when the shinkansen was originally being developed. Rather than tear them out, the developers reused them!

If you’ve got a keen eye you might see a commemorative stone pass you by on the left-hand side of the Kamonomiya maintenance yard shortly before arriving at Odawara. If you don’t see it, though, you’ve not missed much. It’s just an interesting curiosity for someone like me. You’ll probably be more enamored with the multi-colored houses that dot the countryside through here. They were built in the 1980s and were designed to be clearly visible from the shinkansen – I’d say they succeeded. Further up we’ll get views of Sagami Bay and zoom through Atami, a city that was virtually wiped off the map following the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. (A 35-foot tsunami wave swamped the town, drowning three hundred people and causing wide-spread and considerable damage.) The modern city of Atami was founded on April 10, 1937 and much of its economy is heavily dependent on the tourist industry to its hot spring resorts. In fact, the city’s flag and seal reflect their status as an *onsen* town (see right).

On the other side of Atami, we’ll meet another piece of history: the 7.8 kilometer long Tanna Tunnel (丹那トンネル, *Tanna-tonneru*).

The initial routing of the Tokaido Main Line railway connecting Tokyo with Osaka avoided the Hakone mountains between Shizuoka and Kanagawa Prefectures by a long loop north to Gotemba, and then back south. Recognizing that this loop north through Gotemba was a major bottleneck in the rail system, the Japanese Railroad Ministry issued a contract to build a tunnel. The project was heralded as a major public works endeavor that would boost the Japanese economy out of its post-World War I economic recession.



However, construction of the 7,804 meter long tunnel proved to be extremely difficult due to numerous unforeseen problems with the local geology and contemporary tunneling technology. The Hakone mountain range is an active volcanic zone, containing a number of faults and is subject to frequent earthquakes. In addition, workers encountered problems with a huge volume of water seepage, soft rock formations, and vents of hot spring water. The work took many years more than initially anticipated, and costs far exceeded original budgetary estimates, but the two ends of the tunnel were finally joined on June 19, 1933. Less than a year later the tunnel was opened to rail traffic, becoming the second longest tunnel in Japan at the time of its completion (surpassed by the Shimizu Tunnel in Gunma and Niigata Prefectures of the east).

The Tanna Tunnel remains in operation on the Tokaido Main Line to this day. Traffic on the Tokaido Shinkansen uses the parallel Shin-Tanna Tunnel (7,950m) completed in 1963. The original train route through Gotemba is also still in use, it is now called the Gotemba Line.

But enough about that… the best views of Fuji can be had here all the way through to Shin-Fuji station, so I'm going to go ogle out the window for a while. I'll get back to you…

Did You Know?

The Fuji River bridge is the longest bridge on the Tokaido Shinkansen, which you'll cross just after passing Shin-Fuji station. It also marks the electrical boundary of the country between 50 Hz (to the east, as Tokyo Electric imported its technology from Germany) and 60 Hz (to the west, as Osaka Electric imported its technology from the USA.

The Shogunate: Imperialism to Feudalism

HIKARI just pulled out of the sea-side city of Hamamatsu, where, interestingly enough, we'll be back to in just a couple of day's time. It's here where Nicole will meet up with one of her college friends, whom she's not seen in years, for a little catching up. For now we're just passing through – but it was nice to get a peek at the station and its surrounding environs (not to mention the tea fields). No doubt we'll have a great time exploring those with Nicole's friend a bit later on.

Hamamatsu marks the half-way point between Tokyo and Kyoto and as such I probably should talk more about where we're going rather than how we're getting there or what we've seen along the way…

Formerly the imperial capital of Japan for more than one thousand years, today Kyoto (京都市) is one of Japan's twenty so-called "Designated Cities" (a city with a population greater than 500,000; with a population close to 1.5 million it ranks 6th), the capital of its own Prefecture, as well as a major part of the Kansai metropolitan area (which also includes Kobe and Osaka – cities west of Kyoto). With temples, parks, bustling business districts, markets, and from regal estates to tightly-packed neighborhoods, Kyoto is one of the oldest and most famous Asian metropolises. Although ravaged by wars, fires, and earthquakes during its eleven centuries as the imperial capital of Japan, Kyoto was spared from much of the destruction of World War II. It was removed from the atomic bomb target list (which it had headed) by the personal intervention of Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, as Stimson wanted to save this cultural center, which he'd come to know from his honeymoon and later diplomatic visits. With its 2000 religious places – 1600 Buddhist temples and 400 Shinto shrines, as well as palaces, gardens and architecture intact – it is also one of the best preserved cities in Japan, with a deep and rich history.

Archaeological evidence places the first human settlement on the islands of Japan to approximately 10,000 BC, yet relatively little is known about human activity in this area before the 6th century AD, around which time one of the oldest shrines was established in the area: the Shimogamo Shrine. Then, in 794, when powerful Buddhist clergy became involved in the affairs of the Imperial government, Emperor Kammu chose to relocate the capital from *Heijo-kyo* (present-day Nara) to a region far from the priest's influence. He established *Heian-kyo* (平安京, "tranquility and peace capital") in present-day Kyoto, bringing about the beginning of a new period of Japanese history – Heian Period (794-1185) – in the process. (Although his kingdom was never far from priest influence…)

Noted for its art, especially for its poetry and literature (Lady Shikibu Murasaki's "The Tale of Genji" was written during this period), it was a time when the Imperial Court was at its greatest heights, but so were those of the court's regents. Political power was in the hands of powerful aristocratic families (called *kuge*), such as the Fujiwara clan, who ruled under the titles *Sessho* and *Kampaku* (imperial regents). The Fujiwara clan obtained almost complete control over the Court during this time, ascendency gained through matrimonial links with the imperial family. Indeed, because of the number of emperors that were born to Fujiwara mothers, the Fujiwara Regents became so closely identified with the imperial family, that people saw no difference between the "direct rule" by the imperial family and the rule of the Fujiwara, which ultimately begat trouble.

Not everyone liked the powerful Fujiwara's; therefore, the end of the period saw the rise of various military clans, three of which were most powerful: Minamoto (源氏), Taira (平氏), and Tachibana (橘氏). Accordingly, when dissatisfaction with the government arose resulting in the Hogen Rebellion (1156–1158; Fujiwawa vs. Taira & Minamoto), the Heiji Rebellion (1160; Taira vs. Minamoto), and the Gempei War (1180–1185; Minamoto vs. Taira), the target of the dissatisfaction was the Fujiwara Regents, as well as the Imperial family, and later with the other family clans. With the fall of the Taira at the end of the Gempei War, the Court appointed Minamoto Yoritomo to a number of high positions, which he later consolidated. This allowed Yoritomo to become the first person to be designated the *seii-tai-shogun*, or "Shogun", from which emerged a society led by samurai clans under the political rule of the shogun—the beginnings of feudalism in Japan.

Although society in Kyoto was regarded as more refined and cultured than the rest of the country, Yoritomo established his base of power, called the *bakufu*, in the seaside town of Kamakura, moving administration of national affairs there and thus establishing what is commonly referred to as the Kamakura Shogunate (1185-1333). Though military rulers established their governments elsewhere, Kyoto remained Japan's capital until the transfer of the imperial court to Tokyo occurred in 1869 (The Meiji Restoration).

For almost 140 years successions of Minamoto's (and later Hojo's) ruled Japan from Kamakura, enjoying absolute power in the governing of the country. This monopoly of power, as well as the lack of a reward of lands after the defeat of the Mongol invasion, led to simmering resentment among Hojo vassals. Eventually Emperor Go-Daigo ordered opposition to Hojo rule in favor of Imperial restoration. To counter this revolt, the Kamakura *bakufu* sent Ashikaga Takauji to quash the uprising. For reasons that are unclear, possibly because Ashikaga was the de-facto leader of the powerless Minamoto clan, while the Hojo descended from the Taira clan the Minamoto had previously defeated, Ashikaga turned against the Kamakura *bakufu*, and fought on behalf of the Emperor. By 1333, the Kamakura *shogunate* was overthrown and the Imperial House was restored to full political influence. This did not last however.

The warrior class throughout Japan was in tumult. Furthermore, Go-Daigo was not a gifted leader, tending instead to alienate people. Ashikaka Takauji, realizing his tenuous position, seized the opportunity and, after some initial setbacks, was successful in defeating Go-Daigo and his forces at the decisive Battle of Minatogawa (1336). After Ashikaga Takauji established himself as *shogun*, a dispute arose with Go-Daigo on the subject of governing the country. That dispute led Takauji to install Yutahito, the second son of Emperor Go-Fushimi, as Emperor Komyo. Go-Daigo fled to Yoshino (but refused to relinquish power), thus dividing the country between a North Court (in favor of Komyo and Ashikaga), and a South Court (in favor of Go-Daigo).

This period of North and South Courts (*Nanboku-cho*) continued for 56 years, until 1392, when Go-Daigo and the South Court eventually gave up. Although located in Kyoto, the Ashikaga Shogunate was very weak. Unlike its predecessor, when Ashikaga Takauji established his *bakufu* he had little personal territories with which to support his rule. Therefore, this *shogunate* was thus heavily reliant on the prestige and personal authority of its shoguns. The centralized master-vassal system used in the Kamakura *bakufu* was replaced with the highly de-centralized *daimyo* (local lord) system; the military power of the shoguns depended heavily on the loyalty of the daimyo. With the Imperial Court's power greatly reduced this wasn't much of a problem; however, the structural weakness of the Ashikaga *bakufu* was exposed by numerous succession troubles and early deaths. This became dramatically more acute following the Onin War (1467-1477), after which the Ashikaga *bakufu* became reduced to little more than a local political force in Kyoto (and Kyoto itself was reduced to little more than rubble…).

This period of Japanese history ended when the 15th and last shogun, Ashikaga Yoshiaki, was driven out of the Kyoto in 1573 by Oda Nobunaga, a rather ambitious daimyo. We'll be pulling into Nagoya – part of the old Oda domain – in a few minutes. I'm going to give my hand a rest here and will continue with the story after we're underway again.

Sengoku: Period of Warring Kingdoms

The period, a time of intense internal warfare, arose in the years following the fall of the Ashikaga *bakufu* (足利幕府), which had ruled the country for more than two hundred and thirty years prior (from 1333-1568). Although the Ashikaga *bakufu* had retained much of the same structure and obligations established by its predecessor (the Kamakura *bakufu*), it failed to win the loyalty of many *daimyo*, especially those whose domains were far removed from the capital. A growing economy and developments in agriculture led to the desire for greater local autonomy throughout all levels of the social hierarchy, and thus quarrels ensued.

Succession upheavals ("The Onin War", 1467-1477) resulted in the further weakening of the central authority, and regional lords rose throughout Japan to fill the vacuum. In the course of this power shift, well established clans such as the Takeda (武田氏) and the Imagawa (今川氏), who had ruled under the authority of both the Kamakura and Ashikaga *bakufu*, were able to expand their spheres of influence. One man in particular dominated the politic here – Takeda Shingen (武田 信玄) – and he was considered a preeminent *daimyo* with exceptional military prestige (he is sometimes referred to as "The Tiger of Kai" (甲斐の虎) for his martial prowess on the battlefield).

He began earning that prestige from the moment he came of age; as the first-born son to the leader of the Takeda clan, he was given the formal name of “Harunobu” (晴信), which included a character from the name of Ashikaga Yoshiharu (足利義晴), the 12th Ashikaga Shogun, as a symbol of recognition from one’s superior. (Although a common practice at the time, perhaps it held more meaning here since both the Ashikaga and Takeda are descendents of the Minamoto clan, rulers of the Kamakura *bakufu*) At some point after his “coming of age” ceremony, the young man decided to live a monastic life, receiving the dharma name of Shingen (信玄) from his Buddhist master – the name he would go by for the rest of his life. (Consequently, the kanji of “Shingen” can also be pronounced as “Nobuharu,” which is the inversion of his official name, Harunobu.)

And later still, he rebelled against his father (banishing him), took over the family, and began a conquest of nearby provinces. With the shogun weakened following the Onin War, Takeda along with a number of other different *daimyo* were strong enough either to manipulate the Ashikaga *bakufu* to their own advantage or to overthrow it altogether.

One attempt to overthrow the *bakufu* was made in 1560 by Imagawa Yoshimoto, whose march towards the capital came to an ignominious end at the hands of Oda Nobunaga, another ambitious daimyo, in the Battle of Okehazama that same year. In defeat, the Imagawa clan no longer exerted control over the Matsudaira (松平氏) clan and a year later, an alliance was forged between Nobunaga and Matsudaira Motoyasu (who would become Tokugawa Ieyasu – remember that name?), despite decades-old hostility between the two clans. Matsudaira also formed an alliance with Takeda and thus the former Imagawa lands were divided amongst the victors, with Tokugawa Ieyasu obtaining lands around present-day Hamamatsu and Takeda Shingen the area around present day Matsumoto. (Present-day Nirasaki and Kofu are the ancestral homelands of the Takeda clan – I wish I had known at the time!)

While Nobunaga helped to save the shogun from this particular threat, he had no intention of serving the *bakufu* indefinitely, and thus turned his attention to tightening his grip on the region surrounding the capital. Resistance in the form of rival daimyo, intransigent Buddhist monks, and hostile merchants were eliminated swiftly and mercilessly, and Nobunaga quickly gained a reputation as a ruthless, unrelenting adversary. And later, in 1568, when Ashikaga Yoshiaki (the brother of the murdered thirteenth shogun, Yoshiteru) asked Nobunaga to help depose the puppet shogun Ashikaga Yoshihide, Nobunaga frothed at the chance and started his campaign.

Within a short amount of time, Nobunaga reached Kyoto and installed Yoshiaki as the 15th shogun of the Ashikaga *bakufu*. However, Nobunaga immediately began to restrict the powers of the shogun, making it clear that he intended to use Yoshiaki as a façade to justify his future conquests. Not being pleased about becoming a puppet himself, Yoshiaki secretly corresponded with various *daimyo*, forging an anti-Nobunaga alliance, which basically started the conflicts that would bring his *bakufu* to its knees.

Shingen was thirsty for power and after he took control over northern Shinano (the area surrounding Matsumoto), he moved to challenge the Oda-Tokugawa alliance, becoming one of its strongest detractors, in spite of his generally peaceful relationship and a nominal alliance with the Oda clan. Since Shingen was the only *daimyo* with the necessary power and tactical skill to stop Oda Nobunaga's unification plans, he threw his weight behind the shogun and engaged Ieyasu's forces (in 1572), coming out victorious. But before the two could clash again, Shingen died (either by succumbing to an old war wound, a sniper, or simply dying of pneumonia – nobody knows for sure), leaving his son – Takeda Katsuyori – to head the clan. Katsuyori continued to move against Tokugawa strongholds but he was not nearly as skilled as his father. After dispatching Katsuyori, The Oda-Tokugawa alliance was able to turn all its attention toward the shogun, defeating Yoshiaki's forces, and bringing the Ashikaga *shogunate* to an end (1573).

Oda Nobunaga would go on to campaign for unification – laying siege to Himeji-jo (in 1576) – but would die in what has become known as the Honni-ji Incident (本能寺の変, *Honno-ji no Hen*) before realizing it…

Nobunaga was at the height of his power, having destroyed the Takeda family earlier that year (1582). He had central Japan firmly under his control, and his only rivals were the Mori clan, the Uesugi clan, and the Late Hojo clan, each weakened by internal affairs. After the death of Mori Motonari, his grandson, Mori Terumoto only strived to maintain the status quo, aided by his two uncles, as per Motonari's will. Hojo Ujiyasu, a renowned strategist and domestic manager, had also died, leaving his less prominent son Ujimasa in place. Finally, the death of Uesugi Kenshin, arguably the period's most formidable general (and Takeda Sengen's rival), left the Uesugi clan, devastated also by an internal conflict between his two adopted sons, weaker than before.

It was at this point that Oda Nobunaga began sending his generals aggressively into all directions to continue his military expansion. When Nobunaga received a request for reinforcements from Hideyoshi, whose forces were stuck at the Siege of Takamatsu, he made preparations to aid Hashiba in the frontline. Nobunaga ordered Akechi Mitsuhide to go to Hideyoshi's aid, and travelled to Honno-ji, his usual resting place when he stopped by in Kyoto. The only people he had around him were court officials, merchants, upper-class artists, and dozens of servants. Upon receiving the order, Mitsuhide returned to Sakamoto Castle and moved to his base in Tamba province. Around this time, he had a session of Renga with several prominent poets, where he made clear his intentions to rebel.

Mitsuhide saw an opportunity to act, when not only was Nobunaga resting in Honno-ji and unprepared for an attack, but all the other major daimyo and the bulk of Nobunaga's army were occupied in other parts of the country. Mitsuhide led his army toward Kyoto, claiming that Nobunaga wanted to show a procession. It was not the first time that Nobunaga had demonstrated his modernized and well-equipped troops in Kyoto, so this excuse was not doubted. Finally, when getting near to Honno-ji, Mitsuhide announced, “The enemy awaits at Honno-ji!” (敵は本能寺にあり, *Teki wa Honno-ji ni ari*!). Before dawn, the Akechi army had Honno-ji surrounded. Nobunaga, his servants, and bodyguards resisted, but they realized it was futile against the overwhelming numbers of Akechi troops. Nobunaga committed seppuku. Luckily, one of his generals, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, would succeed in picking up the pieces and unifying the country in his stead.

For a brief period of time Japan was stable under Toyotomi, but then Hideyoshi launched an ill-conceived conquest of China’s Ming Dynasty that ultimately failed. Japan then experienced another short period of succession conflict – since the Toyotomi clan was known to be descended from peasant stock, neither Hideyoshi nor his heir Hideyori would be recognized or accepted as *shogun*. When both died the conflicts amongst the ranks were exacerbated and developed into open hostilities. With no appointed shogun over the armies, this left a power vacuum in the Japanese government upon which Tokugawa Ieyasu emerged victorious at the Battle of Sekigahara (1600), seizing political power. This action led to the third and final *bakufu*, the Tokugawa Shogunate.

That battle happened right outside the window in Gifu-prefecture.

Though it would take three more years for Ieyasu to consolidate his position of power over the Toyotomi clan and the other *daimyo*, Sekigahara is widely considered to be the unofficial beginning of the Tokugawa *bakufu*, the last shogunate to control Japan.

The Edo, or Tokugawa period (1603-1868), saw power centralized in the hands of a hereditary *bakufu* that took a firm control of religion, regulated the economy, subordinated the nobility, and set up uniform systems of taxation, government spending and limited bureaucracies. It avoided international involvement, established a judiciary and suppressed protest and criticism. In contrast to previous *bakufu*, though, Tokugawa not only kept Japan unified for more than 250 years, he did so peacefully, bringing a level of prosperity to a nation the likes its 31 million people hadn't seen since ages past, labeling his rule a second golden age. And while the Takeda were virtually destroyed by the loss of Shingen's heir, Katsuyori, Shingen's law, tax and administrations systems had a profound effect on the period (Tokugawa Ieyasu himself is said to have borrowed many Takeda governmental and military innovations, the designs of which put to use in his own *bakufu*).

Did You Know?

The prefecture's capital city – Gifu – was named by Oda Nobunaga in 1567 during his initial campaign to unify the country. The first character used comes from Qishan (岐山), a legendary mountain from which most of China was unified, whereas the second character comes from Qufu (曲阜), the birthplace of Confucius. Nobunaga chose those characters because he wanted to unify all of Japan and he wanted to be viewed as a great mind.

As a result of prolonged peace cultural achievement was high, and many artistic developments took place. Most significant among them were the *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵) form of wood- block print and the *kabuki (*歌舞伎) and *bunraku* (文楽; a type of puppet theater) theaters. Also, many of the most famous works for the *koto* (箏; a stringed instrument) and *shakuhachi* (尺八; a type of flute) date from this time period. And while most of the focus then turned toward Edo, the economy of Kyoto continued to flourish to become one of Japan's most powerful, after Osaka and Edo of course.

* * *

Interestingly, it's up for debate exactly what the people of the Heian Period called Kyoto. Some suggest that, while *Heian-kyo* was the city's official imperial name, it was more generally known as *kyo* (京), following the practice of using the suffix *–kyo* to denote a capital city. Following that logic, the city was also known as *miyako* (都), an alternate word for "capital", and even *rakuyo* and *keishi* (京師), also meaning "metropolis" or "capital". In official documents, the city's name would sometimes be referred to individually as 京 or 都, together as 京都 or 京師, and even as *Kyo no Miyako* (京の都) in similar style to an alternate reading of *Heijo-kyo*'s name as *Nara no Miyako.* Eventually a synonym of *miyako* would come into favor – *to* – and thus Kyoto (京都) became the city's proper name. After Edo was renamed Tokyo (meaning "Eastern Capital") in 1868, Kyoto was known for a short time as Saikyo (西京, meaning "Western Capital"), but this quickly fell out of favor.

It's also interesting to note that many people still consider Kyoto as Japan's rightful capital, even though both administrative and imperial aspects of the government moved to Tokyo following the Meiji Restoration (the return of Imperial Power to the Emperor) – there's been no official decree to suggest that Tokyo is the official capital of Japan.

Consequently, as we move about Kyoto you'll see a number of these names pop up seemingly interchangeably with the surroundings. There's *rakuyo*, shortened to *raku*, which you'll find as a name for Kyoto's bus system, to commonly refer to "kyoto cuisine" by, the name of a museum, and even a type of pottery – although the name *rakuyo* lends itself to a number of Kyoto-based businesses and schools too. You'll also discover *keishi* is just as prominent as both an archaic name for Kyoto still in use and as the moniker for Kyoto-based businesses and schools. And then there's Miyako, which lends itself to prestigious hotels in the area, as well as the area's transportation by way of Kansai Miyako card (a pre-paid card).

There's no escaping history! And while you're in Kyoto… why would you want to?

We'll be pulling into Kyoto station shortly where we'll bid HIKARI farewell (he continues on to Okayama). The plan after that is simply to find K's House, drop off our bags and head out to *Gion*, *Okazaki* and *Higashiyama* regions of the city (the eastern side) to begin our explorations. Finding K's House will be simple enough – I know exactly where it is located – finding our way out of the Kyoto station might be a little more problematic.

You see, Kyoto-eki is Japan's second-largest station building (after Nagoya's) and is one of the country's largest buildings (by size) incorporating a shopping mall, hotel, a movie theater, department store, and several local government facilities under one 15-story roof. As it is the main railway station in Kyoto, it's also home to a number of JR lines and other private railway's lines – so it can get confusing. Besides the Tokaido Shinkansen you'll find the JR Biwako and Kyoto Lines, the JR San'in Main Line (Sagano Line) and the Nara Line (which we'll take later on as well). A private railway company – Kintetsu Railways – operates a line out of this station (the Kyoto Line) and Kyoto-eki is also a station on the municipal subway (but is not the system's most important station – that's Karasuma-oike, and it's a transfer point between the two lines – the Tozai and Karasuma lines – but I'm sure I'll get into all that later on too.)

So, let me gather up all my stuff and prepare to exit the train… they don't give you much time to hop on or off you know!

「A Stroll Through Higashiyama」

Friday | April 12, 2013 (part 2)

Konbanwa fellow travelers! Good evening and hello from the hallowed halls of K's Backpacker House here in Kyoto.

It's a little bit after 8:00pm now, and as the sun has long since disappeared behind one of the dozen mountains hugging the city, we've settled in for the night after what has been a rather long and busy day. I couldn't tell you how many kilometers we've walked since arriving this morning (we've been averaging 25,000 steps a day though), but my feet are screaming at me so I must assume it was way more than they anticipated on. It's been a great day never-the-less.

We've seen a number of cultural wonders today – the gardens of Heian-jingu, the painted walls of Shoren-in, the huge *sanmon* of Choraku-ji, the twists and turns of Nene's road, wonderful *maki-e* at Kodai-ji, shopped along the storied Ninenzaka and Sanenzaka, and marveled at the amazing views of the city from the noted deck of Kiyomizu-dera, amongst many more wonderful sights – all of which more than make up for any pain my poor feet may be feeling.

Even so there've been a few disappointments too.

The weather, for one, was quite dreary for most of the day – cloudy upon arrival, rainy later on, clearing up only at the end of the day. The attractions, second, for not being open or as advertised (Kennin-ji and Yasaka Pagoda I'm looking at you!) but we took it all in stride as best we could. Perhaps I should have known today wouldn't go quite as planned based around the bumbling about Kyoto station we did upon arrival. One wrong exit from a platform here is a one-way ticket to nowhere; we found ourselves on the back-side of the station (the Hachijo, or south side) – where no tourist has gone before! Well, okay, not exactly, but it's a place I've rarely ventured myself in the odd years I've been coming to Kyoto, so I was quite unfamiliar with the scene presented to us. Eventually we found ourselves out the front – central (Karasuma, or north gate) – path and on our way to K's House, all our luggage in tow.

It's amazing how much Kyoto has remained the same! It didn't take much effort to find our new home, even if another one of my navigation markers was missing. In 2004, in order to find K's House again, I relied on an illuminated HONDA sign down the alleyway where the hostel resided, and on a rather strange mural I referred to as the "duck sign" advertising a video store at the base of a particular building; it was a rather weird painting of a duck laying an egg… what do I know? In either case, both markers were alive and well the second time I traveled to Kyoto, but not the third. In 2008, the video store closed and the mural on the side of the building had been painted over. This time the HONDA sign I relied upon to make the turn up to K's House was gone! Alas remembering K's House's location was no sweat – literally – it is cool here in Kyoto.

We pre-checked in (paid and got our key cards), dropped off our bags and headed for the Keihan Rail Shichijo (one of the private rail companies operating here in Kyoto) station. Our destination: Gion-Sanjo and Kennin-ji, one of the oldest Zen temples in Kyoto.

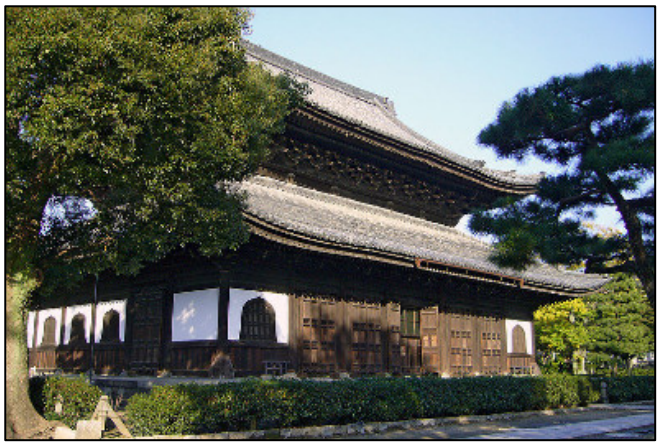
Kennin-ji (建仁寺)

You'll find Kennin-ji nestled in the Higashiyama area of Kyoto, near Gion (the city's "pleasure district" – pleasurable only in the spirits that flows out its doors rather than the other kind), at the end of Hanami-dori – a three-tenths of a mile walk from Shichijo station. Founded in 1202 AD, Kennin-ji is considered to be one of the oldest Zen temples in Kyoto (it stakes its claim as being the oldest) and is one of the so-called Kyoto Gozan or "five most important Zen temples of Kyoto."

Did You Know?

The temples of the Kyoto Gozan are: Tenryu-ji (天龍寺), Shokoku-ji (相国寺), Kennin-ji (建仁寺), Tofuku-ji (東福寺), and Manju-ji (満寿寺) in order of rank. Nanzenji (南禅寺) leads the Gozan.

The Gozan was a system of *shogunate* supported and protected temples initially adopted to promote Zen throughout Japan. However, as Zen had already spread throughout the country by the time the system was formally organized, the Gozan was ultimately used by the country's ruling class for its own administrative and political means. Thus the Gozan system allowed the temples at the top to function as de facto ministries, using their nationwide network for the distribution of government laws and norms, and for the monitoring of local conditions for their military superiors. Of course the Gozan system is more complicated than that brief overview, with layer upon layer of conditions, labels, subordinates and smaller branches that numbered in the thousands – enough to make your head spin. The Gozan themselves are the lead temples, followed by the Jissetsu (十刹) tier (of which 10 temples belonged) and lastly the Shozan (諸山) network of which there were literally hundreds. Each of these temples had specific functions and levels of authority. Over time the initial systems were naturally broken and reformed, but suffice it to say five in Kyoto stood above all. There was a similar system in use at Kamakura when the *bakufu* was in power there.



The monk Eisai, credited with introducing Zen to Japan, served as *Kennin-ji*'s founding abbot and is buried on the temple grounds. For its first years the temple combined Zen, Tendai, and Shingon practices, but it became a purely Zen institution under the eleventh abbot and is now one of the Rinzai sect's headquarter temples. When first built, the temple contained seven principal buildings, but it has suffered from fires through the centuries. Today *Kennin-ji*'s buildings include the Abbot's Quarters (Hojo), given by Ankoku-ji in 1599; the Dharma Hall (Hatto), built in 1765; a tea house built in 1587 to designs by tea master Sen no Rikyū for Toyotomi Hideyoshi; and the Imperial Messenger Gate (Chokushimon), said to date from the Kamakura period, and still showing marks from arrows.

And besides containing Zen gardens, *Kennin-ji* is known for being the place where Zen Master Dogen set out on his path to China and where his remains are buried. Dogen, who lived from 1200-1253 founded the Soto Zen (曹洞宗) school, the largest of the three traditional sects of Zen in Japanese Buddhism (the others being Rinzai and Obaku). It emphasizes Shikantaza, meditation with no objects, anchors, or content. The meditator strives to be aware of the stream of thoughts, allowing them to arise and pass away without interference.

Much of these teachings are found in the temple's art and infrastructure, which we would have seen had the temple been easier to find. Unfortunately for us what we found – if it was even Kennin-ji to begin with – didn't look overly inviting, so rather than push on and tread where we weren't wanted, Nicole and I returned to the train station and made our way to Higashiyama station on the Tozai Metro, walking to Heian-jingu from there.

Heian-Jingu (平安神宮)

Like the gate that stands sentinel along Jingu-michi and Niomon-dori, everything else about Heian-jingu is big: big gate, big grounds, big gardens and a big internal courtyard (the gates are considered the largest *torii* in all of Japan – built in 1929 at 24.2 meters high; top rail is 33.9 meters long – they're quite a draw). Constructed in 1895 to commemorate the 1,100th anniversary of *Heiankyo*'s/Kyoto's founding, Heian-ingu pays homage to the two emperors who bookend the city's era of national prominence: Kammu (the 50th emperor of Japan), who brought the imperial throne here in 794 (realizing that the capital of Heijo/Nara was small in scale and beneath the dignity of the country), and Komei (the 121st emperor of Japan), whose reign ending in 1866 saw the sun set on Kyoto's days as the capital (after which the capital was moved to Edo/Tokyo during the Meiji Restoration). As an assertion of Kyoto's splendor, Heian-jingu was built as a slightly smaller replica, about 2/3rd scale, of the Imperial Palace, destroyed in 1227.

Although not as old as many of the structures that surround it, Heian-jingu still surprises in its grandeur. The imperial chrysanthemum, which adorns the huge *torii* along the approaching avenue, is made of gold. The Ote-mon, the shrine's two-story main gate, is a vermilion colored blue-tiled structure modeled after Rashomon (羅城門), Kyoto's original main city gate, which during its heyday stood 8 meters (26 feet) high, 32 meters (106 feet) wide with a 23 meter (75 foot) stone wall surrounding it. Then there's the main hall, or *shaden* (社殿), also vermilion-painted with blue tiles, designed to imitate the Kyoto Imperial Palace on a three-fourth scale.

Passing through this gate (don't forget to wash at the basin, it is customary to cleanse oneself before entering a shrine; don't let the menacing tiger perched atop it get the better of you) and into the massive courtyard your sight is immediately drawn across to the East and West Halls and the two Chinese-style towers that rise beyond them – they're known as Byakki-ro and Soryu-ro, White Tiger and Blue Dragon respectively. Through the courtyard is the Daigoku-den (the 33 meter long, 12 meter wide, and 17 meter tall "hall of state" replica; replete with a cherry tree to the right and a citrus tree to the left as they would have appeared in the Heian court), and the Honden (Spirit Hall), where the spirits of Emperors Kammu and Komei are enshrined.

And beyond them is the *Shin'en*, the gardens of Heian-jingu.

The *Shin'en* consists of four precincts that surround the main shrine buildings on the south, west, middle, and east sides. With a total area of approximately 33,000 square meters, these stroll-style landscape gardens are designated as a national scenic spot representative of Meiji-era (1868-1912) garden design and were shaped by Ogawa Jihei, a modern landscaper, to capture and represent the spirit of the Heian court.

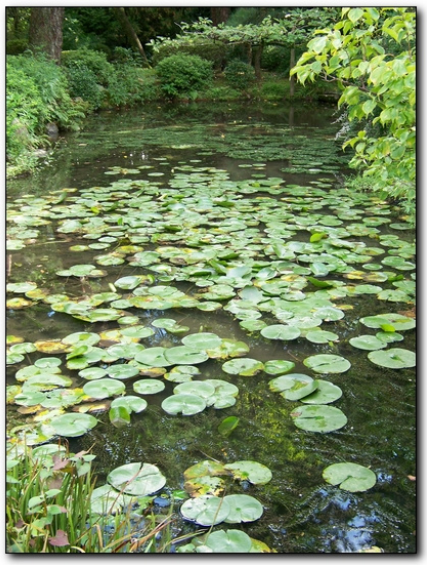
Nishi Shin'en (West Garden) - The focus of the Nishi Shin'en is a quiet pond named Byakko-ike. The irises around the pond bloom in all their glory in early summer, lending the garden an ethereal beauty. A tea ceremony arbor called Choshin-tei is located in the southwest cluster of trees.

Minami Shin'en (South Garden) – This garden was designed for holding *kyokusui-no-en*, a garden party during which aristocrats amused themselves by composing Japanese poems. In spring, the garden is bright with the deep pink blossoms of drooping cherry trees. The cherry blossoms are followed by azaleas in early summer and by *hagi* (Japanese bush clover) in autumn. The garden contains a smaller area called *Heian-no-sono* featuring plants and flowers which appear in literary works of the Heian period.

Naka Shin'en (Middle Garden) – Visitors who pass through the cluster of trees behind the shrine's main buildings will find a beautiful garden called Naka Shin'en. This garden, as well as the Nishi Shin'en, was constructed in 1895. It contains the Soryu-ike pond which features the Garyu-kyo, a walkway consisting of stone pillars which once served as foundation stones for the girders of Sanjo Ohashi and Gojo Ohashi, famous bridges in the center of the city of Kyoto (fans of "Lost in Translation" may recall these stone steps from the film). The pond is also surrounded by an exquisite expanse of rabbit-ear irises.

Higashi Shin'en (East Garden) – This garden was constructed in the early 1910s. In the center of the garden there is a pond called Seiho-ike on which courtiers are said to have gone boating in ancient times. Borrowing the Higashiyama hills as background scenery, the garden contains two elegant old-style buildings – the Taihei-kaku and the Shobi-kan adjacent to it – which add to the garden's overall charm. The Taihei-kaku (Bridge of Peace) is a covered structure that is topped with a phoenix in a similar style to that featured at Kinkaku-ji and Ginkaku-ji.

And that's pretty much Heian-jingu.








Goshuin: Red Seals

Before we departed, however, there was one last thing I needed to do: find a *goshuin-cho*, or temple calligraphy book, and collect here and elsewhere throughout the day. I discovered these books the last time I was in Japan, watching a lady have hers "signed" at the *Dai Garan* in Koyasan. Having seen these books at other locations in Koya I became intrigued, but unsure how to go about participating. Eventually I bit back any uneasiness I had about inquiring and asked. And it turned out to be the best thing I could have done! The practice is referred to as Goshuin (御朱印), which literally translates to "red seal", but features much more than just a stamp in a book – it's a complete work of art.
No one *goshuin* is the same – not from temple to temple nor from the same temple. The reason for its uniqueness is simple: it's done by hand (except the stamp part), so variances with brush stroke – thickness, ink, etc – will always be found.

The origin of the *goshuin* is mostly unknown, I understand, but it is widely believed that a more primitive version worked as a receipt for handwritten sutras offered to temples by pious believers. Nowadays, the calligraphy books are brought with the devotee to receive the *goshuin* on it in exchange for a small sum of money (in this case ¥300). This seal is regarded as the god of the shrine or temple, so some pious followers make it a rule to get one every time they pay one of these institutions a visit for the purpose of placing them on their *kami-dana*, or home altar, as an offering. The *goshuin* you'll find at today's temples show a combination of orange stamps and a shrine's or temple's name with a date of visit written in "sumi" black ink.

I just think it's quite a unique souvenir to take with you. Unfortunately I was at the end of my journey when I discovered this practice last time, so I wanted to be sure to begin this as soon as I got to Kyoto this round. And we were in luck: Nicole and I purchased a nice book and received Heian-jingu's stamp as our first!

Shoren-in (青蓮院)

With stamp in hand we returned down Jingu-michi on foot, crossing busy Niomon-dori (where Higashiyama metro station is location), continued down Jingu-mich into Higashiyama proper and found ourselves at the tree-covered gate of Shoren-in next.

Shoren-in is a delightful and quiet temple that exudes a palpable feeling of tranquility. It is only steps away from the bustling streets of the Higashiyama District, yet when one crosses the threshold of the temple's front gate it is as though one has stepped back into simpler, more peaceful times. Yet it has seen its share of history. As a temple of the Tendai sect of Japanese Buddhism, it is one of the city's *monzeki* (門跡), temples whose head priests were traditionally members of the imperial family or of aristocratic lineage. *Shoren-in*'s close relationship with the Japanese imperial family dates back to the temple's founding in the 12th century. The Emperor Toba (74th Emperor of Japan, 1103-1156) was a follower of the Tendai sect, who's head temple can be found in the mountains of north-eastern Kyoto (Enryaku-ji; I visited there in 2008). The emperor had his son study under Enryakuji's head priest, and built Shoren-in as a residence for the two of them in the city. Over time the residence evolved into a genuine temple. As an interesting turn of fate, Shoren-in once again served as a residence during the 18th century when a fire forced an empress to use the temple as her temporary living quarters.

A winding route takes visitors through Shoren-in's various buildings and gardens.

Visitors first walk through the *Kacho-den*, a guest/drawing room, which has portraits on the walls and paintings on the sliding doors (*fusuma*) of lotus flowers in striking blue color by Kimura Hideki (the artist, not the sumo wrestler). Further in the drawing room opens up to a garden with pond, which visitors can admire while sitting on *tatami* mats. The garden is believed to have been created by Soami (a painter and landscape artist in the service of the Ashikaga *shogunate*) during the Muromachi period (1337-1573).

There are four gardens here – each in a celebrated landscape style found throughout Japan – but it's the main one that's the most pleasing. Its pond immediately draws your eye – its defining feature is a rather large stone located in its center. The stone's shape gives the appearance of the back of a dragon bathing in the pond. Hence its name: *ryujin-no-ike* (*ryujin*, or "dragon god" and *ike* for "pond").

Shoren-in's other principle buildings are connected to the *Kacho-den* by wooden walkways – the *Kogosho* (living quarters), the *Dai-Genkan* (where the sedan chair used by Emperor Komei is exhibited), the Kobun-tei (tea house) and the Shinden (the largest building of the complex, holding fusuma paintings of pine trees by celebrated artists from the Kano school, an important cultural property). But the Shijoko-do (main/image hall) is the most important. It is where the Shijoko Nyorai *mandala* and the Blue Cetaka (the temple's main treasures) are enshrined.

The principal object of worship is a *mandala*, a drawing that represents Buddhist deities and the structure of the religious universe. Here at Shoren-in, the only temple in Japan dedicated to this deity, the mandala is a hanging scroll of about two square meters with the Sanskrit character "Boron" at its center. Depicted at the center of the *mandala* is the head of the Dainichi Nyorai (the most popular among the noble group of Buddha heads); it is known to disseminate great wisdom and light. The Golden Wheel, *ichiji-kinrin-bucho*, is depicted above the Shijoko Nyorai and is followed by Buddha's known as: Kanjizai, the Kongoshu, the Bigutei, the red Butsugen Butsumo, the Fushigi-doji, the Monju, and Kyugosei, in a clockwise direction. Further, they are surrounded by eight moon circles that represent the power of the Shijoko Nyorai.

The following *myo-o* (a "myo-o" is the third type of deity after Buddhas and bodhisattvas; the Sanskrit name literally means "king of knowledge" and they are generally seen guardian the main deity) are located at the four corners of the mandala: *Kongo Yasha* in the upper right-hand corner, *Gozanze myo-o* in the lower right-hand corner, *Gundari myo-o* in the lower left-hand corner, and *Dai-Itoku myo-o* in the upper left-hand corner. *Fudo myo-o*, a fearsome deity of wisdom surrounded by flames and holding a sword, overlaps the Shijoko Nyorai at the center. The background of the *mandala* is painted with a rare expensive pigment known as *gunjo* (ultramarine) depicting the *kokuu* (the void) of a vast space. It is rarely seen by the public, however, so consider yourself lucky if you happen to catch a special cultural opening. We didn't.

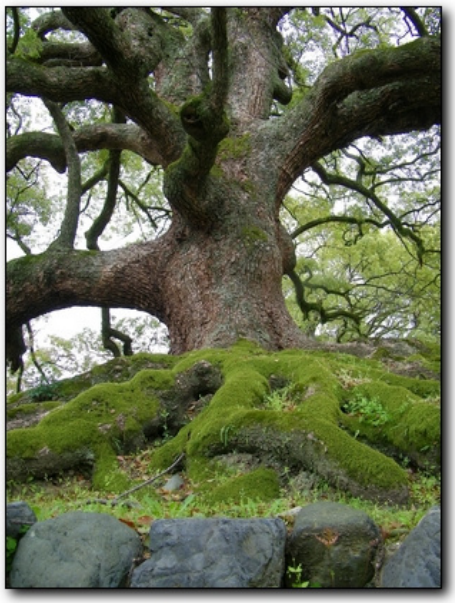
Also here is a revered painting of a Cetaka, one of the main deities in Esoteric Buddhism who can be depicted in five different colors: blue, yellow, red, white and black. Shoren-in is well-known for hosting a Blue Cetaka (there's a Red and Yellow version celebrated out there somewhere) and for the site's camphor trees (*kusonoki*), which are reportedly eight-hundred years old.

Can you imagine the history those trees have seen? And continue to see?

Case in point: just as we were ready to depart – and while waiting for the calligraphy book to be signed / stamped – history was being made for one young couple here at least: their wedding! At first we couldn't determine why a number of snappily dressed people were wandering the halls around the temple's entrance until a number of girls in beautiful gowns made their presence known (bridesmaids!), followed by a young couple (the bride and groom!), dressed in special (and traditional looking) *kimono* and *geta*, and the rest of their procession. We stayed well out of the way (and refrained from taking their picture out of respect) but they looked so happy that we couldn't help but smile along with them. Watching the happy couple walk arm-in-arm to whatever awaited them within was certainly a highlight. We wish them the best!

Did You Know?

Geta (下駄) are a form of traditional Japanese footwear that resembles sandals. They have an elevated wooden base held onto the foot with a fabric thong to keep the foot well above the ground.



<u>Yuzen'en at Chion-in</u>

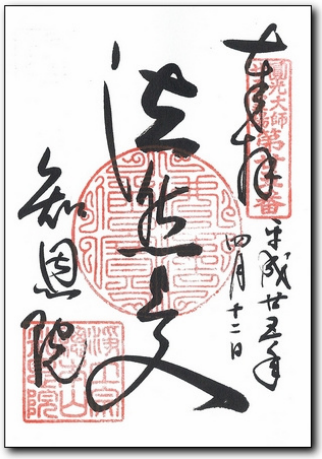
Although we left Shoren-in as soon as we could, we didn't go far. In fact we ended up next door at Chion-in.

At the foot of Kachozan, one of the thirty-six mountains in Kyoto's Higashiyama district, lay the one hundred and six large and small buildings that make up Chion-in (知恩院), the head temple of the Jodo Shu (Pure Land Sect) founded by Honen (1133-1212), who proclaimed that sentient beings are reborn in the Western Paradise (Pure Land) by reciting the *nembutsu*, Amida Buddha's name. Appropriate for the birthplace of the Jodo Shu, the stately appearance of Chion-in welcomes those who visit with a serene air amidst solemn surroundings.

The original temple was built in 1234 by Honen's disciple Genchi (1183-1238), in memory of his master. While the temple was affiliated more closely in the early years with the Seizan branch of Jodo Shu, its 8th head priest (Nyoichi, 1262-1321) was deeply influenced by the priest Ryoku, a disciple of Roychu who was the 3rd head of the Chinzei branch of Jodo Shu Buddhism. By 1450, Chion-in had fully come under the control of the Chinzei branch, but had little direct control, due to the outbreak of the Onin War.

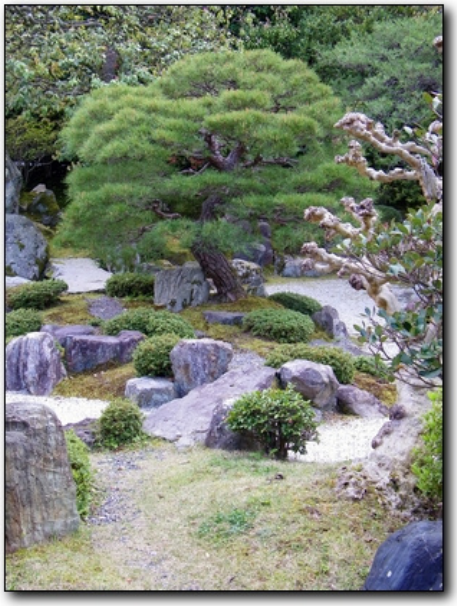
The Onin War (1467–1477), a conflict rooted in economic distress and brought on by a dispute over shogunal succession, is generally regarded as the onset of the Sengoku period. And it started because Yoshimasa, the Shogun, had no heir in which to continue the family line; therefore, in order to successfully continue the reign of the Ashikaga, he had to select one posthaste. He initially persuaded his younger brother, Yoshimi, to abandon his monastic life and join the political court, and groomed him for the position accordingly. But an unexpected turn of events would up-end those plans a year later: in 1465, Yoshimasa's wife bore him a son thereby securing his own blood-heir and when favor transitioned, the house split loyalties. Though this is an over-simplification of the events leading up to, during, and the cause of the conflict, both factions ultimately claimed the title of Shogun and civil war ensued. The result was a protracted battle that virtually destroyed Kyoto and many of its historical relics.

Numerous buildings in the complex were burnt down in 1633, but were entirely rebuilt by the third Tokugawa Shogun Iemitsu (1604-1651). It is why the buildings here today are adorned with the Hollyhock crest of the Tokugawa's. Most visitors are drawn to Chion-in for the complex's massive wooden gate – I cannot lie, so am I – and it's one of the complex's most celebrated attractions. This colossal *sanmon* was erected in 1621 by Tokugawa Hidetada, the second Tokugawa Shogun, and comes with impressive credentials: it stands at a height of about 24 meters, a width of about 50 meters, and contains about 70,000 tiles on its roof. Enough credentials to offer this *sanmon* up as one of the largest wooden gates left in Japan.



Designated as an important cultural property, the structure is especially imposing, and along with the Sanmon Gate at Nanzenji Temple and the Niomon Gate at Ninna-ji, it is considered to be one of the three most famous gates in all of Kyoto.

Since I'd visited Chion-in and toured its grounds extensively the last time I was in Kyoto (2008), I was only interested in seeing the *sanmon* again and, of course, collecting the temple's calligraphy. With the main worship hall currently undergoing an 8-year restoration (until March 2019), the precinct was rather dusty, dirty, and quite the maze to follow – so there was hardly a desire to stay. Still, we did manage to see one new thing whilst here: the Yuzen'en garden. This is a famous modern space which consists of two gardens: one that draws water from a Higashiyama spring and one in the *karesansui* (dry rock garden) style. There are two teahouses inside the garden: the first is Karoku-an, which is modeled after an Urasenke-style teahouse, and the Hakuju-an, which was built in commemoration of the 99th birthday of Nakamura Koryū, the 86th chief high priest of the Chion-in. Besides us, there was one other person in the garden, so not very popular although it could have been the dreary weather.



Yasaka Pagoda & Furebotoke

After grabbing the calligraphy, we continued on and found ourselves around the backside of Yasaka-jinja in Maruyama Park, a small green-space in the middle of Higashiyama. Maruyama Park is one of Kyoto's most popular and most crowded spots for cherry blossom viewing – the centerpiece of the park is a tall *shidarezakura* (weeping cherry tree) – as such it can get rather crowded when the *sakura* are in full bloom. Today, with the blossoms virtually gone the park was not so terribly full, but there were still a number of patrons enjoying the array of food stalls stationed about. These stalls, holdovers from the *sakura hanami* held here a couple of weeks back (similar to the ones we saw at Ueno Park in Tokyo), are still rather busy so I suspect they'll be here for as long as the people come to enjoy the park's spring-time atmosphere.

Furebotoke at Entoku-in (圓徳院)

『大黒天』| "Daikokuten"

元はインドの神様。七福神の一人で福の神として知られています。金運を上げたい方は右手もしくは両手で撫でてください。

Originally, this is an Indian deity and one of the seven gods of good fortune, and is the god of good luck. If you wish to have prosperity, please gently stroke any part of the statue with your right hand or both hands.

With it starting to drizzle we pressed on through the park, walking along famed *Nene-no-komichi* (Nene's Road), ducking into its shops and stalls. Nene's Road is a flagstone paved walkway named after Toyotomi Hideyoshi's widow *Kita-no-Mandokoro*, who was also known as "Nene"; it is one of the most historical paths in all of Kyoto. As such you'll find a number of historical shops, shrines and oddities along the way. One such oddity (and I mean that in a good way) is the *Furebotoke*, a pilgrimage to Buddhist statues placed along the roadside throughout the area. The concept was explained thusly:

東山路傍の触れ仏　Touch the roadside Buddhist statues in Higashiyama

触れぼとけ」「さわり仏」「癒しほとけ」
などと呼ばれ愛されてきた仏様や仏具に触れ、 ご利益を受けてみませんか。

Throughout Higashiyama are healing Buddha statues called *Furebotoke*, *Sawaribotoke*, or *Iyashihotoke*. Touch these beloved Buddhist statues and altar objects to earn merit.

仏様のさわり方…
How to touch statues:

仏様は、右手もしくは両手で触れてください。
Touch them with your right hand or both hands.

背の高い仏様は台座に触れてください。
Touch the pedestals of taller statues.

With many of these along our path anyway we couldn't help but join in the fun! We caught our first ("Daikokuten", previous page) at the entrance to Entoku-in, giving him a rub as asked, and looked forward to catching as many as we could as we went along!

Furebotoke at Korin-in (岡林院)

『三地蔵（さんじぞう）』| Three Jizo

見ざる言わざる聞かざると否定的に生きるのではなく、見るぞう言うぞう聞くぞうと、積極人間になりたい人は右手もしくは両手で撫でてください

Stroke the statue with your right hand or both hands if you wish to become a positive person by trying to see, talk, and listen rather than leading a life of ignorance.

Although sidetracked by the *Furebotoke*, our true destination at this moment was Yasaka Pagoda, a five-storied tower deep in the heart of Higashiyama. It's hard to miss; as the last remnant of Hokan-ji, it is one of the most visible and recognizable landmarks in the district. The pagoda measures 49 meters (161 feet) high, which makes it the third highest wooden building in Kyoto prefecture after To-ji (in Kyoto) and Kofuku-ji (in Nara). Though its height is impressive, its history – if true – is equally so. Legend says this pagoda was built in 592 by Shotoku-taishi, a prince, but no one really knows for sure. It is part of the historical record that the temple existed prior to the transfer of the national capital to Kyoto, so there could be some truth to the legend.
Though the full temple has long since been lost to time, the pagoda has been destroyed and rebuilt several times throughout its existence. The current structure was built in 1440 by Yoshinori Ashikaga, the 6th Shogun of the Ashikaga Shogunate and has remained standing since. But with the pagoda left of this once proud temple, what's the draw then? As a special treat, for a few hundred yen, you're allowed to climb up inside it (one of the very few in which this kind of access is possible). Since it has been closed up tight every time I've come to Kyoto, I've never known about this rare opportunity. And though I was armed with the knowledge of this unique experience beforehand, as before the site was closed up tight. Again. We weren't going anywhere. At least, we weren't going up in that pagoda, so we pressed on toward Kiyomizu-dera, seeking out the *Furebotoke* as we did so.

Kiyomizu-dera (清水寺)

The approach to Kiyomizu-dera is taking a number of steps through history. Here you're along what is called Sannen-zaka (三年坂) and Ninen-zaka (二年坂), slopes upon which you'll find traditional Kyoto-style houses lined on both sides of the flagstone that paves your way and staircases leading you upward in "*sukiya*" style, making you truly feel you've stepped into another era. And if the ambiance of the narrow alleys didn't project that feeling upon you, perhaps the Geisha, Geiko, and Maiko you might spot along these roads will. For those unacquainted, *geisha* (芸者) are female professional entertainers whose knowledge of traditional arts, skill at verbal repartee, and ability to keep a secret win them the respect, and sometimes love, of their well-heeled and often influential male clients. The profession, dating from the 17th century, is in decline and blurred by the activities of so-called *onsen geisha* and others who offer more sexual than classical arts, or who are more glorified waitresses than *geisha*. Kyoto's proud *geisha* prefer the term *geiko* (芸子; "Child of the Arts") and less polished *geiko* are called *maiko* (舞子 or 舞妓; apprentices), and are a Kyoto only phenomenon.

Furebotoke at Gesshin-in (月真院)

布袋（ほてい）』| "Hotei"

中国の禅僧。弥勒菩薩の化身といわれ、豊かな人生を与えてくれるとされています

Hotei, a potbelly deity of good fortune, is a Chinese Zen Buddhist monk. It is said to be an incarnation of *Mirokubosatsu* (god of love and kindness), and is thought to bring prosperity.

The city has four-to-five enclaves of *geisha*, in areas referred to as *hanamachi* (花街; literally "flower towns"): Gion-kobu, Gion Higashi, Pontocho (centers around one long, narrow, cobbled alley running from Shijo-dori to Sanjo-dori, one block west of the Kamo River), Miyagawa-cho (just south of Shijo along the Kamo River), and Kamishichi-ken (in northwest Kyoto). Though it is rare you'll see geisha perform outside of private functions, you might get a chance to see and interact with one (albeit briefly) along this historical path. Though I cannot say we saw any real *geisha*, *geiko* or *maiko* on our stroll here, there were a number of visitors dressed in *yukata*, dress kimono and other traditional garb, out enjoying the spring weather, making the atmosphere along the slope a little more like it was a few hundred years ago. Oh, but do take care on the steps. Local lore maintains that a slip here will bring two or three years' bad luck, and that simply wouldn't do!

Furebotoke at Ryozen (霊山観音)

『願いの玉』| Wishing Ball

円形の願いの玉に、右手を触れながら願いの数だけ廻ることで願いが叶うといわれています。

It is said that your wish is granted if you walk as many times as the number of your wishes around the ball while touching it with your right hand.

After quite a long walk through this part of town (easily a kilometer), and checking out the area's fine merchants, we finally came upon *Kiyomizu-dera* – the pure water temple. For over 1,000 years, visitors and pilgrims alike have climbed the cobbled streets of Higashiyama to *Kiyomizu-dera*, which stands prominently on a steep hillside with fine views of the city, to pray to the temple's bodhisattva Kannon, the 11-faced goddess of mercy, and to drink from its sacred well-spring. Built around 790, the original temple, which today belongs to the Kita-Hosso sect, predates the founding of Kyoto by at least six years. Although Kiyomizu-dera honors the popular Kannon, to whom women pray for an easy childbirth, it has become over time a sort of everyman's temple. You'll see evidence of this throughout the grounds, from the stacked rows of little Jizo Bosatsu statues (representing the god of travel and children) to the many *koma-inu* (狛犬; mythical guard dragon/lion-dogs) marking the pathways. The current structure dates from 1633, thanks in large part to a restoration ordered by Tokugawa Iemitsu following the reunification; the militant monks of the Hiei-zan destroyed the original temple during one of their periodic bloody purges.

You enter the grounds through the Nio-mon or "Gate of the Deva Kings". These Deva Kings, along with the *koma-inu*, protect the temple from any evil that may attempt to slip by. Continuing past the Nio-mon and up a second flight of steps, and you'll come to the Sai-mon (the west gate). Two more Deva Kings stand guard at this eight-pillared gate (depicted with mouths open or closed accordingly). To the gate's left is the Shoro (or bell tower), built in 1596, and behind the Sai-mon rises Sanju-no-to (the three-storied pagoda). This brilliant vermillion three-tiered pagoda, rebuilt in 1633, is the tallest such in Japan; Chinese influences in the forms of colorful flowers, esoteric Buddhist symbols and ornate metalwork are contained upon it.

After the pagoda you'll find the Kyodo, or sutra hall, where the sacred scriptures are kept safe. If you take a moment to peek in you'll find the hall contains images of the Buddhist deities of virtue (Monju) and wisdom (Fugen), along with a ceiling painting of a coiled dragon. To the right of the Kyodo is Zuigu-do (or Jishin-in, the Temple of Mercy), the favorite place of worship for Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Rebuilt in 1728, the temple still contains some of his belongings. The Founder's hall comes next after that, in honor of the temple's legendary founder (a man known as Tamuramaro), and another gate: Todoroki-mon. This gate, which also contains another pair of Deva Kings to protect the inner temple, is known as "the gate resounding to the call of the Buddha's teachings" – though I am not sure why. In front of the gate is a hand-and-mouth washing station (with which you're to use to cleanse yourself before entering) with a spigot in the shape of a dragon. From the spigot comes what the Japanese refer to as "Owl Water". Though at first I wasn't sure why it was called that; however, there is an owl design on the base of the trough which explains why.

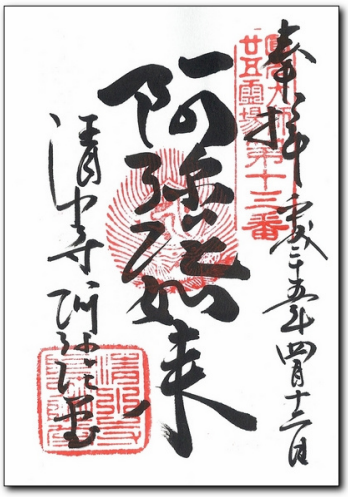
Further on, and to the left of this middle gate, is the Asakura-do. This hall, which includes an eleven-faced Kannon flanked by images of Kishamon-ten (the god of wealth) and Jizu (the guardian of children) has a unique feature: outside you'll find a set of foot prints said to belong to Buddha himself.

Though this was sufficient reminder of Buddha's way in the early years of the religion (images of Buddha or the bodhisattvas were not created early on), today your sins might all be forgiven if you notice the prints. And taking a closer look I also noticed several symbols imbedded within: a pair of fish, a conch shell, and a floral crest!

The main hall's veranda, where you'll find the Kannon (though one can only view this particular image every 33 years – one year for every vow Kannon took to save mankind), is supported by 139 wooden pillars (each 49 feet high), jutting out over the hillside. An amazing feature of this veranda is that there is not a single nail used in the entire structure. The stage affords visitors a nice view of the numerous cherry and maple trees of the gardens, to the south you can see the Koyasu-no-to (the easy child-birth pagoda), which contains an image of Koyasu Kannon, and looking down, you'll find the sacred springs (the *Otowa-no-taki*; or "Sound of Feathers" waterfall). It's quite a viewpoint and very popular with the Japanese. Getting a spot to take in the magnificent view is not easy, and we had to fight our way in, but it was well worth it.

Below the veranda is the before-mentioned Sound of Feathers waterfall, believed to be the original source of *kiyomizu*, or pure water. Drinking the water from the three streams is said to confer wisdom, health and longevity; however, some Japanese believe you mustn't drink from all three (re: don't cross the streams), chose only two. If you are greedy and drink from all three, you invite misfortune upon yourself and possibly your family. With so many people we couldn't drink from any of the fountains this visit, though I cannot say the same for many of the others who queued up and went along. They were slurping up whatever they could find, whenever they could find it!

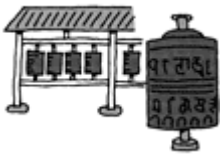
On the north side of the main hall is a small shrine called Jishu-jinja, dedicated to Okuni Nushi-no-mikoto, a land-ruling deity also considered to be a powerful matchmaker. Many young people visit the shrine to seek help in finding their life partners, though it is immensely popular with women. The goal is to walk a straight line between two stones, placed approximately 18 meters (59 feet) apart, with your eyes closed. If you're able to accomplish the goal without assistance then love is due to materialize for you. Should you need someone to guide you from one stone to the other, then that is interpreted to mean an intermediary will be needed in your love life. So choose wisely! (I already have love in my life so I didn't feel compelled to walk the line, as it were.)



There are more than 30 structures situated on approximately 130,000 square meters of land that make up Kiyomizu-dera, so please take your time to poke around. There are plenty of sub-structures and minor shrines and temples to make spending some time here a worth-while proposition – unless crowds aren't your thing…

Kodai-ji (高台寺), the Maki-e Temple

With the sun beginning to set (the only way we could tell was that it was getting darker and darker), and the temples preparing to close their doors, we had time for just one more stop before returning to Kyoto's city streets – Kodai-ji and its four *Furebotoke* statues.

***Furebotoke* at Kodai-ji (高台寺)**	
『秀吉・ねねの像』| "Hideyoshi & Nene" 戦国時代を二人で仲良く駆け抜けた秀吉公とねね様の夫婦円満にあやかりたい人。皆に慕われ大らかな余生を送られた「ねね様」にあやかりたい人  Wishing for a happy marriage just like Hideyoshi and Nene, who slipped through the Warring States Period. Wishing for peaceful remaining years surrounded by many people like Nene.	『天満宮』| "Temmangu" ○ねね様が信仰された天満天神（菅原道真）をお祀りしており、このお堂の周辺を三回廻ると、願い事が叶い、悪いことが去るといわれています。  Temma-Tenjin (Sugawara no Michizane) is the deity Nene revered and is enshrined here. It is believed that if you walk around the hall three times, your wish will be granted and any misfortunes will go away.
『マニ車』| "Mani Wheels" ○マニ車は世界中で知られている仏教徒共通の仏具です。高台寺のマニ車の中には「般若心経」が入れてあり、1回まわせばご利益を受けられます。 健康、長生き、その他願い事のある人、マニ車を右手でまわしながら時計回りの方向に歩いてください。  A Mani wheel is Buddhist object in common use by Buddhists known throughout the world. Mani wheels in Kodai-ji temple contain the Heart Sutra. Earn merit by turning it once. If you have wishes regarding health, longevity, etc, walk around the hall clockwise, and keep touching and turning the wheels with your right hand.	『天満宮　牛』| "Temmangu Ox" 牛は天神さまのお使いです。身体の調子の悪い部分を持っていってくれるといいます。悪い部分の同じ場所を右手もしくは両手で触れてください。  Oxen are regarded as messengers of Tenjin-sama, a Shinto deity. It is said this ox will bear your suffering for you. If you have an ailment on your body, you can touch the corresponding area of the ox with your right hand or both hands.

Touching the Ox's feet were definitely first on my agenda, but we also ran around the *temmangu* three times, turned the *mani* wheels, and gave Nene and Hideyoshi a rub for a good, long, and happy marriage before touring the rest of the temple…

Formally known as Kodaijusho-zenji, establishment occurred in 1605 by Kita-no-Mandokoro in memory of her late husband, Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Tokugawa Ieyasu, extensively financed the temple's construction and the result is a temple renowned for its beautiful design and exquisite craftsmanship. But why name it Kodai-ji? Kita-no-Mandokoro (known more familiarly as "Nene") was awarded the highest rank of nobility by Emperor Goyozei in 1588, and in 1603, was accorded the honorary name Kodai-in; it is from the latter that Kodai-ji's name derives. Following the custom among noble ladies of her time, she became a Buddhist nun after the death of her husband and adopted the religious name Kogetsu-ni. She died at the age of 76 on September 6, 1624 and is enshrined here with her husband.

The shrine is one of a number of objects designated as Important Cultural Assets the temple possesses. Among these others are the Main Gate and the Spirit Hall, noted for its use of *maki-e* (a Japanese style of lacquer that is sprinkled with gold or silver powder), a number of paintings, including one of Hideyoshi, as well as textiles, and a bronze bell with an inscription dating it to 1606. Kodai-ji was ravaged by a series of fires after 1789, and all that survive of its original buildings are the Kaisan-do (Founder's Hall), Otama-ya (Sanctuary), Kasa-tei (Teahouse), Shigure-tei (Teahouse), Omotetmon (Gate to Sanctuary) and Kangetsu-dai (Moon Viewing Pavilion). Fortunately these remain in an excellent state of preservation and most of them you can see with your very own eyes.

Visitors enter Kodai-ji through its main hall (or Hojo), which was originally adorned in lacquer and gold, but was rebuilt in a more modest style after it burned down in 1912. The building is surrounded on two sides by the temple's famous gardens, redesigned by the renowned landscape architect Kobori Ensyu (1579-1647) from an older garden located on this site. Famous for its excellent stone layout, the rock garden is one of the finest gardens of its period and consists of raked gravel meant to represent the ocean. In the other, an impressive Tsukiyama-style garden awaits featuring a pond, man-made hills, decorative rocks and beautiful pine and maple trees.

In the north section of the pond you'll find an island in the form of a turtle and a group of stones arranged to represent a crane in the south. Directly in the middle is the Kaisan-do, the memorial hall in which Nene would pray for Hideyoshi. The Kaisen-do is dedicated to the memory of Kodai-ji's founding priest. His statue is located on the platform in the innermost section of the building. The two statues on either side of the steps are of Kinoshita Iesada and Unsho-in, Kita-no-Mandokoro's elder brother and his wife, respectively. The large outer section of the Kaisan-do is known as the Rai-do, or worship hall. The ceiling in the front part of the building is unique; it originally belonged to Toyotomi Hideyoshi's private sailing ship! The colored ceiling to the center of the building was constructed of materials from Kita-no-Mandokoro's court carriage.

The Moon Viewing Pavilion, or Kangetsu-dai, is the small four-pillared structure sitting in front of the Kaisan-do. It was designed to allow viewing of the moon's reflection on the surface of the pond underneath it. A special feature of its architecture is its Chinese-style cypress bark roof with three gables. On the far side of the garden is where you'll find the Otama-ya, the Sanctuary. This is the special memorial hall enshrining Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Kita-no-Mandokoro. Their wooden images can be seen in the small shrine at the rear of the hall – Hideyoshi to the right and Kita-no-Mandokoro to the left. The small shrine, and the dais upon which it stands, is decorated with a special lacquer work technique incorporating designs in gold. This is known as Kodai-ji lacquer and it represents the finest in Momoyama Period (1568-1600) lacquer art.

A wonderful corridor connects the Kaison-do to the sanctuary (the Otama-ya) is known as the Reclining Dragon Corridor (or “Garyoro”) for its resemblance to the back of a reclining dragon. And further up the hill are two teahouses designed by Sen-no-Rikyu, the famous 16th century tea master. They were moved to their present location from Fushimi Castle in southern Kyoto. The Kasa-tei formally known as the Anka-kutsu, derives its name from its unique ceiling construction, in which bamboo and logs are interwoven in a radiating pattern remarkably similar to a Japanese traditional umbrella. It is connected to the Shigure-tei by an outside corridor. Once you walk through the bamboo grove, you’ve made your exit and have seen Kodai-ji.

* * *

Despite some of today’s disappointments – the aforementioned weather and attraction snafus – it actually turned out to be quite a nice, stress-free day. Having accomplished everything on our itinerary for the day (that we could accomplish) we wandered back through the various stalls and stores of Nene’s Road before leaving the Higashiyama area via Gion (poking into a few of its shows along the way as well), then limped back here (quite literally) to K’s House.

Tomorrow we’ve got a short day in Kyoto (Fushimi-inari-taisha, Daigo-ji, Nanzen-ji and Konchi-in) before heading off to Hamamatsu to meet one of Nicole’s old college friends. I’ve never been to Hamamatsu so this should be exciting!

For now… I think a shower is in order…

Ja ne!

「Earthquaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake!」

Saturday | April 13, 2013

Zzzzzzzzzz…

Imagine lying in your bed, all snuggly and warm, trying without success to will the rising sun away when you hear this strange deep rumble all around you – like a rather large utility truck parked outside your window, sitting there idling. Then, just when you envision the strange sensation is about to cease, it intensifies, gets louder, bolder, and worst of all, you begin to feel it: your stomach sways, the windows rattle, the walls creak from the strain, the ceiling tiles flap in their sockets, the bed clatters away – the entire building is shaking! This, my fellow travelers, is the onset of an earthquake, one of the deadliest natural disasters known to man, and our morning wake-up call today.

E-A-R-T-H-Q-U-A-K-E-!-!-!

To say we shot up when comprehension dawned would be an understatement, but I'd be lying to you if we ran around panicked; we didn't. We handled it all quite well in fact. Within a minute the entire affair was over and we hadn't even left the bed. And you want to know something else? As soon as the pulsing stopped we crawled right back under the covers and went back to sleep! Nobody else seemed to care – the noise level at K's House didn't change so either others slept through the affair or they didn't think to cause alarm. Even the buildings across the way seemed fine and the streets were calm and collected. Either way, earthquakes of any magnitude are a common occurrence here. In fact, each room (especially at Homeikan in Tokyo) has "what to do in case of an earthquake" documentation to review… just so you know. Color me surprised because I've been quite flippant about it before, having never experienced so much as a tremor here, and now that I have?

KYOTO — A strong earthquake shook Japan on Saturday near the southwestern city of Kobe, leaving 22 people injured, seven of them seriously – mostly elderly tripping while trying to flee, police said. No one was killed. The magnitude 6.3 quake left some homes with rooftop tiles broken and cracked walls, while goods fell off store shelves, according to the Meteorological Agency and Japanese TV news footage.

The quake was centered on Awaji Island, just south of Kobe, at a depth of 15 kilometers (9 miles). The quake was in the area where a magnitude 7.2 quake killed more than 6,400 people in 1995. TV news footage showed that some areas on the island had liquefied a common effect of strong earthquakes.

We just went with it!

It was only later we learned some of the details of the quake: that it was a magnitude 6.3, that it was off-shore near Kobe (so close, but not too close) and that some of the rail-lines out west of Kyoto (the JR Kyoto and Kobe lines) had services discontinued for the day. For us it meant that while we were quite certain the Tateyama Alpine Route return to Tokyo was out, so was the alternate to Okayama and Kobe. As for Hamamatsu? It was a lot of fun! But I'll get to that in a moment…

Fushimi-inari-taisha (伏見稲荷大社)

When we finally did get ourselves out of bed we began our day down at Fushimi-Inari-Taisha. Rather than walk down to the Kyoto station and take a JR Train down (as originally planned), we used the Keihan Rail line from Shichijo station instead. (Who wanted to walk all the way down there to save a couple bucks? Not me!) The Keihan Electric Railway – known as "Keihan" (京阪), "Keihan Dentetsu" (京阪電鉄) or "Keihan Densha" (京阪電車) – is one of the hundreds of private, secondary railway operators in Japan. Keihan started operations between Osaka and Kyoto in 1910 with the first electric railway to connect the two. Today, the company has seven lines that service Kyoto, Osaka and Otsu – making it rather popular with those commuting to Kyoto or to and from Osaka into these communities. I find it quite convenient to ride on the east-side of Kyoto, which is why we've used it quite a bit so far, and I'd like to tell you our ride this morning went without incident, but I'd be lying! Would you know we accidentally hopped onto an express train, which not only passed by our planned stop (Fushimi-Inari) but everything else in between – Tofukuji, Toba-kaido, Fukakusa, Fujinomori, and Sumizome – finally pulling to a halt at Tambabashi some 3.5 kilometers away.

Whoops!

Alas we eventually made the return trip and began our investigations without delay.

Exit Fushimi-inari Station and come upon *Fushimi-inari-taisha*, the head shrine of no less than thirty-to-forty thousand similar shines in all of Japan, each dedicated to Inari (稲荷), the Shinto god of fertility, rice, and wealth.

Like most shrines, Fushimi-inari has a variety of sub-buildings and gardens that are ages old. You'll find the Sakura-mon Gate (桜門 ; a large Shinto-gate made of wood and painted vermilion – donated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi) and Go-Hoden Shrine on the premises, but what makes this particular location special and exciting (and the reason for our visit) is a pathway that wanders 4km up Inari-san, the nearby mountain. Harking back to the 8th century and founded by the Hata family, this shrine and its stone walkway draw you in like no other we've visited thus far (with, perhaps, the exception of Tosho-gu in Nikko and Itsukushima in Miyajima). Thousands upon thousands of Torii (鳥居), or Shinto gates, line the walk creating a claustrophobic tunnel of vermilion that hugs the mountainside landscape. Eerie? Perhaps. Awesome? Indeed so. It's like you've stepped into another realm!

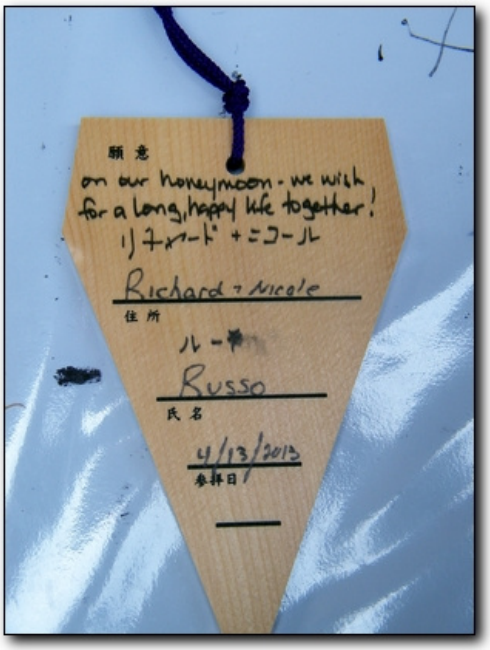
Statues of menacing looking Kitsune (狐), or foxes, pepper about and break apart the Torii gates as you walk along. The Kitsune, which you'll recognize as darkened statues with their tails held high and by the white and red scarf tied about their necks, are the messengers of Inari and they reportedly have magical powers enabling them to take possession of a human spirit. Never fear though, for he is revered as the guardian of harvest (of rice and cereals) and is busy guarding the sacred rice granary (and if you look closely, you'll find he carries a key to a rice granary within his jowls). Consequently, a popular sushi dish "o-inari-san" is named for these guardian foxes, for it is written that foxes love rice balls rolled in fried tofu, which is what you get when ordering "o-inari-san". We didn't indulge.


大阪府東大阪市
(有)ライフインテック
都中野区
(有)東洋商事 鈴
加藤賢一

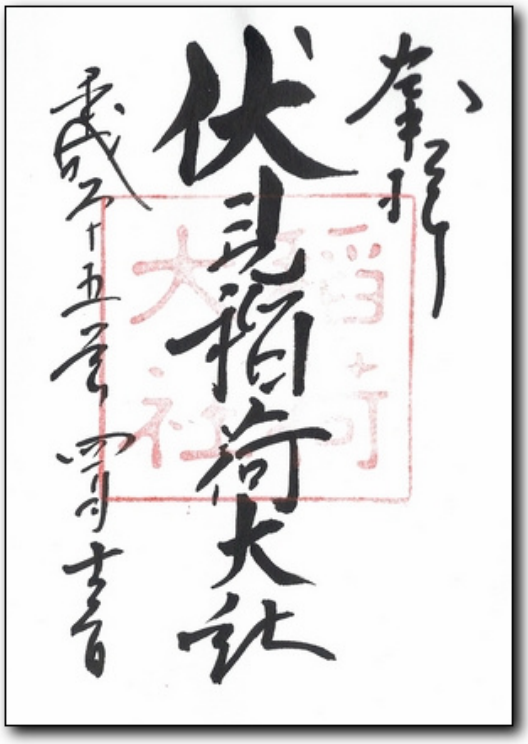

株式会社 トリワークス
株式会社 杉本組
杉本仁堅


株式会社 まつ
岐阜市 株デビア 代表 白井弘人
東京都三鷹市井の頭 気学・木原茂満
大阪市生野区鶴橋 一福 矢守京子
名古屋市中川区 (有)萬扇 川瀬喜念
京都大田区南蒲田二ノ九ノ二 (株)大宝堂 武藤安規典

We did, however, indulge in *ema*. *Ema* (絵馬) are small wooden plaques on which Shinto worshippers write their prayers or wishes. They are then left hanging up at the shrine, where the *kami* (spirits or gods) receive them. They bear various pictures, often of animals or other Shinto imagery, and many have the word *gan'i* (願意), meaning "wish", written along the side. In ancient times people would donate horses to the shrines for good favor, over time this was transferred to a wooden plaque with a picture of a horse, and later still to the various wooden plaques sold today for the same purpose. *Ema* are sold for various wishes. Common reasons for buying a plaque are for success in work or on exams, marital bliss, to have children, and health. Some shrines specialize in certain types of these plaques, and the larger shrines may offer more than one. The Kitsune-shaped *ema* here at Fushimi-inari tickled us so that we couldn't help ourselves but wish for a happy and long-lasting marriage with one. We just hope the *kami* hear our prayers!



Besides the foxes you'll find a number *ishi-doro* (石燈篭; stone lamps), several small waterfalls and two large ponds hidden on the pathway depending on which trail you take. And while that might be a strange thing to say, while the path starts out as one, it branches off again... and again... and again... criss-crossing the mountainside in a confusing maze of vermilion. If you take up the 2.5-mile walk you'll end up on the other side of the mountain and at the gates of Tofuku-ji, a Buddhist temple. I highly recommend a trip to Tofuku-ji (especially in Autumn) as it is as impressive as it is expansive – we didn't make the visit this time, however. It's a strenuous climb should you decide to head there from here, however, so come with your walking shoes and a good sense of direction. Any signs are in Japanese and it's quite easy to forget from which way up you came. But, if you do find yourself wandering the gates, sit a spell and take in the serenity or stop and grab a bite or drink at the dozens of stops along the way!



Nanzen-ji (南禅寺)

With calligraphy collected and a few souvenirs in our sacks (Nicole bought some small charms and a *Daruma*, and I got a small wooden *kitsune* to bring home) we turned our attentions north and east-ward toward Nanzen-ji. Nanzen-ji lies tucked into the foothills of Higashiyama (東山; 山 ; -yama for Hill/Mountain) in the extreme eastern lie of the city where it has been the center of Japanese Zen history since 1386, when it was placed in control of Kyoto's Gozan (京都五山), or "Five Great Zen Temples". As such the temple and its grounds are replete with a long, rich history filled with myth and legend. History records Nanzen-ji was first established in 1264 as a retirement villa for Emperor Kameyama (亀山天皇) and, like nearby Ginkaku-ji, was turned into a temple after the death of its owner. Legend suggests the villa became a Zen temple following the invitation of Fumon, a priest, to exorcise a spirit that had been plaguing the palace grounds.

Did You Know?

A Daruma doll (達磨) is a hollow, round doll modeled after Bodhidharma, the founder of the Zen sect of Buddhism. These dolls, though typically red and depicting a bearded man (Dharma), vary greatly in color, design and composition depending on region and artist. Though considered an *omocha*, meaning toy, Daruma has a design that is rich in symbolism and is regarded more as a talisman of good luck and perseverance to the Japanese, rather than a toy, making them a popular gift of encouragement. It is said you color one eye in – setting a goal – then only fill in the other when that goal (or dream) has been reached.

Instead of chanting incantations to drive out the malignant spirit, Fumon simply sat and meditated until the ghost left. The emperor was said to be so impressed with the strength of Zen meditation, he graced Fumon with his lower palace, allowing the priest to teach about the Zen way of life. The emperor himself later came to believe so deeply the palace became a temple following his death and thus Nanzen-ji was born.

Throughout the years of its initial birth, Nanzen-ji prospered into 62 sub-temples and a number of gardens on roughly 378,902 square meters of land. But it has seen its share of calamity too. By the 14th century Nanzen-ji had become the most powerful temple in Japan, which spurred its ravishing by fire several times – in 1393 by the warrior monks of Mount Heiei (belonging to the Tendai sect of Buddhism) and during the Onin War of 1467 (recall: the civil war of the Ashikaga Shogunate, 足利幕府), and has been rebuilt at least that many – lastly by the mother of Shogun Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (徳川 綱吉) in 1703. Today, Nanzen-ji remains one of Kyoto's most important temples, in part because it's the headquarters of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism, and consists of 12 sub-temples (of which only a few are open to the public) and several gardens (only three are open to the public) on roughly 112,087 square meters of land.

There are three main sights here at Nanzen-ji – the Hojo, Zanzen-in, and the Sanmon – each a unique treasure in their own right.

The Abbots' Quarters, or **Hojo**, are divided into a larger (Daihojo) and smaller (Shohojo) building. The Daihojo building (originally called Seiryoden-do) was actually a gift to the Emperor by Toyotomi Hideyoshi and was relocated to the site from the Imperial Palace in 1611. The paintings on the *fusuma* (襖), or sliding doors, here are priceless; created by masters of the Kano school. But it's the Shohojo that draws the most attention with its *fusuma* decorated in Chinese landscapes and tigers, and for the *karesansui* (枯山水), or dry-garden (rock garden) outside. It is essentially a rectangle of crushed rock, walled on the south and east, and viewed from two verandas of the abbot's residence. Along the eastern wall is a moss-covered area containing large stones, trees and shrubs, these elements arranged in a descending order of size from north to south. Because Nanzen-ji is located just below the steep western slope of Higashiyama, the view of the garden from the eastern veranda includes the borrowed scenery of that hillside.

The design of the garden is attributed to landscape architect Kobori Enshu (小堀遠州; 1579-1647) but as is the case with many of the gardens said to have been designed by Enshu, there is no documentation of his involvement. And while the garden's name is somewhat of a stretch in translation – "Toronoko-watashi", "Young Tigers Crossing the Water" – the lack of a moniker doesn't detract from its beauty. Sit a spell and gaze into the garden scene, depicting tigers (three small rocks) accompanied by cubs (three smaller rocks) in a stream (the pure white sand) and contemplate its meaning.

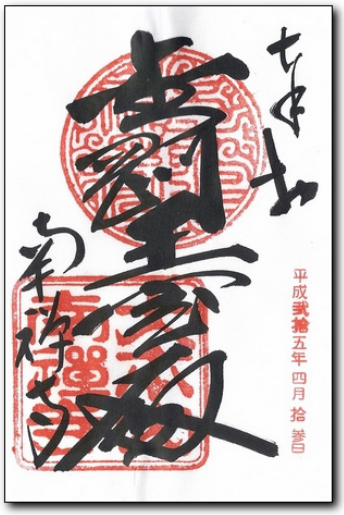
The original palace residence built by Emperor Kameyama is now called **Nanzen-in**. Inside you'll find a portion of the remains of the Emperor, a statue of him dressed in priestly robes, and wonderfully adorned place settings. While small, it's the gardens outside that'll garner more attention.

Reportedly created by Muso Soseki (夢窓疎石; 1275-1351), the garden is the epitome of peace and tranquility. The garden's pond contains several small islands, one even in the shape of shin, the Kanji character for "heart", and a few *koi*. A brick aqueduct, built in 1890 as part of the Lake Biwa Canal Project, also exists on the grounds still ferrying water to a small Shinto shrine well concealed within the mountainside and beyond. Though you might be inclined to dismiss this uniquely "western" bit of construction, it's actually one of the bigger draws at Nanzen-ji, as it was one of the first and most important early construction works of the Meiji period, bringing water into the city from lake Biwa.

And finally the **Sanmon**; standing twenty-two meters tall, this impressive gate proudly guards the entrance to Nanzen-ji temple. Referred to plainly as Mountain Gate (because Buddhist temples are oft referred to as a "mountain", chiefly due to Zen beliefs and because that's where most temples were built – in the mountains) or with more flourish as *Tenka Ryumon*, the Great Dragon Gate (no doubt due to its sheer size; this Sanmon is counted as one of the three greats in Kyoto remember, along with the Sanmon at Chion-in and Goedomon gate at Higashi Hongan-ji), this two story behemoth will quickly capture your attention. Said to symbolize the three roads to Buddhist liberation, its history is as violent as the rest of Nanzen-ji: the gate was built in 1296, destroyed in 1447 and rebuilt later in 1626, as a memorial to the solders that died at the Siege of Osaka Castle. But it is steeped in just as much legend as it is abhorrent violence.

Walking through the gate one immediately stumbles upon hundreds of *senja fuda* (千社札), stickers placed upon the Sanmon's wooden walls. These are prayers, rather than public defacement I've learned, specially placed along these pillars by pilgrims who wished to have their prayers noticed by the gods. To aid those who are "vertically challenged", or for those who are seeking extra visibility to pray for sick relatives or for success in special endeavors, there is an expandable stick that can be used to place your sticker even higher. It is believed that the higher up on a gateway the sticker is placed, the more likely it is to come to the attention of the gods. It's humbling to walk through the gate and see hundreds of these *senja fuda* clinging to the gate, hoping for an answer with namesakes that have long since ended their pilgrimage.

Climbing atop this magnificent wooden structure not only affords breathtaking views of the grounds and of Kyoto (you'll still need to take off your shoes and ascend the wooden staircase in your socks, and you'll also want to "mind your head" whilst doing so"), you'll find even more fable and fairy tale here. The Sanmon hides a room atop its pillars, holding images of Buddha, Tokugawa Ieyasu, and Todo Takatora, fifteen other holy men and two bodhisattvas. Above them is a masterfully crafted painting of young maidens surrounded by phoenixes, created by Kano Tanyu and Tosa Tokuetsu of the Kano school of art. Besides its artistic value, the attic is also famous for its use in the story of Ishikawa Goemon (石川 五衛門 or 石川 五右衛門), a 1594 Robin Hood-style outlaw that tried but failed to assassinate Toyotomi Hideyoshi – he supposedly hid atop the Sanmon to avoid capture. Its depiction has become famous in many Kabuki dramas on the subject.



There's plenty of myth surrounding Ishikawa Goemon's origins and his motive for wishing to murder Hideyoshi – such as being born to a samurai family and having his parents killed by men of the Ashikaga shogunate, to just the leader of a band of thieves robbing rich feudal lords, merchants and temples, and sharing the loot with the oppressed peasants – there is little fact. There are also several conflicting accounts of Goemon's public execution in front of this gate, including but not limited to: the events, the date, and even the season surrounding the execution. Regardless some elements do remain common among the various tellings: Goemon was captured, after which he was boiled alive in a cauldron of oil. And it's this action that large iron kettle-shaped bathtubs are referred to today in Japan as *goemonburo*.

Not necessarily nice things to be contemplating whilst standing up there, I agree, but interesting never the less. I mean, who knows, you might be standing in the exact spot Goemon did as he proclaimed the grand view ("*What a marvelous view, what a grand sight!*"), or when he thumbed his nose up at the Shogunate, daring them to apprehend him. Of course, Nanzen-ji has many more sub-temples and features to discover than I have discussed here: including huge stone lamps (I love these!), wonderfully adorned stone walkways, secondary gardens, smaller gates, lake bridges, and more! It's unfortunate I couldn't spend an entire day wandering around the grounds I enjoy them so much, but we had to press on. There's just too much of Kyoto to see!

Konchi-in (金地院)

Just a few steps west of *Nanzen-ji* lay *Konchi-in*, one of its sub-temples. It was founded in Kitayama by Ashikaga Yoshimochi in the early fifteenth century and moved to its present location in 1605. Its Edo Period garden is notable not only for its formal beauty, but also for the fact that its creation is unusually well documented. The designer was Kobori Enshu, to whom many Kyoto gardens are attributed, often on very little evidence. In this case, however, extant documents indicate that Kobori did indeed design the garden for Abbot Suden in anticipation of a visit by Iemitsu, the third of the Tokugawa shoguns. It was begun in 1611 and completed by 1632. Ironically, the shogun's visit never took place, since Suden died in Edo in 1633, never having seen the garden he commissioned.

Did You Know?

The Turtle Island is marked by a gnarled juniper rising above the rocks to the left. To its right is a square stone – a *reihaiseki* – from which a visitor would pay homage to the Isles of the Immortals. It could also be seen as a boat landing related to the pebble "sea." The Crane island, on the right, features a long horizontal stone that was originally intended to be part of a bridge but now represents the outstretched neck and head of the crane in flight.

The garden is essentially a shallow screen of rocks and plantings located to the east of the main hall, and separated from that building by an expanse of white gravel. Its notable features include two rock formations suggesting the turtle and the crane, traditional symbols of longevity in Chinese and Japanese thought (the garden is sometimes referred to as *Tsurukame-no-Niwa*, "Garden of Tortoise and Crane").

These elements flank a central area in which a cluster of stones evoke the mountain islands of Horai, the home of Daoist immortals (Horai is said to rest on the back of turtles, and its inhabitants to travel on the backs of cranes). The symbolic nature of these elements is specifically related to a building erected just to the east of the garden and once visible from the veranda of the main hall, a memorial shrine dedicated to Tokugawa Ieyasu, grandfather of the man whose visit this garden was designed to celebrate. Suden had served Ieyasu first as a warrior and then as priestly adviser, and it is clear that the garden and the shrine were intended to declare the wider association of the temple and the Tokugawa *shogunate*.

It may be worth noting that this peculiarly two-dimensional garden – so different from the spatially complex designs of earlier gardens--is compositionally akin to the great decorative screens and *fusuma* of the late Muromachi, Momoyama, and Edo Periods. It would appear that the priests of *Nanzen-ji* favored such an arrangement, since it is not unlike the garden of the main temple. After taking a few minutes to admire the garden, we made our way to Kyoto-eki for the Shinkansen to Hamamatsu, concluding our day in Kyoto.

Hamamatsu (浜松市), The Windy City

Located halfway between Tokyo and Kyoto, the area now comprising Hamamatsu has been settled since prehistoric times, with numerous remains from the Jomon period (14,000 BC to 300 BC) and Kofun period (250 to 538 AD) having been discovered within the present city limits. The town became the capital of Totomi Province in the Nara period (710 to 794 AD). During the Sengoku period (1467-1573), Hamamatsu Castle was the home of future shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu. During the Edo period (1603-1868), Hamamatsu flourished under a succession of daimyo rulers as a castle town, and as a post down on the Tokaido. After the Meiji Restoration (1868), Hamamatsu became its own short-lived prefecture (from 1871-1878), after which it was united with Shizuoka.

While Hamamatsu literally translates to mean "coast pine tree grove", it is known more affectionately as "the windy city", thanks in large part to what is known as the *enshu-no-karakkaze*, a very strong and dry wind which blows across Lake Hamana and into the city. During winter it's one of the strongest urban winds in the world! In spring the winds are celebrated with the city's grand festival. Held from May 3rd through 5th of each year, Hamamatsu Festival is known for *Takoage Gassen*, or the kite fights. Imagine over a hundred and fifty large kites catching the coastal breezes, all illuminated by the sun! The festival originated about 430 years ago when the *daimyo* celebrated the birth of his first son by flying a kite, and the tradition stuck.

Did You Know?

During the Meiji Era, the celebration of the birth of a first son by flying *hatsu dako*, or the first kite, became very popular. A tradition that has survived to this day.

Although well-known for its kite festival, Hamamatsu is also an important industrial hub. The city is home to many companies, including Honda Motor Company, Roland Corporation, Kawai Pianos, Yamaha, Sony, Suzuki Motor Company and Hamamatsu Photonics, as well as a large air base for Japan's defense force. Consequently, the city is well known for producing motorcycles, musical instruments and optoelectronic sensors among other things. For its population of just under a million people, Hamamatsu is a uniquely international city.

It is home to almost 16,000 Brazilians, mostly from São Paulo, Paraná, and Belém, as well as 3000 immigrants from Peru, giving it the highest per-capita concentration of South Americans in Japan. The city also has sizable immigrant populations from Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, China, Nepal, and Bangladesh. If you've ever visited here and wondered why the signs are in Japanese and Portuguese, now you know!

The city is large enough to be comprised of seven wards – Hamakita-ku (浜北区), Higashi-ku (東区), Kita-ku (北区), Minami-ku (南区), Naka-ku (中区), Nishi-ku (西区) and Tenryū-ku (天竜区) – which mostly describe their cardinal location rather than actually mean something significant. For example: *higashi* (東) is east, *kita* (北) north, *minami* (南) is south, *naka* (中) middle, *nishi* (西) west and *hamakita* (浜北) is northern beach. The exception is Tenryu-ku – dragon ward – the largest, but lowest populated, ward of the city so named for the Tenryu river that hugs its borders. With a length of 213 km (132 mi), it is Japan's ninth longest.

The Tenryu River (天竜川, Tenryū-gawa; 川 for "river") is mentioned in Nara period records as the "Violent Tenryu" (暴れ天竜) for its fast, turbulent flow and its propensity to flood. The upper portion of the river (in Shinano Province) was referred to as the Tenryū-gawa, whereas the lower portion (in Totomi Province) was often referred to as the Aratama-gawa (麁玉川). In various entries in the national historical chronicle Shoku Nihongi, flooding of the river is mentioned in the years 710 AD and 765 AD. Records through the Heian period and Kamakura period are sparse, but from the Muromachi period, increasing efforts at flood control were made by various warlords and landholders along the river by construction of dikes, levees, and channels. With the occupation of Hamamatsu Castle by Tokugawa Ieyasu (more on this in a moment), considerable efforts were made to increase the revenues of Totomi Province through creation of new rice fields with irrigation from the Tenryū River. However, flooding remained a problem, including a great flood in 1674 which washed away many of the earthen works of previous centuries.

During the Edo period, the Tokaido developed as the major highway linking Edo with Kyoto, and daimyo from the western domains were forced to travel on a regular basis to Edo to attend to the shogun in a system known as *sankin-kotai*. However, the Tokugawa *shogunate* prohibited the building of bridges over major rivers as a security measure. As depicted in contemporary *ukiyo-e* prints by artists such as Hokusai, travelers crossed the river on ferryboats, as the current was too fast and too deep for fording. In cases of bad weather or high waters, they were forced to stay several days (or even several weeks) beside the river at post stations such as Mitsuke-juku.

The river was bridged shortly after the Meiji Restoration by road and railroad bridges. Today the Tokaido Shinkansen trains cross the river in just a few seconds.

Actually, most of them do to be honest. There are only a handful of Hikari and Kodama services that stop here. From Tokyo, there are two Kodama trains that depart every hour, making the run to Hamamatsu in about two hours. Faster Hikari trains depart once per hour, running to Hamamatsu in about 90 minutes. Likewise there are hourly departures from Kyoto on either Hikari or Kodama that will reach Hamamatsu at exactly the same time (two hours and 90 minutes respectively) – but do take care to watch which Hikari you get on – they don't all stop here! Hamamatsu also lies on the JR Tokaido trunk line so you can also reach the city via non-*shinkansen* trains if you're not in a hurry. Regular service takes about four to five hours from either Tokyo or Kyoto, so I'd recommend the Hikari trains.

Though Hamamatsu is big enough to have its own Shinkansen stop, it isn't big enough to have its own subway system. Besides the main JR station (and branch lines), only two other railways provide service here: The Enshu Railway, an 18 kilometer line running from Shin-Hamamatsu station (Naka-ku) through to Nishi-Kajima (Tenryu-ku) is one. It is affectionately called the Akaden (あかでん, "The Red Train"), referring to the color of the train's rolling stock. The other is the Tenryu Hamanako line, a 68 kilometer line that runs along the north coast of Lake Hamana in Hamamatsu, then continuing further afield. It is affectionately called the Tenhama (天浜線), a concatenation of the company's and line's name, for short. Not that we'd become acquainted with either trains.

Hamamatsu Castle (浜松城)

The city center is easily explored on foot though and after meeting Nicole's friend outside the gates of Shin-Hamamatsu station, that's exactly what we did – starting with a few Kimono shops (in one Nicole bought a nice yellow kimono, used, for one of her co-workers) up Kajimachi-dori (かじ町通り) – then moving on to Hamamatsu Castle and Park. The origins of Hamamatsu Castle – also known as Shussei Castle (出世城) – are unclear; however, it appears that a fortification of some kind was built on the site by Imagawa Sadatsuke, the fourth head of the Enshu Imagawa clan. After the fall of Imagawa Yoshimoto at what is known as the Battle of Okehazama (in 1560), the clan became greatly weakened and unable to withstand the combined forces of Tokugawa Ieyasu and Takeda Shingen. The former Imagawa lands were thus divided amongst the victors, with Tokugawa Ieyasu obtaining Hamamatsu. He relocated his headquarters from Okazaki Castle (in present day Aichi Prefecture; near Nagoya) to the castle in 1570, and spent a number of years headquartered here.

During his seventeen-year tenure, Ieyasu renovated and greatly expanded the existing castle – then called Hikuma-jo (引馬城 or 曳馬城) – and gave it its current name. By 1586 he had moved his flag to nearby Sunpu-jo. After the Battle of Sekigahara (which cleared the path for Tokugawa Ieyasu to rule a unified Japan as Shogun), Hamamatsu was briefly ruled by Tokugawa Yorinobu (he was the 10th son of Tokugawa Ieyasu – but never Shogun), followed by a succession of *daimyo* through the remainder of the Edo period.

Contemporary records indicate that the castle was never built with a *tenshukaku*-style (central tower) keep. Throughout its history, a two-story *yagura* (turret) located within the second bailey (courtyard) served as a substitute keep. With the Meiji Restoration, the remaining military structures of the castle were destroyed, outer moats filled in, and outer baileys sold off. The central portion of the castle remained owned by the city as a park. In 1958, a faux donjon was constructed out of reinforced concrete on top of the original stone palisade. This palisade, known as the *norzura-zumi*, refers to the method used to fit the stones together. The reconstructed structure has three stories with an observatory affording a view of the Pacific Ocean at the topmost level. There is a small museum inside which houses armor and other relics of Tokugawa clan, as well as a miniature model of how the city might have looked at the start of the Edo period. Surrounding the museum is Hamamatsu Castle Park which is planted with numerous *sakura* trees (mostly out of bloom at this time). A large bronze statue of Tokugawa Ieyasu also stands in the park.

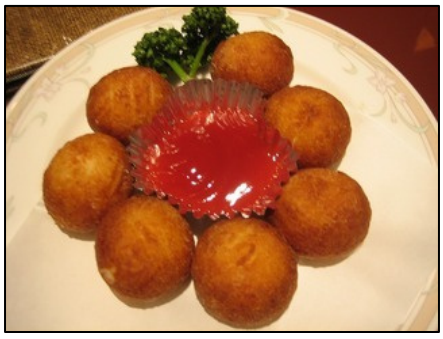
It was a nice stroll – and a nice park!

Once we thoroughly investigated the castle and its surrounding grounds, we made our way back into the city center where all the cafes, restaurants, and bars were clustered – a pedestrian friendly zone called Yuraku-gai (有楽街). Nicole and I we were getting hungry and wondered what might be available here!

Yuraku-gai (有楽街)

Food-wise, Hamamatsu is most famous for eel from Lake Hamana, and *unagi* (うなぎ) restaurants can be found all over the city. In the Maisaka / Bentenjima districts, another famous local delicacy is *suppon* (すっぽん), or snapping turtle, and you can get all sorts of turtle dishes if you're feeling adventurous. Hamamatsu has Japan's second-highest per-capita sales of *gyoza* (餃子) as well (first prize goes to Utsunomiya), and you can't go wrong with pot stickers! With all there was to choose from we were a little overwhelmed. Did we want yakisoba, udon, meats, sushi, or all of the above? Our only rule for the evening's meal was this: nothing weird; we wanted warm and, most of all, comforting food. All we had to do was choose. But we didn't know!

We ended up at –あじたろう(Ajitaru) – a place Nicole's friend hadn't tried before, but it looked so good. It was one of those take-your-shoes-off-and-sit-at-a-recessed-table kinds of places – an Izakaya (居酒屋) – and it was so good! We started with a bean sprout salad then moved onto our tapas: pork gyoza, cheese filled potato balls, some sushi (for the girls), a variety of meat yakitori (liver, chicken, and beef), a pickled vegetable plate, more sushi, and then finished it all up with chocolate ice cream. YUMMY!



We ended our night taking a stroll through a Japanese Toys R Us store inside ZaZa City (it's really not all that different from those found in the U.S.), grabbing hot chocolate (or tea, for the girls) from Starbucks to allow the girls more chatting time, then catching the 9:37pm Hikari back to Kyoto, as planned.

You know, there's one last thing we learned about Hamamatsu before we departed: besides being called the windy city, it's also known as "Japan's City of Music." The area has a virtual monopoly on the production of pianos in Japan! Three major musical instrument manufacturers have established operations here and one of the city's landmarks – the 45-story Act City Tower – was built to resemble a harmonica! Inside are meeting centers, a concert hall, and exhibition areas, as well as the Hamamatsu Museum of Musical Instruments (浜松市楽器博物館), the only one of its kind in the country… open to the public that is. More than 850 exhibits are on display in the museum, housing a collection of over 2,000 kinds of ethnic instruments from around the world. Each instrument has a display attached, with headphones so you can listen to the sound of the instrument. The museum also has a hands-on room, where you can play many types of instruments; drums, xylophones, sitars and native Japanese instruments. Act City also houses an observation deck, but we didn't have a chance to take a peek before leaving.

In either case, we're scheduled to roll in some time past 11:00pm and, since I'm beat, I'm going to close my eyes and rest them for a bit while there's still time (although the fact that our JR overlords won't turn off the lights inside the train makes this difficult).

Wake me when we get there?

Ja ne!

「Silver, Gold & Yakisoba」

Sunday | April 14, 2013

Konbanwa, and good evening from the sitting room here at K's Backpacker House…

It's quite the nice little area too, located on the second floor of the annex building. There's a full kitchen off to the far right, a bank of computers (at least a half-dozen) ahead of me, and a number of plush chairs on which to sit in the center of the room all enclosed by floor-to-ceiling glass windows. Outside the glass enclosure is a wrap-around patio and some tables and chairs – if you wanted to sit outside! Though it's nice to sit around and chew the fat with other fellow travelers, we're here for a singular purpose: to do laundry.

Off to the left is the door that houses the floor's laundry facilities. Here there are three washers and dryers for anyone's use and we really needed to use them! For the past couple of days we had hoped to use the washer and dryer in our own building's community area, but each time we'd gone to check whether or not it was free… it wasn't. This morning it got to the point where I had to ask if there were other facilities on property. There were and luckily they were free (as in not in use, they're definitely not free to use!) So we brought everything else we needed to have laundered with us and now sit idly by waiting for the first loads of wash to finish.

While we wait, why don't I fill you in on what we did today, okay?

You might remember that we were originally scheduled for a day-trip to Nara today, but with our late night in Hamamatsu (and early morning thanks to the earthquake) yesterday, we decided to forgo Nara today, since going would require an early start, and kicked around Kyoto instead. Although perhaps not necessarily the best decision, as ad-hoc plans rarely feel fulfilling, we stuck around never-the-less and made the best of it. To that end we've also decided to skip out on Yoshino having seen plenty of blossoms in both Matsumoto and in various places here in Kyoto, so I felt (and Nicole agreed) that there wasn't need to spend more time on a train just for cherry blossoms. And that's fine! Of course that meant much of today was off-the-cuff and improvised, but I still had a few thoughts of what to see and do before leaving K's this morning…

Sanjusangendo (三十三間堂)

Did You Know?

The number 33 is sacred in Buddhism, for it is believed that Buddha saves mankind by disguising himself in 33 different forms. (Chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra)

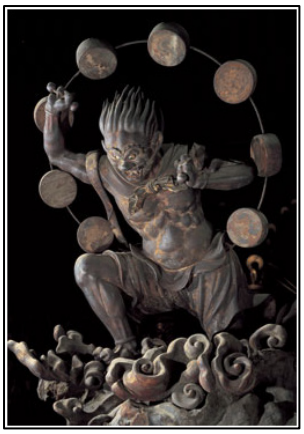
Just a half-mile's walk from K's House along Shichijo-dori, in the eastern part of the city, you'll find this small temple affiliated with the Tendai school of Buddhism. Officially known as Rengeo-in (蓮華王院), or Hall of the Lotus King, the temple is more commonly known as Sanjusangen-do, The Hall with Thirty-three Bays (in Japanese, *san-ju-san* is 33; *san* = 3 and *ju* = 10). Though this name describes the architectural structure of the temple's long main hall – at 120 meters (394 feet) in length, Sanjusangen-do is Japan's longest wooden building – it's what's inside that sets Sanjusangen-do apart from all other nearby temples: this simple and austere structure is filled with no less than 1,001 statues of Kannon (観音), the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, all beautifully carved from Japanese cypress and laden with gold leaf.

One of the more successful generals of the late Heian period, Taira Kiyomori (平 清盛; 1118‑1181; recall that he established the first samurai-dominated administrative government in the history of Japan), completed the temple under order of Emperor Go-Shirakawa in 1164 and dedicated it to Sahasrabhujaarya-avalokiteśvara or the "Thousand Armed Kannon". The statue of the main deity – standing at 131 inches high – was crafted in the 13th century by Tankei, a famous sculptor of the Kamakura Period. He crafted only 20 pairs of arms, though, but that's okay because it's said that each arm saves 25 worlds. This Kannon occupies the central focus of the dazzling display. These golden statues are what drew me to Sanjusangen-do originally, and they're quite an impressive sight.

Take off your shoes for a bit and venture inside the large pavilion. Within is an education in traditional building techniques. Sanjusangen-do, I've learned here, is an exquisite example of the "keshou-yaneura" construction method, prevalent since the Nara Period (710-794). This technique, which gives the appearance of an attic (*yaneura*), is attained through the use of the intricately placed beams and rafters you'll see above you, strolling down the structure's hallway. At the time of construction the interior of this hall was also beautifully decorated with a sea of colors and designs, though the wood's natural color is what we mostly see today (a reconstruction of these striking designs is on display, however). Though the paint has largely faded away to history, the glimmer of the multitude of gold laden statues has not.

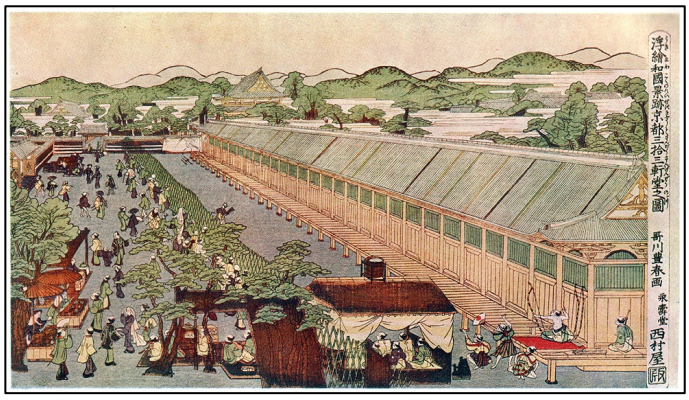
The principle image of Kannon is flanked on either side by 500 smaller statues in 10 rows and 50 columns; each stands about 66 inches high. Though each statue is quite similar in size and appearance with its neighbor, the facial traits of each are quite unique upon closer inspection. Only 156 of the statues are from the original temple – the original hall was destroyed by fire in 1249; the present structure dates from its rebuilding in 1266 (and it hasn't changed since) – the remaining 844 statues were re-constructed after by other equally as talented sculptors of the period (Koen, Ryuen, Shoen, Eien, Inkei, Insho, Inga and Gyokai). The central image spoken above pre-dates the fire.

Twenty-eight very fierce-looking statues of Hindu gods are lined up in front of the Buddhist statues as guardian deities. Their names written in both Kanji and Romanized Sanskrit (such as Daibenkudoku-ten, Konpira, Kinnara, Toho-den, Birubakusha, Karura, Basu-sennin, Ashura, Magora, Sanji-taisho, Missha-kongo, and Naraen-kengo) let you know who they are if you're unfamiliar (though I can't say I am



familiar, I understand these are gods or spirits of beauty, wisdom, prosperity, charity, strength and so on, who attend to Kannon and protect believers from unforeseen dangers). You'll even find representations of Fujin (left; the Japanese god of the wind) and Raijin (right; the god of thunder and storms), both from the vast mythology of the Japanese people.

Besides the statues, Sanjusangendo is also known for the Toshiya, an archery contest, which takes place behind the temple each January. The contest is said to have its beginnings in the late 16th century when, in 1606, a samurai named Asaoka Heibei is said to have shot 51 arrows in rapid succession down the length of the temple's hall.



Competitors came to challenge; the contest was born. Champions were honored with a certificate hung in the temple showing their name, age, the number of arrows fired, and the date of the competition. Although the contest fell out of favor at the beginning of the Meiji period, a ritual based on the Toshiya continues today. It is held on the second Sunday of January in conjunction with the temple's most important mass, the Yanagi-no-Okaji (柳枝のお加持), or Rite of the Willow (whereby worshipers are touched on the head with a branch from a sacred willow tree to cure and prevent maladies of the head), and Japan's Seijin-no-Hi (成人の日) celebrations, or Coming of Age Day (celebrating those who have reached 20 years old, the age of majority in Japan). The hall and its statues are probably the most exciting part of visiting Sanjusangen-do today; however, the temple's grand entrance gate, its *taiko-bei* (earthen walls) and beautiful gardens make a pilgrimage here very worthwhile.

And if you're up for a little whimsy I suggest trying your luck with one of the temple's fortunes – we did and it was a lot of fun! For ¥100 each you get the option of selecting any one of the wrapped and sealed fortunes out of the box before you. Each contain a small figure (a miniature carving called a netsuke, 根付) representing one of the "Seven Deities of Good Fortune" (七福神, Shichi Fukujin) and the blessing associated with that particular deity. Seven because the number is a sacred one throughout Asia (so is eight, but for different reasons). There's…

1. Ebisujin (恵比寿) – the Japanese god of safe voyages and fishery, as well as the guardian of the health of small children.
2. Daikokuten (大黒天) – the Indian god of fertility and harvests. He also brings riches in the form of commerce and trade.
3. Benzaiten (弁財天) – the Indian goddess of knowledge, beauty, eloquence, wit, and art, especially music.

4. Bishamonten (毘沙門天) – the Indian god of virtue and victory. He answers prayers for those wishing to become pregnant.
5. Fukurokujyu (福禄寿) – the Chinese god of three blessings: prosperity/happiness, wealth and longevity.
6. Jyuroujin (寿老人) – the Chinese god of longevity and health without misfortunes.
7. Hoteison (布袋) – the fat and happy Chinese god of abundance, happiness and good health.

I'm not entirely sure which of the guardian gods we received (although I have a sneaky suspicion it was Bishamonten), but, we had a lot of fun trying our chance and I highly suggest you try your luck as well if you happen to be here at Sanjusangendo, or anywhere such fortunes can be found! However, I do not recommend attempting to get the *goshuin* here – buy the pre-made stamps instead. The official that wrote mine barely put any effort into the affair – it looks so sloppy you can't even make out any of the kanji!

In either case, a trip up the Keihan to Gion-Sanjo and a cross to the Tozai Metro landed us out at Nijojo-mae.

Shinsen-en (神泉苑)

Rising out of the cityscape on the cross-roads of busy Horikawa-dori and Marutamachi-dori in the northwest corner of Kyoto's populous downtown is the unmistakable Nijo Castle, one of the most important landmarks and treasures in all of Kyoto. Its rich history traverses the centuries: it was once the home and rule of the Shogun (in the fifteenth century) and later to the Cabinet assembly of the re-instated Emperor (in the seventeenth century). The castle, like the rest of Kyoto, has seen its fair share of siege having been built, burnt and remade many times over and yet it stands defiantly, proud and true, showcasing the wealth, power and artistic prowess of the Japanese people for all to admire. To miss Nijo-jo is to miss something special. Don't. We didn't, but before we crossed the boundaries of Nijo's moats, we found something else to see: in the shadows of this grand site is Shinsen-en, the "Garden of Divine Springs," and although isn't much to look at today, the garden also has numerous ties to the past.

Representative of the earliest of Heian landscaping, only bits of this once extensive strolling Chinese-style garden remains. Its history traverses back to the founding of Kyoto as Japan's capital: when Emperor Kammu established Heian-kyo (Kyoto) as the imperial capital in 794, he constructed a garden to the south of the newly constructed Imperial Palace. Since pure water naturally sprang up there, it was called Shinsen'en. The garden has long been a site where the aristocracy have come to appreciate the flowers, relax on a boat on the pond, compose poetry, practice archery, have sumo matches, perform business, and hold banquets. Only rarely was the public allowed to enter. The garden was the site of a flower banquet organized in 812 by Emperor Saga (52nd Emperor; 785-842) which is said to mark the origin of the tradition of *hanami*. It is also the site of the best-known appearance of Zennyo Ryuō (善如龍王 or 善女龍王), a female god of rain in Japanese mythology (which appears in the form of a dragon), when the scholar priest Kukai or Kōbō-Daishi (774-835 CE), founder of Shingon "True Word" Buddhism, and his rival priest Shubin (守敏) held a rain-sutra recitation contest.

In 823 CE, Emperor Saga (r. 809-823) put Kukai in charge of the Tō-ji "East Temple" and Shubin in charge of the Sai-ji "West Temple". The following year a 3-month drought occurred and since both were well versed in the Mahamegha sutra – Japanese Daiunkyō (大雲經; "Great Cloud Sutra") or Daiun Seiukyō (大雲請雨經; "Great Cloud Praying for Rain Sutra"); considered the most important of the sutras for causing rain in times of drought – Emperor Junna (823-833) ordered Kukai and Shubin to perform rainmaking ceremonies. Zennyo is worshipped at the Zennyo Ryuō-sha (善女竜王社) Shinto shrine on an island in the Shinsen'en, reached by crossing the Hōsei-bashi (法成橋; "Dharma Completion Bridge").

According to Wikipedia, various early Japanese texts record legends about Kukai invoking the rain-dragon Zennyo. The early 12th-century Konjaku Monogatarishu "Collection of Tales about Times Now Past" gives the following account:

> *In a time of heavy drought the Emperor ordered Kukai to cause rain, and the saint for seven days practiced the Doctrine of the Rain-praying-sutra in the Sacred Spring Park. Then there appeared on the right side of the altar a snake, five shaku long, carrying a little gold-colored snake, about five suns in length, and after a while both disappeared into the pond. Only four of the twenty priests who were sitting in a row could see the apparition. One of these elected ones asked what it meant, whereupon another answered that the appearance of the Indian dragon-king Zennyo, who lived in India in the Anavatapta pond and was now living in the pond of the Sacred Spring Park, was a sign that the doctrine would be successful. And really, a dark cloud rose up in the Northwest, and soon the rain was pouring down. Thenceforth, whenever drought prevailed, the same doctrine was practiced in the park, and never in vain.*

Another, called the Kojidan, elaborates the rainmaking story, saying the Emperor first permitted Shubin's request to practice the rain sutra ceremonies, but this only caused showers in the Kyoto area. Kukai promised to make it rain throughout Japan, and after reciting sutras for seven days without rainfall, he went into mediation and realized that his rival had secretly used magical tantra to capture all the dragons and shut them up in a pitcher. He continued reciting rain prayers for two more days, and said,

"In this pond is a dragon, called Zennyo, who pities mankind. To him I have prayed, and now I see him rising out of the midst of the lake, gold-colored, about eight sun long, seated on the head of another dragon, eight shaku in length". This was reported to the Emperor, who soon sent a messenger with offerings for the Dragon-King. And when the seven days of the new vow had expired, a heavy thunderstorm broke forth and a torrent of rain came down all over the country, so that the water of the pond overflowed the altar. As a reward for having saved the people from starvation, Kukai was elevated to the rank of Shōsōzu, bishop.

"Record of the Great Peace" (circa 1372 CE) expands the rainmaking story and says Shubin became jealous of Kukai's successes after returning from China in 806 CE. He magically caused the 824 drought by using tantras to capture "all the dragon-gods of the inner and outer seas".

Then Kōbō-Daishi reported to the Emperor that there was only one dragon, a Bodhisattva of higher rank than Shubin, namely the Dragon-king Zennyo of the Auavatapta pond in Northern India, who was not in Shubin's power. Immediately a pond was dug before the Palace and filled with pure water, whereupon Kōbō invited the dragon-king to come and live there. And behold, a gold-colored dragon, eight sun long, appeared, seated on the head of a snake, more than nine shaku in length, and entered the pond. When Kōbō had reported this lucky news, the Emperor sent a messenger with all kinds of offerings in order to worship the Dragon-king. The result was marvelous, for soon it rained for three days all over the Empire.

Kukai constructed a straw dragon effigy and declared he would transform it into a dragon king who would return to Lake Anavatapta, thus causing the original rain-dragon to stay in the park. He instructed his Shingon priests to pray to Zennyo whenever Japan suffered from droughts. Today, the garden is associated with the major Shingon temple Toji. Every year, from May 1st to 4th, a Shinsen'en Matsuri (Festival) is held, which includes performances of Shinsen'en kyogen, based on Mibu kyogen.

In addition to the large pond and island in the middle of the garden, there are a number of other structures, including a Shinto shrine, a Buddhist temple, a restaurant/inn, and halls ones called Kenrinkaku (乾臨閣 - Tower of Imperial Decisions), Tsuridono (Fishing Palace), and Takidono (Waterfall Palace), among others. A pleasure boat like those used during the Heian period sits on the pond. So, why not drop by on the way to Nijo, like we did, and see this place yourself?

Nijo-jo (二条城)

Nijo-jo's grand and miraculous story begins in 1601 with an order from Tokugawa Ieyasu (徳川 家康; 1542-1616). He requested all Feudal lords throughout western Japan to undertake its construction as a means of paying tribute to the ruling class and his own family's administrative control. In two years, Ieyasu established Nijo Castle as the de-facto stronghold of the Tokugawa Shogunate. His predecessors later completed the castle, adding many of the structures the public can visit today: the Hinomaru (inner palace), the Ninomaru (outer palace), gardens, walls, moats and other sub-buildings that pepper this 275,000 square-meter estate.

In 1788, the city was besieged with unrest and Nijo-jo was not spared this wrath of flame. Fire destroyed the inner palace and gardens, leaving much of the castle empty until 1862. Six years after Tokugawa returned to the palace grounds it became the home of the Imperial Cabinet (in 1868) after Tokugawa Yoshinobu (徳川 慶喜; 1837-1913), the fifteenth Tokugawa Shogun, reluctantly restored sovereignty to the Emperor in what became known as the Meiji Restoration. Twenty years after the castle was returned to the Imperial family it was given to the city of Kyoto as a municipal treasure.

In the past you could enter the grounds through four magnificent gates: Minami-mon (south gate), Nishi-mon (west gate), Kita-Ote-mon (north gate) and Higashi-Ote-mon (east gate); today, however, entrance is gained only through the East gate. Stepping through this gate and past the high, non-descript brick walls is like stepping through and into a whole other world. Inside you'll find:

- Bansho, the Guardhouse;
- Seriyu-en (Seriyu Garden), a 16,500 square-meter garden boasting groves of cherry and Ume trees, a large pond, two tea-houses and more than 1000 carefully arranged stones;
- and Honmaru (Inner Palace), a transplanted structure from the Kyoto Imperial Palace (originally called Katsura Palace after the young prince.)

Through the Kara-mon (or Chinese style gate) one enters the outer palace grounds and into the domain of the Ninomaru, or outer palace, but I urge you not to pass through too quickly. This cypress-thatched, garbled roofed gate might just be another in a large line of gates dotting the countryside, but take another look at its four supporting pillars. You'll find finely crafted and colored carvings of dragons, exquisite metal trimmings, and other ornamental features that make this particular gate a wonder to behold. Passing through without taking a glimpse of the wonderfully pigmented dragon above and you would have missed one of the best artistic expressions found at the site.

You'll find others inside the inner palace, where stately needs are matched with aesthetic desires. An amazing statistic regarding Ninomaru Palace is that amongst its five buildings and 33 rooms, you'll find a grand total of 800 Tatami mats – that's a lot!

A Tatami (畳) mat, as we previously discussed, is made of woven straw but did you know its use is actually constrained by a strict set of rules? For example, a Tatami mat's dimensions are fixed at 90-centimeters by 180-centimeters by 4-centimeters (35 ½ inches by 71 inches by 2 inches). Therefore many rooms are constructed and thereby measured by the number of Tamami, not by their physical dimensions. In this way, many ceremonial rooms (like tea rooms) are all constructed with the same dimensions regardless of what part of Japan they are found. Even the layout of these mats is governed by certain conventions: mats must never be laid out in a grid pattern in the home and should never show a point where the corners of the mats intersect. Consequently, due to the cultural differences between western and eastern Japan, Tatami in western Japan are slightly larger than those in the east.

Accentuating the Tatami are beautifully painted sliding doors and walls by great Kano School artists: Kano Tan'yu (狩野探幽; 1602-1674), Kano Naonobu (狩野尚信; 1607-1650) and Kano Koi (d. 1636) and masterfully carved transoms made out of cypress blocks. And it's unfortunate that photography within Ninomaru was restricted, for that reason, I shall use the descriptions in the pamphlet provided to give you a peek into this amazing palace.

1. ***Yanagi-no-ma (Willow Room) and Wakamatsu-no-ma (Young Pine Room):*** Inspectors used these two rooms to verify the identities of visiting feudal lords. They are named after the paintings on the sliding doors and walls.

2. ***Tozamurai-no-ma (Retainers Room):*** These rooms decorated with scenes of romping leopards and tigers on the screen doors and walls functioned as waiting chambers for visiting feudal lords. The artists of the Kano School had to rely on imported hides to depict these exotic animals, as there were no such animals in Japan at that time.

3. ***Shikidai-no-ma (Reception Room):*** The Shogun's ministers received visiting feudal lords in this room, and accepted presents intended for the Shogun. The great artist Kano Tan'yu painted the massive ancient pine trees depicted here when he was only twenty-five years old.

4. ***Ohioma San-no-ma (Third Grand Chamber):*** This is the waiting room for visiting Tozama Daimyo (feudal lords who did not become retainers of the Tokugawa until after the decisive victory at the battle in 1600). Each of the panels in the transoms is made of a single block of cypress 35 centimeters thick, and carved on both sides with different designs. The metal nail covers of the gold-plated copper found on the grooves are particularly notable here.

5. ***Ohiroma Ichi-no-ma, Ni-no-ma (First and Second Grand Chambers):*** These two chambers served as the most important official audience rooms in the palace. The interior design, incorporating bold forms of pines and a lavish use of gold and lacquer, was intended to overwhelm visiting feudal lords with the power and authority of the Tokugawa Military Government. Behind the sliding doors with beautiful red tassels is a room called Musha-kakushi-no-ma (the bodyguards' room). Here armed guards stood by to protect the Shogun. These chambers are of great historical significance because here, in 1867, the fifteenth Tokugawa Shogun (Yoshinobu) announced the restoration of the Emperor's sovereignty. With this declaration, the long 250-year rule of the Tokugawa Shogunate was brought to a close.

6. ***Kuro-Shoin (Inner Audience Chamber):*** Here the Shogun granted private interviews to Shinpan Daimyo (feudal lords who are nearly related to Tokugawa) and Fudai Daimyo (feudal lords who sided with Tokugawa even before the battle of 1600, which consolidated their power). The architectural design of this room is similar to that of the Ohiroma (grand chambers). Kano Naonobu, a younger brother of Kano Tan'yu, executed the paintings here.

7. ***Shiro-Shoin (Shogun's living quarters):*** The modest and quiet mood of these mountain and water scenes by Kano Koi served to create a relaxing atmosphere for the Shogun's daily life. A unique point here is that only female attendants of the Shogun were allowed entry.

8. ***Ohiroma Yon-no-ma (Fourth Grand Chamber):*** This was the weapons chamber; kept here were the Shogun's spears, swords and other armaments. The screen paintings of magnificent pine trees and hawks by Kano Tan'yu are appropriate symbols of military prowess. One of the pine branches is 11-meters long.

9. ***Rochu-no-ma (Ministers' Offices):*** Three adjacent rooms served as offices of the Shogun's ministers. Kano Tan'yu did the excellent wall paintings of birds in natural settings. Notable are the plain upper walls and plank ceilings, reflecting the frugality of decoration in lesser, non-public areas of the palace.

10. ***Chokushi-no-ma (Imperial Messenger's Room):*** The Imperial Messenger of the Emperor was received by the Shogun in this splendid room. Paintings of Maples on the walls and sliding doors were also executed by Kano School painters and give the room a wonderful, earthy feel.

Another book (on site for purchase) shows off this magnificent artwork. It really was something else to walk around the palace with only your socks on, listening to the floor squeak with every step and have some of the most wonderful art to feast your eyes on.




Speaking of which, the floors from the entrance of the Ninomaru Palace to the Ohiroma (or Grand Chambers) squeak and creak whenever anyone treads on them. According to the brochure, "when the floor is trod upon, the clamps under it move up and down, creating friction between the nails and the clamps which hold them in place, causing the floor to squeak. It is the bird-like sound thus emitted that gives this the name Nightingale Floor." And the Shogun (and his guards) would instantly be alerted to anyone walking about! (Nicole really loved these…) Walking back through the Kara-mon will lead you to the one and only exit.

Ginkaku-ji, the Silver Pavilion

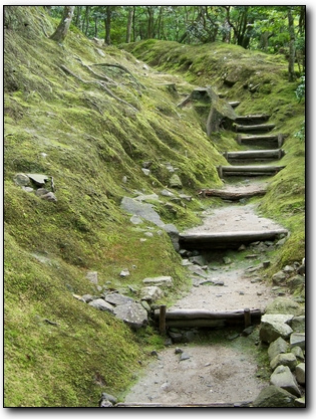
Bus #204, at the corner of Marutamachi and Horikawa, took us on a journey across central Kyoto – from west to east – dropping us off at Ginkakuji-mae, a few hundred meters from the entrance to another of the city's famed attractions.

Ginkaku-ji, or the Silver Pavilion, is not quite aptly named but it would have been had it been completed as planned; it would have been clad in silver leaf. It has a long, rich history, which I had the privilege of entertaining on my last visit. Suffice it to say, Ginkaku-ji is the common name for the temple but its real name is Tozan Jisho-ji (慈照寺) and it, like Nanzen-ji, belongs to the Rinzai Zen sect of Buddhism. The grounds were a villa for Ashikaga Yoshimasa (足利 義政; 1436-1490), the 8th Ashikaga Shogun and grandson of Ashikaga Yohimitsu, the constructor of Kinkaku-ji (which we'll see tomorrow), who eventually did retire here. Construction is said to have begun in 1460, but postponed during the Onin Wars and eventually resumed in 1480 before finally being established in 1482. During this time the grounds were known as Higashiyamadono, or the Palace of the Eastern Mountains, and flourished to house up to 12 sub-temples and buildings, an expansive garden, and sand sculpture.

The treasures of Ginkaku-ji are:

Ginkakuji-gaki – Your first encounter with Ginjaku-ji will be with this 50-meter long passageway between the main gate and inner gate made of sand lined with a beautiful hedge of stone, bamboo and camellias. It's said to be a harmony between Higashiyama and Zen cultures and is actually referred to as the Ginkakuji-gaki style of fencing. "Originally meant for protective purposes," the pamphlet states, "the solemn sparseness of the space also helps us to extinguish our worldly thoughts." Regardless of what the Japanese think of it, it's just a hedge. It's a beautiful one, but a hedge nevertheless. At the end of the passageway, turn to the left and enter Gingaku-ji through a wonderful Chinese Gate (called Kara-mon) that dates to the 17th century.

Ginshaden & Kogetsudai – Rounding Kara-mon, these next two structures come into view situated in the front of the Abbot's Quarters (or Hojo). Ginshaden, or *Sea of Silver Sand*, is a "garden" that consists of a two foot sand platform covering 1.75 acres of land and is meant to be viewed as a sea. And like a sea, its sands are fluid needing to be reshaped and raked everyday! Kogetsudai (向月台), or Moon-Viewing Platform, is a distinctive cone-shaped mound of sand thought to represent Mt. Fuji. Legend says the *Sea of Silver Sand* is meant to reflect the light of Tsuki (月), the moon, while the Moon-Viewing Platform was meant to be used to sit and watch the moon rise. But, according to Ginkaku-ji pamphlets, neither of these structures was part of the complex during its original construction, and date only as far back as the Edo period (1615-1865). Either way they're interesting additions to the temple and wondrous sights to behold.



Togudo – The Togudo (東求堂), or the Hall of the Eastern Quest, is next and was once Yoshimasa's residence here. Inside stands a wooden statue of him and a room called the Dojin-sai, which is probably one of the most important rooms in all of Japan. It's a tearoom (of Souan style) and it's said that this room is believed to be the original design for all tearooms in Japan to come after. An alcove for displaying flowers or scrolls and the sliding shoji that are present in today's tearooms made their first appearance here. It also created a strict 4.5 *tatami* mat flooring scheme, which also became the standard throughout Japan.

Kannonden – While the entire grounds are referred to as Ginkaku-ji, it's this building that has garnered the name Silver Pavilion. Called Kannon Hall, the pavilion is a two-story structure of mixed thematic styles. The first floor, referred to as Shinkudan, or Empty Heart Hall, measures 5.5 meters by 6.7 meters and was built in Shoin style, meaning it's a single room divided into several by *fusama*, or sliding panels. The second floor, named Chouonkaku, or Hall of Roaring Waves, was built according to Chinese Temple style. Among other traits, a structure of the Chinese Temple style features special windows called Katoumado, a rounded ogee-type pointed top opening with a series of S-like curves on both sides, and Chinese style sliding doors. Perched atop the building is a bronze phoenix dedicated to Kannonbosatu, the Goddess of Mercury, and faces east in order to guard the temple.

The Gardens – Ginkaku-ji has a magnificent garden and path that leads up the mountainside, providing a magnificent view of the city and of the pavilion, peeking from under the tree line like it does. As for the garden itself, there are many features here one can really only enjoy in person, such as the Brocade Mirror Pond (Kinkyo-chi) that reflects mirror image of Ginkaku-ji within, Meditation Rock (Zazenishi), Floating Rock (Ukiishi), White Crane Island (Hakkakushima), the Moon-Cleansing Spring (Sengetsusen) that was specially designed to spread ripples across the pond, and a series of stone bridges: the Bridge between Worlds (Bunkeibashi), Bridge Welcoming Immortals (Geisenbashi), Brocade Cleansing Bridge (Takkinbashi), Immortals' Laurel Bridge, and the Sleeve of the Immortals Bridge. I'm also told that each rock in the pond has its own unique name but what those names may be haven't been foretold.

Regardless of the names of its rocks or its many stone bridges, the pond and gardens of Ginkaku-ji were fantastic. And so were the rest of the grounds I might add. While the Silver Pavilion may not be made or inlayed with silver-leaf, it's still very much a cultural asset and a wonderful place to visit. Do so. Unfortunately it can become quite crowded during the day, filled with many tourists foreign and domestic to Japan. At times the crowds made it difficult to enjoy the natural setting, but beyond that one undeniable truth, our visit to the Silver Pavilion turned out to be a very exciting one. Oh, and watch out for the row of shops and café's catering to the tourist outside the gates, they've got their eye on your wallet. Nicole and I had quite the delicious little *sakura*-flavored cream puff pastry (which turned out to be quite messy; one bite sent the filling all over our hands!), as well as sharing a beef and burdock steamed bun, which was quite good as well.

Yasaka-jinga & Environs

Another bus took us away from Ginkaku-ji and toward the pleasure districts of Gion and Higashiyama where we had the opportunity to tour a bit of the shrine located there – Yasaka-jinja.

Furebotoke at Shunko-in (春光院)

『摩利支天（まりしてん）』| Marishi-ten

元はインドの神様。護身・得財・勝利などのご利益があり、武士を中心に信仰をうけました。勝負運などを上げたい方は右手もしくは両手で撫でてください

Marishi-ten is originally an Indian deity and is believed to offer protection, good fortune, and victory, and mainly revered by samurai warriors. If you wish to be better in contests of wit or skill, please gently stroke the statue with your right hand or both hands.

Built in 656, Yasaka-jinja (八坂神社), or more popularly and fondly referred to as Gion-san, sits prominently at the eastern end of Shijo-dori (四条通; 4th street) in Gion. It is one of the few shrines open twenty-four hours a day, seven-days a week and is really one of the most important shrines in all of Kyoto. Gion-san is a Shinto shrine (marked by its stone torii) and is dedicated to its deities: Susa-no-o (須佐之男命; brother of Amaterasu Omikami and "black sheep" of the mythological progenitors of the Imperial family), his spouse Inadahime-no-Mikoto and their eight mythological children. What makes this shrine important is that Susa-no-o is the Shinto god of medicine and in the year 869, thousands prayed for relief from an epidemic, an event that lead curiously enough to the Gion Festival, or Gion Matsuri, a huge street festival.

Yaskaka-jinja contains many interesting features, including the Haiden (拝殿; the Offertory building) and the Honden (本殿), the Spirit Hall where one prays to the gods by first waking them by rattling the pan-shaped bells at the front of the building. What strikes visitors first off is the Ro-mon, the two-story gateway of bright vermillion posts and white walls that greet you as you climb the steps to this wonderful shrine. As I understand it, the gate was built in the Muromachi Period (1338-1573) style and has two Shinto guardians on both sides protecting it and the grounds.
These guardians, which are half lion/half dog are of Korean origin and called Koma-inu (狛犬). Caution is warranted as you climb the steps; these guardians are anxious and ready to pounce on those deemed unworthy to enter these sacred grounds, especially if you've partaken in some of Gion's pleasurable quarters.

I really like the Koma-inu!

* * *

At Yasaka-jinja, we also had the opportunity to partake in the dozens of food stalls set up within and around the shrine this time. They looked so yummy that we couldn't help ourselves – we just had to try a few! I found a *yakitori* vendor serving up a number of meats, choosing a juicy looking beef *yakitori* to try, and boy was it very, very satisfying! Nicole found some kind of noodle and cabbage filled omelet (*yakisoba*) with ketchup and mayonnaise garnishments and a fried egg on top for good measure that we shared. Quite a different taste than we're used to, but it was very good! We finished up the afternoon by wandering around by Kodai-ji again (learning about but not partaking in the Prayer Bead Pilgrimage – next time!), but not going in, and then down the Gion shopping arcade before returning to K's house.

Prayer Bead Pilgrimage (数珠巡礼)

『数珠玉（じゅずだま）』| Beads

社寺を参拝し、ご祈祷・ご祈願された社寺の刻印入り数珠玉を集めて、あなただけの仏様として、お守りにしてください。

Visit temples and collect beads with the names of the temples. Keep them with you as your own Buddhist amulet.

高台寺・圓徳院・春光院・月真院・岡林院・霊山観音は「数珠玉」授与所です。お参りし、数珠玉（1 個/300 円）を拝受し、数珠を作ってください。

Kodaiji, Entoku-in, Shunko-in, Gesshin-in, Korin-in, Ryozen Kannon are where you are given beads. Visit these temples and receive beads (300 yen each) and make a Buddhist rosary by putting them together.

In other concoctions tried today: I finally found a CC Lemon drink. I was feeling the need for vitamin C this morning and since there are quite a number of lemons in that drink (and thus vitamin C), it was welcomed – and it was just as good as I remembered! I also managed to find a Natchan Orange drink from a vending machine steps from K's House too! I had a one of these out at Inuyama last time I was in Japan and found it to be delicious then, so I had to have another. Nicole found and tried that melon-flavored drink that Laura mentioned to us last night at dinner – it's a radioactive green-colored concoction but it's said to be very delicious. I don't think it rated as high as the banana-yogurt-ish drink she found in Tokyo though!

Oh, hey, our laundry is now done so we're gonna grab it and go!

Until tomorrow.

Ja ne!

「Nara, the Southern Capital」

Monday | April 15, 2013

"Ahh, that computer isn't working so well…"

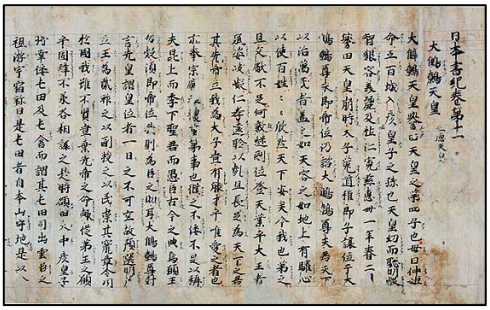
At least that's what the young man from New Zealand who is seated next to me here at K's House thinks, and he's not entirely wrong. A few moments ago the computer wasn't working very well. Using anything on the desktop was problematic, let alone trying to gain access to the Internet, but I was able to fix whatever ailed it by simply clearing the cache on the default browser, deleting the system's temp directory and rebooting the machine. Viola! – A working computer. Thankfully there wasn't some kind of special login code to enter or I would have been out for the count for sure, alas no worries now. I'm logged in and ready to go. As you can imagine, we're back here at K's House and we've been fed, watered and cleaned (thank goodness), and are now spending a few moments here at a bank of computers in the annex building (the very same we used yesterday waiting for our laundry to finish up.) We're winding down our day now, which was busily spent out in Nara today, a 50-minute ride on a limited express train from the JR Kyoto Station on the, you guessed it, JR Nara line…

Nara: A Background

Derived from the Japanese verb *narasu* meaning "to flatten or level", Nara city (奈良市, Nara-shi) is located about 42km (26mi) south of Kyoto in a flat called the Nara Basin (奈良盆地), which occupies the northern part of the Prefecture. With just over 3,600 square kilometers, Nara Prefecture ranks 40th on a list of prefectures by area (it even out-ranks Tokyo) but 28th on a similar list by population (Tokyo ranks first, Osaka ranks third and Kyoto ranks 13th on this list should you be wondering). That being said, the area does have the distinction of having more UNESCO World Heritage sites than any other Prefecture in Japan, and as it borders Kyoto, that's saying something. But Nara isn't just some small village, post town, shrine pilgrimage or unimportant city in the hills. Ancient Imperial capitals of unified Japan, the very first in fact, were built on the land of current day Nara-ken – namely *Asuka-kyō*, *Fujiwara-kyō* (694–710) and *Heijō-kyō* (710–784) – defining an entire period of Japanese history named, you guessed it, the Nara Period.

Interestingly enough, it was during the Asuka period (538-710) – immediately pre-dating the Nara Period (奈良時代; 710-794) – that an emperor even came to power. It was during this time that the proto-Japanese polity (Yamato) clinched its position by defining and applying a code of governing laws, such as the Taika Reforms (大化の改新; Taika no Kaishin; which remolded the politic into a centralized imperial form based on Confucian ideas, philosophies and structure from Tang China. The ruler, according to these edicts, was no longer a clan leader, but an Emperor, who ruled by imperial descent and exercised absolute authority), and the Taiho Code (大宝律令; *Taiho-ritsuryo*; a code that laid out new branches and structure of the government and informed the basic class structure of the age), leading to the establishment of the first permanent capital at at *Heijo-kyo*, or Nara (京; -kyo, "capital"), in 710.

And except for a five-year period when the capital was moved three times thanks to a small pox scare (to *Kuni-kyō*, present-day Kizugawa, in 740–744; to *Naniwa-kyō*, present-day Osaka, in 744–745; to *Shigarakinomiya*, present-day Shigaraki, in 745; and then back to Nara in 745), Nara remained the capital of Japanese civilization until Emperor Kammu established a new capital, *Heian-kyo*, or Kyoto, in 794 (and thus beginning the Heian Period and Kyoto's 1,000 years of Imperial rule.)



While the Nara Period marked the emergence of a strong Japanese state, it is also often portrayed as the country's golden age, as dramatic new cultural manifestations began to flower. Historical tomes such as the *Kojiki* (The Record of Ancient Matters, 712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan, 720), were written during this period. These chronicles give a legendary account of Japan's beginnings, which are the basis of the entire Japanese mythology: that Japan was founded in 660 BC by the ancestral Emperor Jimmu (above), he himself a direct descendant of the Shinto deity Amaterasu (the sun goddess), which begat a line of emperors that remains to this day. (This, of course, elevates the Emperor to god-like status.)

Establishing a new mythology was just the beginning however; other changes were on their way. Most of Japanese society during this time was agricultural in nature and centered around villages with a religion based on the worship of natural and ancestral spirits called *kami*. But the Japanese upper classes rejected this as common and began patterning themselves after the Chinese, including adopting Chinese written characters (*kanji*), fashion, and the religion of Buddhism, which was just beginning to flourish.

Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan in 538 by the Baekje people from south-west Korea, and throughout the period saw the sex great Chinese schools, called Nanto Rokushū (南都六宗, lit. the Six Nara Sects), set up shop in Japan: Ritsu (Vinaya), Jōjitsu (Satyasiddhi), Kusha (Abhidharma), Sanron (Madhyamika), Hossō (Yogacara), and Kegon (Hua-yen). These were not exclusive schools, however, and temples were apt to have scholars versed in several of the various Buddhist doctrines. Thus the Buddhism of these periods was not a practical religion, being more the domain of learned priests whose official function was to pray for the peace and prosperity of the state and imperial house.
Despite this, Buddhism continued to spread.

Did You Know?

The root of the Japanese word for Buddhism, bukkyō (仏教) comes from (仏; *butsu*, "buddha") + (教; *kyō*, "teaching"). Though it was hardly popular with the common people when it got here, the practice did lead to the discontinuance of burying the deceased in large *kofuns*, or tombs, which had defined the period of Japanese history before it (the Kofun Period, 250-538).

Prince Shotoku gave the religion some credence throughout imperial circles when he adopted it in 593 (as we discovered at some sights in Kyoto), but it wasn't until the religion was heartily embraced by Emperor Shomu (reign: 701-756) that the populace began to warm to it. As fervent Buddhists, Shomu and his Fujiwara consort actively promoted the spread of the religion, making it the "guardian of the state". Thus religion and the Imperial Court became harmonious.

New forms of Buddhism established during the late Nara period, split between two sects—the Tendai sect, brought by Saichō (767–822; pictured right), and the Shingon sect, introduced by Kūkai (774–835), would upset this balance however. Whereas the Tendai sect tended to be a monastic form of Buddhism, establishing isolated monasteries (or temples) on the tops of mountains, the Shingon variation was less philosophical and more practical, and thus a more popular version of the religion. Popularity breeds power and thus when the Buddhist clergy attempted to wield influence the emperor relocated to *Heian-kyo*, present-day Kyoto, to escape their growing power. The temples of Nara, known collectively as the *Nanto Shichi Daiji*, remained powerful even beyond the move of the political capital, thus giving Nara the synonym of *Nanto* (南都, "The Southern Capital").

I say all this because I want to impress upon you that Nara isn't just some small village, post town, shrine pilgrimage site or unimportant city in the hills. Nara is important – both historically and culturally – as what happened here informed Japanese history for a thousand years or more. As such you'll find a number of religious relics throughout the cities' numerous historic temples – specifically *Todai-ji*, *Saidai-ji*, *Kofuku-ji*, *Kasuga Shrine*, *Gango-ji*, *Takushi-ji*, *Toshodai-ji*, *Horyu-ji* and the *Heijo Palace* – making Nara an important political and cultural destination to visit.

We arrived in Nara a little before 10:00am.

Horyu-ji (法隆寺), the Temple of the Flourishing Law

We may have arrived at Nara-eki at 10:00am but the journey to our first temple in the area was far from over. Horyu-ji, our first stop, is located in Ikaruga (斑鳩町), a town some twelve kilometers west of central Nara. To reach it one must take the frequently departing JR Yamatoji Line train services from JR Nara station to JR Horyuji – about a twelve minute ride. From there it's a twenty minute walk to the temple, over a kilometer or more through the middle of town, before you reach its gates. If you're lucky, like we were, you'll be spotted bumbling around the station by a nice lady in an information booth who will provide you a map to the temple. It's not fancy but it'll get you there. And though it might take some effort to reach – its location does turn off some tourists – make the pilgrimage anyway. Its five-storied pagoda and central gate date from the 7th century and are widely acknowledged to be the oldest wooden buildings existing in the world, underscoring Horyu-ji's place as one of the most celebrated temples in Japan.

The story of its founding is an interesting one and can be discovered in the historical writings engraved on the back of the temple's principle image – a Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of healing. It states Emperor Yomei vowed to build the temple as a form of prayer for his own recovery from illness. Somewhat ironically it's a vow he was never fated complete; he died shortly after making the proclamation. The dream did not die with him though. Prince Shotoku (him again) commissioned the temple we know today, dedicating it in 607. But he didn't just build a temple; his personal palace, the *Ikaruga-no-miya* (斑鳩宮), also occupied grounds here. As such the temple eventually broke away from the Hosso sect under which it was ordained. The owners currently call the temple the headquarters of the "Shotoku" sect.

Visitors approach the complex by a dirt-paved avenue, and are then greeted by the *Nandaimon* (or south main gate). This gate, restored in 1438, combines simple elegance with power and dignity. Beyond lies the entire complex, divided up into three precincts, all separately ticketed – *sai-in garan* (西院; western precinct), *Daihozoin* (exhibit hall), and *to-in garan* (東院; eastern precinct) – each with their unique treasures on display.

Sai-in Garan

Step through the Chumon (central gate) and Kairo (cloister gallery) to enter the Sai-in Garan. Low, overhanging eaves of the central gate shade entablatures and ornamental railings that are supported by columns designed with entasis, all of which capture the essence of Akusa architecture. The mighty gate doors and Japan's oldest known clay guardian deities, or *Kongo Rikishi*, date from the beginning of the 8th century. Towering on each side of the doorway they stand in imposing contrast to the delicate lattice windows of the cloister gallery. On the opposite site of the enclosure is the Daikodo (great lecture hall), which was originally built for monks to pursue their studies and to conduct memorial services. It is flanked by the Shoro (bell house) to the east, on which hangs a Hakuho-period bell they still use, and the Kyozo (sutra repository) to the west, which currently houses Heian-period seated image of Kanroku Sojo, a monk from the Korean kingdom of Paekche, said to be the first to convey the disciplines of astronomy and geography to the Japanese people.

Within the Kondo (Main Hall) stands a bronze Asuka-period Shaka triad in honor of Prince Shotoku; to the right of the triad is a bronze statue of a seated figure representing Yakushi Nyorai, and on the left is the seated image of Amida Nyorai, or Pure Land Buddha, built in honor of Empress Anahobe Hashihito, Prince Shotoku's mother. Warding evil away here is Japan's oldest set of the four heavenly guardians, or *Shitenno*. These camphor-wood statues, which date to the late 7th century, are quite different from the vigorous warriors they'd come to be represented as in later centuries. Here they stand quietly atop defeated evil spirits. Heavenly beings fly with phoenixes along the eaves of the three ceiling-mounted canopies in a style reminiscent of the "Lands West of China", and on the surrounding walls are world-famous murals, long known as the best extant pictures of ancient depictions of Buddhist paradise.

Pagodas are evolved forms of Indian *stupas* and are the most important structures in Buddhist temples (because that's where the relics of a Buddha are enshrined). Horyuji's pagoda, standing 32.5 meters tall, is the oldest five-storied pagoda in all of Japan.

A collection of clay statues from the early Nara period are located within the lowest level of its interior: on the east side, Yuimakoji and Monju Bosatsu are engaged in an exchange of Buddhist questions and answers; on the north side, Sakyamuni Buddha is passing into nirvana; on the west side, the Division of the Relics of Sakyamuni Buddha is taking place; and on the south side, Miroku Bosatsu, a future Buddha, is giving a lecture. And further west you'll discover the Saiendo, or west round hall. This hall, actually octagonal, is said to have been built by Gyoki Bosatsu at the request of Lady Tachibana in the 8th Century. It enshrines a seated image of the Yakushi Nyorai in its center, a Nara-period statue that is one of the biggest dry-lacquer Buddhist images in Japan.

The Daihozoin & To-in Garan

Moving east through the Shoryoin (the hall of Prince Shotoku's soul; where a statue of the prince is enshrined) is the second of three of Horyuji's districts, the Daihozoin, or Temple Gallery. Here stands the government-sealed repository (Kofuzo) of the Heian-Period and the Jikido (refectory). The Treasures Gallery is a modern building, though, housing a number of the temple's vast treasures: the famous Yumechigai Kannon statue, the Dream-Changing Avalokitesvara statue, the Tamamushi Tabernacle (with the iridescent colors of the *tamamushi* beetle – said to have been Empress Suiko's), Lady Tachibana's Tabernacle, a collection of Hyakuman Miniature Pagodas, the nine-headed Kannon (carved from sandalwood, brought from China), and a small mural depicting heavenly beings, amongst much, much more.

And in the To-in, or Eastern Precinct, you'll find the Shariden (Reliquary Hall, holding the Buddhist relics collected by Shotoku), Eden (Fusuma here depict the entire life Prince Shotoku), Denpodo (Hall of Teachings), and the belfry. But it's the Yumedono, or Hall of Visions, that's the draw here. Within this octagonal pavilion – the oldest of its kind in Japan – is enshrined the Kuse Kannon, or Avalokitesvara the Savior, a life-sized statue of Prince Shotoku, a Sho Kannon Bosatsu, a Nara-Period dry-lacquer statue of Gyoshin Sozu (the monk who built the To-in Garan), and a Heian-period clay image of Dosen Risshi (the monk who supervised the repairs.)

Horyu-ji is quite the place.

Chūgū-ji (中宮寺)

Located immediately to the northeast of Horyu-ji is Chugu-ji, a temple that was once the palace of Hashihito, mother of Shotoku Taishi, the aforementioned prince. Though small, its camphor wood statue of Miroku (菩薩半跏像; a bodhisattva who in the Buddhist tradition is to appear on Earth, achieve complete enlightenment, and teach the pure dharma) and Tenjukoku Shucho Mandala (天寿国繍帳; the embroidery of heaven and eternal life) are National Treasures. It's all they have left. When Chugu-ji fell into decline during the Heian Period (794-1192), Chuguji was transferred to the eastern precinct of Horyuji from a spot some 500m east and most of its treasures were lost to it. During the Kamakura Period (1192-1333), Chuguji re-flourished somehow, discovering and recovering its relics. In the Momoyama Period (1573-1603), Princess Sonchi joined the temple, converting it into a nunnery, which is has served as ever since.

Much of what you see here is relatively new, however (renovated in 1968). The new design features a simple structure highlighted with golden yellow flowers of the *yamabuki* (Japanese Kerria) around its pond and trees to create an atmosphere of gracious femininity suitable for a nunnery across four seasons. Inside rests the Sitting Bodhisattva with One Leg Pendent, said to be a magnum opus of Asuka period sculpture and one of three smiling masterpieces of the world alongside the Sphinx of Egypt and the Mona Lisa painted by Leonardo da Vinci. Its elegant posture with its fingers touching the cheek represents the purity and grace of the Buddhist redemption of mankind.

After paying our respects we made our way around the *gosho*, up through the gates of the Horyuji complex, and back onto the streets of Ikaruga, watching with glee as busload after busload of kids descended upon the temple complex. With Horyuji being so far outside of central Nara it occurred to me visiting would be a quiet affair, but the temple seems to be quite the popular destination with local school groups.

They came by the dozen – all ages alike it seemed – to tour around. We suspect, though we don't know, that maybe because it's the beginning of the school year the kids have come down to take their class group photos here. Regardless of the reason it was interesting to see them all milling about; we were even spoken to on a couple of occasions. And on the way back to the station another bus load tried to get in on one of my pictures!

CHEEEEEEEEZU!

Yakushi-ji (薬師寺**)**

The next location on our journey though Nara would take us to an area called *Nishinokyo*, where two temples – Yakushi-ji and Toshodai-ji – lie less than 600m from one another.

The easiest way to reach this part of town is via the Kintetsu Rail, the largest non-JR railway in Japan (a distinction granted to it because if its complex network of lines connecting Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, Nagoya, Tsu and Ise.) The trip takes about 25 minutes from the Kintetsu-Nara station; however, with us out at Horyuji, the only way to reach this area would be to do a little train hopping: hobble back to the JR Horyuji station, take its services up to JR Koriyama, where we'd have to disembark, walk, and board a Kintetsu train at the Kintetsu-Koriyama station, some 800 meters away.

When I was planning this transfer I expected it to be a boring saunter down some commercialized roadway, but what we found was a nice stroll through a quiet neighborhood instead. And in the process we received a rare glimpse into the real Japan – off the beaten path without really straying too far – a neighborhood in action. Besides local shops there were residences, service fronts and even a small arcade grouped around the Kintetsu station. A real bona-fide neighborhood! It turned out to be a great walk (even if my feet didn't want to hear about it). We boarded there and rode to Nishinokyo-mae; Yakushi-ji was first since it was closest to the station.

Yakushi-ji claims to be one of the most famous imperial and ancient Buddhist temples in all of Japan. Perhaps it gets that distinction by being the head of the Hosso sect, the second oldest school in the country. Or perhaps it's because the main object of veneration, Yakushi Nyorai, was one of the first Buddhist deities to arrive in Japan from China in 680. Actually, I'm more certain of the latter, since it gave the temple its name. The temple was planned by Emperor Temmu in 680, but was actually constructed by his Empress (Jito) after the Emperor's death. Ironically, the Emperor had commissioned the temple to pray for the Empress' recovery from a serious illness, but ended up dying instead. Yakushiji was originally constructed in *Fujiwara-kyo* (the Asuka-period capital) south of Nara (present day Kashihara city), and was finally completed in 698. The temple was moved to its present location in 718, after the capital itself moved to Nara.

Today the Yakushi-ji compound consists of several buildings, including the Kondo (main hall), the Kodo (lecture hall), the East and West Pagodas, and the Toindo (East Hall) in a layout so unique it's sometimes referred to as "Yakushiji-style". Most of the original buildings of the temple were destroyed over the years by fires, wars or other natural disasters. However, the East Pagoda has survived, and is the only architecture from the 7th century to survive here. The other building that is not a recent restoration is the Toindo, rebuilt in 1733. These two buildings are visually distinct from the others as they have not been painted red and white, which is a Chinese style of painting. The other buildings in the complex are recent restorations built during the past 30 years.

The approach to Yakushi-ji is a long and winding path, however, you will eventually come to the Chu-mon (the middle gate), which serves as the main entrance to the temple today, considering that all that remains of its great southern gate sits in ruins. The first buildings you see upon entering the complex are its great pagodas. Pagodas were the most important buildings in the temple during this period (because, as I previously explained, they were considered Buddha's grave) and these are important because they are the first twin pagodas erected for a single temple.

The East Pagoda (*To-to*), as mentioned earlier, is the original structure from the 7th century (completed in 730). The structure stands at 34 meters (112 ft), and is regarded as one of the finest pagodas in Japan, representing Hakuho to Tenpyo period architecture. Although it looks like it has six stories, it actually only has three. The other three "stories" are additional lean-to roofs (*mokoshi*) and are a bit smaller than those of the three main stories. This roof style is a rare one, referred to as "frozen music" because of its rhythmical appearance on the pagodas façade. The other remarkable feature is its roof ornament – the Sorin. The *Sorin* (相輪), as it's called, is made of bronze, has a height of 10 meters, weighs 3000 kilograms, and is "composed" of seven elements: Hoju (宝珠; the Sacred Jewel, usually spherical or tear-shaped believed to repel evil), Ryusha (竜車; the Dragon Vehicle), Suien (水煙; the Water Flame, protecting the pagoda from fire), Futaku (風鐸; the Wind Bell), Kurin (九輪; the Nine Rings, representing Buddhist deities), Fukubachi (受花; a circle of upturned lotus petals), and Roban (露盤; the Inverted Bowl or base).

Did You Know?

In addition to its religious symbolism, the *Sorin* actually supports the pagoda structurally. Although it is often believed that the pillar at the core of a Japanese pagoda is a device to strengthen it against earthquakes, its sole purpose is to support the long and heavy bronze Sorin. It also serves as a lightning rod.

The Yakushi Triad, the temple's principal image, resides in the Kondo (or Main Hall), sitting directly behind the towering pagodas. The Triad is made of bronze, dates from the Hakuho era (645-710), and consists of the Yakushi Nyorai seated between two attendant Bodhisattvas – Nikko on the right and Gakko on the left, the Bosatsu of sunlight and moonlight respectively. (The duo was originally covered in gold but the fire of 1528 gave them their present appearance: a rich black sheen.) Curiously, most statues of Yakushi have a medicine ball or pot in his left hand, but the statue here does not; he sits on a chest instead.

The pedestal he rests on here is also of note: the designs in relief are unique in their combination of various elements from different world cultures. The grape-vine scroll pattern at the edge of the upper projecting frame is very close to Greek work. The lotus flowers patterned around the pedestal was fashionable in ancient Persia. The barbarians crouching in the decorative arch are often seen at a Hindu temple. And the animal designs of the dragon (east side), the phoenix (south), the tiger (west) and the tortoise (north) are influenced by Tang Dynasty China.

This combination reflects the international feeling in Nara the time (becoming worldly) and the influence of the "Silk Road".

The Toindo (East Hall) is located behind the covered walkway next to the East Pagoda. The Toindo was originally built in the Yoro era (717-724), but the current building dates from the Kamakura period (1185-1333). It stands on columns to protect it from moisture and water damage. The Sho Kannon (the Merciful Goddess, healing pain and suffering), is worshipped here and it might be interesting to know she is considered to be one of the most beautiful Kannon. The Shi Tennon (Four Heavenly Kings), which protect her, is also on display. These particular guardians show the evolution of Buddhism as it traveled from India to Japan: the Shi Tenno were originally four ancient Devas in India, introduced as guardian kings and placed around Shumisen (believed to be a huge mountain in the middle of the universe). In China, the four guardian kings were mixed with the four Chinese gods that represent the four corners of the world, which were then signified with four distinct colors: blue, red, white, and black. The Shi Tennos' faces now reflect these colors. In the Toindo the Shi Tenno are arranged around Sho Kannon; green faces Jikokuten in the East, red faces Zochoten in the south, white faces Komokuten in the west and black faces Tamonten in the north.

A little further afield is the *Genjo-sanzoin-Garan*.

The *Genjo-sanzoin Garan* is a recently built precinct located slightly north of the main complex area. Constructed in 1981, the complex is dedicated to the Chinese monk Genjo-sanzo, who lived in the 7th century and is famous for his extensive travels to India and Central Asia. *Yakushiji* is the head temple of the Hosso Sect as I mentioned, upon which Genjo-sanzo's teachings had a profound influence. The main building here is a central octagonal hall, in which some of Genjo-sanzo's remains are enshrined. Behind the octagonal hall is a building displaying works of Hirayama Ikuo, one of Japan's most celebrated modern painters, depicting scenes of Genjo-sanzo's journeys. Other treasures can also be found here, such as: the *Bussoku-seki*, a stone with the imprint of Buddha's feet (it measures 47 centimeters in length and contains engravings of the Horin (Circles of Truth) on the feet, which are flat by the way); the *Bussoku-seki Verses tablet*, upon which twenty-one verses praising the Bussoku-seki are inscribed (it's also the oldest such tablet in Japan), and the *Sho-Kannon*, one of the six manifestations of Avalokitesvara (the savior of hungry spirits).

Toshodai-ji (唐招提寺)

After our turn at the Garan, and coming upon a grump of a calligraphy writer, we took our leave of Yakushi-ji. A "short" neighborhood walk later and we were at Toshodai-ji, a less impressive (buildings wise, they were dark colored and not nearly as many) but at least their calligraphy person wasn't a grump – so I actually got one drawn in my book there instead of the pre-made insert I got at Yakushi-ji!

Toshodai-ji, along with Yakushi-ji, is located in what seems today to be the outskirts of Nara, but this area was a central block of the city when it was the capital of Japan – who'd have thought? The temple was established in 759 when Ganjin Wajo (also known as Jianzhen), a high Buddhist priest of Tang China was invited by Emperor Shomu to teach the Imperial Court and its subjects Buddhist precepts. He accepted this request and proved his dedication in a journey that took twelve years, five unsuccessful attempts, and the loss of his eyesight before he finally crossed the ocean in 754 and arrived in Nara. Upon arrival he had an ordination platform constructed in front of the great hall at "nearby" Todai-ji, and ordained not only many Japanese priests of high standing but also emperors Shomu and Koken in person.

Later resigning from Todai-ji, Toshodai-ji was constructed at his request and he remained here for four years until his death, May 6th 763. His influence on the introduction of Buddhism to Japan at the time was monumental, and his arrival and teaching at Toshodai-ji were important stages in that process. His achievements were so influential to Japanese Buddhist and cultural history that he is considered a figure of particularly distinguished service to Japan to this day.

T he name of the temple itself is derived from the fact that Ganjin was from Toh, or the Tang Dynasty in China, and that it was founded as the first place for Buddhist training in Japan devoted to one of the Chinese Buddhist denominations – namely the Nanzan School. ("Todshodai" is Japanese for "invited from Tang China".) In its early days Toshodai-ji commanded a total of 48 subsidiary temples in the vicinity; however, through various changes in the Japanese political and cultural climate, it has been reduced to its present state, which isn't much. Nonetheless, as the head temple of the Ritsu-shu sect, Toshodai-ji presently owns 17 National Treasures and more than 200 Important Cultural Properties.

The Kondo, seen in the front when passing through the Nandai-mon (southern gate), is the building that represents Toshodai-ji. It has a single story, hipped tiled roof with a seven bay wide façade – indicative of the "classical style". Inside the Kondo are the principal images: a seated Rushana Buddha statue, a standing Yakushi Tathagata statue and a standing Thousand Armed Avalokiteshwara, all national treasures. The temple's lecture hall (Kodo) was moved here from the Heijo Palace (Nara's Imperial Palace) and is now the only surviving building of the former palace. It is where the principal seated Maitreya Tathagata statue, the standing Jikoku-ten statue, and the standing Zojo-ten statue are enshrined, also all natural treasures and important cultural properties.

The Miedo, a hall which stores a famous wooden statue of Ganjin, is also located on the temple grounds. The statue, however, is displayed to the public only once a year for a few days around June 6, the anniversary of Ganjin's death. Since we were a little early we didn't get to see it. And there are a number of small paths on the temple grounds that cut through thick overhanging foliage. Ganjin's grave is located at the end of one of these paths, and the surrounding nature gives the area an atmosphere of serenity. The temple also has a large bell from the Heian period, a chapel (the Rie-do), enshrined ashes from Buddha (in the Koro; it's the only multi-story building in the complex, built in 1240), sleeping quarters once used by monks in training (a rather long and large building), a storehouse of sutras (the Kyozo; the oldest building in the Toshodai-ji complex) and a small treasure house (Hozo) that charges a small entrance fee.

To Central Nara - Heijo Palace

Transiting into central Nara following our visit at Nishinokyo was relatively easy; we took the Kintetsu rail all the way in, traveling through the remnants of the Heijo Palace in the process. Much of this palace is gone, but a few pieces still stand – mainly the court's huge gates, which were quite impressive from the train!

As I stated earlier, the city, and the palace grounds, were largely based on Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), the capital of Tang China. Chang'an was in turn, like many ancient East Asian cities, based on a complex system of beliefs and laws of geomancy. This dictated the grid system of streets, as well as the necessity for spiritually protective shrines or temples to be placed at particular cardinal directions around the city. In accordance with this system, the Palace was placed at the northern end, on an extended line from Suzaku Street, the main thoroughfare running north-south straight through the center of the city. The street ended at the Suzaku-mon and the rest of the Palace buildings were then placed to the north of this gate. The primary buildings of the Palace compound were the Daigoku-den, where governmental affairs were conducted, the Chōdō-in where formal ceremonies were held, the Dairi, the Emperor's residence, and offices for various administrative agencies. The foundations or footprints of these buildings are still visible on the site.

Although the palace once stood as the majestic center of the ancient capital, all of its buildings were eventually lost. When the capital was moved away from Heijo-kyo in 784, Heijo Palace and a large part of the city were abandoned as people flocked to the new capital. The temples on the outskirts of the city (Kofuku-ji and Todai-ji), however, retained their importance, and the city of Nara eventually resumed its growth around them – shifting the city east – while the palace grounds were used for nothing but rice fields. Visitors to Heijo Palace nowadays will still find a rural atmosphere, but the government has gone to considerable lengths to put the history of the palace on display with historic reconstructions and museums.

Three major structures of the former palace complex have been reconstructed in recent decades. Foremost among them is the Daigokuden, or Audience hall, which at one time was the largest building on the palace grounds (it was reconstructed on the occasion of Nara's 1300th anniversary and opened to the public in April 2010).

The hall was used for important ceremonies and meetings. Its ceiling is decorated by the four cardinal animals and the twelve of the lunar calendar. A throne stands in the center of the hall. The building is called the “former” audience hall, because it was replaced by the “latter” audience hall in the second half of the Nara Period. The latter audience hall’s foundations are visible to the east of the former audience hall. Two more full scale reconstructions from the 1990s are the Suzaku Gate (*Suzakumon*), the main gate of the palace to the south, and the East Palace Garden (*Toin Teien*), which features ponds, streams and bridges, used by the imperial family for banquets. Furthermore there are various foundations found across the grounds, some of which are highlighted by bushes, poles or low walls to indicate the former locations of other palace structures, such as the imperial living quarters and administrative offices (many of these you can see from the train).

Getting to the palace grounds from the nearest Kintetsu station was still quite a walk, so it wasn’t something I considered for today’s itinerary. Viewing the relics from the comfort of the train’s window was just as good; in one fell swoop we saw just about everything!

The Kintetsu-Nara station is surrounded by shops, restaurants and people; to say it’s in the thick of things would be an understatement. And while we’d spend some time exploring the shops on our way out, we spent the rest of our day in and around Nara Park. There Nicole fed a number of the town’s famous deer, we shopped at a number of kiosks along the way, toured Todai-ji (which Nicole was imminently impressed with) and even had a hot meal at the very same restaurant I procured a bowl of curry and rice from back during my first visit here. They still had the dish on the menu but I got something different this time: a pork cutlet rice bowl – filled with rice (of course), then topped with the cutlets, breaded and friend (and oh so juicy and tasty), and then crowned with egg-like omelet and a fried egg yolk. Oh my god it was so good! (Nicole had a shrimp udon which she said was equally satisfying.)

But I digress…

Todai-ji (東大寺)

Continue down Sanjo-dori and within a few steps you'll find yourself at the doorstep of Nara-koen (奈良公園), or Park. This huge green space is the largest municipal park in all of Japan and prior to 1888, it was in such a deteriorated state it was considered a wasteland. Nara-koen measures 4km east to west and 2km south to north covering 525-hectares (1297 acres) of land and as you can see, it dominates the landscape within this historical city. In fact, most of Nara's treasures lie within its boundaries, such as: Todai-ji, Nigatsudo Hall, Kasuga Taisha and Shin-Yakush-ji, some of which were on our itinerary.

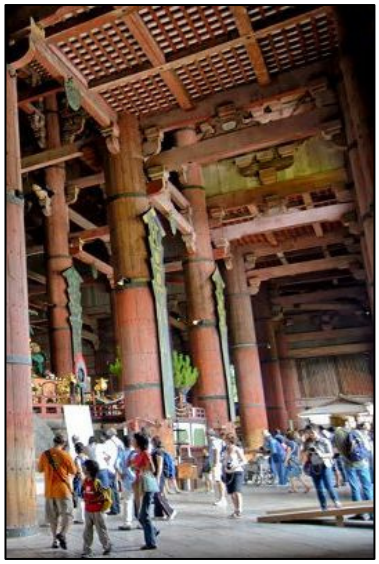
So let's discuss Todai-ji!

The Daibutsu		
	m	ft
Height	14.98	49.15
Face	5.33	17.49
Eyes	1.02	3.35
Nose	0.50	1.64
Ears	2.54	8.33

The main entrance to the temple is inside the Nandaimon, or Great Southern Gate. The Nandaimon was rebuilt in the 13th Century and features two guardian Kings (Nio), each more than 8 meters tall. Once you go through the gate, the sweeping horned roof of the Daibutsuden comes into view. Todai-ji is well known for housing what the Japanese simply call Daibutsu (大仏; "great Buddha"), a 500 metric ton (551 standard ton) bronze statue of Buddha. This image of Buddha, depicting Vairocana (Dainichi Nyorai; "The Cosmic Buddha"), is probably one of the most culturally treasured in the nation. It certainly is the largest (dimensions left); it was completed in 752 and consumed nearly all of Japan's bronze production at the time and had consumed it for several years prior, leaving the country virtually bankrupt. It's been recast over the years as various natural disasters have damaged the original statue: in the 9th century, an earthquake knocked over the Buddha's head and in 1180 (and again in 1567) his right hand melted during a fire, which also destroyed the building housing this great figure.

Even today at 66% its original scale, the Daibutsuden (Great Buddha Hall) is the largest wooden structure in the world and that is really saying something. You'll find that it is 57 meters (187 feet) wide, 50.4 meters (165.4 feet) deep, and 48.6 meters (159.4 feet) high.

The original building took 15-years to construct and originally had two 100m pagoda's standing beside it. Alas, they fell by earthquake and the temple succumbed to fire twice during its lifetime – the last in 1692. Even if the building is smaller than it was in ancient times it will still marvel; it dominates the entire landscape!



The completion of the statue itself was an extraordinary achievement. Emperor Shomu, his wife (Empress Komyo), and the reigning Empress (Kogen) all gathered to dedicate the statue by "opening his eyes", which is accomplished by having a priest actually paint the eyes, using a gigantic brush. They weren't just spectators though: from the end of this brush were hung colored strings, which ran down to the VIPs below, enabling them to take part in the ceremony too. Local monks, numbering in the hundreds, as well as ambassadors from China, India and more distant lands were also in attendance. They brought a dazzling assortment of gifts; many of them are still preserved in the Shoso-in treasury, along with the original paint brush (it's the log-cabin-on-stilts looking structure behind the Daibutsuden). Oh, and should you see someone attempt to squeeze through a whole in Daibutsu's support pillars, do not worry. The Japanese have a belief that if one is successful in squeezing through, they are guaranteed a place in paradise. Not a bad thing really, but just in case you are wondering, neither of us made the attempt to secure our place; what if we caused the whole thing to come down? I shudder to think…

Although the Daibutsuden is the main draw, there are other buildings of note here:

Located to the west of the Daibutsuden is the Kaidanin. Ganjin established the Kaidanin in 754 as Japan's first and principle ordination hall. The hall includes small clay statutes of 8th Century representations of the Four Heavenly Kings, beautifully carved, each standing on a different fiendish beast, while protecting a small Buddha in a wooden pagoda.

The Hokke-do is significant because it is the oldest structure at Todai-ji. Built between 740 and 747, the hall is composed of the Sho-do (image hall) and the Rai-do (worship hall). These halls were of great importance to Todai-ji's predecessor: Kinsho-ji. It is believed that the first lectures in Japan of the Avatamsaka Sutra were given here. The original name of this hall was Kensaku-do, originating from the main image housed here, the Fukukensaku Kannon. The name of the hall was later changed to Hokke-do (Lotus Hall) when the Hokke-e (Lotus Sutra) ceremony began being held here every March. Other important statues housed here include the bosatsus Nikko and Gakko, Kichijo-ten, Bezai-ten, two Kongo Rikishi, the Four Diva Kings, Fudo Myo-o and bosatsu Jizo.

Cultural Notes

The term Bosatsu or Bodhisattva, is bestowed upon those who are dedicated in assisting all sentient beings into achieving Nirvana, by delaying their own entry.

The Twelve Heavenly Generals function as protectors of the faithful, delivering them from illness and harm. Their malevolent faces express violent anger directed at malicious spirits and enemies of Buddhism.

The Four Diva Kings are warrior demigods; their function is to protect the structure in which they are placed by warding off evil spirits. They are known as: Jikoku-ten (Dhrtarastra), Zocho-ten (Virudhaka), Komoku-ten (Virupaksa) and Tamon-ten (Vaisravana).

The Nigatsu-do (Second Month Hall) gets its name from the fact that the Shuni-e Ceremony, more commonly known as "Omizutori", is held here during February. The hall was originally built during the eighth century but burned down in 1667 during an Omizutori, ironically. The current structure dates from 1669 and is known for its excellent acoustics. The Omizutori ceremony began in 752 as a rite of repentance to the Juichimen Kannon (Eleven-headed Kannon) for human qualities of greed, anger and ignorance. These "offenses" of human nature contaminated the spirit, making people ill and unable to see truth. Through the ceremony people could then repent their misdeeds, cleanse their spirits and obtain well being. When this ceremony was first practiced, illness was broadly interpreted to mean natural disasters, epidemics, and rebellions, thus the ritual was held as a state affair to guarantee the welfare of the people.

Another of the sites most interesting features is its "tame" deer. The deer, which are revered as messengers of the spirits, are protected by law and actually give the surrounding park its secondary name: Deer Park. There are approximately 1200 of them roaming around Nara and they're quite friendly. Too friendly, in fact, as they'll just stand there and watch you, let you pet them, and for ¥200, you can buy little "deer biscuits" to feed them. When I was here in 2004 I wasn't going to partake in the ritual originally, but an elderly Japanese lady placed a biscuit in my hand and insisted I feed one. How could I refuse? When I told all this to Nicole she was all about the deer – in fact this was her sole reason for coming: to feed the deer! Consequently, if they think you have something in your pocket or in your backpack they will follow you. The deer have become so revered they're actually the unofficial mascots of the city; you'll certainly find plenty of deer merchandise for sale: plush animals, plush antlers, pictures, and other items! We couldn't help ourselves…


駐車場
入口

Yoshikien & Kofuku-ji (興福寺)

Our final action in Nara was to take a stroll through one of the town's gardens. With a couple near Todai-ji to choose from, and with our time running out, we found ourselves at the front gates to Yoshikien, a pleasant Japanese garden named after the Yoshikigawa River, which runs beside it. According to an old picture inherited by Kofuku-ji Temple, its branch temple "Manishuin" used to stand here, but when Japan entered the Meiji Era (1868) the grounds became privately owned, which then eventually transferred to Nara Prefecture. The grounds include the Pond Garden, the Moss Garden and the Tea Ceremony Flower Garden, each with their own allure: the flower garden has, in addition to an array of flower species, a detached teahouse; in the pond garden, slopes and curves of the land are incorporated with the surrounding buildings (the gate of Tofuku-ji is used as borrowed scenery as an example); and the moss garden is covered in hair moss (Polytrichum). So, a visit to Yoshikien provides the opportunity to see three different variations of Japanese gardens in one spot. Though small and quiet, entry is free to foreign tourists so it's hard to turn down!

A 15-minute walk from Yoshikien and you'll come upon Kofuki-ji. Its history reads much like many of the other historical sites we have visited and is just as colorful. Originally called Yamashina-dera, it was once part of the Fujiwara clan (one of the most powerful families during the Nara and Heian periods) as a tutelary temple, constructed to pray for the recovery of Fujiwara Kamatari (藤原鎌足; 614–669), the family founder, who had fallen ill. Before becoming a temple, it was designed to be a celebratory mark of Fujiwara's defeat over the Soga clan, which he accomplished in 645 by slaying Soga Emishi (蘇我 蝦夷; 587-645), a statesman of the Imperial Court. The temple was later moved from Yamashina Suehara (in modern-day Kyoto prefecture) to Umayasaka (in the Nara prefecture) and renamed to Umayasaka-dera. When Nara became the capital of Japan in 710, the temple moved within the city limits and became known as Kofuku-ji.

Historical Note

"The Four Great Temples" were – Daian-ji, Yakushi-ji, Gango-ji and Kofuku-ji.

"The Seven Great Temples" were – Todai-ji, Saidai-ji, Daian-ji, Kofuku-ji, Gango-ji, Yaksuhi-ji and Horyo-ji

At the height of its prosperity the temple had about 175 buildings and was one of the most powerful. It was recognized as one of the "Four Great Temples" of the Nara period (710-794), and one of the "Seven Great Temples" of the Heian period (794-1185). During their reign, the Shoguns bestowed Kofuku-ji with the status of "protector" over the Yamato province, which gave it de-facto political powers in the region but its powers waned by the end of the Muromachi period (1533-1568) and thus its influence fell. In 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu (徳川 家康; 1543-1616) attempted to revive the temple as a purely religious establishment, which it continues as today – the head temple of the Hosso sect, teaching a "consciousness only" approach to Buddhism.

Most of the site's structures have been lost to the sands of time or confiscated by shifting political powers, but there are still a few to be found here including a five-story pagoda (Goju-no-to) dating from 1426 (at 50.1 meters it's the second largest in Japan) and a three-story pagoda (Sanju-no-to) from 1143.

* * *

Most of these halls are not open to the general public and those that are require a separate entrance fee. If you're interested in the teachings of the Buddha, Kofuku-ji offers an eclectic array of Cultural and National treasures to behold. The site's two pagodas are also eye catching and will more than sate the inquisitor in each of us. Unfortunately we only had a few moments to stroll through Kofuku-ji before it closed for the night, not nearly enough time to collect any of the temple's calligraphy or explore its grounds in detail. Renovations were also in full-sing here too – much like last time – though it appears more has been disturbed than last.

We picked ourselves back up and made the long trek back to JR Nara station, stopping at many of the stores that happened to catch Nicole's eye, but other than Deer charms, there wasn't much else. (Although I did buy a deer plush made of old kimonos!) Returning to Kyoto was made slower by taking a true local train back, which allowed us to mingle with the day-to-day folks commuting to and from their workplaces on this fabulous Monday. It's quite an education – not that going express isn't great, but, sometimes you miss out on the little things by doing so.

Now, as I said, we're back here at K's house and we've cleaned ourselves up, had something to eat, and communicated with our friends and family via social media. I found out a minute ago that the kid next to me from New Zealand is visiting Japan with the rest of his student group. They're in country for more than a month touring about as they learn the language, the culture and its customs first-hand. They've already been back east (Sapporo, Akita, Sendai, Tokyo, etc.) and are making their way westward across the archipelago. He and his class-mates will stay here in Kyoto now for a couple more days before moving on to Osaka next, then continue further west into Okayama, Hiroshima, and Fukuoka. I'm kind of jealous… where they've been and where they're going are certainly more than we've been able to see and do on this trip – on all my trips here to Japan – and that makes me wish I had more time here. Alas all I can do is look forward to tomorrow: Kinkaku-ji, Ryoan-ji then a hand-full of new places, such as Toji-in, the Myoshinji complex, and Tenryu-ji out in Arashiyama before returning to Tokyo.

I'm sure we'll be retiring for the evening shortly. Before we go, though, I want to talk to this kid a little more. So we'll continue this adventure tomorrow. Ja ne!

「Finally, Arashiyama!」

Tuesday | April 16, 2013

clickity-clack, clickity-clack, clickity-clack…

Actually we're hearing more of a *woosh-woosh-woosh, woosh-woosh-woosh, woosh-woosh-woosh* aboard the *shinkansen*, rather than the regular rail's *clickity-clack*, but I'm not quite sure that's the key observation here. More importantly, we're on the *shinkansen* because we're on our way back to Tokyo as I write, bringing an end to another great day in Kyoto, but also bringing us that much closer to our trip's conclusion. Despite the drama of our arrival, the moderate earthquake, and last-minute change-ups in our itinerary, it's been one hell of a great trip. I'm sorry to see it end. Alas, heading back to Tokyo means we're in the home stretch now… just one more full day to go (most likely Hakone), then we depart for home. It's sad to think about, really, but I guess there's no need to get depressed about it – we've had a great time and I know we'll be back just as soon as we can. But I digress…

We've just passed Nagoya, with a number of stops to go before we reach Tokyo (Hamamatsu, Shizuoka, Atami, Shin-Yokohama and Shinagawa await us), so I have plenty of time to bring you up to speed on today's goings on.

My objective today was to introduce Nicole to the gold-laden pavilion of Kinkaku-ji (known as the Golden Pavilion) and the gardens of Ryoan-ji (the Temple of the Peaceful Dragon), then embark on a series of new adventures in the hills of Omuro (Toji-in, Myoshin-ji) before heading further west still to Arashiyama-Sagano (Tenryu-ji). If you're familiar with my previous adventures in Japan you're aware that I've been trying to get out to see Tenryu-ji (and some part of Arashiyama) since I first stepped foot here. Naiveté and poor planning kept me from visiting Arashiyama in 2004. In 2007, Arashiyama was cut loose thanks to the battery debacle that tilted the rest of my Kyoto itinerary. And in 2008, an honest attempt was made by taking a local bus through the area for Daikaku-ji's night-time light-up (even when I failed to find Daigo-ji), but there was no light to be found upon arrival. But I did ride over the area's famous bridge and passed a number of its temples and shrines from the confines of my bus seat – but that's it.

This time I made a pledge that no matter what I'd see either Daigo-ji or Tenryu-ji, but I wouldn't miss out on both. And since I had no choice but to give up on Daigo-ji the other day, there was no way I was giving up on Tenryu-ji. And I didn't have to. We made it!

But getting from K's House to Tenryu-ji to the Shinkansen is an interesting story of ups and downs. And it almost didn't get off on the right foot. Covering Sanjusangen-do and Nijo-jo the day before our Nara excursion certainly lightened our planned load today, which meant we didn't have to rush about in an attempt to reach Arashiyama before our scheduled departure (which unfortunately was a hard stop as we were required to reach Homeikan in Tokyo before their reception area closed by 10:00pm). But it also didn't mean we could sleep in to some ungodly hour. No, we arose and packed early enough – then checked out and made our way to Kyoto station with our baggage in tow.
It was 9:00am or so and we were feeling good; the first few minutes of the morning were going well. Why were we lugging our baggage with us if we weren't going to Tokyo until later you ask? So we didn't have to go back to K's House, of course! It's quite a walk from K's House to the station and having to walk there and back just for our luggage really didn't appeal to me.

There was already a plan.

Last time in Kyoto I made use of the stations' set of lockers to great effect: my bag rested at Kyoto-eki while I went touring the countryside. Later, when it came time to leave Kyoto, I met my travel companion at the station, retrieved my bag from the locker, and off we went – I didn't have to traipse all the way back to K's House for it, nor did he have to lug it all the way to the station for me. Since doing so worked out well then I advised Nicole we'd do the same now. She was on board wholeheartedly, but so was the rest of Kyoto: when we arrived at the station's gates there was hardly a locker to be found – neither around the bus terminal nor on the opposite end of the station's central exit. I was about to mutter an explicative when we found one – just one – near the far end of the bus terminal. And rather than be thwarted, we claimed it immediately lest someone snatch it out from behind us while we continued our search. However, that left us with quite a conundrum…

What to do with Nicole's bag?

There was a third set I was aware of, just inside the ticket gates. The catch was we'd have to use our JRail passes to get through, hope they were available, and then use the passes again to come back outside since we needed to use the Metro instead. To make a long story short: it worked. There were dozens upon dozens of lockers in our size available just inside the ticket booth. So Nicole's bag ended up there. And with that little hiccup settled, we took off northbound toward the Kitaoji Bus Terminal via the Karasuma Metro and hopped bus #204 from there to Kinkakuji-michi, our first stop.

Kinkaku-ji (金閣寺***), the Golden Pavilion***

Properly called Rokuon-ji, (Deer Park Temple) after the owner's posthumous name, this estate was built in the 1220s as a comfortable villa (Kitayamadai) for Saionji Kitsune (1178-1244), an aristocrat. The estate eventually withered and became the property of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (足利 義満; 1358-1408), the third shogun of the Ashiakga Shogunate. He turned this villa into a retirement estate he named Kitayamadono in 1398. Only after his death did the site become a Buddhist temple for the Rinzai sect, which is now dedicated to the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, Kannon (観音, thus it is also sometimes called Kannon-den). Kinkaku-ji is known as the Golden Pavilion for good reason: it's covered in gold leaf (which, consequently, you can buy in a small vial of at the pavilion's gift shop).

Tread softly along the stone walls and gravel walkway leading up to these stunning grounds, and pass through Somon, or Main Gate, to enter this magnificent estate. Just beyond the main gate, in amongst a beautiful stand of trees, you'll find the Shoro (Bell Tower) and the original bell owned by the Saionji family within, ready to be struck; an enormous *ichiigashi* tree, an evergreen native to Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu that is thought to have existed on site prior to the construction of Kitayamadai or planted at that time (it's also a city landmark); boat rock will be on your right-hand side next to the Kuri (Priests & Living Quarters and Kitchen), which may have been constructed during the Meio and Bunki periods (1492-1504); the Hojo (Abbots' Quarters); and the Karamon, the beautifully constructed gate of Chinese design just to the left of the Hojo also await you. It's through here, however, where you'll find Kinkaku, the Golden Pavilion, resting peacefully on the shores of a *kyouki-chi*, a mirror pond.

The pavilion and the pond on which it stands were designed to resemble the image of the Seven Treasure Pond in scenes of the Buddhist paradise. On this 6,600 square meter parcel of land you'll find the pond full of lotus plants, symbolizing the flower of truth, and several stones and islands, representing the eight oceans and nine mountains of the Buddhist creation story. As for Kinkaku itself, it's a beautiful 3-story structure of various designs, measuring 12.8 meters (42-feet) high, 10.0 meters (33 feet) wide, and 15.2 meters (40 feet) long.

The first floor, called the Hosui-in, or "Chamber of Dharma Waters", was constructed in the Shinden-zukuri style first developed in the Heian period for its palaces. This style is depicted by having a large room with a veranda and was probably used as a reception hall for Yoshimitsu's guests. The image of the Buddha Shakyamuni wearing a jeweled chaplet sits on an altar, while a seated portrait of Ashikaga Yoshimitsu rests on its left.

The second floor, called Cho-on-do, or "Grotto of Roaring Waves", is in the Buke-zukuri style originally used in Samurai houses, and it is said Yoshimitsu held private meetings here. The floor is decorated with paintings by Kano Masanobu (狩野正信; 1434-1530) and holds an image of the Bodhisattva Kannon with Shitenno images (four such guardians) on either side. The third floor, called Kukkyo-cho, or "Superb Apex", is a sparse room of 23-square feet and was reportedly used for intimate meetings with friends and for tea ceremonies. The style is of Chinese Temple, complete with bell-shaped windows and a floor that simply glows in the sunlight. The roof is thatched with thin boards of *sawara*, or Japanese cypress, and perched atop is a golden *fenghuang* (a Chinese Phoenix), which watches guard. It, like the rest of the pavilion, is leafed in gold.

But Kinkaku isn't the only treasure to behold here: beautiful and spacious grounds surround the pavilion. You'll find a small flight of stone steps leading up to Shin'un, a small shrine dedicated to the Shinto god Kasuga Myojin (a guardian); the Gingasen, or Milky Way Spring, what was once a source of water Yoshimitsu used for his tea ceremonies; beautiful expanses of trees and shrubs; and Ryumon-taki, a small waterfall. Check out the rock at the base of this waterfall: it's called Carp Stone (*rigyoseki*), so named to impress an ancient Chinese myth of carp swimming upstream to transform into dragons. The dragon is manifested by the rock at the base of this 2.3-meter falls.

Turn up the steps from Ryumon-taki and be led up the mountainside, across a small stone bridge named Tiger's Gorge Bridge (*kokeikyo*) to Anmintaku, Tranquility Pond. Also known as Ushitaku and Bountaku, this small pool is surrounded by lush foliage and inhabits a small island with a five-element Stupa (a Buddhist monument) known as the White Snake Mound (Hakuja no Tsuka). Beyond the mound you'll find a teahouse and a hall for worshiping the deity Fudo Myoo (不動明王).

If there's one unsettling thing to learn about Kinkaku-ji is that what you see today is not the original, nor is it even hundreds of years old. A 21-year old student from Otani University, who also just happened to be a monk, torched the original on July 2, 1950. Today the site serves as a Shariden, a house for Buddha relics, but remains a wonderful destination and a sight to behold. The grounds are spacious and the gardens beautiful; it's hard to grasp that the villa once was someone's residence. It really tends to boggle the mind. And the Golden Pavilion itself… when it catches the sunlight, Kinkaku sings!

Ryoan-ji (竜安寺), the Temple of the Peaceful Dragon

From golden Kinkaku-ji, we turned westward and rode bus #59 down Kinukake-no-michi to Ryoan-ji, the "Temple of the Peaceful Dragon". It, like so many in Kyoto, is recognized as a World Heritage site for its temple buildings and spectacular gardens, but what continues to draw me here is not the promise of beautiful foliage, but its rock garden – a world renowned example of Zen creationism.

If I've described the grounds of Kinkaku-ji as beautiful then what exists here at Ryoan-ji is heavenly: as a residence it must have simply been nirvana to live here. Today, this huge 120-acre estate is of the Myoshinji School of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism. So while affiliated with nearby Kinkaku-ji and Ginkaku-ji, it's of a different school lineage. Its history is as widely vast as all the other places visited thus far, and just as interesting:

The earliest temple recorded on this site dates back to 983 and originally was an estate for the Fujiwara family. Some years later the estate served as a retirement home for an emperor and became known as Tokudai-ji (or Enyu-ji). During the Muromachi Period (1336-1573), a military commander named Hosokawa Katsumoto (1430-1473) built his estate on its ruins though he was later killed during the before-mentioned Onin Wars. It was after his death the estate (now laid in ruins) became the birthplace of Ryoan-ji.

A massive pond, called Kyoyochi, is the center focal point for the entire villa and is beautifully lined with native trees and filled with varying species of lily pad. Until recently one could find many Mandarin ducks floating on its surface, which earned Ryoan-ji the nickname Oshidori-dera (the temple of Mandarin ducks) and the pond the name Oshidori-ike.

You'll also find within the pond two small islands: Fushitora-jima ("Hiding Tiger Island") and Benten-jima, so called for a small shrine that houses an image of Sarsavati, the lone female of the seven Shinto gods of good luck. Take your time strolling around this magnificent pond, I beg of you. Stop and wonder at the lilies as they rise out of the mirror surface and relish the inherent beauty found here. Depending on the season, you'll find an array of color in the garden and I daresay you'll not find a more peaceful setting or a more stunning place to stroll. Further up are the buildings that consist of the rest of this complex: the Kuri (Monks quarters), the Hojo (Abbots quarters), and the Zorokuan (tea room). The Rock Garden lies within the Hojo but it's of the Zorokuan I wish to speak of first: A true gem lies here, if you know to look for it.

It goes by the name “Tsukubai” and its message outweighs its practicality; for its here, nestled in the shrubbery, where one of the most famous washbasins in all of Kyoto (and perhaps all of Japan) exists. Used to rinse the hands and mouth before entering the tearoom, this washbasin was reportedly contributed by Tokugawa Mitsukuni (徳川光圀; 1628-1700), a feudal lord and a member of one of the most influential families of the Edo Period in Japan. While not known to American audiences, Tokugawa is credited for compiling the “Dai-Nippon-Shi” – the greatest history of Japan containing 397 volumes that he originally started in 1657. But it’s not its contributor’s name or his feats that make this basin unique, it’s the inscription chiseled around its edge.

吾唯足知
われ ただ たる を しる
ワレ タダ タル ヲ シル
Ware tada taru wo shiru
“I learn only to be contented”

The basin’s top, which at first glance appears to be a recreation of an ancient Chinese coin, is the keeper of a riddle. Piece it together and you’ll learn one of the most important concepts in Zen teachings. You may first realize that the central part of the basin, which should be circular if depicting a coin, is square – this is your first clue. It’s actually the radical for “mouth” (口 – Kuchi). You’ll find other radicals around: there’s “five” (五 – Go) and “arrow” (矢 – Ya). Reading from right to left and piecing together the radicals correctly, you’ll find this inscription encoded: *He who learns only to be contented is spiritually rich, while the one who does not learn to be contented is spiritually poor even if he is materially wealthy.*

This is an important philosophical realism that Zen teaches and one we can contemplate gazing into another of Ryoan-ji's infamous treasures: the rock garden. Its simple design was laid out at the end of the 15th century, measuring 25-meters east to west and 10-meters south to north, and consists of only white sand and fifteen rocks. Notice the rocks are arranged in groups of five, two, three, two and three and only 14 of the 15 can be seen from any one vantage point. It is said that only when you attain spiritual enlightenment, as a result of deep Zen meditation, can you see the last invisible stone. Notice still the raked lines are circles around the rock groups and yet straight everywhere else. *The lines stop without a single misplaced pebble when they touch the circular patterns, then resume unchanged beyond them as if the rocks are islands.*

I sat and stared for a few minutes, trying to lose myself in the serenity and simplicity of the garden. And for a moment I forgot all about my agenda... and that my time in Japan was short and priceless. Unfortunately, though, with the throngs of people about this afternoon insistent on carrying on a conversation it was hard to fully find contentment, so we took our leave and prepared to dive into the unknown streets of Omuro-area Kyoto in hopes of finding Toji-in, some 500-800 meters from Ryoan-ji's front door.

Toji-in (等持院)

Toji-in, as a Buddhist temple of the Rinzai Tenryu sect, was founded at the foot of Mt. Kinaugasa in 1341 by Ashikaga Takauji himself in fulfillment of a vow. He did so under the guidance of famous Zen teacher, calligraphist, poet and garden designer Muso Soseki, who went on to create the gardens and ponds of the temple. Toji-in later became the Ashikaga dynasty's funeral temple (*bodaiji*) and all fifteen of the Ashikaga shoguns are buried here. As such Toji-in was number one of the Kyoto Jissetsu, the temples immediately below the Kyoto Gozan. The temple's name was later chosen from one of Takauji's posthumous names: Toji-inden (等持院殿).

Finding Toji-in was quite the experience: I've been lost on the streets of Kyoto before, but not quite like this – not on purpose! With just a simple direction to walk in, we left Ryoan-ji and took its stone path down beyond Kinukaku-no-michi (the main road between Kinkaku-ji and Ryoan-ji) ending up in the middle of the Omuro neighborhood without a clue in the world where to go next. Knowing that the temple was "left", we continued walking in that direction, meandering through crooked, narrow streets that were eerily quiet and devoid of people. Eventually we ran into a small sign pointing toward Toji-in, but it would still take a bit of luck to find it. Eventually, just before I was about to give up and press on, we found it hidden away down a deserted looking street.

When you pass through the outer gate to enter the grounds of Toji-in, you first come upon a large graveyard. The two most striking features of this graveyard are a state of Buddha and another of Shozo Makino – the later one of the early legends of Japanese cinema (he was a director of a local stage theater troupe but made the transition to film in 1907; he is still revered in Japanese film circles.) Points of interest inside the temple are:

- **The Hondo** – Built in 1616 as an original sub-temple (*tacchu*) of nearby Myoshin-ji, here you'll find a painting of Daruma (who is credited with bringing Buddhism from India to China and founding the Zen sect – he can easily be recognized by his big eyes and round head).

- **The Garden** – Muso Soseki designed the garden as two halves of a whole. There's an eastern part ("Shinji-chi") and a western part ("Fuyo-cho"). The western one, referred to as the "lotus" because it winds its way around the pond, is the closest one to the Hondo. Notice that the pond is uniquely designed in the shape of the Chinese character for "mind", kokoro (心), which gives the garden its name. Besides the numerous *satsuki* and *tsutsuji* rhododendrons which give a nice pink/red color touch in spring, this area of the garden is also home to the temple's famous tea house ("Seiren-tei"). The eastern part of the garden has taller trees and arranged stones; therefore it is much darker. It is a place of moss and maple trees and thus most beautiful in autumn. South of the main hall is another smaller garden – a *karesansuni* (枯山水), or dry landscape garden.

And then there's the Reikio-den (霊光殿), a smallish building enshrining Tokugawa Ieyasu (the first Tokugawa shogun) and all of the Ashikaga shoguns.

The sixteen statues, which are of limited artistic value, are lined up in two rows on opposite sides of the room, each sitting and carrying a *shaku* (笏; a scepter) symbolizing their shogunal power. Their sculptors are unknown, but they have been tentatively dated to the early seventeenth century. The presence among the Ashikaga shoguns of a statue of Tokugawa Ieyasu, founder of the Tokugawa *shogunate*, suggests that

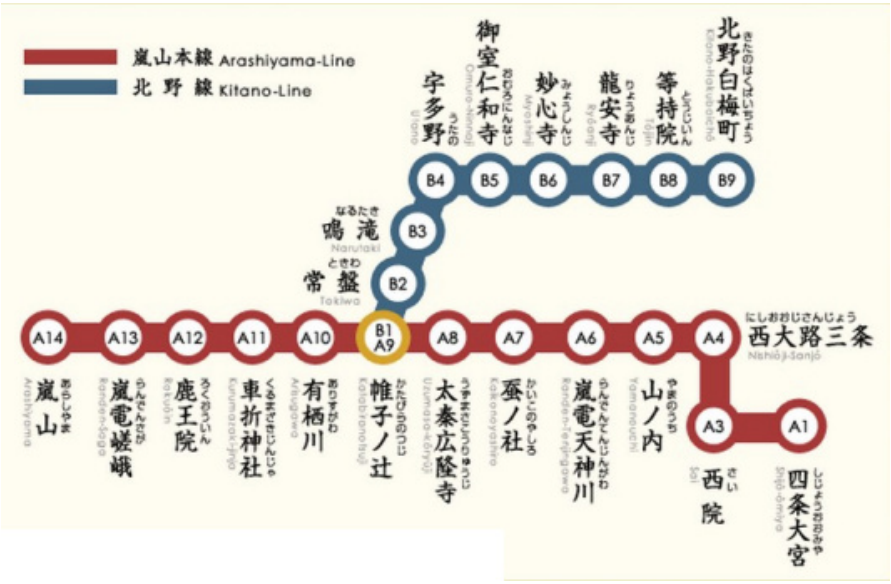
Tokugawa wished to link himself to the Ashikaga clan and give an impression of continuity between the two dynasties. Like them, Ieyasu claimed to be a descendant of the Minamoto clan. That may not have been the wisest course: in 1863, nine men broke into the Reiko-den and stole the heads of the first three Ashikaga shoguns, Takauji, Yoshiakira and Yoshimitsu, as a form of revenge for their role in usurping the emperor's power during the Nanbokucho period. The severed heads were then exposed on the banks of the Kamo River together with placards listing their crimes against the nation.

Images of Daruma and Muso Soseki flanking a central image of Jizo Bodhisattva can also be found in the Reikio-den.

The Randen

Leaving Toji-in was as harrowing as finding it – back through the twisting and turning streets of Omuro. We got so turned around that I had no choice but to ask a police guard where the Randen station was. Unfortunately he didn't seem to understand me at first – my Japanese isn't that great – but once we switched over to English he was able to understand me enough to point me in the right direction: "That-a way".

“Randen” (嵐電) is actually the nickname of the Keifuku Electric Railroad (京福電気鉄 道株式会社), which began service at the turn of the century and has continued to operate as the only streetcar in Kyoto history since 1910. As a matter of fact, there are two small lines the Randen trams run on in this part of Kyoto: the Arashiyama Main Line (嵐山本線) running 7.2 kilometers end-to-end, and the Kitano Line (北野線), at a much smaller 3.8 kilometers. The Main Line connects Kyoto’s city center (Shijo-Omiya terminal) and scenic Arashiyama area. The Kitano Line runs from Kitano Hakubaicho Station near Kitano Tenman-gu to Katabiranotsuji Station in the midst of Main Line. The company also runs cable and ropeway lines for visitors to Mount Hiei on the northeastern edge of the city, but that’s neither here nor there. Actually, it’s there but that’s beside the point.



A few minutes’ walk down the Omuro hills landed us at the Toji-in station of the Randen Kitano line, which was really nothing more than a flimsy looking platform along the side of narrow-gauge tracks. After a few minutes’ waiting in solitude the tram appeared. Boarding in the rear (like you’d do a bus in Kansai), we then took off toward Myoshinji’s stop: something we could actually see ahead of us down the tracks – so it wasn’t far. At first I wasn’t sure we were going to get there… the Randen tram seems to run off of a lawnmower engine (or sounds like it anyway, for all the buzzing and vibrations), but somehow it managed to plod along and soon enough we were at the northern gates of Myoshinji, the second of two large Buddhist temple complexes in Kyoto (the other being Daitoku-ji).

Myoshin-ji (妙心寺)

Myoshin-ji is the head temple of the associated branch of Rinzai Zen Buddhism. The Myoshin-ji school is by far the largest school in Rinzai Zen, approximately as big as the other thirteen branches combined: it contains within it about three thousand five hundred temples throughout Japan, together with a handful overseas, of the approximately six thousand total Rinzai temples, and also has nineteen associated monasteries, of the total of forty monasteries and one nunnery. But this school is different from other schools of Rinzai Zen. The Myoshin-ji school does not necessarily follow the set of established *koan* for the sake of testing one's stage of enlightenment. Rather the Myoshin-ji school allows the master to specifically tailor *koan* to a student's needs and background. This method diverges from the traditionally accepted canon of *koan*.

Did You Know?

It is no coincidence that the JR Train station near Myoshinji is called "Hanazono". The district and many of the areas surrounding it are named "Hanazono" in his honor.

The grounds of the temple was once the villa of the cloistered emperor Hanazono (花園; reign: 1308-1318), who abdicated the throne to become a monk. By 1337, Hanazono was in a position to offer his sprawling villa for his new-found service, and asked his teacher – the Zen master Shuho Myocho (宗峰妙超; 1282-1337) – to suggest a suitable first abbot. Shuho recommended his disciple Kanzan Egen (關山慧玄; 1277–1360), who was doing his post-enlightenment training in the mountains of Gifu Prefecture at the time. Kanzan accepted the invite and Myoshinji was founded and for a while Myoshinji flourished, but after Kanzan's death, the temple went into a period of sharp decline. For a time the name was changed to Ryu'un-ji (龍雲寺), and the temple was placed under the control of Nanzen-ji. In 1432, the fourth abbot, Nippo Soshun (日峰宗舜; 1368–1448), restored the temple buildings as well as the name Myoshin-ji. Nearly all of the buildings were destroyed in the Onin War in 1467, but were rebuilt, initially under the leadership of Sekko Soshin (雪江宗深; 1408-1486), the sixth abbot.

Following that time Myoshin-ji has prospered. The main buildings of the temple today were built during the later Muromachi period (1333–1568), when Myoshin-ji attracted the support of many of the country's leaders. The temple precincts were expanded in 1509 through acquisition of property from the nearby imperial temple Ninna-ji (仁和寺). In the sixteenth century Myoshin-ji instituted the four-branch system of administering its sub-temples: the Ryosen-ha (龍泉派), Tokai-ha (東海派), Reiun-ha (靈雲派), and Shotaku-ha (聖澤派). Myoshin-ji has also grown substantially during the Meiji era (1868–1912). There are now forty-seven sub-temples within the Myoshin-ji compound, and more than three thousand affiliated temples throughout Japan. The temple precincts are laid out in the classical Zen monastic pattern, in which, starting from the south, the Sanmon (山門; Mountain Gate), Butsuden (佛殿; Buddha Hall), Hatto (法堂; Dharma Hall), and Hojo (大方丈; Abbot's Quarters) are aligned toward the north, with the Yokushitsu (浴室; Bath House), Kyozo (經藏; sutra library) to the east of this south-north axis and the Sodo (僧堂; Monk's Hall) to the west.

The complex is located between Ichijo Street (一条通; ichijo-dori) and *shimotachiuri-dori* (下立売通), and can be entered from either of the complex's two main gates: one found in the north (just a few hundred meters from the Randen Myoshinji station), the other in the south (just a few hundred meters from the JR Hanazono station). We entered from the north, having disembarked the Randen at Myoshin-ji.

The complex is quite sprawling, featuring a number of winding paths flanked by high walls, allowing disorientation to come very easily. As is usual in Japanese temple construction, the main buildings are located on the axis from the south gate, in the south-west quadrant of the complex. There is a main north-south path connecting the north gate and the south gate, starting parallel to the main buildings, then continuing north, flanked by veering slight, and ending at the north gate. There is also an east-west path leading east from the main buildings (starting at in the west at Tenju-in, passing between the *hatto* and *butsuden*, then ending in the east, after a curve, at Torin-in). In addition to the direct north-south path, there is a longer path that proceeds east from the north gate, winds past Keishun-in, and then terminates in the east-west just south of Daishin-in. In addition to these main routes, there are a number of side paths. These paths are all lined with sub-temples, generally with a single entrance.

In fact many of the buildings in Myoshin-ji are National Treasures or Important Cultural Properties. The temple bell (the oldest in Japan, cast in 698) is one of them, as are many of the paintings, hanging scrolls, sliding screens, and other art treasures in its possession, and those of its sub-temples. Of the forty some-odd temples within the complex (the names of which I shall spare you of), and the four that were supposed to be open to the public – Taizo-in (退蔵院), Shunko-in (春光院), Daishin-in (大心院), and Keishun-in (桂春院) – we were only able to gain entrance to the first: Taizo-in.

Taizo-in bills itself as the oldest and most famous of the sub-temples, beloved by the people of Kyoto for more than 600 years. It's appeal, they muse, stems from each and every one of its unique treasures: the dry landscape garden – *Motonobu-no-niwa* – by Kano Motonobu, Josetsu's masterpiece, *Hyonenzu* ("Catching a Catfish with a Gourd"), one of Japan's oldest surviving ink paintings, the *Yoko-en* (a pond-and-stroll-style garden), and a *suikinkutsu*, a wash basin in which drops of water echo clearly in a hidden underground chamber, and the *sanmon*, or entry gate; it is known as a "yaku-i-mon" (gates used only by high-ranking individuals) and consists of two central columns and two supporting columns. Even among the sub-temples of Myoshin-ji this gate is said to be the most beautiful and balanced example of the yaku-i-mon; it was built in the middle of the Edo period (1603-1867).

Motonobu-no-niwa

Motonobu Kano, the Master of Zen and also a painter of the Muromachi period, designed this garden and as such, it retains a very graceful, elegant and painterly ambience, giving it a unique air. The background scenery of the garden consists mainly of camellia, pine, Japanese umbrella pine, and other evergreens, presumably planted to present an "eternal beauty" that remains the same throughout the changing seasons.
At the time it was built, Narabigaoka Hill could be seen in the far distance, and we can imagine how this *shakkei* ("borrowed scenery") created depth and gave the garden a dynamic appearance. The garden itself consists of efficiently arranged stones around the central waterfalls and Horai Island (one of five mythical Chinese islands where immortals were said to live) in an area of 50 *tsubo* (one *tsubo* = 3.3 square meters) and primarily makes use of curved, painterly lines in its layout. Compared to the rock garden of Ryoan-ji, which does away with "borrowed scenery" and consists of only of the most basic materials of sand and stone, the *Motonobu-no-niwa* of Taizo-in has a more pictorial, specific, and accessible feel that is suited to a painter. *Motonobu-no-niwa*, is believed to have been constructed when Kano Motonobu was in his 70's, at the peak of his maturity as an artist. The garden is a three-dimensional re-imagining of one of his paintings, and is said to be his last work. The fact that a garden was the final work of a painter makes it all the more unique.

Did You Know?

It is said that the reason *karesansui* ("dry landscape gardens") developed as the hojo (head priest residence) garden is that it represented not only mountains, rivers, oceans, and nature, but the entire universe in limited space. This concept, inseparable from the core of Zen philosophical thought, hints at the unique world of Zen.

Hyonenzu — "Catching a Catfish with a Gourd"

The *Hyonenzu*, designated a National Treasure, is the principal treasure of Taizo-in. Josetsu, the creator, devoted all his energies to this work, which was commissioned by the Fourth Shogun of the Muromachi period (1333-1573), Ashikaga Yoshimochi. Josetsu was a Zen priest who lived at Shokoku-ji Temple in Kyoto and became famous for his painting skills around the beginning of the Muromachi period (1333-1573). He studied *sogenga* (Chinese painting of the Sung and Yuang dynasties) and was a pioneer of Japanese "*suibokuga*" (ink painting), and it is said that he was even admired by the great Japanese painter Sesshu. This painting is the most important treasure among all of those handed down at Taizo-in. It is known as a typical example of "*kanga*" or the Chinese-style ink paintings of the Muromachi period. As is also apparent in the commentaries, this work presents a deeply meaningful *koan*, peculiar to Zen, of trying to catch a scale-less catfish with a slippery gourd.

Taizo-in is the true gem of this complex.

Myoshin-ji is also known as the "Temple of the Wondrous Mind" but neither Nicole nor I found that to be so. Quite frankly neither of us were all that impressed by what we saw here. Nicole felt the complex was too closed up and formal; we found all but one of the sub-temples actually open (although there were supposed to be four). To me the complex was just too hot and unforgiving, very unlike the lush areas surrounding Daitoku-ji. And the couple of areas we did find that had actual people around them did not appear to be very courteous. One actually turned us away suggesting they were not open and yet a sign right next to them listed tour times. Only Taizo-in was truly open and inviting and while it was nice enough it's not enough for me to ever want to return and tour again.

Arashiyama (嵐山)

Taking the Randen out to Arashiyama is actually one of the best things you can do. The terminal station – simply called "Arashiyama" – is right in the middle of the action, unlike the JR Sagano-Arashiyama station, which is a 10 minute walk away. All this being said, for those planning to utilize the Randen in this way be cautious: a transfer mid-way is necessary, and you're going to have to traverse to a different platform to collect the appropriate tram. It's a lesson we learned when we got there and thankfully a nice citizen recognized our confusion and stepped up to help us – using perfect, accent-less English I might add! You see, the line jaunting off toward Myoshin-ji, Ryoan-ji, Toji-in and Kitano-Tenmangu is a branch line, the real Arashiyama line crosses here, at Omiya, and there is no thru service. But once we were directed to the proper platform the transfer was quick and the ride into Arashiyama relatively easy, so don't worry.

Arashiyama is a pleasant, touristy district in the western outskirts of Kyoto. The area has been a popular destination since the Heian Period (794-1185), when nobles came to enjoy its natural setting (the area is particularly popular during the cherry blossom and fall color seasons – now, though, it was just busy). The Togetsukyo Bridge ("Moon Crossing Bridge") is Arashiyama's well known, central landmark. It was originally built during the Heian Period (most recently reconstructed during the 1930s) and looks particularly attractive in combination with the forested mountainside in the background. A riverside park with dozens of cherry trees is located just adjacent to the bridge (unfortunately already out of bloom).

North of central Arashiyama the atmosphere becomes less touristy and more rural, with several small temples scattered along the base of the wooded mountains. The area north of the Togetsukyo Bridge is also known as Sagano, while the name "Arashiyama" technically just refers to the mountains on the southern bank of the river (but is commonly used to name the entire district). Many small shops, restaurants and other attractions are found nearby, including Tenryu-ji.

Tenryu-ji, located on the Sagano side, is the head temple of its own branch of Rinzai Zen Buddhism. In the early Heian period, Empress Tachibana Kachiko, wife of Emperor Saga, founded a temple here called Danrin-ji (檀林寺), which was historically significant of being the first Zen temple in Japan. Unfortunately the temple fell into disrepair over the next four hundred years. In the mid-thirteenth century, Emperor Go-Saga and his son Emperor Kameyama (龜山; 1249–1305) turned the area into an imperial villa, which they called "Kameyama Detached Palace" (亀山殿, *Kameyama-dono*). The name "Kameyama", which literally means "Turtle Mountain", was selected due to the shape of Mt. Ogura, which lies to the west of Tenryu-ji—it is similar in shape to that of a turtle's shell. In fact, all Japanese temples constructed after the Nara period have a *sango*, or mountain name, used as an honorary prefix. Tenryu-ji's *sango*, Reigizan (霊亀山) – "Mountain of the Spirit Turtle" – was also selected due to the shape of Ogura-san.

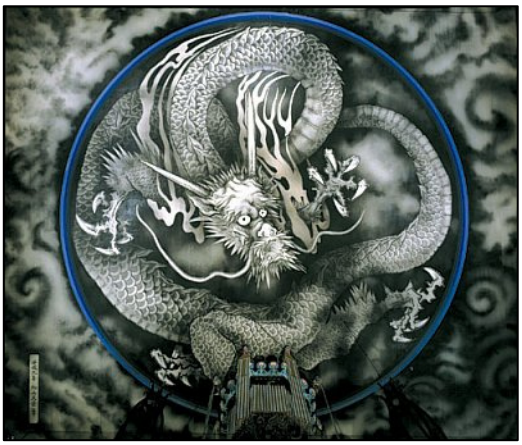
As a villa, it was here that Go-Daigo, Emperor Kameyama's grandson, was raised and educated. After Emperor Go-Daigo (後醍醐; 1288-1339) died in the mountains of Yoshino following the civil war that brought the Ashikaga family to power (recall this was the "Kemmu Restoration", a coup d'état that overthrew the Kamakura or Minamoto Shogunate, reinstituting Imperial rule, but it didn't last long), the ruling shogun Ashikaga Takauji (足利尊氏; 1305–58) re-established the villa as a temple in 1339 in the Emperor's honor. It is said that the temple was originally going to be named Ryakuo Shiseizen-ji (暦応資聖禅寺), "Ryakuo" being the name of the reign of the emperor of the northern court at that time. However, Ashikaga Takauji's younger brother, Tadayoshi (直義; 1306–1352) supposedly dreamt about a golden dragon flitting about the Oi River (also known as the Hozu River), lying just south of the temple, and the temple was named *Tenryu Shiseizen-ji* (天龍資聖禅寺) instead —the term "Tenryu" literally means "dragon of the sky". Today the temple is known as the "Temple of the Heavenly Dragon."

In order to finance the temple's construction, Takauji's younger brother Tadayoshi and Muso Soseki (the temple's first priest) commissioned a vessel, known as the "Tenryu-ji Ship," on a trade mission to Yuan-dynasty China.

In 1342, the new temple was designated number two of the Kyoto Five Mountain monasteries. By 1345 the major buildings of the temple were complete, and the temple was opened in a great ceremony combined with a memorial service for Emperor Go-Daigo. A year later Soseki constructed a Sodo (Monk's Hall) capable of accommodating a thousand monks. Although Tenryu-ji was at first designated number two in the Five Mountains system, in 1386 it was accorded the top position, only to lose it in 1401 to Shokoku-ji. In 1410, however, it recovered its number one ranking and has remained in that position ever since. Soseki's lineage prospered, and came to play a leading role in the flourishing Zen literary culture known as *gozan bungaku* (五山文學).

The temple prospered as the most important Rinzai temple in Kyoto, and the temple grounds grew to roughly 330,000 square meters in size, extending all the way to present-day Katabira-no-Tsuji station on the Keifuku Railway. At one time, the massive grounds were said to contain some 150 sub-temples, however, in the centuries since its founding, Tenryu-ji has been ravaged by fires a total of eight times, first in 1358 and again in 1367; on both occasions the Zen master Shun'oku Myoha (春屋明葩; 1311–1388), Muso Soseki's disciple, helped restore the temple. Fires occurred again in 1373, 1380, 1447, and 1468 (when it was torched during the Onin War). Some reconstruction occurred following, but it was not until after 1585, when Toyotomi Hideyoshi (豐臣秀吉; 1536-1598) lent his support to the temple, that full scale restorative works began. Further fires occurred in 1815 and 1864 (when Tenryu-ji was again torched during disturbances surrounding the end of the Tokugawa *shogunate*).

Today, most of the present buildings – the main hall (*Hojo*), drawing hall (*Shoin*) and temple kitchen (*Kuri*) with its distinctive small tower – date from the relatively recent Meiji Period (1868-1912). However, the landscape garden behind the Hojo (Main Hall) is one of the oldest in Japan, retaining the same form as when it was designed by Muso Soseki in the fourteenth century. Known as the Sogenchi Garden (曹源池), it was the first Special Historical Scenic Area named by the Japanese government, and in 1994 it was designated by the United Nations as a World Cultural Heritage site.



With the main hall under renovation until March 2014 it wasn't possible to enter to see the mystic dragon painted on its ceiling, only the garden was open. And unlike the temple buildings, Tenryu-ji's garden has survived the centuries in its original form.

Created by the famous garden designer Muso Soseki, the beautiful landscape garden features a central pond (曹源池, *sogenchi*) surrounded by rocks, pine trees and the forested Arashiyama Mountains. The pond's group of stone consists of a cluster of rocks suggesting a mountainous island, a three-slab stone bridge established along the shore line, and a dry cascade constructed on the hillside just beyond the bridge. A succession of peninsulas (*dejima*) carries the eye toward the tree-planted island at the eastern end.

The setting of rocks both against the shore and slightly removed from it is prescribed by the author of the Sakuteiki, the earliest of the Japanese treatises on gardening. The trees on this small island are pine and maple, the flowers azalea and iris helping to complete this beautiful picture.

* * *

After a stroll along the path of Arashiyama's famous bamboo groves lying just behind Tenryu-ji (which was jammed with tourists, but the site was interesting), we returned to Kyoto station by way of JR Saga-Arashiyama, collected our luggage at our respective lockers, got a seat reservation for the *shinkansen*, and then bid our farewells to Kyoto a little earlier than planned: we grabbed Hilari #476, which left Kyoto-eki at 4:56pm.

We're due to arrive at Tokyo-eki at 7:40pm and considering we've just passed Shimbashi we're going to be rolling in very soon, which should give us plenty of time to reach Homeikan before their front desk closes and maybe even head out for a look-see of Akihabara, Ginza or Shibuya! Then again we might just want to say in and grab a bath – we're hoping to try out the *suchiro-buro*, or family bath, this time round. This wouldn't be all that different from the baths we've already taken at Homeikan (Japanese style) but we do it together, alone, rather than with strangers.

And that's certainly something to look forward to!

Until next time,
Ja ne!

「The Fuji-Hakone-Izu Circuit」

Wednesday | April 17, 2013

Ahhhhhhhhh, pardon us while we settle in…

We've just had another rousing soak in Homeikan's *suchiro-buro*, or family bath, and I have to say it is one of the most relaxing moments we've had here in Japan. Being able to lock the door and keep things private is truly one of the most peaceful things about it, besides soaking in the hot mineral water (which can be almost a little too hot) that is. It's really comforting to know you don't have to rush through a shower just so you're not walked in on by strangers, you know? Of course, we're not there now… no, we're back in our room, which is quite a bit different than the one we had earlier. This one is #254-Kasuga (春日；かすが), an 8 *tatami* mat, 2 door room complete with a small portico, a waiting room, a main room, and a balcony with chairs! We were quite surprised to see it when we arrived here yesterday, though it does appear to be a little noisier than the room we had earlier in the trip (sleeping last night was a little harder than normal – of course it could have been the pillow. It's traditional buckwheat-filled and it wrecked havoc on my sinuses). Still, it's a nice room and we're quite grateful for the hospitality.

We're soaking up as much as we can tonight, as this is our last night here in Japan. Sure, we'll have a few hours tomorrow morning to tie up any loose ends, but, for the most part today's visit to Hakone and tonight's stroll through Akihabara were the last two official actions of our trip. Although Hakone turned out to be a little lackluster (thanks in part to the shroud of clouds), strolling through the wonderful world of Akihabara more than made up for it. I've not seen Nicole's face light up this much since we petted the deer in Nara! Anything and everything to satisfy an otaku's heart and soul can be found there, and that's no stretch of the imagination.

Like anime? There are literally tons of stores. Enjoy gaming? Check out the dozens of arcades lining the streets. Fond of cafés? You'll find a myriad ranging from maid services to hard-core sci-fi themed. Looking for a little *hentai*? Yes, you'll even find sex shops along the promenade.

That's the world of Akihabara, and we love it. But, as usual, I'm getting ahead of myself.

Hakone is Tokyo-3

Today's trip was all about getting a closer look at Mt. Fuji and it is perhaps with a little irony, since we walked through Akihabara earlier this evening, that we'd attempt to get our close-up of Fuji-san from Hakone. In the anime series Neon Genesis Evangelion, Hakone is renamed "Tokyo-3" and becomes the setting of the series, alongside Mount Hakone. In truth, Hakone (箱根) is part of the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park (富士箱根伊豆国立公園), less than 100 kilometers from Tokyo. The national park, one of the first four in Japan, covers 1,227 square kilometers (474 sq mi) across Yamanashi, Shizuoka, and Kanagawa Prefectures. Rather than being a specific spot, the park is a collection of dispersed tourist sites that dot the region: Mount Fuji, Fuji Five Lakes, Hakone, the Izu Peninsula, and the Izu Islands.

I've been trying to reach the Fuji-Hakone region from the onset, although I must confess that the first attempt was less than half-hearted; I thought about it but never seriously considered it. For my second visit (2007), it was seriously considered before the integration of Cirque du Soleil's Dralion (performing in Osaka) and Hiroshima/Miyajima into my trip itinerary. And on my last visit, in 2008, Fuji-Hakone not only made it onto the itinerary, stopping there was agreed upon by my travel partner, alas a better idea came around: return for a chance to view The Lion King musical, celebrating 10 years in Tokyo, which, of course, is what we ended up doing. So this time I was resolved to make it a priority.

And we did!

Famous for hot springs, natural beauty and the view of nearby Mt. Fuji, Hakone is one of the most popular destinations among Japanese and international tourists looking for a break from Tokyo. During weekends and holidays travel to Hakone can be as harrowing as walking around Shibuya – crowded – but not so much during the week. Completing the Fuji-Hakone circuit can be accomplished a number of ways, but the most popular and attractive way is to circle the region with its five different means of transport (mountain train, cable-car, ropeway, boat and bus) by using the Hakone Free Pass. Since all of the transportation in the area is administered by Odakyu Railways it makes a lot of sense to pick up one of these passes. Having one gives you…

1. One round trip from the Tokyo area to Hakone by Odakyu Railways, unless you purchase the pass at Odawara, Hakone-Yumoto or Mishima Stations.
2. Unlimited use of Odakyu affiliated buses, trains, boats, cable-cars and ropeways within the Hakone area.
3. Discounted admission to selected tourist attractions.

Hakone Free Pass		
	2-day	**3-day**
From Shinjuku Station	¥5,000	¥5,500
From Odawara Station	¥3,900	¥4,400

The pass comes in two flavors – a 2-day and a 3-day – and its cost is based on whether you purchase your tickets from Shinjuku or Odawara. This means, of course, that holders of the JRail pass could take a *shinkansen* (or local train) to Odawara and purchase the Hakone ticket from there, or use Odakyu Railways exclusively, departing from Shinjuku station and having everything covered by one ticket. Our original plan was to do just that: use our JR pass to get out to Odawara then use the Free Pass from there, but since we used it earlier than originally planned to traverse Matsumoto there was little choice in the matter: using Odakyu Railways from Shinjuku was our only viable option. It turned out to be quite the nice ride too and it gave me a chance to utilize yet another new-to-me mode of transportation: Odakyu Rail.

Odakyu Electric Railway Co., Ltd. (小田急電鉄株式会社; *Odakyu Dentetsu Kabushiki-gaisha*), or OER, is a major railway company based in Tokyo best known for its Romancecar series of limited express trains from Tokyo to Odawara, Enoshima, Tama New Town, and Hakone.

The Odakyu Electric Railway forms the core of the Odakyu Group, which comprises 102 companies and includes the Enoshima Electric Railway, Hakone Tozan Railway, Odakyu Bus, Odakyu Department Store, and Hyatt Regency Tokyo hotel. The Odakyu Odawara Line is the company's main line, stretching 82.5 kilometers from Shinjuku through the southwest suburbs of Tokyo to the city of Odawara, the gateway to Hakone in Kanagawa Prefecture. It is a busy commuter line and is also known for its "Romancecar" (ロマンスカー; *Romansuka*) limited express services, the very same service we were going to be using to reach Odawara. Consequently, the name comes from romance seats, two-person seats without separating armrests when one-person seats were a norm. Some Romancecars are equipped with standard seats featuring armrests. Other railroad companies also used "romance cars" or "romance seats" (a Japanese portmanteau for "loveseat") for their special accommodation passenger cars, but Odakyu holds the trademark for the term "Romancecar".

Did You Know?

The RomanceCar service started in 1957 with the 3000 series SE train set, breaking the world speed record (145 km/h or 90 mph) for a narrow gauge train. This record gave impetus for the design of the first Shinkansen, the 0 series.

Either way, getting to *Shinkjuku* at that time of the morning required another white-gloved treatment via *Ikebukuro* and *Shinjuju-sanchome* stations, although by this time in our trip we just breezed right through. Not that our route was any less filled with people rushing to work – no – we're just used to it by now. We arrived at busy Shinjuku station, cut through the throngs of people to find the Odakyu platforms (after just a little bit of a mix-up) and purchased our tickets to Hakone with a 10:00am departure on the company's VSE service train, along with a number of other tourists – foreign and domestic alike. We, like they, were hedging their bets, hoping the clouds enshrouding the area would clear off before arrival. Since we were a little early we indulged in a quick bite at the Okakyu "RomanceCar Café", and then awaited our train's arrival from the platform, watching the people come and go as they pleased.

Odawara (小田原市**)**

About 80 minutes after departing Shinjuku terminal we arrived in Odawara, spotting the remnants of the city's castle from the comforts of our train. Although Odawara is more of a thoroughfare for the *shinkansen*, there's actually quite a bit of history here. Having been settled since prehistoric times, the area has seen its share of warfare, but perhaps none so much as during the end of the Heian Period – one of the periods of Japanese history I find the most fascinating: when imperial Japan, ruled by Emperor, gave way to feudal Japan and the power of the Shogun for almost 700 years.

In fact, one of the first and arguably most important campaigns of the Genpei War was fought near here: the Battle of Ishibashiyama (1180). The Genpei War was the culmination of a decades-long conflict between two of Japan's most powerful families of the age – the Minamoto (源) and Taira (平) – over dominance of the Imperial court, and by extension, control of Japan itself. The battle fought here was one in which Minamoto Yoritomo, who would become Shogun less than a decade later, commanded his family's forces for the first time.

The initial players in this power struggle were none other than the Emperor (Toba) and two members of the ruling (and thus powerful) Fujiwara clan: Fujiwara Tadamichi and his younger brother Fujiwara Yorinaga. The first strike in this long, protracted conflict began after Emperor Toba forced his son, Sutoku, to abdicate the throne in favor of a younger son from another consort, Konoe. Konoe died and while Sutoku harbored the expectation that his son would then ascend the throne, his hopes became dashed by the elevation of yet another of his brothers, he who would become known as Go-Shirakawa. This created animosity within the Fujiwara regents, splitting them – Fujiwara Tadamichi sided with Go-Shirakawa while Fujiwara Yorinaga sided with Sutoku. Each rival side in turn beckoned the Minamoto and Taira clans of samurai for help. Minamoto Tameyoshi, head of the Minamoto clan, and Taira Tadamasa sided with Sutoku and Yorinaga, while Minamoto Yoshitomo, first son of Minamoto Tameyoshi, and Taira Kiyomori, head of the Taira clan and nephew of Taira Tadamasa, sided with Go-Shirakawa and Tadamichi.

The resulting conflict is known as the Hogen Disturbance of 1156.

It's the beginning of the hostilities between the Minamoto and Taira clans as loyalties with each house were split between the two warring parties: those loyal to Go-Shirakawa and those loyal to Sutoku, who thought he got a raw deal. Although Go-Shirakawa won the day, the animosity cultivated between the Minamoto and Taira during the Hogen (most of the Minamoto sided with Sutoku while most of the Taira sided with Go-Shirakawa), led directly to the Heiji Disturbance three years later.

That battle began the moment Go-Shirakawa abdicated his throne in 1158 to allow his son, Nijo, to ascend. As soon as Taira Kyomori (head of the Taira clan at the time) left Kyoto on a personal pilgrimage, the Minamoto and their allies abducted cloistered Go-Shirakawa and Emperor Nijo, burning the palace to the ground in the process. Though strong at first, the Minamoto were completely unprepared militarily for Kiyomori's return. Thus the Minamoto were crushed; Minamoto Yoshitoro (the clan's head) was killed and his son, Minamoto Yoritomo was banished. The result: the Taira were elevated and became a major force on the political scene, replacing the Fujiwara clan in the role of most powerful regent. Taira Kiyomori established the first samurai-dominated administrative government in the history of Japan and then began a series of executions, intended to eliminate rival factions.

By 1177, though, relations between the Taira and then retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa became highly strained, and the latter attempted a coup d'état to oust Taira Kiyomori from office. Kiyomori defeated the former emperor and in the process abolished the Insei (cloistered rule) system provoking strong anti-Taira sentiment throughout the land. Thus, in 1180, Prince Mochihito, another son of cloistered Emperor Go-Shirakawa (humiliated by the Taira because of the Taira-backed accession of the throne of his nephew), Emperor Antoku (who was half Taira himself) along with Minamoto Yorimasa sent out a call to arms to the various samurai families and Buddhist monasteries to rebel against the Taira. Kiyomori called for the arrest of Mochihito, who then sought protection at Mii-dera near Lake Biwa in the city of Otsu.

The Mii-dera monks were unable to ensure him sufficient protection, so he was forced to move along. Taira forces then chased him to Byodo-in, just outside Kyoto in Uji, where with a dramatic encounter on and around the bridge of the River Uji that the Genpei war officially began. The battle ended in Yorimasa's ritual suicide (seppuku) and Mochihito's capture and execution shortly afterward. This action, however, only invigorated the Minamoto; Yoritomo (who had reached Kamakura and married into the Hojo clan) decided to get involved, mostly to enact revenge for his banishment against the Taira.

After a number of confrontations from Kanto to Kansai and beyond, the decisive battle was played out five years later at Danno-ura. It became one of the most famous and important battles in Japanese history up to that time. Here the Minamoto engaged the Taira fleet in the Straits of Shimonoseki, a tiny body of water separating the islands of Honshu and Kyushu. The tides played a powerful role in the development of the battle, granting the advantage first to the Taira, who were more experienced and abler sailors, and later to the Minamoto.

The Minamoto advantage was considerably enhanced by the defection of Taguchi Shigeyoshi, a Taira general who revealed the location of Emperor Antoku (who had fled Kyoto) and the regalia. The Minamoto redirected their attention on the Emperor's ship, and the battle quickly swung in their favor. Many of the Taira samurai, along with Emperor Antoku and his grandmother Tokiko, widow of Taira Kiyomori, threw themselves into the waves rather than live to see their clan's ultimate defeat at the hands of the Minamoto.

Following the battle of Dan-no-ura, the Taira clan was completely destroyed and the Minamoto victory was followed by the establishment of the Kamakura Shogunate. Though Minamoto Yoritomo was not the first ever to hold the title of shogun, he was the first to wield it in a role of nationwide scope. The end of the Genpei War and beginning of the Kamakura shogunate marked the rise of military (samurai) power and the suppression of the power of the emperor, who was compelled to preside without effective political or military power, until the Meiji Restoration over 650 years later.

Much of what makes up "The Tale of Genji", one of Japan's most celebrated classical novels, and "The Tale of the Heike" document the rise and fall of both the Minamoto clan (the Genji) and the Taira clan (the Heike) respectively. They are fantastic reads if you get the opportunity. Consequently, the term "Genpei" is a portmanteau of the alternate readings of the kanji Minamoto (源) and Taira (平) as "Gen" and "Pei" respectively, which gave the war – one of the quintessential conflicts of Heian period Japan – its name. The conflict is also known as the Jisho-Juei War (治承寿永の乱), after the two eras between which it took place.

And it all happened out there, right outside our window. At least some of it did.

The village survived the age and during the Sengoku period, Odawara developed as a castle town and capital of the domains of the late Hojo clan, which covered most of the Kanto region. The Hojo were defeated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the Battle of Odawara in 1590, despite the impregnable reputation of Odawara Castle, and the territory came under the control of Tokugawa Ieyasu.

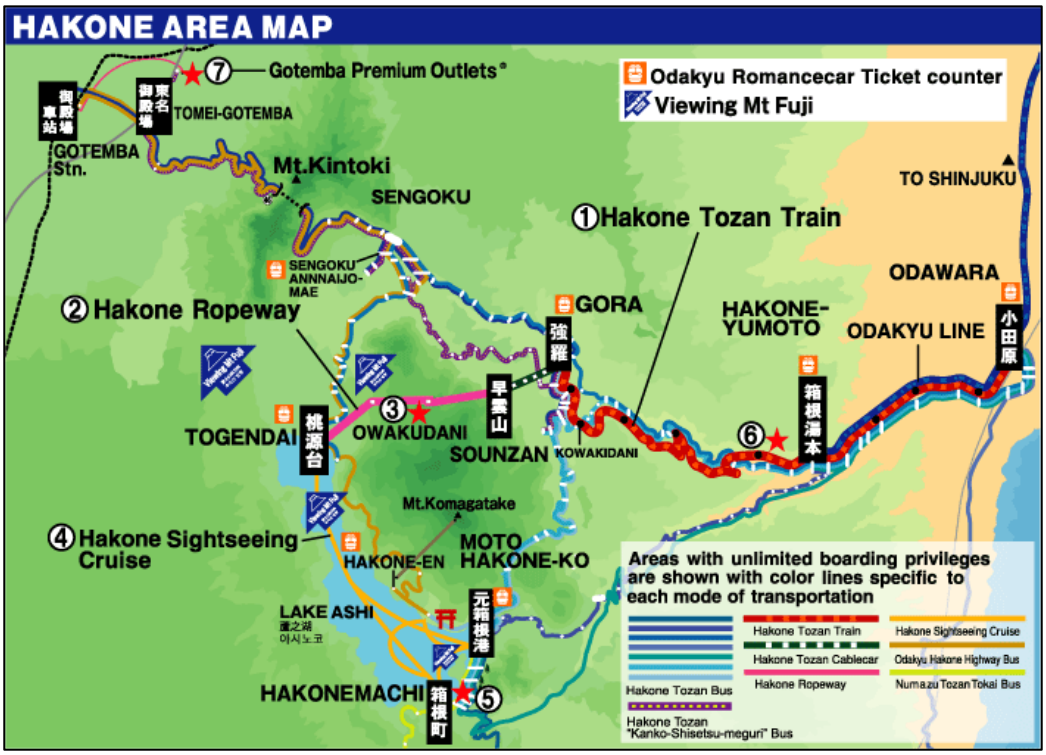
Did You Know?

Odawara is known for its production of *kamaboko* processed fish, stockfish, *umeboshi* salted plums and traditional herbal medicines.

Under the Tokugawa, Odawara became a feudal *han* ruled by a succession of *daimyo*. The castle town prospered as Odawara-juku, a post station on the Tokaido highway connecting Edo with Kyoto. After the Meiji Restoration, Odawara Domain briefly became its own prefecture before joining Kanagawa Prefecture in 1876. During this period, the center of economic and political life in Kanagawa shifted to Yokohama and Odawara suffered a strong decline in population, which was made more severe in 1889 when the original route of the Tokaido Main Line bypassed the city in favor of a more northerly route via Gotemba. The epicenter of the Great Kanto earthquake of 1923 wasn't far from here; it devastated Tokyo, the port city of Yokohama, surrounding prefectures of Chiba, Kanagawa, and Shizuoka, and caused widespread damage throughout the Kanto region. Ninety percent of the buildings in Odawara collapsed immediately, and fires burned the rubble along with anything else left standing. Odawara was in ruins.

But the town regained some measure of prosperity with the opening of the Tanna Tunnel in 1934, which brought the main routing of the Todaido Main Line back through the city. But Odawara did not escape the ravages of WWII: it was the last city in Japan to be bombed by Allied aircraft on August 15, 1945. Though there can be no doubt that the area recovered from those disasters (today Odawara is designated "special city" – a classification of those urban areas with 200,000 or more inhabitants, expanding the scope of their administrative authority), we would not be taking in the sights on foot, rather, we were booked to continue right on to Yumoto so we could begin our circuit of Hakone.

The Tozan Circuit



Hakone has been one of Japan's most popular hot spring resorts for centuries, drawing throngs of Japanese from all over the countryside. Nowadays, more than a dozen springs provide hot spring water to the many bath houses and *ryokan* in this region. And Yumoto, at the entrance to this caldera, is one of Hakone's most revered destinations of all, with a particularly long history, high quality water, and numerous baths and inns in which to enjoy it. Nicole and I entertained an over-night stay here in Yumoto during our planning process to enjoy the mineral waters, but we just couldn't make the logistics work out. If we arrived too late we'd miss out on the entire purpose of staying at an *onsen ryokan* in the first place, but if we arrived too early, who knew if we could check in, or drop off our bags, or anything while we went out to explore the area. So, rather reluctantly, we chose not to burden ourselves with the stay. Be that as it may, day visitors to the area can enjoy a hot spring bath in any of Yumoto's bath houses or most *onsen ryokan* by paying an admission fee of some type, typically between ¥500 and ¥2000; it's well worth it if you've never had the pleasure! We continued on to Gora.

A ride on the Hakone Tozan Railway (箱根登山電車, *Hakone Tozan Densha*), Japan's oldest mountain railway, is a treat for more than just railway fans. The small trains (when they say small, they mean small!) wind themselves through a narrow, densely wooded valley over many bridges and through a number of tunnels, stopping at a number of small stations along the way.

The railroad is capable of climbing one meter vertically for every 12.5 meters of horizontal distance, a maximum slope of 8%. Due to the difficult conditions, the line has three switchbacks used to ascend particularly tight spots. The route up the mountain consists of two sections: the lower section from Odawara to Hakone-Yumoto is used by Odakyu trains from central Tokyo and is not particularly noteworthy. Far more spectacular is the 15 kilometer upper section from Hakone-Yumoto to Gora, which is served by the small Tozan (i.e. "mountain climbing") train. The 35 minute train ride from Hakone-Yumoto to Gora is especially fun and is said to be quite beautiful in the summer when thousands of hydrangea (*ajisai*) are in bloom along the tracks. Special trains actually run the length of the line just for the viewing of the illuminated flowers. Today, however, there was little to see but shrubs and darkened cloud-filled skies.

Before long we pulled into Gora station (強羅駅), the terminal of the Hakone-Tozan train. There's little at Gora station, save for a few stalls selling goods to tourists, and even less on days like today when the people aren't out en masse, but unless you're going to the Open Air Museum (an outdoor art museum), Gora is nothing more than a weigh-station between the Hakone-Tozan Railway and the Hakone-Tozan Cable-Car (箱根登山ケーブルカー; *Hakone Tozan Kēburukā*), a 1.2 kilometer long funicular that links Gora, the upper terminus of the railway line, with Sounzan, 214 meters above it. But that doesn't mean there aren't interesting things to see along the cable car's route.

There's Gora Park (強羅公園), for instance, half-way up the 1.2 kilometer link at Koen-Kami station. The park is a western-style landscape garden, primarily French-styled, featuring a large fountain, large trees, beautiful flowering bushes, and a rose garden. The park also has two greenhouses, one housing a tropical botanical garden while the other contains a plethora of flowering shrubs. There are two restaurants here – one a sit-down café and the other a quick counter service experience – as well as a teahouse. Additionally, there is also a craft house on site whereby visitors are welcomed to partake in activities such as glass blowing, glass etching, pottery making and dried flower arrangement. Activities range in cost from ¥1,000 to ¥3,500 and take from 30 minutes to an hour to complete. We didn't partake, though, as we weren't quite comfortable there. The park is billed as a relaxing place to unwind and enjoy the scenery and views of Hakone, but with hardly anyone about and lack-luster views thanks to the persistent fog, we felt more compelled to return to the cable-car as soon as we could.

Did You Know?

At an altitude of 533 meters (1,749 ft), Gora is the highest railway station in Kanagawa Prefecture.

The Hakone-Tozan Cablecar is an interesting creature. Much like the Randen in western Kyoto, the cable-car here seems to chug along its 35-degree incline without a care in the world, and doing it in a much more efficient and quiet manner than its Randen tram counterpart. Its stations, six in number (Gora, Koen-Shimo, Koen-Kami, Naka-Gora, Kami-Gora and Sounzan), are nothing more than small wooden platforms clinging to both the track and mountainside. The whole route has so little room that only one track exists for the two-way traffic (and only two cars; there's a passing loop or two along the way), but even with that limitation, the cable-car makes it work by hauling about 250 people sitting and standing each way.

We re-boarded and within five minutes or so (the entire end-to-end travel time is just nine minutes) we were standing on the ground at Sounzan, the cable-car's terminus and the beginning leg of the Hakone Ropeway (箱根ロープウェイ), a *funitel* line that links Sounzan and Togendai via Owakudani – the great boiling valley. This is quite the ride too, worthy of Tokyo Disneyland by all standards of thrill. By the numbers, the system runs a distance of 1.4 kilometers (0.9 miles), rises vertically 281 meters (922 feet), has a maximum gradient of 25°33′, and has a top speed of five meters per second without the wind. With the wind, well… it may not go any faster but it sure whips about! Thank goodness the entire line was converted from gondola to *funitel* in 2002 too because I'm not sure we would have made it on just one cable alone the winds were that strong!

Did You Know?

A funitel is a portmanteau of the French words funiculaire and telepherique, or inclined track. In this case, the track is a set of cables. Funitels are able to tolerate higher wind speeds than classic gondola lifts because they are clamped to two steel cables instead of one.

But we did… and Owakund ani proved to be a great stop!

Owakudani (大涌谷) is the area around a crater created during the last eruption of Mount Hakone some 3000 years ago. Today, much of the area is an active volcanic zone where sulfurous fumes, hot springs and hot rivers can be experienced. A short walking trail (about ten minutes one way) leads from the ropeway station into the volcanic zone to a number of steam vents and bubbling pools, and for the more adventurous, another trail leads up to the peak of Mount Kamiyama, continuing on to Mount Komagatake from where you can catch another ropeway down to Lake Ashi. Alternatively, about 30 minutes past the peak of Mount Kamiyama a trail splits off down towards Lake Ashi. It leads down the mountain and along the lakeshore, ending at Kojiri not far from Togendai, from where the Hakone Ropeway connects back to Owakudani. Both hikes can be rocky or slippery as well as quite windy. Proper hiking shoes and rain gear are recommended should you wish to try. With the wind whipping at gale force (if not hurricane forces) and the clouds pushing in on us from all angles, there was no way in hell we were going to do anything but get from one tent to the next and get out of the weather, let alone walk up (or down) a mountain.

But even if the volcanic zone pathways were closed off to us today (due to a recent landslide rather than the terrible weather), we still had a blast with the area's local delicacy – *kuro-tamago* (黒卵; literally "black eggs") – which could still be purchased from the visitor's center. They're quite interesting things, and very popular with the visitors (and rightfully so, this is what Owakudani is known for). They're hard-boiled in the naturally occurring hot water found in the valley, but their shells become blackened by process due to the sulfur content of the water. Because of the unique compounds of the water consuming the eggs is said to increase longevity: eating one is said to add seven years to your life. You may eat up to two and a half for up to seventeen and a half years, but eating a whole third is said to be highly unadvised. (The consequences thereof are somewhat hazy though…) Tables are provided in a sheltered area for patrons to expound their lifelines, complete with small buckets to place your discarded egg shells. Thus we pulled up to one and joined right in with our fellow Japanese travelers, who were digging in with gusto – it was fun (and not to mention yuuuuuumy!)

We made sure not to eat more than two in a sitting.

After poking about the egg- and Fuji- themed tchotchkies (from phone charms to candies), we re-boarded the ropeway and descended to Togendai where pirate-themed sightseeing boats were prepared to take us on a cruise across Lake Ashi. Two companies, Hakone Sightseeing and Izuhakone Sightseeing, operate a small fleet of these boats sailing between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-machi at the lake's southern shores and Togendai and Kojiri at the lake's northern end.

Lake Ashi		
Area	7.1 km^2	2.74 mi^2
Elevation	723 m	2,732 ft
Mean Depth	15 m	49 ft
Shore Length	21.1 km	13 mi

A boat cruise from one end of the lake to the other takes roughly 30 minutes and costs ¥970. The Hakone Free Pass is valid only on Hakone Sightseeing Boats, so we became a buccaneer crew, setting sail across Ashinoko to Hakone-machi, the first of two ports of call along the lake's southern shore.

Hakone Sightseeing operates two of these pirate ships: the Vasa, modeled on a ship commissioned by 17th-century Swedish king Gustav Adolph, is painted emerald green and decorated with ornately sculpted woodwork; and the Royal, a red ship with a double-decker promenade and observation deck, was inspired by the 17th-century French sailing warship Soleil Royal. We set sail on the Vasa and learned all about Lake Ashi during our cruise, such as: Ashinoko (芦ノ湖) was formed after the volcano's last eruption some 3,000 years ago and with Mount Fuji in the background, is celebrated as the symbol of Hakone (and arguably one for all of Japan.) Alas, for all that majesty, the lake's name is rather mundane. The name means "lake of reeds" in Japanese: 芦 (ashi) is "reed", and 湖 (ko) is "lake".

It was a nice, restful, ride.

Hakone-machi is one sleepy little town and looks like it has remained so for many, many years. Hakone used to be an important checkpoint to control traffic along the Tokaido (東海道, Tokaido), the highway which linked Tokyo with Kyoto during the Edo Period. Today, a short, cedar lined passage of the old Tokaido and a reconstruction of the Hakone Checkpoint (箱根関所, Hakone Sekisho) are located between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-machi along the shore of Lake Ashi. In spring 2007, the reconstruction of the Hakone Checkpoint was completed after three years of construction work. The checkpoint now appears true to its original form, including gates, fence, housing for officers and foot soldiers, a prison chamber and a lookout tower. The Hakone Sekisho Shiryokan, a small museum with various related exhibits, stands nearby. It is possible to walk a longer passage of the old Tokaido (also referred to as Kyu-kaido, 旧街道) between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-Yumoto. Some of the original stone pavement remains, and the best preserved section leads from Moto-Hakone to Hatajuku (75-100 minutes). Between Hatajuku and Hakone-Yumoto (90-120 minutes), the trail follows the road, which is neither particularly scenic nor pleasant to walk due to car traffic and the absence of a side walk for pedestrians.

We didn't go that far, however, just to Moto-Hakone where we grabbed a bus to Yumoto and boarded an Odakyu MSE train back to Shinjuku. Although we didn't get to see even one peek at Fuji while in the area, we did get quite the send off from Odawara – a view of the summit in sunset!

AKIHABARA: the Electric City

Walking along the streets of Shibuya, shopping along the streets of Asakusa and even exploring the various levels of the Mitsukoshi Department store in Nihonbashi were interesting in their own right; nothing prepared Nicole for the whimsical nature of Akinhabara, the absolute number one place in Tokyo to shop for all things diverse. And there are many things of that nature here – from computers, phones, cameras, robotics and console gaming shops to gambling halls (*pachinko* parlors for example), computer arcades, *anime* stores (for the *otaku*), cafés and, yes, even adult sex toy shops (probably also for the *otaku*).

This mélange has given rise to my nickname for this area – "The Eclectic City" – but it does have a more official one of its own – "The Electric City" (電気街; Denki Gai) – due in large part to the various stores dedicated to all things electrical. Historically speaking the area was just outside of Sujikai-gomon, the big city gate where present-day Mansei Bridge spans the river. It was the gateway from inner Edo to northern and northwestern Japan and Kan'ei-ji temple in Ueno. Many dealers, craftsmen and relatively lower class samurai lived here. A great fire in the 19th century burned most of the area to the ground, which prompted the officials to clear thousands of acres bare in order to further protect the city from fire. And it's in this once barren wasteland that the area gets its name.

A small Shinto shrine once held in old Edo Castle was built in this cleared land. Known as “the extinguisher shrine” (鎮火社), many misunderstood its purpose. Many in Tokyo thought that the deity Akiba or Akiha (秋葉), which was the most popular fire-controlling deity in central and eastern Japan, must have been enshrined in it. Therefore, the residents of the city referred to the cleared land as “Akiba ga hara” or “Akibappara”, which translates to “the deity Akiba’s square”. The area didn’t become known as the Electric City until following World War II, when a black market developed around the first school of electrical manufacturing here. Clustered around here were various stores selling vacuum tubes, radio goods, and electrical items to the students. With the advent of wireless, computers, gaming, anime (otaku), and more, Akinhabara has changed with the times.

Today its name is frequently shortened to just Akiba (アキバ) by the locals.

Akihabara is centered around Akihabara Station, located on the JR Yamanote, Keihin-Tohoku, and Chuo Local lines. Getting to Akihabara by subway is also quite easy; travel to Akihabara Station by the Hibiya line (H15), or Suehirocho Station by the Ginza line (G-14). The Toei Shinjuku line is also a 10 minute walk to Akihabara from the Iwamotocho Station (S-08). Just take the conveniently labeled “Akihabara Electric Town” exit to be dropped into the middle of the action. And what action there is to see!

Akihabara has emerged as a center of Japanese otaku and anime culture, and dozens of stores specializing in anime, manga, retro video games, figurines, card games and other collectibles have filled the spaces between the electronics retailers. In addition to shops, various other animation related establishments have become popular in the area, particularly maid cafes where waitresses dress up and act like maids or anime characters, and *manga kissaten* (“comics cafes”), a type of internet cafe where customers can read comics and watch DVDs in addition to having access to the internet.

Maid cafes are cosplay themed restaurants where guests are served by waitresses that are typically dressed as French maids. In addition to serving food, the maids engage in conversation and games with the customers and treat them with the care and respectful language due to the master of a house. Maid cafes are popular with both men and women, and some cafes, like the @Home Cafe, offer English speaking maids.

Anything your otaku heart could desire can be found here and boy did we find it.

Other than the variety of capsule arcades we frequented (and played), the other place of note we visited on the streets of Akihabara was the Sega "GiGo" building (池袋ギーゴ), an amazing arcade palace if I ever saw one. GiGo without a doubt stands for the old computer axiom – Garbage In, Garbage Out – which has been used primarily to call attention to the fact that computers will unquestioningly process the most nonsensical of input data (garbage in) and produce nonsensical output (garbage out). The term was most popular in the early days of computing but still applies to today's most powerful systems, as they can spew out mountains of erroneous data in a relatively short time. And with more and more people granted access to more and more powerful technology there's a lot of GIGO going on.

As a choice for an arcade name, GIGO was perfect.

Make no mistake: GIGO is not your typical arcade. This place has machine types you've never seen! One type I took notice of immediately was a "pod", a contraption the player sat in while the display (a curved panoramic screen) engulfed you in all its arcade goodness; a Gundam game no less. Another type I had never seen was some kind of cross between the "Pokemon type" card games and a regular arcade machine. A pad on the machine is somehow used in conjunction with the cards. Move the cards across the pad and they move on screen. This way you use the cards you have to form strategies, fight groups and various other execution methods in order to play and ultimately win the challenge. Way cool! There was even a *taiko* drumming game machine there. Had I been less apprehensive and more playful I would have attempted to play one of these machines, but I was too self conscious about doing it wrong or getting help with making it work to actually go through with it. But boy did I want to!

* * *

Seeing Mt. Fuji illuminated in the golden tones of sunset and the stroll around Akihabara later on saved what was a rather mundane experience out at Hakone. Although I did enjoy traversing the countryside in its unique modes of transport, the lack of anything exciting (save for the black eggs at Owakudani and an egg-shaped pudding we had on the way home) put a damper on most of today's activities. And being that today was our last full day here in Japan it was important to close out on a high note; I think we accomplished that!

Tomorrow we plan to use what time is left to us by heading back to Nakamise-dori so Nicole can pick up a few souvenirs for friends back home, then to Mitsukoshi's book department so we can get that Studio Ghibli kids book we saw earlier in our trip. By then it'll probably be time to head off to the airport and conclude our trip.

私たちは悲しいです– *watashi-tachi wa kanashiidesu* – we are sad but I think ready to get home. It's been a really great trip, one I hope we can repeat again soon. We've both become accustomed to the eccentricities found here that we really don't wish to leave – the convenience of the vending machines, the quick and easy food marts, and the easy way of moving about the country. One of the biggest things we'll miss is the unique chimes played at all the train stations – especially the one at Hongo-sanchome, our home station in Tokyo. Sure, they're nothing but alarms to alert passengers that the doors are closing and the train is preparing to pull away, but, it's such a happy little tune and we got used to coming back to it.

Alas…

Well… I guess with nothing left to say I'll just say goodbye.

さようなら!
Sayonara!
(*Goodbye!*)

the 36 views of mt. fuji

Once again permit me to leave you with this last bit of cultural information pertaining to the Japanese – the highly celebrated 36 Views of Mt. Fuji (富嶽三十六景, Fugaku Sanjūrokkei). You may have noticed that spearheading each chapter of this experience is an image depicting Mt. Fuji in differing seasons and weather conditions, from a variety of distances and locations. These images were taken in part from a ukiyo-e series (浮世絵; meaning: "Pictures of a Floating World") by artist Katsushika Hokusai (葛飾北斎; 1760-1849), who first published them in 1827. Their popularity grew and ten more images were added by 1837, bringing the total number of landscapes to 46; however, the title of the work remains unchanged.

In the first Japanese expedition ("'日本国 ; In the Land of the Rising Sun' -- Reflections of Life"), I chose to sample only 11 of the 46 – as there were only 11 chapters of the story. For my second outing in Japan, once again I decided to showcase the infamous views of Fuji-san, choosing another 10 from the remaining 35. In this third installment, another 11 fantastic views of Fuji from this series were incorporated, and now the final 14.

Although many of these aren't nearly as famous as "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" or more simply as "The Wave" (神奈川沖浪裏, Kanagawa-oki nami-ura), this third set of views of Mt. Fuji are just as spectacular, and just as culturally rich.

These last 14 used are…

April 7, 2013
五百らかん寺さざゐどう (#13)
Gohyaku-rakanji Sazaidō
Sazai hall - Temple of Five Hundred Rakan

April 8, 2013
武陽佃島 (#29)
Buyō Tsukuda-jima
Tsukuda Island in Musashi Province

April 9, 2013 (Part 1)
武州千住 (#7)
Bushū Senju
Senju, Musashi Province

April 9, 2013 (Part 2)
江戸日本橋 (#21)
Edo Nihon-bashi
Nihonbashi bridge in Edo

April 10, 2013
隠田の水車 (#16)
Onden no suisha
Watermill at Onden

April 11, 2013
諸人登山 (#42)
Shojin tozan
Climbing on Fuji

April 12, 2013 (Part 1)
駿州片倉茶園の不二 (#43)
Sunshū Katakura chaen no Fuji
Katakura Tea Plantation in Suruga

April 12, 2013 (Part 2)
尾州不二見原 (#9)
Bishū Fujimigahara
Fuji View Field in Owari Province

April 13, 2013
本所立川 (#37)
Honjo Tatekawa
The Timberyard at Honjo

April 14, 2013
遠江山中 (#34)
Tōtōmi sanchū
From the mountains of Totomi

April 15, 2013
上総の海路 (#20)
Kazusa no kairo
The Kazusa Province sea route

April 16, 2013
深川万年橋下 (#4)
Fukagawa Mannen-bashi shita
Under Mannen Bridge at Fukagawa

April 17, 2013
礫川雪の旦 (#14)
Koishikawa yuki no ashita
Tea House at Koishikawa
The Morning After a Snowfall

Bonus
東海道吉田 (#19)
Tōkaidō Yoshida
Yoshida at Tokaido

終わり？

(owari; "the end"?)