

Japan
Tokyo, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Himeji, Miyajima
March 25 - April 4, 2005
(Exchange rate: 111Y per dollar)
© 2007 Aaron Linsdau

Friday, March 25, 2005

Flew out of San Diego at 10am, through LAX at 1230pm and didn't arrive into Tokyo until March 26, at 530pm! It was a good, boring flight. The Boeing 777 is great for spaciousness.

Saturday, March 26, 2005

Narita airport is huge. The airplane taxiing seems several miles long and the terminal is far from the landing area. Getting through customs and immigration is a cakewalk. I activated my Japan Rail (JR) pass and found my way to the Narita express to Shinjuku station, Tokyo. It was an hour twenty minutes to Shinjuku. Wow, the airport is really far from the center of the city.

I got to Shinjuku station, found Wendy, flashed the JR pass to get out and I was in the depths of Japan. Awesome. We stopped by her apartment, dropped the backpack and headed off to dinner. It was a real Japanese dinner, dominated by tofu and rice. That seemed to be a common theme there. We wandered a bit and got to be pretty late. I've been up for 24+ hours at this point. I'm totally wasted!

Sunday, March 27, 2005

Wendy and I took the Shinkansen (bullet) train down to Kyoto. That thing flies.

Here's the list of things we saw while wandering around today:

Ginkakauji Temple (Silver temple)
Philosopher's path
Nanzenji

Aqueduct brick structure

Walked to the river past the museum and then headed for the ryokan, a Japanese hotel, to drop our bags.

We then walked to Nijo castle which is wonderfully lit at night. We wandered around there for a few in the dark, ran into the first experience with Japanese xenophobia and then headed to a Ramen shop for supper. It was quite warm inside compared to the cool evening air.

I had my first bath experience at the Ryokan in Kyoto. Just like the movies (isn't everything?) where you wash yourself off with a scrubber while sitting on a stool, then hop into a large boiling hot tub to take the edge off the day.

Monday, March 28, 2005

Another day of wandering around Kyoto brought us to these places:

Arashyama - Katsuna

Tenryuji, the garden walk

We went for lunch and had Yudofuteshoku (I can't remember what this was)

Then we enjoyed green tea mocha and vanilla soft serve ice cream

I love the irony of our experience. We spent quite a while waiting in the rain for the bus to take us around the town, but after some time we decided to walk. As always, about 10 minutes later the bus passed us as we were walking. It's funny how that works, especially when you're walking in the rain. We finally caught another bus to Kinkakuji, the Golden Pavilion. This temple is completely covered in gold leaf, likely the only structure like it in the world.

Then we headed over to the Gion district and ate Dango (rice slime balls) with Kinako. They were quite appetizing and were served on bamboo skewers. While covering myself in sticky rice, a Maiko, an apprentice Geisha, came by and I was able to get a photograph out of her. That was to be one of the best shots I took the whole trip. All the time it was lightly raining across the city, adding a little sparkle to the experience.

We wandered down alleyways and headed for the river, down to Pontocho and ate Shabu Shabu, sashimi, fruit and beer. What an excellent meal for supper. While walking back to the hotel, Wendy told me to "Run, just run - that way!" Not being one to ignore instructions, I began running down the darkened alleyway toward an unknown objective. Quickly, I realized that Wendy had directed me to run and catch another Maiko. After standing there for a moment, I was able to grab a poor flash picture of her and the Maiko's handler mother whisked her down an alleyway into an unmarked door. They were gone, and I was standing in the rain pondering the experience in silence. Wendy finally caught up, knocked me out of my stupor and we headed back to the ryokan.

Tuesday, March 29, 2005

The clean up and breakfast crews breezed through our room and we enjoyed the traditional Kyoto breakfast and then caught a taxi to the train station. Because we woke up late, we blasted out of the ryokan to make the train. Wendy had to be there because she had to get back to Tokyo in time for work. She had everything planned down to a 15 minute window. Japan has trained her quite well. It was cutting it close for me but I didn't know what I was doing, either.

Fortunately, Wendy was able to secure me a direct ticket to Hiroshima so I didn't have to figure too many things out. This saved me the trouble of getting lost in Osaka station.

From Kyoto to Osaka, the train was empty and I had a few minutes to reflect on my trip so far, thanks to the incredible silence of the Shinkansen.

Up to this point, it's been warp speed through Japan, hardly leaving any time to write postcards and certainly not time to write in the journal, hence just the general list of things seen rather than my punishing long descriptions. This is the usual timing on a trip, running at 110% for the first few days until I settle into a routine.

Some notes about traveling in Japan. Bring hand sanitizer. Even though 5% of the people seem to wear masks for hay fever, you touch things, like handrails, that 1,000's of people touch daily. If you're a germ-o-phobe, this can be rough. A little sanitizer before you eat will keep the bugs away. It's good advice for subsequent trips.

All transport here is done by bus, train and subway, rarely by taxi. A 15 minute ride from the ryokan to the train station was 1,000Y (\$10). Not as bad as Chicago is comparably priced. The biggest expense here seems to be the food. Dinner last night was Shabu shabu, sashimi, fruit and sundries for \$53. The hotel was \$62 per night, including breakfast in the core of the city. You can eat off \$40/day easily, but eating pretty well.

Sadly, I didn't know much about the places we visited, other than what my Lonely Planet guide had to tell me. It seems that knowledge of Japan is far more limited compared to China. Perhaps this is a product of being a closed society and there are few massive monuments in Japan compared to China. I've been comparing the two countries the whole trip - there really aren't that many similarities. Traffic is far safer in Japan, there are few bicycle riders, taxis dominate China and there are no Japanese equivalents of Chinese rip-off artists that permeate the tourist areas.

The ride from Kyoto to Himeji took 50 minutes.

China is covered in endless construction. Japan seems to have very little going on. These two countries are as different as they can possibly be.

I saw two Maiko yesterday and from what people tell me, that's incredibly lucky. My guide at Himeji said she had been to the Gion district of Kyoto many times and had never seen any Maiko. Women only become Maiko after 8-10 years in the Geisha program. It's a lifetime commitment to be sure. The Maiko were always pleasant but seemed to be in a rush. What a brutal life. Wendy told me that when I thanked the alleyway Maiko with "Domo", that was far too informal for taking a photograph. "Arigato gozimas" or,

better, a deep bow would have been a far better idea. It was neat to see the alley Maiko with her handler, too. The handler and other women were in a rapid fire bowing contest.

We saw a bunch of women wearing kimonos as general dress. This is apparently a Kyoto trait. Older women don't like western clothing and younger women only want western clothes. Everyone dresses well here. No California casual. Even thi kids who look rough still have their high-end shoes, pants or otherwise.

Trash is separated here for recycling. When you're living in such a packed country, there isn't much choice. Japan must be a beautiful place in the fall. The hillsides are covered in broad leaf trees and must turn to flame red and sunny yellow before falling off into the dead of winter.

I ended up visiting Japan one week before the cherry blossoms broke out. They are just budding here but very few have flowered open. The philosopher's path through Kyoto is no doubt one of the most beautiful walks in the world for the week that the cherry trees blossom. A whole 2% of the year, Japan must have the best walks.

People drive on the left side of the road here. It's very confusing about which way to look. Inattention can mean death here.

I arrived in Hiroshima with no troubles at all. Figured out how to buy the Shinkansen train ticket to Himeji tomorrow, then found the Flex Hotel (that's the name) and checked in with ease. Finding English speakers is pretty simple. Hotel Flex has spacious rooms - you can almost walk around the beds without turning sideways. I don't know what people complain about.

Got down to the A-bomb dome using the city trolley. Very fun and easy to use. The lady at the tourist center tried to convince me to walk to avoid the challenge of figuring out the fare, money and such, but I was able to squeeze the rail station location out of her. She seemed hard pressed to explain why she wanted me to walk half an hour.

The dome isn't much of a site, just a broken concrete and steel building. That is, until you think about the implication of it. I went over and saw the eternal flame, meant to burn until the last nuclear weapon has been dismantled. After looking around the pleasant park for a while, I wandered over to Hiroshima Castle and ran into soccer players, skate boarders and other tourist groups. All quite fun!

It's fascinating how the back alleys of Japan are clean - no garbage sitting around. That's very different than the rest of the world!

Went back and captured the A-bomb dome at sunset with an eerie mix of colorful lights.

I ate at a counter restaurant with a bunch of businessmen dutifully wolfing down their food. They all seem to leave work around 8pm! And you then see them in the morning at 7am. Way too many work hours for me.

Wednesday, March 30, 2005

Enjoyed another traditional Japanese breakfast at Hotel Flex in Hiroshima. It was excellent. I altered my shinkansen ticket for tomorrow so I could have time to visit the museum, see the O-tori at Miyajima and ride the ropeway, the Japanese version of a tram.

The train ride to the Miyajima transfer point took 30 minutes. I got on the ferry with the JR pass and went over to the island. To photograph the huge orange O-tori well would have required a 400mm lens to fill the frame. Since I didn't have that on me, I would just have to enjoy the view.

The deer at the ferry landing have no qualms about head butting you to get food. There are little vendors who sell food chips for the deer there, probably better for them than chips and cookies. There are plenty of kid shots available here.

I walked around and took some bland shots of the O-tori. Earlier in the morning might have been better, if there was no fog. Took a walk over to the ropeway only to find that it had been closed on March 26 with an indeterminate re-opening date. Crap! I wanted to see those monkeys. There was only solution. Walk all the way up the 1.5 mile trail to the top of the mountain. Immediately.

This was the first time I used the dork zip off shorts on my pants and it worked well, making the walk up the mountain surprisingly pleasant. Unfortunately, the zippered pocket failed closed so anything that was placed in there became annoying trapped.

It took about 45 minutes to get to the top of the ropeway. I passed a few people on their way down the endless stairs. There were only a couple of baby monkeys in the lower part playing around. You can get about 2 feet away from them before they skitter off.

I, foolishly, tested the food aggressiveness of the monkeys and it was scary. I pulled out and crinkled my snack bag. Almost at once, 12 monkeys began to advance toward me. I quickly put the bag away and out of sight. The monkeys resumed their business, as if I had done nothing. I jumped at them to shove them back. Apparently the monkeys will come up and bite people to make that person drop whatever is held and run away with it. They're scary when you're by yourself and there are hundreds around. They have teeth to back it up, too.

I wanted to get over to Mt. Misuni but it was another 2 mile walk uphill. That means I wouldn't get to the A-bomb museum so I started downhill, a challenging walk in itself.

I ate some funky ice cream product and caught the ferry, taking about 20 minutes to cross the channel. Quickly, I hopped the train back to Hiroshima station, walked to the rail car and took it back to the A-bomb dome. It was only a 10 minute walk from there and just in time too, as the door was locked behind me. That's pretty good timing considering I just came from a mountain in Miyajima.

I needed about 3 hours to look around there, but only had 1/2 an hour to do it. So, I took in what I could. There was a scary diorama of three life-size children walking with their skin partly melted off, with flames and flickering lights in the background.

There was a scale model of the city and a ball suspended above it showing just how high the explosion took place. Now I can see the scale of the explosion. The bomb exploded 1/3 of a mile above the city, doing that much damage with just a 10-kiloton device.

The basic idea of Little Boy was to use a gun powder charge to fire a slug of uranium into a semi-critical-mass sphere of uranium, creating critical mass, firing off a neutron source to get it all going and boom - instant death for 3 miles around and death all around the basin of Hiroshima. Wow.

I walked over and hit the same site and eat place as last night for supper. Today, I actually saw a group of deaf girls at a donut shop sitting, and then later saw a blind man and amputees this day. The four girls in the donut shop were cute, signing away and having a grand old time. Mister Donut donuts are not as sweet as American products. The huge arcade of stores is one block south of the city railway and it's the biggest linear mall I've ever seen.

Thursday, March 31, 2005

Up at 5am, wrote and chilled out before breakfast at 7am. Thought breakfast was included in the price but apparently not, as I discovered while checking out. It was well worth it, though.

I grabbed the next shinkansen "Rail-Star" to Himeji. That thing is blasting fast, at 285kph (about 170mph).

Japanese are funny:

They wait for a cross walk sign for a 15 foot wide alleyway with no traffic coming from either direction.

80% of the bikes had a generator type headlamp on them, attached to the front tire and always in use.

90% of the men wear suits here and all women wear dresses and have their hair done. They are the best dressed society in general on the planet.

Everyone seems to follow the rules here.

30+ year olds play video games in pachinko parlors.

They're the most photogenic people I've met. Kids makes faces for me and always give the peace/2 fingers up sign for me all the time, making them the funniest to photograph ever. I ended up tracing the same path as two siblings through the A-bomb museum.

They seem to party loud and hard based on what I saw at Hotel Flex in Hiroshima.

A man stopped to give me directions on my way to Hiroshima castle because I was standing in one place, quizzically staring at a map. He offered to take me there but I courteously declined because I kept running into photo ops along the way. He was sure nice and friendly, though.

People here speak to you in animated Japanese even though they know you don't understand, but they still try and be as helpful as they can.

The city streets here are cleaned. Period.

No one eats while walking. You sit down somewhere and do that.

When rail crew enter and exit a car, they bow to the car, even if no one looks.

Wendy and I did run into one "Gaijin" (meaning foreigner in a less than nice way) comment at the castle in Kyoto that set Wendy off kilter. It does happen but not too often. It'd be easy to give him a roughing up, only to justify his comments.

On to Himeji.

Himeji castle is awesome.

Once again, the tourist info lady tried to dissuade me from taking the bus, otherwise she was nice. Maybe that's how you don't become fat here. It was 100Y to take the bus to the castle. It was easy.

There were some swans in front of the castle, inside the moat. Work crews were setting up the for the cherry blossom festival for this weekend, even though the trees hadn't begun to blossom yet. Apparently I'm not the only one missing out.

Found a nice English-speaking guide quickly. She gave me an excellent 2.5 hour tour of the castle and was very informative. She gave me a book on Samurai as a gift and I gave her three chocolate bars from Trader Joes. I got to participate in a Japanese gift exchange. Good thing I listened to Wendy and brought along a few gifts. I guess my guide and I had to exchange gifts because we shared knowledge on the tour?

- The average Himeji house costs 20 million Yen, or \$200k. That's pretty expensive for what they are.

- Wood is a sacred building material here.

- 83 foot tall, 2'x2' thick beams hold up the main tower
- The design has been earthquake tested with models and survived remarkably well
- One feudal lord committed suicide at the top of the tower
- When committing suicide, it's a big ceremony with observers. Usually when a person stabbed themselves in the gut, an assistant hacked the neck with a sword to make the end swift, a poignant detail left out in many descriptions
- The castle has multiple defense mechanisms, including iris leaves planted on slopes to cause sandal wearing soldiers to slip on the leaves
- You tour the castle building with your shoes in a plastic bag, wearing borrowed sandals
- The inside stairs are extremely steep
- Outside walkways are designed with blind corners, making attack more difficult
- From the castle well to the inside of the building, there were six water checkpoints. Each person tested the water before moving on to insure the water quality and lack of poisons. Being at checkpoint position #1 was not an ideal job.
- The iron nails pinning the main beams together are covered with lacquered wood, obscuring the artificialness of the iron. The top level has gold foiled caps. Apparently that's okay.
- I would have bought the castle for 23Y in the early 20th century, as no one saw the value of such an expense. Now it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- The place is full of hidden rooms, false floors, and attack defeating designs, patterns and layouts.
- The builder of Himeji castle, Toyozumi, used non-Japanese aggressive design techniques, including using stone instead of wood sarcophagus for burying people. Toyozumi didn't rule Japan for long but he unified the country under one leadership. The interesting thing is he was not of royal birth, but a common person.
- Each stone end-cap of a roof tile row is a family crest, making it very easy to determine when something was constructed.
- Even today in Japan, you are not allowed to use a 16 or 18 petal chrysanthemum as a family crest because it is reserved for the Emperor

Other things of note:

- Japanese believe that if they cross the street against the crossing light and they are hit, it's their fault, causing them to wait at 10 foot wide streets even though it is very obvious no cars are coming.
- It's possible to improve one's social position but it's a rare person who does.
- The first and second visit of Commodore Perry to Japan in 1868 altered Japan forever. The samurai saw the firepower of the modern military ships and decided that a treaty rather than fighting was better. The Japanese were still using 17th century flintlock match rifles. Perry's black ships frightened the people and the feudal lords did not want to get in a war with modern combat utilizing medieval techniques.

As usual, I needed another whole day in Himeji just to take in the place. A new rule must be established - I need to stay two days in a city because there's always something you learn about a place that makes you want to look a second day.

I met some people in Himeji who I ran into at Hiroshima castle. Pretty freaky! They were three Aussies (two women, one man) who had studied Japanese for 7 years here. I should have traded contact information with them. They all seemed nice enough. Wandering through the castle garden alone was a nice diversion before I had to rush back to the train station to make my way onward.

Japanese gardens blow away Chinese for cleanliness of the grounds and the upkeep, though I cannot comment on comparative designs. Even the stones in the carp pond were placed very deliberately, creating a pattern.

Just don't know enough about them. It seems that communism ruins the former beauty of the Chinese gardens. The whole thought of comparing communism seems to come down to communism seems to work nicely in poor places because it appears to level things out for the poor. It seems to. I say this because at one time China was vastly more advanced than Japan but that has completely reversed. Japan has all but left China in the dust.

While pondering these ideas, I cracked my head on a low overhanging doorway, loud enough that people 20 feet away looked back and asked how I was. Owch. Fortunately no nails were protruding from the wood. I had a good laugh for 5 minutes as I walked along.

Now on the Hikari Shinkansen headed for Tokyo (5:05pm Himeji to 8:45 Tokyo with 5 stops), then transfer to the local trains to make it into Shinjuku. The passing opposing direction trains fly by with stunning speed at a relative 200 MPH.

Met back up with Wendy and we went to a Nepalese place with her coworker Laura from Boston. Funny, Laura didn't have the Boston accent at all.

Finally, after a long day, I slept.

Friday, April 1, 2005

This day was a blur and I only have a list of things I saw, no dreary commentary to keep a reader enthralled by my tourist activity. Wendy led me on a tour up to Ueno Park and we toured the following:

Amekaycho, a shopping area

Took the oldest subway system to Ginza, then to Asaksa

Walked down Nakamisea, then on to Sensogi temple

Saw an Edo period house
Observed the Asahi beer headquarters with their fallen flame symbol
Took the subway back to Ueno on the Yamanote line
Went to Yuakcho
Over to Ozshi for sushi in the round
Then over to Hibiya to visit a statue of Godzilla.
We walked over to the Tokyo International Forum, the city's convention center
On the Chiyota subway line for a few minutes and then in to Harajuku and we hung out with the weekend goths for a few minutes
The Meiji shrine can have as much as a million people visiting it - stunning!
On the train back to Shinjuku, we saw the southern terrace of the city capitol and walked over to the Tokyo metropolitan government building
We enjoyed some sweets
And this was only the morning to early afternoon until Wendy took leave of me and went off to work.

I wandered over through Honozono park and temple, then through Kabukicho, the Japanese mafia district, and was treated to many "Japanese Only" signs. That was fascinating to see what I had always heard about. Enjoyed seeing bands playing in the street as well as street artists, something you expect to see in New York and San Francisco.

Finally, I met up with Wendy and her coworker Mathew and we went out for food. Mathew is from Portland, majored in Japanese which brought him here, is very young and quite entertaining.

Saturday, April 2, 2005

Today Wendy had to leave for work early, so I am on a self guided tour. Again, I didn't have time in the evening to give a more comprehensive description, so this is just a listing and partial activity description.

Harajuku

Yoyogi park with the rockabilly Japanese

Nenzu art museum and garden

Hamarikiu garden and flower field

Photography museum at Eibius

Beer Museum and some pastries as a snack

Met Wendy and her friends Emma and Norton at Shinjuku and then we went out for some real tempura for dinner.

Sunday, April 3, 2005

Again, this is more of an assault list than anything.

Fortunately it didn't rain today. Wendy will be guiding me around the city and we'll see how much we can pack in.

Walked past the Craft Museum
Saw some cherry blossoms near Kudanshita metro station
Yasukuni shrine
Nipon Budokan in the Imperial Palace Park
Sat and enjoyed the 16th century dojo structure
Walked to Otemon
We had sushi near Marunouchi in a place under the raised train tracks
We took the tour bus and rode around the Imperial Gardens and actually got to see some cherry blossoms actually out
Saw the Japan Diet and some of the old walls and battlements of th Imperial Palace
We walked back to the Marunouchi building and took a free shuttle to connect to the train, heading over to the Ginza shopping district
We toured the 5 story Apple and Sony stores and played around a bit
Japan certainly blows away the stores at home for electronics selection
We looked into some of the premium food and excellent chocolate stores
Dinner was in Kichijoji at the "Garlic Kitchen". Wow, a meal based on garlic and butter. Is there anything better?
We watched a band on the street and caught a train from Shinjuku to Musashino Sakai and packed up, because I'll be visiting the Tsukiji fish market, weather dependent, and then off to catch my airplane.

Monday, April 4, 2005

We took the JR line over to the Tsukiji fish market. Today I was hiking around everything in my backpack because I was not going back to Wendy's place prior to catching my plane at Narita. From Wendy's apartment to the Tsukiji is almost an hour and it was a waste to burn two hours just transiting around. It was annoying to haul around that load but it made me really think about what I needed to carry in the future.

We came out of the subway station at Tsukiji and immediately smelled fish. We're in the right place! Several flights of stairs led to the surface where I dropped my backpack off with Wendy while she remained at a coffee shop while I headed off into the fish market.

What a busy place! Propane powered carts, trucks and hand carts move around with dizzying speed, all seemingly chaotic and yet everyone seemed to know where they were going. Everyone was running around like ants from a freshly stomped ant hill.

Once you get to the distribution and loading docks, you get to the actual fish market. Massive doesn't begin to describe this place. Most everyone was friendly in the place and the 2-up finger hand gesture (a peace sign to Americans) seemed to smooth out anything I was doing as I caught people's glances. I asked one lady for permission to photograph her while she was working. She got a real laugh out of the LCD displayed photograph of herself.

My hour in the fish market passed quickly and I ran back to meet Wendy at the coffee shop. We then walked over to Ginza, did some shopping, ate pastries overlooking the Mitsui intersection and headed off to the Narita express train station.

I used my expired JR pass for three days throughout Tokyo and finally had to purchase a \$35US train ticket back to the airport from the Tokyo main train station. You just have to flash that pass with confidence as you walk through using expired passes. I said goodbye to Wendy and caught the 50 minute train to the airport.

Getting into and around Narita was no problem, as lines were non-existent, giving me two hours to kill. The flight from Narita to LAX was 9 hours, much better than the 12 hours going over, into the jet stream. We flew on a Boeing 777 at 600 MPH over a more shallow Pacific Ocean route, rather than up through the Bering strait, more in between Midway Island and the Aleutians.

Getting through LAX customs and immigration was not a problem, so I waited at the American Airlines commuter terminal for my connection to San Diego.

Crud, everyone is grossly overweight here compared to Japan. It was just like coming back from China and South America. I caught a slightly earlier flight to San Diego and arrived home without incident.

End of report