

Japan: The Return
Tokyo, Nagano, Yudanaka
November 13-22, 2005
(Exchange rate: 110Y per dollar)

Sunday, November 13, 2005

Tried a different approach on jet lag this time to Japan. Bought *Memoirs of a Geisha* to fill the complete flight with reading so I didn't sleep at all. I didn't want to get to Japan and not be able to sleep at night.

Monday, November 14, 2005

By the time I arrived, I was toast so sleeping was not a problem. Bed time equaled hard sleep. It was much nicer because I didn't want to wake up wasted. The ride into Tokyo was the same train ride and met my friend Wendy at Tokyo station, went out to dinner and went back to her place to crash out.

One of the shorter days of my life - seven hours long. Met up with Wendy at Tokyo train station and then headed to Musashino city where we went to her apartment, had curry rice for dinner and crashed, 4:30am California time.

Tuesday, November 15, 2005

Woke up, enjoyed a yogurt and cereal breakfast and we headed off to do some gift shopping in Asakusabashi for the family. After muddling around in local craft stores for a while, we headed over to Koishakawa-Korakuen garden to begin the purpose of my trip - ponder life, consider my place and find myself. Sounds good to me, though it's pretty hokey from the outside perspective.

Sent Wendy on her way to work while I returned to the garden to continue the self-search. Found a nice wooden bench and proceeded to stare at the sky for half an hour, listening to the environment and taking in the smells. Around 4:30pm, I headed out to follow the train line from Suidobashi to Kojimachi, went the wrong way, hit the Imperial Palace and then back to Yotsuya, almost getting seriously lost. Heading toward Yotsuya, the rain started and I was without an umbrella. That terminated my plan to walk all the way (2.5 miles) to Shinjuku. Hopped on the train, got into the station and then tried to cat nap at Takashimaya Times Square until Wendy left work at 9pm.

Once I caught up with Wendy, we headed back to her place and had dinner at the Japanese equivalent of Denny's. Today was a day of calming myself and not tearing around the city - totally out of character for me. Must change the approach to take a different perspective. Hope this works!

Wednesday, November 16, 2005

Began at the open-air Tokyo Architecture Museum to begin the exploration of Japanese history in architecture and form.

The docents allowed entrance to the house portion of the flower shop - very nice of them. The stairs to the top were steep enough that I banged my knee on the next step, basically a ladder with boards. Everything is made of wood and even the nails holding the beams together are covered in wood plugs to hide what Japanese consider impure building materials. Everything is a facade of one sort or another.

After the museum stroll through transplanted buildings, we caught the bus back to the Mitaka station and went to Shinjuku for a huge sashimi lunch and then walked Wendy to work. She gave

me directions to a park but I immediately forgot them - need to memorize faster - and ended up at the Shinjuku-Tokyo Central Park. Ambled around for a few hours, watching skateboarders, artists and homeless ponder their day's activities just as I was pondering my life.

The first conclusion I came to is you cannot know where you are going if you first don't know where you are. It's not brilliant (or correct) but it's a start.

After giving that a thought or two, I walked all the way over to Shinjuku-Gyoen National Gardens to check out the grounds. It's a huge place and only spending two hours there does it no justice. I walked the entire length of the place to discover that the back gate was locked and the only option was to walk the 0.6 miles back to Shinjuku gate to continue my trek toward the soccer and baseball venues.

It was a good long walk around and then to the National Stadium where a soccer game was going on and then over to the Tokyo gymnasium where the Grand Master World Champion Volleyball tournament was being held. Wanted to purchase tickets but found they were sold out. Damn. Sat watching people go in and out and had the police pester me for what looked like a collection of knock-off sports wear being sold just outside the stadium. After the two cops came up and gave me a hard time, it was time to leave before they changed their minds.

Found my way back to Shinjuku and Takashimaya Times Square where I rested in a hotel lobby until Wendy was freed from her daily labor of teaching English at AEON. My calves and feet were killing me at this point. We both rode the train to her apartment and crashed out from a long day of pounding concrete.

Thursday, November 17, 2005

After a late start, we headed to the Mori Art Museum and City View in Roppongi Hills, checking out wonderful aerial views of Tokyo. Along with that, we enjoyed the mathematical art exhibit and the most impressive to-scale models of New York, Tokyo and Shanghai I've ever seen, all side-by-side.

Stunningly, each building in the model had a photograph glued on of all four sides and the top. Each and every building! It was a 10-year project. Even buildings to be constructed in Shanghai in the Pudong section were represented in acrylic as well as representations of the World Trade Towers in New York City.

Wendy had to take off for work and I continued my walk around Tokyo. Got some lunch by pointing to what I wanted to eat to a guy wearing a 70's era San Diego Padres baseball cap.

Visited the park around the Tokyo Central Library, walked to Tokyo Tower and enjoyed the magnificent view from the top for two hours, then walked down to the water front to be just in time to see a cruise ship maneuvering into the dock. What a challenge that must be.

From there, caught the subway at Daimon for a 1/2 hour ride to Shinjuku to meet up with Wendy. Got busted by the Japan Rail police when I was sitting on the steps (loitering to them). Wendy said someone probably complained I was sitting on the side of the stairs. Apparently people aren't busy enough here to mind their own business. Wendy and I met up with one of her students and went out for a curry dinner and then back home.

I'm having a heck of a time finding my answer to what I should do for the rest of my life. God, any time now would be good!

Friday, November 18, 2005

Headed out to Odaiba Island today after a late start from poor sleep. Took the train across without incident and hit MegaWeb, the biggest Toyota and car dealership in the world. Awesome!

After wandering around the old historical MegaWeb with sweet old wheels, I came to the conclusion that I've got a passion for two things - creation and exploration. Okay, that's a start! Now we're getting somewhere. Saw the Fuji TV tower, Rainbow Bridge, Statue of Liberty Tokyo edition, the Tokyo skyline and such. The MegaWeb was the highlight of it all. Rode back to Shinbashi, cruised Ginza, checked out \$350 Prada underwear (it still spins the mind to think about spending that much on underwear) - they were the only thing in the store with a price tag. Caught the subway back to Shinjuku to meet up with Wendy. We had noodles for dinner near her place and crashed out.

Now, if I can keep up one realization per day with a three day start up, I should be happy. This is a painstakingly slow process. Father, guide me.

Saturday, November 19, 2005

Today is the last whole day of roaming Tokyo, lost in thought, for tomorrow we head to Nagano for a little exploration. Since this day is Wendy's early day, I decided to get in a bike ride and local exploration of the Musashino-Sakai area, her local hood. We hung out and chatted for a few. It's been fascinating to spend a bunch of time with her, as this is the longest continuous stretch we've spent time together.

Borrowed Wendy's bike and headed singularly down her street to prevent becoming seriously lost. It was a good idea as I can't read any of the signs anyway, so it was just as well.

The actual riding wasn't remarkable but to be riding a bike in Japan where you grow up hearing about people doing such things was wild. It was a strange experience, especially since I ride my bike all the time. Strangely exciting, really. After an hour of enjoying the experience, I returned, cleaned up and struck out across the city.

Today's goal was the Japanese Sword and Edo-Tokyo museums. Since time was short, I wandered over to the ponderously massive Edo-Tokyo museum. There is also the sumo ring to explore but it ended being closed on the weekend. Having a volunteer English speaking guide was a salvation to museum enjoyment because I was able to ask questions and squeeze more out of the experience. After a couple hours of looking around, I was ready to go.

It was cold and windy upon leaving the museum, so I didn't linger too long to take photos of the structure.

Rode the train back to Shinjuku and after a little wandering around, met up with Wendy and one of her students, Yuko. She's a sweet girl who arranged our tour to Nagano and the stay at the ryokan. We enjoyed a bowl of curry at an Indian place and headed for home. Since we had to rise early the next day, we crashed out and were both off to dreamland.

Wandering the museum and surrounding environs did not provide me with any particular revelations, so it will be chalked up to a simple enjoyable day. Did spend a great deal of time staring at the ground, sky and buildings, lost in thought, letting my mind loose.

The best part of being in a place where you do not speak the language and can't read the writing is there is nothing to distract from thought. More than once I felt as though I was a ghost wandering the streets of Tokyo, lost to those who might talk to me or me to them.

November 20, 2005, Sunday

Being Wendy's first day off in the week, we rose early and headed off to catch the Shinkansen (bullet train) from Tokyo station to Nagano, an hour and a half away. On the way to the train station, we enjoyed a clear and beautiful sunrise skirting the rooftops of Tokyo, made all the better with few people on the trains and streets to impede our navigating the city, saving us from distraction.

The ride from Tokyo to Nagano was uneventful as all Shinkansen rides seem to be. Arriving in Nagano, home of the 1998 Winter Olympics, we rushed over to catch the next train ride into the mountains. Our goal was the mountain town of Yudanaka and then Shibu Onsen, where we were to head out to see the snow monkeys run around the mineral hot spas. The air was in the 40's in the city and dropped into the 30's once we reached the hiking trail, about one mile long. During the hike, we had to walking along a seemingly rickety runway of scaffolding because the trail had been damaged by rock fall and rain. Wendy held on extra tight to my hand because it did seem like a few times that the scaffolding metal floor was buckling. Quite fun, really, reminiscent of something out of Indiana Jones. Nothing happened but it was fun anyway.

We arrived at the monkey park, paid our 300Y and proceeded to see the toothy beasts. We watched as one hapless man almost had his grocery bag stolen by a monkey. Apparently, he wasn't aware that the simians know what a food bag looks like. We put our backpacks in lockers just for that reason. After a while of watching the moneys eat, fight, swim and generally run around, we headed down the mountain on another path in relative silence, taking in the sights, sounds and smells of the forest. It was fun to hand in cold hand (it was just above freezing) with a friend I've had for years and yet scarcely spent but a few weeks together at most.

We spent quite a while exploring the empty streets of Yudanaka, looking at the onsen (hot springs) all over the place, virtually any of which you could go in and use at your pleasure. Perhaps that is where all the people were that Sunday because the place was dead empty, devoid of humans. Maybe it was being Sunday, with everyone hiding out. Whatever the case, it was fun.

After a good time exploring, we headed back to the old ryokan we were staying at for tea and to relax. After getting situated, we went downstairs to the separated onsen (men & women don't bath together) and bathed in the waters hot enough to strip the skin off a rhino. It took a moment to ease in and you couldn't stay too long. You completely washed off on a little stool with a bucket before getting into the bath. Quite a different experience, really. I did three bail-and-chill cycles because I couldn't stand to be in the onsen more than a few minutes at a time. I got light-headed on the last cycle so I knew it was time to get out.

We met in the lobby and went up for our ten course traditional Japanese meal. What a stunning feast! To make things more interesting, I opted for the local delicacy meat, horse sashimi. It was 1500Y extra and well worth every yen. That's not only horse meat but raw horse meat, excellent with a tuna consistency without the crumbliness. It's cut into impossibly thin slices and was easily a quarter pound of the fine meat. It was filling by itself along with the huge amount of food and beer we had. Stuffed to the gills, we both went to boil in the onsen once again and chatted well into the night, finally falling asleep late.

Monday, November 21, 2005

Awaking to birds chirping and gorgeous morning light glinting off the fall colored leaves, we had one more bath in the onsen before taking our leave of the little town. We caught the morning train down to Obuse where Katsushika Hokusai, the famous Japanese wood block artist, took up residence 150 years ago. His most famous work was the large blue waves washing around the two small boats with Mt. Fuji in the background. It is arguably the most famous wood-block painting to home out of Japan to the west. Ironically, Hokusai's work wasn't recognized until after his death and even then by a foreigner.

We enjoyed wandering around the town, seeing old buildings and had a cold Soba noodle lunch. My first entertaining food and social screw-up came when I poured Soba noodle juice, thinking it was hot tea, into our tea cups by mistake. Wendy got a laugh out of it and fortunately it wasn't a big deal. No assumptions can be made about what's in containers here, even with a teapot because it might not be holding tea.

We caught the afternoon train to Nagano and had just enough time to take a bus to see the city's big Buddhist temple, Zenkoji. After burning down 11 times, statues were erected to help with prayers offered in hopes of averting any more fires.

Taking the bus back to the JR station, we caught our Shinkansen ride back to Tokyo station, watching a splendid sunset across the landscape of the Land of the Rising Sun. We took the Chuo line back to Wendy's apartment to drop our things and head out for food, sake and beer. It's good we did that because Wendy was wearing down & getting quiet, as she warned she would. A few glasses of sake improved that situation immensely. She returned to her normal, personable and talkative self. At dinner, a huge table of noisy and what Wendy called ugly Russians were making quite a ruckus. In Japan, any loud groups stand out terribly.

Finishing a 11,000Y (\$100US) dinner, we took the train two stops back to her place. We chatted well into the night before bedding down. Mixing beer and sake created a headache for me and Wendy was good and buzzed with just the starts of the spins. She handled it quite well and it was good for a laugh.

Tuesday, November 22, 2005

Last day in Tokyo for perhaps a long time. Wendy and I chatted the morning away, cleaning up and me packing to leave. Unfortunately my backpack doesn't seem to weigh any less than when I can to Japan 9 days ago. We geared up and headed to Shinjuku to have my last lunch of rice and sashimi with Wendy. We really didn't say that much but took long looks. What more is to be said when you know you may not see each other for a long time and under unknown circumstances. As Wendy was fond of saying, "Rip off the Band-Aid quickly."

We went over to Starbucks and watched the world pass by in relative silence, aware of what the movie at the Hokusai gallery said, paraphrased, "If there is a large gap between reality and our mind, how are we to know what reality is?" The actual quote was more profound but that's the critical part that I remember.

All we both knew is that we would shortly be returning to being friends separated by the mighty Pacific Ocean. Wendy was planning to renew her contract with AEON in February for the next year. Had I been laid off earlier in the year, maybe we would have traveling around somewhere at this time. Then again, who knows what would have happened.

She escorted me to the station and saw me off to the airport. I watched her slip away as the train doors closed and I was whisked away to my reality.

I caught the Rinkai line Skyliner to Narita airport for 1,000Y, much cheaper than the 3,000Y for the NRT express and only a little slower. Made it to the airport and through it without even, though I did run into another pack of Russians, sounding like the same ones at dinner last night. Thank goodness that they weren't on my flight but it did look bad for a minute there.

Epilogue

Riding here in the night across the Pacific, headed back to the United States, I have mixed feelings about my experience in returning to Japan. This was the first trip in my life where the goal was to wander the city, mostly lost in thought. I was with no particular plan to see anything or go anywhere, other than the short trip to Nagano. It was strange to have an entire week where

my purpose was to think of myself, fully away from the distraction of places I know and the patterns I follow. I'm not able to read much here, keeping my mind free of trifling things. I asked the Man to direct my life and I can only guess that He has, though I don't know it yet.

Then there is the matter of Wendy and I exploring feeling we've both had (well, probably just me) for each other but was always suppressed or distracted by the work/life/boyfriend/girlfriend cycle. We both know and discussed that retaining our friendship is the most important goal and that I desperately don't want to ruin that.

We both acknowledged that the other might start seeing someone and we both have to accept that, no matter how bitter a pill that might be to swallow. We left some things unsaid, too. I didn't think we really had any other choice because of the huge distance between us. We both agree that a long-distance relationship is a stupid thing to embark on because our current rate of communication wouldn't change.

Oddly, I guessed that Wendy had many thoughts going through her mind today as we sat there because she kept twisting her lips this way and that. She never does that. Sometimes I think it's good that we can't read each other's minds. You wouldn't want someone hearing all the random crazy thoughts in your head.

Where does this leave me? Did I come back with more answers or questions than I left with? I know that I'm in the middle of somewhere and have to choose a course to take. I know the two things I like to do most are explore and create. I'd like to do a one-day winter ascent of Mt. Whitney. I've no ice skill, no snow shoes or crampons, a perfect solo recipe for disaster and suicide. As long as I can hit above the meadow by 6am, it's possible to succeed. [I failed on my December 23 attempt but obviously made it back. The snow was deep and soft, making it impassible for a day trip.] When life is good you have to create challenges to make it feel tough. Life for me is infinitely far from tough - I'm not starving and I have a roof over my head to return to.

If it takes this long just to come up with those simple thoughts, I'll never get anywhere with this introspection. The ability to just blow out to any country is a recent thing, maybe two years old. I wish I was 24 and knew that it's possible to do that, but instead I'll be 32 in less than a month. God knew I'm not ready and He made sure I didn't try it. I hope and pray I'll be still physically able when the time comes.

Goodbye, Japan. Wish to see you soon, Wendy.

On my own accord, I'll likely never return to Japan just to visit. There are too many places in the world to see. Going back was for a very special, out of the ordinary reason - I was laid off September 26, 2005 from Callaway Golf. He gave me a kick in the pants. Now I need to see where I'm left facing. It apparently is a full-time position as a contractor at Myron L. I'm a contractor so I'm reasonably free to come and go. Perfect.