Maxine and Peter's Japan Travelogue

Sunday, 11/9: We were up early to catch a 5:30 limo to the airport. That's an ungodly hour, to be sure, but we were all psyched up about the trip. After a short flight to Chicago, we boarded an All Nippon Airways plane for the long leg of the trip, 13 hours to Tokyo. It was interesting to look at the on-screen flight map about one-third of the way through the trip and see that we were almost directly over Denali National Park in Alaska, which we visited a few years ago. Flying business class made the flight less of a travail that it would have been otherwise, we could actually stretch out and catch a nap, and we enjoyed two surprisingly good Japanese meals ("western" food was available as well). Even so, after the long flight we were really ready to get off the plane at the end.

Not your run-of-the-mill airplane food!

Monday 11/10: Thanks to the International Date Line, it was the afternoon of the next day when we landed in Tokyo. We caught our connecting flight for the short hop to Osaka, where we arrived at about 6:30 PM local time. After a problem-free trip of many thousands of miles, we ran into our first (and only) glitch—the prearranged taxi was not waiting. Showing us our first glimpse of the Japanese focus on service, the taxi coordinator at the terminal was quite upset, apologized profusely, and got us another car in 15 minutes. We were soon at our hotel and, exhausted, went right to bed.

Tuesday 11/11: Despite the large time difference (Japan time is 14 hours later than North Carolina time), we slept most of the night. A major goal for our first full day in Japan was to stay awake and spend as much time as possible in sunlight to help reset our internal sleep clocks. Lucky for us, it was a bright, sunny day (and in fact we had perfect weather for the whole trip, with just a bit of rain on the last day).

Our first destination was Osaka-jo (Osaka Castle), which we reached easily using the local trains (with some help finding the right train from an English-speaking information person at the train station). While Maxine speaks a little Japanese, she does not read it, and we could not be sure we were interpreting the signs correctly.

This castle was originally built starting in 1583 by Hideyoshi Toyotomi, the feudal lord of that part of Japan, as both a stronghold and symbol of power. The Toyotomi family was deposed, and the castle destroyed, during a war in the years 1614-1615. The new Shogun, Ieyasu Tokugawa, rebuilt the castle during the 1620s. Over the centuries the castle has suffered various misfortunes from war, fire, and earthquake, but it has always been rebuilt. An interesting account of the castle's history can be found here: http://www.osakacastle.net/english/history/index.html.

One of the enormous rocks used to build the defensive walls at Osaka Castle. It is estimated to weigh 110 tons!

The outside of the castle is indeed impressive, as are the grounds with the amazing defensive walls constructed from huge stones. And, as is so typically Japanese, the defensive works are interspersed with beautiful gardens. The interior of the castle is less interesting, having been converted into a museum and shop—which are interesting in their own right, but do not give a sense of what life in the castle was like. For that you need to go to Himeji Castle (which we visited 17 years ago), where much of

Osaka Castle

View of Osaka and castle gardens from the top floor of the castle

the interior has been restored to the original condition. While we could have climbed the stairs, our legs argued for taking the elevator to the top floor of the castle, where there is a viewing platform that gave a great vista of the castle grounds and the city of Osaka. After leaving the castle we strolled around the gardens for a while. We both find Japanese gardens to be particularly attractive and prefer them to the more geometric style that is typical of most European-style gardens.

Osaka Castle gardens. If you look closely you, can see a heron near the base of the lantern.

After lunch we hopped back on the train and went to Shitenno-ji Temple, a Buddhist temple (the oldest in Japan) that was started in the year 593, not too long after Buddhism was introduced from China in about 552. The name Shitenno-ji means Temple (the *ji* suffix) of the Four Heavenly Buddhist Guardians (S*hitenno*). According to history, Prince Regent Shotoku Taishi prayed to the Shitenno for victory in a war against another clan that opposed the spread of Buddhism in Japan, and built the temple in thanks when he was victorious. The buildings are not the originals, of course, as the temple structures have suffered destruction many times over the centuries from fire, earthquake, war, and typhoons.

Shitenno-ji Temple.

Lanterns at Shitenno-ji Temple.

Shitenno-ji Temple.

Wed 11/12: After breakfast we checked out of the hotel in Osaka and took a local train to Kyoto, about a one hour ride. We could have taken the high-speed train, the Shinkansen, but the local train was more convenient and provided us with another glimpse into Japan. The area between Osaka and Kyoto that we saw from the train was not very attractive, to be honest, lots of industry and unappealing housing. We did see the Suntory Yamazaki distillery from the train, a company that makes a variety of excellent whiskeys. Given that Japan's economy is the 3rd largest in the world, perhaps one must expect these industrial areas—there are the temples, museums, and shrines to be sure, but there are also the factories and smelters (and distilleries!).

When we arrived in Kyoto, we took a taxi to our lodging at the Ryokan Kinoe. This one night at a ryokan (a traditional Japanese inn) was a splurge, and we truly enjoyed it. See the section The Ryokan for more details on this unique Japanese lodging and our experience there. We were too early to check into the ryokan, so we left our luggage there and walked around.

A bit of Kyoto history may be in order. This city was the imperial capital for more than 1000 years, until 1869 when the capital was moved to Tokyo at the time of the imperial restoration. Due to its long role as both a government and religious center, the city is home to an abundance of shrines and temples, and currently has about 1600 Buddhist temples and 400 Shinto shrines within its boundaries. The city is very well-preserved compared with most other large Japanese cities because it was largely spared destruction during World War II. This is an interesting and somewhat chilling story. When America began its conventional bombing campaign against Japan, the atomic bomb was already being developed. With somewhat cold-blooded reasoning, it was decided to spare several cities from conventional bombing so that, if the A-bomb were ever used on them, the resulting destruction could be evaluated as solely due to the A-bomb and not due to earlier bombing. Kyoto was one of those cities, as were Nagasaki and Hiroshima. When it came time to make the final decision as to where to use the A-bombs, Kyoto was spared thanks to the personal efforts of Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War, who had visited Kyoto and was aware of its enormous cultural significance.

Our first stop was the Kennin-ji Temple, a Zen temple that was founded in 1202. The first abbott of the temple, Eisai, is credited with bringing Zen to Japan (while Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century, the Zen school was introduced much later). The buildings and interiors are beautiful, simple, and serene. The temple houses an exact replica of the famous screen painting of Raijin, the god of thunder, lightning, and storms, and Fujin, the god of wind (the original is at the Kyoto National Museum). These rather fierce looking spirits are part of the Shinto tradition, and their display at a Buddhist temple is one of many indications of the very sensible approach the Japanese take toward religion. No need to choose one religion and exclude the other, but rather appreciate what is beautiful and meaningful in each.

At Kennin-ji Temple.

Interior, Kennin-ji Temple.

Screen painting of Raijin and Fujin, a Japanese National Treasure (public domain photo).

View of rock garden, Kennin-ji Temple.

Laughing Buddha, Kennin-ji Temple.

After leaving the Kennin-ji Temple, we headed for the Gion district, which was originally developed in the middle ages to accommodate travelers who were visiting the nearby Yasaka Shrine (which we did not visit). Gion eventually evolved into a well-known and exclusive geisha district. While the number of geisha has decreased greatly, you can still see geisha or *maiko* (geisha in training), with their elaborate costumes and makeup, on the streets of Gion from time to time (see photo). Don't be fooled by tourists in kimono. It's popular for young women and men to dress in a kimono, often rented, for their visit to Gion. As nice as they may look, they are not maiko—look for the elaborate makeup (see photo), the hair arrangement, and the high wooden sandals.

Maiko, young women training to be geisha.

Street food in Gion.

A real maiko's makeup is quite elaborate—see the back of her neck.

Narrow streets and crowds in Gion.

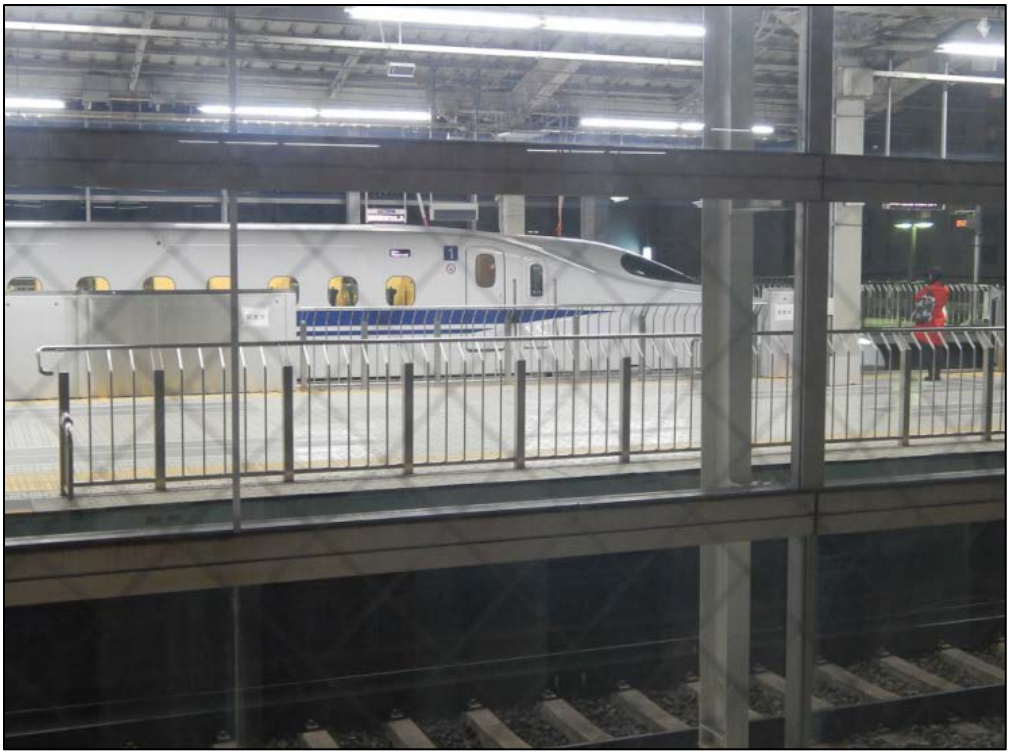
While Gion offers a lot of interesting architecture and winding, narrow streets to explore, it seems to consist mainly of shops aimed at tourists—and it is a very popular destination for the Japanese! It was mobbed, including many school groups, and the crowds took a lot of the enjoyment away for us. So, we decided to find

our way back to the ryokan by a new route, which means we got a bit lost! But, it was fun wandering some quiet residential streets and finding unexpected sights, such as the children's memorial shown here. As I understand it, these memorials are created to honor children lost to miscarriage or who died in childbirth. This was right at the side of the road, it was quite touching.

Children's memorial, Kyoto.

Back at the Ryokan Kinoe, we relaxed while eagerly anticipating one of the highlights of almost any ryokan—the dinner. More on our feast below in The Ryokan.

Thurs 11/13: We checked out of the ryokan and took a taxi to the Hotel Kintetsu in the Kyoto train station. This turned out to be more of an adventure than you would think. It's a new hotel and the taxi driver did not know exactly where it was. To further complicate matters, the hotel is actually inside the station, with no obvious sign on the outside of the building to identify it. After asking a few people we finally figured it out. This was the only disappointing hotel stay of our visit, a very cramped room that looked out directly on the tracks. And I mean directly—if the window had opened, I could have thrown an egg and hit a train and the waiting passengers on the platform (see photo). Plus, we were given a smoking room despite having reserved non-smoking, it stank something awful. Oh well, it was only one night.



View of tracks and Shinkansen from our Kyoto hotel room.

We left our luggage at the hotel and spent the day exploring Kyoto. It's very easy to get around by taxi in the city, there are lots of them, due in part to the city's local train and bus systems not being as convenient as in other large cities. We almost always could hail a taxi on the street very quickly, and when we were off the beaten path it was a simple matter to have someone call for one. In Japan, taxi drivers usually wear uniforms with white gloves, quite a contrast to the cabbies in, say, New York City! Also, the rear door is operated by the driver, so don't try to open/close it yourself. The drivers as a rule do not help with luggage, and tips are not expected.

Our first stop was the Sanjusangen-do Temple. While the temple's official name is Rengeo-in, it has almost universally become known as Sanjusangen-do, which literally means "hall with 33 spaces between columns," describing the main building's architecture. The original building was completed in 1164 and destroyed by fire in 1249; the current building dates from 1266. The main hall is 120 meters long and is Japan's longest wooden structure. The hall houses a truly amazing sight, 1001 statues of Kannon, the goddess of mercy. There is a large, central statue of Kannon, perhaps 4 meters tall, flanked on each side by 500 life-size statues of Kannon. Each statue is made from cypress and covered with gold leaf. Of the 1000 statues, 124 are originals, rescued when the original temple burned down and the remainder were created in the 13th century. Photography is not permitted inside the hall, but I found a public domain photograph showing the Kannon statues (below).

Kannon is a very interesting Buddhist deity. She is the goddess of compassion, and is more accurately known as The Thousand Armed Kannon. She also has eleven heads, the better to see human suffering (and all the arms help her to alleviate it). The statues at Sanjusangen-do have only one head and 42 arms each. The use of 42 arms is related to Buddhist theology. If you don't count the 2 "regular" arms, each Kannon has 40 "extra" arms.

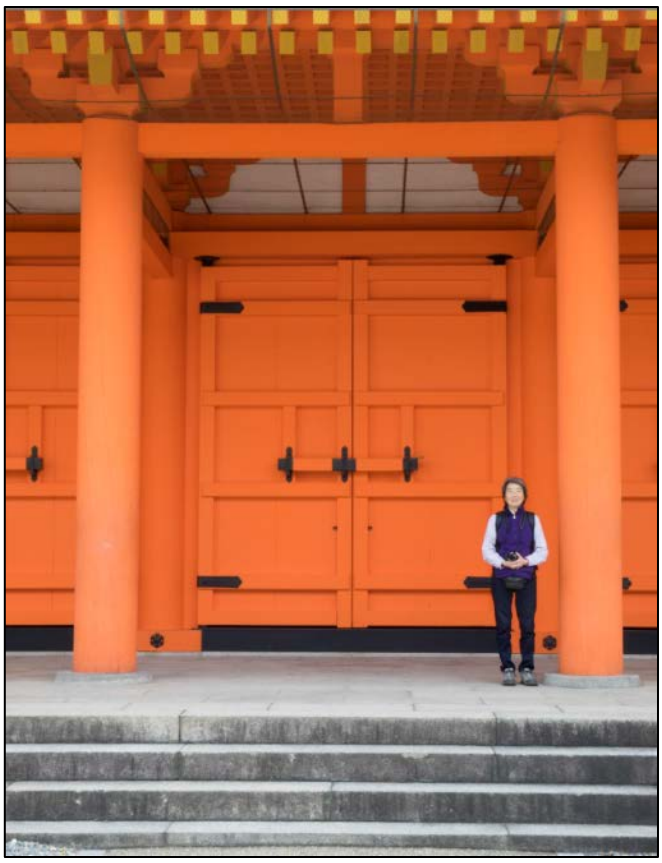
Multiply this by the 25 planes of existence to get the one thousand arms. And, because Kannon is supposedly able to take on 33 different forms, the 1,000 statues are symbolic of 33,000 Kannons.

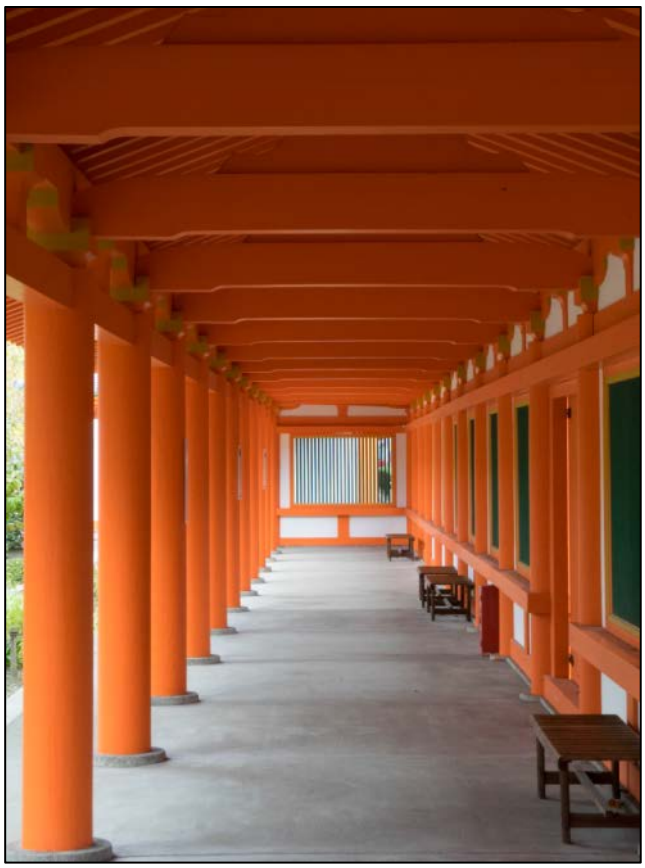
Spaced along the front of the ranks of Kannons are life-size statues of 28 guardian deities. These deities all can be traced to Hinduism, and each has a corresponding deity in the Hindu pantheon. Each has been thoroughly adopted by Japanese Buddhism, with a Japanese name, and seeing this link with Hinduism was a graphic reminder of Buddhism's origins in India.

The main hall at Sanjusangen-do.

Statues of Kannon at Sanjusangen-do (public domain image).

Altar at Sanjusangen-do.





At Sanjusangen-do Temple.

Next we visited the Nishiki market, an enormous indoor market with over 100 vendors specializing in food and cooking-related items. It's quite an experience to see so many food items whose identity is a complete mystery! The seafood is particularly interesting! The Japanese are extremely attentive to the quality of seafood, and even at an ordinary, small market you will find nothing but very fresh (sometimes live) and carefully prepared items. You may not know what it is, but you know it's fresh! There are few U.S. seafood markets that would survive in Japan.

While at the market I kept in mind a lesson I first learned during our first visit to Japan, 17 years ago. The Japanese place great value on the appearance of fruit, and particularly attractive specimens, such as a perfectly formed bunch of grapes, are often given as gifts and will command very high prices (imagine an $80 bunch of grapes!). But even "ordinary" fruits and vegetables meant for daily consumption are supposed to look good as well as tasting good. Thus, when you see fruits and vegetable on display at a market stand, the rule is – DON'T TOUCH! Our American habit of prodding and squeezing produce to see if is ripe is definitely taboo.

Pickles are another wonder of Japanese cuisine and were on display in abundance at Nishiki. Generically known as tsukemono, Japanese pickles encompass a huge range of vegetables (and sometimes fruit and seafood), flavors, and colors. They are, in small quantities, part of almost every Japanese meal. Perhaps the best known example in the U.S. is the *gari* (pickled ginger) that is served with sushi. One of our favorite Japanese pickles is narazuke, made by covering vegetables with sake lees, the rice mash left over after making sake (Japanese rice wine) and letting it mature for one to three years (yes, that's right….years). It is most often made with various

kinds of melons and squash, although other vegetables such as carrots are sometimes used. See the top left photo below. Fortunately, we can get very good narazuke at a nearby Japanese market in North Carolina.

Narazuke for sale at Nishiki market in Kyoto.

Seafood for sale, Nishiki market.

Nishiki market.

Unidentified seafood at Nishiki market.

At Nishiki market.

After a tasty lunch at a noodle restaurant in the market, we were off to the Kyoto Handicraft Center to do some shopping. Then, back to the hotel to relax a bit before going to a nearby restaurant for a tempura dinner.

Fri 11/14: Today we had a private tour of Kyoto with an English-speaking driver, arranged by our daughter-in-law Hideko. Normally, we aren't enthusiastic about tours because when you go in a group you are always on someone else's schedule and can't make little side-excursions to explore things of interest. A private tour is quite different, and while it was expensive, we were chauffeured from place to place (in a BMW 7-series limo no less!) by a friendly, English-speaking guide who had an extensive knowledge of the city and its attractions.

Our first stop was the Kiyomizu Temple, also known as the Temple of the Goddess of Mercy. This Buddhist temple first opened in the late 8th century and the current buildings date from 1633. It's quite amazing that no nails were used in the construction, even though some of the buildings are sizable. Unfortunately, quite a few of the buildings were being renovated and were covered with scaffolding, so what we could see was limited. Being on a high hill, it offered nice views of Kyoto.

The temple's name, Kiyomizu, means *clear water* and comes from the Otawa waterfall on the temple grounds that runs from the nearby hills. The waterfall is divided into 3 separate streams and visitors use cups attached to long poles to drink from them. Each stream's water is said to have a different benefit: longevity, success at school, or a fortunate love life. However drinking from all 3 streams is considered greedy. There was a long line of people waiting for their chance, including many school groups (identified by their uniforms and hats).

At Kiyomizu Temple.

Supports under the main building at Kiyomizu Temple. All wood, no nails!

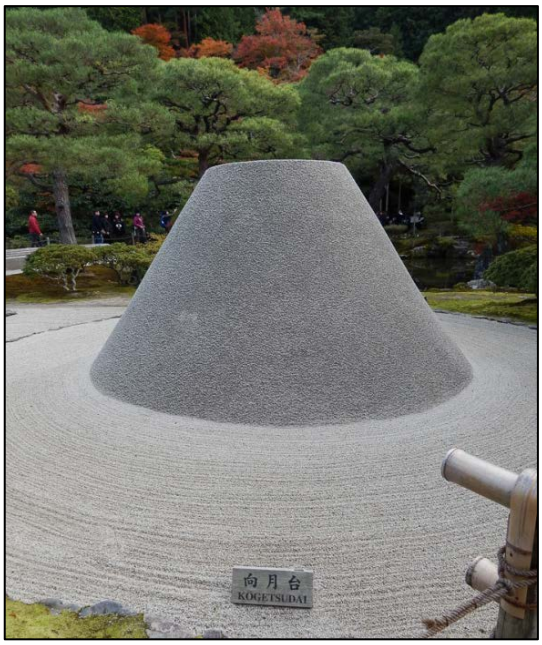
Students getting their luck-granting drink at the Kiyomizu Falls.

At Kiyomizu Temple.

Our next stop was the Ginkaku-ji Temple, a Zen temple whose name means Temple of the Silver Pavilion. This name is confusing because there is nothing "silver" about the buildings. The original plans called for the exterior to be covered in silver foil, but war and other events intervened and the foil was never applied. Still, the name remains.

The temple complex was initially conceived in about 1460 as a retirement villa for the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa, with the intention that it become a temple after his death. An unusual feature of this temple is its dry sand garden, known as the *Ginshaden* or The Sea of Silver Sand. Within this sand garden is the Kogetsu-dai, or moon viewing platform. The original purpose of the perfectly formed cone of sand is not known. Some believe it is meant to resemble Mount Fuji, while others say it was designed as a simple mound of sand used to replenish the walkways. Still others say that the cones of this type (they are found in other temples in Japan) are meant to reflect divine light into the hearts of the visitors. No matter what the original purpose was, the Kogetsu-dai illuminates the Silver Pavilion on moonlit nights, making for a magnificent sight. In addition, it is said that from above the Silver Pavilion the Kogetsu-dai upon the Ginshaden resembles the silvery full moon reflected in a deep lake.

The main structure, or *Kannon-den*, at Ginkaku-ji.



The Kogetsu-dai in the sand garden at Ginkaku-ji.

More of the sand garden.

The main building and pond at Ginketsu-ji.

Next, we were off to Kinkaku-ji, location of what is officially called Rokuon-ji, but is almost universally known as The Golden Pavilion. This breathtakingly beautiful building is quite literally golden, as the exterior of the upper two floors is entirely cladded in gold leaf. It is set at the edge of a large pond amidst a beautiful garden. Tourists are not permitted inside, unfortunately, but there is a display of photographs showing the statues and paintings inside. The original building dated from the 14th century, but it was burned down (as our guide explained, by a crazy monk) and rebuilt in 1955. When the sun shines on the Pavilion, it is quite a sight to behold!

The Golden Pavilion

It was time for lunch, and our driver asked us what kind of food we would like. We think he may have expected us to request a fancy sushi restaurant or other upscale establishment, and was therefore a bit surprised when we said we wanted to have ramen, a delicious noodle soup specialty that is nonetheless considered to be “ordinary” food. He took us to a typical neighborhood ramen place, definitely off the tourist trail, where we feasted on ramen in broth with pork, eggs, and a heap of slivered scallions on top. Delicious! Our driver joined us and we enjoyed getting to know a bit more about him and the city.

Our ramen lunch.

The neighborhood ramen restaurant.

With happy stomachs full of ramen, we were off to see the Ryoan-ji Temple. This Buddhist temple perhaps best known for its *kare-sansui*, or dry landscape garden—carefully selected rocks artfully arranged on a mindfully raked surface of polished river pebbles. This is the type of garden that many westerners associated with Japanese temples, and the one at Ryoan-ji is considered by some to be the finest extant example. It is sublime in its simplicity and it is easy to see how the experience of the garden would be conducive to meditation—which in fact was its original purpose.



The Zen rock garden at Ryoan-ji.

Ryoan-ji also has a water garden and a tea garden. In the tea garden we came across a beautiful *tsukubai*, a basin with continually running water that is used for ritual washing of the hands and mouth. The word *tsukubai* translates literally as “crouch” because the basins are intentionally placed low so that users must crouch, or bow, to use them, signifying humility and reverence. You will see tsukubai at most Buddhist temples, but the one at Ryoan-ji is particularly noteworthy because of the complex and multi-layered symbolism relating to Buddhist teachings that is embodied in the round shape, the square opening, and the characters written on the top surface. If you are interested, there’s a detailed explanation in the Wikipedia entry for the Ryoan-ji temple.

The tsukubai at Ryoan-ji.

Garden at Ryoan-ji.

The final stop on our tour was Nijo Castle, which originated in the early 17th century as the Kyoto residence of the Tokugawa shoguns. Like castles everywhere, it was designed as both a military stronghold and as a way to impress visitors with the power and wealth of the lord. It's a huge complex, with many gardens and buildings—and of course it has suffered the ravages of time, war, earthquake, and fire, with many reconstructions over the years. We could not take photos inside.

The Nijo Castle shoguns must have been quite paranoid—which may have been a good thing in feudal Japan! Two aspects of the castle—or more specifically, the Ninomaru palace, the main building within the castle—illustrate this. In some areas, the wooden floors were specifically designed to squeak like birds when someone walks on them—the *nightingale floors*. No assassin could possible creep up on the shogun without being heard. And, after these hundreds of years, the floors still squeak! Also, in certain large rooms where the shogun received visitors, there was a large distance maintained between the guests and the lord (in those days, you had to get close to someone to assassinate him). There was also a discrete door behind which the shogun's bodyguards waited, ready to lunge out and protect him if needed.

The castle grounds are extensive and there were many areas we did not, or could not, visit. The gardens are beautiful, and the detail work on some of the buildings is really impressive. This was a fitting end to our tour of Kyoto.

At the entrance to Nijo Castle.

Nijo Castle gardens.

Details, Nijo Castle.

After the tour, we picked up our bags at the hotel and waited at the train station for the Shinkansen (the "bullet train") from Kyoto to Okayama. When we arrived in Okayama, we were picked up by Emiko, Maxine's distant cousin, and her husband Kenji. This family connection makes visits to Japan very special. Maxine's grandparents, all four of them, emigrated from Japan to Canada in the early 20th century. Over the years, contact was maintained on the Okazaki side (Maxine's father's family) between those who were still in Japan and those who were in Canada, with occasional visits by family members to Japan, Canada, and the U.S. Thus, we received a warm welcome in Okayama and were guests at Emiko and Kenji's home for four nights. This was a very special part of the trip.

Sat 11/15: We were up early for a home-cooked breakfast and a drive to the Chichu museum on Naoshima Island, which is a short ferry ride off the coast near Okayama. This is a very unusual museum in that the museum itself is on display as much as the art works. There are, in fact, very few art works at Chichu: four paintings from Monet's water lilies series, an installation by Walter De Maria, and a couple of installations by

James Turrell. The entire museum is underground, designed that way to prevent conflict with the beautiful scenery of Naoshima. The museum is constructed of cast concrete and designed with angles, ramps, spaces that make the museum itself perhaps is the main work of art! Despite being underground, it is almost entirely illuminated with natural light through creative use of skylights and light pipes. Photography is not allowed, unfortunately, but you can find some images at the museum's web site.

Near the museum is an area with numerous outdoor sculptures on permanent display. The theme of squash (yes, the vegetable) was common, and it's quite striking to see one of these fanciful creations on display at the water's edge.

The Inland Sea, from Naoshima Island.

Maxine with a squash sculpture.

After the visiting the museum, we went to the nearby village of Honmura to see the Art House project. This village was losing population and as a result there were numerous abandoned houses. Rather than let these fall into disrepair, the project gave individual houses to selected artists with the understanding that the houses would be transformed into works of art. We saw quite an array of very creative approaches to this task. One in particular stays in memory—a completely dark room where, after sitting for 10 or 15 minutes to let your eyes adjust, you start seeing a very faintly illuminated tableau in front of you. Another had opened up the interior of the house to enclose a very large Statue of Liberty replica. You never know what artists will come up with—which is what makes art so great!

The village is interesting in its own right. There are many interesting buildings, narrow streets, endless places to stroll and enjoy. One things that caught my attention was the private gardens. Houses tend to front directly on the street—in other words, no front yard—but if the main door is open you will sometimes catch a glimpse of a lovely private garden within. The town has become a popular tourist/artist destination and offers an impressive array of restaurants, most small and seemingly in converted private homes. We has a delicious lunch at a vegetarian restaurant before continuing our explorations.

One of the narrow streets in Honmura.

Art House project in Honmura.

Private garden in Honmura.

We took the ferry from Naoshima Island back to the mainland and returned to Okayama. In the evening we went to a restaurant for dinner with many Okazaki relatives. It was a small restaurant, again in a converted

home, with the chef working busily away in the room where we were seated. This was one of the best meals of our trip, I can't even begin to recall (or even name) the many delightful things we were served. I enjoyed speaking with Kiyotaka and Takako's two children (Takumi and Ayane), helping them with English while learning a few Japanese words from them.

Dinner with Okazaki relatives in Okayama.

Sun 11/16: We spent the day at Tabara, a farm near Okayama that has been in the Okazaki family for ages. It's not as busy as it used to be, given that younger generations are less interested in a farming career, but it still grows rice and a variety of fruits and vegetables. It was a great treat for us to have this brief glimpse into the day-to-day life of some Japanese people. On this day, family, friends, and us two Americans—about 20 of us altogether—gathered to harvest Atago pears. These are the "glass" or "Asian" pears that we see in U.S. markets once in a while, although the ones we picked were a lot bigger and (I must say), tastier.

Picking pears at Tabara.

Munching on a very ripe persimmon.

Riding on the farm truck at Tabara (photo by Jun).

Two of the larger pears we picked (photo by Jun).

The pears are grown with typical Japanese attention to detail. When they are small, each pear is enclosed in a paper bag to protect it against insects and the sun, because sunlight would change the color from pale yellow to something darker—not considered desirable! They are also suspended in small, individual mesh bags so their weight does not pull them off the tree. We harvested quite a pile of them, although this year the harvest was apparently half of last year's. These pears are huge, up to 2.5 kg, almost as big as a cantaloupe. They are delicious when just picked, but letting them sit for a month after picking is supposed to make them sweeter. We also picked some persimmons and watched as daikon and other vegetables were gathered. And, it was fun to ride in the back of a farm truck, something that American safety laws would frown upon.

After harvesting the pears, we tackled the persimmons, or *kaki*. In Japan there are two kinds—a round persimmon that is eaten fresh, and a more oval persimmon that are hung to dry, making the most delicious, chewy snack. They are delicious fresh as well, and when properly ripened are not at all like the astringent

persimmons we often get here. At one persimmon tree we were given a slightly overripe fruit to eat, it was a real treat (sticky fingers and juice running down our chins).

Shelling azuki beans.

Takako-obachan trimming just-picked daikon. *Obachan* is an honorific that is used to refer to respected older women.

Recently harvested rice field. The cut plants come back to life, but are turned under during the winter in preparation for the spring planting.

Picking persimmons (the kind that are eaten fresh).

Some of the harvesting crew at Tabara.

Persimmons (the drying kind) ready for picking, with rice field in background.

After the harvesting, we all went back to Kiyotaka's house for a picnic feast. There were two charcoal grills going, with an amazing assortment of meat, fish, and vegetables cooking away. While Japanese cuisine is known for focusing on fish, with meat either absent or used in small amounts, this feast was an exception, with pork, beef, and chicken in abundance. Fish too, of course...a favorite was the sanma (which translates to *autumn swordfish*), a sleek silver fish about a foot long that is simply gutted, impaled on a skewer, and grilled—pick it up and eat it like corn, what a treat!

Maxine digging into a sanma.

Grilling fish and pork at our picnic.

The very well-fed gang at the barbecue.

The youngsters enjoying the feast.

Mon 11/17: This was our day to see some more sights in Okayama. With our hostess Emiko, distant cousin Akemi, and friend Jun, we went first to the Kibitsu shrine. The main building of this Shinto shrine, which is considered to be a national treasure, was rebuilt in in 1425, giving some sense of how ancient the shrine is (there are no records of its initial founding, although the 9th century has been suggested). The shrine is dedicated to Prince Kibitsuhike, who was the model for the well-known Japanese legend of Momotaro (the Peach Boy), a young boy who exterminated ogres.

One noted feature of this shrine is the *long corridor*, a covered walkway that is about 400 meters in length. It is covered with a graceful wooden roof and follows the contours of the land in a graceful curve. There is also the tradition of tossing pebbles onto the Torii gates—if your pebble does not fall off, you will get a wish. It's a lot harder than it seems!

With Jun, Akemi, and Emiko at the entrance to the main building at the Kibitsu Shrine.

At the Kibitsu Shrine.

Maxine and Akemi in the Long Corridor at Kibitsu Shrine.

Lanterns at Kibitsu Shrine.

Throwing good luck pebbles.

Emiko, Akemi, and Jun at Kibitsu.

We next went to the Korakuen garden, which is considered to be one of the three most beautiful gardens in Japan—and if you know Japanese gardens, that is saying a lot (the other two are Kenrokuen in Kanazawa and Kairakuen in Mito). This garden, which was started in 1700 by Ikeda Tsunama, Lord of Okayama, is associated with Okayama Castle (see below). It comprises about 32 acres. One of its most interesting features is a stream that winds through the garden, feeding several ponds of different sizes (some of which host the most beautiful koi). The stream is diverted from the nearby Aashi River and, after running through the garden, the water is returned to the river.

With Emiko and Akemi, Korakuen Garden. Photo by Jun.

Bamboo grove.

Panoramic view of Korakuen Garden.

Many of the trees in the garden were wrapped with straw “girdles,” as shown in the photo. It turns out that this a clever and ecologically benign method of pest control. Certain insects infest the trees, and when the weather turns cold they crawl down the trunk to over-winter in the soil, emerging again in the spring. The straw mat fools them, so they stop and spend the cold months cozy in the straw. Before they emerge again to infest the trees, the mats are removed and burned, and goodbye to the pests!

Pest control mat on tree, Korakuen Garden.

Standing at the mirrored ping-pong tables, with Okayama Castle in the background.

From the garden we walked across the river to Okayama castle. This fortress was started in 1573 and, like all castles in Japan, has suffered over the years from earthquake, fire, and war, with the final complete destruction coming in a U.S. bombing raid in 1945. The castle was reconstructed in the early 1960s, completely in concrete. While it is indeed an impressive sight from the outside, the interior has been totally modernized, with elevators and air conditioning. In the courtyard in front of the castle was one of the strangest things we saw in Japan, a large, raised platform holding a couple of dozen ping-pong tables.

Tues 11/18: Today we left Okayama. Our host Emiko, along with Akemi, drove us to Kobe. The trip took us through very mountainous country and the road went through many tunnels. The scenery was beautiful and emphasized the fact that Japan has many mountains and relatively little area that is suitable for agriculture and habitation.

We dropped things off at our hotel, met Takako (who lives in Kobe), and went to explore an unusual and interesting part of the city and its history. Kobe has been an important port since the opening of trade with the West in 1853, and in the late 19th century the foreign traders built trade missions in the city to conduct their business. The missions were all located in the same area of the city, high on a hill, and they were all built and decorated using the architecture and style of back home—England, Germany, Holland, and so on. The buildings are now mostly converted to museums, and it's quite interesting to be walking through a Japanese city and suddenly find yourself in a 19th century European house.

At the Denmark House in Kobe.

Japan—or Paris?

Interior of one of the European trade missions in Kobe. Wishes made while seated in this chair are supposed to come true.

Emiko in a very British phone box near the British mission in Kobe.

Even though it was only the middle of November, Christmas decorations were on display around the city. It's a popular holiday in Japan, but not because of its religious associations. Gifts and cards are exchanged, particularly between young couples. It's not an official holiday, so shops and offices are open on the 25th. As a great example of how English phrases have been adapted to the Japanese language, *Merry Christmas* is spoken in Japanese as *Meri Kurisumasu*.

Christmas decorations in Kobe.

We went back to the hotel and connected with our son Ben, his wife Hideko (or Heidi as we call her), and our two granddaughters Sarah and Hannah (4 and 1 years old). They had flown from New York the day before, and we would spend the remainder of the trip with them. They were a bit jet-lagged, but glad to be in Japan. We did some visiting with our Japanese relatives, who were quite taken with cute little Hannah, and afterwards we went to dinner at a Chinese restaurant.

From left: Maxine, Takako, Peter, Sarah, Ben, Emiko, Heidi, Hannah, Akemi.

Wed 11/19: The first stop was a professional photo shoot that Heidi had arranged for the girls. This involved dressing the youngsters in traditional Japanese garb and posing them with appropriate props. The photographer was quite skilled at getting the girls to cooperate, and the final photos are very cute!

Sarah and Hannah in traditional Japanese outfits

While they were doing the photo shoot, we walked a few blocks to the Ikuta shrine. This Shinto shrine is one of the oldest in Japan, having been founded in the 3rd century to enshrine Wakahirume, one of the *kami*, or spirits, of the Shinto religion. The shrine seems out of place amidst the tall buildings and bustle of downtown Kobe, but of course it was there long before the city, which grew up around it.

We were quite curious to see many sake (rice wine) barrels at the shrine (see photo). There's a history behind this. At some time in the distant past, perhaps the 9th century, state visitors from the Korean peninsula were visiting the Kobe area. In preparation, rice had been sent from various regions of Japan and was used by the priests at the Ikuta shrine to brew sake for the noble guests. Thus, Ikuta because associated with sake brewing and there is a small shrine within Ikuta, called Matsuno, that is dedicated to the gods of sake brewing. While quite attractive, the sake barrels were all apparently empty and there were no samples on offer!

Peter and ancient tree at the Ikuta Shrine.

Sake barrels.

After the visit to Ikuta Shrine, we rejoined Ben and Heidi and took a train to Harborland, a shopping area at the Kobe waterfront. This was mostly for the kids, there is a great Ferris wheel there and also the Anpanman museum. OK, some explanation is in order. In Japanese, *an* means a sweet jam or paste, made from beans (azuki, lima, etc.), and *pan* means bread. Thus, *anpan* is a confection made by enclosing sweet bean paste in pastry. And, Anpanman is a cartoon character from a picture book series and a TV show, a character who has been very popular in Japan for many years. And, there is a museum. Go figure—it's Japan!

While at Harborland we had a nice Italian lunch, including pizza, although I must confess the Japanese do pizza in their own way, such as squid and clam, but it was very tasty! Then we and Ben split off from Heidi and the kids and went to Kobe's Chinatown while Heidi visited with a friend. Chinatown sounds better than it actually is—just a long street of food vendors and shops, for the most part. And, given that we were not hungry, they did not grab our attention. But still, there were lots of interesting sights, smells, and sounds.

For dinner, Ben and Heidi decided to eat take-out food in their room because the girls were tired. We thought this might be the night for us try real Kobe beef. This is beef from a specific breed of cattle that is raised and processed under closely specified conditions. It is widely regarded as a delicacy, with flavor and tenderness in another league from other kinds of beef. Well, we were in Kobe, where better to find it?

We soon discovered that even in Japan, real Kobe beef—born, raised, and processed near Kobe—is enormously expensive. $100 at a restaurant for a 4 ounce steak? OK, maybe not! We opted instead for wagyu beef, which is from the same breed of cattle, raised and processed the same way, just not near Kobe (in Australia, for example). Still expensive, at about half the price, but not quite as extravagant.

Was it worth it? Oh yeah! It's impossible to describe, other than saying it was astoundingly delicious. Tender without being mushy, many complex flavors, absolutely delicious on the tongue! They say that bacon is the

meat most likely to make a vegetarian renounce their vows. I think that wagyu beef may also be a contender! This may be a once in a lifetime meal, but then again we only get one life.

Peter and wagyu beef. The bib is provided because the platter is sizzling when served.

Thu 11/20: This morning we took a city bus to the Kobe zoo. The kids enjoyed it! The most entertaining thing was, I think, the mother hippopotamus and her baby. They were being quite playful, chasing each other around their pond and engaging in some sort of lip wrestling. They kept at it for quite a while, and it was amazing to see two such large creatures behaving this way.

Mother and baby hippo playing.

Emperor penguin.

Sarah went down this long slide many times!

Hannah at the zoo.

After the zoo, we, Ben, and Sarah went to Kobe's sake district. This section of the city has been famous for sake brewing for ages, largely due to the unusually high quality of the well water. There are still several breweries there and we visited two of them, Hamafukutsuru and Kikumasamune. They had interesting self-guided tours, a video of traditional brewing techniques, a museum of old sake brewing equipment, and of course a shop with samples available (very small samples, I must say!). In the west, many people think sake is always served warm, but it is just as common, if not more so, for it to be served cold. It can be very refreshing, and there's even a sweet, non-alcoholic sake called amazake that is popular with children.

Sarah practicing with a traditional sake mash tub.

Modern sake brewing equipment.

Sake barrels.

Sake making equipment from years past.

Tonight we were on our own for dinner. We explored the area near the train station and found an okonomiyaki restaurant. This is a very popular food in Japan, at its heart nothing more than shredded cabbage, beaten eggs, and perhaps some flour mixed together with other items and cooked like a pancake. It's the "other items" that makes this dish so flexible—it might be simple, just some shredded pork and scallions, or very involved with seafood, noodles, egg, various sauces, and who knows what else. Each city and region has their own style, and I expect that every home cook in Japan does as well. It is traditionally cooked at your table by a restaurant employee, using a griddle that is set into the table top. When it is done, you cut off portions with a small spatula and transfer to your plate.

With the okonomiyaki we also had yakisoba, a delicious fried noodle dish. It is similar in some ways to the lo mein served at Chinese restaurants, noodles with slivered ingredients such as meat, shellfish, and vegetables—and, of course, Japanese flavors. What sets it apart is that the final step is to pile the noodles on a griddle and let them cook until the bottom has developed a lovely, crispy layer. Then, a fried egg is often put on top.

Okonomiyaki and yakisoba on the griddle.

Waiting for the okonomiyaki to be done.

Fri 11/21: Our plan for today was to leave Kobe, spend the day in Kyoto, then take an evening train to Tokyo. The day was made so much easier by having most of our luggage shipped from the Kobe hotel to the Tokyo hotel. It did cost a bit, but it freed us from having to deal with several large suitcases all day.

We took an early train with Ben to Kyoto while Heidi and the girls stayed in Kobe to visit with friends. In Kyoto, we first headed for the Fushimi Inari shrine. This popular Shinto shrine may look familiar to you if you have seen the movie Memoirs of a Geisha. Like all Shinto shrines, it puts some focus on the Torii Gate, which symbolically marks the transition from the profane (the outside world) to the sacred (the temple). It is interesting that you see the Torii gate also at Buddhist temples, a lovely reminder of how the two religions of

Japan learned from each other and have coexisted harmoniously for some 1500 years—unlike some other religions.

Torii gate at entrance to Fushimi Inari shrine

A unique feature of this shrine is the long walks that are lined with torii gates. It was an amazing amount of work that went into creating these, and it's quite an experience to walk through them. It was very crowded, and getting a photo without other people was a real challenge.

Torii gates at Fushimi Inari shrine.

Later in the day we met up with Heidi, the girls, and Heidi's friend Yuri in the lobby of the Granvia Hotel, a huge and architecturally impressive space with prices to match ($8.00 coffee, anyone? And no free refills!). For lunch, we all went to a restaurant that specializes in tofu. In Japan, tofu is a whole lot more than the white blocks we see here in the U.S., and they do an amazing number of creative things with it.

Maxine and Hannah heading to lunch.

Lunch at a tofu restaurant.

After lunch we hopped a train to Arashiyama, a suburb of Kyoto, to visit their well-known monkey park, where Japanese macaques are on display. You can feed them and walk freely among them, they are accustomed to humans and there are always "minders" about to discourage any monkey who gets too friendly. The park is at the top of a hill, quite a strenuous climb, and offers great panoramas of Kyoto as well as some beautiful maples in fall colors.

Sarah feeding the monkeys.

At the Arashiyama Monkey Park.

After visiting the monkey park, we wandered around Arashiyama for a while. It is a very popular tourist destination and is full of shops, food stalls, and—of course—people! Then back to Kyoto to wait for our evening train to Tokyo. While waiting, we bought bento boxes to have for dinner on the train. Bento boxes are Japan's take on portable food, and typically consist of a multi-compartment box holding a variety of fish, rice, meat, vegetables, and pickles. A mother might pack a bento box lunch for her child to take to school, a worker might pick one up for a quick dinner at home, or (as in our case) travelers might buy them for a meal to eat while on a train. They are usually artfully arranged, in keeping with the importance that the Japanese place on appearance. With a bottle of cold tea, they make a nice meal.

Bento box.

After a 2-1/2 hour train ride to Tokyo, we took a taxi to our hotel, where we and Ben/Heidi had rooms near each other, and fell asleep at midnight.

Sat 11/22: The next morning, we took a train one stop to visit the Yokado department store to do some shopping. In Japan, most department stores have one or more of the lower levels devoted to groceries, and we bought a few things to stock up our Japanese pantry at home—miso paste, soy sauce, and so on. Yes, we can get most of these things near home, but a very limited selection. The soy sauce section in a Japanese market is like the hot sauce section of the market in New Orleans, and instead of 3 kinds of miso paste they will have 40. We also bought—and ate immediately—chestnut ice cream and azuki bean ice cream, flavors you just don't see in the U.S. (even though they were made by Haagen-Dazs). To be honest, they were a bit disappointing, with very muted flavors, but still we had to try them!

The department store had a small café, and the cooks were on display as they prepared the food. Their most popular item was *takoyaki*, a snack that consists of a dough ball, perhaps golf ball sized, with a center of diced octopus (*tako*) and perhaps other ingredients. They are made in a cast iron griddle with round indentations, think of a heavy-duty muffin tin. First, batter is dropped each cup, and after they cook for a moment the fillings are added, followed by more batter. The chef turns each one with hashi (chopsticks) and then the entire pan starts to shake, which causes the little dough balls to slowly rotate, ensuring even cooking. When done they are put on a plate, topped with sauce, and served immediately.

Starting, turning, then plating takoyaki

We found a nearby sushi restaurant for lunch. The restaurant had a beautiful display of plastic food in the window (see photo). You see this all over in Japan, expertly crafted plastic replicas of food on display so you

can see what you will order. It's quite an art form, amazingly realistic. Even for non-Japanese dishes you'll see amazing replicas of, for example, spaghetti with tomato sauce.

Maxine eating chestnut ice cream.

Plastic sushi display.

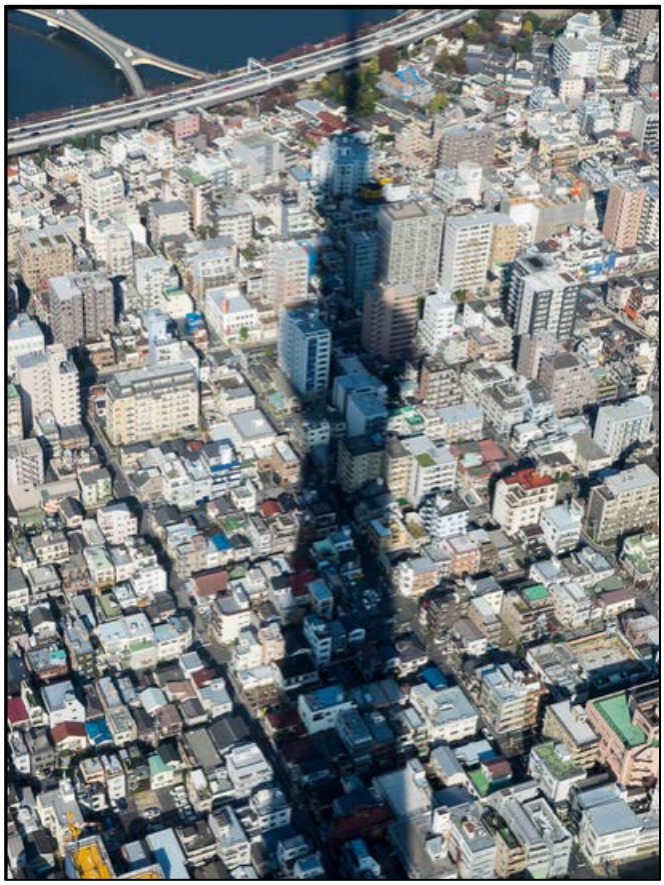
We went back to the hotel and spent some time exploring the garden. As you have probably picked up already, the Japanese love their gardens, and the owner/developer of this hotel felt it was important to devote a few acres of extremely valuable land to a garden, with a tea house and a koi pond (it's open to the public). This is a good example, I think, of how corporate interests and the public good can coexist.

At the hotel's garden.

All of us had dinner at a soba restaurant. I am not quite sure what made this a soba restaurant, other than the fellow in the window at the front making soba (buckwheat) noodles. We had a small, private room, which worked out well because the girls could move around without disturbing other people. The meal was very good and quite varied, and included a grilled sanma, the same delicious fish we had at the picnic in Okayama, and a variety of other small dishes.

Sun 11/23: This morning we all went to Skytree along with cousin Akiko, her husband Shin, and their two daughters Riko and Sako. Skytree is a huge and very impressive tower, the tallest in the world. It was mobbed because this day was a holiday in Japan, and we were very thankful that Akiko had gotten tickets in advance. At the top we had amazing views of Tokyo and the surrounding area, and in the far distance we could just barely see Mt. Fuji, about 60 miles away. Despite the great views, the crowds at Skytree were very unpleasant and we were glad to get away.

Tokyo Skytree.



View from Skytree, with shadow of the tower.

After Skytree we went to a restaurant owned by a friend of Shin's that is famous for tonkatsu, a pork cutlet that is breaded and deep fried. We had a private room and were joined by Noriko (another distant relative) and her husband. We had a delicious lunch with several courses, and the tonkatsu was the best we have ever tasted. I learned after returning home that North Carolina exports a lot of pork to Japan, and it was interesting to consider that the pork cutlet I ate in Tokyo may have come from near my home in North Carolina!

After lunch we went to the Asakusa shopping area, a long street lined with shops and stalls. It is adjacent to Senso-ji, a Buddhist temple. Like Skytree, the area was mobbed due to the holiday, and not particularly enjoyable. We wanted to go for a sightseeing cruise on the nearby Sumida river, but were again thwarted by the crowds and a very long line for tickets. It was late afternoon by this time, so we went back to the hotel.

Crowds at Asakusa and the Senso-ji temple.

With Ben, Heidi, and the girls at Asakusa.

Heidi and the girls went to dinner with a friend while we and Ben went to an area near the train station known for its ramen restaurants. There are about a dozen small restaurants all in a row, all busy, a very active and interesting place. The restaurants mostly used the vending machine approach. At the entrance there is a vending machine that displays photos, descriptions, and prices of all the dishes available at that restaurant. Put in your money, make your choices, and get a ticket—then go in and hand over the ticket and seat yourself. When you are finished eating, you can just leave without waiting for the check or worrying about tipping (there is no tipping at restaurants in Japan). We had a filling and tasty meal and then went back to the hotel.

At the ramen restaurant "strip." The locations of the restaurants are shown on the left and the photos show a sample dish from each place.

Mon 11/24: In the morning we walked to the Sengaku-ji Temple, near our hotel, with Ben and Sarah. This temple is best known as the site of the graves of the 47 Ronin, who are famous in Japanese history as the embodiment of the Samurai code of honor, *bushido*. It's quite a story—a true story—which I will recount briefly.

In the year 1701, the Lord Asano was visiting the Imperial Palace in Edo. He was publically embarrassed by one of the palace officials, Kira. Asano drew his sword and attacked Kira, wounding him. For this serious violation of the law, he was ordered by the Shogun to commit ritual suicide, or *seppuku.* With Asano's death, his followers became *ronin*, masterless samurai.

The ronin vowed revenge, but bided their time, working in menial jobs while making plans. After two years they attacked Kira's mansion, killed his guards, and then beheaded Kira himself. They took Kira's head to Sengaku-ji, where their Lord Asano was buried, washed the head in a well (which is still there), and presented it at their master's grave. Their master had been avenged, but the Shogun was bound by law to sentence them to death by ritual suicide. Each of the 47 ronin committed seppuku and they all were buried at the Sengaku-ji Temple, along with their master. Now, that's a story!

Entrance to Sengaku-ji.

Bronze dragon on ceiling at Sengaku-ji, located just behind the three large white characters in the photo to the left.

A ronin grave. The oranges and flowers are left as offerings by visitors or the temple staff, and the green sticks in the basin are incense.

Some more of the graves of the 47 ronin.

Maxine and Sarah at Sengaku-ji.

The main building at Sengaku-ji.

In the afternoon we took a train to the Imperial Palace, home of the Emperor. It's a huge place, with grounds of almost one and a half square miles, and we could see only a little bit of it. Unfortunately we entered the grounds at the wrong spot and wasted a good bit of time wandering around before finding some interesting gardens. One could probably spend an entire day exploring.

Building at one of the entrances to the Palace grounds, contrasting the old Tokyo with the new.

On the Imperial Palace grounds.

In the Imperial Palace Gardens.

More of the gardens.

This evening we were all invited to have dinner with Akiko and her husband Shin at their home in a western suburb of Tokyo. We took a train to Kichijoji Station where Akiko met us—good thing, we would never have found her place on our own! Their two daughters, Riko and Sako, are similar in ages to Sarah and Hannah, and as kids do they managed to play together despite the language barrier (well, not really relevant for the one year olds!). We had a delicious meal that included a daikon/squid dish, musubi (flavored rice balls with something tasty in the center), a potato cheese gratin, BBQ pork, and other goodies. Then Akiko walked us back to the station for the train ride back to the hotel.

Dinner at Akiko and Shin's.

Tues 11/25: This was our last full day in Japan—how fast the days went by! Akiko came by and picked us up at the hotel, then she took us shopping at various places for gifts, toys, kitchenware, and other things. This was the only day when we had less than perfect weather, with clouds and drizzle most of the day. We could not resist having lunch at MOS Burger, Japan's answer to McDonald's. I had a regular burger, which was actually sort of disappointing. Maxine had a special "burger" comprised of slivered vegetables (including burdock root, lotus root, egg, and carrot) served on a bun made from cooked rice grains pressed into a bun shape. It was excellent!

We did some more shopping with Akiko and then headed back to our hotel.

Japan's answer to McDonald's.

Maxine's special MOS burger.

Wed 11/26: There's not much to say about this day. We packed and took a limo to Narita Airport for our early afternoon flight. I will mention the business/first class lounge at ANA Airlines. It was a real luxury, with freshly prepared noodles, hot and cold food (including sushi), desserts, draft beer, sake, wine, and some spirits—all free. This was quite a contrast to the United Airlines lounge in Chicago that we visited on the way out to Japan, where you were lucky to get a bagel and a coffee. The U.S. airlines are way behind when it comes to customer service. What else is new?

Heading east back to the U.S. and home, we gained a day. After a brief layover in Chicago (during which we were refused entry to the United Airlines lounge, even though we were flying first class from Chicago to Raleigh/Durham), we were home at about 7:00 PM on the 26th. Tired and happy, with about 5,000 photos between us!

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Trains in Japan

The Japanese train system is a real wonder, and makes our U.S. trains look like donkey carts (with a few exceptions for cities such as New York that have good mass transit train systems). Whether you are travelling hundreds of miles between cities or a few miles within a city, a train is likely your best bet. They are on-time, safe, and convenient.

The pride of the Japanese train system is the Shinkansen, the high-speed network that links the major cities. They are specially designed trains zip along at speeds up to 185 miles per hour on dedicated tracks. It's hard to believe you are on a train, they are so quiet and smooth. Can you imagine getting from Raleigh to New York City in less than three hours, sitting in comfort and watching the countryside whiz by? I was quite impressed to learn that the average time discrepancy—difference between scheduled and actual departure or arrival time—was 38 seconds for the entire Shinkansen system last year!

Japanese Toilets

Comparing Japanese toilets to those we are used to in the U.S. is like comparing a new BMW to a model T Ford with 3 wheels. They are marvels of technology, convenience, and comfort. And, they can be somewhat intimidating, given the number of controls and buttons they may sport. Their best feature may be the heated seat, which is particularly welcome in cold weather. Other conveniences that are available include a bidet function, a warm water spray to rinse your undercarriage, blow dryer for the washed areas, massage, self-cleaning, deodorizing, automatic flushing when you stand up, and a noisemaker that plays music or artificial flushing sounds to mask any personal noises that some folks may find embarrassing. Some even have automatic lid raising, and I tell you, the first time I walked into the toilet room in a Japanese restaurant only to have the toilet lid raise by itself, I jumped a foot in the air.

The photo shows the control panel for the toilet in our first hotel room. Thankfully it had some English or we would have been totally lost! This was one of the fancier models, not that we dared take advantage of most of the features—although near the end of the trip, Maxine was getting used to the toilets and using a lot of the gadgets!

In Japan, toilets are almost always in their own small room, separate from the sink and bathtub/shower. To facilitate hand washing, some toilets have a small sink on the top of the tank. After flushing, water flows out of a small faucet into the sink and then drains into the tank to refill it, allowing the user to wash hands without wasting water or the need for a separate sink.

Control panel for Japanese toilet.

Japanese toilet with sink on top of the tank.

In some Japanese toilet rooms you'll find a dedicated pair of "toilet slippers." In Japanese homes and some restaurants and other public places, outdoor shoes are not worn inside. You shed your shoes and put on "indoor" slippers before entering (or you go around in your sox). Because the toilet room is considered unclean (although it's usually spotless), one does not want to wear the indoor slippers there. So, you change from your indoor slippers to the toilet slippers while in the toilet room, and then change back again when finished.

Staying in Touch

Our cell phones would not work in Japan, and even if they did, the roaming and data charges would have been horrific. We discovered a great solution called a wifi hotspot, available from J-Plaza in the U.S. It's a small device, about half the size of a cell phone, and you rent it for about $9 a day. In Japan, it connects to the cell phone network and then via wifi to your device—smart phone, tablet, whatever. Voila, you are online! We used Skype for phone calls and messages, had our regular cell phone numbers forwarded to our Skype numbers, and we were all set. We could check emails and also browse the web to see train schedules, look at maps, and the like using our smartphones. Ah, the marvels of modern technology!

The Japanese Bath

I am talking here about the personal bath in a home or hotel room, not the public baths, which I have not experienced. The Japanese take their baths quite seriously, and their approach is very different from what we in the U.S. are accustomed to. In Japan, a bath is not for cleaning yourself, but for soaking and relaxing. The bathroom—and it is indeed a "bath room," with the toilet and sink being located elsewhere—typically has a hand shower and a drain in the floor. You soap, scrub, and rinse yourself standing outside the tub using the hand

shower, and only then put your perfectly clean self into the tub, which is filled with quite hot water and is also deeper than western tubs, permitting a really good immersion.

Because people wash before getting into the bath, the bath water remains clean and is often reused. This is not such a big deal today when hot water gushes from a tap on command, but in the past when water was hauled from a well and heated by a wood fire, it made a difference.

Culture

Drive/walk on the left. Japan is the only country I know of outside the former British Empire that drives on the left side of the road. Thus, people tend to walk on the left as well, the opposite of what we are used to in the U.S. It's so natural for us to walk on the right, and we often found ourselves struggling upstream against a flood of people walking toward us! This "rule" is often honored in the breach, even in a country as orderly as Japan, but it's worth keeping in mind.

Use the tray for transactions. When executing a transaction, for example at a grocery store checkout, a train ticket counter, or a restaurant cashier, items such as money and receipts are generally not handed directly from one person to another. Rather, there will be a small tray on the counter that is used for this purpose. Thus, when paying for, say, a grocery purchase, you would put your cash or credit card on the tray. This is even the case when paying a taxi driver. The clerk/taxi driver will take it and then put the receipt on the tray for you to take – and so on. I have no idea why this is, but there you go.

Napkins. In fancier restaurants you will be given a lovely cloth napkin, as you might expect. In more casual eateries, and also in people's homes, things are different. You will usually be given a small, damp cloth towel, often warmed, to wipe your hands before the meal. At the least, you'll get a foil-enclosed paper "wet-wipe." But during the meal, napkins may be completely absent, and when they are provided it's more like what we would call a tissue—small and very light weight. So, eat neatly!

Slurping. In the U.S. we are brought up to think that any eating noises are rude. In Japan, things are different. In particular, noisily slurping tea and soup is perfectly OK. In fact, with small bowls of soup, it is the usual practice to eat the solids with chopsticks (*hashi* in Japanese) and drink the broth directly from the bowl. With noodle soups, such as ramen and udon, the noodles can be slurped, but this requires some practice. If you simply suck the noodles into your mouth, they will flap around and splatter the broth on your chin, nose, and eyeglasses. This is not cool! I have found that holding your hashi about an inch from your lips, with the noodles passing between them, helps a lot, as does learning the proper slurping speed. It's all fun, if a bit messy at first.

Toothpicks. These are very popular in Japan. You'll usually find a small cup of toothpicks on tables at restaurants and private homes, and we even received individually wrapped toothpicks as part of our airline meals (we flew a Japanese airline). Using a toothpick when sitting with others after a meal is considered perfectly acceptable, unlike in the U.S. where Miss Manners would surely have something to say. So, pick away!

The Ryokan. A ryokan is a traditional Japanese inn that originally developed in the Edo period (1603-1868) to serve people travelling on Japan's highways. Today they provide a way to experience a taste of "old" Japan. Many people associate ryokan with rural settings, but there are also many located in urban locations, often in an otherwise undistinguished buildings—until you get inside! Your room will have a floor of tatami mats, which

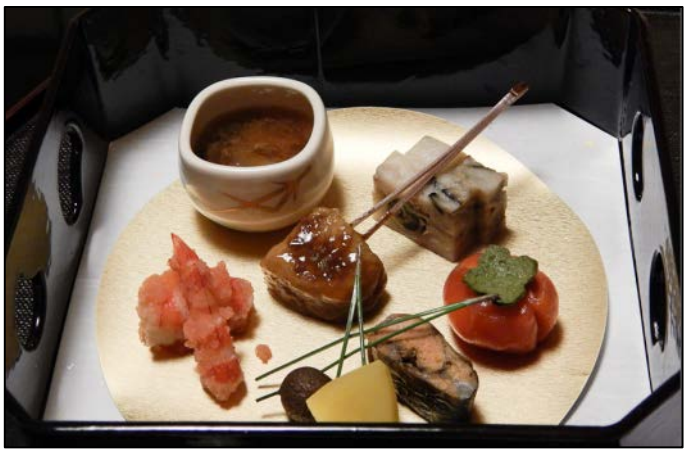
are made from rice straw and provide an attractive and comfortable walking surface (no shoes allowed, needless to say). There will be a small alcove off to one side, typically decorated with a scroll, a piece of pottery, and perhaps some flowers. This is intended for decoration and contemplation, it is not a place to store suitcases! There will be a low table, perhaps a small sitting area, and usually some of the modern conveniences such as a TV, private bath, tea kettle, and humidifier. You'll be provided with yukata, or robes, to relax in. But ... where's the bed? You'll soon see!

The alcove in our ryokan room.

The ryokan room.

A big part of the ryokan experience is the food, with an elaborate, traditional Japanese dinner and breakfast usually included in the room price. They will be served in your room, or sometimes in a communal area, by a friendly woman wearing traditional garb. Ryokan pride themselves on their food, and the meals are a major reason why ryokan room rates are relatively high.

Dinner at our ryokan was the traditional Kyoto cuisine known as *kaiseki*, a multi-course meal that emphasizes seasonal and regional ingredients with careful attention to texture, appearance, and color. A kaiseki meal consists of eight or more courses, brought in a specific order by your server, each consisting of a modest amount of carefully prepared food presented in beautiful pottery or lacquer dishes and bowls. It's a visual as well as a culinary treat and invites lingering over dinner with relaxed conversation.



Two courses of our kaiseki dinner.

Maxine enjoying breakfast at the ryokan.

Now about that bed ... when dinner is finished, your server will clear the dishes, push the table to one side, and set up one or more futons for sleeping. These are kept in a closet during the day to make best use of the limited floor space. Pillows filled with buckwheat are traditional, and while a bit harder than what we are used to, they can be quite comfortable.

Come the morning, it's time for breakfast. This may be served in your room or in a communal space. A traditional Japanese breakfast is totally unlike what we are used to in America, consisting totally of savory ingredients (with the possible exception of some fruit): grilled fish, tofu, fish balls, stewed and pickled vegetables, rice, miso soup, and various other delicious items I don't know the names of. Eggs are about the only familiar ingredient you'll find, and they are prepared very differently—beaten with a little soy sauce and sugar and cooked in very thin sheets which are then rolled up to form small "logs." Very tasty!