

## Japan Travelogue – Day 0 & 0.1

01

04/07  
1:40 PM

AA8453

04/08  
5:25 PM

Days 2-4  
4/8 - 4/10  
Dai-ichi Hotel Tokyo

HND Tokyo 02

03

Day 5  
4/11  
Hakone Setsugetsuka  
(ryokan)  
Carry On Luggage

04

Days 6 & 7  
4/12 - 4/13  
Hida Hotel Plaza

05

Days 8 & 9  
4/14 - 4/15  
Hotel Nikko Kanazawa

06

Days 10-12  
4/16 - 4/18  
The Thousand Kyoto

07

Days 13 & 14  
4/19 - 4/20  
Hotel Granvia  
Hiroshima  
Carry On Luggage

08

09

04/21  
12:05 PM

AA8439

04/21  
5:55 PM

12

KIX  
Osaka

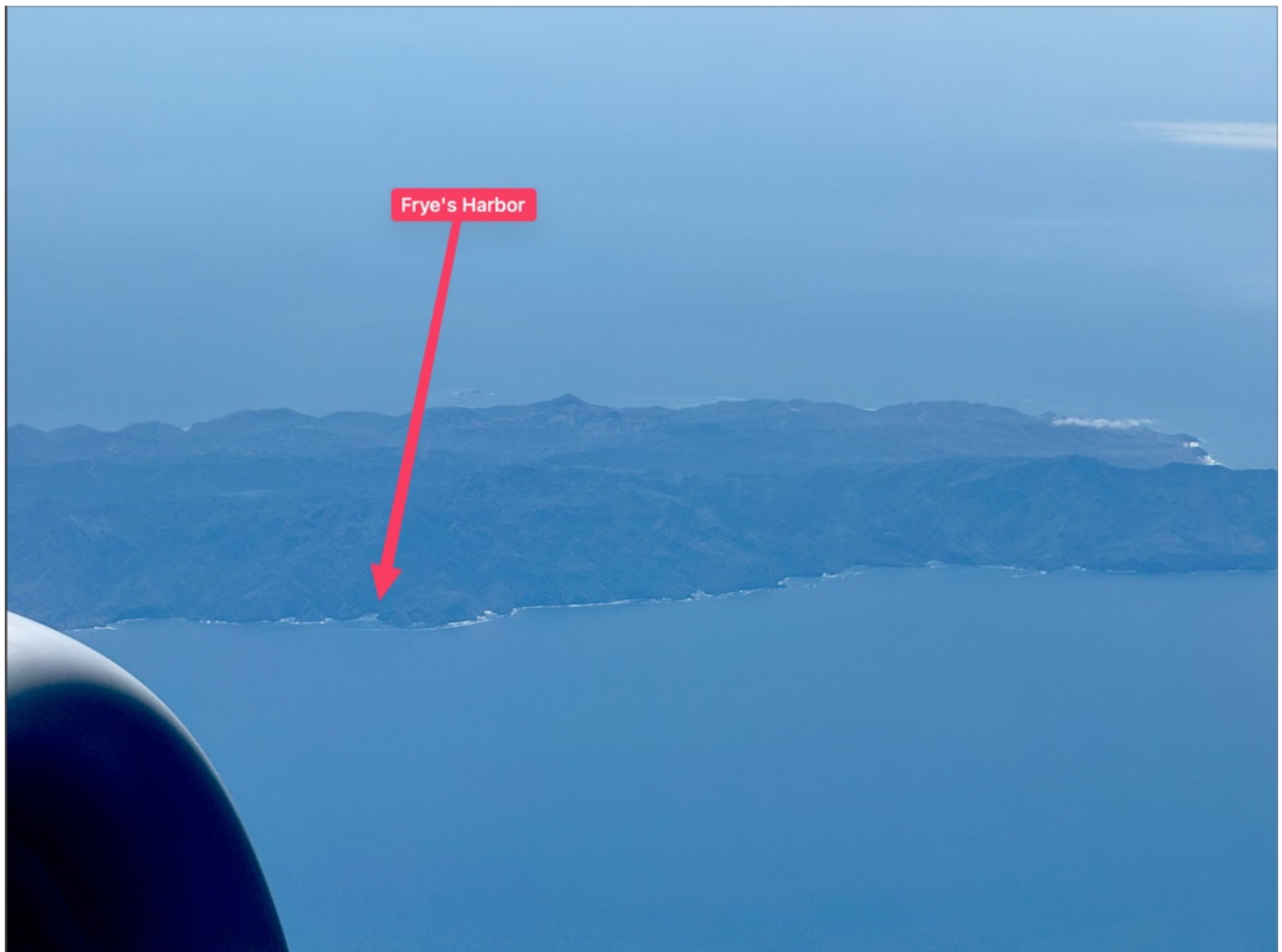
01

LAX

4/2/2025  
Rev C

I'm calling this Day 0 & 0.1 because time is very weird. We left Los Angeles at a civilized 1:40 PM on Monday and arrived in Tokyo at nearly 6 PM on Tuesday night, but the flight was only 11.5 hours. I was especially messed up because I thought we were landing at 6 AM on Tuesday!

As we left Los Angeles, I had a nice view of Santa Cruz Island. Steve and I used to sail there with my parents years ago and spend a week anchored in a little cove called Frye's Harbor. It means nothing to the rest of you but I got a happy feeling looking at it from above. Here's a terrible photo taken from the plane.



And here's our obligatory toast on the plane.



For the nerds (which to be honest is most of you), they had WiFi on the plane that was pretty good. I ran a speed test (of course I did) and it was 27Mbps down and 3.8Mbps up which isn't anything to write home about (but I am).



We're from Los Angeles, so we know about population density, but we were shocked at how far and wide the dense buildings are in Tokyo. It's crazy.



After a quick half-hour bus ride by our tour group Odysseys Unlimited to the Dai-Ichi hotel, we dragged our weary bones upstairs. One of the joys of travel for us is meeting fun people, and part of that is inviting them back to our room to have a glass of wine. Guess that's not allowed here.



We had a lot of spirit guides on this trip, one of whom was Tom Merritt, who just got back from Japan last week. He gave us guidance from what to pack (like plastic bags because there are no trash cans) to how awesome convenience stores are.

So, of course, our first task when we got to Tokyo was to go to one of these famous convenience stores. Imagine a store where half the shelves have pre-packaged foods like chips. But the other half is real food - cooked noodle dishes and all kinds of other delicacies. This doesn't show the glory, but we thought it was amazing (see the stuff on the bottom shelves).



We ended Day 0 and 0.1 by going to the hotel bar and having our traditional vacation cocktail. Ages ago at an all-inclusive resort in Mexico, they kept pushing White Russians on us by saying, "Russo Blanco?"



Hope you're all well and that I have more interesting things to say about Day 1!

## Japan Travelogue Day 3 — Tokyo

It's a long-standing tradition that I can't keep the days straight. Imagine my dismay when I pulled out my diagram to discover that the long day of travel was actually called Day 1 and Day 2! If I don't adjust I'll never keep track, so this is actually Day 3. I'll probably not keep track anyway, but I do actually try!

We managed to get some sleep last night but only made it till 5 AM. We drank hotel coffee but then went in search of our beloved Starbucks. It didn't open until 7 so we had a bit of a walkabout. We found some unexplained tree-management situations.

Not sure what this is about - "don't lean bikes here"?



This one might be harder to see, but there's a long wood log diagonally through these trees, and perpendicular to this view there are more logs tied off. We couldn't even begin to guess what these were for. We could have asked, but where's the fun in that? Maybe you have a guess on either of these and could share it with the rest of the class.



We found a fun little park-ish area outside of the closed Starbucks that seemed a good place to lounge...



Steve started to track the time coming up to 7 AM, and EXACTLY when the second hand clicked over to the hour, the doors opened. Gotta love it!



Aren't you glad you learned so much about Japanese culture so far?

Ok, FINE, we'll do some culture. We went to see an apparently famous calligrapher explain her work. This photo shows a Buddhist chant of 262 characters on a fan that she wrote out every single day praying for the pandemic to end.



She showed off a bunch of cool artwork she was commissioned to do for the Olympics and the Boeing Corporation. You think I'm joking, don't you? She said the symbol on the right means "Dream" so it was part of an ad for the new Dreamliner jet Boeing developed.



To be perfectly honest, it was interesting for about the first 30-45 minutes, but it went on for about 2 hours.

We finally escaped all that culture and got outside again. Saw some of the famous cherry blossoms along the way.



We had free play at lunch and found a terrific sushi bar in a shopping mall building. I'm not normally one for photos of food but the amount of food we had was astonishing. That's sashimi in the upper left (yellowtail, tuna, scallops, and salmon), cooked sea eel in the center, some seaweed sort of thing at the top, vegetable tempura, a turnipy kind of thing, egg, an itty bitty salad, miso soup, and rice. And that was all for ME.



Oh, hiding under the tempura bowl was what I thought was a fancy wasabi mustard. I was wrong, it was a rather rubbery sugary desert thing covered in green tea powder. I am sad to say I didn't favor it but it did look cool.



In the ladies' rooms, they had the COOLEST thing. This is a little stand to put your baby/toddler into so you can go to the bathroom in peace. I think this invention should be guaranteed by law in all male and female restrooms across the globe. Isn't it genius?



Who says I don't bring culture to these letters? Speaking of culture, I know how to solve the energy waste crisis. Every single toilet seat in Japan is a bidet with *heated seats*. Now I don't mean you can *choose* to heat it, it's always already hot when you sit down. I'm not saying I'm not a fan, but how much energy is being wasted waiting for people to warm their tushies?



After lunch (and having our tushies warmed) we went up to the rooftop to enjoy the gardens and the view of the Ginza (the fancy shopping district).



Since we were in a fancy shopping district, of course we had to find the Apple Store and change the homepage on a few Macs to [podfeet.com](http://podfeet.com) ... as one does.



We found what we think is a phone booth? Or maybe it's just WiFi? We weren't entirely sure...



Jennifer told us to get a cold (or hot) coffee from one of the vending machines so we did!



Our guide took us to a Shinto shrine next. Someone asked how many Shinto Shrines there are in Japan, and he said, "There are 85,000 Shinto shrines, 80,000 Buddhist temples, and 50,000 convenience stores!"

The shrine we went to was in honor of Meiji Jingu who had a lot to do with modernizing Japan. I loved it because it was mostly a beautiful walk through a forest. Partway along the walk they had a huge wall of sake barrels wrapped in straw. Evidently, sake is a big part of building construction. Our guide E.K. told us that when building construction begins, the local sake brewers bring in barrels and pour some out on the ground while everyone prays for no accidents on the construction site.



The shrine was beautiful, and we were told the roofs were all made without nails. Didn't see any tongue and groove, but up close, the dark and light areas looked like puzzle pieces put together.



There was a tree that is sacred to married couples so just in case we took a selfie in front of it.



Before we left the grounds of the shrine, our guide showed us a new car sitting in a little parking area. He explained that people bring their new cars here, and then once a week the Shinto priests will have them driven up into the area on the left to be blessed, praying for no accidents. Curious, but I'm not going to lie, I always say a quick prayer that my airline flight makes it to the other end so I'm not going to make fun of them.



We closed out the evening with a group dinner where we got to know two other couples really well. They were a fun group (they laughed at my jokes) and we ate ourselves silly with delightful Japanese cuisine. I'm not joking, I think there were seven courses.

We had planned to hit another Apple Store nearby but they closed earlier than expected so we'll have to do that tomorrow.

We're sated and happy and ready for more adventure. Let's just hope I can get the day count correct.

## Japan Travelogue Day 4 — Imperial Gardens, Akihabara, Shibuya Crossing, and March of Death

Last night when we got back from our day we collapsed into bed before I could even start to write the travelogue. It was 8:15 PM. What a day!

Before we dig in, we have an answer to our question about the mysterious metal structure around those trees. We got two good guesses. Lynn suggested that they were bike racks but we were just there too early in the morning for bikes to be out. That did look likely. Merlee speculated it was to give them a chance to grow straight right from the beginning. As we walked through the city, we found more and yet different metal structures:





We finally found someone who knew the answer. They're to support the trees during typhoons! Isn't that crazy? Ok, let's start the day.

We went with the group by motor coach to the Imperial Palace, or more properly, the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace. You can only go inside the palace once a year. I'm more of a fan of the outdoors anyway.

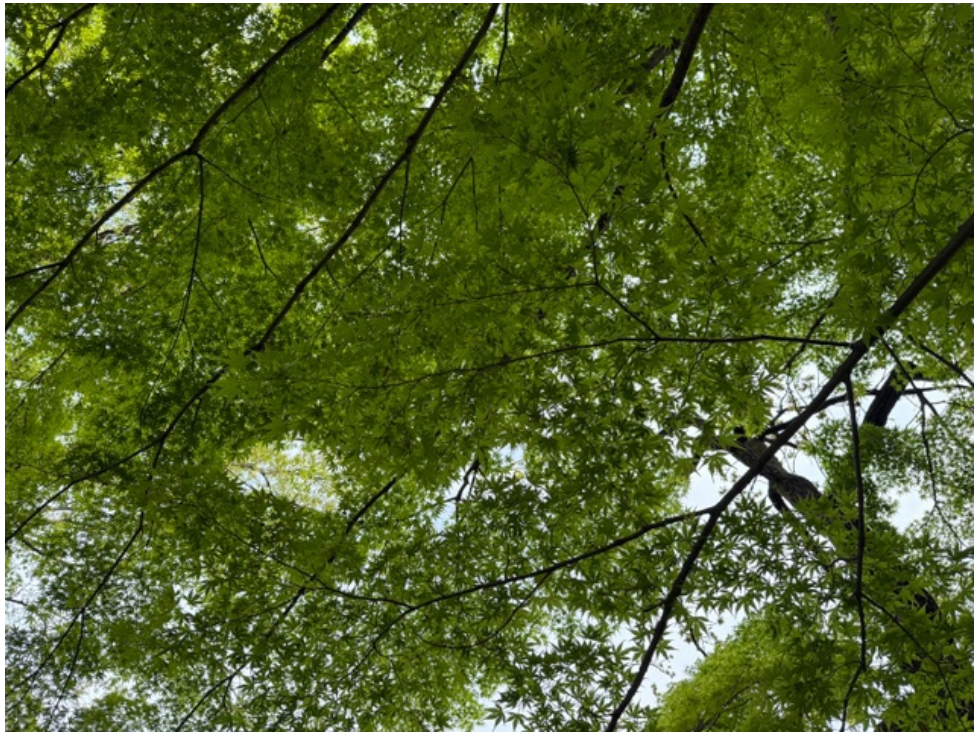
As we walked through the gates, our guide, EK, drew our attention to the fish on the corners of the roof. He explained that they make their buildings out of wood, so they put fish on top to evoke water and keep fire away. Hmmm...I think there are other strategies they could employ.



Walking through this forest was quiet and peaceful.



We were enchanted by the tiny leaves of the Japanese Maple trees.



The walls were constructed in the 6th century. Imagine the time and work to carve these stones and do the puzzle work to fit them together in a way to last *fourteen centuries!*



Necessary photo of some cherry blossoms.



The bamboo trees weren't bendy in real life but I like this vertical wide-angle shot Steve took.



Juxtaposition of the beautiful gardens with their ancient walls against the city skyline



And ok, since you begged, just ONE selfie of us.



Before going on the trip, Steve went to a lot of work to arrange two meetups with fans of the NosillaCast podcast. The agenda said we'd have lunch and the rest of the day free, so we planned to meet with Frank and Michael at an Indian restaurant near our hotel. But we found out that while lunch was free time, it was to be at the National Museum followed by a tour! We decided to blow off the tour and make our commitment, but that meant getting back to the hotel on our own.

Luckily it was only a little over a mile away, so we decided to walk. It was absolutely lovely as the path took us through little parks and over moats (for the Emperor.)



In Japan, they add beauty and nature wherever possible. This is a construction site for a fountain, hence the temporary wall around it. But look how they've planted flowers in/on the wall.



We met up with Frank, but unfortunately, Michael *forgot* it was the day! He jumped on a train and made the 1.5-hour trip to see us but didn't make lunch. Instead, we met him at the Apple Store Marunouchi, a TOTALLY DIFFERENT one than we showed you before. Frank guided us onto a train for our trip.

All of the walkways in the train station and on the normal sidewalks have these curious bumpy yellow lines on them. Frank explained that they're for blind people using canes to stay in a straight line. There was also Braille on the handles going up and down the stairs.

Everyone tells you riding the trains is EASY. Um, well, it's not quite so obvious to me where to go!



We popped out at Tokyo Station Marunouchi patterned after Amsterdam Centraal station.



We found Michael and took a goofy photo inside the rotunda.



And did the work at the Apple Store.



And then we decided to walk to Akihabara, also known as "the electric city," where electronics are on glorious display. We didn't take the train, instead, we walked the 1.5 miles *under* the train to see the district.

Along the way, we found out where all of the fallen cherry blossom petals end up.



It's hard to capture the chaos and diversity of Akihabara but here's a ham radio store for Ron.



From there we took the train to Shibuya Crossing, the busiest pedestrian intersection in the world, with approximately 3,000 people crossing at once when the light changes.

But before we could get on the train, I got sent to train jail for not tapping my pass correctly.



After I got sprung from the pokey, we made the crossing in the sea of people.



We were getting pretty tired by this point so we stopped for gin and tonics which were delightful!



After another much longer train ride, we said goodbye to Michael and went to dinner with Frank at a Yakiniku restaurant which is a traditional style where they cook very thin slices of wagyu beef on a little grill in front of you. The restaurant we found was buried in a tiny alleyway and up treacherous stairs. It was perfect and clearly not a touristy place.





We bid Frank adieu and then staggered back to our hotel. I know we rode the train a lot but the walking seemed endless. I took a screenshot of my Apple Watch Activity Rings before collapsing into bed. We walked 22,804 steps for a total of more than 9 miles!



Off to Hakone Setsugetsuka today for hopefully some more relaxing, serene time in nature at the ryokan.

## Japan Travelogue Day 5 — Mount Fuji, Lake Ashinoko (Boat Day!), and Hakone Osen (Hot Springs)

I was severely berated for not delivering Day 4 into Norbert's inbox so it would be awaiting him when he awoke, so I'm staying up late (it's 8:20 PM) to write to you tonight. Today's entertainment will be much lower on photos but we still saw some interesting things.

The main event was traveling by motor coach from Tokyo to Hakone with small adventures along the way. When we stop for comfort breaks, our guide EK calls restrooms the "Happy Place". I plan to call the potty my happy place from now on when I get home. That's not the adventure part.

Since we were sitting so much on the bus, we decided to take a good stretch at a stop a happy place.



That's not the adventure part, either. We stopped for lunch and went to a ramen place (where Steve and I ordered Chinese food). I only mention lunch because we ordered beers, and I took a photo to show you how *all* beers are poured in Japan - with a GIANT head on them. I'm talking nearly two inches of foam.



Along our drive, we stopped at the Mount Fuji Heritage site which is two buildings with fun facts to know and tell about the volcano mountain. Unfortunately, it was about 138°F inside the buildings so I didn't learn very

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much. As is often the case, the mountain was covered in clouds so we didn't get much of a view. Oh well.



Everyone told us we'd be too late in the season to really see many cherry blossoms on this trip. We saw a fair amount in Tokyo but not the massive displays we'd heard about. As we went higher in elevation today, they came out in glorious display.



My family knows that a vacation isn't any good unless it includes Boat Day, so I was delighted that we got to go out on Lake Ashinoko on a boat. The lake was formed from one of the volcanic eruptions, and I'd be able to tell you which one if it hadn't been 162°F inside the heritage building. It was real pretty no matter how it formed.



Happy Boat Day!



And because we're silly...



At our next Happy Place, we got real happy. Not for the normal reasons, but because they had vending machines where you could do sake tasting! Seriously, you could buy 3 coins for 500 Yen (\$3.50) and get three tastings.

Buying the coins:



And Steve demonstrated the proper way to pour sake into the little paper sippy cup they gave us.



Finally, we arrived at our destination, Hakone, where we're staying in a traditional Japanese inn, which is called a ryokan. Our room has very low beds up on a platform and a table and chairs down at the floor.



But the main attraction of this region is the natural hot springs called Onsen. We were instructed by EK on what to wear and how to go into them. We were issued Japanese Samue which are sort of like pajamas that you wear to the sauna and hot springs.



They told us you can wear them everywhere including down to the traditional Japanese dinner. Then they said we could also wear a Yakuta which is an informal kimono-type robe. We went for the full tamale!



The next part of the story will have no photos for reasons that will become obvious. The girls and boys were to go to different hot springs. You first strip naked, then take a shower with soap, rinse off, and then climb into water that makes the Mount Fuji heritage buildings feel like a cool summer breeze. The hot springs my friend and I chose were the outdoor hot springs, and it was incredibly hot. EK told us that we shouldn't stay for more than 10 min, but we could only stand it for maybe 6 minutes.

We went back inside and discovered there was an ice-cold tub we could climb into and we decided to go for that too. It was FREEZING and we loved it. We didn't want to get out, but we were meeting the boys outside after and we were afraid they'd think we boiled to death.

But then we found a much cooler hot spring pool next to the ice bath so we tried that for a bit. But then we went back to the ice water to complete the event.

I don't know how it was for Steve and the husband of my friend, but we had a great time. And *that's* the actual adventure of the day.

Stay well, and we'll chat tomorrow,

## Japan Travelogue Day 6 — Bus, Bullet Train, Train, Bus, Tea Ceremony, Drink!

Sorry, Norbert, the adventures didn't stop until 10:30 last night. This may become a habit as we keep waking up at 5:30 in the morning with time to play around. Here's where I wrote the letter yesterday at the ryokan while sipping morning coffee. We had to call housekeeping to help us stand up, though.



Toilets are fascinating here. The one at the ryokan had an interesting method to save water. Instead of a hidden tank filled with water to flush, they piped the water up and over the back into a shallow sink. So if you're quick about it, as soon as you flush and this water starts pouring, you can wash your hands ... well ... in the toilet!



Day 6 was a day of travel of over 200 miles to go from Hakone all the way to Takayama. We took a bus to the train station in Hakone where we got to go on the Shinkansen bullet train.

Before boarding, EK told us to go buy bento boxes for our lunches. A bento box, if you're unfamiliar (and even if you are familiar), is a segmented box for prepared food. Kids' lunchboxes have them now in the US, but I believe they originated in Japan.

We rode a bullet train in France with Dean and Suzanne and this one was just as amazing. Riding in one is a dream because they're very smooth and stable and don't make many (if any) stops. But what's even more fun was standing on the platform and watching other bullet trains go whizzing by at 170 mph. We got some video but it's hard to feel it in the video. The sound and the pressure wave really add to the experience. A screenshot of the video will have to do.



Getting on the bullet train was challenging. EK explained that the train only waits 2 minutes for every person to disembark and board the train. Since there were 24 of us jumping on at the same time, it was necessary for us to charge our

way into the aisle without stopping at our seats so that everyone could pile on. Once the doors closed, we were able to back up to find our reserved seats and stow our carry-on luggage at our leisure.



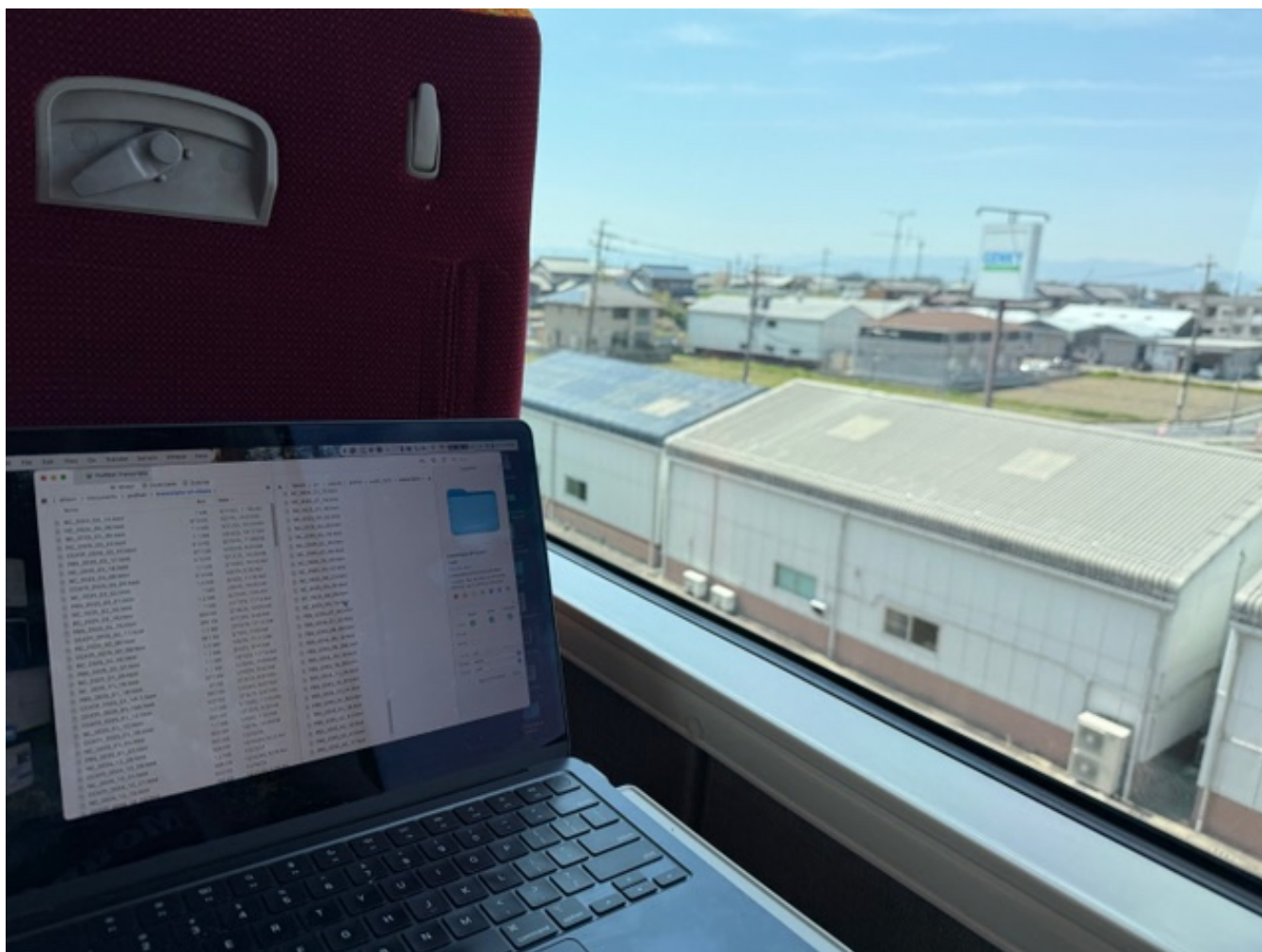
The bullet train was lovely, with lots of legroom, reclining seats, and the smoothest ride you could imagine. The only sad part was that it was so fast, we reached Odawara station in just one hour. Exiting our beloved Shinkansen was much less dramatic as they gave us a full four minutes to disembark.

EK let us go to our happy place before we boarded a local limited express train to Takayama station. While the express train wasn't nearly as exciting, again we had comfortable reclining seats with lots of legroom and tray tables for us to use to chow down our bento boxes.



There was free WiFi on both trains, but it was kind of frustrating in that it would come and go. I think I'd have been content to have no service at all, but intermittent was frustrating. Right before jumping on the train, Jill from the Northwoods, who is hosting the NosillaCast this week, texted that she had run

into a problem transferring the transcripts file to my server. For a brief period, the WiFi was stable enough that I was able to come to her rescue and transfer the file for her.



The bullet train had small-ish windows and to be honest it was pretty hard to look at the scenery because of the speed. The express train had huge windows and the more leisurely pace gave us a beautiful view of the Hida River gorge for the two-and-a-half-hour trip.



We discovered from a cool graphic display that we were riding on a hybrid train. What you can see in this image is that the battery is assisting the engine in powering the motors. We also saw it go the other way where regenerative braking was pushing energy back into the battery.



As soon as we arrived in Takayama, we went onto yet another bus to watch a traditional tea ceremony in a Shinto Shrine. We walked a short distance which allowed us to see these funny-shaped cars. This one is a Honda but there were other brands. It's called an N Box ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honda\\_N-Box](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honda_N-Box)). They're roomy inside but seem to have an itty bitty engine.



I was surprised to find that I enjoyed the Matcha tea ceremony, as this isn't normally my kind of thing. The tea master was explaining things in Japanese to our guide while another person shown here was conducting the tea ceremony.



It was very solemn at first but when we had the opportunity to ask questions, it became rather funny. We were told that the tea masters were borrowing this room from priests who run the Shinto Shrine. Someone would ask a very simple question, like, "What is this room used for normally?" EK translated the question succinctly to the tea master, and then she would speak for maybe three minutes straight in Japanese. We all started to giggle because things seemed to have gone off the rails. Finally, she stopped, EK looked over at us and said, "What was the question again?"

When the demonstration was complete, she asked for volunteers to make some tea. I volunteered. Check out the cool whisk they use.



When I was done making the tea, EK said, "Please serve to your most important person." I stood up, carefully carrying the cup in the correct manner, walked partway across the room, turned to glance at Steve, and then ceremoniously presented the cup to Sandy, our UCLA Alumni travel representative. It got a huge laugh.

Here's the required photo of the Shinto Shrine in which we had our Matcha tea.



We finally checked into our hotel, only to find it swelteringly hot! I'm not a fan of being hot, especially indoors, and most especially when I'm trying to sleep. Steve spent some quality time trying to get the air conditioning to cool it down from nearly 80°F. We discovered we could crack the window open maybe 6 inches and that gave us a tiny bit of relief. We found out later from EK that after a certain point in the season, the hotel chooses to disable the air conditioning in the rooms. So that made me *real* happy as you can imagine.

I did like the luggage tag they put on our suitcases.



The good news is that by fussing with the window, it occurred to us to look out said window, and were treated to a fabulous view of the Japanese Alps above the town of Tokoyama.



In Japan, they only give you the tiniest of napkins, but at least they're very thin.  
This is a typical napkin:



Since paper is evidently a precious commodity, trash cans are wee tiny as well.  
Here's the trash can in our hotel bathroom. If you look closely you'll see that the opening is so small we can't even get our floss inside.



After a long day of travel, EK invited us all to join him for a drink or two at the bar. All but three of us took him up on his offer. Here's EK with a couple of fellow travelers, Sue and Steve, who we met on our trip to Antarctica.



You may have heard of the Waygu beef called Kobe. There's another Waygu beef and it's called Hida beef. This was the best steak I've ever eaten in my life. The marbling was perfection, it was cooked medium-rare, and it was amazing. It was so good I started cutting it into smaller bites so I could enjoy it longer. Luckily for you, I don't like food photos so you'll just have to imagine it!

We finished out the evening by going back to the bar for a single-malt scotch with an interesting architect from the group. And *that's* why the letter didn't come out last night, Norbert.

## Japan Travelogue Day 7 — Takayama Cooking Class & Shogun Government House

Before we get started today, alert reader Michael (the gentleman who lives near Tokyo whom we met earlier in the trip), sent an important correction to yesterday's missive. The name of the Japanese beef should have been Wa-gyu. I was saying it and spelling it incorrectly. He said that wa - means literally "harmony," but often means "Japan" -- and 牛 - gyu - means cow, bull, or beef.

Michael also explained, regarding the "itty bitty engine" in the Honda, you can size by the license plate. License plates that are yellow are on cars with engines of 660cc or less. So it basically has a motorcycle engine in it. ;-)

Thanks, Michael for the correction and the clarification.

Now to today's little adventures. Unfortunately, Steve woke up with a bad cough and cold, and since it was a wet, dreary day outside and all of the fun was going to be walking, so he opted out of the activities.

The group took off on foot to the little town of Takayama. All of the walkways in the town are covered, but they're not covered because of rain, EK explained that they're covered because of how much it snows here.



There were some nice views of what I think is the Miyagawa River from the Kagi-Bashi Bridge with this crazy statue by some famous local artist. I can't guarantee the river's name because no matter how far in or out I zoom in Apple Maps, it refuses to show me the name. On the right bank, you can see little vendor's stalls. That's the "morning market" where we had some free time to do some shopping.



There are tiny Shinto Shrines all over the place, like this one in the morning markets. I asked EK if this was one of the 85,000 he told us about yesterday, and he said no, the 85K are all registered, which means they actually have parishioners, but this one is not.



The main highlight of the day for me was the Hida Cooking Class. We broke up our group into 3 smaller groups of 8, and each group had its own cook to help us. We made a lot of different dishes, including rice with lots of yummy vegetables and eggs, fried eggplant, spinach with Egoma (a type of sesame seed), miso soup, and more.



They assigned us different tasks so we all got to participate a lot. My specialty was the dressing for the spinach as you can see by my excellent presentation here.



When we were all done, they showed us a photo of what our bento box of food was supposed to look like so we could assemble it for ourselves.

I know I said I don't like food photos but I do make an exception when someone makes something themselves and they're proud of it, so I'll allow me to show off my work.



The best part of the cooking class was that we got to eat what we made and it was fantastic! They gave us a link to all of the recipes too:

From there we took off again in the rain to go to the "Government House" which is where the Shogun lived and worked. It was pretty but it was also very cold walking around in our stocking feet! The view of the gardens was lovely though.



I liked the sign for the bathroom ... glad they made the clarification.



EK showed us where they used to hold court on criminals. They not only tried them here, they tortured them too, so that was nice.



When we were finally released to put our shoes back on, we went to a sake tasting. Now *that* was a project I could get behind. I'm going to be honest though, I didn't pay too much attention to the lecture beforehand, other than learning that they use a special kind of rice that has to be continuously polished for a very long time to take the outer husk off of it. Here's a terrible, out-of-focus photo of the rice before and the polishing.



They'd been going on for quite some time telling us all kinds of facts I ignored, when EK asked if there were any questions and one of us — I swear it was not me — asked, "When do we get to *drink* the sake? Evidently, I wasn't the only impatient one in the group. Kanpai!



A prettier photo of the river that shall not be named as I walked back to the hotel by myself.



I saw a few rickshaws, but I think it was just a touristy thing, not a mode of transportation.



And a parking lot Shinto Shrine.



Steve feels well enough that we're going out for more Hida Beef — or should I say Hida-gyu — and I'm going to take the risk that there are no further adventures!

## Japan Travelogue Day 8 — Takayama to Kanazawa

### Thatched Roofs, Paper Making, and Gardens

Today was a day of travel from Takayama to Kanazawa but it felt more like a day of many adventures. Before we left the hotel, I solved a mystery. I'd noticed that many buildings had little red triangles on every few windows.



I cracked the code when I looked at this window because the window I was looking through had the same red triangle. I used Google Translate to find out what it meant. In English, it says it's the fire brigade entrance, and therefore, nothing is to be placed in the area so the firefighters can get in if they need to. Cool convention.



Our first stop was at a World Heritage Site in Shirakawa, an area known for its thatched roofs. They took us in a shuttle to an overlook and the view was spectacular.



After a spot of ice cream, we walked down.



The retaining walls were interesting along the path. Think about how they would have had to lay the forms to pour concrete so it molded around the mountain like this. Defies my imagination.



Lots of water here so they leave room between these structures for waterfalls.



I know you've been wondering, where are these famous thatched roofs? Here's a photo with me for scale. Those roofs are about four feet thick! Curiously we didn't learn a thing from the tour about *how* they make them.



We drove a bit down the road to tour one of the thatched-roof houses by a family living in one. They gave us tea cooked over an open fire (and yes, there were roasted chestnuts hanging over said open fire.) The husband explained that the building was 300 years old and that 14 generations of his family had lived in it for the last 150 years. Many of the homes were destroyed but his house was spared because his family made potassium nitrate (necessary for gunpowder) which made the samurai happy. He and his wife performed a traditional song — here's the husband with a very interesting hat and percussion instrument.



We got to climb up to the third level inside the house and see some really cool farm equipment. I took about 20 photos of the devices but I'll just show you one. Notice that the structure is held together by ropes. They've explained that traditional Japanese architecture doesn't use any nails. We see a lot of tongue-and-groove in the wood too.



We had a traditional lunch - but I didn't favor one of the main dishes.



I'm sure you know that the Japanese don't wear shoes indoors. They give us little slippers to wear indoors, but they also have separate "toilet shoes".



From there we went to a Washi paper-making class. We watched a video on the crazy process they go through to make the Washi paper, starting with mulberry bark. The final process is to dip a screen into a bath of this milky bark mush, strain it, and then it dries on a heated plate and becomes paper.



Here are some of the postcards we made that are drying.



When we got back on the bus, EK told us that the next day a huge storm was coming through. That was unfortunate as we were supposed to walk the Kenrokuen Garden in Kanazawa. He called the gardens, and with our permission, rescheduled the walk so that we could do the walk today instead. He was funny — kept apologizing for packing so much into one day but we all agreed that it was a great day.

As an interlude to all this formal culture, on our drive, EK decided to explain the "shower toilets." He was referring to the bidets in all of the homes and hotels. He gave us a lesson by making drawings on a whiteboard.



I thought that one was self-explanatory. He then drew the Kangi symbol for "stop", which is a very important button on a shower toilet.



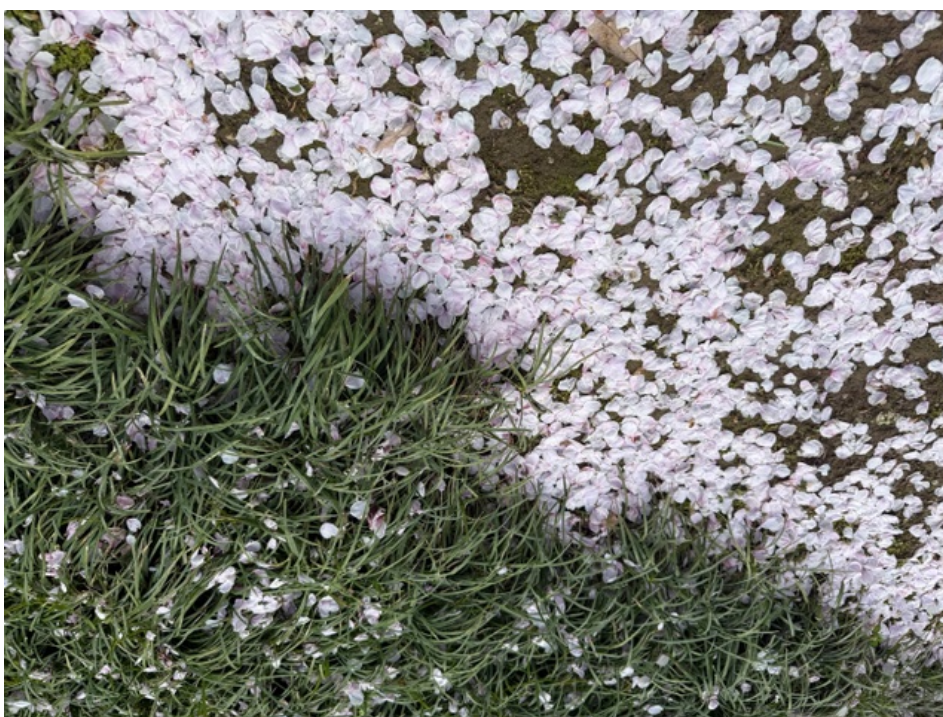
When we arrived at our hotel later in the day, I snapped this photo of our toilet controls which shows he's pretty good at his drawings.



Ok, back to the beauty of the gardens. Before we left on the trip, we were worried that we would miss the cherry blossoms, but they were in full bloom in Kanazawa.



It was like it was snowing petals.

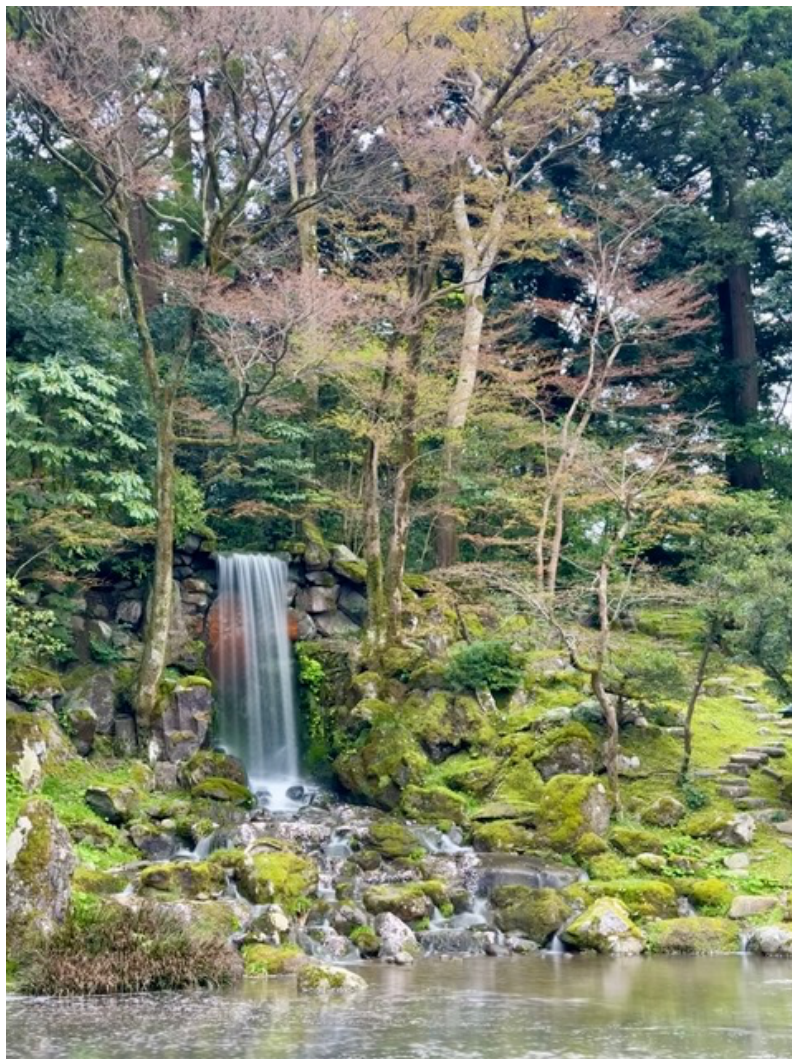


Steve found yet another tree being supported for typhoons.



So beautiful here.

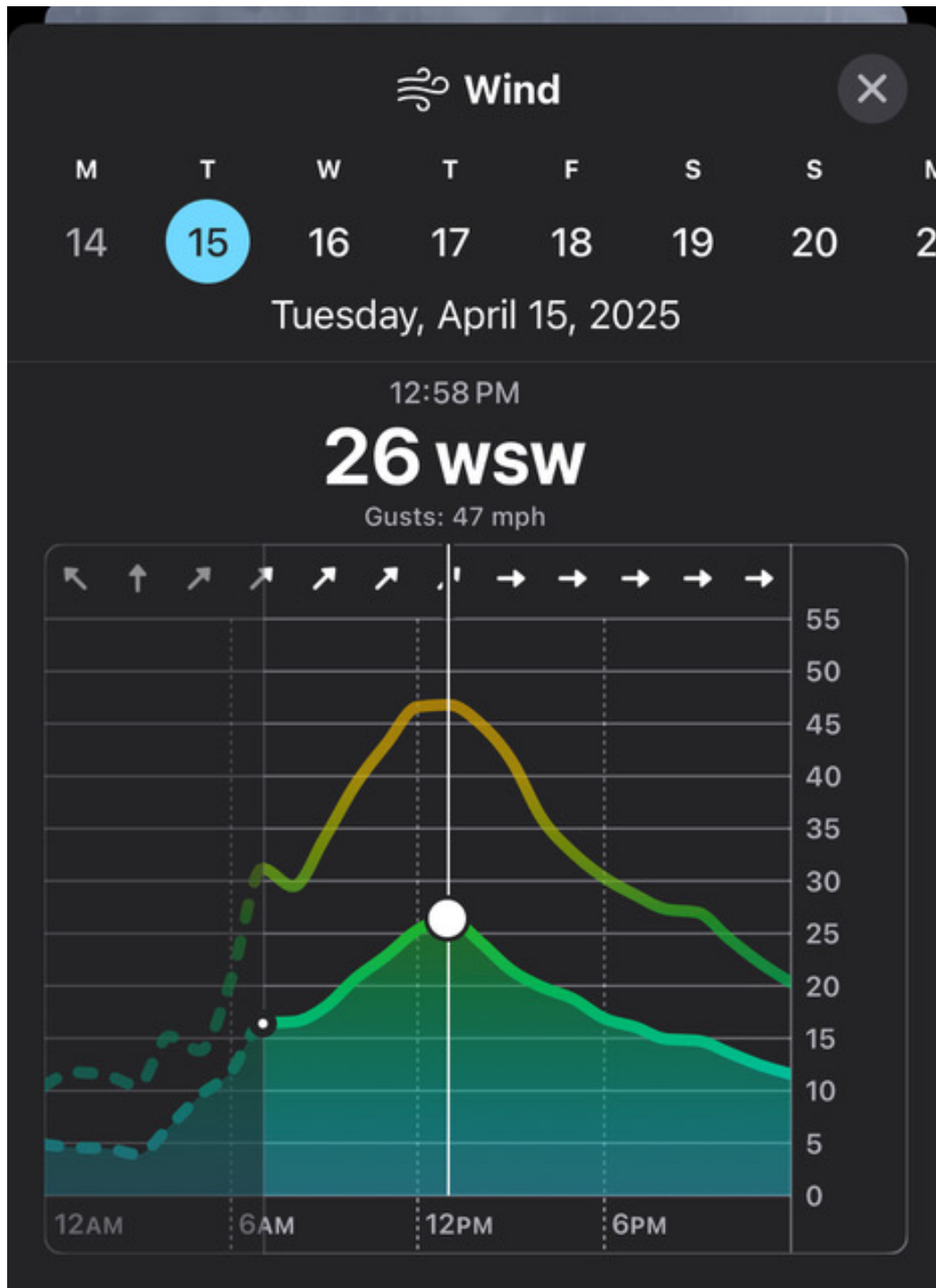




We checked into the Nikko Kanazawa hotel which is by far the fanciest place we've stayed. We're appreciative of things like toilet paper that's more than one-ply. We spent a lovely evening with friends at the 30th-floor piano bar where we learned that we like single malt scotch. A glass of 12-year-old Macallan single malt scotch is only 2700 yen (\$19) which is extraordinarily inexpensive from what we understand.



Before we leave you, let's take a quick look at the weather forecast for tomorrow. At 1 PM, there will be 26 mph winds with gusts to 47 mph. But at least it will be raining. Guess EK made the right call on moving up the garden walk!



## Japan Travelogue Day 9 — Kanazawa Gold Leaf, Pottery Studio, Fish Market

As expected, today was miserable weather, so we were again glad that EK packed yesterday with the garden tour.

We started off our morning with a cup of in-room coffee. We normally wouldn't mention something so mundane, but we're fascinated by how different some things are here. Check this out - it's a tiny coffee filter with cardboard designed to hold it open while sitting on the cup and allows you to make true drip coffee in single servings.



We bundled up in warm jackets, sweaters, and raincoats and armed with umbrellas to face a day of rain and wind. Luckily, all of our adventures had us delivered by bus with only short walks in the elements. Our first event was learning about gold leaf. We learned on our first drive that 99.9% of the gold leaf created in Japan is from Kanazawa. Evidently, a couple of dudes were washing potatoes and noticed this gold stuff in the water, and the rest was history. "Kana" means gold, and Zawa means stream.

This guy is a samurai dressed in armor covered in gold leaf. The guide seemed to think making yourself stand out that much in battle might not be the best idea. Every square you see in this photo is an 11cm x 11cm square of thin gold leaf. It's even on the ceiling.



Then we watched this guy running a machine that's stamping down 100's of sheets of gold stacked on top of each other to get them thinner. The process starts with each sheet at something like 5/100th of a cm thick and gets it down to 1/10,000 of a cm! He was behind soundproof glass, but the guide briefly opened it so we could hear the deafening roar. We hoped those are noise-cancelling headphones he's wearing!



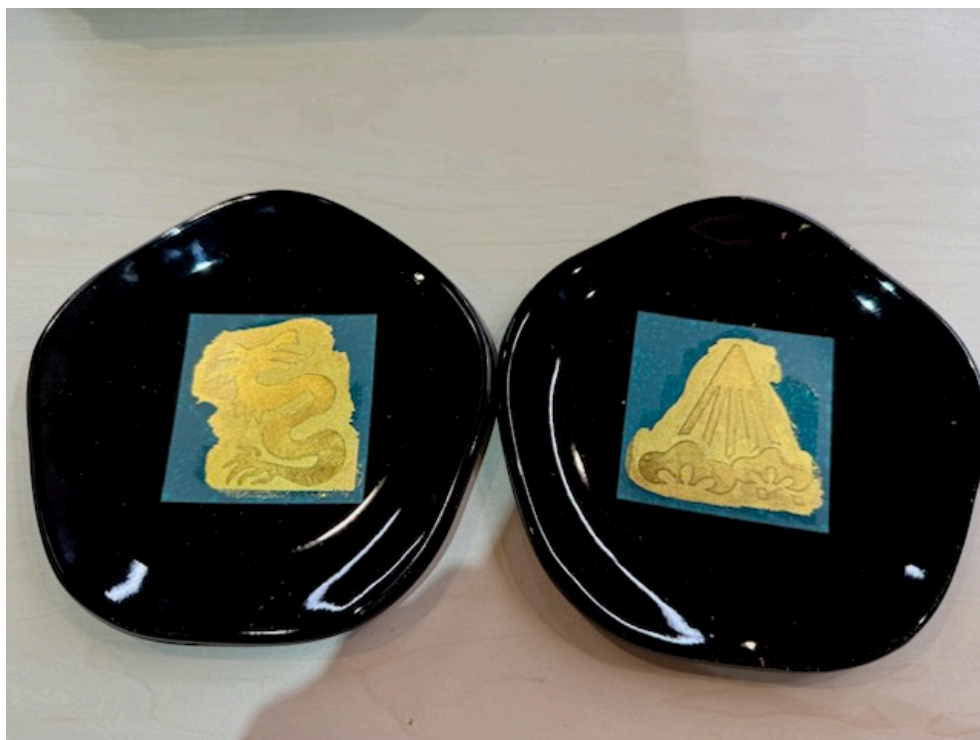
One of the coolest parts was watching this woman separating out the gold leaf sheets and then cutting them precisely to 11x11cm squares. I hope this works, but this is a teeny video pulled from a Live photo of her blowing on the gold leaf to flatten it. It really shows off how incredibly thin the gold is that a simple breath can have this effect.



Then we got to actually apply gold leaf to a dish to take home. It was super fun! Here's Steve about to apply a dragon sticker to his plate. As you can see, he's very excited.



After our teachers applied some glue, we rubbed gold leaf onto the sticker. Mine is of the pine trees in the garden we saw yesterday.



Then peeled the sticker off leaving the dragon on the plate.



Then some more glue or fixer or something, and here's Steve's masterpiece.



I'm afraid mine needed some rework by this lovely young woman, but I think it came out pretty, too.



I know this was a touristy kind of thing to do but everyone had a lot of fun. Our final stop at the Gold Leaf Museum was to have a quick gold leaf latte (seriously, that's gold in our drink!)



Our next stop was a pottery studio. We learned about how they throw the pieces by hand, and then fire them, and the entire process takes 4 months! The master potter demonstrated throwing a few pieces, and I'm not joking when I say it was positively mesmerizing. You know how when you're watching fireworks and you can't help but say, "ooh" and "ah" at them? There's a very sweet woman in our group who did exactly that every time he made a new move with the clay.



He pointed to the photo above him and explained that the older man in the photo doing the same kind of demonstration is his grandfather. There are three boys to his left, and the middle one became the emperor of Japan! Then he explained that next month, the current emperor will come to the studio, and he will be the one to do the demonstration to the Emperor. He's a bit nervous about that!



One of the firing steps decreases the size of the cups by 10% as shown in this photo. After all of the firings, they decrease in size by 18%.



While they didn't let us play in the clay (which would have been fun), they did give us the opportunity to shop for some items, but everything was *super* expensive.

We walked through the town, and during a break in the clouds, we saw the Geisha clubs. He says Geishas are *not* prostitutes as many seem to think. He said we'll be seeing some geishas in Kyoto so that should be interesting.



Our destination from this walk was the Fish Market. It's this massive building filled with booths filled with raw fish. That sounds revolting, and it kind of was, but it was also amazing to see. Luckily it didn't smell fishy like you would think. We took a lot of photos of the fish on display, but my gift to you is to not show you any of them. Instead, this photo will have to do to give you a feel for the place.



But the best part of the fish market was that it had tons of sushi restaurants. Steve and I have been wanting a good, traditional sushi meal without a lot of other foods involved, and we finally got it.



We went back to the hotel for a long afternoon of relaxation, during which time I wrote most of this letter. Our friend Maryanne spent two months in Kanazawa and recommended an udon restaurant called Kamagohan-fukuwauchi. We didn't know what udon was, but Steve made reservations over email weeks ago and we invited our new friends Chrysa and Craig to join us.

Maryanne sent us a note with a photo of her and something written in Japanese that she insisted we show the people at the restaurant. We did and the woman went bananas - she insisted I take a video of her saying something back to

Maryanne. We have no idea what conversation went back and forth between the two of them but it was fun to send a live message between Maryanne in New Zealand and this woman in Japan.

Believe it or not, these were the two different alcohols they offered us.



We learned that udon are noodles, but really they are the BEST noodles. If you haven't had them, find them. Our meals were cooked over a hot pot right in front of us. Steve was most excited that this table actually had room for our legs so he didn't have to sit cross-legged.



When we went to leave, the friend of Maryanne's made us sit on some stuffed fish for reasons that were very clearly explained to us in Japanese.



Maryanne also told us about a jazz club we should go to, and since it was only 0.6 miles away (and the rain had stopped), we decided to walk to it. Apple Maps took us on an odd walk down an alleyway, and then we realized we were actually inside the fish market from earlier today! It was nearly unrecognizable without all the people, and with far fewer fish.



After this walk, we were sad to learn that the jazz club was closed on Tuesdays.



We decided to walk back to the hotel, which was another mile or so. It was lovely and cool outside and it felt good to walk. We had a plan to go to the bar at the hotel again unless we found a bar along the way back. We found one and had drinks. Our new friends ordered a Japanese whiskey that they really enjoyed and Steve had a local gin and tonic. My newfound love of single malt scotch drove me to order a 10-year-old Laphroaig. It smelled like feet. But it tasted even worse!

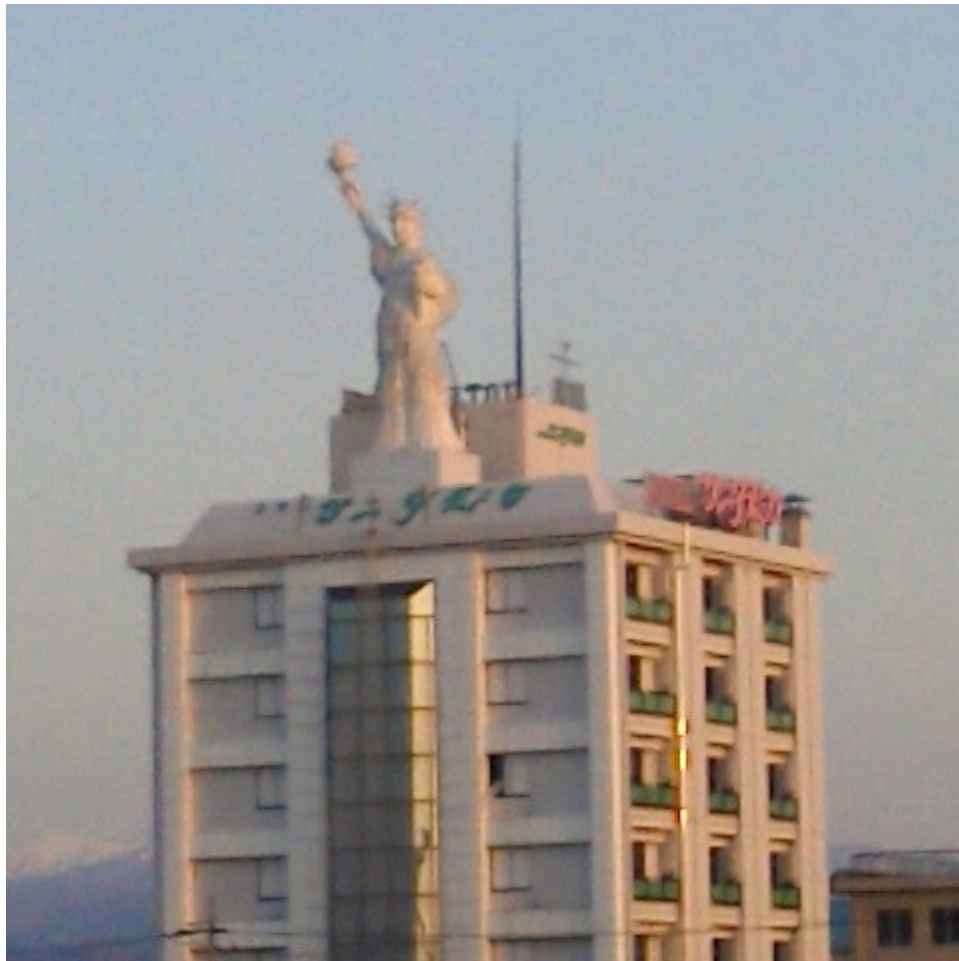
We walked back to the hotel and the whole way there I could taste this feet-whiskey. Luckily, Chrysa suggested we go back to the hotel bar where I was able to wash the taste out with a Cragganmore single malt.

With that, we closed out the evening. Tomorrow we take a bunch of trains to get to Kyoto but that's a story for another day.

## Japan Travelogue Day 10 — Kyoto Castle, Crafts Museum, Flea Market & The 1000 Hotel Kyoto

Let's start with a few addendums to day 9. I was awaiting crucial photographic evidence of the two stories I wanted to tell. I appreciate your patience.

As we were driving from our hotel to the gold leaf museum, we spotted something unusual. It was a hotel with a giant replica of the Statue of Liberty on top.



We asked EK what this building was and he explained it's called Plaza Santa Monica, and that it's one of the "Love Hotels" where you pay by the hour. He told us that with land being so scarce, families live in quite close quarters so there is little opportunity for young people to ... well, you get the drift. He went on to say that the impression of the word "Love Hotel" is not good in Japan

because it has the image of "secret love", so they're running a campaign to call the hotel, "Happy Hotel". This got a big laugh from our group, as you can imagine.

Point two was an explanation of why Japan drives on the left. Most countries that drive on the left side of the road were at one time part of Great Britain, but that's not the case with Japan.

Samurai used their right hands for their swords, and so they kept the swords on the left-hand side of their bodies. If a boy was born left-handed, he was forced to become right-handed, as a way to minimize the number of instructors required. Sorry Ken and Kyle, you would have been poor samurai.

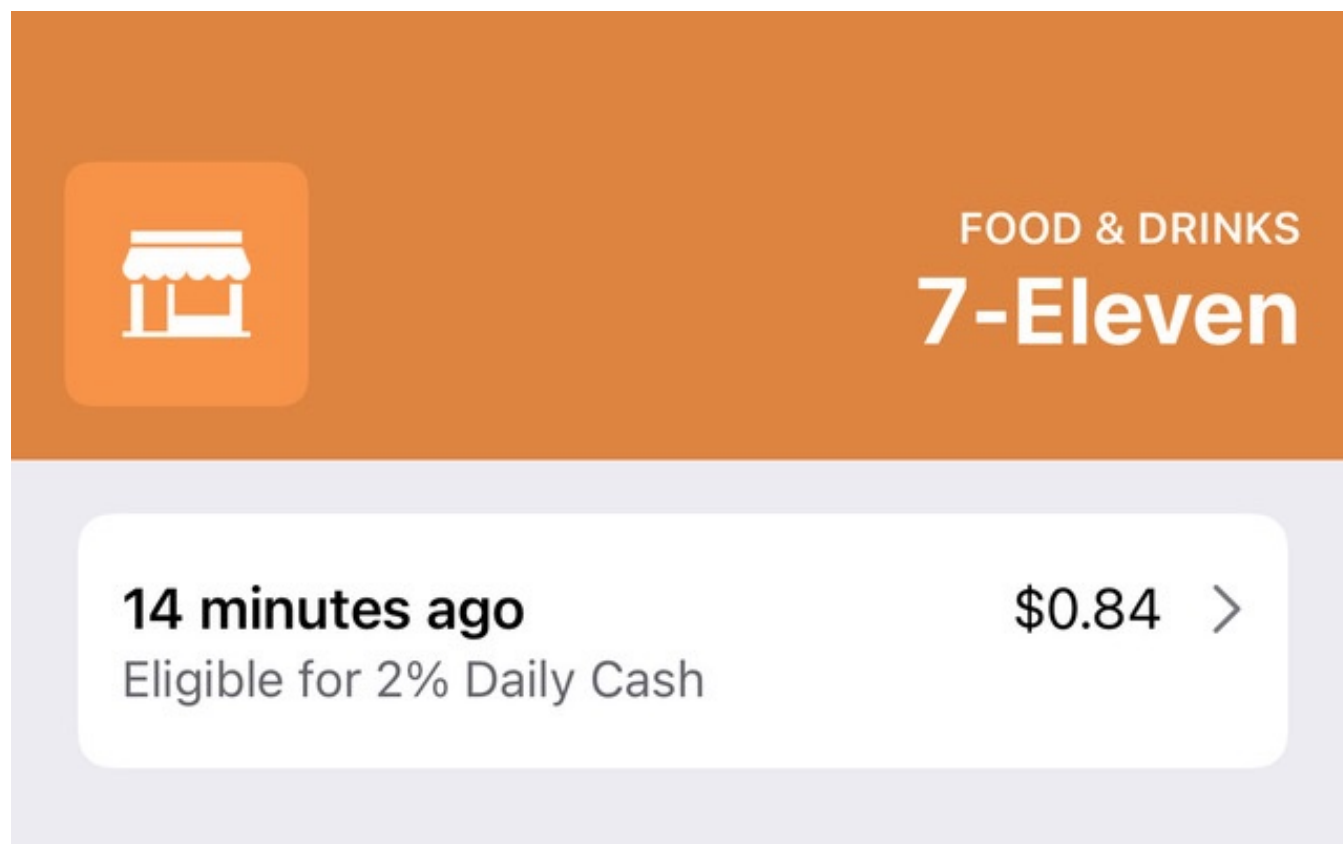
Now, what does right or left side driving have to do with samurai? The roads were originally designed for walking, and if the samurai were to walk on the right side of the road when passing another samurai going the other way, their swords would bang into each other. This problem would have existed when on horseback as well.

Here's our friend Craig pretending to drive our taxi from the left side.



And finally, a correction. I spelled Chrysa correctly the first time I mentioned her, but Chryssa the second time. I apologize for the error, even though she likely will never see this.

Today we took another bullet train, aka Shinkansen, from Kanagawa to some unknown city where we hopped on a local train which took us from environs unknown to Kyoto. EK probably told us where we switched trains but it escaped my elaborate note-taking skills using the tiny keyboard on my iPhone. I may not know where we changed trains, but I bought a cup of coffee at a convenience store at the train station, and the machine actually ground the beans for me ... and it cost \$0.84! (It was also delicious.)



When we arrived at Kyoto Station, EK told us we were going to have lunch there. Now, when you picture eating lunch at a train station, does it make you think of good food, or maybe a hot dog and some cheese on a stick? I'm happy to report that Kyoto Station has amazing food. We had a fabulous tuna sashimi

with miso soup and a local beer. Seriously, better tuna than I've ever had at home came from a train station.

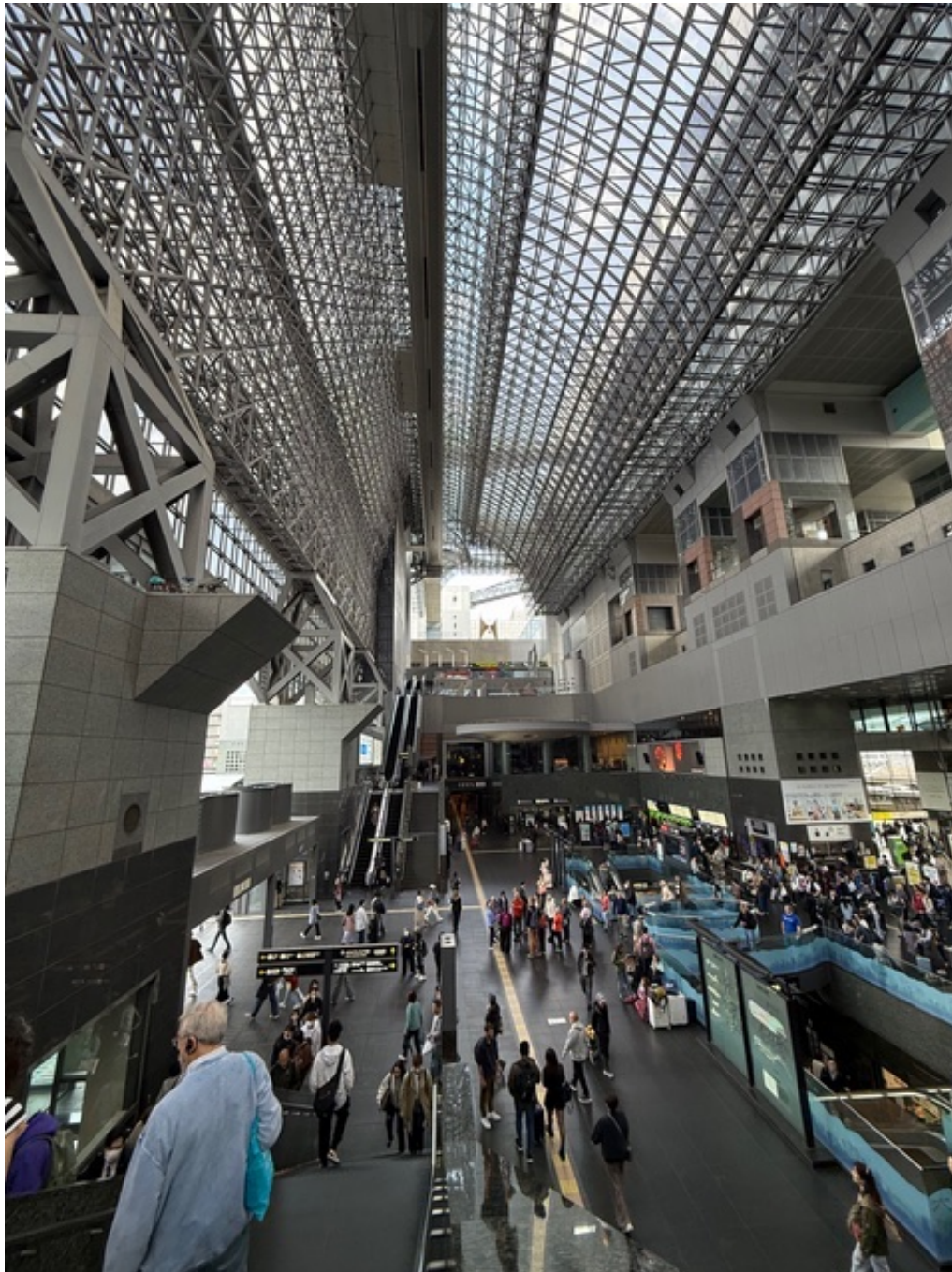
Steve wanted you to see what he looked like when he rode the bullet train:



Not to be outdone, I found a great photo spot in which to pose.



The station is an extraordinary building. EK said everyone said it was way too modern for Kyoto, but people flock to it to eat and to shop. There's an 11-story department store in the station too.



Time for a history lesson! A long time ago, there was a 100-year civil war in Japan because just about every samurai who could tie his own kimono decided

he wanted to be Shogun. In the final battle in the year 1600 (so I guess it started in 1500), the East and West duked it out, and the East won. The Shogun was Tokugawa Ieyasu. He made the West losers build him a castle of sorts called Motorikyu Nijo Castle. It wasn't a castle for defending in battle, and in fact, it has a rather narrow moat around it. EK said even he could swim across it. The castle was actually designed to hold meetings. The reason he needed a castle was that the Emperor lived in Kyoto, so as a sign of respect, he had to come to hang out with him sometimes.



We couldn't take pictures inside, but it was just a bunch of meeting rooms with replicas of what was on the walls at the time. Only two things caught my interest. They had pictures of tigers and leopards running around together because at

the time, they thought leopards were just girl tigers! Funny since they don't live in the same places.

The other interesting thing was that as we walked, we could hear this strange squeaky sound, sort of like birds. Turns out it was the movement of nails against clamps in the floor. It was purposely designed as a way to not have anyone sneak up on you in the night. They said we couldn't take photos or video, but nobody said anything about recording audio, so I squatted down and used Just Press Record on my iPhone to record the audio for you. Don't say I never did anything for you!

Artsy-fartsy pic of some flowers in front of the castle wall.



Some willow-type of cherry blossom (at least I think that's what they said they are.)



At first, I thought this was carp you could eat from a vending machine.



We moved from the castle to a Crafter's museum. I thought I misunderstood what EK was saying, but it's exactly what it says on the tin. People make really cool stuff in Japan, and this is a museum showing it off. Here's a woman sticking teeny bits of abalone shell to the bottom of a lacquered bowl. She touches the tip of her chopstick to her tongue which makes the shell stick to it and then carefully places it on the bowl in a pretty pattern.



Steve being goofy.



EK told us about some dark history of Japan. The Portuguese came to Japan and brought Christianity with them. Many people converted. The Shogun thought that this might be an elaborate plan to conquer Japan, so he made Christianity illegal. If someone was suspected of being a Christian, they would place a drawing of Jesus on the crucifix on the ground and ask the person to stomp on it. If they wouldn't do it, there was punishment. As a way to gather in

hiding, the Christians developed a mirror that, when light was shined upon its backside, would display the image of Christ.

Looks like a normal mirror on the front side:



But here's the image reflected from the back side:



There were too many cool things to show you at this museum, but I'll show you one of Steve's favorites. It's a coat rack. And this woman carefully photographed it, and the explanation that calls it a "Bent Cort Rack". Not sure if that's a

Japan Travelogue 2025

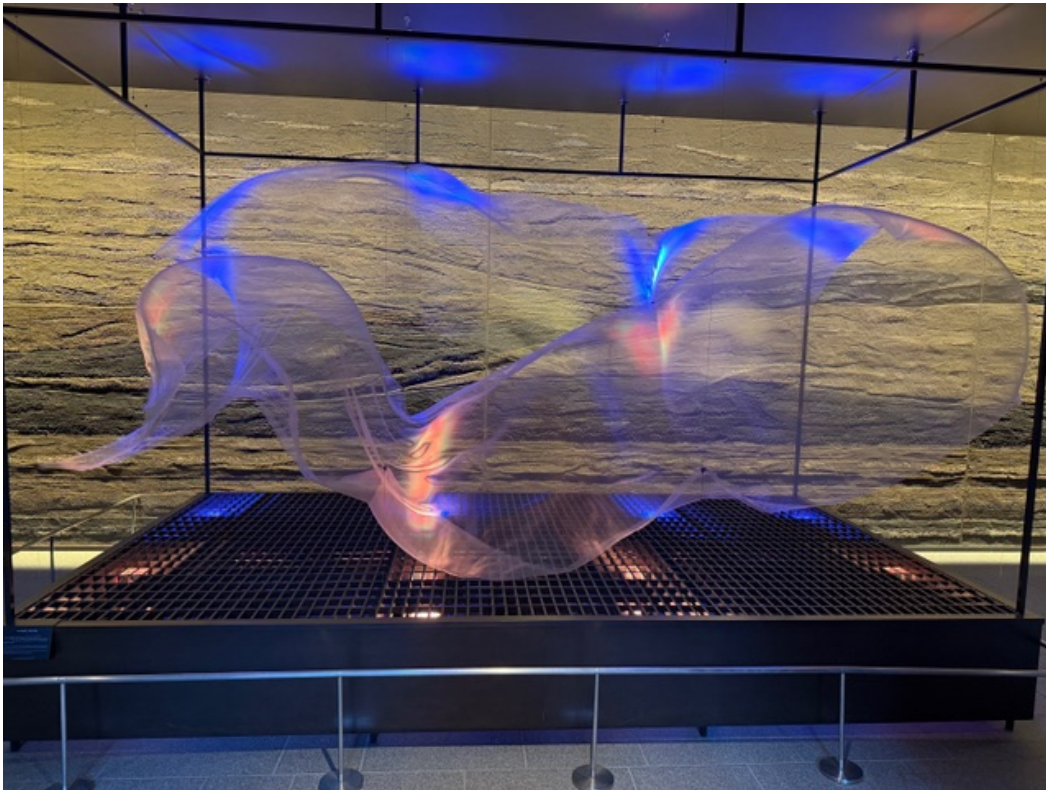
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misspelling of "Coat" or if it's made out of cork. Perhaps I should have read the explanation.

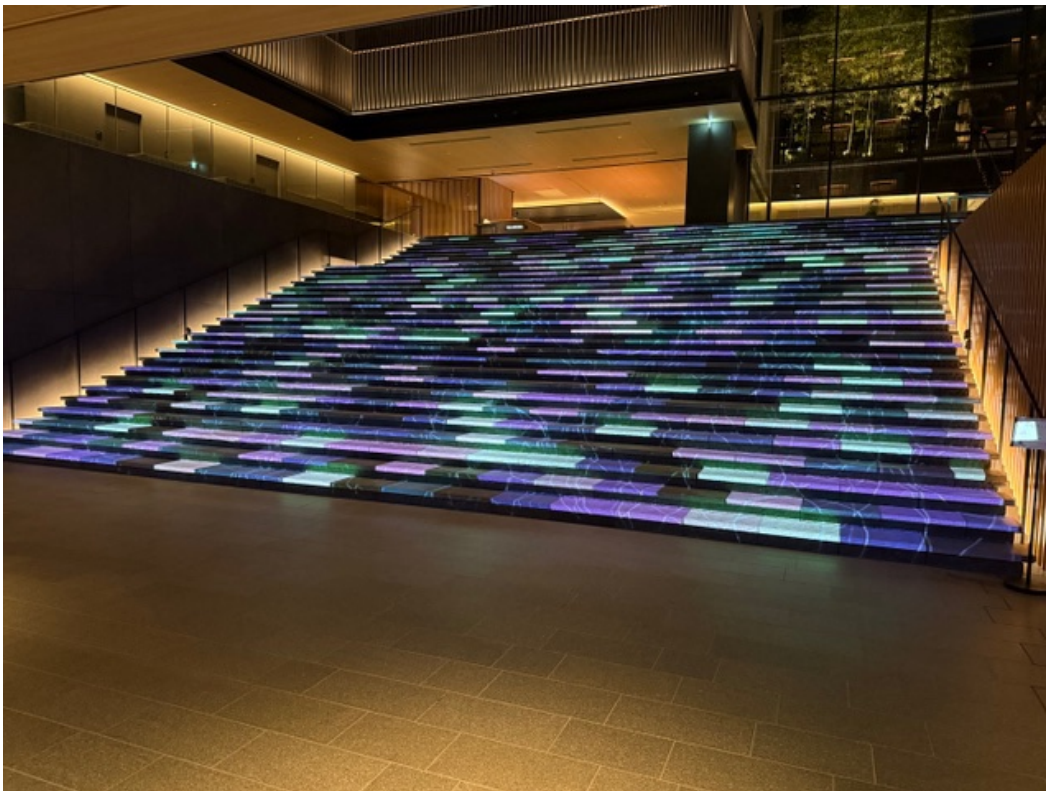


A large pile of various items, including books, a teddy bear, a doll, a pig mask, a bird mask, a sign with '¥3,000', and a sign with 'all ¥1500'. The items are scattered on a light-colored surface, possibly a table or floor. The books include 'The CBC's Choice in Concert' and 'SHOSTAKOVICH'. The teddy bear is brown and black. The doll is a baby doll with blonde hair. The pig mask is pink and white. The bird mask is yellow and green. The sign with '¥3,000' is white with black text. The sign with 'all ¥1500' is white with black text.

# Japan Travelogue 2025



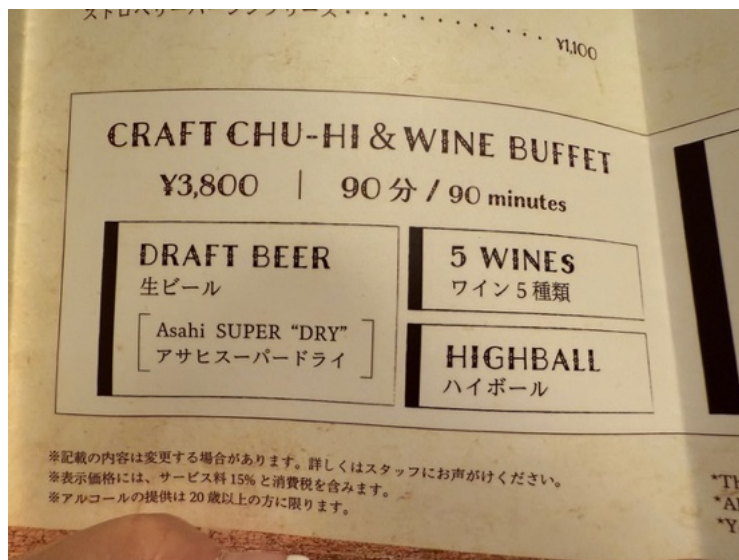
This is the stairwell up to the second floor:



And a giant lamp in the lounge on the second floor. How cool is that?



We went to a buffet dinner (behind the giant lamp), which was actually quite good. My favorite thing on the menu was all you could drink beer, wine, and highball (whiskey) for 90 minutes for 3800¥. That's around \$27. We didn't opt for it.



What we did opt for was the pea soup. I don't like peas. I don't like pea soup. I LOVED this.



The 1000 Hotel Kyoto is named because they have a vision for 1000 years of sustainability. Everything is made of wood, including the hotel room key cards. We're not quite sure how they embedded a chip inside them, but they're very pretty. Here's the welcome sign on our bed.



Isn't this genius (and so obvious)? Why are partially used toilet paper rolls replaced in hotels?



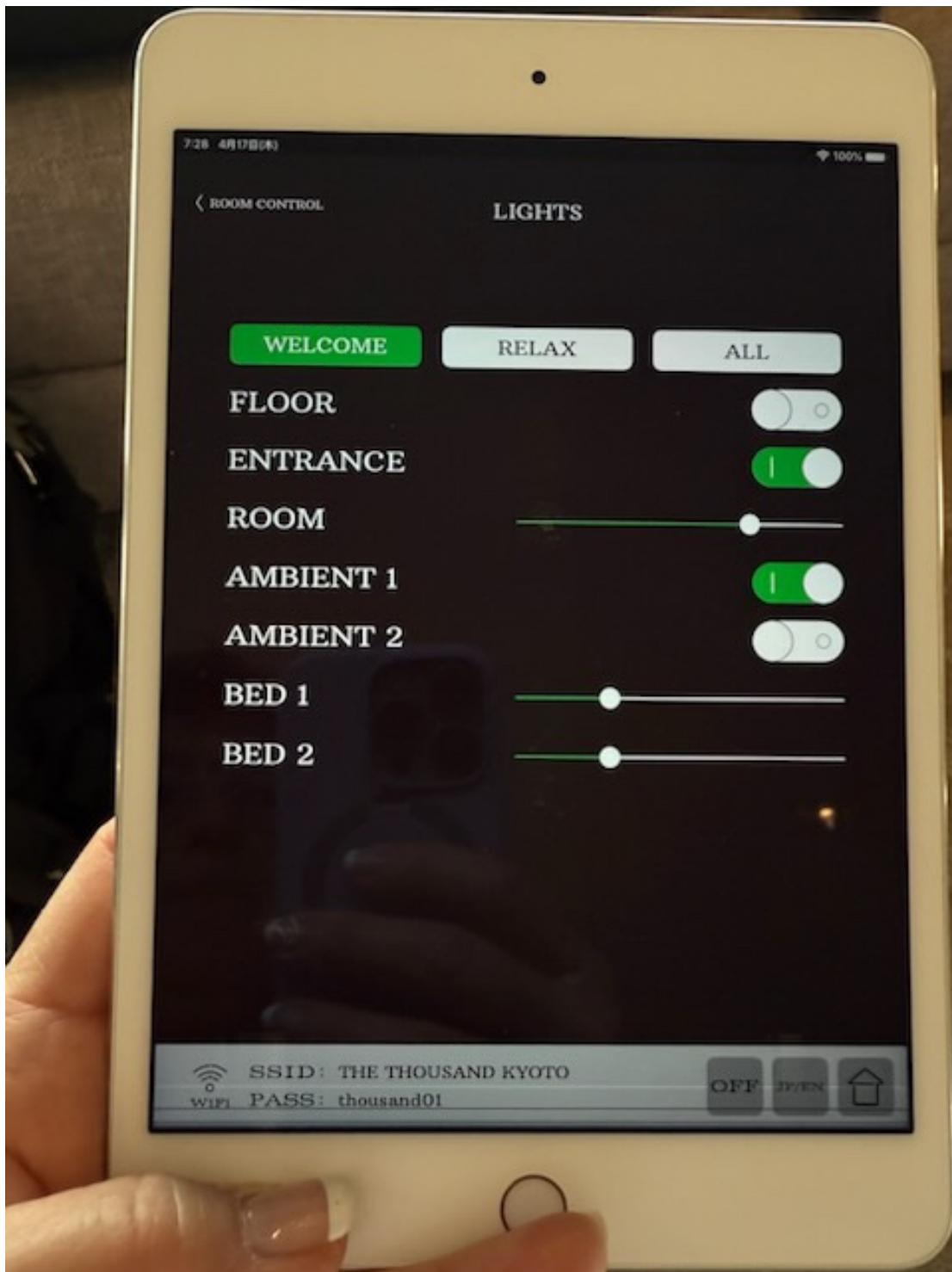
The controls for the room are all on an iPad, and it works very well. On this first screen, you can see lights, air conditioning, and more.



No more fiddling around with some funky 1950s-style HVAC unit — just dial in the temperature you want and even the fan speed.



We couldn't find but a few light switches in the room, one of which turned everything off, but on the iPad, we had different profiles to choose from that we could even tailor to our desires.



Until tomorrow!

## Japan Travelogue Day 11 — Temples, Rocks, Bamboo, and Gold Pavilion

We crammed a lot into today, so let's get started.

We went to the Tenryu-ji Temple, where we sat and meditated about how straight the lines are in this rock garden. EK explained that the monks drink a lot of tea because meditating gets kind of boring, and it's easy to fall asleep.



When we woke up from our nap, we walked to a beautiful reflecting pool that probably has a name.



The real treat, though was a walk through a bamboo forest on the temple grounds.



It was SUPER crowded, so we took this silly photo to try to not have anyone else in the image.



From there, we hopped on the bus and went over to yet another temple, the Ryoanji Temple. You'd think all of these temples would get boring, but they don't let us inside anyway, so it's mostly just walking around in beautiful gardens. The real draw of this temple is the rock garden, but before that, we got to see another pretty pond.



Here's the rock garden I mentioned. The deal is that there are 15 rocks, but you can't see all 15 from any vantage point sitting in front of the garden.



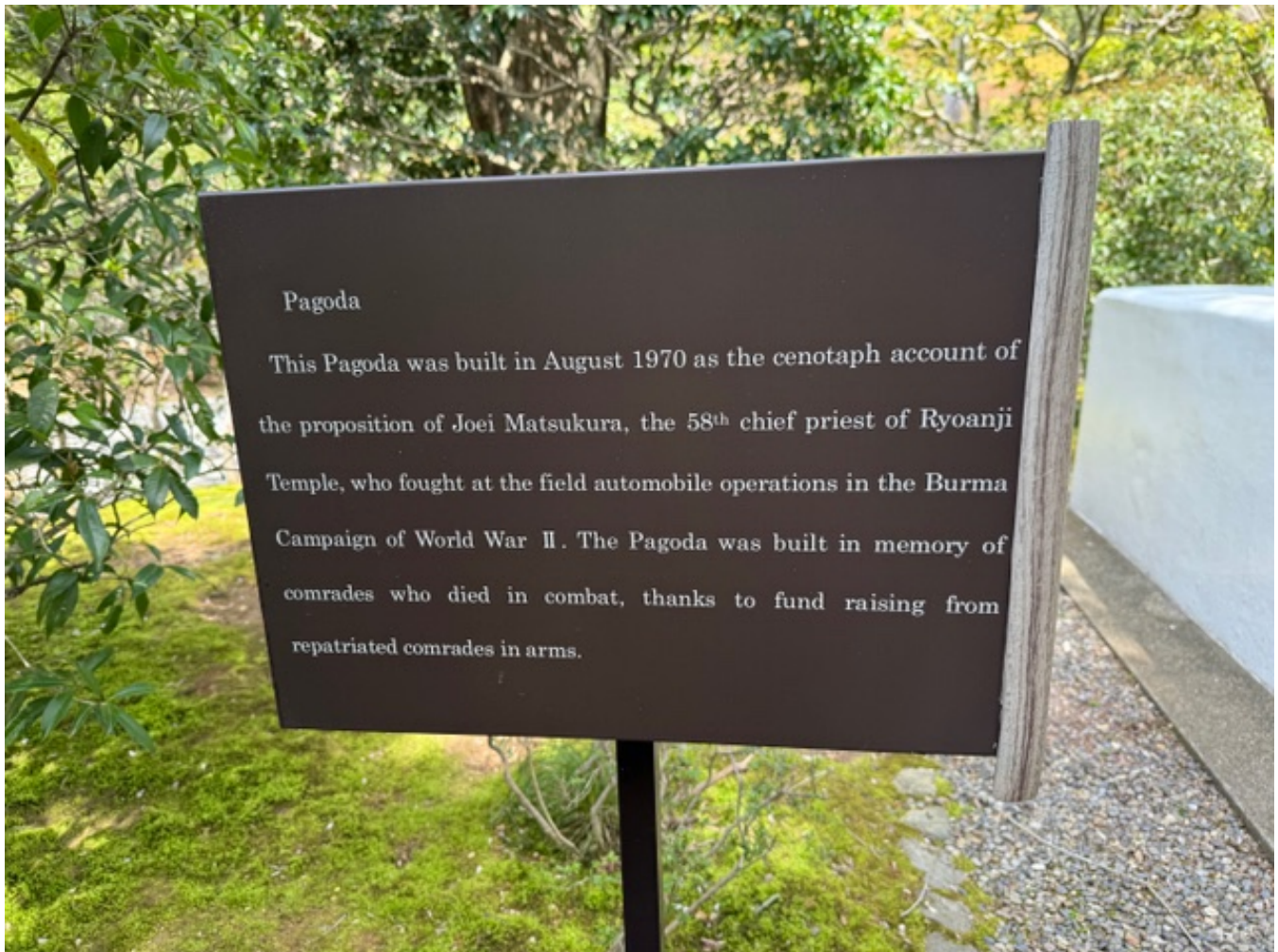
The perfect shape is a circle, and the Japanese (or maybe just Japanese Buddhist monks) feel that 15 things arranged like a circle is close enough to a circle to be perfect. But things aren't supposed to be perfect. So the rocks are arranged (not in a circular pattern) so that you can only see 14 at a time.

Just about every temple story involves a story about things burning down and being rebuilt. Everywhere we go, from the thatched roof houses to the high-rise hotels to the temples, we see very obvious fire alarm systems.



I don't want to be a grammar snob, but do you see anything wrong with the construction of the last sentence on this plaque?

"The Pagoda was built in memory of comrades who died in combat, thanks to fund raising from repatriated comrades in arms."



Time for another selfie!



We don't see much wildlife, so a rare turtle sighting (or three) garners great interest.



How cool is this - it's called the Gold Pavilion. A shogun built a retreat on this pond and then built the Gold Pavilion as a guest house. It's placed so he could look at it from his retreat.



The Pavilion burned down in 1957 (see fire safety lesson earlier) and was rebuilt. There's a gold phoenix on the roof, which I thought was because the Pavilion rose from the ashes, but EK said it was a symbol of long lineage of the shogun's family.



I'm sure most, if not all, of you are wondering, "But what about lightning striking that phoenix?" Don't worry, when we turned the corner, we spotted a grounding cable coming down the back side from the phoenix to the ground.



One of the rarest things in Japan is a trash can. Our friends Jim and Carol spotted one.



Here's the interesting thing - there are very few trash cans, but there's also *no trash* on the ground. I'm starting to think that trash cans are what *cause* trash!

We had an extensive break from adventure, so we walked over to the train station to grab a bite of udon. Then we went up the 11-story escalator, all in succession, in the department store Isetan. We had no particular goal in mind — not even shopping — but it seemed like a fun thing to do.



When we reached the top, there was one more flight of stairs. Curious, we climbed to the top and discovered you could walk right outside onto the rooftop. The best unobstructed view was actually back into the train station from above.



And it's been a while since I subjected you to a selfie:



Later in the afternoon, we met up with the group and went (by yet another bus) to an area of Kyoto called Gion. This is the canal and bridge along which they filmed a scene in the movie *Memoirs of a Geisha*. I've read the book and we own the movie so it was cool to know we were standing right where it was filmed.



Our destination was a theater where we were to see a traditional Japanese arts performance. To say it was interesting is accurate. To say parts were super weird is also accurate. To say certain parts were more boring than watching paint dry, and yet creepy enough to give you nightmares, would also be accurate. Sadly for you, we were forbidden from taking photographs.



They gave us a program, though that had pictures which might enhance your enjoyment of this particular event.

After a snappy 9-minute tea ceremony, they started by playing a [koto which is a stringed instrument](#) that lies on the floor. It was probably the most interesting of the half-dozen performances, but the music sounded dissonant because they clearly don't use the Western diatonic scale. While they were playing, a woman demonstrated Ikebana flower arranging. That was just a wee bit boring.

The Bugaku dance was where things went from boring to weird. I have no idea what the point was but it was really cool to watch. That's a dragon on top of their head, and they had a beard swinging around on a little swing under their chin. They stomped a bit on stage to the worst music we've ever heard. There were two drums and three wind instruments, one of which was a flute, but one of

the other two sounded like a kazoo! These musicians gave the Koto players a real run for their money on dissonant "music".



When we were finally released from purgatory, the comedy show began. This was three guys on stage hollering things in Japanese. One guy appeared to be in charge, and the other two appeared to be goof-ups working for him who were always drinking all of the sake. The main guy successfully tied them both up, one to a long pole across his shoulders, and the other with his hands tied behind his back. Left alone to their own devices, they eventually figured out how to work together to still drink all of the sake.



But the Noh Play was the one that gave me nightmares. It was at once boring and super creepy. This character danced around in front of us in slow motion. And by slow motion, I mean they pulled out a fan at one point and didn't move for at least 2 minutes. They'd occasionally swing around on stage in a crescendo of music heading towards the exit ... and then swing around to stand still yet again. Also disturbing was that, at times, they held the fan from the side, not the handle part. I think they were on stage for about 2.5 hours of the 50-minute performance.



Finally, the show closed with geisha. In Kyoto, they're called Geiko and Maiko. Geiko are the masters and Maiko are the apprentices. They were stunning to watch. It was slow-moving but elegant. Their hair alone mesmerized me. It's hard to see in this photo, but the amount of lacquer to hold their hair in these improbable arrangements must have been extraordinary. Steve, I, and the rest of the group agreed this was the best part of the show. They were on stage for exactly 8 minutes.



We went back to the hotel to close out the evening with some friends at the swanky hotel bar. My new bestie Chrysa (with one "s") turned me onto Sakurao French 75. A French 75 is made with gin, the Sakurao part is a liqueur. It was delicious! It came with a strawberry wrapped in soba and chocolate. Decadent!



And then I needed to prove the curse of Laphroaig (roughly translated to mean "the feet") scotch by tasting the Arran single malt scotch from Scotland. It was lovely.



## Japan Travelogue Day 12 — Unexpected "Adventure", Imperial Palace

Today started with an unexpected "adventure". Before I tell the story, Steve is FINE.

Because we believe in doing a thorough report for you on the culture and customs of every country we visit, we decided to test out the Japanese healthcare system. Steve's small cold earlier in the week decided to take a trip to his lungs, and so we went to the Takeda Hospital on the recommendation of the front desk.



The experience (for having to go to the hospital) was pretty amazing. As soon as we arrived, an English-speaking interpreter greeted us, and she stayed with us throughout the experience. I won't go through every detail, but in two hours (without an appointment), we saw the doctor, Steve had a chest X-Ray that confirmed a little bit of pneumonia, and the doctor had prescribed medications (including penicillin). If you live in the US, start adding up what you think that would cost, walking in off the street with no insurance.

In Japan, it was \$300. *Including* an X-ray.

The doctor was quite enthusiastic about prescribing medications. There were 9 in total, quite a few of which were duplicates — one normal dosage, one a more potent version. Total price was ... wait for it ... \$50. I have to say that socialized medicine here is pretty awesome. The government subsidizes 70% of the cost, and I guess it applies to foreigners as well. They gave us a certificate to turn into our insurance company when we get home, and it looks like our travel insurance will cover it. Thank you to Steve's dad, Ken, for teaching us about travel insurance and that this is just the kind of event that makes it a good idea to purchase for all foreign travel.

The best news is that after two sessions of antibiotics, he's doing much better now, so we're quite relieved.

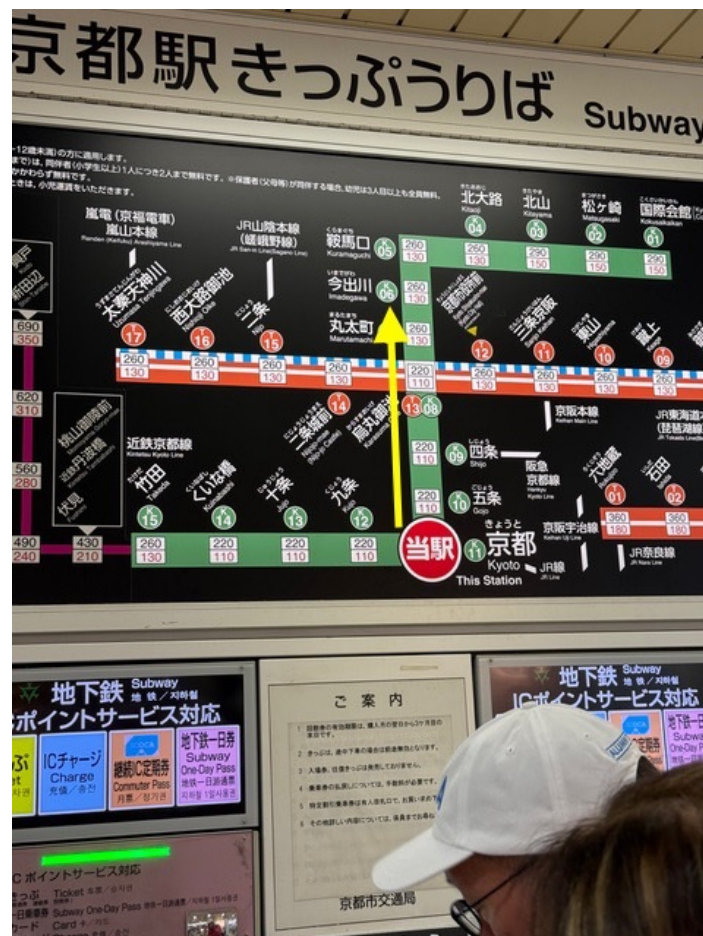
One funny thing to close out this story. While we were waiting for the prescriptions to be filled, they had a TV tuned to the news, and we watched the weather report. The meteorologist was talking while grabbing and moving physical stickers of different weather fronts and what I thought was the sun around on a board (but it's actually yellow sand). It was completely analog! This wasn't some podunk little local weather either, you can see that it's the weather report for all of Japan! As advanced as Japan is in tech, this was a real surprise.



We arrived back at the hotel in time for me to join up with the tour group while Steve took a well-earned nap. The afternoon event was a visit to the Imperial Palace. Right up till the end of the samurai-based government, the capital of Japan was in Kyoto, and the Imperial Palace is where the emperor lived.

We trotted from the hotel over to the train station, where we hopped on the subway for 260¥, which is less than \$2. We rode it for three stops, and in a 5-minute walk, we arrived at the palace. Entry is free, which is nice, and it wasn't crowded, which is even nicer. One of the events we missed in the morning was a visit to the famous Fushimi Inari Shrine with 1000 torii gates, but all any of our friends told us about it was how horrendously crowded it was. Made us feel better!

Things look complicated on the board, but EK pointed at the red "you are here" dot and then to the third stop where we were to hop off. Easy peasy if you know which train to get on.



Our trash can hunters, Sue and Jim, discovered a more unusual trash can. It's *only* for ice cream products. That worked out well, because they'd just had a small cone and were glad to see they were allowed to put the little paper sleeve in the trash.



The Imperial Palace forms a giant square and this is one of the entrances.



This is one of the corners of the structure close up, highlighting the layered bark roof. EK explained that only the high-up mucky mucks were allowed to have this kind of roof.



Here's the bark roof in a cutaway:



As I've mentioned, my favorite part of all of these visits is that we're never allowed to go inside. That means we get to cruise around the grounds and enjoy the serene gardens.



This small square area was the "football court".



We were confused by the size and shape of the court, but luckily, they had a sign explaining the sport called Kemari. It's a non-competitive ball game (so what's the point?) where players pass the ball around in the air, trying to keep it up as long as possible. The best part is the garb they wore to play the game. I can only hope this was never played during the summer.



The Oikeniwa Garden was enchanting.



Can you have too many photos of one garden? I think not.



We're going on to Hiroshima tomorrow, but about a third of the tour group is heading straight back home. By the time dinner rolled around, Steve was already starting to feel better, so he was able to make our farewell dinner at Kyoto Tempura Endo Okazaki-Tei. We had tempura like nothing we'd had before.

These are our besties from the trip — Chrysa (with one S) and Craig, and Mike and Mary Ellen. I think they matched their first initials just to help me remember their names.



I'm sure you're wondering which Single Malt Scotch I had last night. It was the 10-year Yoichi. It was good, but I think I prefer the Arran from the previous night. My friend Diane told me that I probably didn't like the Laphroig Feet Scotch because it's very peaty. One of the guests on the tour specifically asked for a very peaty whisky, so I asked if I could smell it. I wanted to close the loop on whether the Laphroig had actually somehow gone bad, or whether it is peat that I dislike. I took one whiff of her drink, and there was that fresh scent o' feet I remembered. This important research will help me when I get home to order what I like.

The Thousand Kyoto Hotel is extraordinarily modern. The coolest thing is that they have a robot that will deliver amenities to your room! Steve tested it out by ordering ice, and sure enough, this little robot toodled up to the door and opened its ice tray!



## Japan Travelogue Day 13 — Hiroshima

As Steve continues to slowly mend, we continue on our adventures. Most of today was spent moving via the Shinkansen bullet train from Kyoto to Hiroshima.

Remember how EK taught us the symbol for "stop"? It turns out that it's probably one of the most useful symbols we could have learned. Here it is again, on the Emergency stop button on the train that none of my friends would let me push.



Whenever we are out and about, EK says, "Whisper On!" Whisper is a small radio transmitter with a tiny microphone that EK wears, and we all have companion receivers with earpieces. This allows him to speak in a normal voice, and we can hear him up to a hundred feet away. It's nice for both crowded and quiet areas. The funny part is when EK tells us to go to the Happy Place, and we do, we hear him whispering to us while we're taking care of business.



As many of you know, Steve and I share the same birthday (I'm 4 hours older than him). It was a day early, but EK arranged for a robot to not only deliver two little birthday cakes, but the robot also sang Happy Birthday to us! It was a geek's best present ever.



The plates say Happy Anniversary, but the little messages say, "Happy Early Birthday".



The main purpose of our visit was, of course, to go to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. It was a very moving experience. While awful and heart-wrenching to hear the stories of the survivors, we felt that it was important out of

respect to learn about what it was like. I won't describe it any further than that, but I can say we understand much more now.

From the Peace Museum, we walked to the A-Bomb Dome, which I'll explain in a moment. This arch is a symbol of peace. Through it, in the distance, you can see the dome, and between the two is a flame. This flame was taken from the island of Miyajima, where it has been burning for 1000 years. The flame at this memorial will only be extinguished when there are no more nuclear weapons.



At 8:15 a.m., August 6, 1945, the bomb exploded approximately 600 meters above and 160 meters southeast of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, ripping through and igniting the building, instantly killing everyone in it. Because the blast struck from almost directly above, some of the center walls remained standing, leaving enough of the building and iron frame to be recognizable as a dome. After the war, these dramatic remains came to be known as the A-bomb Dome.



After a somber afternoon of reflection, we were ready to enjoy the rest of the day. A huge highlight of the trip for Steve and me was getting to meet a gentleman named David Bogdan. David has been listening to my podcast since at least 2009, and emailing back and forth with me and my co-host Bart for all of that time. He drove 3 hours from his home on an island just to meet us, and he could not possibly have been more delightful.



David, who speaks fluent Japanese, joined our group for a traditional Okonomiyaki meal and was delighted to talk to EK because it turns out he went to school on the island where David lives. They explained to us that Okonomiyaki means "as you like it". They start by pouring a thin batter on a very hot grill.



And then they pile all sorts of yummy things on top, from soba noodles to bean sprouts to an egg, and for some versions, cheese! I made the mistake of ordering mine with udon noodles (because I just learned on this trip that I love them), even though the woman said soba was better. She was right, and David explained to her that I admitted my error as I hung my head in shame.



After we parted ways with David, we made our way up to the 21st floor to have drinks with all of the fun people in our group. I forgot to record which Japanese whiskey I had, but I did have a Sakurao gin that was delightful!



Tomorrow we're off for our final adventure to the island of Miyajima. Not sure when I'll get a chance to write the travelogue — probably during our five-hour wait at the airport for our flight home.

## Japan Travelogue Day 14 — Miyajima Island

Day 14 was our last real day of adventure as we traveled to Miyajima Island, first by bus and then by ferry. As we took off in the bus, EK told us something interesting. Before and during WWII, the Japanese school children had schoolbooks that were full of anti-American sentiment, including language about how the kids were soldiers, and should be willing to lay down their own lives to fight America.

After the war, the school children were put to work redacting all of these messages with black ink in the schoolbooks. I've wondered about how the Japanese turned on a dime from hating us to embracing peace. EK explained that this sudden change in attitude from the teachers did engender distrust, but it seems to have worked to change attitudes.



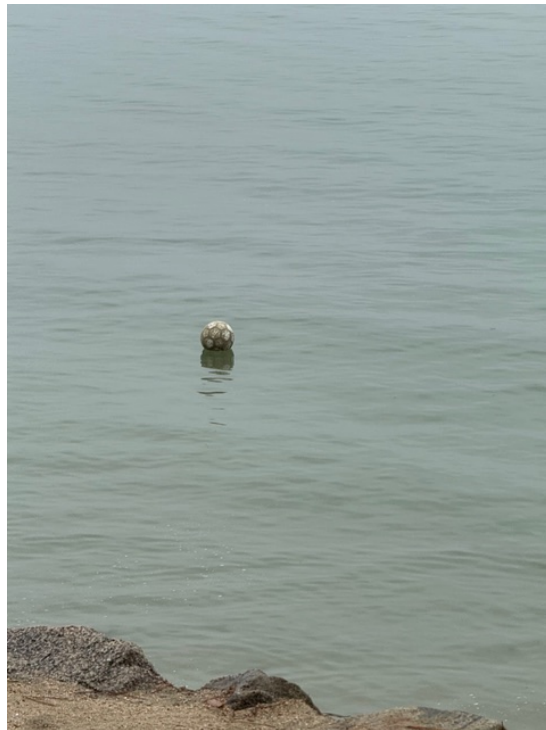
As we crossed the inland sea to Miyajima, we passed oyster rafts. I never understood how they worked, though.



Through the morning misty rain, we had our first view of the "floating" torii gate.



We walked along the shore, seeing all sorts of historical stuff. And then I saw this. Can we all say it together? "WILSON!!!"



Selfie time with the torii gate. (It's not really floating ...)



There are deer in many areas of Japan. These two little rascals appeared to be in the employ of a professional photographer who had a bag of treats on his belt like someone training a new puppy.



One of the options for our free time wandering the island was to take the gondola to the top of the mountain. EK suggested that the views wouldn't be very good ...



We visited the World Heritage Site of Itsukushima Shrine, which was reportedly built in 593. It was rebuilt in 1168.



While we were there, a Shinto priest was performing a ceremony I understood to be conducted on behalf of the family members of someone experiencing difficulty (maybe illness?). The stick he's holding has little white jagged flags attached to it to represent lightning and thunder, and he waves it around vigorously to ward off bad things.



An artsy fartsy picture of the floating torii gate from the shrine.



Japan is big on hand sanitizer, but we found this to be the most delightful way to apply it. There's a foot pedal below, and when depressed, it works against the resistance of a spring and depresses the little plunger on the sanitizer. This is the kind of thing that makes engineers happy.



Speaking of making engineers happy, we saw this curious metal box that said it was an escape chute. Let's zoom in on those instructions, shall we?



It says to flip open the lid, throw a sandbag out the window, and then revolve the hardware to create a chute and jump into it (legs first). What it doesn't explain is why you would want to jump into a chute, and exactly what would happen when you get to the bottom.

# ORIRO 垂直式救助袋 WA

△注意  
指・衣類の  
はさみ込み注意  
△Caution  
Don't get fingers or clothing  
caught in the device

## ●操作方法



① ボックスの上蓋をとり、  
前板をはずす。  
Take off the lid  
and put off the board.



② 砂袋を目標方向に投げる。  
締めてあるバンドを引く。  
Pull the belt  
and throw down the  
sand bag.



③ 袋を先端より徐々に  
降ろす。  
Take down the chute.



④ 入口金具を回転させる。  
Revolve the hardware.



⑤ 足から先に袋に入る。  
Enter the chute with legs  
first.

Steve and I set out on our own to explore up into the mountain hillside (I told you he was feeling better). It was lush and green and so peaceful.



There was still a light rain, but we found a shelter with dry benches, and simply sat and looked at this little pond. We declared this a delightful way to spend our birthday together.



We may have wandered off the beaten path — the "you are here" symbol seems to be in the middle of nowhere.



I've mentioned it a few times, but Japanese bathrooms are amazing. So clean and *always* with the "shower toilet". But this one out on our little walk into the mountain area really made me realize we weren't in Kansas anymore. The sign on that half door says, "Please close the door to keep deer out."



A wee waterfall along our path.



I loved this sign - 8 min walk (6 if run a little!)



We took a photo of the fire station just for firefighter Bodie (to see if he's reading along).



While we took a giant ferry on the way out to the island, we came back on a very small boat that went very fast. It took us back to the A-Bomb Dome area which was way up a river.



When we got off the little boat, we went to a peace monument, surrounded by glass booths filled with zillions of origami paper cranes. There was a little girl named Sadako Sasaki who was two years old when the bomb fell. She survived, but at 12, she developed leukemia. She believed that if she could make 1000 origami cranes, she would survive. Sadly, she did not, but now school children come to this area and make 1000 cranes in honor of her.



From there, we went to the Orizuru Tower Gate, where we went to the top floor and had a spectacular view of the city of Hiroshima.



Below through the netting we could see the A-Bomb Dome.



The last activity was to learn how to make origami cranes ourselves. I've mentioned how kind and patient EK is, but I think he hit the wall when Steve and I complained that it was too hard. He said, "5-year-olds can do this!" Here are our "masterpieces".



We thought we'd get to keep them to give away, but we were told to walk into a terrifying glass-floored, narrow walkway and drop them down so they could "fly". Just for Diane, who doesn't even like being as tall as she is because she's afraid of heights, I took a photo of myself walking on the glass.



When we got back to the hotel, we were exhausted, so a group of us took the easy route and chose the fixed menu at a Japanese restaurant in the hotel. You know I'm not a fan of food photos, but the amount of food they served us was insane. That's 8 pieces of sashimi in the upper right, tempura vegetables and shrimp (which was delicious) in the middle top, a grill in the upper left where we cooked the kobe beef you see.



AFTER this, they brought us a plate with 6 pieces of sushi and miso soup. It was fabulous. Here we are toasting our last dinner together as a group.



Final drink in Japan was a Dewar's White Label scotch ... at the included self-serve bar on the 21st floor.



Off to home tomorrow!

## Japan Travelogue — Final Thoughts

Hello all -

I like to finish my travelogues with a look back on the trip and what we learned that we didn't expect. I took notes throughout the trip, and when I got home, I realized they fell into two categories: tech and normal stuff. Shocking to no one, our tech observations were a much bigger pile. Rather than subject you to all of that, I wrote an article entitled "Tech on Travel — the Japan Edition" and published it here:

<https://www.podfeet.com/blog/2025/05/tech-on-travel-japan/>

One question I get asked often, and I haven't yet mentioned, is who organized the tour? We signed up for this trip through UCLA Alumni Travel, and they used Odysseys Unlimited to actually run the tour.

### Beds and Pillows

Before we checked into our first hotel, our fearless guide EK told us that would have two beds in every hotel room. He explained that in Japan, couples sleep in separate beds. Here are the beds in the Ryokan (the traditional Japanese Inn in Kanagawa). Not only were they separate beds, they were twin beds, and it was a bit challenging to get into and out of them, at least for me, since my bed was on the left. I had two choices: to crawl on my knees on the wood to the bed, or step up and then go from a full stand to dropping into bed. I'm not complaining, and most beds were at "normal" height, but I thought it was interesting.



Every bed in every hotel had two pillows (yay!) But the interesting thing is that they were different from each other. Consistently, one would be a soft, foam, or feather-like pillow of medium thickness, while the second would be like lead. I don't know what they were made out of, but they were heavy and thick. I've heard of pillows made out of beans, so maybe that's what they were, but I found it curious that every room in every hotel had this same combination of soft and hard pillows.

## **Meals and Dining**

I know I talked at one point about the lack of napkins at meals and paper towels in the bathrooms, but it was probably one of the biggest surprises and something I keep thinking about. When I eat, probably every third bite, I wipe my mouth. If it's a messier meal, it can be every bite. I couldn't fathom how the people who live in Japan didn't have food all over the front of their shirts and glop on their faces.

When we returned from the trip, we went straight to Lindsay and Nolan's house to pick up our dog, Kepler. Nolan's brothers and his mom came over to hang out, and I got to talk to his sister-in-law, Ayumi, about our trip to Japan. Being from Japan, she was very excited to hear what we thought of her home country. I asked immediately about this whole napkin issue.

Before she could answer, Nolan's mom, Teri (who went on the same Japan trip a year ago with UCLA), jumped in to answer. She said that they're just very neat eaters. She explained that Ayumi's children, unlike every child on earth, simply don't get food on their faces when they eat. I'm not going to call anyone out, but one of the other children with us had just eaten a peanut butter sandwich and had peanut butter from ear to ear because they ate it from the inside to avoid eating the crusts!

I was still so curious, I asked Ayumi to eat some of the noodles on her plate while I watched ... and sure enough, she somehow performed this act without any of the noodles whipping around and slapping her cheeks. It's an astonishing skill that I'll never learn.

I know I told you about this in a previous letter, but they put a GIANT head on beer in Japan. It's not that we just got unlucky a few times — on this menu, they show you how it will be served. I don't know if you're a beer drinker, but you either have to wait a long time for it to settle down, or take a GIANT sip to get through the foam ... but then I ask you, what would you use to wipe your face with when the foam gets all over your upper lip? It also means much of the carbonation has been taken out of the beer, so it would be flat.



Back to less heady topics (see what I did there with the beer and the bomb?) Did you know the Japanese don't put soy sauce on their rice? I was astonished to learn that. I think it's because soy sauce rinses off whatever it is that makes the rice sticky and easy to pick up, and then they'd get food on their faces?

They have soup with breakfast. We had a choice of US or Japanese breakfast, and while we're pretty adventurous at lunch and dinner, I just couldn't get myself to try soup for breakfast.

There are no hotel lobby bars, and breakfast is *a/ways* on the second floor. Why would every single hotel adopt that convention?

### **Sentiments toward Americans**

Years ago, I talked to my friend Jennifer (who is of Japanese descent and travels there often) about one of her recent trips. She had noted how often people started sentences with, "after the war". As she explained it to me, there is no animosity towards Americans for the dropping of the atomic bombs. I found that surprising because you would think scars like that would run very deep.

On our trip, I had the opportunity to ask EK one-on-one about how the Japanese could be so forgiving. He said the Japanese have a philosophy: " You flush it in the water". In other words, you let it go. I don't know if that was a satisfying answer, as we have similar sentiments here and I'm sure across the world, but the Japanese are a living example of it.

I didn't talk too much about what we learned going through the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, mostly because it is impossible to convey. But they did have a fair bit of information about how soldiers came in immediately to help with triaging those injured by the bomb. EK also talked about how the US very quickly started shipping in wheat because the rice fields were destroyed. I'm not sure if our rapid aid helped heal the wounds quickly after Japan surrendered, or if I'm living in my usual rose colored glasses world. My father was stationed in Okinawa during the war, and so I hear his thoughts in my head

as well. I guess it's good to think through these things, whether or not we come up with any answers.

## Luggage

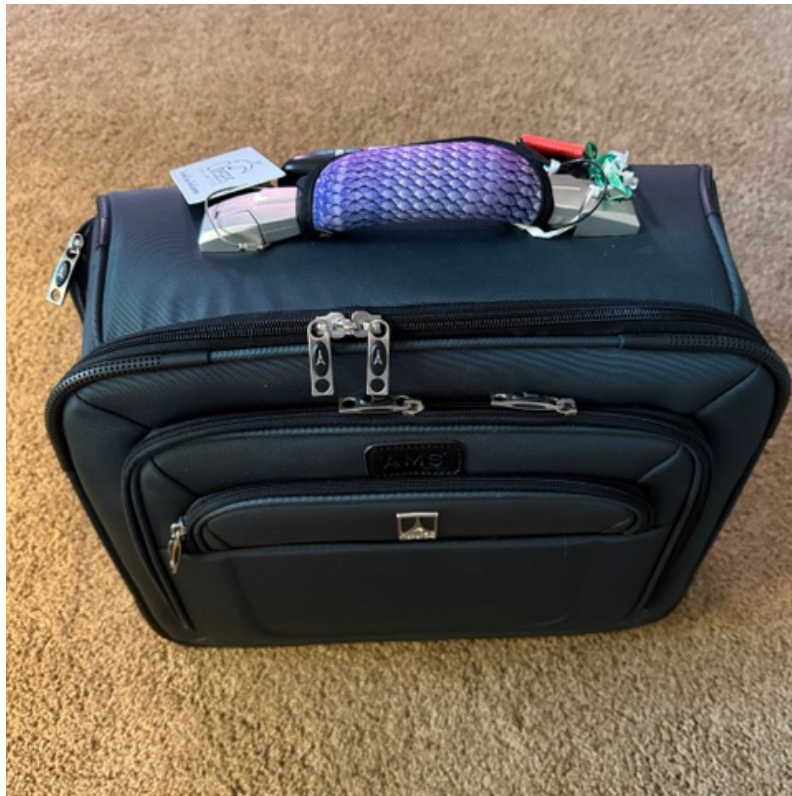
I do have one category topic, and that's about packing and luggage for a trip like this. Steve and I are classic overpackers. We like to have *options*. You should see how much we pack just to go to Lindsay and Nolan's for a weekend. When we went to Africa, we were restricted to a medium-sized duffle bag and we packed those things to the gills, and only wore about 60% of what we brought.

On this trip, we were bound and determined to pack light. That determination certainly didn't apply to our tech backpacks, as we brought the usual two 14" MacBook Pros, a 13" iPad, two iPhones, an Osmo camcorder, two 20,000 mAh batteries, and all of the cables and chargers that go with them.

But for clothes, we planned to do laundry, which I did NOT know was a thing you could do until we were on the cruise in Australia and Dr. Maryanne Garry taught me about it. That allowed us to carry far fewer clothes. I always think, "People will notice I've worn this shirt three times!" and yet I can never remember what anyone else was wearing. It was delightful to be able to pile our bags with souvenirs, with plenty of room to spare.

A challenge of this trip was that for the Ryokan Japanese Inn portion, and the entire Hiroshima part of the trip, we would travel by Shinkansen. Since you have to leap off and on that train, and there's no place to store it, you simply can't carry a large rolling piece of luggage.

While our bigger checked bags were 26" Briggs and Riley which are kind of a medium-sized suitcase. But the suitcase that has turned out to be invaluable on our extended trips is a very small suitcase made by Travel Pro. Externally they measure 15" x 16" x 9", for a total of 40", and the restriction was less than 43". These tiny suitcases have a pocket for a laptop (or a laptop *and* iPad in my case). If you're into volume, they're 32L bags.



They have long, easily retractable handles to allow you to roll them when you can, but to drop the handle and pick it up if you need to (or choose to in our Japan Travelogue 2025

case) walk up or down a flight of stairs. They also have a stretchable strap across the back that allows you to slide them onto the handles of a big suitcase, securely holding them on top. In a crowded airport, one four-wheeled suitcase is far more maneuverable than two rolling suitcases. The little ones only have two wheels, but that works well on such a tiny bag.

The handles for the little Travel Pros are on the inside of the bag, which does make it trickier to pack. I put cylindrical or narrow things in first to take up the space on either side of the handles, and then lay in the flat things.

These little bags fit underneath most airline seats (unless you're three across and you have the aisle seat. They fit very easily in the overhead compartments on planes, trains, and yes, automobiles, if they're buses. We put a change of clothes in them for the big flight over, just in case our checked baggage gets lost.

We found that between our backpacks and our tiny Travel Pro bags, we could easily live for two days away from our big luggage. I found a link to the bags we have in case you're interested. We *highly* recommend these bags for a long trip as an accessory to your main luggage. If you're a normal person, you may not need to carry a backpack too!

We brought one more type of bag along with us, and I was really glad to have it too. When we went to Palm Desert to hang out with Bill and Diane, they both had these super light, thin day packs when we went out for walks. As soon as we got home, I bought them for us too. They're the VenturePal Field Operation 35L. Since they're so thin and light, the VenturePal can fold up into one of its own pockets to make a very small package, maybe like an oversized travel Kleenex pack. At this small size, they were easy to drop into our under-packed checked luggage.

You might be wondering why we needed big luggage, small luggage, backpacks, *and* an auxiliary backpack. The problem this solves is a bag to carry on day adventures. I carry a very small purse with zero extra room, so rather than carry my giant backpack, I could stuff a down jacket or a rain jacket into the

VenturePal, along with my purse stuff, and a water bottle on the side. It was very light and easy to stuff anywhere on a bus, and it had room to carry souvenirs and my cloth for drying my hands (see no paper towels in bathrooms). Here's a link if you're interested:

## Traveling in Crowds

When you go on a tour with a lot of people, it's often hard to hear the guide. You pretty much have two choices. You can muscle your way up to the front and stay right with the guide, or you can lag back and enjoy looking around at things, but you'll miss a great deal of the information from the guide. EK used an audio system he called Whisper. He carried a transmitter with a wired lavalier mic attached to his collar, and all of us had little receiver boxes with wired headphones. We could hang back and take photos of things while EK wandered away and never miss a thing he said. If his transmission started to break up, you knew you were too far away and better hustle up closer to him. He also wore a bright red jacket, so we could always spot him in a crowd.



I'll close with one more observation. There are a LOT of people in Japan. I know that's common knowledge, but walking on the streets, into convenience stores, and especially navigating the train stations really gives you a feel for the dense population. And remember, this is from someone who lives in Los Angeles County!

To give you a numerical feel, Los Angeles County's population is around 10 million people. The greater Tokyo area is 37 million!

We were told to expect crowds at the tourist sites. Not only did we go during the cherry blossom season, which brings in a lot of tourists every year, but also Japan was one of the last countries to open up after COVID, so there's a lot of pent-up demand. All I know is that when we got home and I went to the grocery store, I was lonely.

We had a great trip, and I really hope you enjoyed traveling vicariously along with us.

Allison & Steve