

A First Trip to Japan 2009



by Stephen Mooney



Above: A street in Shinjuku district in Tokyo

Cover: Residential street in Kyoto

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Sensoji Temple in the Asakusa district of Tokyo

Introduction

This is a memoir of a trip that Chris (my wife), Ben (our younger son), and I took to Japan to visit Vic (our older son) and Hana (his Japanese friend and future wife). The sources for this memoir include 1,966 photographs taken by Chris, my sons, and myself during the trip, as well as a diary Chris had kept, and a systematic write-up I had composed during the week after we got home prompted by the photos I was sorting.

Unless otherwise noted all dates and times in this memoir are local times. All of Japan is in a time zone 9 hours ahead of GMT. Boise, Idaho is in a time zone 7 hours behind GMT. Boise observes daylight savings time, but Japan does not. During this trip Japan local time was 15 hours ahead of Boise local time, and sunrise was around 4:50 AM while sunset was around 6:40 PM.



Mount Fuji as seen from shinkansen approaching Tokyo



Tokyo street as seen from Ueno Park

Invitation

Vic had been living in Japan since 2004. In April of 2009, he got a good job in the city of Kashima in Ibaraki prefecture. By this time he had learned enough Japanese to travel anywhere and do anything in Japan. He also had a serious girlfriend, who was willing to move to Kashima, so he decided to rent a house instead of his usual apartment. When he invited us to come visit him, he pointed out that we would have a place to stay and a knowledgeable guide.

Kashima is a small town on the Pacific Ocean 67 miles northeast of Tokyo. It is on a long thin peninsula somewhat apart from the mainland. Kashima has a port and a steel mill, both of which were more active in the past than currently. There is no direct train service to Tokyo, which means that Kashima is not a suburb of Tokyo. It has its own character and is slower paced.

Getting ready

Chris and I started planning where to go and what to do. Vic got two weeks off in late July / early August during the Obon festival. Although it would be the height of the tourist season, it was also the only time he would have two weeks off work. So that determined the time. We decided to visit Tokyo, Kyoto, and Hiroshima. We bought a JR rail pass, which would allow us unlimited travel for a week on any of Japan's trains. Japan is a cash society, so we got several thousand dollars worth of Japanese Yen which we put in our money belts. We were assured our Visa card would work if the local business was set up to accept it.

We booked economy class flights from Boise through San Francisco to Narita airport near Tokyo. Vic sent us an e-mail with detailed directions on how to get to the Keisei bus counter at the Narita airport. He wrote down the Japanese for what we would need to say to get tickets to the "Suigou-Itako" bus station in Ibaraki. We were all set.

Thursday July 30

Departure



Because it was an international flight we were advised to get to the airport early, and we did. The very first thing we needed to do was show our passports to the baggage checker. Their computer told them they needed to call Washington D.C. about Ben's passport. The local airline employee became frustrated by the call, because the Feds seemed to treat the baggage clerk like one of their agents. After he showed his driver's license, and a description of Ben was relayed, the Feds lifted whatever flag they had, and we could check our bags. This took a while, and the wisdom of showing up early was validated. It seemed as though we needed to show our passports to every airline employee we encountered.

We left Boise Thursday, July 30, at 9:00 AM. When we arrived at San Francisco, we went to the international terminal, showed our passports to many more airline employees, and got on the flight to Narita. It was a 12 hour flight (against the jet stream). I hoped that meant the economy class seats would be somewhat larger than the ones used for domestic flights. How could they expect folks to sit so confined for 12 hours? Alas, the seats were just like any domestic flight and we sat confined for 12 hours.

Friday July 31

Arrival

We arrived at Narita airport on Friday, July 31, at 4:30 PM. This is not as bad as it seems, since we crossed the date line. In Boise time, we arrived Friday, July 31, at 1:30 AM, for an elapsed time of 16.5 hours from when we took off in Boise. In late July and early August in Tokyo, the sun rises around 4:50 AM and sets around 6:40 PM.

We were herded down long passageways past an infra-red body temperature sensor (health inspection). Fortunately there were toilets available in this passageway. We were in a zombie-like state when we got into the large immigration hall. It was very efficiently set up with people monitoring the progress of the various lines, and asking to see your passports and other forms to verify you had the proper documents for your interview with the immigration officer. That officer looked things over, stamped the passport and stapled a small ticket with an expiry date to the passport page. This was your visa, and you needed to keep it in the passport, and be able to show it to any official anywhere in Japan at any time for any reason. You especially needed to show it to the immigration official on your way out of Japan. There were immigration interviews for both arrivals and departures. This immigration process was very well organized, and took about a half hour altogether. After immigration we collected our baggage, and made our way to the main concourse.



We found the Keisei ticket counter and were able to buy tickets and find out where to catch the bus without too much trouble. The agent spoke very little English, but understood “Itako”. The bus ride was our introduction to Japan. Everything was so very green. Everything was so built up. We passed large office buildings, huge apartment buildings, and many small rice fields tucked away against hills with trees. We passed several large rice fields in the flatlands with a large house on one edge. We saw people and trucks out working in those fields.

After a 45 minute ride we arrived at the Suigou-Itako bus station, which was just off the freeway. It had a small lobby and ticket office and a large covered outside waiting area with rows of benches. There was a large parking lot across the road. This was obviously a park and ride for commuters to Tokyo. Ben figured out how the pay phone worked, and I called Vic. While we waited we watched the station operate. The place was very clean. People sat on the benches in order of arrival. People got on and off the busses quickly and efficiently. There was no crowding. The busses left quickly and the next one arrived like clockworks.



Vic drove up in a small compact car, a Suzuki. This was a company car he used to get to his various engagements in Kashima. Somehow we all fit into this car along with all of our luggage. It was a half hour drive to his house. Our first impression of the city was that of a 1950's small town. The roads were narrow, with lots of overhead power and telephone lines, and the business signs were small and somewhat subdued. There was a surprising amount of Roman letters and English in the business signs. The English was whimsical, or perhaps just bad.

Vic's House

Vic's house was in the middle of a short narrow street. Although many newer houses, especially in larger cities, are built on Western plans, his house was typical of most older houses, especially in smaller towns. There was no basement or central heating. It was wood frame with two stories. There were retractable hanging mats over the windows to block the view from the street. The front



door opened outwards. Right inside the front door there was a small tiled vestibule (Genkan) where you removed and stored your shoes. The rest of the ground floor rooms were on a level a step up from the genkan. No shoes are worn inside a Japanese house. This is a serious rule.



The ground floor had two rooms in front and a kitchen in back. These rooms were connected by large sliding doors that retracted into the walls. These doors were a light flimsy wooden framework of paper tiles. The top of these doorways were lower than I am tall, but higher than my eyes. I hit my forehead on door frames many times while I was there.

The front room on the right and the kitchen had hardwood floors. The other front room had tatami mats. Tatami mats are made of a woven straw. They are placed adjacent to each other to form a sort of wall to wall carpet. These mats are made in a standard size, thus Japanese rooms are built to standard sizes so that the tatami mats can be placed to cover the floor exactly. The size of a room is described by the number of mats needed to cover the floor.

The sink / laundry, toilet, and bath were in separate very small rooms. The toilet had no plumbing; there was a foot pedal which opened the bottom into a pit under the house. Sort of like an outhouse. You dump water from a cup into the toilet to rinse out the bowl. Once a month or so a service came around to pump out the pit, which was used as fertilizer. At least there was a western sit-down toilet instead of the traditional hole in the floor for squatting. The small window of the toilet room was always kept open, and the door was always kept closed. There was a pair of slippers outside the door to use when going in. Only these slippers ever touched the floor of that room.



The bath was an entirely different thing. This room was large and tiled to serve as a large shower area. A large deep tub was set against one wall. Bath time was traditionally in the evening. The tub was filled with hot water, and you showered with soap and rinsed off before getting into the tub to soak. Chris and I just showered in the morning and skipped the soak. The water came from a local well. There was a pump that automatically started when you opened a tap. The water heater was electric and had no tank. The water was heated in the pipe as it flowed to the tub or sink. Because it was not connected to the water mains, this house still had running water in the days after the massive 2011 Sendai earthquake.



The stairs to the second floor had a narrow tread, were very steep, and had no handrails. Upstairs there were two tatami rooms. One we used as our bedroom, the other was storage. There was no central heating or any window air conditioning unit. Windows were opened at night during summer. During winter it got very cold inside. There were various space heaters but they were expensive to run, so sweaters and thick clothing were the norm.

Finally to bed

This first night Hana made us a delicious dinner of three courses: noodles with mushroom & chicken, tofu with peppers & sauce, and fresh vegetable medley. Although they had western forks and spoons, we elected to learn to use chop sticks. We got to know Hana while we ate. After dinner and some more conversation, we went up to bed. We slept on a futon in the “6 mat Japanese room”. It’s where Vic and Hana usually sleep. We had been up and going since we left Boise. We slept on a thin futon on the floor with a rolled up towel for a micro-pillow. My body adjusted well, and I slept soundly all night. Travel to the West is easier on the body than to the East. No one suffered any jet lag. We all slept soundly and felt great Saturday morning.



Saturday August 01

Rice field

Hana had a pottery lesson in the morning, so she grabbed her bicycle and rode off. We had expressed interest in rice farms, so he drove us out to the countryside, which was not far away.



We parked and walked out on a path along the edge of a large field. It was near harvest time and the fields were staggeringly green. The plants grew over a yard tall with long narrow vertical leaves and stalks with lots of fat green kernels. The plants grew right up to the path, and so thickly that it was hard to see the ground, but you could see standing water. The field

was organized in large squares with narrow built up walkways on the edges. There were pump stations at several of the walkway intersections with irrigation pipes visible. We saw many large white cranes flying over and landing in the field. Very graceful. This field was bordered by the homes of the farmers and low hills which Vic said were ancient burial mounds. When we got back, Hana had returned. We ate lunch at a Japanese Italian Restaurant.

Shinto Shrine

After lunch we set out for the local Shinto shrine (Kashima Jingu). In earlier times this was the third most important shrine in Japan. It is located in a large wooded area near the old city center of Kashima. It is a one mile

walk from Vic's house. There is a small poorly marked eastern entrance to the site a half mile from his house. We entered there, and walked a footpath through dense dark woodland west towards the main entrance. There was a constant buzzing of cicadas in the trees. We passed a large famous stone with a carving of a god standing on top of a giant catfish. In the Japanese myths this catfish is the source of earthquakes. There are lots of minor earthquakes in Kashima. We felt two while



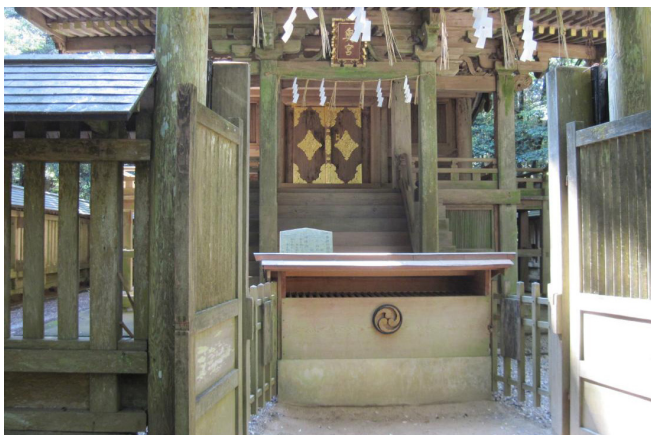
we were there, one of which went on for 30 seconds or so. Vic told us there is a quake in Kashima about once a week. When we reached the western entrance we walked out onto the streets of old Kashima, where there were many little shops catering to the people visiting the shrine. After some sight-

seeing we walked back to the western main entrance to the shrine.



This entrance has a very large gray Torii gate opening onto a very wide footpath. This pathway is used for parades, festivals and celebrations. Along the path there are many stone tablets with inscriptions, as well as very large old trees. Many of these trees have some of their branches shored up by poles. The site actually has two shrines. There is a new large shrine just off of the pathway near the western entrance that has several

smaller buildings around it. One of your choice inside. We walked along this pathway into the center of the site. The light was dim. The temperature was cooler than on the street. The view was green, beautiful, and peaceful. There were no noises from civilization, only the rhythmic thrum of the cicadas. Eventually we came to a small deer park. Deer are sacred in the Shinto religion. These deer were in a large enclosure. You could buy food to feed them from a concession stand, and the deer would come to the fence and take it from your hand. The second shrine is the current incarnation of the original ancient shrine in a small clearing in the middle of the woods.



We kept walking and finally came to the old original shrine. It is a small plain wooden structure. Many prayer papers were hung on strings nearby. From there we continued along the path until we came to the small Eastern entrance near Vic's house. This shrine has a hold on me, and I have made a point to visit it, walk in the woods, and

buy an amulet/charm every time I come to Japan. I keep the current amulet in my pocket whenever I leave my house.

Hana made us dinner which we ate sitting on the floor around the low wooden table. We were getting better at chopsticks. Vic washed the dishes, which he did kneeling on the floor because the sink is so low and he is so tall. This house and most others like it are built for much smaller people.

Sunday August 02

Brunch



We had a lazy morning and went out for brunch. We went to the popular “Yakinikuya”, a teppanyaki style restaurant. Vic’s car is very small and five people do not fit, so he had to make two trips to get us all there. As we entered, all of the staff sang out “irasshaimase” in spirited unison. This means “welcome”, and we heard this all over Japan during our visit. We were led to a large booth and given menus. The table had a small grill

at the center, which the hostess turned on. There also was a button at the edge of the table to summon the waiter, otherwise they leave you alone. We summoned the waiter and selected meats and vegetables which were sliced thin and delivered to our table in bowls. There were also bowls of a barbecue sauce. There were chopsticks, no knives, forks, or spoons. You placed portions of meat on the grill, cooked to your liking, dipped it in the sauce, and ate.

Restroom break

Chris had her first foreign adventure when she got up to use the restroom. The doors were only marked in Kanji, so she needed to wait until someone came out to know which was for women. The toilet had a heated seat and a control panel on the wall, but no flush lever on the tank. There were Kanji labels for the various buttons along with crude icons. Some of the buttons were for several bidet type functions, but she could not see how to flush. She needed to come out and ask someone (who did not speak English) how to flush the toilet. It turns out there are



two flush modes (large and small). Some of the buttons control the temperature of the seat and bidet water. Some of the buttons control the male / female aspects of the bidet. There is a dry control, and sound system to mask out any unseemly noises. A far cry from a hole in the floor squat, or a flap into a “honey pit” like at Vic’s house.

When we were done we summoned the waiter again for our bill. We paid cash and learned more customs. There is NO tipping in Japan. Not for waiters, taxi drivers, bell boys, nor barbers. All prices marked on menus or in stores represent the full after tax price. You pay what you see on the sticker. It is rude to hand cash directly to another person. It is placed on a tray.

Beach

After brunch we all went to the beach. The Oritsu beach is a long wide sandy beach on the Pacific about 1.5 miles North East from Vic’s house. We walked to the beach through a slice of northern Kashima. We walked on narrow roads past many houses similar to his, but also vacant lots being farmed (usually for cabbage). We saw no lawns, but many gardens.



The most interesting sight we walked by was the local Yakuza (similar to the Mafia) compound. It was a long low building built close to the street with a wall around it. There was a big black SUV type vehicle parked by the door, but we saw no people. About 400 yards before the beach, the road went down an incline to flat-lands. There was a very long thin concrete walkway bordering the back of the beach with stair steps along its seaward side down to the sand.



Oritsu is as good as any beach I saw in California, but there were no built up areas or concession stands near it. There was a small dirt parking lot that was not very full. There were lifeguard stations on the beach itself. The lifeguards wore yellow and red jackets that said “Surf Patrol” in English.

I was surprised that although this was a sunny day in August, there were few people on the beach by California standards. They were digging clams, body surfing, flying in paragliders towed by a speed boat. There were some surfers down the beach on the other side of a pier. Vic, Hana, and Ben had brought bathing suits and played in the water. Chris walked out on the sand. I stayed back and sat on the concrete steps. The surf patrol left at four PM.

Dinner

That evening Hana again made dinner: Miso soup (miso is soybean paste), salad, clams in mushrooms, sashimi (raw fish sliced very thin), and rice. There was a sauce in little shallow bowls that you could dip anything you wanted into. Vic said they eat like this all the time.



Tomorrow was the beginning of our excursion to Tokyo, Kyoto, and Hiroshima, so we all got a good night's sleep.

Monday August 03

To Tokyo



Up early and on to Tokyo. Since the train from Kashima does not go there directly, the best way is by bus. The closest place to catch the bus is on the street by city hall, about a one mile walk south. All five of us packed for a week's excursion and walked to the bus stop. The fare was 2,000 Yen (20 dollars) each.

The bus was very clean inside. There were large blue reclining seats with

lace headrests, a cup holder, a hook for your purse, and a rack above for luggage. It was a 65 mile, two hour ride to Tokyo. The ride was smooth. We saw lots of fields and rice paddies. When we got to Chiba, the scenery changed. Buildings, buildings, and more buildings. Similar to going through Culver City to Los Angeles. It was densely populated the rest of the way to Tokyo.

The bus route ends at the “Yaesu South” entrance to “Tokyo Station”. This is a very large transit station serving many subway lines, elevated train lines, the Shinkansen (bullet train) network, as well as many bus lines. Although “Tokyo Station” is its official name, that is misleading. Tokyo has more than five “downtowns” each served by a similar “central” station just as large. (I.e. Shinjuku, Shibuya, Yokohama, Ikebukuro). But “Tokyo station” is near the imperial palace, and is where the bus from Kashima stops.

Our arrival at the station was efficiently choreographed. There were many angled parking slots, one of which was assigned to our bus route. As the bus approached, that slot was empty or the current occupant was backing out for departure. Several traffic facilitators worked with the traffic lights, and so the incoming bus made the lane changes, turned into the staging area, and pulled into the assigned slot with minimal delays. We all got off, claimed our luggage, and entered the station.

Tokyo Station

Although I had been to Grand Central Terminal and Penn Station in Manhattan, I was not prepared for Tokyo Station. It is overwhelming. It is roughly two football fields wide, three football fields long, and several levels deep. The many pedestrian exits are located on the East and West periphery. It is hard to grasp the size of the place because it is a warren



broken up into many long branching corridors leading to many large and small halls that lead off to stairs, escalators, and the various train platforms. Most of these corridors, halls, (and all of the train platforms) are inside gated paid fare zones, but some of them are not. There are also many small restaurants and other shops both inside and outside the paid fare zones. By each of the street entrances there are ticket offices, rows of ticket vending machines, and a huge map covering most of a wall that shows the train and subway lines served by the station. This map shows all of the other stations reachable from this station along with the fare to get there. You can buy an electronic debit card type pass which you can keep adding money to, or a paper ticket worth the

fare for just one trip. You take the card or ticket to one of the gates to enter the paid fare zone. At your destination you will also need the same ticket to exit the paid zone in order to leave the station.

All subway, train, and shinkansen lines have their own color and a symbol (usually one or two Roman letters) for use in signage. There are a great many lines served by this station, so a great many colors. Sometimes different lines will share a platform. So, to catch a train you need to know which level, which hall, which platform, and which side of the platform to stand on (i.e. which direction you are going), as well as the line's color and symbol so you don't get on the wrong train. There are signs hanging from the ceiling of corridors, at stair wells, and at all corridor intersections. There is a large "you are here" map of the current level in most of the larger halls. The wise traveler will have a small compass to use when selecting which branching corridor to take, or which end of the platform to exit by upon arrival at their destination.

The environment at the station and in the train cars is cleanness. No dirt or litter on the floors, no graffiti on the walls. All of the people you see are clean and well dressed, and you do see a lot of people. There is a constant low buzz of human voices due to huge crowds of people moving rapidly in all directions. Most of these people seem to know exactly where



they are going, and they are in a hurry. Some are wearing face masks. There are no buskers or beggars. Both Vic and Hana had been through this station many times and knew exactly where to go. They taught us our first essential word of Japanese, viz. "sumimasen". It is what to say if you accidentally bump into another person. In this context it means "sorry". It is also how you approach a stranger to ask for directions, or say to a passing waiter to get their attention. In these contexts it means "excuse me".

Hana had lived in Tokyo for years and had selected the hotel we were staying at. We wanted the Yamanote line (olive green color) going to Ueno station. The Yamanote is one of the oldest and busiest train lines. It is one big loop that visits almost all of the major districts (and large transit terminals) in Tokyo. Ueno station is only four stops to the North in the counter clockwise direction.

Hotel



We arrived at our hotel, “Sutton Place”, after noon. It is a block and a half southeast of Ueno station’s Iriya exit. The entrance is in the back of a small opening off the street in the side of a large nondescript building. The hotel is identified only by a small plain sign set into the side wall of the opening. There is a small plain steel door in the back of the opening. This is for a small slow elevator, which we took to the lobby on the third floor.

Our rooms were ready, so we checked in and the clerk photocopied our passports. Chris, Ben, and I were in the “luxury” suite; Vic and Hana were in a regular room.

Our room had two bedrooms with two western style double beds in one, and one bed in the other. These rooms were just big enough to contain the beds. In the master bedroom there was a window with a ledge where you could set your wallet, keys, and perhaps a book or drink cup. The luggage took up a fair percentage of the floor space. The bathroom was relatively large by comparison. There was a high-tech toilet, a shower, a sink, and a tub for soaking in hot water.

Studio Ghibli Museum

Our first sight to see was Ghibli Museum. This is a very popular place, and Vic had bought tickets weeks before. Studio Ghibli is run by Hayao Miyazaki, who is sort of a Japanese Walt Disney because he makes animated feature films that are among the most popular films in Japan. “Princess Mononoke” is set 600 years ago and gives a look into the Japanese culture and Shinto religion of that time. “Spirited Away” is set in the present day and is saturated with the modern day Japanese culture. It won an Oscar in 2003.



The museum is about 13 miles west of our hotel in an “artsy crafty” neighborhood of Tokyo. It is not near any subway stations, so the trip out involved a subway ride followed by a bus ride. About five minutes into the trip I realized I had forgotten the tickets. Vic had given them to me, and I had put them in the wrong place. He and I got off at the next stop and went back to the hotel. The others continued on. We caught up with them at the museum forty five minutes late. Fortunately, the tickets were still good.

Hana went off to meet old friends and visit art stores. The rest of us toured the museum. It is for children, with crawling spaces, ramps, and staircases. There is a model of Miyazaki’s studio and lots of hands-on exhibits. We watched some short animations, and bought some fuzzy trinket souvenirs based on popular characters. These are as hard to come-by as official Mickey Mouse souvenirs. You are not allowed to take photos inside, but we got some outside shots.



After the museum we walked around on the nearby streets, and went into several stores to look at electronic gadgets. We met Hana at the train station and arrived back at the hotel at dusk.

Ameyoko



After a short rest and wash-up, we went out onto the Tokyo streets near the Ueno station with Hana as our guide. We started out in the dusk, but she assured us that the parks and streets in general were perfectly safe. She took us on quite a journey, but I could not really see anything because of the dark. We ended up south of the park and went into the bright lights of the Ameyoko market just south of Ueno station. It is partially under the elevated train tracks of the Yamanote line. All sorts of savory and unsavory things are for sale there. There are love hotels, bars, pachinko parlors, trinket stalls, electronics stores, and food stalls. This place is the descendant of a large black market that started during the American occupation just after World War II.

The place was jam-packed with all sorts of people. There were many large and small neon lights. Hana found a small restaurant serving on outside tables set directly under the tracks. The five of us found a table we could all sit at along with a few strangers. Vic and Hana ordered. We ate in the cooling August heat amid the noisy crowd and the occasional train above. After dinner we went strolling on the streets looking for dessert. I found a display of good looking bread buns and bought one. The bread was great, but there was some tough rubbery meat in the center.

Vic and Hana laughed. The sign clearly said “Octopus Buns”, but it was in Japanese. I looked at the bun and could clearly see the remains of small tentacles with tiny suckers. I looked at Vic and Hana, and then gulped the rest down. I think I won several points for being a brave fellow.

Tuesday August 04

Ueno Park

Hana had studied art near here and knew her way around, so she was our guide. We set out for Ueno Park. This park is on Ueno hill just behind the north-east side of Ueno station. A block and a half west of the hotel there is a long switchback pedestrian ramp going up to a bend in a roadway bridge east of Ueno station that comes off of Ueno hill and (after the bend) descends to street level. This bridge spans 20 tracks that go through or past Ueno station. Walking along this bridge is fun because there is always some train arriving or departing on one of the tracks. Once you get to the hill, you are only a block from the south east-entrance to the park.





The park is large (133 acres) with many different attractions. There are museums at one end, several shrines, several playgrounds for children, an excellent zoo, several small cheap restaurants, a large pond, and an elaborate fountain, all set amid many trees and lawns connected by many footpaths. The park is used for many festivals and exhibits that setup with tents on its open

spaces throughout the year. It is most famous for its cherry blossoms, although we have never been there during that season.

We went through the park to the Northwest corner and out onto the streets.

The Streets of Tokyo

The sidewalks are crowded with both pedestrians and bicyclists. Pedestrians mostly try to keep to the left of the sidewalk (cars drive on the left side in Japan). You often see a pedestrian wearing a face mask. They are either wary of germs, or they have a cold they do not want to spread. We were there in August, and saw many pedestrians use umbrellas to ward off the sun.

The streets are too busy and narrow for a bike, so cyclists use the sidewalks and ring their bell. The bike riders are all sorts of people: Students; Moms with a kid riding on the back and groceries in the front basket; Businessmen with briefcases in the front basket. Even though the sidewalks are crowded, it seemed the pedestrians and bicyclists got along and dodged each other in good humor. Even so, we did see several bike accidents while we were there. There are bike racks outside most buildings, and they are often full. We saw an official looking yellow pickup truck with hazard lights and a jumble of 10 or so bikes piled in the back. Vic told us it



was a police truck taking illegally parked bikes to the impound.

Chris became infatuated with the many manhole covers in the sidewalks. They had many different decorative, whimsical designs cast into their tops



that related to their purpose (e.g. fire fighting, water main, electrical, etc.). Some even had colored accents on the designs. She started a photo collection of the many different designs.



We were surprised by how many vending machines there were on the streets. These machines vended cigarettes, juice, green tea, coffee, energy drinks, and even alcohol in bottles and cans. The brand names were wild (e.g. Pocari Sweat, Amino-Value, Boss Coffee), and the prices were low. The sodas had hardly any sugar, very little carbonation, and were excellent thirst quenchers. My favorite was “Dakara”, which was sort of like Gatorade except it had only a hint of sweetness, and a very weak flavor.

We never saw a beggar on any street. We saw the tarps, bed-rolls, and carts used by homeless people lined up neatly in the street by the entrance to Ueno Park, but got the impression that these were used at night, and that permanent encampments were not permitted. Although there were almost

no trash cans to be seen on the streets, all of the streets and sidewalks we walked on were clean and litter free.

The environment was bright skies and the humid heat of August accompanied by the constant singing of the cicadas.

Temple

We first went to a Buddhist temple sited at the top of a wide stairway in the back of a courtyard. The front door was open and although it was dark inside, you could see glints of gold objects in the back of the room. Before going up the stairs you need to perform a cleansing ritual. It involves washing your hands and taking a sip of water at a temizuya station in the courtyard. Hana guided us through the steps of the cleansing. She says that although most Japanese are not very religious, many perform Shinto rites for births and weddings, and Buddhist rites for funerals.



We went into the temple. There is a low barrier with a step to kneel on near the door. Behind it is a great dark room with many golden objects, statues, and candles. She knelt on the step, placed a coin into an offering box, clapped her hands, then after a while she rang a bell and got up. The rest of us tried to not act like tourists. We stood quietly.

Other attractions

From there we walked northward to a gated graveyard for those samurai loyal to the Tokugawas that were killed on Ueno hill in the last battle that overthrew the Tokogawas and started the Meiji era in Japan. Hana went to talk to a person just inside the gate and came back to tell us that this was a holy place closed to tourists.

We wandered northward a little more and found the “International Library of

Children's Literature". Hana had illustrated children's books, and so had an interest in this library. We were able to go inside where we found "Goodnight Moon" which we raved about to her.

Tokyo National Museum

We made our way back to Ueno Park and the "Tokyo National Museum". Inside were many galleries displaying many aspects of Japan's history and culture going back thousands of years. We split up, and spent some time here. I was most fascinated by the pottery and woodblock print exhibits.



Split Up



After lunch we split up. Vic went to a book store near studio Ghibli. Ben took the Yamanote line south in search of the large electronics gadget markets in the Akihabara district, and Hana took Chris to a fabric store she knew of in "Nippori Fabric Town". I went along but stayed out of their way. They found the store and spent about an hour inside while I wandered around in the heat listening to the cicadas. When they came out we all wandered down "Fabric Street" past many sewing supply shops.

One of the larger ones was called "Tomato".

In the late afternoon we all met up again at the hotel and rested till it was time for dinner. We went out in the dark to a restaurant Hana knew near Ueno Park.

Wednesday August 05

After breakfast Hana took off for Kashima. We were on our own. Vic was worried about his Japanese being good enough for the trip ahead, but projected confidence to the rest of us

More sightseeing in Ueno

We had a continental breakfast at the hotel. There was no point in getting to Kyoto before hotel check-in time, so we went sightseeing in Ueno Park. Our first stop was the Natural History museum. There is a life-sized model of a blue whale outside the entrance that is held up by several steel poles.



Our next stop was the art museum. Admission was expensive, so we went to a free calligraphy exhibit. These were prize winning entries from an annual



contest. We spent a lot of time looking at the various styles, and trying to see what distinguished a first prize from an also-ran. We then walked back to the Ameyoko market to see what it looked like in the daylight. It was still busy, and we walked around and bought some small souvenirs.

Around noon we took the Yamanote line back to Tokyo station to catch the Shinkansen (bullet train) to Kyoto.

Shinkansen

Tickets for the shinkansen are like airline tickets, and cost about the same as an airline trip of the same distance. Like an airline, there are different classes of service and prices. The shinkansen trains run on time almost all the time. They run the same routes multiple times a day, so the next one to any destination is no more than an hour away, for some routes a half hour. This means that you do not need to book in advance, just show up and go. The older lines can run up to 200 MPH, but usually around 190 MPH. The newer lines can go faster. They serve the same large central mass transit terminals that serve all local commuter trains, subways, and busses. Unless you are going from one tip of Japan to another, this means that getting from point "A" in one city to point "B" in another city is faster by shinkansen than by flying. Especially if you take into account that you do not need to: go through airports at the edge of town; go through slow security checks; make



advanced bookings; work around limited schedules; pay change fees; pay for excess luggage; or endure the delays and cancellations of air travel.

We went into the JR ticket office, showed our passports and visas, and then bought economy class tickets for the next train to Kyoto. The ticket was for a specific seat in a specific car on that specific train. The platform for the shinkansen trains is in a special

hall with its own fare gate. We got to the platform about a half hour prior to departure. There was no security shakedown involved.

The platform was marked by slots with numbers. Each slot corresponded to a specific door on a specific car. As the time approached, a JR agent was making sure that people were lined up in the proper slot for their car. When the train pulled in, the doors immediately opened, and passengers immediately got off with all of their luggage. A conductor inside the train had already gotten the departing passengers to collect their luggage, and line up by an exit door prior to arrival, so there was no delay. After the last person got off, we all got on, put the luggage in a compartment by the door or in the overhead bin, found our seat, and the train departed. The train was stopped for less than five minutes. No exaggeration.



Even though we were in economy class, the seats were wide and there was plenty of leg room. The train stopped twice before it got out of Tokyo, then took off. It was smooth. No lurching from side to side. No clatter due to gaps in the tracks. There was a tremendous sense of speed because we were so low to the ground. Every once in a while we would pass another shinkansen going the other way on the next track. That was a difference in speed of about 400 MPH only a few yards away. In that case there was a very noticeable lurch to the side until the trains had passed each other.

The secret to the high speed was that the tracks seldom went around obstacles; they went through or over them. There were tunnels into hills and mountains, and bridges over valleys. These were all aligned with the tracks,

so there was no need to slow down on approach. The scenery was spectacular. We made a few stops (I remember Kobe), but each stop was for no more than five minutes. The stops served to educate us all on the proper protocol for getting off the train.



There was a constant patrol through the car by uniformed conductors. They would slowly walk down the aisle. The first time through they would check your ticket. When they got to the other end of the car they would turn around and face the passengers and bow, then go on to the next car. There was no expectation that you needed to stay in your seat, but there was an expectation you would not make a mess, not leave

litter, or make loud noises. Every so often another uniformed person would come by pushing a cart with food and drink for sale. About two hours later we were at the central Kyoto station.

Kyoto

Kyoto was one of the few large Japanese cities that was not bombed during World War II, so all of the old structures and street layouts survived and have evolved incrementally. Kyoto was also the capital of medieval Japan and location of the emperor's court before they moved to Edo/Tokyo (at different times). As such there are many old Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Kyoto is surrounded by hills, and the Kamo River runs through it.

We got into central Kyoto station in the afternoon, had lunch, and then went to the "Urban Hotel Kyoto". This was two miles south of the transit station, so we took a bus. At arrival we had our passports photocopied, and checked into our room. We looked over the pamphlets for local attractions and went out to visit close by shrines on foot.



Shrines

That first afternoon we walked to many shrines near the hotel. Although many small shrines were closed because it was after five o'clock we enjoyed walking in the narrow tree lined streets past the old traditional wooden houses and their gardens. We went north onto larger streets and found several larger shrines that were open. The most memorable was the Fushimi Inari Taisha shrine. This is famous for having hundreds of traditional red torii gates set up to form covered pathways. Over the years each gate was privately funded as someone's prayer offering.



Thursday August 06



Water District

We started our day by taking a subway northward. Vic had visited Kyoto several times and wanted to show us some of his favorite places in the "water district". This is near the Kamo River. Unfortunately, these places only really get going in the evening. As we were walking we saw a demonstration in the street ahead. August 6th is the anniversary of the atomic

bombing of Hiroshima, and this demonstration was connected to that. Vic thought it wise to do a U-turn and explore other areas. As we walked we saw several booths set up selling origami figures to raise funds for world peace. I bought an origami crane.

Kiyomizu-Dera



Across the river were large wooded hills with many shrines and temples. We walked the pathways and briefly visited several, but our favorite by far was the Kiyomizu-Dera Temple. There are several buildings with wide porches built high up into the hillside overlooking several beautiful vistas of the woods that cover the surrounding hills and valleys. This temple is famous for the views. Vic told us that George Lucas used this place as an

inspiration for the Ewok village in one of the Star Wars movies.

This temple is also famous for the magical abilities of the water in a nearby stream to grant wishes if you drink it. There is a platform built underneath three spillway pipes into which a portion of the stream is diverted: one each for “health”, “wealth”, or “wisdom”. You are supposed to drink the water from only one of the three streams. On the platform there are long handled cups that you can use to reach out and catch some of the water from the stream of your choice, but I was not able to find out which stream corresponded to “health”, “wealth”, or “wisdom”. There was a fairly long line to go onto the platform, but we all decided a little magic would not hurt. I stood in line, caught some water and took a drink.



Arts and Crafts Market

After that we walked down hill towards Kyoto and found ourselves in a warren of small narrow streets of many small shops. There were restaurants and shops selling various arts and crafts. There were also people in traditional Edo era garb (kimono, rickshaw puller, etc.) going up and down these streets to promote an exotic atmosphere. We did some serious window shopping and

saw many unusual things. Because Hana was studying pottery, we decided to buy her a set of hand crafted serving plates as a thank-you gift. We had them packaged and shipped to the house in Kashima.

Kuro Neko

The shop had a large sign at their counter advertizing their ability to wrap and ship your purchases anywhere. We instantly knew what this sign meant, because we had often seen it on the sides and doors of delivery vans every day since we got to Japan. It is a yellow oval with a simple cartoon-like image of a black cat walking and holding a small black kitten in her mouth. There is no firm name, just the logo. The simple drawing and proportions give off a comfortable, confident aura. Everyone calls the company “kuro neko”, which means “black cat”. The actual name of the company is “Yamato Transport”. Later, we tried very hard to get some towel, apron, coffee cup, or poster with this logo on it, but failed.



Teramachi-Dori

We continued down the hill and got back to Kyoto. We took a bus towards “Teramachi-Dori”, a place that promised to have fabric stores. Before we went there, we had a late lunch at a McDonalds. The signage on the outside looked like McDonalds, and the staff uniforms looked like McDonalds, but not much else was like the McDonalds we knew.



Teramachi-Dori is several streets of shops turned into a sort of outdoor mall by the installation of a translucent roof over the entire length of each street. There were a wide variety of items for sale, as well as various art works on display. After we were done window shopping we noticed we were very close to the southern entrance to the imperial palace grounds.

Imperial Palace Grounds



Tickets to tour the imperial palace must be purchased weeks or months in advance, and we did not have any. We settled for just walking around on the grounds. The part we saw was a sterile place. It looked like the parade grounds of a military base. There were living quarters that could have been high-end barracks, but were probably not. We had been walking around up and down hills since morning, and we all suddenly realized we were beat.

We caught a bus going south back to our hotel.

Okonomiyaki

After some rest and recuperation we went out for a late dinner. We went to a okonomiyaki restaurant. Vic says this food is a specialty of the region. It is a cross between a pancake and a pizza, and is cooked on a grill set into the center of your table. You can select from many different vegetables and meats. We ordered a standard mix, but hold the squid.

When we got back to the hotel Vic had a voice-mail from Hana asking that we delay our arrival back in Kashima by one day to Sunday evening. She had some of her friends come to Kashima, and they were house guests. We decided to make an overnight stop in Osaka after we left Hiroshima.



Friday August 07

We got up late. The first thing we did was find a coin-op computer in the hotel lobby that was hooked to the internet. Vic got on and looked for a hotel in Osaka. The web sites were all in Japanese, but he was able to find a place. We set up a reservation using its web page, which meant I had to enter my credit card details into this strange web site. I was worried, but it all turned out OK. I give points to Vic for rising to the occasion.

We checked out of the Kyoto hotel and took the shinkansen to Hiroshima. We arrived around noon, ate lunch, and checked into our hotel. The “Hiroshima Ekimae Green Hotel” was another place where the rooms were very small, but it was near the train station, and about 1.5 miles from the Peace Park and museum.

Walk to Peace Park

We set out for the Peace Park in the early afternoon. This was the first non-overcast day since we arrived. Although the blue sky made us all feel cheerful, it was even hotter than yesterday. Everyone walked around with a handkerchief in their pocket. They used it to wipe the sweat from their face. I did the same. Many folks carried an umbrella against the sun, but I relied on my wide brim hat.



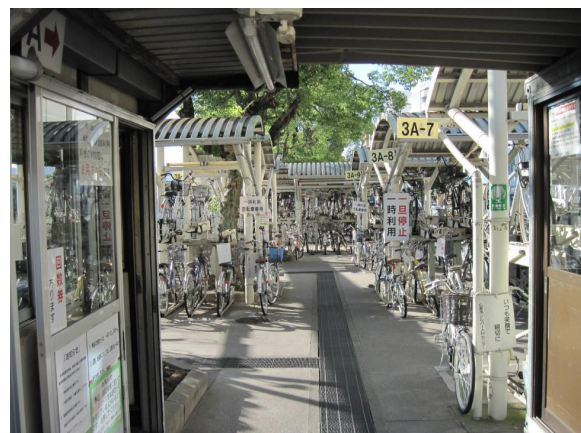
We were walking through a downtown area much like downtown Tokyo. All streets, sidewalks, buildings, and subways were modern. The streets were wider. Only afterwards did I realize the obvious: everything here was built from scratch after 1945.

On our way to Peace Park we walked on a major commercial street similar to Teramachi-Dori in Kyoto that was covered over for many blocks. This is

a way to turn downtown shops into a mall. The A/C from all of the shops lowered the temperature on the street.

One of the shops was a Bernina dealership. Chris went in even though she did not know any Japanese. Vic went in and explained that his mother sold these types of machines in the States. The store manager was a good sport and let us take his picture with her.

Like Tokyo, every one rides a bike on the sidewalks, but here we saw the next level: A bicycle park-and-ride. Next to a subway stop there was a large covered area with a hundred or more parked bicycles and small motor scooters.



Peace Park

We were in Hiroshima on August 7th, one day after the anniversary date of the bombing. There were many monuments scattered throughout the park which had been made ready for the previous day's ceremonies. It was easy to get emotional reading the various messages on the monuments, but the most emotional place for me was the center of the Aioi Bridge to the north of the park. This was the aiming point for the bomb. From there you can see the skeleton of the famous "Atomic Bomb Dome" of the old Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall.



At the south end of the park was the Peace Memorial Museum. The most powerful exhibit for me consisted of two tables each with a scale model of the city. The first table had a "before" model showing all of the buildings, streets, and bridges. The second table had the "after" model with a large bright orange plastic ball suspended over the city at the location and height of the explosion. The model on the table showed the state of the city after the blast and fire.



There was also a big exhibit of photographs illustrating the history leading up to World War II and the bombing. The labels and commentary were in both Japanese and English. I was surprised that the point of view was very balanced (from an American point of view), and at the critical tenor taken towards Japan's government and military of the 1930's and 1940's. The message seemed to be: "Look what happens when you start a war".

Back to the Hotel

We walked back to the hotel at the end of the day. The hotel had robes to put on after you washed all the sweat off and soaked in the tub. They are called Yukata, and are a light, short cotton kimono with a long cloth belt. They were comfortable, relaxing, and cool.

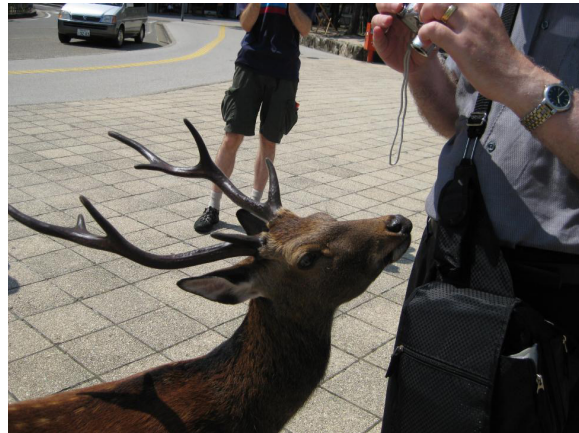
Saturday August 08

The hotel provided breakfast. We ordered the “Western” breakfast: ham, eggs, and toast. The ham was a slice of deli ham, the egg was hard boiled, and the toast was good. Checkout time was 10 AM, so we left our luggage at the desk and walked to the train station.

Miyajima

We took a train down to the docks, where we caught a ferry to Miyajima Island in Hiroshima bay. There is an old Shinto shrine that Vic wanted to visit that was built on the island extending into the bay. At high tide it looked like the shrine was built on the water. This island attracts lots of mostly Japanese tourists. The crossing took about a half hour.

After we got off the ferry we were confronted by deer. These deer are sacred to the Shinto religion, and are allowed to roam freely over the island. They are wild, but have no problem approaching people looking for treats to eat. One pulled a paper map out of Vic’s back pocket and started chewing. There is a waterfront park by the ferry terminal.



There is a huge torii gate rising from the water in the bay near this park. Several outfits operate small boat excursions out to the gate and back. They use canoe like boats operated by a guide with a long pole at each end. About ten tourists get in and put on conical straw coolie hats and off they go. Vic, Ben, and I decided to go out on this excursion. Vic got lots of up

close photos of the torii and the Shinto shrine on the shore behind it.



After the boat excursion, we walked around the park and ended up at a street of shops. This street was shaded by many canvas awnings hung from the roofs on each side to form a sort of ceiling. We bought a few souvenirs and found a steamed bun stand where we bought lunch. It was good. They had small benches with mats on them to sit on. Across the walk was a lady making shaved ice. She had a blade attached to a wheel

(think sewing machine) she was turning it, and it shaved pieces off a big chunk of ice.

We reversed our trip back to Hiroshima, picked up our luggage, walked a few blocks to the train station, and bought shinkansen tickets to Osaka. An hour later we boarded, and an hour and a half after that we were in downtown Osaka by 4:25 PM.

Taxi Adventure

Our hotel was the “Weekly Mansion Osaka at Otemae”, which was near Osaka castle, but several miles from the train station. Vic had copied down the hotel and street name from the web site, but we had no idea how to get there. We decided to splurge on a taxi. Vic showed his notes to the taxi driver who said he knew where it was, but he didn’t. He pulled away from the curb, went fifty feet, then stopped and got on his cell phone. Once he started out, he jabbered with Vic all the way there. Finally, he said “OK, we are here”. We were not. Vic told us to stay in the taxi, and he got out and ran to a nearby 7/11 store to ask directions. The cab driver got out and asked a person on the street for directions. It turned out that the hotel was about two blocks away. The hotel was really set up for weekly stays. The rooms were large, and contained a small fully equipped kitchen. We were in heaven.



Dinner with English

Vic asked at the desk about restaurants. He likes Indian food, so we went looking for an Indian place nearby. We had a hard time because it was dusk, the streets were narrow, and it was hard to tell which doorway was a restaurant. When we finally found it, it turned out to be upstairs and looked like someone's home. We were the only customers. The owner was Indian and spoke great English. Near the end of the meal he sat with us briefly, mostly to just speak English with Americans. He used to work in California for a Japanese company. He had lived in Japan for 35 years and had a Japanese wife. Their two kids were in America. His wife helped in the kitchen and ran the cash register. She said nothing, but she cracked a smile when we pulled out a 10,000 yen note to pay for dinner. The meal was great and I discovered "Kirin" beer. By the time we were done it was fully dark.

We walked the few blocks to Osaka Castle. Vic wanted to take pictures of it lit up at night. The gardens surrounding the castle were beautiful. We took lots of pictures.



Sunday August 09

This day it rained. Not a downpour, but an on and off drizzle. The rain was from the remnants of a typhoon that had hit Taiwan hard. We ate breakfast at a "Starbucks like" cafe. Hot tea and a scone. Checkout was at 10 AM, so we left our luggage at the desk and went out. There were umbrellas to borrow in a stand in front of the hotel, so we each grabbed one and walked to Osaka Castle again.



Osaka Castle

Osaka is the second largest city in Japan, but we only had time to see the castle. The castle was originally built in the 1500's, and then rebuilt several times. It was destroyed in the civil war of the 1860's, and was rebuilt as a museum. There are eight floors of exhibits. The exhibits were of

outstanding quality. Some were like the ones in the National Museum in Tokyo, but others were larger and more elaborate. On the top floor there was a promenade where we could see the buildings in downtown Osaka. The most memorable was the Osaka NHK Broadcasting Center with its large spherical entry hall. We all enjoyed our time at the castle.

Homeward Bound

In the early afternoon we returned our umbrellas, picked up our luggage, and got on the shinkansen to Tokyo. After taking the bus from Tokyo, we arrived back in Kashima around 8:00 PM

Monday August 10

Vegetables

Hana's retired father lives in Kanagawa prefecture (near Mount Fuji) and owns a small plot of land nearby that he farmed for vegetables. He had come to Kashima and set up a vegetable garden in the front yard when his daughter and Vic moved into the house. She used these vegetables in the dinners she made. On the day we returned from our tour, she had received a large box full of vegetables from her father's plot. There were outstanding tomatoes, some water melons, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, and several others I had never seen before.



She made tomato sauce out of the broken tomatoes in the shipment; the rest became ingredients in the meals she made throughout the rest of the week.

Laundry

Almost no one in Japan has a clothes dryer. Everywhere we went, whether by walking, bus, train, or shinkansen, we saw laundry hanging out to dry in yards, from second story windows, or from balconies in high-rises. I wondered what they did when the wind took a pair of pants or shirt off a line strung out in a 17th story balcony.

Vic and Hana have a small washing machine that conserves water, so they did a small load of laundry on most days and hung it out to dry on a line in a second story balcony. We had brought back lots of funky clothes from our tour, so laundry was a prime goal for the day.

Unfortunately, the typhoon caused drenching rain in Kashima on this day, and you can't dry clothes in the rain. So, Chris said it was time for a trip to the Laundromat. Hana had never been to a Laundromat, so Chris showed her how it was done. After an hour or so all laundry was done and dry.



A day of rest

Other than laundry, we did not do much more than recover from our tour. There was a small (3.0) earthquake. Chris was in the kitchen pouring water and felt the floor shift back and forth for 30 seconds. This was the biggest of several earthquakes we felt on this trip. Most do not last for more than five seconds or so. We all thought that a long history of many small quakes would lessen the chance of a very large one.

Dishes

Japanese dining uses up lots of dishes. Medium sized bowls for the rice and soup serving. Smaller shallow bowls for dips. Large bowls or platters for a communal entree. A smallish dish for each setting. Sometimes each setting

had a dish for each entree and there was no communal platter to serve from. There were chopsticks for each serving, but no Western silverware except perhaps a spoon. This generated a lot of dishes to wash, especially with a table set for five.



I usually volunteered to do dishes, and sometimes Hana took me up on it. The first step was to press the button to turn on the tank-less hot water heat-



er mounted outside the house. They kept the water heater off except for bath time and dishes. Actually, they often washed the dishes in cold water to save on the electricity bill.

There is no in-sink garbage disposal. Large chunks were swept into the incinerate canister. They have a pack of fine mesh cloth filters mounted on circular frames which fit into the sink drain. I did the dishes with an open

(filtered) drain and a trickle of water using soap sparingly. When done, debris from the filter was emptied into the incinerate canister.

Recycling

The recycle system was complex, and most Japanese go to the trouble to follow all of the rules. At least Vic and Hana do. There are six separate canisters for: Incinerable trash (including garbage and small pieces of paper), newsprint, cardboard, plastic, aluminum cans, and glass. All food containers are rinsed out before they are put into the proper bin.

There is no curbside trash collection. On a designated day of the week the incinerable trash was taken out to a designated spot (usually a vacant lot which could be up to a block away), to be picked up. It is bad form to dump the trash on the wrong day or after it had already been collected. The other recyclable items are taken as needed to a recycle depot and placed into the proper large bins. Our nearest recycle depot is under the veranda of the Sunport grocery store

Tuesday August 11

In the morning Hana taught Chris how to weave a coaster from strips of wide, thin paper. I sat around and read magazines.

A walk in the neighborhood



During these days of rest Chris and I often went for walks in the neighborhood. The first thing we realized is that the streets had no names or numbers. There were no street signs. The houses sometimes had a name on a plaque, but I did not see any house numbers. I later found out that blocks are numbered, not streets; and houses are numbered in the order they are built on their block, not in relation to their street. We needed to rely on

landmarks to know where we were and how to get back home. We both had compasses and kept track of which way we were going. We would sometimes turn around and look for landmarks that would mark the way back.

Some of the streets were very narrow to the point that cars needed to wait turns to pass through the constricted area. There were no sidewalks or curbs in the residential areas. The street was at the same level as the yards, but there was a slight depression or gutter along the sides of the street. Sometimes the gutter was an actual channel with a concrete or iron grate as a cover.

Often houses, trees, or bushes were near the edge of the yard and obstructed the view down a cross street. The solution was a system of large circular mirrors mounted high up on tall poles set at an angle so a driver or pedestrian could look down the intersecting street for on-coming traffic. The mirror was slightly convex for a wider field of view.



As we walked we did not see any lawns, but we did see many gardens. The houses varied in size and construction: some were wood frame like Vic's and some were brick; some were smaller than his and some were larger. It was a mixed neighborhood in terms of affluence.

There were also many vacant lots. Some were being farmed, usually for cabbage. Some were massively overgrown with green vines that I thought was

poison ivy, because they had three leaves in clusters. Vic said it was “kuzu”, or “kudzu”. We also saw some lots full of scrawny weeds with old appliances dumped to rust. One major landmark for us was a lot piled high with used tires. When we saw that, we knew home was only a few blocks to the north.



As we walked we would see bicyclists and pedestrians. We would wave and say “Ohayo” or “ohayo gozaimasu”. (Good morning) and people would smile and reply “ohayo”.

Wednesday August 12

Early in our stay Chris had made Tacos (one of Vic’s favorite meals) with spice mix and taco shells she had brought from Boise. A little Mexican cooking for Vic and Hana. They said they liked it.

I made chili for dinner from the tomato sauce that Hana had made on Monday. She asked the manager of a local Indian restaurant for chili powder, and they gave her some. The rest of the ingredients and spices we got at the local grocery store.

Grocery Store

Chris and I went to the Sunport grocery store with Vic and Hana. We had to wait till 10:00 AM because the store did not open until then. Many retail stores in Japan do not open till 10:00 AM. This store served a fairly large area and was of medium size, near city hall about one mile south of the house.

The shopping carts were outside under a veranda. The carts were smaller than I was used to, and consisted of two parts. There was a metal cart with wheels, a lower platform at wheel level, and a raised platform about waist high. There was also a push handle much like American carts, but there was no basket. Instead there were separate plastic baskets that



fit snugly on the upper platform. A second basket (or 10 kilogram bag of rice) would fit on the lower platform. These baskets were about 21 by 17 inches in size, and 14 inches high. They had a folding handle on top, and came in two colors: blue and red. The blue ones were stacked up by the carts, so we picked one, put it on a cart and went in.



The first section was produce. I did not recognize most of what was displayed, but what I did recognize was more expensive than in America. We needed bread, cereal, milk, and orange juice for breakfast. A careful search located the bread, milk, and orange juice. The bread was sold in packaging I was familiar with, except the selection was limited to a few brands of soft white bread, and the loaves were smaller. The milk carton had a picture of a cow, and the orange juice had a picture of an orange, so no problem. The cereal came in cellophane bags with pictures of the product on the side. The brand selection was limited and the package sizes were all smaller than in America. The rice section was hard to miss as it took up a whole corner. There were many different brands and types. The bags seemed to be color coded, and came in sizes up to 10 kilograms or more. Most “dry goods” came in cellophane bags. I did not see many boxes, or many glass containers. For instance, all beer was sold in cans.



I needed a pound of lean ground beef for my chili, so I found the meat department. This was composed of two sections. One was a familiar refrigerated case with shelves of packaged meat, the other was a large table holding whole unprocessed fish laid out like ears of corn. They were all silvery and about one to two feet long. I do not know enough about fish to know what kind of fish they were, or

even if there were more than one type on display. I was distracted by their eyes. In the refrigerated case the packaged meat was difficult to deal with because you needed to read the label to know what was what, and I did not know the symbol for beef. It turned out that they did not sell plain ground beef. What looked like ground beef was a mixture of ground beef and pork in various percentages. Numbers are numbers all over the world, but I did not know the symbols for net, gross, grams, kilo, or Yen.

When we were done shopping we walked over to checkout. There was a row of five or six checkers, so we found the shortest line and waited. When it was our turn I put the blue basket up on the counter. The checker took the items from the basket, scanned them, and placed them into a red basket on the other side of the register. All prices marked on all items were after tax amounts, so there was no surprise what the total would be. I only ever saw people paying with cash. No credit cards and certainly no checks. After that I picked up the red basket, put it back onto the cart and moved away out to one of many small tables in the large exit isle. That is where we moved the items from the red basket into the tote bags we had brought with us. There were no disposable plastic bags in sight. We left the red basket by the table, and took the cart with our bags of groceries down the exit isle and out of the store onto the veranda. I returned the cart to the corral, and off we went. If you needed to load up your car, you most definitely would bring the cart back to the veranda afterwards and put it where it belonged.

I got the impression that people did not “stock up” at home as space was limited, and refrigerators were small. Instead they went to the store often and bought fresh produce and fish for only the next few days.

The chili was recognizable as chili, but did not taste at all like what I made at home. All of the ingredients were similar to what I used in America, but none tasted the same. Like the Tacos, the chili was very different from Japanese food, but they said they liked it.

Thursday August 13

Vic and Hana had a surprise for us. They had made plans for all of us to go to an Onsen (a traditional hot springs bath). The one they chose was near Nagasaki beach near Inuboh in Chiba Prefecture. This was near a famous lighthouse 40 miles south of their house.



Train Ride

Due to the way the railroads were built and the lay of the land, this trip is 3/4 hour by car, but a two transfer, two hour trip by train. We would not all fit into the car, so we had an adventure. It started and ended with a 1/2 hour walk through the Shinto shrine's woods to/from the local train station in Old Kashima. We caught a JR train going south to a transfer point where

we got out and waited for a different company's train to Inuboh. At Inuboh we got on a small touristy train / trolley for the short hop to a town near the beach.

We were on high ground above the shore. There was a lighthouse on a point of land, and a very scenic shoreline down below. We walked along the high ground past rocky and sandy beaches until we got to Nagasaki beach. This was about the same size as Oritsu beach, but there was a building with a veranda, concession stands, and benches. We walked down a pathway to the beach and stayed a while. Chris and I sat on a bench while the others went into the water. Hana found several unusual shells on the beach to add to her collection.



Onsen

Then it was time for the Onsen, which was nearby. An Onsen is a place to soak in geothermal mineral spring water. The soaking pools of this one were in grottos outside above the shore. There were several separate grottos for men and women.

When you walk in you take off your shoes and leave them in a cubby before you step into the reception area. After paying, men go right and women go left into large locker rooms. The available lockers have a key with an elastic wristband inserted in their lock. You select an empty locker, put all of your clothes and anything you are carrying inside, lock it, and put the key on your wrist using the elastic band.

Next is a large tiled hall like a shower room with many cleaning stations around the walls. These stations each have a hand held shower head, a low stool for sitting on, and soap. You are expected to thoroughly clean and rinse your body. There were a handful of men in the shower room when we got there.

After you were clean you walk out to the pools. The pools gave the impression of being in a shallow cave where you could look out over the shoreline. The water was hot and was slowly flowing into, through, and out of the pool.

There were minerals in the water, and these Onsens have a reputation of being good for your health. It was pretty hot, but I enjoyed it. Afterwards we dried off, got dressed and all met back in the lobby. It was time to go home.

Going Home

We needed to reverse our two transfer, three train trip back to the station in old Kashima. This took another two hours and it was dark when we got there. We walked through the woods in pitch dark, which was an adventure that reminded me of a night march during basic training. We made it back to the house at 7:30 PM.

For dinner we went out to a Sushi restaurant. The tables are all arranged along the sides of a large conveyor belt. The belt is set up sort of like a large elaborate model train track. On this belt are a never ending series of small plates, each with a piece of sushi on it. You just reach out and grab what you want. We were hungry and accumulated a large stack of used plates. When we were done we pressed the buzzer and a waiter came, sorted the plates by color, and counted them up. Different color plates are worth different prices. This was the cheapest dinner we had. About 3,500 Yen (\$35.00) for all five of us. Very tasty and filling.



Friday August 14

Uguisu

Yesterday was exhausting, so today we rested. While walking the residential streets, or relaxing at Vic's house during the hot afternoons I came to recognize the beautiful bird song of the "Uguisu". I looked for one while on walks but even though several were calling to each other continually, I was never able to see one on this first trip. They can get going and sing for hours. It is a beautiful relaxing song to listen to on a hot day while meditating or drowsing. On later trips I finally spotted them. They are small plain gray birds that sometimes perch on telephone wires. Here is a picture from the web, and a one minute video of their singing:



<https://youtu.be/P84oZYJJKHM>

Feast

That night Hana went all out for dinner. Lots of veggies, rice, tofu and a pork based dish. I bought wine. We also had tea and water. We all sat around the table on the floor, and had a feast.

Friday night we played poker using candy for chips. Hana had never played. She caught on quickly, and was a winner of a real good pot which she won with two pair, ten high against Ben's two pair, nine high. She enjoyed that.



Saturday August 15

Departure

Vic drove us to Itako station around noon where we caught a bus to Narita airport. They checked our passports on the bus as we entered the airport grounds. We needed to go through an immigration checkpoint to get to the boarding area. They were looking at your passport and visa, and recorded your departure. This was not the formality I thought it was. They could (and did) stop people from leaving for any number of reasons.



We flew out of Narita airport around 4:30 PM. The jet stream was with us this time, so the flight was only 8.5 hours to San Francisco. We were herded into the USA immigration hall. This was disorganized and slow, and the US officials were abrupt and surly. After immigration check we got our luggage and got in another line for customs inspection. Only a random selection of people needed to open their suitcases. People with non-USA

passports got in different lines and had different experiences. We re-checked our baggage then needed to go through another TSA screening before we could exit the international terminal and enter the domestic terminal. Welcome to the USA.

We learned the wisdom of always scheduling at least three hours or more between flights when arriving on an international flight. Unfortunately there was a six hour layover in San Francisco. A lunch at a nice restaurant helped mitigate the ordeal.

Arrival

We finally arrived at Boise on Saturday, August 15 at 7:30 PM. Actually, this was 10:30 AM Sunday, August 16 back in Japan. Eighteen hours had elapsed. Going West to East is not anywhere near as easy as East to West when it comes to jet lag. This time we were wiped out. I was jet lagged for the next four days. Fortunately my job at that time did not require too much alertness.

After we recovered, both Chris and I felt really great. The healthy Japanese diet, the many days of long walks, and sleeping on the floor with a minimal pillow did wonders for our bodies. We both lost weight during this vacation.

This vacation was made possible due to the efforts of our hosts: Vic and Hana. To them we say:

Domo arigatogozaimasu