

Japan Travel Journal – Volume 1

Tuesday, July 4 to Friday, July 7, 2023 - Tokyo, Japan

Konnichiwa (こんにちは) from Japan. It's been a while since we've sent out a journal of our travel adventures, but we're traveling again after the covid shutdown. Lori and Stephen were in Israel this past November for the Tiberias Ironman 70.3 and some touring around and visiting with friends. Now we're traveling in Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun, with our daughter Julia and Lori's brother Marc and his family (Marla, Ethan and Joshua). The occasion is Ethan's graduation from high school. Our son Michael decided not to come on the trip, opting instead to concentrate on his bicycle training and racing this summer. We've photoshopped him into the picture on the right so it feels like he's with us.

We left the Palm Beach airport on Tuesday morning and arrived in Tokyo refreshed after a 14-hour flight from Atlanta on Wednesday afternoon, missing any kind of July 4th celebration and setting our watches forward 13 hours. I think that flight has the maximum possible detrimental effect on anyone's circadian rhythm.

Japan is an island nation comprised of approximately 14,125 islands. They recently "found" another 1,000 islands, so they're either not good at counting or geography or both. We'll be visiting four cities on one of the islands, Honshu, leaving 14,124 islands to explorer on another trip.



Thursday, July 6, 2023

Tokyo is the capital of Japan and has over 38 million people crammed into an area the size of a large shoebox. Needless to say, it's extremely crowded. Tokyo is the most populous metropolitan area in the world. Japan has one of the world's oldest populations in terms of average age and is currently experiencing a serious population decline, even though it has the world's highest life expectancy. That translates into Japan having more adults in diapers than it has children in diapers. That's great if you're in the diaper business but not so good if you want a long-term viable country and economy. As a side note, I've learned that if you read this paragraph out loud, your phone will start sending you ads for Depends adult diapers. It *is* listening to you.

After checking into our hotel, we walked around the area, had sushi for dinner, and had no problem falling asleep.

Today we did a full-day tour of Tokyo. Practically all of Tokyo was bombed and destroyed in World War II, so it's a very modern city. We visited various (rebuilt) Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Japan embraces a combination of these two religions. Buddhism has one god, while Shintoism has over eight million deities and stresses the importance of purity, harmony, respect for nature, family respect, and subordination of the individual before the



group. These gods are everywhere, omniscient, and all knowing, but, as George Carlin said, they mostly need money, so there are shrines dedicated to them everywhere so people can offer food, prayers and mostly money, ostensibly so their prayers are answered.



It may not sound like a big deal, but we crossed the street at Shibuya Crossing, the world's busiest and most famous pedestrian crossing, where as many as 3,000 people cross the streets in multiple directions at one time. We weren't there during rush hour, so there were probably only 2,000 people crossing with us. Then we went to an "Art Aquarium" exhibit where live goldfish are displayed in every imaginable way with lights and sounds enhancing the experience. Very Japanese.

The one thing that took us by surprise was the presence of swastikas everywhere. We didn't realize that the swastika is an ancient religious and cultural symbol, predominantly in various Asian cultures, which stands for "the mark of well-being." It's still widely used in Japan, regardless of how it was appropriated by the Nazi Party.



Friday, July 7, 2023

Today we did a breakfast walking tour of the Tsukiji Market, an area in Tokyo that's been around since the 1600's selling fish, produce and everything else you could need or want. We were struck by the cleanliness of everything. Tokyo is extremely clean, even though there are NO trash cans anywhere on the streets. Eating on the street is non-existent, the reason being that you may drop food or need to throw trash away. If you produce garbage, you are expected to keep it with you and throw it away when you get to where you're going. There are also no beggars or homeless people anywhere. None. Zero. People wait for the signal to cross the streets, wait patiently in line, never speak loudly in public, never honk their car horn and the crime rate is extremely low. No one even locks up their bicycles. Everything is *extremely* orderly.



In the afternoon Lori, Julia and Stephen did a sushi-making class. We learned how to roll sushi rice into the proper shape, wrap it in seaweed if applicable, place the fish or other ingredients on top of it, and eat it.

We've become experts on the Tokyo subway system, as that's the least expensive and fastest way to get around. Tomorrow, we leave Tokyo and head to Takayama. Hopefully our train skills will transfer to the main lines, as we're supposed to take two different bullet trains there without the help of any guides.

Thanks for reading and I'll update you in a few days.

Love, Lori and Stephen

Japan Travel Journal – Volume 2

Saturday, July 8, 2023 – Tokyo to Takayama



This morning we left Tokyo for Takayama via Japan's famous Shinkansen (bullet train). We traveled through the countryside, past mountains and rivers while clocking speeds up to 180 mph. We were booked in a Ryokan, a traditional Japanese inn that typically features tatami-matted rooms, futon mats on the floor instead of beds, and hot spring bathhouses. Upon arriving at the inn after walking uphill for twenty minutes in 90-degree heat and 100% humidity in the rain dragging our suitcases, we encountered our first mishap of the trip: the receptionist couldn't find our reservation. After thirty minutes of back and forths in different languages she found it and proceeded to tell us it was canceled two weeks ago. To make a long story short, the inn had a fire recently and the company that organized our trip was concerned the inn wasn't back up to their

standards and changed our reservation to another ryokan.

But they didn't tell us. So, we put our shoes back on (no shoes allowed in these types of places), and they drove us to the new ryokan, a five-minute walk from where we had started when we arrived in Takayama. We checked in and went to our tatami-matted rooms with one lone low table in the middle of the room with two chairs with no legs and no bed (futon mats in the closet). But that's easy to look past when your room has its own hot bath, which it did. After a hot



bath we all had a traditional Japanese dinner including eggplant jelly, an appetizer tray with at least six different foods of unknown origin, some type of Japanese soup visually resembling matzah ball soup but with fishy-tasting balls, assorted sashimi, local waygu beef with vegetables that we cooked ourselves, a salt-grilled fish that is supposed to be eaten from head to tail including the head and tail (that one was tough



to get down and only Josh and Stephen attempted it), Japanese noodles, rice, miso

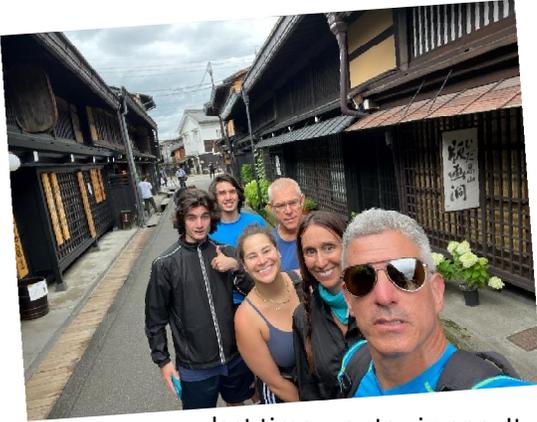
soup, pickled vegetables, green tea, cake and fruits. An extensive list of food but all small portions and spread out, so we weren't stuffed. it was an "interesting" experience, and afterwards we all discussed skipping the next night's dinner at the hotel and having pizza.

Sunday, July 9 – Furukawa

This morning we took a 15-minute train ride to Hida Furukawa for a bike tour. We pedaled through the French countryside, visiting chateaus and tasting various wines along the way. Oh sorry, wrong trip. Today we rode for three hours through the Japanese countryside and learned about rice cultivation, saw lots of rice paddies and stopped at a farmers' market for produce and, of course, rice crackers. We also biked through the town of Furukawa (pop. about 20,000), which is something of a sibling to Takayama, but



it is much more sedate. We saw an old, deserted castle and watched carp swim in the channels that run alongside the streets.



We then returned by train to Takayama for lunch at a ramen restaurant, followed by wandering around the old town section of Takayama. For dinner we did skip the traditional Japanese meal at the hotel, even though it was included in our stay. Marla, Marc, Ethan and Josh went for hamburgers; Lori, Julia and Stephen had Indian-Nepalese food. Everyone was very happy with their meal.

Monday, July 10 – Takayama to Kanazawa

We checked out of the ryokan this morning, which will probably be the last time we stay in one. It was nice to experience, but doing everything on the floor gets old fast. A simple folding table and chair hidden in the closet that could be used when no one is watching would have made everything so much easier. My characterization of Japan is that the Japanese tend to extremes: either super modern or very traditional. They're committed to chopsticks even though they know about forks and knives. Every toilet we've come across has built-in heaters, bidets, automatic flushers and lots of other features I can't figure out. Sinks have automatic faucets, soap dispensers and dryers. But interestingly, it's a mostly cash economy, mainly because the older generation can't keep up with all the modern technology. Seniors will happily have a toilet clean their butt, but using a smartphone app to pay for things is where they draw the line.



We had a full day of activities today, making our way from Takayama to Kanazawa. We drove northwest through the mountains, first stopping along the way to look at the traditional village of Shirakawa-Go, a UNESCO World Heritage Site best known for its building style known as gasshō-zukuri. We then stopped in Gokayama at the Wasi Paper Workshop where we learned about one of Japan's traditional crafts. Papermaking in



Japan has a history of over 1,000 years. We even got hands-on experience and made our own paper postcards using the traditional

methods. Next on to the Yusuke Farmer Village in Uyashinai, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, where Japan's rural past survives. This 300-year-old rice farming village is still in operation and inhabited by about forty-five people. Then a stop at the town of Inami, well-known for its skilled wood carvers and sculptors. We participated in a woodcarving program where we chiseled our own sake cups out of cedar wood, then sampled sake from our own creations. Then we visited the Zuisenji Temple in Inami, built at the end of the 14th century as a satellite to the main temple in Kyoto. We were finally



dropped off at our hotel in Kanazawa, where we changed, walked around, and had dinner at a “conveyor belt” sushi restaurant. That’s were you order sushi from a screen at your table and your food arrives on an automatic carrier that stops at your table. Each dish is on a specifically colored plate to indicate the price. At the end of the meal the waiter adds up the value of your plates and calculates the bill. This is what happens when businesses are forced to adapt technology because they can’t find enough workers. We’re finding Japan to be very reasonable. This sushi dinner was about \$63 total for five of us, with lots of sushi and alcoholic beverages.



Tuesday, July 11 – Kanazawa

We spent the day today in Kanazawa, visiting the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, ranked tenth on the list of most-visited art museums in the world. Then onto Kenroku-en, a strolling style garden constructed during the Edo period and considered one of the Three Great Gardens of

Japan. We walked through Kanazawa Castle Park, a large, partially reconstructed Japanese castle from the 16th-century.



The highlight of our day was a traditional Japanese Tea Ceremony, an activity involving the ceremonial preparation and presentation of



matcha, a powdered green tea. Zen Buddhism was a primary influence in the development of the culture of Japanese tea. The procedure consists of a specific sequence of actions demonstrating hospitality that includes confections, tea preparation and drinking, and recitations dating back to the 9th century. Afterwards we had a lunch of soba noodles and rice, then walked around the Kanazawa-Higashi Chaya (Geisha) District. Taking the public bus back to our hotel, we had our first major cultural faux pas. We got off

the bus through the rear door, unaware that one MUST exit the bus from the front door. The bus driver started honking at us, then jumped out of the bus and started yelling and waving his arms. That wasn’t in any of the lists of “Top Ten Things Not To Do In Japan” that we saw. Now we know. Tomorrow we’re off to Kyoto, so watch for that journal in a few days.

Love, Lori and Stephen



Japan Travel Journal – Volume 3

Wednesday, July 12, 2023 – Kanazawa to Kyoto

We skipped dinner last night, opting instead for going to bed early. Lori fell asleep around 4:00pm and slept all night. After breakfast this morning we left Kanazawa and took a train along the shores of Biwa Lake to Kyoto. Kyoto is one of the oldest municipalities in Japan, having been chosen in 794 A.D. as the seat of Japan's imperial court.



The emperors of Japan ruled from Kyoto for eleven centuries until 1869 when the capital was relocated to Tokyo. It is home to numerous Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, palaces and gardens. The city was spared from large-scale destruction during World War II and as a result, its prewar cultural heritage has mostly been preserved.



I should have mentioned this earlier: Japan has a no-tipping culture. The Japanese people pride themselves on providing excellent service and don't expect a tip for any activities that Americans are accustomed to tipping for. Actually, offering a tip can be offensive, so we didn't tip at all. To anyone. Not to waiters, bellhops or taxi drivers. Not even tour guides.

Instead, tour guides appreciate a small gift, so we've been "tipping" by giving postcards and seashells from Florida, and in some extraordinary situations, mini bottles of bourbon that we brought with us from home. Everyone seems outwardly appreciative of these gifts, but there's no way of knowing what they're really thinking.



When we asked Ann how old the shrine is, her answer, after looking like a deer in headlights, was "very old." It was begun in 656 A.D., and now you know more about the shrine than Ann. The tour only went downhill from there. She was hands down the worst tour guide we've ever had in all our travels, to the point of being comical, and we're still laughing about it. She told us she didn't prepare for any of the sights we'd be seeing, only "Japanese culture," and since she was actually Chinese, she did need to prepare for any cultural knowledge she'd be conveying, which turned out to be none.



We then made our way to Kennin-ji, the oldest Zen Buddhist temple in Kyoto, where we relaxed in a zen-like state inside while it rained outside. Since we hadn't eaten since breakfast and it was already past 3pm, we wanted to get a snack to hold us over until dinner. Ann was absolutely no help in finding a restaurant. She didn't know anything around the area and was searching on her phone for somewhere to take us. We eventually found a small restaurant and ordered pizza, sandwiches and shaved



ice. It was perfect. While we ate, our friends Ginat and Ayal Kimhi from Israel met us at the restaurant. Ayal is an economics professor at Hebrew University and they were in Japan for a conference, and coincidentally planned to be in Kyoto the same time as us. After eating we happily parted ways with Ann and explored the area on our own. We passed the Yasaka Pagoda, a 5-story tall Buddhist pagoda which is the last remaining structure of a 6th-century temple complex known as Hōkan-ji Temple. Later on, we had a wagyu steak dinner at a restaurant along the river. The steak lived up to its reputation; it was delicious, even to the vegetarians in the group.

Thursday, July 13 - Kyoto

This morning we had a half day tour to help us gain a better understanding of what makes Kyoto tick, from a philosophical, religious and cultural standpoint. Our guide was Duncan, a half British, half Japanese guide with a great sense of humor and extensive knowledge of Japan. We visited some shrines, temples and areas off the beaten

path where we were able to feel the 1,000+ years of history and tradition that make this one of the world's most interesting places to visit. We ate mochi from a stand that's been run by the same family for 350 years, across the path from another stand that's been run by another family for 1,000 years! Duncan was excellent, so he got a seashell AND a bottle of bourbon.



After the tour we wandered around Nishiki Market, a narrow, five block long shopping street lined by more than one hundred shops and restaurants, and even has a couple temples and shrines interspersed in it. We ate eel-on-a-stick from one of the food stalls, had a

sushi sit-down lunch, and then had taiyaki, a Japanese fish-shaped cake, filled with either red bean paste, custard, chocolate, cheese, or sweet potato. We chose custard, as we've been choosing all week.

For dinner we had an Evening Food Tour with a guide that took us to three different restaurants that we would never have found on our own and sampled various foods we would never have known to order.





Friday, July 14 - Kyoto

This morning we woke up early and took a public bus to the Arashiyama Bamboo Grove, a natural forest of bamboo that has several pathways for visitors. We were told to go early, and it was a good thing we did. Walking into the grove we had the path practically to ourselves. Walking back took twice as



long because of the crowds. We then hiked up a hill to the Iwatayama Monkey Park, a park on Mt Arashiyama inhabited by a troop of over 120 wild Japanese macaque monkeys that freely wander among the visitors. They

tell you not to feed or make eye contact with the monkeys, so we assumed kissing on the lips was also not encouraged.

After a train ride back to lunch and met our guide biked all around Kyoto, the Higashi Hongan-ji temple which was most 1895 after a fire burned for the fourth time. We Shrine, a Shinto shrine



Kyoto, we grabbed a quick for a Bicycling Tour. We visiting among other sites Temple, a huge Buddhist recently reconstructed in down the previous temple went to the Heian-jingu ranked in the top category

of shrines by the Association of Shinto Shrines, so you know it's an important and impressive shrine. You now also know there's an association that rates shrines. We ended the tour after biking through the gardens of the Kyoto Imperial Palace, the former palace of the Emperor of Japan. Neither we nor anyone else in the entire



city of Kyoto riding a bike wears a helmet. We biked on crowded city streets amongst heavy traffic, but we probably couldn't get a helmet if we wanted one. Interestingly, we had to wear a helmet when biking past rice

paddies in Furukawa when we didn't see ten cars on the entire tour. But in Kyoto, no helmet even though we were dodging cars most of the time. Crazy! For dinner we had udon noodles at a little restaurant with two tables overlooking the owner's displayed sneaker collection.



Saturday, July 15 - Kyoto to Tokyo

We were scheduled to go back to Tokyo on an afternoon bullet train, but decided to catch an earlier train to spend our last day in Tokyo. We're on the train as I'm sending out this last journal from Japan, and we fly home tomorrow. We had a terrific time in Japan and would love to come back. The Japanese people are honorable, proud and extremely welcoming. The entire country is spotless and works very efficiently, and the culture and history are interesting. Thank you for following our our trip to Japan. Lots more travel coming up later this year.

Love, Lori and Stephen

