

Kyoto – May 2008

Day one - Tuesday

With United Airlines offering double qualifying miles for trips until June 15th, we couldn't resist earning 30,000 towards our premier status and decided to return to Kyoto.

We first visited Kyoto in 2002 for a textile tour. Then, our small group (10 in all) visited temples, flea markets, and other sites in and around Kyoto. On our own, we went to Nara, Nagoya, Arimatsu, and Tokyo. We even spent two nights in a Ryokan sleeping on the floor and experiencing real Japanese "living". It was our first experience in Asia and we loved it. And, the dollar was relatively strong. See <http://krauss.ws/japan> for pictures from that trip, the impetus for our website.

Today, we no longer find sleeping on the floor to be an adventure and prefer the comforts of a western style hotel room with all the amenities. But, we have fallen in love with Asia and since that first trip to Kyoto, have visited Korea, China, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam. And, we're looking forward to seeing more of Asia.

But, this time, our trip is short – Sunday through Wednesday with as much time on planes and trains as we will have to actually sight see – and we picked a place to visit that we loved the first time. We left late Saturday evening and stayed overnight in San Francisco for an 11 a.m. flight to Nagoya on Sunday. That was a great way to do it., We had a good night's sleep, and didn't miss our grandchildren's 5th birthday party celebration. Flight from San Francisco was around 11 and ½ hours – daylight all the way - and was very pleasant with a little turbulence coming into the airport. Reminded me of landing at Denver's old airport where one sort of "dropped in" by falling 500 feet at a time rather than landing in one smooth motion.

We easily cleared customs – very efficient – and while waiting for our bags were greeted by bag-sniffing dogs. Fortunately "lassie" didn't stop at our bag, or anyone else's for that matter. But, our large suitcase was opened and thoroughly inspected before we were allowed to enter the country. Japan is much more paranoid about drugs and terrorism than any other country we've been to recently.

We packed relatively "light" – one large check-in bag, one small check-in bag, one carry-on computer bag, and Fern's small carry-on. We took all these bags and headed for the train to Nagoya where we would transfer to the bullet train for Kyoto. What fun schlepping all those bags on and off the trains and through the airport. Fortunately, the Japanese are very civilized and have elevators, escalators, and lots of ways for everyone, especially elderly and handicapped, to get around – unlike other cities – most notably Paris.

It still took almost two hours to get from the Nagoya airport to Kyoto. Why Nagoya? Because on that route, we could use our miles to upgrade and fly business class. For 11

and ½ hours, you really would prefer a 777 business class seat to traveling "cattle car." While there are alternate forms of transportation from the airport to Kyoto, we will stick to the train, as buses take nearly three times as long and don't run as frequently. The train is the best way to go, even if you have to schlep bags. We discovered on our last trip in Japan that the fast train from Tokyo to Narita Airport was a 40-minute ride versus at least a two-hour, very expensive taxi ride.

So we finally arrived at our hotel – literally in the new Kyoto train station. It's called the Granvia and is quite modern. While not cheap, the hotel is extremely convenient to anywhere you want to go. There are the trains, of course, buses, and taxis waiting to take you anywhere. Rooms are spacious, modern, and very comfortable. We're on the 14th floor, have a great view of the city, and hear NO noise of any kind.

We arrived Monday evening, found a restaurant on the 11th floor of the shopping center adjacent to the train station – accessed by a series of escalators – and had sushi, which was just okay. Train stations in Kyoto are like little cities. There's a network of underground stores and restaurants all interconnecting with whatever department store is above them. And, they're always bustling.

It was Tuesday before we knew it and we had breakfast and headed to Kyoto's National Museum. We got there too early so we walked across the street to Sanijusangen-do, a Buddhist temple with a museum housing lots of statues which are designated national treasures – all of which the museum prohibited us from photographing. There were 1001 bronze statues. We didn't count them, but took the word of whoever wrote the signs.

We then visited the national museum. The museum has a statue of Rodin's "Thinker" in the little park in front of it, and inside, a smattering of everything from pottery to textiles, to paintings, including an entire exhibit of ancient artifacts. Here, "ancient" takes on a new meaning - artifacts dating back 30,000 years. Yes, really 30,000 years. In all, a very interesting museum and worth the trip.

Next we traveled by taxi to the Nishijin textile center, where we saw a kimono fashion show (see the photos) and weavers and other craftspeople plying their art. One lady was operating a Jacquard loom. Mostly, this was a place where you could buy goods.

We then walked to the Orinasukan textile center – the handmade fabrics promotion center. Lovely building, but almost no one spoke English, and it appears that hardly anyone visits there.

Another taxi ride back to the hotel, lunch, a brief respite, and further exploration of the shops at the Tokyo Tower, especially the "dollar store" or the Kyoto equivalent, the "100-yen" store. Dinner tonight was at a Kushiagi restaurant – again at the top of the escalators - where food was battered and fried, like tempura but a much heavier and tastier batter, and presented on skewers. We had a sampler platter and it was wonderful. First really good meal we've had here.

It's May, but it's hot and humid in Kyoto - like Washington in the early summer. Most places are air conditioned. Taxis in the city are also as we remembered them from our first trip. They are clean – mostly Toyotas (we're in Japan after all) and the drivers wear uniforms with white gloves. Yes, white gloves. The seats, front and back have clean, white doilies on them. The rear doors open and close automatically under control of the driver, and all the cab drivers are very polite although few speak English. Taxis cost about the same as in Washington. And actually 100 Yen roughly equals one dollar, so Japan is not a bargain, but a better value than cities on the Euro.

Something else we're finding is that almost no one speaks English which is how it was in 2002. Restaurants display plastic models of meals, with prices, in the window and you point to what you want when ordering. Outside of the tourist areas, there are no pictures and no plastic models just menus in Japanese. Not possible to eat there – at least for us. In spite of a language barrier, we seem to be able to communicate. The Japanese are very kind, helpful, and polite people.

Day two – Wednesday - and last

Today was our last full day here, and we wanted to see the Miho Museum designed by I.M. Pei, who designed the pyramid on top of the Louvre and other famous places. The museum is located out in the country – a train and bus ride from our hotel – and about an hour and a half away, presuming you catch the right train! We didn't do it when we were here in 2002, and we didn't do it again today. Even though the signs direct you to the correct platform, they don't tell you what stops the next train will make. The first train we caught took the wrong branch (north around Lake Biwa rather than south) and didn't go to the station where we could catch the bus to the museum. After a little difficulty – mostly language-related – we got off, went back and caught the right train.

We were the last to board the once-an-hour 11 a.m. bus to the Miho Museum, about an hour's ride through windy, twisty roads that are often big enough only for the bus. The ride was an adventure. We passed through rice fields, saw a big eagle or hawk having lunch, and finally arrived at the beautiful museum. The bus is also a regular bus route, so people routinely get on and off.

If the lighting in the galleries were better, we'd have had an easier time reading and understanding what we were looking at, but enough was in English so that we got it. No photography was permitted in the galleries, but we got plenty of pictures outside. We arrived in time for lunch. The cafeteria in the reception building serves a limited menu of noodles and tempura at reasonable prices. The food is good, service is speedy, and we enjoyed lunch. Next we boarded the little car that takes us through a tunnel to the actual museum.

We saw treasures from Egypt, Africa, various places in the middle east including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Greece and Rome, and of course, Japan, China, and Korea. The museum seems to have only treasures on exhibit, or maybe it has only treasures in its collection, but anyway what we saw was spectacular. For example, we saw a 12 foot by

20 foot late 16th century Persian “hunting carpet” (full of animals and hunters) in perfect condition, taken from the Ottoman Emperor’s palace by Prince Sanguszko of Poland when he defeated the Ottoman Empire in 1621. Although the carpet had been on exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Shumei Cultural Foundation, which built the Miho Museum, bought the carpet in 1994 for reputedly \$4 million. The colors were amazing. We saw an Assyrian limestone carved relief from around 860 B.C. We saw an Egyptian figure of the falcon-headed god Horus encrusted with silver, gold and lapis lazuli from before 1200 B.C.

Even though it’s small and we easily saw everything in two hours, this is truly one of the nicest museums we’ve ever seen. The museum itself is a stunning building and the grounds and everything related are elegant. So there are treasures both inside and out! The bus ride back to the train station was uneventful, and all trains passing through this station go to Kyoto.

For dinner tonight, our last meal here, we chose a tempura restaurant famous not only for its tempura but also because Bill Clinton was taken to eat at one of the restaurant’s branches when he visited Japan. We ate fish and vegetables and there were even two multi-legged crispy critters on our plate. My first thought was that these “crayfish” as they were called, didn’t look like any crayfish I’d ever seen but more like something I’d get the can of Raid to take care of! All in all, the food was very good. Didn’t care for the bean paste “dessert.” After all, it wasn’t chocolate.

Tomorrow, we travel via two train lines to Nagoya airport where we will spend two “Thursdays” traveling back to the USA. Flight home is about two hours shorter than the flight coming. Lots of “twos.” Bless the jet stream and tailwinds.

Using one of the few Japanese words I know, Sayonara. This has been an enjoyable, if short, trip.