

July 2002

Our trip to Japan started on a good note. Economy was sold out and we were compelled to sit in business class for the 13 and ½ hour flight to Osaka. Cheryll is really getting spoiled. Upon landing, we started to see signs that land is in short supply. Osaka Kansai airport is built on land recently reclaimed from the sea. We took an efficient 70-minute train ride to Kyoto. It was spotless, on time and the conductors bow when entering and exiting a car, even if they are behind everybody. What have we gotten ourselves into? Only in Disneyland is everything perfect, clean and isolated from reality.

Kyoto, the former capital of Japan, sits in a wide valley. We spent two days working off our jetlag while we explored some of the castles, pagodas and Buddhist temples interspersed with high-rise office and apartment buildings. The nearby city of Nara has an elaborate temple dating to the 9th century, which is thought to be the world's oldest wooden structure. The Japanese make very efficient use of their limited space. We saw apartment buildings next to rice paddies. The houses don't have yards, but the Japanese have learned to live comfortably in close quarters. People are quiet. We walked through a residential area that seemed abandoned. People don't play stereos or TVs loudly. Dogs don't bark. Kids don't scream or even cry. If someone wants to pass you on their bike, all you hear is a polite tinkle on their bell. The respect of others is deeply engrained in their culture.

On our walk to the Kyoto train station we saw a grim testimony to a failed experiment. The Saturn of Kyoto dealership sits abandoned, wedged under the railroad tracks. The Japanese have adopted lots of Western values, but show zero interest in our cars. On Wednesday, July 3rd, we took the bullet train to Tokyo. The ride cost \$110 for the precisely 2 hr and 47 minute trip. Madge the GPS tells us that we reached speeds of 170 mph in the rural sections. Even at that speed the ride was almost as smooth and quiet as an airplane.

The forecast for the next day was good, so we decided to push ahead our summit attempt on Mt. Fuji. Thousands of Japanese climb the 12,388 ft. dormant volcano each year during July and August. Mt. Fuji is a two-hour drive from Tokyo and most people make the climb in two days. The tradition is to spend a night in one of the dozen mountain huts built along the route. 7000 yen (about \$60) per person buys two meals, unlimited use of the "fragrant" outhouse and a two-foot by five-foot space on a mattress shared with five of your closest Japanese friends. Up to 100 people bunk in the same room. Our hotel in Tokyo was prepaid as part of our package, and we felt like we were in pretty good shape and didn't think we could get much sleep in the mountain hut. So even though Cheryll and I travel to experience different cultures, we chose to attempt the climb and descent in one day. Sharing a bed with five of our closest Japanese friends is a little too much cultural immersion. The problem with our plan was that we needed to start at the crack of dawn, and the first bus from

Tokyo doesn't get there until 11:00 AM. Renting a car is expensive and requires an international driver's license. After some negotiating in a city where prices are generally fixed and taxis are notoriously expensive, we found a cab for the 100 mile ride for, get this, 50,000 yen, or over \$400. Without our "shrewd" negotiating the meter would have shown over \$500, plus \$70 in road tolls.

We went to bed early and our taxi was ready at the prescribed time of 2:30 AM. We were too nervous to sleep during the two-hour ride in the darkness. We arrived at the trailhead at 4:30 AM to a brilliant sunrise with no wind and just a few high clouds. It was our last chance to use a Western toilet for a while. Eastern toilets are porcelain rings built into the floor. The trailhead had a restaurant and some souvenir shops, but things were pretty quiet at that hour. Oh, except for the 200 Junior High School students from Nagoya in purple outfits sitting in neat lines listening to their guide's safety briefing. Imagine what would happen if you went to an American junior high and told the students that they were going on a three-day field trip that involved sleeping in a single room and spending 12 oxygen-starved hours climbing a mountain in matching sweat suits.

We decided to hurry up the trail to beat the rush and enjoy the solitude. The trail is well marked in English in some places, but not in others. We were confused at first because the trail descends for a half mile before turning upwards. After half an hour we were above the tree line. The trail is largely a set of switchbacks on loose volcanic gravel, but some sections are steep hard rock with chains anchored to mark the route. It's more technically difficult than Kilimanjaro, but not nearly as high. We were careful to keep our balance under the weight of our packs stuffed with cold weather clothes, rain gear, food, water and a first-aid kit. My pack weighed 25 lbs and Cheryl's weighed 15 lbs. The trail was quiet at that hour. We passed one group of twenty and were passed by a couple of solitary climbers. We stopped briefly at a couple of the mountain huts for a drink and to catch our breath. We found that the accommodations were as advertised. One was flying an American flag and the attendant wished us a happy Independence Day in excellent English! The air got thinner and we struggled to reach the top shortly after 10:00 and over five hours of climbing. Or were we at the top? We were on the edge of the crater, but there is a point 100 feet higher located a mile's hike around a jagged trail on the opposite edge of the crater. A Japanese gentleman explained that most people consider the spot where we were then standing to be "the top" and stop, but some take the trail around the rim. After a rest, yet another Nutri-Grain bar and some water, we decided that we didn't come this far to stop short of our goal, and we still had over five hours before the last bus departed for Tokyo at 4:00 PM. There is a small obelisk at the true summit, which we reached at 11:00 AM. The weather was excellent with the temperature around 40 degrees F and a breeze gusting to around 20 mph. We only spent enough time to take some pictures before heading down to catch our bus.

We returned to the opposite edge of the crater, and some of the students in purple sweat suits were beginning to reach the crater edge, although not continuing to the true summit. The descent took three hours over loose, dusty gravel. It was uneventful except I slipped on a sharp rock and received a minor cut to my hand. On the way down we met a few of the junior high school students who had given up, but we estimate that 90% made it to the rim of the crater. The clouds rolled in during the descent, but Madge the GPS was very helpful in showing us the correct path. When we reached the trailhead we had spent 9 and ½ hours on the mountain and were sweaty, dirty and tired. For the bargain price of \$24 each we took a comfortable bus and two crowded subways back to our hotel. Tokyo subways often don't have escalators and my knees struggled with the staircases after two vertical miles. Everyone on the subway was too polite to say anything, but we could see in their eyes that they thought we looked whipped.

After 11 hours of sleep we set out to explore Tokyo. If the question is, "What would happen if you took New York City and replaced all of the inhabitants with the most polite, hospitable people on the face of this planet?" then the answer is Tokyo. The Japanese are courteous, formal and impeccably clean. The taxi drivers wear suits, ties and white gloves. No one blows their horn. There is negligible crime. People will go out of their way to help. We asked a woman in an ice cream shop where to buy bus tickets, and her English wasn't good enough to explain, so she left her shop unlocked and unattended and walked down the street to show us. Another man walked three blocks out of the way to show us the subway station. The homeless men are even clean and hang out their laundry to dry on hangers under bridges and in trees in the park. The money always looks brand new. Everyone bows. Not just the people serving you. People bow getting on and off the elevator. The service is excellent and there is no tipping. The hospitality is like no other place we've visited. In Russia, foreign tourists are charged ten times as much as the locals to visit museums and palaces. The Japanese will have none of that. At the Tokyo National Museum, the Japanese pay \$4 admission and foreign visitors get in free for showing a passport. We felt very safe. We saw a seven-year-old girl riding the train unaccompanied. People left their merchandise unattended in the market when they visited the bathroom.

The Japanese love gadgets. Our electronic toilet had five separate controls. One was a heated seat. I'll let you guess the other four. I'll give you a clue; they involve cleanliness. At Narita Airport they have a beer-pouring machine, which tilts your frosted glass to the perfect angle. But in other ways, Tokyo appears 20 years behind the times. 50% of men still smoke. The businessmen wear blue suits, white shirts and conservative ties. There are few web addresses, PC's or Palm Pilots. This is probably due less to a time warp and more to the problem of typing the 1850 characters of the Japanese language. Most Japanese can read and write only broken English and struggle greatly with pronunciation. This seems to be leaving them behind in the era of the Internet and e-mail. Perhaps

someone in the future will make computers user friendly in Japanese, but the government is taking no chances. Starting next year, English will be compulsory for all students starting in elementary school.

90% of Japanese are middle-class. In the U.S. some things are cheap because we pay minimum wage for certain kinds of labor that require little education or training, such as fast food or taxi rides. In Japan, almost everyone is well schooled. There are few immigrants willing to work for peanuts. Cooks, cashiers and taxi drivers earn middle-class salaries, so these services cost a great deal more. On average, the prices were about the same as New York City.

I'd like to spend some time explaining the food, but I don't understand half of what we saw and ate. A classic example was a small restaurant where we ate lunch. We picked out some stir-fry from the plastic models displayed out front. A woman showed us how to buy a ticket from a vending machine. We sat at a counter and gave our tickets to the cook. We were fed some sort of soup and a stir-fry with something unidentifiable that tasted like seafood. We were also given some sort of dumpling stuffed with, maybe, tuna.

The Japanese are very conservative sober, but after a beer or six, they have no problem letting their hair down. We had dinner at a hibachi place where you cook your own food on a grill built into the table. It was Friday night and there were people from several office parties getting drunk, singing, dancing, yelling and jumping around, but still wearing clean white shirts and conservative ties. The "pleasure district" is collocated in the huge Shinjuku shopping area. When Cheryl was not at my side, hawkers approached me and described in graphic detail what was available in the various clubs and at what prices. The official line is that you pay per hour for private conversation with a lovely lady, but since I didn't appear to be a police officer, I was assured that you could get a great deal more.

If you can detect that we have a lot of respect for the Japanese culture of discipline, hard work and hard play, you're right. The regrettable side effect seems to be that work is number one and family a distant second priority. We enjoyed this fascinating trip very much, although we're not feeling compelled to return any time soon

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