



# ON THE ROAD IN JAPAN: 2008

IAN HUGHES





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# JAPAN 2012: THE INTRO

I'd been once, and was eager to get back, but the *Global Financial Crisis* managed to put the kibosh on that notion for a while. Once we were out of the woods there, the aftermath of the *tsunami* and the continuing aftershocks meant the consensus over there was that *Hughesy* wouldn't handle things, so an *autumn coloured leaves extravaganza* was put back twelve months.

But you can see why we were going...





## PLANNING THE TRIP

You might think a lengthy diatribe about the factors you consider when planning a trip to *Japan* is a bit rich coming from the bloke who doesn't do a whole lot of the actual planning.

On the other hand, I've been known to expound on all manner of subjects where there isn't a whole lot of experience to back things up.

But this is how the planning process looks from where I'm sitting.

There have been numerous discussions about possibilities, so I do have some base for my assumptions.

It mightn't be 100% accurate, but it gives some explanation about the itinerary that's tacked onto the end of this little ramble.

The first thing you need to realise when you're planning a three-week jaunt around the *Land of the Rising Sun* is that you can't go everywhere and see everything.

Take a place like *Kyoto* and you'd need a good fortnight to get beyond a fairly elementary scratching of the surface.

Live there for a year and you probably find things you've missed that you really shouldn't have.

And that's just *Kyoto*.

Second, it helps to have a theme, or possibly two.

When we went in *April 2008* we weren't sure how I'd go, so we had two. One was the *sakura* season, and the second was *some of Japan's greatest hits*.

The two of those combine rather nicely because most of *Japan's greatest hits* are at their best in when the cherry blossoms are in bloom.

Since we've done that (and we could easily do another trip based on the same seasonal factor), the logical extension was to go to the coloured leaves time and catch the trees in their multicoloured autumnal glory.

The second theme you could throw in this time around is trains, based on the principle that we've got two-week *Japan Rail Passes*. There's no way we're going to limit ourselves to the *Shinkansen*.

The seasonal theme has the added advantage of delivering a direction to work within.

In spring, the *sakura* blossoms start in the south and gradually make their way up to *Hokkaidō*.

In autumn, the process is reversed.

Trees start to lose their leaves in the colder regions first, and the colouring gradually makes its way towards the *Equator*, not that it's ever going to get there.

So, this time, around we start in *Kansai*, make our way north and then loop back to the centre, ending up at the other end of the country.

Third, when you've got virtually unlimited rail travel, you're obviously going to travel *because you can*.

Without the rail pass, you might be inclined to spend time in *Tokyo*, but other considerations mean that on the last trip, and on the one I'm looking down the barrel at as I start typing in a *Cairns* hotel room, *Tokyo* is somewhere to stop for lunch on the way to somewhere else.

Well, you can't go everywhere and see everything, can you?

See point #1 in that regard.

That *Rail Pass* travel factor brings in another element, namely the presence of two basic arrival and departure points and the fact that there's no designated space for large pieces of luggage on a *Shinkansen*.



There's space behind the last seats in the carriage where you might be able to stash a suitcase provided no one has snaffled it already, but you're pushing your luck if you try to take two.

That means if two of you arrive with a suitcase each, you need somewhere to stash one after you've shifted what you need for the rail odyssey into the other. Anything that's surplus to requirements for the next bit goes into t'other one, which then goes into storage somewhere.

There are also possible cases where the big one gets deposited in a coin locker or cloakroom, and the backpacks get used for a day or two.

So it's not just a case of pack up and go.

So the long and the short of it is that the lengthy rail leg bit needs to start and finish in **Kansai** or **Tokyo**, which is another reason for using the capital as a lunch stop if it doesn't represent a viable overnight stay on the route.

It didn't last time, and it misses out again here. Maybe next time.

The next thing to consider is variety.

You've got limited time, a fair bit of travelling to do, and while you could spend a week sitting on **Shinkansen** and zooming all over the place, there are interesting little local lines tucked away around the islands.

One of the highlights last time around was the rail motor journey from **Toyama** on the west coast up to **Takayama** and down to **Nagoya**. Similarly, you could spend the whole train trip looking at **sakura**, autumn leaves, temples or gardens.

But even when you combine leaves and gardens (a natural fit) or leaves and temples you'll need a break to spare yourself the risk of sensory overload.

Last time the mix was heritage buildings and gardens (**Kanazawa**), a heritage village and buildings (**Takayama**), social call (**Nagoya**), trying to see **Mount Fuji** (**Hakone**), social call (**Tokyo**) and another plus temples (**Kitakami**) and back to base in **Kansai**.

That got us to **Kyoto** and **Nara**, where there were significant temple and garden components.

All of that was carried out against a backdrop of **sakura**.

This time, we've got a different mix and next time will be different again.

On that *variety of rail experiences*, it's worth remembering you can do a leg from **Kagoshima** at one end of the archipelago to **Kansai** in a comfortable day.



We already know the same applies from somewhere around the north of *Honshū* (the main island) back to *Kōbe/Kansai*.

That means you can make a substantial shift in location quickly, and you can travel comfortably from the north of *Honshū* to the southern end of *Kyushu* in two days.

Given that consideration, a two-week rail pass gives you time to get out into the back blocks.

So with this time dedicated to coloured leaves, we start at *Kōbe* and head up to *Kitakami*. That's a day, with lunch in *Tokyo* and a meeting with The Translator.

With the coloured leaves in all their glory, we do a bit of exploring around the north, ending up in the bottom of *Hokkaidō* after a train trip through a tunnel under the *Tsugaru Strait*.

Another big jump brings us into the *tsunami* area, where *Matsushima* is one of the must-see views. Then it's up into the mountains for more leaves, *onsen* hot springs and a temple before another jump down to the *Seto Inland Sea*.

A trip across the rail bridge to *Shikoku* and straight back will be followed by another must-see, the temple island at *Miyajima*, then *Hiroshima* and on to *Kyushu*, where castles, gardens and local rail lines come into the mix.

That will use up most of the fourteen-day rail pass, so the final day delivers us to *Kansai*.

We spend the next six days doing the big city bit in *Osaka*, the temples and gardens bit in *Kyoto*, catch up with acquaintances and end up in *Kōbe* to reunite the suitcases and wing our way back home.





## THE ITINERARY

Wednesday 24 October: **Bowen > Cairns**

Thursday 25 October: **Cairns > Kansai > Kōbe**

Friday 26 October: **Kōbe**

Saturday 27 October: **Kōbe > Tokyo > Kitakami**

Sunday 28 October: **Kitakami > Hiraizumi > Kakunodate**

Monday 29 October: **Kakunodate > Dakigaeri Valley > Kakunodate**

Tuesday 30 October: **Kakunodate > Aomori**

Wednesday 31 October: **Aomori > Hakodate**

Thursday 1 November: **Hakodate > Sendai > Matsushima > Sendai**

Friday 2 November: **Sendai > Unazuki Spring**

Saturday 3 November: **Unazuki Spring > Nagano**

Sunday 4 November: **Nagano > Nagoya > Okayama**



Monday 5 November: **Okayama > Seto Bridge > Okayama > Onoura**

Tuesday 6 November: **Onoura > Miyajima > Hiroshima**

Wednesday 7 November: **Hiroshima > Kumamoto > Kagoshima**

Thursday 8 November: **Kagoshima > Yoshimatsu > Hitoyoshi > Shinyashiro > Kagoshima**

Friday 9 November: **Kagoshima > Osaka**

Saturday 10 November: **Osaka**

Sunday 11 November: **Osaka**

Monday 12 November: **Osaka > Kyoto**

Tuesday 13 November: **Kyoto**

Wednesday 14 November: **Kyoto > Kōbe**

Thursday 15 November: **Kōbe > Kansai International**

Friday 16 November: **Cairns > Bowen**





## BOWEN > CAIRNS

**Wednesday, 24 October 2012**

We've done the *Bowen* to *Townsville* bit so often this year that there's practically nothing that would surprise you other than a major spanner inserted forcefully into the works.

For a brief moment, it looked like that had happened. We got to the roundabout near *Maidavale School* and found the road we wanted to follow restricted to residential and roadworks traffic.

Earlier we'd methodically gone through the packing process, much to the concern of three furry felines who mightn't have been totally sure what was going on but wanted admission to their daytime quarters in *The Extension*.

The regular cause for concern came into play with a question about the fridge which could have raised feline issues if they hadn't decided we were *persona non grata* for the time being.

Where they'd got to was uncertain, but we were on the road by eight fifteen with a rendezvous with the *Ukulele Lady* scheduled for around six, so we were able to take our time along the way.

*Road closed* at *Maidavale* might have prompted a retracing of the steps if we hadn't been using the *iPad* to find the shortcut through the back locks to bypass *Ayr* and *Brandon* a while back.

It had been twenty years since I'd been that way. Our first attempt to track that way ended with great confusion that took us on a massive dogleg that came out at the servo near the *Burdekin Bridge*.

I'd done a bit of subsequent research, had nussed out the route in the opposite direction and had, in the process, established that one arm of the four that lead off the roundabout heads straight to *Brandon*, so that was where we found ourselves rejoining the *Bruce Highway*.

The run to and through *Townsville* was uneventful. A stop at the *Frosty Mango* north of *Rollingstone* provided a break, and we were in *Cardwell* for lunch.

The only major interest came when *Madam* decided she wanted a shot of the *Cardwell Jetty*, and was prevented from crossing the highway by a steady stream of traffic in both directions.

*Smartarse Hughesy* was on the point of suggesting I'd head back into the cafe for another round of *crab sangas* when the break in the flow came, but the fact that I hadn't actually made the remark didn't mean I escaped the consequences of the thought.

*Madam* had decided we were refuelling there, and I sat in a hot car as the fuel dribbled into the tank seemingly drop by agonising drop.

The payment process was equally glacial while the temperature in the parked vehicle rose. Still, I can afford to *sweat off a bit of the old avoirdupois*.

Back on the highway we ran in through *Tully*, *Innisfail*, *Babinda* and *Gordonvale* through threatening cloud cover, and had a minor hiccup when faced with a choice of routes into the *Cairns CBD*.

I chose the one that would have a much better traffic flow, but it was a case of varying mileages and dissenting opinions when we arrived at the destination just after four-fifteen.

Given the time you need to check in, shift gear, survey the surroundings, assess things in general and an hour and a half's rest we were off to put the car to bed just after six, returning about half an hour later after being dropped off by a *Car Carer* on her way to *ukulele practice*.

There was never much doubt about where we were headed for dinner since the *Cairns* operation of the *Roma Trattoria* probably had *Spaghetti alla Scoglio* on the menu.

They did, so that was it, the judge's opinion was final, and there was no correspondence to be entered into.

There was, however, a bit of discussion over a suitable wine to go with the heaping plate of seafood and *spaghetti* that was on its way.



There were a good half dozen by the glass offerings I would have been happy to go for, but we ended up choosing an unwooded *Chardonnay* and a *King Valley Pinot Grigio*. Both were quite tasty though the *Chardonnay* finished about half a length ahead of the *Grigio*.

No prizes for guessing who ended up with the *Grigio*.

Before the arrival of the platter itself, a helpful server delivered a pair of finger bowls and another pair of receptacles for shells and other detritus before a more practical colleague decided two of each was slightly over the top and halved the allocation.

As it turned out we could have used another finger bowl, but that was the only possible subject to gripe about.

On the way back to the *Cairns Plaza Madam* reckoned what we'd just had almost matched her first encounter with the dish in their *Carlton* operation.

I'd had a *risotto* that time around, but we'd had another go on a return visit in *Carlton* and again four and a half years ago, and I was inclined to agree that this one was the best of the last three.

Back at base I wandered into the bar downstairs for a cleansing ale before the regulation tapping out of *Travelogues*, with about two-thirds of the *Prelude* completed by the time I decided to call it a night around nine-fifteen.



## CAIRNS > KOBE

***Thursday, 25 October 2012***

Getting a good night's sleep before a major excursion isn't as easy as you might think.

I was awake, if the old memory serves me well, at one-thirty and three before I emerged from a dream where the cast included *old High School acquaintances, degenerate cricketers* and an *Elvis Costello concert*.

That was around around five-thirty.

But I slept better than *Madam*, who ascribed inability to get a good night's sleep to a combination of factors you can probably figure out without being told.

Given the number of things that could go wrong over the next three weeks you'll probably be running over the possibilities, and that sort of thing isn't exactly conducive to deep and undisturbed slumber.



In any case, once I was awake I was back on the *Travelogue* and had the *Prelude* largely knocked over before the pre-breakfast shower.

There had been some consideration of a walk to find breakfast but intermittent drizzle put paid to that theory, and we headed down for a *Spanish omelette* (*Hughesy*) and a bowl of fruit (*Madam*) before we completed the packing and the regulation reshuffle of bits and pieces.

The *Ukulele Lady* had kindly offered to drop us at the *Airport* (she was working somewhere over in that direction, so it was more or less on her way), and we were downstairs around half an hour before the time she'd indicated on the off chance she might be running early.

*We didn't want to be keeping anyone waiting, did we?*

*Check-in* and *departing the country* procedures ran smoothly, producing a state of illusory well-being that was disrupted by an announcement half an hour before we were scheduled to begin boarding.

*Technical issues*, they said, *were going to delay boarding by an hour*, and while I wasn't happy about the delay I'd rather they found things that were likely to go wrong *before* takeoff.

In any case, with things up to date almost right on the originally scheduled boarding time it was a case thumb-twiddling with the *iPad* battery around 83% and the *iPod* taking over the workload.

There was one major departure from revealed form this time around.

Faced with the prospect of an early morning arrival back in *Cairns*, *Madam* thought it might be worth investigating the cost involved and the extra benefits obtained in *Business Class*.

The original motivation was more legroom and the chance of a better night's sleep, but *an extra ten kilogram luggage allowance* is a significant factor for *Someone* who'll be looking to bring a quantity of delicacies and other odds and ends she *can't buy in Australia* back with her.

We were, by the way, entitled to *sixty kilograms of luggage* on the way over, so the fact that the scales registered thirty-five in *Cairns* probably means *Someone's* credit card will be reeling by the time we make our way back.

I'd heard rumours of better quality food and drink in *Business Class* as well.

Not that I was expecting anything spectacular in the *Jetstar* version thereof, *but you never know, do you?*

When the *boarding call* came around an hour late we were the first through the *Business* queue.

That gave us plenty of time to acquaint ourselves with the extras, which started with the zipper bag of goodies and the blanket to keep you warm *en route*.

The offer of *a glass of bubbles* to start off before we started moving was a nice start, particularly when the *glass of bubbles* I started lunch with *seemed awfully familiar*.

*Fine*, but there was better to come when the menu arrived, along with the wine list.

The *bean curd appetiser, with marinated Japanese leek and dressing* didn't quite sound like my scene, but the chance of a glass of *Jansz Premium Non-Vintage Rose* bubbles with it sounded like a good way to take the edge off the *tofu*.

Given the rest of the lineup the *Tinpot Hut 2011 Sauvignon Blanc* is probably a classy drop, but take a look at what followed it on the list. *Stella Bella 2009 Chardonnay*, *Innocent Bystander 2010 Syrah* and *Cape Mentelle Cabernet Merlot*? Count me in.

So the entree, a choice of *Chicken rikyu-yaki* or *Beef ginger teriyaki* for the main and a chance of a bit of cheese for afters, along with very decent wine? *No problems*.

As it turned out, of course, airline catering is airline catering.

The food was about what you'd expect under the circumstances, but the glass of *Jansz Sparkling Rose* seemed suspiciously similar to something I'd tried not that long before.

*Madam* had gone for the *Stella Bella Chardonnay*, and ended up with a glass of *seriously good new style Oz chardy*, which was impressive, and when the flight attendant delivered a glass of *Innocent Bystander Syrah* I wasn't *quite* in seventh heaven, but I was a very happy camper.

If we'd been sitting further back we'd have been looking at a choice of an *SSB* or a *Shiraz* from some offshoot of the *McGuigan* dynasty, but here we were with a choice of wine you'd expect to pay around \$10/glass in a restaurant. On that basis, *Business Class* has got me.

The point behind all this is that on your average budget airline *Economy* starts with a price and you start adding on the extras, starting with minor details like luggage, meals, drinks and blankets.

The *Economy* wine options had kicked in at \$7/airline serve bottle. The *Business* glasses were slightly smaller than that, but you'd have been looking at \$14 for the alcoholic equivalent of what arrived gratis on *Business*.

On the other hand, you can start by looking at the business price and start counting the things that'd cost you. Somewhere around \$20 worth of wine by the glass is a bonus on top of the *extra leg room*, the *increased baggage allowance* and the fact that *down the back you're paying for the meal*.

There's still a differential, but if you look at it that way it diminishes rather substantially.

Of course, it helps to have picked up the seats on sale, but every little bit helps...





With lunch out of the way a predictable torpor descended over the area as we settled in for the long haul without much to look forward to in the way of scenery *et cetera*.

I'd noted green jungle below us during lunch, and guessed we were over the *Owen Stanley Range*. There was a highly distinctive river system that brought the name *Markham* to mind, something that needed to be confirmed, and a recent check on *Google Earth* and the *National Geographic Atlas* app failed to deliver a definitive answer, but for the next couple of hours it was a case of a semi-dose with something quietish on the *iPod*.

*Madam* took advantage of the offered *iPad* to watch *Madagascar 3*, which filled in the time rather nicely, and in terms of battery usage I'd have been better off doing something similar.

As the snob in me sniffily dismissed the audio, visual and reading options available on their *iPad*, I tapped away on mine, running down a battery that was seriously depleted by continuing to read the *Neil Young autobiography*.

When they roused us with just under two hours to go, I sampled the *Cape Mentelle Cabernet Merlot*, declining an offer of more solid sustenance, which was of the *noodle in a cup or packaged snack persuasion*, looking forward to the chance to watch the passing light show once we made landfall.

Last time that had been somewhere around *Kyushu* or the southern end of *Shikoku* and there had been a run along the coast with the *Seto Inland Sea* visible, but we were following a different flight path this time around, and the lack of precise geographic awareness in the darkness threw me.

Looking at it in the cool clear light of reality I can see (with the aid of the **National Geographic Atlas** app) that we must have made landfall around the eastern end of **Shikoku**, probably around **Tokushima**, which I managed to confuse with the **Kōbe-Osaka** conurbation around the time the *final landing instructions* came over the **P.A. System**.

*They're leaving that remarkably late*, I thought, under the impression we were on our final approach.

In reality, we were still somewhere around two to three thousand metres up and the lights on my left that would have represented a fairly large urban and industrial centre that looked reasonably close must have been an extensive conurbation that was probably twenty kilometres away.

Still, even if I didn't know where we were the lights gave something to occupy the attention once we'd been told to *turn off all electronic devices*.

Once we'd landed there was a lengthy around the terminal building before we reached the designated air bridge, where another of the benefits of business came into play.

I'd stashed everything I didn't need except for the **iPad** and whatever I could fit in my pockets in the backpack, which had been stowed in the overhead locker, so once the **seat belt sign** went off and **Madam** moved into the aisle retrieving it was easy.

When the doors opened we were in among the first to disembark, which brought us to the first door on the shuttle that carries you towards the **Arrivals** processing area.

Moving swiftly, **Madam** and I had hit the lead of the pack through the temperature check.

I arrived at the **Foreigners** section of **Immigration** (there was a bevy of her compatriots following **Madam** to the **Japanese passport** section) to find there wasn't a queue at all.

Hand over passport and immigration form, place the index fingers on the fingerprint machine, get the facial recognition bit done, and I was through something that mightn't have actually taken an hour last time around but certainly felt like it.

In fact, the process this time round needed less time than I took to type that last paragraph.

Things didn't go quite so smoothly in the **Baggage Claim** area since the baggage handling process doesn't seem to be class conscious, but once we'd done the retrieval and whisked our way through **Customs** we were on the lookout for the shuttle bus and looking pretty good.

I'm not sure exactly what happened, but having been directed to the stop (#6 if I recall correctly) I joined the queue with the bags and **Madam** headed off to get the tickets from the relevant machine.

We'd checked our bags, the bus had arrived, and the driver refused to accept what we wanted to hand over.



Instead of two tickets and two receipts from the machine we had one ticket, the requisite number of receipts, and a driver who wanted *actuals rather than apparent evidence*.

There was some flustered to-ing and fro-ing that ended up costing an extra ¥2000, but we ended up on the bus at 8:35, a better result than we'd expected when we heard about flight delays back in *Cairns*.

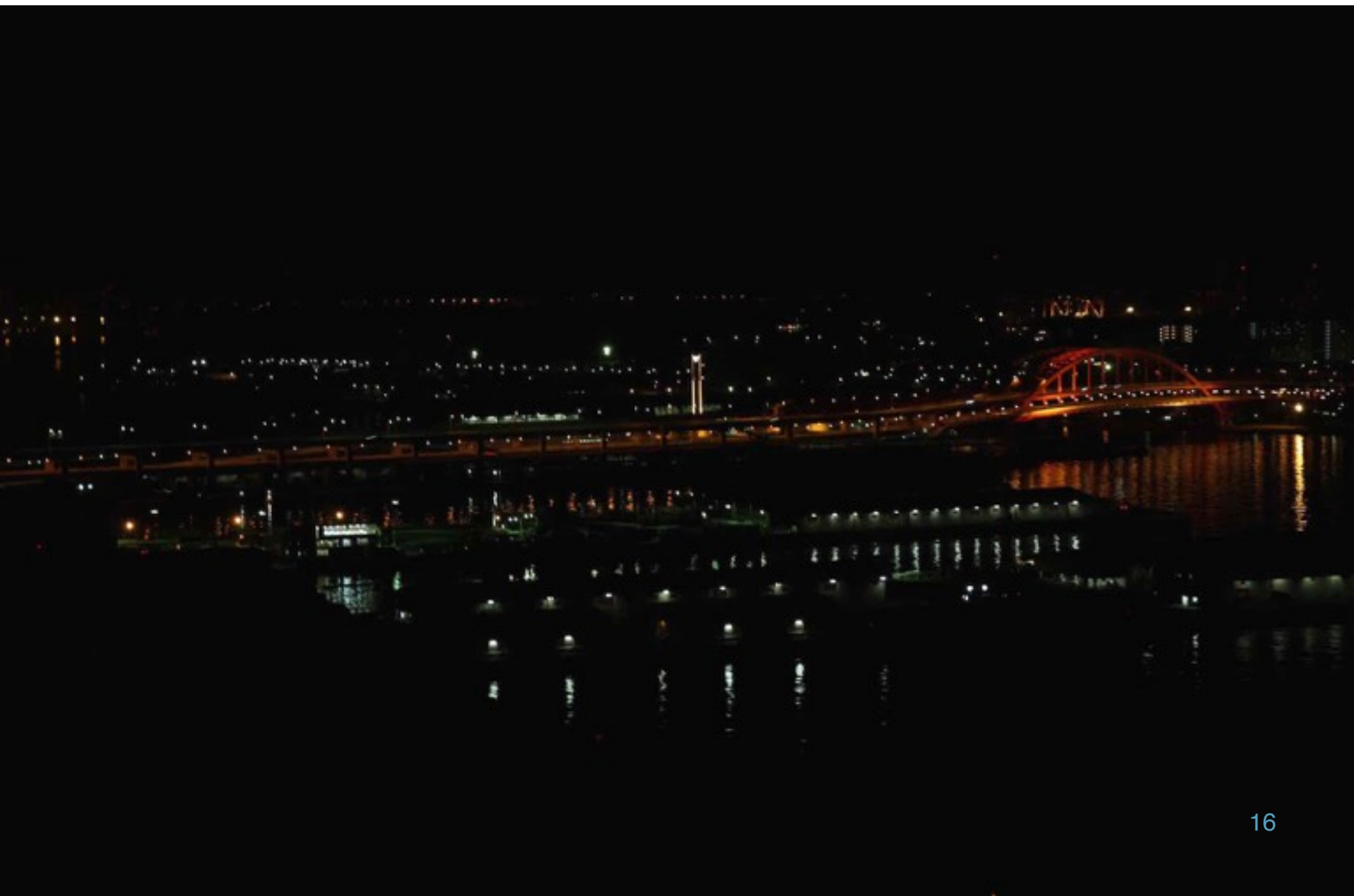
Last time around I'd made a mental note to sit on the right hand side of the bus because it seemed the view of the city lights was better on that side.

This time, *Madam*'s attempts to figure out what had gone wrong proved a significant distraction and I didn't see a lit-up *Osaka Castle* this time either.

The run along the freeway from the *airport* to *Kōbe* takes an hour, and we were in time to catch the 9:50 shuttle to the *Okura* and *Meriken Park Oriental* Hotels

Last time around we'd started at the *Oriental*, but this time it was the *Okura* for the first two nights.

Checking in proceeded with the regular courtesies and rituals, and we were conducted to our room on the twenty-fifth floor by a bellhop who was nowhere near as over the top as the *Harry Houdini* clone we'd encountered at the *Oriental* last time around.





## KŌBE

### ***Friday, 26 October 2012***

Late nights often result in late mornings, but there was plenty on the agenda on ***Admin and Organizing Day***, so despite effective blackout curtains, we were up reasonably early after what had been a late night at the end of a longish and eventful day.

Still, it was after eight when we stepped into the elevator on the way to reacquaint ***Hughesy*** with the slightly strange but very civilized custom of the ***Breakfast Viking***.

We were off, in other words, for a ***smorgasbord*** breakfast.

The day's agenda included:

- ***converting the Rail Pass purchased in Australia*** into an actual usable document,
- ***buying tickets*** for the first few days' rail travel and anything else ***Madam*** thought might be booked out,
- ***chasing up*** computer specific reading glasses with a focal length of 85 centimetres for ***Hughesy***,



- *transferring* the clothing and other items *Madam* was going to need for the rail pass leg from her (blue) suitcase to my black one (*The Black Monster*), and
- *stashing everything else* into the other one, which was going to be spending the next couple of weeks with *The Mother*. That took things like neck cushions, airline blankets, changes of clothes for the return leg from *Cairns* to *Bowen* and other odds and ends out of the *we're going to have to lug all this around the countryside for about three weeks equation*.

Downstairs at the *Viking* I was tucking into a freshly made (as opposed to here's one we made a little earlier) omelette when I had a momentary vision of the inimitable *Frockster* and his likely reaction to the scene before me.

There were, for a start, the regulation number of efficient and courteous hospitality workers, showing guests to seats, clearing tables, delivering tea and coffee and a couple of people who were there to supervise, ensuring that everything was being done just right.

The guests were quietly going about their breakfasts, and the whole scene had a barely audible hum of activity. I figured you'd be able to hear *The Frockster* before he came through the door.

He'd be demanding a table next to *Hughesy and the Kōbe Carnation* and riffing off a variation of the theme that prevented us seeing *Mount Fuji* last time around.

Then, I figured, he'd sight the breakfast options.

Now, I'm not suggesting the man has steak and eggs for breakfast, or sausages, or some specific form of cereal, but the first thing he'd have noticed was an absolute lack of anything resembling *Corn Flakes* or *Coco Pops*.

The eye would have run along what would serve as a perfectly adequate continental breakfast buffet and noted the presence of the standard varieties of fruit juice and the varied selection of pastries, but would have pulled up short where you might expect to find the cereal.

Instead, he'd have sighted a variety of very *Japanese* breakfast options, none of which *Hughesy* is familiar with because of what lies on the other side of the open space.

There are two alcoves *over that way*, the first containing a variation on the old salad bar, with a nice array of mesclun leaves, a tray of cherry tomatoes, the assorted fruits and melons you'd expect to find at the breakfast table, a rather tasty variation on a *peperonata* (which probably explains the grated Parmesan cheese) and a couple of salad dressings (which in *Hughesy's* universe would tend to explain the *croutons*).

I mean, if you're going to have something approximating a *Caesar salad* for breakfast you're going to need *croutons*, *n'est ce pas?*



*The other alcove* delivered variations on bacon and eggs, with a chef on hand to do you an omelette on the spot in a non-stick pan and another doing what looked like perfectly done fried eggs without any hint of frizzle around the edges.

I wasn't 100% sold on the sausages, but a fresh omelette, some bacon and a few other bits and pieces from the other alcove and a ***croissant*** or two made up a pretty solid first go at breakfast.

I ventured back for seconds from the salad bar and a bit more from the pastry department.

*Expecting a fair bit of hoofing, I reckoned I'd need the carbohydrates.*

Back upstairs we finished sorting things out and caught the 9:55 shuttle into ***Sannomiya***. That got us to ***the city's transport hub*** around five minutes later, and after diverting to investigate replacement options for watch batteries headed off to a ***Japan Rail booking office*** for what was probably the most important part of the whole trip.

I've been referring to a ***voucher***, but the ***JR information booklet*** calls it an ***Exchange Order***, and you need to have bought the little devil before you land in the country.

You lob at the ***JR Office*** with your ***Exchange Order*** and your ***passport***, fill out the form you get at the office and after a bit of peel, paste and laminate action you have the document that looks after the majority of your ticket purchases.

It won't get you on to the ***top level Shinkansen services***, and the Pass doesn't work on railway lines that aren't part of the ***JR Group***, but it does cover some ***bus and ferry services***.

Once you've accomplished the exchange the fun really begins.

Given the nature of the beast and the likelihood you'll be sitting in a booking office with a queue of people looking for their own tickets, this is something best done over a couple of sessions rather than all in one fell swoop.

So you get the tickets you ***absolutely must have*** first.

If there's no one waiting you go for more.

If it looks like you're holding up the queue you head off to do something else, and come back for another go, or find yourself another quiet office and proceed from there.

We were looking at a leg from ***Kōbe*** to ***Kitakami*** with lunch in ***Tokyo*** the next day, so we needed those tickets for a start.

Having got that batch we set off for the optometrist for a pair of computer-specific reading glasses and stopped in at ***another JR booking office*** and filled in the ticketing for another couple of stages.



Once the glasses had been dealt with, we noted there was no one in *that JR office*, so we headed back in for another go.

That might seem like an excessively cautious approach until you consider the process involved.

Bear in mind that this is when you know where you want to go and when you want to do so.

Lob up and say you want to go from *here* to *there* on *Thursday*, and it's a lengthier process because there'll be a number of options.

*Madam's* pre-trip research was very detailed, and we already knew when we wanted to leave most places we were going, and we had all the connections along the way nussed out already.

So you start by telling the person you're dealing with what you want and when you want to go.

The operator fills out a requisition form, and when you've finished requesting, they start processing the requests, which involves some fairly solid touch screen action and the odd point of clarification.

That process eventually delivers printed tickets, which are then checked against the requisition form and then checked with the purchaser to make sure you're getting *exactly what you asked for*.

So it's a slow process, and requests for the tickets you'll need to cover a fourteen day pass could occupy one particular operative for a fair chunk of a morning.

That's a significant consideration when you're tying up one of three operators while a queue has formed. Which is why you start with the most important and gradually work your way through the rest.

In any case, with the most pressing ticket issues dealt with, we headed back to the **Okura**.

There was the odd issue to be dealt with *en route*, and we wandered upstairs to collect **the Blue suitcase** just in time for **Madam** to miss the 1:55 shuttle.

The miss was largely made possible by refusal to accept **Hughesy's** logic that *the hotel's over there, there's a road that runs right in front of the hotel and this ramp looks like it'll run down to the roadway*.

It turned out I was right on all counts, but we completed a circuit around the **Kōbe Maritime Museum** and ended up gaining access by the route I'd suggested was there all along.

In any case, there was another bus twenty minutes later.

I'd get in the way *en route* to **Myodani**, so I remained in the **Okura**, and three days' **Travelogue** are more or less complete, up to date about two hours before we head off to rendezvous with one of **Madam's** old school friends and dinner.

With the writing up to date, I decided to follow suggestions and repair to the lobby overlooking the **Japanese garden** behind the building and settle back into reading **Neil Young**.

I'd been happy upstairs, tapping away and listening to **Toumani Diabate** and **Bert Jansch**, which wasn't an option downstairs, but I thought I'd be spotted when **Madam** returned.

*It was her suggestion and I didn't want to be a philistine, did I?*

As it turned out, of course, **Someone** sailed through the lobby while I wasn't looking, failed to notice I was there, had a minor panic attack when the realisation struck and then didn't exactly rush down to ensure everything was OK, and I hadn't been abducted by strange females (or something).



We were due to rendezvous at *Motomachi Station*, which is equidistant from the *Okura* and *Sannomiya*, so we eschewed the shuttle and walked around the edges of the *Old Foreign Settlement* and Chinatown (*Nanking-Nachi*) before making the rendezvous slightly ahead of time.

From there we headed across the road to a *Korean* eatery in a basement at the bottom of a rather steep set of stairs.

There was nothing I could see advertising the place, no prominent display board with the various menu options, no one spruiking what's on offer downstairs.

But when you're that small (it's not the largest eating space you've ever seen and wouldn't hold much more than thirty diners) and that good you probably don't need the shill.

Mind you, there was probably some form of signage outside that I failed to notice.

Dinner came in a variety of small serves in a variety of styles, including some steamed chicken with *kimchi* that I wasn't expected to like, but did, barbecued beef, and a seafood omelette.

There were enough of them to cover the middle of a smallish table with *help yourself* bowls and such in front of each diner.







As the two old school friends chatted away in *Japanese* and the dishes kept coming I did my best to clear space in the middle of the table where everyone could reach things more easily.

One of the things I wasn't particularly eager to reach had arrived with an *I'll tell you what it is later* which is the proverbial dead set give away in the *probably oh yuck* department.

Whatever it was turned out to be chewy, not particularly interesting, and not much to my taste. Subsequent inquiries as to the identity received a single word response.

*Guts.*

There was a bed of noodles as well, which was more to my liking, and I pecked at it intermittently.

Interestingly, no one else seemed concerned to finish *I'll tell you what it is later* off.

A suggestion to this effect will be met with a denial, but I suspect there's a bit of the old *let's see what the foreigner reckons about this one* operating here, much like two exposures to the *surprisingly crunchy jellyfish* last time around.

There wasn't any hint of a wine list, but *Korean* goes better with beer, so I managed to knock over (figuratively, of course) several pitchers while we made our way through the platters.

It wasn't all that late when we wandered back through *Motomachi*, guided by *Old School Friend*, who'd parked very close to the *Okura*.

*Madam* suspects the deals they're offering at the *Okura* and *Meriken Park Oriental* are related to an inconvenient location.

If you know where you're going, are willing to walk, *Motomachi* is only a hop, skip and a jump from the *Okura*.

Cross the road at the zebra crossing, through the car park and over the pedestrian bridge and you're a bit over a stone's throw from *Motomachi*, and with shuttle buses to *Sannomiya* for most of the day and well into the evening isolation is a relative thing.

Still, if they're going to offer deals like the one we were enjoying we'd be mugs to knock them back. We'd picked up an impressive deal (two nights with *Viking* breakfast for ¥23000, remarkably good value when you work on *Madam*'s easy conversion rate of ¥100 to the Aussie Dollar.

It's still pretty good value when you do the sums at the actual conversion rate operating on the day concerned.

By comparison, I'm looking at \$229 as the base rate for my preferred accommodation option when I head to catch an *Elvis Costello* concert in *Sydney* early next year.

Back at the *Okura* we finished most of the preparations for *Travel Day One* and clambered into the cot just after eleven, looking forward to whatever the morrow might bring.





2

## JAPAN 2012: RAIL PASS WEEK 1

The plan was to head out of *Kōbe*, heading north towards the coloured leaves, looping through the *Tohoku* area *en route* to *Hokkaidō*, then back down to *Sendai*. Cross the country back into the *Japanese Alps* and the week ends in *Unazuki Onsen* on the way to *Nagano*, former host city to the *Winter Olympics*.





## KOBE > TOKYO > KITAKAMI

***Saturday, 27 October 2012***

The *Tokyo Express* wasn't leaving until 9:25, but I was awake around the regulation *back home* time.

That meant (a) *the body clock was still operating in **Australian mode*** and (b) *we had time*, once we'd risen around six *for a leisurely movement through the shower and a casual check of the final packing arrangements*.

So casual, in fact, that when we made our way downstairs at the scheduled starting time for the *Viking*, we neglected to *grab the two vouchers on the way out*.

Back upstairs, minor panic when they weren't quite where we thought they were.

It was a timely reminder that you don't want to take things too easy.

There was a single pass through the buffet for *Hughesy*, and *Madam's* return visit brought back a single serve of a single item.



We were back upstairs by 7:40 loaded and locked and checking out comfortably before eight, with intentions towards the 8:05 shuttle. It delivered us to **Sannomiya** in plenty of time to take the one stop underground leg to **ShinKōbe**, arriving a good three-quarters of an hour before the scheduled departure.

The frequency of **Shinkansen** services along the **Tokaido** line was underlined by the fact that our 9:25 **Hikari** was the third train headed for **Tokyo** after nine o'clock, and followed almost immediately after a faster **Nozomi**, which left at 9:22.

Once aboard, the **Black Monster** went into space behind the seats at the back of the carriage; the backpacks went onto the overhead, and we settled back for the three-hour haul to **Tokyo**.

As is so often the case, as soon as the train started moving we were straight into a tunnel, and when we emerged a minute or two later we were zooming along above rooftop level.

We'd landed **Car 7 Seats 10 B&C**, which meant we didn't have access to the window seat, which seemed to be vacant. I could have been tempted to snaffle the spare seat, but, with **Osaka** and **Kyoto** coming up in quick succession it might not be a good idea.

Just as well.





A couple of minutes later we were in **Osaka** where a flood of passengers filled up most of the vacant seats, leaving 10A teasingly empty as we set back off.

That brought us onto the flat land between **Osaka** and **Kyoto**, passing houses intermingled with agricultural plots, assorted commercial premises, apartment blocks, a stretch of forest, a real patchwork of land use.

We came up into **Kyoto** in a hurry.

One moment I was checking we hadn't passed it without my noticing because *I thought we'd be there by now* and the next, there we (quite literally) were.

Another flood of incomers failed to fill 10A, so as we emerged from the regulation tunnel on the way out of **Kyoto** I took advantage of the window seat. With half an hour until **Nagoya** I might as well.

Again, the land between **Kyoto** and **Nagoya** is mostly flat, with the same patchwork of land use.

We weren't quite in **Nagoya** when the news ticker at the front of the carriage revealed **Silvio Berlusconi** had been sentenced to four years, and the stop delivered an occupant for 10A.

The presence of a head between **Hughesy** and the window had me looking around a bit more than would have been the case otherwise, something that underlined the cambering of the tracks on the **Shinkansen** lines.

**Queensland** has the *tilt train* that heads along on the regular railway tracks, but if you want *real speed* and *extremely rapid transit* you want to be travelling on a train that *leans into a cambered curve*.

We'd done the **Nagoya > Tokyo** leg last time around, admittedly in two legs, one as far as **Odawara** en route to **Hakone** and the second the rest of the way a day later, so it wasn't new territory.

That was just as well since the sunshine on that side had the occupants of 9A and 10A sliding down the shades, and directing the sightseeing side of things to the left-hand side, which was, of course, the quarter where you'd expect to be sighting **Mount Fuji**.

Predictably, between the camber and the weather conditions, **Fuji**-viewing prospects weren't looking too flash, but heading out of **Hamamatsu**, when the camber permitted the sight of mountains away on the left (partially obscured by haze, but definitely mountains) made me much more hopeful.

By the time we pulled up in **Mishima**. However, it was obvious that the *Curse of the Frockster* that had prevented us catching sight of **Fujisan** had kicked in again.

For several years, well before our **2008** journey, the **Frockster** had babbled on about trips to **Japan** and the possibilities of planting a **Bowen Mango** tree on top of **Mount Fuji**, a prospect so sacrilegious that *the deities guarding the mountain kept it shrouded in cloud and drizzle* while we were there.



It was an obvious case of ensuring we couldn't locate the sacred peak on the off chance we might return with plans to fulfil *Eylesy's* suggestion, and it seems to have kicked in again.

10A was vacated at *Mishima*, on the edge of the *Yokohama-Tokyo* conurbation.

Apart from the improvement in the sightseeing aspect, there was a handy electrical outlet that allowed a slight recharge of the *iPad* as we thundered towards *Tokyo*. It would only be a tad over half an hour, but every little bit helps.

Everything needed to be packed away the stop before *Tokyo* itself, and once we were off the train, it was a case of seeking out *The Translator*, which was remarkably easy, given the number of people who were in and around *Tokyo Station*.





Once the rendezvous had been made, we wandered off to check out recently completed restoration work that brought the ground level entrance back to the facade built just under a century before.

After a couple of photos of the dome at the entrance, we were off across the station square for lunch.

We had around two hours to spend over lunch, and a glance around the immediate vicinity revealed queues just about everywhere.

Fortunately, we spotted a table in the corner of an *Italian place* that seemed to belong to the *eat at the counter persuasion*, and grabbed it *tout suite*.

It turned out to be a very handy stroke of lunch.

The pasta was made on the premises, the accompaniments were quite acceptable, and there were a couple of *Italian wines* on the wine list.

After lunch, with another hour to kill, the options were to order extras and stay where we were or head off and find somewhere we could sit and talk. If the dessert menu had included *cassata* I'd have ordered one, but it didn't, and I had to settle for a *Nebbiolo* instead.

After lunch we headed to the station, moving through the subterranean redevelopment.

That proved to be quite fascinating.





There wasn't much, surprisingly, until we'd flashed the *Rail Passes* and passed into the *Station proper*, where we found a rabbit warren of retail outlets, some of them more upmarket than you might expect in the setting, including a liquor operation that was offering wine tasting.

I tried two versions of *an indigenous red grape*, something that mightn't sound too promising, but the early drinking style was good, and the other, which had a little bottle age was quite acceptable.

I've tasted *worse wines* made by *better-known makers* from *much more traditional varieties*.

We'd dawdled along the way until we spotted a clock showing 2:44. We were due to depart at 2:56, so it was a case of a scramble to find the seats and, more importantly, claim a bit the all important space behind the seats in the rear of the carriage to stow the *Black Monster*.

That space was almost all gone, but I managed to claim the remaining bit, something that may come in handy when we make the mad scramble off the train in **Sendai**.

We were headed to **Kitakami**, which isn't a stopping point for the faster services and veered away from *the stop everywhere all the way from Tokyo* option that would have meant a reduction in the time allocated for lunch.

Tapping out the **Travelogue** update took us out of greater **Tokyo**, through a stop at **Omiya** and on into the **tsunami** zone.

We'd been over this section before, around the same time of day four and a half years previously, and we were on the right-hand side of the northbound train again.

The countryside is flat, and while there isn't a whole lot of actual visual interest along the way the patchwork is easy on the eye, and the urban stretches have plenty of green scattered among the buildings.

The run towards **Sendai** proved simultaneously easy on the eye and mildly disturbing, largely due to the amount of greenery across to the horizon.

We'd arrived this time with hopes of sighting hillsides full of autumnal colouring. But apart from the odd russet patch here and there the foliage, on the southern side of **Sendai**, at least, remained a dark green that was, as suggested, rather pleasing as a vista but wasn't what brought us there.

Still, we weren't that far into the **Deep North**.

Perhaps things would be more promising as the latitudes rose and altitude kicked in.

A red signal (or something) brought us to an unscheduled stop at **Fukushima**, where there was no sign of the nuclear power facility that attracted attention in the aftermath of last year's *tsunami*, largely, I guess due to the mountain range that lies between the city and the coast.

That isn't the case at **Sendai**, where we were scheduled to change trains.

The **Shinkansen** was around five minutes late coming into **Sendai**, and our slower up country train was due to leave five minutes after the scheduled arrival time of the **Shinkansen**, but it was waiting on the other side of the platform when we arrived, and we managed the switch without difficulty.

The up country train doesn't use the same tracks as its more sophisticated sibling, and from the time we pulled out of **Sendai**, that was rather obvious.

That's not suggesting we're talking the old *clickety-clack* of the **Queensland rattler**, but we moved into the gathering dusk at a noticeably slower speed with much more frequent stops.

The first of those was at *Furukawa*, but not far past there we were into a relatively solid wall of forest, at least on the left-hand side of the train, which is where we found ourselves this time around.

I may well be wrong about the woods, but as we rattled along at a fair old sub-*Shinkansen* clip, there weren't too many lights out there until we started to slow down for the stop at *Kurikoma-Kogan*.

While we were pulled up there, a passing *Shinkansen* reminded us of the pecking order.

*Madam* remarked that we must be starting to climb, and we were probably moving into coloured leaves territory. Given the fact it was now entirely dark outside there was no way to verify the notion, but I hoped she was right.

The carriage hadn't been crowded when we boarded, but there was a steady flow of departures that continued at *Ichinoseki*, And again at *Kanegasaki* so that by the time we reached *Kitakami* there was practically no one left and most of us chickens alighted there.

A check on the ubiquitous *Google* won't give you that much on *Kitakami*, but in any case, we weren't necessarily there for tourist attractions or sightseeing.

*Madam* and *Our Host* go back far enough to warrant a visit whenever we're passing, so it's a matter of catching up and conversing after an evening arrival, with the option of taking a squiz at the sights the next day.

Located at the confluence of the *Kitakami* and *Waga Rivers* in *Iwate Prefecture*, *Kitakami*, with a population around 95,000, sits on the *Tohoku Shinkansen* and the *Tohoku Main Line*, both operated by *JR East*, connecting *Tokyo* and *Aomori Prefecture*.

That makes it a convenient and reasonably accessible resting spot for people looking to catch up with old friends.

It's three hours north of *Tokyo* on the slowest of the three versions of the *Shinkansen*, which delivers a fair indication of the population pecking order where the bullet trains are concerned.

The trip will set you back around ¥12,500 (a tad over \$A145), which underlines the value of the JR Pass (7 days \$335.00; 14 days \$535.00)

The fastest *Shinkansen*, Nozomi, only stop at major centres like *Tokyo*, *Nagoya*, *Kyoto* and *Osaka*, hurtling between destinations at maximum speed, a *now you see it, now you don't* proposition when you're standing on the platform at one of the lesser stations.

*Japan RailPass* holders don't get to ride on those, but that's understandable given the premium service and the demand for seats.



Below that there's a variety of fast and semi-fast versions, depending on the actual line you're taking, including the *Hikari* and *Sakura* (*Tokaido*, *Sanyo*, *Kyushu*), the *Hayate* and *Yamabiko* (*Tōhoku*) that stop more often, but bypass smaller centres.

*Kitakami*, with a population that's heading towards a hundred thousand, still isn't big enough to warrant being included on those services.

We were there in the wrong season since the city's chief claim to fame lies in over ten thousand cherry trees planted along two kilometres beside the *Kitakami River* in *Tenshochi Park*.

You get another sense of pecking orders in the *sakura* department since the fortnight or so in late *April* when the trees are in full bloom might attract a rating as one of the *Tōhoku Region's* three best cherry blossom spots. *Hirosaki Castle* and *Kakunodate* are the others, but it's only regarded as one of the hundred best places nationwide to view cherry blossoms.

Other attractions (mentioned since you might be passing by) include summer festivals including the *Michinoku Traditional Dance Festival*, and *Michinoku Folklore Village*, with thirty preserved farmhouses and other buildings from around *Tōhoku* restored and arranged around forested walkways, ponds and fields.

I guess it's something similar to what we saw in the *Hida Folk Village* in *Takayama* and something that would certainly be a candidate on a less crowded itinerary.

So would *Kitakami City Folklore Museum* (included in the admission fee for the *Folklore Village*) with exhibits of *Buddhist art*, and displays relating to the natural and cultural history of the area.

The *Kitakami River*, coincidentally, being one of the region's most significant geographical features is the fourth largest river in *Japan*. It drains an area of 10,150 square kilometres in the rural areas of *Iwate* and *Miyagi Prefectures* and, interestingly, has no dams from its mouth to the *Shijūshida Dam* north of *Morioka*, which results in a spectacular salmon run every autumn.

We'll be referring to the river again when we talk *Hiraizumi* in tomorrow's *Travelogue*.

Having alighted from the train, we made our way through the station into the car park, where a brief conference saw *Madam* and I back inside buying tickets for the next day's leg after they'd conferred about what it was going to be.

*Our Host* is a teacher, and has plenty to do, so we figured we'd get on a train somewhere along the route we followed on our day's ramblings and then leave her to get on with the rest of her weekend.

Extracting the tickets from an official in the ticket office who seemed to resent people carrying *Japan Rail Passes* in general, or *Japanese-speaking people* carrying *JR Passes* in particular, took a couple of minutes more than you might expect.

But we emerged, tickets in hand, to head off for the evening's accommodation, where we reacquainted ourselves with **Grog Dog** and introduced ourselves to his *canine confrere*, **Red Cordial Dog**, who seems to have fallen into *a vat of hyperactivity inducer*.

We didn't hang about too long and were soon off after a quick discussion of the dinner options.

We got a *sorry, house full* at the first, and a similar response at a second, but a phone call and a brisk walk through the eating and drinking area near the station got us a booth at the third, a **vaguely Italian-themed place** whose trademark dish was **Buffalo Chicken**.

That turned out to be bony chicken pieces with a barbeque sauce, so I'm not sure where the *Buffalo* bit originated.

Still, it was cheap; there was plenty of it.

The Chilean red wine with a title that seemed to translate as **The Devil's Castle** was quite quaffable though I exercised a modicum of restraint.

The bill, which I managed to catch a glimpse of on the way out, ran to around ¥7200, which seemed pretty cheap for a variety of plates of nibbles, a fair sized pizza, a drink each for the girls and around half a dozen glasses of red for **Yours Truly**.

Back at base camp, there was coffee, conversation and a couple of performing dogs to fill in the time until one felt inclined to crash.





KITAKAMI >  
HIRAIZUMI >  
KAKUNODATE

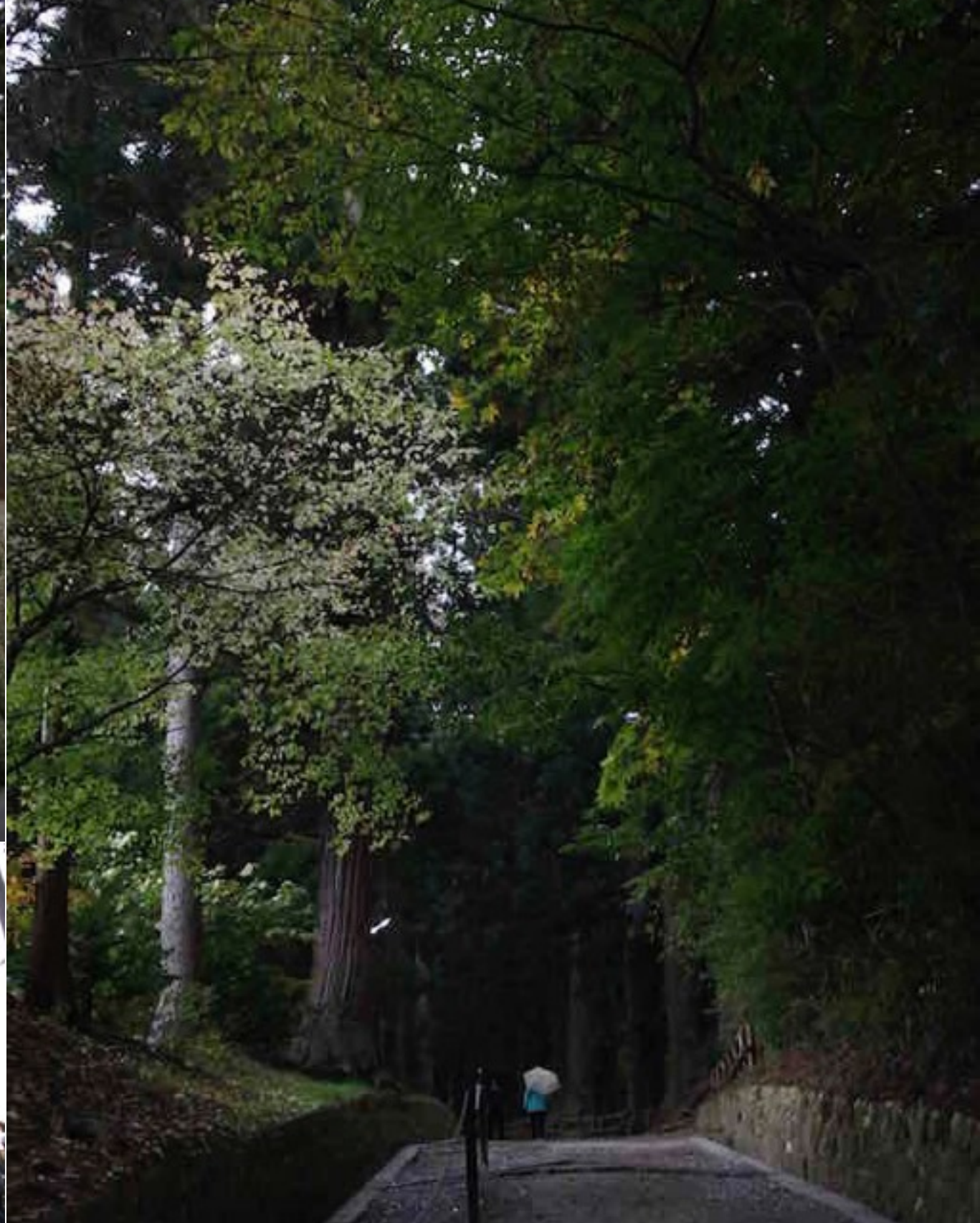
***Sunday, 28 October 2012***

Given the circumstances when I woke, seemingly the first human to have emerged from slumber, I did a quick calculation.

If I was going to sit with the *iPad* on the knees and continue to tap out *Travelogue*, it was a case of finding the niche at the top of the stairs and ignoring the piteous whining emanating from the living area below.

If I'd ventured downstairs, there would have been two insistent canines demanding attention. Until someone else surfaced and took up the running that would make the writing bit impossible.





I hadn't been at it too long before *Our Host* surfaced, and I caught up with the rest of the previous day before venturing into the *maelstrom* for a shower and breakfast.

Readers may suspect hyperbole when I use the word *maelstrom* to describe a living area inhabited by two smallish dogs, but given nonstop hyperactivity (*Red Cordial Dog*) and frenzied demands for attention (*Grog Dog*) no more suitable term springs to mind.

It's equally difficult to come up with a single word to summarise the venue that occupied the bulk of the day, the town of *Hiraizumi* and its premier attraction, *Chusonji* temple.

We set off just after nine, heading south to a place we'd visited last time around. Persistent drizzle had sent us indoors for lunch rather than up the steps to the temple. We had taken a look at the town's other main drawcard at *Motsuji*, and maybe, if I'd done some homework I'd have been more





inclined to venture into the drizzle rather than sit inside and shovel curry down the gullet.

This time, around I'd done detailed research, so strap yourselves in for a somewhat lengthy exposition, boys and girls.

There was a degree of concern on *Our Hostess'* part as to whether I *really* wanted to go to *Chusonji*, but I produced the handy PDF with a *walking around the town map*.

That seemed to quell most of her concerns.

There were some places I wanted to go, even if *going* constituted a brief glance and a photo.

On the surface, driving through the town, there's nothing to differentiate *Hiraizumi* from a myriad of other small *Japanese* country towns.

If you reach the car parks outside the major attractions, you'd soon realise there's something special in the vicinity.

So, the back story.





A population around eight and a half thousand is a far cry from the late *Heian era* or the *Kamakura Period*.

Back then when *Hiraizumi* was the home of the *Fujiwara*, the most powerful clan in *Japan*, and was the *de facto* capital of an area that covered nearly one-third of the country. The population was between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand. The city' almost rivalled the national capital, *Kyoto*.

The oldest structure in *Hiraizumi* seems to be *Hakusan Shrine* at the summit of *Mount Kanzan* (*Barrier Mountain*), described in **1334** as seven hundred years old. The shrine has been rebuilt several times, but its latest incarnation still stands in the same strategic location.



That location, at the junction of the *Kitakami* and *Koromo Rivers*, prompted *Fujiwara no Kiyohira* to move his home to *Mount Kanzan* around 1100. The *Koromo River* was the boundary between the *Japanese heartland* to the south and the territory of the northern *Emishi* peoples.

*Japanese hunters, trappers, settlers and missionaries* had been in contact with the *Emishi* since the early eighth century, with a *Buddhist priest Gyōki* establishing *Kokusekiji* temple in the mountains east of the *Kitakami River* in 729.

Military expeditions to subdue the *Emishi* were repelled in 776 and 787. A scorched earth policy, burning crops, capturing and resettling women and children prompted *Emishi* leaders to surrender in 802. They were subsequently beheaded.

It's one thing to defeat your enemies but another to keep them subdued. The territory ended up as half a dozen semi-autonomous districts along the *Kitakami River* that came under the control of a powerful *Emishi* clan, the Abe family.

*Semi-autonomous* is the operative word.

*Abe no Yoritoki* refused to send taxes to *Kyoto*, led raids south of the *Koromo River* and acted as if he was an independent ruler. He obviously needed to be subdued.







The result was the *Zenkunen* or *Early Nine-Years War* (1050-1062) where the *Abe* were defeated by *Minamoto no Yoriyoshi* and *Kiyohara no Takenori*.

The six districts were handed to *Kiyohara no Takenori*. That didn't work out, and corruption resulted in the *Gosannen* or *Latter Three Years' War* (1083-1087).

Thirteen years later, *Fujiwara no Kiyohira* moved to *Hiraizumi*, on the old border, planning to rule an area stretching from the *Shirakawa Barrier* in the south to present day *Aomori Prefecture* in the north. His new base was located almost exactly in the centre of the *Tōhoku* region on the main road leading from *Kyoto* to the north (the *Frontier Way*).

*Kiyohira* built *Chūsonji* at the top of the mountain and other *pagodas*, temples and gardens followed through *Hiraizumi*'s golden age, one that lasted a mere three generations.





In **1189**, the city was razed by *Minamoto Yoritomo*, who was soon to become *Japan's* first *Shōgun*. He was in pursuit of his brother and rival *Yoshitsune*, who was being protected by the *Fujiwara* leader. After the *Fujiwara* had fallen, the town sank into obscurity, with most of the buildings destroyed.

When *Matsuo Bashō* visited the area in 1689 he reflected on the impermanence of human glory:

*Ah, summer grasses!*

*All that remains*

*Of the warriors dreams*

It was the contrast between the former glory and contemporary reality that prompted the desire to visit and take a look around a few places where there didn't seem that much to see.

But, first, there was *Chusonji*.



We arrived in the car park to find the place close to chockers with *not one, not two, but three baton-wielding traffic wardens* guiding incoming cars and buses into slots in the parking area.

Expecting to pay the regulation couple of hundred yen to fund maintenance and upkeep we were surprised to find there was no charge.

We made our way up the hill, through a magnificent avenue of ancient trees, passing a variety of smaller structures. Apart from being *Hiraizumi*'s most famous temple, *Chūsonji* serves as the head temple of the *Tendai* sect in *Tōhoku*, but it is best known for its *Golden Hall (Konjikidō)*, a mausoleum that contains the mummified remains of the leaders of the clan who ruled the area in its 12th-century heyday.

The *Tendai* sect says the temple was founded in 850, but scholars believe *Chūsonji* was founded around 1100 since there's *no archaeological or historical record of Buddhist activity* in the area before that time.

Similar to *Kyoto's Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion)*, the *Konjikido* is a hall completely covered in gold, dates back to 1124, one of two buildings that survive from the original compound. The other is the *Kyozo Hall*, which was a repository for *Buddhist scriptures (sutra)*.

It mightn't be as impressive as the gilded *Konjikido*, but it predates that building by sixteen years.

The *Konjikido* initially sat in the open air, but successive measures to protect it from the elements saw it housed in a wooden building that still stands on the site, and then moved inside a concrete building and placed behind thick glass, so it's only visible from the front.

Dedicated to *Amida Nyorai (Buddha of Infinite Light)* it measures five-and-a-half metres on the sides and stands eight metres high, contains altars for the first three *Fujiwara* lords. Apart from the roof, the whole thing is covered with gold leaf, decorated with gold lacquer and mother-of-pearl, studded with gold and silver, and includes three *Buddha* images.

Beneath the statues on the central dais the body of the first *Fujiwara* lord, *Kiyohira* is interred. The left holds the body of his son, *Motohira*, and the right holds the body of *Motohira's* son *Hidehira* and *Hidehira's* son, *Yasuhira's* head.

Walking around the network of paths that reach a kilometre into the forest that covers the mountaintop there's more to *Chusonji* than the golden hall, though that is, of course, what draws the crowds.

Other buildings on the site were built in the *Fujiwara* period, including the *Hondo* (main hall), where rituals are performed, a *Treasure Hall* and a *Noh* theatre stage.

Having made our way around the temple, it was time for something in the way of sustenance.

Given the number of tourists and sightseers in the area, you'd probably expect a lengthy delay.



I hoped the majority of those inclined to seek out lunch were being delayed by the booming drums and the Noh theatre performance we'd bypassed.

We were on a side track, separate from the path we'd followed on the way up when we passed a seemingly innocuous building with some *Japanese signage* out the front.

I'd have wandered past, but **Our Host** pulled us up, took a squiz at the sign and suggested we head inside. The description of what we'd be getting inside wasn't the sort of thing that would prompt an immediate *Yes!*

On the other hand, if we could get in that took the lunch issue off the agenda.

Which it did, and rather tasty it was.

The meal was punctuated by frequent updates on the score line from a soccer semifinal, where **Our Host's** school were battling the local equivalent of *Argentina* for a spot in the final.

At two-nil down things did not look promising.

Back in the car as we headed off in search of places associated with former glories frequent updates on the soccer saw the score line move from two-nil down to two-all by full time.

An own goal had the opposition ahead, then came the equaliser before the team hero slotted in the penalty that won the game.



And there's a little side story that goes with that.

The star footballer, apparently not a scholar, had been looking at avenues of employment once he's finished his schooling and wasn't a candidate for tertiary education.

He had, according to *Our Host*, applied for a job as a fireman, and had been scheduled for an interview that very day. With a morning match against *Morioka* and a morning job interview, it looked like something would have to give, and you'd probably assume that a career path would take precedence over temporary sporting glory.

At the same time, the *Japanese* take their school sport seriously.

The first full day of our last visit coincided with the grand final of a *High School baseball competition* significant enough to generate nationwide TV coverage. I know because I saw it, and we ended up sitting at a table next door to a bunch of Okinawans, chain-smoking and toasting their home town's success later that evening.

The semifinal was a big enough event to have *the Mayor* order the *Fire Brigade* to reschedule the interview so the star striker could play.

They lost the Grand Final, but he got the job.







But as far as the locations associated with former glories were concerned, the weather put paid to plans to wander around the place on foot, but we managed to find the ruins of *Kanjizaiōin*, which once boasted a *Pure Land's style Jōdo garden*, built by *Fujiwara Motohira's* wife.

Fire destroyed it in the 16th century, and today, all that remains is a park and a pond.

Across the road, a sign near a cluster of houses is all that's left of the part of the old *Frontier Way* that used to be *Hiraizumi's* main street.

Back in the day, it was an area that would have had blocks of shops, as well as storehouses and commercial premises.





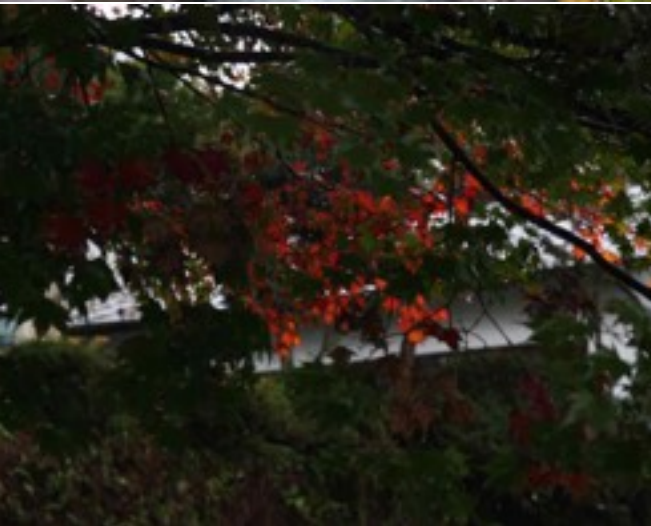
From there, we made our way to the site of *Muryokōin* temple, once modelled after *Byodoin* in *Kyoto*, but apart from the sign that identifies the site all that remains is the temple's pond, along with a larger sign that gives you an impression of the magnificent structure that once stood there.

We also made our way towards the summit of *Mount Kinkeisan*, where *Buddhist sutra* were once buried.

Under more favourable conditions I might have been tempted to take a stroll down the paved path, but I'd dictated the agenda for long enough and passed over the reins to *Our Host*.

It wasn't long before the train left, and there were other fish to fry in an environment of coloured leaves.





The quest for coloured leaves brought us back to the *Genbi Gorge*, home of the *flying dungo*, though you'd have expected the weather to have stifled the *dungo* trade.

We parked at the *Sahara Glass Park*, again pretending to be paying customers before heading for the gorge.

The coloured leaves weren't quite at their best but weren't too far off.

From there it was on to *Ichinoseki*, farewell to *Our Host*, and on to a *Shinkansen* that took us to *Morioka*, where news of the soccer semifinal defeat didn't seem to have reached the platform.

We made our way across to the right line for the *Akita Shinkansen* and were on the ground in *Kakunodate* in *not quite* pitch dark and light drizzle just after five-fifteen.

Fortunately, the hotel was located next door to the station, the rain wasn't falling that heavily, and the dash across open space was a mere cricket pitch or thereabouts.



Better, an investigation revealed *a coin laundry*, which solved a slight predicament. We'd been on the road for five days, and *the laundry backup* wasn't anywhere near *the critical stage*.

But with two nights in *Kakunodate*, a late arrival into *Aomori* on *Tuesday* and an evening appointment in *Sendai* on *Wednesday*, it made sense to get *the dirty laundry* we'd accumulated clean, and push the crisis point back another week or so.

With the washing machine doing its thing, the hotel restaurant did a perfectly acceptable job of filling a yawning gap without threatening to hit any heights.

Afterwards, we retreated to the room, free *WiFi*, the necessary checks on the washing machine and a couple of healthy slugs out of the bottle of *saké* that had been donated to the *keep them warm in the mountains* campaign.

Needless to say, there was no question of needing any rocking.







## KAKUNODATE > DAKIGAERI VALLEY > KAKUNODATE

***Monday, 29 October 2012***

The big issue when I stirred on *Day Six* of the trip involved the weather conditions outside, and an initial glance out the window was hardly something you'd describe as promising.

While there was no way of telling whether there was *any actual precipitation* without wandering outside there was visible mist and a murky gloom that didn't bode well as far as the light was concerned.

There wasn't a definite plan for the day's activities, more a wish list, weather permitting.



After showering and discussing what we needed in the clothing department, we headed down for a very *Japanese breakfast*, returning to see signs that the weather might be lifting.

The first thing was to scope out options for *Tuesday's* departure.

The preferred option was *a non-JR rail motor operation* that couldn't be booked online, and we also needed to check for a more definitive outlook on the day's weather forecast.

*The endangered rail scenario* looked good, but we were advised to be first in the queue if we wanted to be sure of a seat. That wasn't likely to be an issue since the hotel is on the other side of the plaza outside the station.

The girl in the *Tourist Information Centre* had promising news on the weather front.

By the time we were waiting for the shuttle to the *Dakigaeri Valley*, I was thinking of removing the corduroy shirt and doing the walk in a t-shirt. That represented a remarkable turnaround from earlier, when I was advised to ditch the corduroy in favour of the merino thermal underlay and the padded insulator.

The t-shirt bit was probably never a viable option, but the fact that it was even considered shows how much the weather prospects had improved.







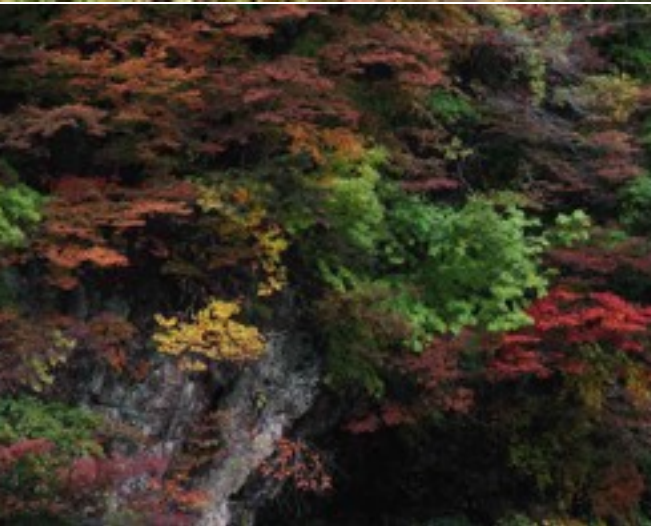
The bus shuttled off on time at 10:15, stopping at the *Tazawaka Art, Spa, Brewery and Theatre Resort* along the way. It's a twenty minute run through the countryside, and while you can do it by taxi, which may be quicker, the free bus is the way to go if you're not inclined to shell out for a cab fare.

The bus runs during *October* and early *November*, so there's no choice for the rest of the year.

Reputedly one of the most beautiful valleys in *Japan*, the *Dakigaeri Valley* runs along the banks of the *Tamagawa River*, and it's obvious from the time you pull into the car park that you're in for something special.

The mountains that surround the valley would be an attractive proposition any time from spring onwards, but are at their best as the autumn leaves start to turn.





The mail we'd received in town suggested they were somewhere between thirty-three and fifty per cent.

If the lower estimate was a correct assessment, I don't think my eyes could stand the full glory at the height of the season.

You make your way in past the predictable array of stalls offering snacks and regional specialities.

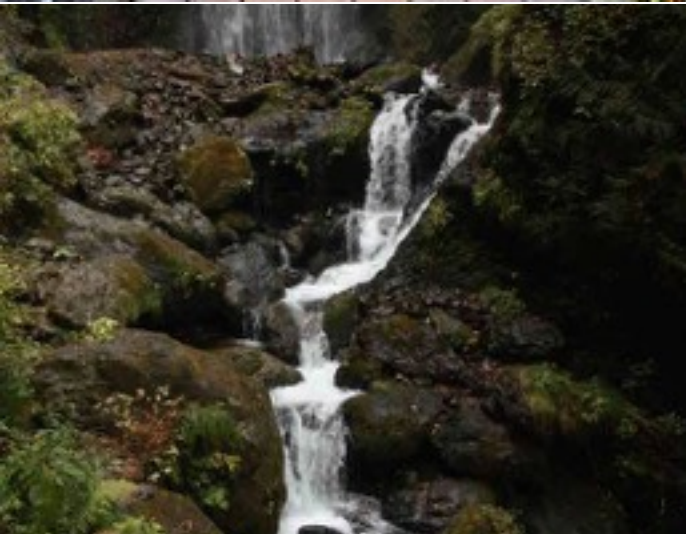
The trail that takes you into the valley starts at a *Shinto* shrine devoted to the god of rain before the *Kaminoiwahashi suspension bridge* leads you onto the path along the river valley.

The path was initially a railway used by timber getters.

Wagons loaded with cedar logs were carried to *Jindai*, the nearest station on the main line.

Unsurprisingly, given the rail origin the track winds through the valley with tunnels and bridges, but only the first four kilometres (out of twelve) were open to the public when we were there.





That stretch was enough to get us to the ***Mikaerinotaki waterfall***, which was the thirty-metre highlight of an incredible stroll through forests where the leaves were around seventy-five per cent (according to ***The Supervisor***, who's more *au fait* with these things than your narrator).

I also noticed the waters of the ***Tamagawa River*** are a cobalt blue, much like the water in ***Bluewater Creek*** north of ***Townsville***. The explanation, in that case, was, if I recall my ***High School Geography***, *copper sulphate*. Whether that applies, in this instance, is uncertain. I must check on that, but ***English language material*** is thin on the ground.

Had the trail been open for more than four kilometres we may well have failed to make it back for the 12:45 shuttle bus, which would have raised issues with lunch and would have limited the time available to look at the ***samurai quarter*** of ***Kakunodate***.





Enclosed by mountains and the *Hinokinaigawa River*, the castle town of **Kakunodate** is famous for its *samurai* tradition. The town was founded in **1620**, with two distinct areas, the *samurai district*, once home to eighty families, and the merchant area.

Hundreds of cherry trees line a two kilometre stretch of the river and make it one of *Tohoku*'s most famous *sakura* viewing spots and the town has been tagged the *little Kyoto of Tohoku*.

Lunch was a curry and a flavoursome product of the local brewery that went down well enough to have me dropping into a bottle shop on the way back to the hotel to pick up further examples of the local brewer's art.

The eatery was an outbuilding of a residence in the merchants' quarter, and a wander through that part of town allowed us to have a look around before heading slightly uphill to the autumn leaves in the *samurai quarter* in the northern part of town.

**Kakunodate** is, by all accounts, a prime example of a *Japanese castle town* although the castle hasn't survived.





Several of the *samurai houses*, privately owned by descendants of the warriors are open to the public and are said to offer some of the best examples of *samurai architecture* in *Japan*

We didn't see many foreigners while we were wandering around, but the town is high on the pecking order as far as the scenic side of things is concerned.

Given the coloured leaves on display, it wasn't difficult to see why.

We took a turn through a *samurai house* and received a definite reminder of just how tough things must have been in winter.

With the prospect of moving on the morrow, we were tucked away in the cot reasonably early.





That isn't too difficult to do when nightfall comes in well and truly after five in the afternoon.

We'd explored most scenic options around town, enough to know there'd be a case for returning in the *sakura* season though that would probably be an overnight stop *en route* to somewhere else. If we do, there'll be a stroll through the riverbank tunnel of cherry blossoms, designated as a *Place of Scenic Beauty*.

And there's the prospect of spring leaves as an additional treat.

Accommodation could, however, be an issue.

*Kakunodate* is big on festivals, and you'd assume the town will be booked out for *Sakura Matsuri* in spring. There's a lion dance with drums and flute (*Sasaramai*) in summer, and *Yamabuttsuke Matsuri* in early autumn (*samurai*-themed floats). The sequence wraps up with *Hiburikamakura* to ward off evil spirits and improve prospects for a healthy New Year in winter.

You might think a return is unlikely, but given the experience on *the endangered railway* the next day, you can never tell.





## KAKUNODATE > TAKANOSU > AOMORI

***Tuesday, 30 October 2012***

If *Monday's* effort seems in direct contradiction to *Hughesy's if you've got the rail pass you might as well use it* principle, the next three days were going to deliver rail travel in abundance.

The schedule for the first day, on the other hand, underlines the *variety* side of things, starting with a morning ride on an ancient rail motor on what *Madam* christened *the Endangered Railroad* up to *Takanosu*.

A stop for lunch at a *French restaurant* would be followed by a leg on a JR local line down to the coast and the main line service looping around the northwestern coast of *Honshū* to *Aomori*.

If you're looking for details regarding the *Endangered Railroad*, the official moniker is the *Akita Nairiku Jūkan Railway*. It's what's termed a third sector company (the *Japan Rail* consortium being *the first sector* and *the major private lines* the second) that took over *two former JR lines* in *1986*, and added a new line to link the two in *1989*.



Since the line runs across a sparsely populated region, it's never going to be a big money spinner, and since it faces what you might term *severe business challenges* you don't need to be *Einstein* to figure out the origin of the *Endangered* bit.

Seats on the *Endangered Rail* are on a first come, first served basis, and we weren't sure whether the carriage would have room to stow the *Black Monster*. So we were into breakfast at the hotel just after seven, packed and booked out around eight and second in line for tickets in the booking office.

So far so good.

We were second on the train as well, which gave us plenty of time to scope out possible luggage space.

As it turned out, there were a couple of bench style seats towards what we presumed must be the front of the rail motor, where there was a useful space for the *Monster* and the prospect of a view to the front on what promised to be an ultra-scenic route.

The cabin wasn't quite full when we started off, but there wasn't an abundance of spare seats either, and there was no way of knowing how many of the passengers were there for the long haul to *Takanosu* and how many were destined for a stop somewhere along the way.







As soon as we started someone plonked themselves in front of where I was sitting, blocking the view through the front of the rail motor, which was, why I'd plonked myself there in the first place.

We started off across farmland, with stops at little places called *Ugo-o-ota* and *Saimyoji*, which lead to the conclusion there was likely to be an amount of picking up and dropping off along the way

I wasn't clued into the back story and wasn't sure whether we were talking *a tourist operation* or *a genuine local line serving relatively isolated communities*.

As time went on, it was evident local traffic was the primary *raison d'être* for the line, but tourists in the spring and autumn allow the business to keep its nose above water.





There was a delay at the third stop (*Yatsu*), where the platform sat beside a siding, to allow a motor headed in the opposite direction to pass.

We were off again at 9:18.

Subsequent research revealed there's a nearby park where *Japan's* largest *Saimyoji* chestnuts are grown, and a vast *katakuri* violet field said to be the largest in *Japan*. That's another reason for tourists to step off the train for a bit.

Next time, maybe we will, but, this time, around we had serious ground to cover.

From *Yatsu*, the line threads its way through mountains and forests.





The mountain leg began with a rapid-fire sequence of three or four tunnels, before opening onto flat farmland again.

Heading upwards through a landscape where the leaves were well and truly on the turn, particularly on the slopes, we reached *Matsuba*, the old terminus when the line was part of the national railway system.

From there, you could head across to the country's deepest lake, *Lake Tazawa*, or relax at one of the *onsen* resorts.

By *Ugonakazato*, whole slopes had gone multicolour.

A thirteen-minute delay at *Kamihinokinai* gave people a chance to stretch the legs and grab the odd photo.

It also gave the opportunity to ascertain that I was, again, the only foreigner in the vicinity.

The delay was to allow an express, a rail motor of roughly equivalent age, to pass. Once it had, we were off again at 9:56.



We hit a tunnel at *Tozawa* at 10:03 emerged, and then another, then a third and a fourth in the space of two minutes, a fifth at 10:05 and a minute later we were in for a long dark haul, moving steadily higher, and emerging five minutes later.

We were only just out of the tunnel when we reached a station platform lined with *a tour party* happily clicking away as the train approached, and clambering aboard once we'd ground to a halt.

They were obviously aboard for the most scenic section of the route, which took the train slowly across a couple of bridges, and were gone again a few stops further down the track.

I hadn't sighted too many other travellers getting on, but there were a couple of instances where the train stopped to set down the odd passenger one assumes came aboard at *Kakunodate*.

Along the way we passed *Ani-Matagi*, one of the top hundred stations in *Tohoku*, where there's also a bear pasture, *Utto Onsen Matagi no Yu* resort, *Yasunotaki Falls*, reputed to be the second most beautiful waterfall in *Japan*, and a museum where displays cover the history of the bear hunters of northern *Japan*.

Not that we were getting out to check out displays that would probably have lacked *explanatory material in English*, you understand.







The population was thinned out considerably there, and we seemed to be well into the uplands, following a broad river valley.

Once the tour party and *onsen* set were gone, there was a noticeable change in the coloured leaves that I'm inclined to ascribe to a preponderance of evergreens rather than deciduous species.

The last leg into *Takanosu* took us across a broad expanse of upland paddy fields.

Overall it was another spectacular tick in the box for *Madam's* research skills.

Comments from people she'd spoken to on the train suggested we'd managed to lob there on the very best day. Given my lack of experience with seasonal leaves, I'm inclined to take their word for it.





Once we disembarked in *Takanosu*, there were of two and a half hours to kill, and the research skills kicked in once again.

Three streets down from the station, a right-hand turn takes you onto a quiet back street with a rather good *French restaurant* that operates under the moniker of *Boire un Coup*.

Of course, we were there for lunch, which doesn't marry well with full *a la carte* and an extensive wine list.

There were two *plats du jour*, a chicken confit and a pasta marinara, both of which were quite delicious, and we tried a *Chardonnay* and a *Cabernet*, both from *Languedoc*, and both good varietal examples of wine from varieties not usually associated with the region.

I had the *Chardonnay* with the pasta and thought it was in much the same flavour profile as *new wave Australian* takes on the variety.

With lunch concluded we still had an hour to kill. An inquiry about origins of wine had the proprietor proudly hauling bottles out of the wine fridge.

He had a right to be proud because, for a restaurant in a small provincial town in *northern Japan*, it was an excellent range.



That turned into a conversation about wine that could have gone on for a while, but when a couple of customers who'd eaten in the private room on the other side of the entrance turned up to pay their bill we took the advantage to escape.

The rest of the waiting time passed in the waiting room at *Takanosu station*, a spell long enough to bring the narrative more or less up to date.

The next leg involved a connection on a local line that brought us down to *Higashi-Noshiro*, where we boarded the rather splendidly named *Resort Train #5*.

Looking at the train itself you'd think there wasn't that much different or unusual about it.

Once you're aboard, however, two things become apparent.

The first is that you've got leg room over and above what you'd reasonably expect.

I suspect this has something to do with the *Resort* in the train's name since you'd expect holidaymakers to be carrying a bit more baggage than the average traveller.

The second is the *not quite ceiling to floor* windows.







Looping around the northwest of *Honshū* we'd be looking across the *Sea of Japan* towards the setting sun, and windows stretching from just below the overhead luggage rack to below the armrest maximise the viewing options.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the way things panned out.

The sun was shining, albeit rather reluctantly, when we left *Higashi-Noshiro*, but the cloud cover had kicked in big time before we hit the coast, and although the fat old Sun was out there somewhere, he was lurking behind a bank of clouds that ruled out anything that resembled an actual sunset.

Although that was the case the views out across a strangely tranquil ocean that presented a contrast to obvious anti-erosion work taking place along the actual coastline.

The railway line hugged the coast, sometimes with a road in between wheels and water, sometimes, quite literally, looking from the picture window almost directly down onto the beach.

Twice, along particularly picturesque stretches of coast, the train slowed to a crawl to allow maximum photo opportunities.

There were frequent stops along the way, as befits a train servicing a resort area, with comings and goings as passengers moved from one venue to another.





After the Sun had slunk below the horizon, there wasn't much to see, so I settled back to read, tossing up between the *Neil Young autobiography* and the latest issue of ***Uncut***, downloaded in *Kakunodate*.

An announcement over the train's P.A. System brought an unexpected flurry of action at ***Kawabe***. The ***Resort Special*** took itself forward one more station, then retraced its path *en route* to ***Aomori***.

The announcement advised the impatient aboard our train to switch to a local train at the next station, which would get us into ***Aomori*** some twenty minutes earlier than originally planned.

Needless to say, a mad scramble ensued, hastily stowing the ***iPad*** in the backpack, and then a frantic hauling of the ***Black Monster*** up the station stairs, across the bridge to the neighbouring



platform and back down again. It was a situation where you'd have been reluctant to use the escalator even if one had been available.

The line into **Aomori** seems, on the evidence available, to be a single line, given lengthy delays in a number of stations to allow trains higher up the pecking order to travel in the opposite direction.

The second last stop was **ShinAomori**, the **Shinkansen** stop, located well out of the city to allow easier construction of the next stage of the network, a new underwater connection to **Hokkaidō**.

Back on the ground in **Aomori**, there was a spell of confusion as to the location of the hotel, which was a bit further away from the station than we'd thought.

Once we'd checked in we checked out **the laundry facilities** on the way to dinner, which comprised a *healthy in one sense but unlikely to attract a tick from the Food Police* serve of deep fried scallops, accompanied by the usual trimmings in the form of rice, *miso* soup and assorted garnishes.

You couldn't have complained about the quantity or the quality, but after around a week of three hearty serves a day **Hughesy** wasn't keen on the bulk.

I made as big a hole as I could in everything else, but was careful to ensure there wasn't *a skerrick of scallop* in evidence on the plate.

Next time I intend, as I pointed out to **Madam**, maxing out on the scallops with no accompaniments at all except, possibly, a beer to wash them down.

And I'm not even sure about the beer.

Back at the hotel, a washing machine in **the laundry** was available, though it required ¥400 to operate so you can't say it was free. Since it was a neat combination of washer and dryer, it meant we could avoid the *up and down checking to see if the dryer needed another cycle or two* routine.

Still, that meant a two-hour cycle, so **Madam** poured herself a full **Japanese bath** of the *fill almost to the brim and then immerse yourself* variety, spent a good quarter of an hour therein and insisted **Hughesy** do the same.

There's a fair bit more body mass where **Hughesy's** concerned, and I was fairly Clancy conscious as I set about the immersion process.

Still, regardless of the substantial overflow (**Japanese bathrooms** seem to be constructed to cater for it), it was a rather pleasant way to relax.





## AOMORI > HAKODATE

***Wednesday, 31 October 2012***

The day kicked off with the close to regulation reasonably early (8:24 isn't up there with the sparrows at first light, but isn't exactly late either) departure from a station that the cool, clear light of day showed to be right beside ***Aomori***'s waterfront.

A ferry that transports cars and passengers over to ***Hokkaidō*** was clearly visible from the footbridge *en route* to Platform 6).

***Aomori Prefecture*** has a number of tourist attractions, mostly nature related, though historic ruins including ***Sannai-Maruyama*** (***Japan***'s largest, said to date back to 4,000 to 5,000 BC), ***Korekawa*** and ***Kamegaoka*** would have their share of appeal to the interested observer.

***Hirosaki Castle*** is a well-known cherry blossom venue.

Given our schedule (arriving around seven-twenty in the evening, off to take the tunnel under the ***Tsugaru Strait*** before eight-thirty the following morning) we were never going to be doing much looking around.



The city is a relatively recent development, dating back to the *Edo Period* when the *Hirosaki clan* began building a port and used woods nearby as landmarks for inward-bound shipping.

*Aomori* either translates as *blue* or *green forest* and the name did not come into use until after 1783. A counter theory attributes it to an *Ainu* word. Either way, there's no doubt the town was an important stepping stone in the *Japanese colonisation* of *Hokkaidō*.

Human occupation of the area goes back a ways, and it was part of the region ruled from *Hiraizumi* by the *Northern Fujiwara* clan during the *Heian Period*, although it was mainly inhabited by hunting and gathering *Emishi* people.

Around the start of the *Edo Period*, *Aomori* was a minor port but in the administrative reforms that followed the *Meiji Restoration* various feudal domains were abolished and replaced with prefectures, a process that brought about the inauguration of *Aomori Prefecture* on *23 September 1871*.

*Aomori*, however, wasn't designated as a city until *1 April 1898*.

You can't help thinking those developments were related to the *Japanese* aim to bring the whole of the archipelago under Imperial rule and restrict foreign incursions.





Within a year of the creation of *Aomori Prefecture* the *Hokkaidō Colonization Office* was operating a ferry service from *Aomori* to *Hakodate*.

Twenty years later the *Tōhoku Main Line* connected the area with *Tokyo* by rail. The line we'd used to reach the city is slightly more recent, dating back to *1908*.

Modern *Aomori* owes much of its status (apart from lurks and perks from being the prefecture capital) to its position at the terminus of those two rail lines and role as the port for the *Seikan Ferry*, which opened in *1908*. It sailed between *Aomori* and *Hakodate* nearly three-quarters of a million times, carrying 160 million passengers until the *Seikan Tunnel*, the longest tunnel of its kind in the world, came into service.

The *Tōhoku Expressway* connected *Aomori* to *Tokyo* in *1979*, and the city is currently the northern terminus of *Japan's Shinkansen* service though that will change in the not too distant future when the new bullet train line goes in under the *Tsugaru Strait*.

We saw signs construction of that line is well and truly under way.







Sighting the ferry on the way to the morning train was a reminder of those matters,

From *Aomori*, the line followed the coast, with views across the water to *Hokkaidō*, though what I thought was the northern island turned out to be the northeastern arm of *Honshū*.

Blue sky and sunshine meant it was sunglasses weather, not conducive to *iPad* typing. That could be caught up on the half hour haul under the *Tsugaru Strait*.

We were running beside the beach as we came into *Kanita*, but from there the line started to move inland, with deep green forests on either side, with broad swathes of multicoloured leaves interspersed with the evergreens, though there were paddy fields closer to the line itself.

By 9:03 we were starting to run into tunnels, the first of them relatively short, and by 9:05 we'd reached a longer one, emerging again by 9:08, when we were supposed to be hitting the big one.

The train came to a halt at *Tsugaru Hamana*.

When we were underway again, with water clearly visible on the left at 9:11 we were in another tunnel. It was not quite the one that meant our next sighting of daylight would have been on *Hokkaidō*, and there were more as we made our way under coastal ridges running down to the sea, which was still over there on our left.

The false alarms meant I wasn't sure whether the tunnel we hit at 9:14 was the big one, but given the fact that we were still hurtling through the darkness two minutes later, I guess it was.



We were supposed to hit the bottom at 9:22, two hundred and forty metres down in a tunnel that's ten metres wide and eight metres high, though there was no way of assessing dimensions in the Stygian gloom outside.

It was an outstanding engineering feat, some forty-two years in the making.

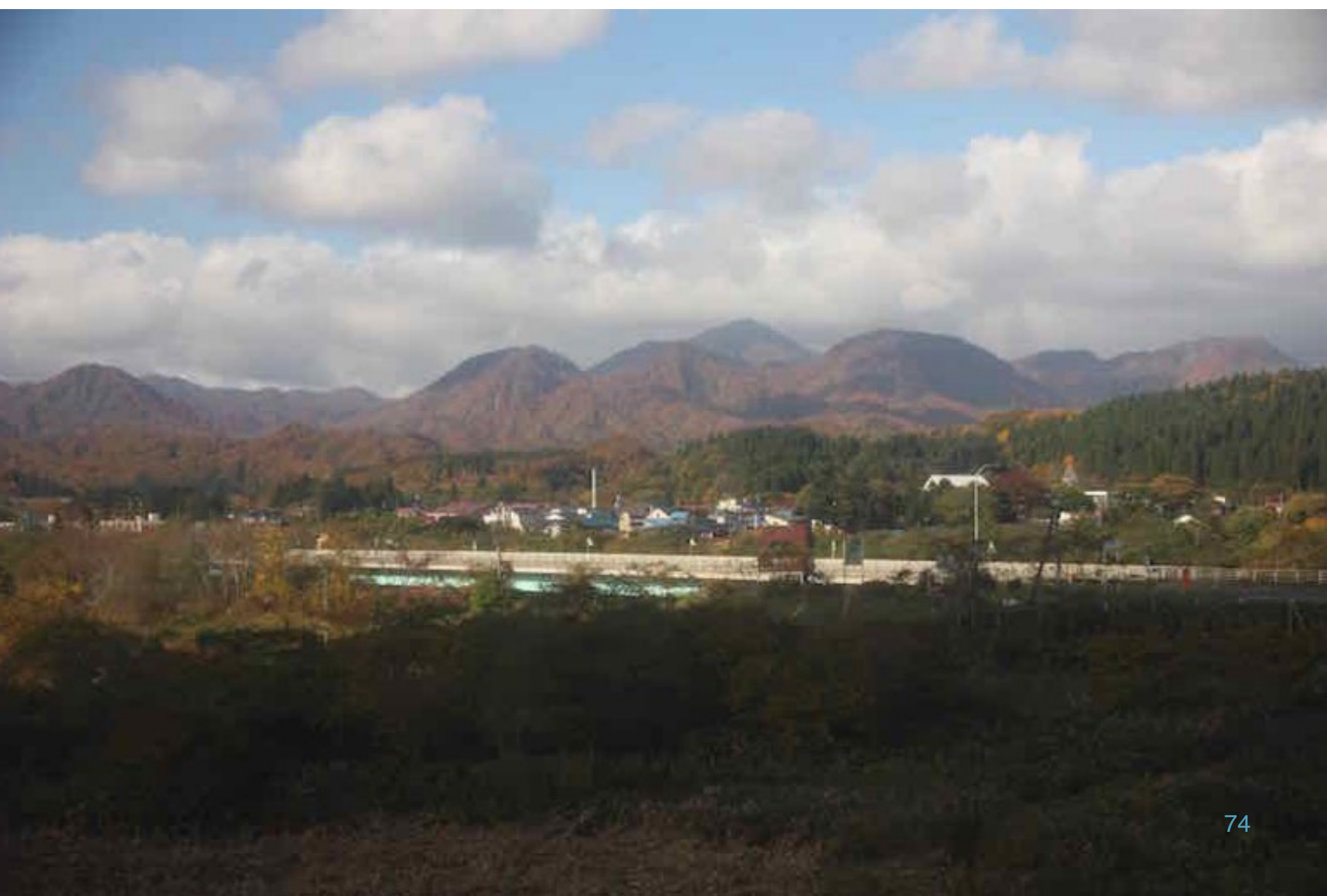
At 9:40 we were onto *Hokkaidō*, emerging with a heavily wooded hillside area on our left as the train pulled into the station at *Shiriuchi*. We were back in a tunnel shortly after that, presumably prompted by the same engineering concerns that applied on the other side.

We were on the eastern side of the train, so it was sunglasses weather as we passed what looked like the in-progress construction of the *Hokkaidō Shinkansen* line.

The water in the Strait was like a mill pond, and it was a case of sitting back and enjoying the view for the rest of the journey.

The last stage took us on a sweeping loop around the harbour that brought *Hakodate* to prominence, so at this point, it's time for another diversion into historical and geographical background.

After it opened to foreign trade in **1854**, *Hakodate* was the major port in *northern Japan* and until the *Great Hakodate Fire* of **1934**, it was the northern island's largest city.





It now ranks third behind *Sapporo* and *Asahikawa*.

The city's origins date back to **1454**, when *Kono Kaganokami Masamichi* built a manor house in an *Ainu* fishing village called *Usukeshi* (a bay in *Ainu*).

We're talking frontier lifestyle and issues with indigenous people here, and an *Ainu* rebellion drove *Masamichi*'s son, *Kono Suemichi*, and family out of *Hakodate* in **1512**.

There isn't much in the way of recorded history for the next century with a recurrent conflict between the *Ainu* and armed merchants like the *Kono* family, who set out to establish trading posts and control trade in the region.

Given the frontier experience elsewhere you'd tend to assume people weren't interested in keeping records for posterity, and you'd guess there wasn't a great deal of government supervision either.

In any case, there was an *Ainu* uprising led by a warrior called *Shakushain* between **1669** and **1672**, that resulted in defeat and suppression for the *Ainu* and laid the foundations for modern *Hakodate*.

By the nineteenth century, the settlement was flourishing, and there was rapid development after, the *Tokugawa Shōgunate* took direct control of *Hakodate* in **1779**. A magistracy was established in **1802**.

But the big change came in **1854** when a fleet of five U.S. ships surveyed the harbour under the terms of the *Convention of Kanagawa*, negotiated by *Commodore Matthew Perry*.

The port was completely opened to foreign trade on **2 June 1859** as one of *five Japanese points of contact* with the outside world. Visitors can see evidence of that status in the *Old Foreign Quarter*, which hosted several overseas consulates.

On the ground in *Hakodate*, the priority was, as usual, dropping the *Black Monster* at the hotel, but there were a couple of logistical and administrative details that needed to be sorted.

*Madam* needed to book the next batch of train tickets, and the travelling funds needed to be replenished, so a rendezvous with an ATM was also a priority.

We could have accomplished those things before we hit the hotel, but railway ticket offices and *Black Monsters* aren't a good match, so we took the item in question to its overnight lodgings, where we found our room was ready for us.

That, at least, took another piece out of the equation since there was no need to get back to check in.

Downstairs we had a chat with the very helpful gentleman on the front desk and headed back to the station for tickets and cash replenishment.





There were three main items on the agenda, and discussion at the hotel had done a fair bit to sort them into a workable sequence.

We started with a trip to the star-shaped fortress at *Goryōkaku*, the first European-style fortress built in *Japan* and a relic of the era when the country was being opened up to the West.

Ironically, it was built to defend the city against imperialist threats from *Western powers* and was completed in *1864*.

That was just in time for the fortress to become the headquarters of the *Ezo Republic* after *Enomoto Takeaki* fled to *Hakodate* with the remnants of his Navy and a handful of *French advisers* in *1866*.





They established the *Republic* on *Christmas Day* and attempted to gain international recognition through foreign legations in the city, but government forces defeated the secessionists in the *Battle of Hakodate* in **1869**, and the city and fort surrendered peacefully.

After the fort had lost its military significance, it was turned into a park, with 1,600 cherry trees planted around the moats, making it one of *Hokkaidō*'s best cherry blossom spots.

The best views come from the nearby *Goryōkaku Tower* though you're likely to wait up to three hours to make the ascent at the height of the *sakura* season.

A hundred metres up looking towards the fort, you can see why.

The area around the castle and the tower is a noted eating area, and we had already picked up two recommendations for lunch.

With a choice between curry and *ramen*, the noodles won, partly due to the number of encounters I've had with curry over the past week.





*Ramen* was always going to be *Madam's* preference, so there is an element of diplomacy in there as well.

The *ramen* arrived in a large bowl of stock.

Having once again left *Hughesy's* fork at the hotel I had no choice but to have a go with chopsticks.

As it turned out, I could have asked for a fork since my unorthodox, but highly effective chopstick technique prompted one of the waiters to deliver one.

By that point, I'd demolished about 90% of the noodles, so the fork remained where it had been placed.

From there, we headed to the *Tower* for panoramic views across the city, then made our way downstairs and headed for the fortress itself, where the *sakura*-covered defensive walls could have prompted an extensive photo session.

We had, however, other fish to fry, so we made our way back to the tram line and headed for the old *Foreign Quarter*.

As one of the first ports opened to foreign shipping, you could have tipped great things for *Hakodate*.

*Relative isolation* (I suspect that was one of the reasons the port was selected in the first place) meant the city was bypassed by more centrally positioned rivals.





That means much of what was built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is still there, if it wasn't destroyed in the **1907** fire, and much of what fell victim to the flames seems to have been rebuilt in a similar style.

Interestingly, the area near the foot of *Mount Hakodate* is known as *Motomachi*, which translates as *an original town*. That explains the presence of the *Hakodate Public Hall*, which housed the local government in the early twentieth century.

Equally interesting is the fact that *Kōbe*, *Nagasaki* and *Yokohama* all have districts bearing the same name.





We took a ramble through the area, passing *Russian Orthodox*, *Roman Catholic* and *Episcopal Churches*, the *Russian* and *British Consulates*, and the *Higashi Honganji* temple, then made our way downhill to the *red brick warehouses* along the waterfront.

They've been developed into a shopping, dining and entertainment complex that's a prime example of the sort of shopping you'll find in a tourist area of a gift-oriented society.

It's also the hub of *Hakodate's* eating and drinking options.

We also passed *Japan's* first concrete electricity pole and located the *Spanish eatery Madam* had selected as a possible dinner option.

By this time, we were waiting for sunset.

The third leg of the *Hakodate* trifecta involved an ascent of *Mount Hakodate* for one of the *Best Three Nighttime Vistas in Japan* (alongside *Nagasaki's Mount Inasa* and *Kōbe's Mount Rokko*), rated the equal of the evening views across *Naples* and *Hong Kong*.



The rambling had just about run out of possibilities around four, so with a good hour and a half to wait for the bus that would take us to the summit we headed back to the hotel for a brief spell.

The helpful advice we received on arrival hadn't quite turned out to be on the money.

We'd been advised against buying a day long tram ticket, which seemed to cost more than the likely total of fares between the railway station and the fortress and back to *Motomachi*.

But we both agreed that if we'd shelled out for the day pass, we might have headed further around to the *Foreigners' Cemetery* rather than moseying back to the accommodation.

In any case, rugged up to the best of our ability we were back out around 5:10, heading for the bus terminal, where a 5:30 service would take us up to the top.

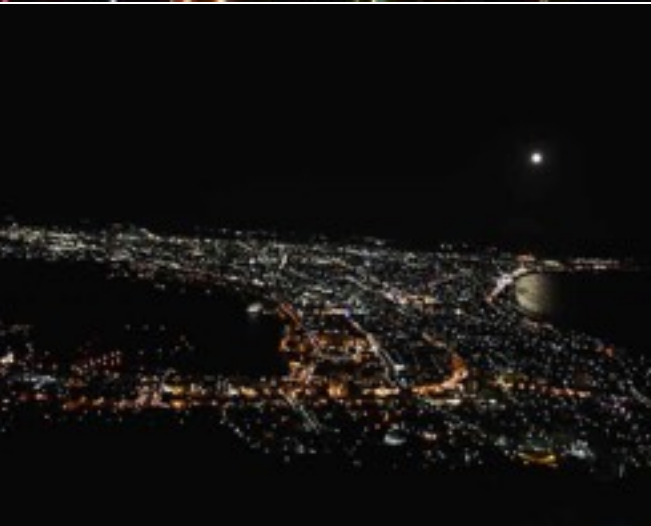
As it turned out, it was just as well we were on the spot early.

Our position in the queue that formed after the *Motomachi Gourmet* bus left landed us seats rather than standing room.

*Mount Hakodate* is a lumpy, 334-metre wooded mountain at the southern end of the peninsula on which *Hakodate* is located.







The mountain is the local nickname of *Gagyūzan* (*Mount Cow's Back*) since the mountain allegedly resembles a resting cow.

Facilities at the summit include observation platforms, souvenir shops, a cafe and a restaurant.

Advice at the hotel suggested the bus (¥360 return) rather than the ropeway (¥640/1160 one-way/return).

The ropeway would provide a continuous vista along a single line of sight where the bus, twisting and turning on its way, offered spectacular views on both sides of the vehicle.

**Hint:** If you take the bus, try to wangle seats on the same side for both legs of the journey. There are good views from both sides, and if you swap you'll end up seeing the same thing both ways.

The bus was packed to the gunwales on the way up, but once we were there, the mob dispersed to all quarters, with many opting to descend on the ropeway.



*Bus one way, ropeway t'other* seemed to be the preferred option since we found ourselves sharing the downward bus with a bunch of stylishly dressed hipsters who alighted in *the gourmet quarter*, evidently out for a big night.

I guessed they made the ascent via ropeway, and with the sightseeing done were off to make merry.

We took ourselves around to a vantage point overlooking the city for snapshot action where capturing the full moon over the city lights was a priority.

Once we'd accomplished that we made our way into the summit complex, with its array of gift shops, tea houses and restaurants and a rooftop area that might have offered the best views but was also, predictably, packed.

In any case, we were out to get a seat on the **6:20** bus and found ourselves occupying the same seats we'd had for the ascent, thus locking in the *both sides of the view* aspect.

Back on the ground, we headed back to the hotel since the camera bag was surplus to requirements, and the plan for the rest of the evening involved *chicken yakitori* and a couple of cleansing ales.

That plan came unstuck when we stopped to chat with the helpful front desk man, who informed us the proprietor of the eatery next door was *inclined to be difficult*.

*Really? A chef with quirky personality issues? Who'd have thunk?*

He directed us instead to a little warren of eating and drinking places a couple of hundred metres away on the other side of the major intersection near the railway station where we'd boarded the bus.

Now, you might take this next bit the wrong way.

So it's important to emphasise that while I was keen to hit the *yakitori chicken* with a couple of beers for the evening meal, the key issues were avoiding a big meal.

Specifically, avoiding the rice, salad and *miso* soup that invariably accompanies a set meal in *Japan*.

In short, I was looking for *a little bit of something tasty that didn't require chopsticks*.

We arrived in a maze that contained about fourteen assorted eateries, most of them of the *sit at the counter and drink while you snack on the nibbles you can order off the blackboard menu persuasion*.

There weren't any spaces at the *yakitori* place, but there were alternatives.

The problem was, initially, deciding which one, and then when we'd settled on one establishment, avoiding *Madam's* natural inclination to try as many as possible of the yummy alternatives.



Personally, I would have been happy to have another couple of goes at the scallops we started with, simmered in a little stock on top of a small stove, with a large shell as a cooking vessel.

I wasn't keen on the sight of raw scallops, but once they'd simmered away atop the little cooker the result was quite superb.

Once they were gone, I could have gone another, probably another and quite possibly a fourth serve, turning the pieces in the broth and taking hearty swigs of beer in between turns.

*Madam*, on the other hand, couldn't help but order *sashimi*, which I'm sure I would have done had I been *Japanese*.

There was a dish of potatoes where you were supposed to hollow out space on the middle and insert raw squid and a dab of butter. This, I gather, is a *Hokkaidō* delicacy, and it wasn't bad, but, as the reader might guess, it involved chopsticks to do the hollowing out, something I was hoping to avoid.

I was also hoping to avoid suggestions that I might like to try bits and pieces off the platter of *sashimi* that followed the platter's arrival.

Like I said earlier, I was after a small feed that didn't involve chopsticks and wanted to avoid concern about whether I was enjoying myself.

Because, actually, I was.

We're talking *an eating and drinking environment you're not going to find in Australia*, and if there weren't the old language issues, I'd have been joining in the badinage.

We were in there following a chat with the proprietress, whose son acted as the barman while she did a bit in the room at the rear that served as the kitchen.

When we arrived, a married couple was finishing up before heading elsewhere and a couple of girls apparently on a quiet night out.

Conversation ebbed and flowed back and forth, aided, abetted and redirected by the barman, who was a pretty classy operator.

After the couple had left, a rotund and jovial gentleman arrived, settled in to simmer scallops and engage in repartee, much of which seemed to concern the relative merits of *Hokkaidō* and *Tokyo*, which was, as far as I could gather, where the two girls were from.

All in all, a very enjoyable little session, except for the fact that the bloke over there was sitting down to what I'd have preferred to be eating rather than the other bits and pieces that seemed to be deemed necessary to broaden *Hughesy's* gustatory horizons.



Those attempts were something I could have done without, as was the consequence of moving the venue from staggering distance of the hotel to a much more remote location.

We'd been snug enough in the little eatery, and when we hit the side street outside things weren't too bad, but as we stood at the intersection near the bus terminal waiting for the lights to change the wind chill factor kicked in big time.

It's fair to say I've never been colder in my life.

One minute I was fine, but as the core body temperature plunged, **Madam** looked in my direction, noted that I seemed to be having trouble and asked whether I was all right.

An anguished **No** produced an offer of the scarf she'd been using to insulate her neck, which, in turn, created a minor thermal crisis on that front.

Needless to say, once the lights changed there was a frantic scramble across the intersection, along the main street to the side street that housed the hotel.

Though that cut out a large part of the wind chill it took a good five to ten minutes to restore the equanimity once we were safely inside.

A warm bath for **Madam**, a hearty slug of medicinal **saké** for **Hughesy** and by nine thirty both of us were snugly pushing up Zs, with the prospect of an early rise on the morrow, when temperatures were bound to be a major cause for concern.





HAKODATE >  
 SENDAI >  
 MATSUSHIMA >  
 SENDAI

**Thursday, 1 November 2012**

If you're going to visit *Hakodate*, four items fall automatically into the *must do* category.

We'd managed three of them the day before, but if we wanted to fit in the fourth we were going to have to be up and about around sparrow fart, and the appropriate layering of clothing was going to be a major issue.

I'd nearly frozen on the way back from the alley full of eateries the night before and wasn't keen to repeat the experience.





We were off to the *Morning Fish Markets*, and I wasn't sure we were going to make it.

I'd seen a fish market in Sydney, and that is something to behold. In this case, on a crisp autumn morning since a picture is worth a thousand words we might as well let pictures do the talking.

There are more than three hundred and sixty stalls in the daily market (*Hakodate Asaichi*) near the railway station, and the action kicks off at five in the morning (six in winter), but there's no hurry.

The markets cover four blocks, operate through the morning, close at noon, and offer an incredible variety of cold water seafood, including crabs, salmon eggs, sea urchin, squid, scallops and many other kinds of fresh fish and shellfish, as well as fresh produce.





And you don't have to cart your selection back to base to cook it.

There are plenty of restaurants and cafes in the area and stalls that serve up a breakfasts, such as *uni-ikura domburi* (seafood-topped rice bowl).

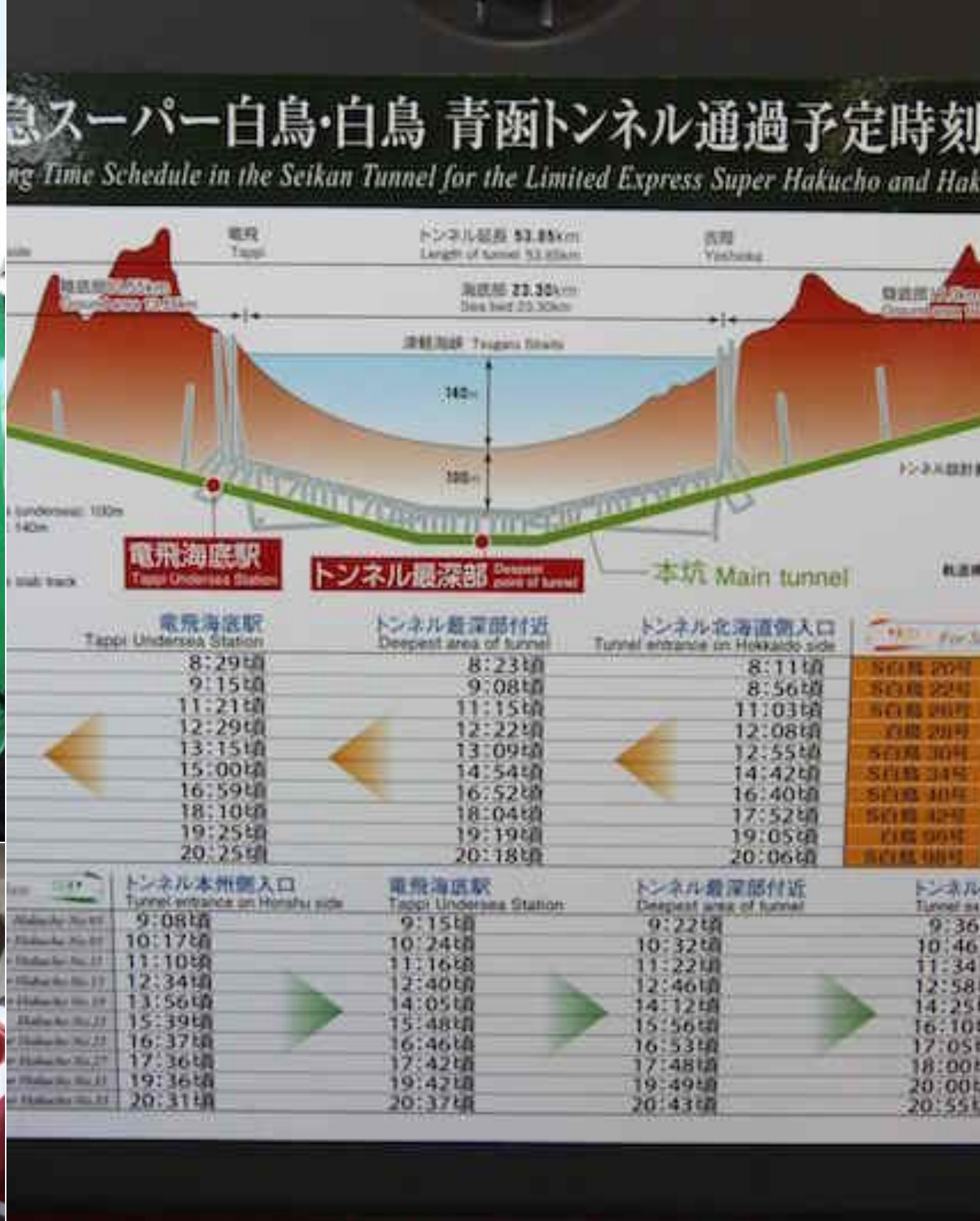
Apart from *Hokkaidō* crabs, *Hakodate's* signature fish is squid, and the signature dish is *shio ramen*, noodles prepared with squid stock instead of the pork stock you're likely to be served elsewhere. Not really my cup of tea.

Neither is *ikameshi* (rice-stuffed squid), but I'll be back to gorge on shellfish and crab...

On a leg of the trip where being on time mattered, we were seated on the train a quarter of an hour before departure.

If we were going to fit everything into the day's itinerary we had to be on the 8:08 *Limited Express Super Hakucho* and would need to be pretty smart about moving to the *Shinkansen* that would drop us at *Sendai* in time to head on a scenic sail around the bay at *Matsushima*.





We were on the left-hand side of the train this time, which meant another view across the water while we made our way towards the tunnel.

The views across the bay were, again, spectacular, though they'd lost some of the wow factor after the trip to the top of *Mount Hakodate*.

While there were the same false alarms, we'd experienced on the northward journey, this time, we were running on time/.

There was a helpful diagram and cheat sheet on the back of each seat in the carriage.

We were slightly behind the 8:56 on the back of the seating schedule when we hit the tunnel, passing the deepest point around 9:08 and the *Tappi Undersea Station* at 9:15.



It wasn't easy to tell which of the lights we passed were station and which belonged to a train in the opposite direction.

My money was on station to the left and train to the right but without a way of verifying the guess...

We were back on the surface at 9:21, and the run to **ShinAomori** proved uneventful.

A lengthy stay at **Aomori** was followed by a change of direction (nose into **Aomori**; rear end leads the way to **ShinAomori**).

That would have left us with our backs to the engine, but there's a facility that allows you to swing your seats through 180 degrees, so you're facing the front. Neat, eh?

We probably didn't need to do that. It was only a matter of minutes before we were extricating ourselves from the carriage, onto a convenient elevator and heading towards the **Shinkansen** section, which was another floor above the intermediate level where we flashed our tickets and rail passes.

The train was ready and waiting, set to go, and the baggage space at the rear of Carriage 2 was conveniently empty.

Once I'd shed the merino undergarment that had been a vital cog in the *keep Hughesy warm arrangements* over the previous couple of days it was time to settle back with the **iPod** shuffling through the playlists and enjoy the bits of new territory I was able to glimpse between tunnels as we made our way towards **Morioka**.

That was where we'd left the **Tohoku Shinkansen** line *en route* to **Kakunodate** four days earlier.

From there it was on to **Sendai**, where there wasn't a mad scramble to get from the train to the hotel to a local line for the afternoon jaunt to **Matsushima**, but we moved at a pretty fair clip.

It wasn't as if we needed to hurry, but there's a fundamental issue when you're not familiar with the actual lie of the actual land and lunch was waiting at the other end of the suburban rail leg.

Even if there wasn't any urgency, it made sense to get to the right station on the right line ASAP.

Things would have been much easier if we'd paused and looked around the corner at the **Lottery agency** on the corner, as per the directions we'd been given at **Reception** when we checked in the luggage.

But we didn't look, didn't find the handy subway entrance we emerged from on the return journey subsequently almost went *via the Cape*.

Once we'd arrived at the station, **Matsushima Kaigan (Beach)** as opposed to **Matsushima**, the first job was to find lunch.



*Matsushima* sits on the *JR Tohoku Main Line*, a ten-minute walk away from where people who are visiting the scenic bay actually want to go, so don't go that way...

We could have looked around for other options, but just along from the station, there was a funky little place offering oyster burgers, which seemed like the way to go. *Matsushima* is, after all, a prime oyster producing area as was evident once we hit the water.

The oyster burger went down a treat, and I could have opted for another, but there were places to go and sights that needed to be seen, so I had to be content with the prospect of a grilled oyster and a glass of white wine once we'd been out on the briny.

I was intrigued, to say the least, by what variety of white wine a funky little operation like this one would be able to rustle up.

From there we set off in search of the cruise terminal, wandering through a park along the way, and arriving in time to be hustled onto an earlier cruise, which turned out to be handy from a post-cruise perspective.

The bay and the two hundred and sixty pine-clad islands and islets known as *Matsushima* (*Matsu* = pines, *shima* = islands) is one of the *Three Views of Japan* alongside *Miyajima* and *Amanohashidate*.







There's an apocryphal haiku often attributed to *Bashō* that supposedly suggests the great poet was at a loss for words when he visited the place, stopping off on his way to or from the *Deep North*:

*Matsushima ah!*

*A-ah, Matsushima, ah!*

*Matsushima, ah!*

But he would surely have been able to come up with something better.



A number of companies offer cruises, and most are based at **Matsushima Pier**, a five-minute walk (ten if you take your time) from **Matsushima Kaigan**. Others operate from **Shiogama Pier**, a short walk from **Hon-Shiogama** Station, three stations ahead of **Matsushima Kaigan** on the **JR Senseki Line**.

We'd opted for the *all-Matsushima* experience, though if you've got time on your hands, it may pay to shop around.

When you've only got a couple of hours in the afternoon, your choices are relatively limited. Of the time on the water, there's not much that needs to be said, apart from invoking the *one picture = a thousand words* principle, noting the water resembled a mill pond, the oyster beds were obvious, and it was a very pleasant way to spend an hour.

Back on dry land, we were inclined to head to **Godaido**, a small temple hall on an islet next door to the pier.

It mightn't be the most historical or architecturally impressive temple, but the site does date back to 807, and it was founded by the same priest who founded nearby **Zuiganji**.

The structure on the site is a 1604 reconstruction paid for by feudal lord **Date Masamune**, decorated with carvings of the twelve animals of the lunar calendar, three on each side.







Its prominent location means it has become one of the key symbols of *Matsushima*.

More impressive, although we didn't have time for an exhaustive look is *Zuiganji* temple, currently undergoing renovations. It'll stay that way until **2018**.

Although the grounds are open, the main hall will be closed until **March 2016**. If you're visiting in the meantime, they've opened alternate buildings, which aren't usually open to the public.

It would be natural to suspect the work is related to the *tsunami* on **11 March 2011**, but *Matsushima* escaped significant damage thanks to its location inside the island dotted bay.

The islands blunted the impact of the waves.





Most tourist attractions, shops and hotels reopened within a few weeks or months of the earthquake, but there was some structural damage.

Though the *JR Senseki Line* is open for business, after *Matsushima Kaigan* you can only go one stop further. If you're looking to get to *Matsushima* by train, you'll have to head through *Sendai*.

Founded in *828* by the *Tendai* sect, *Zuiganji* became a *Zen* temple during the *Kamakura Period (1192-1333)* and was restored, after years of decline, by the same feudal lord (*Date Masamune*) who restored *Godaido* as his family temple in *1609*.

Today it's one of the region's most prominent *Zen* temples, known for its gilded and painted sliding doors (*fusuma*), which we didn't get to see, but there's every chance we'll be back sometime.



As you enter the grounds, there's a straight path flanked by cedar trees leading to the Main Hall, the *Kuri* (the kitchen where meals were prepared in the past) and the *Seiryuden*, also known as *Zuiganji Art Museum* displaying some of the temple's treasures as well as artifacts of the *Date* clan.

As you head in, an interesting path veers off to the right of the main avenue that takes you towards some caves used in the past for meditation.

Today they contain moss-covered *Kannon* statues.

*Madam* had wandered in on the way to *Godaido* while I was putting my feet up and was struck by the long straight path that leads to the main hall, but it was what she sighted on the side path that had her hauling me in for a gander on the way back to the station.

As it turned out we didn't stop off for a grilled oyster and a glass of white on the way, though there would have been plenty of time.

*Madam* wasn't keen, and I didn't insist, knowing we were meeting up with some of her old friends for dinner.

Back in downtown *Sendai*, we finished the *check-in procedure* and hit the free *WiFi* until six, when we wandered downstairs to rendezvous with a couple who we, I was told, wine lovers, although *she* was forced to refrain, having drawn (or possibly chosen) the designated driver short straw.

A brief chat in the hotel lobby had us heading back through the *Sendai Station* complex in search of a funky little *yakitori* place that boasted a rather decent wine list.

That, by the way, is an unusual combination.

*Yakitori* usually gets washed down with beer or *saké*.

We started with beer before moving onto the red, and at that point I'm inclined to draw a discreet veil over proceedings, noting that the food was plentiful and quite excellent.

The vinous proceedings started with a very acceptable *Barbera* and concluded with an equally enjoyable *Nebbiolo* though my liver would have preferred to have done without the *Koonunga Hill Shiraz Cabernet* my learned colleague insisted on inserting between the two.





## SENDAI > OMIYA > ECHIGO-YUZAWA > OUZU > UNAZUKI SPRING

***Friday, 2 November 2012***

I wasn't a well boy when I surfaced on *Friday* morning, but that probably comes as no surprise under the circumstances.

Given my 'druthers, I'd have given last night's middle bottle a miss, but the other party doing the drinking wasn't familiar with *Australian wine*.

It was, as far as we could tell, the only *Australian red* on the list.

That's my excuse, and I'm sticking to it.



Fortunately, after a big night, this was a big travel day and one that, initially, didn't involve a great deal of humping the **Black Monster** up and down staircases.

If it had, I suspect there may have been fatalities.

If you are seriously hung over there are definitely far worse places to be than a speeding **Shinkansen**, and the transfer from **Sendai** to **Omiya** was relatively painless.

**Omiya** kicked in a novelty factor since we were boarding one of the double decker **Shinkansen**.

**Madam's** concerns about stowing the luggage were probably real enough but weren't the sort of thing you wanted to think about when you've got what **P.G. Wodehouse** was wont to describe as a *morning head*.

Sure enough, once we'd boarded and made our way up a tricky curved stairway that would have posed no difficulty at all for a teetotaller unencumbered by **Black Monsters**, there was the regular space behind the back seats in the compartment where **Monster** could be stowed.

Apart from worrying about luggage space, **Madam** had organized lunch, which, predictably, came in a *bento* container and, somewhat less predictably was completely demolished with chopsticks.







I'd only actually managed to do that once before but am currently disinclined to get myself back into the state that seems to have made the feat possible.

After the *Shinkansen*, we progressively downgraded.

First to a *Hakutaka*, which was still rather *shmicko*, then onto a local line operated by *Toyama Regional Railways* (*Toyama Chihō Railway*) a third sector company obviously doing it tough in an environment where travellers are increasingly likely to head where they want to go by car or bus.

The company operates the railway, tram, and bus lines in the eastern part of *Toyama Prefecture*, with their main line running from *Toyama* to *Unazuki Onsen* (which was where we were headed).

It's part of a mere 93.2 km of lines to hot springs and the mountainous region of *Tateyama*.

The *Hakutaka* dropped us at *Uozu*, and I wasn't keen on an *up the staircase and across the bridge and lump the Monster back down the other side* to access the private line.

*Madam* scoped out an elevator on the JR side though there was no escaping the old *heave-ho* as we climbed the stairs to access the local line.

Being a local line we were up for the fare since the *JR Rail Pass* wasn't valid on this section.

The sight of the train that rolled into *Uozu* didn't do much to inspire confidence.



From the look of the trains that passed in the other direction, it seemed the company's rolling stock comprised whatever weatherbeaten items they'd managed to spare from the scrap heap.

There was no standard livery pattern, and most of the rolling stock wasn't far off its last legs.

Or, rather, I guess, its last wheels.

Although they mightn't look that flash, they work.

We arrived at *Unazuki Onsen* late in the afternoon, with *Madam* enthused about hot baths and *Hughesy* after anything that would reduce the pain.

Developed as an off-shoot of hydroelectric projects that brought people into the previously inaccessible mountain region along the *Kurobe Valley* in *Toyama Prefecture*.

*Unazaki* is rated as one of the purest hot springs in *Japan*.

It's at the entrance to the *Kurobe Gorge* and marks one end of the sightseeing train route that runs through a deep V-shaped valley to *Keyakidaira*.

The Hot Springs are the main attraction, drawing their water from *Kuronagi Onsen*, upstream on a tributary of the *Kurobe*, where three thousand tons of water per day gush out of the ground at temperatures around 91°C.







It cools down over the seven-kilometre journey but is still 60°C when it reaches the two-metre fountain in front of the station at *Unazuki*.

The waters are said to be effective if you're suffering from rheumatism or neuralgia, and they're said to help sports injuries and nervous disorders as well.

Today, *Unazuki* is a modern hot spring resort town full of *ryokan* inns and hotels, with the one where we were staying (*Feel Unazuki*) offering the unusual combination of *Japanese-style rooms* (complete with *tatami* matting), flat-screen TV and free *WiFi*.

More or less the best of both worlds.





You get your own toilet, which, predictably is of the *washlet* persuasion, but if you're looking to bathe you'll be doing it in the *onsen*.

No sneaking into the *Western-style shower* here, folks, and you can forget the beds as well.

It's a *futon* on the floor, quilt over the top and that's it.

Pretty spartan, but I can vouch for the quality of the night's sleep, which was sorely needed.

It is, on the other hand, reasonably priced (¥6,000 per head for a two person room, no price differential on weekends and holiday periods).

There's a *Natural Observation Bathroom (Sky Spa)* on the top floor giving you the *onsen* experience along with views of the *Kurobe Gorge*.

It's the closest hotel to the *Kurobe Torokko* railway terminus, and a shortish walk from the regular train station, which is also the terminus of its line.





There are plenty of alternatives if you're chasing accommodation.

You can get some idea of the scale of the *Japanese* passion for the hot spring spa routine from the fact that resorts in this particular location employ four thousand people.

If someone had revealed that factoid in the afternoon, I'd have been loath to believe it, but that was before the following day's experience.

Apart from the abundant waters (if you don't believe abundant I will point you straight towards the hot spring baths where weary travellers can soak their aching feet, built to commemorate the resort's eightieth birthday) the other attraction is the local beer. It's brewed using water from the *Kurobegawa* River and local barley from *Unazuki*.

After a session in the *onsen*, I sampled the local brew over dinner with a curry, and it lives up to its reputation.

Since I'd been suffering from the after-effects of overindulgence all through the day it probably comes as no surprise to learn I was on the *futon* under the *doona*, sawing logs like it was going out of style soon after seven-thirty.





3

## JAPAN 2012: RAIL PASS WEEK 2

Having looped around the *Deep North* and given the leaves further down the archipelago time to start turning, the second week of the rail pass leg takes us out of the *Alps* and all the way down to the very end of the island chain.

*Kagoshima*, here we come, with a final leg all the way back to *Osaka*...





## UNAZUKI SPRING > NAGANO

***Saturday, 3 November 2012***

The hot spring *onsen* experience might be one of the major draw cards to the area, but there's no doubt that most of the visitors are there, at least partly, to ride a rather wonderful little railway that runs out of *Unazuki Springs*.

Operating from mid-*April* to *November* every year, the *Kurobe Torokko Electric Railway* was originally used to carry workers to the construction sites for the hydroelectric dams in the Gorge.

It's just over twenty kilometres from *Unazuki* to the terminus at *Keyakidaira*, and the trip takes around eighty minutes each way.



On the way, the railway passes through the steepest V-shaped gorge in *Japan*, crossing twenty-one bridges and snaking through forty-one tunnels.

It passes several *onsen* locations hot springs, including *Kuronagi* and *Kanetsuri*, and *Keyakidaira* offers scenic options including the *Sarutobi Ravine* and the *Man-eating Rock* and *Meiken Hot Spring*.

That, however, is getting ahead of the developing narrative.

We bunked down early the night before, with *Hughesy* claiming fatigue as a major contributory factor to *Friday* morning's condition.

It was a good eleven hours from when I drifted off to when I emerged from a deep slumber but I wasn't looking forward to what I was likely to find when daylight arrived.

I'd been warned this was the day when the entire array of warm clothing would be called into play.

The best scenario I could hope for was a maximum around ten at *Unazuki* in the afternoon and a temperature that would probably be in the low positive range when we hit the train and made our way into the mountains.





Breakfast was another take on the **Viking** but featured almost nothing recognisable to the **Western** eye apart from the pastry and coffee options.

I managed a hearty enough start that fuelled the day's activities and got me to dinner time without the need for anything else.

With breakfast done, we dropped the **Black Monster** and **Madam's backpack** at **Reception** and made our way a couple of hundred metres along the street to the **Kurobe Torokko Station**.

The presence of some traffic wardens directing private vehicles and tour buses into their respective parking areas confirmed we would be dealing with significant numbers of keen sightseers.

We were booked on the morning's second train, departing at 8:18, and the crowd for the 7:57 were queued behind the barriers as we arrived.

There's an interesting variation on the booking side of things on the **Torokko**, in that your reservation gets you a seat in the carriage. As far as *which* seat is concerned, it's a case of *first in, best dressed*.

They open the barriers about ten minutes before the scheduled departure time, and what follows isn't *quite* a stampede, but by the same token it isn't the casual stroll you'd be taking if you knew you had a pair of guaranteed seats.

The journey starts with a climb through the first of many tunnels, emerging just before the 166-metre long **ShinYamabiko Iron Bridge**, the longest bridge on the route and the red painted structure they use in the publicity material. From there, the track passes the **Unazuki Dam**, the first of the structures that brought the line into existence.

As you proceed, there's a castle-like structure that presumably fulfils some role related to generating electricity, though just what that purpose might be remains a mystery to this observer.

Other structures *en route* are predictably utilitarian.

Apart from autumn leaves, which were the main reason for the crowds being there, and quite magnificent they were, there are plenty of items of interest to catch the keen observer's eye.

Branches and tunnels that run off the main line, for example, and a long tunnel to allow workers to get down when winter snows remove trains from the transport equation.

Suspension bridges across the gorge at a couple of points allow workers and, presumably, trekkers, to cross from side to side though one of them doesn't have handrails.

That one is for the monkeys.





High above, snow-capped mountains tower over the line, uncomfortably close to the travelling observer. I prefer my snow clad peaks in photographs, not clearly visible through the windows on a day where the temperature's hovering unpleasantly close to zero.

The mountains climb higher after you cross *Moriishi Bridge*, and the line passes isolated *onsen* resorts on its way to *Keyakidaira*, where walking tracks allow you to get up close and personal with the coloured leaves.

Given the threat of rain and the temperature, I wasn't the most enthusiastic participant in the up hill and down dale ramble that followed

In any case, my eyes weren't handling a continuous display of coloured leaves all that well.





They're a magnificent sight, but after a couple of hours, the visual richness becomes overwhelming.

Still, the walk gave me one of the stranger sights I've come across in a country where there's no shortage of items guaranteed to baffle and bemuse a **Western** observer.

I rounded a corner to find a **Japanese father** doing up an eight-year old's shoe laces.

Maybe the kid wasn't quite eight but certainly looked old enough to manage to tie up the laces without assistance.

The incredible bit was while Dad got the laces in order (*we don't want anyone tripping now, do we?*) the kid was nonchalantly playing a computer game.





I'd passed the camera over to *The Supervisor* because I didn't think I'd be needing it. Just as well. I suspect an attempt to snap the scene would have produced an ugly incident.

As we made our way back, construction work tricked us into a detour that took us down to a platform just above the river bed where there were more coloured leaves to see and a thermal foot bath for tired feet.

Not being in the market for a foot bath and not looking forward to the climb to the station, I wasn't impressed at all by the situation.

The *definitely not gruntled, but not quite disgruntled* factor continued as we made our way across the bridge, headed towards the Man Eating Rock.





The trail looked like it was going to meander along for quite a way, the weather continued to threaten, and the backpack was a bit of a load.

The key point was no obvious turn back point on the map, and I dreaded the prospect of *let's just see what's around this corner*.

I *knew*, more or less, *what was around the corner*, and was sure there was a similar view *around the next, the one after that and the one after that*.

I was sure they were *all quite magnificent spectacles*, but I was *more or less spectacted out*.

I would have liked to check if we could switch to an earlier train for the descent.

The switch to **Nagano** involved moves between connecting trains. As it turned out, we'd just missed one that may or may not have had room.

The next was a workers' train, so we had to stick with the plan that gave us six minutes to alight in **Unazuki**, collect our luggage,





and make it to the station, up one flight of steps and down another onto the platform, negotiating the purchase of tickets along the way.

Had it been a **JR line**, the ticket purchase would be unnecessary. *Wave the rail pass and you're fine.*

In any case, after a rest and drink, the descent was as spectacular as the ascent.

We were first in the carriage, which got us the best position for alighting quickly at the other end, the bloke in **Reception** at the hotel produced our bags as soon as he sighted us and we made it to the ticket office at the station just as the train was about to depart.

A couple of tickets from a friendly conductor upstairs, *a mad scramble down the stairs and we just (literally) made it as the train door closed.*

There was another train we could have caught half an hour later, but that would have produced the same mad scramble at the other end when we transferred from **Toyama Regional Railways** to the **JR platform**.

As it turned out, we sighted the later service while we were waiting on the platform at **Ouzu**.

Our **Hayate** service was running late.

Once we'd boarded, there was a stretch retracing part of the previous day's route, followed by a switch to a local service that delivered us into **Nagano** just after six.



There was some confusion about the location of the hotel, which seemed to have changed names, but nothing major.

By seven, we were booked in and back downstairs scoping out the eating options.

Given the number of options in the area and the lack of commitments, deciding on a particular eatery wasn't as easy as it might sound.





In most other places along the way, there was either an obvious choice, or some other factor that made things a done deal, but here we had some options, and it was down to what we felt like sampling.

**Madam** had flashed through a couple of options on the *iPad* before we left, and we'd decided the best option was a *Japanese-Italian drinking place* (drinks with nibbles), with some other possibilities as a fallback.

Complications set in when we found other options just down the road from the hotel, including a meat on skewers barbeque operation and a pricey *French restaurant*.

We pressed on, locating the preferred option only to discover it was full except for a couple of places at the bar, which might have suited someone else, but didn't appeal to us.

Across the road, there was a Vietnamese place, where the menu in *Japanese* and unfamiliarity with the ins and outs of the cuisine meant we weren't sure, so we were off in search of others.

Having recognised another fusion place from *Madam's iPad info* we were about to head inside when **Madam** noticed the *Closed - Private Function* sign, so we ended up in another place that was, as far as she could make out, a young people's drinks and nibbles hangout.

If that was the case, I found the all-Beatles soundtrack bemusing, to say the least.

What followed was a succession of little platters - Vietnamese style salmon and prawn spring rolls, pasta *marinara*, *char siu pork* finished off at the table with a blowtorch were three of them - that added up to a substantial meal and went down rather well with a couple of Suntory Premium Lagers.

We meandered back to the hotel, not quite replete, but definitely in a neighbouring postcode, and for me, at least, it was a matter of another early night, followed by an early morning catching up on the *Travelogue*.





## NAGANO > OKAYAMA

***Sunday, 4 November 2012***

With the *Travelogue* backlog caught up, thanks to a couple of hours on the train the day before and a two-hour stint earlier in the morning *Sunday's* proceedings were rather straightforward.

We'd take a walk around the city in the morning, return to collect the *Black Monster* and head to the station for a train to *Nagoya* and thence to *Okayama*, where we had an evening appointment with some combination of *ramen* noodles and *tapas*, though probably not in the same sitting.





The venue for the *1998 Winter Olympics*, *Nagano* is surrounded by 3000-metre summits.

A morning glance through the window revealed snowcapped peaks comfortably removed from the immediate vicinity.

The Prefecture, of which *Nagano* is the capital, is known as the *Roof of Japan*, and since it lies between the *Kanto* and *Kansai* regions, local customs have been influenced by the cultures of both eastern and western *Japan*.

As the regional capital, *Nagano* serves as the hub for the surrounding snow resorts, with handy road and rail links to most of *Japan's major centres*, including *Tokyo*, *Nagoya*, *Kyoto* and *Osaka*.





It's an hour and a half from *Tokyo* by *Shinkansen* on the *Hokuriku Line*, also known as the *Nagano Shinkansen* or *Asama*, a legacy of the *Winter Olympics* with two or three departures per hour from *Tokyo Station*.

There is also a scenic approach; the *Wide View Shinano Limited Express* runs hourly from *Nagoya*, a three-hour journey that takes you through the central *cordillera*.

It follows a route that's almost as stunningly scenic as the line from *Toyama* to *Nagoya* via *Takayama* and was a highlight of our *2008* trip.

If you're heading to *Nagano* from anywhere in *western Japan*, and *Kyoto* or *Osaka* in particular, it's the best option, with one *caveat*.

The *Shinano* is notorious for running late and had us scurrying to get to the right platform when we arrived in *Nagoya*.

If you're headed into *Nagano* and planning to spend the night there, of course, difficulty making connections won't be an issue.





Originally built around a *Buddhist temple* that's the largest wooden building in eastern *Japan*, *Nagano* attracts over a million tourists every year, drawn to snow resorts, golf courses, a variety of sights and natural hot springs found throughout the mountain areas.

*Nagano* is also noted for a variety of culinary products including *soba* noodles, apples and *saké*, *oyaki* dumplings, *gohei mochi* snacks and bamboo leaf-wrapped *sasa-zushi*.

Founded in the seventh century, *Zenkoji* is one of the most popular temples in *Japan*, and while it sees a stream of visitors the most significant feature of the temple is only shown to the public for a couple of weeks every six years.

*Zenkoji* houses the first statue brought into *Japan* when *Buddhism* arrived in the sixth century.





The original is hidden away permanently and what will be on display again in **2015** is a replica.

You approach **Zenkoji** (or at least we did) along a street lined with shops that sell local specialties and souvenirs, passing through a couple of gates along the way.

The outer **Niomon Gate** has a pair of impressive **Deva Guardians**, which protect the temple from enemies of **Buddhism** while the **Sanmon Gate**, dates back to 1750 and offers views of the temple and its approaches from the second storey.

The main hall, rebuilt in 1707, contains several significant statues. If you pay a fee, you can enter the inner chamber, view the altar, and descend into a basement where a pitch-dark passage holds the key to paradise, attached to a wall.

It's believed to grant salvation to those who touch it.

Had I done my research before we set out I would have visited **Yawataya Isogoro**, just outside **Zenkoji's** main gate.



It's a 280-year-old store specialising in *shichimi* (*seven flavours*), a condiment made of ground *chilli* peppers, sesame, citrus, and other spices, and commonly sprinkled on *soba* noodle soup.

But I didn't do the research, so my collection is one condiment poorer.

Predictably, the main item on the agenda before the rail leg to *Okayama* was a visit to the temple, an exercise that took us on an extended ramble past last night's dinner venue.

It was a fair step from the hotel, but I was up for the exercise and once we'd done the temple bit there was the prospect of *oyaki* dumplings for brunch.

With the temple out of the way, and *oyaki* consumed (I opted for mushroom filling at the first place we tried, and mushroom with radish at the second) we diverted in search of *croquettes* to round off brunch.

After that, we made our way back to the hotel through the back streets rather than retracing the route we'd followed on the outward journey.

Once we'd reclaimed the *Black Monster* and made it to the station, since we were boarding at the point of departure there was a ten-minute window before the *Shinano Express* started moving. I used the time to keep working on *Travelogue* material.





That brought a sharp rebuke once we started off and the *iPad* was slotted into the backpack, and the *iPod* provided the soundtrack.

At first, it was a case of fairly broad plains filled with the regular signs of economic and agricultural activity backed on both sides by majestic snowcapped mountains.

Then, as the train climbed into the foothills things closed in on either side as we travelled through deep forest-clad gorges where rocky riverbeds were the order of the day and slopes that were closer to the vertical than the horizontal showed an impressive array of autumn leaves. There was, however, one issue that means this leg is underrepresented in the photographic record.

We were on the left-hand side of a service that departed at midday on a line where the western sun seemed to remain in a fairly steady position. It was a source of continuing annoyance and prevented significant photographic action. Things got so bad towards the end of the journey that we were forced to draw the curtains.

Fortunately, the views on the other side were magnificent, the glare issues ruled out typing, and there was nothing for it but to sit back and enjoy two and a half hours of magnificent scenery.

We spent a fair section of the last bit, heading across the plain into **Nagoya**, pondering the outcome when a train is six minutes late, and your connection leaves ten minutes after the scheduled arrival.

An announcement over the P.A. System advised us to speak to the conductor, which, of course, we duly did, but one couldn't help suspecting the normally reliable and *on time almost to the second* service wasn't going to be kept waiting to allow a couple of stragglers to make the connection.

The **Shinano** is a regular train, rather than a **Shinkansen**, which meant, once we'd alighted and found our way off the platform we had to find our way onto the relevant platform in another section of the station. That mission had both of us moving at a fair clip down an escalator, along a passageway and up another escalator to find...

*Miracle of miracles, a Shinkansen was just coming to a halt, easing into the station just in time for us to board.*

The train we boarded was going to our overnight stop at **Okayama**, but we changed in **Osaka**, boarding a much more luxurious **Sakura** that would get us there quicker than the train we'd just left, which was one of the *stops at all stations* variety.

The reasons for stopping where you do vary.

We were in **Okayama** because of its location, which makes the city an important transportation hub. It's the spot where the main **Shinkansen** line joins the only rail connection to **Shikoku**, which we were going to be visiting briefly the following day, crossing the **Seto-oteshi Bridge**.



Had that detail not been part of the equation we could well have continued to *Hiroshima*.

Okayama's most famous attraction is *Korakuen*, one of the best landscape gardens in *Japan*, along with *Kanazawa's Kenrokuen* and *Mito's Kairakuen*.

The black *Okayama Castle*, located across from the garden, is another attraction, but the single item that dominates the city's cultural environment is a fairy tale.

*Momotaro* delivered, I must admit, a certain degree of wry amusement, due to the coincidence of the mythical hero and a culinary delicacy of which I'm not too enamoured.

In the fairy tale, an elderly childless couple find a peach floating down a river. When they investigate further, they find it contains a baby boy. As is invariably the case in such instances, the couple adopt the child, and given the circumstances in which he was found, name him *Momotaro (Peach Boy)*.

The fully grown *Peach Boy*, announces his determination to rid the neighbourhood of the demons from *Onigashima (Demon Island)*, who've been terrorising the villagers.

He'll need something to fuel his quest, so his aged adoptive mother makes *kibi-dango* (sweet millet-flour dumplings) to take on the journey.

He'll also need allies, which he finds in the form of a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant.

He enlists the trio to the cause by bribing them with the *kibi-dango*.

Predictably, the demons are defeated; their treasure makes the old couple rich, and everyone lived happily ever after.

*Okayama's* main street, predictably, is *Momotarō-Odōri*, or *Peach Boy Street*.

I'm thinking of writing my version of the story, the adventures of *Frock-Star, the rum ball boy*.

The plain on which the city is located produces rice, eggplant, and *Chinese* chives and the uplands behind the city produce grapes and (surprise, surprise) white peaches.

Proximity to the *Seto Inland Sea* contributes to several of the area's signature dishes, including the takeaway *matsuri-zushi* (*sushi rice with vinegar, egg and seafood*), sold in a peach-shaped box.

Other specialities include *mamakari*, which resemble herring and *sawara*, a fish whose name is rendered into *English* as *trout* or *horse mackerel*.

And, of course, there's always *kibi-dango*.

Which explains why we ended up at a *Spanish tapas* place that adjoined the hotel.





## OKAYAMA > HIROSHIMA > ONOURA

***Monday, 5 November 2012***

It's at this point, after ten days of hauling the *Black Monster* up and down staircases, in and out of elevators, on and off assorted trains with the associated worry about somewhere to stow the thing, that we bid farewell to the aforementioned encumbrance.

It's presence had, up to this point on the trip, been inevitable.

We had a week on the road, heading up into the cold country, with no idea how much warm clothing was going to constitute enough, and an understandable degree of caution as far as wet weather was concerned.



Having passed *Kōbe* the day before we were back in territory where it was theoretically going to be warmer, so it made sense to take the cold weather gear and despatch it, along with everything else deemed surplus to requirements, off to *The Mother's* place.

Despatching that material, of course, requires a container, and since the *Black Monster* is the only one on hand that's big enough it's a case of *Bye Bye Monster, see you on the final day*.

That's when we'll be re-sorting the possessions and loading *Madam's* suitcase with *Japanese comestibles* and reading matter.

There's a certain amount of economic sense in the move.

Over the next two days, we'd have been looking to stow the *Monster* in a coin locker at ¥600/day, thank you very much.

At an anticipated cost of ¥1600 to ship it back to *Kōbe*, we're actually ahead if a third day in a coin locker turned out to be necessary.

As it turned out, we ended up with change out of ¥1500, so we were slightly further ahead, and a quick squiz at the coin lockers at *Okayama Station* suggested the *Monster* may have been too wide to fit in.





Of course, having made that decision and bundled things up, *Madam* checked the weather and found what looks like an extremely nasty cold front heading in our direction, having just killed two *Japanese tourists* on the *Great Wall of China*.

The day's agenda, this time, involves a train ride over the *Seto-Hashi Bridge* to *Shikoku*, followed by a couple of hours in *Okayama* before heading down through *Hiroshima* to an overnight stop on the doorstep of *Miyajima*, so we're back in history and geography lesson time again.

Officially they might refer to the *Seto-Hashi Bridge*, but there are actually six bridges spanning five islands that connect *Kojima* in *Okayama Prefecture* on the main island of *Honshū* with *Sakaide* in *Shikoku's Kagawa Prefecture*.

Built between *1978* and *1988*, the thirteen-kilometre stretch connecting *Hitsuishijima*, *Iwagurojima*, *Wasajima*, *Yoshima* and *Mitsugojima* in the *Seto Inland Sea* and the larger islands on either side operates on two levels.

The upper level carries the *Seto-Chuo Expressway* with two lanes of traffic in each direction while the *JR Seto-Hashi Line* and a lesser road share the lower level, and there's room to accommodate a *Shinkansen* line in each direction. Of the six bridges, three are suspension bridges, two are oblique suspension bridges, and there's one truss bridge.

The statistics associated with the *ten-year US\$ 7 billion project* are impressive.

The construction needed over *three and a half million cubic metres of concrete*, and almost *three-quarters of a million tonnes of steel* before the bridge opened on *10 April 1988*.

Today, the bridge is one of three routes connecting *Honshū* and *Shikoku*, though it's the only way to get to *Shikoku* by rail.

Having breakfasted and handed over the *Monster* it was time to light out for the station, where we were booked into the prime seats on the train that crosses the bridge, but that was a one-way arrangement.

In an economy where space is at a premium and efficiency is prized, *Japanese trains* can be driven from either end.

They arrive at the terminus and it's simply a case of the driver changing ends, and then they're set to go on the return journey.

The same thing operates on *local services in Australia*, but we still, from what I can gather, do *the old switcheroo bit* with something like the *Sunlander*, taking the locomotive down to the other end of the train for the return journey.





The astute observer will note *Shinkansen* invariably have a power unit at either end and, more often than not, one more somewhere in the middle, which explains why *Car 1* is always at *that end* of the train, regardless of the actual direction of travel.

If you're in the right place at the turn around point, you'll see something more interesting.

We all like to travel looking in the direction we're going don't we?

So what happens when it's turnaround time for the *Shinkansen*? Well, you have the seats turned to face the new direction, don't you?

These factors hadn't registered until I sat down to ponder the return journey across the bridge.

We'd been told there was no point in holding the same seats for the return journey because they'd be looking backwards.

Until the train pulled in, I'd thought we'd be in some sightseeing bubble, up above the body of the train, which meant, when you look at it that way, the preceding bit makes a certain amount of sense.

We got to the platform just as the train arrived, disgorging the regular crowd of salarymen and office workers, and once the flood had passed, set off to find our seats, which were tucked way just behind the driver's compartment at the very front of the train.





There are four seats, tagged *1 A, B, C and D*. One assumes there's a similar compartment at the other end of the train where the seat labels start with a 2.

They are, by the way, the only reserved seats on the train.

A word to the wise, if you're looking to do the bridge trip.

*Japanese engine drivers* sit in consoles on the left-hand side.

If you're in 1 A or B on the outward leg, your panoramic view to the front will feature the back of the driver's head.

Presumably, the same thing applies to C and D on the way back.

In any case, with a clear view to the front and away to the south, and a pretty clear view over to the left we set off, starting with a sharpish left hand turn out of the station, heading off through the usual edge of a large *Japanese city landscape*.

That's a mix of residential blocks, light industry and scattered paddy fields.





You'll find something similar all across the country, with rice paddies gradually gaining the upper hand as you head away from the city.

*The eager bridge-crosser* will, of course, scan the horizon for signs of bridges, which are singularly lacking for the early part of the journey.

Then you hit a series of tunnels, predictably expecting you'll emerge from this one with a sight of the sea, and, hopefully, a bridge.

You don't sight the water until **Kojima**, the last station before **Shikoku**, and still comfortably short of the bridge itself.





Given the weather conditions we were expecting to be a tad disappointed, but as we made our way onto the first bridge, it was obvious we were getting a magnificent sight on a less than optimal day.

While the spectacle could have been better everything was, under the circumstances, rather more than merely satisfactory.

The research I'd done suggested a series of bridges since the material was careful to enumerate and identify half a dozen components, more than likely (so I theorised) touching down on intervening islands before launching off and upwards onto the next.

That might be the way we'd approach these matters *in Australia or elsewhere*, but the *Japanese* like big statements when it comes to things like technology and engineering, so *the components merge into a contiguous whole*.

A couple of times on the way across you'll register the presence of an island as you pass. There's one spot where you can see trees around eye level, but apart from that, there's no way to tell where one of the component bridges ends and the next begins.

And it wouldn't be a good idea to try.

Looking down to identify starts and finishes will draw attention away from a view that was, even on a day when conditions were less than optimal, magnificent.



It had me pencilling in a return trip in the future, hopefully with better weather conditions and more than likely as part of a longer exploration of *Shikoku*.

Assuming there's a rail pass involved) we'd get two bites of the cherry a couple of days apart.

Once we'd crossed and alighted at *Sakaide* there was a twenty-minute wait before we made our way back on a common or garden commuter train, not that it diminished the view in too many ways.

Back in *Okayama*, the big question was what to do for the next couple of hours.

My preference was to head for *Okayama Korakuen*, rated as one of the three best traditional landscape gardens in *Japan* alongside *Kenrokuen* in *Kanazawa* and *Kairakuen* in *Mito*, an option that would give us a good sight of nearby *Okayama Castle*.

Bearing the weather, and particularly the threat of rain, in mind, *Madam* was inclined to opt for the nearby town of *Kurashiki*, so we set off for the *Tourist Information Centre* in the station complex to check whether there were further options and sort out the issue.

The woman we spoke to was fairly insistent *Korakuen* was the way to go. A glance at the leaflet about *Kurashiki* suggested we'd be spending a bit of time in the open there, so there wasn't a great deal of advantage in that direction.

Forced to make a choice I went for the garden and the castle rather than the neighbouring town.







After all, if things got too bad, we could always retreat to the station complex.

Once outside, it was a case of umbrellas up, and a choice between a walk down the main street, *Motomaro-Ōdōri*, named after the city's legendary *Peach Boy*, a character who'd been the subject of some discussion on the preceding day or two, or taking the tram along the same route.

Given the weather, you could easily have opted for the tram, based on the fact that you'd get there quicker and wouldn't be walking through the drizzling mizzle.

As it turned out, that was the way to go.

We arrived at the point where garden and castle were both visible as the sun threatened to break through the clouds.





Although the umbrellas were unfurled for most of the next hour and a half, the weather was better than you'd have expected when you've started out with a forecast of rain developing.

With the weather looking like it might be starting to clear we paused long enough to gather evidence we'd been there.

Widely known as *Crow Castle (Ujō)*, the castle acquired the nickname from its black exterior.

*Japanese castles*, like the nearby *Himejijō*, tend to be white.

Completed in 1597 in the style of the *Azuchi-Momoyama Period*, destroyed in a bombing raid in **1945** and replicated in concrete in **1966** (except for a single turret that survived the bombing) the reconstruction is much more accurate than most *Japanese replicas* since it was done from original blueprints.

The castle houses a museum documenting the history and development of the castle that might have sounded like a handy wet weather venue, but I knew *English explanations of the contents* were few and far between.





With the evidence gathered we headed across a bridge that took us to the south gate of *Korakuen*, paused to considering whether to use that entrance and then headed for the main entrance, which turned out to be much further around than we'd thought.

The admission charge is ¥400, but *Madam* had picked up a leaflet at the tourist information place that delivered a twenty percent discount.

That, coincidentally, was the reduction offered to groups.

I'm not sure that a duo counts as a group within the meaning of the act, but there you go.

We'd only just made our way inside and were paused considering the right direction to head in when we were approached by a woman obviously canvassing for candidates for something or other.





I suspected a *tea ceremony* and was attempting to decline politely when she turned to **Madam**.

I suspect if it had been a *tea ceremony* she'd have declined too.

As it turned out, a group of enthusiasts were demonstrating a traditional game involving a fan and a target, and **Madam** was inclined to give it a go.

The aim of the particular exercise was to project the open fan so it knocked over the target on top of the stand.

They tried to get me involved as well, but experience with *tatami* mats in **Unazuki** suggested there'd be issues with the posture.

I politely declined, using *dodgy knees* as an excuse.

Outside, **Madam** said she had enjoyed the exercise, so that was fine, and we spent the next little while in a clockwise stroll, snapping away and admiring an extensive garden that is, as you'd expect, spectacular, but in a rather understated manner.





**Korakuen** was constructed on the feudal lord, **Ikeda Tsunamasa's** orders with the work carried out between 1687 and 1700.

There have been changes over three centuries, but the garden is still much the way it was in the days when it served as a venue to entertain the ruling family and a location for receiving important guests.

**Korakuen** wasn't the original name. It was originally called **Koen** (*later garden*) since it was built after the nearby castle.

Built in the spirit of **senyukoraku** (*grieve earlier than others, enjoy later than others, a Confucian quote stating that a ruler must attend to his subjects' needs first and only then attend to his own*), the name changed to **Korakuen** in **1871**.





The garden is in the *Chisan Kaiyu* (*scenic promenade around a large pond*) style which presents visitors with a new view at every turn of the path that connects lawns, ponds, hills, tea houses, and streams.

It suffered flood damage in **1934** and was bombed during *World War Two*, but was restored to its original state thanks to accurate records kept by the designers, *Edo Period* paintings and *Ikeda family* records and documents.

It's spacious with a hill that serves as a lookout point.

Unlike most gardens of this type, it has *extensive lawns* (18,500 out of an area of 133,000 square metres), *groves of plum, cherry and maple trees*, *tea and rice fields*, as well as *an archery range* and *a crane aviary*.



Having taken our time strolling through the gardens, we wandered back out the main entrance, crossed the bridge and looped back to the nearest tram stop. A tram back to the station seemed like the way to go since we hadn't booked seats for the next leg to *Hiroshima*.

Time in these matters is of the essence, and efficiency of movement a key factor, so we headed back to the hotel, grabbed the *Little Red Travelling Bag* and *Madam's backpack*, and arrived at the station to find the reserved seats on the train we'd been planning to catch had all been sold.

That might seem like a hassle, but there was a *Kodama* about to depart, an eight car *Shinkansen* where six cars are non-reserved seats.

We dived downstairs, snaffled a couple of seats in a mostly empty *Car Seven* and arrived in *Hiroshima* a good hour earlier than planned.

Having been caught once, the first move when we arrived was to set in concrete the remaining unbooked sectors, and it was lucky we did.

The final leg, a long haul from *Kagoshima* back to *Osaka* couldn't provide adjoining seats, so we had to settle for *either side of the aisle*.

That's a timely reminder that window seats are highly prized, not so much for the view as the presence of an outlet to recharge your laptop, *iPad* or whatever.

In any case, more than likely those window seats won't both be occupied for the entire duration of the haul from *Kagoshima* to *Osaka*.

With those details looked after we headed for the local line that would take us two stations past the ferry port that delivers passengers to the next day's destination, *Miyajima*. We alighted at *Onoura*, where *a courtesy bus* was waiting to deliver us to the *onsen* hotel where we were spending the night.

I don't know how I formed the impression, but I was expecting *a boutique operation*, possibly with a handful of rooms and was slightly alarmed to note the presence of a tour bus in the car park.

Given the *Japanese passion for communal hot bathing*, I had visions of a packed hot water tub, full of purist connoisseurs of the *onsen* experience.

That's likely to prove rather intimidating to the average *overweight and out of condition Westerner who's not totally up to speed on the correct rituals and protocols when it comes to mass bathing*.

But I'll return to that point in a minute.

As it turned out, and as I should have figured, given the proximity of *Miyajima*, a prime venue for flag bearer-led tour parties), the buses were there while the tour party was elsewhere and would shortly head off to collect the party from the pier.



Once we'd checked in, we were shown to our room by a young girl who felt obliged to lug *Hughesy's* backpack and the *Little Red Travelling* pack while I looked after *Madam's backpack*.

I tried to change the arrangements, but no, she was determined to do her duty, regardless of the fact that we'd arrived with a fair bit more luggage than the *average Japanese tourist*.

We were shown into our room, which had a very similar layout to the one in *Unazuki*, *tatami* mats on the floor, a table in the middle, two cushions to sit on and a section near the window with a table and two *Western* chairs, fridge *et cetera*.

The alcove at the entry provided just enough space to take off the shoes, spaces to stow them, room for minimal luggage and the toilet facility, with the regulation *Washlet*, which you'd see as a key ingredient in keeping the *onsen* waters *clear of claggy matter*.

The *Washlet* is the device that sprays water on your hindquarters in a strategic manner after you've evacuated the bowel area.

In any case, *Madam's* inquiries had revealed the *onsen* was unlikely to be heavily occupied until around five (and it was just after four) so I headed off immediately to the enjoyable experience that I wasn't altogether looking forward to.

When I got there the place was deserted, so I doffed the gear and went through the regulation pre-immersion cleansing procedures.

I probably carried them out to an extent that might be labelled as obsessional to a *casual Japanese onlooker* and spent a good ten minutes soaking luxuriously in a large tub looking out towards the island we were headed to in the morning.

So far, so good.

Clambering out of the bath I moved back into the antechamber, where I dried off, and dressed.

Then one of those interesting issues of etiquette hit me. You arrive with two pieces of fabric, a towel and a washcloth that's a key part of the cleansing procedure.

There was a container containing a couple of used examples of each near the door.

*What to do? Leave my two there? Or carry them back to the room?*

*When in doubt, call*, and there was a handy phone, so I did, established that it was OK to carry them back and was almost out of the door when the first of the evening's bath enthusiasts entered.

There was free *WiFi* access in *the Lobby*, so that was where I was bound shortly afterwards, looking to catch up on the email while she took her first extended turn in the *onsen*.



From my seat in the lobby, I could see a steady stream of gentlemen headed for the male baths, though there didn't seem to be any irate customers arriving at *Reception* with complaints about polluted bathwater...

We were booked in for a full *Japanese banquet* from seven o'clock, and, much to my relief it was going to be served in the room rather than in some more formal setting, so we were back upstairs around half an hour beforehand, where I discovered the *Free WiFi* wasn't limited to the *Lobby*.

That meant I had something to keep me busy in the interim.

Around seven, a discreet tap on the door announced the arrival of the first instalment of dinner, which was laid out on the table and replenished twice as we moved through a staggering array of dishes and bits and pieces.

At this point, I should take a moment to consider the *Hughsoid* reaction to *Japanese cuisine*.

I'm the first to admit that I'm not a big fan because the flavours *tend to fall outside the parameters my palate is accustomed to*, but that's just the first factor.

A second, and it's a very significant second, lies in the fact that my palate, as anyone who's sampled my preferred options would be all too aware, doesn't do *subtle*.







Strong on **chilli**, heavy on the **garlic** with concentrated flavours is the way I like it, and that's not the flavour profile you get with **Japanese cuisine**.

When you're looking at something like this display, however, the variety and contrast of the different flavours and textures work a whole lot better than an isolated serve of **sashimi** or **sushi** does.

In other words, while I don't do (as in *not enamoured of, would prefer not to sample and will go out of my way to avoid*) **sushi** or **sashimi**, serve it in this context, and I'll have a go.

That's not to suggest, on the other hand, that I *liked*, or *managed to finish* everything on offer.

There were a couple of things I tried but couldn't stomach, and the cumulative quantity served up would have defeated anyone who wasn't **an extremely dedicated trencherman**.

And, unsurprisingly, having dined extremely well it wasn't long before I was doing the *carpet snake who's just swallowed a wallaby and slunk off to sleep it off* routine.





## ONOURA > MIYAJIMA > HIROSHIMA

***Tuesday, 6 November 2012***

The first *Tuesday* in *November 2012* will go down in history as the day *Green Moon* won the *Melbourne Cup* and *Barack Obama* was re-elected *President of the United States*.

In my iconography, on the other hand, I mightn't remember the date but I doubt I'll forget the experience of visiting *Miyajima*.

We were downstairs at seven looking for breakfast and directed to the third floor, where we found a table with our room number laid out with a variety of *Japanese breakfast comestibles*, most of



which I would have avoided under other circumstances, such as a *Viking* breakfast layout.

Here, on the other hand, with a variety of platters, things that I wouldn't have gone for under other circumstances *worked off each other rather well, in much the same way as the previous evening's banquet had done.*

With breakfast out of the way, we were back upstairs packed and contacting the front desk to arrange a shuttle bus to *Onoura* station. The 8:37 train would deliver us to the ferry terminal at *Miyajima Port* just after nine.

What we found after we'd deposited the *Little Red Travelling Bag* and *Madam's backpack* in a coin locker was an example of the sheer weight of numbers drawn in by iconic sites when you're talking *Japanese heritage tourism.*

The JR ferry we boarded wasn't quite packed to the gunwales but wasn't far off it, and the ferries we saw headed across in the late afternoon were almost as crowded.

With three ferries running across and back throughout the day that's an awful lot of people headed to a significant site on a weekday when there was nothing obvious (*apart from autumn leaves*) to draw them there.







Admittedly, a significant portion were high school students in excursion mode, and many of the remainder were elderly *Japanese* formed into largish tour groups, but it was still a fairly significant number of travellers visiting the sacred island.

As the ferry neared the shore, there was a predictable movement of seated passengers towards the port side railings for a first glimpse of the famous *torii*.

From what I could gather the ferry's course would deliver a better and closer view on the starboard side, so that was where I was headed, determined to find the optimum viewing spot for the closest approach.

Needless to say, I was subsequently joined by most of those who had previously migrated to the port side railings, but, at least, this time, I had the premium viewing spot.





Once we'd docked there was the inevitable exodus headed towards *Itsukushima shrine*, which lies right behind the *torii*.

It had been low tide about half an hour before, and most of the stretch between the temple and the gate was *not quite* dry land. There was plenty of camera action going on from the headland and across the exposed beach, but we were headed elsewhere.

*Miyajima* means *shrine-island*, a reference to *Itsukushima*, a *World Heritage Site*.

The image usually associated with the island is the shrine's floating *torii* gate set in the *Seto Inland Sea*.

The red-lacquered complex of halls and pathways and the *torii* gate, built over water seem to float in the sea at high tide.

The buildings, the prayer hall, main hall and a Noh theatre are connected by boardwalks on stilts, built so commoners could visit without defiling the ground by walking on it.





The arrangement is based on the idea that the island itself is sacred, and, as a result, the shrine represents the threshold between the sacred and the profane.

Before mass tourism kicked in, commoners approached the shrine by water, steering their boats through the *torii* on their way in.

Away from the boardwalks, paths take visitors around the inlet to the other shrines and temples, and to the island's highest peak, *Mount Misen*.

The buildings have been destroyed and rebuilt many times.

The current design dates back to 1168, when *Taira no Kiyomori*, the most powerful man in *Japan* at the end of the *Heian Period*, selected the island as the site for his clan's family shrine.



Retaining the purity of the shrine is important and since **1878**, there have been no deaths or births near the shrine. Pregnant women are supposed to head to the mainland as their time approaches, as are terminally ill or the very elderly. Burials are still forbidden.

That was the origin of *Itsukushima*.

The present shrine dates from the middle of the sixteenth century but follows the twelfth-century design. Near the main shrine a *Noh* theatre stage, built by *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* in the late sixteenth century, is used to honour to the gods, and act out key events in the mythic history of *Shinto*.

The *torii* and the view of the gate in front of *Itsukushima* with *Mount Misen* in the background is one of the *Three Views of Japan* (along with the sand bar *Amanohashidate*, in *Kyoto Prefecture's Miyazu Bay* and *Matsushima* near *Sendai*).

There has been a gate in place since the twelfth century, but the current sixteen-metre high gate, which dates back to **1875**, is built from *decay-resistant camphor wood* with an extra leg before and behind each main pillar.

It reflects the style of *Ryōbu Shintō*, a school of *esoteric Japanese Buddhism* associated with the *Shingon* sect.







Though the shrine and its *torii* float above the water at high tide, when the tide falls the water drains out of the bay and the *torii* can be approached on foot.

Visitors take the opportunity to walk out, view the gate from close quarters, place coins in the cracks of the legs, make a wish and gather shellfish to add to their *miso* soup.

That had been happening as our boat approached.

Given the numbers involved in an era of mass tourism you'd figure that shellfish would be few and far between these days

I'd done my research before departure, pencilling in a walk around the temple precinct, starting at *Senjokaku temple*, passing the *Five-Storey Pagoda* and a couple of lesser shrines, taking us around





the mountainside *Nature Walk*, then looping back to the main temple area.

*Madam* was determined to make for *Mount Misen* via the ropeway, but the morning weather conditions made that idea a bit iffy, so we started with *Senjokaku*, where there were obvious preparations for something or other under way.

*Senjokaku* (*Hall of One Thousand Tatami Mats*) is the colloquial name for *Toyokuni* shrine, originally built by *Toyotomi Hideyoshi* (one of the three unifiers of sixteenth century *Japan*) in 1587 but left incomplete after his death.

The nickname is an apt description of the largest structure on *Miyajima*, which doesn't contain much apart from empty space.

According to a letter from *Ankokuji Ekei*, head monk of *Ankokuji* temple, the intention was to build a library where the chanting of *sutra* every month would honour those killed and wounded in times of war.





The structure was left unpainted, and since the year it was built is known, the weathering of its pillars and floor boards can help determine the age of other wooden structures on *Miyajima*.

*Senjokaku* is, however, a slight exaggeration.

The area of floor space is equal to 857 *tatami* mats.

From there, once we'd reclaimed the footwear we'd removed so we could enter the temple, we made our way past the *Five-Storey Pagoda* (*Gojunoto*). It was built in 1407 and restored in 1533 and enshrines the *Buddha of Medicine* and *Buddhist saints Fugen* and *Monju*.

From there we headed into the back streets that took us past *Zonkoji*, *Tokujuji* and *Shinkoji* temples on the way to a road the map labelled the *Nature Walk*.





Given the coloured leaves theme, it seemed the way to go.

It was evident that the further you went from the main tourist areas, the less crowded things became, and by the time we hit the *Nature Walk* we had things more or less to ourselves.

The ramble through the foothills was a contrast to the bustling conditions a few hundred metres away, and the foliage was definitely on the autumnal turn, giving *Madam* a considerable degree of heartache due to the sunlight's continued refusal to play nicely and deliver optimal conditions for coloured leaves photography.

That meant once we reached the point where a decision regarding the ropeway needed to be made, the consensus was to head *back into the throng rather than up the mountain*.

Still, once we were back with the crowd, we tended to work away from the mob, heading for *Daishoin* rather than the main temple complex.





Located five minutes' walk from *Itsukushima* shrine at the foot of *Mount Misen*, *Daishoin* is one of the most important temples of *Shingon Buddhism*.

Founded in 806 by the founder of the sect (*Kūkai*, known posthumously as *Kobo Daishi*), the temple was the first *Buddhist shrine* on *Miyajima*.

It features a variety of buildings, statues and religious objects including the *Kannon* Hall, the *Maniden* Hall, a sand *mandala* made by visiting monks from Tibet and a tea room.

There's also cave filled with eighty icons representing the temples of the *Shikoku Pilgrimage* and a flame said to have been burning since the temple was founded.





From the temple grounds, a hiking trail leads to the summit of **Mount Misen**, but the climb takes about an hour and a half, which ruled it out as a serious possibility as far as *Yours Truly* was concerned.

In the middle of the steps leading into the temple, there's a row of spinning metal wheels inscribed with **Buddhist sutra** can be turned as you pass.

That is believed to have the same effect as reading the **sutra** so, without any knowledge of **Japanese**, you can benefit from the blessings the reading of **sutra** is believed to deliver without doing the reading.

*Given those considerations, I was giving the cylinders a good swirl on the way up.*

Up to this point, the emphasis had been on staying away from crowds, and we only made our way into the really congested area when the prospect of lunch came to the fore.





On the way across there'd been a notable abundance of oyster beds, so even if I hadn't already been told the area around **Hiroshima** is famous for its oysters on the evidence I'd sighted earlier I'd have been looking for oysters for lunch.

After ten days of **Japanese specialities** and *try this you might like it*, there was one thing I was definite about.

I wanted oyster, the whole oyster and (almost) nothing but the oyster.

On a multiple basis.

We sighted an uncrowded restaurant when we hit the main temple area on the way back from **Daishoin**, and I must admit on the first impulse I was inclined to stop there and get lunch out of the way.

**Madam**, on the other hand, had sighted references to a couple of places that specialise in oysters.

The problem was their location, bang in the middle of the bustling and almost overcrowded central shopping area.

We passed one, noting a sizeable queue waiting to get in while oysters in the half shell were being grilled at the front of the eatery.



We came to a second, where there was also a queue, but a marginally shorter one that, I decided, would do, and as it turned out it did very nicely, thank you.

**Madam** did her best to talk me into half a dozen in a variety of settings, but I was steadfast.

I went for four grilled on the half shell, with another three crumbed and deep fried, along with a glass of *Chablis*.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the oysters I got were (a) *huge* and (b) *bloody magnificent*.

Don't believe me?

Here's the evidence.

With lunch out of the way, we were left balancing two options.

**Madam** wanted to get to the top of **Mount Misen**, and we'd avoided **Itsukushima** earlier in the piece because of the low tide.

Since it was around one, with a good hour and a bit until high tide it seemed like the ropeway up to the top (well, not quite the *actual* top, but close to it) seemed like the way to go.







We made our way through the back streets to the point where you pre-purchase tickets, did that, noted the crowd waiting for *the courtesy bus*, figured we wouldn't fit on the next one and decided, in that case, there was no choice but to hoof it to the bottom station.

It's a ten-minute walk (*seven*, we were reminded along the way, *if you run a bit*) but with the backpack, in the wake of the morning's up hill and down dale ramble, there wasn't going to be much running.

In any case, most of it is uphill and most of the uphill involves stairs that aren't spaced to make them easy to climb when you've got my stride pattern.





Still, we seemed to have arrived at the base station before *the courtesy bus*, joined the queue, and eventually found ourselves in a gondola with *four Japanese girls*, some of whom, as *Madam* informed me later, weren't too good on heights either.

*Hughesy* isn't particularly good on heights, but that had nothing to do with having my back to the view for the ascent.

*When you're the last one in, you're not given much choice on where you sit.*

Rope ways don't handle curves, and subsequently need to work in straight lines, so there's a station three hundred and fifty metres up a fairly steeply pitched slope where you change for the next stage, which involves larger gondolas with the majority of passengers standing up.

With my back to the view, I hadn't been able to see much and though, for the first bit I'd tried to turn around and admire the view that had everyone else marvelling, but the girth made rotating the trunk difficult.







Those considerations didn't apply to the second stage, which travels above the ridge that leads to the summit.

The view on the other side of the ridge to the *Seto Inland Sea* was breathtaking.

Earlier in the piece, *Madam* had been talking about *the circuit to the summit*, where there are a number of temples and places of interest.

*Mt. Misen*'s ascetic status as a holy mountain site dates back to the autumn of 806.

The sites scattered around the summit add another dimension to the panoramic views across the *Seto Inland Sea*, though we weren't going to be visiting them this time around.





A return visit without the lengthy ramble around the *Nature Walk* would probably allow us to get around the *Seven Wonders of Misen*, including the *Eternal Fire (Kiezuno Reikado)*, said to have been burning for over 1,160 years and believed to be effective to cure all illness.

It was used to light the *Flame of Peace* in the *Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park*.

As stated, *Madam* was keen to go the extra forty minutes or so that would have taken us around the summit, but given the state of both pairs of legs, she decided to give that a miss.

After a photo session around the observatory at the ropeway station, we made our way back down, well and truly in time to catch *Itsukushima* at close to the best tidal conditions.

We didn't, however, get there in a hurry.

The way up had taken us through *Momijidani Park*, with a striking contrast as the red of the maples shows up against the deep green of the surrounding evergreen forest.





We'd been intent on getting to the base station before *the courtesy bus* on the way up, but on the descent, with the urgency out of the equation, I dawdled as *Madam* took her time snapping away.

Back at the main shrine, we found ourselves sharing the space with some school groups, and a throng of *mainly Japanese visitors*, and were mildly bemused by the reaction to the *No Photographs* sign where you pay your admission.

Less than five metres from that point a bunch of high school boys were blithely ignoring the message, but a glance further on revealed the flouting of instructions wasn't a generational thing.

Everyone else was doing it, so we did it too, figuring the *No Photographs* applied to the people in the ticket booths .

They were about the only thing that wasn't being photographed.





I limited my shots to the *torii*, and the general shape of the building, avoiding anything that might be sacred.

It seemed like a common sense compromise.

From there, we could have continued around the bay to other temples and points of interest, but by this stage the feet were aching, the muscles at the back of the legs were indicating that they'd had enough, and the crowds were getting to me.

When *Madam* suggested we head back to the mainland and move on to *Hiroshima*, there weren't going to be too many objections.





We'd been on one of the earlier ferries in the morning and with three separate services operating from *Miyajima Port* and a fourth bringing passengers from *Hiroshima* the flow of visitors had probably continued unabated through the day.

By mid-afternoon, many of the visitors were thinking of heading in the other direction, so the ferries making the return trip were always going to be crowded.

I realised, as we stood at the end of a lengthy queue and watched another flow of incoming visitors leaving the vessel we were about to board, and another carrying a considerable contingent coming in to dock, that the flood of visitors might rise and fall through the day.

But from the first service in the morning until the last one in the evening there's a steady stream coming in.

People arriving towards the end are presumably booked into one of the island's *ryokan* or *onsen* and are presumably there for the sunset.





Day visitors, on the other hand, are going to want to stay as long as possible and leave with enough time to reach their evening destination before dinner time

Which means that regardless of how crowded the boat was on the way over, it's going to be packed on the way back.

We're not talking absolutely packed.

Not to the extent you see in news footage from *Bangladesh* or *Indonesia*, where images of crowded ferries crop up in news bulletins, usually in the wake of some disaster involving severely overcrowded vessels.





But it's a situation where, assuming the capacity of the ferry involved is 1250 passengers, the crowd, and the queue situation means they won't stop admissions to the vessel before 1249 and won't allow it to reach 1251.

I had momentary visions of the capacity limit being reached as *Madam* was allowed aboard with *Yours Truly* left for the following service, but we both passed the checkpoint and headed aboard.

*Madam* wanted to take a few more photos, so I found a seat as she headed upstairs. There was one spare beside me, but it was gone by the time she made her way downstairs.

Back on the mainland, with the *Little Red Travelling Bag* retrieved from the coin locker we headed across to the platform we'd arrived on and waited for the commuter train that would deliver us back into *Hiroshima* a good twenty-six or seven hours after we'd arrived.

That got us into the station complex, and a shortish walk delivered us to the *Hotel Urbain Executive*, where we were spending the night.

Don't be deceived by the title, though. It might have been *Urbain*, rather than *Urbane*, but it was another in the string of places we'd stopped that cater to the travelling salaryman trade, but it had one significant difference from the standard version.



Once you left the security of the lift that brought you to your designated floor you were in the open air, and *remarkably crisp, fresh and breezy open air* it was as we made our way to the room.

It was sort of like a multi-storey version of the standard motel, with the units warped around a central space in a more or less triangular manner with open space looking down into the lobby where the car parks would otherwise have been.

Such establishments offer a variety of enticements to attract the business trade, and in this case, the variants included *free drinks* (of the non-alcoholic variety, of course), *for guests only*, downstairs and a *free laundry* rather than the standard *coin laundry*.

We had a load of washing that needed attention so that solved the issue nicely, but the fact that *Madam* was outdoors as soon as she left the warmth of the room meant she won't be booking us in there again.

With *the laundry* done and dusted we headed off to dinner.

*Madam* was determined to sample one of *Hiroshima's* trademark dishes and steered us past some other possibilities into the station complex.

We found her preferred option was packed, and it's *cousin brother further down the corridor* was the same with a few more thrown in for good measure.

I wasn't over keen on what I saw as we'd gone past the first time, but if *TheTour Director* has set her mind on one particular format for dinner experience suggests it's futile to resist.

We inquired about a table for two and ended up with a space at a bar at the rear of the premises, right beside (actually, *left* beside from the seated point of view) the cash register.

So if what follows appears to be a little jaundiced, consider my situation.

Having spent the day doing a lot of walking, much of it involving stairs and sloping paths, I was leg-weary but not overly famished.

The lunchtime oysters had left room in the stomach, but not enough to require a significant refill.

I was seated in a crowded eatery on a stool that had my knees uncomfortably close to the eating surface.

Every thirty seconds or so something said to my immediate left had me automatically turning my head in that direction (coincidentally, the one from which the food would be coming), and I wasn't keen on what I'd seen in preparation.



The meal, when it arrived, turned out to be a sort of pancake turned into a parcel containing noodles and whatever theme ingredient (beef, chicken, pork, tofu or, in this case, oysters) the diner chooses.

It came with a healthy serve of a variant on soy sauce that is apparently widely enjoyed in *Japan*, but has *very limited appeal as far as Hughesy is concerned*.

*Madam* suggested if I didn't like the sauce, I should try a bit of *this hotter variety*, adding some to the platter. I chose not to respond since the response would have contained variations on the desire to get the sauce *out* of the dish rather than adding any more.

The addition was a *Chilli enhanced* variation on the other one.

Same flavour profile, but more heat.

And the oysters were small, with the taste overpowered by the sauce.

There were places where we could stop for a drink on the way back, but I'd had enough.

We passed two wine bars where the offerings seemed to be aimed at the segment of the market that was disinclined to spend and was after effect rather than taste.

While I *could* have weakened, I want to drink *something interesting* in the wine department.

If I can't, there's always beer, but in this case, I wasn't inclined that way either.





HIROSHIMA >  
KUMAMOTO >  
KAGOSHIMA

***Wednesday, 7 November 2012***

Mention the largest city in the *Chūgoku* region of western *Honshū* and capital of *Hiroshima Prefecture* and the first thing that will spring to mind is what happened at a quarter past eight on the morning of ***6 August 1945***.

And so it should.

Because when American B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped the bomb they'd nicknamed *Little Boy* it didn't just kill around eighty thousand people directly.





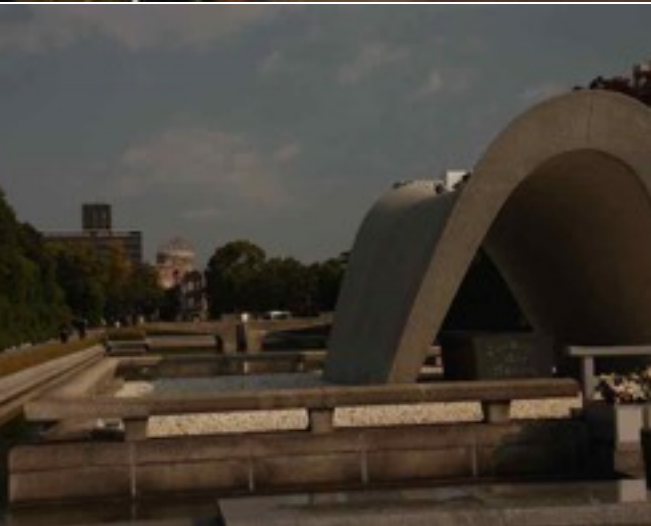
That figure rose to somewhere between ninety and one hundred and forty thousand as the effects of injury and radiation took their toll. The blast changed the world forever and made the world a very scary place indeed for the next quarter of a century or so.

We weren't as concerned about these matters as the end of the twentieth century rolled around, with the *Cold War* a distant memory.

But for a small boy who went to bed each night as the *Cuban Missile Crisis* and surrounding events saw *Soviet Russia* and the *United States* engaged in nuclear brinkmanship the possibility of a global repetition of what happened that morning was terrifying.

It's not as if I *wanted* to visit the city, but if the opportunity arose *I had to*.





*Here's where it happened, here's where things changed, and we have to ensure that this never happens again.*

The spectre of *Hiroshima* and *Nagasaki* was a major factor in the mindset that shaped the culture of the fifties and early sixties.

But *Hiroshima* has a long pre-atom bomb history and presents a remarkable story of recovery and hope for the future.

*Provided*, of course, *we don't allow it to happen again.*

The name means *Wide Island* and *Hiroshima* was founded on the delta of the *Ota River*, in 1589.

Warlord *Mori Terumoto* made it his capital after leaving *Aki Province*, built *Hiroshima Castle* and moved there in 1593.

He was on the losing side in the *Battle of Sekigahara*, the beginning of the *Tokugawa Shōgunate*.

*Tokugawa Ieyasu* gave control of the area to the *Asano* clan of *samurai*, who ruled the area until the *Meiji Restoration*. Under their rule, the city prospered and expanded.



Their descendants were strong supporters of modernisation through the *Meiji Period*,

*Hiroshima* became an industrial centre and a busy port as the *Japanese economy* shifted from *predominantly rural to urban and industrial*.

The *Sanyo Railway* reached *Hiroshima* in *1894*, and the city was a *major military centre* during the *First Sino-Japanese War* with the *Japanese government* temporarily based there.

Emperor *Meiji* made his headquarters at *Hiroshima Castle* from *15 September 1894* to *27 April 1895*, and the first round of peace talks to end the war was held in *Hiroshima* in early *February 1895*.

*Hiroshima* was a *major supply base* during the *Russo-Japanese War* in *1904* and, just over ten years later, a *focal point of military activity* when the *Japanese government* entered the *First World War* on the Allied side.

The *Hiroshima Prefectural Commercial Exhibition Hall*, constructed in *1915* as a *centre for trade and the display of new products* was the closest surviving building to the atomic detonation, designated the *Genbaku* or *Atomic Dome*, as part of the *Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park*.

The city was a major military base again during *World War Two*, with *large depots of military supplies*, and was *a key hub for shipping*. While there was widespread destruction in *Tokyo* and other cities there had been no air raids in *Hiroshima*.

Students aged eleven to fourteen had been demolishing houses and creating firebreaks to protect against potential firebombings, but no air raids.

*Until 6 August 1945.*

Just over a month after the bombing, the *Makurazaki Typhoon* (*Typhoon Ida*) killed and injured more people, destroyed more than half the remaining bridges in the city and added further heavy damage to roads and railroads.

*Hiroshima* was rebuilt with help from the national government that provided financial assistance and land donated previously used for military purposes.

There, in a nutshell, you have the *Hiroshima* story.

When you walk (or, in our case, travel by tram) through the downtown area on your way to the Atomic Dome you see a remarkable recovery. It's proof that, if such an event were to happen again, on a small scale, and at the same intensity of blast, recovery might be possible.

On the other hand, as a guide addressing a tour group about ten metres to my left pointed out as I stood dabbing at my misty eyes and gazing at the Dome, today's nuclear weapons are much larger and infinitely more powerful.



There's a mist over my eyes as I type this, and reflect on a time when a small boy lived in dread that *Hiroshima* was about to be repeated on a worldwide scale.

But it's a place that needs to be visited, an event that needs to be remembered and is remembered in a mid-city environment that has been shaped to deliver serenity and quiet dignity that's impressive given the awful magnitude of the event it commemorates.

We could have gone further, and made our way into the *Peace Museum*, but chose instead to walk slowly through the parkland, reflecting on events and trying not to think about events on the other side of the world that will shape the way things go for the next four years.

We were booked on to the 10:51 *Sakura 549* service that could have taken us all the way to the day's eventual destination in *Kagoshima* if we hadn't decided to break the journey in *Kumamoto*.

We were going to take a walk around the *Castle* there, and as it turned out it was just as well we hadn't opted to visit the *Peace Museum*.







There were other places that could well have been worth a visit on a less crowded schedule.

Just north of the city, *Fudoin* temple on the east bank of the *Ota River* is one of the few structures in the area to survive the atomic blast and the *Kondo* (*Main Hall*) is the only designated national treasure in *Hiroshima City*.

It seems the *Kondo* was originally built in *Suo Province* and moved to the present site, but based on statues of the *Buddha of healing and medicine* within the building, it is assumed a temple had already been built by on the site by the end of the *Heian Period*.

The *Kondo* is the largest remaining structure in the *Kara style*, brought from China in the *Kamakura era* along with *Zen Buddhism*. It boasts beams spanning 7.3 metres and 5.5 metres and *irimoya* (a combination of gable and hip roof) with *mokoshi* (an extra roof).

Inside, the dedication suggests *Fudoin* was built around 1540.

We could also have visited *Shukkeien* garden (literally, *shrunk-scenery garden*), which dates back to *1620*, was started after the completion of *Hiroshima Castle*.

It features a miniature representation of a variety of natural formations and scenic views, depicting valleys, mountains, and forests. Tea houses around the main pond offer visitors views of the surrounding scenery and a path that winds around the pond passes through all of *Shukkeien's* miniature scenes.



It would probably have been an ideal place to destress after the atomic bomb sites, but we had other fish to fry down **Kagoshima** way

By the time we'd made our way back to the station, hoofed it back to the hotel, where the checkout time was a very convenient eleven o'clock, collected the backpacks and the **Little Red Travelling Bag** and made our way back to catch the train we had all of five minutes to spare before departure.

On board and underway, I was tempted to leave the tapping and enjoy the scenery since we were on the left-hand side and there were issues with solar glare coming into play.

But frequent tunnels made the sightseeing bit difficult and by the time we'd passed through the intervening stops and had hit the tunnel that takes the **Shinkansen** line onto **Kyushu** I was well and truly in *tap it out mode*.

Once we'd made our way through **Hakata**, however, I was inclined to sit back and enjoy the scenery.

Once we were out of the urban sprawl at the top of the island, it tended towards forest-clad ridges with the odd bit of residential and farming activity in the valleys and not much of anything in the steep-sided gorges.

We tend to think of **Japan** as a highly urbanised country, a *teeming ants nest* kind of place where they employ people to pack passengers into overcrowded commuter trains.

But 73% of the land is mountainous and relatively safe from urban development. And 70% is forest.

In fact, *natural*, as opposed to *planted*, forests account for 50% of the country's surface area).

**Madam** and I had spent much of the preceding week and a half working our way around that sort of landscape in the **Deep North**, the relatively recently colonised **Hokkaidō** and the mountainous centre of the country around **Nagano**. I'd expected **Kyushu**, being in the south and relatively warmer would have been fairly closely settled.

The **Shinkansen** line, of course, is going to avoid, or go over, urban areas, so the bullet train corridor might well be seen as the exception to the rule.

Our experience the following day, however (he wrote, two days after the events he's chronicling) suggested that forested ridges are the rule rather than the exception in the centre of the southern part of the island.

The original plan had been to conclude the day's travels at **Kumamoto**, move on from there through the back blocks to **Kagoshima** on **Thursday** and do the big leg back to **Osaka** on the last day of the *two-week rail pass*.





But some complication ruled that one out, and Plan B had a three and three-quarter hour stop in *Kumamoto* before we moved on to *Kagoshima*.

The main purpose of the stop was to look at *Kumamoto Castle*, and although only a few structures date back to the castle's construction in 1607, the reconstructed castle is one of the most impressive in *Japan*, rated alongside the white-walled *Himeji* and black-walled *Matsumoto*.

With around eight hundred cherry trees, the castle is a popular *sakura* venue in late *March* and early *April* each year. Although the keep and most other buildings are reconstructions, the work is high quality and new buildings are continually being added.





Building the castle, which was designed and supervised by *Kato Kiyomasa*, the *daimyō* who ruled the area, took seven years following the *Battle of Sekigahara*, though its foundations date back to **1467**.

*Kato* had been awarded what was known as *Higo Province* for service to *Tokugawa Ieyasu*. The castle was part of efforts to unify and develop the region.

*Kato* built fortifications that were highly regarded for their defensive capabilities. Castles he designed in *Korea* during the *Imjin War* were able to repel much larger forces because of their effective design.

*Kumamoto Castle* was considered almost impregnable thanks to its defensive features, with curved stone walls and wooden overhangs incorporated in the design as protection against the *ninja*.

Fifty years after it was completed the castle and surrounding area were given to the *Hosokawa* clan who ruled the *Kumamoto* region for the next two centuries.





Following the *Meiji Restoration* (1868), the castle played a pivotal role when *Saigō Takamori* led the *Satsuma Rebellion* against the new government. *Kumamoto* was the main government garrison in *Kyushu*, and *Saigō* attacked the castle in 1877.

Despite being outnumbered, the government forces were able to withstand a two-month siege, forcing the rebel forces to retreat.

The original castle keep burnt down just before the siege.

A 1960 reconstruction re-created the exterior and a recreation of the *Honmaru Goten Palace* opened to the public to celebrate the castle's 400th anniversary in 2008. They've gone to great lengths to use authentic materials and methods. The result looks like an accurate recreation of the opulent rooms in which the *daimyō* would receive guests.





I'm not a fan of reconstructions, but when they're done this well...

Apart from the walk through the interior reconstruction, there was a *highly choreographed samurai show*, evidently designed to keep the younger set happy, but a pretty good time was had by all.

The city's other attraction is *Suizenji Koen*, a landscape garden built in 1636 by *Hosokawa Tadatoshi*, the second lord of *Kumamoto*, as a private retreat.

A network of gardens spans an area of sixty-five hectares that reproduces *fifty-three post stations* of the *Tokaido Road*, which connected *Edo* with *Kyoto* during the *Edo Period*, in miniature form.



Three and a quarter hours with most of them spent exploring the **Castle** ruled out a visit to the **Garden** this time around, but ongoing reconstruction at the **Castle** and the prospect of a walk through that landscape is the sort of thing that could well draw us back to **Kumamoto**.

Back on the **Shinkansen**, it was an hour and three-quarters to **Kagoshima**, where the accommodation was further from the station than I would have preferred if we were still lugging the **Black Monster**.

With the **Little Red Travelling Bag** in hand, we found our way to the tram stop, alighting three stops later to head off into the **eating and drinking quarter** in search of the **Sunn Days Inn**, which lay right in the heart of the quarter, a prime destination for the hungry and thirsty salary man.

Having checked in, we were out again in fairly short order looking for a particular venue that deals in one of **Kagoshima's** specialities, **black pork**.

Previous stops, having been fairly close to the station concerned, had mostly been away from prime eating and drinking areas, and when we'd ventured into such territory, we were headed for a place where **Madam** had, more or less, a fair idea of the place's location.

We found ourselves wandering along a backstreet, down another, then onto one of the city's major thoroughfares, and back a block before we located the place she was seeking.

Given the fact that this was, apparently, **a highly rated purveyor of prime pork** you'd expect it to have been a bit easier to find.

Tucked away at the back of a basement collection of eateries (two of them apparently **French**) on the edge of the **Eating Quarter** you'd have expected it to be doing things a little tough, but while we were there a steady stream of customers made their way through the door.

*Not bad*, one would have thought, *relatively early on a Wednesday night*.

We ended up in a *tatami* mat cubicle, at the chef's suggestion, rather than seated at the bar.

I was glad we did since we'd ordered the prime version of the pork, which was cut thicker and took longer to cook. I downed a substantial pitcher of beer while we were waiting, and I wanted another with the meal, a request that was overruled by the wait staff because *the meal was substantial, and I wouldn't be able to manage both*.

We'd learnt of **Obama's** re-election in the States on the last leg of the train trip, and I was in a mood to celebrate, so I was \certain that I could, but **Madam** advised caution and the avoidance of scenes.

So we had to do with the meal, which mightn't have been the largest I've ever tackled but was certainly in the running for the top five.



A substantial piece of high-quality pork had been crumbed and deep fried, sliced into substantial chunks and came on a platter with a generous serve of sliced cabbage, slices of cucumber, a bowl of rice and the seemingly obligatory *miso* soup.

I'm not *miso*-friendly, so that was never going to enter calculations, but I made pretty fair work of the pork and my serve of rice.

Around a third of the way through we were visited by the chef, who demonstrated the correct way of seasoning the pork.

He started with a healthy sprinkling of sauce that wasn't too dissimilar to the one I'd disliked the night before and had been avoiding to date, then added a fair-sized dollop of *hot English mustard*, which I had been indulging in, though not in the quantity required.

The combination worked rather well, and by the time my serve of pork and rice were gone, there was only a skerrick of the mustard left, which was a problem when *Madam* advised she'd been beaten by quantity.

There was about a third of her serve left, and a fair quantity of rice which the chef had described as a high-quality product from *Akita Prefecture* in northern *Honshū*.

Under those circumstances, I felt obliged to finish both pork and rice, but there was no way I was going to manage the cabbage and still leave room for a celebratory ale or two.

Having completed the repast *Madam* wasn't inclined to hang around for pitchers of beer, and who could blame her, since she didn't have the capacity to join in the celebrations.

We wended our way back to the hotel, turned on the TV in search of updates on the *Obama* situation, found we were on the end of the relevant bulletin and settled back to watch a panel discussion about dieting as I downed a couple of *Asahis* to celebrate the result.

Predictably, by around nine-thirty the sawmill was in full production.





KAGOSHIMA >  
YOSHIMATSU >  
KAGOSHIMA

***Thursday, 8 November 2012***

At least three times during the night I lay half asleep trying to work out what that noise was.

*It certainly sounded like rain*, a possibility I dismissed as absurd first time around.

When it reappeared, with some emergency vehicle passing by, siren engaged, I considered the possibility a little further.



We're on the thirteenth floor (out of fourteen) and on a corner of a rectangular building, so perhaps rain, driven by a strong wind might account for it.

The trouble was, there was no sound of wind.

On the third, or possibly fourth or fifth occasion the penny dropped. *It was the air conditioner.*

On other days, with walking around as a significant part of the agenda, rain would have been a problem.

But given the morning's schedule, a rail-based loop through southern *Kyushu* that was going to involve some pretty smart movement given an interval of three minutes between trains at the last changeover, rain wasn't likely to be too much of an issue.

The loop should bring us back into *Kagoshima* around a quarter to one, giving us the afternoon and most of the following morning to take a look around the city that has been tagged *the Naples of the Eastern world*.

A bayside location, an impressive stratovolcano (*Sakurajima*, *Kagoshima*'s equivalent of *Vesuvius*) and a mild climate that's largely related to a position as *Kyushu*'s southernmost major city combine to deliver that moniker.







It's the capital of the local prefecture and its largest city by a fair distance.

On the southern tip of *Kyushu*, *Kagoshima Prefecture* stretches around six hundred kilometres, as far as the boundary with the neighbouring *Okinawa Prefecture* in the *Ryūkyū Islands*.

Its territory takes in *Yakushima Island*, a *World Natural Heritage Site*, the twelve *Tokara Islands* and *Amamioshima*, the second largest isolated island in *Japan*.

Dating back to the fourteenth century. *Kagoshima* sits on the *Satsuma Peninsula*, facing *Kagoshima Bay*.

As the political and commercial centre of territory controlled by the *Shimazu* clan of *samurai* through medieval times into the *Edo Period*, it was the capital of the *Satsuma Domain*, one of the wealthiest and most powerful fiefdoms.

Although international trade was banned for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the city remained prosperous. It served as a link to the semi-independent vassal kingdom of *Ryūkyū*, whose traders and emissaries frequented the city.

*Kagoshima* had also been a significant centre of Christian activity before the religion was banned in the late sixteenth century.



The *Royal Navy* bombarded *Kagoshima* in *1863* after the *daimyō* refused to pay an indemnity for the murder of *Charles Lennox Richardson* on the *Tōkaidō highway* the previous year. The city was the birthplace and last stand of *Saigō Takamori* at the end of the *Satsuma Rebellion* in *1877*.

More significantly in the long term, nineteen young men from *Satsuma* broke the *Tokugawa Shōgun's* ban on foreign travel, travelling to *England* and the *United States* to study science and technology, an adventure that did much to kickstart *Japan's industrial revolution*.

There's a statue outside the train station paying tribute to them.

*Kagoshima* was also the birthplace of *Tōgō Heihachirō* whose role as *Chief Admiral of the Grand Fleet* of the *Imperial Japanese Navy* in the *Russo-Japanese War* produced startling victories in *1904* and *1905*, destroying Russian naval power in the East, and contributing to the failed *1905* revolution in Russia.

The city's status as *a significant naval base* and position as *a railway terminus* saw a mass bombing raid on the night of *17 June 1945* that deposited over eight hundred tonnes of incendiary and cluster bombs destroying over forty per cent of the built-up area.

Today, *Kagoshima* produces a wealth of agricultural and marine produce, is home to sophisticated electronic technologies and is the only prefecture with a rocket launching facility.







In *March 2004*, the city became the southern end of the *Shinkansen* network, with services terminating at *Kagoshima-Chuō*.

Recent upgrades mean *Kagoshima* is eighty minutes from *Fukuoka* (*Hakata* if you want to split hairs).

It's around two and a quarter hours to *Hiroshima*, just under three and a half to *Okayama*, just over four to *Osaka* in the heartland of the *Kansai* region and between seven and eight hours to *Tokyo* depending on the particular service you choose to use.

To get that far, you'd be using a combination of the *Tokaido*, *San'yo* and *Kyushu Shinkansen* lines, so there are a variety of permutations and combinations.

There isn't a single service that runs straight through.

The day's travel proceedings involved, *in Madam's* words, *a big train day*, though given our location at the very end of the *Shinkansen* network you might question how that was possible.

The answer to your question, of course, involved local lines.

While I knew this was the case, there was nothing in the lead up to departure to suggest there was anything much out of the ordinary.





Had I been a bit more thorough in my research I might have known I was in for something special once we partially retraced our steps on the *Shinkansen* network and alighted at *Shin-Yatsushiro*.

Even *Madam*, who'd planned the day's route and only had us doing this leg since it would deliver us to *Hitoyoshi*, was gobsmacked by what came next.

It wasn't, by all admissions, the most promising of starts.

Once we'd alighted at *ShinYatsushiro* and made our way from the *Shinkansen* section to the much more prosaic surroundings of the local line the first train that appeared was a *local stopping at all stations conveyance* that was as run down as you might suspect under the circumstances.

We weren't quite in the back blocks, being on the main *Shinkansen* line, but if you were bound for the boondocks, this was the train that would get you there.

And it certainly looked the part.





When the *Trans-Kyushu Express*, arrived it was only a cut or two above its predecessor.

But once we'd looped under the *Shinkansen* line and headed up into the hills you weren't inclined to pay much attention to your surroundings on board the train.

Your gaze is drawn to the passing landscape, *forest-covered ranges with almost vertical slopes that towered above the train as it wound its way along a river valley*.

It wasn't quite as spectacular as the ride between *Toyama* and *Takayama* and back down to *Nagoya* or the run from *Nagano* down to *Nagoya*, but those are well known scenic routes. This one, a mere transitory stage before what was to come was, however, *bloody magnificent*.

We pulled into *Hitoyoshi* after an hour to find the next train waiting for us.





You don't take a heritage train, give it a full restoration and then run it through an ordinary setting that won't attract a clientele.

This section of track, as was the case with the next one, was obviously being niche marketed as a trip for train freaks.

If the *prelude* was *bloody magnificent*, these next two stages were *absolutely stunning*.

Given the niche marketing, there were stops guaranteed to maximise that appeal.

The first was at a heritage station that came before a switchback, a loop up into the mountains and a second stop some five or six minutes later that had you looking back at the station you'd just visited.

I stayed on board for that one, but *The Photographer*, as you'd expect didn't.

Her report, once back on board, had *Hughesy* alighting at every subsequent stop.







One was at a place where the name translates as ***Eternal Happiness***. You struck a bell a certain number of times according to *your relative degree of absolute contentment*.

*One for happy, two for very happy, three for verging on the ecstatic.*

Another stop was the oldest station in ***Kyushu***, though how that works when you're in the uplands in the centre of the island didn't quite compute.

There was a stop at ***Yatake***, which dates back to ***1909***.

An impressive locomotive was stabled in a largish shed beside a stall selling fresh produce (***Madam*** invested in some freshly dried mushrooms).





In front of the locomotive, a hostess was holding a train driver's cap and a board bearing the date, a handy combo for photographic purposes, and offering to take the photo for you.

There was a fair bit of that sort of silliness along the way, and it was difficult to abstain.

On a more serious note, the track was following the route that brought the first trains to *Kagoshima*.

There had been a fair bit of logging and land clearing along the route.

In recently cleared areas there seemed to be a significant spread of invasive vines, creepers and other weeds that made the foreground, on frequent occasions along the journey, an eyesore.





Whether forests will eventually return and overrun the invaders is, of course, one of those *only time will tell* scenarios.

When the weeds took over the foreground, of course, the natural response was to lift up the eyes to the magnificent backdrop.

That stage took us from 10:08 to 11:21. I'd been expecting some difficulty when we got to *Yoshimatsu*, but it was obvious the next train wasn't going anywhere until the connection was made.

The next stage, from 11:24 to 12:48 was on a similarly restored rail motor, though the interior decor was, as you'd expect, slightly different. There were a couple of stops at seemingly out of the way *onsen* to pick up passengers.





Eventually, as we found ourselves approaching *Kagoshima*, the focus shifted to *Sakurajima*, the volcano that is to *Kagoshima* what *Vesuvius* is to *Naples*.

Conditions throughout the day had been hazy, the view across the water wasn't the greatest, but the sight had camera enthusiasts snapping away with *Hughesy* happy to leave the snapping to those who had a fair idea of what they were doing.

Back at *Kagoshima-chuo*, I was satisfied with the day's activities, and would have been quite happy to head back to the hotel.

But *Madam* was determined to get a couple of scenic shots across the bay to *Sakurajima*, so we headed off on one of the bus services that offer a scenic loop around the city.



I suppose we could have got on and off around the circuit. The first stop commemorated *St Francis Xavier*, but there wasn't much of interest once we dismissed *Senganen* garden as a possibility.

We'd passed the garden on the train as we headed along the coast just north of *Kagoshima*, and were probably doing ourselves out of a major spectacle since the garden's most striking feature is its use of *Sakurajima* and *Kagoshima Bay* as borrowed scenery.

But by this point on the trip, we were in scenic sensory overload.

*Senganen* dates back to 1658 and owes its existence to the *Shimazu* clan, who ruled *Satsuma* and were early adopters of *Western science and technology*.

Their influence can be seen in the long stone building that stands just outside the main garden area.

It was one of the earliest *Western* factories in the country and houses a museum with exhibits about the *Shimizu* and the early stages of *Japan's nineteenth-century modernisation*.

As far as *Madam* was concerned *Shiroyama Observatory* at the summit of *Mount Shiroyama* would do us very nicely, thank you, and I wasn't inclined to dissent. The mountain was the site of a castle and *Shiroyama* means *castle mountain*.







The castle's ruins at the base of the mountain are now the site of the *Reimeikan Museum* and were one of the stops we skipped on the way up to the *Observatory*.

*Shiroyama Observatory* is famed for views across the city of *Kagoshima*, the bay and *Sakurajima*.

In fine weather with good visibility, you can see as far as the *Kirishima Mountains*, but the haze that had been a nuisance in the distance all day really made its presence felt, and there wasn't a great deal of joy for the photographic fraternity.

The park at the *Observatory* is of interest to students of *Japanese history*. It was the site of the last battle in the *Satsuma Rebellion*.

*Saigō Takamori* made his last stand at *Saigō's Cave*, another site we passed by on the way up.

A couple of bus services will take you around the sights of *Kagoshima*, but opted to head back to the hotel.

This travel bit can tend to become wearing.

Dinner that night was in a *French establishment* on the other side of the main road from the previous night's pork emporium, and rather impressive it was.

That'll have to do as far as the narrative is concerned because *Hughesy*, for some reason, missed completing this particular bit of *Travelogue* promptly, and now, close to a month later the details have vanished from the memory.





## KAGOSHIMA > OSAKA

**Friday, 9 November 2012**

The last day of the two-week rail leg dawned a little later than my regular waking hour.

It was around six thirty-two when I surfaced from a rather weird dream involving *catering for wedding receptions while obviously working as a primary school teacher* and resumed work on the *Travelogue*.

**Madam** surfaced shortly after that, announcing an intention to hie herself off to the nearby public *onsen*.

That delivered close to an hour's uninterrupted tapping until her return shortly after eight.

With the train scheduled to depart at 11:32 we weren't inclined to do much in the way of pre-departure activity, happy to wander downstairs for a late breakfast, back to the room to finish packing and check out just before ten.





That scenario gave us a leisurely move to the station and a bit of looking around before departure time.

The day before we'd headed down for breakfast just after six-thirty, and found the place close to chocker.

*Madam's* trip out to the *onsen* had started with an elevator ride that stopped at almost every floor on the way down as salarymen and other guests sought to indulge in the ¥500 breakfast that seemed to be the *Sunn Days Inn* gimmick to attract the business clientele.

If it is, then it seems to work, because when she returned and headed to the elevator to take her back upstairs the breakfast room had progressed to the point where there wasn't an actual queue but a waiting list had the next prospective breakfaster being called by name.



On that basis, my decision to tap away rather hurl myself at the shower once she'd been gone more than half an hour could be deemed to be a smart move.

We only had one room card key, and I needed it to keep the lights and electricity running, and I wouldn't be able to hear someone knocking at the door while I was in the shower, would I?

In any case, a leisurely morning was the order of the day, and I lobbed myself gently towards the shower rather than hurling myself into the *Rain Room*.

Breakfast on both days was a good deal for the ¥500, and you could see why most of the occupants of the hotel's three hundred and fifty plus rooms would be inclined to eat there.

Still, it was relatively uncrowded when we made our way downstairs, hit the breakfast options and wandered back up, passing the impressive display of bottles associated with one of *Kagoshima's* other claims to fame, the sweet potato *shōchū* (*imo-jochu*).

Typically distilled from barley, sweet potatoes, or rice, though it can be made from brown sugar, buckwheat, sesame and chestnut, *shōchū* is a completely different beast to *saké*, though if you're in *Kagoshima* and ask for the latter, you'll almost certainly be served *shōchū* instead.

There are, by all accounts, hundreds of brands, and a fair few were represented in the display.

*Kagoshima* is the only prefecture that doesn't brew any *saké*, and the spirit dates back to at least the mid-16th century.

It seems to have been introduced to the country through *Kagoshima* from *China* or *Korea*.

The earliest reference to *shōchū* appears in temple graffiti written by a carpenter in 1559. It seems the abbot at the particular shrine was less forthcoming with the spirit than his workers would have liked.

*Madam* had intentions of sampling the local product, but she hadn't managed to do it over the last day and a half.

With plenty of time till the train left she could still have fitted a taste in, right up to the time we boarded the train since the *Shinkansen* platforms at *Kagoshima-chuo* have bars offering more than a hundred varieties.

Instead, having made our way over to *Kagoshima-chuo*, I set off in search of the statue commemorating the fifteen young men from *Satsuma*, who broke the *Tokugawa Shōgun's* ban on foreign travel, travelling to England and the United States to study science and technology.

The adventure helped kickstart *Japan's industrial revolution*.





I'd spotted the item in question while *Madam* was scoping out transport options between the station and the hotel, had promptly forgotten all about it the following day but now, with the best part of an hour left till the train departed looking for it was a decent way of killing time.

Had I done a head count I'd probably have found only fifteen there, though the party included a recruit from *Tosa* and another from *Nagasaki*.

Apparently a couple of supervisors went along for the ride as well.

They studied at *University College London*, and many went on to *Oxford* and *Cambridge* before they returned home.





Among their number was *Mori Arinori*, the first *Japanese ambassador to the USA* and, subsequently, *Minister for Education*, *Godai Tomoatsu* (founder of the *Osaka Chamber of Commerce* and the *Osaka Stock Exchange*) and *Terashima Munenori*, who went on to become the country's Foreign Minister.

With that done there was still time to kill, so we loitered around the station's shopping precinct, noting a rather interesting poster advertising a newspaper and sending *Madam* off to perambulate through the local delicacies on sale to the travelling public.

As stated elsewhere, this kind of thing is an important consideration in a gift-giving culture, and she didn't return empty-handed.

Once she'd made her way back with a selection of goodies I took a turn around the same area, somehow managing to arrive in the *Shōchū* store, though they didn't seem to be offering samples.



Aboard the train, we were seated on either side of the aisle rather than in contiguous seats, which coincidentally meant we didn't have access to the handy electrical socket that comes with said seats.

I'd been hoping to be able to access the power point *en route* since I figured there'd be a turnover of seats, but while next door was vacant when I boarded it was occupied at the first stop by a bloke who appeared to be an academic rather than a salaryman.

When he got off in **Okayama**, the seat was immediately claimed by another dude who remained aboard until **Kōbe**.

Still, although it ran down the batteries on the **iPad** and the **iPod**, I was able to tap away and listen to my personal playlist, so the four hours passed remarkably quickly.

Arriving in **Osaka** the contrast with where we'd been was noticeable.

It was more than noticeable; it almost amounted to a fair sized clout around the ears.

There'd been plenty of room to move in **Kagoshima-chuo**, and the **Shinkansen** is a fairly tranquil means of transfer, but having grabbed the **Little Red Travelling Bag** and made our way to the door, two steps later we were in the ant bed turmoil of **ShinOsaka**.

Fortunately, there was a mere one stop train ride and a single stop subway transfer to get us to the night's hotel, so we had an opportunity to catch the breath before the evening's appointment with the inimitable **Diamond Chef**.

That started with a visit to an establishment that delivered a range of little platters that went rather well with beer, and a visit to a jazz club where **Madam** found the featured vocalist was an alumni of her old university.

From there we were on to a single malt club, and things start to become blurry.





4

## JAPAN 2012: THE LAST BIT

With the rail pass bit out of the way there's still plenty to explore in the *Kansai* region, between *Madam's* home town, the *Osaka* conurbation and the old Imperial capital in *Kyoto*.

We started in *Osaka*...





## OSAKA DAY 1

***Saturday, 10 November 2012***

After two weeks on the road, *Madam* had designated the two-day stay in *Osaka* as a rest and recreation spell.

After the previous night's indulgences, rest and recreation were what I needed. It started with a long soak in a warm bath, which did some good, but it was never going to be enough to overcome the after-effects.

After breakfast at the hotel coffee shop, I would have been happy to roll the rock across the door and hibernate, but we had an eleven o'clock checkout and a move to fresh quarters.





This hotel was chosen with an eye to convenience (and very convenient it was), but it had one major drawback.

It didn't, as far as *Madam's* initial research could make out, offer *a coin laundry*. After the two weeks on the road, we'd have a pile of washing that would need to be done.

That prompted the relocation, and neither of us was happy when she found that the first stop did, indeed, offer such a service.

Had it been evident when the bookings were made we'd have stayed put, I could have taken further recuperative baths, and the washing could have been started much earlier, giving *Madam* the chance of a longer rest before we set out to dinner with *The Principal*.

As it was, we left the checkout as late as possible, took ourselves out for a walk with the baggage in the cloak room at the old hotel, located the new one and attempted to kill time before we could *check-in*.





We headed to the middle of the business section of *Osaka*, an area that would have been much busier during the week.

While things were pleasantly quiet, my head throbbed after the overnight overindulgence.

My right knee was doing something similar as a result of something I'd presumably done just before we'd shipped the *Black Monster* back to *Kōbe*.

The knee had been troubling me for the previous couple of days, not to any great extent, just enough to make things uncomfortable.

Now, when a long walk might have served to remove the toxic elements from the system through exercise, the knee was saying, *Hang on there buddy boy, this thing needs some rest.*



So I rested.

In a park on the banks of a river while the knee delivered constant reminders that it was there, and the head pleaded for somewhere to lie down and quietly expire.

Eventually, on the off chance that we might be able to check in early, we headed over to the new hotel and made polite inquiries.

A stroke of good luck or astute management saw us into the room well before the regular time.

I slept.

**Madam** ran *the laundry routine* and still managed a bit of a spell before the evening appointment.

That proved to be a much more restrained affair than the previous night's exercise, with a rendezvous that took us straight into *Japan's longest shopping arcade*, *Tenjinbashi-suji* shopping street.

I've seen an arcade or two in my time, but not too many that stretch over two and a half kilometres.

The roofed arcade grew out of a vegetable market associated with the *Tenmangu* shrine during the *Edo Period*, and today contains six hundred stores selling day to day items including groceries, clothes, snacks, used books, medicine, and assorted odds and ends. It's not high-end shopping and, by all accounts prices tend to be low, and goods are of average quality.

Not the place to go looking for *Gucci* handbags and the like.

But since it's an everyday shopping environment for everyday people it offers a range of eateries and cafes. There are plenty in the arcade itself, and there are more in the streets and alleys that open off the main thoroughfare.

You might be inclined to question *Hughesy's* description of a shopping arcade that's packed with a bewildering variety of eateries, and in a common or garden arcade, you'd possibly have a point in any other society.

But a stroll through the eating and drinking quarter of most *Japanese cities* would sort that issue once and for all.

Many of them are *izakaya*, small bars that offer food to accompany whatever you're drinking, casual places often based on after-work drinking. *Izakaya* were originally *saké* shops where customers could drink on the premises.

They were sometimes called *akachōchin* (*red lantern*) since paper lanterns are traditionally placed in front of such establishments. Nowadays the term usually refers to small, non-chain *izakaya*.



As the astute reader might suspect, *Hughesy* is a big fan of this concept, and would be a bigger fan if I was able to read the language and decipher the captions underneath the picture menus you find outside.

Somehow we never managed to find ourselves in *nomi-hōdai* (*all you can drink*) or *tabe-hōdai* (*all you can eat*) places where, for a set price per person you can order as much food or drink as you can hold.

They do, however, tend to be careful to impose a time limit of two or three hours.

On arriving you'll invariably find yourself being given an *oshibori* (*wet towel*) to clean your hands and possibly an *otōshi* (in the *Kanto* region) or *tsukidashi* (in *Kansai*) a snack or appetiser charged to the bill instead of an entry fee.

From there, the food quotient will vary according to the particular establishment, and food and drink are ordered throughout the session. Food items are usually shared by everyone at the table.

It took a while to get used to the fact that the closest platter wasn't specifically mine, but the practice allows you to pick and choose.

One thing you will notice is that such places tend to be light on for rice, which also threw me at first until I learned that you're getting your rice quota through the *saké*, which is, of course, rice wine.

Even if you're drinking beer.

*Yakitori* (grilled chicken skewers, often grilled in front of you go particularly well with *Japanese beer*, and I'm also quite partial to the *cook it yourself Korean barbecue places*

*The Principal* guided us into a *Korean* place of the *cook it yourself on the hot plate in the middle of the table* variety.

We put several platters of marinated meats through the cooking process as various matters were discussed, and a couple of quiet beers were indulged in, then we wandered off to a *Chinese* place in a side alley.

The food there was good, a pleasant change from the *seasoned Korean meats* and the combination as a whole worked rather well.

Given busy schedules for *Japanese high school principals* and the need for weary travellers to rest we weren't up too late.

A farewell two stops onto the return train journey saw us heading back through the dark, semi-deserted but quite tranquil streets to the hotel, which this time wasn't as quite as conveniently located as far as the railway station was concerned.





## OSAKA DAY 2

***Sunday, 11 November 2012***

There were no breakfast arrangements in place for *Day Two in Osaka* and in a way that was just as well.

Given the way things had turned out over the preceding thirty-six hours a sleep in, a late checkout, a move to a third hotel and a rendezvous with *The Sister* at a *French restaurant* provided a painless way of filling in the morning.

We'd already planned to catch up with *The Former Secretary* sometime during the day, so when it transpired she didn't have



anything else on her plate, we suggested she join us for lunch at the *Bistrot des Mauvais Garçons*.

There was a slight degree of confusion regarding the actual location of the *Bad Boys' Bistro*, but we arrived more or less on time, just before *The Sister* lobbed on the scene.

There was no sign of *Former Secretary*, it was drizzling, and we were standing in front of the door of another establishment (*Bad Boys* go upstairs), so we decided to follow the *Bad Boys* and head up, expecting *Former Secretary* to find us upstairs.

As it turned out, *FS* had done been there and gone to check on something when we weren't there well before time. She made it back late, by which time we were upstairs, and she was scratching her head wondering where we'd got to.

A quick text message, one of a couple she sent without *Someone* noticing, sorted that out, and we were set for a lengthy, leisurely lunch, with a bottle of *Pinot Noir* from your actual *Burgundy*.

The wine went down well, the lunch (salad, cream of pumpkin soup, squid in a tomato sauce, beef slowly cooked in red wine, dessert and petit fours) delivered a pleasant combination of tastes though the portions weren't over-generous.





The conversation kept things rolling along, and having been the first customers to arrive, we were the last to leave.

The attempt to find the lunchtime venue had delivered us onto the famous *Ebisubashi* bridge across the *Dōtonbori* canal, just underneath the legendary *Glico Man* billboard. The bridge was originally built to provide access to the nearby *Ebisu* shrine and is associated with a legendary curse on the *Hanshin Tigers*, *Osaka*'s baseball team.

Given the familiarity of the *Glico Man* and the fact that it lies between the *Shinsaibashisuji* and *Ebisubashisuji* shopping districts the bridge is a popular meeting place.

It's known as *nanpabashi* (by foreigners) and *hikkakebashi* (by native *Japanese*). Both translate as the pulling bridge due to the alleged ease with which girls can be picked up in the vicinity.

We went back and forth across the bridge several times through the course of the afternoon and evening, which was largely spent in the *Ebisubashisuji* shopping district.

The district opens off the street that takes its name from the *Dōtonbori* canal, which means it's time for another excursion into the realms of history.

While it's the main destination for food travel in *Osaka*, *Dōtonbori* owes its origins to a decision back in 1612, when entrepreneur, *Dōton Yasui*, decided to connect the two branches of the *Yohori River*, which run north to south, with a canal to increase trade and commerce in the region.

Before the canal was finished, *Dōton* became caught up in the *Siege of Osaka* and died helping to defend *Toyotomi Hideyori*.

His cousins finished the project in 1615 and the new ruler in *Osaka Castle*, *Tadaki Matsudaira*, named the canal and avenue beside it *Dōtonbori* (*Dōton's canal*) even though he'd been on the wrong side of the result in the siege.

Six years later the *Tokugawa Shōgunate* designated *Dōtonbori* as *Osaka*'s entertainment district and by 1662 the street had six *Kabuki* (classical *Japanese dance-drama*) and five *Bunraku* (traditional puppet) theatres, and the *Takeda Karakuri* mechanical puppet theatre.

The theatres were so popular they encouraged numerous restaurants and cafes to open, catering to the flood of tourists and entertainment-seekers who poured into *Dōtonbori*.

While there has been a decline in support for traditional forms of entertainment and *Dōtonbori*'s five remaining theatres were bombed and destroyed during *World War Two* it remains a prime attraction for culinary tourists.





Today *Dōtonbori* is famous for shops, restaurants, and the neon and mechanised signs that line the canal and feature in the shopping areas. For a start, there's snack and candy manufacturer *Glico*'s runner crossing the finish line.

He's just one part of a formidable barrage of electronic advertising.

In *Ebisubashisuji*, a six and a half metre crab that dates back to **1960** moves legs and eyestalks to promote a crab restaurant called *Kani Doraku*. It spawned a string of similar creations, including a squid that puffs steam.

We took a leisurely ramble along the arcade that leads to *Namba station*, where *The Sister* bade us farewell.





The remaining trio headed back through an electronics store and *Tower Records*, looping into the hotel to check in and looping straight back out to chase up *WiFi* hotspots and dinner.

The pursuit of *WiFi* and the need to contact the *Kyoto*-based *Sponge* meant we neglected to book seats at the preferred destination (*Pieno*, just off the arcade-type thoroughfare).

We'd planned to land on their doorstep around five, but *WiFi* matters delayed things to the point where we could either spend a lengthy wait in the drizzle waiting for space to become available or look elsewhere.

Predictably, we looked elsewhere, but only as far as the *Mar Bar*, which was conveniently celebrating a fourth birthday and supplied us with complimentary *Cava* as we surveyed the menu.



That's not quite accurate, of course. The two girls surveyed the menu, passing comments and requests for guidance across the table.

I wasn't particularly concerned about the actual dishes involved. We were in *tapas* territory, and if I didn't like one I'd be right with the next as long as no one headed off into anything too radical.

Everything, however, proved quite toothsome, and while the glass of white that followed the *Cava* was a little on the sweeter side of what I'd prefer, an unidentified fuller bodied red was quite tasty, to the point where I ended up with a third glass.

Having seen *Former Secretary* off at *Namba* we made our way to the hotel, making a final pass past the psychedelia alongside the canal.

Along the way, we made a diversion to take a look at *Hozenji* temple, all that's left of a major 17th-century site after the main hall was demolished during *World War Two*.

Decorated with paper lanterns and tucked away in a quiet neighbourhood in an alley paved with stones and lined with old-style restaurants and bars.

It's one of those places that's worth a revisit, preferably when tiredness is removed from the equation.







## OSAKA > KYOTO

***Monday, 12 November 2012***

*Tired. That was the key word about two-thirds of the way around the day's exercise routine, and with one final day's exertion to go as I sit typing on a Tuesday morning where the forecast says cloudy in the morning, later turning to rain, that's just as well.*

The day's assignment was straightforward on the surface.

A late rise after a big sleep made sense since we wanted to avoid the morning press of salarymen and other workers making their way into central *Osaka*.



A morning transfer to *Kyoto* made sense since it would leave the afternoon free for sightseeing. An evening without appointments would probably leave us fresh to face a more adventurous schedule on *Tuesday*.

After that, it was all a downhill run, so to speak, with *Wednesday* taking us back to *Kōbe* and *Thursday* devoted to preparations and packing before the return *Down Under*. That's pretty much downhill all the way from here, folks.

Of course, there were complications along the way.

The first came when *The Mother's Phone* started making buzzing noises. Given the linguistic issues involved I passed the Incoming message to *Madam*, who was otherwise (naturally, in an expression of *Murphy's Law*) engaged in the bathroom.

Equally, given the fact that it was probably a text rather than a voice call, it wasn't that urgent, so *Someone* had time to complete the morning ablutions.

Checking, she established it was a message from a concerned *Sponge*. His communications had been overwhelmed by spam, and he had been waiting to hear from us.





We had been away from email access for the best part of a week, so there wasn't much we could do regarding contacting him.

In any case, the flurry of texts following that initial contact established that he was off to *Himeji* early on *Tuesday* morning, which ruled out *Monday* night, and whatever happens on *Tuesday* is going to depend on how he feels at the end of a longish working day.

Still, that meant we 'd managed to shine a bit of light on the last issue that we needed to resolve, so we duly packed up and set off for *Kyoto*.

That wasn't such a major operation after the transition from lugging the *Black Monster* to carrying the *Little Red Travelling Bag*, but we were reminded of the way things could have been as we made our up and down staircases and in and out of subway carriages.

Around ten in the morning, things weren't quite as hectic as they would have been an hour and a half earlier, but we made the subway transition to *Umeda* and the *Hankyu* connection to *Kyoto* without too much difficulty.

I hadn't quite been on the ball the night before when we were headed into the *Spanish eatery* and the party space across the road was operational, but we passed that particular side street on the way to the subway station, so I grabbed a quick photographic record of an in-joke along the way....

Things got a little messy once we'd made our way out of the railway station and set off for the hotel, which turned out to be a bit further from the station than expected, and on the opposite side of the street.

Still, things could have been worse.

The initial influence that brought things unstuck was lunch.

That might seem like a minor matter, but, for some reason, *The Supervisor* set her mind on a particular *Italian* option that came highly rated and wasn't that far from the hotel.

It was a bit further than expected (there's an emerging theme here) and was, when we eventually found it, booked out.

I'd suggested I wasn't particularly concerned about lunch, provided it was conveniently close, and we'd already passed some places I thought might have been perfectly acceptable.

When a decision was called for, I pushed us towards a curry place that wasn't that far from the booked out place.

The meals, while they weren't anything to rave over, were perfectly adequate and reasonably cheap.



With lunch out of the way, we set off for the afternoon's sightseeing.

That involved a visit to *Kiyomizu* temple, which is, and I really should have picked up on this earlier, *Kyoto*'s major temple attraction.

As a result, it is almost invariably packed.

As it happens, it's on the same side of the same river as the places we'd visited on the *Sakura Sunday* four and a half years before, and I really should have been looking at a map before I ventured an opinion on *walking* as opposed to *catching a bus*.

Given a slightly better grasp of the geography, I would have voted to *go as far as possible by bus*.

Given a slightly better grasp of our current location *vis a vis* the river and the city's major transport axes, I would have undoubtedly elected to *go as far as possible by bus*.

Given an awareness of the number of steps and uphill paths involved, I would have undoubtedly elected to *go as far as possible by bus*.

From which the astute reader will no doubt have inferred, we walked.







Now, it doesn't really matter whether you catch a bus or not.

The bus doesn't get you that close to the actual temple, so you're going to be doing a fair bit of walking and walking wouldn't have been a problem, except for the fact that it was a bit further than either of us expected.

We'd made our way across town to the river, crossed the appropriate bridge and started the gradual ascent towards the temple precinct when I looked ahead and realized that we were headed for *them there hills* and *them there hills* weren't as close as you'd have liked.

Still, the walk wasn't too bad in the early bit.

The footpath wasn't that crowded, but as we headed uphill all roads, it seemed, lead to the temple.

Each road was delivering its share of pilgrims and sightseers.

Founded in 798, *Kiyomizudera* (*Pure Water Temple*) isn't the only temple in *Japan* operating under that title.





There's also a *Kiyomizudera* in *Yasugi* in *Shimane Prefecture*, on the 33-temple route of the *Chūgoku 33 Kannon Pilgrimage* through *western Japan*.

But the one under consideration here gets its name from the *Otowa waterfall*, which runs off nearby hills and splits into three streams whose waters are supposed to bring long life, ensure success at school and guarantee a successful love life.

Visitors use cups attached to long poles to drink the water, but drinking from all three is considered greedy. You can't have everything, but if you could manage two of them you'd be singing along with the *Meatloaf* song.

*Kiyomizudera* dates back to the early *Heian Period*, but the main structures on the site were built in 1633 when the capital moved to *Kyoto* and were constructed without the use of nails.





Given the size of the *Hondo* (*Main Hall*) and the veranda that opens off it, that's a very impressive achievement.

The veranda, supported by thirteen-metre pillars, juts out above a precipice, offering impressive views across the city, and cherry and maple trees on the surrounding hills in spring and autumn.

Similar structures were erected at many sites visited by pilgrims during the *Edo Period*.

According to tradition, jump off the verandah and survive the fall and your wish will be granted.

That's the origin of the phrase that's the *Japanese equivalent* of *taking the plunge*, *to jump off the stage at Kiyomizu*.



Two hundred and thirty-four people are supposed to have tried it during the *Edo Period*, and, allegedly, 85.4% survived.

I did the maths to figure out an actual number and came up with a figure of 199.836, which probably shows how rounding off affects your calculations. Multiplying by 85.5 comes to a tad over 200.

In any case, you're not allowed to do that anymore.

The temple precinct contains fifteen buildings classified as *Important Cultural Properties*, including the *inner Temple (Okunoin)* a smaller scale version of the *Hondo*, *Amida Buddha Hall (Amidado)*, and a vermilion three-tiered pagoda and several other shrines including *Jishujinja*, dedicated to *Ōkuninushi*, god of love and good matches.

Visitors who manage to walk between a pair of stones with eyes closed are supposedly guaranteed to find love or their perfect match.

Attempt to do so with a bit of help and you'll still find it, but will need the assistance of a go-between or matchmaker. There is also a hall dedicated to the historical *Buddha* and another that contains close to two hundred statues of *Jizo*, the protector of children and travellers.







A visit to a structure at the southern end of the temple grounds is said to bring about easy and safe childbirth.

Like most of its peers, the complex has an assortment of talismans, incense, and *omikuji* (paper fortunes) for sale. When I spotted one that's supposed to protect travellers on the road I thought of the inimitable *Staggster*, and bought it.

We'd seen our share of temples and religious sites over two and a bit weeks, and there's a possibility that I was more or less templated out, but *Kiyomizu* struck me as a bit of a disappointment.

There's no denying there's a great view across the city.

The verandah, with its sheer drop, is impressive when you're up there, and very impressive when you're standing on the bottom looking up, but the crowds were getting to me, and a fair part of the complex was closed and undergoing repairs.

Anyway, with the walk through the temple out of the way it was a matter of making our way back to the hotel, which should have been a matter of making our way down to a bus stop and proceeding from there.

Unfortunately, the way down from the temple takes you through the steep, busy lanes of *Higashiyama*, winding streets lined with shops and stalls, and this is where the failure to take the bus on the way up kicked in big time.





The actual *Higashiyama* District (*Higashiyamaku*, or *east mountain*) covers the eastern part of *Kyoto*'s city centre along the lower slopes of the *Higashiyama* mountain range. It extends a fair bit further than the section we traversed, as far as the *Philosopher's Path* and *Ginkakuji* temple, which was one of the *sakura* season highlights last time around.

Fortunately, it's the sort of place we'll be heading back to, hopefully with tiredness taken out of the equation.

It is one of the best preserved historic districts and a genuine reflection of traditional *Kyoto*.

That's especially true of the section that lies between *Kiyomizudera* and *Yasaka* shrine.

Narrow lanes, wooden buildings and traditional shops invoke a feeling of the old capital.

They've even gone as far as removing telephone poles, doing away with the spider web of cables and wires you find above



most *Japanese streets* and repaving the roadway to maintain the traditional feel of the district.

Streets in *Higashiyama* are lined by shops, cafes and restaurants that have been catering to tourists and pilgrims since the 14th century, selling local specialties such as *Kiyomizuyaki* pottery, as well as gift culture staples like sweets, pickles, crafts and other souvenirs.

The walk through from *Kiyomizudera* to *Yasaka* shrine is around two kilometres and could be done in half an hour or so, but you could easily spend much longer visiting the temples, shrines, shops, cafes and restaurants along the way.

Maybe next time around we'll be walking beyond *Yasaka* past *Chionin* and *Shorenin* temples to *Heian* shrine, and possibly even further via *Nanzenji* temple, with a collection of architecture and artwork from the late 16th century *Momoyama Period*.

The area also contains the *Kyoto National Museum*, and I expect we'll be back, but next time we'll be getting there by bus, won't we?

The businesses along the way gradually morph from establishments catering to the temple visitor/sightseer trade into a network of interesting streets in a neighbourhood that gradually, in turn, morphs into the *Gion District*.

The further we got away from the temple the more the crowding eased though there's rarely any danger of finding tranquility and solitude in any *Japanese city*.

That's particularly the case when you're in one of the *must visit* areas of *Kyoto*.

*Kyoto's* most famous *geisha district*, *Gion* dates back to the Middle Ages.

Shops, restaurants and *ochaya* (teahouses) around *Shijo Avenue* between *Yasaka* shrine and the *Kamo River* originally catered for travellers and visitors to the shrine, but by the *mid-18th century*, the area was *Kyoto's* premier pleasure district.

From there, the district evolved to become one of the most exclusive and well-known *geisha districts* in the whole of *Japan*.

There are actually five *geisha districts* in *Kyoto* where *geiko* (*Kyoto* dialect for *geisha*) and *maiko* (*geiko apprentices*) entertain clients, and since *geisha* are entertainers, not prostitutes, *Gion* is not, despite popular misconceptions, a red-light district.

If that sort of thing floats your boat research suggests you head for *Shimabara* instead.

Traditional wooden houses called *machiya* (townhouse) are a major draw card in *Gion*, and since property taxes were based on the width of the street frontage, they tend to have narrow facades but stretch up to twenty metres in from the street.



Some of them are *ochaya* (tea houses) where patrons have been entertained for centuries.

As expert hostesses, *maiko* and *geiko* engage in conversation, serve drinks, conduct drinking games and perform traditional music and dance. Preserved *machiya* houses now function as restaurants, serving *Kyoto*-style *kaiseki ryori* (*Japanese haute cuisine*).

Having made my way through *Gion* I was ready to get away from the crowd, and boots that had seemed so comfortable back when we'd bought them before the *Cooktown* trip were starting to squeeze the feet.

That was probably the result of having been worn solidly for a fortnight, with a pinch of prolonged exposure to wet weather thrown in for good measure.

I suspect that having got wet the outer layers didn't dry out completely and had shrunk marginally. Hopefully further wear will push things back into shape, but it's very much a case of *wait and see*.

Having made our way through *Gion*, we were off to the hotel, and hose factors involving unfamiliarity with the public transport system and lack of knowledge of the local geography kicked in again.

And they kicked in big time, along with a pigheaded reluctance to say *That's enough, my feet need a rest*.

*After all*, I figured, *it wasn't that far*, and, off course, following up on that emerging theme, it wasn't a bit more than we expected (*May as well walk*, as I recall were my exact words, *it's only a few blocks*).

But it was considerably further than I'd bargained for.

Back at the hotel where any sane man would have had the boots off and laid back for a well-earned rest, someone had to check out the *WiFi* situation in the lobby.

While it was there, it was painfully slow until *Madam* joined me with her *iPad* and ventured into the territory of the bleeding obvious and went over to the *Front Desk* to ask about minor administrative details like passwords.

Things sped up considerably after that.

A spell upstairs after that gave the feet a welcome respite, and around six-thirty we started making Dinner noises, at which point lunchtime's failure to get in where she'd wanted, along with *Hughesy's* suggestion we opt for a curry place kicked in big time.

*Madam* had located another *French/Italian wine bar* sort of place and pointed us in that direction.

It wasn't as highly rated as the first one, but that, hopefully, meant it wouldn't be full either.



There were two (actually, three) major surprises when we arrived on the doorstep of another basement eating and drinking establishment, which meant signage above the steps going down.

The first surprise came in the business name. *Cheers* isn't the first name that springs to mind when you're looking for a *French/Italian wine bar*, but maybe the American sitcom never made it to *Japan*. They probably serve beer, but given the quality of the wine I sampled I don't think I'd be bothering.

Surprise #1 had a significant addendum since *Cheers* seems to be aimed pretty solidly at the female market. That mightn't be quite accurate, but it's hard to avoid the conclusion based on signage and a Girls set section of the menu.

Surprise #2 kicked in when we walked inside to find the place was practically deserted.

Maybe *Monday* nights are quiet, maybe the crowds arrive later, but when we walked in there were two tables occupied. One emptied while we were there, and no one else came in. Strange.

Because the food and wine quotients there were rather good.

We did the sharing a variety of small plates thing, and everything was very good, from the oyster and shallot gratin that arrived with the salad to the pizza that finished the main courses side of things.

*Madam* finished with a *chocolate mousse* that was *very tasty* and had me wishing I'd done the same. Full marks on that front.

Even better was the wine selection.

There were other *by the glass options* that didn't appear in the *by the glass* section of the menu, but I limited myself to the official version, and the results were very satisfactory.

There was a *Prosecco* that might have been a tad on the sweet side but worked nicely as an aperitif. A *Sauvignon Blanc* from *Touraine* was obviously SB, obviously in the mould the Kiwi exponents of the variety are seeking.

A *Chardonnay* from *Burgundy* would have got ticks of approval from the *New Wave Oz Chardy* crew, and an *Italian Primitivo* (a.k.a. *Zinfandel*) wrapped things up nicely.

*Madam* limited herself to the SB while I had the other three, but glasses were passed back and forth, and if she'd weakened I'm sure the result would have been another interesting wine and an excuse for *Hughesy* to go one more beyond that.

All in all, a very pleasant little evening, and *the perfect prelude to a good night's sleep* before an early start in the morning.





## KYOTO

***Tuesday, 13 November 2012***

Anyone familiar with the *standard Japanese operating procedure* as far as sites of national significance and coloured leaves are concerned would know it's a good idea to get in early before the crowds start to arrive.

Given the fact that the two sites *Madam* had pencilled in for our only full day in *Kyoto* lay around nine and a half kilometres from the CBD it should come as no surprise to learn we were queuing for the *Number 8 bus* outside *Karasuma Station* well before the scheduled 7:22 departure.





The crowds were going to increase as the day went on, and it seemed logical to assume a fair swag of them would be travelling out on later services on the same route.

The journey out through the regulation urban landscape was mostly uneventful though it took a while to pass through a particularly notorious intersection, Shortly after that, we were winding our way up into the foothills, alighting from the bus around 8:15 and turning our thoughts towards the morning's route march.

*Madam* has had plenty of time to figure out the paths down which *Hughesy*'s mind is likely to wander. Having landed close to the temple at *Jingoji*, a venue that would, I was told, involve an unspecified degree of climbing, the first thing on her agenda was to determine whether a walk to the other option (*Kozanji*) was doable.



The maps and other data available on the ground weren't particularly helpful as far as administrative details like distances were concerned, so she went for the nearest available human source, a middle-aged woman, obviously a local, sweeping up leaves.

*No problem*, she was told. *It's a fifteen-minute walk*. At least, that's the version I was given.

Since the conversation was in **Japanese**, she could have decided to recast any information that had been given, and I would have been none the wiser.

But a fifteen-minute walk certainly seemed doable, and while there were concerns expressed about the state of my feet I was determined to soldier on and cover whatever distance was required.

It was, after all, the last bit of sightseeing for the trip.

We set out along a relatively deserted back road that provided a pleasant and surprisingly tranquil stroll through autumn tones across the river and up and down the slopes on either side of the stream.

Eight-thirty was a trifle early for people who operated the various sightseer-oriented businesses along the way to be starting the day's business, but there were signs along the way that they'd be starting to set up in the not too distant future.







As I walked, in between stopping to enjoy the views while *Someone* lagged along behind capturing the interplay between light and leaves, I meditated on something approximating *Zen and the art of walking with sore feet*.

*If you walk long enough, I figured, you're going to end up with sore feet. It's part of the deal.*

The more you think about your feet, the worse they'll feel, particularly in situations where you can use them as an excuse to get out of walking any further.

So the answer is to avoid thinking about the feet at all. Focus on the walk, the act of walking and the scenery you're walking through.





So I did, and had a thoroughly enjoyable time up to the point where the riverside back road joined the main road just before *Kozanji*.

That meant a few minutes' careful treading along the side of the road while the traffic moved past within arm's length.

That sort of thing worried me four and a half years ago when I'd been heading to and from the hotel in *Hakone*.

After two weeks of negotiating backstreets where the traffic comes and goes this time around I merely exercised a bit of caution and waited for a break in the traffic flow if it looked like things were getting a little too close for comfort.

In any case, it was only a couple of hundred metres before we hit the entrance to *Kozanji*, another of those uphill tree-lined avenues completely bereft of vehicular traffic.

I'd just settled back into *Zen and the art of walking* when a god almighty racket from over on my right cut into the tranquility.





A bus full of *elderly Japanese sightseers* had pulled into the car park and was busily disgorging its load.

*Fortunately*, I thought, *this would mean they'd have to go down to the entrance we'd used to get us off the road to maintain a comfortable degree of separation between myself and the racket.*

Of course, it didn't work out that way. I rounded a curve that brought me within sight of the booth where you pay your ¥500 admission fee, looked to my right and there they were, heading towards the same point along a converging track.

I was pretty quick about paying the admission fee once *Madam* had caught up, and was pretty smart about getting comfortably ahead of the chattering mass.





The walk up to the temple complex itself, once they'd been left behind, was a pleasant ramble.

Once I got there, and we were comfortably removed from the clamouring crowd we were right into the full *Zen monks in the forest* ambience.

Hardly surprising since the mountains around *Togano*, which are justly famous for their autumn foliage, have a tradition of mountain asceticism, and there are many small temples among the ancient cedar and maple trees in the back woods.

Temples in the area are said to date back to imperial orders issued by *Emperor Kōnin* in 774, but *Kōzanji* (formally *Toganōsan Kōsanji*) was officially founded by scholar and monk *Myōe* (1173 – 1232) who served at nearby *Jingoji* before he was granted the land to construct a temple by Emperor *Go-Toba* in 1206.

There may already have been a temple on the site with *Myōe* doing a restoration job, but a diagram housed at *Jingoji* drawn in 1230 shows the thirteenth-century layout of the temple.



It shows a large gate, the main hall, a three-storied pagoda, halls dedicated to *Amitabha* and *Lohan*, a bell tower, a scripture hall (originally the residence of a member of the Imperial family), and a *Shinto* shrine.

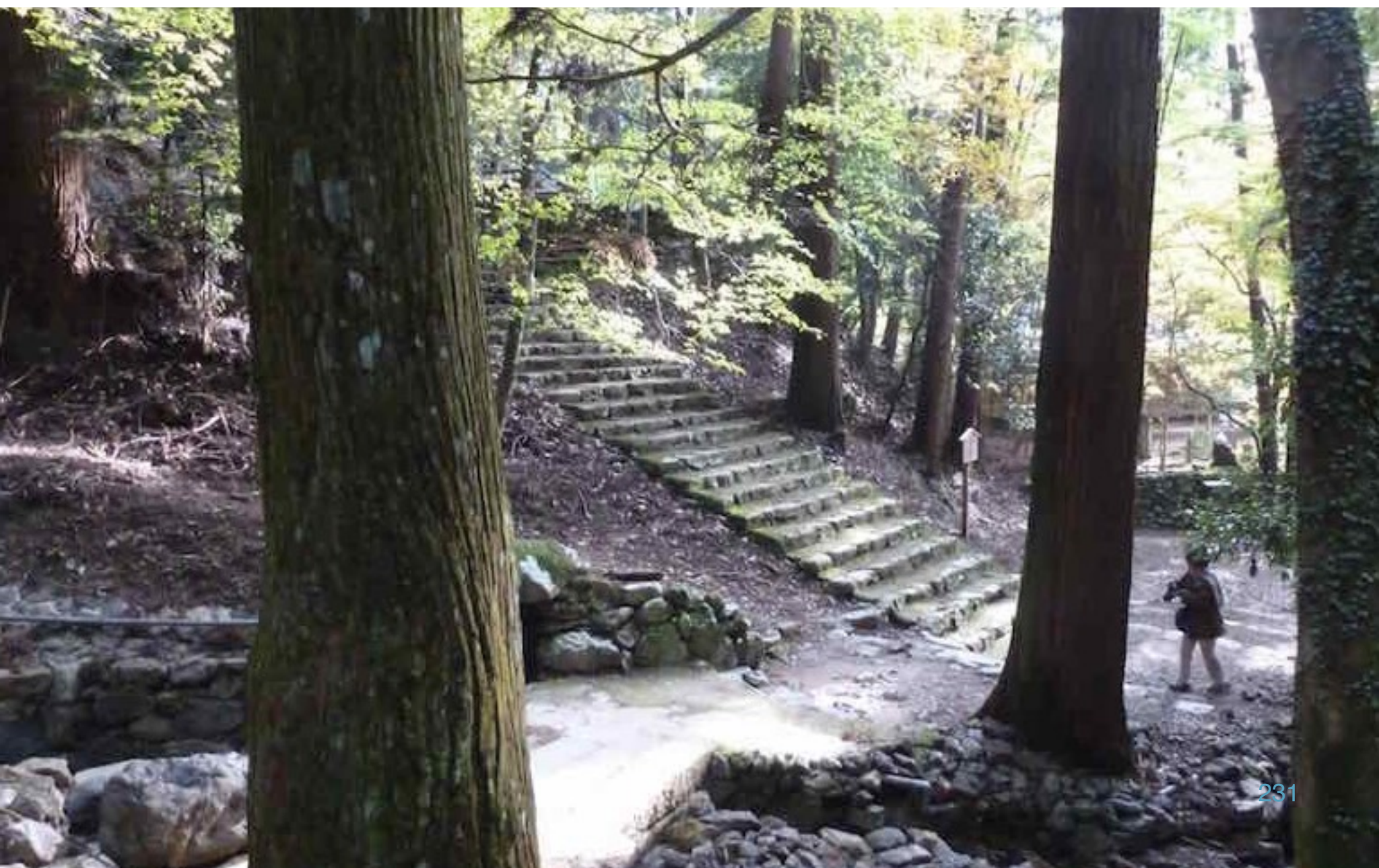
Structures on the site have been destroyed numerous times by fire and war, and the oldest buildings standing today are the scripture hall, now known as *Sekisuiin* and *Myōe*'s residence, two of the few remaining examples of *Kamakura Era* architecture, with roofs of thatch and shingles.

The grounds also hold the oldest tea field in *Japan*, planted by *Myōe* with seeds brought from China by the *Zen* priest *Eisai*. Tea helped monks stay awake during late-night meditation.

*Kōzanji* is home to numerous national treasures and important cultural properties though most of them are currently on loan to museums in *Kyoto* and *Tokyo*.

The *Chōjūjinbutsugiga* (*Scroll of Frolicking Animals and Humans*), four picture scrolls of ink paintings from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, sometimes described as *Japan's first comic*, takes the mickey out of human foibles by showing frogs, monkeys, birds, and rabbits engaged in worldly pursuits.

The original is housed in *Tokyo National Museum* but apparently there are precise replicas on display on the site.







I say *apparently* because I was more interested in the ambience among the towering cedar trees and moss-covered ground than checking out areas that were likely to attract a crowd.

Heading back down the hill I wasn't exactly looking forward to our other temple visit.

The morning was getting on, and there were obvious expectations of substantial crowds among the roadside merchandisers.

Most of the stall holders had just about finished setting up as we retraced our tracks along the riverside side road, and when we made it back to the original starting point, it looked like we were in for another experience in crowded sightseeing.





Fortunately, the monks who set about establishing these temples were careful to locate them in places where visitors would need to make a bit of an effort.

Whoever founded *Jingoji* must have liked his peace and quiet because he positioned the place at the top of a series of fairly steep climbs.

The first one was enough to sort out the sheep from the mountain goats and would, I thought around the halfway point, be enough to deter most of the *Kozanji* chatterers.

Those that weren't put off by the incline would be having issues with breathlessness by the time they made it to the top of that particular climb.

The top of that climb featured a little eatery affair where sightseers could stop for refreshment.

There was another fairly steep set of steps after that, with refreshment stops thoughtfully provided along the way before a





sharp turn revealed another set of steps that needed to be negotiated.

Sore feet and straining leg muscles are likely to kick in with a vengeance in such circumstances, but a combination of *Zen and the art of walking* and the conscious decision to focus on the mechanics of the stride pattern kept those issues in the background.

Along the way, I passed a TV camera crew filming an elderly woman in a yellow top and black tights and a much younger female making their way up the final incline to the temple complex.

This, questioning revealed once *The Photographer* had caught up, was a *Japanese actress* from the generation before mine making a *filmgrimage* around the best spots in the country for coloured leaves on one of those holiday shows.



That means there's a possibility, albeit a very slight one, of a black-capped hairy foreigner, head down in *Zen and the art of monitoring your stride pattern* mode in the act of passing the filmgrimage turning up on *Japanese network TV*.

There's the equally absurd possibility of a sighting as he cowers beside the ticket booth waiting for his native-speaking accomplice to catch up.

From there I must admit the presence of the crew dampened my enthusiasm as I tried to stay out of shot.

I worked around where they were filming, passing impressively weather-beaten structures before I found myself at the foot of another set of steps leading up to the *Kondo*, where the main attraction is an image of *Yakushi Nyorai*, the *Buddha of Healing*.

Sitting on top of *Mount Takao*, *Jingoji* dates back to 824, when *Wake no Kiyomaro* instituted the merger of two temples. One was *Jinganji* from *Kiyomaro*'s home province in present-day *Osaka Prefecture*, with the other being *Takaosanji*, founded on this site in 781.

The new temple was *Jingokokusoshingonji* (*Shingon temple for divine protection of the country*) and *Kukai* (774-835), the founder of the *Shingon* sect, was named as the head priest.







Like most other significant sites, buildings at *Jingoji* have been destroyed by fire and war over the years.

The original structures were rebuilt in **1184** after they had been burnt down, but most were destroyed again in the *Onin War*. Only the *Daishido* survived.

Several of the buildings date from reconstruction ordered by *Itakura Katsushige*, *Kyoto shoshidai* in the *Tokugawa Shōgunate*, in 1623.

Another reconstruction took place in the **1930s**.

*Madam* was having the time of her life, clicking away at the coloured leaves,.



By the time she'd caught up with me the camera crew, who'd skipped the structures I'd just passed, were making their way up the stairs before me.

*Madam* was all for heading up that way herself, but the prospect of further climbing along with camera-dodging had me deciding to make my way back to the approaches to the temple and spend the time gazing at the multicoloured hillsides.

If you're calling me a sook on the strength of that last decision, it's *Mister Sook*, thank you very much.

If I'd done some research, I would have taken myself to the *Jizo* hall, located above the *Kiyotaki River* where you can buy clay cups (*kawarakenage*) to throw off the adjacent cliff (*kin'unkei*) and rid yourself of bad *karma*.

At ¥100 for two, that seems a rather economical way to do it, but it only works (or so the on-line research suggests) if you can get the disk all the way down to the river. Flick the discs gently, convex side up, like a Frisbee.

If only I'd known...





It took a while, but eventually **Madam** made her way back to where I was standing, and we began the descent.

Predictably, that was quicker than the uphill journey, though there were delays along the way as images worth capturing presented themselves in the changing light.

There were a couple of places where the conformation of the stairs permitted a rapid descent, with a single stride covering the whole of a step that needed a stride and a bit on the way up.

Things were tempered by the frequent need to stop, look around and ascertain how far **Someone Else** had progressed.

Back at the bottom I paused yet again, and when the touring party had again attained a quorum inquired whether there was anything else on the agenda.

*No, I was told, there wasn't, unless I was inclined to eat.*

Since we'd set out before breakfast and hadn't managed to find it along the way, the prospect of food was definitely tempting, but there was one more ascent needed to get us back up to the bus stop, and I wasn't sure how frequently the buses ran.







We had a packet of raisin bread rolls we'd bought the night before in the backpack which would, I figured, have to be eaten some time, so my take on the situation was get ourselves up the hill, check, out the bus times, and eat if possible.

That packet of raisin rolls would have to be eaten somewhere, and it was highly likely we'd have a lengthy wait once the ascent had been made.

That was, as it turned out, close to the situation we found when we arrived.

There was about half an hour until the next *Kyoto Bus*, but a *JR Bus* would be heading up from *Kozanji* in about five minutes.

There was a fair sized queue for that one, and since it had started elsewhere there was no guarantee we'd get a seat on the forty-five minute trip back into the city.

That was the way it turned out once the bus arrived, so we headed over to the rival stop, positioned ourselves at the front of the queue and lunched on the packet of raisin rolls.

Once the bus arrived we picked up the same *Hughesy's legs friendly* seats we'd had on the way up and, incidentally, sailed straight through the difficult intersection that had slowed things down significantly on the way up.



The bus dropped us off just past the hotel, and once we were there the thoughts, predictably, turned to lunch.

It was around one by this stage, and updates on the *Sponge* situation suggested we'd be eating late when it came to the evening meal, so lunch was a matter of some urgency.

A packet of raisin bread rolls is all very well, but after significant exercise with the prospect of a night on the turps you need something substantial in the way of lunch.

There was a *ramen* place marked on the *Eateries around the neighbourhood map* *Madam* procured from the *Front Desk*, so we headed off in that direction.

There was, however, a perfectly acceptable alternative just around the corner that did exactly what was required.

Back at the hotel, *Madam* needed to head off to do a bit of shopping while I sat in the lobby, doing what needed to be done online before heading back upstairs for further *Travelogue* tapping.

We weren't expecting any *Sponge* updates until well after six-thirty, since the day's show in *Himeji* had involved road, rather than rail transport, which in turn meant they had to drive back, unpack the van, head home and make subsequent arrangements once they'd touched base there.

Eventually the rendezvous was arranged for the *East Gate* at *Karasuma station*, so we headed along there around eight.

By twenty past were headed off for a return visit to the place we'd spent the equivalent evening four and a half years earlier.

This time around the *dramatis personae* were the inimitable *Sponge*, the young lass we'd christened *Double Sponge*, and Take, an enthusiastic young bloke who announced himself to be *Triple Sponge*, but didn't quite manage to live up to the self-proclaimed status.

Mind you, given the capacity of his colleagues, most people would experience a degree of difficulty in that department.

By the same token, it was a late start, and with the regulation array of platters on the table things flowed along nicely without hitting any great heights in the alcoholic consumption department.

The trio's need to catch the final train for the evening meant that most of us probably ended up in bed in much better shape than would otherwise have been the case.





## KYOTO > KOBE

***Wednesday, 14 November 2012***

Which is where tying up loose ends and preparing for the return trip kicks in, folks, though there was one major long-term issue that needed to be addressed before we departed from *Kyoto*.

It wouldn't have been an issue if we hadn't been able to access *WiFi*, but news that the pre-sale for dates on the *March 2013 Neil Young with Crazy Horse tour of Australia and New Zealand* started at noon local time in the various states produced a quick bit of calculating.



*Japan* is an hour behind *Eastern Standard Time*, and two behind *Sydney* with *Daylight Saving Time* factored in, so that meant both *Brisbane* and *Sydney* looked doable provided nothing went wrong with the connection.

With *Sydney* going on sale first the suggestion that I might see two shows on the tour wasn't immediately torpedoed.

*Neil* tends not to vary the set-lists once he starts a tour, so things mightn't vary much from show to show, but it is *Neil*, and it is *the Horse*, and I haven't had the benefit of seeing the man in any format before.

*Madam* had a bit of end of trip running around to do while I chased up that show, so she headed off, leaving me in the lobby checking email and tapping out *Travelogue* details.

Five to ten saw me logging in to the presale website. After a bit of toing and froing by ten past I had a seat for the Sydney show, which meant I had time, once *The Supervisor* returned, to head upstairs, gather up the goods and chattels while she completed the checking out procedure.

After that, I settled back to catch *Brisbane*, which was, predictably, being sold through a different agency. That was a fact that *Hughesy*, equally predictably failed to notice.

A bit more subsequent toing and froing once I twigged to the change produced a seat, and though it mightn't have been the best you might have hoped for I reckoned I'd done pretty well.

Particularly when you consider that I could well have been away from *WiFi* when the presale started and would probably have either missed out completely or ended up sitting way up in the nosebleeds.

Once that mission had been accomplished it was time to head off to *Kōbe*.

There had been a couple of options kicked around earlier, but the most straightforward involved a couple of blocks' walk to the subway station, followed by a two-station transfer to *JR Kyoto* and a train that would land us at *Kōbe's Sannomiya* without the need to transfer trains in *Osaka*.

We could have said *Thank you to Hankyu*, but that would have involved a transfer somewhere like *Umeda*, and no guarantee of seats on either leg.

Once we reached the relevant platform in *Kyoto*, of course, there were already queues formed for the next train, which wasn't that far away.

We both found seats with *Madam over there* and *Hughesy* perched on half a seat beside the carriage door. Those matters resolved themselves just outside *Osaka* when the other seat *over there* became vacant.



By the time we'd left *Umeda* the population had thinned considerably, which was a big help when it came to retrieving the *Little Red Travelling Bag* and *Madam's backpack* from the overhead luggage racks as the train slowed into *Sannomiya*.

From there it was a short stroll to the bus terminal to catch the free shuttle that delivers customers to and from the *Okura* and the *Meriken Park Oriental*, which was our destination this time around.

It was far too early to check in, but once the luggage had been consigned to the cloak room we were free to set off on the first leg of the final shopping odyssey, though the question of lunch needed to be resolved first.

On the other side of the inlet from *Meriken Park*, there's a complex labelled *Mosaic*, with a number of eating options, and we ended upstairs at an *Italian place*.

Deceived by the weather into taking table beside a window, by the time the meals arrived the cloud cover had seen fit to relocate, and we were sitting in fairly strong sunlight.

That's a bit of an issue when you've rugged up for early winter, but there was nothing that could be done about it.

A *Primitivo Novello* mightn't have been the ideal match for a pasta dish with salmon and mushrooms, but each of them worked in their own way without actually managing to converge.





The pasta dish had its share of interest in the shape and variety of mushrooms in the sauce, and the wine was easy to drink and flavours one in a style that was obviously meant to be *food friendly* though *not necessarily with this particular dish*.

It didn't work that well with *Madam's* fish-based pasta sauce either, but there were other issues at play in that department.

A couple of things, starting with a position away from direct sunlight, would have improved matters on the other side of the table considerably.

The sauce, in terms of aroma, reminded me of my favourite anchovy, tomato and garlic sauce, though the chunks of aromatic fish were visible, rather than dissolved into the rest of the sauce.

After lunch, the next step was to pick up *Hughesy's* *tailor made with a focal length of 85 centimetres* computer glasses, which worked quite brilliantly.

Then we set out on the process of acquiring stuff *Madam* needs to take back with her, either as presents for friends and acquaintances or for her own consumption back at base.

Heading back to *Meriken Park* to check in broke up that process, and we had a couple of hours' break between instalments, largely spent catching up on email and *Travelogue* tapping once certain connectivity issues had been ironed out.

By six, it was time to head out on Stage Two, which took us back into *Sannomiya* and the nearby shopping arcades and department stores in search of *Japanese language magazines*, *green tea* and other comestibles.

In the age of the internet *English* might, in effect, be the world language, but there's no sign of that phenomenon in your average *Japanese book shop*.

Sure, there's a section of titles in *English* in places like *Kinokuniya*, but in the places we visited in search of magazines that aren't exactly easy to find there might have been the odd semi-familiar title but everything under the *English* masthead was *solidly Japanese*.

I couldn't help thinking there wouldn't have been much correlation of content between the seemingly girl-oriented *Oz* magazine and the underground magazine of the same title that attracted more than its share of attention in the early seventies.

From there it was on to the very impressive food section at *Daimaru*, where *Madam*, as we entered, jokingly remarked that they'd be conducting a wine tasting downstairs.

At least, I *thought* she was joking.





We were in the *green tea* section with what appeared to be the wine section barricaded off behind a temporary facade, so that, I thought, was it for the tasting department.

But after a visit to the cookie counter I was steered towards another discrete wine display where, yes, there were tasting options available.

There were red and white versions of *Burgundy*, the red very obviously *Pinot Noir* and the white equally obviously *Chardonnay*, as well as a couple of *Italian styles*.

Much of what had been available for sampling was gone since it was late on the second last day of the promotion, but the *Frascati* and *Trebbiano* I tried would both have been quite acceptable, with the *Frascati* being, to borrow a phrase I picked up at *Rockford*, *the sort of wine that invites itself to lunch*.

I left with a bottle of the *Pinot Noir* as we left in search of dinner in *Chinatown*.

We'd walked through there on the evening of our first full day of this trip without surrendering to the shills of the spruikers outside the various establishments, largely because we were elsewhere bound as far severing meals were concerned,.

We passed most of them by again this time because, basically, neither of us was particularly hungry.



A decision, however, had to be made, and after repeated *What do you feel like eatings* from **Madam** we settled on a place where the spruiker (*or, in this case, the spruikess*) was marginally less pushy than her neighbouring *confreres*.

I settled for a sweet and sour pork and a pitcher of draught beer, which was just the right quantity and combination while **Madam** opted for a small platter of dumplings that were rather tasty.

*The sweet and sour*, by the way, bore scant resemblance to the **Australian version**, largely due to a total absence of pineapple. It made for a rather welcome change.

Outside, making our way back to **Sannomiya** it was obvious winter had set in, with **December** weather coming a good three weeks early.

The conditions forced us into the underground maze that sits under most **Japanese transit centres**, and that took us through passages lined with eating options and other small businesses and delivering us to the bus station just in time to see the shuttle bus heading off.

It wasn't too much of a disaster, but time spent going up and down stairs was probably the difference between catching that bus and the twenty minute wait for the next one. Back at base **Hughesy** was ready for bed while **Madam** had a last opportunity to enjoy a lengthy **Japanese style bath** this time around.





# KOBE > KANSAI INTERNATIONAL

**Thursday, 15 November 2012**

And so we come to the end of the overseas leg this particular time around.

With the sightseeing over and the shopping exclusively *in Madam's* court, there wasn't a great deal for *Hughesy* to do apart from transforming himself into a beast of burden once the morning's *Viking* breakfast had been devoured.

There wasn't a great deal of a hurry in that department since the *smorgasbord* stays open until eleven, so it was after a quarter to nine when we made our way downstairs.

We stayed at the *Oriental* on the first night of the first trip, and I remember the *Viking* with considerable affection.

This time the spread seemed smaller, though still quite adequate and I am, after all, trying to cut down on the dietary intake.

The verdict of the bathroom scales at home isn't something I'm looking forward to.

The *Viking*, however, offers traps for young, and even not so young, players.

I started lining up for a freshly made omelette and found that what I had supposed to be fairly finely chopped mushrooms was, in fact, finely chopped octopus.

Not bad, but not *quite* the taste I had in mind.

From there it was back upstairs to pack, and the only remaining items on the agenda came in the form of a spell in the shops at *Sannomiya*, a train transfer to the dormitory suburb where *The Mother* lives, another run through the shops after arriving there and the ritual restoring of the various goods and chattels after we'd been reunited with the *Black Monster* and *Madam's Blue Portmanteau*.

The only excitement along the way, at least from where I was sitting, came when I was redirected from my position inside the shopping centre.

I was poised, waiting for one of the people occupying the public seating to move and create space for a large hairy foreigner minding two backpacks, the *Little Red Travelling Bag* and *Madam's camera bag*.



*There was, I was informed, much more seating available outside.*

And there was though there was also the threat of drizzle, a rather nippy wind. Still, I managed to get a bit more *Travelogue* tapping out of the way, a process that continued once the luggage had been sorted.

The result, at 3:29, with nothing to do but lock the *Black Monster* while we wait for the *Socialist Taxi* to whiz us over to *Kansai International*, is that the *Japanese territorial trip* is almost, as I tap this out, to all intents and purposes, over.

Unsurprisingly, apart from a rather spectacular sunset, the trip to the *airport* proved unexciting, apart from interest provoked when a driver attempts to direct a minibus into back streets where it's going to be a tight squeeze.

The check in process ran as smoothly as you'd want it to, passing through *Immigration* on the way out was a no paperwork breeze and half an hour before boarding the head count in the *Departure Lounge* ran to less than two dozen.

Or more if you count the cabin crew.

Predictably, the place filled up substantially in the final bit, but still, once we were aboard there was an abundance of vacant space.

After the excitement associated with *Business Class* on the way over, the return leg was, to put it bluntly, a bit of a disappointment, not that there was ever any likelihood of substantial *wow factors* on an overnight leg.

Before we were seated with seat belts fastened, there was a little change of routine that would have implications about eight hours later when it came time to disembark.

I'm the first to admit I'm a creature of habit.

I like to get myself organized, so I know where everything is. I was planning to do a bit of reading and tapping on the *iPad* while we waited for dinner, and once the *seatbelts sign* was off I'd be looking to enjoy a soundtrack on the *iPad* until it was night night time.

With that in mind, I was going to stow the backpack under the seat in front, but *Someone* made the helpful suggestion that I stow the thing in the overhead locker after removing the things I wanted. She'd stow anything that needed to be stowed in her bag, which was going under the seat.

I removed *Pad*, *Pod* and earbuds from the backpack and assumed they'd all gone into the *Little Red Travelling Bag*.



As it turned out, I didn't get around to needing the *iPod* or the ear buds, and that was the cause of a little confusion after we landed.

In the meantime, having seated ourselves, I took a squiz at the menu and accompanying wine list, not planning on a hefty session, but interested to see what was on offer this time around.

The wine options on the way over had me salivating in the manner of *Pavlov's dogs*, but the return leg was, to put it bluntly, disappointing.

There was a *Tempus Two Chardonnay*, which looked like a reasonable match for the sweet and sour on the menu, but that, as far as I was concerned, was it.

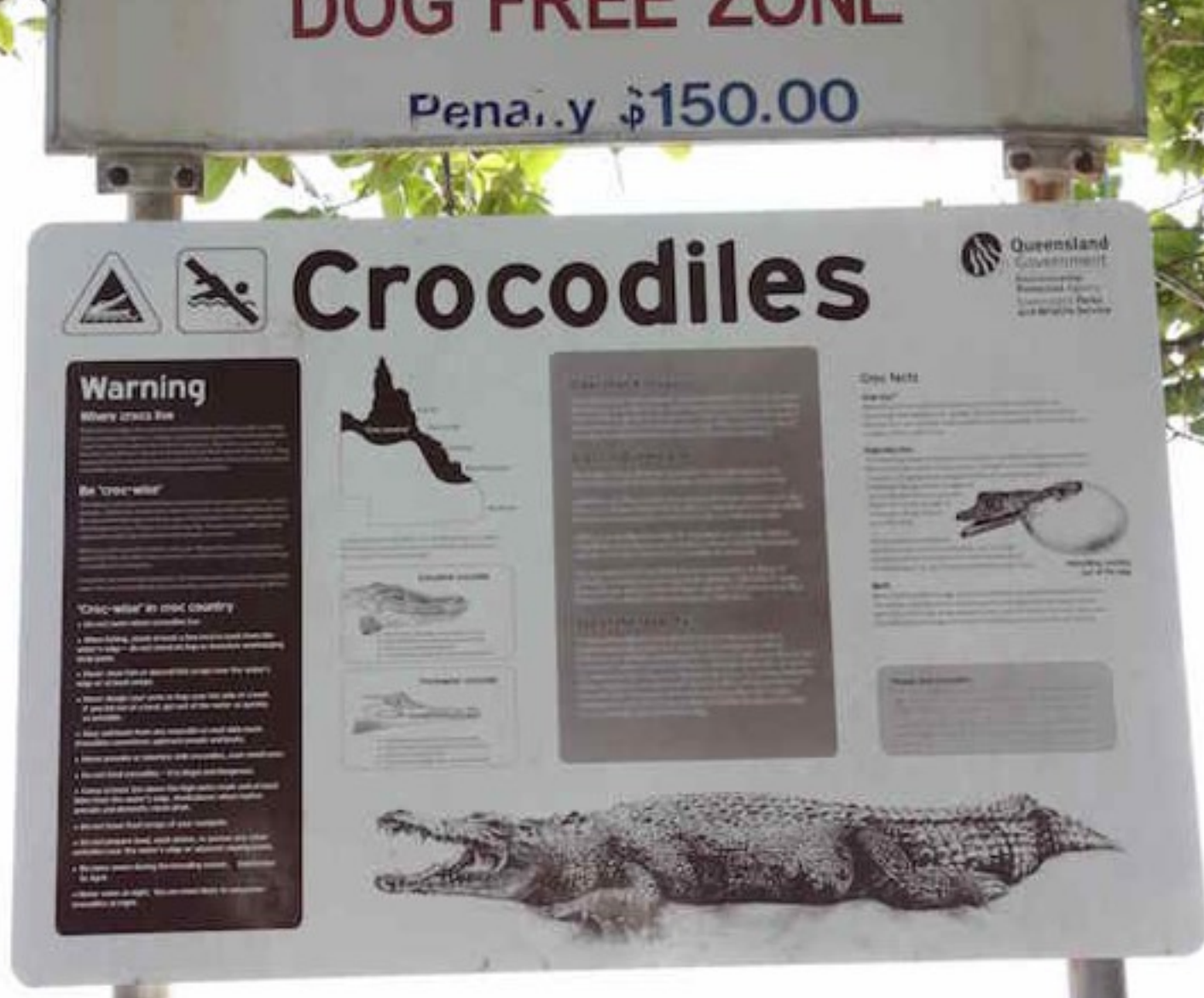
With the relative lateness and all, a single glass of wine was quite enough, but it would have been nice to be left on the horns of a vinous dilemma once I'd checked the *Halliday Companion* app on the *iPad*.

The *Chardonnay* was the only item out of four that rated a 90 or better, so the *Chardonnay* would have to do, wouldn't it?

And the sweet and sour, thanks to the presence of pineapple was much more familiar than the previous night's version, which was, by the way, a far better option...

In any case, it wasn't that long after dinner that I found myself in a darkened cabin pondering how much sleep would be possible under the prevailing circumstances.





## INTO CAIRNS AND ON TO BOWEN

**Friday, 16 November 2012**

It seemed like one moment I was pondering whether sleep was possible and the next I had my arm gently shaken with inquiries about coffee and breakfast.

Three-thirty in the morning, when you're passing over *New Guinea*, mightn't be the optimal time for breakfast, but when it's on offer, and you're not sure about the arrangements that were going to come into play later you tend to accept.

Once you have, it's over to the *iPad* for a bit of a read.

What I should have done was reach for the *iPod* and a soothing soundtrack as well, and some of what followed might have been averted.

As it was, I didn't, remaining blissfully unaware of the fact that I was sitting on the item in question, and the little package holding the earbuds had wedged itself into the crack between the seat and its upright brother.



I'm not sure why I didn't go for that, possibly because deep down I knew I wouldn't have long before the **seatbelts sign** came up along with the request to turn off the electronic devices.

But as far as I was concerned the **iPod** was safely stowed in **Madam's** hand luggage (the **Little Red Travelling Bag**) rather than my backpack, which was lurking overhead in the locker.

It was when we stood up to disembark that a question regarding the location of the device brought a **No**, and a subsequent investigation revealed where it was. I don't know why I didn't check for the ear buds as well, but there you go.

I'm not sure how much of what followed could have been avoided if I had, but there you go.

We'd disembarked and were heading towards **Immigration** when the penny dropped, and since we weren't allowed to head back, I had to wait for the cabin crew to finish doing their thing after a message was passed back.

As it turned out, the search was successful, but I didn't realise that was the case until they'd walked past and I doubled back to the checkpoint where I found the item in question.

In any case, that got us to **Immigration** where I discovered that incoming couples with one **Australian passport holder** could go through the same checkpoint, which would have been handy, and would have delivered us to the head of the **Customs** queue if the **iPod** incident hadn't occurred.

I was fairly flustered by the whole string of events, and when the bloke from **Customs** scrutinised the relevant slips and asked whether we were carrying foodstuffs, I reflexively answered that we weren't, when I should have said / wasn't.

**Madam**, of course, was, and pointed out that she was, and we were motioned over to the *having your bags inspected* queue.

Again, I don't know what difference it would have made, because when filling out the **Customs** slip I ticked the box about *having been out in the countryside over the preceding week*, which we had been.

Without the earbud bit, of course, we would have been at the top of the queue.

So when the phone rang, and the **Ukulele Lady** asked whether we were through Immigration, the response was that we were in a queue and weren't sure how long we'd be there because there were a few people in front of us and no one seemed to be in a hurry.

Eventually, however, we got the *all clear* and made our way to the front of the building, where a lengthy wait ensued.



Under other circumstances, when the call came we'd have been just about through the reentry process and would probably have been told the *Ukulele Lady* would be right over.

Still, it was early in the morning, so when *Ukulele Lady* and *Sushi Chef Husband* arrived in two cars and offered to show us the quickest way out of town there wasn't a great deal of traffic about, and we made our way onto the *Bruce Highway* without too much difficulty.

And here's where the little things started to add up.

The first issue involved the sunglasses that are *de rigeur* when driving in bright sunlight.

They were in *Madam's* luggage, and we needed to pull over somewhere so they could be retrieved. That took place in a rest area on the banks of the *Mulgrave*, where we could also have had a toilet break, but, as in so many other instances through the course of the morning, the penny refused to drop.

As we neared *Innisfail*, two things were obvious.

First, we needed something more substantial than *croissants* and coffee for breakfast.

Fine.

On the other side of *Innisfail*, there's a good bakery at *Mourilyan* where the pies are excellent.

Second, it was obvious that *Madam* needed to take a break and catch up on some sleep.

She'd remarked on the difference between *Economy* and *Business Class* the night before while we'd been waiting for dinner, pointing out that she'd probably already be asleep if we were sitting further back.

Of course, had we been sitting further back we wouldn't have had the three-thirty wake-up call.

Still, we made it to the *Bakery*, and when an inquiry about rest areas nearby proved unsuccessful I asked about *Etty Bay*, which produced an answer along the lines of *yes, you could go there. Lovely spot.*

And it was.

Unfortunately, it's a lovely spot without toilet facilities, so once we'd demolished breakfast, there was an issue that needed to be addressed.

We needed sleep, but *Someone* needed the facilities, and until that came the sleep bit wasn't going to happen.





What did come, however, was a cassowary, and an adrenaline rush while the photographic evidence was being obtained.

We'd heard *Etty Bay* was a good location if you're looking for cassowaries when we'd been on the *Cooktown* trip earlier in the year, and here, in the course of a twenty-minute stay, was the verification.

We were heading towards the highway not too long after that.

*The Sugar Museum* at *Mourilyan* delivered the comfort stop, so we headed off in search of rest areas. There aren't any between *Mourilyan* and *Tully*, but I figured we'd be able to turn off there and find a shady spot.

Maybe a suitable one exists, but if it does, it wasn't anywhere we looked. Back onto the highway...

There was, however, a rest area midway between *Tully* and *Cardwell*, and an hour's stop there was a significant battery recharger.

After that, we passed through *Cardwell*, where extensive post-*Yasi* roadwork nudged stopping into the too hard basket, and over the *Cardwell Range*, where we ran through the massive realignment of the highway very smoothly and on to *Ingham*.

By this point, I was thinking we'd be making our way home rest area by rest area, but *Madam* wasn't needing a break at *Francis Creek*, so we continued onwards.



By the time we'd reached *Rollingstone* she reckoned she did, but knowledge from *Hughesy's* teenage years meant I could point us to *Bluewater*, where the shady spot was found, and an hour's break ensued.

We could have passed through *Townsville*, stopping to pick up a resupply of cat tucker at *The Domain*, but opted to turn off and take the *Ring Road*, which immediately became the default option when a stop in *Townsville* on the way to or from points further north wasn't required.

Another two and a bit hours got us safely to *Bowen*, where we weren't concerned by the presence of two out of three furry felines since the other was fond of nearby drains and would probably be back around supper time.

That theory was shot down in flames shortly after that when the neighbour with whom we share the cat contingent and had been feeding them while we were away arrived to let us know TeeTee was missing and had been for close to a fortnight.

He had apparently (aural evidence, nothing physical) been involved in a disagreement with a wandering dog.

And, after an interval of more than a month there's no sign of him, so we presume the worst...





# AKITA SHINKANSEN

The Akita *Shinkansen* line serves the Kantō and Tōhoku regions, linking Tokyo and Akita, the capital of Akita prefecture with hourly services. Akita *Shinkansen Komachi* trains have all-reserved seating and stop at Ueno, Omiya, Sendai, Morioka on the Tohoku *Shinkansen* line, travelling at speeds of up to 320 km/h.

Up to Morioka, trains come in two sections, an Aomori-bound *Hayate* and a 7-car *Komachi* which turns off the Tohoku line for the rest of the run to Akita. From Morioka to Ōmagari uses the Tazawako Line, then the Ōu Main Line from Ōmagari to Akita. Since neither line was engineered specifically for *Shinkansen* services, the maximum speed is significantly reduced (to 130 km/h). Stations on the latter section of the route are Shizukuishi, Tazawako, Kakunodate, Omagari, and Akita. Trains reverse direction at Omagari as they change from the Tazawako Line to the Ōu Line.

The trip from Tokyo takes four hours, costs about ¥17,000 and is fully covered by both the Japan Rail Pass and JR East Pass. Since all seats require reservations there's a chance of getting in the wrong half of the train in Tokyo.

Route details and maps: <http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/routemaps/akitashinkansen.html>

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen**

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Find Term



# ASHINOKO LAKE

The scenic Lake Ashi, often referred to as Hakone Lake but formally Ashinoko Lake, in Hakone lies along the southwest wall of the caldera of Mount Hakone formed after the volcano erupted 3000 years ago. The name means "lake of reeds."

A popular tourist destination, the lake is known for views of Mt. Fuji and pleasure boats that traverse the lake, providing views of the surrounding mountains and the floating torii of the Hakone Shrine. The Hakone Detached Palace Garden delivers the best panoramas across the lake with Mount Fuji in the background but clouds and poor visibility often block the view. Visibility tends to be better during the colder seasons in the early morning and late evening.

But even if you can't catch a good view of Mount Fuji, the cruises on the lake link to the Hakone Ropeway, which will take the visitor from Togendai on the northern end of the lake across The Great Boiling Valley to Sounzan. The Hakone Tozan Cable Car funicular railway in turn connects to the Hakone Tozan Line mountain railway which delivers you to Odawara.

Hakone Sightseeing Boats and Izuhakone Sightseeing Boats both operate cruises between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-machi at the lake's southern shores and Togendai and Kojima. A round-trip cruise from takes roughly 30 minutes and the Hakone Free Pass is only valid on the passenger ship shaped Hakone Sightseeing Boats.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Hakone, Mount Fuji**



# CHŪŌ SHINKANSEN

Construction work on the *maglev* Chūō *Shinkansen* was due to commence in autumn 2014, with 86% of the initial 286 km route running through (as in under) the Japanese Alps from Tokyo's Shinagawa Station to Nagoya. The line will extend the existing Yamanashi research track and should connect the two cities in less than half the time taken by services on the Tokaido line, with trains running at speeds of up to 505 km/h.

That section is slated to open in 2027 with the next section to Osaka completed by 2045. The journey to ShinOsaka should take sixty-seven minutes (currently a minimum of two hours and nineteen minutes). The project is expected to cost ¥9 trillion, but the economic impact of reduced travel time between Tokyo and Osaka has been estimated at between ¥5 and ¥17 trillion over the line's first fifty years of operation.

The project is as an alternative to the Tokaido *Shinkansen*, where tight schedules leave little room to add extra services, and there's a need for cover if that line is blocked by a natural disaster. With the underground sections passing through soft bedrock earthquakes are an issue, but JR Tokai claims tremors will not affect levitating trains and shocks are supposedly less severe when you're underground. Plans include forty-seven emergency exits from the tunnels, spaced about 5 kilometres apart in urban areas, with high-strength concrete and bolts attached to bedrock bolstering resistance to tremors. Still, the Chuo *Shinkansen* will run across several active fault lines.

There are other concerns. Excavations will produce over 62 million cubic metres of material that will need to be disposed of, environmental geologists suggest tunnelling will affect the above-ground environment and maglev technology requires much more electric power (35,000 kilowatts compared to 10,000 kilowatts for a single run on the Tokaido *Shinkansen*). Concerns with possible noise pollution will see above-ground sections of the line covered by concrete hoods, but JR Tokai will consider allowing open views of Mount Fuji and the Southern Japan Alps from the scenic Kofu basin in Yamanashi Prefecture.

The initial 18.4 kilometre test track between Ōtsuki and Tsuru in Yamanashi Prefecture was extended by 25 kilometres in June 2013. JR Tokai is considering opening services from a station in Kōfu on a 6 kilometre extension of the existing track to carry tourists visiting Japan for the 2020 Olympics to experience the train ride through the Yamanashi mountains.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Akita Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Maglev Trains, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen**



# EKI-BENTŌ

Google *eki-bentō* (as I did, looking for material for this note) and you'll find any number of links to commercial operations, restaurants and the like. That's because *eki-bentō* represents a subset of a much larger entity (*bentō*, the single portion meal, usually rice, fish or meat with pickled or cooked vegetables in a box-shaped container) sold at railway stations (*eki*) or on trains. If you're at an airport and want something to sustain you on the flight it will be *sora-bentō*, and you'll have the same problem with Google.

Produced in a number of styles and packaged in a variety of containers from mass-produced disposable packages to hand-crafted lacquerware. *Bentō* boxes are, essentially, convenience food. The word originates from a Chinese Southern Song Dynasty (twelfth and thirteenth century) slang term that translates as *convenient*. The earliest forms of *bentō* can be traced back to the late Kamakura Period, when cooked rice was dried (*hoshi-ii* or *dried meal*) eaten in that form or reconstituted by boiling in water.

Wooden boxes with the contents eaten at a tea party date back to the sixteenth century Azuchi-Momoyama Period. Edo Period travellers and sightseers often carried a *koshibentō* of *onigiri* rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves or stored in a bamboo box. Theatre-goers consumed makuno-uchi bentō between acts of *Noh* and *Kabuki* performances and similar packages were prepared for *Hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) or special occasions such as *Hinamatsuri* (Doll's Day or Girls' Day).

*Eki-bentō* date back to the In the Meiji Period, with the earliest version (two *onigiri* and a serving of daikon wrapped in bamboo leaves) possibly sold at Utsunomiya station on 16 July 1885. Schools did not supply lunch teachers and students took *bentō* to school, a practice that lasted until schools started providing lunches after World War Two. Aluminium *bentō* boxes became popular during the Taishō period since they were easy to clean and looked classy.

Contemporary *bentō* may take the form of a home-prepared lunch box, but the term usually refers to commercially prepared boxes sold in convenience stores, specialised takeaway outlets such as the Hokka Hokka Tei and Hotto Motto franchise chains, railway stations, and even department stores. Varieties of bentō include:

- Chūka bentō* (Chinese appetisers or snacks);
- Hayaben* (*early bentō*), eaten before lunch with another lunch afterwards;
- Hinomaru bentō*, plain white rice with *umeboshi* (*Japanese salt plums*, pickled *ume* fruit) in the centre in an arrangement that resembles the *Hinomaru* or Japanese flag;
- Hokaben*, freshly cooked hot rice served with freshly prepared side dishes sold at takeaway *bentō* shops;
- Kamameshi bentō* sold at stations in Nagano prefecture, cooked and served in a clay pot with the pot as a souvenir;
- Kyaraben* (*character bentō*) decorated to look like characters from *anime*, *manga*, or video games;
- Makunouchi bentō* with rice, pickled fruit, broiled salmon etc;
- Noriben*, with *nori* (seaweed) dipped in soy sauce with cooked rice;
- Oekakiben* arranged to look like people, animals, buildings, flowers and plants;
- Saké bentō* (broiled salmon);
- Shidashi bentō* prepared in a restaurant and served at funerals or social gatherings;
- Shōkadō bentō* in a traditional black-lacquered box, the inspiration for IBM's ThinkPad;
- Tori bentō* (cooked chicken with rice).

## Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here



# GEISHA

When I sighted a distinctively clothed woman in Kyoto's Gion district and placed a mental tick in the box beside *geisha*, I was immediately wrong on at least two fronts. First, I was in Kyoto, where they're *geiko* in Kansai dialect. Second, the white make-up, elaborate *kimono* and hairdo that form the popular image of *geisha*, usually signifies a *maiko*, or apprentice (alternatively *hangyoku*, or *half-jewel* since they are paid at half the rate of a full *geisha*). Fully fledged geisha only wear the characteristic makeup for special performances.

Regardless of the label we are talking about traditional entertainers who act as hostesses. during meals, banquets and special occasions The word *geisha* is drawn from two *kanji*, *gei* (art) and *sha* (person or doer) so an accurate translation would be *performing artist*, one whose skills covered a range of traditional Japanese arts including music, dance and games, trained to make guests feel at ease with interesting conversation, drinking games and artistic performances.

The *maiko* apprenticeship does not appear to be strictly necessary, since women over the age of twenty-one are deemed too old to go through it, but it seems a year's training (formal or informal) is the minimum needed before a *maiko* or *geisha* can make their debut in the community. Completing the apprenticeship, however, is said to yield greater prestige later a *geisha's* career.

While modern labour laws prohibit girls from beginning an apprenticeship until they are eighteen (though fifteen-year-old girls can become full-time *maiko* in Kyoto) the training process used to start much earlier, progressing through stages as *shikomi* (servant) and *minarai* (watching apprentice) as they developed communication and hospitality skills and techniques.

Elements that combined to develop the *geisha* culture started to coalesce after the imperial court moved to Kyoto in 794. By 1617, there were designated walled-in pleasure quarters (*yūkaku*) that offered sex, along with accomplished performers who entertained customers with dancing, singing, music, poetry and calligraphy.

The early *geisha* who appeared around the eighteenth century were men who entertained customers while they waited to see the courtesans (*oiran*). The female equivalent of the original *geisha* were teenage *Ôdôri ko* (dancing girls) in unlicensed districts that sprang up all over Japan, unrestricted by the strict etiquette associated with the pleasure quarters. Many such areas developed close to shrines and temples, and offered refreshments and entertainment to pilgrims. As teahouses became regulated, the services they were allowed to offer were defined and became ritualised.

The first known female *geisha* was a singer from Fukagawa, who appeared around 1750, the first of a number of women who worked as entertainers rather than prostitutes, often alongside male *geisha*. They were forbidden from sexual activity ith the customers, which would have encroached on the business of the *oiran*. As the courtesans dealt with sexual matters, *geisha* created their own niche as artists and cultured female companions.

The distinction blurred after World War Two, when prostitutes began dressing in *kimono* and imitating the *geisha's* appearance to attract customers from American servicemen, referring to themselves as *geisha girls*. Since their clients could not tell the difference between the legitimate *geisha* and the fancy dress imitations, *geisha girl* became a general term for prostitutes, bar hostesses and streetwalkers.

Today, *geisha* still live in *geisha* houses (*okiya*) in "flower towns" (*hanamachi*), during their apprenticeship, though successful *geisha* may choose to live independently. They are hired to attend parties and gatherings in *ochaya* (tea houses) or traditional Japanese restaurants (*ryôtei*), with the venue providing the *tatami* room where the entertainment takes place. Food and performers are ordered in. Traditionally, *ochaya* were exclusive venues that did not bill guests at the end of the night, but ran a tab that covered all costs (down to taxi rides) and billed the client's bank account every month.

Changing times have modified the standard practice. Tourists and other interested parties can now, apparently, book *geiko* dinners through travel agencies and hotels. The customer can expect (again, apparently) around ¥50,000 for each *maiko* or *geiko* and somewhere between ¥10,000 and ¥30,000 per head for the meal. Since the entertainers probably won't speak English or any other foreign language, interpreters are an additional expense. The highlight of the evening will be a seasonal dance, accompanied by a *shamisen* played by second *geiko*, so the bill will probably start around the ¥100,000 mark.

## Related Glossary Terms

Hanamachi, Shamisen



# GERO

The *onsen* town of Gero on the banks of the Hida River in Gifu Prefecture is the centre of a larger entity, the city of Gero, established in 2004 by merging of the former town of Gero with the towns of Hagiwara, Kanayama and Osaka, and the village of Maze, all of them from Mashita District. As a result, the city has eight railway stations (Hida-Kanayama, Yakeishi, Gero, Zenshōji, Hida-Hagiwara, Jōro, Hida-Miyada and Hida-Osaka) along a stretch of JR Central's Takayama Main Line.

Located between Nagoya and Takayama, Gero is about forty-five minutes by limited express or an hour on a local service from Takayama, which makes it a possible alternative during the Takayama Festival, when accommodation is at a premium in Takayama. From Nagoya, it's about 90 minutes on the JR Wide View Hida limited express. Those trips are fully covered by the Japan Rail Pass.

One of Japan's Three Famous Springs (along with Kusatsu in Gunma Prefecture and Hyogo Prefecture's Arima) as listed by Confucian poet Hayashi Razan, not to be confused with the Three Great Springs or Three Old Springs (see [http://wikitravel.org/en/Japan's\\_Top\\_3](http://wikitravel.org/en/Japan's_Top_3)) the town has been drawing in visitors since the Engi Era (901-923) and while tourism is the city's major industry, attracting more than a million Japanese visitors every year, forestry and agriculture play significant roles in the local economy.

Predictably, there are many hotels and *ryokan*, most of them on the northern side of the river (the train station lies to the south of it) and most including their own bathing facilities, and there are a number of inexpensive, convenient *onsen* near railway stations, residential areas, and shopping centres along the valley, as well as three public bath houses in the town itself. The southern end of the Gero Bridge has a large (free) *rotenburo* (open-air bath) if you don't mind bathing in full view of people crossing the bridge.

Visitors can sample three baths of any of about thirty participating ryokan by purchasing a *Yumeguri Tegata* spa pass, a wooden amulet sold all over Gero at the tourist information office, ryokan, souvenir shops and convenience stores which is valid for six months.

There are also numerous free foot baths, which may offer welcome relief after a hard day's walk. The mountainous backdrop attracts sightseers in both *sakura* and coloured leaves seasons, and the hillside Onsenji Temple for a view across the city and Hida River.

Another attraction is Gassho Village Open Air Museum, located just above town with steep roofed houses *gasshozukuri* farmhouses, traditional folk art and a museum of *komainu* (guard dog statues used at shrines).

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## Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here



## GIFU

Located on the northern edge of the Nōbi Plain in southern Gifu Prefecture. Gifu prospered as a castle town during the Kamakura Period and serves as the prefectural capital. The Nagara River runs through the city from the northeast to the southwest and much of the city lies on the river's flood plain and is consequently susceptible to flooding when typhoons or heavy thunderstorms affect the area. Dykes and levees help control the excess water. The rich soil of the river valley is prime farmland

The city played an important role in Japan's history because of its location in the centre of the country. *Control Gifu and you control Japan* was the catchphrase during the Sengoku period, when various warlords attempted to unite and control Japan.

The region had been under the control of the Toki clan until 1542, when Saitō Dōsan took control of Mino Province and built the first incarnation of Gifu Castle atop Mount Kinka. Dōsan's daughter Nōhime married Oda Nobunaga, who unified half of Japan under his rule. After consulting with a Buddhist priest, Nobunaga renamed the castle, the surrounding Mino Province and the mountain in 1567.

Gifu continued to flourish as a post station along the *Nakasendō* highway connecting the capital at with Kyoto via central Honshū (modern-day Saitama, Gunma, Nagano, Gifu and Shiga prefectures). The local economy also benefited from its location at the centre of Nobunaga's sphere of influence.

Gifu was officially established as a city on 1 July 1889, a small city that grew as Japan industrialised despite earthquake damage (the Mino-Owari earthquake on 28 October 1891). The city's first industry was textiles, and it rivalled Tokyo and Osaka as a leading fashion centre.

During Japan's military buildup in the 1930s, the city became an industrial centre, aided by nearby Kakamigahara's status as the country's aeronautical centre. During World War Two, Gifu was the home of paper-based fire balloons that were supposed to use the jet stream to traverse the Pacific Ocean and bring terror to the continental United States. The city's status as an industrial centre made it a firebombing target, culminating in the Gifu Air Raid of 9 July 9, 1945.

Gifu remained prosperous in the post-war years. While the fashion industry declined, the city's industrial facilities support automotive plants and heavy industry in Aichi Prefecture. A construction boom has improved the economy and the city serves as a satellite of Nagoya.

JR Central's Tokaidō Main Line connects Gifu with Tokyo (around two and a half hours) and Nagoya (twenty-five minutes). The city is just over an hour from Kyoto and Osaka. Limited Express trains on the JR Takayama Line run from Gifu to Gero and Takayama. There are also JR connections via Maibara to Kanazawa and Toyama and a rail link to Chōbu Centrair International Airport. An alternative link to Nagoya is the private Meitetsu Railway, which also services Kakamigahara and Takehana from Meitetsu Gifu Station.

In addition to modern industries, the city also has a range of traditional products, including fans, lanterns and umbrellas, *Mino washi* paper and foods created from the *ayu* sweetfish (river trout), which have been caught using cormorants for more than 1,300 years.

Cormorant fishing is a tourist attraction, with visitors watching six fishing masters from boats or the banks of the river most nights until nine o'clock between 11 May and 15 October each year. Visitors who have watched the spectacle include haiku poet Matsuo Bashō and Charlie Chaplin.

The Nagara River is the venue for two firework festivals, sponsored by rival newspapers, which attract large crowds to the river's banks. The ***Chunichi Shimbun*** Nagara River All-Japan Fireworks Festival is held on the last Saturday of July, with the ***Gifu Shinbun*** Nagara River National Fireworks Display a week later. Approximately 30,000 fireworks are set off at each event.

Mt. Kinka, the 329-metre peak next to Gifu Park, provides a backdrop to the fireworks. The summit, accessible via a ropeway or hiking trails, delivers a 360-degree panoramic view across the Nagara River and the city below and is home to Gifu Castle, a castle museum, and a squirrel park.

Oda Nobunaga used the castle as his headquarters when unifying Japan, but the castle was destroyed in 1601, after the Battle of Sekigahara. The current castle only dates back to 1956. At the foot of Mt. Kinka, Gifu Park, contains a three-storied pagoda, the Gifu City Museum of History, the Kato Eizo-Toichi Memorial Art Museum, the Nawa Insect Museum, and the boarding area for Kinka-zan Ropeway.

Gifu City Museum of History, predictably, focuses on Gifu's past, with a model of the castle town as it was in the Warring States Period and a recreation of the *Rakuichi-ba* Free Market established by Oda Nobunaga to promote the town's economy by drawing in merchants. Associated with the history museum, the Eizō & Tōichi Katō Memorial Art Museum, founded in 1991, is dedicated to works by Eizō and Tōichi Katō, well-known Japanese artists who were both born in Gifu. The Yanaizu Folklore Museum in the Yanaizu-chō area of the city is the other branch of the Museum of History. The Nawa Insect Museum, founded in 1919 by Yasushi Nawa, Japan's *Insect Man*, provides a closeup look at rare and attractive species from around the world. Other museums include a Science Museum, with a planetarium and rooftop observatory, the Museum of Fine Arts, devoted to local art and artists although it does contain pieces from around the world and the Sanko Art Museum houses tea utensils and paintings by Renoir, Chagall, and Ryuzaburo Umehara.

Gifu is also home to a number of other festivals through the year:

- The Dōsan Festival and Gifu Festival on the first weekend in April, both of which include street vendors, flea markets, and floats paraded through the city.

- Gifu Nobunaga Festival on the first weekend in October with a procession of horses and warriors through the city's main streets.

- Tejikara Fire Festival on the second Saturday in April at Tejikarao Shrine and the second Sunday in August at Nagara River Park. Portable shrines are carried aloft amidst a rain of falling sparks.

- Near the end of August Takigi Noh, a traditional form of Japanese theatre takes place on the banks of the Nagara River, lit by bonfires and the fires aboard cormorant boats.

Other attractions include:

- Bairin Park, with over fifty types of plum trees which form a popular springtime attraction.

- Onsen* and *ryokan* inns located along the Nagara River. Springs with a high iron content are thought to be beneficial for a variety of ailments.

- Mount Dodo, north of the Nagara River, is the tallest mountain in the city, with numerous hiking trails. At the mountain's southern base, Matsuo Pond is a popular autumn coloured leaves attraction.

- The ruins of Kanō Castle, built after the Battle of Sekigahara, and designated a National Historic Site.

- The ruins of Kawate Castle, used as a meeting place for the cultural and social elite from Kyoto during the Muromachi period.

- Inaba Shrine, Kogane Shrine, and Kashimori Shrine, considered to be a family since the god at the first is married to the goddess at the second, and they're the parents of the deity at the third.

- Kanō Tenman-gū shrine, built to protect Izumii Castle (predecessor to Kanō Castle).

- Tejikarao Shrine in the east of the city, dating back to 860.

- Buddhist temples include Jōzai-ji, Zuiryō-ji, Jōdo-ji and Shōhō-ji, home to the Gifu Great Buddha, the first and largest basketwork-style dry-lacquered Buddha in Japan, and one of the three largest Great Buddha images in Japan.

#### Related Glossary Terms

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# GINKAKU-JI

Officially *Jishō-ji* (Temple of Shining Mercy), *Ginkaku-ji* (Temple of the Silver Pavilion) is an elegant Zen temple associated with the *Shokoku-ji* branch of the Rinzai sect. Located in the foothills of Kyoto's eastern mountains, the temple is an outstanding example of Japanese landscape architecture.

Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1435–1490), the eighth Muromachi *shōgun*, built his retirement villa on the site of an abandoned monastery in the grounds of today's temple. He modelled it on *Kinkaku-ji* (Temple of the Golden Pavilion), his grandfather's retirement villa at the base of Kyoto's northern mountains. The villa was converted into a Zen temple in accordance with his will and named *Jishō-ji*, taken from his Buddhist name, Jishōin, after Yoshimasa's death.

Plans for the villa date back as far as 1460, and the intention to built it was announced in 1465, when orders went out to find materials of the highest quality for his new home. Shortly afterwards the Onin war (1467-77) reduced much of Kyoto to ashes. Yoshimi's home went up in flames as well, and when the war was over he set about building a new residence on the site. He moved there formally when construction was completed in 1483 and the villa served as his home from 1484 until his death on 27 January 1490. He had become a Zen Buddhist monk in 1485.

Ginkakuji is famous for the main building on the site, the two-storey Kannon Hall (*Kannon-dono*), the Silver Pavilion, which is said to take its name from Yoshimasa's plan to cover the pavilion with silver leaf in imitation of *Kinkaku-ji*, although no silver was applied, possibly due to financial considerations or the increasing severity of the Onin War.

Alternatively, the nickname may have evolved as a reference to the silvery appearance of moonlight on the black lacquer which made up the building's exterior.

The building's lower storey contains the room where Yoshimasa practised meditation while the upper storey holds a gilt statue of Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy,. The interior of the building is not open to the public.

The nearby *Tōkudō* (Buddha Hall) served as Yoshimasa's home and private chapel.

Yoshimasa spent much of his retirement pursuing the arts, including the tea ceremony and the northeast corner of the building has a tearoom, reputedly the oldest in Japan and the prototype on which future tea ceremony rooms were based. It overlooks a moss garden that was originally modelled on *Saihō-ji* temple built by Muso Soseki (1275-1351) in Kyōto's Nishikyō Ward. The garden was redesigned during the Kan'ei Period (1624-1644).

According to temple records, *Ginkaku-ji* originally consisted of twelve buildings, but only two, the Kannon Hall and the *Tōkudō* survived a disastrous fire in the Tembun Period (1532-1555). By the start of the Meiji Period (1600-1868), the temple had fallen into disrepair but was restored with municipal support assisted by private donations.

Today, *Ginkakuji* consists of the Silver Pavilion and half a dozen other temple buildings. Walking a circular route around the grounds takes the visitor past the meticulously maintained Sea of Silver Sand and the massive sand cone said to symbolise Mount Fuji.

Beside the sand garden the *Hondo* (main hall) displays paintings on its *fusuma* sliding doors but is off-limits to visitors. After passing by the *Tōkudō*, the path takes visitors through Ginkakuji's moss garden and then climbs the hill behind the buildings which delivers views of the temple grounds and the city beyond.

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## Related Glossary Terms

### Philosopher's Path



# HAKONE

Located less than a hundred kilometres from Tokyo in the mountainous southwestern part of [Kanagawa Prefecture](#), Hakone is part of the volcanically active [Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park](#), centred around [Lake Ashinoko](#). Noted for hot springs, natural beauty and views of nearby [Mount Fuji](#), Hakone is a popular destination for Japanese and international tourists.

During the Edo Period, *Hakone-juku* was important checkpoint to control traffic along the [Tōkaidō highway](#) between Edo (Tokyo) and Kyoto. The checkpoint formed the border of the Kantō region.

Travellers on the Tōkaidō had their travel permits and baggage examined under laws that restricted the travel of women and weapons. A short, cedar lined section of the highway and a [reconstructed Hakone Checkpoint](#) with gates, housing for officers and soldiers, a prison chamber and a lookout tower are located between [Moto-Hakone](#) and [Hakone-machi](#) on the southern shore of Lake Ashinoko. The nearby Hakone Sekisho Shiryokan museum has related exhibits.

Some of the original highway between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-Yumoto. remains today, with the best preserved section running from Moto-Hakone to Hatajuku via the Amazake Chaya, a tea house serving *amazake* (hot, sweet rice wine) and Japanese snacks. It's a bit under a two hour walk, just under half way to Hakone-Yumoto, but from there the modern road runs over the old highway and there's no footpath for pedestrians.

There are half-hourly buses along the route, so it seems you can still walk the good bit of the ancient highway and use the bus to get you the rest of the way.

The traveller's most likely way into Hakone is through [Odawara](#), and Hakone-Yumoto.

Personal experience (weather conditions permitting) suggests an anticlockwise progress through the area. Odawara, on the main Tōkaidō *shinkansen* line, is an obvious starting point, though the private [Odakyu railway](#) offers services from Tokyo's Shinjuku station all the way to Hakone-Yumoto, including the [Romancecar limited express](#).

From Odawara, the [Hakone Tozan Line](#) runs along the Hayakawa River valley on the way to Gora, with switchbacks as it makes its way up the steepest gradient on a Japanese railway line. From Gora, the Hakone Tozan Cable Car goes up the mountainside to Sounzan, at one end of the [Hakone Ropeway](#), which carries visitors on a thirty minute two leg journey to Tōgendai, on the shore of Lake Ashinoko.

With ropeway cars departing at one-minute intervals, given the right weather conditions, visitors can enjoy views of Mount Fuji as they cross the Ōwakudani geysers in the [Great Boiling Valley](#).

A stop at Ōwakudani provides a chance to try the black eggs, boiled on site, with the shells turned a mottled black by to a chemical reaction with the sulphurous water. According to legend, each one you eat will add seven years to your life..

From Tōgendai sightseeing cruises cross Lake Ashinoko (the crater of the Hakone Volcano) in highly decorated Disneyland-style pirate ships pass the lakeside [Hakone Jinja](#) Shrine, with *torii* gates in the water, *en route* to Moto-Hakone and Hakone-machi. A clear day will deliver views of Mount Fuji but they're not guaranteed.

From there, a Hakone Tozan bus can deliver you back to Hakone-Yumoto or Odawara.

Other attractions in the area include:

- [Hakone Detached Palace](#), a summer palace for the Imperial Family, on the southern shores of Lake Ashinoko between Moto-Hakone and Hakone-machi. surrounded by a park with walking trails and views across Lake Ashinoko towards Mount Fuji.
- [Hakone Botanical Garden of Wetlands](#) in the highlands of Fuji Hakone Izu National Park with over 1700 varieties of marsh and alpine plants native to Japan and boardwalks through different types of marshland. The gardens are accessible by bus from Gora, the terminus of the Hakone Tozan Railway.
- [Hakone Open-Air Museum](#) with a variety of sculptures and artwork in a parkland setting and a substantial collection of paintings, prints, sculptures and ceramics by Picasso
- [Pola Museum of Art](#) with paintings, sculptures, ceramics and glassware by Japanese and European artists and rotating displays from the permanent collection which includes works by Cezanne, Monet, Picasso and Renoir.
- [Hakone Museum of Art](#) in Gora with displays of Japanese ceramics from prehistoric times through the Edo Period, a moss garden and the Sekirakuen landscape garden (only open on weekends, national holidays and through November).
- [Hakone Komagatake Ropeway](#) from Hakone-en on Lake Ashinoko to the summit of Mount Komagatake, where a mountaintop shrine (Mototsumiya) is an attraction. The ropeway's main claim to fame are the views it offers towards Mount Fuji and back towards the coast.

The area's main claim to fame, however (apart from the Fuji-viewing side of things) lies in the numerous *onsen ryokan*, traditional Japanese inns with hot spring baths. Facilities vary, prices are relatively high due to proximity to Tokyo, and if your accommodation doesn't have its own onsen, something nearby can be arranged. T

here's even a hot spring theme park ([Hakone Kowakien Yunessun](#)) at Hakone-machi, a Mediterranean-style public bath divided into two sections (with or without a bathing suit) with unique baths including a coffee bath, a wine bath and a cypress bath.

Getting around is made easier through the [Hakone Free Pass](#), which delivers unlimited use of most forms of transport for two or three days as well as discounts at many hot springs, museums, restaurants, and other locations.

The Free Pass can be bought at a number of outlets, including Tokyo's Shinjuku Station, the stations at Odawara, Hakone-Yumoto, Gora, Sounzan and Togendai Station, and the ports at Moto-Hakone Port and Hakone-Machi. Japan Rail Pass holders are best off traveling to Odawara on a JR service and picking up the Free Pass there.

## Related Glossary Terms

**Ashinoko Lake, Mount Fuji, Odawara**



# HAMANA LAKE

With an area of 65.0 km² and a circumference is 114 km, Lake Hamana, near the southwestern end of Shizuoka Prefecture is Japan's tenth largest lake. It was a fresh-water lake until an earthquake in 1498 cut the sandbank that had closed it off from the Sea of Enshu.

A 16th century tsunami opened the mouth of the lake further, and the result is a salt lake with an intricate shoreline that is a significant source of cultivated eels, oysters, nori and soft-shelled turtles along with wild caught sea bass, whiting, blowfish (*fugu*), pike, conger and flounder. The region is also known for strawberries and mikan oranges.

The lake has been developed as a resort area, with the major drawcards concentrated around Kanzanji-onsen Hot Spring, a relatively new hot spring resort on the northeast of the lake with more than a dozen hotels and *ryokans*. Most of the baths are found in hotels, and many are accessible to day trippers for a small fee. Kanzanji also attracts wind surfers, sea kayakers and parasailers in summer.

Since the Tokaido *Shinkansen* crosses the southern end of the lake, it is easily accessed from Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka, but the fastest *Nozomi* do not stop in Hamamatsu. Using the next fastest option (*Hikari*) it is around an hour and a half from Tokyo, slightly less from Osaka and roughly half an hour from Nagoya. From Hamamatsu it's a 40 minute bus ride to Kanzanji Onsen (frequent departures at least twice per hour) but the bus trip is not covered by the Japan Rail Pass.

Nearby attractions include:

- Kanzanji temple, believed to have been founded in 810 by the famous monk Kobo Daishi (Kukai). The grounds extend over the forested peninsula with walking tracks through the forest, a large statue of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy and views across the water.

- Hamamatsu Flower Park, with some 100,000 plants covering 3,000 different species. There is a western garden with a fountain, a rose garden, lawns, a western garden with glass houses, Balinese and Mexican gardens, as well as a Japanese garden with pine forest and a stream.

- Hamamatsu City Zoo, with over 450 animals including gorillas, orangutan and other monkeys in one of the largest collections of primates in Japan.

- Hamanako Pal Pal Amusement Park with a Ferris wheel, roller coasters, merry go rounds and water slides and merry-go-rounds.

- Kanzanji Ropeway, connecting Hamanako Pal Pal with the summit of Mt. Okusa-yama, which offers a free observatory and Hamanako Music Box Museum.

- Sightseeing boats offer thirty minute or one hour cruises out of Kanzanji's inlet. Boats can be boarded at Kanzanji Temple or the entrance to Hamamatsu Flower Park.

- Bentenjima island, where the sea meets the lake, was originally a small peninsula of the lakeside, and was formed by cutting off by the earthquake in 1498. It is a popular spot for fishing, digging clams and water sports.

- Former Arai Checkpoint on the Tokaido route between Tokyo and Kyoto, located on the southwest side of the lake 700 metres west of JR Arimachi station. The buildings were rebuilt in 1855, making it the only remaining Edo Period checkpoint. The historic Kinokuniya Inn is close by.

On weekends, a free tourist bus (the Flower Go) connects Kanzanji Temple, Hanasaki no Yu public baths, Pal Pal Amusement Park, Hamamatsu Flower Park and Okusa-yama's upper ropeway station, running hourly. It operates every day during peak tourist season.

Attractions slightly further afield include:

- Maisaka Shukuwaki-honjin, an inn for *samurai* and commoners, the only such inn left on the Tokaido.

- The Nakamura Residence, a preserved samurai house north of Bentenjima over the Ufumi Bridge.

- Makayaji Temple, dating back to the Kamakura Period with Heian-style garden and historic wooden statues, short walk or shorter taxi ride from Mikkabi Station on the private Tenryu Hamanako Line, which runs from along the north coast of the lake between Kakegawa and Shinjohara.

- The Sakichi Toyoda Memorial House, the birthplace of the founder of the Toyota company with a museum that includes Toyoda's shed, where he worked on his inventions.

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## Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here



# HANAMACHI

*Hanamachi* or *flower towns* are the *geisha* quarters of Japanese cities, containing *okiya* (*geisha* houses), *ochaya* (teahouses where *geisha* entertain customers) and a *kaburenjō* (meeting place, including a theatre, rooms where classes can be held, and offices that deal with payments and regulations).

*Hanamachi* are separate from and not to be confused with courtesan districts (*yūkaku*, pleasure quarter or red-light district) where prostitution was the name of the game. There were originally three such districts, established in the 17th century: Shimabara in Kyōto (1640), Shinmachi in Ōsaka (1624–1644) and Yoshiwara in Edo (modern day Tokyo, 1617). While the *geisha* culture, which emerged in the mid-18th century, may have started there, the practitioners weremoved into separate areas.

Kyoto has five *hanamachi*, referred to as *kagai* or *gokagai* in the local dialect, mostof them clustered around central Kyoto (Gion Kōbu and Gion Higashi, Miyagawachō and Pontochō) with Kamishichiken, separated from the others, near Kitano Tenmangu Shrine in the northwest of the city. Shimabara, the courtesans' district in the west of the city, dating back to before the *geisha* culture emerged, is now defunct but remains as a tourist attraction.

Of the five districts, Gion Kōbu, Pontochō and Kamishichiken have the highest status and are subsequently the most expensive, attracting powerful businessmen and high-ranking politicians (Gion Kōbu seems to have the very highest ranking).

Kyoto *hanamachi* stage annual public dances (*Ōdōri* ) by *maiko* and *geiko* over several weeks, usually in the spring. Tickets are relatively inexpensive (¥1500 to ¥4500) with a number of performances. *Miyako Ōdōri* , in Gion Kōbu, runs through April and has the greatest number of performances. *Kitano Ōdōri* in Kamishichiken covers the last week of March and first week of April, *Kyō Ōdōri* in Miyagawachō runs through the first half of April with *Kamogawa Ōdōri* in Pontochō running through most of May. *Gion Ōdōri* in Gion Higashi is much later in the year, in early November.

The five districts combine for special performances on a weekend in late June at a larger venue, and tickets for these are significantly more expensive.

Tokyo *hanamachi* include Shinbashi, Akasaka, Asakusa (the city's oldest *geisha* district), Yoshichō, Kagurazaka, Mukojima and Hachiōji, with the latter about 40 kilometres west of central Tokyo.

There are three *hanamachi* in Osaka, Kita Shinchī, within walking distance of Osaka Station, and famous for nightclubs, bars and late night restaurants, Minami Shinchī (only one teahouse) and Shinmachi, the city's first licenced pleasure quarter.

Kanazawa, second only to Kyoto as far as active *geisha* are concerned, has three well preserved *hanamachi*, Higashi Chaya (Eastern Teahouse), Nishi Chaya (Western Teahouse) and Kazuemachi. Higashi Chaya is the largest and best known, with many houses used for high-class entertainment and others converted into speciality shops and cafes. Shima and Kaikaro Teahouses are open to the public. Nishi Chaya is smaller, effectively a single street, and Kazuemachi is smaller again.

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## Related Glossary Terms

Geisha



# HIMEJI

With a population over half a million, Himeji is the second largest city in Hyogo and was reportedly considered as the site of a relocated national capital after the Great Kantō earthquake struck the region around Tokyo.

If that notion sounds far-fetched, you can probably ascribe it to the city’s centre where sits the widely considered Japan's most beautiful surviving feudal castle.

Designated both a national treasure and a UNESCO world heritage site, Himeji Castle remained intact for over 400 years, miraculously surviving a bombing raid that destroyed sixty per cent of the city on 3 July 1945. Travellers on the Sanyo Shinkansen from Osaka to Okayama and Hiroshima can catch a decent view of the castle since Himeji station is so close.

Other attractions in the city include Engyō-ji temple, Mount Seppiko, Tegarayama Park and Kokoen Garden in Tegarayama Central Park and Kokoen Garden.

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# HOKURIKU *SHINKANSEN*

With the first 228km section scheduled to open in March 2015, the Hokuriku *Shinkansen* is an extension of the Nagano *Shinkansen*, opened on 1 October 1997 in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics, branching off the Jōetsu and Tōhoku lines at Takasaki. The first extension from Nagano to Kanazawa will be followed by a second extension to Fukui and Tsuruga. Work on that section started in 2012 and should be completed by 2025.

The section between Nagano and Kanazawa will include stops at Iiyama, Jōetsu-Myōkō, Itoigawa, Kurobe-Unazukionsen, Toyama and ShinTakaoka while the second extension will add Komatsu, Kagaonsen, Awaraonsen, Fukui, Nan'etsu and Tsuruga to the *Shinkansen* network.

A further extension looping back to Osaka is planned, but the route is yet to be decided. There are three possibilities, linking to the Tokaido *Shinkansen* at Maibara, Kyoto, or Shin-Osaka, and they're worth a look because they provide insight into issues surrounding the routing of *Shinkansen* lines.

The Maibara route, with a standard *Shinkansen* track to Maibara is the shortest, with good access to Kyoto and Nagoya but mean a longer travel time to Shin-Osaka along existing, Tōkaidō *Shinkansen* tracks that are already running at close to maximum capacity. That may become less of an issue when the Chuo *Shinkansen* opens as far as Osaka in 2045.

The Kyoto option would upgrade the Kosei Line to Kyoto, by regauging the line to support *Mini-Shinkansen*, or using Gauge Change Trains. With no new construction to *Shinkansen* standards that would be the cheapest option, but would limit train speeds to a maximum of 160 km/h so the trip would be slower.

The Wakasa route would involve building a *Shinkansen* track along the shortest route to Osaka, but would bypass Kyoto. With all-new construction it would be the most expensive.

The Hokuriku line will offer four levels of service: *Kagayaki* (Tokyo - Kanazawa, limited stops), *Hakutaka* (Tokyo - Kanazawa, all stations) a shuttle between Toyama and Kanazawa (*Tsurugi*) and a continuation of *Asama* services from Tokyo on the Nagano *Shinkansen* line.

When the first part of the new line opens, travel time between Tokyo and Kanazawa will be cut from 3 hours 47 minutes on the existing route (take the Joetsu *Shinkansen* to Echigo-Yuzawa and switch to a narrow gauge train with a maximum speed of 160km/h) to 2 hours 30 minutes.

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# JŌETSU SHINKANSEN

Built to connect Tokyo and Niigata and to *promote regional development* the Jōetsu Shinkansen seems to have been the brainchild of Niigata-born Prime Minister Tanaka. Tanaka allegedly drew his proposed route on a map in red pencil. Tanaka's preferred option was the way into Tokyo, terminating at Shinjuku, but economic forces forced the railway authority to a line branching off the existing Tōhoku Shinkansen at Ōmiya. Services began in November 1982.

JR East operates two categories of train on the line: the faster *Toki* and double-decker *Tanigawa*. *Toki* services run between Tokyo and Niigata while the slower all-station *Tanigawa* and double-decker *Max Tanigawa* only travel as far Echigo-Yuzawa, with a winter only branch line to the nearby ski resort of Gala-Yuzawa.

From Tokyo, the services call at Ueno, Ōmiya, Kumagaya, Honjō-Waseda, Takasaki, Maebashi, Kōgen, Echigo-Yuzawa, Urasa, Nagaoka, Tsubame-Sanjō and, finally, Niigata, providing tourists with access to onsen hot spring and ski resorts in Gunma and Niigata.

Route details and maps: <http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/routemaps/joetsushinkansen.htm>

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōkaidō Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen**

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## KAMAKURA PERIOD

The Kamakura Period saw Japan ruled by the Kamakura Shōgunate, established in 1192 by Minamoto no Yoritomo. Japanese politics was refashioned as the emperors and their scholar-courtiers in Kyoto lost power and a feudal system built around the *samurai* warrior caste emerged. The period lasted until the emperor Go-Daigo revolt against the Shōgunate in 1331. The brief reestablishment of imperial rule became the Ashikaga Shōgunate.

Conflict between the Minamoto and Taira clans over dominance of the Imperial court (the Gempei war) ended when the Taira were defeated by Minamoto Yoshitsune in 1185.

Minamoto Yoritomo's headquarters in relatively remote and easily defended Kamakura, about 50 km south of Tokyo, became the effective centre of government. While the emperor reigned as the cultural and religious figurehead in Kyoto, Yoritomo created his own military administration (*bakufu*, or tent government) and reorganised the country, appointing local governors and officials and demanding absolute loyalty from his vassals.

His authority was confirmed when he was granted the official rank of *Shōgun* in 1192. After Yoritomo's sudden death in 1199, his son Minamoto no Yoriie was unable to control the other warrior families. Yoritomo's in-laws, the Hōjō clan, took over. By the early thirteenth century, a realignment within the *bakufu* saw the Hōjō establish a regency, with the head of the clan wielding real power while the *Shōgun* became a powerless figurehead in a direct reflection of the changed relationship between emperor and *Shōgun*. The arrangements did not go down well in Kyoto. Tension between Kyoto and Kamakura saw the Jōkyū War, also known as the Jōkyū Disturbance or the Jōkyū Rebellion, break out in 1221.

Retired Emperor Go-Toba sought out allies from the Taira, other enemies of the Minamoto and the monasteries and set out to overthrow the Shōgunate. There was a battle outside Kyōto, which the Hōjō forces won and the imperial court came under the direct control of the Shōgunate.

The Hojo installed two of their own military governors in Kyoto, seized the imperial court and manipulated the imperial succession. Toba was exiled, and Toba loyalists forfeited their estates which were redistributed to Hojo allies. The result bolstered the transformation of Japanese society, which was further strengthened in 1225.

Third regent Hōjō Yasutoki set up a Council of State to exercise judicial and legislative authority at Kamakura. In 1232, the Council adopted the *Goseibai Shikimoku*, a new legal code that underlined the shift towards a concise statement of duties and punishments that remained in effect until the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

These arrangements brought peace, which lasted until the Mongols turned their attention to Japan. Having established the Yuan Dynasty, Kublai Khan looked to expand China's sphere of influence and demanded that Japan pay tribute, threatening reprisals if they failed to do so. In rejecting the demands, Kyoto cited Japan's divine origin, dismissed the messengers, and prepared to deal with the threatened reprisals, which came in 1274.

Six hundred ships carrying more than twenty thousand Mongol, Chinese, and Korean troops reached Kyūshū and engaged the Japanese forces at Hakata, but were forced to pull back when a typhoon, the *divine wind* (*kamikaze*) decimated their fleet. Kublai launched a second invasion in 1281, which saw seven weeks of fighting in northwestern Kyūshū before a second typhoon took out the Mongol fleet.

Kyūshū remained on alert for a possible third invasion, but the Mongols had problems closer to home to worry about. Still, years of preparations to defend the country were a drain on the economy. New taxes levied to maintain preparations exacerbated financial stresses and inheritances divided family properties. As landowners were forced to turn to moneylenders Kamakura loyalists who had fought the invaders turned to the Shōgunate looking for rewards that failed to eventuate.

The end of the Kamakura Shōgunate came about through its own attempts to hold on to power by allowing other clans to increase control of their own regions and alternating the throne between different lines of the imperial family. The scheme worked until Emperor Go-Daigo defied the arrangement by naming his son as his successor.

The Shōgunate responded by exiling Go-Daigo in 1331. Loyalist forces rebelled, and the siege of Kamakura saw Nitta Yoshisada conquer the city, but the rebellion was an anti-Kamakura rather than pro-Imperial movement.

When Go-Daigo set out to restore imperial authority and reassert the throne's political power, Ashikaga Takauji, from the Minamoto clan, drove him from Kyoto, set the Northern Court contender on the throne and established the Ashikaga Shōgunate, which, despite sixty years of struggle between the Northern and Southern Courts (the Nanbokuchō period) lasted until 1573.

The Kamakura Period saw changes in Japanese society and culture as Buddhism, which had been limited to the elites in the imperial court, spread through the wider community. New sects were introduced as Zen, with its emphasis on self-discipline, concentration, and simplicity found followers among the samurai and the *Jōdo* (Pure Land) sect which assured salvation to commoners found followers among the wider populace.



# KANAZAWA

With a population that's nudging towards half a million, Kanazawa, apart from its status as the capital of Ishikawa Prefecture, ranks as the biggest city in the Hokuriku region, which takes in Toyama Prefecture and Fukui Prefectures as well.

Ruled by the Maeda family, the second most powerful feudal clan after the Tokugawas through the the Edo Period, the former castle town's cultural achievements almost rivalled Kyoto and Edo (Tokyo). Like Kyoto, the city escaped Allied bombing during World War Two, so parts of the old town, including the *geisha* entertainment district, have survived and the city boasts many historical attractions and museums.

Kanazawa's main attraction is, however, *Kenrokuen*, one of Japan's three best landscape gardens, located directly opposite Kanazawa Castle in the centre of the city. It was originally the castle's outer pleasure garden and comprises ten hectares filled with trees, ponds and waterfalls.

*Kenrokuen*, along with the city's historical attractions, traditional handicrafts and performing arts and its proximity to the Japan Alps, Hakusan National Park and Noto Peninsula National Park makes the city a major tourist destination, attracting around seven million travellers every year.

With castles regarded as symbols of the feudal system during the Meiji Period, Kanazawa Castle became the base for the Ninth Division of the Imperial Army, with many buildings torn down and much of what remained destroyed by fire in 1888. After World War Two, the site became the main campus of Kanazawa University until a new site was developed and opened in 1998. The *Ishikawa Gate* and the *Sanjikken* Longhouse survived all that, and part of the site has been rebuilt with plans to recreate much of the rest.

Also known for traditional cuisine, high-quality gold leaf and lacquerware, the city isn't easy to reach from Tokyo (despite the seven million tourists), but that should change when the Hokuriku Shinkansen commences operating in 2014.

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## Related Glossary Terms

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# KANSAI

The Kansai in the south-central region of Japan's main island Honshū is centred on the cities of Osaka and Kyoto and stretches west along the Seto Inland Sea past Kobe, Himeji and Kōbe. To the east it reaches Japan's largest freshwater lake, Lake Biwa.

As a cultural and historical entity, the region is often contrasted with Kantō (Tokyo and surrounding areas). Kansai people are seen as pragmatic, entrepreneurial and down-to-earth (the influence of Osaka merchant culture) with a sense of humour, as opposed to the more sophisticated, formal and reserved Kantō people.

The Kansai region can claim to the earliest beginnings of Japanese civilization, the country's first capital in Nara, Kyoto's shrines and temples, and traditional forms of art that evolved in Kyoto (*Noh* and *Kabuki*) and Osaka (*Bunraku* puppet theatre).

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# KINOKUNIYA

The Kinokuniya chain of bookstores, the largest in Japan, dates back to 1927 and the Great Kanto Earthquake prompted a lumber and charcoal dealer to move to a new building in Shinjuku, Tokyo. The business was refashioned into a book store and opened on January 1927 with an art gallery on the building's second floor.

That building burnt down during an air raid in May 1945 but reopened in December of the same year. Postwar growth saw the business expand to the point where the chain now has 56 stores around Japan as well as branches in the United States, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates.

The Sydney branch was originally located in Neutral Bay but subsequently relocated to George Street in the Central Business District.

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## Related Glossary Terms

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# KITAKAMI

Australians might be disinclined to call a city with a population nearing 100,000 *a small place*, but if Kitakami, a city located in Iwate Prefecture was a more significant location the faster *Shinkansen* services would stop there, wouldn't they?

Kitakami, at the junction of the Kitakami and Waga Rivers, is on the Tōhoku *Shinkansen* and the Tōhoku Main Line, both of which connect Tokyo and Aomori Prefecture.

But even small places have their attractions and claims to fame. Kitakami is famous for the *sakura* that bloom in the riverside Tenshochi Park, one of the best hundred places in Japan to view cherry blossoms.

There are more than 10,000 cherry trees planted alongside the Kitakami River, and they come into blossom for one to two weeks towards the end of April. The result is a tunnel of cherry blossoms that earns the park a rating among the Tohoku region's best three cherry blossom locations alongside Hirosaki Castle and Kakunodate.

During the *sakura* season, visitors can stroll along a two kilometre riverside path, enjoy the vista from one of the sightseeing boats that operate from a jetty at the south end of the park, sample the wares of food vendors at both ends of the path and enjoy *sakura*-related festival events.

Other attractions include the Michinoku Folklore Village, an open air museum next door to Tenshochi Park where thirty preserved farmhouses and other buildings are set up to display aspects of traditional life in the Tohoku region, the nearby Kitakami City Folklore Museum, with displays of Buddhist art, and the region's natural and the cultural history, and Kitakami Michinoku Traditional Dance Festival, held in the summer.

Kitakami also boasts a site reputed to be the grave of the Heian Period *waka* poet Izumi Shikibu.

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## Related Glossary Terms



# KŌBE

The capital of Hyōgo Prefecture, Kōbe is the fifth-largest city in Japan, thirty kilometres west of Osaka on the north shore of Osaka Bay, stretching onto the lower slopes of Mount Rokko. Part of the Kyoto-Osaka-Kōbe conurbation, the city has a population around the 1.5 million mark but did not officially exist until 1 April 1889.

Hyōgo Port was opened to foreign trade at the same time as Osaka on 1 January 1868, and had earlier links to the outside world as one of the ports from which imperial embassies to China departed. During the Kamakura Period, it was an important hub for trade with China and other countries.

Much of the shipping activity is centred on Port Island and Rokkō Island, reclaimed islands developed to give the port room to expand.

The main transport hub is Sannomiya Station, with Kōbe Station to the west and ShinKōbe Shinkansen Station to the north. Kōbe has two subway lines, with the Kaigan Line running along the coast, and the Yamate-Seishin Line towards the mountains.

The city is the point of origin of Kōbe beef, a noted centre for saké production thanks to nearby mountain water, and the site of one of Japan's most famous hot spring resorts, Arima Onsen.

The Great Hanshin Earthquake on 17 January 1995 killed thousands of people, rendered over two hundred thousand homeless, flattened tens of thousands of buildings, destroyed much of the city's transport infrastructure and diminished much of Kōbe's prominence as a major port though it remains Japan's fourth busiest port for container shipping.

Kōbe's recovery from the 1995 quake is celebrated every December with the *Luminarie*, where the city's commercial centre is decorated with illuminated metal archways.

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## Related Glossary Terms

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# KYUSHU SHINKANSEN

A logical extension of the Sanyō *Shinkansen* linking ShinŌsaka with Hakata in Fukuoka, work on the Kyushu *Shinkansen* that runs parallel to the Kagoshima Main Line began in 1991 with the section from Kagoshima to ShinYatsushiro opening on 13 March 2004. That brought a reduction in travel time despite the need to change to a narrow gauge train for the rest of the journey to Hakata. Travel time between Kagoshima and ShinYatsushiro went from 130 minutes to 35, and the four hour trip between Kagoshima and Hakata was halved. When ShinYatsushiro to Hakata opened on 12 March 2011 the trip was further reduced to an hour and 20 minutes.

A line from Fukuoka to Nagasaki, the Nagasaki *Shinkansen*, was included in the 1973 Basic Plan but was renamed the Nagasaki Route and then the West Kyushu Route. The plans were modified after concerns over the need to duplicate existing narrow-gauge Nagasaki Main and Sasebo Lines, and local opposition to the final section in Nagasaki. Construction of the 45.7 km section from Takeo-Onsen to Isahaya began in 2008, and work on the 21 km section from Isahaya to Nagasaki commenced in 2012. The line is due to open by March 2023, with Gauge Change trains running on the narrow gauge line between ShinTosu and Takeo-Onsen and standard gauge *Shinkansen* lines either side of it.

The 1973 Basic Plan included an East Kyushu *Shinkansen* line from Hakata to Kagoshima, and a Trans-Kyushu *Shinkansen*, from Kumamoto to Ōita connecting with the proposed Shikoku *Shinkansen* to Matsuyama, Takamatsu and Osaka. Those plans have been shelved and are unlikely to be reconsidered until lines under construction have been finished.

Stations on the Kagoshima Route are Hakata, ShinTosu, Kurume, Chikugo-Funagoya, ShinŌmuta, ShinTamana, Kumamoto, ShinYatsushiro, ShinMinamata, Izumi, Sendai and Kagoshima-Chūō.

Three levels of train run on the line, with *Tsubame* (named for the former Hakata-Kagoshima limited express service) running once or twice hourly stopping at all stations between Hakata and Kumamoto. Some services go on to Kagoshima-Chūō.

*Sakura* services run hourly throughout between ShinOsaka and Kagoshima-Chūō making the journey in 4 hours 10 minutes, with one or two additional services an hour between Hakata and Kumamoto or Kagoshima-Chūō.

The fastest *Mizuho* services operate a limited number of services between ShinOsaka and Kagoshima-Chūō, stopping at Hakata, Kumamoto and Kagoshima-Chuo. Although *Mizuho* cannot be used with the Japan Rail Pass, the JR Sanyo-Shikoku-Kyushu Pass and Kyushu Rail Pass are valid.

On the West Kyushu or Nagasaki Route construction of stations at ShinTosu and Saga is on hold but when the line is completed in 2023 trains will stop at Takeo-Onsen, Ureshino-Onsen, ShinŌmura, Isahaya and Nagasaki.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen**



# LUMINARIE

Reputedly Japan's best display of lights, Kōbe *Luminarie* runs through early to mid-December, attracting large numbers of visitors (between three and five million every year over the past decade) and raises, according to **Wikipedia**, \$1.3 million in donations and \$6.1 million in sponsorship and merchandise sales.

*Luminarie* is the plural of *luminaria*, which my **Dictionary** app defines as: *a Christmas lantern consisting of a votive candle set in a small paper bag weighted with sand and typically placed with others along a driveway, sidewalk, or rooftop as a holiday decoration or, in New Mexico a Christmas Eve bonfire.*

The flamboyant light displays began in 1995, a bare eleven months after the Great Hanshin Earthquake devastated Kōbe in January that year. Two hundred thousand individually hand painted lights were donated by the Italian Government and the installation was produced by Valerio Festi and Hirokazu Imaoka.

The original intention was a one-off display that would be a symbol of hope, recovery, and renovation and run through December, but popular demand has seen it become an annual event, scaled back to twelve days covering two weekends in early December.

Each light is said to represent a life lost during in the earthquake, and the whole display is powered by electricity generated from biomass in order, so it's environmentally friendly.

Corporate sponsors include JR (Japan Rail) West, Hankyu Corporation, Nestle Group Japan and Hanshin Electric Railway.

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# MAGLEV TRAINS

The spread of shinkansen-like services across the globe means a number of countries are looking towards using magnetic levitation rather than conventional wheels and axles to drive the next generation of Very Fast Trains. With vehicles levitated above a single track (guide way) by magnets creating lift and thrust, maglev trains should prove faster and quieter than wheeled systems and deliver a smoother ride. They should be able to accelerate and decelerate more quickly, should be unaffected by weather and would be more energy-efficient. The big plus lies in the fact that the system is relatively quiet, with minimal noise impact and no air pollution in a dense urban setting.

However, while maglev technology negates wear and tear on tracks and rolling stock in conventional systems, maglev tracks are much more expensive to build, requiring completely different infrastructure along the entire route.. On the other hand, they require less maintenance and have lower operating costs. Maintenance schedules, in fact, are more akin to those applying to aircraft, based on hours of operation, rather than speeds reached and distance travelled.

Still, it is hardly a new technology. The earliest patents for a train that ran along these lines were awarded to German inventor Alfred Zehden in 1905 and 1907. There have, however, only been a handful of practical commercial applications. The first was a low-speed shuttle that ran 600 metres from Birmingham International Airport to the nearby railway station between 1984 and 1995, when obsolete electronic systems made it increasingly unreliable.

Preceding it, and considerably faster, were pilot projects built in Hamburg (a 908 m track for the first International Transportation Exhibition in 1979) and a 31.5 kilometre test track in Emsland where trains regularly reached speeds approaching up to 420 kilometres per hour. The company's licence for the latter facility expired at the end of 2011. Similar demonstration systems went in at Expo 86 in Vancouver and West Berlin, and trial versions of maglev technology have been installed in the USA.

But despite widespread activity and investigation there are currently only two maglev systems in full-time commercial operation, with two under construction. Shanghai's high-speed Transrapid system began operations in April 2004, linking Pudong International Airport with Longyang Road Metro station on the eastern edge of the city. The system operates over a hundred services every day, covering the 30 km line in 7 minutes at a top speed of 431 km/h. Plans to extend the line to Shanghai Hongqiao Airport (35 km) and then to the city of Hangzhou (200 km) have proved controversial and subject to repeated delays.

Just under a year later, in March 2005, the low-speed HSST Linimo line commenced operations in time for the 2005 World Expo in Japan and carried over 10 million passengers in its first three months. With a top speed of 100 km/h, but on a 9 km line with nine stations that was never the main issue. Similar systems are under construction in Beijing and at Seoul's Incheon Airport.

The most interesting project as these pages are concerned, however, is the Chuo Shinkansen maglev. Slated to take some of the pressure off the Tokaido line by cutting tunnels at an estimated cost of US\$82 billion to build, it's subject to the usual pressures associated with shinkansen routes in Japan. A maglev line along the existing Tokaido corridor would be much cheaper, but there are issues with noise pollution and speed-related technical difficulties. Eventually, the trip between Tokyo and Osaka may be reduced to an hour. Trains would travel via Nagoya at speeds up to 500 km/h, but the Tokyo-Nagoya link is not slated to open until 2025 with another twenty years needed to complete the line to Osaka.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Chūō Shinkansen, Shinkansen**



# MERIKEN PARK

Apart from the Hotel Okura Kōbe and Kōbe Meriken Park Oriental Hotel the reclaimed parkland area known as Meriken Park home to some of Kōbe’s most iconic contemporary structures including the Kōbe Maritime Museum, the red Kōbe Port Tower and the Peace Memorial Museum to victims of the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake that preserves a section of damaged waterfront as a reminder of the earthquake's destruction.

Half of the Kōbe Maritime Museum building is devoted to the Museum itself, with exhibits covering the port’s history and role as a connection between Japan and the outside world while the remainder of the building houses the corporate museum of Kawasaki Heavy Industries, with exhibits devoted to the history of the company and its products.

To the west of the Maritime Museum the 108-metre Kōbe Port Tower offers a restaurant, a rotating cafe, with three observation decks that offer 360 degree views of the city.

Sightseeing cruises depart from the nearby Nakatottei Chuo Terminal.

Meriken Park takes its name from a rendering of *American* into Japanese, and refers to the eastern or seaward side of the Old Foreign Settlement.

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# MISHIMA TAISHA SHRINE

Eight hundred metres east-southeast of JR Mishima Station, the Mishima Taisha Shinto shrine is reputed to be the grandest shrine on the Izu Peninsula. According to tradition and Nara period records, the shrine was originally located on Miyakejima and transferred from place to place before being moved to the present site in the mid-Heian Period. With the building repeatedly destroyed by fire and earthquakes the current structure dates from 1866, rebuilt after the 1854 Ansei Tōkai Earthquake. The shrine consists of three parts: the Haiden (oratory), the Honden (sanctum where the shrine deities dwell), with the Heiden in between.

In his youth Yoritomo Minamoto (1147-1199) had been exiled from Kyoto to Nirayama, ten kilometres south of Mishima and is reputed to have worshipped at Mishima Taisha seeking divine assistance in the war against his arch-rivals, the Taira clan. After nearly twenty years in exile, he rose up in arms against the Taira in 1180 and went on to establish the Kamakura Shōgunate in 1185. Since he believed he had won the war thanks to the deities of the Mishima and Hakone Shrines, he made annual visits to both on New Year's Day and rebuilt the Mishima shrine, which was extensively patronized by the Odawara Hōjō, Imagawa and Tokugawa clans.

During the Edo Period, Mishima Taisha and the post town of Mishima-shuku was a famous pilgrimage stop on the Tōkaidō highway, with travellers about to cross or just down from the 15 kilometre stage through the Hakone pass resting there.

The temple precinct includes a 1,200 years old fragrant olive tree designated a national natural monument, monuments engraved with haiku by Bashō and Wakayama Bokusui. A small museum holds significant cultural items including a lacquerware casket donated to the shrine by Masako Hojo (1157-1225, wife of Yoritomo) containing cosmetic utensils and articles from the late Heian Period listed as one of the National Treasures of Japan.

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## Related Glossary Terms



# MOUNT FUJI

One of the country's Three Holy Mountains and, at 3,776 metres the country's highest peak, Mount Fuji's almost perfectly symmetrical cone is arguably the most common symbol of Japan. Situated 100 kilometres southwest of Tokyo Followers of Shinto have worshiped Mount Fuji since at least the 7th century. To Japanese people it's *Fuji-san*, but the apparent honorific (-*san*, as in ***Hughesy-san*** or *Suzuki-san*) translates as *mountain*.

Call it Mount Fujiyama and you're committing tautology (literally *Mount Fuji Mountain*).

There are a number of explanations for the name, including suggestions that it translated as *immortal*, *without equal* or *never-ending*. Edo Period scholar Hirata Atsutane favoured *a mountain standing up shapely as an ear of a rice plant*. As a national symbol, the mountain appears in countless artworks, with Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige producing collections called ***36 Views of Mt. Fuji***. Hokusai also managed ***One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji***.

The mountain itself is an active stratovolcano 50 kilometres in diameter at the base, rising to a summit crater 500 metres wide and 250 metres deep, the result of four phases of activity. The first, *Sen-komitake*, provided the mountain's core, followed by a basalt layer (*Komitake Fuji*) several hundred thousand years ago. *Old Fuji* formed over the top of that around 100,00 years ago with New Fuji believed to date back around 10,000 years. The volcano sits above the junction of three tectonic plates (the Amurian/Eurasian, the Okhotsk/North American and the Filipino)which form, respectively, western Japan, eastern Japan, and the Izu Peninsula.

Its most recent eruption (16 December 1707 - 1 January 1708) deposited volcanic ash over the Kanto plain, Tokyo, and as far as the northwest Pacific coast 280 kilometres away. The eruption formed a new crater halfway down the mountain's east flank. While there has been no activity for three hundred years recent activity, including the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and *tsunami*, has prompted some concern.

As the focal point of the Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park the mountain is the most popular tourist site in Japan. More than a quarter of a million people make the ascent every year, most planning to catch the sunrise (*goraikō*, or *arrival of light*) by making the ascent during the night or staying in huts scattered along the four major access routes to the summit. Peak climbing season is from July to August. Visitors are discouraged from attempting the ascent at other times due to extreme weather conditions and the risk of avalanche.

The ascent passes through ten stations, with the first located at the foot of the mountain and the tenth at the summit. There is, however, no need to climb all the way.

Sealed roads go as far as the fifth station, predictably around halfway up the mountain, around 2,300 metres above sea level. There are four, with four routes to the summit: the Lake Kawaguchi, Subashiri, Gotemba, and Fujinomiya routes and four more from the foot of the mountain to the fifth stations (Shojiko, Yoshida, Suyama, and Murayama).

Assuming you're not interested in climbing all the way, the most popular fifth station takes you on to the Kawaguchiko route. It's not the closest to the summit (that is on Fujinomiya) but it has a larger car park, is most easily accessed from Tokyo and has the most mountain huts where climbers can rest or stay. Depending on your starting point, the ascent from the fifth station takes between three and eight hours with from two to five hours needed for the descent. It takes about an hour to get around the crater and its eight peaks.

Assuming you're not interested in the climb and possible issues with altitude sickness, popular Fuji-viewing locations include the Fuji Five Lake (*Fujigoko*) region on the northern side of the mountain.

Slightly further away, Lake Ashi and the Hakone region also provide highly rated views of the mountain. In favourable conditions it can be seen from Yokohama, Tokyo, and as far away as Chiba, Saitama, Tochigi and Lake Hamana.

It can also be seen from trains travelling between Tokyo and Nagoya (and thence Osaka and Kyoto) with the best view around ShinFuji Station. But there's no guarantee. Clouds and poor visibility often obscure the mountain, even from the relatively close *shinkansen* line (speaking from experience). Visibility is said to be better during the cooler seasons than in summer, and early morning and late evening are reckoned better prospects than the middle of the day.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Ashinoko Lake, Hakone**



# MYODANI

Dormitory suburb of Kōbe, home to a shopping centre adjoining the subway station. It is one of four campuses of Kōbe University.

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# NAGANO SHINKANSEN

Built to connect Tokyo and Nagano in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics the Nagano *Shinkansen* forms the first section of the planned Hokuriku *Shinkansen* that will extend to Kanazawa, Tsuruga and eventually Osaka. *Asama* services, named for an active volcano alongside the line take a minimum of 79 minutes to complete the journey, travelling via the Tohoku and Joetsu *Shinkansen* to Takasaki before branching off onto the first stage of the Hokuriku *Shinkansen*. The services replaced the Shinetsu Main Line limited express services which took 2 hours 50 minutes from Tokyo's Ueno Station to Nagano.

After leaving Tokyo, trains stop at Ueno and Ōmiya on the Tohoku *Shinkansen*, Kumagaya, Honjō-Waseda and Takasaki on the Joetsu *Shinkansen*, then Annaka-Haruna, Karuizawa and Sakudaira on the run into Nagano.

The Hokuriku *Shinkansen* extension from Nagano to Kanazawa should open in March 2015 with the 113-km extension from Kanazawa to Tsuruga, approved for construction in February 2012 scheduled to be completed in 2025.

Route and maps: <http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/routemaps/naganoshinkansen.html>

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tohoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen**



# NAGOYA

Located in the centre of the fertile Nōbi Plain plain at the head of Ise Bay, around two-thirds of the way between Tokyo and the Kyoto/Osaka conurbation, Nagoya is the industrial hub of Japan's third largest metropolitan region, the Chūkyō Metropolitan Area (population over 8.75 million). Just under two and a half million people live in the city, which dates back to 1610 and Tokugawa Ieyasu's decision to move the capital of Owari Province from Kiyosu, around seven kilometres away, to a more strategic location.

Nagoya Castle was constructed as the seat of the Owari branch of the Tokugawa clan and the town of 60,000 people, complete with shrines and temples was relocated to the new site. Around the same time, the nearby Atsuta Shrine was designated as a way station on the Tōkaidō road linking Kyoto and Edo (modern Tokyo) and Nagoya developed as a combination castle and shrine/transit town.

The second-most venerable shrine in Japan, Atsuta dates almost two millennia and houses the sacred *Kusanagi no mitsurugi* sword, one of the three imperial regalia of Japan. Not something that you'd put on public display, but there are over four thousand other artifacts on the grounds and the shrine hosts around seventy festivals every year.

Geographic position coupled with political clout saw the city develop as the hub of the surrounding region. At first it was cotton, ceramics and timber that drove the growth, but when Japan started to transform during the Meiji Era, Nagoya became an industrial centre.

A local company that made looms for textile mills moved into the automobile business in the 1930s. That was Toyota, and Honda and Mitsubishi grew up in the same area.

World War Two saw the city's manufacturing infrastructure turn towards military hardware, with around 25% of its workforce working in factories that produced almost half of the country's combat aircraft. That would have been enough to ensure U.S. Army Air Force attention, but the area also produced machine tools, railway equipment, tanks and military vehicles. The result was a series of bombing raids that destroyed much of the city and had almost half the population flee to the countryside.

Most of the city's historic buildings were destroyed, but the firebombing resulted in wide streets bulldozed through the rubble that make modern Nagoya a remarkably car-friendly city. That also means the city's public transport infrastructure isn't as highly developed as it is in other major centres (notably Tokyo and the Kansai region).

Nagoya Castle was hit on 14 May 1945, but postwar reconstruction of the main building was completed in 1959, and the concrete replica even has lifts. Other attractions include the Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology, built on the site of one of the company's original loom factories near Nagoya station, the Nagoya/Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Tokugawa Art Museum and surrounding Japanese garden, Nagoya City Science and Art Museums, and Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, where the collection includes works by Picasso, Matisse, Paul Klee and an assortment of Expressionists, Surrealists and postwar US and Japanese artists as well as Edo-period paintings and traditional crafts.

Temples and shrines include *Kōshō-ji*, founded in the 17th century by the Tokugawa family, *Shiroyama Hakusan* Shrine, formerly Suemori Castle, sixteenth century *Togan-ji*, where a huge wood block is said to purge sins if you touch it, *Nittai-ji*, *Arako Kannon* (the oldest building in Nagoya, with *Tahoto* pagoda intact after 472 years) and *Osu Kannon* Temple, which dates back to the Kamakura era but was moved to its current location in 1612.

Home to the head offices of, among others, Toyota Motor Corporation, Brother Industries, Makita, Suzuki Motor, Noritake, Olympus Optical and Yamaha, the city is also known for incredibly hot and humid summers, the fifteen-day Nagoya Sumo Tournament, the World Cosplay Summit for fans of Japanese animation, *miso* sauce, shrimp *tempura*, broad flat *kishimen* noodles and an eel dish called *hitsumabushi*.



# ODA NOBUNAGA

Oda Nobunaga (23 June 1534 – 21 June 1582) was a powerful warlord from the Fujiwara clan. Through a combination of strategic alliances and military conquests, he overthrew the Ashikaga Shōgunate and unified half of Japan at the end of the Warring States period. He restored stable government and established conditions that allowed Toyotomi Hideyoshi to become the first ruler of the whole country since the Ōnin War. Tokugawa Ieyasu went on to establish the Shōgunate that ruled Japan until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Oda Nobunaga was the second son of Oda Nobuhide, a deputy *shugo* (military governor) in Owari Province. In 1549, he succeeded to his father's estate. Though Nobunaga was Nobuhide's legitimate successor, the clan was divided into many factions. The clan was technically under the control of Owari's *shugo*, Shiba Yoshimune, but Nobuhide's brother Oda Nobutomo used Yoshimune as his puppet. He challenged Nobunaga's succession, then murdered Yoshimune when he supported and attempted to aid Nobunaga.

Nobunaga persuaded another uncle, Oda Nobumitsu, to join his side, killed Nobutomo in and then formed alliances with Shiba Yoshikane, Yoshimune's son, the Imagawa clan from Suruga Province and the Kira clan of Mikawa Province to ensure his borders were secure.

He still had internal rivals in the form of his brother Nobuyuki and his supporters, who rebelled, were defeated, and then pardoned when Nobunaga's mother intervened. They planned another rebellion before Nobunaga faked illness to get close to Nobuyuki, and then assassinated him in Kiyosu Castle. By 1559, Nobunaga had eliminated opposition within his clan and province.

Then, in 1560 he defeated Imagawa Yoshimoto, who was moving towards Kyoto, allegedly planning to bolster the Ashikaga Shōgunate. His forces outnumbered those of the Oda clan, but a mixture of enemy complacency, cunning and helpful weather saw Imagawa defeated and the clan's influence on the wane.

Nobunaga strengthened his position by forging an alliance with Tokugawa Ieyasu, *daimyō* of the neighbouring Mikawa province and leader of the Matsudaira clan.

In 1567, Nobunaga moved north, capturing Inabayama Castle and renaming both castle and the surrounding district Gifu. It became his centre of operations as he became involved in Ashikaga Yoshiaki's quest for revenge after his brother, the thirteenth Ashikaga Shōgun was murdered. Nobunaga marched on Kyōto and made Yoshiaki Shōgun.

But the new Shōgun had no intention of being anyone's puppet. Yoshiaki set about secretly forging an anti-Nobunaga alliance and persuaded Takeda Shingen to move on Kyoto through Tokugawa territory. Ieyasu was defeated at the Battle of Mikatagahara, but night raids caused Takeda to pause. He died shortly afterwards, victim, according to different sources, of an old war wound, a sniper's arrow or pneumonia.

With their leader dead, the Takeda forces retreated, which left Nobunaga free to deal with Yoshiaki. Nobunaga deposed him and sent him into exile. That was the effective end of the Ashikaga Shōgunate, although it officially lasted until Yoshiaki died in 1597. Around the same time Nobunaga destroyed the Asakura and Azai clans, leaving the Takeda clan, now led by Takeda Katsuyori as the centre of resistance to his ambitions.

Nobunaga destroyed them in 1582 and was about to launch invasions into Echigo Province and Shikoku when one of his allies, Akechi Mitsuhide, ambushed him on an overnight stay at Honnō-ji temple in Kyoto. Nobunaga committed *seppuku* in one of the inner rooms, but the coup d'etat was short-lived. Eleven days later Mitsuhide was killed when his army was defeated by Toyotomi Hideyoshi at the Battle of Yamazaki.

Nobunaga instituted a number of changes in Japanese military and economic customs which, in turn, contributed to his success in bringing the country towards reunification.

Military victories stemmed from tactical innovations, new technologies and developments in castle fortifications. He built up the warrior class, appointing officials on the basis of ability rather than social status or personal relationships. Many of his innovations went on the form the basis of practices by the Tokugawa Shōgunate.

Other changes moved the economy from a rural base with the growth of castle towns linked by roads that facilitated trade and also the rapid deployment of military forces. International trade was encouraged and expanded. A move towards a market economy saw monopolies and tolls abolished and closed guilds and associations opened.

Nobunaga's headquarters at Azuchi Castle beside Lake Biwa was reputedly the greatest castle in Japanese history, and practices inside the complex established the tea ceremony as an environment to where business and politics were discussed. An interest in Western art and weaponry extended as far as support for Jesuit missionaries and the first Christian church in Kyoto, though Nobunaga was not a convert himself. That support reflected a long-standing rivalry with the Tendai Buddhist sect, a powerful force in traditional politics, and the Ikkō sect, who formed a major obstacle to his ambitions to unify the country.

## Related Glossary Terms

Sengoku period



# ODAWARA

Located on the Ashigara Plains, in the far west of Kanagawa Prefecture, with the Hakone Mountains to the north and west, Odawara is a logical point of entry to Hakone hot springs resorts and Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park. The Yugawara area within the city boundaries is a well-known hot spring resort.

Five railway lines pass through Odawara, with the Tokaido *Shinkansen* offering a 35 minute trip from Tokyo Station on *Hikari* or *Kodama*, though the fastest *Nozomi Shinkansen* does not stop there, Rail alternatives are the regular Tokaido Line, with a 100-minute journey passing through Shinagawa, Kawasaki and Yokohama or the private Odakyu Line, where the Odawara Express from Shinjuku takes two hours to make the journey. From Yokohama Station, it's 16 minutes by *Hikari* or *Nozomi* or 56 minutes on the JR Tokaido Line, transit times that make it possible to live in Odawara and commute to Tokyo or Yokohama.

A castle town, Odawara was the capital of the Hōjō clan during the Sengoku period. After the Hōjō had been defeated in the Battle of Odawara in 1590, the territory came under the control of Tokugawa Ieyasu. Odawara flourished as a post town on the Tōkaidō highway connecting Edo (Tokyo) with Kyoto.

After the Meiji Restoration, Odawara Domain became Odawara Prefecture, which was in turn merged with Ashigara Prefecture and incorporated into Kanagawa Prefecture in 1876. As the economic and political focus in Kanagawa shifted north to Yokohama, Odawara went into decline, a situation that was exacerbated when the original route of the Tōkaidō Main Line bypassed the city.

The Great Kantō earthquake of 1923 devastated Tokyo and the surrounding prefectures (Chiba, Kanagawa, and Shizuoka) and caused widespread damage. Ninety percent of the buildings collapsed, and fires in the rubble took care of most of what survived the quake.

Things started to revive when the Tanna Tunnel brought the Tōkaidō Main Line through the city in 1934 and on 15 August 1945, Odawara was the last Japanese city to be bombed during World War Two.

As suggested above, visitors are most likely to pass through Odawara *en route* to Hakone, but Odawara Castle is rated as the best example of a castle in the immediate area around Tokyo. It is a popular sightseeing spot, with the castle tower offering views over the city, and a highly-rated venue for *sakura* viewing in spring.

Odawara is known for *kamaboko* (steamed processed fish), *himono* (dried fish made from a type of horse mackerel) stockfish, *umeboshi* (salted plums), traditional herbal medicines, paper lanterns, and lacquerware.

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## Related Glossary Terms

Hakone



# ŌNIN WAR

Although it only lasted a decade and was largely restricted to the Kyōto region the Ōnin War (1467–77) ushered in *Sengoku jidai*, the Warring States Period (1490–1590), a struggle between the *daimyō* houses that ended when Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu managed to unite Japan towards the end of the sixteenth century.

Triggered by a disputed succession to the Shōgunate, the war resulted from longstanding factional rivalries between Hosokawa Katsumoto, prime minister (1452–64) for *Shōgun* Ashikaga Yoshimasa, and his father-in-law Yamana Sōzen. The Onin War was thus a conflict between the two most powerful *daimyō* families, the Hosokawa and the Yamana.

Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimasa's rule had seen cultural developments known as *Higashiyama Bunka* (the Culture of the Eastern Mountain) including the tea ceremony and developments in flower arrangement, noh theatre, poetry, garden design and architecture.

Yoshimasa was just fourteen when he succeeded his elder brother, Yoshikatsu, and by age twenty-nine he seems to have had enough. He planned to retire (which may not have been unusual in itself) and give up real authority (which, it seems, was), a decision that may have been prompted by another succession dispute between the Hatakeyama and Shiba clans which had drawn in the Hosokawa and Yamana. His desire for a quiet life, based around the tea ceremony, poetry and meditation, may have been understandable but was never a realistic prospect.

The problem was that he didn't have an heir, and he adroitly solved the problem by appointing his younger brother Yoshimi, who had taken monastic vows, to the position in 1464. That would have been fine if his wife Tomiko hadn't adroitly produced a son, Yoshihisa, in 1465. Naturally, mother wanted son to take over from father and, predictably, father seems to have changed his mind.

Younger brother Yoshimi was allied to the Hosokawa, so their Yamana rivals supported the infant's claim to the Shōgunate. In 1466 Yamana Sōzen and Hosokawa Katsumoto began to gather troops near Kyoto. Both called for support from their relations and vassals, with the Yamana lining up 80,000 supporters against 85,000 on the Hosokawa side, armies that were the largest seen in Japanese history up to that stage.

But no one wanted to be held responsible for starting the war, and Yoshimasa remained as Shōgun. As the clans raised their armies and marched them to Kyoto, he issued a decree in an attempt to defuse the situation. Whoever attacked first would be declared a rebel, which carried with it the threat of execution and, more seriously, the confiscation of all the clan's property.

Yoshimasa may have been weak, but this was a powerful threat when the two sides were closely balanced and still in the process of recruiting allies. The threat was never going to be enough to defuse the situation as the niggling between the two sides intensified. Raids were followed by retaliation, retaliation by raids.

A Hosokawa mansion burned to the ground. A Yamana rice shipment was intercepted.

Rumours that Yamana Sozen was going to attack the Imperial Palace prompted the removal of the Emperor and the Imperial family to the Shōgunate's headquarters in the Muromachi District. Yamana attacked the Imperial Palace,

Hosokawa supporters burned a Yamana general's mansion, along with the block in which it was situated, to the ground.

By July, northern Kyoto was in ruins in a medieval equivalent of the Western Front in World War One. By September anyone who could get out of the city was gone as reinforcements for the antagonists flowed in.

A realignment in 1468 when Yoshimi broke with his brother, who duly declared his son the favoured successor, did nothing to stop the fighting, which continued unabated.

Katsumoto scored a political victory when he convinced Shōgun and Emperor to denounce the Yamana as rebels, but the carnage continued, unaffected by the deaths of Hosokawa Katsumoto and Yamana Sozen in 1473.

Two years later Yoshimasa emerged from seclusion and began to order feudal lords on both sides out of Kyoto. Many obeyed and began to disengage, but the fighting continued until 1477 when Yamana leader Ouchi Masahiro agreed to leave. He burned the section of Kyoto he'd controlled, the last one that had remained reasonably intact, on the way out.

In the end the war finished because no one had the strength to carry it on.

In the meantime, Yoshimasa had been planning *Ginkaku-ji*, the Silver Pavilion that would match his grandfather's *Kinkaku-ji*. His complacent attitude to what had been going on around him effectively sanctioned private wars and skirmishes between the *daimyō*. As they made their way back from Kyoto, no part of Japan escaped the violence. Fighting in the provinces continued for another century until Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu were able to reunite the country in the late 16th century.

## Related Glossary Terms

Sengoku period



# ONSEN

Although *onsen* is the word for hot springs in Japanese, the term usually refers to facilities and inns around the springs as much as the springs themselves. Volcanic activity means there are thousands of *onsen* across the archipelago, a key element in the domestic tourist market.

*Onsen* come in many forms, with outdoor and indoor baths operated as public or private concerns, with the latter often part of a hotel, *ryokan* or bed and breakfast operation. While *onsen* are often found in the countryside, there are establishment that offer similar facilities in many major cities. They are a major attraction for Japanese couples, families or company groups who want to relax.

Traditionally, *onsen* were located outdoors, using water from geothermally heated springs, as opposed to *sentō* (indoor public bath houses where baths use heated tap water). Water in an *onsen* must contain at least one of nineteen designated chemical substances and be warmer than 25 °C before any reheating takes place. Major resort hotels feature themed spa baths and artificial waterfalls. An *onsen* may have separate baths with different waters offering differing mineral compositions and healing properties.

Men and women bathed together until gender separation was introduced during the Meiji Restoration. Mixed bathing persists at some *onsen*, which usually also provide the option of women-only baths or different hours for the two sexes. Bathers are not usually allowed to wear Swimsuits are not permitted in most *onsen*, though some require guests to wear a swimsuit in mixed baths.

Guests are expected to wash and rinse themselves at bathing stations equipped with stools, hand held shower heads, wooden buckets, and toiletries before entering the water and entering the *onsen* with traces of soap on the body is unacceptable.

Guests usually bring a small towel with them to use as a wash cloth and set the towels off to the side of the baths, or fold the towels and place them on their heads. It is unacceptable to place a towel in the water, or to wring a wet towel into the baths.

Many *onsen* ban tattoos, which are associated with the Yakuza and the rule is often strictly enforced, foreigners included.

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## Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

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**Index**

Find Term



# PHILOSOPHER'S PATH

The two-kilometre-long Philosopher's Path (*Tetsugaku no michi*) in the northern part of Kyoto's Higashiyama district follows a canal lined by hundreds of cherry trees, making it one of the city's most popular *hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) spots.

The canal the path follows is a branch of the Lake Biwa Canal which tunnels 20 kilometers through the mountains to nearby Shiga Prefecture. The canal dates back to the Meiji era and was used to power Japan's first hydroelectric power plant. The aqueduct in the grounds of *Nanzenji* is part of the canal.

The path begins just down the hill from *Ginkakuji* and ends at *Nyakuoji Jinja Shrine*. Along the way, it passes two temples (*Honen-in* and *Anrakuji*) and *Otoyo no Kuni Shrine*. With the temples at either end and nearby Eikan-do Zenrin-ji, a total of five temples and two shrines makes the path a popular attraction for sightseers at any time of year. It is particularly spectacular (and crowded) in spring and autumn. That popularity is reflected in the number of restaurants, cafes, and boutiques along the way.

The path gets its name due to Kyoto University professor Nishida Kitarō's habit of using it as part of his daily stroll to work from the time he was appointed to the philosophy faculty in 1910 until he retired in 1928.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Ginkaku-ji**

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# SANNOMIYA

The name of a district as well as the station that acts as the transport hub of the Sannomiya is, in effect, downtown Kōbe, having superseded Motomachi and Sannomiya which lie just to the west of Sannomiya. The district's rise to prominence began when the Sogo Department Store moved to a new location beside the existing station.

JR West, Hankyu Railway, Hanshin Electric Railway, Kōbe Municipal Subway, and New Transit (the Port Island monorail) all use the station facilities, with two subways on the Seishin-Yamate and Kaigan Lines.

The area to the north of the station is a noted eating and drinking district. On the edge, Nankinmachi is the only Chinatown in western Japan and to the east, towards the port, the Old Foreign Settlement has a number of luxury brand shops and fashion. Center Gai Shopping Street runs west from Sannomiya through Motomachi and is an arcade lined with shops selling almost anything the average consumer is likely to want.

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## Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

# SANYŌ SHINKANSEN

In the wake of the Tōkaidō *Shinkansen*'s success, it was extended westward to connect Shin-Ōsaka with Hakata Station in Fukuoka, a project that was completed in 1975, bringing Kōbe, Himeji, Okayama and Hiroshima onto the system. The fastest (*Nozomi* and *Mizuho*) services on the line can take passengers from Hakata to Osaka in less than two-and-a-half hours, and with the right connections the trip to Tokyo can be done in under six hours.

From Hakata, the Kyushu *Shinkansen* continues south to Kagoshima.

After ShinŌsaka, *Kodama* (the slower, all-station) services stop at ShinKōbe, Nishi-Akashi, Himeji, Aioi, Okayama, ShinKurashiki, Fukuyama, ShinOnomichi, Mihara, Higashi-Hiroshima, Hiroshima, ShinIwakuni, Tokuyama, ShinYamaguchi (formerly Ogori, renamed in October 2003), Asa, ShinShimonoseki and Kokura, before arriving in Hakata around five hours later.

There are usually three *Nozomi* services per hour (two ShinOsaka > Hakata and one ShinOsaka > Hiroshima) with most northbound trains providing a through service to the Tokaido Shinkansen. The other super express service (the *Mizuho*) provides a through service to the Kyushu Shinkansen to Kagoshima with six round trips per day in mornings and evenings. *Nozomi* and *Mizuho* trains cannot be accessed by Japan Rail Pass holders but they are covered by the JR Sanyo-Shikoku-Kyushu Pass and JR West Sanyo Pass. A *Hikari* service from Tokyo continues as far as Okayama every hour, serving all stations between ShinOsaka and Okayama, while *Sakura* operate between ShinOsaka and Kagoshima-Chuo stopping at a few more stations than the faster services.

In practical terms, the Tokaido, Sanyo and Kyushu lines run more or less as a contiguous southbound line. Services run between the Tokaido and Sanyo lines, so it is possible to travel from Kagoshima to Osaka, for example, though you'd need to change trains if you're going on to Tokyo.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen**



# SENGOKU PERIOD

Lasting from the Onin War (1467-77) to the reunification of Japan at the end of the sixteenth century, the Sengoku period was marked by social and political upheaval until political power was consolidated under the Tokugawa Shōgunate. A century and a quarter of almost-constant civil war mean it is also known as the Warring States period.

The aftermath of the Onin War saw a weakening of central authority, with regional *daimyō* including the Shimazu, Takeda, and Imagawa, establishing independent domains to fill the vacuum. While some clans were able to expand their spheres of influence, others were weakened and toppled by more capable underlings in a process termed *gekokuujō* (literally, "low conquers high"). With the Emperor a marginal ceremonial and religious figure and the Shōgunate less powerful than it had been everyone else was out to secure their own niche in the pecking order. At the same time, despite political instability there was economic growth as the *daimyō* built up their armies and their support base through flood control and land reclamation. Agricultural production expanded, and harvests increased substantially. New gold, silver, copper, and iron mined fostered the development of foundries. Cultivation of cotton, which had been imported, started in Mikawa Province and cotton became the principal fabric. Those advances produced surpluses that generated trade with China and Korea and the domestic economy developed as the use of currency became widespread.

Commercial considerations saw the rise of centres where commodities were exchanged and distributed. Kyōto resumed its role as the country's industrial and commercial hub, and powerful merchants attained a degree of autonomy as towns grew up around the castles of influential *daimyō*. The desire for freedom also saw peasants weary of debt and taxes unite with monks from the Pure Land sect in uprisings (*Ikkō-ikki*) seeking to set up independent domains, with the most successful, in Kaga Province, remaining independent for nearly a century.

But despite the positive aspects of these developments, it was obvious someone needed to reimpose central authority. Oda Nobunaga re-established the Muromachi Shōgunate after his armies entered Kyōto in 1568. Nobunaga's attempt to unify the country ended when he was assassinated by one of his generals in 1582.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi continued the process, conquering Shikoku and Kyushu, and while he united Japan in 1590 by defeating the later Hojo clan in the siege of Odawara he died in 1598 without leaving an adult successor.

After Tokugawa Ieyasu's victory at the battle of Sekigahara in 1600, it took another fifteen years to finalise the process with the end of the Siege of Osaka. The ensuing Tokugawa Shōgunate lasted until the Meiji Restoration in 1868.

Paradoxically, over a century of civil war, Confucianism, classical Chinese poetry and ink painting and the Japanese classics diffused across the country, spread by Zen priests and poets invited to the provinces by the new Sengoku *daimyō* and wealthy merchants. Zen-influenced poetry and art flourished, along with landscaping and the tea ceremony in an era that brought a transition from a decentralized feudal system to a centralized state.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Kamakura period, Oda Nobunaga, Ōnin War**

# SHAMISEN

The three-stringed *shamisen*, a plucked instrument played with a plectrum (*bachî*) can be played solo, or in ensembles with other *shamisen*, flute, *ko-tsuzumi* (a small, hourglass-shaped shoulder drum or large floor drum (*taiko*) as an accompaniment to *geisha* dances and Japanese dramatic forms, notably *kabuki* and *bunraku*.

The *shamisen* derives from the Chinese *sanxian* introduced to Japan through the Ryūkyū Kingdom (Okinawa), where it became the *sanshin* around the sixteenth century.

The instrument was introduced to *geisha* culture in the mid-eighteenth century, and *geisha* are expected to learn to play the instrument, which takes years to master.

The instrument is similar in size to a guitar or banjo, with a fretless neck and strings stretched across a resonating drum-like rounded rectangular body (the *dō*), which amplifies the sound of the strings. The *bachî* is often used to strike both strings and skin, creating a highly percussive sound.

The *sao*, or neck of the instrument is usually divided into pieces that fit together, since most *shamisen* can easily be disassembled and stowed away. The pegs used to wind the strings were traditionally fashioned out of ivory, but are increasingly fashioned out of wood and plastic. The three strings were traditionally made of silk (more recently, nylon) stretched across the *dō*, raised from it by a bridge, or *koma*, which can be made of bamboo, ivory, ox-bone, rosewood, buffalo horn, *kōki* wood or plastic and rests directly on the taut skin. The lowest string is laid lower so that it buzzes, creating a characteristic timbre similar to the buzzing of a sitar). Rather than working from a set tuning, as with a guitar or a violin, the *shamisen* is tuned according to the register of the singer, or the player's personal preference.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Geisha**

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**Index**

Find Term



# SHINKANSEN

You might think *Shinkansen* translates as *bullet train*, but the term means *new trunk line*, and applies to a network of high-speed lines operated by the Japan Railways (JR) Group of companies. All services except the Akita and Yamagata *Shinkansen* run on tracks built for and exclusively used by high speed trains.

Services on the main routes operate at three levels:

- **fast**, stopping only at major centres, badged as *Nozomi* (Tokaido and Sanyo), *Mizuho* (Sanyo and Kyushu), *Hayabusa* and *Hayate* (Tohoku)
- **semi-fast**, stopping at intermediate centres, *Hikari* (Tokaido and Sanyo), *Hikari Rail Star* (Sanyo), *Sakura* (Sanyo and Kyushu), *Yamabiko* or *Max Yamabiko* (Tohoku)
- **local**, stopping at all stations on the Shinkansen line, labelled as *Kodama* (Tokaido and Sanyo), *Tsubame* (Kyushu), *Nasuno* or *Max Nasuno* (Tohoku)

Services on other lines run as *Komachi* (Akita), *Tsubasa* (Yamagata), *Toki* or *Max Toki* and *Tanigawa* or *Max Tanigawa* (Jōetsu) and *Asama* or *Max Asama* (Hokuriku/Nagano)

*Shinkansen* services have carried nearly 10 billion passengers, but the only injuries and the single fatality have been caused by closing doors. Passengers have, however, suicided by jumping both from or in front of moving trains. There are also issues with noise, particularly with the problem of tunnel boom, caused by trains coming out of tunnels at high speed.

For convenience, frequency, punctuality and passenger comfort *Shinkansen* services are hard to beat. Trains depart with split second punctuality, carriage interiors are spacious, seats usually face forward but can be turned 180 degrees to create a group of seats facing each other. Most trains have both non-reserved seats and reserved seats in two classes, but reservations are required for *Hayabusa*, *Hayate* and *Komachi*.

Regular seats are laid out in threes on either side of an aisle and offer generous leg room. The equivalent of airline business class on airplanes comes in Green Cars, with two seats on either side of the passageway, foot rests, reading lights, electrical outlets for both seats and a seat warmer. The newest trains on the Tohoku *Shinkansen* offer the equivalent of first class with single seats and additional amenities.

Trains have overhead shelves that handle airline carry on baggage and there is space for two or three suitcases behind the last row of seats in each carriage on a *first in best dressed* basis. There's probably enough room to fit a suitcase into the space in front of your seat, though it's not the most comfortable solution.

For travellers who live outside Japan discounts offered by the Japan Rail Pass make *Shinkansen* travel an extremely cost effective means of travel on all services except *Nozomi* and *Mizuho*, but you can only access regular seats.

Most trains are served by food carts with a selection of snacks, drinks and boxed *bento* meals. WiFi is available on some trains between Tokyo and Shin-Osaka, but requires a subscription or a one-day pass that has to be purchased before you board the train.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Maglev Trains, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen**

The *Shinkansen* network dates back to a pre-War proposal for a standard gauge railway line between Tokyo and Shimonoseki. There were plans to extend the line to Korea through an undersea tunnel and on to Beijing, connecting with the Trans-Siberian Railway, possibly even extending to Singapore. Those plans were abandoned in 1943, but there had been some construction work and some tunnels on the network date back to the original project.

As the post-war Japanese economy rebuilt, traffic on the Tōkaidō Main Line grew steadily and by the mid-1950s, the line was operating at full capacity. The Railway Ministry decided to revisit the standard gauge *Shinkansen* project after a newly introduced train set a world speed record of 145 km/h for a narrow gauge train. A standard gauge line would deliver higher speeds and government approval in December 1958 allowed construction of the first segment of the Tōkaidō *Shinkansen* to begin in April 1959 at an estimated cost of ¥200 billion. The final cost was nearly double that figure.

Completed in time for the Tokyo Olympics the line began service on 1 October 1964 and had an immediate impact, carrying one hundred million passengers up to 13 July 1967, and passing the one billion mark in 1976. As a result, it was extended to connect Shin-Ōsaka with Hakata (Fukuoka). That line, the Sanyō *Shinkansen*, was further extended when the Kyushu *Shinkansen* from Hakata to Kagoshima was completed in 2011. A West Kyushu route to Nagasaki running Gauge Change trains capable of running on an existing narrow gauge line between is under construction and should open by March 2023.

Work on the Tōhoku *Shinkansen* connecting Tokyo with the north of Honshū commenced in November 1971, and the line opened in stages from June 1982. The line reached Aomori in December 2010. An extension passing through the Seikan Tunnel should reach Shin-Hakodate, on Hokkaidō in March 2016 and Sapporo by 2035.

Branch lines of the Tōhoku *Shinkansen*, the Yamagata *Shinkansen* (Fukushima – Shinjō) and Akita *Shinkansen* (Morioka – Akita) run on the Tohoku line from Tokyo, then branch onto lines where the original narrow gauge has been upgraded. Since these are not purpose built Shinkansen lines the maximum speed is limited to 130 km/h, but travel time is reduced since passengers no longer need to change trains at Fukushima and Morioka.

Planning for the Jōetsu *Shinkansen* connecting Tokyo and Niigata was initiated in 1971 by Niigata-born Prime Minister Tanaka, and services began on 15 November 1982, branching off the Tōhoku *Shinkansen* at Ōmiya.

Completed in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics, the Nagano *Shinkansen* branches off the Jōetsu and Tōhoku lines at Takasaki and forms the first section of the Hokuriku *Shinkansen*, with an extension from Nagano to Kanazawa scheduled to open in March 2015. From there, the line should proceed on to Tsuruga and will eventually loop back to Osaka.

Work on the Chūō *Shinkansen*, a *maglev* (magnetic levitation) line from Tokyo to Osaka via Nagoya was due to commence in 2014, with the line following the shortest route through (as in under) the Japanese Alps from Shinagawa to Nagoya with 86% of the 286 km route underground.

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**Related Glossary Terms**

**Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Tōhoku Shinkansen, Tōkaidō Shinkansen**



# SHIZUOKA

Shizuoka, centrally located between Tokyo and Nagoya along the Tokaido Corridor is the capital of Shizuoka Prefecture and the prefecture's second-largest city. The prefecture is wet by Japanese standards, but Shizuoka is the sunniest of Japan's major cities due to the absence of summer fog and a location that shelters it from northwesterly winds off the Sea of Japan. The name is made up of two *kanji*, *Shizu* ("still" or "calm") and *oka* ("hills").

Shizuoka Domain was created out of the older Sunpu Domain in 1869, and the name was retained when the city was incorporated. The area has been inhabited since prehistoric times, and the Toro archaeological site indicates a significant Yayoi period (400 BC-300 AD) settlement in what is now the central city.

Shizuoka is on the Tōkaidō Main Line from Tokyo to Osaka and is served by the Tōkaidō Shinkansen, limited express and regional trains.

Since the modern city was founded in 1889 Shizuoka has seen its share of misfortune.

The day the Tōkaidō Main Line connection opened (1 February 1889) a fire destroyed most of downtown Shizuoka. Post-typhoon floods in 1914 inundating the downtown area and the city had been rebuilt after a 6.4 magnitude earthquake in 1935 when another fire destroyed much of the central business district. Since there were few significant military targets in the area, the city was largely unaffected by air raids until a firebombing raid on 19 June 1945 inflicted high casualties and significant destruction.

The city is known for high-quality green tea, strawberries grown on inclined stone walls, wasabi, citrus fruits especially Satsuma, lotus roots, roses and peaches. Local delicacies include *oden* (boiled eggs, *daikon* radish, *konnyaku* and fish cakes stewed in beef stock and dark soy sauce), *zōni* soup (rice cakes cooked with vegetables in broth) and *tororo* (grated yam soup). A *tororo* restaurant named Chojiya in the Mariko-juku area of Shizuoka dates back to 1598 and was depicted by Hiroshige in his prints of the fifty-three stops along the Tōkaidō.

Scenic attractions include:

- Nihondaira, a scenic plateau in the centre of the city, with views of Mt. Fuji, Southern Alps, Izu Peninsula and Suruga Bay.

- The Nihondaira Ropeway connecting Nihondaira to Kunozan Toshogu Shrine.

- The ruins of Sunpu Castle, built in 1599, destroyed in 1869 and subsequently turned into a park which is a popular venue for hanami (*sakura* viewing).

- Kunōzan Tōshō-gū shrine, the burial place of Tokugawa Shōgun Tokugawa Ieyasu, might have lost a number of structures but thirteen remain. The Honden and Heiden, built in 1617, are protected as Important Cultural Properties. The museum has displays, including *tachi* (Japanese swords) and suits of armour.

- Shizuoka Sengen Jinja, a group of three Shinto shrines that enjoyed the patronage of the warrior clans who dominated the area through the Kamakura and Muromachi: periods. The complex burned down in 1804 and was subsequently rebuilt in the Momoyama style, with extensive lacquer, wood carvings, and gold leaf.

- Mariko-juku, the twentieth of the fifty-three stations along the Tōkaidō road in Suruga Ward, was one of the smallest post stations on the Tōkaidō. It's a 30 minute bus ride from JR Shizuoka Station, with row-houses from the Edo Period and the aforementioned long-established Chojiya tororojiru restaurant. The post station is the subject of [a classic ukiyo-e print by Ando Hiroshige](#). The neighbourhood is also home to Sumpu Takumishuku, a try-it-yourself facility for traditional crafts and can be previewed [here](#).

- The Toro archaeological site in Suruga Ward dates back to the late Yayoi period in the first century. The remains were discovered in 1943 by workers constructing a World War Two munitions plant, excavated in 1947 and 1948 and re-excavated between 1999 and 2004. Today, the site has reproductions of ancient pit-houses and high-floored granaries as used as far back as the 3rd and 4th centuries B.C., along with reconstructed rice paddies and associated canals and waterways. The site is preserved as a National Historic Monument with a museum displaying artifacts unearthed in the dig.

- Shizuoka Prefectural Museum of Art at the foot of Nihondaira includes [a Rodin wing](#) with a collection of the sculptor's works along with other European sculptures.

- A 25-minute walk from JR Yui Station, Tokaido Hiroshige Art Museum features Utagawa Hiroshige's ***Fifty-Three Stations of the Tokaido*** ukiyo-e woodblock prints.

- The Miho Peninsula in city's Shimizu Ward features *Miho no Matsubara*, a seven-kilometre stretch of seashore is lined with pine trees designated as one of New Three Views of Japan and added to the World Heritage List in 2013.

## Related Glossary Terms

Drag related terms here

# SHIZUOKA PREFECTURE

Shizuoka Prefecture in central Japan halfway between Tokyo and Osaka stretches along the Pacific coast between Suruga Bay and the Minami Alps and east to the Izu Peninsula, a resort area sometimes referred to as Japan's Riviera. Shizuoka has a subtropical climate, hot and humid in summer and, being close to the warm Kuroshio Current, wet by Japanese standards.

The Fuji volcanic belt extends to Izu Peninsula, so an abundance of hot springs makes the prefecture a tourist attraction, alongside features, including Suruga Bay, the Sea of Enshu and Lake Hamana. Tea is the prefecture's most famous product.

The province of Suruga dates back to the early Nara period. Early in the eighth century, the capital was relocated to a more central location on the Abe River at Sunpu, which became the capital of the Imagawa clan during the Muromachi period.

The city changed hands several times after the Imagawa clan were defeated at the Battle of Okehazama, and ended up being controlled by Tokugawa Ieyasu, who made Sunpu the site of a secondary court after he retired from the Shōgunate in 1606.

For the next two hundred and sixty years, Sunpu was *tenryō* (directly administered by the Shōgunate), ruled by the *Sunpu jōdai*, the Shōgun's nominee, officially based in Sunpu.

In 1869, after the end of the Tokugawa Shōgunate, Tokugawa Iesato was assigned the short-lived Sunpu Domain, which became Shizuoka Prefecture in 1871, and expanded to absorb Hamamatsu Prefecture and the western part of Ashigaru Prefecture in 1876. The merger brought the city of Hamamatsu and the Izu Peninsula into Shizuoka.

Scenic and tourist attractions include Mount Fuji, Lake Hamana, the sand dunes in Hamamatsu and Omaezaki and the rickety suspension bridges in Sumatakyo Gorge.

Oigawa Railway operates one of a handful of steam engines operating in Japan between Kanaya Station in Shimada and Senzu Station in Kawanehon on a line built to carry workers and materials upstream to a dam construction site. The line runs through a mountain area with no cities or towns. Most passengers are tourists visiting one of the *onsen* resorts along the way, hikers bound for the Southern Alps, train enthusiasts or photographers. The line operates a variety of historic locomotives and period carriages. From Senzu, the company's Ikawa Line is the only rack-and-pinion railway in Japan, running north as far as Ikawa, at the foot of the Southern Alps with 61 tunnels and 51 bridges in just 25.5 kilometres. Both lines are highly rated scenic routes during the *sakura* and autumn leaf seasons.

The prefecture is host to a number of festivals and special events

- During the *sakura* season on the first weekend in April the Shizuoka Festival recreates Tokugawa Ieyasu's custom of taking daimyō to view the cherry blossoms at Sengen Shrine. A flower-viewing procession with four hundred performers, a cherry blossom dance in the evening and costumed merchants selling food to visitors are some of the highlights.

- In Shimoda, the southern-most city on the Izu Peninsula the three-day Kurofune Matsuri (Black Ship Festival), held on the third weekend of May, is the city's major tourist attraction. The festival commemorates the arrival of Commodore Perry and the Shimoda Treaty which opened Shimoda and Hakodate to American ships in 1854 with a parade of marching bands and naval officers in period costumes. Events emphasising Japanese art and culture feature *origami*, *ikebana*, martial arts, Japanese Tea Ceremony and *taiko* drums.

- Shizuoka City's Abekawa Fireworks display on the banks of the Abe River upstream from Abekawa Bridge on the last Saturday of July features 15,000 aerial fireworks and fifty ground-based set pieces.

- *Shimizu Minato Matsuri* (Shimizu Port Festival) on the first Friday, Saturday and Sunday in August commemorates the opening of Shimizu port to international trade with mass dances featuring 30,000 performers on the first two days and a seaside fireworks display on the Sunday.

- The biggest event on the calendar, however, is the Daidogei Street Performance World Cup, an annual international busker's festival held in November in central Shizuoka City. The competition attracts over two million visitors each year to watch street performers from around the world in performance spaces around downtown Shizuoka City, with a main stage in Sunpu Park (*Sunpu kouen*).

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# SŌAMI

Painter, art critic, poet, landscape gardener, and master of the tea ceremony Sōami, also known as Kangaku Shinsō (1472-1525) was the last of three generations of connoisseurs who served as artistic custodians of the Ashikaga Shōguns' art collection.

As the son and grandson of painters and connoisseurs (Geiami and Nōami, respectively), he is a significant figure who specialised in landscapes painted on screens and sliding doors in Muromachi-period mansions and temples. Some of his greatest pieces covered over twenty *fusuma* panels, depicting Japanese landscapes using Chinese techniques.

As a critic, in 1511 he revised his grandfather's famous catalog of Chinese paintings, the *Kundaikan sayū chōki* (compiled in 1476).

Sōami's work was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Zen and his landscape work can be seen in two of the most celebrated Zen temple gardens in Japan, *Ryōan-ji* and *Daisei-in*, both in Kyōto, and both outstanding examples of *kare sansui*, dry landscape combinations of stones and sand used to suggest mountains and water. He is also believed to have planned the garden of Ginkaku-ji, the temple on the site of the villa built by his patron, Ashikaga Yoshimasa.

*Daisen-in* also holds a set of landscape *fusuma-e*, but with the paintings done on sliding doors in environments where flash photography is forbidden there are few examples of his work available to view away from their original setting. The reader can get a sense of his work from the *Landscape of the Four Seasons* (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/41.59.1,2>).

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# TAKAYAMA

The name means *tall mountain*, and in a mountainous country, predictably, there's more than one of them. To avoid confusion, the Takayama in the mountainous Hida region of Gifu Prefecture is commonly labelled *Hida-Takayama*. With a population around the hundred thousand mark, Takayama is a compact city with a downtown area that's easy to cover on foot, though some attractions (Hida Folk Village, for example) are best accessed by bus. Interestingly, a series of local government mergers since the mid-1930s have made Takayama the largest city in Japan as measured by surface area.

Located in the heart of the Japanese Alps, Takayama is the major transport hub for the Hida region, and the surrounding ski resorts and *onsen* have delivered a high (three star) rating in the **Michelin Guide**. The city is well worth visiting for its beautifully preserved old town, festivals held in spring and autumn, *sakura* (mid- to late-April, around three weeks after Nagoya) and autumn foliage (late October into the first week of November).

Takayama is part of the heavy snow area with snowfall on most days throughout the winter. The annual snowfall comes in at around five metres between the end of November and early April.

The city rose to prominence during the feudal period as a source of high quality timber. Skilled carpenters from Takayama are believed to have worked on the Imperial Palace in Kyoto, and many temples in Kyoto and Nara and the city was important enough to be placed under the direct control of the Tokugawa *Shōgun* in the seventeenth century.

As a result, in spite of relative isolation, it was a prosperous centre that developed its own regional culture over a period of some three centuries.

Takayama is famous for its well-preserved merchant quarter (*Sanno-machi*, three narrow lanes lined with wooden buildings housing *saké* breweries, boutiques and museums), *Takayama Jinya* (the building from which the *Shōgun*'s representative administered the area), *Takayama Yatai Kaikan* (Takayama Festival Float Exhibition Hall, where the festival floats are stored), the Hida Folk Village (an open-air museum that recreates a traditional mountain village), *ramen* noodles and Hida beef.

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# TŌHOKU SHINKANSEN

Construction work on the 674 km Tōhoku *Shinkansen*, connecting Tokyo with Aomori on the northern end of Honshū, commenced in November 1971, and the line opened in stages from June 1982. The line runs through a more sparsely populated region of Japan's main island and reached Aomori in December 2010. An extension of the line passing through the Seikan Tunnel should reach ShinHakodate, on the northern island of Hokkaidō in March 2016 and Sapporo by 2035.

Branch lines running off the Tōhoku *Shinkansen*, the Yamagata *Shinkansen* (Fukushima – Shinjō) and Akita Shinkansen (Morioka – Akita) are labelled mini-*shinkansen* routes.

Services on both lines run on the Tohoku Shinkansen line from Tokyo, then branch onto lines where the original narrow gauge has been upgraded. Since these are not purpose built *Shinkansen* lines the maximum speed is limited to 130 km/h, but travel time is reduced since passengers no longer need to change trains at Fukushima and Morioka.

Planning for the Jōetsu *Shinkansen* connecting Tokyo and Niigata was initiated in 1971 by Niigata-born Prime Minister Tanaka, and services began on 15 November 1982, branching off the existing Tōhoku *Shinkansen* at Ōmiya.

Completed in time for the 1998 Winter Olympics, the Nagano *Shinkansen* branches off the Jōetsu and Tōhoku lines at Takasaki and forms the first section of the Hokuriku *Shinkansen*, with an extension from Nagano to Kanazawa scheduled to open in March 2015. From there, the line should proceed on to Tsuruga and will eventually loop back to Osaka.

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōkaidō Shinkansen**

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# TŌKAIDŌ SHINKANSEN

Government approval of the *Shinkansen* project in December 1958 allowed construction of the line between Tokyo and Osaka to begin in April 1959 at an estimated cost of 1.5 billion yen. The final cost was nearly double the original figure.

Completed in time for the 1964 Olympics the 515.4 km line began service on 1 October 1964, cutting the trip between Tokyo and Osaka from six hours and forty minutes to three hours. By 1965, it was down to just over three hours, and the service had an immediate impact, carrying one hundred million passengers up to 13 July 1967, and passing the 1 billion mark in 1976.

Today, with up to thirteen sixteen car 1,323 seat trains per hour in either direction, the *Tōkaidō Shinkansen* is the world's busiest high-speed rail line.

As a result of the line's success, it was extended westward to connect Shin-Ōsaka Station to Hakata Station in Fukuoka (the *Sanyō Shinkansen*).

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## Related Glossary Terms

**Akita Shinkansen, Chūō Shinkansen, Hokuriku Shinkansen, Jōetsu Shinkansen, Kyushu Shinkansen, Nagano Shinkansen, Sanyō Shinkansen, Shinkansen (History), Tōhoku Shinkansen**

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# TOYAMA

Capital of Toyama Prefecture, located on the coast of the Sea of Japan coast in central Honshū, Toyama is about 200 km north of Nagoya and 300 km northwest of Tokyo.

Traditionally an agricultural area, modernisation after the Meiji Era saw Toyama become an important industrial region, initially producing medicine and paper, then moving into heavy industry and chemicals as power generated by hydroelectric projects in the mountainous hinterland became available.

The city's importance as a centre for aluminium, ball-bearing and steel production saw an air raid that destroyed 99.5 percent of the city in August 1945. Postwar reconstruction, based around a plentiful water supply, a well-developed drainage system and agricultural forestry, fishery, commercial and manufacturing activity has seen Toyama become one of the most influential cities on the Japan Sea coast.

Attractions in the city include the Botanic Gardens, Toyama Castle, the Museum of Modern Art, Toyama Folk Village and Gohyaku-rakan, the Hills of 500 Buddhas.

Rail access will become easier when the Hokuriku (Nagano) Shinkansen line is extended to Toyama in 2015. Current access from Tokyo involves taking the Joetsu Shinkansen to Echigo-Yuzawa and transferring to the Hakutaka limited express train. Rail access to and from Osaka and Kyoto is delivered through a spectacular service that crosses the central cordillera by way of Takayama.

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# UMEDA

The station complex comprising the JR Osaka Station and facilities shared by four railway companies is one of Osaka’s two transport hubs.

As a result, it forms the centre of a bustling district with an abundance of shopping and entertainment options in the world’s largest network of underground shopping malls, as well as above ground redevelopments in a former freight rail yard in northern Osaka. Recent developments include Osaka Station City, Grand Front Osaka, and Umeda Sky Building. The 2.6 kilometre Tenjinbashisuji Shopping Street is located nearby.

Above ground level, the station complex takes in the JR Osaka Station and Hanshin Umeda Stations, with Hanshin Railways, Umeda Station, Midosuji Subway Line’s Umeda Station, Yotsubashi Subway Line’s Nishi-Umeda Station and Tanimachi Subway Line’s Higashi-Umeda below ground level.

While more than 2.3 million passengers pass through the facilities every day, Umeda only ranks as the fourth busiest station complex in Japan.

The equivalent on the south side of the city is Minami, centred around Namba Station.

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