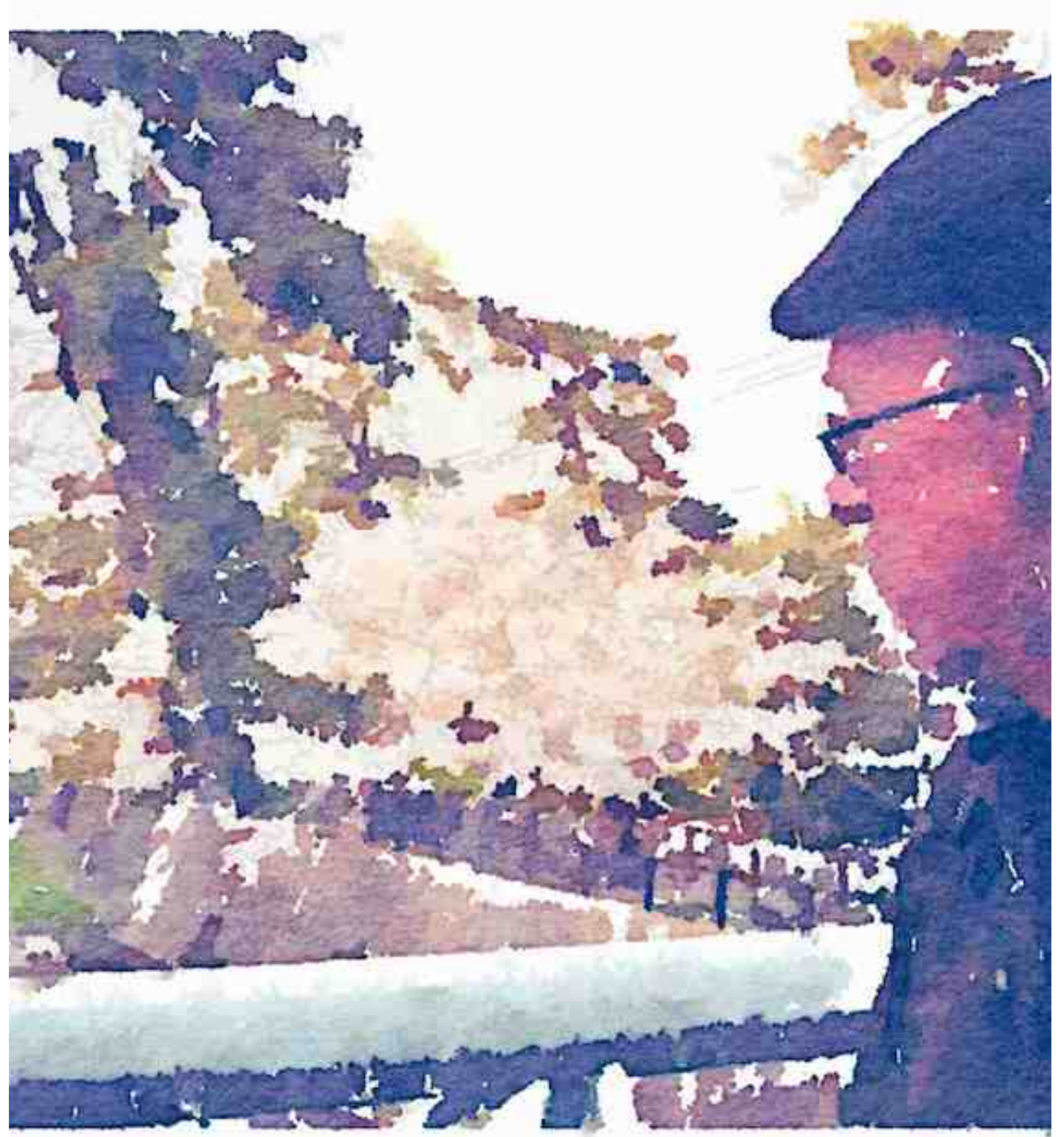


Ian Hughes

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# On the Road in Japan

April 2008



Japan April 2008

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# Introduction: Getting There

Here's where we begin debunking the notion that *Hughesy* is, or was, travel-averse.

I'm not suggesting there wasn't apprehension.

Looking at a couple of weeks in an environment with no prospect of immediate escape if you don't like what's going down you're bound to feel uneasy, but from the moment we touched down at **KIX** I had a great time.

I would head back quite happily at any opportunity, despite the possibility of earthquakes, tsunamis and aftershocks.



# The Itinerary

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Tuesday 1 April: Bowen > Townsville

Wednesday 2 April: Townsville > Cairns

Thursday, 3 April Cairns > Kansai International > Kōbe

Friday 4 April: Kōbe > Osaka > Kōbe

Saturday 5 April: Kōbe > Himeji > Kōbe

Sunday 6 April: Kōbe > Kyoto > Kōbe

Monday 7 April: Kōbe > Kyoto > Kanazawa

Tuesday 8 April: Kanazawa > Toyama > Takayama

Wednesday 9 April: Takayama > Nagoya

Thursday 10 April: Nagoya > Hakone

Friday 11 April: Hakone > Tokyo > Kitakami

Saturday 12 April: Kitakami

Sunday 13 April: Kitakami > Tokyo > Kōbe

Monday 14 April: Kōbe

Tuesday 15 April: Kōbe > Kyoto

Wednesday 16 April: Kyoto > Nara

Thursday 17 April: Nara > Kōbe

Friday 18 April: Kōbe > Kansai International

Saturday 19 April: Brisbane > Gold Coast



## Tuesday, 1 April

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Heading out of downtown Bowen just after lunchtime, the journey to Townsville passed uneventfully, accompanied by selections from the Latin playlist on the iPod.

Once we'd booked into the **Aitkenvale Motel**, it was time to head off to the Lolly Shop for a couple of *Campbell's Rutherglen Tokay* to use as gifts in Japan.

We also needed a couple of bottles to accompany dinner at *The Golfer's* bijou establishment (a *Campbell's Bobbie Burns Shiraz* and a *McWilliams' Mount Pleasant Phillip*).

Arriving at *The Golfer's* residence, we settled back. We feasted in not-quite-baronial style with our genial host, the *Dalby Doyle* and *Miss Behaviour* - roast lamb with the usual trimmings and the obligatory mint sauce.

From the time we arrived on the doorstep until the Muscat went into circulation several hours later, the conversation covered a predictably wide range of topics from primary school cricket to overseas travel via excursions into the cooking techniques of celebrity chefs and other arcane ephemera.

Periodic telephonic interruptions allowed the *Doyle* to dispense culinary tips regarding the correct ingredients for a successful batch of scones to serve at the morning tea break for the monthly board meeting of a leading Australian cultural organisation.

As usual, where the *Doyle* is concerned, as soon as you think you've heard him expound on every conceivable subject from his considerable range of expertise, he pulls another rabbit out of the hat.

No kidding. *Doyle's* baking tips. Wonders will never cease.

The *Bobbie Burns Shiraz* was acclaimed as the wine of the night though the consensus was that the *Mount Pleasant Phillip* was not too shabby either.

A phone call the next morning to organise a transfer from the motel to Townsville Airport attracted background interjections of *Hope the ninjas get ya!*

And since you're reading this, it should be evident that the *Doyle's* desires remained fundamentally unfulfilled.



## Wednesday, 2 April 2008

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Once we'd alighted from *The Golfer's* Taxi and checked in at the Townsville Terminal, there was the usual delay while we awaited the boarding call for **QantasLink Flight 2300**.

Having avoided weighing myself down while packing (supervised by someone who ensured there was no risk of incurring excess baggage charges) my suggestion that I was going to wander across to the newsagent's stand induced a momentary look of concern.

After all, *Someone* knows from bitter experience the drastic consequences that tend to follow letting *Hughesy* loose in a book shop.

In a magnificent display of self-restraint, I managed to spend a whole ten minutes in the area without spending a red cent.

This amazing development occurred despite the presence of the April edition of ***The Monthly***, which I thought might be interesting reading on the Flight Over, a new **Peter Corris** Cliff Hardy novel and various **Detective Inspector Rebus** yarns that needed to find a niche on *Hughesy's* bookshelves.

As I explained when I had finished browsing and returned to where *The Supervisor* sat, I'd packed a book to re-read while we were away.

Joe Boyd's **White Bicycles** would also provide me with something to write about while we're in transit on the *Shinkansen* (assuming nothing is exciting in the scenic department outside).

A **Cliff Hardy**, **Rebus**, **Inspector Montalbano** or **Aurelio Zen** is something I'm likely to knock over in twenty-four hours or so, and I'd then have to lug the thing around.

While I was tempted to buy something else to read, it was better to stick with the **Boyd** and meditation on the musical matters he discusses.

There's also the matter of a significant addition to Brownie points resulting from the aforementioned display of self-restraint.

There was still plenty of time that needed killing, so I wandered over to the coffee shop to check out the brunch options.

We were likely to get a sandwich or something on the flight, but something concrete in the crew was preferable to the vague possibilities associated with *or something*.

In the event, *or something* was an apple.

Call me a Philistine if you will, but I've never really been a coffee shop aficionado.

One cup of **Industrial Strength Moccona** in the morning keeps me going all day, thank you very much.

While I have been known to opt for the **Coffee Club Big Breakfast**, I don't usually pay much attention to what's on offer at the coffee shop.

A couple of beers and a pizza has, up to the present, been the preferred option.

This time, however, it was too early for a stiff drink, the pizza option was on the other side of **Security**, and I went to investigate what was on offer at **Aromas** without expecting anything much.

The sight of a couple of interesting variations on the standard meat pie (*Chicken & Leek* and *Madras Beef Curry* were two that attracted my attention) prompted me to place an order.

*Er Indoors* joined me for an orange juice and sampled a small portion of the *Chicken & Leek* variety, which I'd pronounced *good*, and she considered *not too bad*.

Having sighted the beer options available at the same venue, it looks like *Bye Bye Eagle Boys*.

And not before time.

And since *Madam* has pronounced the *Chicken & Leek* acceptable, maybe next time I can try the spicier option.

The 45-minute flight passed without any excitement whatsoever apart from *Madam's* sighting of **Palm Island**, which she identified by the presence of an airstrip.

She also spotted **Orpheus Island**, an upmarket tourist destination that had featured from time to time on TV.

By the time we were level with **Hinchinbrook Island**, the aircraft was passing through fairly dense cloud.

Once we were above that further sight-seeing became an academic issue.

We'd opted to overnight in Cairns rather than an early transfer from Townsville the next morning.

Our overnight accommodation at **Queens Court** was close enough to walk downtown for afternoon shopping, stroll back to the room for a rest and then set off again towards the Esplanade for dinner.

We've enjoyed eating at **Villa Romana** in Melbourne's Lygon Street and on our last visit I'd spotted a reference to a Cairns branch of the operation.

So the venue for dinner was a no-brainer, particularly when the prospect of *Spaghetti alla Scoglio* loomed on the horizon.

We arrived shortly after five-thirty, halfway through the *20% off food only* window.

From the menu, we opted for a loaf of bread with roast garlic, pesto and olive oil as an opener, the *Scoglio* as a shared main and were able to go as far as squeezing in a risotto to fill in any remaining gaps in the gullet.

We washed the meal down with glasses of *Nugan Estate King Valley Pinot Grigio* and *Wirra Wirra Sauvignon Blanc* which hit the spot nicely.

A brief stroll back to **Queens Court** got us there just in time for the seven o'clock news, and an hour later we were pushing up Z's in anticipation of our overseas odyssey.



## Thursday, 3 April 2008

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Six o'clock saw us surging into action, and by half-past, we were showered, shaved (at least I was) but not shampooed and ready for the Continental breakfast downstairs.

It's hardly a scientific approach, but checking the levels of the spreads available for the morning toast revealed a preference for orange marmalade with, believe it or not, *Vegemite* sneaking into second place ahead of strawberry jam.

Peanut butter finished a distant (and, in my humble opinion quite understandable) last.

A survey of adjacent tables showed a similar level of depletion in the stocks of *Vegemite*, scotching any suspicions that the table we were occupying had already attracted an unusual number of Australian chauvinists eager to indulge in leftover brewers' yeast.

This posed an interesting question to ponder while waiting for a boarding call for the flight to Japan.

I assumed supplies started at around the same level when the bistro opened for breakfast.

Presumably, the sole employee on duty filled the receptacles to the top each morning as part of her duties. I couldn't see that there was much she would need to do apart from that.

I felt that it was also reasonably safe to assume that there wouldn't have been too many dinkum Aussies in the crowd that had passed through the breakfast area before us.

More than likely, the previous clients would have been backpackers or tourists grabbing a bite to eat before heading off on a day tour of the Daintree or a white-water rafting expedition in the mountains between Cairns and Tully.

Anyone partaking in these pastimes might be looking at maximising their Australian experience.

Still, observations of overseas reactions to *Vegemite* suggests that, for most foreign visitors, once is more than enough.

So what happened to all the *Vegemite*?

I had visions of overseas visitors surreptitiously sneaking sachets of the substance into their pockets, intending to smuggle them back home as evidence of the Australian lack of sophisticated taste.

*And, Muriel, can you imagine? They spread THIS on their morning toast! What strange people...*

It gave me something to ponder while we were waiting.

By seven-thirty, we were on our way to the airport and *Hughesy's* first encounter with the vagaries of international travel.

Arriving at the International Terminal, I was mildly bemused by the lack of activity.

A few people were being checked in, a tour guide was marshalling a group of Japanese tourists outside the check-in area, and there were a couple of terminals occupied by staff waiting for the arrival of customers.

No waiting, no delay.

*'Er Indoors*, being quite the experienced traveller, must have been looking forward with considerable amusement to watching the fun as *Hughesy* tackled the various administrative procedures before embarkation.

That was more than likely her motivation for allowing me to hand over my passport first.

And everything went smoothly.

Once the Japanese passport came into play, matters became somewhat more complicated.

Our operator required assistance, first from the terminal next door, and then a supervisor appeared on the scene, followed by further assistance from higher up the echelon.

In the end, it was, we gathered, some minor glitch or typographical error - a zero entered as letter O or some such.

Several years ago I took great joy in describing my version of what happened when a lone traveller on her way back to Japan left an unattended bag in the midst of a Japanese tour group while she made use of the conveniences.

She returned to find the group had moved on, and an unattended bag was the subject of serious scrutiny from the security staff.

However we've been warned about the inadvisability of joking about security issues in areas like check-in counters, so I was forced to give the flick pass to such potential rib-ticklers as *That's funny. It should have worked. Surely the ink's dry by now.*

Once we were passed that little hurdle, it was a case of up the stairs, around the corner and through **Immigration** where my previously pristine passport received its first exit stamp.

There was still ninety minutes to kill before boarding, and the area was almost totally deserted when we walked through Security, where *'Er Indoors* once again attracted the attention of the guy with the little wand that scans you for traces of explosives.

Over the last dozen times, when we've passed through a security set-up, I've walked straight past the individual in question while the strike rate where *'Er Indoors* is concerned in something like 50%.

Lack of crowds meant that we were the only customers in sight when we walked into the duty-free store, making a predictable beeline for the wine department.

It wasn't as if we were necessarily looking to buy anything. There were three bottles of *Rutherglen Tokay* tucked away as presents, and I didn't fancy the prospect of lugging the extra weight around as we made our way around the Land of the Rising Sun.

On the other hand, I thought it would be interesting to see what was on offer.

While I suspected the usual Aussie wine icons would feature prominently, I suspected that we might encounter a couple of items that you wouldn't usually be able to find at your local liquor outlet.

When we visit the Lolly Shop, we are usually looking to restock the wine rack with value for money wines.

When we do venture into the quality section, we tend to head towards areas where we'll find something from a winery we've visited.

I have no idea if *Jacob's Creek Steingarten Riesling* is widely available or if it's a label that has somehow managed to slip past without attracting my attention.

The *Steingarten* vineyard was something I remembered reading about back in the mid-seventies when I was just starting to get interested in wine.

It was a relatively high-altitude vineyard with a gravelly soil (*Steingarten* translates as *stone garden*) which had been developed and planted to produce something approaching a German-style Riesling.

*Interesting*, I thought and proceeded with further investigations.

Since the first night in Kōbe's accommodation was a 4.5-star establishment with water views, I started to think perhaps a nice bottle of red might be a suitable way of celebrating our arrival as we looked out over Kōbe's harbour.



A bottle of *Steingarten* in the backpack wouldn't be *that much* extra weight.

I'd run across references to Heathcote as one of the emerging wine regions in Victoria but hadn't (as far as I can recall, and *Hughesy's* memory can be a most unreliable conveyance) tasted anything from there.

So I selected a *Brown Brothers Heathcote Shiraz*. From the *Limited release* label, it wasn't a wine I'd be likely to run into at the local bottle-o.

From there, I found myself a comfortable seat and devoted myself to writing up the previous twenty-four hours while *'Er Indoors* indulged herself with a wander around the shopping options.

Once the call came, boarding went smoothly, but some difficulty in the luggage compartment downstairs meant that the load needed re-stowing, delaying our departure by half an hour or so.

While we were taking stock of this development, an announcement - first in English, then in Japanese - advised the temperature on the ground at Kansai was a far-from-comfortable eight degrees Celsius.

Obviously, the majority of the passengers, being Japanese, either tend to zone out while the English version of such announcements goes across, preferring to wait till they can get the information in their preferred tongue or else they just don't understand English.

If that sounds like I'm being uncharitable, when the English announcement concluded, *'Er Indoors* and I discussed the need to adjust our luggage to counter extremes of temperature.

We'd just finished when the Japanese version of the same information went across, resulting in a noticeable shudder from the majority of the plane's population.

Looking back, we decided the announcement was a tactical move to provide those on board with something to talk about. Or, if travelling alone to occupy the mind while the rearrangements were happening down below.

Once we were in the air, there was nothing for it but to sit back and try to find something to occupy the mind over the flight's seven and a half hour duration.

Under normal circumstances, I'd have a book to read and with the iPod supplying a suitable soundtrack that would be quite sufficient.

But since I was carrying one book that needed to last me for a bit over two weeks, the time from take-off to touch-down was spent toggling between various modes.

Customs paperwork, reading, writing the Travelogue, eating, meditating on various subjects, listening to the iPod - and despite predictions from certain quarters, I found enough variety to prevent the time from dragging unduly.

Once a wave of excitement went through the group of homeward-bound home-stay students in front of us as land came into sight, we were able to spend the rest of the flight trying to figure out exactly where we were.

That wasn't as easy as you might think, given the haze that covered most of the visible countryside.

We were looking towards the afternoon sun, which didn't help matters much.

But as we approached ever closer to Kansai International (**KIX** in Airport Code - **KAN** was probably allocated to Kansas City), *'Er Indoors* spotted more and more familiar landmarks until, eventually, we were over Osaka Bay on final approach.

Once we landed, a lengthy taxi took us around three sides of the terminal to the disembarkation point.

The air bridge delivered us into the building and, by the straightforward approach of following those in front of us we ended up on the monorail that carried us down to the inevitable encounter with **Customs and Immigration**

Among *Hughesy's* circle of acquaintances, it's frequently been noted that from time to time you wander into the local **Post Office** to find yourself on the end of a very long queue.

Almost invariably, by the time you've made your way to the counter and concluded your business, the previously lengthy queue is now totally non-existent.

In most cases, apart from the **Post Office** staff, you tend to find you're the only person in the building.

I had no idea the same principle applied in international airports.

Arriving in the **Immigration Hall**, *'Er Indoors* (of course) headed for the Japanese-passport-holders' section, where her entry to her homeland proceeded without incident.

Then she settled down to wait for *Yours Truly*.

For my part, I attached myself to the end of a queue comprising, at a rough guess, several hundred people.

Part of the problem was the fact that our flight was half an hour late.

If it had been on time, I guess I would have found myself in front of people who were now in front of me.

As the serpentine line inched towards the processing area, we passed large notices advising that, as of late last year, all foreigners entering Japan needed to be fingerprinted and photographed.

In some cases, the procedure seemed to take a couple of seconds.

Eventually, I found myself second in line from the processing point.

I was looking forward to whatever lay on the other side of the barriers, but the guy in front of me seemed to encounter all sorts of obstacles.

If I didn't spend five minutes waiting for the opportunity to move into another spot presented itself, it certainly felt like five minutes.

Over forty-five minutes or so standing in line, it seemed there only had been a single international flight arrive.

I watched as a handful of passengers who'd arrived after me disappeared towards the baggage carousel while I waited for a vacancy to allow me to shift to another line.

Eventually, I found my way through another processing point, headed down, collected the luggage and passed straight through the rest of the process in no time flat.

Faced with revealed form, one would have expected further delays from the airport to the hotel, but we arrived at the shuttle bus departure point with about five minutes to spare.

Since the rush hour was well and truly past the scheduled sixty-five minute trip to downtown Kōbe took more or less the advertised time span.

*'Er Indoors*, for some reason, decided to install us on the port side of the bus, generously allowing me the window seat.

That meant the first half of the journey had us passing docklands, skirting industrial estates and crossing waterways on the port side while the other side looked over the fairyland twinkle of a major conurbation.

In fact, it was some forty minutes after we started when I spotted the first conspicuous residential building on our side of the bus.



I was just reflecting that one dockland/industrial area around the world must look just like any other one when you remove the neon signs (and the neon signs were conspicuous by their absence at the time) when a voice from beside me said:

*Look over there - that's Osaka Castle.*

At which time, I sent an urgent email to myself.

*Self. Next time we take this trip we sit on the starboard side of the bus.*

Alighting from the bus at **Sannomiya**, Kōbe's main rail terminal and the hub of several transport options it took us a few minutes to locate the departure point for the next shuttle bus, which would transfer us to the **Meriken Park Oriental Hotel**.

Since the next bus was due in about five minutes, that gave us time for a brief debate about the night's eating arrangements.

There were a couple of options close at hand, but I felt that if we went for a look, we might well miss the bus and face a half-hour wait.

On the other hand, we'd had a substantial meal the previous night and snacks on the plane.

The beef rendang and a pastrami sandwich were both considerably better than my limited experiences with airline food suggested they were likely to be.

So it wouldn't do us all that much harm if we failed to find an acceptable snack option at the hotel.

And if we were going to go hungry, there was a bottle of *Heathcote Shiraz* to deaden the pangs.

Once the shuttle had delivered us to the hotel, we were checked in, offered an impressive explanation of the breakfast options and handed over to a porter, who conducted us to our room.

Arriving outside the door, our friendly porter embarked on a lengthy demonstration of the correct use of the key card.

That might have been understandable if the explanation was in English and directed towards a hairy foreigner.

But it was in Japanese, directed at *'Er Indoors* who'd been privileged to receive a similar, somewhat shorter, explanation downstairs.

It seemed somewhat pointless, except as an exercise in repeated bi-directional courtesies.

Inside the room, he proceeded to repeat at length the explanation of the breakfast options we'd already received at the check-in counter, before graciously withdrawing.

Throughout this process, I was left alone to ponder that this guy bore a remarkable resemblance in the mannerism department to a certain ex-pupil known in Year Four circles as *Harry Houdini*.

When I mentioned this resemblance to *'Er Indoors*, the look I received in return suggested further significant evidence had been added to the prosecution brief in the case of *The Crown versus Hughesy's Sanity*.

After a few minutes taking in the view across the harbour, a chance encounter with the room service menu revealed the availability of various reasonably-priced snacks.

So we ventured downstairs and ended up with a club sandwich and a fruit parfait which provided the stomach lining we needed when we attacked the Shiraz, which we'd left quietly breathing upstairs.

And charming it was, too.

Lights Out was some time after eleven.

But with a midday checkout and the prospect of a substantial buffet breakfast in the morning, the lateness of the hour was never going to be an issue.

**Japan April 2008**

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# The First Bit

**Friday, 4 April**

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When I'm safely ensconced in **The Little House of Concrete**, one of the problems that recur in the day to day cycle is the relatively early rise.

Except in exceptional circumstances, when the sun rises, so does *Hughesy*.

Not that I'm averse to sleeping in.

The lack of blackout curtains in the bedroom means it's difficult to remain asleep once the roseate glow of morning sunlight starts to seep into the room, assuming you're in a state of consciousness higher than totally comatose.

Which means when I awoke fully refreshed to find the room in darkness at eight a.m. I was impressed.





*Hughesy's* hotel ratings have tended to deal with the presence of abundant hot water (an important criterion).

But if I had to specify one thing that raises a hotel into the top bracket (at least in my book), it's the possibility of sleeping in until the body tells you that it doesn't want to sleep in anymore.

And I found that to be the case in almost every hotel we stayed in over the next fortnight.

Having completed the morning preliminaries, just after nine we wandered into the larger of the two restaurants offering breakfast for my first encounter with the Japanese *Viking* (which is, essentially, a much easier way of spelling *Smorgasbord*).

After a light supper the previous night, faced with the prospect of taking on enough fuel to keep us going until dinner time that evening, I attacked the range of delicacies on offer with alacrity.

I started with a plate of more-or-less-Western-style breakfast, then followed it with a plate of the Japanese version.

After a return to the Western side, I polished off an omelette.

The final selection stemmed from an urge to relieve a chef without anything to do.

*'Er Indoors* suggested two individuals rostered onto the scrambled eggs/omelette detail looked bored.

*Hughesy* did something about it.

Bookmakers fielding in the *What're the first two things Hughesy adds to the plate when he reaches the buffet stakes* would have lost heavily.

The first things added to the plate?

Cod roe spaghetti and parmesan cheese.

The alert reader will possibly have noted I previously referred to *more-or-less-Western-style* breakfast.

I thought it looked like *Carbonara*, and wasn't far off the mark.

Once we'd eaten, packed and checked out, we emerged into the outside world to find conditions were much colder than anticipated.

That prompted several extra layers of clothing added while we awaited the arrival of the shuttle bus.

Back at **Sannomiya**, I had my first encounter with a subway system designed to move the maximum number of people with the greatest possible efficiency.

For a start, lines indicate where the doors will be when the train stops.

So, if you anticipate wanting a seat for your journey, you not only join the queue at one of the clearly marked boarding points.

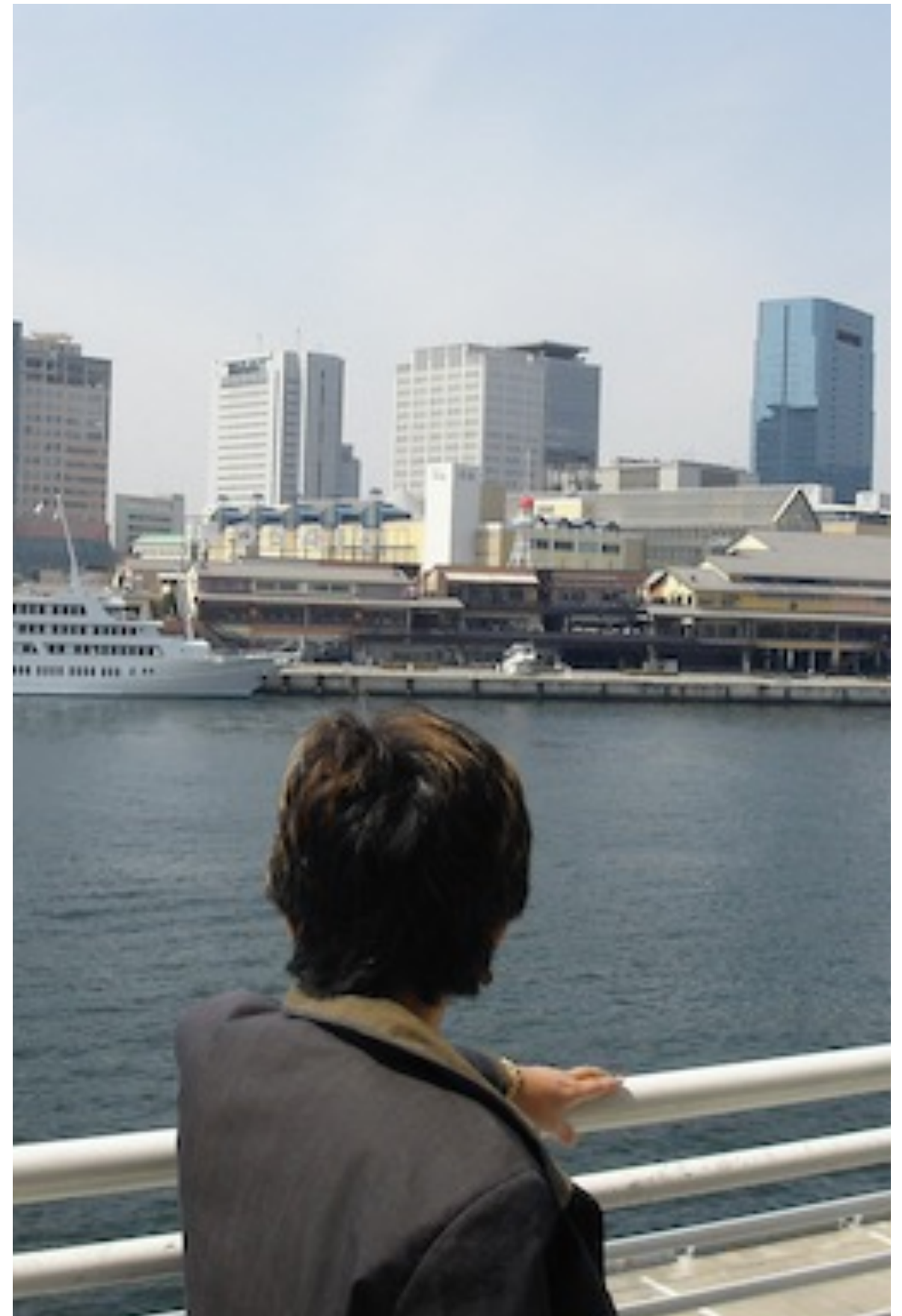
You can always decide to wait for the next train, assuming you can afford the time, should the queue be too long this time around.

That should, of course, place you at the front of the queue.

Once the train arrives, passengers alighting from the train leave through the middle of the doorway, passengers boarding do so from the sides.

Aboard the train, with all our luggage, we were off to *The Mother's* apartment in the dormitory suburbs at **Myodani**.

At **Myodani** station, the quantity of luggage meant we took a taxi the rest of the way.



*'Er indoors* had carefully worked out the logistical arrangements.

What we needed for the next day and a half would fit in my backpack.

After that, we'd be lugging one piece of luggage for the following week or so, replacing it with an overnight bag for the final **Kōbe > Kyoto > Nara > Kōbe** leg.

Everything surplus to our immediate requirements would remain with *The Mother* at **Myodani**.

Once the luggage had been sorted out, a bus took us back to the station, where we diverted towards an electrical store to pick up an improved set of earpieces for the iPod and a 2 GB memory card for the camera.

From there, we headed back downtown to the evening's accommodation at the **Urban Hotel**.

On the way, I learnt another valuable lesson.

When leaving the station, make sure you choose the correct exit.

There were plenty of them, but only one matched the map *Madam* had printed off the internet, and it wasn't the one we chose.

That was a significant issue since the hotel was discreetly tucked away on a side street and took quite a deal of finding.

But, on arrival, we found a spacious room that would do very nicely.

A superficial attempt to find the establishment through a **Google** search while completing this entry failed to return an English-language result, which is why the reader won't find a website link.

Once we'd showered and changed it was back to the subway so we could head over to **Osaka** for our appointment with the *Office Manager* and the *Cereal Queen*.

We left the hotel, turned right (we'd come in on the left-hand side) walked around the block and found, lo and behold, the exit we should have taken an hour or so earlier.

In other circumstances, I might have been tempted to pause for a browse the bookshops that line the entrance to that section of the station complex.









Having plenty of time on our hands before seven o'clock, *'Er Indoors* decided it was advisable to stop off along the way for a spot of cherry-blossom appreciation.

It wasn't until we were off the train and heading along the banks of the stream that I started to realise why cherry blossom time was such a big deal.

You can't tell from the photos since I positioned myself to photograph flowers rather than crowds, but we arrived just before five o'clock.

There was a sizeable crowd already on hand, and while we went for a wander, the crowd grew.

To a certain casual hairy foreign observer, it seemed what we were seeing was as much about social interaction, an excuse to get together with friends and relatives to eat, drink and enjoy the scenery, as it was about the aesthetics of the cherry blossoms.

As the crowd built up, we decided to leave them to it, resume the journey to **Osaka** and arrive at the rendezvous with plenty of time to spare.

The meeting point was **Kinokuniya Bookstore** at the entrance to **Umeda Station**.



For a start, there isn't one entrance to the largest bookstore I've ever seen.

There are at least two, on either side of the concourse that formed the conduit for thousands of people heading downtown from the suburbs in search of their Friday night entertainment and further thousands of people heading in the opposite direction.

We had enough time on our hands to sneak inside the bookshop, where I found an Inspector Rebus novel (**Resurrection Men**, in case you're interested) brand new for eight-hundred and something yen (around eight Oz dollars).

It served to point out, yet again, that Australian readers are paying through the nose for their literary entertainment. I weakened and bought it.

Back outside, we were faced with a difficult choice.

If we placed ourselves outside either entrance, there was no way we could keep an eye on the other one.

And if we tried to put ourselves in the middle, we'd more than likely be swept away by the rushing tide of humanity and wouldn't have been able to monitor either side effectively.

Around us, people were talking animatedly into mobile phones as they attempted to establish the whereabouts of the people they were supposed to be meeting.

We decided to alternate between the two sides and put our faith in digital technology.

In the end, we didn't need to.

I had a height advantage over *Er Indoors* and knew we were looking for two people arriving from opposite directions, one slightly above average Japanese height, one slightly below.

I sighted them before they'd finished ringing *The Mother's* mobile, which had been entrusted to *Er Indoors* for the duration of our stay.

From there, it was a case of finding the selected eatery, which wasn't quite where our guide thought it was, necessitating the use of digital technology as an aid to navigation.

Once we'd arrived at ***Kitchen Stadium*** (I gather the ***Iron Chef*** is far enough back in Japanese TV history to have removed threats of legal action for copyright infringement) it was time for the ritual exchange of gifts.



*‘Er Indoors* had bought packets of dried mango for gift-giving purposes.

*Office Manager* was thrilled to receive some while the *Cereal Queen* went into rapture at the sight of a packet of *Just Right*.

Your actual common or garden breakfast cereal is a rare commodity in the Land of the Rising Sun.

When that was done, we settled down to exchange news, eat and drink.

**Kitchen Stadium** is a New York-style restaurant and bar serving pasta, pizzas, rice, steak, chicken, seafood and vegetable dishes prepared in an open kitchen easily visible from the booth where we were sitting.

The four of us worked our way through a multitude of tastes though the task of splitting some platters four ways presented a slight problem.

Still, you don't always want to try absolutely everything.

One dish arrived with an accompanying bottle of *Tabasco*, and when the waiter learned that I was partial to a spot of hot sauce, he returned bearing a range of bottles from Belize.

Very nice, but extremely hot and a perfect example of why *Hughesy's* taste buds don't detect delicate or subtle flavours.

Still, my appreciation of the sauces on offer was rewarded with a sample of an incendiary number from **Okinawa**.

The island was home to our friendly waiter and the group sitting at the table next door.

They were chain-smoking, celebrating of a win in the grand final of the nationwide High School baseball championship that we'd spotted on various TV screens in the course of our afternoon's travels.

*Hughesy's* photo albums from the *Australia* filming in Bowen also attracted a deal of interest from two girls who'd spent six months helping out *‘Er Indoors* and Bowen High's Japanese teacher.

Our train back to Kosoku Kōbe was crowded when we boarded just after ten o'clock, which made finding seats a matter of good luck rather than good management.

The population had thinned considerably by the time we arrived, well and truly ready for another good night's sleep.

That wasn't looming on the immediate horizon.

The convenient entrance to the station we'd discovered had been closed, presumably, around the time the bookstalls closed.

However, earlier attempts to locate the hotel had left us with some knowledge of the neighbourhood.

So, once we'd found our way out of the station, the task of navigating back to the accommodation wasn't all that difficult.

Much easier than it would have been if we'd selected the right exit in the afternoon.

In other words, what you lose on the roundabout you make up for on the hurdy-gurdy.

## Saturday, 5 April

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Since we had swapped the suitcases for a backpack the day before, there was no need to do anything about the luggage once we'd checked out of the **Urban Hotel** the next morning and prepared to head for **Himeji**.

Since we'd eaten well the night before also meant there was no immediate need for breakfast, so it was a case of straight onto the train and off for further *sakura*-viewing.

We managed to find two seats opposite a Cub Scout troop on their way somewhere, prompting *Hughesy* to reflect that nine-year-old boys tend to be much the same the world over.

Having finished work two-and-a-bit years ago, I don't remember much about Year Four school excursions, but the behaviours I was watching on the seats across the aisle looked uncannily familiar.

Once we reached **Himeji** crowds heading down the avenue from the station to the castle should have warned us that things were about to become crowded.

I didn't realise how many people use *sakura* and a sunny Saturday as an excuse for a day out.









Subsequent information suggests a figure somewhere more than seventy thousand.

We took a break to grab breakfast at a noodle outlet, and a successful attempt at using chopsticks.

That's an achievement I was, for some inexplicable reason, unable to repeat.

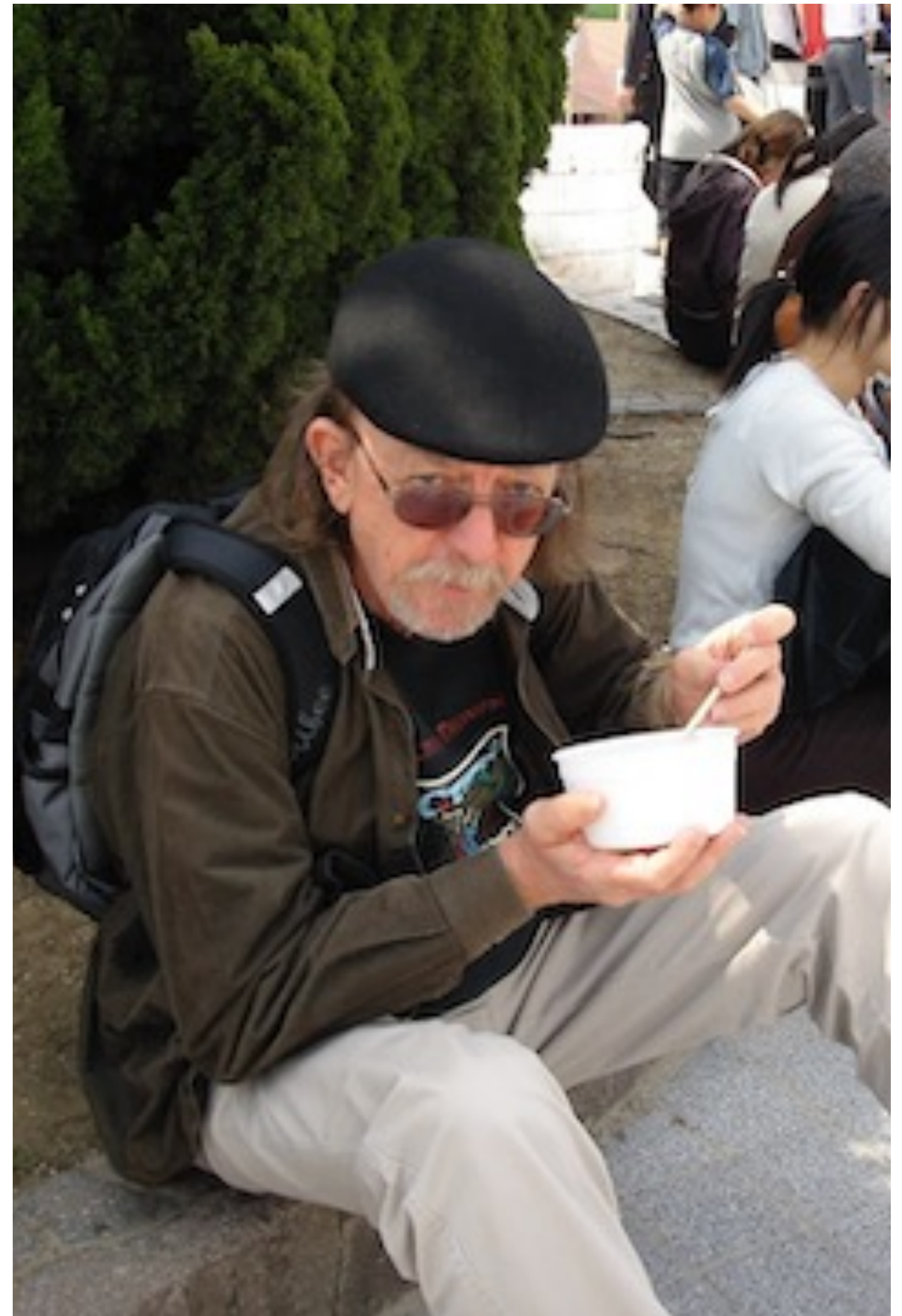
Nourished, we felt ready to join the queues forming at the entrance to the castle grounds.

Alarm bells should well and truly have been ringing at this point.

But once we'd passed into the extensive grounds within the castle's outer walls the presence of vast areas of blue tarps under the trees and musical entertainment in the background suggested it mightn't be too bad once we'd paid the admission fee and passed into the castle proper.

**Himeji Castle** dates back to 1609 and is considered Japan's most spectacular structure of its kind, mainly because it has survived for four hundred years without falling victim to fire, earthquake or enemy action.

**James Bond** fans will recognise it as the secret ninja training school, and rocket centre from *You Only Live Twice*.











**Tom Cruise** wandered through artificial snow and the castle grounds in *The Last Samurai*.

Inside, we followed the tour path through the **West Bailey**, past a long storehouse where rice and salt were stockpiled in case the castle was besieged and into the main *donjon*, noting the population density seemed to be increasing gradually.

Once we'd started the ascent to the upper levels of the main structure, we found the reason.

A steady stream of people admitted to the grounds headed for the walk through the buildings.

But this was reduced to a single line as they attempted to reach the upper levels of the castle.

Faced with an almighty squeeze and, more than likely, a lengthy wait, we bailed out of the tour as soon as the opportunity arose.

Instead, we headed for the tranquillity of the gardens next door.

**Himeji Kokoen** was constructed as recently as 1992 to commemorate the centenary of the local municipality.





While they may have been there for less than twenty years, nine separate gardens in the complex look like they're much older.

While the gardens might have been better with autumn leaves, they were quite spectacular, and while plenty of people passed through, relatively uncrowded compared to the crush in the castle next door.

From the gardens, we had to hurry to meet up with *Minnie*, one of *Madam's High School friends*, who presented *'Er Indoors* with a piece of work that's gracing the living room as I write.

There wasn't too much time for them to catch up on old times.

We had to find our way back to the station, stop off at **Myodani** to pack the suitcase that would carry clothes for the next (week-long) stage of the trip, return to downtown **Kōbe**, check-in, change and meet up with two more of *Madam's High School friends* by six-thirty.

Which didn't leave us a whole lot of time to catch our breath.

Once we'd alighted at **Sannomiya**, it was a matter of moving as fast as possible.



We checked in, changed, and then made a brief subway journey got us to the rendezvous on time.

I'd been warned the couple we were meeting knew their way around **Kōbe**'s restaurants, but I wasn't expecting the high-class Chinese establishment where I found myself sipping beer and wondering how we were going to work the ordering.

In the long run, we entrusted ourselves to the chefs.

We were rewarded with a succession of tasting plates covering a range of tastes and textures, though I must admit that the jellyfish starter had a texture that I, for one, wouldn't have expected.

Jellyfish, you may be surprised to learn, is, if not quite crunchy, much firmer in texture than I would have expected.

Comments about *Hughesy*'s liking for a splash of chilli produced one extra-hot dish featuring a dried chilli that, it was suggested, I might prefer to avoid sampling.

The dish itself was wonderfully warm and faced with the lone dried chilli that remained on the plate. I abandoned any thought of discretion.

I certainly needed the two beers that were necessary to quell the flames, but it was very tasty.

As previously indicated, *Hughesy*'s taste buds don't do subtle but throw a bit of chilli their way...

And the witnesses seemed impressed.

Once the meal was over we faced a ten-minute walk back to the hotel, so we bade farewell to our hosts for the night and headed back to recharge the batteries before the next day's excursion to **Kyoto**.



## Sunday, 6 April 2008

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Reflecting on the previous day's adventures, and bearing in mind this was the only hotel where we were booked in for two nights, I decided to lighten the load in the backpack.

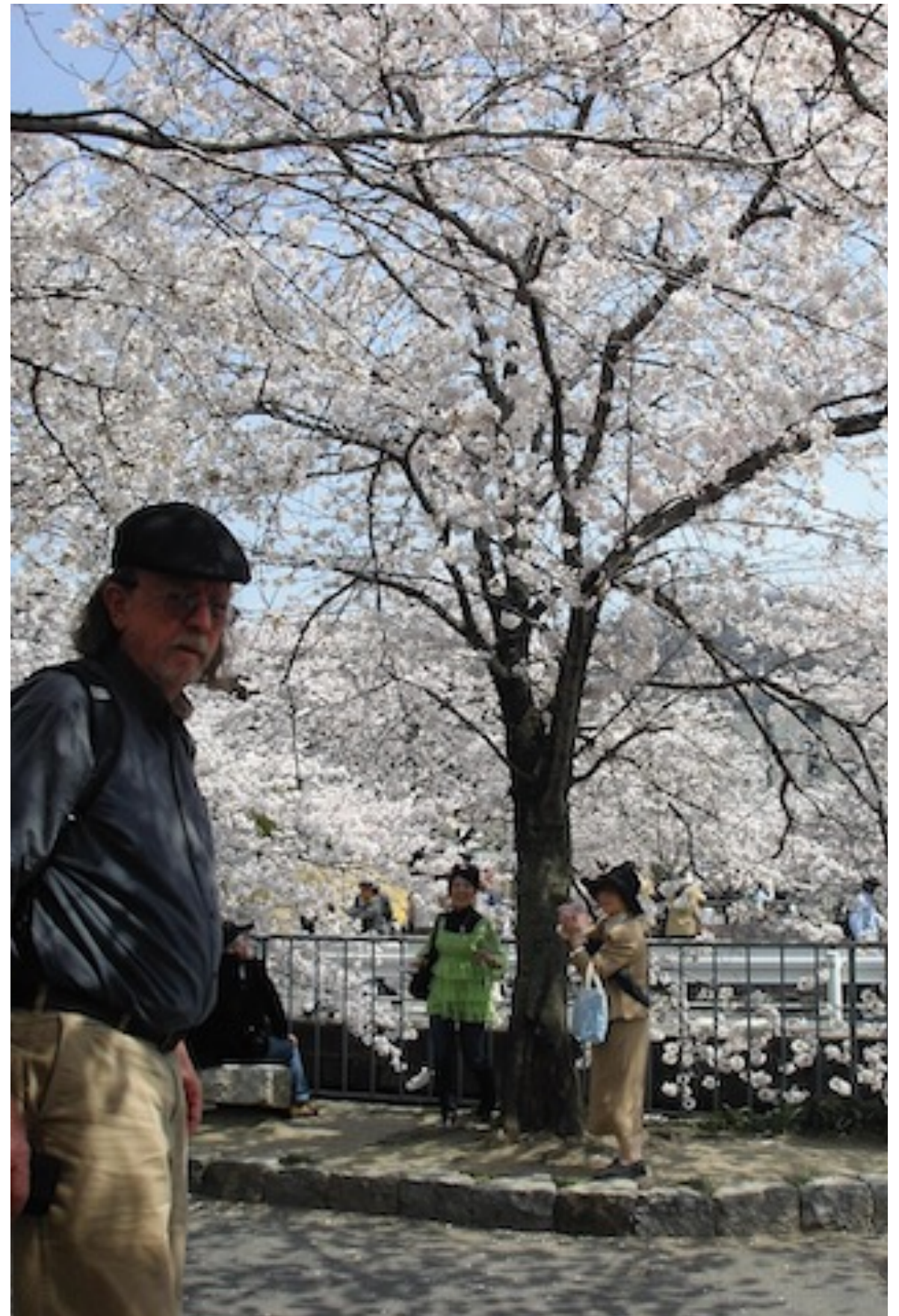
I placed the bottle of *Steingarten* in the fridge before we shut the door and set off for **Sannomiya** en route to **Kyoto** where, on a sunny *sakura* season Sunday, *one could go*, so I was informed, *to look at the people*.

Even after the **Himeji** episode, I didn't appreciate just how many people were likely to be involved.

Prior experience also suggested breakfast might be a good idea, so when we reached the station, we found a suitable eatery and placed our orders.

I thought a hot dog might be a non-controversial selection and was bemused when it arrived accompanied by a salad and a dab of mashed potato.

By the way, it's surprising how often mashed potato turned up over the next twelve days.







We managed to snare seats on the train out of **Sannomiya**, but we had to change trains en route, and the second train must have been packed to the gunwales when it left **Osaka**, so we were forced to stand for the second leg.

Once we'd arrived, *'Er Indoors* announced her knowledge of the local geography left something to be desired, and we needed a map.

That resulted in a search for information that seemed to take an hour and involved enough changes of direction to leave me completely disoriented.

Even if I'd known where we'd started.

Which, of course, I didn't.

Once we had a map, we wandered out in search of a bus and found queues meandering away from close to a dozen points.

Buses appeared, in what seemed totally random order, from time to time, so we attached ourselves to what we thought was the right queue (it wasn't) and settled down to wait.

Close by, some out-of-towners managed to attract the attention of one of the officials wandering around the area.





While I had no idea what the conversation was about, it was enough to direct us towards a completely different location.

Apparently, over there, we would find a more appropriate and marginally less crowded alternative that would deliver us to a point close to our main objectives, **Ginkakuji temple** and the **Philosopher's Path**.

The bus delivered us to the foot of the road leading to **Ginkakuji** (and one end of the **Philosopher's Path**), and we joined the crowd headed uphill.

**Ginkakuji**, the *Temple of the Silver Pavilion*, at the foot of the mountains east of **Kyoto** was built in the fifteenth century as a place of solitude for Shōgun **Ashikaga Yoshimasa**.

The main building was going to match his grandfather's **Kinkakuji** (*Golden Pavilion*).

Plans to cover it in silver were delayed by the **Ōnin War**, which ravaged **Kyoto**, and were abandoned after **Yoshimasa's** death in 1490.

The villa was converted into a Zen temple and trees, plants and mosses from all over Japan were planted in gardens designed by the landscape gardener **Soami**.















We didn't get into the main building, which is being renovated, but I was totally blown away from the time we walked through the entrance, where magnificent high hedges line both sides of the approach to the temple.

Inside the courtyard, the first thing you run across is the **Ginshaden** (*Sea of Silver Sand*), with a smooth cone of sand that represents **Mount Fuji**.

From there, following the pathway, you eventually end up looking back over the city of **Kyoto**.

The notes in my journal read *don't write, just show pictures* though I can't leave the subject without mentioning that I particularly loved the moss.

Until that day, if I thought of moss at all, it was something you find on rocks in pools and damp environments, attractive if you like that sort of thing, but nothing to write home about.

I emerged with totally unrealistic ambitions to incorporate moss into the grounds around **The Little House of Concrete**. But, in the end, it was all about the sand.

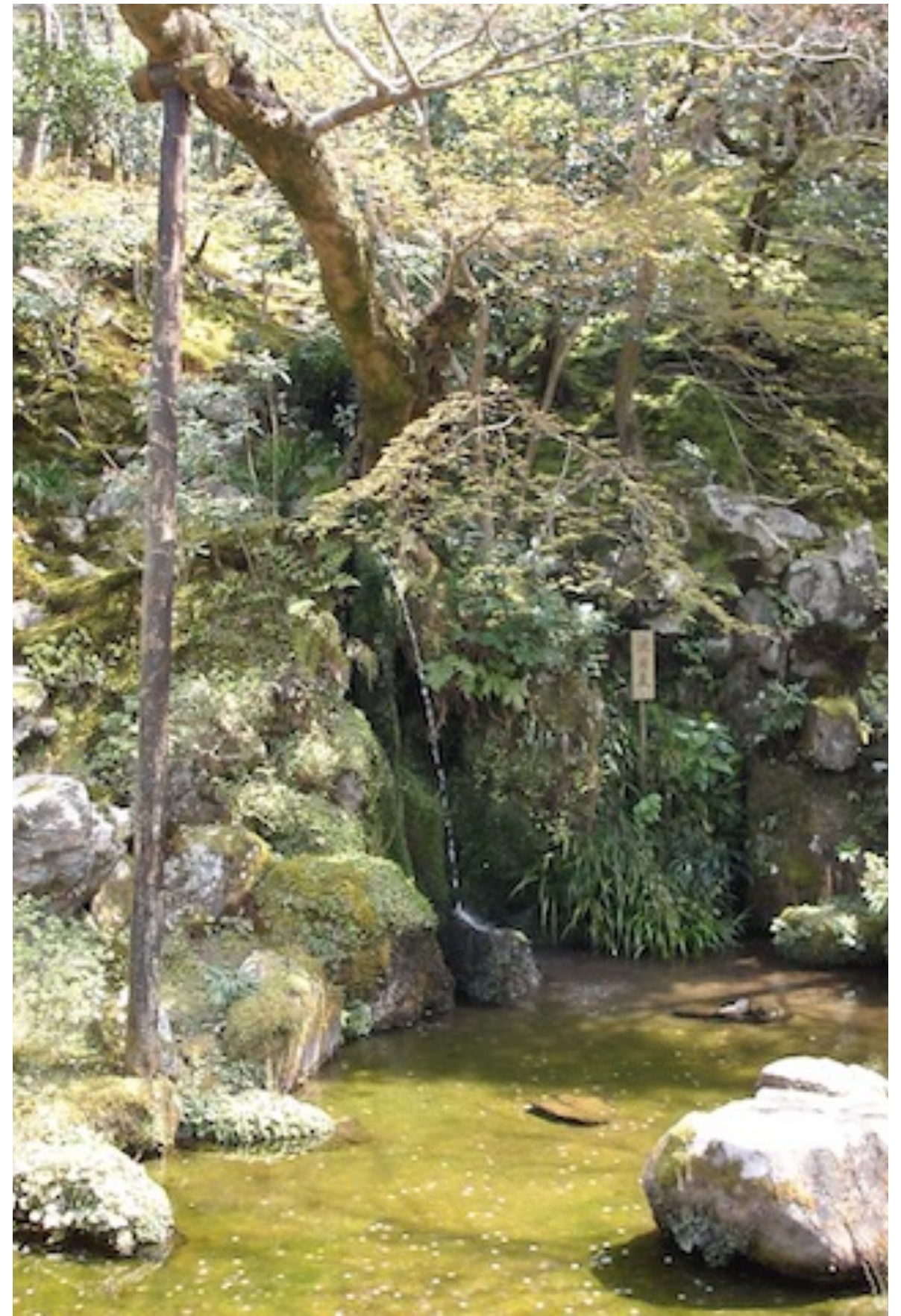
Heading back downhill, we stopped for ice creams and set off on the **Philosopher's Path**.













It's a thirty-minute walk beside a canal, with heritage buildings, tea shops and art stalls beside the path, and a constant flow of people in both directions.

Put that way, it doesn't sound all that fantastic but add the cherry blossom, which is the reason most people are there, and you've got something else entirely.

Eventually, the crush got to us.

We bailed out before the trail finished, and wandered downhill towards the city centre through quiet streets lined with old-style houses.

Eventually, we ended up at an imposing shrine, but we'd had enough of crowds, thank you very much.

Working our way back towards downtown **Kyoto**, we crossed a bridge and dived into alleys lined with bars, restaurants and dens of iniquity.

With a couple of hours' walk under the belt, having landed on a major thoroughfare, we stopped for lunch (a hamburger plate and tuna cream spaghetti).

That was enough, as it turned out, to keep us going for the rest of the day.









Back at **Kawaramachi Station**, we decided we'd had enough, for the time being, boarded a train and managed to find a seat.

That might seem a minor detail, but it was enough to persuade us to travel all the way to **Osaka** rather than change trains as we had in the morning.

That would give us a better chance of a seat on a **Kōbe**-bound train and be assured of a seat.

It had been that sort of day.

Back in Kōbe, we decided we hadn't quite got the full value out of the **three-day Kansai passes**, so we took a ride on the **Portliner Monorail** out to **Kōbe Airport** and back, which gave us a mariners' eye view of the city.

Once we'd finished that little jaunt, it was time to organise the next stage of the odyssey.

First up, we had to convert a couple of **Japan Rail Pass** vouchers into actual tickets, and with that accomplished we were able to book ourselves onto the *Shinkansen* from **Kōbe** to **Kyoto** and the slower train that would carry us from **Kyoto** to **Kanazawa**.

To be quite honest, I'd more or less had enough by the time we got back to the hotel, located in the downtown business district, which meant dining options in the immediate neighbourhood were few and far between.

Instead, I opted for a takeaway snack, a couple of beers from a convenient vending machine and the chilled bottle of *Steingarten*.

Then I set about bringing my travel notes up to date.

Meanwhile, *Er Indoors* slipped in and out of the room to monitor the progress of a load of washing.

The *Steingarten* with its lemon/lime characters on the nose and palate provided a wonderful wind-down after what had been a rather wearing, and at times quite chaotic, day.

Several days later, I heard *Madam* use a word that sounded like *Kyotic* to describe the day's events, adding a new concept to our personal dictionaries.

*Kyotic*: (adjective) State of utter chaos as experienced in Kyoto on a sunny *Sakura* Sunday.

**Japan April 2008**

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# The Rail Pass Leg

**Monday, 7 April**

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It was a case of rise and shine relatively early for the first day of the **Japan Rail Pass** big travel week. When *Er Indoors* checked us out, the process proved to be entirely devoid of human interaction.

Once she was done, we set off in search of the subway station that would begin the day's journey.

I hadn't seen the crowding that people associate with rush hour Japanese subway travel up to this point.

You know what I mean, those images of solidly built railway staff on hand to push a few extra passengers into a sardine-packed carriage.

Solidly built people pushers were conspicuous by their absence when we arrived on the platform, joining a dozen people waiting for the next train.





The arrival of the train, however, suggested they'd been needed further up the line.

The carriages were packed, and making our way towards the carriage against a flood tide of black-suited salary-men proved to be somewhat challenging.

Once the previously packed compartments had emptied, we found ourselves almost alone in a strangely empty carriage.

Of course, we were headed out of the city centre, towards **ShinKōbe Station**, which is, like many of the *Shinkansen* depots, located slightly away from the main commercial and business area of **Kōbe**.

We arrived with plenty of time to spare, which allowed us to enjoy a leisurely breakfast before it was time to board the 8:25 service to **Kyoto**.

Having grown where trains operate much less frequently, I'd been warned that the 8:25 train means the one that actually leaves at 8:25.

That one will arrive, more or less at eight-twenty-three and a half, being a completely different conveyance to the 8:22 which leaves the same platform for the same destination.

I'd become accustomed to guidelines on commuter platforms, but *Shinkansen* stations have barriers with gaps where the doors will open.

Amazingly, that's precisely where they do open.

You've got a minute and a half (if that) to get aboard and locate your seat before you're off.

There are three levels of service on the **Tokaido/Sanyo** *Shinkansen* lines.

The fastest, **Nozomi** (*hope* or *wish*) are express affairs, stopping at a handful of stations.

They aren't covered by the Rail Pass.

That's a pity since they cover the 515 kilometres between **Tokyo** and **Osaka** in two and a half hours.

The intermediate **Hikari** (*light* or *ray*) services stop at a few more stations, usually to allow the faster **Nozomi** to pass.

The slowest **Kodama** (*echo*) services stop at all stations allowing faster services to pass through.

Once aboard ***Hikari 364 Thunderbird 7*** the first section of the journey took us through a tunnel, emerging onto a viaduct comfortably above the surrounding conurbation.

Faced with obstacles like hills, *Shinkansen* services go through rather than over them.

If the obstacle is a built-up area, the solution is to go over rather than through.

Despite the elevation, there wasn't much to see because of the barriers on either side of the track.

There was, predictably, even less when we met with trains heading in the opposite direction.

I did, however, manage to recognise the river we crossed on the outskirts of **Osaka**, which we reached a quarter of an hour after leaving **Kōbe**.

While we were travelling much faster than I'd become accustomed to on the commuter services, things seemed much less blurred as we went past.

That was presumably because the buildings were below us rather than flashing past at eye-level.

And very peaceful travelling it was, sitting back in airline-style seats with the sort of legroom you might get in business class (if you're lucky) with something pleasant to listen to:

*five minutes out of Kyoto on Shinkansen*

*timeless rice paddies amidst scattered timber houses*

*john fahey steamboat gwine 'round the bend*

*on iPod.*

Fourteen minutes after **Osaka**, we were disembarking in **Kyoto**.

The next service would carry us on to **Kanazawa**, wasn't *Shinkansen*-flash but was comfortable enough, with comparable legroom.

Once we'd boarded, I watched as a supervisor (I assume the guard was at the rear) performed some arcane bi-directional ritual to indicate our departure.

Underway I realised what I'd been missing all morning.

There was none of that *click-clack* Australian rail commuters experience as the wheels cross the gaps between one section of rail and the next.

Mind you, if they did exist, at *Shinkansen*-speed, they'd probably sound more like machine-gun fire, which probably explains why they don't (exist, that is).

On the way out of **Kyoto**, we ran into the patchwork landscape I'd noticed before, a quilt of factories, houses, light and heavy industry, an occasional farmlet, and the odd timeless graveyard.

Interestingly, almost every stream we crossed seemed to have been carefully channelled.

As I looked back over the previous couple of days, I couldn't remember seeing a stream where the banks weren't lined with bricks, stone or concrete.

I was also bemused by the fact that many seemingly old, traditional houses were sporting reverse cycle air-conditioning units and even satellite dishes.

As we moved into forested slopes above farmland, the villages became scattered pockets between flooded paddy fields.

By ten-thirty, we had glimpses of mountains away to the right, more or less in the direction we were headed the following day.

As we neared **Kanazawa**, we'd passed through the central cordillera, and it seemed considerably cooler than on the other side of the divide.

I guessed the weather on this side was influenced by colder air emanating from the depths of continental Asia.

The eastern coast was, I suspected, influenced by a warm ocean current, in much the same way as the **Gulf Stream** moderates temperatures along North America's east coast as far north as Newfoundland.

It may have been the haze I'd noted throughout the past few days, but the air looked colder, particularly off towards the mountains where we were headed tomorrow.

Once we'd arrived and found our way out of the station, we had a slight problem finding the hotel.

We went straight past the street where it was located, thinking it was a lane-way too insignificant to feature on the street map.

But eventually we realised we'd gone way too far, backtracked, and found it.

Once we'd deposited the suitcase, we headed off in search of lunch before an afternoon seeing the sights.

Between the hotel and the station complex, the **Forus shopping centre** featured a floor of restaurants, so it seemed the right place to direct our attention.

After completing a circuit of the level in question, we opted for the **G&O (Gumbo & Oyster) Bar**.

Around this time, I realised that *Madam* wasn't kidding when she said you could find any style of food in Japan if you knew where to look.

I wouldn't, however, have thought of setting out in search of Louisiana cooking in **Kanazawa**.

*Er Indoors* selected a set menu with a variety of New Orleans-style treats, which she reported was okay while I ordered a couple of oysters natural and a bowl of seafood gumbo.

It obviously pays to be a foreigner eating early.

When the oysters arrived, there were four of them, plump, juicy and beautiful.

The bowl of *gumbo* also went down well, washed down with a glass of good *Chablis*.

Suitably fortified, we set off to locate the tour bus that does a clockwise circuit around twenty sites of interest and skipped the first couple of sites before alighting at the stop closest to the ***geisha quarter***.

As it turned out, we'd misheard the bus driver's directions.

We should have headed left along the river bank rather than turning left straight off the bus and turning right at the *sushi* bar.

Instead, we headed along the river.

We turned left just after we spotted a couple using a camera, a tripod and a timed delay to get a photo of themselves against a background of cherry blossom.

I took a couple of photos from the same spot before the guy with the tripod asked us whether we'd like a photo of the two of us against the same backdrop they'd used.

We accepted, passed over the camera, and the reader can see the result.

By this time, we realised we'd taken a wrong turn, but knew where the ***geisha quarter*** had to be and headed off in that direction.









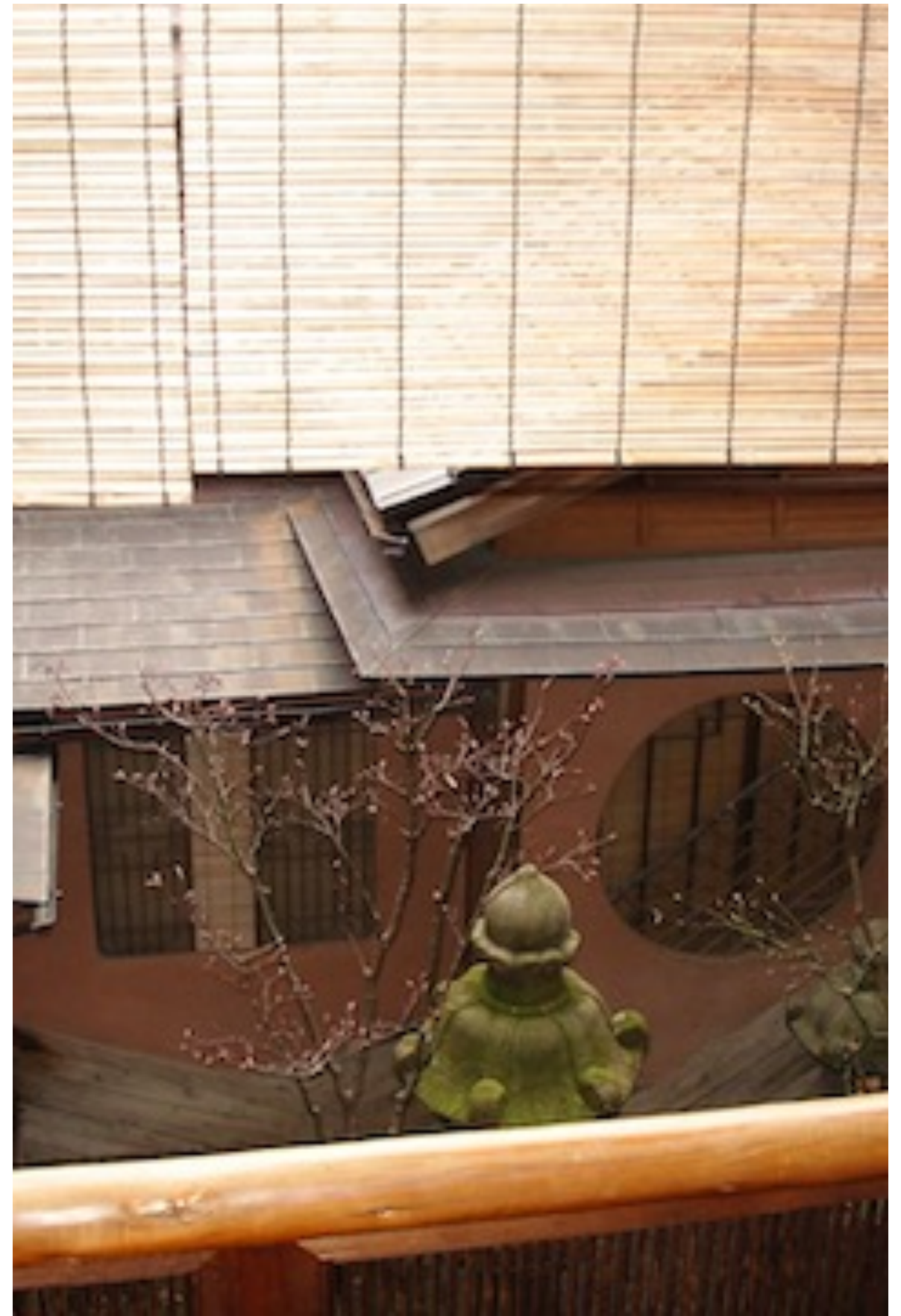
An accommodating old gentleman also helped to put us on the right track.

We stopped at a traditional building set up as an information centre.

Based on the information received there, we retraced our steps to a place where we could tour a recreated *geisha* house.

The camera battery decided to pack it in as soon as we walked through the door.









As a result, we didn't walk away with a complete photographic record of an establishment set up the way things would have been.

Anyone with a mind to sample geisha entertainment might be interested to learn there are still eight houses in the quarter offering the traditional treats.

But be warned - it doesn't come cheaply. A ninety-minute session would set you back \$US 1500...

From there, we headed to the bus stop, boarded the next bus and headed off to **Kanazawa Castle** and more *sakura*.

As soon as we alighted the rain, which had been threatening, decided to do a little more than threaten.

So we walked through the drizzle, managing to complete a loop around **Kenrokuen** before deciding that enough was enough and heading back to the hotel to check-in, rest and recharge the camera.

We figured with a break of an hour or so we could head off on the second-last bus for the day, get a couple of photos and catch the final bus back to base.

We emerged from the warm and dry hotel to find that conditions were cold, drizzly and miserable.











When we'd boarded the bus earlier in the afternoon, it had been crowded.

Now, three or four hours later, it was, practically deserted.

Since we knew where we were going, we planned to snap a couple of photos of the *sakura* in front of the castle, then do a quick lap of the garden.

But as soon as we embarked on the exercise, the camera decided to inform us there was no more space on the memory card. That was just as well since we only just managed to catch the last bus back.

At the station, we booked our seats for the next stage of the trip, then headed back to **Forus** for dinner.

We opted for a Korean eatery that wasn't quite what the doctor ordered and eventually returned to the warmth of the hotel, hoping things would turn out better on the morrow.





## Tuesday, 8 April

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A week into the trip and starting Day Two of the Rail Pass Week, a 7:09 departure from **Kanazawa** precluded thoughts of breakfast before heading to the station.

On the way out of the city, a bleak morning presented no chance to see whether recent precipitation had managed to clear the ever-present haze. Still, there were signs of recent and relatively substantial rainfall.

Given our experiences the previous day, that was hardly earth-shattering news.

**Kanazawa** has a well-deserved reputation for wet weather.

After we'd left the outskirts of the city, we passed through an agrarian landscape, with a misty haze covering the forested hilltops.

Suited salary-men boarded the train at some stations, and I couldn't help noticing that there were upmarket homes scattered through the villages.

Conditions made it difficult to see the snow that I was sure capped the mountains away to our right.





As we moved away from the coast, the land on the left-hand side started to rise, though again, it wasn't possible to get a clear view of the peaks.

At **Toyama**, we had difficulty finding Platform 3, which wasn't well signposted, but eventually discovered the next leg of the journey involved an upmarket version of the old-fashioned rail motor.

When we took our seats in the first carriage, it was apparent, from the picture windows that gave generous views to the front and both sides that we were travelling a particularly scenic route.

The misty conditions were far from ideal for sight-seeing but gave a feeling of travelling in an enclosed world as we headed past streams boosted by recent rainfall.

Despite the rain, many trees held cherry-blossom, which suggested steady drizzle rather than the sort of downpour that would knock the flowers off the branches.

We climbed into the mountains as the mist closed in more tightly, and pylons suggested nearby hydroelectric stations as we passed through some tunnels, skirting sudden canyons and waterfalls.







A lengthy stop at **Inotani**, where I looked out over mist and forest-clad mountains, evoked images of hermits and Zen poets in the mist.

Moving on through **Sugihara**, we passed into an area where there were patches of snow on slopes not far above the line.

By this point, we were following the river valley, almost at river level with the highway on the other side of the stream protected by a roof supported by lines of pillars.

As we rolled through **Sakakami**, I gave up on writing in the journal because scribbling the odd observation was getting in the way of enjoying the scenery.

Approaching **Takayama**, the houses looked to be of much the same construction as those further down.

They'd have to be very well insulated if the occupants were going to make it through harsh winters.

My suspicions about temperatures were confirmed as we alighted in **Takayama** just after nine o'clock in conditions colder than a mother-in-law's kiss.

We deposited the suitcase at the hotel, then headed back to the station to catch the bus to the **Hida Folk Village**.





There, we spent a couple of hours wandering through buildings rescued from river valleys flooded to provide water for hydroelectric schemes.

The houses weren't all that old, not going back much beyond the middle of the eighteenth century, and came from a variety of sources, representing a range of occupations and social classes.

There were farmhouses with upper storeys devoted to the raising of silkworms, a priest's home, a village head man's house where the walls could be removed to make a room large enough for meetings, and a woodcutter's hut as well as a way-station from the main road.











And one building erected as a residence for a wealthy landowner.

Casual onlookers might be inclined to get sniffy and dismiss the place as a tourist trap. But it looks like a genuine attempt to preserve aspects of the area's traditional lifestyle, with streams of melt-water flowing downhill to power water mills.

Here and there patches of snow remained in hollows protected from the springtime sun.

Each building, for example, was heated, if that's the right word to use for a few burning coals in the living area, by fire rather than electricity.



I couldn't help wondering how the occupants coped with temperatures that reached below minus twenty with two metres of snow on the roof.

It is not, however, the sort of place to take kids who can't tie up their shoelaces since venturing inside almost every building involves removing the footwear.

In hindsight, I wished I'd invested in a pair of Velcro-equipped joggers.

Two hours of wandering on an empty stomach meant that we weren't going to wait till we got back to town to eat.















Outside, we found a restaurant serving noodles with char siu pork. I washed it down with half a litre of *Asahi* before we headed back to the bus stop for the return trip to town.

Having just missed one bus, we thought the next one might deliver us to downtown **Takayama**, and it turned out that it was the next bus back to the station.

There was one minor technicality.

It wouldn't be setting out on that route for another twenty minutes since it had to complete a different loop around the town's attractions.

The driver, thankfully, decided that although we were going to be heading back in twenty minutes, we might as well board now, rather than stand around for the intervening period.

Which is what we did.

Once we'd returned to the station precinct, it was still too early to book into the hotel.

We took a stroll to **Takayama Jinya**, the government official's residence and administrative centre from the **Edo Period**.

It turned out to be a fascinating place, although there wasn't a great deal of information available in English. The English-speaking guide was unavailable that day.

We were, however, there at the same time as a group of Japanese with an own-language guide.

From the audience reaction, if the English-speaker is half as good as the Japanese counterpart, his guests would be in for an entertaining time.

From **Takayama Jinya**, we headed across the river to the **Sanmachi Traditional Buildings Preservation area**.

Unfortunately, straight after we arrived, the camera decided it had had enough for the moment, prompting us to use the current visit as a reconnaissance.

We'd wander back in the morning with a recharged camera for a few photographic memories.

Back at the hotel, we took it easy until dinner time, when we faced a minor dilemma.

**Takayama** is famous for **Hida beef**, and we decided that was the preferred option for the evening meal.





The only problem was deciding which particular venue to choose.

We took a wander around the area west of the hotel, found a couple of possibilities, and eventually chose **Yamatake-Shōten**, the one closest to home.

Although it didn't seem like it straight away, it was an inspired choice, a retail outlet for a beef-raising operation with a sideline offering a *cook-it-yourself* service.

Once we'd selected the beef we'd like for dinner, we picked vegetables to accompany it and moved to our table, where hot coals had been placed under the metal grill in the middle of the table.

The proprietor got us started on the cooking process, then left us to it with a bottle of *2006 Cotes du Rhone* to keep us occupied while, piece by piece, we cooked our dinner. Definitely delicious.

The beef, however, would never pick up a heart-smart tick in Australia and definitely wouldn't appeal to anyone fanatical about trimming the fat off their steak.

We were finishing off the bottle when the proprietor returned to check everything was under control.

It was.





Other customers were conspicuous by their absence, so he stayed to talk to *'Er Indoors* (his English being effectively non-existent).

He's obviously someone with pride in his hometown and its culture and proceeded to bring out and unroll posters about the forthcoming **Takayama Festival** the following week.

Although I was an uninvolved bystander unable to catch the commentary the next ten minutes or so were one of the absolute highlights of the fortnight.

Each poster had been rolled and unrolled countless times and showed signs of wear and tear.



Someone doing this sort of thing for a living, or as a regular part of his business would have gone out, gathered a collection of posters, and had them laminated.

Then, more than likely, he would have worked up a ***PowerPoint*** presentation he could leave running on a laptop while he attended to more pressing matters.

Our host, on the other hand, excused himself while he attended to other matters, returning after each interruption to talk about something he obviously takes great pride in.

One interruption involved getting a young Spanish couple at the next table started on the *cook-it-yourself* caper, attempting to communicate with them in extremely limited English.

I presumed his Spanish is about as good as mine. All the while, he was commenting over his shoulder to *'Er Indoors* in Japanese. Amazing.

After that, there was nothing for it but to stroll the fifty metres back to the hotel, pick up a couple of cans of beer from a vending machine and retire for the night.



## Wednesday, 9 April 2008

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At breakfast, I was surprised to notice the people sitting at the next table were the Chinese couple with the tripod from Monday afternoon in **Kanazawa**.

At the time, we thought they were from **Hong Kong**, but as we exchanged pleasantries, we learned they were, in fact, from **Melbourne**.

They'd spent most of the last fortnight based in **Osaka**, heading out to wherever the cherry-blossom was good each day. They were making a loop through the mountains before heading home.

It is, as has frequently been remarked, a small world.

And it seems to be shrinking.

Given our relatively loose schedule for the rest of the day we took our time packing and checking out, and still had two and a half hours to kill before catching the train for the next leg of the trip.

Having missed some serious photographic opportunities the day before, we retraced yesterday's route in reverse.







We took our time as we strolled through the morning markets and managed a little *saké*-sampling.

We ended up outside **Takayama Jinya**, where I overheard a couple of Americans discussing the lack of an English-speaking guide to the building in front of them, which they assumed to be *a temple or something*.

I did my best to encourage them to venture in, despite the lack of English content, but they remained unconvinced.

I wandered away wondering why you'd set out to walk around a strange town without a map. It wasn't as if there's a lack of English-language material in **Takayama**.



















When we arrived, I'd been surprised to discover tourist information came in Japanese, English, French and Italian.

It gave me something to think about as we headed to reclaim the suitcase and set off for the 11:35 train to **Nagoya**.

Seated further back than the day before we didn't have quite the same view to the front.

That's not to say the views to the side were disappointing.

We passed through forests and paddy fields, climbing into the mountains and crossing the divide between the westward-flowing **Miya River** and the eastern-bound **Hida**.

We linked up with the **Hida** at **Kugano**, surrounded by forested slopes before moving downstream through the fringing forest, past hydro schemes and mountain villages with the highway on our right-hand side.

As we headed towards the lower reaches, we passed sections of bare-branched forest amid swathes of green foliage.

At first glance, it seemed these were belts of dead vegetation. Closer glimpses suggested they were deciduous trees amidst hardier evergreens and hadn't redeveloped their foliage so early in the spring.







We stopped at **Nagisa** to let a train headed in the opposite direction pass.

While we were there, lunch arrived in an *eki-bento* (station box) of *Hida Gyumeshi* (beef, rice and vegetables). The handy pamphlet on the train said these came from **Nagoya**.

I assumed the pause to let the other train, which came from **Nagoya**, pass along the single line might have something to do with loading lunch.

In any case, I enjoyed the box of lunch and the *Kirin Lager* I used to wash it down.

Eating kept us occupied as far as **Gero**, one of **Japan's Top Three Hot Spring Resorts**, where boarding passengers filled most of the vacant seats.

It's a popular destination with a history stretching back a thousand years.

We were also back among the *sakura*, conspicuously absent higher up in the mountains.

Passing through forested hills Neil Young's *Be The Rain*, with its call to arms in the fight to defend the Alaskan wilderness, turned up on the iPod playlist. It was a neat piece of serendipity.







By the time it had ended, we were down on the river flats, travelling around sweeping curves beside what looked like a broad stream.

It was, in fact, a dam with the train on one side and the highway on the other.

As we came out onto the river flats, we started to pass low green mounded rows of a crop that I guessed was tea, as the track moved away from the stream.

Twenty minutes out of **Nagoya**, we were up above ground level as we headed into **Gifu**.

We headed back out of the station in reverse on the way back to ground level with our backs to the driver, who I guessed had either swapped ends or been replaced.

With a bit over a quarter of an hour, till we reached our destination, I thought that was unlikely.

Following the usual routine, once we'd alighted, it was a case of straight to the hotel.

This time we were late enough to check in before heading back to the station to meet up with the first of our two appointments for the day.





Just under two years ago, *'Er Indoors* and I headed to the **Whitsunday Coast Airport** to pick up an assistant teacher.

It was a slightly surreal experience as a city girl from Nagoya got her first taste of rural Australia.

Three months later, three members of her family had come to visit her, and we'd met her mother and two sisters on **Hamilton Island**.

Now, outside the store where she'd worked before coming to Australia (quite upmarket, as far as I could tell) we met her mother and one of the sisters.

They whisked us up to the 14th floor for a panoramic view across the city towards **Nagoya Castle**.

From there, we went on to tea rooms on the 52nd floor of the **Marriott Hotel**.

Two hours' chatting saw the flow dominated by *'Er Indoors* and *The Matriarch*, with occasional comments from *The Daughter* and *Yours Truly*.

My sporadic attempts at humour produced polite laughter all round though I was unsure whether the majority of the audience actually got the joke.

We finished with the ritual exchange of gifts as I reflected that the reason the suitcase never got any lighter.

Everything you brought with you as a gift was invariably replaced by whatever they've given you in return.

We headed back to the hotel for a short rest before dinner.

With the batteries recharged, we headed to the lobby to meet up with three more of *Madam's high school and university chums* and headed to the station complex again in search of dinner.

The first option, a nice-looking brasserie, was ruled out through an inability to handle a party of five.

We ended up in an eating and drinking establishment where we worked our way through another exciting variety of small platters with a wide-ranging conversation before drawing stumps around ten.





## Thursday, 10 April

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The next morning we awoke to be confronted by bleak, drizzly weather. When *Er Indoors* checked the weather forecast of *The Mother's Mobile*, it wasn't promising.

Seemingly, indoors was the place to be for the next twenty-four hours or so.

The forecast suggested rain and wind in **Odawara**, where'd we be alighting from the *Shinkansen* on a day where the planned agenda included a lot of walking.

We discussed matters over breakfast, as you do, and headed upstairs to tackle the increasingly difficult task of fitting everything into the suitcase, adding items acquired since yesterday morning.

We managed to stay dry by taking the underground route to the station, arriving in plenty of time despite an initial mild case of panic.

On the platform, I started to realise how many *Shinkansen* services run every day along the **Tokaido** corridor.

The track next door to our platform had trains departing for **Tokyo** at 9:10, 9:19 and 9:27. Our train, also to **Tokyo** (though we were disembarking at **Odawara**) left at 9:22.

In other words, four trains to the same destination leaving in the space of just under twenty minutes.

When we'd booked the day's seats we'd been told that there were no window seats available (we'd landed Car 12 Seats 13 B&C) but, as it turned out, there was no one in 13A.

No one arrived to claim it, so we managed to end up with the window seat since the train was travelling express from **Nagoya** to **Odawara**.

That solved a slight luggage problem on a crowded train.



While there are the predictable overhead racks for hand luggage, on *Shinkansen* there isn't a designated space for large luggage. That's hardly surprising.

Making those provisions would create space constraints in other ways.

Once the places most people stow such items have been filled, there isn't much choice.

You'll just have to squeeze your suitcase between your legs and the seat in front of you.

Fortunately, they've allowed plenty of legroom.

I moved to 13A, *Madam* occupied 13B, and the suitcase had the whole space in front of 13C to itself.

Despite the window seat, there wasn't much to see in a landscape misty wet with rain, so I devoted the time to writing up the previous day's leg of the journey.

Outside, the landscape was pretty much as it had been the last time we were on the coastal plain though I noticed some structures that seemed to be greenhouses.

Surprisingly, there also seemed to be a little more forest than usual.

Before we moved back into the familiar urban sprawl, we reached the bridge across the brackish **Hamana Lake**, a drowned river valley with its mouth blocked by sandbanks.

There were, predictably, plenty of *Shinkansen* headed in the other direction.

One minute you're looking across the landscape, then there's a jolt against the window.

A silver and blue blur obscures the view, which reappears almost before you've had time to blink.

We were seated on the starboard side of the train, but to the left, we had views across to the South Alps as *'Er Indoors* scanned that side, hoping for a glimpse of **Mount Fuji**.

Though spring had well and truly sprung on the lowlands, there was plenty of snow on the peaks.

We passed tea plantings on slopes where rice cultivation would have been out of the question, as well as on flatter ground.

It was probably totally-misguided optimism, but it seemed that the weather away to our right was lifting though there was dense cloud over the mountains on our left.

Still, there was plenty to ponder.

Passing through an urban area, I was surprised to see what looked like a cathedral towering above the surroundings. That might have been in **Shizuoka** though it's impossible to tell for sure.

There are few stations on this section of the *Shinkansen* line. Even if there were, from a train travelling at express speed, you're flat out reading the signs as you whiz past.

The other standout, apart from the odd cathedral-like structure, was an increasing number of tunnels as we headed towards **Atami**.

This coastal hot spring resort has been attracting travellers since the 8th century.

We'd alighted from the train in **Odawara** and were looking for the most appropriate exit when a southbound *Shinkansen* rocketed through the station.

It showed just how fast 200 kilometres per hour is when you're standing nearby.

It was literally a case of *now you see it; now you don't*.

*'Er Indoors* lead us off the platform thirty seconds later, single-mindedly heading off in search of the window where she could pick up a pair of **two-day Hakone passes**.

That left *Yours Truly* struggling down a flight of stairs juggling the suitcase.

About halfway down, I felt a twinge in my right leg, which didn't help the mobility on a day when we'd planned on doing plenty of walking.

Once we'd bought the passes, we caught a local train, which carried us to **Hakone-Yumoto**, and a bus to the **Quatre Saisons Hotel** at Tonosawa.

The bus dropped us off in a car park a hundred metres down the road from the hotel.

That left us with a rather scary walk along the side of a narrow winding road with traffic passing in both directions.

It was about eleven when we dropped the luggage off and walked back to the bus stop in the rain as cars rolled past in alarming proximity.

I don't mind sharing the road with the odd car, but I'd prefer to have the vehicles passing by somewhere beyond an arm's reach.



Back in **Hakone-Yumoto**, we caught the **train to Gora**, an amazing zigzag ride that had switch-backs galore as we headed up into the mountains.

The views on a fine, sunny day would have been spectacular, but the journey through the misty drizzle created a mood of primaeval mystery.

From **Gora**, we took the cable car up the hill to **Sounzan**, just missing the chance to investigate a Swiss restaurant just down the road from the station.

The next stage of the quest involved the **Hakone ropeway** that would end up depositing us on the shores of **Lake Ashi**.

We decided to stop for lunch at a ropeway station, **Owakudani**, one of the top spots for viewing **Mount Fuji**.

A glance at the accompanying photo shows we had as much chance of viewing the mountain as a wheelchair-bound double amputee has of taking out the triple jump gold medal at the Olympics.

Our plans, in other words, were never going to get off the ground.

On the other hand, it was lunchtime.





While *Madam* fancied a fried sweet potato from the lobby, I leaned in favour towards a Japanese curry from the restaurant upstairs.

So I set off in solo mode to find my own lunch, a thousand-yen note in hand.

Seated in the restaurant, I learned that I could have the curry by itself for ¥850 or with egg for 950.

Opting for the egg, I ended up with a plate of curry and rice with a black-shelled soft boiled egg that I peeled and incorporated into the curry and rice mixture.

I don't know if that's the way it's supposed to go, but, lacking any expert guidance regarding the correct protocol, that was what I did.

Downstairs, informing *'Er Indoors* about my action, I was bemused to learn consumption of the seven-year egg had added seven years to my life span.

She pointed to packs of five eggs, but an extra thirty-five years added onto *Hughesy's* life span would be too much for the superannuation fund to handle.

An extra seven would have to do.

Back on the ropeway, we set off once again into the mist, finishing at **Togendai** on **Lake Ashi**, where we boarded what appeared to be a replica of a pirate ship for a sight-seeing cruise to **Moto-Hakone**.

The cruise offers one of the best Fuji-viewing options, but we were flat out seeing past the shores of the lake.

From **Moto-Hakone** it was impossible to see the other end of the lake, let alone any majestic mountain that might be lurking above it.

In **Moto-Hakone**, we decided discretion and the chance to get warm was the better part of valour.





So we boarded a bus back to the hotel, braved the traffic between the bus stop and the front door, and checked in.

When we entered the room I'd, not to put too fine a point on it, just about had enough for the day.

Then we opened the curtains, and the view that greeted us was spectacular.

The hotel is situated right on a bend in the stream that flows down to **Hakone-Yumoto** and, from the rooms on the stream side you have views up and down the steep-sided, heavily-forested river valley.

I would have been quite happy to spend the next hour or so sitting and gazing out the window at the views while the camera battery recovered from the day's ordeal.

*'Er Indoors*, on the other hand, was adamant that I take a trip downstairs to the *onsen*, the hot-spring spa that was the reason the hotel existed.

It was difficult to argue with the notion that it would be good for the muscle that had been troubling my right leg.

On the other hand, the cleansing procedures you needed to carry out before you take the dip into the waters were intimidating, to say the least.



Eventually, I decided that I may as well surrender to the inevitable and traipsed off downstairs.

Under different circumstances, I could have spent longer soaking in the warm water, which does wonders for tired muscles.

But the siren song of the view from an upstairs window proved much stronger than the solitary enjoyment of a giant-sized bathtub.

That pleasure could have been interrupted at any time by the arrival of other guests, so I emerged after ten minutes.

All up the *onsen*-visit had taken twenty minutes out of premium canyon-gazing time.

I had barely settled back into a relaxed gaze across the stream when a phone call advised that dinner - five classic French style courses - awaited us in the restaurant.

A bottle of *Cuvee Quatre Saisons* disappointed on first taste but improved considerably:

(a) with breathing (as a red wine should), or

(b) as the level lowered.

I tend to ascribe improvement to the effects of oxygen on the contents, rather than the impact of the contents on the drinker. However, your mileage might vary.

Back upstairs, *'Er Indoors* attended to various administrative matters while I looked out across the dark stream with the iPod and a can of *Asahi Super Dry* for company.





## Friday, 11 April 2008

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A nudge in the ribs summoned me back into consciousness around 5:10 the following morning. *Er Indoors* was quite keen for the two of us to make an early morning visit to the *onsen*.

A check revealed the facilities were closed for maintenance from 5:30 to 6:00, so we spent a few minutes discussing Fuji-viewing options.

Our train to the **Deep North** was due to leave **Tokyo** after three in the afternoon, and our only other commitment was a lunchtime appointment with *The Interpreter*.

That effectively gave us the whole morning to mount an attempt to glimpse the mountain.

Eventually, we decided a repeat of the train > cable > ropeway routine was preferable to a bus trip to **Moto-Hakone**, which would prove fruitless if the weather was cloudy.

If the weather improved, even if we didn't see Fuji, we'd see views we'd been unable to enjoy yesterday.







Since we could save some time if we caught the train from the station at *Tonosawa* that gave me an excuse, after I was back from the *onsen*, to go for a walk.

I wanted to locate the station that had to be somewhere on the other side of the stream.

Since there were two suspension bridges across the stream, one on either side of the hotel, I guessed one or both must lead to the station. Theoretically, I should be able to complete a circuit, crossing one bridge on the way to the station, and crossing the other one on the return journey.

I planned to confirm my hunches by inquiring at **Reception**, but the area was deserted when I passed through, so I was left to trust my own instincts.

Which, of course, turned out to be totally wrong.

I turned left, on an anticlockwise loop around the route I'd visualised, crossed the downstream bridge and encountered a private residence without an obvious path towards the station.

If The Casual Reader is wondering why *Hughesy* was so confident there was a station there, yesterday's train stopped at a station clearly labelled Tonosawa.





Later, I'd glimpsed a train from my stream-gazing position in the room in the evening.

*Fine, I thought. It's the other bridge. Should have gone that way, since I saw cars crossing yesterday afternoon.*

Heading to the upstream bridge took me past the hotel.

I checked **Reception** on the way, in the hope of gaining guidance, but the area seemed deserted, so I carried on over the bridge and followed the road from there.

The road took me to another small hotel.



There seemed to be a path that looped around behind the buildings, so I followed that.

Sidetracks branched off the main path, but I figured that the route to the station would be fairly well-trodden.

I followed what looked like the best option, which gradually became less and less promising.

In fact, the further I went, the more it seemed that no one apart from the odd adventurous foreigner used the track at all.

Backtracking, I tried various paths that branched off my main track, but each of those seemed to lead to a section of pipe I assumed was associated with the spa business.

Back at the hotel, I found someone at **Reception** and was told I should turn left once I'd passed through the front door and left again at a group of vending machines.

At the downstream bridge, there were no vending machines, so I followed the road downhill, crossed the bridge that took the main road over the stream, and found the machines.

They were situated close to a sign bearing the words **Tonosawa** station and an arrow.

*Fine, I thought. Shouldn't be too far.*

Unfortunately, after a couple of hundred metres, I was faced with a multitude of paths with signs in Japanese and incomprehensible to large hairy non-Japanese-speaking foreigners.

If I had received the same directions when I first set out, I might have been inclined to explore a tad further.

But thoughts of breakfast prompted me to head back to the hotel.

The best option seemed to involve a bus back to **Hakone-Yumoto** and catching the train from there.

Breakfast involved a croissant, juice, and a plate with scrambled eggs, sausages, a hash brown salad and a serve of pasta with mayonnaise, as well as the predictable tea or coffee.

Once we'd finished eating, packing and checking out, we headed back to the bus stop and caught the bus to **Hakone-Yumoto**, where we missed the train by a matter of seconds.

*Never mind, we thought, the next one goes at 9:03, and the weather seems to be improving all the time, and we should be up at the cable railway before ten.*





The train ride was disappointing after the previous day's misty mystery. If we were experiencing it for the first time, I'm sure the reaction would have been different.

Once we were on the ropeway, we realised that the Fuji-viewing prospects were virtually nil, though we were able to get a good view of the sulphurous hell of **Owakudani** on the way.

When we reached yesterday's lunch stop, we headed off in the direction in which, as far as we could make out, **Mount Fuji** must lie.

Since all we could see was a massive bank of white cloud, *Madam* ventured into a souvenir shop to verify that we were heading in the right direction.

She was informed that we were in the right place for a good view of the mountain *but not today*.

In that case, there was nothing for it but to head back down the ropeway and cable car and catch the train to a spot where we could link up with a bus.

That would take us to the hotel, where we could reclaim the luggage, cut our losses and take a taxi back to the station.











A local train should deliver us to **Odawara** in time to take our seats on the 12:35 service to *Tokyo*.

As the train left **Odawara**, I reflected on one of *Frockster*, *the Former-Fishmongrel*'s recurring themes.

If we went to the **Land of the Rising Sun**, we had to plant a Bowen mango tree on **Mount Fuji**.

As *'Er Indoors* scanned the scenery on our left, the suggestion came back to haunt me.

In the wake of an unsuccessful day-and-a-half's attempted Fuji-viewing, it was apparent these sacrilegious sentiments had come to the attention of deities guarding the mountain.

As a result, they'd masked the peak behind a veil of cloud for the duration of our visit.

As the train left **Hakone**, we looked back.

The cloud was slowly lifting.

It seemed the deities had been mollified, though from where we sat on the *Shinkansen* the summit remained shrouded by cloud.

So I turned my thoughts to the next stage of the trip rather than dwelling on the past.

As we headed towards **Yokohama** and **Tokyo**, we moved into a belt of urban development.

However, as we pulled into **ShinYokohama**, I was surprised by the amount of greenery close to the station.

It was hardly surprising to find it was impossible to tell where **Yokohama** ended, and **Tokyo** started.

Just after one o'clock, the train pulled into **Tokyo**, and we set off in search of *The Interpreter*.

Once contact was established, I found myself on the wrong side of a stream of students on an excursion as *'Er Indoors* threatened to turn a corner and disappear from view.

With disaster narrowly averted, we set off to find lunch, eventually settling for pizza before spending about an hour discussing language-related matters and wordplay in general.

I'd been bemused by signs we'd sighted around **Hakone** urging the public to avoid touching "doubtful things".

I was not sure which of an object's properties would render it *doubtful*.



A year or two earlier I'd been equally intrigued by a shop offering "homemade cakes and pies" that operated under the name of **Pumpkin Poo**.

Discussing linguistic oddities with someone whose job involves instantaneous translation from English into Japanese was an enjoyable way to pass the time.

By 3:40, we were back on the bullet train bound for **Bashō** country.

A lengthy tunnel took us to **Ueno station**, where I sighted the new double-decker *Shinkansen* before we plunged into another tunnel.

We emerged looking out over the sprawl of Tokyo's northern suburbs and had hardly gone any distance before two overalled females moved through the carriage collecting rubbish.

I found that odd. We'd been kept waiting on the platform while the train was cleaned before departure.

Or do travellers bring their rubbish on board with them?

After we'd passed **Omiya**, we encountered farmland once again, though there was still plenty of medium-density housing.

And in the middle of one urbanised belt, sighting **Hotel Valentine** I couldn't help wondering what sort of establishment it might be.

There's every possibility the establishment in question could attract the majority of its business from the honeymoon trade.

Of course, there are some other possible explanations, and the name could originate from somewhere right over on the other side of the further reaches of left field.

The blinds on the west side of the train had been drawn to keep out the afternoon sun.

I was glad to have something to look at as we passed patches of forest interspersed with urban areas.

About ten minutes past **Utsonomiya** we were finally in more or less open country stretching to the eastern horizon as we gradually moved into serious forest in between villages and farmlands.

We passed through lengthy tunnels as the land became hillier, and banks of dull grey cloud started to develop overhead.

Glancing across, someone on the port side of the carriage had raised their sunshade.

I caught sight of snow-capped mountains.

The mountains away to the east must have been considerably lower or under the influence of warmer conditions near the coast since there was no snow to be seen in that direction.

We also noticed that we were moving back into areas of cherry-blossom. On the edge of **Sendai**, I sighted one of the few freight trains I'd spotted since I'd first boarded a train in Japan.

The high-speed commuter lines are obviously separated from the corridors that carry the quantities of freight that an economy the size of Japan's must generate.

We arrived in **Kitakami**, our base for the next thirty-six hours comfortably after dark and immediately settled into the routine of booking the next leg of the trip.

That took some time since Sunday's travel involves two changes of train on the long haul back to base in *Kōbe*.

An additional complication reared its head as *'Er Indoors* requested a starboard-side window seat on the final leg, a last

attempt to catch a glimpse of **Mount Fuji** in the wake of *Triple-F's* fantasising.

The only available reserved seats were in the smoking section of the train, so we decided to cut our losses and declined.

While these negotiations were in train, someone I guessed was our host for the next day and a half arrived, mobile in hand, obviously looking for someone.

Having established that she was looking for us, we waited till negotiations had been concluded and the tickets processed.

After that, greetings were exchanged, and we headed off for my first encounter with a modern Japanese house.

Apart from visits to *The Mother's* apartment, which is some forty years old, I'd only seen the external aspect of the Japanese house.

We arrived outside a small two-storey house occupying a small block and guarded by a little hairy dachshund named *Kotaro*.

Inside, the canine was transformed from watchdog to lapdog as he attempted to protect the property by trying to lick the intruders to death.





The new nickname of *Grog Dog* seemed like the way to go when faced with a creature that is obviously a major league Licker.

With the preliminary pleasantries done, we sat down to supper, and talked till ten, while a small brown dog embarked a strategy of subjugation by dissolution.



## Saturday, 12 April 2008

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Don't let anyone try to tell you that it's impossible to get a good night's sleep on a *futon*.

Not the *futon* they'll sell you in your local downtown furniture store, one with four legs, a metal frame and a basic mattress. I'm talking the bed on the floor routine with a good layer of insulation over the top to keep out the **Kitakami** chill.

I slept like a log (and sawed a few) before rising ultra-fashionably late on a day when the first item on the list was attending to the laundry.

Once we'd arranged the washing on the upstairs balcony, the thoughts turned to sight-seeing.

It was around eleven when two Japanese women, one large hairy foreigner and one small hairy dog found themselves en route to the gorge at **Genbi**. I was told we were there for flying dumplings, which I assumed would be lunch.

I wasn't overly sure what was in store since I'd heard a variety of pronunciations, flying, frying, dumplings and *dungo*.







And I was kept in suspense since, immediately after parking we plunged into the **Sahara Glass Hall**, a store selling glass objects in multitudinous forms.

This, I gathered, was a stratagem to avoid paying for parking.

Having established our status as at-least-potential-customers, the *Grog Dog* was retrieved from the car, and we set off for the gorge, which was a short stroll away.

A bridge took us over the stream, and a right-hand turn had us headed directly towards flying dumpling territory.

I had assumed flying dumplings were not, as the name suggested, something resembling a food fight.

*Er Indoors* suspected we were headed somewhere we would be throwing items, possibly as some sort of ritual.

Neither of us was any the wiser when our host knelt down, placed some money in a small basket and used a wooden mallet to tap a wooden object (twice).

The basket, attached to a device resembling the flying fox familiar to Boy Scouts the world over, then zoomed across the river to a small shelter high on the opposite bank.







It was back a matter of moments later filled with a double serve of dumplings and green tea.

The dumplings were *dungo*, a dough made from rice flour and water, rolled into a ball, boiled, grilled and served, three to a stick, dunked in sweet sticky soy sauce, red bean paste with sugar and soy sauce with *mirin*.

I found them an acquired taste and one which I have, to date, failed to acquire, but the green tea went down well in the conditions.

Back in the car, we headed across country, past a Buddha's face etched into a stone cliff on the way to **Motsuji**, a temple complex near **Mount Toyama**.

The main feature is a garden from the **Heian Period** (794 - 1192).

The site dates back to 850 and grew to an enormous complex with five hundred dormitories for monks spread around forty places of worship before fires destroyed the original buildings.

One building, **Jogyoda Hall**, was reconstructed in 1732, but most of the buildings on the site are much more recent.















The fires did not destroy the **Pure Land Garden**, the real centre-piece of the site and the venue for various festivals and ritual observances in January and May each year.

From **Motsuji**, we planned to go for lunch, then head to the nearby **Golden Buddha**, but drizzle set in while we were eating.

The Buddha-visit, which would have involved an uphill walk through the forest was a late scratching from the program.

Instead, we took our time driving through the same sort of countryside I'd seen as our train whizzed past the previous evening.

Back in **Kitakami**, we found the washing, given the prevailing weather conditions, had hardly dried at all. After rearranging the laundry in more favourable drying conditions, I fled to the warmth of the futon for a power nap.

Meanwhile, the girls, who hadn't seen each other for something like a dozen years, continued catching up on old times in the warmth of the living area.

I wandered back downstairs around five and spent an hour working on the Travelogue while the others flicked through photo albums, warm and comfortable in the radiated output of the electric heater.



Meanwhile, the temperature outside plunged well into the single-figure range.

It was warm enough in the living room. But venturing away from the heated area reinforced my sense of wonder at how the people who occupied the wooden buildings we'd seen at **Takayama** managed to survive sub-zero winters.

Around six, there was movement at the station, and various costume adjustments were made while a taxi was ordered.

It might have been peak hour, or maybe we didn't peek out often enough. There was no way we were going to stand outside for any longer than was necessary.

Either way, a second call and a further wait eventually saw the cab arrived.

**Hadori**, a *yakiniku* place in the downtown entertainment quarter, is a small operation with the feel of a local/ neighbourhood eatery. I was assured there were probably people sitting around the eight or nine tables who'd travelled at least as far (a ¥900 cab fare) as we had.

We sat down at a table with a gas-fired grill in the middle, and plates of meat and related products varying in price according to quality were delivered for us to cook to our liking.

The recipe from there ran something like this:

Dip cooked portions in soy sauce before wrapping them in lettuce leaves (chilli optional).

Accompany the lettuce parcels with rice and wash the lot down with copious quantities of draught beer.

In short, my kind of place...

After dinner, we could have walked home.

But bearing in mind that you can't see approaching rain after dark, wiser heads prevailed, and a cab was the drier and warmer option.

Once I decided to call it a night, I managed another good night's sleep on the futon.

I suspect this was mainly due to the human equivalent of hibernation. Once under the covers, it seemed the body shut down completely.

Despite having consumed large quantities of high-quality amber fluid, I didn't emerge from the warmth until absolutely necessary.

That was well over nine hours later.



## Sunday, 13 April 2008

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After surfacing shortly after seven, we had enough time for a shower and a leisurely breakfast before packing and preparing for the long haul back to home base in **Kōbe**.

When I looked outside, the weather offered a pleasant contrast to the day before, being fine and sunny rather than cold and overcast.

That prompted an ill-considered and over-optimistic decision.

We consigned the warmest clothing to the suitcase, although we did consider wearing it to the station, then switching it to the backpack. If we'd risen half an hour later, what came next might not have been a problem.

Once packed, we had about half an hour of spare time between when we finished packing and the optimum time for arriving on the platform at the station.

Our host suggested a detour to enjoy some *sakura* since there was a lovely spot more or less on the way to the station and the flowers were just starting to appear.





Of course, we hadn't stuck our noses outside at this point.

Still, it seemed like a warm sunny day.

The astute reader can guess what came next.

First up, it was much colder than anticipated.

Second, once we'd reached the spot on the banks of the **Kitakami River**, preparations for the cherry blossom festivities were well underway.

Although optimum viewing time would be much later in the week, snow-capped peaks to the west were a spectacular sight.

So we just had to leave the car's warmth and stroll to the optimum (and, predictably furthest) spot for a photographic memory of the sight.

Once we'd made it back to the car, we headed for the station, bade farewell to *Our Host* and *Grog Dog*, and climbed the stairs to the platform. It was only a matter of a few minutes before the train arrived, and we were on our way again.

Once again, we were on the starboard side of the train. Heading in the opposite direction, we ended up with a good view of the mountains to the west.





As the *Shinkansen* rocketed along, we reached the places we'd visited the previous day in less than half the time the road trip had taken.

By the time we passed **Kurikoma-Kōgen**, the mountains had receded, and we were travelling over broad plains with extensive farmland and some hills.

The train we'd boarded in **Kitakami** was a slower, stop at all stations *Shinkansen*.

With a long haul ahead of us, we were going to change to a limited express at **Sendai**.

That was a prospect that evoked visions of a frantic rush up and down escalators, of mistaken platforms and all sorts of potential disasters.

The reality?

We alighted, walked no more than twenty metres, and we were standing at the relevant embarkation point for the next train, which was due in about seven minutes.

The weather had become bleak and overcast after blue skies further north, and the platform at **Sendai** was colder than **Kitakami**, which we'd left an hour and a half earlier.

That had been quite cold enough, thank you very much.

After **Sendai**, the mountains (or reasonably large hills) were much closer to the line.

In some places, we passed virtual oceans of *sakura* though the trees were not yet totally in bloom.

At the same time, the weather closed in, bringing drizzly rain, weather that in the hills around **Hakone** had seemed mystic and mysterious, but in the lowlands was merely dreary and dismal.

I noted that in some areas where there weren't many buildings over two storeys high, the landscape was dominated by towering net-like structures.

It turned out they surrounded the golf driving ranges, protecting innocent passers-by from flying golf balls.

Once we'd alighted in **Tokyo** we ran into the couple we were meeting for lunch, more by good luck than good management.

After greetings had been exchanged, we wandered off for a decent Italian lunch at **Papa Milano**, beside the station, and returned for the final *Shinkansen* leg to **Kōbe**.

The primary remaining question was the possibility of sighting **Mount Fuji**.

We had thoughts of trying our luck and seeing if we could grab a starboard side window seat in one of the non-reserved carriages.

That would have involved queuing in conditions that were even colder than we'd experienced further north at **Kitakami** and **Sendai**.

We took the soft option, standing in the heated waiting room on the platform while the cleaners prepared the train for departure.

We had seats 15B&C in car 14, with 15A vacant, but, given the number of passengers, it seemed highly unlikely our luck would last.

The spare seat remained vacant when we pulled into **Shinagawa**.

As we left the **Tokyo** high-rise behind, looking away to the right, there was no sign of any mountains whatsoever away to the west.

At **Yokohama**, the vacant seat was occupied, and *Madam's* interest was sparked as mountains came into view to the

west. But the conditions limited visibility as we sped past **Odawara** and into **Atami**.

The mountain gods, it seemed, had still not relented.

As we continued southwards, the weather improved as we passed what could have been (judging by the angle of the lower slopes) the bottom of **Mount Fuji**.

But the top was shrouded in the sort of mist that meant we couldn't be sure.

Never mind, we told ourselves. Gives us something to look forward to next time.

Back in **Kōbe**, we made our way to the **Crowne Plaza Hotel**, conveniently situated right next door to **ShinKōbe**, checked in and headed into the neighbouring shopping complex for dinner before heading back to the room.

Free access to the internet from within the room gave me a leisurely opportunity to clear some of the backlog of email that had accumulated since we'd left home.

In most other places, you had to stand at a terminal in the lobby.



**Japan April 2008**

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# The Last Bit

**Monday, 14 April 2008**

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After the previous day's long haul, *Madam's* detailed research paid off big time with a leisurely morning, a midday checkout time and no appointments until the evening.

I kept plugging away at the email mountain, a slow process since most of it was only accessible through Telstra webmail, which is hardly the speediest of conveyances.

From the 28th floor of the hotel, which is on the western edge of downtown **Kōbe**, we had a view away across the long narrow city wedged between mountains to the west and the Inland Sea.

Once the preliminaries were completed, and the suitcase packed, it was time for a brief review of options for the next hour or two.



This amounted to a choice between going straight to lunch at the German bakery or working up an appetite by taking a stroll around historic houses in the former foreign quarter.

That area beside the hotel on the southern side, was, however, *a bit hilly*.

Bearing jobs that needed to be carried out later in the day in mind, I thought walking up hill and down dale would waste time that could be spent otherwise.

My preference was an early lunch.

Once we left the hotel and surveyed the topography, I was sure I'd pulled the right rein.

The slopes leading to the historic houses, while not quite vertical were not all that far off it.

**Freundlieb** is located in a converted church on a quiet back street a short walk away from the hotel.

There is a downstairs retail section we walked straight past, and a stylish cafe on the first floor.

We ordered the Monday sandwich special for 'Er Indoors (soup, salmon and vegetable sandwich, drink and ice cream for ¥1080) and a roast beef sandwich (¥1600) for me.

If I'd been on the ball, I could have ordered a half bottle of *Valpolicella* to go with it.

But the sun wasn't quite over the yardarm, so I opted for a *cappuccino* instead.

Both meals were substantial enough for a satisfying brunch though *Madam* claimed she had difficulty tasting the salmon in hers.

With brunch out of the way, we rolled back to the hotel, collected the luggage from the cloakroom and boarded the subway, **Myodani**-bound.

A quick taxi transfer took us to *The Mother's* place.

A quick report on our activities over the previous week preceded a rearrangement of luggage for the next couple of days (**Kōbe > Kyoto > Nara > Kōbe**).

Having arrived with two large suitcases, we'd transferred to one (mine) for the **Rail Pass** leg we'd just completed.

Figuring we only needed a couple of changes of clothes for the next three days, we packed what we thought we'd need into a smaller overnight bag.



The casual observer might be puzzled by frequent relocations, particularly when we were staying in **Kōbe**.

So, initially, was I.

Once we were on the ground, however, things made a bit more sense.

The first night in **Kōbe** had been somewhere to crash after the flight, a place with a good view, a smooth transfer from the airport shuttle to the hotel, and, most importantly, a smorgasbord breakfast.

Those factors were irrelevant for the rest of the stay. The location on the edge of the harbour was slightly out of the way, but *‘Er Indoors* had found a good deal for one night.

The second place had been chosen for ease of transfer to and from the train to **Osaka**, remembering our return was probably going to be rather late.

The third spot gave easy access to the train service that delivered us into the *Kyotic* cherry blossom Sunday and the following day's *Shinkansen* leg of the rail pass journey.

Back in **Kōbe**, we'd stayed next door to **ShinKōbe** for Sunday night, close to somewhere we could eat and more or less on the way to *The Mother's* place.

Where we were headed for the night might have been a reasonable step from **Sannomiya** but offered a substantial *Viking* breakfast that would fit in with the following day's travel plans.

In other words, we probably wouldn't need to eat until the evening.

Once we'd booked in for the night, it was off to meet *Gomi-san* and *Sakai-san*.

Or so we thought, a late email en route to the rendezvous advised that *Sakai-san* was a late scratching).

Once we arrived at the rendezvous, it was a case of the lift, up to the 28th floor to negotiate the vital matter of free drinks for the night.

Actually, the term free drinks is misleading.

There was a one-off charge (¥1200 for males, ¥900 for females). But a bloke who can't knock over twelve Australian dollars' worth of grog in three and a half hours doesn't qualify as a serious drinker.

With a choice of beer, *saké*, basic spirits and wine, we stuck with the wine.

There was a selection of four reds and four whites  
(*Rosemount Estate Jigsaw* labels included).

Out of the Italian and Californian wines, there was nothing to match what we'd come to expect around the *Rosemount Jigsaw* price point.

Dinner was another *Viking* affair, and while it wasn't the most magnificent spread I've ever seen, there was plenty of it/. I thought it was quite good value for money.

Having eaten, we sat chewing the fat and savouring the *Sangiovese* that we'd agreed was the pick of the non-Oz wines on offer until the management called time.

At that point, predictably, we drew stumps and decanted ourselves into the darkness.

## Tuesday, 15 April

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Two weeks down, one week (more or less) to go.

We headed downstairs to the *Viking* breakfast just after eight, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and in need of substantial nutrition to carry us through a walking-oriented day.

And, if the range of goodies didn't match what we'd encountered at our previous *Viking* breakfast at the start of the sojourn, the quality was, we thought, better.

From there it was a hike to **Sannomiya** and an hour's train journey to the outskirts of Kyoto (Hankyu Arashiyama station).

We placed the baggage in a coin locker, wandered over the river through the cherry-blossoms and caught a bus into the hills, with a basic plan to walk back downhill from Toriimoto.

The first part of the walk took us along a traditional Japanese street lined with houses with a stop at **Kyoto Municipal Preservation Museum of Saga Toriimoto's Streets and Structures**, an impressive title for an impressive little establishment.





The museum is a reconstruction of a Meiji Era townhouse, with photographs and an interesting model of the district as it was in the early twentieth century.

But we got the most benefit out of talking to the attendant, who was keen to point out details we mightn't have noticed.

Toriimoto is spectacular in autumn, and, with tree-covered hills surrounding the area, it would be a fantastic spectacle.

But we were there in spring.

We would have walked straight past the tiny, delicate maple flowers if they had not been brought to our attention.

We eventually found ourselves at **Gioji** temple.

We wandered through the garden, marvelling at the translucent beauty of newly formed leaves as the morning sun filtered through the canopy over our heads.

It's the sort of scene you just don't experience in areas where all the trees are evergreens.

The effect was utterly magical, and, again, I was fascinated by the mosses that covered the ground under the trees.













The sight was almost enough to make me want to relocate somewhere temperature, and rainfall would encourage the development of moss in the garden.

From Gioji, we went on to **Nisonin**, which dates back to the first half of the ninth century.

The main hall was reconstructed in 1521 after being destroyed by fire.

From there, we strolled along the bamboo path.

Our final stop for the day's temple tour was **Tenryuji**, a World Heritage site dating back to 1339.

Most of the buildings on the site are more recent due to destruction associated with internal conflicts over the years.

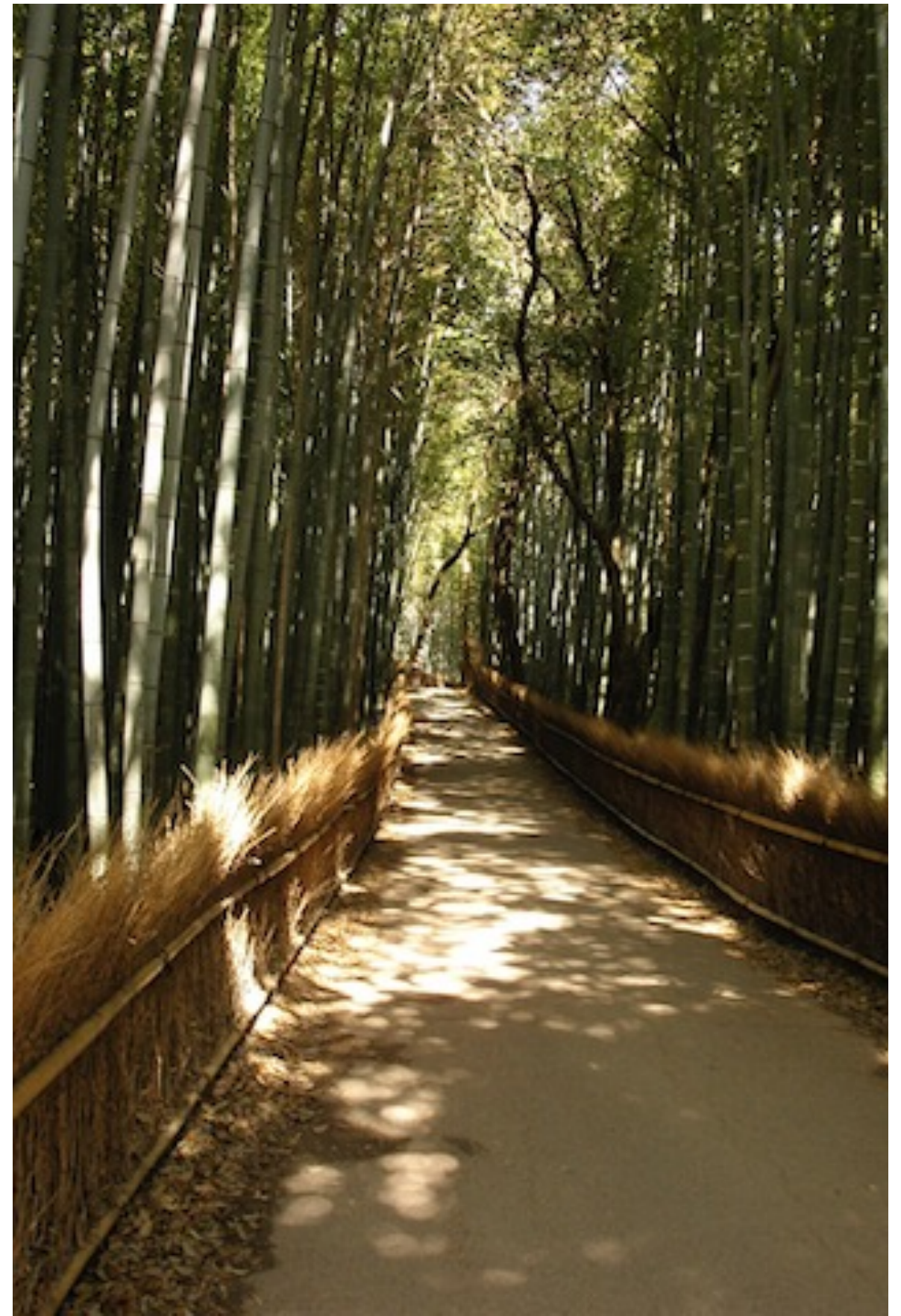
Although fire destroyed the buildings several times over, the landscape garden, one of the oldest of its kind, dates back to the founding abbot, who designed the layout.

We took our time walking around the garden, stopping for a rest at the bamboo grove near the North Entrance, and strolling back through the cherry-blossom.

By this stage, we were just about templed-out.



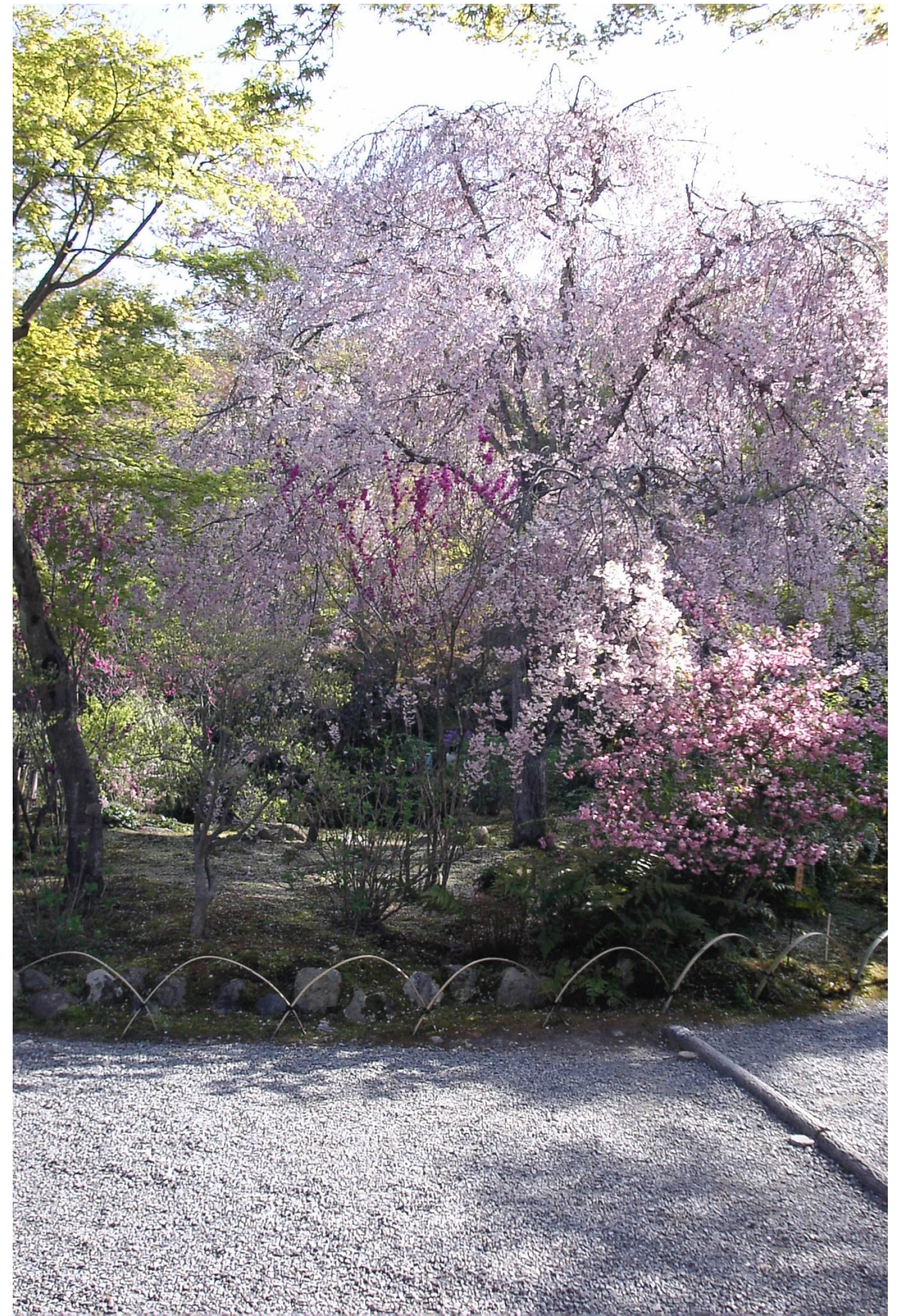


















So we headed back to the station, retrieved the luggage, and set off for the night's accommodation, which turned out to be an economy room with an economy-sized bathtub to match.

Right at the time when a lengthy soak in a warm bath would have been wonderfully therapeutic.

And we had to rest up before an evening when we would catch up with *The Sponge* and *Lighting Dude*, two members of a theatre troupe that had passed through Bowen about eighteen months ago.

They were doing an **Arts Council** gig around the district's schools on their way to the **Pacific Edge Arts Conference** in **Mackay**.

We'd caught up with *The Interpreter* in **Tokyo**, and prior experience suggested the evening would be a somewhat fluid affair.

A flurry of emails established the plan for the night.

Meet at **Karasuma Station** and then head somewhere to eat, and, what is more important, drink.

*The Sponge* is as the nickname suggests, partial to a drink.

And so, of course, am I.

Once at the station, we found two familiar faces along with a third member of the troupe who'd been enlisted for the night because she was *a good drinker*.

She also knew her way around the value-for-money eating and drinking establishments in downtown **Kyoto**.

We stood around, chatting while waiting for the final member of the party to arrive.

Once she had, we set off on a route march that turned to the left and headed into a basement just when I was about to ask why we'd set off on a lengthy excursion without a compass and a cut lunch.

We removed the shoes, placed them in a locker, and were ushered into a cubicle where we set about organising copious quantities of food and drink.

Beer seemed to be the logical starter, and there was a discussion (in Japanese) about appropriate sizes of drinking vessels.

*Sponge*, having spent a day on the promotional trail, was not in a mood to drink out of a tooth glass.

He uttered what sounded like *Dynamo*, but I heard it as *Dynamite*.



And, given the size of the thirst, nothing less than *Dynamite* would suffice.

When the first round arrived, I discovered *Dynamo* denoted a vessel containing substantially more than a pint glass.

For the next couple of hours, *Hughesy* and *The Sponge* washed down another array of assorted dishes.

There was nothing in the high-class-gourmet category, but plenty of good solid blotting paper to soak up copious draughts of *Dynamite* before we changed to *saké*.

Along the way, we discovered *Lighting Dude* needed a change of nickname, due to an aversion to flying. He was now to be known as *Chicken*.

It didn't, however, stop there. Before much more time had elapsed, we learnt *Chicken* was one of the very few people in Japan who doesn't own a mobile phone.

There are probably two people in Japan who don't own one of the ubiquitous devices. Remarkably, they both work in the administrative section of a particular children's theatre company.

So *Chicken* is now known as *Double Chicken*.







As *Hughesy* and *The Sponge* demolished the *Dynamite*, the third member of the troupe kept up.

When she decided beer lacked oomph and switched to *Shōchū*, her capacity for strong drink prompted a new moniker (*Double Sponge*).

She also expressed a desire to visit Australia to demolish large quantities of steak.

Later, I switched to *saké*.

*The Sponge* is an expert on the subject, with a particular interest in smaller regional producers.

On a future visit, he's supposed to act as the guide on an intensive *saké*-appreciation course.

It was some time after ten-thirty when we paid the bill (a reasonable ¥1500 per head to cover food and drink for six people, including three very thirsty ones).

With the financial details settled, we set off for the station to see the others on their way home before wandering back to the hotel feeling no pain whatsoever.







## Wednesday, 16 April

---

After the previous night's excesses, a basic breakfast was all we needed before setting off once again on the temple circuit.

Alarm bells should have been ringing when we walked out of the hotel and boarded a bus heading towards our first destination.

There was an inordinate number of high school students out on the streets when (just before nine o'clock) they should have been in class.

Our first stop, **Rokuonji** (*Deer Garden Temple*), but usually referred to as **Kinkakuji** (*Golden Pavilion Temple*) dates back to the late fourteenth-century.

In keeping with its reputation, the **Golden Pavilion** was spectacular but, on a day when half the High Schools in Japan seemed to have organised a cultural awareness excursion, extremely crowded.

We started our tour beside the **Mirror Pool**, where the crowd meant hundreds of digital cameras were pointed at the three-storey structure with its gold-leaf covering.





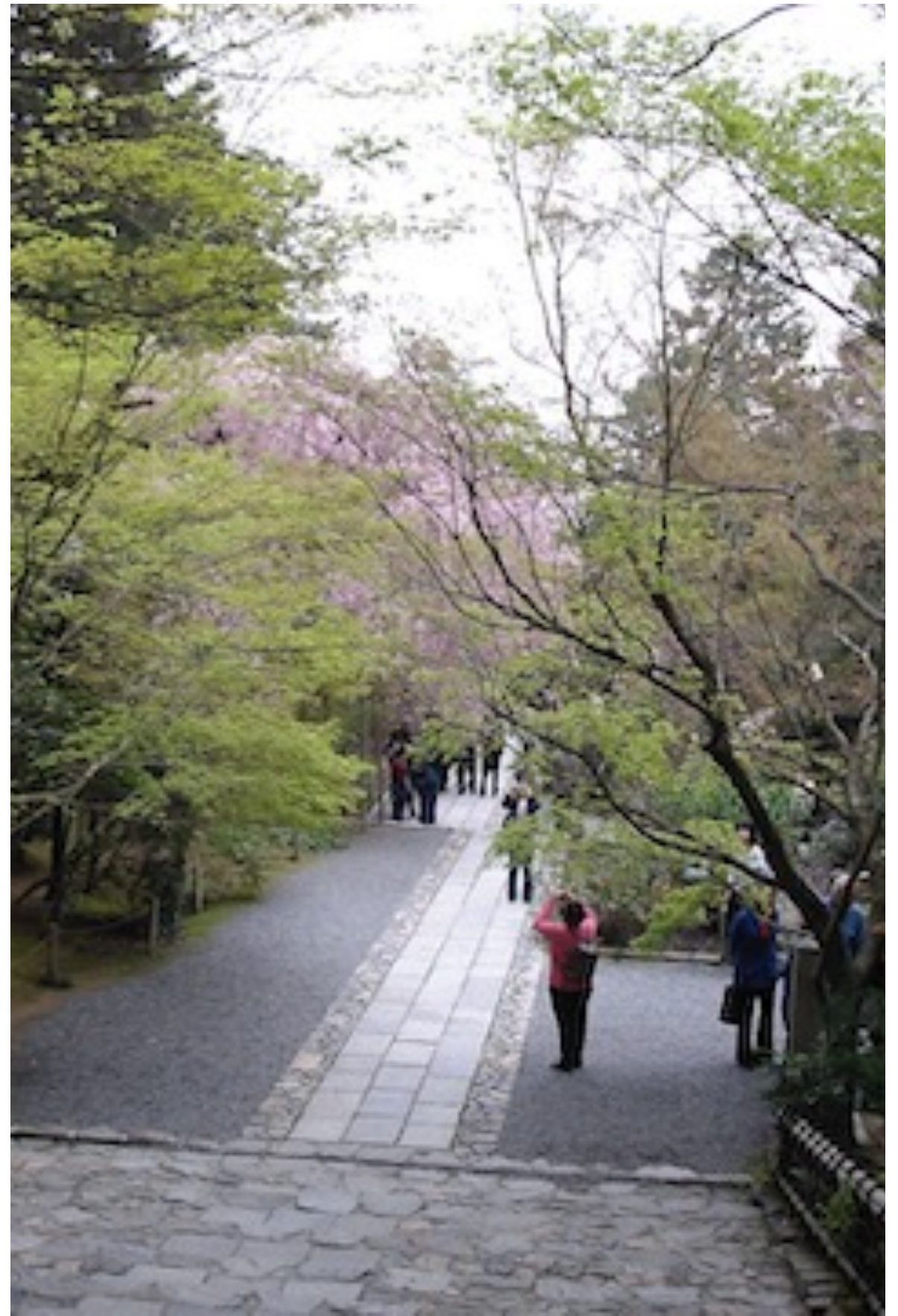
















From there, we made our way through the strolling garden that makes up the rest of the temple grounds, past the **pond of Anmintaku** enjoying the foliage along the way.

Outside, we followed the road down to **Ryoanji** temple, thinking, by the lack of high school students on the ground, that we might just have given them the slip.

But as we neared the temple, there they were in swarms again.

The best way to experience the *Temple of the Peaceful Dragon* would involve a long gaze at the temple's famous dry landscape rock garden, with its fifteen boulders placed on a sea of raked gravel and dating back to the late 1400s.

In the best of all possible worlds, visitors would have the time and space to verify that the stones have been placed so that only fourteen are visible at one time.

The sheer weight of numbers in a confined space limited most people around us to a couple of hurried photos to remind themselves of the visit.

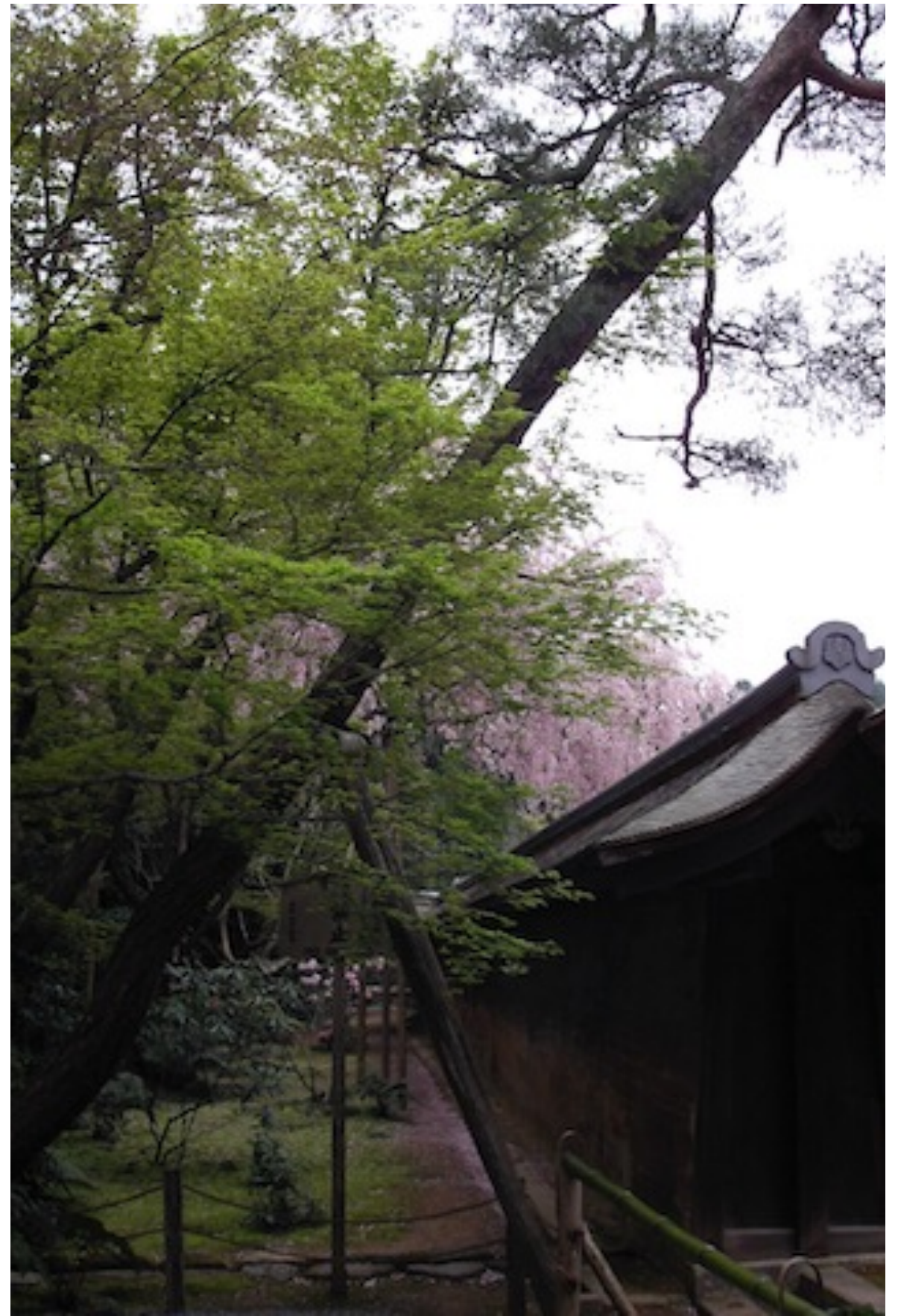
Away from the rock garden, on the other hand, there was room to move. We took our time walking around spectacular picture gardens, with masses of *sakura* over the moss-covered ground.













Outside, we followed the road to **Ninnaji** temple.

There, faced with another swarm of school-kids and a *sakura* display that didn't look as impressive as what we'd just experienced, we gave up and headed downtown for lunch.

A definite case of total sensory overload, though the crowds didn't help.

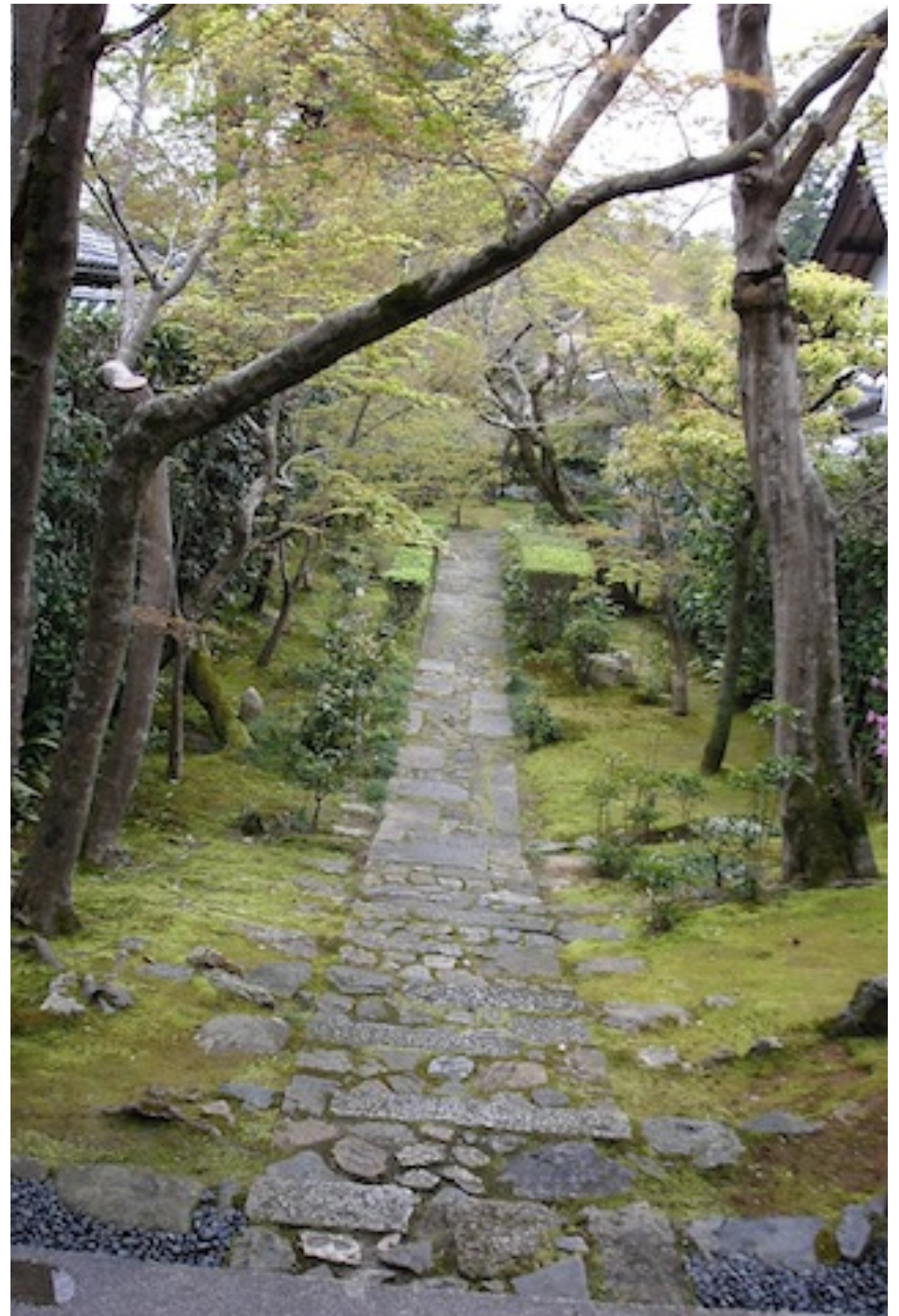
In the city, we found a cafe near the hotel that reminded *Madam* of the places she used to visit in her student days, where I decided to go for something called taco rice.

That turned out to be a chilli con carne remarkably similar to the one I throw together whenever I get the chance. *Madam* opted for spaghetti with *vongole*.

With lunch out of the way, we collected the luggage, walked back to the station and caught the train to **Nara**.

Once we'd arrived and checked in, we could have headed out for a stroll but decided to take it easy in the room until our dinner appointment with The Sister and family.

I'd just finished running a hot bath when a phone call advised *Madam* that *Her Sister* and *The Niece* had arrived downstairs.





So I took my time in a soaking bathtub and left them with the opportunity to chat without having to worry about amusing a large hairy non-Japanese-speaking foreigner.

Out of the bath, with those considerations in mind, I took my time heading downstairs.

I'd made it downstairs just before six.

Once the preliminary pleasantries had been completed, there was nothing for it but to head off to the restaurant where we'd be dining.



After the now-familiar shoe-removal ritual, we were ushered to a private dining room and were joined shortly afterwards by *The Brother-in-Law*.

A very busy middle-level executive simplified what could have been a lengthy ordering process by glancing at the restaurant's Top Ten dishes and ordering the first six.

The roast beef was particularly tasty and, in a moment of weakness, I was persuaded to try the Korean-style raw tuna, which wasn't bad either.

In fact, the six dishes were all excellent,

it was just a matter of those two sticking in the memory.

I enjoyed an excellent *Spanish Tempranillo* as we discussed Australian real estate prices and other matters of interest.

After the walk back to the hotel, we didn't manage the usual good night's sleep in a cramped room where the bed was only accessible from one side.





## Thursday, 17 April

---

When we headed downstairs in the morning, we were surprised to find the breakfast room contained a higher foreigner quotient than we'd become used to.

That gave us something to discuss once the final run-through of the plans for the day had been completed.

I suspect the phenomenon had something to do with the hotel being part of a Western-style chain rather than one of the privately-owned Japanese business hotels we'd been favouring.

It was difficult, given the overall level of ambient background noise to detect where all these westerners had come from.

The couple at the next table were definitely speaking French.

A young woman on the other side of the room expressed very definite opinions about the relative virtues of the sights around **Nara** in a voice that carried right round the room.

Don't get me wrong. It's possible that *Miss America* had qualifications that entitled her to express the forthright opinions she was putting forward.





But as I listened, I couldn't help contrasting her attitude with the older Americans we'd passed during our wanderings around the picturesque garden at **Ryoanji**.

Their expressions of joy, pleasure and wonder made me half-inclined to approach them to inquire if they'd been to **Toriimoto** (our destination the day before).

I would have suggested that they might enjoy a trip there.

But, for some reason, I didn't.

As I listened, without much choice in the matter, to the advice being dispensed from across the room, I was glad I hadn't foisted my ultra-novice opinions on an unsuspecting audience.

The reader might suggest I'm doing precisely that right here, but anyone who has read this far can hardly be described as *an unsuspecting audience*.

With the now-familiar leaving the hotel ritual (pack, check out, cloakroom ticket) negotiated, we headed to **Todaiji** temple, home of the eighth-century **Vairocana Buddha**.

Once we'd boarded the bus, numbers of vaguely familiar-looking students in school uniforms suggested a repeat of the Kyoto crowd scenes was on the cards.





That is more or less how things panned out once we joined the crowd moving through the drizzle down the tree-lined avenue towards the temple.

Along the way, we encountered the first of the famous **Nara deer**.

I found myself, for some reason, humming a bastardised version of *Tiny Tim*'s minor hit (*Tiptoe through the deer poop with me*) as I watched an attendant sweeping up the detritus.

Meanwhile, some teenagers tried to work out a strategy to deal with demands for food from a particularly persistent deer.

Inside the complex, we headed towards the **Great Buddha Hall**, which, 57 metres across, 50 metres back and 49 metres high, is the largest wooden structure in the world.

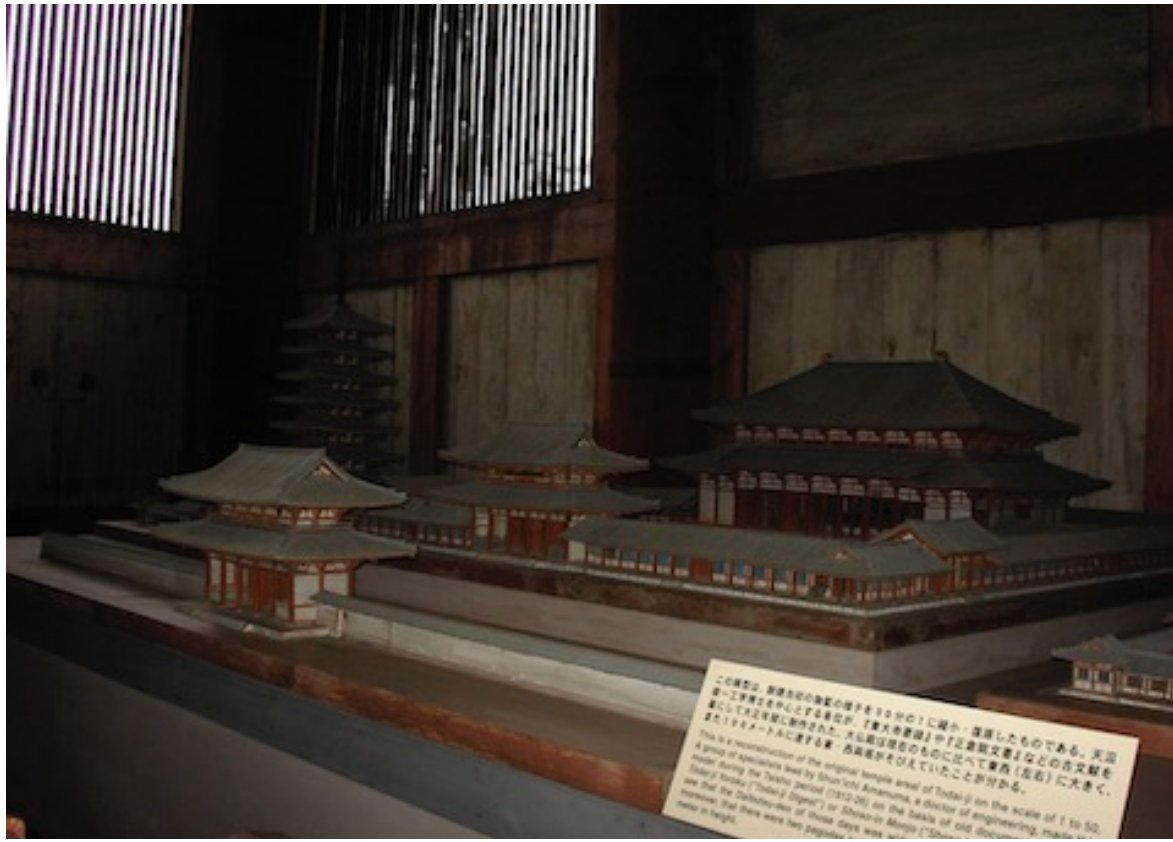
Impressive figures.

All the more impressive when you learn the structure is 33% smaller than the eighth-century version.

It was rebuilt after the first and second incarnations were destroyed by fire in 1180 and 1567.







この模型は、奈良時代の建築の様子を10分の1に縮小・再現したものである。天智  
帝一王統を中心とするが、『東大寺聖蹟』や『近衛家文書』などの古文書に  
基づいて、大仏殿は彩色のものに比べて東西（左右）に大きく、  
また10メートルに達する高・西面塔がそびえていたことが分かる。  
This is a reproduction of the original temple model of Todai-ji on the scale of 1 to 50.  
model during the Tenji period (712-26) on the basis of old documents, made  
based on the 'Shinshu-ji Monji' or 'Shinshu-ji Monji' ('Shinshu-ji Monji')  
however, that there were two pagodas.  
near in height.







Inside the building, the fifteen-metre **Buddha**, which had almost bankrupted Japan's economy by the time it was completed in 751, takes your breath away. It towers over you, surrounded by smaller statues of other Buddhist figures.

Outside we took an extended ramble around the complex with structures dating back as far as the seventh century before moving through **Nara Park** to the nearby **Kasuga Grand Shrine**.

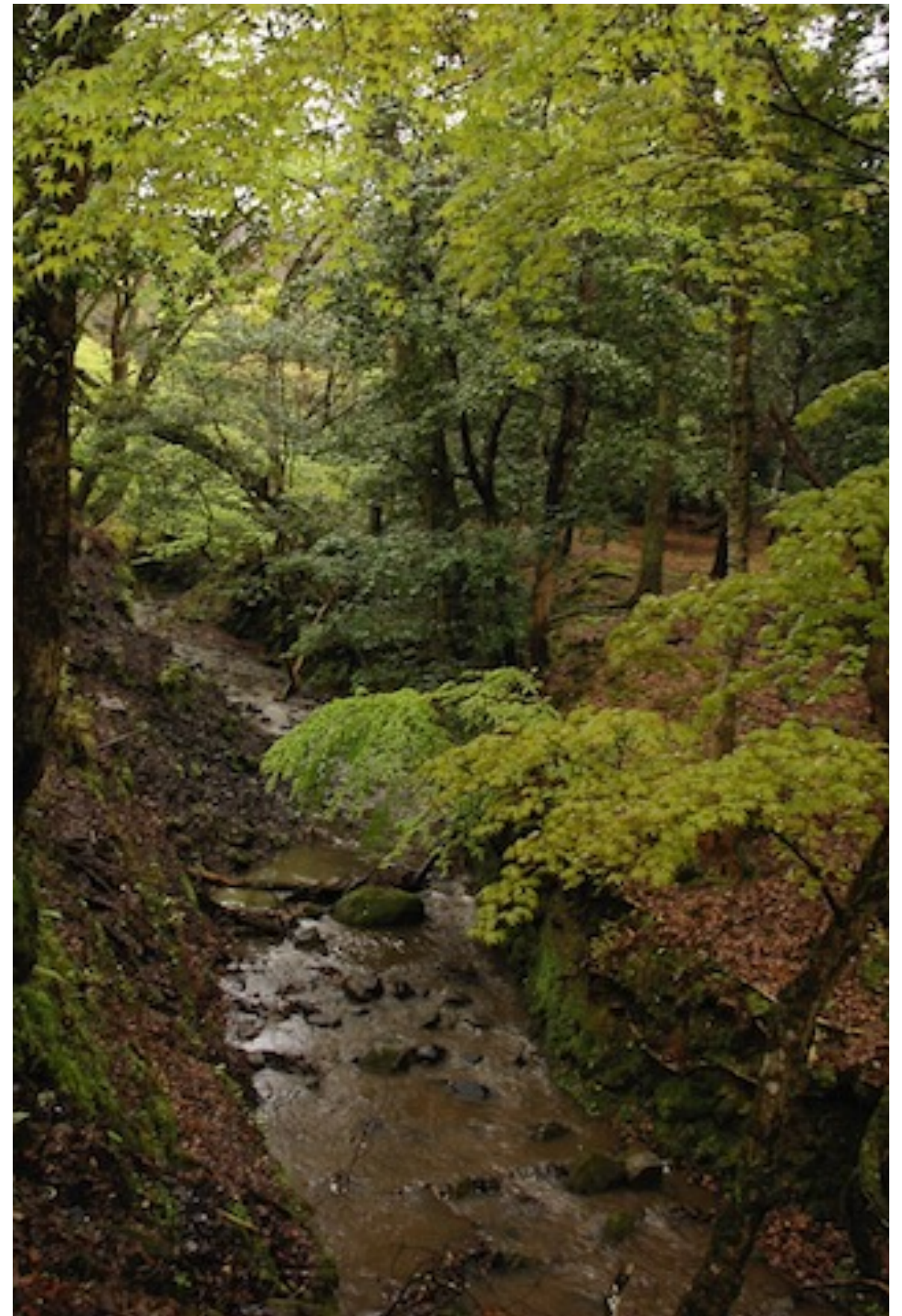
By the time we finished, we'd had three hours of temple and shrine-viewing, so we headed back to the city centre, where we found a *teppan*-style eatery for lunch.



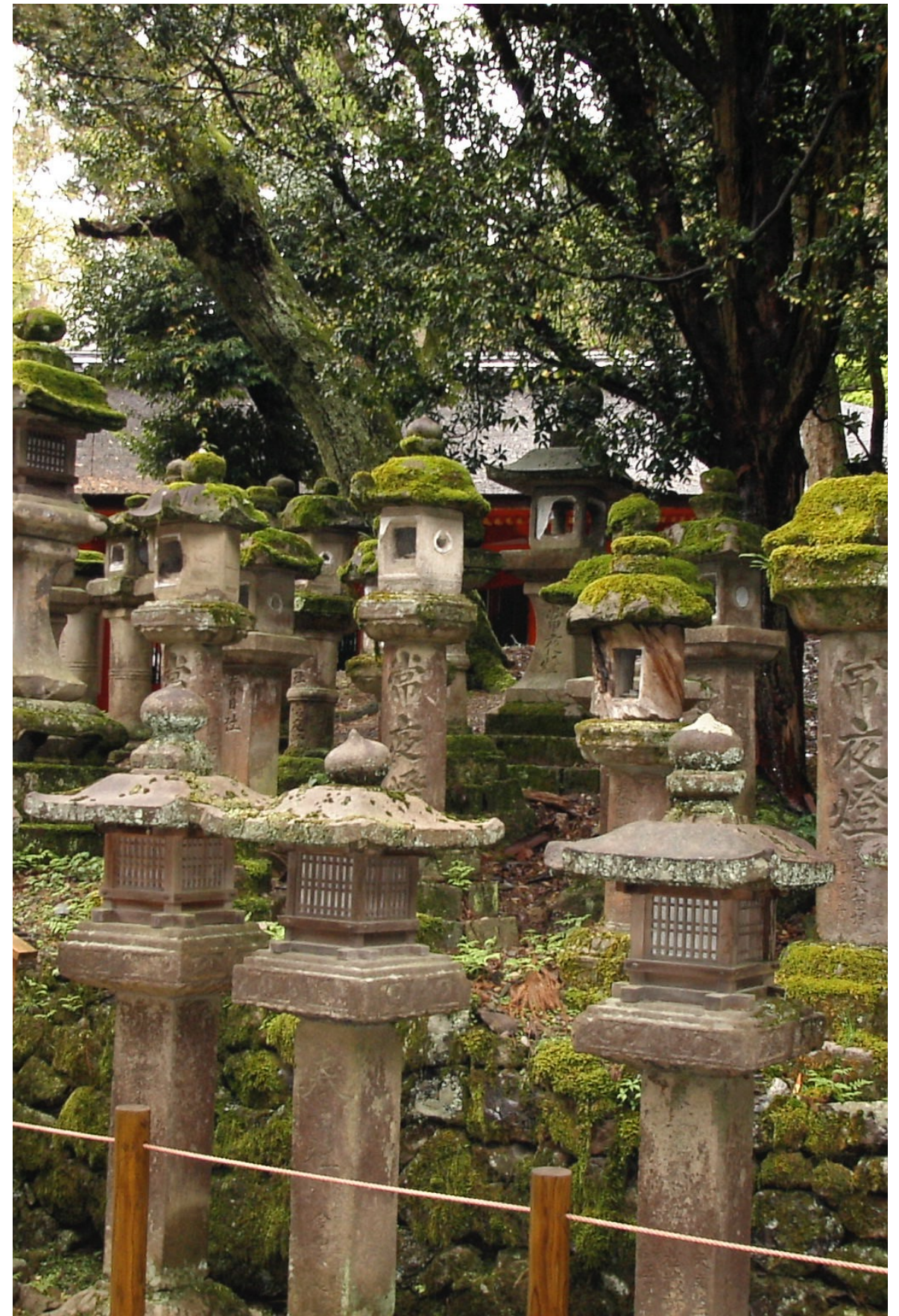


















*Madam* had a pancake, and I settled for beef noodles, both cooked on an iron hot plate in the middle of the table.

We were seated on the Western-style right-hand side while opposite us people sat at low Japanese style, no shoes tables.

From there, we passed through alleys lined with small shops, becoming more than a little disoriented as we attempted to find our way back to the hotel to reclaim the baggage.

The trip back to **Kōbe** took an hour, with the last leg a limited high-speed express after a change of train in **Osaka**.

Arriving at the **Okura Hotel**, we opted for a rest before the night's appointment with *Diamond Chef* and *Drinker Dude*.

We caught a shuttle back to **Sannomiya**, and *Madam* headed off to replenish the finances at the Post Office while I went for a browse in **Tower Records**.

I was hoping I'd find the new album by the reformed, but sadly **Vivian Stanshall**-less **Bonzo Dog Band**.

As she headed off to the Post Office, *Madam* suggested that I was highly unlikely to find what I was looking for.

In her considered opinion, it was far too obscure an item for a Japanese music emporium to have in stock.

As it turned out, the Bonzos album was nowhere to be found.

But a brief browse through what was on offer revealed the equally-obscure **Dr. Strangely Strange**, the first album by the **J. Geils Band** and an album by **Ed Sanders** called **Beer Cans On The Moon**.

I seem to recall the latter met an almost universal thumbs down when released in 1973.

Given the time for a careful survey, I would have managed to uncover even more weird and wonderful obscurities.

As it was, however, the browsing was interrupted by the arrival of *Er Indoors* who announced the night's dinner and drinking companions were waiting for us under the railway.

That set us off at a fair clip towards the area in question.

When the rendezvous had been made, we plunged into the maze of alleys and side streets that make up the downtown eating and drinking quarter.

Arriving at an almost inconspicuous Chinese restaurant, *Diamond Chef* looked after the order while the rest of us directed our attention to beer, fortunately, available in *Dynamo*-sized glasses.



What followed was a range of dishes, all of them excellent, including the without-a-doubt-best lemon chicken I've had in a long time.

It was actually the only lemon chicken I've had this century, and much better than any version I'd encountered previously.

Interestingly, when the first platters arrived, and the jellyfish pointed out after I'd sampled one of the surprisingly-crunchy little morsels, no one seemed inclined to partake in the remaining supply.

I'll be happy to avoid jellyfish in the future.

But another item on the same platter, a pickled cucumber, was easily the best preparation of that particular vegetable I've encountered.

Once dinner was out of the way, we headed into the side streets and back alleys on the way to **Piccolo**, an intimate bar that had been described as *somewhere I would love*.

The only identification in an obscure back alley is an illuminated sign.

A narrow staircase with a U-turn midway leads to an ultra-small cramped area with seats for no more than a dozen drinkers and a total capacity of about twenty.

There's almost as much room behind the bar as on the drinkers' side.

But I guess that amount of space is needed to provide access to the shelves of vinyl LPs that the bartender, an apparent survivor of late-60s or early 70s time warp, will play on request.

My request for Little Feat produced copies of ***Dixie Chicken*** and ***The Last Record Album***.

We managed to get a couple of tracks in before the Feat were superseded by other requests.

After we were well and truly settled in, having scored four seats at the bar, *Diamond Chef* and *Drinker Dude* were keen to learn my rating of the place.

My response?

*I came all the way from Australia to drink at this bar.*

Which was, more or less, true.

We managed to drink and talk till well after eleven. By that time, the last shuttle bus back to the hotel had well and truly left. So we were forced to catch a cab home to crash for the last time on this venture onto Japanese soil.



## Friday, 18 April

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I awoke just after 7:30 without any daylight seeping into the room. It took a few moments to register that we were well into our last day of the overseas portion of the trip.

Not that this had anything to do with the events of the previous evening, you understand.

Absence of daylight when I woke up was something I'd noticed everywhere we stayed.

Curtain or shutter arrangements guaranteed unless you set an alarm you were not going to be aroused before you were well and truly ready.

We had intended to head downtown for breakfast (a free shuttle bus encourages things like that), but a glance out of the window prompted a revision to the planned activities for the day.

It was raining, and while we could probably have stayed dry if we stuck to Plan A, we decided to opt for a leisurely morning.

That involved a late checkout, lunch and a spot of shopping before we headed out to **Myodani** to pack and wait for the shuttle service that would ferry us to the airport.





Poking my nose out the door, I discovered that the morning English language paper had arrived, and I settled down for a chance to catch up on events in the world at large.

We'd managed to avoid news bulletins for the last two weeks, and anything we had heard was in Japanese.

Which meant, of course, that it was Greek to me. (Thank-you William Shakespeare).

You wouldn't expect much Australian news in the ***International Herald Tribune***, in association with the ***Asahi Shimbun***.

But a front-page article with the headline "Australian drought dooms rice farms" dealt with the international ramifications of the collapse of Australia's rice production.

After I'd taken my time over the paper, there was time for a long soaking bath while *Madam* took a phone call from The Sister. Then we packed and checked out just after eleven.

That allowed us to take the 11:15 shuttle to **Sannomiya**, where an early lunch seemed to be a good idea.

*Er Indoors* had spotted references to a couple of possible options, including an Indian curry house somewhere nearby.

We'd initially planned to head in that direction, but she mentioned "a nice bread place" as an alternative before making a major strategic mistake.

I'd completely forgotten the existence of a Kōbe equivalent of the **Gumbo & Oyster Bar** where we'd had lunch in **Kanazawa**.

But when she pointed out that it not only existed but happened to be located right in this very building, the decision was easy.

The order, once we'd arrived and been seated, was equally straightforward. Oysters and gumbo for *Hughesy*, the lady's set for *Madam* plus the obligatory glass of *Chablis* to go with the oysters.

Unfortunately, the oysters arrived as ordered rather than the double helping we'd had in **Kanazawa**.

But they were big, plump and excellent *au naturel* with a touch of chilli and tomato sauce.

I enjoyed the gumbo.

*Madam's* lady's set (nibbles, seafood pasta and chocolate cake) looked as good as the morsels I managed to sample tasted.



My only (minor) complaint involved a lack of New Orleans music in the background.

But you can't have everything, and it would be unreasonable to expect it.

Both the **Kanazawa** and **Kōbe** establishments are part of a nation-wide chain, so I have a feeling I'll be revisiting G&O from time to time over the next few years.

After lunch, I headed to **Tower Records** to pick up a couple of items, then headed across to buy *Madam's* new suitcase and a book about translation matters.



Then it was down to the subway and off to **Myodani**.

A visit to the electrical store for a digital camera was the next item on the list, and I sat with the luggage and geriatric Japanese while *Madam* completed the purchase.

From there, we caught a cab to *The Mother's* and got stuck into the final packing, which was straightforward as far as I was concerned.

Clean clothes went in the upper compartment. Everything else, except for the things I needed for the flight went down below.

*Madam's* procedure was more complicated.

While she continued packing, I got out of the way.

While I wrote up the notebook, I had the chance to finish a half bottle of *Brown Brothers Patricia Noble Riesling 2000* that had been in the fridge for the past three or four years.

It proved to be a delightful drop.

With the packing done, there was nothing to do but sit back and wait for the taxi shuttle to collect us at 4:50.



It arrived on time, so we had just under two hours to enjoy the views as the driver navigated his way through various pickup points.

He eventually deposited us outside the departures section of **Kansai International**.

Checking in involved a lengthy queue.

Two flights were scheduled to depart simultaneously, one to **Cairns**, the other to **Brisbane** and **Sydney** - and both seemed to be rather heavily booked.

Then, once the luggage was off our hands, it was a matter of killing two hours before boarding.

The first bit was fairly straightforward.

We took a stroll through the duty-free shopping before a survey of the meal options. *Madam* headed for the *sushi/sashimi* outlet while I wolfed down some pasta with a glass of red.

Since we had eaten, there was not much else to do but head for Departure Lounge 6 and settle down to wait for boarding.

Both of us had something to read, and I had the iPod, so the wait didn't present any significant problem.

For some reason, the initial boarding call was in English rather than Japanese, which gave us a head-start on most of our fellow passengers.

Not that it did anything to expedite our departure.

But, at least, we were seated with hand luggage safely stowed well before the majority of passengers made their way onto the aircraft.

The flight itself was relatively uneventful, and sunrise saw us tracking down Australia's east coast.

In the window seat, *'Er Indoors* tried to catch a glimpse of **Bowen** once I pointed out that we'd be passing reasonably close.

Admittedly close is a relative term when you're travelling at 38000 feet.

She claimed to have been successful though our position over the wing made it difficult for someone sitting one seat away from the window to verify the sighting.

We were on the ground in **Brisbane** on schedule when the fun and games, such as they were, began.



Unknown to the majority of those on **Flight JQ 1**, during the descent into **Brisbane**, the auxiliary power supply decided to pack it in.

Not that anyone would have noticed since the incident didn't pose any problem (as far as I could gather) while we were in the air.

If the pilot hadn't brought the matter to our attention as the aircraft taxied to the terminal, I doubt that anyone apart from the aircrew would have been any the wiser.

Unfortunately, the failure meant that, once the engines were turned off, the aircraft would be plunged into darkness unless they could arrange for some other source of electrical power.

Which, in turn, meant the engines wouldn't be switched off in a hurry, and that, in turn, meant no one was going anywhere anytime soon.

No sooner had they made alternative arrangements than another gremlin appeared in the system.

There was a problem, believe it or not, opening the doors, which meant that everyone who had stood up when the engines were switched off stayed standing for quite some time.

Eventually, of course, they succeeded in opening a door, and we filed off through the front doors hoping that nothing else would go wrong.

Then, for some reason possibly related to the previous difficulties, unloading the baggage took an inordinate length of time.

But eventually, some operator flicked a switch, and the conveyor belt surged into action.

When our baggage finally emerged, we headed through **Immigration and Customs**.

With those formalities done and dusted, we were off to the Gold Coast for rest and recuperation before the homeward leg.