

When we woke up on Thursday morning it was raining very hard and, unfortunately, it continued for the entire day. As it turned out, we visited only two places (each for over an hour with plenty of time to get wet!) and the rest of the day was spent driving through more amazing scenery. We were now in the northern area of the main island and in the mountainous area near Nagano, site of the last Winter Olympics held in Japan. We reached a maximum altitude of only 4500 feet but we saw many ski runs still covered in snow and even piles of snow in parking lots and on some of the slopes close to the road. Again we went through many long tunnels but these seemed to be older than most we had seen previously and certainly were much narrower.

Out of the tunnels we could see peaks on both sides shrouded in clouds and we passed at least three huge dams along the Azusa River. It was a wonderful drive and we could only imagine what it must be like on a clear and sunny day.



The first place we visited was the Old Town of Takayama and, again, would have been a very nice place to stroll had the weather been better. As it was, we spent about 40 minutes in what had been the Takayama branch of the Edo govern-

ment office from 1692 to 1868. It was a large complex with many rooms where the merchants came to pay taxes, where the magistrate sat, where fines were levied and where honors were presented. We then drove to Matsumoto where the only place we visited was the castle. Unlike the one in Himeji, this was black in color and the whole complex, although similar to Himeji, was far smaller. This time I managed to get through the main keep - a six storey high wooden structure that allegedly is original. This included climbing several steep (some with 60 degree inclines) staircases with 18 inch ris-



es and maybe 9 inch steps which were less than two feet wide in places. Most were one way staircases but the final two were two-way and had some low heavy wooden beams so it was something like climbing Ilkley Moor in England with occasional limbo dancing! There was very little to see inside apart from the structure itself, which was impressive, but there were a few displays of Shogun clothing, military hardware and some battle scenes on wall hangings.

Friday was our day to visit Mt Fuji so we all breathed a sigh of relief when we woke to bright and clear skies. In fact, we got our first long shot of the sacred mountain (it is privately owned by one of the Shinto deity) from our hotel as we ate breakfast. As we drove closer we kept getting good views but of course we had to take pictures from a moving bus.



As we approached the base of Mt Fuji our guide announced

that it was very crowded on the road to the Fifth Station (of 10 if you were to climb it) so we would delay our visit until the afternoon. Questions about what would happen if it clouded over by then were dismissed so we drove to Lake Kawaguchiko, which was a beautiful site in itself.

Here we took a cable car up a small “mountain” and from the top we got some good views of Mt Fuji.

However, by this time the clouds were beginning to shroud areas just below the summit and gradually the whole area covered in snow (the classical shot) was obscured. It was a warm and sunny day where we were but clearly that wasn't going to last for too long. So, our closest pictures of Mt Fuji were not as clear as those we had taken from the bus,





which was a shame, but we were thrilled that we had seen it on a relatively good day. Yesterday, for example would have been a total washout! We had lunch overlooking the lake and then started our drive on the toll road of the mountain but by now it was obvious that classic views were not to be and, in fact, by the time we turned around at the second station we were already in the clouds. Apparently the road was very busy further up and we had a schedule to keep so we moved on to our final stop at the Gotemba Peace Park.

In the park was a fine white stupa which allegedly contains a relic from the Buddha that was presented by Prime Minister Nehru of India after World War II. Information on the rest of the park was scant but we gathered that a number of statues were presented to Japan by neighboring countries presumably as a sign of friendship and peace. Again, Googling is necessary to get the details!

So, our tour for the day ended and we were happy that we had seen Mt Fuji in what was probably one of its clearer forms and got some almost quintessential pictures.

We arrived in Tokyo and our very large hotel before 5pm with just one more day of the tour left. After that Molly and I will be here on our

own for two more days. Saturday was the final day of the tour and it was an action packed experience in the center of Tokyo. We started by visiting the Imperial Palace, the home of the Emperor and Empress. The grounds are open to the public on only two days of the year so all we were able to do was admire the moat and the walls around the grounds and one of the buildings within the grounds - presumably for staff. The wide open area in front of the grounds was very pleasant on a warm and sunny morning.

Next we went to Ueno Park which is a favorite spot for Tokyo residents to view the cherry blossom trees and to stroll the area that has musicians and cafes in addition to the beautiful grounds. The next stop was at the Asakusa Temple which it appears is where Buddhism initiated in Japan and a separation between it and Shintoism began. The temple itself is very ornate as are many of the surrounding buildings but perhaps the most interesting aspect of this complex is the very busy shopping area leading to the shrine. Again, on a beautiful weekend day it was absolutely packed with people.





Then it was time for our final group meal (for which quite a number of the group were relieved) before the afternoon stops. The first of these was at the Edo Tokyo Museum where we visited just two floors which gave the history of the evolution of Tokyo from the relatively small town of Edo. Edo, however, had been the home of the Edo Shogunate which was perhaps the most powerful of the Shogunates throughout Japanese history and covered the period between the early 17th century and

1867 when the ultimate power of the Imperial family was regained.

The museum was extremely well done and there were some fantastic models of the town and its buildings as it evolved. It also helped that there were English plaques for virtually all of the exhibits.

Our final two stops were at the old Tokyo Tower (modeled on the Eiffel Tower but a little higher) where we went to the 150 meter high observation deck for some amazing views of the city and finally to an area near the sea on a man-made island. The main feature here is a small scale model of New York's Statue of Liberty, although it wasn't at all clear why it had been built.

That concluded our tour and we were taken back to the New Otani Hotel where Molly and I left the group and the rest prepared to fly home.



On Sunday (our first day on our own) we decided to have an easy day of sightseeing and settled on a walk from the hotel to the East Garden of the Imperial Palace. These gardens are not the traditional Japanese style but are more like a large English park with lawns, pathways, trees and flower gardens. Unlike an English park, however, these gardens are set within the palace walls and moat so are within the Imperial compound.

The compound originally had three moats with the Imperial residence (to which we saw the gate yesterday) inside the innermost. The gardens we visited today are between the inner and second moat and we were told that the third, outermost moat has been filled in and built upon.



We got two maps from the concierge at the hotel - one to get out to the main street and the other showing the civic center of Tokyo. Both were in English but nevertheless were still a little difficult to follow and it took us two tries just to get outside the hotel complex itself.

Once on the main street we were soon walking alongside the moat with beautiful views of the old walls and some very nice civic buildings across the street. This walk goes all the way around the palace grounds and is a favorite of joggers and cyclists so was very crowded on a warm and sunny Sunday morning. The area had very little traffic on the wide streets and was very quiet.

The gardens were very pleasant and there were a lot of families enjoying the warm weather so it was fun to people watch and stroll around the pathways. We didn't cover the whole park by any stretch but around 2pm we decided that we had had enough walking so we made our way to the nearest subway station. With good signage and ticket machine facilities we found our way back to the station nearest the hotel with minimum difficulty.

On Monday we decided to take the Hop on/Hop off bus tour which made a stop at our hotel so was very convenient. We normally do this as our introduction to a new city but even done at the end of our visit it provided an interesting overview of this city of contrasts.



We took two of the three routes so we saw a lot of the civic, shopping, Imperial and river and sea areas of the city. It was cool and generally cloudy for much of the day which made for a cold ride at times but the sun came out in the afternoon. All in all it was a very good way to end our sightseeing.

Tonight we dined on the seventeenth floor of the hotel in the Sky rotating restaurant which served a buffet of Japanese, Chinese and Western dishes and provided us with another panoramic view of the city at night.

So, our two week stay in Japan has concluded and we have been very impressed with what we have seen. Amazing scenery, a fascinating culture and beautiful people. Another great trip!



