

We are now on our sixth night in Japan on our first visit to this country. We have changed planes in Tokyo a number of times on our way to other Asian countries but have never spent time here.

We chose to take an escorted tour as we had heard that traveling solo might be a little difficult as English signage is limited and surprisingly little English is spoken in general. Having been here for a few days it doesn't seem as bad as we might have expected but being accompanied certainly has its benefits. We are traveling with All Japan Tours about which we knew nothing but so far the hotels, restaurants and the bus rides have been excellent. Our guide speaks very good English and is very personable but so far has not given us as much information on the country, its history and its culture as I had expected. Certainly he hasn't used the longer drives for non-stop talking as we have often experienced (which is not always informative) and I think he could share more of his country with us.

Having said that, in three full days of touring (we arrived a day early and spent it



on our own) we have seen a lot of Tsukushi Sanchi Island, the most southwesterly of the large islands of Japan. We have visited the impact sites of Hiroshima and Nagasaki where hundreds of thousands were killed or injured and which brought to an end World War II.

Nagasaki Peace Park Statue

In Nagasaki we also visited an interesting small island (480 by 160 meters) which at one point housed 10,000 coal miners and their families and is regarded

as a key part of Japan's industrial revolution. It was used as a base for mining for about 150 years and was the most densely populated place on earth when occupied. It has now been abandoned and its huge concrete apartment blocks are crumbling and falling but its significance to industry has recently caused it to be named a UNESCO Heritage site.



In addition we have visited a number of small shrines and sites of interest in Japanese mythology, as well as an impressive gorge and a couple of thermal features (Japan sits on the Ring of Fire). However, for us, the most interesting has been the spectacular scenery in this part of the country. It is very mountainous (not to the point of being snow covered but nevertheless impressive ranges) and there are some spectacular valleys. Many of these are filled with cultivated land and we have seen many vegetables and fruits being grown - as well as lots of rice.

We have seen most of the scenery from the bus but that has also provided us with a close up view of the absolutely magnificent road and bridge infrastruc-



ture. Today we drove from the largest island to the fourth largest (Hikoku) but in doing so we drove across several much smaller islands, each connected to one another by long bridges. The coastal scenery here was also magnificent, despite a rainy day.

For us the highlights so far came during our visit to Hiroshima. First, the Peace park and the A-Bomb Museum were sobering, a little graphic at times but presented the terrible event of August 6, 1945 in a thoughtful and factual manner. One building still stands - although no longer with a roof or windows - that was the "city hall"



Hiroshima Peace Park



on that day and was almost directly beneath the blast from the bomb. The bomb detonated at a height of 2000 feet above the ground which maximized the effects of the blast and, of course, the resulting radiation. As a result,

over 90% of the buildings with several miles of the epicenter were destroyed or badly damaged but this one ruin still stands as a memorial. It is currently undergoing work to re-enforce it and preserve it for future generations. The rest of the Peace park and the museum are beautifully laid out and form a fitting tribute to a terrible point in world history.

In the afternoon we visited major Shinto shrine on the small island of Miyajima off Hiroshima which was impressive in itself but is perhaps more famous for its "floating" torii, the Shinto gate structure quintessentially Japan, which stands in the sea and appears to float at high tide. We even witnessed a large group of businessmen (all in dark suits



and carrying brief case) visiting the temple to receive a blessing on this the first day of the new Fiscal Year. Presumably they were hoping to prompt a prosperous new year!

We have about ten more days in country so hopefully there will be another blog before we leave - but the days are pretty full so watch this space.

Bob and Molly