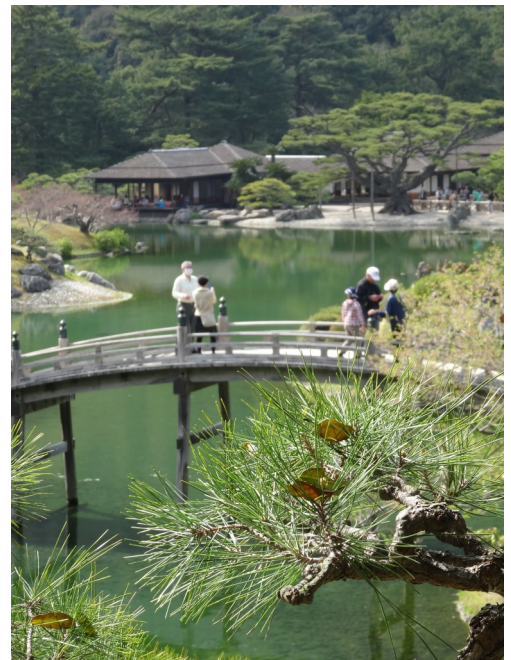


On Saturday we left Matsuyama for another two hour drive through beautiful scenery to our first stop in the town of Takamatsu. Here we visited a village comprising a couple of dozen houses and other buildings that represented life in the old feudal system on this island three to four hundred years ago. The buildings had been brought here from various parts of this island but I suspect a good deal of renovation had taken place in many of them. Nevertheless it was a pleasant - if hilly - stroll and the setting was attractive.

We then went to lunch at a cooking school for the local noodles (udon) and we were taught how to prepare the noodles for cooking in a very hands on way. We kneaded the dough, rolled it flat and then cut into the noodles using a very sharp and lethal-looking knife. This was done under the instruction of a very energetic lady (with translation by our guide) and at times with musical accompaniment and ourselves on tambourine. It was an interesting experience and was followed by the lunch itself which was excellent.

After lunch we drove a short distance to a beautiful Japanese garden that was first built for the feudal lords and is said to have been several hundreds of years in the making. The area where most people were gathered was a lawn area with dozens of cherry blossom trees at just about their peak. This being Saturday there were many families picnicking on the lawn and admiring the trees on a warm and sunny afternoon. The rest of the garden (or at least the area that we had time to visit) was filled with trees, lakes, bridges and flowers in what everyone would recognize as quintessential Japanese.



Our bedroom!

The driving day ended by crossing back to the main island, once again by way of several smaller islands connected by modern road bridges. This had been another terrific day of sightseeing and, together with our day in Hiroshima, was the highlight of the trip so far.

On Sunday we drove just a short distance in the city of Kurashiki to visit a scenic area alongside a canal. The town had been a port but the part we visited is essentially a few streets with buildings of the early 19th century which were mostly two storey in black and white. The area that we walked was very attractive and we saw several groups taking short canal boat rides (complete with what we would classify as “rice paddy” hats), several locals in



beautiful traditional Japanese dress and lots of “local” tourists out for a Sunday stroll with their families. This being cherry blossom time - which was about at its

best here - there were a lot of people on the streets on a warm and bright morning.

We also spent an hour in the Ohara Museum of Art. This had been formed at the beginning of the 20th century to bring Western art to Japan and contained many paintings by Monet and his contemporaries and a lot of Impressionist work. In addition, there was a collection of more modern art (right up to this day) and a section of Asian art work.

In the afternoon we visited Himeji Castle. This is one of only a handful of castles still standing from the era of the Samurai lords and dates from the 17th century although major renovation had just been completed last year. This (and we understand the others) is basically white on the outside with the very ornate tiled roof that is typical of older Japanese buildings. The main keep stands at the top of a large mound and the building itself then stands another six storeys, so the overall effect is one of beauty and strength. In addition, this particular castle stands in a large moated and walled compound in which there are 1000 cherry blossom trees. Needless to say, the place was awash with people - by far the busiest area we have experienced on the trip.

The complex was so busy (not to mention steep) and when we reached the main keep the line stopped. After being stopped for a while, we felt that we



would not be able to complete the circuit in time.

So, we - and several others in the group - strolled at a leisurely pace and admired the outside of the castle and the cherry blossom and, as a sudden downpour started, went back to the bus. Others (perhaps half the bus) made the entire circuit and were back in time, so we may have been able to make it. However, we enjoyed the views we had and apparently didn't miss much insofar as the interior of the castle was concerned but did not get the panoramic vistas from higher up.

From the castle we drove to Kobe where we had a very good Japanese dinner with the famous beef as its feature. This was thinly sliced and we cooked it ourselves on individual heaters on the table. I thought it was excellent as were the rest of the dishes provided. Others were less impressed, mainly because the meat didn't look like a typical US steak.

It was another 45 minutes to our hotel in Sakai, which is very close to Osaka. Since we had eaten dinner, we opted to have a drink in the hotel bar (good but expensive) before retiring after another great day of sightseeing.



Monday we drove to the city of Nara which had been the first capital of Japan before it was moved to Kyoto. In Nara we visited the largest bronze statue of Buddha which stands about 50 feet high within the wooden Todaiji temple. We then went to a Japanese tea ceremony where we made two types of tea; one with conventional leaves (green tea and quite good) and the other made from tea powder. The fun in this one was in the making; whisking the powder with warm water until it foamed or bubbled. When made, the drink was

a dark green and, although we drank it, it would not become standard for our afternoon cuppa at home. This tea ceremony was followed directly by another traditional Japanese lunch but this one had no raw fish so everyone was happy!

We then drove to Kyoto which was the capital of Japan for 1000 years before Tokyo took over about 150 years ago. Apparently the move to Tokyo was a sign of strength by the "Revolutionary" victors in a Civil War.

The first stop in Kyoto (Japan's third largest city and very busy) was to the Fushimira Inari Shrine which is atop a long hill along which are lined hundreds (literally) of orange torii gates. Unfortunately time didn't allow us to walk the whole 4Km length of these gates to the temple itself but the pagodas and other buildings along the way were interesting and very colorful.



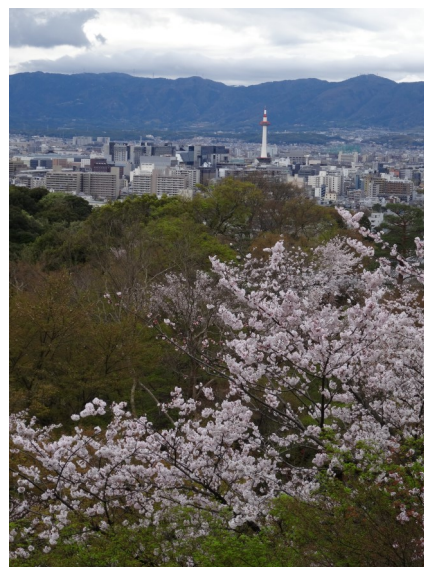
Our final stop for the day was at the Kiyomizu Temple. Once again this Buddhist shrine was

at the top of a half mile long climb but the views from the area at the top were worth the walk. The shrine itself was interesting to see (and was being used as a house of prayer by lots of visitors) but the views over the city of Kyoto were spectacular. Since this is the height of the cherry blossom season we were treated to some beautiful flora that provided a perfect backdrop for the high rises and tower of Kyoto.

We were staying tonight (and Tuesday night also) just outside the major sprawl of Kyoto in the city of Otsu which sits on the edge of the largest lake in Japan. In fact our hotel room had a wonderful view of the lake and the mountains across the other side.

At this hotel we had been given the option of Western or Japanese style rooms; that is, a conventional bed or a mattress on the floor. We were one of only two couples who volunteered for the latter - and it was very comfortable. Each to his own!

We both slept very well on our beds on the floor. There were only a couple of rooms at this hotel that were available with the Japanese style sleeping arrangement so we volunteered and have enjoyed the experience.



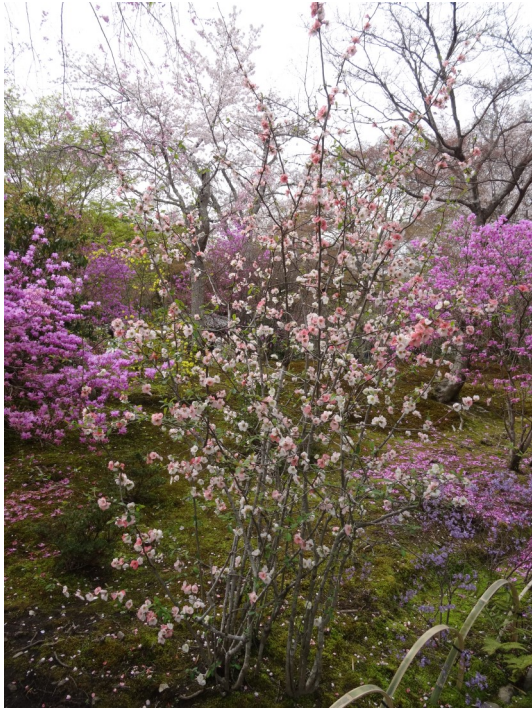
On Tuesday we drove about an hour to the Kinkakuji Temple which is a beautiful pavilion covered in gold standing at the edge of a small lake. The gardens of the grounds were absolutely fantastic and they together with the pavilion made for some beautiful photographs, especially as the water was still so we got perfect reflections. Our next stop was a 10 minute kimono fashion show, which was quite interesting but (obviously) was followed by the chance to buy the goods.

After the show we were driven to a beautiful area (Arashiyama) on the edge of the Hozu River, along which were lined dozens of

cherry trees, The hillside was also dotted with cherry trees in blossom, although we were told that these uncultivated ones did not have such large a colorful blossom as the ones at street level.

We had a good lunch (Italian!) sitting outside before walking a short distance to the Tenryuji Temple. This is a Zen Buddhist temple set once again in some magnificent grounds





with trees and plants as well as examples of Zen landscaping. We walked right by the temple itself (thanks to our guide's pace) but the grounds were absolutely stunning and worthy of a much longer visit. On leaving the temple grounds we walked through a bamboo grove (which got a bigger billing than it deserved, we thought) and then we were back on the busy street. Unfortunately we had an hour to kill before the bus left which was time that would have been better spent in the gardens. However, we were compensated somewhat by our next stop which was at the Gion Theater where we had a brief tea ceremony before watching a wonderful performance

of Japanese dancing. The entire cast (dancers, vocalists and musicians) were female although a few male characters appeared in the one hour performance. We were given earphones that gave us an English commentary throughout the show so we were able to understand what the dances were representing. This was a great added touch but I think everyone felt that the unique dancing would have been excellent even without translation.

Finally we had a Sukiyaki style dinner which in essence was a "cook it yourself" meal of meat and vegetables in a pan shared between four people, something like the "Melting Pot" restaurant experience we enjoy at home. It was very good and we kept asking for - and receiving - additional beef and vegetables. That concluded our visit to Kyoto which, despite its size, has some very beautiful and historic areas and was fortunately spared bombing during World War II as a result of its cultural heritage.

On Wednesday (today) we were driven to Kyoto railway station where we took a short (21 minute) bullet train ride to Maibare. We were then met again by the bus and started a 2 ½ hour ride to Kanazawa. The drive took us once again through some magnificent scenery with some steep climbs followed by descents to sea level and glimpses of the Sea of Japan.



Once in Kanazawa we had lunch and then spent 1 ½ hours in the beautiful Kenrokuen Gardens. These gardens contained a couple of ponds, a waterfall, fountain and a number of sculptured stones as well as many small bridges.



The cherry blossom was still at its peak here and there were some magnificent groves as well as pine trees and many other different flora. On a sunny and warm afternoon it was a very pleasant area to spend some time simply strolling.



Then we had another 1/12 hour drive during which we climbed higher into the mountains and saw a number of snow capped peaks, many with considerable amounts of snow still clearly visible. Our last stop of the day was at a fairly large farm village with many preserved and re-

stored farmhouses, most of which had steeply pitched thatch roofs. This isolated community had once been famous for its silk industry (the worm breeding as well as silk manufacturing) but now is largely a tourist destination. It is, however, another UNESCO World Heritage site and is therefore going to be preserved in its original state as much as possible. We were told that this village was from the Edo era of Japan's history (17-19th century).



Another 45 minutes brought us to Takayama ("Little Kyoto" as it, too, was spared in the war and is well preserved) where our only activity for today was dinner, which was another very good Kai-seki banquet dinner. Tomorrow we continue southeast towards Tokyo where we will arrive on Friday evening. More at that time we hope.