

Japan Travel Notes

These are my day by day notes about traveling in Japan, with a few general observations, etc. thrown in. They also contain a rating of the places we stayed. My trip to Japan was from October 25 to November 6. Before Japan I was in Thailand from October 5.

General comments: I loved visiting Japan, especially this time of year. The fall colors in the countryside were beautiful, especially the bright red of the Japanese Maple Trees. Prices in Japan were high for a lot of things. Souvenirs, like paper fans, were 7 to 10 times more expensive than Thailand. Hotel rooms were higher than the US for a comparable room, and again, many times higher than Thailand. I loved Japan even more once we got out of Tokyo. Kyoto and other places were still expensive, but cheaper than Tokyo.

Day 1: We arrived in Narita Airport about 4:30 on Tuesday, October 25. The flight from Bangkok, on JAL, was smooth and customs went quickly. Tuesday night we stayed at the Holiday Inn Narita. This was a great bargain. The largest room I had in Japan, and the lowest price. Service was excellent and the internet was free. Food was good, too.

Day 2: Wednesday we took the hotel shuttle back to Narita airport, then caught a shuttle bus to Haneda airport and a taxi to our hotel in Omori. We were staying at the Ohmori Art Hotel for a few nights, and the airport shuttles didn't run there. The rooms there were compact, but had everything we needed. The room had a small sofa, desk, and table in one section, with a sliding screen that could separate it from the bed area. Food there was excellent, and breakfast was included. The internet access was free, too, and it was a very fast connection. I uploaded 84 mbyte in less than an hour. If the room was a little bigger, I'd give this place 4 stars, but 3 ½ is all it gets for now.

We were taking our time swapping hotels and got settled in about 3:30. I called a contact for the Chiyoda Square Dance Club about their Wednesday night dance, and he said he'd pick us up at 4:30! We scrambled to change and eat a snack (no lunch!) and met Shozo on time. Picking us up meant walking with us to the Omori train station and getting on the train to Tokyo station with us. From there we took a short taxi ride to the dance, which started at 6 PM. Great club to dance with, with a lot of really friendly members. We were treated as honored guests. After the dance (9 PM) they took us out to dinner, then paid for a cab fare all the way back to Omori.

Day 3: We decided to go out exploring a little in Tokyo. JTB runs a lot of full and half day tours so we decided to take the afternoon tour. After a couple problems finding the bus terminal, we got signed up OK for the afternoon tour. The tour stopped at the Imperial Palace, and the shrine at Asukuso, drove thru Ginza and a couple other areas, then took a boat ride down the river, and back to the bus terminal. Not a bad tour for about \$45 USD. We got to learn a little about the layout of the city. The guide gave us a running commentary about Tokyo and it's history.

Day 4: Friday we went to the Shinagawa Aquarium, which was walking distance from the hotel. It's a pretty good sized Aquarium, set in a nice park. They had a dolphin show and a sea lion show in the afternoon. Both were pretty good. Friday evening we ventured down to Ginza to look around. I was trying to find Bic Camera, but never found it. Afterwards I went online and found it at the other end of Ginza, right beside the next train stop!

Day 5: Saturday morning I ran back down to Ginza to check out Bic Camera. I was looking for a flash for my Canon. Turns out the prices aren't any better than the US, but it was nice seeing a really big camera store. Saturday afternoon and evening we danced at the "pre-dance" for the Chiyoda Square Dance Club's 33 Anniversary Dance. The dance was held in the Bellport Atrium. Bellport is a large office complex in the Omori area. There were about 200 dancers in the afternoon for Advanced and Challenge dancing, about the same in the evening for Mainstream and Plus.

Day 6: The anniversary dance was Sunday, from 10 AM to 4:30 PM. I'm not sure what the attendance was, but the hall was packed. I'd guess 400-500 dancers. They dance non-stop in Japan, so it was quite a workout. It's also good to see that many people eager to jump up on the floor. Dancers ranged in age from pre-teen to senior citizen. The Atrium had several restaurants in it, including a McDonalds, which must be Asia's favorite restaurant because they are everywhere!

After the dance we were invited as special guests to the club's anniversary party. This was a formal style Japanese dinner. We had name cards to assign us to a table. The meal was served a course at a time, on a large turntable in the middle of our 10 seat table. There were at least 7 courses. 4 Liter bottles of beer were on every table, and more beer, wine, and anything else was available free. The dinner went on for about 3 hours, with lots of speeches, jokes, etc. Of course, it was all in Japanese, except for Buddy Weaver, a California caller that was the guest caller for the dance. His speech was then interpreted.

Day 7: Monday we changed hotels again, this time to the Shinagawa Prince. I thought moving closer to the center of Tokyo would be a good idea for sightseeing. In reality, it didn't make much of a difference. The Prince Hotels came highly recommended, but I was a little disappointed in it. The room was even smaller than the Art Hotel, and internet was not free. The price was about the same, but didn't include breakfast. The staff at the hotel and the general surroundings rate at least 4 stars, but the price and small room bring it down to 3 stars.

After moving to the hotel we set out to find the Tokyo Tower. The tower is taller than the Eiffel Tower, and provides a beautiful view of the city. Along the way to the Tower we stopped at a Shinto Shrine and a Buddhist temple.

Day 8: More sightseeing. This time we took the train up to the Ueno area of Tokyo, to visit more shrines and temples. We had intended to visit the Maritime Museum, but found it was closed on Tuesdays.

Day 9: Wednesday morning we got up early, checked out, and started on a 3 day tour. The tour was by JTB again. We headed out of the city, toward Mt. Fuji. The weather gods were smiling, as we got a pretty clear day. A lot of time Fuji is covered with clouds. It had also snowed a couple days before, so the peak was white. After Fuji we had a great lunch at a nearby resort.

Wednesday afternoon the tour took us on a boat ride down the crater lake in Hakone, then up a cable car to another peak overlooking the lake. This also provided us a good view of Mt. Fuji, and it was just at sunset. The tour then took us to a train station where some of us took the train onto Kyoto, and others went back to Tokyo. Those of us going to Kyoto had to change trains, but there was a JTB guide at the stop where we changed, to make sure we got on the right train. There was also someone at the station in Kyoto that put us in a cab to our hotel, the Rhiga Royal Hotel. Nice place, bigger room, but no free internet – 3 stars for this hotel.

Day 10: We toured Kyoto in the morning, stopping at Nijo Castle, the Golden Pavilion, and the Imperial Palace. It was a holiday in Japan, and everyplace was extremely crowded. I would have liked to have spent more time at the Imperial Palace, but there were too many people there.

Thursday afternoon we took off towards Nara, to visit another temple and shrine. Again, the holiday crowds did us in. The bus was stuck in traffic for over an hour, trying to get into the first stop. We finally got off and walked about 1KM to the place. This was the largest Buddha statue in Japan, and one of the largest all wood buildings. Quite impressive. The Shinto Shrine close by was also nice, but we couldn't get in to see a lot of it. The grounds where they were both located is called Deer Park, and is full of deer. They were everywhere, all looking for a handout. Vendors were selling deer food that was supposed to be good for them.

Day 11: We had a “free” day in Kyoto. We took a cab to a temple up on a mountain, overlooking the city. From there we followed a path that was named the “Path of Philosophy”. It was 1.8 KM long, and connected many Shinto Shrines and Buddhist Temples. Some of them were small and old, others were large and more modern. It was a nice walk along a tree lined path. There were lots of boutique type shops along the way, and even an artist hand painting postcards for about \$1 each. After the walk, we grabbed a taxi back to the hotel and took the train back to Tokyo. This was an express train, with just 5 stops in about 3 hours. We checked back into the Shinagawa Prince for two more nights.

Day 12: Saturday we headed to the Maritime Museum. We had bought all day passes for the train line, so we made several stops along the way. First was at the Rainbow Bridge where we walked out to an observation place overlooking Tokyo Bay. Next we saw some type of dancing taking place in Aqua City, so we stopped there. Not sure what was going on but it looked like some type of dance competition. One group after another got up and danced for 5 to 10 minutes. They were in Japanese type dress, but dancing to more modern music.

Fuji TV was next door, so we visited their building, too. They have an observation place on the 25th floor. We also went through a tour where we could see a couple TV shows being shot, and see a lot of memorabilia from shows. The Maritime Museum was next. Not a bad place to spend a couple hours. They had displays of all types of boats, from old to new, plus a couple boats open to the public for touring.

From the Museum we headed to the Mega Web and Palette City shopping complex. Mega Web was basically Toyota's giant showroom, where we could see everything Toyota makes, including their race cars. Outside there was an amusement park with a really giant ferris wheel. I would have like to have ridden it, but the line was long and we were hungry! We found a good dinner in the food area of Palette City, and then caught the train back to Shinagawa.

Day 13: We checked out of the Prince, but made lunch reservations and got tickets for the shuttle bus back to the airport. We had a couple hours to fill, so we caught a subway to Asukuso, mainly to do some souvenir shopping. There was some kind of ceremony at the Shinto Shrine there, with lots of young Japanese girls dressed in Kimonos and adults dressed in suits. Someone said that the girls are taken into the church at age 7, so that may have been what was going on. There was a group of dancers outside, doing Japanese folk dancing.

Lunch was at the buffet restaurant in the Shinagawa Prince. The restaurant had a Japanese section, Western section, and a Chinese section. We stuffed ourselves at all three, before getting on the bus to the airport. Supanee headed off to terminal 2 for her JAL flight back to Thailand, and I checked in at terminal 1 for the AA flight to Dallas and Norfolk. My flight was about an hour later, so I went over to the other terminal until Supanee had to go to the gate. My flight back was long, but uneventful. It was interesting that I had two boarding passes, for Japan and Dallas, and both had a boarding time of 6:40 PM, on November 6!

That's about it for this adventure. I loved both Thailand and Japan, and look forward to going back to both real soon.