



March 26

By Susan Richardson

Konnichiwa. Ten dazed Friendship Force travelers who survived two long exhausting flights with a very close connection in Dallas arrived at Tokyo Haneda at 4:00 PM, greeted by dozens of young Japanese employees holding up cell phones, telling us to display our Visit Japan websites that were to be uploaded and completed at home. I confidently displayed my QR Immigration and Customs codes, sure I'd prepared sufficiently, but no, I was told to stand with a small group to get help. Ugh! I think just one of us passed the first test. The site wasn't fully downloaded, but I was told to move ahead. Phew! Next we queued to show Immunization cards, re-queued in a long snake-like maze to show the QR codes, and finally, finally, emerged to meet a group of smiling faces holding a Friendship Force banner.

I rushed over to give one of these smiling people a big hug. I felt

her body stiffen and back up. Uh-oh. First mistake! I forgot! 45-degree bow with hands placed on my thighs! Photos were taken, and we were ushered to a quieter spot where we met Janet & Tom, Mimi & Al and Katie & Ray who had flown in from Minneapolis. Some of our group waited for luggage and went in a different direction. Norika herded eight of us outside where it was rainy, misty and cool.

We rode a bus for over an hour and were handed off to Fumi, an engaging, soft-spoken sophisticated woman who walked us through a department store and grocery store with apples the size of a small watermelon on the way to an



underground garage. We loaded our luggage into the trunk and drove to Saitama where we stopped at a Long John Silvers-type restaurant for dinner. Back in the car, we drove to meet Masako, our host that Beth and I had been corresponding with for a couple of months. I jumped out, ready to make a good impression. Hands on thighs, ready to bow. But then Masako ran to me and greeted me with a comforting bear hug! Ha! Beth and I settled into the tatami room with sliding paper screens, a shrine in the corner and a view of a garden and Mt. Fuji. Welcome to Japan!

Karen & I (Jackie) were the last ambassadors to arrive at Haneda Airport. We had similar experiences with “Visit Japan Website” as others had and was initially delayed about an hour. However, first impressions of Japan & its people were very positive! Each step of the way through the Immigration & Customs process was comfortable. The area was more than adequately staffed with helpful, pleasant, polite & knowledgeable locals.

We were enthusiastically greeted by Yoko, Karen’s Home Host and proceeded to purchase bus tickets. Other impressions: the bus ticket was purchased with what I call “funny money” & very inexpensive. We loaded our luggage under the bus and were the first passengers to board the “luxury style tour” bus. While involved in conversation and still the only passengers on the bus, the bus driver approaches us to inform us to lower our voices. Lesson learned: in public speak softly! After about a 2-hour ride I met up with my host, Kayo, who was waiting for me. Knowing each other from the past we warmly embraced! After getting my luggage she quickly ushered me to catch a train (another hour) towards her home. Next impression: drivers must be very alert! Navigating 2-way streets which are about the width of 1 ½ small car widths can be challenging!

After an extremely long day, settled in for a good night’s sleep. Ready to meet new Japanese & American friends, and to begin a wonderful journey!



March 27

By Al Gerhardstein

The walking path around the small pond had several cherry trees in full blossom. But what was that music? As I turned a corner, I came upon at least 150 older people doing synchronized exercise to a soundtrack broadcast through a radio at the front of the group. I later learned that the government pays \$5000 Yen to each person who joins for exercise at least 200 days in the year.

Mimi and our host Aya Takado then joined me to walk to the train station. Our hour-long journey to Saitama from Tokyo was fascinating. Thousands of commuters, completely silent on the trains, dancing across, under and through the stations and platforms without disturbing each other. Most were glued to their screens.



Three transfers and four trains later Aya had us arrive right on time at Omiya Station to meet the ambassadors and many of the members of the Saitama Club. A short walk followed to the Bonsai Art Museum. As an art form Bonsai arrived from China during feudal times. Originally Bonsai plants decorated palaces and the homes of the wealthy and powerful undoubtedly to show how they could command and tame even the forces of nature. Gradually the art spread to common people and today Bonsai plants are common in many homes. They require careful attention including daily watering, occasional transplanting in fresh soil and clipping and wiring branches and even roots. We saw Bonsai trees that were 40 - 1000 years old. Bonsai spread dramatically after the 1837 Paris Exhibition and the 1970 Olympics. Bonsai plants are now displayed in art museums across the world.

We then walked to a restaurant where we removed our shoes and settled into delightful trays of raw fish, rice, fabulous wasabi, tofu in several forms, and pudding. Taxis took us to the Kita-in Temple where we saw a beautiful Buddhist altar, raked gardens, carefully tended trees and shrubs, all from a peaceful open sided building with easy access from all sides to the outside.

Outside the temple there were booths selling treats and offering games to play. Next to the Temple was a garden with 500 carved stone statues of the Buddha, each in a unique pose. Quite an ambitious effort and a place where it was easy to linger.



A long walk followed that was a feast for the eyes. We saw many young men and women dressed in Kimonos clearly enjoying being admired in their historic dress. Hanging over one street were beautiful fish kites hung above from pole to pole. "Girl's day" was coming on March 30 and I suspect this street will really blossom with even more Kimonos on that day. We walked past a several hundred-year-old bell that is rung by hand regularly throughout the day. It sits atop a beautiful wood tower. Eventually we reached the Kawagoe Festival Museum where we learned about the spectacular festival held on Oct 1-2 each year which includes large wooden floats and folks dressed in historic costumes.



Someone told me we walked about 4.5 miles that day. The eyes were treated all day long while the legs did the hard work. All worth it.

The day began with a healthy and satisfying breakfast prepared by my home host. I then followed her as we zig-zagged through the streets of Saitama to catch the bus to the Omiya station where we met the other ambassadors and FF members of the Saitama club. What a friendly and energetic group!

We hopped on the subway, then walked to our first stop at the Bonsai Museum. We saw many beautiful bonsai trees as old as 1000 years!

We then had a lunch at a local Japanese style restaurant where we enjoyed a delicious variety of the local favorites. I enjoyed the food, even if I didn't always know what I was eating.

Our next stop was the Kita-in Temple in Kawagoe, Saitama. The origins of Kita-in itself dates to ages about which few written records survive. Kita-in is thought to have been founded in about 850 AD but it really came into prominence when it received the support of Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa in the early 1600's. The Temple is famous for its 540 stone statues of rakan showing various facets of the human experience.



There was plenty to see, just walking around Kawagoe. The cherry blossoms were in full bloom and beautiful. Many young women were out in full kimono dress to celebrate graduation or "just because". We saw carp flags everywhere. This is to commemorate Children's Day or Boys Day which is celebrated in early May.



We stopped by the wooden Toki no Kane bell tower. It is the symbol of Koedo that dates to the 1600s. The 16m-tall structure was erected by the former feudal lord of the Kawagoe Domain, Tadakatsu Sakai. However, the original tower was destroyed in the Great Kawagoe Fire of 1893, and the current tower is a reconstruction built in the following year. The Tsuki no Kane bell rings mechanically four times a day at 6am, noon, 3pm and 6pm. There's also a small Yakushi Shrine behind the bell tower, which is believed to be good for eye-related illnesses.

Our last stop was the Kawagoe Festival Museum dedicated to the massive Kawagoe Matsuri festival, held annually on the third weekend of October. The festival is famous for its 8m-tall floats that go parading through Koedo's main street. The spectacle, which has its roots in the mid-17th century, reaches its peak at night when the floats are lit up and compete in a raucous performance of drums, bells, flutes and dancing. I would love to see this festival in person some day!

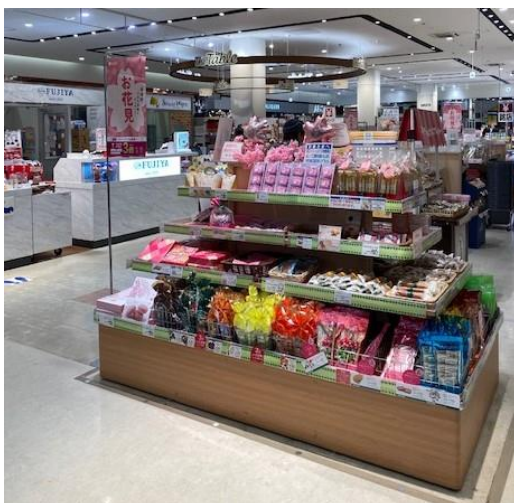


It was a great start to an amazing week!

March 28 Welcome Party

By Bobbye Underwood

Today was an exciting day in our journey, we had a crash course in Japanese culture. The Saitama chapter did a spectacular job in providing a flower arranging demo with an opportunity to try it ourselves. We worked directly with individual members of the chapter on an origami figure, and practiced writing our name in Japanese characters. The ultimate experience of the day was trying on, wearing, and modeling some extraordinary kimonos (with a lot of tugging and wrapping and binding from our very experienced new friends). We left the chapter with a whole new perspective on Japanese culture.



As we returned to our host home, we stopped for a brief foray into a local shopping mall grocery store.

We learned a lot more about day-to-day experiences. As usual our host prepared a wonderful dinner from some of the items she purchased. It was a great day due to the hospitality of the Saitama chapter and particularly our host Yuko.

On Tuesday we enjoyed a day-long Welcome Party at Kitaurawa Culture Hall in Saitama. After introductions and remarks by the journey coordinators, FFGC presented and taught the line dance, Boot Scootin' Boogie.

Then we broke into groups and practiced calligraphy and origami and learned Japanese children's games. We had a delicious bento box lunch, and after lunch,



we learned the basic principles of Ikebana, Japanese flower arranging.

The highlight of the day was when the FFGC ambassadors were dressed in kimonos and Samurai outfits for the photo session with our hosts. We never looked so good!





Wednesday was one of the “free days” on our agenda for our Japan experience. The ambassadors were staying with Japanese host families for that first week and I had the pleasure and privilege of staying with Sayoko and Yasuo Ichikoji in Tokyo in their lovely guest room on the 4th floor of their beautiful 35 story Hi-Rise building. Conveniently located near the train station. A good friend of mine recommended that a “must see” while in Tokyo was the Chiku Chiku (Hedgehog) Café in Asakusa. I asked Sayoko if we could go there on our free day and we combined that visit with a visit to the Senjo-ji Temple. The Senjo-ji is one of Tokyo’s most colorful and popular temples. The legend says that in the year 628 two brothers fished a statue of Kannon, the goddess of mercy, out of the Sumida River. Even though

they put the statue back into the river, it always returned to them. Consequently, Senso-ji was built nearby for the goddess of Kannon. The temple was completed in 645, making it Tokyo’s oldest temple. When approaching the temple, visitors first enter through the Kaminarimon (Thunder Gate), the outer gate of Senso-ji Temple and the symbol of Asakusa and the entire city of Tokyo.



A shopping street of over 200 meters, called Nakamise, leads from the outer gate to the temple's second gate, the Hozomon. Alongside typical Japanese souvenirs such as folding fans, various traditional local snacks from the area are sold along the Nakamise. The shopping street has a history of several centuries. Beyond the Hozomon Gate stands the temple’s main hall and a five storied pagoda.



Next we traveled on to the Chiku Chiku Café where we had a 3:00PM reservation. On the way, we were able to see another landmark – The Tokyo Skytree.. It’s the tallest tower in the world at 634 meters. It was built for Broadcasting and as an observation tower. The number “634” is an easy number to remember as it can be read as “Musashi,” which is a word that is very familiar to the Japanese. It is also reminiscent of the Musashi Province, which is the old name of the large region that encompassed part of Tokyo, Saitama, and Kanagawa. After that, Hedgehogs welcomed us in their little dollhouse rooms such as a kitchen, a dining room, a bedroom, a classroom, a bathroom , a garden and a Japanese-style room. The cost is about \$20 USD for a whole hour of looking at, and holding, the little hedgehogs. They also served all kinds of

tea, both hot and cold, thus making it an official café. Everyone has to wear gloves when handling the hedgehogs to keep them free of germs but they occasionally will bite if frightened. They were really cute and it was a fun visit. Apparently two days later, Kim Kardashian also visited Chiku Chiku with her children. Made me feel like a real trendsetter!

That evening Sayoko and I treated ourselves to salads and entrees from a local market near her apartment. The perfect ending to a perfect day. I could not have asked for a more informative and fun Free Day in the Tokyo area!

This was a free day with my host, Ikuko Koriyama. She took me by train to see the 17th century Senso-ji Temple Complex. School was out so the place was packed. Kabucki actors still come there before a new season of performances, and sumo



wrestlers visit before a tournament to pay their respects. We stopped at the huge bronze incense burner, in front of the main hall, to bathe our hands & face in the smoke - the charm to ward off illnesses. Then we climbed the stairs to offer prayers.



This was one temple where we did not have to remove our shoes, since the floor was concrete!

The gate to the temple has its guardian gods, should either god decide to leave his post for a stroll, he can use the enormous pair of sandals hanging on the back wall to walk around.

We shopped at the many small shops leading to the temple, and saw many young ladies & families dressed in rented kimonos. We made faces with the guard at the gate as is a photo op. We went to a grocery store and admired all the fresh fish and I purchased small local kitchen items that are used daily in Japanese homes.



What a fun day!!



Today our gracious hosts whisked us off by bus to Nikko, a small town in the mountains 63 miles north of Saitama. The ride gave us our first look at the countryside, a mix of small agricultural plots, villages,



and industrial buildings. Not a mile went by without cherry trees – by a river, next to a warehouse, near a Starbucks – more evidence that our blossom timing is close to perfection. We stepped off the bus into crisp mountain air at our first stop, the Tamozawa Imperial Villa Memorial Park.

We were among the first visitors to arrive at this magnificent villa and garden that was used by the emperor as a temporary residence in the late 1800's. The house was traditional architecture with wooden walls, sliding wall panels, and tatami rooms. It reminded me how much America's most famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, borrowed the techniques of Japanese designers, particularly the integration of low-profile buildings into their settings. As we walked through, at every turn the villa offered views of the surrounding garden and the faint, calming sound of the brook running through it. With few other tourists around this site, our visit had a meditative quality.

From the restaurant where we had lunch, we walked to the Nikko Toshogu Shrine, a massive complex of ornate pagodas, gates, temples, and



shrines. The Saitama Club members divided us into groups and escorted us through the main shrine. Our guides spoke to us from scripts they'd prepared to fill us in on what we were seeing, another sign of the effort they put into our visit. The complex was an example of the lengths the Shogunate went to demonstrate their power and authority. Costing billions of yen, more than four million workers built the several dozen buildings in 17 months. More than 5,000 carved statues adorn the buildings, all of them expressing goodwill and life advice for the shogunate. Most of us saw the world-famous hear-



see-speak no evil monkey carving on the horse barn, and there were so many, many more. Unlike this morning's villa visit, we were among hundreds of other tourists at this site, and it was impossible to keep our groups together. Some of us wound up climbing the 200+ steps to the okusha haiden (inner shrine hall of worship), but others descended from the main temple in time to see and hear a large group of Taiko drummers who gave a short, artfully choreographed concert in traditional costumes at the foot of the temple grounds – an unexpected bonus to this eye-popping day.



Nikko is a lovely city 130 km (81 miles) north of Tokyo. In the Japanese language Nikko means “sunlight “. I was told that it is a very popular vacation spot for Japanese.

The highlight of my visit to Nikko was the tour of one of the country’s best-known shrines; Toshogu Shrine. The area encompasses three UNESCO World Heritage sites. They are Toshogu Shrine, Futarasan Shrine and the Rinnoji Temple.

Toshogu Shrine honors Ieyasu Tokugawa the first shogun and founder of Tokyo. It is said to be the most elaborately decorated shrine in Japan with the use of many colors, inlaid pillars, red lacquer corridors and extensive use of gold leaf.



Shinkyu houses the sacred horse said to be a messenger of the Gods.

Drum Tower



Today began at 4:30 am when I woke up. It was time to organize 2-3 days' worth of necessities for a small bag as we must send most things ahead to our hotel in Kanazawa. Large luggage is discouraged on the bullet train. Soon we walked to the train station in Kunitachi and took trains to Meiji-Jingu Shrine. This quiet oasis enshrines Emperor Meiji 1868-1912. Entering, hands are washed, and visitors bow at each Torii (gate).

Next, we traveled to meet the group and view cherry blossoms at the Kitanomaru National Garden. There are many very old trees here and around Tokyo that bloom for a short time each spring. This time is much enjoyed by Japanese and tourists alike. We bought fortunes and tied them to a rack where they will surely be transmitted upward. The Yasukuni Shrine nearby honors to the level of God all soldiers lost fighting for Japan. It's existence is controversial among the Japanese.



Lunch was at Yamato-Kan, a steak house featuring Wagyu beef cooked at the table. Next we walked through Hibiya Park, once a military facility. This took us to the Imperial Palace area. We viewed the famous double

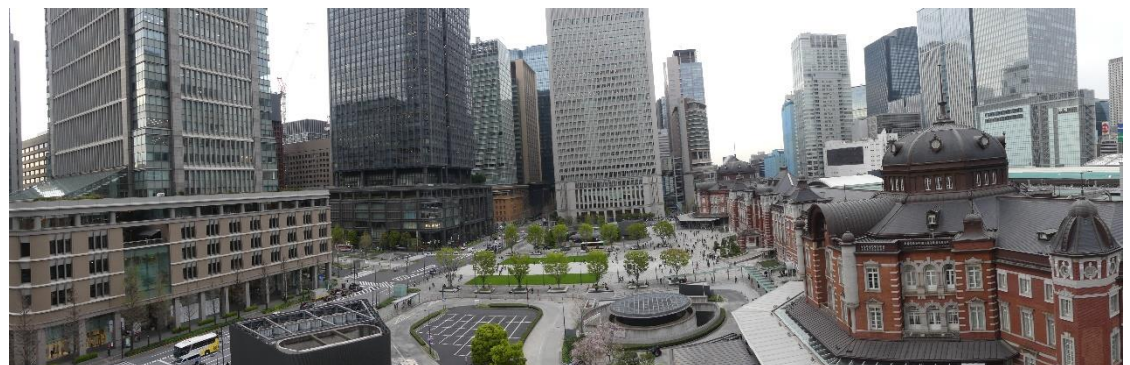
arched bridge, Nijubashi, and several water-filled moats around the grounds. Long lines waited to get into the grounds for the



once-a-year opportunity to see cherry blossoms. There has been a castle on this site since 1457. The current Imperial Palace buildings were completed in 1968. The Emperor moved from Kyoto to this site in 1869. Leaving this area we made a stop at Starbucks then walked to Tokyo Station. There is the original station much expanded over the years. We were able to get a view looking down at trains coming through.



In general, this was a day of contrasts. It is a modern city accented by historical sites and buildings. It was a small taste of a large complex city seen with the help of wonderful hosts.



. April 1

By Bobbye Underwood



Today we were treated with a wonderful Japanese family experience. We were served a lovely breakfast, and we visited an area being decorated for children's celebration. Streamers (koinobori) were strung across the River. Some were painted beautiful colors; others were decorated with children's handprints. It was very colorful. Yuko's family was so welcoming. We met Yuko's mother and niece, all of Yuko's family was so welcoming. Her daughter-in-law and son, daughter and 3 children visited while we were there, nothing adds excitement and energy to a family gathering like a three-year-old, two-year-old, and a four-month-old.

Yuko's son and daughter-in-law fixed dinner Okonomiyake cabbage pancake, and grandma brought donuts for dessert. My son had asked me to buy a Japanese silver coin. After searching the internet, Yuko took us to a pawn shop, where I made the purchase.

In the evening we participated in another organization that Yuko is a member of, focused on international languages understanding and then we had dinner at a typical Japanese restaurant with the entire family.



By Marilyn Kaiser

April 1 was our second free day. We had done so much in such a short time, including a lot of walking, that I was glad to have some time to rest. We didn't do any outside activity that day, but we did have many extended family members visit with us and enjoy the evening meal. Altogether, there were twelve of us for dinner. The special guest was Yuko's mother.



For dinner something similar to waffle batter was poured into an apparatus that was like the bottom half of a waffle iron except the recessions were half spheres instead of squares. Someone worked almost constantly separating the batter into individual spheres by turning the batter to form small balls. Various foods like octopus, cheese, fish, or corn were placed in each sphere. When the dough was cooked the balls were served with a variety of sauces.

What touched me the most on the trip was a daily practice of Yuko's husband. Yuko told us that everyday her husband fed rice to his dead mother and father. In a large room was a shrine to her husband's mother and father containing a picture of them. Every morning her husband put grains of rice in small bowls in front of the pictures of her husband's mother and father. Early one morning Connie witnessed Yuko's husband performing the ritual.

Today was a "bitter, sweet" day as we had to say goodbye to old friends (members of the Saitama Club whom we hosted in Cincinnati) and goodbye to the new friends who hosted us in Saitama. After breakfast and lunch with our host families, we met our Samurai Tour Guide, Mike, at Omiya's Station South Exit at 1:00 pm. Many pictures and gifts later, we boarded the bullet train (Shinkansen) at 1:49 to travel to Kanazawa.



We arrived in Kanazawa at 4:17pm, walked to the hotel and checked in. At 6:00 Mike met us in the lobby, and we walked to a mall area where there were about 20 restaurants where we were



able to choose our dinner. Several of us had Indian food and several of us had beef. Since the mall closed at 9:00 we returned to the hotel to prepare for a walking day on April 3rd!

We went to the Kanazawa Castle and were greeted by another beautiful display of cherry blossom trees. In 1583 construction on the castle began and was emblematic of the powerful Maeda clan that dominated the region through the Edo Period, 1603-1868 and was in use until 1945. It had numerous features for their safety and extra protection such as a system of moats and canals and stone walls curved outward making climbing difficult. Both skill and craftsmanship were evident in the massive Ishikawa entrance gate.



Kenrokuen Garden was a feast to the eyes since everywhere you looked was a different configuration of trees, bushes, rocks, and water. I thought it was especially interesting how they used large wooden beams and poles, the size of a telephone pole, to hold up the branches of these massive trees.



After a visit to the Handicrafts Museum, we had a delicious lunch (Soba Noodles, Tempura, Wakame Rice) and went the Higashi Chaya District, one of the three geisha districts in Kanawaza. We were disappointed in not seeing any geishas but did enjoy walking through the streets and visiting the shoppes in the area.



April 4

By Joe Hadley

Today when people hear the name “Hiroshima” they are likely to think of the city on which the first atomic bomb was used in the closing days of World War Two. I know I do and so tried to mentally prepare myself for our visit there. Our tour group traveled to Hiroshima from Kanazawa by express train and then transferred to the Shinkansen (bullet train). Altogether it was about a 4-hour journey even while traveling sometimes at a top speed of around 150 mph! We arrived at Hiroshima train station around noon and then walked to the hotel, dropped off our overnight bags and walked back to the train station in search of a restaurant. We found many shops and our food choices were abundant. After lunch, we caught up with the rest of the group and headed off via taxi to the Hiroshima Peace Museum and the site of the first ever atomic bombing in war time.

Today, Hiroshima has become a vibrant, beautiful, modern Japanese city, even though reminders of that terrible moment in history are preserved in a beautiful park filled with many memorials and a museum. The display in the museum was terrible to see as it contained photos of the destruction of the city and especially the deaths of mostly civilians, including children. On the morning of August 6th 1945, an atomic bomb was exploded above the city, in an effort by the United States to bring the war to a close. It was an “air burst” at about 2,000 feet, which was designed to increase the casualties and destruction of buildings. Since most buildings of the city were constructed of wood with tile roofs, most of Hiroshima proper was destroyed or heavily damaged in the initial explosion and the residents who somehow survived the bombing, were later to die of burns and/or radiation sickness. The then unknown cause of the lingering deaths was termed “the spots of death” since the radiation caused spots on the skin of many doomed survivors. Mere words cannot describe the gruesome photos and exhibits in the museum. Afterwards, we then toured the grounds of the park, which is now known as the Hiroshima Peace Park, a memorial to those who died as well as a hoped-for deterrent against the use of nuclear weapons. There were many memorials to the victims around the Peace Park. Most especially heart rending was those for the children whose lives were lost on that and subsequent days. A tall clock located near the epicenter of the blast chimes but once a day, at 8:15 a.m. the time of the bombing.

While I intellectually understand the military reasoning behind the use of the atom bomb, it was certainly a sobering reminder about the horrors of war and our continued inhumanity to one another. I will echo the sentiment expressed there by saying “No more Hiroshimas.”



Pictured, the Atom Bomb Dome which was the only structure left standing in the wake of the bombing.



Hiroshima as it looks today on the Ota River.

April 5

By Rella Hadley

After breakfast in the hotel, we traveled by Shinkansen to Kyoto. We had lunch in an area with many restaurants from which to choose.



We visited Sanjusangen-do after lunch. The principal images of the temple are the 1001 statues of the Buddhist deity, Juchimen-senju-sengen Kanzeon. 1000 standing and 1 gigantic seated statue. The 28 images placed in front of the 1001 Kannon statues are guardian deities which protect the Buddhist deity Kannon as well as pious Buddhists who believe in Kannon. They are made of Japanese Cypress and painted gold. 124 were made in the 12th century when the temple was founded and the remaining 876 in the 13th century when the temple was renovated.



Thursday, April 6. Kyoto, Japan

by Mimi Gingold

Off to a bit of a rough start with taxi snafus that were quickly forgotten with the beauty of the art throughout the Nijo Castle. It was built in the early 1600's by Shogun Leyasu Tokugawa as his home with plenty of rooms for his many shogun underlings, but he stayed there only a few times. Its main purpose was to impress potential aggressors. Pine trees planted on the grounds and painted on walls symbolized qualities meant to convey strength and endurance of the Shogun's rule.



Painted ceilings and walls were adorned with tigers and trees and cranes and designs. Squeaky floors were intentionally laid as a warning system - no sneaking up on the shogun! In October 1867, it was in this stunning edifice that the last shogun voluntarily ceded rule to the emperor.



Then another cab ride and we were drop-jawed again at Kinkakuji with the sight of the Golden Pavilion, the retirement

villa of a shogun. A golden Phoenix at its peak and entire gold leaf exterior were brilliant even on this overcast day. When the shogun died in 1408, it became a zen temple. Gradually winding our way around and upward, we were flicking our cameras like crazy as every angle was an irresistible photo op. At the top we enjoyed foamy green tea and a sweet while some succumbed to souvenir shopping.



Lunch was delicious and provided us bamboo in tempura, rice, and soup as well as the opportunity to show off our noodle slurping talents. Taxis again brought us to the Nishi Market—filled with a kazillion food shops and some pricey gift shops. Some folks walked to the geisha district from there and then back to our hotels.



April 7

By Thomas Scott

Today we ventured out on a day trip to Osaka on our first rainy day in Japan. We walked in light rain from our hotel (the group in the other hotel took cabs) to the train in Kyoto for our 30- minute Shinkansen (bullet) train ride to Osaka. A series of subway trains brought us to the stop near Osaka Castle. It was a lovely, albeit wet, 20- minute walk in steady rain to the castle entrance.

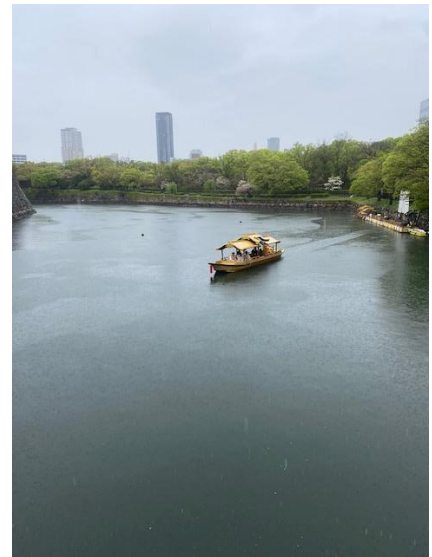
The Osaka Castle is a major landmark in Japan. It was originally completed in 1597 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a feudal lord and one of the great Japan unifiers, and occupied by his then five-year son, Toyotomi Hideyori, after his



death a year later. The castle was the site of one of the most famous battles in Japanese history, The Siege of Osaka, in 1614 -1615. This battle resulted in the reigning Shogun (the ruler appointed by the Emperor) capturing the castle, killing Toyotomi Hideyori, who some viewed as the legitimate ruler of Japan, and other Toyotomi family members, thereby solidifying his position as ruler of Japan.

The castle tower was reconstructed twice, the last time in 1997 to repair damage incurred in World War II when the castle grounds served as an arsenal and was bombed by the Allies.

The tower houses a museum with extensive exhibits relating to the history of the castle, the Toyotomi family and the Seige of Osaka, as well as an observation deck. There is both an outer moat surrounding the entire castle grounds and an inner moat around the tower. Quite impressive.



After the castle visit we retraced our path, again in the rain, to the subway stop for a short ride to a covered (yeah) shopping area in the Namba area, a well-known shopping and entertainment district. After waiting a while to locate the restaurant, we had a late lunch of mixed okonomiyaki, a pancake style mixture of griddled noodles, cabbage, flour, oil and other optional meat and fish ingredients. The lunch was very good as was the opportunity to warm up and dry out a bit.

As it was getting into mid-afternoon and the rain was continuing, we headed back to Kyoto and our hotels by subway and then express train. Dinner was on our own. Those of us staying in the hotel closest to the train station had the option of enjoying the Japanese bath, which a number of us took full advantage.



April 8

By Janet Scott

Our last day was a travel day, with Jackie and Karen leaving their hotel bright and early at 5:15 AM for the airport in Osaka and flight to Toyko and home to Long Island NY & Largo FL from there. The rest of us left at various times in the morning to catch the bus to the Osaka airport and our respective flights to Haneda airport in Toyko and then home or other destinations.

8:45 am Katie, Ray, Mimi G, Al, Tom & Janet headed to Japan Airlines and a Delta flight to Minneapolis.

11:30 am Beth, Susan, Judy, Connie, & Jessica headed to Japan Airlines and an American Airlines flight to Cincinnati & Deborah to visit a friend in Akita for a week before returning to Dayton OH

11:45 am Bobbye, Joe, Rella, Mimi B & Marilyn headed to Japan Airlines and an American Airlines flight to Cincinnati.