

Springtime Voyage to Classical Japan

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PREFACE

Japan was a trip that I thought I would never visit. A great itinerary by the **Skeptics Society, Phil Vickery, and “devil water” made it happen**. Well, it almost happened. It’s a long story. We had a couple of miss-happens that ended our adventure before it ever happened. Nevertheless, Phil’s enthusiasm about the trip and his ability to sell it to his wife Rosemary was so infectious he made it “a must-go” for all of us.

Our story begins on an evening in a motel in McMinnville. We had just finished a long day’s bike ride around Sequatchie Valley and dinner. Phil and Tim Murphy bought a fifth of bourbon in a nearby liquor store and I was forced to help them sample it.

On numerous occasions, Phil has forced me to sample evil bourbon. But those are for other stories for me to write.

We pulled three lawn chairs from outside our motel doors to behind Phil’s car. He turned on the car speaker loud for us and maybe for the rest of the motel residents to hear. He had many country music songs on his iPhone.

As he and Tim commiserated about past excursions and passed around the bourbon bottle, I contributed to the **Skeptics Society’s** boat expedition around the South Japan islands.

“It was one of the best itineraries I found for Japan,” I said, “and to make it better joining us on our voyage is **Admiral James Stavridis**, former *Supreme Allied Commander of NATO*, and *NBC News Chief International Security*.”

I wanted to go on the trip, but after my wife Sharyn died, **I quit traveling**. The solos were not enjoyable. I never thought about doing this expedition.

I didn’t think heard me while he was mouthing one of the songs to which he and Tim listening.

He said, “Let’s do it.”

Surely, that was the bourbon talking and I told myself, “On the next day, he would forget about it.”

He didn’t. He was sober serious.

When we got home after biking, and after the bourbon wore off, he came to my house. He said that he already had the trip money from baseball cards that he sold and

Rosemary wants to go. Even more serious, he had already interviewed our travel agent about the **Skeptic Society**. Phil was wasting no time. He practiced speaking Japanese on his iPhone.

We were going! I never expected another opportunity like this one. Yes, we were going. ***But it wasn't going to be that easy.***

In early November 2022, we booked our reservations for the **Skeptics Society's *Springtime Voyage to Classical Japan*** from May 17 - May 30, 2023.

Phil, Rosemary, and I were super excited about our plans. Phil even had me trying to speak Japanese. That didn't work. I had aphasia after my stroke. I could barely speak English. Nevertheless, I found a lecture course about Japan and convinced my weekly **Nerd Night** study group to learn about the history and culture of Japan.

As I said, "It wasn't going to be easy."

In February, we were told that **our trip was canceled**. The new owners of our ship could not get licensing by May 2023. As a consolation, the new owner asked us to rebook for the same trip in May 2024. They sweetened it with a small discount.

Now imagine kids being told that the Christmas gift they had been dreaming about for the last year is not available. Would they accept it for next Christmas? It was a huge disappointment, but yes, we still wanted our gift.

As I said, "It wasn't going to be easy."

In autumn 2023, **we got another disappointment**. The new owners couldn't get enough reservations and they were cancelling the whole thing.

About this time, we were about to "paddle our own canoe" to Japan. I went searching for other tour companies.

Much to my surprise, I found even a **better itinerary offered by Tauck** with whom I have been traveling throughout Europe for the past two decades. It was a little more expensive, but we booked for late April 2024.

I created one of my travel websites. For three months, I emailed Phil and Rosemary every week with tidbits from my website about the history, culture, and language of Japan.

Finally, we were going to Japan and I was super excited that Phil and Rosemary still wanted to join me. Without them, I would not be going to Japan.

Nevertheless, as I said, “It wasn’t going to be easy.”

Two weeks before our departure, my urologist phoned me and said, “**I had stage 4 prostate cancer**. Be in his office that afternoon for an injection of Eligard and set up an appointment for consultation with an oncologist.”

That was unsurprised and a monumental “*shot my the head.*” That medical notice was completely unexpected. Suddenly, my thoughts were confused and pained. I was just told, “**My future plans had ended.**”

Nevertheless, I planned to tell nobody about what I learned. How do I share that report? How could I manage that shock?

I would try not to think about that diagnosis. Phil, Rosemary, and I were going to Japan.

Again, as I said, “It wasn’t going to be easy.”

On every major tour, I write a journal of our experience. Originally, they were scrapbooks. Then they became long stories or a slideshow. Lastly, I advanced to creating audio-narrated videos.

Unfortunately, as excited as I was about Japan, I decided I would do no journal or even take photos. I apologize. During this time, I just could not get passed my depression. However, **Phil is an excellent photographer**. He would easily fill in my void.

During our travel, everything seemed to go okay -- until I got sick in Tokyo. I could no longer join the group. On our last day, I had to apologize to Phil and Rosemary for my behavior. I told them the report of my urologist; and, I would meet an oncologist team in May immediately when we landed in Nashville.

My oncologists gave me **a better prognosis**. Nevertheless, I have been ill in two hospitals and treatment at Sarah Cannon Cancer Center. By December 2024, I was finally more optimistic. I decided to write my missing Japan journal and promote lots of Phil’s great 765 photos.

As I write, please be patient. I am almost 82 and may have a few lost memories. Phil and Rosemary may disagree with a few of my written comments. But where is their journal?

Regarding my recovered memories of attempting to write this journal,

“It isn’t going to be easy.”

WHAT TO KNOW TO READ THIS JOURNAL

I have written and published over thirty-six travel journals since 1994. They started with copies of my scrapbooks. Most recently my recordings advanced to audio-narrated videos and several books. Now, I prefer publishing books with huge amounts of stories and photos.

The journal content is drawn from our travel websites and from hundreds of photos from Phil Vickery and me. Some are included in this journal; all are saved in **Shutterfly** and **Google Photos** albums with my website – www.evanscenter.com. **About My Travel Websites** explains more about this journal.

This journal includes lots of internet hyperlinks (underlined in blue). The reader can access them in the online copy (pdf or docx). For hardcopy, URLs are **recorded in the references** behind each titled section.

WHAT ABOUT TAUCK?

This Japan trip is my second Tauck trip since COVID. I think Tauck has changed but not for the better. Let me explain.

Beginning in 1994, I have taken eight tours with **Tauck**, eight tours with **Regent Cruise Lines**, two tours with **American Cruise Line**, one tour **on Princess Cruise Line**, and one tour on **Grand European Tours**. At the same time, I have been a “tour director” for six non-bike trips.

Since 2000, I decided to travel only with **Tauck** or **Regent** even though they are the most expensive.

A frequent travel friend said, “You get what you paid for.”

My travel was limited and I wanted to do it well. It wasn’t only the destination; it was the way I traveled.

Normally, Tauck offered extraordinary experiences that I couldn’t or wouldn’t do for myself. Dozens of companies had similar itineraries but Tauck did it with high class. As an example consider visiting American National Parks, we knew Tauck would put us “in the park” (that’s what I wanted) and just not in nearby lodgings.

Tauck put us in the top-highest hotels dined us in the best restaurants and picked up the bill.

Tauck gave their directors extra money to use their options to provide special pleasant surprises for the guests.

With Regent, we had similar luxury experiences. The cruise ships were small with 500 passengers; often, we felt the whole ship was our own. The staterooms were spacious with 352 sf and large balconies. Everything was all-inclusive. Food and beverages were always available 24 hours a day.

We had sufficient support on our excursions with local guides, usually with one guide no more than per twenty guests. Our directors handed out maps, written instructions and highlights, photographs, and local treats as we bused.

Past Tauck guests knew what to expect. That was not the case in my 2022 Poland and 2024 Japan trips (post-COVID.) The luxurious hotels were still on the itinerary. The extras, the special care, for which we bragged were missing. Many past and new **Tauck** customers commented that they were disappointed.

Many said, "It just wasn't the same **Tauck**."

My greatest disappointment was the absence of adequate local support on excursions. In Japan, Tauck provided only one guide per forty guests. That is not what we paid for. Several of the local guides rushed us. With the large crowds, a few of us got lost or injured. Too often, we were on our own to find restrooms when guides failed to make reasonable accommodations.

Our ship **LeSoleal** was also a problem for several. More info is in the chapter in this journal.

Several said, "We'll never again travel with a **Ponant** ship."

ON OUR WAY TO JAPAN

We had a 16-day Tauck tour to Japan starting on April 21, 2024. We started Nashville and **flew 26 hours** to Osaka Japan ala Atlanta and Seoul Korea. Managing sleeping schedules across the date line was quite a challenge. (1)



I tried alleviating the discomfort by shifting my sleep schedule in advance. But it still seemed forever. We left on April 21st, 4:30 PM Nashville, and arrived at **Kansai Airport** at 11:20 AM on April 23rd.

Japan also had a new treat for visitors. We had (not an option) to sign up via their website **Visit Japan Web**. (2) It was a good idea, but for many Tauck arrivals, it didn't work. It wasn't Tauck's fault, but they received the brunt. I heard many grabby Tauck people. This experience was **not a good start for Tauck**.

The ***Web*** worked fine for me but it was a **mess for Phil and Rosemary**. We followed all of Japan's rules "to the letter," but apparently their immigration people didn't read THEIR instructions. I buzzed through immigration and customs in minutes. It took Phil and Rosemary a frustrating hour.

His few Japanese words didn't help. I suspect his few added American words increased his struggles. I was also not permitted to go back into immigration to help him.

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Japan's **Kansai International Airport (KIX)** was opened in 1994 and was considered an engineering marvel. It was one of the **world's floating airports** and cost roughly \$20 billion to construct.



It was the third busiest airport in the country after Narita International Airport (NRT) and Tokyo Haneda Airport (HND) and serves as a hub for major airlines. However, **KIX airport was sinking**. Some experts believe it may be completely submerged by 2056.

Kansai Airport was built to relieve overcrowding at the first airport in Osaka: Itami Airport (ITM). The new airport was in the middle of the sea, where operations could take place 24 hours without disturbing locals. Constructed in 1987, engineers built the airport by draining millions of liters of water out of 75 feet of soft clay and constructing a seawall.

Construction crews laid sand five feet deep atop the clay seabed and installed 2.2 million vertical pipes, each nearly 16 inches in diameter. These pipes were then pounded into the clay and filled with sand and soil to create a more stable base.

Throughout its 30 years, the floating airport withstood a major earthquake in 1995, the great Hanshin earthquake which reached a magnitude of 7.2 and claimed more than 6,000 lives. In 1998, the airport also survived typhoon Stella which triggered over 70 landslides. However, the airport was **sinking faster than anticipated**. Owing to its foundation being similar to a wet sponge experts have calculated that the airport would sink by 18.7 feet in 1990. Instead, it had gone down 26.9 feet.

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A small bus transferred about a dozen of us from Kansai to our hotel at the [Conrad Osaka](#). (5)



We rode about a half-hour between a heavily wooded mountain ridge and the ocean. Almost the entire southern half of Japan is mountainous. Near our highway, we saw a dozen tiny burgs pocketed in small valleys, not bigger than a football stadium, with traditional Japanese houses. The ride was entertaining.

Osaka was Japan's second largest metropolitan area after **Tokyo**. It was the **third-most populous city in Japan**, with a population of 2.9 million in the 2020 census. It was the second-largest metropolitan area in Japan and the 10th-largest urban area in the world with more than 19 million inhabitants.

Osaka was the economic powerhouse of the Kansai Region for many centuries. **Osaka** was formerly known as **Naniwa**. Before the Nara Period, when the capital used to be moved with the reign of each new emperor, Naniwa was once Japan's capital city, the first one ever known.

In the 16th century, **Toyotomi Hideyoshi** chose **Osaka** as the location for his castle, and the city may have become Japan's political capital if Tokugawa Ieyasu had not terminated the Toyotomi lineage after Hideyoshi's death and established his government in distant Edo (Tokyo).

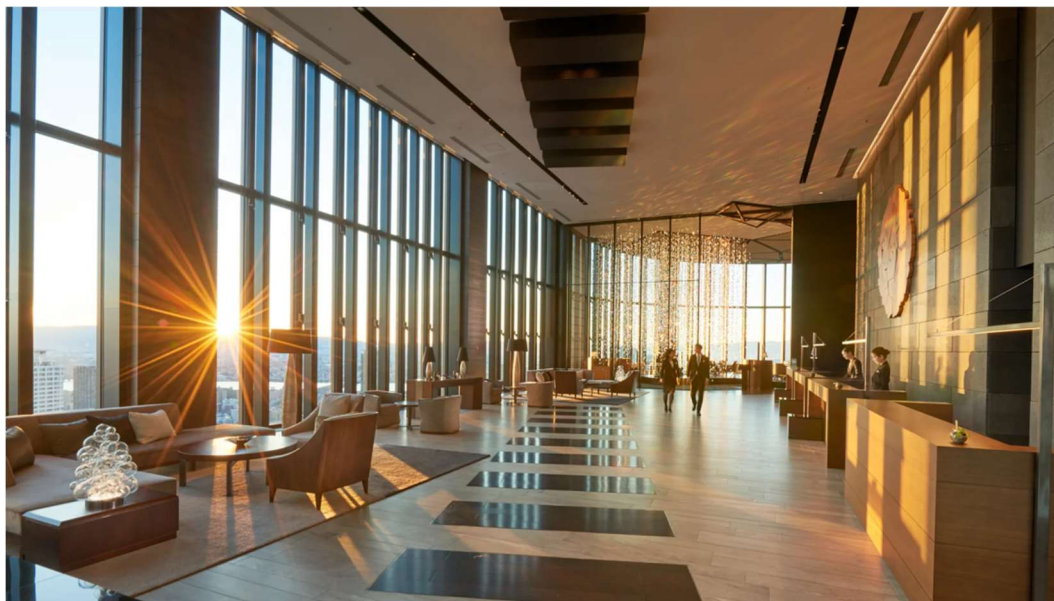
Our future itinerary (3) started with a couple of days in **Osaka** Then we had a bus ride to Kyoto for a day and to Nara the next day. On our fifth day, we left Osaka to sail on the French ship [Le Soleal Ponant](#). We island-hopped for a week. Our multiple stops included Busan Korea. (4) We disembarked the ship for a ride on the Japanese bullet train. On our last two days, we were in Tokyo.

We were excited to experience the wonderful Japanese culture.



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Our **Osaka Conrad** (5) was above the fortieth floor and top of the building. It was the **most luxurious hotel in which I had ever been** and I have been in many comparable hotels with Tauck.



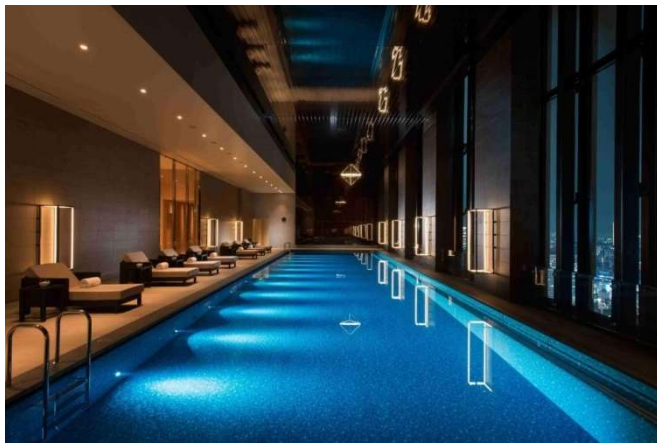
My room had to have a thousand square feet with ceiling-to-floor windows out looking Osaka. **We were in the clouds.**

With my 12-foot-high windows, I was glad I brought my pajamas. But at that height, who was going to see or care?



This place was maybe okay for the Vickeries, but it was too much for me. I checked my American Express card in my wallet. I was in a \$20 per can of beer palace. Surely, the waiters would frown at my measly VISA card.

As I thought, Phil settled in just fine in this fancy bungalow. He found and daily took advantage of the “FREE” SPA and the swimming pool. Even that matched the best men’s clubs about which I ever dreamed.



At the end of the day, I enjoyed being back in my room. Phil was in his SPA or swimming pool and Rosemary was in the exercise room.

Phil invited me to join him and gave me instructions. Repeatedly, I told myself, “Toto, we weren’t in the YMCA.”

No, I wasn’t talking about my Japanese toilet. I hadn’t figured out that thing yet. I was talking about Dorothy’s puppy in The Wizard of Oz.



The best I could do was lay in my bed, stare through my giant window, and stare at the city lights until I fell asleep.



Our breakfast restaurant was also on the 40th floor of the building. It had a buffet in a couple of thousand-square-foot rooms with ceiling-to-floor windows. I did have a little bit of trouble negotiating the waitress's attempt at English. My hearing aids didn't help.

No problem. I too have trouble with English and the young Japanese ladies were cute.

Before Japan, I heard reports of weird Japanese food. I was worried that my menu would have crawly things. It didn't. The buffet had many of my favorite breakfast selections. It did have Osaka's famous *takoyaki*. I ate about a dozen. Its name was misleading.

On two nights, Tauck wasn't picking up our meal. I searched for food outside the hotel. I heard *Western food* was on the underground floors of the hotel building and Frontal Street. The concierge mentioned the **Irish Pub** and drew us a map.



We found the **Pub** jammed with post-5 PM office workers. This time, I was with Phil and Rosemary and Phil did a great job with sign language finding us an empty table along the back wall and getting large mugs of beer.

References

- (1) Date Line <https://24sjapan.blogspot.com/p/travel.html>
- (2) Visit Japan Web <https://services.digital.go.jp/en/visit-japan-web/>
- (3) Our Itinerary <https://24sjapan.blogspot.com/p/itinerary.html>
- (4) LeSoleal <https://us.ponant.com/le-soleal>
- (5) The Conrad <https://www.hilton.com/en/hotels/osacici-conrad-osaka/>

OUR FIRST/LAST DAY IN OSAKA

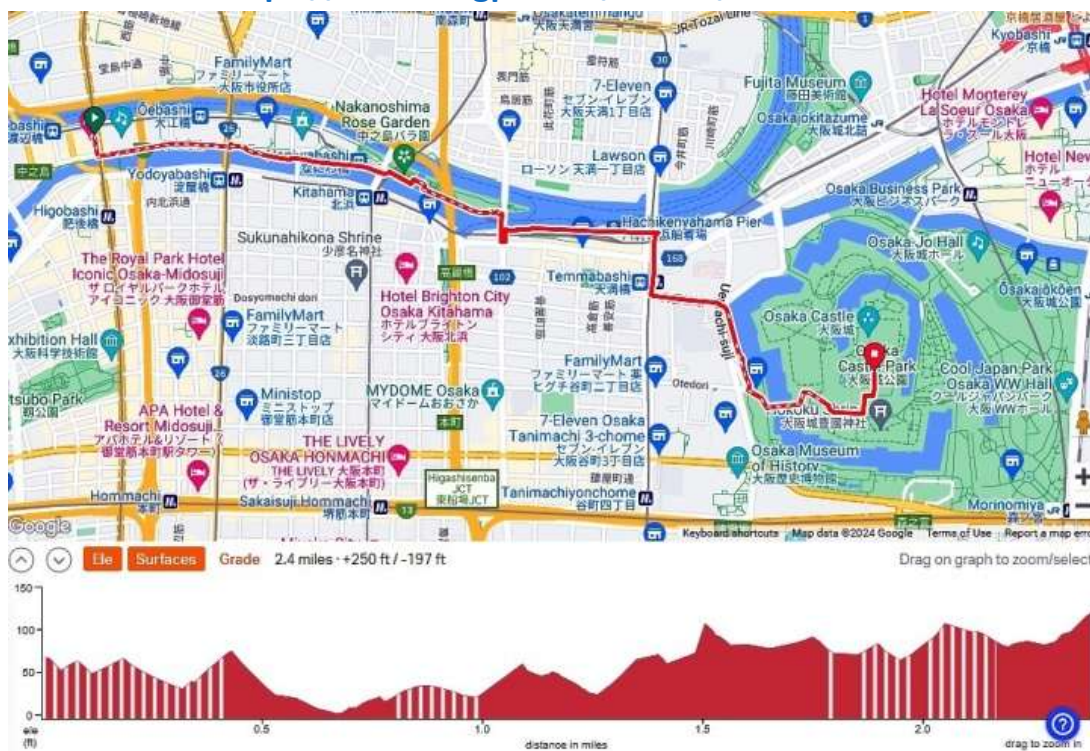
On our second day in Osaka, we were on our own for the morning. In mid-afternoon, we had to check in with Tauck at Conrad. Their **Welcome Dinner** began at 5:30 PM. I asked ChatGPT about [what to do in Osaka](#). (1) It suggested Osaka Castle and Dotonbori. Each was about 2-1/2 miles from the Conrad. On our first day on our own, we walked to **Osaka Castle**. On our last day in Osaka, Tauck took us for a walk down **Dotonbori** before boarding the **LeSoleal**.

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OSAKA CASTLE WALK

After breakfast at the **Atmos** in the hotel, my plan was a casual walk to the Castle along the **Tosahori River** in **Nakanoshima Park**. On the way, we would stop at an **ATM** on the bank across the street from Conrad. To make sure I don't get lost, I prepared a [detailed list of pictures](#) (2) with Google Maps. I printed it for our walk.

<https://ridewithgps.com/routes/43962300>



Another useful snippet of information was reading Google Maps to understand how Japanese assign addresses. It was nothing like Western notations. One must follow this link for instructions – [Japanese Addresses](#). (3)

If you want to read the **Google Maps** in Japan, good luck. Most often, Japan didn't use street names. That was why I made pictures for our walk along the "greenway" trail from Conrad to Osaka Castle. Oh, the story got much worse!

If someone gave you their address, you'll never find them, even on **Google Maps**. For those from Western countries, where streets were clearly labeled with names or numbers, Japan's system is bizarre. While Japan may have had names for some streets, they were never used in addresses. Here is a short explanation.

The country was broken up into 47 prefectures. For example, consider *Tokyo Prefecture*. Each prefecture then was broken up into municipalities, such as *Chiyoda, Tokyo*.

So far so good? Here was where it gets screwy.

Each municipality had different "zones" or "areas". Continuing with our sample, Marunouchi was a zone in Chiyoda, Tokyo. These neighborhoods things were further broken down into districts or "chomes." Each area could be numbered by 3-6 different **chomes**. Example, *1 Chome, Marunouchi, Chiyoda, Tokyo*; *2 Chome, Marunouchi, Chiyoda, Tokyo*; or *3 Chome, Marunouchi, Chiyoda, Tokyo*.

Each chome number had no order. Most likely, the most prestige neighborhoods got the lower number.

Each **chome** was further subdivided and numbered into different banchi or ban. For example, *1 Chome Marunouchi* had numbered banchi: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, etc. Half the time, they were not even contiguous.

Each **banchi** was then sorted by building number, which had no order. The number goes by the order in which the building was chronologically registered. Even worse, there was no correlation with position.

Lastly, **chome**, **banchi**, and **building number** are abbreviated as 1-2-3: chome #1, banchi #2, building #3.

For example, "*1-10-8 Tsukishima, Chūō, Tōkyō*", is in prefecture Tokyo. *Chuo* is one of the 23 special municipalities of Tokyo. *Tsukishima* is the neighborhood. *1* is some random chome; *10* is the banchi; and, *8* is in some building.

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We had **a great 2-1/2 mile walk** from the Conrad to the Castle. I didn't even have to check my picture map. I memorized it. I was like a local guide; I never got us lost.

Our first destination was the bank across the street with its six ATMs. Phil stepped next to the International machine, read the instructions, and inserted his credit card. The device didn't like it, even after a half-dozen attempts. He finally gave up.

Not to worry. Since Japan was noted to be a "cash" country, every **Seven-Eleven** market, which seemed to be on every corner, had an ATM. He was successful elsewhere.

The first thing that an American was likely to notice on our stroll, this **place was immaculately clean.**

Through various campaigns and initiatives, the government encouraged individuals and businesses to adopt more sustainable waste management practices. This, combined with the cultural values of the Japanese people, resulted in a country that was clean and litter-free, even in the absence of public bins. It was also free of graffiti.

Our twenty-foot-wide walkway bordered the river and right through the high-rise buildings of the commercial district. Hundreds of people were moving around. At first, I was apprehensive. Would I hike through similar areas of Chicago, San Francisco, or New York City?

Japan was generally safe and was rated among the **safest countries in the world.** Reports of crime, such as theft, were very low, and travelers were often stunned by the fact that locals leave belongings unaccompanied in cafes and bars (though it's certainly not recommended!).



Our trail had small statutes, flowered bushes, restrooms, and views of the river.

The present **castle** (4) tower was a ferroconcrete reconstruction rebuilt in 1931 of the 1583 version. Entirely modern on the inside, it housed an informative museum about the castle's history and **Toyotomi Hideyoshi**.

The castle tower was surrounded by secondary citadels, gates, turrets, impressive stone walls, and moats. The **Nishinomaru Garden**, encompassing the former "western citadel", was a lawn garden with 600 cherry trees, a tea house, the former Osaka Guest House, and nice views of the castle tower from below. Unlike most of the rest of the castle grounds, the garden required a 200 yen admission fee.

To **Osaka Castle** (5)



A lot of people wrapped around a block to buy a 600 yen ticket. Not a problem for us. I bought tickets in advance online. We buzzed right into the castle. Yes, we walked *all the way* to the top of the castle.



The greenway trail from the Conrad Hotel to the Castle was very enjoyable. The walkway was wide and well-maintained. Gardens, restrooms, and food shops lined our route. Naturally, we had to stop for a lunchtime snack and a couple of glasses of Kirin to build up our strength.



In the early afternoon, back in the hotel we “logged into” Tauck and received our instructions for this evening’s affair. Phil headed to his exceptional SPA/Pool and I took Rosemary for another walk around Osaka. I had memorized the roads; I was a local guide.

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At 5:30, about 60 of us rode two buses to a large reception room. Another 140 people were sampling traditional Japanese appetizers, champagne, wine, and beer on a fifty-foot-long table. Surprisingly, only a small side table had sushi or crawling things.

I don’t know what Phil and Rosemary ate, but I sampled small amounts of everything, even the sushi that I don’t normally like. With those many people, the room got very hot. A dozen of us gave up the food and drink and sought the cooling side rooms.

After about an hour, we were ushered into a large banquet room with twenty-five, twenty-foot round tables. We randomly found an empty dinner plate, sat down, and introduced ourselves to our new neighbors.



The food was good. Nothing was out of the ordinary to the western pallet. I don't remember what we had.

The evening's highlight was to meet and learn about the [Geisha/Geiko](#) culture. (6)



They were professional entertainers who attended guests during meals, banquets, and other occasions. They were trained in various traditional [Japanese arts](#), (7) such as dance and music, as well as in the art of communication. Their role was to make guests feel at ease with conversation, drinking games, and dance performances.

The evening was completed with the introduction of the **six Tauck Directors** for this tour – Tauck published they would have one director for every forty passengers.



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LOGISTICS

On this tour, Tauck had about 220 passengers who were mostly of retired age. In Osaka and Tokyo, Tauck placed their guests in six of the highest world lodgings in Japan. In Osaka, we were in the **Conrad**, and in Tokyo we were in the **Mandarin Oriental**. The other lodgings were at the **St Regis** and **Ritz Carlton** in Osaka and **Shangri-La** and **Palace Hotel** in Tokyo. We didn't get a choice but we were delighted with our hotels.

That number filled out our ship the **LeSoleal**. During the tour, we would likely meet most of the directors depending on our excursion selection. Anna was our director for almost the entire trip.



At each excursion destination, Tauck distributed about thirty-five guests across six buses. Each had one local guide. That became a problem.

Our local guides had to manage too many people. They gave us those “ear buddies” but they were not adequate to handle us in the huge crowds that we often met throughout our excursions.

In my past traveling with Tauck, they always had extra guides to keep walking groups to about sixteen. Our director did mention at the beginning of our visit that Tauck was having difficulty hiring help post-COVID.

To make matters worse, our time was Japan’s **Golden Week**. Japan is normally crowded but this had many more people for us to maneuver. However, our hosts were their famous politeness and the grounds were exceptionally clean.

Daily mixing up 220 guests, it was difficult to stay among the same people to develop friendships, but we did. Somehow **Jim and Nancy Sido** (Florida) gravitated to our three. They are the ones on the left of this picture.



You'll find more pictures of them in my journal. It was also Nancy who suggested that we go on another Tauck tour. She picked the Douro Riverboat from Madrid to Lisbon in early November 2025.

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OUR LAST DAY IN OSAKA

On our last day in Osaka and embarking on ship **LeSoleal**, we walked on DOTONBORI. Each of our six Tauck buses dropped their guests at the beginning of the street lined on both sides cramped with shops.

Our local tour guide said, "Follow me, and don't get lost."

I took one look in front of us at that herded mass of heads, shoulder-to-shoulder, and thought, "Good luck."

Dotonbori was one of Osaka's principal tourist and nightlife areas. It ran along the Dotonbori Canal from Dotonboribashi Bridge to Nipponbashi Bridge in the Namba district of the city's Chuo ward. It was filled with towering neon signs, clubs, bars, and restaurants serving up local specialties.

Historically a theater district, it was now a popular nightlife and entertainment area characterized by its eccentric atmosphere and large illuminated signboards. Visitors came here for a stimulating and essential slice of Osaka's nightlife.



Like a mother duck, our guide weaved with her line of ducklings for about three blocks of gazing at neon lights next to lines of outdoor tables stacked with food, souvenirs, and miscellaneous finger junk.

We had two of those audio ear-things. Our guide used it to highlight the most important sights. I used them to keep *track-watch* of our guide as she weaved through the crowd. Managing forty people in this mess was impossible. Fortunately, we previously had our instructions.

When our guide and tour director walked us to the end of the street, they turned us loose and said, “Go shopping. We’ll meet you back at the bus in a half-hour.”

Not me!

I found a road between the **Dotonbori Canal** and this busy street that was empty of people. I used it to find my way back to the bus. Phil, Rosemary, and a handful of others followed me.

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Our next stop was lunch before boarding the **LeSoleal**. Our restaurant was on the thirtieth floor with clear views of Osaka. We had quite an assortment of Japanese flavors.



Everything tasted good. My only negative is our table barely had enough space for all the plates, baskets, glasses, and bowls. I don't remember what foods were but none of it was sushi. I think it matched all our pallets.

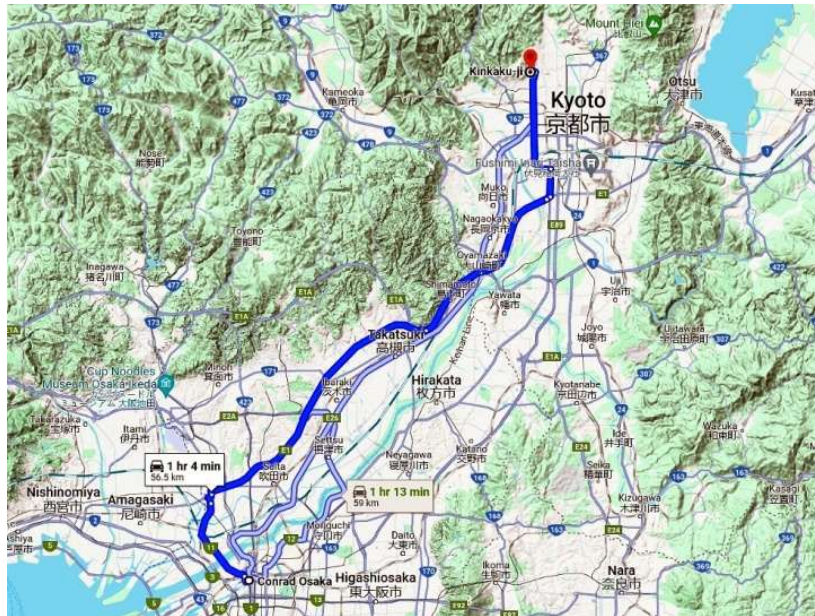
After lunch, we climbed on our buses for the ship.

References:

- (1) What to do in Osaka: <https://24sjapan.blogspot.com/p/osaka.html>
- (2) Detailed list of pictures: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zytnlji_0WjtBVGXHLx_2lQXrbAZ-CHF/view
- (3) Japanese Addresses:
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- (4) Castle <https://www.osakacastle.net/>
- (5) Osaka Castle: <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e4000.html>
- (6) Geisha/Geiko: <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2102.html>
- (7) Japanese arts: <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e639.html>

BUS RIDE TO KYOTO

In the morning, we had a little over an hour's drive from the Conrad to [Kinkaku-ji](#) (1) in **Kyoto**.



The city had been the capital and was the cultural center of Japan with gardens, imperial palaces, traditional wooden houses, and 2,000 **Buddhist temples** and **Shinto shrines**. **Kyoto** was also known for formal traditions such as *kaiseki* dining which consisted of multiple courses of precise dishes and *geisha*.

To understand the Japanese culture, one must examine their beliefs.

The Japanese practiced two religions simultaneously: **Buddhism** and **Shinto**. Like most of the world, they were nothing like **Christianity**, **Islam**, or **Judaism**. **Buddhism was so different** that some people questioned whether it was a religion at all.

Buddhism was based on the teachings of **Siddhartha Gautama**, who was born in the fifth century B.C. in northern India. He came to be called "the Buddha," which means "*awakened one*," after he experienced a profound realization of the nature of life, death, and existence.

Buddhism is non-theistic. The Buddha taught that believing in gods was not useful for those seeking to realize enlightenment. Most religions were defined by their beliefs. But in Buddhism, merely believing in doctrines was beside the point.

The Buddha said, "Doctrines should not be accepted just because they were in scripture or taught by priests who taught doctrines to be memorized and believed."

The Buddha taught you how to realize truth for yourself. The focus of Buddhism was on practice rather than belief.

Shinto originated in Japan and was regarded as its indigenous religion. It had no central authority and had much diversity of belief and practice. Shinto revolved around supernatural entities called the *kami* that inhabit all things, including forces of nature and prominent landscape locations. The *kami* were worshipped at household shrines, family shrines, and *jinja* public shrines.

Shinto placed a **major conceptual focus on ensuring purity**, largely by cleaning practices such as ritual washing and bathing, especially before worship. Little emphasis was placed on specific moral codes or particular afterlife beliefs, although the dead are deemed capable of becoming *kami*. The religion had no single creator or specific doctrine and instead existed in a diverse range of local and regional forms.

Buddhist temples were places of worship for Buddhists to pray, meditate, and gather as a community. A **Shinto shrine** was a sacred place to house *kami* which contained spirits that inhabit the natural world, and many things, including ancestors, the sun, and creativity. Shinto shrines can be found in many forms, including buildings, trees, rocks, and mountains. **Often Buddhist temples contained Shino shrines.**

The [Kinkaku-ji](#) "Temple of the Golden Pavilion" (2) was bathed in gold leaf and capped by a golden phoenix. Since the 1400s, it sat in this meticulously preserved landscape design strategically placed in a pond that hauntingly reflected the shimmering golden temple.



Kinkaku-ji was a [Zen temple](#) (3) and the 1408 retirement villa of the shogun [Ashikaga Yoshimitsu](#). (4) Temples were places of worship in Japanese [Buddhism](#). (5) Virtually every Japanese municipality had at least one temple, while large cultural centers like [Kyoto](#) (6) had hundreds.



In 1191, the **Zen sect** was introduced from China. Its complicated theories were popular, particularly among the members of the [military class](#). (7) According to Zen teachings, one could achieve self-enlightenment through meditation and discipline.

We were not allowed to enter **Kinkaku-ji**, but we did beat a drum for our next stop.

- - - - -

Taiko drums were traditional Japanese drums, which were played in traditional performing arts and festivals in Japan.



In feudal Japan, **taiko** was often used to motivate troops, call out orders or announcements, and set a marching pace; marches were usually set to six paces per

beat of the drum. During the 16th-century Warring States period, specific drum calls were used to communicate orders for retreating and advancing.

During these days, **taiko** music was enjoyed as **Taiko** performances around the world. Members of our tour had the opportunity to practice.

I sat down while I watched Rosemary *pound the hell of it*. [Check out my video](#) (8)



- - - - -

After our pounding experience, we drove a half-hour to the [Sanjusangen-do](#), (9) another **Buddhist temple** in Kyoto's Higashiyama District – officially called "Rengeo-in" ("Hall of the Lotus King").

It was an ancient temple of the **Tendai** sect. The main hall, which was rebuilt in the Kamakura period, was a long hall measuring approximately 394 feet from north to south. It has been designated as a national treasure.



Pictures were forbidden in its long and majestic main wooden hall known for sheltering **1,001 statues of Kannon**, the deity of compassion. All the [1001 Buddha statues](#) (10) enshrined here, including the principal image of the thousand-armed Kannon seated statue and the thousand-armed standing statue of the thousand-armed Kannon, were national treasures.



1001 Buddha Statues of Kannon



Seated Thousand-Armed Kannon Statue



Wind and Thunder God



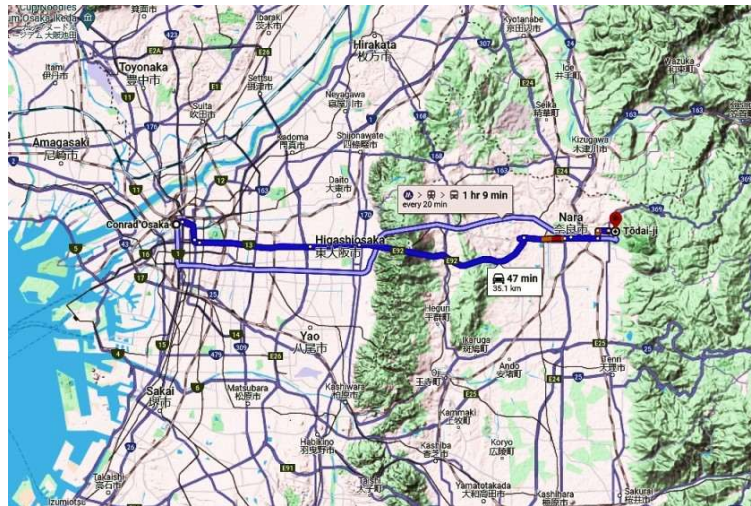
One of 28 Deities

References:

- (1) Kinkaku-ji <https://www.shokoku-ji.jp/en/kinkakuji/>
- (2) Kinkaku-ji <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e3908.html>
- (3) Zen temple <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2055.html>
- (4) Ashikaga Yoshimitsu <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2134.html>
- (5) Buddhism <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2055.html>
- (6) Kyoto <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2055.html>
- (7) Military class <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2127.html>
- (8) Video - Taiko drumming by our Tauck group
https://photos.google.com/album/AF1QipNbPzZQGih88h4lQmli0K4HCPzCrDGBstlGgtmS/photo/AF1QipO9EkWgiYw_vfgCAJls80ZAIMTYjjZosXnY_fY2
- (9) Sanjusangen-do <https://www.kanpai-japan.com/kyoto/sanjusangendo>
- (10) 1001 Buddha statues <https://www.sanjusangendo.jp/statue/>

BUS RIDE TO NARA

On the next day, our bus trip was 45 minutes to Nara.



Nara was the capital of Japan from 710 to 794 as the seat of the Emperor before the capital was moved to Kyoto. Nara is home to eight major historic temples, shrines, and heritage sites, specifically **Tōdai-ji**, **Saidai-ji**, **Kōfuku-ji**, **Kasuga Shrine**, Gangō-ji, Yakushi-ji, Tōshōdai-ji, and the Heijō Palace, together with **Kasugayama Primeval Forest**, collectively form the **Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara**, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Today, we are visiting **Todai-ji** (Great Eastern Temple),(1) a Buddhist temple complex that was once one of the city's powerful **Seven Great Temples**. (2) It serves as the head-quarters of the **Kegon school of Buddhism** (3) in Japan and is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site officially called the "**Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara**,"(4)

The world's largest bronze statue of the **Buddha Vairocana**. (5)



Todai-ji was a zoo. Our bus unloaded us about three miles from the temple. We had to hike among hundreds of people and school classes walking back and forth on city streets and alleys, from our dropping zone and intermingling with thousands in the tourist attractions.

The region around the temple was like standing at a football field. At our left goal was the **Nandaimon Gate**. At our right goad was the **Daibutsuden** (Big Buddha Hall). We arrived at the 50th marker. In the field, a thousand spectators were maneuvering between the goalposts, and lots of deer strolling amongst the crowd.

Nandaimon Gate, known as the **Great South Gate**, stood as an architectural marvel and a significant entrance to the sacred **Todai-ji Temple** complex. This structure from the **8th century** was a National Treasure of Japan and reflected the craftsmanship of ancient Japanese builders.



Until recently, **Todai-ji's** main hall, the **Daibutsuden** (Big Buddha Hall) (6), held the



record as the world's largest wooden building, even though the present reconstruction of 1692 is only two-thirds of the original temple hall's size.



The massive building housed one of Japan's largest bronze statues of Buddha (Daibutsu), 50 feet tall.



Emperor Shomu promoted the construction of provincial temples throughout Japan to eliminate social unrest of that time, such as repeated political changes and riots, with the power of Buddhism (the idea of nation protection). On the other hand, the emperor decided to build a **Great Buddha**. As the principal image of **Todai-ji Temple**, the construction of the world's largest gilt bronze statue of **Vairocana** was started. In 752, the ceremony for opening the eyes of a newly-constructed image was conducted with great *éclat*.

Vairocana meant the sun or light in Sanskrit and was the founder of **Avatamsaka Sutra**. **Mahavairocana** (Dainichi Nyorai) regarded as the **Primordial Buddha** of the universe in esoteric Buddhism in the Heian period was the Buddha developed from **Vairocana**.



A pillar in the great hall at **Todai-ji** had a small hole at its base. It was believed to be the size of the **Daibutsu's** nostril. Anyone who squeezed through that was believed to be granted enlightenment in his next life.

You know it was similar in concept to the camel passing through the eye of the needle and all that.

Deer in Nara were friendly and roamed the city freely. According to legend a mythological god, **Takemikazuchi**, arrived in Nara on a white deer to guard the newly built capital of Heijokyo.

Ever since then, the deer have been seen as heavenly animals protecting the city and the country. You can find deer just about anywhere but the highest concentration was located in Nara Park where they also sold deer biscuits or *shika sembei*. The deer that populate Nara are **Sika deer** or spotted deer and were also **known as bowing deer** because they often bowed their heads before being fed.



Phil said, “I caught Rosemary **bowing** to her friendly deer.”

Really? Don’t know. You’ll have to ask her.

Other than the train station to Tokyo, **Todai-ji** was the **most crowded place** we experienced in Japan. Unquestionably, several thousand people and herds of deer toured the site. Here our **Tauck directors lost two clients.**

Back at the bus, we waited a half-hour as our leaders contemplated on what to do.

They questioned us, “Did you see them when they left the group?”

Tauck was unequipped with an insufficient number of local guides. I have been on nearly twenty tours with Tauck and Regent and never before did one guide try to handle thirty tourists, especially in the crowd like at Todai-ji.

This situation wasn't the only time on this tour we had local guides who were not skilled with large groups. We had medical issues. Tauck was unprepared to handle the injury and at the same time manage the large group. Fortunately, no one else got lost. But they surely could have. Most definitely, I did share my dissatisfaction with Tauck.

They sent our bus to the lunch restaurant, while one director and local guide left behind in **Todai-ji** with hopes of finding the missing couple. After about an hour, they found them. They put our "lost souls" in a taxi back to **Osaka**. Their day was over. Everyone was a bit dramatized.

- - - - -

It's lunchtime. What is on the menu? I don't remember but we had beer and we had to cook our own steaks.



Our second destination in Nara was [Kasuga-Taisha](#) (8) (known as the Kasuga Grand Shrine) a **Shinto shrine** found in Nara. Known for its many bronze and stone lanterns that lead up to the shrine, the Shrine had been rebuilt several times since its establishment in 768 CE.

Because the shrine complex was so extensive, I created a [detailed photo website of the shrine](https://24sjapan.blogspot.com/p/kasuga-taisha.html) (9). <https://24sjapan.blogspot.com/p/kasuga-taisha.html>

A **torii** was a traditional Japanese gate most commonly found at the entrance of or within a **Shinto shrine**. It symbolically marked the transition from the mundane to the sacred and a spot where **kami** were welcomed and thought to travel through.

When entering the **torii** we were allowed to walk to the left or right, never to the center.

Shinto tradition said, “The center was for the gods (and I suspected deer.)”



Also, according to Shinto, we had to wash our hands before entering the shrine.



A long trail led from the **torii** gate to the shrine complex. On the way, we passed a tree growing out of time previous tree.



Entrance - **Check my webpage (9)** to see the dozen buildings we visited.





References:

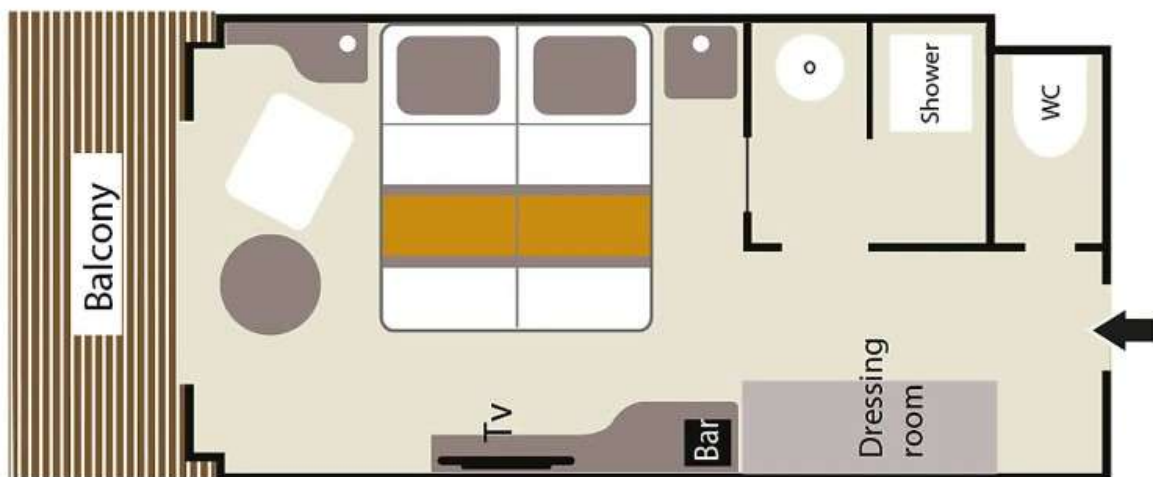
- (1) Todai-ji <https://www.todaiji.or.jp/en/>
- (2) The Seven Great Temples <https://www.sakuramani.com/seven-great-temples-of-nara/>
- (3) Kegon school of Buddhism https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kegon_Engi_Emaki
- (4) Historic Monuments of Ancient Nara <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/870/>
- (5) Buddha Vairocana
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vairocana#/media/File:TodaijiDaibutsu0224.jpg>
- (6) Daibutsuden <https://www.todaiji.or.jp/en/information/daibutsuden/>
- (7) Daibutsu <https://narashikanko.or.jp/en/feature/daibutsu/>
- (8) Kasuga-Taisha <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e4102.html>
- (9) My travel webpage <https://24sjapan.blogspot.com/p/kasuga-taisha.html>

LeSoleal

We cruised on the French Ponant **LeSoleal** ship for a week from Osaka to Sakaiminato, looping the southern Japanese islands. Launched in 2012, this small ship held a maximum capacity of 264 passengers, 132 staterooms and suites, 145 crew members, a spa, two restaurants, and 6 decks.



The staterooms were small at about **193 sf**. (Typical rooms in riverboats on Tauck and Viking are **196 sf** and **225 sf**.) They had sliding windows with ocean views; 95% had private balconies. Services contained Inclusive Wi-Fi internet access, individual A/C, hairdryer, minibar, Nespresso coffee maker and boiler, safe, direct line telephone, TV, one 110V American plug and 220V European plug.



The main dining room **Le Restaurant Gastronomique** served French and international cuisine. The meals were excellent with each day having three different menus. A complete dinner could take almost three hours which was on a regimented schedule.

Instead, I chose the casual **Le Grill Restaurant** with a limited buffet. My dinner was often less than forty-five minutes.

MOST IMPORTANT: We unfortunately learned **LeSoleal was a Riverboat-class** and not a small Cruise-class boat. It lacked many of the services one finds on a cruise boat or even on other Tauck riverboats.

The Tauck Japan version of **LeSoleal** didn't have early morning services with breakfast pastries and coffee juices; and, snacks and beverages available throughout the day. The **LeSoleal** also promised to have three lounges and an outside bar offering evening entertainment, bars, and access to the open decks and multiple observation areas (Blue Eye, Main Lounge, Panoramic Lounge, Outside Bar.) Only the Main Lounge was ever open and only during cocktail hour.

Main Lounge for Afternoon Games and Evening Cocktail hour with music



The ship had a nice **Théâtre** available to host informative lectures and entertainment. I remember about a dozen informative lectures. I attended about half of them. Most of them were conducted by **Tauck's** directors.

Tauck did have one opening evening show with local adolescences. Those who attended it raved about it. Unfortunately, I missed it.

In comparison, the riverboat **American Cruise Line** had great entertainment every evening. I looked forward to attending all of them. **Tauck** might have had some on the LeSoleal, but I remember nothing that motivated keep me away from bed but 9:30.

BOTTOM LINE

Normally, I photographed our ships extensively. Because of my personal issues, not **Tauck's**, I took no pictures of the **LeSoleal** or the on-board activities. I am comparing my **LeSoleal** experience to my nearly dozen **ocean cruises**, three **Tauck Riverboats**, two **American Cruise Line Riverboats**, and **two 75-foot sailboats**. Maybe that's not fair.

Tauck customers were used to above ordinary. Unfortunately, I was disappointed. On my previous **Tauck** tour (Poland 2022) and this Japan trip, we were given **less than ordinary**. Maybe I am (and too many others were) being extra critical, but the special extras about which Tauck guests rave were missing.

My thought was, *"Why pay the extra price for Tauck when I can have the same experience for less money with average tour companies."*

EMBARKING IN OSAKA



ROSEMARY EMBARKING



PHIL'S READY WITH HIS **ARDBEG**



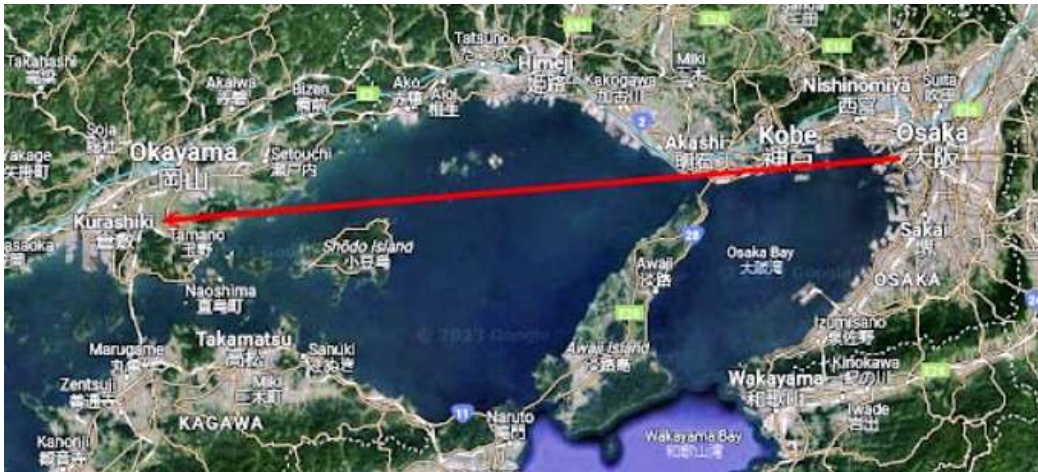
It wasn't our only glasses of **Ardbeg**. Early on our sail, we emptied the ship.
Tauck did not replace it. Not a "plus" for **Tauck**.



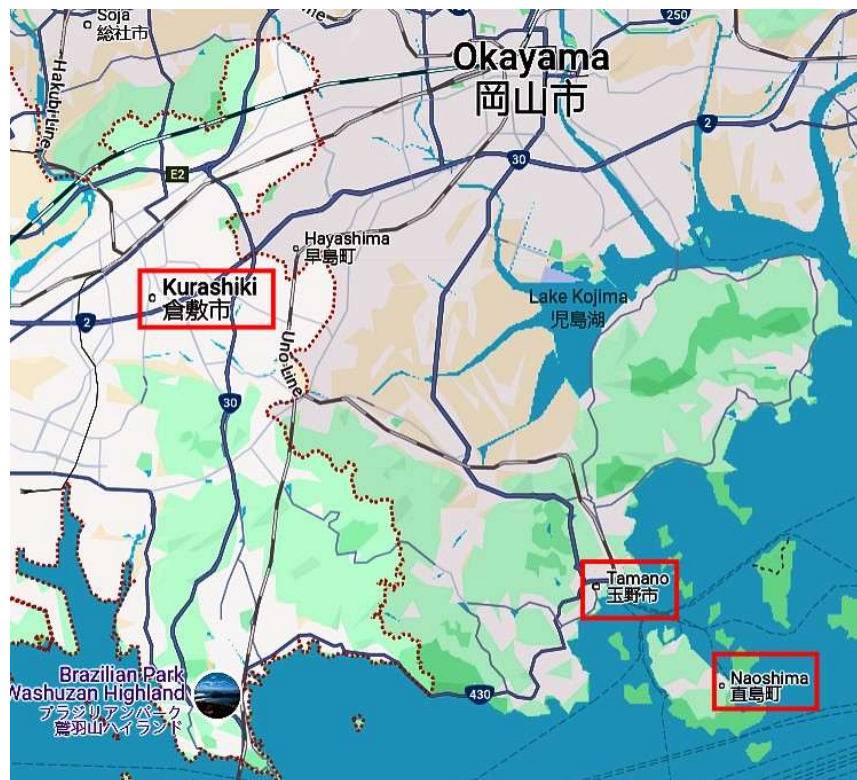
References: Tauck LeSoleal <https://www.tauck.com/ships/le-soleal#overview>

UNO KO / KURISHIKI

LeSoleal sailed from **Osaka** to **Uno Ko (1)** and **Kurashiki (2)** during the night.



The Uno Ko Port was located at the south end of **Tamano City**, Okayama, on the Seto Inland Sea, one of the first national parks designated in Japan. **Kurashiki** was located near Okayama City. **Kurashiki** had a preserved canal area that dates back to 1603-1867. The name "Kurashiki" was roughly translated as "town of storehouses" about the rice storehouses.



In the morning, a group of us ferried from **Kurashiki to Naoshima** (3) an island in the Seto Inland Sea. It was known for its contemporary art museums, architecture, and sculpture. In the afternoon we went to **Kurashiki's Bikan Historic Quarter**.



Once on the island, we visited the [Chichu Art Museum](#) (4) and [Art House Project](#). (5) The **Benesse Corporation** constructed much of **Naoshima's** art. It oversaw art museums, installations, and sculptures both on **Naoshima** and on neighboring islands. **Ando Tadao** designed the **Chichu At Museum**, the **Lee Ufan Museum**, and all the buildings of the **Benesse House**. He was a Japanese autodidact architect whose approach to architecture and landscape was categorized as "critical regionalism". He was the winner of the 1995 **Pritzker Prize**.

The **Art House Project** (5) involved restoring old vacant homes and transforming six sites with six artists into “works of art.”



We saw at **Gokaisho** and **Kadoya**. They didn't work for me!



From the "houses" to the **Chichu Art Museum** we passed several pumpkin sculptures.



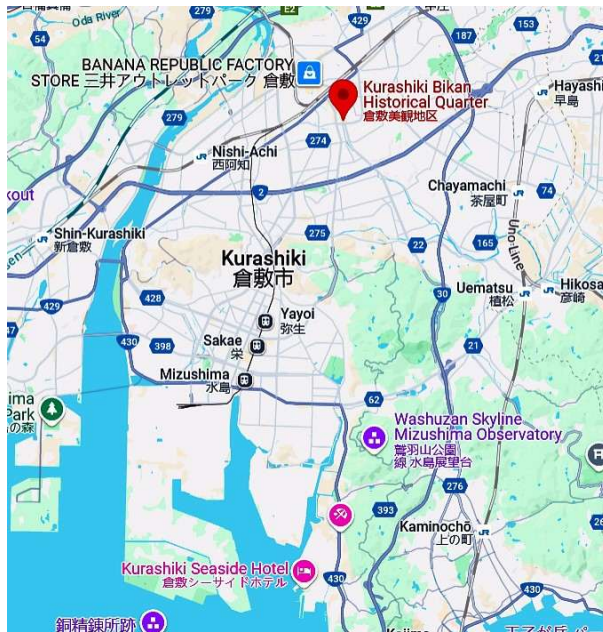
The **Chichu Art Museum** was built on a hillside overlooking the southern coast of Naoshima. The museum building, said to be a work of art, was mostly located underground and solely utilized natural light to illuminate the artwork.



Sorry, I just don't understand Japanese art.



Back on the mainland, we traveled to the **Bikan Historic Quarter**, (6) where warehouses, shops, and mills remained virtually unchanged from the Edo Period (1603-1868).



Throughout Kurasaki, canals were built to allow boats and barges to navigate between the city's store-houses and the nearby port. The weeping willow trees that lined the canal and the stone bridges that crossed over the water made for a picturesque scene.



For four blocks, we strolled along twenty-foot-wide sidewalks next to the canal as our guide explained the highlights.



After our instruction, we had a couple of hours on our own to explore and/or shop.

Many of us selected the **Ohara Museum of Art.** (7) It was Japan's oldest private museum of Western art. Its building was strikingly similar to an ancient Roman or Greek-inspired structure. The museum housed Western art such as El Greco, Monet, and Gauguin, as well as modern and contemporary Japanese and Western art, works by leading folk artists, and valuable antiques from Egypt and Asia.

References:

- (1) Uno Ko <https://www.mlit.go.jp/kankocho/cruise/detail/038/index.html>
- (2) Kurishiki <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e5750.html>
- (3) Naoshima <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e5475.html>
- (4) Chichu Art Museum <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e5477.html>
- (5) Art House Project <https://japanjourneys.jp/kagawa/naoshima/lifestyle/art/naoshima-art-house-project/>
- (6) Bikan Historic Quarter <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e5751.html>
- (7) Ohara Museum of Art <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e5754.html>

HIROSHIMA

Again at night as we slept, **LeSoleal** made our way from **Uno Ko** to **Hiroshima**.



This morning's sightseeing tour was to the **Hiroshima Peace Memorial** atomic bomb blast of August 1945 and in the afternoon we visited the **Miyajima-Itsukushima Shrine**.

The [Hiroshima Peace Memorial](#) (1) was the only structure left standing near the hypocenter of the first atomic bomb on **6 August 1945** at the condition right after the explosion.

The **Genbaku Dome** has been preserved as a ruin as a stark and powerful symbol of the most destructive force ever created by humankind.



Models of the Genbaku Dome “after” and “before” the bomb

This silent structure was the skeletal form of the surviving remains of the **1914 Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotional Hall**.



The rains started, but our local guide explained the history with her album of pictures.



From near the Dome, we walked to the **Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park** and the **[Hiroshima National Peace Memorial Hall \(2\)](#)**.



For an hour in the Hall, we merged with hundreds of visitors as we snaked through couple-hundred-foot-long hallways. Hundreds of pictures and artifacts displayed the impact of the world's first atomic bomb on a city.



Managed by Hiroshima City, the Memorial was designated as a historic site under the Japanese 1950 Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties.

[Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki \(3\)](#)

On 6 and 9 August 1945, the United States **detonated two atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki**, respectively. The bombings killed between

150,000 and 246,000 people; most were civilians. They verified the only use of nuclear weapons in an armed conflict.

In the final year of World War II, after Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945, the Allies prepared for a costly invasion of the Japanese mainland. This undertaking was preceded by a conventional bombing and fire-bombing campaign that **devastated 64 Japanese cities**, including Tokyo.

By July 1945, the Manhattan Project had produced two types of atomic bombs: "**Little Boy**", an enriched uranium gun-type fission weapon, and "**Fat Man**", a plutonium implosion-type nuclear weapon. On 6 August, **Little Boy** was dropped on Hiroshima. Three days later, a **Fat Man** was dropped on Nagasaki.



Fat Man



Little Boy



Lunch was at a local restaurant **servicing regional fare**. Tauck put all 220 of its guests, 12 of us each together at hot plates, as our cook prepared the food in front of us. We were in a large department store with at least a couple dozen of these tables serving other customers besides our tour group.



He cooked onions, peppers, chicken, shrimp, noodles, and his secret sauce. He popped the conglomeration onto a small hand-sized corn- or wheat-based tortilla and gave each of us our personal meal. Looks a mess, but it was really good.



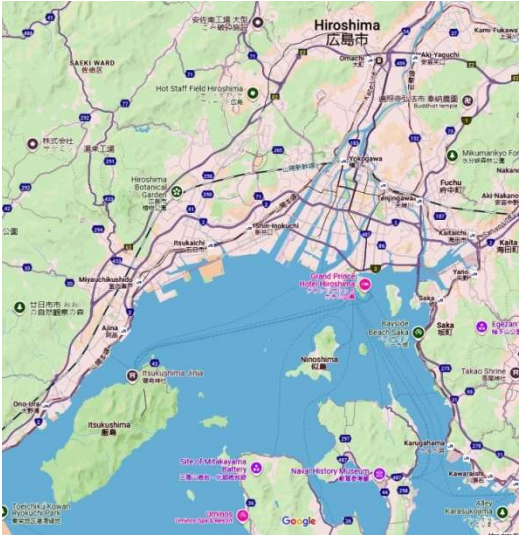
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In the afternoon we visited the iconic [Miyajima-Itsukushima Shrine](#). (4) Unfortunately, the rain got even more challenging for our umbrellas and rain gear.

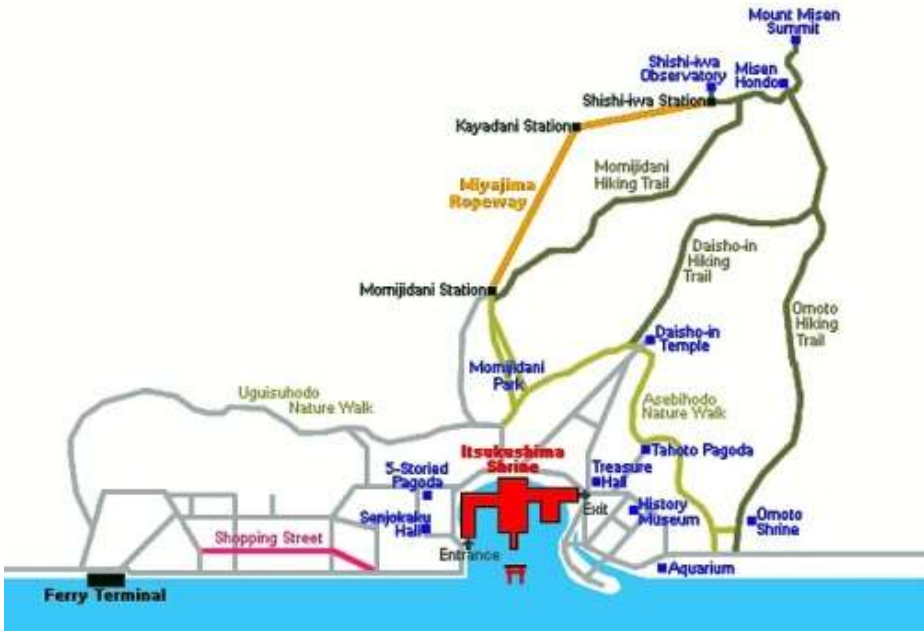


The centuries-old **Itsukushima Shrine** on [Miyajima](#) (5) was the source of both the island's fame and its name. Formally named **Itsukushima**, the island was more popularly known as **Miyajima**, literally "shrine island" in Japanese, thanks to its star attraction. The Shinto shrine, unique for its **torii** gate being built over water, was **known worldwide for its iconic "floating" torii gate** seemingly floating in the sea during high tide.

To get to the island of **Miyama** (5) (The large island in the lower left of the following picture), we took a ferry boat.



We then walked in the rain from the ferry to the shrine.





The shrine consists of multiple buildings, including a prayer hall, main hall, and [noh theater](#) (6) stage, which are connected by boardwalks and supported by orange-red pillars above the sea.



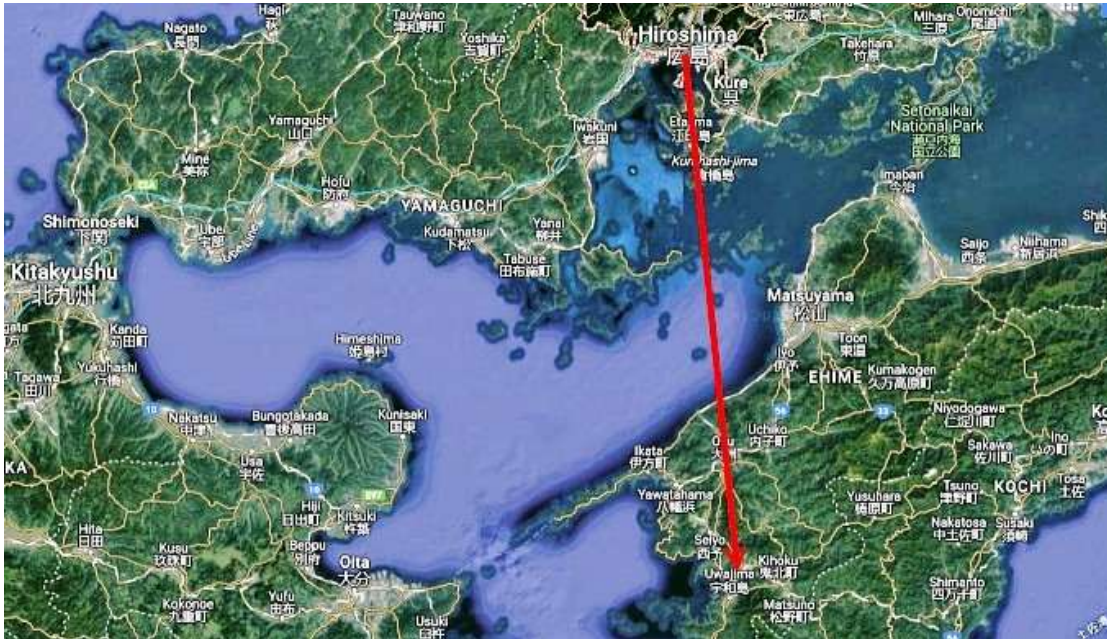


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- (1) Hiroshima Peace Memorial <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/775>
- (2) Hiroshima National Peace Memorial Hall <https://www.hiro-tsuitokenkan.go.jp/en/about/>
- (3) Atomic Bombs on Japan
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki
- (4) Miyajima-Itsukushima Shrine <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e3450.html>
- (5) Miyajima <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e3401.html>
- (6) Noh theater <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2091.html>

UWAJIMA

Uwajima (1) was a city on Japan's Shikoku island and almost due south of Hiroshima.



When we landed early in the morning, the locals waited to welcome us to their home.



We had one of three choices for the excursion:

- 1) **Pearl farm** and 16th-century Dairaku-ji temple known as Musasabi-dera ("Flying Squirrel Temple") for a Buddhist monk-led tour,
- 2) **Nanrakuen Garden** including a calligraphy demonstration and a tea ceremony, or
- 3) **Danbata** (terraced fields) and a forest walk to a waterfall in **Yakushidani Canyon**.

We chose to explore the [Nanrakuen Garden](#), (2) the largest traditional garden on Shikoku, presenting a series of beautiful gardens based on themes of "mountain, village, city, and sea." It was a popular place for tourists and locals alike to visit for leisurely walks and casual photo shoots.

Before they let us loose to the garden, they gave us a **calligraphy demonstration**.



From Rosemary's facial expression, I think our Japanese symbol said "Where's the toilet?"



Without a doubt, **Nanrakuen Garden** was the most picturesque and idyllic conservatory that we saw in Japan.





We finished our walk with a tea party.



Our host explained how the Japanese prepared a several-step procedure for their tea. Then Phil, Rosemary, Jim, and Nancy repeated the process.

After sipping our tea, we were supposed to express appreciation by smacking our lips with a loud, "Yum Yum." I may have overdone the declaration because I ended up on the evening video back on the ship.



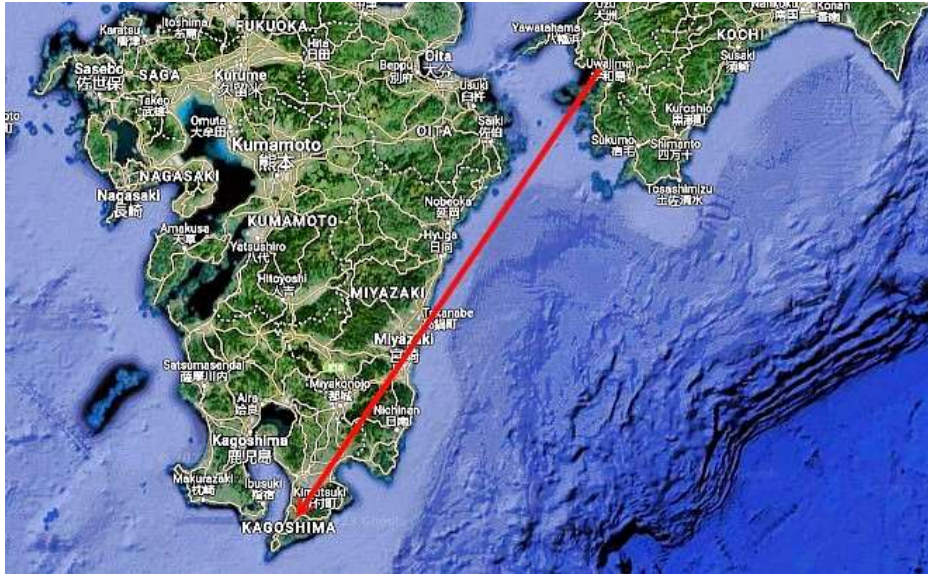
Our next day, **Kagoshima** was a long sail. We had no afternoon event. We returned to the ship, had lunch, and some played games in the Main Lounge.

References:

- (1) Uwajima https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uwajima,_Ehime
- (2) Nanrakuen Garden <https://www.nanreku.jp/site/nanrakuen/>

KAGOSHIMA

[Kagoshima](#) (1) was located on the southwestern tip of Japan's southernmost main island, Kyushu.



It was a seaside city on Japan's Kyushu Island and the capital of Kagoshima Prefecture. It was best known for [Sakurajima](#) (2), an active volcano that faces **Kinko Bay**. At its base, the **Nagisa Lava Trail** winds through lava fields filled with boulders. Once set on an isolated island, the volcano became connected to the Osumi Peninsula after an eruption in 1914.

In the morning, we took a **short ferry ride** across the bay to see **Sakurajima** ("Cherry Blossom Island"), an active volcano, and take a guided scenic drive.



Stopping at the visitor information center, we learned about **Sakurajima's** volcanic history.



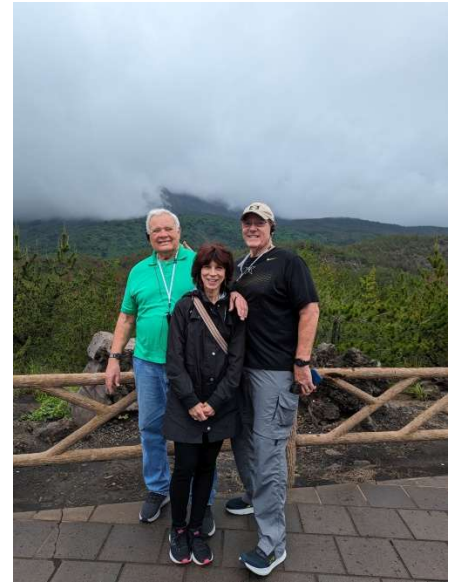
Sakurajima was an active stratovolcano, formerly an island and now a peninsula. The lava flow of the 1914 eruption connected it with the Ōsumi Peninsula. **It was the most active volcano in Japan.**

The 1914 eruption was the most powerful in twentieth-century Japan. The volcano had been dormant for over a century until 1914. Almost all residents had left the island in the previous days; several large earthquakes had warned them that an eruption was imminent. Initially, the eruption was very explosive, generating eruption columns and pyroclastic flows. The earthquake killed 35, and in total, 58 people died.

A **volcanic hot spring immersed at our feet.** No, I did not stick my feet in the stream. I trusted the reports of the others.



We then climbed the trail with the hope we could get a better view of the volcano. What did we see? The picture of the three of us shows just a lot more fog.



Was it dangerous for us to be there? YES.

This preparation in the hutch at the top of our hill was somewhat disturbing. **Sakurajima's** activity became more prominent in 1955, and the **volcano has been erupting almost constantly ever since**. Thousands of small explosions happened each year, throwing ash to heights of up to a few kilometers above the mountain.



On February 14, 2024, an eruption occurred at the Minamidake crater on Sakurajima emitting plumes of over five kilometers in height and spewing rocks as far as a mile.

- - - - -

In the afternoon we visited the **Sengan-en Garden**, (3) a traditional Japanese garden and **stately home** in Kagoshima.



The charming garden boasts spectacular views of Sakurajima across the bay, while the house provides a glimpse into the lifestyle of a powerful feudal lord.



The house passed down in the Shimadzu family for over 350 years.

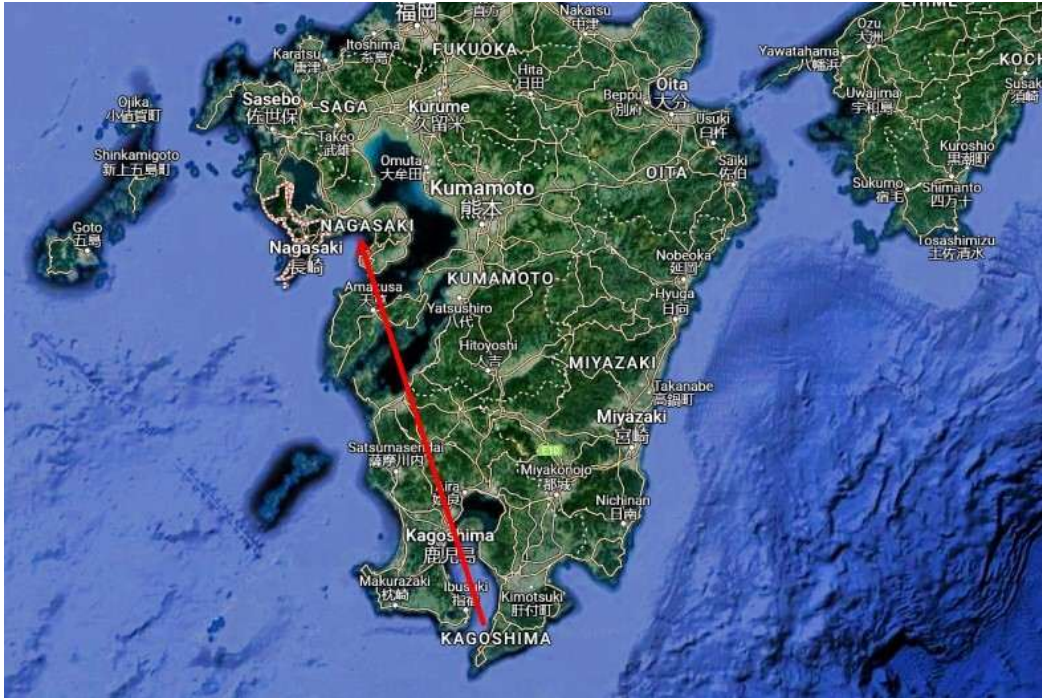


References:

- (1) Kagoshima <https://www.japan.travel/en/destinations/kyushu/kagoshima/kagoshima-and-around/>
- (2) Sakurajima <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakurajima>
- (3) Sengan-en Garden <https://www.japan.travel/en/spot/602/>

NAGASAKI

[Nagasaki](#) (1) is on the northwest coast of the island of Kyushu. It's set on a large natural harbor, with buildings on the terraces of surrounding hills. It is synonymous with a key moment during World War II, after suffering an Allied nuclear attack in August 1945.



In the morning, we visited the [Nagasaki Peace Park](#), (2) monuments and memorials, and the Atomic Bomb Museum, recounting the devastating events that occurred on August 9, 1945, when an atomic bomb was dropped on the city.

Built to commemorate the atomic bombing of Nagasaki City on August 9th, 1945, **Nagasaki Peace Park** reminds us of the horrors of war, while also expressing hope for peace. The complex is comprised of two parks and the **Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum**, which has exhibits on the reality of the atomic bombing.



Designed by local artist Seibo Kitamura as a testament to those who perished, the park's majestic **Peace Statue** is a major draw. Its outstretched arms warn about the dangers of nuclear weapons while also gesturing toward a more peaceful future.



The **Fountain of Peace** at the south end of the park commemorates those who died searching for water in the bomb's aftermath.



Here was a heart-wrenching poem written by a nine-year-old girl at the time who was exposed to the atomic bombing, in which she describes the desperation of those needing to quench their thirst.

**"A burning sky, so bright and cruel,
The world turned black, a silent pool.
My tiny hands, they clutched in fear,
A thirsty cry, no water near.**

**The shadows danced, a twisted sight,
The ground did shake, the day turned night.
My mother's voice, a fading call,
As ashes fell, like tears that fall.**

**I searched for friends, but none were found,
A broken city, scorched and bound.
A burning thirst, a heart so sore,
Oh, please, just let the bombs fall no more."**

On a more positive note, a row of monuments contributed by various nations conveys sympathy and goodwill from around the world.



The center where the bomb dropped



26 Martyrs



Mother and Infant

Few of the other Memorial Park Statues



In the afternoon we rode the [Mt. Inasa Ropeway](#), (3) from Nagasaki to the top of **Mt. Inasa**, rising to the west of the city.



References:

- (1) [Nagasaki](https://www.japan.travel/en/destinations/kyushu/nagasaki/nagasaki-city-and-around/) <https://www.japan.travel/en/destinations/kyushu/nagasaki/nagasaki-city-and-around/>
- (2) [Nagasaki Peace Park](https://www.japan.travel/en/spot/742/) <https://www.japan.travel/en/spot/742/>
- (3) [Mt. Inasa Ropeway](https://japantravel.navitime.com/en/area/jp/guide/NTJtrv0123-en) <https://japantravel.navitime.com/en/area/jp/guide/NTJtrv0123-en>

BUSAN

[Busan](#) (1), a large port city in South Korea, was known for its beaches, mountains and temples. Busy **Haeundae Beach** featured the **Sea Life Aquarium**, plus a **Folk Square** with traditional games such as tug-of-war, while **Gwangalli Beach** had many bars and views of modern **Diamond Bridge**. **Beomeosa Temple**, a Buddhist shrine founded in 678 A.D., was at the base of **Geumjeong Mountain**.



Reflecting on all the aforementioned highlights, we did none of them. Instead, after docking in **Busan**, we went to the **United Nations Memorial Cemetery**, and in the afternoon we visited the **Jagalchi Fish Market**.

[United Nations Memorial Cemetery](#), (2) honored troops from many nations who fell during the Korean War. These 35 acres contained 2,300 graves. At the front of the cemetery, there stood the **main gate that Busan citizens contributed** to commemorate the UN soldiers in 1966.

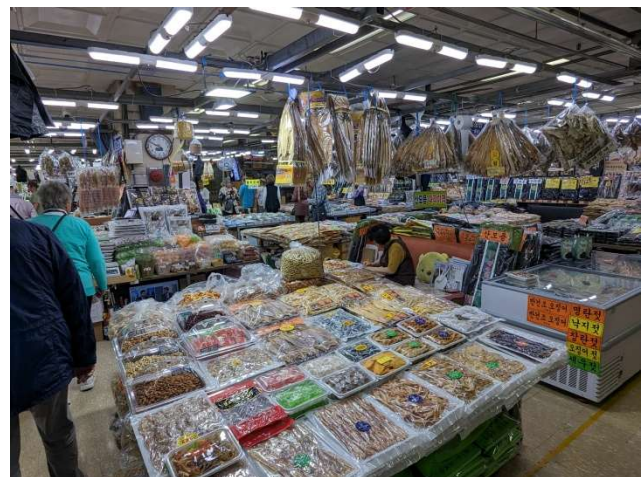
The Memorial Service Hall was after the main gate and the plaza. The triangular shape of the building symbolized eternity, and it also represented various religious faiths held by soldiers from all different cultures.



Tauck served lunch for their 220 guests with another 1000 Busan locals on long fifty-foot tables. So how was the food? So, so.



In Korea as in Japan, seafood has been a mainstay of local cuisine for millennia. Our visit to [Jagalchi Fish Market](#), (3) the largest cooperative, traditional seafood market in the country, offered an in-depth look at this longstanding cultural tradition.



This market was the **largest I have seen** on any of my travels. Hundreds of small stores with outdoor tables and water tanks lined both sides for two blocks. Every kind of fish I could imagine was displayed. Many eels, snake-things, octopuses, squids, crustaceans, and whatever, squirmed for easy view.

Our local guide explained some of it as **she rushed through the streets**. I didn't know what she was saying. I was relying on that "ear buddy" to keep up with her and not to get lost in the crowds. I learned nothing about those fishy things.

Here was the problem: our one guide was leading a bus full of about forty guests. Our one Tauck director trailed behind, hoping to gather up stragglers. She wasn't successful.

I had to take off on my own when I saw a sign for a restroom. They made no restroom allowance after lunch; many of us needed a stop. As I hurried on a side road with a restroom sign, Phil watched between the tour group and me to make sure I did not get left behind.

As our guide raced up an escalator to the second floor of a department store, **one of our ladies fell on the stairs and was hurt**. The guide didn't delay. It was not her responsibility. The department floor was as far as we could see. Hundreds of white plates had different sea animals that I can't begin to describe. Dried fish hung from the ceilings.

Our one director Anna now had to manage the injured lady and the other three-dozen guests scattered among tables full of sea creatures – **very bad planning by Tauck**.

We left Korea mid-afternoon.



References:

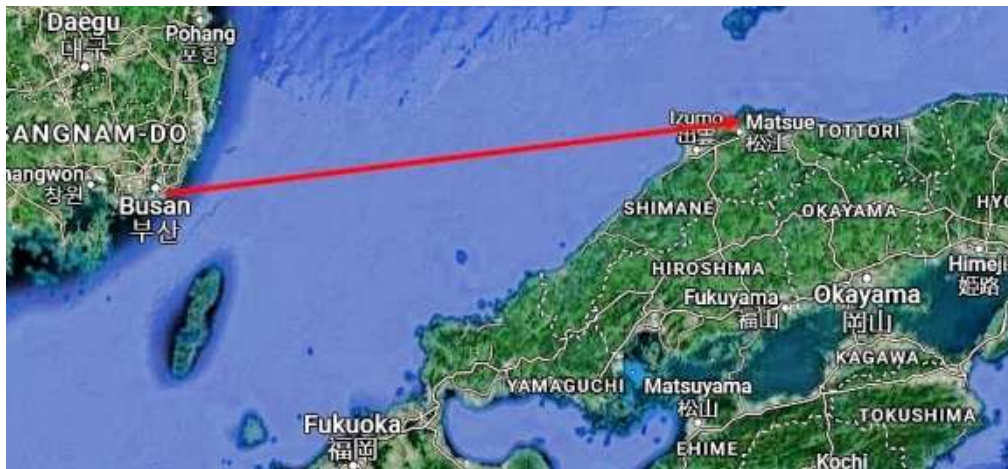
- (1) Busan <https://www.hotels.com/go/south-korea/busan>
- (2) United Nations Memorial Cemetery <https://www.busanpedia.com/united-nations-memorial-cemetery-busan-south-korea/>
- (3) Jagalchi Fish Market <https://thesoulofseoul.net/inside-jagalchi-fish-market/>

SAKAIMINATO/MATSUE

The sun set as we focused our sights on **Sakaiminato**.



In the morning we were in [Sakaiminato](#), (1) a small fishing town in the northwest end of Tottori Prefecture.



It attracts a lot of visitors from all over Japan because the famous anime creator [Shigeru Mizuki](#) (1922-2015) (2) was born in this city.

On this port was our last day on **LeSoleal**. We had two destinations: the **Adachi Museum** (3) and the black [Matsue Castle](#) (4) one of the oldest surviving **Tokugawa Samurai castles**.



Adachi Museum was “garden art.” We viewed but did not touch. We remained restricted inside a building and looked out through tall windows. (see the gray line in the picture below).



The sculptured trees and bushes created a stark graphic over the white sand ground.



Visitors also seemed puzzled by this magnificent Japanese-style garden. **Adachi Zenko**, the museum's founder, tried to express a strong resonance between the sublime sensibility of the Japanese-style garden and the paintings of [Yokoyama Taikan \(5\)](#).

Yokoyama Taikan (1868 – 1958) was the art-name of a major figure in pre-World War II **Japanese painting**. He is notable for helping create the Japanese painting technique of ***Nihonga***.



We travel to **Matsue** (6), known as "the water city" for its river, canals, and setting on two lakes and the Sea of Japan (weather permitting, take in a great view of the city and beyond from its feudal fortress and toured the **Black Castle**,



Tauck had a few actors to help put us in the mood. We are supposed to growl. Some of us participated.



We then climbed the stairs to the top seventh floor. An elevator was available for some to the third floor, but we took the challenge of mounting all the 12-inch high steps.

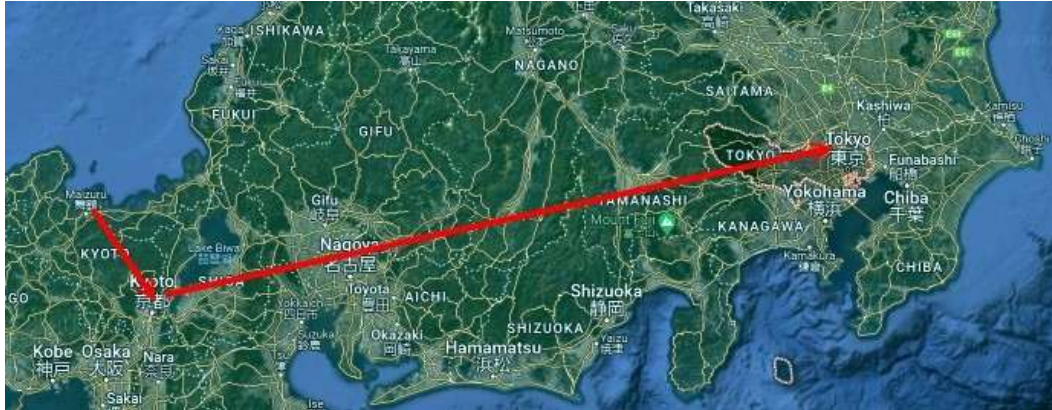


References:

- (1) Sakaiminato [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakaiminato, Tottori](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sakaiminato,_Tottori)
- (2) Shigeru Mizuki [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shigeru Mizuki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shigeru_Mizuki)
- (3) Adachi Museum <https://www.adachi-museum.or.jp/en/>
- (4) Matsue Castle <https://en.japantravel.com/shimane/matsue-castle/1265>
- (5) Yokoyama Taikan [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yokoyama Taikan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yokoyama_Taikan)
- (6) Matsue <https://www.japan-experience.com/all-about-japan/matsue>

TOKYO

After breakfast, we left **Le Soleal** for Tokyo with a scenic bus ride from **Maizuru** to **Kyoto**. From **Kyoto**, we boarded the Japanese bullet train **Shinkansen** (1) to Japan's capital city, Tokyo.



Before getting on the train we stopped for lunch. **Phil wanted a rickshaw ride.** This was probably the last chance. He missed it.



Kyoto was super crowded when we got to the trains.

Our director said, “Stay tightly together. If we lose you, ***you are on your own.*** We won’t be able to find you. Find a train to Tokyo.”

That was scary, but she wasn’t kidding. Hundreds of people were going “somewhere” and jogging in multiple directions. We walked through a large chamber, rode an

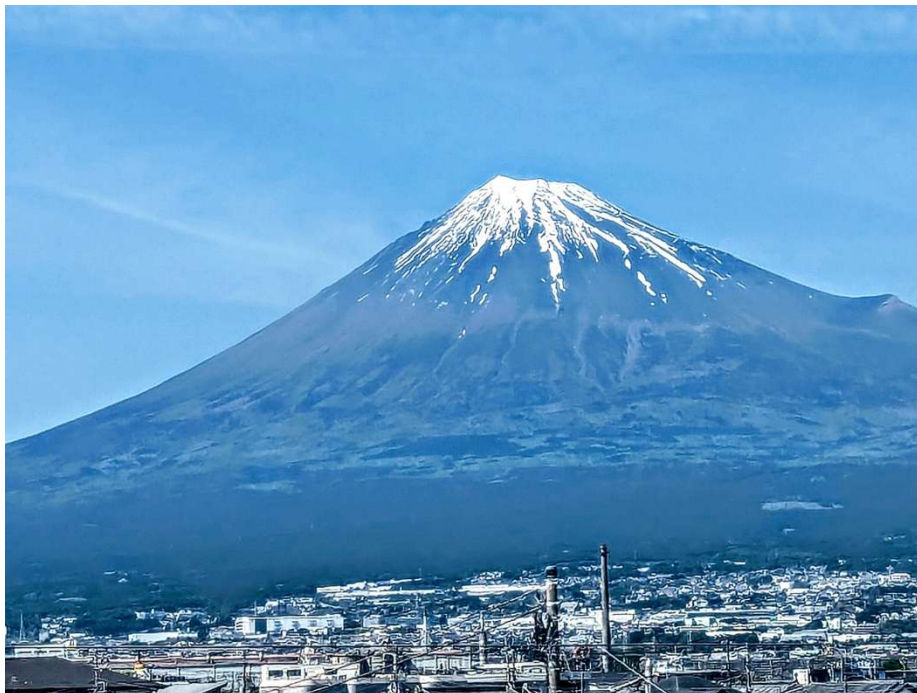
escalator to the upper concourse, and waited a half-hour for our train to arrive. The train was comfortable and took a little over two hours to get to Tokyo.



Phil taking a photo



On train went near [Mount Fuji](#). (2) We hoped to get a snapshot from the window. **Mount Fuji** was an active stratovolcano with a summit elevation of 12,389 ft. 3 in. It was the highest mountain in Japan, the second-highest volcano located on an island in Asia, and the seventh-highest peak on an island on Earth. Mount Fuji last erupted from 1707 to 1708. Mount Fuji's exceptionally symmetrical cone, which was covered in snow for about five months of the year, was commonly used as a cultural icon of Japan and was frequently depicted in art and photography, as well as visited by sightseers, hikers, and mountain climbers.



We did! Everyone scrambled to get a photo. We passed our cellphones around bragging as to who got the best picture.

Of course, Phil got the best with the reflection of **Mt. Fuji off the pond in the rice paddy.**



A bus picked us up at the Tokyo train station and took us to the [Mandarin Oriental](#). (3) The readers of Travel + Leisure placed the **Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo** on the list of the **500 World's Best hotels** and voted it the **#1** hotel in Japan.

This luxury high-rise hotel occupied the **top 9 floors of the 38-story Nihonbashi Mitsui Tower**. It was 2 km from the **Tokyo Imperial Palace** and 8 km from the landmark **Tokyo Tower**. It had two bars and ten restaurants including one earning a **Michelin star** for its contemporary French menu and another earning **Michelin-star** Cantonese.

Other amenities included a swanky spa and a gym.



Lobby



My room

After everyone checked into their hotel rooms, Tauck had a local guide take us on a walking tour introducing the city's famed luxury shopping **district of Ginza (4)**. In the evening we were “on our own for dinner.



Unfortunately, **I had to pass all the activities.** I remained in my fancy room. I was sick and was barely able to walk with swollen legs with edema. I had been skipping my medication because it conflicted with my ability to be on this tour. I lay on my settee with my legs raised high and watched the **Tokyo lights from my picture window.**

No Ginza, no dinner in those luxurious restaurants, and no photos of what the group enjoyed.

I planned not to tell Rosemary and Phil about my medical report a couple of weeks before we left. For nearly two years, we had been looking forward to this trip. **I didn't want to ruin it for them.**

I tried to stay optimistic as we traveled, but I just **couldn't block continuous fatal thoughts.** When I got sick, it became obvious something was wrong. They asked me why I stopped joining the group, and I told them.

By breakfast time the next morning, I was feeling better. I wanted to visit the [Meiji Shrine \(5\)](#). **Meiji Jingu** was one of **Japan's most popular shrines.** In the first days of the New Year, the shrine regularly welcomed more than three million visitors for the year's first prayers (*hatsumode*), more than any other shrine or temple in the country.

Entry into the shrine grounds was marked by a massive **torii gate**, after a tranquil forest. The approximately 100,000 trees that made up **Meiji Jingu's** forest were planted during the shrine's construction and were donated from regions across the entire country.



By this time, we knew the Shinto's shrine rules.

(1) We entered by either the **left or the right**. Only gods could walk through the center.



Entering the shrine after passing the torii

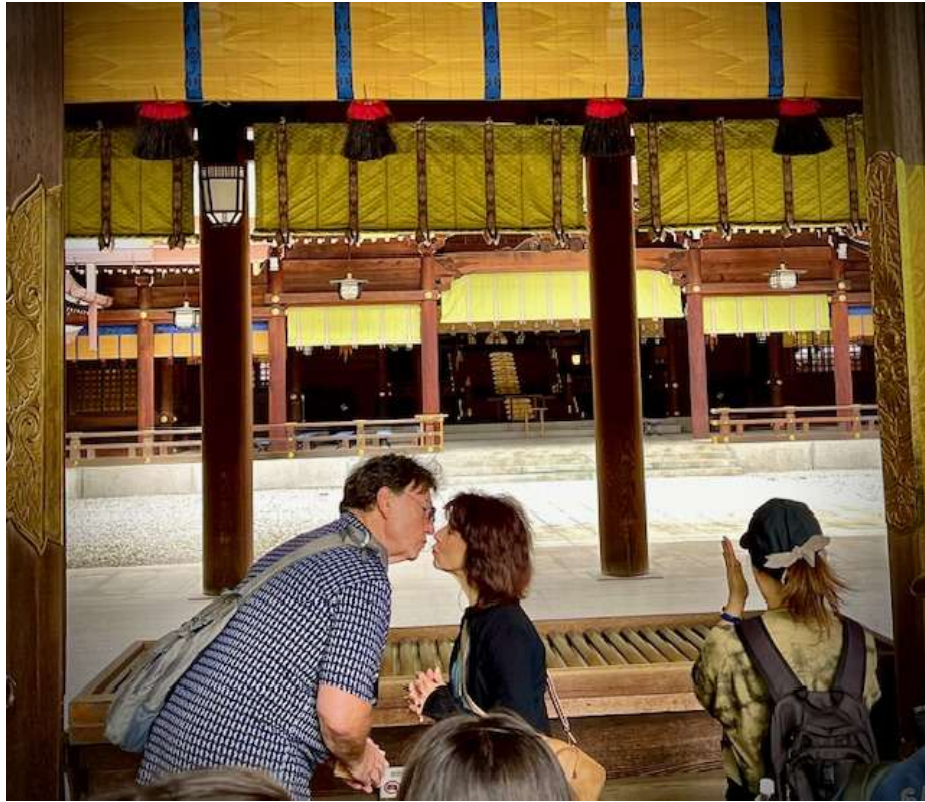
(2) Next, we had to cleanse by **washing our hands**,



(3) Then, at the shrine we approached with **two respectful bows**,

(4) We made our wish and left a coin as a gift.

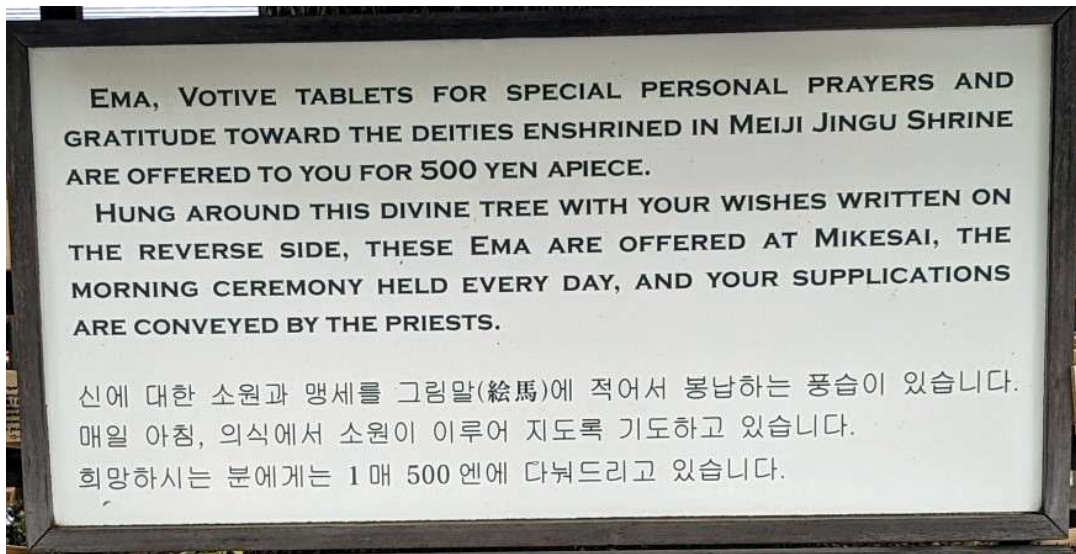
(5) We **clapped our hands**, made **one bow**, and departed.



I didn't think kissing your neighbor was on the Shinto list

(6) We wrote our wish and left it posted.





Barrels of Sake Wrapped in Straw

During the Meiji Era, Emperor Meiji, whose divine soul is enshrined here at Meiji Jingu, led the industrial growth and modernization of Japan by encouraging various industries and supporting technological development. Due to their grace and virtue, Emperor Meiji and his consort, Empress Shoken, the beloved mother of our nation whose soul is also enshrined here, are held in the highest esteem by the Japanese people.

These sake barrels are offered every year to the enshrined deities by members of the Meiji Jingu Zenkoku Shuzo Keishinkai (Meiji Jingu Nationwide Sake Brewers Association) including the Kotokai, which has made offerings of sake for generations, as well as other sake brewers around Japan wishing to show their deep respect for the souls of Emperor Meiji and Empress Shoken.

In addition to stating our humble gratitude to all of the brewers who have so graciously donated their sake, we also pray for the continuous prosperity of the sake brewing industry and all the other industries maintaining Japan's traditional culture.

Meiji Jingu

Provenance of the Bourgogne Wine for Consecration at Meiji Jingu

By gaining the good and rejecting what is wrong,
It is our desire that we'll compare favourably
With other lands abroad.

Poem by Emperor Meiji

The Meiji period was an enlightened period during which a policy of "Japanese Spirit and Western Knowledge" was adopted, to learn from the best of Western culture and civilization while keeping Japan's age-old spirit and revered traditions. Emperor Meiji led the way in promoting modernization by embracing many features of western culture in his personal life, such as shearing his topknot and donning western attire, and in many other aspects of daily living. Among these departures, His Majesty set an example by taking western food and in particular by enjoying wine with it.

The barrels of wine to be consecrated at Meiji Jingu have been offered by the celebrated wineries of Bourgogne in France on the initiative of Mr. Yasuhiko Sata, Representative, House of Burgundy in Tokyo, Honorary Citizen of Bourgogne and owner of the Chateau de Chailly Hotel-Golf. Profound gratitude is due to the winemakers who have so generously contributed to this precious gift to be consecrated here to the spirit of world peace and amity, with the earnest prayer that France and Japan will enjoy many more fruitful years of friendship.

Meiji Jingu



We watched a wedding ceremony at the shrine.



Afterward, our tour finished, and our group went to the [Japan National Museum](#). (6) I returned to my hotel room. Phil filled in with the picture-taking.







Before or after the visit to the museum, Phil, Rosemary, Jim, and Nancy enjoy a meal.

References:

- (1) Shinkansen <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinkansen>
- (2) Mount Fuji https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Fuji
- (3) Mandarin Oriental <https://www.mandarinoriental.com/en/tokyo/nihonbashi/offers>
- (4) district of Ginza <https://www.gotokyo.org/en/destinations/central-tokyo/ginza/index.html>
- (5) Meiji Shrine <https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e3002.html>
- (6) Japan National Museum https://www.japan-guide.com/e/e3054_tokyo.html

Farewell

Our **Farewell Reception** and dinner started similarly to our Welcome Reception – all 220 guests in one banquet room.



Tauck provided us entertainment with unforgettable [sumo wrestling](#) (1) demonstration and traditional Japanese music.

Sumo was a form of competitive full-contact wrestling where a *rikishi* (wrestler) attempts to force his opponent out of a circular ring (*dohyō*) or into touching the ground with any body part other than the soles of his feet (usually by throwing, shoving or pushing him down).

Sumo originated in Japan, the only country where it was practiced professionally and where it was considered the national sport. It was considered a *gendai budō*, which referred to modern Japanese martial arts, but the sport had a history spanning many centuries.

Life as a wrestler was highly regimented, with rules regulated by the **Japan Sumo Association**. Most sumo wrestlers were required to live in communal sumo training stables, known in Japanese as [heya](#), where all aspects of their daily lives—from meals

to their manner of dress—were dictated by strict *kyara* tradition. Because of this lifestyle, sumo wrestlers had a much lower life expectancy than the average Japanese man.



I took many videos at the exhibition. Unfortunately, the only way to view my movies was by looking at them in my **Google Photos**.

Our evening was in a fabulous building. Here are a couple of pictures. The best appreciation was also on my **Google Photos**.



Phil, Rosemary, and I had a final beer to applaud our great tour. It took us two years and three potential trips to make it happen.

But it was everything we had hoped for.

We also celebrated new friends of **Jim and Nancy Sidos** who will join us again soon on another Tauck tour.



Jim and Nancy Sido, Tom, Rosemary and Phil

References:

- (1) sumo wrestling <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumo>

FINAL THOUGHTS

Our Japan visit was excellent. The people were very friendly and the country was super clean and safe. Before the trip, we studied the history and culture of Japan and were prepared. If my time permits, **I would like to return** and learn more about the society. We toured only the lower third of the region and, with only two weeks, we just had a cursory perspective.

Usually, before every tour, I researched the itinerary and destinations. I was prepared. My travel website – <https://24sjapan.blogspot.com> – had lots of detail.

The “Background” page was the most important. It had **History of Japan's Ancient and Modern Empire, Under-standing Japan: A Culture History, 24 lecture videos** about Japan from **Great Courses**, Japanese Manners and Etiquette, Learning the Japanese Language, and Religion in Japan.

Phil, Rosemary, and I practiced our *“Japanese manners”* and tried to learn a few Japanese words. We were good with our manners; we were not so good with the words.

I was the one who was not so good with a new vocabulary. With aphasia, I had trouble with English. Some of my vocalizations were dangerous. I left it to Phil who did well as he frequently dropped a few Japanese words.

We were warned the Japanese expected guests to be clean and respectful. Even on our bus rides, our director collected even the tiniest bits of paper. Phil, Rosemary, and I were super aware of this cultural difference when we returned to the States.

In Atlanta, Phil observed and said, “We are in the back of pigs and disrespect.”

As guests, we didn’t have to bow with the Japanese practice, but in Nara, even the deer bowed (and maybe Rosemary to her deer.)

We visited many Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Our companions seemed to respect the Japanese religions. Nevertheless, our Christians didn’t understand Japanese Buddhism. Their explanations didn’t conform to my Indian Buddhism. I didn’t attempt to correct their comments.

Japanese anime was welcoming throughout. I have tried to understand the “why” of the Japanese emphasis on the practice. It’s cute and refreshing. They didn’t mess up their buildings and walls with graffiti commonly seen in Western cities.

Unfortunately, I didn't pay attention to it and have no photos of it. Phil got a few.



I liked the unique Japanese art. It was often expressed in the gardens. Regarding Japanese paintings, I remember the house of the Impressionist Claude Monet in Giverny, France. It was full of Japanese art and not his stuff. I too liked it enough to want to find work for my house.

ABOUT MY TRAVEL WEBSITES

My travel website <https://24sjapan.blogspot.com> contains what I wanted to know before going on Tauck's 2024 *Cruising the Land of the Rising Sun*. The TABBED pages are:

- Home: Tour Map and Schedule
- Agenda: A Tauck's promotion of the daily plans
- Itinerary: My research of Tauck's Agenda
- Hotels: Description of the hotels and ship we were staying
- Excursion: The multiple optional trips available on some destinations
- **Background**: Almost everything needs to know about Japan
- Travel: Airline schedules, Insurance, Visit Japan Web, Money, Weather, Telephones

Associated web pages contain information about each destination and optional excursions: A description (with *hyperlink* for more comments) of the city, a small touristy YouTube video, and ChatGPT recommendations. Accesses are available via *hyperlinks* on the Agenda and Itinerary.

The Background page has lots of information about Japan:

- **History of Japan's Ancient and Modern Empire**,
- **Understanding Japan: Culture History**,
- ***The Great Course*** 24 lectures about Japan,
- **Japanese Manners and Etiquette**,
- **Learning Japanese Language**,
- **Religion in Japan**, and
- **Getting Around in Japan**.

I retained my website <https://23japan.blogspot.com/> of our plans for the **Skeptic Society** expedition.

I have collected and published photos from friends on trips. I have many albums in my gallery at www.evanscenter.com/PhotoTvl/gallery.html. Albums include Phil's photos, saved in **Shutterfly**, and my photos, saved in **Google Photos**.

This journal is also published on my website.