

JAPAN TOUR - 2018

OSAKA TO TOKYO



**TOUR DATES: 17 MAY – 2
JUNE 2018**

- 17 May Departure from Adelaide (home) en-route to Singapore for a 10hr layover (transit). After approx. 6hr flight arrive Singapore and book in to do Free Singapore City Tour at 6.30pm. The tour took us past many popular Singapore sights, including a stop off to walk around the Merlion on the Singapore River, and then off at The Gardens by the Bay, beautiful lighting at night. Return to airport to wait in Lounge until flight departure at 1.25am. Highly recommend do the Singapore Free Tour if you have a 5hr transit layover. Upon return to Changi Airport we made our way to arrival gates to meet Brian & Nicola from Brisbane. We all then boarded our Osaka bound flight at 1.25am (18th) to arrive around 9.30am.
- 18 May After more than 30 hours of collective travel (maybe 1-2hrs nap on plane), we collected our luggage and then attempted to decipher how to get Bus to Hotel. Obviously whilst looking lost and confused a NZ man approached and help us navigate the ticket machine to board an OCAT Bus to the Interchange, where we decided to catch a taxi to our hotel, the Ibis Osaka Hotel, right in the middle of Dotonbori, the epi centre of the Osaka tourist area.

As we were unable to check into our rooms until 2.00pm, we left all of our luggage in a secure area of the Hotel and decided to hit the streets and lanes of Dotonbori, to self-explore the area, shops, people and advertising etc etc. We walked through the Tenjinbashi suji Shotengai mall, had a well-earned coffee stop at Honolulu Coffee, and also tried some Kobe beef for a snack. Of course, I sniffed out a lot of Dumpling, Sushi, Kobe beef and Noodle (Ramen) stores.

After the obligatory typical inquisitive tourist walk-about, we returned to the Hotel and checked into our adjoining rooms and took a well-earned SNAP (Senior NAP) until around 4.00pm. First executive decision to be made was to head to a local Café/Diner to have coffee and organise next few days itinerary, e.g. places and train lines to visit.

Re-energised and a need for a feed, we ventured back out to Dotonbori again to find place for everyone to eat dinner, walked, walked and walked some more, decision making by all very poor, and a decision could not be made. Walked the main street to find subway entrances and came across Pachinko place (bingo) where locals play for money/tokens with prize of small shiny balls (ball-bearings).

Then we walked through Ten-Pin bowling area into a huge Gaming Area, loud and video/electronic games amazing, very very popular places in Japan - gaming, anima and dance interaction games massive. Whilst looking around and in awe of the volume and height of activity, turned around and there's Brian sitting down in a huge console playing Space Invaders, hilarious....

Finally, we gave in and went back to the Restaurant where I saw Noodle dish with Dumplings and beer, where we could all have an individual dinner choice.

So, a decision was finally made after fluffing and walking around for about 20 minutes, entered the Restaurant and were told full, no seats and had to wait on street for around 20min before being seated. Meals were quite good, but dumplings were really good, V.G. along with other meals, and the cold beer. Good Choice.....

After dinner as the sun had set we decided to re-walk Dotonbori to experience the area lit up and specially to see the Glico Running Man, infamous to Osaka. The riverbank wasn't as lit up as much as I thought, however at the nucleus of the Glico Man (bridge) was impressive. A BIG day was had by all, consensus was to turn in as we had planned a very busy long day of site-seeing. Karen and I decided to have a night-cap Beer and went into the Sports Bar opposite Hotel and watched some Japanese Baseball on TV. Brian & Nicola straight to room.

19 May Breakfast at 7.20am, and gee was this an experience we have never dealt with. Arrived to Lvl 15, got out lift to walk into dining area and walked directly into a long cue, a cue of guests waiting in line to enter for breakfast. Never have we seen this, quite a site and a laugh really. Then shortly after whilst standing in line, we again had a chuckle when we saw Brian and Nicola turn the corner to see us in cue and the amazed look on their faces as well. So, after breaky we headed out for an action planned day of site-seeing with our first stop to the train/subway network – to navigate the complex and confusing system (initially). What an experience to work out the ticketing system and what train to catch, talk about 'The Travel Experience' with a touch of stress, laughs and fun.

Stunned, numb and confused not knowing what we were doing, finally got some help from locals in broken English to get ourselves to head out for the day.

First stop to the Osaka Aquarium Kaiyukan in Minato to see Whale Sharks, Rays, Hammerheads and more..., but as we walked towards the Aquarium and huge Ferris Wheel Brian saw a Japanese War Ship docked in Port, The JS Kaga (50 years old) which was in especially for a commemorative purpose. So, we took time to walk around and photograph the ship and adjacent displays. Were luckily in time to witness Speeches and Crew members in uniform along with Naval Band playing as part of the ceremony.

After we continued on to enter the Aquarium, but first it led us thru a Jungle Section to see otters and crabs, dolphins, seals and penguins etc. Then it was the HUGE aquarium where we timed our entry perfectly to witness the Whale Sharks being fed at the water surface. There were so many marine species in the water, Rays, Sharks and fish, it was my happy place, but feeling very indifferent about the captivity side of things. It was when I saw 2 Hammerhead Sharks, Leopard and Guitar sharks along with myriad of different rays that I was in awe. Karen knew just to leave me alone and walked on with Nicola and Brian and from memory I felt like I was mesmerised for around 1 hour and took at least 100 photos'.

After leaving the Aquarium, we went to look through the adjacent Tempozan Mall which was on many 'Things to do' when in Osaka, underwhelming, would not recommend. After we walked back through the front promenade of gardens, flowers, water features and the Ferris Wheel to continue our trek back to the train station onward to the Osaka Castle. From the train station walking towards the Castle, we were met with a grand entrance through gardens and a promenade leading up to Castle with huge rock walls/facades and smaller sections of the Castle, like Turret Towers, bridges and moats.

Once inside first gate entrance (across bridge) we walked past the Elephant Wall, a huge 'Slate Like' slab of stone that formed a major part of the wall structure. Then into the main courtyard where Karen and I tried on some Samurai Helmets and posed for photos in front of the Castle. After taking in the grounds, buildings and manicured trees', all 4 of us bought entry tickets to Castle and climbed the 7 flights of stairs, stopping at each level to look at displays of History, artifacts and story boards. We finally reached the top level for a 360dg lookout/walk around view of the Castle grounds and over the city of Osaka 'Breathtaking'.

After our slow stair descent, we then went to look at the Hokoku Temple (Japanese Ruler), however the Temple was closed for private wedding ceremony, but we still took the time to look over the grounds, signage, parts of the yard and entrances etc.

While walking back towards the train Brian and I tried Osaka's famous Octopus Ball snack, a small dough ball cooked in a cast iron griddle style plate (not a fan), while Karen and Nicola indulged in an ice-cream. We then caught the JR line back to Hotel for a quick nap (re-charge) to move onward to the Umeda Sky Building to be there around Sunset. However, bit overcast (cloudy) for nice sunset by the time we got to Rooftop area. It was however a fantastic 360dg view overlooking Osaka, the main river, numerous bridges and the hills in the horizon.

We decided to try to look for a place locally for dinner but alas as normal indecisive and returned to Dotonbori and found a Pasta Diner and had dinner there instead, average. After dinner we returned to Hotel for rest, tidy and sleep.

20 May Breakfast and slight sleep in before joining a Free Osaka Walking tour starting at 9.30am. Got lost and went to wrong location for Start Point (my fault) and arrived last to meeting point.

Masa was our tour leader who took us around Dotonbori, first to the Running Man area where he also showed us the Famous Ramen Noodle Restaurant (tick). From there we continued through to local streets and stopping every now and then as he explained some local history, religions and customs of Japan. Next stop was the Kuramon Markets where he told us about the crazy expensive prices of fresh fruit, e.g. slice of Mango \$120US and Melons, Strawberries and Mandarins – crazy prices.

As we walked through the markets the range and style of different foods were good to see and experience, pricing, quality and size, especially the Prawns and Crab legs etc. After the markets we stopped near a local school and he explained about the education system and the chores etc. the children are required to do, e.g. cook and serve food, clean the school and the code of dress and style of backpacks they wear.

Also, about the safety of Japan for all, females walking home late at night and that the children walk, train and ride themselves to school with no fear of danger. We then stopped for a short toilet and drinks break at 7/11. From there we walked to an area that was originally built to replicate Coney Island Fair Ground, which never really successful, and burnt down, and soon after the large steel structure (Eiffel Tower) was scraped for metal for the War Efforts. Next around the corner was a 'Hello Kitty' carpark area where the Kitty has no mouth as she speaks from the 'Heart', and is an icon, now 44yrs old. Just around the corner we stopped in an area famous for Street foods and Restaurants of all sorts, Karen rubbed the feet of a local icon (statue) for good luck.

As the tour ended, quite far from the starting point (slightly stranded by the tour), Masa informed us that the Temple I had on the agenda to go see upon was under construction and randomly Nicola said 'Let's do a day trip to Nara!' and of course we all said

'Yeah why not' so off we ventured on the JR train system to Nara (deer park).

Finally got there, no real issue and walked from Railway Station up the long main Road, like a paved promenade and we stopped for a coffee (as usual). After a re-charge we were off, soldiered UP the road and hill to the Nara Deer Reserve to look at Temples, Deer and the views. Was a great day weather wise and the views and roaming deer were very entertaining and unique? In Japan the religion is Shintoism and they pray, get Baptised and Married at Shrines, however in death they pray to Buddha.

We walked through the park to several sites and made our way back to the Hotel for a 6.00pm Welcome meeting. Well with the walk and 2 train rides we arrived back to Hotel at 6.10pm and we were last to join the Welcome Meeting!!!!!! Oops.

We met our G Adventures Tour Leader (CEO) Kiyoe and the remainder of the group, a good mix of ages, couples and single etc...mainly from Australia, with 1 young couple from Germany.

After the meeting we returned to our room to make 1 suitcase an overnight bag for our early morning trip on several trains, including a Shinkansen (bullet train – 300kph) and a funicular at 900mt ^ S.L. to a Monk Monastery in Koyasan (Mt Koya) for an overnight stay.

21 May Upon arrival to the Ekoin Temple Monastery we were taught the manners and rules to follow, e.g. how to take off shoes and put on scuffs, so as not to bring dirt/mud inside. Also shown to our rooms and where meals to be eaten, communal bathroom/baths. Once settled into rooms we took a group walk/tour, en-route we stopped off at a small temple where we walked in the dark under the blessing area where it is believed is a shortcut to understand the readings and learning of the Buddhist Bible.

Karen was quickly first to volunteer to enter, so I quickly followed holding her hand and trying to keep constant contact with the walls. It was a tight space and total darkness, not the best place for someone with claustrophobia.

We continued walking along the local streets where we came across a group of school children handing out Charms and fruit (watermelon/oranges) in remembrance of the earthquake and its victims, whilst being filmed by local TV station. After a small break and eating the fruit, we went up the stairs towards the Temple, but stopped briefly at a cleansing station. Here you use a scoop to wash your right and then left hand, then your face to cleanse before entering the Temple.

Cleansed, we entered and walked and explored areas including rooms/story boards, the gravel raked and rock gardens. We were also fortunate to see some young girls dressed for modeling photo shoot, small boy (Karen gave Koala) and Koyasan mascot, Koyakun. We then walked back to Monastery, stopping for coffee (as usual), then back to room to rest before dinner.

We were requested to dress accordingly in our traditional clothing and to wait until a Monk came to our room to collect us for dinner (shojin-ryori) vegetarian cuisine dressed in Kimono & Yukata.

Well dinner certainly was an experience and was quite impressed with both of us and Brian & Nicola trying all parts of the dinner out of respect of the Monks. After dinner the majority of the group did an optional guided tour of the Oko-no-in Cemetery, the most sacred site in Koyasan and the location of the mausoleum for Kobo Dashi (Kukai) the founder of Shingon Buddhism.

There are over 200,000 tombstones lining the 2km path by more than 10,000 lanterns burning day & night.

Karen and I decided to go for our own self-guided walk through the cemetery and then back to room, where I took the opportunity to bath and shower in the communal bathroom while others were out for the authentic experience.

So, to sleep on the floor on a very thin mattress and pillow filled with small pieces of plastic tube??and a Duna to keep us warm alongside an electric heater. Weird night's sleep, but the authenticity and location of the room and the features were humbling, amazing experience.

22 May Awake early and up for breakfast where some of the group went to morning prayer, and meditation. After a vegetarian breakfast was served and again tried by all, leaving some of the group wanting for more (coffee and bakery lol). After breakfast the majority of the group went to witness the morning Fire Ritual/Ceremony where after the normal ritual, the Monks burnt the Wish Sticks of people who wrote their blessings, dreams or wishes on etc.

We then left the Monastery to make the return trip, Funicular and 2 trains back to Osaka to then catch a Shinkansen (300kph) for a 1.5hr ride to Hiroshima. Again, upon arrival as a group all off with luggage in tow we all walked to the Hotel New Hiroden for a 2-night stay. Later that evening Kiyoe ran a group exercise teaching paper folding (origami) on how to make a paper crane (traditional bird of Japan (Hiroshima)).

First stop for the day was a local bus ride to see the Hiroshima Castle ruins, Temple and the remainder of the Watch Towers, however Karen and I were left on the bus as everyone got off without us knowing. As the bus left the stop Karen looked out to see Brain frantically waving his arms to either us or the Bus driver, as we were left there alone, very funny travel story....

We then walked through the gardens, across a bridge and string of lanterns to the Temple. Most of the group went in for a tour/walk, but Karen, Brian & Nicola stayed out. So, I ventured in and went in to all floors and inside was able to dress like a Samurai and had photos taken by myself, with Houda dressed in Kimono wear and then Kiyoe joined in for a group photo. Took some city scape photos from the roof top level and stuck my head out next to a gap near the binoculars and called out to Karen.

From there we walked towards the city to the Hiroshima Parco Shopping Mall, shopping, cafes, puppies, ABC shoe Marts, sock stores etc etc. We met at the end to attend a group dinner, Okonomiyaki where over 4 levels of the building there are 80 little diners serving Okonomiyaki. Well, what an amazing experience eating like a local in a place you would never find, the mum, dad & son all cooked and served from behind a tiny long hot plate making the multiple level meal with all sorts of different fillings, including egg, cabbage, bacon, spices and more, Cold beer, baseball on TV, great food and company all wrapped up into one night of Fun. Okonomiyaki YES please!

Walked home at night back through the street besides the local shops, eateries, little bars and Okonomiyaki places and others we couldn't recognise. Finally, back to our room to prepare for next day, tidy up and sleep. (zzzzZZZZZ)

23 May Well, luck wasn't on our side as it decided to rain, yes rain 'all day' for our day trip to Hiroshima Park & Peace Memorial – Miyajima Island ('**torii**' gate)

First up, meet at the Mermaid Bakery to have breakfast, warmed cinnamon bun (soo good) and coffee, then head towards JR Bus to visit the A-bomb dome, very much near the hypocenter of where the Nuclear bomb was dropped (Wednesday August 6th 1945 at 8.15am).

The A-bomb dome was originally built as an Exhibition Hall and still remains today in memory of the horrific events that led to thousands of deaths for many years after due to Radioactive fallout etc. Kiyone also explained and got quite emotional when talking about the fact many many bodies of the people from the moment of the attack are still in the adjacent river, along with thousands of children who were visiting the area having a day off school. Only metres' away along the river we stopped at a Memorial built and dedicated for the children killed and for us to pay our respect.

We then continued onto the memorial site and statue for the young girl who died from Leukemia where local people from all over Hiroshima made folded 'Cranes'. It was believed if they made and presented 1,000 paper cranes (Hope & Healing) '**Sambazuru**', to help give her strength to survive, but unfortunately, she did die. Earlier the tour group made cranes in the Hotel as a learning experience, and in her own time Kiyone made them all into a beautiful hanging design and out of respect and tradition they were presented and placed at the site.

Across the way we then walked into Hiroshima Peace memorial Park, where on 1st August 1964 in hope of a world without nuclear weapons, the flame (Flame of Peace) will continue to burn until nuclear weapons are abolished worldwide.

The pedestal was designed in the image of two hands pressed together with the palms facing the sky. (Let's hope its extinguished soon).

Next was a visit to the Hiroshima Memorial Hall (Museum) where the group spent 1hr looking through to experience the history, reasons and devastation of the event.

It was somber, sad and enlightening experience, yet felt very indifferent.....Met in Café, again coffee to move on to catch bus towards the Ferry for Miyajima Island. As a group we caught the Ferry (10 min ride) over to Miyajima Island to visit the Itsukushima Shrine, the floating 'torii' gate.

Itsukushima, also known as Miyajima, is a small island in Hiroshima Bay, western Japan. It is known for its forests and ancient temples. Just offshore, the giant, orange Great Torii Gate is partially submerged at high tide. It marks the entrance to the Itsukushima Shrine, which was first built in the 12th century.

It was a rainy day, very wet under foot, not the best day for clear photos and blue sky, however the mist was effective in the foothills and over the Temple.

The timing for the day was for high tide as organised by Kiyone so we could see the gate floating, as at low tide you can actually walk to the gate. Photos were had and taken by all. We then continued to the Temple and decided not to enter, soo many people and 100's students, also with no guide to explain we said 'No'. I however climbed the steps solo to see the Temple and Pagoda while the others remain at ground level....(lazy)

We all then strolled the local street mall shops, coffee and cake again (of course). Nicola tried some local oysters while we searched for lightweight rain coats. Ice-cream was needed by then on the way back to ferry. We then deciphered the train system to get back to Hiroshima Station and the Hotel, to dry off, do washing and later find a dinner location.

Well, all went well apart from the washing expedition, by the time Karen, Nicola and I got to the local laundromats, we only had until 6pm to do washing and drying.

As a matter of urgency the washing was taken out before spin cycle finished and the tumble dryers were next to useless, so wet smelly clothes were the outcome. So off we head back to Hotel to try to hand dry without vain so we walked the streets looking for a dinner choice. We decided on the Beer & Restaurant place next to a nice Sashimi/Shushi place and had Ribs, Beer, garlic bread and crumbed prawns were the order of the day. Belly full, back to Hotel for sleep, tidy and pack ready for early morning departure on Bullet train headed for Kyoto via Osaka.

24 May Up early to head to Train Station by 7.45am, again meeting point to have breakfast and stand in-line to ensure seat on Bullet train (non-reserved carriage). After arriving back in Osaka caught another train to Kyoto and then another 2 JR trains to get to Hotel (4 trains). Walked to Hotel, again with all luggage to the B-Kyoto-Sanjo. Unable to check-in until 3pm, too early so off walking to site-see.

First stop was along the river headed towards city streets and main local shopping Mall/Plaza. Stopped off and had dumplings for morning snack before booking in to watch a Season-Only floorshow/musical of Kimono people doing play, adaption to Shakespeare. Not really impressed, but not quite as bad as Water Puppet show in Hanoi. Move seats and got told off as they were reserved seating (no-one in them, lol).

Walked the tight, small lanes which had tiny bars and eateries onward to catch subway to Nijo Castle. Very impressed with the Nijo Castle, the history and story surrounding the Shogun and how their daily lives were conducted etc.

The gorgeous style of this castle was intended as a demonstration of Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616)'s prestige and was the residence of the Tokugawa shoguns in Kyoto, who had been ruling Japan for over 260 years from 1603 to 1868.

And it remains an eloquent testimony to their power. The wide moat, massive stone walls, and heavy yet elaborate gates are still impressive, and were the only fortifications the inhabitants felt necessary, so firm was their grip on power. The grounds are large and contain several lovely gardens as well as groves of plum and cherry trees. The palace building itself is imposing, yet upon closer examination, is rich in decorative detail.

Inside the palace are several masterpieces of Japanese art, most notably the painted screens of the main chamber. In this room the shoguns met the daimyo (high-ranking warlord-administrators) who sought an audience.

The screens were painted by artists of the Kano school and employ rich colours and large amounts of gilt to depict flowers, trees, birds and tigers. 'They were meant to impress'. Also the most intriguing factor in the palace are the famous "nightingale floors," which were designed to squeak when stepped on and thus alert guards to any intruders.

After, as we ventured back to Hotel we passed a quaint corner store that sold genuine and replica Samurai Swords, ninja stars and similar paraphernalia, very nice. Back to Hotel where Karen stayed behind and re-did the damp-smelly laundry with Nicola.

Karen needed some down time and stayed in Hotel room to re-charge etc while Brian, Nicola and I ventured out with group to the Geisha Streets to site-see. After as a group of 8 we experienced a local diner which served Japanese Pasta with Kiyone. The meals were adequate for Japanese Pasta in comparison with Italian Pasta, however Brian's meal had heaps of Coriander, lol, not impressed (Coriander Hater).

Returned to Hotel to set in for the night, let myself in lobby and up to room, knock, knock, knock (Very curious).

Hahahaha, Karen very slow to answer door as she had fallen asleep after some down time, warm shower and relaxing.

25 May Today we head out to 3 very exciting areas of interest, after breakfast we again hit the train stations for a trip out to see the Fushimi Inari Shrine – ‘torii’ gates. On arrival we first stopped at a monument of a bronze fox with an object in its mouth, then Kiyoe explained the history and story behind the monument, the purpose of the fox and the torii gates. We then walked to the ‘torii’ gates along a tree lined avenue entering a large open courtyard area, cleansing station, Shrine and other ornate buildings.

So once inside we walked the paths of the 5,000 plus gates leading up and through densely vegetated rainforest like hillside, up to a series of lookouts and smaller shrine and praying areas. The enormous number of tourists and local people made it next to impossible to get photos of rows of gates without people, luckily with much cooperation and politeness from everyone, some people absent photos were achieved, exciting. (refer to Blog)

Next as a group we walked to have lunch, and the awesome 4some found a Café for a local tandoori chicken and Japanese style salad lunch special, very nice lunch.

We then met at the lane entrance to walk through the Sagano Bamboo Forest past the local eatery and trading stores. Again, heavily crowded with tourists.

The towering green stalks of the famously versatile plant sway in the wind, creaking eerily they collide and twist, leaves rustling. The sun filters through the densely packed grove, projecting thin slashes of light onto the dozens of camera-clutching tourists shuffling down the wide trail that cuts through the middle of the forest as they awkwardly angle their shots.

A peaceful walk along the pathways up and through the Bamboo to the top breezeway, and then back down through some laneways past local homes and yards, very pleasant walk.

The group then decided to head back to the Hotel, however our group of 4some decided to venture onwards by local buses to the Golden Pavilion. Kinkakuji Temple's Golden Pavilion is probably Kyoto's most famous sight. Covered in glittering gold leaf, the pavilion dazzles admirers as it shimmers in the sunlight over its mirroring pond. Both the temple and its delightful Zen stroll garden are a must visit location.

Adventure plus was had on the local buses, interchange and it didn't stop there. We then had to get home, it was like a scene from 'The Amazing Race', trying to get directions, language issues, going this way, walking that way and each person having a separate idea....So I found a young male I assumed could speak English, a German tourist who helped and advised to catch the No 52 bus. Well that went well, NOT, bus went wrong way, went 2 stops and driver told us to get off, as it was the last stop (end of the line).

We then crossed the road to what looked like a bus interchange in front of a College, and somehow worked out what bus to catch.

Boarded and tried to follow direction on Me. Maps and then finally a safety point finally surfaced, the Nijo Shrine, so off the bus to catch the JR line back to Hotel.

Worked out really well for me as I said to Karen earlier that I really wished I bought a Ninja star as a souvenir from the shop we passed after our visit to the Nijo Castle the day before. Winner winner, bought 1 style of Ninja Star, happy boy....

Back to Hotel to rest for around 1 hour or so, freshen up and then head out as Nicola wanted to go back to the Kyoto Station to see the light show on the steps, very entertaining and colorful. The Kyoto Station Building is the famed "big stairs", with 171 steps studded with about 15,000 LEDs that generate amazing light shows created for the season of your stay.

Walked around and saw a light/water fountain show in front of Station but had to wait for next showing. So, we walked across the road for coffee/ice cream and then back to watch the water show, was a letdown, however...opportunity.

26 May Big day of travel to leave Kyoto to head to Hakone, walked and struggled with luggage over a series of 4 trains, including Shinkansen (bullet train) to get to Hakone. Arrived at Hotel which was again a very traditional Japanese style lodgings (700mts ^ S.L.) like the Monk Monastery. Gorgeous traditional rooms, with a welcome snack of green tea, bean paste cake and accompaniments - communal baths and very traditional Japanese Dinner and breakfast.

Headed to Brian & Nicola's room and shared an ice-cold beer from Mini Bar fridge. Shortly after that it was time to move on and continue the tour we caught a local train, a zig-zag train that weaved its way up the mountains switching lines and different sections to get to the top. Along the way there were many stops for people to alight where they lived or worked in smaller style towns. After the zig-zag train we then went to a Cable-Car (rope bridge) to climb up a part of the existing volcanic hillside that still even today is very active. The hillside, which looks very similar to a quarry is emitting natural steam and a very strong (rotten egg) Sulphur smelling gas, even turning the hillside yellow.

We stayed there at a lookout for around 1hour, through the shops tourist features (Black Egg).

Kiyoe found us and handed out a black shelled hard-boiled egg for us to eat/try and was really nice. Unfortunately, due to the weather, cloudy/misty day we were unable to see Mt Fuji at all and should have been able to, as we couldn't have gone to a much better area of Japan to see her, but alas she eluded us.

Caught a local bus to the 5 lakes to have a Boat ride from one end of the lake to the other, again another perfect spot for that Photo opportunity for Mt Fuji, again 'not today'.

For me quite disappointed and feeling let down, really wanted to see and get that Postcard photo. So, off to another bus-ride back to the Hotel, and I then decided to try the traditional Onsen (hot baths) and was required to cover tattoo and be naked, quite the experience, 'when in Rome'. Well, got the experience I was after, not knowing what to do and the tradition felt out of place, but oh well.

The man in the baths area gave me quite a surprised and aghast look at my shoulder tattoo and signed to me in hand gestures to use the tiny towel and cover up.

He then was quick to gesture to me, take off my underpants, then I can go in.

Oh well, kept on going and followed the tradition and went 'Full Monty' straight into a spa style area of bath, then tried a still bath with small fountain/waterfall effect. Stayed for a few minutes and then hit the showers sitting on stool/bucket. So back to our room to dress in my Yukata and found it hard to cool down from the hot baths, so decided to indulge again in a cold beer.

Karen and I then made our way to dinner after dressing in our traditional Kimono and Yukatas for a very traditional dinner.

Quite surprisingly dinner was quite good with variety of foods and accompaniments, both of us tried everything, again even Tofu, and I especially liked the Sashimi.

After dinner returned to room and found our Futons were laid out for the night. So, again relax briefly and semi-pack for departure in the morning, and believe it not, had a great night's sleep.

27 May Again, breakfast was traditional but did not dress traditionally, and breakfast was certainly different and very little was eaten, however did try most things. After we decided to re-route our tour for the group to revisit the Lake to capture a sight of Mt Fuji as I was determined to see her if possible, still feeling letdown. However, that was dashed very quickly, again very shy and not visible, so we re-joined the tour. Caught trains back to Kyoto to catch the Shinkansen (bullet train) to Tokyo, our last destination of the tour.

Once arrived we then transferred to local Metro train to Ikebukuro to leave luggage at Hotel.

As a group we then walked back to catch Metro train to walk and experience the famous Shibuya Crossing. Upon arrival first, we looked at the Statue of Hachiko, the faithful dog who sits comfortably in the middle of circular benches, very sad story surrounding the love and dedication for his owner.

We all then walked across the infamous crossing with the crowds, especially crowded being a weekend, so photo's galore and selfies going off everywhere. Once over the crossing Kiyoe took us up to Starbucks to catch an overhead view for a video and photo opportunity to see the crossing from above. After we walked back across the crossing and headed by train to Shinjuku Prefecture to visit and experience Takeshita Street.

The focal point of Harajuku's teenage culture is 'Takeshita Dori' (Takeshita Street) and its side streets, which are lined by many trendy shops, fashion boutiques, used clothes stores, crepe stands and fast food outlets geared towards the fashion and trend conscious teens.

Very very crowded and young girls dressed in strange and colorful clothing along with a few Cat Cafes, weird.

Stayed for a short time, but soo crowed and not too much of interest really for us as a group but had to be seen and experienced. Most of the group becoming tired and weary, so back to Hotel for a quick nap, rest and recharge before heading out for a group farewell dinner in Kabuki to have Sukiyaki.

Sukiyaki is a Japanese dish that is prepared and served in the 'nabemono' style. It consists of meat which is slowly cooked or simmered at the table, alongside vegetables and other ingredients in a mix of Sweet soy sauce and water. So, the format of the meal is, you have 1 hour to eat as much as you like of beef or pork and cook it yourself along with vegetables and rice – very very nice meal and experience.

After the dinner some of the group returned to the Hotel, however most of us went together to experience the sights and sounds of the Robot Restaurant. Well, wow wow wow, what an awesome, energetic and entertaining night, Fantastic. Would sooo recommend this to everyone to see while in Tokyo. It was then around 11.30pm, so after a big day of travel, walking, eating etc we headed off back to Hotel to shower, sleep and pack for departure in the morning.

28 May Up for breakfast at reasonable time, and then returned to Hotel to say our goodbyes to most of the tour group and exchanged some FB details etc.

It was onward from here for the 4 of us to head to Suidobashi, the B Hotel and the Tokyo Dome Hotel respectively. Once to our Hotels we again met back at the corner 7/11 to head straight out to Asakusa to visit the Sensoji Temple, Nakamise Street mall, Denboin-dori street.

Asakusa Sensoji Temple is the oldest and most visited temple in Tokyo and is known to bring good luck, happiness, good relationships, and make all wishes come true!

If you have any dreams or goals you wish to achieve, Asakusa Sensoji Temple is the very place you want to go!

It is also the oldest and most visited temple around Tokyo. The origin of Asakusa Sensoji Temple dates way back to the 6th century, when in 628 the Hinokuma brothers were fishing at a river nearby and happened to fish a Buddha statue.

The brothers brought the Buddha statue home, rebuilt their home into a temple, and started a temple which later came to be known as Asakusa Sensoji Temple.

Asakusa Sensoji Temple has its own traditional Japanese-like atmosphere and you will find yourself time traveling to the ancient Japanese era, the second you set a foot into the temple's property, but the Asakusa Sensoji Temple is not just a normal shrine. It has a long path called "Nakamise-dori (Japanese: 仲見世通り *Nakamisedori*), a path jam packed with souvenir stores all along the way to the main hall.

You can find anything here: Kimonos, chopsticks, fans, Japanese confectionary, keychains, T-shirts, you name it.

As you approach the front of the main hall of the temple, you will see many people covering themselves with smoke.

The smoke they are covering themselves with, is believed to make the part they covered with smoke better. Therefore, many people pat smoke on their head in order to make themselves smarter.

Very much enjoyed Nakamise Street mall that leads toward the Sensoji Temple. At the Temple we witnessed a Wedding and bought a Blessing for Jason's new home. Would highly recommend visiting here for the buzz of the mall and the Temple, along with the Asakusa area in general.

We had some spare time, so it was decided to take a river boat tour along the river on a return trip, so as to return to visit and go up the Tokyo Skytree Tower for sights from the observation level at 354 mt in an elevator that ascended at over 300 feet per second. The views over Tokyo were very impressive and would be quite a sight at night with lights.

The Skytree was built as a television broadcasting tower and a predominate landmark of Tokyo. It is the centrepiece of the Tokyo Skytree Town in the Sumida City Ward, only a short train ride away from the Sensoji Temple in Asakusa. With a height of 634 meters (634 can be read as "Musashi", a historic name of the Tokyo Region), it is the tallest structure in Japan and the second tallest in the world at the time of its completion.

At its base it is a large multi-level shopping complex and an Aquarium located at its base. Dinner was had at McDonalds on level 2F to wait until it became dark to photograph the Tower. So, after many night photos of the light display on the exterior of the tower we ventured back to Hotel, 2 train rides.

29 May Well today is dedicated to a Boys Day out – selfish maybe but had to be done. Prior to leaving for Japan, my son Jason highly recommended both Karen and I do a Mario Kart drive through and around the streets of Tokyo.

An experience only in Tokyo something that he would be very jealous that we get to do before him. Karen was very unsure and didn't want to do it, and when talking to Brian & Nicola about it earlier during the trip, Brian told me he very much wanted to do it as well. I then made arrangements to change my day so he could join me, which gave Karen a girl's day out with Nicola.

We caught an Uber to Tokyo Bay BBQ where we paid and got dressed in our respective costumes, Mario & Spiderman, hilarious and so much fun already. We were joined by another 6 people, mainly Aussies and no-one doubled up on costume theme. It was then for a pre-cursory lesson on the rules and operation of the cart, then off we go for a 3 tour of the streets of Tokyo.

We took the long tour, leaving from Tokyo Bay BBQ – Rainbow Bridge – Tokyo Tower – Shibuya Crossing – Tokyo Bridge – Tokyo Bay BBQ. The carts were great and easy to drive, comfortable with plenty of leg room. They were a typical cart, very low to the ground and quite a bumpy ride...awesome experience driving on the public streets alongside normal traffic but felt very safe. Following the lead driver, we drove the streets, stopping at Traffic Lights and turning with indicators to weave and drive the streets. First the long drive over the Rainbow Bridge, sadly an underpass section, not on top and boy did we pick up some speed, at least 70kph easy, and along the road there are raised sections of striping, which makes for a very bumpy ride. It was then in and around the streets past the Tokyo Tower, Parklands and high-rise buildings making our way into built up areas of like business district and shopping. Then it was upon us, Shibuya Crossing however it was much quieter and not as packed with people as hoped, but enough to grab attention, smiles, waves, photos and video of us as we were stationary at the Traffic Lights.

We then continued through the Crossing and went through the surrounding streets to return again to the Crossing. After we then made our way to Tokyo Bridge and into a Highrise carpark, racing up and around to the third level. This was where we got to have a break, toilet and drink stop.

We then caught the lift to the top level and came out onto a Plaza area out to a tourist location near another large Bridge and a mock Statue of Liberty for a group photo, public and friends' photos.

After that we drove back again over the Rainbow Bridge where I easily got the cart to just over 75 kph, then through the streets again to head back to the Start, Tokyo Bay BBQ.

'Boys and their Toys' is all I can say and is all that is needed to be said. Again, please can we do it again....but sadly, NO, caught an Uber back to our Hotels to meet up with Karen & Nicola to change, refresh and get ready for a Night of Japanese Baseball at the Tokyo Dome.

Tokyo Dome City, to meet at Gate 23 at 5.00pm. While waiting for Brian & Nicola Karen & I watched all the people, the hustle and bustle, the air of excitement was intense and couldn't wait to enter and experience the atmosphere of the game. As we lined up with our tickets the Stadium staff were handing out Giants Baseball Guernseys' to everyone, plus a fan and some souvenir material, exciting. We then tried to decipher where to go, but tickets were in Japanese, so I tried to ask Stadium Staff for directions and we finally made our way to reserved seating, and what seating – very very happy with location and view of the ground, players and respective Team Fan-Clubs.

So, the teams playing were the Yomiuri Giants V's the Hokkaido Nippon-Ham Fighters, and as we were in Tokyo and wearing home team guernseys, we were supporting the Giants.

Wow, what an energetic, eclectic and loud atmosphere the Japanese crowds exude, especially the Team Supporter Clubs. The food and drink sales girls as well were very entertaining in their energy, smiles and array of products on sale, Beer on Tap, Whisky and Soda served like being in a Bar, Popcorn, Ice-creams and other products we couldn't recognise.

So, from memory I think the first Home-run was hit by the opposition which I cheered for and clapped, and Karen quickly reminded me I was cheering for the wrong team – bit silly cheering and clapping for a home-run wearing the home team top.

The game continued with the score not in our favour, but more runs, chanting and home runs hit, but alas again Karen & I failed to see a home team win.

After the game was finished we all went back to The Tokyo Dome Hotel with Brian & Nicola to have coffee and snack. And it was here sadly that we as a holiday 4some had to part ways and go our separate ways for the remainder of the trip...Sad times as we shared so many great memories, laughs and special moments. Karen & I moved to Shinbashi where Brian & Nicola hired a car and drove to Nagano.

30 May After a bit of a lay-in Karen & I found a local Café for breakfast, then onward by train to Shinjuku are to visit and experience the Meiji Jingu Shrine. After getting off train, walked the wrong way, checked Me. Maps and walked back to Information Office near Takeshita Street. This was actually very helpful in directions, maps and we bought a PASMO pass for the train network, giving 3 days on the Metro and Toei Lines, great value.

Walked to main intersection, across the bridge and found the Torii gate entrance to the Shrine.

We continued and walked along the wide and very long walkway flanked by beautiful gardens/trees all the way to the Shrine and courtyard.

Found that the Shrines, like many Temples in other Countries are very similar in nature, however we took the opportunity to again buy some traditional 'omamori' blessing amulets/charms. This time some for Matthew to help with his learning and studies, and 1 for ourselves for Wealth & Happiness.

Karen also took the time to write a message of good fortune and her wishes on a traditional Wishing paper, give small donation and placed into the wishing table.

Just after that out the corner of my eye I saw a small parade of people traditionally dressed and called out to Karen, perfect timing to witness a Wedding walk with Priest, Bride & Groom, Parents' and special guests. There was also another couple dressed traditionally having photos' taken, and Karen deliberately stood in the distant background trying to photo bomb them, lol.

After leaving the Shrine, we walked back to the entrance and walked along Otamendi Street, a high end boutique street, Amani, LV, Chanel and so on and so on.. We did go into a shop called Awesome Shop, was actually average.

But we did find the Bazaar shop and bought a few little souvenirs, then located Cat lane and a very very popular Lobster Café 'Lukes Lobster' where people line up constantly to buy a small baguette style roll with either Lobster or Crab and assorted fillings, must be good. After another full-on day we made our way back to Hotel using our newly purchased PASMO pass and I rested and did some journal while Karen did some laundry in the Hotel Laundrette.

31 May Today after another restful lay in we decided to make our way to visit the Imperial Palace and Gardens by train, and again took on the challenge to navigate and ask locals for directions. Finally, we actually found a male sitting eating lunch, and surprise surprise he was an Aussie from Melbourne.

Finally, we found the Palace and Gardens, however it was all for nothing as there is NO ENTRY to the Palace, and you need your Passport to join the free tour on the Gardens.

So, for Karen & I it was a disappointing venture. The reason you can't tour the Palace, is that we believe it is still occupied by the Emperor of Japan.

So onward it was, a short walk away we went to look at and walk through the Hibiya Park, and its History tells us it was the grounds of feudal lords during the shogunate and became a military parade ground during the early years of Japan's modernization in the late 19th century. It was then made a public park in 1903.

Feeling slightly deflated about the days itinerary, we decided to catch many more trains and made our way to Ueno Ameoyko market area. After the war, candy (ame) were a luxury item, and they could be found in this area because it flourished as a black market.

It became known as Ame-shi, or Ame City. Now there are more than 400 stores all linked together. It gets especially crowded at the end of the year when people do their shopping for the New Year's meal there. The scenery of the assertive shopkeepers and the haggling customers is a famous sight.

The stalls were a mixed bag of fish mongers, shoes stores, clothing, jewellery and so on, with minimal Knick knack souvenir style shops.

We did find a few and Karen bought a gift for her girlfriend, a nice small Japanese style purse.

Wanting more, we decided to catch the train back to Asakusa District to walk the market stalls of 'Nakamise-dori'.

Here we found what we were after, the crowds, the stalls, the feel and energy we crave from a holiday. Shopping, crowds and diversity gives us a sense of living and excitement, and finding local items to buy, such chopsticks, fridge magnets, key-rings etc etc and as suspected we were successful and of course more than we really needed.

Not done with yet, I dragged Karen on the train once again to go to and experience Akihabara District, which is infamous as the headquarters of everything manga, anime and games, a colorful paradise for every geek and otaku! Just like popular areas like Shinjuku and Shibuya, it is a must-visit for every tourist visiting and experience Japan. One of the most interesting sights we saw were the girls dressed in uniquely different clothing, make-up and colored contacts, trying to spruik customers into the shops, cafes and restaurants.

The most bazar were the two girls who had live Owl's on their arms, advertising Owl Bars where you can share a drink in a Bar with live Owls around you.

This area is by no means just a highlight for otaku, however. Even if manga and anime isn't your thing, the unique atmosphere won't fail to amaze you. It is a bit like stepping into an unknown world that waits to be explored!

Bugged and feet aching, we decided to call it a day and head home to rest and sleep, basically to re-charge very flat energy levels.

1 June This was my last reasonable change to actually experience and see Mt Fuji, hoping for a clear day, and yes, the sky was clear and the weather format was looking promising.

So off we go again and head to the Metropolitan Government Building, known simply as "Tocho" in Japanese, is the centre of government for the 23 wards of Tokyo. As well as serving as a giant city hall, the building offers amazing views of the capital from its 45th-floor observation decks.

On a clear day you can see as far as Yokohama in one direction, Chiba in another and, way out west, Mount Fuji. It is no exaggeration to say that you haven't really seen Tokyo if you haven't seen it from here. The full extent of Tokyo's urban sprawl can only be appreciated from up high.

The observation decks are in both north and south towers of the main building and offer slightly different views, but to my disappointment the skies were not so clear towards Mt Fuji, even though I could catch a glimpse of her, not quite to the image I was after, but the best we could muster.

Decided to go somewhere locally and have a coffee break and go back in hope the sky's cleared. Funny by chance moment while having coffee, was watching the office works shuttle in and out, in and out in varying numbers to the dedicated 'Smoking Area', people watching sport at its best.

So what then, Karen decides to go out and joining the activity and become her environment, hilarious actually and loved her spontaneity. After we went back up the North Tower to check out the view, would you believe, totally worse and no view what so ever.

So back down the lift to the second floor to access the Exit, and we walk past a Tokyo 2020 Olympics exhibition displaying the original Olympic Opening Flag presented to Tokyo at the closing ceremony from Rio.

Was quite awesome looking around the displays, along with the Paralympic Flag and other information boards etc showing the history of the Olympics, what a by chance opportunity.

Back to the train network to head home for a power afternoon nap, which was shortly interrupted to head out again to walk around the Hamarikyū Gardens, these gardens are traditional Japanese style gardens with about 250,000m² that was created in 1654 in Tokyo.

It was used as one of the generals (Shogun 将軍) of the Edo period in Japan at that time as a part of his own palace. Hamarikyū Gardens represents a typical Japanese style gardening design (Kaiyu Teien style 回遊庭園) that had been very popular among the powerful feudal lords (Daimyo 大名) since the 14th century.

After a nice relaxed walk and visiting the various parts of the gardens it was time to head back as this was our last day before departing and leaving Japan the next day.

After the train ride we stayed in the main area of Shinbashi near the Train Station and found a BBQ Curry house and decided to eat there, well what a great decision.

Firstly, when Karen's meal was served I didn't notice, but it was served with a Shovel, yes, a shovel – so so fitting for Karen as it's a running joke as I am always saying to Karen she needs a shovel when eating, but only when really hungry lol.

We had a chicken and beef meal and a dared to have a cheese topped curry side order with local veggies, wow, wow and wow, what a great final departing meal with a cold beer.

After we went back to Hotel reasonably early to do a final tidy, pack and prepare for the looong haul home to Australia, e.g.

Train (last of approx. 40-50), Express Bus to Narita Airport, Flight from Tokyo to Singapore and finally flight from Singapore to Adelaide, roughly 25hrs of travel.

2 June Wake up, reasonable sleep in, tidy and final check of room for anything left behind – all good. So off we head, and after getting lost from the first train, we walked, got lost, asked for direction from 3 people who told 'No English' but were able to give us some directions in English. By the time we even got to the Bus Interchange we had knocked over 3,000 steps.

Found Express Narita Bus at Stop 7, boarded and relaxed for next 1 hour for transfer to airport, Terminal 1, waited for around 25 minutes before the check in counters opened and went for a coffee at Tully's. The best coffee Karen and I had the entire trip were from Tully's, also footnote, this is where we bought Karen her Tote Bag, score.

Boarded plane after a reasonable wait, and onward to Singapore, off to the Gold KrisFlyer Lounge for some dinner, rest and drinks before our overnight flight home to Adelaide.

Finally, THANKYOU THANKYOU Japan for your awesome hospitality, manners, politeness, cleanliness and respect.

I could go one, please consider going to Japan, and even if it's on your 'To Do List' bump it u your list and do it sooner, you won't regret it.

'Japan is truly unique and if you want to experience something different I'd recommend spending at least three to four weeks traveling through Japan, talking to local people as much as you can (the Japanese are very friendly and often speak good English) and really experience the Japanese culture to its fullest.'

Finally, thanks to our Travel Buddies, Brian & Nicola for a worry free, friendly and memorable trip, miss you both already.



Special Shout-Out to Karen for always being with me to share and experience our travels and amazing life together.



3 June 7.30am, finally arrived home to Adelaide Airport, called for an Uber to head home to unpack, wash and put all our travel accessories and memories again until next time – next time at this stage is 'Unknown' a mystery for '**Rivetting Moments**'.