

FROM SAPPORO TO OKINAWA ... JAPAN 2025



This trip mostly came about thanks to a disability insurance policy I've had ever since I started teaching at Garrigan. If there are no claims filed in a ten-year period, the policy refunds most of the premiums that have been paid. In summer of 2024 I got a check for nearly \$5,000. In the past when I've gotten those checks, they've helped keep me going at times when expenses were particularly tight. This time, though, I was mostly caught up with things, and I figured the windfall would allow me to splurge on a trip somewhere overseas. I considered a wide variety of destinations. In fact, I nearly booked tickets that would take me to Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Great Britain. I also looked at taking the Canadian train from Toronto to Vancouver, and at destinations as diverse as Buenos Aires, Cape Town, and Sydney.

Japan was kind of an afterthought in that planning process. Indeed, my whole life I've never really thought about going to Asia. I had friends in college who were fascinated by Oriental culture, but that was never something that really caught my fancy. The pictures I've seen from Japan show crowded cities with all the charm of the Soviet Union or else so-called "natural" areas that are so carefully manicured they look like it would be illegal to set foot in. It's also a completely foreign society, with a language not remotely like any I speak and a culture quite alien to my own.

As I did a bit more research, though, and it seemed that Japan might be both interesting and affordable. Helped by the fact that the yen was at near historic lows, traveling to Japan (particularly on a Japanese airline) cost roughly the same as flying to Europe. I was also able to find hotels in Japan for quite a bit less than they'd be either in Europe or America. Domestic transportation is not subsidized in Japan, but it's not absurdly expensive either, and food (both in restaurants and supermarkets) is quite a bit cheaper than it is back home. While the U.S. dollar would start tanking after President Trump announced his stupid tariffs (falling from almost 170 yen to 140), the cost was still quite reasonable. It would add up to more than the insurance check, but the amount I spent out of pocket really wasn't all that much. The trip would also become a strange combination of luxury and budget.

SATURDAY, JULY 14 ALGONA, IOWA TO PRINCETON, ILLINOIS

I was up right at 6:00 this morning, and I left home to start my trip right at 6:45. It had rained very heavily overnight, and as I made my way up the hill by my house it occurred to me that the area by Veterans Park at the north edge of town might be flooded. I chose to take the long way out to highway 18. That turned out to be prudent, because they had indeed blocked off the route I'd otherwise have taken.

I headed eastward over to Garner, where I stopped to pick up breakfast at Hardee's. It would be fascinating to know just how many times I've had a fast food breakfast at the start of a trip. This one has to be close to the most expensive I've ever gotten, though. Inflation has increased prices everywhere, but they've truly skyrocketed at fast food. Once tax was added, my total came to eleven bucks—for stuff that a few years ago would have been under five. That said, I will say the biscuits at Hardee's are tender and buttery, easily some of the best biscuits I've had anywhere.

I hit every single stop light in Garner, Ventura, and Clear Lake, but eventually I made it over to I-35. They're doing construction on the interstate at the minute, and I was very thankful there was a break in traffic just when I wanted to get on.

I followed Avenue of the Saints southeastward, making my next stop at the Kwik Star in Janesville. I used to stop there quite frequently, particularly when I'd go down to my Aunt Alaire's place in Coralville. They've rebuilt the interchange by it with a double roundabout, and that makes it harder to access these days. I did need to use the restroom, though, and it made for a nice break.

As I drove through Cedar Falls I thought of James White, a student I taught in the '90s who became a friend after he graduated. He and his family live nearby, and he owns an advertising company in the area. It had been a few years since I'd heard from James, but out of nowhere he texted me just yesterday. He wanted me to know that he'd be in Algona next week and was trying to make arrangements to get together. Unfortunately his return to town would coincide with my vacation, so our communication would be only by text. Hopefully we can get together again before too much more time passes.

I turned onto U.S. 20 at Cedar Falls and headed east from there. I've always thought highway 20 made for a very dull drive, and I was glad I had a variety of CDs to keep me alert today. The drive was uneventful, and I reached the nice bypass at the west edge of Dubuque quicker than I expected to.

The most interesting thing on my drive was seeing at least two dozen coach buses heading west from Dubuque to Waterloo. Later, when I saw a number of RVs with bicycles attached to them, it occurred to me that the buses might have been associated with RAGBRAI, which starts tomorrow. I'd think it would be extremely expensive to charter a bus for a week (it's pricey enough when we get a bus to take the team to state football), but perhaps some people (especially those in charge of the event) did.

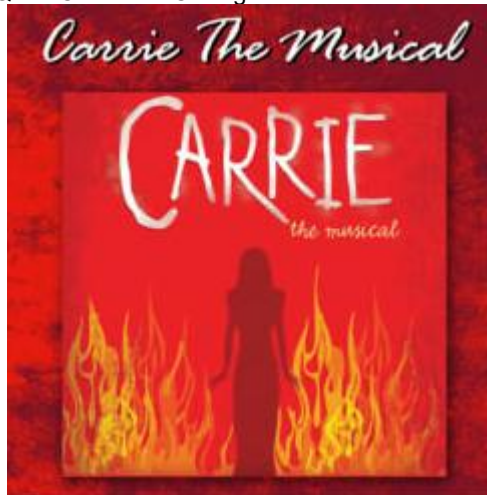
I headed south on U.S. 61 and made my main stop of the day at my brother's house in Maquoketa. I had a nice visit with John and Janet, and they treated me to a delicious lunch of grilled marinated chicken thighs, corn muffins, and a corn and bean salad. I think the last time I'd seen J & J was last Thanksgiving, and it was very nice to get caught up again.

We visited for about five hours. I left around 4:15 and headed down to the Quad Cities. I'd noticed earlier that Google Maps had recommended I take I-74 through the area, and I should have followed that advice. Instead I followed I-80, which had rather nasty construction in both Iowa and Illinois. I did make it through the mess, but it probably would have been faster to follow I-74.

My ultimate destination was Exit 56, which leads to Princeton, Illinois. I've stayed in Princeton at the beginning or end of trips numerous times before, most often at a clean but otherwise not particularly nice Econolodge. Tonight I'd made a reservation at a brand new Comfort Inn that's right next to the exit at the north end of Princeton. The place opened for business just over a week ago, replacing a truly hideous Days Inn that used to be on the same site. While they appear to have some growing pains (it took forever to check in, there's still construction dust in some places, and there were several rooms with checklists on their doors showing things that still needed to be done before they could be used), it seems to be a very pleasant hotel. Assuming the prices remain reasonable, I'll likely stay there again on future trips that take me through Princeton.

I headed across the parking lot to a Wendy's, where I picked up a taco salad. Service is often rather slow at Wendy's, but this time I got the salad almost instantly. I munched on it as I wrote the first installment of this journal.

Shortly after 7pm I made my way to downtown Princeton, where I'd bought a ticket to see a show at the Festiva 56 Summer Theatre. Now in its 23rd season, Festival 56 (which is named after the Princeton exit on I-80) has a creative team that includes college students from all over the country, local talent, and visiting actors and technicians with various professional theatres (particularly those in Chicago and Minneapolis). They do about five shows each summer and market their season both in the immediate area and in the Quad Cities and Chicagoland.



This summer's shows include *Hairspray*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Cabaret*, and *The Little Mermaid*. My ticket, however, was for none of those well-known shows. Instead I'd be seeing *Carrie: The Musical*, a show based on the Stephen King novel and horror film of the same name. While visiting with John and Janet, we'd pondered just how the horror genre would fare as a musical, and the answer is really not well. The cast did all right, but honestly it's just not a good show. Rather generic showtune melodies are paired with downright stupid lyrics and a rather contrived plot. After seeing it I read the Wikipedia article on the play and found that it closed on Broadway after just five performances. This was actually the sixth performance in Princeton. There were only about fifty in the audience, though (in a theatre that seats 120), and my sense was that several of them were friends and family of cast members.

The acting was decent, and the singing and choreography were all right. There was essentially no set at all, though. School desks were moved about in various ways in a rather confusing attempt to convey several different settings. The costuming was also kind of weird. It made sense that the classroom scenes were done in the street clothes students might wear, but they wore those same clothes for gym class. What's more in one of the songs the men sang about dressing up for prom, but the those "dress-up" clothes were conveyed by putting jackets without ties over their school clothes and jeans.

The movie *Carrie* was known for its special effects, with the central character having telekinetic powers. Apparently the original Broadway production also featured special effects, but that really wasn't the case in Princeton. They used a strobe light to imply something supernatural was happening, but that was it.

I'll whine about one other thing before finishing my review of the play. Festival 56 performs in a very intimate theatre, one where you can see the actors close up. For some reason, though, they insist on giving all the actors headset mikes that look ridiculous taped to their chins. It's a small enough room that the actors wouldn't really even need to project much to be easily heard. The mikes don't add anything to the sound, but they do detract from the visual effect. It just seems silly to use them.

I stopped on the way back to the hotel to buy gas at the Princeton Casey's. The price was \$2.93⁹ a gallon. While that's 19¢ more than it is in Algona, it was actually less than what I saw most places in eastern Iowa.

SUNDAY, JULY 20

PRINCETON, ILLINOIS TO CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

I'd set my alarm for 6:45 this morning and was up shortly before it went off. I noticed a couple of other issues that the hotel needs to iron out before they're really ready for "prime time". I had to remove the protective film from the TV screen, together with its "energy star" rating, and there was also a water guard on the shower door that had not been correctly attached. Perhaps most annoying, though, they didn't serve a real breakfast. They had an enormous breakfast room and all the requisite buffet equipment, but I suspect their food service certification hadn't been approved yet. Instead I was given a paper bag that contained a package of muffins, an apple, and a banana. The desk clerk also got a tiny tub of yogurt out of a refrigerator behind the desk. They had coffee (albeit quite weak), but no juice available. It was a rather disappointing start to the day.

It had rained quite heavily during the night and was still raining when I left the hotel at 8am. The parking lot was sloped, but enough water had accumulated that my shoes still got rather wet.

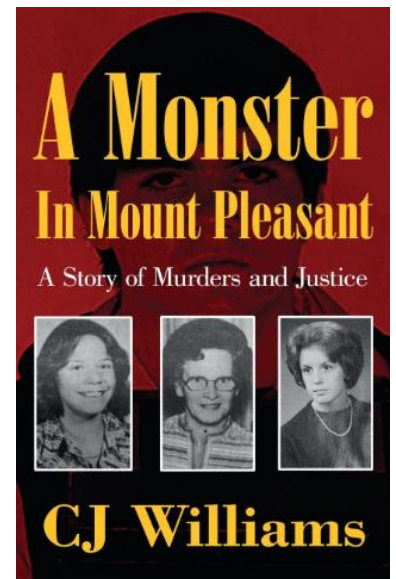
The Wendy's advertised that they sold breakfast, but they didn't appear to be open on Sunday morning. So I just drove the mile southward to the Princeton Amtrak station. I waded through the parking lot there and joined a room full of Cubs fans who were headed into the city for a game.

The volunteer assistant told me the train would be about five minutes late. That's pretty typical on this line. There's rarely much of a delay, but it's rare that it's exactly on time, either. The train actually showed up right at 8:40, nine minutes late, and I boarded together with about two dozen Cubs fans.

I filled my time on this ride reading a book set a block away from my childhood home. *Monster in Mount Pleasant* recounts a series of three murders that occurred my junior year in high school. In one of those murders a waitress was clubbed to death with a bottle. That murder resulted in a bunch of employees leaving Mt. Pleasant's Iris Restaurant and created the vacancy that gave me the job I had my senior year. The other case involved the rape and murder of one of my classmates, Karol Beavers, who lived just a block south of me at the corner of Locust and Webster Streets. Karol's mother was also shot in that incident. While Karol wasn't a close friend of mine, we'd gone to school together since first grade, and I always got along well with her. I'd actually helped build our class Homecoming float in her garage just a week before she was killed.

The murder went unsolved for years. Indeed, at my ten-year class reunion there was all kinds of gossip suggesting that another of my classmates (who at the time was behind bars on unrelated charges) had been the perpetrator. Years later I'd heard through the grapevine that the cases had been solved, but I never actually heard who had killed Karol.

This book was written by a federal judge who as an adult goes by the Honorable C.J. Williams, though back in high school we just knew him as "Chuck". Williams interviewed another classmate of mine, Monte Seager, who had been convicted of the wine bottle murder. In the interview Seager apparently confessed to the Beavers murders as well and explained the details of them. I got through the first few chapters of the book this morning, and it brought back both good and bad memories from my days in Mt. P.



Yesterday John had asked how long the train trip from Princeton to Chicago was. I actually overestimated in my answer, telling him 2 hours and 15 minutes. The scheduled time is actually right at two hours, which is almost exactly the same time it would take to drive in good traffic. Today it actually took slightly less than that. After a crowded, but otherwise uneventful trip, we arrived at Union Station 1 hour and 55 minutes after leaving Princeton. That was partially because no one got on or off at two of the stops (Plano and LaGrange), so they didn't even open the doors at either of those. We also made up time because on weekends all the Metra commuter trains are always on the local tracks through the suburbs. We stayed on the express tracks and weren't slowed down at all.

I'd redeemed some Amtrak points for a lounge pass. I didn't really care about most of the features of the lounge, but it provided an easy place to leave my baggage throughout the day. I also got a cup of coffee and used the restroom.



While I was in the restroom I realized that I'd forgotten to take my prescription medicine this morning. I'd actually set the pills out in my room, but in the confusion with the lack of a real breakfast, I'd never actually taken them. Presumably a maid would eventually find them this afternoon. Fortunately there's no great danger if someone should find the pills (which are for diabetes and high blood pressure), nor is there any real danger in my missing a dose now and then.

Since we got into Chicago in good time, I decided to spend the late morning at church. I made my way seven and a half blocks north and east of Union Station to a church I'd been past several times but never actually been inside of, St. Peter's Church in the Loop. On the outside St. Peter's is a bunkerlike, mostly windowless building that shares walls with two office buildings on the north side of Madison Street between Clark and LaSalle. Inside it's a much more appealing place, with tan granite highlighted by well-lit frescoes



Interior of St. Peter—Loop

give much the same message that Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde gave at the prayer service for President Trump's inauguration last January. The prayer of the faithful included several intentions related to the homily, including one specifically for the release of those being held in immigration detention facilities.

Most of the music at this mass was completely unfamiliar, but I was pleased that the recessional was one of my favorite hymns, the old Welsh standard "Sent Forth by God's Blessing". It felt like an appropriate song with which to start my trip.

After church I made my way to lunch. Yesterday's lunch had reminded me of how much I like flavorful chicken, so today I went to one of many Chicago locations of Nando's, the African chicken chain that is Britain's #1 restaurant. I had what they called a "Peri-Bowl", which included grilled chicken, rice, arugula, hummus, corn, and charred red peppers. I also had some nata custard for dessert.

While I was at Nando's I got an e-mail from All Nippon Airlines telling me it was time to check in for my flight. While the check-in process was unnecessarily complicated, I was able to complete it on my phone while simultaneously enjoying my lunch. I'll still need to stop by the counter tomorrow because I'll be checking a bag, but at least for the most part everything is good to go.

I spent a couple hours just bumming around Chicago, which is always one of my favorite things to do. Among other things I checked out a new 'L' station that just opened about a month ago at Damen on the green line. It's unlikely I'll ever be using this station, which mostly serves a poor residential area on the west side. It's also just a couple blocks from the United Center, and it certainly won't surprise me if next winter they market it to sports fans.

I also strolled through Chicago's Little Italy, which is an area I'd never been to before. It's located on the near south side, in the wedge where the Eisenhower, Dan Ryan, and Stevenson Expressways all come together. Though there are far more Asians and Hispanics than Italians these days, it's really quite a pleasant neighborhood.

My ultimate destination this afternoon was the recently opened National Public Housing Museum. This is located in a single building that was salvaged when one of the oldest public housing projects in the country (the Jane Addams Homes) was bulldozed to be replaced by luxury condos. This was a low-rise community (mostly three-story buildings) built as a W.P.A. project. It had the honor of being the first racially integrated public housing in America and long predated the more infamous tower projects from the '60s.

The museum preserves remnants from the Jane Addams Homes and also has a collection of artifacts from people who lived both there and at other projects throughout the country. It was fascinating that one woman had donated an old Walgreens envelope of photos, one of which showed her meeting with future President Barack Obama when he was running for the state legislature.



Brass mailboxes from the Jane Addams Homes

After seeing the exhibit area of the museum I went on a tour of two apartments they have restored to reflect different eras. One was the apartment of one of the original families that lived in the Jane Addams Homes back in 1938. They were Jewish immigrants from Belarus, and they shared the building with people from all over Europe, and there were also a handful of Mexican immigrants and African-Americans who lived there at the time. They'd all come there as a step up from the run-down tenements, which often lacked both running water and heat. Better housing brought better lives for Chicago's poor, and that led to a big sense of community among those who lived in the projects in their early years.

The apartment was furnished and decorated with possessions donated by the children and grandchildren of the original family, and there was almost a sense of déjà vu in seeing it. Much of the stuff looked remarkably similar to things I saw on my grandparents' farm when I was a kid. I suppose life wasn't all that different for poor folks, whether they were in the city or the country.

The other apartment was that of a black family who lived there in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By that point almost all the residents in Chicago's public housing projects were African—American. At the same time funding for public housing was cut, which led to “deferred maintenance” and buildings that were almost literally crumbling. Of course this was also when social conditions changed, with drugs and gang violence taking a huge toll on those living in the projects.

The woman who led the tour was of mixed black and Hispanic background, something fairly common in the Chicago of the 2020s. She is a single mother who lives in public housing, and it was interesting to hear her contrast what life is like today compared to what it was 50 to 90 years ago. It appears the biggest difference is space. She and her daughter live in a two-bedroom apartment, while the same size unit housed as many as seven people in the past.

When I finished at the museum, my intent was to walk up to the Racine stop on the blue line, which is only a few blocks away. Unfortunately, I found that the main entrance of that station was closed (most likely to make it ADA-accessible). If I wanted to use that station, I'd have to backtrack a quarter mile west to Loomis Avenue. The walk in that direction didn't look particularly pleasant. (It's an area of run-down single-family houses where those who were evicted when they tore down the Jane Addams Homes may well have ended up living.) I instead headed a quarter mile east, through the rapidly gentrifying near west side and boarded the blue line at U.I.C.—Halsted.

I rode just one stop east to Clinton, which is just south of Union Station. I was pleased to see they'd done some renovation there. While it's still not actually accessible, they installed a handicapped turnstile that allows people with luggage to enter or leave the station more easily. Given that a large part of those using the station are coming from either Amtrak or the Greyhound bus station, it makes sense to make the place luggage-friendly.

I made my way back to the Metropolitan Lounge, where I claimed my luggage and took a few snacks that would serve as my dinner tonight. Then I hauled my bags back to Clinton station, through the handicapped turnstile, and down the extremely narrow escalator to the platform.

There was a bit of a delay, but eventually an O'Hare-bound blue line train arrived. The train filled up quickly, which made me glad I'd gotten on when there was still space to sit with luggage. The most interesting part of an otherwise uneventful ride was that we made an unusually long stop at Division station, where there were at least half a dozen police officers on the platform. They appeared to carefully look through each of the cars of both our train and one going the opposite direction, though they never actually entered either train. Eventually they gave an all clear, and we were on our way again. I'd love to know what they were looking for, though I'm probably glad they didn't find whatever it was on our train.

The train continued to be quite full all the way through the northwest side. It really didn't start emptying out until the park-and-rides at Cumberland and Rosemont. I rode all the way to O'Hare (a 50-minute ride from Clinton). There were still a dozen people in my car when we got there, and more than a hundred on the train overall.



**Views from Room 9032
Hilton—O'Hare**

A few months ago I'd made a reservation for tonight at the O'Hare Hilton. The blue line station at O'Hare is right in the basement of the hotel, and I've walked past it several times. While this is the single most expensive place I'm staying on this trip, it will certainly be convenient tomorrow morning. It also provides some lovely views. My room overlooks terminals 1 and 2, with the gates and runways beyond them. One of the control towers is also right outside my room. This is actually the fourth time I've stayed at a hotel that overlooked an airport (the others were at LAX, Halifax, and JFK), and I think this is probably the best view overall.



I'd set up my phone to be a digital key for the room, so I didn't bother stopping by the desk when I arrived. However, after I left my stuff in the room and went to get some ice, for some reason the digital key stopped working. I had to go back down to the lobby and pick up an actual key card to use instead. I was intrigued that about half a dozen people were waiting in a line for high-status Hilton Honors members to check-in. There was no line at all for the "peon" counter, though, and I was quickly served there.

I enjoyed popcorn, potato chips, and peanuts for my dinner. After that I mostly spent the evening updating this travelogue. Tomorrow will be a long day of flying, and it was good to have a not-so-busy day today.

MONDAY, JULY 21

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS AND FLIGHT NH-11

I slept well last night, though not particularly long. That's often the case before travel, though. I'm certainly not blaming the hotel, which had a very comfortable bed. Nonetheless, I was up before six o'clock this morning.

Not long ago I'd subscribed to a free e-mail service from Tokyo's lone English newspaper, the *Japan Times*. Something that went completely unreported in American news was that Japan held elections yesterday, and businesspeople there were worried about the effect the election could have on the economy. As it turned out the longtime ruling party (named the Liberal Democrats, though they are in fact the more conservative of the country's major parties) maintained control of the Diet (the national parliament), though only through a razor-thin coalition.

In addition to the election, one of the big stories in Japan was that the government had begun a program to have renewable energy cover the majority of the country's needs. Today the bulk of Japan's electricity comes from nuclear power, the issues with which were shown in the Fukushima meltdown. The new program will focus on solar, wind, and geothermal energy.

The lone U.S. story in the *Japan Times* was something I doubt was covered anywhere at home. Coffee farmers in Hawaii are apparently protesting Trump's tariffs, which theoretically is intended to benefit their product at the expense of coffee from Brazil. The farmers note, though, that as coffee overall becomes more expensive, customers will be likely to buy less and may switch from premium blends like the Kona they produce to cheaper alternatives.

I dawdled around the hotel and left around 8:10. It was just a short walk over to terminal 1, and I got to the ANA check-in line at about 8:20, half an hour before they opened.

You might notice that the sign in the picture at right says "business class". I noted earlier that this trip would be a strange mix of luxury and budget, and the trans-Pacific flights would be the biggest contributor to luxury. When I first priced things, I'd mostly looked at premium economy (which is more or less what actual economy was a few years back). I noticed that at the time I booked the price for business class (the second of four classes of service ANA offers) was only a little bit higher. With the insurance money I was able to splurge and fly long distance in a ritzy cabin for the first time in my life.

I'd come to the terminal counter to check a single small bag. While it was small enough that it could easily have been allowed as a carry-on, checking it allowed me to pack such things as larger liquids and a pair of scissors. It also meant I'd have less to worry about while getting at the airport and on the plane.

My single bag was definitely toward the low end of what people were checking. ANA allows two checked bags per passenger on international flights, and lots of people had checked two enormous suitcases. What's more a woman in the economy line had a suitcase and five large cardboard boxes that she was shipping to Vietnam. I'd be fascinated to know what that costs.



ANA check-in area at O'Hare

The check-in staff (six different employees) showed up at 8:45. While I did have to wait a bit, getting there early allowed me to be processed quickly. I had to wait a minute for a family of four (the lone group in front of me) to haul all of their luggage to another station. Eventually I snuck past them and was the first person processed by one of the clerks.

The clerk seemed surprised that I wasn't extremely familiar with the layout of the United area at O'Hare. She made a point of showing me how to get to the expedited security checkpoint and then how to find the Polaris lounge that is a perk of flying business class on one of United's Star Alliance partners.

The expedited checkpoint is also used for processing disabled travelers. They have two lines there, one for people on foot and the other for wheelchairs, and they alternate between the two. There were about half a dozen passengers ahead of me in the foot line. I noticed two of them had to get their photos taken to match their ID. When I got to the front, though, the officer just took a quick look at my passport and waved me on through.

Security itself was among the quickest I've ever dealt with. It's been all over the news that removing shoes is no longer required by the T.S.A., though I noticed a couple of people took theirs off, presumably out of habit. I was told I also didn't have to remove the

liquids from my bag. I'd been a bit worried that I might get flagged for a support sleeve I wear to help with knee pain. That has a gel circle around the knee, and gels are generally considered liquids. I'd purposely worn shorts so the agents could see it was a medical device. I honestly don't know if that mattered or not, but got through the checkpoint with no questions or delays at all.

I made my way through the tunnel that connects concourses B and C. Just beyond the escalator on concourse C is the entrance to the United Polaris lounge. When I flew to Charlotte last Christmas, I paid for a pass to United's Club lounge, which was very nice. It's quite plebian in contrast to Polaris, though. The Polaris lounge is enormous, with hundreds of seats in every type and configuration imaginable. Perhaps most unique, it features a full sit-down restaurant, where I enjoyed a ham and cheddar omelette, an English muffin, and two barista coffees. Everything was free of charge, though I did make a point of leaving a tip for the waitress. There's also a self-serve buffet, where I got bacon, eggs, mixed fruit, and a tiny frittata. In addition they have unlimited snacks and beverages of all kinds available to guests. Had I wanted to use them, they also have complimentary showers and sleeping rooms and a spa and fitness center as part of the Polaris lounge.

I spent most of my time in the lounge in an area facing the runway. (Presumably I hadn't gotten enough airplane views last night.) The seat I chose was an enormous leather chair with a granite desk attached to it. It was comfortable, and it provided a nice place to work on this account while I waited.

At about 11:00 I left the lounge and made my way to Gate C-10, which was only a couple gates away. As is invariably true at O'Hare, the gate was extremely crowded. They had everyone but first class wait in an area called Gate C-10-A, where of course most people had spaced themselves so that every other seat was occupied. I was surprised that I was able to find a place to sit and even more surprised when shortly after I sat down they started calling the different boarding groups to line up.

Boarding on ANA is efficient. They use five boarding groups, and they have all of them line up separately in the hall area outside the gate. Then they march one group at a time down to the door of the jetway. Each passenger has to stare at an i-pad to get their picture taken (standard these days for international flights), and assuming the light comes up green, they're waved on their way.

They boarded this flight through three different doors. First class only used the frontmost door of the plane. I boarded through the main door. There was an additional jetway connected to the back of the plane, and many more passengers boarded through it. Spacing everyone out made the boarding process go quicker than it does on many international flights.

As I entered the plane a flight attendant introduced herself and directed me forward. I was seated in 6—C, which was actually in the fourth row of the plane. (The number 4 is often avoided in much of Asia in the same way we avoid 13 in the west. That's because the word for 4 in both Chinese and Japanese is similar to the word for "death".) The business class set-up on ANA is unique and to my mind extremely luxurious. Each row is set up in a 1—2—1 configuration, so 6—C is on the aisle but also has a window. It's set up so that the odd rows face backwards, while even rows face forward. I'd purposely chosen an even row, because I didn't want to sit backwards. I find that annoying enough on short train rides, and I definitely didn't want to sit that way all the way to Japan. The reason for the backwards seats is that seats in both directions can easily convert into lie-flat beds. The footwell for the odd seats serves as a side table for the even rows, and vice versa.

The seats are extremely wide, about two and a half times the width of an economy seat. They have tons of storage and come with multiple pillows, a blanket, a small pouch with an eye mask and various lotions, and a complimentary pair of slippers (which I didn't bother with, but the Japanese guy across the aisle from me immediately put on). Each seat also has what appears to be about a 30-inch screen, nearly as large as the TV in my bedroom. There's an enormous pull-out table about double the size you'd find in an economy seat, plus the side table above the leg well for the opposite seat.

ANA's international flights are extremely heavy on premium seats. More than half the space is devoted to first class, business class, and premium economy. Because of that this Boeing 777 holds fewer than 200 passengers, when on domestic flights they cram 500 onto the same plane.

The flight attendant (named Okiyaki) introduced herself, gave me a choice of champagne or orange juice, and explained how to fasten the seatbelt. The business class seats have shoulder harnesses similar to what you might find in a car. Unlike an automotive seatbelt, the shoulder harness is detachable, but it's important that it be connected for take-off. I did detach the shoulder belt for most of the flight, because it was extremely uncomfortable.

They closed the cabin doors at 11:45am, five minutes ahead of schedule. Soon after that they played a safety video that featured animated characters. I think it may have been Pokeman and his friends, but no being into such things, I really don't know. It intrigued me that the animated flight attendant who narrated the video did a formal Asian bow at the start and the end. It's interesting that the safety video was said in both Japanese and English (as were all crew announcements). It was actually captioned in five languages: Japanese, English, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean.

We began taxiing at 11:57. That's never a short process at a big airport, and it was slowed down even more because we had to skirt around runway construction all around O'Hare. We finally took off 12:09pm.

Once we reached altitude, Captain Ota welcomed us, and soon after that the flight attendants began what would be one of the longest service sessions I've ever encountered. First three different flight attendants confirmed that I wanted a vegetarian meal, which I had ordered ahead of time. Once that was clarified, an attendant made the rounds to present passengers with an "oshibori", which is essentially an oversized wet wipe. Then another distributed menus, and a third took served water and took orders for other drinks. Since we were headed to Japan I chose to get a glass of sake, the fruity rice wine for which the country is famous. It wasn't bad, but I wouldn't go out of my way to order it again.

We were over Eau Claire by the time they actually began serving food. The meal started with an amuse bouche (literally French for “entertain the mouth”). It appeared that every passenger had a small ball of mozzarella cheese covered in pistachios together with some cherry tomatoes and raisins. The carnivore version included a small triangle of toast topped with pork paté. In lieu of that the vegetarian version had a little cup of pickled vegetables. Everybody’s amuse bouche was topped with garnish of pine needles. That brought back memories of those old Grape Nuts commercials where they asked, “Did you ever eat a pine tree?”

We were nearly to International Falls when they served the appetizer. Part of the reason I’d chosen the vegetarian meal was because both the western and Japanese appetizers were primarily seafood. I don’t like most seafood, and my iodine allergy means I can’t eat shellfish at all. Instead of sashimi or grilled shrimp with mango salsa my appetizer was a fussy little salad. It wasn’t bad, but it had far too many mushrooms for my liking. The salad came with two different kinds of bread that were served with margarine rather than butter. It does seem odd that they’d serve dairy cheese, but then follow it up with margarine.

We were over the northern end of Lake Winnipeg when the main course was served. The vegetarian entrée was a cheese and spinach ravioli topped with ratatouille. While a bit blander than my preference, it was still good.

The official menu had three options for dessert, which was served as we neared the border between Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. Those options were blueberry cheesecake, a cheese platter, or a bowl of assorted fruit. My preference would have been the cheesecake, but apparently the vegetarian meal defaults to vegan dessert, so I was served the fruit bowl without being given a choice. Dessert could be accompanied by coffee, green tea, or wine. I chose coffee, and it was amusing that I was offered the option to have it with cream.

A big difference between business class and the “economy skycouch” I had when I flew to New Zealand is that in business class the meals are served course by course on china and for westerners they are accompanied by polished metal flatware. (Those who ordered from the Japanese menu were given disposable chopsticks.) It does feel quite a bit more elegant eating off china than from what dishes that look like a microwave meal.

I spent much of the flight reading more from *A Monster in Mt. Pleasant*. It was interesting to find that another player in the case (albeit a sort of red herring) was a guy I knew all too well, a neighborhood troublemaker named Dennis Cornell. Dennis got me in trouble back when I was in grade school, and if I’d followed his ways I might well have ended up like him as one of the “dirtheads” who spent their days smoking dope across the street from the high school. (Oddly, they never seemed to get in trouble for that particular crime.) I was also fascinated to recall through the book that I was in a speech class that both Karol Beavers and her murderer were also in. (I knew Karol was in that class, but I’d forgotten about Monte.) There were several quotes from speech teacher Marilyn Vincent (who everyone called “Vince”, though the book refers to her as “Ms. Vincent” (she was actually “Mrs. Vincent”). I kept in touch with Vince for many years after leaving Mt. Pleasant, though it’s been a long time since I’ve heard anything about her.

According to the book, the police had suspected that Monte Seager had killed the Beavers nearly from the start, but they weren’t even close to having sufficient evidence until he had also killed Sue Wheelock (the waitress at the Iris). Even then it took nearly three decades and multiple trials to finally convict him. It’s amazing just how much the field of forensic science has developed since the ‘70s.



**“Selfie” showing privacy divider
Seat 6-A – ANA Boeing 777**

I tried a couple of times to take advantage of the fact that my seat converted into a lie-flat bed. The seat really is quite nice. It goes down or back up at the push of a button, and there are also panels by the aisle that can be raised to create the illusion of privacy. (It really is an illusion, since the flight attendants have to be able to see over the top of them.) I did try things out, but unfortunately I wasn’t as successful at sleeping as I was when I went to New Zealand. I think that’s because this is basically a daytime flight, even though it’s very long. We left around noon, and after flying through fourteen time zones we’ll arrive at three in the afternoon. While they dimmed the lights and encouraged us to pull down shades over the windows, even then it wasn’t really dark. The second time I tried to sleep I was startled back into consciousness when the flight attendant quite loudly asked if I wanted a drink or snack.

While this is considered a trans-Pacific route, it’s fascinating that almost the entire flight was over land. The great circle from Chicago to Tokyo lies mainly over Canada. It was actually very similar to the route I flew when I went to Anchorage years ago. That certainly makes it a prettier route than flying to New Zealand. Both out the window and on the live cameras that look both forward and down from the plane I could see beautiful snow capped mountains much of the way. We continued west from Anchorage over the uninhabited part of Alaska, finally flying over the Pacific near Russia. I think the most direct route would actually fly right over eastern Siberia, but these days flying over Russian airspace is prohibited.

When the flight attendant asked if I wanted a drink, I chose ginger ale. It came with a small bag of sweetened rice crackers. That bag alone had more carbohydrates than I’m supposed to have at a meal, so hopefully my blood sugar won’t skyrocket too much. They have more substantial snacks I could theoretically order like soup, curry, and onigiri (rice balls filled with fish paste and wrapped in seaweed). I’m honestly not hungry, though, so I haven’t felt a need to order anything.

Rows 5 and 6 on this plane make up a sort of mini-cabin. They’re nestled between first class and the galley, while the main business class section is further back. That does make it one of the quietest flights I’ve been on.

There’s conveniently a toilet right behind me, though the fact that it’s right next to the galley might not make the food seem that appealing. Some people who have reviewed ANA make a big deal of the fact that they have Japanese toilets on their planes—that is,

the toilets have a built-in bidet function. While I might try out one of those toilets on the ground, it just doesn't seem that wise to spray my backside at 35,000 feet. To me what stood out about the toilet was that it's incredibly tiny. All airplane bathrooms are small, of course, but here the toilet itself seems to be built for a Japanese body that's quite a bit smaller than mine. It's lower than I'd expect and also has a very small bowl. If that's what Japanese toilets are like on the ground, they'll take some getting used to.

I finished *A Monster in Mt. Pleasant* as we crossed over Attu at the end of the Aleutian Islands. It is a fascinating little book, and I think the first one I've ever read that focused on people I actually knew.

TUESDAY, JULY 22

FLIGHT NH-11 TO TOKYO, JAPAN

Just past Attu we crossed the International Date Line, so today officially became tomorrow, though it was late morning both days. There was no announcement made about that, nor was there even a line on the route map to show it. I know that the date line skirts west to put all of Alaska in the same time zone, though, and it's always tomorrow in Siberia.

Somewhere east of Russia I asked the flight attendant for some ice cream. I received a china plate with a rice paper napkin on top of which was a tiny carton of Haagen-Dazs. It amused me that this treat had less than a fourth as many grams of carbohydrate as the rice crackers did.

I spent a while watching the map show our route east of the coast of Kamchatka. As we neared the south end of the peninsula (with the next country south being Japan) the attendants announced it was time to serve "breakfast". Mind you it was lunch time in Tokyo and time for a late dinner yesterday in Chicago. All of the second meal options struck me as more appropriate to lunch than breakfast. My vegetarian meal was gnocchi with a white wine cream sauce, topped by mixed vegetables. This time the mushrooms were limited, but it was a bit heavy on sweet potatoes. I did clean my plate, though. I also got a dinner roll with margarine and the exact same fruit plate I'd had for dessert earlier, though this time it was garnished with five mint leaves. The western "breakfast" was grilled chicken breast over risotto with the same fruit bowl I had. The Japanese option actually was what I've read Japanese people have for breakfast—miso soup and a slice of fish served over rice. On the side they had cold chicken and eggplant tempura. The meal came with a cold drink (I chose orange juice), and after the meal they did a hot drink service, with fancy little chocolates accompanying the coffee or tea.

While it seemed to take forever to serve lunch, breakfast was actually served quite quickly. In fact we weren't yet to Hokkaido (Japan's northernmost main island, two hours north of Tokyo) when the plates were cleared.

I'm writing this as we pass east of Hokkaido. Hopefully I won't jinx myself by saying it, but this has been a remarkably smooth flight. At the start the captain implied there could be significant turbulence, but the seat belt sign hasn't come on at all—nor would it need to. Unfortunately it sounds like the forecast won't be so nice while I'm in Tokyo.

Something I haven't mentioned yet (except in the daily header) is that the number for this flight is NH-11. The official abbreviation for All Nippon Airlines is "NH". That comes from the company's original name, Nippon Helicopters. They quickly added planes as well, and today they're Japan's largest airline (though just barely bigger than JAL).

Just as had happened in New Zealand, the flight attendants gave us pre-landing candies. There was a choice, and I took a green grape flavored hard candy that was extremely flavorful. The flight attendants seemed a bit nervous about whether we'd enjoyed the flight. It almost seemed as if their jobs depended on a positive response. I assured them that it was indeed a good flight.

We finally crossed over land around 2:10pm, and we came down on Narita Airport's extremely rough runway at 2:43pm, seventeen minutes ahead of schedule. The taxiing went quickly, and we were at the gate around 2:50. Then I went up and down about a dozen escalators before finally making it to customs.

The Japanese border process is weird. First I had to walk past a booth labeled "quarantine" where a rather bored guy looked for anyone who appeared obviously unhealthy. Then I proceeded to the cavernous immigration room where people were divided by their nationality. Basically developed countries got quicker processing than the third world. While I don't really care for that concept, as an American I could hardly complain. I'd filled out the necessary forms online a couple weeks ago, so when I got to the front of the line I scanned a QR code and gave my passport to a woman in a cage. She took my picture and electronically matched it with the passport and also got scans of the fingerprints from both of my index fingers. Fortunately I'd read ahead of time that the scans were part of the process, so it didn't catch me by surprise. The woman then put an actual adhesive stamp in my passport and sent me on my way.

Immigration had taken exactly long enough that my bag was coming off the conveyor when I arrived at baggage claim. I grabbed it and then went to customs. No person was actually looking at anyone's bags. Instead we just had to scan our passports and QR codes again, and they waved everybody on to the exit. I reached the arrival hall right at 3:30pm.

I took care of several errands at Narita. First I found an ATM and got some cash. Annoyingly, the machine dispensed only 10,000 yen notes, each of which is worth about \$67.75. I got four and hoped I'd be able to break them to something smaller.

I used the bathroom and then found the airport train station. My first business there was to pick up my Japan Rail Pass, a ticket that's only available to foreign visitors (they literally check to make sure you have that stamp in your passport) that provides long-distance unlimited rides at a set rate. A lot of people don't ride enough to make the JR Pass worth the cost, but I knew it would easily pay off for

me. I had also made reservations for the individual trips ahead of time, and I was pleased to find that they could print off the boarding passes for all of those right at Narita.

Next I bought a prepaid fare card called “Welcome Suica” that works on almost all local trains throughout Japan. This is the tourist version of the Suica card that Japanese commuters use. It has the advantage that there’s no initial deposit like there is for the regular card. I put 5,000 yen on the card, which should pay for most of the local train rides I’ll be taking.

I’d planned my route into Tokyo ahead of time, but I wanted to double-check it on my phone. Unfortunately I couldn’t get the prepaid SIM card I’d bought ahead of time to work. It showed that it was getting a strong signal, but it wouldn’t let me access data. So I spent a while staring at the multilingual signs, none of which said exactly what I was expecting it to. Eventually I did find the right platform, though, and I boarded the 4:04 departure of the Keisei Access Express.

Signage and announcements on the trains in Japan are multilingual—sort of. Recordings announced all the stations, first in Japanese and then in English, and a rotating digital sign above the doors had those languages and also three other Asian languages (Korean, Chinese, and something else I didn’t recognize). Between stops there were many lengthy Japanese announcements that weren’t translated. While I assume these were things like “stand up give people with special needs a seat” or “we’re stopping briefly as we wait for signal clearance”, I of course have no clue what any of those said.

In spite of the name the Access Express is a slow train. Narita is further from Tokyo than O’Hare and Kenedy are from their downtown Chicago or New York. The train goes fast, but it makes a couple dozen stops along the way. That meant the trip to my hotel would take about an hour and a half. The good thing, though, is that it was a straight shot with no changes. Out in the suburbs it functions as a commuter train, but once it enters the city of Tokyo it enters the subway and runs on one of the standard subway lines. I rode all the way from Narita to the Daimon station, which I knew was just a block away from my hotel.

I actually had to walk about two blocks, because there wasn’t a safe place to cross a busy street right by the station. I still made it to the hotel without a problem, though. I’m staying the next six nights at the Henn Na Hotel—Hamamatsucho. “Henn Na” can be translated as “strange”, “unique”, or “changing”, and the hotel chain prides itself on a bit of weirdness. Most noteworthy is that their desk is “staffed” by animatronic robots. The robots don’t really do anything noteworthy. Really they’re just dressing up a self-check-in system. They have touch panels where you press a language, and then the robots appear to speak in your language as they direct you through the steps of checking in. My interaction was the absolute bare minimum. The hotel had sent me a pre-check-in e-mail ahead of time, and by filling out their forms online all I had to do at the desk was scan a QR code. My receipt and room key popped out almost instantly.

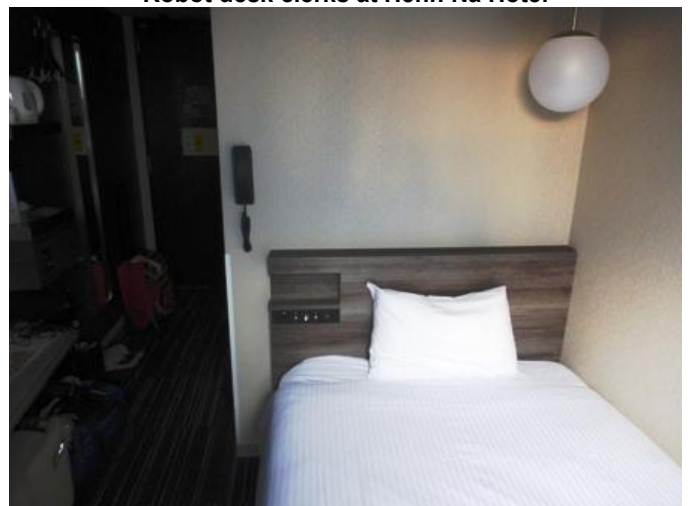


Robot desk clerks at Henn Na Hotel



View of Tokyo Tower from Room 1305

but it averaged less than \$70 a night, which isn’t a bad rate in the world’s largest city. Mind you, you don’t get a lot for that price. The rooms are absolutely tiny. They’re certainly larger than those infamous capsule hotels that are like rentable coffins. The business hotel rooms fit a bed, an ensuite bath, and not much more than that. You’ll notice my luggage is crammed by the desk. I had to spend quite a bit of time arranging it to be able to actually use the desk. I did get things to work, though, and as a bonus the room has a nice view of Tokyo Tower.



Room 1305 at Henn Na Hotel—Hamamatsucho

For my dinner tonight I went to a 7—Eleven that was about a block away from the hotel. While it was founded in Texas, 7—Eleven is now a Japanese owned company. Many tourists rave that it and the other Japanese convenience stores (called “kombini”

locally) are far, far better than their American equivalents. While that may be true, you're still far from haute cuisine. My dinner was two small store-made refrigerated sandwiches that were discounted because it was getting on to the end of the day. One was egg salad on white bread, and the other was chicken, vegetables, and mustard on a tasty brown bread roll. I picked up a few snacks as well, enough to make a total of 1,070 yen (about \$7.25). I was a bit embarrassed to pay with the 10,000 yen note, but the clerk didn't even blink. Actually he didn't handle the money at all. He scanned the purchases and had me put the bill in a machine that verified it and spit out 8,930 yen in change. I actually got eight 1,000 yen notes, but I presume those will be easier to spend.

I munched on my sandwiches and finished the day's account for the travelogue back at the hotel. I tried to stay up long enough that I could get a decent sleep tonight and hopefully wake up at an appropriate hour.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 23

TOKYO, JAPAN

I did sleep pretty well, but I was still wide awake at 4am. Of course that was 2pm yesterday back home, so it is somewhat understandable. I used some of the available time to get some bills paid online and to make arrangements to "pocket wifi" (a rented portable router) to use in place of the SIM card that didn't work. The pocket wifi is more expensive than the SIM, but it's a necessary expense to be able to get around easily.

It starts getting light in Tokyo not long after four. They don't use daylight time here, and they're also toward the eastern end of their time zone, so both sunrise and sunset are earlier than they are back home.

Around 6:30 this morning I had breakfast at a McDonalds that's just a couple blocks from the hotel. It's convenient that ordering at McD's is done at kiosks these days, and of course there's an English option to make things simple for me. It was a bit odd that the kiosk accepted neither cash nor credit cards. They did accept the Suica transportation cards (which is how I paid) as well as Alibaba-Pay, which appears to involve scanning a barcode on your phone.

Compared to the States, McDonalds in Japan is cheap! I ordered the Egg McMuffin "set" (i.e., value meal) with hash browns and coffee, which came to 520 yen (US\$3.55). Back home the sandwich alone is over four bucks, and the value meal is more than seven. I also got one of their unique to Japan products—a cheese, potato, and bacon pie. Those three items (in the comparative amount the order of the ingredients implies) are placed inside pastry and deep fried like the apple pies used to be. It was really delicious and certainly worth another 219 yen (\$1.50).

The ordering area and kitchen for the Daimon McDonalds occupy a tiny space on the first floor of an office building. The dining room is down in the basement, and it's also rather small. At 6:30 in the morning it was packed with people. Every person there was male—a mix of college kids, businessmen, and people who seemed one step up from homelessness. At the table right next to me was a middle-aged teacher who was grading worksheets over breakfast. I have no idea what subject he taught, but the students gave short answers in Japanese, and he often wrote lengthy critiques of those answers. He, like everyone else in the restaurant, was absolutely silent. The biggest noise occurred when people sorted their trash into various bins at the exit.

After finishing breakfast I spent an hour or so wandering around the Hamamatsucho/Daimon area. Most neighborhoods in Tokyo are named after their train stations, and the above-ground Hamamatsucho and underground Daimon stations are essentially different parts of the same complex. The area feels a lot like Manhattan. There's tons of high-rise office towers, but there's also lots of apartments and even single-family homes packed close together. It functions as the main downtown of Minato, which is among the largest of Tokyo's 32 wards (similar to the boroughs of New York or London). "Minato" literally means "harbor", and it's not hard to figure out it's also where the port of Tokyo is and where cruise ships dock when they visit Japan. It's a very busy area, especially during the business day.

Tokyo doesn't really have an identifiable city center—a single place that functions as "downtown" for everywhere else. Traditionally the business and shopping area for all of Japan was Ginza, which is just a couple stops north of Hamamatsucho on the train. The word "ginza" just means what British people would call a "high street", though, and you'll find dozens of them all over Tokyo. Today you hear more about Shibuya and Shinjuku, which are in the western part of the city center, well away from the harbor. All the big corporate headquarters are in Minato, though.

Something particularly weird about Japan is that most of its streets are unnamed. A few important boulevards do have names, but even those aren't used in addresses. The main parts of an address are the neighborhood, the block (called a "chome" in Japanese), and the building number. A chome is a full square block, and in each chome buildings are numbered in the order they were built, not in any geographical order. That means the building number is basically useless in trying to locate anything. I walked past buildings where #7, #22, and #13 were right next to each other. It appears that most businesses here don't bother with addresses at all. They give the name of the nearest station and then walking directions from there.

Something I saw a lot of wandering through the neighborhood was vending machines. You may have heard that Japan has more vending machines per capita than any other place on earth. There's one vending machine for about every 20 people, and in a neighborhood with lots of high-rise apartments I saw multiple vending machines on every block. The vast majority are drink machines, and it's interesting that they'll sell both hot and cold beverages (like bottled juice or canned coffee) from the same machine. Those drinks are another thing that seemed cheap to me. Half-liter bottles of pop that could easily go for two bucks back home were just 140 yen (\$.95), and I added a 200-milliliter Pepsi "energy shot" to my collection for 90 yen (\$.60). The vending machines all take coins (though usually nothing less than 10-yen). A few also take bills, and lots and lots take "IC", which is the generic term for the prepaid transportation

cards. ("IC" comes from the English words "integrated circuit", by the way.) Suica is the largest of those, but they also issue Pasma cards in Tokyo, and they're as interchangeable as Visa and Mastercard are. There are more than a dozen other IC cards issued in other cities around Japan, and they're all completely interoperable. It would be like using the Ventra card I got in Chicago to take the subway in New York and then using that same card to buy stuff from a vending machine in Los Angeles.



Daimon gate

ples, and Zozoji had pretty much all of them. There's a cleaning station at the entrance where visitors are suppose to purify themselves by rinsing their hands and mouth. There's an offering urn into which you're supposed to toss coins with holes in them (which in Japan are the 5-yen and 50-yen coins). There's a bell you can ring and amulets you can buy for good luck, and there's a place to buy fortunes and a rack to tie bad fortunes to so the bad luck doesn't stay with you. Another thing that I found interesting at Zozji was a whole section of little miniature cement figures that are supposed to bless the souls of stillborn children. People knit caps for these statues for protection of those children in their own families who were lost.

Zozoji sits just south of a much more modern attraction, the Tokyo Tower. This was built in 1953 as a broadcast tower. It was modelled on the Eiffel Tower, though the Japanese will be quick to tell you their tower is taller than its French counterpart. The one in Paris honestly looks nicer though, because Tokyo Tower is painted bright red. This is apparently because it's in a major flightpath, and the color makes it more visible to aircraft. The contrast between the traditional temple and the modern tower really is striking.



Shrine for the souls of stillborn children – Zozoji

There are several tall things in Tokyo that you can go to the top of if you want to. Guidebooks today tend to suggest either the Skytree (the tallest tower in the world) or Shibuya Sky, which is in a more trendy part of the city. I decided on the more traditional option of going up Tokyo Tower.



View from Tokyo Tower



Tokyo Tower and a torii gate at Zozoji

From the tower I did get a sense of just how sprawling Tokyo is. Today Tokyo is generally considered the largest city in the world, though “city” is not an easy thing to define. The so-called “Tokyo Metropolis” is incorporated as a single unit by the Japanese government, though the individual wards also have significant power. In addition to the metropolis there’s several nearby satellite cities that also have over a million people each. In all greater Tokyo (which is what the U.N. considers the “city”) has about forty million people, which is more than the entire state of California and about the same as the nation of Canada. It really is massive.

I picked up a couple of souvenirs at Tokyo Tower. Most notable was probably a box of Tokyo bananas, a rather silly product that has become famous on social media. The Tokyo banana is essentially a Twinkie. It’s just cream-filled fingers of sponge cake, though being Japanese they of course have to decorate the sponge cake with a cute face. The cream is banana flavored, which trivia buffs will know was the original flavor of Twinkies, too. I ate the four overpriced Twinkies, but I did save the box as a souvenir.

After seeing Tokyo Tower I returned to the hotel and then made my way to Haneda Airport to pick up the wi-fi router I’d ordered. Haneda is much closer in than Narita is; it’s just a fifteen-minute ride from Hamamatsucho. I got to the airport easily enough, but it took forever to find the counter for Ninja Wi-Fi where I was supposed to pick up the thing. There were at least a dozen different wi-fi companies at Haneda’s Terminal 3, which clearly shows I’m not the only person who had problems getting cellular data to work here. It took more than half an hour to track down the company I needed. Fortunately, once I did I got the unit quickly and it actually connected easily and works.



Yamanote line near Shabuya station

To get to my afternoon destination, I took some very crowded trains. You’ve probably heard stories of people having to be pushed onto trains in Asia. They didn’t technically do that, but it felt nearly that crowded. The worst train was on the Yamanote Line, a route that makes a circle that connects all the major parts of central Tokyo. The line goes to Hamamatsucho, and I’d thought it might be fun to actually take the complete circle around the city. After a short ride on the Yamanote line today I decided to prune that idea from my itinerary. There was nothing pleasant about that ride—nor most of the others I took today either.

A few paragraphs back I noted that Tokyo is very spread out. Evidence of that sprawl was that my next destination was 75 kilometers away from Haneda. Except for the very last part of the trip it was solid city all the way. That’s about the same distance as from Algona to Ft. Dodge, with dense development the whole way.

That sprawl and development is actually a positive from the point of view of people who live in Tokyo. When all the cities in the developed world are compared, Tokyo has the most affordable housing. There’s a lot of apartments in Tokyo, but there’s tons of single-family homes as well. There’s housing of various types absolutely everywhere. While in America we’ve zoned things so neighborhoods are either residential, commercial, or industrial, in Japan everything is consciously mixed. I saw a shopping mall that was served by a train station larger than its parking lot that was surrounded by small factories, a school, and homes of every kind.

It also helps that in Japan there isn’t really a tradition of real estate as an investment. People want to have nice places for their families to live, but they don’t look at those homes as a way to make money. Without the speculation, things stay more affordable for everyone.

My ultimate destination this afternoon was Mt. Takao, the tallest mountain in the immediate Tokyo area. The world’s steepest cable car runs from the bottom about a third of the way up the side. At one point it rises 35 meters in an 80 meter section, and the whole ten-minute ride is steep and rather scary.

I did a bit of hiking at Mt. Takao, though honestly not that much. It got up to 97 degrees in central Tokyo today. While both elevation and forest cover made it a bit cooler than that on “Takao-san”, it was still very hot. I did see a couple of shrines that had been built, and I enjoyed gawking at some flowers along the way as well. I had hoped there might be some panoramic views, but I think you have to go all the way to the top for any of those. It was kind of cool to see a bit of nature that’s technically part of an enormous city, though.

I caught a train back to Shinjuku station, which happens to be the busiest train station on earth. Seven of ten busiest train stations in the world are in Tokyo. What raises Shinjuku above the others is that it’s really about dozen different stations that have been connected together with a maze underground passageways and above ground skywalks. There’s supposedly more than 200 entrances to the station, and every guide book or travel video I found said “you WILL get lost at Shinjuku station”. I’m sure everyone who reads that feels they’re smarter than the author. I certainly did, and of course—needless to say—I got lost trying to make a transfer at Shinjuku. Not only did I make multiple wrong turns while trying to find the train I wanted, but I ended up heading the wrong way on that train without even realizing I’d made a mistake. I’ll actually have to go to Shinjuku at least once more on this trip, and hopefully the curse will be broken the second time around.



At Mt. Takao

My mistake meant that I went almost all the way around a circular subway line (the Oedo line) the long way, which meant it took forever to get back to Daimon. I hadn’t really had any lunch today, so I was quite hungry when I did get back. I decided to have dinner at a place right above the subway station called Yakiniku Like. Yakiniku is a Japanese style of barbecue, and at Yakiniku Like they specialize in doing a sort of “self-serve” barbecue for individual guests. They cater almost exclusively to parties of one. Two large island counters are set up with about a dozen miniature grills in each of them, with dividers between those grills to separate the guests from one

another. I heard someone who reviewed the place describe it as “an introvert’s delight”. I figured that would work for me, and I thought it would be fun to check out the place.



At the Daimon location of Yakiniku Like

Yakiniku Like is actually on the second floor of an office building, though the entrance is at street level. There was an i-pad I could use for ordering beside the little grill, and I was nice to be able to set that to English. I ordered their “budget set” in the medium of three sizes. Before long I was presented with a tray that had four little slices of raw steak and four boneless beef ribs. I also got some onions, a big bowl of rice, a cup of miso soup, complimentary water, and a bowl of kimchi. Kimchi is essentially pickled cabbage and peppers. I’d always been afraid to try kimchi before, but I found it was actually pretty tasty. The steak and ribs were also quite good, and an advantage of eating in a little cubicle is that I didn’t need to worry about other people noticing my clumsiness with chopsticks. I’d never had miso soup before, and it wasn’t bad either. The rice was by far the worst part; it was pretty flavorless even after being drenched with various sauces. Rice does seem to be essential for every Japanese meal, though. Aside from the rice it was a very enjoyable dinner, at a cost of just 1500 yen (\$10.25).

After supper I worked on this travelogue and also watched a bit of Japanese television. When I’ve been in other countries I could usually get the idea of what was going on when I’d flip through TV programs, but a lot of the stuff in Japan was just weird—strange to the point that I had no clue what was going on. I did find a couple of sports shows I could relate to, if not really watch. The strangest thing, though, was a program of German lessons for native Japanese speakers. Both from English cognates and from context I was able to figure out what they were saying in German (though I’ve never studied that language at all), so presumably the Japanese was something similar.

THURSDAY, JULY 24

TOKYO, JAPAN

I was not on a particular schedule today, but I woke up right at 6:30am. After getting ready I again headed over to McDonalds for breakfast. I got the Egg McMuffin meal again, but this time instead of the savory pie I got a warm mixture of edamame and sweet corn that is apparently similar to what many Japanese people have for breakfast. I noticed a similar succotash dish on the buffet at the hotel. (By the way, the hotel breakfast would have added 1,800 yen or \$12.30 to the room rate—and they don’t seem to have any robots working in the restaurant.) It was interesting that when ordering “to go” the coffee cup was automatically placed in a little plastic bag, and the clerk automatically included a packet of sugar and a tub of “coffee fresh” (presumably fake cream) on the side.

Japan is very much a land of wasteful packaging. Tourists often complain that there are essentially no public trash cans at all in Japan, yet they’re presented with a higher amount of trash than usual that needs to be disposed of. I saw another example of this when I was going around yesterday. A woman was selling maple cookies (Japanese people are even more into maple than Canadians are.) She sold the cookies in sets of various numbers. In each set the individual cookies were each placed on a cardboard bottom and wrapped in cellophane. Then the number that were sold together were placed in a box with more cellophane on the inside of it and a piece of tissue paper on top. The top of the box was added, and then the whole box was shrink-wrapped. Then the box was presented to the customer in a plastic bag. I gather this is very standard, especially for products that might be given as gifts.

They sort trash in Japan, but only glass and metal are recycled. Paper is placed with food scraps and sent to be composted, and plastic is burned. Pretty much anything there’s any doubt about (like plastic-lined paper food containers) is sent to the incinerator. They actually generate a fair amount of their electricity here from burning trash. The garbage trucks here have separate compartments for the different things, and everyone appears to put out three bins on trash day.

While I was out I also stopped at the Daimon subway station and picked up a three-day subway pass I’d ordered online ahead of time. I’m not sure if this will actually save any money, but being prepaid, it’s money I don’t need to worry about now. Like the long-distance train pass, this is something only available to foreigners, so I had to scan my passport and a QR code I’d been sent to claim it.

A little after 8:30 I left the hotel and headed back to the subway. I rode one stop north to Shimbashi station and then transferred to the Ginza line, which I took up to Ueno. It’s amusing that most subway trains in Tokyo are painted to match the colors in which the lines appear on the subway map. I started out in a pink car and then switched to an orange car the rest of the way.

The Ginza line is the oldest subway in Asia, dating back to the 1920s. Because of its age it was built with smaller stations that can only accommodate six-car trains, while other lines have as many as ten cars. Trains come frequently on the Ginza line, but they’re still very crowded.

The trains in Tokyo are all air conditioned, but the second I stepped outside I started sweating. The government weather service issued an “extreme heat warning” for greater Tokyo today, with temperatures again expected in the upper 30s (that would be upper 90s Fahrenheit). I was got completely soaked in sweat just walking about half a mile to my destination.

I followed a bunch of pedestrian tunnels and escalators (including one escalator with a weird, long level area in the middle of it) before eventually finding an exit from Ueno station (which, by the way, is pronounced “WAY-no”, rather like the Waymo driverless taxis. I walked a couple blocks through the shopping area in Ueno and then took an elevator to the roof of a mall that doubles as the entrance to

Ueno Park, one of the largest green spaces in a mostly concrete metropolis. Ueno Park has lots of athletic facilities, and they were being used quite heavily today. It was kind of fun to walk past some high school boys who were taking batting practice on a baseball field in the park.



Baseball practice in Ueno Park, Tokyo

Eventually I found my ultimate destination, the Tokyo National Museum. I joined a long queue at the ticket machines, and it was fascinating to see that visitors from all over the world were pressing “English” on the language option screen. As with most things here, Japanese is the default language, but there are options to switch to Chinese, Korean, and English. I heard people in front of me speaking French, Spanish, and something Scandinavian, and of course all of them chose English to buy their tickets. So did some people who looked Asian but apparently weren’t Japanese, Korean, or Chinese. I did notice that one of them had a credit card that said “Bank of Singapore”, so I suppose that answers the question on where he was from.



School kids admiring a screen painting at Tokyo National Museum

The national museum wasn’t really what I was expecting. I’d pictured it as Japan’s Smithsonian, and really it’s the Met. There is an element of history to the place, but first and foremost it’s an art museum. I have to say that the Asian wing at most art museums is something I go through quickly, and the Tokyo National Museum is just a larger version of those.

It didn’t help that the place was extremely crowded. It seemed like half the school kids in the country were taking field trips there today. It amused me that they all wore old-fashioned uniforms like you might have seen at a Catholic school in America back in the ‘70s—white blouses and plaid skirts on the girls, and shirts and ties for the boys.



Statue of the Spirit of Fire

The national museum is absolutely massive, with two enormous buildings. I enjoyed it, but I do wish there had been more on the history of Japan. I did learn a few things, though. For instance, I found that samurai armor wasn’t generally made of metal (though their very sharp swords definitely were). Instead the “armor” was generally made of leather and straw. It was really more ceremonial than protective. I also found out that Zojoji, the temple I’d visited yesterday, was also both the home and burial place of the shoguns who ruled this era back when Tokyo was called Edo. There was a special exhibition on powerful women of Japan, and much of it was about the women who amounted to the shoguns’ harem. Those women lived in a sort of dorm that was one of the buildings I’d walked past at Zojoji.

While I was at the museum I used the restroom. The signs for the toilets here are generally in red and blue, with stylized stick figures to show which is intended for each sex. The sign on the men’s room said “western-style toilet”, and it contained a standard ultra-modern Japanese toilet—bidet combo, something that’s never been found in any “western” country. The label distinguishes it from a traditional Japanese toilet, which was porcelain squat basin I remember seeing in the U.S.S.R. years ago. Apparently lots of older Japanese people still prefer squat toilets, which is why they bother labeling the type that is provided.

By the way, I mentioned that the toilet on the airplane struck me as smaller than standard. Having used several now, I can confirm that the dimensions of the Toto “washlet” that is ubiquitous in Japan are indeed less than those of the basic throne built by American Standard. While there are fewer overweight people in Japan than there are in the States, I’ve seen a lot of folks who I do think would have issues using them. Younger people in particular tend to have bigger frames than their parents, which makes me wonder if the sizes of toilets (and everything else, for that matter) might not change in the future.

I spent about an hour and a half at the Tokyo National Museum before walking back into the heat of Ueno Park. The most interesting thing on the way back to the station was a college-aged western man (a white guy with a Washington Wizards jersey) who

was playing rock songs on the violin. He was really quite a good musician, and it was definitely not what I expected to hear as I was walking through the park.

Perhaps it was the violinist who inspired me, but I ended up having lunch today at the Hard Rock Café. There are actually two Hard Rock locations in Tokyo, one of which is in a mall right in Ueno Station. I had a bacon cheeseburger and a mojito (rum, lime juice, and mint). The mojito was more ice than drink, but it was still refreshing. I mentioned earlier that McDonalds is cheap in Japan. The same can't be said of the Hard Rock. I paid 3,380 yen for my lunch, which works out to \$23.10. That is probably cheaper than it would be at a Hard Rock back home, but it's likely to be the most I'll spend on a meal here.



Marunouchi façade of Tokyo Station

I walked a few blocks through the Marunouchi neighborhood (the area's name comes from the Imperial Palace's moat) with the plan of going to the next subway station to the south. I must have missed the entrance for that one, so I kept walking and walking while getting more and more dehydrated in the blazing heat. By the time I finally did find a station, I was just a couple stops from Daimon. I downed two full bottles of pop in my room back at the hotel before I was in a condition to write some more on this.

I considered a bunch of options for dinner tonight, but nothing sounded good. I ended up back at McDonalds, which was probably a mistake. I had their McTeriyaki®, which was way too sweet for my taste. I couldn't finish the thing. The fries were all right, and I also had an old-fashioned fried apple pie. Again the prices were good—less than five bucks for the teriyaki burger combo and under a dollar for the apple pie.

I watched some more Japanese early in the evening. It was a news show, though for the most part I have no clue at all what any of the news was about. I'm going to insert a screenshot from that news program here, and you can see why I have no clue. Google



Scene from NHK News

Translate tells me that the Japanese caption means “The red ribbon goes well with it.” All I see is some bratty kid eating.

On a vaguely related note, something I'd read about the Japanese language was confirmed at the museum this morning. Some of their displays are of old scrolls full of careful calligraphy. They explained that traditionally Japanese was written vertically, with the columns read from right to left. They noted that older Japanese books were also typeset that way. However, with the coming of the computer age, a switch happened in Japanese writing. In modern times it's invariably written horizontally and read from left to right, just as most other languages are. It's

still written syllable by syllable. I've actually used that fact when the information screens on the trains display station names. I know “Daimon” has two syllables, for instance, which makes it easier to figure out which of the upcoming stations it must be. Those screens do occasionally switch to English, but the Japanese shows far more often.

This evening I had second bit of pre-booked entertainment. I took the subway to Asakusa (pronounced “ah-SOCK-sah” with the silent “u” that's everywhere in Japanese), which is one of the big nightlife areas in Tokyo. I was here to see a tourist-oriented dance production called the Kaguwa Cabaret. I'd enjoyed similar shows in Spain, Mexico, Ukraine, and Iceland, and I really liked this one as well. The information with my ticket said that the doors would open at 7pm, but the program wouldn't start until 8:00. I didn't want to sit around bored for an hour, so I tried to time my arrival for 7:30. That ended out working great. While the proprietors seemed surprised that I'd come so late, it allowed me to enjoy my one complimentary drink and get settled in before the show. They of course tried to upsell additional drinks and various snacks, but the freebie was enough for me.

While I hadn't paid extra, I was seated at a table by myself in the very front row. I was right up next to the five women and two men that formed the company. They did both historic and modern dances, many of which told stories through the movement. The timing was impeccable, and I couldn't begin to count how many costume changes they went through in just an hour's time. Everything was beautifully done, and I was very glad I went.

Of course I took the subway back to the hotel after the show. I was amazed by how busy it was late at night. Even in New York things slow down on the trains when it gets dark—unless there's a ballgame or some other special event. In Tokyo they're busy all day long. The trains are crowded—not just at rush hour, but from dawn to dusk. I'm glad I'm settled in my hotel, because I wouldn't want to have to drag around luggage to change to another place.



FRIDAY, JULY 25

TOKYO & CHIBA, JAPAN

This morning I attempted to find a more creative place to have breakfast than McDonalds. That was no small task, though, and in fact I didn't succeed. There are a couple of Australian-owned coffee houses and also a Denny's in the immediate area. Those didn't open until 7:30am, though, while the Daimon McDonalds is 24-hour. (I must say 7:30 seems a strangely late opening hour to me, since the neighborhood is hopping from six.) I did check after one of the coffee houses was open, but it looked like it would be a chore to eat at. The ordering is all at a counter, and you sit individually at big tables—just like the hotel breakfast bars I hate. I also considered the restaurant in the hotel. It serves a very traditional Japanese breakfast, which mostly means fish with rice and noodles. They charge 1300 yen (\$8.85) for that, which is more than double the price at McD's.

So I went back to McDonalds, where the woman who works the day shift at the counter seems to view me as a regular now. This time I got a raspberry macaron as the side order with my breakfast combo. Fussier pastries aren't what I generally think of at McDonalds, but this one wasn't bad.

I technically spent most of the day today outside of Tokyo, though I was still well within the metro area. In fact if anything things seemed more urban and developed than they did when I went to Mt. Takao the other day.

After breakfast I made my way to Tokyo Station (which I'd been past yesterday). I went down to the third basement level to board a Sobu line train towards Chiba. Chiba is an independent city that's on the east side of Tokyo Bay. Chiba prefecture (i.e., state) is where Narita Airport is located, in the same way that New York's Newark Airport is in New Jersey. The airport is actually quite a ways north of the city of Chiba, but the area we went through on the train from Narita the other day was pretty similar to what I saw on the Sobu line today.



Typical views between Tokyo and Chiba

Of the places I've been, suburban Tokyo probably looks most like suburban Madrid. It's a mix of high-rise apartments, single-family homes on tiny lots, industrial parks, and shopping centers. Some of it's in excellent condition, while other stuff looks tacky.

Everything seems to have been built relatively recently, though. It also just sprawls on and on and on. It reminded me of taking the train from Los Angeles to San Bernardino, where there's similar close-packed sprawl. The difference, though, is that Chiba is closer in size to San Diego than San Bernardino, and Tokyo is many times the size of L.A. It's about a forty-minute ride on the express train from Tokyo to Chiba (an hour and a half on the local train), and it's completely developed the entire way.



Mister Donut by Chiba Monorail

monorails in Seattle or at Disney World do, the Chiba monorail hangs from a single rail and essentially flies over the streets of the city. At right is a picture of the monorail entering a station. It mostly looks like a normal train station, but if you look closely, you can see there's just a big gap at the bottom and no tracks there. The guy on his phone obviously didn't care that the train was just suspended in the air, so I figured I'd be safe as well. It's kind of a weird way to travel, but it was actually a pretty smooth ride.

I took the monorail about 5 kilometers south to Dobutsukoen station, which sounds like it should be a Russian word. My ultimate destination was the Chiba Zoo, whose main entrance is directly connected to that station.

You won't see any animal pictures in today's section of the travelogue. That's because I realized after I left that I'd forgotten my camera at the zoo. I'm pretty sure that happened when I got out my phone and then put the phone down to respond to an e-mail from my brother Paul. At any rate, The pictures I took at the zoo were lost with the camera. Most travel guides will tell you that Japanese people are scrupulously honest, so there's a good chance that camera was taken to the zoo's lost and found. It's a cheap camera, though, and not really worth the trouble of going back to Chiba to retrieve it. I don't really like using my phone for pictures, but I guess that's what I'll have to do for the rest of the trip.

While it was of course annoyingly hot, I rather liked the Chiba Zoo. It's a small zoo, but nicely done. It reminded me a lot like Blank Park Zoo in Des Moines. They basically have one of about every type of animal, and the enclosures are small enough that there's not too many places for the animals to hide out in the heat. There's also a nice indoor rainforest exhibit, and it was kind of amusing in the hot weather to be able to cool off in the rainforest. There wasn't really much about the zoo that was unique to Asia. In fact the sections they were proudest of were the rainforest and an Australian exhibit.

I spent about two hours at the zoo, and it was past lunch time when I left. After first heading the wrong direction, I eventually took the monorail back to Tendai station, where I stopped at one of those many shopping centers that dot the Tokyo suburbs. This one had a small parking lot with about equal areas devoted to cars and bikes, and the train station was right above that parking lot.

The shopping center was a two-story cement block building. A supermarket called Beza filled the entire first floor, and I spent quite a while checking it out. The whole store reeked of fish, which is of course a big part of the local diet. About half the store was devoted to fresh goods, with frozen occupying the second largest section. Canned and boxed goods were a much smaller share of the store than they'd be at home. Prices seemed to be all over the place. The sense I had was that things produced locally were cheap, while anything imported was very expensive. The fresh goods were also expensive (you may have heard about the absurdly pricey Japanese fruit), but the quality looked good. I bought a box of instant coffee packets that will help me avoid going to McDonalds again for breakfast as well as some pop and a candy bar. The whole purchase was about 1,000 yen (\$6.75), with the coffee making up the bulk of that.

Upstairs they had a home goods store, an Anytime Fitness, restrooms (which I desperately needed at this point), and my next destination, a restaurant called Saizeriya. This could be described as a Japanese chain of Italian-inspired restaurants. I'm sure true Italians would thumb their nose at the place, but for me it made a nice place to have lunch.

Saizeriya is known by the Japanese people mostly for its cheapness. They feature a self-service drink bar at 200 yen (\$1.35) for unlimited fountain drinks, coffee, and tea, and apparently the place is popular with students who just order the drink bar and then sit and study all day. The food is equally inexpensive. I had a western-style salad (shredded chicken and cherry tomatoes over salad mix with a weird dressing that seemed like a mix of ketchup and mayonnaise), the drink bar, a main course I'll describe in the next paragraph, and a dish of flan (which they technically called Italian caramel cream), all for 1,050 yen (\$7.10).

You may recall that a year ago I visited the last Mister Donut location in the United States, which is on a seedy strip in Alton, Illinois. Doughnuts are big in Japan, as is anything with a mascot. Mister Donut combines the two, and while it died in America it thrived in Asia. For amusement as much as anything I stopped at a Mister Donut in Chiba station, where I had a custard cream bismarck. It was far from the best doughnut I've ever had, but it wasn't bad.

Mister Donut was right next to my first destination of the day. Transit nerd that I am, part of the reason I'd come to Chiba was to ride the Chiba Urban Monorail, which happens to be the world's longest suspended monorail. You read that right. Instead of straddling concrete hump like the



Monorail entering a station

The main dish was called doria. I'd read reviews from others that described it as lasagna made with rice instead of pasta. It's rice topped by a very rich meat sauce made with cream (no tomato) and I think Worcestershire sauce, and then cheese melted and browned on top. It was really delicious, and something I just might try copying at home at some point.

After lunch I went back to Chiba station and caught a train back to Tokyo. It was interesting that both directions on this trip some of my fellow passengers were hauling cellos in cases with them. This morning there was a woman who apparently was a professional cellist. She had stickers on her case showing all the places she'd performed. The guy this afternoon didn't have any stickers but he did sport the same awkward, oversized case.

On the ride back to Tokyo I decided to pay a small supplement to ride in the "green car". There's nothing green about the green car, either in color or environmentalism. The green car is what in Europe they'd call "first class". On commuter trains in Japan most cars have bench seating at the sides facing an aisle. While the seats tend to be decently padded, the configuration is the same as you'd find in a standard subway car. The green cars are double-decker carriages with forward-facing, reclining seats. Because of the supplement the green car is also uncrowded and quiet. It's a nice place to ride, and on a short trip it costs just a couple bucks extra.

I made my way back to the hotel and confirmed that the camera wasn't buried under something else. I think the trip to Chiba had primed my mind with an idea for supper. I'd seen a Burger King near Chiba station, and I thought that if there was one relatively near to me, that might be a good dinner idea. There actually isn't a Burger King anywhere in Minato, and in fact I'd have to spend about half an hour on the subway to get to one. I ended up going to Akihabara, which has the nickname "electric town" and is one of the trendiest areas in the city. (I've never really thought of Burger King as "trendy", but I suppose it might be from a foreign perspective. I made my way through a throng of oddly dressed college kids to have my meal.

While Burger King has kiosks with an English option, they're quite a bit more complicated to order from than the McDonalds kiosks. I ended up ordering what they call an "ugly burger", which has crispy cheese melted on the outside of the bun that supposedly makes it look ugly. While not the best burger I've had, it wasn't bad—far better than McD's teriyaki burger. Burger King's "set menu" had a big choice of side items, and I went with a small salad instead of fries or onion rings. It consisted of iceberg lettuce with absolutely no other vegetables and a tiny pouch of Caesar dressing (no other option). Saizeriya definitely did better in the salad department.

I made my back to Hamamatsucho and stopped briefly at the 7-Eleven a block from the hotel. Mostly I picked up some pastries I'll have with the instant coffee for breakfast tomorrow.

Back at the hotel I decided to do a load of laundry while I was working on the travelogue. The bar in the hotel restaurant was hopping, but I'd have a more subdued Friday night. I had the time to get the laundry done tonight, though. It was interesting that the washing machine dispensed its own detergent. It also charged by weight—100 yen per kilogram, with a minimum charge of 500 yen (\$3.40). The dryer charged 200 yen (\$1.25) for twenty minutes, and even after two cycles many of the clothes were still a bit damp. They've got a couple days to dry out before I have to travel with them, though.

SATURDAY, JULY 26

TOKYO, JAPAN

This morning I was up around six and began the day by boiling some water in the electric kettle that came with the room to make instant coffee. While it's essentially the same kettle they had when I was in New Zealand and England, the Japanese one runs on 100-volt power rather than the 220 they use in Europe and down under. That means it takes longer to do the boiling, but it did eventually get the job done. 100-volt is actually less than the 110 we use in America, but it's close enough that things manufactured for the U.S. market work fine—which is likely why for decades U.S. electronics were invariably made in Japan.

Another quirk about electricity in Japan is that it uses American sockets, but only the two-prong kind. Things that come with a grounded three-pin plug (like my travel computer) need an adaptor. Fortunately I'd heard that ahead of time, but apparently a lot of Americans are caught off guard by that.

With my coffee I had a cream puff and a popular Japanese breakfast food called "melon pan". The "pan" here means "bread"; they borrowed the same word from Portuguese that I'd expect in Spanish. The name refers to its appearance rather than its taste. They score the top of the roll and caramelize sugar in the cracks. That gives it a rough surface that's supposed to look like the outside of a melon. To me it also resembled that ugly burger I had last night. While the picture here is from Wikipedia and shows some melon pan from a bakery, they look pretty much identical to the one I got from 7-Eleven. It really tasted pretty good.

The melon pan cost 149 yen (basically a dollar). Like almost all Japanese products, it actually had two prices written on it. It first said 138¥ in relatively large type and then had 149¥ in parentheses and a smaller font after that. The prices are what things cost before and after tax. Stores are required to show the tax-included price, but they often choose to feature the



feature the pre-tax price to make things seem cheaper. There are apparently two symbols for yen, though the only one I've regularly seen is ¥, which is supposedly the kanji for "circle" (as in coin). That is always written after the amount. Apparently ¥ is also used for yen in international trade (and put before the amount), though at exchange places and ATMs I instead saw things written with the western letters "JPY".

That's as good a place as any to force a transition to Japanese money. There are three bills and six coins that are in common circulation, several of which have multiple designs. The coins are honestly kind of boring. They remind me most of the Soviet coins I picked up years ago. All except the 5-yen coin have the value written as a western number on one side and a design from the natural world on the other. (The five is only written in Japanese characters.) The absolutely worthless 1-yen coin is aluminum, the 5-yen is brass, the 10-yen is copper, and the 50- and 100-yen coins are nickel. Both the five and fifty have holes in the middle of them, and the 50 has ridged edges. The 5-yen and 50-yen are also the exact same size, though the five has a slightly larger hole. The 10-yen and 100-yen are also the same size (roughly that of an American nickel), which has to be confusing for blind people. The 1-yen is smaller (the size of a penny), but no one ever really uses it anyway.

There's also a 500-yen coin which supposedly has three different designs. The most common I've seen is bimetallic, with brass on the outside and nickel in the middle. It looks almost identical to a Canadian \$2 coin or a 2-euro coin. I've also gotten an older design that's a solid brass coin of the same size, and supposedly they still have an old-style oval-shaped 500-yen coin as well. Five hundred yen is a lot of money (about \$3.40), and it's weird to think of a coin the size of a quarter being worth so much.



Back of a 1000-yen banknote

spend for most transactions. Fortunately 7-Eleven has automatic bill changers at their check-outs that make for an easy way to use them. The bills are green. The front features a very stern-looking man who apparently was the guy that introduced western-style capitalism to Japan. On the back is a picture of Tokyo Station, which I showed earlier in this travelogue.

All the bills are roughly the same size as American money, and they're all made of banknote paper as opposed to the plastic that is becoming more popular around the world. The newer bills have numerous obvious security features, while the older ones don't. The bill acceptors seem don't seem to care whether bills are old or new, though, so obviously there's some hidden security in the old banknotes too.

I have the morning news on in the background as I write this. While of course I can't figure out what they're saying, I can follow some of the stories. Perhaps most interesting was a feature on baseball player Shohei Ohtani's success with the Los Angeles Dodgers. They had a clip of all his home runs this year, and beside it they showed a stack of pancakes going up one by one for each home run. I could make out the presumably made-up word "Sho-tower", which presumably was describing the tower those pancakes created. Eventually the graphic showed the stack of pancakes being topped with a fried egg. I suppose that must be popular in Japan, but it's not anything I'd choose.

Around 9am I walked eastward toward the waterfront. The buildings here are beautiful, a mix of luxury condos, top-level hotels, and the headquarters of major corporations. In the middle of that area I boarded another in the string of transportation modes that would highlight this trip. Today's was the Yurikamome, or the waterfront line. This is a driverless, rubber-tired train. It's the same technology that's used in airport people movers all around the world, except that here it stretches on for nine miles and connects sixteen stations.

The line first passed the rather dreary 2020 Olympic village, which has been repurposed as government housing for the poor (Perhaps the museum I visited at the start of the trip was foreshadowing that.) Then came the highlight of the trip, when the train crossed over the harbor on the enormous Rainbow Bridge, which also carries a tollway. On the other side of the bridge is the artificial island of Odaiba (often just called Daiba). This was built in the mid 1800s to defend Tokyo from invading navies. I could still see the battlements at the edge of the island closest to the bridge. Today, though, Odaiba is a playground for the wealthy, and it features numerous tourist attractions popular with both domestic and foreign tourists. While I saw more Americans in Odaiba than I did



Yurikamome approach to Rainbow Bridge

anywhere else in Tokyo, I saw more Japanese people than anyone else. That was probably because this was a weekend, and weekends are the time when Japanese parents take their kids on family outings.

All over Odaiba there are signs like the one at right, which give the elevation of the location and caution about the need to evacuate in a tsunami. The sign in the picture is actually about the highest ground on the island. There were signs showing elevations as low as 1 meter. Something that I wondered about was that in addition to a bridge, there's also a highway tunnel between Odaiba and the mainland. I wonder what happens to that in a tsunami.

My ultimate destination was a place that in English is called the Museum of Emerging Technologies. The Japanese name (which most often seems to be written in Roman letters) is Miraikan. This was an extremely popular place. In addition to the family outings I mentioned earlier (which likely also took in the beaches and shopping centers on the island), there were also bus tours of students on trips from across Japan. Then there were all the European college kids who were taking a gap year across Asia. I waited for about fifteen minutes in the ticket line before finally handing over 630 yen (\$4.25) for admission.

Miraikan is run by the Japanese Institute for Science, and it is a celebration of all things scientific. The current U.S. government would probably hate the place, but I absolutely loved it. I spent a couple hours there, and had it been less crowded, I'd likely have stayed there longer.



Tsunami sign

There are both static and interactive exhibits on almost any aspect of science you could imagine—and some you likely wouldn't.



Robot pets

It was no surprise to see a huge area devoted to robot technology. Probably the most interesting part of that was a display on robot pets that the kids were having particular fun with. Another area I found fascinating was a display on the science of aging and the technology that is being used to help older people. They look in detail at the science behind the many problems people face as they age and what is being done to overcome them.

Aging is probably the biggest issue Japan is facing. It has the longest life expectancy and also the oldest population of any major country on earth. As people retire, there are fewer people to replace them, which is why a lot of jobs are rapidly being replaced by technology. That aging population also has a host of medical problems, and they are being dealt with in both simple and complex ways. One of those that



Tactile strip on the sidewalk

I've seen absolutely everywhere is shown in the picture at right, which I mostly took to show typical vending machines. In front of the machines, though, you'll see a yellow stripe. I'm used to seeing those at the edge of train platforms, but that's far from the only place they use them here. They have stripes like that on walkways everywhere in Japan, both indoors and outside. On sidewalks they separate the flow of traffic, with people keeping to the left of the yellow whichever direction they're walking. Blind people move their canes along them to keep walking straight, and the texture changes in different ways to show obstacles (like a crosswalk or those vending machines) are nearby. It's a relatively simple thing, though it had to cost a fortune to install those stripes everywhere around the country. The yellow stripes were just one of the ways the museum pointed out as a technology that helps the elderly.

After seeing the museum I had lunch at a food truck that was parked outside. I had tandoori chicken and cabbage wrapped with naan bread. It's probably the mildest Indian food I've ever had, but it did make for a nice meal. I also got some sparkling apple soda from the vending machine in the picture. Together the lunch cost 890 yen, or about \$5.90.

I took the people mover back to Shimbashi station and caught the subway over to Shibuya, what most people consider the modern-day heart of the city. The subways aren't any less crowded on weekends. People are going different places, but they still use the trains to get around. Shibuya is a big shopping area, and a lot of people were also headed to a big beer festival they were having there today.

It's interesting that the Ginza subway is underground everywhere except at Shibuya, a place that was out in the sticks when the subway was first built. The terminal is above ground, and I walked down a series of escalators and staircases to get to my next destination, the Shibuya Scramble. This is probably the most famous intersection in Japan. Six different streets come together at odd angles in a massive amount of pavement. Cars on the different streets go through a cycle of the various possible movements. Every couple of minutes, though, pedestrians from all directions are given the right of way to cross in every direction at once (hence the name "scramble"). Pretty much everyone who comes to Japan seems to include the scramble in their itinerary, and I made my way across it as well. The

area looks a lot like Times Square, and it feels as crowded as Times Square must be on New Year's Eve. I was glad to get to the other side without incident, and I vowed to leave by another way.



Shibuya Scramble

If you look closely, something you'll notice in the picture are all the women with parasols (really just plain umbrellas, but we'll use the more pleasant term). That's been true everywhere I've gone in Tokyo, probably due to the hot weather. The women all have parasols, and people of both sexes carry battery-operated personal fans. I'm not sure how much good either actually does in the heat, but they're definitely popular.

My ultimate destination in Shibuya was the flagship store of Don Quijote, a chain of stores the locals call "Donki". I'd been to a Don Quijote store in Hawaii, and I figured it would be fun to check out one in Japan. The Shibuya store is immense. It has seven above-ground floors and two basement levels filled with pretty much anything you could imagine wanting to buy. I could have bought a battery-operated personal fan, for instance, for anywhere between 999 and 2,999 yen.

What I actually bought at Don Quijote was food. Kit-Kat bars are supposed to be the souvenir of Japan. Supposedly the name "Kit-Kat" sounds similar to the Japanese words for "good luck", which is why they became popular here. At any rate, I got some Kit-Kats in various unusual flavors. I also bought a straw fan with an image of Mt. Fuji on it and some beverages—the strangest of which was sparkling orange juice in a clear plastic can. You see plastic bottles all the time, but I'm pretty sure I've never seen a plastic can of pop before.

When I was done in Shibuya I made my way back to the subway and purposely chose a less crowded route than the Ginza line. While I wasn't entirely sure where I was going, I actually made it back to the hotel in about fifteen minutes, with just one quick transfer along the way. That's one of the quickest and easiest transit trips I've had so far in Japan.

After resting up at the hotel a bit, around 5pm I set out for the evening. First I ended up going the wrong direction on the Oedo line subway, that circle line that I got lost on the other day. While the routing of that line is particularly screwed up, it's not hard to get directions mixed up in general. Like most transit systems, they do use the final stop as the destination on signage. However, sometimes those destinations change at different times. (New York has that same issue.) Moreover, the words for many of those destinations look surprisingly similar in English. It's not enough to just focus on the first part of the word; you have to look at everything. Fortunately when I realized my mistake tonight the next station had an island platform, so it was easy to just go back the other way. It did add about ten minutes to the trip, though, and it meant I was in a bit of a rush to get where I was going.

I took the Oedo line to Shin-Okachimachi Station, where I changed to a train I'd not taken before called the Tsukuba Express. (The first word is basically pronounced "scuba".) I rode just one stop north to Asakusa, but a different Asakusa station than I'd been to the other day. When I surfaced, my destination was just around the corner, past another Don Quijote store.

My prepaid booking tonight was for a sumo presentation. I was again the very last person to enter, and this time things started almost immediately after I was seated. Basically this was dinner theatre. We were served a traditional part of a sumo wrestler's diet, chanko-nabe. They call this "hot pot", but basically it's a stew that includes chunks of chicken, chicken meatballs, cabbage, carrots, and onions in a broth that's apparently based on chicken, mushrooms, bonito (fish) flakes, kelp (seaweed), and soy sauce. The ingredients in the stew were fine, though the broth honestly wasn't my favorite. The dinner also included a piece of cold fried chicken, sushi tempura (rice filled with tofu, then battered and fried), edamame (soybeans), and two little pieces of what was basically a Swiss roll (cake and cream rolled up tightly). We were also given something I thought was a coaster, but it turned out to be a cookie. It was printed with the silhouette of a sumo wrestler on it. While it wasn't my favorite meal, I finished everything. One free drink was included, and I just had a Coke Zero. You could order additional food or drink at extra cost. I didn't, but many people did. The woman I was seated next to must have really liked the Swiss rolls; she ordered three extra portions at 400 yen a piece.

Real sumo matches normally take place in winter, so this show was staged by two retired wrestlers and an emcee who was from Canada. The emcee began by giving a brief history of sumo and explaining the significance of the meal, and in particular the fact that the meat in it was chicken. In sumo the wrestlers have to stay on two feet, so traditionally they chose to only eat animals that had two feet. He then explained that the competitors traditionally take the names "Asanodori" and "Asanokuma", which basically mean defender of the east and west respectively. He had the crowd root for one of those two based on our location. (I rooted for Asanokuma, who was the ultimate winner.)

The wrestlers then demonstrated the pre-match rituals, such as sprinkling the ring (dohyo) with copious amounts of salt to purify it. There's also a specific sequence of stretches that they do before the match and a starting pose that indicates that they are honorable (i.e., not cheating).



Purifying the dohyo

We were taught the rules of sumo, which are fairly simple. The first one who either puts any part of his body outside the ring or touches the floor with anything but his feet loses. Also things that are obviously unsafe (like poking someone in the eye) are prohibited. Beyond that, pretty much anything goes.



Demonstration umo match



Posing with the fighters

Apparently a standard sumo match is done as a best of three, and the full three matches are likely to take no more than ten or fifteen minutes. The demonstration we saw was less than ten minutes, and I'm pretty sure it was planned to go all three rounds.

After the "official" match, the wrestlers took questions, by way of the bilingual emcee. One of the most interesting things I learned is that the garment the wrestlers wear is a single strip of fabric that is seven meters long.

They asked for volunteers from the audience to go up against the wrestlers. People from Mexico, France, the Netherlands, England, Australia, and the U.S. (Mississippi) took up the challenge. It was interesting that most of the Europeans had skills in sports like judo and karate. I'm sure the outcomes were planned. Basically the adults lost miserably, and the kids won.

Finally they had everyone in the audience come up for a complimentary photo with the fighters and a woman dressed in a geisha outfit. I threw mine in below. At least my belly isn't quite as big as the one on the man next to me.

While the sumo show wasn't my favorite, I'm glad I went. I learned a few things, and it was a fun way to spend a couple of hours.

When I left the sumo club they were having some festival in Asakusa with fireworks going off. I didn't linger, but it was kind of cool to see them as I made my way to the station.

After the sumo demo I took the subway back to the hotel, which is obviously where I snapped the picture at right. I took it to point out a number of things. One is the ridiculous shoes



that the woman on the right is wearing. Second is the contrast in the two women's outfits. People on this train were dressed to the nines or dressed very casually, and people dressed in both types of outfits were going out clubbing for the evening. On the other hand, I think the man was just on his way home from work. Third, you'll notice that everyone is on their cell phones. That's been true on almost every train ride I've taken, even though there are posters and announcements saying you shouldn't do that. Finally, you'll notice there's a pink poster in the window above these people. That indicates that at weekday rush hours this is the women's car. They've had huge problems with men groping women on the crowded trains, and cars for women only were introduced as a remedy for that.

I got back to Hamamatsucho, and things were very much hopping on Saturday night. Indeed, it was clear that lots of people had already consumed a bit more than they should. Everyone was pretty tame, though, and I made it back to the hotel without any issues.

SUNDAY, JULY 27

TOKYO & NIKKO, JAPAN

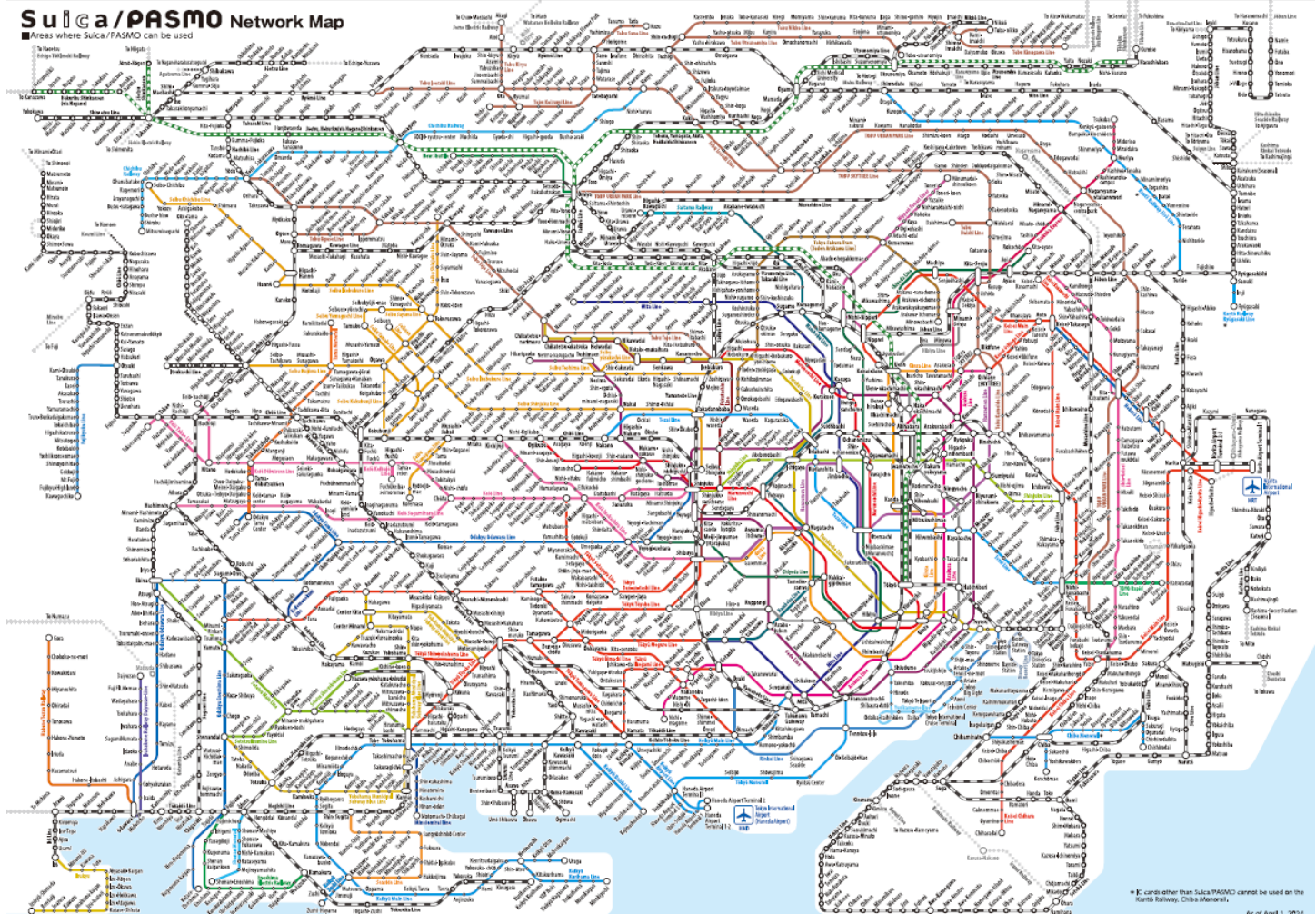
While the main thing on the agenda today was a bus tour, I think I ended up walking more than I did any other day of this trip. Nonetheless, it was a very enjoyable day.

I was wide awake before six this morning and spent a while watching Sunday morning TV in Japan. It was a weird mix of informercials, music videos, animé, and the Japanese equivalent of *American Idol*. As in New Zealand, they also did blocks of

commercials, with as many as a dozen in a row before going back to actual programs.

I left the hotel right at 7am and was a bit surprised to find trash strewn all around Hamamatsucho. Tokyo is generally quite clean (almost to a fault), but obviously the drunk people last night were less than tidy. I would find the litter would disappear by the time I got back tonight.

I scanned my 72-hour metro pass for the penultimate time and rode up to Ginza, where I had an awkward transfer to another subway line. I ended up walking underground for nearly fifteen minutes, including going up and down various stairways, escalators, and elevators. A lot of the transfers are awkward in Japan. I think that's because they have so many different lines that were often built and in many cases still operated by different companies. While they can all be paid for with the same fare cards, they're not really meant to connect easily. Connections almost always involve a lot of walking, with signs showing the walk can be as long as 1,200 meters.



Map of all subways and commuter trains in the greater Tokyo area

I'd made this connection so I could avoid going through Shinjuku station again. Instead I made my way to a much smaller station in the same complex called Nishi-Shinjuku (literally "West Shinjuku"). Nishi-Shinjuku only has about half a dozen exits, and my destination was just a block away from one of them. I made my way upstairs and easily found Tokyo's copy of the LOVE sculpture I know as a feature of Philadelphia.

Unlike some of my other ticketed experiences, I arrived for this one about half an hour before I needed to. I filled a bit of time by getting some breakfast at a 7—Eleven on the same plaza as the LOVE sculpture. I had a ham and cucumber sandwich and a chocolate éclair. I also bought some dental floss, which I'd been wanting to get. This was the first place I saw it for sale in Japan.

It appears that the LOVE statue is the meeting place for just about every group tour in Tokyo. Hundreds of people from all over the world were waiting for different buses. It was fascinating to see Asian people who I thought were Japanese speaking in very American English. I also heard lots of Spanish, as well as French, German, Russian, and a couple of languages I didn't recognize.

At about 8:10 I spotted a guy holding up a dark blue flag that said H.I.S. I have no idea what those initials stand for. I'd booked my tour through a different company, but the instructions said to look for that flag. I made my way over to the guy. He checked me off the list and gave me a seat assignment. I was in seat 3-A, and fortunately there was no seatmate in 3-B.

As with the tours I booked in New Zealand, the companies I booked with issued scannable codes that I was supposed to display on my phone. However, also like New Zealand, nobody bothered with those codes. They just wanted to know my name and then checked me off a list.

The bus set off right at 8:30, and we began by following a weird combination of one-way streets in the Shinjuku area. After about ten minutes we were back to the subway station I'd gotten off at, just a block from where we started. We were however now going the right direction, and soon we entered a tunnel (with weird S-curves in it) that led to the expressway out of town.

Both the tunnel and the expressways we followed were toll. Every few miles we'd see signs that said "ETC" in Roman characters. I figured out that stood for the English words "electronic toll collection". We had to slow down to 20 km/h, and when we went through the tollbooth the transponder on the bus would ding and female voice would say something in Japanese (I assume something like how much toll was paid).

Both the tunnel and the actual expressway were four lanes (two in each direction) through most of Tokyo. Through much of the city it was a double-deck bridge sandwiched between apartment buildings, so it couldn't be easily widened. When we got to the more distant areas (out by the Sky Tree) and then crossed the line into another prefecture in the suburbs the road widened to six lanes. Nothing in the Tokyo metro area had a shoulder, though. It's got to be a nightmare when there are accidents. We didn't see a shoulder until we were in the middle of rice paddies far north of the city.

All the speed limits were shown on changeable signs like I'd seen in New Zealand. The speed limit in the tunnel was 60 km/h (about 40mph). On the four-lane sections of expressway it was 80 km/h (50mph), and on six-lane sections it was 120 km/h (75mph). The bus had a speed alert that would beep any time the driver attempted to exceed the speed limit.



Unique road signs

Japanese signs are a weird mish-mash. The speed limits were numbers in red circles, like they have in Europe. Warning signs, though, are yellow diamonds like America uses. Then there's the Japanese stop signs, which look kind of like yield signs but are solid red. I'm putting a website image of a stop sign here, as well as an image of one the most unique warning signs I saw, a monkey crossing sign.

Directional signs at the different exits were all bilingual in Japanese and English, but pretty much all the other signage was only in Japanese.



A very strange series of signs that came up periodically said "50m", "100m", and "150m". These were presumably spaced 50 meters apart. I'm not really sure what these are for, and a Google search brought up contradictory answers. It looked like many drivers were using them to get a safe following distance. Most of the time people did seem to leave quite a bit more space between vehicles than you'd see on an urban freeway in the States, and here it looked like that distance was about 50 meters.

The road surface was entirely asphalt, and much of the time it wasn't particularly well maintained. I don't know if that's just the roads we happened to drive on or if it's typical in Japan. Some of the time the expressways were in pretty sad shape, though—not something I'd want to pay toll for.

We passed a few gas stations, though way fewer than you'd see in the same length of road back home. None of brands is anything we have back home. By far the most common brand of gas is Eneos, which is apparently a Japanese company but always has western lettering on their signs. Prices ranged from 144 yen to 178 yen per liter, which would be between \$3.55 and \$4.38 a gallon.

Once we got out of the metro area we saw a lot of farms, including many where vegetables were being grown in greenhouses. We also saw tons of land covered in solar panels. Our guide noted that these have gone up as farmers have retired and had no children who wanted to take over their farms. With the population declining and almost everyone young moving to cities, there's nobody left to work the land.

I'd read that Japanese small towns were also dying, but the houses we saw in the towns looked nice. As in the cities they're crammed onto tiny lots, but they seem to be well kept. On the other hand, it doesn't look like there's much in the way of businesses in small towns. What we mostly saw were convenience stores and love hotels. The latter are places that will rent either overnight or by the hour to provide a place where a couple (married or otherwise) can have some fun. In Tokyo these are concentrated near certain infamous stations, but in the countryside they seem to be in every little town.

It was about a two-hour drive from Tokyo up to Nikko. As we made our way north, our guide (Shun) gave a lengthy explanation of Japanese history and religion. The reason for this was that we would be visiting the burial site of the first shogun and a summer retreat for later shoguns. The site houses both a Shinto shrine and a Buddhist temple, which very commonly go together.

Pretty much all Japanese practice Shinto, though many will say it's not so much a religion as it is a way of life. The guide noted that Shinto is involved in most happy life events—birthdays, graduations, and the like. Most Japanese will also say they are Buddhist, though they typically only visit temples at the new year and for funerals. Buddhism is generally associated with negative things, and people go to the temples to overcome bad luck in their lives.

Then there's Christianity, which came to Japan by way of Portuguese and British missionaries. Almost nobody in Japan claims to be Christian, but it is very popular for young people to be married in Anglican churches. A lot of Buddhist people will also attend mass at Catholic churches as an additional means of overcoming bad luck. Christmas is also celebrated by almost everyone in Japan, in both in a religious way (as a festival of peace) and in its secular forms. The mix of religions really is quite fascinating.

We made our way into the small city of Nikko, which looks like a resort town you might find in the mountains of Colorado or Alberta. (It reminded me a lot of Aspen.) Lots of wealthy people own second homes in the area, and foreign embassies have villas for their ambassadors here.

We parked at what was very obviously a tourist restaurant along a strip west of the historic area in Nikko. There is parking there for a dozen or so buses, large restrooms, an overpriced gift shop, and tables that could easily accommodate large groups for meals. We paused there for a restroom break, and then the guide led everyone as we walked about half a mile over to the historic site entrance.

The guide bought tickets for the group, and then we proceeded to go up and up and up to the various sights. There were 274 steps leading up to the shogun's grave—I counted. There was also probably a mile or so of level walking. Most of them were very awkward to negotiate. They were uneven (mostly cut from stone), and there were rarely any handrails. (Japanese people rarely use handrails even when they are available, I think due to that germaphobia that everyone in Asia seems to have.) I've had a lot of issues with my knee in recent months, and while it was slow going, I was glad that I was able to make it both to the top and back down again.



The journey upwards was worth it. All aspects of the sight were interesting, and the guide did a good job of explaining everything. For instance, the five tiers of the pagoda at left represent the elements of nature. (Sadly I don't remember the fifth one besides earth, air, fire, and water.) It's all just a big roof, though, with the building entirely hollow inside.



Nikko temple and shrine

Because of the importance of those who worshipped here, everything at Nikko is even more elegant than at most shrines. There are ornately carved animal shapes, both in wood and marble, and there's gilding everywhere. Among the most famous things

at Nikko is a set of carvings of monkeys above an entryway that are supposed to symbolize seeing, hearing, and speaking no evil.



at Nikko is a set of carvings of monkeys above an entryway that are supposed to symbolize seeing, hearing, and speaking no evil.

The worst thing about Nikko was that it was horribly crowded. The place is a world heritage site (as well it should be), and

that means it's on the itinerary for pretty much everybody who visits Japan. There were so many people that it was difficult to get close to many of the things at all, and the lines to get into the actual places of worship moved at a snail's pace. The throngs of people made it seem more like a theme park than a historic site or holy place. There have been a number of articles written about overtourism in Japan. While those mostly focus on Kyoto, I think they could easily apply to Nikko as well.

In addition to the main shrine and temple, there are numerous side shrines at Nikko. Probably the most interesting of these featured a gundam (basically a transformer robot) and was intended as a place for kids to worship. That's definitely not something I expected to see.

You're required to remove shoes when entering the sacred space at temples and shrines in Japan. Unfortunately there's no good place to put them on again. Multiple times at Nikko I felt like I was at the end of the airport security line with people rushing me to get on my way. In the process of hurrying with my shoes, I ended up losing a baseball cap I'd been wearing. It was certainly not worth retracing my steps to get it, so I guess it's just forever lost.

It began to rain just as we finished our visit to the historic site. First it was just sprinkles, but then it rained quite hard. The women in our group had mostly packed parasols, and of course those worked for wet conditions as well. Like most of the men, though, I got thoroughly soaked by the time we got back to the restaurant.

Lunch was included with this tour, though in retrospect I think I'd rather we'd been on our own to get food. The guide bragged up the meal, noting that it was the traditional food that the monks in Nikko would eat and that it featured the traditional food of the area. That traditional food is the skin that forms when tofu is being made. They think it's a delicacy, but it just seemed disgusting to me. The meal was vegetarian, because monks did not traditionally eat meat (though apparently in modern-day Japan they do). It was also purposely bland, lest the monks should be overstimulated. Finally, like a lot of Japanese food, it had essentially no texture. It was a collection of pastes, gels, and vegetables that had been boiled to death that was honestly one of the worst lunches I've ever had. I liked the mushroom broth and the rice we were given, but that was it. I've definitely had better food in the hospital. I managed to wash down about half of it with copious amounts of green tea, but even that was more than I wanted to consume.

We were given far longer to eat than the meal required, probably to allow us to generate more kickbacks for the tour company from the gift shop. I was hoping they might have some decent souvenirs, but about all they had for sale were toys or packaged food items. Most of the food items they had were regional specialties. Apparently strawberries are grown near Nikko, and they had an entire room of strawberry products. The one thing I picked up was a bag of strawberry popcorn. That turned out to be much more tasty than lunch had been. It was basically kettle corn dusted with natural strawberry powder. I'd buy it again if it were available back home.

We all got soaked again heading back to the bus, and then we left Nikko and headed into the countryside. It was amusing to see a changeable sign that could display various warnings. What it showed today was an outline of an umbrella.



Lake Chuzenji

The guide noted that the road that goes up the mountain by Nikko is one way. It had been a two-way road, but they restricted it due to accidents. Now one road leads up the mountain and another goes down. It basically functions as a one-lane road with occasional passing areas, and it is a beautiful route.

The area around Nikko is a national park, and we made a couple of sightseeing stops there, one at Lake Chuzenji (where my shoes got thoroughly soaked just walking through the parking lot) and the other at Kegon Falls. Most foreign tourists don't go to the national park, but I'm very glad we did. It's a truly gorgeous area.

There was another shopping opportunity at Kegon Falls, and the stores there had a much better selection than the restaurant in Nikko. The one thing I bought is

a little block of wood decorated on one side. (Mine shows Mt. Fuji.) Locals would write prayer intentions on the other side and then hang them on a rack at a shrine, but I plan to hang mine from the Christmas tree. I'm sure I won't be the only American who's done that.



Kegon Falls

Some people commented on the numerous school groups we had seen. The guide noted that in Japan there are three school terms in a year, with roughly a month of vacation between them. Summer vacation had just started last week. The groups we were seeing weren't field trips, but more the equivalent of summer camps, trips that would take kids away from home for a few days at a time.



Road down the mountain from Kegon Falls (Japan highway 120)



After seeing the national park we had to make our way down the mountain, and I was certainly glad I wasn't the one driving on that part. I put a screen shot here of Google Maps' depiction of the road, and you can see it's just one hairpin curve after another. I also took a shot out the window of the bus that shows just how tight those curves are. The official speed limit is 30 km/h (less than 20 mph), and I suspect were doing even slower than that. I could see why they started the one-way system, and I certainly compliment the driver on getting us down the mountain safely.

We made our way back to Nikko and rejoined the expressway. The guide had warned us that the trip back to Tokyo

was likely to take longer than the trip to Nikko had been. Japanese people tend to go on weekend trips to the countryside, and that means on Sunday afternoon traffic is heavy going back into Tokyo. I've encountered the same thing in Chicago, where I-90 is jammed outbound on Friday and then inbound on Sunday. It was indeed slow-going once we reached the edge of the metro area. In fact in a couple of places we came to a complete stop on the expressway.

Apparently there's a time limit that bus drivers can go without rest in Japan, and ours had reached that limit before we got back to Tokyo. Because of that we took an unplanned break at a service area in Saitama prefecture, the suburban area to the northwest that mirrors Chiba in the northeast. The service area was similar to what they have on the tollroads in both Europe and the American East. The main difference was that this one was designed to look like an Edo-period shopping street, with old-fashioned looking wood buildings housing the toilets, gas station, snack bars, and vending machines. I bought some surprisingly good coffee brewed fresh in a vending machine. The machine even had a count-down timer that showed the progression from grinding the beans to putting a lid on the cup.

They'd padded the schedule a bit, so even with the traffic jam we got back to Shinjuku at 6:20pm, about ten minutes earlier than we'd been told our return would be. I was a bit annoyed to see a woman from Florida who had been sitting next to me give tips (1000

yen each) to the guide and driver. Like New Zealand, Japan does not have a tipping culture, and in fact many guides caution against giving tips, lest it encourage the custom to spread. Both the guide and driver certainly did a good job, but I didn't feel a need to pad their pockets with additional funds. I really wish we'd do away with tipping in America and instead pay service people a living wage (like they do in Japan). I've never understood why people think tipping is a good thing.

I chose to have dinner in the Shinjuku area, and it could not have been more different than that weird lunch I had. I went to a Japanese chain called Royal Host. (The trademark name is in English only.) In the same way that Saizeriya is inspired by Italian cuisine, Royal Host takes inspiration from American family restaurants like Denny's or Perkin's. They serve an all-day American-style breakfast, but I instead ordered from the dinner menu. I had French onion soup (which they described in English as "onion gratin soup", a nice dinner salad with chicken, and the same drink bar concept that Saizeriya had. Royal Host wasn't cheap. The meal came to 2563 yen, which is about \$17.35. I must say I enjoyed it much more than today's lunch, though.

My subway pass had expired, so I had to use my Welcome Suica card to go through the gates this time. I was pleased that for the first time I managed to get on the right platform to take the Oedo line directly to Daimon station. I was about to leave Tokyo, but I seem to have finally mastered the subway.

Back at the hotel I spent most of the evening re-packing my stuff. Fortunately I hadn't bought much, so things did fit decently into the same bags I'd taken on the plane.

MONDAY, JULY 28

TOKYO, JAPAN TO HIROSHIMA, JAPAN

I'd set my alarm for six this morning, but I was awake before that. I soon realized that in the process of re-packing I'd somehow misplaced my hotel key. That was more of an issue than it would be at an American hotel. The unstaffed desk does check-out by having you insert your key card like you would at an ATM. Without the card, I obviously couldn't do that.

I knew there was a button on the touch screen to request a staff member, so I went to Google Translate on my phone and typed in a brief explanation I could show. When I pressed the button, the robot announced in a rather British voice, "I shall call a member of staff urgently." Almost immediately a middle-aged guy appeared from the back. I showed him the message on my phone, and he assured me there was no problem. Basically all he needed to do was jot down my name and room number, and that was it. Everything had been paid for at check-in, and at this hotel any additional expenses (like if I'd chosen to have breakfast in the restaurant) have to be paid in cash. In less than a minute after pressing the call button, I was out the door.



JR Pass

This morning I'd use my JR Pass for the first time. The pass works on Japan Railways trains, which includes the above-ground commuter trains in Tokyo. I'd gotten up early because I wanted to beat the crowds on the Yamanote line and then find things in Tokyo station without being rushed. So around 6:30 I made my way over to Hamamatsucho station. The pass is a piece of tagboard with an entirely magnetic back (not just a magnetic stripe—the whole thing is magnetic). It works exactly like the subway pass did. I place it into a slot at the front of the turnstile. The machine reads it, and it pops out the other side. The pass also comes with identical cards that record the seat reservations I made online. (The back of one is in the picture at left.) Only the actual pass needs to be used, though; as long as I sat in the assigned seat, I didn't even have to show the reservation card to a conductor.

It was a bit annoying that there was neither an elevator nor an escalator at the north entrance to the station, so I had to drag my bags up two flights of stairs. Fortunately they weren't too heavy. I was indeed wise to get on the Yamanote line early. While there were plenty of people on board, there was a place for me to sit. Moreover, I didn't feel like I was disturbing other people with my luggage.

Tokyo station is just three stops north of Hamamatsucho. It's also one of the busiest stations in the world, but it's way better organized than Shinjuku was. The signage is clear, and the route from the commuter trains to the long-distance Shinkansen is pretty

intuitive. It was simple enough that there was really no need to get to the station particularly early.

I killed some of the wait time by just wandering around the station. I'd hoped to get some breakfast, but none of the restaurants opened until 7:00. Once that hour hit, everything suddenly jumped to life. I went to a fancy French bakery, where I picked up three items. For breakfast I had what they called "Alsacian toast" (though spell-check tells me the word should be spelled with a "t" rather than a "c"). That was garlic bread topped with ham and Swiss cheese and then broiled. I also bought a corn and cheese roll, that is pastry with those two products scattered through the dough. Finally I got what I'd have for lunch today, basically a cold ham and cheese sandwich on a mini-baguette. Most Japanese people get what's called an "ekiben" or "station bento box" for their meals when traveling. Those I saw at Tokyo station were about as appetizing as yesterday's lunch, and I knew the ham and cheese would be more enjoyable.

I also bought an expensive coffee (508 yen, or \$3.45, more than three times the price at McDonalds), and I sat next to the departures sign to have my breakfast. I was glad I was headed south rather than west today, because the trains going to the west were

cancelled due to downed trees on the tracks—very likely the result of the same storm we'd been through in Nikko. Heading southward there was a shinkansen leaving about every five minutes, each with between 10 and 16 cars.



Shinkansen departure boards at Tokyo station
(The language alternates between Japanese and English.)
station serving the place where they're located.

It's surprisingly quiet in Tokyo, mostly because they don't make verbal announcements of departures. There are occasional safety announcements, and today they had announcements apologizing for the cancelled service. Most of the time the P.A. was off, though, and—typical for Japan—even a crowd of people made relatively little noise. My sister Margaet would have loved it here!

At about 7:40 they displayed the train I was ticketed for, the 8:03 Hikari 503 shinkansen. "Hikari" means "light", and I was reminded of an old Queen song that uses what is obviously a form of that word ("hikario") to mean either "candle" or "burn". (The English version of the lyric says "Let our candle always burn".) I think that the concept of giving that name to a train is that it implies we'd be traveling at the speed of light.

Shinkansen, by the way, means "new trunk line". At any rate, it was new back when I was a toddler. The world's first bullet train celebrated its sixtieth birthday last year, though it does seem surprisingly spry for its age. Many Shinkansen stations have the word "shin" in their names, which simply says they are the "new"

I made my way up to Platform 14, and almost immediately they opened the doors for boarding. My ticket was for Seat 10-D in Car 8, one of two green cars on this train. I found the seat easily, put the luggage overhead, and got settled in a very comfortable seat. Most of the other passengers in this car were Japanese businesspeople, and almost everyone was traveling alone. You can choose your seats when you buy shinkansen tickets, and pretty much everyone had chosen a window seat, so the aisle seats were mostly free. Except for welcome and station announcements, it was absolutely silent the green car the whole way. Getting a green car pass was about \$100 more expensive than a regular pass would have been. If my other trips are like this one, I think it was a good investment.

Unsurprisingly we left bang on time at 8:03am. The Shinkansen route parallels the commuter train line through Tokyo. I turned on the speedometer app on my phone, and I found we were already going 64 mph by the time we got to Hamamatsucho. We made a brief stop just south of there at Shinagawa, and then we sped up to 120 mph before stopping again at Yokohama. South of there the stops were less frequent, and we appeared to cruise at about 180 mph.

The Hikari is the second-fastest train on this route. All the trains have the same maximum speed, but the overall speed is determined by the number of stops. People with a JR Pass have to pay a supplement to take the Nozomi (which means "wish" or "hope"—basically "esperanza" in Spanish), which is the fastest on this route—though not really enough faster to make it worth the extra charge.



Typical urban view from Hikari Shinkansen

I've heard urban Japan described as a linear megalopolis, and from the train I could definitely see that. While we passed a few fields, we passed a lot more houses and factories. I wrote in my notes that every Japanese city looks alike. While that's not technically true, there certainly is a similarity to them. From the train Yokohama, Nagoya, Kyoto, and Osaka all looked very similar to Chiba. Kyoto in particular is supposed to be known for its beautiful temples, but from the train it's just a generic city. Pretty much all of urban Japan is boxy buildings made of concrete. The beauty of this country is definitely not in its cities.

Promptly at 11:11am we arrived at Shin—Kobe station, in the city you may know either for an earthquake or for wagyu beef. I had purposely chosen to change trains in Kobe, because I knew the station here was simple (just a single track in each direction), while Osaka (where the Japan Rail's scheduling program defaults train changes to) is far more complex. That worked precisely as I had hoped. I had time to buy a Coke Zero and an ice cream bar from vending machines on the platform, but by the time I'd finished that it was time to board my second train. I couldn't tell you at all what the city of Kobe looks like. Not only was I there for only about fifteen minutes, but there are tunnels at both ends of the station and a mountain to the west.

The second train was Sakura 553. Sakura means "cherry blossom", and the difference between this train and the Hikari is that it's run by a different division that was spun off from the former national railroad. All the divisions honor the JR Pass, but they operate different trains. The Sakura was a shorter train, and likely because of that it was more crowded. A businessman sat next to me for about two-thirds of the rest of my ride. He basically napped the whole time, so it was still a pretty uneventful trip.

From Kobe onward (and really starting around Osaka) much of the Shinkansen is in tunnels. There are extremely long tunnels that we were in for a couple minutes each. Apparently they changed the shape of the high speed trains from "bullets" with pointy ends to

long-snouted cabs that almost look like snakes. The reason was because the original shape caused too much vibration in the tunnels, and things flow better with the longer front. Both of the rides I had today certainly seemed smooth—even though we went through a lot of those tunnels at 190 mph.

The Sakura had fewer English announcements than the Hikari did. On the Hikari everything was said first in Japanese and then in English, with an Australian woman doing all the English announcements. The Sakura had quite lengthy Japanese announcements, and then a rather gruff male voice would say something like “next stop Hiroshima”. I’d heard that the further one gets from Tokyo the less common English is, and perhaps this was a sign of that.

My destination was Hiroshima. We were scheduled to get in at 12:52pm, and we actually arrived on the platform a minute early. There seems to be no single way to pronounce Hiroshima. I heard recorded Japanese voices say both “he-row-SHE-ma” and “he-ROW-she-ma”. The latter would be closer to how most Japanese words seem to be pronounced. Generally long words are stressed on the antepenultimate syllable—two syllables from the end, as opposed to the next to last that is common in both English and Spanish. However, the desk clerk at the hotel here put the stress on “she” when she welcomed me to her city.

Hiroshima station is enormous. I suppose that makes sense since the city has over a million people and Hiroshima prefecture has almost three million. There’s lots of local trains in addition to the shinkansen, and besides those the station is basically a big shopping mall. I stopped at an ATM at the station and was pleased to be able to get 1,000-yen bills instead of the 10,000s I’d gotten before. Then I placed my luggage in a locker (where a tap of my Welcome Suica took care of the rental fee) and set off for the afternoon.

The core of Hiroshima’s transit system is a fleet of trams. The system was in place back when the city was bombed, and a lot of the trams look like they date to the immediate postwar period. It’s a very slow way to get around, much like the streetcars in New Orleans. I wasn’t in any particular hurry, though, and it did give me a nice city tour.

The weirdest part of the trams is paying for them. They seem to accept almost any form of payment you can think of, and when you pay depends on what kind of payment you’re doing. A lot of people seemed to use QR codes to pay, which I think is the Alibaba-Pay I referred to earlier. Those people scanned the codes on boarding. People who paid with credit cards or with payments from their cell phones also scanned when boarding, but people with other IC cards (like Suica or the ICOCA card that is used in Hiroshima) had to scan when they got off. It looked like everyone did in fact pay, but how the conductor keeps track of it, I have no clue.

My first stop this afternoon was the Memorial Cathedral for World Peace, the seat of the Catholic Diocese of Hiroshima and is also called the Church of the Our Lady of the Assumption. The building was dedicated to victims of the atomic bomb, and the building plan was begun by a priest who died from radiation sickness. Pope John Paul II visited the cathedral in 1981, and there’s a statue of him in the courtyard. There’s also a big sign that welcomes people to a pilgrimage site that’s part of the 2025 jubilee project.

The exterior of the cathedral is quite stark, but inside it’s really quite beautiful. It’s very modern in style (dating to 1954), and its windows (which double as the Stations of the Cross) are particularly striking. It’s not on most “must do” lists for Hiroshima, but I was glad I saw it.

Next I made my way through downtown and saw the one thing that is on everybody’s “must do” list, the Atomic Bomb Memorial Peace Park. I’d seen pictures of the so-called Atom Bomb Dome, the building that essentially functioned as Hiroshima’s convention center before World War II. It was left to stand as a ruined reminder of the horrors of war. It was somehow more striking to see the building up close, with tourists from all over the world going by to pay their respects to those who lost their lives that horrible day.

The park includes the dome and numerous memorials, but the main reason to visit is to go through the museum. They purposely keep it cheap to enter (just 200 yen or \$1.35), and it’s definitely something anyone who comes vaguely near the area should see.

The museum features photos of the victims, both those who died immediately and those who succumbed to the effects of radiation later on. There are also personal effects of various people that were left in the rubble when the owners died. What struck me most, though, was artwork that was done by survivors. Having just taken the tram, it was disturbing to see a painting that showed a tram car on fire as it crossed a bridge right by the epicenter of the bomb. I had just crossed the replacement for that bridge on a tram myself. I also found out that without knowing it I had walked past the actual epicenter, where in true Japanese fashion a 7—Eleven stands today.

The experience of visiting the museum is really indescribable. It’s extremely moving. My one complaint is that it’s a very cramped space, and it doesn’t accommodate its many visitors well at all. I’m sure the architect was proud of his work, but there’s lots of wasted space that could have been put to better use. Hopefully they’ll do some renovation at some point to improve the flow of things.

After seeing the museum and the park I went back to Hiroshima station to reclaim my luggage. Then I took the tram back downtown to my home for the next two nights, the ANA Crowne Plaza. The airline I flew on owns the master franchise for Holiday Inn



Memorial Cathedral for World Peace



Atom Bomb Dome

properties in Japan, and this if this is any indication, they're doing a nice job with it. My room is probably triple the size of the hotel in Tokyo, about what you'd expect at a nice American hotel. It's set up with a separate entry way from which you choose to go through different doors that lead to the bedroom and the bathroom. I'm on a high floor (Room 1418—though there are eight more floors above me) with a view overlooking the peace park. Some reviews describe the place as dated, but everything is well maintained and spotlessly clean. It's also right at \$100 a night, which is less than you'd pay for a similar place in Des Moines or Sioux City—and, unlike the robot hotel in Tokyo, the room rate here includes breakfast.

A unique quirk about the place is the elevators. Like many hotels, you need to scan your key card to go up to the guest floors. Here, however, when you scan the card it automatically selects the floor you're on. I don't know if it's possible to access other room floors or not, but it was weird not to have to press any number at all.

Around six o'clock I went out for an amusing dinner. Just a short walk from the hotel, across from a small park in a residential neighborhood, there's a vending machine that sells fresh pizza. It rumbles around and plays a video that showed a pizza cooking that definitely was not the one I received (a bait and switch, perhaps?) About five minutes later a freshly baked margherita pizza popped out of the bottom, balanced on a wire baking tray and placed in a pizza box. I even got a little plastic pizza cutter that worked surprisingly well on the side. Was it great pizza?—No. Was it worth 1,300 yen (\$8.75)—Maybe. Was it fun to buy pizza from a machine?—Definitely.



Margherita pizza from a vending machine
(The prices shown at the top of the machine are for a parking ramp that the machine is on the first floor of.)

I spent much of the evening getting this recap caught up. I was also pleased that this hotel offered TV in English—in particular CNN, the BBC, and MTV. That's kind of a strange combination, but at least I can understand what they're saying.

TUESDAY, JULY 29

HIROSHIMA & MIYAJIMA, JAPAN

I slept both long and deeply last night. I think one of the biggest reasons for that was that this hotel has western pillows. The Henn Na Hotel in Tokyo had traditional Japanese pillows, which are filled with rough buckwheat husks, and there was only one of them on my double-sized bed. The Crowne Plaza has one of those European queens that's really two single beds slammed together with a gap filler in the middle. On it are four comfortable western pillows.

I slept in until roughly seven o'clock. I began the day with the shower, which brings an unusual complaint. This has to be the only shower I've ever had where the pressure was too strong. It practically knocked me down, and it was all but impossible to wash my hair. I checked all the controls, but I couldn't figure out any way to adjust it.

I went downstairs and spent quite a while wandering around trying to find breakfast. The restaurant is hidden in a corner on the ground floor. Once I did find it, the buffet was certainly broad. They attempt to cater to both Japanese and western tastes, though it would appear they understand the former quite a bit better. There were half a dozen kinds of fish, prepared in various ways, plus lobster chunks and shrimp tempura. They also had a very nice salad bar, and while that strikes me as something more appropriate to evening, I did have a decent helping of it. The Japanese offerings also included curry over rice and what they called "lemon hot pot" (I didn't try it), plus the local specialty, a dish called okonomiyaki. While it's generally a dinner food, I was glad to have okonomiyaki on the breakfast buffet so I could try it without having to go to a local restaurant. It's a layered noodle dish that guides sometimes call a pancake. Between the soba (i.e., buckwheat) noodles are eggs, meat (in this case shredded chicken), and vegetables. Basically it's leftovers layered with noodles. It was topped with a weirdly sweet sauce that was my least favorite part of the dish, but it wasn't bad overall.

The western options from the buffet included American pancakes that had been cut into eighths and stacked with toothpicks. Those were served with a yogurt and blueberry dipping sauce. They also had extremely runny scrambled eggs, badly undercooked bacon, hot dogs, various fruits (both fresh and canned), and tater tots. There was a cook to order station where I got a cheese omelet (no meat fillings were available). They'd even cook you a tiny steak, though I passed on that. Presumably for the British guests they had baked beans. I took a small portion of those, and it was a weird mix of beans that more garbanzos than navy beans. The sauce was also odd—again weirdly sweet. While I was eating a woman came around and offered croissants. Oddly there was neither butter nor margarine to put on them, though they did have jam and honey. Finally I had a dish of flan (which they just called "pudding") to end the meal.

Dozens of high school athletes from around Japan are staying at this hotel for a soccer tournament. (Japanese people seem to use the words “soccer” and “football” interchangeably when referring to the sport in English, by the way.) It was interesting to see what those kids chose for breakfast. A few had the traditional Japanese dishes, but more seemed to opt for the American pancakes and hot dogs. Almost all got the steak, which was invariably cooked well done, as is standard in Japan.



Astram map in a station

Further out the view switches to a mix of single-family homes and rowhouses. They're all built of concrete and have steeply sloped roofs made of either tile or metal. Many have solar panels on the roof as well.

I made my way into the subway and bought a day pass for Astram (which unfortunately didn't also work on the streetcars). There were trains waiting on two different tracks at the terminus, and people seemed to be aboard both trains. I boarded the one on my left, and that turned out to be the correct choice. Almost immediately it left. For now I just rode a couple stops to the north end of the downtown area.



Hiroshima castle

what was lost when the atomic bomb was dropped.

After breakfast I made my way over to the streetcar stop. I rode just one stop north, which honestly wasn't worth the 240-yen (\$1.60) fare. At Hondori, a major downtown transfer point, I made my way to the Astram. This was conceived as a “space age” transit system and was built when Japan hosted the World Cup. It's another of those rubber-tire trains that runs on a guideway like an airport people mover. Astram's route is shaped like a question mark, which I found amusing. The downtown area is at the bottom of the straight part, and a huge soccer stadium is at the end of the curve. Between there are mostly residential areas.

The close-in neighborhoods look a lot like the Soviet suburbs Paul and I saw decades ago on our trip there. It's almost all high-rise apartments that have not been particularly well cared for. That makes sense, since the oldest parts of modern Hiroshima were built shortly after World War II, and the city grew dramatically in the 1950s and '60s. Those apartments that were modern after back then are looking a bit seedy today.

My destination was officially named “Central Park”. This massive green space is surrounded by various rankly ugly public buildings including the prefectural capitol, city hall, a hospital, and a high school. At the center of the park is a much more attractive building, the one I was here to see today, Hiroshima Castle.

Hiroshima was founded by samurai in the 1500s. At the time much of what is now the downtown area (including where both my hotel and the whole peace park area are) was under water. The original Hiroshima castle was built as a watchtower right by what was then the shore. Within and around it were barracks for the samurai and administrative facilities. Long after the samurai era what is now Central Park continued to serve as a military fort. It was an important command center during World War II and also housed American prisoners of war.

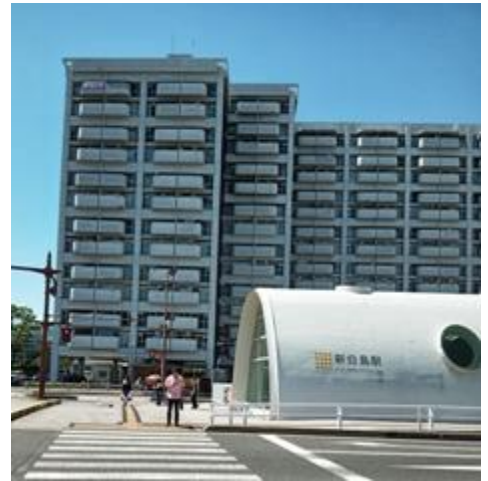
Hiroshima Castle, which was built of wood, was completely destroyed in the bombing. None of the out-buildings survived either, and most of the plants in the park were destroyed. (A single willow tree survives and is marked as a “miracle tree”.) After the bombing thirsty survivors came to the castle moat for water, and thousands died there after drinking water that had been contaminated by radioactivity.

The Japanese government decided to rebuild the castle quickly, as it was seen to be an important psychological symbol for the rebirth of the area. The modern castle is primarily built of concrete, with a wood veneer on both the inside and outside of the walls. Most of the surrounding area is left as ruins as a memorial to

Inside the castle is a museum that tells the history of the area and has a number of artifacts for samurai times, though obviously not ones that originally came from here. I paid the 370-yen (\$2.50) admission and spent about an hour going through the place. After visiting the shrine in Nikko, the 168 steps I walked up and then back down this morning seemed like nothing by comparison—particularly since everything at the castle had handrails. While most people were gawking at the samurai swords and helmets, what I found most interesting were recreations of the barracks the samurai slept in, with low ceilings, traditional tatami mats, and thin futons. I also enjoyed the panoramic view from the top of the tower, even though Hiroshima is far from the most beautiful city I've seen.

After seeing Hiroshima Castle I made my way back to the subway. The line soon becomes elevated beyond downtown, and I enjoyed a little ride up and down the line through the neighborhoods. My ultimate destination was at Shin-Hakushima station, which is in one of those Soviet-looking neighborhoods just a little ways north of downtown. There I got out my JR Pass and switched to the JR Sanyo train. “Sanyo” in this context refers to the region that Hiroshima is in and essentially means “sunny side of the mountains”. The same-named company claims their name comes from a homophone that means “three oceans” which would suggest their plan to be a global corporation.

I caught a commuter train south to the port area, which is about half an hour from central Hiroshima. This was a very crowded train, and I stood the entire time. Japanese commuter trains have rings that standees are supposed to hold on to. They tend to be placed at a height that is convenient for short people, though. Even most modern-day Japanese would find them inconvenient, and they were definitely not at an appropriate height for me to grab. Most of the time I reached to a bar above them, though that was actually a bit too high. I did make it, of course, but it was not a comfortable ride.



Near Shin-Hakushima station

From the station at the port I walked about a block south, took an elevator down to basement level, walked under an extremely busy road, took another elevator back up to the street, and walked about two more blocks to the ferry terminal. Huge signs there advised that while the ferry was free to JR Pass holders, the pass did not include a mandatory tourist tax, which had to be paid with a ticket from a vending machine. The machine was unnecessarily complicated, but I did manage to pay my tax of 100 yen (67¢). Then almost immediately I made my way aboard a ferry for the ten-minute ride to my next destination.

I'd taken the ferry to get to the other attraction everyone is supposed to see in Hiroshima, Miyajima Island. The entire island is considered sacred in Shinto, and because of that there's an enormous torii gate that stands in the harbor off the island. The gate is considered one of the top ten views in all of Japan. While I often find such statements exaggerated, I really don't disagree with this one.

Aside from the gate, Miyajima is a pretty generic tourist town, though there were some strange quirks to it. There's a seaside walkway, but only small parts of it were open. I got the feeling they were trying to direct visitors away from the ocean and down the business street instead. There are dozens of restaurants, all of which sell the same local specialties—eels and cookies made with maple syrup and filled with red bean paste. I passed on those but I did get an ice cream cone with matcha (i.e., green tea) soft serve. Like many Japanese take-out places, to get my ice cream I had to buy a ticket from a vending machine, where I chose the size I wanted and then whether it was vanilla, matcha, or twist (my choice). I then gave the ticket to the woman at the counter, who prepared my cone. This does make the ordering process more tourist-friendly, but it also leaves the woman with very little to do.



Torii gate in the ocean – Miyajima

I also went into one of the gift shops at Miyajima, where I got a replacement for the baseball cap I'd lost in Nikko. This one has the kanji word for “samurai” on the front. At least that's what Google Translate assures me it says. I remember a few years at Garrigan when one of our athletes would get temporary tattoos with Chinese inspirational phrases. At one point he figured out that one of the tattoos meant something very different than he'd been told it did. Hopefully that will not be the case with this cap.



Miyajima deer

Another thing Miyajima is known for is deer. These are theoretically wild animals, but they've learned to follow the tourists, many of whom give them forbidden food. The deer are cute, and it was fun to see them roaming around.

I took a much less busy train back to Shin-Hakushima and made my way through another complicated series of elevators and underpasses to a place called CoCo where I had a late lunch. There are actually two restaurant chains in Japan with the name CoCo (which appears to be just nonsense syllables). One sells curry, while the other (the one I went to) specializes in what the Japanese call “hanbugu”, which is basically Salisbury steak. CoCo was also interesting because while there was a minimal waitstaff, the ordering was all done through touchscreens and the food was mostly delivered by robots. (I'd been to a similar restaurant in New Zealand, so that was surprisingly familiar.) The robots continuously circled the restaurant, playing a happy synthesized tune as they moved, the sort of thing you might hear from an ice cream truck.



Robot delivering lunch

I ordered a hanbugu that was covered with what they called “beef stew”. That consisted of a lot of gravy, two beef tips, and two green beans. It had been cooked in a foil pouch and was presented on an insulated plate like you might see at a steakhouse. I also got a small salad and a rye bun with butter on the side. For dessert I had a dish of shaved ice topped with pieces of fresh apple, lychee, pineapple, and kiwifruit, with condensed milk on the side. While I waited for nearly twenty minutes before the main meal came and another ten for dessert, it was a truly delicious meal. The whole thing came to 1628 yen, or just under eleven dollars.

I took the Astram train back to the downtown hub, but then I walked back to the hotel from there instead of taking the streetcar. Since lunch had been quite late (after 3pm), for dinner I just had some snacks for dinner that I picked up at a Lawson convenience store next door to the hotel. (It does seem weird to me that all of Japan’s “big three” convenience stores have English names—7-Eleven, Family Mart, and Lawson. I had an ice cream sandwich with lemon tea flavored ice cream. If the package hadn’t have had the flavor on it, I don’t think I could have identified it, but it wasn’t bad. I also had an interesting snack that in English was labeled “fried potato sticks”. I was expecting shoestring potatoes, but what I got was essentially dehydrated french fries. It seemed like the sort of thing that should be sold in gift shops at science museums together with astronaut ice cream.

By the way, some foods in Japan are labeled bilingually on the front, while others are only in Japanese. The ingredients and nutritional information are pretty much only in Japanese. Many times there are illustrations on the package to show what’s inside, but I

also saw things—particularly in vending machines—where I had no clue as to the contents. Even using Google Translate only led to a trade name, which wasn’t particularly helpful. Obviously I didn’t buy those items.

I re-packed my stuff, which I was pleased still fit in the same bags. I’ve bought very little on this trip, and the things I have purchased tend to be quite small. I set an early alarm and was off to sleep shortly after 10pm.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 30

HIROSHIMA, JAPAN TO MORIOKA, JAPAN

I was up before six this morning and had another super-powerful shower. I was at breakfast right when they opened at 6:30. The place was surprisingly full for so early in the morning, a combination of soccer players who must have had an early game and a tour group of elderly people. The offerings were basically identical to yesterday, though this time I got butter with my croissant. I also got some grapefruit juice. That’s something I’ve had very seldom since being diagnosed with diabetes. (Juices in general are basically sugar with vitamins from the body’s perspective.) My blood sugar has been doing well on this tip, though—knock on wood—and grapefruit juice has always been one of my favorite drinks.



Control panel for Toto washlet

Plaza had directions and a lengthy set of warnings on a separate panel under the lid of the bowl. The warnings cautioned against getting the outside of the toilet wet (which was honestly a challenge with the shower in this bathroom) lest it cause an electric shock. It also warned against letting an infant use the toilet and said you shouldn’t wash a baby in the toilet bowl.

I checked out of the hotel at 6:50am and made my way to the streetcar stop. I was glad that I’d beaten the rush hour crowd, so I could get on a tram and have a seat all the way to Hiroshima station. It’s about a twenty-minute ride to the station (though I suspect it would be ten if they had a subway that went there), and the trip this morning was uneventful.

The schedule in my head is used to dealing with Amtrak rather than with how trains work in Japan. I’d arrived at the station about 45 minutes before my train was scheduled to leave. In Chicago that would be cutting things pretty close, but in Hiroshima it meant I had about 40 minutes to stand around (there’s no seating anywhere in the station) doing nothing. I wandered around the station, and I did buy some crème brulee ice cream at a 7—Eleven and a small pack of those maple and red bean cookies (which were about half the price at the station that they were at Miyajima). Eventually they showed that my train would be leaving from track #14, and I made my

Just for fun, I’m going to include a picture here of the controls for the toilet in my hotel room. Pretty much every modern Japanese toilet has this kind of control panel, though often there are only the pictures, rather than bilingual labels for the buttons. Fortunately from my point of view everything here could be completely ignored, as it’s all variations on the bidet function. The actual flush mechanism on every toilet is a separate handle located on the wall. Like European toilets, there’s a choice of a small or large flush, though the quantity doesn’t actually seem very different. The toilet at the Crowne

way upstairs. Mine would actually be the third train on that track, so I watched the other two leave before mine arrived. One of those was a special anime-themed train, and the people on the platform were going crazy gawking at it. Sakura 540 (which had the ordinary paint job and interior) left right on time at 8:10am.

Something I'd read about and was amused to see in person was that the conductors on the Shinkansen bow whenever they enter a train car. That's not really surprising, since waiters and store clerks also bow when greeting customers. It did let me know I was in Asia, though. The conductors don't actually check tickets on the Shinkansen. Passengers would have needed some form of payment to pass through the gate, and they'd need to scan it again to exit. On the train the conductors go around with a handheld computer and appear to sort of take attendance, pressing buttons to show who's in what seats. Presumably if people were seated incorrectly they'd have to show their tickets, but I never saw anyone asked for one.

I re-traced my route back to Kobe. This time I had just a ten-minute layover there. This being Japan, that was of course more than enough. In fact I had to wait for another train to come and go before the one I would be getting on (Hikari 502) arrived.

On the Hikari they have a service that lets green car passengers order food and drinks from their seat. I scanned a QR code, and it brought up a website with various options. I got a coffee and a tiny tub of ice cream (Belgian chocolate flavor) that was frozen solid when it arrived. Once it started to melt, the ice cream was very good, though. I also ordered what they called a "snack bag" that was unidentified on the website. It turned out to be cheese sandwiched between crackers that were made of cod skin. I'm sure many in Japan find that a delicacy, but it's definitely not my idea of a snack. Oh well! The snacks came to 1350 yen (\$9.10), and more than half of that was the unwanted snack bag). I paid with a credit card, but they also accept cash, transportation farecards, and QR code payments.

It does amaze me how smooth the ride on the Shinkansen is. Most Amtrak trains travel half the speed or less, and things are often rough enough that I have to physically hold on to a cup of coffee while on the train. On the Shinkansen I could let the cup rest on the table with no danger of it spilling. They apparently work to maintain the tracks every single night, and it shows.



On the Hikari Shinkansen



Mt. Fuji in the distance from the Shinkansen

The trains were busy, but by no means full. I had a row to myself all the way up to Tokyo. I mostly filled time writing on this travelogue, but of course I looked out the window as well. It had been shrouded in clouds the other day, but it was clearly poking out higher than the surrounding mountains today. Our guide in Nikko had told us that Fuji was totally black at the moment; thanks to global warming, the snow that traditionally has crowned it disappeared in April this year. While I did get just a brief view of the famous mountain, it was kind of nice to be able to check it off my list.

We made it back to Tokyo station right on time at 12:42pm. Today I had to transfer to another bullet train there. Different branches of Japan Rail operate the lines south and north of Tokyo, and no trains run through from one line to the other. The transfer is pretty easy, though. There's an escalator right by the green car that leads down to a transfer gate. I just scanned my JR pass there and made the switch without having to go into the main part of the station.

I had about a forty-minute layover in Tokyo, so I stopped to get a bit of lunch. I went to a kiosk of Beck's Coffee (apparently a German company) and got a ham and cheese sandwich for 480 yen (\$3.25), and I paid the same amount for a large cup (more like the medium size back home) of drip coffee.



Hayabusa/Komachi

Fewer trains run north of Tokyo than south, and mine was already on the board, showing it would leave from track #22. It was fascinating to see them get ready to turn the train around after it came in from the north. As soon as the southbound passengers were off the train, an army of custodians boarded. They turned all the seats around so they were facing forward, wiped off all the hard surfaces, and vacuumed the floors. Meanwhile other people were visually inspecting the exterior of the train, presumably making sure things were as they should be mechanically. That all took only about five minutes. The janitors left, a conductor saluted, and the doors were opened for northbound passengers to board.

The train I'd be on this afternoon was really two trains in one. The front ten cars of the train are painted turquoise. That part is called the Hayabusa (which means "peregrine falcon") and eventually heads to the northern island of Hokkaido. The back seven cars are painted pink and called the Komachi (which means "small town girl"). After Morioka (my destination today), that back half splits off and runs through a bunch of small towns until it ultimately gets to Atika on the west coast of the island of Honshu.

I chose the Komachi section of this train because its green car had a single seat available. The Komachi is slightly narrower than the Hayabusa because west of Morioka it's a dual gauge train; west of Morioka it runs on what in

America we'd call standard gauge, while south of there it uses the same broad gauge that other Shinkansen lines use. That actually made boarding rather awkward, because her was **big** gap between the platform and the train. Because the car is narrower, they fit fewer seats into the cars, so the row I'm in is just 1—1, while other rows are 1—2. On the Hayabusa all the green car seating is 2—2.

This is the fastest train in Japan, and by some measures the fastest in the world. (Other trains run short distances at faster speeds, but this has the fastest average speed.) We went through the Tokyo area at about 150 mph, and north of there we sped up to the top speed of 200 mph (320 km/h). (The speedometer app on my phone has actually shown as high as 209.) At speeds like that you could make it from Algona to Minneapolis in under an hour. It does feel faster than the trains I was on this morning, but it's still a very smooth ride. The land around here is quite flat, and we go almost an hour and a half without stopping. People have demonstrated that it's quicker to take the train from Tokyo to Sendai (the next major city to the north) than it is to fly.

One of the places we sped past on the way north was Fukushima, which you probably remember from a tsunami-related nuclear accident a few years back. While the power plant is still offline, it appears the place is otherwise back to normal. There's actually a slightly slower train on this same line that serves Fukushima, and people commute from there to Tokyo (about an hour's trip) each day.

That said, literally as I was writing this a tsunami warning came on my phone. The warning was in Japanese, but of course I translated it to English. The closest place to the ocean I'll be is along the coast south of Sapporo tomorrow, and the prediction there is only 0.2 meters (8 inches). On the other hand, they're looking at a 3-meter (10 foot) crest in Chiba, so I think I'm glad I'm not there today.

The northern end of Honshu is called the Tohoku region, and it has a reputation for being a bit poor and backwards. There's a lot of agriculture, and I get the sense that most of the farmers live together in small towns rather than on individual farms.

We got into Morioka right on time at 3:42pm. My hotel was called the Toyoko Inn—Morioka Ekimae. "Ekimae" literally means "facing the station". To get to the hotel I had to go down to the basement of the station and through an underground passage under the busway. As I was going up the steps on the opposite side, my main suitcase fell apart. Screws that held the pull-out handle in place had obviously come loose and fallen out. I managed to get the bag up the steps, through a construction zone, and on to the hotel, but now it was essentially useless. Margaret bought that bag in Calgary in 2013. She used it heavily until she died, and it's been mine main bag since then. It's gotten a lot of use, and it probably was due to fail. It is kind of weird, though, that this is the third trip I've taken where I had to replace a suitcase somewhere in the middle.

Toyoko Inn is a chain of business hotels (the same sort of thing as the Henn Na, and with similarly low prices) named after the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama, where the first two locations were established. Today they have locations almost literally everywhere in Japan, especially right next to railway stations. The company is unique in Japan in having a female C.E.O., and they're known for promoting equality in the workplace.

Having just said that, it was interesting that a man assisted me with the self check-in machine (the exact same thing Henn Na had, but with live people behind the desk). The machine spit out a key to Room 805, and I made my to the elevator. They have numerous room types at Toyoko. The one I'm in is called a "deluxe double". That means it has a double bed, but it's significantly larger than what I had at the Henn Na in Tokyo—though not nearly so large as the room at the Crowne Plaza. The bathroom is actually the smallest of the three I've had so far, but with the same super toilet and hand-held shower that can be hand-held or hung from the wall that the other two had.

The hotel is under **major** construction at the moment. There are two buildings (each about twenty floors). One of them is closed entirely at the moment, and the other has metal scaffolding all around the building. The workers went home right at 5pm, so at least I won't have noise from that keeping me up all night.



Screenshot of tsunami coverage

which lies between Japan and Alaska. Earthquakes are extremely common in Japan, which is the other side of the Ring of Fire from California. Tsunamis are less common, but they do happen. Any time I've been near the coast on this trip (like yesterday in Miyajima)

When I turned on the TV at the hotel, all the stations were running tsunami coverage, and I found more information on my computer (where Japanese web pages are automatically translated into English). It turned out the highest waves had been just east of where I am now, on the coast of Iwate prefecture. Morioka is the capital of Iwate, but fortunately it's an inland city. None of the shinkansen trains was interrupted by the tsunami; however a lot of local trains were cancelled. Had I travelled further north today, the train from Hakodate to Sapporo would not have been running. JR Hokkaido was planning on running that service normally tomorrow, though, so hopefully I'll make it north—knock on wood.

The tsunami was caused by a major earthquake in Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula,

there have been evacuation signs. The TV coverage about the tsunami was similar to what you'd find on a night with a bunch of tornados in Iowa. It's important news, but nothing unexpected.

It's interesting that on the same day as the tsunami warning, Japan also recorded its highest temperature in history. It was 41 degrees Celsius (106 Fahrenheit) in Tamba, a small city inland from Kobe. I thought the upper 30s were bad, and I certainly hope I don't have to face temperatures in the 40s Celsius with Japanese humidity.

After briefly checking the tsunami status, I went back to the station in search of a place that sold luggage. Google Maps showed that such a store existed, but I couldn't seem to find it. Failing at first, I set out exploring the neighborhood in search of somewhere else that might have what I needed. I thought I'd succeeded when I found a place called Aeon Max Valu that looked like a Wal-Mart. It was an enormous store, and they did indeed sell dry goods as well as groceries. The dry goods were limited to clothes and housewares, though. There was no luggage to be found anywhere. I also checked out a place that was essentially. Next to that was a place with a name only in Japanese that appeared to be the local equivalent of Walgreen's. It was interesting to check out the place, but they didn't have luggage either.

I went back to the station again with a resolve not to leave until I'd found something. It turned out the issue was that, like most buildings in Japan, the enormous mall that is Morioka station has multiple floors—at least three main floors and two basement levels. Google Maps doesn't really indicate what floor something is on, and it turned out luggage (a place with the French-ish name Gran Sac) was clear up on the third floor. Once I found it, there were almost too many choices. Pretty much all luggage in Japan is hard shell, so that's what I got. It's slightly larger than the soft-sided suitcase I had, which is good since it won't expand. It's also in an avocado green color, so it should be easy to spot on the luggage carousel. It cost about 12,300 yen (about eighty bucks). That seemed expensive to me, but it was toward the low end of what they had in this store. Hopefully it will last well. Theoretically it was on sale, but the savings basically just cancelled out the tax. As a foreigner I could get a large purchase like that tax-free. The problem is that to do that legally the item is supposed to be sealed until I leave the country, and that kind of defeats the purpose.

Once I had the new bag I hurriedly set out to do a bit of exploration before sunset (which, as I mentioned earlier, is surprisingly early in Japan). I walked about a mile to the south end of the downtown area, where there's a large park that is the site of the ruins of Morioka Castle. Like Hiroshima, Morioka was founded by samurai as a castle town. The castle was used in various forms through the 1700s, but it was abandoned and gradually destroyed in the 1800s. They began excavating the area around the turn of the millennium, though about all there is to see today are the outlines of various buildings. The signs there were only in Japanese, but Google Translate helped me figure out what was up.



**Pedestal and castle ruins
Iwate Park
Morioka, Japan**



At the top of the castle hill is what I'd call a "zócalo", that is an empty pedestal that held a statue of a hero from the Russo—Japanese War through the first half of the 1900s. The sign by it doesn't say why the statue was removed, but today it is just a pedestal.

It was right at sunset when I walked back to the hotel. I stopped briefly at a 7—Eleven (the first one I'd seen with a parking lot), where I picked up a sandwich for dinner. For dessert I had an ice cream bar covered with lemon popsicle—an interesting concept and really very good.

While Morioka is roughly the size of Des Moines (and the capital of a mostly rural state as well), it comes across as a very bustling place. It seemed every bit as lively as Tokyo or Hiroshima.

Back at the hotel I turned the TV to a baseball game, which is one of the easiest things to understand with a language barrier. This one featured the Yokohama DeNA Bears vs. the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants. The weird names come from the teams' corporate sponsors, a software company named DeNa and a publishing company called Yomiuri. During the game one of the announcers basically said nothing but "hai" (Japanese for "yes") over and over again. I guess he liked what was happening. I was also intrigued that Japanese directly borrowed the words "ball", "strike", and "out", which they basically did in Spanish as well.

It was also interesting that at the end of the game, the Yokohama team (the home team and ultimately the losers) bowed to their fans before leaving the field while the winners were high-fiving each other. The Nippon Professional Baseball League is a mix of homegrown talent and washed-up American major leaguers. It's got to be weird for the American guys to go through the bowing ritual. After both teams left the field, they did a drill team show accompanied by fireworks, all of which was broadcast on TV. I should be going to a Japanese baseball game in a little over a week, and it will be interesting to see it in person.

I get *USA Today* in my e-mail. They seemed obsessed with the fact that tsunami waves had hit northern California and Hawaii, but they didn't even mention that they'd first hit Japan. News in the U.S. really is America-centric; it's like nobody else ever matters. The Japanese news, on the other hand noted that waves had reached not only the U.S., but also as far south as Ecuador. Fortunately the color on the Japan map has changed from red to yellow, so hopefully things will be all right tomorrow.

THURSDAY, JULY 31

MORIOKA, JAPAN TO HOKUTO, JAPAN

As it turned out, this would be a fairly wasted day thanks the tsunami. While the warnings had been lifted, they cancelled all the trains in southern Hokkaido (the ones I'd use to get to Sapporo) so they could inspect the tracks along the coast. It certainly makes sense to put safety first, but it was not good from my personal point of view.

I was up at six this morning, though I honestly hadn't slept that well overnight. Toyoko Inn uses those same buckwheat pillows I complained about earlier, and while I did have two here, they still weren't comfortable. When I figured out I couldn't get to Sapporo today, I cancelled my hotel reservation and then made a reservation in southern Hokkaido, at the point the Shinkansen line ends. I also made a reservation to take the first train of the day tomorrow from there on to Sapporo. I'd have less time than I intended there, but I would at least get to see the place.

Once all that was sorted, I made my way down to breakfast. Toyoko Inn serves a very Japanese breakfast. Chopsticks were the only utensils provided, and basically the only western item was various types of bread. In addition to a croissant, I had a salad that had lettuce, cabbage, and some root vegetable I couldn't identify. I also had an extremely bland macaroni salad (picture eating the salads with chopsticks, by the way) and some cold meatballs made of unidentified mystery meat and covered with an overly sweet sauce. I passed on multiple types of fish, curry, and multiple types of soup (miso, pumpkin, and corn). The Japanese seem to love soup for breakfast, but it's just not something I can relate to. I did get some coffee, and they had unidentified and odd-looking juices there as well. While I did break my fast, it's not something I as a westerner would recommend.

I had an e-mail from my brother Paul this morning. He had obviously heard about the tsunami and wanted to know if I was all right. Fortunately I am; I'm just inconvenienced a bit. Also fortunately it sounds like the limited evacuations they had did keep everybody in Japan safe. The worst places I saw on TV were the Pacific islands, where the land is universally low and there are also no tall buildings. I repeatedly saw a clip of people in Tonga crowding onto the roof of a school in the rain. Hopefully everyone there was all right.

I made my way over to the station and managed to change my ticket north to a later train. Had I not done that, I'd have been waiting at a remote station basically all day. This way I'd have a couple of long waits, but at least things would be broken up a bit. I also picked up the ticket for tomorrow I had booked. Technically I didn't have to do that (the rail pass is all that's necessary to get through the gates and on the train), but it was a reminder of what seat I was in.

Compared to the others I'd been at on this trip, Morioka is a very quiet station. Basically they have trains in each direction leaving hourly, and that's it. I browsed through the shops, but the only thing I bought was a bottle of Coke Zero from a vending machine. After ponying up for the new suitcase yesterday and taking a hit on cancelling my reservation in Sapporo tonight, I really didn't want to spend anything more.

While I was waiting, I also made a reservation for tomorrow night in Sapporo. The hotel I'd originally booked was much more expensive on Friday than on Thursday, so I changed to the ANA Holiday Inn. Hopefully it will be as good as the Crowne Plaza in Hiroshima.



Hayabusa train at Morioka station

last thing I expected to see in northern Japan.

Shortly after 10am I made my way up to Platform 14, and I entertained myself watching a guy working on a broken escalator. About 10:20 they announced that Hayabusa 5 would be arriving shortly, and I took my place at the front of the green car queue. A ton of people got off at Morioka, but only a handful boarded. I found my seat (9-A in car #9) easily, and I was pleased that the new bag actually fit in the overhead rack easier than the old one did. (It's bigger, but its width is slightly narrower.)

We left almost immediately. The route today would mostly take us through tunnels. The Tohoku Shinkansen isn't much for views. They seem to have run this part of the line arrow straight and level, drilling through every mountain that was in the way. Some of the tunnels are very long—like being between stations in the subway for three or four minutes at a time.

When we do get a view of the countryside, it's mostly forest with a few fields in the valley. That makes it look kind of like the American South. They even have some of those huge-needle flash pines I remember from Mississippi. The trees they're known for in this area, though, are apples. They grow a lot of them, and they're considered some of the best in the world.

It's about an hour and a half from Morioka to Shn-Hakodate-Hokuto. The only stop is halfway through, at Shin-Aomori. I did a double-take when I saw a Cub Foods just east of the station there. I did some googling (thanks to the fact that we were temporarily out of tunnels), and I found that this is different from the Minnesota chain, but they apparently licensed the name and logo for some reason. It was certainly the



Cub Foods – Aomori, Japan

only had about twenty more minutes before we got to the end of the shinkansen tracks at Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto. At some point the Shinkansen should run all the way to Sapporo, with the part yet to be built also mostly in tunnels. The extension has gotten postponed numerous times, and now it's projected for somewhere between 2028 and 2035. That's a wide range, but basically it means not very soon.



**Manhole cover with shinkansen
Hokuto, Japan**

North of Aomori we came to the **big** tunnel. The Seikan Tunnel that connects Honshu and Hokkaido is arguably the longest underwater tunnel in the world. I phrase it that way because both the Seikan Tunnel and the Channel Tunnel that connects England and France make that claim. The Seikan is actually longer overall (53.8km or 33½ miles), but the chunnel has a longer stretch that's actually underwater. Of course, you don't know you're underwater. The whole thing is bored through the seabed, so it's not even like there's water around it. It definitely is a great work of engineering, but I must say I was glad 21 minutes later when we reached the northern end.

There were more tunnels on Hokkaido, and where it wasn't tunneled they'd built walls on the elevated structure so it was hard to see the surrounding area anyway. Fortunately we



In the Seikan Tunnel

I wandered around Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto station a bit. The station is built pretty much in the middle of nowhere, at a spot where the main line across Hokkaido crosses the path of the shinkansen. There's mostly farmland nearby, but right by the station there's also several car rental places and a couple of hotels. The one I'd be staying at literally towered above its neighbors, the only tall building for miles around. It's another Toyoko Inn, which I booked because it was far cheaper than its competition (and at 6200 yen or \$41.40, cheaper than just about any other hotel anywhere).

Japanese hotels are very strict about check-in times. I couldn't enter my room until 3pm, but they did let me store luggage for the day. The desk clerk actually had me check in with the self-check-in machine before putting my bags with a bunch of others under a big net by the desk. The machine spit out a key, but the clerk assured me it wouldn't work until three o'clock. He gave me a receipt for the bags, and I made my way back to the station.

Normally there is a shuttle between the city of Hakodate and Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto station that runs every twenty minutes. The area it runs through was not affected by the tsunami, but for some reason they had extremely limited service on that route today. Instead of every twenty minutes, trains were running about every two hours. I had about an hour to kill before I could board one.

I was both annoyed and glad to find that they had resumed limited service on the line up to Sapporo. In theory I probably could have gone up there late in the day, but there would have been no guarantee of that. I certainly wasn't going to change things at this point, and the fact that service had resumed meant I should be good to go tomorrow.

At about 1:35 an inbound train from Hakodate arrived, and I joined a big crowd of people heading for that train, which was obviously going to be turned around to head back into the city. I'm glad I joined them, because that allowed me to get a seat on the air-conditioned train rather than waiting in the stuffy station. (Japanese train stations seem not to have air conditioning in general, except when there are shopping malls attached to them—and then only the stores are cooled.)

I'd read articles and watched videos that recommended Hakodate as a great place for tourists to visit. I must say I'm a bit confused as to why that is. There is some history to the place. Hakodate, together with Nagasaki was declared an open port in the Meiji era, so it was one of the first places in Japan to westernize. There's pretty much nothing from that era that I could find, though. Honestly Hokodate seemed like a not particularly nice provincial town. It reminded me of some of the rural cities in Spain. Both it and Morioka are about the size of Des Moines. Morioka seemed bigger than it was, though, while Hakodate seemed smaller. There's no tall buildings, and the downtown seems a bit sleepy compared to the rest of Japan. It's very industrial and blue collar, and everything seems rather grimy. It wasn't really what I was expecting in the second largest city in Hokkaido.

That said, Hakodate station was much more important than Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto, though I think a fairly large crowd had developed from all the delayed and cancelled trains. There's lots of food vendors in the station, mostly selling various forms of preserved fish together with pickled vegetables. Nothing there looked remotely appetizing to my western eyes.

I ended up having my main meal of the day at the downtown Hakodate branch of Saizeriya. I had the same doria I'd had in Chiba, but this time I accompanied it with French onion soup and gelato. It was interesting that this Saizeriya had a robot waiter, but it was humans who delivered my food to me—though strangely the gelato came out before the soup or the main course.

Like many places in Japan, Saizeriya had self-check-out. This has normally gone fine, but today I had an issue with it. I paid cash and purposely used a 10,000-yen note. The machine accepted it with no problem and told me my change would be somewhere around 8,900 yen. It spit out a receipt and the appropriate coins, but no bills came out. Fortunately a middle-aged Japanese guy was

waiting in line behind me, and he was able to explain the problem to the waiter. He checked inside the machine and found that a 5000-yen note had gotten stuck. It took a while, but eventually I did get the proper change.

I spent about an hour walking around central Hakodate. Basically I walked to the edge of the downtown area (to another of those Aeon MaxValu stores) and then took a tram back to the station. While it provided something to fill the day, there wasn't really anything of interest I saw. Hakodate wasn't originally on my itinerary, and I doubt it would be if I were to return to Japan.

One interesting thing I saw were tourist-oriented signs in Russian. Hokkaido is quite close to Russia, and I suppose that when there's not an earthquake they might get tourists from there. English signs are everywhere in Japan (though less common the further I've gotten from Tokyo), and it's not uncommon to see signs in Korean and Chinese. Russian was definitely a first, though.

I got to the station around 3:45pm. The departure screen showed trains would be leaving at 4:40 and 4:55. The 4:40 departure was actually headed all the way to Sapporo (I think the first train of the day to go there). It required reservations, so I got on my phone and went to the JR website to make one. It amused me that when I googled the website on my phone, I got a notation that said "you have accessed this site frequently". Actually I hadn't accessed it on my phone at all until this morning, but I certainly did make use of it today.

I'd actually have gotten back quicker if I'd have taken the later departure on a local train. The southbound train from Sapporo got in about 4:15, but then it pulled into a yard. Meanwhile the local train arrived on the next track, and people boarded it and waited in the air conditioning while those of us on the reserved train waited in the heat. At 4:40 they began making a string of announcements only in Japanese, presumably explaining that our train would be departing late. About every minute there was another announcement, but still no train in sight. Since everyone remained on the platform, I assumed they had not said the train had been cancelled. The 4:55 local train ended up leaving before ours even arrived on the platform. Once it did arrive, there were tons of announcements (again in Japanese only) on the train P.A. Finally they turned on the recordings (which were trilingual in Japanese, English, and Chinese), and at 5:10pm we finally got going.

I reclaimed my luggage and got settled into Room 518 at the Toyoko Inn—Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto Eki Minimiguchi (the extra words give its location as "south of the entrance to the station"). While theoretically I'm in a lower class of room (the "economy double"), the room is basically identical to what I had yesterday. About all I notice that's different is that this one doesn't have a hair dryer or curling iron (which yesterday's did) and the generic artwork on the wall is in a different color scheme. This hotel also looks brand new, while the one in Morioka was obviously old enough to need renovation. I'd definitely recommend the Toyoko Inn chain to anyone traveling to Japan. The hotels are well located, clean and pleasant, and—most important—dirt cheap.

My main accomplishment this evening was doing laundry for the second time on this trip. (As sweaty as the weather has been, that's something that really can't be delayed.) This hotel has downright cheap laundry facilities. It costs 200 yen (\$1.35) to wash (plus 30 yen or 20¢ for detergent) and 100 yen to use a powerful industrial dryer. That's about a third of what I paid to do laundry in Tokyo.

Something unique about this particular location of Toyoko Inn is that they serve a free dinner in the breakfast room. (My bet is that's because there's basically nowhere to eat anywhere even vaguely nearby.) Like breakfast had been this morning, dinner was very Japanese. They served curry and rice. I'd read that Japanese curry is quite mild, and that's definitely true; it's nothing at all like Indian food. My curry came with beef tips and onions, and it really was quite tasty.



Toyoko Inn
(The lone skyscraper in Hokuto)

I watched more baseball on TV, as well as a strange game show that really was beyond description. (There's a lot of those on Japanese TV.) Then around 10pm I settled off to sleep.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 1

HOKUTO, JAPAN TO SAPPORO, JAPAN

This morning I'd set my alarm for 5:15, but I was actually up right at five. Sun was blaring through my window as if it were noon, a sign I was further north than I'd been before.

I showered and packed, and right at six I checked out of the hotel. A nice thing about the automatic registration process is that check-out is quick and easy. I just put my key into the machine, and almost instantly it told me the process was completed.

I made my way over to the station and upstairs, and I was delighted to see that the 6:21 Hokuto train was on the board. ("Hokuto", by the way, means "big dipper"; the logo on the front looks almost identical to the flag of Alaska. They soon began announcing which car would board at which position, and I made my way to the very rear of the platform (position "I" using English letters, with a picture of an iris marking it—it was right next to "horse"), where the green car would be located.

The train showed up about five minutes early, and we actually left the station about three minutes early. Hopefully nobody was dawdling to board. This looked like an older car than the one I'd been in yesterday afternoon, but it's perfectly nice. The green car is arranged in a 2—1 configuration, while the regular cars are 2—2. Trains other than the shinkansen run on narrow gauge in Japan (as they did in New Zealand), so the cars are quite a bit narrower. The arrangement is comfortable enough in the green car, but I think it would probably be a bit cramped elsewhere.

The Hokuto is not high speed rail, though it is considered a "limited express" train and runs significantly faster than the local trains on this route. The speedometer app on my phone showed we were doing right at 50 mph, so about a fourth of the speed we went yesterday. We stop at about a dozen stations on the way to Sapporo. There are actually seventy-four stations on the line, and I hate to think how long the local train takes to make the same trip.

There are only occasional tunnels on this route, which means I'm able to enjoy the view more. I'd said that northern Honshu looked like the southern U.S. Southern Hokkaido, by contrast, looks like Canada or possibly upstate New York. Everything is heavily forested, with just occasional clearings where there are farms.

At the rather depressed looking town of Mori (the first stop north of Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto) we began following the coast. Mori had a sea wall, which made me wonder how it fared during the tsunami. In this stretch the train tracks are just a short distance from the coast and probably only a meter or so above water level. It reminds me of the Pacific Surfliner Amtrak route in California, except that the scenery is greener and the ocean is on the other side. It's absolutely gorgeous, but I can definitely see why the service was cancelled yesterday.

The green car on this train is practically empty. Besides me there's just one middle-aged Japanese couple. Interestingly they're seated across the aisle in the same row (#4) as I am. There are numerous Hokuto trains throughout the day, so unless someone wants to get to Sapporo as early as possible, there really wouldn't be a lot of motivation to take this particular one.

Unlike most trains in Japan, the Hokuto is a diesel train, and I can definitely smell the fumes from my seat. Even the most remote train lines on Honshu are electric, and the local train I took to Hakodate also ran on overhead wires. Beyond Shin-Hakodate-Hokuto the electrification stops, though. The shinkansen will have wires in its many tunnels, but the old train line will continue to run the way it always has.



View along the Pacific coast from the Hokuto train

I can tell that Hokkaido is notably less populated than Honshu, though overall I'd still say the rural population is denser than what we see in America. The area looks poor, too. I get the sense that this is the neglected part of Japan, kind of like Appalachia. That may be a bit deceptive, though. They get serious winters in Hokkaido, much more severe than elsewhere in Japan. The construction materials are the same throughout the country, and the weather may just make things age more quickly here.

The countryside in Hokkaido is much more overgrown than it was in Honshu. That actually makes it prettier, since there's wildflowers everywhere. Something else that's everywhere is kudzu, a plant I believe is native to Japan. It chokes the trees here just like it does all over Dixie.



Building the Hokkaido shinkansen

The Hokuto does seem to be going quite a bit faster than traffic on the adjacent highway. It's mostly truck traffic on that road, and they look to be going about half the speed of the train. Except right around Sapporo, there are no expressways on Hokkaido. I gather that people who want to travel elsewhere in the country either take a ferry down to Honshu and pick up the expressways there, or they take the train.

It was interesting to pass a stretch where they were building an elevated section of the shinkansen. It does look truly massive, and it's amazing what a work of engineering it is.

As we make our way northward, I've been enjoying a breakfast I bought at a convenience store in Hakodate yesterday. I picked up a package of Dutch waffles, little waffles with chunks of caramelized sugar inside. There's certainly nothing nutritious about them, but they are delicious.

The further north we go, the more prosperous things look. The construction materials for homes have also gradually shifted. While there's still a lot of concrete, I've seen more and more wood or at least wood-like siding. That makes sense, as heavily forested as it is up here. The roofs of the homes are almost all metal in Hokkaido, and I've even seen a few asphalt shingles. There's none of the tile I saw further south.

There's a fair amount of agriculture in Hokkaido, too. The island is apparently known for potatoes and dairy, but I've seen just about every kind of crop, including lots of corn and soybeans—which presumably are grown for human food here. I've also thought of

my friend Beany Bode many times when I've seen markets with pumpkins for sale. It seems early for pumpkins to me, but perhaps that's just because I associate them with Halloween. The farms are in clearings in the valleys. Many will have greenhouses as well, which presumably gives them a longer growing season for various vegetables.

The couple across the aisle from me left at a small town along the way. They were replaced by a young couple and a businesswoman, all of whom were dressed to the nines. The passengers here have generally been better dressed than those in America. I'm used to seeing folks in Wal-Mart sweatpants on Amtrak, but about the most casual dress I've seen here is teenagers in jeans.

Like the train I was on yesterday, this one has trilingual announcements. The Japanese are by far the longest, and the Chinese is the shortest. In English in addition to announcing the name of the stop, the very British female voice also says, "The stops at stations are brief. Please gather your things and prepare to disembark immediately." The voice is correct—the stops are indeed very brief. At most towns we were on the platform not more than thirty seconds—more like what you'd find on a subway than an intercity train.

I used the restroom as we neared the end of our journey. I found it interesting that while the shinkansen trains have the Japanese super-toilets in each car, the Hokuto just has standard western toilets—perfectly adequate, but no weird features. This one had also not been kept particularly clean. That's very unusual in Japan. Just about every other toilet I've seen was spotless.

We got into Sapporo (which is pronounced SOP-uh-row, by the way) right at 9:45am. That was essentially on time, and if anything a couple minutes early. I left my bags in a locker in the station. One of the nicest things about Japan is that there are luggage lockers everywhere, and they're always quite cheap. I stored both of my bags with space to spare for 700 yen (\$4.65), which I paid for with loose change I'd accumulated. This locker had a physical key that I put in the little plastic bag where I kept my change. (The one I'd used in Hiroshima instead issued a code I had to enter to unlock it.

I followed signs for the subway, which took me through a maze of turns in an underground shopping mall. That took me down and also up numerous escalators. Something I don't think I've mentioned yet is escalator etiquette in Japan. Everywhere I've been in Japan, people on escalators stand on the left. (Apparently the reverse is true in Osaka, but I've not used an escalator there.) In theory you could pass on the right, but basically no one does. They just stand like zombies scrolling through their cell phones on the left side of the escalator. I'd think all that weight on one side would cause mechanical problems, and I'd also think things would move more efficiently if they'd let people use both sides of the escalator. That's not the way it works, though, and Japan is first and foremost a nation of rules.

Eventually I found the entrance to what I would call the blue line (it's actually the Toho line). I rode south just one stop and changed to the orange line (the Tozai line, which I rode clear to the end of the line at Shin-Sapporo station in the southeast corner of the city. It was a boring ride, entirely underground and with look-alike stations from the '70s. Fortunately it wasn't all that crowded.

At Shin-Sapporo I made my way to the bus terminal, which occupies the ground floor of an enormous mall run by Aeon, the same company that runs MaxValu. Buses to all over the suburbs leave from Shin-Sapporo I knew I wanted bus bay 10. (They actually call it "track 10", as if it were a train.) It took quite a while to find the right place, but once I did the bus I wanted showed up quickly.

I rode on bus 22 for about twenty minutes. The first half of the ride was down a suburban strip that had the same feel as an American strip, but with everything just a bit smaller. The stores all had too much parking, but since Japanese cars are significantly smaller than American cars, those lots for Aeon MaxValu and MOS-Burger (more on them later) were smaller than what you'd find at Wal-Mart or Hardee's back home.



**Interior of JR city bus
Sapporo, Japan**

We passed a number of gas stations, and the prices in Sapporo were generally higher than they were further south (generally in the 180s per liter). It appears that all gas in Japan is full-service. I also found it interesting that I haven't seen a single electric charging station anywhere. I know Toyota and Honda make electric vehicles, but it would appear no one buys them domestically.

Something there is a lot of in Sapporo are bicycles. You don't generally see bikes on a big suburban strip back home, but I saw plenty of them today. All the strip businesses had bike parking, and the bus driver had to yield to bicycles on at least four different occasions.

After going down the strip for about ten minutes we detoured to serve a small train station in a residential neighborhood. Then we headed through the equivalent of a state park and made a stop at a sports complex there. Finally we got to the two stops I was riding this bus for, the Hokkaido Historical Village and the Hokkaido Prefectural Museum.

Before I talk about those attractions, I need to mention some oddities about taking the bus in Japan. Fortunately I'd watched people on YouTube describing the process, but it would definitely have caught me by surprise otherwise. First, you enter the bus from the back door, not the front. At that door you either tap a fare card or (if you plan to pay another way) you grab a little ticket from a machine by the door. The ticket shows what zone you were in when you boarded. When it's time to leave you exit at the front by the driver. You either tap your farecard again (in which case it automatically charges the right fare) or you put the zone ticket in another machine that

then displays the necessary fare. You then pay that amount by cash, credit card, or whatever. In my case the JR Pass actually took care of my fare, because this bus was operated by JR. I still had to enter at the back, and then I showed the driver my pass as I exited.

I first rode the bus to the end of the line, which was the Hokkaido Historical Village. This is a wonderful attraction that so far is my favorite of all the things I've seen on the trip. The place is enormous and well worth its 1000 yen (\$6.65) admission. It's most like the Shantytown park I saw in New Zealand and it's somewhat like Living History Farms in Des Moines. The village is a collection of homes, shops, farm and industrial buildings that mostly date to the late 1800s (anywhere from 1850 to 1920). Hokkaido was sort of Japan's "last frontier", and it was settled by people who would call themselves Japanese in that era. They've recreated both urban and rural areas and the homes of families of all income levels. It's interesting that wealthier people were more likely to have western influences in their homes, while poorer people were very traditionally Japanese. There is also a Shinto shrine, a Buddhist temple, and a Protestant church, all of which were moved here from towns around the island.



LEFT: Interior of wealthy and poor homes
RIGHT: Sleigh manufacturer Hokkaido Historical Village Sapporo, Japan

The industry they chose to show was fascinating. There was lots of things related to mining and fisheries, and the same blacksmiths and bakers you'd see in any historical village. You get an idea of what the climate in Hokkaido is like, though, from the fact that one of the craftsmen made sleighs.

The signs at the historical village were in five languages, though the bulk of the text was in Japanese. Each sign had an English description that was quite a bit shorter than the Japanese. They were well written, though, so I didn't really feel I missed much with the abbreviated descriptions. I would have missed out, though, had I relied on the Korean, Chinese, or Russian descriptions. Those were just a few words each and looked to be little more than the name of whatever was there.

I spent about two hours at the historical village. Then I caught the bus one stop back to the museum. It would normally also cost 1000-yen, but they have a special ticket that lets you visit both places for just 400 yen (\$2.65) more than the first admission. This is run by the prefectural government. It's primarily a historical museum, with a bit of science (mostly biology) thrown in on the side. It was quite a nice museum, and I would have liked it even better if I'd spoken any Japanese. The bulk of the signage here was only in Japanese, and when there was English, it was usually very brief.



Traditional Aino house Hokkaido Museum – Sapporo

The first floor of the museum told the history of Hokkaido from prehistoric times to the early 19th Century. They started with mastodons and woolly mammoths and soon made their way forward to the Aino, the indigenous people who are thought to have come to Hokkaido from Siberia. The Aino still exist, and they seem to have the same sort of special treatment in Hokkaido that the Maori do in New Zealand. The settlers of Hokkaido displaced the Aino in much the same way as American pioneers displaced the Indians, and these days there appears to be a bit of embarrassment about that.

On the top floor they talk about "the immigrants", which here means the people who moved to Hokkaido from other parts of Japan and whose descendants now make up about 90% of the local population. They start in the era of the historical village and trace the life of the non-Aino through modern times. One interesting thing I learned is that many of the Hokkaido pioneers were sent by the government to Manchuria in an attempt to colonize there. I was also pleased to see a small exhibit on the 1972 winter Olympics, which is how I first found out that Sapporo even existed.

I spent about an hour at the museum and then re-traced the bus and subway rides to Sapporo station. I was a bit worried that I'd have trouble finding the locker with my bag, but I located it without a problem. I then took a different subway line (the green or Namboku

line) two stops south to Suskino station, which is just a couple blocks from my hotel.

The Suskino area, where the ANA Holiday Inn is located, is considered the “Times Square” of Hokkaido. It’s a very busy area, and I’m glad to be on a high floor (Room 704) where I can only barely hear the hubbub down below.

I did a bit of shopping at the Sapporo Don Quijote store. One of the things I bought was something I thought was candy. Instead it turned out to be drinkable jelly. This is a product Japanese people seem to like. I’ve seen it in numerous vending machines. I tried one of each flavor (grape, apple, and “green”), and I could barely keep the stuff down. It was really disgusting.

I had much better luck with a combination lunch/dinner at the downtown Sapporo MOS-Burger. This is a Japanese fast food chain that tries to be a bit more upscale than McDonalds or Burger King—sort of like an Asian Culver’s. Their English website says that their name, which is the capitalized English letters M, O, and S (in a green and white trademark) stands for “mountain, ocean, and sun”, though that strikes me as a bunch of B.S. that was created after the fact. MOS sells a wide range of food (including some strange “only in Japan” items), but they specialize in burgers.



Suskino area – Sapporo

I ordered the “Tobikiri burger”, which is described as having “Hokkaido gouda and cheddar cheese”, as well as “green leaf lettuce, tomato, and a rich Japanese-style barbecue sauce”. While a bit pricier than the competition at 690 yen (\$4.60), it really was a very good burger. I also got a surprisingly large salad (also quite good) and a tiny envelope with a combination of cold French fries and “tempura onions” (i.e.: onion rings). Finally I ordered their promotional dessert, which was called a “strawberry and milk syrup delight”. That was a frozen bar made of strawberry jam topped with condensed milk. It wasn’t bad, but it was really strange.

I spent much of the evening writing on this travelogue, but I had a bit of a surprise in the middle. Out of nowhere the door opened, and a middle-aged Japanese man walked in. When he saw someone was in the room, he apologized profusely. A couple minutes later I got a call from the desk clerk with an apology that she had given the wrong key to another guest. She said she had then made a new key for me and would be coming up to give it to me. When she did she also gave me QR codes I could scan in the hotel vending machines to get free drinks. Mistakes do happen, but I’ve never had anyone just walk into my room before.

My room tonight is a European double, meaning it has two single beds. It’s interesting that one of the better hotels I’ve been at has the smallest beds. It is a perfectly nice place, though—in spite of the key mix-up.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 2

SAPPORO, JAPAN TO SENDAI, JAPAN

When I woke up this morning I thought it was 5:15am. I was about to turn over and snooze a bit more when I realized it was in fact 6:15. That put me in a bit more of a rush than I’d planned.

I showered quickly and made sure my bags were packed appropriately to fly, since I was headed to the airport today. While I was brushing my teeth, it occurred to me that I don’t think I’ve mentioned the amenities that Japanese hotels include by default. It’s unsurprising that they give slippers to all guests. Sometimes these are complimentary disposable slippers, while other times they sanitize them between guests. All the hotels I stayed at also had pajamas available, not that I used them. One of the strangest amenities is that hotels invariably provide disposable toothbrushes, with one-use portions of toothpaste. That strikes me as a ridiculous waste, though I did take them with me to use in the future. The toothbrushes look like they’d last far longer than one use, and I might as well get some use out of them.

My rate at the Holiday Inn included a so-called “western breakfast”, though I can’t say it was particularly great. I had some fatty ham (which they actually called bacon), as well as fruit, cheese, chunks of pumpkin, and Japanese salad with the fish they’d topped it with removed. I passed on runny scrambled and badly under-fried eggs (the whites hadn’t even fully set). They also had a traditional Hokkaido dish (again something that’s usually eaten for dinner rather than breakfast). It’s called Genghis Kahn, and it’s basically a beef and onion stew. It was oddly spiced, and I have to say I liked the okonomiyaki in Hiroshima quite a bit better. I also avoided the cold pancakes and hot dogs. (I’m not sure what it is with hot dogs as a breakfast food in Japan, but they do seem to like them.) They did have decent coffee and a wide range of juices. I just don’t know that it would be worth the 2200 yen (\$14.85) they were charging walk-in guests.

I grabbed my stuff from the room, checked out, and took the subway back to Sapporo station. When I’d come yesterday I’d encountered a lot of stairs I had to go down. I really didn’t want to go up those same steps, so I was careful to look for elevator signs. Almost all the stations in Japan have elevators, but they’re often well hidden. I took a couple escalators as well, but I did manage to avoid dragging the bags up actual staircases.

I added value to my Suica card and also got a bit more cash from an ATM. Then I stopped briefly at another Mister Donut. I got a mochi doughnut and a honey-glazed churro. The churro in particular was really tasty.

The clerk at Mister Donut repeatedly communicated by pointing and gesturing. I caught myself trying to speak to her in Spanish. It's not the first time I've done that. I'm quite comfortable dealing with tourist-oriented conversations in Spanish, and it's the foreign language I've used by far the most often as a tourist. That won't help me in Japan, of course, but then neither will my non-existent Japanese.

Something I've also done that actually does work is speaking English slowly and simply. A lot of Japanese people do understand basic tourist phrases in English (like "can I store my bags"), though they rarely want to speak English. I feel like an idiot speaking extra-slow English, but it generally does seem to work.

One of the basic phrases every source I looked at said I must know in Japanese was "arigato gozaimasu" (with another silent "u"), which in the way a tourist would use it means "thanks a lot". What guides to Japan don't tell you is that you hear that phrase constantly. Service people greet customers by essentially saying "thanks for shopping here", waiters say "arigato gozaimasu" as they distribute food, and you hear it when people (and sometimes even vending machines) give back change. It's often abbreviated to just "gozaimasu", with a big stress on the "MAS". Something I don't know how to say, though I'd really like to, is "you're welcome". When I've googled it, all the things that came up were rather complicated and seemed to depend on the situation. Apparently there's no generic equivalent to "de nada".

I had made a reservation with my JR Pass for the 8:08 train from Sapporo station to New Chitose Airport. While I could have taken the same trains I'd come up to Hokkaido on back south, it was quite a bit quicker to fly. With an international ticket, ANA throws in a small number of domestic flights for essentially free (basically you just pay the tax), so that's why I was flying.

New Chitose is the only major airport in Hokkaido. It's considered Sapporo's airport, but it's way out in the suburbs, forty minutes away by train. They run airports every six minutes, but this one at least was packed. I was glad I'd made a seat reservation, because I easily could have been standing all the way.

As we left the station, it started raining, which made me glad I'd made it to the subway station beforehand. That would turn out to be a theme for the day.

When we reached the airport I made my way to the ANA check-in area. I'd already checked in online, but I wanted a physical boarding pass and I needed to check a bag (though I'd see people who had bags larger than mine as carry-ons). The woman slapped a label that said "SDJ" (which presumably stands for Sendai, Japan) on my bag and gave me a boarding pass that was mostly written in Japanese but showed the routing CTS → SDJ. She said I should go through security half an hour before the departure time and that boarding would close ten minutes prior to departure.

I had tons of time to kill. Honestly, I probably could have left an hour later and still made the flight in plenty of time. I killed a bit of time by wandering through the enormous shopping mall that is New Chitose Airport (it's Shin-Chitose in Japanese, but they use "New" when giving the name in English). I picked up a shirt at UNI-QLO, a global clothing retailer that's based in Japan. I've seen their stores in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Winnipeg, but I figured it made sense to patronize them in their home country. I also got some fruit-filled layer cookies that are apparently traditional in Hokkaido (most tasty) and a tiny model of an ANA plane that will go on the "toy shelf" of my room at school.

When I bought the shirt I accidentally left my passport and boarding pass on the counter at UNI-QLO. Fortunately the clerk ran out and caught me so I didn't actually lose it. The camera and the hat are no big deal in the great scheme of things, but it would be a disaster to lose my passport.

I made my way to security around 9:45, which was about an hour before boarding would start. The woman at the desk had told me I'd be leaving from Gate 1. What she didn't tell me was what security checkpoint I should use. I looked at an airport map and concluded that Checkpoint A was the closest to Gate 1, so I made my way there. Unfortunately I was promptly scolded, because apparently that checkpoint is for the exclusive use of passengers on the budget carrier Peach Air. ANA passengers are required to use Checkpoint B. I wheeled my bag back to around Gate 10 and was pleased to find there was practically no line for the ANA checkpoint. The attendant asked if I had "water", which confused me until I realized he meant liquids in general, not specifically water. I set out my liquids bag, and he waved me to the metal detector. I didn't set off anything, though I realized after I'd gone through that I still had my belt on, and it has quite a bit of metal in it. The person behind me did set off the alarm. It buzzed repeatedly and flashed bright red lights. The woman running the machine wanded him and patted him down before eventually letting him go.

On the other side of security, I my way back to Gate 1, which was indeed right behind Checkpoint A. I bought myself a soft-serve cone (300 yen or \$2.05) in the flavor Spaniards would call "nata" (unflavored sweet cream). Here the English translation was just "milk". Then I sat down in a large section of seats by the gate that was theoretically reserved for handicapped people. I had the sleeve on my knee, and there was nobody with a real disability anywhere around. I took out the computer and worked for a while on this.

It was still raining, and I was a bit worried when they repeatedly ran announcements saying various flights were delayed because of late inbound equipment. However when I saw passengers coming down the jetway, followed by stewardesses and pilots, I figured—correctly—that we were good to go.

They began boarding flight NH 1224 at 10:40am, which is twenty-five minutes prior to the scheduled departure time. They put up boarding group 1 on the changeable sign for about thirty seconds and then boarding group 2 for about another minute. Next came "Group 3 – window seats", and I was among the first of those. I assume middle and aisle seats followed.

I was in Seat 15-A on a Boeing 737. I hadn't realized it, but that happened to be an exit row seat. The stewardess asked me in English if I was willing to do emergency duties and showed me the English side of the card that explained them, and of course I responded yes. When a college-aged boy took the aisle seat, she presumably asked him the same question in Japanese, and he responded "hai". The kid was wearing a T-shirt that had the English phrase "change is a team sport" on it. I'm not really sure what that was supposed to mean.

They finished most of the boarding in ten minutes, though there was an elderly couple that boarded right before they closed the doors at 10:55, ten minutes before our scheduled departure. I think I was the only non-Japanese person on this flight, which was kind of an interesting experience.



**Tarmac workers bowing at flight NH-1224
New Chitose Airport – Sapporo, Japan**

I had read earlier that when planes begin taxiing in Japan the ground crew bows and waves at the plane to send the passengers on their way. It's true. The crew had already been out in the rain getting us off, but they actually took the time to bow and wave. It's definitely one of those "only in Japan" things.

I thought at first there were no tray tables on this plane, but actually the entire plane had tables that pulled out from the arm rests like are usually found in first class. There were no at-seat screens, but they had screens that dropped from the ceiling to play the safety video and then show advertising all through the flight. The safety film was bilingual, and it was interesting that they had captions in one language while the other was being said. Except for the safety video, though, all the announcements on the flight were only in Japanese.

As we ascended and my ears popped, it occurred to me that I hadn't seen gum for sale in the convenience stores or at supermarket check-outs in Japan. I later googled it and found out that gum is available in Japan (it's not like Singapore, where it's illegal), but apparently it isn't often chewed. The most popular gums for adults are actually nicotine gums for smoking cessation.

The flight was scheduled for an hour and forty minutes, but the actual flying time was right at an hour. In that time they did a very quick drink service (I chose apple juice, which was served in a half-full Dixie cup) without even any snacks distributed. Lots of people got up to use the restroom, which is not something I'm used to on a short flight. Indeed there was still a guy going back to his seat less than five minutes before we landed. They actually began clearing trash before they were done serving the drinks.

It was very cloudy, and we cut through several layers of clouds as we approached Sendai. That made for a rather rough landing. As at Narita the runway was also quite rough. Sendai is quite a small airport, though, so we didn't have to taxi long.

We landed at 12:07pm. Luggage came quickly, and my bag was the second one on the belt. I made my way to the airport rail station and had a bit of a surprise when the faregate spit out my JR Pass. I'd checked ahead of time, and I knew the pass was supposed to work on that line. I went to the woman at the side booth, and she got out a handheld translation device. She didn't really help with the problem, though. Basically she just made me tap my Suica card and told me it would cost 460 yen (\$3.10). While I was waiting for the train I typed an explanation of the situation into Google Translate so I could show that to someone when I got to the main station in Sendai.

A train came soon, and I boarded immediately. I was glad I did, because while it waited on the platform it rapidly became jam-packed. They only run airport trains every half hour in Sendai, and those trains are only two cars long. They also stop at a ton of intermediate stations, and at almost all of them more people got on than left.

A guy who was standing in the aisle with his butt to my face amused me. He was wearing what were rather obviously knock-off jeans. Instead of saying "LEVIS", they said "LIVES", and the stitching on the pocket was just slightly different than it should have been. His girlfriend was also in knock-offs. She had sweatpants that had two stripes going down the leg instead of the three that name-brand Adidas would have. I could relate to that because when I was a kid all the cool kids wore Adidas shoes, but I always had the kind with two stripes from K-Mart. (I assume they come from MaxValu in Japan.)

It took about half an hour to get to Sendai station. I went to the office beside the faregates and showed the woman there the message on my phone, as well as showing my JR pass and the Welcome Suica card. She read it and looked at my pass. Then she had me put the Welcome Suica card on a machine similar to the ones you use to add value to the cards. I think she basically cancelled the transaction at the airport. She gave the card back and then waved me through the door. I have no clue why things didn't work right at the airport, but I'm glad I wasn't charged for the trip.

I have to say Sendai is probably the largest place I've ever been that I'd never heard of before planning a trip there. The city proper has about 800,000 people. That's about three times the size of Morioka and a third the size of Sapporo. It's the capital of Miyagi prefecture, which has around two million. It's mostly known as a college town, home to several large universities, and it's the major

service center for the whole Tohoku region of northern Honshu. I'd certainly never heard of Sendai until last fall, though. My brother Steve said he had heard of it, but as far as I know he's the only person I know who has.

The first thing I did in Sendai was find my hotel and drop my luggage there. I'd actually seen the hotel when we went through Sendai on the shinkansen the other day, so I knew it was close to the station. The hardest part turned out to be just finding an exit from the station. It's another of those stations that's a shopping mall you can't get out of. Once I finally did find the way out, the hotel was only about a two block walk away. It was a bit odd that the reception was on the second floor (the first floor is a car rental business), but once I found it, the woman at the desk took my bags and gave me a little plastic number that I put in my bag of coins for safekeeping.

Most of my time in Sendai would involve adventures on the bus. The first issue was finding the bus I needed to begin with. The busway at Sendai station is massive and awkwardly designed. All the signage is in Japanese, and Google Maps seemed to be unable to locate my position precisely enough to give good directions. I'd eventually find out that while the busway allows about two dozen buses to lay over between runs, there's actually just one place from which all buses board. To get to it, though, you have to go up an escalator and then down one of half a dozen unmarked staircases that lead to different fenced off areas—only one of which is the boarding zone. I did eventually find it, and there was a big sense of accomplishment in doing so.

I was glad that I'd ridden the bus in Sapporo, because I had a bit of an idea of what to expect. This time I was paying with the Sucia card, so I entered at the back and tapped the card there. Then I knew I'd tap again at the front when I got off. With only a couple of exceptions (those being the stops for major universities), the announcements on the bus were only in Japanese. They were also very soft, to the point it was hard to hear them. I had the bus route on Google Maps on my phone, and I followed the location as we made our way along so I'd have a clue when to push the button to get off. I've actually done that before, in Kansas City of all places, so it wasn't that odd of an experience.



Sendai Daikonnō

The main attraction they encourage tourists to see in Sendai is a samurai castle ruin that's apparently a bit more developed than the one in Morioka. I didn't go there. Instead my destination was quite literally bigger than that. In fact it was quite literally a colossus. I'd taken the bus to see the Sendai Daikonnō.

The Daikonnō is an enormous statue of the Buddhist goddess of mercy. She stands in her stern glory towering 100 meters above the top of a hill looking down on the Aeon Mall, a golf course, and a residential neighborhood in the suburbs. It was commissioned by a businessman (presumably as a tax write-off). When it was built in 1991, the Daikonnō was the tallest statue in the world. It's #9 in the world now, and not even the tallest in Japan. It's still absolutely enormous, though.

Knowing that the Daikonnō was the Buddhist goddess of mercy reminded me that the Catholic parish that sends kids to Garrigan is called Divine Mercy. Perhaps they should up the ante and erect a 101-meter statue giving Christ's blessing to Algona.

When I found out such a thing existed, the curiosity in me wanted to see it, and it really did turn out to be quite fascinating. There's a small shrine outside the entrance, and it costs 500 yen (\$3.40) to go inside the statue. There's a small museum and a couple of other small shrines at the bottom. Then you take an elevator up to the twelfth floor and gradually walk back down to the bottom. On the way down they have smaller marble statues of what they call "108 manifestations of the buddha". I read a couple of the descriptions via Google Translate, and essentially these appear to be Buddhist saints. They seem to be living people who were inspired to do good works. I'd read that at one point they had offering boxes beside each of the 108 statues, but it appears they have taken those away. I was glad of that, because I think 108 separate offering boxes would be a bit tacky.

It takes 40 steps to get from one level to the next, so I walked down 480 steps to get from the head to the foot. Apparently there are people who essentially do a pilgrimage and walk up all those stairs, stopping to pray at each of the 108 statues along the way. I was quite happy to go down, though, and I was happier still when I reached the bottom.

I bought a couple postcards in the gift shop, as well as another Buddhist trinket I'll use for a Christmas ornament. There are two types of ornaments on my tree—those that were my parents' and those I've acquired, mostly while traveling. Both bring back memories, and those memories are part of what makes Christmas special.

It began sprinkling when I left the Daikonnō, and soon it began to rain more steadily. I saw the Aeon Mall across the street and figured spending a bit of time there might be a nice way to get out of the rain. Unfortunately when I got the parking lot it began to absolutely pour. I dashed to the nearest place, which wasn't even part of the main mall. It was basically a kids play zone that wasn't even connected to the mall itself. I spent about fifteen minutes just cowering under a canopy in front of the place until finally the rain let up slightly. Meanwhile I called up Google Maps to try to get bus directions back to Sendai station.

Once again Google seemed to have difficulty finding my actual location. It essentially told me to reverse my tracks and head back by the same route I'd come on. There are actually three routes that connect the station with the mall area, and it suggested any of them. The problem wasn't those routes—it was getting to a bus stop to find them. I found what I thought was the correct bus stop, but Google basically told me I should cross the street to the stop for the opposite direction. I did, but then it again said I should cross, basically

back to the stop I was at to start with. In that time buses came and went both directions. Both the bus stops and the buses themselves in Sendai are labeled in Japanese only, so I couldn't really tell which was the one that was going to Sendai station.

I knew it would be half an hour before the next bus on this particular route would come, so I set out walking, thinking I was retracing the path the bus had come in on. We'd come up a steep hill to get to the Daikonnon, so I walked down a steep hill on the other side of the road. Each time I neared a bus stop (which are marked with red circle signs almost identical to the signs they use to identify fire hydrants in Japan) I'd look back to see if a bus was coming. It turned out I'd walked about a mile in the wrong direction before a bus showed up. I got on that bus and then went about another mile before I realized I was heading the wrong way.

The good thing about going the wrong way is that I got to get an up close and personal view of suburban Sendai. I have a picture I took while walking around at left. Before this trip I really didn't expect Japan to look like this—sort of like a compact version of suburban America. It does appear that outside of the city centers the vast majority of people live in single-family homes, and almost everyone owns a car. The cars tend to be smaller than their American equivalents, largely because national law requires that to own a car you have to be able to park it off-street on your own property. It appears that most people commute to work using public transportation, but they use their cars to shop or when going out of town.

I got off the wrong bus just as it started pouring again, and then I crossed the street to a stop where a bunch of people were waiting. They probably thought I was stupid pointing my phone at the schedule sign, but I was able to confirm with Google Translate that the destination of all the buses that served that stop was Sendai station. One soon came, and while it took a much less direct route than the one I'd gone out on, I did eventually make it back downtown.



Typical suburban neighborhood – Sendai, Japan

It was pouring again when we got to the drop-off point at the station. I rushed to the nearest entrance, which happened to lead to an enormous department store adjacent to the station. I spent about fifteen minutes roaming around the place before discovering that the only actual connection to the station was on the third floor.

I stopped briefly in the station for a bit of refreshment, since I hadn't eaten or drunk anything since the apple juice on the plane. I had a specialty of the Sendai area, a zumba shake. Zumba is edamame flavored ice cream. I must say a soybean milkshake is kind of weird, but it really wasn't bad. I'd take it over that drinkable jelly any day.

The rain let up, and I rushed back to the hotel. This was a point redemption from Choice Hotels, and I'd been instructed to scan a QR code at their self-check-in machine. It took forever to get the code to scan, and then it took forever to get the same scanner to scan my passport (something that is required by law when you check into a hotel in Japan). Eventually the machine spit out my key, though. I gave the plastic number to the same lady who had taken my luggage earlier, and she returned the bags to me.

I made my way up to Room 520. This is a Comfort Hotel, what would be a Comfort Inn in America, with the "hotel" probably stressing its very vertical building. This is the first room I've had that basically has no view at all. It looks out at a windowless cement wall on the building next door. Otherwise the room is fine. While it's another room with two single beds, it's the most spacious room I've had in Japan. There's plenty of space around the beds, and there's also a desk, an easy chair, and a table. The bathroom is microscopic, but that does seem to be typical here. The redemption was for 8,000 Choice points, which is basically the minimum amount you can redeem anywhere, and it's good value for that amount.



**Bus exchange
Sendai station**

I still hadn't really eaten anything since breakfast, but of course it started raining again. I ended up just making a quick dash to a 7-Eleven in the building next door. I bought a small bag of salad greens for 118 yen (80¢), that consisted of several kinds of lettuce, carrots, celery, and grated radish—strange, but tasty and healthy. I also got another of those mini-baguette sandwiches, and I got some mango sherbet for dessert.

Back at the hotel I worked on the travelogue, and I also tried to e-mail the pictures I'd taken today to myself. One of the things I hate about using the phone is that I have to e-mail them to get them on the computer; I can't just download straight from an SD drive like I do with a camera. (I'm sure people younger than me will know some easier way to do it, but I've never figured it out.) This time several of the pictures got lost in the ether while being sent, so I'll have to make the best of what's left. The main thing I lost were the pictures I took of the daikonnon, so I had to insert an image of it from a website in my description earlier.

SUNDAY, AUGUST 3

SENDAI, JAPAN TO TOKYO, JAPAN

I was up right at six o'clock this morning. The water in the shower at this hotel was very slow to heat up. That's very much the exception in Japan. I think they have on-demand water heaters for each room, and the other places I've been have had hot water almost instantly. Like the other places this one had a sign on the bathroom door that said to keep it closed while showering, lest the steam set off the fire alarm in the room. I actually was in room at an American hotel years ago where that happened. With the cramped bathrooms at Japanese hotels, I suspect it's rather common.

This was another place where breakfast was weird and very Japanese. I had a salad with noodles that came with a very odd dressing. I also had some cold meatballs and a dish that consisted of pulled pork mixed with assorted vegetables. Finally I had a couple of grapefruit and pineapple chunks and some coffee. There appeared to be no bread anywhere, there were no eggs, and the only "western" meat was hot dogs.

While I did not try any, they did have two Kellogg's dispensers with dry cereal on the buffet. One was labeled corn flakes. It looked like corn flakes that had been mixed with bits of dried corn (like mini corn nuts). That actually might be good. If I see it elsewhere, I might give it a try. The other looked kind of like Grape Nuts, but it was completely black in color. After breakfast I went to Kellogg's Japan website and found out it was most likely chocolate muesli. It did not look quite so appetizing.

I grabbed my bags from the room and checked out (which means I just inserted my key into the self-check-in machine, to which the machine announced "arigato gozaimasu"). Then I took the elevator down to street level.

Perhaps unsurprisingly after the strange hotel breakfast, I made a quick stop at the McDonalds at Sendai station. I got an Egg McMuffin and a berry smoothie. It's the first smoothie I've had since being diagnosed with diabetes (I'm pretty sure they don't even sell them anymore in the States), and while it will likely be years before I have another, it did make a tasty treat.

I found the Shinkansen entrance, which is on the third floor of the station. (The actual tracks are higher still.) Then I sat outside a shop that sold souvenir foods from the Sendai area while eating my Egg McMuffin. There are souvenir food shops in pretty much every station in Japan, and also at the airports. Apparently it's traditional whenever someone travels to essentially bring back treats for the office as well as for family and friends. That's the purpose of these shops. While I almost always bring treats to Garrigan when we have occasions that warrant them, I don't plan to bring them as souvenirs of my trip.

I made my way up to platform 13 and had a very steamy wait for my train to arrive. All the rain from yesterday seemed to have evaporated, and it felt like a sauna.

Hayabusa 6 departed right on time at 8:07am. They call all shinkansen trains "super-express", but this one really seemed to fit that bill. It made only one stop between Sendai and Tokyo, so we went at full speed pretty much the full way. The sun was shining brightly, so I lowered the shade partially and honestly didn't notice much of what we passed by. I spent most of the trip inserting pictures into the last couple days of this journal.

Shortly before we arrived I used the toilet at the end of the car. I saw that beyond there was the Gran Class car. The green car I was in is actually the second level of service on trains that head north of Tokyo. Beyond that is Gran Class, which features a lie-flat seat, a complimentary bento box of food, and unlimited alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. I'd actually toyed with the idea of splurging for that on this particular leg, which is about the cheapest Gran Class run you can make. Even that would have set me back about a hundred bucks—on top of the JR Pass—and I certainly had better things I could do with that money.

We got into Tokyo right at 9:45am. I spent quite a while searching for a locker where I could drop my bags. There are literally thousands of lockers in Tokyo station, but it seemed as if every one had a red light on to indicate it was already in use. Eventually I found one at the far end of the basement level, actually quite near where I'd waited before my first shinkansen trip. I tried to pay with my Suica card, but there wasn't quite enough on there to cover the 900-yen (\$6.10) rental fee. Both of my bags fit easily, and I made a careful record in Google Keep of exactly how to find the location. Then, with just a shopping bag to gather junk, I went about my day.

That shopping bag got a workout on this trip, and I'm sure it stood out. Mine was a bright orange bag from the Amazon Go automated convenience store in Chicago. While just about everyone in Japan carries a bag, the men almost always have a very neutral black or brown bag, while the women are more likely to either have a designer purse or something that looks like one.

Today was the last day my JR Pass was valid, and I got as much value out of it as I could. The pass works on all the commuter trains JR operates in the Tokyo area, and I made a point of using those rather than the subways to get around today. First I scoped out how to get to my ultimate destination this afternoon, and I found I could literally see it from one of the JR stations. On the way there I passed a Wendy's, and—having already tied McDonalds and Burger King—I figured it might be fun to complete the trifecta of American food in Japan. With that in mind I had lunch today at Wendy's.

Wendy's in Japan is very different than it is at home. The chain apparently merged with a Japanese chain called First Kitchen, and the combined restaurant has elements of both. There are several things on Wendy's menu you can't find in Japan. For instance I've had Wendy's taco salads in Spain, Canada, New Zealand, and of course the U.S., but they're not on the menu in Tokyo. Oddly, they also don't have the Frosty, which I've always thought of as Wendy's signature item. I did order some chili (which had more meat and fewer

beans than I'd expect back home), and I also ordered a plate of pasta that was described as being covered in bacon, with a mozzarella, tomato, and cream sauce. The bacon was an odd touch, but it was actually pretty good. They also had decent unsweetened iced tea. All in all, it wasn't a bad meal.

Something kind of weird at Wendy's was that they used a mixture of disposable and washable table service. The pasta came on a stoneware dish and was served with both a metal fork and disposable chopsticks. (I chose the fork.) The chili came in the same paper bowl you'd get back home, with a weirdly shaped disposable plastic spoon that was like a cheap imitation of the spoons you might get at a Chinese restaurant.

After lunch I made my way to my first real destination of the day, St. Ignatius Church. It's not hard to figure out that this church was founded by Jesuits. Today it's also one of the largest churches in Asia, serving more than 17,000 members. They have masses in seven languages each weekend, and when I saw they had a noon mass in English, I thought it might be interesting to attend.



**Windows and ceiling
of St. Ignatius Church
Tokyo, Japan**

St. Ignatius is an enormous modern church, and it's really quite beautiful inside. The altar area is one of the simplest I've seen in a Catholic church, but that actually makes it more of a focal point. The most beautiful thing about the church are its stained glass windows, which I think were made to resemble the scroll-like vertical paintings that were common in traditional Japanese art. It really is a beautiful space.

Something interesting is that there are sheets in the pews warning in Japanese and English what to do in case of an earthquake. In a modern building like this, basically the answer is stay put. The building is designed to withstand a 7.0 earthquake. In bigger quakes the stained glass and the glass ceiling would be the biggest issues. They actually store earthquake helmets under the pews for just such a situation. Fortunately those didn't need to be used today.

I did some calculations in my head and determined that it holds about 700 people comfortably. There were people standing at the side for the noon mass today. For the vast majority of those present, including the lector and cantor, it appeared English was their second language rather than their first. About the only times I've been to bigger masses were for special occasions like my friend and former student Jake Rosenmeyer's recent ordination. I'd arrived about half an hour before mass, but people kept coming in until about the time of the gospel.

It intrigued me that they had an American hymnal by the St. Louis Jesuits as the English worship aid in the pews, though they also projected the words to the hymns on screens at the front. I felt properly welcomed since the opening hymn was the very first hymn I ever sang at a school mass at Garrigan, "Glory and Praise to Our God". I always liked the upbeat responses of the St. Louis Jesuits' mass, and I really enjoyed hearing them again.



**LEFT: Crowd of worshippers
before mass**

**RIGHT: Emergency earthquake helmet
Saint Ignatius Church
Tokyo, Japan**



The priest was a very old man from India with an accent I found extremely hard to understand. Interestingly there was also a white deacon with a very American accent and two seminarians from Africa who were participating in the mass. The lectors and cantor were all middle-aged Asian women, though I suspect they (and many in the congregation) were Filipino rather than Japanese. They also had five different altar servers, three girls and two boys. All of them were Japanese, and when they genuflected, they bowed in a very Japanese manner. A Japanese sister was also at the front, and she served as a communion distributor.

his homily. It stood out because it was almost exactly the same as an Asian priest who used to frequently do masses at Garrigan said in pretty much every homily he did: be good to each other. I always liked when Fr. Peter said that back home, and I appreciated it today as well.

While I didn't understand a lot of what the priest said, I did get the gist of what he was trying to get across in

The wording of the mass was pretty much identical to what is said in the United States today. That stood out, because in New Zealand the wording was quite a bit different. Their hymnal is from Oregon Catholic Press, so presumably it's the liturgy that appears

there that the priest was using. Something unique was that they didn't have kneelers on the pews at St. Ignatius, so the places where the congregation would normally kneel were done standing. I actually appreciated that with my knee.

A unique part of the service was the passing of the peace. In most American churches this basically is a time for everyone to shake hands with those around them. Japan is, of course, a more formal society, and it's not a place where people touch those they don't know well. So for the passing of the peace, everyone did a very Japanese bow in all directions while saying "peace be with you".

About three-fourths of those present took communion. They made a formal invitation for those who would not take communion to go up and receive a blessing (which is always an option, but rarely publicized). What stood out was that those blessings were long and sincere, both when done by the clergy and by the extraordinary ministers (i.e., the communion distributors). When I see the Protestant kids go up for a blessing at Garrigan, it's almost always literally two words—"bless you", like they sneezed. The priests will say more, but the distributors never do. That as much as anything is why I pretty much never go up for a blessing at school. The blessings in Tokyo were longer and much more genuine, though. They seemed to want to make everyone feel they were truly part of the service.

Mass ended right at 1pm, and I took the train three stops down to my next destination, the Tokyo Dome. I'd used a booking service online to get a ticket to a Japanese baseball game where the Tokyo Yomiuri Giants would be taking on the Yokohama DeNA Bay Bears. I got there around 1:30 for a 2:00 game, and the stadium was already packed. I'm pretty sure this was a sellout, which would mean 43,500 fans in attendance. Unlike most American ballparks, there were actually people in even the most expensive seats.

While I wasn't in one of those seats, I was actually in the section just behind the movers and shakers. My seat was in Row 9, right behind third base. I was sandwiched between Japanese fans of both teams, with an American couple wearing New York Yankees clothes in front of me. The seating is quite tight at the Tokyo dome, like sitting in bad economy seats on a plane. They're built for Japanese bodies, too, though I suspect even most younger Japanese people would find those seats uncomfortable.

They had a huge spectacle before the game with hundreds of little girls doing a dance routine while costumed characters ran around among them. Then they had a little boy throw out the first pitch. Instead of just throwing to a player at the plate, though, there was actually an opposing player in the batting box when he threw. It was kind of odd that there was no country's national anthem, but after the kid threw that ball, the game just started.

It's hard to describe just how into baseball Japanese fans are. American teams could only dream of having such loud, devoted fans. Both of the teams had a formal cheering section (kind of like the student section at a high school basketball game) with their own band that played songs to cheer on each player on their team. They wave towels and flags and clack noisemakers together all through the game. At an American baseball game the crowd is usually quiet when guys are actually batting, but in Japan it's loud all the time—and of course in a dome it was even louder.



LEFT: BayBears batter at the plate in front of an enormous crowd
RIGHT: One of the "beer girls"
Tokyo Dome
Tokyo, Japan

The game seems to be played a little bit differently in Japan, too. I saw only one walk the entire time I was there, and there were no steals at all. There were also almost no line drives. People were always swinging for the fences. Most of those bombs ended up as "can of corn" outs, but I did see two home runs—and, of course, the crowd went even more wild for them.

The scoreboard alternated between Japanese and English, and it was kind of interesting to see Japanese characters spelling out the names of American players. One of the guys was named Trey Cabbage. I pointed my

phone with Google Translate when the Japanese came up, and it told me his name was "three cabbage plants".

Another thing you can't miss at a Japanese baseball game are the vendors. In American ballparks, the stadium vendors tend to be old men who have been selling beer and hot dogs their whole lives. In Japan the vendors are, without exception, college-aged girls with "kawai" (cutesy) haircuts and make-up. The beer girls carry pony kegs on their backs and walk up and down the steps all through the game. I also saw young ladies selling pop, ice cream, whiskey, and nuts.

I bought from a concession stand rather than from the girls, but food in general is quite cheap compared to American sports events. I got an alcoholic drink (a mango sour, mango because the team's color is orange) in a souvenir cup for just 800 yen (\$5.40)—which is less than they charge for pop at the state football and basketball tournaments in Iowa. I also got a box of the snack I grew up calling Bugles (though they were labeled only in Japanese) for 350 yen (\$2.35), and you basically can't touch anything for under three bucks at a concession stand in America these days. The prices the girls in the aisles were charging for beer and ice cream were just

slightly more than what those things would go for in Japanese vending machines. I've always thought sports venues would sell more if their prices were more reasonable, and I think Japan is proof of that.

I left after about half the game. When the people next to me got up to use the restroom, I just kept on walking to the exit. I think I could have actually come back in by just scanning my ticket again, since tons of people went outside to smoke. I made a brief stop at the team store (where I got another baseball cap) and then found my way back to the train station.

I returned to Tokyo station and reclaimed my bags. Then I caught the Yamanote line down to Hamamatsucho, right by the hotel I was at back at the start of the trip. I didn't leave the station, though. Instead, I switched to the Tokyo monorail and rode down to just shy of the airport, where I'd booked another extremely cheap business hotel.

My hotel was the Keikyu Ex Haneda, which is owned by the Keikyu Railway, one of JR's competitors in the Tokyo area. Just like ANA, all the other transportation companies are involved in other businesses like hotels. This one is a lot like the Henn Na where I stayed at the beginning of the trip, except that it doesn't dress up the self-check-in machines with robots.

I did get some more robots with dinner tonight, though. I chose to eat at a place called AISCAPE, a name I think is trying to merge artificial intelligence with escape. It's part of the Haneda Innovation Center, a sort of permanent convention center that shows off various technology that's located right next to the airport. AISCAPE was created by Kawasaki to demonstrate their robot division. They claim to be the first restaurant where the cooks and waiters are robots. While that's not untrue, they also employ three women who basically just stand around and babysit the place.

I was the only customer on Sunday night. (I think most of their customers are families with young children who come earlier in the day.) It was honestly kind of annoying to order, because after scanning a QR code they required me to create an account. Once I did, I was able to order a "set" that included pasta, Bolognese sauce on the side, a small salad, and a cup of iced tea. The cooks were pretty standard industrial robots, but really all, but honestly they just had the skill of a college kid with a microwave. They took a premade salad out of a refrigerator and heated up premade pasta and sauce. The iced tea came from a drink machine where a robot placed the cup and then tapped the button to select iced tea. The robot waiter was a beefed-up version of what I'd seen at different family restaurants. Instead of just bringing food to the side of the table, it physically lifted a tray with the food on it and set it on the table. While it was kind of fun to watch the show, I wasn't particularly impressed with either the technology or the meal.



**Industrial robot preparing meal
at AISCAPE
Haneda Innovation Center – Tokyo**

MONDAY, AUGUST 4

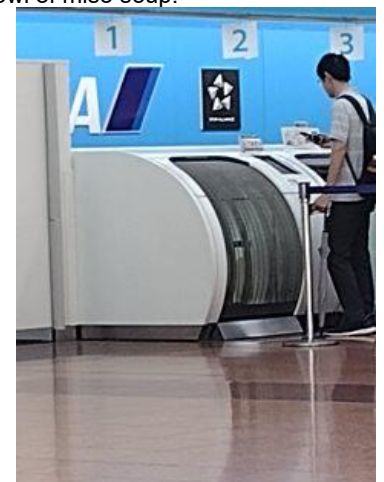
TOKYO, JAPAN TO NAHA (OKINAWA), JAPAN

While I'd set my alarm for seven, I was up around six this morning. The hotel served what they called a "western" breakfast set that included a Japanese omelet (think layers of scrambled egg stacked atop each other, with a bit of cheese inside), a salad of cabbage and corn, Vienna sausage (so basically a miniature hot dog), a dish of yogurt with strawberry sauce on top of it, a bowl of miso soup, barely toasted bread with melted butter and jam, and a cup of green tea. While I am a bit tired of the Japanese concept of breakfast, I suppose there are folks from Asia who go to a Hampton Inn and wonder how hard it is to make a bowl of miso soup.

My first stop at Haneda Airport was at an ATM, where I replenished my cash. I also put some more value on the Suica card. Then I stopped at a convenience store where I picked up some mouthwash and a comb. If I had money for all the combs I've lost while travelling, I think I'd be quite wealthy.

I got my bags and then made my way to the nearby train station. Both the monorail and the Keikyu line go directly to the airport. The Keikyu line had the advantage that their part of the station had an elevator, so that's what I took. A couple of express trains bypassed the station without stopping but eventually I got on a very crowded local train. Fortunately it was only two stops to the end of the line.

I'd checked in online, but I needed to check a bag, and I wanted a printed boarding pass. Neither of those things was easy, because pretty much everything is self-serve in the domestic part of Haneda. I first found the baggage check section. I had to scan the QR code I'd gotten when checking in, and place my bag in a contained area. I confirmed that there was not anything dangerous. (The oddest of their prohibited items was umbrellas, which I think would be an issue for every woman in the country.) Then the machine spit out a baggage tag marked with the destination "OKA" together with rather complicated directions on how I was supposed to attach it to the bag. I again had to confirm there was nothing dangerous, and then the cover of the unit



**Luggage self-check
Haneda Airport – Tokyo**

closed. It went through a process where the machine said it was weighing the bag, checking it for explosives, and reading its bar code. Then it spit out a claim check and notified me that the bag was on its way to Okinawa.

The issue I had with the ticketing machine was getting it to recognize me. Whenever I'd turn my phone to the angle of their barcode reader, the phone reset so that the code was no longer visible. I then tried scanning my passport, but the passport was not associated with the domestic booking, only the international one. I tried to enter the reservation number, but all I had was a six-place alphanumeric code while they wanted a 14-digit number. Eventually I tried scanning the bar code at another machine, and that time it worked. The boarding pass I got was smaller than the one in Sapporo, and everything on it was bilingual. It noted that the flight would be leaving from gate 65, which was in secure area C.



**View of atoll and a lagoon
at the north end of the Ryukyu archipelago**

The security areas at Haneda are rather hidden, and it took me quite a while to find them. There was a very short line, and I made it to the front quickly. This time I did set off the metal detector. I got wanded and re-wanded and then patted down repeatedly. The only possible issue was the sleeve on the knee, which does have metal in it. Once the officer confirmed that I didn't have a forbidden umbrella or anything, I was free to go on my way.

Gate 64 was quite close to the security checkpoint, and I made it there and was among the first to sit in the waiting area. The area quickly filled up, mostly with Japanese families who were going on vacation. Okinawa is considered the Hawaii of Japan. The locals look at it as a tropical paradise that's close to home. The irony is that the whole time I've been here that tropical island has been quite a bit cooler than anywhere I've been in the main part of the country.

At 9:49am they announced that our departure would be delayed by five minutes due to a late inbound aircraft, so we wouldn't be departing until 10:30. At about the same time they posted a sign asking for volunteers to be bumped onto a later flight. The reward for that was a 10,000 yen voucher, which sounds like more than the \$70 it's actually worth. If it were cash I might have considered it, but there's close to zero chance I'd ever use an ANA voucher.

If my sister Margaret had made this trip she would have complained fiercely about the wait at this gate. There were little kids running around everywhere, and their parents were happy to make them someone else's problem. Kids tend to be a bit spoiled in Japan. I've seen several whine and get their way, and many parents tend to indulge their every whim. Honestly the kids at the airport weren't being all that bad, but as I noted, Margaret would have despised them.

They began boarding at 10:15am. This time there were five boarding groups, though I was again in Group #3. Without knowing it, I was again assigned to an exit row seat (30-A) The seat had space in front of it for the flight attendant's seat and as a waiting area for the toilet, which basically meant there was infinitely much legroom. We were on a 787 in a domestic configuration with close to 400 seats. I think any row but the one I was in would have been rather cramped.

People on this flight were dressed way more casually than they were on the flight to Sendai or on any of the train rides I've taken on this trip. Not a lot of people go to Okinawa on business; they're there to relax and have fun, and it definitely showed in their attire.

They closed the doors at 10:30, so they did manage to board that big plane quite efficiently. Before the safety video they went through a series of rules for the flight on the TV screens. The weirdest of those said "No sneaky video". It showed a cartoon of a guy pointing a camera up a flight attendant's skirt while she was lifting something into an overhead bin. It's hard to imagine anything less appropriate than that, but presumably someone has done it, or they wouldn't have the rule.

That rule video caused me to notice that there were multiple unused storage bins that the stewardesses had to close. That pretty much never happens in America these days, but on ANA you can still check bags for free. That's how they differentiate themselves from the low-cost carriers.

On this flight the head flight attendant gave a bilingual welcome, though pretty much all the other announcements were in Japanese only. Both her announcements and the safety video were barely audible, because the volume on the P.A. was turned very low.

We had a very long taxi, and then the captain made a bilingual announcement that we would be delayed on the tarmac for about fifteen minutes due to "air traffic congestion". Fifteen minutes came and went, and we'd barely moved 100 meters, but we finally did take off at 11:15, fifty minutes after our scheduled departure. The flight they were bumping people onto left at 11:25, and I wondered for a while if it would make it to Okinawa first.

Like on the trans-Pacific flight, theoretically this one had wi-fi. I did all the steps, and my phone said it was connected but also that no internet was available. I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean.

It's almost exactly two hours of flying time from Tokyo to Naha. Most of the time we clung to the east coast of Japan, basically until there wasn't any coast to follow anymore. Through the entire flight they ran coverage of a golf tournament on the overhead TVs. The announcers were Japanese, but it had been captioned in English. They did the same drink service they did on the way to Sendai, and again there were no snacks or other food. With a longer flight they did offer refills on the drinks, though. The flight attendants also passed out activity books to the kids on board, and at one point they had to dispose of an air sickness bag.

I mostly entertained myself by watching an endless parade of people waiting outside the restroom. Many were kids, some so young they had to be accompanied by a parent. It really was almost comical watching everyone wait. Some rather obviously had to go now, but of course they couldn't until their turn came. The line continued even after they turned the seat belt light on as we approached Naha.

It was weird looking down at the ocean near Okinawa. It was such a dark blue that it almost looked black. I don't think I'd ever seen the sea quite that color before.

We landed at about 1:25pm. Naha has a concrete runway, which was quite a bit smoother than the other runways I'd been on in Japan. The runway we landed on was on an artificial peninsula built out in the ocean, and we had a very long taxi before we made it to the terminal. We were greeted with tropical flowers lining the jetway, but when we got inside we had chaos that reminded me of a third world country. It honestly seemed like the airport in Peru.

My luggage came quickly, and I managed to negotiate through the throngs to find the way out of the airport. Okinawa's only train line is the Yui, a monorail that runs a circuitous eleven-mile route through the city of Naha (the only place of significance in Okinawa). One of its endpoints is at the airport, and I knew there was a station right next to the hotel I'd be staying at. I bought a two-day pass for the monorail, as well as a farecard for the Okinawa bus system, which I'd be using tomorrow. I got on a very crowded train and rode five stops north to Tsubogawa, a station just south of downtown Naha. I took an elevator to street level, and within thirty seconds I was at my hotel.

Most Japanese hotels have a very strict policy that guests can not check in before 3pm. There are stories of people waiting in the lobby until that precise time before they were allowed into their rooms. That's the reason I'd left luggage at hotels and stations earlier on this trip. Because of that it surprised me that the Mercure—Naha let me check in almost an hour before the official time. I was delighted to go upstairs and enjoy the air conditioning. As a bonus, for being a member of Accor's "frequent" guest program (though the last time I stayed at one of their properties was in New Zealand), they gave me a can of beer at check-in.

The early check-in was just one way the Mercure appears to be the most western of the hotels I've stayed at in Japan. Another thing that stood out was the bathroom. It still has the Japanese toilet/bidet combo, but unlike every other hotel I've been to, the floor of the bathroom is level with the rest of the room. Traditionally you step either up or down to enter a restroom in Japan, something I think has to do with traditional customs around cleanliness. I've actually tripped a couple of times using the toilet while semi-asleep, and it's nice not to have to think about that here. They also have a coffee maker in addition to the electric kettle, a queen-sized bed, and there's a free ice machine in addition to the ubiquitous vending machines.

After cooling off a bit, I set off into the heat again. Mind you it was only 34 degrees Celsius (93 Fahrenheit) in Naha, while up in Tokyo they were expecting 38 (right at 100 Fahrenheit). It was much more humid, though, which is exactly what I'd expected from a "tropical paradise".

For my main adventure today I took the monorail up to Shiro station, north of downtown. On the way I saw a lot of Naha. I saw that even more than the rest of Japan Okinawa is built of concrete. That probably makes them stronger in tropical storms, but it makes them look cheap. Honestly, Okinawa reminded me a lot of Mexico. Naha could easily be mistaken for Cancun. You wouldn't even have to change the language all that much, because—like in Cancun—there's lots of English in Okinawa, presumably due to the big American military base at the north end of the island.

The people of Okinawa look different than the rest of the Japanese, too. (They are in fact different, which goes along with the place I'd be visiting.) They're stockier and have slightly darker skin, looking like a mix between Pacific Islanders than Asians. In fact, they reminded me a lot of the Maori in New Zealand. They also dress much more casually. Business attire in Okinawa is loose-fitting and floral, similar to Hawaiian shirts or the guayaberas you see in southern Mexico. I think that sort of dress may be universal in the tropics.

My destination this afternoon was Shuri Castle Park, which was historically the headquarters of the Kingdom of the Ryukyu Islands. Today's prefecture of Okinawa is this entire chain of islands, which stretches between the main islands of Japan and Taiwan. The island of Okinawa is right at the center of the chain, and it's closer to China than it is to most of Japan. The Ryukyus were historically controlled by China, but they became an independent kingdom in the 1400s. Imperial Japan annexed the islands in the 1800s, and after World War II they were under American control. They returned to Japan in 1971 and became Okinawa Prefecture.



**Castle walls and entrance, with construction behind
Shuri Castle – Okinawa**

The kingdom that existed from the 1400s through the 1800s was ruled from a castle that sat at the highest point in Okinawa. The castle was neglected after Japan took over the islands, and it was almost fully destroyed during the battle of Okinawa at the end of World War II. For much of the late 20th Century the site was used as a university, which was later relocated. The central building of the castle was reconstructed in the 1990s, but it was destroyed by fire in 2019. Now it's being reconstructed again and expected to be fully open next year. It would be fascinating to go back and see the place complete, but I doubt I'll ever do that.

I spent a couple hours walking all over the palace grounds.



**Peering through fence at construction workers
Shuri Castle – Okinawa**

They have multilingual signs that do a good job of explaining what was at all the places that are ruins, what the few remaining undamaged structures are, and what the final reconstruction will look like. The castle here (which housed generations of kings rather than samurai) is very different from the one in Hiroshima or other cities in central Japan. First, the main structure is more horizontal than vertical. While it has three levels, basically it's an ornate box rather than a pagoda. Also, the whole area around the castle was designed to be a self-contained city. Farms and tradesmen that supported the royal family were all contained within the castle walls. The structure was surprisingly similar to that of the imperial palace in Tokyo, though instead of being surrounded by a moat, Shuri Castle was a walled city at the top of a hill.

Shuri Castle was well worth its 400-yen (\$2.75) admission, though I definitely got my exercise in exploring the place. I had to walk down 178 steps to get from the monorail entrance to the entrance to the castle, and then I walked up just over 100 steps to

get to the outer part of the castle and the construction project. I thought I'd have to retrace all that to get back, but fortunately I was able to return by a bit more level route. On the way back I also passed a nice Shinto shrine.

I was dripping in sweat when I made it back to the monorail. I cooled off a bit with some grape juice from a vending machine as I searched for my pass. I couldn't find it in my wallet or in the bag, and I was afraid it had blown out somewhere on the castle grounds. I resigned myself to writing off the 1800 yen (\$12.25) I'd paid for the pass, and I spent another 320 yen (\$2.15) for a single ticket to get back to the hotel. I was still sweating when I got on the monorail, and I'm sure I offended many commuters with my smell. There weren't a lot of other options, though.

When I got back to the hotel I did locate the pass. It was crumpled up in a pocket and soaking wet. Fortunately the pass is optical (you scan a QR code), so once it dried out a bit, it was usable. Hopefully I can keep it in decent shape tomorrow.

I got the pass dried enough that I could go a couple of stops south of the hotel for dinner. I ate at Okinawa's biggest restaurant chain, which happens to be the classic American chain A & W. A local businessman bought the franchise for the islands back when they were under American control, and it grew to become very popular. While the franchise has expanded into Taiwan, you won't find A & W anywhere else in Japan. I had a ham and cheese sandwich for dinner, which honestly was far from the best meal I've had on this trip. Much better were some homemade potato chips and a small mug of their classic root beer.

After dinner I did a bit of shopping. Since I hadn't been able to get inside the one in Sendai, I decided to go to Naha's Aeon Mall. I found that Aeon is a Japanese retail company that actually dates back to the 1700s. They own a ton of different businesses; indeed it would be hard to live in Japan without supporting them. The focus of an Aeon mall is the Aeon hypermarket, which is like a three-floor Super Target. There are groceries on the first floor, clothing on the second, and home goods on the third. The big store is surrounded by various smaller stores, though I think some of them are also owned by Aeon. On the fourth floor there's a food court, and there are two levels of parking above all that. (For me the parking was irrelevant, because there's also a skywalk that connects it directly to the monorail.)

I bought some pop on the grocery level, and I spent quite a while looking through menswear. I was amused that they had a whole collection of T-shirts and polos from a brand called Golden Bear that actually featured an embroidered bear where you might see an alligator on a different brand. I think the brand is supposed to be golf wear, and I assume the name honors Arnold Palmer. Given that they were having a 30% off sale, I couldn't resist buying a shirt that honored Garrigan's mascot. The labeling is all in Japanese, but even with Google Translate I couldn't find any indication of where it was actually made—I assume somewhere in Asia.

On TV tonight I watched women's bowling of all things. That was easy to understand, and it stood out because the commentators sounded like they were announcing a Brazilian soccer final. Every throw of the ball was over-the-top dramatic. After the bowling finished I watched an infomercial for air conditioners. The unit they were selling seems to be very standard in Japan. It's been mounted on the ceiling of most hotel rooms I've stayed at, and I've also seen it in a number of stores and restaurants. It's a non-vented air conditioner; it doesn't draw air in or exhaust air outside the room. It just cools, dehumidifies, and recirculates air from the room. You can apparently have one for the low, low price of just 40,000 yen (\$271.50).

When I turned off the TV I realized another western feature the Mercure has that's been absent in most of the hotel rooms I've stayed in. The room has black out blinds. The other rooms typically had a sheer curtain and a shade, which invariably let in a lot of light from the surrounding cities. This room really was completely dark, which made for a decent night's sleep.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 5

OKINAWA, JAPAN

It was nearly seven when I got up this morning. This was another hotel that featured a local specialty on their breakfast buffet. They actually had two. I passed on the fried Spam (which is big all over the Pacific Islands), but I did have some taco rice. This is a

combination of Tex-Mex and Asian cuisines that owes its existence to the American troops that have been stationed here. Basically you take the ingredients for a walking taco, but you put them on top of rice instead of tortilla chips. Most of the Asian people who frequented that section of the breakfast bar took enormous portions of rice and much smaller amounts of lettuce, tomato, cheese, and salsa. I did the opposite—just a bit of rice and a big taco salad on top.

My main outing today was another bus adventure. First I took the monorail one stop north to the central Naha bus terminal. I'd done some research and knew I wanted to catch bus #89. Unfortunately there were two bays that showed 89 as one of the buses that stopped there. It turned out that one of them was where it let people off and the other was where it would depart from. The signs probably said that in Japanese, but it certainly wasn't clear to a foreigner.

Okinawa's buses work slightly differently than those elsewhere in Japan. In fact, they're closer to how American buses work. You both enter and exit through the front door. The fares are still zone-based (and can get rather pricey), so you either have to take a zone ticket and pay cash at the end or tap a fare card both when entering and exiting. I had bought a fare card yesterday specifically for this, because I knew that Okinawa is one of the few places in Japan where the local farecard is not compatible with Suica. The Okica card worked great, and I think the fares are slightly cheaper with it than when paid in cash.



Okica card for use on Okinawa buses

Bus 89 followed an extremely winding route, with numerous deviations I wasn't expecting. I think the route serves different places at different times of day, though there's not a special code (like route 89-A) that seems to indicate that. The ultimate destination was where I needed; it just took a little longer than anticipated to get there. The route was so convoluted that after riding for fifteen minutes I ended up literally across the street from the bus terminal where I'd originally boarded.

I rode the entire length of bus 89, going all the way to the Itoman bus terminal, in a suburb south of Naha. Something I'd find interesting is that Okinawa has a much greater percentage of apartment-dwellers than the other cities I've been to in Japan. There are a few single-family homes, but they seem to be limited to the very wealthy. In central Naha most of the housing is in high rises, while in Itoman it was what they call "garden apartments" in California—three- or four-story structures with about four units on each floor.

There's also more traffic in Okinawa than anywhere else in Japan. I'd actually read that before coming here, and it's definitely true. Tokyo surprised me with how light the traffic was, but of course pretty much everyone goes everywhere there by train. In Okinawa just about everyone owns a car, even though the only place you really can go is just the island. The streets are jam-packed with traffic, and it's pretty much all one person per car. I think that may be more of the American influence.

Guides to Japan will tell you that it's extremely quiet on public transportation there. It's true that passengers rarely talk, and when they do it's in soft voices. What they don't tell you, though, is that there's almost always background noise. In the case of the Ryukyu Bus Company, I was accompanied by the constant yapping of a recorded young female voice. Most of the time she sounded very happy, and I assume she was saying something like "the next stop is ..." or "Thank-you for using Ryukyu Bus." At other times she sounded loud and aggressive, which I assume was admonishing passengers not to do prohibited things. The recording literally played the entire time; the girl just wouldn't shut up. She even sang a song promoting the Okica card to the tune of "Ode to Joy". The same voice interrupted herself each time someone tapped in or out with their farecard. That caused the recording to say "I.C. cardu", to which the driver typically added an "arigato gozaimasu". Listening to that constant recording did provide a bit of entertainment in an hour-long bus ride.



Memorial tower at Okinawa Memorial Peace Park with Pacific Ocean behind

I got off at Itoman terminal I paid my 900-yen (\$6.10) fare and crossed the street to the opposite side. In just a few minutes bus 82, came along, and I boarded it. This one had less frequent recordings, and the route was a bit more direct. I followed the progress on Google Maps. About half an hour later I pressed the button, paid another 550-yen (\$3.75) on my Okica card, and got off. That's nearly ten bucks for a trip that would cost \$2 in Chicago.

My destination this morning was the Okinawa Memorial Peace Park, an enormous park run by the prefecture at one of the major sites of the Battle of Okinawa. My father fought on Okinawa, so it was kind of important to me to see this place. It was rather a chore to get to, but I'm glad I made it.

The thing they promote is the only thing in the park that charges an admission, which is called Peace Hall. This is mostly an art museum filled with various paintings done by local artists on the theme of war and peace. Some of them were nice, but I didn't dawdle going through it.

At the center of Peace Hall is a prayer room that features an enormous statue of Buddha surrounded by "gifts of peace" that have been presented to Okinawa by people from other places. There's thousands on thousands of paper cranes that were presumably folded by schoolkids, plus endless garlands of fake flowers, books filled with letters and

poems, and other gifts like a mound of peace symbol buttons. They obviously didn't throw away anything, and honestly they probably should. Outside Peace Hall is a butterfly garden, which apparently was also a donation, although it was unclear from whom. I was intrigued that all the butterflies were the same species, with a complex black and white pattern on their wings.

Most of the rest of the park is—well—a park. It even features things like a children's playground and a skateboard ramp. There's also multiple picnic areas and well-kept public restrooms. A couple of signs in Japanese indicate that this was in fact a battlefield, but I think their goal was to repurpose it for peaceful uses.

Near the cliffs along the coast are a collection of different memorials donated by all the prefectures in Japan as well as a number of foreign countries. The monuments honor the soldiers on both sides who died in the battle and particularly the 70,000 civilians on the island who also lost their lives.

Near those memorials I could imagine what things must have been like for my father during World War II. His job was clearing out caves where Japanese soldiers would hide. (That civilians also hid there was troubling to him later in his life.) The rugged cliffs contain a lot of caves, and it was interesting to see signs warning of snakes all through the area. While most of Okinawa is heavily developed today, right by the coasts I got a glimpse of how wild and overgrown things must have been eighty years ago. It was fascinating to see.

There are dozens of memorials, and I really had no desire to see all of them. I think Japanese people treat them like Americans do the World War II monument in Washington; they find the one that honors people from their prefecture and admire the others from a distance. I looked at two close up—one because it was set among wild cliffs and the other because climbing up to it afforded a nice view of the Pacific. I spent a couple of hours walking around the area, and I'm glad I made the effort to go there.

I finished at an awkward time, because I could tell Google Maps that it would be nearly an hour before a bus back would arrive. I filled a bit of that time having an ice cream that I bought from a sleepy old man who I practically had to awaken to get him to sell me something (another thing that reminded me of Mexico). It was a kind of ice cream made locally called Blue Seal, and the cone I got was a scoop with a combination of pineapple and coconut. There were actual chunks of both in a vanilla ice cream base. I'd also become a bit dehydrated, so I bought a can of Coke Zero from a vending machine. Then I sat down at the bus stop to wait. It was at least shaded, and there was a nice breeze, so it wasn't an unpleasant wait.

Twice while I was waiting for the bus taxi drivers pulled up trying to give me a ride. I found out from one that the fare back to the Itoman bus terminal would be 3,500 yen (\$23.70), or about six times what the bus fare would be. I wasn't really in any hurry, so there was no problem with waiting around.

While I was waiting I checked in for my flight back to Tokyo tomorrow morning and also went through formalities to get a QR code that will allow for quick check-in at the hotel tomorrow night.

The bus was running about five minutes late, but it did show up, and I retraced the route back to Itoman looking out the opposite side windows. While most of the area is quite developed, there is a bit of agricultural land mixed in. They grow a lot of sugarcane here, as rice. There's also a lot of greenhouses, where presumably they raise salad vegetables. It's all fields mixed in with apartments and housing developments, though.

I nearly missed my transfer at Itoman and ended up dashing across the street before a light changed to make it. This time bus 89 ran a much more direct route, though we did detour to serve a shopping center we hadn't gone to on the way down. Eventually we got back to Naha, and I boarded the monorail.

It was kind of cool that this time I first stood and then sat at the very front of the first car on the monorail, right behind the driver. While monorails aren't particularly practical, they are kind of cool. The little kid in me really had fun watching the view as we moved along.

Something I don't think I've mentioned before is that the monorail (and most Japanese trains, for that matter) play a few bars of some musical number before stopping at each station. The music is different for every station, and I suppose it reminds people when it's their time to



**Cave entrance on a coastal cliff
Okinawa, Japan**



**LEFT: Monorail driver opening the doors
RIGHT: Crab sign on monorail indicating “don't get pinched by the doors”
Naha, Japan**

get off. The Mercure is by Tsubogawa station, and it stood out that the musical number for Tsubogawa was “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy”.

I didn't get off at Tsubogawa this afternoon. Instead I continued to the Omoromachi station near the north end of downtown. I walked a few blocks west of there to my other main destination today, the Okinawa Prefectural Museum.

This was definitely not my favorite attraction on this trip. It cost a minimum of 450 yen (\$3.05) to enter, and there were additional charges if you wanted to see any of their many special exhibitions. (I passed.) The signage was mostly in Japanese, with occasional very brief nods to English. They also seemed to forbid just about everything. Everywhere I looked there were pictures saying no touching, no cameras, no use of phones, no talking, etc. If you could think of something people might do, it was probably forbidden. I found the no pictures rule particularly odd and unnecessary. Most museums these days allow pictures as long as you don't use flash. I don't know why they would feel the need to prohibit photography here.

While you can tell I didn't like it, I will say that this was quite a large museum. They begin with a rather thorough examination of the geology and natural history of the Ryukyus. At one time they were part of a mountain chain in east Asia which then moved into the sea, which is why much of the natural life in Okinawa is similar to what you'd find in China and different from the rest of Japan. Sadly that's about all I could get out of the English descriptions.

There was a fairly large exhibit on cicadas. That stood out, because I'd heard cicadas the whole time I was at the memorial park. I don't think I'd ever actually seen one before. They really are enormous bugs.

Next they traced human history in the Ryukyus. The highlight of this was a reconstruction of the bodies of what they called “Mingatogawa man”, based on bones that were found here that date back 20,000 years. At the time they were originally found, they were thought to be ancestors of the modern Japanese race, but it was later shown that while they likely were ancestors of the Ryukyu people, those elsewhere in Japan did not descend from them.

They had a large exhibit on the Ryukyu Kingdom, including artifacts that had previously been exhibited at the castle and will presumably return there when the reconstruction is complete. What I found particularly interesting were items that showed the everyday lives of the ordinary people who lived there, as opposed to the royal family.

Finally there was a gallery explaining World War II (which they call the Great Asia—Pacific War) and its aftermath. They showed artifacts recovered from the battlefields and from homes that were destroyed when the island was bombed. They then went through the American occupation (of which they point out both good and bad aspects—like rapidly rising incomes and girls serving as prostitutes for American soldiers).

Overall it was an interesting museum. I just wish they had a friendlier attitude toward their visitors.

I stopped at a convenience store, where I got some money at an ATM and then bought some more Coke Zero. Then I took the monorail back to the hotel. I got some work done on this travelogue, but then—since I hadn't had lunch today—I went out for an early dinner.

Tonight I chose to eat at the other CoCo restaurant chain, the one that specializes in curry. I'd noticed there was a location of that chain near the Aeon Mall, and I thought it would be fun to try. I got there right at five and was their first dinner customer today. They let me sit wherever I wanted, but I chose the bar, since it looked like the tables might fill up quickly (which they did while I was eating). I spent a while perusing the menu, and then it took a while to get the waiter's attention so I could order.

At CoCo Curry, you first select the item you want. (I chose “tonkatsu”, which was a breaded pork cutlet served atop curry and rice. According to the menu, that particular item is their specialty. Next you choose the amount of rice you want. The default is 300 grams, which is the amount I got. The price goes down if you choose less than that, and it increases if you get more. Finally you choose the heat level of the curry. I chose 3 (on a 1 – 10 scale, although they also make a 20 which they apparently require signing a release before eating). Level 3 was spicy enough to clear my sinuses (literally), but not ridiculously hot. I also got a salad on the side that consisted of leaf lettuce, bean sprouts, and corn. It came with a very nice sesame dressing. They gave me a full pitcher of water, and there didn't appear to be any other drinks on the menu. They automatically gave me a fork and spoon. (I don't know if that's what locals get or not, since the customers who showed up after me appeared to be British.) The meal was served quickly, and it was really pretty tasty. The curry wasn't bad, and the katsu was really very good (far better than similar dishes I've had in Hawaii and Chicago). While I doubt I'll go there again, I'm glad I chose to patronize them tonight.

As I was walking back to the monorail I passed a police car that had responded to a call at the local post office. It would be fascinating to hear what happened there, since it's not a place you think of much crime happening.

I went back to the hotel, got caught up on this write-up. Then I washed a couple of shirts in the sink so I'd have just enough for the rest of the trip. As I often do when I travel, I purposely packed some ratty old clothes that I threw out during the trip, so even after buying a few things, I have less in my bags than I started with.

Mentioning throwing things out brings out one other topic that I don't think I've mentioned yet. Garbage cans are exceedingly rare in Japan. Guidebooks will tell you that they were banned in most public places following the sarin gas attacks in the subway thirty years ago. What they don't tell you is that the disposal space is limited in hotel rooms as well. Most of the hotels I've stayed in had a single tiny wastebasket the size most Americans would put in a bathroom. The Mercure had two of those, one under the desk and the other in the bathroom. That's still not much, though, when you consider all the bottles and cans tourists get from vending machines or the wasteful packaging that is commonplace in Japan. I did cram everything in, but it was a tight fit.

On TV tonight they had special reports on the eightieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, which would be tomorrow. They visited the museum I was at a week ago and had interviews with survivors who would have been small children at the time of the bombing. While the coverage was all in Japanese, this was a topic I could piece together pretty easily from the pictures. When that was over I briefly watched part of a baseball game. It was still tied 0 – 0 in the eleventh inning, though, and not much was happening at this point either. So before long I went to bed.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6

NAHA (OKINAWA), JAPAN TO YOKOHAMA, JAPAN

The taco rice was missing from the buffet this morning. In its place was a local pastry that looked and tasted like bunt doughnut holes. I did have a bit of the Spam, and I had a salad with lettuce, garbanzos, and cherry tomatoes. I passed on the runny scrambled eggs (they would certainly have been considered a liquid at the airport), the hot dogs, and all the various leftover stir-fries. This being a French-owned hotel, the “continental” section of the buffet was enormous, and I enjoyed a croissant with honey and a pain au chocolat.

At the next table were five American music teachers who were on a group trip to Japan. They were singing the praises of this hotel, though for some different reasons than I would. It apparently has a pool (which I didn't even know), they serve ice cream on the breakfast buffet (which I knew, but hadn't bothered to try, since ice cream is absolutely everywhere in Japan), and it's next door to a convenience store. Every hotel I've stayed at has been within a block of a convenience store, so that last one didn't even register to me. I'm glad they liked the place, though.

I was pleased to get an e-mail this morning saying that my credit card had been credited by the hotel I'd originally booked in Sapporo. The credit appeared to be for the full amount of the original two-day stay I'd booked, so they must have adjusted their cancellation policy due to the tsunami. That was certainly good news.

I checked out of the Mercure and took the monorail back to the airport, thankful that my forlorn pass still functioned correctly. I'd purposely planned to arrive well ahead of my departure in anticipation of the same chaos that greeted me on arrival in Naha. This morning the airport was very calm, though—at least on the departures level.

My only issue this morning was checking my bag. They had the same machines I'd seen at Haneda. The machine printed out a tag, and I placed it on my bag. Only then did it tell me the scale didn't register correctly and that I should proceed to the manual check-in counter. The woman there was perplexed as to why the machine wasn't working properly, but she did eventually print out a different tag for “HND”. She ripped off the old tag and replaced it with the new one and then sent my bag off to the ether.

After the severe security at Haneda the other day, I was expecting issues today as well. I made a point to take off my belt, and I also had a different knee sleeve that I don't think has any metal elements. That must have done the trick, because I sailed through security in seconds.

When I got there the gate I would be flying from was marked for a flight to Fukuoka, a city at the southern edge of the main part of Japan. (A fun fact about the place is that it's apparently where ramen was invented.) The area was mostly empty, though, so I grabbed a seat with a power cord and proceeded to work on inserting more pictures into this travelogue.

The boarding area at Naha airport soon returned to the level of chaos I remembered from when I'd arrived. The flight for Fukuoka departed, and the gate area filled up with Tokyo passengers. I was glad to already be settled.

While I waited they announced that my flight was delayed first ten and then fifteen minutes due to late inbound equipment. While that did mean I'd probably get little if anything touristic done today, there wasn't really much I could do about that.



Jetway at Naha Airport

The inbound flight from Tokyo showed up at 10:15am. Before boarding I used a very crowded restroom and bought a couple of snacks for the plane from the traditional Okinawa goods store on the concourse. One of the items was bamkuchen, which I could guess from the name and later googled is of German origin. Apparently it was introduced to Okinawa during World War I (not II) by a German prisoner of war. I also got what they called frosted pretzel cookies, which are essentially what the name suggests. They flattened pretzel dough into a wafer shape and then coated it in frosting (either chocolate or strawberry). That was another item with wasteful packaging, as each cookie was individual wrapped, and then they put half a dozen together in a plastic bag. Finally I got a tiny tub of Blue Seal ice cream in a flavor they called “traditional Okinawan salted cookie”. Whether it's traditional or not, it did indeed have very salty cookies crumbled into it—not bad, though.

They began boarding flight 462 for Tokyo at 10:45am. Both this flight and the one to Okinawa boarded through a double jetway. Here the flower-lined jetway made a “Y” in the middle, with connections to the left and right side aisles. I'd never been on a plane that used that boarding method before. Apparently a lot of today's passengers

hadn't either, because many went up the wrong aisle, causing issues with them finding their seats.

This plane was a 777 in a very cramped domestic configuration. I was not in an exit row this time, and leg room was very much at a premium. It was also a bit annoying that there were no individual air vents. I was in 23-A, and an elementary aged Japanese girl and her father were in B and C. The music teachers who were at breakfast were also on this flight, as were multiple sports teams. The Konan football club, a boys soccer team, was traveling in uniform. There was also a gymnastics team and a high school baseball team on the plane. Of course, if people in Okinawa are going to compete against anybody else, they have little choice but to fly.

The high school baseball team reminded me of a comment the guide on our trip to Nikko made. He noted that August is the biggest month of the year for baseball in Japan, and the focus is on high school players rather than the professionals. The national championships take place in August, with the final game happening in Yokohama shortly after I leave. The tournament serves as a showcase for Japanese players to display their talents in front of a global audience. Most of the big name Japanese players who made it to the American major leagues were recruited straight out of high school.

They closed the plane door at 11:05, but people were still finding their seats for a goof ten minutes after that. They finally began to play the safety video at 11:20, and it wasn't until 11:27 when we left the gate. We took off to the south and then circled back north over the island. I spent most of the flight reading from Cher's autobiography in the Kindle app on my phone. I actually started that book last Christmas but never got a chance to finish it. Hopefully on the trans-Pacific flight home I can check that off my list.

The flight was smooth and uneventful. We landed in Tokyo at 1:40pm. There was a long wait in the middle of our taxi because we had to cross an active runway to get to the terminal. Whoever designed that traffic pattern was insane!

We pulled into the gate at 1:50, but from there it was a long walk to baggage claim. I got there at 2:05pm, but they didn't start unloading bags until 2:11. I'd lucked out after the other flights, but this time it was 2:25 when my bag finally showed up on the conveyor belt.

I used the restroom and bought another tiny tub of ice cream from a Baskin—Robbins vending machine. While at home I'd have likely chosen pralines and cream, at Haneda Airport I picked the most popular Baskin—Robbins flavor in Japan. Its name translates to "popping shower". It looks and tastes like a seasonal flavor we'd see at Christmas back home. It's toothpaste mint flavored ice cream with red and green "pop rocks" sprinkled through it. It's weird, and honestly I wouldn't buy it again. It was interesting to have one, though.

I made my way to the Keiyu train station where I'd arrived the other day. I boarded a train that first took me back to the station at Haneda Innovation Center, by the hotel I'd stayed at the other night. Then it turned and headed south for about half an hour, eventually getting to Yokohama station. I then had an awkward and badly signed transfer to the Yokohama subway. Once I finally found it, I rode three stops south to Kanai. Google Maps directed me to the exit closest to my hotel. Unfortunately taking that exit meant I needed to lug my bags up 54 steps. I did so, but I resolved to find the elevator for the return trip.

Once I got my bags up the stairs, the Comfort Hotel—Kannai was only two short blocks away, a straight shot down the main drag. This was another place where the lobby was on the second floor, as this time they use everything on the first floor except for an elevator shaft as hotel parking. Check-in went relatively quickly with a QR code I'd downloaded, though a too helpful clerk insisted on telling me about all of the hotel's features (which are pretty much the same as those you'd find at every hotel in Japan). She seemed surprised that I didn't grab a pair of complimentary pajamas, but I'll certainly survive without them.



**Step leading up to bathroom
Comfort Hotel—Kannai
Yokohama, Japan**

My room is on the 11th floor. Unlike the Comfort Hotel in Sendai, I do have a halfway decent view here. Basically I'm looking out at an apartment building across the street. That beats a blank wall, though. Otherwise it's a pretty generic "business hotel" room with one double bed, and the bathroom here is elevated the highest of any of the hotels I've been to.

I got settled and thought I'd head out to see one of Yokohama's dubious attractions, the International Cup Noodle Museum. I walked back to the subway and went to the stop nearest the museum. However, when I exited the subway, I realized I'd left the wi-fi router in the hotel room, which meant I couldn't access Google Maps. I'm sure you can guess that I ended up heading the wrong direction. I did see a bit of Yokohama's Chinatown (an interesting concept in another Asian country) and got to a commercial area that I realized later was quite close to the hotel where I'd begun.

I hadn't had anything but snacks to eat since breakfast, so I had an early dinner at KFC. There's more Japanese tradition to that than it might seem, for it's traditional each December 25 for Japanese people to celebrate a secular Christmas with take-out from the colonel—who does look a bit like Santa Claus. I had a chicken sandwich they were featuring. It had both far too much mayo and far too much of a very sweet sauce on it, but it was better than the teriyaki burger I had from McD's. I also had some very tasty coleslaw and a microscopic cup of ginger ale for about 1,200 yen (around \$8). I ordered from a kiosk for eat-in service, but the woman at the counter seemed confused because apparently I'd sat in an area where people normally wait for take-out.

I made my way back to the subway station, which was one of those where the trains are lost in an enormous shopping mall. I stopped briefly to browse through Daiso, part of a chain that people still call 100-yen shops, even though like the dollar stores in America

many of the items have increased in price to other multiples of 100. (What's more, even for those that are 100-yen, the price is really 110 after tax is added.) I bought some candy and a 200-yen bath towel that will be one of my longer-lasting souvenirs.

Eventually I found the trains, and I went back to Kannai. I spent a while figuring out where the elevator was, though I avoided actually exiting there, because there was a backlog of fans headed to a baseball game. (The stadium is just down the street from my hotel.) At least I do now know where to drag my luggage on the way back to Tokyo.

I made one more stop, this time at a store whose name translates to "My Basket". It's a chain of small supermarkets owned by Aeon. They're barely larger than convenience stores, but they stock a full range of groceries. The size and style of store actually reminded me a lot of Beavers' Jack & Jill, the little grocery store that was owned by the father of the girl whose murder I read about on the flight over here. That store was just down the street from the junior high in Mt. Pleasant, and all the kids would go there on their lunch breaks to buy candy, baseball cards, and the like. At My Basket I picked up some pop, juice (mandarin flavor, and it really does taste like clementines rather than normal oranges), and cheese.

I have to say that my initial impressions of Yokohama aren't the greatest. It comes across as more of a "big city" than anyplace else I've been—more so even than Tokyo proper. It's fast-moving, kind of dirty, and the people here just don't seem particularly friendly. Yokohama is a big city (larger than Los Angeles), but pretty much every place I've been in Japan could be called that. Yokohama just comes across as more gritty and urban than everywhere else. A lot of travel guides rave about Yokohama (apparently it's got a lively nightlife scene), but it doesn't seem to do a lot for me. Hopefully tomorrow will bring me more reasons to like it.

Back at the hotel among other things I counted the change I'd accumulated and realized I had 5,413 yen (\$36.65) in Japanese coins. Those add up fast when you get 500-yen coins as change. I'll definitely have be intentionally spending coins tomorrow.

On TV tonight I watched Japan trounce Syria in the Asia Cup basketball tournament. Basketball isn't a sport that comes to mind when I think of either of those countries. It was also fascinating that Syria's team was primarily black, while Japan had a very tall white player with a very American last name (Hawkinson). The game was being played in a mostly empty arena in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 7

YOKOHAMA & KAMAKURA, JAPAN

I had no particular scheduled time to get up this morning, so of course the sun streaming through more sheer curtains awakened me at 5am. ... So much for getting some extra sleep.

I deciphered the morning new son NHK as best I could. One of the stories was about the fact that every prefecture in Japan except Tokyo has been losing population. That includes even includes Tokyo's satellite cities (such as Yokohama) and other big cities like Osaka. There was also coverage of the formal ceremonies that marked the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, a speech Donald Trump made claiming Japan was "giving" the U.S. money through his tariffs (a remark that understandably did not go over well in Japan), and a storm that had caused more than three meters of rain to fall on part of the west coast of Japan (over what time frame was not clear).

Something I don't think I've mentioned before is that on the TV news correspondents always bow at the start of their segments, and then they bow again when it's time to go to commercial break. It really is ingrained in the culture.

I went down to the breakfast room right when they opened at 6:30, and the place was extremely crowded at that hour. This was likely my last hotel breakfast in Japan, and it was again a very Japanese experience. I had a salad of cabbage and cherry tomatoes, a potato salad that had pickled eggs in it, and a dinner roll with blueberry jam. I also tried some of those corn flakes with dried corn kernels in them. They're lightly sweetened and really not that bad.

I made my way over to Kannai station and up to the JR platforms. I almost got on the wrong train, but my sense was that it would be headed the wrong direction. I was actually right this time, and the train on the opposite platform was indeed the one I wanted. I went south to Ofuna station and there caught the second suspended monorail I'd take on this trip. I think the only time I'd ridden a monorail in my life before was by the Space Needle in Seattle, but I've ridden four of them in Japan—and two of them were hanging.

The Shonan Monorail isn't as long as the one in Chiba, but it's arguably more impressive. The terrain in the Shonan region is quite mountainous, so in many places it's hung from great heights, and it passes through multiple tunnels. To the locals, though, it's just another train. The vast majority of people I rode with this morning were just scrolling through their phones on their way to work.



Shonan Monorail

Japanese people seem even more addicted to their phones than Americans. People of all ages (literally from toddlers to grandparents) are on them constantly. They're pretty much all Androids rather than i-phones, and they're not the latest and greatest. They're definitely a part of the Japanese way of life, though.

I rode the Shonan monorail to the end of the line at Enoshima, which is right on the Pacific coast south of Yokohama. The combined train and monorail made about a 45-minute trip, and it was urban the whole way. Kanagawa prefecture (which stretches from Kawasaki, just south of Tokyo, down to the coast) had about 9 million people and is the second largest in Japan after Tokyo. It, like Chiba, is considered part of the Tokyo metro area, and people commute both directions between the various cities in the region.



Enoshima Electric Railway

At Enoshima I caught another unique form of transit, the Enoden or Enoshima Electric Railway. This railroad was built by British engineers in the middle of the 1800s, and it continues to run vehicles that look historic (though they are modern inside). This line is apparently famous in Japan because it has appeared in several animé books and films, and people come from all over the country to take pictures of it.

I bought a day pass to use on the Enoden, though I probably could have gotten about half my rides for free. There are many stations that don't have ticket barriers. They do have places where the locals tap their farecards. The day pass is a paper ticket, though, so it doesn't work with the tap machines. Pretty much all the stations get a lot of passengers, so I don't know why they haven't installed barriers everywhere.

My first stop was at Hase station, which is at the west end of the city of Kamakura. Kamakura was the capital of Japan in the 13th Century, and it has many temples and shrines that date to that era. The largest of those (literally) is the Great Buddha, a hollow bronze statue 11½ meters tall. While that's nothing compared to the statue in Sendai, it's still quite impressive. It's also been standing in Kamakura since the year 1252.



**Great Buddha of Kamakura
with offerings of flowers and a watermelon below**

It costs 300 yen (\$2.05) to visit the Buddha, and there's an additional charge of 50 yen (35¢) if you want to go inside. There's honestly not much to see inside, and it's rather cramped. They had signs announcing that this afternoon visiting the inside would be suspended because of an extreme heat warning. I was glad to see the statue itself, though. It's impressive, and the surrounding park is quite beautiful.

I next made my way to the main street of Kamakura, which is a strange mix of tacky souvenir shops and luxury clothing and handbag outlets. Guide books recommend the place, but honestly I didn't care much for it. The most interesting thing I saw there was a young couple who were getting their wedding photos taken by a clock in the main plaza. The clock gives me the feeling of a Swiss or German village rather than a Japanese town, but it does look quaint, and I can see why the couple chose that location.

Finally I made my way to the stop known as Kamakurakokomae station, which means "across from Kamakura beach". This is one of the main places that the animé associated with the Enoden were set, and as a result there were hundreds of Japanese teachers taking selfies with the train and the beach in the background. I got my own selfie at the beach, which looks remarkably like those 8,700 miles away on the California coast. Kamakura is a surfing beach rather than a place for swimming, but the rough waves really were quite beautiful.



Selfie at the beach



Wedding photos in Kamakura

I had a long wait for a train back from the beach. While I was waiting a group of Japanese high school boys stood on the platform singing a cappella. The words were in Japanese, but it was very western-style music.

It was late morning when I returned to Enoshima. Outside the station there the had a collection of "gachapon" machines. These things are everywhere in Japan. They look kind of like old-fashioned gumball machines.

You insert coins in them and turn a dial, and then a capsule drops out that contains a mystery prize. The name supposedly comes from the sound the machines make as the capsules drop. Japanese people throw a ton of coins into gachapon machines. Both kids and adults collect the junk from them in the way Americans might collect sports cards of figurines.

One of the gachapon machines by Enoshima station had little plastic model train cars in its capsules, and I paid 400 yen (\$2.70) for a souvenir. It will probably also go on the toy shelf in my room, but to me it's more fun than most of the stuff they have in those machines.

I stopped to use the restroom on the way back to Yokohama and was amused by the multilingual sign they had in the stall. Not only did it make me wonder just who does steal toilet paper, but I also got a laugh out of the picture of a bowing cop in the corner.

Mentioning that leads me to another thought about Japanese toilets. In addition to all the bidet features, Japanese toilets have the option for the toilet seat to be heated. This is accomplished by slowly circulating hot water under the surface of the seat. I can see why this might be a feature people would want on a cold night in winter, but it's beyond me why anyone would want a warm toilet seat on a sweltering summer day. Nevertheless, both in public toilets and in my hotel rooms the default setting for warming the seat seems to be "on".

I got back to Yokohama early in the afternoon, and I made it my quest to find the elusive Cup Noodles Museum. While the place is kind of amusing, trust me, it's not worth making a special effort to get to. The admission is 500 yen (\$3.40), and then you pay an additional 500 yen to make your own personalized cup of instant ramen. (I think you can get twelve of those at Aldi for the same price.) It was kind of interesting to learn the history of the product. Its origin was in helping to stop the famine that followed World War II, and the biggest challenge the inventor had was figuring out how to quickly dry the noodles. The solution was to fry them, which also dehydrates them. Blocks of instant noodles (the kind I know best) have been available since the 1950s. The foam cups were developed in the '70s as a way to help market the product to western countries that would be more likely to eat the noodles with a fork. Nissin (by far the largest company in the market) has even developed a form of instant ramen designed to be eaten in space.

Something that stood out at the Cup Noodles Museum was that their film was a cartoon with stereotypes of Asian characters that would almost certainly not be allowed in America today. I suppose it's not unlike racial epithets that black people can get away with using about themselves, but whites can't use.

The Cup Noodles Museum is located across from an amusement park that appears to be an urban renewal project on the Yokohama waterfront. I thought it might be fun to ride the big ferris wheel (and apparently the rides are charged a la carte), but for some reason it wasn't running today. It was also threatening to rain, so I figured it



Cosmo Wheel – Yokohama

might be prudent to head back to the hotel. It was also threatening to rain, so I figured it might be prudent to head back to the hotel.

As I was leaving Kannai station, I saw a rather disturbing incident. A stocky Japanese teenager with a gruff voice began shouting at another guy. He kept at it, like he was trying to provoke the second guy to fight him. I'd never seen anything like that on a subway anywhere in the world before, and it was certainly unexpected in a place as orderly as Japan. I noted before, though, that Yokohama came across as a rather rough place, and I think this may have been more evidence of that.



"Do not take toilet paper" sign



My personalized Cup Noodles dropping from a shrink wrap machine

I probably could have walked to the hotel more quickly than it took to get there by transit. On paper it required one transfer, with the rides on either side being just a couple of stops. That transfer took forever, though. I walked a long distance already when I saw a sign that said the line I was connecting to was 850 meters away. I turned around and saw that the line I came from was 900 miles away. If you add that up, that's more than a mile—all theoretically in the same station.

While making that transfer I stopped for a late lunch at a place called Vie de France. This is a chain of bakeries I'd seen elsewhere, and I thought it might be interesting to try. I had a croque monsieur (which is just a ham and cheese with pretensions) and a truly delicious caramel croissant.

I was serenaded during my French repast by a Japanese teenager who was playing classical music on a public piano in the station. A lot of train stations in Japan have pianos in them, and they seem to be used a lot. It does make a nice break from the usual din of people coming and going.

My dinner tonight was crackers and cheese from the grocery store down the street from the hotel. While I did manage to use up the bulk of my change today, I still have a bit more Japanese cash than I'd care to have as a souvenir. I'll have to see what souvenirs catch my fancy at the airport.

On TV tonight I watched a game from that national high school baseball tournament. I don't even know where the teams that were playing were from. One had a Japanese kanji on their caps, and the other had the Romanji letter "E". It was interesting that the style of the game was very different from the pro game I saw—and much closer to how a high school game would go back in Iowa. The goal always seemed to be to get on base and advance runners rather than hitting a home run. The team with the "E" caps lost, and they were literally in tears afterwards. They showed both teams digging up dirt from the field and putting it in bags to take home. I suppose that's kind of like cutting down the net at state basketball.

This would be my last night in Japan, so I had to get things packed up and ready to go to the airport. It would also be a fairly early night, because I wanted to be at Haneda in good time tomorrow.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 8

YOKOHAMA, JAPAN TO MOLINE, ILLINOIS

Again today I wondered why I bothered setting an alarm. The sun poured in promptly at 5am, an hour before I'd intended to get out of bed. I made some instant coffee, showered, and double-checked the directions for getting back to the airport.

After checking out of the hotel, my first stop was at a mailbox. I had to return the wi-fi router I'd rented. It came with a prepaid cardboard envelope in which I was to place it and instructions to place it in a red Japan Post box prior to passing through security at the airport. I figured Yokohama was prior to security, and I knew there was a box on the way to the station. I'd copied down the train directions (not that they ended up mattering), so it was time to get rid of the wi-fi.

I also made a quick stop at a 24-hour McDonalds to get one last Egg McMuffin value meal that was truly priced at a value. Then I went into the JR part of Kannai station. I added 500 yen to my fare card. I knew I'd be about 50 yen short of what I needed to get to the airport, but 500 is the minimum you can add. So I'll be donating about three bucks to JR, since there's essentially no way to use that up.

I caught a train up to the main Yokohama station and transferred there to the Keikyu line to Haneda. My last train in Japan also ended up being the most crowded. I stood crammed by the door for about forty-five minutes. People came and went, but it never got any less crowded.

I got off at Haneda's terminal 3 and made my way up to the ANA departures hall. Even for business class, the process here was all do-it-yourself. I first scanned my passport to access a machine that would let me print a boarding pass. Then I had to scan my passport again at a machine that printed out a baggage tag. I went to a third machine where I scanned my passport yet again. At that machine a woman operated the touch screen for me as I confirmed that there was nothing dangerous in my bags.

The baggage lady also directed me to the expedited security line, which was an enormous timesaver at Haneda. The regular line wrapped around and around a tape maze, but there was no line at all in the expedited area. I got through the metal detector with no problem, but my bag did get pushed aside for additional screening. The person then checked the TV screen closely, though, and he concluded there was nothing amiss with it and let me go.

Following security was exit immigration. Here I scanned my passport again at a machine that took my picture and cranked around until it made the proper match. The light flashed green, and I was officially out of Japan.

The secure side of the airport was surprisingly chaotic. I had a business class ticket again (you can't split fares in opposite directions on ANA), so I wanted to find the lounge. Signage wasn't good (something that's been true almost everywhere in Japan), but eventually I did find the magic escalator to where it was hidden.

ANA actually has two lounges at Haneda's terminal 3, and I suspect this is one of the ways they distinguish between first class and business class. While it's enormous, the business lounge is crowded and cramped. It almost has the feeling of a school cafeteria rather than a place of luxury. I couldn't see into the first class lounge, but I suspect it's much more refined and pleasant. To give an idea of how many people pass through the business lounge, the men's room had five stalls and four urinals, yet there was still a line out the door. The crowding was certainly less than it would have been on the concourse, though, and I settled in, got some breakfast, and worked a bit on the travelogue.

An interesting side note—Windows features different scenes from around the world on the log-in screen on my computer. I rarely see things I recognize in those pictures, but today's scene happened to be the Rainbow Bridge in Tokyo that I went over about two weeks ago.

I got bored in the lounge, so I made my way to Gate 144, where my flight would be departing. On the way I first stopped at a souvenir shop, where I picked up a T-shirt with some of the cash I had left. The line to check out was absurdly long, so I'm glad I wasn't rushed to get to my gate. Buying the shirt left me with just a few 1000-yen notes, which I'm fine with.

I stopped at a different shop where I picked up a bag of strawberry kit-kats that used up much of the remaining coins I had. There's still a few left, but I can give those out as souvenirs to friends and family.

The two places I shopped were definitely at the low end of the options on the concourse. Most of what's available there is designer handbags, expensive watches, and alcohol. While the shops have different names, they're all run by a company called Tiat Duty Free, which also has its name plastered on the luggage carts, the wheelchairs, and just about anywhere else you could imagine. Because it's technically duty free, I had to show my passport and boarding pass to buy my T-shirt and kit-kats. The kit-kats were minimally cheaper than what they had at Don Quijote and Aeon, but not by very much.

I was also able to use most of the balance on my Welcome Suica card buying some grape juice and Coke Zero at a vending machine. I'm left with 132 yen, which was less than anything in the machine cost. That's practically nothing, though, and the card is also a nice souvenir.

I was honestly glad I'd left the lounge early, because Gate 144 was just about as far away from the lounge as it could be. It was also down a level from the main departures area. I was pleased to see there was already a plane parked at the gate, so we shouldn't be delayed do to inbound equipment.

They repeatedly ran an announcement that JAL regreted that flight 45 to Paris would be delayed due to mechanical issues. The expected boarding time was postponed until tomorrow at 8:40am, and passengers with questions were asked to approach the JAL desk. I can only imagine just how swamped they must have been with a plane full of people bound for France who were stuck in Tokyo for an extra day. It certainly wouldn't help that many of those people would likely be Francophones, and French is not a language that's commonly spoken or understood in Japan. (English is the default European language, followed by German, Spanish, and Portuguese. French is never a language option.)



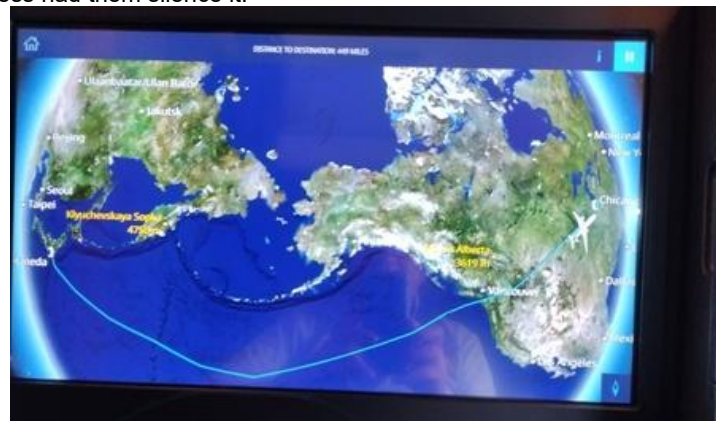
**In seat 6-H
(wearing the "Golden Bear" shirt
that I bought in Okinawa)**

Our flight was also delayed, though fortunately not by a whole day. Around ten o'clock they announced that boarding would be delayed "due to flight preparations", without giving an estimated length of delay. They did begin pre-boarding at 10:20, though, just ten minutes after we were scheduled to start boarding. At that point I walked from my seat near the front of the gate area to the end of a long line for "Group 2", since this flight would also be very heavy on business class. They began boarding Group 2 at 10:30, and apparently the photo at exit customs meant that we didn't need to get our picture taken again at the gate. The gate agents carefully looked over everyone's passports, but then they just scanned the boarding passes and waved us to the jetway.

This plane appears slightly older than the one we flew on to Narita, and the configuration is just slightly different. There are three rows of first class, so seat 6-H where I'm at is actually in the fifth row of the plane (since again they skip over the unlucky Row 4). I'm on the opposite side of the plane, but otherwise things are pretty similar to the set-up coming to Japan.

They closed the doors at 10:55, fifteen minutes late, and we pushed back at 10:58. We had a very long taxi as they played essentially the same safety video I'd seen four times now—though it does vary slightly depending on the aircraft. We finally took off at 11:16am (9:16pm yesterday in Chicago). The flight time this direction is significantly less than westbound. It's right at 11½ hours, so we should be getting into Chicago more or less on time.

As we took off someone nearby was playing a children's video with the volume very loud. Fortunately once we were above 10,000 feet the stewardess had them silence it.



**LEFT: ANA safety video
RIGHT: Flight map from near the end of the flight**

As the service started, it stood out that we weren't offered the oshibori wet wipe that we'd gotten westbound. I was given a

choice of orange juice or champagne when boarding, and once we were at cruising altitude the offered other drinks. I chose to have a sparkling sake (which was very nice) and also more orange juice.

The meal started with an amuse bouche that had two parts. One was described as a pair of nut and chili pie sticks, which was indeed nuts and chili flakes baked onto pie crust. The other was described as “mélange of gizzard, cheese, and olive”. There was also a cherry tomato in that mix. The cheese and vegetables were fine, but my “bouche” wasn’t amused by the gizzard. It was tough and strongly flavored, and I left most of it.

I was pleased to actually get the wi-fi to work on this flight—though just on my computer, since the free code only works with one device. It’s absurdly slow, but I did feel a sense of accomplishment in actually getting something.

For this flight I chose the “western beef” meal. The appetizer featured three items, one of which was most decidedly not beef. That was seasonal bouillabaisse aspic, and I must say a seafood gel was one of the least appealing things I could imagine. I didn’t even touch it. Much better was tomato mousse with marinated seasonal vegetables. The third item was between those two. It was called “corn and beef cheek composition”, the corn was a section sliced straight off a cob, and the beef cheek was part of a strange layered thing that also featured aspic. I ate it, but it was far from my favorite. The appetizer was served with a roll that had corn baked into it and a slice of baguette. Unlike the vegetarian meal, these were served with actual butter, and there was also olive oil I could drizzle on them if I wanted.

The main course was excellent. It featured steak that could be cut with a butter knife served over an onion cream sauce, with risotto and carrots, broccoli, and some root vegetable I didn’t recognize on the side. Everything went together well, and it really was delicious. I enjoyed every bite.

As I pretty much always do when flying, I’m entertaining myself with the flight map on the screen. Our route is notably further south than when we flew over, presumably taking advantage of the jet stream. We’re flying well south of Aleutian Islands and look to cross over Canada near Vancouver.

The Japanese woman across the aisle from me ordered the same meal I did, though she didn’t finish her steak. Had she ordered the Japanese menu, the appetizer would have included eel and yam sushi, fish paste with corn, and cheese with dry young sardines. That would be followed with a bento box where the main feature was braised pork belly and the side dishes were maceral salad, steamed chicken with marinated eggplant, and grilled fish with malted rice. The Japanese meal also comes with pickled vegetables and the obligatory miso soup. The western menu also had a fish option for its main course, which I opted out of.

Dessert as also excellent. I had a pistachio mousse over a moist matcha sponge cake, topped by white chocolate flakes. The other options were a cheese plate and the same fruit salad I had multiple times with the vegetarian meal on the flight over.

After dinner I did finish reading Cher’s autobiography, though the book I had is only part one, covering the first half of her incredibly fascinating life. I’ll probably read part two on some future trip. It’s kind of interesting that while the woman built her reputation as a flamboyant sex symbol, she’s actually quite shy and rather conservative in her own actions. You definitely can’t judge a book by its cover.

Once I finished the book I put down the window shade, lowered the bed to its lay-flat position, and rested my eyes for a bit. I wouldn’t say I actually slept, but hopefully a bit of rest will help me get through the day once I get to Illinois.

I was a bit surprised to get up again and discover that it was almost completely dark outside, with a full moon providing the only light. I really hadn’t expected that, since the other direction was entirely a daytime flight and we left earlier in the day this time. It was 2am Central Time, though, which would make it 11pm in the Alaska Time Zone we were flying through. Since we were further south, we didn’t have the midnight sun, either, so of course it was night outside. The weirdest thing, though, is that from my point of view, this is last night—that is Thursday night, before this flight even began. We crossed the date line almost immediately after departing, and we’ll arrive in Chicago two hours earlier than when we left Tokyo.

ANA has an “order anytime” menu that business class passengers can take advantage of, and at about 4:30am Chicago time (6:30pm in Japan) I did so. I ordered a salad, which was really very nice and also an ice cream, which turned out to be Haagen-Dazs strawberry. The flight attendant asked if I’d like anything to drink, and I ordered the “cola zero” on the menu. I was expecting Coke Zero, which is just about the only sugar-free soda in Japan, but I ended up getting an American can of Diet Pepsi. It even has deposit labeling for Iowa, among other states. The can of pop was served with a glass cup filled with ice, the salad was served on a lovely china plate, and while the ice cream came in its cardboard tub, it was served on a rice paper napkin. Everything was also served with quite elegant silverware in a Japanese design.

I spent a while doing the “Stuff” quizzes I’d started doing when I went to New Zealand, another advantage of having wi-fi on the flight. When I looked up we were right over Tofino at the west edge of Vancouver Island. I remember when my brother Steve and I were there years ago when we went to the world’s fair. While we were still a ways from home, it was good to be over North America again.

We crossed into the United States at about 5:45am Chicago time around Wenatchee, Washington. It was nice to see the lights of towns below after seeing nothing but darkness over the Pacific for hours on end.

I made an update to the school website while we were flying over Idaho. It was kind of cool to do that from 33,000 feet. We continued flying eastward, and dawn broke around 5:30 Mountain Time as we were over eastern Montana.

They began serving breakfast as we crossed over Montana. This would be my third breakfast of the day, after McDonalds and the lounge, and of course there was what amounted to an evening meal in the middle. I had the main western choice, which was described as a mozzarella frittata with tomato sauce. It also came with lots of potato chunks, a slice of tomato, a piece of broccoli, and a hot dog. There were assorted veggie bits in the frittata, and I wouldn't have known there was mozzarella save for the description. It was definitely not as good as dinner.

The breakfast also came with a croissant and what they called tomato bread (it certainly was red). That was served with New Zealand butter (the butter at dinner had been from Hokkaido) and strawberry preserves from the United States. There was also a fruit salad that was slightly different than the one I'd had on the way to Japan. This one featured watermelon, kiwifruit, and blood orange, grapefruit.

There was also a continental choice on the western menu that subbed out the frittata for a ham and cheese sandwich. (In retrospect I think I would have preferred that.) The Japanese option featured boiled octopus with soy sauce, grilled halibut with steamed rice, and of course miso soup.

As we crossed over North Dakota they change our E.T.A. from 8:34 to 9:02am. I assume at that point they'd communicated with the controllers at O'Hare and got a more specific landing pattern. We also had a bit of turbulence as we cut through clouds over North Dakota, and that might also have slowed us down a bit.

As the flight map kept going through its cycles, I pondered the fact that they had three different spellings of South Korea's second largest city: Busan, Pusan, and Fusan. About all I know about the place is from M*A*S*H, and they pronounced it with a "P". I have seen a "B" more recently, but I've never seen it spelled with an "F". It would be interesting to know just what the sound is in Korean.

I felt like I was getting home when our flight path crossed between New Ulm and Worthington around 7:50am. At that point the map even showed Spencer and Mason City.

Much of the morning had been cloudy, but it cleared off as we flew over Wisconsin. I turned the screen to the plane's downward facing camera, and it was fun to watch the fields and woodlands pass by below us. Before long we were into the development of the Chicago suburbs.

We actually passed O'Hare, flew out over Lake Michigan, and approached from the east. On the final stretch we flew right above the Kennedy Expressway, just veering slightly to the south as we reached the airport itself. We landed at 8:52am, which was officially twelve minutes late. We had a long taxi and finally pulled up to Gate M-44 at ten past nine.

The walk to customs took about fifteen minutes. The room was absolutely empty, and I was the first U.S. citizen off our plane to arrive. I still got plenty of exercise walking through an enormous tape maze they had set up. When I finally got to the front, they had me go to a facial recognition camera. It showed a green checkmark without me even scanning my passport. The immigration woman asked if I had anything to declare. I said "no", and he gave me a laminated piece of green cardboard with the letters "EPP" written on it.

I then went to baggage claim, where I waited about ten more minutes for my bag to finally show. While I was waiting a couple from Nashville were complaining that they had only thirty minutes to make their flight in another terminal. It was probably an hour connection originally, but that's still way to short to schedule for an international connection. A woman gave them a card to give to security for expedited service. I hope it helped.

Once I had my bag, I went through another tape maze to the customs desk. The officer there just took the green card and sent me to the exit. I was expecting that with all the new ICE issues there might be problems at customs, but I've never had an easier time in my life. That said, the first class people who had gotten off the plane ahead of me were mostly from China, and they still hadn't passed immigration when I got my bag.

I caught the airport people mover to terminal 3, which is vaguely near the O'Hare blue line station. I searched for quite a while to find a restroom and then made my way to the station. I'd walked a lot after being confined in the seat—and even though the business class seat is huge, it's still confining. My leg was hurting, so I was going pretty slow as I made my way down to the platform. They closed the train doors just as I got there, but oddly about a minute later, they opened them again.

The trip downtown was mostly uneventful. For Chicago this was a crowded train, the busiest I've seen other than when there was a sports event. It was still rather empty compared to almost every train I rode in Japan, though. A few people were standing, but there was plenty of room for them to do so.

Riding the 'L' also reminded me of what I like about American transit. There's personality to it. Every station is different (often dating from vastly different eras), and in a place like Chicago I could look out and see the city as I passed by. In Japan, even when the trains were elevated, they were usually too crowded to see much of anything. The stations are almost all strictly utilitarian, with no real personality to them. No one has fun riding the train (except for the shinkansen); it's just a way to get from here to there.

I got to Union Station and discovered that the Amtrak train I was ticketed on this afternoon would be leaving an hour late—from the terminal where it originates. After being spoiled by Asian efficiency, I'd have to return to the reality of Amtrak.

Mostly to kill a bit of time, I went out to have some lunch. I went to Naf-Naf Grill, a chain I've only seen in Chicago and the Twin Cities. I got a chicken shawarma pita with pretty much all the Mediterranean veggies and sauces you could imagine. I did get a reminder that I was back in America when just the pita cost \$10.90, or close to double what something similar would have been in Tokyo.

I went back to the station and still had a ton of time to kill. If I'd been more ambitious, I might have gone around exploring. I didn't want to drag luggage with me, though, and I also didn't want to pay the ten bucks that Amtrak charges to store bags at the station (again about double what it would be in Japan). I also didn't have lounge access, nor did I want to pay for that, so I just sat around in the Great Hall at Union Station preparing to kill about three more hours.

As it turned out I'd end up killing more than that. The California Zephyr was originally scheduled to leave at 2pm. They first moved the departure to 2:45, then to 3:05, and then to 3:40. At 3:30 they finally called boarding for that train, but all that meant was that they had everyone who had been waiting in the Great Hall move forward into the "queuing lounge" by the platforms. We couldn't actually go to the platforms, but we joined the chaos of three other trains that were called at the same time in a big tape maze.

At 3:55 they actually moved people from the Zephyr out to the platform. This was also mass confusion, though. People were supposed to head to different cars based on their destination, but they weren't told which cars until they were actually out on the platform. There were also "red caps" (porters) driving carts on the platform, getting in everyone's way. The car attendants yelled at everybody because they weren't boarding efficiently, but they really wasn't any way they could board efficiently. With all the chaos, the train didn't actually start moving until 4:37pm.

Once we left the station, we got even further behind schedule. Normally Amtrak runs on the Metra express track throughout the Chicago suburbs. However, with the delay it was now rush hour, so that track was occupied by commuter trains. We ended up crawling all the way to Aurora, and by the time I actually made it back to Princeton, it was three and a half hours after I was supposed to have arrived.

I was pleased that my car started right up, though it was hellishly hot inside. I stopped briefly at the Culvers in Princeton, where I bought a salad I'd eat later and also a large iced tea. After being up for 29 hours with only minimal rest, I knew I'd want some caffeine for my drive over to Moline. There was a long stretch of construction on I-80, and traffic was quite heavy. I also had trouble finding where the hotel I'd booked was actually located. Eventually, though, I pulled into the Hampton Inn—Quad City Airport.

I'd checked in online and had a digital key on my phone, so I just went straight to the room. As I went in I noticed my brother Pau had texted me. I was too tired to do anything other than say I'd just made it to the hotel. I had my salad, and then collapsed into bed.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 9

MOLINE, ILLINOIS TO ALGONA, IOWA

While I'd have liked to sleep in a bit, it was fruitless to stay in bed past about 4am this morning. That would of course be 6pm in Tokyo, so at least my body had made the shift between night and day with some accuracy. I got up and figured I'd at least get this travelogue up to date before breakfast.

Something I couldn't help but notice as I took time to look around the hotel room were all the differences between the Hampton Inn and the various Japanese hotels I'd stayed at. First, like almost all American hotels, my room here was much larger than any where I'd stayed in Japan. It has a king bed and a sofa bed, plus various additional furniture, and there's tons of empty space where you can just move about the room. Space is always at a premium in Japan, so even if there were a king bed, there would be little else in the room besides that. An issue with the size is one that plagues a lot of American hotel rooms—the room is badly lit and has a lot of dark corners. The Hampton Inn has air conditioning that exchanges air between the inside and outside, which is more effective than the ceiling units they use in Japan. It also has far more power outlets (though that's likely because it's a brand new hotel), and of course they have the three prongs that are standard in the States.

The biggest difference is probably in the bathroom. Not only is the bathroom much larger than any I had in Japan, but the focus of it is a shower with a fixed head. Every hotel bathroom in Japan had a tub, although most of them were far too small for my American body to use as a tub. The showerheads are always portable, and in their high position the water pressure makes them turn so the spray is anywhere but on the bather's body. The plumbing at Japanese hotels also looks gerry-rigged to be shared by the shower, sink, and toilet, with a lever that determines which part of the bathroom gets water at any given time. In America the different parts of the bathroom are controlled separately. One advantage of the Japanese plumbing, though, is that you control the water temperature before turning on the shower, so you don't get sprayed by cold water or scalded while adjusting it.

The Hampton Inn didn't give me a free disposable toothbrush or pajamas, but they do have adequate containers for both trash and recycling. It also didn't have an electric kettle, but of course it did have a tiny coffeemaker and complimentary packets of flavorless brew. The curtains honestly aren't all that great here, but then sunrise isn't before 5am either.

Finally the Hampton Inn is way smaller than almost any Japanese hotel. Like the vast majority of roadside lodging in America, the Hampton Inn is three stories and has about a hundred rooms. Roadside hotels like that just don't exist in Japan. Instead they cluster lodging next to train stations, and they're almost always high rises. While some only had about a dozen rooms on each floor, when there are twenty or more floors, that adds up fast.

Breakfast at the Hampton Inn started at 6am, and I was among the first guests there. While this particular hotel actually had a pretty weak breakfast compared to others in the chain, it was at least much more familiar breakfast food than I'd had the past two and a half weeks. They had scrambled eggs that weren't runny and little coins of ham, plus various types of rolls.

I left the hotel at about 6:30 and headed west around the Quad Cities. There was tons of construction east and north of Iowa City, though it appeared to be the kind that might eventually prove useful. They're six-laning both I-80 and I-380, and it looks like a fair amount of the widening will be done this year. I-80 should be six-laned all the way to West Branch, and about half of the I-380 widening project appears to be done, with just the very middle part around Swisher left to do. Both roads have needed additional lanes for years (really decades), so this will be a real improvement.

I made a brief stop at a Love's truck stop in Waterloo and then continued west on U.S. 20. My only other stop was at a Casey's in Eagle Grove, where I bought gas for \$2.80⁹. It had actually been cheaper in the Quad Cities, but this appeared to be the lowest price in northern Iowa.

As I got closer to Algona it became very clear that they'd had too much rain while I was gone. There were many flooded fields, which is quite a change from recent years. It was raining today as well, which I'm sure did not make the local farmers happy.

I got home around 11:30 and managed to get things unpacked fairly quickly. I debated on going to a community theatre play that features both some of my friends and some friends of mine tonight, but I figured it might be better to wait until tomorrow, when I'd likely be a bit fresher.

This was a lengthy trip (I think the second longest I've done), and honestly Japan is not an easy country to visit. I did enjoy the trip, though, and I'm glad I went there. Now it's time to get back into the routine and get ready for another school year.