

**John & Su's
Diary
Japan Study Tour — March 2014**

**Getting there
Monday 3rd March**

We caught a 7.00 am domestic flight to Cairns. It was overcast and we saw only tantalizing glimpse of the coast as we travelled north. We could identify the coastline and features in the breaks between the clouds as we kept the coast on our starboard side all the way up to the Whitsundays. We had a good view of the Mary River estuary and glimpses of Moon Point. We could identify Round Hill Head and associated features and Lady Musgrave Island. We passed directly over Gladstone. Of special interest was Great Keppel Island, the Corio Bay, Shoalwater Bay area and Broad Sound.

We changed in Cairns and passed through Immigration and Customs and waited before eventually finding ourselves in the middle of an A330 without any window view and without much in-flight entertainment so we went to sleep and read as we passed the 8 hours to Tokyo.

We made a fairly quick exit from Narita, after despatching surplus luggage to Keiko's place when we get there. Then we collected our JR Rail Passes that enable us to ride on any five days in a fortnight at a huge price reduction and caught the Narita Express to Tokyo station where we identified and planned where we would rendezvous with Jennifer and Andy on their arrival on 15th.

We then caught the Green Circle line train to Hamamutcho and with Su's expert pre-planned navigation walked to our hotel MyStays that turned out to be convenient and surprisingly comfortable.

**Day 1
Tuesday 4th March
Mt Fuji**

Our choice of hotel was determined by the closeness to the Ogasawara shipping terminal and the green circle train station. We caught the train to Shinjuku. It was interesting to

ride in the subway on this circle route. In one corner of our carriage was what looked to be like a homeless man sleeping fitfully. It would have been a warmer night than outside and all for 290 yen. The train filled and emptied as commuters boarded and departed. The commuters who had seats were either engaged with electronic devices or nodding off to sleep to surprisingly wake in time to disembark at their preferred station. I was impressed by the school children obviously from rich backgrounds and attending private schools show such independence in their travels.

We eventually found the bus terminus to take us to Mt Fuji, Japan's newest World Heritage site, declared only in July last year. The 115 kilometre bus journey was mainly on a freeway.



As we explored the many layers of Tokyo from our high rise building, the many layers of subway at various depths, the flyovers, overpasses, underpasses, tunnels, embankments, cuttings, fillings, etc. I was mystified wondering where the original ground zero for this mega-city might have been. It seems that the vast Edo Plain on which Tokyo sits may have once been level before modern engineering reconfigured it.

It was surprisingly sunny and clear and we looked forward to a clear sunny view of the fabled mountain. However as we left the greenhouse of Tokyo we saw ever increasing volumes of snow piled up beside the freeway.

The bus made many stops before most of the passengers, who looked mainly like 18 to 22 year old university students disembarked at the Highlands Resort Theme park that looked to have a massive roller coaster ride. We were the only passengers of a previously full bus to continue on to the terminus not far on at Kawaguchiko that was also the train terminus.



After cup of coffee we caught a taxi to take us to the Fujisan Visitor Centre. It turned out to be surprisingly close and we could have walked but it was worth the ride. I won't describe the Visitor Centre because it is the subject of a separate report except to say that it was impressive already and due to be overtaken by a grander edifice explaining the OUV of Fujisan.

We were recommended to fill in our time by taking a cable car and a boat ride on Kawaguchiko. We caught a cab again to the cable car station that gave us great views overlooking the lake and when we reached the top what should have been a great view of Mt Fuji but it was shrouded in cloud when we were there. However the snow covered landscape from this elevation was so inspiring especially where it etched the lake on a grey part of the day.

Back at the bottom we walked over the road and took a boat ride. It was only for 20 minutes but for about three minutes the sky opened up enough to see Mt Fuji bathed in sunlight. After a wonderful relaxed sit down meal overlooking the lake we walked back to the bus terminus. It was here we probably gained a better view of Mt Fuji as the sky again opened briefly.



We boarded the bus unaware of the huge 40 cm dump of snow on Kawaguchiko within a few hours of our departure. We purchased some take-away food in Tokyo and didn't need to leave the hotel. We were finally linked to Wi-Fi and we dealt with Emails until late.

Day 2 Wednesday, 5th March Getting to Ogasawara

We woke up to a cold day with drizzly retain in Tokyo and the news that 40 cms of snow had fallen at the town at the foot of Mt Fuji we had visited the previous day. They were still trying to clean up the remnants of the 1500 mm of snow from two weeks ago.

We repacked ready for our short walk down to catch the "*Ogasawara Maru*" at the terminal. I was impressed by the street art and sculptures adorning the roadside and in the footpath. But then Japanese seem to value art and aesthetics more highly than Australians.



The shipping terminal was just like an airport with queues, crowds milling and waiting and impatient. There was apparently a large contingent of university zoology students coming on board with us.



There were many layers of quarantine measures before we touched the ground at Chichijima and even within the islands there was more quarantine

There was a huge amount of briefing in the shipping terminal on the need for Quarantine to protect Ogasawara from further invasions of pathogens and weeds. This was reinforced as we boarded the ship with the obligatory shoe cleaning on the gangway so that we were even more aware.

We had been warned that there was a very rough sea but as we left Tokyo the only evidence was the light continual rain. We left the terminal with so many ashore waving yellow ribbons and as we were leaving Tokyo Bay we were passed by a huge LNG bulk carrier (probably bound for Australia).



Outside the bay the weather was as rough as predicted and we were soon forced to retreat to our bunks just for safety and to help avoid *mal-de-mer*. We were mainly horizontal for the next 14 to 16 hours of the 25-hour voyage.

It is strange to be the only Westerner on the ship and even more weird to find out how few westerners find their way to Ogasawara and they don't know what they are missing.

Day 3 Thursday, 6th March Arriving at Ogasawara

Fortunately the very rough sea slowly abated during the night. And by morning we were able to stand and move with some more ease. We could even use the computer and read which was a relief after spending more than 14 hours on the bunks.

Two hours before our arrival though the first group of Ogasawara islands loomed into view on our port side. The passengers were have no human population been ravaged by goats and almost completely denuded. Strenuous efforts are now being made to rehabilitate them. The basis of the efforts was the establishment of a dam so that some plants can establish on the severely eroded landscape and start a process of recolonization.

Once ashore on Chichijima we met our host from the Orange House and he took our luggage and left us to spend a couple of hours at the Visitor Centre.

The two hours spent in the Visitor Centre helped get an appreciation of the problems of managing this World Heritage archipelago. I couldn't but help to draw many parallels with Lord Howe Island except that the land area of these islands is more than 12 times the size of the Lord Howe Island group. There are endless problems with invasive weeds — over 300 of them. There are problems with soil borne pathogens, rats, cats, feral goats and many others. It is a familiar chorus but being in the Tokyo Prefecture lots of resources are being directed to managing this.



I have many guides and backgrounds in English but the best was a very clear management strategy developed while the case for World Heritage was being developed and this was given to me after dinner by our host from the Orange House, our minshiku for our three night stay.

Day 4 Friday, 7th March Ogasawara — Hahajima

It was an early start with boxed breakfast and lunch packs and departing at 6.40 for the wharf where we waited for an hour for the departure of the *Hahajima Maru*. It was a good comfortable vessel and took exactly two hours to our destination Hahajima or Mother Island.

We had been told that Hahajima had escaped most of the invaders that have infested Chichijima. The worst of the detrimental introductions to Chichijima apparently has been a fusarium fungus that has decimated the snail populations. Given that snails are to Ogasawara what finches and tortoises are to the Galapagos in their diversity and speciation (with over 300 species for the archipelago) this has been a tragedy for the study of evolutionary biology. Since this fusarium isn't on Hahajima stringent efforts are being made to quarantine the island. We all had to walk across a foot wash of sea water. There was a ranger on hand who ordered anyone with any mud on their boots to scrub them clean before they could board the ship.

With such environmental awareness and knowing that Hahajima has a population of only 500 (a quarter of the resident population of Chichijima) I was looking forward to experiencing a more pristine environment.

Alas on our arrival at Hahajima we found all of the tours booked out and no transport of any sort to let us see the island so we were forced to explore as much as possible on foot. It wasn't easy because the island is much more mountainous than Chichijima. Still we managed a long haul up an incredible well made road and then diverted to walking tracks to explore the unusual forest comprised of at least 50% exotic species. The main forest invaders were Casuarinas,

Luecaena and Bischofias. However hovering below these was a rich cocktail of weeds familiar to us from Fraser Island. These included Sisal and some other agaves, Mother-in-Laws Tongues, Clivea lilies, lantana, cobblers pegs, syngonium, and water vine. There were other weeds such as snake vine that is common in northern Australia. It could have been worse because there were few invasive exotic grasses and surprisingly no vines and creepers. However weeders have a daunting task ahead of them to restore the natural ecosystem.



Almost every visible plant above is a weed

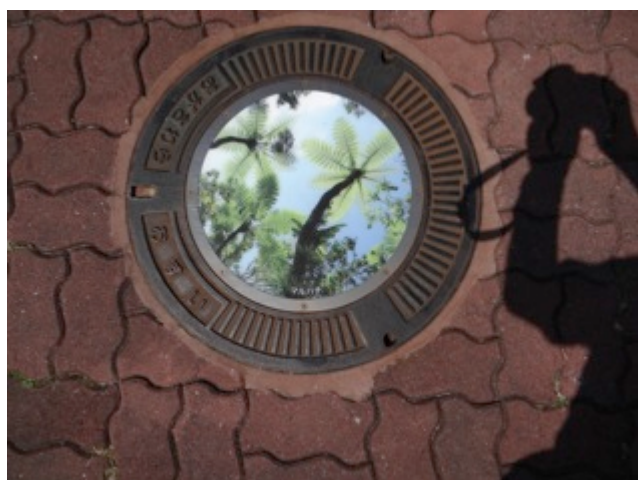
Fresh from weeding in Fraser Island it was difficult to ignore the weeds that were everywhere. Luckily for me Su was able to contain her enthusiasm as a weed warrior and only once bent down to involuntarily remove a weed. There were though other things to see including relics from WWII that were right around the island and only installed in 1944. There was also in interesting coast. I was determined to find some if the fabled snails but we found only empty shells.



We managed a round trip but there wasn't enough time to look on the opposite side of the harbour and village so we settled to shop for a picnic lunch in the pleasant climate beside the harbour and a quick foray to the Ross House museum before returning to catch the ferry home.

Day 5
Saturday, 8th March
Exploring Chichijima, Ogasawara

After a very comfortable night at our minshiku, the Orange House, we had a delightful breakfast. I had caught up on Emails, submitted my Abstract for the World Parks Congress, and caught up with the diary enough to be able to send a draft to family and friends. We hung out the washing and at 9.30 set off on the 5.8 km walk into town. It was a pleasant stroll with lots of breaks to view the scenery, bird, goats and the variety of weeds. I was impressed to find a calophyllum close to the beach but high above coast. It reminded me that some of the Ogasawara islands have experienced huge uplift from the sea floor. Wikipedia reports *"Captain Cook's surveying crew in 1776 to 1779 landed on a beach which is now 40 m (131 ft.) above sea level due to volcanic uplifting."*



Footpath inlays & access hole covers describe OUV

I was particularly impressed by the number of inlays in the footpath. These helped convey and emphasize the natural values of Ogasawara. We were told that they have been there for about ten years, probably installed to mark the 25th anniversary of the return of Ogasawara to Japan by the Americans. We were also most impressed by the standard of every road for such a small population. Perhaps it was the American occupation that lasted longer on Ogasawara that set up this amazingly well maintained system of roads, walkways and tunnels.

After four tunnels diverted around the fifth to check out the turtle farm. We had learnt about the take of turtles by the locals under

traditional hunting that allows 50 turtles to be harvested for Chichijima and 70 for Hahajima. The turtle Centre guide was Satomi Kondo who had studied Marine Biology at Southern Cross University Lismore. She showed us three large turtles in tanks, a Green, a Loggerhead and a Hawksbill. The Green turtle seemed almost fully-grown at 11 years weighing 37 kg. It has yet to manifest its gender. Also in the tanks were hatchlings captured when they headed for the lights instead of the sea in the town beach area. These are raised for a year before being released to give them a greater probability of survival.

As we were leaving the Turtle Centre Su's heart leapt to see a team of six young people from Hokkaido escaping the deep freeze by working on weeds. The weed they were pulling up in vast quantities was water vine. They received no wages just basic accommodation and a rice ration. However it was an example of volunteers working on weeds. Later in the day we were to meet a more mature group of Ogasawara residents led by a professional expert who were returning from an afternoon of ridding part of the most pristine forest on Ogasawara of particular weeds threatening special endemic plants including an endemic Melastoma.

We watched the small boat traffic going to and fro around the cruise liner, *Nippon Maru* anchored in the harbour. It carries 450 passengers and was on one of its four visits to Chichijima this March. Later at 5.00 pm we watched its departure from Ogasawara heading north.



The Nippon Maru a 450 pax Cruise liner

After a sushi lunch in the park and we joined Hiro, his only clients for the day. (The cruise liner contributes negligibly to the local economy). Hiro took us to the northern and most pristine part of the island pointing out a variety of endemic plants. We recognized some related to Australian species such as an endemic *Eleocarpus*, *Cyathea* and an endemic *Freycinettia*. I was amazed by the almost over-the-top quarantine precautions we had to undergo to get into the special pristine area where all tourists had to be accompanied by guides. The soles of our boots had to be sprayed with vinegar and our external clothes roller over by a sort of flypaper that was designed to extract any seeds adhering to our clothing. Then we had to place a special coloured stone into a tin to indicate that we were taking a particular route. However this very simple pattern was able to provide a vast amount of information on the patterns of recreation and usage of this particularly attractive Sanctuary managed by the Forestry Department although with significant volunteer assistance.

The area was fenced to keep out goats that targeted some of the rare endemics like ground orchids and cats that were predators on the rare Wood Pigeon. Pigeon numbers are reported to be down to 100 but they are confident that they are starting to get on top of the problem.

One problem that was very obviously being addressed is the progressive elimination of *Pinus* species introduced from Okinawa. There are large areas where skeletons of these trees stand above the canopy like undressed scarecrows.



Slowly the feral pines are being progressively eliminated

Hiro who had spent six months a decade ago on a working holiday in Queensland took us to the lookout so that we could see the sunset and the departure of the cruise liner before walking home to a delicious meal and a we tot of Bailey's Irish Cream. We deserved it. We had been on the go (mainly on our feet from 9.30 am to 6.00 pm

One of the inspirations for the day was a thought that FIDO should get a graphic artist to produce a World Heritage logo for Fraser Island similar to the logo developed for Ogasawara. This helps convey the sense of OUV peculiar to the site. It is a proposition FIDO may find merit in for Fraser Island because apart from helping the OUV it could also be a money spinner for a small outlay.



Day 6

Sunday, 9th March

Marine Side - Depart Ogasawara

The weather forecast predicted rain for Ogasawara today and the early morning cloud made me think that it was imminent. However Hiro yesterday said the rain would not come early and he was right. It still hadn't rained when we left at 2.00 pm. While it didn't rain though the wind built up to become ever stronger during the morning which again wasn't what we wanted for the trip in a small boat that was scheduled. Su was very keen to swim and see coral.

After breakfast we finished packing and were delivered to the shipping terminal where we

could leave our luggage while we went out on the “*Pink Dolphin*” skippered by Capt. Sandy. As we headed to the south of Chichijima to swim the chop became ever sloppier and by the time we reached our appointed landing and swimming site it was decreed too rough to land. I was thankful because I wasn’t enthusiastic about the swim in cool water with a lot of wind.



The lack of swimming opportunity though allowed us to cruise and explore the sea peppered with rugged rocky islets. We were thrilled by the flying of the Wedge tailed shearwaters around the boat but were really impressed by the hole in the wall where we could look into a bay the other side of the exterior coast. It was a great experience and I had received good value by 10.00 am . However, Captain Sandy was committed to delivering a full three-hour tour and not get us back to port until noon. He combed the sea looking for whales. Eventually we came upon a mother and young calf. They really performed for us . The calf did at least 10 full breaches and about 20 half breaches and they come under the boat so we got a great look through the glass bottom. Then to add value we found a turtle swimming on the surface and got quite close to that before it submerged.

Japanese enthusiasm for whale watching matches the enthusiasm of Australians which raise the question of why the Japanese Government insists on continuing its support for killing whales in 2014.

Back in the bay we saw that the “*Ogasawara Maru*” had arrived but we weren’t going there yet. Instead we saw the war relics from the water including the “*Hinko Maru*”, a Japanese

cargo ship bombed during WWII by George Bush Snr., and coral as well as other features around the bay.

Back on shore after a takeaway from the supermarket we returned to the Visitor Centre to be advised by an employee we had met working as a volunteer weeder the previous day. We learnt a bit about the fairly nominal community consultation. The Government appoints a committee that meets “once or twice a year” to voice their opinions. This seems less than optimal. However we were able to elicit more information on the OUV logo and badge. It turns out to have been developed by the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism who receive a royalty for its use. They pointed us to the “Badge Shop” where we procured a sample of their wares. The logo was on big and small badges, key rings, and an array of small products. I was just amazed that it isn’t on T-shirts where it could be spreading the message much wider and more visibly.



I hadn’t expected such an exciting farewell from Chichijima that is such a remarkably sedate and quiet community. However a significant percentage of the population was on the wharf to farewell us. The dramatic Japanese drumming was just a foretaste of what was to come. There was a squadron of pom-pom school girls with a banner, “Thanks” but the performance of a chorus of young men in a disciplined line was so moving even though I don’t know what they were chanting.



There was waving of arms and banners until we were off from the wharf and then we were joined by a flotilla of seven small craft that accompanied us out of the harbour. Then as we reached the outer buoys the exuberant young passengers performed spectacular somersaults and mass dives into the churned up briny to give us a most memorable departure gesture. Not one flag or greeting said "Farewell" or "Goodbye". They just want us to come again. It must be difficult in a small community of 4,000 to form friendships and see their new-found friends leave after such a short time to gain familiarity. However it happens 60 times a year on Chichijima.



Day 7
Monday, 10th March
Arriving Tokyo

The voyage back to Tokyo wasn't as rough as our voyage down but there were still some big waves. I took the opportunity on the voyage to try to catch up with sorting photos and bringing the diary up to date.

We took a taxi from the wharf to our hotel. It was called the, The Grand Arc in Hanzomen. We chose it because of its location and the price was comparable with Hotel MyStays. However, it was a much grander hotel, almost next to the National Theatre and close to the Royal Palace. We looked directly out at the Diet and the High Court. It was clearly close to the centre of government.

We were on the 12th Floor and had a great outlook over this huge and seething city as we watched the daylight fade and the city lighting take over. However as a very practical and symbolic gesture the lights on the Diet and the Tokyo Tower were extinguished by 8.30 pm but rest of the city blazed on.

Day 8
Tuesday, 11th March
Tokyo and to Nasu-Shiobara

We had braved the bitter cold last night to venture out of the Grand Arc. We settled on purchasing wine, cheese, crackers and bread etc. for dinner and consumed the leftovers for breakfast as well as consuming the free internet access to catch up on Emails etc.

We took a morning walk beside the moat surrounding the Emperor's Palace. It was a pleasant park with all of the Spring buds waiting to burst. In two weeks that same park will be festooned with cherry blossoms and lots of people but on a crisp morning we had it almost to ourselves. We strolled past a huge compound that was the British Embassy and looked at the nearby public buildings before checking out at 10.00 am.

This day marked the third anniversary of the tsunami that has had such catastrophic consequences for Japan. All week the NHK TV has been doing an in depth revue of what has been done to rebuild after the tsunami and the failure to meet the target and expectations. The Japanese are remembering that the tsunami took more lives than the September 11 terrorist attack on New York. The National Theatre didn't open today as a mark of respect. This anniversary gives new significance to our visit to Sendai for the concert to be performed by some of the kids orphaned by the tsunami there as well as Ugandan kids.

It was a short walk to the nearby Hanzomen Subway station and here we had to negotiate our way through the maze of tunnels to get to the right subway platforms and then change trains once to get to Tokyo Station. Here we activated Su's JR Rail Pass and found some lockers. However in the process Su misplaced her critical handbag containing her passport and all the Japanese money we had between us. While she left me standing with the bags beside the lockers, I wondered how I would cope if she didn't return, being unable to speak, read or write any Japanese and having only 500 yen in my pocket. Happily Su returned and there were no great dramas to confront.

The underground contained everything that any shopping centre would contain except for motor vehicles and I couldn't eliminate the parallels between this station and a termite or an ant's nest.

We had four hours to spare before setting off on the Shinkansen. Having enjoyed exploring London on a double-decker sight-seeing tour, we opted for a similar type of bus trip to see Tokyo. I wasn't anticipating anything extraordinary but it would help pass the free time. I wasn't deterred by all of the Nips around me but the nip in the air in the open top deck of a double decker bus was a challenge. What I discovered amazed me. I hadn't considered comparing Tokyo with other cities of the world. I had passed through Tokyo on the other Japanese visits. This time, having visited New York and London within the last 18 months after the bus tour I came to the conclusion that indeed Tokyo surpassed both those cities for the quality of its architecture and the general cleanliness and presentation. It is a big claim and one that I wasn't even considering before this look around. Of course the courtesy and politeness of the Japanese people adds to the appeal of this city as well. It isn't ostentatious but it left a big impression on this bush bloke from Down-under.

It was a fast 75-minute ride to Nasu-Shiobara our base for the next four days. Su's niece, Keiko met us and took us around to her father's (Suzuki San) home where we were to stay. It was a lively animated discussion over dinner as they caught up on family news. It was only two years ago that we hosted Keiko's family in Brisbane and Fraser Island but since then, Keiko's mother, Sister No 2, has died.

Otawara is a bigger city almost adjoining Nasu-Shiobara. Both cities are located on the northern fringe of the vast flat plain that encircles Tokyo and was the food bowl for much of Japan before it grew so many houses and factories. It isn't far from Ungandji where Su grew up, but she resided in Otawara while she attended high school. It wasn't a well planned city at all and almost lacked a CBD which left it without a real heart.

Day 9

Wednesday, 12th March Family and Friends in Tochigi

Suzuki San lives in Otawara City and was a high school principal. He knows the area intimately as we found out when we went to visit Su's Sister No1, Tok Chan who has hosted us on each of my three previous visits in Ungandji. Tok Chan had operated the family farm and ancestral home alone for more than 15 years. Now having reached 86, she has moved into a nursing home. It was great to catch up with her again but it was very sad. Sitting with Tok Chan and Suzuki San I was moved to haiku to express my sad thoughts:

*Another winter,
The years keep rolling around.
Are there many more*

*Buds are forming
Spring flowers ready to bloom,
A new generation.*

*Today the sun shines;
Tomorrow it may shine again;
We may not see it.*



Suzuki San, Tok Chan and Su

Then Suzuki San took us on a wonderful drive meandering through the countryside along lanes used by only very few who have to be intimately familiar with the district. It ended at a cemetery where we paid tribute to Sister No 2. Then Suzuki San took us to a restaurant that turned out to be very close to the family's Boarding House that Su stayed in while attending high school. It was a very traditional restaurant.

In contrast with the well-organized well laid out Tokyo the rural area of Japan seem to lack any planning. Housing estates and factories

are sprinkled around the countryside seemingly in a chaotic way. Cities such as Otawara seemed to have commercial outlets even more jumbled up and more dispersed than in Dallas. It would be almost unliveable in without a motor car.

We did some shopping for our planned Hot Pot Dinner and was amazed to find a vending machine for recycling at the supermarket.



The vending machine returns credit to credit cards as Pet plastic bottles are fed in and shredded. Other machines take milk cartons and trays. It seems like a container deposit scheme that is an entirely non-government commercial operation.

I have had a chance to see a lot of Japanese TV even if I didn't understand the language and the subtitles. I was impressed with how little politics was featured on the news and how many more human-interest stories are covered. For example, there were lots of stories I saw covered in depth such as the seriousness of ticks that can attach to humans in Japan and be fatal. There were a plethora of other similar informative segments on a range of human-interest topics. Also there is much less coverage of sport on Japanese TV which I appreciate and even less on financial matters. There is though an exceptionally thorough coverage of the weather.

The print media appears to similarly deal more in depth with topics other than politics and sport. For example, there was a large story in the newspaper about a Japanese rice farmer who has plans to grow rice near Ayr in Queensland where they can produce four crops of rice annually. Rarely would such stories get more than a brief mention outside the provincial dailies in Queensland but here it made large headlines.

When Keiko's lifelong friend Musuko turned up when school finished there was another lively discussion because only a few years ago she had visited us in Australia. Since then she has married. She took us out to see some white swans that have now included this area in their annual migration to their Siberian nesting grounds.



There was an even rowdier dinner party when Keiko and Ashiko (her daughter) joined us for dinner with lively conversation and lots of laughter.

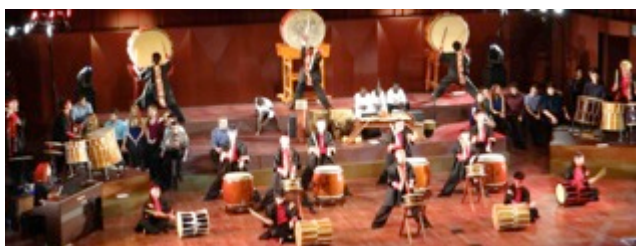


Day 10 Thursday, 13th March Concert at Sendai

The last two days have been crisp but with bright golden sunshine all day. This morning, true to forecast it was a drab overcast morning and it was drizzling rain by midday as we made our way to the Shinkansen station. It was quite wet and heavier rain by the time we reached Sendai.

Just like in Tokyo the Sendai Railway Station was seething with thousands of people moving around like ants with equal numbers heading in all directions. Sendai is a city of just over a million people that was badly impacted by the tsunami that drove five kilometres inland from this port city killing

hundreds in the process. The tsunami left 2,000 orphans and some of those were engaged in the concert tonight.



At 5.00 pm Keiko and her eldest daughter Shoko who attends a University not that far out of Sendai joined us and we caught a cab to the huge concert hall of the Tohoku University. The free concert was attended by two princesses and a huge contingent of American academics and others who had flown in to attend the event. It was a dramatic and exciting affair that I hadn't anticipated. With a lot of media coverage and narrated by a top TV presenter that I had seen on TV twice this week. Unfortunately with all his VIPs to attend to, we didn't get a chance meet Mr Tamai, Su's long time friend who heads up the Ashinaga Foundation that sponsored this event that brought the 30 Ugandans to these shores and has done so much to change the lives of orphans in many countries.



Day 11
Friday, 14th March
Hiraizumi World Heritage

The heavy rain last night was gone but while not raining it was still grey as we had our breakfast at the Green Selec Hotel. In discussion with the catering superintendent Su discovered that she was a supporter of the Ashinaga Foundation.

We (Keiko, Shoko Su and me) caught the subway to the Sedai Station where we caught a Shinkansen to Ichinoseki where we changed to a small local train to Hiraizumi. We caught the Loop bus in Hiraizumi that stopped at the various components of this World Heritage site that was inscribed in June 2011 at the same time as Ogasawara.

The first site was the most scenic and illustrated the OUV that state: *"The four Pure Land gardens of Hiraizumi, three focused on the sacred mountain Mount Kinkeisan, exemplify a fusion between the ideals of Pure Land Buddhism and indigenous Japanese concepts relating to the relationship between gardens, water and the surrounding landscape."* It was a temple adjacent to a man-made lake and was a marvellous example of how Japanese religion which incorporates Shinto's worship of nature with Buddhism. The photos tell it all especially as the landscape was still coated with snow.



There was a lot of information on the history of Hiraizumi at the Visitor Centre but there were also some extraordinary claims that Hiraizumi was greater than Kyoto. On a subjective basis I think that claim can't be substantiated and is based more on parochial pride.

The walk up Mount Kinkeisan was a sheer delight especially in the snow and we did get to observe a small sample of the grandeur that must have once characterized Hiraizumi. On the mountain the snow was thicker and many ponds were still coated with ice. After lunch on the Mountain at a lovely restaurant with a grand view and pleasant jazz we went to see the outer major features.

The Loop Bus didn't run a tight timetable. As we had almost arrived back at the Railway Station we saw the hourly train departing.

During the day we had met up with a retired American Professor of Modern Japanese History from Los Angeles, Dr Gordon Berger, who spoke excellent Japanese. Our parallel paths enriched all of our experiences. We had coffee while we waited for 45 minutes for another local train. He was able to explain much of the background to modern Japan and also cast some light on the blending of Shinto and Buddhism. We farewelled him at Ichinoseki. Then it two Shinkansens to get us back to Nasu-Shiobara via Sendai. It was a late evening, made more interesting by further discussions of the blending of Shintoism and Buddhism.



Day 12
Saturday, 13th March
Tokyo Rendezvous and Depart

It was a beautiful crisp morning without a cloud in the sky for my last day in Japan. Su made breakfast and I packed up. We said our goodbyes to Suzuki San. Before driving us to the station, Keiko presented Su and me with some wonderful gifts. While waiting at the station we could clearly see the snow clad Nasu Date we had walked on less than two years earlier.

We caught the Shinkansen and arrived at the appointed Tokyo rendezvous at precisely the same time as Jennifer and Andy. That was just as well because Su had left the mobile phone to facilitate the contact at home.

We caught a train and cab to the Ginza district and the fish markets and after queuing for

some time squeezed into a small but obviously in demand restaurant to have a wonderful sashimi and oyster lunch as Su's final generous gesture to my departure. Certainly Tokyo is the most sophisticated city I have been in. I couldn't get over the dress the style but most of all the activity. The streets were seething with people. The railway stations were even busier than on week-days. It seems that Japanese are not given to spending there weekends watching sport or TV. They are out actively doing things.

There was one thing we saw and were impressed by and that was an anti-nuclear energy march which blocked us off for some time. However everything was orderly. Everyone accepted the inconvenience without protest or fuss and when the long procession of marchers finally past traffic and pedestrians just followed on normally. There was one clear reminder of the obsession though of the Japanese with electronic gadgetry. Coffee Shops are essentially places where people should be able to sit and socialize and discuss. Yet at the coffee shop we attended it was necessary for them not only to place "No Smoking" notices at each table but a request not to use mobile phones. Indeed smoking was incredibly rare and I barely caught a whiff of tobacco in all of our Japanese travels but I people seemed obsessed with staring at the screens of there smart phones, to the death of much conversation.

Su, Jennifer and Andy left me at the Platform in the right spot for the Narita Express and I was on my way at 4.00 pm. Tomorrow at 6.25 I should be at Coolangatta Airport back in Queensland.

I left with composing a few Haikus:

Snow melts silently
New growth emerges soundlessly
Change needs to be seen

With help from the wind
Clouds can soar to the heavens
But sometimes they weep.

Every Spring new leaves grow;
Soaking up sun and carbon
They don't last forever