

Wed 9/2, Day 1:

The journey begins a day early. Not wanting to have to hassle with the potential for morning traffic jams to the airport or deal with whether or not the airport shuttle will show up at our door for our ride to the airport, we decided to spend the night at a lodging facility near the airport and park there for a month. In retrospect, it was a great idea.

On the way to the airport Hiroko and I stopped at my friend Pierre's house to have a drink and say adios. It had been a month and a half since I had seen Pierre. I lost a month being at the hospital daily with Rich and Pierre was away for a few weeks after Rich's passing and we just could not get together. It was a good visit. I left with a borrowed copy of the book "Blink" that Pierre thought I would enjoy for the flight.

We left Pierre's, made the relative short drive to where we were staying, and checked in. We could not get into the room as our keys were not opening the room door and I was bitchy over that one. By the time we got into our room and sort of settled down it was already 9:00 PM and that was too late to go out to dinner, so we munched on cheese and other stuff we brought for the long flight the next day. We both slept fairly soundly.

Thu 9/3; Fri 9/4, Day 2:

For whatever reason we were up before the crack of dawn this morning. It was probably in anticipation of the trip. We showered, got fully repacked and went to the hotel restaurant for our 'continental' breakfast. That is a metaphor for basically a junk food breakfast. I had a glass of OJ, a bagel and a cup of coffee. We made our way back to the room and waited for the shuttle to pick us up at our room at 8:30 AM.

It was a very short ride to the airport. We were there more than two hours before our flight (I tend to be anal retentive about arriving at the airport early for flights), checked our baggage and making our way to and through the security which was a breeze. There was practically no line at the security screening station of TSA, but it became an amusing episode nonetheless.

When we were in Oaxaca, Mexico the previous autumn I developed a fondness for a cheese that is indigenous to Oaxaca. I try to always keep some of it in the house as I found a local bodega (Hispanic grocery) and I decided to bring whatever I had in the house along for the flight. Queso de Oaxaca, as it is called, comes in long tubular strips where we buy it (ribbons of it are wound into a ball in Oaxaca) and it is roughly the same size and shape as a stick of dynamite. For easy storage in small Zip Lock bags I normally cut the cheese tubes in half.

Well, the security screener looked at the object on the screening monitor and obviously thought it was C-4 plastic explosives by the reaction of the screening agent and she called in a supervisor to hand inspect the carry on bag. When she pulled out the Zip Lock bag with the cheese in it she asked what it was and when I told her she shouted across the area to the screening machine operator that it was just cheese. That is about as much attention as I ever wanted to get from TSA security screening people.

On the way to the gate we stopped at the 'Duty Free' shop where I purchased two 750 ml bottles of Sapphire gin for the trip. Little did I know how badly I was being ripped off. I'll get to that in a day or two (it is now Sunday in Hokaido and I am finally starting this blog in earnest). So we are at the gate long before the vast majority of the passengers get there and I am writing and shipping my daily newsletter and calling people to say Hasta Luego.

We board the plane and after I was settled into my seat, I realize I forgot to pick up my 'rip-off' Sapphire, so, like a salmon swimming upstream, I go against the flow of people boarding the plane to get my booze. Once in hand I get back to my seat and we pushed away from the gate precisely on time. I could not help but notice how much leg room there was in economy coach these days. Apparently the numbers of people flying is not enough, so United made fewer rows of seats and gave everyone more room for their knees.

Usually on long flights (this one was almost 11 hours) I take a sleeping pill and spend most of the flight asleep. However, such was not the case this time around. The book Pierre lent me was so interesting I wanted to read rather than sleep. It also made it easier to avoid jet-lag if I stayed awake for the

entire flight. You see our scheduled arrival was for 3:00 PM in Osaka and if I could stay awake, then I could hopefully slip into a better sleeping routine. Well, the flight felt a lot shorter than 11 hours because the book was so absorbing.

Our arrival at Osaka International Airport (it was Friday 9/4) was mostly uneventful. It got interesting when we were retrieving our baggage from the carousel. I am a Medical Marijuana patient in CA because of my hearing condition of tinnitus. I would never consider carrying pot into a foreign country because iron bars on my windows is not a condition I would be happy with. However, that did not deter me from bringing along some brownies and ginger snap cookies. Well, as we were walking towards the baggage carousel we passed several drug sniffing German Sheppard dogs. Fortunately, it was good to find out the dogs were not at all interested in brownies or cookies.

By the time we checked into our hotel in Osaka we were both really tired, but we knew that if we went to sleep too early we would have to deal with jet-lag for days, so we toughed it out and went out on the town. Having been to Osaka only 18 months earlier we had a sense of where we were and where we wanted to go. As luck would have it, after strolling around town for hours we stumbled into a tiny authentic local restaurant less than 100 yards from our hotel. The food was nothing short of sensational.

While we were enjoying our meal a very nice Asian couple from Toronto sat next to us at the counter. When the woman seated right next to me said 'hello' as she sat down I reflexively asked where they were from and we had an interesting conversation for a while. Before long we were making our way back to our hotel just across the street and it was 'crash and burn' time. I slept like a corpse. I chose that word carefully. I wept openly on the flight over from San Francisco. I think it was what I needed to initiate the healing process of the passing of my friend Rich. I went to sleep looking forward to the next day and our reunion with Hiroko's family.

Sat 9/5, Day 3:

We went to sleep too early the night before, so we woke up too early Saturday morning. That gave us an opportunity to go for a long discovery walk in Osaka before we had to catch our 11:30 AM Shinkansen (Bullet Train) to Tokyo. It was a productive and delightful walk. I could easily spend a few months living in Osaka and that is probably something we will be doing in the next few years. I just love these photo ops. BTW- The train ride from Osaka to Tokyo was 28,000 Yen for the two of us, which at today's exchange rate is just over US \$300.

I am still a working person and I have a newsletter business with paying clients that expect their product and I am not prepared to tell them I am on vacation and do not want to be bothered with doing what they need for their marketing. So, while on the flight from San Francisco to Osaka I wrote the text for the 'private label' monthly newsletters. On the 2.5 hours train ride to Osaka I finished the monthly newsletter and wrote the weekly newsletter. Upon our arrival and Hiroko's brother's house in Kawasaki (a city with a common border with Tokyo) I finished the weekly and shipped both the weekly and monthly newsletters to my clients from Kawasaki before we headed out to a special private party at local restaurant near the Kawasaki house.

The party at the Kawasaki restaurant, called Café Denim, was just too much fun and funny as hell. You'll have to look at the photos to get a sense of what it was like. The people here could give lessons on how to party hardy. Considering we had a 5:00 AM wake-up call to leave for the airport at 6:00 AM the following morning to go to Hokaido, we called it a night about 10:00 and went to sleep on the futon laid on the top of the hard wood floor in a newly spare room at the house. One again I slept like a corpse.

Sun 9/6, Day 4:

I guess my body clock has not reset yet to the local time in spite of the melatonin pills and the Ambien I took, again. I was up about 4:00 AM and it could also be due to the way my body reacts when I have an early morning flight to take. My internal clock seems to know when I need to get up early; all buy itself.

With the precision of the national railroad system (even though our Bullet Train from Osaka to Tokyo was 15 minutes late the day before) we had our 5:00 AM wake-up and we packed and made ready for the trip to the airport. Natcha and her Husband Takeshi, who live upstairs in the same building, were taking us to the airport and were ready to roll at precisely at 6:00 AM, as planned. It was a short ride to Haneda Airport, which is very close to Kawasaki, where we spent the night. As a side note, we thought it was great that three generations of the same family were living in the same house.

We got to the airport with enough time to check in the bags and have breakfast. When I tried to take my carry on with me (without checking it) they would not let me do that saying that they would only allow 10 kilos on the plane as carry on and my bag weighed 16 kilos. I put up only nominal resistance and then they gave me a large grocery bag to carry my laptop and other essential stuff that I would not check in. From there it was off to a sort-of breakfast that for me consisted of toast and coffee. Yes, I drink coffee when I travel, but not at home. Go figure.

Going through security screening with the perfectly polite security screeners was something to behold. I had too much metallic stuff in my toiletry bag including a corkscrew that had a foil cutter on one end. I said goodbye to that item rather than go through an ordeal. They also took out my two nail clippers, a metallic toothpick and some other items to run through the screening machine again. Hiroko's brother tried to bring a pair of scissors through, but that did not fly at all. I had to surrender only the corkscrew.

It was a short 90-minute flight from Haneda to the Asakihawa Airport on the Northernmost Japanese Island of Hokaido. We got our bags from the baggage claim area and went to the rental counter to fetch our van for the week. Hiroko's family thought they needed to big vehicle since I am so large relative to them. In fact we needed it for all the luggage and stuff Keiko was going to buy. At the rental counter inside the airport terminal the attendant was reading aloud all the rules and regulations for the rental. It was like he was reading a book. When he got into the third chapter I excused myself and went for a walk to the restroom. The dude was still reading when I got back. Eventually we got into a shuttle and we were driven to the parking area for the rental

vehicles. We were off and running moments later and it was only 10:00 AM local time.

Day one on Hokaido was a protracted road tour of the area where we landed. We took what seemed like a 150-mile loop around the central part of the island because Keiko wanted us to see the lush vegetation, rolling hills and wide-open spaces that Californians are used to, but it is unique to Japan. We drove and stopped infrequently and finally stopped for lunch. Much to my surprise we stopped at a tiny roadside restaurant in the middle of nowhere that specialized in German sausages. The last thing in the world I would have expected to be my first meal on Hokaido would be German Brots. I like Brots, but...

The food was really excellent and then we went for a walk in the countryside behind the restaurant. It was a pleasant walk in spite of the overcast and the high humidity. During the walk I did get a bit of paranoia come over me. We had our baggage, including my laptop computer, in the back of a van and in clear view of anyone looking inside. I was not prepared to have my computer ripped off. I could replace the rest easily. While on the walk I expressed my concerns about leaving the van unattended for a long period of time while we hiked in the middle of nowhere. It was very stressful for me and could have contributed to what followed later.

I aired my concerns to Hiroko and asked what the rest of the day was going to be like and when were we doing to go to the hotel. When I was told that we were going here and there and would go and check into the hotel at the end of the day that only added to my stress level and concerns. I said no! I said we needed to offload the stuff out of the vehicle at the hotel first. We changed our itinerary and started to make our way back to Asahikawa (the city where we landed) to check into the hotel. The 'incident' happened while en route.

I do not know if it was the two days of trains, planes and mini-van riding that took a toll on my body or if it was the stresses of what I described or a combination of both, but I started to feel a pain in my back. It started out like a muscle strain on the left side of my torso at the midpoint between my left nipple and the center of my spine. It felt as though it was slightly below the level of my nipple. The intensity of the pain built rapidly to a point where it

became unbearable. It felt like someone put a hot ice pick into my back. I told Hiroko to instruct her brother that he had to stop the vehicle immediately, that I was in intense pain.

We pulled off the main road and I jumped out of the vehicle started to breathe deeply and began to stretch thinking and or hoping it was a muscle cramp in my back. The pain was deep inside my body and not just at the surface where I might associate a muscle thing and fortunately the pain subsided slowly and steadily. I continued to breathe deeply and stretch for about ten minutes before I felt okay to continue on our journey. Almost all of the painful sensations were gone within another ten minutes and it return not returned to my relief.

We checked into the hotel in Asahikawa and I told Hiroko that I needed to chill for a while before going to the local zoo as planned. She asked if thirty minutes would be okay and I said yes. She went to the next room and told Keiko and Hiroko's brother of my need to rest for a bit. Hiroko came back concerned that the zoo closed at 5:15 PM and it was approaching 3:30 PM and Keiko was very much looking forward to going to the zoo. Hiroko asked if it was okay with me if they went without us. I said of course.

After about 40 minutes I was feeling better and decided the best thing for me to do would be to go for a long walk and stretch out my muscles, open up my lungs and regain my center and that is precisely what we did. Our hotel was directly across from the train terminal and on the city's main pedestrian mall lined with parked bicycles and shops. It was a good walk even in spite of the intermittent rain showers. Thinking ahead we decided to buy a bottle of wine, some crackers and cheese and snacks and munch out with everyone in our room after their zoo adventure.

We first looked inside the 7-11 very near the hotel and found wine, but it was cheap jug stuff with twist off caps. Not something we would consider buying. We went across the mall to a large department store and in this country all the large department stores have food departments in the basement. We found the wine, cheese and crackers and had an episode that is so indicative of this country and the politeness of her people.

I had to give up my corkscrew at the airport, so when we were paying for the wine we asked the clerk if we could buy a corkscrew. At first she asked if it would be okay with us if she just opened the bottle for us and then push the cork back in just a bit. We said fine. Then she reached into a drawer behind the counter and pulled out a new corkscrew still in its packaging. She turned to Hiroko and apologized for not having a good corkscrew. She asked us to please forgive her and take the corkscrew she had, albeit an inferior one. We graciously accepted her gift and could not believe it. We purchased a really good bottle of Australian Merlot for 1,200 Yen (about UD\$13) and she gave us a corkscrew that would cost anywhere between \$5 and \$10 back home.

Back at the room we turned on the TV, I poured myself a glass of Sapphire and opened the bottle of wine to let it breathe until we were ready for it. It was not long before Kazuharu and Keiko were back and we munched and drank with the Beatles movie Help playing in the background on the television. Within minutes of having our fill of snacks Keiko asked if I was ready to go out to dinner. I said give me half an hour. Within ten minutes they were ready to go out in search of soba (buckwheat noodles) and I said what the hell and we were off and running.

The soba was good, the conversation was good and it was time to bed down. When I got back to the room I check my email, downloaded all the photos I took that day to the laptop, backed up laptop to the auxiliary drive I was carrying with me at all times after the car episode earlier that afternoon and we called it a night. I keep that auxiliary drive with me at all times because if my laptop is stolen out of the hotel room while we were out I could boot up using another Dual Core MacBook laptop using my auxiliary drive as though it was my own computer.

Mon. 9/7, Day 5:

It gets rather confusing at times when I know it is Monday morning here and it is still Sunday back in CA. The 16-hour time difference can make things challenging if you want to make a “real time” phone conversation with someone back in the states.

Anyway, in spite of a few premature awakenings it was finally time to get out of bed at about 7:00 AM. We agreed to hook up with Keiko and Kazuharu for breakfast at 8:00 AM. We chose that time because we had heard that the “bus people” would arrive for breakfast at 7:00 AM and then shove off. We do not like the mob scenes associated with the herd mentality of tour groups and we avoid them whenever possible.

Kazuharu and Keiko laughed at my choices for breakfast. The three Japanese in our group of four all had a Western style breakfast with scrambled eggs, toast, coffee and side dishes. I wasn't really paying much attention to what was on their plates after I saw the brilliant yellow eggs. I was the only one of our group that had a traditional Japanese breakfast.

My breakfast consisted of bowl miso soup and a bowl of rice with what I thought was going to be a raw egg (it was only slightly cooked) broken over the steaming rice. In the bowl with the rice and the very soft-boiled egg there was also some seaweed, some pickles and a piece of nicely prepared grilled fish. The fish was either a small mackerel but more likely a sardine. I also had tea rather than coffee and some orange juice. Now you know why Keiko and Kazuharu were surprised at my breakfast choice. Hiroko is used to seeing me eat this way in Asia. I figure when in Rome...

We finish breakfast, made it back to the room to finish packing and the road show was underway again before 9:00 AM. We had been spending way too much time inside the van for my liking or my body. I did not bitch about it as I knew that when Keiko made the plans for this week she did so with the best of intentions and wanted us to experience as much as possible of Hokaido. The problem is their style of travel is radically different than the way we travel, so I just go along to get along. I utilized the roughly four to four and a half hours in the mini-van this day to catch up on my blogging and get some work done on the photographs.

It was another overcast morning with intermittent rain. We made our way to our first stop, which was Daisetsuzan National Park. This park is at the mouth of a magnificently beautiful gorge. It had white water meandering in, around and over many rocks that fell off the very unusual cliff faces over the many thousands of years since the last major volcanic eruption here. There are many

dormant volcanoes surrounding this picturesque gorge. Hokaido gets very cold in the winter due to the frigid winds blowing down from Siberia in Russia. Hokaido is only a short ferry ride from Russian territory. In the winter there is a boat service that takes passengers out to watch icebergs float by. Not exactly my thing those sub-zero frigid outdoor adventures.

So we walk around this recently developed outdoor mall that had four hotels within the complex, many shops with touristy crap and many restaurants serving ramen (noodles). We cruised through the visitor center and saw an animation about how the area became the way it did geologically since the eruption of the volcano and some beautiful photos of what the place look like in the different seasons. It was a very worthwhile stop on our trek across the Northeastern section of Hokaido. After about forty-five minutes we were on the road again.

It was a short ride to our next stop, which had a beautiful waterfall and a frothy narrow river with lots of white water. Hiroko asked me if it was a class five rapids and I said it was more than likely a class six. A class six means you might (with the emphasis on might) be able to get down it with a kayak, but definitely not one of those large river rafts that carry up to ten people. We were here at the right time of year with relatively few tourists and the weather was still bearable albeit chilly in this northern region of Japan.

Back in the van again and we were off to our final destination of the day, which is the City of Abashiri. Along the way we stopped for lunch at a restaurant that brags about their home made soba. They had every right to brag on their soba, as it was good. I had one of my favorites. It is called sansai soba, which are soba noodles in a rich, clear, dark broth with mountain veggies. I get this dish often when we are at Japantown in San Francisco. I love it. I think it amuses Hiroko that I am so fond of many traditional Japanese foods. Back in the vehicle and on the road again to Abashiri.

The Japan guidebook lists the large prison in Abashiri as the first point of interest. Yuk! We were destined for a classic ryokon the shores of Notori Lake just outside of town. This is a large salt-water lake fed by the ocean, as Abashiri is a port city. As we pulled up to the front of the ryokon it was typically nondescript and was a typically plain and traditional structure. When

you walk into the entrance the beauty of this place just hits you in the face. I was beyond pleased at the choice of this place. I was a bit concerned about sleeping on the tetami mat floor with my back getting a bit tender from all the time in the mini-van, but not too concerned.

If you've never stayed in a ryokon the rooms are fairly large (here anyway and not everywhere) and the floor is covered with tetami mats. In the center of the room is a low black table (about 2.5 feet by 6 feet) with floor mats around it and two facing back rests on opposite sides of the table. They look like legless chairs. In other ryokon they serve your meals in your room and then later on they move the table to the side of the room next to the wall and bring out the futon floor cushions for you to sleep on. We dumped our stuff and walked outside to the boardwalk at the lake to look at the coral reeds. They are very colorful at various times of the year, but not today. The lake also has an odd form of vegetation that people come from all over to see. They are floaters that rise and fall in the water, probably from all the gas oozing from below the lakebed. We took the short walk from the ryokon, looked around a bit, took some pictures and then, you guessed it, back in the mini-van and off to a fish market. Kazuharu wanted to buy some King Crab and ship it home. We drive about 20 minutes to the other side of town to this huge market that was very disappointing. It is one of those touristy places that must pay the tour busses to bring their passengers to it. You know how we feel about tour groups. We did not stay very long fortunately. Back in the mini-van, again. We went to another market in the direction of our ryokon and the crab there was not up to Kazuharu's standards, so he did not buy any. The man knows his fish, as he is a sushi chef.

We get back to the ryokon just before 5:00 PM local time and I asked Hiroko to ask the innkeeper for a glass with ice in it for me. We had some time before dinner, so I was looking forward to having some Sapphire. I had two or three. I was pretty loose and relaxed at that point. Hiroko, Kazuharu and Keiko went down to the baths, but I stayed in the room dealing with another issue with my web hosing company. They keep screwing up my email and web access. By the time they were back that particular issue was resolved.

We spent time in the room next to ours with Keiko and Kazuharu before heading down to the dining room for dinner. Of course I had another drink.

The Japanese place a lot of importance on the appearance of their food. The higher-end facilities turn food into art for my eyes. This place is definitely a high-end place noted for their great cuisine. I had to pause before sitting down to eat to let my eyes take in the majesty of the roughly ten-course dinner that was laid out before us. Being as visually oriented as I am, this was a feast for my eyes. I soaked it all in before sitting down to eat.

All of the seafood served came from either the lake just outside the front door or the nearby lake. We had sashimi of scallops, agi, maguro, hokki, veggies tempura, and nabe with clams, scallops and veggies in a nice broth, large red shrimps (raw, boiled and tempura), King Crab and some other stuff I do not know what to call. Everything was sensational. The sake served with the meal was great too. I found myself chewing my food slowly with my eyes closed savoring every morsel of this magnificent and very memorable meal. It was the most memorable meal I can recall since my first ever stay at a ryokon on the Ise Peninsula (famous for pearl cultivation) back in 1986.

I over ate, but what the hell. We made it back to our rooms and the four of us congregated in their room and we just chatted and had a grand time of it. We were served soft ice cream on cones in the room and after a while it was time to call it a day and we crashed fairly quickly.

Tue 9/8, Day 6:

I guess my body has not adjusted to the time zone we are in. I was up at 4:00 AM this morning and that is with having some of my cookies that I brought from home. One of the first things I did was check my email and I was not at all surprised that it was down again. My ISP is killing me.

I discovered that being jammed into my suitcase was not a good thing for the headset I brought along to make phone calls through my laptop using the internet IP telephony service Skype. However the built-in microphone and speakers on this new (two week old) MacBook Pro laptop allowed me to call the hosting company back in the states. It was shortly after noontime in CA. The service was restored shortly after my conversation with the support technician. However it proved to be short-lived.

After that I spent some time working on how to format the blog properly so it would appear as written. Quotation marks and apostrophes were not rendering properly as a text file on the web, so I decided to reformat as an html file and that resolved the problem. I know, I am picky about some stuff and not others. Ultimately, that did not work properly either.

It was around 7:00 AM that Hiroko checked in on Kazuharu and Keiko. I may not have mentioned this before but Keiko and Hiroko were childhood friends and remained close over the years and distances. Kazuharu was commanded by his father to marry Keiko. Yes, it is a throwback to yesteryear, but it worked rather well for this couple. They are perfectly compatible even though they are completely opposite.

Around 7:15 or so Hiroko and I go down to take a hot bath after bathing in one of the private baths down on the ground floor. I got some good exercise going up and down the stairs to and from our third floor room. Ryokans generally do not have elevators although this place had a lift to bring up the baggage, what little of it we had with us- two small carry-on 22 inch bags. I carried my bag up the stairs with me out of concerns for the laptop inside my bag.

As 8:00 AM approached we went down for breakfast and it was a traditional Japanese one. Sugoy (awesome). It was so hot in the dining room that we were all sweating and we were not overdressed. We were back in the room at 8:30 and relaxed and finished packing to get ready to shove off at 9:00 AM. We were headed to do some hiking around five lakes that are about an hours drive from here. I was asked if I objected to hiking in the rain and I said no now that I bought a hat the afternoon before. We also brought along our rain gear with us. Yes, we got a lot packed into our small suitcases for a one-month trip. Sayonara Kazaeya Ryokon!

We were off and running again and it was pouring rain again. We are feeling the impacts of the typhoon that veered to the Northeast and away from Japan, but it still brought us heavy rain on a daily basis. We were now making our way to Shiratoko on the Western coast of the peninsula. Most of the Shiratoko

Peninsula is designated as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. All you have to do is see the place to understand why.

En route to the peninsula we stopped at a national park in the mountains. After a while all the waterfalls, the gorges, rivers, streams and mountains begin to look the same. This is especially true at the pace we were seeing things. Also contributing to the enigma for me is the acute exhaustion I am dealing with. The hours and hours in the vehicle every day and scrambling to take in as many sites as possible every day and moving to a different city and hotel every day has taken its toll on me. I came very close to passing out from the pain at one of our stops when we arrived at the peninsula.

After driving around in the rain from site to site we stopped at a shoreline local restaurant. I was so tired I had trouble even chewing and swallowing my food. I finally broke down and told Hiroko of the dire condition of my body. I said I cannot keep up this pace and that my body was on the verge of going down. In my mind I was entering a physical danger zone that could in fact jeopardize my life. I said this mode of traveling needs to be modified somewhat. It was obvious to everyone that I was in pretty bad shape over lunch and we went and checked into the hotel. Keiko, Kazuharu and Hiroko went off somewhere to hike around a place known for its five beautiful lakes and I stayed behind, as I desperately need to rest.

The hotel we were in was a small one but with an outstanding view of the harbor and sunsets. If it would ever stop raining we'd be treated to a spectacular sunset. I took my laptop down to the hotel lobby, which is where they had their only Internet access. I had some connectivity issues and the front desk clerk was Mac savvy and he set up an auxiliary Apple Airport Extreme network for me. That did the trick.

This really is a funny little hotel on the hill relative to the enormous hotels surrounding it. It was also located next to a campground and across the street from a relatively new cemetery. What I found particularly amusing was the room numbering system. The hotel had only thirty lodging rooms on three floors and the rooms on each floor were numbered from 51 to 61. In the lobby and on the elevator there was an information sign that advised people that if

their room number was 452 (our room) it was on the 4th floor. I would have thought that would be fairly obvious to everyone, but...

After organizing and uploading a series of photos to my website I decided to take a short walk to the cemetery across the street. I find Japanese cemeteries to be of particular interest with older ones the best. What really caught my eye at this one were two monuments: One new and one old. The old one was of someone that was either a baseball player or someone very food of the game. There was stone tablet with a baseball player at the ready in the batting stance awaiting a pitch. The other one was big, new and modern. It was the most massive monument in the small cemetery with a most unusual shape. On the monument was etched the picture of a young looking person (I could not tell if it was a male or female) on a snowboard coming down a slope.

I took some photos and made my way back to my room to lay down and relax a bit. Before long the gang returned just in time to see the spectacular sunset from the window of our room. We drank a bit before heading out for our dinner. Dinner was being served at the “sister hotel” down the hill near the water’s edge. I made a visual reference to our hotel being like a shrimp next to a huge whale and found it odd that they could be characterized as “sister” facilities.

The shuttle took us to the modern mega-hotel and the dining room was cavernous. They were serving just about everything imaginable. We were show to our table and turned loose at the expansive buffet tabled that offered foods from around the world. My first stop was to the sushi and sashimi table. Knowing how much there was to eat there I limited myself to one of each of what was offered, except for the uni (sea urchin). Uni is one of my favorites and it was also something you had to pay extra for. Sugoi desu (awesome) I exclaimed.

After the sushi and sashimi I got some steak, king crab legs, salad, rice, miso soup, tempura and a lot more I am not remembering. My brain function was not up to speed for remembering things and I am already being challenged by my age in a short-term memory context. It seems that my retention of short-term memory in a work context is still okay. Perhaps my work memory is still functional because my work is important to me. As exhausted as I was I ate

like a horse with multiple stomachs, but I was fading fast and ready to return to the hotel.

We returned to our cute hotel and it was too early to go to sleep. It was 8:00 PM and I knew if I went to sleep I'd be up and about between one and two in the morning and that would run the next days activities. As desperate as I was for rest, I decided to watch a movie on my laptop to pass the time until I knew I could make it through most of the early morning hours sleeping. At about 10:30 PM I ate a brownie, a piece of one of my special cookies and I took a knockout pill. I was determined to get a descent night's sleep, as I was fearful of the physical consequences of another night of not enough sleep.

Wed 9/9, Day 7:

I awakened around 4:30 AM and was not sure if I got enough sleep overnight. I was a bit groggy from the knockout pill I took. Eventually the groggy wore off and I was feeling somewhere around 90% of my normal self. I thought one more good nights sleep and I'll be back to normal. We were back into the Keiko dash routine and schedule of 6:00 AM wake-up, 7:00 AM breakfast and 8:00 AM on the road again.

Breakfast at our cute hotel was served in their restaurant. It was a buffet, as usual, only one that was much weaker than any before it. We ate and checked out. I was more than a bit surprised to find our bill being more than what it was at the sensational riocon we were in the prior night. The hotel price included a boat cruise around the tip of the peninsula that can only be seen by boat, as there are no roads out there. We packed our gear, loaded the mini-van and then awaited our tour guide for our trek through the mountain marshes that this area is famous for.

The trek was in the altitude range of 700 meters, plus or minus 100 meters of elevation changes as we hiked. Special high waterproof boots were required to make it through the mud and muck that we encountered. The rest of the group had rented their boots, but the touring company had nothing that approached a size that would fit my large gaijin feet. Knowing this in advance Keiko had purchase a pair of boots for me back home before we made to Hokaido. The

boots were way too large for my foot, but what the hell. For a three to four hour trek I could (and did) deal with it.

On the way up the mountain we happen to look out the window and could see an island close by. It was perhaps three to five miles away. I was told that was Russian territory and it has been a source of contention between Japan and Russia for centuries as both countries claims it as theirs. In looking at it I thought to myself, gee I now know as much about foreign policy as Sarah Palin.

Needless to say my words could never capture the beauty of where we were trekking up in the mountains. You'll have to see the photos I took along the way. We were in brown bear country and the tourist shops in the area sell bells for trekkers to wear to scare off any bears that might be within earshot. The guide, trying to make the trek more exciting or adventurous stopped at a spot and said a bear had been sighted at this spot. I asked when and she said a week ago. Big deal I thought to myself. Later at a lake she said there was a bear sighting here too. I asked when and she said three months ago. What a joke! I guess the locals do not ask such relevant questions.

Hiroko was of course worried about my physical condition, so she kept asking me how I was doing. I got tired of saying fine or great and after a while I politely asked her to stop asking me that question that I was fine. It was a worthwhile time out of the mini-van. It was the longest midday chunk of time spent outside the mini-van since we got into it. I very much enjoyed the long hike.

After the trek we made our way back to the hotel to grab our mini-van and hook-up with the boat for our cruise. However the boat ride was canceled. They said it was due to the weather conditions but I figured they did not have enough people signed up to make the outing worthwhile for the boat owner. Our hotel price included the cost of the boat ride, but around here there is no such thing as a refund of part of what we paid. They offered a voucher for another ride, but it was doubtful we'd ever be back this way again. So, the hotel people loaded us down with junk food and crap from their concession stand in the lobby and we were off to lunch.

We stopped at a ramen restaurant right down the hill. They had an extensive menu, but there was a problem. They had no rice, so we were left with the choice of one of two ramen- that is it! Considering the place was mostly empty due to people leaving after hearing they had limited selection of what to eat, it still took forever for our lunch to be served. I cannot imagine what this joint would be like in high season. We finished lunch and we were on our way again.

Our next destination was on the on the leeward side of the island; a town called Rausu. On the way into the town we stopped at the beautiful visitor center. They had lots of interesting photos of the area and of bears and salmon. Clearly after tourism, fishing is an important part of the local economy. The thought came over me to ask Hiroko to ask the park ranger if there was a problem here with diminishing salmon runs like we are experiencing in CA and on the entire West Coast. He said this was going to be a bad year for the salmon runs here because four years earlier the ocean waters were very cold at the time the young salmon fry make their way to the ocean from the spawning grounds. The life cycle of the pink salmon this area is noted for is four years from hatching to dying after spawning.

It was after the park ranger told us this story that he said the salmon were running right across the street in the river. He wasn't kidding. This turned out to be one of the highlights of the Hokaido trip for me so far. We walked across the street to the river and at first were looking for salmon jumping up the man-made falls and saw one or two at a distance. Kazuharu walked about 100 yards down stream and he began to wave at us to come and join him there. We were standing right in front of the spawning grounds and we watched in amazement as the females laid their eggs in the gravel at the bottom of the river bed and the males with their now hunched backs and ominous looking jaws competed with each other for the right to have their sperm fertilize the eggs the female just laid. We stood there for a while and just took it all in, then we were back in the mini-van for a short hop to the small inn where we were to stay.

We pulled up in front of the place and Keiko went inside. When she returned she said in a very noticeably different tone of voice that we should not have any expectations from this place. That could be defined, as a dump and that

description was not that far from the truth. The innkeeper gave us no choices for when to eat our dinner. We were told dinner at 6:00. After checking in and ready to go to our room I asked the innkeeper if they had Internet access and she said no.

We went up to our room and I took out the laptop to charge the battery and transfer photos to the hard drive. While I had the computer out, I turned on airport (Mac for wireless) just for the hell of it to see if there was any wifi in the room. I must have picked up the signal of the house next door because I had no trouble getting onto the net. Having accomplished what I needed to, it was back in the mini-van and we were headed to some vista point and then a lighthouse and then in search of a bottle of wine for everyone else. I tried to suggest to everyone that we should go back to the store where we purchased a good bottle of wine the night before first thing in the morning before we left the wilderness lodge, but they opted to try their luck in the next town because it was larger than the village. They wound up with an expensive bottle of rot-gut wine. I'm glad I carry my Sapphire with me.

So we get back to the inn about 5:10 and the innkeeper tried to get us to sit down for dinner right then and there as the table was set and the food was out. They politely said no way to her. I probably would not have been as polite. We went up to our room and Keiko and Kazuharu joined us for crackers, cheese and their bottle of wine. We went down to eat just before 6:00 Because Kazuharu was ready to eat.

The innkeeper expressed concerns to Hiroko that I might not enjoy Japanese food. Boy was she in for a surprise. On the table was a plate of sea urchin with the part that you eat still inside the shell of the creature. I had never seen that before. The innkeeper asked if I was really going to eat it and Hiroko told her it was my favorite Japanese delicacy. The woman was amazed when I woofed down not just mine, but Hiroko's also as Hiroko will not eat uni.

The meal consisted of some okay sake, some really fresh sashimi and sushi, local fish delicacies and the usual accompaniment of pickles, oshidashi (cooked & pressed spinach) rice, soup, a whole local crab, fresh fruit and tea. The innkeeper was so impressed with my devouring of the meal completely and my complementing her on it that she brought out a special bottle of sake

and poured a glass just for me. She said it was the best sake made in Japan. It was really good. She also gave me a small porcelain figurine of an owl. We finished the meal and retired to our room for the night, or so I thought.

Hiroko had fallen asleep at about 7:30 PM. Knowing it was way too early for me to go to sleep I pulled out the laptop and began to watch one of the many movies I loaded onto my hard drive before leaving home. After a while there was a knock at our door and it was Keiko beckoning Hiroko to come with her to the hot springs bath just outside. I declined to go and stayed in the room. Hiroko came back after a while and we both went back to sleep. I slept until midnight, woke up, took a knockout pill and went back to sleep.

Thu 9/10, Day 8:

Surprisingly enough I slept until almost time to wake up this morning. It was down for breakfast and out the door 15 minutes late at 8:15 AM due to technical issues with my Internet hosting company, again. It is past time to dump these fuckers and go with a company that is reliable.

So, we are in the mini-van and when I got around to asking what was on the agenda today and how long of a drive we had today I got really upset with the answer I got. At first I was just told that today was the last long drive day, but got no precise answer. When I was told it was about three hours drive to our first stop I said okay, but how long to our destination. Well, I am writing this six hours after we got into the mini-van and I still do not know when we will arrive at our destination.

We were on Hokaido for six days and it felt to me like three of those six days were spent driving somewhere or another. This is not my idea of a relaxing vacation and I let it be known through my silence that my body was very unhappy with what this day held for me. My back was very sore from the sitting in the mini-van for hours on end to stop somewhere for a five minute stop to look at something and then drive somewhere else.

All Hiroko could do was say she was sorry about the situation and little else as the die was cast for the day's movement. That three-hour drive was to see was

to see another lake. It was a driving storm when we arrived at the lake and it was cold up in the mountains. I did not even get out of the car to look at what was there. I was in pain and not ready to go out into the cold and rain, as it would probably completely lock up my back. The others were back in the van in a flash, wet and shivering.

Next stop was another lake. It was a beautiful volcanic caldera, but I was in too much pain to appreciate it. It stopped raining, so I got out to look, but my mood was somewhere beyond somber and Hiroko was upset because I was upset. I never took my camera out of the bag, which said quite a bit to everyone. Hiroko tried to “talk me down” but it did not help and I asked her to let go of it all. She didn’t initially. She asked me if I wanted them to just drive through to our final destination for the day and I said no. She asked if anything could be done to make matters better and I said no, just let it be and leave me to be.

At one point I was laying on the concrete platform view area of the lake trying like hell to stretch out my back to minimize the discomfort. It did not help much because of the cold at this elevation and northern latitudes and the concrete was cold too. Back in the van I popped two pain pills (first time in a long time that I had to take a pain pill for my back and neck) and I was trying very hard not to say anything. The suggestion was made that perhaps we go to a local onsen (natural hot springs) where I could stretch and loosen up my back after getting it nice and hot. I said let’s go.

It was a funky little place in the middle of nowhere. The first thing I saw was an ominous looking Husky with a heavy chain around its neck tethering it to its doghouse. It looked like a guard dog that would chew your arm off. In this country many people do not like strangers petting their dog and as such the dogs are raised as people unfriendly. Hiroko reminded me of that as I approached the dog. I talked to the dog and its tail never moved, so I stayed more than the chain’s length away from it. We went inside.

This funky little place charged ¥400 per person to use the hot bath. The place had four rooms to rent and also allowed day use of the hot springs. I stayed in the hot water until almost cooked and then got out on the deck and stretched the hell out of my back. Then I got back into the hot water and warmed

everything up all over again. I took a seat near a Shinto lantern near the bath and did a meditation going inside to see where the source of the pain was. I focused on it, breathed deeply into the source of the pain and then did specific stretches to the areas that were the likely cause of the discomfort.

After all the stretching I dried off, got dressed, went out into the backyard of the place where we were, found a suitable tree stump and did another meditation with a different objective this time. I went inside to calm myself down and try to let go of the disappointment of my body's reaction to all this driving. Between the discomfort relief and the focusing on inner calm my mood lightened quite a bit in a relatively short period of time. We sat in the building for a bit, sipping on a little coffee, watching the birds come to a feeder just outside the window and then we were off and running again. This time we were looking for a place to have lunch even though it was approaching two in the afternoon.

We found a soba restaurant and went inside. I brought my laptop and charger in with me as I was almost out of juice. I tried to pass the time by writing my blog and picking photos to upload. At around 3:30 I asked if they had a clue when we would reach our final destination for the day. I was told it would be about an hour and there would be one stopping point along the way. It was a more than eight-hour traveling day today. However, it was almost over.

We checked into this remote wilderness place literally in the middle of nowhere that Keiko picked out. It is owned and operated by a weird naturalist. Upon our checking in, if you can call the informal coming into what is essentially a four-room lodging facility, in checking in we asked about Internet access. The kuso tare (Japanese for shit head) said the only access here is his personal access and we cannot use it. It took every bit of self-control I had to keep me from exploding at him right there and then. I went into our room, looked out at the beautiful scenery and started my breathing routine to calm down and get my blood pressure down as it was going sub-orbital at the time. I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest at not being able to access the net for two days. We were a forty-minute drive to the nearby sizable town for net access or so the kuso tare told us. I had some urgent business that had to be dealt with placing thousands of dollars at risk. I was an unhappy camper.

Rather than explode, I chose to go outside, sit in the fresh air and beautiful surroundings and breathe deeply and rhythmically like I do when I meditate, to get my body back under control. I did not want to cause a scene or create friction between Hiroko's family and me, or create a rift between Hiroko and I. So, I sat outside and went into a meditative mode to calm myself down from the terrible state of mind I was in. It was not something that was easily accomplished.

I asked Hiroko to ask the innkeeper for a glass of ice and I poured myself a very stiff drink. As I was sitting outside trying to calm down Hiroko came out to ask me if she could do anything and I said no. She asked if I wanted to be alone and I said yes. It took me about ten seconds to realize that was the wrong answer and I went into our room and told her I would like it if she would come outside and sit with me. She came outside to sit with me. After a moment or two I suggested we grab our shoes and go for a walk along the countryside, as I wanted to get away from this place. She said okay and then asked me what about my glass full of Sapphire. I said I'd take it with me and I did.

So, we went for a walk down this remote unpaved country road and walked towards the village of Tsurui, Hokaido, Japan as the sun was getting low in the sky. Tsurui means, "where the cranes live" in Japanese. This place is famous for the native population of red headed cranes that live here year round. We went as far as I felt comfortable with and turned around so as not to be caught in the dark in an unfamiliar place with no street lighting whatsoever. As we approached the dirt road we had to go down to get back to the lodge we were staying in all of a sudden there appeared the mini-van with Keiko and Kazuharu. They were headed to a nearby hotel that advertised Internet access in the Japanese tour book.

We flagged them down and Keiko told us where they were headed, so we jumped in and went to the nearby hotel. The girls went to the front desk and asked about Internet access. They said if we paid to use their hot baths we could use the Internet access just outside the bath area. We were pleased and I was relieved. We went back to our wilderness lodge decompressed. It wasn't long before dinner. Hiroko suggested that I might want to consider going back

to the hotel with my laptop to see if I could access the net. I said in the morning was fine.

During dinner the asshole that initially said I could not use his net access said that I could use his access tomorrow after 4:00 PM. I immediately suspected he chose that time so we would go out on his guided tour during the day and then he would let me use his access. What a dick! After a very nice dinner we took the keys to the mini-van from Kazuharu, I grabbed my laptop and we headed for the hotel to check the net access. Outside the lobby area there were tables and chairs. We sat at a table and I was able to logon to the net. We no longer needed the shit head's access and both of us were relieved and felt much better. We drove back to the wilderness lodge and were ready for sleep and the next days whatever.

Fri 9/11, Day 9:

I was up at the crack of dawn this morning. It was a disconnected night's sleep in this isolated wilderness lodge outside of the small village that was near us and this village was a forty minute drive to the nearest sizable city of Kushiro. We had hours before breakfast and what we thought was going to be a full day's adventure with our naturalist guide that was also the owner of the wilderness lodge.

Knowing I would need Internet access in the morning, I got the mini-van keys from Kazuharu before we went to bed last night. I drove to the Taito Hotel with laptop in tow, got my financial market numbers and did my email thing and went back to the lodge for breakfast. The Taito Hotel had some tables outside and that is where I sat to access their wifi. I was not there very long and I did not do the daily update for my economic website for a second consecutive day. I needed to get grounded once again and get back in touch with the US financial markets.

The routine at the lodge was breakfast at 8:00 AM, leave at 9:00 AM and have a full day of adventure. It did not work out that way largely because the dick-head naturalist scammed and conned us. We left at 9:00, drove for an hour in our mini-van, following the naturalist and his assistant with canoes on the roof

of his van. The incessant pounding on the dirt roads, not to mention our losing control of our vehicle in a skid, took its toll on my extremely taxed back and neck. We got to what we thought was a remote and isolated lake to do canoeing. The lake was beautiful and mostly quiet except for the road that was at most a hundred yards from the water's edge at the far side of the lake.

There were two canoes: Hiroko and I were in one and Keiko and Kazuharu were in the other with shit-head. Shit-head had no way of knowing whether or not I could effectively paddle a canoe, but I really do not think he gave a damn. He was the most ego centric, obnoxious Japanese person I have ever met and that is saying a lot. The lake was peaceful and beautiful. There were several Blue Heron that darted in and out of the trees and reeds and I got a few good shots of them with my camera. The lake was full of crystal clear water and the trout were jumping out of the water chasing bugs to eat. It was a sight to behold.

After spending about two hours on the lake we were literally cut loose by the shit head and he told us where to go to find the best soba in the area. We got back into the van and were on our way. The pounding on the dirt road on the way out was more than my back could take and it was killing me. I was in agony and I was perturbed when we drove through a village with at least a dozen good looking restaurants that we bypassed to go to where shit-head said there was good soba. I did not have any kind thoughts for shit head when we found ourselves in the back of a grocery store for lunch!

At best the soba there was okay, but it really did not matter to me. I was in agony from all the pounding to my back and neck on the dirt roads and driving another half an hour to get to this place was just too much. Hiroko asked me what I wanted for lunch and I said I'll have tea. I lost my appetite somewhere in all the pain I was in. Hiroko ordered tempura and the way it was ordered was indicative of what this shit-head naturalist was all about. In the back of the grocery store was perhaps six tables and you had to go to a vending machine and put your money in, select what wanted to eat, get a ticket out of the machine and then hand the ticket to the waitress. I was in serious pain.

The only good thing that surrounded lunch was a gorgeous hawk that landed atop of a utility pole outside the window where we were sitting. I took a few photos from inside and then went outside to see how close I could get before it flew away. I got off a few shots before he took to flight. From here we were going to go for a hike and I agreed to go with a large caveat. I was unwilling to go for another long drive to get to the hiking area. I said I would go if it would be in the direction of the lodge where we were staying. Keiko said that it might be a significant drive and Hiroko asked them to take us back to the lodge first and then they could go wherever they wanted to. They agreed. At this point my back and neck were in such bad shape I was losing all feeling and sensation in my right hand and forearm. Yes, this was a nightmarish road trip for me at this point.

Every bump on the road and every turn induced agony in my back and neck. I was in a bad place physically. Back at the lodge I took a pain pill and a couple of Motrin to reduce the discomfort. I threw my laptop into the backpack and we walked to the Taito Hotel for a hot bath to loosen up my back so I could stretch and bring myself some relief. It was about a twenty to thirty minute walk and walking is always good for my back. We paid our ¥500 each and I stopped outside the entrance to the men's baths to check email and answer the important ones. While it might seem as though it would strain my back carrying the laptop in fact it was beneficial. The pain was causing me to scrunch up my shoulders and the backpack with the laptop was forcing my shoulders down and this helped.

Walking into the hotel we passed three women that obviously just left the baths. The hotel allows day use of the baths for a fee. One woman could not stop staring at me with my mountain man appearance. I had not trimmed my beard in almost a month and my hair was down and wild looking. She stared at me as she passed me by going in the opposite direction and then stopped and looked back at me after she passed me. I guess they do not get to see too many hippie looking men around here. On the way into the bath area some men already inside also stared at this gaijin as though they never before saw anything quite like me.

Inside the baths I followed the routine of sitting on a tiny stool no more than ten inches high and washing my body as a prelude to getting into the very hot

semi-public (men's only) bath. I am used to this routine after a few trips to Japan. There were two baths; one indoor and one outdoor. I started with the indoor one and it was good and hot. I did my thing and stretched as much as I could. By the time I left the bath area I was thoroughly cooked and limped over to the bench where Hiroko was waiting for me. She offered to massage me a bit to loosen up my back even more and it did help. She commented on how hot my body felt to her touch. In an effort to cool me down she went and got us a soft ice cream cone. Right! It did help me cool down and sitting in front of an open window also helped.

After a short while we decided to walk back to the wilderness lodge at a leisurely pace. This was after I finished with my Internet stuff. On the way out Keiko and Kazuharu were on the way in for their baths at this nice facility. Did I mention earlier that a famous photographer owns this nice hotel?

We got there and of course I poured myself a jet fuel for a change. I uncorked a bottle of French Cabernet Sauvignon that I picked up at the local convenience store earlier in the morning. Keiko and Kazuharu came to our room prior to dinner for drinking and snacks. Much to the surprise everyone the ¥500 bottle of wine (US\$5.49 at today's exchange rate) was really good. It was many times better than wine we paid more than twice as much for a few days earlier. Dinner was scheduled for 7:30 PM. Mr. Shit Head was doing a Japanese style barbeque this evening.

The food came in waves and it was just okay. We could not wait to get out of this place in the morning after breakfast and head for the port city of Kushiro where we had an evening flight back to Tokyo. The most interesting part of the dinner was when a Canadian girl named Tami happened by. She was married to a Japanese photographer (not the one that owns the nice hotel). She was apparently taking Japanese instructions from Mr. Shit Head. She seemed to have no difficulty in conversing in Japanese to my ears. Perhaps she was taking lessons in Kanji, Kana and Romaji, which are the three different sets of characters for writing.

I was in some discomfort after the hot springs baths, stretches, massage from Hiroko and the walking. However it was not all that bad relative to what I had been going through. Tami left to go to what she thought was a volleyball

match. It turned out to be only a practice, so she came back to the lodge ate and chatted with us while Mr. Shit Head was preoccupied with grilling and serving our food to us. Tami joined him in his study and we retired to our room for the evening. I took some more Motrin and went down for the night.

Sat 9/12, Day 10:

I was up at the crack of dawn again. It was not quite light out yet and it was a very chilly morning. Even though it was only mid-September you knew winter was on the way here. I need to figure out how to get past this 5:00 AM waking up routine. It is as though my body has gotten used to the local time and I get up the same as if I were home. Hiroko was getting up really early too. This morning I had the keys to the van and I was off to the hotel for net access.

Because it was chilly out and sitting at the outside table might not be a good idea this morning. For one it was cold and for two it was going to be too obvious what I was doing and I did not want to risk a confrontation with hotel staff over my using their net access as a non-guest. The first thought was that I should sit in the van and do my thing. The second thought was to go into the restaurant, drink coffee and work. When I got to the hotel the restaurant was not open yet as it was before 6:30 AM. So, I was parked as close to the hotel as I could for the best possible wifi signal while sitting in the van.

My strategic positioning placed me in the line of sight of the front desk of the hotel through the glass door entryway. When I parked I did so backing into the parking space. I did this so I could sit in the passenger seat and be closest to the wifi. This also left a clear view of me for the hotel staff. After about ten or fifteen minutes a woman came out of the hotel, obviously an employee, and tried to discretely check me out to see if she could tell what I was doing. She pretended to be doing something else. They don't get many foreigners out in this remote area (because almost nobody speaks any languages here other than Japanese) and likely very few of those gaijin looked like me, so they were probably somewhere between concerned at my presence, curious or worried.

About every ten to fifteen minutes someone else working at the hotel would come strolling through the parking lot and tried to see what I was doing. The dashboard of the van was high enough so they could not see the laptop on my lap. I figure they thought I was sitting there asleep as I kept my head down and not looking up as far as they could see or I was casing the place to rob it and or their guests. As I was finishing up with what I was doing a very stern looking man came out for the second time and walked within ten feet of the van and just stopped for several long seconds directly in front of me and stared at me. Perhaps he was trying to intimidate me, but it did not work. He strolled around the lot for a minute or so and then sat down at the nearby tables, lit up a cigarette (far too many people here still smoke) and he just kept his eye on me. In about five more minutes I was done with what I had to do, packed away the laptop and I was gone.

I went back to the lodge, packed and made ready for breakfast. We actually had the van loaded before breakfast. Everyone was anxious to get away from the asshole that owned the lodge. After breakfast we were gone in a flash and headed for Kushiro. We had to make a quick stop at the hotel so I could send out an important email regarding a business transaction. I made mention to Hiroko that I needed us to not take the van on any more dirt roads as my neck was very tender this morning. I must have slept funny on the pillow filled with the husks of buckwheat. It was an okay and relatively short drive to Kushiro with a stop at a shipping terminal for Keiko to ship back a lot of her purchased booty from the trip. I spent the drive working on my Pimsleur Japanese lessons. At the shipping terminal I got out and walked around in the parking lot doing my lessons while Keiko was inside. We were bound for the Kushiro train station before long and it was the last stop for the van before returning it. Hoorah!

One of the few areas of contention on this trip was the planned train ride into the marshlands that Keiko and Kazuharu were going to take at 10:50 AM. It was a ninety-minute round trip ride with the objective of seeing the marsh and taking photos. I loved being in the marshes of Hokaido the two times I was there, but I was not even remotely interested in taking a train ride into the marsh. Hiking is one thing and that train ride was something else. I did not want to do it. Sitting for another hour and a half was not what my back needed

either, but that was not the only reason I did not want to take the train ride. Hiroko and I opted to walk around this fairly sizable town.

We walked down the main drag heading away from the station and towards Fisherman's Warf and could not help but notice how empty this town was. We remembered it was a Saturday, but the streets were mostly devoid of people or vehicles. It was also fairly early on a weekend day and it became obvious this was a commercial street with banks and brokerages. We strolled to the Warf and on a bridge crossing the river at the Warf a short and very friendly local man stopped us and asked us (in Japanese) where we were from. When Hiroko said San Francisco he began to brag on his town, what to do, what to see, where to have coffee and to see the views from atop the largest office building in town that was only a block or two away. He was so nice and we could not get over how friendly everyone (except Mr. Shit Head) was on this island.

When we entered the tower we happened upon an art exhibit just off the building lobby and entrance. There were many attractive and imaginative creations there made by school kids, people from different civic and retirement centers and others. We thoroughly enjoyed it and then we were off to the 9th floor for coffee and some views. It was a great view from the restaurant. We had our coffee and were on our way to the large market at the Warf. It was okay and we were basically filling time waiting for Keiko and Kazuharu to return. Before their departure Hiroko told them to take their time in returning that we would be fine. They gave us Kazuharu's cell phone and we hoped they would take their time returning. We wanted some time alone and we were fearful that they would come back too soon, would want to go somewhere else and drag us along with them if they came back early. Our flight back to Tokyo was not until 8:25 that evening.

We were making our way back in the direction of the train station when the phone rang. They neglected to instruct us how to answer the phone. We assumed that if we opened it that would answer the phone, but such was not the case. The first call was followed up by a text message saying they would be back at 11:49 and we got the text message at 11:50 and we were blocks away from the station. We walked back towards the station at a more brisk pace. There was another unanswered call followed by another text message

asking where we were. By the third call I figured out how to answer the call and Hiroko told Keiko we were at the station. Well, Keiko and Kazuharu said they were at the van, so we headed in that direction. They could not go anywhere with the van as I had the keys in my pocket. We got back to the van and they were nowhere in sight, so we just stood there. After a short while they returned. I figure Keiko went shopping again.

We all decided to go have lunch across the street at the big store, not really knowing what to expect inside. There were some small restaurants, but the one we liked was full and no seats were available so the plan was to walk around and come back in a while to see if any seats opened up. That proved to be the perfect choice. There were many different types of merchants in a configuration similar to a food court at a shopping mall where the center area has tables and it is surrounded by vendors. IN this enormous configuration there were many concentric circles of merchants radiating out from the center. The closer you got to the eating tables the more likely the vendor would be selling fresh fish, and near the court itself there were mostly sashimi and sushi vendors. There were also a few rice vendors close in and they were very necessary.

So, the immediate job at hand was to find a place to sit as the tables were full and finding seating for four was a challenge. Keiko saw a table for four that looked as though the occupants were nearing completion of their meal so she just stood there and waited. Once she secured the table Hiroko suggested that I look after the table so nobody else would take our seats to which I said I don't think I can communicate well enough to fend off someone trying to take one of our seats. I suggested, and Keiko agreed, that she'd watch over things for us while we got our food and then she would go get hers.

First things first: you go to the rice vendor and select the size of the bowl of rice you want and pay for it. Then you go back to the vendor of your choosing and hand them your rice bowl. The vendor we chose must have been a good one because it was the only one with a crowd of people waiting to be served. When it came my time I picked some sea urchin, fatty tuna, octopus, raw salmon roe, raw shrimp, yellow fin and some whale sashimi. I wanted to eat some whale meat on this trip and I had been talking about it for months. Kazuharu said I was going to get into trouble with Greenpeace.

Whale meat has a very deep red color to it and the texture was much smoother than what I had expected. Within the deep red meat I could see some white flecks here and there and did not know until I bit into it that it was small ribbons of tendon like material. The meat was thinly sliced in a way to make it easy to chew and eat. Did I mention I was eating it raw? The taste to me seemed as though it was somewhere between llama meat that I ate in the Andes Mountains in Peru and filet mignon. I was not at all squeamish about eating it and it was better than I expected. I later discovered that there were vendors selling frozen whale meat and some were selling the fresh meat. I got lucky as I obviously had fresh meat. I am likely going to eat it again before we leave Japan, so don't rat me out to Greenpeace or PETA.

This clearly was the most novel eating experience I had ever had and Hiroko and Keiko had never seen anything like it before either, so it was a treat for all of us. Kazuharu had the largest bowl of rice and Hiroko and I had the smallest. I ate to my satisfaction, which is what I need to do or turn into a Blimpie Station on this trip. After lunch it was off to the Kushiro Museum of Art. There was an exhibit of the photography of Michael Kenna that all of us had heard about before we left Kawasaki and we were all looking forward to it.

Kenna's work is special. He does some incredible nature, scenic and landscape studies. He is incredibly biased towards long exposures and it creates some fascinating effects when the subject is in the throws of a winter snowfall or water moving or fog drifting across a landscape. He also does very long exposures that captures the vapor trails of high flying jets creating interesting patterns in the sky. One of my first observations was that his prints were all in a square format and I thought this was a bit unusual until I realized he was shooting with a roll film Hassleblad camera. Photos shot with a Hassleblad produce a square negative.

As it turned out there were only two out of perhaps one hundred photos on display in the gallery that were in a rectangular portrait orientation. I'd like to send him an email and ask him why the two were like that. He does such a marvelous job of framing everything in the camera. He also does everything in black and white and his stuff is nothing short of dramatic. Shooting photos

of the exhibit was prohibited, which was of no surprise to me. If you get a chance, you should see his work.

So we had lots of time on our hands and did some walking around the museum area, which included the Warf. We ran out of ideas of how to fill the time and decided to discuss the situation over coffee at one of the local shops on the main street that had more people and activities now than earlier in the day. We all decided to just go to the airport earlier than originally planned and do some drinking, as we did not have to drive when we arrived back in Tokyo. Natcha, our niece, and her husband Takeshi, were picking us up at the airport. Since we did not have to worry about being stopped for drunk driving, we were ready for another drinking session. Did you know that in Japan if you are arrested you have a 95% probability of being convicted? If you get convicted of drunk driving here it is an automatic lifetime revocation of your driver's license. Clearly they made the penalty severe enough to deter people from doing it. The USA should learn from the Japanese in this area. Too many people are killed and maimed every year in the USA by drunk drivers.

We get to van and head out to return the rental vehicle. At the return area they noticed a dent in the back of the van that was not recorded on the papers when we picked up the van. After a brief discussion with the clerk they forgot about it. One of the dents was from my backing up into a small tree at the wilderness lodge. Kazuharu said he was unaware of the dent to the rental folks and did not know how it got there. I did not tell him about my parking incident and that proved to be a good thing. We get into the shuttle to the airport and I was a bit surprised (even though I shouldn't have been) at how tiny this airport was. It had only two gates and had to be the only airport in all of Japan that did not have a whiskey bar. We found a restaurant that served sake and we went in.

We ordered some appetizers and I lost count of how many bottles of sake we went through, but it had to be at least four that were the size of what we often refer to as a "split" which is roughly a half bottle. These were 300 ml bottles and a fifth (which is 4/5 of a quart or 24 ounces) is 750 ml. Hiroko was the first to reach her limit and stopped drinking. Keiko was next then came Kazuharu. We were not drunk, or close to it, but were filling time with whatever was available to us. Of course Keiko found a place to buy more stuff

in the airport terminal building. Hiroko told me she was buying stuff as gifts for all her coworkers back home and that it is a Japanese tradition.

After more than three hours in the airport terminal we boarded our flight and headed back to Tokyo. It was a wait for the luggage likely because we might have been the first ones to check in for the flight. Baggage in hand we head to where we have to meet up with the kids. It seemed like we walked a mile to get there. Yes, Haneda airport as I knew it years ago, is now called Tokyo International Airport. It is huge and they are expanding it again.

We get back to the house and we started drinking and munching again. The King Crab legs that Kazuharu had purchased and shipped from Hokaido was there and we had that, hamachi kama, sake (salmon) kama and some other stuff. The kama is the cheek of the fish just behind the gill slit and it is tender and tasty if prepared properly. Kazuharu is a master chef, so you know it was good. I started out drinking my Sapphire and then had some Shochu (a form of Japanese wine) made from sweet potato and then when we finished that bottle we broke into some Shochu made from wheat. We all got pretty lit up. Hiroko commented to the family that she had never seen me drunk. I said that I have been drunk only twice in the past thirty years that I can remember. My friend Pierre in San Francisco might have a different perspective on that one. My point being that this evening Hiroko noticed that I was beginning to slur my speech a bit and it must have been from all the booze I drank this evening.

At some point while drinking I broke out the laptop and did a slide show of trip to Hokaido for everyone. I have no idea what time it was when we went into the bedroom and crashed, but I slept really well that night. My body was beginning to heal itself now that I was not spending a lot of time in vehicles, but I still was in need of a massage. Hasta mañana.

Sun 9/13, Day 11:

I had a good sleep thanks to all the drinking. My back and neck were still not up to snuff, so I was looking forward to getting a massage this morning. Keiko had called ahead from Kushiro to book massage appointments for the two of

us at 10:30 AM in Kawasaki. The massages were happening in the facility where Keiko's drinking buddy Sumi works.

Kazuharu prepared us a special rice soup for breakfast. He noticed how much I enjoyed it at the wilderness lodge, so he made us the "good stuff" that he is well versed in making. The man knows how to cook! At breakfast Kazuharu, normally a big eater at breakfast, ate very lightly. When asked why he said he had a bad stomach from all the drinking the night before. When I was asked if I had a hangover I said no. I think Kazuharu jokingly referred to me as an alcoholic (again).

Sometime this morning I was going to trim my beard with a scissors they had in the house. I was thinking of buying a new pair of small barber's or stylist's scissors, but Keiko offered me the use of one of the large pairs they had in the house. I was skeptical that it would work, but I was wrong. I was surprised that I did a good job of it. I could not really tell until I shaved around to trim it up and see what I had done. I had a very full beard at this point not shaving around the beard in two weeks.

The Japanese people have their own distinctive style for just about everything and that includes massages. Unlike naked or near naked massages in Europe and in the US, here you put on pajamas and are massaged wearing clothing. Their techniques are very different and the results are great. When I got onto the table she asked me "hard?" I responded with "tsuyoi onegai shimas," which means strong please. I did not know the word for hard.

This woman masseuse was strong as can be. It took only one pass of her hands over my back to know what was hurting and what to do about it. I need to get back to my chiropractor Moses in Novato to fix my back, but until then, I will do what I must to get by. This woman found knots in places I did not even know I had those places. It was an hours of intermittent painful pressure, but the result was well worth the temporary discomfort. When we got done I settled up with Keiko over the payment and we left. When we got back on the street Keiko asked me if I wanted to walk back to the house and I said yes. Walking after a massage is just what was needed. I walked at a brisk pace to raise my body's core temperature to hopefully enhance that massage's effect

on my sore body. Keiko later commented that she had a difficult time keeping up with me at my brisk walking pace.

The rest of the afternoon was ours to do as we pleased. We decided to go walking around Kawasaki in search of a backpack. Our first stop was the high-end department store at the Kawasaki Eki (station). We went into the basement and were in search of a salad for lunch. Our bodies have been craving salad as we almost live on that stuff at home and we have not been eating much of it here. We found salad and Hiroko went to a nearby bakery (in the same basement) to get a loaf of fresh French bread; the kind she ate as a kid. I waited at the table with our salads while she went off to get it. She came back with a loaf still warm. It was delightful and the typical 'at home' lunch for us hit the spot.

We had been halfheartedly looking for a pack for me to replace my bulky and heavy computer bag that was not going to make it back to CA. I was in slim down mode with what we were taking around with us. Most of the packs I have seen so far were not large enough to accommodate my 17" laptop. There was no urgency as we had a flimsy one that will work for a while. I want something that will accommodate my laptop and my camera so I do not have to have a backpack and a shoulder bag tugging at my neck as we go from place to place.

We walked to a local shrine where I sat and contemplated the inner and outer world and we went on. We found a Starbucks, not many seen so far on this trip, and we had some coffee and rested our feet for a bit. We ducked in and out of shops and department stores looking for a pack and wine. Hiroko prefers red wine and after that great find at the convenience store in Tsurui, Hokaido I was the search party for vino. In an upscale department store basement (where the food is made and sold along with a high-end supermarket) I saw our first CA wines being sold in Japan. Mostly we see Japanese, French, South African, Chilean or Australian wines being sold here. Very few places carry my beloved blue bottle of Bombay Sapphire.

We walked enough and decided that we were not going to find the pack in this town, so we headed back to the house. When we got back at Keiko's house we were greeted just inside the door by Kiyoko (Keiko's sister) and her husband

Ichiro. Kiyoko had come to Guam for Natcha's wedding in November/December 2007 but Ichiro could not come because his father was gravely ill. In 1986 when we visited the Island of Kyushu Kiyoko and Ichiro graciously allowed us to stay in their condominium. It was good to see them both again.

It was not very long after we got back to the house that a rash of conversation and drinking broke out. I broke out a new bottle of Sapphire and made a drink on the rocks for myself and got Ichiro to join me. When the hell, we were all together to celebrate the wedding of Daisuke (our nephew) and Aya his bride to be the next day. Aya and Daisuke were also on the Guam trip for the wedding of Natcha and Takeshi. It got really fun that evening. Kazuharu gets very funny when he drinks. It was a perfectly delightful evening of talking, eating and drinking. Before long Natcha and Takeshi joined us and two-thirds of the bottle of the bottle of Sapphire was gone before the evening was over. It was to be another good night for sleeping.

Mon 9/14, Day 12:

I was up at the crack of dawn, again. I got out the laptop and got onto the net access at the house. Nobody in the house knows the password access to use the wifi. Natcha, the most technically proficient here, said she did not know the password, that her computer logs on automatically with the password stored somewhere within her windows machine. For me to access the net I have to unplug the wireless router, take my Ethernet cable and plug my cable directly into the cable modem. I'm glad I know how to do that stuff.

It wasn't until sometime after Hiroko woke up that I realized we had to pack today as we were spending the night at the Hotel Mets right next to the Kawasaki station. Kiyoko and Ichiro were spending that night in the spare room. After breakfast I was also informed that the girls were going to be getting into their kimonos beginning at 9:00 AM and I had to be either outside the house or in our temporary room while the girls were being helped into their traditional kimono garb for the wedding. We were scheduled to arrive at the Pan Pacific Hotel in Yokohama where the bride and groom worked and

were being married at 11:30 AM. The wedding was on a Monday because the bride and groom needed to work that weekend.

I opted to stay in the room and work on a slide show to give to the owner of Café Demin around the corner where we attended the party our first night in Kawasaki. I wanted to give it to her before we left town. We were told that the girls would be finished dressing by 10:00 and that we were going to leave for the hotel at 11:00 as we were expected at the “family waiting area” in advance of the start of the wedding events. Knowing they would be late, Hiroko and I did not start to dress ourselves until well after 10:00. Hiroko and I brought along some handmade clothing made for us while we were in the city of Hoi An in Vietnam a few years ago. I was wearing a long black silk shirt with very Asian looking symmetrical graphics embossed on it, a pair of black Dockers (we’re traveling light) and my black suede walking shoes. How light are we traveling? We each as a 22” carry-on suitcase, period! Hiroko was wearing a typical Vietnamese woman’s outfit of a gorgeous full-length black silk top, also embossed, and black leotards underneath.

Keiko and Natcha were in full kimono garb and looked great. Natcha, as usual, looked drop-dead beautiful. So we all load up into Takeshi’s SUV and we’re off to the hotel and actually arrive on time. We sit in the waiting room, kind of a very odd situation to me, and then go through the routine of posed photos and the like. That was where the similarities ended. There was a very formal ceremony where the family of the groom was led out of our waiting room into yet another different waiting room. This room has many chairs facing each other across the room. I was told this was going to be the formal introduction of the families of the soon to be betrothed.

Next the family of the bride was led out of their waiting room into this communal introduction room. Kazuharu was first to introduce his contingency. In this society the male is always first. We were led into the waiting room first and the introductions of the groom’s side came first. In Japanese you cannot just say Howard, so I was introduced as Hawado Blum from America. As each person in the contingency was introduced everyone on both sides of the room bowed and said, “Hagime mashte. Dozo yoroshku.” That roughly translates into, “Nice meeting you. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” I as was previously advised; this would be a day of incessant

bowing. It was. All of this is happening without the bride and groom being there. They are busy with an entourage of about five: two photographers, two videographers and an assistant.

After the introductions we done and some word were spoken by the facilitator of this formal ceremony we were led back to our respective waiting rooms to wait for our formal entrance into the chapel for the wedding ceremony. Of course, the groom's side was led into the chapel first, followed by the bride's family contingency and then the friends and coworkers were led in. There were many more people there than the chapel could accommodate, so it was a standing room only event. The first thing that struck my eye was the large crucifix on the wall of the chapel and the crucifix on the prayer script handed out for the ceremony. Of course the bride and groom were in a formal white Western bridal gown and a white tuxedo, which was a hint that this was not going to be traditional Japanese wedding.

Next came the singers and the organ music and I was snickering under my breath. I knew that almost all Japanese are born as Shinto, live as Buddhists and die and are buried as Shinto. However, this is the second wedding in this Japanese family I have gone to that was a Christian wedding ceremony. I am reminded of Natcha wearing a crucifix on a chain the day before the wedding and I asked her why (she too had a Christian wedding ceremony)? She said it was just an ornament. Hiroko was at a loss for why this was happening, as Japanese people largely do not buy into the Virgin Mary story, the Immaculate Conception, (this is a very sexually oriented society) and the resurrection. So be it.

After the ceremony the bride and groom made their exit and everyone filed out of the chapel in the reverse order that they entered leaving us the first to arrive in the chapel and the last to leave. Oh well. While waiting our turn to leave I asked the minister who married the bride and groom where he was from and he said Australia. He was a large dude and he spoke both Japanese and English (during the ceremony only) in a very odd manner. It sounded like the way the Japanese speak English. In my conversation with him he spoke English perfectly. This was stranger than strange, but I said nothing.

So, The families finally get their turn to leave the chapel and we follow the parade of people to a small room on the floor below for cocktails. All of us from our contingency are crammed around a smallish table and we have our drinks and were then told to go into the dinning room, which was the room adjacent to the cocktail room. The dinning room was huge and elaborately set up. I never saw so many wait people for a dinner party of 150 people. It appeared as though there was one waitperson for every two guests.

The room was set up there was an elevated platform to the right where the bride and groom were to sit. This is the front of the room as it is laid out. In this society the “pecking order” is different than what we are accustomed to in the USA. There were four rows of four tables per row going back from the bridal platform towards the back of the room. There was also a platform at the back of the room with nothing on it and it was not obvious what that was there for, but it was not a permanent platform. It was set up for some purpose and it was the same height (about a foot) as the bridal platform. The row of tables in front of the bridal platform was where the bosses and coworkers of the bride and groom were seated. The middle two rows were for friends of the bride and groom. The last row in the back of the room was for the families with the two outside tables for the parents and immediate family of the bride and groom. Since the entire contingency for the groom consisted of ten people we were all at the same table.

They had a place card with assigned seating for each guest. Inside of the place card with your name on it was a hand written message from either the bride or the groom. My place card was the easiest in the room to find, as it was the only one in English. That reminds me of the handout given prior to the ceremony. It was a folded thing that spoke of the celebration of the day. When you opened the first fold it had a photo of the groom on the left side and gave his birth date, his blood type (I kid you not), his astrological sign, his personal characteristics (both good and bad) and his hobbies. The same thing appeared on the right side for the bride. I immediately noticed (once I was told that it was their blood type) that both the bride and groom had AB blood type. I wonder what the odds of that happening are. On the inside of the second fold was the table layout of the dinning room with table numbers and the names of everyone at each of the tables and their relationship to the bride or groom. It was amused that my name was the only one in English.

When we get to our table I could not help but notice how much silverware each place setting had. I have never seen anything like it before. There were five forks, three knives and two spoons. Some of the dishes served were also accompanied by their own pieces of silverware. It was as incredible as the menu. It was an eight-course dinner and I'll spare you the elaborate description, save one item. They served an appetizer that consisted of egg custard, mushrooms, raw salmon roe and sea urchin partially covered in gold leaf. Aside from being much too much food for us, it was amazing. I had to only eat small parts of each course after about the third one or my stomach would have exploded before the last course.

So, getting back to the ceremonial part of the evening, the bride and groom make their grand entrance to applause and their music. They meander through and between some of the tables making a circuitous route to their table. It wasn't very long after they were seated that the Grand Poobah of the hotel got up to speak. It was short and sweet telling of how the bride and groom were valued employees. The second speaker was a world class 'kuso tare'. He was a terrible speaker saying "ano" incessantly and that is equal to our saying "and" or "um" during a speech. The worst part was he went on for what seemed like forever. He put at least a dozen people in the room to sleep he went on so long. He talked about everything imaginable after briefly talking about the bride and groom. He talked about his wife, his marriage, his children, his parents, the difficulties of his life and all kinds of irrelevant things for the day. I felt like shouting out to him to stop already, but that would have been the ultimate insult to the bride and groom and their family, so I sat patiently and ignored the asshole.

Finally the immediate boss of the bride and groom came up to propose the toast. The champagne corks popped and they did something very odd to me. The bride and groom stood up and cut the cake and fed each other some of the cake. We are used to that happening at the end of the dinner, not the beginning.

There was no band, no dancing and no formal entertainment. At some point the bride and groom left the room to change into a second outfit. They made their second grand entrance to another standing ovation and walked around

the room before being seated again at their table. I'll spare you the rest of the details. There were two very interesting things that happened after the meal was over. The friends of the bride and groom were a lively and happy bunch of young folks. They were having a great time. Some of them put on a skit of sorts that was begun with the beginning of the Michael Jackson video, "Thriller." About a dozen of them were on the platform at the rear of the room and were dancing to the music of Thriller and they were in assorted amusing costumes. It was great fun.

Later on there was a video presentation of memories of the lives of the bride and groom. There were their baby pictures, photos of them as they grew up and photos with their friends and each other. There was one photo in their presentation of the family photo taken of all of us that were on Guam for the wedding of Natcha and Takeshi eighteen months earlier. Hiroko and I were surprised to see us in that photo on the screen. As 4:00 PM as the end of the party neared (Japanese precision timing is always in play) the parents of the bride and groom were led to the platform at the back of the room and the bride and groom were led to a microphone at the front of the room. It was time for the bride to say goodbye to her parents and thank them for raising her. It was a lengthy, emotional and incredibly moving speech even though I could only understand a small portion of what she was saying. At the opposite end of the room the bride's parents were crying. It was a very moving scene and both Hiroko and I got caught up in the emotions of the moment. It was heart-warming.

After Aya finished her speech and got a rousing ovation from everyone she and Daisuke made their way to the platform at the opposite end of the room and each presented their respective mother with a bouquet of roses. Then the Aya and Daisuke were positioned between their parents and Daisuke made a brief speech. Flower boutonnieres were presented to the fathers and then they were led out of the room to form a receiving line to thank everyone for joining in the celebration as this young newly married couple is starting their new lives together.

Everyone was bowing and chatting as they approached the receiving line. When I got there I said to Keiko, "hug, hug" and we hugged. Then I shook Kazuharu's hand (I felt like hugging him too, but that would not work in this

setting), I shook the hand of Daisuke and Aya and then we came to the groom's parents. I bowed to the father and mother respecting their way of doing things and said, "dozo yorushku," which means it is a pleasure meeting you. They responded in kind and then both the father and mother extended their hands for a handshake. I guess they were extending our Western greeting to us. We were the only ones that I saw that shook hands with anyone in the receiving line. We were near the front of the parade of people saying goodbye and went off to the side to wait for the family to be done before we could leave the hotel.

After it was over for most of us, the bride and groom were still being photographed by the crew of five. After the wedding there was a second party somewhere for the friends only. So us old folks went back to the house for more drinking. Hiroko and I had to get our luggage out of the spare room and check into the Hotel Mets. Kazuharu's car was not at the house for some reason, so we walked to the Mets, checked in and walked back to the house. Back at the house the discussion started about what we were going to drink. At that point I realized that my gin was in my suitcase back at the Hotel Mets and I mentioned that to Kazuharu. Moments later as we are all ready to make a toast and start to drink we noticed that Keiko was missing and nobody knew where she went, so we began without her.

A short while later Keiko returns to the house. She had gotten on her bicycle, went to the local liquor store and bought a bottle of Sapphire gin for me. I was flabbergasted and amazed that she did that. I still cannot believe that immediately after the wedding of her son, she'd jump on her bicycle to go to the store to buy that bottle for me. She is an absolute sweetheart. Everyone was drinking and munching and chatting. I put together a quick slideshow of the photos I took this wedding day for everyone to see and I displayed it on my laptop. We did not stay too late as we were off and running in the morning. We had an early train to Takayama. We get to the hotel, unpack what we need and went to sleep relatively quickly after I checked my email.

Tue 9/15, Day 13:

I was up early again as usual. Unlike the last time we stayed at the Hotel Mets we were not up before anything was open. We did not have to go out in search of a cup of coffee this morning and not find one like the last time. It would not be long before the restaurant downstairs would be open for breakfast. We went down to have breakfast and I had a traditional Japanese breakfast as usual at this hotel. They offer you a choice of which buffet you want to eat. Hiroko went Western.

After breakfast we bathe, pack and make ready to leave for the Kawasaki train station literally just steps outside the hotel entrance to go one stop to the Shinkansen station in Tokyo. Just as we were ready to leave the room to check out and go the phone in the room rings. It was Keiko. She was in the hotel lobby and came here this morning to say goodbye to us. This woman is unbelievable. I absolutely adore her. I was beginning to have bad feelings at some of my behavior on the Hokaido trip, even if it was pain induced.

Keiko told us that the boys stayed up drinking until one in the morning after we left the house. It is a good thing we left early. We all hugged and kissed and bid our fairwells. I told Keiko I was not saying goodbye that I preferred to say I was looking forward to seeing her again soon. Her and Kazuharu are planning a trip to Canada next year and they will come to visit with us in CA before heading back to Japan.

Keiko walked with us all the way to the station and helped us buy our tickets to Tokyo and waved as we entered the station area beyond the electronic turnstiles. We turned back and waved one last time and we were on our way. We were somewhat concerned about the potential for crowds on the train as it was at the tail end of rush hour. We thought most of the crowds would have subsided by 9:00 AM when we were leaving. Unfortunately that proved to not be true. The trains were still packed with people, but not the heavy heavy load that required station people to push folks into the cars so the doors could close. I have seen that before. We were on our way for the next leg of our adventure.

Our first leg to Tokyo was part of a three-train trip to last about four hours to get us to Takayama. I passed the time between trains doing my Pimsleur Japanese lessons. On the trains I was doing blogging trying to catch up before

the memories and details faded. I am a bit surprised at how much detail I am remembering days later considering I often have issues with my short-term memory. Perhaps my problem might be a form of attention deficit rather than a memory issue. I'll have to explore that one.

We decided to take the non-reserved seating on the Shinkansen for the first time, as it was less expensive than the reserved seating. We figured midweek at this time of day we would not have too much trouble finding seats. We were right with one exception. There are three cars in the train for non-reserved seating and two of them were pretty full without two seats together for us, so we had to sit in the third car: the smoking car. Hiroko asked me if I could survive the two and a half hours on this train in the smoking car and I said yes. The next train on the final leg to Takayama was in a non-smoking car. The ride to Takayama was incredible. We were seeing mountains peaking out of the fog and mist, small villages, rivers, streams, old traditional homes and miles and miles of farms and tea plantations.

We get off the train in the small station in this small town and it is raining. We ask directions and make our way to the ryokon that was a five-minute walk from the station. There were a few gaijin on the train, but there were many on the streets of Takayama. We check into the ryokon, settle in and we are on our way to explore this town and do some shopping. I was in search of chopsticks that come apart just like Kazuharu had taken on our trip to Hokaido. Kazuharu said we may have difficulties finding them, but I was determined.

So we are walking down the main drag of the town through the newer parts of town that Kazuharu does not like. He remembers this place as a child when it was very underdeveloped and had a more quaint character. Their father brought Hiroko and Kazuharu to this town when they were small. Hiroko suggested that we not buy anything today, just look. I said we'll see. It was not long before we were in a high-end shop (after looking at many junk stores filled with crap for tourists) and there were exactly what I was looking for. Hiroko said let's wait until we come back in two days and buy them then. There were only two pairs there and I remembered not buying a beautiful scroll in Koshkojima in 1986. Hiroko told me back then that I'd see it all over the country and don't buy it there and carry it around. We never saw it again.

So, not wanting to forgo the opportunity I buy these beautiful dark lacquered chopsticks with its plastic carrying case and ornate and attractive fabric carrying case that the plastic case fits into neatly. It also has a leather strap for keeping it closed. It was not very long after that in another shop that Hiroko purchased her set of chopsticks. We then bought her some rice crackers, we bought some teacakes, some Ritz crackers to go with the cheese we had in the roomome sake for her to drink back in the room and we bought some apples for the road. We darted in and out of shops and I took many photos of doors, entryways and buildings. I was having a blast and Hiroko was being very patient with me.

We went back to the ryokon, as it was getting dark. After not seeing many gaijins on this trip we were staying in a ryokon that had nothing but gaijins staying there. What a change. This ryokon was mentioned in the travel guide "Lonely Planet," so many foreign people booked rooms there over the Internet. We had the option of booking with or without breakfast and dinner and we chose breakfast only. We wanted to go out on the town to eat, as there were many good restaurants here. We had drinks in the room and we make ready to go out for dinner.

Fortunately the rain had stopped by the time we were ready to go out. We had two spots picked out and were out in search of them. The streets looked desolate with most of the shops and many restaurants closed. We had difficulties finding the place we were looking for and with the help of a few kind strangers we managed to find one of the recommended restaurants on a dark quiet street. In the USA we would never consider going down this dark side street, much less go inside what looked like a desolate place. WRONG! The place was packed. The only two seats open in a restaurant that held perhaps fifty people were at the counter. We sat there and I did not object to the nearby smokers.

We knew we were in a good restaurant for one simple reason. The place was filled with Japanese customers in a town filled with gaijins. Much to my delight there was whale meat in the display case along with the fish. Need I say more? I had some sushi this time rather than sashimi and I had some shochu wine. I was asked if I wanted it hot or cold and I said cold. I was

disappointed that they mixed it with water, but what the hell. I was a bit lit up already from my gin.

One of the things Hiroko ordered was a potato croquette. This town is supposed to be famous for them. What came was a total surprise for us. At home we (Hiroko) makes them the way we normally see them everywhere. Here they load an empty crab shell with the mixture of potato, crabmeat and whatever and deep fry the whole thing. Aside from being great visually, it was exquisite. We know how we will be making croquettes from now on. Everything we had was great. The finale to the meal was somewhat bothersome.

They said they accepted American Express cards and they took mine and ran it. Supposedly for the first time ever the paper slip came out of the printer blank. The owner of the restaurant was very apologetic and said she did not know if the charge went through or not. She asked me to pay cash and if the charge did go through she would reverse it. Humm. I paid her and made sure we got a receipt for the payment just in case the charge did go through and she did not reverse it. She was very apologetic and gave us a token discount off the bill and a token gift on the way out the door. I tend to be very skeptical of people, but I have to remember where I am. In the states I would instantly think it con job. Here the people are generally not that way. We will see how this turns out.

We go back to the ryokon and we go to take a bath in the public baths: one for men and one for women. When I get into the men's bath there is a man from Paris in the tub while I am washing off as a prelude to getting into the soaking tub. I seem to be asking almost everyone where they are from if they are foreigners. So far at this ryokon I have met a woman from Spain, a couple from Australia and the man from Paris. The Parisian is out of the soaking tub before I am finished washing myself off. We exchange pleasantries as he leaves and I am soon in the tub. The tub is large enough to accommodate two people, but I'd prefer if the second person was someone of the opposite sex, but that was not an issue so far. I got in and the water was only warm to me, so I turn on the hot water full blast so I can cook. It worked.

I finish with my bath, dry myself off, go back to the room and grab my laptop and check my email. It was not long before I was back in the room and ready to go to sleep.

Wed 9/16, Day 14:

I was up way too early again this morning at our cute ryokon. The vending machine just outside our doorway or the tiny refrigerator inside our room awakened me in the middle of the night. It took me a while to fall asleep, but I managed to do so. I am surprised that with all the walking we have been doing (not to mention the drinking) that I am not sleeping better. There must be many things on my mind that are not finding their way to the surface of my consciousness. Admittedly I have been not meditating enough for me. That is the best process for me to get at what is eating me. As Melissa (Richie's daughter) recently wrote me in an email, his passing away is still so surreal.

This morning we were headed via a local bus to Shirakawa-go, an extraordinarily small mountain village that has been declared a World Heritage Site by the United Nations. It only takes one look to understand why. So, we rise and I go down to the Internet connection in the lobby area to plug into the cable net access and check my email and stuff. It was largely an uneventful start to the day. Breakfast was early and it was a typical Japanese one. Hiroko had no Western style option. We ate, we packed and we went in search of an open bank or ATM as we were running short of Yen. We had lots of cash, but they were American dollars and that currency is not accepted in trade for goods or services.

The first bank lobby bankcard machine said it did not accept international cards for transactions. The second bank across the street was not open and the lobby ATM machine did not open until 8:45. We were directly across from a modern looking hotel, so Hiroko went inside to see if they would exchange our dollars for yen. No dice. They did give her various locations where we might be able to do that but none opened before our bus departed. We had enough Yen with us for transportation and accommodations, but my concern was for shopping and munchies. Our ryokon accommodations included breakfast and dinner. There was an ATM at the convenience store, but I was

not inclined to tempt being overcharged for ATM use. No only do convenience stores charge hefty fees, my bank will charge a hefty fee for a foreign non-aligned merchant, but tack on a 3% surcharge for the currency exchange. We rolled the dice and left with the yen we had in hand.

We got to the bus terminal, conveniently adjacent to the train station and we were early (Howard mode again). I spent most of the bus ride catching up on my blogging. There is a limit of how much visual and sensory input you can deal with in short periods of time. The scenery look like more of what we had seen on the train ride up to Takayama only we were in a bus and dealing with diesel fumes and frequent turns up and around the hills not to mention getting out of town. We took the earliest bus of the day rather than the one we were originally scheduled to take an hour later. That proved to be a very fortunate itinerary change. We got here before the tour busses arrived. Talking to another foreign couple (from down-under) we discovered many people do not spend the night in Shirakawa-go. Many stroll around the village for a few hours and leave. The place is really small and you can see much of it in two to four hours of walking around in the ancient part of town.

We walked towards the ryokon where we were spending the night and we dropped off our baggage and we were out and about in a flash. Our room was not ready, so we left our stuff with the owner and we were out the door in a flash. We peeked into a few trinket shops and then we went into a coffee house for a cup of java. The sign out front bragged at their price being higher than everyone else, but they had a view that made it worth the price. We sat down and I was busily writing Haiku. Haiku is a rigid form of poetry created by the Japanese. You are limited to the number of sentences you should use and the number of syllables per sentence. You are really forced to focus on what you want to communicate and be concise about it too. I knocked out two fairly quickly as we facing out the shop's huge picture window with a breathtaking view. The coffee was okay too.

As we are walking we could not help but notice the increasing numbers of people strolling down the mostly pedestrian only walking paths. There was one main street that had vehicular traffic, but that was mostly small cars and tiny trucks. Big trucks and busses were not allowed on the streets of the old and ancient town. It was not long before we lamented at the swarms of bus

people everywhere. We arrived at 8:50 and by the time it was 10:00 the tour busses were already here in force. The scene reminded me of a National Geographic episode of army ants attacking a food source with vengeance. That may be a bit harsh, but that is what it felt like to me. We were looking forward to the afternoon when the bus people swarm back to their vehicles and disappear so we can really enjoy the serenity of this place.

We decided to go back to our ryokon for the evening and get settled in, drink some coffee and enjoy the splendor of that place and its garden and pond just outside our floor-to-ceiling windows. When you pull back the shoji screens and the windows it was just like being out there with the small waterfall whispering gentle tunes of nature into your ears. The eye candy only completed the splendor of where we were. Beyond the pond and the bamboo fence there was a footpath with swarming bus people, but there weren't too many and they weren't too noisy, so it was not bothersome to us. After being completely wound down we decided to go for a walk and take in the sights in spite of the swarms of people.

We ventured out to look at the ancient buildings that were brought here so they could be preserved. Prior to being brought here they were scattered around the area. I am not familiar with the what, where or why of all of this. The date back to the end of the Tokugawa period more than three hundred years ago and they remain of the same construction as they were then. It was splendid eye candy. After making one full swing through the area that held the ancient homes and support structures we decided to hike up a hill to a vista point to overlook the valley below. Knowing me (if you do) you can imagine how many pixels I burnt through this day. We took the rugged route up an earthen footpath that mostly went straight up the hillside. We passed nobody coming down and saw only two other people on this path. It was a rugged climb, so we did not expect to see any of the swarming bus people here and we were right.

We were advised to not stop at the first observation point and to continue on to the second as it was better. The advice was right on. There was a road up to this area and there was a large restaurant, some merchants with trinkets for sale and some typical snack food stands. Of course with a restaurant and a road, so too the busses came. We discovered that you can actually take a bus

to the bus terminal where we arrived, take a shuttle to the hillside ridge observation area, go back down and leave the area without ever breaking a sweat. I'm sure there are many people that do this. One of the more amusing things at the second observation area was some placard that noted the current date. People would come and stand next to or behind the thing to memorialize when they were there with the majestic view in the valley below as a background. There were also photographers up there that would take your picture with their camera and sell you a print or, for a fee they'll take your photo with your camera. I found the whole that whole thing rather amusing.

After I burnt too many pixels Hiroko and I just sat on a rock and looked out over this beautiful scenic valley and just took it all in silently. It was very calming and peaceful up there even with the bus people coming and going. I lost track of just how much time we spent up there, but we went down and were counting the hours until the bus people left so we could really enjoy the place even more. Beginning around 2:00 PM the crowds were thinning out. At 3:00 we headed back up to the observation area taking the easier route this time. On the way we stopped into what was once a private home that is now owned by the temple next door to it and it is open to the public for a fee, naturally.

Inside this house we got to see how the roof trusses were lashed to the structural beams with ropes. There were no screws or nails in building the framework of these rather sizable structures. We are in major earthquake territory. If the structures were hard fastened the way Western style constructions is done these buildings would have collapsed hundreds of years ago. The roof is tied to the trusses with ropes also. It is made of numerous layers of a special straw to a thickness of nearly two feet. In the old days those roofs would last for fifty years. This is because of the open hearth in the center of the structure that used wood for cooking and heating. The creosote that came from the burning of the wood would act as a preservative and waterproofing for the house. Today these open-hearth fire pits are used largely for decoration and display and little else. As such the roofs now only last about twenty years.

When one of these roofs needs to be replaced it is a communitywide project. Everyone lends a hand at the construction or the preparations and serving of

the food and drink to the workers doing the roofing. We got to see many photos and video presentations on how this was done. Soguuuuui! This community is a one in every sense of the word. Neighbor caring for and about neighbor and lending a hand when necessary. This brings my mind back to the debate going on in the USA about healthcare reform.

A country that is supposedly a “Christian Nation,” there is nothing Christian about the people that are against doing the moral thing and providing healthcare for all of the citizens of our nation. The totally selfish and self-centered objections that “I’ve got my healthcare coverage, I like it and I don’t give a damn about anyone else is terminally myopic.” Ultimately the Republicans in the US (the supposedly religious and moral right wing people) will pay a heavy price for taking such an immoral position on this subject. The US is the only major industrialized nation in the world that does not provide some form of healthcare for all the people. Okay, I am off my soapbox.

Back to this former family house, it has a passageway into the temple next door and we took the opportunity to go inside. Knowing that the bus people were swarming, I positioned myself directly in front of the opening to the altar area so the swarms could not get in between me and the sacred items in front of me. After bowing deeply before the sacred altar, I crossed my legs on the floor and began to go inside and do some meditating. I sat there for what Hiroko described as about ten minutes in silent meditation and contemplation and was undeterred by some of the noisy and rude bus people that came by to look and be on their way. No doubt they had difficulty understanding what this gaijin was doing in front of that sacred altar. They must of thought the worst, but that is their problem, not mine. I did not even flinch when someone came very close to me and ripped a loud fart.

When I was done we were out the door and headed up the hill with me snapping pictures all the way. Unlike earlier in the day the sun was mostly out and everything looked quite different for the better. Therefore, snap, click, snap again and again. We took the easy route to climb up the hill this time and the valley looked quite in the sunshine. The rice fields were a magnificent golden yellow in color as harvest time was near. The stalks of rice, heavy with their load of grain were bowing to the beauty surrounding them in this mountain skyward as they announce to the world that they are there and just

slumbering. The entire region is seismically active and there are natural hot springs everywhere in the area save this scenic valley. After my photo shoot we sat and watched and took in the colors and patterns that were being made on the rice fields by the passing clouds. It was so peaceful. By this time the buss people were almost completely gone and there were no buses at the restaurant near the observation area.

We leisurely made our way down the hill to the ryokon stopping briefly to buy some sake for Hiroko for the room that evening. I was still okay with my supply of gin. We relaxed in our room and I began to write, to look at my photos of the day, to drink and just “being” in the moment. The “being in the moment” part has come only after years of my Buddhist practice. It can at times make the chaos into orderly and turmoil into calm. Then there are times I cannot achieve that state of mind no matter how hard I try. That is why they call it a practice. With luck I will remain in my practice for the rest of my life and work towards a constant state of peacefulness and calm. It would be a lot easier if I lived in a place like this. Koyasan, the mountain village we visited eighteen months ago that became the enclave of Kukai, would be another place where I could expand my consciousness and state of being easier than in CA with all the distractions and pressures of being there and in the midst of modern living.

Our dinner was being served at 7:30 and we were ready. Hiroko had gone to take a bath while I stayed in the room contemplating my navel, writing and looking at the photos I shot. We went into the dinning room, which is I fact the large communal room with the open hearth and fire pit surrounded by tetami mats. There were five tables set up for dinner. One table had a single place setting, three had two place settings and one had four. We chose one, sat down and were ready to go. I had my jet fuel refills before leaving the room, so I was feeling okay. By the way, staying out of cars and vans has been doing wonders for the recovery of my back and neck. I am not back to 100%, but back enough as to not need any Motrin or pain pills. Hoorah!

The dinner was typical Japanese and yummy. Hiroko was in a ‘hanten’ (traditional Japanese robe) and chose our seat, which was alongside the open hearth. The couple that sat directly behind me came to visit here from Australia. They were polite and quiet and mostly kept to themselves. Across

from them was a group of four young Japanese men that appeared to be of university age. To my immediate right and on the other side of the hearth was a gentleman from Plano, TX. Initially he said Dallas as he thought I would not know where Plano was.

There was a very interesting couple seated along the side of the hearth closest to the kitchen area. The husband was from Moscow and the wife was from Kiev. They were currently living in Philadelphia. He was a large man with a deep voice and seemingly pleasant disposition. She was of average size and on the petite side for a Caucasian and also quite pleasant. Hiroko and I chatted with the Russians and the Texan as we awaited our meal to be served. The lady of the house knowing by now that Hiroko was bilingual and that most of the guests were English speaking, she asked Hiroko to translate her instruction on how to eat the meal and what was there. Hiroko was very accommodating.

We all enjoyed our dinner and then we got to see some videos (on a large screen television that seemed out of place in this house) of how the roof of this 300+ year-old house was replaced eleven years ago. Then we got to watch a video of Takayama, the city we were in the day before and returning to the next day. After dinner we decided to go for a walk in the dark around this quaint and remote mountain village. It was very dark, very quite and delightful. The most I heard was the clip clop sound of the traditional wooden Japanese slippers Hiroko had put on for the walk. Other than that all I could hear was the sound of the babbling streams and man-made irrigation channels winding their way through this mostly agrarian village. It was a delightful walk and it was not too chilly.

After finishing our stroll through the village we went back to the room and got ready to go to sleep. Hiroko was down and out before I realized it. I think she can fall asleep almost anywhere at any time. I finished what I was doing and also went down for the night.

Thu 9/17, Day 15:

We were up early as we wanted to stroll through the village one more time and before the bus people arrived. Breakfast was served at 7:30 and we ate

and chatted for a while with the very pleasant couple originally from Russia and Kiev. Just in case you did not know it, Kiev is part of the Ukraine and is not a part of Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Hiroko was already in her street clothes and I was in my robe, so I excused myself, got dressed and went back to the communal room finding Hiroko still engaged in pleasant conversation with the nice couple. We excused ourselves and were went back to our room to pack and get ready to check out.

We settled our bill with the innkeeper, left our luggage with her at the ryokon and made our way out to the village. We figured we had roughly an hour before the bus people made their appearance. It was a delightful walk that culminated with our paying to go into a house that up until a year ago was not open for public viewing. Sugooooiiiiiii! Upon entering you are invited to have a cup of tea made at the open hearth and from local grasses of the village. It was more subtle and delightful than we had expected it to be. Then I sat in front of their alter and went inside for a short while. Next we went upstairs and we greeted by the lady of the house that was so engaging and pleasant. Standing by an open window with a splendid view of nearby homes I commented that if there was a heaven that the views there could not be any better than it was from where we were standing.

After the lady of the house took a picture of us in front of that window (with my camera) she gave us a history of the house and how things were done and the three of us were in conversation for ten to fifteen minutes before we were interrupted by others coming to see the house. It was a wonderful cross-cultural experience for me and I know Hiroko enjoyed it as much if not more. We were out and about again and the lighting was once again dramatically different than it was the day before so I shot many photos of things I already shot. Burning pixels costs nothing and the rejects can always be dumped at another time.

Before long it was time to fetch our luggage, make our way to the bus depot to catch our bus back to Takayama. We had a so-so cup of coffee while waiting for the bus at the terminal. The bus ride was uneventful and Hiroko slept almost the entire fifty minutes of the trip.

We got back to the ryokon in Takayama around noon, dropped off our baggage and headed out to walk around town a bit. The madam of the house handed us an envelope upon our arrival. It was from the restaurant owner we ate at the other evening. In the envelope was a note and ¥6,000. Apparently the American Express charge for that meal did go through and we was returning the cash we paid her for the dinner just in case the charge did not go through. The note was an apology for the inconvenience.

First order of business after dumping the luggage was to go to the bank and convert some dollars to yen. Having done that successfully we were out and about playing tourist, again. I was toting around my backpack with the laptop in it as I am not comfortable just leaving it at the ryokon to sit in the hallway in plain sight only about fifteen feet inside the front door and there being no reception area whatsoever. When you enter the building if you do not ring a bell nobody comes out of the kitchen area to see who enters the building. It is not exactly the most secure place to leave my laptop so I carried it around with me and we walked around, had some coffee and filled the time nicely until we could drop off the laptop around 3:00 PM when our room would be made up and ready.

We dropped of the laptop and headed to the oldest part of town to tour the old municipal building. It was a museum that was a tribute to a bygone era. It was nice. We re-walked many of the streets in the old part of town and then went back to our room at the ryokon for drinks and munchies as a prelude to dinner. Along the way we purchased a few gifts for Kim and her daughters. Kim is taking care of business for me in my absence.

Back at the ryokon we are drinking and watching Sumo Wrestling on television. It is the first time I ever really sat down and watched these matches. Hiroko was remarking how shocking it was for her to see so many gaijin contestants there were. She said that guijins were hijacking their national sport. Since I do not speak the language well enough to follow the dialogue of the commentators I had all my attention focused on the combatants. I made some interesting discoveries. The ceremonial rituals that are a prelude to the match are fascinating. The foot stomping, the throwing of salt and the combatants slapping themselves on the legs, belly and thick belt that is part of the ritualistic outfits.

After a while I was able to detect things in the body language, posturing and facial expressions of the Sumo combatants. I decided to forecast who was going to win the match just from my observations and it had nothing to do with the size difference between the two opponents. In one match I predicted the winner even though he was about a hundred pounds lighter than his opponent. I kept track and I accurately predicted the winner in four of the last five matches we watched. If there is betting on the outcomes of these matches I may have a new career to pursue over here.

After finishing our drinks, snacks and Sumo wrestling on TV it was time to go out to dinner. During the afternoon we had passed a few places on the main street that bragged about their soba noodles and Hiroko was in the mood for soba, and since I am agreeable to eating just about anything here I said okay. We stopped at a restaurant that looked okay, albeit empty after a couple left just as we were about to enter. As it turned out, there was a large party upstairs in their banquet room. I had sashimi and some shochu on the rocks and Hiroko had her sake and soba. They served us an interesting appetizer on the house that was a small trout slow cooked to the point that it was completely edible, bones and all. It was very tasty. Since we cannot buy trout that small back home I know where to go fishing to catch those small ones.

We finished out dinner and made our way back to the ryokan to call it a day. It was another full day of walking, touring and visiting. My body was not in any major discomfort as we spent very little time in vehicles and transport. Tomorrow we will have about four hours to train rides and hopefully my body will hold up to it.

Fri 9/18 in Japan and still Thursday in CA, Day 16:

Up early again, even though I had a decent amount of sleep, I was into the laptop and doing my stuff. At about 6:30 I was downstairs checking my email. Even though the lady of the house previously said that the Internet access was not available until 7:00 AM what she was obviously referring to was the desktop computer they have at the quasi-lobby area for public use. They do

not shut down the modem overnight, but they do turn off the desktop machine at around 10:00 and reboot it at 7:00 in the morning.

The connection here was fast enough that I was able to upload the reconfigured web pages for the photos and all the images again as that is necessary for everything to display properly. I also uploaded the blog for the first time in several days. I then sent out an email advising people that there had been connectivity issues for the website that were finally fully resolved and that the site was updated. We went down to breakfast shortly before it was to be served at 7:30.

Even though it was a full house, there was only one man that was having breakfast that morning. He was from Tokyo and touring. He chatted with Hiroko for a while, we finished our breakfast and we were upstairs finishing our packing and ready to head out. We wanted to visit the morning market near the old section of town. We did and it was no major wow at all. Perhaps we were expecting something akin to the major night markets we have seen in other Asian countries. We had a cup of coffee at a street side vender and wandered for a while before we had to grab our luggage and head for the train station for our 9:37 AM train Kyoto. I was looking forward to spending a week in one place. I think Hiroko was too. This is especially true since the last time we were in Kyoto the monks were on strike and all the temples we wanted to visit were closed. Can you imagine monks going on strike? It was the first time that ever happened in this country and I am still unclear why they did it.

The first train rides were fine. We took a semi fast train from Takayama station to Nagoya, one of the major cities in Japan and then the Shinkansen (Bullet Train) from Nagoya to Kyoto. The non-reserved seating worked out well again and we were not stuck in any smoking cars this time. The only concern we had was the Shinkansen from Nagoya to Kyoto was scheduled to leave ten minutes after our scheduled arrival from Takayama and the ticket agent at the time of the purchase told us it was a seven minute walk from our arrival platform in Nagoya to the departure platform. He also said not to worry that there was plenty of time to make our connection. He was wrong about the walking times and he was right about it being more than enough time to make the connection.

For some reason I just thought of my sister Sanda telling me before we left CA that she would be “riding my eyelashes” on this trip. I thought it was such a delightful metaphor. That is in part why I go into so much detail in the blog.

Once we arrive in Kyoto rather than take a taxi to the house we rented we decide to take the subway. The last time we were in Kyoto twenty-three years ago there were no subways in Kyoto. There is a North-South line and an East-West line. We got to sample both to get from the main train station to the Central-Eastern section of town where we are renting a house for a week. We are only very short walk to the primary areas of interest for us: Temples, Shrines, Museums and the Kyoto Museum of Contemporary Art.

So, we manage to find our way to the house with relative ease and meet the owner who got there before us. He ran down everything we needed to know from Internet access, to how to operate the appliances, to when the trash was to be picked up, to how to operate the washing machine in the tiny courtyard to how to get in touch with him if we needed to. We got familiar with everything after his complete explanation and began to familiarize ourselves with what was there, what we needed to purchase and we were out and about shortly thereafter to see some of the sights. It was mid-afternoon and we had lots of time to explore.

So, we say our goodbyes to Rory, unpack what we need, make a pile of laundry needing to be washed, get ourselves organized, we make a list of the necessities we need for our stay that are not already here like condiments and we are out the door and ready to explore the first of the huge temples. It was the Kyomizutera Temple complex, a National Heritage site. We were hoping that because it was a day before the start of Silver Week here (a national holiday) that we might beat the crowds to this famous temple. Such was not to be. The streets leading to the temple were lined with shops and the streets were filled with people and we had a sense of what we would find at the temple: a sea of people.

Our destination was to the mother of all temple complexes that was about a thirty-minute walk from the house. Along the way we bypassed countless merchants of touristy crap, some staples, some gorgeous restaurants and some

house ware stores. Clearly this is not an area the locals come to buy anything. Along the way to our destination we passed many smaller and beautiful temples, but we had an objective in mind. It was Friday and tomorrow was the beginning of “Silver Week.” Many people do not work during Silver Week and we wanted a shot at the temple before the massive crowds were there beginning on the weekend. Well, the massive crowds were already there.

We paid our entry fee and I was awed by the scope of the size of this complex. Hiroko was disappointed at the sheer volume of people there scurrying around like ants at an unguarded picnic lunch. There were noisy students everywhere in sight. In spite of the masses I was enjoying being there. Hiroko hid her displeasure well, but we did discuss how we did not like being around those groups of unruly, inconsiderate and noisy children of all ages. When school kids swarm like angry bees they form a mob mentality and abuse anything in their path, like us. It was very hard for me, but I remained civil even though at one point I wanted to punch a teenage boy in the face for nearly knocking me down while “horsing around” with friends and not caring if anyone was around him.

We did not stay at the complex as long as we might have if the place was not such a mob scene. I would guesstimate there were more than 10,000 people inside the very large complex, but it was too busy and noisy for us. We went out a side entrance so we did not have to run the gauntlet of junk dealers and mobs of people making their way to the complex through the main route to the front entrance. It was a constant sea of people winding through the narrow streets of shops and eateries.

So we are making our way back towards the main part of Central Kyoto, a major Japanese city and in search of the stables we needed, including wine, gin, sake, bread, coffee, a coffee making cone with filters and some basic food staples and condiments we use regularly. We did a lot of walking around this city after doing a lot of walking in the morning before our four plus hour transit times.

It was not long after we left the temple complex and walking down a largely quiet street lined with shops that I noticed a shop with an interesting collection of handmade wrist bracelets made of leather and other materials. One I found

particularly appealing that was made of leather with heavy cord, a bead with the Ying-Yang symbol on it and a metallic leaf hanging from it. I take it off to shower and sleep, otherwise it is on the rest of the time. I have given up looking for the perfect set of Ojuzu (ceremonial Japanese Clear Land Buddhist prayer) beads for myself. I decided that this new bracelet will be my symbolic Ojuzu beads instead and it will be a reminder of Kyoto for me forever. There were other emotional stirrings at the temple complex that will remain private that the beads will also be a reminder of for me.

As an aside, we left the Takayama station the day before a Japanese black bear, for whatever reason, attacked a group of tourists right where we were at the joint bus terminal train station area. The day before we walked right through the area where the bear attack happened. Four tourists (their origin not disclosed) were seriously injured and hospitalized with bites to the face and head. It is highly unusual for a black bear to attack people and the authorities destroyed it.

So laden down with provisions and bit fatigued from all the travel and walking we did that day we headed back to the apartment with food in hand to eat in. On the menu was green salad, something we have not been eating enough of on this trip, sushi, sashimi, sake, tea and some sweets for desert. It would have been easy for us to crash, and perhaps that would have been the prudent thing to do, but since there was no television service in this house (a TV was there for viewing videos with the video player, we opted to go for an evening walk towards the large nearby park and the temples.

The temperature has been perfect so far albeit a bit on the warm and muggy side for our liking. We decided that we would get up early and hit the temples we wanted to first thing in the morning before the crowds arrive. That bit of strategic planning proved to be great thinking on Hiroko's part. We made our way back to the house and went down for the night. I did not take any sleep aids and in retrospect that was a mistake.

Sat 9/19, Day 17:

I did not sleep well at all last night. Something was bothering me and it was a restless short sleep and I was up at 3:00 AM. I could not fall back asleep, so I got out of bed at 3:30 and went to the laptop to check email, read the financial news and see what was happening in the world. The Internet is so great and we have great access here in this small house via a USB modem provided by the owner of the house. I got out of bed at 3:30 AM, sat at the computer and started to write the blog. I really wanted to try to keep up with it better than I had done to date.

I guess I never got around to describing this cute little Japanese house. The front door has an electronic combination lock on it so the owner does not have to be there to let you in when you arrive and no hassle with getting or returning or losing keys. The house is tucked into a small alleyway off a major intersection in the northeastern part of town near much of the interesting parts of old Kyoto that we wanted to see. For hard-core walkers like us it is in perfect location. Within a ten minute walk there is adequate shopping for food, train stations, parks, many restaurants, museums, libraries, temples and shrines. It is snuggled behind large street front buildings that completely block almost all of the street and vehicular noises (lots of that). We were told the houses to either were currently unoccupied, so it would be quite here.

You have to walk through a narrow tunnel running under one of the buildings fronting the street to get to an inner courtyard (if I can call it that) where there is an alley that leads past several small houses. Before long we find the door with the combination pad affixed to the door. We went to punch in the code, but the door was open and the owner Rory was already in there making sure all preparations were made for us. There were other occupants that left earlier in the day. He was on the short side of bloke for an Australian, but exceptionally pleasant. He had purchased this house and lived in it for two years until he met his wife, got married and bought another house to rear their family. The first thing I wanted to know was how to access the net.

Rory took all the time we needed, and then some, to explain everything we needed to know about the house from the hot water system to the appliances, to how to run the DVD player across the television set that gets no TV programming. Everything was quite compact in this tiny house that would be a monster of a challenge to cook in considering there was no cooktop or stove,

a small sink, a tiny refrigerator with a really good freezer atop this incredibly tiny fridge section that I do not think it could hold two six-packs of beer and a dozen eggs. However, it was perfect for our purposes.

The entry hall is made of hand laid small blackish gray stones of irregular shape, but mostly about the size of a US fifty cent piece. The stones are hand set into ordinary cement and this entryway runs the entire length of the house near the right hand wall only about three feet away from it. This allows an area for a bench for us to lay our suitcases on. Continuing down the hallway to pass through one of those hanging fabric entryway separators to the kitchen/pantry area. There is a large typical Japanese credenza between the walkway and the right hand wall and then comes the sink, fridge and working area next to the sink. The far (left) side of the sink is at the outside wall of the house with a door that leads to the courtyard and the washing machine just behind a small fence.

The rest of the house is on a raised platform roughly two feet above the concrete subflooring. The living area of the house is separated from the hallway, as well as the three rooms from each other, by sliding shoji, wood or bamboo screens. The front room is made into a living room area with a tetami mat floor, a low coffee table in set on the tetami mats and a couch is inside what used to be a closet. It is a two-tetami mat size room (a tetami mat is always roughly six feet by three feet). The former closet that now has a couch in it is on a wooden floor. There are shelves that run along the walls high up that are used to hold the TV, DVD player, DVD movies and books.

Next comes the bedroom that is separated from the living room area by sliding wooden partitions. There is a raised Western style bed against the far wall with a small end table to the left of it and a small dresser to the right of it. This room is a four and a half tetami mat size room. The room also has those narrow high up shelves to store stuff and it holds mostly books or ornamental stuff. There is also an oscillating electric fan on the small night table and an air conditioning unit in this room above the entryway to the dining area and shower/toilet area. The A/C is really needed here, even in late September.

The last room was not a tetami mat room. It had a wooden floor and was also on the same raised platform. It began where the hallway wall ended and ran

another ten feet. On the right was a shoji screen to separate it from the windows that look out onto the small courtyard that led to where the washing machine and dryer. The courtyard is about six feet by eight feet. There was a normal height (30") table in the last room that had a square top and was no more than 30" by 30" and it had two standard height chairs. The table was right next to the shoji screens and windows. There is also a small sky light in the ceiling and a mirror on the far wall.

Opposite the table and windows were two doors and a narrow storage area on the left for hanging clothes that was no more than eighteen inches wide. The door to the right led to the toilet. The door to the left led to the shower/small sink one-piece unit. There was adequate lighting and electrical outlets in this smallish house. It is compact, comfortable and addressed all our necessities while we are here for a week. This is much more preferable to us than staying in a hotel or a ryokon for a week.

So, we are out the door at an ungodly time of 6:30 AM. After the prior day's experience we wanted to hit the temples before the crowds. That was such a great idea Hiroko had. We made our way to Nangenji Temple and it was not that far from the house, massive and there was almost nobody there but us. It was heavenly just strolling around at a leisurely pace and soaking up the majesty of this place. We stopped at one of the smaller of the temples within the complex and I sat and did a meditation there. Afterward I lit a candle, some incense and said a short prayer for my parents, Hiroko's parents and Richie. I did not sit too long because I was so tired and did not want to fall asleep right there.

We were making our way to several more temples strolling along a riverside path know as the "Walk of the Philosophers." In ancient times it was where students and scholars would stroll to contemplate the inner and outer worlds. We then sat a sidewalk cafe to have some coffee and I had an order of cinnamon toast. We found it interesting in that they named the café after one of our heroes; the physicist/philosopher Carl Segan (even though they spelt it Sagan). Then we made our way to two more beautiful temple complexes and then went back to the house for a breather. It was getting very hot here and we were wilting rapidly. We said we were going to take it easy today because we were both so tired from not enough sleep.

After a short while of resting we went out to explore and find food. We found a large shopping arcade that led us to a food arcade that was beyond awesome. We bought all sorts of stuff. I can remember buying some cooked octopus, we got some pickled veggies, cooked rice, a Japanese salad that was made of thinly sliced squid and cucumber and marinated in a vinegar sauce with a hint of sweetness. I got some lemons for my hot water and lemon routine that I have not had since we left home and some grilled fish roe. We were ready for a feast and we had one.

We were determined to get a good sleep tonight and not get up in the early morning. To that end we decided to fight to stay up and we watched the video "The Last Samurai." Much to our surprise we managed to stay awake for the entire movie. I was so far past terminally tired that I could not fall asleep after the video was over at 10:00 PM, so I took a pill. Adios.

Sun 9/20, Day 18:

I seem to recall a slogan we used to use back in the 60's, "Better Living Through Chemistry." The pill routine, as much as I hate going that route as I have an issue with taking ANY medications, did the trick for letting me get the sleep I need to function normally. I was up too early (again) but rested. I had some OJ, made some coffee and began to work at the computer until it was time to wake Hiroko for our day's outing.

We were going to venture outside of Kyoto today in the hopes of avoiding some of the crowds we have been running into. It is "Silver Week" in Japan, a five-day national holiday, so many people travel and visiting Kyoto. We were going to the outskirts of this major city to find some quiet leisure in a different non-metropolitan setting. First stop was Sushini, a town noted for its sake brewing facilities alongside the river that runs through the town. It was a relative short train ride to get there. In yesteryear they were famous for their sake brewing because of the quality of the water in the river. Then again, every region of the country has its own sake brewing facilities.

Being the early birds we have become it was relatively peaceful and quiet here when we arrived. We strolled through the older sections of town, strolled down a street where merchants set up their tables, like at a farmers market, to sell their wares to visitors. It did not look as though this was a set up for locals. We made our way to a small ryokon called Ikedaya. It is a riverside ryokon frequented in the old days by people traveling between Osaka and Kyoto. It was also a place often frequented by Ryoma, one of Hiroko's heroes. He was one of the founders of the revolution away from the feudal system and the blind allegiances to the aristocracy, which at the time was the Samurai War Lords. He was the first to proclaim, "I am a Japanese." Some would argue he was the founding father of modern Japan.

From there we made a nice stroll to the local arcade where the town's people to go shop. While there we found a small eatery that made the best looking momiji cakes Hiroko is so fond of and we got her one. They also make takoyaki, which is one of my favorites. It is a dough ball with cooked octopus on the inside. Takoyaki are generally smaller than the size of a gold ball. Since they sold them in batches of ten, I ordered the minimum amount. They had to be made, so we sat and waited. We could not help but notice many locals coming by and ordering lots of stuff. We knew my takoyaki was going to be good. I got one load and immediately wolfed down seven of them. Osaka is noted for its takoyaki, and I had it there both the last trip here and this one, but these were Sugooooiiii! They were totally awesome and the best I ever had.

From there we walked into a liquor store to get Hiroko a bottle of local sake since this town is famous for the stuff. Hiroko had been buying 'splits' up to this point, but I insisted she buy a full liter bottle this time. She was concerned that I would weigh down my backpack, but I insisted and she said okay. It was around 11:00 and it was time to make it to our next stop, Uji. This is a town famous for its tea. We hop on the train and we're on our way. We have taken nothing but trains here and you can get almost anywhere in this country by train. It is a marvelous public transportation system that the USA should emulate.

We were headed for another huge temple complex called Byodoin. It is another World Heritage Site as designated by the United Nations. There was

just no way to avoid the sea of people that was there on this national holiday. On our way to the temple we stopped at tea vendor's shop to buy a package of macha tea for Wendy Manfredonia, Richie's widow. She had asked me to get her some and there was no way I was going to forget to do that before I did anything else in this town. Macha in hand we are off to the temple complex.

I don't think I have the words to adequately describe Byodoin, so you'll have to look at some of the photos. We did not stay there as long as we might have due to the crowds, but I know we'll be back here again someday when it is not a weekend or national holiday. Within the grounds was a museum that was housed in one of the most modern and beautiful buildings I have ever seen. It was breathtaking and no doubt there is a great sense of national pride in this new building along with the historical significance of the entire regal temple complex. I must not forget to mention my watching some guy in a store window making fresh soba noodles by hand. Now that I saw the technique, we'll see if I can duplicate that at home. Hiroko will probably laugh like hell when she reads this part.

The town of Uji was once a resort retreat area for the wealthy and aristocracy of Japan. There were some unbelievable homes and estates in the area and I was simply awed by the whole place. Trying to get a cup of tea was an adventure here as there were many places to buy tea, but few places to sit and enjoy a cup of tea (or coffee for that matter). We finally found a place on that busy street headed towards the temple complex after walking for nearly twenty minutes in search of a place. We had some macha and a local mochi treat and we were ready to roll. On the way out we stopped to buy some macha for us too. In a flash we were on the train back to central Kyoto and headed for the house.

Back in Kyoto we did a bit of food shopping, some beer for me to cool off and we were ready for another night of eating in and relaxing. It was another successful day of more than seven hours of walking. I think we have kept up this six to eight hours of walking per day since we left Kawasaki. It does not matter how much I eat. At this pace I could never gain any weight. I have a sense that I have lost weight on this trip so far. I have not been on a scale for a while. After dinner we were going to watch a movie on my laptop, but we crashed before that ever happened.

Mon 9/21, Day 19:

Aside from today being the autumn equinox, we needed to remember to call Keiko to wish her a happy birthday. She was joining our club of the “Big 60” today. Do I really have to say I got up early this morning, again? Today was supposed to be a special day.

We were headed for the once-a-month public market on the grounds of the Nishi Honganji Temple today. Once upon a time there was a famous monk here and he died on the 21st of the month. To honor him, there is a public market held there every month. Our guidebook said if the 21st falls on a weekend or a national holiday it would likely become another sea of people. Knowing that was likely true, we wanted to get there at 7:00 AM when the market opened. We got off to a later than expected start and did not get there until just past 7:30. There were many people there already.

Unlike previous experiences of disappointments, this market far and away exceeded all of our expectations. We have been to some great public markets around the world and I might characterize this one as the best I have ever been to. No, it was not just because of the scope of it. The quality of the merchandise on sale was very special. All the foodstuff there was also incredible. You name it and it was for sale. The first thing I bought there were two handmade kitchen knives that were sturdy, sharp and very reasonably priced. The guy “hawking” the knives was copping wood with them and said they would never break. He did caution us about drying them after washing them, as they would rust if we didn’t.

I was having a ball taking pictures and Hiroko was marveling at the dry goods, fabrics and clothing items for sale there. We both marveled at the food we saw. We passed one particular tent with oden (you’ll have to Google this one as it is too tough for me to describe) for sale and we said to ourselves we’d be back for some before we went home. Hiroko bought some unusual and attractive fabric sacks for cell phones for her yoga group friends. It had a fabric closure so a lady could put her cell phone in her handbag and fix it to the strap to find it instantly rather than having to grope through the bag

looking for it. I thought it was a particularly clever and attractive handmade item.

It was becoming an oppressively hot and humid day this day and we got to enjoy the market for about an hour before the place got too crowded for our liking and before the heat and humidity rose to uncomfortable levels. The time to go find a cup of coffee and take a break was at hand. Considering we were within a half dozen blocks from the gigantic Kyoto Central Station (for buses and trains) we thought it would be easy to find a coffee shop. Perhaps due to the national holiday places were closed and we had difficulty finding one. When we did though it was worth the trouble of the search without going back to the central station.

Yesteryear in Japan all the cities, including Tokyo, had many small coffee shops that were mom and pop operations. They were everywhere and they hand brewed each cup of coffee in a Silex-type brewer over an open gas flame. It was wonderful having a leisurely cup of coffee in those places. I remember them well from my trip here in 1986. Well, between Starbucks and some huge domestic Japanese mega coffee companies these mom and pop coffee houses fell by the wayside. What we luckily stumbled into just blocks from the Kyoto Central Station was one of those bygone coffee houses; Sylex brewers and all. It was such a great nostalgia trip for the both of us. The coffee was damn good too!

Having finished our coffee we make out way back to the public market. By the time we got there the crowds were enormous and simply navigating down the aisles was more of an effort than it was worth. The temperature was now into the 90s well before noon and the humidity was becoming unbearably high. When combined with the crowds, it was just not fun anymore. Hiroko was ready to leave, but I wanted that oden, so we made our way to the tent, had some and made our way towards a side exit to go on to the next place on our agenda for the day.

On the way out we ventured onto something special for me. When we were in Kyosan in December 2007 we saw people on spiritual pilgrimages. Back then we had only seen them going from temple to temple saying their prayers quickly in the frigid cold and moving on to the next temple to repeat their

routine. In the midst of the insanity of a sea of merchants and hordes of shoppers at this special public market we happen upon a tent where the pilgrims were changing, praying and completely isolated from what surrounded them. I was instantly mesmerized. I found the chanting beyond uplifting. It warmed me to my very core. I took a few photos and then asked Hiroko if she minded if I just sat near them for a while and just absorbed the outpouring of positive energy I was feeling. It brought to a close a very special market outing with what was a spiritually uplifting happening for me. I thought nothing could possibly spoil the rest of this day.

Just outside the gate we exited from we run into our landlord Rory. The odds against that happening are unbelievable. We told him how much we enjoyed staying at his house, thanked him, and we were on our way again.

We were on our way to the Toji Temple complex in the heart of Kyoto and just a few blocks from the Kyoto Central Station and even closer to station than the market we just visited, but on the other side of it. It was sooooo hot and humid I was fading by the minute. We got there and it was more than I expected, except for the other visitors. Japan was changing too rapidly, and not for the better.

I can remember when most Japanese people were quiet and considerate of others around them. Those days have fallen by the wayside like those quaint coffee houses. I was trying to meditate in the main gallery of the main temple in the Toji Temple complex and there was a Japanese man taking quite loudly to his wife no more than a few feet away from him and very near where I was meditating. He just would not shut up. She was not deaf and neither of them had hearing aids on, but maybe they should have.

Being more considerate than he was, I got up and went to another gallery in a different building in the temple complex and was in the midst of a wonder "sit" when the loud asshole appeared in the gallery I was not in. He was just as loud and inconsiderate as before and I was not going to put up with it again. I politely asked him to be quiet. He and his wife got up and left the gallery, thankfully. I finished my sitting and got up and left that gallery. Just as we were leaving the gallery there was another noisy group headed into that smaller gallery. What is this country coming to?

Next on our agenda was an area that was once where the Kyoto brothels were housed. Those houses seemed to be long gone and I was fading rapidly from the oppressive heat and humidity. Hiroko wanted to go to another temple, but I asked that we go back to the Central Station for a respite from the heat and that is what we did. We were thinking of getting an ice cream sundae to cool down, but that too was not in the cards. The numbers of people in the station complex was indescribable. Every restaurant, snack shop, coffee parlor and eatery had long lines outside waiting for seating. It was just indescribable. It was 12:15 PM and we decided to find an electronics store to get a few items I needed and we'd try for that sundae again after lunchtime.

We went to a nearby camera store and it was five floors of everything electronics, electrical and then some. All I needed was a few blank CDs and a replacement for my broken headset so I could use Skype to make phone calls through my laptop. We got what I needed and headed back towards the Central Station. Along the way we stopped at a department store to look at the food section in the basement. I love the pickled foods and vegetables on this country and I decided to buy some more even though we already had several varieties back at the house. We also bought some very delicious and novel marinated and pickled mushrooms. It had to be served with hot rice and since we were not cooking rice back at the house, Hiroko thought we should not buy it. I said I wanted to carry it home and she did not object because she too enjoyed it. We bought some teacakes and some sweets and were ready to head back to the station complex for an ice cream sundae.

Well, the crowds were still everywhere and we just gave up. We were going back to our neighborhood, back to the food arcade we found a few days earlier to get some more food for the house, and some other needed items. High on Hiroko's list was the cucumber and squid salad we had the day before. Making our way towards the concessionaire that sold us the salad the other day we noticed a large number of the food vendors were closed due to the national holiday. We were hoping against hope the salad vendor was open and we lucked out; they were. We also bought some gobo root salad, some more cooked rice, some grilled fish and we were on our way back to the house with a few short stops. One was for wine and my gin and some ice-cold beer to cool me off.

Back at the house the first thing I did was guzzle down a beer. This surprised Hiroko, as I am not normally a beer drinker, but it is a good thirst quencher when I am overheated. We sat down to dinner too early, but it was a glorious feast. We essentially skipped lunch again and between the heat, humidity and lack of a full meal that day, we had to eat and we did. We were done with dinner by 6:00 and we cleaned up, stowed everything and we set to lay down in bed and watch the video, “Kill Bill.”

I don't think I made it five minutes into the video before falling asleep, which was not a good thing for me. Falling asleep before 7:00 PM meant there was no way in hell I could sleep through the night. I have been fighting to get into some normalized sleeping routine, and it has been largely unsuccessful so far. Sure enough, I was wide-awake at midnight. I got out of bed, drank a glass OJ washing down a sleeping pill and set up my laptop to do a backup while I slept (hopefully). I had another half glass of OJ, went back to bed. I went down fairly soon thereafter.

Tue 9/22, Day 20:

I got lucky. I slept until 5:15 AM and now I had a fighting chance to get into a more normalized sleeping routine for the last twelve days of our trip. Whew. Today we were off to a mountain village that was only a twenty to thirty minute bus ride from the heart of Kyoto. We were planning on making it an easy day of it. We were headed for the town of Ohara, which means “Big Field” in Japanese.

It was amazing to me that such a remote place could be so close to a major metropolitan area like Kyoto; Japan's 7th largest city with a population of over 1.5 million. Ohara has a very small village look and feel to it. The bus ride was uneventful and I was somewhere between amused and entertained at the different people on the bus with half of them half asleep as we were on another early morning jaunt. We wanted to get to the temples just as they were opening. When we got to the first temple we wanted to visit, Sanzenin, it was not yet open, but there were people sitting on the stairs waiting to get in. We opted to go for a walk instead of waiting there.

Considering we were already in a remote area, it did not take very long before we transitioned from walking on a gravel path to one of just compacted clay and rocks. We were headed to a waterfall and along the way we saw some old temples, some shrines, restaurants, trinket shops and some homes. The waterfall was small but the walk was worthwhile. It was peaceful and quiet under the canopy of trees and bamboo groves. There was an occasional sprinkle of precipitation, but not enough to be a bother. By the time we got back to our first temple of the day there were already too many people there for our liking. It was not a massive place and it was far enough away from downtown Kyoto (and no capacity for tour busses near the temple) so it was not all that bad.

The second temple we visited, Jakoin, was gorgeous. The entry fee was a bit on the pricy side for the temples here, but that proved to be a good thing, or so I thought. I figured that would keep most of the noisy kids away and I did not think many parents would pay that much to bring in your children. The entry fee included a serving of macha and a red bean-paste pastry in front of one of the most serene and peaceful gardens you will see anywhere. In one corner of the large tetami mat room where they were serving the macha there was a monk at an altar. There was a monk praying. He was lighting incense and chanting and I quietly took a seat on the floor about six feet behind and to the left of him. I sat there meditating for an indeterminate length of time. I went back to where Hiroko was sitting and joined her. As we were making ready to leave some overly chatty people were entering the room we were in and we knew it was time to go. It is bothersome to us that such beautiful and tranquil settings can have the mood completely disrupted by rude, inconsiderate and insensitive people. As I said previously, even Japanese society is morphing and to our values, it is not in a good direction.

On the way out of the temple complex we happened to stumble into a gift shop where I happened to spot a silk pouch that was exactly the kind Hiroko was looking for. It was a replacement for the one we got in Cambodia that was worn out. She was very happy with the find. We meandered our way through the alleys and lanes of this hillside village and happened across a shop that was selling the chocolate covered macadamia nuts that I had been eating since our first afternoon in Kyoto. This was a good find for me. We figured it was

time to head down the hill and make our way to a temple that was on the other side of the bus terminal where we arrived. We came down the hill via a different route than we went up and we were a bit confused as to where to find the bus terminal. We asked and headed in the right direction. Along the way found a coffee shop and popped in for cake and coffee. This has become a daily ritual in Kyoto.

We were headed to the Housenin Temple. This was a temple formerly of just nuns and the temple's head nun was the sister of the Emperor of Japan and the mother of a Prince of the Heike Clan. Carl Segan did a piece during his series "Cosmos" about artificial selection and mentioned the story of the Emperor to-be being thrown into the sea by his mother after the Heike warriors were defeated by Gengi Clan. The mother also threw herself into the sea, but she was rescued. It was after that episode that she went to Ohara and became the head nun. Hiroko did not have her expectations up too high for this site because the main temple building in the complex was destroyed by fire in 2000. The place was special and not too crowded. Having our fill of this place we made our way back to the bus depot and were headed back into town.

Back in the thick of the bustle of Kyoto we did a bit of food shopping for our dinner. I commented at how I wanted to eat out Thursday evening. We got what we needed in our food arcade and walked back towards the house. We stopped at Lawson, the equivalent of a 7-11 or Circle K convenience store and I got a couple more cold beers. We made our way back to the house and called it a day. We were tired from the heat and our constant walking. We have been "speed walking" as much as possible because Hiroko commented that slow walking was bothering her lower back. Speed walking in the heat just made it a bit more fatiguing. We ate, we relaxed and this day was done.

Wed 9/23, Day 21:

My goodness, three weeks gone already! This day we got a later than usual start. We had accumulated some 'stinko' clothes that needed attending to and I had so catching up to do with blogging and photo selection for the website. We also needed to find someplace to exchange money. We were beginning to run low on Yen and we had not counted on the banks being closed for the

entirety of Silver Week. We figured worst-case scenario we'd be okay until Thursday and go to the local bank and exchange dollars for Yen. Today we were headed to an extraordinary temple.

Sanjusan Gendo Temple is one of the most unusual sites I have ever seen. The main hall was over 145 meters long. That is the length of one and a half football fields. In the main gallery of this enormous hall were one thousand statues of various manifestations of Buddha. There were also 28 statues of Hindu gods that stood in front of the sea of golden almost life-sized Buddha statues and acted as protectors, inspirers and aspects of being. The sight was overwhelming. It is difficult to describe and photos were not allowed at all. I did not cheat any on that rule. I did not need to buy any bad Karma.

It was another stiflingly hot day with high humidity and being inside this enormous temple without any air conditioning or any ventilation whatsoever was difficult. Along the way down this enormous building there were places to light candles, burn incense and pray. I found it an interesting blend to see the Hinduism influence on the Japanese variation on Buddhism called Pure Land Buddhism. This flavor of Buddhism is not my cup of tea. We walked around for a short while and began to walk back towards our neighborhood. Along the way we stumbled into a large Shinto Shrine and looked around for a bit. By this time it was after two in the afternoon and I had not eaten a meal yet today, so I was famished and rapidly running out of energy. Breakfast was once again only juice, toast and coffee.

We found a local soba shop and took a seat and ordered some soba. Hiroko ordered it cold and I had hot soba with tempura. It was good soba. We ate and walked back towards our food arcade right off Sanjo Dori, the main street we have been walking down daily to and from the house. Once again many of the food vendors that were open our first day here were still closed for Silver Week. Today is the last day of this holiday, which is a good thing because we need to exchange money. None of the ATM machines we have seen so far would accept our US debit card. Bummer!

Food provisions in hand we made our way back to the house and got right into drinking. I started with a couple of really cold beers, switched to gin and then to sake. I wanted to eat dinner as late as possible so we would not have to

struggle stay awake. I did not want to wake up at 3:00 in the morning again. We ate and then went for a walk to an alley near the river and ran alongside of it. Hiroko had been wanting to visit this place. It was lined with bars, restaurants and a sprinkling of gift shops and liquor stores. Everything was impressive looking. We eyed one place that served a dish Hiroko said I must have, so we made a mental note of it and planned on returning the next evening for dinner. While walking I saw a bar that served Guinness beer and I was ready for one.

We walked back and forth a bit and Hiroko was getting weary of going back and forth in this alley, as it was crowded and she had her fill of crowds for the day (and week for that matter). I found the bar I was looking for and we went out onto the rear deck by the river. It was much cooler back near the water and it was very pleasant. I ordered my Guinness and Hiroko had a glass of wine. It was the most expensive Guinness I will probably ever drink at \$10.00 US, but that is only half of the story. When we got the check they added a ¥2,000 surcharge for sitting out on the deck for half an hour. There was nothing posted or spoken of to forewarn us of this charge. I must say it was the first time I have ever been ripped off like that anywhere in Asia and especially in this country. So, a glass of beer and a glass of wine cost us \$40.00 and I instantly let go of it. I was not going to let \$20.00 ruin my day or mood.

We went back to the house and it was not very long before we were asleep.

Thu 9/24, Day 22:

It was rough night for sleeping for the both of us. I was up at 3:00 and I was out of bed by 3:30, as I just could not fall back asleep. Today we were going to get a later start so we could get to the bank at 9:00, when we presumed they opened to convert currency. When we got to the local bank in our neighborhood they said they could not exchange money until 10:30 AM. That is the time of day when the Japanese financial markets open and the current exchange rates were posted. Oh well.

Walking towards the train station I suggested we try a hotel we were about to pass, but they said no. The clerk at the front desk suggested we take a fifteen

minute walk to another hotel that was larger and they might exchange our money for us. I suggested that since it was hot already at 9:00 and it was not a sure thing that hotel would do anything for us, I said why don't we go to Kyoto Central Station and give the ATM machine at the Central Post Office a try. I don't know why I did not think of it the day before when we were there mailing a package to Kawasaki. When we were Kyoasan and completely out of Yen, the ATM at the tiny Post Office there saved our skins.

The ATM machine worked, but it only allowed a maximum of ¥10,000 per transaction. Hiroko said why don't we just do it again and we did. At the second ATM we just continued to take out ¥10,000 at a time until we hit a total of ¥50,000 extracted from the two machines. That was about \$550.00. Now we had the cash we needed to pay the landlord for the house rental and enough left over for whatever we might need for the rest of our stay in Kyoto. We were now headed out of town to a special place Hiroko had been holding off for our last day in the area.

We were headed for Arashiyama-Sagano and some temples and sights that proved to be very special for me. We took the train and our first stop was another World Heritage Site called Tenryu-ji Temple. It was big, it was crowded and it had some nice gardens. No big woof. We opted for the garden walk rather than go into the main temple building as there were too many people there already. Yes, there was an entry fee for the gardens, but it was well worth it. We strolled in the searing heat and made our way to the highest terrace of the complex to look out over the entire complex and beyond into the valley. It was nice, but what followed was nicer. We made our way to and through a bamboo forest. The bamboo canopy was so thick that it stayed relatively cool there and it actually caused its own air currents and there were gentle cooling breezes coming out from the dense bamboo forest. It was refreshing and delightful. We sat at this rest area until some noisy people approached and then we were out of there.

We made our way to the North exit of the complex after entering from the South. Hiroko wanted me to see some picturesque streets, house and sights away from the main temple area. She knew the further we got from the temple, the fewer people would be found. She was right, again. Along the way it was really hot at 11:00 AM and we stopped at a local shop and I bought a

cold beer for myself and got Hiroko got an iced tea. We sat on a bench in the shade next to the shop and I had my Bento lunch. It was really hot out this day!

After finishing up with our snacks we were off to the primary site for Hiroko this day. It was called Nenbutsu Dera and it was awesome. It was so peaceful and quiet, and quite different. There was a garden of ancient statues that were for the deceased that had nobody to care for them after passing away. Some of the statues looked as though they were ten centuries old. The weather had removed much of the facial and body features. It was a site to behold.

I was in full bowing, candle lighting and incense burning mode here. I strolled lazily around this fantastic site stopping here and there to either meditate and/or sit in silent contemplation of what was surrounding me. We strolled through another bamboo grove to an upper terrace with a small cemetery that was likely only available to the very wealthy. We probably spent more time here than at most other sites we visited during the week primarily because it was so special. As we left the site we continued to walk up the hill and away from the train station's direction because Hiroko wanted me to see the beautiful homes along this obscure road. We were wilting from the heat and after a while we headed back towards our last stop for the day: a large Shinto complex.

Daikakuji Temple was once one of the residences of a former Emperor of Japan. Hiroko told me that in the old days it was fairly common for Emperors to become monks after they left power. I had never heard this before. From first sight you could tell this was a masculine looking place with few subtleties about it. It reminded me of a line from the baseball movie "Bull Durham," where Tim Robbins' character said, "Announce your presence with authority." There is no mistaking this place was built by (or for) a Samurai warlord.

As we were walking through the complex Hiroko asked if we could take a taxi back to the train station, as it was far away and she was tired. That is her subtle way of asking for something and of course I immediately knew it was time to go. We made our way through the maze of walkways around the building complex to the exit. As I learn the language and how indirect it is and

can be, I am getting better at picking up on some of the subtleties within Hiroko's requests. We get out of complex there was a taxi right in front us and we were off to the station. The taxi dropped us off right in front of an ice cream vendor. We buy one and eat it while sitting in the shade and then get on the train to return to the house.

We get off the train and make our way to the small local food arcade near the house for snacks to go with our planned afternoon drinking as a prelude to dinner out. It was relatively early, not even 4:00, and after firing up the air conditioning unit at the house we break out the booze and some finger food. I got my first chance to see just how sharp the new knives I purchased the other day were. The test was on a ripe tomato and this knife went through it like a hot knife through butter. Ripe tomatoes become flattened and then tomato juice if the knife is dull. We munched, we drank and we relaxed.

At about 7:15 we are ready to head out to the restaurant named Tobacco. Unfortunately, it was closed that evening. Rats! After trying to figure out what to do for dinner we turn in a different direction than usual at the end of this alley and find this local joint that serves Izakaya style foods. They are somewhat like small tapas plates and this place specializes in charcoal grilling. We ordered sake, grilled whale, grilled hokke (a fish) and steamed veggies with pork and I do not remember what else. While waiting for our food we were served some pickled veggies. I love that stuff.

This place is a small eater on the third floor of a small building off the beaten path. It was obviously an eatery for locals. There were two other parties in the place; a young couple at the table next to us and two middle-aged businessmen at the far end of the room. There were only seven tables in this restaurant and a bar that could seat four. The food was yummy! When I ordered my second sake I offered to buy our waiter a beer. He declined as he said he was getting red in the face from drinking. He suggested I offer the chef a beer, and I did.

Taisho, the big boss (who is also the chef), came out to greet us. Of course I immediately bought him a beer and he sat at our table and we chatted for a while. He was surprised to see us in his establishment as it is not a place that tourist find or find appealing if they happen to stumble into it. We had so

much fun laughing, joking and chatting with Taisho. When he saw that we had our own chopsticks he jokingly yelled back to our waiter in the kitchen area to give us a discount because we had our own chopsticks. It proved to be the perfect final dinner to cap a wonderful day at the end of a delightful week in Kyoto.

After this delightful evening and our upcoming trip to the island of Shikoku in the morning I needed my rest. I took a knockout pill and went down rapidly.

Fri 9/25, Day 23:

After one week in Kyoto, sadly it is time to take the show on the road. It was a great week in this town and I am looking forward to returning. I am still thinking about Taisho and still laughing every time I think about him and the dinner last night. On a more somber note, last night we asked Taisho about the famous former Japanese great baseball player and manager "O" and we heard on the news today he had passed away.

Our game plan was to leave the house about 9:00 or 9:30 to catch our bus to Tokushima on the Island of Shikoku. We were packed by 8:30 and ready to roll, so we did. We were headed to Kyoto Central Station to take the bus and go to the post office was right across the street from the station. Hiroko was mailing the guidebook of Kyoto to Keiko back in Kawaskai and I was going to use the ATM machine again to get more cash. Well, after the first ¥10,000 withdrawal from our checking account Bank of America began to block any further withdrawals. Fortunately the post office also has a money exchange counter, so I swapped some dollars for yen and then we head for a cup of coffee until our bus was ready to depart.

The bus was large, comfortable and it was a ride of just under three hours. It was uneventful and I got to do my blogging to catch up and do some other stuff too. When we got to Tokushima we could see right away that this was a larger than expected port city. We were on the Southeastern part of the island, which is on the Pacific side as opposed to the inland sea. When we got off the bus at the central station it was swelteringly hot. It is a good thing the hotel was a very short walk from the station. We checked in, put what we needed to

into the fridge and I checked my email. Hiroko was surfing the net looking for a different place for us to spend our last on Shikoku as the one we had reservations at did not have net access.

While Hiroko was surfing, I decided to take a short walk around the neighborhood. I went in search of some cold beverages for us and I also wanted to get the “lay of the land.” I headed in the direction of the central station after walking to the rail yard to do a bit of train spotting. There are a lot of single-track rail lines on this island. As I neared the station area I decided to go into the basement of the station plaza complex where they normally have food vendors. I was surprised to find everything we could possibly need in the way of food provisions. They also had some nice bento lunch boxes. I bought an orange and a nice large ripe tomato and I was on my way back to the hotel.

Along the way I stopped at a Circle K convenience store near the hotel and got myself a cold beer and got Hiroko a cold tea. The clerk at the cash register obviously did not get to see too many geijin here and when I spoke to her in Japanese she looked at me like I had five eyes and came from another planet. I just laughed and was on my way. Back at the hotel Hiroko had mostly concluded her research and we changed our final night’s booking on the island of Shikoku in the city of Matsuyama.

We were going out to look around this small looking city and walked to the Ropeway, which is what they call the tram to get to the top of the hill to view the city. It proved to be a much larger place than we thought it was. This is a sizable port city that is noted for its noodles. According to the guidebook there are over 100 noodle shops in this town. We made a mental note of some places in consideration for dinner that evening. It was a quiet town on a Saturday afternoon/evening and there were few people on the streets and many of the shops were closed. The town had an arcade, but it did not appeal to us. We headed back to the hotel for drinks, and stopped at the station plaza complex basement where we bought some, salad some finger food and lunch ‘bento’ for our excursion the next day.

We opted for a restaurant that we spotted earlier that was fairly close to the hotel. It had something on the menu that Hiroko said I had to try. It was a very

tasty dish that was served in a teapot. It was some cooked fish, shrimp and an unusually tasty mushroom all cooked in a fish stock. It was very delicious and I can see why she said I must try it. We initially thought we were the only ones in the restaurant until we saw the waitress scurrying back and forth going to the upstairs dining room. She was so cute and never walked at a normal pace: just scurrying or running. It was a cute show to be watching. We finished our meal, went back to the hotel and just crashed. Oyasumi Nasai!

Sat 9/26, Day 24:

Once again I was up really early. I think I am just getting road weary and looking to get a good night's sleep in my own bed. The pillows here are not very comfortable for me and they have a tendency to 'tweak' my neck and wake me up several times during the night. My brain is tired from insufficient REM sleep. I am really trying to avoid using my meds to sleep. I am concerned with the potential for developing a dependency for them. Compounding the problem is I do not need that much sleep. If I go to bed and fall asleep at 9:00 PM, it is almost guaranteed that I'll be up and awake by 3:00 AM. I do not think I have made it to 11:00 PM awake more than once or twice on this trip so far. Those occasions were because I could not fall asleep even though I was trying.

We went down to the restaurant for our breakfast, which was a typical Japanese one with a local twist to it. We finished, went up to the room and finished our packing. The hotel was going to let us leave our suitcases with them while we went out for a while on a discovery. We were going to a national park noted for the famous eddies caused by extreme tidal conditions over a rocky bottom in this inland sea as they call it. The peak tide, which only happens once every four weeks with the lunar cycle, came two days earlier, but what the hell.

It was a bus ride on a local bus that lasted about an hour. The heat here was oppressive already. We were going to a water area as the eddies form under a bridge above the inland sea. It was about a ten-minute walk from the bus stop to the bridge. There you go out under the bridge on what is a walkway to where the eddies form. Along the way there are areas in the walkway that are

glass and you would be amazed at how difficult it is to step onto these glass floors with a 45 meter drop to the water and/or rocks below you. There is something in our primordial brains that tells us stepping out onto the glass floor is not a good idea.

We get out to the observation area and we have about twenty-five minutes until the peak tide. We hang around and look at the people, the water flowing under us and waiting for the big eddy. It never appeared and after a while we left and headed back to the shore. It was a worthwhile adventure nonetheless. We were headed for a bridge viewing area where there was merchants selling stuff and we were going to have our picnic lunch there. We got an ice-cold tea and dug into our bento that we purchased the prior afternoon, along with our rice balls and some tangerines we brought along. From there we went for a walk.

It wasn't long before the heat got to me and my core body temperature was getting way too high. I was beginning to think I would keel over. Fortunately, I didn't. We stopped and I sat in the shade for a bit until I cooled down somewhat. We headed back to the area where we had our picnic lunch and we got an ice cream to help me cool down. Shortly thereafter we were headed back to the bus and back to Tokushima and our trip to Takamatsu where we would be spending two nights.

We had the option of taking a bus or the train to Takamatsu and I opted for the train. I was "bussed out" for today with two hours already logged on busses. It was hot and every time the door to the bus opened a rush of hot air surged into the vehicle and the air conditioning system on this local bus line was marginal at best. We got back to Hotel Astoria where we were reunited with our luggage and we were off to the central station where we boarded our train for our next discovery.

As a side note, did you know there is no such thing as parking on the streets anywhere in Japan? No curbside parking; no parking meters; no handicapped parking zones, no nothing for parking on the streets. Delivery vehicles often park on the sidewalk while making their deliveries. Better yet, if you want to buy a car in Japan you have to produce PROOF that you have an off-the-street place to park it or the dealership will not sell you a car. There are many

privately owned day use for-a-fee parking lots. The only vehicles I can recall seeing at the curb are taxis awaiting a fare.

Okay, it was about an hours train ride to Takamatsu and we were surprised to see such a modern looking city. The central station was not only brand new, but it was part of a very stylish and well-designed municipal complex that was part of the harbor area. There were modern stores, sidewalks with markings on streets where bicycles should be and where pedestrians should be. There were also many “hip” looking restaurants including French, Chinese, Italian, Indian and of-course Japanese. There were no izakaya restaurants in the modern complex, but that seemed to be the only place in town where there were none of those local eateries.

We were trying to find Hotel Dormey where we were spending two nights. It is a business hotel with a large public bath on the eleventh floor and high-speed net access. What more did I need? We were wilting with the searing heat and we were asking some people along the way where the hotel was, but that did not help much. We finally hailed a taxi and we were there in a flash. We check in, went to our room, turned on the air conditioner, checked our email and settled in. After cooling down we decided to go for a walk and check out the arcades that were nearby.

We did little more this day as we were getting road weary and the heat was really sapping our strength rapidly. Insufficient REM sleep was only exacerbating the situation. We were not out there in the heat for all that long even though the arcades are covered and we were out of the sun. It was only a partial respite from the heat. We went back to the room, started drinking earlier than usual as a prelude to dinner. We were also watching the next to the last day of the Sumo wrestling season. I was ‘getting into it’ as I learned more about it.

So, we were a few sheets into the wind and asked the front desk clerk for his recommendation for the best izakaya restaurant in the area. He said he had the perfect one for us and we went there. The first thing that we noticed when we sat at the counter was that there were cigarette smokes on either side of us. I may have mentioned earlier that there are still too many cigarette smokers in this country. Oh, the cost of a pack of cigarettes here is almost half of what it

is back in the US. The US state and federal governments are taxing the hell out of those poor addicts.

The food was pretty good at the recommended restaurant in the arcade, but nothing sensational. After our last dinner in Kyoto any izakawa restaurant would have a difficult time matching up with taisho. We ate, made our way back to the room and crashed rather early. We were becoming more tired by the day.

Sun 9/27, Day 25:

It was another night of insufficient REM sleep. I was at the point where my motor skills, equilibrium and thought processes/thinking were way too sluggish. I was concerned about the potential for falling down as I was having a very difficult time just walking. I was also concerned that I did not want to have my sleep situation ruin our last week in Japan.

I was not alone in the sleep deprivation department. Hiroko was also in a similar boat. We were going to take it easy this day, as we needed to conserve what little energy we had left in the tank as it were. I got up first, as usual and made myself a cup of coffee. While here we bought a small plastic drip coffee making cone, filters and some beans that we got custom ground. Hiroko got up after a while and I made her some coffee too. We went down for our breakfast and went back to the room and took it easy for a while. Eventually we headed out on the town.

First order of the day was we were headed to a smaller town that was supposed to be only a thirty-minute train ride away. It took an hour. It was promoted in the Lonely Planet guidebook as having a Sunday market at the park just outside the grounds of the former castle. Well, to say the Sunday market was a disappointment would be a gross understatement. There were perhaps a half dozen vendors there and there was nothing worth seeing or buying. I was disappointed as I had been practicing my Japanese specifically for shopping purposes and did not have the opportunity to use it there. We hiked up the hill to where the castle used to be, got a good overview of this very smoggy/hazy port city and we were back on the train to Takashima. The

return trip took only half an hour. It went by in a flash as we bought some chocolate layer cake and coffee for the train ride.

W=Back in town we were looking for a new section of Takashima that was supposed to be “hip” and “tony” or so the guidebook said. It used to be a warehouse district that is now boutiques, galleries and coffee houses. On the way there our attention was drawn to the Sunport area and some happenings there. It was like a real Sunday market with entertainment for adults and kids, food and crafts for sale. It was nice. Then we came across the once-a-year artisan flea market and the stuff there was both spectacular and inexpensive by any measure. It was great and if we did not have an issue with carrying more stuff with us we would have loaded up on some of the spectacular woodwork and ceramics.

This morphed warehouse area lived up to the billing (for a change). It was nice, relative small and had great potential. We walked there (it took longer than we expected which is not good when you’re hot and tired) and walked around for a bit before heading back to the hotel. We were very wilted, tired campers at this point. Of course we followed our typical travel routine of drinks and snacks before dinner. Hiroko went up to the baths while I did some writing. I went up to the baths after she came down and I got back to the room just in time to see the final match of the Sumo 15-day series that was the culmination of the season that began in the spring.

After more drinks and relaxation we were off to find a good place to have dinner. After looking for about half an hour we found a nice place by complete accident was awesome! It was packed with locals. It was the most unique menu we had seen to date in this country. I ordered oysters, whale and venison (deer meat) sashimi. I also had deep fried frogs legs and we had some fried fish and rice. I was drinking shochu made from sweet potato and Hiroko was still into her sake, which is made from rice. The meal was beyond awesome. Hiroko kept commenting on how much I ate this evening. It was not only great, but it was only yards from the hotel. It was time to crash and burn.

Mon 9/28, Day 26:

It was another one of those up at 3:00 and out of bed by 3:30 routines, again. This was not only getting old, it was problematic. My equilibrium was so messed up this morning I felt like a staggering drunkard trying to navigate my way around our tiny room. I managed to make myself a strong cup of coffee and it helped somewhat. My hand-eye coordination still sucked and I was concerned about how my body would respond to my brain's request to have my body perform some normal functions.

I kept busy with my photos and stuff and filled the time until Hiroko woke up and then I made her some coffee too. We got dressed and went downstairs for breakfast. I felt like I did in the old days when I was either stoned or on a partying binge where I did not sleep for days. At my age this is no longer a desirable condition to be in. As was the case with other days and similar conditions I was hopeful that getting out and walking around would do me some good. We had plans for the morning and we did not have to check out of the hotel until noon today to make our way to the City of Ikeda in the mountains.

I managed to get dressed with a degree of difficulty and we headed out into the town. We were walking to a park where their gardens were celebrated on the Island of Shikoku and the people of this city were very proud of their gardens. When we got there their pride was very understandable. It was a pleasant, albeit a warm walk and by the time we got there after perhaps a twenty-minute walk from our hotel, we were already sweating profusely. The place was a sight to behold.

I am definitely going to have difficulties in trying to weed out which of the pictures I took of this place as there are so many good ones and I cannot overdo it as I can if turned loose on a single subject.

Walking back from the gardens I knew it was time to 'deep six' my walking shoes. Aside from every step hurting, the collapsed heel in the right shoe was picking up small rocks and pebbles and pushing them up into the foot compartment and irritating my foot. There was a large hole in the bottom that went up into the soot area. We knew it might be an adventure finding a pair of walking shoes in my size in this city. We made our way back to the hotel and

Hiroko wanted to go inside our room and chill out with the AC going. I decided to tough it out and go look for shoes.

Most of the shops in the arcade were closed as it was still early. I did find one shop that actually had a pair that was too large and the next size smaller was too small. He did not have any half sizes of a shoe that large. I would have bought them if they fit in spite of them being ugly, but they did not fit, so...

The next shop was a sports shoe store sort of like the Athlete's Foot in the USA. They carried nothing in my size even though they had some good-looking stuff. I was making my way back to the hotel when I came upon a great looking bakery that we saw the day before. I got some goodies and went back to our room. Hiroko was already packed. Of course I could not resist buying some stuff. I got back to our room, finished my packing and we were headed to the station after checking out. Along the way we found another shoe store that was open and they had something that fit and I said goodbye to the walking shoes that I had for years.

We got to the station long before our schedule train departure, so after purchasing the tickets we found our way to a bakery and got some pastries and coffee for the train ride. We did not know it at the time, but the stuff was fresh out of the oven. It was still warm when we consumed it on the train. In about an hour we were in the sleepy town of Ikeda. It was a very short walk from the station to the ryokon where we were spending the night. When we arrived at about 1:30 and asked if we could check in. The house Mamasan said no, we had to wait until 4:00. Not having any choice, we left our bags, guarded by a quick-to-bark long-haired dachshund. Hiroko was shocked that I left my backpack with the laptop inside along with my suitcase. I was just too tired to carry it with us for two and a half hours until 4:00.

We left the ryokon and made our way to car rental place at the train station. By this time it was close to 2:00. The rental agent told us that the rental was contracted to be from 9:00 that morning to 9:00 the following morning. That did not fly with us at all. We asked for a 24-hour rental from 3:00 to 3:00 the following afternoon. After checking with headquarters the agent said okay. We got in the car drove around for only a few minutes. I was too tired to drive safely. My reaction time and reflexes were shot and I told Hiroko that. We

parked the car in a lot across the street from the ryokon and went looking for a better map of the area. The map the rental clerk gave us was crappy.

We stopped at what proved to be a camera shop to ask the clerk if he knew of a bookseller so we could buy a map. He told us to look on the third floor of a building down the street at the end of a parking lot. Hiroko went in search of it while I was busy looking at a replacement neck straps for my camera. My strap was frayed and halfway torn through. I did not want to risk my camera falling off my neck. Hiroko came back and said she found the place and we went to it after I paid for my neck strap. I asked the clerk in Japanese if they accepted credit cards for payment and he said, “cash please” in English.

The multi-floored that housed the bookseller on the third floor was an unusual sort of retail center. The ground floor was a supermarket with just about everything. We went up to the third floor where we found a comprehensive map. On the third floor there were several different stores, but it was an open floor plan. It was most unusual. The second floor had mostly clothing and that was not what we were looking for so we bypassed that floor completely.

On the way down and out after securing our map I wanted to cruise the aisles of the market to see what was there. We wound up buying some cheese for the room, some chocolate, some snacks and we marveled at both the selection and the prices. We slowly made our way down the street to the ryokon, checked in and went to the room. To our amazement this eighty-eight year old ryokon (we found out the age later) had WiFi. I was not expecting to find any connectivity in this city, much less high-speed access within this old traditional ryokon. Hiroko went down and got me a glass of ice for my gin and I opened the bottle of wine for her. Shortly thereafter it was five and the public bath was open so she went down for one. I stayed in the room, checked email and read the news from around the world and worked on my gin and cheese.

Dinner was going to be served somewhere between 6:30 and 7:00 at the ryokon. Hiroko said they would call us, but they never did. I was having doubts if I would stay awake that long. I did, barely. We went into the twenty tetami mat dining room about 6:45 in our ryokon robes. The food was nothing fancy, but was delicious. We ate our fill along with some sake. There

was a group of four men that arrived when we were mostly done with our dinner. Apparently they were also there for the evening and for dinner. They were a noisy bunch and the first thing they did when they entered was to turn on the television to some noisy ridiculous Japanese game show. I said nothing in spite of being miffed at that.

One of the guys went in search of an ashtray, as there were none in the dining room. He returned after a longer than expected period of time and asked us if it was okay if they smoked. Hiroko has translated his request to me and I said I was okay with it largely because they asked. Shortly thereafter Hiroko told me the house Mamasan told the guy they could smoke in the dining room if they asked us for permission. Mamasan was cool!

We finished our dinner and made our way back to the room. I decided to take a hot bath as that would help me sleep. I asked Hiroko to join me, and she did. My plan for the night was to just crash without a sleeping pill, knowing I would awaken around midnight and then take a sleeping pill to make it through the night. Hiroko thought it was a good idea for her too. We only made it to 11:15 and we each took one of those Ambien I had been carrying along on the trip.

Tue 9/29, Day 27:

The Ambien did the trick. We both got a good sleep for a change. I was up about 5:00 and Hiroko probably made it to almost 6:00. Breakfast was not until 7:30, so we did stuff to keep busy until then. It was a good and filling traditional breakfast at the ryokon. I felt a bit “punk” today. I was feeling feverish when I woke up this morning. It was either from just road fatigue or from being directly under the air conditioner all night. Either way, I was feeling very feverish this morning. I was not feeling sick, just feverish. My body had been successfully fighting a cold for about a week.

I’m really surprised I was not already sick. I mean, we were in and out of trains and busses constantly. Many people were coughing and sneezing without covering their mouth or nose (those inconsiderate bastards), so the

bug exposure potential had to be great. Add to that the lack of sleep and I was ripe for getting sick, but didn't, so far.

BTW- The cost of the room at the ryokon for the two of us, including dinner and breakfast was ¥12,700 and the two sake the night before with dinner was an additional ¥1,000. Considering the other night we spend almost ¥6,000 for dinner and drinks (and ¥7,200 the night before for just dinner and drinks), this ryokon was a bargain. We finish our breakfast, made it back to the room and finished packing. We checked out of this ancient ryokon, loaded our luggage into the microdot car we rented and we were on the road by 9:00 AM and looking forward to our first road adventure (with me driving) on this trip. We were headed to what was supposed to be an incredible looking ancient gorge winding through the endless mountains on this large Japanese island.

The main Island of Japan is Honshu and the Capital Tokyo is on Honshu. The Island of Shikoku is due South of Tokyo and is now connected via a series of bridges. Those bridges were built within the past fifty years and Shikoku was very slow to develop and modernize. They see very few foreigners visiting here, so I am something of a novelty to them wherever we go. When I have my hair down and it is all curly and fluffed out like a Wolfman, it is a real oddity for these people. In spite of this almost everyone here is nice, polite, courteous and pleasant.

So, we are in this tiny car and it had a computerized navigator that was pre-set for a destination that was unknown to us. We did not know how to turn it off or lower the volume of the navigation voice, so we tried to ignore it. We headed towards two tiny towns along the gorge and stopped here and there to look at the beautiful scenery. We basically had the roads to just us, as it was so early. After driving along the river and gorge for a while, we turned into the mountains to see an ancient hanging rope bridge and more great scenery. The tour book told us that only way to truly see the area was to arrange for your own transport rather than rely of the tour busses. I'm glad Hiroko trusted my driving enough so we could take this adventure.

The first hanging bridge we came to was a large tourist destination including facilities for tour busses and many of them at that. We did not go near the place and decided to venture higher into the mountains and that is where our

true adventure for the day begins. We were driving through ancient villages and hamlets. All the roads were a single-lane (not a single lane in each direction; a single lane, period). There were areas where it was a bit wider, so a car coming from the opposite direction could wait for you to pass them before they would continue in their direction.

We drove through many towns, villages, hamlets and clusters of houses where the road might have been barely wide enough for my Chevy Camaro convertible back home to make it through the streets. The buildings in many places were right up to the roadway and one concern we had was that some child might dart out into the roadway into our path. It did not happen thankfully. At one point we reached a road blockage due to construction work and we had to take a detour unlike any we have ever encountered. Can you imagine going down a dirt road just barely wide enough for your car to traverse and then come upon a huge dirt hauling or tanker truck headed the opposite way? This went on for half an hour until we cleared the construction zone and then had to deal with the single-track road, again. As I said, this island is primitive just outside the cities.

We were headed towards the twin rope bridges across the river gorge. Legend has it that one bridge was for the husband and the other for the wife. Never really sure how far it was to get there thanks to the detour and knowing we had to have the rental car back at 3:00 PM, we stopped at a monorail place designed for kiddies and asked how far the bridges were. We were caught between going back the way we came and deal with the difficulties we knew we would encounter, or go to the bridges, perhaps twenty minutes drive away, and then take a different route back to the station at Ikeda to return the rental car and onto our next stop of Kochi.

Well, the adventurous side of me kicked in and we went to the twin bridges and it was worth the drive, but that is not the story. We were about to step into a grand episode of National Geographic with our drive back to Ikeda. The alternate route we took brought us to the top of what is translated as "Sword Mountain." It was nothing but a narrow windy single-lane road and after a short while we saw no more houses, buildings or other cars for that matter. Hiroko was somewhat frightened, but remained silent about that.

The drive was breathtakingly beautiful. I would imagine that only a handful of guijins get to see this in a decade. It was beyond awesome. We stopped here and there to marvel at the majesty of nature and this place. At the summit of Sword Mountain we saw a ski resort complete with chair lift. Here we are at the end of September in sweltering heat and looking at what is supposed to be ski resort. We could not connect with that for an instant.

We made our transition from highway 439 to 438 at the summit of the mountain at the ski resort. On our way down we passed another ski resort area. No shit. We had to stop periodically just to ooh and ah at what we were seeing. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind a concern about whether or not we would get back in time to catch our train was beginning to surface. We had little idea of where we were or how long it would take us to get back. I still soaked in the sites as best I could while driving. At this point all I can say is if you want to feel what this place is like you'll just have to come here. My words and pictures are just inadequate to transmit the essence of this special place in the world.

As we neared the Ikeda station we knew we had enough time for lunch. Hiroko was reading the restaurant signs for the offerings and when she said noodles I turned into the lot. This restaurant was specializing in udon (broad white noodles). These were the best udon noodles I have ever eaten and we soon found out why. These were handmade fresh noodles. We stopped and went towards the front of the restaurant to watch our waiter hand kneed the dough and then hand cut them into the noodles that we were eating. It was easy to see why they were the tastiest udon noodles we ever ate. After we finished our lunch I paid our waiter who was also taking care of the cash register (when he was not making noodles) and I told him his udon noodles were sugooooiiii! He giggled at first not expecting a gaijin to say anything in Japanese and then he thanked me.

We made it back to the station after filling up the gas tank. The rental agency required a copy of the receipt for the gas station where we refilled the gas tank before returning the car. Yes, they do things differently here. We were early for the train (as usual) so we humped our luggage down the street and had a cup of coffee until it was time to catch our train. Next stop Kochi.

The seventy-five minute train ride was uneventful. Hiroko was busily looking out the window at the river and gorge while I was playing with photos and working on the blog. We arrived a Kochi station on schedule and walked through the mild rain to the arcade and turned into it where our hotel was located. We checked in shortly after 5:00, settled in a bit and we out the door checking things out. We went up and down the arcade the hotel was located on and then went back to our room to drink until it was time for dinner.

Walking down the arcade looking for a place to eat saw what looked to us as a “drop dead beautiful” restaurant storefront. It was too soon and too early to jump into it, so we continued our search. Hiroko was tired of translating menus for me and tired of strolling in the rain looking for a local izakaya for our dinner. We ultimately went back to that gorgeous looking restaurant.

Our primary concern for eating at this place was that it was too pretty to Western eyes. We were afraid that too much energy was put into appearances and not into the food. Much to our surprise, the quality of the food was on par with the appearance of the restaurant. It had some unique items on the menu. Grilled beef tongue was one of them and I very much looked forward to eating it. Nancy (my mom) would have loved it. It was awesome in both taste and appearance. We also had a Western style salad (something our bodies were craving), Sanma (a local fish for September) grilled with salt, some tasty rice balls and everything was great. The sake was equally good. We knew that the following evening if all else failed we had a restaurant with more things on the menu we wanted to eat but were too full this night.

We went back to the hotel and I had an ice cream cone along the way to cool me down. I was still feeling feverish on and off. We got back to the hotel and I fought like hell to stay awake until at least 11:00 so I could take a nuclear sleeping pill. I laid out a melatonin and a sleeping pill for each of us while Hiroko brewed some tea for us. Our bodies cooperated with the game plan.

Wed 9/30, Day 28:

I got up this morning with my body in the worst shape it has been in for years. Chronic fatigue would have been an improvement. Even thought I had a

descent sleep it was a drug induced one and not as good as a natural one. I was literally staggering to get to the bathroom. What I was feeling like was a cross between exhaustion, a chronic headache, slightly lightheaded from being high on cannabis and being drunk all at the same time. It was not a comfortable feeling.

After using the high-tech toilet I made a strong cup of coffee for both Hiroko and myself. She too was road weary, tired and her body was not responding well to the heat and humidity we have had to endure on a daily basis. Being here in Southern Japan during the peak summer months seems unimaginable to me at this point. I think I would just keel over from heat exhaustion. I was hopefully a full breakfast might get my body's attention and straighten it out a bit. The coffee shop/café attached to the hotel said they were done with service Japanese style breakfasts and offered us a Western one. I said no thank you and we turned to leave when the hostess asked us to wait for a moment. She returned from the kitchen and told us they could make us a Japanese breakfast, but it would take twenty minutes to prepare. We said thanks just the same, but we left.

There was supposed to be a sizable public market near where we were, so we set out to find a breakfast there and was I glad we made that choice. They had just about everything I wanted for breakfast. It was almost like buffet style help yourself to what you want meal and the cashier would take your money. Hiroko asked if they had raw eggs (we saw they had rice and miso soup) and when they said yes, we began to pick what we wanted. Of course I had some pickles, rice with a raw egg broken over it, a piece of grilled fish and some hot tea. They also gave us a coupon for some coffee for later use. We never did get to use that coffee coupon even though we did return there later in the afternoon, Oh well.

We had some destinations in mind for the day. They included the beach where Ryoma used to go and where there was a large statue of him erected there, the Kochi Castle and a hilltop temple complex. I did not know if I had the energy to give it a go, but we did. We started the day's adventure by walking to the Kochi Castle. It was sprawling complex that was built in the seventh century, burnt to the ground and was rebuilt in the very early part of the eighth century. The place was undergoing major renovations as the year 2010 was going to be

a huge one in this city as a celebration of Ryoma and his contribution to Japanese history. It was a nice walk through the complex albeit already too hot and humid. From there we had planned on walking a few blocks to a house where Ryoma once lived. However, that did not happen as Hiroko was already wilted from the heat and humidity and wanted to go back to the hotel room to chill out in the air conditioning. I offered no argument or resistance to that plan.

Having cooled down sufficiently we headed to the Central Station where the busses and trains terminate and made inquiries about tickets for our next day's trip to Matsuyama. On the way to the station we walk past a nice looking local bakery we had seen on our arrival day as we walked to our hotel. We stopped in for some coffee and pastries and got some pastries for the road or for having in the room the next morning since our bus was leaving at 9:00 AM and we might not have time for a full breakfast. The coffee was strong and good and the pastry was fine.

We get to the station, ask the agent some questions, bought the bus tickets for the next day and cancelled another bus reservation for a partial return to Osaka for our last day in the country. We opted for train all the way to Osaka rather than making it a four-hour journey we'd save about forty-five minutes with the train at a higher cost of course. I don't mind busses all that much in this country and I never take busses in the USA. However, I have my limits for bus rides, no matter how comfortable they may be. Yes, I am getting more particular in my advancing years.

From the station we head towards a small bridge that is the center of the town from a commercial and interest perspective if not from a geographical one. From there we jump into a taxi and make the trip to the mountaintop temple complex. At first we saw a few pilgrims walking around in the complex. It was peaceful and quiet and that did not last very long. Apparently there are more people making pilgrimages than we thought there would be. When we were Koyasan some twenty months earlier we only saw a handful. Here they were streaming in by the busloads. Fortunately they were not rowdy or noisy. Most of the sound coming from them was their rhythmic chanting and barely audible prayers at the various religious places within the complex or their bidding us a good afternoon, which we responded to with bows. I did not

mind their chanting or prayers one bit. I lit some incense up there and said some silent things to myself about departed friends and relatives and we were done here.

We had our fill of the temple and on the way out of the complex itself we needed to decide how we were going to get down this mountaintop retreat. There were three options: take a taxi (there were some up there waiting for a fare), walk down the paved road or take the ancient footpath that the pilgrims had used for centuries. The very nice and polite worker that told us about walking options forewarned us that the path may be slippery from the fallen leaves and rain and we needed to be careful. Having considered our option and our feeling better as the rain that was falling cooled things down we opted for the pilgrim's footpath. After all we too were on a pilgrimage of sorts. We walked slowly and careful and managed not to fall at all.

So, here we are at the bottom of the mountain and it did not take very long to figure out that this path took us down on the opposite side of the mountain. We were unsure of where we were or in what direction to walk to hopefully find a taxi. The rain had increased in intensity and took out her folding umbrella and I just put on my hat and walked in the rain uncovered. The coolness of the rain hitting my still slightly feverish body was very soothing and comforting to me. We must have been walking in the rain for at least twenty minutes when we saw a taxi and hailed him. He was more than a bit curious as to where in the world we came from as he picked us up in the middle of nowhere on some obscure part of town. He was amazed that we walked that far in the rain from the mountaintop. While taking us back to our arcade we asked him for his recommendation for a local sake to drink and for a good izakawa restaurant. We got both, paid the fare and we on our way. Oh, here is how unique an English speaking person is in this town. The taxi driver told Hiroko he thought it was "so cool" to actually hear someone speak in English in person. No shit!

Hiroko had wanted to go to the beach, but said it might not be such a good idea in the rain and I agreed. So, we walked around a bit and went back to the lovely market where we had breakfast. Most of the food vendors there were not open when we were there early for breakfast so we wanted to see what was being offered. I could have easily gone over board buying sashimi, finger

foods and other local treats, but we were headed home soon and did not want to lug too much stuff around with us. Besides, we still had lots of my pickles in the fridge in the hotel room. Hiroko bought some fried potatoes (two varieties of sweet and one of white) and I bought some edamame (boiled soy beans). It was time to go back to the hotel and start drinking.

We were into our libation by 4:00, so we had lots of time to munch out and then go to dinner. After all, we did not have lunch today and did a lot of walking even though we agreed to take it easy today. We said that a lot on this trip and still walked like crazy. I ate a bunch of those pickles and saved my cheese for the bus trip tomorrow. We ate and drank our fill. Hiroko was beginning to nod off, so I jumped into the shower. After I was all nice and clean I filled the deep seeping tub in the room with very hot water and soaked to the point where if I stayed in there any longer I would fall asleep. Considering people drown doing that I decided I was done after about a twenty-minute soak. My body was totally limp and relaxed. I did manage to shave too (around the beard of course). To my surprise Hiroko was awake and watching TV when I went back into the sleeping area of the room. Did I mention we were almost eaten alive by mosquitoes when we hiked down the mountain and through a dense forest-like area in the middle of this bustling city?

It was about 7:15 when we decided to get dressed and go out to dinner. Taxi driver that gave us the recommendation to the Daicuma (big bear in Japanese) restaurant we decided to check with the hotel front desk for precise directions. They pointed to it on a map that they gave us and we were out the door in the rain without our umbrella. Earlier in the day my “jungle clothes” dried off in a flash once out of the rain. We were hoping the sky would not open up the way it did earlier in the day with a torrential rainstorm.

We passed several restaurants along our journey to Daicuma and they were mostly empty. However, Daicuma was packed with local people (a very good sign for a restaurant), only there were no tables available. They asked us if the counter was okay and I said sure. They tried to tuck us in the corner with Hiroko next to the wall and far enough away from the itasan to not be able to watch him do his art. I immediately ask that we move four chairs to our right and we got no argument.

This restaurant may have looked very Western many ways for a traditional izakawa restaurant, but the food was beyond excellent and the taxi drive did us right with this recommendation. We had red miso soup, a western style salad, tuna sashimi, the local fish slow cooked in soy sauce and sugar, shrimps wrapped around avocado and of course local sake. We ate slowly and enjoyed the show of the itasan (sushi chef) doing his art. It was a great dinner. However, all good things must come to an end. We finished our dinner, paid the very reasonable check and made our way back to the hotel. I was sooooo tired I was moving much slower than normal. It was not long before I laid out melatonin pills and sleeping pills for both of us and we crashed. We woke up about midnight, took the sleeping pills and it was lights out.

Thu 10/1, Day 29:

I woke up this morning feeling human for a change. It has been a week since I felt this good. I am hopeful the worst of my physical episodes are over. Hiroko was feeling fine too except for the humidity that was running around 97% when it was not raining.

As usual I was up early and making coffee in the room. That purchase of the plastic brewing funnel was a great acquisition. Hiroko woke up and I made her a cup too. We lingered for a while and then decided to just head out early and see if we could rustle up some breakfast before the nearly three-hour bus ride. We packed and made our way to the lobby of the hotel and used their automated checkout system. I neglected to mention earlier that the room key they issued us had the room information on it as a holographic image on a very thin piece of plastic, perhaps a tenth the thickness of a credit card. I thought it was very cool. So, I put the card into this ATM like machine that also changes your currency into smaller denominations if you need to. It told us we had a zero balance, we turned to the front desk and bowed and thanked them and they bowed and thanked us and we were on our way.

It was about a ten-minute walk in the drizzle to Kochi Central Station to catch our 9:00 AM bus to Matsuyama. At the station we went into the Eki Café to have breakfast, as that was the only thing there that offered food. (BTW- eki

means station). The selection was limited but I managed to have some rice balls, some soup, a few pickles and some hot tea. We were discussing over breakfast how lucky we were to have avoided serious rain with the exception of one day in Hokaido. Then again we came up against what everyone (including the TV news) was describing as unseasonably hot weather. It was between 28 and 30 degrees Celsius every day. Do the math. That is uncomfortably hot when coupled with high humidity.

The bus was large, comfortable and not full, so we could move around and switch seats if we wanted to. I moved across the aisle from Hiroko as there was more space between the seats on the other side of the aisle for some reason. I had to go to the bathroom and you had to go downstairs (on a bus mind you) to use the toilet as they say here. I thought using a Japanese style commode at 150 miles per hour on the Shinkansen was a feat. Trying to not pee all over the tiny bathroom on a fast moving bus in which the driver was constantly swerving from side to side was a feat. I did good!

I spent most of the bus ride working on photos or writing. However, whenever I looked up all I could see was the jaw-dropping scenic beauty of rural Shikoku Island. Outside the large metropolitan areas it was like traveling through a National Geographic special (again). There were mountains peeking out of the morning mist and fog that were occasionally interrupted by terraced rice fields.

The climate here is such that they probably get at least three and perhaps four rice harvests per year. If it is the very end of September and the air temperature reached near 100° F every day, you know they have a very long growing season. I was constantly seeing fields ready for harvest, fields that have been harvested recently and fields that were just planted. I am not familiar with the length of time it takes for rice plants to mature from planting to harvest, but if they are planting in late September you know it will mature sometime in the winter.

As we approached the City of Matsuyama you could tell we were coming into a major metropolitan area. When we were at a point where there were almost no more farms and were inside what looked like a city we were still twenty minutes from the heart of the city. One amusing site was a golf driving range

surrounded by rice fields. Land here is so precious and valuable that the driving ranges are much smaller than what we see in the rest of the world. They are fully enclosed in netting so the balls cannot go more than I would estimate 150 to 170 yards. The one I saw was no more than 100 feet wide. Many of these driving ranges have multi-level hitting areas.

Along the trip the bus driver was apologizing incessantly that we were ten minutes behind schedule. This was caused by traffic congestion leaving Kochi. We made up about half of that en route to Matsuyama but he continued to apologize all the way. The driver let us get off the bus at a stop closer to our ryokon rather than making us ride all the way to the central station. We get off the bus and hop onto a local trolley that terminated a few blocks from our ryokon. Our objective here was to relax, do some serious soaking in the hot baths and wash away some of our road weariness.

Getting off the trolley we saw a tourist information office and went in to ask for directions to our ryokon. The trolley was a throwback to my childhood when we had them running up and down Church Avenue in Brooklyn, NY near where I lived. The tourist information was at one end of a shopping and eating arcade. At the other end of the arcade was one of the oldest onsens in Japan. Legend has it that two thousand years ago people observed an ailing, sickly White Herron soaking in the naturally hot spring water and after a while it flew away. They thought the waters had healing powers and it has been a popular destination ever since. This onsen even has a private bathing room that can only be used by members of the Japanese Royal Family. As I said, this is a popular destination for Japanese people. They come in droves by the bus and train.

We get to our ryokon shortly after noon. This was no small ancient ryokon. It is a sizable multi-story facility of modern architecture and construction. They said check-in time was 3:00, so we left our baggage with them and made our way to the arcade and stroll it and popping into and out of the shops catching a bit of air conditioning where we could. We were almost getting used to the temperature, but now the humidity was killing us. We stopped to get a soft ice cream cone and that cooled us down enough to make our way to the Matsuyama Castle to have a look. It was onto the cute trolley again. The first one we rode when we arrived was a very modern and new one. The one we

got onto this time looked like it was circa 1950s. Fortunately it was retrofitted with air conditioning.

We got off the trolley at the same stop that we got onto it when we first arrived. Our landmark there was a large Starbucks right on the corner. We had to walk up a hill to get to where the entrance to the castle was. Along the way we again dart into and out of shops looking for a case and cover for Hiroko's chopsticks. The fabric sack that came with hers was insufficient as it never fully closed and they were constantly trying to sneak out and escape. I have been looking for days for a case and fabric cover similar to what I had. It has been at least ten days that I've been looking without success. We popped into an antique shop at my suggestion because the old pottery caught my eye. While inside the antique shop some fabric broaches caught Hiroko's eye. She picked out a very nice oval one with a white symmetrical geometric pattern on a blue background. She is so easy to please.

While making our way up this street we decide that we will take the ropeway up to the castle rather than trying to 'tuff it out' by walking up the big hill the castle is sitting atop in this heat and humidity. I almost thought about not going up there at all as we've seen a few castles already and they were pretty much of similar construction and layout. Not going up to this castle would have been a huge mistake. Not only was Matsuyama Castle awesome in size, the views of this enormous city form atop this big and beautiful castle were breathtaking.

The construction of Matsuyama Castle began in the year 1603. It took many years to complete this vast complex of buildings and fortifications. The designer of the primary castle structure and complex also designed the city that surrounded it way back when. He was a visionary of a designer and civil engineer. Knowing that commerce was the key to making this new city successful, he created two tax-free zones for merchants to attract them. It worked. Today Matsuyama is the largest city on Shikoku. For you trivia buffs, "koku" is an ancient Japanese unit of measure used for a specific size bale of rice that was used for taxation. It was also the measurement of the size of a plot of land required to produce one koku of rice.

On January 1, 1701 much of the original structure was destroyed by fire. The fire was started by a lightning strike. The rebuilding did not begin until 1735. There were other fires through time and an incident in 1933 I found curious and must find out more about it. Parts of the complex fortifications and not the main castle were destroyed by arson, but what I read offered no details. We got to watch an interesting video of a major reconstruction and renovation of parts of the complex from 1966 to 1968. They were repairing damage done by bombings during World War II. Wars are so destructive and make no sense. Invariably, the ones that suffer and pay the ultimate price had nothing to do with the causes of the war. People do not make war with each other; governments do. When will mankind learn a better way to deal with conflict? As the Dali Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhists says, peace is never achieved through violence.

We spent a lot of time at this castle and spent quite a bit of time at the uppermost turret just looking out over the city. We also stayed there for the refreshing breezes that were blowing through there keeping it naturally cooler than the city below. It was time for us to go. We walked down the hill rather than taking the ropeway/tram and it was a delightful downhill walk through the dense tree growth and yes, more mosquitoes. At the bottom of the hill we find ourselves in a completely unfamiliar place. Once again the walking trek down the mountain took us to a different area than what we expected.

We get our bearings and ask a passerby where the large arcade was and we headed that way. We were in search of dessert concoction that Hiroko has not had since her childhood. It was a mound of frosty delights built on a base of shaved ice. The ice was flavored with what tasted to me to be macha (powdered Japanese tea) and the top of the mound of ice was covered with a chilled red bean paste. There was a scoop of vanilla ice cream sitting atop of this tasty treat. I have only recently acquired a taste for the not-too-sweet red bean paste that in previous trips to Japan I would not eat. Finding this treat was more problematic than we expected. After walking along way through this arcade and not seeing it we finally stopped and Hiroko asked a girl at a teashop if she knew where we might find it. She told us, we found it, we ate it and we headed back towards the main street where we entered the arcade and the major department store there. We were going to the basement for a look at the foods and Hiroko was looking for more rice crackers to go with her wine.

We found the store, but not the rice crackers. We also saw some peanuts and I would have bought them as our supply was gone, but the price was ridiculous. The cost of the peanuts was almost three times more than the cashews. No, they were not covered in gold leaf. We did find some yummy pastries that we got for the long train ride in the morning. By now it was approaching 4:00 and Hiroko said we needed to go back to the ryokon, check in and start to drink. I could not argue with that assessment of the situation. When checking a discussion arose about my size and whether or not the hanten (robe) in the room would fit me or be long enough. Moments after we get to the room someone from housekeeping is at the door with an extra large hanten for me. What service!

We were delighted to see just how large our room was. You walk into what is a Western style sitting area complete with a modern sofa and table that looks onto a ten tatami mat traditional ryokon room setting. The entire far wall from the room's entry door was a glass window. The width of the exterior wall that spanned both rooms was more than twenty feet long and most of the view was of a park like setting of dense trees. We also had an Internet connection in this room which is why we switched from the place we had reserved prior to our booking this room. This place was also strategically closer to what we wanted to see and do than the original place, so it was a score all around.

I popped the cork of a new bottle of wine that we got the day before in Kochi to let it breathe a bit. I go out in search of ice for my gin. My first effort yielded nada. I went back to the room and Hiroko suggested I try the third floor where they had vending machines. Nada again! I asked Hiroko to call the front desk and ask where we can get some ice. They told her to go to the restaurant and so I did. At first they tried to give me a large plastic bag with enough ice in it for a cooler. I said it was too big and she gave me much less. I went back to the room poured Hiroko some wine and some gin for me and we toasted to a successful trip.

Before long Hiroko said she was ready for a bath and was I going to go down with her? I said not now. I was still trying to cool down and a hot bath was not appealing at that point. It was early enough and our dinner was not being served until 7:30 (at our request), so I had lots of time to go take a bath. While

she was gone I had a second gin and was uploading photos to the website. When Hiroko finally came back to the room I began a backup of my laptop to the primary backup hard drive. I had two backup drives with me on this trip just as I did on the Mexico road trip. With the backup going I headed down to the bath.

I got to the entry to the baths and was faced with a perplexing situation. Not only was there nothing in English here, they did not even have the typical international symbol for men's and ladies' anywhere in sight. I stood there to assess the situation and figure out what to do. I did not want to go back to the room and ask for help. I can be stubborn that way sometimes. I crouch down to peek under the entryway half-drape to see if I could see if there were any shoes that looked like they might give me a clue. You cannot see inside beyond the area where you take off your shoes and that proved to be no help.

Being a logical person and getting used to Japanese protocols I decided the first door that you come to when entering the bath area had to be the men's. I went in and still no overt clues, so I open the sliding door that leads to the bathing area from the dressing area. I looking inside the communal bath area and I saw a guy in the large bath, so I knew I was in the right place. It might have been interesting if I guessed wrong, but...

I scrub down, rinse off and get into the bath for a good soak. I had the place to myself as the only guy in this large bath left while I was washing myself as a prelude to getting into the tub. I practically melted into the tiles lining the tub. I stayed there as long as I could as the heat was magnifying my body's reaction to the gin. I dry off and see a scale so I jump on. My body weight was down to 77.6 kilos. That is three kilos less than when I first got to this country. It proves that you can eat as much as you like and not gain weight if you are active. I figured the weight loss was from sweating my ass off for the last few weeks. I had better be mindful of hydration, as I have not been drinking as much water as I usually do at home and gin might look the same but it is not a good substitute.

Drinkers often have big bellies because booze is essentially useless calories. So, I have another gin back at the room before we go down to dinner. We were both in our hanten, which is the custom here. We were brought through

the restaurant area where they had regular tables and chairs and walked towards the back of the restaurant. At first I thought they wanted to hide this unusual looking guijin with all that long frizzy hair in a Jewish Afro, but that was not the case. We were taken to a private dining room and we sat at a traditional low table in a tatami mat room.

I have a large glass of shochu with our delightful dinner. The dinner was great and I ate everything in sight. I also finished whatever Hiroko did not eat. It was a traditional multi-course dinner with one surprise. In one of the dishes there was some roasted duck. I was a happy camper with that surprise. We took our time eating and drinking and talked about when we might return to Japan and about our tentative plans to go to Turkey in the upcoming year.

We finish our dinner and decide to go for a stroll in town. We are still in our robes. We stop at the front desk and ask about what to wear on our feet outside, as we did not think the hotel slippers were appropriate for street use. We were shown to a place where they kept the footwear for outside. Hiroko puts on a pair of flip-flops and I put on a pair of geta (traditional wooden semi platform shoes). Initially I was expecting to fall down on the street with these things that I have never tried to wear before. Being pretty “lit up” with gin and shochu only made the situation more interesting.

Try to visualize what I looked like coming down the street in this town where they do not see Westerners very often. Add to that my unusual height relative to most Japanese and now I am in a cotton robe, my Jewish Afro and clip-clopping down the street in my wooden shoes. Instead of taking the same route we had been taking we went down a different street this time and found ourselves in front of the old onsen at the head of the arcade.

People were staring and gawking at me and I was thoroughly amused at the entire situation. We walked through the area just outside the onsen and I noticed that each ryokan had its own distinctive robe so you could tell who was staying at the same ryokan you were. We saw an ice cream vendor and got what turned out to be hand made matcha gelato. It was awesome. While sitting on a bench eating the gelato we heard someone start to beat a large drum nearby, so we go have a look. It turned out to be a free outdoor show with a

couple doing drumming. We made our way a table in the front row but off to the side.

This couple did traditional tyco drumming and modern variations too. They were great drummers in any format. Towards the end of the show the guy drummer said to the audience foreigners would appreciate their next tune and he looked over in my direction. Of course many heads in the audience turned to look at me and I smiled and nodded to the drummer.

The show ended and they told the audience if anyone wanted to have their photo taken with the drummers to come up. This was their first show, or so they said, and if true then any PR is good for them. We made our way back to our ryokon, my shoes making noise every step of the way. We went up to our room, had some tea and Hiroko turned on the news. They were talking about flood warnings for the City of Kochi, the place we just left that morning, due to torrential rains. Once again our timing was good.

Hiroko fell asleep rather quickly. I took a melatonin and laid out a Ambien just in case. I tried to stay awake as long as I could to make sure I had a fighting chance to sleep through to the morning. I did not need one. I went to sleep thinking about a wonderful day to finish off a great week on Shikoku.

Fri 10/2, Day 30:

I slept through the night and woke up feeling really good at 5:45. It was not light yet and I thought that it was the middle of the night. I was totally surprised I slept through unaided. Hiroko woke up within moments after I did and I made us some coffee. Since we were not scheduled to have breakfast until 7:30 we made our way down for another hot bath around 6:45 or so after I pulled financial market numbers.

When I entered the bath area there were six pairs of slippers at the entry area. I go in, undress and make my way to the area where you scrub up and rise off before entering the large bath. I guess none of these people wanted to be in the bath with a large guijins. By the time I was done with washing my hair and

body and rising off I was alone again in a very large bathtub. I did not mind that one bit.

I go back to the room and made an interesting discovery. The door to the rooms did not lock automatically when you leave. You had to manually key lock the door. It is a good thing there is little crime in this country and nobody entered our room and nothing was missing.

Hiroko got back to the room shortly after I did and we relaxed for a bit and then went down for breakfast. Hiroko got into her clothes while I chose to remain in my honten for breakfast. When we got to the restaurant the place was bustling. There were no empty tables and it was a buffet style breakfast. Initially I saw nobody else in a robe, but did not mind being stared at with my JewFro. Hiroko found an empty table and put her tray down while I was making my way along the buffet table looking for what I wanted, which did not include the sausages or scrambled eggs.

When I went to the table there was another tray there. When the man realized that we were at the table he began to stand up to go look for another place to sit. We asked him to please stay and he did. It seemed like moments later that the restaurant just cleared out. Apparent there was a large group of people that were on a tennis playing tour (not pros) and they moved en mass. I did not think I would clear out the restaurant too.

Back at the room I tried to check my email one last time in Matsuyama and couldn't. My ISP was down again, my website was down again and I was royally pissed off. I opened a new trouble ticket and told them what I thought of their new unreliable ways. Since my service is paid through the end of the year I can take my time finding a replacement company for these assholes that cannot keep their servers up. Maybe their servers need a digital Viagra.

So, we pack at a leisurely pace and make our way down to check out and go to the trolley for our final ride on it to the Central Station. As it turns out there are two central stations in Matsuyama: the municipal one and the JR train line one. We were on the wrong trolley and when Hiroko asked the conductor he told us to get off here and take the next trolley, which would take us to where we wanted to go. We get to the station, buy our tickets and go to the coffee

shot for a cup of coffee before boarding the train for our nearly four hour journey off Shikoku and to Osaka for our final day in country. I am a bit sad as we board the train and tell Hiroko that. She just shrugged her shoulders and I said I have something to look forward to: our return to this area.

On the train I am blogging away. I was hand carrying (very carefully mind you) the pastries I bought the day before. We were waiting for the cart to come by and buy some coffee. After two hours of no cart we go for one of the two pastries. This was the first time that the cart did not show up when we wanted it to. Usually they are always up and down the train aisles. Go figure. Finally one showed up and we got our coffee and finished off the first of the two delicately subtle and tasty things that were just as fresh as they were when purchased.

As the train made it way across the Shikoku landscape I marveled at the beauty I was seeing. The mountains were beautiful as were, the rice paddies, the villages, the rain and the inland sea on the other side of the train. It was something to behold and remember fondly. I considered taking out the camera and shooting through the train windows, but decided against it. We got to where we had to change trains exactly on time and made our way to the Shinkansen for the final leg of this trip.

The fifty-minute Shinkansen ride was uneventful other than meeting a gentleman from Africa (Nigeria I think) that I started a conversation with when I saw him carrying an English language newspaper. He is in the clothing business and asked me what I was doing in Japan, how long I was here, etc. It was a pleasant albeit brief conversation. I bid him a good day as we made our way to the exit as our station was approaching. In the row where we were seated a prior passenger had left an umbrella. The man from Nigeria came towards the exit with that umbrella in hand. I told him it was not ours. That was such a nice thing he was doing.

We arrive at the Osaka Shinkansen station and took a subway to our hotel. The Japanese bend over backwards to be of service and make things as convenient as possible. Our hotel had an entrance in the subway station so we did not have to venture out into the rain with our luggage. We checked in,

went to our room and settled in briefly. It wasn't long before we were out the door.

We were in search of some lunch and some food items that we cannot easily find back in CA. Having found a restaurant that made a traditional egg-like pancake (thick) with octopus, shrimp, bean sprouts, shrimps, pork and other stuff we went in. It was like a mini-Benihana grill at each table. You order what you want and they bring over the stuff, cook it on the grill right in front of you and they tell you when it is ready to eat. We also ordered a noodle dish that is also a specialty in this town. Osaka is a place to eat hardily.

Having eaten at lot for me (Hiroko said she never saw me eat as much as I have on this trip) we headed for the large department store basement in search of the stuff we wanted. In the larger cities in Japan you never have to cook a meal if you do not want to. They have an unbelievable amount of prepared and cooked foods in these department store basements and everything was beautiful. We got what we were after and decided it was time to go back to the room and drink before dinner.

Knowing we might not be able to bring an open container of gin or an open wine bottle onto the airplane we finished off the bottle of wine and I put a dent in the remaining gin I had. I also finished off my favorite pickles and we watched some TV. I was laughing at watching a replay of Monday Night Football with Japanese commentary. Mostly we watched the news on BBC. It was the first English language TV I have seen in a month. We were ready to out on an adventure for dinner.

We were headed to a neighborhood that Hiroko had heard of, but had never been to. It was purportedly a "working class" eating and drinking area about half a mile from our hotel. It was at the base of the Osaka Tower; a hundred year old structure that at the time announced to the world that Osaka was a major city on the Japanese map. The area specialized in a form of cooking called okonomiyaki. It is deep-frying with breading on whatever it is they were frying.

We were walking down towards the tower in a light rain and we had our umbrella, so it was not a problem. We were looking for a famous alley that

Hiroko wanted us to find as she had heard about it when she lived in Japan. We found it and strolled the streets looking at the restaurant offerings, the pachinko parlors and a gaming room with a Japanese game that is very similar to chess. One restaurant was the only one in the area with a large line of people waiting to get in to eat at the counter. We figured if the locals were standing on line in the rain it had to be a great eatery. We decided to walk on and return later in the hopes the line would be gone.

We walked and looked and peeked in at places and could not find anything that appealed to us, so we went back to the place with the line. The line was still there, so we went into the place next door. The food was interesting to look at as well as eat. I marveled that they deep-fried hard-boiled eggs too. We had shrimps, octopus, shitake mushrooms and asparagus. I had a draft beer and Hiroko had a sake. We ate to satisfaction and thought we would go down the street to have some sushi. While walking I said I ate enough and did not want to go eat sushi just for the sake of eating more. Hiroko agreed and we went back to our hotel to call it a night.

Back at the hotel it was not very long before Hiroko was dead asleep. I decided that I would fight to stay up for a while so I could sleep through the night. It sort of worked. Oyaumi nasai!