

Japan – Summer 2000

Needing to go to CERN shortly before leaving for Japan, I decided to leave from Geneva. I flew via Amsterdam on KLM. Returning I would stay in Amsterdam. The ticket was cheaper than just flying from Amsterdam. Strange are the ways of airline tickets.

Wednesday, 19 July 2000 I was up and away from CERN by 8:30 and at the airport in plenty of time. I guess I am in the KLM computer as preferring an aisle seat, which is what I want on short flights. Fortunately, I could change it to a window seat for the Amsterdam–Osaka flight. That’s an advantage of having to change planes—you tend to check in earlier.

The plane was a bit ahead of schedule arriving at Schiphol, which, of course, meant waiting for the gate to become free. The wines in the business class lounge, which the KLM frequent flyer program allows me to visit even though I only have a tourist class ticket, were good, and I happily waited two hours for the flight to Osaka. It was quite full, mainly with Japanese tour groups returning home.

The flight was uneventful and I got some sleep. We had taken off 15 or 20 minutes late, but with the help of some extra tail-wind and a small course change (with the approval of air traffic control, the captain assured us) we still landed on time at 8:50.

Thursday, 20 July Kansai airport is on an artificial island. The terminal is one long straight row parallel to the runway, which certainly simplifies getting from runway to gate. To keep you from having to walk too far, there is an automatic train which brings you to the customs area. Which is very large—they must expect traffic to grow enormously over what it is today. I got through immigration very quickly, but the customs official wanted to look through my suitcase. That hasn’t happened for a long time. There were signs saying that they were being extra careful because of the G8 meeting taking place at that time, although it was on Okinawa. So he politely poked around with his white-gloved hands, discovering nothing.

I asked at the information desk about getting to Kyoto. I had the choice of train or bus. The train was faster, but more expensive, and the bus would leave in a few minutes. I had just enough time to change money and buy the bus ticket from the machine. There was a traffic jam on the toll road, which made it take longer than scheduled, but we got there OK. An American couple on the bus pointed me in the right direction to get to the other side of the huge Kyoto train station, the bus stop being on what for me was the wrong side.

Also on the wrong side, is the traffic. It’s like being in England. So I have to remember not to trust to habit and only look left before stepping off the curb. However, they seem to drive quite sensibly.

I found my hotel easily, about a ten minute walk from the station. The only hitch was that the tourist office, which I passed on my way to the hotel, was closed. It seems I arrived on a national holiday. And I had hoped to get a map there.

Fortunately, I could check into my hotel right away, even though officially the check-in time was 3:00. The hotel, which I had reserved through a reservation service linked to the Japan Tourist Bureau on the web, is a *ryokan*, a small, traditional Japanese hotel. So, shoes off and slippers on just inside the door, and even the slippers off when you enter your room, which is to protect the floor mats, *tatami*,

made of rice straw. (In fact the size of a room is given by the number of *tatami* it takes to cover the floor. However, the size of the *tatami* varies somewhat from one area of Japan to another.)

When I entered the hotel, there was no one around. I stood there wondering what I should do. After a couple of minutes, the driver of a taxi, which was standing outside the door, got out of his car and came into the hotel. He went in search of someone to help me. The hotel was family-run, and it was the grandmother who came to check me in. She spoke Japanese with a few English words mixed in and used a lot of sign language. In spite of only understanding the scattered English words, I knew exactly what she meant. She was very friendly, and after accepting my credit card for the price of the room and asking me to pay the tourist tax in cash, she showed me around the place. There was a water heater/cooler where I could get hot water for tea or cold water to drink. To make sure I understood she demonstrated and gave me a glass to try it out too. She made me understand that I was also welcome to fill a water bottle to take with me when I went out. Then there was the bathroom and the toilets (one Japanese style squat toilet and one Western style), with the toilet-slippers just inside the door. Yes, you change slippers when you enter the toilet—the Japanese are fanatics on cleanliness. Just in case you didn't understand there were also signs in English reminding you to change slippers at the toilet. The hotel, as one might expect since it is on the web and since it is in Kyoto, gets many Westerners. In fact almost all the guests were Westerners. And she gave me a map of Kyoto, the same one I had expected to get at the tourist office.

I was shown to my room, which was upstairs, by one of the younger generation. The layout followed the guidebook description of a *ryokan* room: no furniture except for a small, low table and a cushion. In the small alcove, there was a flower. There was a hook on the wall to hang up clothes, In addition there was a TV. The paper sliding screen opened onto a small balcony above the street, and there was (you can see they get lots of Westerners) a chair and a small table on the balcony. The room was air conditioned. A *yukata*, which we would tend to call a bathrobe, but which is to be worn almost all the time inside, was also provided.

Then out to start sightseeing. The grandmother suggested I visit the Shōseien Garden just two blocks away. (Kyoto, like many old Japanese, and not-so-old American, cities follows the ancient Chinese model of a rectangular grid of streets. So it is reasonable to speak of blocks.) The garden was also recommended by my guidebook. I found it quite pleasant. It dates back to the 17th century, but the buildings in it were all destroyed by fires in 1858 and 1864 and then rebuilt. There were artificial hills, a large pond full of big, hungry carp, and a couple of bridges over parts of the pond.

Kyoto was the capital of Japan from 794 to 1868, at least officially as the home of the emperor. However, there were periods when the emperor had little power. In particular, from 1600 until 1868 the shoguns of the Tokugawa dynasty ruled from Edo. The emperor was restored as a real ruler in 1868 following years of turmoil. He moved to Edo, and renamed it Tokyo. Much of the turmoil and weakening of the shogun's power was due to disagreement about how to respond to the West—Commodore Perry with the U. S. East India Squadron had 'opened' Japan in 1853.

So there is plenty to see in Kyoto, far more than I will be able to.

After the garden I was off to see a couple of temples. The Higashi Hongan-ji was built as a competitor to the earlier Nishi Hongan-ji after some disagreement around

1600. The two-story main gate has huge doors made of a single piece of wood. The temple was destroyed in the 1880s and rebuilt shortly after. An interesting display in the corridor connecting the two main buildings appears to be a very thick rope. It is made of hair donated by women devotees, ropes of other materials not being strong enough to lift the huge timbers of the main hall, which is said to be one of the largest wooden structures in the world: 38m high, 76m long, and 58m wide. The front, *i.e.*, the long side, of the building is completely open, and after taking off your shoes (and putting them in the plastic bag provided in order to carry them with you) you mount the stairs and enter. A large open area covered with *tatami* spans the entire length of the building. There you can kneel and worship. Facing you are three rooms with various images. The second building is similar but smaller. A small park contains a few benches, and a guard makes sure you behave respectfully, *e.g.*, not lie on the bench with your head in your girlfriend's lap, as I observed but did not experience directly.

A few blocks to the west is the Nishi Hongan-ji, from which the Higashi Hongan-ji split off. Just before getting to it, it started to rain. Fortunately, I had just stopped to read a sign about the temple, and it was under a small roof. I was quickly joined by two Japanese and we waited there for about half an hour until the downpour stopped. Nishi Hongan-ji was originally built in 1272 in the mountains but was relocated to the present location in 1591. The temple complex is supposed to include five buildings of outstanding architectural and artistic achievement. However, they are *all* being restored, and only a small part of one of them could be seen. One could visit the modern administration building to see all the propaganda and perhaps join the sect. It is the headquarters of the Hongan-ji branch of the Jōdo Shin-shū, which has more than 10,000 temples and 12 million followers spread around the world. It looked like big business to me. So this temple was rather disappointing, especially after waiting so long in the rain.

By then it was time to look for a place to eat. It was no problem finding a restaurant—there are lots of restaurants—rather to choose one. They generally have wax or plastic models of the dishes in the window, with the price. The prices all seemed high. Finally, I picked one, more or less at random, from a long corridor full of small restaurants in a shopping plaza under the train station. Then back to my hotel, a shower, and early to bed.

Friday, 21 July Up, not very early, and ate breakfast at the hotel. It was a Western breakfast (the Japanese breakfast had to be ordered in advance), which I ordered from the grandmother, who, pointing to a sign, read off (or recited) what they had. I took a cup of coffee, ¥150, toast, also ¥150 (one slice, but a thick slice, more than twice the thickness of what I would call normal), and a scrambled egg, ¥200. At the time ¥100 was about €1 or about \$1. Not surprisingly, considering that most of the hotel guests were Westerners, there were copies of several western guidebooks on a shelf in the breakfast area, all (I assume) recommending this ryokan.

I left my suitcase at the hotel and headed for Tō-ji (or Kyō-ō-gokoku-ji). In case you haven't figured it out from the above, *ji* means temple. On the 21st of every month there is a flea market outside of and on part of the grounds of this temple. On the way there I stopped by the tourist office and picked up some folders.

The temple grounds were full of people. In front of one temple you could buy flat pieces of wood, either with a prayer already written on it or blank so that you could

write one yourself. Most of those who were doing it themselves were copying from a book. With their prayers, they would go to the temple, toss money into a box and the wooden prayer into another box. Inside a priest sat in front of a large fire, stoking it with the prayers. You could see your prayer going up in smoke, which I guess in this context is a good thing.

There was a service going on in another building. The head priest before the altar, a row of monks in golden robes in the first row, and behind them normal people. The monks were chanting, reading the chants from books. Some of the normal people chanted along. Some people would just go in for a short while and then leave. The chants were quite pleasant to listen to.

Then I visited the old, main buildings of the temple. These you had to pay for, and they contained interesting statues and a few paintings. The temple was established in 794, and, of course, has suffered destruction by fire many times. This temple is the “home” of esoteric Buddhism. So not only which statues, but also how they are arranged is significant. This is seen in the main hall where there are 21 statues occupying the entire building. However, I must admit that the significance of the arrangement was lost on me. There was also a five-story pagoda, the highest in Japan (57m) now helping to pay for itself by being home to an antenna. I rested a while on a bench in the small park containing these buildings, as well as a pleasant pond.

Next I walked back to the train station, got a sandwich, and took the subway up to the Imperial Palace to sign up for a tour of the palace. But, because of the funeral of the Empress Dowager, everything concerning the palace was closed for three days—so I had to skip that. I sat in the public park around the palace for a while, and then it was a long walk back to my hotel (I should have taken the subway) where I picked up my suitcase and walked to my new hotel.

Almost from the beginning I had the feeling that I had made a mistake. Not being sure how I would like a traditional ryokan with communal bath and even communal wash basins, I had decided to take the first one for only one night, and had reserved this new, modern ryokan for the rest of my stay in Kyoto. It had a private bathroom, for only about ¥500 more per night. However, communication was more of a problem. The woman running this place knew almost no English and, in direct opposite to the grandmother at the first ryokan, was very shy (which is probably more typically Japanese). There was also a hot/cold water dispenser with tea-bags and instant coffee, which the woman pointed out. Since I knew how to operate it from the first hotel, I didn't have to figure it out myself. The private bath was indeed nice to have, but the charm of the first place was missing.

After a shower I went out to eat. There were not many restaurants in the area of the hotel, and I ended up walking back to the train station to one of the other restaurants there. It was better than the night before. A few pieces of shrimp tempura and a few pieces of pork tempura, fried rice, and a bowl of noodles with a slice of meat and some leafy vegetables cost ¥880+5% tax. On the way back to the hotel I bought a cold can (50cl) of beer at a 24-hour 7-11 convenience store for ¥250+5%. (See what I mean about expensive?) There are lots of convenience stores in Kyoto, all with English names: 7-11 (yes, *the* 7-11), Lawson's, Mini Market, Family Mart.

Saturday, 22 July Somehow I just couldn't get myself out of bed (or maybe I should say up from the floor) this morning. Finally about 8:15 I went to the Family Mart around the corner and got some kind of pastry. Back in my room I ate it with

a cup of tea.

So, somewhat later than planned, I started a long day of temple touring. The first temple on my list was Kiyomizu-dera (*dera*, like *ji*, means temple—if there is a subtle difference in meaning, it was beyond my guidebook) on the side of one of the hills of Eastern Kyoto, which I decided to walk to rather than try to figure out the buses. On the way I passed a mausoleum of some great Buddhist. At first I thought it was a temple and went in. But it looked like you had to take a guided tour. So after a couple of cups of tea from the gratis tea-dispensing machine in the lobby, I left. The tea machine was rather fancy—three types of tea, cold or hot. I tried two of the cold ones. One was difficult to distinguish from cold water. The other had a bit more flavor, but maybe just because it was not as cold.

Continuing on, I walked up a fairly steep road, lined with shops whose wares became more and more touristy the closer you got to the temple. Just before the temple was a large cemetery, which stretched to the mausoleum I had just left and, in fact, was a part of it. So, I guess I could have walked from the mausoleum through the cemetery to get to the temple. Instead I now walked back a way into the cemetery, which was peaceful and rather interesting.

The Kiyomizu temple was very busy—lots of tourists. It was first built in 798, but what is there now are reconstructions from 1633 plus more recent buildings. Befitting a big tourist site, this temple contains lots of stalls selling good luck charms and such, *e.g.*, a charm to help you get good marks on your school exams. There are several Shinto shrines on the site. There are two stones, about 20 meters apart, and if you walk from the one to the other with your eyes closed silently repeating to yourself the name of your loved one, love and marriage are assured (presumably to the one whose name you have repeated).

The site is on a rather steep hill. The main building has a platform built out over the slope which gives a nice view of Kyoto. Apparently the Japanese have a saying that taking any big chance in life is like jumping off the platform at Kiyomizu.

Down the slope below the platform you come to the bottom of a small waterfall. The water is channeled into four spouts. With a bamboo ladle you can stretch and get water from your choice of the spouts. If you drink that, or perhaps pour it over yourself, you are blessed with happiness, or truth, or whatever (four different ‘desirable’ things).

From Kiyomizu-dera I walked back downhill to a turn-off to the ‘potters quarter.’ I passed many shops where English was spoken, Visa and American Express were accepted, and pottery was sold. Much of it looked very nice—not just tourist junk—and expensive.

After a while I came to Maruyama-kōen (*kōen* means park). There is a small pond, some streams, trees and paths. In the middle of the summer it appears a bit dry, but it is supposed to be a very popular place at cherry blossom time.

Very close-by is Yasaka-jinja (*jinja* means shrine). Most of the buildings date from 1654. Through gates on at least three of the four sides (I didn’t try the fourth side) one comes to a central area where there is a long rectangular building open on one side (when the shutters are up). As I was to learn, the would-be worshiper approaches and pulls on a rope to sound a gong, which is to awaken the deity—no use worshipping a sleeping deity! Yasaka-jinja is considered the guardian shrine of the neighboring Gion district, which is the night-life district of Kyoto (complete with geisha). Whether from there or not, I saw one young woman, traditionally dressed,

who approached the shrine, rang the gong, and remained there in deep concentration for at least ten minutes.

It was time for lunch, so I proceeded in the direction I thought would lead to a more densely populated area. After a few blocks I came to a main street, and a block away was a Mini Market where I bought a sandwich (tuna-fish salad, if I remember correctly), which I ate on a bench back in Maruyama-kōen.

I proceeded further north to Nanzen-ji. The grounds are very extensive with many sub-temples scattered throughout. Originally this was a retirement villa for Emperor Kameyama. Upon his death in 1291 it became a Zen temple. One could spend half a day, or maybe even a whole day, exploring all the paths and temples.

But, being a rushed western tourist, I pushed on towards the north following the “Philosopher’s Path” (a famous 20th century philosopher, Nishida Kitarō, is said to have walked along it lost in thought) along the side of a canal. It was quite pleasant and peaceful. Along parts of it there were some very nice houses and people walking their dogs. This is clearly a nice part of town.

In all, I guess it was only about 8 km walking, but hilly and hot. Cultural observation for today: Places selling frozen custard (soft ice) tended to have two flavors: vanilla and green tea.

Then I found a bus that went to the train station where I again had dinner: a few pieces of sushi, a sort of dumpling, and sweet and sour pork (I think) with the usual bowl of noodles in broth for (again) ¥880+5%.

Sunday, 23 July I took the bus to Ōhara, now a part of Kyoto, but “rural”. A city bus went out there in about an hour. The bus system works quite simply. You board at the back and take a ticket from a machine, which identifies the zone in which you boarded. On a display at the front of the bus is a table, which changes at each zone boundary. There you see how much you would have to pay if you were to get off at the next stop. You pay when you get off by depositing your ticket and the exact fare in a machine next to the driver. If you do not have the exact fare, you are expected to get change (from a machine) before you get to your stop. The driver, incidentally, is in an immaculate uniform including white gloves.

The high point of Ōhara was Sanzen-in, a temple founded in 784. It is a *monzeki* temple, which means that the abbot is traditionally of royal blood. Consequently, the temple is very rich and filled with nice works of art. The paintings on some of the sliding wall panels were quite nice depicting, *e.g.*, trees in the mist. There is a beautiful garden on one side of the main building which you view from a wooden porch. But for me the best part of the temple was the large garden outside the main building, said to be one of the most photographed sites in Japan. It would be even nicer in the Fall when the leaves change color. There were several sub-temples in the garden. It was at one of them that I learned to what detail Buddhist sects can differ. At one of the buildings on the grounds a Japanese couple kneeled. Their guide corrected their manner of kneeling. They had kneeled with their feet turned toes inwards. No, said the guide, here the toes should point outwards. At least that is what I interpreted from their actions. So Christians are not the only ones with schisms over picayune details.

There were a couple more temples in Ōhara, but I skipped them. I walked around a bit, including a hike to the disappointing “soundless” waterfall, whose resonance

(so you see it is not really soundless) is supposed to have inspired Shōmyō Buddhist chanting, and got pretty tired.

I took the bus back to Kyoto and got off in the center of town. After some searching I found the Kyoto Museum, which was a big disappointment. It was strong on displays and TV presentations on the history of Kyoto, but short on actual things. Not much was labeled in English, and the page of English explanation they gave you was unintelligible. Ah well, I suppose the page of Japanese that western museums pass out (if any) is also not so great.

At this point I seemed to be coming down with a cold: sniffles and a sore throat, probably from too much hot sun and air conditioning. In general I found Japanese air conditioning less obnoxious than that in the U. S. It is generally not too cold, but there is often a draft. By the time I got back to my hotel from dinner, it was getting pretty bad. Fortunately, I had Vicks, sudafed and aspirin with me.

Monday, 24 July I bought a one-day bus pass for ¥500, which is a bargain considering that a single bus ride (within Kyoto) costs ¥220. Then I visited several temples, all some distance from each other.

First was Ginkaku-ji, also known as Jishō-ji. It belongs to the Shōkoku-ji school of the Rinzai school. It has a very nice garden of ponds, trees, and a gravel area, nicely raked with a truncated cone of sand, which is supposed to reflect the moon and make it even nicer at night. Contemplating raked gravel seems to be particularly Zen (see below). I preferred the trees and ponds.

Taking the bus to the next temple, I got off at the right stop, and while I was looking around to get my orientation a Japanese woman said, questioningly, the name of the temple I was looking for. When I nodded, she pointed out the street I should take. On the whole I found the Japanese very considerate. But before going there, I bought a sandwich at a nearby convenience store. Then I ate it in a sort of picnic area just outside the temple, where there were also public toilets and vending machines selling soft drinks, beer, ice cream, *etc.* In fact, machines selling soft drinks and beer could be found on many a street corner.

The temple was Rokuon-ji, often known as Kinkaku or Golden Pavilion. The main pavilion, on the edge of a nice pond, is completely golden. The reflection in the pond is nice, and it is no wonder that the tourists flock through. In 1950 a young (crazed) monk set fire to it, burning it to the ground (fictionalized, the monk's story became *The Golden Pavilion*). It was reconstructed by 1955, even nicer than the original: the gold foil now covers the lower floors too.

The following temple was Ryōan-ji. It is of the Rinzai school, which is Zen. Its chief attraction is a rectangular garden, 30 m by 10 m, of raked gravel with 15 carefully placed rocks, enclosed on three sides by earthen walls about 2 m high. The raked pattern and the placement of the rocks is supposed to provide you with plenty to contemplate. It may be thought of as “the quintessence of Zen art” according to the brochure. It was laid out around the beginning of the 16th century and “is acknowledged to be one of the masterpieces of Japanese culture”.

I wanted to see another temple and the castle, but there was no time. Most places close at 4. I also wanted to visit a market street where there are all kinds of specialty food shops. Of course it would be most interesting in the morning, but I looked for it anyway. But somehow I just couldn't match the map of bus routes with the map that showed where it was. After several false attempts I gave up.

While waiting for the bus to get back to my hotel, all the traffic in one direction suddenly stopped. I first thought that there must have been an accident. But soon I saw the real reason—a Buddhist procession, apparently from one of the temples.

Tonight's dinner was the least interesting so far, a sort of rice omelette—a layer of egg on the outside and filled with rice—with a sauce, basically eggplant and hamburger, over it. For some reason, to eat this dish you get a fork and spoon (not just me—everybody). I used the fork; most people used the spoon.

Since this was my last night in Kyoto, I thought I should see the night-life. So I went to Gion and walked the narrow streets a bit. Not so much to see really. There were lots of places you could go into, presumably fancy restaurants or bars, although from the outside it was not usually clear what they were. Being able to read Japanese would certainly have helped. A few women on street corners passed out cards with names of who-knows-what on them. Most of them were not interested in giving a card to a Westerner.

At Gion there is a temple and there was something of a crowd gathered before it. So I waited too, since it was next to my bus stop. Sure enough, as I expected, the same procession I had seen earlier returned to the temple. With perfect timing, they blocked my bus. So just after they passed I could get the bus back to my hotel.

Tuesday, 25 July I had planned to visit the National Museum this morning, which is just down the street from my hotel. That turned out to be very good planning, because it was raining. The museum was nice with everything labeled in English. There were also some explanations in English. The collection covered archaeological finds from prehistory up to fairly recent art works (mostly Buddhist). I found it quite interesting.

Unfortunately, it was still raining when I left. I got my suitcase from the hotel and took the bus to the train station. Then I took the train to Nara, about 45 minutes.

Nara was the first permanent capital of Japan, from 710 until 784. By then Buddhist priests striving for power forced the emperor to move the capital to Nagaoka, between Nara and what is now Kyoto. In 794 the emperor moved the capital again, this time to the village of Uda, northeast of Nagaoka, which he renamed Heiankyo, which means the capital of peace. Later it became known as Kyoto, the capital. You will notice that *kyo* also occurs in Tokyo, and it is the same Chinese symbol as the *jing* in Beijing (Northern Capital) or Nanjing, also at various times capital of China.

When I arrived in Nara, it was still raining, and I got rather wet before getting to my hotel, another ryokan. The people were more friendly, like the first one, and it was even nicer, having a nice little garden.

Since it was still raining, although only lightly, I went to the Nara National Museum. It was also very nice and modern. It contained mostly Buddhist art, including some paintings and some very nice statues. By the time I finished the museum, which coincided nicely with its closing time at 4:30, it had stopped raining.

I sat for a while in the park surrounding the museum admiring the deer, which are free to roam. There are about 1200 of them. In the evening, at the call of a trumpet, they return to their pens. In olden times deer were regarded as messengers of the gods. Now this herd enjoys the status, like many of the art works in the two museums I visited today, of National Treasure. They are quite tame, a fact not appreciated by a little kid in a push chair when the dear deer wanted a bite of his cookie. Some Japanese tourists were feeding a couple of the deer. One of the deer had learned a

good trick, to bow. The Japanese woman would bow to the deer. The deer would bow (lower its head) to her, and she would give it something. The timing had to be right though. If the deer and the woman were to bow at the same time, she could end up with antlers in her face.

Then I went back to the hotel for a shower. I donned my *yukata*, and headed for the men's bathroom, where I first took a shower and then relaxed for a while in the tub of warm water, remembering *not* to pull the plug when I got out. The tub should be viewed more like a swimming pool than a bath tub—you are supposed to wash yourself under the shower before entering the tub.

I found a little place to eat where the food was prepared on a hot surface built into the table. I guess you could describe what I had as a sort of omelette, at least it was various vegetables and shrimp held together by egg. If you were experienced you were left to cook it yourself. But since I was a simpleton Westerner, I obviously didn't know what to do, and everything was done for me, with sign language instructions to me that I was just to wait. When it was finally done, it was quite tasty.

Wednesday, 26 July I was down to breakfast in the hotel restaurant at 8, the time I had said I would be when I had ordered a Japanese breakfast the day before. I was the first one there, though others arrived a bit later. Everything was all laid out on a low table. I got a bit stiff after some minutes of kneeling and had to shift around. It was not a very comfortable position for me, but I suppose that if you do it from childhood it seems perfectly natural. Indeed I saw Japanese in restaurants with chairs pull up their legs and sit cross-legged on the chair. My Japanese-style breakfast was pretty good: a bowl of broth, a bowl of rice, some bite-size cubes of meat, two strips of an omelette (approx. 1 egg), two kinds of pickled vegetables, some paper-thin strips of dried seaweed (I think), and, of course, tea, but black tea rather than green.

After breakfast, I was off to see something of Nara, in particular some temples. Rather than starting with the highlight, I headed across town, seeing something of residential districts, towards a smaller temple from which I would walk along several temples ending at the largest, most famous one.

The Kasuga Taisha shrine, actually four shrines, was interesting for the number, seemingly endless but actually about 3000, of stone and bronze lanterns lining the paths to it, which have been donated over the years. It is located in the woods, and its vermilion color contrasts nicely with the trees. Founded in 768, it has been rebuilt repeatedly, about once every 20 years, but always, they say, following the original plans. This almost continuous rebuilding seems to be the usual practice with Shinto shrines.

I proceeded on towards Todai-ji in somewhat the reverse of the usual route. At the Nigatsu-dō, actually part (I think) of Todai-ji, high up the slope of a hill, there was a nice view of Nara. There I ran into Jimmy MacNaughton, a fellow physicist on his way to the conference. Then there was the bell tower with a huge bell.

Finally I arrived, by the back door so to speak, at the main building of Todai-ji. It is the largest wooden building in the world, but even so is much smaller than it used to be. The temple was founded in 752. The main hall was rebuilt in 1709, one-third its original size (or 1706 and two-thirds, according to a different guidebook). It houses a giant bronze Buddha, one of the largest bronze statues in the world (a bit over 16 m high, 437 tons of bronze and covered with 130 kg of gold), last repaired in 1692. It

represents the cosmic Buddha believed to give rise to all worlds and their respective historical Buddhas. It *was* impressive. There were also some smaller statues, in particular a couple of “heavenly generals”.

The main gate to this temple area, through which I now exited was also impressive, containing two ferocious looking massive wooden guardians carved in the 13th century. I proceeded back past the museum, a five-story pagoda and a few other buildings of another temple to the Sarusawano-ike Pond, where I sat briefly in the shade admiring the reflection of the pagoda, before proceeding back to the hotel to collect my suitcase.

Having had such a big breakfast, I decided to skip lunch. So at 2:46 I was in the train to Osaka. My hotel was just a block from the Nipponbashi subway station, and by a stroke of luck that station was also a stop for my train from Nara. The hotel is a “business” hotel, which is what the Japanese call a hotel which is “reasonably” priced and efficient. The room was small, but comfortable. A leaflet explained how ecologically minded the management was: no bars of soap, but a liquid soap dispenser; no tea bags, but individual portions of instant tea. The toilet was certainly high-tech. Actually, there had been a similar one in my first hotel, but I had not figured out all its features there. Instead of using toilet paper, you could have the toilet rinse you off with a spray of water. Temperature, force and shape of the spray could be controlled. I think these features are meant primarily for Moslems. If I remember correctly they are supposed to use water, not paper.

The hotel is about a 25 min. walk from the conference site. I walked over, registered, and after reading e-mail for a while and drinking some beer with others at the reception went out to eat, which was nothing special and more expensive than I was used to paying, partly because it was a group and partly because it was big-city Osaka rather than the smaller Kyoto or still smaller Nara.

I will spare you the conference, except to say that it was organized with the precision of the Japanese railroads. Talks were expected to start and end according to schedule. Speakers who ran over were to be cut and if someone finished his talk early, the chairman was to fill up the gap. At least that was the organizers’ instructions. A few chairmen failed to follow them, but on the whole everything went smoothly.

Near the hotel are a couple of streets stretching several blocks where just about every second building is a restaurant. It was not hard to find interesting places to eat. The raw fish was, of course, delicious, but so were many other dishes, difficult to describe, since I was usually not so sure what they were.

Sunday, 30 July A day off from physics. Rather than an organized tour, I slept late and then took the subway to the main train station to get a train to Himeji. From the route map above the ticket vending machines I could find Himeji—some of the route maps had names in Roman letters as well as Japanese. Then I bought a ticket for the amount indicated on the route map (¥1450 one way—they do not seem to have round trip tickets) from a machine. The ride took a bit less than an hour, although the guidebook had said 90 minutes. Perhaps I was fortunate enough to get a faster train. But the return trip was also fast. So maybe I was twice lucky.

The main thing to see in Himeji is the castle. It is very impressive: three levels of moats and walls. Within the innermost moat is a hill on top of which is the castle itself. It dates, in its final form, from 1618. Between 1956 and 1964 the castle was completely taken apart and then reconstructed in order to replace parts in poor condition. It is made of wood. To protect the floors, you had to take off your shoes.

Plastic bags were provided for you to carry your shoes with you. From the top floors you had a good view of the surroundings.

Tuesday, 1 August The conference banquet, a stand-up buffet, organized with precision in a large fancy hotel, was a disaster. The food was fine, but the quantity was not geared to a crowd of hungry physicists. Those who arrived 20 minutes late got nothing to eat. Those who arrived on time and were impolite enough to elbow their way up to the food got barely enough. I missed out on dessert. Everything was gone and we were told that all good things must come to an end, in other words that it was over within about two hours.

Thursday, 3 August Up early, and checked out (electronically—insert your key, which is a card with a magnetic strip, the machine tells you if you have something extra to pay, since you pay for the room itself at check-in, and if you do, you insert your credit card to pay it). I walked to the train station (about 15 minutes) and got the train to the airport. I was lucky enough to get a seat in the preferred seating section of tourist class—business class seats, but tourist class meals, although a confused stewardess served some of us business class wines before realizing her mistake—frequent flyer cards are useful sometimes. And after an uneventful flight I was back home.