

Friday March 25th

Jim Thomson

The group that gravitated to Johnathon's Restaurant and Coffee across the road from the Tokyo Grand Hotel for breakfast, seemed to have totally recovered from the jetlagged group who had arrived via the Monorail and a walk through the streets in light rain and then had to wait three hours before rooms became available.

Some sampled Japanese food while others opted for the "western" alternatives of Bacon and Eggs or Toast. Discussion covered the various activities of exploring members had done, while waiting for rooms and then back to the hotel to repack, check out and assemble in the lobby at 10.15 to await the arrival of our hosts.

The hosts arrived with welcome gifts and photos to identify their guests and after much greeting and exchanges we all lined up for the "official" photos before pairing off and departing to our respective host destinations which were widespread and in some cases involved up to 3 hours of travel across the city.

Our journey reminded us of the wisdom of our travel agent who recommended the baggage transfer service, as we went with bags down to subways, up and over to change trains, up stairs, out of subways, and across more overbridges before arriving at the home station of our host to be met by car for the remainder of the journey to our home for the next week.

But it didn't end there as our hosts felt the afternoon should not be wasted and took us to visit the giant Bronze Buddha which at 100 metres tall is the tallest bronze statue in the world (Guinness book of records) and more than twice the height of the statue of liberty in New York.



Then it was home to settle in with a meal that would not have disgraced any 5-star restaurant followed by an early night. A great introduction to Tokyo and Japan.

Saturday March 26th

Judith Burch

My hosts in Tokyo were Kyoji and Yoneko Inaba and on our free day we drove to the local railway station and then took the train to Tokyo to join the rest of Tokyo in admiring the beauty of the cherry blossoms in the an surrounded by art galleries and museums. There were hundreds of young people sitting under the trees on tarpaulins enjoying their food and drink and hundreds like us walking along admiring the beauty of the blossoms.



Not far away there were lanes full of stalls selling clothes, food, leather goods, jewellery, etc. I bought my husband a bright red t shirt with Japan emblazoned on the front and a smart new wallet for myself. The number of people around was astounding, but it was all very civilised with no pushing and shoving. We had a cup of tea and cakes in a posh 'English' tea shop before making our way back to the station and to their lovely peaceful house in the countryside!

Sunday March 27th

Brian Clarke

THE DAY OF THE WELCOME PARTY

We started the day with the usual breakfast of 11 smallish dishes of food, so much food, in fact, that we did not touch the strawberries and yoghurt. The fine weather continued and we walked to the local supermarket for a look around. After going back home we had a 5 minute walk to catch a bus to the local train station [Omiya], and then on to Komagome station. There are even lots of people on the trains at that hour. A short walk and we were at the “Shohakuken” or Food Nutrition University for the Tokyo Club “Welcome”. Part of the formalities were photos of Hosts and Ambassadors taken as the Hosts introduced their Ambassadors. These were included in the booklet they gave each of us prior to our departure.

Lunch, which was substantial and quite varied and catered wonderfully for all of us, was followed by our “item”. After lunch and the formalities, we all participated in the “final claps”...how is your memory? ...was it 3 claps, three times?

Following the Welcome we were all walked to Komagome station to travel to Ueno station. A further short walk [with hundreds, no, more like thousands, of others] found us at Ueno Imperial Park, where the cherry blossoms were in their full glory. We had arrived in Tokyo at just the right time, as this was the first day of the celebration of the Blossom Festival.



The park was packed with people picnicking along the walkways, under the fully blooming cherry trees. With shoes off, of course!

The blossom really was a beautiful sight.



After a walk through the park with lots of photo

opportunities we caught a bus to Asakusa, and the Seinsouji Temple, another area of beautiful blossoms. We were able to buy some Japanese wine here, before going up to the 8th floor of the nearby Information building to see the Sky Tree Tower, a Tokyo highlight.

We walked back to the station and after arriving at Omiya [the trains are still crowded], we did some more shopping in the station shopping mall for dinner. We also bought our tickets for seats to travel to Nagoya on Thursday.

We were home by 7pm for dinner [with hot sake, beer and Japanese wine] and in bed by 10pm after another very interesting day.

Monday March 28th

Midge Janssen

It was our last day at 1000 feet in the mountain town of Karuizawa, an area where foreigners had been interned in WW2, but now a thermal and skiing resort area of mainly holiday homes. We had expected really cold weather but we awoke to another crisp but not cold day. Not far away we could see Mt Asama, still smoking but with less snow.



We had a sit-down shower then added our washing to our hosts'. We folded our futons that had given us snug nights then put them in the futon cupboard. Our host, who enjoys cooking all the meals, prepared us another cooked breakfast, this time coffee, an omelette with potato salad, lettuce, toast and a sweet yoghurt. We decided that omelette is much easier to eat with chopsticks than a runny poached egg is. As usual they finished long before us.

I dried the dishes while Henk vacuumed, then we packed everything for the return to Nerima in north Tokyo. While our hosts recycled their rubbish and did their final packing we took their spaniel for a 15 minute walk. Her poo was later flushed down the loo, then she was taken on Chizuru's lap for the trip to our hosts' city apartment.



The two hour trip back to Tokyo took us from narrow rural roads through bare forests still in winter, past towering rugged volcanic plugs and rugged scoria ridges, through toll gates and tunnels to a 6 lane highway where we reached 140kph. As we travelled, the sky clouded over and the mountain scenery that had been so clear on our way there became hazy, so we missed out on the clear photos we had hoped to get. We passed signs warning of monkeys but didn't see any. We drove through broad valleys ringed by mountains, with white stialata magnolias in

full flower all along the road. Further down we saw early sakura. Then views were blocked by the high walls built to block traffic noise. All the time Takura's smart phone relayed beautiful classical music through the car's sound system.

We stopped at a Highway Oasis or Layby. We were amazed at how huge it was - a vast open area circled by 20 - 25 shops and eateries, with open air seating, and a fairground for children. There was a spectacular exhibition of orchids, with some beautiful displays done by school children. We bought coffee all round and ate Chizuru's manuka honey pretzels. The temperature was a pleasant 14 degrees, much warmer than in Karuizawa.

Arriving in Nerima, Takuya backed the car on to the three level car stack while we took the lift to their 4th floor apartment. We put our gear in our tatami room, hung our washing on the balcony in the sun, then we all drove to a Lunch Box for a lunch of grey buckwheat noodles that seemed a yard long! The owner took our photo and gave us each a copy wit.

We were amazed at how many cyclists there were everywhere, usually riding on pavements as the streets are so narrow. Not the racing lycra-clad helmeted type seen in NZ, but men and women in ordinary clothes sitting on upright bikes, cycling sedately, often with baskets back and front. And bikes in racks didn't always appear to be locked.

We walked to nearby Hikarigaoka Park. As it was a school holiday, many families were picnicking beneath the cherry trees; people played badminton, cyclists of all ages were everywhere, but we saw only one skateboard and one mobility scooter. A lovely Peace statue of two children with doves had a braille plaque explaining it. Men clustered beneath a Smoking Spot sign. It was great to hear a lot of bird song, as we'd heard only crows in the mountains.



We went to a supermarket for ingredients to match the recipe Takuya had photo'd from TV with his smart phone, which amused us. We contributed two bottles of wine. For the first time they learned to use the self-checkout, which surprised us as Japan is so modern in other ways. A visit to a Y100 shop enabled us to buy bits and pieces.

At 5.30 two of Chizuru's English language students, a 23 year old boy and a music teacher, came for a couple of hours to practise their English conversation with us, with a lot of shyness and laughter. Chizuru has a small classroom set up in their apartment.

After another delicious multi-dish dinner cooked by Takuya we had a skype conversation with their son and grandson, then made up our futon beds in the tatami room. With only 6 tatami, it was smaller than the 8-mat room we'd had, with nowhere to hang or stack things.

We were instructed in how to use a different type of automatic toilet to the one we'd used at Karuizawa, a later model. With all the instructions in Japanese, his help was appreciated, but we tended not to use the "wash & blow dry" functions anyway as they took so long.

Henk read while I did our diary for the day, then we all watched a travel programme on TV before an early night, ready for the 6.00am start next day for the bus trip to Mishima

Tuesday March 29th

Kate Hector

Day 5 Bus Trip to Izu Fruit Park, The Grand Shrine of Mishima Oshino Hakkai and to the top of The Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building.

Kathleen and I had a very early start for this day, leaving the house at 6.40am for the railway station of Machida, There we met with our day hosts, Mutsuko Uematsu and Sachiko Yamazaki. We then caught the train to Shinjuku Station in Tokyo.



We met up with the rest of the group, and onto the bus and off for the day. On the way we encountered two accidents, which slowed us down. While it was taking so long it was decided that we would play bingo. As we arrived at the lunch place, the Izu Fruit Park we were able to see Mt Fuji in all its glory.

After lunch we went to the Shrine .The Main

building is made from zelkova-trees, with a copper roof, it was rebuilt in the Meiji Period. There is an old tree about 1,200 years old which blooms with gold and silver leaves in the autumn months. Most of us sat on the wishing stone to see if our wishes would come true.



After another hour of driving we were at the Oshino Hakkai. The Oshino Hakkai was designed as a Japanese Natural Monument in 1934 from the viewpoints of shape, water quality, water amount, preserved condition, scenes and Buddhism thought. We spent about 45 minutes there.



Back on to the bus and another long journey back to Tokyo, there were more accidents on the way back to Tokyo arriving at about 7.30pm. We then waited in line to go to top of the Government Building. It was a great view of Tokyo at night. We declined the offer of dinner as we were both very tired. Back to the station and onto the train back to Machida station where Teruko was waiting for us. She had made a lovely vegetable soup for us, which we both enjoyed very much, after such a long day.

A very eventful local activities day! Around 7am a tall stranger opened my sliding bedroom door and quickly closed it - my absent hosts adult daughter! Then out to their first floor deck looking for Mt Fuji - clouds in the south!

After putting on all the under garments required to wear a Kimono, and the kimono itself, standing appropriately I was taught the tea ceremony by preparing it for my hostess Fukuko. Then followed the details about the many treasures that were displayed or stored in their equivalent of our lounge and vestibule.



Wandering down cherry blossom lanes and streets to an Italian cafe for lunch was magical. Later I bought some Almond Shortbread in the Mall for Fukuko before visiting her "community shop" where we socialized with the knitting class there. Fukuko provides this community meeting place. Last Saturday they'd held a dinner there for the Sri Lankan Group and the English Language Group, with the entertainment being me and my illustrated talk about NZ and a classical Sri Lankan folk dance.



Whilst wandering home via waterways with small Island shrines we passed by an agricultural field and visited the local Buddhist Temple complex where Fukuko was organizing a Japanese Expo for her International students, and locals, on Sunday. The Shinto Shrine was magnificent and nearby I bought a couple of bunches of jonquils from one of the many wayside fruit and vegetable stalls - honesty boxes only.



Stopping later for afternoon tea at the home of one of her friends - I'd met her twice before - Fukuko gifted the shortbread and one bunch of flowers to her!!



Back home I had an instructive tour of her garden and plant nursery before concluding the day with yet another varied collection of delicious small plates for dinner, including fresh fruit and ice-cream.



Thursday March 31st

Bob Walker

This was the day we left Matchiko and Sinichi in the South of Yokohama, to travel down on the Shinkansen to Nagoya. We left Kamada Bunko our nearest suburban station with Matchiko, to take the 'local' express to Yokohama Main station. (Without going on a bullet train you'd be very impressed by these high speed urban expresses).

Our excitement started when Matchiko (an energiser bullet) decided she didn't have the faintest idea which platform we were to take to get into Tokyo. Sue and I were told to stand stock still where we were on the station while she disappeared to look for the platform. Time to meet the rest in Tokyo was fast diminishing now, she was gone for 25 minutes and Yokohama I swear is the second busiest station in the world so our doubts about her ability to find her way back to us crept in. She did return and as in everything Japanese got there pretty well on time.

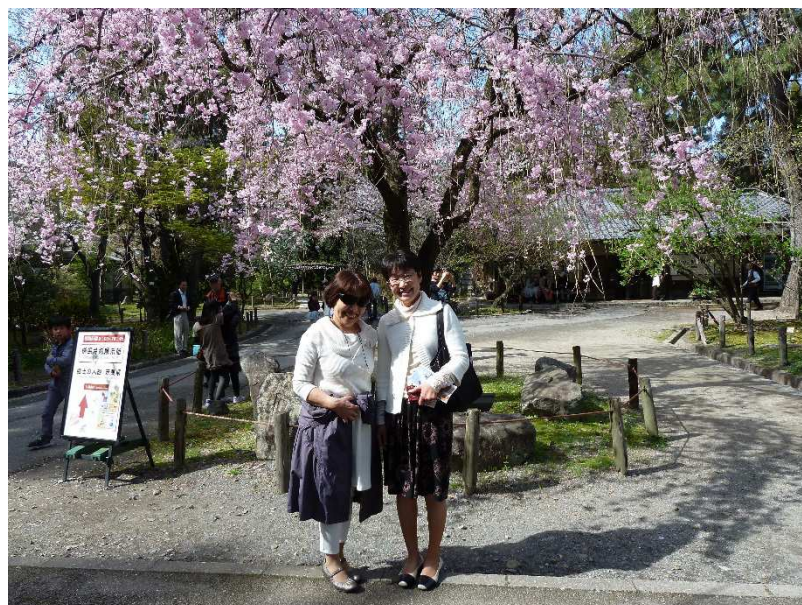
Another hiatus then occurred in my inability to find my ticket to get onto the Shinkansen line having a fancy jacket with 300 pockets, and I had no idea where it was. Needless to say I found it in the last pocket I looked in. I was blasé about it, but rest of group were not.

The bullet train is so fast smooth and comfortable, you don't notice much out the window; 100kmh is very much like 390kmh. We arrived in Nagoya 1.35 minutes later, 260kms.

On arrival we had a very nice combined meal with Kate, Katherine, Midge and Henk. Our host –a widow- looks 30 but is a grandmother with 5 grandchildren. She had no English, but we also had an English speaking day host who accompanied us most places.

Her house is very spacious and in a lovely small town to the South of Nagoya called Handa on a peninsula in Ise Bay.

As we were to find out, yet another very charming pair of Japanese ladies, who couldn't do enough for you.



Friday April 1st

Henk Janssen

Beer, cotton and car tour.

We had early cooked breakfast. Left early by car with our hostess and her sister-in-law for Kirin Beer Park. Our group of FF members arrived early and had to wait until 9.45am for our guided tour. We were greeted by a tour guide who spoke little English, and a translator.

Beer is produced from three main ingredients - barley, hops and yeast. It is stored in four tanks, 23 metres high and 3.5metres diameter. The processing from start to finish and ready for consumption takes approximately 6 to 8 weeks. The Kirin Company's history goes back through 500 years of brewing beer. The word Kirin comes from a mythical beast. They now produce 1,450,000 cans of beer an hour, and export to many countries. At the end of the tour we had nibbles and up to three free drinks.



We had lunch at Brick Age Restaurant, with a choice of fish or pork, salad, rice and a small dessert. After lunch we waited approximately 25 minutes for our tour of the Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology. We had a brief introduction of the history of the founder, Mr Toyoda, then the Company's representative who spoke excellent English took us through the first section of the museum which was about cotton spinning and weaving from early manual technology through to

computerised fully-automatic computerised jacquard machines. The factory started in 1911 with hand spinning and weaving, was upgraded to mechanised production in 1949. There were many demonstrations of various processes including hand and power looms, water and air shuttle propulsion and multi-coloured jacquard weaving.

We moved on to the coming of age of the Japanese automobile industry which began in 1921. Early models, based on GM cars, were panel beaten and welded over a wooden car model. In 1935 production became more mechanised and, in 1936, the first standard automobile was produced... By 1938 they were producing 800 cars a year. During WW2 production of vehicles gave way to production of military trucks. In 1953 full production of cars, trucks and buses took place. We saw the model of the first forklift, which was designed by a FF member, Mr Takano. At the end of the tour we saw a proto-type of a hydrogen car, and an 1898 steam engine which is still in running order.

We didn't go to the Noritake Museum as our host was unwell. She drove us home, and we were later picked up and taken to a second potluck dinner, this time at a FF member's cooking school. After another delicious meal, there was a demonstration of a Japanese dance. Several of our group responded to the invitation to join in, to great hilarity. It was a lovely finish to a very enjoyable day.



Saturday April 2nd

Kathleen Rose

We started the day off with a traditional Japanese breakfast with sour plums and miso, we were ready and energised to take the train into the centre of the city. From here the whole group joined together to proceed with their day activities. I also met my day host Nene Sato there to split off from the group to give me a younger person's experience of Nagoya city. We first went to the popular shopping place Osu shopping street where I saw many small trinket shops, popular clothing stores, and lots of food stalls.

After exploring the street thoroughly she then took me to a popular arcade where we played claw crane, and then had a purikura photoshoot. Purikura is extremely popular amongst teens in Japan, but mildly terrified me. It was all very fun and energetic and I am sad that Wellington does not have this.

Next stop was a small Udon shop. Nagoya is known for great Udon, and it was awesome. Definitely my new favourite food. It was just awesome.

The next stop was a gigantic department store, it had food one level, makeup the next, and I'm not really sure what the other levels had but it was huge. It seemed very popular and I got to see the many strange things some Japanese girls put on their faces to make them smaller, they looked a bit like wrestling masks. Then we took a break to sit down in Oasis 21, events are held there and it also has many shops, and restaurants. We were tired from shopping so it was a relief to just sit.

At the end of it we went to the main train station to go have a group meal with the friendship force hosts in Handa. After this we went and walked around a local park to see the cherry blossoms which was a nice end to the day.



Sunday April 3rd

Lyn Morris

Instead of staying with our host who was the exchange director for Nagoya, we had overnighted with a new host. This was arranged by the Nagoya Exchange Director, who wanted to find out if this lady (Kiyomi) was a suitable host. We also spent the day with Kiyomi, as well as two ladies who had been day hosts on other days.

Our first activity was to visit several homes of people who were reported to be very good English speakers and who were said to be keen to practise their English with us. These were very short visits, and we spent most of the time viewing the art and craft creations of these people.

Then we were taken to a private concert by three musicians – one playing a French Horn, another playing a flute and the third playing a piano. During the concert, the French Horn player gave a talk about a traditional horn, similar in function and twice the size of a didgeridoo. One bracket of songs included Japanese and Korean songs, but also “It’s a small world” and “Danny Boy”.

This particular day was special in that it was a community celebration for the Cherry Blossoms. Kiyome’s husband attended the celebrations and helped with the preparation of the community meal which took place in the shrine grounds just behind their house, but we had lunch separately at her home.

After lunch at Kiyome’s home, we were taken to the Mino Ceramics Park and the Museum of Modern Art of Gifu Ceramics. The exhibition included many valuable pieces. There was a big display of Meissen pieces and also Royal Copenhagen, Sevres and Berlin artists as well as a number of important Japanese artists. Our host’s hobby was collecting ceramic pieces and so she was keen to show us the ceramics in Gifu.



Monday April 4th

Judith Clarke

DAY TRIP TO TAKAYAMA

An early start to catch the train to Kanayama, where we were to meet up with everyone. It was raining and we first set with Miyo in the wrong direction, but eventually we saw the bus with most people on board. We were in the back seat with the Morris's, and being a Japanese bus, there was not a lot of room!

We were given nibbles, a drink and some information before we set off. The roads were good, we had no hold ups and regular comfort stops, where we could stretch our legs for a few minutes.



We stopped at Shirakawa to take photos of the gassho style houses – very steep thatched roofs allowing the snow to fall off in winter.

The lower quarters of the homes may be buried in snow in the winter. A most picturesque village, even though the day was misty and cloudy.

On to Takayama where we had a very nice buffet lunch. A steak was brought to the table and we helped ourselves from the salad bar.

We began our tour of Takayama at the Jinya which served as the Government's administration office for the Hida area during the Edo period – the only remaining government office from that period left in Japan. We then wandered down the narrow streets of Old Town. Lots of small interesting shops.

One had beautiful wooden furniture carved from huge slabs of wood. The chairs, curved to fit the body, swivelled so smoothly. An inner garden was behind the shop with quarters for the merchants behind the garden. A ladder led to another storey to extend the living area.



Our guide led us to the Museum of History and Art where we had a rather rushed tour before boarding the bus for the long drive back. A traffic jam delayed our arrival at the dinner place. We cooked our own meat over a cooker in the centre of the table. There was a great selection of salads, vegetables, fish and meat, then ice cream and cakes if one was still hungry.

Fortunately they'd let our hosts know of the delay and we arrived back in Kanayama to find Miyo waiting. Two train rides later we were back to where she'd parked her car. What a lot of running around they do for us!

A most enjoyable day.

Tuesday April 5th /Wednesday April 7th

Heather Salmon

Ah so, and now it is time to say goodbye. We have learnt when to put on the slippers and when to take them off, and how to use the showers and the Toto toilets. We have perfected our chopstick skills, much to the amazement of our hosts, and we have navigated the length and breadth of Nagoya on the subways and by hybrid cars, following intently the on-board Sat-Nav instructions to find our destinations via motorways, major roads and byways and tiny lanes. We have explored the mountainous area of Takayama as well as the city areas of Nangoya itself.

We now understand the intricacies of brewing beer the Kirin way, and the principles and values of kaizen in the Toyota automobile industry. Some of us have even been lucky enough to visit the Noritake Garden to understand the driving force behind Japanese industry - to build a better economy for Japan by becoming the world-class leaders in their products.

And everywhere we have seen the amazing displays of cherry blossoms, white, pink, shades of pink to red, upright and weeping, beside the road, overhanging the rivers, in the parks and around the castles.

And most of all we have come to love these beautiful people, so kind, so generous, so thoughtful, so caring, who can't do enough to make us feel welcome and to give us such wonderful experiences as they encourage us too to love their amazing city. They have worked so hard to speak to us in English, while we have struggled with Konichiwa, Ohayo Gozaimasu, Ogenki desu ka, Kombawa and Oyasuminasai.

But now it is time for us to learn to say Sayonara. We eat our last breakfasts, we exchange our final gifts, and we encourage them to come and visit us in NZ so we can return their wonderful hospitality and share with them our wonderful country.

We are taken to our various departure points for our various next destinations: Jaye, Midge and Henk to Tokyo and home; Judith, Sue and Bob to Kyoto; Bryan and Judith to Himeji; Kate and Katherine to Gifu and Sapporo; Rhys and Lyn to Odawara and Hakone; Joy to Nara and Heather and Jim to Osaka. We hug and wave our goodbyes. Arigato, arigato, arigatogozaimasu to our hosts, to our Exchange Directors and to the Friendship Force Club of Aichi for our wonderful experiences. We have all certainly helped spread peace in the world through these new friendships.

Sayonara, until we meet again, dear friends.

