

Leon & Audrey's world trip 08/09

Part 3 - Japan

A late start to the day. But we did look out the window for our view of Mt Fuji. Pity the smog/fog was so bad that you couldn't see the edge of Tokyo let alone the mountain, but I'm told it's off that way somewhere. We also saw what we thought was the hotel pool the previous night but is actually an outside an outside pool for dolphins, killer whales and seals for the Aqua Stadium that is part of the hotel, so I shaved watching the dolphins leap out of the water for fun.



It was almost 8 before we got down to the hotel restaurant for breakfast and we had to wait in line for 15 minutes until a table was ready. It was a buffet with the usual sausages, eggs, bacon, toast cereal etc, but with additions of Japanese items like rice porridge, fermented bean curd and pickled vegetables, and for some reason I have yet to figure out spaghetti. At the end of breakfast we loaded a few left over items into a bag to have later for lunch – bananas, chocolate croissants and bread rolls – and grabbed the rest of our stuff from our room and headed off for the train.

Figuring out which line we needed to travel was easy. Figuring out the platform and which entrance we needed was another – each entrance only gives you access to certain lines, so if you get it wrong you have to come out and go back in again. Luckily for us as we were standing looking at the map a Japanese gentleman who was showing around another gentleman from Belgium and lead us to the right platform, from there, it was as I have said easy.

The trains are 11 carriages long and each carriage has 36 seats for the elderly, disabled, pregnant women and anyone who can get to them quick enough. Everyone else stands for the trip. There are screens above each door (4 per side per carriage) that tell you what station is coming up, how long to each of the rest of the stations on the line, what connections are available at the next station, what side of the train you need to get out of and any delays on any of the lines in Japanese and English. There are also announcements in Japanese and English. This is a lot better than last time when there was only a small sign in English at each station and no announcements in English. Each station also plays a different electronic fan fare just before the doors close so you could probably know what station you are at by the fan fare alone if you spent the time to learn them all.



Today was a day of window shopping, well it was supposed to be window shopping, but we found interesting things- more on that later. We arrived at Shinjuku station and headed off for a camera shop. Well it's called Yodobahi Camera, so I expected there to be cameras, but it took a while. The first floor seemed to be all mobile phones and computers so we headed up a floor. I have to admit I lost track of what was on each floor, but before finding the cameras tucked away at one end of the first floor we went through the other 8 floors of the building and found all sorts of interesting electrical appliances.

Fridges seem to be fashionable in 6 drawers at the moment with one drawer having an adjustable temperature from -17 to +63 degrees – they only had 5 drawers when we were here in 2002. Heated carpets are still around but seem to be less popular than before. Add on bidets are now popular and there was a whole display about 3 times the size of what is shown here. Dish dryers are also making a big splash.



Anyway having found only a few cameras in this building we made our way to the second building of the shop which did in fact have 6 floors devoted to cameras, and a Pentax display out on the street and girls with signs waving and shouting outside the building. I have a shopping list of 1 new lens for this trip. Just one. The problem is that it is not out yet. Pentax announced it a bit over a year ago, but it's not going to be on the shelves until January. I did try out a similar one that is cheaper than the one I want should but decided to wait until January for the one I want.



Then of course I had to have a look at the third building of Yodobashi camera even though I knew there were no cameras in it, but I'd hate to have said I'd missed anything.

We went looking for a place to sit and eat our lunch, but found nothing. Well almost nothing, there was one place where there was a collection of seats and completely filled with smokers to the point where we walked a long way away before stopping and eating lunch on the run.

The next supposed window shopping location was Tokyu Hands. It's a sort of hardware/department store and filled with all sorts of interesting stuff. We walked right Tiffany's on the first floor without looking in the window (sorry Dora), though we did look at the menu of the Fauchon cafe before continuing on and spending the next three hours looking around Tokyu Hands. We bought a few things, origami paper, thermometer/hydrometer, spirit level, bottle brush, 2 knives (my fault, I stopped to watch the demonstration when Audrey was going to walk past. After a minute she said "We have to get one". Two minutes after that she said "We have to get two. How many do you want?" I walked away at that point), 3 strainers and a pair of forceps. The most exciting purchase was several lengths of solid plastic tubing and a block of black foam. You just have to be us I think to understand these purchases.



At this point our feet were starting to feel tired so we wandered off to another camera shop. Along the way we watched the other pedestrians to make sure we were walking on the correct side of the foot path and not crossing streets in the wrong places. As we crossed one intersection with crossings marked every way across including diagonally I finally understood that when there is no traffic to run them down the citizens of Tokyo will cross the street any way they like, anywhere they like. With a choice of all options available people were walking more often than not in other directions. At other times we had followed arrows that directed us to walk up and down stairs on the right hand side and along the footpath on the left had side, so anywhere else is obviously fair game.



Arriving at Bic Camera without getting run down by vehicle or pedestrian (though it was a close thing with some of the pedestrians), we looked into the first building and it was all computer games. We went around the block to the second building and asked about camera bags (I'd decided by this point to see what was around – you can never have too many camera bags) and were taken out of the building via the back door and back to the first building and directed to the basement where we did in fact find a very good collection of camera bags. None of them really fit the bill for what I was looking for, but it was fun to look.

We now fell into the routine we started when we were in Hong Kong last time which was to go back to the hotel for a rest stop about 4pm for half an hour or so before heading out again. So a quick train ride and a bit of a rest in the room and we headed to Tokyo station for a look around Daimaru.

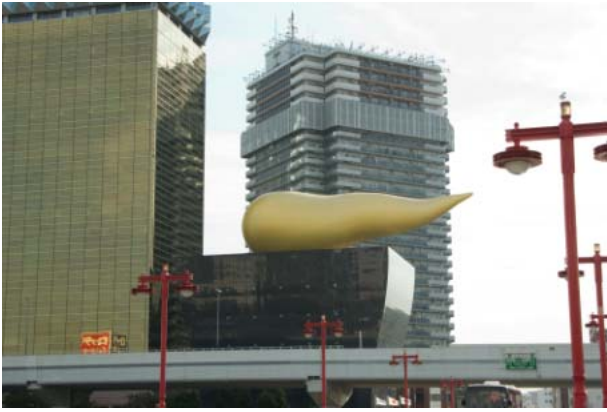
Daimaru in Tokyo is celebrating its first birthday. We of course ignored the 4 floors of women's fashions and 3 floors of men's fashions and went off to the food area. Lots of nice cakes and pastries, chocolates, prepared sushi packs, Chinese food (this seems to be a fashionable thing as it's everywhere), fresh fruit and vegetables and fresh meat. None of the meat is cheap. The most expensive we found was some wagu beef for 5250 yen per 100 grams. That's about \$772 per kilo. There was a box with 2 mushrooms in it (ok and a couple of limes, but I don't think they affected the price much) for 63000 Yen (or \$926), mangos with individual foam nets and my favourite a square watermelon.



After a bit more of a wander around we headed back to the hotel via our local department store where we picked up dinner of tempura vegetables (including lotus root) and prawns and a small chocolate Fauchon ice-cream for dessert (to share). We then both started to put down our thoughts before they escaped and we forgot about what we have been doing.

The next morning we got up closer to our normal time (6 am) got ready for the day (the dolphins were less frisky this morning, just swimming around gently) had another large buffet breakfast (this means we aren't hungry for most of the day and can eat lightly and hence spend less on food) and took along a couple of bananas for lunch.

First stop for the day was the Buddhist Sensoji Temple in Asakusa. As we got out of the train station at Asakusa we notice this huge golden "object" on top of one of the buildings. No idea what it is meant to be, but it certainly stands out. We also headed in the wrong direction (deliberately) to get a better view of the river. There were some river cruise boats tied up to a very rickety look wharf with small offices and lots of air conditioners. It's more reminiscent of Hong Kong than Japan.



Headed in the right direction we made it to the gate of the temple area. In front of the temple is what I imagine was a market in years gone by. Now it's more like a pavilion at the Royal show, complete with side show games. There was a shoot an arrow at a target and win a prize stall, the obligatory scoop an object out of water and win a prize stall and a stall that looked like it would sell sausages on a stick once it was set up. We were a bit early to catch most of the food stalls, but the octopus balls were going strong and so was the stall making fruit covered in frozen sugar syrup.



One stall was making these and I'm not really sure what to call them so the pictures will have to do. On the left is part of the process and on the right is ready to serve off the grill.



The temple itself was very nice and the sort of thing you would expect, small shrines and contemplation gardens and beautiful old style Japanese buildings. The temple was built in about 648 and the five storied shrine a lot later in 1649. While we were in the temple a bell was rung outside, so of course we went to investigate and found an old bell at the top of a wooden ladder with no one else in sight. If we had known

when it would be rung again we would have hung around, but not knowing we never actually saw anyone climb the ladder and ring it.



From the temple we walked a few blocks to Kappabashi Street which is full of cooking equipment. Absolutely everything you would want to start a restaurant of any kind. Furniture, cash registers, waiters writing pads, chestnut peelers, tea pots in traditional shapes to camels and kittens, cooking equipment of every sort and of course knives.



Both Audrey and I like looking at knives and we have a good collection at home with the right knife for almost anything. My favourite is the Japanese cooks knife which I use for most ordinary purposes over the western style cooks knives, so I was looking at what was available and the helpful salesman brought out a 24 cm knife when he heard me comment that the 16.5 cm knife was too short. I didn't really want a longer one, I was just looking but Audrey wanted a Japanese knife to add to the collection and after a bit of thought we

ended up with a short bladed knife that will fit well into our range being a bit longer than all our other short knives. In other shops we bought a treble clef biscuit cutter and a double suction cup to hold bowls down to the bench.

Wandering through the side streets (looking for a public convenience) we came across a park with a children's playground, people sitting eating lunch and general common things. We like to get a view of the normal life of the people in the places we visit so this was enjoyable and we sat and ate our bananas and watched people doing pretty well exactly what they would do in a suburban park in Melbourne. We also found these trees that were lining the sides of the street looking quite sculptural having lost all their leaves in preparation for winter.



We headed back to the hotel to unload and give our feet a rest and finish lunch off with a sausage bun from the local baker. Then we were off again all the way to the third floor of the hotel to the Aqua Stadium to have a look. There was the large walk through aquarium, small tanks of various animals and seal and dolphin shows. We missed the seals because we were watching the dolphin practice but enjoyed it so much we came back for the 8:30 show while we were in the middle of packing later that night. They also had an “amusing” sun fish. It didn't seem amused or even happy at all, though it is difficult to tell with fish. It was on its side close to the bottom of the tank spinning around and around like a top. It was too sad to watch.



Packing took a while. Our bags had sort of exploded all over the place and we had to add in what we had bought and items we had removed from cabin luggage. It all fit in the long run with the bags weighing 30, 26 and 16 kg. Cabin bags were about 10 kg each.

Up early to catch our train to the airport. We had a wake up call booked for 4:30, but we were both awake at 4:20 and in the early opening restaurant where we had an American breakfast. Omelette, sausage, ham toast, bread roll, salad with lots of mayonnaise, muesli with yoghurt and fruit, orange juice and a choice of tea or coffee.

For some reason the train was heated to 30 degrees plus in the cabin (as shown on Audrey's pocket thermometer/hydrometer), though it was cool in the luggage area near the doors. It was also a bit bumpy for typing and taking photos was difficult at about 150 km/h, though I wanted to try and get pictures of the farms and the buildings we saw on the way in.



Airport check-in was efficient, though they have changed our plane and also our seats so Audrey will now have a view of the wing on our way to Singapore. Customs and immigrations went with no problems. The lounge is nice with a separate dining area with tables set up to eat of rather than the coffee tables you get in most lounges. We will soon be heading off for Singapore and the next chapter.