

Japan 2009 (PSC) – by John Schaukowitz

This was a trip of a lifetime. It had been on my hit list for a long time. Speaking of long, so was the flight; more than 11 hours from JFK airport in New York. This adventure was well worth the price tag and investment in time.

THE SKIING

Although Japan has over 700 ski resorts, the ones in Nagano are most familiar because Nagano was the host of the 1998 Winter Olympics. I found that the snow in Japan was similar in consistency to most of Europe and the Southern Hemisphere; wetter and heavier than what you would find in Colorado or Utah. The first day of skiing at Hakuba Goryu was in a snow storm and fog. Visibility was virtually nonexistent. The snow, though new, was still heavy and hard to work. The second day of skiing at Happo One was better. Some of the new snow was groomed; but much of it was still loose, cut up and even heavier. However visibility was good and the overcast kept the sun from further softening the snow. The third day at Hakuba Iwatake, was a sunny day. Most of the snow was skied down and there was evidence of further grooming. Conditions in the morning were great. By late afternoon, the sun had mushed up the snow and skied-off patches were starting to crop up; especially near the bottom. None of the areas were very large; however, Nagano Prefecture (district) had at least six ski areas providing more than enough skiing for the week. Most of them share the same “Happy Pass”, which uses an electronic chip rather than a paper lift ticket. A 1000 Yen (\$10) deposit is required on the chip, but I kept mine for souvenirs. Shuttles to all the resorts were free and lift lines were not to be found. Temperatures were relatively warm – at freezing or slightly below. Helene and I used rental skis for the week. My rentals, supposedly high performance, had only one pair of good edges. The other pair of edges was trashed.

THE TOURING

A couple of tours were included and some optional excursions were available as well. In Kyoto we were treated to a half-day city tour where we saw Nijo-jo (Nijo Castle), which was built from 1603 to 1626 and was the official Kyoto residence of the first Tokugawa Shogun, Ieyasu. We also visited the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha temple, which is the headquarters for more than 12,000,000 Shin Buddhists and was rebuilt in 1636 after being consumed by a fire in 1617. The final stop was at the Rokuon-ji Temple. Originally a private residence, today it is a Zen temple. The main attraction on the grounds is Kinkaku (The Golden Pavilion); a three tiered pavilion gilded in gold leaf and splendidly reflected in Kyoko-chi (Mirror Pond). Also on the grounds of Rokuon-ji is Sekka-tei (Tea House), Fudo-do (a hall dedicated to the God of Fire) and a 700 year old pine tree. All of these places have been designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites. While at Nagano, all of us passed up a day of skiing to eat lunch at a sake brewery and visit Jigokudani Yaen-koen (Monkey Park). Jigokudani is the only place in the world where you can observe monkeys (Japanese Macaques) bathing in natural hot springs and living this far North. This excursion’s highlight was a visit to Zenkoji Buddhist Temple; which is said to house the Golden Triad or first Buddhist image to arrive in Japan. The actual image is never shown to the public, but every seventh year an exact copy is revealed in a grand ceremony called Gokaicho. This year (2009) is the next revelation. The Triad is a symbol of light, leading to the acquisition of wisdom and truth and is the attraction for 8 million visitors a year. Here we paid extra to venture down into a pitch-black tunnel beneath the altar of the main temple hall and grope in the darkness to touch “The Key to Paradise”, which is supposed to help you experience spiritual awakening. In Tokyo, we had another included half-day city tour. Sights on this tour included Zoujouji Buddhist Temple and Tokyo Tower (1093 feet) – the tallest self-supporting steel tower in the world; which was opened in 1958 and patterned after the Eiffel Tower. We also saw the exclusive Ginza shopping district where just 3.3 square meters (35.5 square feet) of land will cost you over \$1 Million. Also, near the Waco Building in this district is a statue of Godzilla because this is about where the monster first appeared in the movie. The highlight of this tour was a visit to the Emperor’s Palace where we happened to catch the ceremonial changing of the guard. The Palace is not open to the public except on the Emperor’s birthday (December 23) and New Years day. We also had a day and a half to explore on our own. Some took in Sumo Wrestling matches, some sought out Kabuki (Japanese theater). Helene, Doug and I took the

Yamanote Line subway to Harajuku where we visited the Meiji Jingu (Shinto Shrine) in Yoyogi Park and happened to take in a Shinto wedding. The bride was exquisitely adorned from head to toe. And finally, most of us got our first ride on a bullet train between Nagano and Tokyo.

THE LODGING AND FOOD

This trip provided, by far, the nicest lodging of any ski trip I have ever been on. The Kyoto Hotel Okura, the Hakuba Tokyu Hotel in Nagano and the Hotel Pacific Meridian in Tokyo were all superb 5-star hotels with great locations and complete amenities. One clear day, I was even able to get a look at Mount Fuji. Breakfasts were included throughout the trip. In addition to the familiar bacon and eggs, I became accustomed to also eating lunchmeat and cheese, salad, udon noodles and rice for breakfast. Dinners in Nagano were included and alternated nightly between western (French) and traditional Japanese. At all of the Japanese dinners we were served sushi and sashimi. Now, I'm not one for eating raw meat (except for beef); especially raw fish. That is nothing I would ever order, if I was just going out to eat. However, since that is what was being served for dinner, I figured I might as well give it a go. To my complete surprise, it was no where near as gross as I had imagined it would be. In fact, much of it was downright delicious. Dinners in Kyoto and Tokyo were whatever Japanese or Asian fair we could find. Of course, the ubiquitous American icons McDonalds and TGI Fridays were there as well. I used chopsticks to eat every meal while in Japan.

THE PRICES

When someone tells you it is expensive in Japan, believe it. We paid \$60 for what I would describe as an average beef and noodle stir-fry dinner. Then again, we paid as much as \$10.50 for a glass of beer. And, that wasn't even in a resort area. However, you can buy a beer from a vending machine any hour of the day for \$3.50 to \$4.00 per 355 ml (12 oz.) can. We didn't find any shopping bargains either. The electronics in the Akihabara district were as much and more as you would pay for them here. One thing though, you will see gadgets in Japan 6 months to a year before you see them in the United States.

THE PEOPLE

The Japanese people are kind, patient and polite to a fault – always bowing when they greet you. They are very conservative people – always shrinking and miniaturizing everything. Most will go out of their way to help or accommodate you. Most Japanese are very traditional straight-line thinking people. I read a long time ago that the reason there is no competing software programming coming out of Japan is that they aren't taught to think that way. Their thinking is straight down the middle. There is no left-brain/right-brain thing with them. But, the Japanese are gadget happy. They build gadgets into the most unlikely things. How about a toilet seat? That's right! The toilet seats have more buttons, controls and lights than I have seen on some automobile dashboards. First off, they have a power cord attached to them to power the electronic and because they are heated. When you sit on one, it usually triggers off something like running some water in the bowl or starting a small fan. Then there are a whole series of knobs that control the temperature and spray pattern of the bidet water. Some of them play music. Others have a button to spray a shot of deodorant. When you lift the lid, you find a whole page of instruction on how to use the toilet seat. Imagine that.