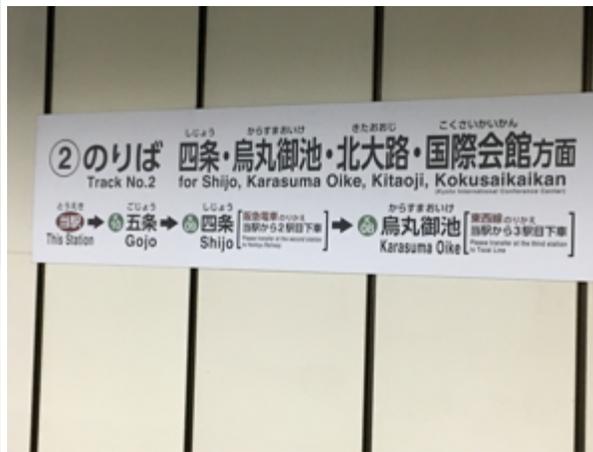


Japan Journal – Part 1 of 3  
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Konnichiwa,

Our five-day trip to Japan during the Chinese Mid-Autumn (Mooncake) Festival (and SHNYU break) was thoroughly enjoyable. We decided not to spread ourselves too thin so we spent four days in Kyoto and one day in Nara. We saw a lot of beautiful and interesting sites at a relaxed pace. Perfect!

Our hotel room in Kyoto was tiny but comfortable (they provided comfy cotton PJs), and in a great location for getting around, near subway and easy walking to many areas.



The first site we visited was Fushimi Inari-Taisha, a Shinto Shrine southeast of Kyoto, a short ride by train from the central station. Shinto is the indigenous faith of the Japanese people and Japan's major religion alongside Buddhism and Christianity, and Fushimi Inari is the main temple.

There are over 10,000 torii (shrine gates) spread across a thickly wooded mountain. As you climb, you walk through these gorgeous vermilion gates surrounded by the warm glow of color. Along the way you see stone foxes, considered the messenger of Inari, the god of cereals, and small shrines where people pull a long colored rope to ring the bell, clap their hands, bow and pray (or take photos if one is a tourist). Little carved foxes can be purchased to leave at the shrine with prayers or wishes written on the back.



There were throngs of people at the entrance to the site and walking through the first series of torii, but once we climbed higher the crowds thinned out and it became a truly awesome experience moving through these gates surrounded by nature.



We spent about four hours going up to the top and back down. I'm glad this was our first stop since my knees held up to the climb, and I think later in our trip they might not have done so. It was also the sunniest day of the trip. I was proud of myself for making it to the top.



We saw several people dressed in traditional clothing and discovered later that there are shops everywhere that rent these clothes. It seems to be a popular thing to do, especially among young people. We also saw older women on the subway dressed in gorgeous silk kimonos, not of the rental variety. They wore white gloves and looked so elegant.

Then we took the train back to Kyoto and walked to another temple complex a few blocks from the train station. Toji is a Buddhist temple built in 796 as Kyoto's guardian temple. The five-story pagoda is the highest wooden tower in Japan. After burning down five times it was rebuilt in 1695. The area is designated a UNESCO

world heritage site.



Our hotel was on a quiet street around the corner from a busy shopping area with fashionable people and all the high-end shops you see in Shanghai, New York and Paris. This sign caught my eye as a symbol of such areas. We were happy though to find a really good vegetarian restaurant, and good coffee every morning at Dean and DeLuca's two blocks from hotel. It was interesting to see that people never cross against the light and they don't cluster at the curb but line up patiently for the light to change.

