

Japan Journal (Part III: Nara)
10-6-17

Konnichiwa,

This is the third and final part of my Japan journal describing our trip to Nara. Nara was Japan's capital in the 8th century. A Japanese colleague of Ravi's told us we should go there and I'm so glad we did. After the busyness and crowds in Kyoto, Nara was a welcome change of pace.

We arrived by train in the evening and walked to the ryokan (traditional inn) where we were staying, almost like a bed and breakfast. Our host, Noriko Hirasawa, warmly welcomed us and gave us a bigger room than we had reserved, so we had a separate sitting area. The room was lovely, with old paintings, ceramics and fresh flowers. The beds are on tatami mats and were quite comfortable. The ryokan is on a small street with an entrance through this small stone arch into a courtyard with a garden and two buildings.





We've heard that some ryokans are quite fancy (and expensive) but we really liked the hominess of this one. Noriko had tea prepared for us and we sat and talked for a while about her family, the neighborhood and things to see in Nara. The ryokan is her family home and one of her daughters and two granddaughters live in the house next door. (The other daughter lives in Vancouver). We met the eight year-old granddaughter who goes to school every day in Kyoto – a 40 minute train and then bus ride to school, traveling with one of her friends from Nara. She studies all subjects in Japanese and English.

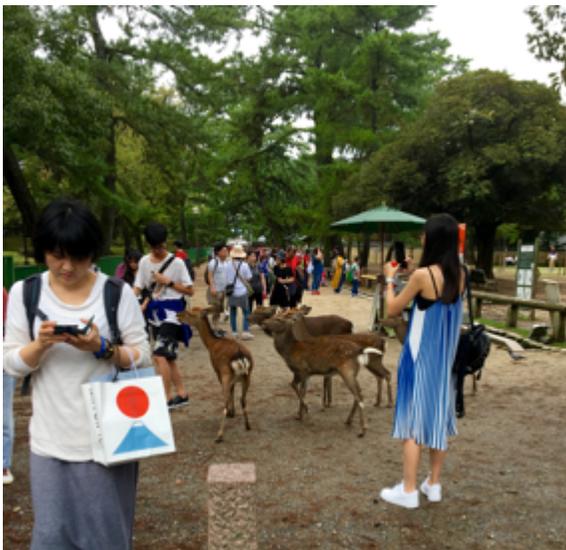
Part of the ryokan experience is a traditional Japanese breakfast, beautifully prepared.



Noriko had asked about dietary restrictions when we made the reservation and prepared a full vegetarian breakfast for Ravi and one with salmon for me. We had a delicious miso soup with all kinds of mushrooms and sprouts in it, and several small dishes to savor, as you can see. Luckily, Noriko showed me how to eat the egg. The egg is raw and is cracked into a bowl, whipped together with soy sauce and then rice

is folded in. Lucky I didn't try to peel it like a hard boiled egg! It tasted very rich, but all I could think of was salmonella so I didn't take more than a couple bites. Everything else was delicious though.

Ryokan Tsubakiso is located right in the heart of Nara and it was easy to walk everywhere. As the first capital of Japan it has some of the largest and oldest temples situated in a large park at the foot of a mountain. Deer are considered special and roam freely. Tourists feed them crackers sold at kiosks all over the park and they can get pretty aggressive. One tried to eat the map I was holding in my hand and Ravi had to tap it on the nose to get it to let go. It was kind of creepy really to see people touching the deer and taking photos and teasing them with the crackers, even though there are warnings throughout the park to be careful.



There are several temples and two museums in the park but we headed directly for the grandest temple called Todai-ji, which houses what is said to be the largest bronze statue of Buddha in the world. We talked to a woman who told us the history of the temple's construction after a small pox outbreak that killed many. In order to unite the people, the emperor passed a law to get them directly involved with establishing Buddhist temples throughout Japan, believing this would protect the country from further disaster. More than two and half million people helped construct Todai-ji and the Great Buddha statue by contributing rice, wood, metal, cloth or labor. 350,000 worked directly on the statue's construction.

Todai-ji is enormous and the entrance reminded us of the Taj Mahal, though it is difficult to capture the grandeur in photos. The Buddha is stunning.



Outside of the temple is a statue of one of Buddha's disciples who is said to have healing powers if you rub a part of the statue corresponding to a pain in your own body. I rubbed both of his knees vigorously, but so far have not felt the effect.



The temple museum nearby had some gorgeous statues, scrolls, and other archaeological finds from digs around the area. Afterward, we walked to a restaurant we had read about but got there too late for lunch. (Restaurants close at 2:00 and don't reopen until 5:30). So we made a reservation for 5:30 (since our bus to the airport left at 7:00) and got some snacks from a grocery store to tide us over.

Most of the shops seemed pretty kitschy and full of tourist junk, but we found a small shop at the very end of a street that had beautiful clothes, a sampling of which was gracefully worn by the woman who owned the shop. She said her friend designed the clothes. I ended up buying two cotton blouses – one that has trimming cut from kimono cloth. Can't wait for an occasion to wear them.

We returned for dinner at Nino's and it was definitely worth the wait. The owner and chef had worked in Milan for a year and a half where he became enamored of the idea of slow food. He returned to open this Italian restaurant in Nara with his wife, Mayumi. She spoke English but he didn't. However, once we started speaking Italian we had a great time. He told us about his family farm where they grow the vegetables he uses in the restaurant, all the while translating our part of the conversation to three Japanese friends at a nearby table. When he said his father just turned 70, I said we were close to that age and that I was turning 68 and Ravi 69 the following week. Before we knew it, they brought birthday dessert for us, followed by lemoncello that he made from the lemon trees on his farm. Mayumi presented each of us with a small plaque where she had written our names in Japanese! It was such a special, unexpected experience and a perfect way to end our trip to Nara. I've also added a photo with Noriko, our ryokan host – the people we met were as much a joy as the sites we saw.



I want to end with one more photo.



I saw this in lots of women's restrooms – a seat for their toddler while they use the toilet. Isn't that a great idea that should be replicated everywhere?!

Sayonara, Japan! I'm so grateful for all that I saw and learned there.