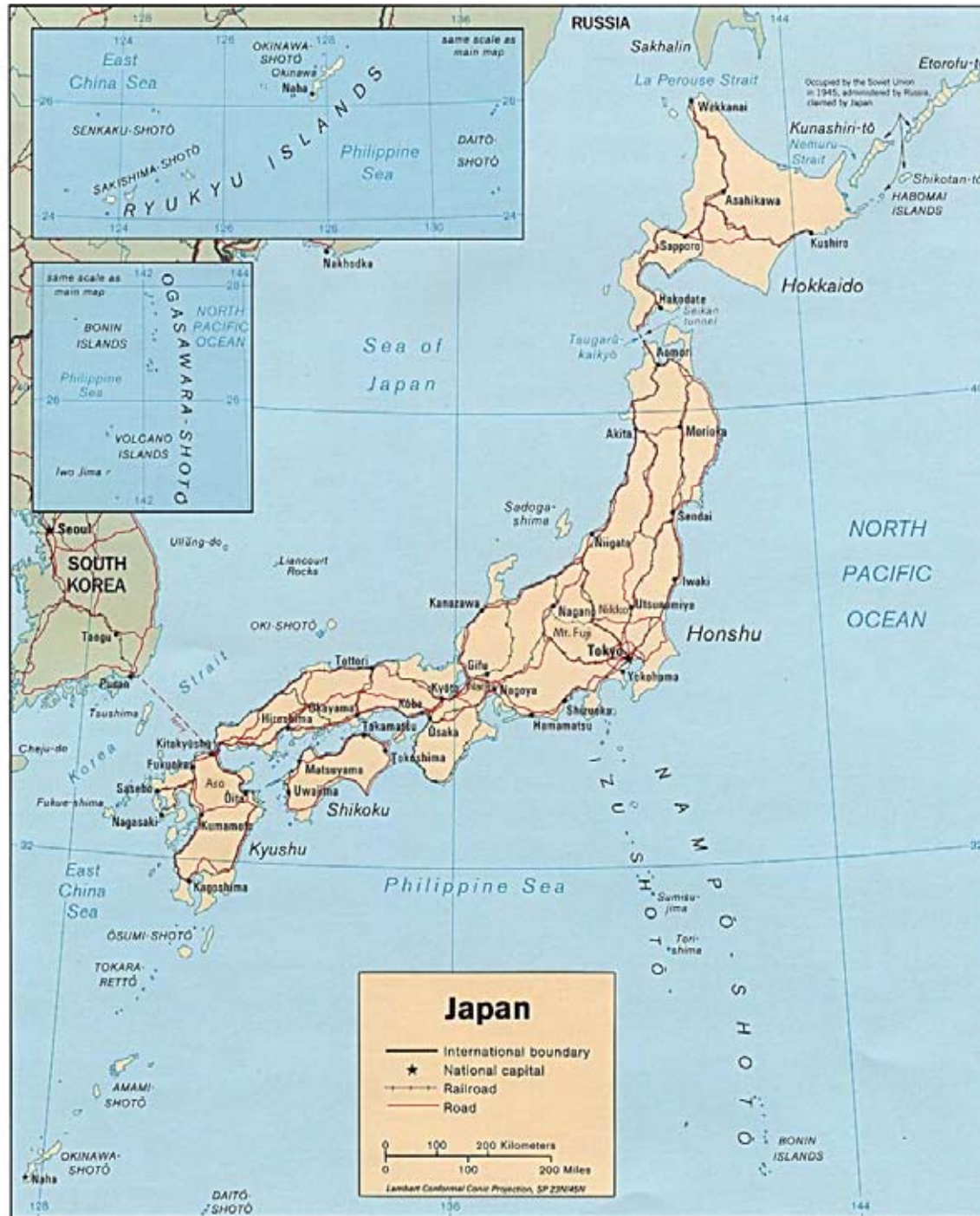




J a p a n
a pictorial journal



Japan: a pictorial journal

- Day 1 **Tokyo**
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Day 1 - Arrival in Tokyo

Discovered Akasaka district.

Plate of sushi inc Eel, Herring Rowe and Sea Urchin. Early night. No jet lag.

Not a noisy part of the city. Beautiful hotel. Should have booked three nights. £260 for extra night.

Journey through Tokyo was an eye opener. So clean. So friendly. People extremely polite (always in a hurry). Riverside massively industrial. Great sky walkways. Labyrinthine roads. Trains look extraordinary. Heavy police presence but not threatening.

I'm not overdressed though I'm wearing a suit and tie. It's the norm.



Sushi: tuna, swordfish, snapper, salmon, mackerel roe, prawn, omellette, salmon roe, sea urchin, ginger and wasabi

Day 2 - Tokyo

Started early. Breakfast place - convenience restaurant opposite hotel. Basil sausage and egg muffin. Cheaper than hotel buffet. Under a tenth of the price.

Bought day ticket for underground. Cost £5. Superb system hampered by my inability to distinguish one green from another. About 1 in 5 people wear face masks.

Yoyogikamizonochō park is a hub of activity. It houses the national gymnasium and serves as a running track. Trees and fountains with vast open space. The soundtrack is provided by crows, parrots and chattering sparrows.

Though people are bright and polite, I hadn't realised how essential being social was to them being happy.

There's a steep learning curve attached to getting around on the trains. The tracks can be used by different lines without warning, so you have to be careful that the train you're boarding is on the line you need. This is only true on the outskirts of Tokyo.

Walking through the Ginza district was like walking through the ultra-commercial areas of most cities. Some eye-popping and wallet-wincing sights.

It's not quite 11 o'clock and I'm heading to the technical shopping district. It's getting warmer on the streets and some small black insects are around. Only a few, but it brings home how few flies and creepy-crawlies pester you. I hope this is due to the impeccable cleanliness and superb litter collection.

There are so many cultural lessons to learn. It's very important to stand in just the right spot. There are marks on the pavements showing where to walk and stand. A metre either way is crucial.

I thought the tech district had let me down. The key here was to get off the street and get past the unassuming store fronts. Inside, a world of consumerism opens up. I kid you not, in one store there was a whole aisle dedicated to expansion sockets.

Lunch at a Katsu shack on top of an electrical department store.



I've been given a pestle and mortar and been told to grind my own sauce. Order anything and the side dishes prove far more entertaining.

No new flavours with this one. I've had Katsu before. But the fresh ground toasted sesame seeds were quite something. Opted for a coffee desert which was sweet and creamy. Delish!

I mentioned to the waitress that I'd enjoyed everything but the soup. She immediately deducted it from the bill.



On to the final call of the day in the Shimbashi district. The Hamarikyū-teien gardens by the river. Busy but pleasant. Sea water pond with tide control gates and old Shogun irrigation channels. Met a guy called Greg - American military technician. Chatted whilst walking back to Metro station.

Found that there are two owners of the Underground - Govt. And private. There's a different card for each owner, so paid a small single fare and walked the rest of the way. Glad I did.

Saw a crowd gathering by a shopping centre and joined it. Treated to a superb light show. Walked back through Akasaka district. Didn't need to eat again, but grabbed a donut for later.



Day 3 - Tokyo to Kyoto

Bullet Train

My first sojourn with the transport that's going to get me around Japan is efficient and clean. Before I board, I grab some Yashimi from a kiosk. There is an army of women dressed in bright pink, who busily clean while we wait on the platform. Train is pristine, spacious and quick.

I was due to see Mt. Fuji today. It's not very clear though so I'll hope for better weather towards the end.

The speed of this thing is extraordinary.

The guard bows when entering and leaving the cabin. There seems to be an importance placed on entrances. A ritualistic shout goes out when anyone enters or leaves a restaurant. Great or irritating - the jury's still out.

My Yashimi turned out to be slightly different to what I'm used to. Each one of the five pieces was a large prawn, coated in cabbage and wasabi, surrounded with rice and bound with seaweed. There was also a sweet date-like plant, cut into strips at the bottom of the pile covered with a plastic leaf so it didn't infuse the Yashimi. Filling and tasty.

The scenery varies between lush vegetation and bland residential / industrial site. I'm not sure how my trains are going to help me find rural Japan. Hiking might be a better idea.

Half an hour from Kyoto and the landscape has changed significantly. More and closer hills give way to villages and farms. The autumn colours add depth. Huge industrial estates herald the beginnings of Kyoto.

From the hotel walked to a huge Shogun palace. Size is extraordinary. Low slung Walls hide an inner sanctum of trees and temples.

Back to hotel. It's 6 ish on a Sunday evening so take the back streets. Not a sound. The restaurants, as always, have blinds over the doors and windows. It's done out of respect for the diners.

Strangely tired. Grab a bite from a 7/11 and spend the night in.



Day 4 - Kyoto

Up before my alarm this morning. Lots to do. Buy a day pass for bus and subway. At £10 it's quite expensive. Five stops (possibly) today.

Subway is less frequent than Tokyo. End up on the Randen streetcar (the Keifuku Electric Railroad). Brass and wood fittings. We head to the hills.

At Arashiyama, head to the Tenigū-Ji temple and gardens. Astonishing scenery with autumn reds and browns matting the surrounding mountains. The gardens were quiet. I got there at 8am. Very pleased as passing the gates an hour later, the car park was full.

The highlight though was a short walk through a bamboo grove.

Waiting for the bus, I opted for breakfast on the hoof. Had a sweet potato roll and a shrimp and lotus bun. It started raining. I was by the river when I noticed a bird of prey hunting a small gull. It turned out to be a nesting eagle. There were kingfishers, cranes, ducks and cormorants.

As the skies darken, it might be worth a change of plan. Maybe the aquarium.

Not so. Went up the observation tower and saw lots of good sunshine. Schedule resumed.

Caught a bus to The Golden Pavilion. Beautiful place absolutely heaving with tourists. Nice photos though. Got into a taxi to take me to my next spot. Got out again when he told me the ride across town would set me back £20. Two buses got me there free. Again lots of tourists, but very pleasant.

Stopped for a bite at a pleasant, cheap cafe for a bowl of grilled duck, rice and raw egg. Fine.

After the temple, head back into town via the Path of Philosophy. Utterly enchanting. Quite bohemian. The weather really helped as well. Plenty of sunshine. Happened upon another temple. Huge, two-tier gate way. Passed by the southern city gate then headed

back to the hotel. Nice central location but the room's a little small.

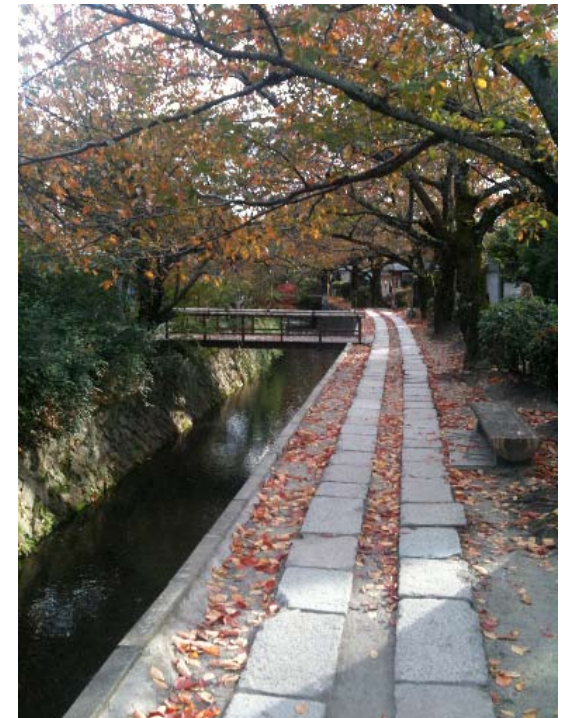
Decide to head to a local tempura inn. An incredible dining experience. Started in the tempura parlour. A chef busily attended me, frying everything in front of me. Nothing pre-prepared. Not even the batter. Starter was



raw fish, vegetable and sea urchin. Courses were haphazard. They included three types of fish; shrimp, eel and swordfish and various sundries (chestnuts, Chinese mushroom, scallop, egg plant, sweet potato, asparagus). There was salad too. Next came the rice, vegetable dish and rich broth - served with brown tea. All of this was meticulously planned for all its apparent randomness. There were three types of dip; lemon juice, salt and horseradish which required diluting in a bowl of warm water. I reached for the soy sauce at one point and was immediately advised against it. Absolutely right - akin to asking for salt in a French restaurant.

The sweet was served in a separate room. I removed my shoes and was led into a sunken area with a suspended teapot and a warm fire. The fire heated the floor as well to avoid cold feet. A feature window looked onto a relaxing Japanese garden. There were so many elegant touches. The sweet was kiwi, pomegranate and lychee, served with sorbet and hot Jasmine tea.

Back at the hotel, decided to plan out the next week. Have made a few calculations in order to see Mt. Fuji on a clear day after a light snowfall. Should be lovely. Tomorrow, I finally start to use my bullet pass. Seven days of exhausting travel ahead and no luxurious two night stops. It's go go go if I want to see as much of Japan as possible.



Path of Philosophy





Day 5 - Kyoto to Hiroshima

The first sight from my window on this glorious day was of the office opposite. Everyone was warming up for the day. Communal lunges, arm raises and star jumps. Everyone seems perfectly happy to join in. Imagine that in Britain.

At Kyoto station - a huge building with a twelve storey suspended glass ceiling - I set up my railpass. There was no queue so I took advantage and got my tickets for the next four days. I'd planned all the hotels I could, so now my travel arrangements are taken care of too. The confidence in their transport system is unshakeable. Some of the connections are



three minutes! I balked at this which offended the lady who seemed incredulous that I should doubt her.

Just had breakfast before boarding the bullet; Filled croissants with coffee. There's Sarah Vaughn on the stereo.

I've also purchased my lunch. There are lots of shops selling sushi boxes. As with the restaurants, the wares are displayed using plastic replicas in the window. It's easy to point. Chatting to a Scottish couple, they've found it easier to travel here than any non-English speaking country in the world. I have to agree, so far it's been a breeze. The population's patience, tolerance and endless desire to help, make the communication problems eminently surmountable. What they really make of this lumbering Englishman is anyone's guess.

Leaving Kyoto isn't easy. It's been too short a time and such a pleasure. Train time...

A seat in the first class green coach was a luxury. The seat reclined to horizontal and there was masses of leg room.

Met a guy from Brisbane called Mark. He travels here a lot and recommended a few places in the northern regions.

Arrived in Hiroshima and, pushed for time, hailed a cab. Cheaper here. Hotel was incredible. I was told my room was on the 24th floor. A huge room with the window being the whole of the front wall. The view over the bay area will stay with me for a long time.

Headed off to the island of Mayajima. Pleasant walk through the spacious city centre to the tram stop. Hopped on. Journey to the ferry pier took over an hour. Pier trip was free with my rail pass.

The island was a unique experience. The O-torri Gate was visible from the ferry, but the shrine to it's rear could only be appreciated properly from the shore.

Climbed to the Momijidani Park path. Got half way up the Misen path before heading back down. It was too dark to continue. Shame, but the route down



was beautifully tranquil. The dusk brought out the racoons. There was a fair amount of wildlife. The island is known for the deer herd that lives in the town centre. Very elegant but slightly incongruous amongst the neon lights of the souvenir stalls. Ferry back and another hour on the street car. Pick up a sandwich and early night.









Day 6 - Hiroshima - Nagasaki

Couple of problems to rectify today. I don't have an adaptor that fits my toothbrush and shaver. It's not a major problem. My shaver will probably last and, so far, there's been a toothbrush in every hotel room. The pressing problem is my camera battery. Again, it will probably last, but it's the one thing on which I can't risk losing power. Purchased a charger with a local power plug.

Another issue was my hasty ticket booking yesterday. Strikes me that the time I should be travelling is between 11 and 2 when it's more comfortable to be on an air conditioned train. Went to the station rebooked and cancelled the later train. No problem at all.

Now sitting in beautiful luxury - leather individual seat and view of driver's cockpit - bound for Nagasaki. This morning, spent a couple of hours around the Peace gardens of Hiroshima.

It was a heavy-hearted humbleness that settled on me as I took in the memorials. This was replaced by a repellent dread as some of the exhibits at the museum hit home. An incinerated tricycle, charred step (the only remains of the man sitting there on August 9th 1945) and a stopped watch (8.15) effected me the most.

The children's monument, peace flame and a-bomb dome told their own sad stories. It just happened that the sun sat perfectly where the bomb went off. 600 metres above this unfortunate place. I say unfortunate, because the letters from Roosevelt, Einstein, Truman etc. detailing

the whole sorry tale, makes one wonder whether this indiscriminate WMD changed anything politically. Simple geography (the surrounding mountains and islands are ideally positioned to accentuate such a blast) and US/Russian cold war paranoia make the act seem like random terrorism. That it ended the war was fortunate, however, the papers seem to suggest that it was justifying the development expenditure (120 million) that was the principal aim. Interesting to see Churchill painted so bleakly.

Between Hakata and Nagasaki, I've found the kind of rural idyll I'd been searching for. Large houses and extensive, yet intricate, farming and irrigation are a contrast to the heavy industrial and residential districts I've passed previously.

The train leans very elegantly, but the hazy weather means that the mountains aren't as clear as they could be.

Nagasaki is considered a bit of a backwater (think Exeter). That's not entirely fair. Certainly there aren't the niceties of Kyoto, but the harbour area is exquisite, particularly tonight.

I've opted to dine in Chinatown. I used my translator for the first time. I asked for a translation of 'lemonade'. It came up and I pointed to it. The waiter immediately said 'Ah, Lemonade!'. He didn't have any. To be honest, I haven't seen any anywhere. Coke by the gallon and plenty of lemon water, but they don't seem to go for it here.

Meal was great. Less emphasis on tourists here. More practical town.

Day 7 - Nagasaki to Aso

Nagasaki beckons. After a ride on the tram and a quick stop for breakfast, I realised that Nagasaki doesn't have much of interest beyond the Chinese influence. It's been great to see though.

The bomb's epicentre was some way north of the city centre. The tell-tale signs of why Nagasaki was chosen are here again. But Nagasaki lives less in the shadow of the A-bomb than Hiroshima. It seems cosmopolitan and accessible. There's no subway which necessitates sky walkways. The one over the central junction outside the railway station has 14 access stairs. It's bewildering. Hiroshima was built from scratch with American style grid system streets. Nagasaki didn't experience that destruction so has the old street plans largely in tact.



I've decided, once again, to take an earlier train and bat on to Aso. It's more remote and I'm anxious to see it while it's still light. The volcano is active and I might not have the freedom that I've enjoyed elsewhere. The journey there has two stops and should be an adventure in itself.

Even passing the coastal towns, the Japanese love of gambling is evident. There are several Pachinko palaces. These are huge banks of slot machines. They're usually full and the money spent here must be phenomenal.

The ride along the promontory's eastern shore is beautiful. Endless lobster and crab traps grouped into strategic phalanxes dot the inlets. Birdlife is plentiful and the land sweeps gently to the familiar looking hills. These are green and tree-covered and are probably the most identifiable feature of Japan's countryside. Clearly impossible to farm, they are home to a vast variety of tree species which makes the foliage supremely pretty. The hills are low, intricate and close set. It seems to be a young, rapidly eroding landscape. The superb irrigation and farming of the lowlands makes for a specific aspect that I haven't encountered anywhere else.

A fascinating journey. Split into three sections, each with its own character. The middle part between Tosu and Kumamoto was heavenly. Varied, uneven vistas interspersed with shrines, hilltop pagodas and exquisite gardens.

Kumamoto was sprawling and characterless. However, beyond its outer limits, the volcanic hills look splendid. Exciting stuff.



Rolled into Aso at 3.45. Aso itself is just a main road with a few truck stops. Head away from the road though and the atmosphere becomes like a village. I walked 500m up the hill and asked about accommodation. I was pointed to a B&B and hit upon something rather special.

I'm in a traditional budget guest house made like a Ryoken. This is actually a Mysaken as it's not just made of paper, bamboo and reeds. It's utterly beautiful, with sliding wooden panels separating rooms and corridors, fitted grass mats and paper diffusers on the windows.

It was late by the time I got settled and ready. The sun was dropping, so I decided to tick off another Japanese experience; I went to an Osen. This is a local communal bathing area. It took a while to find as I only had rough directions. I asked, but no-one had a clue what I was trying to say.

I decided to head back to the B&B and photograph the map. It didn't have any words, but there was a picture of two girls bathing. I was able to produce this as I asked. One woman did look shocked when I said 'I would like...' and pointed to two women bathing, but instead of phoning the police, she pointed me in the right direction.

Didn't think to bring a towel, but was able to hire one and the experience came in at about £4.

The first thing to do was remove my shoes and leave them at the door - it's the same at the guest house. Next I disrobed and headed into the bath house. The water was from the natural spring and there were three bath's - one for cleaning, one for soaking, and another with various pumps and jets. The latter pool was outside under a pagoda, surrounded by trees. There was a sauna and shower cubicles too. It was luxurious and restful. Curious thing though, the locals were more reserved than me and many seemed a little embarrassed. Maybe it was because I was there, sticking out like a Daz-White thumb. Great experience. Grabbed some food on the way back as I opted not to eat at the B&B.

Noticed lots of strange spiders on the way back. Fearsome looking things with angular abdomens and stripy legs.

One feature of the Ryoken is that there isn't a bed. There's a host of mats and bedding, so you just make your own. So restful, was asleep by 7.30.



Day 8 - Aso to Osaka

Today, I've got about 6 hours to explore the rim of the caldera. It's about 128 km around its circumference and contains industry alongside national parks.

I started walking to Mount Aso, but was put off by a sign saying 14km. I headed back to search for transport and found an obliging taxi. It was worth the early start as I was able to catch the first cable car of the day and set off around the 4km rim.

Extraordinary views and challenging walking conditions made the morning sublime. I made it up two mountains before a sign warning of dangerous fumes forced me to turn round and head back. So in the end it was a 5km walk and unquestionably a highlight of the trip.

The surrounding hills look like fluffy cushions. They're covered in a tall wheat derivative which looks like a small pampas grass. The early fog is clearing so, earlier than expected I'm ready to pick up my bag and head to the station.

I'm ahead by about an hour. This won't make much difference, but at least allows me time to gather my thoughts in Osaka before I head off again. I've come to the end of my forward planning. I have to make some decisions as to what to do next. Much of this will come down to the visibility of Mount Fuji.

Used my translator again. Proved accurate but takes time. He'd already sussed what I was saying by the time the translation came through.

Stopped for food and will now get into Osaka at 8.30. Still a little ahead of schedule.

Got to the hotel room and plotted the rest of the holiday. Difficult choice, but opted not to go the very north.

Frustrated by the bank declining my transaction for the hotel bookings.

Hotel is truly exceptional. Beautiful location and view. Nice big bed. Strange dream that Tom Cruise had died.





Day 9 - Osaka to Nara

Osaka is bathed in sunshine and the park is where I head first. Saturdays are relished here. On my walk to the castle there is a ridiculous variety of events. There's a huge croquet tournament, games of baseball and badminton, a youth orchestra contest... The list goes on, but the latter created the most incredible din as the kids practiced simultaneously by the castle moat.

The other odd thing was that they were playing nothing but western music. Hearing a seven-year old girl in a majorette's outfit riffing on 'I Got Rhythm' was quite unsettling.

The castle itself was notable for its style, but what struck me were the rocks used to shape its foundation. Huge and sculpted - breathtaking.

I grab some vegetarian noodles from a street vendor and eat them on a water taxi. I'd hoped it might take me to the aquarium, but it looks like that will have to be a separate journey. Again, the accompanying soundtrack is steeped in western culture: Zither music (the Third Man), Henry Mancini (The Pink Panther) and Richard Clayderman.

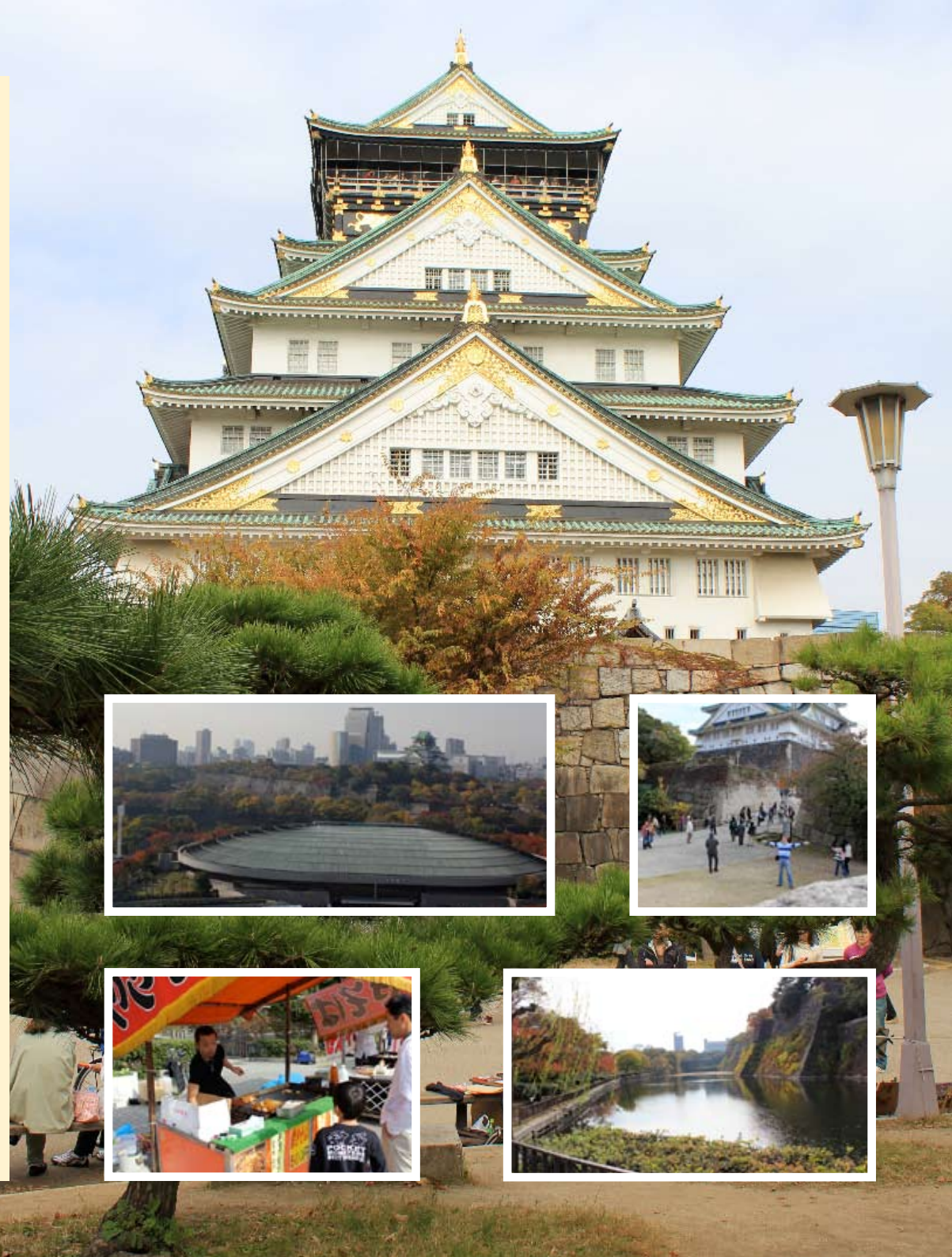
The boat's ceiling has just lowered to the strains of My Fair Lady.

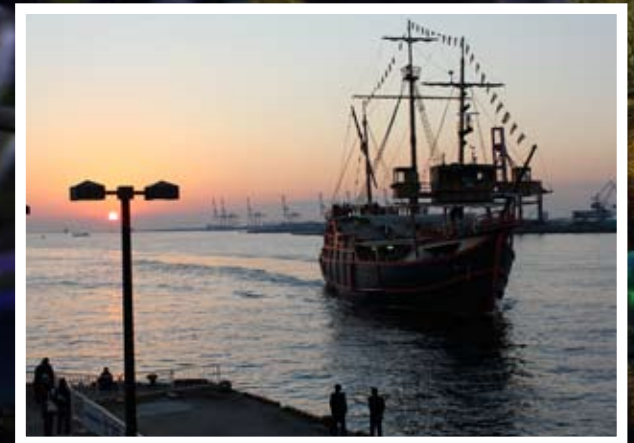
Off to the Aquarium. The JR Pass entitles me to free local train travel and it'll get me close to aquarium without paying. Also found out that the trip to Nara is only 45 minutes from the hotel. I'll delay picking up the bag until about 6pm. Not sure about hotels in Nara, but I'll leave it to chance.

The chance thing proved to be a mistake. It turns out that this is harvest weekend. The reason hotel rooms proved so hard to find on the Internet was that there aren't any.

The third hotel I tried was - I discovered after what must have been an interesting 5 minute negotiation - a 'love hotel'. It was a very classy brothel, but would much rather I was staying for an hour, not a night. The fourth was a more seedy brothel, but the fifth pointed me to its sister hotel 20 minutes away that proved to be cheap and just right.

West of Kyoto, the Italian influence disappears and is replaced - food-wise - by a passion for the French: mayonnaise on everything and patisseries on the street corners. Had a raspberry tart, which is something I could probably have negotiated for at the love hotel.







Day 10 - Nara to Nikko

Blimey. It's day 10. Early night and early morning, up at 5.45, off at 6.30, heading to Nara Park. With so many tourists I knew I'd have to be up with the lark.

Nara is known for its deer. They do lend interest to the place, but it would be as spectacular without them. The morning was perfect - warm and sunny. A quick train ride got me into the park and I explored the shrines, gates and finally the hall of the great Buddha. This wood statue sits about 30ft tall and is a jaw-dropping sight. You can walk around it too. The back is flat and inlaid with gold. Shamefully, there's a tourist shop inside the hall.

I returned to the hotel, before 10, to collect my bag and upload the morning's photos to Facebook. I've been doing this whenever possible and people have been leaving comments and feedback. I can't think of many places at which I could do this with such frequency. The only hotel that has charged me for the use was the most expensive - Osaka. Apart from the Ryokan at Aso, all have had superb Internet services with much faster speeds than the UK. Great, especially as there's very rarely a British TV channel.

I'm now heading to Nikko, changing train three times at Kyoto, Tokyo and Utsunomiya. I reserved some accommodation at Nikko, but didn't receive any confirmation. We'll see if the Turtle Lodge has ever heard of me.

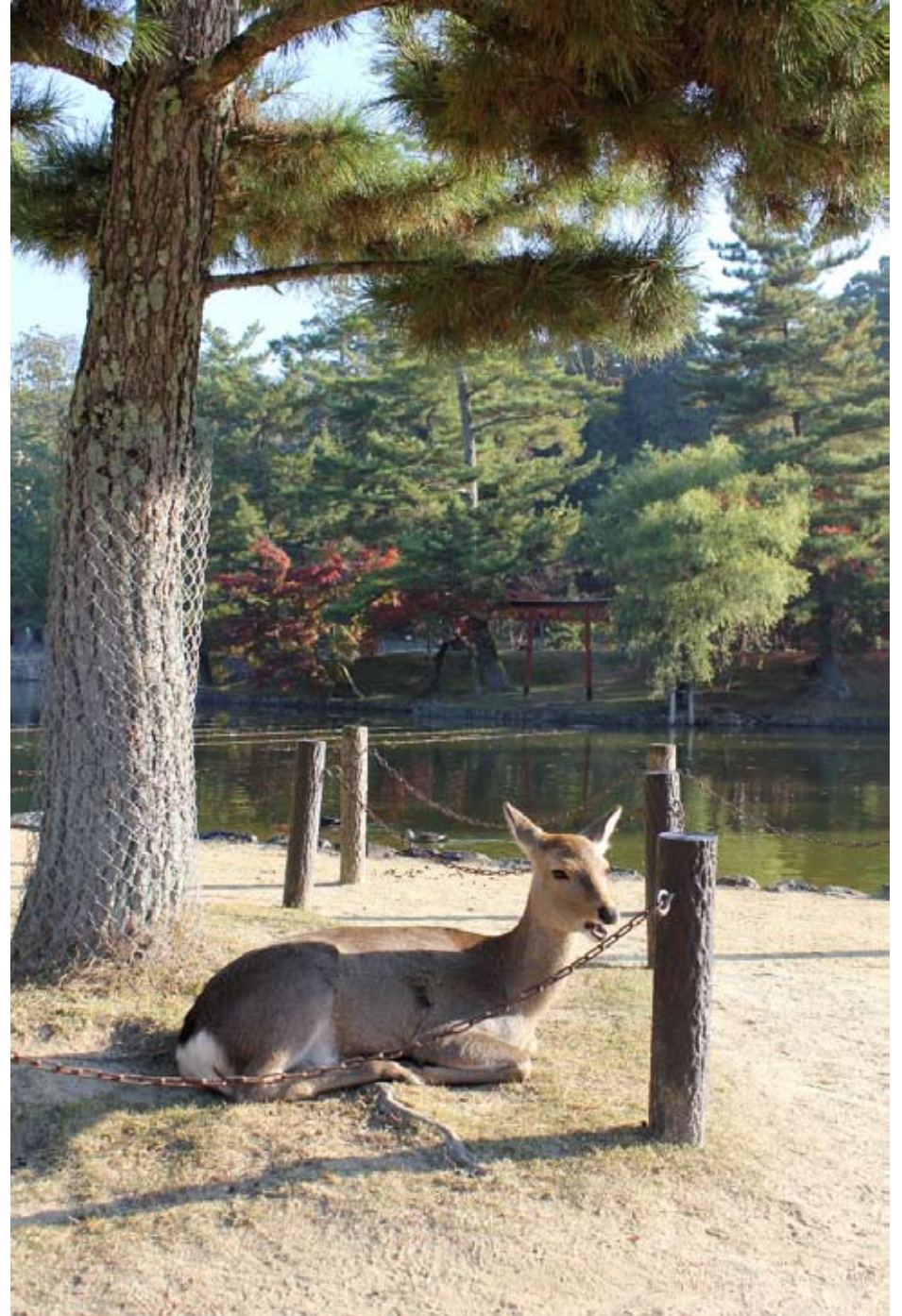
It hadn't. Not to worry, room available. Another early start tomorrow. Nipping out for a quick snack.

Eating at Gusto this evening. Not through choice, as it's akin to a Little Chef, but it's all that's open. I've not a clue what I've ordered. I vaguely pointed to anything that looked nice. Fingers crossed, once again.

Ended up with some dim sum, beef stew and a desert that could have fed a hockey team.

Got back and noticed there was an Onsen at the guest house as well. Got ready for a dip, but could only manage to go up to my waist as I was being steadily boiled. I emerged with my bottom half a beautiful salmon pink, and my top as white as ever.





Day 11 - Nikko to Tokyo

Some real highlights this morning, but they weren't what I expected them to be.

Set off before 8 to catch the shrines as they opened. Already pretty packed, but avoided the main temples and headed away from the crowds. Got a combination ticket and had seen everything by 10, which was check-out time at The Turtle. The ceaseless commercialisation of the 'sacred' beliefs and artifacts was depressing me.

Apart from a few bits of stonework and a look at the preservation of the shrines there were a couple of other good points.

There was the original 'hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil' image and an interesting acoustic demonstration by a priest bashing together two bits of wood that resonated wonderfully only when struck at a certain point in the room. A dragon was painted on the ceiling and the mouth signalled the spot where the 'dragon roared'. Good job I'd read up about it in advance as there was no translation anywhere.

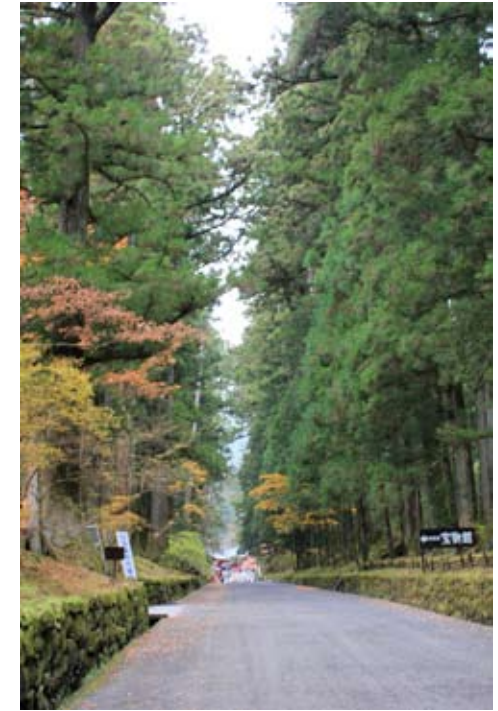
The truly staggering thing this morning was the grandeur of the landscape. The temples were gaudy and lacked the aesthetics of Nara. But the hills and streams were a treat and I decided to walk to the station. Took me about half an hour but boarded the train just as it started raining. I'm glad I didn't visit the lake. Though I'm sure it's tremendous, there's no sun and so many day trippers that I doubt I would have enjoyed it.

It's the last day of my travel card, but not the last day of travel as I've got my trip to Mt. Fuji tomorrow. Now, what to do this afternoon?

A little shopping and food. Chinese restaurant for some dumplings and chilli beef. Visited some other areas of the city before the rain came.

It looks like the trip to Mt. Fuji might be a bit of a waste. There's no visibility there at the moment. Still, coming to the end now.

I feel I've done what I set out to do. Nagasaki was a point on the map, but the main highlight was probably Aso. Those amazing morning views will stick with me.





Day 12 - Tokyo to Mt. Fuji

Lazy morning. It's a chintzy but extremely grand hotel room. The best I've had, but probably the most expensive @ £110. Wonderful king-size bed and jacuzzi bath.

I've gained some bumps and bruises from carrying a 30kg bag through the Tokyo subway and some bites and scratches from insects and walking.

I'm now on a bus, heading for a stormy looking Mt. Fuji. I'm short on cash. I'd expected to pay for my bus ticket with my card, but they only took cash. I've only got about a fiver, so I'm hoping that the last leg of the bus journey doesn't cost more than that or I'm stuffed.

The pass into the mountains was beautiful. Splashes of autumn still remain, but admittedly, another week and most of the foliage will be gone. Some impressive bridges and wide, clear roads make the journey very pleasurable. Clouds are growing thicker though.

Couple of things to note. Kids here are tired. It's rare you'll see a kid travelling on his/her own who's awake. Japan's renowned for having the longest school year in the world - and it shows. Next, a few national obsessions... Food, golf, youth, technology, photography, the west, politeness, tradition, ritual, formality, quiet, jingles, suits. Life is led at two paces, go and stop.

Sadly, my dash for cash has made me miss my bus, but at least I've got enough cash to get me back to Tokyo. I've booked an evening meal and breakfast as I have no idea what facilities are around the resort. Stopping at the foot of Mt. Fuji for a ratatouille panini. I can't see the mountain, but I'm sure it's there.



Day 12 - Tokyo to Mt. Fuji (cont...)

So... There I was, bathing naked with six or seven of a Tokyo High School's baseball team, when I saw my first full glimpse of the snowcapped Mt. Fuji. That's the short story.

The long story is this. The bus I caught took me away from Mt. Fuji and the resort and drove to the opposite side of a lake Kawaguchiko. The Sunnide (pronounced "sunny day") is wonderful. Accommodation is in the Japanese style and there is an Onsen on-site. A huge picture window indicates where Fuji should be.

I get into my kimono and hop along to the Onsen where I disrobe, shower then bathe. Again there is a picture window agonisingly ogling a cloud-covered Mt. Fuji. I step outside and notice the outer bath is full.

I'm not sure many westerners embrace the Onsen, but I've no qualms about the whole public bathing thing. As such, I do tend to stand out a bit and one of the teenagers asks me 'where from?'. 'England' is my response and, as always seems to be the case, the short hand is football - especially when I disclose my home's proximity to Manchester (Not that I would be seen dead in Old Trafford).

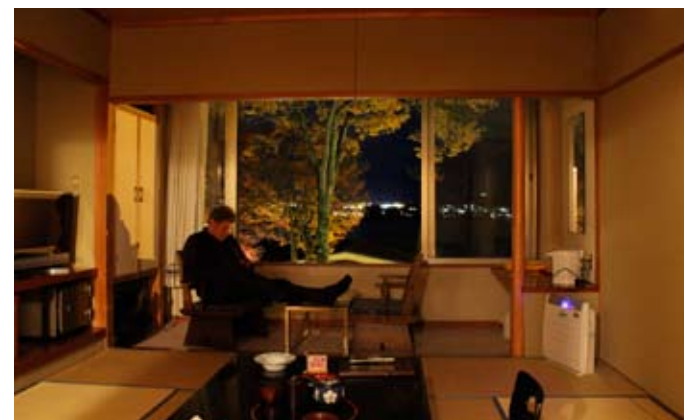
The next few minutes see a volley of talk about the quality of Wayne Rooney, Gerrard, Michael Owen... For better or worse I'm likened to Peter Crouch. They aren't footballers, they all play Baseball.

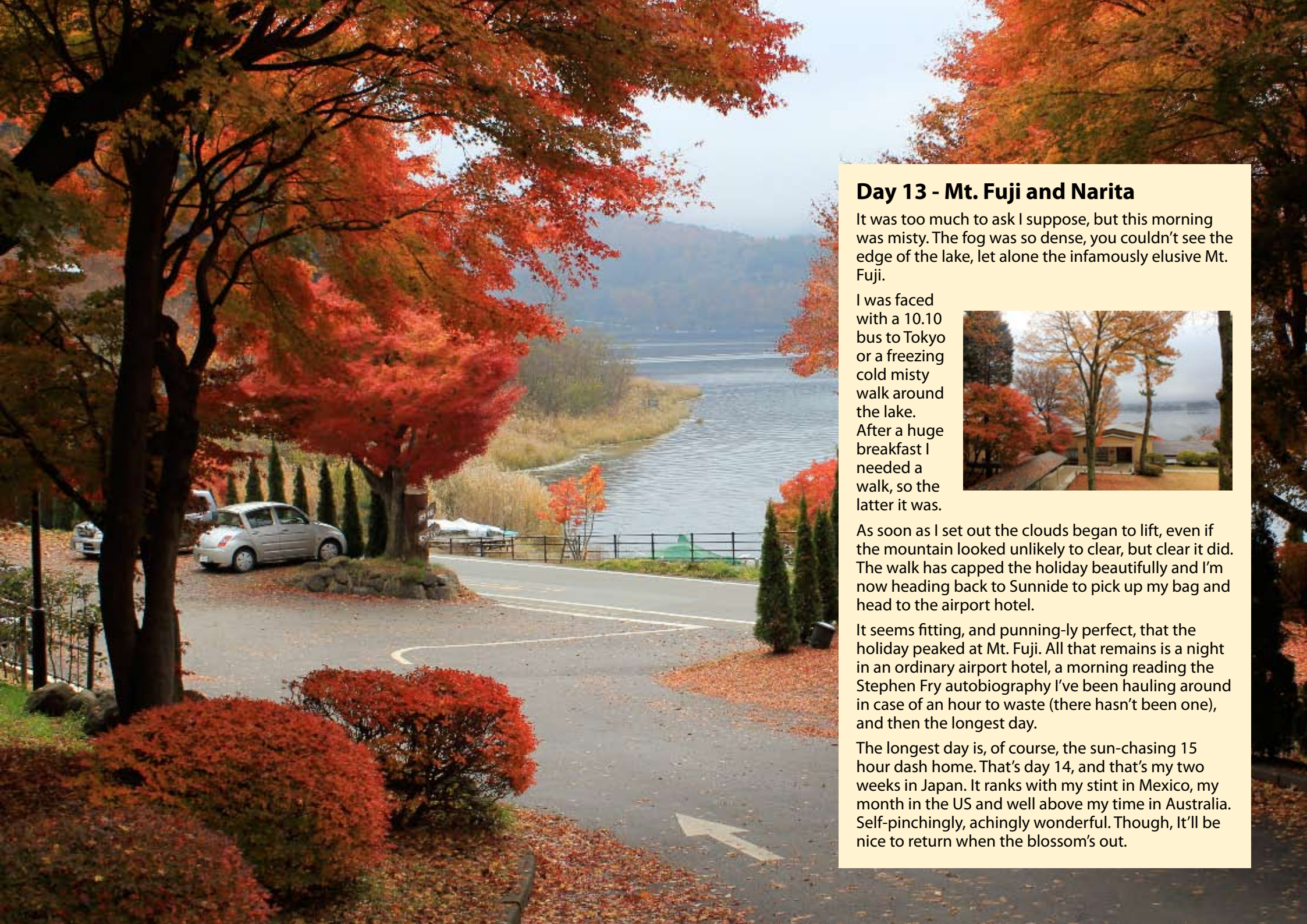
It's then that I notice, what I at first thought was moonlight on a tree, but it is, in fact, the beautiful peak of Mount Fuji. It's truly glorious and the clouds continue to clear. After dinner I race out with the camera, but I don't really get any successful shots.

Having said that, even if that's how I remember Mount Fuji, then it will have been worth it. If there's more tomorrow then so be it.

Dinner was a superb Japanese seven course affair. It consisted of Shokuzenshu and Zensai (aperitif with chestnuts, unpeeled wasabi nuts, pickle, cognac, mushroom, mushroom and sesame roll, etc.), Otsukuri (raw fish - sashimi - lobster, squid, tuna, snapper, marinated cod), Kawari-nabe (beautiful raw pork and vegetables which sat on a bamboo steamer for me to eat when it was ready), Mushinono (a truly revolting combination of egg custard with vegetables), Sunomono-gawari (Japanese style salmon carpaccio - honestly, a bit salty but the salad was lovely), Agemono (seafood and veg tempura - the main attraction and it was superb), Shokuji (rice, soup and Japanese pickles) and desert which was small cakes, fresh fruit, a blob of ice cream and a hot mug of green tea. Sorry, nine courses - but I didn't like two of them.

Whilst I ate, the guy at the front desk has rearranged my room to lay out a very comfy futon. Early night and a hope that tomorrow is a Sunnide. It's my last full one in this wonderful country.





Day 13 - Mt. Fuji and Narita

It was too much to ask I suppose, but this morning was misty. The fog was so dense, you couldn't see the edge of the lake, let alone the infamously elusive Mt. Fuji.

I was faced with a 10.10 bus to Tokyo or a freezing cold misty walk around the lake. After a huge breakfast I needed a walk, so the latter it was.



As soon as I set out the clouds began to lift, even if the mountain looked unlikely to clear, but clear it did. The walk has capped the holiday beautifully and I'm now heading back to Sunnide to pick up my bag and head to the airport hotel.

It seems fitting, and punning-ly perfect, that the holiday peaked at Mt. Fuji. All that remains is a night in an ordinary airport hotel, a morning reading the Stephen Fry autobiography I've been hauling around in case of an hour to waste (there hasn't been one), and then the longest day.

The longest day is, of course, the sun-chasing 15 hour dash home. That's day 14, and that's my two weeks in Japan. It ranks with my stint in Mexico, my month in the US and well above my time in Australia. Self-pinchingly, achingly wonderful. Though, it'll be nice to return when the blossom's out.

