

## Japan: The Authoritative Edition, by Andy Etter

### Day 0, Part 1

In keeping with my tried and true travel tradition (say that five times fast), I forgot to pack possibly my most essential item. That is correct: I am talking about the charger for my Nintendo DS. Judging from Japanese sales figures, however, the Nintendo DS is as ubiquitous as toothbrushes and rice cookers here. I expect to have a replacement within 24 hours.

So I was without entertainment for the majority of the eleven hour flight, which left me with plenty of time to ponder the fundamental questions of life, questions like:

- How the *hell* did I forget that charger?
- What deranged airline "chef" would think to pair what was essentially a chicken stroganoff with udon noodles, peas, carrots, and limp bell peppers?
- What if this plane and these people were the only reality I had ever known? Could this plane ever feel like home? (I was starting to lose my grip on reality by this point.)

In truth, the flight was uneventful. My seatmate was an exceedingly polite, friendly Japanese woman with flawless English. She advised me to, in situations where communication is difficult, *write it down*. "If you just write what you want and show it to them," she said, "most people will get it."

While the in-flight meals were atrocious (the second one was a day-old dinner roll and a single slice of processed turkey breast microwaved with Velveeta), at least they were included in the cost of the ticket. The overhead bins were spacious enough to accommodate my pregnant backpack. Even the TSA, who, aside from the Cal Poly administration, are my most-hated enemy, were helpful. When they caught me trying to smuggle a full water bottle through security ("We have a Code 32. Agent needed at Station 4 for a Code 32. Full canteen."), they acted like reasonable human beings.

"I'm supposed to escort you out of the security checkpoint and make you dispose of the water and get back in line," said the young, attractive agent, "but I will just go around the corner and dump it out for you." She was even smiling. A government employee... smiling? It was all so confusing.

### Day 0, Part 2

"You will be OK?" asked my seatmate from the plane after we cleared Japanese Customs together. She seemed concerned about me, which, in turn, concerned *me*.

"Yeah, I think so," I replied. "I just take the JR line to Narita and find a hotel, right?"

"Yes, and you know some hotels?"

"I do. My book has some."

She seemed unconvinced, but she smiled, held out her hand, and told me her name.

*And I can't remember it.*

I stopped at the tourist information booth at the airport in the hopes of acquiring a map of

Narita. The girl behind the counter was dressed in a full uniform with a hat that matched her green jacket. When I asked for a map, she said, "This all we have. This here. You take and talk to...." She handed me a brochure and gestured to the right.

The brochure was written in French. I read a few things, just to prove that I could, and threw it away.

The metro ride to Narita was a breeze, even without the tourist "assistance." It was then that I first noticed an interesting phenomenon about the Japanese when they ride the metro: they slip into comas, only to magically revive themselves eight seconds before reaching their destinations. It is outrageous to watch. They let their bodies and heads go completely limp, swaying back and forth as the metro creaks down the track. Then the train stops, and they open their eyes and take off striding at a ferocious pace.

It was pouring rain when I arrived in Narita. All my worries about the weather were coming true, and I shook my head at the thought that this could conceivably continue for two full weeks. I sprinted through the rain and purchased a horrible, clear plastic umbrella at a convenience store near the station. Getting a hotel room was a simple process, anyway, and because she spoke some English, I took the time to harass the front desk clerk.

"What is your favorite restaurant here?" I asked.

She handed me a tourist map with sixteen restaurants marked on it. "No, no," I said. "Where do you eat? What is your favorite?"

She drew an X on the map at an unmarked location and said, "Maru. Very famous, very good."

I ended up having a spicy bowl of broth with fatty pork, green onions, bean sprouts, a chicken sausage, and udon noodles. Everything arrived at my table raw, and the broth was cold. I was... a little concerned. But then the host, who spoke a bit of English, delivered a hot plate, cranked the heat to high, and instructed me to "wait wait wait pork cook." He checked in with me throughout the meal, always curious about me and where else I was going to go in Japan. In addition to the service, the food was outstanding. I am not sure I have ever eaten so much food and still felt so light upon standing up from the table. When I went to leave, the host bowed deeply and said, "Japan enjoy. Japan enjoy." I smiled and thanked him, awkwardly bowing as I made my way out.

He held the door open for me, and I was about to open my umbrella when I realized the rain had stopped.

## 『丸島鍋』とは？

白ごまの旨みと香味、コクを生かした、味噌スープで頂く「まる」特製鍋です！コラーゲンたっぷりの豚肉とビタミン豊富な野菜、そして抗酸化物質セサミンを含むゴマが美容と健康にも一役買う、元祖旨辛（うまから）鍋です！

鍋具材（豚肉、鶏つくね、豆腐、キャベツ、にら、もやし）



### Day 1, Part 1

I awoke early the next morning and went downstairs for breakfast. If the previous night's dinner was the most food I have ever eaten and still felt so light, the hotel breakfast was the least food I have ever eaten and still felt so heavy. I had a couple small rice balls — one with salmon and seaweed, the other with bonito flakes — a tiny bit of yogurt, some fruit, and a glass of orange juice. I was stuffed. Rice balls sit in your stomach like lead weights. I wanted to go straight back to bed, but Osaka and Trevor were waiting.

I made a quick stop at the temple in Narita before heading off to Tokyo Station, where I purchased a ticket for the shinkansen, the famed Japanese bullet train. Everyone talks about how fast it is, reaching speeds of 300 km/h, but I never saw any mention of how *quiet* it is. The train whispers along the track even as the landscape blurs outside the window. I arrived in Osaka in a mere two and a half hours and took a connecting train to the "suburbs," where Trevor was indeed waiting for me.



*Part of the temple at Narita.*



請内現山築

**Benzaitendō Hall**

The hall was erected in the Edo period and is one of the oldest structures in the Temple. It has a hōgyō-type roof. Benzaiten (Sarasvati), a Goddess of bliss, is enshrined here.



Trevor teaches English at a local high school, and he gave me a very thorough tour of it. The buildings were old but well-kept, and the grounds themselves were nothing but dirt. Every sports field was pure dirt, as well. "Grass is too hard to maintain," he explained, "so they have to play soft tennis. Four courts for 50 kids, but they manage."

"Soft tennis?" I asked.

"They use a spongy ball that bounces better on the dirt. Apparently our team is pretty good."

I met a few of Trevor's students, all of whom were eager to shake my hand and practice a few English phrases. Just about the first question from every student was, "How old are you?"

"Is it a pecking order thing?" I asked Trevor. "Are they sizing me up?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "but it is always the first question they ask. I mean, in North America, our first question is always 'what do you do?' At least that gives you some background information on a person. Here, they don't talk about work much. My wife does not know what her uncle does for a living, and all she knows about her father's job is that he works for the government."

Rob is the other English teacher at Trevor's high school. He has been working in Japan for 18 years. He married a Japanese woman and has two children. He asked to accompany

Trevor and me to dinner in order to avoid "fish night" at home.

"What's wrong with fish night?" I asked. "I like fish!"

"You come home from work," Trevor explained, "and the whole house smells like fish. And we're not talking about a nice fillet or some fancy preparation. We are talking about a whole fish, guts and all. Its eye stares up at you as you try and dissect it with a pair of chopsticks."

## **Day 1, Part 2**

Trevor and I made three stops before dinner: my hotel, his house, and a grocery store. My hotel is hardly worth mentioning. It was a Japanese business hotel. The room was small, and the bathroom was smaller. Still, I could not have cared less. When you are asleep, all hotel rooms look pretty much identical.

Trevor's house, though, was something special. Shrines, temples, castles, spectacular views — don't get me wrong: I love them all. But as I said to Trevor at the time, seeing a *real* house from a *real* foreign culture that *real* people *really* live in is "the sort of thing that gives me a cultural boner." It is rare to get a glimpse into how people of a foreign country actually live, and I appreciated the glimpse.

Trevor's father-in-law owns several rice paddies and rents out portions of them to friends and family. The paddies themselves are scattered around the town, and apparently the yield is so great that he is able to grow a year's supply in a single growing season with rice to spare. "There's something honorable about growing your own food," said Trevor.

"Especially the main staple of your diet," I nodded.







*Trevor's backyard.*

We walked to the grocery store. Beautiful slices of heavily marbled beef were everywhere. There were gorgeous, deep purple tuna fillets and pork cutlets to die for. "Is this Kobe beef?" I asked.

Trevor laughed. "Oh no, this is way too good of a deal to be Kobe beef."

I glanced at the prices. By my standards, this was heinously expensive beef: 400 yen for 100 grams (around \$15 per pound).

Our quick trip through the grocery store reminded me that I was starving, having not eaten anything since breakfast nine hours prior. I should not have worried. Trevor's boasting about "cabbage, pork, and egg pancakes with fried chicken the size of your fist and impossibly large beers" was entirely accurate. These pancakes, called okonomiyaki, are delicious, but the fun is in the atmosphere. The restaurant delivers a giant bowl of ready-to-fry goodness, and you prepare it however you like. "It literally translates to 'as you like it,'" Rob said. "The joke is that you can't screw it up. That's just as you like it."

Well, the "impossibly large beers" part of Trevor's statement might not have been accurate. They were large — .8 liters each, to be exact (around 27 ounces) — but that did not stop each of us from drinking three of them. The fried chicken in Japan, I should mention, is as good as I have had anywhere. Because there were five pieces of chicken between the three of us, we had an intense battle of rock-paper-scissors to determine who would not get a second piece. Trevor proved once again that he is unable to beat me at anything. Rob and I

devoured the chicken as Trevor sulked in the corner of the booth.



*Okonomiyaki and fried chicken.*

Completely stuffed, I assumed we were done eating. Trevor had other plans. We hopped on a train to another neighborhood and, stopping along the way to urinate and purchase a *charger for my Nintendo DS*, arrived at a yakitori restaurant staffed by a middle-aged man and two young waitresses. The next portion of the evening requires some explanation, so bear with me.

My roommate, Sebastian, and I have a running joke, one that particularly applies to waitresses. When we see an attractive girl, we will simultaneously say, "Dude, the search is over. There she is. She's the one. It's fate." We then proceed to argue over which one of us she is fated to be with for the next 20 minutes. It's juvenile, to be sure, but we are simple creatures, my roommate and I. Forgetting that I was not in the company of Sebastian, I looked over at Trevor and Rob and said, "This is it, boys. There she is. The search is over."

Normal friends would have laughed and moved on, but Trevor and Rob, determined to show me their mastery of Japanese compared to my complete ineptitude, began hitting on the waitress on my behalf. I protested. I put my head in my hands. I made gestures to Mami, the waitress, indicating that this was *not my idea*. Worse still is that Trevor and Rob are both married men. Fueled by alcohol and a desire to live vicariously through me, they were relentless. Mami seemed receptive to it all, though, smiling and waving to me often. We drank another four beers each while sharing plate after plate of juicy, skewered chicken. Yakitori is a funny thing. It is so simple. But a few chunks of quality chicken, some

seasoning, a sauce, and maybe a leek later, you end up with something truly special. I have spent much of my free time on this trip considering the variations of yakitori I am going to try when I arrive back home. My favorite idea thus far is pork loin with asparagus and a cilantro-lime dipping sauce.

Mami eventually joined us for a drink. (She stuck with tea.) Nearly an hour later, she offered me a ride back to my hotel, an act that was beyond generous. To be honest, I think she was concerned for my safety; there is no way I could have navigated the rail network in my current condition. Trevor and Rob were high-fiving each other as I left with Mami, but I want to stress that *nothing inappropriate occurred*. She dropped me off and made sure I made it inside before leaving. I stumbled up to my hotel room and forgot to turn on the air conditioner before falling into a deep, deep sleep.



*Mami and me.*

## **Day 2**

I awoke at 4:30 AM covered in sweat and clearly still intoxicated. As I fumbled with the air conditioning, I tried telling myself that this was all a bad dream. None of it was really happening. I overcame the Japanese controls after a few minutes and lay on the bed, basking in the cool air and hoping I could get back to sleep. For maybe ten minutes, I despaired, but I eventually drifted back into a fitful slumber.

I dragged myself into the shower around 9:00, and I was on the road, backpack shouldered,

by 10:00. I remembered Trevor's advice as I arrived at the train station. "Make sure you change trains at Izumi-sano," he had laughed. "Otherwise it will take you like two and a half hours to get into Osaka." At that point, however, two and a half hours sitting on an air conditioned train sounded just fine. I sat down in a corner seat and sipped water while the train clacked along the track, stopping every few minutes for two hours.



*Taken from the train into Osaka.*

When the train arrived in Osaka — Namba, to be exact — I felt significantly better. I wandered the streets for an hour before realizing that I was *really, really hungry*. I poked my head into the first cafe I saw that had Japanese people actually eating in it and blindly ordered the lunch special. "It is... chicken," the waitress said.

"Anything is fine," I said, lightly rubbing my temples.

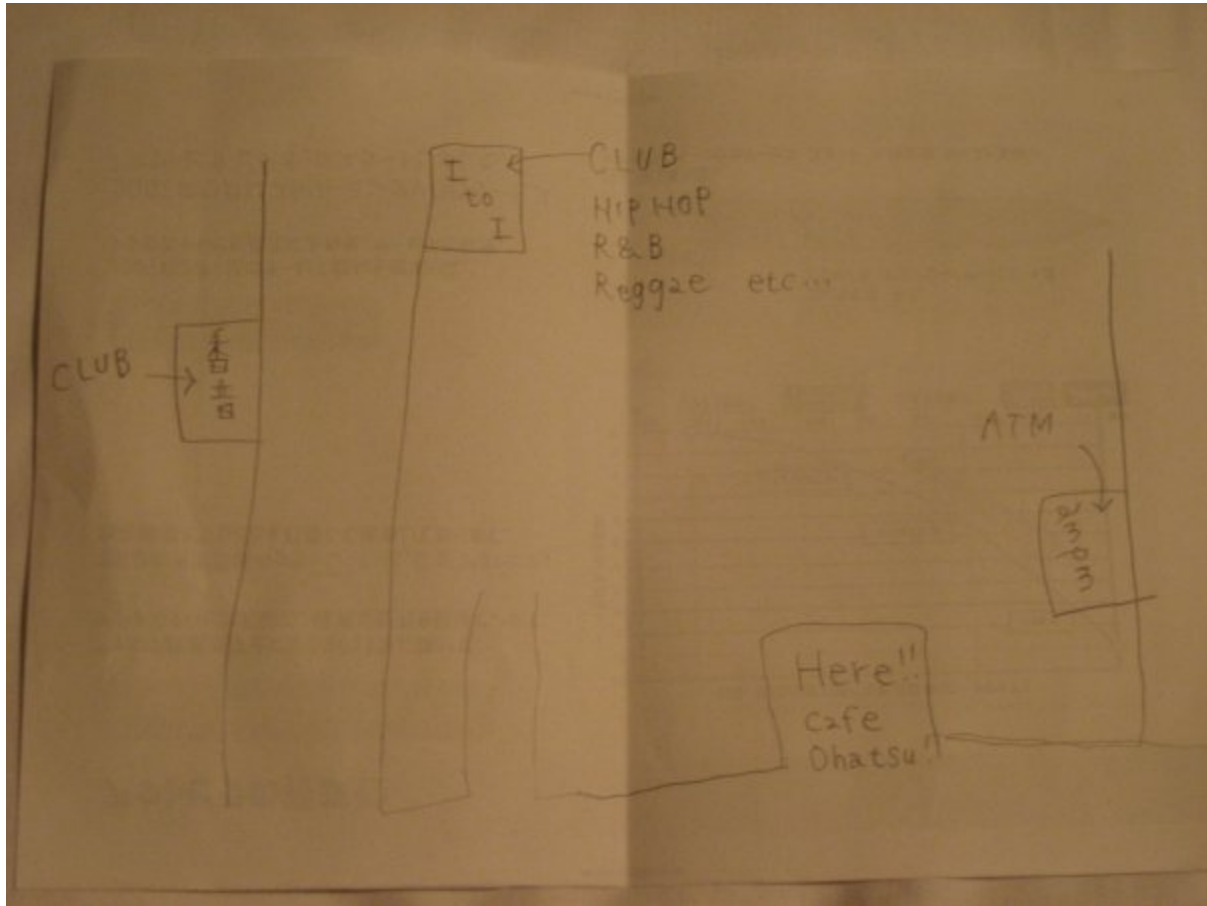
The other customers left a few minutes into my meal, and the waitress came to chat with me. "You are Australia?" she asked.

"No, California."

"Oh!" she cried, clapping her hands twice. "Very good! California!"

I asked her about clubs in the area. She drew me a map of the area and pointed at one of the clubs she had marked. "This one much, much fun," she said. Though I looked for it later

in the evening, I never did find it.



*What else does an American tourist need?*

After leaving the cafe, I happened upon a capsule hotel and got myself a room. I needed a nap, and at only \$25 a night, the capsule fit my wallet as snugly as my body.



*Capsules.*

After my nap, I went for a stroll. Without knowing it, I had based myself in Amerika-mura, a sort of deranged, Japanese imitation of New York City crammed into a few city blocks. The neighborhood was jam-packed with clothing stores blaring rap music and selling t-shirts with nonsensical phrases written on them. Bars, love hotels, and restaurants rounded out the mix of establishments.

I made my way to Dotonbori, the entertainment district of Osaka, and dined a rice bowl with fatty salmon that had *barely* touched the grill. It had a slightly charred exterior but was otherwise raw. The salmon had no odor whatsoever and literally melted on my tongue. I devoured it with a bit of wasabi and continued walking for another couple hours.



*The bright lights of Osaka.*

I was going to return to my capsule when I realized that a) it was only 9:30 and b) I had nothing to do. Sightseeing is a daytime activity, and I had squandered most of the day nursing my hangover. I wandered a bit more before following the sound of the Beatles — blaring from the stereo inside — into the aptly-named Mojo Bar.

The bar was deserted, but I ordered a beer and enjoyed the music. A girl walked in and sat on the stool adjacent to mine. She whipped out her cell phone in typical, Japanese fashion. I assumed she was meeting someone, working out the logistics of her evening. A few minutes later, she asked me where I was from. I answered, and she immediately returned to her cell phone. A few more minutes passed, and she asked how old I was. I answered, and she again returned to her phone. This pattern continued for maybe 15 minutes. I assumed she was making polite conversation before her friends arrived, but when I leaned over and regarded her cell phone, I saw that she was using it as a translator. She was typing out what she wanted to say, memorizing the English pronunciation, asking me the question, and



then typing any confusing words I used back into the cell phone, where they were translated to Japanese.

I had never had a conversation with a cell phone before. The whole thing intrigued me. I asked her name. She seemed confused, so I pointed at myself and said, "Andy."

"Me Rie!" she said, excited that I had finally asked *her* a question. She returned to her phone and then asked me what I thought about Japanese culture.

"Hard, hard. Me," I said, pointing to myself, "feel very stupid. In two weeks, maybe not so stupid."

"Me always stupid!" Rie laughed.

"No, no," I said. "You're not stupid."

She frowned and said, "Not stupid, but me very...." She pointed at her cell phone, which read "obedient; docile; flexible."

I choked on my beer before realizing that she had probably meant "easy-going." I never did find out, but there was no way that I was going to try and explain the miscommunication.

"My Sherona," by the Knack, came on over the stereo, and I briefly sang along to the chorus. Rie's eyes lit up. "You karaoke?" she asked.

"No, no!" I said. "Horrible, horrible singer."

She furiously keyed characters into her cell phone. "You come karaoke now," she said.

How could I refuse?

At this point, I should mention that Rie had consumed no fewer than eight alcoholic beverages and had sucked down nearly a pack of cigarettes, and she was a petite little thing. Still feeling the effects of the previous night, I had kept my consumption to a minimum — just a few beers. Rie seemed perfectly coherent, however, skipping along as we made our way to the karaoke bar.

Karaoke bars in Japan are *slick*. For a small, hourly fee, you get your own, private room and watered-down, all-you-can-drink beverages. I also suspect that the karaoke software makes efforts to improve your performance by leveling out your tone or increasing the volume on the master track. All I know is that I have never sang that well before, and I will never sing that well again.



*Rie and me.*

At Rie's request, I sang Radiohead, the Knack, Green Day, and a few other bands. Rie stuck with Beyonce and Avril Lavigne, though she did branch out and sing a bit of Japanese pop near the end of the set. I doubt too many of my readers are familiar with the Beyonce single "Brown Eyes." A portion of the chorus goes thusly:

*And when he looks at me, his brown eyes tell his soul.*

On the second or third time through the chorus, Rie looked at me through her eyelashes and sang, "His bruuuuuuuuue eyes tell his soul."

I have seen puppies and kittens and babies — all types of small animals, really — doing charming things. Trust me when I say that this was the most adorable thing in the history of mankind.

By the time we left, Rie had quaffed another four or five drinks and smoked another half a pack of cigarettes. A bit concerned for her safety, I walked her to her bicycle, which was parked nearby. I then watched her — thirteen drinks deep, folks — ride off into the night *without wobbling even once*. It was like watching an archer fire an arrow on a calm afternoon.

I got the feeling that Rie is one of those friends you are glad to have, but with whom you cannot hang out more than twice a month.



*Rie singing Japanese pop.*

### **Day 3, Part 1**

I'll admit: I felt guilty when I awoke the next morning. I had come to Japan was to see *cool stuff*, not party, and aside from the high school and Trevor's house, I had done remarkably little sightseeing. Determined to get an early and productive start on my day, I got out of my capsule at 8:00 AM and jumped in the... jumped in the...

"Wait," I asked myself, "where the hell is the shower?"

I found a wandering maid and asked her where I was supposed to bathe, pantomiming the process of soaping my chest for her benefit. She pointed at a sign near the stairs. "Men's Shower B2," it read.

"Oh," I said, kicking myself mentally as I bowed to her. "Thank you very much."

I went downstairs and took a towel off of a nearby shelf when I reached the second basement floor. Then I turned the corner and saw 30 naked Japanese businessmen strolling around a large room. Some were dressing in front of their lockers, while others were regarding themselves in front of a row of mirrors. No one was making any attempt to conceal himself. Not a single towel was around a single waist.

"When in Rome...." I shrugged, stripping down and making my way into the communal bath with a bar of soap and a washcloth in hand. To my right were six rows, each with five

showers. Men were sitting on tiny wooden stools and scrubbing themselves thoroughly. To my left was an enormous pool of water with maybe six men soaking in it. I decided to forgo the bath in favor of *getting out of there as quickly as possible*, but the basic idea of the communal baths in Japan is: shower, then bathe. The bathwater is changed only daily; being clean when you step into it is essential.

I shouldered my backpack and wandered through the heart of the city to the Osaka Museum of History. The museum was well-run with a friendly staff, but when you can only read the most basic description of a particular artifact, some of the appreciation is lost on you. For every giant block of kanji, there was *maybe* a single sentence of English. Still, most of the items on display *looked really cool*, and I tried my best to appreciate them. I wandered around the museum for an hour and a half before turning my attention towards my stomach.



*The museum.*



*I think these plates are 500 years old.*



There was a small snack shop a few hundred yards from the museum. Normally I try to avoid tourist-oriented establishments, but I hadn't eaten breakfast. I was famished.

It's worth noting that, during my two and a half weeks in Japan, I ate many, many bowls of noodles. The noodles at this snack shop were without a doubt the worst I had. Even still, I'd rate them "pretty good." They weren't inedible, they weren't unhealthy, and they only cost \$4. It was a nice change from the \$4 lunch options of the United States.

Anyway, I made my way to Osaka-jo, the local castle. The castle was originally completed in 1583, only to be destroyed in 1615, rebuilt again by 1625, and destroyed again in 1868. Despite being a reconstruction, it was spectacular. The heat and humidity, however, were unspectacular. I treated myself to some ice cream on the way to the train station.



*The castle grounds.*



*Osaka-jo itself. A Chinese man offered to take this picture for me while the two girls with him giggled off to the side.*





*Osaka is more attractive than it gets credit for.*

I enjoyed the ride to Okayama. Osaka had been too large of a city for me to wrap my head around, and everyone I had spoken to about Okayama had used the word “rural” to describe it. As I watched the countryside whiz by outside the window of the bullet train, I *knew* I had made the right decision. Osaka had been nice, but I wanted something more real, something more down to earth. Then I noticed that Okayama had a population of 630,000.

“Rural,” I thought. “Yeah.”

### **Day 3, Part 2**

Okayama was not what I expected. The train station, while quaint compared to that of Tokyo and Osaka, was still a massive structure packed with an uncomfortable number of people, stores, and restaurants. The city itself was large and modern, basically a downsized version of the neon and towering structures of Osaka paired with a lower population density. Still, there *was* something rural about Okayama. Fashion was more conservative, and the people seemed to be strolling as often as they were striding. A young boy tugged at his mother’s dress and pointed at me as I walked past. The mother didn’t look surprised to see me, but she didn’t look unsurprised, either.

I made my way to a ryokan, a Japanese-style inn, near the train station. I was tired of staying in business hotels, and Lonely Planet had given the establishment its highest recommendation. It was easy to see why. The rooms were spacious, spotless, and quaint. The staff was almost too courteous and spoke excellent English. There were even two

computers in the lobby set up for complementary internet access. Happy to finally be able to ditch my backpack, I took a quick shower and went looking for food.



*My hotel room.*





Too cute.

Much of my fun, and exercise, in Japan came while I was looking for food. I would often wander for an hour or more before finding a suitable establishment, namely one that smelled good and was crowded with Japanese patrons. I was looking for just such a restaurant when I heard a voice call out, "Hey, man, you looking for food? You hungry?"

I turned around and saw a tall African man with short, neat dreadlocks. His Hawaiian shirt was mostly unbuttoned, and his smile was blinding. "Speak English?" he asked. "I am meeting a friend here soon if you want to join us for dinner."

"Is the food good? Don't lie to me!" I joked, pointing at him.

"Yes, it is good food," he laughed. "My name is Mamadu."

"Andy," I said, shaking his hand.

Mamadu, it turned out, was a musician from Guinea who had lived in Japan for 19 years. "Just Africa and Japan," he said, when I asked if he had traveled anywhere else in his life. "I would like to visit California very much."

"So how did you learn English?" I asked.

"From the music, man. Reggae, R&B, rap, rock — I love it all. I think every genre has something special about it."

I nodded. It was a common response. Even if they don't like a particular piece of art, most artists are able to find *something* about it to admire. I was pondering Mamadu's answer when his friend arrived.

Attired in what I can only describe as a little black dress, Mamadu's friend was a tallish Japanese woman of maybe 35 years. (Because it is impossible to tell the age of Japanese women, my standard method of estimating age was to estimate the age of the guy a particular woman was with, and Mamadu had told me he was 36 years old.) After we had dispensed with the usual pleasantries, I inquired as to the woman's profession.

"She does — I think it is the same name in English — S&M performance," Mamadu said.

"What's that?" I asked. "Like acrobatics?"

"No, not really. You know, S&M, where you can walk woman like dog."

I boggled. I was sure I had heard him correctly, but I had no idea what he was talking about. I later found out that S&M stands for sadomasochism and typically involves leather-clad women inflicting and accepting punishment in some bizarre sort of sexual role-playing.

Still, the woman was exceedingly polite. When she heard that I enjoyed food and cooking, she insisted that I try at least a bite of everything on the table. She refilled my water continuously and refused to accept my money at the end of the meal.

"She took care of it, man," Mamadu said when I pulled out my wallet.

"Can I please pay her?" I asked. "I feel bad. She just met me."

"No, she will not take your money. She likes you! Do you want to meet us for drinks later? We are going out tonight."

I considered the offer. Even in my ignorance, I was *pretty sure* this woman was some type of stripper. Mamadu was nice, but there was something about him that set off my mental alarm; earlier, he had seemed a little too interested in where I was staying. I had feigned ignorance and provided him with vague answers.

"Yeah," I said, "give me your phone number and I'll call you from my hotel. I need to shower and change clothes."

I really did need to change clothes, but I had no intention of calling Mamadu. Instead, I went for a stroll around Okayama. I don't know what I was looking for. If I'd seen a friendly bar, I know I'd have stopped for a drink, but I think I just wanted to take the city's pulse. I walked for a couple hours before realizing that I was in the Dead Zone.

I call it the Dead Zone because it was a large portion of my map without a single marked point of interest — no sights, no hotels, no restaurants, no bars, no street names. It was a blank grid. I veered back towards the train station and saw a handful of large, well-lit signs along the road. I was looking for a reason to stop by this point. The signs represented the hope of a comfortable chair and a drink.

A scantily-clad woman approached me and spoke in a voice that was probably intended to be sexy, but instead was creepy. Think the Wicked Witch of the West soliciting you for prostitution in Japanese. "I'll get you, my pretty!" she seemed to cackle. "But your dog will cost extra!"

I said nothing to the woman and quickened my pace. Another three women appeared around me. Two of them took up positions on either side of me, while the third walked backwards directly in front of me. They cooed and extended their hands. In response, I jaywalked to the other side of the busy street. The other side was an improvement; only one woman harassed me. "Japan best massage," she said, making a vulgar gesture with her hands.

By the time I had arrived back at my hotel, I had resolved to get a good night's sleep and an early start the next morning; Okayama only had a few notable sights, and there was no way I was going to spend a second night there.

#### **Day 4, Part 1**

I didn't think that, of all the things in Japan, *gardens* would be a highlight for me. But it makes perfect sense, given my love of Japanese art and cuisine. The Japanese seem to follow the axiom "less is more." They have realized, and continue to strive for, elegance in simplicity. A fresh piece of fish doesn't *need* to be paired with anything to be delicious, in the same way that a perfect rose bud could exist in a vacuum and still enchant us. There's a purity inherent in the Japanese notion of beauty, the idea of capturing existence itself at its absolute peak.

So I'll let Koraku-en, the garden at Okayama, speak for itself.



*On the way to the garden.*















A woman stopped me as I was making my way out of the garden, towards the castle. She was tending a small table of confections. "You try," she said, motioning towards a bowl of quartered candies. I sampled one of the gelatin-based candies. It wasn't bad, but I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't have rather had a gumdrop.

"You like?" the woman inquired.

"Yes, very much," I lied. "Unique."

It was the wrong answer. The woman thrust a box in front of me. "It is... one-thousand yen. Big box two-thousand."

"No, no," I said. "No room in backpack."

"You are American?" she asked.

"Yes, California."

"Oh! I know song by... you know, I wish they all could be California girls." She was singing. A Japanese woman was singing the Beach Boys to me in the middle of one of the most beautiful gardens in Japan. Was I really here right now? Was this seriously happening? I tried to keep my eyes from betraying my thoughts.

"Beach Boys," I said.

"Beach Boys?" she repeated.

"Yes, Beach Boys."

"Oh, yes, yes, yes. Beach Boys. Yes. You want traditional tea Japanese?"

No, no thank you," I said, bowing as I walked away.

"Please have fun Japan!" the woman shouted after me. I bowed in response and continued towards Okayama-jo.

Thankfully, the builders of the castle, back in 1597, remembered to include central air conditioning. No, just kidding! The reality is that, due to Japan's history of internal and external warfare, most castles in Japan are restorations. Still, I was too warm to care about the authenticity of the castle. The air conditioning felt wonderful on my sweat-soaked skin.

The bottom floors of the castle were something of a miniature museum, with relevant artifacts on display, things like tax records, suits of armor, swords, and art. I made the climb to the top floor and enjoyed the view for a few minutes before turning back towards the train station.



29日の、市街地空襲により焼失した。

現在の天守閣は、昭和41年（1966）11月に鉄筋コンクリート造りで再建されたもので、外観は全く旧来の通り復元されている。

## OKAYAMA CASTLE (Ujo)

Okayama Castle was built in 1597 by Lord Ukita Hideie who governed Okayama, then known as the province of Bizen. Its Tenshu-kaku (Donjon or castle tower) and adjacent watch towers are designated National Treasures, as they fully show the spirit of the Azuchi-Momoyama Period with their beauty and grandeur. Okayama Castle has been nicknamed "Ujo" (Crow Castle), stemming from the black exterior of the Donjon. This is due to the dark weather boards covering the castle's outer walls.

The original Castle was destroyed during a World War II air raid.

The present keep was reconstructed in 1966.

### 岡山城の特徴

- 1 不等辺五角形の天守台  
この城の天守台は、北に大きく突き出た不等辺五角形で、全国に例のない珍しい形をしている。
- 2 野面積（のづらづみ）の石垣  
これは、日本全国に近代的な城づくりが始められた頃

### Characteristics of Okayama Castle

- 1) The base of the Donjon is an irregular pentagon.
- 2) The outer stone walls were constructed using natural round stones. Known as "Nozura-zumi" this method of construction

月見橋

Tsukumi Bridge

至徳楽園

To Kokuen Gate

## Characteristics of Okayama Castle

等辺五角形

- 1) The base of the Donjon is an irregular pentagon.
- 2) The outer stone walls were constructed using natural round stones. Known as "Nozura-zumi", this method of construction depicts an ancient style of stone-wallbuilding.
- 3) The second floor of the Donjon houses a replica of the actual Lord's Chamber. This type of display is rare in existing Japanese castles.

始められた頃  
を中心として、  
た石垣がこれ

残を残す書院造  
している。  
よくご覧になれます。





*A kindly old man noticed that I was alone and asked if he could take a photo for me.*

Along the way, I noticed a sushi bar, walked in, and reeled at the scene. Eight chefs were standing in the middle of an enormous, circular bar, shouting at each other and frantically plating endless varieties of sushi. A conveyor belt covered in small plates ran the length of the counter. Waiters were running around the perimeter of the establishment, delivering checks and taking drink orders. Save a few vacant stools, the bar was completely full. I sat down next to an old woman, who regarded me quizzically for a moment before pointing to a small bowl of powdered green tea. She handed me a mug and said, "Two spoons."

I thanked her, dumped two small spoonfuls of powder into the bottom of my mug, and topped it off with scalding water from one of the many spouts attached to the bar. I grabbed what I knew to be fatty tuna belly as it approached on the conveyor belt.

It was love at first bite. Where had this *been* all my life? *Toro*, I thought, dipping it lightly in my shallow dish of soy sauce. This was a word to remember.

I was so enamored with the toro that, when I arrived at the train station, I realized that I *did not know where I was going next*.



*This is a (bad) shot of a conveyor belt sushi joint. I didn't want to be any more conspicuous than I already was.*

### **Day 4, Part 2**

My continuing quest to find "rural" Japan led me to choose Matsue as my next destination. A city of around 150,000 people, Matsue seemed as close as I was going to get to rural without going too far out of my way. I shouldered my backpack and boarded the northbound "limited express" train out of Okayama. Though the name suggests otherwise, limited express trains departed every 15 minutes or so.



*Taken from the train on the way to Matsue.*

The train glided along the tracks, and I became curious about my destination. The more I read about Matsue, the more I knew I had made the right decision. Matsue was known, Lonely Planet said, for its seafood, sunsets over Lake Shinji, and laid-back atmosphere. An original castle and nearby art museums and shrines were the chief tourist attractions. Accommodations appeared reasonable in cost, and the city looked compact enough that walking would be a non-issue.

My hotel was more than reasonable. For \$50 a night, I had a spotless room on the sixth floor in the middle of downtown, complete with a westward view over the lake and a complementary breakfast. Matsue itself was picturesque. Narrow canals littered the streets, which were alive with people without feeling crowded or rushed. No one seemed to be in any sort of hurry, a sharp contrast to Osaka and the insanity of Tokyo's central station. Attire was subdued but still somewhat formal. There was none of the ultra-chic, zany neon of the big cities. This was a city. To me, this felt more like a home, less like Las Vegas.



*Looking out over Lake Shinji in Matsue.*



Uh.

After a quick shower to remove the stench of travel, I found a crowded restaurant and requested a table for one. The waitress ushered me to a small table with four cushions around it before taking my drink order and scurrying off to the kitchen. Not knowing what else to do, I folded my calves under my thighs and sat bolt upright with my butt on my feet. The waitress returned, beer in hand, and started giggling loudly. "Relax, relax!" she said.

I extended my legs under the table and loosened my posture. "OK?" I asked.

"Good, good," she said, placing my beer in front of me. "Maybe more beer, more relax."

I laughed, took a gulp of beer, and stared helplessly at the menu. The waitress held it in front of me and pointed at some prominent characters. "You know sashimi?" she asked.

"Yes, I like very much."

"OK, sashimi."

When she returned with my dinner, the waitress made a point of identifying the silver-skinned fish in the sashimi set. "This... skipjack," she said, pointing at it with pride.

"Oh, OK. Thank you."

Not being familiar with the fish, I didn't know what else to say. I later found out that skipjack is another name for bonito, the most important fish in Japanese cooking. Practically every broth in Japan starts with dried, shaved bonito. The waitress seemed slightly put out, so I asked her about the other fish. She mumbled to herself, pulled out her cell phone, and finally said, "Sea bream."

"Oh!" I said. "Sea bream, yes."

"You know?"

"Yes, yes," I said. "Very good."

The waitress beamed. "Beer?" she asked.

"Hai, nama biiru," I said.

"Good, good!" the waitress said, beaming a second time.

The sashimi was excellent, but what really surprised me were the fish eggs. They exploded in my mouth with a delightful pop and a rush of liquid, a delicious surprise. The octopus was too chewy for my taste. The eel would have been fantastic, but hundreds of tiny, crunchy bones marred its distinctive flavor.



The sashimi set.



*The aftermath.*

After dinner, I found a deserted bar staffed by two young women. I ended up teaching the bartender how to make a martini and was getting ready to leave when an honest-to-God white girl walked through the door. She spoke to the bartender in Japanese, however, and walked directly into the bathroom. Put out, I sipped at my nearly-empty drink.

The girl returned, grabbed the beer she had ordered, and took a seat in the opposite corner of the bar without even glancing at me. I frowned. This night was not unfolding as I had hoped. "Well?" the girl shouted across the bar. "Are you going to join me?"

"I hadn't planned on it," I laughed. "Would you mind some company?"

"Grab a chair. I'm only over here because I like the view out the window."

We talked for 20 minutes before exchanging names. Tonya was an English teacher living in Matsue. Originally from Australia, she had a strange demeanor, an odd mix of sociability and introversion. She often mentioned "hating people," but asked me to tell story after story. When I asked her to tell me one, she steadfastly insisted that she had no funny stories to tell.

"You've been here for six months, you just got back from Vietnam, and you have no stories to tell? Come on," I said.

"It's just, well, I was broke for a time when I was between jobs. I wasn't doing much of

anything, you know?"

"How'd you manage?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. You see, my school went out of business after I'd been here for just a few months. I went four weeks without paying for food. My friends and coworkers invited me over for dinner every night. I have a job now, though, and my father sent me some money. So drinking," she said, pausing to finish her beer, "is financially acceptable now."

A friend of Tonya's, a Japanese girl who looked around 16 years of age, joined us a short while later. Michiko spoke excellent English, and she was clearly excited to use it. She assaulted me with questions, all of which were formed with perfect grammar. When I told her my age, however, she said, "Oh, so young!"

"How old are you?" I asked, thinking maybe I had underestimated her age by a year or two.

"Twenty-eight," she said.

I was floored. Michiko had mentioned that her mother had dropped her off at the bar, and she had enormous buck teeth that jutted out past her upper lip when she smiled. Her outfit was reminiscent of a schoolgirl's uniform. It was then that I decided I would stop trying to estimate the age of Japanese women.

The girls mentioned that there was a "house party" across the street. "Do you dance?" Tonya asked.

"No," I said, "but I'll stand at the bar and drink."

The party was in a smoky basement, and a mixed drink was included in the cover charge. Fighting the bass, I tried to convey my desire for a whiskey cola to the bartender. I ended up just pointing at a random item on the soaking wet drink menu. I then watched the bartender pour me a double shot of gold tequila and top it off with orange juice. This night was *really* not unfolding as I had hoped. I sipped my drink and surveyed the scene.

Two DJs from Tokyo were on an elevated platform on the far side of the basement, but what held my attention was the dancing. I couldn't discern a rhythm or pattern in the motions of the people on the dance floor. They would abruptly spasm from one leg to the other and back again, stopping to take a sip from their drinks or a drag on their cigarettes. It was hysterical, and I sincerely wish I could better convey their motions in words. This was something that had to be seen to be believed. I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone.

Maybe an hour later, Michiko informed me that her mom had come to pick her up. I tried to keep from laughing, made her spell her name for me, and thanked the girls for showing me a side of Japan I could never have seen without inside help. The girls, by this point quite drunk, asked if I knew how to get back to my hotel. "Yeah, I think I'll manage," I laughed. "It's right across the street."

## **Day 5**

Day 5 is when it all caught up to me. The drinking, the late nights, the early mornings, the long days, the heat, the humidity—I awoke feeling like I had been struck by a bus. It seemed like no matter how much water I drank, I never needed to use the restroom. With all my walking, I was burning a lot of energy, and Japanese food is anything but calorie-laden. I felt awful.



I was determined, however, to press on. I ate some breakfast, threw my laundry in the hotel's washing machine, and went to look for an ATM. A half hour later, mission accomplished, I returned to the hotel to move my clothes into the dryer. While there, I asked the front desk clerk if there were any nearby internet cafés. She handed me a map and circled a nondescript building around a mile away. I had an hour to kill while I waited for my laundry, so I wandered off towards the café.

An hour and a half later, I finally admitted to myself that I was lost. I had gotten turned around after weaving through a sports complex and had walked a mile or more in the wrong direction. It was hot and humid, and I was wearing jeans; my shorts were in the dryer. I stopped at a vending machine, purchased a grape soda, and considered the situation. I knew the basic direction I needed to go, but my location was a mystery to me. I took a drink and felt a drop of rain splash on my hand.



*Lost in Matsue.*



Still lost in Matsue.

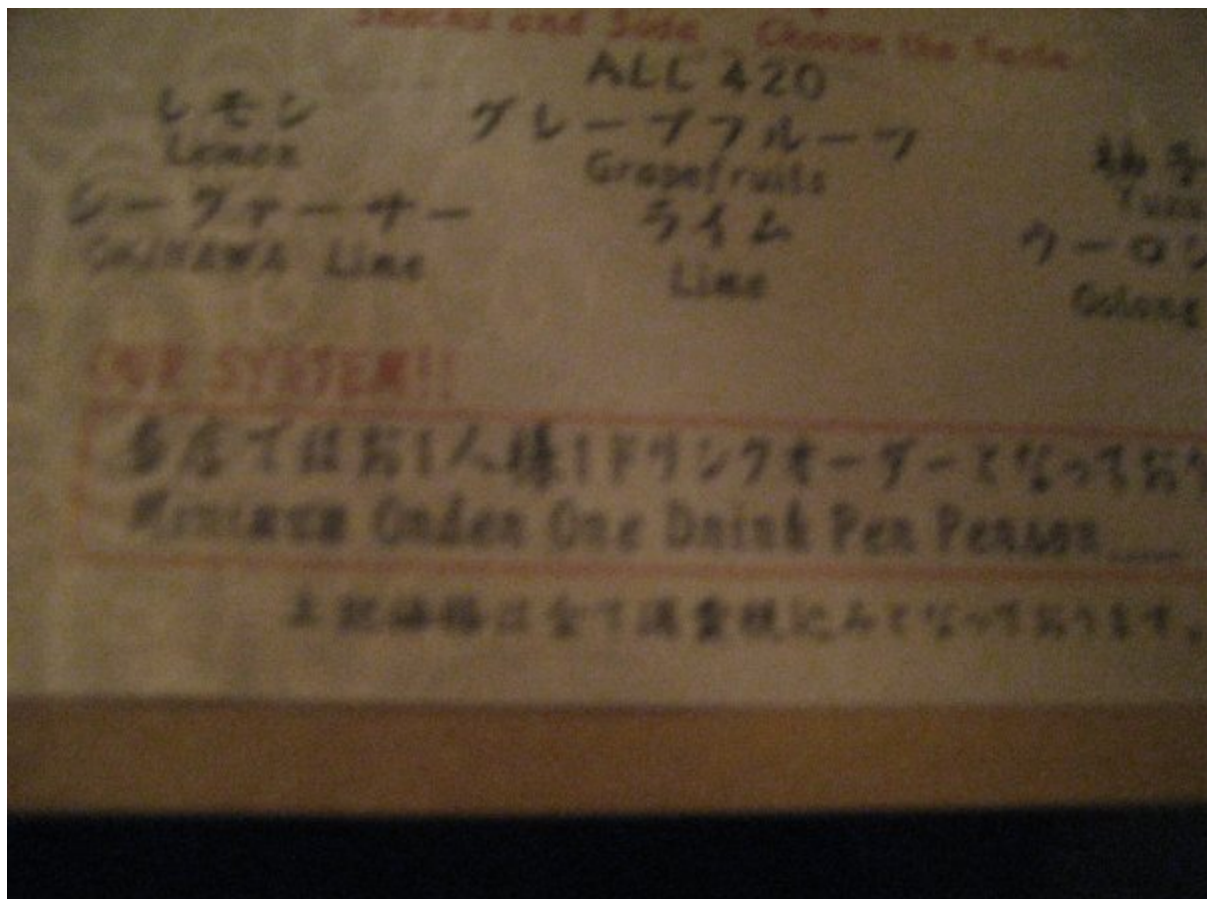
The hour-long walk back to my hotel was beyond miserable—heat, humidity, rain, my diminished physical condition, and worst of all, the knowledge that the entire situation was *my own damn fault*. When I arrived back at the hotel, the first thing I did was tell the front desk clerk that I would be staying another night. Izumo Taisha, Matsue Castle, and the Adachi Museum of Art would have to wait. I drank as much water as I could stomach and dropped face-first onto my pillow.

I awoke five hours later and felt a little better. As I drank yet more water and retrieved my laundry, I realized that what I really needed was food. I checked the hotel's restaurant directory and hustled off to the first establishment I could find that a) had an English menu and b) specialized in something other than fish. I wanted *solid* food. I wanted *calories*. Looking back now, it was a historic decision; I proceeded to have one of the best meals of my life.

The best thing about yakitori restaurants is the *variety*. At most restaurants, you get a large entrée—usually a protein, a starch, and some vegetables. But in yakitori restaurants, you pick your own assortment. With portions so small and prices so reasonable, it's easy to have ten small plates of different grilled meats and vegetables. I felt like a king as I ordered. "Yes, this, this, this... and this... that, too..." I said, pointing. "Oh, this..."

In the end, I feasted on chicken thigh, chicken cartilage, pork loin with leek oil, scallops, pork and asparagus "meat rolls," and chicken breast with avocado, yuba, and tuna. I also requested, and ate, two bowls of rice, to make no mention of the enormous, mixed

vegetable salad that I devoured with glee. To wash down all this food, I had a large glass of iced plum liqueur, two beers, and ten glasses of water. The wait staff, after filling my water glass for the fourth time, brought me my own pitcher. The chicken cartilage represented the only weak point of the meal. Its flavor was outstanding, but its texture was an odd cross between elastic and crispy. I could feel it gently giving way between my molars before cracking with an audible pop. It was too strange for me to ever consider ordering it again, but I *had* to try it.



*It's hard to make out, but the menu reads "Minimum Order One Drink Per Person," and they weren't talking about sodas. My kind of place!*

Feeling very content after dinner, I strolled around town, looking for a distraction. A half hour later, I spotted a Guinness sign through a row of windows and was delighted to see that a bar was open so late on a Sunday night. The bartender spoke excellent English. When he handed me a coaster for my beer, the name on it caught my eye. "Oh, this is Filaments?" I asked.

Lonely Planet had recommended a bar called Filaments, but the night prior, I had been unable to find it. I'd mentioned this to Tonya. She'd told me, "I heard Lonely Planet and the Rough Guide made Filaments too popular with tourists. The owner was upset that he was losing his local business, so he moved the bar, even though the rent is higher at the new place."

The bartender laughed. "You know us from Lonely Planet, yes?"

"Yeah, I heard you changed locations because of that book. Is that true?"

"Yes, yes."

"So I am part of the problem, I guess."

"No, no," said the bartender. "You are welcome here. I always have need of company, because I am workaholic and alcoholic."

I started to laugh, but stopped myself; the bartender was not laughing. His face was contemplative. "Well you have very good English," I said, trying to change the subject.

"Yes," he said, "many Japanese do not want to use English because it is not perfect. But to me, language is just a tool. You know, a tool for communication. It is to be used."

A short while later, a young woman and an older couple joined us. The bartender was kind enough to include me in the conversation by translating the gist of any funny jokes. At one point, the bar erupted in laughter. The bartender pointed to the young woman and said, "We are laughing at her, because she is hostess. It is her job to please customers. But she is not busy with business, only busy with love."

"Her boyfriend drives trucks for... one week trips, you know? One week gone each trip. He is long time away. When he is not here, she has too little customers to keep busy."

I smiled appreciatively. The atmosphere was wonderful. I felt as if I was among old friends. The older woman asked if I had ever tried what the bartender described as a "traditional Japanese summer cocktail" and insisted that I try hers. I ordered one of my own after one sip. The cocktail was a mix of red perilla, ginger ale, and lemon juice—very refreshing. The older man spoke some English and asked me a few questions, things like my home town, how long I was staying in Japan, and my age.

"I'm twenty-four years old," I said, trying to speak slowly, "and I'm from California. I was born in Alaska, though."

The older woman started laughing and spoke a few words to her husband. "How old do you think she is?" he asked.

I paused. With the memory of Michiko fresh in my mind, I was loathe to give an honest estimate. The woman *looked* 60. I studied her for a moment and, with as straight of a face as I could muster, said, "Thirty-five."

The bar erupted in laughter again. I was just happy to have deflected the question. "Where are you going next?" the bartender inquired.

"I am trying to decide between Tottori and Hiroshima," I said. "Where do you recommend?"

"I am biased, because I am from Hiroshima-ken," he said. "But I think Hiroshima is very important place, good to visit."

"I want to visit, but I heard I might not be welcome there," I said.

The bartender shrugged. "The A-bomb is passed, done and gone. We have to, I think, look to the future."

"I agree," said the older man.

The bar was quiet for a long moment. Then the young woman asked the bartender if she could see the snack menu.

### **Day 6, Part 1**

Years ago, the American humorist Dave Barry wrote of international travel, "The major problem here is that foreign destinations tend to contain enormous quantities of foreigners (in the form of Japanese tourists)." This made me smile when I read it at the time of publication, but it was only after I did some sightseeing in Japan that I realized the greatest concentration of Japanese tourists *exists in Japan itself*. It's not something one normally considers, the presence of domestic tourists when visiting a foreign country. But the Japanese are notoriously well-traveled; I should have anticipated lots and lots of company.

So it caught me off guard when, after stopping to photograph some turtles on my way to Matsue Castle, a throng of Japanese tourists descended upon my location with the tenacity of a mother determined not to miss her baby's first steps. "What?" they seemed to be asking. "He's taking pictures? The white kid is taking pictures? What's he looking at? Quick, go! It must be interesting!"

When the tourists realized I was photographing nothing more interesting than a trio of turtles, most of them wandered back to their impeccably-dressed, flag-holding tour guide wearing masks of profound disappointment. The few that remained halfheartedly snapped a photo or two before rejoining the group. This was not a group of people with whom I could coexist, and we were bound for the same destination. I needed to get ahead of them. I dabbed my forehead with a small towel and quickened my pace.



*On the way to Matsue Castle.*



*Turtles!*

I don't want to downplay how cool Matsue Castle was. I mean, it's a gorgeous, **original** Japanese castle built in 1611—no restorations here, unlike in Osaka and Okayama. Still, I was suffering from Japanese Castle Overload by this point, an affliction similar to European Cathedral Overload. Symptoms include being desensitized to large, imposing structures of great beauty. The castle was spectacular, but it was "just another castle," as absurd as the statement might sound.

## MATSUE CASTLE

The castle was built in 1611 by Horio Yoshiharu who took five years (1607-1611) to complete it. It was the stronghold of the feudal lords: Three generations of the Horios, one of the Kyogokus, and ten of the Matsudairas. The castle is an example of a practical fortress, or a watch-tower rather than a castle-residence.

"From under the black scowl of the loftiest eaves, looking east and south, the whole city can be seen at a single glance, as in the vision of a soaring hawk." (Lafcadio Hearn)

*Some background information.*





*Matsue-jo.*



*Miniaturized Matsue.*



*Matsue, as viewed from the top floor of the castle.*

After Matsue-jo, I had to prioritize my sightseeing destinations. The writer Lafcadio Hearn's former residence was easy to pass up; one taste of his insufferable prose left me permanently disinterested in all things Hearn. An hour to the west was Izumo Taisha, one of the most important shrines in Shinto. To the east was the Adachi Museum of Art. I wanted to be in Hiroshima, a four hour bus ride, by nightfall. The main transport hub for the region was Yonago, located to the east. For this reason, I decided upon the Adachi Museum of Art.



*Saying goodbye to Matsue.*

And what a decision it was. I can unequivocally state that the Adachi Museum of Art was the best destination I visited in Japan. Even *without the museum*, the trip would have been worth it. Allow me to explain. The museum proper is surrounded by the most meticulously-crafted, beautiful gardens I have ever seen. Inside the museum, however, are 1,300 varied works of master painters, potters, and ceramicists from the modern era. Views of the garden are interspersed amongst the exhibits, ensuring that museum patrons are never left wanting for one or the other. The Adachi Museum of Art is a work of art filled with works of art.

Unfortunately, photography of the paintings and pottery was forbidden.



*A view of the gardens.*



*A view of the gardens.*



*A view of the gardens.*



*A view of the gardens.*

After leaving the museum, I took the complimentary shuttle to Yonago and, once there, purchased a bus ticket to Hiroshima. I had two hours to kill before my bus departed Yonago, so I went looking for some lunch.

I followed my nose to an aromatic noodle house a half mile up the road and sat down at the bar. The waitress handed me a picture menu. I pointed to a picture of an enormous bowl of noodles. The waitress nodded and asked me what I'm sure was a very simple question. I sat baffled as she repeated the question. She repeated it again, this time growing impatient. She looked to the chef, who shrugged in response.

I gestured for her to wait a moment, whipped out my Lonely Planet phrasebook, and sounded out, "Please decide for me." The waitress blinked a few times, but nodded and shouted my order back to the chef. Two minutes later, I had a steaming bowl of delicious udon in front of me, complete with green onions, massive slices of roast beef, and a dark broth with outstanding depth of flavor. I slurped my noodles with gusto and did my best to smile whenever the waitress passed.

While I was eating, it occurred to me that there was no reason I couldn't compliment the chef on his excellent broth. I spent ten minutes memorizing the pronunciation of "broth, very good" in preparation for the end of the meal. When I went to pay, the chef, without a word, pointed to the "500" displayed on the cash register. I handed him a 500 yen coin. "Dashijiru i i," I said, feeling very proud of myself.



The chef smiled, looked at me, and said, in perfect English, "I am glad you enjoyed it."

## **Day 6, Part 2**

"The easiest way to get to Hiroshima is bus," the bartender at Filaments had told me. "It takes maybe four hours, but you know, you just...." He had leaned his head back and closed his eyes, indicating that the ride was as simple as leaning back and relaxing.

As I watched the bus driver navigate the route to Hiroshima, I knew things were not so simple. White-knuckled near the front of the bus, I sat with my eyes glued to the windshield, positive that we were going to crash at any moment. Japan's traffic lanes seemed as if they were designed exclusively for the Toyota Yaris. The driver, attired in a full suit with a navy blue hat and white driving gloves, navigated the winding two-lane highways and Hiroshima traffic with an otherworldly grace. His speed around turns was flawless, and he changed lanes with a fluidity that even I can't match—and I drive a 180 pound scooter.



*Taken from the bus on the way to Hiroshima.*



*Taken at a rest stop an hour outside of Hiroshima.*

You would never guess that Hiroshima had endured a nuclear strike. The city was modern and vibrant, lush and green. A monorail snaked over the city's many rivers, and beautiful parks littered the spaces between towering buildings. I found a hotel near the center of the city. My eyebrows shot up when I entered the room. Everything looked brand new, as if it had been purchased and unwrapped that very day. The styling was tasteful and modern. I found a wonderful restaurant overlooking a river just a block from the hotel, where I feasted on a bowl of pork curry and half a baguette before making my way to the city's entertainment district. A trio of girls, all of whom looked like models, grew wide-eyed and excited at my approach. Why had I ever been concerned about coming to this city? I loved Hiroshima, and Hiroshima loved me.



*Hiroshima in the evening.*



*The view from the Peace Pot restaurant—highly recommended.*



*Hiroshima at night.*

I spotted a sign for a bar a few meters up the road. Called "Bull," it advertised, in English, that it was a "pub bar with darts." How could Hiroshima get any better? I took the elevator to the second floor of a tall building, where the bar was located.

The elevator doors opened, and a chorus of greetings ensued—until the crowd saw me. The patrons returned to their drinks, and the bartenders looked uncomfortable. I walked up to the bar with as much confidence as I could muster and smiled at the nearest bartender. She said something to me. Assuming she wanted my drink order, I asked for a beer. The bartender repeated herself, this time shaking her head no.

I looked around the bar. I could have sworn I had seen a Kirin sign out front, but everyone was drinking cocktails. I looked back at the bartender and said, "Please decide for me." I pointed to a likely-looking cocktail in the hand of a nearby customer. The bartender again shook her head no. "Saturday night only," she said. "So sorry."

I blinked a few times and looked around again. What had been an inviting, fun atmosphere prior to my arrival had turned quiet. Everyone was paying very close attention to their drinks. I pointed to the door. "I have to go?"

This time, the bartender nodded. I walked to the elevator and pushed the call button. The elevator rose all the way to the sixth floor before starting its descent. I stood there, dumbstruck, waiting for it to rescue me from the shame and frustration I was feeling. I had no recourse. My Japanese was non-existent; I couldn't engage in an ethical debate with the bartender. Complaining in English, however politely, would have labeled me a stereotype, and telling the entire bar to fuck off would have resulted in a total loss of face. My only option was to slink away with as much dignity as I could muster. As the elevator doors closed, I could hear the bar surging back to life. Games of darts and conversations alike had resumed at my departure.

I stood on the sidewalk a moment and told myself that it was an isolated incident, that I should not let it ruin my night. This was Hiroshima, a city of over one million people. There were plenty of other bars. At least ten were visible from my current location. I told myself I should try again, that the next bar would be fine.

It was no use. I walked back to my hotel, feeling more foreign in Japan than when I first arrived.

### **Day 7, Part 1**

I awoke early the next morning, my determination renewed. One bad experience was *not* going to taint my trip—not a chance. I tried to scrub out my frustrations under the shower's ample water pressure.

On my way to the Hiroshima Museum of Art, I passed the local baseball stadium. A long line of people wound around the circular structure. I asked a uniformed man if there was a game that evening. "Hai," he said, pointing to the line. Excited at the prospect of attending a professional baseball game, I took my place at the back of the line. Ten minutes passed. I grew curious as to the opposing team. "Excuse me," I asked the young couple in front of me, "speak English? Tonight is Hiroshima and...?"

Fives minutes of miscommunication ensued. The young man was confused as to what I was asking. The young woman was confused, too. Four other people entered the conversation, all of whom were eager to figure out what I was asking. "Hiroshima and... Tokyo, Osaka?" I asked hopefully, by this point turning a bit pink out of embarrassment.

Finally, the young man exclaimed, "Oh, today game Hiroshima and Yokohama!" I thanked him profusely, glad to have my question answered, but mostly glad to have the group's focus off of me. Ten more minutes passed.

"For today game, over there," the young man said, pointing to an open ticket window with only a single person in line. I blinked.

"Tickets for today's game are over there?"

"Yes, yes."

"Arigato gozaimasu," I said, bowing slightly. Why the young man had taken so long to offer up this information was beyond me, but I was glad to have avoided an hour-long wait in

Hiroshima heat only to be told that I had been waiting in the wrong line.

The woman in the ticket window showed me a diagram of the stadium's seating areas and asked me where I would like to sit. I chose the block just behind the home team's dugout, down the third base line—great seats. I assumed the ticket would be expensive, but seeing a baseball game in Japan was an opportunity I doubted I'd ever have again; I was willing to splurge. The woman asked for 2,000 yen, approximately \$20. I couldn't get my wallet out quickly enough. \$20 for those seats? In the United States, that's unthinkable.

My guidebooks indicated that the Hiroshima Museum of Art, my original destination, was only a short distance to the north. I wandered in that direction and encountered a veritable amoeba of aging Japanese tourists attired in elegant dresses and well-cut suits. The crowd was easily 3,000 strong, and they were all going south through the sports complex—hundreds of meters of tourists crowded onto a 20-foot-wide street. I felt conspicuous and unwelcome as I fought through the crowd in a fruitless attempt to find the art museum. Annoyed and wanting nothing more than to be alone, I made my way towards a Chinese-style garden located across the street.





The garden was deserted, with two quaint gazebos overlooking a tranquil pond. I rested for a moment and contemplated my next move. The Peace Memorial Park and Hiroshima Castle were in opposite directions. If I hurried, I could take in both destinations, but with my camera running low on battery power and the weather being especially hot and humid, I elected to proceed directly to the Peace Memorial Park.





*This is as close as I got to Hiroshima Castle.*



*The A-Bomb Dome.*

I didn't think the A-Bomb Dome would affect me as much as it did. Every tourist around the dome, myself included, snapped a single photo and then stood in awe of the setting. Knowing that an atomic bomb had exploded a couple hundred meters above our heads, killing 70,000 people instantly and demolishing everything with a kilometer radius, was disquieting. I thought of all the people who know and care about me, of all the people I know and care about. Then I tried to imagine each of those innumerable connections severed—70,000 times over. Defending or condemning the dropping of the bomb was not on my mind. This wasn't the time for justification or finger-pointing. All I could think about was how tragic it was that actions of this magnitude were ever considered, let alone carried out. And Hiroshima was hardly an isolated incident. Warfare *is* tragedy. The ability to level a metropolis with a ten-foot-long object—I didn't know what to think.

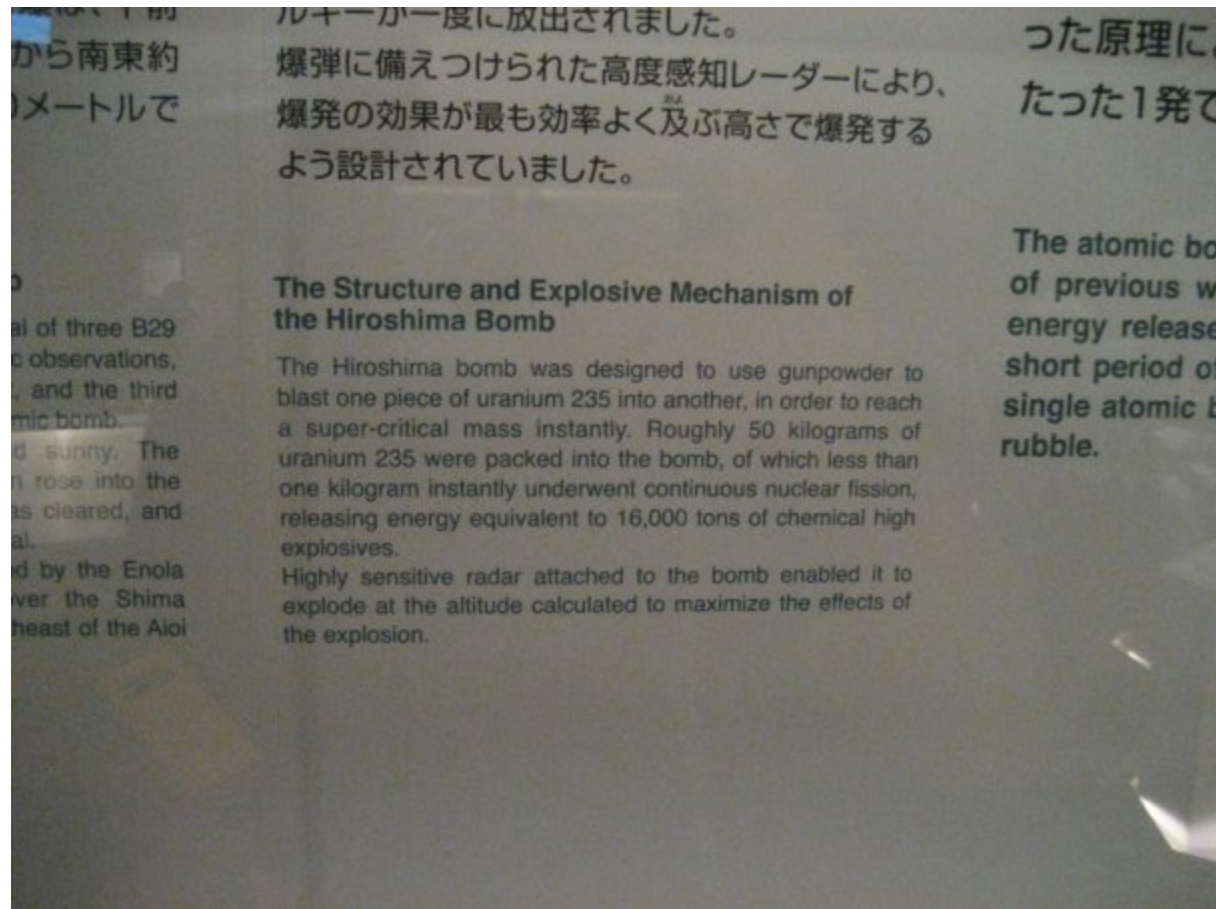


*The Peace Memorial Park.*

Next, I went to the Peace Memorial Museum. The many Japanese patrons filed through the exhibits in orderly, single file. Still reeling from the A-Bomb Dome, I found myself skipping many of the more uncomfortable sections of the museum. The museum's goal seemed to be to humanize the victims of the atomic bomb. No person was a statistic. Full names, brief biographies, and family histories were included where available. Tragic stories about the "A-bomb orphans" and ten-year-olds dying of leukemia abounded. It was too much to absorb. I touched some formerly-radioactive objects and tried to avoid the tales of those who took hours, days, or years to pass away.



*A scale recreation of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.*



Some background.

と呼ばれました。(上部の模型は実物大です)

### The Hiroshima Bomb (Little Boy)

The A-bomb dropped on Hiroshima was about three meters long and weighed about four tons. Called "Thin Man" at first because of its long, thin design, when the actual bomb turned out to be shorter, the nickname changed to "Little Boy."  
(The model above is the actual size.)



アメリカ国立公文書館提供  
Courtesy of the US National Archives

Some background.



Art done by a survivor.

## **Shadows of people rising up as bluish-white flames appeared**

August 6, 1945, 8:30 a.m.

Eiichi Uchida (20 at the time of the bombing, 77 when he drew this picture)

[Notes from the artist]

After being buried under the barracks, I was able to escape on my own. It was pitch black all around. I couldn't see an inch in front of me. I could make out shadows of people rising up as bluish white flames appeared.

Hiroshi

Some background.





The Peace Park.

On the way out of the museum, a Japanese man in a dark suit asked if I thought there would ever be a world without war. I said no. "I would like there to be," he said. "I have accepted Jesus Christ into my heart. Do you know about the teachings of Jesus Christ?"

"Yes, I do."

"Would you like to hear more?" he asked, offering me a pamphlet.

"I appreciate what are you are doing here, and best of luck to you. But for me, I don't think that's the answer," I said, trying to be as diplomatic as possible. I shook his hand and bowed as we parted.

Further down the road, there was a small shrine with a wooden sign that read, "All people, by nature, own nothing." I stopped for a moment and thought about the desire for power that drives people and nations into conflict. Maybe a world without material possession was the only answer, which to me, meant that there was no answer. I walked back to the Peace Pot restaurant and treated myself to an especially large dinner, complete with a chocolate-covered dessert.

## **Day 7, Part 2**

A few innings into the baseball game between Yokohama and Hiroshima, I concluded that the Japanese know how to *play ball*. And it was the kind of baseball I love. After a single to

opposite field, the next batter would dutifully bunt the runner into scoring position—or the team would attempt a stolen base. Even after tapping an easy ground ball to the shortstop, players sprinted towards first base, not slowing down until the umpire called them out. These were players with an appreciation for and understanding of the game. To them, baseball was about more than home runs and strikeouts. It was about shifting the outfield ever so slightly before an outside pitch, fouling off enough pitches to earn a walk, and much more.



*Hiroshima before the game.*



The stadium.

The fans were rabid. In the United States, the common chant of "DE-FENSE" tends to start strong and fade to nothing after a minute or two. "The Wave" might last a couple of revolutions around the stadium. But the Japanese fans had intricate, synchronized cheers that *did not stop until the end of the inning*. Foot stomps, thigh slaps, claps, shouts, fist pumps—these cheers were not simple affairs. A brass band in left field led the proceedings. As with the fans, their dedication and stamina was incredible. Surely, I thought, they will stop playing with such enthusiasm after a half hour or so. If anything, they seemed louder and more determined as the innings wore on.



The stadium.

To me, a baseball game is not complete without an ice-cold lager. I was prepared to open my wallet; in the United States, a tiny plastic cup of beer at a baseball game can cost as much as \$7. I flagged down an extremely fit young man who was carrying at least five gallons of beer in an insulated backpack. 32 ounces of draft beer set me back a cool \$6.50—quite refreshing.

I was especially excited for the seventh inning stretch. I doubted anything could be as hilarious as 20,000 Japanese fans singing "Take Me out to the Ball Game." I was wrong. Something could indeed be more hilarious.

When the seventh inning arrived, at least half of the fans in the stadium inflated—and there is no other way to describe them—four-foot-long, penis-shaped balloons. With bulbous tips. I was left speechless as I gazed out upon a veritable sea of flesh-colored schlongs being held at rapt attention. Suddenly, the crowd let their balloons fly. Try, if you can, to imagine 10,000 penises simultaneously rising through the air, going flaccid, and falling back to earth. I wanted nothing more than to turn to a friend and ask, "Am I losing my mind, or did that honestly just happen?"

After the game, I went for a walk around the city. Still feeling a bit too timid to visit a bar, I checked out an internet cafe nestled amongst the neon. \$10 netted me a private cubicle for three hours. The cubicle had a locking door, a modern computer, a Playstation 2, a small desk with a reading lamp, and a comfortable bean bag chair. All-I-could-drink beverages, everything from coffee to Slurpees, and a library of manga were just a few feet away. After

all the walking, sightseeing, and yes, drinking, I needed a bit of downtime. The internet cafe was perfect. I nestled into the bean bag and tried to figure out where to go next.

### **Day 8, Part 1**

After such a relaxing evening the night prior, I awoke refreshed on my eighth day in Japan. I strode down to the hotel lobby and gorged myself at the western style breakfast buffet. After a week of dining on miso soup and rice balls each morning, even clumsily-prepared scrambled eggs, boiled potatoes, and sausage links were something to celebrate.

The buffet was included in the cost of my room, which was a good thing; my wallet was feeling a little light. Not wanting to embark upon a long day of travel without a healthy amount of yen, I went searching for an international ATM. My guidebooks recommended the towering banks along Hiroshima's main street. I visited them all—nine banks total. Not one of them accepted my Visa card. Sweaty and unhappy, and still shouldering my backpack, I stopped at a convenience store to buy a beverage. I glanced up at the sign. "7 & Holdings," it read.

I paused for a moment. Hadn't the bank I'd used in Matsue had "7" in its name? Did... did the store have an ATM? It did! Could a downright pervasive convenience store really be the best place for an American to get money in Japan? **It could.**



*A convenience store did what nine imposing banks could not.*



*One last shot of Hiroshima.*

Wad of cash in hand, I made my way to the train station and purchased a ticket to the Miyajima ferry terminal. Before boarding the train, I asked an elderly, uniformed woman if I was getting on the correct train. She nodded fervently, spoke in rapid Japanese, pushed me towards the train, and repeatedly pointed at two wholesome-looking girls in my car. I had no idea why she was so incensed. After I did not take a seat next to the girls, she went over and spoke to them for a moment, this time pointing at me. The girls giggled and hid their faces, intermittently sneaking glances in my direction. The elderly woman again motioned for me to come sit next to the girls. One of the girls shrugged and moved her suitcase a few feet to the side, making room for me. I chuckled and motioned to the girl that I had no intention of intruding on her and her friend.

The old woman finally abandoned her quest to get me seated, and I was left standing in the middle of the crowded train. After a few stops, a seat opened up next to a balding man with a salt and pepper ponytail and casual clothing. He gestured for me to come sit next to him.

"Hello," he said, speaking with an odd accent. "You speak English? You are American?"

"Yes," I said. "From California."

"Oh, with Arnold," the man laughed, doing his best impression of the governor. "Vacation?"

"Yes, I am traveling for two weeks."

"You are alone?"

"Yes."

The man talked for a long while about his own travels. He had lived in Spain for eight years, had visited the United States, and had travelled extensively around eastern Asia. He joked often about the differences in culture between Japan and Spain and continued to impersonate Arnold from time to time. We laughed for the majority of the 30 minutes we spent together on the train. The man was carrying a small gift bag.

"You are so worldly," I laughed. "That gift must be for your 20-year-old girlfriend."

The man laughed, which made his next statement all the more harsh. "No, this is for my wife. She is in hospital for many days, so I must visit."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I said.

"She will be fine, fine," he said, but his face was grave. "Four more stops for you. Four, I think."

## **Day 8, Part 2**

A short ferry ride from Hiroshima, Miyajima represents the idyllic image of Japan that so many tourists seek. And tourists *do* seek it. Plush, green hills and blue sea flank the main road, which runs between a Shinto shrine and a squat, heavily-wooded mountain. Miniature deer roam freely, sticking their noses into purses and prodding pockets in search of handouts.

I'm ashamed to confess that I have little to say about such a worthwhile afternoon. I wandered around the island, enjoying the ocean breeze and remembering there are *good reasons* that places become tourist destinations. I chuckled quietly as I watched middle-aged Japanese women scurry away from overcurious deer and stood in awe as teenagers respectfully cleansed their hands prior to entering a shrine.



The ferry to Miyajima.





*One of the most iconic images of Japan, taken from afar.*



*Miyajima.*



*Miyajima.*

。鹿にんごをすんない(たいてい)  
。鹿に近づいたり、触ったり、しないで  
下さい。

### ATTENTION TO DEER

The deer on Miyajima are wild. Recently visitors have often been involved in accidents with deer.

Deer may bite if you feed or touch them.

Please pay special attention to your babies.

Thank you.

*Please pay special attention to your babies.*



Miyajima.



WARNING.



*They did not heed the warning.*



*I wear short shorts.*





*The deer were brazen!*



*Miyajima.*



*A rare photo of me, taken by a nice Spanish couple.*



*I cannot stop laughing about those pants.*

"Hey, mate, you know what this building's called?" an Australian accent inquired to me. I turned and saw a thin teenager on a bicycle. He was wearing a camera around his neck and shorter shorts than I would be caught dead in.

"I think it's the Treasure House," I said. The boy detected my accent.

"You're American?" he asked.

"Yes. Where are you from?"

"Melbourne."

"Ah," I said, nodding.

"That's in Australia," the boy said.

"Yeah, I know."

A few more Australian boys in similar attire rode up on bicycles of their own and began talking loudly amongst themselves. Not wanting to be associated with them or their exposed thighs, I wandered down the shopping corridor and found a pleasant little restaurant. I ordered the udon with oysters, which ended up being a bit overpowering. I like oysters—I really do—but they have such a potent flavor that I have no idea with what

ingredients I could ever pair them. If I am ever forced to deal with oysters in the kitchen, I will probably serve them on the half shell with gold tequila and a squeeze of fresh lime juice. Nothing rinses down raw shellfish quite like hard alcohol.

After my late lunch, I purchased a hydrofoil ticket back to Hiroshima. While I waited for the boat to depart, I grabbed a seat on the shore and sipped on tea from one of the omnipresent vending machines. Two girls walked past me, and their faces lit up into enormous smiles. "Hello," one of them said.

"Konichiwa," I said carefully. The girls seemed put out by my response; they were hoping for English. I just smiled. I was enjoying looking out over the sea. I took a sip of tea and exhaled through my nose. This was vacation.



*The hydrofoil.*



*Leaving Miyajima.*

I boarded the hydrofoil and, after the short ride, hopped on a connecting ferry to Matsuyama, a city on the northwestern end of the island of Shikoku. During the ferry ride, I stopped to review my notes. Over nine days, I had accumulated 40 handwritten pages. I looked at my camera. I had already taken 800 photographs. It was only then that I truly realized what a daunting task writing this blog would be.



*Half of those pages are double-sided.*

### **Day 9, Part 1**

Stopping halfway up the lengthy climb to Matsuyama Castle to dab my forehead with a hand towel, I asked myself whether all this trouble was really worth it. There are so many other things I could be doing, I thought to myself. I could be soaking in the natural hot springs at Dogo Onsen, quaffing draft beer at the local brewery, or simply resting in the shade with a bottle of mugicha (barley tea). There was no *need* to hike up to the castle; the damn thing had hardly left my field of vision for the past two hours.



*Matsuyama.*





*The chairlift.*

By that point, however, it was a matter of pride. I had come this far, wandered this long. I was going to stand on the top floor of that castle, look out over the city, and declare myself triumphant over Lonely Planet, whose map of Matsuyama had led me several miles astray. I tried—unsuccessfully—to dismiss my negative thoughts. A refined woman with a pink umbrella passed me on the chairlift that ran the length of the hill. "Bitch," I muttered. I shook my head over my own idiocy, pressed my palms into my eyes, and tried again to remain upbeat. I had woken up grumpy after six hours of sleep on my hostel's granite-like mattress. The long walk was not improving my mood.

Thankfully, the castle was spectacular. I removed my shoes at the entryway and was about to struggle into a pair of tiny slippers when I saw the security guard disappear into his equally tiny office. He returned a moment later wearing a huge grin. He handed me a pair of burgundy slippers and, bowing, said, "Big, big!" I accepted his offering with both hands and returned his bows. The aged, polished wood of Japanese castle floors can be quite slick. Having slippers that were not four sizes too small was a true blessing; I would have had to commit seppuku out of sheer embarrassment had I lost my footing while descending one of the narrow staircases.



*So close.*



*Yes, I put a haiku in the box.*



*"Big, big!"*

I took a gondola down the hill and went searching for lunch in the nearby shopping arcade. There, I found an attractive establishment advertising a set lunch menu for \$12. The food was ordinary—mediocre, even—but after the waitress dropped off my main course, I stared in awe at the table. Dessert had not yet arrived, and already there were two bowls, two glasses, five plates, and six small dishes in front of me. It was a bizarre spread of food, including spaghetti with meatballs, an egg roll, a bit of steamed cod with lemon, and miso soup.



*Matsuyama.*



*Matsuyama.*



*Matsuyama.*

When I had finished eating, the waitress returned and held the dessert menu in front of me. It was nothing but row after row of kanji. The waitress looked at me expectantly. I tried to remember how to say "please decide for me" and pointed at the waitress while I thought. Her eyes grew wide for a moment. Then she grinned. I realized I had just implied that I would like to have her for dessert. "No, no, no, sorry," I said, laughing. The waitress began to laugh, as well. I regained my composure long enough to use my intended expression: o-ma-ka-se shi-mas. She nodded in understanding, still covering her mouth with her hand to conceal her silent snickers.

After lunch, I strolled around Matsuyama, taking in an unremarkable art museum and a small park in the process. Cooler weather and a full stomach had improved my mood, but I was stalling; visiting Dogo Onsen was my priority for the day, an activity *steeped* in tradition that involved soaking in a communal bath with a large assortment of buck naked Japanese men. I needed to be sure I knew what I was getting into. I took a seat on a

bench and began reading Lonely Planet's lengthy section on onsen etiquette.

**Day 9, Part 2**



*Dōgo Onsen.*





*A bit of history.*

In the film *You Only Live Twice*, James Bond is treated to what his Japanese contact calls "your first civilized bath." A trio of scantily-clad females scrub and massage Bond's chest and back until, utterly relaxed, he retires to bed with his love interest du jour. My experience at Dogo Onsen was pretty much identical.

No, just kidding! Unlike Mr. Bond, I had to do all my own scrubbing, but there was something decidedly civilized about the whole experience. After purchasing a ticket of admission and reviewing the rules of etiquette, I handed my valuables to a pleasant woman who was attired in an elegant yukata. With a blinding smile, she handed me a yukata of my own, this one less elegant, and directed me down the hallway to three more women, all of whom were wearing identical smiles. They gestured for me to hurry down the corridor. The staff seemed accustomed to having foreign guests. I was a reality, not a novelty.

(A yukata, I should probably explain, is a traditional Japanese garment similar to the kimono, though less formal. They are frequently worn around onsen, traditional Japanese bathhouses whose water comes from natural hot springs.)

I wandered into the locker room and disrobed, doing my best to keep from staring out over the sea of naked Japanese men. Many of the men were conducting themselves as if they were out for a pleasant stroll. They were wandering from location to location in the locker room, sometimes stopping to regard their reflections or rub their hair with a towel, but they seemed to lack any sort of objective. They were wandering for the sake of wandering. Maybe they found the extra air flow agreeable. My objective was simple: avoid eye contact

on my way to the bath.

I had purchased the premium bath, which meant that I had access to one of the more ornate tubs. It was still in the Japanese aesthetic, though, a minimalist presentation with a few bold lines of blue amongst the tranquil white. I scrubbed myself thoroughly under one of the shower heads and entered the bath.

It wasn't a life-changing, revelatory experience, but slipping into the water of the oldest, most famous onsen in Japan was certainly surreal. With 3,000 years of history and numerous mentions throughout Japanese literature, Dogo Onsen is, for lack of a better term, *kind of a big deal*. In a country so renowned for its work ethic, it was good to see the Japanese holding the art of relaxation in very high esteem. I folded my hand towel onto my head and submerged myself up to my chin.

A long while later, I emerged from the tub, dried off, and donned my yukata. My instructional pamphlet recommended that people not experienced in wearing a yukata wear undergarments underneath. To me, this indicated that the Japanese go naked under them. I snorted, left my boxers in my locker, and made my way up to the second floor.

One of the pleasant women from before directed me to a straw mat and arranged several plush cushions around me. The floor was open-air, and a gentle breeze wafted over my steamy skin. Another woman arrived with green tea and some rice crackers. I happily munched on these snacks and people watched. Husbands and wives in matching yukata and geta (wooden sandals) were strolling around the outside of the onsen, taking in the late afternoon. Teenagers were enjoying ice cream on the numerous benches. Though it was a tourist destination, Dogo Onsen didn't *feel* like it. It was clearly beloved by the Japanese—not as a sight to see, but as an idea to embrace. No one was there to see anything. They were there to take part in the simplest of joys, to let themselves go in the fantasy of being treated like a member of the ancient nobility.

After changing back into my street clothes, I made a beeline for the brewery across the street, a small establishment that specialized in *dark beer*. The typical Japanese lager is light and flavorful, with a dry finish, perfect for washing down yakitori and other pub snacks. I was excited to sample something a bit more complex.

In addition to quaffing three beers, I dined on duck meatballs with a delicious sauce, traditional yakitori, some skewered vegetables, a bowl of rice, and a salad that was far too light on dressing, even by my standards. Still, the meal left me satiated and drowsy, especially after my long day of walking. I wandered back to my hostel, intent on making the most of the next day.

## **Day 10**

I had an ambitious itinerary planned for the next day. I was going to take a train to Kotohira, hike the lengthy trail to the top Mount Zōzu, visit the Shintō shrines scattered along the mountain path, feast on Shikoku's famous udon, take another train to Takematsu, find a hotel, wander the famed gardens of Ritsurin Koen, and sample the local nightlife. It was a lot to cram into a single day, but I'd arisen early. By this point in my trip, I was maybe a little *too* comfortable with the Japanese rail system. Trains ran so frequently! Surely I wouldn't have any problem making my way between destinations.

Three hours later, I found myself occupying one of only three seats in the tiniest train station I had ever seen. To call this place a station would have been overstating its very existence. It was a stop, a speed bump—a pigeon-sized blip amongst C-130s on the radar

system that is the vast Japanese rail network. Long grass ran as far as the eye could see in one direction, terminating at some undeveloped hills in the other. I couldn't see any buildings. Three schoolchildren stared at me with looks of total bewilderment on their young faces. What was I even *doing* here?

I didn't have an answer to that question. Somehow, I had boarded the wrong train during my changeover in Tadotsu, riding it south nearly to Mino before realizing my mistake. I had then disembarked at a random station in order to turn around. When I had boarded the wrong train a week prior in Osaka, I had disembarked, walked ten feet, and been on a train back to my previous destination in 30 seconds flat; the flow of trains had been continuous. On Shikoku, however, things moved... a little... more... slowly. No trains were bound for Tadotsu for over an hour. The schoolchildren continued to glance in my direction from time to time. Even Tommy Lee Jones, his face present on a nearby vending machine, seemed confused by my present circumstance.



*Oh Tommy.*

When I set foot in Kotohira nearly two hours later, I was a man on a mission. This *goddam* train and *goddam* inconvenience was *not* going to ruin my *goddam* day, not a *goddam* chance. I stashed my backpack in a coin locker and set off at a brisk pace towards the shrine.

Near the base of the mountain, however, I noticed two young men busily producing udon noodles behind a large pane of glass. A glance inside the restaurant revealed dozens of people happily slurping away. I was sold. The hike could wait. Lonely Planet had

recommended I purchase a particular variety of udon noodles while in Shikoku, so I took a stab at the pronunciation.

"No soup noodles," said the waitress. "Noodles. No soup. OK?"

"Hai," I nodded.

"Use soy sauce. Please wait eight minutes," she said, scurrying off towards the kitchen. I noted the time on a nearby clock. I already loved this place. The interior was an eclectic mix of well-worn wood furnishings. Though the tables and chairs appeared to be from the same maker, none were identical. The outside doors were flung wide open, inviting in the mild breeze. Exactly eight minutes later, my udon arrived.

Served chilled with scallions and dried bonito flakes, these noodles were heaven. I drizzled a bit of soy sauce on them, looked to the waitress to ensure that my actions were acceptable, and dug in. The noodles had a slightly chewy texture and a delicate flavor—absolutely perfect. It makes me a little sad to think that I will probably never have noodles of that quality again. Had I not been about to embark on a hike, I would have ordered seconds without hesitation.



*The start of the hike.*



*Another shot.*



As much as I would like to say I savored the atmospheric hike up to Kampira-san, the reality is that I *plowed* through that mountain. I blew past older couples, most of whom were in elegant attire and carrying long walking sticks. I overtook younger couples, too, who tended to favored casual clothing and carried huge, impractical digital cameras around their necks. I took the steep steps two at a time and stopped only to snap photos and mop the accumulation of sweat from my forehead. Near the summit, I passed a trio of young, fit Japanese men and two French guys who were smoking cigarettes on the side of the trail and complaining about the lack of water. I was on a mission.

Just a couple hundred meters from the top—I did not find out how close I was until later—a wasp began to buzz around my head. Trying to evade it, I ran smack into an enormous spider web and its *two-inch-wide, vibrant green occupant*. As I was shaking the web off of me, doing what I am sure was a very entertaining dance in the process, I noticed a six-inch-long, golden lizard near my feet.

At that point, I decided to turn around. I passed the Japanese trio and French duo during my descent. Both parties asked if I had reached the summit. I answered "hai" and "oui," respectively, but not because I felt the need to impress them with my speed. Rather, I didn't want to explain that I ran like a little girl at the sight of two insects and a salamander.



*Lizard!*



*After the hike.*

On the walk back to the train station, I heard a squeal of delight. I looked up. A young boy wearing only his underwear was regarding me from a second story balcony. The boy squealed again and hid behind a curtain, but his legs were still visible beneath it. I stopped for a moment. The boy slowly peeked his head out from behind the curtain. I waved to him. His face lit up with a huge grin, and he waved back fervently. I started walking again. I could hear the boy yelling into his house, "Papa! Papa!"

**Day 11**





*Taken on the way to the garden.*

Ritsurin Koen, the garden at Takamatsu, was spectacular. Had it not been for the heat and my desire to make it to Kyoto, I could have spent the entire day there. Every view from every location felt as if it had been painstakingly considered and sculpted. Interconnected ponds dotted the landscaping, with well-groomed trees and trickling waterfalls adding to the tranquility of the garden. There was a balance about the place, not a single ostentatious feature. The trees and bridges, water and fish all existed in quiet harmony.

Well, maybe not the fish. Eager for a handout, these fish wrestled for position whenever a human being approached the water. Fat and happy, they appeared to subsist entirely off of the goodwill of tourists.



*The entrance.*





# 根上り樫

## Neagari-kashi

明治の末、この位置に幹が二股に分かれた老松があり、樫がこの松の分かれ又の部分に生えていた。生長と共に樫の根は、松の空洞化した幹の中を通り地中まで下ろしていたが、その後、老松が枯死したため、この根上り樫ができたものである。県の天然記念物に指定されている。

In the late Meiji period, an oak came out in an old hollow pine.  
The oak rooted not in the ground but in the pine trunk.  
The death of the pine left this oak with its roots above ground.  
(Prefectural Natural Monument)





# 桐林洞

Bairin - kyo

別名「赤橋」と呼ばれ、緑一色の湖景に  
一点朱色が鮮やかに映え、付近庭景に対する  
見事な引締め役となっている。

Bairin-kyo means "ume garden bridge". It is sometimes called  
Aka-bashi (red bridge). The red bridge contrasts beautifully  
with the surrounding green.























*Probably my favorite photo from the entire trip.*

After the garden, I made my way to the train station and hopped on a train to Kyoto.

I won't lie: my first impression of Kyoto was, "This is it?" From the way Lonely Planet presented the city, Kyoto was some sublime Japanese paradise, all traditional architecture and geisha. Instead, Kyoto, at first glance, was strikingly similar to Osaka and Hiroshima. As I walked to my hostel, however, I noticed that there did seem to be an abundance of small shrines littering the roads. The architecture, too, was less modern. There *was* something different about Kyoto.

My hostel was a positive start, anyway. With immaculate rooms, broadband internet access, real computers, and an enormous, sunny lounge at my disposal, I spent most of the afternoon catching up on my email and chatting with Sam, a 22-year-old plumber from England. Having saved up a sizable lump of quid, Sam was hoping to travel the world for a full year, taking in Japan, China, Australia, and New Zealand in that span of time. His wild

hair and outrageous beard obscured his thoughtful demeanor; we were able to gloss over the usual questions of occupation and homes and get straight to an interesting subject: our thoughts on the Japanese.



*My hostel.*



*Sam.*

"I love the women here, but they all dress like prostitutes, don't they?" Sam asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "I think the way they dress is pretty classy."

"Christ, I need to go to California, I guess," he laughed.

Sam and I ended up wandering the streets for a couple hours before dinner, talking on a vast array of subjects and sipping on beers as we wandered. A pretty Japanese girl waved to us from a bus. We lightly tapped our beers together in a silent cheers. Over dinner, Sam and I began to discuss food. "French food is the best, mate, nothing better," Sam said. "But this French bloke named, um, Pascal—yeah, that's his name—is shagging me mum, so I'm a bit down on the French at the moment." I nearly spewed Asahi onto my plate when he finished this sentence.

"So your folks are divorced?" I asked.

"Yeah, they are. My dad, the wanker, gave me this set of watercolors before I left for my trip, you know? Told me to take the time to do some painting as I traveled, said it would do me good."

"Are you an artist? Do you paint? Did you ever paint?"

"No, that's just the bloody thing! I couldn't paint a wall! But it's... you know, it's a really

nice set of watercolors. So this one night, wicked pissed, I sat down and just started painting, and I woke up with all these horrible, crumpled little things scattered around me bed. I put them in my journal, though. There's no way I'll remember that stuff otherwise."

"Watercolors, huh? I'll have to give it a shot," I laughed.

"Yeah, mate, you can buy little watercolor sets, the fucking things, for just a couple hundred yen." I continued to laugh at the mental image of Sam, wasted off of cheap sake, sitting down to paint before passing out amidst his absurd creations. It was the kind of event I wished I could watch in a time-lapse video; everything's funnier, or at least less tragic, in accelerated form.

After dinner, Sam and I stopped at a convenience store to purchase a few more beers. I was standing in line when Sam emerged from an aisle holding *it*. "No, no, no," I said.

"Bang for buck, mate," Sam grinned. "Split between us, it's barely four dollars apiece."

*It* was a two-liter red carton of sake, proudly advertising itself as containing 20% alcohol. I knew purchasing the carton was a bad idea—I had only budgeted one full day to see Kyoto—but there was some allure in getting to mingle with the international crowd back at the hostel. My mind began to spin fantastical yarns. Sam and I would be the combined life of the party. I envisioned us doling out shots from our magical red carton, laughing and pointing as we turned the hostel's lounge from a place of quiet typing into one of uproarious good cheer. The other guests just needed something to bring them together, something to bring us all together. Sam and I would be... we'd be heroes, really.

OK, so things didn't quite work out as I'd envisioned. After trying, and failing, to entice a couple wholesome Korean girls to join us for a drink or seven, Sam and I ended up playing cards with a Frenchman and two Australians. The Australians won the first few hands, which prompted Sam to comment on their luck.

"Well, we are Aussies," one said, "so we might be cheating."

"No cheating!" Sam bellowed, by this point quite drunk. "My country made you, but I will destroy you!"

A few hours and an uncountable number of shots later, I staggered up to bed, capable of little more than drunken babbling. I managed to exercise enough judgment to reach for my water bottle... which was bone dry. The bathrooms, no more than 20 feet away, seemed an insurmountable trek. I knew that the next morning would be unpleasant no matter how much water I drank. I climbed under the covers, resigned to my fate.

## **Day 12**

I woke up the next morning with a hangover that could have killed a bull moose. Sunlight was streaming directly onto my face through the tiny window above my bunk. I groaned and looked over at Sam, whose right leg was draped over the edge of the bed frame in what looked like a very uncomfortable position. I took two aspirin, left the box in plain sight for Sam's benefit, and got ready to face the day.

In a lot of ways, Kyoto reminded me of Florence, Italy. Both cities are spectacular tourist traps, jam-packed with all manner of cultural significance. Tourists are aware of this fact, but the cities themselves seem to be, too. Both cities have an indescribable, smug, disdainful feel to them. Everywhere I looked, throngs of tourists were parading through

shrines and silently appreciating nearby objets d'art. Intersections featured arrows to prominent locations. Tour buses roamed with impunity along the narrow streets. When a crosswalk indicated it was safe to proceed, I felt the urge to moo as I surged forward with the rest of the herd. "Does anyone just live here?" I wondered.





If I had entered every shrine I passed during my seven-hour romp through Kyoto, I would have easily spent \$200 on admission tickets alone. Instead, I limited myself to the more interesting attractions. The first shrine I visited, Sanjūsangen-dō, featured a massive Buddha flanked by row after row of guardian statues. "Good lord," I boggled silently, "there must be 1,000 of them." A plaque revealed that the real number was 1,001. I smiled as I circled around the people praying before the giant Buddha and made my way into the attached gift shop. To me, nothing undercut the message of Buddhism in quite so fitting a manner as selling bracelets and fortune scrolls to tourists for \$20 and \$1 apiece, respectively.





*Near Sanjūsangen-dō.*





*Near Sanjūsangen-dō.*

I made my way to the Kyoto National Museum, an enormous complex of art, crafts, and archaeological finds. The museum was spectacular—I don't mean to imply otherwise—but it was like a crypt, nothing but dim lighting and silence. Masses of tourists crept through the halls with their hands at their sides, not pointing nor speaking. It wasn't hard to envision the group, zombie-like, chanting "braaaains" at irregular intervals. I did my best to blend in, hoping to avoid being eaten as an afternoon snack by the walking dead.

Having no idea where to proceed after I exited the museum, I followed the general flow of tourists up a long, winding, uphill stretch of narrow road, the sides of which were laden with restaurants and open-air shops selling all manner of trinkets. The crowd was reminiscent of passing time at my high school. There was an equilibrium rate of speed to which everyone who entered the amoeba of humanity had to conform. Those who stopped to photograph the fearsome chaos were scorned for impeding the progress of others, whereas those who tried to hurry cut a disruptive swath through the middle of the group. Had I been able to take the walk at a leisurely pace, I'm sure I would have enjoyed the ascent up to Kiyomizudera.



*Dear lord.*



*Dear. Lord.*

Located at the top of "Teapot Lane," Kiyomizu-dera is an important Buddhist temple and one of Kyoto's most famous landmarks. I did not know any of this at the time. All I knew was that I had to separate myself from this oppressive crowd. I snapped a few photos and ducked down a side street, wandering for 30 minutes before seeing another person. And that's when I saw her.

Shuffling down the street to the light, equine clip-clop of her wooden sandals, the geisha was refinement personified. She wore an elegant kimono, flowers in her hair, and a knowing smile. Her heavy, traditional makeup concealed any flaws that might have adorned her face. Keeping her head bowed, she glanced through her eyelashes at the swarm of onlookers. People were draping their arms around the poor girl and jamming cameras in her face. Still, I thought, one picture can't hurt. I turned on my camera. The screen briefly read "LOW BATTERY" and went dark.

"No, no, no, NO," I thought. This was not happening. It couldn't be happening. My one geisha sighting was not going to be spoiled by a lithium-ion battery, of all things. I shook the camera in my hand like a vicious dog trying to snap the neck of its prey. Maybe I thought I could somehow transfer kinetic energy into the rechargeable battery. Whatever my rationale, I turned on my camera again. This time, I snapped a photo the moment the lens cap opened. The screen displayed the image for only a second and again went dark. But I had my geisha photo. I breathed a sigh of relief and watched the geisha for a few more moments. Her pace, already downright glacial, had slowed to nearly a stop. The scene reminded me of a crowd of small children poking a jellyfish with a stick. I shook my head.

There was nothing I could or should do. Moments like this were the reason people visited Japan. But this wasn't the Japan I knew, the Japan I had experienced.







When I arrived back at my hostel several hours later, the other foreigners and I began the evening's festivities with a spirited penis-measuring competition. "I walked for, I don't know, maybe seven hours," I said, sipping a large glass of water, "all around Higashiyama, beautiful area."

"That's it, mate?" Sam asked. "I was wearing these big ol' boots, and I still wandered about for nine hours. I'm trying to conserve money, though, so I didn't go into any of the shrines or anything."

The Swedish engineer scoffed. "I got somewhat lost, so I walked for ten and a half hours, south of the station and through Higashiyama."

The Frenchman pursed his lips and said, "Yes, I too walked for many hours. I enjoy walking."

"Well I don't know about you blokes," Sam said, "but I need a drink." I chugged my glass of water and went to refill it; I knew the direction the night was headed. If I couldn't avoid it, at least I could be prepared.



*From left to right, a Canadian guy living in Kyoto, his girlfriend, the Swedish engineer, me, the Frenchman, and Sam.*

### **Day 13**

When I awoke the next morning, my first impulse was to *panic*. I had slept until nearly noon, and I was supposed to meet Kevin in Tokyo in just a few hours. I sprinted to the bathroom, reeking of sake, and tried to brush the cheap booze and dehydrated morning breath from my teeth. I showered, hurled dirty clothes and books into my backpack, and trudged towards the train station. Having no cell phone, I couldn't just call Kevin and tell him I was going to be a few minutes late. I needed to get my ass on the road.

Thanks to the Nozomi Super Express (*nozomi*, ironically enough, means "hope" or "wish" in Japanese), I arrived in Tokyo with fifteen minutes to spare. I raced out of the train station, hopped in a taxi, and asked the driver to take me to the statue of Hachikō at Shibuya Station. Hachikō was a dog who, at the end of every work day, greeted his master at Shibuya Station. His master, a professor, commuted to campus. One day, the professor suffered a fatal stroke and never returned home from work. Hachikō returned to Shibuya Station to wait for his master every evening for *ten years*. This degree of loyalty was not lost on the Japanese, who erected a statue in Hachikō's honor shortly before his death.



*Just outside the station in Tokyo.*

25 minutes later, having traveled a distance of 4.7 miles at an average speed of 11 miles per hour, I arrived at Shibuya Station. The ride was more enjoyable than it sounds. Although we spent the majority of our time together at a full stop, the taxi driver knew a bit of English and pointed out various landmarks to me. "Emperor," he said, pointing to the palace with pride. "Emperor." I nodded fervently, wanting to appear appreciative. The ride became less enjoyable when I had to pay the driver \$50 for his services. I made a mental note to stick to the subway in the future.

Kevin, being of Taiwanese descent, had instructed me to "look for [his] friend, Joe, the black guy." And indeed, I would have had a hard time picking Kevin out of the sea of Japanese. Joe, with his bright yellow shirt, was easier to spot. "How have you been getting around without knowing any Japanese?" Joe asked.

"It hasn't been a big deal," I said. "I just smile and try to look helpless."

"Yeah," Kevin said, "it must be a little easier for you, because you're white. People speak Japanese to me and then look at me like I'm *retarded* when I can't say anything back. No one expects anything out of you."

"Exactly!" I laughed.





Tokyo *is* entertainment. Neon lights, pachinko parlors, arcades, shopping, bars, restaurants -- as long as you have money in your pocket, there is no excuse for being bored. The city has a phenomenal energy, a palpable pulse that stems from 12 million people sharing 800 square miles of earth. After a brief stop at an arcade, Kevin told me that we were going to Sunshine City. "Is that an open-air mall or something?" I asked.

"No, it's completely indoors. I'd never thought about that, actually," he laughed.

"So there's no view of the sky... in *Sunshine City*. What is it, anyway?"







Sunshine City was a massive structure containing 60 floors of entertainment and office space. Without Kevin and Joe to guide me, I would have almost certainly gotten lost. We wandered down escalators and through sliding doors until I was so disoriented that, even using gravity as a reference point, I could hardly have pointed up. Kevin told me there were rumors about some vendors spending their entire lives within the structure, never once leaving. Even though he was probably joking, I believed him.

After dumplings, ice cream, and some time spent acquiring stuffed animals on the abundant UFO catchers, we decided to brave the Sunshine City haunted house. As lame as the experience sounds, it was hilarious. Before we entered, a Japanese man in formal attire gave us a very long, involved speech about how we were, apparently, supposed to solve the mystery of the haunted house. We did not understand a word of it. He gestured, referenced a laminated instruction sheet, took our pulses, and finally handed us two objects that we would need in order to uncover clues. One of the objects was a wooden charm that was supposed to keep us from harm while we were inside. I recently spoke with Kevin in an effort to figure out what the other object was.

Andy: What did they give us at the haunted house?

Andy: A ghoulish head or something that lit up when you put it on those circles?

Kevin: LOL

Kevin: it was like a cat

Kevin: or something

Kevin: wasn't it an owl?

Kevin: i thought u wrote it down

Andy: I don't remember. I had that useless-ass piece of wood.

Kevin: LOL

Whatever it was, the other object had practical value. Throughout the haunted house, there were small, dimly-lit circles. Placing the object on top of those circles would activate a film, a sound clip, or worst of all, a change in lighting. It was our job to put aside our fear—assumedly by holding aloft our wooden charm—and make note of whatever Japanese characters appeared on the wall, through a looking glass, or the like. At the end of the haunted house, we were asked to solve a riddle using the clues we had gathered. Not having any idea what these clues meant, or even what the riddle was, we blindly stabbed at the answers to multiple-choice questions until the proprietor took pity on us and showed us the solution. He then took our pulses again, printing off tiny receipts for us. "Your heart... very strong," he said, handing me a receipt that had my initial and current heart rates on it, along with an A grade, indicating that my heart rate had risen very little during the harrowing experience.

"D?" Joe cried, incredulous.

It would be impossible to describe all of our activities that day—and not because of any deficiencies in my notes or memory. Tokyo defies description. It possesses a degree of sensory overlord unlike anything I have ever experienced. Animated neon lights, jostling from the omnipresent crowds, the endless mixture of big city sounds set to whatever music a particular establishment is blaring, the scent of exhaust and good food—I could write a novel in which I did nothing but describe the setting as a character walked through the city. If I spoke Japanese, I could probably extend it to a trilogy. All I can say that is Kevin, Joe, and I eventually ended up seated in the corner of a small yakitori restaurant.

Our waitress, a bizarre young woman named Mami, was the type who, in ancient times, would have taken a club to the head of a man she fancied and claimed him for her own. She was confident, pushy, and attractive. She wasn't cold or distant, though, just authoritative. We were going to order food and drinks, damn it, and we were going to enjoy ourselves. Mami was the law hereabouts.

Because he spoke some Japanese, Kevin and I let Joe take care of the ordering. Mami nodded curtly with each successive item. Then she turned to the kitchen and *screamed* our order. This was not a yell or a shout. This was the shrill cry of a harpy, the piercing wail of a banshee, and the sweet song of a siren wrapped up into one. She reached octaves I didn't believe humans were capable of. Kevin blinked a few times and meekly managed, "Sorry, and a Coke, please."

"KOKE!" Mami screamed at the kitchen.

A few minutes later, Mami returned with our drinks. I had ordered a beer and a large sake. Mami placed a beautiful, lacquered wooden box in front of me and a shot glass inside of it. Then she poured the sake into the shot glass, letting it overflow until both shot glass and box were filled to the absolute brim. "Why do they do it that way?" Kevin asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Isn't it something like 'May your cup runneth over'?"

"Oh," said the guys in unison, nodding.

"I mean, I have no idea if that's true, but it sounds good, huh?"

Confused over how to proceed after finishing the glass of sake, I looked to Mami for

assistance. I oriented the box so that I could drink from one of the corners. Mami nodded for me to proceed. I raised the box to my lips and took a small sip, setting it gently down. I looked back at Mami, who was wearing a look of total disgust. She made a "bottoms up" motion with her hands and said, "Japanese-style."

Some people will call it immaturity, but I *had* to drink that sake. There was no other course of action. I was not going to be emasculated in front of Mami over a few shots of rice wine. Japanese-style? I'd show her Japanese-style. I drained the box in a slow, deliberate fashion, to let her know that it was neither the taste nor the alcohol content preventing me from doing so in the first place. When I looked back at Mami, however, she was practically in tears from laughing so hard. "Japanese-style!" she cried, motioning that the Japanese take their sake in small sips. Doubled over, she pointed and laughed even harder.

When Mami, still laughing hysterically, had walked away, I shook my head. "I need another beer."



*At the yakitori restaurant.*

## **Day 14**

Kevin and Joe's apartment was *tiny*. In square feet, the entire place was about the same size as my bedroom. Across from the bathroom, a small kitchenette was crammed into the entryway. One of the two burners on the minuscule stove top was covered by an aluminum pie pan with a book on top of it. "Is this one broken or something?" I asked.

"Oh, no, we trapped a really big roach under there. We're waiting for him to die," said Kevin.

The main living space featured two Japanese futons separated by such a small gap that Kevin and Joe could have held hands while they slept. A couple TV trays with laptops on them and an assortment of empty drink bottles littering the floor rounded out the apartment. I could see why the duo had been reluctant to have me stay with them; there was barely enough room for one person, let alone two. Nevertheless, we watched a movie in the early hours of the morning and, without having slept, headed off to the Tsukiji fish market at 5:00 AM.

I have one piece of advice for visitors to the Tsukiji fish market: pack light. Because I did not intend on returning to Kevin and Joe's apartment after our visit to the market, I brought my swollen backpack with me. The lazy drizzle of rain from the night prior had persisted into the morning. I was left trying to juggle an umbrella and my backpack as we navigated the crowded, narrow pathways of the enormous market. Everywhere were fishmongers riding recklessly around the market on small carts and pallet jacks, screaming at each other to make way. Men in knee-high rubber boots were feeding whole fish through band saws and using four-foot-long knives to portion sides of tuna. I wouldn't say we were unwelcome as much as I would say that we were *really, really unwelcome*. The purveyors and customers alike were there to conduct business, not indulge the whims of a trio of sleep-deprived tourists. We wandered the market for an hour or so before locating a nearby sushi restaurant and setting in for breakfast.

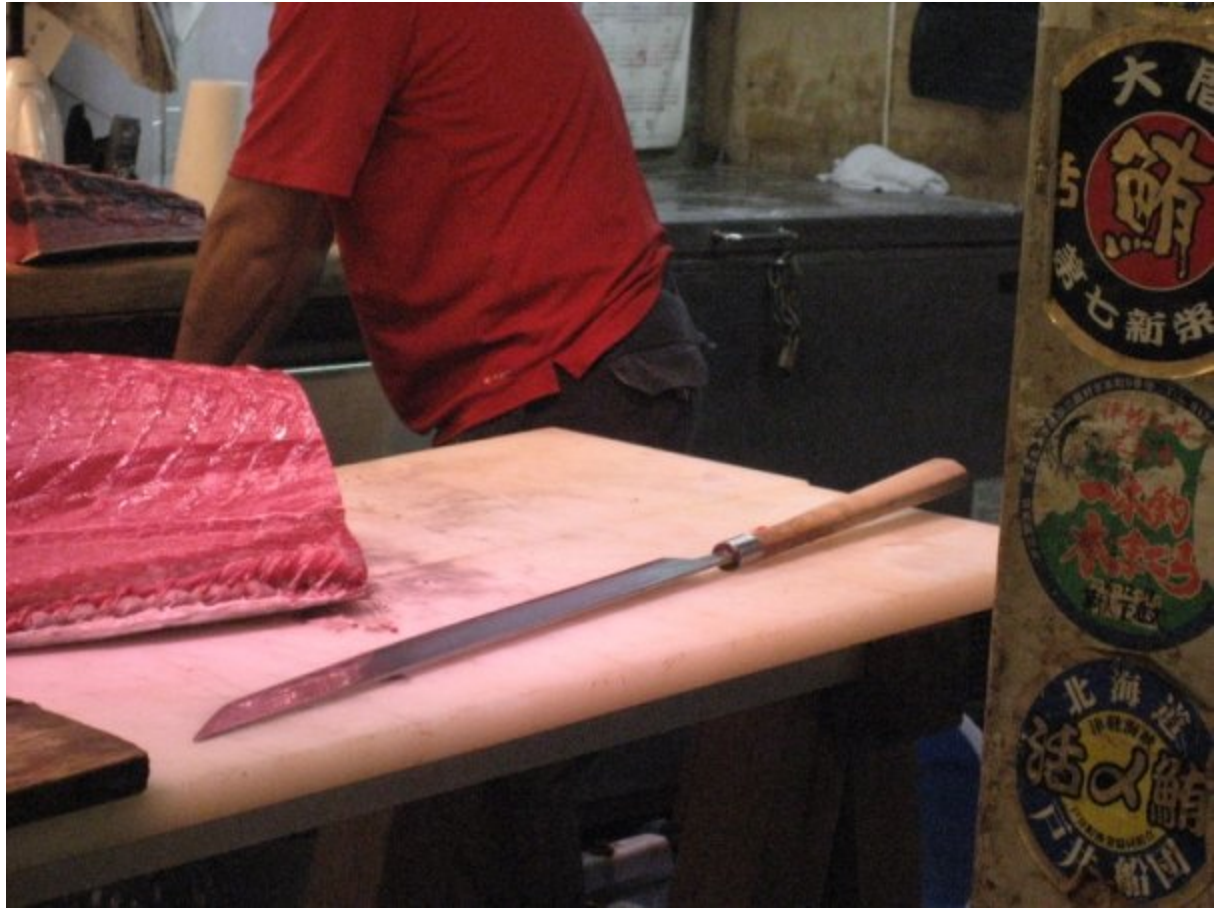


*Outside the market.*











Thankfully, Kevin and Joe were adventurous eaters. To me, a really great meal is one in which I get to sample a bite of everything on the table, regardless of whether or not I ordered it. Yes, I'm one of *those* people. We must have ordered at least ten different varieties of sushi, along with something I just *had* to try: horse sashimi. It wasn't bad, but I'd be lying if I said I wouldn't have preferred a nice beef carpaccio. The horse had a slight gamy flavor, and it was so lean that it was less tender than I had anticipated. Still, it was an integral part of a fantastic meal.

After breakfast, Kevin, Joe, and I separated. They went home to sleep, and I went to an internet cafe to, well, sleep. \$15 bought me eight hours of time in a snug cubicle, along with all-I-could-drink hot and cold beverages. I grabbed a barley tea and took a few t-shirts out of my backpack to use as a pillow.

When I awoke, my first thought was, "Where the hell am I?" It took me a few moments to get my bearings in the dark of the cafe. I chugged a few more drinks, checked my email, and went looking for a hotel in Shibuya, one of the swankier neighborhoods of Tokyo. During the day, Shibuya seemed remarkably human. Yes, fashionable young couples were casually strolling, ice cream in hand, browsing the many boutiques, but daylight subdued the neon and gave the place a certain homeyness. I found a lovely hotel just a short walk from the busy streets and... slept for another four hours.



When I awoke this time, however, I was ready to *go*. The endless refrain I had heard from travelers and travel guides alike was that the night life in Roppongi, another neighborhood of Tokyo, was not to be missed. I showered, put on the one and only collared shirt I had packed, and gave myself a spritz of cologne. Roppongi, I thought, nodding my head slightly from the excitement of it all as I scrutinized my appearance in the hotel mirror. Tonight was going to be *awesome*.

I strolled to the metro station took a moment to glance at the map on the wall; I was pretty comfortable with the metro at this point. I noted that I needed to take the Hanzomon Line two stops and transfer to the Oedo Line at Aoyama-itcho. Just then, a goddess appeared at my side, clad in a vibrant pink scoop-neck and a matching miniskirt that left nothing to the imagination. On her feet were knee-high black boots with five-inch heels. Straight black bangs framed her lovely visage, with the rest of her hair reaching halfway down her back. She leaned in so that her face was only six inches from mine and asked, "Where are you going?"

I swallowed and tried to keep from soiling myself. I wanted nothing more than to say, "Wherever you're going. I... I love you." Instead, I stammered, "Uh, Roppongi."

"HEY," she screamed at a metro security officer who was standing 50 feet away. The poor man looked almost as shocked as I was. My beautiful companion shouted a few more things at him, and the man went jogging towards a small office. He exited the office a few moments later and, still jogging, presented us with a metro map similar to the one on the wall. The security officer then *bowed* to the two of us and returned to his post. I was

speechless. Who was this girl? More importantly, would she marry me?

The girl scrutinized the map for a few seconds and said, "Easiest is take Hanzomon Line to Aoyama-itcho. Then Oedo to Roppongi. Understand?"

"Yes, yes," I nodded fervently. "Thank you so much."

"Hai," she said, moving towards the exit with slow, deliberate steps befitting the height of her heels. I watched her go, overcome for a few moments by the tragedy of it all. Then I remembered where I was going: Roppongi. Things were only going to improve. The possibilities were limitless.

When I arrived at Roppongi, things did *not* improve. The possibilities *were* limitless, I supposed, but only if I wanted to sleep with a hooker. Not ten steps into the neighborhood, I was accosted by muscular African man after muscular African man promising me "tits and booze, man, no joke" if I would only come into a particular establishment. Rather than acknowledging the men and possibly having to defend my sexuality, I played the mute, walking purposely forward and giving no indication that I had heard them. One man followed me for 100 yards, constantly trying to elicit a response from me. He complimented me, told jokes, and promised me that he would look out for me tonight. "My friends would love to meet you," he said. I stayed silent.

When the man finally gave up on me, I spotted another group of ten African men on the road ahead. I had to avoid them. I crossed to the other side of the street and darted into the nearest restaurant, which happened to be *Wolfgang Puck's Cafe*. "Whatever," I thought. I was hungry, anyway, and there was no way I was going to brave the streets of Roppongi sober. After a pizza and a couple enormous beers, I ventured out onto the street made a beeline for the nearest bar, a dirty little establishment called Gas Panic.

Gas Panic was just about the most depressing place I'd ever seen. The lighting had a reddish hue, which indicated a certain level of danger despite the impassive crowd. Single girls were nursing drinks at the bar and glancing around from time to time to see if there was anyone worth approaching. Some unsavory guys and a few 40-year-old members of the American armed forces rounded out the mix of patrons. A sign on the wall said, "YOU MUST BE DRINKING TO STAY INSIDE GAS PANIC." I paid \$7 for a tiny glass of bad beer and parked at a table.

Even the cute French waitress, whom I conversed with in her native tongue, could not make up for the horrible atmosphere and clientele. I left after only a couple beers and resolved, this time, to check out bars before ordering any drinks. But every bar I glanced into was the same, dreary setting. Maybe I had come on an off night, but I hated Roppongi. This place was hell on earth. I glanced at the time; if I hurried, I could make the last train back to Shibuya.

While waiting at a crosswalk just a block from the metro station, a rake-thin woman in a black dress approached me. "Why leaving so soon?" she asked.

"The last train is about to leave," I replied, gesturing towards the station.

"Ah, so soon, so soon!" she said. "Come with me for special Japanese massage, yes?"

"No, no. Sorry," I said. Was this crosswalk *ever* going to change?

"Special massage, just for you. Come on, baby. Let's just try," she said, placing her hands

on my shoulders and gently going to work.

Now, I like to think of myself as a relatively thoughtful, logical human being, but I am also a *man*, damn it. After two weeks of hauling around a heavy backpack, her hands felt *exquisite* against my shoulders. I wanted nothing more than to lose myself in that massage, to give myself over to something that felt so incredibly right. My eyelids drooped for just a second. Then I remembered how many men she must have jerked off in her career as a Roppongi quasi-prostitute. "No, no, no," I said, moving forward. The crosswalk had finally changed.

When I arrived back at my hotel, I needed a drink. The hotel bar was nearly empty, but they had Guinness on tap. I settled into a comfortable chair and watched the bartender, using nothing but an icepick and a towel, reduce solid, foot-long cubes of ice down to drink-sized pieces. The music sounded familiar. A moment later, I realized that the bar was playing nothing but highly-stylized versions of the songs from *The Legend of Zelda*. "Only in Japan," I thought, finishing my Guinness and ordering another.

## **Day 15**

I don't care what Newton said about matter being neither created nor destroyed: something as fragile as a vase existing in tangible form for 12,000 years is awe-inspiring. As I wandered through the Tokyo National Museum, my jaw was either dropping or about to drop. Ceramics, porcelains, paintings, journals, calligraphy, sculptures, *1,500-year-old katanas with silver inlays*—the museum was a dazzling display of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean cultures. The exhibit on the evolution of medicine was especially fascinating, too. Even 100 years ago, treatment of injuries and diseases was downright cringe-worthy. I spent three hours wandering the massive structure, carefully checking the guide pamphlet to make sure I did not miss anything. Photography was prohibited throughout the museum.



*From the entrance to the museum.*

After leaving, I went on a stroll through the Imperial Palace. The grounds were large and well-kept, with plenty of wide open spaces and interesting landscaping. The dreary weather matched my melancholy mood; I knew I was leaving for home the next day. I had done well, I told myself. I had no problem with the way I had spent my time, but it had all gone by so quickly. I just needed *more time*—and a few thousand extra dollars. Then I'd really be able to do something with this trip. Everything I had seen and done didn't seem insignificant, just inadequate. It was an odd feeling, a sort of remorse without regret.









*This picture always depresses me.*



With my backpack weighing me down, I went looking for a hotel in the Ueno area. Ueno Station had the most convenient methods of reaching Narita International Airport, and as much as I wanted to miss my plane, I did *not want to miss my plane*. Lonely Planet recommended numerous hotels in the area, and they appeared to be reasonable in cost. When I arrived at my first choice, however, they had no vacancies. "No problem," I thought, striding off towards the next hotel... which was also full. The third hotel was full, as well. And the fourth. In total, I visited eight hotels over the course of a *three hour walk* until I found a dump of an establishment that could house me. When I walked into my room, I knew I should never have left the expensive hotel in Shibuya. The room was old and poorly-maintained, with a rusty shower head and threadbare comforter. The lone window opened up against the side of another building, with a metal radiator jutting out from the far wall. There was no air conditioning. Soaked in sweat from my trek through the humidity, I peeled my backpack from my body and climbed into the shower. I wanted to get out of this room, back to the city, and make my last night in Tokyo a pleasant one.

## **Day 16**

It was raining on the morning of my last day in Japan, giving me further incentive to indulge my inner Hemingway. The rain was a metaphor for... for... well, maybe it wasn't a metaphor. Maybe it was a symbol. The rain was a literary device of some sort, damn it! It had to be. There was *something* significant about the way I strode out into the rain that morning. I did not open my umbrella, preferring to let the precipitation drizzle down my forehead, like an informal baptism performed on a dying man. Ha! I *knew* I could work in a literary device!

Anyway, my plan had been to visit the Ueno Zoo, but the night prior, over dinner, Kevin and Joe had told me that "they put all the animals away if there's even the slightest bit of rain." So the zoo was not an option. I started wandering aimlessly through the streets until I saw a large archway, something that often signals the entrance to a shopping arcade. But this was so much better. Instead of the usual assortment of clothing and electronic and dollar stores, this was an open-air food market.

Despite the rain, the streets were packed with shoppers. Fresh seafood, meats, fruits, and vegetables were everywhere—pickled, smoked and dried goods, too. Vendors were shouting out to the market, advertising their products against the chatter of the crowd. It was a harmonious cacophony, music to my ears.



San Luis Obispo, my current hometown, only has one Asian market, but it is more of a Chinese, Korean, and Thai market. In the months prior to my departure, I had been searching for instant dashi, *the* staple of Japanese cuisine. Dashi is a broth made by boiling dried bonito flakes and kombu, a type of kelp. Instant dashi is more like bouillon, but still well-regarded. If I couldn't find instant dashi mix here, where *could* I find it?

I found a likely-looking shop but was turned away by the owner; I think he thought I was hungry for soup, not realizing that I wanted to buy an ingredient. The next shop was staffed by a young woman who spoke English and reeked of fish. I must have spoken to her for ten full minutes as she tried, ever so patiently, to figure out what I wanted. At first, she pointed me to the bonito flakes. "No, no," I said. "Instant, um, powder. Dashi powder."

Next, she directed me to the liquid version of instant dashi. I would have bought it, but I was going to get on a plane in just a few hours; I couldn't bring any liquids with me. "Powder," I repeated, not knowing what other word I could use. Finally, the young woman's eyes lit up. She directed me to a box with a fish on it.

"For dashi?" I asked.

"Yes, yes," she said. "Fast! Make bonito broth."

I was elated. Yes, the box was \$22, but such a massive amount of instant dashi had to be good for at least a few gallons of broth. And now I knew exactly what to look for when shopping online. I wandered the streets for another hour before returning to my hotel to get my backpack. The front desk clerk, I knew, spoke excellent English, so I approached her to confirm that I'd purchased the correct product. "Excuse me, I was hoping you could help me with something," I said.

Her face grew momentarily serious. "Yes, sir, how may I assist you?"

I moved my box of instant dashi onto the counter, and she started laughing. "This is instant dashi?" I asked.

"Yes, yes," she said with a smirk on her face. "For... *professional taste*."

It was my turn to laugh. "Is this as good as dashi made with bonito and kombu?"

The clerk beamed. She seemed so excited that I knew something, anything, about Japanese cuisine. "Close, close," she said, "but very easy. This is no trouble." She showed me the ratio of water to powder on the side of the box.

"How do I make the broth spicy?" I asked.

"Spicy... spicy... oh, spicy!" exclaimed the clerk. "Togarashi, yes, togarashi." I was pretty sure I knew what she was talking about; every noodle house had a spicy red seasoning kept next to the soy sauce and chopsticks. I thanked her profusely and ran off to find some togarashi and some lunch. I found both within an hour.

Content that I could now emulate Japanese soup broth at home, I was ready to leave. It felt good to know that I was bringing a little bit of Japan home with me; I hadn't purchased any other souvenirs during the trip. The dashi felt important. It was a vacation in a box, a little way to relive my experiences over the past couple weeks from the comfort of home. I boarded the train to Narita International Airport and watched out the window as the Tokyo skyline faded into the distance.



*Lunch.*



This is the last photo on my camera. *It's not a good picture, but there's something about it that I really like.*