

# Our Asian Blogs, 2017

Southern China, Myanmar, Malaysia,  
Singapore, Taiwan and Japan



Paul & Janita O'Neill



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In three trips, totalling almost two months in the second half of 2017, we travelled to Southern China, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Japan. With the exception of Taiwan, we have visited all these countries before, so we elected to seek some new experiences and places, travelling predominantly by public transport. Since we began travelling in 1976, we have maintained fairly detailed travel diaries. This is the latest in a now substantial body of work, which we have kept as, essentially, a personal record of our experiences. An exception to this is the latest blog on Japan where we have offered some advice for those thinking of visiting this fascinating part of the world. This collection and our other blogs are also online. **[www.brisbanecornershop.com](http://www.brisbanecornershop.com)** is our website.

Paul & Janita O'Neill  
December 2017

# Southern China

## August 2017





## 5 August, Golden Spring Hotel, Kunming, China

We find ourselves in the little-known city of Kunming, in the province of Yunnan, as the result of our uncontrollable weakness for cheap air fares, courtesy of Air Asia X. After a disastrous trip to South America early this year, we probably didn't need too much encouragement to get back on a plane and head off ... "somewhere."

Silly as it might sound, "somewhere" was just where we were heading once we had locked in a couple of cheap return fares to Kuala Lumpur, our favourite entry point to Asia. A couple of beers later, we had decided on something a little different and a little off the western tourist track - the Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong.

So, after a relaxing night in our favourite airport hotel, the Tune at KLIA2, we continued with Air Asia to Kunming, the only non-Chinese on the flight. We have travelled in China before so we were well-prepared for the pushing and shoving, the yelling at each other across open spaces and the overall uncivilised (by western standards) behaviour of the Chinese. We weren't disappointed, but now, back in our hotel after our first day out and about in this tiny city (by Chinese standards) of 4 million people, we have adjusted our expectations. The Chinese have changed markedly, or the beer is kicking in and we are in a more mellow mood. The public behaviour of the good citizens of Kunming is far more civilised than we have experienced before in China. It could be the result of a public relations exercise evident all over the city promoting "Civilised Kunming", but it also could be the beer.

Our major task for today was to collect our train tickets for our overland journey from Kunming, to Guilin and on to Guangzhou, with a couple of side trips. We pre-booked our tickets through a company called DIY China. We have used them before and we can't praise their services enough. For starters, they are partly Australian-owned, so for us there was the added advantage of being able to pay through Aussie bank transfers. On top of that, they provided everything needed to successfully navigate the maze that is the Chinese railway system, except for the instructions on dealing with the thousands of people in the queues at the ticket office!

We should now dispel a couple of myths about the Chinese. Firstly, there is

now some discipline in queues. We saw a queue-jumper yelled at and driven to the back by others who had had enough, as well as ticket window staff who sent "jumpers" packing. The other myth that we have dispelled, having recently expanded our Mandarin vocabulary, adding "yes" and "no" to "thank you", was that next to nobody in this part of China had any English. Not true. We have been able to get by, even in some rather complicated circumstances, with a bit of sign language and the locals' basic English skills.

To us, this trip is an exposure to the "real" China, rather than what we have experienced before in more westernized cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Xian. To do that, we are off on our own, using public transport, buses and the railways.

Our starting point, Kunming, was a bit of a random choice, so we have been taken aback by just how civilised this 4th tier Chinese city is. Chinese cities are generally categorised in four levels, 20 million plus, 10-20 million, 5-10 million and less than 5 million. Yet here there is a skyline that would rival most large American cities, a well-functioning freeway system and a great public transport system. Not only that, as testament to China's claims to be addressing her pollution problems, the city is one big solar generator! Every roof that we can see from our hotel room has a solar hot water system fitted, the factories ringing the city, that we observed from the plane, are covered in solar panels and virtually all the motor bikes in the city are electric.

Aside from sorting out our tickets for the remainder of our train trips, we managed to squeeze in one tourist activity, the Yunnan Railway Museum. We learned a lot about the history of the area through the advance of the railways. French money and engineers provided the financial and technical backing for the construction of the then Tonkin (Vietnam) to Yunnan railway which opened in 1910. But it was the thousands of Chinese workers who really made it all happen.

Looking back on the way the scales of power were set in those colonial times in comparison to today, the pendulum of history has swung and it is now the Chinese who have built the greatest rail network in the world and the Chinese who are financing the expansion of this network through South-East Asia and on to Europe through their "One belt, one road" project.





## 6 August, Golden Spring Hotel, Kunming

Kunming isn't an attractive city, although some of the areas we saw today were rather nice. The city is probably best defined as functional. Broad boulevards and a fairly extensive freeway system keep the masses of cars and buses moving, at least most of the time! Special lanes for motor bikes and push bikes assist greatly, although the common practice of zooming on to the footpath to avoid heavy traffic in the bike lanes can be somewhat disconcerting. All in all, Kunming City's motto, "Civilised Kunming" seems to be gaining some traction with the masses.



In the Metro we have noticed special, roped-off areas at normal carriage entry points, monitored by uniformed staff. It took us some time to realise that these areas are designed to educate passengers on the appropriate etiquette for entering and exiting subway carriages. The normal practice in China has been for entering passengers to barge through the just-opened doors, blocking those exiting. At peak times this can be a real problem on crowded Chinese Metro trains. The training is definitely having an effect, although there are always a few who haven't yet completed the curriculum!



Keeping with our theme of "going native", we ventured on to the Kunming local bus system today. Planning our journey was a real challenge because there are no maps available for Kunming's 50+ buslines. Nevertheless, we managed to find the right bus and actually catch it with not too much difficulty - no small feat when there is no English signage on the bus network. Our destination was the Yunnan Nationalities Village on the outskirts of the city. It was also the destination of what seemed to be half the population of Kunming. Our 40 minute bus trip cost us the princely sum of 2 yuan (50c) each. This exorbitant sum was due to the fact that we had chosen the "A1 Special Tourist Bus". If we had taken one of the several common buses, we would have done the trip for 1 yuan. It should be noted here that A1 Special Tourist doesn't mean western tourists. There weren't any! A1 Special Tourists are all Chinese.

The village was a cultural Disneyland, featuring reconstructions of minority villages from the province, cultural displays of music and dancing rolling through the day, opportunities to buy and eat offerings from the various ethnic groups, all set in lush, tropical gardens. We managed probably a third of it before we headed for the adjacent Yunnan Nationalities Museum - not a must-

see, but well-presented and free!

As with many of our travel experiences, particularly in Asia, the journey and what we see along the way is what it is all about. As two of only a handful of westerners in the crowd - we saw just four others - we were constantly greeted with "hellos" from kids and adults alike. People smiled and waved, little kids looked at us shyly and broke into grins when we winked or smiled back at them. Another striking feature of the crowds around the village was just how gregarious they were. Invited up to dance with the performers at the many cultural events, everybody, from toddlers to grannies, joined in the fun. We haven't seen this side of the Chinese in previous trips. Perhaps it is just a part of the character of people from this part of the country.

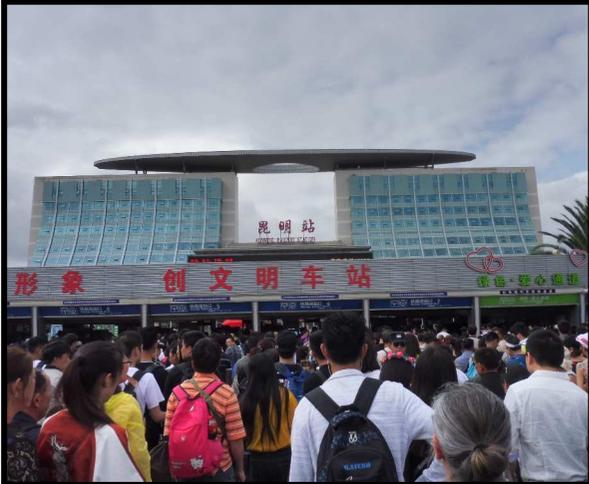
We have wondered for some time why so many Chinese appear to be, in western eyes, ill-mannered. We have a theory. As older folk ourselves, we pride ourselves in being able to cope with the rapid changes that we have experienced throughout our life time. But we have an advantage over Chinese people of our age or older or even those somewhat younger. We have had a lifetime to adjust to change, having grown up with it. Imagine what a rural Chinese citizen, born in the years just after WWII, has been through - a Communist revolution, Mao's Cultural Revolution, The Great Leap Forward and the more recent, rapid growth of capitalism and technology. Those of us born into western countries post-war have had 60 plus years to progressively adjust. Chinese of the same age, or older, or even those born in the 1960s, have had to, not only adapt to a whole new political environment, but also condense 50 years of change into a decade or so. Little wonder we see people our age struggling to use lifts, ATMs and subway ticket machines. The poor buggers are simply from another time. Their perceived rudeness is more likely to be purely lack of knowledge of the new norms.

So that explains the old folk. What about the rude young ones?

### **8 August, Dali Yunxi Boutique Inn, Dali**

Our travels began relatively early yesterday. A little freaked by the throngs at Kunming Main Station a couple of days back, we were leaving nothing to chance, leaving our hotel at 8:30 am to catch the 11:45 train to Dali. We made it, but as we sat in the waiting hall, we saw many punters who didn't factor in the





incredible queues at the station's security check points and who, despite some valiant sprints, found the platform entry doors firmly closed. Although our train was a day train, the only alternative to "hard seat" class was "soft sleepers". We had one upper and one lower berth, which was fine for pint-sized westerners, but larger, economy-sized travellers are not adequately catered for! Even many of the newer-model Chinese males would have difficulty squeezing into a top bunk. These "newer models" are generally 30% to 50% larger than their grandparents. Not surprising when you see how they eat! We have been staggered by the servings they dish out for themselves at the breakfast buffet.

It is still summer holidays in China, so large numbers of locals are on the move. We purchased our tickets online on the day they were released, 30 days prior to travel, so we had no problems getting what we wanted. Given the tens of thousands of people streaming in and out of Kunming station, this was a good call.

Dali station is actually some distance from the ancient Town of Dali that we had come to see. Our research told us that there was a local bus from the station to Dali Town. The chaos that accompanies Chinese travellers in a relatively small provincial "town" (Pop. 375,000) is something every Australian should experience at some time in their lives, if only to increase their appreciation of the comparatively civilised behaviour of Chinese Australians. Our native cunning, honed by experiences in other, similar situations, allowed us to rise above the yelling, pointing and pushing and jump on the first bus to pull into the bus parking lot, while our fellow travellers struggled with ports, sacks of Lord knows what and screaming children. Ah, the joys of carry-on only luggage!

The bus journey took more than twice the advertised 30 minutes because of peak-hour traffic. We think the driver leaning on the horn the whole way must have helped enormously! We have, until recently, been wary of bus travel in countries where we can't read the signage. What has made the difference for us lately is using the GPS on our phones to track our progress and estimate when we should alight.

The weather has turned our trip to Dali into a bit of a fizzer, so tomorrow we do it all again in reverse and take the seven hour train trip back to Kunming. From

here on we are taking the CHR (Chinese High-speed Rail), so our journeys should be far more comfortable and definitely faster.

### **9 August, Golden Spring Hotel, Kunming**

Our departure this morning was just as damp and miserable as yesterday. We had been admonishing ourselves for not planning for more time in Dali. As it turned out, it was a good call. The weather was so bad that we would have had to spend the day in our hotel room.

But the trip was not a total failure.

It's not every day that we get to spend seven hours behind closed doors with a Captain in the PLA (People's Liberation Army) but today we did just that. We hadn't been arrested as spies or transgressed in any way at all. Captain Ocean (not a superhero character) and his lovely girlfriend, Maggie, happened to share our compartment on the return to Kunming. Maggie is a primary school teacher and spoke excellent English. Ocean was not so good, but with her help he was able to communicate effectively. We had an extremely entertaining and informative trip, with our greatest learning being that people really are the same the world over. We learned a great deal about Chinese culture and how it impacts on life in modern China from a young couple who were extremely open about their feelings about internal politics in China and its place in the world. Ocean was very professional and a couple of times chose not to comment on things we discussed. It was a rare opportunity for all of us to gain a real understanding of life in our respective, not so dissimilar worlds.

### **10 August, Moon Reflection River Inn, Guilin**

We spent most of the day today on the train again, though this time it was on the CHR trains. For obvious reasons, the stations for the fairly new High Speed network are a long way out of the city. So we had long subway and bus rides to deal with at either end of our journey. We travelled over 1000 kms, with one change, in under six hours at a cost of about \$80 AUD each. Our connections at either end, covering about 50 suburban kms, cost \$2.20 each. The CHR trains were packed and one left every 10 -15 minutes. Every time we hear Australian politicians promoting high speed rail for Australia we just shudder. They have no idea!





Guilin is yet another city that we bet 90% of westerners have never heard of. Like every other Chinese city we have visited, it is just amazing! Freeways, high-rise and traffic have to be seen to be believed! Our journey was uneventful except for a very hot wait for the number 22B bus from Guilin West station to the city. It has been 35C here for a few weeks. We are hoping for a change!

Our special reflection on Chinese culture for today is on Chinese eating habits. Put simply, the Chinese eat like there is no tomorrow and the bulk of their consumption seems to be carbs. Not only rice or noodles, but deep-fried foods, packet chips and sweet bakery goods. The latter seem to be the latest big thing in the Chinese diet. In city centres there is a bakery almost every block and the crowds lined up for that deadly combo of sugar and carbs demonstrate the high demand. At our hotel in Kunming there was a table of cakes and sweet goodies at the entrance to the breakfast buffet. It required constant topping up! China is not in the position of the US or Australia where obesity is a major problem, but it is a looming one, particularly among the young.

### **11 August, Moon Reflection River Inn, Guilin**

Imagine Cairns in February, with the temperature hovering around 35C, 100% humidity and heavy rain. broken by sultry breaks when the sun heats up the clouds just enough to make the humidity feel like 110% and the temperature 38C. Then add the sauna effect of high-rise buildings, wet footpaths and the constant threat of those stealth ninjas - Electric Motor Scooters - and you get some idea of what this morning was like in Guilin. Trudging along the lakeside in the rain, through magnificent tropical gardens framing ancient pagodas, with a backdrop of towering karst mountains, we consoled ourselves with thoughts of how beautiful this city would be on any half-decent day, or any day other than today! So disillusioned were we that after several rounds of the floors of a beautifully air-conditioned department store we had Burger King (Hungry Jacks) for lunch! Shame... Shame. We are fairly sure that we have never eaten at Burger King before. Actually it wasn't all that bad, except for the fact that we are in China and American fast food isn't our idea of local cuisine - though the locals seem to have taken to it, especially the trendy young. Defeated, we slogged on back to our hotel, cranked up the aircon to 17C and spent the afternoon doing the washing.

## 12 August, Moon Reflection River Inn, Guilin

Becoming more confident, we passed up the day trip to the historic ancient river town of Daxu and opted for a local bus for the 20 km trip through the burbs to this village, once a major river trading centre. Informed by our research, we walked around behind the main Guilin bus station to the "back lot", from where buses left for nearby villages. Flicking off the inevitable touts, we eventually were found by the actual bus driver and, after some unsuccessful haggling, coughed up our 15 yuan (\$3) each for the journey. More than an hour later we were dropped by the main road with instructions, in Chinese, on how to find the village. Sustained by our breakfast of noodles sprinkled with an array of unrecognisable accompaniments, we walked through a few nondescript alleys to find the village, at least the tourist entry point for the village - a square full of market tables and a nice, clean, public toilet.

The more easily accessed village streets were lined with the usual trinket shops, but further on, where the shopping interests of the local tourists were not so well satisfied, the village was pretty much as advertised - narrow streets, lined with a mix of two-storey old merchant houses and smaller, more humble, workers' dwellings.

The rain stayed away, but the alternative was stifling heat and humidity, forcing us to adopt what we call the Asian shuffle, a very slow walking pace where the feet just clear the ground. The more out of the way parts of the village were populated by older Chinese men and women who seemed a bit overwhelmed by the crush of tourists, sheltering behind window shutters and greying wooden doors.

After an unadventurous lunch of an ice block and dry biscuits, we found our way back to the main road, just in time to board a bus, having been assured by the passengers that it was heading back to Guilin. We were pleased to learn that our return fare was only 4 yuan each, but as we got closer to the city, we realised that, while our bus was indeed going to Guilin, it was not to our part of Guilin. Guilin is a minor Chinese city but, with a population of about 6 million, it is easy to imagine just how many parts of the city we could be heading for. Luckily we were armed with our smartphone GPS and a good old paper map of the city and its bus routes. We were fine and managed to find our way





home, two further bus trips later.

### **15 August, Train D2965, Guilin to Guangzhou**

A couple of long day trips out of Guilin have put us a bit behind with our blog. Our first trip was up the Li River through a spectacular, karst-dotted landscape, reminiscent of Halong Bay in Vietnam. As usual, getting there was more than half the fun. The boat pier for the trip up the river is 20 kms north of the city, an hour and a half with traffic! Scores of buses disgorged thousands of tourists through a far from chaotic set of ticket gates that led to the wharf, packed with large river cruise boats. Ours was an English language tour, so we had some English-speaking company for a change - a Moroccan couple, two young Germans and a family of French/Chinese Canadians. The Canadian family was interesting as the two boys, 10 and 8, spoke Mandarin, English and French. For the first time in many days, the rain held off for most of the boat trip and, even though the sky remained overcast, we had a great view of the spectacular Li River and the karst pinnacles that seemed to go on forever. We had thought the 400 yuan each (\$160 AUD for two) a little steep, but the trip was well worth it. One drawback was being left for three hours, waiting for the punters who had taken the side trip, to see water buffalo and cormorants, at the disembarkation point, Yangshuo, for the bus back to Guilin. To make matters worse, the rain started up while we were killing time among the tourist stalls that lined every street of the town.

Yesterday we scored a comfortable minibus with a reasonably good driver for the five-hour round trip to the Rice Terraces of Longji. For most of the bus trip, the rain was torrential and rock slides and the rising river levels threatened to cut the road in several places. While the thought of spending five hours in a bus on rain-affected roads to see some rice paddies might sound a little crazy, these rice terraces have to be seen to be believed. For almost 1000 years, the local minority group has been carving out these terraces on the steep slopes of this valley. Our day trip included something called the "Longhair Show". Unaware of the character of the local people, we were a little puzzled by what this might be. We were enthralled! We were greeted by a troupe of highly entertaining and exuberant ladies of all ages who performed some extremely lively folk dances. The highlight of the performance was the display of their long hair. The women cut their hair only once in a lifetime, at age 16. The hair they cut off at this point is saved and used as a kind of "hair extension" in their

elaborate hairstyles.

We had chosen to add a return cable car ride to the top of the valley at 50 yuan each to our tour, which turned out to be a bargain. The fare on the spot was 110 yuan and, with the rain and mist closing in, the alternative of an hour's walk up to view the terraces and a 40 minute "slide" down would not have been a pleasant experience.

We headed back down the mountain in increasingly heavy rain. We had been told by our guide that the Li River was flowing so fast that small boat excursions had all been cancelled. The road had been cut up in many places by bus and other heavy vehicle traffic and, at one point, we were stopped by a rock fall. Visions of spending the night in our minivan flashed through our minds, but all was fine. Only in China! In minutes, a bulldozer arrived from nowhere and commenced clearing the road. Within ten to twenty minutes we were back on our way.

Chinese cultural note for today. Ever wondered how the Chinese can type on a smartphone or computer keyboard using a script that has many hundreds of characters that represent concepts rather than sounds? The answer is simple. They use Pinyin, a phonetic script that uses the western alphabet to translate the vocalisation of the script to the Chinese characters. Confused? We were at first. The Chinese word for a station is "zhan" and it is pronounced fairly well as we would spell it using western script. So, the Chinese type z, h, a, n and the device translates that to 站. Even more amazing is that Pinyin was developed in the early 1950s with the increased use of typewriters in China.

### **16 August, Zhuhai Special Economic Zone Hotel, Guangzhou**

How more neo-Maoist can you get than the "Special Economic Zone" Hotel? Whatever the SEZ was 20 years ago, today it is just another thriving, enterprising part of the enormous city of Guangzhou.

Classified as a Tier One City, Guangzhou is claimed to be highly developed and BIG. It is truly both. With the nearby metropolises of Shenzhen and Hong Kong, this conurbation could easily lay claim to being the biggest city on earth, with a population approaching 45 million.





The scale of the place is daunting. Twenty million passenger journeys are made every day on the Guangzhou subway system. A few simple calculations will bring you to the conclusion that, in one year, the entire world's population could have made a journey on the Guangzhou subway. Frightening? Not really. It is only the third largest system, by passenger volume, after Tokyo and Seoul, and it works reasonably well. We bought a 3 day pass on arrival. After trying the ticket machines, which wouldn't accept our notes, we picked our passes up at the Customer Service window in our local subway station. For the princely sum of AUD\$10 we can ride the rails for 72 hours. Trains are crowded all day, but at busy stations, doors open on both sides of the carriage, with passengers exiting one way and entering the other.

The pollution we experienced on earlier visits to China has not been so evident this trip. Today in Guangzhou we had clear blue skies in the morning, until the tropical haze closed in during the afternoon, making it hot and humid. There was none of the eye-stinging muck that we experienced in Beijing and Shanghai a few years back. Like many things in China, things are turning around. The West needs to recognise how difficult it must be to create and sustain change in a country with such a long history and tradition. The obvious economic change is well-documented, but the change in the people and their attitudes is not so well-recognised in the West. We see positive change everywhere. Simple things, like vehicular traffic stopping at zebra crossings, people putting litter in bins and our favourite, learning to be civilised in queues - still a bit of work to be done here - all contribute to, as the city of Kunming promotes, a civilised city. Next step is getting the motorcycle and bicycle riders to obey the same traffic rules as cars and trucks. Believe us, crossing at the lights, believing you have right of way and being assailed by bicycles and motorbikes coming from all directions, is not fun.

We did a couple of historical tourist attractions today, focused around two major Chinese figures, Sun Yat-sen and the Nanyue king Zhao Mo. Those with even a rudimentary knowledge of Chinese history would have heard of Doctor Sun Yat-sen. Many, including us, may never have heard of Zhao Mo.

Sun Yat-sen was one of the three main characters in the complicated drama that resulted in the creation of the People's Republic of China. The others were Mao Tse-tung and Chiang Kai-shek. The good Doctor, unlike the others, is

loved on both sides of the Straits of Taiwan. Luckily for him, he died before the alliance that he had stitched together between his Kuomintang Party and the Communists fell apart. His Memorial Hall and statue stand in a beautiful park in the centre of the city. The hall has played a significant part in the history of the country since it was opened in 1931, just six years after Sun Yat-sen's death in 1925. For example, it was here that the Japanese general, Tanaka, was executed in 1947 for war crimes perpetrated by the Japanese in the Second World War.

When the foundations of an apartment block were being dug in the 1980s, the tomb of the Nanyue King Zhao Mo was discovered in downtown Guangzhou. For Chinese archaeologists, it must have been a Tutankhamen-scale discovery. Thousands of articles of jade, pottery, bronze, gold and silver were unearthed, along with the remains of the king and fifteen attendants, who were probably sacrificed to assist him in his next life. We were able to go down into the excavated tomb, which was rather small and somewhat of a challenge for even the shorter of us, but well worth the stooping required. The items recovered from the tomb, displayed in the museum, were just mind-boggling. Everything a king and his sacrificed servants would need on their journey into the afterlife, including food, drink, chariots, tools, household implements - the list goes on and on - was buried with Zhao Mo. Yet another hidden wonder of China.

Today's cultural comment. The Chinese Emperors thought of their realm as the "Middle Kingdom". This myth was dispelled over time, as successive empires broke up and warlords took control of most of the country. Then, in the early years of the 20th century, western powers carved out spheres of influence in China. In modern China, the notion of the Middle Kingdom has probably been reborn, but with a lot more of a realistic foundation than before. The Chinese Century is coming, if it isn't already here.

### **18 August, Zhuhai Special Economic Zone Hotel, Guangzhou**

With a couple of fairly adventurous days under our belt, we are planning a sedate Pearl River cruise for tomorrow, our last day in China.

Yesterday we found the number 63 bus and headed off into the vast 'burbs of Guangzhou to find the Baiyun Mountain Scenic Area. Our routinely thorough research and preparation got us to the cable car station that accesses the





mountain with consummate ease. We favoured the cable car option to get up the mountain, given that it was again in the mid 30Cs and extremely humid. Also, the 25 yuan fare made it a no-brainer. We were fairly early, so the usual crowds of grandparents and kids being entertained for the summer holidays were not yet out in full force. The views from the top of the mountain would have been spectacular, except for the smog that hung over the city. We have to say again that smog in the south of China is nowhere near the levels we have seen in the north.

Now comes the part where things got a little messy. We had foolishly assumed that the return bus would stop across the street from where we got off. There was no bus stop in sight, so we started walking back along our original direction of travel. We walked and walked and... no bus stops at all. Eventually we changed course and found a stop that had about half a dozen buses listed on the board, with all stops in Chinese! This was the outer 'burbs and with no likely-looking English speakers in sight, we returned to study the route board and noticed that there were Metro symbols on some of the stops. Saved! We found the rough location of a Metro stop, using our GPS and got off. On the way, we also spotted a nice fruit shop, where the young lady spoke reasonable English. Where was she when we needed her?

Our suburban wanderings had taken us into some very culturally diverse areas of Guangzhou. People from Africa and the Middle-East were everywhere, a most unusual sight in China. We guessed we had stumbled upon a university area of the city.

Today, it was with some trepidation that we set off on probably our greatest challenge in China to date, an overland trip to Kaiping, 160 kms to the south of Guangzhou. We were seeking diaolou, iconic watchtowers that were built by Chinese returning home from the mid 19th century gold rushes in the USA and Australia. About 1800 diaolou remain today of around 3000 that were built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

We had done extensive research on this trip, because it was in a fairly remote rural area and it involved several bus and subway interchanges. We set off early on the subway to the Fangcun Bus Station, on the southern edge of the city. Here we purchased tickets to the city of Kaiping (58 yuan each). This was

the easy part. Following a two hour bus trip we then had to find the number 17 local bus to get us to the Li Garden (Li Yuan in Chinese) and the village of Zili. None of the buses we could see in this fairly large station had the number 17 on it and none of the stops was labelled as 17. Eventually an attendant pointed out the correct bus bay, for bus 617, not 17. Apparently all the buses operating out of Kaiping now have 6 added to their number!

The number 617 driver was most helpful, even pretending to understand our attempt at the Chinese for our destination. For 40 minutes we bumped along with a dozen or so locals, who were highly amused by the antics of one gent who got on the bus with something bound up in a fertiliser sack, not an uncommon sight on rural buses. We think he was telling all and sundry that he had his wife in the sack and he was off to dump her somewhere. The tale was re-told everytime a new passenger got on and the whole bus laughed and giggled all over again. The driver let us know where to get off and pointed us in the direction of Li Garden, about a kilometre up a side road.

The Li family returned to China after making their fortune on the Californian gold fields. Generations of the family moved back and forth between the US and China until the 1940s. The gardens are beautifully laid-out and well-maintained, as are the diaolou that the family built.

The village of Zili was easily accessed via a free shuttle bus that runs between three of the sites in the area. Today it was not heavily used. We were the only tourists on the bus and the only westerners we saw all day. Most of the locals had their own cars or were on tours.

For our return trip, we got the shuttle driver to let us off on the main road to catch the number 617 bus back to Kaiping. After some initial confusion about which side of the road we should wait for the bus on, we were on our way. Note: Rural Chinese bus route signs need to be treated with caution. They are routinely the reverse of how we would show a bus route in the west.

Back in Kaiping, we negotiated the ticket purchase with minimal difficulty and were on our way back to the Fangcun Bus station and the subway home. As it turned out, things went very smoothly, but we need to give credit to the author of the web site, [guangzhoutravelguide.com](http://guangzhoutravelguide.com). Their directions were near perfect.





Today's cultural note. It has to be said that the Chinese central and local governments are really trying hard to ensure more civilised behaviour in their citizens. Everywhere we have been on this trip we have seen posters and video messages emphasising "civilised" behaviour. It is working, but changing the habits and attitudes of 1.4 billion people doesn't happen overnight. Western countries need to reflect on just how uncivilised some of their citizens are before they criticise China.

### **19 August, Zhuhai Special Economic Zone Hotel, Guangzhou**

Encouraged by our recent successes in navigating the more remote by-ways of Southern China, we decided to spend our last day on the Pearl River. River cruises are available but, as with most tourist activities in China, they can be a little costly. We knew Guangzhou had a public ferry system, so we decided to chance our hand. A short stroll from Beijing Lu metro station saw us at Tianzi Ferry Wharf. As usual, we were flying blind when it came to reading the signs and maps around the small terminal. What we could see was that the fare was 2 yuan (40c) for an air-conditioned "liner" and just 1 yuan (20c) for a non-air-conditioned boat. Our 4 yuan tinkled into the collection box with no further debate. There seemed to be two or three distinct waiting areas. We headed for the first seats we spotted, a habit quickly acquired in China. Within minutes, a River Cat-like ferry pulled in and we leapt to our feet to be first in line (another habit quickly acquired in China!) No. We were waved away. This was obviously not our ferry. Our second boarding attempt was more successful and we dived down to the "special" air-conditioned deck, to be confronted by a riot of tiny Chinese children under the, not too strict, supervision of their grandparents. Not only that, but every seat was taken and the air-conditioning was struggling against the heat generated by the scores of excited children.

We had no idea where we were heading, but it was a jolly cast and crew and we figured for under a \$1 for both of us we could take up a spot on the outside deck, probably the 1 yuan cabin and enjoy the view. And a spectacular view it was.

Guangzhou has a reputation for innovative architecture and many of the best examples line the river. The sheer scale of the skyline is impressive on its own, but throw in some truly bizarre structures and you have one of the most interesting big city skylines we have seen.

A few stops into our journey, the reason for all the excited little people became evident. Half our complement disembarked, sporting rubber rings, flippers, kickboards and water pistols. A water park. As the last grandparents prodded their exuberant charges out the door of the 2 yuan deck, we moved down to grab a seat in the hope that the air-conditioning might now catch up. But no, there were enough hyped-up littlies and fan-waving oldies left to keep us sweltering.

Soon the second attraction of our mystery voyage loomed on the southern bank of the Pearl - the Canton Tower. Looking like a large, twisted white musk stick, the tower is something every city that doesn't have a ferris wheel "Eye" seems to need to compensate. It was hot and the crowds were gathering, which would undoubtedly involve queues, so, noticing a subway entrance, we dived into the cool of Guangzhou's wonderful, fully air-conditioned metro system.

We counted our mystery river tour a great success. A forty-five minute river cruise on the Pearl River and a visit to the number one Guangzhou landmark, the Canton Tower, for under a dollar for both of us was a fine finale to our travels through the three southern provinces of Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong.

### **Reflections**

Forty years ago, as we drove through one of the worst European winters on record in our little Fiat Bambino, with one of us five months pregnant, we had no idea that we would still be adventurous enough in our advancing years to be revelling in the thrills of travelling independently in more and more countries that nobody then even imagined visiting. Back then, we would never have even considered China. Five years back, in 2013, we took our first tentative steps, with a couple of weeks spent in Beijing, Hong Kong and Shanghai. In 2014 we went to Xian to visit the Tombs of the Terracotta Warriors, then by train to Beijing and beyond, across central China to Mongolia as the first leg of a Trans-Mongolian/Trans-Siberian adventure that took us by train and bus through to Amsterdam.

Back this time on a whim, driven by cheap airfares, we felt a little more confident and more understanding of Chinese ways. What we didn't expect



was just how developed even some of the more remote cities, towns and villages of China have become. Modern highways, great communication infrastructure, a rapidly improving standard of living - that for many is approaching or exceeding western standards - and finally, the High Speed Train network that is by far the largest in the world, have all contributed to making China the powerhouse it has become.

All this is amazing, but China will always struggle with one simple thing. It is crowded. And as more and more of its citizens flood into the scores of mega-cities, the pressures on delivering services will remain a major challenge - not an insurmountable challenge, but one that will test the ability of a system that has come a long way in giving its people increased freedom, but now has to manage their expectations of higher living standards as well.

We see happy, mostly well-off people wherever we go in China. In the countryside, what would have historically be known as "peasant workers", may still struggle, but we still see many villages where multi -storey family houses have replaced mud dwellings that now house live stock or have become storage places for grain.

The key observation is that China is changing and developing way more rapidly than many in the West believe. This is a ship that won't be turned around. The 21st Century will be the Asian Century, led by China. Get on board because there isn't another boat coming.

# Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan October 2017





## 10 October, Tune Hotel, KLIA 2 Airport

We often miss the mundane in our blogs and regret years later that we didn't record some of the everyday aspects of our trips. Our stays in the Tune Hotel in Kuala Lumpur and our, now regular, flights from Coolangatta to KL definitely fall into this category.

Kuala Lumpur has become a real travel hub for us over the past few years. Of late, our modus operandi has been - see cheap flight to KL, book it, then decide where to go from there. This trip and our previous one to Southern China happened this way. Coolangatta is not the flashiest of Australia's International Airports, but it is serviced by an increasing number of budget airlines like AirAsia, Scoot and Jetstar. We even noticed a Hong Kong Airlines plane on the tarmac this morning.



AirAsia's specials to KL range from AUD99 to AUD199. Their on-flights to other Asian cities are in the same range, although we once got a flight from KL to Ho Chi Minh for \$27! We usually pay for extra legroom seats, or use a site called OptionTown, which charges around \$8 for a chance to grab a spare seat in a three seat row. If you miss out, you get a refund. We have never missed!

With time not an issue for us retirees, we choose to stopover in KL before our next leg. We use two options here. Increasingly, our favourite is the Tune Hotel at KLIA 2. The Tune is within easy walking distance of the terminal and reasonably priced. It is clean, the staff are pleasant and the rooms are a good 3 🌸 standard. We also use the Hotel Sentral, directly over the road from Sentral Station in KL. There is a bus from the Airport to Sentral Station for around \$4 for the hour-long journey; for a faster trip, there is the KLIA Express train for about \$14. On our latest visit to the Sentral, we were thrilled to see that a Domino's Pizza had opened across the road. We aren't big consumers of pizza, but after a month of eating out in Asian restaurants, it was just too tempting.



The Tune now has a bar and cafe, as opposed to the 7 Eleven where we used to buy our beer. It is reasonably priced as well and there is a good selection of snack/cafe foods on the menu. We are about to head off there

for dinner. We have an outrageously early flight to Mandalay via Bangkok tomorrow. 6:40am! Lucky we are just across the road!

### **11 October, Hotel Yadanarbon, Mandalay**

Our day started at 3:30 am! We had gone to bed early to prepare ourselves for the early start, but we both woke early and decided to head over to the airport. We weren't the only ones! The terminal was quite busy. All was fine on our first leg, the plane was on time and, reassuringly, the captain was Australian. We even hit the Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok early. Don Mueang, a low cost terminal like KLIA 2, was very busy and, to make matters worse, our plane to Mandalay was delayed almost an hour, stretching our stopover to close to four hours. These delays are not as common on AirAsia as people might have you believe. Around 80% to 90% of our flights have been on time over our years of flying with them.

Mandalay has a nice, new, small terminal and we were through Immigration in a few minutes. Australians need visas for Myanmar, but we had done an eVisa online and it was an easy process, even if it was a little pricey at US\$50. Next job was changing our specially selected, pristine US\$ to kyats. We had been down this road before and so were well-prepared for the surgical examination of our notes. A girl at the counter beside us was not so lucky with most of her rather large stash of dollars failing to meet the rigid standards of the Myanmar Banking system.

Mandalay airport is about 25kms out of the city and there is no bus service. The taxi price is regulated at 4000 kyats per person in a share taxi and 15000 for a three person private taxi. We selected the private option, but we picked up a stray Irishman on the way to the taxi park and had a bit of a hassle with the driver over his joining us. As is the Asian way, everybody within hearing wanted to offer advice and join in the debate. All to no avail. We stood our ground and good sense prevailed.

We stayed in the Yadanarbon on our last trip. It is comfortable and at around \$66 AUD including breakfast, it is in the mid-range for hotels in Myanmar, which are often significantly more expensive than in other South-East Asian countries. It is in a dusty old back street which has a real "old Asia" feel to it.





Our only task for the afternoon was to find the train station to buy the tickets for our next leg, to the small village of Thazi. This was easily done as it turned out. Well, finding the station was easy enough, but purchasing the tickets presented us with a couple of simple challenges. All signage was in Burmese script, which looks a little like Thai that has been through the spin cycle of a high-speed washing machine. Also, it seemed there were special windows for specific trains and, though we weren't too sure about it, maybe even special windows for booking specific days. All was fairly easily resolved as everybody in sight leapt to our assistance and directed us to the correct window where an extremely helpful man hand-wrote our tickets as he lavished praise on Australia because he had seen something on TV about it. Or that is what we made of his comments. Price for the two hour trip on the special Express Train, in “Upper Class” seats - AUD2 each.

Mandalay still has some of its “rawness”. The back streets are still dusty and the stray dogs still lounge under the trees that struggle through the bitumen, where there is some. Almost everybody still wears traditional dress, the women still paint their faces with Thanakha and the men still chew betel nut and spit the residue on the street, but there is now at least one set of traffic lights and cars and motorbikes actually stop at them! In our experience, Myanmar is one of the few South-East Asian countries where enough original culture and tradition has been preserved for travellers to gain some understanding of a world that is rapidly disappearing. We are looking forward to our train trip through rural Myanmar in a couple of days' time when we hope to get a little closer to the real character of Myanmar and away from mass tourism.

### **12 October, Hotel Yadanarbon, Mandalay**

We had planned a fairly adventurous trip for today, catching a local pick-up/ shared ride, then a ferry to Inwa (Ava) to visit some ruined temples by horse and cart. When we pulled back the curtains this morning, that plan quickly unravelled. The street below was knee-deep in muddy water and the rain was pelting down. None of this deterred the locals though. The street turns into a mini-market in the morning, with small vegetable stalls and a couple of fish and chicken sellers. The chicken lady was happily hacking into chicken carcasses with the water lapping just below her table. Bikes and cars sent wakes rolling within centimetres of the stock laid out for sale. Given the obvious lack of concern, we figured that this was a fairly regular event in the monsoon season.

The breakfast room on the top floor of the hotel was awash when we went up, but breakfast was served as normal.

The ride in the back of the pick-up was suddenly an extremely unattractive proposition. We had been approached by a taxi driver in the street yesterday afternoon so we found him or, more correctly, he found us and we arranged to hire his taxi for the day for \$40 US. As it turned out we made the right call. Many roads around town were flooded and the intermittent rain would have drenched us on the back of the truck.

So we played tourist for the day, being driven from site to site in air-conditioned luxury. Even more to the point, we would never have been able to travel around the temples that dotted Sagaing Hill on foot as we had thought we would. We did get our dose of adventure, though, catching the ferry across to Ava and taking a two hour, bone-jarring ride in a horse cart through the quagmires that pass for roads on the island. Prices seem to be rising fairly quickly in Myanmar. Blogs that we read prior to this trip quoted 500 kyats return for the ferry and 4000 kyats for the horse cart. Today the ferry was 1400 kyats and the cart, 10000 kyats. (1400 kyats equals US\$1)

As we were only going to be in Mandalay for one day, we decided not to buy the multiple entry pass that covers the temples and other attractions in the district. Consequently, we weren't able to go into some of the temples on Ava, not a great loss as we have seen more than our share of Buddhist Temples. We finished the day with a walk on U-Bein Bridge in Amarapura. This is obviously the cool thing to do for the younger set, as the bridge was crowded with hand-holding teens and 20-somethings. U-bein is the world's longest teak footbridge, curving 1300 yards across a shallow lake. There are no railings and we wonder how many people fall or are nudged off the bridge in the high season.

Much of the area we travelled through today was dominated by Buddhist temples and monasteries. Buddhism is at the core of the culture of Myanmar, as it is in many other South-East Asian nations, so it is difficult to maintain respect for those cultures if you don't respect their core tenets. However, we do wonder, respectfully, just how much of a drain the support of the millions of Buddhist monks and their monasteries, places on these developing nations.





From what we have observed, over many years travelling in these countries, the life of a Buddhist monk is no picnic. Their monasteries are extremely basic at their best and downright squalid at their worst, so we definitely mean no disrespect to those who adopt the monastic life. However, whole villages, cities and towns have to support and maintain the monks and their extensive sites. Many of these communities struggle to support themselves, yet they willingly give daily to feed, clothe and accommodate the monks. Perhaps we are touching on one of the key differences between our cultures. They willingly give, while we expect to be given.



### **13 October, Wonderful Guesthouse, Thazi**

Some respite from the rain today with clear, non-polluted blue skies for most of the day. The downside of the sunshine was, of course, the humidity, which had us doing the Asian shuffle as we plotted our way through the mud, puddles and traffic to fill in the day, before we headed to the station to catch our 3pm train to Thazi.

By the time we arrived at the station it was steaming, but at least the rain had held off. The station was packed with many hundreds of interesting characters - soldiers heading off somewhere, families loaded up with what might well have been their worldly goods, young girls selling boxed snacks and scores of people just hanging around, charging their smart phones or sleeping in the shade of the station awnings. We had seats in an “Upper Class” carriage, which was comfortable enough for the journey but, until the train got moving it was a hot box!



Thazi was a lot more hectic than we had imagined. Hundreds piled off the train and, since we were the only non-locals, we immediately drew the attention of the horse cart drivers. We gladly paid the 2000 kyats for the five minute ride to our guesthouse, rather than attempting to navigate the slushy streets. The same driver will pick us up at 6:00 am tomorrow to catch the train to Shwenyaung.

We had been a bit concerned about the Wonderful Guesthouse, as it was one of only two places to stay in what looked on the map to be a tiny rural village. As it turned out, it is a great little place, run by an extremely friendly and helpful

family. Our room is small, but comfortable with air-conditioning and a clean bathroom with great hot water.

#### **14 October, Royal Nyaung Shwe Hotel, Nyaungshwe**

Our “carriage” awaited us for an early start to catch the 7:00 am train to Shwenyuang this morning - the same driver and tired old pony that had brought us into town last night. The station platform was even more hectic than it was yesterday. We probably could have coped ourselves, but the son of the guesthouse owner was right behind us, ducking into the ticket office and organising our tickets. We were also provided with a breakfast box that was enough for our lunch as well. Great service.

Again, we had taken the “upper class” carriage and, though the standard was not as good as the mainline train we took yesterday, it was comfortable, if not terribly clean. We sat with an interesting German ex-pat and his daughter who is part-Burmese. He runs a travel company in Yangon that specialises in community-based home stay and trekking. His daughter was 18 but looked about 15. Her local language skills added to our enjoyment, as she was able to translate the comments of the locals that we normally simply smile and nod at.

Thazi to Shwenyuang is a good 10 hours, on the aptly named “slow train”, but it passed quickly with truly spectacular scenery mixed with some long and rambling conversations with fellow travellers. Early on we crawled through some fairly densely-populated, swampy lowlands with rice fields, bananas and cattle standing up to their knees in water. As we climbed into the mountains, the jungle closed in, to the extent that it became dangerous to sit too close to the open window as branches whipped the sides of the carriage. We had been adopted by a little girl of about 4 or 5 who, to our horror, insisted on hanging out of the window, branches thrashing past her face. The train made many stops at villages where the locals thronged to the platform, selling all sorts of food, drinks and snacks. Stations we stopped at around lunchtime had full instant kitchens set up on the platform to dispense hot food.

Past the 4000 foot mark, the jungle opened up to spectacular highland plains, with high mountains in the background. The little villages disappeared and large open fields of corn, vegetables, rice and even grapes took over. The area reminded us of the Atherton Tablelands in North Queensland. Best of all, the





temperature dropped to the mid 20C mark. The fare for this fantastic day was 3000 kyats, AUD\$3 each. Interestingly, the 10km trip in a shared pick-up with three other travellers, from the station to our hotel, was 2000 kyats, which gives some indication of the difference between tourist prices and what the locals pay.

### **15 October, Royal Nyaung Shwe Hotel, Nyaungshwe**

What a difference a bit of altitude makes. Nyaungshwe is the stepping off point for Inle Lake, one of the big four of Myanmar tourism, the others being Yangon, Bagan and Mandalay. There isn't a lot to see in the town itself, so we spent most of the day exploring the fairly basic Cultural Museum and yet another "unique" Buddhist Temple, this one having the only stepped stupa in Myanmar. We also managed to sort out our boat trip on the lake and our return to Mandalay. We don't often use Travel Agents but, following a Lonely Planet tip, we sought out Thu Thu Travel in the main street. Having scoped out prices for both the boat and the return to Mandalay, we were happy with the agent's prices and sorted it all out on the spot - AUD\$24 for a whole day boat ride and AUD\$26 for the 7 hour minibus ride to Mandalay for two.

The town is fairly laid back at the moment as it awaits the boom that follows the end of the wet season. Touts still hit on the few tourists wandering the streets, but we were not as interesting a target once they discovered that we had a boat sorted already.

### **16 October, Royal Nyaungshwe Hotel, Nyaungshwe**

Our boatman was waiting for us, as arranged, at our hotel. We had assumed that we would be picked up in a car and taken to the boat landing. No such luck! We had to walk down to the landing, which wouldn't have been a big issue except for the fact that we have settled into the Asian tropical shuffle to avoid becoming drenched in sweat and our boatman was in a bit of a hurry. The boat landing was crammed with longboats sporting the long driveshaft power plants common throughout South-East Asia. The traffic in the channel that leads from the town out to the lake pulsed with activity. Tourist boats are exactly the same as the normal working boats, except for the addition of wooden chairs with pillows, umbrellas and life jackets.

We had been expecting a bit of a glum day, but after an hour or so on the lake

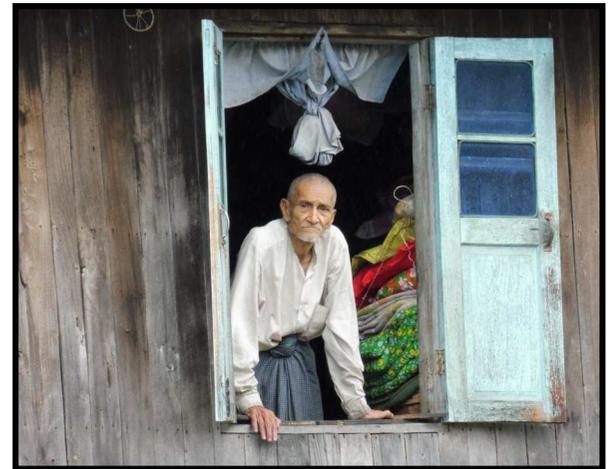
the clouds burnt off, exposing a crystal clear blue sky. The boat was fairly comfortable although, as the sun warmed up, we were a bit exposed in the open boat. The umbrellas helped a bit, held close to our heads.

The lake and its shore line are quite heavily populated. Stilt villages, complete with floating gardens, are strung out along the eastern shore. The main crop is tomatoes, which are grown on beds of water hyacinth. One of the iconic images of Inle Lake is of the straw-hatted fisherman balancing his conical fishing net with one leg while holding on to his oar with the other. Sure enough, just as we exited the channel onto the lake, there they were, two, costumed, balancing fisherman. The poor guys must be paid by the hotels and travel agents to pose all day for the tourists - a fairly unnecessary activity, given that most of the real fishermen do fairly much the same thing, except that they use cast nets.

Tourism is a major industry here, but many other activities are conducted on and around the lake. We visited a traditional silk and lotus-weaving factory, a silversmith, cheroot factory and a boat-making yard. These probably once were viable cottage industries, but tourism has had its impact. We are fairly sure that the stock in the showrooms attached to each of the locations we visited was not made there. There was just too much of it and - surprise, surprise! - the same stuff was on sale at the hundreds of stalls in the market and those surrounding the pagodas and famous Jumping Cat Monastery we visited.

The lake looks reasonably clean, except for a fairly large amount of floating litter accumulated in spots around the shore. One also has to wonder what happens to the human waste of the many thousands who live over the water in the stilt villages.

The scenery around the lake is spectacular, particularly on a sunny day. Being the end of the wet season, the surrounding mountains are green, as are the areas along the shore line. While the villages may be somewhat of an environmental threat, they are unarguably attractive and interesting. We are glad we arranged our trip through an agent. We had a good, co-operative boatman, a well-maintained boat and all for a price that was less than the touts on the street were asking.





### **17 October, Hotel Yadanarbon, Mandalay**

Back in Mandalay again and just about at the end of the Myanmar leg of our trip. We had planned to take a shared taxi back here from Inle Lake, but the mini-bus worked out much cheaper at 13000 kyats each as opposed to 40000 kyats for the taxi. The roads in Myanmar are patchy, but this route wasn't too bad and if we avoided looking out the front window, we weren't panicked by the driving!

Back to KL tomorrow ready for the second leg of this trip down the Malaysian peninsula by train to Singapore, via Malacca.



### **19 October, Heeren Palm Suites, Malacca**

The last couple of days have been spent on the road and in the air. An hour long taxi ride to the Mandalay Airport was followed by a flight to Bangkok; connection to KL; overnight in KL at the Tune Hotel; airport bus into KL Sentral station; three hour train ride to Tampin and finally an hour's taxi run into Malacca. Doesn't seem much when you type it in to a few lines, but we know we have covered a lot of ground!

Our taxi to Mandalay Airport was courtesy of our new friend, the 31st Street Cabbie who calls himself and his driver, Starsky and Hutch! We can highly recommend S&H. Reliable, helpful and a fair-priced service.

**oemyintmyanmar7@gmail.com** is the website.



We have passed through Don Mueang Airport in Bangkok a couple of times now and each time it has been packed! Its parallel runways land and take off planes at an amazing rate. It operates more like a high traffic bus terminal rather than an airport. We always seem to depart from the bowels of the earth, where literally thousands of people mill about, anxiously watching screens to see just how long their flight is to be delayed. Then they pile on to fleets of buses, to travel out to planes lined up, like buses, on the edge of the runway. The noise at some gates, especially those served by airlines heading to China, is deafening. It puts us in mind of the sound that assaults the ears when the doors open into a Japanese Pachinko Parlour. If this means nothing to you, think of a shed full of chickens!

We have recently been using the KLIA Express train into Sentral Station, but

just for old times' sake, we decided to take the Airport bus. This used to be a bit of a crazy ride. Buses pulled in to the kerb, well away from the terminal exit and there was always a rush to jump on to the one that was just leaving as there was no guarantee that another would be along any time soon. You paid on the bus or, on a couple of occasions, we got away with showing our Air Asia boarding passes. Those days are gone. We rolled up to the bus terminal, now just outside the arrivals exit, expecting to just jump on. Oh no. "You need to buy a ticket at the booth inside, sir." Once on the bus, no loud tuneless music from the driver's personal "Best of India" CD collection, and no ticket collector running about collecting fares. Ah the good old days. But not all was lost. The arrival platforms under the new KL Sentral Station and Shopping Mall still look like a construction site, though now there are tiles and concrete where there once was just mud.

The train from Kuala Lumpur to Gemas is new, Chinese-built and moderately fast. The long-term plan is to take the line all the way to Johor Bahru, just across the causeway from Singapore. We got off at Tampin, two stops before the end of the line, a three-hour journey for 25 RM each (AUD\$8). We were planning to catch the bus from Tampin Bus Station in the middle of town, into Malacca, but a few blogs we read about the trip put us off. It can apparently be an extremely long and uncomfortable journey. So we opted for a taxi. Unlike taxi drivers in most parts of Asia, who generally haunt the station platforms and grab your bags as you alight, the taxi cartel of Tampin takes up residence in a small cafe a hundred yards or so from the station exit. We were lucky enough to catch one who was getting something out of his boot. He showed very little interest in our fare, but he did manage to rouse another driver who lumbered over and declared that the fare was 80RM. We knew it should be in the range of 50RM to 60RM, so we told them we would catch the bus. Now they were interested - not in taking us into Malacca, but in hitting us up 10RM for the 1km to bus station. We smiled and walked off. About 200m down the road one of the boys, who had obviously broken ranks, pulled up and offered 70RM. It was hot as hell, so we jumped in. After all, AUD\$25 for a 40km, one hour taxi trip isn't all that bad a deal.

### **20 October, Heeren Palm Suites, Malacca**

We don't generally comment on our hotel selections because our standards and expectations may well be quite different to many other travellers.





However, the Heeren Palm Suites deserves a special recommendation. Located right in the middle of Chinatown's Jonker Street Walk area, the hotel is a restored, original traditional house, or more correctly, two houses that were joined in an earlier restoration. It is great value and a taste of what homes were like in the 19th century, but with all the modern conveniences.

Malacca is a place we learnt about in primary school, probably because it was an important British trading port. What we didn't know was the long history of conflict between the local population and the many invaders that attempted to control this strategic trading city over the centuries.

Arab and Chinese traders were the first to influence Malacca. The Arabs brought Islam to the city from about the 14th century. They were followed by the Portuguese in 1511, the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1797. With the exception of a short period of Japanese occupation, 1941-1946, the British governed the whole of Malaya until Malaysian Independence in 1957. It is easy to see how the current ethnic origins of the Malaysian population came about. The original Malay population was heavily influenced by Islam and so it has remained today. The Indian population came with the British and possibly earlier on with the Portuguese, who came to Malaya via their colony of Goa in India. The Chinese traders successfully insinuated themselves throughout South-East Asia and so it was also in Malaya. Why was the least impactful influence that of the European Christian colonialists, the Portuguese, Dutch and British? Saint Francis Xavier even visited the city during the Portuguese period. He was buried here for a short time on his way to his final resting place on Goa. We have no answer, but Islam prevailed, as it does today.

We are so well-informed now because we have visited a couple of excellent local Malaccan Museums located in the colonial heart of the city.

### **21 October, Heeren Palm Suites, Malacca**

Today we did a very silly thing. We decided to walk a couple of kms to Kampung Morton, a small, remnant Kampung close to the city centre. By the time we arrived we were totally drenched in sweat and not an air-conditioned building was in sight.

The Kampung was named after a Commissioner of Lands who played some

part in the establishment of the Kampung. In 1922, a small village on the other side of the city had to be relocated as the government needed to resume its land. The relocation was assisted by a government loan negotiated by the village headman who just happened to be the grandfather of the current occupant and owner of the well-preserved house we had come to visit, Villa Samosa. The home had much in common with two houses we had lived in. When we lived in Home Hill, we rented a typical tropical home on stumps, with wrap-around verandahs, VJ walls and ceilings and breeze-ways above the doors. The old Queenslander that we owned at Holland Park West was built within a couple of years of Villa Samosa and it shared the same characteristics. There was even a squatter's chair!

Our return walk was no less unpleasant, although we did manage to pick up some breezes along the splendid river walk that the good burghers of Malacca have recently constructed. Sadly, nobody seems to use it. Before heading off to complete our to-do list for Malacca, we closely examined the clothing on offer on all three floors of the air-conditioned H&M store over the bridge from Dutch Square. We calculate that 10-15 minutes in very cold air-conditioning can bring our core body temperature down enough to allow for about 5 minutes walking in the torrid Malaysian humidity. Only trouble with this approach is that there are simply not enough buildings with sufficiently powerful air-conditioning to do the job.

Tomorrow we continue our journey down to Singapore, catching the train from Tampin to Gemas, just two stops and changing trains for the final run down to the border city of Johor Bahru.

### **23 October, Bright Star Hotel, Geylang**

First off, the Bright Star is less than a shining star of quality, even at our fairly tolerant standards, but it is clean and the bed doesn't move underneath us so it gets a two star rating. On the other hand, it is located in what is probably one of the last remnants of "old Asia" left in Singapore - not old Asia like the back streets of Mandalay, a little more like, "Oh come on dear, let's drive the Mercedes down to Geylang and slum it."

We had a very long day yesterday, so perhaps we were a little past it when we finally crossed the causeway from Malaysia towards Singapore. We had taken





a taxi back to Tampin to catch the train to Gemas, where the electric line ends and the slower train down to Johor Bahru was waiting for us on the next platform. From there, down the peninsula to Singapore, was about a five hour trip through yet more palm oil plantations. Where does it all go? We knew we were in for a late arrival into Singapore, but had figured that we could get to our hotel by around 9:00pm.

Malaysian Immigration and Customs was a breeze, as was the bus across the causeway to Woodlands, the Singaporean check point. It didn't seem to matter too much which bus you took for this part of the process as they all stopped at Woodlands checkpoint,



From the Woodlands side of the causeway, things started to go pear-shaped. Signage was non-existent and the service atrocious. We only found out that we had to complete arrival cards by accident. (Some countries have done away with them.) Then we joined the queue. Now our image of Singapore has always been one of a place of smooth, though sometimes officious, efficiency. No more! With thousands lined up at the gates, Immigration officers stalled the process by holding people with problems within the queue for ten to fifteen minutes, rather than calling in somebody to deal with the issue. We spent over one and a half hours in our line, when we could have been through in half an hour in any other country.

Our previous crown for inefficient immigration went to New York. The Big Apple has been diced and sliced. Singapore is the new winner. It was the worst immigration process we have been through and we have been to some tough places - East Germany before the Wall came down, Mongolia, Russia and several, then Communist, Eastern European countries.

To their credit, the bus companies on both sides of the border were extremely efficient and very reasonably priced.



We finally arrived at our hotel after 10:30pm, beerless and foodless. We dumped our bags and hit the street food shops on our corner. After a good sleep and a late start, we took ourselves off to, of all places, McDonald's! Where else do you go for breakfast after two weeks of rice and noodles?

Our agenda wasn't too strenuous today. We took the bus from the end of our street out to the area where the original Changi Prison camp was located, to visit the small museum that chronicles the events that are so important to many Australians who had family or friends who were here as POWs between 1941 and 1945. Most, if not all of the visitors we saw, were Australians and it is understandable why so many of us make these pilgrimages to locations like this that are so ingrained in our national psyche, but what we sometimes miss, is the involvement of others in these events and what they suffered. Thousands of Singaporeans were tortured and killed by the Japanese and thousands more suffered hunger and starvation under the occupation. These deprivations were recalled for us later in the day, when we visited the excellent National Museum of Singapore. We had been here before, some years back, but we were again impressed with the quality and breadth of the displays.

Continuing our WWII theme, we visited the special Exhibition on the war and its impact on Singapore, which only further enforced our views that we have underestimated the impact of the war on the local population of Singapore and probably on other SE-Asian nations as well.

#### **24 October, Horizon Inn, Taipei**

Our 9am flight to Taiwan required a 5:15am start. Exiting Singapore was much less painful than our entry. They have introduced a thumbprint scanning system that reads your passport and matches your ID to the scan you gave on entry, much the same as Australia's face recognition entry system, except that it can be used for everybody.

We flew Scoot for the first time. It was about what we expected from a budget airline, though their food prices on board were way higher than AirAsia's.

Countries in Asia and probably in other places, need to do something to better apply technology to immigration processes. The security issues are, of course, understandable, but surely this is an area where enhanced, technically-sophisticated processes would not only save money, but also alleviate some of the tension and frustrations that are building at border crossings in many countries. It took us over an hour to clear immigration into Taiwan today. Thousands of "non citizens" snaked their way through three manned gates, while there were at least six gates un-staffed. It wasn't just the non-locals who





suffered, the queues at the citizens' gates were just as bad.

### **25 October, Horizon Inn, Taipei**

Taiwan was never really on our travel radar, but when the opportunity to get here on the cheap arose, we, of course, grabbed it. Early impressions are that it is very much like Japan and a little like mainland China, but without the pushing, yelling and spitting that can rapidly put those with less tolerance than us off China. English is not as widely spoken as in Malaysia or Singapore, but most people can and will help you out. Just looking confused will have a passer-by asking if they can help. Today we did a reconnoitre for our planned rail trip to an older and more traditional part of the island.



This morning we returned to Taipei Main Station, an enormous, underground complex joining the High Speed Rail, Local Rail and Metro systems. We walked for well over a kilometre, through cavernous halls with next to nobody in them. Our journeys around the city today on the Metro were as uncrowded.

We wandered about the city most of the day, visiting a couple of interesting museums and other sites, the most spectacular of which was undoubtedly the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, which is part of an enormous square which rivals Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Many parts of the city we have seen today have the same spacious feel as Tiananmen, with wide boulevards and footpaths - where you are not likely to step into a drain or be blocked by motorbikes or somebody doing their washing. Ah, as much as we love the challenge of old Asia, it is nice towards the end of a trip like this, to be able to get around easily and feel more comfortable while doing so.



### **26 October, Horizon Inn, Taipei**

Back on the rails again today to visit some small villages and scenic mountain areas just to the north of Taipei. We have been using the Taiwan EasyCard, a standard, contactless, transit card commonly employed in most cities worldwide. Our trip today required numerous transfers and use of both the Taipei MRT and the national rail, TRA. It was all seamless and extremely cheap. Over two hours of train travel, covering almost 70 kms cost us less than AUD \$6 each.

While Taipei itself is a reasonably attractive city, its outskirts and the cities and

towns surrounding it could charitably be described as “decayed industrial”. Once we headed up into the mountains, however, that changed as we rolled on through tropical jungle, deep ravines and smaller towns.

This line is very popular with the locals, so we made an early start and managed to beat the rush, taking the Pingxi Line through to the terminus at Jingtong, as in “Jintong-idli-poh”, wondering along the way whether the Goons had ever been here. (You need to be a Goons Show fan). The area around Jingtong had once been dotted with coal mines. All that is left today are some overgrown loading hoppers and ruined sheds. We decided to walk the first leg back down the line to Pingxi. It was a nice country stroll, nothing too spectacular, but the fact that we were the only people walking between stations had some benefits.

The distance between stations is not great, so we probably could have walked a couple of other legs. It would have been easy, walking downhill and comfortably cool. Our serenity was shattered on the outskirts of Pingxi as we walked past ten or so tour buses. To make things worse, the Tour Groups were high school kids who, while extremely well-behaved, managed to choke every narrow thoroughfare in the extremely touristy village.

From Pingxi, we trained it back up the line to Shifen, probably the most popular stop with the locals and, by the time we got there, the later starters, coming up the line towards Jingtong, added to the congestion. It was packed! The main attraction here, apart from the street food and the fact that the train runs right up the main street, is the lighting of coloured lanterns, which float into the sky, delivering the purchaser’s wishes on high. We escaped the crowds and hiked out to the Shifen Falls. Billed as Taiwan’s Niagara, we had high expectations. Canada need not fear - while they were extremely attractive, set in lush tropical surroundings, we couldn’t imagine the Maid of the Mist making passes under the spray.

While the organisation and co-ordination of the Taiwanese rail system is not up there with Japan, it isn’t too shabby. It takes a bit of time to sort out connections when there are so few English language signs, but with a bit of practice, it is easily mastered. Then there is the local help, which will quickly come to your aid whenever you look confused or lost.





We ended the day on a slow local train back to the end of our MRT line, in the company of hundreds of exhausted locals who nodded off as soon as the train started moving. How do they do it?

### **27 October, Horizon Inn, Taipei**

We have been in Taipei for three days now and one great mystery has befuddled us. Where are all the people? On our first night here we travelled from the airport on an almost empty MRT train, arriving at Taipei Main Station to find it almost deserted. The footpaths aren't crowded, the traffic is only moderate at worst and, though we have had to stand on a couple of MRT rides, we have been far more likely to have found a seat. We got a bit of a hint yesterday as to why this is so when we saw the crowds around the villages we visited. Today, all was revealed. The good people of Taipei spend their time flocking to local tourist attractions.

Tamsui is a rather large city at the mouth of the Tamsui River, about 30 minutes on the subway. Unlike in Taipei, the streets were packed with locals and local tourists, to the point where it was difficult to make any progress on the streets. Don't any of these people have jobs to go to? Granted, there was a smattering of older folk among the throng, but the bulk were predominantly working-aged people. Tamsui was once a major port and, though there are still port facilities at the mouth of the river, in recent times, it has been surpassed by more modern Taiwanese ports.

The whole northern part of Taiwan, around the city of Keelung was once controlled by a sequence of European powers. The first colonisers were, of course, the Chinese, but they were soon surpassed by the Spanish. The Spanish built a fort at the mouth of the Tamsui River, but they abandoned it during the sixteenth century and were replaced by the Dutch. In a not unfamiliar pattern, the Dutch were eventually, in turn, ousted by the British and the fort, which had been rebuilt by the Dutch, as well as a stately nineteenth century house, eventually became the seat of the British Consul.

In our wanderings today, we visited the fort, now known by its original Spanish name of Fort San Domingo. We noticed an Australian flag flying alongside those of Taiwan, the USA, the UK and others. On reading a nearby plaque, we were amazed to discover that Australia had operated the Consul and occupied

the fort and residence following a diplomatic spat between the UK and Taiwan. It was 1972 and Australia was soon ousted herself and replaced by the USA. Though no comment was made about what caused the diplomatic rifts with the UK and Australia, it is safe to assume that it was the British recognition of Communist China, closely followed by the Whitlam government's like action, that caused the changing of the guard at the Consulate. It is interesting, although not unexpected, that today, Australia has no formal diplomatic relationship with Taiwan (officially, The Republic of China).

Now we can say "we've been to Bali too". Though we currently have no intention of visiting that part of the world, we have visited the Taiwanese Bali. Just a short ferry trip over the Tamsui River, this Bali is a much-visited and much-loved riverside village, whose narrow streets are lined with stalls featuring all types of deep-fried seafood treats. A towering extinct volcano forms the backdrop for this much more attractive Bali and although there are hordes of local Chinese visitors, we were the only Caucasians in sight and definitely the only Australians.

### **28 October, Horizon Inn, Taipei**

We usually reserve our hotel recommendations for our online booking agency, either Agoda or Booking.com, which can sometimes be "pot luck," but this place is a special find. We took a superior room with a window. Silly as it might seem, specifying a window can be critical in Asian hotels. We have been in a few where there are impressive full length drapes that covered a solid wall! Not only do we have a window, but also a view of the street, rather than just the side of the building next door.

The room has all the basics and the bed is softer than the normal Chinese-style rock-hard affairs. The biggest attraction here is the breakfast. As the hotel seems to attract a largely Japanese clientele, the offerings are many and varied, including some western staples but, more impressively, great fruit and beautifully arranged little bowls of Asian fare. Close to the MRT and at \$90 AUD, a great price for a big city hotel. AND it provides a free self-service laundry!!!!

Taking to the hiking trails today, we struggled up the 400 stairs to the top of Elephant Mountain, for a view of the Taipei 101 building. For a while, Taipei 101





was the tallest building in the world and, even though it has lost this crown, it is still a mighty impressive sight, dwarfing everything around.

We had been looking forward to visiting the National History Museum of Taiwan but, sadly, it was a bit of a disappointment. Very short on actual history, it could more accurately be described as an Art Museum. Later in the day, we took a bit of a punt on a small museum just around the corner from our hotel - the Miniature Museum of Taiwan. Featuring model buildings and dioramas of all sorts, from nursery rhymes to historical street scenes and dollhouses, this was a real find. Shame we didn't have our grandkids with us. They would have loved it.



### **31 October, Horizon Inn, Taipei**

We spent the past two nights in the city of Chiayi, about a four hour train ride south of Taipei. We had planned to travel by train from Chiayi to the acclaimed mountain town of Alishan, high on the range that runs up the middle of the island. The Japanese had constructed a narrow gauge railway through the mountains to transport the logged cypress trees in the area. The line is now a major tourist attraction, providing spectacular views of the palm-tree covered ranges. It is such a major attraction that we were unable to get seats on the train! Luckily, all was not lost. There are other travel options to the town, including a three hour local bus ride or a ride in a mini-van, touted by a very aged Chinese woman. Everything we had read warned against the “dodgy granny” option, so we lined up for the 9:35 am bus. To get the travel times in perspective here; four hours on the train to Chiayi and another three hours up the mountain - a good seven hours all up – we were hoping for something special.



The drive up the range was just wonderful, at least the views were - the driving, not so much. Our local bus wasn't the only bus on the road - scores of large tour buses zoomed up and down the range on what was a very good, but extremely narrow road. After many years of travelling on Asian buses, we have developed an ability to just look the other way as on-coming traffic swerves into our lane and to focus on the scenery rather than the road. Or just close our eyes!

About two thirds up the range, our bus pulled up in a small village and

everybody piled off. Many passengers looked just as confused as we were. We all soon figured out that the bus had made an unadvertised stop and would soon be back.

Eventually we arrived at the very flash and resort-like terminus, from where we could hike into the forest and get fantastic views of the Taiwanese wilderness. Hike we did, on boardwalks, through some very nice forest scenery - some very nice and very cold, heavily-misted scenery. From the look-out points we were treated to total white-out. You can't win them all and, realistically, we have been very lucky with the weather in our travels. Paul wasn't well, suffering from a cold, so, after about an hour, we were back on the bus, with the same crazy driver, forgetting he was driving a bus, not a small car. We survived the three hours back down the mountain, had a good sleep in a very nice hotel and, today, the four hour train trip back to Taipei. There was an upside though - the weather was fine for our journeys to and from Taipei, with clear blue sky and bright sunlight.

We see very little difference between the landscapes of Taiwan and Japan, particularly when travelling through the densely-populated urban areas in both countries. North-western Taiwan and the central coastal plains of Honshu are very similar, with hundreds of kilometres of industry, interspersed with low to medium level high-rise buildings and small areas of farmland.

Back in the familiar Horizon Inn in central Taipei, we are doing a last wash and dry before flying back to Singapore and home. Four days later we fly to Japan. Somebody has to do the hard yards.

## 2 November, Singapore

Our evening flight meant that we had a very long day to kill in Singapore and only a few options to fill the time. We had seen some information about a relatively new attraction that had been developed around old British bunkers buried beneath Fort Canning in the city centre. Known as "The Battlebox," it involved a guided tour through the underground command centre used by the British and Allied armies as they mounted the disastrous defence of Singapore in February 1941. Yet another hidden gem. The tour was led by a well-informed young guide who took us through the surprisingly extensive and well-preserved underground headquarters where Major General Percival and his





staff made the fatal decision to surrender more than 100,000 British, Indian and Australian troops. Key rooms were setup with period furniture and equipment that replicated conditions of the time, including life-like wax figures of the leading players. To make the experience even more pleasant, the whole complex was air-conditioned!

Staying out of the heat for the remainder of the day, we took ourselves off to an absolutely freezing cinema until it was time to head to Changi for the flight home, which we had upgraded to business class!

# Japan 2017





## 8 November, 2017. Prologue

Our travel blogs to date have focused on where we have been, what we saw or did and what we thought about it all. Given that this is our sixth trip to Japan, we thought we might take a different angle this time and write about how we choose to travel in Japan and how we go about it. Please note that this is about how we travel, not how others should travel. We hope that our experience may be of some help, if only as a way to show people how they might *not* wish to travel!

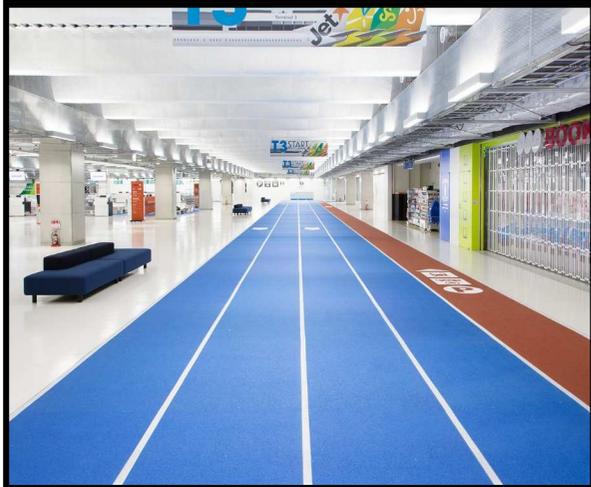
To be clear from the outset, we are travellers, not tourists. We don't travel for a holiday or to relax, far from it. Many of our travels have been stressful and exhausting, but they have also been exciting and rewarding experiences. Wherever possible, we travel by public transport. We travel light, predominantly with carry-on luggage only. We stay in three star hotels, costing between \$50 and \$100 per night. We fly budget airlines, but we pay a little extra for better seats with more leg room. We eat out most nights, but very rarely frequent bars. We speak a smattering of French and can get by in Spanish and Italian, but other than that we can say “hello”, “please”, “thank you” and “beer” in most Asian and European languages.

Our comments are from an Australian perspective, but we believe other Western and European travellers will find them of some use. Prices we quote are in Australian dollars and Japanese Yen. The exchange rate at the time of writing was AUD\$1=0.80\$US and 80 Yen.

### *Getting to Japan*

Why Japan? Japan is one of the least challenging of the countries we have visited, is relatively easy to travel around, the people are extremely polite and helpful and the culture is both ancient and modern. We have always been able to find new and exciting things to do and experience in Japan and hopefully we will continue to do so.





Our trips to Japan are very rarely planned. They just happen. All it takes is an offer of a cheap flight to pop up in our email box and we are off. We have always flown Jetstar out of the Gold Coast, Queensland, which is an hour's drive from home for us. Fares for our first few trips started around \$500 return, but now the starting price is as low as \$350 return - starting price, because everything else is extra on Jetstar. As an example, this trip was \$350 starting price. We added extra leg room seats at \$50 each; food can add another \$10 and up each leg per person and booking fees, credit card surcharges etc. have brought this trip up to a total price of just under \$500 return each. If you want to lump more luggage around, 20kgs will cost you another \$20 each way. Off-site parking at Coolangatta airport is about \$120 a week. We are lucky to have parking at a family member's place, close to the regular Gold Coast 777 Airport bus route, which runs every 15 to 20 minutes to and from the airport.

Jetstar gets some horrible reviews and we are sure some people have had experiences that have put them right off the airline. We have had some flights delayed, more than six hours once from Hawaii, but the delays for us have been the exception, not the rule. Others complain about the service. We haven't had a problem in this area at all, perhaps because we don't expect five star service on a three star airline.

Our flight on this trip left ten minutes late, but landed right on time, just after 7pm. We were off the plane, through Immigration and Customs and on our way from Narita Terminal 3 to Narita Terminal 2 inside 20 minutes.

Narita T3 is a low-cost terminal, which is not served by reasonably-priced, direct transport to Tokyo. You must walk to T2, or take a (free) shuttle bus, both well-signed. This takes about 10 minutes either way. We walk rather than hang around waiting for the bus.

Our next step is to validate our Japanese Rail Train Passes. We would never consider travelling in Japan without a JR Pass. Passes

must be purchased outside Japan. There are many different passes for different regions. We generally use the full JR Pass, which covers all JR trains, including Shinkansens (except Nozomi and Mizuho), JR buses and the Miyajima ferry. Price fluctuates with the AUD/Yen rate, but our latest 14 day passes cost just under \$500 each. Don't leave home without one! And don't buy from RailPlus. Use HIS Travel. Way better service and much cheaper.

Narita T1 and T2 both have railway stations. Follow the signs to the T2 station, where the JR Service Centre is located. What HIS Travel gives you is really a voucher. This must be activated, by choosing a start date, at a JR Service Centre. We had our passports ready, had filled in the required form and were set to go, except for the queue which, this time, was rather slow moving because several people ahead of us needed to tell their life stories to the service staff! Even with these delays, we were on the platform, waiting for our train in just on an hour from landing. We also picked up our pre-booked, on-line seat reservation for the Shinkansen to Sendai tomorrow.

The Narita Express (NEX) train is our normal mode of transport into central Tokyo. Every other trip we have reserved our seats for the next Narita Express when we picked up our JR Passes, activating them immediately. This time, we had decided to overnight at Narita town rather than head into the city. This was because we were only going into Tokyo in order to catch the Shinkansen to Sendai. What a great idea that was! Narita Station is only small, so we could face the big station of Tokyo after a good night's sleep, plus we didn't lose a day on the Pass.

Narita town is about a ten minute train ride from the Airport, covered by the JR Pass, if activated, or 210 Yen if not. When we have caught the Narita Express in the past, we've arrived in the city as late as 10:00pm. This trip we were settled in our hotel, 5 minutes' walk from Narita station, by 8:15pm. First time travellers could do worse than spending their first





night in Narita, taking the morning to explore Narita town and then heading into the city in the afternoon. Trains from Narita town run about every 30 minutes in peak, a little less frequently off peak. Having chosen a starting date of 9 November, we could take either the NEX or the slower train, depending on the timetable. We use the great web site, HyperDia, to check train times and to get the details of train number and destination that we need to book seats.

What may be obvious by now is that we travel by train in Japan. Is there any other way? No. Simply, no. That settled, let's move on. Booking hotels in Japan is fairly simple. Because we travel by train, we always book hotels near stations. This trip, as with all our others, we have booked just a day or two ahead. However, we always book our arrival and departure hotels before we leave home. We use online booking sites such as Agoda or Booking.com. The Japanese have a "thing" about hotel bookings. It is not generally acceptable to just walk in and book a room. Many hotels are clustered around the main train stations and the prices are very reasonable. We paid \$90/night at Narita and we probably average \$100 a night, including breakfast.

This morning, we took the train into Tokyo station, the busiest in Japan. Well-signed, in English and Japanese, like any other major city station in Japan, it is fairly easily navigated, though today we had a lot of trouble finding somewhere to sit down and have a coffee.

Caffeine fix finally satisfied, we found our platform and waited for our train to Sendai - not as simple as it might sound for the first time traveller. Shinkansen trains come in various numbers of carriages. You need to know how many carriages your train has so you can line up at the right spot on the platform to board when the train arrives. All required information is displayed on the departure boards in Japanese and English. The carriage numbers are on the platform floor, also above, along the length of the platform. This is where you need to line up for your train.

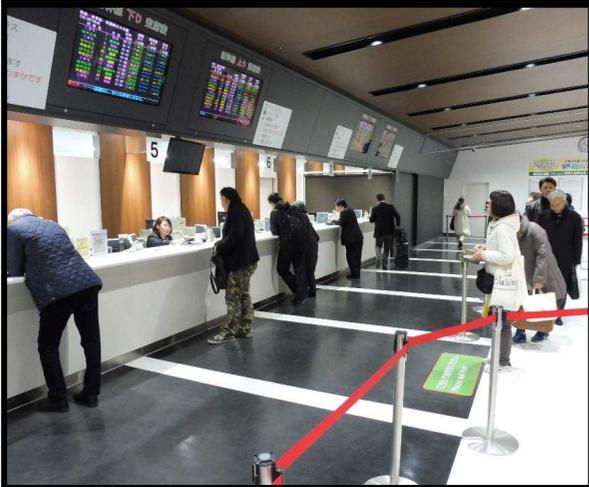
After six trips this even confuses us sometimes. Take care to line up for the right train. Shinkansens come so frequently, that there will usually be two queues, one for the next train to arrive and one for the one after that. If you don't get it right, just get on the train and work your way through to the correct carriage. The trains stop very briefly.

Today was one of the most beautiful days we have experienced in Japan, with clear blue skies, a nice, crisp 15C temperature and a strong breeze swirling the autumn leaves about. The two hour trip to Sendai was relaxing, with fantastic views and the now-familiar, yet still incomprehensible, burble of train announcements in the background.

We actually arrived a few minutes late in Sendai, which is extremely unusual, but no real problem for us, as we had no connection to make. We only had to find our hotel. At this point, we need to disclose one of the secrets about travelling by train in Japan. Japanese stations, except in small towns, are the most disorienting places on earth. Many will spill you out into mega malls, with a maze of underground arcades; others will deliver you so far beneath the surface of the earth that your phone compass won't work. We have no better advice than that you should know which exit will lead you in the general direction of your hotel. This can generally be worked out before hand, using Google Maps or Google Earth. There are also maps on the walls of stations, after you have exited the station proper, but before you commit to an exit, so you can (maybe) find your street. The Exit signs can also help, as they indicate which exit to take for a particular street or landmark. Today we were fine, but we have been here before. On previous trips to larger cities, particularly at night, we have roamed the streets for hours. But that's part of the experience. The other little quirk is that hotel receptions can be on the 2nd, or higher, floor of the building. Check the hotel's reviews when booking as they will often mention this.

So here we are at our starting point for this trip - Sendai. Tomorrow we are





heading off on a day trip on local trains and possibly buses, to see some of the autumn foliage that is the main attraction this time of the year.

### **10 November, Premier Green Hills Hotel, Sendai**

#### *Getting around on trains and buses*

Our trip today was a logistical success, but a little disappointing from the foliage point of view. We had a leisurely start, kicked off by a fantastic breakfast. We learned a long time ago that most hotels in Asia provide substantial breakfast buffets, more than enough to sustain us for the whole day, with just a sandwich from a convenience store to top us up.

At the station a little early, we took the opportunity to reserve our Shinkansen seats for the next leg of our trip. The Japanese rail system can be a little confusing, but you can be sure there is excellent logic behind it all. The classes of trains are fairly self-explanatory. Local, limited express and rapid trains; these make, all stops, a few stops and a very few stops respectively. Simple, right? However, some trains have both reserved and non-reserved cars and some are fully reserved. This means you must book a seat if the train is reserved seats only. If a train has both reserved and non-reserved you should book a seat if at all possible. If you can't book for some reason, get to the platform early, find the non-reserved queues and get on one of them early enough to score a seat. If you miss out on a seat, it is also possible to stand, usually at either end of the carriage.

Above all these are the Shinkansen trains, which run on a totally independent system with dedicated track and stations. Complex enough yet? Sitting alongside all these yet again, are the privately-owned railways. These trains are not covered by the JR Pass, so we just avoid using them at all, except for the subway systems in the cities, when it is unavoidable.

How we managed our trip today provides some examples that may help.

With our JR Passes in hand we sought out the JR Ticket Office in Sendai station. These places are generally a picture of perfect Japanese efficiency. Long queues are common, but they move with surprising speed, until Westerners or other foreign types, gum up the works by tying up a few counter staff with dumb questions because they haven't done any planning. To make life simple for ourselves, the counter staff and others in the queue, we use HyperDia to find out which trains we need to book. We then write down the date, time, origin station, destination station and train number. Today, with two scraps of paper with these details, we booked reserved seats for the first part of today's trip and our longer journey tomorrow to Aomori, in under a minute. Booking these seats is free with the JR Pass, and most JR counter staff speak reasonable English and can help if there is a problem with what you want to book.

Sendai is only a mid-sized station, but by Australian standards it is huge. Once you get used to the signage though, finding your way around is relatively simple. We flashed our JR Passes at the manned gate (you can't use the automatic gates), found our train details on the electronic board and headed off to our platform. Dead on time to the second, the train arrived and departed for our 12 minute trip to Furukawa, where we changed trains to a local line (no booking needed) for our destination, Naruko Onsen Station.

Most Shinkansen stops are linked to local and/or subway lines. At Furukawa, we simply exited the Shinkansen-dedicated area and linked to the local line for our, stopping at every station, slow haul to our destination.

From Naruko Onsen Station, we had a leisurely 6 km stroll through mountain scenery in which trees were sporting the last of their autumn colours, to Naruko Gorge. We were just a week too late for the full autumn colours. Never mind, it was great to have the trails to ourselves and enjoy what passes for wilderness in Japan.





Our return trip was a good example of how things can go wrong travelling independently and just how easy it is to redeem the situation.

We had decided to walk from Naruko Gorge onward to Nakayamadaira Onsen Station, rather than go back over the same terrain, to catch the train back to Furukawa and then home to Sendai. As usual, we had screenshots of the relevant timetables on our tablet, the tablet that was back in our hotel in Sendai! We enjoyed the gorge and the walk, being away from civilization, out in the “boonies” you might say, but when we saw Nakayamadaira Onsen station, basically a shed, in a village of about twenty houses and a shop, we were a little perturbed. There was a timetable on the wall of the shed, in Japanese, so we were able to translate, with our basic knowledge of the symbols, the names of the towns we needed to get to and figured we had an hour and a half to wait. After an increasingly chilly sojourn, sure enough, to the second, round the bend came the 15:52 Local to Furukawa. A short wait on the Furukawa Shinkansen platform and we were on our way home.

### **11 November, APA Hotel, Aomori**

*More on bus travel*

We arrived to a dismal, freezing Aomori around lunch time. Check-in time for our hotel was 3:00pm so we thought we might pursue some heated, indoor activity. Leaving our bags at the hotel, we headed off to the Aomori Museum of Modern Art, which our guide book told us was just a kilometre from the station, but we were instead driven into a warm-looking building by a howling gale, rain and, for a short time, sleet. Our refuge turned out to be the Nebuta Museum, that celebrates the local and apparently world-renowned, Aomori Nebuta Festival - yet another random find in Japan. The museum houses some of the most recent festival floats that truly defy description. Check out the photos. We were also treated to a fabulous festival music presentation. Great fun and way better than being drenched and frozen outside.

The local tourist information office was nearby, so we headed there when the rain eased. These tourist services are universally excellent throughout Japan. In larger cities, or where there are major attractions, you will usually find good English speakers behind the desk. Information offices are generally located in stations or very close nearby. Even in more out of the way places, staff are extremely helpful. The lady who helped us today was able to give us a bus timetable, in English, direct us to the bus information centre for a bus day pass and point out the correct stop for the Modern Art Museum bus.

We have only fairly recently gained a reasonable degree of confidence in using buses in Japan. The problem with buses is that you need to know where to get off. This is complicated by the fact that virtually every bus we have used outside Tokyo has had no English signs or announcements. Couple this with drivers with little or no English and a complicated, zone-based fare system and you can see why we have been shy of them. If somebody had explained what we are about to disclose, we might have gained confidence more quickly.

With the exception of Tokyo and some other larger cities, getting on Japanese buses is the first oddity for Westerners. You enter from the rear door. You don't pay at this point, but you will either scan a travel card like a Suica Card, (see November 19 entry for more details) or take a small ticket from a dispenser near the door. But we have probably skipped a few steps here. You obviously need to know what bus to catch. Bus maps are available for most cities, but unless you can read Japanese, they are next to useless. Asking at the tourist or bus information counter has been how we have tackled this problem. Sometimes just wandering about bus stations looking lost will attract a willing helper, but we recommend being well-planned yourself.

Once you know the correct bus, you need to check the timetable. In larger cities, buses run so often that this is often not necessary, but if you





need to know departure and return times, the tourist or bus services will help. Alternatively, once you get used to the system, you can find timetables at the bus stops. Next you need to know which stop to get off. We use two methods here, sometimes in concert. Firstly, we find out the Japanese characters for the stop we need. Remembering them and recognising them can be a bit tricky. We usually equate the symbols to things we recognize, like “chair with three storey building on it” or “man with funny hat”. The upcoming bus stops scroll through on a board at the front of the bus. Sounds insane, we know, but it works for us.

Applying modern technology alongside this rather primitive, though effective method can also help. We use Google Maps and GPS to track our progress towards our destination.

Getting off the bus and paying the fare is the next stress point. Remember the little ticket you took when you got on the bus via the rear door? Well that little ticket needs to be fed into the machine beside the driver and it will tell him, and you, the fare required. As well, you can see what you are up for on a board at the front of the bus. This had us stumped for a while. The way it works is that the ticket you take on boarding records the zone in which you entered the bus. That number and the relevant fare are shown on the board at the front of the bus. So if you got on the bus in the first zone, your number would be 1 and the fare against that number is what you owe on exit. You can generally pay your fare with notes or coins inserted into a machine, which gives change. On some buses there is also a “note breaker” machine that will issue you coins for notes. Got all that? If you neglected to pick up a ticket on entry, just act dumb and point to a fare that you think is reasonable in the screen above you and pay up. Drivers are used to dealing with foreigners.

Now for the easier way. If you are going to use a few buses in a city, you can usually buy a day pass, which gives unlimited travel, or a Suica Card, (or its local equivalent) so you don't have to worry about how to pay. You

just have to know which bus to catch and when to get off. One last thing. You should always check where the return bus leaves from. Mostly, that will be just across the road, but not always, particularly, if you are dropped on a one-way street. Some buses do continuous loops, so they always drop-off and pick-up at the same stops.

Today we made it home fine, though chilled and wet. The bus trip was fun and yet another learning experience, but the museum was a little disappointing. We aren't great fans of modern art, but we keep trying to "get" it. Today we were no more enlightened, except for confirming that Japanese modern art is close to the most bizarre we have experienced. Our prize for that goes to the Modern Art Gallery in Santiago, Chile. We did, however, like the enormous dog called Aomori Ken.

## **12 November, APA Hotel, Aomori**

### *Japanese hotels*

Another day trip today, to Hirosaki, for some more autumn colours, this time in an ancient castle's grounds. We pounded a lot of pavement through this small (130,000 pop.) city. Very nice pavement it was too. The city was once the cultural centre of the province until it was surpassed by Aomori. The city fathers are fighting back with well-laid out streets, plentiful street art and a great park area around what is left of the original castle.

Back in our hotel with sore feet, we thought we might explain a little about Japanese hotels, a subject on which we have a reasonable degree of credibility, having spent sixty plus nights in Japanese hotels over a period of six years. Our first experience was with the Oak Hotel in Ueno, a couple of stations away from central Tokyo. Don't worry, we don't propose to examine each hotel we have used individually. The Oak is one end of the spectrum of the hotels we have booked. At \$65 a night, it isn't the cheapest hotel we have used, but it is probably the lowest star rating. So what do bottom of the range hotels in big cities offer? Small, no, very





small rooms for one thing. The Oak's rooms were so small that one reviewer joked that the TV remote was superfluous because he could change channels with his toes. We had no room to put our backpacks down. Would we stay there again? Yep. In fact we have. Why? The service was fantastic, the beds were comfortable, the room was spotlessly clean, there was a free laundry, the shower was hot, it was a three minute walk to the station and best of all, there was a vending machine, with beer, outside our room.

We have come a long way since the Oak, but the way we select hotels hasn't changed. As with any real estate it is all about location, location. For us that means near a station or subway. Next, does the hotel offer pre-payment? Is there a fridge in the room? Are there eating options nearby? And finally, is breakfast included?

Our view on hotels when travelling is that they are a place to sleep. They are not that important in the overall scheme of things. As long as they are clean and we can get a good night's sleep and value for money, we are satisfied.

Proximity to a station doesn't seem to cost more in Japan; in fact in many cities, the competition within walking distance from stations keeps prices reasonable. At this point we should also reiterate the importance of being able to find your hotel. We have learned from experience to print or screen dump maps to our hotels. We even use Google earth to do a virtual walk to our hotel if possible. Our best tip for finding hotels is to know which exit to use from your arrival station. Take the wrong exit and you will more than likely get lost. Google maps can save you, but you might need to get back to the station and try again.

We prefer pre-payment as it is AUD and we can put it on a credit/debit card.

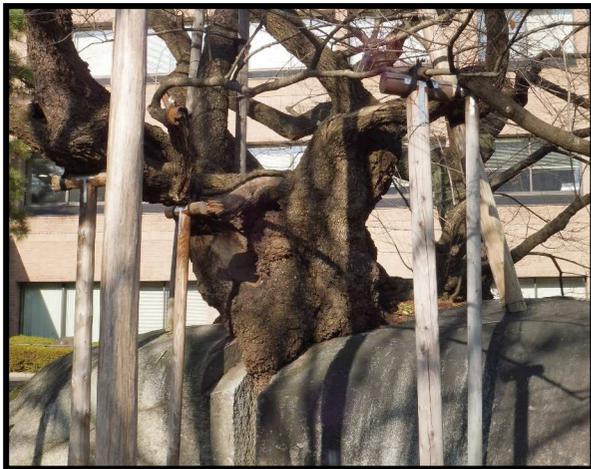
Booking hotels online, generally only a couple of days ahead, is the way we prefer to travel. Others may be more comfortable booking a whole trip, but we find this restrictive. Hotel booking systems are extremely sophisticated these days and they use pricing models that reflect a hotel's demand and supply. This means that booking just a day or two ahead through booking sites like Agoda or Booking.com can produce unbelievable bargain prices. However, there are some traps. There are often special events going on in Japanese cities - sporting events, festivals, even just weekends, which can cause prices to jump and availability to drop. We have been caught out more than a couple of times, but there is always a way out in Japan. Assuming you have a JR Pass, it is easy to seek accommodation in a nearby city. Silly as this might sound, moving between cities that are hundreds of kilometres apart is a bit like catching a suburban bus in other countries. On the topic of booking sites, we use Agoda in Japan and all over Asia. We have booked well over a hundred hotels with Agoda and only ever had one small hitch, which was solved by the reception staff at the hotel where the problem occurred. But that's Japan!

So what are Japanese hotels really like? We don't know about the Hilton or the Marriott, except that they are the same the world over. What we do know is that we have never had a bad Japanese hotel.

We have gravitated to some of the many chain hotels in Japan. There are too many to name, but the standards are fairly uniform across the board. Even the non-chain hotels we have used have been fine. So what do you get? Real value for money. Dollar for dollar, yen for yen, pound for pound, Japanese hotels provide great value for money. Note we didn't mention dong for dong (Vietnam), kyat for kyat (Myanmar) or even ringgit for ringgit (Malaysia). The hotels in these countries are in a different class altogether.

If the Oak was one end of the scale, what was the other? Two come to mind - a hotel just across the square from the station in Sapporo, off-ski





season, a night-before booking, around \$100 AUD for a Hilton-standard room and breakfast, plus a room where you could actually swing a cat without hitting the walls. The second was in a city, we can't remember where, where we scored a suite upgrade for an original price of around \$75!

In summary, book ahead, be prepared for small rooms, but expect clean rooms, great service, slippers to wear in the room, sometimes also slippers to wear in the bathroom, casual robes (sometimes pyjama-style sets to wear in the room, or down to breakfast!). Please don't forget to include breakfast.

### **13 November, New City Hotel, Morioka**

#### *Hotel upgrades*

Nice easy trip today to Morioka, another smallish city that we have passed through before but never visited. Our hotel was simple to find as we could spot it from the station. We have three nights here with a couple of day trips planned, so we took advantage of our early arrival and dumped our bags at the hotel before setting out to see the sights of the city.

We mean no disrespect to the city and people of Morioka. We are sure we will get to know and love them and their city over the next few days, but no matter whether it is a small town in western New South Wales, or a small city in central Honshu, everywhere needs to have something to attract visitors. In Morioka it is the famous Rock-Splitting Cherry Tree and the Park of the Site of the Former Castle. The park was very pleasant. The ruins of the castle walls have been beautifully landscaped and in the late autumn sunlight they made for a relaxing stroll. The Rock-Splitting Cherry Tree was something not to be missed. We had fairly low expectations, but yep, there was a very large cherry tree growing out of a very large rock. If you ever get to Morioka, don't miss the Rock-Splitting Cherry Tree. Otherwise you will die wondering.

We have no real wisdom to impart based on today's events, except perhaps for how to improve your chances of getting an upgrade in a Japanese hotel. We scored one today - a very nice, larger room with a King Bed! Who really knows how these blessings are bestowed? We think it is a little bit about being polite and respectful to the staff at the hotel. Smile when told you can't access your room before the designated check-in time. Bow with a slight nod of the head in response to reception staff's welcome. It all worked for us today. Oh and one other small matter. On tipping. You don't tip in Japan. It is not part of the culture and not at all necessary. We just mention this in the context of room upgrades, because in our experience, the way to secure an upgrade in some countries is to tip heavily.

#### **14 November, Morioka**

##### *Eating options*

Bright sunshine greeted us as we headed off to the station this morning for a day trip to the historical town of Kakunodate, famous for its well-preserved Samurai District. About 20 minutes into our trip, the rain started and didn't stop for the rest of the day. We can't really complain as we have been extremely lucky with the weather to date.

We grabbed some lunch from a convenience store at the station, which made us think about eating in Japan. Again, not a very eloquent segue, but it will have to do.

Let's start with breakfast. As we have already said, we are big fans of hotel breakfasts in Japan. Most hotels provide extremely filling, quality breakfasts, packaged with the room price. Breakfast offerings on the street are predominantly traditional, or increasingly, chain places like Yoshinoya, that serve quick (and filling) bowls of noodles and a bowl of miso soup. An emerging trend we have noticed is the self-serve bakery like Breadtop. These are popping up everywhere in Japan, as well as in other Asian countries. Finally, Western standards such as Starbucks and





McDonalds are everywhere in the larger cities. And no, we have never succumbed. Not in Japan anyhow.

We have to admit to knowing very little about lunch options, because we prefer light lunches on the move. Convenience stores are our source of midday sustenance. These gems are literally a stone's throw away in any town or city in Japan. You can live out of a Lawson, 7-Eleven, Family Mart, or any of the many others. The prices in these shops are not all that different to supermarket prices and they sell alcohol as well. All will heat ready-made meals for you and many have small, sit-down, café-style areas.

Dinner options in Japan, particularly in larger cities, are virtually limitless. You can spend \$5 each for a hearty bowl of noodles in a Ramen House or have a beer or two and a pub-style meal in an izakaya (like a pub) for about \$25 each. Larger train stations have multiple, café-style establishments, serving traditional Japanese fare. Several hundred dollars will fly out of your pocket for a top-notch meal in an up-market Tokyo restaurant. Whatever your taste or budget there are options a-plenty.

Japan is famous for its plastic food displays which grace the windows of many eating houses. These displays are a great help for non-Japanese speakers as they give some idea of what is on offer. We have often taken a server outside and pointed at our preferred meal. Prices are also generally displayed with pictures of meals. We avoid any restaurant that is not at street level, particularly if they don't have a menu available at the entrance.

What we call "coin in the slot" restaurants are good value and a bit of fun. Sometimes it is a bit like "Japanese roulette" as the pictures on the machine, if they are there at all, are so small that you really have no idea what you are selecting. Once your selection is made, including beer, and you have paid, the machine spits out tickets, which you simply hand over

at the counter, sit down and your meal and drinks are brought to you.

Final warning. If you have strong objections to things such as offal, raw meat or fish, horse meat or animal parts that are not part of your normal diet, be very careful when selecting a place to eat or picking something off a menu that you are not sure of. Just a few nights back, we found ourselves in a tongue-only restaurant. As it turned out, beef tongue was fine, but a very new experience for us. We have also eaten raw mince, fish, horse and many other things that we still aren't quite sure of.

What should you never eat in Japan? Pizza. The Japanese have an even worse understanding of what real pizza is than Americans do!

### 15 November, Morioka

#### *Being flexible and money*

Another day, another day trip. Hiraizumi, a very nice little town of just under 10,000 souls, is about 100 kms from our temporary base at Morioka. Just outside Hiraizumi, a beautiful, wooded hill is home to a cluster of 16th century temples. To be more correct, there is a cluster of temples that have been progressively restored since the 16th century. We are a little further south here, so the autumn colours are far more evident than in the cooler north. We spent a good three hours either riding the rails, or waiting for trains today, but we have found that striking out from a base to see the sights is an effective way to travel in Japan.

Freed from concerns about the cost of travel because of the JR Rail Pass, we think nothing of travelling 300 to 400 kms round trip on a day outing. By Shinkansen, even the longer trips can take as little as two to two and a half hours return. As an example we can look at our plans for the next couple of days.

Tomorrow is Thursday and, as we approach the weekend, we know from experience that there is a high likelihood that hotel prices will start to rise

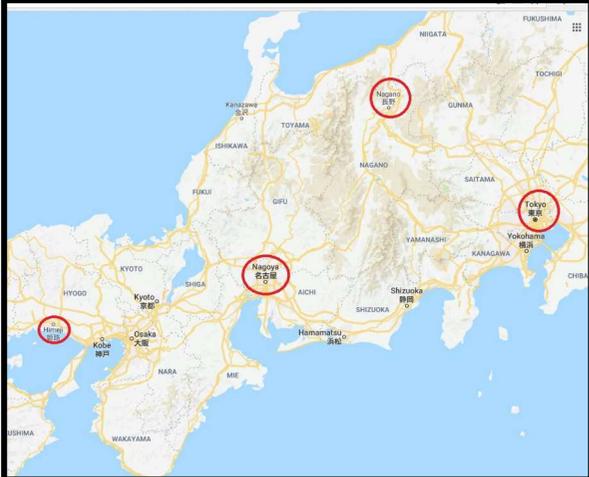




and if there is something special going on, availability will also decrease. We don't know what is happening this weekend, but hotels are so short on supply and prices are so high that we had to spend a couple of hours last night finding somewhere to go that wouldn't blow our budget.

Our initial plan was to go to Niigata, the largest city on the Japan Sea coast, foiled by booked-out reasonably-priced hotel rooms on our chosen dates, a downside to booking close to travel date. Undeterred, we instead chose Nagano, Japan's fourth largest city and from there, we will take a run down to Hiroshima or Himeji. We have visited both before but, on previous trips, we had very little time in Hiroshima and Himeji castle was being renovated.

After poring over maps, guide books, HyperDia and arguing about whether we had been to Nagoya or Nagano before (we always get the two confused!) we finally decided on a plan. We will go to Nagano for two nights and then zip down for Himeji, stay the night, visit the castle and head back to Tokyo for our last night before flying home.



This map of Honshu will give some idea of the distances such a trip will cover.

The actual travel times are:

To Nagano:

Morioka to Omiya. (change trains) Omiya to Nagano. 10:50 – 13:56 (12 minute transit)

Two nights Nagano

To Himeji:

Nagano to Nagoya. (change trains) Nagoya to Himeji. 10:00 – 14:42 (8 min transit)

One night Himeji

Himeji to Tokyo. 11:06 – 14:40.



The cost of these last days' travel would be over \$300 each without the JR Pass. At a rough estimate, we will have had almost \$700 in value out of our JR passes by the time we get back to Tokyo, for an outlay of just under \$500. And we still have a full day around Tokyo and a trip out to Narita to add on.

This change of plans allowed us to book some more reasonably-priced hotels, but we still had to pay more than \$200 for a night in Himeji, well above our usual \$60 - \$100 range.

Speaking of money, another smooth segue, we are running short of cash. We have no concerns about carrying large amounts of cash in Japan. On this trip we brought about 8,000 Yen, \$1,000AUD for a two week trip. All our hotels are pre-paid as we book them online and our transport costs are mostly covered by the JR Pass, except for metro travel in Tokyo where we use the Suica card (still getting to that).

Surprisingly, cash is still king in some sectors in Japan. With the exception of high-end restaurants, eating out is generally cash only. Convenience stores do seem to accept some Japanese cards and a range of stored-value cards like the Suica card (coming soon now), but they are also mostly cash only. Likewise, many entry fees are cash only, though, interestingly, the souvenir shops attached to these places will often take cards.

Unlike most other Asian countries, cash withdrawals from ATMs in Japan cannot be made from just any machine. Japan Post is one source we understand, though we have never tried there. There are a few banks as well. But why spend time searching out a particular bank, or trying to find a post office when 7-Eleven store ATMs do the job and they are everywhere! 7-Eleven ATMs have no fees, but your domestic bank will charge. They are, usually, flat rate, so take out large rather than small amounts. Any cash left over can be exchanged back home. If you do wish





to use credit cards where they are accepted, for Australians, we recommend the 28 Degree Mastercard, which has no transaction fees and their foreign exchange rates are very reasonable.

A last note on currency. Please don't try to travel in Japan using US\$ or Euros. Except for shops in the larger airports and flash hotels, nobody will accept them. Banks and currency exchanges will take them of course, but our experience is that the best rates for cash exchanges are found at home. We once exchanged AUD100 at a bank in Sendai and lost about 20% on the transaction. Having said all this, nothing beats a good old \$100US tucked away somewhere as a last ditch saver for when things go pear-shaped.

### **16 November, Nagano, Hotel ABest**

#### *Packing light and laundry*

No trouble spotting our hotel this afternoon, as it was right across the square from the station and visible as soon as we hit the top of the escalator from our arrival platform.

Nagano is yet another rather small Japanese city, pop. 320,000. Silly as it may seem, these smaller cities have a country town feel to them. They are laid-back and easy-going, but hellishly difficult, sometimes, to find somewhere to eat.

We thought we might deal with the issue of laundry tonight and then, as we are getting close to the end of our trip, have a go at answering some of the basic questions people ask about travelling in Japan.

Travelling as light as we do, doing the washing is fairly much a nightly chore. One of the oft-quoted maxims on packing is, select what you think you will need, then halve it. Carry-on luggage limits are 7 kgs on the airlines we fly, but it isn't always the clothes that give us a weight problem. More often than not, it is the amount of technology that we drag around

with us. We will look at how we use technology in our travels tomorrow night. Back to the more mundane - the washing - we have followed the above maximum on packing clothes and still, at the end of a trip, we find we could have shed a little more. The reason we can do without a lot of clothing, even in cooler climates such as we are travelling in now, (-2C to 8C on some days) is that we are prepared to wash and dry in our room. Every now and then in Japan we score a hotel that has a laundromat. Even more rarely we hit the jackpot and land in a hotel with a free laundry.

Washing in Japanese hotels is way easier than in other Asian countries where baths are a rarity. We buy detergent on our first day as there is less weight on the flight in. If we are travelling in summer in Japan, we have only lightweight items to wash and they dry easily overnight. At colder times, heavier items like jeans take longer to dry and they are harder to wash, but if we are sitting on a train or doing fairly limited physical activity, a pair of jeans can last two to three days. Light cotton shirts can also do a couple of days' service if one day they are worn over a t-shirt or singlet top. Coats and fleeces are not washed at all. Undies, tights etc. are so light that, if you choose, more can be packed, but they are easily washed and dried, so it's really not an issue.

One little trick that we have learned is to use the hotel's bath mats, hand towels, washers and, if absolutely necessary, a bath towel, to roll and twist washed items to wring out excess moisture. We carry a few elastic, expandable clothes lines that we string up in our room. For drying, in summer we pump the air-conditioner up to freezing and in winter we hit the hot switch just before we go out for dinner.

## Travelling in Japan, FAQ

### Is English widely understood and spoken?

*Understood, yes. Spoken, sort of. This is a complex issue. In big cities or places where there are tourist attractions, or in virtually any hotel, somebody will be able to speak and understand basic English at the very*





*least.*

### **Can you drink the water?**

*Yes. Japan's water quality standards are amongst the highest in the world. But if you know you have a weak stomach, or have had a history of reaction to different water, you should boil the water or buy it.*

### **If we get sick, can we trust Japanese doctors and hospitals?**

*Absolutely. Japanese health services are some of the best in the world. You will of course have adequate health cover in your travel insurance package.*



### **What power outlets are used?**

*Japan uses the two-prong American-style outlets.*

### **Can I use US\$ in Japan.**

*No and Yes. No, they won't generally be accepted for everyday transactions. Yes, you can exchange them.*

### **Is Japan expensive?**

*Depends on where you come from and how you travel. For Australians, Japan is cheaper by a factor of 10% to 20%. For Americans and Europeans, it is probably on a par. But these comparisons depend on how you wish to travel. It is easy to spend a lot of money in Japan if you are not careful.*



### **Can I drive in Japan?**

*We haven't, because we haven't needed to, though driving wouldn't be a problem, particularly for those with experience driving on the left. Traffic is well-regulated and drivers are courteous and skillful. Hire car rates are rather high, however.*

### **Can we travel in Japan with children?**

*Yes. We have and there is a lot for kids of all ages to love about Japan.*

### **Is Japan a safe country?**

*Yes. The safest we have experienced and we have been around a bit.*

### **Would learning some Japanese before I travel be helpful?**

*Of course. But don't get too concerned about speaking the language. If anything, put some time into trying to recognise the various Japanese scripts for the places you intend to visit. This will help if you are in areas where there are no English translations on timetables etc.*

### **Are toilets clean and widely available?**

*Yes and yes. And they are free.*

### **What is the best way to get around?**

*Train and sometimes bus.*

### **Can we use taxis rather than public transport and are they reliable and metred?**

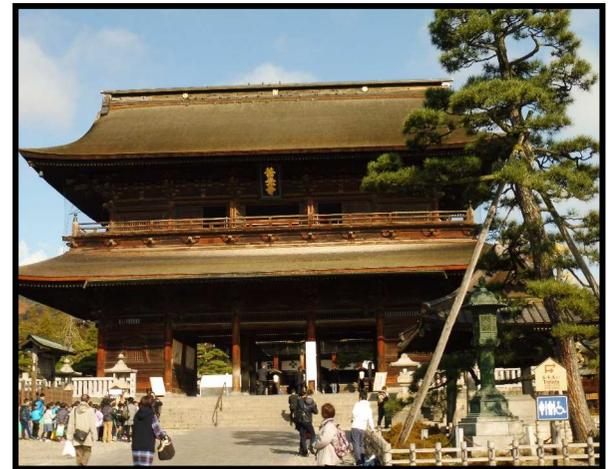
*Yes. Taxis are metered and extremely safe and reliable. But they are an expensive option.*

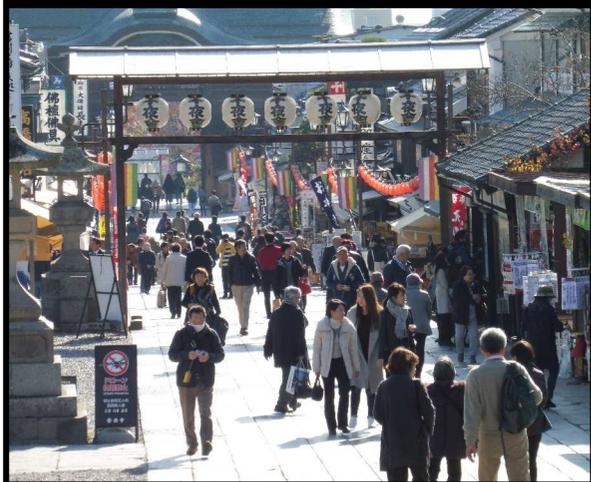
### **Are there English signage and announcements in Japanese stations and on trains.**

*In most cities and on most main lines, yes. But, in smaller towns and more remote lines, no. However there are usually people who will help you. Again, being able to recognise the script for your destination is helpful.*

### **Should we go shopping for cheap quality clothing in Japan?**

*From our observations, you would do better at home and larger sizes are extremely difficult to find.*





### **Where can I find information locally about interesting places to see?**

*Local tourist information offices are located in most stations. Even very small towns, where there is some attraction, will have a tourist information centre and they are uniformly extremely helpful and informative. Also try some of the online sources such as Trip Advisor.*

### **What is the best season to travel in Japan?**

*A hard one! We have never travelled in Japan in full summer. Even in spring and early autumn it can be hot and sticky. We prefer March-April, for the cherry blossoms and September-November for cooler temperatures, smaller crowds and, in this period, the autumn colours. The thing about Japan's climate is that it extends north-south, so while it can be snowing in Sapporo, it is T-shirt weather in the deep south. Many Australians also travel to Japan to ski in the winter.*

### **18 November, Nagano**

#### *Travelling with technology*

Another beautiful day today, in another extremely pleasant, smallish, Japanese city. The autumn colours are at their very best.

We did a fair bit of walking today, some of it unnecessary, due to the inaccuracy of maps. We had trusted a town map over one of the many large-scale street information maps that abound in Japanese cities. Eventually, we pulled out our phones, opened Google Maps, hit the GPS key and found our location in relation to our target, the nice little Nagano zoo. It is a free zoo with a small collection of animals and some rides for kids - a bit of a mix between an amusement park and a zoo. Animal liberation folk would freak, because the cages were small, with only minimal attempts at creating a natural environment for the animals. However, all the interns looked well-fed and healthy. There were even some snow monkeys that kept us amused for some time. We had actually come to Nagano to see the snow monkeys in the hot springs, but sadly, as it was put to us by the young lady in the Tourist Information Office,

“monkeys not come down now, make babies.” This translates to – it’s breeding season and the monkeys are way too busy!

Today wasn’t the first time technology has saved our bacon, or made our travels easier. Truth to tell, we totally depend on it. We travel with a smartphone each, an 8-inch tablet and a bluetooth keyboard. With these we book our hotels, check opening and closing times of places we intend to visit, monitor the local weather, and continue to manage our home affairs, keep in contact with family and friends and even write this blog.

Google earth and Google maps help us plan how to get to our hotels. We screenshot the maps we need and the street views of the corner we need to turn to find our target. This may sound a bit silly, but if you have tried to find a hotel in Japan after exiting a major station, you will know why we go to this amount of trouble.

Our phones are pre-paid, non-contract, so we are extremely careful when using them anywhere overseas. We don’t bother with using local SIMs in Japan, because WiFi is so widely available. If we need to call anybody, we use Skype. We have an account that cost us 10 Euro (AUD\$15) about 10 years ago. We think we may have topped it up once and we have used it a lot. Having an account lets us call phone numbers direct. An added bonus is the videos and audio books that keep us amused while travelling. All of these miracles may be self-evident and even passé to younger generations, but for many years now we have used and appreciated the benefits mobile technology affords the independent traveller. We constantly wonder how we managed all those years before there was an internet and smartphones. We are talking the 1970s, when, believe it or not, there weren’t even personal computers!

### **18 November, Grandvrio Hotel, Himeji**

*Where to go in Japan*

We were on the train fairly much all day today, travelling through the



Japanese Alps and out on to the coastal plain of central Honshu. Where we could see them, the mountains were at the height of their autumn splendour, showing green, bright yellow and many shades of orange and red. A heavy mist hung on through the valleys for most of the trip, but in some ways this enhanced the autumnal effect.

It is difficult to define what to see on a trip to Japan. As this is our sixth trip, we have again gone beyond the well-travelled tourist tracks and again found some wonderful and different sights and experiences. But what might a first time traveller in Japan plan to cover?

To be clear, this is what we would do to best enjoy a first trip to Japan. You will probably have different ideas and enjoy different things.

### **Seven Day “taster”.**

If time is short, we would suggest staying in Tokyo, exploring the city and doing a couple of day trips. We have rented an AirBnB apartment in Tokyo for just over \$100 AUD a night. It was practically on top of Shinagawa station, one of the main stations on the JR Yamanote loop line that circles Tokyo and serves most interesting sights.

Day 1.

Arrive and either travel to central Tokyo or stay the night in Narita town (see pg. 44/5). Flights from Australia arrive in the early evening. From other countries the timing may be different.

Day 2

Tokyo sights. Try a trip to Harajuku, visit the Meiji Shrine and check out the trendy street as an easy way to orientate yourself to Japanese culture and the train system.

Day 3

Tokyo sights to suit your taste, but include a visit to Asakusa, the Imperial Palace and Ueno Park somewhere in your exploration of Tokyo. If you have kids travelling with you, Tokyo has not one, but two Disneylands!

Day 4

Day trip to Mt Fuji.

Day 5

Tokyo sights.

Day 6

Day trip Nikko.

Day 7

Easy day in Tokyo or hop on the train and visit Yokohama as it has some interesting and bizarre attractions. Flights returning to Australia leave around 8.30pm.

To manage all this, you should use a 7 day JR Pass (check pass details online) and the Suica Card. Tomorrow we will explain the Suica card, promise!

### **14 Day Serious explorer trip.**

Use the full 14 day JR pass for this trip.

See days 1 – 5 above and add

Day 6

Travel to Osaka. Take AirBnB apartment or hotel.

Day 7

Explore Osaka.

Day 8

Day trip to Kyoto.

Day 9

Day trip to Himeji.

Day 10

Day trip to Hiroshima.

Day 11

Day off in Osaka – local sights.

Day 12

Day trip Nara.

Day 13

Travel to Tokyo. Overnight in Tokyo.

Day 14

Flight out.

**WARNING:** Be aware that the JR Pass operates on a 24 hour day basis, meaning that if you

activate the pass when you arrive in Japan at 7:00pm on Day 1 of your trip, you will be on Day 2 of your pass the next morning. This is part of the reason we suggest staying at Narita and going back to the Airport the next morning to activate your pass. (This may not be a problem for flights arriving in the morning.)

### **19 November, Hotel MyStays, Nippori, Tokyo**

#### *Suica Card*

We were lucky enough to see Himeji Castle on a near-perfect day. Between us we probably have more than a score of photographs of the outside of this amazing place. Himeji is one of the very few Japanese castles that were not destroyed in WWII. It is simply magnificent! We have been here before, but the castle was shrouded in scaffolding and in the middle of a major renovation.

So here we are back in Tokyo and the land of the Suica Card. Finally! For the full details on how to use the Suica Card, including coverage, you should consult the Suica Card website, <http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/pass/suica.html> as it is the best English language source of definitive information on the card. In summary, this is another “don’t travel in Japan without it” essential . Increasingly, stored-value cards like this are becoming the norm in many countries and in some places we have visited, such as China, the technology is way beyond this, expanding into fairly universal use of smart phone payments and transfers using QR codes.

In Japan, the Suica can be used as a replacement for a JR Pass to some extent, as it is accepted on JR Lines. In Tokyo and some other cities, (check the web site) it can also be used on subways and buses. Tokyo buses all take the Suica Card and as buses in Tokyo are a flat rate, 210 yen, you only need to tap on as you enter via the front door (different from other cities). As an added bonus, the Suica Card and its several variants in other areas, can also be used for entry to attractions, at convenience stores, vending machines and numerous other transactions.

Tomorrow, we are off home. If readers wish to ask questions, we are happy to help. Use email contact us.



