

## TUESDAY, JUNE 5<sup>th</sup>, 2007

### ... the first night in Japan

The international terminal of the airport is, of course, made for foreigners, so we weren't really "in Japan" yet until we got through customs and outside. Our first taste of it was, of course, trying to buy train tickets at the airport station for the next-to-last leg of the journey - from the Osaka International Airport to the Kyoto station.

Both are a really big deal. The Osaka International is actually meant as a temporary airport, even though it's outrageously elaborate and massive. It's built upon a man-made island that is settling, and, I am told, the entire structure has hydraulic jacks in the foundation to keep the buildings level as the earth below sinks.

The Kyoto station, on the other hand, is the focal point of the trip.

Riding the train was almost like a "movie trailer" for the trip. We watching for over an hour as cityscape and countryside flew by at around a hundred miles an hour. I took some photos and videos of this, which I will be linking too later. This was a very exciting time, and a really potent way to drive home that we were now, really, in Japan.

Everything is miniature. The houses huddle together, pressed so tight, but never actually touch. Many homes (especially in Osaka, which we rode through) have vegetable gardens - rice fields are very common as well. All of the homes have old TV antenna on the roofs. Everything is packed so tightly - the roads, the sidewalks, the yards, the very infrequent parking lot, it's all just a tumble - a neatly organized tumble.

Before we knew it, we were in the Kyoto Station. We thought that the airport building was big. You could have fit two of them inside the main space of Kyoto station. But we really couldn't stand around to enjoy it. We were exhausted from the tip, unwashed, and anxious to find our hotel. But we couldn't agree on what to do next.

Some wanted to take the subway. Some insisted on Taxis - like Stan suggested. After standing around looking this way and that for far too long, finally a group split off and dove into the subway station (Chris, Giancarlo, Steve, and Matt). The rest of us went outside to find a Taxi.

It was much easier than I thought it would be. As soon as the first of us hailed the first Taxi, the cabbie saw the extent of the group, and began flagging down other taxis himself - enough to fit all ten of us and our luggage. He was told where we were going, and he told each of them himself. Before we knew it, we were being whisked away from the train station, driving down the wrong side of the street, with the driver on the wrong side of the car, through far too narrow roads, packed with bicyclists and pedestrians. Yeah, we were in Japan.

And thus, we came to the hotel which, in a way, was a little like leaving Japan. It's a hotel aimed at foreigners, and so was very much like a hotel you'd expect to find in, say, Orlando. Only miniature. Again, confusion with the rooms. We got to Japan one day before the course officially started, so the first night of hotel rooms were neither reserved nor paid for. Well, they were reserved, but by Stan for us, and not by the program. We had to pay out of our pockets for them (well, we did for the real reserved rooms too, but that was included in the program fee) and would not be the rooms we stayed in for the rest of the trip.

None too soon, I was in my (temp) room. I called home. This in itself was a small adventure, for I had to try to get an operator (easy) wait for them to finish their very rapid set of Japanese lines they said, and then ask them how to dial to America. They told me. I tried it. It didn't work. I tried it two more times - I don't know what I did differently, but the third time was the charm.

The bathroom was really small. The shower was even smaller (it had to be, this isn't a Tardis) and the shower head, not very high. Changed and showered, I was now ready for action.

Everyone seemed to finish up around the same time, and agreed that we had to go out on our first night. Sleep would not do - especially because we had a certain theory about architecture students and jetlag to prove. We all dove in.

Everyone was looking for some place with an obvious food display in the wall. I don't know what made Chris pick that door, as there was no such display, but I am glad he did. Giancarlo was right behind them, asking if they spoke English and, just to be clever or funny (it was lost on them) began speaking in Spanish. I had no idea still, what was going on, but Chris seemed intent on going in. He asked everyone if they wanted to go here, which a murmur of dissatisfaction as his reply. I then quickly volunteered, and it was

decided that Chris, Giancarlo and I would stay, and the others would move on. Very good choice.

It was a small tavern - one room, a bar that seated maybe a dozen, with a kitchen not unlike any you'd find in a home (everything was much smaller though!) and a hostess who cooked and served drinks. There was one older Japanese couple present. We claimed our bar stools, and began the adventure of figuring out how we were going to actually order anything.

The guys had it easy enough - I think the word "beer" is universal, but I had a small panic trying to tell her no, no beer for me! She tried to offer me other drinks, even Sake, as I tried to figure out how to ask for water, when finally she offered wulong tea. I jumped on that, and was set. She served it iced, no sugar in the whole house, of course!

How can I paint this picture? Like a scene from a movie? The type of situation you think would be awesome and hilarious to actually be in, but don't expect to actually happen? Three guys sitting in a Japanese tavern trying desperately to communicate and trying every crazy food the hostess served us? Oh look, we're being served a whole fish? Eat the whole thing? The head too! Ok! What's it called? She tells us, we try to say it back, we get it wrong, she corrects us, we try again. If we weren't trying some strange unidentifiable dish (yes, we each ate everything she gave us) we were trying to learn words for things and telling them words for things. Then a pair of salarymen came in, and joined in with the fun. They had an electronic translator that made things a little easier. But it was still crazy. They loved the fact that we were going to be here for two months, that this was the first place we visited, that we knew how to use chopsticks, that we were from Florida, and of course, all of our attempts to say their words.

I could go on for twice as long as the airport post, and still not cover everything that happened that night. It was so dense, so richly packed, it would be impossible to remember everything and even try to convey it all.

In time of course, we had to go. She had run out of things for us to try (one looked like dirt - turned out to be rice bran - another was a sweet/sour thing that looked a bit like jerky but could have been anything) and were a bit anxious to see how much of a bill we had racked up. 55,000 Yen between the three of us. Turns out that's about \$50... a bit much if it had just been a visit to Applebee's, but definitely worth it for this experience.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Looking at this now, I realize that \$50 for three people at Applebee's was getting off easy. I don't go there much, obviously.

We want to go back there again, but with only three days so far and so much to do every single day, we haven't gotten a chance. Next time, we'll bring our translation books. It would have been less manic without them, but that was part of the fun. On the other hand, with the second visit, it would be nice to have a little help with the communication, or it could get old very fast.

I may want to edit this post later on to add more<sup>11</sup> - I am very tired, and it's late - but I wanted to get it down before I got too far behind. I have two more full days of experiences to recount, and another one will be upon me in no time tomorrow. Hopefully this weekend, which will be free from class work, will be open for more blogging. I'd just rather be out there getting topics to blog on, than be sitting in the hotel lobby with my fingers hammering keys.

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<sup>11</sup> Sadly, I never did, and it's all pretty much lost to the pages of memory.



1 - View of Osaka from the train



2 - View of Osaka from the train, with rice patties



3 - View of Osaka from the train