

Japan at Cherry Blossom 2023

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A trip to Japan was on our agenda for a couple of years. We even decided to go in spring and with an organized tour to avoid the hassle of finding hotels and trains during high season. Then Covid came and Japan closed its borders to any traffic. Only last year they started allowing tourists to return.

But this is not the only thing that changed: Freya is reluctant to take long-distance flights - not flights in general, but anything longer than 4 to 6 hours. I was already in the US on my own last year USA and since I travel frequently for business, she's used to being alone for a while. This is even more true, as she wants to go on a garden tour through the UK this summer, something I'm not interested in at all.

Last summer, when it became apparent that Japan was going to reopen its borders, I checked what Djoser has to offer. Djoser is a tour operator that is focusing on the organizational aspects of the trip and gives you a lot of freedom on what to do after you arrived at the hotel. We have traveled with Djoser a few times over the years and when we want to go with a group they are usually our first choice.

Luckily, they still have the tour on offer that we would have booked before Corona. It's a 20+2 day trip through Japan at



the beginning of the cherry blossom season.

15+16.03.23 - A long journey to Tokyo

The flights to Japan are included in the package. It's a connecting flight with Emirates via Dubai. In theory, it's possible to book the trip without the flights,

but as we arrive in Tokyo and leave from Osaka, it would have been tricky to find direct flights matching the timetable.

The problem with flights being booked by a tour operator is that they are bundled, and you don't get access to your individual booking. So, no way to change

my seating during the online checking yesterday 😊 .

The flight is scheduled to leave Frankfurt at 2:30pm. I get up at my usual time, have breakfast, and leave at 8am. This is all very relaxed and leaves enough buffer in case of a traffic jam. The weather is more April than March with a mix of sunshine, cloudy skies, and snow showers. But everything runs smoothly and I arrive on time at the car park in Neu-Isenburg where I'm going to leave my car for the next 3 weeks. A shuttle takes me to the airport and the check-in counters are already open. I still try to change the middle seat

that was assigned to me for the flight from Dubai to Tokyo, but no chance - the flight is almost full.

The flight from Frankfurt to Dubai takes nearly 6 hours and is business as usual. In Dubai, everyone has to go through security again and even though all shops are

still open (it's past midnight local time) I go more or less directly to the new gate. Unfortunately, it's another 2 hours before boarding for the flight to Tokyo starts. That flight is absolute standard as well.

We arrive 20 minutes late, but that's not the most time-consuming part. Immigration is super bureaucratic and takes ages, although I've heard it was even worse in the past.

I'm one of the first at the meeting point,

another hour. From touchdown, till I'm in the hotel room 4 hours have passed.

Nevertheless, I want to get a first sneak peek of the area and walk through the nearby pedestrian zone. I grab some sushi and a beer at the Family Mart that is conveniently located in the hotel, sort a bit my stuff for the following days, and then go to bed. By the way: The room is as small as expected.

17.03.2023 - The first day in Tokyo

Weather: gray-in-drab, but contrary to the announcement dry
Walking distance: 18 km

The two days in Tokyo are the only ones I planned ahead. But after the first announcements of our guide yesterday evening it was clear that I have to change the planning. We have to go as a group to the nearby Ikebukuro station because we have to exchange the voucher for the Japan Rail Pass for the pass itself. Before that, for those who do not have one yet,

there is the possibility to buy the Suica card. The Suica is a contactless, rechargeable chip card with which you can not only pay the tickets for public transport but also buy small items in some stores. There are similar things in other major cities from Hong Kong to Santiago. I already bought mine via the internet and they



in Senso-ji Temple - Tokyo



in Senso-ji Temple - Tokyo



in Senso-ji Temple - Tokyo

sent it to my home in advance. Had I known the schedule, I could have saved some money, but with my original plans, this seemed like the better choice.

We are in front of the office for the Rail Pass just before it opens, but again the process is quite bureaucratic and takes time.

With the whole group, we are now going to Asakusa to buy tickets for those who want to join the trip to Nikko on Sunday. The rest will go on their own.

I start with the nearby Sensō-ji Temple and the neighboring Asakusa Shrine.

I know it will take some time for me to get into the flow. But even though the chances of taking really good photos are slim (the weather isn't helping either), I start taking pictures. The temple is nice, but it sure looks a lot better in the evening when it's lit up. The cherry blossom season is just around the corner and the first trees are already showing blossoms or at least buds. Some women have dressed up and take photos of themselves in front of the temple or one of the flowering trees. In total, I spend an hour or more here.

I now walk through the neighborhood to Ueno station and take the metro to Akihabara. Public transportation here in Tokyo (aside from buses) is a mix of ele-



Kanda Myojin Shrine - Tokyo

vated and subway trains, both of which often use the same stations (mostly abo-



Tokyo International Forum - Tokyo

ve ground) and go up or down depending on their location. For simplicity, I will refer to them all as metro.



Kanda Myojin Shrine - Tokyo

Akihabara is a shopping district for electronics, manga stuff, and the like. I just ta-



Miyashita Park - Tokyo

ke a look around today but do not go into the stores. Instead, I head for the Kanda Myojin Shrine on a hill in the middle of skyscrapers. Interestingly, there are a lot of smaller shrines around a bigger one. Like at all those shrines you can buy wish boards (called Ema), inscribe them and then hang them on special racks. The interesting thing here is that most of them are in manga style, partly painted by hand.

I return to the station and take the metro for a short ride to the Tokyo International Forum to take some archi-

tectural photos. Entering the building, I see a posting for the lifts on the right-hand side. So, let's see if it's possible to go up. I get off first on a middle level where there is a row of meeting rooms. I don't see any signs indicating that access is restricted, except in one area at the very end. I take some photos and now want to see if it's different on the top floor. And indeed, here access is blocked on the right side, but if you turn left, there is a restaurant at the end of the hallway. Since it is now closed, I can enter the area with the tables outside and take a few photos.

The last neighborhood to visit today is Shibuya with its famous crossing. I've picked out a few viewpoints at home, but the rooftop terrace of a shopping mall is closed to the public and the spot in a hotel would be from a (probably expensive) Japanese restaurant. So, I go where everyone goes: Starbucks. You can't miss it, as it's right at the Shibuya crossing.

After taking some pictures from the second floor, I stroll a bit through the streets of Shibuya, but I'm not as impressed as some others I talk to. The last destination for today is Miyashita Park, a mix of shopping mall and public space including a climbing wall and tennis courts. I struggle to find it, even though I've seen it on the way to Shibuya crossing. The reason is that Google Maps sends me to the back entrance and the signs here are not really obvious. Also, the view from this side is quite different.



Big Buddha - Kotoku-in - Kamakura



Cherry Blossom - Kotoku-in - Kamakura



Hase-dera Temple - Kamakura

1333. With its many temples and shrines, it's a very popular destination for local and international tourists. Usually, it's not recommended to go there on a weekend, but with the current weather forecast, the crowds should be limited. Anyway, the agenda is set and there is no real alternative if I want to see Kamakura.

18.03.2023 - Rain in Kamakura

Weather: Rain (partly severe) until 6pm
Walking distance: 13.5 km

We meet at 8:40am in the lobby for an excursion to Kamakura. The city is located about 50 km southwest of Tokyo and was the capital of Japan from 1185 to

So we are walking through light rain to Ikebukuro station. Today we take a local train which is not very different from the metro-style trains I used yesterday. Some of the group complain about the heating under our seats, but at least we don't have to stand for the hour the ride takes.

Our first destination is the Big Buddha.



Hase-dera Temple - Kamakura

It's too far to walk and so we learn how to ride a bus in Japan (entering at the rear, don't forget to register your Pismo/Suica card, leave the bus in the front, and check out with the card again).

For a few minutes, the rain stops and we use the time for the obligatory group photo. Behind the Buddha, there is a small garden, but there is not much more to see. So it doesn't take long before we leave again.

Our next stop is not far away: The Hase-dera temple. The temple is one of the larger ones in Kamakura and was built on

two levels on a slope. Besides the buildings, there is also a shallow cave, which I, of course, have to visit too, even if I have to do it in duck gait. The rain is back, but one can handle it even the surrounding would be much nicer in the sunshine. Still, this temple has its reputation for a reason.

We take the bus back to the train station and grab something to eat. Most of us use the nice bakery right next to the station entrance. After everyone

is back we take the train to the northern part of town where many other interesting temples and shrines are waiting for us. It's just one station to Kita-Kamakura, but while we are on the train, it starts to pour.

Our guide is showing us the entrance to the first temple and then take the next train back to the main station.

The rest starts to visit the Zen temple Engaku-ji. This is one of the most important Zen temple complexes in Japan with qui-

te some buildings on the slope of a small mountain. It would have been nice to stroll from one temple to the next in better weather, even if it had been like this morning. But the rain is so massive that it's like jumping from one shelter to the next. After a while, I even put the rain co-



Senso-ji Temple - Tokyo



Senso-ji Temple - Tokyo



Senso-ji Temple - Tokyo

ver over my backpack, something that I'm doing now for the second time in all those years.

After a while, I give up and leave the temple. I briefly consider taking the train back to the main station, but then I decide to walk the 30 minutes or so. On the way I meet a few others and together we walk back to the station without visiting the other temples on the way. The rain is so heavy that even the outdoor jacket I'm wearing let the moisture through.

And no, it's not sweat. It's far too cold for that.

The 2 hours until we meet with the rest of the group, the three of us spend in a cafe. Unfortunately, we are on a group ticket and have to take the train toget-

her. Otherwise, we surely would have returned to Tokyo earlier.

While we are on the train back to Tokyo the rain stops as predicted. So after our arrival at Ikebukuro station I don't return to the hotel but continue to the Sensō-ji temple, where I was already yesterday, for some nighttime photos.

As expected, the temple is illuminated and looks much better than during daytime. I was hoping for some puddles to take pictures with a reflection, but there

are none. Still, it was absolutely worth coming back.

It's a bit chilly and I think it would be a good idea to look for something to eat here in Asakusa. I end up at a restaurant where you order your dishes via a tablet.

The nice thing about it is that you can change it to English, so there's no guesswork involved. I order some duck breast and small, fried potatoes. Tasty! So I add some

pickled squid, which tastes, well, special.

After dinner, I take the metro back to the hotel and call it a day.

19.03.2023 - A busy day in Tokyo

Weather: Nice, sunny spring weather
Walking distance: 22.5 km

The first item on today's agenda is St. Mary's Cathedral.

Initially, I had planned to visit it on the first day, but I had to shift it to today as we had to pick up our Japan Rail ticket there.

I have seen some nice pictures on the internet, but in reality, you are not allowed to take photos inside. The architecture is rather cool, with a lot of visible concrete and very little decoration. The first prayers



Mode Gakuen Cocoon Tower - Tokyo



Mode Gakuen Cocoon Tower - Tokyo



Mode Gakuen Cocoon Tower - Tokyo

are arriving for the mass, so I leave soon. I take some pictures from the outside, but after a first look, I mark them for deletion. If I had known before, I would have skipped the church and would have started earlier in the day.

The next difficult thing with the Cathedral is that it's quite a walk to reach a metro station that is serving Shinjuku, my next destination. So I already have an hour's walk through residential areas under my belt before I enter a metro for the first time today.

The main reason to go to Shinjuku are the skyscrapers and especially the Mode

Gakuen Cocoon Tower is huge - really huge. As I changed the agenda I now arrive at a different part of the station and have to figure out where to go first. If you also want to go to the skyscrapers, look for signs to the western exit and later to the western concourse. At the western bus station, you can then walk up the stairs and you will already see the Cocoon Tower. If you like you can continue downstairs to the Metropolitan Govern-



at Meiji Shrine - Tokyo



at Meiji Shrine - Tokyo



at Meiji Shrine - Tokyo

ment Building, but if this is not your only destination I don't really see a reason to do so.

I'm strolling through the streets and taking photos. As it's Sunday there is not much going on today. This is mainly a neighborhood with office buildings. Reaching the other side of this area, I turn left and head for the northern part of Shibuya.

On the way, there is the

Meiji Shrine. It's situated in the middle of a nice park. The shrine itself is ok, nothing special except for its age and importance.

Just as I enter the inner area a guard comes and sends all the people aside so that a wedding procession can pass. In front two priests, followed by what in Europe

would be some bridesmaids; then the bride and groom in front of an umbrella-carrying guard. At the end of the queue, the rest of the guests are

following. All move at a measured pace. There is even a second procession a while later and other couples taking wedding pictures. Great photo opportunities!

At the south entrance, some Sake and French wine barrels are piled up. These barrels are donated every year by the brewers to pay their respects to the former Emperor Meiji and his Empress Shoken.

Next, I want to see the cosplay girls who are supposed to pose on a bridge between the train station and Yoyogi Park. First I stroll unsuccessfully through the streets of Harajuku and only after reading my notes I find out where the real hotspot should be. Unfortunately, there is none to be seen here either. Probably because later in the day a big cosplay



gambling hall - in Osaka



in Tokyo



in Tokyo

meeting takes place in the stadium.

The streets in Harajuku are packed. You are pushed rather than walking. Super annoying. So I decide to escape and take a metro to Akihabara. I have been there on Friday but was not in one of the arcades or department stores.

The arcades are usually not super wide (although I'll see some in Osaka that were the size of a normal department sto-

re), but quite long and stretch over 3-5 floors. Downstairs you have those grab machines you might remember from amusement parks, but upstairs you have those arcade machines that became popular in the 80s but have disappeared almost everywhere else. Here they have new models with big screens and speakers so loud you can't hear the people

standing next to you. Totally different to the rest of Tokyo where everybody seems to be keen to be as quiet as possible.

Akihabara is not only known for manga style (in many stores you can buy manga figures and other stuff), but also for electronics. Interestingly I don't find any gadgets that I've never seen before - maybe I just don't know where to look

for them as the signs are in Japanese only. But while Media Markt and Saturn here in Germany are closing stores or at least reducing floor space, you can find Bic Camera in every part of town. 5 stories high and full of electronic and (partly) non-electronic stuff. Nothing I haven't seen in Germany or online, but with a super wide assortment. They still have things you won't find in Germany anymore, like portable DVD players.

It's 4:30pm as I find a self-service Japanese BBQ restaurant. I enter the restau-

rant and am seated at a kind of counter. The individual seats are separated by a plastic barrier. On the screen, which you can switch to English, you select what you want and order it. As soon as it is prepared, you get a notification on the screen, take the card with the seat number and pick up the tray.

I selected two sorts of meat with a total of 200 g. I also get a bowl with rice, soup and some kimchee. The water comes

from a tap and spices and dips are also ready. In front of me is a small gas grill set into the table, which I turn on with two knobs and then put the meat on for as long as I want. Half a minute or so is usually enough. It's really tasty and I only paid 1560 yen (12 USD).

The sun will set in fifteen minutes, and I head back to Shinjuku to take some evening shots. Arriving there I walk straight to the Metropolitan Government Build-

ing and take a few photos of the neon lights. Finally, I return to the hotel.



in Shinjuku - Tokyo



in Shinjuku - Tokyo



in Shinjuku - Tokyo

ding to get a view from above. This time I'm staying underground using the moving walkways. The entrance is easy to find, but unfortunately, one tower is closed and the queue in front of the other tower is therefore very long. It makes no sense to wait here for more than an hour or so. Instead, I walk back to Shinjuku

20.03.2023 -

A beautiful view of Mt. Fuji on the way to Matsumoto

Weather: Nice, sunny spring weather
Walking distance: 8.5 km

Today we leave Tokyo. The announced meeting time in the lobby is 8:15am but because of the always crowded elevators, everyone is early.

For the only time on this trip, we take a private bus to reach our next destination. After departure, we use the time for some organizational topics like handing out

seat reservations for the train rides or preparing the reservations for the helicopter rides at Mt. Aso at the end of the trip.

Already on the way we have a clear view of Mt. Fuji and everyone is taking pictures through the bus windows just in case

it will disappear behind clouds later. We stop at Lake Kawaguchi. You can't see Mount Fuji from where we stop, but all of us have decided to take the ropeway to a viewing area anyhow. We are really lucky because in spring it is often so foggy that you can't see the mountain at all. Even our Djoser guide, who has been to Japan a few times, has only seen it twice, but never so clearly.

After our return, the bus takes us to a viewpoint on the other side of the lake.

Also from here you have a nice view of the mountain with the lake and some reeds and other greenery in the foreground.

It's now already 1:30pm as we had to

wait more than half an hour in the queue of the ropeway. So the next stop is to grab something to eat at a rest area another 30 minutes away. This is only a short stop because we still have 90 minutes to Matsumoto and the bus has to return to Tokyo today.



Mount Fuji

The hotel is directly opposite the train station and next to the long-distance bus station, which we will use tomorrow. The room is even smaller than the one in Tokyo and there is actually no room for the suitcase. I have to take out what I want, close it again, and put it aside. Tomorrow our main luggage will be transported directly to Kyoto while we take a public bus to Takayama. We have to take out what we need for that night and put it in a separate hand luggage. This is quite common in Japan, especially when traveling by train, and is called Takkyubin. So I briefly make up my mind about what to separate and then go out to make some evening photos.

We are right in the city center and the main attraction, the castle, is just 1.5 km away. Otherwise, there is not much to see and the streets of the city are rather unattractive from a photographic point of view. But the castle is nice and I will return tomorrow morning when it opens for visitors.

The sun is just setting behind a mountain and there won't be much color in the sky anyway. I check where exactly the res-

taurant I looked up (Soba Kobayasi) is. Good idea - I figure out that it is already closing at 7pm. So, I go to dinner with another couple from the group and postpone the photos of the illuminated castle. The restaurant serves mainly hand-made Soba, a

tasty, even for someone who isn't the biggest fan of soups. What is super nice is that we get a pack of noodles as a gift to take home at the check-out.

In the meantime, it has become dark and we go back to the castle. I didn't bring a normal tripod, because I re-

stupid, but works pretty well. The early morning shots in Venice for example I've taken with it too. In most places, you have to go super low, but that is very often what helps to get a good photo.

As expected the castle is nicely illuminated and I take a couple of shots mainly with the castle reflected in the water moat.

After a while, I call it a day and return to the hotel for the usual tasks like backing up the pictures of the day and writing some notes for this travelogue.



Mount Fuji



Matsumoto Castle - Matsumoto



Matsumoto Castle - Matsumoto

type of noodle made of buckwheat. In the end, it's a big pot of noodle soup topped with some duck breast (you can have a different topping as well). It's pretty

ad that they are forbidden in most, if not all, temples, but my Platypod. This is an (expensive) piece of metal where you can mount a ball head on top. Sounds

21.03.2023 - Off to the Japanese Alps

Weather: Nice, sunny spring weather in Matsumoto, gray-in-drab on the way, rain in Takayama

Walking distance: 6.5 km

I was awake early enough for some early morning shots, but the scouting of yesterday didn't come up with anything promising. So I stay in bed a little longer and later grab a coffee and a bite in the nearby Family Mart.

Key target for this morning is a visit to Matsumoto Castle which opens at 8:30am. I leave the hotel at 7:45am hoping to be early enough to avoid a long queue. I leave the backpack and the small bag for the next night in the room as I'll be back early enough for a regular check-out. The suitcase with all the other stuff goes with me to the reception.

Not walking too fast I'm at the castle at 8:15am and surprise, surprise: there is no queue at all. I take a few more photos from the outside, this time with the snow-capped mountains in the background, and then be the first in line. At exactly 8:30am the doors open and after paying 700 Yen entrance fee I head straight to the tower.

You have to carry your shoes in a plastic bag, so it's a good idea to have an extra pair of (warm) socks with you. I put on mine only inside after the first stairs not to block the entrance.

Speaking of stairs: they are super steep and you have to constantly watch your head. Thankfully I just carry my camera (and the shoes of course) and left the backpack at the hotel.



Matsumoto Castle - Matsumoto

The building is smaller than it looks from the outside. There are some exhibits, but no decorations inside. However, from the upper floors, you have a nice view of the surroundings. The windows are enclosed, but they have left openings through which you can put your lenses. It was definitely a good idea to be here early. They are prepared for larger crowds, and it would not be fun to be

pushed through the floors and stairs. But as it is now, with only a handful of other people on the same floor, a visit is highly recommended.

After leaving the tower, I walk a bit through the garden and take some more pictures of the castle in the morning sun. On the green, in front of the castle, you can find some markings indicating the walls of an even older castle.



Matsumoto Castle - Matsumoto

Now I walk back to the hotel grabbing another coffee on the way. I have nearly 1.5 hours until check-out and our public bus to Takayama will leave an hour later.

The way to Takayama is passing a ski resort and indeed shortly after leaving Matsumoto the terrain along the road is covered with snow. Temperature is

dropping below 0°C and as we reach the resort the snow cover is about 1 meter high.

In Takayama, the snow is gone and the temperature has risen to 14°C again. But it has started to rain and it is expected to stay like this for at least the next 3 hours - just before our shuttle leaves for the hotel. The hotel is too far from town to walk, so we have to rely on the shuttle or take a taxi.

The suggestion for the afternoon was a museum village with old houses from all over Japan. But in the rain, with an umbrella in one hand and the camera in the other? No thanks! Tomorrow the weather should be ok again and we have more than half a day to explore the city. Our tour guide takes the next shuttle to get everything ready at the hotel and I let him know that I will accompany him. Since the hotel is outside the city and there are no restaurants or the like nearby, we buy something to eat at the Family Mart, since the hotel only offers an expensive buffet.

22.03.2023 - Takayama pastime

Weather: foggy in the morning, but clear skies after 10am with temperatures reaching 22°C in Takayama and Kyoto.

Walking distance: 14 km

As a surprise, even for our guide, breakfast is included in this hotel. It's buffet style and they even tried to offer something for western tastes, but the taste is no better than what I grabbed so far at the Family Mart. At least it was something different. There are several shuttle buses to the train station in town and I take the first one at 8:10.

I start my walk with the Miyagawa morning market. Unfortunately, this has nothing to do with a traditional Asian morning market where locals buy vegetables and other things for the day. It's a mix of tents on one side of the street and stores on the other. Everything is geared exclusively toward tourists.

I walk through the market and then turn

right towards the Higashiyama temple area. At the beginning, there are a few other tourists, but as I walk further up the hill, I am quickly alone. It is nothing spectacular, but it has a nice quiet atmosphere.

I go back down and stroll through the streets of the old town. Takayama has decided to declare a large part of its old town a conservation area where the old style houses are protected. But they haven't made it a pedestrian zone, and



Sakurayama Hachimangu
Shrine Precinct - Takayama



Murahan - Takayama



Shinkansen

even without hordes of tourists, it doesn't feel special. Maybe it's different in the evening.

I find an old townhouse that has been renovated by the government and can be visited as long as it is not booked for another activity. In front are the living rooms, then follows a courtyard, and in

the back the stone storage building - interesting.

The town reminds me of a larger village in the Northern Alps. Not so much because of the style of the houses, but because of the focus on winter tourism. I even saw large snow shovels in a garage. Aside from winter tourism, Takayama is known for its colorful festival. People from all over Japan come to see the procession. But there is nothing to see of

either at the moment.

On the opposite side of the old town, but also near the river, is the second morning market, the Jinyamae morning market. It consists of a couple of tents on a square. It's the same as the Miyagawa morning market: it's for tourists only,

although the focus here is on fruit and other local foods. There are many unoccupied spaces at both markets. Whether that's because it's low season or another side effect of Corona, I don't know.

I still have more than 3 hours before we meet to take the train towards Kyoto, so I decide to walk up the hill to Shiroyama Park and the ruins of the old castle.

But before that, I go to the next Family Mart to grab a coffee. Luckily, there's a bench right in front of it where I sit down, drink my coffee, and eat the pastries I bought for this morning before I knew breakfast was included.

The idea of climbing up to the castle was a good one. As soon as the street is going up, the number of tourists drops significantly. At Shorenji Temple, at the foot of the castle hill, there was

only one French family with me. On the left side of the temple, I even find a nice path with 13 torii gates. As soon as the path leads into the forest, I am all alone and hear only the birds chirping.

At the top of the hill, there is not much left of the castle. A small wall and a few markers, that's all. But you can sit down

and relax from the quite steep way up. Even though I sit there for a while, only 3 people come. After 20 minutes or so I decide to go back down.

At 2:44pm we leave Takayama with a local train to Nagoya (2.5 h) and from there with a Shinkansen to Kyoto. Even the local train is more pleasant than anything we have in Germany. It's even better than the Shinkansen later.

23.03.2023 - A rainy day in Kyoto

Weather: gray-in-drab in the morning, rain (partly strong) from 10am till 6pm, after that a mix from dry to heavy rain

Walking distance: 22 km

The plan for today is to start early. First, because I want to visit the bamboo forest which will be super crowded du-

port companies serving it. It takes me a while to get to the right track. I take the local train to Arashiyama, from where I walk directly on to the Bamboo Forest. By the time I get there, it's about 7:15. Because of the weather, it is still quite dark. Of course I'm not alone, but there are only a few people including a couple with a photographer taking wedding photos. The famous part with the long alley is surprisingly short, maybe some 200 meters. It's one of those typical

tory. On the way there I find a nice park with quite some cherry trees and a woman playing the flute. I leave the park and walk in the direction of Togetsu-kyo Bridge. According to the descriptions I read before, it is supposed to be something special. Why, however, is not clear to me.

Nearby is the Kimono forest. This is something I found on the internet just before leaving Germany. At a local train



Arashiyama Bambuswald -
Kyoto



in Arashiyama - Kyoto

ring the day, and second because the weather forecast says "rain starting in the morning and increasing till late afternoon".

So I leave the hotel at 6:05am and walk to Kyoto station. This is again a huge complex with several parts and trans-



Kimono Forest Of Arashiyama - Kyoto

must-see places, even though there are better ones elsewhere. I still remember the bamboo forest on Hawaii with the thick bamboo trunks bending in the wind and making noise. But ok that might be an unfair comparison.

I stroll a bit around toward the observa-



Kimono Forest Of Arashiyama -
Kyoto

station (a different one than the one I arrived at) an artist has set up steles made of plexiglass. Inside is fabric usually used for kimonos. Each stele has a different pattern. When it is dark, they are lit from inside. Even in today's gray weather, some lights are still on. I walk around and

take a few photos from different angles.

Right across the street is Tenryu-ji with its famous garden, which belongs to the UNESCO World Heritage Site "Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto". You have to pay entrance fee for the garden and buildings separately, but as you can see most of the buildings from the garden, I save my time and money and visit only the garden. It's really a beautiful one with large cherry trees in full bloom. At 9am the tour busses arrive and it's getting full, but I already finished my tour.



Tenryu-ji Temple - Kyoto

Nearby is a sign to the Hogenin Temple. In front of it is a Buddha garden with many Buddha statues in different poses. I do not enter the temple area. It's mainly another garden with a steep entrance fee.

At 9:45am it starts to drizzle. I buy a coffee and something to eat at Lawson, a convenience store like 7/11, or Family Mart. I

start to walk towards another temple I have on my list (in this area are many of

them). It's a little further away and on the way there it starts to rain harder and after a while, it's like Kamakura. But I learned my lesson and do not try to force



Kyoto Station - Kyoto

the visit of the temple, but put the rain cover over the backpack and turn around.

The train to Kyoto just left, but there is another one 20 minutes later. In Kyoto station, I leave via the main gate to take



Tenryu-ji Temple - Kyoto



in Gion - Kyoto

some shots of the entrance hall. I also take a look at the Isetan department store located there, but nothing is calling "ta-

ke me home".

It is still raining cats and dogs, so I go back to the hotel. It's shortly before 1pm and I already have 13.5km on my watch.

The rain is supposed to stop at 6pm, so I leave the hotel a little earlier and indeed it's just drizzling a bit. I want to go to Gion to take some night shots. On the way it starts to rain more intense again and as I pass a nice-looking restaurant I decide to have an early dinner (although - it's 6:30pm, so not that early). Most of the tables are reserved, but I'm early enough to get a seat.

It is a fusion restaurant of Japanese and European cuisine. The waiter is a young guy from Europe who wants to attend a Japanese cooking school as soon as his Japanese is good enough. I have a Fish Teriyaki which turns out to be salmon and tastes great.

When I leave, the rain has stopped and I continue my walk. On the way to Gion, I find a street along a canal with beautifully illuminated cherry

trees.

In Gion, I walk down the main street towards Yasaka shrine. This is the only temple that is illuminated. I try Kodai-ji temple and Hokan-ji temple, both closed and the surrounding area barely lit. On top, it starts to rain more severely again.

It's past 8pm anyhow and I have some 40 minutes back to the hotel. Plus, I should have some nice shots from the alley with the cherry blossom trees. So I turn around and head for the hotel.

24.03.2023 - Kyoto and an excursion to Nara

Weather: overcast sky
Walking distance: 18 km

Today I have a full program. Officially the plan for today is to visit Nara. But we will meet only at 9am. That should give me enough time to visit the Fushimi Inari shrine beforehand. As this is one of the touristic highlights of Kyoto, I need to be there very early anyway to get some undisturbed shots.

I get up even before the alarm rings at 5:15am, take a shower and go to the station. Of course, the train to Nara, which I have to take even now, has just left and so I am at the shrine around 6:20.

At that time I'm not alone but for the most part, people are not standing in the

way. So I'm able to get my intended pictures already at the lower end of the stairs. At this time of the day, even the cats are asking for some strokes.

I start the climb up the mountain, but at some point, I realize that I keep taking the same shots again and again. So at 7am I turn around halfway up. That was a good decision as on the

way down are dozens if not hundreds of shrines offering more motives.

This is the best temple so far. Not only because of the torii gates but for the atmosphere and variety plus because I'm alone at most places, especially at the shrines on the way down.

I could continue from here to Nara, but the train would take 60 minutes because it stops at every station. So I go back to



Fushimi Inari Shrine - Kyoto



Fushimi Inari Shrine - Kyoto



Fushimi Inari Shrine - Kyoto



in Nara



in Nara

the hotel, eat the breakfast included here, and meet the group at 9am to take the first express train to Nara. The fast trains save you some 20 minutes, so it takes 45 instead of 67 minutes.

On the way, a young Japanese woman wants to practice her English. The pronunciation is quite ok, but she clearly lacks vocabulary, but Google translate helps 😊.

In Nara, we get a map and walk as a group for a while before splitting up.

First temple is the Kofuku-ji which is free to visit if you don't want to go inside the hall. Here we also see the first of the famous Nara deer that will accompany us through Nara Park and all the temples around. They are conditioned to beg for food (you can buy special food at various places for 200 Yen). They even bow when begging for food, and if they got something from you, they may follow you for a while. They have even learned to use the crosswalk - only the thing with the pedestrian traffic light needs to be improved 😊.

In general, they are very friendly and you can pet them, but you shouldn't fool them (like some members of an Asian

group who thought it's a good idea to place the food on their heads). It's said that they sometimes take your map or other papers for food.



Todai-ji Temple - Nara



Todai-ji Temple - Nara



Kasuga-Taisha Shrine - Nara



Kasuga-Taisha Shrine - Nara

We walk through Nara Park with more deer to the Yoshikien Garden. A small,

nice garden that is free to visit, too. At the moment not much is blooming, so we quickly leave. For the same reason, no one is interested in going to the

neighboring Isui-en garden, which is otherwise also supposed to be nice but costs 1200 yen.

From here we walk to the Todai-ji temple where we part. The temple hosts a huge Buddha. It's the first really impressive Buddha temple I see here in Japan even though it's by far not as colorful as the ones in Myanmar or Thailand.

Before I leave the area I take a look at the buildings further up a neighboring hill. Very different with nice details to photograph.

Through a forest, I'm now heading for the Kasuga-Taisha shrine. Already on the way I see nice, weathered steles and lanterns with moss. The shrine is famous for its large number of lanterns. I'm able to take some photos from the outside, where is much more to explore so I don't go inside.

From here I walk back through Nara Park and the city towards the station. On the way, I grab a coffee and something sweet at a Family Mart as it's close to 3pm and I skipped lunch so far. This time I arrive just in time to catch the train back to Kyoto.

On the way there I think about what else I could do in Kyoto and decide to go to the To-ji temple because it is located south of the station and I

probably won't make it there tomorrow. I arrive there just a few minutes before 5pm what is the closing time. So I can just shoot a couple of pictures from the



To-ji Temple - Kyoto

parking lot. At least there were few people still on the premise.

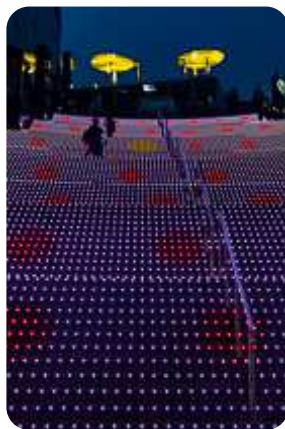
After a brief dinner in a kind of restaurant arcade at the station (meat and fish skewers - quite ok but not as good as the fish yesterday for the same price), I go to

the main hall of the station for some blue hour photos. I want to photograph the Kyoto Tower from a higher vantage point. It looks okay, but nothing special. But as it gets

darker, they then start a light show on the grand staircase and later I even find an illuminated walkway from one side of the station to the other.



Kyoto Tower - Kyoto



Kyoto Station - Kyoto



Kyoto Station - Kyoto

25.03.2023 - Kyoto leftovers

Weather: overcast sky

Walking distance: 20 km

I'm awake before the alarm clock rings, but after a look through the window, I return to bed for a while. Since I've already been to my personal favorites, there's no reason for a very early morning walk. The idea is to go to the Philosopher's Path and take a look at the temples in that area.

As I leave the metro station Keage (which is still more than half an hour away if I were to walk directly to the philosopher's path), I see an old railroad track lined up with cherry trees. It's Sunday morning, so no wonder that quite some people are around, including the obligatory bride and groom.

I stroll around the area to see if I can find anything interesting. Nearby is Nanzen-ji temple, a temple that I don't have on my list, but it's not far, so I turn that way. Nice area, but definitely not a hidden gem.

Close nearby is the start of the Philosopher's Path. This is a walkway along a canal lined up with booming cherry trees. Of course, there are many people on the

way, but it is not as bad as expected. After a while, I leave the path and turn right into a parallel street. Along this road is the Honen-in temple, a smaller temple that cannot be visited most of the year but has a nice, more natural compound with a nearby cemetery.

Not far away is the Ginkaku-ji temple with the silver pagoda (which isn't silver at all). What you can visit is a very nice garden. You have to follow a given path, but you can walk it twice if you want. It's around lunchtime, so it's not cramped, but still, you don't have decent time to take pictures as you often block the way as soon as you stop.

Ginkaku-ji is the northernmost point of my agenda, but before I return to the hotel I want to visit one more place - the



in Kyoto

Heian Jingu Shrine. It's anyhow on the way back to where I started. In front of the shrine, there is a huge open square. It reminds me a bit of the Forbidden Palace in Beijing. They charge an entrance fee for the (apparently huge) garden only, but I've seen more than enough gardens over the last couple of days. From a nearby station, I take the same metro lines as in the morning back to Kyoto Station and then walk back to the hotel.



Heian Jingu Shrine - Kyoto

At 5:45pm I'm leaving again to take some blue hour shots of the castle. When I arrive, I find that there is an event going on in the castle grounds ("Naked Flowers") and the number of people waiting in line is huge. I'm not in the mood to wait for 30+ minutes just to get a ticket. Inside it would be crowded too, making it very difficult to get a decent shot even I have my platypod with me.



Ginkaku-ji Temple - Kyoto

I'm taking a couple of pictures of the castle from the outside and decide to

walk around the premise. Good idea! On the other side of the street, I see an illuminated gate that you obviously can pass. It's the gate to the Shinsen-en tem-

ple, with a small park and pond that is beautifully illuminated. The lights create great reflections of the temple, a red

bridge, and some cherry trees.

I finish my walk around the castle grounds and back to the next metro station. Back at Kyoto station, I think about what I could eat. I'm not really hungry as I had a snack after 2pm, but I take a look at the food court below Kyoto Tower. It's around 8pm in



Heian Jingu Shrine - Kyoto



Shinsen-en Temple - Kyoto

the meantime and the place is still pretty busy. My first choice was sold out, and they weren't taking orders at all for the

second. So I leave and grab something to go on the way to the hotel. In the meantime, it started raining again. A harbinger of the weather we'll have tomorrow.

26.03.2023 - Monastery time

Weather: raining all day long
Walking distance: 7,5 km

Today we are leaving Kyoto and heading to Koyasan. This is a sacred place in the mountains southeast of Osaka. The distance from Kyoto is not super far, but it's complicated to reach. We have to take 4 different trains, a cable car, and a bus. We leave our hotel in Kyoto at 8:30am and reach the monastery after 2pm. Luckily we don't have to carry all our luggage but use the Takkyubin service again.

Arriving at the monastery we have to take off our shoes and are friendly greeted by a young priest from Turkey who lives now in Tokyo but is coming to the mo-

nastery frequently. In the monastery, we don't have single rooms, so I have to share one. The rooms do not have private bathrooms. I have to go to the toilet one floor below in a public area. The rooms are large and instead of a bed we have futons, but they have air conditioning and wifi. Somehow it feels like being in a hostel, although it is an active monastery. Dinner and breakfast are included, both vegetarian style. And who wants, can join a meditation session in the morning.

The main attraction of Koyasan is the Okunoin cemetery in the forest at the end of town. It's still raining pretty hard, but skipping it is not an option. So together with a

couple I start walking. One way should take us half an hour or so, but halfway we decide to take a bus.

The cemetery starts with a modern part where also companies bought graveyards for their high-ranking employees. The graveyards range from ordinary to

extreme - including a rocket. Then comes the older part and of course that is much more interesting. Somehow the weather suits this place with all the moss. I hide my camera under my jacket, take it out when I see something interesting, and quickly put it away again.

There is an inner area where you are not allowed to take pictures, but otherwise, you

are free to move around and take photos.

The longer we're in the rain and the colder it gets (we're down to 7°C and the temperature continues to drop), the more we say goodbye to the idea of returning here after dinner when it's dark. For the same reason, we take the bus back to the monastery.

Dinner is surprisingly good - you can even order beer or sake. After dinner our tour guide is giving a lesson about Buddhism and a lot of the group joins him. Some are going to the onsen and I return to my room to prepare tomorrow's visit to Osaka and write this travelogue.



Okunoin - Koyasan



Okunoin - Koyasan



Okunoin - Koyasan



Okunoin - Koyasan

27.03.2023 - Shrines in Koyasan and a half day in Osaka

Weather: partly cloudy
Walking distance: 23.5 km

We are both awake before the alarm clock rings. Instead of going to the offered meditation session, I go out to pho-

looking here and there what is inside.

After some 45 minutes, I turn around to be in time for breakfast. I'm not the guy for Asian breakfasts, but I want to give it a try. So I eat what looks appealing to me and then go to Family Mart around the corner and grab a morning coffee ☺ .

The way back to Osaka is of course as bothersome as the way to Koyasan was.

nearby 7/11 with a cup of coffee, they are already handing out the keys. So I drink my coffee to the pastry now in my room after all.

I change clothes as it's much warmer here than in the mountains and rearrange a few things as I now have my suitcase back, but then I'm ready to go.

The first area to explore is Umeda with its Sky Building. This is a skyscraper with

tor and escalator. After getting the ticket from a vending machine, you go up one floor to an indoor area where you can also get a coffee or something to eat. One level further up is than the outside viewing area, where you can take photos without standing behind a window or glass wall. Unfortunately, it's a bit foggy, but of course, the weather is much better than the days before.



Danjo Garan - Koyasan



Danjo Garan - Koyasan



Danjo Garan - Koyasan

tograph for an hour. It's 6:15am and a bit fresh but not raining anymore. Best of all, I hardly see anyone and the temples are all empty. I start with a temple just across the street (Danjo Garan) and spend much more time here than expected as the grounds are larger than they appear from the street. I continue walking to the center of the village,

Finally, we arrive in Osaka and have to change from the train to the metro there. While our guide buys tickets, most of us storm a bakery. I buy a nut pastry and some puff pastry with chocolate. Both for about 2 EUR each and really tasty. At the hotel, the rooms are not ready yet. First information was an hour, then 20 minutes and as I'm back from the

a so-called observatory. In fact, it's a rooftop viewing area. The building has a quite interesting architecture. I'm usually hesitant to go to such lookouts, especially during daytime, but here the architecture with the escalator to reach the top seems to be worth the time and price.

You pay at the top after taking the eleva-

From here I walk over to Osaka station to go to the castle or at least nearby. It's still some 30 minutes to walk. When I arrive the sun is right behind the castle, so I start to walk around it. Again the weather is not exactly my friend. At the beginning it was partly cloudy now it's getting heavily overcasted.

Just outside the castle grounds is a food

festival with various booths, and at one of them I buy a meat skewer.

The temple I originally wanted to visit will be closed soon, so I change my

plans and go a little earlier to Shinsekai. This is an entertainment district with arcades, shopping streets, the Tsutenkaku Tower, and especially restaurants with nice neon signs. I'm there at blue hour, which helps to keep the contrast under control, even if it's not a must for these motifs. Surprisingly, the sky colors up nicely, even though the weather at the castle was anything but promising.

Finally, I want to return to Umeda and see what the area and



Sky Building - Osaka



Sky Building - Osaka



Sky Building - Osaka

appointing at night. Neither the area nor the Sky Building is illuminated in a fashionable way. So I take some pictures here and from the bridge on the way to the

especially the Sky Building looks like at night.

Coincidentally, I completed that way the Circle Line. The nice side effect is that I don't have to pay anything for transportation thanks to the Rail Pass. The Circle Line is operated by Japan Rail, which also

operates the Shinkansen and other trains. The other metro lines here in Osaka are maintained by different companies and you have to pay for them individually. It's more or less the same as in Tokyo.

The area near the Sky Building is a bit dis-

hotel and call it a day.



Osaka Castle - Osaka



in Shinsekai - Osaka



in Shinsekai - Osaka

28.03.2023 - From Osaka via Himeji to Hiroshima

Weather: sunny

Walking distance: 18 km

It's time for Takkyubin again, this time for two days. No problem, by now I know what to take with me and what I can leave in the big luggage. At 7am I bring the suitcase to the reception area and go to buy a coffee and something for breakfast. This time I have a free choice: 7/11, Family Mart, and Lawson are all around the corner. I go for Lawson because I had a really good coffee there in Kyoto. This time it's a standard coffee, which is still much more than one would expect from a tea-drinking country.

In Himeji we stop for more than 5.5 hours to visit the castle and the garden. That's quite a bit, but the trains earlier are all special Shinkansen variants that we are not allowed to use without an extra ticket. There would be the option to go to the nearby mountains, but that is quite time-consuming and you would

have to rush to have enough time for the castle.

I'm at the castle at 10-something. Already from the outside, it's a pretty sight. When you enter the first gate, even before paying the entrance fee, you come to a huge garden area. People can use the greens to relax or play with their dogs. The paths are lined up with cherry trees, all in full bloom. From here you



Osaka Sky Building - Osaka



in Osaka



Tsutenkaku Tower - Osaka

can probably take the best photos of the castle during the cherry blossom. The fee is paid at a machine, but as you can switch it to English it's easy to handle. I'm the second in line, so next to no waiting time at all. Something that will change soon and shortly after noon, when I leave, the queue will be long enough that it might take half an hour or

more just to get the ticket.

I walk straight to the central tower. As in Matsumoto, I have to take off my shoes and carry them in a plastic bag. This tower is bigger than the one in Matsumoto but without any interior. Also here you have to climb a steep staircase. The difference is that it is crowded. So crowded that they are starting to limit access. I'm in the middle of a queue,

being pushed forward, up, and then down again. It feels a bit like being in line at airport security. From the main tower, I go to the western gallery. Again I have to take off my shoes and climb up one floor. Here were the living rooms and the like, but no original furniture or so is left. Instead, there are some display boards about the history of

the castle. Almost nobody reads them, though. But you can get some nice pictures of the main tower from here.

It is a few minutes after noon when I'm leaving for the Koko-en garden. It was highly recommended to visit it, so I bought a combo ticket at the castle entrance. The extra charge was minimal, only 50 yen, which is about 30 cents.

The garden is so-so. I can imagine it looking good later in the year and especially in the fall. Nevertheless, it still takes me half an hour to walk most of the paths.

Now I could go back to the castle and shoot some more cherry trees, but today I'm hungry early. So I decide to look for a restaurant first. Not so easy. In the street where I thought they are, are mainly shops, and the only restaurant I see is a super expensive teriyaki restaurant.

I look in the department stores and food aisles but only find takeaway food. That's quite common here especially if you go for a train ride with the Shinkansen. Finally, I'm successful and eat a lunch plate with salmon, rice, soup, and some other side dishes. Perfectly fine,

especially for 10 Euro or so. I get another coffee at the Family Mart and sit down in the sun writing on this travelogue.

At 3:15pm we meet to continue our travel to Hiroshima with two more Shinkansen rides. Nothing special anymore, you get used to the routine pretty easily.

Close to 5:30pm we check in to our hotel close to the train station. I have a headache since noon, but with the chance to photograph the Peace Park during sunset and blue hour, staying at the hotel is not an option.

The site is not too far away and I'm there within 30 minutes. The sun is just about to set (unfortunately in the "wrong" direction) and the light is good. I take photos of all the familiar subjects. Interestingly, there are not too many people there. It's not empty but they do not disturb. In fact, I wonder now if it is really necessary to be here the day after tomorrow as early as I had planned.

I'm still not feeling better and although I see some restaurants I'm interested in, I'm not in the mood to sit down and have dinner. So beer and chips in the hotel have to be good enough.

29.03.2023 -

Miyajima and its famous torii

Weather: sunny

Walking distance: 15.5 km

On today's agenda is a visit to Miyajima standing in the water. We meet shortly

after 8am and walk to the nearby station. Half an hour train ride and 10 minutes on a ferry and we are there.

This is one of the main tourist attractions here and of course, it's anything but empty, but at this time of the day, it's still acceptable.

In fact, our timing is perfect (just by chance, but I take what I get). Low tide was an hour ago and in the meantime, the water is high enough that no one walks to the torii (or even boats go there, as I will see in the afternoon). On the other hand, I can go down to the beach and get a nice angle to shoot the torii from there. I can't shoot 100% straight on, but the version with a 45° angle looks better anyway, as the background is much more favorable. So I don't have to go to the temple and queue up twice (first to pay for the entrance and then on the jetty to get the picture).

By the way: You can get nice pictures of the torii from the ferry too. When you go on the ferry, walk to the end, go to the first or second floor, and stand either straight ahead or on the right side.

From the Torii, we walk through the Momi-dani Park to the ropeway up Misen Mountain. In the park, there is a nice red bridge, which I have on my list, even if it looks much nicer in autumn with the leaves of the trees in red too. First I go down to the riverbed on the "wrong" side and have to do the same again on the opposite side.

Now I'm of course the last one of the group and have to hurry. But where are they? I follow the signs to the ropeway



Himeji Castle - Himeji



Himeji Castle - Himeji



Atomic Bomb Dome - Hiroshima



Peace Park- Hiroshima

but no one is to be seen. Are they that fast? We bought the tickets on the way and so I join the queue to get in on the second floor. Just as I'm about to enter the cabin, I see them arrive. I have no idea how I managed to pass them.

You are going to take two different types of cabins; first a smaller one for just 6 people and then at a transfer station a bigger one for 30 people for the rest of the climb.

agenda, but aside from some parks and temples (and of course the torii) there is not a lot you can do and our guide strongly recommends it, as the view over the sea and the island is supposed to be great.

After I have reached the mountain station, I make my way directly to the top of the mountain. Unfortunately, it first goes down quite a bit to reach the path that leads up from below and then the climb

At the very top, they've built a two-story observation deck. It may not be the most romantic place with all the people coming and going. But with the benches, they have a great place to eat my lunch. We were told that you can't buy much to eat on the island, so we all went to the 7/11 at the train station and I brought sushi.

This doesn't look like the ones we know (they have those too). It's more of an outdoor version. It has the shape of a tri-

varieties are already sold out and you have to take what is left.

Our guide recommended going down the Omoto Park trail, which would be a nice walk through the forest even though with limited views. But even though this is the longer way it is mostly stairs. As mentioned: Not the stairs you expect, but rocks with different heights, most of them quite high. Those are not really a friend to the knees. If you have



O-Torii - Miyajima



view from Mount Misen - Miyajima



Daishoin Temple - Miyajima

There is the option to walk up but it's some 530 meters and more or less all the way uneven stairs - but we will come to that later. Already the way up to the ropeway station is a sweating matter and so I think it's a good decision to take the ropeway up to the hill and then walk down. The mountain was not on my

begins. Quite exhausting, because most of the "stairs" are simply rocks of different heights that you have to climb up. First I reach a temple that hosts the original eternal fire. From here it was taken to the Peace Park in Hiroshima where you now can find a descendant of it.

angle with each side being ca. 5cm long and 1cm thick. On the outside is a layer of seaweed, then a thick layer of rice and the filling, in my case red salmon and salt. It tastes quite good although I miss the soya sauce and the wasabi.

If you're interested, I'd recommend buying it early as around noon the popular

hiking poles it might be a good idea to take them along. Let's see what my knees will tell me tomorrow. But no matter what: Somehow I have to get down from 530 meters to sea level.

Was it worth going up? If the weather is really clear it might be worthwhile as the

views from the top are really great. Today it was quite hazy and I have my doubts that I will be able to recover a lot in post, especially as I shot most of the pictures around noon. I would definitely recommend taking the cable car up and down. You still have to climb anyway to enjoy the view from the top or to get to some temples. There's no real advantage to going up or down on foot, other than saving some money. So, I book the trip under "exercise" 😊.

From Omoto Park, at the foot of the mountain, I decide to go to the highly recommended Daishoin Temple, even if it means climbing some stairs again. This temple is a nice one and if I had saved myself the walk, I might have stayed here much longer. But I'm done and want to return to the hotel.

I walk back to the ferry station and just make it on board before the ferry leaves. The same goes for the train to Hiroshima - when I arrive at the station, I can already see the long queue on the other track. I get in line, and 5 minutes later the train pulls in. The disadvantage of this "just-in-time" approach is that I now have to stand for half an hour.

Our guide arranged a table at an Okonomiyaki restaurant for 6pm. This is a dish

that is prepared differently in different regions of Japan, but here in Hiroshima, it's the most popular dish available. You are sitting in front of a metal plate and the dish is prepared right in front of you. There are a lot of videos on YouTube showing how it is done.

We're on the 6th floor of a multi-purpose building with different types of business and even a capsular hotel. The whole floor is filled with little stands big enough to host a dozen customers. But there are even bigger places like this. One of them is 6 stories high and all floors are filled with Okonomiyaki restaurants. The portions are quite large, affordable and the taste is absolutely my style.



Kumamoto Castle - Kumamoto

30.03.2023 - A lazy morning in Hiroshima and an evening walk in Kumamoto

Weather: sunny in Hiroshima, overcast sky in Kumamoto

Walking distance: 16 km

We will not leave Hiroshima until the afternoon. The morning is intended for people to visit the Peace Park, the museum, and the other things in the area. But I've been there already the day before yesterday for some sunset and blue hour shots. So I skip my originally planned early morning visit and decide to take it easy.

Check-out time is 11am and after getting a coffee I go back to the room and sort through some photos.

Shortly before 11am I'm checking out and by chance, I meet another couple

from the group. They want to go to a café for a late breakfast or brunch and ask me if I want to come along. Why not?. Yesterday evening I thought to go back to the Okonomiyaki restaurant, but now I think that the portion is way too big.

So we are walking towards the station where they found a cafe on Google Maps. Unfortunately, it seems that it doesn't exist anymore. So we look at the next department store but the cafe there is anything but nice. Instead, I find here the Japanese BBQ chain I had dinner in Tokyo. Still, we're looking for a cafe. The next one is serving only Japanese lunch till 3pm but nothing sweet. Finally, we go to a local version of Starbucks on the other side of the train station. I take a look at what they have to offer and decide to change my plan. I will go for the Japanese BBQ. This time I order a smaller portion, which should be enough for now. The meat is different, but again very tasty. Good decision!

I grab a coffee at Lawson (this time as good as the one in Kyoto), sit a bit in the sun, and then return to the hotel to take the Shinkansen to Kumamoto together with the others.

The train ride takes 1:40 hours, but check-in at the hotel takes its time. There are not many highlights here in Kuma-

moto. We're mainly here to visit Mount Aso tomorrow.

Around 5pm I leave the hotel to take a walk. I decide to go to the castle of Kumamoto. It's still under renovation after being damaged by an earthquake a couple of years ago. However, I wouldn't visit it anyway and maybe I can get some nice shots from the outside. The problem is that it is overcast, so no nice afternoon light and no chance of a nice sunset.

It's a 30 minutes walk, but not really interesting - a lot of mid-sized concrete buildings. When I arrive, I stroll a bit through the large park near the castle, which offers some nice views.

Now let's see if I can find a restaurant in the city center. Well, there is not just one but literally dozens if not hundreds. An area of maybe 5 blocks is full of shops and restaurants. Not only downstairs but also on the upper floors. The problem is just that they are obviously not set up for international travelers. Everything is in Japanese only often without pictures and no prices either. Even with Google Translate, I'm pretty lost. But who's coming around

and saving me? My favorite Japanese restaurant chain. The one from Tokyo and Hiroshima. So I have a Japanese BBQ again. This time they even bring you the tablet with the food and there is a cashier instead a machine to pay the bill.

During dinner, I decide to go back to the castle and see if the illumination is worthwhile for a few nighttime photos. Around 9pm I'm back at the hotel.



Hitsujisaru Turret - Kumamoto Castle - Kumamoto

31.03.2023 - Helicopter flight at Mount Aso

Weather: overcast sky in Kumamoto, cloudy at Mount Aso
Walking distance: 7.5 km

The longer the trip continues the more relaxed the agenda. Today we meet at 9:45am to go by bus to Mount Aso. This is a huge volcano with a caldera of more than 25x19 km wide. It's an active volcano



Kumamoto Castle - Kumamoto

no with the last eruption in 2016. Within this huge caldera are several villages and 5 other volcanoes, one of which is the active one.

The ropeway to the crater was destroyed during the earthquake 7 years ago and has not been rebuilt to this day. Due to the activity and the amount of esca-

ping gas, access to the rim was restricted for several months. Only recently it was reopened, at least partially.

Already on our way to Matsumoto we were asked who is interested in a helicopter flight and most of the group signed up. They will only fly if the weather is good, but the forecast looks promising.

The drive takes almost 2 hours. We make a 20-minute stop at the info center to use the restrooms and get a first overview of the area. The next stop for those who want to fly is a parking lot with a kind of improvised hut. The rest of the group stays on the bus and goes to the former ropeway station.

The helicopter is quite small (a Robinson R44), at least the smallest I flew in so far. It has three passenger seats, so everyone has a window seat,

but there will only be two of us flying. I sit in the front, next to the pilot. The flight takes only 7 minutes, but unlike the flight in Hawaii for example we start right at the point of interest. There was no mention of the flight in Djoser's trip description, so it was a nice surprise to have this option. Everyone who gets off

the helicopter has a smile on their face.

We are picked up by the bus that brings us now to the former ropeway station. From here we can hike to the rim. Only a small part of the rim can be visited, but at least you can look into the crater, even if you see mainly smoke. If you have more time though, you'll find many hiking opportunities over former lava fields a little bit further downhill.

We're back in Kumamoto around 4:30pm. As I've been at the castle and the city center yesterday and I'm not in the mood for a temple or garden, I go to my hotel room to backup and sort my pictures, write a bit on this travelogue, and watch YouTube videos in parallel. I bought some sushi this morning that I had on the way back from Mount Aso, so

I'm not super hungry and just go to the food court in the department store next to the station. For the second time I order just based on pictures or plastic models and for the second time I get something that looks like what I ordered but doesn't meet my expectations in terms of taste. But ok it wasn't expensive and I've learned my lesson.

After that, I go back to the hotel and continue with my homework.

01.04.2023 - From Kumamoto to Nagasaki

Weather: sunny in the morning, cloudy in the evening

Walking distance: 12,5 km

The trip is slowly but surely coming to an end. My suitcase is going to Osaka from where our flight back home will depart, while we have one last destination: Nagasaki.

Nagasaki is easy to reach from Kumamoto, so we leave at 10:15 and will be at the hotel in Nagasaki by early afternoon. Again, it is not a through connection. This time we have to take a total of 3 trains.

Arrived in Nagasaki, I go together with

another of the group directly to the information center inside the train station. We want to go to Ghost Island or (semi-)officially Gunkan-Jima Island (the official name is Hashima) tomorrow. What we know is that the tours are usually sold out and you need a reservation. I tried to figure out the details at home but the information was confusing at best. The lady at the information knows what we want and tells us where to go and even gives us a voucher for 10% off. Unfortunately, they don't do the reservations straight away.

Our hotel is far away from everything. It is located halfway up the local mountain and can realistically be reached by taxi or shuttle bus only. There is no other restaurant or convenience store nearby so you have to bring everything with you or



at Mount Aso



at Mount Aso



at Mount Aso



Meganebashi - Nagasaki

As a group of three we walk a bit through the town and pass Dejima, a former Dutch trading post on what was an island in the past, but that is now in the middle of the town. We want to go to the Na-



sunset on Inasa-yama – Nagasaki

buy it (at high prices) at the hotel.

After checking in and leaving our things in the hotel room, we take the next shuttle back down to the station. We walk to the nearby harbor, as the lady from the info desk described it to us. We have to go to the second dock south of the station, which takes us about 15 minutes. The shipping terminal is at the end of the street. There are a number of tour operators on the first floor and we have to look for Yamasa, which is at booth 7.

Our booth is already closed as the last ship of that company already left. We ask at another booth and they tell us to knock at the window. Ok, we would not have expected that now here in Japan, but if they mean. And really, they open and we can make a reservation for tomorrow 9am.

kashima-gawa Bridge and so we follow the riverbed. Of course, there are many tourists in the middle of the day, making it hard to get an undisturbed shot. This would be an early morning destination, but the location of our hotel makes this impossible.

Our last stop of the day is the local mountain, the Inasa-yama Mountain, to see the sunset. Again there is a ropeway that takes us up the mountain. Over time we meet most of the group here. After sunset, it gets cold and windy, but I stay a bit longer than the others to take some blue hour shots. Finally, I decide that I have taken enough pictures and leave.

I walk down to the hotel as it would be more complicated to take the ropeway to town, than the bus to the station and then the shuttle up to the hotel. It's just

half an hour down and the way is along the road, so not really pleasant, but on the other hand without risk of getting lost.

02.04.2023 - Nagasaki's Ghost Island Gunkan-Jima

Weather: mostly sunny
Walking distance: 10.5 km

Today a special and somewhat unusual destination is on the agenda. Together with another guy from the group I'm visiting Ghost Island or Gunkan-Jima Island as it's called by the tour operators. It is part of an overarching World Heritage Site on Japanese industrial history. The James Bond movie "Skyfall" was also partly filmed here.

It's a small island from where the Japanese built underwater coal mines starting in 1887. The island reached a peak population of more than 5000 people in 1959, which equals 83,500 people/km². Just for comparison: Mumbai, the densest populated city was at 29,650 in 2006.

In the mid 70's the mines were closed and the buildings were left for good. For 30 years the island was left alone. Only in 2001 did Mitsubishi Materials hand over the island to Takashima which belongs to Nagasaki nowadays. Travel to Ghost Island was finally reestablished in 2009.

When I was looking for possible places to visit in Nagasaki at home, this place was at the top of my list. But as it was said that reservation is a must and the descriptions on how to get it was pretty vague, I was not very optimistic that I would be able to make it happen.

We take the first shuttle bus at 8am from the hotel to the train station, as we were told to be at the ticket counter of the cruise company between 8:15am and 8:30am. We arrive on time and there are long queues everywhere but at our booth.

So we show the reservation we got yesterday, hand over the signed declaration on what we must not do on the island, and our passports that they want to copy. We pay some 4000 Yen (deducting the voucher) and get in return two tickets (one for the vessel and one for the island), a batch in purple, and a brochure. Then we were told to go to Pier 8 and that boarding is at 8:40am.

A long line of people is waiting at the pier but everybody has a blue batch and so we are not sure if we are right. We go to the front of the line and try to ask but even with the help of Google

Translate, no one understands us. So we just give it a try and yes, we're right. As far as we can see we are the only Western tourist on board and as we were told before all explanations will be in Japanese or Chinese.

The boat seems to be more or less sold out and we are surprised how easily we got our reservation yesterday. It's a nice boat ride through the harbor and over the sea. On the island, passengers



Ghost Island Hashima - Nagasaki

are divided into three groups and you are not allowed to leave the groups. The stay on the island is about 30 minutes, but only 3 sightseeing points, all more or less in the same area, can be visited. You can't get near or even inside the buildings at all for security reasons.

I expected a little more, but so it is just a



Ghost Island Hashima - Nagasaki

nice cruise with a short visit. The island was only 10% of the total price anyway, so maybe I should have just managed my expectations better.

The tour takes 2.5 hours in total so we're back at the harbor at 11:30am. The question is what to do now. I'm not interested to visit the Peace Park in the northern part of town. So I go to the nearest department store and as all restaurants have a waiting line, I buy a sushi takeaway in one of the specialized shops in the basement. This one is much better than the ones of 7/11 and alike. I grab a coffee at Lawson and go for a picnic in the harbor park like a lot of locals do. While I eat, I watch the families and their kids play baseball.

Afterwards, I walk a bit through the old town including Chinatown and find by chance the restaurant where we will have our farewell dinner today. It is not super interesting and after 2.5 weeks in Japan I also have no desire to walk a long

distance to see another temple. I'm back at the hotel shortly after 2pm.

At 6:40pm we take the shuttle to the obligatory farewell dinner. Since the plans for Osaka on the last evening didn't work out we do it here in Nagasaki. It's quite difficult to organize something like that here in Japan as restaurants are usually very



Ghost Island Hashima - Nagasaki

small and don't have bigger tables or even separate rooms. But our guide knew this Chinese restaurant that is able to handle a group of 21 people.

In fact, they have specialized in this kind of business. The tables are good for 6 to 7 people and there are at least two more tour groups with us.

03.04.2023 - From Nagasaki to Osaka with a stop in Okayama

Weather: sunny

Walking distance: 13.5 km

Today is the last full day in Japan and it's mainly a transfer day to Osaka from where we will fly back tomorrow. To ma-



Korakuen Garden - Okayama

ke it a bit more interesting we will use a longer stop in Okayama to visit one of the 3 best gardens in Japan. At least Japan Guide ranked it so.

Also today we have to use 4 different Shinkansen trains and two metro lines to reach our hotel in Osaka.

We arrive at 1:15pm in Okayama and ha-

ve now 3 hours until our departure. We store the luggage that we don't need in lockers. I just have a small bag in addition to my backpack that I easily could have taken with me, but I share a locker with someone else from the group. Our guide goes to the information desk and figures out where the bus leaves for the garden.

The Koraku-en garden is indeed one of the nicer ones. Like many of them, it



Okayama Castle - Okayama

might look even better in autumn when the leaves have different colors. At the moment it is not really colorful, even though they have some cherry trees there. But they are located in just one area and many other trees are still missing their leaves.

I leave the garden at the south gate and walk over to the castle. It looks like most

of the other castles here, but it's still a nice sight - especially with the pedal swans in the foreground.

At the bus station, I meet a good part of the group and like some others, I decide to use the spare time until the departure of the train to eat something. In a small restaurant at the station, I eat ramen (a kind of noodle soup).

We arrive at the hotel in Osaka and have our keys around 6pm. I just bring my suitcase to the room and leave a few minutes later. I decide to take one last walk and the destination I chose is a Ferris wheel built on the roof of the department store HEP FIVE. It should be half an hour's walk away, which is fine.

On the way there I find some more motives and when I arrive, the blue hour is over and the wheel cannot be

seen from below. So I take the elevator to see if I can take some interesting photos from the top. Surprisingly, there was no queue at all and the fee of 600 yen was in the range that some temples or gardens charge as admission. So after who-knows-how-many years, I take a ride on a Ferris wheel. It takes 15 minutes and is nothing spectacular, which is also

due to the less spectacular view - but it was nice.

Back at the hotel I go to the lounge and check if they have a printer. They do and so I check in for the flights back home and print my boarding passes. Afterward I go to my room and do my usual homework. Arranging the luggage for the flights is something I postpone until tomorrow. Then I will have more than enough time to do it.

04+05.04.2023 - A last day in Osaka and the long way home

Weather: sunny and above 20°C in
Osaka, partly sunny and
12 °C in Frankfurt



in Osaka

Today we will start our long journey back home. As we have an overnight flight we will not leave the hotel until 7pm. Check-out is at 11am, but I decide not to



Osaka

go into town anymore.

I have turned off the alarm clock, but of course, I am still awake at the usual time, and since a Chinese group leaves an hour later, there is no chance of a long sleep anyway. For the last time, I grab a coffee and something to eat for breakfast -



in Osaka

again at the Lawson next to the hotel. I rearrange my things for the flight and work a bit on the laptop before I check out at 10:30am.

The hotel has a small lounge that we are allowed to use and as they have power plugs and a table I continue to sort my pictures.

At 1:30pm I go for lunch. Yesterday I saw a branch of my favorite Japanese BBQ chain near the local train station and so it was clear where I will have my final meal. I've been there now 4 times and was never disappointed. The meat is always a bit different even though I ordered more or less the same, but it was always delicious.

After an hour, I'm back to the lounge and continue working.

At 7pm we leave the hotel with a couple of taxis to the departure point of the airport bus. The airport is quite far outside the city, so it takes us about an hour to get there. More than 3 hours before departure we are at the counters, more precisely at the end of a very long queue. We say goodbye to our guide and the usual routine starts.