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JAPAN, KOREA, march-april 2017

We started planning this trip almost one year ahead of time as our visit will be during the cherry-blossom season.

Kyoto, our first destination surprised us with cold and rainy weather, hardly any blossoms were out by march 28th.

Trying to get rid of the jet-lag we are staying at a Hotel in Asashiyama, lovely place, quiet during the evening and night, busy in the day time.

The Suiran Hotel, locates beside the river in a Japanese garden, is perfect for taking walks to sightseeing spots near by and the busy local shopping streets.

The bamboo-forest, recommendation go early morning to avoid the crowd, is good but lots of others receive the same advise. Surprise, we are not the only ones.

Just of the beaten track is the Ohkohchi-Sanso Garden, it is a private villa of the famous silent-film actor, Okochi Denjiro (1898-1962). He constructed this unique garden over 30 years. You will find pine and maple trees as well as cherryblossomtrees. Above all there is a grand view of Asashiyama. Worth a visit.

On the way to and back there are several interesting temples. Means the day is gone before we see them all.

A feast for our eyes, the famous bridge, the ladies and gents in Kimonos, the rickshaws. Please look at the feet of the rickshaw driver with the Ninja shoes, reminds me of dinosaurs, not sure why. Could not get my eyes of them, the feet I mean, dear reader.

Even with rain we enjoy ourselves by watching the by-passers from a dry warm cafe at the Randen train station. Interesting decoration with 600 poles displaying kimono fabrics, illuminated at night, the Kimono forest. The Randen Tram goes to Kyoto Centre, a nice way to get around inexpensive and with a view.

April 1st and no joke, we start our cruise around the south of Honshu. Departing Osaka in the evening to reach the first port, Tamano, next morning. Our excursion commence with a visit to the Bizen Osofune Samurai Sword Museum. Gosh, watching the muscle of the craftsman forming the sword ! What a skill and power.

Another highlight of Okayama is the Korajuen Garden, 133000 sqm, it was built in 1700 by the local lords. Beautiful if only the thunderstorm clouds would go away, but no, they don't and we escape to a dry place, our coach.

It is very comfortable to take your bed with you, no packing of suitcases, no worries of Hotel reservations. Our cruise ship provides that all.

Arriving in Hiroshima, the largest city of western Honshu. Destroyed by a nuclear weapon at 8:15am on August 6, 1945.

Hiroshima was proclaimed as a City of Peace by the Japanese Parliament in 1949.

We escape to another world, the peaceful Island of Miyajima with its red Torii gate and the Itsukushima shrine. Lovely to see, I wish others did not have the same idea but it is a popular spot.

Next stop Uwajima, which locates deep inside the Bay, protected from the sea and rough waves.



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From the pier we embark to a one-hour drive into rural Japan. We visit the terraced fields of Yusu Mizugaura, there are stonewalls about one meter high and one meter wide providing space to grow vegetables. It has a special beauty to see the wall terraces flowing gracefully from the top of the mountain.

On the way back a visit to the Uwajima Doi Pearl centre. Watching the implantation of the little ball which, with help of the oyster, will become a pearl. At harvest time not every oyster was successful in creating a pearl but we learn you can still eat the oyster, different consistency and taste as the ones you find at the fish market. Not so my thing.

Back to the ship and getting ready for dinner but today no oysters please.

The port of Kagoshima is waiting for us, the town has a nickname " Naples of the Eastern world " for its bay location, hot climate (we missed that one) and impressive volcano.

We turn south to Chiran, famous for its samurai residences that have been preserved, all around 250 years old.

The gates of the houses, moss-covered stone walls and black tile roofs recapture the flavour of the Edo period. Open for visitors are seven gardens, small in size but beautifully melting with the surrounding mountain to one.

Not far from here is the Chiran Peace Museum, dedicated to the young kamikaze pilots. A sad sacrifice of men and a plea for world peace.

Next day, Nagasaki, which was founded by Portuguese in the 16th century and the centre of European influence for 3 centuries.

Unfortunately known for the atomic bombing, the second one after Hiroshima.

Nagasaki Peace Memorial Park's attraction are the collection of statues and sculptures donated by countries and groups all over the world. From here we pass Ground Zero to reach the Atomic Bomb Museum. It is unbelievable the destruction of the bomb " Fat boy ". For a moment the noise of the world stops but I am unable to fully understand the action, the grief and why we are today still having nuclear weapons.

Off to another place, the Hamanomachi Arcade, the central shopping area, then passing by the Dutch quarter, Hollander Slope, and China town to return to the ship.

Strange feeling that Korea is so close to Japan. Our visit to Busan, South-Korea, is just when the news about North-Korea were prominent in the press.

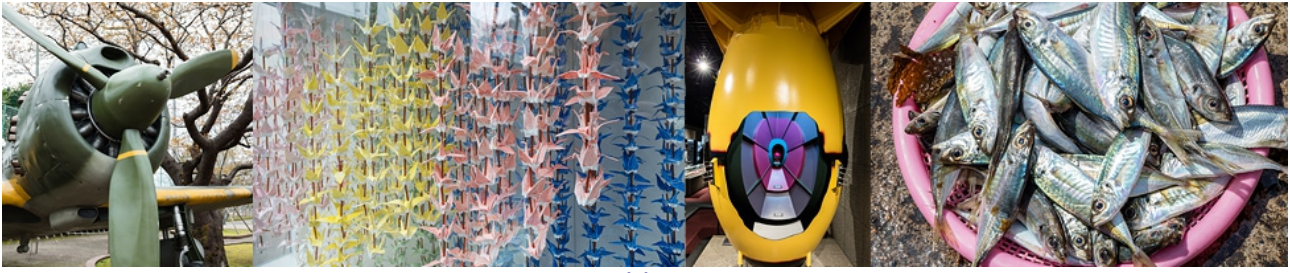
The sightseeing drive gives a glimpse of the 3.6 Mio. City, modern high-raising building, daring bridges and traditional buildings. Our tour provides a brief overview, finishing with a walk thru the fish market. Jagalchi Fishery Market displaying the fresh catches and if you hungry, sit down and order your portion.

Last port Sakaiminato City, at the tip of the Yumigaham Peninsula. From here we drive to the Izumo Taisha Shrine, an impressive set of buildings and garden, we stroll around and enjoy the scenery.

Last stop and visit the Adachi Museum of Art, superb Japanese garden and art collection of modern Japanese paintings.

Last night on the ship, pack the suitcases and get ready for an early wake-up call.

The Taxi is there and we are on our way to Kyoto for one night. After the 9 days of cruise Kyoto has changed, the cherryblossomtrees are in full bloom, the people picnic underneath the trees, the streets are busy, the tourists are plenty.



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Tomorrow the next adventure starts, our car with driver will pick us up at 10am and we will be on route for 4 days thru the Japanese Alps.

9.50am Mr. Matsumoto, our driver has arrived, getting our luggage into the car, a challenge but he masters it perfectly. Kyoto is bigger than expected, it seems to take long before we are out of the city on our way to Hikone.

The Hikone castle, the garden, the river, the cherry blossom trees: romantic pure ! Great view from the castle towards the town and region, the walk makes us hungry. We decide on an easy Ramen lunch. The Restaurant, run by a family who does not speak or understand English. But we get the food and it is the one we ordered and expected to get... success !

Continue our way to the Tojinbo cliffs, interesting forms, like poles. We are making our round and watching the sunlight to turn orange, it is time to get to our Hotel.

The Ryokan Kinjohro is located in a busy part of Kanazawa but calm. Just 6 guest-rooms in this former Samurai residence, it is like travelling in time. So special, the house with its decoration, the garden and our room.

After the warm welcome and changing our shoes with slippers for the house, the tea is served in our living room and yes, we are sitting on the floor ! Not easy, my bones are not happy and getting up gracefully is a challenge, it is more like a rolling whale. Gosh !

I am impressed with the toilet, yes, that is right. Why ? You open the door and the light lifts, the light goes on and the noise of a waterfall starts. The WC seat is heated and you have a panel to decide on how warm, what kind of water and where etc..... I want one at home!!

Serious, almost everywhere you will find this technical gadget even in public toilets.

The atmosphere and comfort in the Ryokan is beyond my expectations. At dinnertime we get guided to our dining room, just for us. Our "private Geisha" is serving the menu and explains all very nicely, starting with the napkin and making sure we know that all things on the plate are edible.

The meal has 10 courses and each of them is decorated perfectly fitting the season, we enjoy it very much.

Before you think we have to sleep on the floor, no...wrong, we have a western style bed but with a futon.

After a good night sleep we chicken out at breakfast time, we order the western style breakfast. Shame on us.

We have one more night and plan the day according to weather, visiting the Park and as the rain does not stop, the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art.

The special exhibition shows drawings from Ikeda Manabu, the master of pen and ink. We are enchanted by his detailed work.

Another Kaiseki Dinner, delicious and so different again. We don't want to leave but the next destination is waiting for us.



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Driving along the rural narrow streets to reach Ainokura Village, World Heritage & National Historic site. It is cold, still snow around even it has started to melt, we can see how much there must have been. Interesting the wooden houses with thatched roofs. Continue to Shirakawa, very touristy village but great for lunch, many small places.

We finish the day in Takayama, visit the main spots and the shops. The afternoon gives the sun a chance and the day gets warmer.

The Hotel is more a practical one, our room has a great view towards the parking lot.

Next day we drive to Matsumoto, the weather is nice and we explore the centre as well as the Nawate Street. The history says it was once a horse carriage free street and the visitors enjoy to buy (Kaeru) and go home safely (Kaeru). Since then, people started to call the street “ Frog Street” (Kaeru = frog). So the shop keepers put a big frog statue at the entrance of the street to watch over us and keep safe.

Of course the Matsumoto castle is a must see and we see it with the cherryblossoms and a wedding in progress. What an experience!

For the night we have an Onsen Hotel about 30min drive into the forest, again so different and special. We have our private Onsen on the terrace, a spacious room and Japanese hospitality.

We just love the Kaiseki Dinner and this time we include a Sake tasting, no more to say.

Our last day with the car, the weather is superb and Mount Fuji appears in its beauty.

Good viewing spot, the snow covered top in the sun, just like I imagined.

With us hundreds of other tourists, please don't stand in the way to take a photo.

Tokyo, our last few days. Our Hotel, modern and great location near the Imperial garden, is a good starting point to discover Tokyo.

Of course we have to see Ginza, the shopping district, busy and all the labels you can think of. Surprisingly nice small restaurants and cafes with moderate prices.

A must see is the Meiji shrine dedicated to the deified spirits of Emperor Meiji and his consort, Empress Shoken. Located just beside the JR Yamanote Line's busy Harajuku Station,

But Harajuku area is also the Mecca for novel fashion and an interesting place. I heard Lady GaGa always shops at Harajuku.

The Hama-rikyu gardens is the family garden of Tokugawa Shogun which functioned as an outer fort for the Edo castle. From here we take the waterbus to Asakusa and have a good view of the 14 unique bridges across the river Sumida.

Almost the opposite of Ginza is Asakusa with its narrow streets, small shops and Rickshaws. Take a tour with the rickshaw and get a first impression of this area. Good to buy souvenirs and may be a kimono in a second hand shop.

The kabuki theater captures us, we try to understand the story with the help of a notebook which one can rent.



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Our last evening was a treat, eating the famous Japanese beef, being pampered by the chef and enjoying one more time the rituals and excellent food.

Doumo arigatou gozaimasu
to our Japanese friends who did the sightseeing with us in Kyoto and Tokyo
to our Japanese friends and former colleagues for arranging a reunion-dinner in Tokyo

Sayonara Japan, hope to see you again.

Regina Fink Blumer

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