A Temple Stay in Koyosan
by Nancy Bestor

As we walked a cobblestone path lined with glowing lanterns, graves, and ancient temples on a dark and snowy winter night, I couldn’t help but be transfixed by our surroundings. We were on an evening stroll through Koyosan’s Okunoin Cemetery, and it was so very different from anywhere we’d ever been—it was obvious we were a long, long way from home.

We had arrived in Koyosan, Japan, after a 2 ½ hour journey from Kyoto earlier in the day (see end notes), and gotten settled in our shukubo, or Japanese temple lodging. Monks at the Eko-in Temple greeted us kindly, and led us to our room for our overnight stay, which would include a vegan dinner and breakfast the next morning, cooked and served by monks living at the temple.

The Eko-in Temple is one of about 50 temples in Koyosan that provide overnight lodging for visitors. The village has about 3000 residents, but February is the cold and snowy off-season, so we did not see many visitors or residents, and that suited us just fine. Our spacious room was typical Japanese ryokan style. It was behind sliding fusuma doors, and consisted of a carpeted area with a low-slung table in the middle, set up with blankets and a heater under the table to keep our legs and feet warm. Dinner was served by two monks promptly at 5:30, and consisted of many small tasty vegetarian dishes, some hot and some cold, as well as warm sake. After dinner we perused the internet (as our temple did indeed have wifi) and then put on as many layers of clothing as we could—including socks over my gloves to keep my hands warmer—for our nighttime cemetery adventure.

Led by a Shingon Buddhist monk, the cemetery tour ($14 each) was a highlight.

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New Innovations in Travel Products—Ready for Adventure
by Ember Hood

The prime travel season is upon us. There are great travel deals to be had, and great new places to explore. Here are a handful of innovative new travel products ready to come along on your next adventure.

Eagle Creek Expanse
Eagle Creek’s new Expanse Luggage line ($109 - $279) offers durability and packability at a great price. Whether you want four-wheels for easy transport, or two-wheels for a little more packing space, you’ll find easy grab-handles, lockable self-repairing zippers, heavy-duty wheel housing, sturdy off-road wheels, and sleek, scuff-resistant construction. And all of the uprights are expandable for those times when you need a little more room. The Expanse line features everything from a small rolling tote to a spacious 29-Inch flatbed upright. We also love the two convertible Expanse.

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of our two-week visit to Japan. The beautiful two-mile walk took us past gravestones, monuments, and statues. The Tamagawa River flows through Okunoin, and at points we spied wooden talismans placed within its waters by devout Buddhists. We saw many Ojizo-Sama, small Japanese Buddhist statues with red bibs, who guard children that have died before their parents. We walked over several bridges, and learned that some Japanese believe if you trip, stumble or fall on the bridges of Okunoin cemetery, you will die within three years (we are expected to live to see 2021). We saw both ancient gravestones and new monuments, some branded with the logos of Japanese companies (Panasonic and Nissan to name a couple) who paid for employees to be memorialized at Okunoin. There was even a 30-foot monument in the form of a rocket ship, erected by an aerospace company in honor of its employees.

We learned that more than 200,000 gravestones and memorials are located at Okunoin, which is high on Mt. Koya in the Wakayama Prefecture, and so very far from Japan’s bustling, neon-lit cities. It is highly revered by the Japanese, and a trip to Koyosan and the Okunoin cemetery is often a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage.

Our monk guide told us the story of Kobo Daishi, the founder of Shingon Buddhism, and how in the year 816 he established a Monastic complex at Koyosan, which is housed in the Miroku Stone, its own wooden cage. If you can reach through the opening and lift this heavy stone with one hand to the level above its resting place, it is said you are a good person. For those to whom the stone feels heavy—so, so heavy—yep, bad. I intend to take up a strict weight-lifting regimen and return to lift the stone on a future date. The Sugatami no Ido (Mirror Well) is another good stop, but must be done in the day. According to legend, anyone who does not see their reflection in the well will die within three years. I’m sensing a theme here. We returned to look in the well during the day to guarantee our long lives. Next to the well is the Asekaki Jizo (Sweating Jizo Statue). It is believed that this statue is always perspiring, as it deliberately suffers pains on behalf of all people.

Returning from our cemetery tour to Eko-In Temple, we found our room had been transformed from an eating area to a sleeping area, with thick, comfy futon mats laid out in the middle of the room, and toasty down comforters on top. I took the opportunity to soak in the women’s Onsen (Japanese hot tub). I was alone late in the evening, and it felt great. I contemplated my bad self in the hot waters and then returned to our room, where I slept very well.

The following day we woke at 6:30am for the morning service in the great temple. Three monks go through their daily ceremony of chanting and praying to show appreciation to Buddhist saints. From there it was on to the daily Goma fire ritual. One monk beat a taiko drum and chanted, while another burned small sticks, representing negative energies, in the consecrated fire. In addition to destroying detrimental thoughts and desires, the fire ritual is also performed for the making of secular requests and blessings. Our breakfast awaited us upon our return to our room, which had once again been magically transformed into a comfortable eating area, with the bedding nowhere to be found.

Everything about this two-day visit in Koyosan was fascinating, and I am neither a Buddhist, nor a meditator. A one night, two-day stay in Koyosan is the perfect length of time to explore this region and culture. I highly recommend it.
Somebody Get Me A Doctor—Staying Healthy...

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My dad ran down to the hotel front desk only to be greeted with looks of incomprehension, as neither he, nor my mom speak any Japanese. He left, sure he had been understood, but it actually took a second trip to finally communicate the need for an ambulance. Unfortunately, over the next hour or so, that was about all he was able to communicate. Though the ambulance and its three EMT’s arrived within a few minutes, none spoke English. Except by gestures and miming, communication was impossible. One EMT used a medical translation app on an iPad, but the cumbersome process of passing the device back and forth with my dad and painstakingly typing in my mother’s medical history (age, weight, medication, etc.), was taking far too long.

By pointing to her heart and rapidly tapping her chest, mom finally made the EMTs understand the location of the problem. So down the elevator they went to the ambulance where, for an agonizing 10 minutes, they waited for the EMTs to determine where she should be taken.

Finally a destination was chosen, the ambulance rolled, and they soon arrived at a nearby hospital. She was immediately surrounded by four or five medical professionals, but once again the language difference was almost insurmountable.

We later found out that her pacemaker was taking far too long.

...beats per minute, while the attending medical personnel looked quizzically at mom and her medication containers, spoke to each other in Japanese (of course), and shook their heads. They cared a great deal, but didn’t know what to do. My dad, on his iPhone, used Google Translate to communicate a few basic medical phrases like “pacemaker,” and “atrial fibrillation.”

Let’s rewind a bit and go back to the hotel where, in the midst of her fright and discomfort, mom realized that one important med, the one that keeps her heart from beating too fast, was still in its container and not distributed to the daily compartments of her pill dispenser. She discovered she hadn’t taken this vital medication for four days. Before leaving the hotel with the EMTs she downed one pill. Forty minutes later, as she lay in the emergency room, she started to feel much better, so they decided to leave.

The hospital called a taxi and directed my dad to a cashier where his AmEx card was charged 12,000 yen (about $108) for everything: EMTs, ambulance, emergency room visit, and professional services. With sincere thanks, many bows and smiles, and the certain knowledge that all the fuss was because mom had not properly organized her meds, they sheepishly returned to the hotel...but also with the chilling realization that the language barrier could have led to a much different outcome had mom’s discomfort been a heart attack. Less than two hours later we were all out to dinner and they regaled Nancy and I with their adventure.

So, what can we all learn from this episode? What’s that saying about an ounce of prevention? Well that’s close, but maybe an ounce of preparation is more appropriate in this case.

Just about every traveler’s foreign language phrase book has a good section of medical terminology. And while online translation is an option, like the aforementioned Google Translate, wifi is not always available. A pocket phrasebook takes technological availability and compatibility out of the equation. However, a pocket phrasebook cannot cover every malady or situation. For example, “atrial fibrillation” is not listed in any of three phrasebooks I checked.

So, if you have a serious medical condition, you might consider a translation of your medical history into the language of your destination. Accredited Language Services (www.accreditedlanguage.com) and other outfits perform translations for all needs, including travel medical. Prices start at $125 and increase based on the amount of history that needs translation.

Over the 23 years we’ve been in business, I have heard the advice to carry prescription medications in the containers that they came in. While we’ve yet to hear a first-hand account of customs troubles related to unlabeled pills, you never...

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A Temple Stay in Koyosan...

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Notes:
The Eko-in Temple stay cost about $208 for both of us, with two meals included. At the time of this writing, it is rated number one on Trip Advisor for specialty lodging in Koyosan. The only heated areas of the Temple are individual rooms, and no shoes are to be worn inside (slippers are provided). Toilets are down the halls from individual rooms. We booked our night directly with Eko-in, thru their website, http://www.ekoin.jp/. All of Koyosan’s temple stays are listed on the very helpful and official website of Koyosan, http://eng.shukubo.net/index.html.

As noted earlier, we were in Koyosan in the middle of winter, and while it was very cold, as well as icy and snowy, it was also picturesque and extremely quiet. Our 37-room inn had perhaps 10 rooms booked the night we were there (as evidenced by the pairs of shoes just inside the entrance). I could see this lovely village easily becoming very crowded, and not nearly as charming, in the height of summer. That being said, many restaurants and stores were closed on our visit, although we did find a delightful tiny restaurant open for a noodle lunch across from our temple stay.

Getting to Koyosan isn’t easy, but that definitely adds to its charm. Our picturesque journey started with three train rides, the last one winding through beautiful valleys and along a stunning river. Once we arrived at the Gokurakubashi station, we changed from the train to a funicular, where a steep, 10-minute ride takes you up the mountain. After the funicular, we boarded a bus that took us into Koyosan proper, as no walking traffic is allowed from the funicular station into the town. The length of the entire journey is about 2½ hours and costs about $25 each.

“Self-consciousness kills communication.” — RICK STEVES

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New Innovations in Travel Products...

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When you’re traveling, you are what you are right there and then. People don’t have your past to hold against you. No yesterdays on the road.” — William Least Heat Moon

You sweat, your stuff will stay dry. Both of Cocoon’s Silk RFID Wallets are big enough to hold passports and much more. For easy organization, the Neck Wallet features three zipper pockets and the Waist Wallet has two.

CitySafe Convertible Crossbody/Backpack
Pacsafe’s CitySafe Convertible CX Backpack & Crossbody Bag ($99.95) has a lot to offer in a small package. This clever and comfortable compact backpack easily turns into a shoulder bag when you need a stylish purse for a night on the town. The Convertible CX has a padded interior slip pocket that holds an iPad and boasts all the ingenious security features we’ve come to expect from Pacsafe - an RFID-blocking pocket, slash-proof mesh in the front lining, slash-proof straps, turn-to-lock security hooks, and secured zippers. Excellent interior organization and a fashionable look make it both easy to use and elegant to wear, while hidden safety features offer peace of mind.

Wrap-n-Rest Pillow
Let’s face it, sleeping on airplanes is a challenge. But the Wrap-n-Rest pillow ($19.95) can make it a little bit easier and a lot more comfortable. Its simple design wraps completely around your neck, so no matter which way you want to rest your head, you’re supported. The Wrap-n-Rest also features an elastic/velcro strap that easily attaches to your carry-on bag when you’re not using it. Simple, soft and comfortable, the Wrap-n-Rest pillow is the perfect companion for any long flight.

Pacsafe RFIDsafe Tec Wallets
Pacsafe’s sleek RFIDsafe Tec Wallets ($29.95 - $39.95) are slender and streamlined microfiber billfolds that still offer plenty of slots for all your cards and cash - there’s even one that can hold a passport. Heat-welded seam construction and a buttery-smooth, high-tech polyurethane, make them extremely slim and durable, with a sleek look and a velvety touch. RFIDsafe TEC Wallets also block RFID (radio frequency identification) signals to protect your personal and credit card information from digital thieves, and keep your data secure.

HydraPak Collapsible Bottles
HydraPak’s Collapsible Stash Water Bottles come in two sizes (750 ml for $18 and 1 liter for $23) that twist and pack down to a fraction of their full size for easy storage in any purse, backpack.

Cocoon Silk RFID Neck & Waist Wallets
Keep cash, passports and other valuables comfortably undercover with Cocoon’s Silk RFID Neck & Waist Wallets ($27.95 - $44.95). Each of these soft and smooth security pouches is designed to be worn hidden under your clothes, so you won’t have to worry about pickpockets, while their RFID lining ensures digital scammers can’t skim the information from your credit cards or passports. They also feature a TPU backing, so even when
New Innovations in Travel Products...

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briefcase or shoulder bag. HydraPak Bottles are lightweight and easy-to-use. When you’ve finished your water, simply twist the bottle to collapse it, and then snap the bottom and top together to save space. When you’re ready to refill, just give it a squeeze and a twist and you’re ready to hydrate again!

**Eagle Creek Mission Control Backpack**
Eagle Creek’s Mission Control Backpack ($179) is designed to hold and organize everything you’ll need to take care of business comfortably and with style. Your mission here, should you choose to accept it, is to arrive at your destination with everything you need, neatly packed, and easily accessible. The Mission Control does it all and is carry-on-friendly, with a laptop specific compartment that clamsheles open to get you through airport security with less muss and fuss. Its large main compartment has plenty of room for clothes and other travel gear, while padded shoulder straps, a waist belt, and a sternum strap work together for a comfortable carry.

**Big Skinny MyPhone Plus-Size Wallet**
Big Skinny’s Plus-Sized Phone Wallet ($29.95) is a lightweight and compact, durable wallet with an amazing pocket that holds a smartphone of any size! Its interior has oodles of room for cash, cards and more, while a stretchy but strong exterior elastic pocket keeps your phone safe and accessible. As you might guess, Big Skinny is famous for making thin wallets. Their slim and lightweight construction keeps a low profile while still offering secure storage for all you’ll ever need to carry. Big Skinny’s Plus-Sized Phone Wallet also comes with an attachable wrist strap for easy carrying when you’d rather leave your purse behind. We have several other styles of Big Skinny Wallets too!

**World Map Cork Board**
Whether you want to plot past trips, plan future journeys, or you just need a cool place to display postcards from around the world, our World Map Cork Board ($24.95) will help you get the job done. Measuring 15.75 x 23.5 inches, it’s the perfect size for kitchens, bedrooms, hallways, dorm rooms, or wherever you want to showcase your adventures. And, it comes with a handful of red pushpins to get your plotting started!

**Wally Bag Garment Bags**
Whether you’re traveling for business or pleasure, it can be a challenge to keep your clothes wrinkle free. If you’ve got a suit or a nice dress to transport across the country or around the world, a garment carrier from Wally Bag ($39.95 - $59.95) just might be the ticket. Wally Bag’s lightweight, durable, and water-repellent construction is sure to protect your clothes, while their patented Wally Lock holds your hangers neatly in place. Each Wally Bag can hold up to six garments, depending on their size and thickness. And with a variety of lengths to choose from, your Wally Bag will make sure you look sharp anywhere, from La Scala in Milan, to a wedding in the Caribbean, or a business dinner in Tokyo.

“Only it seems to me that once in your life before you die you ought to see a country where they don’t talk in English and don’t even want to.” —THORNTON WILDER, OUR TOWN
Walking the Alleys and Backstreets of Japan

by Nancy Bestor

As we walk down Piss Alley in Tokyo, searching for a spot to drink beer and eat yakitori, I can’t help but feel a little bit like Anthony Bourdain. I don’t have tattoos, I haven’t been a chef, and I don’t have my own TV show where I’ve eaten Bun cha with President Obama in Vietnam. I am, however, on one of Tokyo’s most famous little alleyways, and it is filled with tiny bars and yakitori stands where locals crowd together to eat and drink, and I think, this is exactly the kind of place Tony (I’d like to think we’d be on a first name basis) would love.

On our recent trip to Japan, it took a few tries for us to even find Piss Alley, or Memory Lane, as Japanese officials would prefer it be called, that’s how small it is. We missed it at least once, but after we finally located it, we sauntered down the itty-bitty alleyway, soaking it all in (not the piss mind you, the atmosphere), before choosing a busy Yakitori stall and bellying up to the bar to drink beer and eat. And we did plenty of both.

Piss Alley got its name in the 1940s, as a black market drinking spot where there were no toilets. Thus, bar patrons relieved themselves on nearby railroad tracks. After burning down in 1999, the alley was rebuilt, fortunately with restrooms. I can safely say that all I smelled the night we visited was good food. Most restaurants in the alley have anywhere from 5-15 seats, usually around a bar. And our stall, Sasamoto, was no exception.

Yakitori is simply skewers of meat and vegetables cooked over an open-fire grill. It is best accompanied by beer and sake.

But there was nothing simple about our yakitori that night. We sat right in front of the grill, where Sasamoto’s owner (who now cooks just two nights a week, said the patron next to me who spoke a little English), was grilling up delicacy after delicacy. As he would put a new item on the grill he would gesture to us to ask if we were interested. We said yes to everything he offered. I’m sure Tony would have been proud. We sampled asparagus wrapped in bacon, pork cheeks with onions, okra, mushrooms wrapped in bacon, cabbage, ginger wrapped in bacon, and cherry tomatoes, to name just a few. Every skewer was first parboiled in a big vat of fatty broth and then finished on the yakitori grill. We loved everything we ate that night. And the beer and sake went down very easily too.

Tokyo was one of six stops on our recent two-week trip to Japan. Bob and I had been to Japan twice previously, but this was the first visit for Bob’s parents, our companions on this foray. Thus, we tried to blend key cities that in our opinion should not be missed (Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka), with new spots that Bob and I had never visited (Kanazawa, Takayama, and Koyosan). While it was a whirlwind two weeks, we were easily able to travel from city to city via Japan’s speedy and dependable train system, and thoroughly enjoyed seeing more of Japan.

Although it was the middle of winter, and many days were very cold and snowy, most cities were busy with tourists. Hotels and restaurants were full, and many sites were bustling. Takayama was one such city. The historic neighborhood of Sanmachi-dori, with its beautiful and lovingly preserved wooden private houses, was jam packed with people during the day. Bob and I went back later that night and walked the streets again. The tourists were all gone, and the neighborhood took on a distinctly different feel—a good reminder of why we stay at least one night everywhere we visit, rather than taking day trips.

I preferred Kanazawa to Takayama. Kanazawa boasts a beautiful restored castle, and right next to it are the stunning Kenroku-en Gardens. It is not to be missed. We also thoroughly enjoyed a walk thru Kanazawa’s Nagamachi Samurai District. This well-preserved neighborhood has canals running through it, with narrow cobbledstone streets and beautiful buildings.

Kyoto found us back in a city where Tony would have once again loved to join us. We did some great shopping in Kyoto, at a specialty needle shop for Liz, a fancy cookie/cracker/chocolate store for me, and a fascinating old school knife shop for all of us (more on this in a future e-newsletter). Tony would love the knife shop—it would not surprise me one bit to find out that he has already been there. And he would have loved eating with me, ahem, us, at Chao Chao Gyoza, a famous dumplings restaurant that serves just one thing, yep, dumplings. After a 20-minute wait for a table where we drank beer on the sidewalk, we sat at the bar (let’s face it, the bar offers the best seats in the house) and watched as friendly, efficient, and

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"Dear Hotel People: We don't need a cheeseball clock radio. WE NEED PLACES TO PLUG STUFF IN. Thank you." —DAVE BARRY
Life Begins When You’re in Mexico

by Nancy Bestor

This Spring I celebrated a milestone birthday, and I could think of no better way to celebrate entering my 60s 50’s than a tropical vacation with my gals. Thus three friends and I took an extra long weekend and headed to Yelapa, Mexico for some quality girlfriend time, sun time, and taco time.

Yelapa, a small village of about 1500 residents, is a 45-ish minute boat taxi ride from Puerto Vallarta. Surrounded by jungle and water, a boat is really the only way to get to this sleepy spot. Lots of day trippers from PV find their way here for an afternoon, but if you really want to explore this lovely village, you should plan to stay, and check out from the everyday world.

My gal pals and I booked a lovely, three-level, palapa-style house on airbnb. It was open to the elements, right on the water, and just a short walk from town. And it featured everything four women who just want to sit and visit while drinking coffee and cocktails would want, except, unfortunately, for comfortable chairs. Perhaps with age comes the need for more butt cushion, but none of the chairs in our house were quite right. Uncomfortable seating aside, we loved our spot on the ocean. We relaxed while watching birds dive for fish, flying mobula rays leap out of the water, and fishermen and other workers go about their business on the shore below us.

Everything in Yelapa must be brought in by boat, so we saw furniture delivered on small water taxis, as well as plants, construction items, food, and more. Yelapa has no autos either, so if you want to transport bricks, cement, stones, etc., from one end of the village to the other, you are either carrying them on your back, or using burros to do the heavy work for you.

Now we didn’t just sit and drink the whole time. We walked in to town and ate too. The farthest beach from our end of the village was the spot day travelers hang out on when dropped off by boat, and we did spend one afternoon under umbrellas there, and ate a nice lunch while eavesdropping on conversations around us. We also each bought a piece of pie from “the pie lady”, a woman who has been selling slices along the beach of Yelapa for more than 20 years, after her mother started the business and sold pies until she passed it on. We sampled lemon meringue, chocolate coconut, and cheese pie, (about $2 each) and all were quite tasty. But our favorite places to eat were the more local spots in town. We ate delicious yet inexpensive marlin and shrimp tacos every day.

We also hiked to both the in-town waterfall—a 15 minute walk each way—and to the out-of-town waterfall—about 90 minutes each way. Neither of these spots had much water to speak of, as it was the end of the dry season, but the hike out of town (although extremely hot) passed by fascinating small homesteads.

The village of Yelapa really is carved out of the jungle. As such, we were told to search our beds (which were under mosquito netting) each night for scorpions. We had a couple of large, resident iguanas that sunned themselves outside our palapa each day, and I got bit by a tick. Since our house was open to the elements, we were advised to keep all of our food inside the refrigerator and locked pantry, to keep the critters out of it. One morning we discovered that an animal had gone through our garbage. Apparently we hadn’t sealed it as tight as we should have.

I loved this village, and would happily return again for another stay. I might just have to bring my own seat cushion.

Notes:

Yelapa does not have a bank, ATM or money changer. And most places don’t accept credit cards. So go to the bank in PV before boarding the water taxi.

We took the last water taxi of the day from Puerto Vallarta’s Los Muertos Pier (at 5pm). I had arranged passage (about $15 each, round trip) with Sergio, who runs the water taxi business, ahead of time via email. And that was a good thing, as we arrived at the pier from the airport just a few moments before the taxi was scheduled to depart. We still needed to go to the ATM for pesos and they kindly held the boat. The boat ride was incredibly rough, and I’m not exaggerating. Apparently the later the ride, the rougher it is. Next time we might stay overnight in Puerto Vallarta and take an early morning taxi to avoid the afternoon seas.

Doctor...

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know if a strict border agent will crack down on unlabeled pills. Keeping your meds in their original prescription bottles also keeps them organized in the same manner in which you have them at home. And anything you can do to maintain your meds routine will certainly help overcome any confusion brought on by the rigors of travel and sleep deprivation.

In addition to your best efforts to maintain your home meds practices on the road, I highly recommend creating your own personalized meds trip calendar. Simply write out every pill you are to take for every day of your journey and cross it off immediately after you’ve taken it.

The International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT) is a great resource for travelers health benefits. IAMAT (www.iamat.org) provides access to vetted, English speaking doctors around the world to help you navigate the local healthcare system. Best of all it’s free to join—you only pay when you use the service.

And while Liz and Bob Jr. got off easy with their $108 bill, not everyone gets sick where healthcare is cheap. Travel Insurance is also a key consideration. Travel Guard International is one of the largest providers. But there are others out there, so shop around.

“I am not the same, having seen the moon shine on the other side of the world.” —MARY ANNE RADMACHER
Walking the Alleys of Japan...

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enthusiastic young employees quickly made dumplings filled with yummy ingredients, and cooked them at record speed. We sampled pork, mushroom, green onion, chicken & mozzarella, ginger, and garlic just to name a few. The restaurant was super loud, super friendly, and super delicious. And they just kept the beers coming. I wonder if this is why they seemed to get friendlier as the night went on?

From Kyoto it’s just a short train ride to Osaka, and its famous Dotombori Street. A popular shopping, entertainment and restaurant neighborhood, Dotombori is best experienced at night, when the massive (I am not exaggerating here) restaurant, billboard, and entertainment signs light up the street. Everything from Kuidaore Taro, a world famous, 60-year-old, mechanical drumming clown, to a giant moving crab is on display, supersized and awash in neon. You can get almost anything you want to eat at busy, energetic restaurants and food stalls. Over the few days, we sampled Okonomiyaki (savory Japanese pancakes), Takoyaki (octopus balls), dumplings, sake, and Japanese Wagyu beef. We also explored the alleys around Dotombori, thanks to a Lonely Planet recommended walking tour, and were rewarded with an older and quieter Osaka, lit by lanterns in the evening, and highlighted by the famous moss covered Mizukake Fudo statue, where you can make a wish after splashing water on it.

I’d happily go back to Japan a fourth time, as I’m sure there are many tiny alleys and delicious restaurants that we missed. Tony, you know where to find me.

Notes:

We booked all of our lodging ahead of time, via individual hotel websites, Trip Advisor, etc. Hotel prices ranged drastically, perhaps depending on availability. It seemed that they were cheaper in the larger cities, and in the two smallest, touristy cities, Kanazawa and Takayama, the prices were steeper. Wi-fi was readily available in all of our hotels.

We booked a seven-day Japan rail pass before our trip for about $340 each. This worked on all our inter-city train trips, except the one to Koyosan, which required a separate ticket. We did occasionally travel by subway in the larger cities, but this was not covered by the rail pass.

Although larger restaurants and most hotels accept credit cards, many smaller establishments are cash only. 7-11 stores tended to be the best place for us to find ATM machines that would work with our debit cards.