

Discovering Japan, October 2008

"What a way to spend some gorgeous autumn days.

30 or so of us from around the world gathered in the busy town of Utsunomiya to begin a week of exploration, friendship and lots of fun. It started at a cracking pace with a smiling Yashiko rushing up to meet us at the appointed rendezvous. All here? Yes, let's go. And off we zoomed, luggage bobbing over the flagstones and kerbs as we headed towards our hotel. Unfortunately some of us tail enders couldn't maintain the pace and rounded a corner to find not a familiar face in sight. Oh no! Where shall we go? What shall we do? Headless chickens sprang to mind. Minutes later, Yashiko reappeared, still smiling, apologising profusely, and led us safely to basecamp. After that we kept up and had a wonderful time in cities, towns, mountains and rural communities.

Next morning we left for Nikko National Park, our coach climbing the winding mountain road, taking us higher and higher to the breathtaking area so popular with outdoor loving Japanese people. We marvelled at the height of the Kegon Falls, the vivid colours of the trees, and the many traditional buildings. Especially photoworthy was the facade of the Sacred Stable at the Toshogu Shrine complex, depicting the world famous three wise monkeys – Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil, See no Evil. We encountered some real monkeys from the forest too, but they were too busy being monkeys to be photographed.

The Welcome Lunch was delayed a day or two, so that we would be in the perfect spot. The sun shone, the restaurant was charming and the staff were delightful. They had even come in on their normal day off to accommodate us. A large green Praying Mantis with emerald eyes also turned up to say hello. Suitably charged with a good meal, each 5W member told something about herself and why she liked our organisation. Although expressed in different ways, with laughter, tears and nervously clasped hands, it was clear that we all enjoyed the opportunities for visiting other lands, but most of all we appreciated the great companionship of 5W activities and the friendships engendered.

A lunch visit to a traditional country farmhouse, served on low tables in gorgeous rooms with luxurious cushions to sit on or a heated pit beneath a table under which to dangle your legs for warmth. Outside – a 300 year old bonsai tree and some young saplings a mere 100 years old. Apples the size of melons hanging on the trees, quince protected on the branch by brown paper bags, persimmon, pomegranate, pale round pears, dainty rice stooks about 2ft high, and everywhere were clouds of pink and white cosmos flowers and anemones, the Japanese variety of course.

Then the town of Obuse, paved with wooden blocks and the opportunity to sample crispy fried crickets – perfect with beer according to the vendor. Next a peaceful few days at the Petit Mignon Hotel de Noel in the winter sports town of Hakuba in the Northern Japan Alps. The ancient Salt Road ran through the town, from the Sea of Japan to Tokyo, according to the roadside sign. "Beware the bears in the forest", they said. We were advised to go about in groups and chatter a lot to frighten off the bears – not difficult to adhere to!

The last day included a visit to Matsumoto with its castle, a moat full of huge, hungry carp, quaint streets with perfect shopping opportunities. Time flew as if we had spent just a couple of days, but we seemed to have packed at least a month's activity into our time.

