

Ohayo (pronounced like Ohio) means Hello in Japanese and boy, it was a big Ohayo for 53 participants from Space City, Austin, and San Antonio Ski Clubs when we arrived in Japan. This country is by far one of the most modern and clean Asian countries that many of us have ever been to. Unemployment is very low and the Japanese culture honors cleanliness so everywhere we went, there were no slums, trash, homeless people or crime and the Japanese people are so gracious and helpful.

Marsha Kilgore, Gloria Lopez, Tami Kawasugi, Bob Wray, Thuy Rocque, Laura & Jim Nowicki, Penny Chancey, Barbara Carlson, Annie Benzon and Myra Whitten were the 11 lucky participants who left Houston a few days ahead to enjoy a pre-trip to the beautiful ancient city of Kyoto. We arrived late but the Kyoto New Miyako Hotel did not disappoint. It has an excellent location across from the main Kyoto train station. It also offers a fantastic breakfast buffet at any of their 3 restaurants. One buffet was all Western style, the other was all Japanese style, but the crowd favorite was the restaurant serving both styles of breakfasts.

The next day we were rewarded with a full city tour of Kyoto with a terrific Japanese guide named Taku, who spoke excellent English. He's quite a handsome young man so several of the ladies ended up calling him "Hot Taco" by the end of the day. It was a beautiful sunny day with very comfortable cool temperatures. We started out at the Kinkakuji Temple (Golden Pavilion) because Taku knew that it would not be busy first thing in the morning and we could take photos of the Golden Pavilion reflection in the surrounding pond.... and he was absolutely right!

Next we went to the Sanjusangendo Temple where we saw thousands and thousands of Buddha statues, which was



fine, but the fun part was the "shoe shuffle" where we had to take our shoes off and wear their slippers which were either way too small or way too large for most of us. So we never really "walked" but "shuffled" around the temple! However, the funniest part was reading everybody's fortunes that we all bought at the temple. The tradition is to buy a fortune paper for 100 Yen (\$1) and if it's a good fortune, you keep it, if it's a bad fortune, you tie it to a wooden tree and leave it behind at the temple. Evidently the Japanese have a sense of humor or else something got lost in the translation because it said Barbara shouldn't eat seafood otherwise her stomach will get upset and it told Penny that she will find love late in life.....well, Penny said she's 71, how much longer does she have to wait???? Our third stop was the Kiyomizu-dera Temple which was a really fun area to eat and shop, so Taku let us loose for 2 hours to find lunch and shop. Many of us ate at a wonderful Soba noodle and tempura restaurant and then got Green Matcha ice cream. People watching was also fun since there were many young girls and women dressed up in beautiful kimonos walking around the area, so we all had some good photo ops! Our final destination was the Fushimi Inari Shrine, which is a Shinto shrine with 10,000 gates. We learned how to purify our hands before entering the shrine and how to pray properly (2 bows-2 claps-1 bow-pray). There were many orange colored gates to walk through all inside a forest with surrounding mountains, so it was quiet and peaceful.

We were short on time so we couldn't go all the way to the top, but Bob, Thuy, and Tami raced up the hill trying to cross as many orange gates as possible for good luck. This is also where Bob began his one-bad-joke-a-day trend and told everybody that he saw Bill's Gates shop where they were building new gates for the shrine. Bob, don't quit your day job!!! The street food around the shrine smelled heavenly so Thuy & Tami couldn't resist and bought some teriyaki beef skewers. What a wonderful first day in Kyoto.....hum, what should we do tomorrow????



Well, it turns out that we liked Taku so much as our guide, that when we found out he was free the next day, quite a few of us hired him again to take us around to more sights in Kyoto! So, on the 2nd day, we started out north of Kyoto at the famous Bamboo Grove and



Botanical Gardens. The bamboo trees were majestic and so tall that you cannot see the tops of them. We enjoyed the serenity of the bamboo forest with the birds chirping all around us. We were rewarded with yet another beautiful day with mild cool weather so Barbara, Thuy, Tami, Bob, and Gary (from Austin ski club) took a scenic boat ride along the river while the rest of the group went to a monkey park. At lunch, Taku took us to the famous Nishiki Food Market where there were endless rows and rows of stalls selling food, souvenirs, flowers, etc. Taku also took us to his favorite Ramen Noodle restaurant and OMG, it was absolutely the BEST ramen noodle bowl I've ever had. The gyoza dumplings just melted in our mouths and we washed it all down with a cold glass of Asahi beer. Wow, it doesn't get any better than that folks! The best is yet to come because our last stop was at the famous Gekkeikan Sake Brewery where we learned how sake was made and why this area of Kyoto and this brewery is world famous for their sake! We tasted numerous sake and everyone ended up taking at least one if not more bottles of sake home....well, some didn't quite make it home since we "tasted" more sake during the bus ride back to the hotel. Well, Marsha and Gloria took it easy and enjoyed the hotel amenities and some shopping. Myra, Annie, Laura and Jim booked a different Kyoto tour with Tours by Local but for sure everybody enjoyed their last day in Kyoto.



Now it's time to say Sayonara to Kyoto so the following day we savored our last wonderful breakfast buffet and boarded a bus for our long ride to Hakuba Valley to meet up with the rest of our group and start the ski holiday! As we entered Hakuba Valley, we were greeted with snow-capped mountains and numerous ski resorts on the way to the hotel. The Tokyo Hotel in Hakuba is centrally located amongst all the 10 ski resorts but closest to Happo One, which was one of the primary downhill skiing competition venues during the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano Japan. The rest of our Space City crew arrived really late that night from the states,

so the Kyoto pre-trippers used the time to settle in to the hotel and get their ski equipment rentals at Rhythm Japan Ski Shop for the week.

The next morning at breakfast, at last all 23 Space City participants were reunited. The other 12: Ash & Madhu Moza, Evan & Ginger Howell, Mary Heafner, Danielle & Will Houston, Debi Underwood & Kurt Jones, Cameron Underwood & Kristen Farmer, and Craig Campbell all made it after the long flight from LA and bus ride from Tokyo. Once again, the hotel breakfast buffet was unbelievable with both Western and Japanese cuisine. About half the folks skied that day and the rest explored the town. There is a great free ski shuttle system in Hakuba Valley so all you do is decide which ski resort you want to ski that day and then find the right color ski bus and check their bus schedules.

Most people skied at Happo One the first day since it was the closest, but several of us went to Iwatake in the morning and Happo One in the afternoon. Of course, those lucky few who had the Epic Pass got a free 5-day lift ticket pass good at any of the HV ski resorts. However, all is not so bad as the daily lift tickets are fairly inexpensive



(compared to US standards) at \$44-\$60 per day. Unfortunately, that first day was a complete white out where visibility was extremely challenging. The other challenge was the fact that there was a lot of snow, but the snow is a little heavy and wet so that also made skiing somewhat difficult. Oh, did I mention that there aren't really any signs on the ski runs, and if there are, they're in Japanese! Nevertheless, we all braved the conditions and had fun on our first Japan ski day and of course after the hard day, several people relaxed at the hotel's "onsen" (thermal hot springs) to soak the tired bones and muscles!

All the dinners in Hakuba Valley were included in our trip package in the hotel's Grand Banquet Room so that first evening, we had a Welcome Reception hosted by our local tour operator, Ski Japan, with drinks and appetizers followed by a French Menu Dinner. The multi-course dinners every night were works of art as the friendly waitstaff presented us with exquisite dishes artfully presented, which also tasted heavenly. The 2nd dinner was a Japanese Menu once again with beautiful presentation but many of the dishes were mysterious and not readily recognizable, but almost everybody was adventurous enough to try everything. The beef



hot pot was wonderful as were the sashimi selections. The 3rd dinner's theme was back to a French menu complete with fish and meat dishes. Several of our participants are vegan and vegetarians and the chef did a wonderful job accommodating those guests with equally impressive dishes. The trip's Most Avid Skiers Awards must go to Cameron, Kristen, and Craig who skied all 4 days that we were in Hakuba... they sure got their Epic Pass worth. Those 3 skied again the next day while everybody else went on the Snow Monkey day tour. The bus ride out to the Snow Monkey park was very scenic but the highlight of the day (besides the snow monkeys) was our guide Kenji. He was SO entertaining, knowledgeable and funny. He kept us entertained and informed the whole day with stories about Japanese culture, the snow monkeys, and the tidbits about Japan and Hakuba Valley. Once we arrived at the park entrance, there was a pretty long hike in the forest on snowy trails then up a lot of steps to get to the snow monkeys. It was a fairly tricky and tiring hike, but it was all worth it to see the snow monkeys running around and sitting in the thermal hot springs - especially the babies clinging to their mamas! I wonder what they think about the hundreds of tourists running around taking pictures of them soaking in the hot tub!!!



Later, we went to the town of Ebisu and had a wonderful traditional Japanese lunch with a sizzling hot pot and chestnut rice! The town was really quaint, and Kenji turned us loose to explore for an hour, so we had very little time there but somehow...ALL of us found the only Apple Strudel and Ice Cream shop and the sake shop! Go figure. Finally, we ended the day at a Sake Brewery where we toured the museum and of course tasted and bought more sake! What a good day.

About half the group skied the following day at other ski resorts such as Cortina and Hakuba 47. Once again, the conditions weren't great with fog and clouds but there was plenty of new snow as it had snowed continuously overnight. The other half of the group took another day tour visiting

the famous Matsumoto Castle. It is one of the oldest surviving castles in all of Japan because it was never attacked, although the palace was burned to the ground so the only surviving structure is the 5-story pagoda. The volunteer guides at the Castle are senior retired Japanese men and women who speak English and are passionate about sharing their national treasures with tourists. One of the guides, a retired engineer, was so passionate that he gave quizzes throughout the tour to 5 of our participants who were in his group! The building is very old and impressively built but the worst part was climbing up and down 5 sets of extremely steep wooden staircases (they are more like ladders than staircases). One of them was over 60 degrees steep....yikes!



This was one of those times where the clean Japanese culture of taking our shoes off sucked because it was SO cold that most of our toes were frozen by the time we were done. To be honest, I was pretty glad to get out of there so I could put on my warm snow boots again. Next, we visited a Miso Brewery where we had a most delicious lunch with food prepared with their own miso. We learned how they make miso, which is a fermented soybean paste that is used as a condiment in cooking. We learned and tasted the difference between a 1 year miso (white) and 3 year miso (red) and 10 year miso (black). We hurried to the gift shop and scooped up various miso products to bring home. The 10-year miso sauce is out of this world. Next, we visited a museum where they showed us the ancient art of wood printing and gazed at some of the most beautiful framed wooden printed art pieces. The most famous is from the artist Hokusai, so we got to see his famous print of the Kanagawa Wave and the red Volcano. We even got to make our own Hokusai prints to bring home as souvenirs. However, that wasn't enough for many of us, so we nearly cleaned out their gift shop purchasing postcards, fans, coasters, large prints, etc. We ended the day at another sake brewery! Our guide for this day was an American named John who married a Japanese woman



and has lived in Japan for over 30 years. He's a rice farmer in Hakuba Valley and told us wonderful stories about how he came to be a rice farmer in rural Japan, and entertained us all day with his humor and knowledge. We are batting a thousand on good guides in Japan!

On our final day in Hakuba, several of the ladies enjoyed a Kimono and Tea Ceremony experience. Mary, Penny, Gloria, Marsha, Madhu, Ginger, and Myra were whisked away to a local Japanese mansion where a team of women spent nearly an hour on each person putting on their kimonos and then they enjoyed a tea ceremony while wearing their kimonos.



The ladies were completely transformed into exotic Japanese ladies by wearing the exquisite kimonos and we heard (and saw on pictures) that they had the most wonderful time! Several others including Tami went on a snowmobiling tour, while most everyone else took advantage of the very last day to ski in Japan and headed up the slopes. At the hotel, the sun was out, and it looked to be a bluebird skiing day, so Thuy and Ash were so excited as they headed over to Goryo and Hakuba 47 to ski the last day. Well, it wasn't meant to be because the fog and snow rolled in and it was another white-out condition, so they skied the lower elevations until the first shuttle came to get back to the hotel. Oh well, we tried.

On our final night in Hakuba Valley, we were treated to the special Japanese Farewell Banquet, complete with a special Drumming show. We transferred over to the Goryo ski resort and were treated with the most impressive Japanese food buffet EVER!!! There was a Sashimi tray with thousands of dollars' worth of sashimi of tuna, salmon, snapper, etc. There was a Tempura station where fresh shrimp and vegetable tempura were made. There were endless noodles, soups, meats, desserts but the best part was the Drumming show!

It's hard to describe how fantastic these young and old, male and female drummers were, showing their talents on these giant ancient drums. The crowd was on their feet the whole

time completely mesmerized by the drum beat and the drummers' athleticism. Oh, there was audience participation! Many of us got a chance to try our hands at beating the drums with some guidance from the professionals of course. WOW, what a way to end our visit to Hakuba Valley!



Well, it's now time to say Sayonara to the Japanese Alps and head back to Tokyo. We enjoyed the hotel breakfast buffet yet one more time then loaded the bus heading to the Nagano train station to take the Bullet Train to Tokyo. Another marvel of Japanese modern technology and efficiency! The bullet train left at 12:58 on the dot and 90 minutes later we were at Tokyo Station. OK, we are now experiencing the massive humanity and crowds that we've seen on TV as 53 American tourists snaked our way through the station and streets to get to our buses for a 1/2 day Tokyo city tour. We drove by the Imperial Palace where the Emperor and his family live, we stopped at Asakusa shopping district, and finally visited the famous Meiji Shrine. It was a quick afternoon tour, but it gave us an overview of Tokyo, and our guide gave us some good suggestions on where to visit the following day when we are on our own to explore Tokyo. Finally, we arrived and checked in at the Grand Prince New Takanawa Hotel. This hotel is enormous and beautiful with a great location close to one of the large train stations. Several of us went over to the train station to check out the restaurants and shops that evening and ended up finding where all the local Japanese men go to drink after getting off the train from work. It's interesting nowadays to find bars full of men smoking!

On our one free day in Tokyo, everybody divided into groups and targeted different areas of Tokyo to visit based on their interest. We all braved the Tokyo's efficient mass transit system of trains, subways, and buses. They were very clean but definitely packed with people. Tami & Bob checked out the museum district and the zoo to see the pandas. Mary and several ladies from the Austin club went shopping at the famous haute couture Ginza District then met up with Evan & Ginger for drinks at sunset in the Park Hyatt sky bar. Thuy, Marsha, Gloria, and Penny went to the Asian Bazaar area to shop for souvenirs then up the top floor of the Metropolitan Building for a panoramic view of Tokyo, but Mt. Fuji was covered up in clouds. Ash & Madhu also went



shopping around town. Debi and Danielle started their trip in Tokyo first so they knew the city better and showed the rest of their families around town (Cameron, Kristen, Kurt, and Will)! Annie, Myra, Jim and Laura were the most adventurous and went to a Sumo Wrestling match!

Well, it was finally time to say Sayonara and Farewell to Japan as we have to head back to the states. This country has made a lasting impression on all of us - whether it's the modern

amenities or the clean streets and cities, or the wonderful food like the noodles (Ramen, Soba, Udon) and sushi, or the quiet respectful nature of the Japanese people, or

the tasty sake, or the grand hotels, or the super clean Japanese Bucee's truck stops, or the numerous efficient vending machines everywhere, or the beautiful ski hills of Hakuba, or the history and monuments of ancient Japan. Each one of us brings back his or her own unique set of memories of our time in Japan and our experience enhanced by the fact that we shared it with our Space City friends. For me, my best memory of Japan has to be the heated toilets complete with flushing sounds and choice of "buttons" to make the bathroom experience the most memorable ever!

