

HEART OF ANCIENT JAPAN

21 March – 6 April 2016



Text by John Biggs © 2018

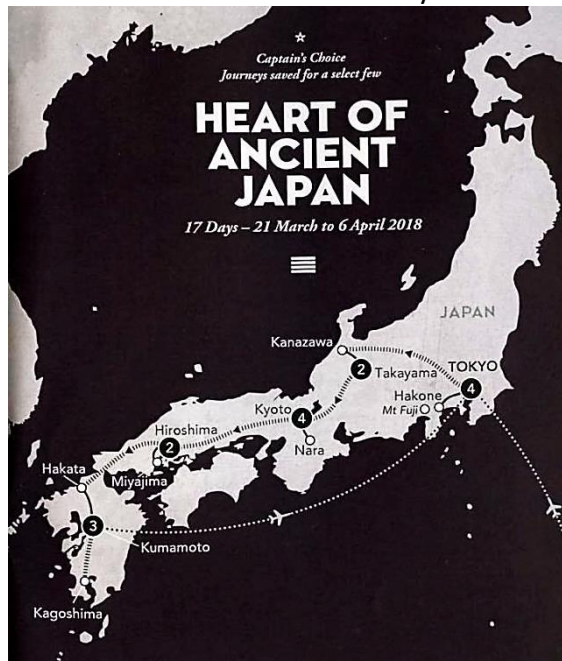
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Our Itinerary

Captain's Choice has designed a tour of ancient cities in Japan at *Sakura*: Cherry blossom time on Honshu and a little of Kyushu. Tokyo a huge sprawling city: gardens, To Lake Ashi,



for a lake tour then by cable car to Owakaduni volcano. By bullet train to Kanazawa, famous for gardens, gold, and kimonos. Old Takayama is inland then to UNESCO heritage village Shirawakago. Kyoto next, for 1,000 years the capital, where maikos and geishas walk the streets and to once capital to Nara, where deer greet us under the eyes of a massive Buddha. A sad journey to Hiroshima; we unwind on the beautiful island of Miyajima. Then to Kagoshima and volcanic island Sakurajima. Finally to Kumamoto with its famous castle under repair from recent earthquakes. (The numbers indicate number of nights spent at each destination).

History and Geography

Japan was settled by hunter gatherers from 13,000 BC. When rice was introduced from 300 BC, the new agricultural society bred social class as powerful landowners flexed their muscles. By 400 AD the country was united, the political centre in Nara Prefecture, Kyoto becoming the capital city for the next 1000 years. Only recently did Tokyo become the capital.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan around 550, with Confucianism and Taoism. The Chinese writing system was introduced to Japan as kanji, but two other alphabetical systems known as kana were introduced later. However Chinese influences such as Confucianism and Buddhism and many other imported ideas were gradually "Japanized".

Shōguns, although nominally appointed by the Emperor, were military dictators from 1185 to 1868. The *samurai* (or bushi) were the warriors of premodern Japan making up the ruling military class that eventually became the highest ranking social caste of the Edo Period (1603-1867). They were the military nobility of medieval and early-modern Japan, becoming very powerful near the end of the Edo period (1603-1867). In 1615, Shogun Tokugawa won a very important battle eliminating any rivals, so Japan was peaceful for about 250 years. In

these 250 years, military skills became less important. Most samurai became bureaucrats, teachers or artists.



In 1868, the power of the shoguns and their samurai ended with the Meiji Restoration, the shoguns submitting to the emperor, who was determined to modernise and westernise Japan. However the nationalistic right were angry at the humiliating way they were treated after WW1, especially during the formation of the League of Nations, thanks mainly to Billy Hughes and the US President Woodrow Wilson and subsequent US humiliation over immigration and trade. Hirohito became emperor in 1926 and a warlike nationalistic wing

dominated the 30s when Japan ravaged China and Korea, with Pearl harbour down the track.

But the Japan we find has very nice, polite, gentle people, the very opposite of what we expected from the Japan of the 30s and 40s. What had happened? It goes back to the humiliations after WW1. After a brief democracy in the 1920s, the samurai spirit resurged. The Prime Minister was assassinated in 1932 by army cadets, making the army and navy free of civil control so the country was effectively under military rule. Army cadets were brutalised deliberately so that they in turn would brutalise whoever was in their way. Japan invaded Korea, then China and the rape of Nanjing soon after.

After their defeat in WW2, Japan lost all the territory acquired after 1894 and was under essentially US occupation for seven years until April 1952. Okinawa was returned to Japan in 1972, but a territorial dispute with Russia concerning the Kurile Islands has not been resolved even today. The remains of Japan's war machine were destroyed. Over 500 military officers committed suicide right after Japan surrendered, and many hundreds more were executed for committing war crimes.

The Japanese determined to rebuild the country, which they did very successfully and cooperatively, until they became the economic power they are today. And with their militant nationalists now just a noisy minority, the national culture reinforces the niceness and politeness we see today. As a footnote, after Japan we spent a few days in Hong Kong. The clash between respectful Japanese culture and the noisy brash in-your-face culture of the Cantonese was especially striking despite the fact that I had spent many years living in Hong Kong -- but that was before the newly rich mainland Chinese came and distorted Cantonese culture.

Tokyo

We set out for Hobart Airport at 4 am on 21 March, which is bad enough in itself. But what made it far worse was that our plane blew a tyre on take-off from Melbourne, delaying the

plane by two hours, add the two hour time change to that, we had been on our feet for 21 hours before we settling down to attempt sleep in the magnificent Palace Hotel in Tokyo.

We are met at Norita airport by Eko, so charming, a low soft voice, ever smiling, all belying the fact that she is a kendo martial arts champion. After a lunch (French) in the hotel restaurant, we cross the road to The Imperial Palace Garden opposite to stroll around. We aren't allowed inside, only the Emperor and Empress and their 1000 attendants were allowed there. After photographing the pleasant gardens, we decide to see a bit more of Tokyo. The area around our hotel



is open, plenty of gardens with pine trees, some well-spaced out skyscrapers, but this was not the Tokyo I had been led to believe existed. To sample modern Tokyo, we are told we must go to the Ginza district, a half hour walk from the Palace Hotel. This is more like it, but it is cold, we are still dog tired, so back to the hotel for a welcome dinner – at a French restaurant. Quite magnificent, but not as magnificent as dinner the following dinner, also at a French restaurant, cooked by a young Japanese chef of Iron Chef fame. All terrific but hey we came to Japan to eat Japanese not French

Never mind, next morning, is a “typical” Japanese breakfast at the Tsukiji Fish Market, the biggest in the world, where the 450 different species of fish it deals with daily is unparalleled. Our breakfast comprised a large plate of 10 different sushi dishes, each comprising a different fish, and a bowl of miso soup. Different from muesli and eggs. A few of our number leave their plates untouched, their faces registering disapproval of 10 different sushi for



breakfast.

After breakfast a walk in the Hamarikyu Garden built in the samurais' Edo Period, much more splendid than the Imperial Gardens of yesterday, then a temple and the Namakise Shopping Arcade. Lunch a splendid bento box, which is a little bit of many splendored things (more splendid I'm afraid than in Hobart bento boxes I have sampled, nice though they are) followed by a bus tour around Tokyo.



Next day we bus to Hakone National Park. Snow! Lunch at the hotel which overlooks Lake Ashi then all aboard a kitschy version of Sweden's ship Vasa which you may recall overturned minutes after launching. Fortunately this stays afloat while we cruise around the lake – look, Mt Fuji's snow caps appear in the distance. We disembark alongside

other kitschy vessels, to board a cable car to the fumaroles at Mt Owakudani, still an active volcano and once an industrial source of sulphur and still spluttering sulphur fumes. We are told it is still active, last eruption about 200 years ago, but it could go off any time. Fortunately it didn't while we were there. Eggs boiled in the hot sulphur springs turn black and are supposed to prolong life by seven years, but they taste like any other hard boiled egg. However as there is no control group we'll never know if we'll die 7 years after we are due to.

Kanazawa

The bullet train or Shinkansen takes us to Kanazawa on the East Coast, famous for gold, gardens, kimonos and miso. The journey is smooth and deceptive: we hit 300 kph yet it feels like nothing much. The Japanese garden in Kanazawa is rated as one of the 3 best gardens in Japan containing Japan's first fountain. Here the girls don Kanazawa's famous kimonos and add their eye-catching decorations. These kimonos are quite cheap, about 2,000 yen (\$25) to rent for the day. These are printed on cheap fabric, but the real thing is hand painted on silk and cost up to US\$500,000 each.



Back to the train and on to Takayama, a small town that has suddenly become a hit tourist spot, especially because of the onsens or hot bathing springs, usually out door in picturesque rock pools. Typically one goes to the changing room, removes clothes, is issued with a large towel and a small towel, the latter used to shield the most important body parts before lowering oneself into the pool, but as Eko our guide explained – the most important part is one's head. There is an indoor onsen in the hotel, but swimwear is required. It seems to me like taking a hot bath with the neighbours. No thanks.

The hotel is a grotesque in-your-face box overlooking the town, built big and fast to cater for the tourism boom. However the view from our room is stunning. As we arrive the sun is setting on the snowy mountains in the background; in the morning they are brilliantly white.



Takayama's old quarter is beautifully preserved mainly from the Edo period. One of the legends in the area is the baby monkey which is faceless. Whatever emotion you are feeling, love, fear, or anger you can project that emotion onto the monkey's face and it feels with you. A bell tower and temple, barrels of sake on the footpath, then

the old market beside the Miyagawa River, a tourist draw as are the old houses with a front door sized frontage in which a tiny boxlike car can be parked, just. Then that activity on tours that produces a sharp gender divide: shopping.

Nearby is the Shirakagawa mountain village which is even older than Takayama and is a UNESCO listed heritage site. The houses were constructed some 400 years ago. The steep thatched roofs resemble Buddhist hands in prayer, built to let the snow slide off as in Alpine regions everywhere. The roof space allows for silkworm breeding. Between the houses are paddies for rice production, even though they are covered with snow for long periods. Parting shot looks like a Swiss resort.



Kyoto



To Kyoto by local train just behind the driver's cabin. We are intrigued by his ritual of pointing at signals then at something at his side, all televised. I guess it is a system of making sure he is awake. We connect with a bullet train which takes us to Kyoto, once the nation's capital.

The Shogun Tokugawa, founder of the Edo Period, built Nijo Castle with numbers of "conference" room decorated with animals, and beautiful gardens, completed in 1603. One room is especially important, where in 1868 as I mentioned the Edo Period ended when the emperor required allegiance from 14 shoguns, modelled here. UNESCO World Heritage listed Todaiji Temple contains Great Buddha Hall.



There are three levels of Buddha: the enlightened, the getting there, and a long way to go. Outside there is an ugly statue, with a very long way to go, but it is supposed to be lucky: if you have a knee problem say you touch the knee of the statue then your own knee. I *think* my knee was a little better for that. Silka deer are regarded as messengers of the gods and demand to be fed. The Kasuga Grand Shrine built in 768 AD has over 3,000 stone lanterns. Fushimi Inari Shrine has thousands of red gates ending in a dark room lit by hundreds of lanterns.

In the evening a maiko , that is a girl apprenticed to a geisha, and her geisha, sing and dance



for us while the geisha plays the samisen, a stringed instrument. The maiko had visited Australia and spoke good English, which made her highly traditional career decision even stranger but she was delighted with her choice. Maiko become apprentices at about 15, and go through a rigorous four year programme of dancing, singing, elaborate etiquette, current affairs, and more – their main job is to entertain rich CEOs with conversation, entertainment, which may or may not include sex. That is a private arrangement that only fully blown geishas may undertake. Many don't. Geisha literally means art person. They dress less elaborately than

the Maiko: their hairdress is simpler and their platform shoes are less high. There are also differences in face make up and colour of the kimono.

The golden pavilion was built as a holiday shack for the Shogun of the day, clad with 20 kg of gold sheet and at his request became a Buddhist temple on his death, the most beautiful in Japan. However, a disapproving Buddhist burnt it down in 1950, the present version is a reconstruction and is even better, and still has that 20 kg of gold.



We return to Kyoto to find a team of rickshaws awaiting us, drawn by very cheerful and athletic young men. I felt a bit leery of being hauled around by another human being but our guy was a track and field athlete and regarded this as training. He chattered away in reasonable English while pulling us through a beautiful Bamboo forest: he did a tricky something with Catherine's iphone to yield this. The plants reach maturity in two months, and are harvested for various uses, a completely sustainable timber exercise that we could emulate if only *e regnans* grew to maturity in 2 months. A Buddhist vegetarian lunch with sake then to the Silver Pavilion, nowhere near as splendid as its golden sister but set again in terrific gardens.

The Gion area is Kyoto's soft red light district wherein Geishas have their base. Thus inspired perhaps, many kimonoed girls and their swains lounge around, some jump in the air with delighted squeals. I don't know why they do it but it is a delightful thing to watch. And here is a real maiko. All are delighted to be photographed. Close by is a geisha house, it seems they are advertising the choices available,



We are presented now with two options: making sushi or the Japanese tea ceremony. As we didn't care for drinking tea in slow motion we opt for the sushi class. Catherine is good at making sushi with salmon and avocado but now we learn how to make the real thing, with turnip, cucumber, and thick egg omelette but as our tutor explains you can add whatever you like, rolled up in a bamboo mat not in a sushi maker.

We buy some green tea in a specialist shop and taste the special flavour of roasted green tea.

Hiroshima



Hiroshima Peace Park is in the city centre where the Industrial Promotion Hall, which was a few metres away from where the first atomic bomb was dropped on 6 August 1945 at 8.14 am at the height of

600 ft calculated to do the most damage, flattening everything within a 5 km radius. The Japanese still honour the site deeply, our guide Eko couldn't hold back tears as she described how her grandfather father and uncles were killed. Many who survived the blast drank contaminated water and that killed more, more still from longer term effects of radiation. It is estimated that a minimum of 120,000 were killed, 70,000 at Nagasaki which was partly protected by a hill. Many cities were lined up but the sky cleared over Hiroshima so Hiroshima was the city that collected the bomb first. Nearby is a museum which is very harrowing to visit.

The generally accepted view, strongly held by President Truman, was that the bombing clinched the Japanese surrender. Certainly Eko believed that. However a later view was that the Japanese were already preparing to surrender before the bomb on Hiroshima so that the latter was unnecessary, even more so the Nagasaki bomb. I couldn't help thinking of what the US, with the help of John Howard and Tony Blair, did to Baghdad also for totally spurious reasons.

There are two monuments to children. This one beside the river, and this one dedicated to Sako Sasaki who was two when exposed to radiation and at ten died of leukaemia. Before she died she vowed to make a thousand paper cranes for peace. Her classmates went to other Japanese schools to construct this monument in the shape of a bomb but with a peace bell inside, inscribed with "A thousand paper cranes" and "peace on earth and in the heavens". Behind the monument are now millions of paper cranes sent from children all over the world. Back a km from the bomb site and in front of the war museum, an arch looks through an eternal flame, the peace monument, back to the original site of the bomb's destruction. The museum is harrowing, containing examples of damage and recordings of survivors from the day.



Nest day for relief we go by boat to Miyajima, a lovely island some hour's drive from Hiroshima, passing oyster beds which yield giant oysters that are like steaks. The island is sacred to the Shinto religion and has a Shinto gate like it is floating in the sea off a temple complex. The gate with Mt Fuji are two symbols of Japan. Street side stalls, selling these huge oysters (not very nice actually) prawns and squid, shops, a brewery giving a lovely dark beer, and huge crowds. The island has high mountains and we walk to take a cable car to the summit for the advertised breathtaking views. However the queues are so long we don't have time for that. We say goodbye to a hungry deer who gobbles up a piece of paper. A lovely place reminding us of the outlying islands of Hong Kong.

That night we eat a speciality of Hiroshima: Okonomi Yaki. I don't know about the Okonomi but the Yaki is about right. A thin pancake piled with chopped cabbage, a flattened egg, all cooked upon a tepenyaki top with a throat catching sauce to make it palatable. It doesn't.

Sakarajima

We reach the island of Kyushu by the bullet train diving beneath the waves had we known it. We reach to Kagoshima the main city, where we catch a ferry to the island of Sakurajima a small island of 4,000 people, mainly farmers who till the rich volcanic soil. Sakurajima means cherry blossom island but the main features are the twin volcanoes that spew fumes and dust day and night. The cloud disappears briefly but while we watch from the geopark one volcano obligingly belches for us then subsides.

Lunch at a major hotel which oddly enough is French again, which the staff serve gingerly, mixing up the glasses for beer and wine. The niceties of serving grog is clearly a strange concept to them. But it didn't still their enthusiasm for us Australians for as we are departing the staff and manager rush outside waving Australian flags with "please come back again" signs. A heart warming farewell that I have yet to see in the Australian hospitality industry.



Iso-Tien Garden was built by the Shoko Suseikan family who built the first factory in Japan. It is very high tech, we use a device that you point to a map and it tells you all about where you are standing in any one of many languages. So high tech I got the hang of it near the end of the tour. A martial arts station where a father is instructing his daughter to beat the hell out of a model of a presumably human target, while her brother is a natural. An automatic water hammer that was used to dehusk brown rice. Lovely sculpted trees, elaborate gate, views, flowers and a house. Then the family museum for Shoko Suseikan the man who built Japan's first factory in 1850s.



As we leave late afternoon the volcano turns on a stunning farewell for us,

Kumamoto

We spend 3 days in Kumamoto, a pleasant city of 1 million. Kumamoto means region of the bears but we see only comic-style logos.



The ubiquitous garden, Suijenzi, was built in 17th century follows a circular path that is meant to represent the road from Edo with Kyoto, including a miniature Mt Fuli. There is a Buddhist temple, where people shake out sticks with their

fortunes written in slips of paper. If you don't like the fortune you hang it out to dry. At the end is a Noh theatre. Noh is a drama where the story is told not just through dialogue but also through utai (singing), hayashi (musical accompaniment), and dance. Kabuki is slightly later more dance and movement based, with over the top make up and stylization.

Kumamoto Castle is the largest and most impressive castle in Japan, surrounded by a deep dry moat and a tower 33 m. high. It was built around 400 years ago and suffered a few earthquakes, the last in 2016 which made a terrible mess of the walls and watch towers, one barely supported by corner stones while the supporting stones disappeared. The 2016 quakes struck at night, so only 1 person was injured. The Japanese are rebuilding it, the fallen stones numbered and to be replaced in the original positions. It will take 20 years to complete. We come to the main entrance, to see a small shrine built in a tree, another Japanese wedding couple.



Back to town, a gigantic arcade of shops and a food hall, which was a good experience to savour authentic everyday Japanese lunch. Cheap tasty and filling at \$6-7. Some shots around the town, before we go: a shinto temple with unwanted fortunes tied to a tree. .

Finally sunset over kumamoto.

Conclusions

Let me generalise about things of interest.



Food was interesting but we had several excellent French meals with only a little Japanese fusion. I asked if there was some connection with France because of food and shop names but the answer was 'no, we just like French food'. The bento boxes we had were rather better and cheaper than those sampled in Hobart, one in a Japanese dinner was extraordinarily elaborate and haut cuisine.

Teppanyaki was brilliant in one restaurant a circle of hot stainless steel, kept scrupulously clean, on which all ingredients were cooked, wagyu being especially nice. Wagyu literally means "Japanese beef" so I'm not sure where that leaves wagyu beef from Scottsdale. Kobe and Hide beef are regional varieties of wagyu. Most cows live the life of Riley for two years: they are massaged, they listen to classical music which makes them serene, and they drink sake or sometimes beer, all of which laces fine lines of fat throughout the meat. After two years there are lovingly slaughtered and even more lovingly eaten. Black pork is also fed



sake as it sends the pigs to sleep so their meat is similarly marbled and tender.

Japanese also eats lots of fish raw in sushi and sashimi, a short grain rice, and vegetables and herbs many of which we see rarely, like crunchy daikon radish. Presentation is exquisite.

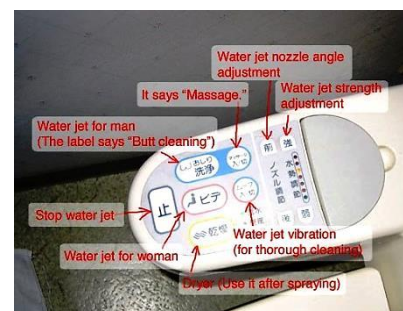
Sake is still a mystery. We were to go over a sake brewery but the manager closed early and we left still ignorant. It's mainly rice and water, with a catalyst and special yeast, and special



songs that are sung while churning over the rice at this stage called moromi. As soon as the brewing is finished a hairy ball is hung outside the brewery. The best sake is drunk cold, but some prefer it warm. The very best is made from highly refined ingredients and the more expensive it is the more tasteless. In

sake menus are like listing Bordeaux, you have to know the region, the maker, and a few other specific details that make it totally opaque to foreigners. Most sake is now a mild 15% alcohol. Some sakes are made of fruit such as plums and apricots which are very pleasant. Shochu is really vodka distilled from potatoes.

Hotels are universally clean, most equipped with marvellous toilets, with warm seats, and an array of buttons, for light flush, use as a bidet, as a bum washer, and oscillator(I don't know what that does to the nether regions). In addition to the illustration some toilets have two more buttons, one to raise and lower the top lid, and another to raise and lower the action seat (which men find handy). When you sit down, a whirring sound occurs which when you stand up, explodes into a massive flush after a few seconds. Which is all very well, but bathrooms are very close to the bedroom, and when one partner goes to the toilet in the night the other is likely to be woken by the sound of rushing waters. It flushes even after false alarms, which seems not a good use of a precious resource.



Another techno problem we found and not only in Japan is an elaborate set of buttons on the bedside table which makes turning off the lights at night strangely difficult. We were curious why all Japanese building had these elaborate staircases: earthquake escapes if the lifts become unworkable.

Buildings puzzled us with outside stairs more elaborate than fire escapes: they are earthquake escapes in case the lift gets stuck: compulsory on all floors.



People. Eko our guide set the standard for us to judge Japanese behaviour: scrupulously polite, ever smiling, outgoing. People in any close capacity such as sharing a table in a restaurant smiled, and tried to communicate, bowing. Everyone bows to the other, which isn't subservient it is a mark of

mutual respect which if introduced in Australia, which I can't imagine, might cut the rate public violence. Even deer bow when you bow to them.



80% of the population are Buddhists, 80% Shinto, and 10% Christian. That weird statistic is because most people observe both Buddhist and Shinto religions. Shintoism proposes thousands of gods located in natural features. Much of the country is mountain and forest which they revere, so instead of cutting down their own trees for paper and industrial use they import woodchips from countries that don't hesitate to clearfell their native forests and sell to Japan at below cost. That's business Tasmanian style.

Women's wages average 3 million yen a year less than \$40,000 pa while men earn 5 million yen or over \$60,000. There are moves to equality but it is still a chauvinistic society. In traditional families even today if a couple ask two couple for dinner, the table is set for 5, not 6. The wife is in the kitchen cooking and serving: she does not eat with her guests.

Children are mostly good looking with their usually flawless skin and cute faces. They are lively but rarely wild, you sense close bonding, more so than I observe in Australia. Eko assures us that children's politeness is breaking down with the new generation, and this is a reason she gave up teaching she said. But they seem to us far more polite than Australian kids would ever be and would be a dream to manage in comparison.

Elementary school children after morning lessons prepare and serve lunch for the whole school, and then clean up the classrooms while laughing and singing. Asked if they like



school they shouted "We LOVE it" and when asked about doing those chores again they shouted "We LOVE it". Loving school is certainly one reason why they score so brilliantly on international attainment tests. School is 6 years elementary – 3 jnr high – 85% go o 3 senior high, 60% go on to higher education of some kind. About half high schools are private.

The bullet trains or Shinkansen are fast, smooth and travel average 200 kph reaching 300 kph but you'd' never know it, they are so smooth. The authorities are obsessed with punctuality: the trains arrive on the dot, 2 minutes is allowed in busy stations for cleaning, automatically turning the seats right around, then passengers can get off and others get on, but in smaller stations it's even less than a minute. Here's a couple of happy train cleaners. If the train is 30 seconds late, profuse apologies over the public address system. We were held up at Kyoto for half an hour because of a technical breakdown, the PA system blaring apologies throughout, Eko said she'd never heard of such a long delay before,



However the view from the train is not great: dull city scapes stretch out from Tokyo and other major cities. In the country a flash of countryside with pleasant steeply gabled alpine looking houses, with black tiled roofs shielded by beautifully trimmed pine trees, and rice fields greening the large spaces between houses, then a tunnel blocks the view, and next, a flash of mountains some snow clad, then more tunnels. All in all travelling by bullet train doesn't tell you very much about Japan's countryside but it does say a lot about the tremendous infrastructure – bullet trains require a flat direct track and Japan is 70% mountains so the tunnelling required is enormous. Canberra has been talking about just one superfast train for years with few tunnels but nothing so far. We don't seem to get things done like Japan does, and like most other European countries, Scandinavia especially.

So to *taxation*, Japan, however, has lower levels of inequality than almost every other developed country. Japan has a high income-tax rate for the rich (45 percent), and the inheritance tax rate recently was raised to 55 percent. This makes it difficult to accumulate capital over generations. As a result, Japan's richest families typically lose their wealth within three generations. This is driving a growing number of wealthy Japanese to move to Singapore or Australia, where inheritance taxes are lower. Thus Japan's "super-rich" remain a lot less wealthy than their counterparts in other countries. In the U.S., for example, the average income of the top one percent of households was \$1,264,065 in 2012, while in Japan, the top 1 percent of households earned about \$240,000, on average. The Japanese are sensitive to inequality, even the richest avoid ostentatious displays of wealth. One simply does not see the profusion of mansions, yachts, and private jets typical of, say, Mosman or Point Piper. Haruka Nishimatsu, former president and CEO of Japan Airlines, attracted international attention for his modest lifestyle. He relied on public transportation and ate lunch with employees in the company's cafeteria. In China, the heads of national companies are well known for their grandiose lifestyles; not to mention Australian CEOs.

Modern Japanese is written in a mixture of three basic scripts: Kanji — virtually identical to written Chinese characters — and Kana which is alphabetical consisting of two styles: for

The three Japanese Writing Systems

ひらがな Hiragana

カタカナ Katakana

漢字 Kanji

native or naturalised Japanese words and grammar and also for foreign words and names, scientific names. There are a few thousand Kanji characters, while Hiragana and Katakana have 46 each. Catherine could get the sense of most notices from the kanji but was stumped by the insertions of kana. Having three separate writing systems must make

Japanese incredibly difficult for foreigners.

I close with a shot of Mt Fuji from a distance, and Chris, Eko and Steve our guides.

Over many trips I have usually one or more of the following:

The head prefect, a self-appointed male who sees himself as the natural leader and spokesperson for the group

The empress dowager, likewise self-appointed who seeks homage from the rest, and unfortunately all too frequently gets it. It's worse when she and the head prefect are partners, for then both reinforce each other's sense of entitlement, such as occupying the front seats in the bus on all occasions.

The comedian, who makes loud facetious comments on whatever comes up. He (always a he) can often be an icebreaker however.

The know-all, who gives lectures on whatever topic, from identifying all the ingredients in a complex menu, to elaborating often incorrectly on what the tour guide has just informed us about local history or customs.

The attention-seeker, who draws attention to him/herself in various ways, such as compulsive talking or even hypochondria (I need special attention for I am really quite ill). The know-all and the attention-seeker overlap.

Conversation spoilers, who loudly dominate meal times especially with self-referential comments to which there is no response apart from playing the same game: I did this and that... The result is serial monologues, not conversation.

The observer isolate, who labels his fellow travellers.