

Surfing the 17th Floor

6 September, 2004

Hello to all,

There have been more than a few surreal moments on this trip.

Getting pulled over by a police car with a functioning hood scoop and a rear wing was one.

Seeing the Japanese people washing their road signs and tombstones was one.

Eating a dried locust was one.

Watching a woman demonstrate the traditional greeting for the arriving husband (getting on her knees and bowing down until her head was on the floor) was one.

Participating in a small town's annual festival was one.

Riding across the world's longest suspension bridge was one.

Seeing the incredible devastation of the typhoons in the high mountain passes was one.

Experiencing the collective amnesia on world history from 1925 to 1946 was one.

Paying \$120 for 12 pieces of sushi was one.

Paying \$45 for about 80 pieces of sushi was one.

Discovering a restroom high in the mountains that was spotlessly clean, fully stocked with toilet paper, equipped with an electric, butt-showering, heated toilet seat and realizing they ran electricity all the way up a mountain for this one bathroom was one.

Knowing that Japan depends on imported supplies for over 95% of its oil and only seeing three hybrid cars in a month was one.

Having a 12th generation samurai give us a tour through his ancestral home that he lived in until 10 years ago was one.

Being invited to tour the private residence of a sake brewery owner, including a visit to the inner sanctum Buddhist shrine to their ancestors was one.

Hanging out in a Jazz Hotel with a former elementary school teacher and lifetime jazz lover who had combined his dream of owning his own hotel with his love of jazz was one.

Sleeping through two typhoons was one.

Sampling sublime local sake at each night's stop was one.

Learning that due to a plummeting birth rate the Japanese population will peak in 2006 and then drop dramatically, signaling an end to either the Japanese nation as a viable economic and political entity or to the racially pure Japanese nation state that has existed for millennia, was one.

Watching a gasoline station attendant step out into the street and stop traffic for a departing customer was one.

Learning that the 100V AC electric supply is 50 hertz in western Japan and 60 hertz in eastern Japan, and not a single grounded outlet to be found on either side of the country, was one.

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Having every single purchase, no matter how small or trivial, exquisitely wrapped, was one.

Watching the Japanese residents of by far the most developed country on earth ride the ubiquitous 1950s era single speed bicycles was one.

Learning that to an older generation Japanese, expression of pain, such as anything beyond the simple statement that "my hand has been cut off," is unthinkable, was one.

Watching farmers harvesting rice by hand, as they've done for countless centuries, in the shadow of the 200 MPH Shinkansen train tracks was one.

But none of them came close to standing in my room on the 17th floor of our hotel last night and surfing the floor as an earthquake rocked the region for at least 30 seconds. It was the first earthquake I've been through, and was a completely surreal experience. My only thought was, "I'm on the top floor, so if I lie next to something that won't compress and stay in the void, I'll probably survive if I can ride out the collapse."

I was, however, very concerned about my wife, who was on the internet terminal on the first floor. I was hoping she would dash out into the square in front of the hotel before she got pancaked.

Fortunately, the hotel merely swayed, rocked and rolled for about two minutes. Within minutes, the TV was filled with live reports showing fixed camera feeds shaking around in newsrooms and intersections.

This was quickly followed by Tsunami warnings for our entire coastline, another first for me, and a nice desert topping on our growing list of natural disasters and devastating weather.

In between the earthquake reports and flashing Tsunami graphics they showed satellite photos of typhoon #4 of our tour, rapidly approaching from the southeast.

So, let's add this up. So far on this trip we've had:

- Three typhoons, with number four about to come ashore.
- A volcano eruption just up the road from where we stayed a couple of weeks ago.
- An earthquake.
- A tsunami alert.

Anybody need any natural disasters in their area? Just call us at 1-800-nat-dzstr.

Be well,
Doug