

Anon Goes to Japan

by /a/non

Week Zero

Preface

I've decided to write about my "first times" in Japan. I wrote a diary as I went along that I'd been meaning to turn into a proper account for a long time now. This won't exactly be it, it's more like the "edited highlights", but it's a good first stepping stone. I think I'd better do it before all those little nuances I didn't scribble down are lost to time, not so much like tears in rain, but probably more like an individual cicada in a forest.

I'm expecting to get told "Oh, you should have gone to [place], or did [thing]" a few times. Pre-emptively: I may have some time after this. I came back from this trip with a few missed targets and the odd regret (the biggest of which was not getting out into the countryside more – I fixed that on my second trip big-time). However – just like you, I'm sure – I'm looking forward to being back over there and everybody's to-do-in-Japan list could always use more entries, right? Suggest away. If I don't use it, I'm sure someone else will.

I've made a few very minor changes where things might end up identifying me (for clarity: No, you don't already "know" me. I just really want it to stay that way.) I've also cut a few chunks where nothing particularly interesting happened, so if Anon cares he can consider this account "mostly true". In particular, I spent a lot of time getting slightly lost. Word to the wise: japan-guide.com and other, similar websites are very good at getting you in the ballpark, I generally recommend them, but unless you're very careful which exit you take at the train station, those last few steps before you know where you're going can often feel a little bit like "now draw the rest of the owl". I've pulled out a lot of that aimless wandering, unless it's relevant. I also think I may have mixed up a few days here and there. Some of the timestamps from my photo archive don't match the order some of my comments are written down in my diary, and certain things I took multiple passes at. I've tried to condense each "thing" into one coherent event, so

none of my sources ends up being chronologically definitive. To compound issues, parts of the original diary are organised geographically and updates happened in chunks as I found a little time on train journeys, rainy days, etc. Between that and my memory, I've done the best I think I can reasonably do to make something that's as true to history as possible while still being entertaining.

We pick up the story in early September, somewhere in the 2010s...

Thursday

From my hotel room, I have a great view of the airport. While I have never been the world's biggest aviation geek, I do like to watch the planes. I am proud to say that I love my airport just as much as my station. The setting sun has washed the sky in those hyper-real shades of blue, purple and orange. Here and there, small clouds piled up like boulders, catch the last of the day's light.

The triple-glazed windows prevent most of the drone of the jet engines from reaching me, but sat right by the window I can still hear the spool-up of the larger birds down this end of the nearest runway. It's a busy evening, and short of actually staying in the airport hotel itself, this is one of the best seats in the house.

I rummage absent-mindedly through my things one more time. Passport...boarding passes...insurance...directions...meds...insect repellent...sunblock...cash...PASMO...phone...charging cable...toiletries...clothes...All present and correct, just as it was an hour ago, and the hour before that, and the one before that.

I draw the curtains as the sun dips below the horizon, and glance at my phone. Just before eight PM. Twelve hours to check-in opening, fifteen hours to the flight. I push my complimentary slippers back on, grab my toiletries bag and pad gently over to the bathroom. Opening up my toiletries bag, I mentally cycle through everything in there as I extract a disposable razor and the tiniest travel cans of shaving foam and deodorant I've ever seen. These, along with a disposable toothbrush, are the leftover

toiletries saved from a previous holiday. There's just enough here to get me to Friday morning. Everything else is fresh and sealed, ready to go into the cargo hold so that I don't have to concern myself too much with airport security and their arbitrary bullshit.

I've always found it easier to shave in the evening if you've got a busy day ahead. You're more relaxed, there's no rush to be anywhere, and so afterwards you can just wind down quietly for a few hours until it's time to sleep. Plus I won't look like I just desperately dragged a sharpened spoon over my face when I'm in front of airport security. Everything planned for maximum calm and comfy, nothing is rushed, plenty of time and space to adjust if something isn't quite right.

With an appearance that is slightly more human than before, I take some time to lie on the end of the bed and poke about online. As usual, there's not really anything *worth* looking at, but I'll look at it anyway. Eventually, tiredness gets the better of me. I set the alarm on my phone to 6AM and plug in the charger. *Oyasumi.*

Friday

Friday morning. I lift the phone off the bedside table, and look at the time. 05:55. Still got it. I cancel the alarm before it can trigger.

At 6AM, I'm expecting to get a wakeup call from Dad, but I have a cunning plan. I scroll through the contacts and select his number. He's awake already; his job would demand nothing less, but it's still funny to call him first. I'm given the standard speech about looking after myself, and all the usual parent-y things, and then he wishes me a safe trip.

I fill the kettle from the sink in the bathroom and make myself a cup of tea. There's a good selection of tea and coffee, and the choice is not an easy one. In the end, the English Breakfast

wins over an equally tempting Earl Grey. It's too late in the year and too cold in the morning for that much bergamot.

Once the tea is made, I hit the shower for the world's fastest splash-and-dash while it cools. My hair, still nice and short from the haircut I had last week, should dry quickly.

Tea drunk, dressed and ready to roll, I go through my possessions autistically all over again, making sure I leave nothing behind in the hotel room. I shoulder my laptop bag and grab the handle of my suitcase. *Go time. Let's have some fun.*

Down in the lobby, I check out, and the receptionist hands me a smudgy photocopied timetable for the shuttle bus. Five minutes. The bus stop is just the other side of the road from the hotel. As I step outside, I'm met with the fresh, humid air of a new morning. I look up to an overcast sky. It's threatening, but I think things will be okay for the time I'm waiting. The wheels of my big grey suitcase rumble and bump excitedly across the tarmac as I go. *Yes, yes. I'm excited too.* At the bus stop, I check the time. Check-in opens in about 30 minutes, loads of time. Although I know I'm going to be spending quite some time flight-side with a strategy like this, I have a cunning plan. Two hours is more than enough time to get breakfast, and I have a few places in mind.

As I'm anticipating the next part of the journey, two middle-aged women waddle up with their luggage. A few drops of rain fall as I exchange pleasantries with them. They're going off to Brazil, the larger one tells me. *Well, that's nice,* I find myself saying. I'm sure it would be. I make a few other conversational nudges to get them to disclose a few locations, and they rattle off their itinerary. It doesn't sound like my cup of tea, but I'm sure they'll enjoy it. I make a mental note to look up where I might go if I ever find myself in Brazil.

As the women are chatting amongst themselves, the bus rounds the corner and pulls up. We all pile on, a mess of damp footprints and suitcase tracks following behind us. There are only two seats free, so I stand. It's only a few minutes, and I'm in the best possible mood. The bus picks its way through a few back streets, before joining the main road. Here it has its own

dedicated lane, so things progress quickly, and before I know it, we're the other side of the security fences and pulling up to the terminal.

I bump my case out of the bus and roll in through the entrance, a full twenty-five minutes before check-in opens. The first sign to greet me tells me that the check-in desks are at the level above me, so I push the button and wait for the elevator. Emerging on the upper level, I wander over to the departures board and scan down the list to find where I'll be checking in. OK, looks like it'll be Zone B. I wander down that end of the hall and grab a seat.

After a short wait, check-in opens and I hand off my baggage with some small confusion. When you print your boarding pass, the website asks "How many bags total?" and assumes you'll keep one in the cabin, the rest going in the hold. The app asks "How many bags go in the hold?". The self-service kiosks in the airport ask a stupid question that somehow manages to be neither of those things and I get it wrong. The nice lady who looks after the self-service wanders over, smiles and tells me she's seen people do it a hundred times before while correcting my details. I thank her and make a bee-line for security. The wait here is pretty short, and I'm through much faster than I expected. Making my way down into the main concourse, I start by taking a quick look around the duty-free section. This seems to be a complete waste of time - the prices on the shelves here is about the same as it is back in the local supermarket. I move on.

Time for breakfast. There's a little place in the main hall that does sushi, so I take a look to see what takes my fancy. I settle for some cucumber hosomaki, a pot of strawberry yoghurt, some fruit salad, and a 'raw chocolate' bar. *What makes it 'raw'*, I wonder. At the very least, I can tell there's no sugar in it. I take a sip at my green tea and watch the world go by as I contemplate my next move. I have about 2 hours left to kill, and I need to reserve about 20 minutes of that to catch a shuttle train over to one of the other departure lounges.

The television catches my attention for a moment. The

screens are planted throughout the airport, and the newsreaders on the screen have been chattering away at me for the time I've been eating. Now, though, they tell me something I really don't want to hear: The airline I'm flying with today has had a data leak. They're sure that the hackers have taken some of their member's credit card details, and they're currently investigating how bad it is. There's that odd sinking feeling in my gut that can't be caused by a few over-ripe grapes. *Well, shit.* I hope and pray I'm not going to get to the hotel at the other side of this journey only to find my card locked or cleaned out.

I decide I'd better just carry on as planned and hope for the best. If I try to phone the bank now, they won't be able to do much about it with me already through security, and even if they could, they might not need to. I get up and wander around the shops a little, try to take my mind off it. In the end, there's not much worth buying. I do a little test purchase with my card to get a bottle of water for the flight and a few things to snack on. After a slightly longer pause than I'd like with the card machine, everything goes through fine.

I make my way down to the shuttle train and get myself over to the right departure lounge to watch the planes for a bit. Here, the inescapable newsreaders have some good news for once – the airline has put out a statement. The data leak started about 3 weeks *after* I bought my tickets, and only appears to have been capturing newly input cards. *Okay, I'm officially safe to ignore that unless it bites me.*

The Piper at the Gates of Boarding

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. I'm your captain, Chad McWell-paid, and in the cabin with me this morning is my first officer Saif Parahandz and flight engineer Ubendem Weemendem. On behalf of all the crew, I'd like to welcome you on board this Boeing triple-seven service to Tokyo Haneda airport...

Finally, after all the planning, all the waiting, I'm on the plane, and we're ready to go. I stow my laptop bag in the over-

head compartment, and relax into my chair. Luckily, I've managed to snag premium-but-not-quite-business seats for a small upgrade fee. It's a little better than the "cattle class" setup, so I'm grateful for that. This is the longest flight I've ever been on, so I'm not going to fold myself up into a small space with zero legroom if I don't have to. This part of the cabin is arranged 2-4-2, and I'm assigned the aisle seat on the left of the '4', with an empty seat on my right. It's the last row in this part of the cabin, so I can recline my chair right back to the bulkhead without bothering anyone.

We push back and the flight safety video is played. An assortment of tired but well-loved actors from the 80s and 90s try to get me excited about how to put my seatbelt on and where my oxygen mask is located before begging for money for some charity or another. We taxi out to the runway, and it seems like an eternity before we're granted clearance. The cabin thrums as the engines get pulled up to 40 percent and stabilised. I strain to listen for that one last step. Suddenly, the engines roar as they spool up to full power, and the cabin shakes as we accelerate down the runway. There's a small pull at my stomach and we leave the ground behind us. *Positive rate, gear up.* This holiday has officially begun.

Week One

Saturday

With about two hours to go before landing, I find myself sat in the dark with the world's *worst* headache. I ascribe this suffering to three main factors: Not only have I been awake at this point for about eighteen hours, with only three caffeinated drinks, but the bottle of water that I bought on the plane was nowhere near enough. I needed at least twice what I thought I did. The real problem though, came during the first meal service. I had the fish, but passed on the white wine and got red. It doesn't really go with fish, but I've always preferred red. Not any more.

With about an hour to go, the lights come on in the cabin and we're served what could charitably be described as "breakfast". A small piece of pink shoe-leather that might once have been bacon is flanked with watery mushrooms on one side, and something yellow and rubbery on the other. I take a cautious taste test and find that it reminds me of something that's almost entirely unlike scrambled egg. As I pick my way through this culinary nightmare, I notice a change in the pitch of the aircraft as we descend towards Tokyo...

On the ground, I'm in no rush to get out of the airplane. Although I *do* want to get out of here, there's no point rushing when I have baggage in the hold. That stuff takes as long as it takes, and I can't exactly go anywhere without it. As the cabin becomes a little less crowded, I open the overhead locker and retrieve my stuff, then saunter down the long corridors that lead into the main body of Haneda airport.

I spend some time waiting in the line for immigration and passport control. The imitation cooked breakfast does back-flips in my stomach as I try to look normal. There's a thermal camera

pointed at us to try and spot if anyone has a fever, and suddenly I'm feeling very warm and unwell. When I get to the counter, the guard is a very serious 20-something guy. He looks very seriously at me, then at my forms, and points out where I'd forgotten to sign one of them. *Ah, gomen.* He brightens up upon seeing my passport photo, which is quite old and was taken at one of the more interesting points during my education. *Hair different now.* He smiles. *Hai. Student then. Salaryman now.* My fingerprints and a photo are taken, and, with the guard satisfied, the entry sticker goes into my passport.

Next I claim my bags and pass through customs. The ojisan guard there takes one look at me and figures out the content of my soul instantly. *Are you carrying any medicines on you?* he asks. Out comes the folder. *Yes. There's the e-mail from your guys telling me I don't need a Yakkan Shoumei, here's a certified letter from my doctor telling you what I have and why I take it...* He sifts through the paperwork for a second. *OK. Anything else not shown here?* he asks. *No, that's all.* I'm waved on.

I walk around a small wall and the automatic doors slide open. I'm officially in Japan. With a headache. And nausea. And it's warm, way warmer than I'm used to. The combination of heat and humidity is doing nothing to help me here. I take the *just-do-as-this-says-and-get-to-the-hotel* instructions out of my bag, and make my way over to the ticket machines I've spotted. After a little bit of fumbling around, I manage to get ¥2000 extra on to my PASMO card. So far, so good. I then take a look at the line to redeem my train pass. I don't fancy the wait, and it doesn't need to happen today. I have 16 days out here and a 14-day pass. I figure I'll sleep off my headache and then go get it sorted in Shinjuku station. It's near enough to the hotel that I'll be passing through it every five minutes anyway.

So, some might be wondering – why Haneda? Aren't there more services to Narita these days? Well, sure. But once you get to Narita, you then have to get into Tokyo proper. I've been told that's quite a drag, and I know myself too well to trust that I can navigate for that length of time on that little sleep. Besides, I'd

miss an easy chance to do something I really wanted to do – ride the Tokyo Monorail.

The Tokyo Monorail is a lot of fun. There are announcements in English, which is very convenient, Japanese, which is to be expected, and Chinese, which sounds like someone who hates you. Riding the Monorail is a little bit like riding a retired roller-coaster. There are banked turns, dips and climbs, but it's all done at a very sedate 30-40ish miles an hour. We take a route out of the harbour area and follow the main road along the coast up to Hammamatsuchō station.

At Hammamatsuchō, I switch to the Yamanote line and instantly discover a flaw in my instructions. I want to get to Shinjuku. But the trains here say Tokyo one way, and Shibuya the other. *Oh. Why didn't I note which direction I'd need to go in?* I watch the trains for a moment before thinking *fuck it, Yamanote line is a big circle anyway.* I grab the next one to Shibuya and get myself a seat. *At least there's air-conditioning now.* Because it's Saturday, and just gone 10AM, the number of passengers is reasonable, and I don't have to manhandle my suitcase out of the way too much.

Japanese society grabs you immediately with its little differences. If you're a girl and you're laughing, then covering your mouth is apparently a good idea. It looks cute, at least. But there's a old guy stood opposite me with two fat tram-lines of snot streaming down his face, sniffing and dripping, presumably because he daren't blow his nose in public. OK, so blowing your nose in public is supposed to be kinda rude out here, but he could at least have a mask, or dab at it. I'd rather he just blew it and got it over with. I try not to look at him too much.

As it turns out, going towards Shibuya did give me what I had planned for, but was probably not the fastest option. I change at Shinjuku. Deposited back on the platform, I'm simultaneously baked by the heat and hit with an odd smell that I can't quite place. I imagine it's something akin to frying a ten-day-dead cat with the fur still on. I make way for everyone else on the assumption they'll know where they're going. Once they're passed, I pull a Dirk Gently and follow them down the stairs and out through

the ticket gates, before working my way through the giant rabbit warren to the Marunouchi subway line. There's plenty of signs everywhere, including useful coloured lines on the floor. It's a little hard to keep track of the things you want in amongst all the other signs, but as long as you take it easy, things come to you pretty well. This one's pretty easy, just round the corner and down the stairs.

I re-emerge into daylight at Shinjuku-gyoemmae station, M10. My hotel is a short walk from here. I feel like I've been to this station before, and immediately decide to adopt it for the time I'm in Japan.

(It's only much later when I get back home that I would come to realise where I know my newly adopted station from. It has the unfortunate history to be one of the locations that was affected by the 1995 sarin gas attack, and the area was prominently featured on the news with people being dragged out on stretchers. I guess after an event like that it could do with some love.)

A few minutes later and I'm at my hotel. I'm super early, and the receptionist apologises for the fact that my room is not ready yet. I know it's not her fault, I'm here way before official check-in but nonetheless no matter what I say she's very sorry anyway. I leave my suitcase with the hotel staff and go for a short walk. This takes me about as far as the end of the road and then back again. It's hot, it's humid, and I'm too tired to wander around in the sun anymore. I make my way back to the hotel and wait for a while in the hotel lobby. Almost as soon as I sit down, the receptionist brings me a little piece of paper so I can connect to the hotel's Wi-Fi. I send a few mails out letting everyone know I've arrived safely, and then reach for my diary.

I only just get time enough to note down some of the details of my travel from the airport to the hotel when my thoughts are interrupted by the receptionist. Apparently my room is ready an hour early. I can't help but wonder if maybe I've given the wrong impression by writing things down like this – perhaps they think I'm reviewing the hotel or something – and I feel a little bit guilty. There's a little bit of paperwork to do, I pay, and then I'm handed

my room card.

I ride the lift all the way up to the top floor of the hotel. My room is located right in the far corner, so I get a slightly larger room and looks like only one neighbour. *Nice*. Shuffling my possessions around, I manage to get the door unlocked and drag everything inside. Switching the light on, I cast a critical eye over the space. Just inside the door is tiled flooring, and here lives a small galley-style kitchen with a sink, a kettle, a microwave, and a single induction hob. On the worktop, I find a few bottles of water. Next to this I have enough to make a few cups of tea and coffee. There are “Royal Walton” black teabags, which sounds like it should be a brand that makes toilets or kitchen sinks. Next to this, I have some super-strong instant coffee with lightning bolts on the packet, some fairly generic green tea, “stick sugar” that come in long packages that look like they should have half-size plastic straws inside them, and something rather ominously called “Creamy Powder”. I guess it will do for the moment.

I drop my case in the middle of the room and check out the bathroom. The sink is just outside the door, on the colder floor tiles that make up part of the entryway. Inside, there’s a deep bathtub with a shower, and the toilet. I decide to get acquainted with the Japanese toilet technology. *Well, now I’m awake again. This is going to take a little getting used to.* There’s no hot-air function to dry afterwards, and the paper is literally 1-ply see-through stuff I have to fold a thousand times. I guess it has much less work to do, so it’s fine. Toilet tech: 9/10, Toilet paper tech: 5/10, adequate but could do better. Immediate concerns sorted, I plonk myself down on the couch and dig through my laptop bag, extracting various bits of tech. I set myself up on the coffee table and pull a few extra notes from my stash into my wallet. At this point, I’ve been awake for over 24 hours, so I need to sleep, but I want get some food to put in the fridge first. I don’t want to be figuring out how to not be hungry when I wake up at two in the morning or something.

There’s a Lawson just down the road from the hotel, and I stick my head around the door, not knowing quite what to ex-

pect. *Irasshaimase~!* Well, I wasn't quite expecting that. The nearest member of staff is right near the door, and delivers his welcome at a volume the CEO can hear all the way back in head office. I bow slightly, not knowing what else to do, and grab a basket. There are some onigiri with tuna mayo in the fridge. I feel good about the fact that I can recognise this from the label directly, before realising I'm subconsciously reading the English underneath anyway. *So much for immersion learning.* I also grab a small salad. There's no tea other than green tea here, so I pass on it for now.

Back in the hotel, I dump everything into the fridge and put the "do not disturb" sign on the door. Hungry can now officially wait for later. Removing my shoes and socks, I make fists with my toes and walk around barefoot for a bit before making my way to bed.

Nope, doesn't work. Stupid films.

I wake up again at about half four and munch on the onigiri. *Hm. Not bad, but about what you'd expect for ¥100.* I go stand under the shower for entirely way too long in an attempt to feel somewhat human before heading outside. I figure the best thing I can do at this point is to get outside for a bit, wander around the block and acclimate myself to the day/night cycle by experiencing it directly. Just outside the hotel, I stop, and for a moment allow the whole world to pass in front of me while I decide which way I'd like to go. It's not dark yet, but the sun is just starting the process of setting, and the air is much cooler. Despite my fatigue, despite the aching, fuzzy feeling in my head, despite the lack of a functioning train pass...or maybe because of it all...it finally sinks in.

The ground under me? Japanese soil.

The sky above me? Japanese air.

These salarymen walking past? Serious Japanese business.

Those plants? Japanese bushes.

The deafening little *min-min* cicadas even have a Japanese accent.

Sunday

Six forty-five. By now I've been awake-ish for the last two hours, drifting in and out of sleep, but this seems to be the point at which I feel both 'awake' and rested. My eyes are not quite as bloodshot now as they were the day before; all that dry air when you're flying is bad for you.

Tokyo. So, first impressions, having seen all of the airport and a few streets...it's much neater than I was expecting. Even in the places where it's disorganised, it's clean. Most of the large cities and towns I've been to – even the ones that would be considered “nice” – have this slightly lived-in quality to them that isn't here. It's pretty far from an open meadow, but the locals obviously look after this place.

It helps that there are lots of little green spaces dotted around: parks, temples, bushes, trees...I think without these a city of this size wouldn't work so well.

I've used the last of the Royal Walton black tea provided to me by the hotel, along with some of the odd but passable Creamy Powder. Today, I think I'd like to find a proper supermarket. Must be one around somewhere, and I bet they have proper milk. Yesterday's trip to the conbini only yielded the Tuna Onigiri and the Salad, and I have a proper rice cooker loaned to me by the hotel. Better find some rice too.

I jump into the shower first, and then shave while deciding what to do with the day. Unlike the simple shaving kit that I used the other day, my “proper” toiletries contain a tube of shaving cream that smells of roses, a double-edge safety razor, and a fresh pack of Feather blades. I like these blades in particular because they have a reputation for being the sharpest. Coincidentally, they're made in Japan. The fact that they've travelled halfway around the world only to return home is not lost on me.

I step out into the warm air. I've decided to start with a little wander through the shops in the Shinjuku labyrinth and see what's there. Almost accidentally, I stumble across the JR offices while scouting out the station's labyrinth and redeem my train

pass. Now I can go pretty much as far as I want. I make a mental note of where I am and decide to come back later with my request for the Shinkansen tickets. I've been told that the Japanese are reasonable with their English, but they're not so confident, so if you can write stuff down, they're better off that way. I'll find that notepad back in the hotel room and get my tickets tomorrow morning on the way out.

In the afternoon, I make my way to the Meiji shrine. The crows in this city are as large as roosters, and noisy as you like. Their calls reverberate off the buildings as you wander through the streets, often without being able to see the crows themselves. Here, though, there are no buildings, so they come down to the paths and hop around with the humans. Probably keeping an eye on us.

I make my way from Harajuku station up along the path, making sure to pass through each of the *Torii* off to one side. Although I've never seen a *kami* walk through a gate, the Japanese seem to reckon that when they do, it's in the middle, and you shouldn't anger them. I'll play nice for the sake of the people as much as the spirits. If there are any, the crows might tell on me.

The path takes me deep into the forest surrounding the shrine. I'm grateful for the cooler air that's down here, and the canopy of leaves that mostly covers the path. About halfway up, there's a small souvenir shop and a restaurant. Just outside, there's a small stall selling drinks. I take a break here and buy some ramune. I lean against a nearby wall for a moment, with a large metal sign just behind me. I've taken a few sips when I'm startled by a small clang – something has just struck the sign behind me. Turning, I meet the gaze of a crow that has landed there. *Konnichiwa.*

Leaving my feathered friend behind, I carry on walking up. The first thing I see are barrels of wine and sake, left as an offering for the Emperor Meiji and his wife Shōken. I wonder what happens to all this stuff over time. It looks like it's renewed on a regular basis, so the old stuff must go somewhere...

Wandering the rest of the way up, I get to the shrine itself.

I step out into a small area with a massive *Torii* in front of me, and a small water font off to the left. Following the instructions carefully, I purify myself before wandering through the gate. I quickly find myself in a large courtyard, and at the far end, is the shrine itself. I pay my respects to the man who opened the doors to Japan and leave a few coins. Without him, I might not be here right now. I also get a little poem from the Empress –

*To pass one's days unworried
By any trifling thing –
Surely therein will be found
The potion of long life.*

In other words, I shouldn't worry too much about the small stuff and take it easy. Gotcha.

On my way back down, I pop into the gift shop. I buy myself a small tea cup that changes between two patterns when it gets warm: bamboo (cold) and cherry blossom. I've decided that, because smell can be one of the best ways to unlock memories, I'll try to buy some incense at each temple I go to, so I pick out the one that reminds me the most of this place. I also spot a small shoji screen, about 40x30cm. The small piece of paper inside the box tells me that the design is the classic "Pine Trees and Cranes" by Anonymous. *You paint well, random Japanese Anon from the distant past.* I have to have it.

Popping back out at Shinjuku-gyoemmae station on my way back, I duck into a nearby Family Mart. I grab a few other sweets here, very much on the bargain end of things, as well as some mango sorbet-style thing called "Ice Monster". *He looks cheerful.* I also throw some crisps into the basket on my way round. From the package, they seem to be "angry red daruma" flavour. *Never had those before.* There's also some bargain-basement rice, so I grab a pack of that.

Thankfully, I also spot some black tea, and more importantly, milk. I've been told that some of the cartons have a notch on them so that blind people can recognise the "real milk". Apparently a lot of it is shipped in as powder and re-hydrated in the factory. So, notched milk for the win? We'll see. I also add a big bottle of Pocari Sweat to my basket, as well as some Meiji brand dark choco. Seems appropriate.

Back in the hotel room, the feast is laid out before me: Chicken and egg salad, Ice Monster, choco marshmallows, some crisps, and a cup of Earl Grey tea. I make a point of starting with the nice healthy salad. The top leaves are lettuce, but everything underneath seems to be shredded cabbage. *Bleh*. I guess you can't ask for miracles at ¥100. I'll eat this one, but I'm not going to have that again. The Ice Monster is basically just mangoes, mashed, squeezed, and then frozen. It tastes really intense, and I like it. The crisps are straight-up chilli. They burn, but it's not just a boring "this is hot", there's an interesting fruit-like quality to them. Jalapeños, perhaps? It's not wasabi, that's for sure. To finish, I test a few marshmallow-coated chocolates, and some of the Meiji choco. Both are good.

Monday

Monday rolls around, and I decide that I've been here for long enough without getting a proper overview of this place. That means I have two choices. Either I go to the Tokyo Skytree...or I can go to the Tokyo Government Building. There's advantages and disadvantages to both, but for me, the fact that you can get into the Tokyo Government Building for free with a minimal waiting line tips the balance. At least, I'll start here and if I end up feeling like it's not enough, I can always go to the Skytree with nothing lost but a little time.

When I arrive, there's a small line that goes out to the carpark. I count about 20 people in front of me, and the line is soon moving. Just before the lifts, I'm subjected to a bag-check,

and then it's all the way up to the top floor. The lift accelerates pretty hard, and we're at the 45th floor in no time. At the top, I have a chat with an old lady who volunteers as a tour guide. She asks about political stuff back home, and to stay polite I'm biting my tongue a little when responding. At the same time, she's taken a genuine interest and I feel like I need to be truthful with the things I do say. When a random 3rd person digs their oar in and starts carping on, we change the subject very quickly back to holiday-related things until he pisses off.

I take a few photos of the Pre-Neo Tokyo skyline. It's very pretty, as far as cities go. It's interesting to see the big green patches given wholly over to shrines and parks. The visibility isn't the best today, though. I can't really see Fuji. I suppose it's better I found this revelation out for free. There's a small gift shop, and I select a few fridge magnets and postcards. I've decided to do more things in the middle of the day that involve being inside. It's not the heat that really gets you, it's the humidity. Now that I have my rail pass, I can bounce around a bit more than is economical, if it puts me in a nice air-conditioned location in the middle of the day. My PASMO can be relegated mostly to getting me in and out on the Marunouchi line – either to Tokyo or Shinjuku station, depending on where I'm going. I'll probably burn a large hole in it when I get to Kyoto.

I use the evening to check out Nakano Broadway and the surrounding market. You step off the train, and just across the road is a covered street that leads up to the Broadway itself. There are plenty of food stalls, and I take the opportunity to try a few different things on the way up, not really caring what they are. I just point like a barbarian, offer up some English and with a few *kudasais* get what I'm interested in. Most of it is pretty good, although I'm glad that I don't know what something is when I don't like it.

Nakano Broadway is interesting. There's a few general shops that sell groceries, or handbags, but I'm not really there for that. There are some up-to date shops for anime and manga related stuff, but the far more interesting part for me is that it's got

lots of little shops that tend to lean towards older and more obscure otaku stuff, and not just in the animé-related world either. There's one shop in particular that seems to be a treasure-trove of Japanese history – I find myself looking at old cameras, maps, stamps, banknotes, photos, watches and a load more besides. It seems like if someone finds it collectible, the guy running this shop would have something for you. I think about buying something, but quickly get the feeling that if I did take something home with me, I'd be taking something too valuable. This stuff looks like it should mean something to people.

Wow. Fruit salads in Tokyo are sharp as *fuck*. All the citrus seem to be present and accounted for here.

Tuesday

The day starts with a trip to Akihabara. As it turns out, otaku the whole world over are the same in one very specific way - they don't get out of bed at 8AM on a Tuesday morning. Almost all the shops are shut here, which is fine for now. I'll come back later this evening, but in the meantime, I can still take a few snaps. The weather is much cooler now, and I'm glad for it. There's a nice breeze, and the sky is overcast. Of course, this leads to rain pretty soon afterwards. I duck into a nearby konbini and buy myself a ¥500-and-somethingish umbrella. These things seem to be pretty much disposable items out here. They're always piled up in the racks at the various entryways to buildings, and it's not so many days before I'm unsure if the umbrella I keep with me is the one I actually bought. I amuse myself with the idea that there is really only one konbini umbrella. The clear one I have with the white handle is when The Umbrella gets bought and travels forward in time, and when it reaches the heat-death of the Universe it turns black and travels backwards until it returns to the umbrella factory where it can be un-made and then re-made. This is, of course, bunk.

I've been recommended a few places to go eat, and one of

them is a restaurant near Yoyogi Park. I decide to go and check that out, jumping off at Yoyogi-Hachiman station and walking down. The sun comes out pretty soon afterwards and slowly bakes me to a crisp as I walk. Real Men never ask for directions, and now that I'm here the instructions I've been given have clearly been written by a blind lunatic on acid. Crucially, they don't actually say the name of the place, so I couldn't ask anyone or look it up even if I wanted to. The further I walk, the less things seem to bear any relationship to the instructions, but it's an interesting neighbourhood. Eventually I figure I've gone the wrong way, and when a train station presents itself, I give the fabled location up as a lost cause. *I'll just say it was closed or something.*

Akihabara in the late afternoon is much more like I was expecting. I come out of the station and fall into the first shop that's there. There's a lot more stuff here, but it seems to be more the mainstream and popular things. Also, because tourists "know" that this is the place to come, there's a lot of pandering to that. There are a few big souvenir shops, selling the same stuff that you'd see anywhere else, probably. I wander the streets, going into any place that takes my interest. I spend some time eyeing up a PC that has a seriously interesting case - rather than the standard tower configuration, it's a big red cube, stood on one flattened corner. As the fans ramp up, vents open and close as if it's breathing. It reminds me a little of a giant digital pufferfish. I doubt I'll find the case when I go back home, but I'll have to look it up anyway. I come away in the end with a few gifts for the family - a package of neko-meido *langues de chat*, chopsticks, t-shirts, postcards, as well as some minidiscs for my Walkman. This ends up being a critical error, as I now have to drag them around with me for the next two weeks. I'm also under instructions to buy a figure. When asked, the request was *get me one of the ones with big tits*. Okay, you're my friend, and sometimes I think you're a little *misguided* in your tastes...but I will do this thing for you. I get a Sonico figure that is designed to wrap around the average Japanese bottle. I'll get some Ramune to go with her and she'll be an interesting gift. The clerk wraps her up in a special black

bag, and I only realise when I'm out in the street rearranging my stuff, that people might assume it's something more lewd than I actually have...

In the evening, I make my way over to Shibuya. There's only two reasons to be here that I know off the top of my head. The first is to say hello to Hachikō. The second, of course, is to cross the road. Shibuya is well known for its crossing just outside the station – it is a popular clip to insert into many different films and documentaries, and it's understandable why. Joining the crowds, I wait for the lights to turn, then follow everyone else diagonally across the road. It's a strange feeling, much like a fish might feel swimming upstream. As we cross, there's an equal and opposite number of bodies making the same trek in the other direction, and it's quite a challenge to dodge them all. I continue on into the store just there on the corner, which happens to be selling CDs and books. I spend some time looking around, before moving on to other places.

On the way back, I wander through the Odakyu food market – I'd spotted it down in the guts of Shinjuku station the other day, and was curious to see what kind of things they might be selling. This is the kind of food that ends up all over social media: Flawless, shiny and beautifully packaged. The cakes and other sweet treats are all very pretty and picture-perfect, with price tags to match. I end up buying some chestnut mochi out of curiosity, and because they're just about the only thing in the store that won't require a mortgage. The lady I hand my money to makes a big deal about wrapping them up. It's fun to watch something that simple be executed with that level of skill, and I guess I already paid for it...I end up trying one with a whisky highball and a warm bath. *Not bad. I could get used to this.*

Wednesday

Yet again, I find myself awake at an insanely early hour. Being a total night-owl back home, suddenly becoming a morning per-

son has me come over all philosophical. Perhaps I'm meant to be here, or something. This train of thought is interrupted as the screen between me and the bed starts to shake...and then just as soon as it started, it's over. Not even enough to wake most people, but a quick check with the USGS website confirms it: *Namazu* has tickled me gently.

I'm struck by how easily the kids here navigate Tokyo, and Shinjuku station in particular. Some of them, hardly tall enough to see over the ticket barriers, walk through this place on their way to school as if they designed and built the entire station themselves. Although I can remember roughly where something is, I'm finding out the hard way that my sense of direction is only two-dimensional. I've had a few moments in this place where I need to find a set of stairs or an elevator before things start to make sense again.

Today, I have two places I want to see: *Senso-ji* and *Senkaku-ji*. I decide to start with *Senso-ji*, which is one of Tokyo's most popular and well known shrines, sat right next to Tokyo's oldest Buddhist temple. I arrive at *Asakusa* station early enough that when I reach the *Kaminarimon* Gate and peek past the giant lantern there, I can see a whole host of closed shops leading down to the *Hōzōmon* Gate beyond. That suits me, I know I'll need to come back this way so I can look in on the various shops as I make my way back. I pause to take a few photos of the statues here - they are representations of the Gods of Wind and Thunder - before wandering down *Nakamise* to the *Hōzōmon* Gate. On the back of this gate, there are a pair of giant straw sandals. Touching them is supposed to help you become a "goodwalker" - I think this is meant in terms of walking the path to spiritual enlightenment and happiness, and not so much putting one foot in front of the other, but I'm planning to be doing a lot of walking on this holiday in both kinds of ways. I reach up and touch the straw, hoping that I'll be looked after.

Slightly further down, there's a large *jokoro* filled with sand, and out of it are burning sticks of incense. Although it's not yet ten in the morning, there are a large number of incense sticks

already planted here by people donating their money, and people are busily wafting the thick smoke over their heads. I walk up and do the same. *When in Rome...* Just off to the side, there's another one of those fountains. I take the time to purify myself, and then climb the steps to the temple. Inside, there are some pretty impressive statues, including Kannon, goddess of Mercy, to whom this temple is erected. Although there are signs everywhere saying *not* to take photos, there are a few Chinese tourists who are steadfastly ignoring that. I feel bad about this, but not for very long. Interestingly, a leaflet I pick up tells me that at one point, a monk was given a divine message and told in no uncertain terms that the statue would be in danger. He took the original, hid it around the back where nobody could see it, and left a carefully constructed copy at the front. So, I guess it's not too bad if you take a photo of the copy, right? *If the gods saw that one coming, then I, for one, am suitably impressed.*

I buy myself a good luck charm in the temple shop and then take a wander through the gardens. There's a lot here that's very pretty, and so I find myself taking pictures of statues, plants, Koi ponds...as well as the outside of the shrine, the temple and the nearby five-story pagoda. On my way back I take a small rest at an area where wooden seats are covered over by a big frame with some sort of wisteria climbing all over it. There's a gentle misting of the air here, which combines with the shade to cool you down very effectively.

On my way back down, all the shops in Nakamise street have opened, and I take my time looking through the various stalls for something that takes my fancy. I come away with some green tea flavoured with yuzu, and a cute little wind chime in the shape of a bell.

Next, I make my way back to Asakusa station, and on to Senkaku-ji. This is a Zen temple notable mainly for being the final resting place of the 47 Rōnin, whose story is not only popular throughout Japanese history, but is also well known worldwide, having been adapted repeatedly into plays, television shows and films showcasing the loyalty, determination and devotion these

men had. As such, there's not much I can say about them that hasn't already been said a thousand times before. For modern-day Japan, Senkaku-ji holds meaning for anyone that wants to put a long-running plan into action and be successful. It's therefore become popular with businessmen and students who want to make an offering before undertaking a large task. I offer incense in the hopes that they are resting well, and that my trip continues to work out, before buying a few postcards (photography seems disrespectful, given that there are a few locals here also), and visiting the little museum.

As to pondering the often-asked question "What if Kira had died before the revenge attack could happen?", much has been said about how honourable or not various aspects of it were, or if a samurai should even consider undertaking such a thing. I shall defer to those who are far more knowledgeable than I am on those counts. My answer is one that I suspect only a foreigner might get away with giving: *Lucky for the poets and playwrights of this world that he didn't.*

Thursday

I start my day with the idea that I might take advantage of my new-found daylight persona. I'm out of the hotel before it's properly light in order to see Tsukiji Fish Market. I'm already way too late to see the tuna auctions, but at least I should get there in time to see things working as they should be. Tsukiji isn't really a "proper" tourist destination, but people like to go and see it. As such, the access to the general public is quite limited, and there's a leaflet with a map on it to tell you which parts of the market you're allowed to be in and when. Even sticking to the "allowed" areas, you really need to have eyes in the back of your head to make sure you don't get run over. The turret trucks and other vehicles that move the boxes of fish around aren't expecting to wait for anyone or anything. You can't walk around just looking up, either. Chunks of ice, used to keep the fish cool,

end up strewn across the floor. In places where the buildings are packed closer together, deliveries are strapped to the back of a moped and then fired down the alleyway with little regard for the random people milling around. I buy a few T-shirts before stopping to eat. There's a few places here to have breakfast, and how can I not try what claims to be the freshest fish in all Japan? I settle for a simple tuna bowl with some rice, and while I'm not a connoisseur of raw fishes, it goes down surprisingly well.

The main target for today is a train out towards Kawasaki, and the Nihon Minka-en. It's a museum with a little something different about it. Because it's a museum of different types of traditional houses, everything is outside. By this point, I've been to the Tokyo Museum already. Although it's interesting to see how royalty and those otherwise of status lived, I've always felt that if you really want to understand a country and it's culture, you *have* to know something about the "little people" too. How they lived, what jobs they did, what their hopes and dreams were, how they died, that kind of thing. It's also a great reference for painting and drawing – literally everywhere you turn you'll find something new and exciting to look at.

As I'm wandering around, I notice that some of the houses have older folks tending to fires in the fireplaces. In this heat, that confuses me for a minute, and I watch them working while I try to think. Suddenly, I realise what the reason for these fires must be – the fires are burned with deliberate intent to create as much smoke and unpleasant air as possible. They're fumigating the houses and driving all the bugs out.

In one of the houses, I meet three old folks. There are two guys and a lady, and we get to chatting. One of the guys explains to me at length – in slightly broken English – about horses and how this house was used. I'm interested, but I'm not sure I got all of it. As I'm leaving, the other guy – who to this point has been mostly silent – hands me a gift. While his co-conspirators have been distracting me, he's taken a few blades of grass in his hands, and by careful folding and wrapping, made one into a grasshopper and the other a snail. I bow and thank him for his generous

gift before continuing on my way to see the rest of the houses.

Apart from the houses themselves, one of the things I notice is that Japan has some pretty big ants, and some great big fuck-off hornets to go with them. I try my best to avoid angering them as I walk past a hornet's nest, giving it the widest birth the path will allow me. I've never been stung in my life, so finding out how I react to the business end of a thousand pissed off hornets isn't on my list of things to do today.

By the time I get back to the train, I notice that I've lost my grasshopper and I'm rather disappointed about this. I ponder the idea of re-tracing my steps, before realising that even if I did, the wind has probably taken him away.

Later that evening as I'm going to sleep, I'm informed by the news that one of the Shinkansen was delayed today "due to a collision with a bear" and that the management is very sorry for this inconvenience. *Sorry to other humans, sure, but what about the bears?*

Friday

It's one thing to take a few nice snaps for the memories and to show the folks back home, but if you're spending all your time staring at it through the viewfinder, are you really experiencing being there? Just as I'm starting to think I've been spending too much time behind the camera, and not enough time just *being...*

Friday afternoon, I catch the train out to Mitaka. When I arrive at the station, I find that I'm just in time to come down the stairs and grab the bus outside. Although it is not Catbus, it is decorated with some of the little creatures featured in the opening credits for *Totoro*. The ride up to the museum is only a few minutes, and although it wouldn't have been any trouble to have walked it...how can you not ride the not-Catbus?

When I arrive at the Ghibli Museum and line up outside, I'm equal parts disappointed and relieved that they tell you not to take photographs inside. Mostly, though, I'm just glad to be here. This is one of those places I've always wanted to go, even before

they built it. Most kids growing up around me at the same time I did got Disney and not so much else. I had Ghibli, and I loved it. As we're waiting in line, one of the employees walks down to greet everyone, checking each group or person's printed tickets to make sure they match up to the details in their passport. As he reaches me I hope and pray that I haven't gotten my details wrong while registering and thereby fumble-fingered my way out of the single most important part of my trip. I hold my breath and hand over my paper. He takes one look, scans the QR code, checks my passport, smiles, and then waves me on down the line. Just inside, there's a lady behind the counter who gives me my "proper" ticket – it's a piece of colourful card with a window holding a few frames of actual film inside it. Holding it up so that the light shines through the film, I squint and see a few jellyfish. *Looks like they come from Ponyo. Cool.* There's a few instructions and another leaflet, and then I'm directed where to go. I turn to the left and there's a flight of stairs. About halfway down it strikes me that there are no more barriers, no more waiting, no more questions, no more "you're going to screw this up" moments left, and I'm here. Things get a little bit dusty.

Inside the museum, there's a few exhibits on how films are made – there's a de-constructed projector in a big glass box with a huge loop of film running through it, and you can peer at it from all angles to see what the various components are doing to the film as it passes through. There's also a really cute merry-go-round type thing with a scene from Totoro on it. As the motor speeds up, a strobe light flickers at 24 times a second, and when both are in sync, suddenly all the different poses of each character merge into one and you can see Catbus running across the grass, Totoro bouncing about and so on, right there in front of you. Going upstairs, you get to see how the animators actually worked with re-creations of their working areas along with loads of concept sketches and other reference materials. Up here, there's also a giant stuffed Catbus in one of the rooms. Kids were climbing around all over him, and for the first time in a long while, I wished I was twelve or younger again so I could go and

hug the Catbus. Not allowed.

Up on the roof, there are a few icons from my favourite Ghibli film, Laputa. Climbing up the stairs, you emerge in a small tower, with a bridge to the main body of the roof. Here, there's a big Robot waiting for you, and since we're not inside, he's OK to photograph and hold his hand – at least, everyone else was, so I wasn't going to not do it. Just around the corner, there's a giant black stone cube, carved with Laputian runes. One Japanese guy strode confidently up, slapped his hand on it, and exclaimed “balus!” at great volume, which caught me by surprise. Well, okay. I wasn't expecting it to bring the whole of the Ghibli Museum crashing down around me, but it still seemed kinda strange to do it, given what it would represent. Each to their own, I suppose. When he left, I placed my hand gently on the stone. *Dōmo*.

Down on the ground floor, there's a small courtyard with a well. Here, just under the stairs and out of view of anyone else, I found a small alcove that is painted as if I'm looking out over the town of Koriko, from *Kiki's Delivery Service*.

The highlight of the day came with the Saturn Theatre. I got to see *Mei and the Kittenbus*. It's a small but highly lovable feature, about 5-10 minutes long, that runs as a continuation of *My Neighbour Totoro*. Mei is playing out in the fields, eating some caramel sweets when she gets blown about by a gust of wind. Chasing it around for a bit, she eventually manages to corner it inside the house, where it reveals itself as a very cute Kittenbus. Mei being Mei, she offers it a Caramel and makes friends before it leaves with Catbus. Later on, in the evening, Mei is woken again by the Kittenbus, who takes her to see Totoro and the Grandma Catbus, who is a kind of giant airship. Mei feeds it her last caramel, and – although there's a little bit of coughing – thankfully the Catship doesn't choke on it. All of Totoro-kind board the Catship, and off they fly of into the night.

Finally, I found my way to the giftshop. Here, I was suddenly and swiftly deprived of ¥20,000. I think I got away pretty lightly, all things considered. By the time I go to make my way back to the station, the sky had opened up and it was raining hard. The

not-Catbus takes me on a steamy-windowed lap of the city centre before depositing me back at the train station. I wonder what I might get to eat with less than ¥300 on me.

The ¥100 cabbage salads are calling again. Oh no.

Week Two

Saturday

My stay in Tokyo over, it's time to catch the Shinkansen for the first time and go to Kyoto. I check out of the hotel early and take the Marunouchi line over to Tokyo station. There's a fair amount of time to wait, so I wander about in order to find a good ekiben to take with me. I end up with a banana, a bottle of matcha green tea, and a very nice beef-and-rice box with veggies. The station itself is very busy, but pretty easy to navigate. The signposts for the Shinkansen are everywhere. Soon, the time approaches and I'm up on the platform. The platform itself is marked so that you know ahead of time where each carriage is going to stop, so you can just stand by the right gate and wait. This is crucial, especially in stations part-way through the route, as the train won't stop for very long. Here in Tokyo, we have a few moments longer to wait while the cleaning staff work their way through the train. As I watch through the window for one of the cabins, I see something awesome – the last step in the process is to have someone walk down the aisle, and there's some sort of a release button for each pair of seats. As the cleaner passes by, she turns all the seats around so that nobody will be going backwards.

Soon, I'm nice and comfy in my seat, and we're making our way out of Tokyo. It takes a while to get out from the built-up areas with tighter bends, but once we do, the driver puts the hammer down and there's a noticeable feeling of acceleration. By the time we hit maximum speed, I'm well into my ekiben brunch. Even though the world outside is whipping past at a vast speed, everything inside the cabin is peaceful and calm. The little tray-table in front of me is hardly even shaking.

I arrive in Kyoto just after lunchtime. The train journey has

given me plenty of time to think on things. First off, in my sleep deprived state the other day, when I'd calculated how much cash I could spend per day, I'd counted wrongly. When I'm travelling on the Shinkansen, just a few leftover coins in my pocket can be enough to get something to eat and drink, so I don't really need to count that as part of a day. Also, I didn't spend so much on the first day of my holiday, since I was travelling from the airport and sleeping. As for the last day of my holiday as I was counting it – I'll be in the air for most of that time anyway. Whatever is left over for the airport is what I'll spend. This allows me to *just about* justify the fact that I went into the Acorn Republic in Tokyo station. Again, faced with more Ghibli merch, I can't really say no. In my defence, though, I was rather restrained and totally classy about my selections this time. I bought a beautiful Catbus cup and saucer set.

Out here, I've rented a little house. It's one of those old-style houses in Kyoto that doesn't really command much money in the local market, but rather sadly is often torn down and replaced with more modern earthquake-proof buildings. I understand totally why the locals do that, but I love the fact that this one has been refurbished and saved, even if it's all in the name of profiting from tourists. Inside it's all old-school tatami mats and twisted roof beams. It reminds me very much of some of the houses I saw in the Nihon Minka-en, only this one comes with some more modern furniture, too. Although, I think it's fair to say I'd probably have a rather different opinion of it come wintertime. No straight lines anywhere and gaps under doors is a good way to freeze. I get all my stuff stowed away and the welcome pack on the kitchen table tells me how everything works and what I might do in the local area. I fold the complimentary copy of the hand-drawn map and place it in my wallet, then head for the closest supermarket I can find to add some food to the fridge.

The afternoon is bright and warm, but not nearly as oppressively humid as Tokyo was. I spend some time back in Kyoto Station itself, taking the escalator all the way up to the rooftop gar-

den at one end. As a general rule, I love sky gardens, and this one looks like it'd be a nice place for a bashful salaryman and his cute office lady love interest to spend a lunch break together. There are great views of the city on three sides, so I get out the camera and take a few snaps before heading back into the metro and on to Nijō castle.

When I arrive at Nijō castle, there's only about an hour before closing time. That means I don't have as much time to spend here as perhaps I might have liked, but there are relatively few people walking around, so I'm happy to make the compromise; the photos are far better without a load of random tourists in them. The phrase "This is the Real Japan™" gets thrown around a lot by people. Most of them are trying to sell you something. This, however, might actually be a part of it. In the late afternoon, with the gently setting sun, the gardens here are exquisite. Kyoto generally feels more "Japanese" to me than Tokyo, although both are good. Nijō castle itself, though, has good reason to lay claim to being "Real Japan", having been built as a place for the Tokugawa Shōgunate to stay whilst in Kyoto, and the site of the Imperial Court. It's interesting to see the inside, and many of the panels are decorated in the same style as the mini shoji screen I bought back at the Meiji shrine. Because of the age and delicate nature of the pigments in these kinds of things, there are plenty of signs telling you that you shouldn't take photos to prevent damage from the flash. A few of the Chinese tourists still left wandering around at this hour carried on anyway.

Food in the evening was bell peppers, bok choy, very thinly sliced beef, mushrooms and some soy sauce. It's a kind-of a half-assed sukiyaki, and it went quite well. There's a Zojirushi rice-cooker here, so I fired that up, too. Although some of the other rice cookers I've used have been pretty good, the elephant undeniably takes top position of the ones I've used so far. Not only does it cook rice better, but it has a magnetic power cord, too. Must try and get one for back home.

It was this evening that I met my first Japanese cockroach. Late in the evening, I decided I'd check out what was on the lo-

cal television. While I was flicking through the channels, I suddenly became aware of the cockroach that had slipped in under the door and was now washing his antennae just under the television. I paused for a moment, not knowing quite what I wanted to do with him. *You wanna watch Nichijou as well?* I forced myself to move, and slipped out to the kitchen where I rummaged around in the kitchen – all the while painfully aware that I had my back to this thing, the bedroom and bathroom doors open, and it might disappear at any point. You know when all you've got is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail? I didn't have a hammer, but I did have a can of fly-spray that had been left under the kitchen sink. I don't know much about roaches, but if this stuff messes up flies, it might at least be unpleasant to him.

Blasted with an aerosol jet of permethrin and half a dozen chemicals that cause hyperactivity in young children, Mr Roach decides that possession of a can of fly spray constitutes nine-tenths of the law, and leaves in much the same way as he arrived. I'm not sure if I gave him a large enough dose to actually kill, or if that was more like flinging Flintstones Chewable Vitamins at a heroin addict. Either way, out of sight is out of mind, and shortly after I make my way to the futon laid out for me, making sure to slide the bedroom door *very* firmly shut.

Sunday

Sunday morning brings light rain and cooler weather, and I wake early with the overwhelming feeling that I need to be somewhere.

At around 7:30 in the morning, I find myself under the covered walkway for Teramachi-dori, one of the streets just a little way from Nishiki Market. The place is pretty quiet at this hour; all of the shops are closed, and the only people here are bringing their vans slowly up and down the street to make deliveries before anyone opens.

I stop by one of the little side-streets, where I notice a vending machine. Extracting the coins left in my pocket, I poke them around for a moment, counting to myself, before deciding on an iced coffee with milk. The breeze here is cool and gentle, and I stand just underneath the covered area while I drink. As I'm stood there, I don't have a single thought in my head. I'm just watching the rain fall and listening to the crows calling in the distance. As I do, there's a warm feeling of peacefulness that gently washes over me. I've found the furthest point from all the things that cause me to suffer, and it's right here and now, just next to this vending machine.

Drink finished, I let my feet go where they will, and shortly find myself taking a solo tour of Pontochō, before wandering back up the Kamo river, the gravel pathway crunching excitedly under my feet. The rain dances across the flowing water, tapping a gentle polyrhythm on my umbrella as I walk. Because they are here – and because there are no people to judge me for doing it – I talk to the crows as I go. Sharing this moment with me as they are, I feel perhaps they might understand.

It's calm, just calm, and I like it.

Monday

When I wake up, the rain is pouring down pretty hard, so I decide to do as many indoor things as I can today. This starts out with a trip to the Aeon Mall, which is a minute's walk from Kyoto Station. It's quite an interesting place, there's a supermarket on the ground floor and I spend some time stocking up on some essentials. Bacon and eggs for breakfast tomorrow sounds like a good idea for starters. On the upper floors, there's plenty of more "specialist" stores, and I spend a while looking around before getting something for lunch. I'm impressed by the variety of things that they have here. The mall is split into two buildings and I spend some time in a music shop in the "secondary" building. I've wanted to look for some music while I'm out here, but

the order in which things are sorted is baffling. There's an ojisan manning the fort here, and although we both try to make ourselves understood, he doesn't speak a word of English and seems to be slightly deaf to boot. Of course, being totally unprepared for the encounter, it somehow doesn't occur to me to just pull my phone out, or mention artists I'm interested in and have him point.

There's also a Muji in the Aeon Mall, and I spend a little time in there stocking up on stationery. Although I can get some Muji stuff back home, the selection is quite limited and the nearest store is about an hour and a half away from me. Although I do have a few things that take me over that way once or twice a year, for practical reasons, most of my purchases end up being made online. It's really nice to see the entire range of things that are available and to be able to pick them up and decide what might work for me and what won't. One thing that I'm surprised at is the range of foods that Muji does here in Japan. I'm burning a ton of calories out here, so I find myself needing to eat more food than I would normally. I pick up a few heat-it-and-eat-it pouches that grab my attention, and also a few random snacks and sweets that look good. I also buy a small spray bottle. The Internet tells me that one of the best non-lethal ways to disable a cockroach is to blast them with a little soapy water. Apparently it gets in their breathing tubes and they can't run away fast enough.

I wander back through Kyoto Station to get back on the subway. Just inside the entrance, there's a waterfall that is made up of loads of computer-controlled water jets in the ceiling. I stand there for a moment and watch it cycle through patterns and various messages. It's quite hypnotic.

Later, I go for a wander through Nishiki Market. Given the weather, it seems that pretty much everyone else had exactly the same idea, and the place is heaving. That's no bad thing, I think that's how places like this are supposed to look. I stop off at a few of the food vendors and try a few things out, including some very tasty wagyu beef that is seared in front of you on the grill. I pop into a small shop and buy some sakura tea. I've been asked by

my aunt if I can bring some sakura coffee back, but after looking around, I've come to the conclusion it's the wrong time of the year for that kind of thing. I buy two pouches of sakura tea, thinking that one way or the other, I'm going to want some for myself.

I've been sleeping pretty well on tatami mats for the last few days. It helps that I'm running around for 8-12 hours each day and pretty much destroying my feet, but I'm surprised at just how comfy a bit of grass and a futon can actually be. I'm thinking I might try to buy some tatami mats when I get back home and change my sleeping arrangements around a bit. When I spot a shop selling small tatami mats, I know I need to have one. They're about 15cm square and beautifully made. As I'm walking through the streets, I suddenly notice an opening that leads to a small shrine. I stop off here for a quick look and buy a charm with a Koi on it.

In the evening, the rain eases off and I make a little detour to Fushimi Inari shrine. Although it's getting too dark to climb all the way up the mountain, all the buildings are lit up, and no-one else is here. I take a few photos at the bottom of the mountain, and am stopped from going any further up by a sign that warns me I might be attacked by wild boar.

Tuesday

Overnight, there's been a big improvement in the weather, so I head out to Nara. It would seem that the whole world and his wife has had the same idea; the temples are insanely busy, and there are a few school outings in the mix just to complete the absolute carnage. *So much for getting around quietly.* I leave the station and jump on a bus that takes me into the centre of the park.

I get off the bus about halfway up so I can walk through and see the deer. They have the run of the town, pretty much, which means that if you're driving along and the deer want to sleep on the road, well, you're driving around them, or you're waiting. I

take lots of photographs of deer that give precisely zero fucks. Most are tame enough to approach without problem, and I dish out a few head-pats. I find myself highly amused when one well-meaning person decides to buy food for them from one of the vendors. The second the package is open, a spontaneous rugby match breaks out, and the unwitting tourist is the ball. She can't get rid of the crackers in her hands fast enough.

Walking through the underpass, the air is much cooler here, and it's interesting to see that the deer are well aware of this. A few have come down here to get out of the sun and have a little rest. It seems a bit strange to see them here, but I suppose to them, it's just another cave.

I start with Todai-ji, a temple that promises a giant statue of the Buddha, as well as a good 20 minute wait to get in. There are actually five very impressive statues here, Buddha is just the largest of the three biggest ones. It's a bit of a cliché to say it, but this is one of those situations where you really have to see something for yourself in order to believe it. It's very difficult to convey the sheer scale of the statues here with a few photographs. Thankfully, the temple staff have attempted to assist with this by offering up some scale pictures that you can photograph. Buddha's head is about as tall as I am. In the far corner, one of the large wooden pillars holding the place up has a big hole in it. As I understand it, if you can pass through the hole, then you'll achieve enlightenment in this lifetime. All the kids wait in line to take their turn, being in equal parts pushed and dragged through by the adults attending to them. I could probably make that, but I'm not going to wait around to find out. *If enlightenment comes, let it be a surprise.*

On my way back, I plan to stop at Uji - the birthplace of Japanese tea-drinking. However, I find myself dozing off in the train, and by the time the station comes up, I'm a little too comfy for it. It's not that far from Kyoto station, so I convince myself that I might have time to drop in on it some afternoon later in the week. Of course, I never do. When I get back to the house, the first thing I want is to turn on the air conditioner. As the vents

open, a small roach that had been sleeping there drops straight out. In that moment, I think he's about as surprised by this as I am. Reaching for the spray bottle I bought from Muji, I give him a quick blast and he stops pretty much instantly. *Nice. Now I have all the power here.* Now – I'm sure it'd be nicer to read if I said that I did something totally humane and Buddhist-like here. Letting small insects go free, showing respect for all life, walking through the world with birds and small rodents hanging off my outstretched arms like a Disney princess...but that's not what happened. Through my actions, I brought more pain and suffering into this world – although admittedly, not for very long.

Wednesday

Wednesday morning sees me drag myself into Kyoto station at an ungodly hour. I want to be in Hiroshima as early as possible, and that means a roughly two and a half hour ride from Kyoto. I have a banana and a Pocari Sweat for breakfast. If it is not the breakfast of champions, it is at least the breakfast of someone who doesn't want to eat lunch yet. Pulling into the station, I get a great view over towards the baseball stadium, and make a note to buy myself a Hiroshima Carp t-shirt. I grab something else to eat when I arrive: There's a McDonalds in the train station and I know that the PASMO card I have doesn't work on the trams here (Yet. Coming soon, I'm told). There is – apparently – an IC card that will work here, but I think I'll just break a ¥1000 note and get some fries.

There's a place just outside the station to get the tram, and I jump on to go the few stops down to the A-Bomb Dome stop. There's something that's part of the controls of these trams that chirps and chatters away while the driver is moving. Perhaps it's some sort of messaging system for the drivers? It's not long before we've reached literal target zero – the three-way bridge that the Enola Gay was aiming for. I step off the tram and cross the road to find the A-Bomb Dome. It's a skeleton, propped up now

for safety reasons by beams and girders on the inside, but it gives a good idea of what it would've looked like the day after. There are a few volunteers who hang around this area. They talk to you about the bomb, where they were, what their families did after, and what they thought of it all. Most were surprisingly diplomatic about the whole thing. One of the volunteers hands me a roof tile, scorched by 4000°C heat. It's a surreal feeling, holding something in your hand that has been present at one of the biggest moments in world history. The surface is like little balls of glass on a piece of sandpaper, and although I know that it's much safer than playing with rocks in the Chernobyl exclusion zone, I can't help but have that irrational feeling I'm doing something I *really* shouldn't.

There's something very humbling about this place. Although there's a lot you can say about Hiroshima, the things that really matter are hard to find words for. I wander down through the peace park, trying not to miss anything out. The clock just across the river from the Dome itself chimes only once every morning, at 8:15, the time the bomb dropped. I make a note that if I'm ever back this way again I need to book an overnight stay here so that I can hear the clock chime.

I make my way further towards the museum, pausing to look at the memorial to the mobilised students, before crossing the bridge. Here, there's a memorial to the children. There are many paper cranes here, all bright colours fluttering in the breeze. The cranes are – I'm told – inspired by a girl who got leukaemia and was trying to fold 1000 cranes in order to get a wish granted. Depending on who you believe, she either folded some 600-odd before dying, or she made it to 1300. It's about here that the schoolchildren start practising their English on me.

I've had kids walk past me and give their best "herro" or other simple stuff before. It's really quite endearing and I don't mind waving back and answering them. Here though, in the Peace Park, there are roaming groups of schoolkids, all around 10-12 years old, and they're desperate to learn English from any foreigner that moves. The first group is quite a novel experience.

They come up to me very politely and ask if I don't mind answering a few of their questions. *Sure, I think. I have a few minutes, this seems like it's going to be cute.* They all go round and introduce themselves, and I do the same. They ask me where I'm from, about my pets, what kinds of foods I like here, and carefully note down my answers. They then thank me and wander off. This ends up being the first of about 5 groups, and although they're all very nice...by the end, they've taken quite a bit of my time and it's all wearing a bit thin. I've started making up what pets I have in order to keep things interesting. The final group comes over with their ojisan teacher in tow, and, after the usual grilling by the local Hiroshima Inquisition, I'm handed a small bag full of beautiful little origami animals the students have folded themselves. Out of all the things I've brought home from Japan, this little bag might be my favourite.

I take a few photos at the Pond out at the front of the museum, where a flame is kept burning, before going into the museum itself. There's a collection of the interesting, the informative, and the heartbreaking here. Plenty of little items where people's possessions have been melted by the blast, and plenty of photos of people who have, too. I spend some time here looking at the exhibits. Upstairs there are videos and various other, more interactive displays that take a step back from the individual and offer wider historical context and technical information.

When I'm done here, I buy a small porcelain ornament in the shape of an origami crane that takes my fancy, and head out the exit, keeping to the far edge of the park so that I don't have to deal with roaming gangs from Sensei's English Class. Here I meet a statue of Kannon, and then get to see the burial mound for a large number of the victims. It's quite sobering to be stood there.

Nearby, there's a peace bell, and I go to ring it. The log used to ring the bell is chained to the roof above the bell, and is deceptively well balanced. It takes no effort at all to move the log. As a result, I swing quite a bit harder than I was expecting to. The bell reverberates with an ear-splitting *DOOONNNG* that echoes clean across the park, and I can feel my face going red. I consider

that a point well made... before moving very quickly away.

Thursday

In the morning, the rain was falling in big fat blobs. *Good. Should be quiet, then.* I'd planned to go to Kinkaku-ji, Ginkaku-ji, and then *maybe* walk the Philosopher's path down to Nazen-ji to finish. Or take the bus, depending on how tired my feet are. I emerge from Kitaoji Station and wait for the bus. You can go from Kyoto Station directly, but there's only a couple of buses you can take, and I'm told it's quite a slow journey. Getting most of the way there by train is supposed to cut the time in half. Luckily there are a few other people that want the ride, so I make a point of allowing them on first so I can see what to do – you enter through the door in the middle of the bus, and exit at the front by the driver. I tap in using my PASMO card, and then tap out at the front when I get back off.

The walk up the road to the temple entrance tells me one thing quite directly – the rain isn't stopping anyone. As I'm stood in the line waiting to get in, I come to the conclusion that the rain might have made the crowding issue worse. Everyone wandering through here has their own umbrella, and most of them are Asian, which makes them shorter than me. All the points at the edges of their umbrellas hover dangerously around eye-level. I've never been more glad to be wearing glasses.

Kinkaku-ji, or the Golden Pavilion, is one of those photographs that everyone going to Japan ends up taking, and I'm no exception to that rule, snapping away from underneath my umbrella. I think the rain adds a certain artistic something, even if I am getting a little frustrated at having to bide my time in order to avoid the worst of the Chinese tourists, who practically shove you out of the way. I try to get plenty of photos that nobody else thought of, knowing full well that this place is so well photographed that actually managing that should be pretty much impossible by this point. At the gift shop, I buy myself a little

glass pot with some gold leaf in it, as well as an “academic success” charm – which is actually a small but perfectly formed *rando-seru* – and wander back down to the exit.

I catch the bus to Ginkaku-ji and watch out the window for the duration of the ride. The rain, which had been relatively steady while I was walking around Kinkaku-ji, now really goes for it, so much so that it gets hard to see what’s going on outside. This forces everyone else back indoors, and by the time I arrive at Ginkaku-ji, I find that I share the place with about 3 other people, all of whom are already over the far end of the temple grounds. I quickly find myself a little space where the roof will shelter me just by a Zen sand garden. Well, I say sand, but it looks more like gravel after the rain has battered it. I sit and watch the world go by for a moment, wondering how they made that giant cone out of sand.

As the rain eases off, I start wandering round and am rewarded with some very good photos of the silver pavilion itself. There’s a rock in one of the ponds where you have to throw a coin and if it lands on the rock, that’s lucky. The sign says that men should throw using their left hand to make it harder. In my case, it makes it too hard, and I miss. *Oh, well. The temple has a few more pennies to help look after the place.* I move on. The moss garden here is one of the nicer ones I’ve seen, and although I should be snapping photos all over the place, I find myself so immersed in the place that I take hardly any. On the way out, though, I spot a cute little mushroom just sat there and I reach for my camera. That’s all I need, I think.

At the gift shop, I manage to find some incense that I really like, so I get this along with a fridge magnet. Outside, there’s a vending machine serving hot drinks and I decide to get myself a coffee. The rain has almost stopped, so I can just stand there with my cup and watch things happen for a bit. Out of the two locations, I think I much prefer Ginkaku-ji. Although Kinkaku-ji is the more impressive temple, Ginkaku-ji makes up for that in spades with the gardens around it. Out of the two, I know which one I’d rather go back to. Given the way the weather has been,

I don't take any chances walking the Philosopher's Path. I can't help but feel I'll probably end up looking like a drowned rat if I do. Back on the bus for Nazen-ji it is.

By the time I reach Nazen-ji, the rain has stopped completely. *Figures*. I could have walked it if I wanted, although I'm kind-of glad I didn't. I think my feet have taken enough punishment for a while, they're screaming at me again. You can climb up inside the second gate that you come to here, the staircase inside goes up at about 50° though. The monks that used to look after this place must've had steel springs for legs. There are a few Zen gardens on the way up to the main temple itself. Each of them charges a separate admission fee, and each one is more expensive than most gardens I've been in, but I really like moss-and-sand Zen gardens, so I don't mind the cost at all. Each one is unique and incredibly well kept, so the money certainly appears to be going to the right things.

Around the back of the temple is an old aqueduct. I recognise it immediately from K-On! and take a few photos. On my way back down, I notice a small shop, and wanting a drink, I pop in. I come out with a small incense burner, in the shape of a kitten. Apart from being very cute, the smoke comes out of his ears. There's no way I'm not buying something that makes me laugh that much.

Later that afternoon, I make my way back to the Aeon Mall to grab a few supplies. I also wanted to get a chance to try again with the ojisan in the music shop. In a moment of inspiration yesterday evening, I grabbed some of the artists and albums I was interested in and put them on my phone so that I could just pull them up in a moment's notice and enlarge the text for him if needed. When I show him what I'm after, he knows exactly where to look, and before I know it, we've found three of my five wanted. CDs in Japan are quite expensive compared with back home – ¥2500–3000 for the average album, it seems. If I was living here, I'd pirate pretty much everything. Still cheaper than having it shipped over, but only just. I limit myself to just one – Tatsuro Yamashita's *Ride on Time*.

Around the side of the mall, I spot an amusingly named coffee/donut shop. They've obviously tried to capture that "Jack-in-the-Box" vibe – but they've gone with "Jack in the Donuts". Oh dear. They might be the best donuts in the whole of Kyoto, the owners are obviously putting a lot of love in their products, etc. etc...but I think I'll give it a miss.

Friday

There's only one thing left that I feel I must do before I leave Kyoto behind. I need to climb Mount Inari. Another one of those photos that everyone gets, the Fushimi-Inari shrine is home to over a thousand red *Torii*, and has been used quite a few times as a filming location. The weather looks a little on the threatening side as I go out, but by the time I'm at Inari station, the sun has burnt away the last of the clouds, leaving me with a humid but bright day. There are a lot of people here, I suppose just after lunch is peak mountain-climbing time. I spend a little time in the temple grounds, making sure to donate a little money to appease the Kitsune who would otherwise block my path, before starting up the mountain.

The climb isn't too hard, but it's one of those *apply constant pressure over time* situations that starts to wear you down in the end. Some of the recent storms have knocked down the odd tree here and there, and it's quite interesting to see. The people around me are all going at their own pace; I overtake some, only to be overtaken myself in turn. Usually by old people, too. Japan has some elite mountaineering old farts, it would seem. They're at every shrine or temple you visit, and they always go bounding on ahead of you. They're interesting to talk to, though. Most of them have kids or grandkids who've gone out into the wider world and therefore they're pretty confident with their English.

When I reach the Tea-houses near the top, I stop for a rest. There's a shop here selling orange fizz, and I buy myself a bottle. It's a little bit sheltered here, but you can look out between

the trees and see all of central Kyoto beneath you. I take a few photos, and then have to make a decision. I do not know at this point exactly how close I am to the peak of Mt Inari, and I somehow miss the signs that tell me. I can go off to my right, and the climb to the peak takes about 10 minutes going up at 35-40°, or I can go straight on and then bear right, which will take me all around the “crown” of the mountain at a fairly gentle incline of 10° and end up approaching the peak from the other side. I end up taking the longer walk, which, if I’d realised what the choices were, would never have taken. It’s a good walk, though. There are small shrines dotted along the walk, and I got to have it all to myself.

Finally, I reach the peak of Mt Inari. The temple here is an “involuntary open-air” situation – being on the top of a mountain means getting hit repeatedly by lightning, so after it burned down a few times, the will and the money to rebuild it was apparently gone. I pay my respects and look around for a bit, taking a few photos as I do. I then turn to the shop behind me. Here, the sign tells me, are the exclusive never-get-it-anywhere-else souvenirs of the shop at the top of Mt Inari. Well, I wonder about that, but I’m not in a rush to climb halfway down to find out. I buy myself a banner of the shrine itself, and also a cute fridge magnet. It has a picture of a happy little fox walking back down the hill through the *Torii*. When I reach the bottom of the mountain, I buy myself one of the little red torii as well, and then hop back on the train.

As my day comes to a close, I head back to the house. Near where I’m staying, there’s an amateur baseball field, and the floodlights are already on. I pause just outside the station for a moment. Around the floodlights, there are a handful of bats, wheeling around the lights, obviously catching insects that are too small for me to see from here. I’ve only been stood there for the briefest of moments when it feels like someone has shoved a white-hot needle into the back of my hand. I look down in horror at the massively oversized mosquito trying to deprive me of my precious bodily fluids, and swat it away. I start moving away, but

obviously not fast enough; the little bastard nails me again on the upper arm. I pick up the pace even more, brushing my exposed arms furiously as I go, hoping the vicious little demon gives up, or I squash it, before it can bite me again.

Back in the house, I fish around in my toiletries bag to find some bite cream and spend a few minutes applying it. It would appear that climbing Mt Inari earlier with all that humidity wore off all the repellent I put on. The bites will continue to itch for the next few days, and I spend the next 48 hours feeling slightly unwell. *The only good bug really is a dead bug.*

Saturday

Saturday marks my last full day in Japan. I start the morning at about 8AM, and after coming out of the shower, carefully start to pack all of my stuff back up into my suitcase. Since this isn't a hotel room, I'm expected to do a few tasks for the cleaner before leaving. I take a few leftover perishables out of the fridge, and then bag up all the bins and put them in the entry-way, ready to go. This done, I make one last check of the place I've called home for the last week, and roll my suitcase out into the street.

The train back to Kyoto Station is quite quiet, by the time I'm lined up on the platform and waiting, it's about 10AM, so anyone going to work or school has already been and gone long before. I share my ride back with mostly housewives going shopping and old men, who...well, if they have a reason to be going anywhere, it escapes me for now. At Kyoto Station, I grab myself a banana and a Pocari Sweat. It's not overly warm, but this is fast becoming a tradition for me when on the Shinkansen.

The train pulls up, and I get on first. Because I'm carrying a heavy case with me, I stand by the adjacent door and wave the other passengers into the carriage first, so that I'm not in anyone's way. Luggage delivery services are great out here, but not when your flight leaves at 8AM tomorrow morning and you didn't send everything yesterday. I stow my cases and take my

seat. As the train pulls out of Kyoto, I watch the city disappear into the distance.

By the time I reach Tokyo station, it's mid afternoon. I bump my case around and catch the Yamanote line back to Hamamatsuchō station, before catching the Monorail out to Haneda airport. Here, I've booked an overnight stay in the airport hotel. Although these places are always on the expensive side, it's worth it to just roll out of bed and go through the airport tomorrow morning. I haul my case up on the hotel bed and pop it open. Anything I don't need after today can stay out of my case now; it'll all go in the bin to save weight tomorrow morning.

Time, like fate, catches up with all of us in the end. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to run from it for a bit. As a final act of defiance, I leave the hotel behind me and get back on the Monorail, determined to squeeze some last little thing out of this day. I stare out the window at the skyline as I go, the light slowly fading along with my remaining time. I have no plan, no set destination. All that remains is this burning determination *not* to sit in the (admittedly very nice looking) hotel restaurant for the next hour or so. There's plenty of time to not be in Japan when I get back home. I change over to the Yamanote line, and find myself jumping back off at Akihabara. Here, I suddenly realise that the only thing I ate today was a banana, so I grab myself a burger and hide out in the basement of the McDonalds near the station. By the time I get back out, the sky is dark, and all the lights have come on. I wander the shops and streets for a while, just trying to form a few memories that I can hold on to and keep inside myself a little longer. In the end, though, I can only accept the inevitable, and begrudgingly make my way back to the airport.

The international departures lounge at Haneda has some really nice shopping areas on the upper level. I spend an hour or so up here, finding a few last things to get as gifts for the family; a few kit-kats here, some Hello Kitty merch there. I pick up some leaflets with oddly phrased English that make me laugh. That done, I step out on to the observation platform, and stand

in the cool night air for a while, just watching the planes. At ten PM or thereabouts, I finally surrender to tomorrow. I have to be awake at 5AM, so I should try to get to sleep at a reasonable hour. I stash all the goodies I've bought in a now dangerously full suitcase, and get ready to hit the hay. The water in this airport is held in a giant wooden tank – there is a small, laminated card by the bathroom sink that tells me all the environmental and earthquake-resilience benefits of having such a thing, before telling me I might be able to detect a slightly different “woody” taste in the water here. To my surprise, when brushing my teeth, I actually do. As a whisky drinker, I find it to be a pleasant, slightly familiar taste, and start wondering what drink I might've paired it with, given the chance.

Sunday

It's still dark outside when the alarm wakes me. I curse the thing for doing its job as I asked it to, drag myself out of bed and get myself ready to go. I arrive in the departures hall just as check-in opens for my flight. Again, there's that confusion with the bags – the website asks how many bags you want to put in the hold, and the app asks how many bags total. Or was it all the other way around? I ask the nice lady to sort it all out for me. *When will I ever learn? No. Fuck that. When will they fix their BS?* I pass through security and passport control, where they officially tag me as having left Japan. *Shikata ga nai.*

I move on and secure myself a very nice bottle of Japanese whisky in the duty-free section, as well as a carton of smokes for Dad. I have about an hour to kill, and I spend most of it walking around the shops, wishing I'd run off into the forest somewhere and hid in a cave so I didn't have to leave. Sadly, though, I do. I get a last bottle of Pocari Sweat from the vending machine at the gate, making sure to note down that there's ¥600 still on my PASMO. It should be valid for the next ten years, so I'll keep it around. Finally, we're called to board and it's with mixed feel-

ings that I get on the plane, excited aSalways to fly, but sad to be leaving.

The plane pushes back and gets a priority taxi out to the runway. It's all over faster than I'd like. As the engines come up to full power, I turn to take a final – slightly watery – look at Tokyo as we climb into the sky and make for home.

Postscript / Monday

So, that's it. My first trip to Japan over, and we'll leave past me to take the long drag back home on my own. It's never too early to plan your next visit, and I had something pretty well outlined by the time my first in-flight meal arrived. Bat-flu aside, I've been back to Japan every single time I could afford it. I hope you've enjoyed coming along with me. I'm sure those of you walking with me down Memory Lane will have recognised some of the baka gaijin moments I had, echoed perhaps in your own travels or of those around you. I promise I've gotten better since then! I've catalogued most of the things I did and places I went to, but one of the things that's far harder to capture – and was a super important part of my time there – is just that almost Zen-like state of being. Having tried a few times now, I think I've caught some aspects of it, but perhaps the very core of it defies words altogether. At the very least I can say that it's one of those things where if you know, you know. I spent quite a bit of my time just being, and it seems to be good for the soul.

If you've never been, I really hope I'm extra motivation for you to go, that you won't have to wait too long for it, you won't have to jump through too many medical-related hoops and that on your first go you won't have to be as dumb as I was. I'm a huge convert to the belief that you should be willing to get just a little bit lost and confused when travelling: Many of the things that you'll find that way never appear or get headline attention in any travel guide book. When you're done, it's often some of the smallest and most unexpected things that leave you with the best memories. But all the same, it's important not to get too lost and confused. You still want to have a good time, right? I got heatstroke at one point. You really don't want that...

I'd taken an extra day off after my trip in order to get over the worst of the jet-lag that is inevitable with a large change of time-zone. I figured I'd be best off staying outside: Having some exposure to daylight should reset the internal clock faster. So, I used my time to do a little bit of general tidy-up on my life, pay my bills, and then catch the train into a nearby city to do some shopping.

When my train turned up on time, I was surprised. But, then the announcement came: the usual catering service on that route was "unavailable due to unforeseen circumstances". I smiled. Ah, home crap home, you never fail to disappoint me somehow. I really doubt this will make the evening news. Or warrant a proper apology.

The cicadas that had been so distracting on my first day were now sorely and desperately missed. I found I couldn't sleep properly for weeks afterwards unless I had cicadas on in the background. I needed to hear my little buzzing, chirping friends again. Even now, they're my go-to sound whenever I want to feel relaxed and comfy on a warm summer evening.

You very quickly get used to the way that people treat you out in Japan, and how easy many things are. It sneaks up on you, and then you get an odd reverse-culture shock as you step off the plane. Back home, normal human-human interactions that would be water off a duck's back at any other time suddenly become the most effort-y, unpleasant experiences that leave me wanting to tear someone else's head off and hurl it into traffic. It gets worse re-adjusting to this when returning from each subsequent trip, too.

And while we're on that subject – so is something else.

Allow me to preface by saying that I'm not usually so sentimental. I reserve it for immediate family and some very old and meaningful possessions that were gifted to me by those now long gone. I've never minded moving houses or changing jobs.

My goodbyes are short and largely devoid of emotion. I've always seen leaving other countries as part of the normal process of going on holiday. But leaving Japan...That gets worse every time. I don't mind telling you that the last night before catching the plane home is always an emotional one. It's not quite "tears before bedtime" yet, but over time it's been getting harder and harder to choke them back. It's not just about going back home, or being thrown back into the wage-cage with no prospect of escape for months. Of course, it is partly those things too, but most of it is something far deeper. There's a kind of "homesickness" to it that claws at your insides and never truly leaves you. You've left a part of yourself behind: the only way to be whole again is to go back to Japan and find it patiently waiting for you in the airport. I look forward to a day when I can get on the plane for the last time, knowing I'll never need to leave.

– *Anon*