

Post



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Sayonara, Seoul. Konichiwa, Tokyo! - April 14, 2023

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SUMMARY

Up early for our flight from Seoul to Narita airport outside Tokyo. For some reason I had it in my head that Japan would be uber-efficient but it took us well over an hour to work our way off the plane and into Japan. Anyhoo, we caught a bus, got dropped close to our hotel and we're able to check into our small room in the Shinjuku area. We arranged for a private tour for tomorrow and headed off to the nearby Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden which is gorgeous. We missed the peak of the cherry blossoms but there were still lots of them in bloom along with brightly colored azaleas and rhododendrons. Dinner and drinks at a tiny restaurant with

great food - Kuriya - then "ran" the gauntlet that is Shinjuku at night back to our hotel. - Karen

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DETAIL

Last night, which was our last night in Seoul, we spent at an enormous hotel with two big towers of rooms. So it's only fitting that there's a huge shuttle bus to convey us the quarter mile to the airport. As the crow flies it's probably an eighth of a mile, but if you have to drive it you'll go five miles. Whatevs.

Upon entering the airport, we're greeted by a smiling robot, wandering around asking people if she (it?) could answer any questions. Later on we see another robot wandering around looking for people for whom she (it?) could carry their luggage. We didn't have any luggage because we turned it in earlier. To a robot. The paper feed (for printing the luggage tags) got jammed so a flesh and blood human had to come and help. Take that you helpless computers! [Just kidding! We love our new robot overlords... please don't kill us.]

It's over a two hour flight from Incheon to Narita. We fly over Mount Fuji. It's clear and when we look down we can see lots of snow, but Fuji is on the other side of the plane. What's on our side of the plane, coming down the aisle, is lunch. The thinly sliced beef with mashed potatoes is quite good and it's washed down with an Australian beer. The steward admonishes the two people sitting in front of us. They had the audacity to have their seat backs reclined when it was time for us to eat! She, not overly gently, remedied the situation. Wow, we're really not in Kansas anymore.

Prior to landing the crew comes through the plane and solicits any fruits and other things that might make the immigration and agriculture departments in Japan unhappy. There goes our croissants from the morning [really??] and an apple from the Small and Cozy Apple Orchard. That one we can understand. Upon landing I turn on my phone and my all-Asia SIM works great. We're asked to remain seated while the plane is checked out for quarantine. It takes quite a while and we're not really sure what they did.

We breeze through immigration in a couple of minutes (after 30 minutes standing in line, ugh.). We get our luggage and are through customs almost instantly. Outside of the secured area, in the main arrival terminal, dead ahead of us is a ticket counter for buses into Tokyo. #11 is going to Shinjuku, where we're staying. It's like US\$20 each and there's one leaving soon. It's sunny, blue sky and a delightful temperature. Enjoy it while you can, tomorrow is supposed to be rain from sun up til sun down. :-)

While on the long bus ride into town we look at the sights (there aren't many, especially at first). We do see some flowering fruit trees. Maybe cherry?? On the bus Karen goes online and signs us up for a four-hour personal, customized tour of Tokyo for tomorrow. We hear from the tour coordinator via WhatsApp. His name (handle?) is Guydeez and his phone country code is Spain. Our guide is Ferris (spelled Fares). His phone is from Egypt. Nothing suspicious there!

We need to come up with a written personal CV of who we are, what we're interested in, and what we want to see on our tour. It's not easy but for sure on our list are cherry blossoms (if there are any left), gardens, shrines, torii gates, and people dressed in animé costumes. I'm interested in Akihabara (where all the crazy electronic shops are). Karen, not so much.

Our bus drops us at the Shinjuku metro station, about 250 meters from our hotel. Yay! It's early afternoon on a Friday and people are already getting off work. It's a bit of a challenge with so many people on the sidewalk, but after we figure out that they drive, and walk, (mostly) on the left, things get easier.

We get to our hotel and to check in we talk to (you guessed it) a robot. It's just a touch screen with questions and places to fill in answers. There's also some place we can put down our passport and a room key generator and a printer (for our receipt, all our breakfast coupons, and our room number/WiFi passcode). It's a little challenging, even though it's in English, and one of those humans help us out.

The room won't have soap, shampoo, q-tips, or coffee. All those things are self-serve from a buffet of amenities in the lobby. Also in the lobby is a place you can change your foreign currency into local Japanese Yen. Yes, it is a robot. We feed in our Korean won and get some number of fresh 1,000¥ notes (about US\$7.50 each) and some coins.

In our room, on the inside of the metal door, are two magnets. One says "make up our room" and the other says "don't come in, but please leave fresh towels outside our door". You can choose which to attach to the outside of your door. Put out neither and they do nothing. They have anticipated the wise-acre who puts both out and does explain what will happen. Too funny.

We settle in to our oh-so-cozy small room. There's a sign explaining that you can put your luggage under the bed... apparently with the size of the room this is not an uncommon question. The waste can in the bathroom is about five inches deep and wide and eight inches tall.

We leave our room, no magnets on the outside of the door, and head back out into the delightful weather of the day. There's a big national garden just a short walk from the hotel. We hike over, waiting obediently (not jay walking) at the red lights, despite there being no cross traffic. We each pay our 500¥ entry fee (US\$3.75) and go in.

The place is huge, and fun, with different style gardens here and there. It being Friday, in spring, with good weather there are quite a few people here. Many are Japanese, but many are westerners like us. There's a buzz around the cherry trees that are still in bloom. It's not bees, but us tourists oohing and ahing and taking photos. The place is a delight and we log quite a distance going from one end to the other.

On our way out we consult TripAdvisor and find a possible place for dinner. We won't have a reservation but we'll be getting there when they open. It's a hike getting there but there are so many interesting things, and people, to see along the way. One thing we don't see is an ATM. From the street the place is a doorway, a small menu on a pedestal, and two pieces of cloth slightly obscuring the wooden stairs leading to the basement.

We are there just before opening. They do accept credit cards and we are quickly seated. So far it's just the two of us, but the place is already 10% full. TripAdvisor is right, the place is great. Karen has wine and I have a G&T, and another, and then Karen has one. We order a half-dozen small plates and they're all delicious. We skip the various skewers of chicken skin, chicken gizzards, gristle, chicken tails, plus the horse sashimi, and a few of the other 'less common' offerings. But what we have is great, including caramel cheesecake for dessert.

If we thought the crowds were crazy at 5:30 when we arrived, they were nothing compared to the ones at 7 pm. The streets are overflowing with people headed out for the evening. It is mayhem and we laugh as we try to navigate through it, mostly clinging to the sides of the buildings.

Closer to our hotel we see two jay walkers and are scandalized! In our room we hear from Fares. He (from his WhatsApp messaging bedside manner) sounds like a hoot. We make a plan for our morning tour. But for now... off to bed. Tomorrow's another day (sadly, likely a wet one).

Photos



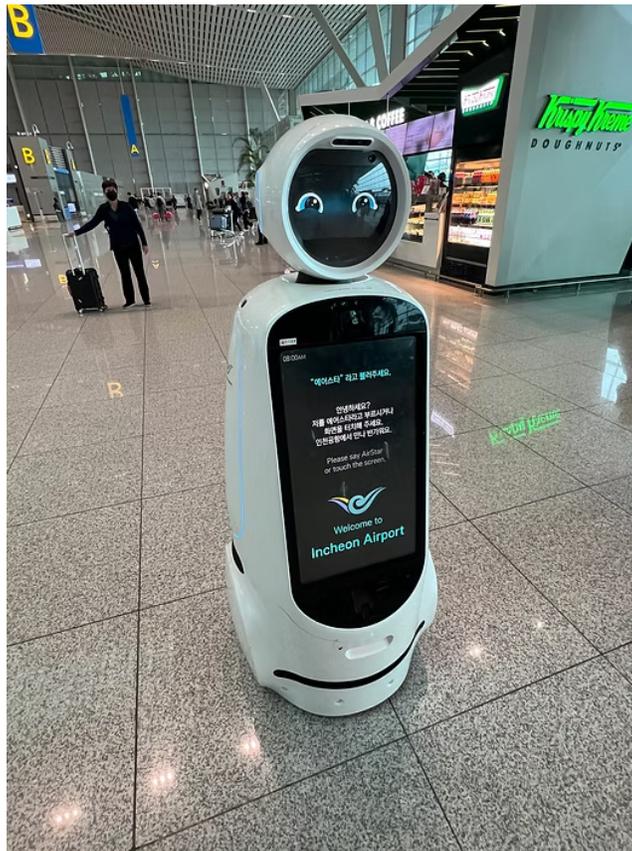
One last shower before leaving Korea. Still amazed the shower head dumps the water on the floor outside the tub. (And NOT sure why Karen thought now is a good time to take this picture!)



Also still not sure what the "Silver" button on the bidet toilet (with the icon of an old guy with a cane) does.



The biggest hotel airport shuttle bus I've ever seen



The first of many robots we'll see / interact with today



This is the second robot. This one takes your luggage with (sometimes) no human intervention.



Snow on some mountains near Fuji



Karen in our small room with the small garbage can. Use too many Kleenex and we'll have to have it emptied.



Some of the flowering cherry trees at the national garden



These are some well cared for trees



The locals and tourists, both, were buzzing all around them



On our walk to dinner we saw much colorful neon and even some colorful people



FARNSNIENTE 



The entrance to our chosen restaurant was initially a tad underwhelming



But the food and drinks and service were awesome. (There's something on my lip in that picture, but for the life of us we can't think what)



A stray we found on the street after dinner



So many people all going somewhere



We're considering this place for breakfast.
The sandwiches look yummy, though the
name could use some work.

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