

Post



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There's no monkeys like snow monkeys - April 16, 2023

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SUMMARY

High-speed train to Nagano, home of the 1998 Winter Olympics. We came hoping to see cherry blossoms and were not disappointed! We saw lots! What we hadn't realized is that Nagano is also the departure point for seeing the snow monkeys - macaques famous for bathing in a thermal hot springs. After a soba noodle lunch at the train station we boarded a bus headed for the Snow Monkey Park and along the drive is where we saw the most cherry trees. (Hard to get a picture from a moving vehicle!) After a muddy 1.8 kilometer uphill hike we got to the park and saw many, many, many monkeys - they walk right by you making

it difficult to keep the 1 meter distance the park rules require. Back in Nagano we hit a craft brew pub then an Italian restaurant for Caesar salad and pizza. - Karen

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DETAIL

We've just had one day (two nights) in Tokyo but it's already time to head out, at least for a short while. In our quest for peak sakura (cherry blossom) we're heading up to Nagano, where the 1998 Winter Olympic Games were held. We know nothing about Nagano, but we guess that being at a higher elevation with associated cooler temperatures maybe it'll help.

We have another OK breakfast at our hotel and check out (again, interfacing with a very polite robot/kiosk). She/it took our two keys, verified we owed no money, and wished us a pleasant day. As the hotel is dead nuts on top of the subway/metro we're there in no time. We're there so fast in fact, we don't know where we're going. We know we want to get to the main Tokyo station, but how do we get there?? We consult a map on the wall and quickly give up hope. Karen talks to the kind man in uniform behind a counter and he gives her a map on which he's indicated the route.

In the meantime I realize I can look it up on my phone. Off we head, with the advice Karen has, and what my phone is recommending, being in disagreement. Being bigger than Karen we go my way for a while, until I realize our subway passes won't work on this other line. We back track a bit, me with my tail between my legs, and soon are on our first (of two) subway lines heading for the main Tokyo station.

We find the corner of the enormous station that handles the high speed trains (the Shinkansen) and find our track and where our car is going to stop. On the ground there's an area painted for waiting for our car. There's one labeled "1st" and one next to it (in a different color) labeled "2nd". We scour our tickets to figure out if we're in 1st or 2nd class. We ask someone standing in the 1st line, and show her our ticket. Now we've created a kerfuffle. It turns out "1st" means "for the next train leaving from here" and 2nd means "for the subsequent train leaving from here". So smart. We feel better, knowing we're in the correct line. The people we asked for help? They're still fighting about this. Whoops!

The train glides silently into the station and the doors open. Being first in our line we head towards the door. "No! No!" the uniformed people say. Apparently they need to clean the train and get it ready for us. Among other things they turn the banks of seats around so everyone's facing forward. Nice!

Once we're settled and underway four rough looking Americans (two couples) ask if we speak English. We admit to having that skill. One hands me their tickets and asks what they're good for, where are they supposed to sit? Sorry, all we know is we have these reserved seats and these are ours. All seats in this car are reserved. Their tickets are JRail passes. We think that means they CAN travel, but they very likely need a reservation as well. They head off in search of someone who knows something. We hear an announcement that all seats on this whole train are reservation only. Whoops!

In anticipation of the conductor I've tucked our tickets into the crack between the tray table and the seat back in front of us. I smartly have them sticking slightly into the aisle so the conductor can't miss them.

The four unticketed passengers pass by again, now going the other direction. I miss it, but one of the girls brush by the tickets and knock them to the floor. She picks them up and keeps walking, asking her SO/friend "What are these??" He says, "whoops, they're someone's tickets!" and gets them back to us. Whoops again!

All the rain we got yesterday seems to have cleared the air. The sky is very clear and blue and sunny. Air quality in Seoul was 375 out of 500 (the worst). Here today it's 24. Really good. It's flat valleys that we're 'flying' through, but there are pretty hills and mountains in the distance. In theory Mt. Fuji is off in the direction we're looking but it's either too far away or too shrouded in low clouds to see. According to the map there should be some 10,000+ foot mountains off in the distance, along our route.

We checked to see if our hotel offered onsens (baths), either private or group. No, but we notice the hotel prides itself on the views from (some of) their rooms. Not ours. I write and ask if that's an option. Yes, is the reply. For an additional 2,000¥ (\$15) paid at check in. Sign us up! I reply.

The sun is bright and the sky is very blue. We go through some towns, cities and long tunnels, but also through a lot of agricultural land. Vegetables. No rice so far. We did see a lot of rice coming in from Narita. We do see some baseball fields and players practicing. The field is immaculate. The uniforms are crisp and white with thin stripes.

We feel sad about not having more time in Tokyo. We get back from Nagano in the afternoon and board the ship around 3 pm the next day. We have the hop on-hop off bus flyer, showing the bus routes in Tokyo. It's apparent the city has an awful lot to offer and to see, and we're not going to be able to get to most of it this trip.

In no time we get to the Nagano train station and have about two minutes to de-train. No worries there. We walk out of the station and bingo, there's our hotel. In some places, like Paris, being near the train station is the last place you want to spend time. Here it's lovely, clean, pleasant, lots of colorful planter boxes, with business you'd be happy to visit. We drop our luggage at our hotel and get information about how to see the snow monkeys. We buy our combo bus/train/park entrance tickets. Apparently this is a big deal.

It's a while til our bus leaves and we need lunch so we pop into to a soba noodle restaurant attached to the train station. Soba noodles are famous in this part of Japan, who knew? We examine the menu outside. It has pictures and Japanese characters. We use our translator to figure enough of it out. Inside is a kiosk robot takes our order and money and gives change. It also spits out one little scrap of paper for each of the things you order (and pay for). We give our paper scraps to the humans who apparently do whatever the robot/kiosk says.

It's a good lunch. We order extra mixed vegetable tempura and more beer halfway through. The robots and humans continue to cooperate. We are sitting for lunch at a counter, looking at the two ladies who prepare all the food. There is a plexiglass screen between each patron, so there is one between Karen and myself. We move that over so that we have a combined space for the two of us.

With each food delivery, and when we leave, we try to do the lilted "arigato gozaimasu". We hope that it means what we think it means. When we are done, we put our used dishes up on the counter, wipe down the space, return the divider to where it was, and the space is prepared for the next patrons. Decent people, these Japanese are.

On the bus to snow monkey land, we see many fruit trees in bloom. Mostly bright white apple blossoms but some brilliant pink cherry trees. They're in the wild but also cultivated in fields. Aren't the cherry's just decorative and not edible? Maybe they cut some branches (boughs?) for sale to Japanese flower arrangers?

At the drop point we confirm with the driver the return time options. They're an hour apart, so we don't want to miss one. We follow the signs towards the snow monkeys. We have mixed emotions about the 1.8km ahead of us. It's good exercise but it's a long way and we really want to see the monkeys! We query some returning westerners and hear "So many monkeys!" but also "Lots of mud!" We scurry, not wanting them to run out of monkeys. Finally we see a couple of monkeys playing. Then more and more. Eventually they're everywhere. They ignore us but love finding stuff to eat and playing with each other. They're beautiful, majestic, silly creatures.

We hike back, and just barely catch a bus. It's not at a time we recognize, which is weird. The driver nods through the glass as I hold up our Snow Monkey Park entrance cards. I interpret this as "Yes, that lets you on this bus and yes we are going back to the Nagano Train Station". Karen thinks we should actually talk to him (we being me) to which I reply: Piffle!

We sit in two of the only seats still available, all the way at the back of the bus. Next to Karen sits a skier in full ski clothes with gloves, goggles, skis and poles. Karen wonders quietly, aloud, where he's been and what he's been doing. I'm thinking it's pretty obvious.

After a very short delay we get our first clue we're on the wrong bus. The ride out had few stops and they were far between. Now we've been driving four minutes and here's our first stop. Whoops! Could Karen have been right? A few more quick stops, with passengers getting off at each, and then a stop where everyone gets off. Double whoops!

We ask the driver how we get back to the Nagano Train Station and he motions to the huge train station at which we're parked. Ahhh. It turns out this was a better way back (I justify in my mind) as we'll see different things, it'll be faster, yadda yadda. It's fun and fine. We see more dazzling displays of cherry blossoms.

At our hotel we try to clean off some of the mud from our shoes and pants. Karen vigorously uses a toothbrush to get the mud off. I'm hoping it's not mine.

For dinner we find a possibly good ABJ (anything but Japanese) pizza place, but stop first at a craft beer pub. Both the pub and Italian restaurant are fun and good. Again at the restaurant we place our order on a tablet.

Back at the hotel we use our key in the elevator and it lets us head up to ninth floor. That seems like a good sign. Sadly neither of us can remember our room number. I'm pretty sure it's 935 but all three tries don't work and quickly we hear the real room occupant activate more door locks from the inside.

Full of red wine and sake, Karen starts trying our key on every room. I make a beeline for the elevator. I'm certain the front desk can tell us which room is ours. On the elevator, having convinced Karen to stop terrorizing the ninth floor, I remember we're in 835. We are. I don't remember anything else from yesterday.

Photos



Karen waiting patiently in the queue labeled "2nd". We must be in 2nd class.

Hm...



A ski area off in the distance, still with some snow.



In Nagano they proudly remind us of what happened here in 1998.



The lady at the reception desk at the hotel can not simply hand us the key cards to our room. How unsanitary! Why feed them (from the back) through the Card Cleaner and we take them, oh so clean and safe.



Being served our delicious soba noodle lunch soup. Karen's had a breaded/fried prawn. Mine had a breaded/fried cutlet. [A cutlet of what?? Bread. Oh...]



Somewhere we didn't make it to. It's a ninety minute drive from Nagano, but looks way cool.



Cherry blossoms at last! [OK, apple. Don't tell anyone.]



Now THESE are cherry trees!!



The long walk to monkey-land was long
but very pretty.



Monkeys at last. Monkeys at last. Praise
God almighty, monkeys at last.



They're cute as can be, but we have to do
something about that facial hair!



Not infrequently they pull each other's legs. Such jokers.



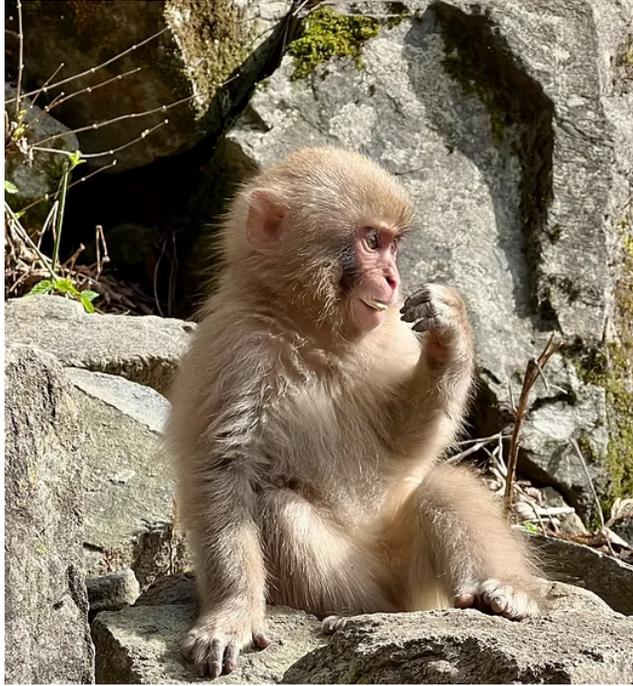
The young ones were totes adorbs.



They hang out alone, or in pairs.
Sometimes frolicking in threes or more.
They're animals!



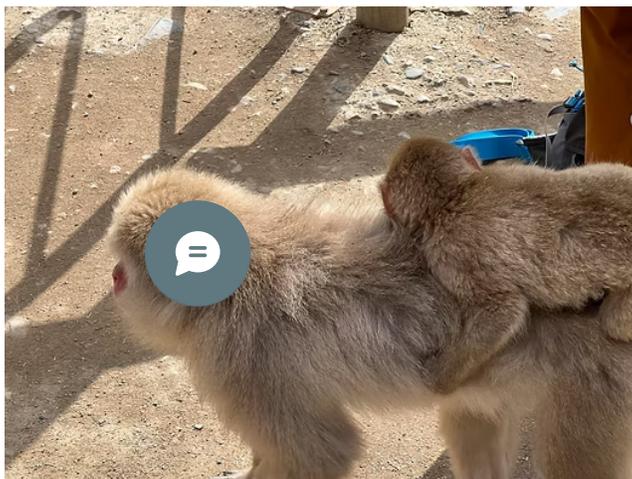
A human loudly blows a whistle and starts
throwing (what we can only assume is) rice.
The monkeys like this trait in a human.



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So many monkeys.



We only saw one baby catching a ride on mom.



Karen and monkey, both playing nonchalant.



The bus, er, train (whoops!) back.



In the hallway. We never met a mirror we didn't like.



For all you manhole collectors out there.



More red wine. Just what we DON'T need.

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