

TRAVEL TALES

Circumnavigating Japan

Part 2: Ports of Call

By Llewellyn and Susan Toulmin

For 14 days in April, we sailed on Holland America Line's Westerdam in a circumnavigation of Japan. This month, we highlight our Japanese ports of call, starting with the best – Shimizu.

Shimizu itself is not a major attraction, but look north to see one of the most stunning sights in the world: snow-capped Mt. Fuji, 12,388 feet of perfection.

The mountain is only about 100,000 years old, and last erupted in 1707. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site that was first climbed by the wizard-sage Enno Gyoja first in 663 CE. Last year, 208,000 people climbed it.

We did not go climbing but did visit a lovely Shinto shrine at its base, to enjoy the cherry blossoms, ornate architecture and pure water filtered by billions of tons of lava rock.

On the hour-long bus ride to the shrine, we sadly noted that 99% of Japan's built environment is not tourist brochure-style temples and parks, but rather dense, boxy, unattractive recent homes and warehouses.

That is the result of having minimal flat land and most of the picturesque urban architecture destroyed during World War II.

At Osaka in southern Japan, we departed for a day-long tour of nearby Kyoto, the country's most famous ancient town.

Spoiler alert – even Kyoto is 90% new. But the old stuff is terrific. The lovely Golden Pavilion Zen temple complex was originally built in 1397 but was burned twice, most recently in 1950 by a crazed arsonist monk.

The Pavilion was re-built in 1955 and re-covered in shining gold leaf in 1987. It is another World Heritage Site and is topped with a golden phoenix ornament. Surprisingly, the Japanese recently lent this actual phoenix to the Washington, D.C. National Gallery of Art.

Near Otaru, on the northernmost island of Hokkaido, we first visited the Sapporo Nijo Ichiba Fish Market, where the strangest offering was black, squid-ink ice cream, which thankfully tasted just like white, soft-serve vanilla ice cream.

One member of our tour group dared to eat a piece of poisonous Fugu fish, but he survived.

Thence to the Historical Village of Hokkaido, with 60 fascinating buildings from the 19th and early 20th centuries spread out over 120 acres. The open-air museum is divided into four sections: the town, the



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The Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisha shrine at the base of Mt. Fuji, built in the the 800s, with 500 cherry blossom trees.

mountain, farm and fishing villages. Each structure is an authentic building brought to the site, filled with period antiques and looking like the occupants just left.

Our village guide surprised us by saying that the large, northern island of Hokkaido was largely uninhabited (except by the aboriginal Ainu) until the 1870s when the samurai warrior class was ordered to lay down their swords and sent off to farm in distant Hokkaido, where they could not threaten the new social order.

This was a tremendous come-down for the once-proud warriors, who made very poor farmers, and some became homeless.

At the port of Hakodate, we toured the western-style fort of Goryokaku, that was built in 1865 in a five-pointed French design.

The purpose of this impressive structure was to protect northern Japan from Russian invasion (the Japanese beat Russia in a war in 1904-1905 and still have a border dispute with Russia over a chain of islands just north of Hokkaido).

Ironically, the only fighting at the fort took place in the Boshin War of 1868-1869, when forces from the Tokugawa shogunate defended the fort against the army of the Imperial family. Today the fort is mainly famous for its hundreds of cherry blossom trees.

Also, in Hokodake, we visited the Museum of Northern Peoples, focused on the aboriginal Ainu. This hunter-gatherer fisherfolk lived mainly in Hokkaido, and controlled the island until the Japanese annexed it and forced assimilation in 1899. The Ainu were then decimated by smallpox and war, their culture and language were suppressed, and their numbers reduced from 200,000 to 25,000 today. They were not officially recognized as a minority until 2008.

In Aomori, the northernmost city on the Japanese main island of Honshu, we first visited the amazing Nebuta Museum. The Aomori Nebuta Festival takes place each August and involves daily parades of 24 massive floats depicting gods and mythical figures. The floats take a year to build from wire and thick paper. Eight master float painters have been honored as "Japanese national treasures."

Our last stop was at a lovely, massive bronze Buddha outside Aomori. At 70 feet high, this is the largest sitting Buddha in Japan. The Aomori Nebuta Festival is in the lotus position and has a museum inside his body full of paintings and wise quotes. As we approached, we thought of Buddha's quote on travel: "As you travel, be where you are. Otherwise, you will miss most of your life."