

MY LONG OVERSEAS HOLIDAY - PART 3

Our flight from Amsterdam to Tokyo, courtesy of Japan Air Lines, was exactly what we had now come to expect. The cabin staff was very calm, relaxed and efficient. International flights with another airline that we took some months later were almost frantic by comparison. Again, the staff was very attentive checking whether I had any special needs due to my medical condition. I must have looked pretty well because the staff, at first, thought it was Dad who had the medical problem. That took the wind out of his sails. The other airline I referred to was not interested in my medical situation and would not even refrigerate some medications. They told me beforehand to bring a small esky. All in all, Japan Air Lines were pretty special.

The flight to Tokyo took eleven hours. We left at eight o'clock at night and arrived at Narita Airport in mid-afternoon. We got back eight of the ten hours time difference between Sydney and London. On arrival at Narita, Dad was body searched by a female customs agent. After doing this search she was counseled by a male superior, presumably for searching a male. Being searched by anyone didn't bother Dad, he might have enjoyed this time.

Our transition through Narita was quick and smooth but the fun was about to begin. Before we left Sydney we had researched the best way to get from Narita to Kanazawa, our first stop. Domestic travel in Japan is very expensive – for both air and rail travel. We had decided to travel by rail because it was a little difficult to get to the domestic airport some distance away. Also, Kanazawa does not have an airport so some road or rail travel would have been necessary at the other end. In any case, traveling by rail gave us an opportunity to see something of the Japanese countryside. To get to Kanazawa, however, required travel on three trains. This was to cost us, all up, more than seven hundred Australian dollars.

We found the Japan Rail Office at Narita Airport easily enough but then discovered that our Australian credit cards were not accepted by the payment system. Mum and I had a rushed trip around the terminal and found an ATM that would give us some cash. This turned out to be a problem during our stay in Japan. Not many Japanese ATMs accept international card transactions and the trick was to find a machine that takes cirrus cards. The best places we found were post offices. Even then, there was generally only one ATM that would accept our cards.

We finally carried out our transactions with Japan Rail. With the transfers and also having to make reservations for two of the three trains (we could have missed out on a seat otherwise), this was a complicated business. The time our trip to Kanazawa would take was more than six hours – we would arrive at midnight. What a good time to be checking in at our hotel!!

Between us we had ten pieces of luggage, including three bags weighing more than 20 kilograms each. We had just 19 and 11 minutes respectively in which to make our train transfers. The express journey to Tokyo was good. This was to be Dad's only look at

Tokyo. Mum and I had been to the city two years previously while enjoying a DELA dialysis tour. This earlier tour was, in fact, our motivation for making Kanazawa and Kyoto our two stops on this trip. I had dialysed previously in the two units we chose to use this time. Nancy (of DELA, of course) was a big help in coordinating our dialysis this time.

Tokyo Central Station is huge. After our arrival there we had 19 minutes to make our next train. We thought we would be able to do in reasonable comfort. How wrong we were. Now that I think about it, we moved from the Station's basement platform to one at the highest level, and went from one corner of the Station to the diagonally opposite corner. We had one piece of luck – when we needed to see a sign to help us, one was there. In the end, we were confronted by about 100 steps to the platform we quickly needed to get to. We were lucky to be given help. A security policeman and two station attendants ran up these steps each carrying one of our more than 20 kilograms bags. We felt sorry for the man who had Dad's bag as it was easily the biggest and heaviest.

It was a close call. We threw the bags on the train at the first carriage we came to and no sooner had we done this than it was underway. If you aren't aware of it, there is great emphasis in Japan on the rail system running precisely on time. You may have read that this obsession with punctuality was a factor involved in the big rail crash near Kyoto a few months ago. It seems that the driver of the train involved was speeding because he had fallen a little behind schedule.

This journey to a place called Maibara took about three hours. The train was carrying many city workers on their way home. We were aware that many Japanese workers spent many hours in travel to and from work. When we got to Maibara we were faced with another transfer and had only eleven minutes to accomplish it. At least the Japanese obsession with railway punctuality worked in our favour here. Fortunately, Maibara was a much smaller station with few platforms. We also had the help of a young man who very generously escorted us to the right platform and carried one of the bags.

Even though we were travelling at night, we thought that we might see something of the Japanese countryside in the two hours it would take to get to Kanazawa. Mostly we saw very little after we left Maibara because there was little lighting in the areas we passed. In comparison to the small stations we passed through, we found that the Kanazawa station is a large and modern building which had undergone a substantial refurbishment in the time since Mum and I were in Kanazawa last. We were to find that, in Japan, the central railway station is the focal point in the life of the city. There are many shops of various kinds, and restaurants, in the main station building at Kanazawa.

The night of our arrival, a supermarket was still open even though it was after midnight. We bought something for dinner. Our only problem then was that even though we had a map we had difficulty in finding our hotel. We had been forced to book hotel rooms in both Kanazawa and Kyoto despite our preference for apartments. It seems that there are no apartments for short-term renting in Japan. Because we had been wandering around for a while and getting nowhere, we had to ask a group of men coming out of a bar for

help. We weren't sure how that was going to work but they weren't drunk and they rang the hotel to find out its exact location. They then took us there which was very kind of them considering the time. At least it wasn't too far to walk.

Our room at the Castle Inn Hotel was not large but it was comfortable. The highlight of the room was the bathroom with a toilet that had multiple features and a heated seat. It had electronically operated sprays and it was fun to try them out. Apparently, this sort of toilet is appreciated by the Japanese clients of hotels. We found also that we did not have to search out an internet café as our hotel, being predominantly a business hotel, provided this service to all of its guests. We had become very dependent on the internet for keeping up to date on events in Australia, as well as for staying in touch with family and friends, and for finalising my dialysis arrangements.

It was a late start to the next day. It didn't take us long to work out that the railway station was the place to go for breakfast. In daylight, it was clear to see that the station was still undergoing renovation. It is being done up in a modern/classical Japanese style outside but is definitely just plain modern inside.

Mum and I have no problem eating any Japanese food. We found that out on our last trip to Japan. My dad is a different story. While he said he would eat some Japanese food, he wasn't going to commit to eating everything that might be put in front of him. He preferred to look for western food first and then consider something else if western style food was not readily available. The outcome here was that we didn't always eat together. On occasions, Dad would eat in a western style restaurant while Mum and I ate Japanese style food.

In Kanazawa there weren't too many Westerners about. Those that were there were generally to be seen at the station, rarely anywhere else. Still there were eateries such as a German Bakery and a McDonalds at the station, we were all happy although we criticised Dad for his boring eating habits. By the end of the second week, Dad found that he did like quite a lot of Japanese food as long as it was cooked in a western style. His favourite was the deep fried huge prawn like creatures with rice. We didn't know whether these were just very big prawns or were something else.

After breakfast on this first day, we headed outside the station to catch a taxi to my dialysis at the Saiseikai Hospital under the supervision of Dr Nakashima. The hospital is about a 25 minutes trip from the station by taxi. The fare was about \$30 Australian. It was our first good look at Kanazawa and we were pleased to see that it had a thriving commercial sector. Its population is 460,000 which means that it is half as big again as Canberra. Once, Kanazawa was a castle town and much of the castle, including the walls, is still standing. The guide books say that the Castle gives the city the atmosphere of traditional Japan.

The hospital itself is a large and modern building of about four storeys. Each time we entered the building it seemed eerily quiet – it made us want to ask where all the patients were. One day we did ask this and were told that there were about 300 in-patients at the

hospital. It was explained that the reason we didn't see any activity related to the wards was that these are situated well away from the dialysis unit. We occasionally saw a patient or two in the hospital shop.

When we arrived on that first day, Dr Nakashima came down to the foyer to welcome us. Even though he is head of the department he seemed a bit nervous about being with us because, as we found later, he was worried about the standard of his English. He shouldn't have worried because we had a good communication with him. He was embarrassed when we congratulated him on the standard of his English. He said, "You flatter me". He took us up to the dialysis unit and I was whisked into the very large room which served as the unit's ward. The unit is very clinical and all the staff were immaculate in their white uniforms. I was assigned to a nurse who looked as if she was about 16 years of age, but she was in fact 22 years old. Her name is Miki Kaido. Miki spoke the best English of anyone at the unit so it was very nice of Dr Nakashima to put me in her charge. Miki looked after the three of us very well and every evening she made sure to get us a taxi to take us back to the hotel – she even gave instructions to the driver.

In Japan dialysis units like to wrap up their patients very snugly – cocooning would be a good way of describing it. I was looked after very well. Each patient gets a sizable container of Japanese food for lunch, except that on the first day I was given sandwiches. I asked if, in future, I could be given what everyone else was having which I found was delicious. The staff liked that I liked Japanese food. My dialysis in Kanazawa cost just over A\$250 which was the cost of a blood test in London. Dialysis here was the lowest cost dialysis of all the cities in which I dialysed.

Because I love being in Japan and feel very comfortable, I wasn't concerned about dialysing there. I was certainly made to feel very welcome at Saiseikai Hospital.

The hospital is essentially in a residential area but with some nearby fields and factories. There was nowhere much for Mum and Dad to go while I was on dialysis. It was too far for them to travel back into town. They would, however, go down to the hospital cafe for something to eat. Every day Dad made sure he ate some Green Tea ice cream which he rather liked. After that they would come back to the patients' waiting room and read, do crosswords or watch television. There were no English language broadcasts and every day any patient sitting in the waiting room would ensure that the television was tuned to a soap opera with a detective soap being the favourite. Unfortunately, during our two weeks in Japan we found that there wasn't much quality in the television programming. Importantly though, as far as dialysis was concerned, it must be said that Kanazawa is very safe.

We weren't really expecting to find one in Japan, but outside Kanazawa station we saw that a hop-on, hop-off tour bus was operating. The bus itself was small and looked to date from the fifties. While it went to a number of places of interest to tourists there was no English language commentary. We weren't entirely lost, however, because inside the railway station was a very good tourist information centre with volunteer English

speakers who were most helpful and went out of their way to assist. The centre provided us with a route map for the bus which had some English commentary on it.

The most important stop on the bus trip is the stop for Kanazawa Castle and Kenrokuen Gardens. Much of the original Castle was destroyed by fire during the upheavals which gripped Japan in the 1800s. It has been rebuilt and is now as it was when at its prime in the 16th century. To make it as authentic as possible the rebuilding was done using traditional woods and methods of construction. There are many signs erected which go to great lengths to explain how the castle, and the troops protecting it, functioned. It gave a very true impression of a feudal lord's domain.

The Kenrokuen Gardens, which are next door to the Castle, are revered by the Japanese people and this was evident during our visit. It was like visiting an ecological church. The basis for much of the reverence given to the Gardens is that it contains a number of trees many hundreds of years of age. The carers of these trees go to great lengths to ensure the trees' longevity. For example, ropes are used extensively to support the branches during winter. Also, some branches are supported so that when snow falls, the branches will not become so heavy with the additional weight and break off.

An impressive feature of the Gardens is the number of quality water displays. The Japanese love these ponds containing carp and surrounded by waterfalls. They especially like fountains and the Gardens have the oldest fountain in the country. The fountain was built in the mid 1800s. It is of special significance because it is not dependent on a pump, relying instead on water pressure created by the different levels of the surrounding ponds.

During our stay in Kanazawa we visited a number of cultural exhibits and saw, for example, wonderful articles of lacquer ware at the Honda Museum and many items of antique pottery. We also visited a food market and saw fish, meat and vegetables for sale that many Australians would probably baulk at eating.

Surprisingly, it took us a few days to find it but Kanazawa has a pretty glitzy shopping street with department stores and a wide variety of other shops. The street is less than two kilometres from the station and we only discovered it because we were on a bus which traveled along it. Mum and I had, in fact, stayed in a hotel in this street on our previous visit to Kanazawa but had forgotten it.

We walked down this street on a Saturday morning and found that it was a festival day to celebrate that children of the city had reached the ages of 3, 5 or 7 years. The reason for this is that children's mortality rate was once so high in Japan that reaching these ages were considered milestones to be celebrated and for parents to give thanks for.

We visited a temple situated off the street and found that many families were present for festival ceremonies. The children were so beautifully dressed in their kimonos. One family gave us permission to take photographs of their little girl.

When we left the temple we headed in the direction of International House where a woman that Mum and I had met on our last trip was working. We had a bit of difficulty getting there. Dad was an air navigator in the Navy but his navigation was off this time (again). A lady from a house near where we had stopped to read our map for the tenth time came out and eventually told us that she would drive us to the building. This was typical of the consideration that the Japanese have for visitors.

We were given a surprise at the International House as our friend had arranged for us to take part in a Tea Ceremony being held there. We had one little problem. Dad had his knee replaced a year before this and has trouble getting down on the floor, let alone getting up again. No worries though, he got to sit in a chair for the ceremony. Mum and I envied him a little as our knees were well and truly buckled under us by the end of the Ceremony.

As we knew it would be, the Ceremony was very precise and we had to follow the example of others to ensure we did not make mistakes. For a tea ceremony, there was not that much tea. We each got about two drips – literally! Those two drips, however, were very potent and the flavour of the tea was very strong. We also got to sample a cake that was sweet, uncooked and a bit doughy. A curious thing about the Ceremony was that it was conducted by a young Korean woman.

The International House is regarded by the many cultured people of Kanazawa as being very important as it is a typical traditional Japanese house with wooden floors and sliding panel doors inside and, not so traditional, sliding glass doors leading to the outside. We were told that the traditional house is dying out in Japan as more modern accommodation is now being built. The importance of the traditional house is that the current glass doors, and the former shuttered doors, bring the outside into the house and as the Japanese garden is exceptionally symbolic, this is crucial. We were invited to go outside and were shown around the quite large garden where the rocks, for example, have special significance, especially in regards to where and how they are placed. It was certainly a very peaceful and beautiful area. The house, incidentally, is quite comfortable in terms of its size but, again, typical of Japanese houses, it was sparsely furnished.

There is virtually no rubbish on the streets of Kanazawa, even though there are very few rubbish bins. This is mainly because the Japanese do not eat or drink while they walk. Also, we were intrigued by the pedestrian crossings at the traffic lights around the city. They provide unique sounds to alert pedestrians when they have the right of way. They are based on different bird calls. The easiest to pick is the cuckoo.

We visited a large department store. The most striking difference between this store and, say, Myers is the very much larger range of food items and specialty sweets that this store sold. It reminded us of the similar departments we saw in Harrods and Selfridges in London, only there was a vast difference in the types of food sold. Generally, there were very few traditional items stocked in this store, apart from some lacquer ware.

In Japan, there is a very useful baggage forwarding service available to people moving about the country. We wished we had known about it when we were leaving Tokyo to come to Kanazawa. Anyway, we certainly learnt about it before we left Kanazawa for Kyoto. It was a relief to be able to leave our 20 kilogram bags for someone else to handle. As I said before, it was quite an effort dealing with our baggage on the trains from Tokyo. The cost of the baggage service was quite reasonable too. The only difficulty is that the bags need to leave a day before you do so that they are available as soon as you arrive at your destination.

We ate practically all of our meals at food outlets at the station. As I have said there is a variety of foods served. On a number of mornings we had breakfast at the Estacion Café. Despite its name the café did not serve Spanish food as such. Breakfasts consisted of an omelet, ham, salad and toast. This was a pretty good start to the day.

My last dialysis in Kanazawa ended on a good note. I had trouble free sessions in the Unit at Saiseikai Hospital. My only difficulty was that I could not have my blood pump as high as I normally have it at home, because only smaller size catheters are used in Japan. I had run out of my own supply of size 15 catheters in Italy. I was not advised beforehand by any of the units at which I dialysed that they did not stock the larger sizes. This was most disappointing. Next time, I will bring a supply to last for all of my dialysis sessions. When we left the hospital that last time, Dr Nakashima, the head nurse and the ever present Nurse Miki Kaido came down to the taxi to farewell us. It was sad to say goodbye. The next day we boarded our train for Kyoto.

The Shinkansen (the Bullet train) took just two hours to reach Kyoto. It was a reasonably comfortable ride although the train was quite full with, mostly, students. As this was a daylight trip we were looking forward to seeing something of the northern Japan scenery. It was nice but maybe a little disappointing in that there was little variety to the countryside, although we did travel along the shores of a lake for some distance. I expected to see a good number of paddy fields but there were very few of these. I also expected to see the land being put to good use, given what we had heard about the shortage of land in Japan, but much of it looked unused.

Kyoto Station was initially misleading. It looked, at first, much like many other railway stations but it was only when we saw the complex from a window high above it that we realised its enormity. It had many platforms at numerous levels but was probably overshadowed by the Tokyo Station in this respect. It was what was immediately attached to the station that made it a special place. There is a very large department store of 11 levels sitting within the complex. The store is named Isetan and is apparently owned by Japan Rail. It is the way that this store is set out that makes it so interesting. The main escalator sits at the front of the store at ground level. As you reach each of the next nine levels you walk forward twenty paces or so to step onto the escalator to get to the next level. At the highest level if you turn and look back you see what I would describe as cascading escalators. It is a spectacular sight. The store is very well stocked with women's clothing predominating.

The top level is a viewing platform which provides a very nice view of the Kyoto rooftops (the store would be about the tallest building in Kyoto). It is when you turn around that you realise that you are also able to look down back into the centre of the complex. This is what makes it so unusual because you can walk back down by way of marble and granite stairs to the ground floor level. At night, at the time of our stay, this view was dominated by spectacular Christmas lighting. This came as a surprise to us because we did not expect much acknowledgment in Japan of a Christian festival. Perhaps it is the commercial aspects of Christmas that are driving its popularity but, in any case, it was plain to see that the Japanese people are getting the Christmas spirit, even though it was then still early November.

Halfway down the stairs is an open air stage with the stairs forming the seating. At the bottom there are a number of cafes and restaurants of various kinds, mostly selling western style food.

The final surprise comes at the lower ground floor level of the complex. Running in two different directions are two malls with a number of passageways containing hundreds of shops, restaurants and cafes. A number of the food outlets were franchises such as a Subway and an English tea house. Many of the others took a western approach to the food they served as we could see from their window displays. We had no problem in finding meals to satisfy our diverse palates.

Our hotel was the Kyoto Garden Hotel just over two kilometres from the railway station, straight up a broad avenue called Karasuma Street. The hotel had a Chinese restaurant which we used a couple of times, including on our first night in the city. My dialysis was at a unit situated within a hospital not far from the station.

As my dialysis was timed for late afternoon, we at first did some sightseeing on our first full day in Kyoto. We headed for Nijo Castle which was just ten minutes walk from the hotel. The Castle is an imposing building looking much like a temple in white. It dates back to the 16th century and was a Shogun's palace, bearing in mind that Kyoto was once the capital of Japan. A unique feature of the Castle is the squeaking floors of the passageways near the entrances. The purpose of these was to alert the Shogun's guards that attackers may be in the building. The wall decorations are ornate and colourful in a sedate way but the signs of wear were apparent and restoration is under way in some areas of the building.

Many schoolchildren visit the Castle and we were guinea pigs for one group who picked us as their targets to answer questions assigned to them for their English class. One girl about ten years old was the leader and we sent her a card after we arrived home but we never heard from her again.

As is always the case with the Japanese, the outside areas of the Castle are very important. The gardens and water features are beautiful but in a controlled way, nothing ostentatious here. In fact, there is nothing ostentatious about gardens anywhere in Japan unless nature takes over, such as at cherry blossom time.

We had tried to locate a hop-on, hop-off bus in Kyoto, but surprisingly to us there isn't one. It was surprising because the smaller Kanazawa had such a bus, but this city more than three times the size of Kanazawa did not. There was only longer organised tours which mostly go outside the city. We had to work out our own sightseeing, this time.

Kyoto does have a very good subway system though. We didn't travel very far on it, no more than three stops, but it is very modern, efficient and safe. There was a station very close to our hotel and we used it to get to the central station.

We had just a little difficulty finding our way to dialysis, mainly because the hospital housing the dialysis unit did not look much like a hospital. It was also much closer to the central station than we were expecting. On the first day I had to go through a small registration process at the hospital front desk. Once that was sorted out we were directed to an upper floor where we found the ward in which I was to be dialysed. There was no waiting area, apart from a landing outside the ward, so Mum and Dad had to go somewhere else and find something to do.

Luckily, the staff did not insist in wrapping me up, as was done at Kanazawa, because it was quite warm in the room. Unfortunately, in Kyoto, I encountered my first real dialysis problem of the whole trip. I mentioned earlier that I brought a number of my own size 15 catheters with me in case some units did not have this size on hand. I need this size because my site is in my thigh. When my supply of catheters ran out, I found that I was still able to have a reasonably satisfactory dialysis using a smaller size catheter. Unfortunately, however, not using catheters of the right size finally caught up with me in Kyoto.

After the first dialysis, I was not feeling as good as I normally feel after dialysis. For some inexplicable reason, in Kyoto, the smaller catheters required that my blood pump had to be set at much too low a level for me. If I tried to increase the pump pressure my machine would continually alarm. While I did have to settle for a lower pump pressure in other places, it was not as low then as it was in this case and did not greatly affect the quality of my dialysis. In Kyoto, it did have this effect and for the first time on this trip, I had what could be described as an unsatisfactory dialysis. Fortunately, we quickly recognised that this was a problem that would get worse and we decided that while we would stay in Kyoto until after the next dialysis, we would not remain for the planned third session. This situation wasn't directly anyone's fault, it was essentially a technical problem, but it was frustrating that I had been unable to get the catheters I needed.

Our decision meant reorganizing our flight schedules. Luckily, Japan Air Lines lived up to the good impression they had made on us and our flights were quickly changed with a phone call. What this meant was that we now had five nights in beautiful Kyoto instead of seven. I have to admit that this didn't upset us too much as we were, by now, feeling pretty tired.

The English language barrier was more pronounced at the Kyoto unit than it was in Kanazawa. This doesn't mean to say that the nurses in Kyoto were any less professional though. My main nurses were young males and they certainly knew their business. In fact, they were professional and persistent in their attempts to overcome the problems I was experiencing. The nurses realised, also, that dropping the third session was in my best interests. The cost for each dialysis in Kyoto, at about A\$300, was considerably less than what, we had been told, would be the maximum we might be asked to pay.

Having sorted out the medical situation, we got back into sightseeing mode. When Mum and I were here in 2002 we visited the Kyoto Handicraft Centre. We were keen to go there again as we had some kimono shopping to do and this is the best place in Kyoto to do it. The Centre is a building of six floors full of businesses selling all sorts of handicrafts and related products. We were able to find our best-price kimonos and other small gifts. The Centre is very well run and we were impressed by the assistance the staff provided in ensuring that we received the customs discounts to which we were entitled as foreigners.

I can recommend having a massage in Japan. There are massage centres at the railway stations in both Kanazawa and Kyoto. I visited these centres and was most satisfied by the treatment I received. The cost was not high either.

Our last full day in Kyoto was Saturday, 20th November. It is memorable because it was the nicest day we had in Japan.

In 2003, my parents were asked if they would accommodate, for a week, a teenage Japanese girl who was visiting Canberra from a high school in Nara, Canberra's sister city. Kumiko struggled with her English but she really enjoyed her stay which culminated in a weekend visit to Sydney. Her parents were so appreciative of how well she was looked after that they were keen to reciprocate the hospitality at some time. Their chance came with our visit to Kyoto, which is only a 45 minutes train ride from Nara. Kumiko who was 17 years of age by now came to Kyoto with her mother and her older sister, Mikako. Mikako was the key to our communication as she is a university graduate in English and teaches English to children for a living. The girls' father would have come too except that he had to undergo medical tests in Nara on that day. The family went out of their way to ensure that they gave us the best possible day.

We were asked if there was anywhere we particularly wanted to go. Our one choice was the fabulous Golden Temple (Kinkakuji). Our hosts bought all of us travel passes for the day and we caught a train and a bus to get to the Temple. It was still mid-morning but there was a large crowd at the Temple which is "golden" because of the gold leaf which covers the building. In the sunlight it is very beautiful, especially when you catch a glimpse of its reflection in the very still pond, at the edge of which it sits.

The gardens surrounding the Temple were another example of the reverence the Japanese people have for nature. There was, for example, a tree which had flourished in the garden since the 1300s. The tree was cherished and its branches had been readied for

winter snows by being supported with wooden stakes. This was reminiscent of the preparation given to many of the trees at the Kenrokuen Gardens in Kanazawa.

Our hosts next escorted us to Kyoto city where we taken to a popular restaurant which specialises in catering to families. We had already been asked by our hosts if we would prefer to eat at a Japanese style restaurant or eat western style food. In deference to Dad's tastes we selected the latter and this restaurant served superb meals which were western influenced. This was especially true of the desserts, for which the establishment is famous.

After a wonderful lunch, again paid for by our hosts, we walked through the former geisha district of Gion. This is an area which draws both Japanese and foreign tourists in heavy numbers. Shortly afterwards, we reached our next objective the shrine, Yasaka Jinjya. The Shrine actually consists of a number of small shrines plus a public park that is a very popular venue for both the Japanese people and overseas tourists. Mum and I remembered that we had been to this park during our previous visit to Kyoto in 2003. It took a while to realise this because our last visit was at night and was at the peak of the cherry blossom festival. At that time the ground was covered in blossoms which had just begun to fall and there were fairy lights strung up in the trees. The thousands of Japanese people enjoying the spectacle of the blossoms were in a very happy mood.

The highlight of this visit occurred when we were suddenly in the midst of a traditional wedding procession. We, of course, along with a couple of hundred other people stayed around to see the wedding which was conveniently taking place on a raised open Shinto shrine. The bride looked beautiful in her traditional wedding kimono and was the focus of dozens of cameras as the wedding party moved away from the shrine. Mikako told us we were very fortunate to have seen this wedding as not many Japanese now have this experience.

By the time we left the Yasaka Jinjya shrine it was late afternoon. Again we walked and this time it was through narrow lanes passing many more traditional homes. These came to an end after about a kilometre and suddenly we were in a street which was not much wider than the lanes we had just walked through. The street was lined on both sides with shops of many kinds but with most selling items that would appeal to tourists. The street was packed as there were hundreds of people making their way to the Kiyumizudera Shrine. That is where we were also heading. It was quite an uphill climb.

It seems that this Shrine attracts more visitors at night because it is an impressive sight under lights but also because it is situated high above the city of Kyoto. Most people were more absorbed with looking out from the boundaries of the Shrine than with looking at the Shrine itself. It was no wonder that this was the case as Kyoto and its Telecom Tower were lovely as their lights were just coming to life, especially as the city was only two or three kilometres away.

The walk down from the Shrine was not easy. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people were making their way up the hill. When we eventually reached the bottom we were at a

large traffic junction. Getting across to the other side was tricky but we eventually found our way to an underground station and boarded a train that would take us to the station close to our hotel. As a final gesture, our hosts insisted on buying us some dinner. This was embarrassing as we felt that they had spent enough money on us already. Luckily, however, there was a McDonalds close by and we said that a light dinner was all we needed.

After dinner our hosts insisted in walking the short distance to our hotel with us. Goodbyes were formal and awkward at first until Mikako said, "How about a hug!" Even after that we had to enter the elevator before our friends would leave.

There is a little twist to this tale. Before we said our goodbyes we told our hosts that if, at any time, they wanted to come to Australia we would look after them. Ten days after we arrived home we received an email from Mikako which said, "Guess what – I'm coming to Australia." She landed at Sydney just two weeks later on Christmas Eve and stayed with Mum and Dad for 17 days. During this time they took her to the Gold Coast and Sydney as well as having a look at all of Canberra's attractions.

Next day we completed our preparations to leave our hotel and get to Kyoto Station where, instead of a train, we were catching a bus to Kansai Airport, Osaka. The bus was so much more convenient than getting a train to the airport. It was cheaper and was more direct. As it turned out, we and a Japanese man were the only passengers on this interesting trip. We traveled on a freeway past Osaka which seemed to go forever. This city appeared to be heavily industrialized and didn't seem to have the appeal of Kyoto.

When we arrived at 1pm, Kansai Airport was deserted. Our flight was not due to depart for more than another eight hours. I think that this was the most boring and frustrating period of our trip. We were really looking forward to getting home by this time. When the call came to board our aircraft it was very welcome.

Our flight back to Australia was quite relaxing. Our only problem with it was that we had to endure a stopover in Brisbane. We love Brisbane but, on this occasion, we could have happily bypassed it. In the end, notwithstanding Dad's little problem with customs that I mentioned earlier, we felt really good when we saw the big sign at Sydney Airport – Welcome Home.

My dialysing around the world had gone much better than I was expecting. Did I learn any lessons? The most important lesson I learned was that I should not have assumed that the units at which I was dialysing would stock all the items I needed for a safe and satisfactory dialysis. I thought I had covered all areas and had brought ample medication and other stores with me, but what I didn't anticipate was that not one unit stocked the size of catheter vital for my dialysis. I carried some stocks but, because no unit advised me that they didn't keep this size, I didn't have enough. Yes, when I told the units the size of catheter I used, they should have informed me that they did not stock them. However, it was me who paid the penalty for their oversight, not the units. If there are stores that are essential to my dialysis and the units I am visiting have not specifically

told me that these stores will be available for me, I will never again assume that they will be available. Next time, I will carry sufficient essentials to last every dialysis plus a few spares.

If you have ever thought of taking an overseas holiday and your general health is reasonable, I urge you not to let your doubts about dialysing in another country stop you from doing so. It is not too difficult to find a dialysis unit in your chosen area. The site www.globaldialysis.com provides basic but valuable information on units around the world. The Fresenius and Gambro websites also give information on holiday dialysis. In the end, our most successful method of finding a good dialysis unit was to simply enter a search on Google – for example, “holiday dialysis in London”. It worked for me. Whichever site we used, we focused on units with a web address. If you can’t negotiate arrangements via email, the whole process becomes too difficult. Good luck!!

If there are questions you would like to ask me about dialysing overseas, or about my experiences generally, please feel free to contact me on walfords@webone.com.au.