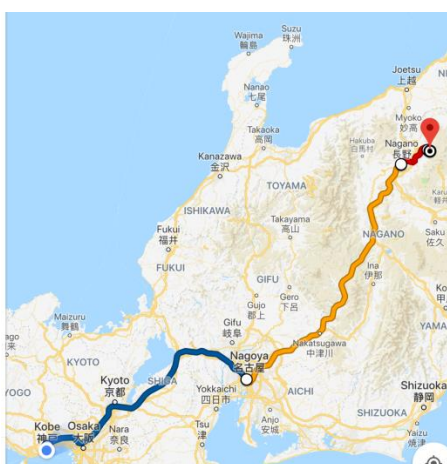


Update 3: 28th January 2018 sailing out of Kobe Harbour - next port Shanghai China

It must be something bred into my psyche – the instinctive conviction that a few millimetres of snow will shut down every form of transport for hundreds of miles! But not in Japan.

I've spent a lot of time over the last four days on Japanese trains. Most of it was during active snowfalls and traveling through landscapes covered not in a dusting but in many inches, and sometimes over a foot, of snow. The trains were 'delayed' by sometimes (gasp!) a whole 15 mins! But that was rare – they went a little slower in places but I didn't once have a cancelled train.



The day we docked I headed out on a long trek north to the mountains to see the famous snow monkeys. For the first hour or so the train was full of SASers – all heading to Kyoto and Tokyo. But I switched at Nagoya for the route north. After that it was just me, my rail pass, google maps and a rough idea of where I was going!



Shibu Onsen – where visitors sample the nine public onsen often in traditional dress

I was heading to stay in a traditional Ryoken, complete with futon beds, onsen (bathing pool –

no swimsuits allowed) and Japanese meals. The snow monkey park is just outside Shibu Onsen, the home of many hot springs, a few minutes from Yudanaka train station. After more than 7 hours travelling, alongside the 4 hours it took to get through immigration, I finally got there in the evening. They kindly kept dinner for me (a spectacular mixture of traditional Japanese foods) and then I was so tired I didn't really notice I was sleeping on 2 inches of mattress on the floor.

The next morning I set off early, getting a ride to the start of the park, and then the 2km+ trek up the hillside to the hot spring where the monkeys congregate in the day. I find wildlife tourism fascinating. Sometimes I spend as much time observing the tourists and the business operations as I do the actual wildlife! The trek up was hard. Bitterly cold, with snow falling every time the wind blew and a long, often steep, winding path through the woods. To be honest the trek down was almost as bad; trying not to slip in the ice and snow.



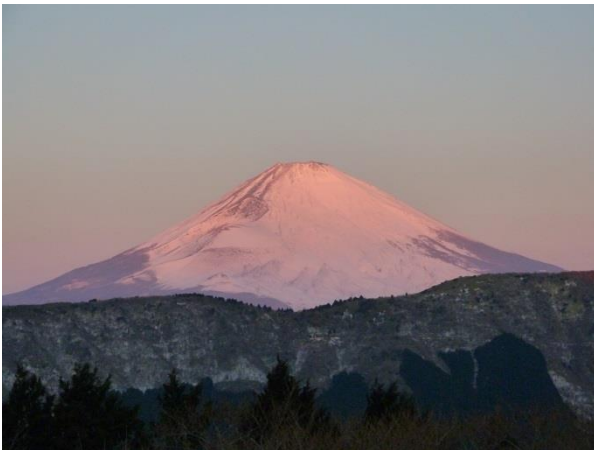
I spent two nights in the Ryoken. The second night it was so cold outside that all the external pipes feeding the showers and toilets froze. I had to wash using the onsen water and then soaked to try and get the cold out of my bones! I left very early the next day – that pesky British fear of the snow kicked in and I started to worry about getting to the next place.

Another long trek by train down past Tokyo (where they had an unprecedented snowfall of 17 inches) to Odawara. Here I transferred onto a little bus (finding it was a task!) and then it was an hour travelling up into the mountains again, for over an hour on very windy and steep roads, covered in snow. It was bizarre to hear the recorded warning, about 40 minutes into the journey, that the bus was passing through an 'active' area of volcanic gasses and to be careful.

Then they dropped me off at the bus stop by my hotel. It seemed a long way from anywhere!



But this is what I found when I found the hotel. The magnificent Mount Fuji. After a night on another futon I woke to the view of Mount Fuji at dawn.



Then it was off again - heading back towards Kobe. This was a long journey back. First the bus down the mountain, then two Shinkansen and a local train, plus a mistaken side route to the wrong pier, and then finally back to my ship.

It was fascinating to see the landscape of Japan across all those trains. The well-tended, regimented agricultural plots, currently all covered in huge amounts of snow and the expansive fields of solar panels I saw across all the routes. Those surprised me – I am wondering about their solar industry. Who the players are, whether the industry has consolidated into a handful of key actors or if these are more individual plots.



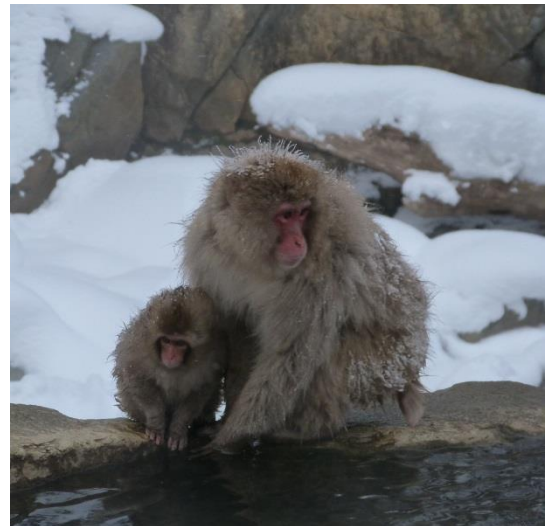
I learnt a lot about Japan in the pre-arrival global studies briefings we all attend. Then even more in watching the daily everyday activities of people travelling around Japan. From the patient queuing at the train stations, to the unfailing politeness and willingness to help, and the sheer amazing organisation of everything (in snow!).

It's also some of the subtle gestures – I understand a lot more I think of what the body language and behaviour of Japanese students might be and where it comes from. Even the masks – loads of people wear them. I always used to think it was about the wearer being afraid to catch germs. It's not! It's about them protecting you from a cold or cough they have.

And to finish off more snow monkeys!



And some more....



Japan was an amazing experience, from the brass band that played as we arrived to the Japanese drumming band played us out as we sailed away and everything in-between. My final memory of Japan is of our SASers shouting in unison from the deck Arigatō to our amazing hosts. Diane