

A Summer Trip to Japan: Temples, a Typhoon and a Mountaintop

by Kate Holder



The Golden Pavilion in Kyoto

Japan in summer can be taxing. When you aren't swooning from the relentless heat and extreme humidity, you may find yourself caught in the path of a typhoon — while hiking to the top of Mount Fuji, no less. Such was my experience when I traveled to Japan for the first time in August 2006. Despite the sweat and the scary weather, it was one of the best trips I've had, in one of the most beautiful and fascinating countries I've seen.

I traveled with a group of friends from Tucson. Our 10-day itinerary included the main island of Honshu, Tokyo, Kyoto and scaling Mount Fuji. Our overnight flight landed at Tokyo's Narita Airport. After a 90-minute train ride, we came upon downtown Tokyo in all its ultramodern glass-and-steel glory. Kinetic images flashed across huge video screens and billboards high above the hordes of pedestrians. I have never seen so many glaring electronic images, or so many people streaming across extrawide crosswalks. I was thrilled to be there despite jet lag, the heat and the 80-percent humidity that slicked my skin.

Everything was so clean. Trains, buses, even the streets were pristine, something I'd notice throughout my journey. Our Western-style, high-rise hotel in Tokyo was also spotless and comfortable even though my room measured only about eight by six feet. We enjoyed our first dinner in a traditional Japanese restaurant, where we removed our shoes, sat on cushions at a low table and ate with chopsticks. We shared small servings of sushi, marinated eel, tofu and julienned vegetables with rice.

Although Tokyo was both the start and end point of our itinerary, we spent only about three days there. We walked a lot, shopped a little, and enjoyed the company and hospitality of some wonderful Japanese friends who acted as our

hosts and helped us plan our trip. They invited our group to their beautiful home and took us to excellent Tokyo restaurants. For lunch, we visited a sushi bar that served small plates of sushi on a moving conveyor belt that ran the length of a huge counter where customers sat.

The food was a revelation everywhere we went. I discovered cold soba noodles made of buckwheat, and a great Japanese beer called Yebisu. A bento box lunch that I bought on a train included purple rice and a delicious salted plum. Convenience stores sold bread rolls filled with a scrumptious sweet-bean paste. Eating became my favorite part of the trip!

We traveled to both Kyoto and Mount Fuji by train, which is the best way to see Japan. We purchased Japan Rail Passes for unlimited travel on both local as well as the Shinkansen high-speed bullet trains. The trains run on time, to the minute, and offer sweeping views of the verdant countryside.

Kyoto is about 250 miles west of Tokyo. It was the imperial capital for over a millennium and features several of Japan's greatest historical sites, Buddhist temples, and Shinto shrines. During our three-day stay we toured the huge Nijojo Castle and visited several famous Zen temples.

The Ryoanji Temple is known for its mid-15th-century Zen garden, a raked expanse of gravel containing only 15 stones, assembled in small clusters and surrounded by a roofed mud wall. Tourists lingered around the Zen garden, steeped in silent serenity. We also saw the brilliantly gilded Kinkakuji Temple, aka the Golden Pavilion. Perched on a stone platform in the middle of the beautiful Mirror Pond, two of the pavilion's three stories are painted in 18-karat gold leaf.

Whereas Kyoto charmed with its old-world culture, Mount Fuji loomed before us darkly amid a summer tem-

pest. Two days before we were to hike Fuji, Typhoon Maria formed just off the southeastern coast of Honshu. It was heading our way, with winds gusting up to 75 miles per hour. We had no room in our itinerary for flexibility — we had to hike Fuji on Aug. 9 or not at all. Luckily, the typhoon was downgraded when it hit land, making it safe enough for us to climb. But as we found out later, the tropical storm had stalled and left bands of bad weather in its wake.

Our hike up Fuji began around 12:30 p.m. at Station 5 (where most hikers start), which is over 7,000 feet in elevation (Fuji's volcanic crown rises to 12,395 feet). Our group ambled along excitedly, enjoying the cooler temperatures and views of Lake Kawaguchi. The sky was mixed, but visibility was good. As we ascended the volcanic cinder path, our group split, and I moved ahead with just one other hiking companion, a young man who was willing to proceed at my pace, which was much slower than his. My pack was loaded with extra layers of clothing, water and energy bars.

Soon after we moved above the tree line, the sky grew gray and it began to drizzle. I pulled out my rain gear and covered up my pack. There were still patches of blue sky, but the winds picked up and it grew colder. The black, barren path occasionally traversed rocky outcroppings that were steep and slippery — I huffed and puffed my way up those. After a couple of hours, and as the two of us climbed higher, the crowds dwindled. We stopped at three of the trail stations along the way to buy more water or to use the bathroom. The winds picked up again, and we found ourselves alone on the trail, shouting at each other above the gale. The sky closed around us and visibility dropped

to about 40 feet. Winds buffeted us and gusted to around 30 miles per hour. Now I was scared.

Fuji is a sacred mountain, said to represent a kind of deity. So I silently spoke to it, said it could bluster and bully all it wanted, but just let us get up and down safely. I couldn't remember ever feeling this physically vulnerable, or small. We pushed on, and after a four-and-a-half-hour ascent, the two of us made it to the top, to Station 10, at around 5 p.m. Our celebration was brief: there was no one in sight, and because of the storm, Station 10 was shuttered and the door locked! We banged on the door and were let in by young Japanese workers who lived atop Fuji for the summer hiking season. Ever gracious, they fed us bowls of hot curry and rice and let us sit by the fire. Even when the mountain is angry, its sentries are hospitable.

After a short rest, I donned every layer of clothing I'd brought with me, including my fleece jacket. We went back outside and braved more high winds and rain. We found the descending trail and moved down it as fast as we could, still alone. We finished our seven-and-a-half-hour round-trip hike in the darkness, with the aid of headlamps and the determination of refugees seeking a safe haven. But we still had the rest of our group to worry about. As it turned out, they'd stopped at Station 8 and made it down safely the next morning.

Fuji blew hard but it never struck; I thanked it for that, and for the adventure of a lifetime.

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