

Visit Andy In Yokohama (April 2023)

After 10 years living in one, then two rooms in a share house in the Yokodai section of Yokohama, Andy and Suzuna decided they needed to move into a larger place that would give more opportunities for their two children, Melina (Age 8) and Tyler (Age 2). With this change, they got much more living space, four bedrooms, two bathrooms and even a large triangular shaped yard with grass. The balcony around the second floor also overlooks the local area. There is a nice little park across the street, and another (larger) park down the street. They are close enough to their previous place across the street from the Yokodai station on the Negishi train line so they can walk there. That distance is still too far for walking challenged me.

They really did a nice professional job remodeling what was a more traditional Japanese house by removing the wall between the kitchen and the living area, adding new electrical fixtures, and turning a wall into a 65-inch ultramodern OLED television and sound bar system. The new furniture and cabinets were made from very light wood in contrast to the original doors and windows which were all very dark wood. They even installed a heated carpet in the living area along with a completely new kitchen and laundry. Their new place even has a one-car garage at street level. There are 21 steps up from the street to their front door. Of course, since it is a Japanese house, the front door has an umbrella closet, a fish/frog tank, and slippers waiting for everyone. The house has many azalea bushes in front, but the neglected back yard needed major help. Andy recruited his friend Ken from Calabasas to help with the renovations.

We used Delta Frequent Flyer miles (120,000 miles for two people) to get us roundtrip from LAX to Haneda Airport in the south side of Tokyo nearer to Yokohama than the much farther and larger Narita. Andy sensibly told us to take the train from the airport to his local station in Yokodai. We were three hours late on arrival, due to the Kamchatka Volcano cloud detour, large headwinds, and slow Japanese customs service. We took the Keikyu line from the airport to the main station in Yokohama and then attempted to transfer to the Negishi line of Japan Rail (JR). Fortunately, a friendly Japanese baseball fan (really likes Shohei Ohtani) showed us how to make the transfer in that huge station. When we got to Yokodai, Melina was waiting at the exit to take us to the illegally parked Andy car.

Although Yokohama is right next to Tokyo, it is a huge port city in its own with over 3.7 million people. We were trying to travel there for the famous cherry blossoms, but we were four weeks late this year when we landed on April 13. I thought the huge number of azaleas in bloom everywhere at that time were spectacularly colorful, they were frequently planted under the cherry trees.

Games Day: After two days of rain and recovery, Andy took us to his game group at a local community center on a Sunday afternoon. The people were Americans living in the area who got together once a month to play board games. We played an interesting "steam" rail game where four players tried to build and operate a rail link from Vienna to Trieste. Chris played it very well and won by a large margin.

Sankeien Gardens: Suzuna drove us to the very nice gardens and associated shrine. This was an old elegant family home and nature area in the Japanese style. I was reminded of the Japanese Water Garden at Sepulveda Dam and the Japan house at Huntington Gardens. Their large koi pond had many turtles and a few large herons along with many other birds and azaleas in the surrounding nature area.

Hakone: Andy suggested we take a two-day trip to the Hakone area. He got us the Green Pass and sent us off on the train from Yokodai with excellent instructions on where to go and what to do. We took the line west to Ofune where it ended and changed to the train to Odawara, where there is another train that comes from Shinjuku on the west side of Tokyo and even the Shinkansen from Tokyo goes there. Somewhere in the distance is Mt. Fuji. On the track in front of us is the red or orange train that takes two switchbacks to climb up the hill. This track looks like an old steam train route from 1900. We stopped at the Hakone Open Air Museum, which had several large modern artwork pieces as well as mobiles scattered around the area. There was an excellent restaurant and a diverse buffet overlooking the grounds. The museum also included an excellent Picasso exhibit, showing his thoughts on art.

Where to Stay?: The previous evening, Chris had gone through the Internet to find a place, but prices were high. She found what looked like a reasonable place in Gora at the end of the train line for \$150. It was supposedly right next to the incline two-car railway in Gora that also appeared to be a relic of 1900. We could not find the place. Finally, Chris found a cab that took us to a parking lot where the driver told us to climb up a narrow rock path for four blocks to a certain street. She then found the place with a sign on the door to call a certain number to get the code to enter the room. No response. I sat down nearby and noticed a smelly brown liquid leak from the wall nearby. REJECTED! We climbed up the path for two more blocks where there was a paved street, a parking lot, and a nice-looking building.

Ryokan: Chris made an executive decision to stay there. \$600 got us into the place that was actually a ryokan or super deluxe Japanese resort hotel there. Change of clothes required to ryokan provided attire and slippers, super gourmet dinner served at your table in a private room with wagyu sukiyaki, and many thoughtful courses. The suite included two private bedrooms, a private mineral spring tub, views of the area, and a custom breakfast again at a private table. The grounds contained several hot mineral water onsen in the forest. They even gave us an included taxi ride to the incline station in downtown Gora.

Hakone Ropeway: At the north end of the multi-stop incline railway, there was a large newer gondola ride. It swooped over the volcanic territory underneath until I started to smell the distinct sulfur odor coming from the yellowish volcanic ground. The gondola stopped at Owakudani which is an active volcanic zone with sulfur vents and hot springs. There was a volcanic museum there. Chris bought some of the famous duck eggs cooked in the sulfurous spring water. The legend has it that eating one prolongs life by seven years. There was some solar artwork there and a very large gift shop. The next section of the ropeway continued onward from there with a great view of Mt. Fuji and then dropped down to an end terminal adjacent to Lake Ashinoka.

Pirate Ship: The lake has three large, very well decorated "Pirate" ships running around the lake with three stops and stunning views of the area. There are red torii in the water at the stations around the lake. Refreshments are available on ship. We got off at the second stop, boarded the waiting bus, which drove up the steep hill, through the thick forest and wound up back at a bus stop near Odawara. We got some gelato there, crossed the street and boarded the trains to Yokodai.

Sea Paradise: Now what? CLAMS? As it turned out the next Saturday is the super-low tide in Yokohama harbor, it is really crowded with a thousand or more people going to the shore to dig for razor clams. Andy planned to meet up with the parents and children from the Melina's school for the event. There is an old Japanese seaside estate house there and we are located just across the

harbor from Yokohama Sea Paradise. This is an aquarium, Ferris wheel, roller coaster, and other entertainment options on an island. There are many fishing boats going across the harbor. Off in the distance there are two large red cranes with the signage saying Sumitomo Yokosuka. Everyone is out in the sand off the shoreline collecting razor clams. People are sandy and wet; our group collected about thirty clams; we then went back to the house to cleanup. Suzuna fixed the clams the next day and they were delicious.

Floral Exhibit: The next day, we went to a very large Flower Festival at the Kanazawa Zoo Garden property. The planted flower arrangement up a hill was quite spectacular. Down in a valley with a river, there were many fish flags arranged over the top. Further down the area, there was a large variety of zip lines for kids. The children were especially enthralled with a large net network. Andy chased Melina and her friends around the area and was late to get back to us. He had left us his cell phone, and car keys, but we did not know where he parked the car. So, there was no easy way to find him in the area. We just went to the drop-off zone and waited. I noted that the symbol of that zoo was the striped rear end of the very shy Okapi, only found wild in the Congo jungle.

Kushikatsu Tanaka: In looking through some articles on the Internet, I found an article about a lady who found an old Tanaka family recipe for Kushikatsu. That recipe led to the founding of a series of restaurants that have been very successful. I asked Andy to take us to one of those. It was located next to his train station; I was expecting a small stand, but it was a large very crowded place even on a Sunday night. The detailed menu had features for various groups like all you can drink beer, included selfserve-softserve ice cream, and free tacoyaki to make at your table if your group had children. Melina showed her chopstick expertise at fixing these.

Kamakura: Andy took a day off of work, and he and Ken took us to the historical Japanese town of Kamakura. Andy arranged a ricksha ride for us through the narrow old streets and alleys with classic houses. We went to an old two-family shrine with tea service and tall bamboo forest. The main street starts near the ocean and goes to a large pond area with the tall red torii at either end. This town is famous for the 13.35-meter brass statue of Buddha from 1252 as well as many other temples. That evening Andy cooked us a wonderful Tempura vege/seafood dinner.

Yokosuka: Ken went with Chris and Lou to see the old naval battleship Mikasa, built in Bristol, Britain for the Japanese Navy in 1902. From a distance, it looked like it was floating, but a closer look found that it was surrounded by a sea of concrete with a barrier to the water. There was a large play area and an old 2-8-2 steam locomotive, along with memorial trees. The ship was a participant of the key Tsushima battle of the Russo-Japanese war in 1905. We then took the ferry to the formerly fortified Sarushima Island in the harbor. A parking lot next to the harbor had several thousand new Subaru vehicles ready to be shipped. We had Tonkatsu for dinner.

Strawberries: It was now Saturday, the weather was clear, the children were out of school. We decided to go pick strawberries. Andy found a convenient location about a 20-minute drive in the peninsula to the south. There was a fixed fee per person for all the strawberries you could eat. They opened the door on a long plastic covered building that had four long shelves with containers for the soil with strawberry plants in them. The strawberries hung over the edge of the containers at a convenient one meter above the floor. There were several different types of berries; each with its own texture and flavor. All the red berries were about three to four centimeters in length and were very flavorful and sweet. YUMMY.

Jogashima: Our tummies were berry full, so we drove down over a bridge to the island at end of the Miura peninsula. There was a large grassy area and a lookout tower there. We wandered around the very windy field. I got blown off a platform and Melina attempted to jump and fly through the air. I threw my hat into the air and it went about 20 meters. Gravity won. Afterwards, we went to a little restaurant by the shore run by two ladies. There were only seven seats inside and many seats outside. Our group occupied all the inside seats (it was cold and windy outside) and had an interesting Japanese dinner featuring the local area specialty, Maguro.

Hiroshi: We agreed to meet Chris' work friend from the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington DC where she worked back in 1983. We had met with him on our last trip to Japan in 2006. Since he lives far on the other side of Tokyo in Chiba, we agreed to meet at the Haneda airport. He formally gave us the gift of elegantly wrapped mochi in various flavors. His wife was ill, so we did not have much time together.