Chapter 30
Chengdu-Beppu 2010

Journal of Trips to:
Chengdu, China, October 11-17, and
Beppu, Japan, October 30 – November 6, 2010

Saturday, October 16, 2010, Amsterdam airport

I've just about finished a trip to Chengdu, China, for a two-day conference. My trip took me through Amsterdam, and on the return the only flight to Amsterdam arrived after the last flight to Detroit, so I'm staying the night. I'm in a Yotel. It's a place to sleep inside the airport, the rooms of which – called cabins – are apparently modeled after the sleeping quarters on certain first-class airlines. The cabin has a bed that you climb up to, a toilet, sink, and shower, and a rack for your suitcase. There are no windows except in

the door to the corridor. Getting to the cabin through the corridors was, I imagined, like getting to a room in a submarine. The room does have a flat screen TV and WiFi, so there isn't too much else you could want. Except an electrical outlet. If there's one here, I haven't found it. I'm just using my battery. In the morning I'll check out and return to the airport's business-class lounge, where I already spent several hours and had dinner. So, I won't use this cabin for much more than sleep.

The conference was the Global Trade Forum, an event that the OECD (an international organization of rich countries based in Paris that I've dealt with before) holds every year. This year they wanted it in China, as a gesture of friendship towards China, and they chose to hold it in Beijing. But the Chinese insisted on Chengdu, a large city in Szechuan Province in the west of China that doesn't get much press. It's not clear that Chengdu has much at all to offer tourists, although I had to leave today before the opportunities they provided to tour the city, so I don't know that for sure. Whatever the attractions may be of Chengdu, it is certainly true that our hosts were very forthcoming and treated us well.

Conference podium, from trip

My flight from Detroit arrived mid-morning Tuesday in Amsterdam, where I settled in for a 4-hour wait before my flight to Chengdu. I hadn't been there long before Mike Plummer saw me and introduced me to others from the OECD. Mike, who appeared in one of my journals many years ago on my first trip to Thailand, is now the head of OECD's development research division. He and the others had flown in from Paris and would be on the flight with me to Chengdu. Actually, they wouldn't exactly be with me. They were all flying business class, as required by the OECD on long flights, whereas I, who had been given cash to spend as I saw fit, was flying economy.

We arrived in Chengdu at 9:00 AM Wednesday morning, so by then I had slept two nights in a row on planes. We were met there by a host of young women dressed alike, each assigned to one of us. Mine was Sue, who had e-mailed me a few days before to get details of my travels. They ushered us to a waiting bus, and each sat with their charges on the ride into the city. Sue and I had a nice conversation. She is a college student studying public health.

We all were staying at the Shangri-La Hotel, a large modern hotel near the center of the city, and the site of the conference. My room, on the 29th floor, was as nice as any I've stayed in, equipped with everything one could imagine wanting, and more. In the closet,

next to the safe, were two gas masks. That's one amenity that was new to me. I never used it.

Another amenity I did use, though: A flat-screen TV built into the wall of the bathroom at the foot of the bathtub. There was also a shower, which I would use each day, but I couldn't resist taking a bath while watching TV, something I've never done. So that was the first thing I did. I watched a show on the National Geographic Channel about how the Earth will change as the sun grows older over time. You don't want to know.

Shangri-La Horel, from Web 2025

I had the day to myself until a reception at 6:30, so I went out for a walk in the neighborhood of the hotel. Just across a narrow side street, as I'd seen when we arrived, was a German beer hall, built to look exactly as it would in Bavaria. It seemed out of place, but I gather from talking to others later that it did good business with the business crowd at the hotel.

The hotel was on a busy road that ran along the river that runs through Chengdu. There were no convenient places to cross this road, at least that I could see, so I waited for a break in the flow of traffic to hustle across. The river wasn't much to look at, just a muddy expanse under cloudy skies, so I only walked along it short way. There was an interesting bridge across the river that was not meant for cars at all – there were steps to get up to its surface – and it had places of business on it, restaurants and such. The bridge itself was built in a Chinese style and may have been quite old. The bridge and its buildings were in good shape, but many other places along the river were under construction, and it didn't seem like the walkway along the river was quite ready to be used. Before long I crossed back to the hotel side.

There, not far from the hotel, I found a large complex of buildings that seemed to be forming into a plaza for tourists. There were large brightly colored statues of cartoonish people placed along a walkway, and signs indicated the future locations of various stores. Most of them were not yet open, but one was, and I went in: Starbucks. I drank a coffee and felt very much at home.

I returned to the hotel and had lunch. The restaurant there was large, and its buffet had some half a dozen stations with different types of food. One of the stations was explicitly Japanese, and another seemed to be vaguely western. But the rest were Chinese, one with fish and shellfish, another with dumplings, another with rice and stir-fried vegetables, another with desserts.

And one station had noodles. There must have been six different kinds of noodles in big bowls, and a cook behind them who placed your selection into a basket that they then

immersed in boiling water along with your selection of vegetables. After a moment, both were ready and were dumped into a bowl to which was added a clear broth plus a scoop of a darker liquid. I took this back to my table and soon realized that this combination was essentially the same as the noodle dish that I always try to buy at the Tokyo airport, where it is called Szechuan Spicy Noodles. Since I was in Szechuan, this made good sense.

Back in my room, I first spent time preparing my presentation for the next day. Then I lay on the bed and tried to read the Economist. That didn't work. I fell asleep and didn't awake until after 8:00, by which time the reception would have been over. So, without much regret, I missed the chance to meet others who would be attending the conference. I wondered what I'd do for dinner, but I then noticed that while I'd slept somebody had brought a plate of fresh fruit into my room. I ate a banana and an apple and worked more on my presentation.

On Thursday the conference was to start a little after 9:00, in this same hotel. I had breakfast in the same place that I'd had lunch, where the extensive buffet had now been modified for breakfast. I found my usual cereal, juice, and coffee, then tried a few other things. I wasn't too adventurous, though. I was glad to see that the noodle station was there as before, and I finished my breakfast with that.

I hadn't given much thought to what the conference would be like, but from prior OECD conferences, I should not have been surprised by the layout. In a large room, tables were arranged in a large U, with places all around it bearing name plates for countries. Behind each of the two uprights of the U were two more rows of tables without nameplates. One of the many uniformed young women who greeted me ushered me to the front row place for the USA. I objected that I was not a delegate and should not be sitting there. Two men in the second row behind it, clearly also from the US and there in supporting roles, offered to let me sit with them, which I would have done immediately if I could have climbed over the table to join them. I tried to walk around, but I was grabbed by another greeter who insisted that I must sit at the US place. I think they were afraid that no US delegate would show up, and that would look bad. I took the place and settled in.

Shortly after the speeches began, my friend Michael Ferrantino from the US International Trade Commission was ushered in and placed in the seat next to me. That seat had a sign for the UK, which they removed. Michael was, it turned out, the US delegate. Fortunately, nobody ever did appear from the UK (and they removed its sign on Friday).

We were each given headsets so that we could listen to simultaneous translations, and we had to hand over an ID to assure that we would return them. Given that almost everyone would need them, I don't know why they didn't just place them on all the tables. Were they worried that we'd steal them?

The headsets were certainly needed, as about half the speeches and other talks were in Chinese, even by speakers who knew English. A few began by saying, in English, that they would speak in Chinese because they weren't confident of their English. If they

ever got to hear their own translations, I suspect they might have decided that their own broken English would be better. The translators were skilled, I'm sure. But I always have a hard time comprehending them. And here it was made harder by hearing the speaker's spoken Chinese, usually quite loud, at the same time.

My main job at this conference was to give the Keynote Speech after lunch that first day. Usually that would mean that after people had time to eat, they would stay at their lunch tables and listen to the speaker. Apparently, the Chinese insisted that it not be done that way. Lunch was in a second large room next to the one where the conference was held, with tables on both sides of a long buffet that ran most of the length of the room. That buffet might indeed have been an awkward presence had I tried to speak in that room, but in any case, that wasn't to happen. After lunch we were to return to the main room for my talk.

Conference room, from trip

I got there on time, of course, and went up onto the podium where the table had a name plate for me as well as several more for the speakers of the first afternoon session. I sat there and looked out on what was a nearly empty room. After a few minutes, the highest OECD official at the conference came over and said he'd keep me company, as I looked lonely. We discussed how we might go about getting the conference participants to come into the room. The OECD organizers had anticipated this problem and had suggested a bell. But the Chinese hosts had vetoed that. I think my companion got several others to go out and herd people into the room, and it did gradually fill up. By the time Michael Ferrantino introduced me, there was a decent audience.

My talk went well, I think. There was time for questions afterwards, and I took them. One was from a Chinese fellow who gave quite a long speech, which I desperately tried to understand using my headset. Michael later described it as Chinese Government Speech No. 19. I got enough that I was able to respond to a couple of points. That was a relief.

Having finished my duty for the day, I didn't pay much attention to the talks in the afternoon. I didn't really think that mattered, since nobody would care in this large group, and indeed I'd already seen one fellow whom I knew from New Zealand quietly sleeping on the other side of the U. Unfortunately, I paid a small price for this when my seatmate on my flight from Chengdu to Amsterdam yesterday turned out to be a woman

who had been at the conference. I asked if she had been a delegate, and she said no, she had been one of the presenters that afternoon. There is really not much excuse for failing to recognize one of the few western women speaking at a conference in China, and an attractive woman from Rome at that.

The day ended with a Welcome Banquet in the same room where we'd had lunch. This was not a buffet, but a multi-course dinner served to us at nicely decorated tables. The room had perhaps a dozen round tables for eight or ten, plus one very large round table that must have seated more than 20. The large table had name plates, so I looked for a smaller table that had people I more or less recognized and sat down. I'd not had time to settle in, however, before Mike Plummer grabbed me and insisted that I sit at the big table of honored guests. There wasn't a place for me, but he snatched a nameplate before I could see who it was and plopped me down between two Chinese men that, it pretty much goes without saying, I didn't know. Way across the table I could see another friend, Alan Winters, but he was way too far away to talk to. Neither of my Chinese neighbors showed any sign of wanting to talk to me, so I sat quietly. In a way, this was better than being next to a stranger to whom I was expected to talk. For about half of the dinner, therefore, I spoke not at all and just ate.

The eating wasn't as easy as it sounds, though. It appears that, as honored guests, we were served different things than the masses at the smaller tables. Dish after dish would arrive and be placed before us, then be removed to be replaced by another. There was a menu that told what all these were, some of which I did understand, but much of it was still a mystery.

One dish was easy to understand: deep fried goose foot with rice noodles. The noodles were good. I tried to eat the foot, which was large and looked like it might have some meat on it. But I had a hard enough time holding it with my chopsticks, and anywhere I bit I only found bone. Fortunately, nobody expected us to clean our plates.

I said I didn't talk to my Chinese neighbors, but that's not quite right. Repeatedly, somebody would stand up and make a toast, at which point we each would raise our glasses of red wine (already poured before I got there, or I'd have declined) and clink them with our neighbors. That at least connected me just a bit with the two guests who were two away from me, one from Brazil and the other from Pakistan. They both spoke English, and I managed to talk with them individually a few times while the two Chinese were talking to each other, which they did a lot, speaking past me.

Towards the end of the dinner the one on my left suddenly spoke English to me, and so we did chat a bit. I don't remember about what.

On Friday the conference ended mid-afternoon. I had not intended to try to see Chengdu, since it hadn't seemed feasible. But I did want to do a bit of shopping, and the hotel didn't have much to offer. I asked about that, and the concierge suggested a shopping street that I could get to easily by taxi. I did.

On the way I noticed one oddity that I don't recall seeing anywhere before, though perhaps it will become more common. Some of the traffic lights had only a single light, instead of the usual three for red, yellow, and green. The single light, which was big and round, was able to glow in each of these colors as needed. I can see how this is now possible with new forms of lighting, such as LEDs. And now that it is possible, I'm not sure what purpose is really served by having separate lights for each color.

Starbucks, from trip

The shopping street was nice. It seemed to have been created by renovating a neighborhood of very old buildings. I can't be sure of that, of course, but the entrances to each of the shops had the high threshold that I know were common (although I've forgotten why) in medieval Chinese architecture. The first shop that I saw as I entered the street was Starbucks, which you might think set a rather unfortunate tone. But it was very tastefully done, and I finished my visit with a drink there, sitting by an open window looking out on the street. Most of the other shops were more Chinese, and I was able to find a few things that I was happy to buy.

The first thing that I saw that I thought I might buy was a metal bracelet that looked old and seemed to be one of a kind. I asked the price and was told 200 yuan. That's over $30, and while perhaps not unreasonable it was more than I was thinking of spending at that point. When I shook my head, the man asked how much I'd be willing to pay. I said 20 yuan, and this got quite a laugh from both him and others nearby. I walked on, wondering if he would follow me with other offers, but he did not. I didn't much care whether I got the bracelet, but I had to wonder if I'm ever going to learn how to do this sort of bargaining successfully.

Three girls, from trip

As I said, I ended my visit with coffee at Starbucks. As I drank it and read my magazine, three girls appeared just outside the open window next to me, indicating that they wanted to take my picture. I said yes, of course, feeling flattered, perhaps inappropriately. I then asked to take their picture myself with my phone, and they posed nicely, each holding up two fingers in a V. I have no idea what that meant, if anything.

My trip home, starting the next day, took most of two days. As I explained above, I spent the night in the Yotel at Schiphol Airport, where I began this journal. I've now moved on, as I'll explain. The one thing I learned as I prepared to leave the Yotel was that there was, after all, an electrical outlet. I'd blocked my view of it with my suitcase.

On the flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, I sat next to an attractive young woman. She was reading what appeared to be a medical textbook, so I asked if she was a doctor or a doctor-student. She said she was a doctor, and that was about all the conversation that we had for more than half the flight. At one point, though, we hit a patch of turbulence, and I noticed how quickly she tensed up. Evidently not a relaxed flyer.

About two thirds of the way through the flight, a flight attendant asked over the PA if there was a doctor on board, and if so, could they go to a seat further back in the plane. My seatmate had on her earphones and seemed not to hear this, so I touched her arm to get her attention so that she heard the announcement. I wasn't sure this was appropriate, since perhaps she did hear but preferred to ignore it. Anyhow, she did respond and went back to help. She returned right away, though, as another doctor had gotten there first.

This was enough to get us talking, and we chatted through most of the rest of the flight. She was from Venezuela and was on some sort of fellowship at the U of M hospital. She was returning from Prague where she had attended a workshop on ultrasound. I enjoyed talking with her. I learned that her boyfriend, also a doctor, was saddled with the usual huge debts of American medical students. She, on the other hand, had been trained in Venezuela, where the education was free.

Chengdu, from trip

Chengdu, from trip

Chengdu, from trip

Chengdu, from trip

Chengdu, from trip

Thursday, November 4, Beppu, Japan

I didn't quite finish writing the above in Amsterdam, and once I got home, I didn't find time to complete it. Now I'm nearing the end of another trip, to Japan, and I've got some time. So, I'll include that trip in this journal as well.

I'm in Beppu, Japan, for the Sylff Administrators Meeting being held at the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU). Sylff stands for Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund, which made $1 million endowments to each of some 70 or so universities around the world to support students who are expected to become leaders and improve the world. This is, apparently, not unambiguously a good thing, as the original Sasakawa was some sort of war criminal in World War II – a rich one apparently. We and the other universities (which include Yale, Princeton, Berkeley and Texas among others in the US, plus many in other countries) seem to have made our peace with this fact and accepted the money. The current Sasakawa attended the meeting, and I met him. He seemed harmless.

The Sylff funding comes through the Nippon Foundation, and the program is administered by the Tokyo Foundation, both of which had staff very much in evidence at the meeting. Even though they have given this money to the universities as endowments, they continue to have considerable leverage over how it is used. So, when they expressed unhappiness that our Economics Department was not going to send anyone to this

Sylff meeting, from trip

meeting, our Chair quickly lined me up to attend and was willing to grant my request for business-class travel. The result has been a pleasant trip: very comfortable and with no expectation that I perform while I'm here.

I flew nonstop from Detroit to Seoul, Korea, where I connected with a short flight to Fukuoka, Japan. Fukuoka and Beppu are on a different island than Tokyo, southwest of it and therefore closer to Korea. From Fukuoka I caught a bus that took almost two hours to reach Beppu, and there I got a taxi for the short ride to the hotel. One always wonders, when traveling, whether arrangements have been made correctly. So, I was pleased when I arrived here late in the evening to find that the reception desk had several envelopes already laid out, one of which had my name on it. They didn't even ask me to fill out a form or provide a credit card. They just handed me my key and showed me to my room on the twelfth floor.

This was Sunday night, and the conference wouldn't start until a reception on Monday evening. I spent the day lounging about the hotel and reading materials for the course that I'm teaching at home.

I'd been given coupons for breakfast each day, and these said that breakfast would be served 7:00-10:00 each day. I therefore went to the restaurant at 7:00, expecting to be one of the first to arrive. Instead, I found a huge room with almost every seat already taken by a huge number of guests, most of whom appeared to be Japanese. Many of them were wearing the same purple robe and slippers that I'd been provided with in my room but had so far ignored. It turns out that this city, and this hotel in particular, is known for its hot springs, and all these people were either on their way to, or from, a hot communal bath. They must have known that the restaurant opens earlier than I'd been told.

I was given a tray and a plate and began assembling my breakfast from the huge buffet, starting with a glass of orange juice. There wasn't a lot of western food, but there was enough that I was able to fill my plate with eggs, bacon, and (Vienna) sausage. Unfortunately, just as I finished filling it, I accidentally knocked over my glass of orange juice, flooding my tray (though not the plate) and part of the buffet table that it was on at the time. I righted the almost empty glass and did my best not to spill the orange juice from the tray onto the floor, carrying my tray while I searched for a place to sit. I was a bit overwhelmed by the crowd of people and confused by what to do.

Then one of the staff got my attention and ushered me into a neighboring room where many tables were empty. I sat down gratefully and contemplated my flooded tray. Almost immediately, another staff person appeared with a dry tray and a full glass of orange juice for me, transferred my plate to it and took away the flooded one. I felt well taken care of.

A bit later I went in search of coffee and found some. On my way back to my table, a woman saw me and said, "You found coffee?" I indicated where it was, and she soon returned and joined me at my table. She was perhaps the only other western person in the

place, a Sylff Administrator from Berkeley. We compared notes on our trips to get here, and it sounded like I'd had a much easier time of it than she had.

Saturday, November 6, Fukuoka, Japan

I'm about to leave for the airport to fly home, through Seoul. A day of touring, yesterday by bus, ended at a hotel here in Fukuoka from which many of us will be departing. My stay in this hotel was too brief to bother getting internet access, or I'd be doing e-mail right now as I wait for time to leave. I'll continue this journal.

On Monday after breakfast, I spent a quiet day in the hotel doing reading for my course. In the evening there was a reception that included enough bits to eat that I didn't bother having dinner, and I then went early to sleep. The Sylff meetings started on Tuesday morning, when they bused us all to APU, which is perched atop a hill overlooking Beppu and the sea.

APU, from trip

APU seems to be only about ten years old. Half its students are Japanese, and the rest are international, from dozens of different countries. The teaching is in both Japanese and English, and at least the international students – whose native languages are diverse – speak mostly what they call APU-English outside of class. It was a natural host for our meeting, which includes administrators from all over the world.

Indeed, that was the best part of the Sylff meeting: the international diversity of the participants. At breakfast one morning I found myself at a table with three others, and the four of us represented four continents, being from Brazil, Jordan, Finland, and the U.S. During the four days of the meetings, I got to know others from Vietnam, New Zealand, Egypt, Czech Republic, Philippines, and of course China and India.

The meetings themselves were nothing to write home about. The first morning was filled with speeches extolling the foundations that funded and run the program plus presentations about APU. The afternoon was slightly more interesting, as several Sylff Fellows – current and former students who had been funded by Sylff – made presentations about their research projects. This at least had substance, although the time available and the diverse audience prevented much depth in the presentations and discussions. Late in the day there was scheduled a two-hour lecture by a fellow whom none of us knew, and there was some muttering in anticipation. In fact, he was a scientist with almost renaissance interests and abilities, plus an amazing ability to connect with his audience. The two hours flew by, and we all enjoyed it and learned quite a bit. But please don't ask me to say what we learned.

On Wednesday there was more of the same, plus breakout groups in which we were to discuss and then report back on how best to identify and promote leadership ability. Not a very productive exercise, in my view. More talks by Sylff Fellows were better, though, including one by a former Michigan student, Heather Montgomery. She was very surprised to find me here, and we had a good time re-acquainting. She gave a talk about globalization, which was the substantive theme of much of the conference. She did a great job, and I'd like to borrow some of her slides.

Saturday, November 6, Seoul, S. Korea

Moving along, I'm now in the lounge at Inchon airport in Seoul, where I have a 5-hour wait between flights. Here I do have internet access, so I've caught up with my e-mail. It was very foggy when we landed, and it still is, as I look out on the runway outside the lounge. I guess that's not a problem, as the flights seem to be continuing.

Performance, from trip

On Wednesday evening our day ended with a concert at APU. We'd seen some short performances the evening before after dinner, by APU students from Korea and Japan doing traditional (and rather strange) sorts of music and dancing. But Wednesday's performance was much more serious and professional. It was held in APU's performance hall with an audience from the community was well as Sylff. It began with a woman and her seven students all playing a remarkable stringed Japanese instrument. It looked slightly like a banjo, but the sound box was more like a drum, and the sounds it made were a mix of strings and percussion. The performers were all dressed in traditional Japanese dress, and they performed with hardly a trace of movement except by their hands. The woman in the lead – known apparently as the Japan's best player of this instrument – managed to do amazing things with both her hands while sitting perfectly erect and staring straight ahead, with never a hint of facial expression. Her students tried for the same effect, but they occasionally had to look at their hands to get the fingering right. The music itself was not something I'd want to listen to often, although I suppose I could learn to like it. But the experience was wonderful.

Performance, from trip

This group was followed by four students from Juilliard, which turns out to be one of the Sylff institutions. They performed classical pieces by Mozart, Chopin, and Brahms. The Mozart was a trio of piano, viola, and clarinet. The Chopin was just piano. And the Brahms was a trio of piano, viola, and violin. All of them were as professional sounding as I could wish for, and the pianist was, I thought, especially impressive. She was an Asian-looking woman, but I think she may have been American, like the others.

As we filed into the auditorium to the section of seats reserved for our group, we were directed into the rows, and I found myself sitting next to the woman from Juilliard who had brought these students to us. She did not seem to be as relaxed as the rest of us, perhaps being nervous on behalf of her students. Her presence next to me became relevant with the end of the first movement of the Mozart. Our program had not told us how many movements of each piece there would be, and even if it had, I suspect that many in the audience would have applauded. But she, of course, did not. From then on, I watched her out of the corner of my eye each time a movement ended for a signal whether to applaud or not.

I mentioned that the Japanese performers had performed as close to perfectly still as possible. The American performers certainly did not. All of them put their whole bodies into the music, leaning forward and back as the music seemed to call for, and with facial expressions that often conveyed some emotion. It was not at all excessive, but the contrast was notable. It made me wonder whether their teachers direct them to do this, just as the Japanese teachers apparently insist on the opposite.

On Thursday, the morning was to be filled with a single session titled “Speak Your Minds and Your Hearts.” The organizers had lined up about twelve participants to speak briefly (5 minutes each) on whatever they wished, perhaps but not necessarily related to globalization. These were split into three panels, and between panels they had two other speakers scheduled who were, I gathered, well known scholars in Japan. All of this promised to be just so much more to listen to.

But there was a twist. At the start of each panel, two members of our group were told, apparently at random and as a surprise, that they also would speak, as “respondents” to what the panels had said. Each respondent would get just two minutes. Naturally, that got our attention. I was not selected with the first panel, but as it spoke, I thought about

what I might say if I were selected later, and I really didn't therefore pay too much attention to what the panelists were saying.

Sure enough, at the start of the second panel, they called my name. I had come up with something that I wanted to say, so I was not unhappy about that. Since I had already decided what to say, I was not in any sense "responding" to what my panelists were saying. Indeed, I hardly listened to them.

In case you are interested, what I said was that while globalization had brought us all together from around the world and may have made us feel like we were citizens of the world, in fact we were all from academic environments and were much more like each other than we were like others in other environments, even in our own countries. And I said that I had felt that especially when I attended my grandson's graduation from basic training, where the military seemed to be such a different world from what I inhabited.

The plan for the rest of the day, after a brief lunch with more speeches, was that we could participate in a tour of the APU campus including a Japanese tea ceremony, then take the bus back to the hotel at 5:00. I had no interest in seeing more of the campus or the tea ceremony, so I wanted to head back to the hotel right after lunch. I could have taken a taxi, but that would have been surprisingly expensive ($25). So, I took a city bus, without really knowing where it would take me. The bus stop was right next to campus, so I asked the driver of a bus that was boarding passengers if this would go down the hill towards the sea, since I knew that was where my hotel was. He, of course, didn't understand English, but a student on the bus tried to help me and told me that the bus was going to Beppu Station. That seemed a reasonable destination. I got on.

The bus did not head downhill, or not for a while. It seemed to be going the opposite way from my hotel. But I didn't worry, since Beppu Station had to be in the center of town, and that would have to be near the sea, if not near my hotel. It was a long ride, and at some point, I began to wonder how much it would cost. Most passengers getting off were just flashing cards of some sort, so that wasn't helpful. Above the front window of the bus, though, was a screen with a matrix of what appeared to be amounts in yen. When I first noticed it, just two numbers were there, for amounts like 120 and 80. As the ride went on, these numbers changed to larger values and new numbers appeared with small values. As best I could understand, when you boarded the bus you would take note of the smallest of these numbers, then watch as it increased during your ride and pay the amount it recorded when you got off. I have no idea if that was right. But when we did finally reach Beppu Station (the end of the ride and, as I'd hoped, at the bottom of the hill near the sea), I handed the driver a 1000-yen note He somehow knew what to charge me and gave me change.

Inside the station, I was looking around for an information desk when a young man approached me and asked, in English, if I needed help. I told him that I wanted to get to my hotel and showed him the hotel key that had its name. He led me to an information desk (which I think I would have found eventually) where they had him direct me to a van that was waiting outside at the curb. Sure enough, the van had the name of my hotel

printed on it, and it took me without cost straight to the hotel. I was surprised, again, by how easy this was, as well as by how helpful a couple of strangers had been.

Friday (yesterday) was our day to be tourists. In two buses, we set out at 8:00 for what had been billed as a sightseeing tour of Beppu. It was not, and from what I'd seen of Beppu the day before, that was a good thing. I'm sure Beppu is fine to live in, and we'd already enjoyed its view of the sea. But it doesn't have anything much of interest for tourists.

Instead, we first drove about an hour to a "castle town" called Kitsuki. Here, atop a hill that we reached by a long set of steps, were the homes where samurai (which I guess used to be the Japanese elite) had lived in earlier centuries. The homes themselves were good for lots of photos, as were the Japanese gardens that were next to them. The homes were all of wood, with "tatami mats" (mats woven from rice straw) covering the floors. There were no glassed windows, and light came in through translucent panels of paper, as well as just through open doors. In one house, these open doors allowed you to look from outside the house all the way through to the garden on the other side, and I learned that the houses were designed with this in mind. The Japanese, at least in the past, seem to put great store by having an environment that will be peaceful, calm, and beautiful.

I haven't said why Kitsuki was called a castle town, and you might be expecting us to visit a castle. So was I. Instead, it was pointed out in the distance, atop another hill. But there was no mention of our visiting it.

Also in Kitsuki we had lunch. We were welcomed by a young man who identified himself as the owner and said, I thought, that he was from the "sixties generation." That seemed unlikely, unless he just meant that he was born in the 60s, but even that wasn't plausible from the look of him. It turned out that I had misunderstood. He was from the "sixteenth generation," meaning that his family had owned this restaurant for 16 generations, presumably over 300 years. The building wasn't old, but apparently the business was.

We were served several small dishes, plus one larger one that was the specialty of the house. This arrived as a bowl of cooked rice covered with fish that I think was raw. They then came around with pots of hot Japanese green tea, which they poured over the fish and rice. The result was like a fish and rice soup, and it was delicious.

Our next stop, after another hour on the road, was a Buddhist temple, called Monjusenji. To reach this we had to climb some 250 stairs, at the top of which was a building that didn't look like a temple at all. It was just a wooden building that housed several monks, one of whom welcomed us and performed some sort of prayer for our wellbeing. The prayer was almost a song, performed on his knees with his back to us, facing a small Buddha statue. It included repeated hits to a large metal bowl that sounded like a gong, and then, as the tempo sped up, some elaborate beating on a large drum.

Beppu, from trip

The same monk then took us into the next room – empty except for many square cushions on the tatami mat floor – for meditation. Were our visit to be longer, a proper meditation would last a couple of hours. Ours would be just twenty minutes. The monk showed us carefully how to sit (cross-legged was fine) and how to hold our hands: the fingers of the left hand cupping the fingers of the right, and the two thumbs touching above them. Once the meditation began, we were to keep our eyes half-closed.

But if you are expecting a peaceful, even boring, few minutes, not at all. Because, as he also explained in advance, during our meditation he would move through the room, coming to each of us with a long, flat, wooden stick, and hit us three times on each shoulder. He demonstrated this before we started, showing how we should bow forward for this purpose, and his stick then struck more on the back than on the shoulder with quite a loud series of whacks. Sure enough, when we started the mediation, he left the room briefly but soon returned and started making the rounds with his stick. I wouldn't say that it hurt particularly, but it wasn't gentle, either. How in the world this was supposed to help with meditation, I never understood.

From here, another hour's drive took us to the USA Shrine, a shrine of the Shinto religion. No, this was not about the United States. Usa is the name of the town, and I don't know why it was listed for us in all capital letters. This, I would say, was the least interesting of our three stops, but it was good for a few photos.

Beppu, from trip

Beppu, from trip

Beppu, from trip

Beppu, from trip

Through most of this day I was with a woman from Vietnam, whose name was Nguyen Hong Hanh. This was because, when we first boarded the bus that morning and while there were still plenty of open seats, she sat down next to me. I have no idea whether that was a deliberate choice, or it was just the first open seat that she came across. In any case, with all those 1-hour rides between stops (and another 3 to our hotel after it all), we had lots of time to talk and became good friends.

I'm not sure what to call her, as I never had occasion to address her by name. I guess I'll call her Mrs. Nguyen (which it says on her card), but that hardly conjures the image of the small and pretty young woman that she was. She wasn't as young as I thought; I eventually learned that she was 46. But to me she could have been in her 20s or at most her 30s.

She was born in Hanoi, trained in linguistics and initially taught English, then became some sort of administrator at her university, also in Hanoi. She has traveled to the US at some point, including Cincinnati as well as Washington DC and New York. She showed me photos on her camera of her 5-year-old daughter, her husband, her mother, her mother-in-law, and many more. She learned that I am diabetic, as was her (deceased?) father-in-law, and at one point she advised me not to try something we were being offered to eat, because it was too sweet.

I learned her age for a surprising reason. Part way through the day, our guide came through the bus and wrote the ages of each of us on her list of passengers. She said this was needed for the insurance. I can't think why, unless the rates of insurance for this sort of outing vary with age. But how? Would insurance on me be cheaper than on a younger person because, if our bus pitched off a mountain, the value of my remaining life would be less?

That about covers this pair of trips. I'm still waiting in the Inchon airport, and it is still foggy.