

Jack and Clare May
Trip Report
JAPAN
March 24 to April 11, 2010

So now on to the narrative, which is broken up into at least one part for each city visited.

Part 2 - Wednesday March 24 to Thursday March 25

With an 11:10 flight, we were picked up by our son Paul at 9:00 on Wednesday, March 25 and arrived at Newark's Terminal C at 9:25. We got through the security line quickly so we had to sit around for some time before our flight was called. The Boeing 777 plane was full, and we were soon ensconced in two aisle seats opposite each other in row 39, to avoid the dreaded center seats in this 3-3-3 configuration. We did not pull away from the gate until 11:39 (11:10), but there was only a short queue, allowing us to become airborne by 11:50, which is good for Newark.

Our route took us north between Montreal and Ottawa, and then over James Bay, Hudson Bay and then Canada's Northwest Territories. We did not fly over Ontario or Manitoba. We had a choice of short ribs or cod for our main meal, and were served two snacks during the 13 or so hours we were aboard the jet aircraft. Our "Great Circle" route continued, taking us over the Arctic Ocean, north of Prudhoe Bay, the Sea of Okhotsk and finally, Sapporo, capital of Japan's island of Hokkaido. It was daylight all the way, although most of the plane was shrouded in darkness so that the entertainment monitors on the backs of seats could supply optimum video contrast. With a multitudinous number of "albums" from which to choose, I was able to listen to a great many recordings while reading. We finally touched down at Narita at 14:06 and reached our gate at 14:11 (14:10). Despite being crowded it was a good flight, with no crying babies and very little turbulence, and absolutely no bump or bounce as we crossed the International Date Line. It was now Thursday.

Upon alighting in heavy rain we saw a plane painted in Star Alliance colors, but I was unable to determine whether it belonged to United, ANA or any of the other carriers with which Continental is now aligned. The line at Immigration was incredibly long, weaving back and forth over a large area in a hot, muggy space. It took us over 45 minutes to get to the front, but then admittance was quite rapid. We had one carryon each along with two small soft-sided bags, for cameras, film, reading material and sundries, so we did not have to stop at a carousel to pick up luggage. We then found some ATMs, but had trouble obtaining money until we got the right combination of card and machine to work. Now it was time to swap our vouchers for our Japan Rail Passes and so we rode an escalator down to the rail concourse, where we easily found the Terminal 1 JR Group exchange office. Clare sat with our bags while I went in and exchanged our vouchers for the passes. It was a pretty simple procedure, although I had to wait on line for about 3 or 4 minutes. But part of that time was spent filling

out a form indicating our passport numbers and our selected first day of pass validity. I suspect this procedure was established to avoid disputes from claims that the clerk entered the wrong starting date on the pass. We chose March 29, as we would initially confine our travel to the Tokyo area and did not want the 14-day pass to expire before our long trip from Okayama to Narita on our last day, April 11.

Because we had to pay our own way to the hotel, we decided to ride the Keisei interurban line rather than JR-East, as it would get us to our hotel with the least amount of walking, and it would cost less (although it would take a little longer). Like JR's *Narita Express*, the Keisei's slightly cheaper *Skyliner* service operates almost non-stop to downtown Tokyo, terminating at Ueno station. While both stations are served by subway lines, transferring to them can consume a great deal of time. I had photographed the *Skyliner* in 2008, when we arrived at Narita several hours before the departure of our plane, and even sneaked aboard it for a short ride, figuring (correctly, thank goodness) that all tickets had already been inspected. With both the JR and the Keisei also offering slower commuter trains, we chose to use the Keisei's because some of their routes operate through the subway as part of Tokyo's reciprocal running program. I had printed out a sheet listing different train combinations via different transfer points from data supplied by Hyperdia, starting at 14:39 and running until 17:25, and saw that we just had about enough time to catch the 15:42 train, a semi-express. Our goal was to obtain a direct ticket to the Shiodome subway station, which I asked for and received from a puzzled ticket clerk who, I believe, first thought I wanted *Skyliner* tickets (racial profiling, no doubt).

We just made the train, boarding its last car, and obtained the last two (all longitudinal) seats. There were standees after we departed Terminal 2. We stopped at all stations up to a certain point and then ran express, skipping quite a few others, and reached Aoto at 16:44. Here we accomplished an across-the-platform transfer to a reciprocal Keisei train and left at 16:47 aboard similar equipment, eventually plunging into the Toei Asakusa line subway tunnel. There were many ons and offs and we reached Daimon subway station on time at 17:14. Here we would transfer to the Toei Oedo line for a short, one-station ride. We didn't see any escalators so had to lug our bags up and down stairways, but we did make the 17:19 (operating two minutes late), and rode to our final destination, arriving at 17:23 (17:21). Shiodome has both elevators and escalators and we reached the fare barriers quickly. They duly ate our tickets and we found an escalator to take us almost directly to the lobby of our hotel. It was still raining.

In reviewing the trip to our hotel I should mention some additional information regarding airport access. Some of the material in the paragraphs below was copied from my 2008 trip report, but has been updated to reflect some major developments in the last 2 years.

Narita Airport, located about 40 miles east of downtown Tokyo, has two railroad stations, serving Terminal 2 and Terminal 1, with the latter at the end of the line, where trains reverse. The tunnel has two tracks, which expand to four at the stops, separated by two island platforms. This might sound like a typical track arrangement for high throughput, but in reality it isn't. Rather than each platform serving trains running in a single direction, they each serve tracks of different gauges, used by

two separate railroads. The standard-gauge track belongs to the Keisei Railway, an interurban, and the 1067-mm (3-foot 6-inch) rails are JR East's. Thus each platform has its own fare controls and the two tracks running through the tunnel are bi-directional. This means both scheduling and operations must be precise to permit a decent frequency, as inbound and outbound trains cannot pass each other except at the two stations near the end of the line. Thus, due to the restraints caused by the length of the tunnel, each company can run only 3 or 4 round trips per hour.

Both organizations operate regular and limited express trains, with the latter, called *Skyliner* on the Keisei and *Narita Express* on the JR, being almost non-stop services at premium fares with comfortable seating and lots of room for luggage. In 2008 the *Narita Express* cost \$30 while \$20 was charged for the *Skyliner*. Both took approximately 60 minutes to reach their Tokyo terminals, with the slower trains taking about 30 minutes longer, but with a fare of only about \$14. Since then (and also since this trip) the privately-owned Keisei has upgraded its service, having constructed a new 12-mile high-speed cut-off. This has allowed the interurban to increase speeds to 100 mph in many places, thereby cutting 18 minutes off the run to its Ueno terminal, reducing the running time to 45 minutes. The Keisei raised its fare to about \$27, which is still about three and a half dollars lower than JR's rate of about \$30. JR trains have to cover 50 miles while the Keisei's route is now only 40 miles long, giving it a distinct advantage in speed. On the other hand, the JR service also stops at other stations in the Tokyo commuter shed, including Ofuna, Yokohama, Ikbukuo and Shinjuku, with most *Narita Express* trains being combined/split into two sections at Tokyo station.

The new cutoff has also lowered the running time between Narita and Haneda airports, as both the Keisei (Narita) and the Keihin Keikyu (Haneda) run through the Toei Asakusa subway, making the connection very simple. [I suspect that once Haneda is upgraded to international standards, the two interurbans will begin running through service between the two airports. Currently bus service is the predominant way of making the trip]

Of course, an important part of the decision regarding which line to ride from Narita would depend on the passenger's ultimate destination and whether a Japan Rail Pass is being used. And most tourists might use taxis for the final leg to their hotels after alighting from an Airport express.

The desk clerk had our reservations and we were ensconced in our spacious room in the new, modern Villa Fontaine hotel by 17:30. Did we immediately begin relaxing? Not me, as the picture window from room 832 overlooked the JR mainline operating southward from Shimbashi station, with about 8 narrow gauge tracks and 4 *Shinkansen* standard gauge ones. And we also had a great view of one of the Tokyo area's rubber-tired New Transit lines, the Yurikamome, which starts at Shimbashi and stops right in front of the hotel. Further in the distance I could also see the inner end of the Tokyo Monorail, which operates to Haneda airport. It was getting dark so I postponed photography until the following morning.

We actually did lie down for about an hour and a half before going out to find dinner. Shiodome is a huge, relatively new (2002) urban development, near the JR Shimbashi station. It is located on land formerly used as JNR's principal Tokyo

freight yard, and encompasses an area larger than New York's Rockefeller Center (or even the footprint of the World Trade Center complex). [I'd guess it was about as large as the PRR's old Potomac Yard in Virginia, which now encompasses Pentagon City and Crystal City.] It is made up mostly of high-rise office buildings, but also contains residential and amusement venues. At least 9 of the buildings are over 20 stories high, with 5 reaching 43 to 56 floors. Several buildings carry the name, Sumitomo, a large conglomerate that among many ventures, arranged for the construction of various railcar fleets in the U. S., including MUs on the South Shore Line and Metra, MARC coaches, and LRVs in Los Angeles (and now DMUs north of San Francisco).

Several of the buildings have Restaurant Courts and the desk clerk gave us an English-language map showing the location of various eateries. One of these courts was adjacent to the hotel, which was fortunate, as the rain had not let up. So we only had to go outside briefly (equivalent to crossing a street to enter the appropriate building, although we probably could have found a way to get there via the system of underground passages in the complex). We chose a Chinese restaurant for our first dinner in Japan, and had no trouble selecting from the menu, which also had *Romanji* characters and photos. The meal was fine and we returned to our room, settling in our bed at about 20:30.