

Ski Ni Ikimasho!

(Let's Go Skiing!)

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Well the big stories in this newsletter all have to do with the snow and cold of winter. Later, i will talk about the last cold i endured. I guess the biggest new experience i had this month was skiing. Yes, i had been skiing many times in America, but my 3 day skip trip in Japan turned out to be a really different and eventful experience.

The Ski Trip

The zaniest aspect of the trip definitely was the transportation. As i have said before, i and most people here, do not rely on cars for transportation. It is very common for people in their 20's to go on arranged ski tours using bus or train. The basic idea is to work all day on friday, catch a bus or train around 8pm, and ride it all nite long trying to sleep as best you can. You arrive at the ski area sometime around 7 in the morning, go to a little changing room to put your ski clothes on, and then ski all day. I think it is pretty crazy to spend 8 to 10 hours in a bus with essentially no sleep and then try to ski all day... but that is what everyone does. Oh yes, this same technique is also applied to the return trip... ski all day... ride all nite in a bus... and then go directly to work on monday morning.

Now i knew about this style before i signed up... yet i still signed up... it must be the (possibly reckless) sense of adventure in me. I was going to go with six other people, three ladies and three other men. We were supposed to take a bus on friday and return on tuesday by sleeper train since monday was a holiday. That was the plan... it was a semi-reasonable plan... but that's not what happened. We are still laughing and telling stories about what did happen.

On friday, the day we were leaving, we found out that the Travel Bureau had overbooked our transportation. Instead of taking a bus with reclining seats, we were going to take a commuter style train. The basic drawback of the train was the seats... they were very straight backed with only minimal padding... not exactly ideal sleeping conditions. When we arrived at the train station, we found out that the Travel Bureau had again screwed up and that the train was leaving immediately. (30 minutes early) We rushed on the train and began our journey... or should i say gauntlet.

We have 2 sets of facing seats with each seat able to hold 2 people. Of course, in true Japanese modesty, the women orginally sat on one side of the train and the men sat on the other. After about an hour or two, i finally convinced them that they would sleep better if we alternated male and female. Since there were no volunteers, we had to play Jan Ken Pon, (scissors, rock, and paper) to pair up the sleeping buddies. We all switched seats and attempted to sleep. Unfortunately, the other two ladies did not really glean the concept of sleeping on someone else's shoulder so they ended up with sore necks while trying to avoid any physical contact with their sleeping buddy. Although, I was able to share a sleeping shoulder, sleep was difficult because of the intense temperature in the train. They had cranked up the heat to at least 30C (90F)... so it was practically a sauna.

We finally arrived at the train station at 3:30 in the morning... really... look at the picture! Since the tour company had screwed up, they paid for the hour and half taxi ride from the station to the ski lodge. Since there were seven of us, we took a nice minivan with reclining seats... yes.. worthy of some sleep. When we arrived at the ski lodge at 5, we were able to catch an hour and a half of sleep. When we finally hit the slopes a little after 8, we took the gondola to the top and had breakfast. We ended up with an excellent day of skiing... great snow... and reasonably warm weather.

The warm weather later turned out to be a detriment... that nite... and all day Sunday... it rained. Avoiding the water skiing... we stayed inside and played the card game Uno and this crazy balancing game based on the Leaning Tower of Pisa. That evening, we attempted some

nite skiing... but with only one lift operating... the line was long. Since the ski run was pretty short anyway, we decided to hike up the slope for a short but tiring ski run. Monday brought clear skies again, so we hit the slopes early. By late morning... it started to snow, and snowed most of the rest of the day. A layer of heavy powder over a hard base of ice... that was lots of fun.



The ski lodge we stayed at was really homey and a lot more comfortable than a regular hotel. The breakfast and dinner meals were included in the price of the room and were very tasty. (after you have been skiing... just about anything is tasty sometimes) There was a large livingroom where guests gathered to chat, hang out, and play. The rooms were typical Japanese style of sleeping on the floor... and the bath rooms were public. And I mean the BATH rooms were public. The individual rooms did not have bath rooms or showers... baths were taken in a community tub that held about 4 people... It's kinda strange taking a bath with three other men... but i lived. BTW, there are separate baths for the men and women... but the same is not always true of the restrooms.

At the ski area, several of the restrooms were co-ed. Let me tell you... it is a little unnerving to be standing there taking care of business with ladies

Mr. Yamamura



milling and chatting around you. I have seen the concept of mixed restrooms in other parts of Japan and I think it is in sharp conflict of their shyness between sexes concept. The only weak explanations that i received were "it's ok since you don't know the people around you" and "it's cheaper to build". I didn't know walls were that expensive.

After all of those experiences, the ride home was supposed to be relaxing and restful aboard a sleeping train. Of course... that's not how it happened. Five minutes before the train was supposed to leave... we were informed that our tickets were for yesterday's train. Empty seats were not available on today's train so we had jump on the commuter train again. This time we were slightly better off since there was enough room for a single person to occupy a seat for two people... but it was still an unfun way to travel. But, overall... the trip was fun.

St. Valentine's Day

Even valentine's Day is celebrated a little differently over here. In America, usually it is the men who give flowers or chocolates to their lovers. Here in Japan, only the ladies give gifts to the men on Valentine's day... typically chocolates. It is fairly typical for the office ladies to get together and gave out small chocolates to all the men in their department. I also received some chocolates from some other ladies i had been friendly with during the year. I am told that this is one of the days when all of those "shy" ladies are allowed to be a little more direct in seeking out the unsuspecting/shy male.

The men do get their turn though. On March 14, it's called White Day, the men give cookies or chocolates to the women who gave them gifts on Valentine's Day. I am not sure what i am going to do yet.

Eiko provided some of the best Valentine's gifts that I have ever received. She started out with music tapes and tickets to a concert. The event culminated with her giving me an awesome black sweater that she had knitted entirely by herself.

Steve Goes to the Doctor

I new it would happen someday... i would have to go to the doctor in Japan. Now many of you know that I don't hold doctors (and lawyers) in high regard... but they are useful sometimes. Unfortunately, i didn't think that a doctor was needed this time that I was sick... but that was not the same opinion as my girlfriend or her mother.

I had been suffering with a sore throat for a few days when i totally lost my

voice. (Some people say that it was a gift.) This went on for a few days along with the typical nasal problems associated with a cold. I was actually starting to feel a little better when Eiko insisted that i go to the doctor. I finally agreed but quickly stated, "I don't know how to go to the doctor in Japan".

In Japan, when someone is sick (even with a common cold) they go to see the doctor in a hospital. Naturally, they have special hours when you can see the doctor. At the hospital i went to, the hours are 9:30 to 11:30 in the morning and 5:30 to 7:30 in the evening... pretty reasonable for working people (who don't have time to be sick). So after work one day, we trot off to the hospital. When we arrive, we were directed (of course) to a waiting room. The waiting room was fairly empty to my surprise since doctor's offices and emergency rooms are always crowded in America... especially in the evening. Now here is where the fun starts....

Eiko and I got into a discussion about what people were thinking about us. Specifically, we were pondering if people thought if we were married or not. Yea, it was kinda strange to be talking about... but... a lady sat down behind us and started asking us questions. Oh course, about the third question was, "Are you two married?". She then begins rambling about her first husband who was German, and her son who used to live in Santa Monica and was now taking a trip. She was pretty wacky... but we were trapped.

After a few minutes, a bouncy little nurse came up to us and started asking medical questions. I have never seen anyone so happy to have symptoms like flem and congestion described to them. We guess she was having her first professional experience with a gaijin and was very excited (to say the least). After the questions, she informed me, through my trusty translator, that she wanted a sample. Yes, one of those samples. I said ok and the three of us headed off. I jokingly asked if this was going to be a group effort. This lead to a giggling discussion of how full i should fill the cup.

Normally, when i finally go to the doctor, no matter how sick i have been before i get there or how terrible i feel after i leave, i usually feel great when i am actually at the doctor's office. That nite was no exception, i was actually in a fairly joking mood.

I had the feeling that Eiko and i were causing a stir in the hospital that nite, but things got a little crazier as we were sitting in the hall. Nurses kept walking past us giving us the *full-on* Japanese stare. Then they would congregate and

share some giggling whispers. There seemed to be a lot activity in the room almost across from us... lots of people stepping out looking around, going back in and then lots of discussion. Although this situation was starting to pique my curiosity, i was trying to appear like i was not paying attention. Finally a female doctor comes out and starts staring directly at me. At this point, i decide to have some fun, so i look directly at her, smile, and stare. She immediately was embarrassed that i noticed she was observing me and scurries back into the room. Not wanting to be outdone, i decide that i would continue to tease her by going over to stare at her. As i sneak over to the door, i hear excited voices talking. When i peek inside, all that i immediately see are the nurses who were staring at us earlier but not the doctor. As i bend further around the corner, i finally catch sight of the doctor who is now trying to hide her face with her arms. My mission accomplished, i quickly retreat back to Eiko amongst a flurry of chatter and giggling.

It was finally time to actually see the doctor. To our surprise, he spoke fairly good english, asking all the typical questions. His diagnosis... surprise... a common cold. His prescription... surprise... rest and symptom relieving medicine. I really wasn't surprised, but I had appeased Eiko and her mother by going to the doctor.

When i was paying for the prescription, the crazy lady caught hold of us again. She indicated that if i have any problems in Japan that I should call her. She also wanted my phone number, so she could have dinner for me and her son. Somehow, I have the feeling that someday soon, she *will* call.

To finish up the doctor story, I was pretty impressed. The system was fairly well organized and the people were competent. The whole process took about 25 minutes. And the cost... for me it was 321 yen... roughly about \$2. Since i work for Masushita, our health plan pays 90%. Even if i would have had to pay the full \$20, i still consider that to be very inexpensive for actually seeing a doctor in the evening and a prescription.

Wrap Up

I guess my ranting was heard concerning handkerchiefs and tissues from the first newsletter. I want to thank everyone who has sent me handkerchiefs and paper towels. In addition, my collection of those little packs of tissues has grown to over 45.

This letter has been a little weak... i am still suffering from that third cold of this season. Next newsletter topic: work.