

The Japanese Skating and Cultural Experience

In mid February Nicholas and I embarked on a journey to Japan to participate in the Japan National Games as part of a Special Olympics team including three skiers, a ski Coach and a Head of Delegation. These games were the precursor to the SO World Winter Games to be held in 2005 and were intended to test out the facilities.

We arrived in Japan on the Tuesday morning to start our journey in Tokyo and spent the week doing lots of walking on foot to pursue cultural and sightseeing interests. Our hotel was in the Shiba Park area, within easy walking distance of the Tokyo Tower and Zojoji temple.

We ascended the Tokyo Tower to the main observatory floor at 150m above ground level and then the special observatory floor another 150m higher. The views across Tokyo city were stunning but with the slight cloud cover we could only just make out the outline of Mt. Fuji in the distance. The tower itself is 333m tall and hosts the transmitting antennas for nine TV stations and five FM radio stations. It is a massive steel structure weighing in at 4,000 tons.



Interestingly enough, despite the predominance of electronic technology everywhere, it was extremely difficult to find Internet cafés or Internet facilities in the hotels. Our hotel in Tokyo had two old PCs that only worked some of the time. The Japanese PCs had different keyboard layouts and that presented a real challenge. The space bar was very short to allow the addition of extra keys and some key positions were changed. I would begin typing and accidentally touch a key that converted my English text into Kanji script – the frustrating part was that I couldn't easily determine which key it was! So after two attempts of directly typing an e-mail message I reverted to creating a document and e-mailing that – at least I could save the attempts to try again.

We walked long distances around the outside of the Imperial Palace with its huge moat, massive stone walls and expansive gardens but unfortunately the public are not allowed inside the perimeter. Moving downtown we finally found the Aki Habara shops, an area renowned for its extensive collection of small electronics shops. There one can buy almost every electronic component ever produced or complete products such as modern computers, radios, and consumer electronics. The stalls were very cramped so it wasn't easy to get around the shops however prices were definitely very cheap.



The next day we travelled on the monorail train system to take in the Tokyo Disneyland experience, and what an experience it was! One definitely needs a whole day there and even then there isn't time to take in all of the sights and try all of the rides. Particularly notable attractions were Splash Mountain, the Jungle Riverboat, Space Mountain, and the Country Bear Theatre. I almost escaped the trip on the high-speed roller coaster but unfortunately no, I had to take the ride like the rest, and I can't say that I enjoyed having my stomach flattened at some incredible G-force!



The Japanese train system is very efficient and well used. Small LCD screens above each door on the newer trains are used to show the next stop and the time to that stop. They also display advertising messages between stops. The Japanese are heavily into cartoon style stories etc. and some of those were very entertaining on the little screens. What was difficult was that the train maps and timetables were all in Japanese and station staff did not speak English!



We travelled on Saturday to Nagano, the site of the Olympic Games in 1998 and our competition venue. Speeding along at speeds exceeding 250-300 kph the trip only took 90 minutes on the Shinkansen or “bullet train” (compare that with 5-6 hours by bus!). That afternoon we walked for over an hour to the M-Wave Arena. This is arguably one of the world’s best speed skating rinks with superior facilities and an architectural beauty. It contains a multipurpose arena with removable stands and state-of-the-art facilities including a very large screen display system. Inside the arena are separate ice hockey and speed skating rinks in the centre and a large speed skating oval around the outside. Skating was



free that day, but no wonder – there were 800 of the public doing their public-session skate around that oval!



On the Sunday we walked up to the famous Zenkoji temple area from downtown Nagano. There were many interesting cultural aspects to view, not the least being the main Zen Buddhism temple itself. We passed smaller temples and many Japanese gardens complete on the return journey. Whilst simple in design, the gardens add dignity and grace to the surroundings.

On Monday it was time to get down to the serious stuff – practice. We visited the organising committee and were told that M-Wave was not going to be available as planned for practices on Monday through Thursday because of a speed skating competition. Since Nick’s first event was only four days away we asked for another practice venue. Imagine our surprise when they said we could use the Big Hat Olympic arena for an hour’s practice – we had it all to ourselves! This is an awesome facility with a five-level structure, four levels above and one below ground, occupying an area of approximately 25,000 square meters. The spectator areas on floors one to three hold approximately 5,000 people. The ice surface is 60m x 30m with a thickness of 8 cm. Just standing inside this facility was a truly breathtaking experience.



That evening we received a call to say that we would be practicing for the remainder of the week at a location in the surrounding countryside. At 8am, as promised, we duly were escorted to the train station and placed on the train to Karuizawa, a resort area 1-1/2 hours by train from Nagano. On arrival we were met by a local SO committee member who transported us to the rink. The rink, a conventional semi-circular roof structure, was located in the middle of a scenic winter sports area featuring skiing, luge, ice skating, etc. After practicing for an hour Nick was joined by a Japanese athlete and his chaperone. They were very friendly and were amazed by watching Nicholas on the ice so pleaded with us to stay for a couple of days in the chaperone’s house.



Following the practice session we were treated to lunch followed by an elaborate afternoon tea then a trip to the famous Hoshino spa (Japanese bathhouse). In the evening friends and relatives were invited over and we enjoyed a traditional Japanese meal with the family and their relatives. By that stage we were well used to Japanese food (but not the Saki!) and it was exciting to be immersed in the culture. The next day it was practice again followed by a trip to the Olympic curling rink and lessons from a member of the Tokyo University competitive team. Nicholas was getting pretty adept at that sport by the time we left, but unfortunately not his father!



The following day it was time to return to Nagano to move into the official games hotel and then attend the opening ceremony. Preceding the opening ceremony was the “healthy athletes programme” run entirely by volunteers. This is an amazing programme that covers dentistry, vision, hearing and nutrition. Its no mean feat to examine

and test 700 athletes but the programme organisation was faultless. At least two of our NZ athletes were given corrective eyeglasses after testing. Apparently in the past 80% of athletes have had some aspect to be addressed so it's a very worthwhile exercise.



The opening ceremony was held in the White Ring Olympic Stadium and was a truly grand event of Olympic scale - it was indeed humbling to be part of it. Nicholas was honoured to carry the NZ flag for the team on our entry into the arena. Over 1000 athletes and officials represented the nations of Singapore, Austria, Russia, Korea, China, Czech Republic, Poland, Hong Kong, NZL, Macau, Japan. Sports represented included cross-country skiing, snowboarding, figure skating, alpine skiing, floor hockey and speed skating.

On Saturday it was down to business with practice and competition. Nick was competing in level 6, the highest level, but contrary to previous advice fortunately there was one competitor in that level. The first event was the compulsory elements, worth 1/3 of the total mark. Unfortunately the Japanese organisers had mixed up the event requirements, using the new freeskate programme requirements but taking the requirements (“badges”) for the compulsory elements section. Nick had of course practised the new elements (brackets, etc.) under Marina's guidance so it meant we had all of five minutes to change that programme aspect.



The Russians were similarly confused so I had to help them out with the interpretation of the requirements.

In the afternoon Nick skated his long programme for the preliminary Level 6 freeskate event. It was clearly a good skate and drew the attention of the crowd up in the stands however this skate was merely to be used for “divisioning” and wasn't marked for the final result. That evening at the Coaches meeting we became aware of an issue relating to the duration of the freeskate programme for Level 6. Due to an oversight in the new regulations the duration of the level 6 freeskate programme was not stated and the Japanese had assumed it would be the same as Level 5. On the other hand we (and the Austrian senior Judges) expected a 3-minute duration given the level of the programme. To resolve the Judging discrepancy the only solution was to penalise Nick for overtime – one deduction for every 10 seconds over the 2-minute 30-second +/- 10 second standard allowance. I was quietly advised by one of the Referees that this was unlikely to cause a problem as Nicholas would likely be well ahead in the marks.

Throughout the whole competition we had the support of 3-4 volunteers plus an interpreter and a liaison assistant. They were all wonderful people, very bright and cheery personalities and tremendously supportive. They made a dual nationality flag for Nicholas being the Japanese emblem on one side and the NZ emblem on the other and “Good Luck Nick” written in both languages. We really enjoyed their friendly banter and company during the competition.



Sunday – the final day of competition and a repeat of the previous day's events. The Japanese lad skated better than the previous day drawing a supportive response from the crowd. Then it was time for Nicholas - I had great difficulty holding the camera steady with the suspense. Nick had a great skate and the crowd really appreciated his performance. It was a truly amazing experience as Coaches from other countries came over to shake his hand and the media converged on us!

Shortly afterwards was the medal award ceremony and the closing ceremony. We travelled back to Tokyo by bus, stopping every 45 minutes during the 5-hour journey. On arrival at Tokyo airport we were met by a large contingent of volunteers who kept us occupied in the airport lounge until the ticket counter opened. The Japanese organisers had asked for 4000 volunteers but had 8000 responses – absolutely incredible. After check-in at the airport counter the volunteers took us all to a conference room in the airport and occupied us for an hour by teaching us how to make various Origami figures – good fun!

In summary, it was a fantastic journey and most memorable experience. Contrary to the rumours that abound Japan was not an expensive place to visit. Most items we bought or paid for were of similar cost to New Zealand when the exchange rate was accounted for. Of course cars were incredibly cheap but electronic products were generally not cheaper, even in the duty free stores. We were pretty tolerant and prepared for the differences in food but the breakfasts in the competition venue hotel were disappointing with only cold food and drinks being provided and no bread products being made available.

We'd both like to thank everyone for their many faxes and e-mails of support – that was very much appreciated since we were in a new country and involved in such a grand scale event. We also must acknowledge the contributions provided by Special Olympics Canterbury, the NZISA and the Centaurus Club plus extra ice time provided by the Alpine Ice Arena and the NIA for practice. Thanks also to Nick's Coach, Marina, for her efforts in preparation for the competition.

Last, and most importantly, we must convey sincere thanks to our Japanese hosts and friends who displayed such incredible hospitality, warmth and friendship, the extent of which I have never encountered elsewhere. We've made some great friends and had an awesome life experience!

Eric and Nicholas Apperley