

Day 11 (Tuesday, 9/30/08) Aomori and Hirosaki, Japan

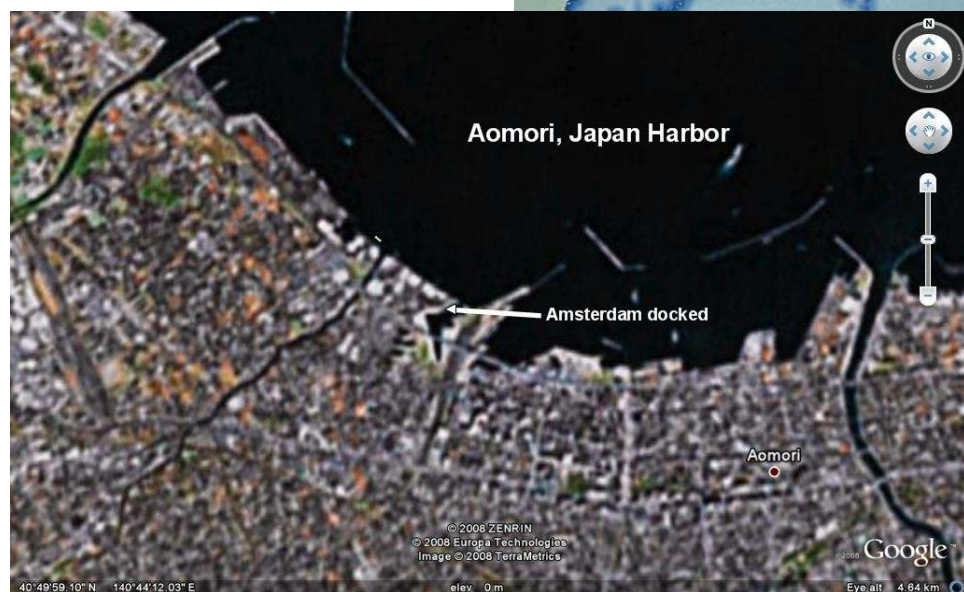
This morning we were greeted by a scene very appropriate for the "Land of the Rising Sun". The sun rise gave promise of reasonably clear sky and good weather for our visit to Aomori and Hirosaki, Japan. In accordance with maritime protocol the Amsterdam flies the national flag of Japan, with the sun image, while in port. The Netherlands flag flies off the stern while in port.



We sailed into the harbor at Aomori after only 6 or 7 hours since leaving Hakodate. Aomori (pronounced with a strong "A" and strong "O" followed by "MORY") is on the Japanese main island of Honshu and only 75 miles south of the city of Hakodate on the Island of Hokkaido. (For trivia buffs, during the American occupation of Japan after WWII the name for the big island of Honshu was slightly corrupted and incorporated into American slang as the word "Honcho" used to refer to anyone we thought was important.) The islands of Hokkaido and Honshu are now connected by 25 miles of undersea tunnel and we learned yesterday that some of the tour guides will follow the Amsterdam to their job today by taking the train from Hakodate to Aomori. Here is a map that shows where we are today while we visit Aomori and the nearby "Castle City" of Hirosaki.



The Amsterdam was docked within walking distance of downtown Aomori. (photo courtesy Google Earth)



The skyline of Aomori, viewed from the harbor, was attractive with a modern suspension bridge and triangular shaped building dominating the scene. The triangle building was a business center for promoting commerce and tourism in the area.



When we arrived in Japan we found to our surprise that cars drive on the left side of the street, just like in England and several other countries. Since we didn't have to drive, this situation wasn't a problem except that we had to be alert when crossing streets to check in both directions just to be sure we didn't get a nasty surprise.

We had purchased a tour to the city of Hirosaki in order to visit the ancient Hirosaki Castle and the temples of that inland city. We boarded the bus about 9:30am and enjoyed the ride through hilly countryside. In the valleys were many farms with rice fields and apple orchards. The rice fields were golden and ready for harvest. Some rice, as shown below, was already bundled and



hung up to dry in the fields. This was harvest time and the apple trees, as shown below, had

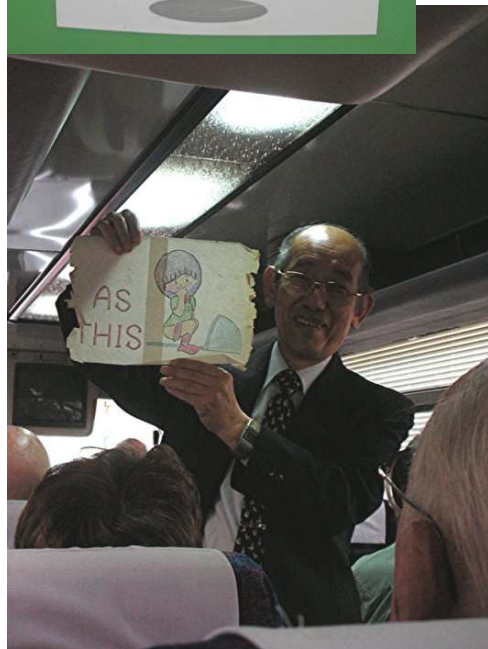


plastic sheets spread beneath them perhaps to catch the falling apples and prevent rot.



Apple growing is a major industry here and the logo is posted in many of the public and commercial areas.

They take promotion of the apple industry a step further in the wrought iron decoration of the highway guard rails which frequently incorporate the green outline of an apple.



During the bus ride, which took about an hour, our guide introduced himself with his real name and then, taking pity on our untrained Western tongues, said we could just call him "Smiley".

He was very considerate and was particularly attentive to the toilet needs of his mainly senior citizen passengers. Before the first pit stop he warned the ladies that they may not find the usual Western style toilets available. He then went down the aisle with a drawing showing how a lady might have to use the facilities provided. He used a baseball analogy and called it "the catcher's position". The ladies laughed nervously.

Fortunately, as reported by Barbara, there was usually at least one Western style toilet in all the facilities she visited.

Hirosaki is called the Castle City and our main touring interest was the Japanese castle that had been built during the 1500s. Most of the structures associated with the original castle have burned down or been destroyed in wars over the centuries but the main fortification building has been maintained in the original form surrounded by a beautiful Japanese garden. We walked into the grounds through a massive wooden gate and followed gravel paths about a quarter of a mile to the castle shown here. The castle was a beautiful



three story Japanese style building but rather small and fragile looking by our experience with touring the castles of Europe. We entered the ground floor which was a single room about 30 by 30 feet square. Very steep, narrow wooden ladders led up to the second and third floor which all contained well prepared displays of weapons and equipment that were in use during the 1500s when the castle actually served as a seat of the government and defensive fortification. We were not allowed to take flash photography and the rooms were dimly lit so our little digital camera was at a real disadvantage for recording what we saw. Nevertheless, here are a few photos of the artifacts stored in the castle museum.



Above: A sedan chair for the ruler.

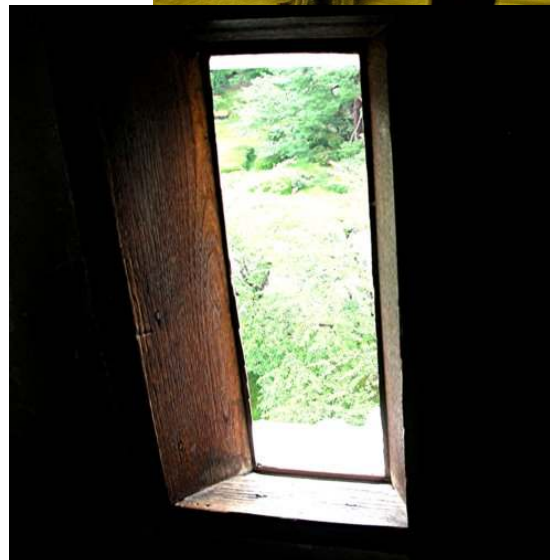


Left: A ceremonial mask



Right: A warrior's armor uniform.

Left: A window on the third level for shooting arrows out of. On the third level around the periphery of the room was an opening for pouring hot oil down on attacking soldiers.



The Amsterdam has a good policy of sending one of the ship's staff along on tours to act as assistant to the guide by bringing up the rear and make sure that none of the passengers get lost in the foreign cities we visit. That person carries a flag with the number of the tour clearly displayed in large red letters. We were very fortunate today to have, Apollonia, the Captain's wife as our assistant guide. We had met her on the 2007 Grand World Voyage and were very happy to tour with her again.



After visiting the castle we walked around the gardens. They were very neat and clean with each leaf that fell carefully removed from the pathways by ladies with brooms. We had met Doug and Joyce at a get together with Ray and Anne a couple nights ago and it turned out they were on this same tour with us. We took advantage of the meeting to get photos of each other.



The castle has a Buddhist heritage and the symbol that resembles a German Nazi swastika was displayed on several signs. This Buddhist symbol existed long before the Nazis adopted a revised version of it. At the top of this sign is an example of the signs we saw. We have seen this symbol before but it is always a shock when first viewed. Then we remember the Buddhist connection. If you think of the symbol as a pinwheel you can keep the Buddhist and Nazi symbols separated in your mind. The Buddhist swastika would spin clockwise and the Nazi swastika would spin counter clockwise.



We left the castle grounds and toured a sequence of Buddhist Temples. The most impressive of these temples contained a five story pagoda. At the same temple was a ceremonial bell. The correct protocol is to strike the bell with the wooden log and then wait for the several minutes while the sound dies away



before striking it again. In Oak Ridge we have a Buddhist Bell that was given by our Japanese sister city, Naka Machi, as a gesture of friendship. Today, Barbara give the bell in Hirosaki a couple "gongs" before we went on our way.

At one of the Buddhist Temples was a most fierce looking dragon with water streaming out of its mouth. The symbolism was lost on us but it was one of the most elaborate water dragon statues we had ever seen. Since our granddaughter, Emily, has developed a fondness for dragons lately, we decided to take this photo for her to illustrate her latest book about dragons.



We also saw some Shinto Shrines. Our guide, Smiley, said that Buddhism was a religion but Shintoism was not really a religion. No God is monitoring human behavior in the Shinto belief system. The Shinto erect shrines where they show honor to things that are important in human life. He said a Shinto shrine was more like the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. than it is like a church. A Shinto shrine gate is distinctive in having two horizontal bars at the top of the arch while a Buddhist temple gate is much more massive and elaborate. Here is a typical Shinto Shrine gate on the right. Below is a typical Buddhist Temple gate.



buried in a full sized casket.

We saw several cemeteries in the vicinity of the Buddhist Temples and Shinto Shrines. Our guide said that it is the law that a person who dies in Japan must be cremated rather than being

Apparently this law was made to conserve space. The cemeteries do look crowded as this picture illustrates. Under a single family headstone would be all the different urns containing ashes from deceased people in that family. Smiley said that since this law is a problem for Catholic people, the Japanese Bishop is empowered to give special dispensation to people forced by law to be cremated. Another possibility is that the law can be circumvented by petition to the government based on religious reasons.



Near one of the Buddhist temples were a couple interesting signs posted on the street. The sign showed the image of an old man and old woman with some Japanese characters under the sign. We asked Smiley what the meaning of the sign was. Strangely, he seemed unable to express the meaning, as if he were embarrassed. Finally, he indicated that many elderly people lived in the area and the sign was a warning to car drivers to be extra careful to avoid hitting the old folks. In view of the trouble Smiley had in explaining

the sign we are wondering if we got the whole story.

About 1pm we were taken to the Park Hotel in Hirosaki and treated to a sumptuous buffet with a wide selection of Japanese foods. Two bus loads of touring Amsterdam passengers (about 80 people) were seated in the spacious dining room. We tried a little bit of just about everything they had to offer. It was all good but we were hard pressed to know exactly what it was that we were eating. However, we are pretty sure now that we like octopus the way they had prepared it.





At the risk of appearing to be hung up on toilet issues we felt obligated to provide this additional piece of information. While many toilets we saw in Japan were not much more than ceramic bowls set into the floor, they also had some high tech Western style toilets that were new to us. The one shown here with precision push button controls for a heated seat was available for patrons of the Park Hotel. Barbara found a similar one at the Hirosake Castle restroom.

The bus took us back from Hirosaki to Aomori and the Amsterdam. It was about 3:30pm and we had to be back on the ship for departure by 4:30pm. We hadn't looked around Aomori since our morning arrival so we decided to take a quick walk around the town in the vicinity of the ship. We were just past the gangway and on to the dock when a nicely dressed young man asked if he could interview us for his newspaper. It turned out his name was Yujiro Okabe and he was a staff writer for The Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper. He was interviewing passengers from the Amsterdam to determine their opinion about Aomori. He was particularly interested in what food we had tried and tourist sites we had visited in Aomori. We told him we had not yet had a chance to walk around Aomori but he proceeded to ask us questions about our experience in Japan anyway. We told him about our tour to Hirosaki and the very favorable impression we had of how we had been treated since arrival in Japan. He was most gracious and polite but after a few minutes of conversation we excused ourselves to take a quick walk around the port area.



Finally it was nearly 4:30pm and we boarded the Amsterdam. Once in our cabin we found a bit of bad news in our copy of the ship's edition of The New York Times Digest. The stock market had just suffered the biggest drop in average stock price since 1987. It's hard to put a positive



spin on this kind of news. However, we feel fortunate to be on a delightful cruise during these perilous times when the best thing to do with sound investments is probably nothing at all.

The ship's whistle blew as part of the casting off procedure so we went out on deck. Our spirits were buoyed up by the group of Aomori people who waved to us from the pier and a band played as the ship got underway for Miyako, Japan.