

## Blair's Japan Journal July 2006

Blair H. is a long time member of TalkTemari and we have been most fortunate in that she has shared her Japan visits with us through Temarikai.com. This year is no exception. I much appreciate Blair's willingness to let us all share this experience!

Here, in her words is her journal from the latest trip, July 2006:

### Background

In January 2005, I took the helm of the Mobile (Alabama)-Ichihara Sister City Association better known as MISCA. This organization was formed in the early 1990s through the request of the city of Ichihara, Japan, located perhaps an hour east of Tokyo. Since then, every summer has seen a student-exchange trip. One summer, the Japanese students (highschool-age) visit our city to get a taste of American life and the following summer, our students visit the city of Ichihara.

As president, I was instrumental in the planning phase of activities for the Japanese students and their chaperones during the summer of 2005. It was a great success as we shared with them the Gulf of Mexico, the antebellum homes, a taste of Mardi Gras and the history we have in this part of the country. In October 2005, I began recruiting high school aged students from this area who would be interested in being a part of Mobile Delegation, scheduled to visit Ichihara in July 2006. In March 2006, I continued to serve as an email contact in planning the visit of Mayor Sakuma of Ichihara and his 20+ member (adult) delegation. The delegation members had a grand time visiting the Mardi Gras Museum, taking part in the Azalea Trail Run, being here for The Festival of Flowers, and so much more.

It seemed only days after they left that emails began in earnest as our hosts began to prepare for our visit to Ichihara, scheduled to begin July 22. I was able to recruit 9 students (we can take up to 10) and a 2<sup>nd</sup> chaperone who had previous experience with another group of students who went to Ichihara in 2000. We met with the students going this year over the course of 9 weeks to prepare them for the differences in culture, language, traditions, expectations, etc.. Then - the day had finally come. I was going back to Japan.

### Saturday, July 22

Did I sleep much? I don't think so. I went to bed around 10:30 the night before, woke up about 2am and never really went back to sleep. I got up about 3:15 to take a shower then woke Amy, one of the students going with us who had stayed the night. I roused my husband, John, and then we left home about 4:30am. It was going to be an hour to the airport and our flight was scheduled to leave at 7am.

We got to the airport to find a few of the group already had arrived. It didn't take long for the others to show up, although two were going to be flying out of Pensacola, Florida. We would meet them in Houston, then be together the remainder of the trip.

The flight to Houston was quick (at least compared to the next part of our trip), close to two hours. Martha, the 2<sup>nd</sup> chaperone, took the group to the connecting gate while I went to the pick-up point for the two students meeting us from their Pensacola flight. It was beginning to sink in how much trust these parents had put in Martha and me. We have met perhaps five times for meetings at my house, and now they have given me their child to take care of as we travel half way across the world. I seemed to be knocking on wood at every opportunity!

Our flight to Tokyo left on time. I could sense excitement from many of the students - this was their first international flight and, for one, his first flight ever! We were slightly spread out in cabin seating but the flight attendants worked with us to get the students sitting as close together as possible.

The flight was close to 12 hours. The airline had a video monitor installed for every seat which gave us all 10 video channels, multiple audio channels and even a game channel. In addition to just getting to know each other better (we are both teachers), Martha and I dozed, watched a movie or two, stretched our legs and checked on the students who were just a few rows behind us. At some point, we crossed the International Dateline and suddenly it was Sunday in the blink of an eye.

### Sunday, July 23

We arrived at Narita Airport around 1:30pm. Clearing Customs went without a hitch. I was the first one through, and when the agents learned that the 9 students tagging after me (with Martha bringing up the rear) was a tour group, they waved us all through.

Tanaka-san, Koide-san and Kubo-san (who are all involved with the city government of Ichihara), were part of the greeting party. I had met Tanaka-san and Koide-san in March when they had come to Mobile with the Ichihara mayor so it was a pleasure to see them both again. I had corresponded with Kubo-san for over a year and, knowing she would be part of my first host family, I was delighted to meet her after all this time. There was also Eriko-san, one of the chaperones who came to Mobile last year with the Japanese students. She and I just squealed when we saw each other! I also met Takeshi-san, who had been corresponding with me through email as a city government representative.

After collecting our luggage (everything accounted for!), we boarded a very comfortable bus for the 50 minute ride to Ichihara. We were offered bottles of cold water during the trip, and also a brief orientation during the drive.

Upon our arrival at the City Hall, we were met by a number of young people and adults who took charge of our luggage as we were guided to an upper floor to gather in a meeting room. We were given folders with our schedule, information about the city, and our nametags. Moments later, we were ushered into the next room for our reception.

As we walked into the reception, we were met with applause – the room had a lot of people in it! At the front sat the important officials, and Martha and I were asked to join them. Along one side of the room, the students sat side by side according to where they found their name signs. Opposite them on the other side of the room were 2 rows of people: the front row was a member of their first host family, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> row was a member of their second host family. (The trip was split so that half the time was with one family and then the

second half with a new family). At the other end of the room were the additional members of all of the host families.

Then, the speeches began accompanied by translations. Fortunately, I had been given warning that I would be called on to speak, so despite being up for over 24 hours, I was prepared. The reception closed with a formal introduction of each student to their host families, and it was time to leave and become "members" of our host families. It was interesting to watch the faces of these students who had come all this way with friends and familiar faces, only to realize they were now on their own. Granted, I had phone numbers to get in touch with them, and they knew how to get in touch with Martha or me, but it was finally sinking into them that their experience was truly about to begin for real.

I was the last one to leave with Kubo-san (who I was quickly comfortable with calling her by her first name, Kazuko-san) and her husband, Hiroshi-san. It was a short ride to their home. I needed to get my heavy luggage upstairs (I haven't even started to share with you how I came to buy 2 pieces of luggage the day before we left, one around 9pm the night before....). I was given a small guest room to store my luggage and clothes in, but would be sleeping on a futon in their tatami room (tatami rooms in Japanese homes are considered to be the most formal). Once I got situated, I joined my family in the living room, and I shared some small gifts and conversation with them. After dinner having out and before my bath, they let me use their computer to send a quick email to family and friends to let everyone know that we had arrived safely and were all situated. I also called to check on half of the students (Martha was taking care of the others) and see how they were faring. All was well, so I went for my bath. Bedtime was a delight. Kazuko-san had set out the futon with a small lamp so I could read. She had set the wall unit on cool, and placed a tray by my bedside with a cut glass pitcher of cold water with a glass and a small washcloth. It became a nightly tradition that I looked forward to with pleasure. Sleep came quickly.

#### Monday, July 24

It was time to rise and shine, as I was being picked up about 9am for a city tour by Eriko-san, my friend from the previous summer. She took me to the Ichihara Agricultural Center, which opened in 1995 as a place where farmers and consumers can exchange ideas, and the citizens of Ichihara can commune with nature. My favorite part was the greenhouses – wonderful succulents and some gorgeous plants.

We also went to see Iiagaoka Hachiman Shrine, said to be first built in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. The existing building dates back to the Muromachi period and has been designated as an important national cultural property. Worship there centers around prayer for safety at sea and successful child rearing.

We had time to visit Kazusa (Kokubunji) Temple. This is one of over 60 temples ordered built nationwide by Emperor Shomu in 741 AD. It is a national historic site. At lunch, we met up with Martha, Kubo-san, Koide-san, and several other ladies at a wonderful restaurant. We then headed to city hall to meet with the mayor of Ichihara.

Mayor Sakuma's English skills may be limited, but he sure knows how to work a crowd. We entered a conference room and waited just a few moments

until the mayor arrived. Speeches were given by the mayor and me, then it was time for official gifts. The group had selected Amy, the oldest student, to present gifts to Sakuma-san from the group and also from Mayor Jones of Mobile. The Mobile gift was a beautiful platter from a local potter (given to me just 3 days before we left, and transported to Japan in my carry-on bag padded by t-shirts and nightgowns). The gift from the group was a signed baseball from the Mobile Bay Bears, our local baseball team. Turns out "kuma" means bear in Japanese so the mayor quickly tied that one together for our benefit! Then he went to each student, one by one, presenting gifts and spending a few moments speaking to each one. He did the same for Martha and me. We moved to the lobby for a group picture before it was time for Sakuma-san to move to his next appointment. The group had about an hour of 'laid back' time during which we heard a story about a wishing tree then added our own wishes that had been provided for us. The tree became part of the decorations for our official welcome reception that evening.

Our official welcoming reception was held in a fairly large hall that was crowded with city officials, members of our host families and any other Ichihara citizens that had anything to do with taking care of us during our stay. It was time for speeches again. The mayor was first, and I was called to the podium for a speech. I was asked to have the group stand with me so that once my speech was done, I could introduce each one. Sakuma-san then moved to join us as he had a happi coat for each of us – both students and chaperones. You would have thought we were celebrities as cameras were everywhere (including cell phone cameras) with flashes popping off left and right all over! Toasts were made (Kampai!! – to good health!) then it was time to eat. We were served plenty of both Japanese and American dishes, but so many different people wanted to speak with me and the group members that it was difficult to eat!

After the enjoying the various foods it was time for entertainment, musical and dancing. The dancers had fantastic masks and wonderful costumes. It didn't take long before the mayor prompted me to join the dancers. I swallowed hard (I am not that coordinated!) and jumped in. After hearing applause, I felt a little better especially when I saw that Martha was now on the floor. (On a side note – I bought a wooden mask that looks exactly like one of the dancer's masks, and it is now hanging in my classroom. Every time I look at it, I think of that experience of joining them.) The dancing came to an end, more pictures were taken of our students with their new friends, and then it was time to go home. Now, despite that fact we had food spread out over many tables at the reception, Kazuko-san and Hiroshi-san insisted that we go to dinner. We ended up bringing Michael, an English language teacher who had been in Japan for two years and was preparing to head back home in a matter of weeks. He had been hired for the job while he was at a local university in Mobile. We had dinner at a sushi bar, one of those wonderful conveyer-belt sushi places. You can place a special order of sushi with the chef, or simply select one of the many dishes that slowly move past you. Prices depend on the type of plate (there was a guide posted up on a wall) so that at the end of the dinner, you simply pile the similar plates together then add everything up. Good company and great fun. Somehow, I deleted a video I took of the experience but it was one I will never forget.

Tuesday, July 25

Today was our first of two free days, one with each host family. Kazuko-san and Hiroshi-san had asked me a few days ago what I might like to do. I had thought a visit to a national park might be a nice way to spend the day. Hiroshi-san got on the computer and did some investigating. They presented the idea of visiting Mt. Nokogiri ("saw-mountain" in Japanese), about 2 hours south of Ichihara but still in Chiba prefecture. On Mt. Nokogiri's southern side is the Buddhist temple, Nihon-ji, dating back to 725 A.D. One really intriguing part of the area was the 1500 Rakan Statues or Buddhist saint statues. The stone images were made in the Edo period. Each is said to have a different expression. I knew it was going to be an interesting journey and said yes.

We started out about 9am. It was a quiet drive as I spent so much time whipping my head back and forth, left and right, watching the scenery pass by us. The country truly is concentrated on the coast. As we made our way south, I could see so much farm land, so lush.

We breezed through a few toll booths before I finally asked about the voice I heard just as we would pass through each one. Turns out my hosts participated in ETC or electronic toll collection. They had a prepaid plastic card, maybe the size of a credit card. The ETC card had to be somewhere on the person driving. This allowed them to go through the ETC lanes with barely having to slow down. The card signal was picked up and a voice would announce what they paid for the toll and how much they had left in their account, in addition to seeing that same info on a stationary screen as they drove past the ETC gate. Very cool! Speaking about cars and driving, while I have been fully aware of GPS (global positioning systems) now found in many cars, it was on this trip that I got to see them in action, first-hand. Fantastic technology! My favorite GPS was the one my 2<sup>nd</sup> host family had. One side of the screen was surrounding streets or a broader view of things. The other side was the car (pretty one dimensional but still the car) as it made its way down a street. On that side, you could see the buildings coming up, some even marked as to what type of business. A voice would announce when you were getting close to your final destination. When you changed into in reverse gear, the whole screen would change to a monitor so you could see what was behind you as you backed up (which everyone does in Japan – when you go into a parking lot, almost all the cars are facing out as if they are ready for a fast getaway). Now, back to Mt. Nokogiri.....

Few people in Tokyo are aware of the existence of the biggest stone Buddha statue in the whole of Japan, that sits right there on the side of Mt. Nokogiri and overlooks the mouth of Tokyo Bay. Anyone who has seen Kamakura's bronze Buddha will tell you how huge it is, but if they're telling you about the Kamakura Buddha, they haven't seen the Daibutsu of Nihon-ji Temple.

The Daibutsu of Nihon-ji has a total height of over 100 ft. The Daibutsu is a representation of the medicine Buddha, Yakushi Nyorai, and was carved by Jingoro Eirei Ono and his 27 apprentices. It sits cross-legged on a pedestal, one hand lying upturned across the lap and the other cradling an urn over the stomach. The craftsmanship is exquisite, but it's the location that makes it so very impressive—a small opening at the end of a moss-covered path through the flowers and bamboo, the sea hidden by the trees on one side and the mountain sloping downwards behind.

Walking trails leading to the statue feature small natural caves filled with a total of more than 1,500 small statues, or Arhats. These statues of Buddha's disciples were carved at the end of the 18th century. The stones were brought in by sea, then chiseled out and scattered around caves and sacred rocks. Damaged by an anti-Buddhist movement a century later, they can often look grotesque; they are frequently decapitated and melted, with bodies smashed in and pedestals chipped away. At the same time, I found myself taking time to try to see them all as each one had a unique facial expression. My favorites were 2 that looked like they were sharing a good joke.

From the peak of Mt. Nokogiri, you can look across Tokyo Bay all the way to Mount Fuji on a clear day and right along the coast to the Pacific. I wish our view had been better, but the longer we stayed the more I could see across Tokyo Bay. One part of the park I chose not to visit was the overhang evocatively called Peering into Hell, a triangle of rock hanging 300m in the air. I was grateful the mist was still covering much of what might have been an 'eye-opening' view.

Another impressive site was the Kannon or Goddess of Mercy, a statue in pristine condition by comparison. Its flowing lines and curves are set within an alcove of smooth rock. It's almost 100 feet high, stretching right up the trees screening the observatory at the top. All you can do is stand at the base and look up in wonder.

It was a fantastic day (albeit with humidity like I have never felt) only to be topped off by a tempura party back at the house. We went grocery shopping for supplies, with a quick trip to the local fish market. Two ladies joined us for dinner, Hikosaka-san and Eriko-san. We did tempura (pieces of food coated with batter and quickly deep fried) with just about everything we could think of – vegetables, meats, shrimp, fish – it was a great dinner, to be sure. With a wonderful sashimi lunch at a waterfront restaurant on Tokyo Bay, it had been day full of both adventure and excellent cuisine.

### Wednesday, July 26

Today was to be a group day, a time for many adventures. We met at city hall and were joined by some Japanese teenagers and older members of the IIA (a division of the city government that is responsible for sister city relationships and cultural exchanges).

Our first stop was to Chiharadai-minami Junior High School. It was a great surprise to be met by Eriko Tanaka, my IIA contact when I first came to Japan in 2002. Eriko-san helped me arrange our sister school in Ichihara then met me my one free weekend in 2002 to visit my sister school. She also was my escort and translator when I first visited the Temari Museum. She had since moved back into the classroom and was teaching English at Chiharadai-minami. We had a short reception with a few speeches (I was exempt this time!) before we began a tour of the school. Martha and I left this tour early so that we could visit my sister school. The students went on to finish the tour, play a basketball game against some Japanese students and then have a calligraphy lesson.

Shimizudani Elementary has been a sister school with my school since October 2002. I asked to visit the school to renew our commitment as sister schools and pay respect to the principal. I brought a gift of books: one by Jimmy Buffet and his daughter as he is a native of the Mobile area, and another one

about hurricanes and how they can affect the Gulf Coast area. In addition, I brought some American classics such as *Black Beauty* and *Treasure Island*. I was very impressed that these last titles were familiar to them all.

A comment about Japanese schools – it may have been school summer break in Japan during our visit but, in all 3 schools we visited with our students or with a group of adults, there were Japanese students everywhere on campus (and in uniform!) participating in group sports, practicing band instruments, involved in group clubs, etc. I don't know that our students would ever put a foot on their school campus during any break! School in the summer in the US means summer school – not a great association. Much different in Japan.

After lunch at the Goi Grand Hotel, we were taken on a tour of Tokyo Electric. We had a presentation in English about the objectives and history of the company, then were treated to some science experiments. The facility tour followed, which included a visit to the top of their LNG stacks, a privilege not given to all of their guests. It was a superb view all the way across Tokyo Bay into Tokyo. At the end of the tour, we were each given ceramic cups as gift from the company.

Our last stop of the day was to be at a large shopping mall, but we got caught in street traffic which took away shopping time. The students, though, made the most of it. The biggest purchase of the day was by most of the boys - picking up something called a "J-Board". It is like a skate board, but it pivots and swivels in the middle, and the wheels rotate 360 degrees. How they found them in the limited amount of time we had, I will never know. They were quite a sight outside the mall as we waited for the bus. Every one of them was demonstrating their J-Board skills.

After arriving back at city hall, the students headed back to their host homes while Martha and I were ushered back to the Goi Grand Hotel for a special dinner with Tanaka-san. It was a wonderful dinner, with several courses of top-notch food. Despite some language barriers, the conversations flowed easily. One lasting impression I may have left behind is when Martha and I were asked what our biggest interest was in Japan. I shared that I loved the art history and the crafts of Japan, BUT - I went on to add I have always have enjoyed and admired the manhole covers seen throughout the country. They are artistic and colorful, which makes something we never take a second look at here in the US, a 'seek and find' treasure hunt in Japan (visit [http://www.frangipani.info/photography/v/manholes\\_of\\_japan/](http://www.frangipani.info/photography/v/manholes_of_japan/)). I was dead serious but I believe I took them all by surprise. Perhaps it was something they never considered, since it is a part of their daily life. They smiled and may have shaken their heads a bit, but I think (I hope!) they appreciated my different perspective. (I jump ahead a bit here but, in the coming days, I had others come up to me and ask about my interest in these covers. Word got around : >)

#### Thursday, July 27

Today was the student mixer. We all met at a local hall along with some Japanese students the same ages as our US kids. The goal was to try to open some dialogues. The morning started with a game of musical chairs. I could see the competitiveness in our students and the good will in the Japanese. Don't get me wrong – my students were polite and well behaved but, by golly, they weren't going to have a chair taken from them! Next was a questions-and-answers session, where the Japanese students had prepared questions in

English written on poster boards. Everyone from the US had to try to give an answer. Questions posed to the group were meant for one to consider before answering. An example: *If you had 24 hours left on this Earth, what would you do with your time?* The Japanese adults leading the activities then asked for suggestions for the next activity so Martha and I came up with the game *Telephone*. We made sure none of our students were sitting next to each other, and played two rounds, one with a simple Japanese phrase and the next with a simple English phrase. That went over well although the final results in both rounds were well – not what they started out to be! The students then gathered in small groups to share with each other. I was pleased that many of our students had thought to bring their personal photo albums, so that opened up some discussion. A few of our boys took the opportunity to show the Japanese students how to ride a J-Board. The Japanese girls especially enjoyed the lessons : >)

Martha and I missed most of the small group discussion as she and I had been invited to meet with a group of Japanese teachers of English were gathered at a local school for an in-service program. There were perhaps 40 teachers who listened to our answers to questions posed by a moderator. The questions dealt primarily with our roles as teachers and discipline at our respective schools. The teachers had a chance to practice their English when a question/answer period opened up, but only a few raised their hands. One question asked for an update on Hurricane Katrina damage. Several teachers came up after everyone was dismissed for lunch to speak with us. Teachers approach to in-services they have to attend is truly universal. I had to smile looking out at those teachers' faces. They were probably hungry and tired of sitting, much less listening to two American teachers.

Our hosts were going to take us to Denny's for lunch. Perhaps they thought we needed to have American food on a regular basis. Denny's was too busy, so Martha and I were pleased to be taken to a coffee shop where we were able to order more traditional Japanese food.

We rejoined our students at the hall for a cultural experience. Also joining us was the local media, a reporter and a tv cameraman. A group of women who played the taishogoto worked with us to learn how to play the instrument, then actually play a song together. There were American and Japanese students spread over three rows as these women moved among us helping wherever they could with an interpreter at the microphone. A short presentation on the history of the tea ceremony followed. We moved to the next room where we found a set appropriate for the ceremony to take place. We had a narrator explaining each movement and procedure, as the ladies who were actually in the ceremony served everyone in the room. The students weren't too sure about the tea but seemed to enjoy the whole experience. The sweets were wonderful. I almost couldn't eat them as they were so pretty.

After our afternoon of culture, it was time to leave our first host families and move to our new families' homes. Takako Nishiumi was there to pick me up, along with her two children: Raiki who was about to turn 3, and Nonoka who was 9 months old. What a sweet family! Takako-san was comfortable but not fluent in English. She told me she and her husband applied to be a host family since they both wanted to practice their English (most Japanese people that know any English are usually very eager at any opportunity to practice it). We easily conversed as I got settled into the house.

It was quite warm and I quickly learned there was no air conditioning (there is no central air conditioning in Japan – just wall or portable units that are referred to as air conditioning). They did have a small cooling unit that they pushed after me wherever I went! I had bought small gifts for Nonoka and Raiki for each day I would be there, as I wanted to be their favorite American aunt! Raiki and I quickly got into a game of “catch” with his gift of two Velcro mitts and a ball that would stick. It didn’t take long before he was calling me Blair-san and I just loved to hear his voice. Wataru-san, the husband, came home about 7pm which gave me a chance to get to know him.

I began to see a difference between my two host’s homes. The Kubo home was more traditional and, understandably, more established as they were an older couple. They had a tatami room with an altar, a futon cabinet, a Tokonoma alcove, hanging scrolls, pottery, etc.. Their home held a lot of memories of raising a son who was now married and living in Tokyo, and of their daughter who still lived at home. The Nishiumi home was only 2 years old. It had a tatami room but with none of the more associated items one might see in that type of room. There was a video monitor that allowed them to see who was at the front door. They even had a control panel by their dining room table that allowed them to start the bath waters, or, for whomever was in the bath to speak with who might be in the dining room. This was a young family just beginning to make their mark in the world and create memories that would last them a lifetime.

Turns out my bedroom did have an air conditioning wall unit so it helped me sleep hard and well. I believe Wataru-san and Takako-san gave me their bedroom (I had a bed similar to what I sleep on at home but had a pillow much like those neck pillows air travelers use – loved it too) and slept in a guest room on futons. I’m not certain.

### Friday, July 28

We had no obligations until late afternoon, so I slept late and enjoyed a morning playing with Raiki, watching Japanese children’s TV shows and talking with Takako-san. We did make a trip to a local mall where I picked up a few souvenirs, and then on to the 100 Yen store. This is the Japanese equivalent of our US dollar stores but packed to the brim with great “stuff”. It was so fun to explore the aisles – trying to figure out what many things were, and filling my basket with gifts for friends and family. I bought silly stuff too – like dry erase markers for my classroom, same as what we know but the Japanese characters all over the marker.

That evening was the Ichihara-Mobile Citizens get together. Speeches again (at least I had time to prepare) by many, then time for food and entertainment. Shamisen players performed and then it was our turn to take the stage. On each exchange, the visiting students give a cultural performance that tells a little more about their heritage. The students and I had met at my home before coming just so that we could rehearse for this. We came up with the theme of Alabama pastimes or - how our culture influences what we do when we have spare time. Our biggest fear was that my living room and this stage were worlds apart! The highlight, I believe, was at the end when we created a Mardi Gras parade. The students had brought Mardi Gras necklaces, candy, doubloons, moon pies and so much more. We closed with a traditional dance (can’t

remember the name) that I couldn't get the hang of but kept trying. I met many people that evening: city officials who had visited Mobile in March, the superintendent of Ichihara schools, host family members, I just couldn't keep up with them all. A big highlight was seeing Tomomi-san who was the 2<sup>nd</sup> chaperone for the Japanese students who visited the previous summer.

### Satur day, July 29

Today was going to be a full day. The city of Ichihara provided us with a bus and guides, along with many adults and students to keep us company, as we toured Japan. Our first stop was Tokyo Tower. At almost 1,100 feet, Tokyo Tower is 42 feet taller than its model, the Eiffel Tower of Paris, and the world's tallest self-supporting steel tower. It was completed in the year 1958 as a symbol for Japan's rebirth as a major economic power, and serves as a television and radio broadcast antenna and tourist attraction. All of us went to the main observatory at 492 feet and some even paid the extra fee to go to the special observatory at 820 feet to get a true bird's eye view of Tokyo. Under good weather conditions, Mount Fuji can be seen in the distance, but it wasn't to be while we were there. Although there was not enough time to explore, the Tower has an aquarium, wax museum and several other attractions that can be found on the ground floors of the tower. After lunch at a very nice hotel, we visited the Edo-Tokyo Museum. Founded in 1993 as a place where visitors come to learn more about Tokyo's past and culture, it was a fantastic place. I could have spent all day there. Our last stop of the day was Asakusa, a wonderful shopping area. We came in at Kaminarimon Gate or Thunder Gate (the original was destroyed in the air raids of 1945, so this one is a reconstruction built in 1960) and saw the god of the wind on the right and the god of thunder on the left. Once through the gate, we were in the Nakamise Shopping Arcade. The street is lined with colorful, lively stalls selling traditional knick-knacks, festival foods and rice crackers. Asakusa is really festive and quaint although absolutely packed with people the day we were there due to a large fireworks display scheduled for that evening. For visitors in earlier years - between the sixteen and eighteen hundreds - the attraction was somewhat different: Asakusa contained the notorious "Yoshiwara", the city's licensed "pleasure quarters". Next was Sensoji Temple. Legend says that in the year 628, two brothers fished a statue of Kannon, the goddess of mercy, out of the Sumida River, and even though they put the statue back into the river, it always returned to them. Consequently, Sensoji Temple was built there for the goddess of Kannon. The temple was completed in 645, making it Tokyo's oldest temple. As you get nearer the Sensoji Temple, we saw the large incense burners. Incense is wafted over the body as an act of purification. There is also a large wooden fortune telling stand. To use it, we each selected a stick from one of the metal cylinders and gave the stick to the temple official, who in turn chose the proper slip of paper with the fortune on it to give back to us. If the paper says you have bad luck, by then tying it to the branch of a tree or the special rack provided, it will apparently blow away. Those of us that participated were fortunate enough to only have good luck. Sensoji Temple may date back to 645, but with the original destroyed in the air raids of March 1945, today's building is a 1958 reconstruction. At the top of the steps, as a mark of respect, one claps twice and bows your head. It's also customary to make a small offering by tossing coins

into the wooden rack. Located close by is the Five Storied Pagoda built in 1973 and amongst others, stands in honor of comedians! It is reinforced with concrete and steel, and like all pagodas, running down the centre is a giant pillar of Japanese Cypress tree wood. Around this, the five stories are loosely packed, resulting in a highly flexible structure able to withstand earth tremors. After returning to Ichihara around 5, the Nishiumis took me to dinner then to a neighborhood festival. It was a good day.

### Sunday, July 30

Today was the day. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> free day and our last full day in Japan, and Wataru-san was taking me to the Temari Museum today! Takako-san had called the museum early yesterday to inquire of Ozaki-san would be in, as I truly wanted to meet the Sensei. While we were out yesterday evening, Ozaki-san called the house to say she would in and looked forward to meeting me. She also shared that the JTA certificates from this year's exams had just been mailed out less than 24 hours ago. I was almost able to receive my Honka (Beginner) certificate from Sensei herself. That's ok – I was about to make my 2<sup>nd</sup> trip to the Temari Museum. Life is good.

Takako-san dropped Wataru-san, Raiki and me at the subway station. The Japanese subways are immaculate and well-run on lines that are comprehensive in covering Tokyo and surrounding areas. It takes a small amount of time to understand the system and, even if you don't speak Japanese, you can find your way from one end of the city to another. One of my proudest moments during my 2002 trip to Japan was making it from my hotel in Shinjuku to Shinjuku station to Tokyo Station (one of the biggest) then make my way to the other end of Tokyo Station to catch a train to Ichihara so that I could visit our sister school for the first time. THEN I successfully made my way back to my hotel. So, I was pleased that I would be able to travel the subways on this trip too. We ended up catching 4 trains to make it to Kami Noge station closest to the Temari Museum.

We arrived close to 11:30 and were met at the door by Ozaki-san. A very petite lady, she was gracious in her ways as she encouraged us to be comfortable. As a special guest, she allowed me to take pictures everywhere when normally, pictures are not allowed past the entry foyer. In the hallway, were older Temari done by Ozaki-san and her mother. In the back are display cases of Temari that Ozaki-san said are changed on a weekly basis. In the center of the room is a beautiful black table with drawers on all sides. I could just see that they were full of Temari being stored as they wait their turn to be displayed. The displays were tremendous. I did try to take pictures of as many as possible – some singles and others in groups. I loved the blowfish and the Japanese Chin dog Temari. I saw a temari in a design from a book Ozaki-san had previously published that there had been some questions on about how to make it; the lines were done in an arc. She told me the arc was done with the help of pins. I tried to ask about how one can be inspired with original ideas for Temari. I am afraid that Wataru-san, who was doing such a good job translating, didn't quite have a grasp of Temari terminology to make my question clear. No matter, we moved on speaking about marking balls, her favorite thread to work with (Perle Cotton #5), how long she has been making Temari (40 years), and so much more. Ozaki-san and I exchanged gifts. I had

brought a gift from Ginny, and an album of photos of my students and other young people we know (my niece, Brendan, Elsbeth and Izzy) doing Temari. . Ozaki-san gave me a teenie she had made and a picture book of her work, her mother's and their student's that celebrated 30 years of publishing Temari. We sat together to enjoy green tea but I couldn't contain myself too long before I was up taking pictures again. Raiki, though, was getting a bit antsy so we wrapped up and moved to the entry foyer where I could pick up some souvenirs. I purchased two Temari and some metallic thread. It was so hard to decide which ones to take home. As we left, Ozaki-san knelt on the floor and helped to get Raiki's shoes back on his feet. It was a great visit and a highlight of this trip to be sure.

Wataru-san thought I might like to go back to Asakusa as our time yesterday had been limited to keeping the students in our sights. This time, I could shop for myself. We enjoyed a soba noodle lunch then headed into the Nakamise Shopping Arcade. Wataru-san and Raiki were so patient as I stopped in shops along the way. I picked up some daruma dolls, a few mimikaki (ear cleaners), and some wood Noh masks. It was time to get Raiki home before too long as it had been a long day.

Two things of note – I saw my first Sumo wrestlers on one of the trains today - wish the picture had been better. Also, Japan has a path system to take care of their visually impaired. Every street, cross walk, public path, subway station has a raised grid that visually impaired can use to help them know where to walk and when to stop. The grids change direction or pattern to help distinguish parts of the path – an excellent system.

That evening I improvised making brownies in a microwave that could only reach 250 degrees- I wanted to make them an American dish. Turned out not too bad – slightly gooey but perfect for ice cream. Then it was time to pack for heading home.

### Monday, July 31

Hard to believe the day had come to say good bye. The citizens of Ichihara took care of us all like we were members of their own family.

Since we didn't have to meet until 11:30, I slept in a bit as I was close to being packed 100%. Last evening, we visited the neighbors across the street who were thinking of perhaps hosting in the future. They had also loaned Takako-san an ironing board that I still needed, so we were going to let them know we would bring it back in the morning. I took them a small gift in appreciation. This morning, I brought them decorative turtles small enough to hang on the lip of pots, since the wife maintained a really nice garden. They reciprocated with gifts for the trip home. The wife is a sumi-e artist. She gave me a large bottle of India ink along with brushes and calligraphy practice papers. The husband gave me a selection of Sudoku puzzles he had created so I wouldn't get bored on the plane. Such nice people.

We arrived at our meeting point to a small group already gathering, and it began to grow steadily. Hugs everywhere. Cameras being used. Peace signs flashing. Tears flowing. The host families were all over the place, not just the most recent ones but even the ones who first took us in. Hiroshi-san joined us to say goodbye. Kazuko-san was there already as she is a city official. I had a hard time saying farewell to them and, even more so I think to Takako-san and

her children. I still can hear Raiki calling my name. Needless to say, we had to go. As the bus pulled away to head for the airport, cameras were still going with many of the family members running after the bus.

We had a small delegation accompany us to the airport and wait as we checked in. Some family members drove themselves to Narita Airport to say goodbye all over again.

We lifted off about 2pm (midnight the same day in Mobile) with just a short layover in Houston. It was long enough for some of the students to find their first McDonalds in ten days! We arrived back in Mobile at 6pm (8am on August 1 – Tokyo time).

When I returned from Japan in late 2002, I never would have thought I would have gotten the chance to go back. This trip has renewed my interest in the Asian culture and the way of life in the beautiful country called Japan. Their respect for nature and graciousness in dealing with daily life makes me dig deeper into my own self to become a better person. I can't thank the citizens and the members of IIA in Ichihara enough for giving us such a wonderful taste of their city. I am forever in their debt.