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Night view of the Yokohama skyline, taken from the deck of "Norwegian Jewel"

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Welcome! Who says that you can't teach an old dog new tricks? Somehow, in my 48 years in the tour and travel industry, I had managed to never make it to Japan, other than one time to change planes between Guam and Vancouver at a Tokyo airport. However, this year the opportunity arose for me to take a three-week, springtime trans-Pacific cruise from Yokohama to Seattle aboard *Norwegian Jewel* (on which I'm still traveling), so I planned a three-night stay in Tokyo before the ship sailed for additional stops in the "Land of the Rising Sun," as well as in Petropavlovsk on Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula, before continuing further to extensive cruising in Alaska.

For some reason, Japan has never been a big selling destination for Americans, other than for those traveling on business. I had always heard that it was a *very* expensive country to visit, but surprisingly, I did not find that to be the case at all, so perhaps the prices one expects to pay in other parts of the world have caught up over the years. I certainly enjoyed my visit to Tokyo...it is a sprawling, fascinating, colorful place filled with plenty of modern skyscrapers, although not a beautiful city like Paris, Prague or Barcelona. Historic religious (Buddhist and Shinto) sites play a major role in the city's attractions, but after visiting China, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong and now Japan within the past six months, I'm pretty much templed and shrined out. However, I did visit the historic Meiji-jingū Shinto shrine in a wooded, park-like setting, which was quite nice, although offering little that I hadn't seen previously elsewhere. I also took the hop-on, hop-off sightseeing bus, which was good for general city orientation, but not exceptional like the operations in Dubai and Singapore.

The bustling Ginza area, the Imperial Palace East Garden, the shopping mobs at Shibuya Crossing, and the incredible lighted signage of Shinjuku were highlights for me. My four-star hotel for \$80.59 a night, including taxes and fees, booked through a popular U.S. internet travel site, was excellent...although the room was compact, it was very comfortable and well appointed, and located in a quiet area of office towers within easy walking distance of two metro stations serving five separate lines. A convenience store was across the street, and a Wendy's for hamburgers to satisfy "comfort food" tastes like mine was nearby, although the number and variety of restaurants in Tokyo for those more gastronomically adventurous than I am is truly astounding.

The city is safe and remarkably clean, which made me wonder why trash bins are almost impossible to find on the streets. I found the Japanese people to be helpful and incredibly courteous. Although most apparently do not speak English, despite being required to study the language in school, I was always able to find *someone* who could help with directions without too much trouble, as my understanding of Japanese is *zero*. It was fascinating to note at each and every intersection where no traffic was passing or even visible nearby, *everyone* waited for the "walk" light to appear before crossing, and vehicles making right or left turns invariably gave pedestrians the right of way. But it did take me a day to figure out the inexpensive and extensive metro (subway) and train system, which is surely *not* user-friendly for folks with disabilities! But by the time I left the city, I was comfortable enough with the public transportation grid to make it all the way from my hotel to the ship in Yokohama, and without having to climb or descend *any* steps with my wheeled luggage, for only about \$8 total.

Due to necessary maintenance work on *Norwegian Jewel*, we missed a scheduled port call in Shimizu, which gave us an overnight and extra day in Yokohama (as well as a \$100 per person shipboard credit), which was fine with me, since I walked around town for 4½ hours and found Japan's second-largest city to be a most worthwhile place to explore. Here are countless interesting attractions, ranging from an extensive Chinatown to historic marine vessels and even the Cup Noodles Museum...but without the hectic pace of Tokyo, for which it serves as the closest seagoing port. Although my visit was too late in the season to see the renowned cherry trees in full blossom, and few other flowers could be seen in Tokyo, in Yokohama I discovered a magnificent public garden filled with a wide variety of vividly-colored floral displays.

I took excellent ship-sponsored shore excursions in all three Japanese ports we made after departing Yokohama...from Aomori to Lake Towada, the Oirase Gorge (*really* spectacular) and Mt. Hakkoda; from Hakodate to Onuma Quasi National Park; and visits to three significant local sights in Otaru. All in all, our springtime weather was cool but very good, with an exceptionally beautiful afternoon and a full day of bright sunshine and blue sky at our last two stops. To sum up, learning that *not* having previously visited Japan was definitely my loss, I'm definitely looking forward to returning in the not-too-distant future.

CroisiEurope inaugurated three new ships this spring, bringing its fleet to a total of 55 vessels. Two of this year's inaugurations are for ships that underwent complete redesigns, while the third is a newbuild. The *Van Gogh* and *Renoir* have been completely redesigned and redecored to meet the requirements of a "Premium Class" ship, each with a total of 54 cabins for up to 105 passengers. *Van Gogh* is cruising from Lyon on the Rhône and Saône Rivers, while *Renoir* is navigating the Seine between Paris and Honfleur. The line's youngest vessel, *Elbe Princesse II*, features 45 cabins for a total capacity of 86 passengers, including 3 single cabins and one handicap accessible cabin. She is cruising the Elbe and Vltava Rivers between Berlin and Prague. CroisiEurope has also announced a special fare for solo cruisers, in that single supplement fees are being waived on all 2019 cruise departures on bookings made before this June 30th. And finally, earlier this month, the line launched a revamped version of its website. www.croisieurope.rivercruises.com/