

## Circumnavigating Japan, Part 4: A week in terrific Tokyo

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Special to the Sentinel

Our April 2019 circumnavigation of Japan aboard Holland America Line's MS Westerdam Cruise Ship ended with a week on our own in Tokyo, Japan. We had been a bit nervous about this, since we do not speak Japanese. We knew that few street signs are in English, and the subway system appeared very complex.

By the end of the week, we were able to navigate around Tokyo easily, and had a terrific time in one of the world's greatest cities. Highlights of our week included Godzilla, the food and shopping, the Samurai Museum and a warm, comforting ending to our stay.

We stayed in what we called the "Godzilla Hotel," because it was dominated by a 50-foot-tall statue of Godzilla threatening the city below, from the building's eighth floor. At \$308 per night, with smallish rooms, the Hotel Gracery Shinjuku was not cheap, but it was in a great neighborhood near the Shinjuku Station (the busiest train/subway station in the world according to the Guinness



PHOTO BY LLEWELLYN TOLMIN

**Samurai generals' armor on display at the Samurai Museum in Tokyo.**

World Records), with excellent food and good staff.

At the hotel, we learned that Godzilla, the "King of the Monsters," is so popular in Japan that every year since he debuted in 1954, there has been a Godzilla movie or TV show. There are hundreds of video games, novels, toys, comic

books and other spinoffs dedicated to the monster, who is a combination of a radioactive Tyrannosaurus, Iguanodon, Stegasaurus and alligator. Who could not love a cute critter like that?

Food choices in Tokyo are amazing. All the food we saw was fresh, well presented, beautifully wrapped, and tasty. Even the packaged foods (cheap sandwiches and bento boxes) we occasionally bought in the three omnipresent convenience stores (7-Eleven, Lawson's and Family Mart) were fresher and healthier than anything we could get at similar US stores. Even buffets in hotels were usually excellent, again much better than most US buffets. One of our best finds was the Bake Cheese Tart shop at 3-38-1 Lumine East, Shinjuku Station. This shop serves the best pastry in the city - a light, puffy, mild cheesecake tart.

An excellent food experience was the Tsukiji Fish Market tour from Viator, at only \$40 each. This three-hour tour featured loaf-shaped omelets, sake served in square wooden cups that we were allowed to keep, fresh tuna, fried fish cake, and excellent sushi. Even Susan - who

normally dislikes sushi - found this very appetizing.

Our best food find was the basement of famous Isetan Shinjuku department store, where thousands of temptingly prepared and fresh foods were on display. In the U.S., we would never go to a department store for food, but Isetan is Japan's best department store, and tens of thousands of customers flock there every day for takeaway and the many in-store restaurants.

Isetan was also astounding for its customer service. At a very good U.S. department store, you might see four or five staffers per floor. At Isetan, there are two to three hundred staffers on each floor, all in uniform, all smiling and bowing and asking how they can help! There are so many staffers that it is hard to see the goods.

With ten floors of clothes, furniture, jewelry, household items and food, and say 200 staff per floor, we estimate Isetan employs at least 2,000 customer service staff in its main building.

Just a few steps from our hotel was the excellently small but concentrated Samurai Museum. We

learned the history of the samurai, the warrior class who ruled the country from 1192 to the 1870s. Two modern samurai swordsmen sparring on mats in front of us - so close we were glad we were not sitting in the front row! We marveled at the samurai armor, starting with underwear made of badger skin, topped by lacquered plates, and helmets decorated by buffalo horns, sword blades, antlers, feathers or conch shells.

Not all of Tokyo is terrific. The city is very crowded (avoid the subway at rush hour), very dense, has few green spaces and there are very few American cars on the city roads.

On the other hand, the infrastructure is great, there are no potholes, there is hardly any trash, the drivers all obey the speed limit, and everyone we met was polite and helpful.

Our final memory of Japan was very unusual: toilet seats! Most hotels and homes in Japan have heated toilet seats that are easy to use and are very comforting. We are in the process of buying a \$79 kit to install one in our home so we will have warm memories of Japan in the future, every single day!