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My Travelogue Manga of Japan (Sans Drawings)

by [Kat Avila](#)

Traveling by yourself is the journey of the fool.

Thu., March 23

Overnight lodging: airplane

While in the airline check-in line, I meet some Jewish people on their way to a wedding in Nagoya, Japan. The woman with fluorescent pink hair is a women's clothing designer, so reports her grade-school daughter. Digging through my convertible backpack, I bring out a toddler's touch-and-feel Passover book. It was going to be *o-miyage* (gift) for a Japanese friend, but I give it to another woman in their party.

I have a window seat on the airplane and start to doze off. The outside light on my eyelids doesn't bother me, but I don't feel its warmth, just the cold of truck exhaust-smelling cabin air blowing around me. I'm getting a headache.

Fri., March 24 (Happy Birthday to me!)

Overnight lodging: Tokyo Yoyogi Youth Hostel (All rooms are singles!)

A 20-minute delay is announced because another plane occupies our gate. Will I make it to the youth hostel before they lock the doors?

After trading my prepaid Japan Rail (JR) Pass exchange order for a two-week pass, I take the Narita Express from Narita Airport to Shinjuku, where I transfer to another train and after a short walk reach the youth hostel at 8:10 p.m. The

web page is wrong, I'm told. I had until 10 p.m. to check in, not 8 p.m.

Sat., March 25

Overnight lodging: Tokyo
Sumidagawa Youth Hostel

At a JR Information Center kiosk, I pick up a free "Welcome to JR EAST" map to get around Tokyo. The map supplements the free "Youth Hostels Map of Japan" from the Tokyo Yoyogi youth hostel, which I will use to locate certain cities and not youth hostels since I made reservations for most before I left home.



**TV superhero Garo at
TIAF 2006**
Photo by Kat Avila

On my way to Tokyo Big Sight where the **Tokyo International Anime Fair (TIAF)** is being held, I help a French man get to Daiba where he is meeting a friend. We talk about the anime his sons enjoy watching. At **TIAF**, I chat with a number of other foreigners. (See my **TIAF** report for details.)

At the **Anti-Counterfeiting Association (ACA)** booth, I learn the biggest problem is China, where copyright laws have been interpreted to mean: We have the right to copy. The **ACA** representative says 90 percent of movies in China are pirated, but Japan cannot readily talk to China regarding anything for historical reasons.

At the youth hostel, I share a *tatami* (straw mat) room with a Japanese woman and her three-year-old son, who scratches himself all night.

Sun., March 26

Overnight lodging: Tokyo Yoyogi Youth Hostel (again)

From Tokyo Station, I wander off to the Imperial Palace, then to the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater. I wait in line for the box office to open for the chance to buy one of 49 cheap *tachimi* (standing room) tickets. In a preliminary count, I'm the 50th person in line.

"*Onna no yume* (A woman's dream)," says the woman in front of me about the **Takarazuka Revue Company**. Five 70-80 member troupes perform romantic productions throughout the year. Fantasy men are played by women actors (the opposite of Kabuki where women are played by men).

Today's production is an adaptation of Riyoko Ikeda's manga ***The Rose of Versailles*** performed by the Star Troupe; it's the Fersen and Marie-Antoinette version. (I will miss the more popular Andre and Oscar version by less than a week.)

The box office opens. To my relief, I get a ticket, as do the two people behind me. One of them is a guy from Osaka (near the older, primary Takarazuka Grand Theater); he's in town for *yakyuu* (baseball).

Mon., March 27

Overnight lodging: Yokohama-Kanagawa Youth Hostel

I get off at Oizumi-Gakuen Station and walk about a half hour to **Toei Animation**, past the Cosmo gas station, turning left at the *kouban* (police box). The **Toei** security guard says the gallery is closed. Many museums are closed on Mondays in Japan. I have visited this small gallery twice before, but had wanted to see what they did for **Toei's** 50th anniversary this year.

That evening, on my way to the youth hostel, I am shocked to discover a particular mural/graffiti wall. In 1992, I interviewed Chicano muralist Victor Ochoa about his month-long trip to Yokohama to paint a mural. The project was part of the San Diego-Tijuana-Yokohama Art Exchange that celebrated the 35th anniversary of the Yokohama-San Diego sister city pact.

This very wall beneath the Sakuragi-cho Station was where Latino muralists Victor Ochoa, Richard Martinez, Roberto Salas, and Ruben Seja had joined Japanese muralists such as Rocco Satoshi, Satoru Uehara, and Morimasa Sagaya to paint. The original murals are long gone. But it looks like Rocco attempted a "Mural Revival Experiment, Yokohama" in the fall of 2004.

I share a room with two blonde otaku girls from Canada. They show me their stash of manga and doujinshi from a shopping spree in Akihabara.

Tue., March 28

Overnight lodging: Kamakura Hase Youth Hostel (The top bunk was so high!)

I treat a Japanese writer friend to lunch and show her the photos of the Yokohama murals and graffiti art I took this morning. We also talk about the Yokohama Curry Museum where another friend and I ate dinner last night.

Wed., March 29

Overnight lodging: Shin-Osaka Youth Hostel

There was a thunderstorm last night, yet this morning's sky is clear. I walk to the beach before I get on a train to Kamakura's Tsurugaoka Hachimangu Shrine.

A few hours and a *shinkansen* (bullet train) later, I visit the **Suginami Animation Museum**. The museum is compact and interactive. I play on the computers in the digital workshop room and watch short videos on the production and future of anime. One floor up is a special exhibit dedicated to the 10th anniversary of TV and movie animation related to Gosho Aoyama's manga **Case Closed: Detective Conan**.



Roof garden of Ghibli Museum

Photo by Kat Avila

Instead of returning to Shinjuku, I end up by mistake going to Mitaka in the opposite direction. I decide to go to the **Ghibli Museum** since I'm in the area. Surprisingly, the Mitaka JTB office still has tickets (sold only to foreign tourists with a passport in hand). The **Ghibli Museum** is best enjoyed from a child's perspective, since it's geared toward them, which is why I left it off my original itinerary (well, I had also been there before).

Thu., March 30

Overnight lodging: Moroyoseo Youth Hostel (It has a *kotatsu*, which is like a table heater with a quilt covering.)

From the train window, I see snow falling. *SNOW?!*

In Sakaiminato, on the west coast of Japan, there is a road dedicated to Shigeru Mizuki, the creator of the supernatural manga *GeGeGe-no-Kitaro*. I remember watching the anime as a child. There are 100 bronze statues of *yokai* (nature spirits) from the manga within the city. At a related museum, which is very entertaining, a kind staff lady snaps my picture in the garden with deep pink *sakura* blossoms behind me (a weeping willow-type of cherry tree).

Fri., March 31

Overnight lodging: Hiroshima-Miyajimaguchi Youth Hostel

I hurry over to the **Osamu Tezuka Manga Museum** to see what's new since my last visit. This year is the 60th anniversary of the start of Tezuka's career as a cartoonist. (I will always remember him as the creator of Astro Boy and Princess Knight.) Then I rush back to the nearby Takarazuka Grand Theater to catch the musical *Never Say Goodbye: The Footsteps of Lovers* performed by the Cosmos Troupe.

Sat., April 1

Overnight lodging: Beppu Youth Hostel

I take a JR boat to Miyajima Island. Mt. Mizen is my Mt. Fuji on this trip. I meet a guy from Switzerland, then a German couple who are on their way down. I am passed by a couple of German guys on the way up. A French couple passes me. I am not in the best shape for this. On the way down, I meet two girls from Pennsylvania who are teaching English in Japan.

By 3 p.m., the tide has gone out and tourists are walking across wet sand and seaweed to take pictures up close of the famous *torii* (shrine gate). Families are digging for clams.

That evening, an 85-year-old man on a bike helps me find the Beppu youth hostel. He is wearing a Kennedy Space Center cap with a U.S. flag on it. During WWII, when he was 23, he fought in Taiwan and in the Philippines. Because of a weekend festival celebrating the city's famous *onsen* (hot

springs), individually decorated paper bag lanterns light the sidewalk along the way.

Sun., April 2

Overnight lodging: Shin-Osaka Youth Hostel

I'm feeling a little frayed around the edges. I arrive at Shimabara Castle after taking an expensive train ride to get there (a guide book might have helped at this point). The JR pass could not be used. The castle is linked to the famous Shimabara Rebellion, an unsuccessful 1637 uprising of mostly Christian peasants.



**GeGeGe-no-Kitaro
barbershop on Shigeru
Mizuki Road**
Photo by Kat Avila

Mon., April 3

Overnight lodging: Shin-Osaka Youth Hostel

I have started to misplace small stuff, like my shaving razor, chapstick, etc. My vacation is starting to feel like the tail end of a long convention.

I arrive at Ise after six hours of slow trains from Osaka to see the Ise Shrines, but at this point I have already lost the light for any good photographs. I toss in the towel, leaving before I see anything significant. Filled with disappointment, I take a private train and a JR bullet train back to Osaka. I get back in half the time with a quick stopover at Nagoya Castle.

Tue., April 4

Overnight lodging: Shin-Osaka Youth Hostel

I visit Himeji Castle. Along the street from the train station to the castle, there are a number of statues of naked young women, though not all. Coming back from the castle down the other side, the last bronze statue I see is of a fat naked guy playing a saxophone.

Wed., April 5

Overnight lodging: Home Sweet Home

I saved the best for last, a manic shopping spree in Ikebukuro, boy's love/yaoi central! **Animate! Character Queen! Mandarake!**

On this trip, there were some places I had wanted to revisit (from a previous year-long stay in Tokyo) such as **Mandarake Nagano**, the **Bandai Museum** in Matsudo-shi, and the **Saitama Municipal Cartoon Art Museum**, but I ran out of time. The **Tokyo Anime Center** in Akihabara didn't have much going on.

And, yes, the airplane cabin air was just as bad going back as when I left for Japan. Next time I travel there I'm switching back to my favorite airline, even if it costs a little bit more!



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