

2019 Japan (Kyoto)

Apr 19 Taxi at 07.30, train to Schiphol and Finnair flight AY1302 to Helsinki (11.55-15.15). Met Pia, and the flight to Osaka Kansai International airport (Finnair AY77) arrived one and a half hour before schedule at Osaka (09.00, April 20). I even slept for half an hour or so in the plane, perhaps due to a melatonin tablet.

Apr 20 We passed the border and custom controls, and bought return train tickets on the Haruka Express to Kyoto main station, combined with a card for local transport in Kyoto. Pia picked up a mobile wifi hotspot at the post office, and got yen at an ATM. My first impression of Japan: everybody seems relaxed, organized, easy going and friendly, and it was only just over 10.00 before we entered the train. The train ride is about 80 minutes, and upon arrival downstairs at the Kyoto train station we had lunch at a nice conveyor belt sushi restaurant. From the station, we walked to the Resi Stay “headquarters”, where we checked in and were transferred by shuttle bus to Resi Stay Higashiyama Sanjo (25-5 Sanchome, Higashiyama-Ku), where we rented rooms/apartments. We arrived at the Resi Stay about 14.15. While the entrance code of Pia delivered her room key immediately, I got the key to my room a little later from one of the cleaning ladies. Rooms were fine for the price, having a little kitchen, bathroom etc. To complete our logistics, we bought breakfast for the next morning at a nearby supermarket. There were lots of food at the supermarket I had no clue what it was: most food is (often double) wrapped in non-transparent plastic. Pia had Google translator on her phone that translates Japanese characters efficiently, indispensable especially when you suffer from food allergies. After dropping the groceries “back home”, we walked 10 minutes to the convention center, then along the botanical garden etc. A first impression of Kyoto, below.



Although I had no binoculars while walking, we ended up with a handful of common urban species, including Tufted Duck (close to the airport), Mallard, Great Egret, Grey Heron, Black-eared Kite, Barn Swallow, Large-billed Crow, and House Sparrow. In the evening, we tried to find a Japanese restaurant. Since we were starving and all nice looking Japanese restaurants

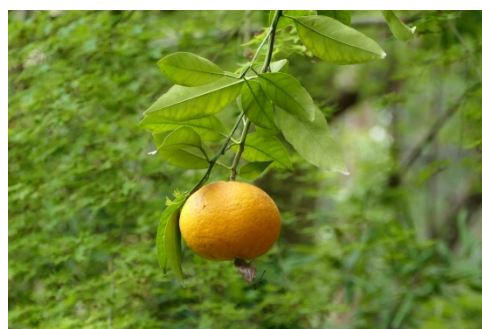
had long waiting queues, we ended up buying take away from McDonalds! We sat down to eat along the river Kamo amidst locals spending the evening, and to be honest, both the French fries and burger tasted superb. Albeit dark, to our surprise several Grey Herons were still fishing in the river, and we saw a swimming tortoise. Walked back and I slept well from about 21.30 to 05.00. Weather nice, about 20-25 °C, chilly in the evening. Below, the Kamo river at daylight.



Apr 21 When coming down to my room for breakfast coffee, Pia woke up my jet-lagged next-door neighbor by knocking first on the wrong door. Breakfast was an interesting combination of tomatoes, (imported) Dutch filter coffee, (imported) and microwaved Finnish bread, sushi, cucumber (Pia only), etc. The microwave instructions for ‘toasting’ were slightly confusing, producing dehydrated “toast” about 50% of its original size. Pia managed the toasting by day 4, when I had already moved to Okura, the official congress hotel.



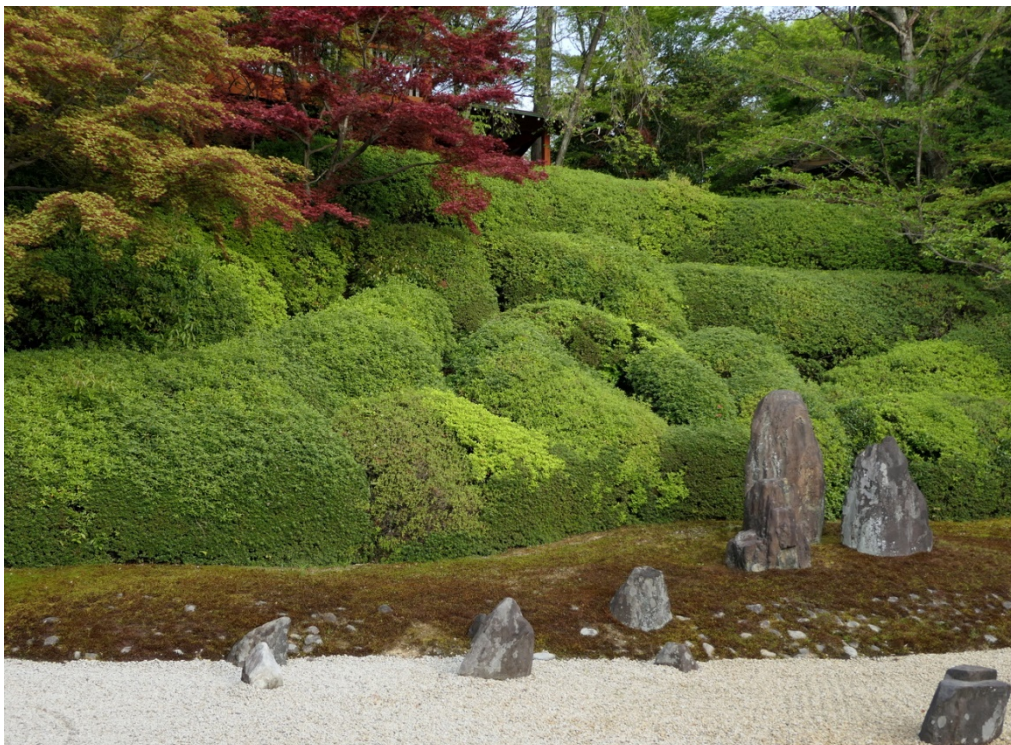
After breakfast, we walked to the nearest train station, took a train and visited the Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine. Upon arrival, festivities were ongoing, rather busy. There is a walk uphill, mostly stairs, along little shrines, a small tortoise-containing lake, etc. The most spectacular elements are orange-colored torii gates, which are placed over the path resembling arches, one after the other, which together produce the impression of a large orange snake winding through the forested hills.



Everywhere are little souvenir shops, drinks and food. I spotted a female bunting on one of the gates, likely a female Black-faced bunting. On top we found a quiet place to eat amongst the shrines, and lunch consisted of YBC Chip Star potato chips. Spotted the first Brown-eared Bulbul. The skies were overcast with a bit of blue, and the temperature was again about 25 °C with a high humidity.



The walk downhill was pleasant and we stopped at a local restaurant just outside the shrine for a late lunch at about 15.00. Thereafter we took a train and visited the Komyō-In temple (founded 1391), which has a dry landscape garden.



We stayed in the garden until about 17.30, and saw Tree Sparrow and Great Tit. Thereafter, we walked down. We had to wait at a railway crossing where I am made some pictures. Took a train and had dinner.



Apr 22 Mediocre sleep. Awake at 05.30 and shared breakfast at 08.30. Again an interesting mix of stuff. Microwaved toast, insufficiently heated nuggets (me only), etc. Because Pia had to answer some mails, we left about 11.00. Took a train / metro and walked to the Eikando Zenrin-Ji Temple (founded 863; http://www.eikando.or.jp/English/eikando_e.html).



A beautiful garden with *Acers* (maples) of which some have dark-red or even blood-red leaves. There was a ceremony ongoing with monks in full battle dress, beautiful old paintings including a Bamboo Tiger, colorful ceremonial flags all over the place (reminding me of the prayer flags in Northern India), classes of Japanese children in school uniform, etc. The must see is the “Looking-back Amida” (Buddha), which looks more sideways rather than back. When walking in the garden again, we heard a church organ and the community singing a hymn. Flexible religion, quite a chance from the earlier drums, bells and flutes. Birds included Grey Starling and female Masked Bunting, and we saw little brown crabs and a small skink with a blue tail.

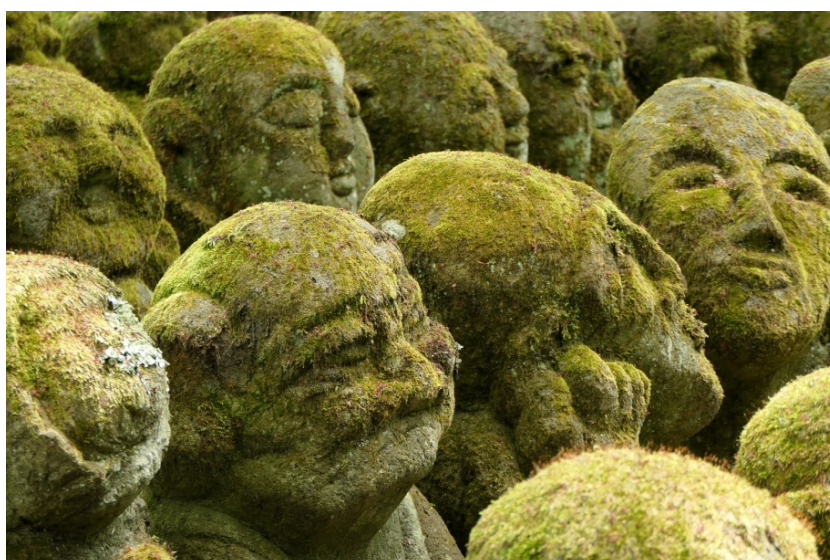




We left the temple complex about 15.00, found a shady place for a late lunch, crisps again. Weather was fine, again about 25 °C and a mild breeze. Visited “our” supermarket where we bought a sanck and a can of beer. Then Pia worked on her presentation, and we had some coffee and Finnish fruit cake. At 19.30 or so we were too tired to look for a restaurant, so again some food and drinks from the supermarket, which were consumed in our rooms working. Went to bed early.

Apr 23 Woke up at about 05.30 or thereabouts, showered, and got my stuff together to switch to the official ISEV housing. Although the five star Kyoto Hotel Okura is not difficult to find, my lack of navigation skills resulted in stumbling around the Resi Stay for a while, finally discovering that I held my phone (with Google maps) upside down. Perhaps a combination of

jet lag and coffee deprivation, or just being simply stupid. In the end, I crossed the bridge and saw (again, without binoculars) Spot-billed Duck, a distant Eurasian Kestrel and Japanese Wagtail. After successful check-in at the Okura, I returned to Resi Stay for another creative breakfast at Pia's room, who finally discovered that we had been misreading the microwave instructions on how to prepare toast. The end product was only slightly better. We left about 08.30, and only thanks to Pia's remarkable sense of direction and knowledge of the Japanese public transport system (two subways and one train), we arrived at the correct station Saga-Arashiyama. Due to the long walk uphill, we took a taxi to the Otagi Nenbutsu-Ji temple, which is famous for "about 1,200 carved stone figures of Rakan, the disciples of Buddha. The interesting thing is that the faces of the stone figure show all kinds of expressions, which all differ from each other. Most are old, and many faces are covered with moss and lichen.



Best bird was a singing Asian Brown Flycatcher. We walked downhill along the “Saga-Toriimoto Preserved Street” to the Adashino Nembutsu-ji temple with about eight thousands stones of Buddha, originally made as gravestones.



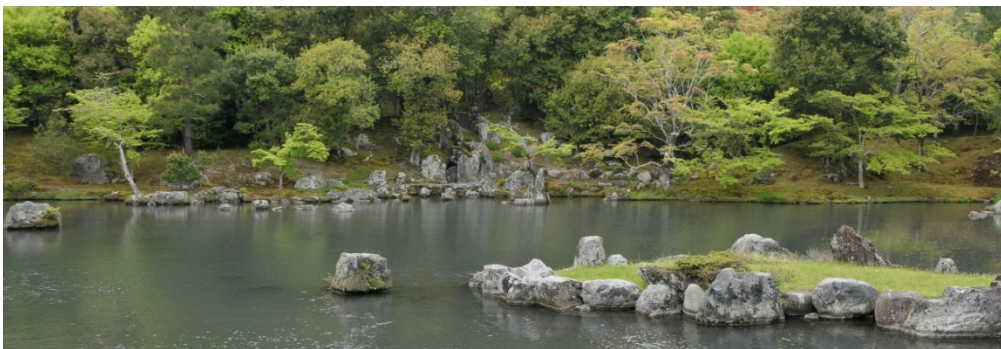
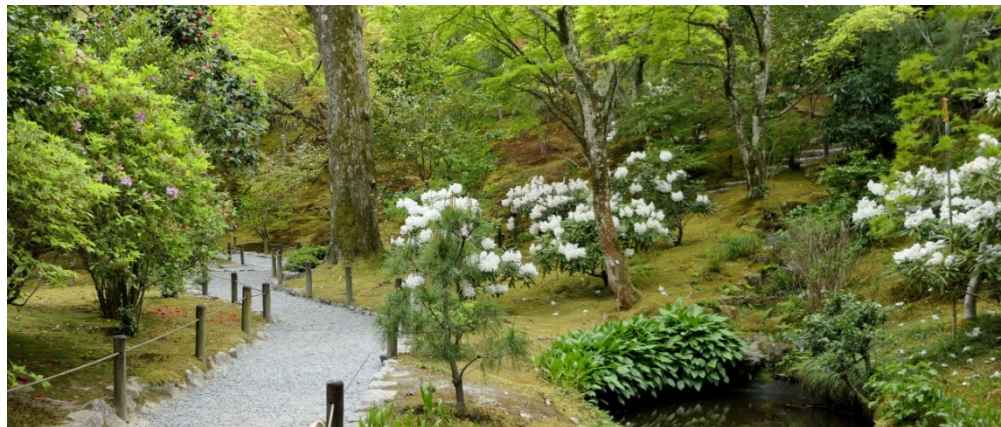
Most if not all of these temples are surprisingly old, this one being founded around 800. This temple is beautifully situated in the hills and still many cherry trees were in full bloom. Thereafter, we walked further downhill and had again a late lunch at a 160-year old tea house. Somehow, the tea house seemed slightly off the beaten track, clearly old, and run by two friendly old ladies (guess, which of the ladies below is 70). The lunch was very tasty, rice with fish and sake, and I spotted a Varied Tit through the old and slightly blurry window.



We continued our walk downhill along the “Saga-Toriimoto Preserved Street”, where we had good views of our only Grey Wagtail of the tour, an unexpected Blue Rock Thrush and a striking Japanese Moon Moth (Japanese Luna Moth) *Actias artemis*.



The last temple visited was the Tenryuji Temple (UNESCO World heritage site), which has a truly nice garden.



The last stop we made was at the famous Arashiyama bamboo forest, where we had great views of Oriental Turtle Dove and Japanese White-eye, the latter – again - spotted by Pia, who is not at all keen on birds!



- Apr 24 From Wednesday April 24 to Sunday April 28 about 14.00, we attended the meeting of the International Society on Extracellular Vesicles.
- Apr 28 It was a special time to be in Japan, because the present Emperor Akihito abdicated on the 30th of April, marking the end of the Heisei era and the start of the Reiwa era. Because the Japanese people had a “golden week”, many festivities were scheduled. One of the unforeseen problems was that it was not easy to find a restaurant for dinner. Thanks to the friendly staff of the Okura hotel, a reservation was eventually made for a two star Michelin restaurant, called Kikunoi Roan (<https://gm.gnavi.co.jp/shop/0415007901/>). I picked up Pia at the Resi Stay about 16.00, and we strolled around in Gion, visiting e.g. a shop selling old Japanese wood block prints, a small shop in which an old guy made wood block prints himself (in hindsight, should have bought one). The dinner was not too bad.
- Apr 29 Travel day. Taxi at 05.50, picked up Pia at the Resi Stay, and then Haruka train to Osaka. Pia dropped the wifi hotspot, bought some honey and sake, etc. Finnair flight AY078B to Helsinki was on time (10.45-14.40), as was my connecting flight to Amsterdam (Finnair, AY1305B; 16.15-17.45). At Helsinki Vantaa it was busy, perhaps due to reconstruction works, and I had to run to catch “my plane”. Fortunately, my seat was upgraded to Business class and some drinks offered a nice compensation.

BIRDS

ANATIDAE

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* – Common at the Kamo River, Kyoto.

Eastern Spot-billed Duck *Anas zonorhyncha* – As previous species, also in several temple ponds.



Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* – Seen while driving from and to the airport, Kyoto.

ARDEIDAE

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* – Common at the Kamo River, Kyoto.

(Eastern) Great White Egret *Ardea (Casmerodius) albus (modestus)* – As previous species.

PHALACROCORACIDAE

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* – A few seen flying and swimming at the Kamo River, Kyoto.

FALCONIDAE

Eurasian Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* – A single distant bird flying over the Kamo River, Kyoto.

ACCIPITRIDAE

Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus* – Common at Kyoto.

COLUMBIDAE

Rock Dove *Columbia livia* (introduced) – Common, introduced.

Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis* – A single bird seen well at the Arashiyama bamboo forest, April 23.



CORVIDAE

Large-billed Crow *Corvus pectoralis* – Common in and around Kyoto.

PARIDAE

Eastern Great Tit *Parus minor* – First seen at the Higashiyama-Ku temple, April 21.

Varied Tit *Poecile varius* – A single bird seen well in the garden of the tea house, April 23.

HIRUNDINIDAE

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* – Common, seen daily in good numbers.

PYCNONOTIDAE

Brown-eared Bulbul *Microscelis amaurotis* – First bird seen at the Fushimi Inari Taisha Shrine, April 21. Common.

ZOSTEROPIDAE

Japanese White-eye *Zosterops japonicus* – A single bird seen well at the Arashiyama bamboo forest, April 23.

STURNIDAE

White-cheeked (Grey) Starling *Sturnus cineraceus* – Two birds seen well at the Eikando Zenrin-Ji Temple, April 22.

TURDIDAE

Pale Thrush *Turdus pallidus* – Two single birds in the garden of the Tenryuji Temple, April 23.

Blue Rock Thrush *Turdus solitarius* – A single bird while walking along the Saga-Toriimoto Preserved Street, April 23.

MUSCICAPIDAE

Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica* – A single bird at the Otagi Nenbutsu-Ji temple, April 23.

PASSERIDAE

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* – Common.

MOTACILLIDAE

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* – A singing bird, perched on the roof of a house, along the Saga-Toriimoto Preserved Street, April 23.



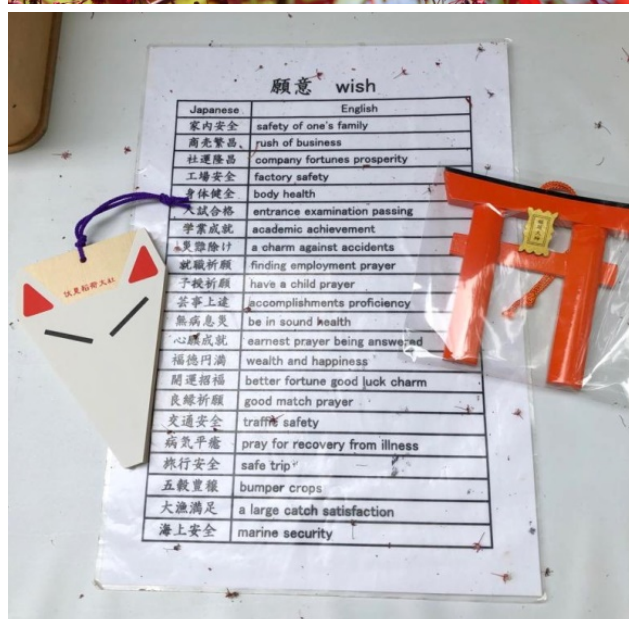
Japanese Wagtail *Motacilla grandis* – Common at the Kamo River. A striking bird, especially when flying due to its entirely white wings.

EMBERIZIDAE

Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala* – Several sightings of single buntings, all likely this species. Best views were a male at the Tenryuji temple, April 23.



Miscellaneous – Temple visits



Miscellaneous – Temple visits



Miscellaneous - Kyoto impressions

