

# My Adventures in Japan

By Jeremy Shafer

Every year one lucky folder is chosen by the Yoshino fund committee to attend the Tanteidan origami convention in Tokyo. This past summer I had the good fortune to be chosen, so here I am to share my experience.

My first adventure was taking the subway from the airport to Hakusan, the area where the convention was held. Although signs were in Roman characters I found the subway system far too complex for my tastes. Some stations were so large you had to walk several blocks to reach a “connecting” train. Since I was carrying my origami, unicycle, juggling stuff and clothes bags, it was difficult to walk anywhere, and not much easier to unicycle. To make matters worse, I kept on taking the wrong trains or shooting past where I was supposed to get off. In short, a trip that should have taken one hour took me about four, and after finally getting there, I vowed that I wouldn’t again take the subway alone. From then on, all of my solo trips were by unicycle. Still, I got terribly lost, but usually I didn’t have anywhere I had to be, so it didn’t matter. It was a lot more fun fumbling around by unicycle than trying to make sense out of the subway.

During my two weeks in Japan, I stayed at the home of Mr. Makoto Yamaguchi, a prolific origami author, designer, and main driving force behind the Tanteidan. Mr. Yamaguchi, who regularly makes his home open to visiting folders, was a sensitive, considerate and fun host. He made me feel at home, guiding me from place to place, and orienting me to the Japanese culture.

The convention was held at a university a few blocks from the Gallery Origami House, a store run by Mr. Yamaguchi and the Tanteidan. To my surprise, I was the only foreigner attending, so the spotlight was on me even more than I had expected. I was greeted on all sides by an abundance of bows and I was asked to sign many autographs. Several of the Tanteidan could communicate well in English, including Mr. Yamaguchi, and Natsuko Hanawa, my translator, but still, the language barrier was an ongoing challenge. The one time when communicating was the easiest was while teaching my Labyrinth Walker class, because teaching origami requires no speaking. Just by watching what I did, everyone in the class was able to complete the model, and I even had a chance to teach some easier models, such as my Frog Tongue and Exploding Envelope.

The classes were arranged in a format similar to the Origami USA conventions, complete with model menu and ticketing. The first class I took was the Harrier carrier plane designed by Yoshino. It was particularly special and significant to me since it was the Yoshino fund that sent me to the convention. Although the class was taught step

by step, due to the language barrier, I relied on the diagrams. Another class I took was Maitreya, a Buddhist goddess, a model designed and taught by Takashi Hojyo. Finally, I took a card folding magic class, taught by Mr. Kazuhisa.

The convention was unique in several ways. Saturday night, after the first day of the convention, there was an elegantly catered reception complete with a huge gourmet buffet and enough sake to fill a bathtub. Entertainment-wise, there was a magician, who performed with magic rings and did several card tricks. Afterwards, I got up and performed with everything I’d brought, except the fire, which they wouldn’t let me do since we were indoors. Although being fireless shortened my act considerably (and cooled it off too), the audience was very receptive and applauded every chance they got. The reception ended with a huge game of bingo. The game wasn’t over until everyone had bingo, and prizes were given out to everyone upon winning.

After the reception the group pilgrimaged on foot to a traditional bed and breakfast hotel where we would spend the night. At the hotel I got to experience the Japanese communal baths and the Tanteidan’s version of a convention late night folding session. Actually, nobody did any folding! The session consisted of about fifteen Tanteidan sitting around a table drinking, smoking and telling jokes, which I’m sure were funny but far beyond my comprehension. The highlight of the evening for me was at the other end of



“Juggling on Shinjuku”

R to L: Mrs. and Mr. Maekawa, Mr. Tango, Mr. Shafer and ???

the room where the kids were all gathered. They weren’t folding either, but they each had their own shoebox of original origami treasures, which they were showcasing to each other. The origamis were mostly of Japanese animation heroes but there were also quite a few new ideas. The funniest was a cartoon portrait of Mr. Yamaguchi. Most of the models were extremely detailed, lifelike, and cleanly folded and designed. It was refreshing to see so much creativity bursting forth from this new generation of folders.

The second and final day of the convention closed with a grand auction fund-raiser. Everything from Japanese novels to Origami USA T-shirts, buttons and convention books were auctioned off. Right on the spot, I wrapped up a set of three juggling balls which I had hand-sewn, and donated them to the auction. This set off a fierce round of bidding in which the set ending up selling at an astonishing 10,000 yen (~\$70 US)!

The evening after the convention, a group of us went out to a restaurant for a closing dinner reception. I was presented with the Yoshino award and asked to say a few words to the group. I recited some Japanese phrases of thanks which I had learned from tapes. I don’t exactly remember what happened next, but somehow the session degenerated into an impromptu round of acapella karaoke, and before I knew it I was belting out Italian opera, and then some mariachi, and finally a Gilbert & Sullivan patter

song. Then, the rest of the group took turns singing Japanese songs, and before the night got too old, several of us ventured out to do some real karaoke, which was a blast.

During the week I was led on several sight-seeing trips by my guide, Takeharu Tango, a soft-spoken young folder who spoke excellent English. In the middle of the week, Mr. Yamaguchi invited Tango and myself to visit his wife and daughter in Shizuoka, a city about 3 hours outside Tokyo. At his house we were treated to gourmet cooking by Mr. and Mrs. Yamaguchi, who went out of their way to cook vegan dishes for me, which were exceptionally oishi (delicious)! We stayed for two nights with the Yamaguchis, during which one memorable outing was to the downtown. To my surprise, Yamaguchi's daughter, Kei, had her own unicycle and so we rode around together and I did some street performing in the town square. I was surprised to learn that Shizuoka holds an annual street performers festival (but not when I was there).

The big highlight of the drive back, was a huge lightning storm, which Mr. Yamaguchi told us was the worst he had ever experienced on the road. Several lightning bolts hit extremely close to our car, one hitting a toll plaza while we were in it!

An important aspect of my trip was to experience street performing on the streets of Tokyo. Unfortunately, in Tokyo, street performing is so illegal, that I was told that had I declared to the customs officials that I was there as a street performer, they might not have allowed me into the country. Sure enough, during my first attempt to perform on the street (juggling fire outside the subway station), the cops came and busted me... well, not exactly *busted*... I played dumb American -- "Sorry I do not speak Japanese... I don't even know how to say THAT!" -- so they just kicked me out, without fining me or confiscating any of my equipment.

I learned that the one exception to the no street performers rule, is every Sunday afternoon on Shinjuku Ave. when they close the street to vehicles. This was my long awaited chance to street perform, and it was even advertised at the Tanteidan convention, so many folders came there to see me. I chose a spot surrounded, by stairs so the audience could sit and relax, but unfortunately, it was in front of a huge building-sized TV screen which I had to compete against for people's attention. In my act I performed torches, fire balls, flaming unicycle, and the flaming crane. In addition it was over 100° out, so everything was *hotsui*, but nonetheless, I had fun, and seemingly so did the audience.

Later that day, I was supposedly on my way home, when I found a seemingly perfect spot to perform that I couldn't pass up. It was in the middle of the street and packed with people. I got out my act and started performing again. I was in the middle of the act, three torches in hand as well as a huge crowd, when this small middle-aged

Japanese man came up and started angrily shouting at me something I clearly couldn't understand. I quickly mustered up all the Japanese I knew to try to convey to him, "excuse me, sorry, but please let me just finish this act and then I will leave," but I guess I didn't know that much Japanese for he just got angrier and even though I was much bigger than him and had three lit torches in my hand, he started hitting and kicking me. Usually I am vehemently opposed to using violence to solve conflicts, but in this case I was being attacked by a mad man and using words to defend myself just wasn't working. I was about to resort to fighting back when suddenly this huge European came to my rescue, grabbed the man and flung him to the ground. Suddenly my concern shifted from protecting myself to protecting

my attacker from his attacker. Meanwhile, the crowd had tripled in size, and I remember thinking, "if only the three of us could work together, we could really yoke this crowd for all it's worth!" Instinctively, I jumped in between the two and, much to the audience's dismay, managed to keep the European from "rescuing" me any further, for the Japanese man had been sufficiently scared enough to stop harassing me. I quickly finished my act, passed the hat and, much to the European's dismay, packed up my stuff and moved down the street to do one more performance before the street opened. I later learned from a local that the man who had attacked me is a bird trainer who regularly causes trouble with performers there, and that he was angry at me not only for

performing in his territory, but also, he felt my fire was scaring his birds. Despite the conflict, the middle of the street was far more crowded and lucrative for me than where I was before and had I had it to do over again I would have performed there from the start, but, of course, away from the bird man!

Another scary incident was when I was unicycling around and around the Imperial Palace looking for Shinjuku Ave. I decided I would try to ask a Palace security guard for directions. But as I was unicycling toward him, he must have thought I was trying to invade the palace, for he jumped up and charged at me rifle in hand shouting and scaring me half to death. I quickly jumped off my unicycle put my hands up and called out "Gomen nasai, sumimasen!" which means "Sorry, please forgive me!" When he realized I wasn't a true threat, he calmed down and I very timidly asked him, "Shinjuku dori wa doko desu ka?" He pointed me in the right direction and sent me on my way. Obviously he was hired to defend the castle from intruders, so this was his big chance to do his job, but he sure scared the living daylights out of me!

Another funny encounter I had while unicycling was with a magazine vendor. I was trying to find my way back to Yamaguchi's house which is on Hakusan Ave., so I asked the vendor for directions: "Hakusan dori wa doko desu ka?" He said he didn't know and he stopped a passerby



"Posing in front of a giant Flasher at The Origami House."

to ask the same question. The passerby responded, “Koko des!” which means “Right here!” The vendor didn’t even know the name of the street he worked on, and he was very embarrassed, rightly so!

From folding, to juggling, to getting hilariously lost, my trip was an adventure that I will always remember. To the members of Tanteidan, I extend my deepest thanks and gratitude for inviting me to Japan and treating me to such warm hospitality. Not only did I get a first hand look into what origami is like in its

hometown, but beyond that, I learned a whole lot about the Japanese culture. I found the Japanese to be extremely generous, gracious, modest and polite, on all levels, from their heartfelt hospitality right down to their simple custom of bowing. During my two weeks in Japan, I exchanged so many bows that when I came back home, for two weeks I could not help using that new hinge at my waist on all occasions. All in all I had a fantastic trip and recommend folders everywhere to seek adventure in the Land of the Rising Sun.