

HAKUBA-NAGANO, JAPAN by Ross Baker

The Japan 2009 trip went to the Hakuba Valley in the heart of the Japanese Alps. There was an optional pre-trip to Kyoto, Japan and a post-trip to Beijing, China. And, what a fantastic trip this was! From the moment we departed until the moment we returned, everything clicked amazingly well. The Japanese people were consistently efficient, friendly, hospitable and courteous while our trip was packed with cultural experiences that we will never forget.

In one respect, Japan is what you might wish the world would be like. A sense of order and the desire to do what is best for the public good pervades the culture. There is virtually no street crime or graffiti. You feel very safe here. Hot and cold vending machines stand on every corner, yet none of them are vandalized. Japanese people with colds, or those wanting to avoid catching a cold often wear surgical masks in public.

Technology reaches into everything in Japan. Virtually every toilet seat is heated and most have bidets built into them. **Gai-Lynn Marshall** reported that one toilet seat cover automatically rose when she entered the stall! These toilets were truly unusual by Western standards!

Thirteen lucky SCSC travelers began their vacation with the pre-trip to Kyoto. This city was Japan's capital for more than 10 centuries and is loaded with history. On our city tour we visited the Nijo Castle and the Golden Pavilion which had purposely-designed squeaky floors to warn of intruders in the corridors. While exploring Kyoto, **Manolo Valle** met some beautiful Geisha girls. He also enjoyed a delicious Kobe beef dinner. There were so many sights and attractions to see in this city and everyone left with a memorable impression.

After Kyoto, we departed to the world-class Olympic Ski area of Hakuba, Nagano. Nagano has a variety of ski terrain and many options with over 10 ski resorts nearby. Happo One was the venue for the Olympic downhill, slalom and ski-jumping events and it was within walking distance from our hotel. Hakuba 47/ Goryu had fantastic vistas and offered another fabulous day of skiing in the Japanese Alps. **Ross Baker** joked about how the Japanese language was translated

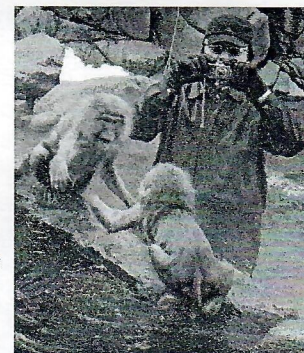
into English on the ski area signs. He found one that read "Confluence Attention". This really meant "Caution: Trails Merge"! **Tom Huzzey** had the Olympic spirit and skied every day.

There were many highlights in the Hakuba area including the snow monkeys at the Jigokudani Hot Springs. These Macaque monkeys are native to Japan and are the most northern living non-human primate. They spend most of their day soaking in the natural hot springs. It was exciting to see them playing in their natural habitat while they ignored our presence. **Yvonne McMahon,**

Caroline Vetterling and **Chris Urbanzyck** all enjoyed getting up close and personal with the monkeys. This tour was like National Geographic come to life! There was even a Tokyo TV crew on site who interviewed **David George** about his experience while here.

After seeing the monkeys, we visited Nagano City, home of the Zenkoji Temple. This national treasure is one of Japan's most revered temples and houses the first image of Buddha brought to Japan in the 7th Century. The streets surrounding the temple are lined with souvenir shops and **Mary Ann Harrell** found many unique and special treasures to bring home.

On another excursion, we toured the Daio Wasabi farm, the largest of its kind in Japan. We were told this plant is very sensitive and must be grown in a particular environment including cool, clear, free-flowing river water. Our guide explained that much of the "wasabi" we eat is fake and in reality is just colored horseradish. **Tor Lileng** enjoyed tasting many of the real wasabi products at the farm including the wasabi beer, while **Peggy and Jerry Montgomery** enjoyed the wasabi ice cream.



(continued on page 7)

HAKUBA-NAGANO, JAPAN *(continued from page 6)*

Afterwards, we toured the Matsumoto Castle, a five-storied donjon with a moat and one of the oldest castle structures in Japan. This was a wonderful venue for photographers. Slippers had to be worn inside. An exhibit on each floor broke up the challenging climb to the top including several flights of steep wooden stairs. **Margaret Walker** found that the ascent was worth the effort because of the beautiful views from the top of the castle were picture perfect! Later, we all enjoyed a traditionally cooked and superb Japanese lunch, complete with sake.

After five days in Nagano, we boarded the bullet train to Tokyo. This technological marvel ran smoothly and quietly at speeds of over 160 miles per hour! We arrived in an hour and then enjoyed a tour of Tokyo including the Asakusa district. Here, many colorful stores line the Nakamise walkway leading up to the Sensoji Temple, Tokyo's oldest and most famous Buddhist temple. We also took a cruise on the Sumina River and then viewed the city from the heights of the Tokyo Tower. This landmark resembles the Eiffel Tower and offers spectacular views.

The next day, most of us went our separate ways to explore the many districts and attractions in Tokyo. Ross enjoyed Akihabara, the "Electric City" where a dazzling variety of electronics and appliance stores abound, however, he found that prices were not as cheap as in the U.S. **Diane Baker** was amazed at the Tsukiji Fish Market with its torpedo-sized tuna

getting ready for auction. This market seethes with activity and is the largest in the world! Tokyo is a very exciting and stimulating place. It is a real treasure trove of surprises and it seems that everyone found something special here.

On Sunday, February 1, seven members left on the post trip to Beijing while the others returned home. Most everyone who went on this extension reported that this was the best part of the entire trip. A few highlights included the 2008 Olympic venues, Temple of Heaven, the Forbidden City, Tianamen Square, the Ming Tombs and of course, the Great Wall of China.

Whether you went to Japan, China or both, this trip was fabulous in every way and was immensely enjoyed by everyone!

