

JAPAN TRIP REPORT 2025

viranatura
tours

Lilium auratum

Day 1 25 June Arrive in Tokyo

Everyone from all over the world safely arrived and we rendezvoused at our first hotel (Mercure Tokyo Haneda Airport). After a welcome briefing at the hotel reception, we walked to a local BBQ restaurant for our first dinner together. Everyone seemed intrigued and entertained in equal measures by the robot servers!

Day 2 26 June Katsu'ura

As we were a group of 16, we went in three separate cars driven by Başak, Kazuyuki and myself, which remained our main mode of transport for the rest of the tour. Leaving the hotel at around 9AM, we drove towards the city of Katsu'ura, on the Pacific Ocean side of Chiba Prefecture through the impressive Tokyo Bay Aqua Line (a 23.7km long tunnel and bridge connecting Tokyo to Chiba). On the way, we made our first convenience store stop (this one was a 7-Eleven) for our picnic lunch supplies: everyone chose from the dazzling array of sandwiches, bento boxes, noodles and various exotic snacks. After just over two hours, we arrived in a quiet cove of Ubara in Katsu'ura, the grandly named Ubara Risōkyo (literally Ubara Utopia). Soon after starting our short hike towards the sea and through a little pedestrian tunnel, we found our first lily of the tour, the fabulous Japanese endemic, *Lilium auratum*. Several large flowers were open for us to enjoy and there were certainly lots of shutter sound and clicks coming from all directions. We also found a few toad lilies (*Tricyrtis* sp. probably *T. hirta*) around the *Lilium* although they were not in flower, being a decidedly autumn flowering plant.

We continued our walk through the low canopy of the broadleaf evergreen forest, typical of the warmer, southern half of the Japanese seashores, characterised by *Quercus* sp., the large *Camelia japonica*, the iconic *Fatsia japonica*, *Pittosporum tobira* (Japanese cheesewood), etc. There we encountered a few extremely tame Reeve's muntjak (*Muntiacus reevesi*). These small-ish deer were, like in the UK and continental Europe, unfortunately accidentally introduced to Japan and they are multiplying unstoppably – and the icing on the cake was that we were in the epicentre of their invasion. Some went about their businesses with a brazen assurance right in front of a whole group of mesmerised humans. At this point, we were yet to realise that the shadow of deer-damages would raise its ugly head here and there throughout our tour. I had been to Katsu'ura six years earlier in 2019 and while I knew of the muntjak problem in the area, back then I didn't



Campanula punctata

see a single one. More poignantly, when my group visited on 25 June 2019, we were welcomed by quite a few large specimens of *Lilium auratum* in flower on the cliff with the Pacific Ocean as their backdrop. This time though, it became clear pretty quickly that the muntjaks had eaten all but the one or two we got to see at the beginning of our walk. It was sad but we at least got to see a plant in flower. We sat around a little gazebo with a sea view on the headland and had our 7-Eleven picnic.

After the picnic, we casually descended from the clifftop area while looking for more plants: there were numerous *Hydrangea macrophylla* around, and some large clumps of *Angelica japonica*. I think some of us also noticed the uniquely neat-looking leaves of *Boehmeria splitgerbera*. Down at the quaint fishing village (or the remain thereof), lovely *Campanula punctata* were growing on the cliffside by the footpath. There were several *Lilium maculatum* (not in flower yet – we saw them at the end of the tour) growing higher on the cliff, presumably survived the muntjak attacks because they were growing on a vertical cliff. We walked back to the car park through little village area and some of us were still finding more plants – several unidentified *Arisaema* and *Wisteria floribunda* growing among the planted *Cryptomeria japonica* right were seen quite close to the car too.

It was time to drive back to Tokyo in the mid-afternoon. We drove back through the Tokyo Bay Aqua Line but instead of returning to the Haneda Airport area, we braved the rush-hour traffic to reach the massive Tokyo station to catch our first Shinkansen (bullet train) service up north to Shin-Shirakawa. Once on the train, we could finally relax (I must admit I still find those massive Tokyo terminuses quite stressful to navigate through!).

It was an entirely different world from the hustle and bustle of Tokyo when we arrived in Shin-Shirakawa. It is technically still designated a 'village' and at night it indeed felt like it. We quickly went to our hotel, a minute's walk from the station, then we walked to the main event (!) of the day at the local izakaya named Hokkai where we were treated to an unbelievable feast by the



Rhododendron molle subsp. *japonicum*

fantastic people lovingly running the place. Sake and beers were flowing. It was a long day, and we were all completely exhausted but happy!

Day 3 27 June Takashimizu Natural Park

After a quick breakfast at the hotel in Shin-Shirakawa, we were promptly on our way towards the town of Minami Aizu. Our main target today was the beautiful and elusive Japanese endemic, *Lilium rubellum*. As we drove west away from the town, the calmingly flat rice fields gradually gave way to the woodlands, and we soon entered one of the species-rich areas of Japan. The monsoon-fresh greenery of the mountains was at times breathtaking. Some large lianas of *Actinidia kolomikta* and *Hydrangea petiolaris* could be seen even by the roadside. En route, we made another lunch-supply stop, but today's stop was an interesting local-produce market. There were a lot of interesting items on sale, and we ended up staying there for a while. On the plant front, there were some lovely *Stewartia pseudocamellia* planted by the car park showing off their pure-white, camellia-like flowers.

When we finally arrived at the Takashimizu Nature Park where the *Lilium rubellum* reserve is situated, we were welcomed by two friends of mine – Koji and Keiko – who travelled from Sendai to meet us with some gifts and even a welcome banner! They had been on my Canaries tour just a month earlier and it was lovely to see them again so soon.

Lilium rubellum is only found in a small mountainous area in the northern-central Honshu. It may seem almost unthinkable why this gorgeous lily is not cultivated more widely, but it just happens to be one of those (many) plants that don't do well outside their natural habitats. I've never tried to grow this myself, but I hear that they readily succumb to all sorts of pathogens and perish in a few years. One of the contributing factors may be that the area is known for extreme snowfalls in the winter and sees a dramatic temperature variance with the lows of -20°C or lower in the winter. Another curious fact about the habitat: lilies were growing amongst low-growing mixed vegetation but one of its major components was young bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*). Apparently, moles and rats don't like bracken thus their presence is critical for protecting the lily bulbs that are nestled among the dense web of bracken rhizomes. There is another dimension to this observation: in Japan, bracken is a very popular sansai ('wild vegetables') and people go foraging for them en masse. So, there was a sign that



Schizocodon soldanelloides

read “bracken foraging prohibited” at the reserve! It was as if to prove the point that Keiko (Hiro's friend above) had brought some pickled brackens which she prepared herself for us amongst numerous snacks they brought along. I think I shared them with some of you in Tokyo.

The lily reserve was a truly astonishing sight to behold: a gently rolling clearing surrounded by the lush forest was covered in thousands of the pink lilies in full bloom. I believe we chanced upon the peak flowering day of the season too. We could easily spend longer there but we needed to visit another site afterwards but I'm sure everyone took hundreds of photos there.

We got some help from a local guide to show us around our next destination, Komado Marsh, which is designated as a nationally natural monument. First, we were led through the wooded area with beeches and spruces, where we saw some patches of *Paris tetraphylla* and *Monotropastrum humile*. Then suddenly the vista of the bogland opened in front of our eyes, and it became clear that this marsh was also having a fantastic season: flowers everywhere! In the widest part of the bog, there were astounding number of cottongrass *Eriophorum vaginatum*, and amongst them were the yellow *Hemerocallis esculenta*, purple *Iris setosa*, *Veratrum stamineum*, as well as the lovely fronds of ostrich ferns *Matteuccia struthiopteris*. There were occasional salmon-flowered *Rhododendron molle* subsp. *Japonicum* and *Rhododendron multiflorum* with its bell-shaped pink flowers. Nearby, we also found some smaller bog specialists including the sundew, *Drosera rotundifolia*, and two Japanese endemic orchids, *Pogonia japonica* and *Eleorchis japonica*, too. For the lily enthusiasts, there were several tall *Lilium leichtlinii* var. *maximowiczii*, but here, they wouldn't start flowering the before mid-July. We were sad to leave this amazing place, but we needed to catch the shinkansen back to Tokyo in the evening, so we tore ourselves away and said goodbye to the millions of flowers. It was starting to rain as well by this point. After a quick photo stop for an impressive group of *Rodgersia podophylla*, we drove straight back to Shin-Shirakawa for our train journey. Another exhausting but successful day came to a close as we arrived back at the Mercure Haneda Airport.

Day 4 28 June To Sapporo, Hokkaido

After a hearty breakfast at the hotel, we transferred to the Haneda Airport to catch the flight for Sapporo, the largest town on Hokkaido. After landing, we travelled via the national highway (there were several native Japanese tree lilac *Syringa reticulata* in flower along the way) to the Yurigahara Garden in the north of the city



Dicentra peregrina

where we were met by the garden’s director, Mr Ihara. First thing first, we were invited to have lunch at the garden’s café, and very fittingly for our tour, we were served with the rare but tasty lily bulb dishes (lily bulb croquette curry)! The bulbs are sourced from the nearby region which produces most of Japan’s edible lily bulbs.

After the lunch, we started our leisurely walk through Yurigahara Garden (which means field of lilies). Hokkaido’s climate is closer to that of Western Europe or American Northeast than the rest of Japan, and we were welcomed by many familiar garden favourites. But everyone was here to see an impressive groups of both species and hybrid *Lilium*. Amongst other impressive lilies, there was an area planted with over 3,600 (!) *Lilium regale*, but we were very unfortunately a few days too early – not a single flower was open! Being shown around the garden by Mr Ihara had its perks: we were invited to see the greenhouses where they grow some unusual *Lilium* species from Japan, as well as China and Korea. Some were excited to see an impressive collection of several rare *Lilium concolor* varieties flowering. Sadly, it was soon time to say goodbye to Mr Ihara and his team at the Yurigahara Garden and make a long drive towards So’unkyo, a hot spring resort town in the Daisetsuzan National Park where we would spend two nights. It was completely dark by the time we got to the Choyo Resort Hotel. Everyone’s favourite at the hotel’s dinner buffet was the wondrous beer mugs that filled up from the bottom!

Day 5 29 June Mount Kurodake

We woke up to a lovely sunny morning in the So’unkyo gorge, which was formed by the upper reaches of Ishikari River – one of the largest rivers in Japan. Just across the road from the hotel car park, we saw a small group of *Lilium pensylvanicum* (*dauricum*) growing on the artificial cliffside. These lilies prefer open areas with low and often recently disturbed vegetations, and roadside artificial environment seems to be perfect for them. At the same time, it looked as though they were probably growing only on the steep cliff/slopes now because of the pressure from the exploding deer population here too (in 2019 they were flowering just by the bridge in a flat area!).

Today’s first main event was to go up Mt Kurodake (‘black mountain’) by the jolly cable cars and the chair lift that whisked us from 670m above sea level to 1,520m. The leafy stretch between the cable car station and the chair lift stop was a made into a natural garden planted with some native flowers including a few *Fritillaria kamtschaticensis* and a colony of *Thalictrum aquilegiifolium* var. *intermedium* as well as a few nice shrubs of *Rhododendron* (*Therorhodon*) *camtschaticum*. Other plants we saw included *Mertensia pterocarpa* and a few late *Primula cuneifolia* in the shaded area by the foot path.



Fritillaria camtschaticensis

The officers at the mountain hut were fairly sure that the wild *Fritillaria kamtschaticensis* at the top ridge area of Mt Kurodake were not open yet but for some of the more intrepid members of our group, the temptation of seeing the area with their own eyes was just too great. So, we split into two groups and asked Kazuyuki (who knows Hokkaido’s mountains like the palm of his hand) to take the Die-hards up to the top. The rest of us had a leisurely stroll followed by a noodle/curry lunch by the cable car station before descending to So’unkyo. Once down, we then drove to another area south of So’unkyo, called Ginsendai, which is one of the popular trailheads for Daisetsuzan (the great snow mountains) trekking, but we weren’t going to do a proper hike here. We did walk the first few kilometres however and were amply rewarded by the glorious view with a large colony of white-flowered *Ledum palustre* ssp. *diversipilosum* in the later afternoon sunlight. Along the path we saw many giant butterburs, *Petasites japonicus* both in leaves and flower, while back at the car park there were several yellow-flowered shrubs of *Weigela middendorffiana* and a few orchids, *Dactylorhiza aristata* growing in the lawn area too. My favourite was perhaps the glorious kiwifruit-relative, *Actinidia kolomikta* growing up the tall trees by the side of the access roads to Ginsendai, showing off their leaves painted in white and pink. Our final stop of the day was on the way back from Ginsendai to the hotel, for a good group of *Lilium pensylvanicum*, again thriving on the artificial roadside slope by a dam lake. The orange flowers glowing in the afternoon sun were particularly enjoyable to look at. The sunlight was so magical that it induced one or two of us to go up the high slope to precariously perch at the top merely to shoot a few lily flowers! But luckily, we all returned safely to So’unkyo for another evening of onsen and buffet dinner with bottomless drinks.

Day 6 30 June Wakkanai coast

Today we drove 300km from So’unkyo in the centre of the Hokkaido to Wakkanai, the northernmost city of the island, and consequently that of Japan too. Leaving the hotel early in the morning, we drove north through the Daisetsuzan National Park then eventually into the expansive farmlands dotted with residential areas. We may as well have used this day for travelling as the weather turned quite wet as we progressed. We made our first stop at the town of Nayoro, at its michi-no-eki or a ‘wayside station’, which is often a unique market selling local produces and found all over Japan. The speciality at this michi-no-eki was glutinous rice produced in the area, so we had to try some soft mochi dessert with fruit fillings made from local rice. We continued our drive north in the grey rainy weather until we arrived in the small town of Teshio, situated on the shore of the Sea of Japan. Here our lunch stop was another michi-no-eki. After the noodles and curry lunch, our first botany stop was only a few minutes away.

The Teshio River, that forms a large floodplain along its winding path, flows into the ocean near the town of Teshio, but just before its mouth it has formed a 5 mile long, very thin sand bank that



Angelica ursina

was our first botany stop today. The sandbank hosts a unique coastal low-lying vegetation with a bizarre littoral scrub of low bamboo, *Hemerocallis dumortieri*, *Vitis coignetiae* and *Rosa rugosa*, dotted with numerous and massive *Angelica ursina*. After about half an hour enjoying this wind-swept scenery, we then started to drive again along the very straight National Route 106 towards Wakkanai. Our next stop was the Sarobetsu Wetland Centre, where the boardwalk makes an easy stroll over a small corner of Sarobetsu Plain, the largest remaining peatbog in Japan. Here amongst other plants, we were able to see typical bog residents from the smaller *Pogonia japonica* and *Drosera rotundifolia* to the slender and tall *Veratrum stamineum*, *Hemerocallis dumortieri* and *Iris ensata*. Although nearly finished for the season, we were luckily in time to see the last few remaining *Iris laevigata* as well (later we found a good population of *Iris setosa* along the Route 106 as well, so we got to see three iconic Japanese “wet-feet” Iris in one afternoon). A little surprise find near the end of the boardwalk was the unthinkable massive marsh marigold, *Caltha palustris* var. *barthei* in the shaded area with one-metre-long leaves. They certainly made some of us laugh in disbelief.

On the way back from the Sarobetsu Wetland Centre towards the coastal Route 106, we found a small, wooded area (probably the entrance to someone’s private farm!) and there we saw a few lovely *Hydrangea petiolaris* in flower, almost smothering the host trees with their vigorous climbing habit, and of course we had to stop for some photos. It is always fascinating to see the popular garden favourites in their natural habitats, and this was certainly a fantastic example.

Before arriving in Wakkanai, we had another excellent discovery again along the road, a beautiful population of large *Lilium pensylvanicum*. I believe Isik found them and stopped the car she was in – the other two cars including mine went ahead and realised one car was missing, so we returned to where the stopped car was – and were we glad to have done so! By this time the weather had turned pretty poor and also surprisingly cold, but many a happy lily snaps (with very smily lily people included) were taken nonetheless.

After the lilies, the only thing left to do was to hurry to today’s destination, the city of Wakkanai, arriving at the cozy hotel near the port just before dark. We indulged ourselves in another bottomless drink dinner at an izakaya a few minutes’ drive away. Hopefully some of us enjoyed the onsen with a view on the tenth floor of the hotel before going to bed.



Iris sanguinea

Day 7 1 July To Matsumoto

This was a long transfer day back to Honshu, but before our transfer to Wakkanai Airport, the Diehards struck again. I knew there was a low-land population of the so-called “black lilies” *Fritillaria kamtschatcensis* at the northern most point of Japan, the Cape Sōya. I also knew that we were very late for the flowers. Anyway, some dedicated members still decided to go and check. It turned out that we were about a month too late: all we saw was the brown shrivelled remains of the plants that had clearly finished flowering weeks earlier. It was nevertheless still interesting to see the habitat of this fritillary in the open grassland just a few metres above sea level.

When the breakaway group returned to the hotel, it was soon time to leave for the airport. The flight connections were a bit unusual: there used to be a Wakkanai – Tokyo Haneda flight once a day but they don’t operate anymore so we needed to fly via Sapporo (Shin-Chitose). We had an airport food court lunch at Shin-Chitose, then off we took a very niche flight route from Sapporo to an industrial city in central Japan, Matsumoto. This flight conveniently took us near enough to our next destination, Hakuba, now only a couple of hours drive away. After changing to our vans in the centre of the city of Matsumoto, we set off for the village of Hakuba arriving at dinner time. Our dinner was taken at a famiresu (from ‘family restaurant’) in the quiet centre of the village, and we were served by the hard-working server robots again. We settled for the night at another onsen hotel in the quiet part of Hakuba.

Day 8 2 July Hakuba

When you stay at an onsen hotel, the common tradition is to have an early bath before breakfast (as well as the night before, or as many times as you like!), so Kazuyuki and I certainly did this and enjoyed the fresh morning air with the mountain view. Hakuba is a scenic village situated in the eastern foothills of the Hida Mountains (aka Northern Alps). This highland area is a former Olympic host (Nagano 1998) and is now well-served with cable cars that can take us into the hills quickly. A very popular ski resort, it is frequented by numerous overseas visitors and especially popular with the Australian skiers.



Paris japonica

After breakfast, we started a day with a busy itinerary. There was a small hiccup with the original plan: the first area where we were hoping to hike (the area called Hakuba-Jiri, literally the ‘bottom of Hakuba’) was inaccessible due to an unseasonably large amount of remaining snow en route. Instead, we decided to go up to a different mountain on cable cars. The path between the two cable car stations was full of interesting native plants. Superbly architectural *Rodgersia podophylla* and *Filipendula camtschatica* were flanked by of *Oplopanax japonicus* with their terrifying large leaves with thorns all over, while *Acer caudatum* ssp. *ukurundense* with their upright cream-coloured racemes were providing a lovely background over the white fringes of the *Trautvetteria carolinensis* var. *japonica*. There was also a good flowering specimen of *Arisaema serratum* right next to the connecting cable car station. The icing on the cake here was the one single flowering *Lilium medeoloides* in flower by the bush next to the path. We were amazed to find it as this lily usually only flowers about a month later! Naturally it was very popular with everyone and the clouds of pink flowers of *Weigela hortensis* and the dark purple Iris setosa helped to make the encounter even more special.

After another short cable car ride, we arrived at the Tsugaike Nature Park located at around 2,000m above sea level. The namesake of the area, the ‘tsuga’ trees (*Abies mariesii*, though confusingly not a Tsuga species) with blueish purple cones were abundant adding a special highland feels to the scenery. This nature reserve is another nationally significant highland peatbog. As it sits in a cirque left behind by a long extinct glacier, the bog’s terrain is unusually variable in elevation, resulting in the very diverse vegetation for a relatively small area. Probably the targets for everyone here were the two spectacular Japanese endemics, *Paris japonica* and *Glaucidium palmatum*. Both species welcomed us in superb condition, and it was absolutely fantastic to see both flowers in very good number, and the lingering snow patches here and there only added to the overall experience. Around them were numerous other specialities, such as the white spathes of *Lysichiton camtschaticense*, *Diphyleia grayi* whose white flowers turn famously turn transparent when wet, the slender *Veratrum stamineum*, and the small but lovely flowers of *Paris tetraphylla*, *Schizocodon soldanelloides*, *Heloniopsis orientalis* and *Anemone debilis*. It was also interesting to see the native cherry *Prunus nipponica* and dark pink flowers of *Rhododendron albrechtii* in flower in July in the drier parts of the reserve. Having thoroughly enjoyed this bog reserve, we had a quick snack before descending back to Hakuba village on the cable cars.



Glaucidium palmatum

For today’s second stop, we drove a few km south to the area called Kamishiro. Here are two small waterbodies in walking distance from each other: the source of the Hime River and the Oyomi Bog. The source of Hime River is a natural spring fed by the snowmelt from the nearby Hida Mountains, and it wells up in the area protected by the grove of Japanese cedars, *Cryptomeria japonica*. A fairly shaded area, the plant diversity also reflected this. We hadn’t looked at the woodland undergrowth much on this tour and we saw some different plants including the odd whorls of the leaves of *Syneilesis palmata*, the close relative of its more famous cousin Ginseng *Panax japonicus* and the red berries of *Sambucus sieboldiana*. *Arisaema serratum* and *Lysichiton camtschaticense* had finished flowering but the ostrich ferns, *Matteuccia struthiopteris* were happily extending there long leaves next to them. There were a few submerged *Ranunculus nipponicus* in the stream, but the water level was so low, and they were sadly not doing well when we were there. As we walked towards the Oyomi Bog through the Cryptomeria grove further, we saw more undergrowth plants such as the green-flowered terrestrial orchid *Liparis kumokiri*, dainty *Hydrangea serrata* with white flowers, and the tufts of white flowers of lovely *Astilbe odontophylla*. The bog itself is a watery opening in the wooded area again served with a good boardwalk. There were good colonies of *Lysimachia vulgaris* var. *davurica*, the bogbeans *Menyanthes trifoliata*, and the tall and slender white orchids *Platanthera hologlottis*, as well as a few flowering *Hosta sieboldii* and *Iris laevigata*. The bog hosts a good population of *Lilium leichtlinii* var. *maximowiczii* but we knew we were too early for them, and none were found in flower.

After a full day botanising, we returned to the hotel for a relaxing evening with the buffet dinner and of course more onsen!

Day 9 3 July To Kyoto

Today we needed to transfer again, this time to Kyoto via Matsumoto. Before driving south towards Matsumoto, we had more cable car and lift rides from Hakuba to do. This was a beautifully sunny morning and the view towards the snow-covered mountains from the hotel was particularly amazing. So off we went up another mountain. Happō-One (Happō = eight-way; oné = ridges) hosts a slightly different flora from the neighbouring mountains in the range, due to its ultramafic (serpentine) substrate, with several endemic species/subspecies known only from this rather small area. The route up involved three different cable car/lifts in total, and the second and third of those were open ski lifts that allowed us to enjoy the views and observe the plants growing beneath our feet. Although we couldn’t stop and take photos, there were some big colonies of *Rodgersia podophylla*, some endemic plants such as *Euphorbia togakusensis*



Diphyleia grayi

and *Sanguisorba hakusanensis*, and if you looked closely, you could also see some late *Primula farinosa* subsp. *modesta* here and there. At the second station, there was a little pond around which we could find the lovely pink flowers of *Rosa acicularis* alongside some of the now familiar flowers such as *Hemerocallis* and *Veratrum*.

Along the well-kept climbing path from the top station (1,800m above sea level) was where many of the small but interesting flowers were found (quite easily at that too). For example, the Happō-One form of Japanese edelweiss, *Leontopodium japonicum* f. *happoense* would be growing right in the middle of the steps, while some *Filipendula multijuga* and *Spiraea nipponica* would gently adorn the sides by the rocks. Many other plants we saw there include *Narthecium asiaticum*, *Dianthus superbus* var. *speciosus*, *Thalictrum minus* var. *stipellatum*, the only thyme species native to Japan *Thymus quinquecostatus*, *Rhododendron tschonoskii* subsp. *trinerve*, *Pinguicula vulgaris*, *Pogonia japonica*, and *Erigeron thunbergii* subsp. *glabratus*. Only those who followed Kazuyuki all the way up got to see the endemic *Swertia tetrapetala* var. *happoensis*. A slightly disappointing was that we couldn't find *Epimedium koreanum* in flower – which Margaret really wanted to see – though we found many plants. Incidentally, the same *Epimedium koreanum* flowers two months earlier in April/May at a lower altitude (-1,000m) inside the village of Hakuba.

By late morning, we had descended from the mountain and started our drive south towards our second destination of the day, Takakagari-Yama. This is a verdant hill covered in a thick forest near the town of Ōmachi, and at the top there is one of the most northerly populations of another Japanese endemic lily, *Lilium japonicum*. The first thing we did was to fill our stomach with our picnic lunch under the *Cryptomeria* trees at the top of the hill where there was a small lookout area. Then we casually went off to find the delicate pink lilies. They were found though not in a great number. Luckily there were a few that looked well and quite easy to photograph but it was all too clear that this area was also affected by the uncontrolled deer population. Luckily, some delicate plants such as *Liparis kumokiri* and *Campanula punctata* had survived in the undergrowth, which is also favoured by *Lilium japonicum*, so not all was lost it seemed – we left for the town of Matsumoto with our fingers crossed.



Moss Temple



Before the train to Kyoto, we decided to engage in a non-botany activity for the first time on our tour. The city of Matsumoto is known for a few things but probably most famous for its beautiful castle: the Matsumoto Castle. It is one of the 12 Japanese castles with the original tenshu (main tower), and it is thought that this tenshu was built around 1596-97. After wandering around the moat while admiring the view, it was time to go up to the top ourselves. Being an original wooden structure, some stairs were seriously steep and narrow, but the climb was well worth it.

It was a very hot afternoon, and it had been a relief when we finally settled in our seats on the train to Nagoya. We had our special station bento boxes for supper, and it was time to relax. We had a bit of a worry when the announcement came through the tannoy that our train was suspended due to a local flood caused by a heavy downpour but luckily, we were able to move after about an hour and half. We missed the connection to our original Kyoto train, but the JR people managed to change our booking swiftly. Finally, we were in the muggy air of Kyoto and arrived at our hotel at about 10 pm.

Days 10 4 July Kyoto Day One

Our first temple visit was done on foot, about 15 minutes' walk from our hotel. Ken'nin-Ji is the oldest zen temples in Kyoto, established in 1202, and serves as the headquarter of a sect within the Rinzai school of zen buddhism. The temple houses some national treasure artworks, and the garden of Hōjō (abbot's quarter) is a wonderful introduction to the world of zen temple gardens. The contrast between the large kare-sansui (aka Japanese rock garden) garden overlooking the pine trees and the tall gables, and the fresh green Acers in the square patio garden surrounded by the roofed passageways is particularly memorable. For us plant lovers, there is an area of Ken'nin-Ji where the hedges are made of tea trees, Camellia sinensis, as well as a quiet stone monument to tea. This is because the founder of this temple, Myōan Eisai is credited to bringing the seeds of the tea plant as well as the tea culture from China.

From Ken'nin-Ji, we took a taxi to a completely different kind of experience. Only a few minutes' drive by car up the hill is a super-popular attraction called Kiyomizu-Dera Temple, most famous for its very tall and imposing veranda of the Hondō (main hall). It is even more impressive that not a single nail is used to build the main hall. The temple was already popular as a pilgrimage site as far back as the Heian period (794-1185) but today, it is a tourist magnet of a different level. It is not

difficult to see why: the temple itself with its combination of the red main gate, the colourful pagoda right next to it, then the austere but majestic and highly impressive Hondō is enough to attract a large gathering daily, but on top of that, there are two hilly streets packed with restaurants and souvenir shops right outside the temple. It is fun to visit but can be exhausting to say the least. We had a quick noodle lunch within the temple's grounds.

Leaving behind the crowds, we descended in our cabs to the other side of the hill and strolled down the area in the east of the city. After calming ourselves down with some cakes and lovely coffee in a cafe in a rather unlikely place, we visited a very different temple. Konchi-In is a tatchū (satelite or sub-temple) of Nanzen-Ji, a large temple complex just down the road from where we were. It is small and very quiet, and so lovely. While still a zen garden, Konchi-In's garden, by the famed designer Kobori Enshū (1579-1647), feels much more active than the kare-sansui gardens we witnessed in the ensuing days, with trees and rocks interacting utilizing height and movement as important design features. This is one of my favourite gardens!

Today's final temple garden was the Garden of Hōjō at Nanzen-Ji. We got there quite late so much so that the sun was already on the way out by the time we arrived there, and serendipitously so were most visitors. It is a super well-known garden and usually very busy, but not this afternoon: it was amazing to feel the calm of the austere structures (designated a national treasure) and the kare-sansui garden attributed to Kobori Enshū by ourselves. What a luxury that was. Satisfied, we walked out of this temple, walked through the massive main gate of Nanzen-Ji, and returned to the hotel by taxi.

Day 11 5 July Kyoto cont'd

We packed this morning's itinerary with the visits to three distinctive temple gardens in the Kita Ku (North Ward) of the City of Kyoto. First up was one of Kyoto's most visited landmarks, the Golden Pavilion. It is one of the several buildings in what is officially called Rokuon-Ji Temple, but it is such an iconic building that even in Japanese, the temple is usually called Kinkaku-Ji (Golden Pavillion Temple). It is unashamedly golden, and certainly memorable. If you can see beyond the hustle and bustle of the busy crowds, the topography of the premises is wonderful, and you realise it is in an absolutely prime location. Flanked by the two lakes on staggered levels and featuring gentle ups and downs, while using the typical shakkei (borrowed scenery) technique, utilising the surrounding verdant hills as part of its vista, this is actually a wonderful temple. Just, one day, I'd love to see it completely serenely empty!

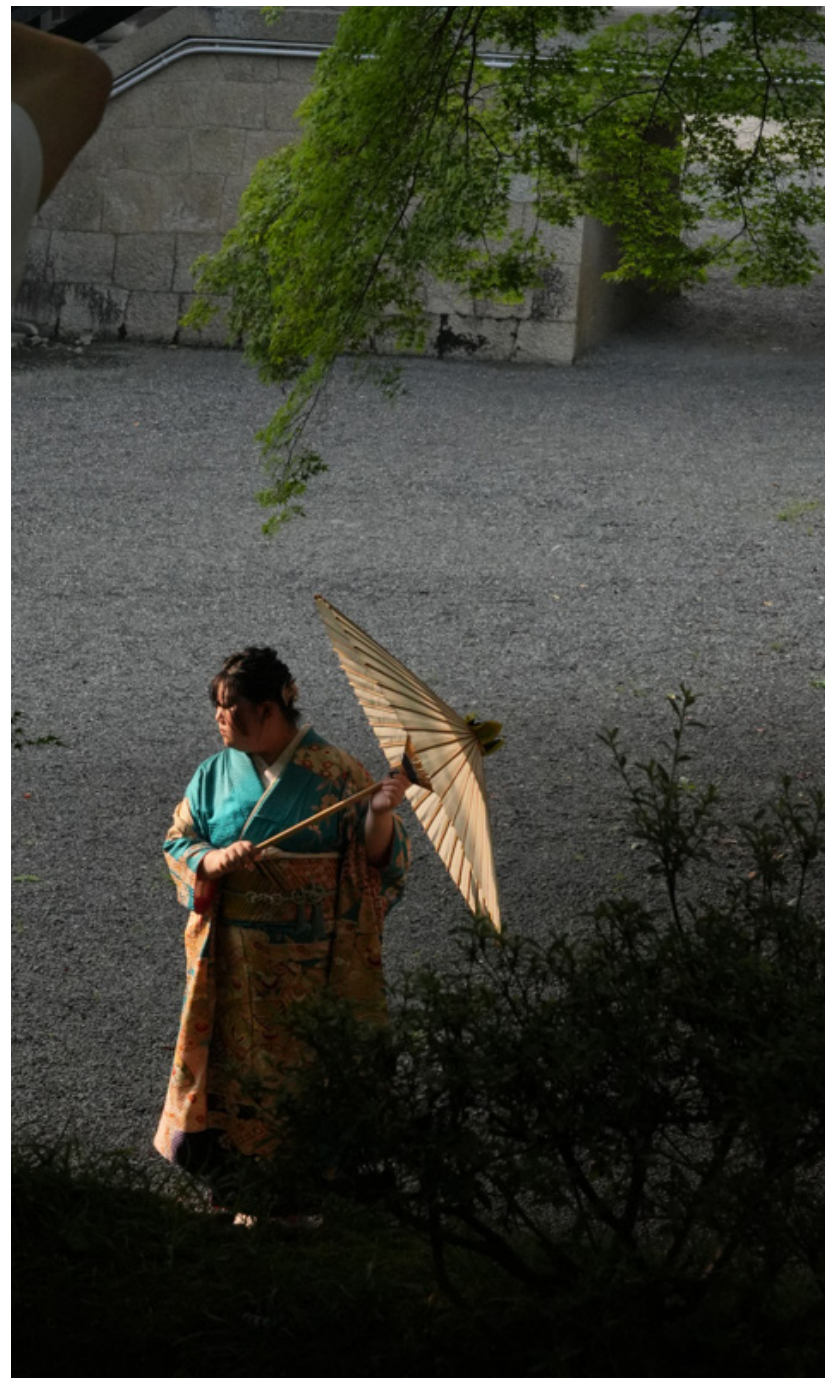


Our next destination was only a few minutes away by car from the Golden Pavilion, and another world-famous garden. But compared to the extrovert glitters of Rokuon-Ji, Ryōan-Ji has an entirely different feel to it. The famous and probably the most historically significant of all karesansui gardens is here. There were quite a lot of visitors but almost everyone sat on the engawa (japanese style wooden loggia) adjacent to the garden and quietly absorbed the tranquillity of this zen creation. We joined them and enjoyed the riddles thrown at those who seek by the original creators of this wonderful garden.

Before lunch we visited the Daitoku-Ji temple complex, another of my favourite places in Kyoto. Established around 1315, today the namesake temple and its numerous tatchū constitute one of the most significant zen temple complexes in Kyoto. Of the 24 tatchū, only three are open to public and we got to visit one of them. Ryōgen-In is a hidden treasure, often not too busy with tourists and while it is a fairly small temple, it has four highly characteristic gardens old and new, including the smallest kare-sansui garden at only 13.2m².

Our lunch place was just a few minutes walk away from Ryōgen-In, and a very special eatery called Ikkyū. Ikkyū started its life as the caterer for the monks of Daitoku-Ji back in the 15th century and they still perform to this day the same function over 500 years later. It is now one of the restaurants where visitors can enjoy the kaiseki (formal meal consisting of numerous courses) of strictly vegan creations called shōjin ryōri. Often, they include some very rare food items, and today's surprise item was perhaps the simple salad of the underwater shoots and flower buds of junsai (*Brasenia schreberi* = watershield), a summer delicacy in Japan. Having enjoyed the unique experience of the special (and filling) menu, the atmosphere of the building and the lovely service, we said goodbye to the wonderful owners who were waving to us for a while as we walked away.

Back at the car park, we separated into several groups – some of us walked back into Daitoku-Ji and visited a few more satellite temples, some went back to the town and visited the markets, etc. I was of course in the desperado group, and we drove to the furthest north of the Kyoto Prefecture. Although still 'Kyoto', when you drive for a few hours away, there is nothing of the aristocratic atmosphere of the City of Kyoto anymore. We arrived at the scenic beach facing the Sea of Japan, called Hakoi-shi-Beach. Our targets here were of course another lily, *Lilium leichtlinii*, and a large colony of the beautiful *Hemerocallis citrina* which only starts opening its lemon-yellow flowers just before the sunset. I had visited this place before covid. Back then (more



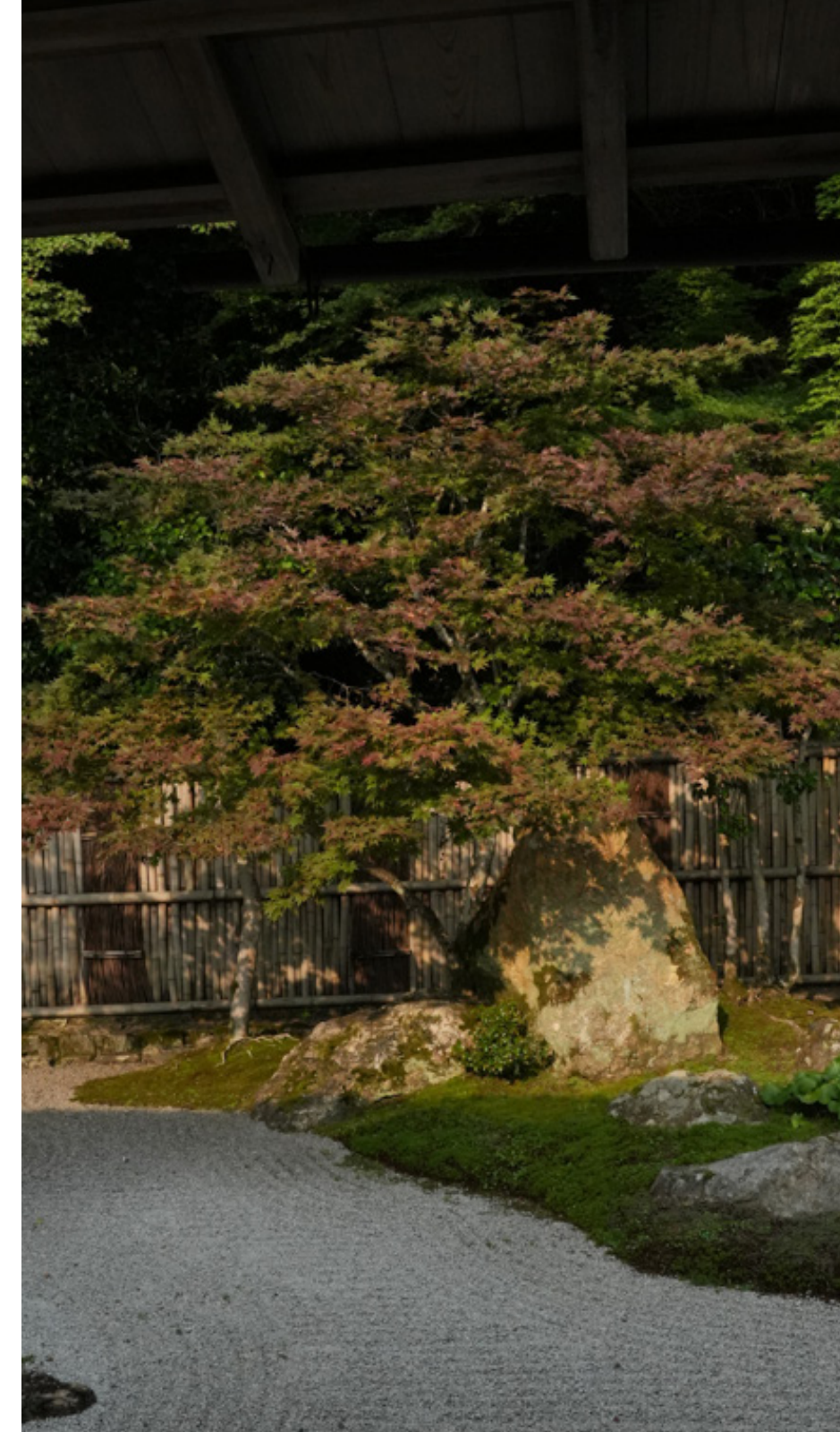
or less the same day of the year) I saw the sandy cliff covered in the *Hemerocallis* just starting to open, and dotted around them were a very good number of large specimens of *Lilium leichtlinii* with many flowers. I remembered the place fondly. This time however, I was completely shocked to witness that the local deer (again!) had almost eradicated both. I asked the local farmers who just happen to be cutting the grass near where we parked. They were clearly not interested in the flowers and had barely taken notice of the disappearance of these flowers by the look of it, but they certainly confirmed that the deer number is getting out of control. Luckily for us, we did find one or two *Hemerocallis* in flower, and just one single small *Lilium* specimen clinging on by a large rock. Sadly, there is not enough incentive, or money, to control the deer population in Japan, and I have a feeling I will never be able to return to this formerly wonderful site.

After another long drive, we were back in the city and for a change, we had a western-style dinner to give everyone's palate a bit of a rest especially after the vegan Buddhist fare earlier in the day! Some of us walked back afterwards to the hotel along the Kamo River, which was quite refreshing.

Day 12 6 July Kyoto cont'd

This morning, our main focus is the UNESCO World Heritage site, the Saihō-Ji, better known as the "Moss Temple". Built in the small ravine in the west of the city of Kyoto, it is covered in tall greenery and a world away from the artificial and more open beauty of temples such as Daitoku-Ji. When we visit Saihō-Ji, we are very much reminded that they have not forgotten that it is a religious institution: we have to sit in silence and trace a short sutra before we are allowed to visit the garden. In a way, this unique experience also calms you down nicely and prepares you to enter the garden. The natural dappled light here, coming through the tall boughs towering over the whole garden covered gently in numerous velvets of moss crisscrossed by quiet shallow ponds is always a special treat, and almost a spiritual one. We each casually walked around at our own pace and I hope everyone absorbed the loveliness of this special garden.

After the Moss Temple, we walked to another small temple close by, Jizō-In, known for its bamboo-grove approach before its main gate. We didn't have enough time to go in properly so we were taking photos and chatting by the entrance cashier, and clearly a bit too loudly: the cashier gentleman suddenly really got angry and told us right off to be quiet – rightly so I guess. We walked back sheepishly to the car park!



After this point, I can only write about what my group did for the rest of the afternoon. The desperados struck again of course, and in the afternoon our small group decided to try our luck to see if we can spot the elusive *Lilium concolor* in flower. Sadly, this lily has seriously declined everywhere in its relatively wide former range, and it is now considered a critically endangered species in Japan. Where we visited, Oishi Kogen – a minor hill in Wakayama prefecture and almost 3 hours’ drive away from the centre of Kyoto – is now the only remaining known population in Central Japan. In short, we found a living plant (with the help of the local men), but the flower had shed its last petals a few days before our visit. We heard the ominous rumour that the deer population is getting out of control here too, and tellingly we saw only one *Lilium concolor* plant right next to the cafe (hence avoided by the deer), and the locals didn’t think there was any other plant this year. Aside from its high temperature and the fact that there’s nowhere to hide from the sun in the open, the hill was quite a nice place, and we saw some lovely plants such as *Lilium japonicum*, *Lysimachia clethroides*, *Dianthus superbus* var. *longicalycinus*, and a beautiful orchid with light orange and purple flowers, *Epipactis thunbergii*.

We drove back to our Kyoto hotel before we refreshed and readied ourselves for another special meal: this time dinner in the heart of Gion, on the famous historical street lined with old, often members-only institutions. It is an atmospheric area, and the place you can still encounter the real geishas (more correctly in Kyoto, maiko or geiko) walking down the street. Our restaurant, Mametora, was in one of those old buildings that was converted into a traditional Kyoto-cuisine restaurant. We had a typical kaiseki with numerous courses again but compared to the austere vegan-fair of Ikkyu, this was a positively decadent kaiseki where colourful ingredients were unashamedly served in colourful receptacles. The menu culminated in the opening of the wooden box revealing the jewel-like presentation of mame-zushi (bite-size sushi), this restaurant’s speciality. With our stomachs and hearts full, we strolled back to our hotel through Gion, and then the atmospheric night-time ground of the Ken’nin-Ji Temple.

Day 13 7 July Fushimi/Uji – back to Tokyo

We had to go back to Tokyo in the afternoon today, but we of course squeezed in an excursion to the south of Kyoto. Our first destination was the Fushimi Inari Shrine, now world-renowned for its tunnels of ‘one thousand torii’, although it is thought that there are over ten thousand of those red gates in the entire ground. Like the Kiyomizu



Temple, the approach route from the train station to the shrine were heaving with gift shops, restaurants and of course countless tourists! It was a very hot day and quite tiring to walk but Fushimi Inari is an impressive place, and I hope everyone enjoyed the visit. While most buildings and the torii gates we saw at Fushimi Inari are of relatively recent origin (19th century to present day), the next temple we visited is nearly a thousand years old. The Hōō-Dō (‘Phoenix Hall’, a national treasure) of the Byōdō-In (‘Temple of Equilibrium’) in the city of Uji was built in 1053 and the architecture itself as well as the style of the surrounding garden are quite distinct from the other temple gardens we had visited. The garden prominently features a pond contiguous to the Hall, in the jōdo-style (‘pure land’ = paradise in Buddhism). As it is one of the older surviving buildings in Kyoto, it represents an older style of garden design than the other temple gardens we had visited, and Byōdō-In is considered one of the finest jōdo-style gardens. After a stroll in the now-almost-unbearable heat back to the station, and a quick lunch, we returned to Kyoto, got our bags, and back we went to Kyoto Station for our shinkansen journey back to Tokyo. We enjoyed our bento boxes on board the shinkansen, arriving a few hours later at our final hotel of the trip near Tokyo Bay for a relaxing night of sleep.

Day 14 8 July Izu Ōshima

The volcanic island of Izu Ōshima (ōshima = big island) is still very much active with obvious areas of recent lava and ash, and this is where we are visiting as our final lily destination of the tour. In the morning, we walked from our hotel to the Takeshiba Ferry Terminal and got on a high-speed ferry that took us to the island in just under two hours. After arranging the cars, we duly drove off up the winding road up towards the caldera of the Mt Mihara, the main volcanic peak of the island. It didn’t take long before we spotted the legendary *Lilium auratum* var. *platyphyllum*, supposedly one of the largest, if not the largest wild Lilium in the world, also well-known as an important parentage in the oriental-hybrid lilies, most notably in L. ‘Casa Blanca’. It is probably also one of the most strongly scented as well. The real thing growing here on the island are unmistakably larger than the mainland form (*L. auratum* var. *auratum*) which we saw at the beginning of the tour in Katsu’ura.

They were completely unmissable, hanging from the overgrown roadside banks, but we had a bit of a problem – that those lilies were so inconsiderate in choosing to grow by the narrow mountain road busy with traffic! Kazuyuki and I acted as (slightly worried) traffic wardens while everyone enjoyed taking photos and taking the perfume



Lilium maculatum

in. There were some pretty large wild *Hydrangea macrophylla* (also *H. involucrata* later) in flower but maybe everyone was too intoxicated by the sheer presence of the lily flowers. When we got to the parking area on the rim of the caldera, it was already time for our picnic lunch. The view was not the greatest due to the clouds hanging over the area sadly. After lunch, we endeavoured to walk into the edge of the vast of black volcanic sand – this is actually the only place in Japan designated as a ‘desert’ by the Japanese authority, albeit a tiny one compared to the “proper” ones. We were hoping to find more *Lilium* here but sadly we were probably too early for them at this elevation. The sandy slopes of the inner caldera, especially towards the summit of Mt Mihara is the famous area for the lilies but they won’t be in flower until the end of July or August. Next time!

Due to the time of the return ferry back to Tokyo, we couldn’t stay around for too long. So, we started our descent soon, but driving around the other side of this fairly round-shaped island. While driving through the dense laurel forest, reminiscent of some Canarian islands or Madeira, we found another glorious specimen of *Lilium auratum* var. *platyphyllum*, positively shining in the undergrowth. Here there were much fewer cars, so we were much more relaxed to enjoy an audience with this noble queen of the lilies. The smile on everyone’s face in our group photos speaks volume. After this encounter, we descended all the way down to the sea level, to a small cove close to some magnificent sea cliffs. Here was another lily, this time the vivid orange *Lilium maculatum*, flowering in the open grass area right next to the sea, alongside *Hemerocallis fulva* var. *littorea*. Another interesting habitat for a *Lilium* species – utterly exposed to both constant salty breeze from the sea and often scorching sunlight.

As if we weren’t feeling tightish for the ferry departure time, we found another, and probably the most impressive, *Lilium auratum* var. *platyphyllum* specimen on the last stretch of the road before the port. And this was on the side of an even busier road than the first one we saw. I was practically screaming by this point, and I apologise... But make no mistake, I could see in the corner of my eyes, that this was a jaw-droppingly huge specimen with an amazing number of flowers, and also with very few red speckles on the petals – a true representative of the var. *platyphyllum* type. I wish I had taken a few photos myself (photos courtesy of Başak here). In the end, we managed to arrive back at the port of Motomachi in good time. We said goodbye to this lovely island of Izu Ōshima from our return ferry and reflected on a short but fruitful visit.



When we disembarked from the ferry at the Takeshiba Terminal, it was sadly the time to say goodbye to Kazuyuki, who had been completely amazing throughout the tour and so helpful (he helped me a lot as well). He had prepared and read out a message in English. I’m hoping to work with him again and if you find yourself in the Iwate region, I highly recommend visiting his lodge in the mountains. He knows his plants there like the back of his hands.

After getting refreshed back at our hotel, we had our final dinner together at a Chinese restaurant (of course with the bottomless drinks!). It was a good finale to our colourful and eventful tour, with new friends, good food and laughter! We returned to the hotel and each of us prepared for the departure and farewells the following morning.

viranatura
tours

Botanical & Cultural Journeys

www.viranatura.com | info@viranatura.com

