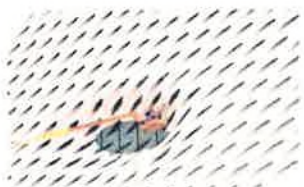


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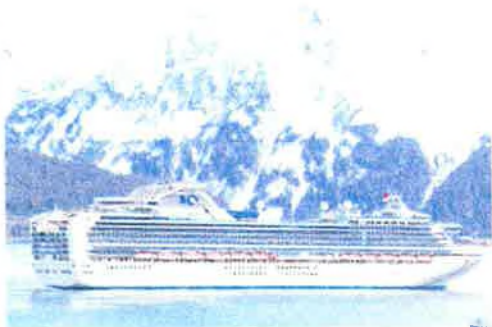


THE BROAD
New Los Angeles museum to showcase top-notch contemporary art >> **G3**

SIGNS OF HAWAIIAN LIFE >> **G6**

LAS VEGAS ADVISOR >> **G6**

COURTESY PRINCESS CRUISES



The Diamond Princess cruise ship keeps passengers busy with a gym, spa, casino, library, art gallery and 10 restaurants.



An example of an illuminated float for the August Nebuta Festival in Aomori.



Kushiro: A red-crowned crane, a protected species since 1924, is the only crane species that breeds in Japan.

ANSWERING JAPAN'S CALL

An abiding fondness for the island nation is reason enough to go

Story and Photos
By Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

In hindsight my kinship with Japan was inevitable. Growing up, my mother's best friend and our next-door neighbor, Gladys, was second-generation Japanese, spoke Japanese and was an amazing cook. I could thus be regularly found in Gladys' kitchen listening to Japanese music and watching her cut fish, make sushi or separate limu from other algae we had collected during low tide. After studying Japanese, I went to Japan in the early 1980s and lived with a host family, often thinking of the many life lessons Gladys bestowed during those early days in her kitchen.

So started a lifelong love affair. Though over the years I'd traveled throughout Japan, my travel partner George recently complained he'd never even been to Tokyo. As Princess Cruises offered a nine-day voyage commencing from Tokyo's port of Yokohama, stopping in various Hokkaido cities and then continuing onward to Russia's Far East, suitcases were swiftly packed. After overnighting in To-

kyo and spending a day walking around Shinjuku, eating our way through several department stores' beautiful basement food halls, we boarded the Diamond Princess, a 2,700-passenger ship possessing all one could need: gym, spa, beauty salon, pools, casino, boutiques, library, art gallery, 10 restaurants and nine bars and clubs. There were about 75 daily activities — from Japanese, ping-pong and ballroom dancing lessons to card tournaments, karaoke and movies. Proof that on a large ship, cruisers can keep as busy as desired.

Fighting my inner sloth on our first sea day, I went to the gym, then took Zumba, attempted Bollywood and line dancing, followed by a cha-cha class chaser. Certainly I embarrassed myself, but thankfully was told that, just like in Vegas, what happens at sea stays at sea.

Kushiro

Our first port on Hokkaido's southeastern coast was Kushiro. Known for intense fog and nicknamed the City of Mist, Kushiro boasts an annual fog festival.

A 20-minute drive brought us to the Red-Crowned Crane Reserve. After the Meiji Era these cranes were nearly extinct. However, in 1924, 10 were discovered in the Kushiro



Marsh, and they've been protected ever since. Called the "sarurun kamui" by the Ainu, Japan's indigenous people, these cranes are revered as symbols of longevity, luck and fidelity. Of the various crane species, this is the only one that breeds in Japan. (It is also the symbol of Japan Air Lines.)

At Kushiro's Washo Fish Market, we bought bowls of rice and meandered the stalls, where local fishermen sliced their morning catch, artfully placing aburahi, crab and salmon atop our steaming bowls. Across the street was an antique shop. I narrowly escaped — but didn't — purchasing a vintage, intricately brocaded orange kimono for \$40. The floor below contained a massive 100-yen store — all the rage in Japan — where every conceivable gadget, rice

cracker, candy, household item and more dubious-purpose items one doesn't need to buy 10 tiny Japanese cartoon-embellished plastic containers "because they were so cute."

Shiretoko Peninsula

After an al fresco lunch of grilled lobster, the skies cooperated as we approached the Shiretoko Peninsula in the Okhotsk Sea. Named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2005, much of it is national parkland protecting forests and wildlife. Against a backdrop of snowcapped mountains and rugged coastlines, we had a good vantage point for several whale and dolphin pod sightings.

Please see CRUISE, G4

Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing, thought to be the busiest crosswalk in the world.

The aerial view from the top of Mount Hakodate.



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>> **Contact:** 800-774-6237; www.Princess.com. While flights from Honolulu to Tokyo's Narita airport are slightly cheaper than flights to Tokyo's Haneda Airport, Haneda is only about 45 minutes to central Tokyo, while Narita is a two-hour drive or train ride.

>> **Packing:** Summer temperatures can fluctuate and change rapidly, especially in the north. Daytime temperatures ranged from 80 degrees with high humidity in Tokyo to a chilly 62 in Korsakov. So layering is key, as is a thin wind-breaker or light sweat-shirt and a small umbrella.

>> **Getting around:** In most ports on this itinerary, except for Korsakov, you can walk from the ship to all sights or take a complimentary or low-cost shuttle bus to the town center. In Russia, unless you are from a nation that's visa-exempt (the U.S. is not), you must have a visa that is expensive and time-consuming to obtain unless you are on a prepaid ship excursion. As time is limited on Sakhalin (one day), and with about a 40-minute drive from port to the capital (with no public transportation), combined with the language barrier, the ship's excursion is recommended (and should be reserved when the cruise is booked, as it quickly fills up).

>> **Where to stay:** Tokyo: Keio Plaza Hotel, 2-2-1 Nishi-Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo. Telephone 011-81-3-3344-0111. www.keioplaza.com. Centrally located high-rise hotel near JNR train and Shinjuku Metro stop. Summer rates start at \$200 per night for two. Mercure Tokyo Ginza, 2-9-4 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo. Telephone 011-81-3-4335-1111. Visit www.acorhotels.com. Subway entrance is conveniently located directly beneath the hotel. Summer rates start at \$170 per night for two.

>> **For more information:** see info.go.jp, japan-guide.com and la.us.emb-japan.go.jp.

CRUISE

Continued from G1

A dinner of sashimi followed by green tea ice cream with black bean paste at Kai, one of Diamond Princess' specially restaurants, completed the day.

Sakhalin Island

Arriving the next morning at Korsakov, on Sakhalin's southern tip in the Russian Far East, we tendered to the pier and drove 30 minutes to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, the capital.

Russia claimed Sakhalin in 1853, commencing the tug-of-war with Japan. In 1858, Czar Alexander II declared Sakhalin a penal colony, dispatching prisoners on two-year journeys by boat and land, with thousands dying en route. When Japan prevailed in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War, the Karafuto Era began, and Japan retained control until Sept. 2, 1945, when Sakhalin returned to Russia. Japanese and Ainu residents were repatriated to Japan, while many Koreans who provided labor on Sakhalin still remain.

We stopped at the small St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, built from logs topped with an iconic gold dome, but a funeral was underway so we couldn't enter. At Glory Square, on a grassy knoll dubbed Sakhalin Beach, beside statues honoring Soviet soldiers who perished during Sakhalin's 1945 liberation, several women were sunbathing, some topless.

Passing Lenin Square and its robust statue — the obligatory Soviet symbol — we arrived at Sakhalin's Regional Museum. Built pagoda-style by Yoshio Katsuka in 1937, it houses taxidermy of the region's various animals, maps of Sakhalin and the nearby Kuril Islands, photographs, artifacts, native clothing and decorative arts. Our knowledgeable, English-speaking guide was essential because the museum contained only Russian placards.

Other than some fast-food outlets in Sakhalin's only dreary mall, we didn't see a single restaurant. So we enjoyed sushi, Bibb salad and seared scallops in the ship's Savoy Restaurant.

Otaru

On Hokkaido's west coast, Otaru began as a fishing village but is now a charming town with Venice-like canals and 19th-century warehouses re-gentrified into cafes, microbreweries and shops. Besides delicious fish and ramen, Otaru is known for artisan-blown glass and music boxes shaped into every conceivable configuration, including sushi-shaped.

Buying a Stroller Bus day pass, we started at the canals, when the skies opened. Happily, another bus arrived, and off we went to Mount Tengu's base. During the 20-minute ride, the skies cleared, and we had a good view of Otaru. Also at the base was an excellent glass blowing studio where George bought some lovely Christmas ornaments.

At sea level with ominous skies, we exited at Miyakodori, a covered walking street with shops, restaurants and a packed pachinko parlor. After a ramen stop we headed to Sakaimachi-



COURTESY JULIE L. KESSLER

Visitors explore canals on Hokkaido's west coast.



STAR-ADVERTISER

dori, another artisan shop area with several restaurants and some of the best bakeries ever. Sampling several, our favorite was Le Tao, selling utterly divine, unamillike, sweet-salty-crunchy cheese cookies. So ended a perfect day.

Hakodate

Commodore Matthew Perry's gunboat diplomacy of 1853 resulted in the Kanagawa Treaty between the U.S. and Japan, obliterated Japan's seclusion and ultimately felled the Tokugawa Shogunate. Hakodate thus became one of two ports servicing boats to and from China and a foreign culture recipient, evident in its architecture.

At Hakodate's 400-stall morning market, where seasonal unagi — sea urchin — was selling briskly, we headed east toward the red-brick warehouses containing shops, restaurants and craft breweries. Climbing one of Hakodate's many steep slopes, we reached the church section — Russian Orthodox, Catholic and Episcopalian — and finally, Mount Hakodate's base. Boarding the gondola up for the breathtaking view, we walked 45 minutes down through Motomachi, passing the foreigners' cemetery, the magnificent Old Russian Consulate, Jitsu-Ji Temple and the impressive Old Public Hall.

Refueling with iced coffee and bean cakes, we took a 30-minute bus ride to Japan's first Catholic convent run by Trappistines. Hiking up yet another hill, we were rewarded with several gorgeous, European-style buildings set high amid lush gardens.

Aomori

On Honshu's northern tip, nearly all of Aomori was

blitzed during World War II, thus while modern it lacks charm. Known mainly for native-son woodblock artist Manukata Shiko and its August Nebuta Matsuri — the festival featuring enormous, illuminated floats.

As Typhoon Nangku was quickly gaining speed, we had to leave Aomori several hours early to avoid the worst impact. It was a perfect opportunity, I thought, for George to experience an "onsen": mineral hot springs. Though not keen on the idea, I told him it would be insane not to. Missing that would be like going to Paris and skipping the Eiffel Tower.

An hour later we arrived at Sukayu Onsen atop Mount Hakodate. Unbeknownst to us — and much to our chagrin — Sukayu's medicinal nude baths were completely coed. As I had been to several onsens over the years, the coed aspect didn't shock me nearly as much as the 5-foot snake that slithered across my sandals as I climbed the nearby hill to see Sukayu's botanical gardens.

Typhoon Nangku made our final day at sea extremely stormy, resulting in George appearing an unflattering shade of green. Despite bad weather the crew was top-notch: smiles and good service continued non-stop.

On our final, marathon day in Tokyo, we squeezed in the Shibuya Crossing, the massive intersection resembling a continuous flash mob; Tokyo's 5th Avenue-like Omotesandodori; Tokyo's greatest shrine, Meiji-Jingu; edgy Harajuku (with its five-story Daiso 100-yen shop); and ramen dinner in Shinjuku, all before a mid-night flight.

Marcel Proust wrote, "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes, but in having new eyes." Japan's landscape wasn't new to me, but with the intervening years my vision had indeed been altered anew. Leaving Japan this time with indelible memories of Gladys reconfirmed the genius of Proust.

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer and legal columnist based in Los Angeles and the author of the award-winning book "Fifty-Fifty: The Clarity of Hindsight."

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