

University of Tasmania Taiko Society visit to
Ikeda, Japan
Launceston's Sister City

(A personal account by Maria Grist)

On the 27th of January 2005, six members of the University of Tasmania Taiko Society arrived on the platform of the Ikeda station in Osaka, Japan, loaded down with our luggage. The members of the group were Simon Vanyai (leader), James Beattie, Maria Grist, Helen Gouteff, Lara Wasilewski and Ana Page. Our plan was to visit several cities on the way to our Taiko drumming course in Achi Village, led by Art Lee, a western teacher fully qualified to teach Taiko drumming in Japan. We greeted each other, and then walked across the road to the Ikeda town hall.

We were met there by Ikeda officials, including Reiko Hirai, from the Ikeda Board of Education, who speaks excellent English. They led us to the meeting room where we were expected. Our host families were there, along with some other city officials. The leader of the homestay group and the chairman of the Ikeda-Launceston Sister Cities Committee were there. The mayor came in and made a short speech on the achievements of the sister city program, and how Ikeda had worked together with Launceston. He welcomed us all to



Reiko Hirai and chairman of committee.



Japan. We all introduced ourselves in Japanese (which was a bit intimidating for those of us who only knew a few words). We exchanged gifts – we had bought the mayor a Huon Pine frame crafted in the shape of a map of Tasmania, with our Taiko logo in the centre. We also had smaller gifts for the Sister City committee. The mayor gave us all gifts also and then left – due to pressure of work. We were put in a row facing a row of Japanese people who were our host families, and we were formally introduced.

My host mum was Ayako Fusimi. She took me home to her house, where I settled in to a beautiful traditional Japanese room complete with tatami mats, futon, low table, and traditional Japanese artworks and hangings.

The next 2 days were free days with the host families.

The next morning I brought my camera downstairs because I was told that the meeting with the Mayor would be on TV. I took some photos of the TV as the item ran.



Simon Vanyai



Ikeda Mayor

My host mum's daughter Hiroko brought her car, and we went to see my first ever Shinto shrine. We walked around looking at the magnificent buildings with the distinctive crossed pieces of wood on the roof, the walkway entrance, the statues of lions, the folded white paper hanging everywhere – which I am told is because it is still New Year season and will all be burnt in a bonfire at the end of the season. I am told that there are many Shinto gods – it is a nature religion, and the gods each represent a different aspect of nature.



Next we went to the Ikeda zoo. I was surprised to see wombats and other Australian animals – a result of the sister-city relationship with Launceston. Outside of the wallaby cage is a large sign proclaiming the sister-city relationship. We walked into Ana, who was also there with her host family. There is another Shinto shrine nearby. We walked through a reconstruction set of a 1950's lane of shops. To my western eye, I can't see the difference between them and a modern streetscape.

Next we went to Ikeda Memorial Park, the site of the Ikeda Castle. There is a traditional Japanese tea room on display. The gardens are in the Japanese style. We went to the top of one building and look around – there is a good view of the surroundings. You can see out over the city as well as over the lovely gardens below. Next, we visited a Buddhist temple on the way home. I took a picture of the huge bronze bell in front of a block of flats – the old and the new together.

That evening we all went to the Taiko event. This was held in a local school in the north of Ikeda. The local Ikeda group was there, and we all introduced ourselves over some MacDonald's hamburgers. Then we did a Taiko exchange – the Ikeda group played some, and we played some. We were amazed at how good the Ikeda taiko group were. We saw other community Taiko groups later on and the Ikeda group were way better than any of them. They were way better than us also – and they were only children!!! They had a lot of presence, they were dynamic, they moved well, they really kicked butt. We all agreed we were soundly beaten. Then they brought out some music and taught us a simple song which we then played together. Unfortunately I did not get any photos of this event.

Next day my host mum took me to Itsuo Art Museum, where there are numerous magnificent historic artworks kept I was really affected by one above-life-sized painting of cherry blossom on a large screen. It seemed to me that the image bypassed my eyes and went straight into my heart. It had a deep effect on me.



Then we went to a small gallery which had a showing of intricate shadow-box art. I was amazed at the detail and complexity of the 3-d work. Here my host mum left me while the staff served me Japanese green tea, and came back a few minutes later with the Ikeda homestay organiser. The three of us drank Japanese tea together.

Our next destination was the Expo 70 Commemoration Park site. As we walked down we could see large fair-rides such as big dipper and Ferris wheel – this area was closed, I suppose for the winter. We walked past the large Expo statue – it just seemed to get bigger the closer we got. It is absolutely huuuge. We went to the Japanese gardens in the area. The first signs of cherry blossom are just coming out on the occasional trees. There were ponds and waterfalls,



rocks strategically placed to form rock features, immense Japanese carp, little shrines dotted around.

Next we went to visit the Museum of Ethnology. We had lunch in the restaurant. The Museum is so large and filled with just so much stuff from around the world that you simply can't take it all in in one visit. They have magnificent artefacts from all around the world. I was most impressed with the Japanese, Balinese, Ainu, Indonesian, and Nepalese sections. The Japanese section included a huge puppet which

is carried in festivals by several strong men.

Home to bed, then on to the railway station to meet the others and go on to Kyoto. The other members of our group all said that they had also had a fabulous time. I was sorry to say goodbye to my Ikeda mum as she was really nice. I felt as though I had gained a sister. We had a really good connection, and I believe she enjoyed the time as much as I did.

