

Notes: Blog on personal experience in Narita, Japan

## Have a Layover in Narita Airport? Check Out the Town



*Train Station - Narita, Japan*

By the time, we got to Narita airport, we were dead tired. We had been on two airplanes for more than 8 hours, with the longest leg yet to come. Our return trip started from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore, then Japan and finally back to LAX. We still had a way to go.

Norela and I had a few hours to spare, so we decided to hop the train and explore Narita, the town that the airport gets its name.

It seemed simple in the beginning until we realize that there is no English signage

after you leave the airport. Once you pass through the airport doors, it's like Alice through the looking glass. You're in another world.

We relied on instinct at that point, to attempt to buy a train ticket. We looked for lines of people buying tickets and jumped in. Luckily, we had previously exchanged some cash with a money changer at the airport booth, so we pointed at the map and held out some Japanese Yen to the cashier. He quickly gave us our tickets and excitedly hopped on the next train.

Fortunately, for me, Norela has lived or visited most of the world at some time in her life, including Japan. She gets around just using instinct, curiosity, and observation.

### It's a Different World



*One of the only English signs at the train station.*

headrest.

The first stop after leaving Narita Airport is the Town of Narita and it only took 15 minutes to get there. We looked like deer in the headlights. Not an English word in sight except for a sign saying, "Matsugishi Ladies Clinic – Happy Birth." If you want total immersion in a foreign culture, then Japan is for you.

We followed the crowd and took the escalator to the street level. There were black taxis lined up with white-gloved drivers. We peeked inside and noticed each seat had an immaculate white embroidered doily on each

There was a bus terminal in front of the station with people lined up waiting for their particular yellow bus.



Then we saw it. Across the street, there was a billboard in English! It shouted, “Japanese ‘Pachinko’ Casino” at AEON Shopping Center. It hit all of our buttons in one ad, casino, and shopping. The next trick was finding the right bus to take us there. As luck would have it, a bus pulled in with the same billboard ad on its side. We hailed the driver and pointed at the sign. He nodded affirmatively. I held out a fistful of Yen coins, he took the correct amount, and we were on our way.

One curious note about taking a bus here, they always turn off the engine when stopped at a traffic light. The bus was dead silent.

There was no chatter or radios just muffled ambient outside noise. Inside the bus and outside on the street, everything was immaculate.

As the bus maneuvered around the narrow streets, we noticed shopkeepers sweeping the sidewalks. These were tiny shops so close to the road you felt like you could almost touch them. Behind the shops, there were rows of compact houses stacked neatly on clean narrow streets.



The only place as clean as this is Switzerland. There was not one speck of litter or graffiti anywhere. Coming from the U.S. and Malaysia, it is very refreshing to experience.

I won't bore you with the details of the shopping mall except to say that the grocery portion of the store was something to behold.

The array of fish on display was so fresh that some were still moving.

And... You have never seen such a variety of fresh mushrooms, in one place, in all of your life. They had little speaker boxes hung over varied produce touting, presumably, their features in Japanese.

The other major notable difference from other grocery stores was the refrigerated cases of freshly prepared sushi, about 70 feet long. Looking through the window into the prep area were 20 workers who were continuously creating colorful morsels of fresh sushi.

Prying ourselves from all the delicious looking food, we headed out of the mall in search of the infamous Pachinko “Casino” that we had seen in various movies but about which knew nothing.

A large yellow arrow pointed the way to the next building, so off we went.

## Japanese Pachinko – The Loudest Game You’ll Never Play



The first thing you notice upon entering was the sound. It sounded like a machine factory in full production mode. It was incredibly loud. In fact, if this were a factory in the U.S. you would have been required to wear hearing protection.

The reason was, each of these machines has hundreds of ball bearings that shoot around a vertical surface similar to an American pinball game. We would have liked to have tried it, but we did not see a coin slot. And even if an attendant could explain it, we never would have heard him over the noise.

Consequently, we just walked around and watched people sitting in front of these machines, staring at the ball bearings cycle around presumably winning money.

With our ears still ringing from the cacophony, we walked out of the Pachinko Parlor and back to the bus stop. We hopped back on the bus and, thankfully, took a quiet ride back to the train station.

Outside of the station, there was a little food stand. Although closed, it had pictures of a hot dog on a stick and an octopus tentacle on a stick. Presumably, that means they serve Japanese and Western food.

The train whisked us through the beautiful Japanese countryside back to the airport with plenty of time to spare.

Checking into Narita as foreign travelers is still a lot less hassle than flying domestically in the U.S. (Japan Airlines still gives you stainless steel flatware instead of flimsy plastic). If you are stuck at Narita Airport and have 6 to 8 hours to kill, take the train, get off and explore Narita. It will be the most memorable part of your layover.

