

Bill Jones' Japan Trip Diary – January 2010

I realised a dream the day I set out for Japan. Along with Ken from Corley and six others we made that fantastic trip. 'We' were Nigel and Mark from the Mid-Staffs Club, (Mark is a landscaper and Nigel works in the command centre for the ambulance service), Steve the Butcher from Birmingham & West Midlands, Steve the Icecream man from Hereford, Darren a builder from Ramsgate in Kent, Rik from Tewkesbury who is the owner of Itchiban Koi and Ken, of course. With the exception of me and Ken the chaps were all over six foot tall, two of the lads were 6'6". In a country of very small people they were giants as you can imagine. Me and Ken looked like natives.

Day 1

Flying from Birmingham to Amsterdam and then onto Narita in Japan. The journey took us about 13 hours. The plane out to Japan was not full and we could almost sit where we wanted. Big Nigel had a door seat and most of the other chaps had plenty of leg room, I didn't need extra leg room and so I had three seats to myself!

Tokyo was warm in the sunshine. No hint of the snow that was about to engulf us. At the airport we were met by our tour guide Toro, who spoke excellent English, and the first thing he wanted was our passports so that he could get our passes for the trains. We had no idea what was happening but a few of the guys said it was normal, so we handed them over. We caught the Narita express into Tokyo. The trains are spotlessly clean, well organised, no rushing about. Then we caught the bullet train down to Isawa, four hours south of Tokyo. I was looking forward to this as much as seeing the fish! It was so comfortable you couldn't feel yourself moving. It reached speeds of 200 miles an hour. The train was three storeys high! Before we could get onto the train the previous passengers alighted, the doors were closed and the cleaners went on. The ticket gave the number of the line to stand at and the doors opened directly in front of you when it stopped, so we just walked straight on. The

train pass for the week was £150, well worth it. I wasn't at all tired, indeed I was very excited.

We were met at the other end by the Sakuma brothers who took us all to our hotel. The brothers were always laughing and one spoke a little English. Later I found out that most of the young people in Japan learn English as their second language. Most of the signs were in Japanese and English. The first hotel was ok for one night and cost something like £50 plus breakfast. We dropped our bags and the brothers took us (in their cars) for something to eat. There was no problem at all with food (even though sometimes you weren't sure what you were eating).

Day 2 – We had breakfast at 7ish and then the Sakuma brothers picked us up and drove us to their fish farm five minutes from the hotel. Their mother greeted us, she couldn't do enough for us. We had coffee, served in tins! In the fish house we saw tosai, 1 and 2 year olds. Ken, Mark and Nigel bought showas for grow and show for Mid-Staffs Club.

Then we went outside. The lads who hadn't been to such an establishment before (me included) just stood back and gasped. What a sight. I saw my first one metre long fish – in fact there were 10-20 massive fish in each pond (8 outdoor ponds in all) – steaming because the water was fed from the hot springs.

They let us net the fish ourselves, trusting us with their produce. More coffee and snacks followed, photos were taken and we went off for a curry at lunch time with the brothers. Bonus, the brothers paid! (they had just taken £3,000 off us).

After lunch we travelled five minutes down the road to Hiroi. Again, the water was supplied by the warm springs. The filtration was mostly settlement tanks with nothing in them, maybe a few brushes. The place was small, not even a quarter of an acre. Fish quality excellent, plenty of doitsu, more boxes of fish were purchased. More food eaten and then back onto the bullet train to Nagaoka. Another four hours on the train, still on a high. Toro said there were some funny noises coming from Mr Ken's seat! but we were all getting tired by

this time and soon we were all snoring. Arrived at 6 o'clock and I couldn't wait to shower and put on clean clothes. We stayed at The Hotel Metz at a cost of £50 per night including breakfast (toast, toast and more toast!). Beds were rock hard and we didn't sleep very well. It was like this for the whole week. The time change was difficult.

Day 3 – out by 8 and the first pond visit was to Shinoda. Toro hired a mini bus and picked us up for an hours drive. The snow came down. They had already had six foot of snow. Amazingly the roads were all clear, with no ice, no slush etc. Sprinklers wash the roads constantly when the snow falls, it was quite something to see. A lot of ginrin showas were bought at this stop. The lads called Shinoda 'Billy's dad' because we looked alike (I actually felt quite tall against him). The snowball fighting started here, it actually continued all week. Ken being the instigator, naturally. Like big kids we were.

We travelled onto Sekigutshi's who had SOLD ALL HIS FISH with the exception of tosai pearl ginrins. We were told that we had to phone up before arriving. The Chinese had bought the lot. Toro then said he would take us to Takahasi where we were greeted by his wife as Takahasi was organising the All Japan Show and was not at home. The lady did all the work, she wouldn't let us help her take the covers off and net the fish. Lots of fish were bought here, very cheap for the quality. Next pond Isa. All sold to the Chinese and we ended up at Torazo's. We were met by Mr Torazo who opened up his fish house, not a sound was heard. The best fish house we had been in yet. There must have been seven ponds with meter long fish in, going down to tiny fish (where all our party was!) some quality fish were bought here.

We were mini-bused back and we decided to hit the town. I have a new name now 'Billy the Bath' because I got slightly drunk and ended up sleeping in the bath. When I woke up I had no idea how I had got there, how long I had been there or indeed whose bath it was!! But I didn't have a hangover so that was a plus.

Day 4 – early breakfast. Snowed overnight. After 30 minutes we ended up at Ofuchi's. You took your life in your own hands here, walking on very narrow planks and the ponds were 8 feet deep, and I won't even mention the electrics which were hanging off the wall and looked decidedly dangerous. Outside Ofuchi's I saw a snow blower with two men inside working flat out. The snow drifts were 12 feet high. Onto Hosokai's – very nice fish house, nothing bought – fish lacking in quality.

Hiroi, the goshki man came next. Goshki's by the hundreds, good price for the quality and many fish were bought. When the earthquake happened Hiroi helicoptered his fish down to his brother's farm. All damage was repaired and a new fish house built, before the fish returned. We beat the Dutch to this farm. (Ornament fish buy ponds of fish at a time for the European market and they seemed to be everywhere we were.) A fantastic sight here with thousands and thousands of tosai coming towards us with their mouths open.

Onto Kase – long drive and I felt very sick, Nigel not impressed with the drive and told us over and over – where we saw metallic fish. Nothing bought because of size – too small. Next stop, Masaki, Mark bought some lovely doitsu showas and then just down the road was Akoi but Dan the Dutch got there before us! So it was back to the hotel, shower and out on the town.

Day 5

Snowed overnight, 12 inches in two hours. Again, out on the road early – first stop Marudo, incredible koi, the prices started from £4,000 upwards. There were 20 big fish in each vat and one was full of karashigoi – just like chags – very big with red edging round gills. Too expensive to buy so back to Masaki where we went yesterday to buy two very big showas (Nigel got them half price because he had bought from this chap before!). We were invited in for coffee where we met his wife and sat down on the floor where we partook of coffee, fingers biscuits and rice cakes. There was a family shrine in the corner. His daughter goes to university in Bournemouth. Next stop, Isamiya but he was not there, he was setting up the All Japan Show. I got out of the bus first, opened the doors to what I thought was the fish house to be faced by Two Huge Fighting Bulls – oops, wrong doors. This fish farm was badly damaged by

the earthquake back in 1997 and the indoor ponds were at a right angle to the water, it looked very odd. Fabulous fish house, it was so good I thought it was out of this world. The very best fish I had ever seen, so far... Couldn't buy anything, no one was at home, but the place was wide open and anyone could have helped themselves to a million pound fish!!! Japanese people trust everyone! With heads spinning we stopped at Aoki, where there were lots of metallic and doitsu fish. Mark and Ken bought a box of fish and I bought a kikusuri. Next onto Dianichi – absolutely perfect giant fish. Nigel was having a baby and kept asking if he could find a backer with very big pockets, bumped into a young apprentice chap from the USA who was studying under Dianichi who was hoping to go back to the USA to start a koi business with his family. Too expensive for anyone to buy, but lovely to see. Hirasawa came next, but the Dutch were in and the Germans were in and so we turned round to go to Yamasaki but again we were thwarted by a huge snow drift, so we just headed on down to Maiusaka's place. Ken and Steve bought a four step kohaku and one with an izuma pattern (lightning pattern). The light was fading and although we didn't want to stop we decided to call it a day. Usual routine at hotel, wash, dressed, inspected, and fed (I learned a big lesson falling in the bath, so I was careful not to disgrace myself again!).

Day 6

First stop, second fish house of Hosoki (brother without the beard), water green and we had to net the fish ourselves. Ken had a box of kindai showas, big Steve bought a lovely shiro utsuri at a bargain price. Back to Hirasawa. Boxes of fish bought by Rik and Mark, and I found a small beko for the wife (cheapest fish I bought, don't tell her). We sat down for tea and rice cakes with Mr H. and his family. When Ken was getting the 50th rice cake inside of him the Japanese TV people turned up asking for an interview with us tomorrow. Lunch on this day was at a takeaway shop, that sold everything. Then onto Kaneko's which turned out to be Darren's day, he filled up with Shiros. No one about so we just netted and bowled up the fish, Toro got on the phone and we bought them there and then. Yamokoshi village; stopped at the Toro gate on our way up – ascended the steep steps to the shrine where hundreds of paper lanterns hung. After yet another snowball fight at the shrine (loads and loads were

thrown – Ken was actually the best shot!) we went onto Igarashi's. The very best koi that we had ever seen. Again, nobody about so we just helped ourselves, they started at £5,000 plus. Every single koi was outstanding and I mean outstanding. I am sure my show and grow will turn out to be the same!! The whole group, if they put all their money together, could not afford one of these fish. Hey ho, maybe next time. Oh, you should know that I dropped the camcorder here and the record button from my machine ended up in one of his vats. I picture a fish in years to come coughing this up. Sorry Carl, I owe you.

We headed for the top of the valley, where the snow was tremendous to a breeder called Yagenji. The view down the valley was absolutely stunning. No one at the fish house except his father, who told us all the fish had been sold, except for the very tiny fish, the Chinese have amazing appetites for koi.

Onward to Shintaro's – had a quick look round, no one about and then onto Torazo who was at the show. His wife let us in. Tancho and kohaku purchased by Steve the Butcher. Stopped at a steak house on the way home, then we went to the beer shop to take back to the hotel for a session.

Day 7

Last day of fish farm visits. Snowing like mad, very very cold, snowploughs in front of us clearing away the snow on the roads. Stopped a few times to clear snow off the bus because we couldn't see! Nigel got out to clean the windows and on his return an avalanche fell from the top of the minibus straight down his back and a woman in the car following couldn't stop laughing, neither could we! First stop on this day was Hasegawa's. I had been looking forward to this visit – I have always wanted to go to Hasegawas. The kohaku and tanchos were amazing, the white stood out like the snow. Nobody bought anything, too dear, so we all dived into his house, sat round the table for refreshments, his wife was gorgeous, had a picture taken but for some reason it didn't come out, that useless Toro! Onto the museum in Ojiya. The gardens were lovely, but covered in snow so we couldn't gauge their beauty. Another 12 inches of snow. Nigel decided to smack his head on the beam in the museum which put him on his bum. From there we went to Hirasawa but again the Dutch had

landed and we cleared off to Yamasaki's. His ponds were full of hariwake's – my hands were itching in my pockets, but alas I had spent out.

We passed Chogoro's, he had KHV, so we didn't stop. Onwards behind another snowblower back to Hirasawa. Orna fish were just leaving so we filled our boots with Kinki Utsuris plus kohaku and showa.

Then the Japanese TV turned up, spoke with Ken and Rik and filmed the rest of the lads as well. They asked why we were there and how big the interest was in the UK. On our way back we stopped at the post office, for more money and called at McDonalds because we were starving and Toro said he didn't eat beef, so he had chicken instead. Crossed the Shimano river for the last time where the road to Yamakoshi is and Toro remembered that we needed one more koi to fill a box so we went to Torazo's where Ken bagged a very nice three step kohaku. All of us were exhausted, and we had an early start in the morning.

Still snowing.

Day 8

Up early and out by 7, guess what - Ken has lost his passport, so we all hunted round and found it in his sweetie pocket. Standing in the station was seriously cold. The winds were blowing in from Siberia. Glad to get onto the bullet train to Niigata which took 2 hours. A bus took us to the All Japan Show. Entrance was FREE. The exhibitors pay a lot of money to show the fish, which pays for the hall. When we arrived at the hall we went upstairs to look over the show site, it was the size of a football pitch and full of vats. The first row was the dealers section of vats. There were no side vats for sale. Next row, very tiny fish all finished in colour and some of these tiny fish cost over £1,000. Onward up to the jumbos and then onto the winners of the trophies which lead to the grand champion, a kohaku this year, owed by Catosan. The size was unbelievable, over a metre, its head was bigger than a human's. Mark said one of these fish would eat me and still look round for afters. What a show. I would have liked to have spent much more time, but we only had a few hours and then we went off into the Siberian snow and a hurricane of wind. We took

shelter in the fish market opposite around a charcoal fire, waiting for the bus. We dashed for the bus, Ken took a short cut and landed in a snowdrift, right up to his waist!

Back to the hotel to pick up the bags and onwards by train to Tokyo. McDonalds hosted us again before leaving. On the train going back Ken shut his eyes and Toro told us that there were some very funny noises coming from Ken. I helped two girls with their bags get off the train. They were so thin I couldn't let them struggle with their cases. They presented me with a box of French bread. Mark thinks they had been stalking us for half an hour. Their legs were so thin with huge knuckle knees which knocked – in fact they looked like Olive Oil. Caught the Narita express and stayed that night in a hotel called the Kikusui which had a massive water fall in reception with orchids all round. Had a shower and then out for a very expensive steak.

Last Day in Japan

The sun shone through the hotel window and it was very hot. Ken was overweight (both himself and his luggage) so I had to take the excess. I also had to carry clay for the icecream man because he was overweight too. Big Nigel and me laughed because we had seats on the plane next to the door, but as soon as the free pot noodles came out thousands of nippons descended on us, where we were sitting. They were like mozzi's homing in on the grub! Had a brandy because I had picked up a bad cold and couldn't stop sneezing. The flight back was long and I couldn't wait to get home.

The jet lag lasted a week but I would not have missed this trip for the world. I am saving up to go again. I helped Ken unload the fish into his quarantine vats on Friday and we were all very pleased to see that, so far, they had all survived. About 30 boxes of fish were brought back, every one had a wonderful bargain in it. Visiting Japan in the middle of winter had its advantages. The parent fish were brought up from the mud ponds and we were all very interested in seeing them in the fish houses. The All Japan Show is usually staged in February in Tokyo, but this year it was relocated to Niigata

(an anniversary of some sort) but I think it will be staged in Tokyo next year. The attendance was down because of the location and the extreme weather conditions.

I estimate that my trip cost £2,500 in total. Was it worth it. YOU BET it was worth it.

I am, with Carl's help, going to edit the video footage I took and have offered my services to the events manager of our club to give a talk and answer any questions you may have but I hope the above gives you a flavour of the trip. I apologise for the spellings of names.

See you all shortly.

BILL THE BATH