

Six Days in Kobe

The Shinkansen glides effortlessly to a stop as I wait in the luggage bay for a short, frail-looking lady to stop blocking the landing. I edge closer, attempting to provoke some movement toward the door, but she appears catatonically in no hurry. As the door opens, the lady springs to life and briskly exits. Tired and sore from a week of walking and sightseeing around Tokyo, I disembark with renewed vigour and—having never been to this particular station before—eventually meander my way outside.

Leaving the station, I'm only a moment down the road before I encounter my first familiar sight.

“おすい”。

The irony isn't lost on me that a manhole cover on the ground would 'ground' my feelings of returning to this place. I can't explain why I was nervous on my way here, but those jitters are now replaced with a calmer sense of belonging and a determined curiosity. I pause for a second, take a quick photo, and draw in a deep breath of the crisp Winter air.

Hello, Kobe. It's nice to see you again.



A lot can change in a decade, especially in a country as industrious as Japan. This was my third trip to Kobe, with the last being in late 2008. Collectively, I had spent three weeks there, with this trip adding another week. It's the place in Japan in which I've spent most of my time—mainly because I have a friend in the city, but also because of everything that makes Kobe such a wonderful and interesting place to visit.

En route to the hotel, I gazed skyward and saw flags fluttering with another familiar sight.

“Kobe. UNESCO City of Design.”

Kobe was designated as such in October 2008, just prior to my last visit. In October 2017, my home city of Geelong, Australia, was also named a UNESCO City of Design—and as a designer myself, this connection made me feel even more at ease. More at home. I took a few photos and tweeted one to the City of Greater Geelong.

After the 15-minute walk from Shin-Kobe Station, I arrived at the lovely Hotel Piena. It's not overly extravagant, but it is reasonably priced, spotlessly clean, thoughtfully appointed, the staff are wonderfully attentive and helpful, and the old-fashioned decor made me feel cosy and relaxed. After checking in and quickly freshening up in my room, I was back outside and on my way to Sannomiya Station to meet up with my friend for a few drinks and some dinner.

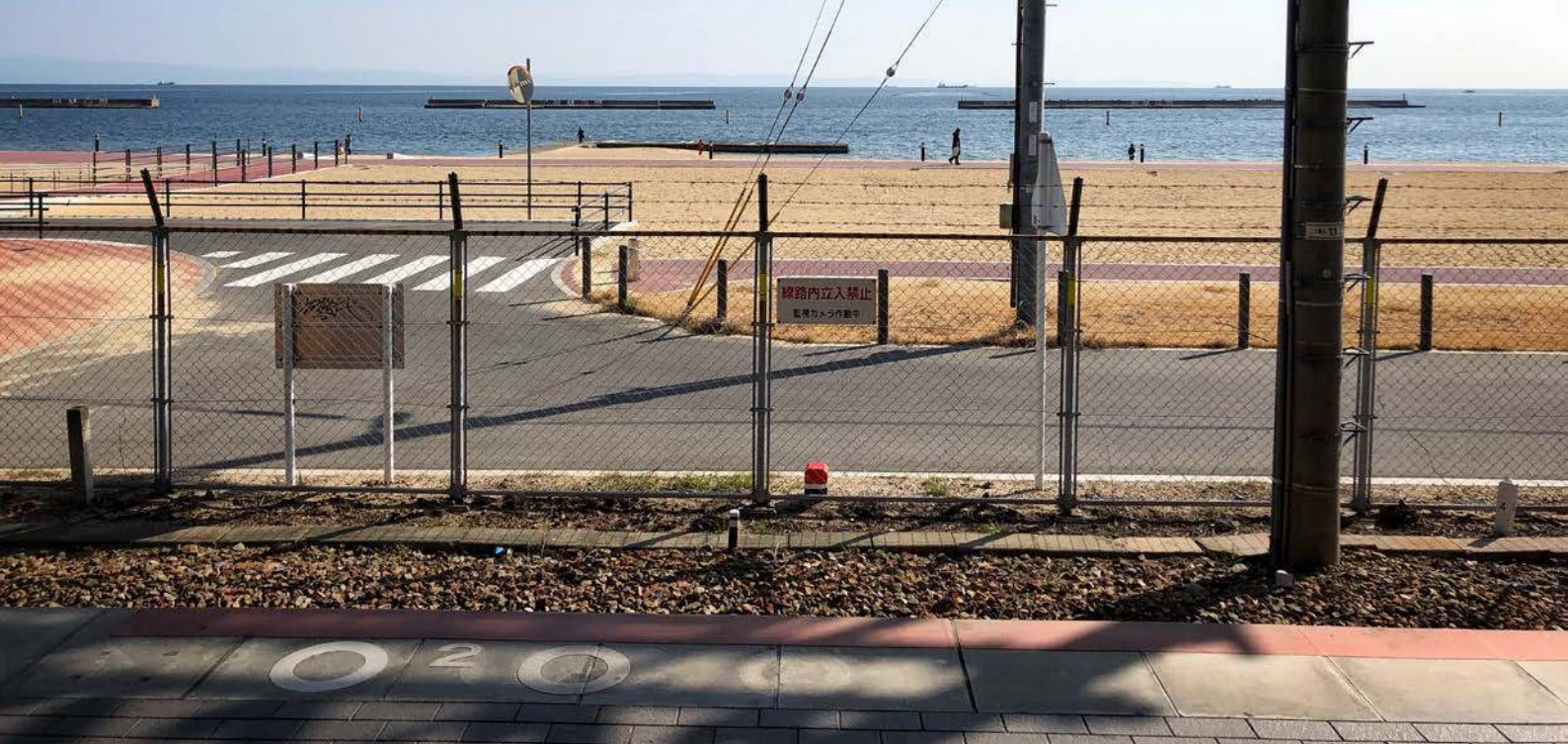
As I approached my friend waiting at the Central exit, I was roped into participating in a survey about improving travel around the Kobe area. Never one to engage surveyors or salespeople back in Australia, I happily obliged in this case and spoke highly of the region and its services. Finally reunited, my friend and I made a beeline to a nearby bar for some drinks and snacks, where we not only ran into some other friends of his, but also encountered a group of Australian students who we got chatting to. This is what I love about Kobe. You can run into anyone, anywhere. Having just come from the hyper bustle of Tokyo, the more casual nature of Kobe was a very welcome relief. Sitting in a bar sharing good times with a good friend—this was the Kobe that I remembered.



Over the next six days, I would see things that were familiar but which had changed since my last visit, some things that were still exactly the same, and many things that I'd never seen before. This, to me, was quintessentially Kobe. A hotpot of many elements all coming together with the same spirit. From the diverse backgrounds and ethnicities of the people, to the evolving architecture, to the very landscape—where you can walk from the waterfront, through the city, and end up in the mountains.

On my second night, I was grateful to be invited to my friend's home in the suburbs for a home-cooked dinner. This was a side—not only of Kobe life, but of Japanese life—that I was yet to experience in my travels across Japan. We were treated to an incredibly delicious meal of yakisoba and okonomiyaki, and I enjoyed taking in the entire experience of Japanese home life. Being amongst friends at home around a dinner table, instead of yet another restaurant or bar, was a highlight of my stay.





It had been suggested that I take a trip out to Suma to check out the beach area and visit Sumadera Temple. A recent post on Project Kobe had profiled a local hotdog restaurant, *Copenhagen Suma*, so as a food lover it was a must-do for me. I had never been to Suma before, so when I arrived at the station and saw the expansive beach area across the open platforms, I exclaimed 'wow!'. Copenhagen Suma is located across the road from one of the station exits, so it was my first stop. Chef Bjarne Hansen was incredibly warm and welcoming, and made my entire experience one that I'll never stop recommending. The traditional Danish hotdogs were outstanding, and I wished that I had time to return for more.





My afternoon at Sumadera Temple was really nice. It wasn't too far a walk, and the temple grounds were quiet and fairly empty, making for a very pleasant and relaxing experience.

On my walk back to the station, I once again passed Chef Hansen's *Copenhagen Suma* restaurant. I looked through the window to wave goodbye, but couldn't see him. As I continued on, Chef Hansen came running out and invited me back in for a coffee. He had been behind the counter and saw me begin to walk off. After a quick coffee and another chat, I was on my way again.

Heading back to Sannomiya, I decided to make a quick stop in Akashi to view the castle ruins which I'd seen from the train the previous day. It was getting late in the afternoon, but I'd worked out that it wasn't too far to walk from the station. Once I arrived at the ruins, I got to stand along the castle wall in-between the two towers and watch the sunset. It was a beautiful end to an amazing day.



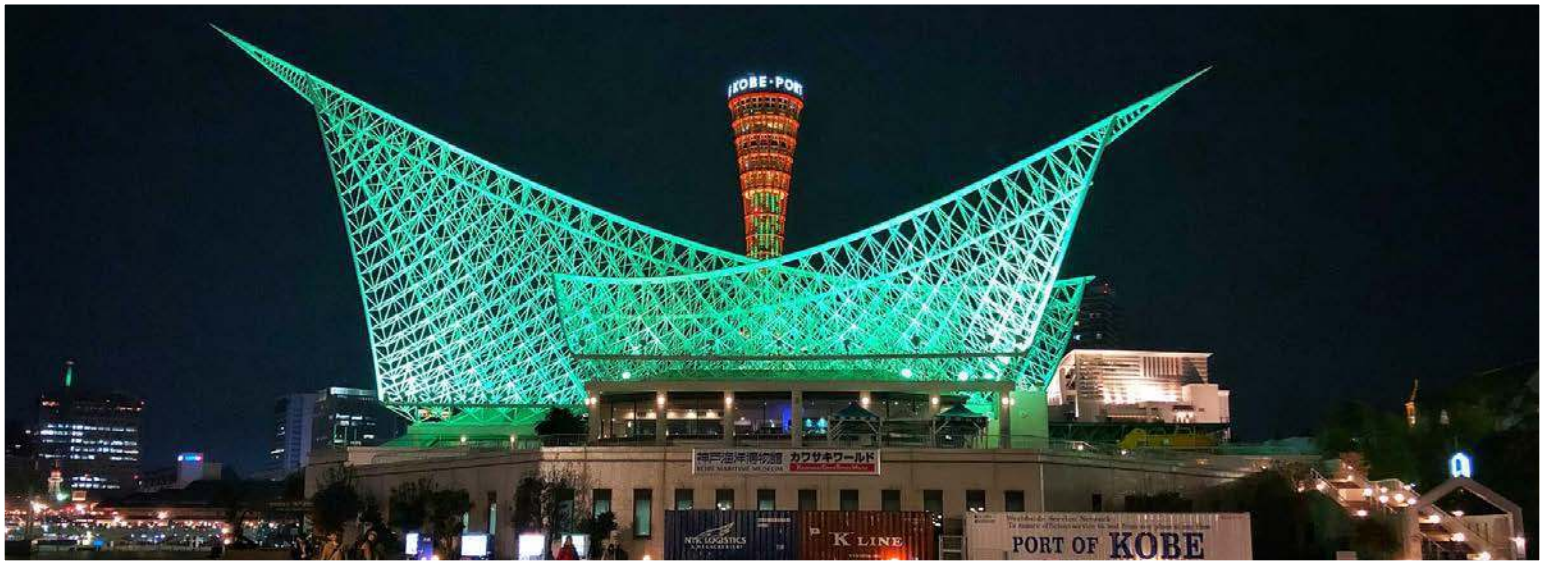


As a huge Studio Ghibli fan, one of my highest priorities of this Japan trip was to visit the Ghibli Museum in Mitaka while I was staying in Tokyo. As a bonus gift from Kobe, I happened to be there for the opening of a special Ghibli exhibition at the Takenaka Carpentry Tools Museum, which explored the wonderful architecture found in a number of Studio Ghibli films, including *The Wind Rises*, *My Neighbour Totoro*, *Princess Mononoke*, and my personal favourite, *Spirited Away*.

I purchased a fantastic book that explores it all in greater depth, and also enjoyed exploring the rest of the multi-level museum, going on a journey through the history of Japanese construction and architecture.

The museum, near Shin-Kobe Station, is not somewhere I would've discovered or entered had I not known about the Ghibli exhibition. But I'm so glad that it was the catalyst to get me in there, because it was yet another glimpse into traditional Japanese culture.





Back in 2007, during my first visit to Kobe, I spent a bit of time down at Harborland and Meriken Park. Returning more than ten years later, it was a surreal experience. Everything was so familiar, yet at the same time so very different. More people dotted the area, there were installations and buildings I'd never seen before, and it took a few attempts to get a solo photo in amongst the still fairly new, but very popular *BE KOBE* sign—which is sure to become as iconic as the *I Amsterdam* sign in Amsterdam, and Robert Indiana's *LOVE* sculpture in New York City.





My last full day in Kobe was a Sunday, spent walking around visiting a number of sake breweries in the renowned Nadagogo brewing region—the largest sake producing region in Japan. Combined with the Fushimi area in Kyoto, they account for nearly half of all sake production in Japan. My sake education was lacking going in, but was certainly much more enlightened coming out. My head was a bit lighter too, especially after a generously bountiful tasting at Sakuramasamune Brewery!



The various breweries presented the history and production of sake in different ways, and all provided samples of varying amounts as part of their gift shop at the end of the self-guided tours. It was a fascinating glimpse into a historic and iconic part of Japanese culture.

I purchased a bottle of straight-from-the-vat fresh sake from Kobe Shushinkan Brewery, which I drank a few days later as I overlooked Mt. Fuji during a stay in Gotemba.

It was delicious.



I have been saying to people a lot lately that my heart lives in Japan, and that at times I wish the rest of me did too. I can attribute a lot of that feeling to Kobe and my experiences and memories there.

Kobe will always feature on my Japan itineraries. I've now spent four weeks there, and I feel I've only just scratched the surface of what is a vibrant, diverse, evolving city.

Ja Matane, Kobe. I hope it's not another ten years before I see you again.