

Report From Nagano -- Part 1 "Travel Troubles"

1/19/98

Good Evening Friends and Associates, and all the ships at sea...

Sorry this first message has been so long in coming. The first few days here were quite bizarre and did not allow time (or access) for emailing. Then, when I finally had the time, I had trouble connecting with the Compuserve node here in Nagano (despite the fact that it worked fine when I called it from home). At this point I still do not have a usable local connection so I am doing email by calling back to DC long distance! So, don't expect too much chattiness for now...

But on to the real fun. The flight over was great. Northwest Business Class is "THE SHIT" (as GC would say). I hope I never have to travel this far in coach again! Decent food, real silverware and glasses, free booze, attentive service and, best of all, big seats that recline to almost 30 degrees and have a leg rest. What joy! This was the first time I have been able to sleep on a plane. Also, the upstairs cabin on a 747 is nice and quiet. No airport problems and the bus ride to Tokyo was slow but fine (the traffic around there is horrible). We stayed overnight at the Dai'Ichi Hotel Tokyo which was really nice. So far CBS did it right, to their credit.

Trouble started the next day. At 9am about 22 of us set out in two "buses" (kind of miniature coaches, made by Toyota) for Nagano. Normal travel time is around 3 hours. It had snowed hard all night and there was already about 5 inches on the ground but, hey, even in DC that is passable! Now recall the theme song to "Gilligan's Island"... It was slow going out of the city, and we ended up waiting about two hours at a rest stop along the highway while the drivers put chains on the tires in heavy snowfall (an ugly job for sure). These rest stops, incidentally, are quite interesting; there are actual people cooking Japanese food to order, along with many vending machines and convenience items and questionable toilet facilities.

Back on the road, everything seemed to be fine and then all traffic just stopped. The two buses, our luggage truck, and several hundred (or thousand) cars just came to a standstill on one side of a four-lane highway. And there we sat for 13 hours. The snow was still falling hard and after a couple hours we noticed that all traffic on the opposite side had ceased. It was about 3pm when we stopped moving and began to get dark around 5. Eventually someone noticed that there was another rest stop on the other side of the road divider and a few people trekked over. Thankfully they were open and fully stocked! We basically spent the next 12 hours either sitting or sleeping on the bus, surrounded by diesel fumes from all directions (everyone had their motors running because it was bloody cold) or standing around the rest stop trying to imagine what could possibly be going on.

Meanwhile, we saw a total of about 3 snow plows and a few police cars pass on the other side and once or twice tried to find out what was going on. Various reports said that there was a car stuck ahead on a hill, that there were trucks stuck, or that they were simply clearing snow. Keep in mind that the Americans in our party were in awed disbelief of what was going on; over the entire 13 hours no authorities ever tried to communicate the conditions, hardly any emergency vehicles passed by, and there was no sign of the Press whatsoever. To this day we cannot imagine what could possibly have taken that long to clear up, or why the authorities allowed thousands of motorists to sit in their cars in the freezing weather with no attempt to provide help. Certainly in the US there would have been all kinds of government activity and reporters and whatnot. The whole thing was simply...surreal. Honestly, if we had not been lucky enough to land in front of the rest stop it really would have been ghastly. As it is we wondered how people were faring that had been stopped in a tunnel! It is quite possible some of them ended up dead of carbon monoxide poisoning.

I will not go into our personal theories about the Japanese mindset, or our disgust with how things were handled. Or the whole question of why CBS tried to save a buck by not sending us on the Bullet Train or waiting another day. Nor will I describe my eventual run-in with the traditional Japanese toilet (the most dehumanizing experience of my life). Around dawn traffic began moving again and continued very slowly for about another 20 miles at which point the authorities announced that the road ahead was closed. At this point we had only traveled about 1/4 of the way to Nagano and were trying to come up with alternate plans. By some stroke of luck the police and snow crews finally figured out that they

could put two plows in front and let everyone else drive behind, which they did after much prodding and another hour of indecision. Strangely enough, the road ahead seemed fine. We can only assume that the Japanese idea of "impassible" is far too stringent.

I cannot even remember clearly what the next 200 miles were like, except for stretches of clear pavement interspersed with slush, snow and ice that felt like an old west wagon train for miles. We wrecked both sets of chains and both mudflaps. There were a few good sights of Mount Fuji after daybreak, but it took another 6 hours to reach Nagano, where we got in at around 2 pm. All together we spent roughly 23 hours on the bus, a feat which has garnered reknown around the CBS facility! I guess you really had to be there to understand the full effect. <Oh, the horror!> Let's just say that I will gladly buy my own \$65 Bullet Train ticket back when I leave!

We (the engineers in the group) took the next day essentially off and then Sunday was an official "off" day. Today (Monday here) was our first real work day. Without going into detail, the CBS portion of the IBC (International Broadcast Center) is quite vast. It is truly amazing how much work and equipment has gone into this place, not to mention the incredible logistics. For example, among our bus group were several men and women coming to Nagano to work in the motor pool--there must be 30 or more drivers, most of whom are from around Australia and who speak good Japaese to boot. It is hard to believe that all this is just for a two week broadcast and will then be ruthlessly taken apart! The facility comprises a studio, two master control rooms, about 10 edit rooms, graphics, audio and all kinds of support offices, not to mention the facilities at the actual venues. The physical building is kind of thrown together, but the technical installation is first rate. It is a shame to tear it down.

The accomodations here are spartan but okay. There are currently three of us in this apartment (with a fourth bedroom to be filled). Private rooms but two, slightly peculiar, shared baths. The building is brand new, but is somewhat different than what we are used to in the States. The Japanese idea of apartment living is a lot more like a dorm. Very tight and very austere. We think this will become a two-bedroom family residence when we leave.

I will try to fill in more later, but in the meantime if you have Internet access check out:

[http:// members.tripod.com/~CBS_Olympics](http://members.tripod.com/~CBS_Olympics) (watch those characters!)

This is a web page maintained by one of the engineers here and he has been uploading digital photos of the events so far, including the famous bus trip!

Gotta run!

-- Eric

Report From Nagano -- Part 2 "The Calm Before the Storm" **1/27/98**

Hello friends and countrymen:

I don't imagine I'll write anything as harrowing as the last time, I certainly hope not, but I figured it was time to go back over events and curiosities (partly for my own record as well).

I've been in Japan two weeks now and feel pretty well adjusted. Activity at the IBC is beginning to pick up as more and more CBS operators arrive by the truckload. We had our first substantial tech staff meeting today and I got a better picture of the scope of this operation. Altogether there are roughly 1500 CBS personnel involved (I don't know if that means all here or not), with technical operations at the IBC and 14 venue sites. The venue setups range from one or two remote trucks to full-blown mini-IBCs with editing rooms, studios, etc. Planning for this event actually began as far back as 1994, with the bulk of the work happening in the last two years. The IBC technical installation was nearly a year in construction, beginning with rack assembly in California last Spring. I mention all this partly because it is just so amazing, and partly because it lends perspective to other aspects of life in Nagano. When you

consider that CBS may be the largest TV operation on-site, but only one of many, it is no wonder there are housing problems.

The official estimates call for roughly 8000 media people, 3000 athletes and staff, and "one million" spectators (according to the New York Times article you may have seen, in which the writer paints a rosy picture of the situation, of which we are skeptical). It just does not seem like the locals realize what is coming. There are an assortment of new buildings and the like, but the roads are congested with just local traffic and they have made virtually no attempts to accommodate other languages. Most restaurants have only Japanese menus, few of the people speak English (thank god for our Japanese-speaking motorpool drivers) and the subway has absolutely no English at all! It seems that part of the reason for this is that Nagano was a fairly isolated town until the government built the new highway and Shinkansen (bullet train) line. They have only had a few years to adapt and they just have no concept of what 10,000 pushy foreigners, let alone 1 million, will be about.

CBS people are spread out across the city, with large concentrations in the Yanagimachi and Asahi Media Villages. Here in Yanagimachi there are something like a dozen apartment buildings with various numbers and layouts of apartments. Mine is set up as a four bedroom, but we believe that the two back bedrooms are actually destined to be the living and dining rooms of a 2-bedroom place when we leave. The management has concocted all kinds of ridiculous rules of behavior in an effort to minimize wear and tear on their future rental units. We have, essentially, two full baths but they are laid out unconventionally: one room is a combination toilet/sink/shower (prefab unit), then there is another shower/bath room with an exterior sink, and a toilet-only closet in the hall. Thankfully all toilets are "Western" style, and one has a heated seat (which seems silly until you realize that they do not centrally heat the apartments).

I am in one of the larger back rooms, with a balcony (very useful in this weather). The front two rooms have Mike and Bob, both New Yorkers. Bob works for CBS in NYC and Mike is a freelance audio guy who I actually met last year on a job in Bethesda. The room next to mine is awaiting TWO occupants come Feb. 2. I guess the ameliorating factor to the 5 guys/2 bathrooms dilemma is that we will be running 12-hour day and night shifts for most of the last month here. I TOLD you this was not a vacation! I am seriously considering taking the night shift because I figure it will be easier to do laundry, probably calmer at work, and will put me closer to the correct time orientation for home.

The biggest hardship so far here is food. Not that it's terrible by any means but it requires some searching to find anything really good in either taste or value. Obviously, the Japanese food is generally fine--and can be had very cheaply at some places. They have trouble making anything "American," though they try, and ethnic food of other countries is a real gamble since there are so few actual ethnic people here. I have had passable but overpriced Indian, both passable-cheap and passable-overpriced Italian, and today some very good and cheap Brazilian-style cooked by an actual Brazilian woman who speaks only Portuguese and Japanese. A language double-whammy for me, since even my Japanese is better than my Portuguese, and the guy with us that spoke Spanish was of little help!

The local Denny's chain is completely unlike the ones in the States (better, actually), but the Royal Host chain is like Denny's (I also seem to recall Royal Hosts on either Guam or Hawaii, but I'm not sure). There are MacDonaldis everywhere, including inside the IBC, which I have been resisting, plus Kentucky Fried Chicken. Oh, boy! I have been told that the local Pizza Hut really is like home, so I may go there at some point for a break. The cafeterias in Yanagamichi and the IBC serve vapid international-style food which is overpriced. You really can eat better outside but they are convenient. Breakfast is free but consists of the same selection of eggs, meats, fruit, cereal and oddities (curry rice, miso soup) every day. The pancakes are terrible, which I don't understand because every confectionary shop (at least in Tokyo) sells an item which consists of two very good "pancakes" with bean paste in between. The Japanese buy these things in cellophane wrappers, multiple assortments and gift wrapped boxes. I think they give them to each other as gifts, but I have a theory that they are never actually eaten--kind of like the proverbial fruitcake. Point is, they KNOW how to make pancakes; maybe they just need to be told that is what we want!

Side note on confections: so far I have tried a few different kinds and they all seem to have either bean paste, chewy rice dough or this brownish flour dough. I don't understand the Japanese love of bean paste. It's not that bad, but if you are expecting what looks like chocolate filling and it turns out to be

bean paste...well, enough said. They do, however, make some creditable American style junk-food snack cakes!

I honestly don't know whether to be annoyed at the apparent lack of understanding of Western customs or saddened that the Japanese seem to be trying so hard despite our complaining. I have heard various stories from people that have lived here about how the Japanese don't really work as hard as they want everyone to believe, how they lack morals, etc. I can believe these allegations because I continually notice the hypocrisies of their society, but in our little encampment they seem to want to please. And yet, I don't know if they understand the scorn and cynicism of which we (westerners, and especially Americans) are capable. What do you do when a self-effacing young girl proudly hands you a sub-par sandwich and then thanks you for taking it? Of course you graciously say, "domo arrigato goziamashite," but the contrasts are daunting.

Meanwhile, entertainment is also hard to come by. I have been somewhat disappointed at the number of CBS people whose idea of fun is going to some unbelievably smoky club and drinking themselves into a stupor. Admittedly this is a fairly young crew, but beer seems to be the main topic of discussion. There are an assortment of little bars and restaurants which have become hangouts. All of them are sodden with cigarette smoke, since the Japanese love to and so do these kids, and usually small and crowded. There are a couple I have liked more, mostly because they tend to be more quiet and low-key. A place we went last night, Lefty's, actually played jazz on vinyl! I have been told about a local band of some sort that plays two gigs simultaneously at two different clubs, alternating with a DJ. I also want to check out the Japanese bluegrass band. I have been mostly going out with my roommates and assorted associates, but I have yet to find a classy bunch to hang with. Perhaps that is too much to ask, particularly since there is nothing "classy" to do here anyway. Even the Japanese, it seems, don't do much more than work, eat and shop.

So far we have gone to a place that featured all-you-can-eat shabu-shabu (meat and vegetables you cook in broth at the table), beer and sake--you can imagine how that turned out, mongolian barbecue (good but not as much variety as at home) and karaoke. The karaoke place was interesting; basically about 6 sound-proofed rooms, each with its own sound and video system. Your drunken group goes in there and wails karaoke for an hourly rate while the people outside are spared the experience. The soundproofing was quite good. I think the time has come for me to take matters into my own hands and begin a quest for proper food and entertainment.

Some of that was had, to my relief, on my trip to Tokyo this past Sunday. I took the Shinkansen down (a shocking 1.5 hour trip) and went around to various areas on the excellent subway. I hit Asakusa, which is part of the "old" downtown Tokyo--though I did not get much beyond the marketplace and the riverside (home of the Phillipe Starck-designed Asahi beer building); Akahubara, one of the consumer electronics centers; Hibya, site of the Imperial Hotel (once of Frank Lloyd Wright fame); and Roppongi, which is the "Greenwich Village" of Tokyo. In Roppongi I stopped an American fellow for directions and we ended up having dinner at an excellent Korean barbecue place. This guy has lived here for 7 years, works in the securities industry, and rents a tiny one-bedroom in Roppongi for \$3500/month! I can't say Tokyo is particularly charming, but it was easy to get around and by the end of the evening I was beginning to feel civilized again. It was a slight shock to return to Nagano. More on Tokyo another time.

I have made one half-hearted trip to a health club near the IBC, but am hoping to maintain some kind of workout schedule. The club is actually pretty nice; small but with all the facilities of a good club in DC, and spotlessly clean. It's a little pricey, but the other nearby place was just a "gym" with no amenities at all and kind of skanky. So far the only other CBS'ers I have seen working out are a couple of guys from the scenery shop who are quintessential New York working-class Italians. I'm always afraid I'll inadvertently say something offensive or effete and get on their bad side. Serious weight-lifters, I should add, so I gotta be tough, ya know?

Well, I can't produce anymore of this spittle right now, so I'll give you all a break!

-- Eric
<Nagano, Japan>

Report From Nagano -- Part 3 "Music and Food, Food and Music"

2/4/98

Greetings from the Night Shift!

Three days in and it's going fairly well. I haven't fallen asleep on the job yet and I've been sleeping 6-7 hours during the day, so I am starting to adapt. Plus I kind of like the low-key late night scene here. I just hope my plan of avoiding major jet lag when I get home actually works. The ungodly return trip can put your body into a mode that has no actual time relationship at all.

It doesn't help that we still don't have much to do. Production people have been pouring in the last week, and there is some activity here at night, but most things are working fine and there is not enough going on to keep us busy. I guess that could change drastically when the Games start, or maybe not. I suppose I shouldn't complain about being paid to sit and...think. I guess they are cutting real segments from here already, since I know there is stuff on the CBS Morning show and news. It is hard to tell what is actual programming and what is practice.

The last night before this shift started, which was Saturday here, a bunch of us went out to this yakiniku (Korean style barbecue) joint. I eat this sometimes back home and the Japanese like it, though they have different names for some things. We were told that this restaurant had particularly good chicken. So we ordered a "set meal", which included meat and vegetables for 8 people, but it did not include any chicken so we made an additional order of that. Then it turned out that the portion was small so we ordered some more. So, we are cooking this meat on the gas grills in the tabletop, and of course you have to cook the chicken thoroughly. At first taste it seemed underdone, so we kept cooking it. Now, if I mention that the menu was only in Japanese and we picked out chicken by using the pictures of raw meat, you can probably guess where this is going. On first taste it was clear to me that this was not chicken. It was extremely tough and chewy, but had no real flavor. We ended up asking a British guy at the next table who spoke Japanese what we were eating.

Intestines. Of course, after we found out nobody wanted any more. It did not taste bad, but the texture was really nasty. To be honest, I was suspicious when they first brought it out--it just did not look like raw chicken to me. But I figured maybe they had some kind of special marinade or something. The power of suggestion! It sure is a good thing we had TWO orders. Then it occurred to us that perhaps the guy who suggested the chicken has been eating intestines all this time and not realizing it!

I should note that the Japanese use the term "set" to mean a meal that includes several items, such as main course, soup and rice. In other words it's a "complete set." For a while I thought they meant it was "set" as in fixed, or unchangeable, but they love the concept of the meal "set". This works out well at McDonalds where they already have that whole "meal deal" thing going.

I finally found a Japanese dessert item that I like. It's kind of a filled pastry, but the dough is like pancake batter and they cook it in these sort of shallow muffin tins so that it comes out shaped like a hockey puck. The one with vanilla custard filling was good. I passed on the bean paste version. We got these things in the "food court" of a nearby department store. They also had a French-style bakery which had some very good bread, and some really weird stuff like a mini sub roll with pork cutlet at one end and spaghetti with sauce at the other end. I bought a baguette and some Japanese-made Camembert cheese which was also quite good. Nicely runny. Today (Tues) went over to this bakery near the Media Village and got some more good bread and other oddities. One turned out to be a very nice chewy French bun filled with macaroni salad. Then tonight, at the NAOC (Olympic Committee) Broadcasters Welcome party, they had little potato-salad sandwiches on white.

More good news: On the way to the bakery I passed a little music store. Very well stocked; they have guitars, amps, violins, horns, audio gear, guitar effects boxes, keyboards and two baby grands! I spent about a half hour playing on this white Yamaha G-5. It was in tune and played quite nicely. The sale price for this piano was 165,000 Yen, which is about \$5500! The owner said I could come back and play whenever I like (I just hope that next time they don't have the TV blasting in the background). This was a great find, and only a few hours earlier I had been lamenting the lack of any pianos around.

Which brings us to the musical segments of the story... A few nights back we went to this Indian restaurant which features live music. It is a tiny restaurant that has a ground floor with a few tables, a tiny corner bar and the kitchen (which is run completely by one Indian guy). Then there is a very steep winding staircase to this upstairs kind of "club" area with two levels which looks down on a tiny stage that is kind of midway between both floors. It is sort of like a very small version of the Bayou in Washington.

There was this kind of band which consisted of an older guy that played jazz vibes (actually rather well) and a young guy playing upright bass. Then the vibe guy would switch to Kurzweil piano and one of the waiters would get up there and sing and play harmonica. They did really awful versions of American pop songs, like "Honesty". The singer did the words but we don't think he actually understood what he was saying; just reproducing the sounds. After about 30 minutes the waiter would go back to work and the vibe and bass guys would rush out of the club and head over to ANOTHER club up the street where they would do a set of American rock and roll on different instruments! An hour later they come back and do another set of jazz and bad pop songs. We eventually figured that the older guy is probably an owner of both clubs (and a third) because he also seemed to be the maitre'd of the Indian place. It was like they were the only band in town! So we're eating Indian food in Japan and listening to American music played by Japanese restaurant workers. Very strange.

Another night we went to the Liberty Pub, and they had a live band as well called Jazz Monkey. What they actually played was more like instrumental funk, or maybe jazz/funk. To my surprise they were pretty good; drums, bass, guitar, keys, vocal and three horns. They had tight arrangements and a very good feel. But, naturally, it was louder than shit, hot, smoky and crowded. All my favorite conditions!

Last Sunday I visited the local Zenkoji Temple, which is famous throughout Japan. The building is quite old and essentially open to the outside so it was very cold. Apparently they have a huge statue of the Buddha there which nobody has seen for some 350 years because they believe they will go blind if they look at it. How do they know it's still there? Underneath the floor where the statue is located is a little passageway which is pitch dark inside. You walk through the passage by keeping one hand on the wall and the transition from dark back to light symbolizes death and re-birth. Along the road to the temple there are quite a lot of shops selling religious icons, incense, groceries and bean paste confections. The main anchor studio for CBS is right next to the temple and they have a huge boom-mounted camera out front. I'm sure you will see many views from this during the Olympic coverage.

Tonight I had a decent pizza at DIC (Delicious Italian Cuisine), a few blocks from the IBC. This place seems to be all Japanese, but must have had an Italian involved at some point because they have excellent grated cheese on the tables, risotto and homemade tiramisu. They've been in business since 1971! One of the problems of working nights is that there are fewer places open. We are supposed to get vouchers for food at the IBC cafeteria during the Games so we will probably go there more often.

That's about all of interest for now!

-- Eric
<Nagano, Japan>

Report From Nagano -- Part 4 "So What's the Big Deal?"

2/13/98

Konnichi-wa comrades,

Well, we are nearly a week into the actual Olympic Games. By now everyone should have had a chance to watch some of the CBS coverage. You can draw your own conclusions. Back in the shop we tend not to see much of the final shows that you get in the States; we end up watching raw camera feeds or switched feeds from the venues or pieces that are being edited, so I don't have much opinion on it. I have heard a variety of complaints about the coverage but I can neither confirm or deny anything. ;)

In the end, after all the dire predictions, the city of Nagano seems relatively unscathed by the event. There are definitely large crowds in some areas, such as around the train station, where the Olympic PR

and souvenir tents are centered, and along Chuo-dori street which runs between the station and the Zenkoji temple. But the paralyzing crowds and traffic that we feared have not materialized. Even on the press side, which is supposedly 8,000 strong, it does not seem too bad. Of course, being on the 7p - 7a shift my perspective might be a little skewed; we tend to find ourselves on virtually empty motorcoaches most of the time, while I know that the day shift buses are full. Speaking of which, the Nagano Olympic committee's Herculean effort at providing official transportation has turned out to be permanently disorganized. For some reason they cannot seem to get these buses to arrive at the scheduled times and often do not know which ones are going where. It is frustrating to stand out in the freezing cold at 7am waiting for a specific bus while 8 or 10 empty ones drive up, stop and leave. They cannot conceive of re-routing the things to fit the need.

Work continues to be very light, to my great surprise. I have so much free time that I have gone back to working on design projects for home. Unfortunately I did not anticipate the time available so I did not bring all my files, but I had some sent over (three days by Express Mail, not bad!). It is a pain working on a laptop, but I can get a lot accomplished. Everyone is also taking time to see events. We can get free tickets through CBS on an as-available basis. I have put in for events which will not cause me to lose too much sleep; skiing aerials next week and figure skating exhibition on the 21st. I also went to a hockey match this afternoon (Thurs here) which was...fine. That is to say, it looked like hockey to me.

Harvey, the Quantel service guy from England, has fashioned himself a sleeping area under one of the workbenches. He's lined the space between two back-to-back benches with packing paper and closes himself in with big cardboard boxes. This is so reminiscent of the "Seinfeld" where George builds a sleep nook under his desk that I even took a picture of him lying under there! Meanwhile, many people have bought these tiny Mini-Disc recorders and want to copy various music CDs onto them. Unfortunately the U.S. copy-protection system prevents digital-digital copies between these devices, so the resourceful maintenance techs rigged up a dubbing system which strips out the copy-code using some digital audio test gear. It's quite amusing.

The Yanagimachi Village cleaning squad has gotten very aggressive lately. When we started working overnight shifts the CBS Housing department kindly provided us with DO NOT DISTURB signs in Japanese for our rooms. For a while they worked alright; the cleaning crew would come barrelling in at about 10am and slam doors, talk loudly and generally create a din while cleaning--but did not try to clean the rooms with signs. This would wake me up, but only briefly. Sometimes they would return later in the day to do the rooms they had passed over. Unfortunately we are often still sleeping at 3pm. A few days ago they decided to ignore the sign on my door and unlocked it while I was still lying in bed. I was not really sleeping any longer but I had no desire to get out of bed so they could change the sheets again. When the first one stuck her head in I tried to indicate that she need not clean the room. She went away and was followed by two more workers, each asking if it was okay to clean. I eventually made it clear that it was not necessary, or desired, but one of my roommates, who had also been sleeping, was quite incensed at the whole incident. Apparently they don't like to abandon a mission. It has not happened since so perhaps someone complained.

Another important thing I have learned is that the stuff that we find so funny about those old Japanese sci-fi movies is all TRUE! The police all wear matching outfits and white helmets, every kind of public-works employee wears a jumpsuit (for a while we joked that they were all actually the same crew who just changed outfits depending on the job), the cities are criss-crossed with power and phone lines and the buildings are surprisingly flimsy--an easy target for Godzilla or Mothra. When we were stuck in the goddam bus out on the highway, the few police that did show up were wearing winter jumpsuits, helmets and these vests with flashing lights on the front. It is easy to see where Ultraman originated. The Japanese have no need for self-parody (nor would they probably understand it).

I also get a general feeling about the Japanese that is both amusing and sort of pathetic, but hard to explain. The surface culture has what I (as an American) perceive as a child-like quality. Public signs, advertising and even serious written matter are loaded with cartoon characters of every description; they love to add what we would consider a "cutesy" touch to everything. Primary colors are used a great deal and much of their machinery has a toy-like appearance; the police cars, fire trucks and construction equipment seem small and flimsy. Couple this with the bright colors, and a team of matching jump-suited workers, and it's kind of like a living Playmobile set. Then it gets even weirder when you consider how grim their urban landscape is. Place these toy vehicles in a gray, cramped environment,

where even the new buildings look dilapidated (the TV coverage does not expose the true appearance of the place), and a nearly surreal quality begins to develop.

I keep having the feeling that much of what we see here now has not changed significantly since World War II. Perhaps this is pragmatism, perhaps inflexibility. I am no great supporter of the (capitalist) agenda "change for change's sake," but it is hard to come face-on with NEW office furniture that is straight out of the U.S. Government catalog from 1955 and not be bemused. Or perhaps confused; this is the same country that produces high technology of all kinds! The sense of WWII-era outlook pervading the public infrastructure is eerie at times.

The child-like aspect is also present in the way the people behave. They sometimes seem almost naively eager to do good (particularly, as I have said before, when dealing with crass Westerners) and genuinely pleased by the slightest act of good will. I suppose one could see this as a refreshing lack of cynicism, but I sense that their entire world view is different in a way that is not necessarily inherently positive. There is also an unsavory interest in, what appear to be, very young girls in both the general culture and the pornography. The psychology of this society would be fascinating to investigate--if it were possible to get straightforward information from the Japanese. Of course, these are all just my own impressions.

The Food Part:

I have received some ribbing (sorry) about my apparent fixation with food over here so I have decided to create a special section for this subject. Anyone who can't take anymore may skip this part! Actually, there is not much to tell this time. We received our CBS meal coupons for the IBC and they are good in the cafeteria OR the in-house Royal Host restaurant. The restaurant has become a general favorite because they have quite good American-style food. The service is spotty, and some items kind of odd, but it is really not bad at all for basic cuisine. They also have properly translated menus and a staff that speaks decent English. In both cases the coupons are good for quite a lot of food, which is particularly important in the cafeteria because the Japanese idea of portion size is a joke. I guess they don't eat as much as Westerners. It seems we quickly revert from adventurous world travelers to provincial home-bodies when given the opportunity.

Which is not to say I have completely given up. I had some good Korean-style barbecue at a new place directly across from the IBC, a nice change. Also enjoying oyaki, the little buns that are sold everywhere. They come with a variety of fillings and make a nice snack. Because of the work situation my forays out for new restaurants have declined. For the curious, I don't care for sushi so I have not been eating it! I know, such as waste to miss out in Japan, etc. I've been told that even the hole-in-the-wall places are very good, but I have also noticed that the Japanese do not eat as much sushi as we tend to imagine. At least not up here in the mountains.

An update on desserts is that while the Japanese make some unlovable native sweets they do a good job with Western imitation (as we well know). The "French" bakeries have nice bread and pastries, the chocolate candy is quite good and they have some interesting variations on familiar items. The IBC cafeteria sells a packaged, but fresh, "banana cake" which is a kind of pound cake slice wrapped around whipped cream filling with a banana inside. It's good; no bean paste!

Overall, we are beginning to tire of the place. It is amazing how quickly you can adapt to a new environment to the point that I am no longer very aware of being in Japan. It has become just another anytown in some corner of the world (as did Guam a year ago). In addition to the sports events I still want to try the Japanese bath house down the street and, possibly, visit the wild monkey reserve if I have time.

-- Eric
<Nagano, Japan>

Report From Nagano -- Part 5 "Intermediate Message"
2/18/98

Hidey-ho!

I've been collecting observations over the last week which have become so numerous that I have to use some of them up, despite nothing big going on. I expect to do one more update before I leave Tuesday morning (!) which will hopefully have my last few adventures.

I hope most of you had a chance to catch some of the more interesting Olympic events. Certainly the figure skating always fares well in the American eye (and some would say CBS' coverage has been skewed heavily in that direction). I personally found the snowboarding quite exciting to watch and the Curling kind of interesting. The debate continues over whether Curling should be an Olympic sport at all; it requires skill, but lacks the usual athletic aspects. On the other hand, neither Luge nor Bobsled appear to be heavily athletic either. I just liked the Curling because it had it's own brand of quirkiness. I also thought the Speed skating was kind of weird this year; guys in skin-tight devil suits, with very specific preparatory stances, and that strange starting voice and then all those horns blasting that one cacophonous chord. I don't know if it was obvious from the TV coverage, but they have taken to playing this insipid background music at the arenas between the action. It was particularly noticable yesterday when we saw the live raw feed of the Women's Hockey final. During the entire medal ceremony it never let up; this continuous, cheesy movie score music from the loudspeakers. It's as if someone has decided that the emotion of the event itself is not enough; it has to have a *soundtrack* as well. Horrible. It reminds me of EPCOT.

I had last Sunday off, which meant staying up all night trying to occupy myself. Once the stores closed, by about 9pm, there was not much to do. First thing I did was go for a MosBurger. It's really not as bad as it sounds! This is a Japanese chain which features American-style burgers and sides--served by guys in white paper hats, no less. Naturally I HAD to try it. The "Fresh Burger" was kind of like a Whopper, but heavy on the Thousand Island. The Spicy Mos Cheeseburger had this sort of weird salsa but was okay. I was enchanted by the Japanese eating technique, which is to keep the burger in the paper wrapper and peel it back--like we used to do when I was a kid. A Canadian couple sat down next to me and we had a lively discussion about THE JAPANESE. They have been living here for a couple years and were able to put finer points on some of my own observations. The guy, apparently, really likes the Spicy Mos Cheeseburger (and claims that MosBurger is better than Wimpy Burger, a UK chain that looked horrible when I was there). His defining description of Japan, which I think is quite apt is, "Kafka meets the Gong Show."

I stopped in at this one Jazz club, which claimed music until 10:30, but it stopped an hour early. No sooner had I ordered my Gin Rickey (one of five drinks listed) then the band, as the Japanese have learned to say, finished. This is the same club, incidentally, that advertised the "MJQ" a couple weeks back. Turns out this was NOT the famous Modern Jazz Quartet, but the not-famous Manhattan Jazz Quintet. Sorry I missed that. So I headed for a bar that was supposed to have live Celtic music by some Canadian band. As usual, noisy, smoky and hot, and unfortunately the band was quite awful.

Half-hour later I'm back on the street and spent some time trying to figure out what was in this building across the way. I know I've mentioned to a few people how the fact of living in such a small country informs every aspect of the Japanese culture. In this case, the Japanese must use more vertical space for retail than we do at home. We would never put typical "storefront" businesses on the upper floors of a building, only offices or housing. But here the banks, hairdressers and other stores are often several floors up. Therefore the buildings have lots of signs outside which tell what businesses are upstairs; almost every multi-floor business building has a big (luridly colored) vertical sign running up the outside and this creates a defining element of the urban environment. This particular place looked like an apartment building but had a huge sign with about 20 different businesses listed. After a while I decided that this might be some kind of fantasy-themed "Love Hotel" because all the signs had these sort of exotic-sounding names: The Sahara, The Night Runner, Snacks (well, maybe not that one). I walked up a few floors to see what was going on but naturally they were all closed. Then I met a bunch of Western guys who live in Tokyo and were in town for the Games. They dashed my hopes by informing me that most of the places were, in fact, restaurants. The thing is, you have to imagine how all these little restaurants are behind what appear to be standard apartment doors in a "garden-style" building. They were also able to tell me, by knowing the language, where the businesses of ill-repute actually were, but I decided to hang out with them instead because the primary male-oriented entertainment seems to be the "hostess bar."

A word about Love Hotels and Hostess Bars: Love Hotels are the Japanese answer to "by the hour" rooms. The difference is that, in addition to certain commercial uses, they are considered respectable places for a married couple to go for some privacy (Japanese often have extended families living in very small houses). They work anonymously in that there is no contact between the desk clerk and the customers. There is one, the Hotel OX, near Yanagimachi Village. Well, the sign says "Hotel O X", which we read as "ox", but it might stand for "hug and kiss." I don't know for sure. Hostess Bars are kind of like the old Playboy clubs; well-off businessmen go there to be fawned over by attractive women, but sex is generally not part of the deal. Apparently they can be quite expensive, just paying for these women's time and attention, with any other services at the discretion of the female. I do know that a couple of CBS guys wandered into one by accident and actually hit it off with the girls, to the extent that they have become kind of temporary "girlfriends" for the duration. I don't think my luck is that good these days...

The rest of the night was just hanging out with the guys from Tokyo, then meeting some more Westerners and going to a different restaurant and all of us trying to have a conversation with some Japanese girls. All pretty silly. I just don't know if there is anything else to do around here after hours. Perhaps if I were Japanese I would know where to go. Perhaps this is it; the Japanese (men at least) love to drink and smoke.

A quick summary of various observations:

**** Top 5 Most Annoying Things About Being Here ****

- 5) The steps in the staircases are too close together; they make my calfs hurt.
- 4) The temperature is always either too hot or too cold.
- 3) Ceaseless cigarette smoking everywhere (with poor ventilation).
- 2) They continue to drive empty buses past empty stops while we wait in the snow.
- 1) They have virtually RUN OUT of Olympic souvenirs! How is this possible???

This last one is particularly vexing and disappointing to me because there were barrels of stuffed Snowlets and other items for weeks and weeks, then when I decide to go buy some they are GONE. I mean vanished. I suspect the vendors decided to take any stock from outlying locations (such as the IBC) and move it to the main outlets by the train station, but even those have been swept clean. And there are still 4 days left! This is good planning.

Despite their politeness and apparent concern for everyone's safety in public (did I mention the safety instructions that came with our room furniture?) I have noticed a decidedly cavalier, even aggressive, attitude regarding vehicles. There is a lot of bicycle traffic on the sidewalk, which is fine, but they never use a bell or horn when coming up from behind. And they drive very fast, even in crowds. I have been nearly side-swiped several times just walking along; if I had stepped a few inches off-center at that moment they would have plowed right into me. Then there are the taxis. I had a hair-raising trip through the back streets the other night in which the driver pressed on as fast as possible down alleys only wide enough for 1.5 cars and filled with milling people. He just kept going and would slow momentarily, until they realized he was behind (no horn, of course), and then swerve around and speed on. It reminded me of some scene from Indiana Jones or James Bond: driving crazily through a village in Bombay or somewhere.

Okay, enough complaining for now; people are going to think I'm some sort of CURMUDGEON or something! So, what's good about this place?

**** Top 5 Positive Things About Being Here ****

- 5) Good sushi readily available (for those who like it).
- 4) Good bread, pastries and chocolate.
- 3) Excellent iced tea available everywhere!
- 2) General sense of manners and civility (which is disappearing in much of the U.S.).
- 1) People are generally polite and helpful (almost to a fault).

Is this list as superficial as the other one? I guess so. Does it sound like I would rather be back in the States? Anyone who knows me well knows that I have many complaints about the U.S.--it's politics,

culture, economics, etc. But I certainly cannot say that I think things are better here; just different in many ways, worse in some. I suppose some of it comes down to what you are accustomed to, and what you have learned to believe about your own society. For the Japanese, the aspects that I find unacceptable are perfectly reasonable (at least on the surface), and the way we do things is often looked at strangely. But I do believe there are times when it is possible to evaluate an aspect of a society and, somewhat objectively, decide that this aspect is good or bad. Perhaps this is not the forum to get into sociological theories, let's just say I've had about enough. It was fun for a while, when it was still new and curious.

And on that note, let me note that I leave in FIVE DAYS!

Still to come: a ski venue (hopefully) and the public baths...

-- Eric
<Nagano, Japan>

Report From Nagano -- Part 6 "The Last Transmission" **2/24/98**

Dear Friends and Relations,

And it came to pass that the dark days and nights reached an end: the written word became readable, vehicles returned to the left side and water again flowed into containers larger than 2 ounces. All was well...barring any unforeseen travel problems.

I did manage to get to a ski venue, finally. Went to the Women's Giant Slalom at Shiga Kogen. This is an area of ski lodges and resorts in the northern mountains, about an hour from Nagano. Of course it took us 90 minutes to get there, but we're used to that. I don't think I have been to ski areas since I was a kid and I was surprised at how they all look about the same, even from that far back. It was fairly warm but unfortunately sleeting and raining continuously. The event was on a substantial-looking hill with an assortment of lifts running overhead, including these funny little gondolas that looked, oddly enough, kind of like Ultraman's head. The most troublesome thing was that there was no clear walking surface. Perhaps this is typical for a ski area but it presented quite a problem; when hundreds of people are tramping over the snow, and the temperature is up slightly, what you get is very slick packed snow. It was preposterously bad--haven't they heard of SAND??? Fortunately there were a few security types standing around and yelling in Japanese through their bullhorns.

Harvey (from Quantel) and I had enough trouble getting around in our boots, but the laughable part was what some of the Japanese were wearing. Business slacks and wingtips, sneakers, flared pants and 4" platform heels. I am totally serious. There was one guy with dress shoes, golf pants, a shirt, sweater, yukata (similar to a kimono) and what looked like a red courderoy blazer. And one of those giant stove-pipe hats that were around in the 70's--I think some rock musicians used to wear them (they've made a comeback during the Olympics). It was encouraging to see so many parents with children but the conditions for a baby backpack were treacherous. Plenty treacherous for the skiers as well since about half of them wiped or dropped out. In the end it was good to get out and see the mountains ("very nice") and a real ski event, but it was too rainy to stop at the monkey park, so that will have to wait for another time. Right.

As an addendum to my previous list of GOOD things here, I should add the extremely low crime rate. This had slipped my mind until a recent conversation with a Japanese girl who had been to the States--we were comparing various cultural differences. It is quite a novelty to be out on the street any time of the day or night with virtually no fear of personal crime. She was also surprised at the fact that you must lock your car in the States, and that people even steal *parts* off cars! So, the Japanese score a big point on this one; one of the tradeoffs we make for having such an individualistic (undisciplined?) society back home. In fact, I have found that my general opinion of Japan and its people rises whenever I have the chance to speak with a native at some length. The younger people, particularly, are so curious and open about most things that it is hard not to like them.

I would also like to add that I enjoy the department stores. There are quite a few, both swanky and K-Mart-ish, and they sell a wide variety of items. There are usually 6-7 floors--building vertically again--of men's and women's clothes, household items and appliances (including displays of fancy toilet seats), children's items, books and CDs, etc. The employees are very helpful and friendly. But, of course, the best part is the food department in the basement. Sometimes they have an American-style supermarket but there are always an assortment of food stalls selling all kinds of raw and prepared items. It's good fun to cruise around looking at the stuff (and eating samples if you dare). All the department stores are laid out roughly the same, with a restaurant floor on the top. Strangely, I have NOT gone to any of these restaurants. I think this is due to a well-earned distrust of department store restaurants. Besides, they always seem to have more of the same Japanese food.

By contrast with these stores, one of the weirdest things I've seen is the stuff they sell at the counter of the 7-11. In the States it's day-old hot dogs spinning on those little rollers, here it's a steamer box full of the most unappetizing things you can imagine; dough blobs, soggy-looking meat rolls of some kind, unsightly colored shapes, and tentacles. And the smell...the 7-11s here actually smell WORSE than back home! I'm sure it is due to those steamers. Generally, if you pass a 7-11 (or Lawson's) there are always a bunch of young men loitering around the magazine rack, but this is less because they sell girly mags and more because they are reading the famous Japanese comics. The consumption of comic books here is astounding. In any department, convenience or bookstore there are likely to be dozens, if not hundreds, of comics, mostly on newsprint. They include everything from super-heros and gangsters to serialized fantasy adventures to porn. I may have mentioned the bizarre "Lady's Comics" which feature all manner of extremely graphic and kinky sex (with the naughty bits obscured or erased). I have even seen what appear to be kinky gay comics (oddly called "Boy's Comic" on the front). All are sold out in the open, right next to the kiddie books.

Not to overdue this topic but the one labeled "Young Man's Comic" was not something we would consider giving to an adolescent back home. This made me wonder what is going on around here. What would it be like to be a boy who is raised in this atmosphere of propriety and public self-effacement, to be taught that sexuality is a private (if not downright unwholesome) matter, and then start in reading comics which include fairly graphic and kinky sexual behavior--some of which might be considered misogynistic as well. Not to mention the way young girls are featured in the men's magazines. I don't know if there is an age limit on these things but most of the 7-11 clerks are mere teenagers themselves. I just have to wonder what the cumulative effect of all these messages is. Is it better or worse than the screwy messages we give in the States?

Saw Scott Hamilton walking down by the train station. I neglected to take his photo.

Another interesting thing I saw by the train station is, what seems to me, a relic of some bygone age of Japan: the yam seller. These guys have a cart or small truck with a wood burning stove and they roast and sell giant (and I mean GIANT) yams. The one by the station has a recording which comes out of an old-fashioned speaker horn on top of the truck. It sings this rather plaintive tune in Japanese, which I assume means something like, "Come buy my yams..." There are also guys with little carts that have a steam whistle attached to the stove which just blows a single note all the time. It is terribly quaint and tends to make me feel some vague, wistful yearning for a time and place that no longer exists, perhaps never did, and which I never even experienced. Kind of like how I feel about the 1950's USA. I guess it is partly from our exposure to images of the old Imperial Japan, with all its apparent grace and fortitude. These yam salemen seem like a final vestige of a past which is almost beyond retrieval in modern Japan. At least in Nagano.

Which brings me to another old-world holdout: the bath house. I did finally get there, the Barrato (almost like "The Day the Earth Stood Still") public bath near the IBC. This place is not exactly like a traditional Japanese bath because it is completely modern and has many different pools. Massage is available but, naturally, Monday is the one day they leave early. There is a men's locker room to change (and smoke) and then a main pool area and an outdoor area. First you must wash, which is done at rows of stools, each with faucets, sprayer and basin. The men wash themselves sitting down, which I found awkward, but they do an extremely thorough job. I suppose this contributes to the notion that they are a very "clean" people, but how do you explain a culture that often has no napkins or toilet paper available? Many men also do other grooming tasks at the wash stations, then you just roam around this steamy room and use the facilities.

They have various temperature pools and an assortment of water-jet massages, the likes of which I have not seen before. The best thing about the massage pools is that the jets are STRONG. For example, one has two jets at about mid-back level, standing, and you have to willfully hold the side rails to keep from being pushed away. They are very conscious of applying jets to various areas, such as the feet, which are often forgotten. There was also one whirlpool where you layed on this bumpy back support, and another (which I did not see in use) that apparently runs an electric current through the water! I also tried the regular steam room and the steam room where you rub course salt over yourself. There was a sauna, a cold pool and a couple outdoor hot pools. Air temp was about 40 tonight which I liked because the pools make me too hot. Outdoors there was also a sitting area with pointy rocks that you put your feet on (accupressure?). The whole place was very clean, with water continuously running over all the seating benches. I struck up a conversation with a German fellow, who was in town dealing pins, and he told me this was the best bath he had seen anywhere. The bath part was not coed, but a few fathers brought young girls (3-4 years). Interestingly, at one point a middle-age woman came through the men's area to pick up towels and such. Nobody paid her any mind, so this made me wonder even more about Japanese sexual mores. Would they have a male steward work on the women's side? I doubt it. Lastly, the question you all really want to know: From what I saw, the men's equipment, in the relaxed (but not shrunken) state, was no smaller than any I've seen at home. Deduce what you will.

Once again, in an effort to kill the night hours before my train to Tokyo (most of us that were on the bus trip from Hell opted to spend our own money rather than take our chances on the 6-8 hour bus ride), I headed downtown and, once again, found that the main social activity is drinking. I encountered three Americans who I had met on my last night off and we talked about how they came to be in Japan. They all had similar stories of coming for a purpose and just never quite making it home. Ten years later they are still here tending bar or playing gigs, drinking and sleeping, marrying Japanese women and having kids. There almost seems to be a sort of American ex-patriot sub-culture of people who might inhabit "Palookaville" in the States. Then I suddenly realized one of the tempting aspects of staying here...can you guess what it is?

I guess that's a wrap. This trip has been interesting, moderately fun and moderately eye-opening. I feel I have learned a great deal about the Japanese, though I know that Nagano cannot be taken as the sole example (for one thing, I have been told that the distinct lack of trash receptacles around here is NOT a problem in Tokyo). The work and work conditions were not what I expected, mostly in good ways; the TV people probably were, if I'd thought about it. I don't know what to think about the Olympic broadcast effort in general; for the most part it seems like WAY too much work for such a short event--and I wonder if the viewer would be better served by less production and more simple coverage. The spectre of the 2000 Games in Sydney has, of course, come up. While I would love to go to Sydney on someone else's nickel, I cannot decide if I would want to do another Olympics (assuming I have the opportunity). Many people I've spoken with here seem to "end up" at the Olympics over and over via some kind of selective memory erasure; at the end they swear they'll never do another and then mysteriously find themselves in Nagano (or Albertville or Barcelona or...) a few years later. There is a kind of "Stepford" quality to it. I guess it's easy to forget the ridiculous hours, housing, transportation and food after a few years, and remember the overall experience as a good one. I almost feel like I should do another, just for the perpspective, but I'm not young, or interested, enough to do it simply because it sounds "cool". The Goodwill Games this summer in NYC? Nah.

-- Eric
<Nagano, Japan>

Report From Nagano -- Part 6.2 "Post Script"

3/1/98

I decided to add a few more words about things I've noticed since returning to the States. The flight back was great; once again business class and I think the food on this United flight was actually *better* than on Northwest! Arrival at JFK was smooth until I went to get the terminal shuttle bus. Here I've got this big suitcase on wheels, with this huge, overstuffed Nike duffel on the top and my carry-on bag, and people just would not get out of the way. It was raining and crowded at the curb and everyone around me was oblivious or rude. Just for a second I thought, "if I were in Japan people would be hopping over themselves to help out!"

Now, this is probably not entirely accurate; for one thing, when I was in Tokyo station I noticed many Japanese, especially businessmen, just barrelling through the place with no regard for anything in their way. This fits with what I observed about the Japanese in general, that is, as individuals they are very polite, but in groups they become surly and aggressive (and this includes driving cars). Speaking of trains, the Japanese know how to do trains! The Shinkansen from Nagano and the Narita Airport Express were great: smooth, quiet, comfortable, on time. Even the little subway in Nagano was good.

I still find myself trying to use some Japanese words out of habit. I guess when you are concentrating on the language it becomes ingrained very quickly. How better to express agreement than with a quick, "hai!"

The anti-jet lag experiment appears to have been a rousing success! Admittedly, it is hard to tell whether the last 36 hours of the trip, on 6 hours sleep, contributed to wearing me out past the jet lag stage, but since coming back I have been sleeping fine back on my normal schedule. I experienced about 1.5 days of slight space-out, but none of the sleepness nights or waking up at 4am bullshit. Let's hear it for the night shift!

For anyone who cares, my theory on the ex-patriots I met in Nagano is this: they have discovered that they can make a good living doing whatever they like and, more importantly, they married Japanese women that have been taught to let them do whatever they want! These guys stay out to all hours drinking and carousing, have various affairs with other women and still have a wife to come home to. They never have to grow up! That's my theory, and if you know MEN you know there is a grain of truth in it.

That's all I had left. It's good to be back, and my pictures prove it was not just a weird hallucination. Thanks for reading and keeping in touch!

-- Eric
<Silver Spring, MD>