Hi Grandma,

Here’s a bit where I can tell you more about each photo in the order in which they’re labeled of the folder.

1. This is Meiji Shrine in Southern Tokyo. In Japan’s Shinto-Buddhist religion, the Emperor of Japan is both the spiritual head of the country and also semi-divine. Like Roman Emperors, they are deified after death, so rather than simply Japanese Emperors have shrines that house their divine spirits and that of the Empress. This is the shrine of Emperor Meiji, who was responsible for opening Japan to the world in the 1860s and ending the Shogunate that had ruled Japan for nearly 300 years.
2. The Meiji Shrine is, like many shrines and temples, surrounded by a large natural park. This is only a short walk from the last photo and shows how this old forest has been preserved as a sizable park in the center of Tokyo, the densest city in the world.
3. This is the Toho theatre in the Tokyo district of Shinjuku. Toho has been both the theatre and production company that has produced every Godzilla film since 1954, and so of course they keep their most famous monster forever looming over their first theatre, while advertising his newest movie below.
4. The Tokyo National Museum in Ueno Park is devoted to the art and antiquities of Japan, and houses many of their national treasures. It’s a beautiful building, and a great modern museum.
5. This wooden statue of the Buddhist guardian deity Bishamonten was carved from a tree trunk over 1,100 years ago during Japan’s Heian period. This statue was already over a century old when William the Conqueror crossed the English Channel and its condition is still remarkable.
6. This is a Japanese *katana* sword that’s almost as old, forged in the 12th century by famous Master Swordsmith Okanehira and considered one of the finest to still exist. The cultural prominence of swords through Japanese history has led to its preservation for over 800 years.
7. And there’s me! Doing my best to overcome my fear of heights on the observation platform of the Tokyo Skytree, the tallest building in Japan.
8. A view from the Skytree of central Tokyo and the Sumida River (Including the famous Tokyo Tower if you squint). It’s impossible to overstate how vast Tokyo is, functionally 20 large cities smashed together in one Metropolitan area. By many definitions the most populous city on Earth.
9. We depart Tokyo to go to one of its old capitals, Kamakura. About an hour and a half by train from Tokyo, one of the main draws is Kotoku-In, a temple finished in 1252 famed for its 43ft statue of the Buddha Amitabha. This statue is so old and so well-known it’s been in art and photographs going back over a century. I saw a painting of it in a museum in Vienna!
10. Close to Kamakura is an island called Enoshima, well-known for its local cuisine, folklore, and views of the Japanese coastline overlooking the Pacific Ocean.
11. This photo was taken in the city of Kyoto, at a mountain shrine called Fushimi Inari, dedicated to the god Inari. Inari was the patron deity of many things, including agriculture, commerce, wealth, and foxes. So statues of foxes were frequent throughout the shrine.
12. Speaking of commerce, businesses in Japan still donate these bright vermillion gates, called *Torii*, to the Fushimi Inari shrine in the hopes of invoking Inari’s blessing. Given the shrine is more than a thousand years old, that’s a lot of businesses and a lot of gates!
13. While the cities have much to see I tried to get outside of them as well. This was taken halfway up Mt. Kurama, which has a host of old stories and folklore associated with it. The famous fall colors were just starting to come in, so it was a gorgeous landscape to walk through (Though quite a lot of mountain walking).
14. In the city of Osaka, nowhere is more synonymous with food and entertainment than Dotonbori district. A cross between Times Square and the Fulton Fish Markets, it’s the best place to taste Osaka’s famous local cuisine.
15. And speaking of, being a port city Osaka is famous for its crab. Crabs are everywhere in the city’s marketing, especially in a place like Dotonbori.
16. A ways outside Osaka is the city of Himeji. Most famous for its castle, known also as the “White Heron Castle” due to its white walls and sweeping rooftops. The whole complex is seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites carefully preserved to show how it was when it was built in the early seventeenth century.
17. Next to the castle (You can see some of the bailey rooftops in the background) are the stunning Koko-En gardens, a series of walled gardens dedicated to different natural themes. Here you can see the autumn colors starting to come in, with an actual heron standing to the right of the waterfall.
18. A Hibiscus still in bloom in the gardens.
19. Eventually I made my way back to Tokyo and from there to the airport. But while riding the train from Osaka to Tokyo you could still see a stunning view of the famous Mount Fuji. It really was a fantastic trip, and one I intend to make again. Hopefully it won’t take me fourteen years this time.