

# The Land of the Rising Brick (II)

By Iluigib

Pictures by Iluigib and Delia Balsells

After the first week in Japan, visiting Kyoto, Osaka and Itadori-Seki, our arrival in Tokyo gave us new opportunities to discover how people live the LEGO® passion in Japan.

## LEGOLAND DISCOVERY CENTER TOKYO

We arrived in Tokyo on August 13th afternoon. Again, our journey related to LEGO started. The 14th in the morning (my birthday) we went to visit the Discovery Center of Tokyo. I had contacted Mr. Kojiro Matsuo, responsible for marketing of the LDCT, for a guided tour. He encouraged us to arrive at the opening time to avoid the crowds. When we arrived at the entrance of the venue, there were over 200 people queuing to enter. Since our visit coincided with Obon (Main holiday related to the ancestors), when almost everybody is on holiday in Japan, the crowds were ensured. Kojiro met us and walked quickly, avoiding the “jam”.

We went up the elevator to the floor where the Discovery Center begins. We found, as in other Discovery Center that I visited, some rides and a miniland reproducing Tokyo. Obviously the rides are more for children than for adults, although we tried one of them, where we had to shoot the



“bad guys”, and we had a lot of fun. Obviously we got the typical photo of the ride... Then we went to miniland Tokyo. Fascinating! There were reproduced the most typical elements of the city such as Tokyo Tower, Rainbow Bridge, Asakusa Temple, Shibuya crossing road, the shopping district of Ginza and Tokyo Skytree. Every 5 minutes the atmosphere changes from day to night and vice versa. The Buildings illuminated at night are really attractive.

After miniland we just took a look to the other rides (we decided to not try some of them to not disturb the children) and we also saw an extensive play area with thousands of bricks for kids to unleash their imagination and build. Obviously all the decoration was made with bricks. Surely we missed hundreds of details as our brain could not process them all. Our visit was quick, not to disturb the activities of the center.

We reached the end of the visit to the latest must-stop for any Discovery Center: The LEGO Store. There we took some pictures in a “photo booth” that prints photos with exclusive decoration of the LDC Tokyo. I also got a coin stamped with an engraving of the LDC Tokyo, and some special little goodies of the center.

In our conversation during the visit, I was interested in some aspects of the center. It was opened on June 15, 2012 to be, as Kojiro said, “a daydream place for all fans of LEGO.” Like other LEGOLAND installations, the Discovery Center is geared towards children ages 3-10 and their families. Anyway there is one day every month when they do a building workshop with LEGO for adults. The favorite attraction for children is the Kingdoms Quest (it is the ride we tried). The Discovery Center was very crowded that day. I asked about the number of annual visitors, but LDC policy doesn't allow them to provide that figure. There are no plans to expand the center.

Leaving the LEGOLAND Discovery Center we walked around the island of Odaiba and its shopping malls, and we found another Clickbrick, bigger than the Osaka one, and with more





variety of shirts and LEGO® sets. Obviously I was interested in things I can not easily get in Spain, so I picked up a couple more shirts, and something that I had long pursued, and had never been able to find in Europe: small Birthday Party Kit gift from the destiny :).

That day in the afternoon we met our friend Maiko, and we dined with her and her husband. A little relaxing until the next day, when we had the meeting with the AFOLs from Tokyo.

### AFOL MEETING IN TOKYO

The meeting in Tokyo was coordinated by Yoshihito Isogawa, a famous Japanese builder we interviewed in *HispaBrick Magazine*® 016. He was so kind to find a place for dinner near our hotel, so as not to risk us getting lost. In this case we went to a small traditional restaurant that was in a basement near JR Shimbashi Station, an easily recognizable place as there is a great steam engine.

In this case there were 8 AFOLs: Yoshihito Isogawa, Shigeru Okawa, Taka Ai, Hac Shac, Tamakoshi Masahiro, Naoki Asakawa and Yoshikazu Saito, the Japanese LEGO Ambassador. Again, after sitting down, all the AFOLs began to put lots of MOCs on the table, and it was a delight. And again I was fascinated by the quality of the models shown there: A symphony orchestra, a hot dog, a beer mug, an accordion, cars, airplanes, wicks, interstellar cruisers... Yoshihito brought a dog that was motorized with remote control. Like in Osaka, I brought the micro scale Sagrada Familia, and offered one to

Yoshihito-san and another to Yoshikazu-san as thanks for their kind help. Meanwhile, Yoshihito-san probably confused by the beer, made me sign the issue *HispaBrick Magazine* in which his interview was published. But, he is the protagonist!!! While understandable, it was a pleasure and an honor to be asked to sign it, and I did it willingly.

With the stomach recovered, compared to the Osaka dinner, we were able to enjoy Japanese cuisine and I must say that everything was delicious. It is true that when testing something new, I was surprised by the taste or texture, but then I found it tasty and ate more. During the dinner, all MOCs went from table to table so we could all watch and chat about building techniques, as well as other issues related to LEGO, or broader issues of culture and likes of each of us. Delia was especially grateful for this fact since she could talk about topics that were not boring for her...

I must say that many of the ideas I got in Osaka about how is the hobby in Japan were corroborated in Tokyo. The hobby is very "personal" and they build more personal MOCs than collaborative displays. They have almost no public events and due to the lack of space in the houses of the fans, they tend to build small MOCs, very detailed and easily removable and storable. Being a "first person" hobby they proudly show all the details of their MOCs and they explain how they built them. When they can not show the MOCs live, they come with albums or tablets to show you the rest of their constructions.

Yoshikazu, LEGO Ambassador in Japan, updated me on what

the Japanese community is like: "In my opinion, the Japanese AFOL Community unfortunately is not really together as a unit. There are some groups that were put together for projects like Brick Fan Town (BFT) and Brick Fan Castle (BFC) but currently there are not many large groups working together. There are some smaller groups in various parts of Japan, but they have a tendency to group and then disappear. Things have become more difficult since Naoe-san of LEGO® Japan passed away last year."

Regarding the relationship with LEGO Japan, Yoshikazu said: "My relationship with LEGO Japan started when I competed on the TV show "TV Champion." It became stronger after I published my books "Let's Play with Toy Blocks." I became very friendly with them through Naoe-san and from working as a counselor for the BFT and BFC projects. Further, I help them out through promoting LEGO on Japanese TV Programs, and helping them as a staff member at events."

After dinner, some of AFOLs had to leave, but before that, we went back to the meeting point and took the indispensable group photo. Those who didn't go back home went to another place to continue the meeting. In this case we went to a small street, beneath the train tracks of the Yamanote line, where we could enjoy some typical skewers and continue with the talks.

Some fans, like Masahiro Yoshihito are related to education, and we were discussing how children live experiences with bricks, and also about some tricks to keep their attention, or to provoke a smile. For example, on an iPhone case with studs, Masahiro had built a Mario (Nintendo game Super Mario Bros.) to keep children concentrated during explanations.

At the end of this second dinner we went back to the hotel very grateful for all the attention they gave us and the kindness with which they explained their way to live the LEGO hobby.

#### **LEGO JAPAN Ltd.**

The last day in Tokyo, after Yoshikazu Saito made the necessary arrangements, we visited the offices of LEGO Japan, and we could talk with Mr. Kazufumi Okazaki,

Marketing manager of LEGO Japan.

In our conversation I asked him some questions about LEGO in general, and some peculiarities of the Japanese market. The first question, was to know the difference, in his opinion, between LEGO and other toys - "LEGO can be anything. From a small piece you can build an entire model, only with imagination. That's what differentiates LEGO from other toys. "LEGO began in Japan in 1962 and the typical consumer is a 4-5 years old child, receiving toys from parents or grandparents, in many cases DUPLO, and 5-8 years old child that continues with the toy and starts asking for LEGO sets they most like. Also some children continue with the hobby as they grow, and are inspired by models of the brand to create their own models. Mr. Okazaki recognizes that there isn't still a big LEGO community in Japan, but they are trying to grow in this area.

Currently, LEGO toys are the third in number of sales in Japan. Mr. Okazaki recognizes they can not compete with brands like Bandai. Although Japan has been immersed in an economic crisis for more than two decades, it seems that this does not particularly affect the sales.

Curiously NanoBlocks is not a direct competitor of LEGO. "NanoBlocks is a toy for young girls. It's a toy and market very different of the LEGO market, so we do not compete with them."

The children's favorite subjects are CHIMA, NINJAGO, CREATOR and CITY. There aren't special products, except some buckets made especially for Japan, both for LEGO and DUPLO.

After the "formal" talk, we could see a presentation with some of the events organized by LEGO for children. The one that struck me was one that encouraged children to build railcars in Kyoto Station. They got over 2000 children assembling their car, and put them all together in a very long table, which had a remarkable visual impact. Also noteworthy was that they did some events after the earthquake of March 11, 2011 to recover the illusion of the affected children.





Finally he showed me some pictures of the exhibition “Piece of Peace”, which is an exhibition of unique pieces representing monuments and other characteristic elements worldwide. Is a traveling exhibition for Asia, and Mr. Okazaki offered me the official guide to have a better idea of the contents of the exhibition.

Before we left, we took a photo in the logo made with LEGO® minifigs placed in the entrance hall of LEGO Japan.

Finally, I would like to do a tribute to someone who, unfortunately, did not get a chance to meet, and who passed away a few months before our visit. This is Naoe-san, the most known Japanese builder who was supposed to have attended the meet with fans in Tokyo, as well as the visit to LEGO Japan. I asked three people who knew him well to explain who he was and why he was so special.

According to Nathan Bryan, “Naoe-san was loved by everyone and is deeply missed. He really was a pillar of the LEGO community. An incredible builder and a bridge between the LEGO fans and LEGO Japan. A kind, outgoing, and helping person that always tried to do as much as he could for others.”

To Kazufumi Okazaki, loss of Naoe-san was “a tragedy. He

was too young to die. He had worked a lot with us. He loved the students and we have to honour him in the future and continue what he started, especially as far as events are concerned, which helped many fans, and also many children, which were inspired by him here in Japan. But for me the saddest thing is that I can not see him anymore.”

Finally Yoshikazu Saito talks about his experience with Naoe-san: “It is hard to think about Naoe-san in just a few words. He was a big person, with big dreams. Without his support neither BFT or BFC would have been possible. Because of him Japanese AFOLs were able to create wonderful models to show to the rest of the Japanese people. It really can be said that he did not build for himself, but he build from a new point of view to make the people who saw his models happy. Personally he suggested that I become a LEGO Ambassador and also provided me with lots of chances to help out. I think of him as a teacher, a benefactor and as a very good friend. One of my fondest memories was of riding the roller coaster at LEGOLAND with him. Due to the combined weight of the two of us, the coaster almost flew off the rails!”

Rest in peace.  
#