

conference **REPORT**

by Warren Block

AsiaBSDCon (Amazingly Friendly People)

The 2016 AsiaBSDCon conference was held in Tokyo from March 10 through March 14, 2016. If I had expected my paper on the new FreeBSD documentation translation system to be accepted, I would have developed even a small Japanese vocabulary. But it was a pleasant surprise.



WARREN BLOCK PHOTO

THE TRIP

Getting to Japan required a bit of travel. The good news was that the Boeing 787 has higher air pressure and humidity than other planes, so it is more comfortable. The bad news was that the flight would take 11-1/2 hours. Tip for travelers: take your own over-the-ear headphones, and watch some movies to pass the time. Due to the long flight and the extreme difference in time zones—somewhere between 8 and 14 hours, I'm still not sure—the times and events given here even if numerically inaccurate will still capture the feeling of the event.

I had been outside the U.S. before, to BSDCan in Ottawa. Still, Canada is hardly the same as Japan. Concerns about difficulty with customs turned out to be entirely unfounded. There was nothing more difficult than standing in line, and eventually I found the train station at the Narita airport.

The Narita Express is a fast train from the airport west into Tokyo itself. It is a train trip that would convince even the most cynical American of the value of train travel: big comfortable seats; a smooth, quiet ride; video and audio announcements of location and destination in Japanese and English. The video monitors also showed news clips and continuous ads for some remarkably ugly sports shoes.

The Narita Express only goes to the Tokyo subway station, so it was necessary to transfer to the local subway trains to reach the hotel. The Tokyo station is huge, at least three different levels, and I arrived there during rush hour. After several circumnavigations of the entire station, several locals took pity on me and the correct train was located.

This was the only difficulty I had, because, while almost all of the station signs are bilingual, the particular ones I needed were Japanese only. Many Japanese people understand individual English words even if they do not speak English. And many are completely fluent.

Eventually, I arrived at the Ichigaya station near the hotel. A handheld GPS was useful several times, because it was both dark and raining.

The whole process would be easier for someone more used to passenger trains or subways. In the American West, trains carry coal, grain, cows, and occasionally the powdery dry version of slimy bentonite, but almost never people. The Tokyo system is very smooth. Users pre-load an RFID "Suica" card with cash, then scan it at entrances and exits. When lost, merely look like a stupid tourist (probably my default look) and people will help you.

Check-in at the hotel was very easy; the AsiaBSDCon organizers had it all set up. However, the room had two-prong outlets, and my notebook AC adapter had a three-prong plug. Japan is apparently in the middle of the two-to-three changeover. A U.S.-style cheater plug, ground cut off as per tradition, will create ungrounded fun for all. The Japanese adapter I bought actually had an insulating boot over the wire.

An additional difference was that many of the available wireless networks were still using WEP. This was not obvious from the 'ifconfig wlan0 list scan' output, and only became clear after someone mentioned it at the conference. The hotel room did have wired Ethernet, though, with its welcome simplicity.

THURSDAY

Many FreeBSD conferences are preceded by developer summits, meetings for planning and coordinating to take advantage of the rare facetime with other developers. There is a small but dedicated group of documentation people, and that group was mostly present again at this conference. Dru Lavigne, Benedict Reuschling, Brad Davis, and, of course, AsiaBSDCon organizer Hiroki Sato were present. Allan Jude was there too, but he has his hands in so many things that we rarely see him.

There is always a larger contingent of source and ports developers, and frequently some OpenBSD developers. If we are lucky, NetBSD and DragonFly people are present as well, and they were at AsiaBSDCon. This mix of projects with different goals adds variety, and often results in cross-pollination where projects share their solutions or techniques.

The FreeBSD developer summit's biggest topic of discussion was "pkgbase," packaging the base system like a collection of ports. This work is proceeding, and many people are curious about implementation details. Documenting how it will work is also a big concern, as are other new features of FreeBSD 11. We also talked about help with documentation, particularly review. The sad fact is that once a person learns about something, they usually don't go back to the Handbook later to review those sections for accuracy and completeness. The flip side is that we documenters have not been very good about announcing major revisions and additions, so people are not always aware when things have changed. We have some ideas in progress on this. We also repeated that source developers only need to worry about content in their attempts at documentation. If they want to use DocBook or mdoc markup, that is great. But if they just want to work with text, documentation project people can help with the markup.

Bento box lunches were provided by the conference, with an interesting variety of dishes. The organizers had provided vegetarian dishes, which

was very nice of them and probably took some effort. Fish is used in a great number of foods in Japan. Some of my rice had tiny, transparent fish staring back at me, but that was either a mistake or quite possibly a garnish.

Later that day, several projects gave status reports. They were all interesting, but Alistair Crooks's reports on NetBSD and pkgsrc were particularly comprehensive and well-presented. It is always nice to hear these kind of reports from people who are both experts on their subjects and good speakers.

FRIDAY

The doc developers had our own meeting later where we talked about several ongoing subjects like the new PO translation system, the perennial website bikeshed, and our lack of communication about all the things that are happening with the documentation. The ports team has done a very good job communicating all the interesting things they are doing, and we need to do the same thing.

In the afternoon, we made a brief excursion to Akihabara, the fabled district of Tokyo where electronics from the smallest component parts to the largest assembled items are sold. There is a staggering amount of electronics crammed into every available area. Some places are one building with a bunch of tiny, specialized booths sharing the space. I had hoped to find a particular Japanese-made crimping tool, but it seemed unlikely. In the first store we visited, one of the booths sold only crimping tools, and the one I wanted was hanging on the wall! Information overload is easy to experience in Akihabara, and we returned to the conference for a later session.

The documentation tutorial began in the late afternoon. I attended that, mostly to see how well the new translation system worked. Dru and Benedict were the teachers. Over the three-hour session, they worked with Daichi GOTO to cover all the aspects of working with FreeBSD documentation. A few rough spots in our examples were discovered, but at the end, GOTO-san had completed a Japanese translation of the leap seconds article.

We did discover that a few seats in that room were somehow the focus of vibrations from heating or air-conditioning equipment. Sitting in those seats was much like riding in a car with a couple of wildly out-of-balance wheels. This was useful knowledge for later talks that were held in the same room.

conference report

SATURDAY

The first round of conference presentations began on Saturday.

Kamil Czekirda gave his presentation on “FreeBSD Test Cluster Automation.” This was a separate project from the existing test cluster, and used network booting to completely set up raw machines as test nodes. It was an intriguing setup, and tied in well with automated testing we had discussed earlier at the dev summit.

“High Density Filers” was Baptiste Daroussin’s talk on setting up large file servers that are booted from the network. They had tried several different operating systems, and FreeBSD had done very well in the comparison, shown with benchmarks and pretty rigorous testing. Remaining issues were ones that many of us have experienced with the FreeBSD PXE boot loader and other network-booting problems. Improvements to these components will make FreeBSD more versatile and competitive with standard Linux boot loaders like Syslinux and Grub.

During a lunch break, I walked to a couple of local bike shops looking for water bottles with their shop logos. This turns out to be something that the entire world stopped doing, so neither had such a thing. On the way back, I saw a shop called “Leonidas Chocolates” and thought it would be nice to take something back for others at the conference. Three women were working there, and after I asked for an assortment, they wanted to know if it was for a gift. “Sure,” I said, thinking that was probably all my vocabulary would allow. All of their faces lit up. Six pieces of chocolate were carefully wrapped and presented for my inspection. The box was carefully taped, and then I had a choice of ribbon color. Thinking it was the safest choice, I asked them to choose. All of them became even more interested, and they chose a red ribbon. The box was carefully placed in a fancy bag. It’s still not really clear, but I might be engaged to one or even all three of those women.

A banquet was held Saturday night, conveniently located at my hotel. This was a very upscale event, with lots of food, a quiet enough atmosphere to speak to others, and an open bar that encouraged speaking to others. I sampled “shochu,” a distilled liquor made from barley. Sake is direct and obvious about its intentions. This shochu was subtle to the point of misdirection.

SUNDAY

At last, it was time to give my own presentation, a fairly innocuous little number about the new PO translation system for documentation, why translators are important to FreeBSD, and how this new system can help them. More people attended than I had expected. While there might have been some shochu-induced overhead, most people looked fairly alert. The projector did not even put up a fight. I forgot only 20% or 30% of the points I had intended to make. The audience all appeared to be awake at the end, a rousing success by some standards (i.e., mine). The topic filled the time available, avoiding the embarrassing silence of finishing very early or the awkward arrival of people for the next presentation.

After my presentation, I could relax and enjoy the others. Allan Jude talked about his work on booting FreeBSD from encrypted disks and the patently ridiculous multi-stage loading that FreeBSD has used for ages. It was an entertaining and insightful talk.

The conference keynote was given by Stephen Bourne. He spoke entertainingly at BSDCan last year about how he wrote the `sh` shell. At AsiaBSDCon, it was about the development of Unix, how and why things came to be the way they are. He is an excellent speaker, and it is well worth attending his presentations.

Finally, I went to Kirk McKusick’s “Brief History of the BSD Fast Filesystem.” It struck a pleasant balance between technical details and overview, and gave me new respect for UFS, which not only takes far less resources than ZFS, but is a very good filesystem at the same time.

There was a Work in Progress session, where people gave very quick reports on ongoing projects, then the traditional FreeBSD Foundation drawing. Three prizes had been donated for the Foundation to give away. Two were AMD-based router systems with multiple Ethernet ports, one a bare board and the other in a steel case that would safely support a car. The third was a Minnowboard Turbot donated by Netgate. This is a 64-bit Atom processor with 2G of RAM, USB 2.0 and 3.0 ports, SATA, HDMI, and gigabit Ethernet, all in a 3 x 4-inch single board computer. Also included was an aluminum case with a special laser-cut AsiaBSDCon commemorative graphic. I never win anything—but I won the Minnowboard!

THE RETURN

The return trip was somewhat easier. Brad Davis managed to upgrade my ticket to an “economy plus” seat with more legroom, and in an otherwise-empty row. At the airport, we waited in the United lounge, where throngs of servants peeled grapes for us, disposed of empty edamame pods, and then eventually escorted us to the plane in an elephant-mounted howdah.

The return flight took only nine hours, still appreciable but tolerable, and much more comfortable, thanks to Brad.

There was a short layover at the Denver airport. Everyone who has waited in an airport knows the value of an electrical outlet. Some fancier seats have them nearby or even built into the seat frame. But gate B56 had not one single outlet. A vigorous search and I finally spotted one over in the corner on some metal trim. I quickly relocated to the seat next to it, unpacked my AC adapter, cables, and computer. Balancing all this, I turned to the outlet to discover that it was not an outlet, but instead a photo-realistic sticker of an outlet, placed there by some amaz-

ingly evil bastard. People wondered what I was laughing at and edged away nervously.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Go to AsiaBSDCon.
- Take a two-prong AC adapter or cheater plug.
- The first time, meet up with someone who has been there before to help navigate.
- Have waypoints set in your GPS or phone for the conference location, hotel, and train station.
- A small vocabulary of Japanese words can go a long way. “Sumimassen” (excuse me) and “domo arigato” (thank you very much) cover many situations.
- Take a small umbrella. It will rain.

SUMMARY

The conference had many more presentations and meetings than I’ve described here. The entire event was an adventure before, during, and after the conference. Go to AsiaBSDCon. It is awesome. ●

WARREN BLOCK has been using FreeBSD since 1998, and has been a documentation committer since 2011.

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