

Memories of Japan

2001 and 2003

SASHIMI, SHOES AND SUZUKI

I

Irasshai-mas-ehhhh....! It is 10.30am in Ginza, Tokyo's fashionable shopping precinct. The Hanyu *depato* has just opened. A dozen assistants assemble on the ground floor to greet the first customers of the day. They form a line. Bow politely. The last syllable of their welcome elongates and fades to the sound of Mozart coming through the loudspeakers. The volume is subdued. Tasteful.

The Imperial Palace is nearby and we are forgiven for thinking the *depato* is being honoured by a royal patron. But no. This quaint ritual is observed every day of the week in every major store throughout Japan. It is not a little disconcerting.

Tokyo is vast. Several cities rolled into one. They cater for every taste, from teen fashion to Kabuki theatre and love hotels. Ginza is elegant, Shibuya trendy, Shinjuku brash and crowded. Ueno and Marunouchi offer culture and tranquillity.

Identifying Tokyo's boundary is more a matter of context than geography. As National Capital, it comprises seven prefectures and is home to 40 million people. By UN definitions of urban agglomeration, it has a population of about 28 million. Nearly 8 million live in the *ku* - the inner wards - alone. Its main airport, Narita, is 60 kilometers to the north-east and 60 minutes from Shinjuku railway station.

Our ultimate destination is Matsumoto, three hours out of Shinjuku to the west. The view gradually changes. Urban agglomeration gives way to middle-class villas with tiny gardens, then to rice fields and small farms. More towns. The train glides into each station and out again within seconds of the scheduled times. Ticket collectors doff their caps and bow as they enter the compartment. On the platform, suited *sararimen* mingle with cute schoolgirls in ultra-short, pleated skirts and rolled-down chunky stockings.

At last we see mountains, distant and snow-capped. The trees still have their autumn colours, but the air is cooler. We enter Nagano Prefecture where Matsumoto

nestles in alpine surroundings. Its castle is a national treasure. Begun in 1504 and later remodelled for gun warfare, it has survived the centuries intact.

With the Americans staying away ⁽¹⁾, westerners are even more conspicuous than usual, especially in the country areas. Small children stare in amazement and nudge their parents excitedly. *Gaikoku-jin desu*, they whisper loudly.

Look, foreigners!

However, we soon forget we are different. After a day or two, bowing becomes second nature. People are friendly. We greet strangers in lifts, restaurants, parks and even in the street in this traditional way. Their responsive *konnichiwa* - hello - is surprised, but spontaneous.

Nagano-shi, the prefecture capital and venue for the last Winter Olympics, is modern metal and glass mixed with touristy shops and shrines. Zenkoji, one of Japan's finest temples, proclaims welcome to people of all faiths. It lies at the end of a narrow street lined with boutiques peddling lucky charms, enamelled chopsticks and paper dolls. There are restaurants too that hide the delights of Japanese cuisine behind curtained doorways and banks of discarded shoes. The menus in bewildering *kanji* and *hiragana* lend new meaning to the term pot luck.

Back in Matsumoto, we search unsuccessfully for a memorial to one of its most famous sons. Dr Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998), violin teacher extraordinaire, gave the city its prestigious music academy. However, it seems his life and work are celebrated more outside Japan.

The shops are decorated with Christmas trees and festive bunting. High fashion straight from London, Paris and New York competes with traditional *kimono* and *obi*. Suits are Jaeger and Armani. Ladies' shoes are strapless with fifteen centimeter heels. Apples the size of grapefruit are individually boxed and sell for the price of a modest breakfast. Packaged *sashimi* meals are worth a king's ransom.

Japan is a fascinating land. It is at once mysterious and garish, exotic and commonplace. Racially one of the purest places on earth, it remains one of the least racist in the English sense. High moral ideals coexist with acceptance of public sleaze. Respect for the family is a national virtue, yet Japan is not an equal society. Women dominate the home but men dominate almost everything else.

It is doubtful if Westerners can ever do more than scratch the surface of Japan's history and culture. But through the oriental veil we can catch glimpses of the Japanese character, - their strange indifference to their own heroes, their reluctance to challenge authority or tradition.

It can't be helped, they are fond of saying. *Shiyoo na gai.*

⁽¹⁾ *in November 2001, post 9/11*

II

In Kyoto, the *sakura* blossom will be opening, ⁽²⁾ a sure sign that spring has begun. In the Nagano highlands it is still winter.

The mountains that ring Matsumoto stand out, white-capped, in glorious vista-vision against the pale blue sky. In the crisp morning air, they seem closer and more three-dimensional than ever. To the west are the Japanese Alps, soaring to a height of three thousand metres; to the east is a two thousand metre high tableland. A cold wind blows along the valleys of the Susuki and Metoba Rivers. In residential streets, in shady corners where the early April sun does not reach, lie small heaps of snow. It can take a while to melt because, in Nagano Province, each household is responsible for clearing from the roadway adjacent to their property - and Nagano sees a lot of snow.

Matsumoto is not on the main tourist itinerary; however, the city is steeped in history and culture. There is the sixteenth century castle of course, with its amazing collection of weapons, but other museums abound. Possibly the most intrinsically Japanese is the *Ukiyo-e*, the museum of woodblock painting, a style begun in the early sixteen hundreds and for which the country is justly famous. This includes works by Hokusai and Hiroshige, who are known even in the west.

Some attractions are easily found, but the Suzuki School of Music proves elusive. The locals are apologetic, either through apathy or because with our limited Japanese we fail to ask the right question. Fingers point only to lead us astray. Heads are shaken. One suspects that to the natives of Matsumoto the word *Suzuki* conjures up quite a different image to that of the elderly violist with a special understanding of children. At last we find it, not far from the main boulevard, in a back street

surrounded by small business premises, the rear walls of department stores and a temple or two. By then the fine morning has given way to cold rain. And the school is closed! The only concert advertised is in Tokyo, three hours away by train.

Shiyoo-na-gai.

Food is never far from our thoughts and, when it comes to meal times, the choice is wide. One option is the packed lunch, or *bento*, purchased in special shops with the slogan 'quick, cheap, tasty.' Quick and tasty they may be, but the better ones are far from cheap. Then there are the sushi parlours, many of which can only be described as 'Americanised'. The small, family-run businesses are more expensive but worth the premium. Making the effort to understand and conform to the customs brings its own reward. Not only is the service exceptional, but a second visit may bring the proprietor to the table with a parting gift.

Better still, drive into the foothills, just beyond the city limits, where lie more exclusive restaurants. There, especially if you are lucky enough to be a guest of a Japanese friend, you can partake of a banquet of traditional fare and enjoy an ambience that only Japan can provide. Squatting is optional. However, the *tatami* is pristine and shoes are public enemy number one. Two pairs of slippers are provided, and woe betide the guest who confuses them. The first is to wear during the meal, the second for visiting the toilet, an unusual pleasure in itself especially if the premises are equipped with the latest Japanese technology - heated loo seats and piped music. Not male voice choirs, though there are at least a dozen of these in Japan.



Cool horseradish

For a different kind of gastronomic experience, visit the *wasabi* farm. *Wasabi* is a kind of horseradish, a very hot, green spice used to flavour *sashimi* and other dishes. It is either grated fresh or made up into a paste for the self-service diners.

In the country that gave us *fugu*, it is perhaps no surprise to learn that *wasabi* has other uses. For a real treat, why not try *wasabi*-flavoured sweets, or something the Japanese call *wasabi-ai-su-ku-ri-mu*. You figure it out!

Sa-yo-na-ra.

⁽²⁾ **March/April 2003**

STATIONARY IN KYOTO

The *Shinjuku-eki* in downtown Tokyo is a nightmare.

Imagine Euston, King's Cross and St Pancras all rolled into one, with Piccadilly metro station and Harrods superimposed thereon, and you will have some idea of this uniquely Japanese experience. The guidebooks advise visitors not to panic, but how can you avoid it. Shinjuku is panic with a capital P. It supposedly handles two million passengers a day, and they move through its maze of tiled corridors, lifts and escalators like a video film on fast-forward. Maybe that's the problem for, slow it down and it becomes a haven of logic and master planning. Moreover, it's a gateway to the world. Trains from this station will take you just about anywhere.

The *shinkansen* will whisk you to Kyoto in under two and a half hours. The fare is sixty pounds, and for that you get club class comfort and service. The staff wear gloves and bow on entering and leaving the compartment. In Japan, politeness is everything. The fastest trains reach 300kph and shave about twenty minutes from the journey. At all costs, avoid the temptation to fall asleep in your comfortable armchair unless your destination is also a terminus. Arrival and departure times are finely tuned to the point of suicidal obsession. Ignore this warning and you may wake up in Osaka.

After the sheer hell of Tokyo, Kyoto seems peaceful. (Has anyone ever noticed the anagram?) Its new railway station is a marvel of architecture and design - spacious arrival halls, shopping arcades paved with coloured tile, shiny escalators

and twisting stairwells. Its roof is a soaring lattice of metalwork, reminiscent of the Eiffel Tower but more subtle. There is something almost musical about its lines. However, do not be lulled into a false confidence. Despite the multiple information points with English-speaking staff, it is too easy to lose a sense of purpose and direction.



Kyoto-eki - the new station

Getting lost is easy. First, count the floors. Kyoto New Station admits to two, labelled plainly 1F and 2F. What is wrong with that, you ask? Well, 1F is at street level; Japan has followed the custom of the USA and has abolished the ground floor. Moreover, there are not two floors but three or four, if you count the underground system. Find yourself there before you have purchased a map and the following steps no longer matter.

Look for somewhere to stow your luggage. There is no shortage of lockers - on the west, on the east, and in the central pedestrian walkway on 2F. Finding one that will accommodate a large suitcase and two bags is quite another matter and when you do, it is invariably taken. However, perseverance pays off; an extensive search along many kilometers of corridor will eventually yield a result.

The next stage is buying lunch. You are spoiled for choice! The Japanese take their eating seriously and, without stepping outside the boundaries of the *eki*, you will find sushi parlours, hamburger joints and cafeterias, as well as a selection of

'proper' restaurants. Alternatively, you can visit the railway company's very own department store, the JR *Isetan*.

Lunch over, it is time to escape from the station and find your hotel. Well, one bank of lockers looks very much like another, even if you have correctly remembered which floor you are on, or, which of the many entrances to the *Isetan* you used.

After that, Kyoto is easy - with a tiny smattering of the language. German or Russian a problem? You've got to be kidding. Try this one, US tourist style -

Pah-rah-sah-ee-dah hoh-teh-roo mah-deh oh-neh-gah-ee shee-mahs ⁽³⁾

Never use an American phrasebook!

⁽³⁾ **translation supplied! - "To the Palaceside Hotel, please.**

GOSHO, GEISHA AND GION

From the eleventh floor of the *Isetan* department store in Kyoto station, you can see the whole city. Its rectilinear boulevards of clean, modern buildings - shops, offices and hotels - stretch away into the haze of the hills that surround it on three sides. Criss-crossing them are neat, narrow lanes lined with boutiques and traditional teahouses that speak of an age long gone, when Kyoto was Japan's capital and the *geisha* was queen. Here and there, a temple roof peeps out from a verdant cocoon of maple and pine, while patches of *sakura*, the much-vaunted cherry blossom, make an unlikely appearance ⁽⁴⁾ midst the jungle of garish neon signs.

To the north and somewhere in the centre of this panorama lies the Imperial Palace, the *Kyoto-gosho*, a complex of buildings set amid stunning gardens, with avenues of acer, cedar and azalea. There are streams crossed by dainty, arched bridges, and well-stocked ornamental ponds. This site was the official residence of the Japanese emperors for five hundred years, though most of the original palace that stood here has long gone, damaged by fire beyond repair. The present buildings were completed only in 1855, just thirteen years before the move to Tokyo. Kyoto had been the capital of Japan for more than a thousand years.

Apart from the palace, the city boasts one castle of note, the early seventeenth

century *Nijo-jo*, built by a powerful Shogun, but now public property. It too is set in magnificent gardens. Nijo is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Kyoto abounds in gardens, havens of peace and tranquillity in the *Zen* tradition with ancient stones laid in symbolic patterns, arboreta of shapely conifers and mirror pools that teem with enormous carp. Sometimes there are pavilions with walls of paper and wood, their floors laid with *tatami*. There you can squat and, for little more than the price of a downtown coffee, be served with a bowl of green tea and a cake by a *kimono*-clad waitress in a ceremony that is as old as Kyoto itself.

In the evening, the streets are swelling with people, shopping, dining or simply enjoying the spring air by the river. April is the time of the *hanami* - blossom viewing. The Japanese have a thing about the seasons, and they celebrate each in their own special way with ceremonies and festivals, some semi-religious and dignified, others sheer outrageous fun - an excuse for partying, fireworks and plenty of *sake*.

Women in *kimono* and *obi* are still to be seen gliding along in Gion among suited *sararimen* and teenagers with bared midriffs and bright red hair, but real *geisha* are comparatively rare. There are probably no more than two hundred in Kyoto today compared with ten times that number a century ago. They earn their living on the stage or in a semi-secret world the western tourist seldom penetrates. Perhaps it's the secrecy that has led to western misconceptions. These women, more properly called *maiko* and *geiko* - have nothing to do with the sex trade. They are talented entertainers who sing, dance and play musical instruments for the delight of private, exclusive banquets and parties. At their own theatre in Gion, they perform traditional music and dance for the public at large. Their most famous and colourful presentation, the *Miyako Odori*. - the 'Cherry Dances' - is given in April at *hanami* time.



A few of Gion's 'Geisha'



Kinkaku-ji - the Golden Temple

Travelling around Kyoto is relatively simple. There are two main underground lines and, if you can come to terms with the station maze and master the ticket machines, they offer a speedy and comfortable way of traversing the city. The bus service is even more practical - and cheaper - once you pluck up courage to try it. For 220 yen (just over £1 sterling), it will transport you anywhere within the city limits. The main destinations and street names are displayed in *romaji* - English lettering - on an electronic board at the front of the bus, so the language isn't a problem.

Like any city in the world, Kyoto also has its museums, theatres and cinemas. It has fashionable department stores too, but if you are looking for souvenirs, - real souvenirs - visit the smaller shops where specialist advice and personal service are the norm. You might even get a cup of tea. Often there is a price to be paid. Electronic goods - cameras, mobile phones and the like - are inexpensive and funky and you can buy a genuine Japanese fan for around 5,000 yen.

But if you want a kimono, better sell your car first!

⁽⁴⁾ **Spring 2003**