

# Rijumati's travels, part 6

Dear Friends,

I have finally made it to the USA, where I am staying with my dear friend, Manapa, and his wife Carson, it is wonderful to be here in Seattle with them. Having been in Asia for the last 9 months I am experiencing a bizarre variety of culture shock at being back in the West! How does this country work, what are the people like, where am I??? But it was the same arriving in Russia and then Japan, I am sure I will get over it.

The Pacific crossing was awesomely dramatic with heavy seas, lots of whales around the Aleutian Islands and a force 9 storm in the Gulf of Alaska (we took a northerly route from Japan). I arrived in Canada having completely misjudged the distances. Disembarking from Prince Rupert port I thought I would just take a local bus to get to Vancouver. In fact it is a 24 hour bus covering 1600km and that is only half of the state of British Columbia. Canada is mind-bogglingly BIG and very beautiful!

I still haven't finished reflecting on Japan, and have several more pieces in the process of being written. Below is a short passage about my visit to Hiroshima, also my time walking the temple pilgrimage in Shikoku: 7 days of walking 20-30km in the scorching heat, most of the time on asphalt. It was wonderful but hard work. I did about one sixth of the pilgrimage, so I will just have to come back to Japan sometime. I will write more about it later.

Love  
Rijumati

## Hiroshima Mon Amour

It was a hot August day in Hiroshima. The sky was a faultless blue, peppered with clouds, the city, cradled by its many rivers, was looking lovely in the bright sunlight. Everyone was going about their ordinary lives, but something utterly unforgettable was about to happen.

On an August day just like this one some 63 years ago the fury of nuclear war was unleashed on the world. I came to Hiroshima as a kind of duty: to see the unseeable, listen to the unspeakable, comprehend the incomprehensible. How, why, what was it like to have been part of the hellish tragedy of Hiroshima? I knew that tears would flow.



With great foresight the city fathers, as they struggled to rebuild their broken and shattered world decided in the 1950s to build a memorial park and museum in the very centre of the old city just where the full force of the bomb had vaporised buildings and people. Kenzo Tange won the competition to design the park and memorial buildings and the result is a juxtaposition of beauty and horror, aesthetics and sadness. The Prefectural Exhibition Hall, now known as the A-Bomb Dome, was originally a much loved city landmark built by a Czech architect in 1915. It has been preserved just as it was the day of the bomb: a skeleton of a building prominently offset by a lovely park, the Motoyasu river and modern towers of glass and concrete. The incongruity is intentional and complete.

The two museums tell the story in different ways. The Victims Memorial Hall has the subjective account of 1000s of hibakushi (A-bomb survivors) as well as an aesthetic yet harrowing post-blast panorama made from 140,000 little tiles, one for each of the estimated number of people who died from the immediate effects of the bomb. Everywhere there is running water, an offering remembrance to the 1000s who died crying out for water. For some inexplicable reason many of them were denied water for fear that it would kill them, most died anyway in intense agony. In the multimedia suite one can view 1000s of hours of interviews with survivors. The architecture and technology elegantly support the experience of trying to understand this personal side of the Bomb.

The Peace Memorial Museum gives the objective account. What is impressive here is that the displays start by clearly retelling the Japanese war policy of the early 20th century which was part of the conditions for the Bomb's use on Japan. The American role is told with almost total historical objectivity, no interpretation or judgement is given. One is left with a strong sense of anti-war rather than a nationalistic blaming.

Nonetheless, as one views original photos of horribly burnt and disfigured bodies, barely clinging to life, or contemplates the gruesome waxworks of people whose skin hangs from their bones, or sees pictures of the appalling radiation diseases that followed it is hard not to feel anger for the politicians, bureaucrats, scientists and generals who coolly undertook this project. The memoranda and letters show the precision and calculation that went into the decision and execution of the A-bomb drop on Hiroshima. The cool heartlessness of their rationality is terrifying. What kind of men were they who could unleash such horror on a city largely made up of non-combatants? Yes, there was the need to end the war with Japan quickly before the Russians had a chance to extend their influence, yes there was the need to justify the immense cost of the Manhattan project with a significant strategic victory - but what the hell were these men thinking when they decided to snuff out the lives of so many innocents in this way?! Why couldn't they have chosen a purely military target, why couldn't they have demonstrated the Bomb's power somewhere uninhabited and used this as a threat to end the war? No extenuating circumstances will ever justify for me what these men did on 6th August 1945.



The careful monitoring of the after effects of the Bomb by the Americans in occupation shows that they were desperately keen to know what its effects on human beings would be. The testimony of one hibakusha says "they monitor us, but they don't treat us." Surely an indication that survivors of Hiroshima were seen as scientific specimens rather than suffering human beings. So it would seem that Hiroshima was the first sacrifice to the nuclear age, the controlled experiment to see what power mankind had unleashed.

As I left the halls filled with images and objects of hellish destruction and suffering, Hiroshima was still looking beautiful; children were running and playing, people walking and talking - a reminder of the renewal that follows even from the fury of Hell. In the blue sky was a huge cumulus cloud, towering above the baked August landscape, as if echoing that fateful cloud that rose 63 years ago. Silently the tears rolled down my cheeks. Yes, Hiroshima is utterly unforgettable, and may it ever be so!

## First Impressions

Although I arrived in Sapporo, Hokkaido's bustling capital of 2 million souls, around midday I was still too late to bag a cheap hotel. As ever the girls at the Tourist Information were faultlessly polite and trying hard. After several "fully booked" Chihiro, my assistant, said "you know Cap-sool hotel?" My heart sank, yes I knew about Capsule hotels, "very cheap" she added as if to offset my look of dismay. "Well I suppose it will be okay for one night and I ought to find out what they are really like" I tried to convince myself. After so many weeks of Russian dormitories on trains and boats sampling the Japanese equivalent wasn't high on my agenda of tourist priorities.



I made my way down Sapporo's main north-south avenue (I was never able to work out if it actually had a name) and arriving at the Sapporo Capsule was scrupulously careful to check whether one was allowed to approach the reception desk with shoes on (after being physically ejected from a Youth Hostel in Wakkanai the previous day). The answer was a definite "No!" so off came the shoes which were then deposited in a tiny locker. As someone used to the on-off of shoes all over Asia, I think the Japanese take this practice to new, almost obsessional heights. What is so special about a cheap hotel reception desk that it can't be approached with one's shoes on?

There is something very unnerving about the whole experience of staying in a Capsule hotel. It is hard to say whether this is because one's possessions are spread between lockers on different floors (at one point my gear was stuffed in 4 different lockers plus my sleeping space), or because one is allotted a personal space not exceeding 2 cubic metres, or because of the shockingly explicit and neatly laminated pornographic images in the lift that advertise the paying TV channel (the sort of thing one would expect to see in a Soho

backstreet). Whatever the case it is unnerving! For sure it is a completely male environment, most Capsules - they seem to be a feature of every major Japanese city - won't accept women guests.

With clinical Japanese precision everything is arranged down to the smallest detail. My key for the shoe locker was deposited in a pigeonhole labeled 506, which was also the number of my basement locker and my bed space on floor 5. Machines were embedded into the fabric of the building offering alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, internet access, instant highly plasticized food, cigarettes, clothes washing facilities and vouchers for the porno TV channels. It is possible to satisfy all one's human needs, and desires, without ever interacting with another human being.

My capsule was a prefabricated unit, really just a bed, with built in TV, radio, light, alarm clock and air-conditioning. On the fifth floor, in the space that might accommodate 1 or 2 medium sized hotel rooms were enough capsules for 40 men, one-up and one-down on both sides of a central corridor. The densities aren't quite at South Asia levels, but it isn't far off the crowding of a Kolkata street, and yet it is neat and clean and every man has his own tiny private space. Amazing!

The best part is the communal bath. On the seventh floor is a smoke-filled TV lounge adjacent to the bathroom. The vestibule houses yet more lockers, though in this case one can pick any locker one likes, a shocking lapse of orderliness! The bathroom consists of six sit down showers and a large 4m by 3m bath sunken into the floor. Here I joined the band of Capsule guests, stripped off, lathered up and showered and soaked in this generous bath which I had mostly all to myself. It was very refreshing. There was no verbal communication and every man attended scrupulously to his own hygiene, and yet I felt a strange bond between us, as if entering this utterly male preserve I was receiving some kind of Japanese initiation.

Back in the communal TV room it was football, beer, cigarettes and adult comics (manga). And some of them were decidedly Adult! Explicit sexual imagery seems much more acceptable in Japan than it is in the West, even in our liberated times. And yet the relation between the sexes seems to be wrapped in formalities, so presumably sex is too. I guess this is just another of the seeming contradictions that faces a foreigner visiting Japan. Unsurprisingly, with all the sexual imagery around - and having recently arrived from far more strait-laced Eastern Russia - the place stirred erotic feelings in me. I guessed I wasn't the only one, but as far as I could tell, and to my great relief, the Capsule hotel seemed to be a totally heterosexual environment. By contrast going to a communal male bath in England would be tantamount to looking for a gay pickup.

Surprisingly I slept remarkably well, at least once the earplugs were in and even managed an early morning meditation, though it wasn't the most inspired I've ever done. I can't say that I liked the Capsule world, the next day I checked into a budget hotel, but it wasn't as bad as I had feared and yes, it is cheap!

## Visiting the Volcano



As volcanoes go Showa Shinzan (Showa new-mountain) is a juvenile, an adolescent who's just started smoking. 55 years ago he was merely a humble wheat field in the shade of his big brother Uzusan, and then suddenly in the space of two years he rose to become a 398m crag on the edge of the great Toya caldera lake. And he smokes continuously, obviously government health warnings have very little effect on young volcanoes.

Toya-ko (Toya Lake) is like a Japanese version of the Cumbrian Lake District. Awesome nature is somehow made to seem tame and manageable in a beautifully manicured landscape - except for two things: the high rises would never get past Cumbrian building regulations and Uzu-Showa is a living untamable volcano who is still

erupting regularly. The contrast between the neat lakeside promenades and gardens and the raw geological power that can turn a wheat field into 398m of rock in two years is extreme. Perhaps it's just another of those unfathomable Japanese contradictions, perfect order meets untamable destructive power. Uzusan has been erupting roughly every 30-50 years since it awoke from dormancy in the mid-17th century. The Toyoko volcano museum is a tour-de-force of vulcanistic delights, replete with wrecked Nissan van from the last eruption, and a tin

shack that on demand shakes with ground tremors and has pumice rain down on its roof. It details the world-leading prediction by Japanese volcanologists which gave people 3 days warning before the summer 2000 eruption, during which time 15,000 people were evacuated. Uzan then proceeded to regurgitate a massive amount of ash, rock and mud yet despite a 12km high toxic cloud raining down for many kilometres all around not a single person was killed. The main highway suddenly lifted up by 100m as the subsurface magma radically resculpted the topography of the Toyako landscape. The photos of the devastation are shocking: cars, houses, forest all flattened by rock, ash and boiling mud. And yet today, 8 years on, all is neat and tidy, perfectly ordered, just as a Japanese town should be - how amazing!

Mr Mimatsu is to volcanologists what Arnold Schwarzenegger is to weight trainers, the amateur who made it with the hotshots. A local postmaster in the Toyako district, he had an undying fascination with the volcano. So in 1943 when Showa Shinzan began to bulge he dug deep into his own pocket and purchased the nascent volcano. Now that is what you call a daring real estate purchase! He spent the next 20 years of his life mapping and drawing its evolution and in fact he developed a methodology for recording the changes which is now recognised as the benchmark by volcanologists worldwide. He is therefore definitely the "Local Hero," so I was very pleased when some Japanese girls agreed to take my photo next to his statue.

## Heading for Honshu

It was raining ninjas and turtles as the Toyako to Muroran bus dropped me in the middle of a neat industrial estate with nice green spaces and a large car park. Even though I ran for it, trailing my wheelie bag through the puddles, in the 40 seconds it took me to get to some shelter I was sorely drenched. No wonder Hokkaido is so green and luscious!

What I expected to be the ferry terminal, the bus' supposed terminus, turned out to be an open air sports stadium, though the only customers were a rather bedraggled flock of seagulls. The two reception staff seemed rather bemused at the appearance of this lone "gaijin" (foreigner) complete with luggage, dripping in their reception area - and who could blame them. There followed a rather linguistically challenging few minutes whilst they communicated that this was not a ferry terminal and I asked if I could sit out the rain storm in their lobby. We eventually got there and the manageress kindly offered me a tasteless but hot cup of instant coffee, and later on an umbrella. It is truly amazing how much anonymous kindness one is the recipient of when traveling.

Since this is Japan I had expected the usual joined up thinking in which the bus would drop me at a spanking new ferry terminal, rather than in a parking lot next to a sports stadium - a concurrence rather more reminiscent of Russian public transport! Oh well, another naïve illusion shattered. Actually there is a spanking new ferry terminal, but it is 600m away on the other side of the car park, though there was no way of knowing this other than asking strangers, or just wandering around in the rain hoping to stumble upon it.

No matter how many times I convince myself that taking a local bus for an intercity journey is a good way to see the local people and the "real life" of a country, I always end up regretting the grindingly slow procession of suburbs, shopping malls and housing estates that "real life" seems to consist of. The Toyako-Muroran bus took about 135 minutes to cover just 50km and for Japan that is awesomely slow! In this case I had no other option other than a very expensive taxi, so local bus it was. Since I was the first to board, and the last to exit I concluded that not many people make this trip. And that is hardly surprising since Toyako onsen (hot springs) is a very chic spa resort, close to Sapporo city and served by two airports, whilst Muroran port is the economy ferry option to Honshu from southern Hokkaido. Toyako and Muroran do not have a natural affinity for one another, hence the lack of transport options.

In fact Toyako onsen is so chic that it hosted the G8 summit just before I arrived. If only I'd known I could have timed my visit to meet with George W., I'm sure he would have been interested to hear my views on global warming. Shucks, another opportunity to rub shoulders with the great and the good missed!

## Meeting the Poet

Traveling in Japan's Deep North I met a kindred spirit, a poet called Basho. Though he died some 300 years ago, he offered me his friendship through careful observation, deep emotion and delight in the small things along the Way. This is a man who seeing a 500 year old ruin would weep for the long dead warriors who had expired there - surely the heart of a great romantic. This is a man who lived his dream, a dream which drove him to sell his house and propel his old body, which he called a "weather exposed skeleton", onto the open road. He left with no idea if he would ever return, an awesome prospect which I shy away from, though in a sense all travelers know not whether they will return. So I wrote Basho a haiku to cement our friendship:

Ah, so wonderful  
To meet a friend along the Way  
The boats and trains  
Grow weary of my solitude.

Basho travelled all over Japan, but his most famous and longest journey was captured in a masterpiece of Japanese literature "The Narrow Road to the Deep North." Since I was traveling from the Far North, in fact the Farthest North, I decided to follow a small Basho pilgrimage and visit some of the places he went to.

One wonders what haiku Basho would compose now that his beloved Matsushima is overrun with hotels, amusements and retail opportunities. Still, a Japanese sense of decorum prevails and the seaside tat is of the more tasteful variety, and of course Matsushima is scrupulously neat and clean. Regarded as one of Japan's great natural wonders, Matsushima bay is home to about 250 pine covered islands, with gentle lapping waves and miniature beaches - it is unbelievably picturesque.

Avoiding the crowds I spent much of the time sitting on a rock on Oshima island, one of the three that are connected to the mainland by a bridge, and gazing out across the bay towards the Pacific. This was a place frequented by monks and carved into these ancient rocks, entwined in pine roots, are dozens of little alcoves each with its own Buddha image. Basho wrote a famous haiku here, which is inscribed on a rock on the centre of the island.

Breaking the silence  
Of an ancient pond  
A frog jumped into the water -  
A deep resonance  
*Basho*

Just behind the buzzing main pier of Matsushima is Zuigan-ji, a Zen temple. The entrance through the large torii (symbolic gate) marks a distinct change of mood even though the crowds persist. Immensely tall cedars line the main avenue, masking the harshness of the sun's rays, and giving the temple a deep green mood. Carved into the rocks to the north are many shrines and Buddha images, originally the abode of hermits and contemplatives.

## Dewa Sanzen

After my stay in Sendai, Basho recommended that I climb the holy mountains of the Dewa Sanzen. Who am I to disregard the advice of a seasoned Japanese beatnik (17th century equivalent) and literary genius? So I took the bus cross country east-west over the towering central hills on the impressive Yamagata expressway. It was tunnels and viaducts all the way, and a remarkable change of weather as we passed through a 3km tunnel from the finely drizzling east to the humid sun-drenched west and the unassuming metropolis of Tsuruoka.

The Dewa Sanzen, collective name for the three holy mountains of Haguro-san, Gassan and Yudono-san, have been a place of pilgrimage for over 1000 years. In particular they are the main destination for yamabushi pilgrims, a rather eccentric fusion of Buddhist and animistic Shinto beliefs. The Ideha Bunka Kinekan - what a wonderful name for a museum - has a delightful video installation, projecting two yamabushi actors onto a real miniature waterfall. They start by emerging from the installed rock in formal costume blowing shells and horns, before bashing sticks, and then they reappear in loincloths squatting and grunting. Though fascinated, both by the

installation and yamabushi rituals, I wasn't inspired enough to try this myself. For a fee (apparently about £250) one can attend a weekend course and learn to be a yamabushi.



When I met Mr Masamito he was hunched over something in the bushes, in fact he could even have been relieving an urgent call of nature. Seeing me peering at him he jumped up and, as if discerning my uncharitable suspicions, he spoke rapidly in Japanese. Somehow from his gesticulations I gathered that he looking at some flowers, which as it turned out was his great passion. I thought little of it as I walked past, but as I strolled on he matched my pace so we naturally fell into walking together. In fact Mr. Masamito was exceedingly fit, striding up the steps of sacred Mt Haguro two at a time - and there are over 2500 of them! I was able to keep up with him but not pass him, so when he told me that he was 73 (or was it 63, the sign language between us was rather ambiguous) I wanted to prostrate myself in admiration. As it was I bowed to him deeply in respect and made sounds of amazement. Even aged 63 he was remarkably energetic. And it is not that rare to meet a senior Japanese of his stamina, what a lovely way to grow old!

Mr. Masamito spoke not one single word of English, so my dozen words of Japanese were the only verbal communication we were able to share. Still we enjoyed one another's company for two hours, either walking in silence or me listening to his enthusiastic Japanese explanations of history and nature, whilst making appreciative "hmms" and "ahhs". Discovering that I was a friend of Basho he took me on a detour to visit the ruins of an ancient temple where a very famous Basho haiku had been composed, and he was utterly delighted when I produced the English translation from my backpack. If anything the temple was even more ruined than when Basho had visited since all I could see were a few piles of stones. Nonetheless as Basho recalled the holy mountain with:

I drenched my sleeves  
In a flood of reticent tears

I too felt a sudden surge of emotion at the ephemeral nature of life, the link with a long dead poet and companionship with a contemporary flower lover.

The forest ascent of Mt Haguro is absolutely Japanese. All the key elements are there: vast looming cedars, deep green mosses and ferns, carefully placed rocks with elegant kanji inscriptions, streams with delicate wooden bridges, a towering 5 storey pagoda, aged wooden shrines and an ancient stone staircase of uneven steps that climbs to the peak. Add to this all manner of wild flowers, a chorus of birdsong, the cacophony of cicadas and the hint of a fox and one is transported to a timeless magical Japan where the natural world teems with benign and malign spirits. Some of the malign ones took the form of vicious biting flies, or tiny kamikazes that dive into your eyes.

Mr Masamito's love of flowers was all-consuming. Whenever we passed a bright dash of colour amongst the dense greens he would stop, point animatedly and regale me with explanations in rapid Japanese. Occasionally I communicated my verbal incomprehension with a "*wakarimasen*", but I didn't like to dampen his obvious enjoyment at describing and detailing the beauties of the Japanese forest, so mostly I just listened appreciatively. At the full height of his enthusiasm he produced his camera and showed me a wonderful close up of a brightly coloured frog.



Halfway up the 400m climb is an old tearoom. I was going to pass it by but Mr Masamito indicated with his open palm that we should sit for a tea. From the verandah one can gaze out over the Tsuruoka valley, and just beyond the haze, discern the waters of the Sea of Japan. We were served a free cup of iced green tea - wonderfully refreshing - an ancient service to the pilgrims of the mountain (at first as a gaijin I was offered many expensive choices of tea). It was stiflingly humid, and both Mr Masamito and I were sweating profusely.

We reached the summit and made a quick tour of the temples, bowing and clapping in the requisite manner, but really it was less about the destination than the ascent itself. After 10 minutes or so we agreed to go back down, and shared a silent communion descending through the forest. Eventually we parted with a heartfelt two-handed shake and a mutual delight. We will probably never meet one another again.

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At Oquibo I landed in a working pilgrims rest house or *shukubo* complete with shrine room, white clad yamabushi and hordes of children on a summer school trip. The owners were unfailingly polite and welcoming but I fear they were rather perplexed at what to do with this lone English Buddhist. I was given my own bedroom and separate dining room whilst all the other guests seemed to sleep in large groups and eat together, which in fact I would have been happy to partake of, but that clearly wasn't the done thing. The catering was a major event with a large canteen kitchen to prove it. On my first night I waited for an hour in my private dining room whilst the large groups were served.

The yamabuchi are famed for their ascetic practices: walking barefoot through cold mountain streams, sitting naked under icy waterfalls and eating vegetarian food before undertaking the pilgrimage to the three holy mountains. Obviously this latter "hardship" reflects the intense Japanese love of meat and fish. At Oquibo rest house I was furnished with an "ascetic" banquet of vegetarian delights. Served in individual bowls were a dozen different flavours and textures, colours and aromas, all exquisitely presented. From fat Udon noodles to rice, from pickled radish (yum!) to miso soup. The most remarkable of the dishes took me right out of my zone of familiar foods. The small shriveled brown leaves in clear jelly I found merely puzzling - why would anyone want to eat something so bland and nutritionally worthless? Next favourite were the clear wormlike noodles in lemon sauce with hot grated ginger. But most startling of all was the crème caramel desert with a sweet looking yellow topping that turned out to be blisteringly hot mustard! My exclamations of surprise must have passed through several walls, since the following evening the crème caramel came topped merely with a glacé cherry. I was both relieved and disappointed, and a little suspicious that I had been the object of a culinary practical joke! Add to all this the lashings of tofu, salad and freshly steamed vegetables. It is one of the best meals I have ever eaten and the kind of asceticism I could really learn to endure.

Mme Joshu is a delightful and diminutive woman of latter years. She shuffles with her toes pointing together in the manner of a traditional Japanese woman, and has an infectious laugh and smile that lights up her whole face. As proprietress of Oquibo - which can host up to 100 pilgrims a night - she must certainly be a capable person, yet you wouldn't guess it with her air of charming absent-mindedness. Her husband is the head priest at the rest house, performing morning drummings and evening worships, but he seems a distant and aloof character. The real heart and soul of Oquibo is Mme Joshu.

She took great delight in showing round her *shukubo* from the shrine to the ancient ropes and lacquer-ware and we even exchanged tips on how to bow correctly to a Buddhist shrine. On seeing the way I made a bow she exclaimed with amazement a rapid "so, so, so, so." In fact a stream of *so's* was her favourite exclamation for anything from "yes, you've got it!" to "how interesting!"

When we parted she gave me two gifts, a printed dragon cloth and a little guardian bell that I attached to my rucksack and which rings as I walk to ward off evil spirits. I didn't know the form for parting so I shook her hand, but she offered me her cheek which I kissed lightly and then she embraced me with her tiny frame. As I walked down the road to the bus-stop she stood waving from the *shubuko* gate until I was out of sight. How wonderful to meet someone of 70 years so full of the zest for life!

## Ascending the Holy Mountain

The Japanese public transport network is phenomenal. It is phenomenally effective and phenomenally expensive. Wherever you want to go there will be a train or bus going there sometime soon. From the sleepy village of Haguro, at the foot of the Mt Haguro, a local bus arrived to the minute of its scheduled time and collected me, the only person on the street. On-board were a few fit looking middle-aged Japanese decked out in the latest hiking fashions. The driver had already discerned my destination. "Gassan?" he questioned and I nodded appreciatively. At Haguro summit we collected one passenger, Stephane, a French solo traveler and intellectual (he certainly smoked like a French intellectual). He looked startled when I greeted him with a "bonjour" but his accent, even when speaking Japanese to the bus driver, was unmistakable.

Our little bus then proceeded to laboriously wind its way up 22km of hairpin bends through the forest and deposit us at the trailhead for Mt Gassan - a dead end road. I was shocked when the driver wanted nearly 1700 yen for his pains - hardly a local fare - but still immensely appreciative that any sort of bus would make this trip, without which my intended hike would be impossibly arduous or prohibitively expensive.

It was Stephane who suggested that our meeting was more than pure chance, and I felt it too in my heart. In the swirling mists and intermittent rains a solo hike to Gassan and Yudono-san would be somewhat perilous, so we were both in need of a companion. But more than that we met as kindred spirits, travelers through life who had launched ourselves upon an unknown destiny.

In fact I had seen Stephane the previous day as he made sketches at the children's cemetery on Mt Haguro. He said that the contrast between the tragedy of a child's death and the brightness of the decorations - colourful clothes and shoes had been affixed to each stone - had arrested his attention.

As Stephane and I plied our way to the summit of Gassan, highest of the Dewa Sanzen peaks at 1984m, the visibility was down to a few metres. This created an eerie atmosphere, shapes suddenly emerging from the cloud: a small wooden torii, a statue of Jizo (Bodhisattva Kshitigarbha) clad in a red bib, a pilgrim plodding silently wearing a round straw hat and propped up by a strong wooden staff. We passed through flower strewn alpine meadows, the bundles of lilies were lovely even in their shroud of mist. Often we would hear the jingling of the pilgrim's bell several minutes before seeing a mature party clad in white cotton tunics. Only the most dedicated were making the journey under these conditions. In actual fact, this being Japan, the path was easy to follow, as it was laid with large rocks that made a kind of paving, though the mist and rain had made these treacherously slippery. At one spot an elderly yamabuchi took a nasty tumble, but he just got up silently and continued on as before. The hardship of the pilgrim's journey is intimately bound up with its sacred purpose. If one could make the climb in stilettos and listening to an iPod (as is fairly standard for England's highest peak, Scafell Pike) then the journey would lose its meaning.

At times we had to cross well-trodden snow fields, the snow black with grit and dripping with melt water. Lower down the temperature was a humid 22°C, yet amazingly many of the snow fields persisted. I couldn't think of a convincing scientific explanation so I plumped for the magical one: these mountains are inhabited by various cold-hearted spirits who freeze the waters.

At Gassan's summit there is a Shugendo shrine which cannot be entered without first going through a purificatory rite. So Stephane and I paid our 500 yen to an enrobed man in a tiny damp ticket booth, who then proceeded to chant and shake a large paper pompon at us. The whole ritual took less than a minute, certainly too brief for me to perceive the departure from my soul of any sins. I can't help feeling it was really just a bit of a show.

As we were about to head off into the fog, attempting the more navigationally difficult route to Yudono-san a Japanese woman stopped and asked if she could help us in perfect English. From her mountain gear she was obviously a seasoned walker. After a few minutes she proceeded to produce a map - something which we hadn't been able to find - and to my surprise and immense gratitude she gave it to us saying that she could easily get another one. There is so much generosity in this world!



When we finally dropped out of the cloud Stephane and I discovered we were walking in a lovely green valley with precipitous forest clad slopes, and equally precipitous rusting metal ladders for the descent. When we came upon a miniature pine clinging to a large rock it felt like we had really found the essential Japanese wilderness.

The next day Stephane and I met again and took the train south, we had a wonderful couple of hours talking about life, love and philosophy and his big dream after our walk to the holy mountain. Meetings and partings like this are the soul food of solo traveling.

## Kyoto Ramblings



Arriving anew in any of the world's great cities is always exciting, and Kyoto definitely lives up to expectations. Kyoto new railway station, opened in 1996, is a modern marvel of steel and glass. The blurb on a 7th floor plaque by the architect Mr. Hara, explains that the building incorporates ancient sensibilities by creating a pseudo-boundary in which the sky is always visible yet separate. It sounds very post-modern and Derrida, and none too convincing, but the building speaks for itself and it is stunning. I took the multi-stage escalator - just a long series of steps rather than the usual switchback escalators - and walked the "Skywalk." Here, hanging 11 stories up over the auditorium is a wonderful gangway that affords views of the scurrying passengers below and the city stretching out to the north, enfolded in brilliant green forested hills. To the east one can see many of the pagoda roofs from the oldest part of the city. Straight ahead is the Kyoto tower, clean and elegant, dominating the skyline. It is an awe-inspiring view.

In Kyoto one just has to drop one's independent pretensions and join the crowds, become a bona-fide tourist. It is well worth sacrificing the pioneering spirit to follow the well-trodden paths of Kyoto's old town. After getting lost in the back streets for a while I found my way to the first astounding temple of the day - Kiyomizu. My guide book recommended a visit to the Tainai-meguri, without giving any indication of what it was (I suspect this was the lonely planet's attempt at a practical joke). So I paid my 100 yen and descended into the "womb of the temple" as the ticket described it. After turning a corner it was pitch black, the only guidance being a handrail. I shuffled along, bumping into a partition and feeling my way through a curtain. "This is crazy" but I was excited and intrigued. Of course in England the health and safety people would put an end to such "nonsense," but here in Japan one could become lost in a dark womb, a sort of initiation. After several minutes of shuffling along, aware of people somewhere behind me, suddenly I saw a faint light shining onto a finely polished lump of granite, on the surface of which was carved a sacred seed syllable. There was just enough light to see the syllable and nothing else. As I had been directed, I touched the rock and chanted my own blessing, tarrying in this intriguing space, before moving on and suddenly back into the light of day. As I emerged the friendly ticket collector asked "are you okay?" implying that for some people the Tainai-meguri is a very unsettling experience. But I was fine, alive and electrified by the visit. Surely one of the strangest tourist attractions in Kyoto!

What can one say about Kiyomizu temple that hasn't been said better by poets and historians? Lost among the cedars on steep slopes, vast-timbered and resting on stilts lest an earthquake shake it to pieces, adorned with both beautiful and powerful shrines, replete with delicate pagodas, stunning views across the Kyoto valley and swamped by hordes of tourists; Kiyomizu has everything one would expect of one of the world's great religious buildings.

Here I happened to get talking to James, a PhD student from Warwick University who is working on nuclear fusion. So amongst the cedars, the incense wafting by, we discussed magnetic field containment, vector calculus, lithium neutron enrichment and whether fusion was destined to forever be the power source of the future. What a strange contrast to the 17th century Buddhist Pureland in which we were immersed!

Kodai-ji is the quintessential Zen temple. Raked gravel, carefully placed rocks, beautifully tended mosses, gently flowing waters, elegant wooden bridges, paper-walled rooms opening onto miniature gardens: everything you've ever seen or heard about Zen aesthetics is represented at Kodai-ji, in fact probably was inspired by Kodai-ji. The temple was built in 1605 and the gardens were designed by Kobori Enshu, the Japanese equivalent of Capability Brown. There is also a tea-room - in fact two adjoining rooms - designed by a tea ceremony master called Senno

Rikyu. Despite the crowds passing through, as I lingered on one particularly lovely hall, looking out onto two different gardens, a sense of peace and aesthetic appreciation enveloped me. I could have happily spent the day just sitting there.

## A case of Zen-digestion

Nick and I met by chance, solitary strangers on a bus. And in the easy way of the solo traveler we fell into a pleasant camaraderie, sharing the delights of Kyoto's zen temples for a day.

Nick is a young Cambridge graduate in English, now a teacher doing a part-time MA and with a zest for travel. When I met him he was wearing bright yellow Indian trousers, clutching his lonely planet Japan tightly to his breast, and simultaneously trying to keep control of his various bags as well as a soiled paper cup. I thought this combination of artifacts a little strange for a seasoned traveler, but of course one doesn't want to say that to a complete stranger. It turned out that he had been trying to find a dustbin in which to dispose of said cup for some time. For somewhere so incredibly tidy it is one of Japan's strangest omissions that there is a great lack of public dustbins. Thus his clutching of the cup was actually symbolic of responsible waste disposal.

At our first stop, Daitoku-ji, we struggled to even find a zen temple that was open to visitors. Eventually however we came upon a beautiful enclosed bamboo garden and temple. Of course it came complete with rocks and raked gravel, one part of the garden even being laid out in the style of a cross since there was some Catholic history to the place which I couldn't quite fathom. I moved a small pebble from one spot to another just to see if it would change the aesthetic, but if it did I'm afraid I was too insensitive to notice!

At the Golden Pavillion, one of Kyoto's premier tourist attractions we just joined in with the hordes of trigger happy tourists. The Pavillion is indeed stunning, set in a small lake with carefully sculpted islands and pines, but the midday photo mania and the searing heat tended to lessen the serenity. We didn't stay long.



At Ryoan-ji we found perhaps the most famous and admired of all Zen rock gardens. I am not a cynical person, but I do take some of the adulation lavished on the zen aesthetic with a pinch of salt. The Ryoan-ji billboard blurb confidently informed us that the zen garden evoked a complete sense of the natural world without any trees, grasses or flowers and that the 15 rocks in the garden had been "expertly placed."

Yet entering the rectangular walled garden I did feel a tangible sense of beauty arise in my mind. Despite the crowds of admirers, something about these rocks, mosses and gravel was indeed uplifting. Nick and I sat there for a while just gazing at these expertly placed granites and slates. I am certain that with typical

Japanese care every last detail was significant. Some of the rocks were smooth, others were jagged, some were tall others were flat - but sadly a prosaic description leaves you none the wiser. The effect created was however intensely pleasing and refining. After a while we both tried to get the perfect photo, along with dozens of other tourists, and I have to admit feeling slightly embarrassed by my shameless attempt to digitally capture the utterly intangible sense of zen beauty. But as Nick put it rather succinctly "one's got to do it really."

Having wondered round the temple for a while, there really wasn't much else of note beside this tiny patch of rock and gravel, how amazing that thousands of visitors a day pay to come and see it.

My exit from Ryoan-ji was spectacularly incongruous, though very few people noticed. This being the third zen temple of the day, I had managed to achieve a near perfect state of spaced-out satori. And in this altered state of awareness I managed to put on another man's shoes, which admittedly had a strong resemblance to my own, and even walk a few paces before realising that I was wrong-footed. The only people who seemed to notice my rapid

re-hoofing were the two ticket ladies, who gave me very strange looks as I swapped footwear. What a wonderful irony, a seasoned meditator exiting the most refined of zen temples and walking off in the wrong pair of shoes! Surely a dangerous case of zen-digestion!

Realising that we were both zenned-out, Nick and I decided to forego anymore temples and head for the famous bamboo grove in Arashiyama, at the base of Kyoto's western hills.

What is it that is so enticing and fascinating about bamboo? Amongst all of Asia's wonderful flora bamboo seems to hold a privileged place. As we passed from the toytown tourist promenade of Arashiyama village into the deep green grove of giant bamboos, there was a powerful change of mood. Though small (a 10 minute walk is sufficient to emerge at the far side) these groves do manage to evoke a kind of archetypal realm. Nick and I, tried to find a suitable description of the essence of bamboo, repeatedly suggesting different words to see which would fit: deep green, dense, delicate, linear, powerful, soft, dark, magical... the abode of foxes and deadly assassins!

The last pilgrimage of the day, and the most physically exacting, was to find a particular onsen which had a cool pool as well as the usual hot tubs. Nick had been before, but the journey by public transport from the magical bamboos of Arashiyama was rather little complex. In Kyoto's heavy humid heat we ended up with a long walk down the main roads before finding the shangri-la bathhouse. A suitable reward for a hard day's sight-seeing.

The onsen was certainly worth the effort with nearly a dozen different ways of soaking, heating and cooling the weary body. Cheap and compact it was clearly a favourite with the locals, for many Japanese men were scrubbing or soaking when we entered. I showered and dived into the nearest bath. Hmmm.....soooo very relaxing!

But Nick was looking distinctly uneasy and confused. "It's definitely the same building, but this isn't the place I came before." Was Nick also suffering from a severe case of zen-digestion, was he having some strange flashback or deja-vue? After some minutes puzzlement we managed to figure out that the men's and women's baths had been swapped over since his last visit - as evinced by the completely pink toilet facilities, which had struck me as rather out of keeping in a men's public bathing facility.

The last shock of the day was yet to come, Nick waded into a particular pool and suddenly jumped out again. "I've just had a strong electric shock!" I tried it too and yes, an unpleasant tingling started all over my immersed skin - "this isn't good, maybe there is a loose wire somewhere." But no one else seemed in the least concerned, and one Japanese gentlemen had been happily sitting in the same pool before Nick got in. Using impeccable group-logic Nick concluded that since no one was worried about it, it was probably meant to be like that. I wasn't so sure, but in any case both of us eschewed that particular bath for another tub.

Finally we returned to Kyoto station, where Nick had a train to catch, and we wandered rather desperately, it being already late, trying to find any sort of vegetarian meal. In a dimly lit bar we had a passable meal and talked about our life and loves. On the way back to the station Nick, being gay, offered me a late night liaison, which I, being straight, politely declined. We parted warmly, after sharing a day of surprisingly zen moments!

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