

April Snow

WE spent 2½ weeks on the coasts of western Honshu, then three days at the port city of Yokohama just south of Tokyo. Cherry blossoms were moving north, as they always do, and spring was ripe in the air. Now was the time to go inland into low-level mountains, to Karuizawa and Kusatsu, familiar territory for both of us. We didn't expect snow, but we got it. Karuizawa's Mampei Hotel at upper right offers western comforts that we find nowhere else in Japan. This was our tenth Mampei visit since 1999, so chief desk clerk Shiratori-san, bartender Ozawa-san and maitre d' Nagai-san greeted us as old friends. Even the shop girls waved as we were being escorted to Room 351, which we consider "ours." Yoshi and I said "*Tadaima!*" in unison when we entered the room. That's what Japanese say upon returning home. We agreed to have dinner in the hotel's ornate dining room on the second night, but on the first, we hungered for pizza at *Buongiorno*, a short taxi ride along *karamatsu*-lined roads. *Karamatsu* are deciduous pines, Karuizawa's signature tree. At the Italian restaurant, we took seats at a window table. The manager remembered us and was not surprised when Yoshi handed him a tin of anchovies with which to spice up my half of the large pizza. We bring our own, to be sure I get enough. Snow flakes were falling outside the window. I didn't think they would stick, but I was wrong. At middle right is a photo I took the next morning from our hotel window. Yoshi seldom goes to hotel bars, but she joined me on our last night at the Mampei, and Ozawa-san captured the moment at bottom right. To get from





Nagano Prefecture's Karuizawa to Gunma Prefecture's Kusatsu, many would take a train, but we took a bus, up a winding mountain road and through Tsumagoe farmlands to the famous spa town. The bus was faster, cheaper and more direct. We have learned shortcuts over the years. The Tenojiya at top right was waiting for us at Kusatsu, as was the inn's pretty *okamisan* or manager, shown peeking out above. This inn cannot be compared to our beloved Mampei. East is East and West is West, and this was strictly East, a traditional Japanese inn with its very own hot spring, only ten rooms, expensive as hell. No going out for pizza because the inn will serve an outrageous amount of gourmet food for breakfast and dinner. I have never been able to finish a meal at a Japanese inn, and Yoshi, who eats like a horse, can't do it either. The Tenojiya assigned us to what might be called its penthouse. The photo at bottom right, showing a snow-covered garden outside, suggests a room at ground level. No, our room was on the top floor, the inn's third floor. You see, the inn was built into an excavated hillside. The first task upon checking into an inn is to strip off western clothing and don a *yukata* robe and *hanten* jacket. Here, Yoshi is also wearing white *tabi* on her feet. *Tabi* are socks, sort of, but they are designed to accommodate thong





footwear, which of course requires the big toe to be separated from the smaller ones. The big attraction at Kusatsu is *Yubatake*, arguably the hottest natural hot spring in all of Japan, and certainly the most popular. The mineral water, heavy in sulfur, is so hot that it has to be cooled a bit before it can be piped to inns and hotels in the spa town. Above, Yoshi inspects the cooling troughs. At right, I pose at the downstream end of *Yubatake*, where the water flows into a distribution pool. The green and yellow rocks behind me were colored by the acidic and sulfuric water. The stench of sulfur is pervading at first, until one gets used to it. Whenever I am in Kusatsu, I always visit my leathersmith, a nice guy and a genuine artist in leather carving. I bought a belt from him this time, but in the photo at bottom right, he is drying my billfold after applying a liquid polish. He polishes it every time I come into his cluttered shop. I purchased the billfold ten years ago. I'm afraid I insulted him back then. I asked if the billfold's running horse design was stamped into the leather. He was horrified. How could I think such a thing? My goodness!



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