

Houshi: World's Oldest Hotel

When you first see the world's oldest hotel, it looks very much like a modern American motel. You have to go inside to see old things — centuries-old pottery, paneled screens and other objects related to that long period (1600-1868) when the Tokugawa shogunate ruled the land. This was the Edo Period in Japanese history, with Edo being the old name of present-day Tokyo. Houshi *Ryokan* stood far away from Edo, all the way across the mountains to the Sea of Japan coast, in a region called Kaga. Although remote from the capital, the region was very wealthy, because Kaga warlord Maeda Toshinaga shrewdly backed the winning side in the great nation-unifying battle of Sekigahara in 1600, which put Tokugawa *shoguns* in power for more than 260 years. Lord Maeda was richly rewarded, and his wealth percolated down to everybody. Beauty was creat-



ed, but I was not fully satisfied with what I saw in the hotel. The place was established in 718 A.D., for God's sake! That was *really* old. Surely some *really* old stuff lay around here somewhere. What I had seen so far was old, sure, but not old enough. I began to grumble, under my breath and otherwise.



Yoshi takes a seat at the *irori* in the inn's lobby. An *irori* is a place where charcoal is burned to boil tea water and provide warmth to those gathered around it. The traditional fish carving — two fishes in this case — symbolizes something good, I forget what. Yoshi is holding a bowl of thick and slightly foamy green tea, the kind made at Japanese tea ceremonies from powdered tea. I have never liked it much. I prefer green tea filtered through tea leaves, clear green with just a few dregs at the bottom of the cup.



I was far from bustling Tokyo, but I had business back there. Yutaka Katayama, known as “Mr. K” in the automotive world, wanted me to meet with a bunch of

Japanese Datsun fans. Arrangements needed to be made with Mr. K’s executive secretary, Eiichi Shimizu. Thus, my letter containing the following preface:



This photo was taken in the daytime, but relatively little light penetrated the foliage.

Dear Mr. Shimizu:

A week and a half after Mr. K’s marvelous luncheon, Yoshi and I reached Houshi Ryokan in Ishikawa-ken’s Awazu Onsen, where I am writing this letter following a nice ofuro soak. At long last, I am staying at the world’s oldest hotel, which the Houshi family has managed for an amazing 46 generations. Our suite is simply delightful. It looks onto a koi-filled pool in a shady, moss-covered garden. I’m especially pleased with a sitting room that will serve as my “study” while I’m here. I can work at all times of the night without disturbing Yoshi’s sleep.

On our last morning at Houshi *Ryokan*, I didn't want to leave. A gentle rain was falling in the garden. In my "study," the windows were open and I was perched in *yukata* on the window sill, smoking and sipping coffee and watching the *koi* swim around in a rain-dimpled pool. I breathed the garden's mossy freshness. For a minute or two, I was young again, when everything was fresh. Then I was interrupted, not unpleasantly. Mr. Zengoro Houshi and his wife — the president and *okamisan* of this ancient *ryokan* — paid us a visit. He had heard that a *gaijin* guest was making inquiries in halting Japanese: *Koko de wa ichiban furui mono wa nan desu ka?* Which means: "What's the oldest thing here?" In my estimation, a 1,300-year-old inn had to have some *really* old treasures. I wasn't satisfied with the roof-peak gargoyle that had been protecting guests for a mere 180 years, or even the 300-year-old pottery on display in the lobby. There must be more. Mr. Houshi assured me there was. He proudly displayed photographs of family treasures kept at his home, and gave me a CD from which the photos below were extracted. The photos show a *samurai* saddle and a pair of stirrups. I could have chosen other images, probably of older things, but I'm more interested in martial accouterments than pottery and boxes and hanging scrolls. Without further investigation, I can't be sure how old the saddle and stirrups are, but I'm pretty certain they predate the Tokugawa *shoguns*. Let's say the 16th century, when warlords Oda Nobunaga and Toyotomi Hideyoshi waged bloody campaigns to unify all of Japan. Of course, unification in their view meant that all 200 clans would bow low to them and nobody else. They almost did it by the time Nobunaga was assassinated and Hideyoshi died. Tokugawa Ieyasu finished the job at the 1600 battle of Sekigahara. A story is told to illuminate the personalities of these three great men in Japanese history. *What do you do if a nightingale won't sing?* "Kill it," says Nobunaga. "Torture it," says Hideyoshi. "Be patient until it sings," says Ieyasu, the first Tokugawa *shogun*.

