



SLIGHTLY annoyed. That's what I was as I stood at the bottom of the stone steps stretching up to the Ise Shrine's main sanctuary. Cameras were forbidden beyond this point, so Yoshi shot a quickie that at least showed I was there. With my camera stashed away in a jacket pocket, and with my irritation cooling somewhat, I climbed the steps, walked through the Shinto *torii* at the top, and became annoyed once again. My view was blocked by a guarded gatehouse and a tall fence. I could see only a portion of the thick thatched roof of Japan's holiest of Shinto shrines. Only the Imperial family – Emperor Akihito and his living relatives – could go farther. The couple at right, flanking their little son and holding his hands on the way to those stone steps, passing beneath some of the oldest trees in the world, must have been disappointed, too. Or maybe not. Like

A Shrine I Didn't See



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all Japanese, they knew they must visit two places – Mt. Fuji and the Ise Shrine – before they die, and they may have known, as I did not, that a ban on photographing the main shrine was long-standing and strictly policed. But someone, if not me, got away with it. I found the photo at right on the Internet. One wonders what all the fuss is about. The shrine's floor space measures 10.9 meters by 5.5 meters, no bigger than a three-car garage. Well, it has antiquity and Shinto dogma going for it. Two thousand years ago, the goddess Amaterasu told an emperor's daughter that she wanted to live within the Ise forests between what are now the bustling cities of Osaka and Nagoya. Later, in the seventh century, a house was designed and built for Japan's sun goddess, and she has resided there ever since, worshipped by a nation of pilgrims who faithfully come calling. Faithful, too, are the master carpenters who rebuild the shrine every twenty years or so. The first rebuilding was done in 692 A.D.



The sixty-second rebuilding is scheduled for 2013. All the wood and timbers, fashioned entirely by hand of course, come from Japanese cypress trees. Such wood, like American redwood, is resistant to weather moisture but not impervious to it. Each new shrine looks exactly as it always has. The new structure in 2013 will rise on a plot of empty land adjacent to the old. The old shrine will be torn down, and the new one will play its Shinto

role as home for a goddess, until around 2033, when it will be time to rebuild on the old plot, which will have stood empty for a couple of decades, just waiting for another turn. Although the partial view of the main sanctuary was anticlimactic, I wasn't disappointed at all in the long hike to it. On the outskirts of the small town of Ise, a bridge over the Isuzu River provided access to the forested Ise Shrine park. There was no admission fee, which surprised me, since I knew money was needed for maintenance and all kinds of things, including the periodic rebuilding of the main shrine as well as the lesser ones. I guess it would be too much like charging admission to church. We gaped at the gorgeous vistas around us. At bottom right, I caught Yoshi strolling past a grove of manicured black pines. Farther along, we encountered a roofed structure containing a pool of water for ritual purification. Yoshi, a Christian, not a Shintoist at all, took a drink to clean her body and soul. On occasion, I've done the





same thing, but here I stood back, leery of using communal dippers. It was a health risk I wasn't willing to take. Above, we reached a cluster of public buildings, where Shinto souvenir trinkets are sold, where events are staged, where nearby attractions, such as the *koi* pool at right, are, oh, attractive, and I immediately understood why admission fees were unnecessary. The complex was not only doing lots of cash business but it was collecting donations for the 2013 rebuilding. We made a donation. Why not since we were there? I expected to slip yen notes into a slotted box. No, a donation form had to be filled out. Name, address and telephone number. I envision transpacific solicitations within the several years before the shrine is actually rebuilt. Well, it doesn't matter. Yoshi, a soft touch, seldom answers the phone, and I'm always rude to solicitors. I can be rude to Japanese solicitors, too. I am an equal-opportunity tightwad, racially unbiased.

