Izu Peninsula

Goodbye, snow. It was time to go south to the Izu Peninsula, which juts into the Pacific Ocean southwest of Tokyo and boasts moderate weather with no snow at all. Oh, maybe a bit of snow will fall at this time of year in the lovely Amagi Mountains that form the peninsula's spine. But not on us. Over the next two weeks we will revisit seashore towns scattered along the peninsula's eastern and western coasts, moving from Japanese inn to Japanese inn, with a couple of Western-style hotels providing a change of pace. After enduring all that white stuff in mountainous Snow Country, Yoshi was hungering for the sight of winter plum and early cherry blossoms, and for seascapes featuring little offshore islets too perfect to be real. I like those things, too, but the peninsula has a human history that interests me even more. Commodore Perry's Black Ships (*Kuro Fune* as the Japanese call them) landed here in the 1850s and shocked feudalistic, isolated Japan into modernity. The sad legend of Okichi, teenage Japanese mistress of Townsend Harris, the first American counsel general to Japan, grew to national prominence here. And 400 years ago it was here on the Izu Peninsula where an Englishman, the only foreigner ever to become a *samurai* lord, built Japan's first Western-style, oceangoing sailing ship and became known as the father of the Japanese navy.

Atami

The name Atami means "Hot Sea." The town is perched on what remains of a long-ago volcano that half-collapsed into the Pacific Ocean. Nearly 50 years ago, when I was a young Navy officer, I wrote about my first visit to Atami, calling it "The Niagara Falls of Japan," meaning that Japanese newlyweds flocked here just as American newlyweds went to Niagara Falls in that quaint postwar time. Now the Japanese go elsewhere, often to Hawaii or Italy. But Atami is still charming in any season. At left, an early-blooming cherry tree hangs over the river that runs through the town. Remember, this is still January.

Atami's Plum Tree Garden

It's my curse that I'm more interested in history and culture than natural scenery. As Ronald Reagan once said, "If you've seen one tree, you've seen them all." What makes it a curse is that Yoshi, my wife and travel agent and someone whose happiness is important to me, is just the opposite, so of course we went blossom viewing in Atami and almost everyplace else on this peninsula. The plum trees at this park were smaller and not as pretty as the one in our backyard, but we admired them anyway. I admit, though, that a single plum cannot match the magnificence of a forest of them. And *sake* and foodstuffs were here. Below, Yoshi samples plum tea. She also purchased packages of *iwanori*, seaweed plucked from rocky seashores and processed as fragments instead of *nori* sheets.

“Umi no Otoko”

Remember James Clavell’s novel *Shogun* and the TV miniseries based on it? A shipwrecked English sailor washes up on the shores of feudal Japan more than 400 years ago. He is thrown into prison and treated brutally, and then, incredibly, he is befriended by a powerful warlord and becomes a *samurai*, a Japanese lord himself! The stuff of fiction, right? Not at all. He was William Adams, a ship’s navigator who, even today in Japan, is called Miura Anjin — “Miura” as taken from the Miura Peninsula south of Tokyo where his fief was located, and “Anjin” meaning “pilot” or “navigator.” Annually on the Miura Peninsula, at what may be his grave in the hills above the huge Yokosuka naval base, this long-dead Englishman of humble origins is honored as the father of the Japanese navy! In Ito, a fishing village across Sagami Bay from Miura, a statue of William Adams stands near the inn at which we were staying. The plaque on the statue base at left reads “Umi no Otoko” or “Man of the Sea,” not “Seaman,” which might suggest a mere sailor, but *Man of the Sea*, a poetic and reverential reference. Japan has long been generous in recognizing the contributions of foreigners.

Ito Village

A short distance from the statue, at the mouth of the Matsukawa River, rises a large metal sculpture of a 120-ton sailing vessel that William Adams built here with the help of Ito shipwrights. This was the first truly oceangoing Western sailing ship ever built in Japan. By this time, around 1604, his patron warlord, Tokugawa Ieyasu, had won the great battle of Sekigahara and become *Shogun* of unified Japan. As a *hatamoto*, a high-level *samurai*, Adams enjoyed direct access to the *Shogun* himself. He died in 1620, leaving behind in England a wife unseen for 20-something years, plus a Japanese wife at his Miura estate. We must wait 325 years, until General Douglas MacArthur showed up in 1945, before we encounter another foreigner who could stride within Japan’s ruling circles.

Mt. Fuji: A Magnificent Glimpse

The Ito fishing village stretches along the shoreline of its bay, nestled between the seashore and rapidly rising mountains, as seen above. People in the village never see Mt. Fuji unless they do as I did. I hiked to a promontory at the far end of the bay, sat on a bench next to a clump of winter-brown reeds, and waited until fluffy clouds moved out of the way. Then I shot this picture of Japan's signature mountain poking up about 35 miles away.

At left, a view of Ito harbor, snapped from the wharf of a large fish-processing facility. But there is room for entrepreneurs. Above, on a public sidewalk, a woman guts fishes that will be sun-dried for a single day before going to local markets.

A Stroll Along the Matsukawa River

As a nitty-gritty professional editor, I have a problem when referring to Japanese rivers. All of them end with *kawa* or *gawa* or *zawa*, which means "river." Thus, "Matsukawa River" means "Matsu River River," which is redundant, right? And yet, "Matsu River" sounds strange to me, so I'll just live with the redundancy. Anyway, above, Yoshi walks along Ito's storied Matsukawa River, with an old cherry tree in early bloom on the far bank. Normally the river water is clear, but there is upstream construction going on now, so it is a little muddy here. Japanese inns line this river, mostly modern ones, but a few of them date back to the time when Tokyo was called Edo (1868 and earlier). At intervals along the river railing are plaques dedicated to dead Japanese writers and artists. Everywhere I go in Japan, I find "literary monuments" praising the achievements of writers. In Atami, where we stayed just a couple of days back, an oceanfront park features "Omiya's Pine," a Japanese black pine tree that serves as a focal point for an elaborate memorial to a Koyo Ozaki novel serialized in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper a century ago. Omiya, the novel's heroine, sadly faced her lover on this beach, telling him that she must marry a rich man's son for the sake of her poor family. "You are blinded by diamonds!" yelled the angry young man. To this day in Japan, "*Daiyamondo ni me ga kurami*!" is a well-known castigation. Farther south on the Izu Peninsula, deep in the Amagi Mountains, Yasunari Kawabata is honored at two spots. In Japan's Snow Country, from which we recently came, the 1968 Nobel Prize laureate is memorialized because his masterpiece novel "*Yuki Guni*" ("Snow Country") virtually named the area in Japanese minds. His tender novella "*Izu no Odoriko*" ("The Izu Dancer"), written when he was a very young man, is similarly recognized in southern Izu, down the eastern coast from here. Where in America are Ernest Hemingway's memorials? Surely they exist. Do we Americans honor only soldiers and politicians in public places?

Snow in Imaihama

It never snows in the coastal villages of the Izu Peninsula. Everybody says so. Well, as I sat in the lounge of an Imaihama resort hotel, sipping coffee and writing in my journal, I watched large flakes fall outside. "*Mezurashii*" ("very rare"), everybody said. Upstairs, from the balcony of our room, I recorded the rare sight of snow on Imaihama's beach, as seen at left. The snow melted away within an hour. It also snowed down the coast in Shimoda, our next stop. When we got there, everybody was still talking about it. A Shimoda *sushi* chef told us this was the first time in 40 years he had seen snow fall on his shop. At virtually the same time the snow was falling here, the Columbia spaceshuttle was breaking up. No relationship, of course, but snow in Imaihama marked the American tragedy for me.

Shimoda: A Break From Raw Fish

Look, I'm just a red-blooded American boy, growing old but still the same inside. A time comes when I've had all the raw fish I can eat. I gotta have a greasy burger! Above, the big red *katakana* sign that says "*Makudonarudo Hambaagaa*" ("MacDonald's Hamburger") doesn't mean much to most Americans, but the arches symbol says it all. I went inside and ordered the ¥270 ($2.25) burger featured in the large poster outside. I enjoyed the snack more than the expression on my face indicates. Notice the ashtray. You don't get that in a California MacDonald's. Truth be known, I wasn't suffering all that much from meat hunger. In Imaihama, where it snowed on us, our expensive *teppan* dinner consisted of steak and lobster.

Okichi, age 17. Photographed in 1859 by a student of Shimooka Renjo, pioneer Shimoda photographer.

The Legend of Okichi

It is a tale with all the elements to pluck the heartstrings. Every Japanese knows it. It has spawned novels and plays, movie after movie, song after song. . . . It is a moving story, and who can begrudge people a story that means so much to them? But it is not a true story.

Oliver Statler, "*Shimoda Story*"

The truth doesn't matter much here. For almost a hundred years Japanese have flocked to Okichi's grave site, above, which lies at Hofukuji Temple off Shimoda's main street. She was buried as a pauper, and her modest grave can be seen under a bright-green Japanese black pine in the patio of a museum devoted to her life. Four other monuments were erected alongside by rich Japanese who felt she deserved better. Commodore Perry steamed into Shimoda with his "Black Ships" in the 1850s, effectively "opening" Japan after two and a half centuries of xenophobic isolation. A treaty important in early Japanese-American relations was concluded here. On the other side of the harbor, America's first counsel general to Japan, Townsend Harris, established a diplomatic outpost at Gyokusenji Temple in 1856. And yet Okichi, a teenage sailor's wench from a poor family, holds central stage in the Shimoda drama. Forevermore she will be seen by Japanese as a beautiful *geisha* who was sacrificed to barbarian lust for the sake of her country. And in a sense, she was. Not everything in the legend is fanciful nonsense. Okichi was indeed pressured by 19th Century shogunate officials into becoming the mistress of randy Townsend Harris, who was then in his mid-50s. Generally Okichi is described as 17 years old when this happened, which doesn't sound too bad given the times and customs. But those accounts were based on the way Japanese ages were determined prior to World War II. Okichi was born in November 1841, and she was considered one year old on the day she was born. Six weeks later, on January 1, she became two years old. Thus, when Okichi slipped into Harris's bed in 1857, she was actually just 15 years old. A dirty old man was representing America at this crucial time. The legend says Okichi nursed Harris through a critical illness, found milk for him, saved him from an assassin, loved him and sank into depression when he left her to the scorn of townsfolk. In truth, she served only three days at Gyokusenji Temple, quickly dismissed because of a skin eruption that Harris found suspicious. As an alcoholic, syphilitic hag at age 48, now the village madwoman, she drowned in Shimoda's Inozawa River. She probably slipped and fell while in an alcoholic stupor, but legend says she committed suicide in deep sorrow. Who knows? In such cases, legends always prevail.

Shimoda

Daffodils at Shimoda's Tsumekizaki Coastal Park. It is early February, a bit chilly, but spring cannot be far away. Yoshi can never see enough blossoms. My eyes, however, go straight to her 66-year-old legs, still shapely. I've always been a leg man. The photo of me, also taken at the park, is thrown in simply because I like it. Lambswool hat, cashmere muffler, a bad habit in one hand, a fat journal in the other — that's me or what I believe to be me. The falcon's-eye view of Shimoda, below, cries out for photographic comparison with earlier times. A 1961 photo of Shimoda, taken from this very spot, was mounted inside the ropeway station where I stood. It inspired me to snap an updated 2003 picture. The mountains looked the same after 42 years, but a patchwork of rice paddies covered a full two-thirds of this inland portion of the town then, and now there were none.

Mustard

A huge field of flowering mustard plants (only a fifth of which can be seen in the photo at right) lies alongside the road to Shimogamo *onsen* near the tip of the Izu Peninsula. This is the same mustard that grows wild in Southern California. Yoshi thinks the Shimogamo field exists for the sole purpose of dazzling tourists. Poppycock, I say. Arable land in Japan is too valuable for that. I probe. Do Japanese eat it? Well, yes, she says, it can be stir-fried with other edibles and it can also be boiled, chopped and put into *miso* soup. Ah ha, I say. On this day we were on our way to Irozaki, a fishing village at the southern-most point of Izu. There, I got a chance to eat some more *sazae no tsuboyaki*, large chewy sea snails cooked in their shells, an addiction in the making. And we encountered a situation that we just can't believe will be allowed to continue in a land where animals are cherished. See below.

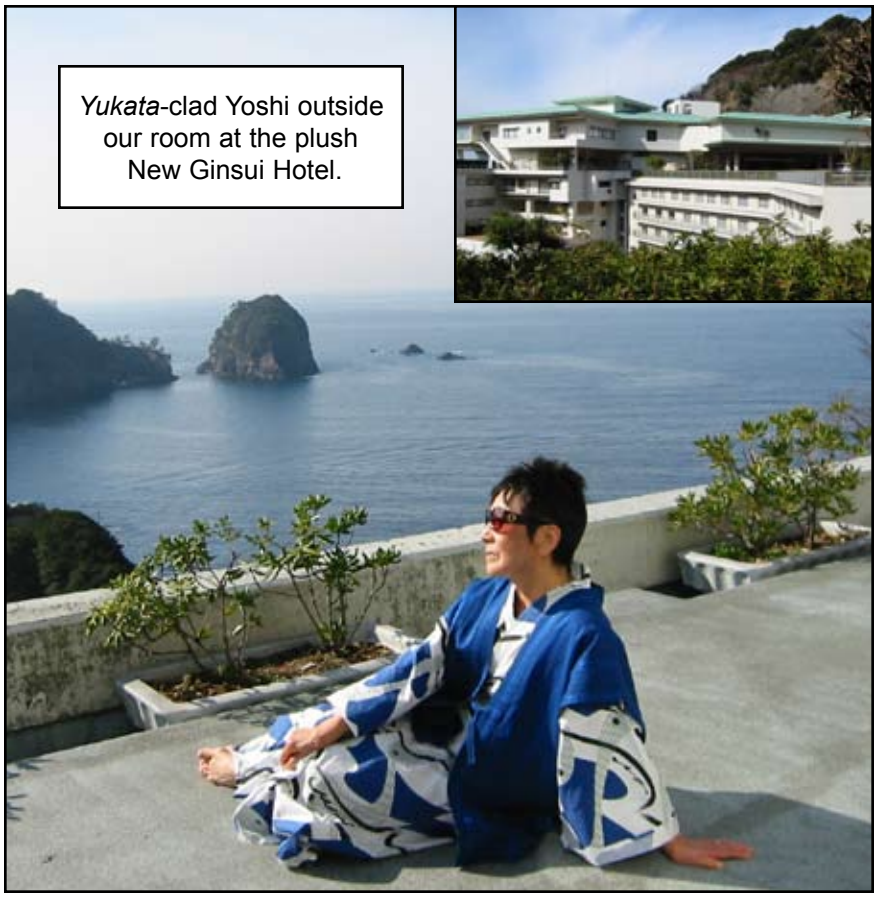
Hungry Monkeys

I wish this were a happy story and the picture at left better. While balancing myself on the deck of a rolling tour boat, I snapped this fuzzy photo of island monkeys running along the shore to grab sweet potatoes thrown to them by the boat crew. The monkey at bottom left has a baby clinging to her stomach. These are long-tailed monkeys imported from Taiwan and placed on this barren islet as a tourist attraction. Unlike short-tailed Japanese monkeys, they can't swim and thus can't escape to the nearby mainland, which is precisely why they were kidnapped from their homeland. The company that imprisoned them has gone bankrupt, and they are no longer cared for in a humane way. They wait for the tour boat and fight over scraps. You see, the boat doesn't come in bad weather. No tourists, no food for the starving tribe.

Hot Water

This is the sort of thing in which Yoshi has absolutely no interest. If it's not pretty, she doesn't want to see it. But both days at Shimogamo's Ikona *ryokan*, I ventured behind the inn to ponder the source of all that hot water in the bathing pools. At left, a maintenance guy checks the inn's *gensen*. There is no heating going on here. What the earth spews up, the bathers get. Below is the men's *rotemburo* or open-air bath, with steamy water flowing in between the rocks. The clear water magnifies the flagstones so that the pool looks like it is suitable only for wading. Actually, if you sit your naked ass down, you are up to your neck.

Dogashima



Yukata-clad Yoshi outside our room at the plush New Ginsui Hotel.

The sun rises from Sagami Bay on the Izu Peninsula's eastern coast, where we spent ten days. Now, at Dogashima on the western coast, we can watch it sink into Suruga Bay, which we did on the first evening of our stay at the New Ginsui Hotel. Yoshi loves the New Ginsui. We spent a couple of days here last spring, and we came back this winter for two more days. The place is opulent and its shops are full of "nice things." Yoshi bought me still another turtle-shell bolo tie. The shell is so highly polished that it looks like plastic, but never mind. Such jewelry, she says, will get scarce and thus more expensive because sea turtles can't be hunted anymore. Me? I don't care much for the New Ginsui. It's too big and glossy, reminding me of what can be found in Tokyo or Las Vegas. I prefer little Japanese inns where I can imagine myself as a kimonoed Edo-era traveler writing *haiku* with a brush loaded from an ink stone. But here I am, and here is an excerpt from my ballpoint-pen journal, addressed to my dead daughter as all my Japan journals are.

Saturday, Feb. 8 — What can one say about 6,000 pots of orchids, each a little different or even very different from the other? At the Orchid Sanctuary in Dogashima, I saw a red papa orchid and a white mama orchid, and between them sat a red and white baby orchid as yet unnamed by its progenitors. The sight reminded me of you, Kei, an orchid mixture of the two of us. As I write this, I am drinking Sapporo beer at an octagonal bar in the obscenely ornate atrium of this huge hotel, with a noisy game room on one side and an even noisier nightclub on the other. A couple of bright elevators crawl up and down a tall wall. Escalators delineated by neon tubes carry people to and from the largest bathing pools I have ever seen. Slot machines whirl and click. A *ramen* shop serves noodle dishes to those who inexplicably failed to get enough to eat at 12-course dinners in their rooms. Across the atrium, dark and lonely, stands a popcorn wagon with no popcorn. Oh well. I lift my glass in silent prayer: *Please, God, if You exist, allow the red and white orchid to live longer than its parents.*

White mama orchid, red papa orchid, white and red baby orchid.

SHUZENJI

SHUZENJI

For the first time on this second visit to the Izu Peninsula, we headed inland, up from the seashore to ancient Shuzenji in the Amagi mountains. Here, alongside the Katsura River, sprawls the last Japanese inn of our trip, the Kikuya, where we stayed last year. It is a *shinise ryokan*, an old and well-established place. Just upstream from the Kikuya lies *Tokko no Yu*, a hot spring that spews from a huge rock formation poking up from the riverbed. It's the very symbol of Shuzenji. I was shocked to discover that the *Tokko no Yu* structure had been washed away in a recent typhoon. After we bathed in the Kikuya's *ofuro* pools and donned *yukata*, our maid brought the first of our *kaiseki* dinner dishes, and then, at my request, snapped the photo above. Behind us, against a *shoji* screen, a whisky bottle stands next to a jar of instant coffee. I carry both with me from inn to inn. Beer and green tea are plentiful enough at *ryokans*, but the hard stuff and coffee are sometimes rare, or at least not available when wanted. This night I intended to step out onto Shuzenji streets for a bit of bar hopping while Yoshi slept, but I was tired. A drink or two, a few pages of poor Alan Booth's final book on Japan (published posthumously after his colon-cancer death at age 47), and I was sound asleep on *futon* laid out for me on the *tatami*. The next day Yoshi posed on the window sill of our second-floor room so I could capture an image of our "private" garden at the Kikuya. The colorful *koi* that inhabit the pool winding through the garden are dormant this time of year, but they are still there, waiting to get hungry and frisky again as the water warms up.

Another Plum Park

In the heights above Shuzenji lies a plum tree park much like the one in Atami but bigger. As usual, Yoshi was enthralled by the sight of white, pink and purple blossoms. *Very pretty*, I said sincerely, but I was most attracted to a blazing fire in the park, where people were drinking and eating at picnic tables. A guy in a Snoopy apron, below, was serving *aiyu* on a stick, cooked by being stuck upright in the ashes in close proximity to the fire. The sign says: “Be careful. Sparks will burn holes in your clothes.” *Aiyu* are river fish similar to the *iwana* with which I was most familiar. The basic difference is that *iwana* are found only in high mountain rivers, and we were now in low-lying mountains. I skipped the fish because I had to leave room in my stomach for a big dinner at the inn in a couple of hours. But I drank two bottles of hot *sake* and warmed myself at the fire as Yoshi cooed nearby over blossoms.