

Luggage Woes

The first thing we discovered upon arrival in Tokyo was that our hotel overlooking Shinjuku Central Park had changed its name. Century Hyatt Hotel had become Hyatt Regency Tokyo. No big deal. Same ninth-floor Regency Club where I could have breakfast and smoke a cigarette while reading an English-language newspaper. Tokyo has all the comforts of home, and then some. At a little bakery/coffee shop a few steps down the street (photo at lower left), I enjoyed a smoke with my coffee after eating fresh cheese pastry. You can't do that at any restaurant in California. We were ready at last to embark on a 36-day loop tour that would take us far north of Tokyo and bring us back to this very hotel. As Yoshi had planned things, Tokyo was meant to be an overnight rest stop after a long flight from Los Angeles. Just a single night at the Hyatt before boarding a *Shinkansen* bullet train for northern Honshu. But back in America, I had made a happy mistake in booking airline reservations, so we arrived in Tokyo a day early and had two whole nights to kill there instead of just one. Yoshi was annoyed – her budget was busted from the start – but she accepted it readily enough. My mistake gave us additional time in Shinjuku, a lively portion of western Tokyo and familiar stomping grounds for us. We ate dinner both nights at a Shinjuku *sushi* shop that Yoshi had discovered in one of her Japanese magazines. It was a *kaiten* shop with conveyor-belt service. Take what appeals to you as it comes by, and the price is



determined by the color of the plates. Fast-food *sushi* requiring little intercourse with the chefs. Surprisingly fresh and delicious raw and cooked seafood. They even offered *shako*, a striped shrimp-like crustacean, a favorite of mine in my early years in Japan. At below right, Yoshi strikes a pose for my camera. We ate a lot that first night and drank several bottles of hot *sake*. But when the plates were counted, the bill came to only \$65 and the tip was zero because tips are neither expected nor accepted in Japan. Gee, the cost would have been many times that much in Tokyo's snooty Ginza and maybe three times as much at our favorite *sushi* shop back home in Lake Forest. Okay, enough eating and



drinking. It was time to be on our way. The first leg of our journey – 4½ hours on three trains – would take us to Asamushi, a little town on Mutsu Bay at the extreme northern tip of Japan's main island of Honshu. Our destination was a room with a bayside view of a forested conical island named Yunoshima, as seen at right. Now look, we travel with a lot of luggage, too much luggage at our advanced ages, to tell the truth. We were smart enough to send the biggest bag ahead to a hotel we wouldn't reach for more than two weeks. *Takkyubin* is what this marvelous hotel-to-hotel luggage service is called. Still, we were left with too much stuff to carry or roll. Only I noticed this. Yoshi likes to save money by using me as her personal mule. A taxi took us and our heavy luggage to Tokyo Station where we could board a fast *Shinkansen* headed north. Escalators helped us in getting to the right track platform. I huffed and puffed as I stored the baggages into overhead bins, but it was not too bad. We sped through lovely country, mostly farmlands on a coastal plain, interspersed with homes and occasional good-sized towns and small cities. At Hachinohe, three hours later, we had to hustle – only eight minutes between trains. I huffed and puffed again, but there were escalators here, too. Not too bad yet. But then we ran out of escalators as we got deeper and deeper into the sticks. At tiny No-hegi Station, with only four minutes between trains, we faced our first flight of stairs, a long flight up, then a long flight down. Yoshi couldn't manage. I had to drag her baggage up, then go back down to get mine. Same thing on the steps going down to the platform. This last train was more like a trolley than anything else. It gave us our first glimpses of Mutsu Bay and delivered us to teeny-weeny Asamushi Station. No escalators, of course. More huffing and puffing on stairs, dragging and carrying Yoshi's luggage and mine. I was sweating like a pig. Does a pig sweat? I had lost my wind, my dignity and my patience. I told Yoshi that I would never, ever do this again. From now on, *Takkyubin* will do the toting, not me. And that's what happened for the rest of the trip. The people running the Asamushi *ryokan* were not much accustomed to having foreigners – *gaijin* – as guests. They were distressed to learn that I had skipped breakfast on the first morning. *Miso* soup and rice doesn't satisfy me. I went out and bought a cellophane-wrapped sandwich at a convenience store. On the second morning, the proud lady at my shoulder in the photo at right heroically produced fried eggs, thick toast and a mixed salad for me. I didn't tell her that I don't like salad at breakfast either. Rabbit food.



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