



Old Hotels

I like 'em, wherever they are. They are mature and solid with 19th century manners. I'm not talking about the numerous Japanese inns, or *ryokans*, that are much, much older, where guests traipse around in flimsy *yukata*. I'm talking here about grand ol' Western-style hotels mostly built for foreigners when the emperor was called Meiji. In Japan, there are precisely five of them, scattered through the heart of Honshu from Nikko to Nara. During previous Japan trips, Yoshi and I stayed at three of them — the Kanaya in Nikko, the Mampei in Karuizawa and the Fujiya in Hakone. Now, in the spring of 2006, we checked into our fourth, the Nara Hotel in Japan's ancient capital. The Nikko, Karuizawa and Hakone grand hotels are



Our second-floor corner room at the Nara Hotel.

older, but the Nara Hotel has been around since 1909, old enough. Ours was a second-floor corner room located a goodly distance from the main entrance. Our room's three windows looked down on gardens. Sometimes a munching deer could be seen just outside. Fencing around the old hotel is designed to keep the deer out, but it doesn't work. Nara's famous deer have the run of the town, and they go where they please. At right, a youngster accepts a *sembei*-like biscuit offered by Yoshi. The biscuits are sold at stands and billed as official deer food, but I noticed that the deer, like goats, will eat anything, even banana peels. When I say I like the grand hotels of Japan, I don't mean they are truly comfortable. There's no hot springs bathing, and the bathrooms are small and cramped in most cases. Hallways are lined with elaborately framed photos showing Emperor Hirohito and Emperor Akihito during their stays there. Weddings are big business nowadays, invariably conducted in Japanese by Christian ministers. Whenever I see one taking place, I always remark to someone standing nearby: "Japanese are born as Shintoists, married as Christians and die as Buddhists." It's true enough and generally gets a big laugh. Food at these grand hotels is superior, especially for a *gaijin* like me who has



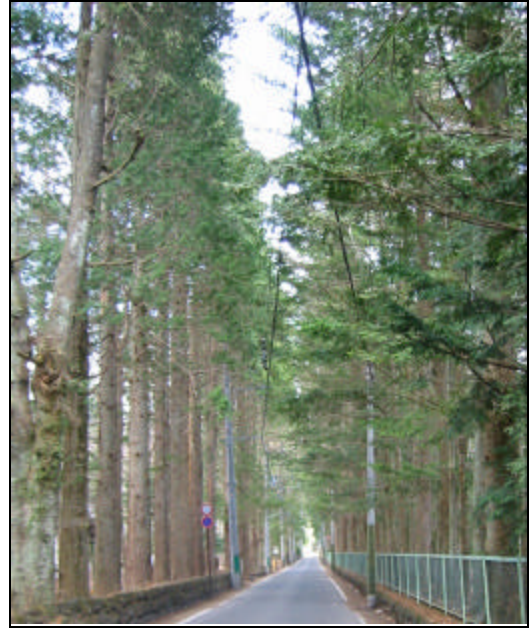
breakfasted on too many soy-soaked fishes and pickled vegetables at Japanese inns in the more remote regions. What a relief to sit down to scrambled eggs, hot cakes and an English newspaper! That's another thing about the grand hotels. Tucked among Japanese newspapers in the lounge is always one in English. You can't find an English newspaper at a *ryokan*, although some madams are kind enough to seek one out for a news-starved American tourist.



Looking Up

In our room at the Nara Hotel, I aimed my camera at the 12-foot-high panel-and-beam ceiling. It wasn't the first time I've done this at an old hotel. Our ancestors, generally shorter than we are, seem to have required more headroom. In Boston six months earlier, our room at Parker House, America's oldest hotel, also had a high ceiling. There is something liberating about this architectural feature, even when the room's floor space seems constricted.

The Others, Very Briefly



In the eight Japan trips that Yoshi and I have made together since 1999, we have never failed to spend a few days at the **Mampeï Hotel** in Karuizawa. It's almost like coming home. We are well-known here and have our "own" room. I can slip into pajamas and scribble in my journal at a modern desk. Sometimes, while gathering my thoughts, I stare out the window at a hillside covered with *karamatsu*, deciduous pine trees. The tall trees also line the road leading to the hotel. It's spring now and the *karamatsu* are greening up, but in the autumn, the roadway is blanketed with rusty fallen pine needles. Below is the **Fujiya** dining room, and an image of the **Kanaya**, the oldest of the five. Someday we will stay at Yokohama's **New Grand Hotel**, and our tour of Japan's old Western hotels will be complete.



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