



## Red Leaves

ELEVEN times in ten years, we have arrived in Gunma Prefecture's Shibukawa city, which boasts of being the "Belly Button of Japan," and then we have taken taxis up a mountain to the spa town of Ikaho. Usually it's a fast trip on a lightly traveled two-lane road, 20 minutes or so, but this time it took longer. Traffic was surprisingly heavy. We asked the cabdriver about it. "People are coming to see the red leaves," he said. He was referring to maple leaves that turn bright red in the autumn if weather conditions are just right, as they were on this trip. Clusters of *momiji*, as maples are called in Japan, are prominent in Ikaho, where we always stay at Kishigon, a hot-springs inn established more than 400 years ago. To enjoy one of the largest clusters, it was only necessary to step out of the inn onto Ikaho's steep stone steps, climb to the top between shops and eateries, and stroll a short distance to an area that was ablaze with red *momiji* leaves. This tourist attraction is lit up on autumn nights, a





beautiful sight, but afternoon was best for us. As old folks, we stick pretty close to Kishigon at night, eating dinners served in our suite, taking baths in Kishigon's iron-rich waters, and chatting with Kishigon's women bartenders downstairs, who have seen us, especially me, so often over the years that we've become friends. We are also friends of their boss, Mineko Kishi, the inn's *okamisan* or general manager. She is a daughter of the founding Kishi family. I'm a foreign VIP at Kishigon, the author of its English-language

website. When Yoshi is planning a Japan trip, she expects me to email Mineko for Kishigon reservations, and Mineko always puts us in "our" suite, named *Kōyō*, which, coincidentally apropos here, means "Red Leaves." When I enter the suite, after being away for many months, I always mutter "*Tadaima*," which means "I have come home." I truly feel that way. This time, within minutes

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of entering the suite, I snapped the photo below, with Yoshi peeking from the alcove. The inset photo, plucked from the inn's website, shows our main room better. Also this time, Mineko gave us a bottle of *sake* champagne and, to me alone, a handsome Shick razor. The razor gift puzzled me. Mineko explained that I, the previous spring, had complained that Kishigon's throw-away razors were no good. Yoshi was appalled: "How could you say such a thing, Jackson?" Gee, I don't know. The truth maybe? Nothing's perfect.

