

Jackson & Yoshi's "Snow Trip"

January-February 2003

During our 31-day Japan vacation, we spent only 11 days in snowy mountains, but snow was the motivation for this winter trip. We wanted to see snow covering landscapes that we have often seen in green spring and colorful autumn. Straight from Narita Airport near Tokyo, we went to Karuizawa in the foothills of the Japan Alps, mostly by *Shinkansen* bullet train.



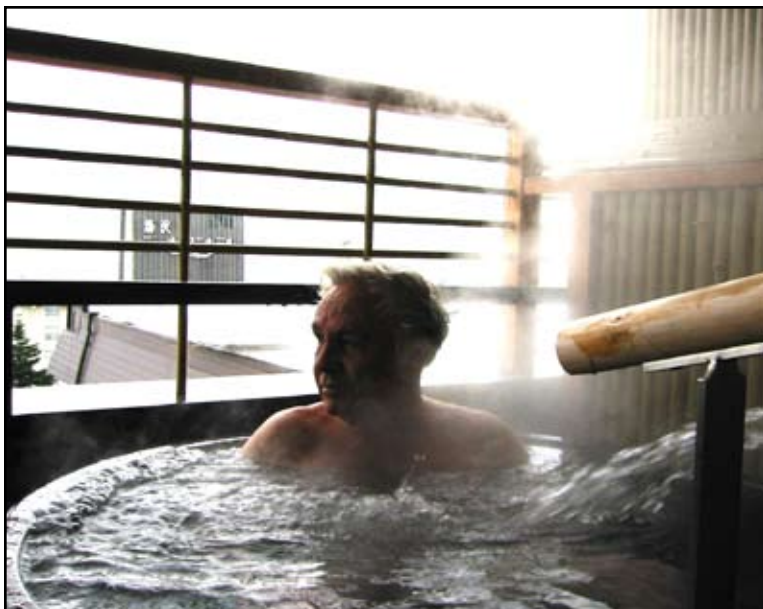
Karuizawa is one of our very favorite places. While there, we like to go restaurant hopping. A little *gyoza* here, a little *yaki-tori* there. In this photo, we are patronizing a small *izakaya*, an eating and drinking shop. Notice the ashtray in front of me. At our previous stop, just after we had placed our order for *gyoza*, we learned that no smoking was allowed. I was highly annoyed. "I get enough of that shit in California," I said. We never let that happen again.

Yoshi is in silhouette here, but the point of the photo is to show the Mampei Hotel's dining room garden under eight inches of snow. We are well known at the Mampei, an old establishment in Karuizawa. We have our "own" room here. The hotel is Western — as opposed to the Japanese inns where we usually stay — but it gives us a break from living on *tatami*, sleeping on *futon*, and eating *kaiseki* meals on low tables. The latter requires more knee-joint suppleness than I and even Yoshi possess nowadays.





Snow Country



At a Yuzawa inn, I soaked in a steamy open-air tub just outside our room. Hot spring water, perhaps 110 degrees, poured in from a bamboo spout. The Tanigawa mountains (above) looked much like a Chinese watercolor. “Only” two feet of snow covered uncleared areas, but more snow would fall the next day. This is “Snow Country,” the very heart of it, made famous the world over by Nobel laureate Yasunari Kawabata’s masterpiece, a 1930s novel entitled — what else? — “*Yuki Guni*,” which means “Snow Country.” Cold winds from Siberia pick up moisture over the Japan Sea and dump it as snow when they hit the Tanigawas. I quoted from Kawabata’s famous opening sentence when I first caught sight of Yuzawa: “*Soko wa Yuki Guni de ata!*” In English: “There it is! Snow Country!”



Still in Yuzawa in Niigata Prefecture, still at the Futaba hot springs hotel, but ready to check out. It is snowing vigorously outside the lobby lounge, and snow is piling up behind us on a rope-supported pine tree that hangs over a pool at the base of a waterfall. Between us is Mitsue Igarashi, Yoshi's childhood friend, owner of a Minakami liquor and confectionary shop. They hadn't seen each other for more than 50 years. Despite snowy roads, Mitsue had come with her driver to pick us up and take us to Gunma Prefecture on the southern side of the Tanigawa mountains. In the 1940s, Mitsue's well-to-do family lived on a farm near Yoshi's family home in Gunma's Komochi Village. As a kid, Yoshi

often visited her and ate good things prepared by her mom. It was still snowing when we got to Mitsue's large shop on Minakami's main street. From our previous trips, we are quite familiar with Minakami. We have walked past Mitsue's successful shop several times without knowing the business belonged to her. She took us to a *soba* shop for buckwheat noodles and *tempura*. I'm not a noodle man. I took only a couple of grudging bites of cold noodles — while Yoshi and Mitsue slurped huge amounts of the stuff — but I gobbled up the *Shiitake* mushroom *tempura*, a specialty of the little restaurant, which was built by one of Mitsue's ex-employees on land she donated.



Ikaho

I like the photo at left. It may be my favorite of the trip. Yoshi was putting on makeup, and she was not aware I was snapping the picture. The *keyaki* tree outside the window, where a flying squirrel lives in a hole and sometimes pokes his head out, is delineated by the snow sticking to its limbs. This is our suite at Ikaho's Kishigon inn. I have stayed here four times, Yoshi five times. The first time for Yoshi was 30 years ago with our daughter Kei, just six years old then and, now, dead for the same number of years.

The Kishigon suite is quite large. Two *tatami*-floored rooms, each with a Western-style alcove. A *hinoki* bathing tub with a view of mountains. A toilet with not only a digital commode but a urinal. Another room with double wash basins. A refrigerator, wet bar, etc. By the way, I am a VIP at 400-year-old Kishigon. Why? Well, I am the author of the inn's English-language web site (http://www.kishigon.co.jp/html/top_en.html), which praises its iron-rich bath waters and traditional Japanese dining. The web pages are credited for attracting many guests from Hong Kong and Taipei. "Kishigon has become an international hotel!" exclaimed *Okami-san* Mineko Kishi when she greeted us on arrival. This time, as in the past, Mineko and her friend Kazuko (my rich sister-in-law who owns a hospital down the mountain) picked up the entire cost of our three days here, including my substantial bar bills at the club downstairs.

A shop on Ikaho's famed Ishidan Dori ("Street of Stone Steps") sells scarves featuring the designs of Yumeji Takehisa, a Japanese artist who was well-known in the 1920s and still has a following. On previous visits Yoshi bought a number of these scarves, mostly as gifts for women friends, and here she holds one of them while purchasing nine more from the shop owner. I took the photo between sips of green tea and puffs on a cigarette. Shopping in Japan is not half bad.



Komochi Village

Yoshi considers herself a cosmopolitan Tokyoite, because Tokyo is where she matured as a high school and university student, where she spent several independent years as a popular bachelorette, where she eventually met a handsome American newspaperman and married him. Her origins, however, are rustic, although highly privileged. She was, still is, the *imoto* or youngest sister/daughter of the prominent *samurai*-descended Iizuka family of Komochi Village in Gunma Prefecture. When signing her name, Yoshi writes “Yoshiko I. Sellers,” with the “I” standing for Iizuka. The village is only a few miles from the Ikaho inn where we were staying. Of course, as on previous Japan visits, we went there. Fresh flowers were placed and smoking incense sticks were offered at the snow-covered graves of Yoshi’s mother and father, her oldest brother, her grandpar-



Mr. and Mrs. Jackson Sellers, Tokyo, 1965

ents, the baby brother who died, etc. All were Buddhist/Shintoist. Yoshi is the only Christian in this family. Don’t tell anybody, but a small portion of our daughter’s ashes, taken from the urn in our California home, are scattered in the Iizuka cemetery. It seemed appropriate to us, although surely illegal and never disclosed to our Japanese relatives. They loved Kei, too, but they would not have approved. Certainly Kei was not forgotten as her mother prayed at lower left. Just up the hill from the cemetery was the home of Tsutae Ochie, another of Yoshi’s childhood friends. We dropped in for tea. Ochie is Tsutae’s family name. Her husband adopted her name as his own. Smart man. After all, she owns the house and lands.





Above, the Iizuka family crest, meaning "Many Mountains." Below, the present-day entrance to the compound, which once was supported by numerous tenant farmers.



The Gate House, uphill view, with portion of Big House visible at right.



Big House at left, Gate House in background.



Gate House, streamside view. A truck can drive through it.

Old Plantation

Halfway into Yoshi's reunion with Tsutae, I excused myself and tramped through the snow to the compound where the Iizuka family reigned for hundreds of years. Again, our Kei's secret ashes are scattered here, where she was pampered as a baby and child more than 30 years ago when the structures, themselves "only" 200 years old, were still occupied by Iizukas. Snow lay as a beautifying blanket on everything. The *nagayamon* or "long gate house," where Yoshi was born, stands proud. It was grandly refurbished in 1999, mostly to serve as a country getaway for the eldest son of Yoshi's banker brother. The brother's earthly remains lie in the cemetery down the hill while his wealth goes marching on. The Big House, abandoned now, is only opened up when architectural students come to tour it. Yoshi doesn't want me to photograph it. Its rundown image makes her sad. But I take photos anyway. I don't listen to my wife all that much. The Gate House, too, is considered rare in Japanese architectural circles. That's because it sits on the bank of a stream instead of being high and dry like other *nagayamons*. But never mind that stuff. Notice the Japanese black pine stretching its tortured limbs over the stream bank. It looks exactly as it did 60 years ago, Yoshi says. We change, we die, but black pines go on forever.



Shima

More snow, everywhere we go. That's okay. It's the theme of this trip. At left, I pick up a handful from the balcony railing at Shima's Yamaguchi-kan inn in northwestern Gunma Prefecture. At lower left, Yoshi admires snow-covered limbs hanging over the small Shima River that flows alongside the hotel. I am wearing a *yukata* cotton *kimono* and a *hanten* jacket that serves nicely inside the inn and even outside in mild weather. But since this was chilly late January and I wanted to go out for a drink or two, I donned a woolen *doteru*, as seen below. The *doteru* goes over the *yukata*, and the *hanten* goes over that. The white *tabi* socks are designed to accommodate *geta* thongs between the big and second toes. Now I'm dressed for a bit of gentlemanly bar hopping in snowy streets and alleys. Where did I put my *samurai* swords?





Kusatsu

If I had known I was going to prepare this album and distribute it to friends, I would have taken more photos while I was in Japan. Now, here I am, back home, laying out a couple of pages on Kusatsu, which is perhaps the most famous *onsen* (hot springs spa) in the country, and I didn't have a readily available digital image of the town's heart and soul, Yubatake! On this trip — my fifth as an old man and my first as a digital camera owner — I stupidly failed to take photographs of many things I had photographed previously with my old film camera. Yubatake is Kusatsu's *gensen*, the town's "original source" of hot bathing water. I revisited Yubatake, of course. Once again I sniffed the sulphur that pervades the plaza. But I didn't take a photo. The images shown here were scanned from a previous visit. Very hot water rises from the bowels of the earth in the area that can be seen, at left, just above and beyond Yoshi's head. The mineral-rich water is cooled and filtered as it flows 114 feet through seven wooden troughs. Below, the water gushes from the troughs and tumbles into a pool from which it is pumped to dozens of Japanese inns, where guests sink into it for their pleasure and their health.



The Streets of Kusatsu

Kusatsu lies on a high plateau in Gunma Prefecture, surrounded by mountains. It is famous for its very hot bathing waters. Once, when I complained that the baths at Hoshii, another Gunma *onsen*, were tepid, my octogenarian Japanese brother-in-law replied: “Hoshii is too cold, Kusatsu is too hot.” While scalding baths

are the big attraction in Kusatsu, shopping and eating are close behind. This page is a hodgepodge of tourist photos, without a common theme, without a unifying thread, but so what?



Each time I visit Kusatsu I stop at the leather shop that sold me a billfold several years ago. Either the leathersmith himself or his wife (at left here) polishes the billfold, which is supposed to last for the rest of my life. The image of a Gunma horse (the name Gunma means “Many Horses”) is carved into the leather. When I bought the wallet, I innocently suggested that the intricate design must have been stamped rather than carved. The leathersmith was insulted, but he has forgiven me.



There’s no reason for the photo above except that the woman, a shop huckster, gave me an *omanju* and a cup of tea — and she had a great smile. Unfortunately I didn’t capture the smile.



When visiting Kusatsu’s Sainokawaru Park, we always drop into this small shop for coffee, tea or whatever. We are sitting at an *irori* where a kettle hangs over glowing charcoal. The sign says: “Please don’t throw trash into the *irori*.” Boors everywhere must be cautioned to be nice.



Yoshi buys *tsukudani*, greeneries cooked in sugared soy sauce and white wine and eaten as a garnish on rice. It smells awful and tastes almost as bad. Our refrigerator has pots of the stuff. I hate it, but Yoshi has never met a Japanese foodstuff she didn’t like.