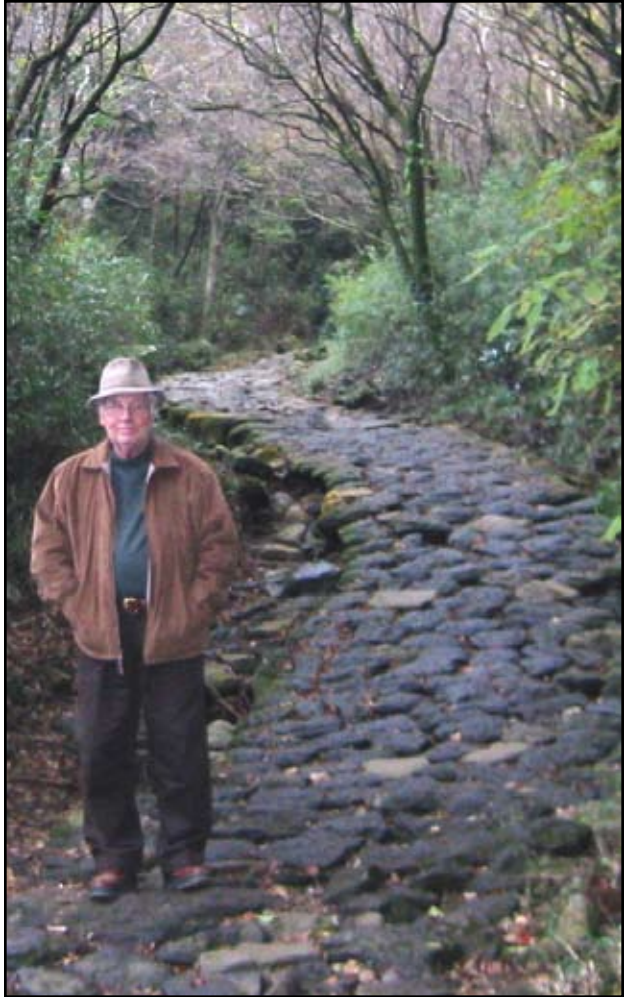


Tokaido Road

I have a confession to make. I was plodding along a preserved section of the 400-year-old Tokaido Road near Hakone Town at the south end of Lake Ashi. Walking on the stones was tough going, and the town was still quite a distance away. At one point, I crossed a modern highway, asked Yoshi to snap the photo at right, and hailed a passing taxicab. The taxi took me to a place where I could pick up the last hundred yards of the famous road. From there, it was all downhill to the lakefront town. I'm no fool. I have 73-year-old legs. Long-ago travelers would have done the same thing if there had been any taxis back then. The Hakone section of the 300-mile Tokaido Road was seen as the most difficult of the entire trip. There were mountains to cross. Lake Ashi, which Hakone Town overlooks, is a crater lake created eons ago when a huge volcano lost its top in a cataclysmic eruption. Actually, there were palanquins hundreds of years ago for those who could afford them. Ancient taxis, sort of. We pilgrims just do the best we can.



A network of highways radiated from Tokyo (then called Edo) in Tokugawa Japan (1600-1867). Except for the road going straight north, all led to Kyoto, the site of the imperial court. Edo's military dictatorship managed traffic at checkpoints along the corridors. At left, numerous checkpoints are marked with white tags. The most heavily traveled road was the Tokaido, which ran through Hakone along the Pacific Ocean coast.

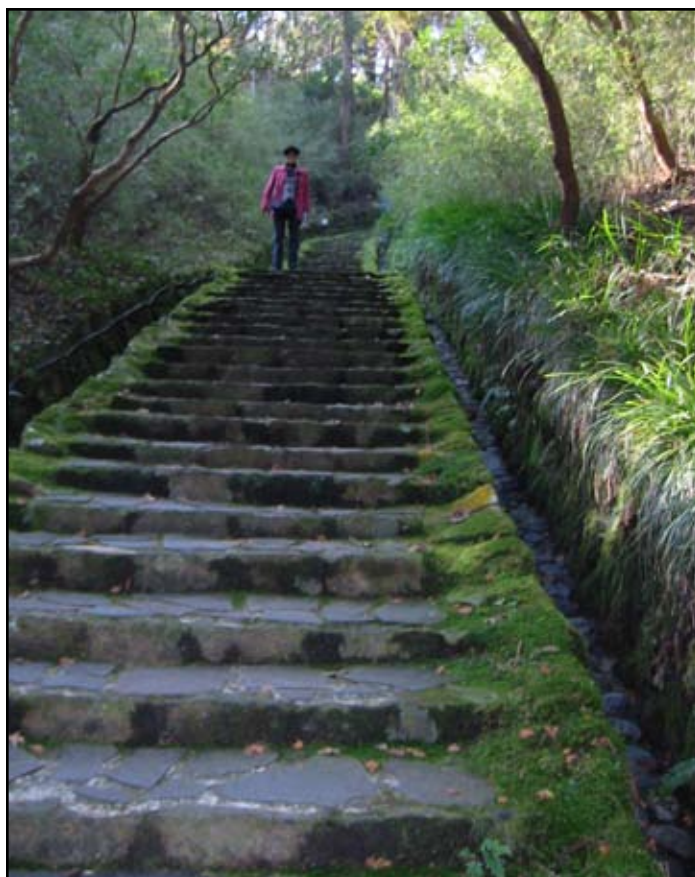


I tend to think of the Tokaido Road as being 400 years old, but it is actually hundreds of years older than that. Japanese have always needed a path between western Honshu, where their civilization first flourished, and eastern Honshu, to which politics and warfare took their government about eight hundred years ago. Warlords established dictatorships in

Kamakura and then in Edo. It was Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first Tokugawa *Shogun*, who created the 53 Tokaido checkpoint stations between Edo and Kyoto in the early 17th century. Perhaps the most important was the Hakone checkpoint, which looked like the thatched-roof model shown above. Woe to undocumented travelers who tried to sneak around it. Death on the spot was the penalty.



At left, Japanese tourists peek into Hakone's reconstructed checkpoint complex. Pardon me if I prefer the thatched-roof original. But despite the modern jeans and jackets, we can visualize the tourists here as 18th century Tokaido Road travelers lining up at the Hakone checkpoint to get their documents approved. Nobody could travel without permission in those days. Women leaving the Edo capital were especially scrutinized. They might be homesick hostages, the wives of lords from outlying provinces. The *Shogun* required them and their children to live in Edo within striking distance. This encouraged lords to behave.



Oh God, more stone steps, lots of them, and I paused often, once yelling to spry Yoshi to stop and pose for the photograph at left. But this was the only way to get from the Hakone checkpoint to a little park overlooking Lake Ashi. The park is famous for showing an upside-down reflection of Mt. Fuji on the lake's surface. But we didn't see it this day. Although the atmosphere was clear enough, the huge lake was too wind-ruffled to reflect anything. On the other side of the lake, to the left of Yoshi's head in the photo above, was our Yamano Hotel. We liked this Western-style hotel with its Lake Ashi and Mt. Fuji views and its Japanese-style bathing facilities. As always, I was the only foreigner around, and Japanese guests wanted to talk to me, give me treats and get photographed with me. I have never fully understood this, but it happens often. Japanese are gracious.

Excerpted from the journal of Jackson Sellers, November 2004