

# Twin Towns



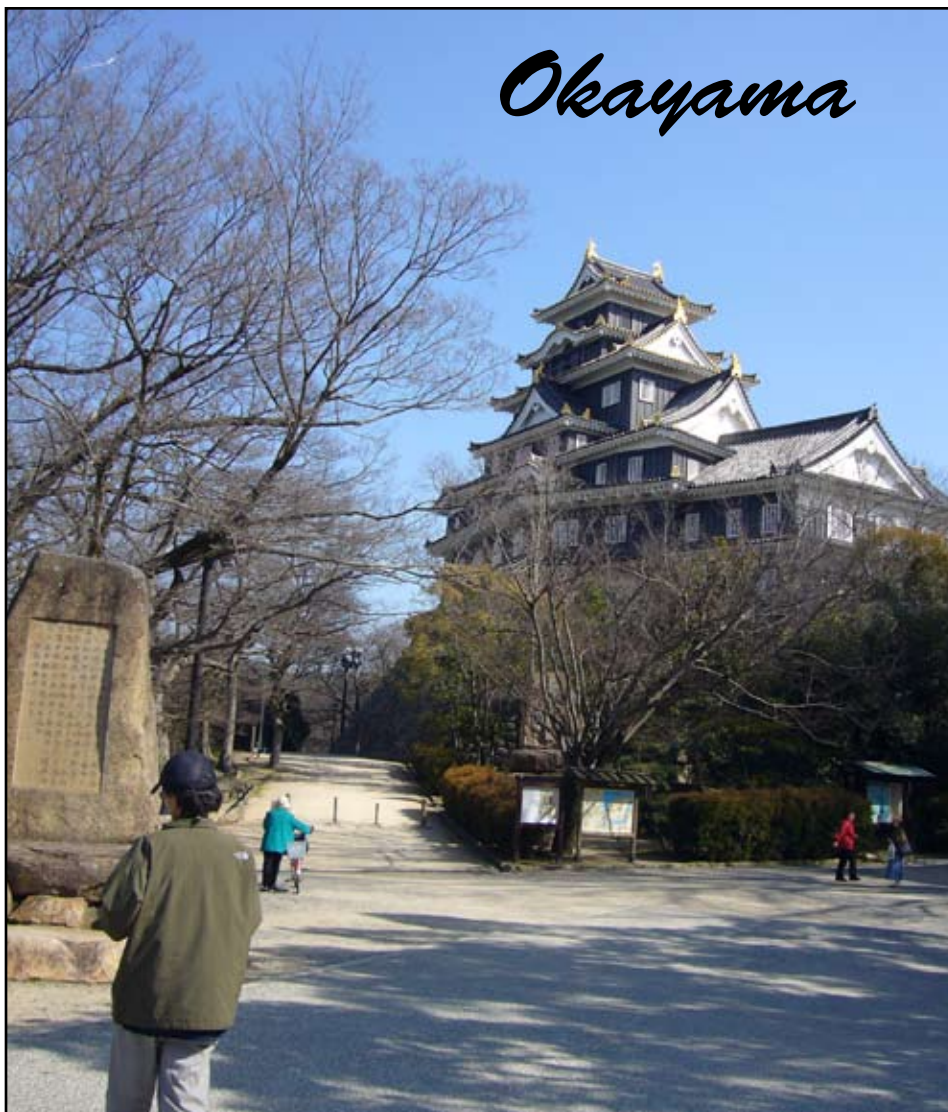
HALFWAY between Osaka and Hiroshima, on the Inland Sea coast, lie Kurashiki and Okayama, virtually next to each other. They are cities, of course, but I prefer to think of them as towns, the way they were several hundred years ago. Then, Kurashiki was a down-to-earth mercantile town, with barges of rice moving through its canals, the rice destined for far-off ports, while Okayama was a castle town managed by *samurai* bureaucrats. Yoshi and I stayed in Kurashiki, settling into a boutique Western-style hotel. Just down the street was a joint where I could get *yakitori* to go with my beer and cigarettes. *Yakitori* is chicken chunks and chicken innards broiled on skewers. Truth be known, I prefer pork *yakitori*, which I enthusiastically ate as a young man a decade or so after World War II, but it's hard to find now, being considered low class. Kurashiki was never bombed during WWII, as big cities were, so it retains the ambience of Old Japan. We shopped and lunched at shops fronting the canals. The willow trees, which normally grace the canals, were dormant and stunted in mid-March, having been pruned during the winter. Farther down the canal pictured at left, we entered an antique store and Yoshi purchased a Noh devil's mask for a Mendocino couple, an *omiyage*, a gift brought back from a trip. I was doubtful about it. Would the







rather large wooden mask fit in our luggage? But Yoshi managed, as she always does. How does the old joke go? Yoshi decides the little things in our lives, like where we will live, the car we will buy, the food we will eat, etc., and I make the important decisions, like who will be president of the United States. The photo at left, with me leaning on a bridge balustrade, is thrown in here just to show the lattice decorations on Kurashiki buildings in the background. I'm no architectural expert, but I've seen such lattice trimmings only in Shimoda near the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula, far to the east. I suspect that Shimoda and Kurashiki, both seaports, exchanged bits of their culture over the centuries. I like the notion. I'm fond of Shimoda, too. When we made an excursion to Okayama to see the castle, I was feeling sickish. Yoshi complained that I was moving like an old man. Well, that's what I felt like. It had been only a couple of days since the 16-hour flight aboard two jets that carried us from California to Osaka. Damned airplanes. Bugs and viruses are circulated and recirculated throughout the cabin. I caught one of them and it was attacking me. Laryngitis was part of it. Yoshi kept saying my voice was funny, although it sounded okay to me as it reverberated inside my skull. During our two days in the twin towns, I searched for anything written in English, anything at all. No luck. This was Japan for the Japanese. To hell with rare *gaijin* like me. Finally, at the park featuring the Okayama castle, I spotted a lonely English-language sign. It said, "Keep off the grass."



## Okayama

**JACKSON SELLERS**  
**Lake Forest, California**  
**April 2009**