

We Went Anyway

By JACKSON SELLERS
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Yoshi and I were treated like VIPs in Japan. We arrived in Tokyo only a week and a half after the horrendous March 11 earthquake and tsunami in the Tohoku coastal region north of the capital. Resident foreigners, fearful of radiation, were getting out or had already done so, and 75% of expected foreign visitors – Americans, Australians, Chinese, Koreans, etc. – had canceled their hotel reservations. Also, Japanese in the Tokyo metropolitan region, normally avid tourists, were staying at home, hunkered down so to speak, patriotically donating their vacation money to beleaguered Tohoku, where many were homeless. Thus, Yoshi and I were warmly welcomed at hotels everywhere, then promptly upgraded to more expensive rooms and suites. *No extra charge, Mr. Sellers.* It started at our very first stop, Tokyo's deluxe Imperial Hotel a short distance from the Ginza. We had booked a nice \$600 room but they put us into a nicer and bigger \$700 room. Why not? There were plenty of empty ones. These hotel upgrades continued throughout our five-week Japan tour, most of which was spent in Kyushu, the southernmost major island, far from Tokyo and even farther from the troubled Fukushima nuclear plant. In a sense, we benefited from the disaster, but lots of our money went into Japanese hands.

Poor Japan. Nationwide, it was in a deep depression. The quake/tsunami/nuclear impact was seen right away upon our arrival at Narita International about 40 miles north of Tokyo. People at the airport were few – there had been many empty seats on our incoming American Airlines plane – and never before had we cleared the Japanese immigration process so quickly. On the bus into Tokyo, things looked different, grayer, subdued. We saw no gaudy neon signs, since power from Fukushima had been lost and businesses were conserving electricity, were even required to do so. The first restaurant we entered that night, an *izakaya* tavern near the Imperial Hotel, disappointed me. I wanted to eat *yakitori*, broiled chicken nuggets on a stick, but they had no chicken, at least none of the livers and gizzards that I adore. Their chicken supplies came from Tohoku, and the distribution routes up there had been disrupted by the quake. So we ate a bit of fried pork, washed down with beer and *sake*, and

moved to a different little restaurant. Ah, this one had what I wanted – chicken livers and gizzards sprinkled with red pepper. Delicious. You see, their chicken supplies came from undisturbed Kyushu, where we were headed. The next night in Tokyo, we wandered over to a famous Ginza intersection. Usually it is ablaze with monstrous animated digital billboards, an awesome sight. Not now, though, not even when we departed from Japan five weeks later. Energy conservation reigned. If it didn't, there would be rolling blackouts throughout the capital. Japanese pedestrians on Ginza sidewalks were sparse, but shoppers in the huge Mitsukoshi department store seemed plentiful enough.

People were also plentiful in the restaurants. No matter what's happening, they've got to eat. We had to take a rear table at the popular Midori sushi shop on the Ginza Corridor alongside the raised Yurakucho train tracks. Incidentally, this was quite near the beneath-the-tracks newsroom where I once worked as an *Asahi Evening News* movie columnist and general assignments reporter. God, that was 50 years ago! I wasn't truly hungry at the Midori, but I ate some fine *chutoro sashimi*, fatty raw tuna, and was served the specialty of the shop, *anago* sushi. I had eaten *anago*, or sea eel, before, but this serving surprised me, amazed me. Normally a cooked sliver of eel is placed on a finger of vinegared rice, and you pick it up and eat it. But this was no mere sliver. It was at least eight inches long and two inches wide. The rice finger beneath it raised a hump in the middle of it. Picking it up wouldn't work. Chopsticks or a fork was required.

The next morning we checked out, after only two nights at the Imperial, and took a taxi to Tokyo's Haneda airport. The old Haneda, recently expanded and refurbished, has been reclassified as an international airport, just like Narita, but we were there to catch a domestic flight to Nagasaki. Unlike what I went through at Los Angeles International two days earlier, I was not asked to remove my shoes, my jacket or my hat to clear security. A two-hour Japan Airlines flight and a one-hour bus ride took us into downtown Nagasaki in southwestern Japan. Our grand Kyushu adventure had begun.



In the immediate wake of the big quake and tsunami, Ginza stores and restaurants seemed sufficiently crowded. Shopping was brisk at the Mitsukoshi department store, as my snapshot above shows. Below, at a nearby sushi shop, Yoshi and I had to sit at a rear table. We would have preferred the sushi bar up front, where we could watch the chefs work.

