

Japan for the Japanese

On the night before we journeyed to “Old Japan,” while we were still at Ikaho’s Kishigon *ryokan* in eastern Honshu, Yoshi asked me to raise the volume on the television set. I inspected the remote control in vain, looking for symbols or Roman letters identifying the button that increased the TV volume. Finally I asked her for help. “It’s so obvious,” Yoshi said impatiently, and she pointed to a button that looked like this:

音量大

Easy for her to say. If I was having trouble on the familiar Tokyo side of the Japan Alps, what could I expect on the Sea of Japan side, where foreigners are pampered even less? In the Tokyo metropolitan area and much of the sprawling Kanto region in which the capital lies, romanized signs identify businesses and shops — “Asano Machinery Co.,” “Orchid Coffee Shop” and so forth. Not so where we were going. During a long trip on four different trains, we raced along the Sea of Japan coast, mostly through farmlands and communities stretching from the shore to the foothills of distant snow-capped mountains. Sunshine and blue skies were a welcome relief from the gray Kanto drizzle of the past week. But it was at this point, as I gazed out the train window, that I began to get a clear picture of what awaited me. All the signboards were in Japanese only. No Roman characters to help out a semi-illiterate *gaijin* like me. I scribbled in my journal: “This is Japan for the Japanese.”



I’m not a complete dunce. At Yamashiro, our first stop in “Old Japan,” I could read the *hiragana* syllables on the roof of the shop in the photo at left. “Bengaraya,” it said, but that was just its name and didn’t suggest what kind of shop it was. So Yoshi pointed to characters that meant “coffee.” Look, “koohii” in simple *katakana* has been familiar to me for nearly 50 years, but here it was rendered in complex ideographs! Tokyo-bred boy that I was, I had never before seen them. Like Dorothy and Toto, we were not in Kansas anymore.

I was the only foreigner here, as I am almost everywhere I go outside of Tokyo, but I was not the only tourist who had difficulty recognizing shops for what they were. Even Yoshi, a Japanese native who had never been this far west on the main island of Honshu, had trouble in this ancient Kaga region of Ishikawa Prefecture. Places that looked like private homes would turn out to be shops selling pottery or something else if you just mustered up enough nerve to slide open the door. Guidebooks written in Japanese for Japanese tourists recommend doing exactly that. *Open the door and peek inside. Take off your shoes if the floor is tatami.* Lacquerware, pottery, silk and even candy are famous Ishikawa products, but modern marketing techniques, including blatant neon and signboards, have not been much imported from highly commercial Tokyo and Osaka. I found it charming. Below, just outside the Yamashiro municipal bathhouse, young people perform dances that hark back a thousand years. Only four dancers are shown here, but there were at least 20 in the troupe. The yellow sign at upper left advertises boiled eggs from the hot *onsen* water. The characters on the roadway tell motorists to stop for pedestrians or, in this case, for dancers.



Araya Ryokan

Our Yamashiro hotel, the 20-room Araya, as seen at right, has been in operation for 800 years, although its appearance has changed many times over the centuries. The boxy structure to the right in the photo houses the inn's hot springs source. This *gensen*, as it is called, produces much more hot mineral water than the inn needs, so five additional rooms were being built while we were there, and each will offer private bathing as compared to the communal bathing available elsewhere in the inn. Our room, shown below with Yoshi sitting in an alcove overlooking a woody embankment, was unique in our experience. Although thoroughly Japanese, it had a Chinese flavor. It was the only room in the hotel with red walls. The story I got was

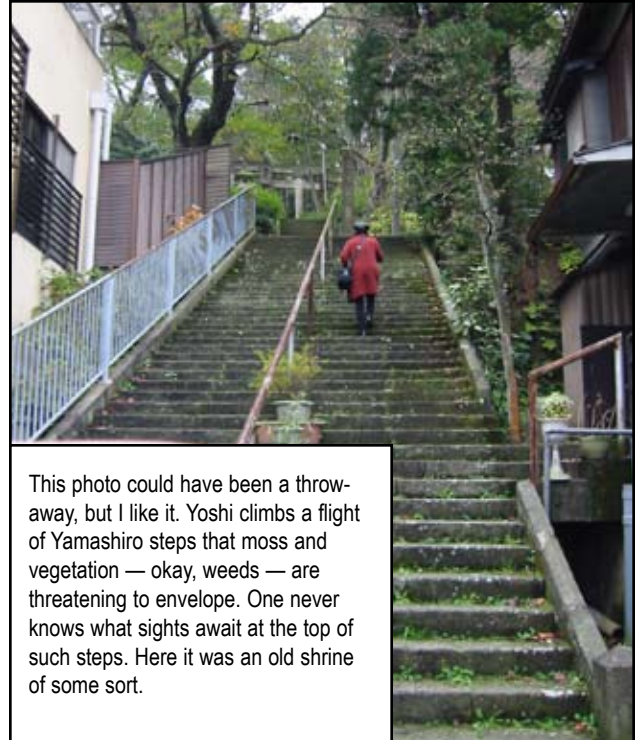


that Lord Maeda of Kaga, maybe 400 years ago, had authorized this royal red for a single Araya room and had actually stayed in this room or, more likely, one just like it. Anyway, it was ours for a couple of days, and we ate fine *kaiseki* meals on the lacquered table and slept comfortably on *futon* laid out on the *tatami*. In the photo above, a tiny Yoshi stands in front of the Araya's gift shop. There she bought two expensive lacquered bowls for our growing collection.



Buckwheat Noodles

It was lunchtime, and Yoshi was hungering for buckwheat noodles, especially the handmade type available at a small Yamashiro shop recommended by *Okamisan* Asako Nagai, the 17th-generation madam of the Araya inn. Below, Yoshi happily slurps *soba* as she chats with the noodle-maker over the counter. I am not a noodle man, so I purchased *kakifurai* (fried oysters) and *ebifurai* (fried shrimp) at a nearby hole-in-the-wall take-out joint and then joined Yoshi at the *soba* shop, where I was served complimentary tea. My lunch was just as good and much cheaper. The noodle-maker didn't care if I brought in my own food. I think he saw Yoshi as someone who would buy more than just noodles. Notice those glazed earthen tea cups on the serving counter, each of them unique. You see, the noodle-maker was also a pottery-maker, and he dispensed two different name cards, one for *soba* and one for pottery. Yoshi wound up buying two tea cups. Our simple



This photo could have been a throw-away, but I like it. Yoshi climbs a flight of Yamashiro steps that moss and vegetation — okay, weeds — are threatening to envelope. One never knows what sights await at the top of such steps. Here it was an old shrine of some sort.

lunch cost \$100. But that's okay. The cups are beautiful, coming from a place we enjoyed, and I'll probably sip from them two or three times before I die.

