

IN THE LAP OF JAPANESE LUXURY

Visiting three ryokan on the southern island of Kyushu, a guest enjoys the sensual delights at these elegant traditional inns

By DAVID M. KAHN

ONE of the great joys of traveling in Japan is the opportunity to stay at elegant ryokan, where guests can experience a way of life that has become foreign even to many Japanese. The gracefully proportioned rooms of these traditional inns are detailed with rich natural woods and sliding papered shoji screens. The delicate scent of fresh tatami mats usually fills the air. Meals, works of art themselves, are taken in your room with service provided by one or more kimono-clad maids. In better ryokan, rooms also afford garden views. Hot baths, or *oturo*, are always available, and you sleep on luxurious, fluffy futons laid out on the floor at night.

Having stayed several times in Kyoto's renowned Hiragiya and having sampled various other ryokan in Japan's ancient capital, I have made a point in recent years of seeking out ryokan in other parts of the country.

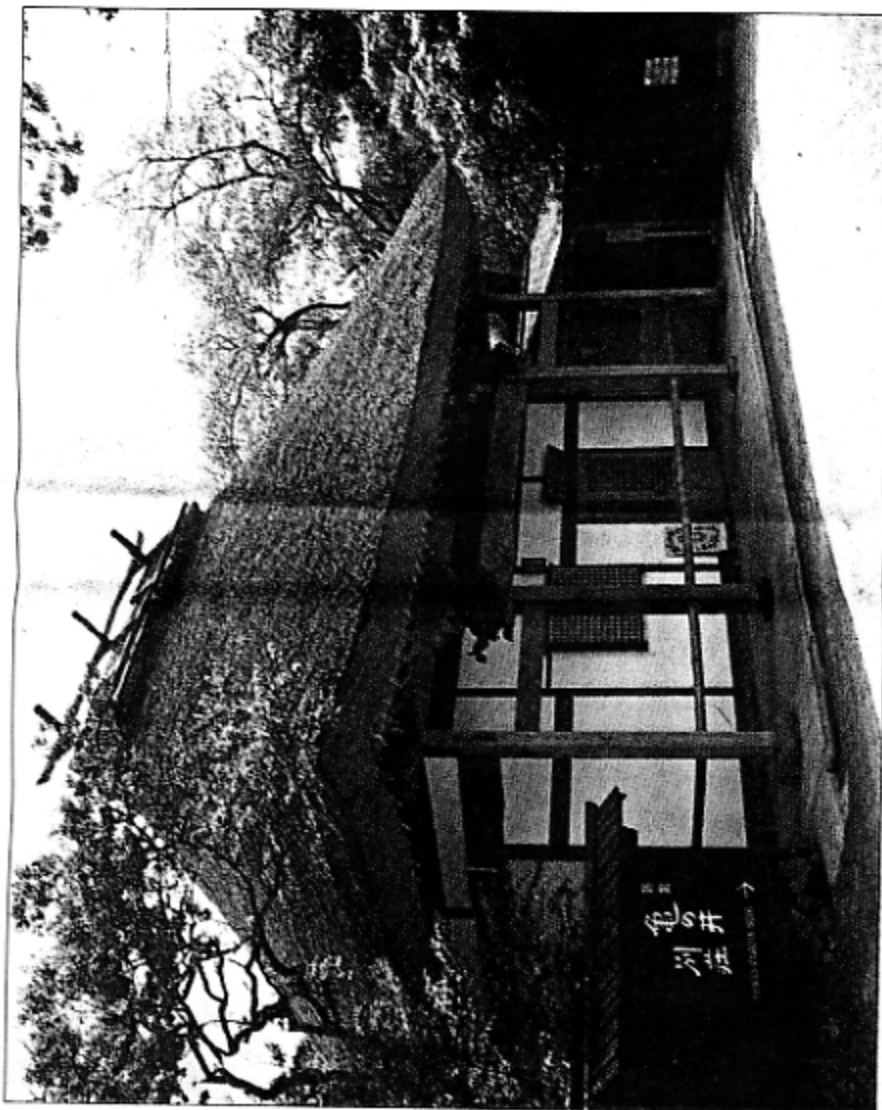
A trip in late November last year to Japan's southernmost main island, Kyushu, yielded some rich rewards as well as one (laughable) disappointment.

My sister, Karen Kennerly, who lived in Japan in the 1960's and 70's and speaks Japanese, traveled with me. Her language skills were most useful at one of the smaller ryokan we stayed at (the more expensive ryokan had some English-speaking staff members).

Our first stop was Kamenoi Besso, in the hot spring resort of Yufuin in eastern Kyushu. It was late November — leaf-viewing season in Japan — so the mist-shrouded hills and mountains surrounding Yufuin were alive with brilliant shades of red, yellow and orange.

The inn itself is made up of a collection of cottages linked by covered walkways. Some of the buildings appear to be older and have thatched roofs. Others are newer but designed in traditional style. Our cottage, one of the newer ones, was quite spacious. After sliding back the lattice door, we stepped onto a stone-paved entryway, then up to a tatami-matted foyer that gave access to both a sitting room and another chamber where the futons were later laid out. This arrangement was most unusual; even the best ryokan generally offer only a single room that is used for all purposes.

To top things off, a small tea ceremony room with a sunken hearth, called an *irori*, opened off the sitting room. A fresh flower arrangement brightened this room, as well as the entry and the tokonoma, a raised alcove that ornamented the side of one of the two principal rooms. A large hibachi with live coals occupied a prominent place in the sitting room, with a cast-iron kettle



Photographs by Koko Kurita for The New York Times

A thatched cottage at Kamenoi Besso, a ryokan in the hot spring resort of Yufuin.



Hot baths, futons and fine food

Better ryokan, with central heating and air-conditioning, are a pleasure to stay in any time, but you may want to visit during the beautiful spring or fall months. Getting a reservation at these times may be difficult. It can also be difficult, if not impossible, to secure reservations for one person. On occasion the staff will say that lone travelers are not accommodated; more indirectly, you may be told, as I have been, that there are no rooms available even when there are.

For more information about ryokan, contact the Japan National Tourist Organization, 1 Rockefeller Plaza, Suite 1260, New York, N.Y. 10020; (212) 757-5640.

"The Japanese Inn: Ryokan" is a picture book that provides a good introduction. It is available at Kinokuniya, 10 West 48th Street, (212) 765-7766, for \$24.95.

Prices are calculated at 108.63 yen to the dollar and are per person, double occupancy, and include breakfast and dinner. Tax (6 percent) and sake (about \$5) are extra.

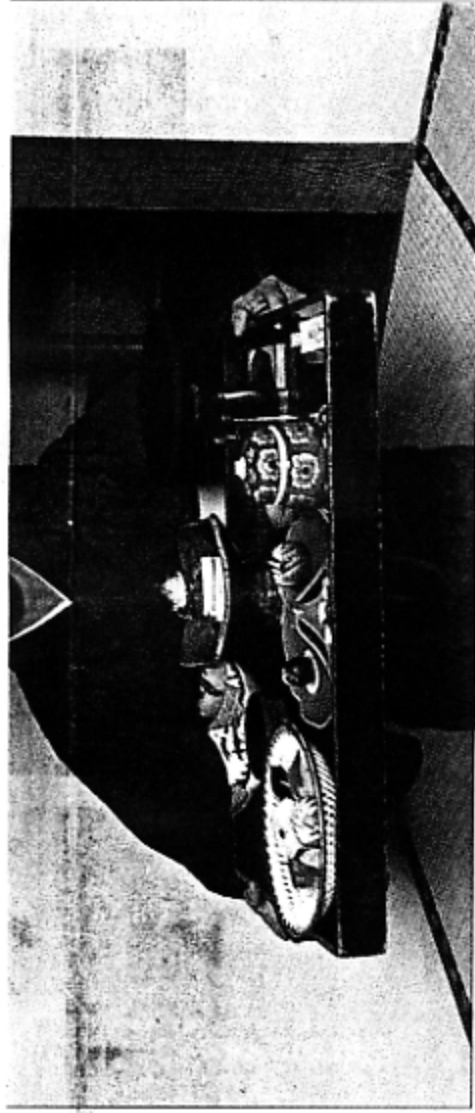
Kamenoi Besso, 2633-1 Kawakami, Yufuin-cho, Oita-gun, Oita; telephone (81-977) 84-3186, fax (81-977) 84-2358; 21 rooms. Rates: \$278 to \$371.

Gajoen, Miyoken Onsen-go, Makizono-cho, Aita-gun, Kagoshima-ken; (81-985) 77-2114, fax (81-985) 77-2203; 10 rooms. Rates: \$186 to \$278.

Chikuden Saryo, 2420 Taketa, Taketa-shi, Oita; (81-947) 63-3261, fax (81-974) 63-0508; 12 rooms. Rates: \$148 to \$195 (English not spoken). D. M. K.

Our next major destination was Gajoen, a ryokan in the hot spring resort (onsen) of Miyoken, about an hour outside of Kagoshima. Since Kagoshima is at the southern end of Kyushu and would require a fairly long train ride if we went directly, we decided to spend the night in Bungo Taketa, which is in the same hilly central region of the island as Yufuin. Our ryokan, Chikuden Saryo, though recently renovated and nondescript from the outside, had the charming interior of an earlier era. The shoji, woodwork and other features in our modest-sized room were nicely detailed and dated from the late 19th or early 20th century.

At old-fashioned inns that do not fall into the luxury class, sinks, bathing facilities and toilets are usually in separate places, none of them necessarily near your room. Such was the case at Chikuden Saryo. In addition,



A maid at Chikuden Saryo serving a kaiseki dinner, a meal of many small courses presented sequentially.

the two principal rooms. A large hibachi with live coals occupied a prominent place in the sitting room, with a cast-iron kettle filled with water gently bubbling on top of the coals. At dinner our maid warmed our sake in this kettle. In an earlier age the hibachi would have been our primary source of heat. Like most ryokan of its class, however, the rooms at Kamenoi Besso are equipped with artistically concealed central heating and air-conditioning.

A large section of our cottage was occupied by separate vanity, bath and toilet areas, all with their own doors. The toilet featured an electrically heated seat and a built-in bidet with a scary control panel. Those who can't read Japanese are advised to resist toying with the controls, which can send streams of water gushing into the air.

The bathing area was huge, the largest I have ever seen attached to a private room or suite. Measuring about 8 feet by 10 feet, it had a slate floor, walls and ceiling of natural wood, and a tub made of fragrant cedar big enough for two. While sitting in it I opened up a sliding window nearby and had a lovely view of fall foliage and the thatched roof of the adjoining cottage.

SINCE Yufuin is a hot spring resort, Kamenoi Besso also offers a large communal ofuro. My sister and I donned handsomely patterned yukata cotton robes and quilted jackets, supplied by the ryokan, and bobbed along in wooden geta to the separate men's and women's baths, which were housed in their own building. The facilities were identical. In the men's section, after passing through a large dressing room, generously stocked with thick towels (a rarity in Japanese inns), I entered a large room with a vaulted wooden ceiling, tile floors and walls of glass that overlooked an enclosed garden. In the center of the room was a rock-lined pool, 20 feet in diameter, with steaming water melodically pouring into it from a small waterfall.

I enjoyed this vast space all by myself before going out to the garden, where there was another, smaller bath. The water in both was just right, not too hot (for Westerners, anyway) as can often be the case.

Back in our sitting room, our maid served dinner from a pantry that opened off the foyer and had a separate entrance. As at virtually all fine ryokan, kaiseki cuisine was presented sequentially. Following a plum wine aperitif were about a dozen selections including sashimi, various mushroom and mountain-vegetable dishes, two different soups, grilled freshwater fish, rice, pickles and two desserts. One was a thick hot soup of red beans, known as osôiruko, with a piece of mochi (a chewy confection made of rice) floating in it. The other dessert was a kind of gelatin in a cream sauce. Everything was delicious.

Throughout the meal, the maid provided superb service in an elegant style, at one point inquiring whether my untouched ice water might be getting too warm.

Breakfast the next morning was equally glorious. In addition to the small omelet, hot tofu, soup and pickles one usually gets dur-

riors are usually in separate blocks, none of them necessarily near your room. Such was the case at Chikuden Saryo. In addition, meals were not brought to us, but served in a private room with a garden view in the ryokan's restaurant. The ample kaiseki meal, however, was surprisingly good considering the \$130-a-person room rate. The maid was very friendly, and even the chief came by to say hello.

The next day, a five-hour train ride down the scenic west coast of Kyushu took us to Kagoshima, where we caught a bus to Gajoen ryokan. After a pleasant, hour-long ride through the mountains, we arrived for a two-day stay at the ryokan, perched on the steep bank of a river that passes through the hot spring resort of Myoken. A wonderful, rustic sensibility prevails at Gajoen. Thatched cottages for guests and pavilions housing a gift shop, seating areas, an outdoor kitchen and a breakfast room are arranged along a quiet pathway, as though you have entered a tiny country village. Foliage screens out the rest of the world, and the village atmosphere is enhanced by a number of elegantly plumed chickens that strut about.

The rates range from \$186 to \$278 a person. At the \$278 level, which we chose, we got one of the five thatched cottages with a private outdoor ofuro, set in a small garden enclosed by a bamboo fence and trees.

OUR ofuro, which comfortably accommodated one at a time, looked as though it were carved out of solid rock. A bamboo spigot poured a perpetual stream of water into the basin, causing it to constantly overflow into a drain strategically set in the ground. The water generated a restful, gushing sound, as wisps of steam from the hot spring water rose into the cooler air.

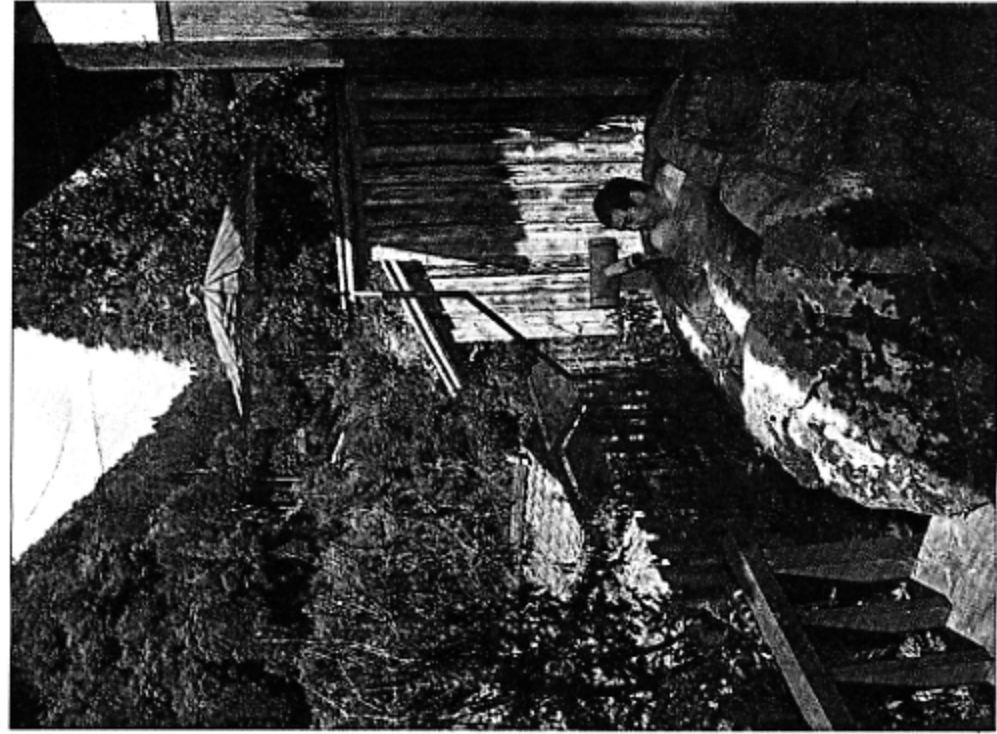
Though smaller than the accommodations at Kamenoi Besso, the interior of our two-room cottage was very appealing. In the first, outer room, a dark, polished wood floor surrounded a sunken hearth, or irori, where live coals glowed under a kettle of water. The ceiling soared about 15 feet to the underside of the thatched roof. Opening off it was a tatami-matted room with a lower ceiling of beautifully grained wood.

Here, a shoji screen opened to reveal views of the garden and its ofuro. In the middle of the room was a kotatsu, a low table with a thick blanketlike covering and an electric heater underneath. You put your legs under it to ward off the chill. In the past, live coals provided the heat.

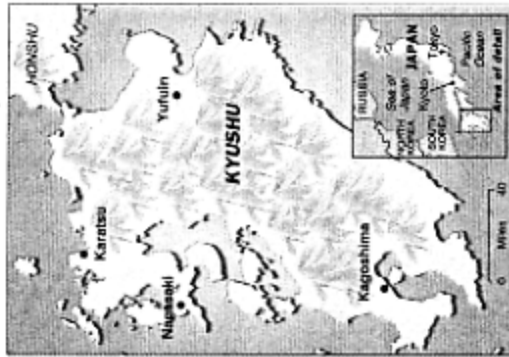
The kotatsu was there essentially for effect since the room was furnished with central climate controls. Traditional paper-shade lighting fixtures were on dimmers. And hidden behind different wood panels in the outer room we discovered a nice, big closet, a stereo-compact disk player, and a refrigerator stocked with beverages.

After changing into our yukata, we headed out to the communal ofuro. Here, as at Kamenoi Besso, the Japanese guests did not visit the ofuro until 6 P.M. or so; some went very late at night. Since no one else was about when we went around 4 P.M., we peeked into the men's and women's sides, which were identical and quite striking.

What made the baths special were fantas-



At Gajoen, a private ofuro, or hot bath, is fed by the springs at Myoken.



The New York Times

ing a fancy Japanese breakfast, there was a delicate dish of cubed chicken, a delicious salted fish that we heated up on the grills provided, and rice flecked with green tea.

All of this comes at a price. With extras such as sake, the bill came to just under \$325 a person a night. Yet even at these prices, getting a reservation at Kamenoi Besso can be a major undertaking. We called more than three months in advance but could secure a room for only one night instead of the two we hoped for.

The next day we moved on to a more modest, two-room inn in Yufuin. Sanso Yamashige, a picturesque old thatched farmhouse, turned out to be an unmitigated disaster — from the used stub of soap on our tiny cold-water sink to the gunk-coated hairs in the ofuro. Our room was worn and filled with tawdry knickknacks, and the landlady, Mrs. Yamashige, managed to slam open the shoji every time she barged in, unannounced and all too often. We could hardly wait until morning to escape.

DAVID M. KAHN, the executive director of the Connecticut Historical Society, visits Japan frequently.

Ryokan



Kaku Kurita for The New York Times

A futon at Kamenoi Besso in Yufuin.

Continued From Page 15

tic arrangements of dried flowers and berries, artful lighting and simple benches and stools. The flooring was of stone, and the ofuro themselves were larger versions of the one outside our room. Perhaps 10 people could sit in each at a time. The baths occupied a kind of pavilion with bamboo blinds substituting for walls, so natural light filtered inside.

The water, unfortunately, was too hot for me, and the smaller pool of ice-cold water in each section did not appeal. So I walked down to yet another bathing area, a small rock pool on the level of the river. The setting was magnificent, with great clouds of steam billowing into the air, but, if anything, the water was even hotter than in the communal ofuro. Happily, the ofuro outside our room was just the right temperature.

The kaiseki dinner that evening was beautifully presented in a combination of porcelain dishes and artistic bamboo serving pieces of various sizes. As at Kamenoi Besso, a plum-wine aperitif started off the meal, highlights of which included a tempura dish consisting entirely of

leaves of various shapes, grilled fish, a lovely vegetable dish of sweet onions, as well as soups, a hot custard, and bird sashimi, a rarity on ryokan menus. (We didn't ask what kind of bird.) For dessert there was a kind of flan and fruit. After the dishes were cleared, fresh tea was brought, along with servings of oshiruko and plump pickled plums.

Dinner the next night proved a bit problematic. We decided to try the maid's suggestion of a sort of mixed country grill, cooked in the sunken hearth of our room. Additional coals were brought in along with cooking utensils and a mammoth tray of local sausages, beef, chicken and vegetables. It was all very showy, but the room filled with smoke.

Breakfast both days was served at long, low tables in a refined tatami-matted room overlooking the river furnished with sculptural lanterns and floor lamps made from heavy, textured handmade paper stretched over twisting wire frames. Either Western- or Japanese-style breakfast was available, but everyone got a cup of fresh milk from local cows. When we left, we were each presented with a beautifully wrapped raw egg, laid by the chickens we had come to know so well. ■

HAKONE, ONCE STERN, NOW SOOTHES

In the 17th century, travelers stopped here for official inspections; today they come for a dip in the hot springs and a view of the lake

By SHERYL WUDUNN

FOR centuries, Japanese feudal lords struggled across the mountains around Mount Fuji, stopping to rest near the gentle hot springs and glistening lakes around Hakone, about 65 miles southwest of Tokyo.

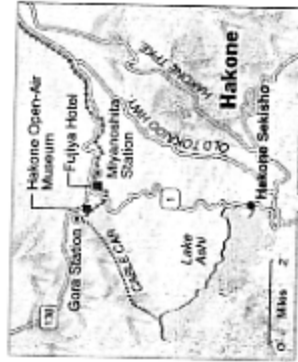
The hills in this region once formed the most treacherous stretch along the Tokaido, the famous Eastern Sea Road that crossed Japan. A hilly, winding pass, Hakone was the crossing point for wives and lovers fleeing from the capital of Edo, now Tokyo, and for feudal lords making their pilgrimages to and from the shogun — and their wives — in Edo.

Japan's shoguns, who ran the country in those days, kept the wives and daughters of their feudal lords in Edo, as hostages to insure the loyalty of the lords. Meanwhile, the lords were sent out to oversee their territories, returning to Edo periodically via the Eastern Sea Road.

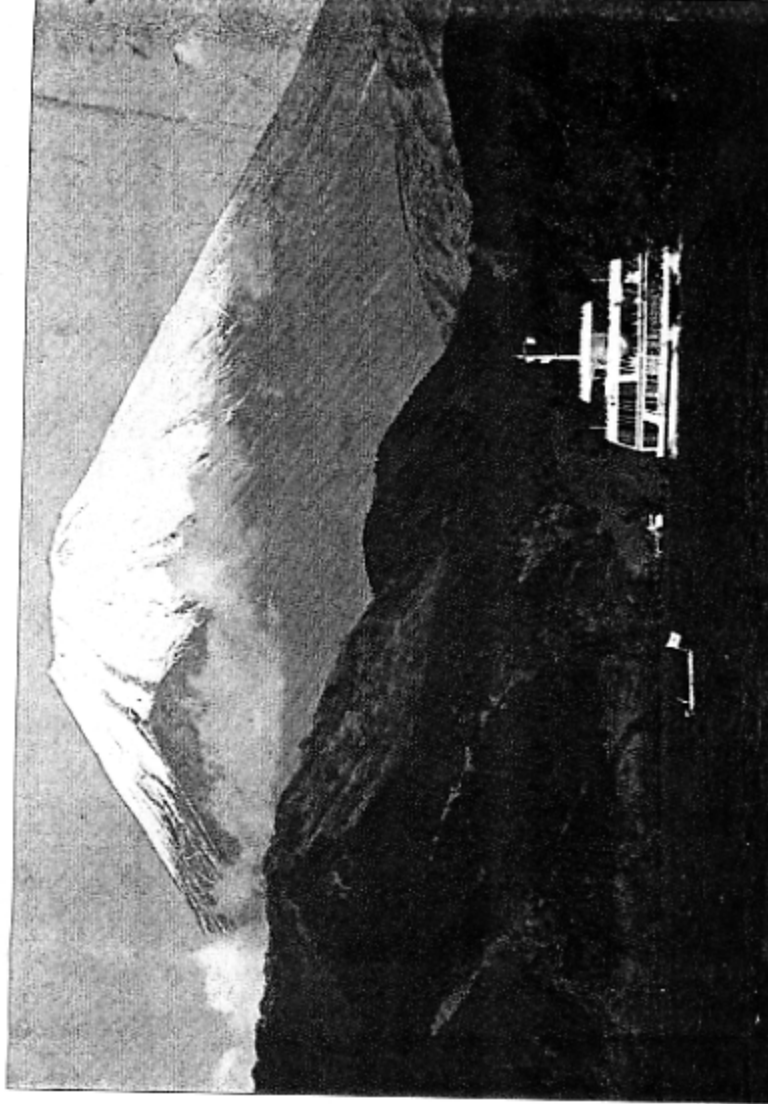
In 1618, the Tokugawa Shogunate set up a barrier station in Hakone to search for escaping women or for murder weapons being carried secretly into Edo. As travelers awaited their inspections, they often slipped away for dips in the enchanting hot springs nearby. Though travelers had been using the hot springs for several centuries, little bathhouses cropped up to cater to the swelling number of bathers.

From such stern beginnings, Hakone over the centuries has blossomed into the largest hot springs resort area in Japan. Now it conures a sense of warmth and pleasure for the Japanese, many of whom dream of acquiring a villa in the hills of Hakone. Most, however, just go for a weekend, as I did with my husband and two young sons in September.

Now Hakone offers long winding lakes around the hills, hot spring baths, a sky ride that lifts visitors up to the sulfurous, bubbling watering holes, and the Fujitza Hotel, a Japanese hotel in the Victorian style that is a regular respite for Japanese emperors and empresses and visiting foreign royalty. The Fujitza was Japan's first Western-style hotel, built 118 years ago by Semnosuke



The New York Times



A sightseeing boat on Lake Ashi below Mount Fuji. The lake was formed by volcanic activity 4,000 years ago.



Photographs by Sabu Kurita for The New York Times

style hotel, built 116 years ago by Sennosuke Yamaguchi, who had been sent abroad to learn Western ways. He created the Fujiya out of images from his European travels, seemingly intent on fashioning a different kind of elegance in this resort town. Nestled in a steep hillside, the hotel stands out from a distance, its pagodalike balcony roofs recalling European chateaus.

The Fujiya's historical significance in Japan is still so overwhelming that it charges substantially more for Japanese than for holders of foreign passports. Thus, foreigners pay only \$137 for a room on weekdays and \$195 on weekends, while Japanese are charged about \$217 on weekdays and \$271 on weekends.

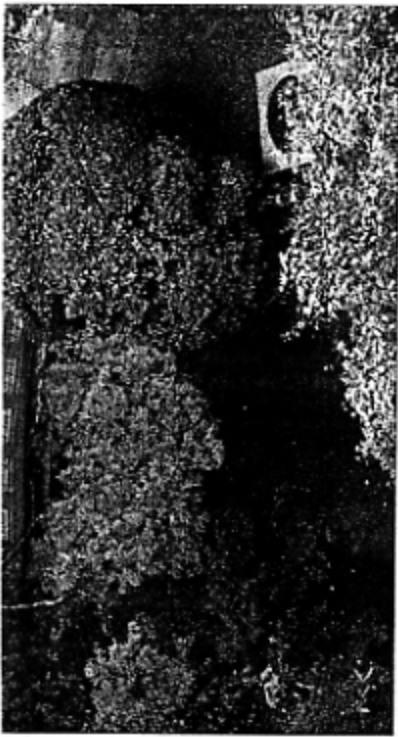
SHERYL WILDUNN is a correspondent in the Tokyo bureau of *The Times*.



CENTER Henry Moore's sculpture "Reclining Figure: Angles" at the Open-Air Museum.

ABOVE Sampling eggs boiled in the springs.

RIGHT Bridge at the entrance to the Fujiya Hotel.



WHERE A ROOM IS A CALLING CARD

There may be fancier, more expensive and more modern hotels in Tokyo, but the Okura bestows an aura of consequence

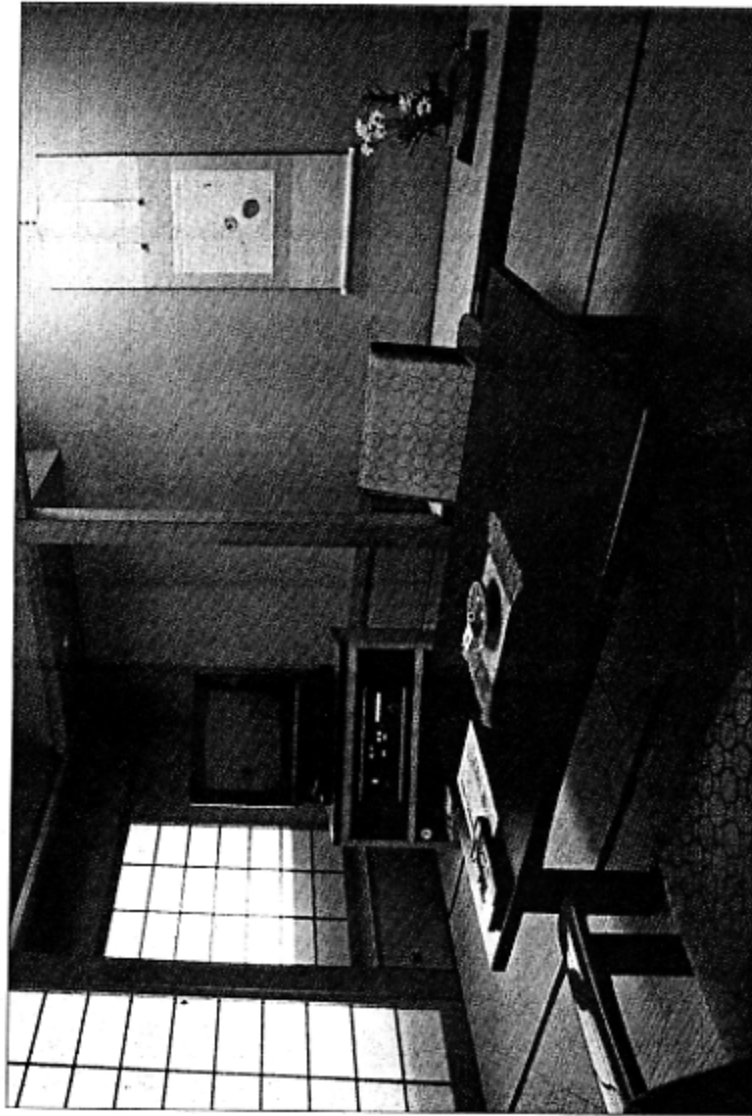
By HERBERT MUSCHAMP

MY respect for Japanese etiquette is not everything it should be. On my first trip to Tokyo, in August, I forgot to pack business cards. On the other hand, I did take the precaution of booking myself into the legendary Okura Hotel, so I did not entirely lose face. The Okura gives the face of those who stay there an instant lift. The hotel is in the Toranomon district, just across the street from the United States Embassy, and a privileged ambassadorial aura rubs off on the Okura and its guests. A room here is itself a calling card, a credential that identifies the lodger as a somebody, or at least as somebody willing to go along with the way the Japanese expect visiting somebodies to behave. There may be better hotels in Tokyo. Fancier, more expensive, and more modern hotels are numerous throughout the city. Let them all try harder. There is only one Okura.

Opened in 1953, the Okura Hotel is a lovingly maintained period piece. A friend describes the hotel's architecture as Eisenhower Modernism. Crude but apt. The hotel's main building is a boxy bit of business, a low rise block of glass and concrete; its facade adorned with daisy perforated screens. Even the names of the hotel's restaurants evoke the flowery hospitality of the postwar years. Breakfast? Try the Camellia Corner, with lighting fixtures evidently designed to evoke the aurora borealis. For dinner, there's the fabulous Orchard Room,

HERBERT MUSCHAMP is the architecture critic of *The Times*.

A traditional Japanese room at the Okura Hotel.



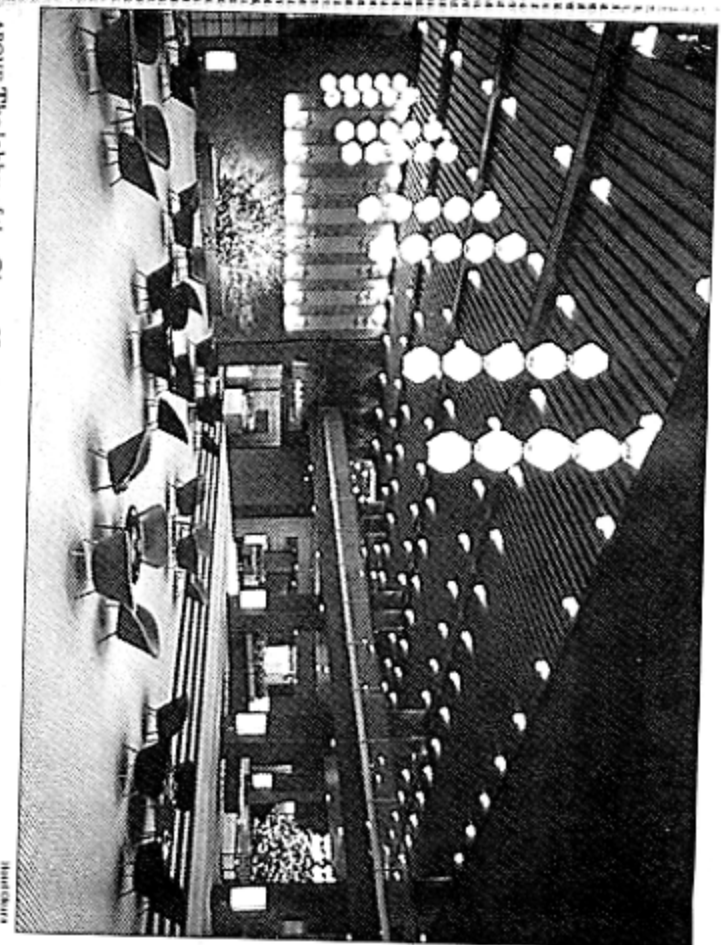
Kaku Kunita for *The New York Times*

featuring Continental cuisine. Cocktails? The Fifties had the right idea. Why bother with martinis if you can't order them straight up in a penthouse bar called the Starlight Lounge?

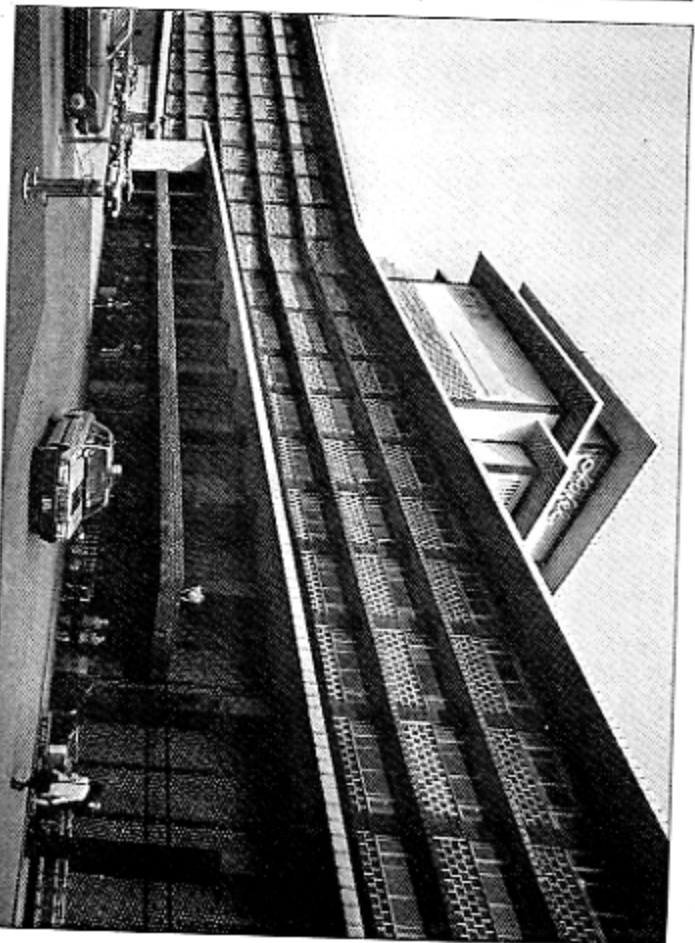
No one, however, stays at the Okura for the food. At breakfast, the scrambled eggs are a faintly chicken-flavored foam. For lunch, there are sandwiches in several varieties of moistened cardboard. Nonetheless, you may well find yourself ordering frequent rounds of bland dishes simply for the pleasure of watching the spellbinding grace with which they are served. Japan is justifiably famous for elaborate courtesy, but at the Okura, service rises to the level of an art form. Stylized but not stiff, formal but not intimidating, it's like a martial art from which the martial element has been subtracted.

On arrival, you are greeted by a lineup of white-gloved bellboys. Even if you're the sort of person who ordinarily insists on carrying your bags from the taxi to the check-in desk, you will refrain from doing that here. The staff does not stand there looking servile, overburdened, or confused. Instead of trying to be helpful, they help. They are your partners in a dance. The choreography with which they relieve you of your bags is so lovely that it would be philistine to protest. If you held onto your luggage, you would feel as if you had stolen it.

The arrival, however, is merely a curtain raiser for the full kabuki performance that awaits you when it's time to eat. The basic movement goes something like this. The waiter or waitress puts down the plate, stands back, but not straight up. The body



HARUO UETA



KAREN BURTIS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ABOVE: The lobby of the Okura Hotel, a grand flow of space in a country where space is the ultimate luxury. RIGHT: The hotel's boxy main building evokes the 50's.

Tokyo Hotel

Continued From Page 14

remains slightly bent, slightly twisted in a sideways, nearly imperceptible bow, while the arms, acting as a kind of counterbalance to the swivelled hip, gesture toward the dishes of the palms of the hands turned outward. It's a real presentation, a grand gesture of offering. The Okura is not a cheap place to stay, but as flipping is virtually unknown in Japan, you may find yourself thinking that a visit is a bargain of a lifetime. You can't order a peanut without being treated to this amazing floor show, whether you choose the Belle Epoque, the Highlander Bar, the Tokai-Lin or the Sazanka.

Order breakfast in your room. If only to spare yourself the glare of the Canalina bell rings. Blurrily, you answer it. A waiter stands framed by the doorway. He does not barge over the threshold crying "Room service!" He allows a moment for jaggered eyes to adjust to the shock. Then: "May I... come in?" No one has said "May I?" to you for years, certainly not in such a sincere tone of voice. The pause between the words suggests a reservoir of politesse that,

in the West, was drained dry centuries ago. Your overpowering impulse is to throw your arms around this person and say, "Where have I been all my life? Of course you may come in."

You need things laundered. You have already placed your clothes in the crisp paper bag provided for that purpose. It is embossed with the hotel's logo, a circle of three ping-pong leaves. You regret wrinkling the bag. But it's pleasant to know that your fine washables will on no account touch plastic, even if they are made of it. The laundry is returned a few hours later, in immaculate shape, with a handwritten note from the housekeeper: "Dear... we are so sorry that we could not remove this stain! We did the best we could, but, unfortunately, the stain would not come out." Stain? What stain? Little nose sounds so disconsolate you can almost hear the sound of sobbing as you read it.

Young ladies dressed in kimonos stand by the elevators in the main lobby and on the concourse level below. They do nothing but smile, nod and say good morning. At first you think, how would to employ a living person to provide an ornamental touch, as if

she were a human version of the handsome bows of flowers that grace the hallways. Later it may occur to you that the service performed by these women is functional as well as decorative. For you must smile back. This accomplishes for your mood what the elevator does for your body.

FEW people stay at the Okura because of the décor. The guest rooms are comfortable but unexciting. Though there are some traditionally furnished Japanese accommodations, most of the rooms are like the Orchard Room's cuisine: blandly conventional. Tasteful lamps, pastel furniture, somewhat ceremoniously arranged. But there are perks: a fax in each room, for instance, with idyl-gram instructions for international dialing. Beside the bed there's a convenient console with switches to control the lights and the electrically operated curtains, and buttons that bring in four stations of taped music. Along the minibar tea or coffee. But who would want to forgo the charms of room service for a bag of instant Sanka?

Nonetheless, the hotel's public rooms are wonderful, an immaculately preserved relic of a time when modern architects sought to recast the austerity of modern architecture for the era of postwar prosperity. Golden light, open space, that's the predominant effect of the Okura's famous lobby, perhaps

the world's most celebrated meeting place of East and West. Clean, wide-open, flowing spaces, suffused with the radiance of indirect lighting bounced onto golden screens and wall reliefs, are accented by slim, pendant chandeliers, their glass globes moulded in the shape of shells. You glide down four low steps — it's the ultimate conversation pit — toward a broad expanse of wheat-colored carpet that rolls on and on, seemingly toward the horizon.

Low modern easy chairs, of relaxed, slightly flying-saucer contour, are arranged in groups around elliptically shaped coffee tables. The chairs, and those sitting on them, are silhouetted against the lobby's rear wall, a translucent surface that recalls shop screens. This arrangement affords a social strategy as well as an esthetic effect. People here can recognize arriving guests before they can recognize themselves. This gives them time to rise, step forward and take the initiative in the ritual exchange of bows.

The design owes more to the "organic" esthetic of Frank Lloyd Wright than to the machine age sleekness of the International Style. Indeed, the Okura is more characteristically Wrightian than the Imperial Hotel, the fabled building Wright designed for Tokyo in 1914. But the Okura's grand flow of space signifies something very different from Wright's idea. For Wright, the open-plan symbolized America, an expansive continent, drawn out in space, well-being in space, another waiting for breathing to

feel confined within walls. Japan, by contrast, is a tiny, constricted country. Space here is an ultimate luxury, a quantity that is a quality, something to be treated as if it were gold. The expansiveness of the Okura's great interiors must be appreciated as a refuge from deprivation.

So must the hotel as a whole. Today the Okura sits in the capital of a great industrial giant, a global economic superpower, maker of the world's most desirable electronic products. It takes a certain stretch of the imagination to envision the hotel rising in a city, indeed a civilization, that was recently reduced to war-torn rubble.

The stretch should nonetheless be made. We've reduced ourselves, in the West, into ever that may mean. Here one regains an appreciation for modernity as a condition where efficiency and courtesy may coexist, are perhaps even inseparable. In the West we tend to think of service as being Old World, underemphatic, upstairs-downstairs, that sort of thing. Here one gains the sense that there may be a link between Japan's postwar regeneration and the seductive power of a voice that knows how to ask "May I... come in?"

The Hotel Okura is at 2-10-4 Toranomon, Minato-ku, Tokyo 100; telephone (81-3) 3582-0111, fax (81-3) 3582-3787. A night's stay for two people ranges from \$170 to \$735. ■

ASIA-PACIFIC ISSUE

BARGAINS ARE FADING IN ASIA

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

THE bad news these days about travel to eastern Asia is that the region has reverted from being the certifiable steal that it was at the height of the economic crisis two years ago to once again being comparably priced with many other parts of the world — or even pricier.

The good news, if that's the right term when bargains are evaporating, is that the region's many currencies seem finally to have stabilized, and budgeting for travel once again seems possible throughout much of the area, even when making reservations a few months in advance.

Most Asian currencies have strengthened handsomely from their lows of two years ago, accounting for the largest rise in costs for travel by Americans and others with United States dollars. A dramatic case in point is Japan, where the yen has appreciated by 22 percent since early April 1998, to about 105 yen to the dollar from about 135 yen.

Prices in yen have scarcely changed in two years' time; indeed many have decreased marginally in the recession that hangs over the country. But that will be little comfort to holders of dollars, who will have to buy yen at a much higher rate.

Visitors to Tokyo today will pay about 44,000 yen, about \$420, to stay in

HOWARD W. FRENCH is chief of the Tokyo bureau of The Times.

The rebound of the region's economy makes planning easier but trips more costly

a double-occupancy room at the Okura Hotel, one of the city's top business hotels, and 38,000, \$360, for one in the Western Tokyo, another favorite among visiting business people. Those rates in yen have barely budged in the last two years. Unfortunately, the difference in dollars — an increase of close to \$100 in each case — will be keenly felt.

It has been a long time since Japan has been considered a bargain by travelers from anywhere. For many visitors — and residents — it often seems to be the most expensive place on the planet, what with tiny \$5 cups of coffee and taxis whose meters start at \$6.50.

One of the best bargains, though, remains the Japan Rail Pass, available from the Japan National Tourist Organization offices in the United States. A one-week pass, which covers wide-ranging tours of the country aboard Japan's famous bullet trains, is 28,300 yen, or about \$270 at current exchange rates.

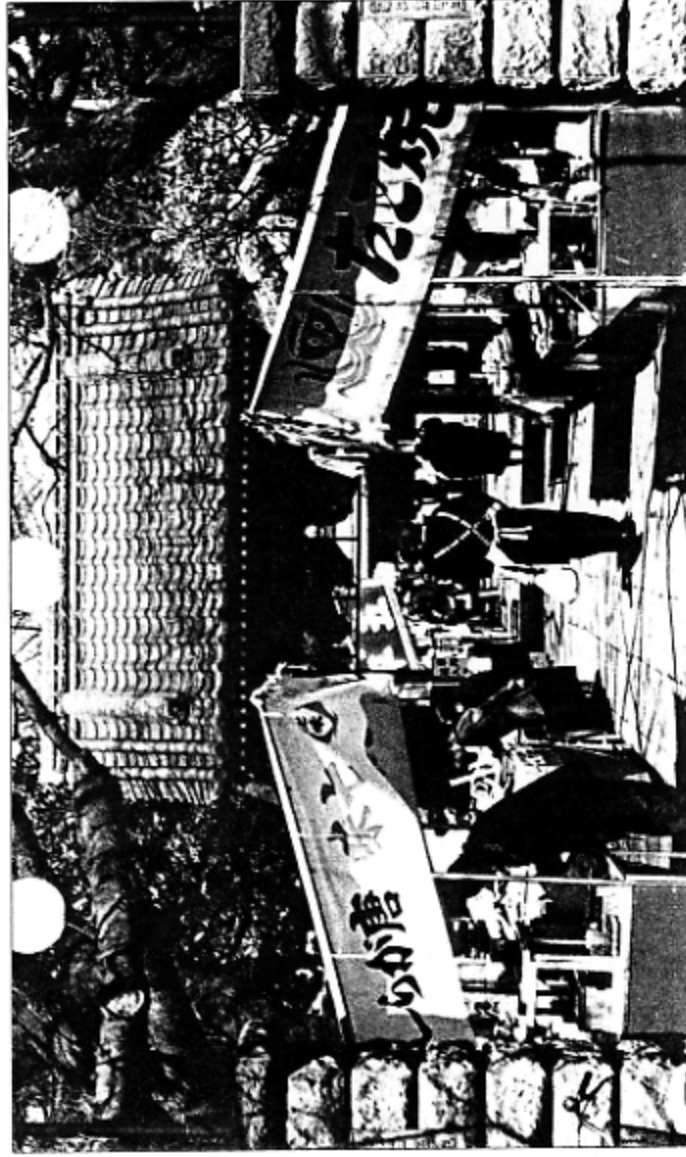
In China, the currency is held steady by a Government-fixed exchange rate. Room rates in Beijing have remained fairly stable as well. Double rooms are available at the China World Hotel in Beijing for \$210, plus 13 percent service and tax charge. Another central city establishment, the New World Hotel, offers doubles for \$120, including breakfast, service charge and tax.

In Thailand, a favorite tourist destination for visitors from both the West and elsewhere in Asia, prices have been on a slow, steady rebound since the Asian currency crisis. Compared with precrisis days, many of

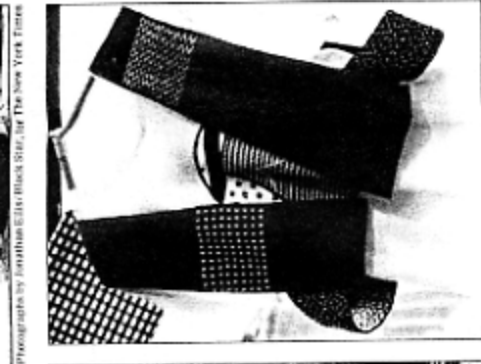
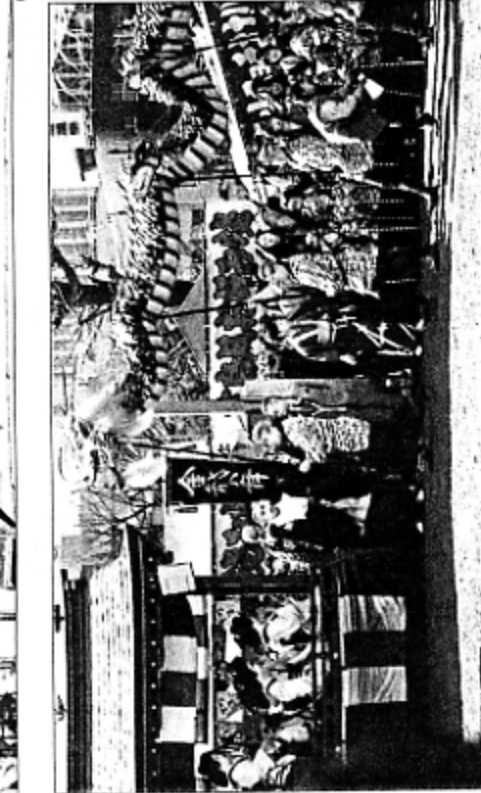
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OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE, OLD JAPAN FOR SALE

Sacred and secular coexist on market days, when vendors offer crafts, food and flowers in Tokyo and beyond



Shopping in Tokyo: TOP ROW Arai Yakushiji temple market; yukatas and kimonos at the Togenuki Jizo temple market. BOTTOM ROW Golden dragon dance at the Asakusa temple; a sashiko vest at Amy Katoh's Blue & White shop; at the Asakusa temple court.



By PAULA DEITZ

WITH their clusters of pagoda-roofed structures set among groves of trees, temple and shrine enclosures in the cities and towns of Japan are like small ancient kingdoms left behind from another time as the bustle of modern life eddies around them. During the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), so writes the historian Sumiko Enbutsu in "Old Tokyo," temple towns were first built on the periphery of old Edo, now Tokyo, to fortify the city against military invasions, which never happened. The forecourts of these compounds, once populated with religious pilgrims, eventually became gathering places and fairgrounds for people of fashion.

Today, in a culture that wastes no space, these green enclosures serve as quiet neighborhood parks except on designated days, most often on Sundays, when the grounds explode with market stalls and crowds jostling in search of a piece of old Japan or of contemporary wares in that tradition. As purveyors of traditional crafts and textiles, temple markets and shrine sales, like Japanese gardens, are a strong link to the past.

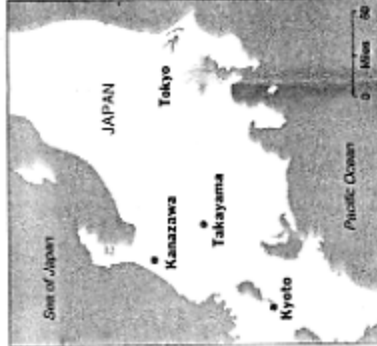
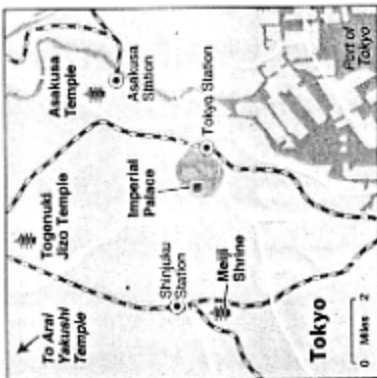
The almost startling serenity of the Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines found at the heart of these colorful throngs, and their pleasant clamor of haggling, reinforces the view of the easy rapport between the sacred and secular spheres of Japan. With wide, inviting verandas under extended eaves, the temples and shrines attract passers-by who make a ritual of tossing coins into a bin in the hope that their prayers will be heard. Hanging from trees and strung in shrine courtyards are slips of white paper with prayer wishes that flutter in the breeze.

Add to this picture the festivals that are a phenomenon of Japanese shrine and temple life. On a first trip to Tokyo, one might be surprised to come upon a stately performance of Bugaku dances at the Meiji Shrine on Culture Day (Nov. 3), but festivals with their processions and banners in celebration of historic and religious occasions are a weekly if not a daily occurrence in Japan. When they are incorporated into a temple or shrine setting on a market day, there is nowhere in the world one would rather be than in the exhilarating flow of costumes and products that tell more about Japan than exported electronic devices ever could.

On just such a spring Sunday in Tokyo, along Nakamise-dori, the old narrow street lined with open market stalls leading up to the Asakusa temple, brigade after brigade of firemen paraded on their way to a shrine for the annual service in memory of firefighters who have died in the line of duty. Firemen have always been revered in this country of wooden houses, and old firemen's coats with emblems of their profession, like ginkgo leaves, are a popular item on the vintage clothing market. This day, as they marched through the temple gates, they twirled white streamers hanging from signs painted with Japanese characters. Some carried tall green bamboo ladders for a later display of acrobatic stunts.

When the pageantry subsided, shoppers rejoined their own procession from shop to shop, almost a hundred in the area, a few owned by families going back more than a century. Wares included everything from old cutlery to handmade toys.

Handkerchiefs are a necessity in Japan, where public restrooms even in chic restaurants or departmental stores do not dispense paper towels. Instead, women delve into their pockets to unfold some gorgonous piece of froth with flowers or other traditional designs to dry their hands. As a result, one of the best buys in the Asakusa market is handkerchiefs; I particularly liked one set of 12 in white batiste, each printed with



The New York Times



A purification ceremony at the Togonuki Jizo temple in Tokyo.

the flower of the month: cherry blossoms for April, morning glories for August, and so on. One soon gets over the "too pretty to use" inhibition in Japan, where everything is beautifully presented and packaged. In a country where gift giving is paramount, women often present handkerchiefs to one another.

During iris season in early June, stalks of artificial iris decorate signposts on the streets, and in the market stalls there are fixed paper fans with iris motifs of every imaginable variety. Late spring is also the time to rummage through racks of yukatas, the crisp cotton summer kimonos printed in traditional indigo-and-white patterns: geometric, stylized waves, dragons or historic figures for men; florals, bamboo stalks, fans or butterflies for women.

Yukatas are a major item in the market street adjoining Tokyo's Togonuki Jizo Temple, which is patronized by elderly Japanese who go there to pray for good health. (The name of the temple literally means "to remove the thorn.") Young Japanese friends in tow may smile tolerantly as one goes through the racks of yukatas worn by their aged parents on muggy summer nights. Though only a few on the market are still hand-printed with stencils and resist-dyed in vats, the designs for all of them are bold and seductive. A hydrangea pattern with generous-sized blossoms was a good choice (for \$20), as it also signified the seasonal cult for hydrangeas. (At Sanzen-in Temple, on the outskirts of Kyoto, 3,000 hydrangeas bloom each June.)

At Aral Yakushi, a temple in northwest Tokyo dedicated to a Buddha of medicine who cures eye diseases, the courtyard was surrounded by hydrangeas in full bloom. Shaded by cherry trees planted along the walkways, the grounds were animated by market wares right up to the temple steps. One stone bodhisattva standing on a lotus flower base near the entrance was over-see-

Temple Markets



Photographs by Jonathan Ellis/Black Star, for The New York Times

ABOVE Temple market in Takayama. BELOW Celebration at the Asakusa market in Tokyo.

Continued From Page 10

ing a domain of blue-and-white china garden seats for sale. On earlier spring mornings at dawn, when the weather is nippy, merchants heat up their morning miso soup, filling the air with a fragrant steam.

Having already developed a taste for iris fans, I could easily recognize a masterpiece in one washi, or hand-made paper, fan with boldly painted green stalks and delicate smudges for the purple iris. It came from the workshop of Issei Yamauchi, who has attained the status of "living national treasure," and cost about \$48. Displayed next to it was a box of rusted metal buckles for samurai sword hilts. Cleaned up they would equal any preserved by museums. White rabbits, symbols of longevity, adorned everything from blue-and-white dishes and tea bowls to bean bags for children.

BUT the real business at hand was the piles of blue-and-white textiles that are the essence of the rural culture of Japan. Amy Katoh, an American-born woman living in Tokyo, has become a trusted collector of these traditional fabrics. Wearing a baseball cap, she is unmistakable as one of the perennial early shoppers. In her books and in her Tokyo shop, called Blue & White, she honors the basic frugality



got into the mood.

Ragweave, not unlike rag rugs from New England, can be found in this market in long segments (about \$2 each) suitable for table runners or sewed together to form large coverlets lined with patchwork in faded country plaids. It is a very homey technique in contrast to the racks of sophisticated silk kimonos that are a fixture of these sales. Because clothing in Japan is often sold after death, there is always a surplus of fine garments to be recycled through these sales, both kimonos and the hip-length outer wrap in wool or silk called haori. In blue and white, a short gardener's jacket for sale for about \$50 with a round family crest

ma's narrow streets, these plants are artfully combined into miniature gardens on the stone-block sidewalks, their brilliant greens glowing against the dark wood latticed facades. (Some markets, like Omicho in the western city of Kanazawa, also sell seeds, including the Japanese Snow of Dawn morning glory, with only 10 seeds to a packet.)

The morning market in Takayama continues a few blocks away on the other side of the Miyagawa River that runs through town. Booths are set up between two main bridges above steep stone banks dotted with willow trees. The temples in the side streets are never far from the action. Among the wooden products for sale

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On this same Sunday in June, at the Togo Jinja flea market, a shrine sale near the central Meiji Shrine in Tokyo, Amy Katoh and her loyal entourage created a spontaneous festival in the guise of a hat show. Suddenly, on an arched bridge overlooking a pond, clipped azalea hedges and a bamboo wisteria trellis, a band of young musicians (cello, flute, recorder and guitar) struck up a song about hats composed for the occasion. Keeping time, a line of women fetchingly bearded snaked around the market booths looking every bit like an unusual academic procession. The hat designer, Ryoko Kodama, had taken fragments of old textiles from pattern books, colorful ragweave, braided strips, and tie-dyed and pleated fabrics, mostly in indigo but with sparks of red, to fashion some 30 hats. Both humorous and svelte, they brought down the house as everyone at the market



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Displayed against the massive posts of a shrine pavilion was a collection of richly grained storage chests, or tansu, with iron fittings that often serve as the only furniture in a traditional Japanese home. Their architectural configurations and drawers are designed for very specific household functions. Though everyone mills around with head lowered so as not to miss a priceless antique, it pays to look up and notice how the crowd moves along the shrine path in waves under a series of great torii gates like the pilgrims of old.

Though not an actual temple or shrine, the immense Tsukiji wholesale fish market in Tokyo has become an almost sacred place to visit in the early morning hours. In itself it is an amazing sight, but equally illuminating are the surrounding market streets where vendors sell everything associated with the preparation and service of fish, from the split bamboo regulation baskets to green bamboo sake cups. This is where local residents stock up on festive table settings.

In Takayama, a small city nestled into the Hida Mountains — a little over four hours northwest of Tokyo by train — the morning markets are famous for their local products as well as their settings. Having retained the look of an old Japanese town lined with wooden buildings and merchants' houses (Takayama craftsmen helped build Kyoto), it boasts the only local government headquarters surviving from the Edo period. This complex of wood and whitewashed buildings with up-turned roofs, along with its rice warehouses and an enclosed garden, was in continuous use from 1692 until 1989. The Takayama Jinya, as it is called, has become a dramatic backdrop for an early-morning market where farm women sell produce and crafts particular to this mountainous region.

As an example of the Japanese love of children and their ingenuity for homemade dolls and toys, one of the good-luck charms sold to children in this market is rag dolls of different sizes (about \$3 for a small one), usually red, dressed in blue and white with a tucked-in kerchief (a uniform not unlike that worn by the women at the booths). Tied around one shoulder with red thread is a little red-and-white sack of medicinal herbs to ward off illness. A small tanking bell completes this irresistible composition.

Many of the booths specialize in bonsai of azalea, maple, cotoneaster or spruce and in potted seasonal plants like columbine, tree peonies, iris and hydrangea. Along Takaya-

ma's narrow streets, these plants are artfully combined into miniature gardens on the stone-block sidewalks, their brilliant greens glowing against the dark wood latticed facades. (Some markets, like Omicho in the western city of Kanazawa, also sell seeds, including the Japanese Snow of Dawn morning glory, with only 10 seeds to a packet.)

The morning market in Takayama continues a few blocks away on the other side of the Miyagawa River that runs through town. Booths are set up between two main bridges above steep stone banks dotted with willow trees. The temples in the side streets are never far from the action. Among the wooden products for sale (for \$2.85) are the elegantly austere flat-bottomed ladies with long handles that appear at stone temple and shrine fountains all over Japan for washing one's hands.

Pottery is always in abundance, and it does not take long to distinguish quality. From a basket of wheel-thrown bud vases or weed jars for \$3.50 each, it is easy to select interesting pinched shapes and variegated glazes. I have chosen one unusual and appealing tea cup at a time at various markets to form a useful and memorable collection. In this sake-brewing region, everything that pertains to the drink is sold in Takayama: old storage jars, bottles and cups.

IN Kyoto, when Toji temple was founded in the eighth century, it was one of only two Buddhist temples the Emperor permitted to be built in the city proper. Boasting the highest pagoda in Japan (five stories, 180 feet) and massive structures with multilayered brackets, this is a major architectural complex with a lotus pond and gardens. Its stucco walls and tree-lined avenues are a serene background for antiques on market days, the first Sunday and the 21st of each month.

Bright blue tarpaulins and red, yellow and blue umbrellas shading individual booths make a garish contrast with the temple buildings, but the wares strewn out on tatami mats cover the whole range of Japanese culture. Among stacks of old baskets were weathered winnowers, the shallow scoops used by Japanese gardeners to gather dead leaves. Here were elegant plates brushed with delicate calligraphy, a pottery tea bowl in a deep black glaze with touches of red, old kettles, sake bottles and fragile fans decorated with flying cranes. Among the textiles were homespun indigo garments.

At the end of the afternoon, as shoppers and dealers were leaving, one could imagine the succession of historic occasions that filled these courtyards in the past. Today, by providing space for a kind of commodities exchange, the markets have transformed an urban landscape into a cultural experience. Wandering off through the back streets of Kyoto at dusk, I walked through many a covered market serving a local neighborhood. Emerging finally along one of the narrow canals that flow through the city, I came upon a perfect hydrangea bush cascading over the edge alongside a tree filled with the glimmering lights of fireflies — a sacred place of its own. This is the memory I've preserved when wearing the yukata in the blue-and-white hydrangea print.

If you go

For temple and shrine sales and festivals, check local listings. Two sources in English are Tokyo Journal and Kyoto Visitor's Guide, both monthlies. These are the markets that appear in the article:

TOYO: Arai Yakushiji: First Sunday, dawn to dusk. Rain cancels. Arai Yakushi-mae Station (Seibu Shinjuku Line). 3388-1355

Asakusa Sensoji: Daily stalls. Asakusa Station (Ginza/Toei Asakusa Lines).

Togonuki Jizo Temple: Daily stalls. Sugamo Station (Toei Mita Line).

Togo Shrine: First, fourth and, if there is one, fifth Sunday, 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. Harjuku Station (Yamanote Line) or Meiji Jingu-mae Station (Chiyoda Line). 3403-3591

Tsukiji: daily stalls and stores in streets surrounding the wholesale fish market. Tsukiji Station (Hibiya Line).

TAKAYAMA: Jinya and Miyagawa morning markets: daily, 7 a.m. to noon.

KYOTO: Toji Temple: First Sunday and 21st of each month, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Minami-ku (an eight-minute walk from Kintetsu Toji Station); 075-691-3325.