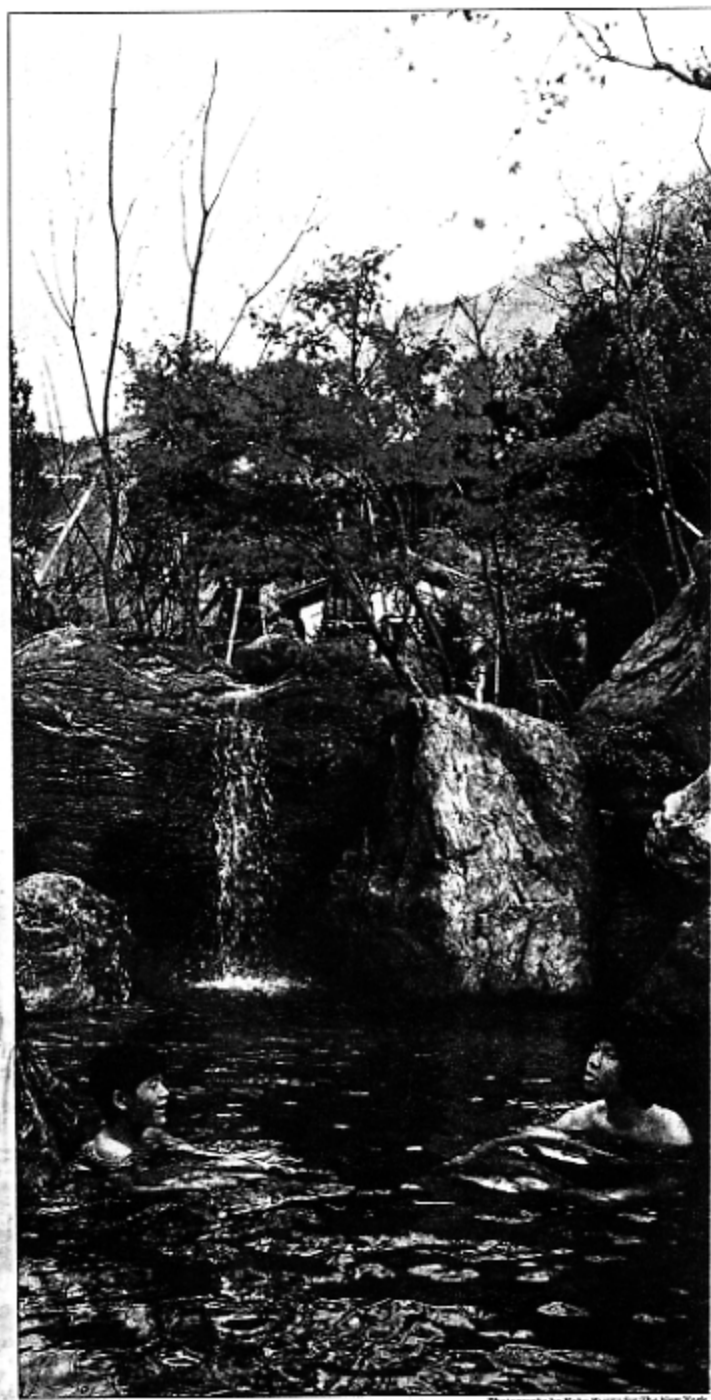


Travel

5

OLD TRADITIONS ENDURE IN JAPAN



Photographs by Katsu Kurita for The New York Times

Exploring the many museums, crafts shops and folk art galleries of Kurashiki in western Honshu.

BY ELIZABETH ANDOH 11

Falling under the spell of the ancient ritual of the Japanese bath, with visits to four rural retreats.

BY MATTHIAS KRIESBERG 10

A COMPANY TOWN THRIVES ON ART

Kurashiki's historic district is a center of culture where traditional craftsmanship shows even in the food

By ELIZABETH ANDOH

THE black tiled roofs, white-washed walls and latticed windows of Kurashiki's landmark houses are dramatic. Learning their history makes them even more intriguing.

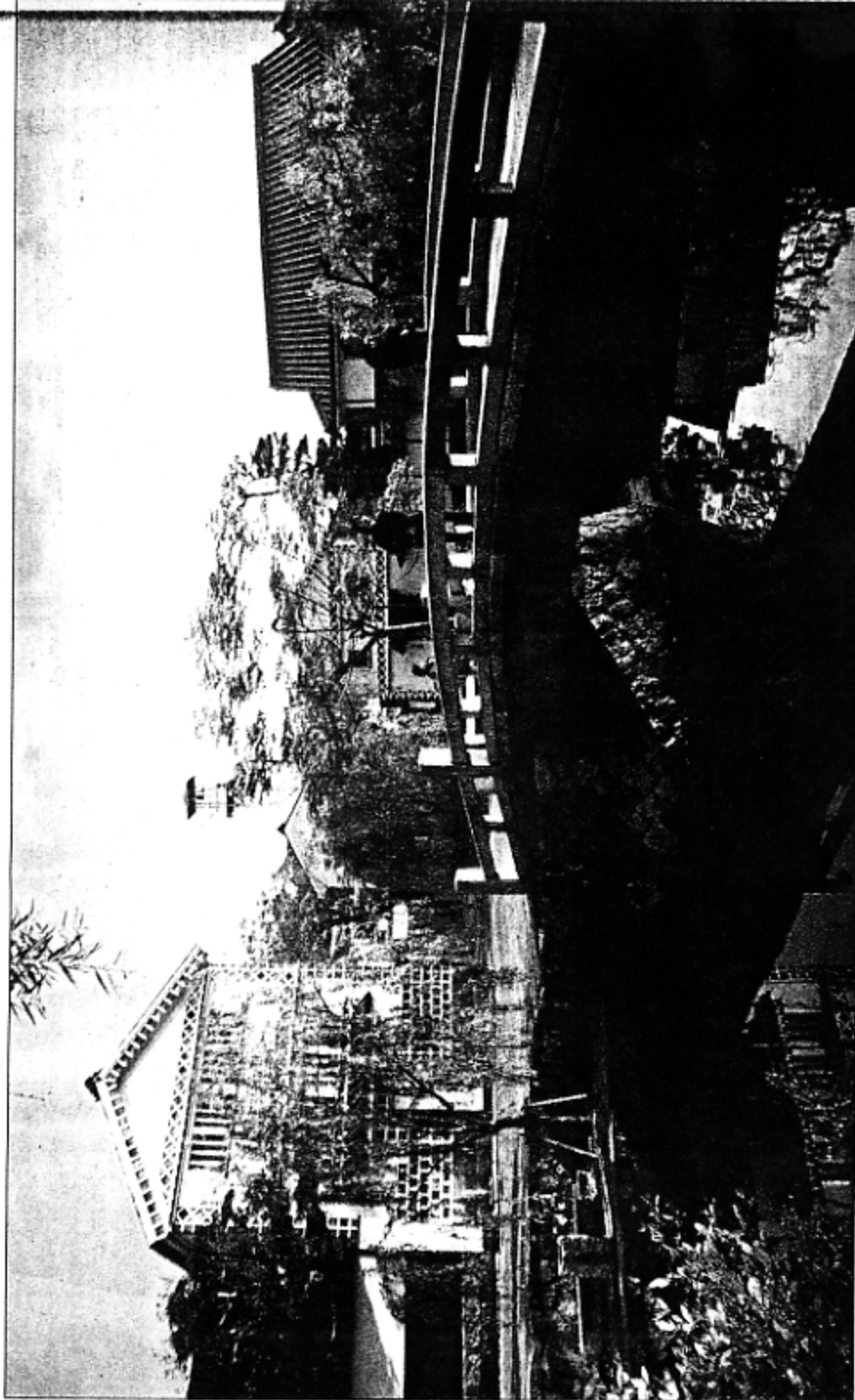
Many of the 500 or so structures in the 51-acre bikan chiku, as this historic district along a canal is known, were built during the Edo period (1600-1868) as yashiki, or sumptuous homes, others as kura, or warehouses. (The name Kurashiki is thought to be a contraction of these words.) Barges laden with grain and other goods were floated down the town's canal, then through a series of other waterways, to the Inland Sea, a dozen miles to the south.

Known today as a center for art and culture, Kurashiki has spread far beyond the historic district and has a population of 430,000, but at heart, this is a small town focused on arts and crafts. About 75 miles northeast of Hiroshima, in western Honshu, Kurashiki is a short local train ride from Okayama City, which is served by bullet trains; the 450-mile ride from Tokyo can be as fast as three hours.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Kurashiki was the hub of a lucrative spinning industry — a humming factory town, run by the wealthy Ohara clan. The family endowed many of the schools and hospitals in the area, and nearly all of the museums and cultural institutions that make Kurashiki an important arts center today.

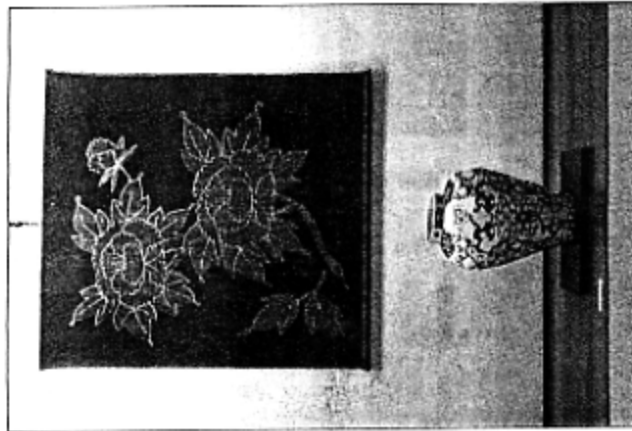
Beginning with the socially benevolent Koshiro Ohara (1833-1910), who provided what was considered excellent housing, education and medical care for his mill workers and their families, the Ohara legacy includes four generations. Koshiro Ohara's son, Magosaburo (1880-1943) and grandson, Soichiro (1909-1968), were great art collectors; the current chairman of the board of the Ohara Museum is Koshiro's great-grandson Kenichiro.

The first museum in Japan dedicated to masterpieces of Western art, the Ohara Museum complex includes a low-slung, sleekly modern annex (the Bokkan) that houses a diverse collection: many ancient artifacts from the Middle East and Asia, American pop art by Warhol and Lichtenstein, and Western-style paintings by Japanese artists. Sculptures by Isamu Noguchi, Henry Moore and other notable 20th-century artists are displayed on the lawn. Magosaburo Ohara commissioned Tora-



Photograph by Kaku Kurita for The New York Times





TOP Edo-era buildings line canal in historic Kurashiki. ABOVE LEFT Local work at Kurashiki Museum of Folkcraft; large work is "Festival of Venice" by Aman-jean. ABOVE RIGHT The Ohara Museum was the first in Japan devoted to Western art; Imari vase.

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Magosaburo Ohara commissioned Torajiro Kojima, a Japanese artist studying in Paris during the early 1920's, to purchase European art for the Ohara family. More than 100 works by El Greco, Rembrandt, Manet, Matisse, Rodin and Gauguin form the collection displayed in the Corinthian-columned main building, or Hon Kan, of the museum. Magosaburo Ohara and his son Soichiro were both avid supporters of the burgeoning Japanese mingei, or folk art, movement in the early part of the 20th century. The term mingei was coined by a philosopher of aesthetics, Soetsu Yanagi, and denotes utilitarian objects of beauty, created by skilled, but nameless, artisans. Yanagi startled the Japanese art community of the early 20th century by suggesting that the simply crafted objects of everyday life be seen as art.

It is something of a contradiction, then, that the early heroes of the Japanese folk art movement were themselves distinguished artisans. Members of Yanagi's core group included the potters Shoji Hamada, Kanjiro Kawai, Kenkichi Tomimoto and the Englishman Bernard Leach. The textile designer Keisuke Serizawa, who was declared a National Living Treasure by the government in 1956 for his kata-zome stencil dyeing, and the woodblock artist Shiko Munakata were also active members of Yanagi's circle. Fine examples of the work of these six artists are on display in the Kogekkan, the Industrial Arts wing of the Ohara Museum, built in the early 1960's.

A few doors down from the Ohara Mu-

ELIZABETH ANDOH is a journalist who directs a culinary arts center in Tokyo.

A village made for lovers of art and shopping

Kurashiki is about 16 miles from Okayama City, which is served dozens of times a day by bullet trains from Tokyo. A reserved seat for the roughly four-hour trip on the Shinkansen Hikari (33 trips a day) costs about \$122, at 133 yen to the dollar; the three-hour run on the Shinkansen Nozomi (15 a day) costs \$133. At Okayama, the local trains on the San'yō Line to Kurashiki take less than 15 minutes and cost \$1.68.

Where to Stay

Hotel Grace Kurashiki, 2-1-15 Chuo, Kurashiki, (81-86) 434-0111, fax (81-86) 434-0112, is a comfortable, no-frills, 64-room business hotel across the street from the entrance to the historic district. All but 19 rooms are single rooms, costing \$59; doubles are \$79, including tax. Each room has a private bathroom with shower and toilet. Breakfast is available, for \$6.

Atsurugata Ryokan, 1-3-15 Chuo, Kurashiki, (81-86) 424-1635, fax (81-86) 424-1650,

seum is the Kurashiki Museum of Folkcraft (Kurashiki Mingeikan), built in 1948 with the support of the local artists' community. Here, the work of unidentified glass blowers, weavers and dyers, basket makers, metalworkers and potters is displayed in restored rice warehouses.

Looking at the display of finely crafted rustic platters and vessels stirred in me a latent desire to return to making ceramics. My own early experiences at the potter's wheel, both at the High School of Music and

Art in New York City in the late 1930's, and later here in Japan, taught me the tactile pleasure of kneading clay, and the satisfaction of coaxing a spinning cone into bowls, pots and plates. I remember, too, the mixture of frustration and joy at the quickness of the kiln's searing heat that transformed dull slips into vibrant glazes.

Wandering through the Kurashiki Mingeikan, I realized that much of the exhilaration I feel when preparing Japanese food is the pleasure of matching food to vessel. As I

admired a huge, boldly beautiful, black-and-aqua-green platter from the Ushunōto kiln in Tottori Prefecture, I imagined it on my dining table, with chunks of soy-glazed salmon mounded in the center, accented by a few snowy slices of sweet-and-sour lotus root.

The term shokunin denotes an accomplished practitioner of a craft, someone who typically acquires his or her skill through apprenticeship to a master. There are shokunin in the culinary, as well as visual, arts. Several meals that I enjoyed while in Kurashiki seemed to be the gustatory equivalent of mingei: everyday fare prepared with care and skill by anonymous cooks. Two popular dishes I enjoyed at a pub named Mingei Chaya Shinsai in Kurashiki, seemed to exemplify the principles of folk art: *hōne sembei* (literally "bone crackers") and *aradaki* (literally "simmered fish bits").

Hōne sembei is made by double-frying the heads, fins and back bones of fish that have been stripped of their flesh for use in other dishes. Calcium-rich *hōne sembei* are as crisp and salty as potato chips and just as addictive, though far more nutritious. *Aradaki* typically includes the meaty collar and plump cheek meat of large ocean fishes like yellowtail. These chunks are stewed until tender, then glazed with a reduction of sweet soy infused with fresh ginger.

The folk art tradition is alive in Kurashiki outside the kitchen, too. Ample evidence can be found in smaller, private exhibits scattered about the district and in tiny shops that feature local handicrafts.

Most of these storefronts open onto Honmachi Dori, which despite its name (Main Street) is a narrow roadway without sidewalks that runs parallel to, and just behind,

Tomino Yuasuda, speaks English and he says he can also be reached within Japan at (090) 3178-9255.

Ichijou-Gama sells bizenware at 3-17 Honmachi, (81-86) 421-0246.

Utsuwa Naeshiro sells the work of the local ceramicist Norio Naeshiro at 11-27 Honmachi, (81-86) 427-1418. Closed Monday.

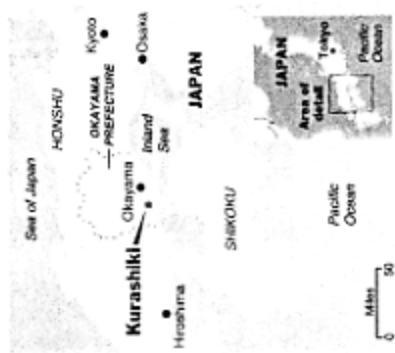
What to See

Chokin-bako Hakubutsukan (the Savings Box Museum), 1224 Funakura (in the San'yō University building), (81-86) 425-4577, is closed Monday. Admission is \$2.25.

At Nippon Kyoudo Gaugukan (Rural Toy Museum), 1-4-16 Chuo, (81-86) 422-9-58, the gallery and store are open year-round except on New Year's Day. Admission is \$3.75.

Ohara Bijutsukan (Ohara Museum of Art), 1-1-15 Chuo, (81-86) 422-40015, is closed Monday. Admission is \$7.50.

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The New York Times

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Small groups of visitors stroll the street, browsing with little concern for the occasional bicycle, car or scooter that manages to squeeze by. Tranquility is occasionally challenged, however, by bunches of older Japanese tourists who, following banner-waving guides, descend upon souvenir shops with enormous vigor.

Among the small crafts shops there, I was charmed by the molques, pinwheels and other handcrafted paper objects at *Kaze no Yakata* (Hall of Breezes).

A village made for lovers of art and shopping

Kurashiki is about 16 miles from Okayama City, which is served dozens of times a day by bullet trains from Tokyo. A reserved seat for the roughly four-hour trip on the Shinkansen Hikari (33 trips a day) costs about \$122, at 133 yen to the dollar; the three-hour run on the Shinkansen Nozomi (15 a day) costs \$133. At Okayama, the local trains on the Sanyo Line to Kurashiki take less than 15 minutes and cost \$160.

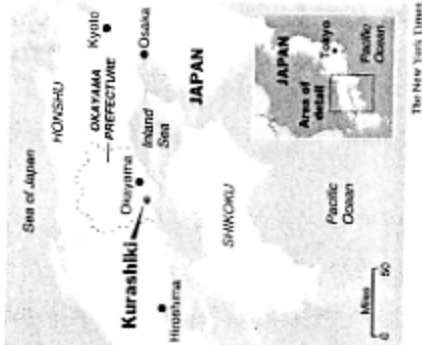
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At Tsurugata Ryokan, 1-3-15 Chuo, Kurashiki, (81-86) 424-1635, fax (81-86) 424-1650, has 13 tatami-matted rooms with private toilet. Three rooms have private baths but there are separate baths for men and women on the main floor that can be locked for 20- to 30-minute intervals if it is not busy. Doubles are \$90 to \$240 a person, including dinner and breakfast, but not including tax and service charges. The Web site, www.mmd.co.jp/tsurugata, is in Japanese, but includes photos.

Where to Shop

Most of these shops and museums in Kurashiki stay open if a national holiday falls on days they are normally closed.



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Ohara Bijutsukan (Ohara Museum of Art), 1-1-15 Chuo, (81-86) 422-0005, is closed Monday. Admission is \$7.50.

Kurashiki Mingeikan (Museum of Folkcraft), 1-4-11 Chuo, (81-86) 422-1537, is Closed Monday. Admission is \$5.25.

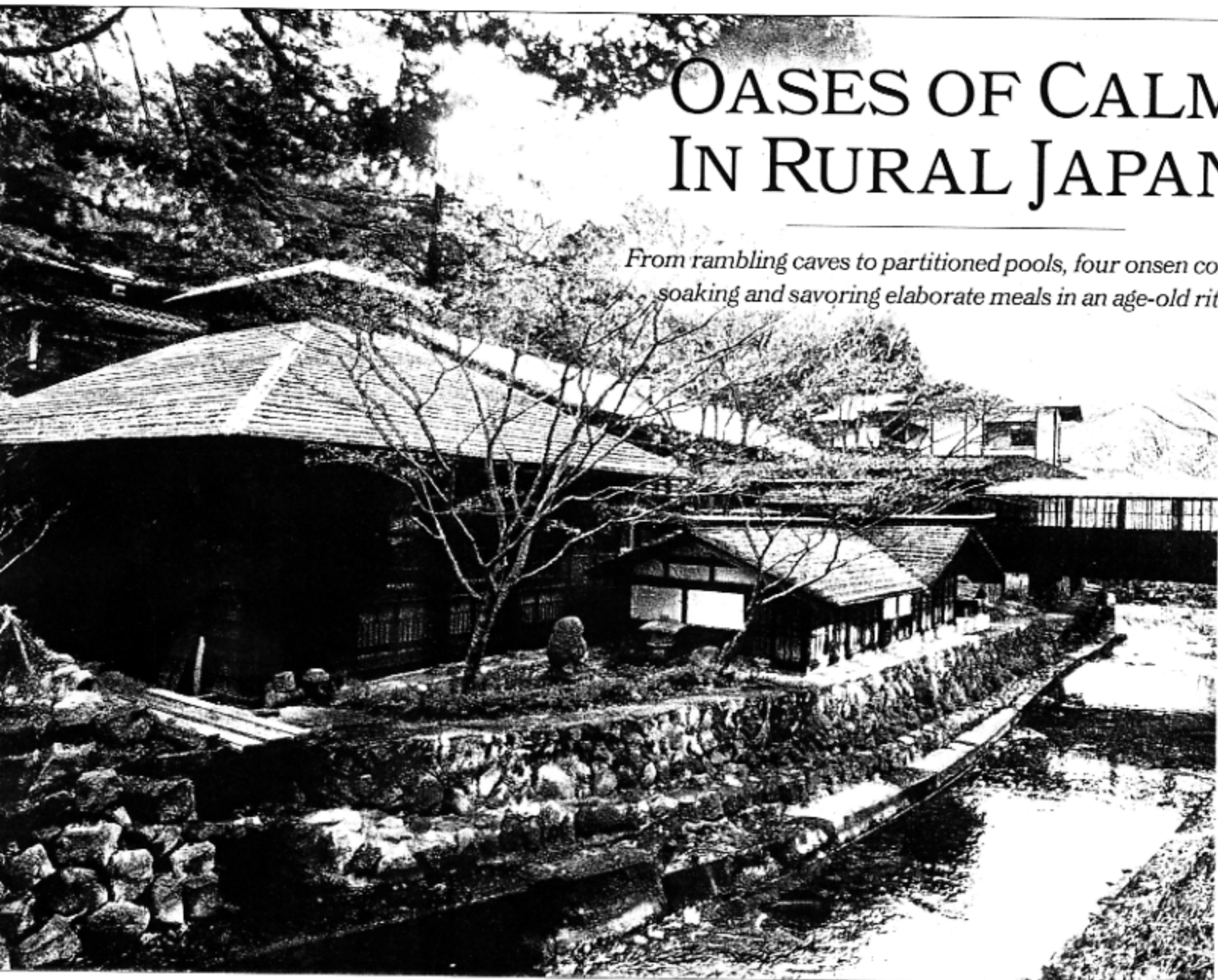
Where to Eat

Mingei Chaya Shinshu, 11-35 Honmachi, (81-86) 422-5171, offers pub-style food including *hone sembei* ("bone crackers") and *aradaki* (summered fish bits), both for \$3.75, and *zousui* (egg drop soup with rice and vegetables) for \$4.50. Closed on Sunday.

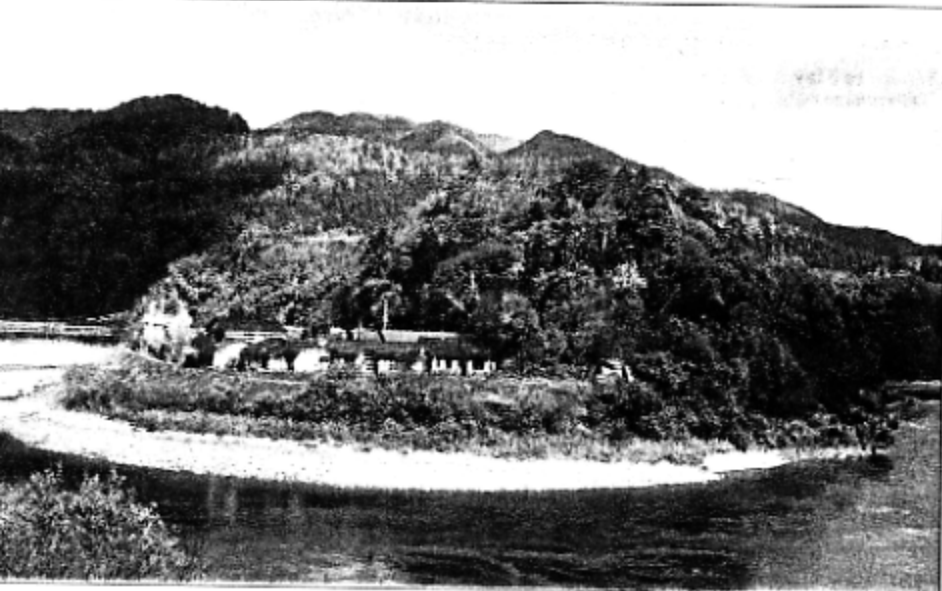
Fancy Fruit Shop Ueki, 2-3-1-11 Achi, (81-86) 422-0043, specializes in fruit grown locally. In the summer, it serves an incredible white peach smoothie, \$4.50. Closed Monday.

OASES OF CALM IN RURAL JAPAN

*From rambling caves to partitioned pools, four onsen co-
soaking and savoring elaborate meals in an age-old rit*



Photographs by Kikui Kurita for



TOP AND LEFT Shikinosato Kikuya at Takanosu, where guests cottages with private indoor and outdoor baths. ABOVE Lobby fireplace at Chojukan, a moderately priced onsen at Hoshi, ou Tokyo. BELOW Guests having tea in Shikinosato's tatami room

PREDICATED on the notion that communal bathing is a transformative experience, onsen — Japanese inns set beside hot springs — are an acquired taste. Still, it doesn't take all that long to adjust to the protocol of bathing, eating — and sleeping away the effects — in what is typically a one-day respite from the cares of the world.

Into that busy schedule, you can always try to find time for a hike in the surrounding forest or mountains. The benefits, my Japanese-speaking companion, Sylvie, and I found, were significant: we could bathe longer, eat more and sleep more profoundly — with somewhat less guilt.

In the course of three trips I made to Japan between January and June, we visited four onsen, all between two and four hours from Tokyo by train and bus. We took the typical package — an overnight stay with two meals. (While moderately priced onsen usually accept day visitors for a nominal charge — \$6, at 133 yen to the dollar, at Hoshi, for example — luxury places like Senji and Takonosu do not.)

With hundreds of onsen out there, the biggest decision was where to go. We narrowed our choices by considering only those offering mixed (kom'yoku) bathing. After all, why shouldn't we share the main attraction? In all cases women also had the option of a bath to themselves; with the exception of Namegawa onsen, so did the men.

Leaving Tokyo station at 9 on a Sunday morning, our northbound shinkansen (bullet train) brought us to Fukushima an hour and 40 minutes later. After lunch with a friend, we resumed our trip on a local train that some 30 minutes later deposited us in a shed serving as Toge station. There we were warmly ushered into a van to carry us up the steep, sometimes precarious mountain road to Namegawa, set beside a river. At the entrance, we parted company with our shoes. Our room, overlooking a thundering waterfall, was blessedly simple, with a low table and two cushions in the center. (After dinner, the table would be moved and two soft, snug futons laid out.) As our attendant

MATTHIAS KRIESBERG, a composer, lives part of the year in Tokyo.



prepared and poured green tea, she explained where things were, the times we would be served our dinner and breakfast, and scheduling details for the baths.

Then we quickly changed into the yukata (cotton robes) provided, padded down the hall and through separate disturbing rooms entered the bath, a windowed room with plain wood walls and black stone floors. Soaping and scrubbing, an integral part of the ritual, take place first, using hot and cold spigots and plastic buckets beside the bath. Privacy is not an option (with no independent hot water supply apart from the natural spring water, onsen rarely have separate showers).

The real draw was the rotenburo, the outdoor bath, accessed through a short, slightly treacherous trail along the river. Once settled inside — the occasional boulder on the bottom allowed us to adjust our level of immersion — we chatted with some of our fellow bathers and looked out at the mountains towering above. Imposing, at dusk, mysterious in starlight, tranquil in the predawn — it's hard to say one time of day or night is better than another. The air temperature, though, makes a difference: ideally, it should be cold enough outside that the heat of the spring water enveloping you remains inviting. (The downside is walking between the changing shed and the roten-



buro with nothing but your standard issue towel.)

That towel, by the way, measures precisely 13½ by 32 inches, and we were each allocated exactly one. It had a lot to accomplish: not just to dry us every time we got out of the bath, but also to vaguely impart some modesty as we entered — which meant, of course, it was supposed to accompany us into the bath, or until the very last moment. In fact, it's a personal choice of little consequence: the water was hot enough that we air-dried quite rapidly.

The next morning we set out on foot for Ubuyu, another onsen we'd heard about some three miles away. The road, variously overlooking forest and mountains, was often so steep that high-heeled shoes would have kept us level; at one point an elaborate sign advised drivers just how to execute a hairpin turn — at the critical second stage of a three-pointer, go in reverse — a technique we experienced firsthand when a couple driving by offered us a lift to join them in the rotenburo.

Nestled in a crevice between two steep mountains, the bath is available to day visitors for \$7.60. That wasn't quite the bargain it seemed: the views were glorious, but the clear water was so close to scalding it worked out to 50 cents a minute.

After two days of splendid austerity at Namegawa, we felt ready for a little more comfort. At midday we arrived at Niigata station; with a 45-minute layover, a sushi bar right before us, and the region's reputation for some of the freshest fish in the country, it was an easy call. Two hours later, having diligently ridden a connecting bus to the end of the line — in the wrong direction — we at least did not have to worry about getting hungry.

Hoshi, the largest and closest to Tokyo of the onsen we visited, interweaves rustic plainness with luxury. The baths were stunning: the first, kom'yoku 22 hours a day, was cathedral-like in appearance and almost Olympic in proportion, with a complex of massive beams above and below that subdivided the waters into free-floating compart-

ments, enabling one to lie back, supported at neck and ankles by the sides of the compartment, gazing at the landscape outside — a useful option because the water is decidedly on the hot side. Just before 8, as the impending transition to women-only was announced, I exchanged wistful glances with the male half of another couple; contentedly immersed, he, like me, no doubt hoped to be grandfathered in.

Beyond this bath we found its counterpart, a new addition elegantly proportioned, glorious in blond hinoki wood throughout, sun-filled by day, ethereally illuminated by night, with meticulously designed changing and washing facilities; beyond the glass doors at the far end is the carefully conceived rotenburo, tranquil with pastel-colored boulders, a small waterfall and views of the surrounding varied vegetation. Regrettably, these splendid baths are never kom'yoku — they alternate between women and men every 12 hours. But late that night

Onsen: Oases of Calm

Continued From Page 10

we checked for slippers at the entrance; finding none, we sneaked in together and had the baths completely to ourselves.

As is traditional at onsen, the elaborate dinner and breakfast were served in our room, and were dazzling in imagination and quantity: soups, hearty and delicate; mushrooms in a panoply of shapes; pickles in a colorful bouquet; mountain vegetables defying description; fish, raw, grilled, sautéed; bountiful-size crustaceans to be eaten whole — sensational by any reasonable standard. Except when compared with the cuisine of Senji or Takanosu.

In early January, returning to Tokyo from celebrating New Year's with friends in Osaka, we stopped in Nagano, and an hour's travel time later arrived at Senji, surely among the most luxurious of Japan's onsen. Our gracious attendant, ritually apologizing every few steps for the length of our walk through corridors adorned with miniature sculptures, prints and brooches, arrangements of flowers at every turn, hardly prepared us for the design and spaciousness — even by Western standards — of our suite. Even the toilet was state-of-the-art, with an electronic control panel boasting enough dials to fly a small aircraft.

The main bath at Senji is a rambling cave with dimly litged cu-de-sacs that variously afford privacy and offer delight to exploring children. The clear water, not especially hot, allowed us to stay in for hours on end without being scalded. It's a clever layout. At the entrance are separate washing facilities for men and women with enough accommodations (including an unlimited supply of towels) to encourage you to get really, really clean. You then enter single-sex baths, lovely in their own right; venturing farther into the cave, you join the main, mixed bath, where you can meet up with your partner.

At 7 p.m., wearing our yukata, we presented ourselves for dinner and were escorted to our private dining room, reached up a few steps and through a sliding screen, with a window opposite looking out on an illuminated garden. The meal — sashimi, grilled fish, soup, numerous small dishes of local vegetables — was already waiting for us, set upon the table with such care and precision that disturbing it seemed an unthinkable violation. A brief state of grace — we had first to review with our hostess each of the dishes and select our accompanying beverages — mercifully stayed our hands.

In such circumstances, the first bite becomes an extraordinary moment of transition from one aesthetic (cool, distant visual gratification) to quite another, especially when half the time you're not sure just what you're eating. But a bigger shock was to come: for the meal before us was only the introduction, part one of a composition of unknown dimensions. Every quarter hour or so our attendant slid open the screen, ex-

cused herself profoundly, wriggled off her slippers and, never rising above her knees, set before us yet another dazzling array of dishes, with flavors continually oscillating between the robust and the expensively subtle. Deep into the meal she brought a dish rarely served at onsen: cubes of tender beef were to sear on a hot stone. When it seemed that more to eat could scarcely be imagined, steaming bowls of noodles arrived, a traditional conclusion.

Who could sleep after that? We prowled the halls, discovering an elegant library, and among the various subtly marked doors, a private bath for couples, reserved simply by locking the door behind you. Overnight, we were intimidated by the thought that the next morning we would have to acquit ourselves honorably at breakfast, which, though more constrained in scope, was nonetheless the most extraordinary first meal of a day we had ever encountered.

Last June we also tried an onsen that offered an unusual combination of luxury and privacy: Takanosu, several hours north of Tokyo in a quiet setting of forest and lake, provides guests at the Shikimotsu Kikuya with a separate cottage that includes a living room, sleeping room and both an indoor and outdoor private bath. There is even a kitchen — theoretically you can prepare your own meals. But why miss the chance to experience a dinner of such extraordinary imagination, not to mention astonishing duration? Our attendant made no fewer than nine trips over several hours to bring the complete dinner of countless regional specialties to our cottage, including, at the end, the region's prized rice prepared with mountain herbs, exquisitely simple and confoundingly delicious.

Besides the private baths, Takanosu also offers modest traditional ones open to all guests. These are not *kon'yaku*, but they might as well be; we found them completely unused during our visit. That was not surprising: the suites are so self-contained,

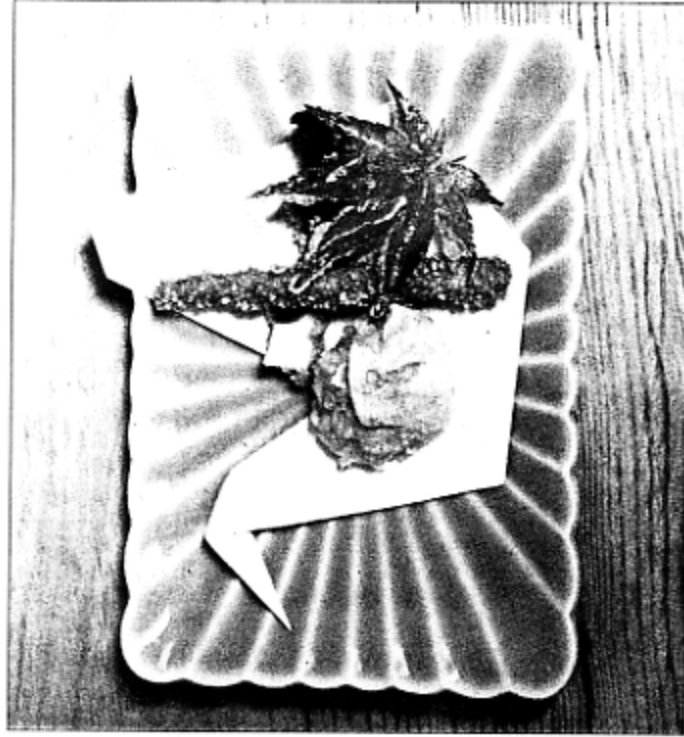
why leave? (However, remembering Senji, with its meticulous attention to preserving an authentic Japanese aesthetic in every detail, we found small motel-like touches in these rooms slightly jarring.) But we were drawn outside by the chance to take a long walk through a large park and along the river that runs adjacent to the property. Although it was a summer weekend, there was hardly anyone around. In itself, that was quite unusual for Japan. ■

Finding your way to the baths

Most stays at onsen are for a single night, with arrival after lunch and checkout after breakfast. If you plan to stay two days or more, you can request lunch. Prices quoted are per person, and may depend on the number in your party. Four people, for example, can stay in one room or suite. Most onsen have a range of prices, depending on room location and size, and day of the week; you generally won't go wrong choosing the lower-price options (the prices listed below). Only the more expensive onsen have private toilets in guests' rooms; otherwise there are public restrooms throughout the lodgings. Smoking is allowed.

English is unlikely to be spoken at these onsen. If you don't speak Japanese, make sure you are clear about travel arrangements and train and bus schedules or, if you are driving, precisely how to get there; carry a Japanese printout of your itinerary and connections, so you can ask for assistance as necessary. It's best to use a travel agent or hotel concierge to make arrangements. Learn a few key words, such as "Arigato gozaimasu" ("Thank you very much"), and memorize the kanji for women and men.

There is frequent shinkansen (bullet train) service between Tokyo and the major cities throughout Japan; local connections thereafter, however, may run just a few times a day. JR, the principal Japanese train line, offers an information service in English, Monday to Friday 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., (81-3) 3423-0111, for schedules and fares, including reserved seats. You can also buy a JR pass — mine cost \$230 for seven days of unlimited travel, a real bargain — but only before you arrive in Japan. For information on buying the pass, contact Japan Railways at (212) 332-8686; www.japanrail.com. A.T.M.'s can be hard to find outside cities, and credit cards are often not accepted, so take enough cash to cover your bill. A good source for information is "Japan's Hidden Hot Springs" by Robert Neff, an engagingly opinionated guide. Fukushima, Namegawa Onsen, Aza Namagawa, Oaza Osawa, Yonezawa-shi, Yamagata-ken 992-1303; (81) 90-320-1189. Closed during winter months (this year until the end of April). About \$70 a person. An hour and 40 minutes on the Tohoku shinkansen from Tokyo station to Fukushima station; then take the local Ou line train to Toge (30 minutes). The onsen van will meet you there. Chojukan, Hoshi Onsen, 650 Nagak, Nihojuran, Tene-gun, Guama-ken, 379-1401;



Photograph by Ikuo Kikuta for The New York Times

ABOVE: Japanese maple leaf tempura with bamboo shoot and mushroom at Takanosu. ABOVE LEFT: At Hoshi, a traditional goodbye.

(81) 27-898-0005. About \$125 a person. The Joetsu shinkansen from Tokyo to Jomo Kogin is an hour and a half; then take the bus to Sarugakyo stop, a 30-minute trip. From there a taxi will take you the 20-minute drive (about \$15) up to Hoshi. (A bus will take you back.)

Iwanoyu, Sent Onsen, 3159 Nirei Machi, Suzuka-shi, Nagano-ken 382-0034; (81) 26-245-2453. About \$180 a person. (It is best to reserve at least six months in advance.) From Nagano, less than two hours from Tokyo by shinkansen, take the local Nagano Dentetsu line to Suzaka (25 minutes). A bus right outside the station will take you to Senji.

Shikinosato Kikuya, Takanosu Onsen, 1076 Yusa, Sekikawa-mura, Iwafune-gun, Niigata-ken 959-3209; (81) 25-464-1001. About \$160 a person. The shinkansen from Tokyo to Niigata is about two hours; the local Yonesaka line train to Echigo-Shimoseki takes about 35 minutes. Leaving that station, walk to the traffic light, turn left at the first corner; a few hundred feet away is a small bus station. The bus ride to Takanosu takes 25 minutes. (In winter, it's best to take a taxi; \$11 for a 10-minute ride.)

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