

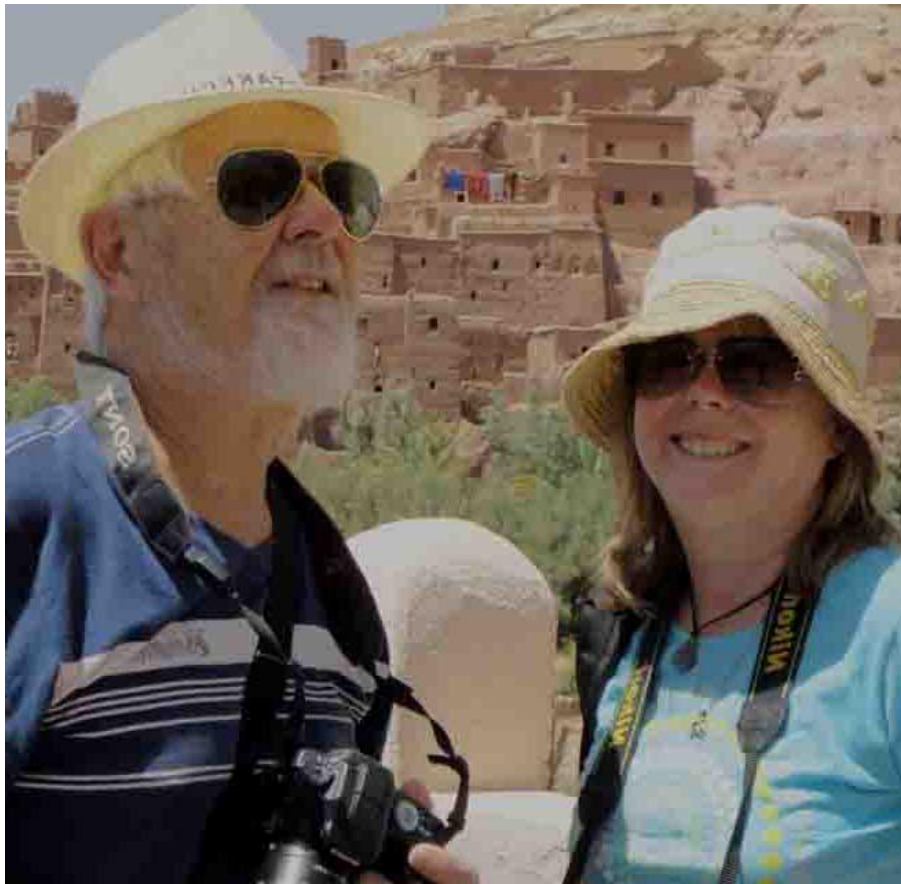
Mike's Japan



Mike Dixon

Mike's Japan **(2016 Edition)** by **Mike Dixon**

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I have lots of Japanese friends and I often visit them in Japan. I have noticed that the conversation flows more freely after a few glasses of sake. I then get to hear about things I might not otherwise know. The stories in this book were written to entertain and provide travel advice.

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1 Country and People



The islands of Japan stretch down the Asian mainland from latitude 45° to 25°, almost exactly the same as the east coast of the USA. The distance from the tip of Hokkaido in the north to Okinawa in the far south is about the same as from Halifax to Miami. It is equivalent to going from Bordeaux to the Canary Islands.

In winter, icebergs come down from the Bering Straits and the sea freezes in northern Hokkaido. In Okinawa (off the map to the south-west) the weather is still hot and balmy.

The main island of Honshu has the sort of weather normally associated with continental climates. Snow is not unusual in Tokyo in winter and uncomfortably hot conditions are the norm in summer.

The history of Japan has similarities with Europe. Just as Europeans derived much of their culture from Rome so the Japanese took a lot of theirs from the Chinese. This shows in the written language. Japanese is totally different from Chinese. As a consequence, Chinese characters have to be supplemented by a syllabary (sort of alphabet) when used to write Japanese. The result is a complicated mess that has become even messier with the use of the Roman (ABC) alphabet in recent years.

Written Japanese is a language in itself and this is a major obstacle to reform. The Chinese characters often convey subtle meanings which cannot be expressed in words. Reading Japanese is (even for Japanese) a bit like doing a translation job. More than one reading is possible.

Japan sits on the Pacific Rim of Fire and owes its very existence to volcanoes. It is situated slightly to the west of the junction of the Asian tectonic plate and the Pacific plate. The latter dips down as it makes its way northwards and pushes under the Asian plate. A lot of melting takes place when this happens and lava forces its way to the surface.

Japan is mainly mountains. To borrow a phrase from Mark Twain: Japan would be a mighty big country if it were ironed flat.

No matter where you go, you will find volcanoes. They stick up along the spine of the country and have created a mountainous landscape with few flat areas suitable for habitation. Japan is an immensely crowded country in some places and sparsely populated in others.

As you travel around, you will see small paddy fields kept alive by government subsidies. Elsewhere, highly efficient market gardens are using the latest technologies to produce fruit and vegetables.

Ancient shrines and temples dot the countryside. The "English garden" with flowers is becoming more common but many people stick to the traditional garden of shrubs and manicured trees.

Forests cover the mountains. Many are plantations. Others are natural. The display of autumn colours is spectacular and city folk flock out to admire it. The mountain roads are often very crowded at that time of year.

A few old castles survive from the past. Where they have been destroyed, concrete replicas are often built and used as museums.

Modern urban life is vibrant in Japan. You will find museums, art galleries and workshops specialising in arts and crafts. Dining out is an everyday experience for many inner city folk and whole areas of the larger towns are given over to restaurants. The youth culture is alive and well. Japanese girls love to dress up and parade with their friends. Fashions change from week to week.

2 Getting Around



There was a time when you had to speak Japanese to travel in Japan and you needed a fat wallet. Those days have gone. The Japanese Yen is no longer highly priced and enough people speak English for you to be able to get around.

However, bear in mind that the Japanese are not brilliant linguists. Like many English speakers, they find it difficult to speak any language except their own.

Getting around is easy. The country has a superb rail and road system. You can take a train, travel by bus or hire a car. If you plan to take domestic flights see if these can be purchased as part of your international air ticket, as this can save money.

Car hire prices are about the same as in most developed countries. My wife speaks fluent Japanese and we usually take a train to where we are going to start our tour. We leave the railway station and shop around in the car hire places that are to be found near most big railway stations.

If you don't speak Japanese, use the car hire counters at the airport because this is where you will find the English speakers. Then take a train to where you want to pick up the car. An international driving licence will be needed together with your national licence.

The Japanese drive on the left and use the same international road signs as in most countries. Drinking and driving is strictly prohibited but there is a relaxed attitude towards speed limits, which are set low and not rigorously enforced. I set my speed to match that of other road users. On the whole, the standard of driving is good.

If you are planning to travel by train, take advantage of the generous rail passes that are available to visitors from overseas. Take a look at www.jrpass.com and shop around to see what is the best deal for you. At the time of writing (Jan 2016) rail passes (for foreigners) can only be purchased from outside Japan. My Japanese friends wish they could buy them on such favourable terms.

Money: Major international bankcards (Visa, MasterCard etc.) are accepted almost everywhere for purchases. The problem comes when you try to withdraw money from a cash machine (ATM). Hardly any of the banks accept non-Japanese bankcards. I always take some Japanese currency with me. When I want to withdraw cash, from an ATM, I go to a **post office** in a major centre. These are run by the Japanese Government and have ATMs that accept international cards.

3 Places to Stay



Secure your accommodation well in advance. The Japanese tourist industry is booming. Last year (2015) the country welcomed more than 20 million guests from overseas. Many come from China. They come on weekend trips. Be aware of that. Finding accommodation at weekends can be next to impossible. On a recent trip to Tokyo, my wife and I were obliged to travel to Chiba (about 80 km away) in order to find a place to spend the night.

We used to travel around without making reservations. All we needed to do was head for the main railway station and check out the hotels in the immediate vicinity. Those days have gone.

You can no longer amble around. That's a shame for those of us who don't like to plan our holidays in detail. Some of my young Japanese friends overcome the problem by camping. They head for the hills at sunset and kip down amongst the trees.

If you plan to camp, bear in mind that campsites are few and far between and generally intended for school parties and youth groups. Older people, in Japan, have not caught onto the idea of camping. The few who continue to do so, after the age of eighteen, are like my crazy friends or they are on walking treks.

My wife likes to stay in the old-style inns. If you go to one you will have the opportunity to sample traditional Japanese hospitality. Guests sleep on the floor on futons that are stored away in the day and rolled out at night. Cushions or low chairs are available for sitting. Tea and biscuits are free. Meals are usually served in rooms as well as in the restaurant. There is often a choice of both traditional Japanese and Western food.

Photos: Top, a traditional inn. Below, futon room and restaurant area.



Search the internet for places to stay:

- Inn groups that cater for non-Japanese speakers: www.Japaneseinnngroup.com.
- Most big hotel chains have pages in English and staff with enough English to book you into your room. I have joined the Toyoko Inn Club (www.toyoko-inn.com). Take a look at them and some of the other hotels that advertise on the net. Prices will remain low so long as Prime Minister Abe manages to peg the Yen at a low exchange rate.

4 Places to Eat



Food is becoming faster and increasingly Westernised in Japan. As a Japanese friend remarked: it's what happens when everyone wants to go to work and no one wants to stay at home and do the cooking.

As a visitor, you will have little trouble finding a hamburger joint or a place that sells chicken and chips (French fries). At the same time, there is no shortage of good, old-fashioned, Japanese fast-food. The noodle bars and sushi trains are still doing a brisk trade and they are cheap.

Eating out is cheap in Japan compared with most developed countries. The problem for a non-Japanese speaker is to find what you want. Hamburger and chicken fry are easy because the signs are impossible to miss. Noodle bars and restaurants present a greater challenge.

The more interesting eating establishments aren't obvious. If you want something more exciting than a place where office workers go at midday, look for paper lanterns. They usually indicate that the proprietors have gone out of their way to create a bit of atmosphere.

Let's suppose you have located a suitable place. If it's a hamburger joint it will be like anywhere else. You merely go to the counter and point at a picture on the wall. If it's a noodle bar, there's so little choice it hardly matters. If it's a beer hall, it's easy. They have menus with pictures and prices in the straightforward (1,2,3 ...) numerals that everyone can read.

Beer halls are my favourites. The staff dress like pirates. Many are students. There's a lot of yelling when new customers arrive, gongs sound and raffle tickets are drawn from a jar (in the better establishments). You can order small amounts and take time eating while you down a few beers. The choice is so wide that even fussy palates can be satisfied.

Restaurants present the real challenge. You think that everything is straightforward but you are wrong. You have been fooled by the plastic displays in the window (see photo below). They show replicas of the dishes you can order and many are highly realistic. Then you realise that the names are in Japanese and there are no numbers beside them. I speak a primitive form of Japanese and can understand the odd written word yet I'm sometimes forced to take staff outside and point to a dish in the window.



The problem doesn't end there. For some annoying reason, many restaurants feel obliged to give prices in an old fashioned script that you don't see anywhere else except in Shinto temples and funeral parlours. Mercifully, it's simpler than Roman numerals. Each character corresponds to a numeral normal people use. So if there are three of them you know the price is less than 1000 yen. It helps to remember that one horizontal stroke corresponds to 1, two strokes make 2 and three make 3. After that it gets more difficult. Take a look at the picture, above, to see what I mean.

When I'm in Tokyo, I often eat in the shopping area below Tokyo Station. There's a vast expanse of streets down there and most are packed with restaurants. The main customers are office workers so I try to avoid the midday break. Ten years ago, most served Japanese meals. Now, I'm having difficulty finding a place that does not serve a Japanese version of Western food. If you want to eat Western (or something like it), Tokyo Station could be the place for you.

5 Narita Stopover



A lot of people break their journey at Narita, which is Japan's main airport and about an hour away from the centre of Tokyo by train. There are various possibilities.

You can check into the airline hotel at the edge of the airport and eat in the hotel restaurant with a whole lot of other international travellers. Alternatively, you can book in and take the next hotel bus to Narita city.

Most buses stop at the main railway station and you can walk through it to the top of the high street, which is packed with tourist shops and eating houses. You can choose to dine there with other tourists or you can hunt out the places where the locals eat.



My preference is for the beer halls near the station. They are in high-rise buildings and you have to look at the advertising signs to find them. The signs are lavishly illustrated and written in both Japanese and English so you will have no difficulty. The beer halls sell drinks and snacks from an illustrated menu. All you have to do is point and hold up one or more fingers to show how many items you want. Needless to say, places in Narita are accustomed to serving people who can't speak Japanese.

If you have time, stroll down the high street to the magnificent temple gardens (Top image). These are shut after sunset so you might consider spending a second night in Narita to see them. You could also take a trip into Tokyo. As always, surf the net to find places to stay.

6 Tokyo



I have friends who left well-paid jobs in Tokyo for a more relaxed lifestyle but they make frequent trips back. It's a great place to visit. Whether you are a teenage tearaway or a serious-minded intellectual, you'll not be disappointed. There's a lot to turn you on so long as you have time to enjoy it.

When my wife and I go to Tokyo we generally stay in one of the many inns that specialise in taking foreign guests. On our last two visits we stayed in Asakusa. That's a famous temple area and it has a lot of character. I'm reminded of parts of London that have retained something of their Cockney heritage. There are stalls selling things, guys with rickshaws, priests, nuns and girls in kimonos.



During the day, Asakusa is overrun with tourists. When night falls the tourists leave and the atmosphere changes. Side streets light up. Shutters are opened. Tables are brought out onto pavements and suddenly it's like a small town where everyone knows one another and every night is party night.

Getting around in Tokyo is easy. You go to the nearest Metro station and take a train. Timetables and maps are in Western (ABC) script as well as Japanese. You can buy a ticket from a machine or use the ticket office. Many railway staff know enough English to tell you what to do. If you look suitably lost, there's a fair chance some nice person will come to your aid.

If you want to take a look at top department stores and chic restaurants then the Ginza is the place for you. For the latest in electronic wizardry, go to Akihabara. If you want to see where the kids have their rave parties, try Shibuya and Harajuku. The photo on the cover was taken at Shibuya.

The nation's top art galleries and museums are at Ueno. You will also find the ancient shrine of the Tokugawa family (of Shogun film fame) in the park there. The famous Ueno markets are next to Ueno station. Hang on to your wallet and see if you can spot any Yakuza.

Sumo enthusiasts should visit Ryogoko, which is where the wrestlers live. Go just after breakfast when they are walking to their training sessions in full regalia. You'll make the day of some young guy if you photograph him and ask for his autograph.



For books, private art galleries, and shops selling old prints and manuscripts go to leafy Kanda.

7 Daytrip to Nikko



Nikko is up in the mountains to the north of Tokyo and is famous for its temples and gardens. The royal family had a country retreat there and it is open to visitors.

Use the train to get there. The station is in the high street and an easy stroll takes you to the main attractions, past numerous tourist shops and restaurants. I advise you not to take a car unless you go in midwinter. Finding a place to park can be a nightmare.

The natural scenery is magnificent. A huge, ornamental lake flows into a gorge down a waterfall that freezes in winter. Dress warmly if you go at that time of year. We visited Nikko in winter and spent most of our time huddled beside a fire in a restaurant overlooking the famous frozen waterfall.

The mountains around the lake are covered in majestic trees. These tower above huge boulders and are an important feature of the temple gardens.





Don't forget your camera. You could spend an entire day taking photographs. The temples, royal holiday palace, lake, waterfall, sacred bridge and other attractions deserve your attention.

8 Daytrip to Mt Fuji





Mount Fuji is to the west of Tokyo and visible from the nation's capital on a clear day. It is Japan's highest mountain at 3,776 m (12,385 ft) and is snow-capped throughout the year.

Fuji is one of those rare volcanoes which looks like a volcano when seen from any angle. It is one of the world's most famous volcanos and one of the most beautiful.

To see it close up, get on a train to Fuji Yoshida. The town is an ancient pilgrimage centre for the mountain. It is a bit rundown following the collapse of the Japanese textile industry when factories relocated to cheap-labour countries. But, the old shrines and viewing spots are still there.

If you want to go up the mountain, get back on the train and continue to the next stop. There's a gigantic amusement park there and you can't miss it. Buses leave from outside the station and drive through the forested area at the base of the mountain to the start of the cinder cone. There's a visitors centre where you can have coffee and learn how the volcano works. You can also press on further up the mountain.

Guides with ponies will take you part way. You can also join the hardy types who trudge to the very top. You will, of course, have to come fully prepared with the necessary climbing gear if you want to do that.

The three photos were taken from leafy suburbia in Fuji Yoshida, depressed downtown Fuji Yoshida and the amusement park at the bottom of the mountain. The last was shot after it had started to snow. In case you are wondering, that's cherry blossom on the trees. The weather in Japan can be unpredictable

9 Visit a Castle



Japan and Europe have a lot in common. Unlike China, neither had a strong central authority in medieval times. Power lay in the hands of feudal lords who controlled vast stretches of territory. They went to war with one another and paid lip service to kings and emperors.

The Europeans built out of stone. That wasn't an option for the Japanese. Earthquakes are common and stone castles would soon be shaken down. The solution was to build in wood and place the castle on a high stone platform made from irregular blocks that would (hopefully) settle back into their original positions after a big shake.

The castle mounds have survived in most places but the wooden structures rarely withstood the ravages of time. They are vulnerable to fire and costly to maintain.

My first picture is of Himeji Castle in southern Honshu. It is one of the few to have survived in something like its original condition. Those that follow are of Kumamoto Castle in Kyushu.



It is 30-metres high which gives an idea of its massive scale. The building is a 1960s reconstruction on the original stone platform. The exterior was made using authentic materials and methods. The interior was constructed using modern materials and houses a museum.



An adjacent building was completed recently and is a faithful copy of the original. It houses the great hall and associated chambers. The magnificent decorations, shown in the second photograph, are based on careful historical research and are judged correct down to the smallest detail.



The third photograph shows security precautions against ninjas and other assassins. The fourth is of a room in a restored samurai house. The samurai served their lord as soldiers and administrators and were drawn from the knightly classes, just as in Europe.



You'll find more about Japanese Castles in my mystery thriller *The Missing Miss Mori*. You can buy a copy from the major retailers for \$2.99 or receive a **FREE COPY** from me. **CLICK:** <http://eepurl.com/bP8XL9>

10 Visit a Volcano



Japan sits on the Pacific Rim of Fire and owes its existence to volcanoes. They spew out the stuff that Japan is made of. You can see them in the far-north island of Hokkaido and at the very tip of the southern island of Kyushu.

The top picture is of Mount Unsen in Kyushu. It has a long history of eruptions. The town of Shimabara, on its slopes, was destroyed in 1792 with the loss of 15,000 lives. More recently, in 1991, 43 people died in a pyroclastic flow (avalanche of superheated gas and dust) that suddenly erupted and sped down the mountainside. Most were newsmen and volcanologists. The town's population had previously been evacuated.



An impressive museum, in Shimabara, is built of land buried in that eruption and preserves partially-buried houses. Other exhibits include videos of the pyroclastic event, shot by newsmen as the gasses raced towards them. They died but their cameras survived.

Kyushu has many active volcanoes. You will see them puffing out smoke and ash as you travel around. Occasionally, you may be treated to a distant display of red-hot lava. Don't expect to get close. As soon as volcanoes start to get really interesting, you are not allowed to go anywhere near them ... unless you are a newsman or distinguished volcanologist.

One way round the problem is to take a trip in a site-seeing aircraft. Even then, you will be severely restricted in how close you can get.

My next photo was taken on the rim of the Mount Aso volcano, which is also in Kyushu. A road leads up there and there is a visitors' centre complete with displays telling you how the volcano works. The centre has a siren which sounds whenever Aso sends out more noxious gases than are thought healthy for the average visitor. People who are slow to heed the warning are approached by staff wearing breathing apparatus. People with lung problems are advised not to make the trip up the mountain in the first place.





My last photo is of the city of Kagashima, which is at the southern tip of Kyushu. Its volcano is just off the coast and was an island before an eruption joined it to the mainland. We stayed there, on the slopes of the volcano, in a house built amongst lava flows. The neighbours' children went to school wearing hard hats and padded jackets as protection against stones that might rain down from the sky. Concrete shelters lined the road so that the children (and others) could take shelter if the loudspeakers, beside the road, stopped playing music and warned that an eruption was about to occur.

11 Hiking in Japan



We call it bush walking in Australia and the Japanese call it mountain walking. By any name, it's a popular recreation in Japan and well organised.

Japan has an extensive system of National Parks with trails to suit all tastes from the casual walker to the hiking enthusiast. Parking, toilet and other facilities are provided and there's no shortage of maps and helpful signs for those who can read them.

Hiking in Japan is much the same as in other developed countries but there are notable differences. One is the virtual absence of campsites. I have hunted for them and occasionally found one, only to discover that it is reserved for youth groups. I've spoken to hikers about this and have received a mixed reaction. Some are amazed that anyone over the age of twenty would want to sleep in a cabin or tent. Others say there is no law to stop you sleeping on a mountainside and that's what they do.

Another notable difference is wildlife. In Australia, where I live, it is important to keep an eye out for snakes and crocodiles. In Japan it's bears, boars and monkeys. The Japanese National Parks people are highly protective of the furry creatures in their care and some of them venture surprisingly close to cities.

I recently photographed the warning sign (above) about bears. I came upon it in a park about 100 km from Tokyo and showed it to friends who live nearby. The wife refused to believe there were bears in the park, claiming that the wildlife service puts the signs up to attract tourists. Her husband assured me that the bears are real and have to be taken seriously.

We wear bear bells when we go hiking in Japan. They jingle and let the bears know we are coming. That way they don't get taken by surprise, which can be bad for their nerves and lead to dangerous defensive behaviour. I stomp around when I go bush walking at home in Australia. That way the snakes know I'm coming and get out of my way.

Japanese hiking gear is much the same as elsewhere but you will occasionally see people dressed in a far older style. They are pilgrims making their way between mountain shrines. The traditional gear is white tunic, straw hat and straw sandals. A few hardy types keep to the rules but many compromise on footwear and wear modern climbing boots.







You don't have to climb to get to the top of many peaks. There's no shortage of cable cars and mountain railways. And there are lots of places to leave the track for a meal with friends.

12 Skiing in Japan





The Skiing industry is well developed throughout Japan. My Australian friends often stop off to ski when on their way to Europe or North America. That's a thought for those planning a trip in the opposite direction. Prices are attractive while the Yen remains low relative to other currencies. There is no shortage of information on what's available on the internet.

13 Sapporo Snow Festival





Japan and Russia are close neighbours. Relations have often been strained but both have learned from the other. The Russians have adopted Japanese technology and the Japanese have adopted snow festivals.

The northern island of Hokkaido is very close to Vladivostok. In winter, the people there build fantastic sculptures out of ice. They were doing so during the time of the tsars and they are doing it now.

The people of Sapporo have followed the Russian example. Some of their creations imitate the Russians. Others are uniquely Japanese. If you are thinking of going to the Sapporo Snow Festival, bear in mind that the weather will be severe. It will probably be snowing and you will need to make frequent trips down into the underground shopping malls to warm up.

I went to Sapporo by air. But, I could have gone by boat.

14 Tsunami Coast



I was in a Gold Coast (Australia) sushi bar, owned by my friend Shu, when the recent Tsunami struck. I got home, turned on the TV and saw scenes of devastation as a wave of water raced towards the city of Sendai. Shu came from Sendai and I phoned him immediately.

That was one amazing coincidence but not the only one. In Sydney, Yukino McHugh, the daughter of my friends, Tim and Toshimi McHugh, turned on her TV and saw a wall of water racing up a river near to where her parents live in Japan.

Tim recounts how he had gone to the rescue of friends, living on low-lying land, and was taking them to safety when his phone rang and he heard his daughter's voice.

'Daddy! Daddy! Where are you?'

Tim told her.

'Daddy. The tsunami is coming at you.'

Tim had almost reached a designated safety area. He knew there was a severe risk. He did not expect his daughter, in Australia, to be giving a detailed account of just how bad it was.

We live in an amazing world. Information flows around at lightning speed. I phoned Shu and he phoned his mother in Sendai. The tsunami sirens were blasting away when he reached her. Mother was safe. Sadly, not everyone followed the evacuation instructions.

Tim got his friends to safety and set about collecting relief supplies. He took time off from his English language school and went up the coast to help devastated communities. He writes sci-fi novels using the name Vindal Vandakoff. Toshimi convinced him to switch genres and write an account of the tsunami, as seen through the eyes of ordinary people. His book is called *Japan Beyond Tragedy* and is available as an ebook.

Last year (2015), my wife and I visited Tim and Toshimi and they showed us some of the damage caused by the combined disasters of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown.

We toured the local sake distillery and were shown where an ancient structure had collapsed, spilling thousands of litres of the precious liquid. That was nothing compared with the spilling of highly radioactive nuclear material.

I recalled visiting the Nuclear Energy Authority's information centre some years earlier. To my amazement, some of the displays claimed it was safe to store nuclear waste underground in Japan. I can believe it is safe to do that in parts of the world which have been geologically stable for billions of years. Japan is not one of them. It sits on the Pacific Rim of Fire.

The Japanese have become highly suspicious of people in authority, on this and other issues. They have good reason to be. And they are not the only ones.

We spent a few days with Tim and Toshimi then went north to take a look at the part of the coast that suffered most when the tsunami struck. Our first stop was Aomori in the far north of Honshu. We used one of the five days available on our JR-rail pass and took the shinkansen.

The Aomori district has some spectacular scenery. The name means "blue forest". Its rugged mountains are clothed in a variety of trees and shrubs. Some are the magnificent blue pines which give the region such a distinctive appearance. It is a marvellous place to visit. But expect mist and rain.

We hired a car in Aomori city and set off down the rugged east coast. Most of the area is designated National Park. Picturesque fishing villages nestle in quiet coves. Bigger towns cater for tourists. Here and there, broad valleys stretch inland. These were badly hit by the tsunami.

Tsu means *harbour* and *nam*i means *wave*. We once called them *tidal waves* and that was misleading. Tides are caused by the moon. Tsunamis are caused by earthquakes. The seafloor moves up and down and water mounds up.

The mounds are packed with energy. In deep water they are scarcely noticeable as they spread out. When they reach shallow water, all that energy becomes packed into a small volume. The mounds wander around furiously drawing water towards them. The sea recedes from the shore ... and returns with extreme violence.

When fishermen see the water level fall in their harbours they know that disaster is about to strike. We noticed that most fishing villages were built on high ground. The only buildings, at sea level, were those needed for fishing.

The people in the big towns sought protection behind tsunami walls. These were effective for small tsunamis but totally useless when the last one struck. The Japanese government was criticised for being slow to react. When it finally swung into action it did so on a massive scale.

Huge walls are being built in some places. In others, hills are being carted away and dumped in valleys. Ground levels are being raised by fifty or more metres. Vast areas resemble the opencast mining sites that I visit in Australia.





My photos (directly above) give an idea of what you can expect to see on a trip from Aomori to Sendai by car. The first is of a Shinto Shrine in a volcanic area near Aomori. The last is of the massive equipment that has been brought in to raise the level of the valley floors.

15 Gods and temples





Like much of Europe, Japan is essentially secular when it comes to religion. The country is home to Confucianism, Buddhism and Shinto. The last of these is, in a sense, the national religion. It is uniquely Japanese and I spent some time trying to work out what it's all about.

I began by asking questions and got nowhere. At first, I thought my Japanese friends were reticent about discussing personal beliefs. Then I realised they knew as much about Shinto as I know about, mistletoe, Christmas trees, wishing wells and Easter eggs.

I would ask a question like: *Why do you hang out lanterns on a certain day?* And I would get an answer like: *That's what we do.*

I guess that if I were asked: *Why do you kiss under mistletoe?* I would answer in much the same way.

My friend Tim McHugh, who is a science fiction writer, put me right on the subject. He got to know the local Shinto priests in the district where he lives. In doing so he became an enthusiast for Shinto.

Tim explained that it is one of those ancient religions that sees all parts of the cosmos as connected. We are part of the cosmos and must harmonise with it: not just on the physical plane but on a wider spiritual plane. That's what Shinto helps us to do. Okay. I take the point. I guess that some of us have that sort of feeling when we decorate trees at Christmas and paint eggs at Easter.

There are two sorts of temples in Japan: Buddhist and Shinto. Very occasionally you find Buddhist shrines in Shinto temples and vice versa.

You will see images of gods and devils in both. I get conflicting views on whether they are meant to exist and have heard similar arguments about saints and angels when religion is discussed in Christian countries.

16 Cherry Blossom



The Japanese word for cherry is *sakura*. The entire country is planted with them. When the trees are in flower, the display is spectacular. Like Christmas in the West, it is a time of year when people get together. Individuals and businesses hold parties. People are obliged to socialise when their inclination might be otherwise, which can be both a good and a bad thing.

Cherry blossom viewing is difficult to avoid if you live in Japan. If you like flowers, it's a great time to visit the countryside. If you are a student of human behaviour, there is a lot to see.

Offices arrange parties and staff feel bound to turn up. You can see them in the parks, sitting beneath the trees. Some will be viewing the blooms with eyes attuned to the beauty of nature. Others will be swigging beer and stuffing themselves with potato crisps. It takes all sorts to make a world and no one can escape the sakura parties.

Sakura time starts in early spring in the south of the country and several weeks later in the north. Be aware that weekends can be very busy. People are off work and have time to take part in the festivities. Secure your weekend accommodation well in advance.

We are invited to Sakura parties most years but rarely make the trip from Australia. One year was an exception. We saw an amazingly low air fare on the internet and grabbed it before it could vanish. We arrived on April 6 and got in two parties during the next two weeks. One was near Mount Fuji and the other about 100 kilometres up the coast from Tokyo. The second party was abandoned due to snow and we retreated indoors.



The photos (above) are of the two parties. The first was organised by friends who moved into the Mount Fuji area, from Tokyo, for a more relaxed lifestyle. Land prices were relatively low and they got a bargain. That has since changed and people are flooding in. Their cherry blossom party was arranged so newcomers could get to know one another. I sat with a JAL pilot on one side and a banker's wife on the other.

The second photograph was taken a week later, with other friends, to the north of Tokyo. A cold front had moved in and it had begun to snow. We retreated indoors. Our host put on the gear he wears for such occasions and we embarked on a very different sort of cherry blossom party. Next day we decided to go skiing only to find that the roads were cut by snowdrifts.

17 Hot spring baths



They are an institution in Japan, which is not surprising because the country is overrun with volcanoes. The mist in mountain gullies is often not mist at all. It's steam rising from cracks in the ground. And that smell of bad eggs has nothing to do with eggs. It's sulphur dioxide ... the price you pay for having a continual supply of hot water.

Many country inns have hot spring baths and these are usually private. Spas have big pools as well as private baths. Bathing is done with clothes off and most pools are segregated. A few allow mixed bathing.

Whether you bathe privately or with others it is important to wash first. The hot spring baths in the inns may look like big wash tubs but they are not for that purpose. A washroom is always provided and you use that first. You will find low stools and bowls for hot water. Squat on a stool, smear yourself with soap, scrub thoroughly then take a shower to get rid of the soap.

Spas provide minuscule towels. They serve three needs. The first is modesty. Bathing costumes are not allowed and many bathers feel the need for some sort of covering as they make their way from the washroom to the side of the pool. The second reason is advertising. The resort's name is on the towels and customers are expected to souvenir them. The third reason is drying but how you dry with such a small item beats me.

Some young guys told me about a fabulous spa they used to visit before the municipality shut it down. Their account was given in Japanese and no one was game to call on my wife or any of the other ladies for an accurate translation so I may have got a few details wrong.

As far as I can make out entry was, on certain nights, restricted to older teenagers. There were separate washrooms but bathing was mixed. The girls stripped off and got in at one end and the boys did the same at the other. There was a rope at the halfway mark and the bathers were allowed to swim to it and talk. Underwater viewing masks were banned and touching was strictly out.

I'm aware of fundamental errors in my command of the Japanese language. However, there are limits to my mistakes. I sometimes confuse left and right. I'm sure that I never confuse male and female. So, unless I got the whole thing hopelessly back-to-front, it was the girls who started touching and that was the cause of the fuss.

A journalist with one of the local newspapers claimed that the young ladies ran a competition to see how many boys they could touch, awarding points according to where contact was made. The article caused an outcry of indignation from parent and teacher organisations. The licensing authority made threatening noises and the spa's owners were obliged to insert a second rope, a couple of metres back from the first.

That didn't work. Some of the girls were top swimmers and upped their scores with record-breaking, breath-hold dives. In the end, the spa was required to impose fully segregated bathing for all young people and that was very bad for business. It was already struggling and the further restrictions forced it to close.

The whole thing reminded me of an episode in Townsville, where I had my backpacker hostel. A beer garden was holding mud-wrestling competitions for buxom girls in floppy tops and the local wowsers (Aussie for killjoys) got the whole thing stopped. One lady even picketed the place and that was bad for business. You can read about the sad incident in my book *Free Beer and Sex*.

Photo: The snow monkeys like to take a bath. These lucky boys and girls are at their favorite spa in the mountains near Nikko. Getting dry and leaving the water for a bite to eat always pose problems for them. To make matters worse, notices, in multiple languages, tell humans not to feed the bathers. Discarded chocolate wrappers and remnants of sushi rolls tell another tale.



You'll find more about hot spring baths in my mystery thriller *The Missing Miss Mori*. You can buy a copy from the major retailers for \$2.99 or receive a **FREE COPY** from me. **CLICK:** <http://eepurl.com/bP8XL9>

18 Love Hotels



Other countries have rooms for rent by the hour. Japan does it to extremes. Lovers don't have to put up with rickety beds and dingy surroundings. Nor do they have to worry about hidden cameras. The cameras in love hotels are not hidden. They are clearly visible and operated by handsets. You can record your memorable moments for posterity.

Let's suppose you are a student living with mum and dad in a posh part of Nara West. It's most unlikely that your socially conscious parents will approve of you taking a girl back to your room. The neighbours might get to hear about it and that could lead to all sorts of malicious gossip.

The fleshpots of wicked Osaka are just down the road. They're half-an-hour away on the train. You and your beloved can nip down for a harmless get together and be back before anyone knows you've gone.

You arrive in Osaka and head for the hotel district. There are business hotels, tourist hotels and the sort of hotel you are looking for. You fancy a place that is themed with Dungeons and Dragons but your companion turns it down, saying a friend of hers had some very bad experiences there. Pirates of the Caribbean is your next choice but she doesn't fancy making love in the rigging of a fake galleon. Her preference is for a place across the road.

You enter through a side door and are relieved to discover that the lighting is dimmed and there is no reception desk. A mechanical voice greets you and a flashing machine asks for your credit card. The prices are a bit steep and you wonder if you can get a loan from your father. You could say you need it to buy books. At any rate, you are not going to bail out now. You are with the hottest chick in town and there's no turning back.

Your companion points to a picture of a 1950s car. The price is mid-range and you hastily prod the picture before her fancy turns to something more expensive. The picture fades and a message appears saying you have successfully completed the transaction. Your credit card is returned. Lights flash on the floor and illuminated arrows guide you to your room.

A shining automobile stands on a thick shag carpet. You take a step forward and the air is filled with the sound of Elvis. You take another and the vehicle opens up. The roof lifts back and the seats unfold to form a double bed.

Condoms hang in packets from the windscreen. Your companion reaches towards them. They come in different sizes and she wants to know which to pick. You are tempted to say *Jumbo* but have been warned about the perils of a loose fit. *Slim* is the manufacturer's way of saying *Small*. There's no way you are going to say *Slim*. That leaves *Standard*. Then she asks about flavour. That's something you hadn't thought of and you are struggling for a reply when she chooses *Peppermint*.

Buttons on the dashboard have to be set before you begin. There's a selection of 1950s records. You choose Rock Around the Clock and go on to the next step. It's worse than downloading a file from the internet. There's always something else to be done. You set the humidity control, adjust lighting and choose a suitable gear. The overhead camera has to be positioned and you're fiddling with it when you feel a cheek on your thigh and smell peppermint.

PS (1): An Australian friend claims to use love hotels because they are cheap. He reckons the down-market, no-frills joints have a better bed price than normal hotels. That's because they don't make money from beds but from the "massage" services they provide. As he says, there's no obligation to use these services. If there was, the hotels would be classed as brothels and the licensing fees would be far higher. He does admit that, on one occasion, he was turfed out of bed in the middle of the night by some heavily tattooed guys who said his time was up and he had to go.

PS (2): The charming couple featured above are tanukis. They are members of the racoon family and famed for their sexual exploits. Some love hotels use them for advertising. However, don't assume that everywhere that displays tanukis is in that sort of business. I have seen them outside teahouses, sushi bars and country inns.

19 Yakuza



The Japanese refer to their crime syndicates as "Yakuza". Most people know they exist but think their chance of meeting a member is minimal ... especially on an overseas trip.

I live on the Gold Coast in Australia and have Japanese neighbours. We recently organised a barbecue for a visiting party of Japanese ladies. We picked a local park as a suitable place to entertain them. I arrived early, with some of my surfing mates and laid claim to one of the barbecue stands and surrounding tables.

The ladies came from Nara, which is an ancient city just up the road from vulgar Osaka and smelly Kobe. It is a very refined place, overflowing with temples and cultural centres. The ladies made a point of saying that, while their husbands worked in Osaka, they resided in far more genteel surroundings.

My surfing mates were a mixed bunch of young Japanese and Australians. The ladies seemed to get along with the Australians but a couple of the Japanese guys caused a bit of an upset. They came from Kobe where people speak with accents that are upsetting to refined ears.

The barbecue got underway and everything was going smoothly when a group of Japanese men began to congregate nearby. One was elderly and dressed in a smart business suit. The lads from Kobe took an immediate interest in him.

They told me the Yakuza had arrived and the old guy was an *oyabun*, or *godfather* in mafia parlance. One of the Nara ladies joined us and was informed that the Osaka Yakuza were holidaying on the Gold Coast and had brought their most senior member along with them.

The lady was dismissive of the claim. She insisted that the thuggish looking men were factory employees on a works outing and the elderly man was almost certainly the works manager. The Kobe boys said she would soon see what they were talking about.

Now, I've heard of the secret signs that Free Masons use and I've been subjected to some strange handshakes in my time but when it comes to funny greetings, the Yakuza leave the Masons for cold.

As each newcomer approached the elderly man, he bowed respectfully, lent forward and tapped the old chap's testicles. The lady from Nara didn't know where to look. I guess she knew factory workers were uncouth but had no idea their behaviour sank so low. She hurried to the other ladies and returned insisting we relocate to a more agreeable place.

I must admit that I was taken by surprise. Not so much by what happened but by the way the Kobe boys predicted it. I shouldn't have been. I can identify members of Australian criminal gangs from their appearance ... and I'm not just talking about bike gangs.

The criminal classes have a sense of identity. They dress the part and behave the part. Public servants, academics and a heap of others are no different. You can pick them out and predict how they will behave. I have been an academic and I've worked for the government. Individual departments feud with one another and so do the crims. Needless to say, it gets very messy when the Yakuza fight.

Dress sets the Yakuza apart but it doesn't stop there. They have a fascination for tattoos. Intricate designs cover every inch of their bodies except the parts that protrude beyond the cuffs and collars of their business suits.

One of the Kobe lads recalled how he once tried to gatecrash a hot-spring party in a posh resort. Hearing male and female voices on the other side of a bamboo fence, he left his all-male pool and, suitably unattired, slipped through a narrow gate. Beautiful young women frolicked with older men. He strolled towards them and was about to

jump into their pool when tattooed figures grabbed him from behind, spun him round, and hurled him back the way he had come. His mates said he was lucky to return with everything intact.

Rumour has it that, in former times, the tattooed skin of dead Yakuza was peeled from their bodies and made into lampshades. The Kobe boys reckon it still goes on. They say it is a great honour to be turned into a lampshade. They point out that politicians have statues erected in their memory. Past presidents of Rotary have plaques inscribed. Yakuza are commemorated with lampshades.

I asked about sliced fingers. I'd read about it. The practice is a variant on IRA kneecapping, which was a punishment inflicted upon individuals who failed to do as they were told. The Kobe boys said that finger slicing is self-inflicted and shows remorse for getting things wrong.

The Yakuza are sticklers for law enforcement. So, if the oyabun tells you to go out and shoot someone, it is important to get it right. If you shoot the wrong person, you have to admit your mistake. You do this by cutting off the end of a finger and placing it in a small box with a note explaining what happened. You say you are humbly sorry and will be more careful in future. The Kobe boys say they know people with bits of fingers missing

Mike's Other Books



You'll find more about the Yakuza in my mystery thriller ***The Missing Miss Mori***. You can buy a copy from the major retailers for \$2.99 or receive a **FREE COPY** from me. **CLICK:** <http://eepurl.com/bP8XL9>



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