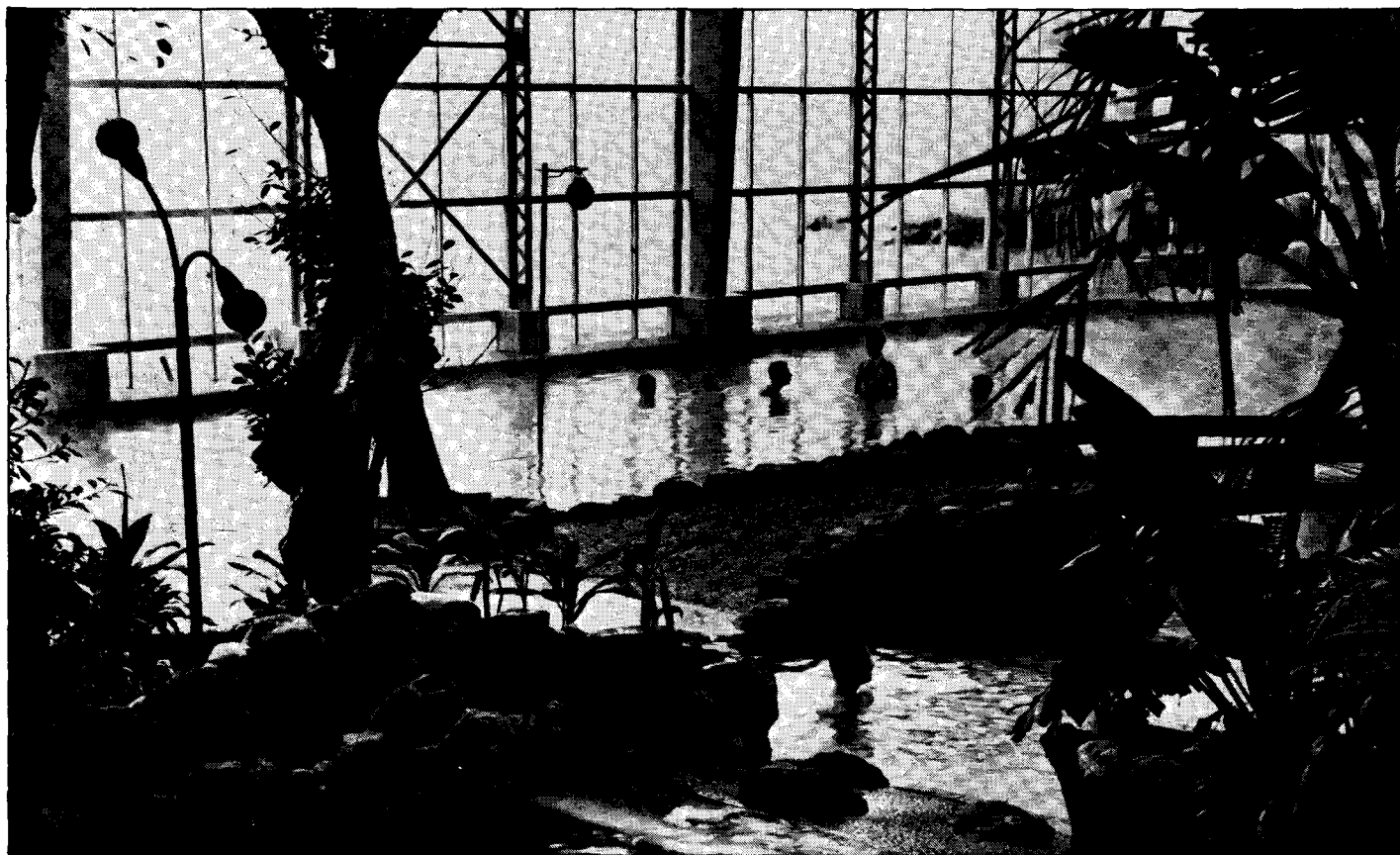


Taking Nippon by Surprise



Japan National Tourist Organization

Hot spring baths at Ibusuki Spa—"Japanese need to do everything together whether it's visiting shrines or taking a swim."

by Rafael Steinberg

VISITORS used to ask me why I stayed so long in Japan. "When I wake up every morning," I replied, "I know that something will happen this day to surprise me. It may delight me or infuriate me, but it sure as hell will be unexpected."

The first surprises one encounters are simple and quaint. When the Japanese gesture "come here," for instance, they hold the hand out with palm down and flap their fingers, something like our waving goodbye. Very confusing. If one learns that the Japanese word for rice is *gohan* when it's in a bowl, one must be aware that it becomes *raisu* (the English word "rice") when the same product is served on a plate, as with curry.

On a slightly higher plateau, the Western visitor discovers the Japanese need to do everything in groups, whether it's running away from home, visiting shrines, or taking

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a swim in the sea. Japanese airlines run special "honeymoon excursion flights" from the cities to the bigger hot spring resorts on days that are auspicious for weddings, and every pair of seats is occupied by a newlywed couple. And at 3:25 every afternoon, all the office workers in every branch of a major Japanese bank stop what they are doing and—in unison all over Japan—go through five minutes of prescribed calisthenics at their desks.

One might think that marriage to a daughter of the country, my rough competence in the language, and more than 3,000 risings of the sun would have run me out of surprises. Not so. On my most recent trip, I dialed a wake-up call on my hotel's automated telephone message system and then fell asleep, consumed by jet lag. At precisely the proper time the phone rang, and when I picked it up the first sound I heard was the tape-recorded twittering of a gardenful of birds. This time they had me even before I woke up.

When the transpacific fares come down, I will return to Japan and follow the ritual: Coming home from a journey, every Jap-

anese is supposed to notify his ancestors. The emperor reports to the sun goddess at the Ise Shrine; ordinary Japanese clap their hands and bow their heads before the little altars on the walls of every proper home.

Having no ancestral spirits in Japan, I will be welcome to report to my wife's. But then, soon after my arrival, I think I will check in with my two guardian deities. The most prestigious is the Daibutsu, the Great Buddha of Kamakura, 30 miles south of Tokyo. I am neither mystic nor Buddhist, but this huge, 700-year-old bronze statue of the seated Buddha is my personal case officer in the bureau of the Japanese pantheon that handles foreigners.

When first brought into his presence, I approached the front of the statue and fell under his gaze, which is reproachful but tolerant. "What's the matter? Why do you come to me?" he asks. Later I stepped often into the circle of his gaze, and there was no reproach, only warmth and protection. I agreed with Lafcadio Hearn, who wrote that "the image typifies all that is tender and calm in the Soul of the East."

When I come again, I must pay more



**Someone told her
you may put off coming to the
Orient for another year.**

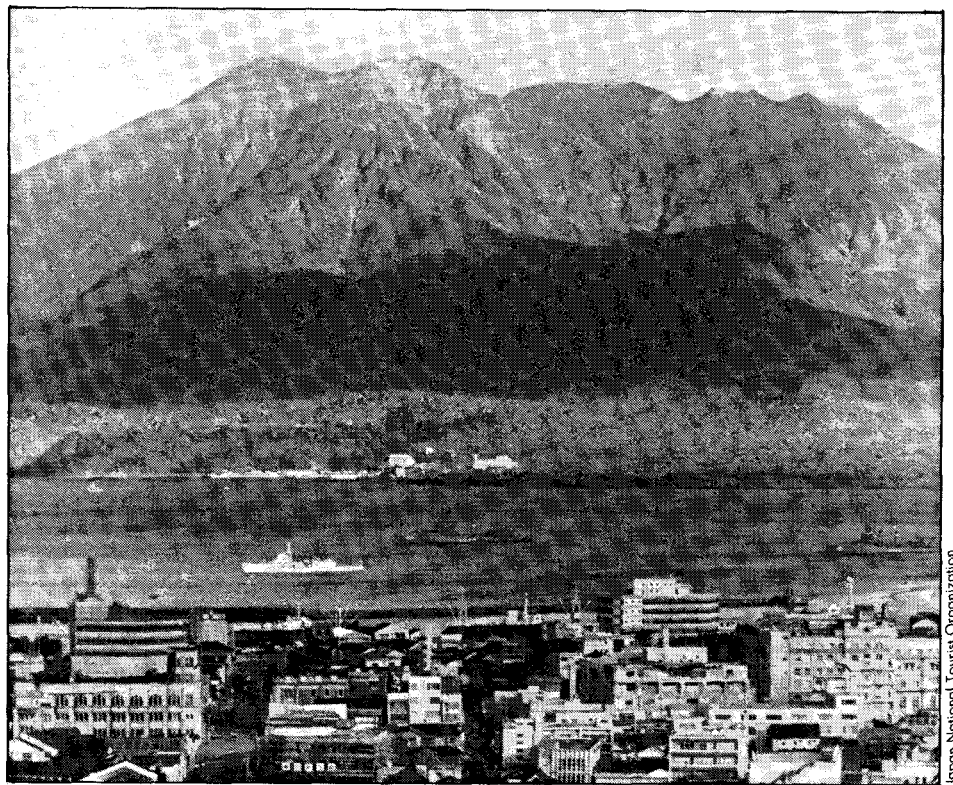
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Active volcano, Kagoshima — "Women are still ashamed to be seen in bathing suits."

attention to the seaside town of Kamakura itself, which was the military capital of feudal Japan when the Great Buddha was cast. Shrines and museums and Zen temples tucked away on side streets contain relics of the bloody civil wars of the thirteenth century; signposts mark the real life sites of intrigues, assassinations, betrayals, and mass suicides well known to the audiences of Kabuki plays. But I will avoid the place in the summer, when Kamakura and its beaches are jammed with the youth of the Tokyo area—Fort Lauderdale and the Hamptons rolled in one.

From Kamakura it is only a few miles along the rim of Sagami Bay to Enoshima, where my second guardian resides. Enoshima is a tiny, rocky island a few hundred yards off the beach, and it was the setting for *The Honorable Picnic*, by Thomas Raucat, the best novel about modern Japan ever written by a foreigner.

On the far side of Enoshima, a series of wooden footbridges lead to a huge grotto facing out to sea. The surf pounds the rocks, and at high tide the spray makes the going slippery. At the mouth of the grotto a solemn crone sells candles to light the way to the shrine of Benten, goddess of the arts and of luck. Benten is jealous of lovers, the legends say, because she is incapable of sexual passion. On my first visit to the area, my companion, who was not yet my wife, stubbornly refused to set foot on the

island with me. Benten, she said, would be angry and would destroy our love. So one enters alone, gropes in candlelight deep into the cave, and peers at the carved stone image of the pudgy muse. Banish carnal thoughts, ask for success in work, in art—in writing, perhaps—and she may reward you. I don't believe in her completely, but I take no chances. Enoshima is as good a place as any to ponder the tension between art and love.

At Kagoshima, in the far south of Japan, the townsfolk talk about Takamori Saigo, who 100 years ago led the last samurai rebellion against the modernization of Japan. Kagoshima sits under an active volcano and is called the Naples of Japan. It is a backward area, about 20 years behind the rest of the country in its changing social customs. Married women, for instance, are still ashamed to be seen in bathing suits; on hot summer days they stand under parasols along the seawall while their children and their husbands splash happily in the bay. And they would never dream of entering a doorway before a man.

In Tokyo, I hasten to Jirocho, a tiny counter restaurant specializing in a dangerous delicacy that I cannot get in New York. This is *fugu*, the poisonous globefish. Unless the toxic liver and ovaries of the fish are entirely removed with the first deft stroke of the *fugu* chef's knife, the poison will spread in an instant

Japan National Tourist Organization

throughout the entire creature, and a few bites of it will be fatal. Scores of Japanese die of *fugu* poisoning every year, invariably because they tried to clean the fish themselves. The way to eat *fugu* and live, therefore, is to stick to an official *fugu* restaurant where a license on the wall attests to the chef's ability to recognize and extract the poisonous organs.

Fugu is served *sashimi* style, uncooked, in thin, transparent slices that you pick up one by one with your chopsticks, dip into a special sauce, and place on your trembling tongue. The light, tangy flavor is unforgettable. And that slight numbness of the lips and tongue? Some say it is caused by traces of the poison; cynics attribute it to the sauce. Customers may worry, as they swallow the first slice, whether they are about to get the ultimate surprise, but the master of Jirocho swears he has never poisoned a customer. On the contrary, he assures us, *fugu* is a potent aphrodisiac.

No trip to Japan would be complete without a visit to an *onsen*, a Japanese hot spring resort. There are 1,800 spas in Japan, all over the volcanic country, and several thousand *ryokan* (Japanese-style inns) that exist primarily or exclusively for the *onsen* trade. Nowhere else in the world do so many people get so much positive pleasure from immersing themselves in hot water several times a day.

In the West we bathe to take the dirt off our bodies, and we do it privately, with a sense of duty. But in Japan the hot bath combines the religious notion of ritual purification with the curative powers of certain waters and with the simple comfort of a long soak in a hot tub—especially in winter in an unheated Japanese house.

North of Tokyo, at Nasu Spa, in the garden of a lovely old many-gabled hotel, is an outdoor hot spring pool cut into the rock. It is about two feet deep, so one can sit upright in it, submerged to the neck. The hot waters gush down from the hillside to keep the pool full. Under the stars at night or at sunset, in summer or in winter (even in freezing temperatures, with snow on the ground), families, couples, men, women—and groups—approach in the buff, holding little towels before them. They squat down on the rim to wash themselves first, then gingerly sink into the steaming, clean water—and the collective sighs of comfort seem to rustle the pines. I was shy the first time I stepped into that pool, but when I came out, it felt like one of the most natural activities in the world. Only later did I realize that *that* was my surprise for the day. ©

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Down and Out in Dharamsala

by James Traub

I'M BUMPING DOWNHILL from upper to lower Dharamsala, India, in an ancient packing crate of a bus, speaking with one of the local citizens, a freckle-faced girl with a backpack and an unmistakable New York nasal. Her neighbors, purple-clad, snub-nosed Tibetans, seem rather unlikely dinner guests for this youthful émigré; but she is detailing for me the wayward course that brought her to her new, wholly transcendental identity. Having left home just before the Sixties shut down, she wandered across the planet in search of a place holier than Greenwich Village and finally found it in Dharamsala, where the exiled



"India is really not funky."

Dalai Lama, whom pilgrims from the West seem to regard as the ultimate avatar of John Denver, set up shop. Here she settled down to a life that the spiritual vanguard of her day would swoon over: With her husband, the son of the former Canadian ambassador to Canada ("or something like that") and author of—what else?—unpublished verse, she putters around a crude hut, with neither heat nor running water, above the village filled with Tibetan émigrés. She studies. For the past 18 months, it's been Buddhist meditation, immersion in ancient texts, getting into Old Tibetan, mastering of exercises. Well then, I ask, how does the Buddhist discipline differ from the Hindu one? Got her there; she doesn't know about the Hindus. How about the Buddhists, then? Here, too, after

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