

Welcome to Japan

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

“CHARISMATIC” is the title the Japanese Government has given Sawa Isao. This makes him one of a carefully selected 100 people throughout Japan for the Visit Japan Campaign, launched in 2003, in an effort to inspire more foreign tourism. By 2010 they aim to increase the number of visitors from last year’s six million to 10 million.

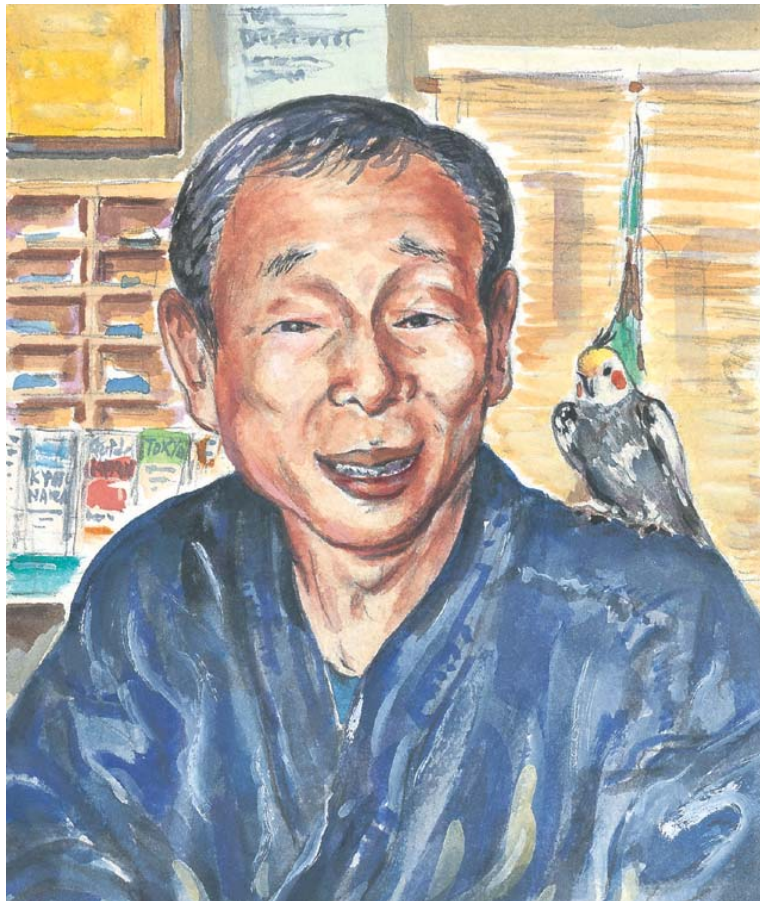
The choice of Sawa for such a role is of particular interest to me. For 17 years I lived on the same block in Yanaka, an old area of Tokyo. Right from the day I arrived, he became a fast and inspiring friend. Around 23 years ago he was faced with a dilemma. The small and charming family *ryokan*, or inn, called Sawanoya that he and his family run was fast going out of business. Most Japanese were opting to stay in economy hotels rather than sleep on tatami mats and share his communal bath. His option was to close down the 2nd generation family business or do something drastic.

Sawa took a gamble. With only a smattering of English skills, he opened his doors to foreign tourists, hoping that the opportunity to stay in authentic Japanese-style lodgings would appeal to them. He was right, but the path he took was anything but smooth.

HIS first foreign guest was a Hong Kong native who was a resident of Canada named Jennie. She arrived, ate breakfast and dinner at the inn and at the end of a week, announced that she had no money to pay. She had nowhere to go and Sawa ended up keeping her for 22 days while discussing with the Canadian Embassy how to get her back to Canada. Fortunately for Sawa, the embassy ended up paying the bill.

“That was the beginning of my new adventure,” Sawa told me. “But I thought, these things happen. Little did I know that this was the first of many perplexing incidents at my inn. During the past 23 years I have learned a lot about the cultures and life-styles of many countries.” When I mentioned that he was brave to continue on after such an experience, Sawa laughed and told me that the same Jennie turned up at his inn one year later, again looking for accommodations. He was fully booked so he had to turn her away. She became the first of his many – would be anyway – repeat customers.

Sawa greets his guests in his indigo *samue*, – kimono-style top and loose pants – with Leon, his 28-year companion parakeet, perched on his shoulder. “Welcome to Sawanoya,” are his first words. His wife, Yoneko, is bustling about in a room behind him and likely as not his two grandchildren are playing in the inn’s entryway. His son, Arata, and his wife Noriko, the third generation proprietors, are also pitching in to welcome cus-



tomers. The family is a big part of the delightful experience that Sawanoya’s guests enjoy.

Over the years, I have occasionally been called in to decipher illegible handwriting, answer questions or help decide what to do when baffling problems turn up. And over the years my husband Itsuo and I have joined hands with Sawa to throw cherry blossom viewing parties and street parties that his guests can attend and meet and talk with the locals. Sawa also encourages his guests to participate in the various local festivals occurring throughout the year, giving them a unique opportunity to get to know this colorful old community.

Sawa has files of thank you letters he has received over the years. Some include hand-drawn pictures, photographs, messages in odd Japanese and souvenirs from various countries. All convey the message of thanks for the special experience they had, and Sawa keeps these mementos with the same pride and care that he lavishes on his guests. Since opening his inn to for-

eign tourists he has put up 110,000 people from about 80 countries.

Not surprisingly, his inn with its 12 rooms, accommodating between 15 and 18 guests on a normal evening, has a 93% occupancy rate. Thirty percent of the guests hear of it by word of mouth and there are many repeaters. One such repeat visitor is Eckhard Stothfan from Nurnberg, Germany. He has been visiting Sawanoya for a week every year for the past 17 years. He invited Sawa and his wife to stay at his home when they visited Germany several years ago.

SAWA has learned that “culture” is country specific and that often what seems bafflingly strange has the potential to be inspirational. Globalism may be watering down differences between well-traveled wealthy countries, but puzzles remain when people from less-traveled countries visit. Listening to Sawa relate his experiences at the inn opens a window on what seems like bizarre behavior that is totally normal in a different location.

Some of his experiences would fray the nerves of most, but Sawa shrugs them off. “If I get angry about some of the things my guests do, I may as well quit,” he says. “Usually the strange behavior is just something that is normal in their own countries. For instance, an Iranian once ruined the tatami mats in his room by laying out the wet clothing that he had washed. I later saw a picture of people in Iran drying their laundry on the grass and was able to understand.”

One man got angry with Sawa because of his smile. He arrived claiming that he had a reservation, but Sawa had no record of it and had no vacancy. He searched his reservation book to no avail, all the while smiling because smiling comes naturally to him. When accommodating guests he smiles and when there is a problem he smiles as well. The foreigner got furious, “Why are you smiling?” he demanded, perhaps feeling that he was being laughed at. The bigger the problem became, the more Sawa smiled while trying not to. Even the meaning of a smile can be misinterpreted.

Another time a guest used the bathroom as a toilet, horrifying the Sawa family until they learned that in Thailand the toilets are tiled like the bathroom and also have the same kind of buckets and ladles that they use in the traditional Japanese bath. Sawa told me that only 50% of the countries in the world use toilet paper. And, actually, it is said that these days in Japan – with the new “washlet” toilets – the use of paper is declining here as well. Since the inn replaced their old Japanese-style squat toilets with the ultra modern mechanized

western-style ones now popular in Japan, more than a few guests have had problems with how to use them. Sawa had to have the washlets made-to-order with English directions on them.

From the time he was 50, 16 years ago, Sawa and his wife have been vacationing in foreign countries once a year. They make a point of staying at bed & breakfasts wherever they go. “This has added to my understanding greatly. I now realize that when we are abroad, even we Japanese confound others with our seemingly strange behavior. I made a faux pas one time when using a foreign bath. I placed the bath curtain outside of the bathtub so it wouldn’t get wet and also so the bathtub wouldn’t get dirty from it hanging in the water. I later even dried off the curtain. I can’t imagine how strange that must have appeared to the people running the inn and I wonder how much water got on the floor. Everybody has heard the stories of hotel ceilings being ruined by Japanese tourists washing themselves outside of the bathtub, as we always do in Japan. Foreign bathrooms don’t have floors with drains like ours.”

“These days, when something peculiar happens at my inn, I stop and ask myself, ‘why?’ There is always a logical reason. This is something I have learned from my many different guests,” Sawa muses. “I have learned that certain customs and ways of doing things are not right or wrong and there is no superiority or inferiority, better or worse. Within each culture, different ways of doing things develop which are considered the correct way. Ours in Japan are just one of them. The ways of Korea, China or France are merely others. When you really think about it, it is these differences that make the world so interesting and wonderful.”

Sawa’s tolerance and warm attitude are part of the reason his inn is so popular. His interest in people and the opportunity he provides his guests to see the everyday side of Japanese life make for an experience that none of the fancy modern hotels can offer. If diplomacy were done on the grass-roots level by people like Sawa, the world would be a far more loving and peaceful place for all of us. **J.S.**



– This is the last article of the series –

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