

# ***Beneath the Mountain Mists***

*Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley*





It is hot and sultry down in the cities, but here in the maze of Yamanashi Prefecture's ridges and valleys, the air is close and dank and cool. Perhaps springtime has not ended, or autumn has come early to these highlands; which it is, I cannot decide.

I have found my way up a meandering narrow road to this Buddhist temple, the Seiunji. It sits all alone with a river valley before it and green-flanked mountains behind. The temple fits so well here that it seems to have grown in place instead of having been built. There is, however, one glaring detail: a red-and-white soft drink vending machine stands at one side of the *hondo* (sanctuary building). It is, in a word, disgusting. I wonder to myself about how a nation with such a deep and pervasive aesthetic tradition as Japan can tolerate such crass and undeniably ugly commercialism. Tradition aside, the modern traveler to Japan soon learns that the archipelago is overrun with such coin-gulping robots: soft drinks, beer (whiskey too, believe it or not), tobacco, lurid magazines and videotapes, batteries, and even bags of rice are all offered up by these alien eyesores. I can perhaps forgive their presence when they are arranged in a row in some spiritless office building or desolate airport terminal; but here, among mist and mountain that inspire visions of ancient and delicate painted scrolls, such a presence is nothing less than felonious. This visual crime, I decide, should be recorded. When the light misting rain at last fades away, I drag out my camera and begin.

Through the viewfinder, I notice a small human figure peering intently in my direction. I approach and introduce myself; it happens that this figure is that of the chief priest's wife, a refined-looking woman

apparently in her mid-60s. She invites me into the *hondo* for tea.

After a while, between sips of tea, I mention the soft drink vending machine, adding—as politely as I can—that I certainly did not expect to see such a thing here. The priest's wife tells me that on summer weekends there are often great busloads of tourists who visit the area. She explains: "The summer here can be terribly hot, without the slightest of breezes. So we thought that having a machine to sell cold drinks would be a kindness to those who come so far to visit us." I take another sip of tea and nod in polite agreement.

"But we don't use it anymore," she adds.

I say nothing.

"About five years ago—I think it was about that many years now—the machine got broken and so we turned the power off. Before the man from the company came to fix it, some birds built a nest in one of the spaces inside. We just couldn't throw out that family of birds, so they stayed until fall. After that, we just never got around to having the machine fixed. Now we have four nests inside."

The tea and tiny Japanese sweets are long finished when at last I rise to take my leave. I exchange the proper pleasantries with my host and step out on to the temple's veranda. The soft rain has begun again. As I walk to my car, I turn and look at the former vending machine. In one of its recesses I can make out a small brown head, bejeweled with a gleaming black eye. Sometimes, things are so far from what they seem. 27

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