Close to Paradise

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

The morning light is clear and strong, but it flickers gently across the coral thickets. Small fishes hover and dart and then hover again; even smaller ones peer from tiny retreats within the dense and complex pattern of the coral's calcium branches. It is hard to believe that this ancient and pristine reef is hard by the very entrance of a fishing port.

The village of Omura lines the edge of a small bay, part of which is set aside for the local fishermen. It is an arrangement common in Japan, where small villages beyond numbering cling to a galaxy of miniscule, steep islands and draw their living from the sea around them. But this island and those around it are far from typical. Frankly speaking, they are far from anything.

1000 kilometers south of Tokyo's traffic jams lie the Ogasawara Islands, often referred to in English as the Bonins. They are perhaps the most unusual islands of any in this island nation. An overworked adjective fits: they are truly unique. They are Japanese, but can boast histories—both natural and human—that set them well apart from the rest of Japan.

Thrust up from the Pacific's bottom 3 million years ago, these islands have never been connected with any other land mass. They were slowly colonized by plants and animals that evolved into a panoply of species found nowhere else on the globe. Between one and two millennia ago, they were briefly inhabited by people whose material remains link them with seafaring cultures to the south. For some reason, those inhabitants suddenly and mysteriously disappeared, leaving only the merest traces of their sojourn. For centuries after, the reefs and forests knew nothing of the human race.

In 1543, a Spanish explorer sighted the Ogasawaras, but did not go ashore. Fifty years later, an expedition led by the Japanese warlord Ogasawara Sadayori landed and investigated the far islands, calling them *bunin-to*, meaning "unpeopled islands". A second Japanese expedition in 1675 spent five weeks charting the islands in detail and taking specimens of the flora, fauna, and minerals; in 1785 a map published in Edo showed these Ogasawara bunin-to as a part of Dai-Nippon (Greater Japan). These claims were at the time unknown in Europe and America, and in the 1820s, American and British vessels "discovered" and explored the isolated archipelago on their own. Occasionally, whaling vessels would stop for water and the abundant wild food that was available.

In 1830, Nathaniel Savory, a 35-year-old Massachusetts native, was recuperating from a shipboard accident in Honolulu, and heard tales of rich but uninhabited islands far out in the western Pacific. There was talk about a group going to claim and settle them, and Mr. Savory threw himself into the adventure; on June 26 of that year he and one other American, a Briton, Dane, a Genoese, and "about 25" Hawaiians (some of them female; the records are tantalizingly unclear as to the exact numbers) arrived. They established a small colony that spoke English with a dash of Hawaiian thrown in, and fished from Hawaiian-style outrigger canoes. The little society thrived. There were new arrivals: seamen jumped ship to join, and in 1831 a vessel from Honolulu dropped off six unnamed "female passengers."

In 1861, the tottering Tokugawa Shogunate sent a vessel to reaffirm the Japanese claim to the islands. Nathaniel Savory, by that time the patriarch of the community, saw no point in resisting. The next year, the first Japanese settlers arrived.

About 1/7 of the islands' 2300 current inhabitants are descended from those first pioneers. They are of course all Japanese citizens, but Japanese with a difference. The surnames of some of those early pioneers yet remain: Savory and Webb, for example, survive in Japanized form as Sebori and Uebu.

The Ogasawaras are now reachable by a 30-hour sea voyage from Tokyo, a fact that has made growth and development difficult. An era of isolation will end when a long-planned airport opens in 2003. Great changes will come. I hope that the beauty of this reef—and the islanders' pioneer spirit—may survive what will likely ensue. JJTI

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.