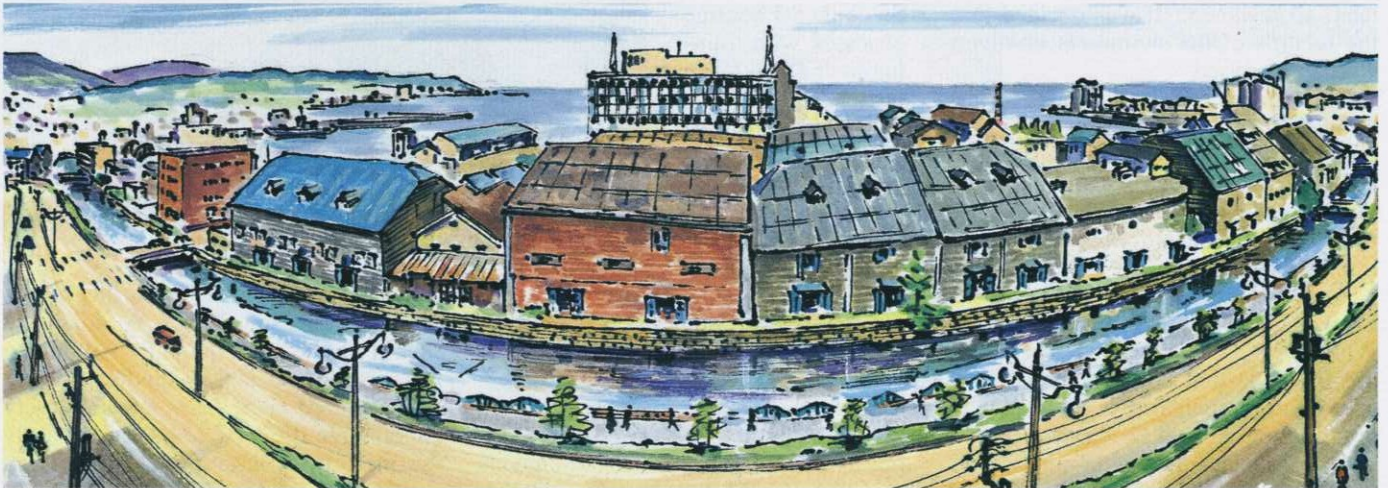




Japan's Canal City, Otaru

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo



Twenty-three years ago, I spent several years commuting by train from Sapporo to Otaru along the craggy seacoast of the Sea of Japan. Twice a week I took this scenic route to my flower arranging and tea ceremony teachers' homes. A fishing town located on the northernmost island of Japan, Otaru was chock full of elegant, ancient warehouses and homes that, despite their sometimes down-at-the-heel appearance, attested to a former prosperity. A few of the city's "Wall Street" bank buildings still survived, even though the banking center of Hokkaido had long since moved elsewhere. Otaru's fish markets and glass industry were then fast becoming a destination for visitors from all over Japan.

Thanks to its thriving past and sudden economic decline during the 20th century, much of interest has survived in Otaru simply because there was little money to rebuild or modernize. Times have changed, though, and its proximity to Sapporo and increased visitors have begun to affect the area.

I have many fond memories of Otaru and was interested in seeing how well it has done in balancing pragmatic eco-

nomie development with retaining its charm and historical legacy. As in so many areas in Japan, Otaru has been going through a push and pull between the business and land owning sectors wanting tall new buildings and modern-style development, and residents who wish to preserve its heritage by limiting building heights and increasing the attractiveness of the city without succumbing to the lure of short sighted profit. I went back after 20 years to check out the results.

Today Otaru is best known for its scenic canal, flanked by grand old warehouses that date back 80 years and more. This has become the symbol of Otaru to the point of monopolizing posters and travel brochures promoting the area. So much so, that it is difficult to believe that just some 15 or so years ago a fierce battle raged among the residents: between those who wanted the canal filled in and those who insisted it be preserved and renovated as a cultural asset.

The resulting compromise has left the canal cleaned up but shrunk in size with a highway separating it from the hotels that serve tourists who come to see it.

Most of the grand warehouses have been converted into rather typical "tourist attractions" housing the clone-type cheap restaurants and souvenir shops that are found just about everywhere in Japan. The great triumph, however, is that much of the historical hardware remains. In the future conceivably, the highway could be tunneled underground leaving a grand swath for a park. The warehouses could be converted into more sophisticated attractions like the Otaru Museum, already housed in one of them.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Otaru was the most prosperous area in Northern Japan, its port serving Hokkaido, Sakhalin and the Japanese mainland. Fur, sea products, lumber and coal were sold in Honshu and rice and everyday necessities were brought back to Hokkaido. The warehouses were constructed to store these goods and the first trains in Hokkaido were built to service this trade. Japan's first two train systems were built on the main island of Honshu with English technology, linking Osaka to Kobe and Tokyo to Yokohama. Train transport in



Hokkaido, however, required surmounting numerous technical challenges connected with burrowing through mountains to connect its coal mines. It was an American, Matthew C. Perry, who opened Japan to trade in 1858 and former American president Ulysses S. Grant became unhappy at the thin American presence in the development of Japan. Through his influence Joseph U. Crawford was brought in and by 1880 Japan's third railway link was completed, adding greatly to Otaru's prosperity.

Hokkaido's first steam locomotives were rather whimsically named Yoshitsune, Benkei and – quite significantly – Shizuka, names of well-known characters on the Kabuki stage. According to Tsuchiya Shuzo, the director of Otaru Museum, at that time it was unthinkable in Japan to name a train after a woman. According to him, the unusual naming of the third locomotive “Shizuka” was attributed to the “American influence on male-female equality.”

Otaru has a first-rate Transportation Museum that displays a variety of trains and delves into their history and development. Train travel in those days had an elegance to it, one that can be experienced by trying out a seat in a late 19th century train car. Its interior is extraordinarily plush with ornamental hand-carved wood, velvet lined seats and a potbelly stove to warm passengers in the winter.

The original tracks of Hokkaido's first trains still bisect Otaru, and with marvelous foresight the city has bought up the adjoining land. The resulting green belt that is festooned with flowers during the warm seasons is a refreshing reflection of creative urban planning. Located away from the tourist centers, it appears to be preservation for the enjoyment of the residents themselves.

Also off the beaten trail is a mysterious “mini-Stonehenge” located in the middle of vegetable patches and pine trees on the outskirts of Otaru. This intriguing arrangement of rocks called

Stone Circle dates back over 3,500 years and is thought to have been a burial site. Despite its mystery and ancient origins, it was only just recently that a sign was erected asking us not to walk through the area. Other than this, only an old woman farming the land kept a sharp eye on us while we were there.

Otaru abounds in colorful small fish markets, although my favorite, Myoken Ichiba, may be on its last legs. More successful, it seems, is the Sankaku Market, near the train station, which now caters to tourists. Globalization hits lovely towns such as Otaru like an infectious disease. One by one citizens succumb to mall and convenience store shopping and this gradually leaches the quality out of their everyday lives. It is the give and take between fishmongers, small-scale vendors and customers that has always livened up the atmosphere of this town. It is sad to see the traditional rituals of



shopping and community life encroached on by rationalization.

At Myoken Fish Market case upon wooden case of just caught fish lay out on ice under searing light bulbs. Octagonal fish called *hakkaku*, grotesque blobs called *kajika*, shellfish of every shape and size imaginable and edible seaweeds are on display. Seasoned fishmongers, sometimes the fishermen's wives, discuss cooking methods with patrons while slicing enormous salmon and tuna into everyday portions. Direct and intimate connection to just harvested food is dying out on a global scale, something I am reminded of every time I rip open a

saran wrapped hunk of fish from my Tokyo supermarket. Without being able to see a fish's eyes, I can no longer judge if it is fresh. Sometimes I cannot even remember what the whole fish actually looks like – part of the down side of globalization.

Glass was once used for making fishing buoys – thick green-tinged balls fitted with rope netting – to mark the fishing nets in the water. Walking around Otaru you occasionally get a glimpse of one of these, now relegated to decoration, having been ousted by cheaper, easier to handle plastic materials. Today Otaru is well known for its glass works. The largest business, Kitaichi Glass Co., is housed in several huge old buildings along Sakai Street, one of the main tourist areas in the city. The Kitaichi warehouses are brim filled with everything from the smallest ornamental bead to enormous vases. Other more upscale glass art shops are located nearby. In between coffee shops, eateries and hand-made goods stores lure visitors, most of which are also housed in old buildings.

Otaru and its environs are not all preservation. Other popular tourist destinations include Mycal, a gargantuan shopping mall and the Ishihara Yujiro Memorial Museum. The latter honors a movie star, affectionately known as “Yu-chan,” who lingers in the Japanese psyche similar to the way that Elvis Presley remains in mine. Yet for me, the charm of traveling lies mostly in seeing an area's heritage and in reflecting on the past. Happily, Otaru is finding a harmonious balance. It seems to be developing with a judicious reverence for the vestiges of its historical past as it gears up for more modern commercialization. **JTI**

Elizabeth Kiritani is a newspaper columnist and an announcer for bilingual programs of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation).

Kiritani Itsuo, her husband, is an artist who has held exhibitions in several countries.