

“Japan is the Best Posting for Ambassadors and Their Wives”

By Arabella Ouvrieu, wife of the French Ambassador to Japan

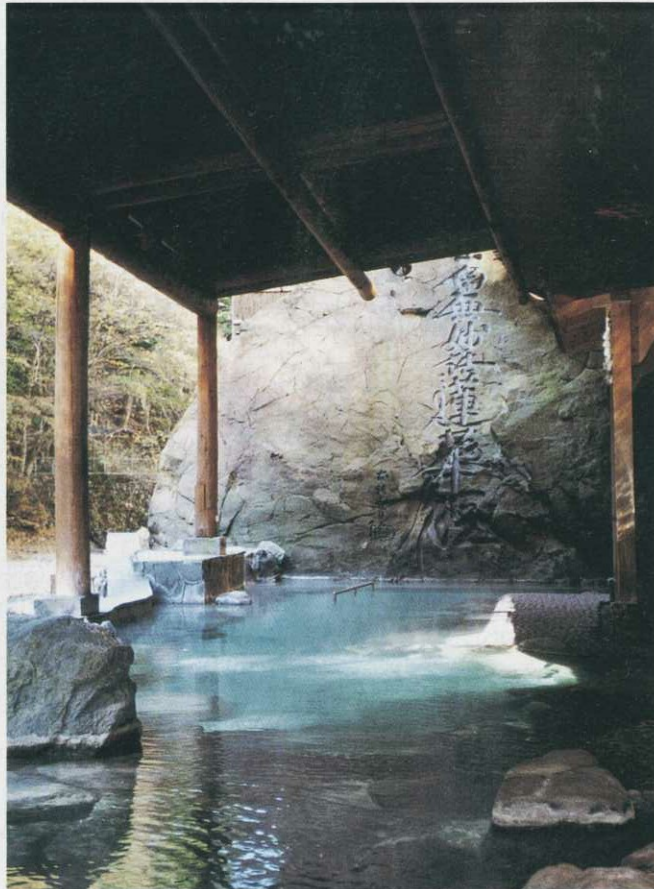
That is what many foreign ambassadors to Japan and their wives told us when we arrived here. When ambassadors arrive in a country, they have to pay a courtesy visit to colleagues, and very often their spouse accompanies them. All were quite enthusiastic about Japan. And it is the same message that we give now to the ambassadors who arrive in this country... I can tell you, after nearly four years in Japan, I still think it is absolutely true. And I'll try to explain why.

Welcome

First, Japanese ladies think that their country is difficult for foreigners to understand and they do their best to help us. I went to many other countries with my husband, but none tried so well to welcome us. Many clubs exist. When you speak French, and especially English, it is not difficult to belong to groups where Japanese ladies, also speaking French or English, will do their utmost to introduce their country. Of course we want to have a more personal relationship with the people we meet. But this is very difficult for a foreigner in Japan.

The only times when I had the impression I could obtain more intimate knowledge about Japanese women was when we belonged together to the group “women” as opposed to the group “men.” Then, I gathered some very interesting points of view, extremely personal and very enlightening for a better understanding of Japan. But this doesn't happen often.

On the other hand, thanks to these clubs, I have visited several beautiful



Outdoor hot springs: The “rotenburo” fascinates foreign and Japanese “onsen” fans alike

Photo: Gunma Prefectural Local Products and Tourism Office

old Japanese houses, I have learned a lot about paintings, pottery, gardens and other Japanese arts. In having responsibilities in a number of these clubs, I have discovered the dedication of some of these Japanese ladies who spend a lot of time to help us understand this country but also, in some cases can work together, year after year, for some good cause. Among them I made very good friends.

Discovery of Japan

Even though we are very busy, we have had some time to visit Japan. Some of these visits are official, some

private. When they are official, we meet the governor or the mayor or both, we have very busy schedules and rush from one place to the other. But we very often have guides who give a lot of meaning to whatever we are shown, museums, buildings, temples, etc... When we are alone, it is more like an adventure. My Japanese is very poor, so we have some surprises. For example, one day we went to the outskirts of Kyoto to visit a beautiful temple in a very wild, unsophisticated landscape. By a river, there was a small Japanese restaurant. They proposed that we have *soba*. That much, I understood, but I had no idea which kind of *soba* it was. We learned later that the name of that *soba* was *soba* with wild plants from the mountain. I had never eaten fern before. I didn't even know that it was edible. But my husband loved it.

Among my best memories of official visits will certainly be the visit to Horyuji in Nara with the Grand Priest as a guide. He showed us everything, and we went close to every statue, behind lots of doors that are of course usually closed to the public. It was a wonderful experience.

Among so many memories, I could talk also of the visit to an old house in Kyoto. It belongs now to a company after being the private home of the founder of that company.

It was spring, there were flowers everywhere in the garden through which passed a small brook. It was so peaceful while we were right in the center of Kyoto. The landscape was protected, which means that no building

marred the view of the mountain. I was so sad to learn that only meals were served to the members of the company or their guests, like us. Nobody ever slept in that beautiful place any more.

Among some of our memorable visits are some *ryokan* and their *rotenburo*. What refinement in those places! The only problem is having some privacy. When you arrive, you want to change and put on the *yukata* that has been prepared for you. My husband could never undress without having some lady coming in without knocking.

In Hakone, a friend lent us her house several times. Among our greatest pleasures are the enjoyment of her *onsen*. A sliding door can be opened on the garden. The sulfur water of Hakone drips all day into the wooden basin large enough for at least two. It is much too hot for our foreign taste, but no problem, we can add cold water. And while we soak in it we can talk and relax like nowhere else.

After discovering this pleasure, we could not imagine living without it when we go back to France. In fact, the former owner of our house in Paris happened to be married to a Japanese lady. And they had planned to have an *o-furo* there.

But it never worked because it took too much time to fill up or to empty the bath. After discovering the pleasure of an *o-furo* and living in Japan for more than four years, we had it modified so that now we'll be able to enjoy it, reviving our beautiful memories of Japan.

Japanese food

I must say it took me some time to get used to sushi and sashimi. Even today I like only the pink tuna fish. But you can take me any time to Kitcho. There, they are sweet enough to recognize me and offer me a plate of steamed fish instead of sushi. But there also, the whole meal is a feast; a feast for the eyes as well as the palate. Everything

is a picture, every plate is a work of art, and even if you don't know about the beautiful tiny things you are eating, it is, anyway, delicious.

That is not to say that I love only the Japanese cooking at Kitcho. We have gone to wonderful *tempura* and *teppanyaki* restaurants. I have enjoyed home-made *sukiyaki* and *shabu-shabu* and my husband loves any kind of *soba* or *bento* (his favorite is the one you can get at Karuizawa Station). I prefer the *yakitori* and my favorite place is in Kyoto, where there are only two tables for eight guests. It is my best training place for Japanese language.

Fashion

Of course you cannot imagine that a French lady would talk about a country without talking about the fashion. I love French fashion and many French designers are very generous with me and it is really thanks to them that I am considered elegant.

But it is also thanks to the Japanese in many ways. First, I have always felt and said that Japanese are very refined. Japanese ladies will care for details on themselves and on others. Never before have I paid so much attention to the color of the ribbons I wear in my very personal pigtail. They have to match the rest of my clothes. Bag and shoes,

it is obvious for a Japanese lady, have to finish the "ensemble." Never before was I so careful. I used to keep the same bag from morning to night hiding it under some furniture if need be ...

Second, I appreciate many Japanese designers. I go with enormous pleasure to their fashion shows and love to discover their good taste and class together with something that is purely Japanese.

Conclusion: Beautiful memories

After you have read all this, you'll understand how very beautiful my memories of Japan will be. To conclude, I would like to talk about an experience which, for me, summarizes the Japan I love. I was invited once by the wife of the grand master of one of the best known tea ceremonies in Japan.

Before, the tea ceremony was for me a kind of ceremony for tourists, a lot of fuss to drink a very bitter beverage. When I saw that lady and later her husband doing the rituals of the serving of the tea, in one of the most beautiful old houses in Kyoto, my point of view changed so dramatically that I consider it, now, as one of the most wonderful experiences I had in Japan.

Of course, the Japan we love is a kind of mixture of modern and old. Like in Tokyo; the beautiful modern towers besides very small wooden structures, the large avenues and the streets where you wonder how a car can go through. But I have talked mainly of the Japan of the old times that can still be discovered today.

Probably, when you go to France, you do the same, and look more for the beautiful testimonies of old France than for the modern aspects of France.



The art of food: Kitcho's delightful dishes please both the eyes and the palate