

# How the "Second Isolation" made Japan a Better Place to Tour

By Margaret Price

Most people know about the 200-year period of isolation that Japan imposed on itself in the 17th-19th centuries. But what if I were to say Japan is just emerging from a second period of isolation? No, obviously this is a mischievous exaggeration. But quite a relevant one in my occupation.

I have been involved in travel writing about Japan for 17 years. During my early days in Japan I was still able to see Hato buses disgorging loads of blonde ladies at Meiji Shrine; one could still come across English-language tours to remotish places like Tohoku and Kyushu, and there were even some rather innovative tours on sale: I remember one by the wife of the ambassador to Japan from my own country, Australia. Mrs. Menadue's Minshuku Tours took people to out-of-the-way towns staying at country-style B&B's called *minshuku*.

Japan had so much to offer and the tour operators were starting to cash in.

But over the years, imperceptibly at first, I saw fewer and fewer tours for foreign tourists. And, finally last year, as if to symbolize the demise of foreign tourism in Japan altogether, the good ol' Matsubaya *geisha* house on the Hato Bus "Tokyo Nightlife" tour closed its doors for ever.

What had happened? In the early days I was too excited by my own discoveries in Japan to give it much thought. My excitement germinated with the discovery of Japanese inns — those hushed havens encapsulating the grand craftsmanship and tender ministrations to comfort of a more genteel pre-Western Japan, and blossomed with the discovery of "*furui machinami*" — pockets of old



Final days of Matsubaya geisha show

Japan left behind in surprising enclaves, where there had not been the cash to destroy and replace with concrete.

Every weekend I'd be off to a new place clinging to the little bit of guidance I could gain from such Japanese-language books as "A Close Look at Machinami," "Old Highways," "Inns that Writers and Artists Loved," "Inns where the Emperor Stayed," "The Hidden Hot Springs of the North Country." In my newspaper job, I wrote a column on inns on the side. And from time to time, the Japan National Tourist Organization (JNTO) or the Transport Ministry would invite me to speak on a committee or a panel about how we might get more foreign tourists to Japan. I was delighted to talk about the huge potential of Japan and puzzled at why they could not see that all this country needed was to throw some real money behind a good overseas TV promotion: like the Paul

Hogan one that had catapulted Australia as a favorite destination for Americans around the same time.

But, instead, they talked about the pressing need to make station signs in English; to clean up the public toilets and to offer cheaper places to stay. It was obvious to me that none of this, not even the much lamented "*endaka*" — high yen — was keeping tourists from coming to Japan — though the *endaka* certainly put some grit in the works. No, an attractive campaign would have fixed it all.

Nevertheless, after a great deal of unproductive chin-wagging, it finally penetrated my head that the panels were mainly lip service and Japan was not seriously interested in promoting inbound tourism at all. "We already have a big enough trade surplus without bringing in more foreign money," I heard one tourism industry leader say, and the truth finally dawned that unlike my own country, Japan did not need an inbound tourist trade. Then, by the mid-1990s there was even the troubling rumor that the government might do away with the precious JNTO altogether, with the ominous consequence that promotions of Japan would be handed over to the private sector.

Looking back, it seems that what I call Japan's "second period of isolation" had probably begun in the mid-1970s with the first *endaka* and became entrenched after the bigger *endaka* shock of 1985, when the G-7 intervened to lower the dollar even further. This period incidentally parallels my own stay here — about 17 years — and is still going on. During that time I saw students on working holiday visas rush to Japan to plunder its growing wealth — I had



been one of them — and some businessmen, too; but the tourists stayed away. The “economic animal” nomenclature was in vogue and the only good press Japan got... well, let’s face it, Japan got no good press.

Japan had become a black hole of information about itself at a time when it was more important than ever for people to come and see its human face. But this was not to be. By 1999 there were only 4.1 million foreign visitors entering Japan, 2.5 million of them from Asia, and most visiting more for business than for pleasure. Meanwhile the government’s “Ten million plan,” to have ten million Japanese travel to spend their cash overseas, was working very well indeed. 16 million were traveling overseas by 1997. The 12 million gap between inbound and outbound tourism in Japan is incongruous by anyone’s standards.

It finally took a report three years ago showing that even South Korea had overtaken Japan in the number of foreign visitors to make the government prick up its ears and think about inbound tourism again. And now, at last, the economy has sunk low enough that it is okay to get the tourists back. Thus it was that this year the government allocated 7 million U.S. dollars to the JNTO to raise the number of foreign tourists — its first big injection of funds since I can remember. With this the JNTO has launched an evocative TV commercial campaign in the United States and is improving the sophistication of its website, among many other much-needed measures.

So the period of isolation may be coming to an end. But what sort of Japan will greet the next generation of tourists?

The irony is that Japan’s second isolation coincided precisely with its bubble economy. What this meant was that while the tap on overseas tourists had been turned off, the money tap had been turned on, and towns and villages all over Japan were very busy indeed making themselves a better place for the very tourists that

were destined not to come. Throughout the 1980s, places that had been left behind by the flurry of postwar progress were admonished under the “*mura-okoshi*” movement to do something — anything — to “rouse” themselves from their slumber — and while you’re at it, clean up those public toilets!

So, flush with money from the bubble, these towns and villages and many individual historic properties set about repackaging themselves for the modern traveler — toilets first — and the result is so fine that I wish I could take the reader on a quick trip to show you just what money and motivation can do, and has done, for places all around Japan — places like Obuse in Nagano, Tamba Sasayama in Hyogo, Kurashiki and Fukiya in Okayama, Iwakuni in Yamaguchi, Iwami Ginzan in Shimane, Uchiko in Ehime, Yufuin in Oita, the Northern Culture Museum in Niigata and the ever up-to-date Ise. The toilets are great. No, really, some of the most successful juxtapositions of old and new are to be found in these towns.

Meanwhile, the Shirakawago village of “praying hands” farmhouses, Himeji Castle and many temples in Nara, as well as primeval forests in Yakushima have been made UNESCO World Heritage sites. And there are now not just one but three sets of bridges that link Honshu (the main island) with Shikoku — bridges that people said could never be built. They are spectacular. The first of them, the Seto Ohashi Bridge, is the longest bridge in the world combining both road and rail and it soars right over the awesome island-dotted Seto Inland Sea. The latest — the Shimanami route, which has ten bridges linking many tiny islands — has only just been finished with a lane for cyclists, and I have decided that my next trip will be to tour those small islands by bicycle.

Long-time Kyoto personality, the late David Kidd said it about his own town: “The longer you stay in a car, the uglier it becomes; so get off the main streets and walk.” This is true



Photo: Margaret Price

Rice paddy scenery in Shiga prefecture

for the whole of Japan. Where the landscape used to be dominated by temples, it is now a *pachinko* wasteland. But just one street behind all that ugliness can exist so much beauty — even the street behind your international hotel in downtown Tokyo. “If you want to find the beauty of Japan, said long-time Tokyoite Bill Benfield, “look down, not up.” He meant that you can find the essence of Japan in the pot of *bonsai* on someone’s doorstep. This is certainly true of the backstreets in the big cities.

So, by all means, take a *shinkansen* to some faraway destination, but in the big cities get out on foot and enter the backstreets. In the less populated northern parts of Japan, get a car and drive into the hills. The national parks of Nagano and Tohoku and the deep-mountain rice farming communities of Niigata or Shiga offer panoramas that you would never dream of as you gaze at the industry-infested Kanto plain from a Kyoto-bound *shinkansen*.

And in Japan the green is bright green in spring, while the snow is deep in winter. I love it and can close my eyes to what’s ugly because of all the beauty I know is there. **MTI**

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