

# Home Thoughts from Japan

By Catrien Ross

Much of what I like best about Japan has to do with houses I have lived in over the years. Despite being a foreigner, or perhaps because of it, I have experienced a variety of Japanese homes, from one-room *manshons* in the city center to traditional farmhouses in remote rural areas. Sometimes all I could call my own, however briefly, was no more than a place to sleep—a tiny bed in an equally tiny room. Yet I have also enjoyed the grandness of spacious interiors—a true luxury in overcrowded, overpriced Tokyo.

Many of my good memories stem from the kindness of Japanese people who assisted me in finding suitable housing. Often this has included actually putting me up in their own homes, typically at great inconvenience to themselves. It is rare enough for Japanese to invite other Japanese into the privacy of their houses, never mind to ask a foreigner to actually stay with the family. Because of such open-mindedness, I have been able to learn firsthand the rhythms and patterns of daily household life, an intimate exposure which has been invaluable in increasing my understanding about Japan.

In Ryogoku, the center of sumo wrestling, I was allowed to share the top floor living quarters of a small company president and his family, who had constructed their own commercial building. Along the narrow streets of the old neighborhood sumo wrestler trainees wearing blue and white cotton *yukata* would boldly pedal their bicycles, as if defying the latter to collapse under the massive weight of the riders.

A different glimpse of traditional Japan could be seen from the window of a narrow, compact, one-room *manshon* I once borrowed in Sugamo. The Japanese word *manshon* is peculiarly optimistic in that the housing it typically describes is not like a mansion in the Western sense at all. Although a modern *manshon* can be comparatively spacious, it can also be a cramped,

ferro-concrete box with barely enough room to turn around. Owned by the young president of a music company, my particular *manshon* had the washing machine and one-burner cooking element in the entryway, the usual miniscule unit bath, and just enough additional space to lie down and sleep. But it was free for my use, and I looked out on a lively, endlessly interesting scene. The street where I lived even now teems with elderly people headed for a temple associated with healing of physical ailments. I still carry an image of walking canes and somber kimono, the waft of prayer incense, and colorful road stall vendors noisily touting their wares. On that same street I first discovered how nicely made Japanese toothpicks are, and how delicious is *ichigo daifuku*, a combination of glutinous rice, strawberries, and azuki beans.

Another, much larger *manshon* loaned to me in Ebisu had not been lived in for several years before I arrived. Although the owner himself, with hair neatly wrapped up in a Japanese-style bandanna, came to clean the tatami and air the house, I promptly fell ill after my first night's sleep and remained sick for my entire stay. It was a ready lesson, not only about the mold that lingers in disused rooms in Japan, but also about the myriad invisible creatures that can inhabit old tatami (I itched all over). Yet what I recall most clearly is how I was nursed through my sickness by the owner's wife, a complete stranger, who nevertheless came every day to prepare my lunch and check on my recovery.

Whenever fellow foreigners talk of the rudeness and insularity of the Japanese, I realize that they probably have good cause for their complaints. Many foreigners are especially discriminated against when they seek appropriate housing in Tokyo, and there are numerous unhappy tales. But at the same time I recognize that in Japan people can show an extraordinary concern for a stranger's well-being and comfort,

and will personally go to great lengths to ensure both a caring attitude and practical results.

## Urban hideaways

Although I have enjoyed luxurious home surroundings in Japan, I have never had the luxury of a corporate expense account to underwrite my overseas housing costs. Like countless other foreigners who have come to this country by their own means, for whatever reasons, I have therefore always been constrained by my budget (miserably small) and my expectations (unrealistically high). This combination, however, has given rise to some of my most memorable and creative approaches to the housing problem in Tokyo.

One December, for example, when it had become clear that I had carelessly overextended my welcome as a house guest in a Japanese home, I knew that I would have to find an alternative residence as quickly as possible. My only hope at the time was the classified ads section of an English language newspaper. And thus began a housing search that ultimately changed my entire life as a private individual and as a businesswoman in Japan.

The immediate result of my newspaper hunt was an invitation to stay for a week in the top floor apartment of a building owned by an ambitious computer company president whose business had been wrecked by his over expenditure just prior to Japan's economic collapse. To recoup a portion of his extensive losses, he planned to turn his office building into a temporary hostel (the offices were to be made into furnished dormitories) for foreigners. Before this venture officially opened, I could have the use of the upper apartment, which turned out to be a magnificent three-level expanse of wood floors, ample balconies and undisturbed quiet. The enormous lower level living room boasted a wood burning stove, while the second level, up a spiral stair-



case, contained another private space, as well as a small kitchen and a huge bath with a built-in dry sauna room. The third level was a cozy loft sleeping area. All this, in the middle of central Tokyo, I could have for the unbelievably paltry sum of ¥2,000 (about \$20) per day.

With that astonishing sojourn over, I turned once again to the same classifieds, this time to end up in a penthouse apartment owned by a woman who liked the fact that I had lived in Arizona, her home state in the U.S. Situated in exclusive Hiroo, the modern apartment looked out on Tokyo Tower and the rooftop of one of

Japan's best-known billionaires. Of course this extravagance devastated my housing budget, so when I returned to Japan a couple of months later from a visit to the U.S., I knew I would be quite restricted in my choices.

I have sometimes thought that if among the myriad Japanese gods and goddesses, there exists a deity of housing for foreigners, then he or she must be looking out for me. "Serendipity" is how one Japanese associate likes to describe my housing finds, and certainly I have been very lucky, to say the least.

But the house which gives me some of my fondest memories is a shabby, run-down traditional-style dwelling in a tree-filled residential area of Tokyo. Standing at the top of a hill, it was rented to an Irish-Japanese artist who sublet her room to me while she traveled abroad for two months. She told me that the house was connected with Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), that ardent Japanophile, who, among other writ-



Old-style farmhouses can still be found in rural areas.

ings, chronicled Japanese tales of the ghostly and weird.

The house itself stood next to a cemetery, and it took awhile for me to grow accustomed to the sound of the wooden markers at graves clattering in the night wind. My Japanese-style room, with its *shoji* screens and shutters, opened out to a large, if neglected, garden rich with greenery and birds. In many respects the house was a shambles—the tiny kitchen area offered a single gas burner, the bath heating element was tricky, the wood floors had termite rot, and in winter, the period of my stay, the interior was drafty and terribly cold. Yet the house held decided charm for me, perhaps because I remained eager to experience my image of a traditional Japan. I loved it.

What's more, it was in the potentially spooky garden of this house that I first met the Japanese man who is now my partner in the QRQ Nature Research Center, with our clinic offering comple-

mentary and expanded Oriental Medicine therapies. Our nature center is hidden deep in the mountains, surrounded by edible gardens and Japanese cypress forests. But the events that led us to this house is another story.

When the time came for me to leave the Koizumi House, as I called it, I ardently hoped that I would be able to find another house in the neighborhood. One morning, as I was heaving shut the old, wooden gate, I encountered a Japanese woman who struck up a conversation in English with me. We walked together to the station and boarded the same train. On hearing that I would be leaving "that old house" as she called it, and that I was searching for alternative accommodation, she immediately offered me the use of a house owned by her father.

I learned from her that the house where I had been living really was connected with Lafcadio Hearn, because this woman knew the grandson, who





High-rise mansion crowd Tokyo.

had once lived there. Her brief encounter with me led to my moving into a completely furnished house with garden, not five minutes walk away, and where I would spend ten fruitful months researching and writing. Originally a small, Japanese-style house, it had been recently remodeled into a Western-style, one-bedroom home that offered a perfect retreat.

The housing stop after that was a huge central Tokyo house which was soon abandoned in favor of a farmer's former house in Hachioji. Old but solid, it boasted its own well and carp pond, stocked with fish captured in the nearby river. The landlord's daughter regularly dropped by with vegetables and fruit, providing us with a supply of fresh garden produce. It was another house that generated many wonderful memories.

Not so pleasant, however, are the memories of the frustration I felt in trying to relocate to the Tohoku area of northern Japan. I have visited this region several times, even staying with farmer's families in big Tohoku farmhouses, and have always hankered to live here.

Related work opportunities made Fukushima Prefecture a logical Tohoku choice and for awhile it seemed as if this would be my new home in Japan. There were a number of empty houses available, but for one reason or another, none worked out. One dwelling, enthusiastically described as a large farmhouse, was really a two-room shack sagging under years of mold and damp. Another house high in the mountains offered the possibility of seclusion, clear spring water, and spectacular views. Never mind that the house was in a state of near collapse or that the toilet was an outside affair—here was another opportunity to experience a Japanese house. Alas, the son, already in his 60's, happily agreed to rent this humble homestead, but his father, in his 80's, vetoed the son's decision and withdrew the house. Respect for the aged still exists in Japan, particularly in rural areas, because the son has since announced that it will be necessary for him to wait until his father is "much weaker" before he ever considers renting or selling the house again.

Actually there is a strong reluctance

on the part of many Japanese to rent out empty houses in rural areas. For one thing, it is too troublesome to clean up a place—empty houses are often used for storage of unwanted or useless items. Then there is always *Obon*, the annual Buddhist celebration remembering the dead. Millions of Japanese return to their rural birthplace—their *inaka*—and where do they stay? Of course in those empty houses.

But in the Japanese climate a house left empty and shuttered up is soon subject to the mold and damp that can rapidly destroy the interior. Within a few short years, a once livable house can be ready to fall apart. Allowing a tenant in the house keeps the structure alive and breathing. Yet one empty and impressively built house I visited in Fukushima was wonderfully preserved, despite hav-

ing been abandoned for more than eight years. The heavy wood beams remained in excellent condition, and there was no sight or smell of moldiness. But then, the quality of the materials used in the original construction had been of the highest and someone throughout the years had taken sufficient care of the building to maintain its condition.

My most recent house in Japan is nowhere near as impressive in looks or materials. It is a simple farmer's house that once served as a silk weaving center. The wood is of poor quality and the exterior is decidedly shabby. But the rent is low, and I have the added benefit of being surrounded by herbs, flowers, vegetables, fruits, and the calm of the mountains. I can stand on a high point in the garden and see the twinkling lights of a far-off city. Instead of traffic I hear the rustle of trees and wind and the burble of a running stream. There are new memories in the making. ■

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