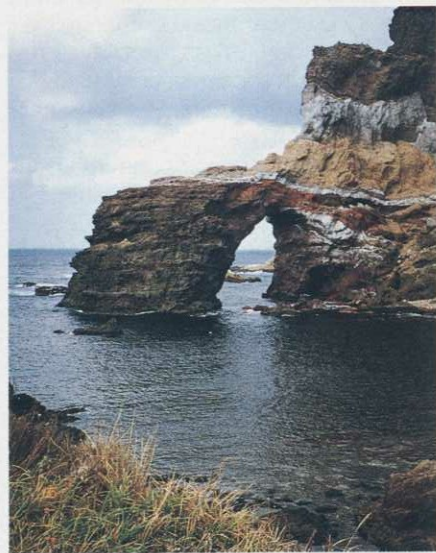


The Oki Islands: Land of Exile

The Oki-bound ferry from western Honshu at last docks at Urago Harbor after a two-and-a-half-hour crossing. It is early November 1991, and the Sea of Japan is calm, swept clean by the series of typhoons that passed through here in September and October. For a time the docks bustle with the commotion of the ferry's more than 100 passengers and the dozen or so cars that come down the ramp. Very soon, however, everyone has scurried off, each to his or her own business, and the harbor returns to its former sleepy quiet.

More than half of the ferry passengers appear to be fishing enthusiasts, come to enjoy their weekend at the Oki Islands' superior fishing spots. The remaining passengers either have business on the islands or are returning from having conducted business on neighboring Honshu. There do not appear to be any tourists.

The Oki Islands consist of four major islands with a population of almost 30,000 and some 180 smaller, unpopulated islands dotting the Sea of Japan. The island group is only 40 kilometers from western Honshu at its nearest point, up to 80 kilo-



Basalt cliffs carved by wind and sea on the Kokuga Coast.



A view of the Kokuga Coast

meters distant at its farthest point. The four populated islands consist of Dogo, the largest of the group and located on its eastern edge, and the three islands on the western edge known collectively as Dozen. Urago Harbor is located on Nishinoshima, one of the three Dozen islands.

Back in time

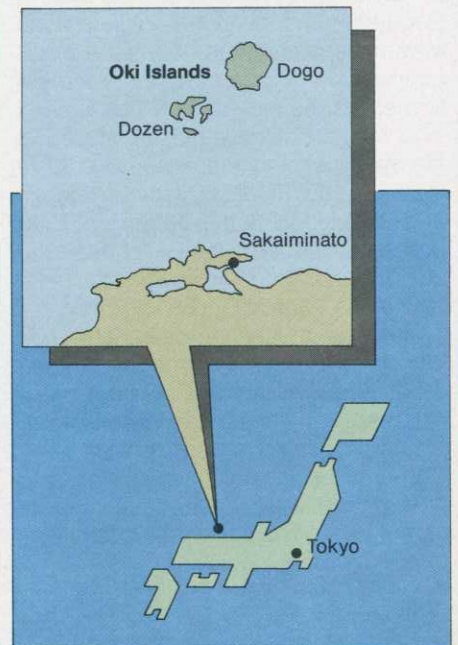
The Oki Islands are linked to Honshu by sea and air. Most tourists go to the large island of Dogo, which has the only airport in the island group. Urago Harbor in Dozen is, in effect, the back door to the Oki Islands. Not surprising that I see few tourists here, even considering the high season for tourism is over.

It is only a 30-minute flight to Dogo from the Izumo and Yonago airports on Honshu. Even from Osaka, it takes only a little more than an hour. Still, unless you are in a hurry or are susceptible to seasickness, I recommend traveling to the Oki Islands by ferry rather than plane. The more gradual approach by ship is like a passage through time back to the islands' rich history, symbolized by the rustic dwellings that become visible as the ship draws closer and closer to the islands.

Preserved on the Oki Islands is an old-fashioned simplicity fast disappearing from farming and fishing villages throughout the rest of Japan. There are also ancient dances and rites dating as far back as the 8th through the 12th centuries which are designated today as Intangible Cultural Properties by the Ministry of Education. As the popular writer of histor-

ical novels, Ryotaro Shiba, notes, the Oki Islands "have an independent culture going back thousands of years, and at the same time they have kept contact with Japan's central ruling elite and culture. Thanks to their island isolation, they have been able to maintain ancient cultural traditions more thoroughly than has been the case on the main Japanese island of Honshu."

Despite the fact that the Oki Islands offer numerous natural and historical attractions for the tourist—the islands are a part of the Daisen-Oki National Park—there are very few tourist hotels or inns. In-



stead, many island residents have turned their homes into *minshuku*, Japanese-style bed-and-board lodgings.

In these modest quarters one can experience firsthand the island lifestyle, not least of which is the rich variety of inexpensive and delicious seafood dishes prepared by the housewives, ranging from fresh *sashimi* to fried, broiled and stewed fish dishes of all kinds. For the not so avid seafood lover, I recommend the abalone steak eaten with locally made *miso*. Even foreign visitors unaccustomed to Japanese food will find this a delectable dish.

The majestic vistas of the ancient volcanic islands are another major attraction. All along the islands' ragged shoreline are rough eroded rock formations consisting of alkali rocks, which are also found in the Korean Peninsula and northeastern China but rarely in the rest of Japan. The 13-kilometer Kokuga Coast on the northwestern side of Nishino-shima, for example, consists of basalt cliffs carved by wind and sea and riddled with mysterious hollows and caves. Most pronounced is the 267-meter high crag called Matengai, a towering cliff.

History is the Oki Islands' third, and perhaps most compelling, allure. Through-



Urago Harbor on Nishino-shima, one of the three Dozen islands.

out Japanese history until modern times, the many tiny islands scattered around the main Japanese islands were places of banishment and exile. The Oki Islands are one of the most ancient places of banishment, two famous exiles being the Emperors Gotoba and Godaigo, banished in the 13th and 14th centuries, respectively.

Banished emperors

Gotoba never left the islands, dying there at the age of 60 after 18 years of yearning to return to the faraway capital. Godaigo, on the other hand, escaped within a year with the islanders' help to reclaim his throne. Legend has it that when Godaigo was fleeing the islands,

his craft was almost captured by boats sent out to pursue him. The emperor threw a tiny pouch of the Buddha's ashes into the sea and prayed, and, lo!, a cloud descended and enveloped his boat, hiding him from his enemies. There may be some truth to the legend, for the climate of the sea around the Oki Islands is indeed highly changeable, pouring buckets of rain all of a sudden and then just as suddenly becoming calm and quiet.

There are two theories—Dozen and Dogo—as to where Godaigo resided during his exile. One is that he lived on a bluff overlooking Beppu Harbor on the western side of Nishino-shima, where I visited. Nakano-shima, the second island of the Dozen three, is across from Beppu Harbor. Here one can visit the Oki Shrine, located next to the site where Gotoba lived out his days of banishment. At the time of my visit, in November, the area was badly scarred by the typhoons of the preceding months, with whole trees pulled up by their roots. The harsh environment is little changed from the ancient days of Gotoba and Godaigo.

Winds rock the ferry on our return trip to the port of Sakaiminato on Honshu. I wonder if the gentle skyline of Honshu was as welcome a sight to Godaigo as it is to me. Could Gotoba glimpse these hills from his palace-in-exile on a clear day? The ferry glided into port and the view of the bustling port suspended my reminiscences. Suddenly I felt as if I were a traveler coming home after long days of exile.

Toshio Iwasaki
Secretary General, Motor Sports Dept.
Japan Automobile Federation



The Oki Shrine, dedicated to the Emperor Gotoba, on the Nakano-shima island.