

Japan Seen from a Foreign Perspective

By Danièle Nothomb, wife of the Belgian Ambassador to Japan

To comment on what typifies a country, especially when this country is Japan, is always a very vast subject. There is a saying in French which describes very accurately what I feel as I am faced with such a task: "*Je me sens devant 'la mer a boire'*" meaning, I am taking on a huge challenge.

Actually, as my husband and I have officially visited the 47 prefectures of Japan, I have a great deal to say about this country.

My overall impression is one of great variety in the scenery, majestic beauty and a very strong exoticism. I will limit my commentary to only a few of the provinces which deeply impressed me, but it will be difficult for me to say which is my favorite prefecture as the characteristics of each area are too different to be compared. Therefore, the order in which I will talk to you about these places does not follow a criterion. I will simply comment on them as they surface in my memory.

Let's begin with Noto Peninsula: after having met the governor of Ishikawa, the mayor and the president



Tottori Dune, in Tottori prefecture

of the Kanazawa Chamber of Commerce, my husband rented a car and we drove along the coastal road which was very steep and romantic with its rocky cliffs between which fishing villages are dotted. I must mention that the shore of this peninsula is one of the rare ones that has not been destroyed by a road built too close to the seaside, for it is alas an unfortunate tendency that the Japanese have, that when they discover a beautiful location they feel

compelled to build a road right through it, instead of keeping the site intact and constructing the road a little farther away. We arrived just after an earthquake, which as usual had caused a tsunami that unleashed a strong storm with enormous waves crashing against the cliffs, adding a dramatic note to this landscape of spectacular beauty.

I am thinking also of Tottori Dune in Tottori prefecture. I bestow upon this dune the prize for the most beautiful beach in the world, as my criterion for a beach's beauty is its immense desert-like space: it has furthermore inspired quite a number of Japanese photographers. This very vast sandy layout produces an astonishing illusionary effect, for the sea appears close while it is really receding as one advances toward it.

Tottori Dune is a national park and I thank the Japanese National Tourist Organization which has succeeded in preserving this landscape in its natural state which I discovered for the first time 30 years ago, when I would spend numerous vacations with my children there. Having returned to the spot 30 years later, I have been able to assure my children that their memory would not be scarred were they to see 'the dune' again. Unfortunately



Noto Peninsula seashore, in Ishikawa prefecture

the tree-covered hills which border the dune to its right have been turned into an eyesore by a hideous little chair lift for those lazy individuals incapable of walking to the sea, when in fact going on foot is a real pleasure. Isn't it rather the desire to create something for commercial means that has brought on this laziness?

Coming from a country of which the highest hill culminates at 700 meters, the splendor of your Japanese mountains filled me with awe. My husband and I have climbed many of them, such as Kumotoriyama, Daisen, Tsurugi, Kitadake, Ichizuchi, Nantaisan and many others, including of course Mt. Fuji.

I am particularly fond of Tateyama for the extent of its scenery in the form of *'circarama.'* I will never forget, to the left of the ridge where we used to walk, this cirque of snow-capped peaks, from which, for example, an active volcano bubbling over with clouds would peer. I can honestly say it was the most amazing sight I have ever witnessed in my life.

Continuing along this ridge, we finally reached the sea, which was perpendicular to the ridge. What a vision, and what a surprise for a Belgian used to being surrounded by a flat country!

And I must expound on your volcanoes! If ever there was something exotic on earth, I know of nothing more intense than these gaping craters such as Mt. Aso or Mt. Asama with their depth of unexpected colors, one a sulfurous yellow, the other a bright turquoise blue. Or the juxtaposed craters of Kiso Komagatake and Mt. Bandai. And then to make a contrast with your volcanoes and your mountains, we discover your marshlands. The Oze marshes with their stretches of water that seem limitless! What a luxurious

expanse in a country where space is scarce and exorbitantly expensive. Not to mention the pleasure this brings botanists who can admire a constantly changing flora all year round. There are the marshes of Senjogahara which remind me of African swamps. And since these *'Akanuma'* ponds are so close to them, one must speak of Chuzenji Lake, this ancient crater filled with water, completely surrounded by hills and tree-covered mountains like Mt. Nantai, Mt. Fuji's 'younger sibling'.

I know very few landscapes more perfect than the one we can see from the window of the Belgian Embassy's retreat located just on the edge of this immense lake and facing Mt. Shirane.

You also have your temples, your pagodas and your castles, but Kyoto, Nara, Himeji, etc., are endless subjects and my intention was to focus on the effect that Japan's natural beauty has on a foreigner.

Yes, my husband and I are proud to say that we are very familiar with your country, but we have also undertaken the discovery of the multitude of your islands; beyond Okinawa and Sadogashima, we

came upon Okishima, a really wild jungle, Tsushima, Oshima, Shikinejima, the microscopic island with its *'rotenburo'* (outer bath) right on the beach brushing the waves.

What a paradise for us as diplomats, hidden away in the most beautiful parts of your superb countryside!

But in the middle of all this beauty, one thing remains very regrettable. The mediocrity and shall we say the squareness, the ugliness of too many buildings spoiling beautiful classic areas such as Kyoto where one has allowed (but was permission really granted?) the construction of truly hideous buildings which we must consider as a grave lack of respect for the environment. In a country boasting some of the greatest architects in the world, such as Kenzo Tange and Kisho Kurokawa, how can we tolerate such a disregard for town planning? We can denounce this unpardonable neglect as an insult to Japan. But I am sure that the concern over perfection with which the Japanese are obsessed will correct little by little this unacceptable fault.



Tateyama, in Toyama prefecture