

Miyake-jima: Japan's Galapagos

Although it is not widely recognized, a living museum of natural history, in many ways unlike any other in the world, awaits the adventurous traveler a mere one-hour airplane ride from Tokyo's teeming metropolis. Even scientists are often surprised to learn that Miyake-jima is the location of the world's highest-latitude coral reefs. Ninety-one species of coral, 80 of which are reef-building forms, are nourished by the crystal clear warm waters of the Kuroshio current, which also bathes a spectacular coastline of black volcanic cliffs and beaches. Behind this, an aggressively lush subtropical forest of live oaks, camphor, orchids and exotic endemic birds interact in a complex ecological web under the steaming volcanic crater of Mt. Oyama. Within the borders of the Fuji-Hakone-Izu-Ogasawara National Park, Miyake-jima is the third-largest of the Izu Islands.

Miyake-jima is situated 160 kilometers south of Tokyo, hence qualifying as "outside Tokyo." It may therefore come as a surprise that the island is under the administration of Tokyo's Shinagawa Ward, a fact that is verified by the Shinagawa plates on the local vehicles and the signboard in front of Tokyo-to Miyake-jima High School, which, with 129 students, is one of greater Tokyo's smallest. With a population of 4,201 scattered around the rim, down almost 50% from its postwar peak, most of the island remains green and lush, in refreshing contrast to the concrete, smog and dust of Tokyo.

Throughout the Tokugawa period and before, Miyake-jima functioned as an island of exile for undesirables. Unlike Hachijo-jima, 64 km to the south, however, which was used for political exiles, Miyake's prisoners were primarily thieves, gamblers and an occasional murderer. Those who could read and write were given positions of some importance, but the majority were forced to live under harsh conditions, isolated from the indigenous island population, whose origins are much more difficult to trace. The presence of Jomon shell mounds here and there around the island is evi-

dence of human habitation for several thousand years, at least, and semifossilized bones of deer and wild boar suggest an ancient connection with the islands to the north and Honshu, the largest of Japan's four main islands.

Traditional habits

That there were periodic influxes of fishing people, riding the Kuroshio stream from a variety of locations, was very apparent to me when I first arrived on the island 37 years ago. Residents of each of the five villages (Tsubota, Kamitsuki, Izu, Igaya and Ako) spoke distinctly different dialects in those days and displayed unique cultural characteristics, such as carrying loads balanced on the head in Ako, but in baskets on the back, supported by a headstrap, in Tsubota. Okinawa's influence is apparent today in certain fishing techniques. There was no electricity when I first arrived on the island, and only nine boats per month came from Tokyo. Miyake islanders were relatively isolated from the rest of Japan.

A new airport and much-improved port facilities greatly changed that in the 1960s. Nowadays, television has almost totally obliterated the dialects and has opened the eyes of the islanders to the fashions and conveniences of the outside world. Although traditional habits and dialects can still be seen and heard among the old people, who make up a sizable portion of the population, the middle-aged and young adults mostly adhere to the values, fashions and habits of their counterparts in Tokyo.

Most make their living from tax-supported construction, tourism, and related business and clerical occupations. Fishing, although still of tremendous value, has dropped from first to third place in importance to the island's economy in the past 25 years. The traveler who comes to Miyake to discover the elusive "real Japan" may therefore be disappointed. The sincere friendliness, honesty and hospitality of today's residents is not disappointing, however, and is no different than it was when I first arrived more than a quarter of a century ago.

Far from disappointing, the island's natural history is of world class and

should be proclaimed as valuable and unique in a nation of plundered natural resources. That it is not is due only partly to the island's historical isolation from the mainstream of Japanese life. More important is an inherent Japanese abhorrence of "raw nature" that to a large degree results from the Zen-influenced idea that man can manipulate nature into something more aesthetically pleasing to the sophisticated human mind.

In order to see the true value of Miyake, one must merely travel around Japan as a whole, where 70% of the rivers are already locked in concrete and 90% of the coral reefs have been killed by construction-related siltation. The path from one Zen garden to the next is long and littered with concrete and plastic. Miyake is a somewhat isolated oasis in Japan's ever-growing environmental disaster. But the traveler must hurry! Six tax-supported local construction companies are currently competing to help this small island "keep up with" the rest of the country. And the Japanese Defense Agency dreams of a military airport on the southwest coast, in an area currently designated as a "special protected area" by the same government's Environment Agency.

Symbol of resistance

Miyake's commercial nickname, "Bird Island," results from the fact that about 200 species of birds can be seen at various times of the year on the island. Most well-known among them is a species of thrush, very similar in size and coloration to the American robin, to which it is closely related. Known as *akakokko*, this thrush occurs only in the Izu Islands, with its largest breeding population residing on Miyake. It has been declared a "natural monument" or protected species by the Japanese government. Ironically, it is known to Communists and ultraleftists as a symbol of resistance to the proposed military airport. Happily, as it forages for large centipedes on the forest floor under a dense subtropical canopy, it remains totally ignorant of man's arrogant and self-interested misuse of its name.

Another protected species, the Japanese woodpigeon (*karasubato*), can also easily be observed by the interested



traveler. This large, iridescent black tropical pigeon, like the *akakokko*, has its largest breeding population on Miyake. It is abundant around Tairo Pond near Tsubota, and at Toga Shrine on the southwest coast. Its current world distribution is limited to small offshore islands in southern Japan, with occasional reports of sightings on islands off Shanghai.

A third protected species, Ijima's willow warbler (*Ijima-mushikui*) is known to breed only in the Izu Islands, but migrates southwesterly to winter in the Okinawan Islands. Unique subspecies of the Japanese robin, the varied tit and the pygmy woodpecker are also common at Miyake. Although not unique, the little cuckoo (*hototogisu*) has special meaning to Miyake islanders. The melancholy call of this late-May migrant, coming from the misty slopes of Mt. Oyama throughout the dreary days and occasional moonlit nights of the rainy season, is as much "Miyake" as the nightingale is "England" and the meadowlark is "Kansas."

Birds can best be viewed from mid-April until the end of the rainy season in mid-July, although numerous migrants from Siberia and northern Japan can be seen in winter. For travelers with an interest in birds, I recommend Oshidori Pension in Tsubota (tel: 04994-6-0346).

As a marine biologist who has spent

more than 5,000 hours in tropical waters around the world, I can say with absolute confidence that when conditions are right, the scuba-diving traveler will find Miyake-jima's waters hard to beat. Right conditions are best found between mid-July, after the rainy season, until mid-October, during not infrequent periods when the meandering Kuroshio's flow strikes the island directly, and when winds and waves are minimal. At such times, underwater visibility can reach 40 meters, and the water temperature rises to 27 C.

Spectacular scene

Volcanic submarine cliffs covered with scattered corals, gorgonians, lush tropical algae and numerous exotic invertebrates provide a varied and spectacular scene. Although the coral variety surpasses Hawaii and most of the Caribbean, actual coral cover is limited to scattered patches, the largest of which are at Toga Bay and Gakko-shita on the southwest coast. Limited coral reef development (i.e. new living coral growing on old dead coral) can be found in Igaya Bay.

Similar to Miyake's bird fauna, the marine life around the island is of great scientific value. Two species of fishes, one a wrasse (*Macropharyngodon moyeri*) and the other a dragonet (*Synchiropus*

moyeri) are known in the world only from Igaya Bay on Miyake's northwest coast. (I consider it a special honor that both species were named after me by the scientists who discovered them). Two other species, a dragonet (*Synchiropus kiyooae*) and a garden eel (*Gorgasia japonica*) are known from Miyake southward to Hachijo-jima. Like the thrush *akakokko*, the breeding population of the valuable Japanese angelfish (*rentenyakko*) represents the largest in the world.

Other Miyake endemics, already discovered but awaiting scientific description, include two coral species, three tropical marine algae, and at least three species of fishes. Nature lovers residing in Japan need not go to the Galapagos to see unique wildlife. Miyake-jima has an adequate supply.

For spectacular diving, I recommend Gakko-shita or the Sabigahama arches. The latter area is currently closed to diving by the Miyake-jima Fishermen's Cooperative Association, but may soon be reopened. For rich biological diversity, the submarine cliff extending northward from the port at Igaya (not the bay itself) is my favorite, but be prepared for a moderate offshore current. The Miyake-jima Marine Lodge (tel: 04994-2-0776) has nice cottages and offers both diving and windsurfing assistance. Prices are moderate.

For the traveler who is so inclined, more than 100 Shinto shrines await exploration. Toga Shrine, on the southwest coast, is the largest and most important. Hiking, bicycling, windsurfing and sport fishing are other tourist attractions. Many *minshuku* lodgings are available at ¥4,800 per night with two meals. I recommend Misaki, Utsuki-en or Tsumura. The latter features traditional Miyake *taiko* drumming for no extra fee. For a slightly higher price, the picturesque Japanese inn, Yamanobe, is nice. The Miyake Kanko Hotel is available for those who desire a more expensive atmosphere.

Miyake can be reached via ferry from the Tokai Steamship Company's Hinode Pier, near Hamamatsucho, in Tokyo. Boats leave nightly at 10:10 p.m., arriving at Miyake at 4:40 a.m. Round trip fares range from ¥8,320 upwards, depending on the quality of accommodation preferred. Flights leave Haneda, wind conditions and visibility permitting, twice daily at 10:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. and are priced at about ¥17,000 for a round trip.

Although construction threatens Miyake-jima's natural treasures, there is some hope that much of the island can be saved. The "airport problem" has re-

sulted in an international effort to protect this unique environment. The national and local governments have done little in response to such pressures, however. It is not easy to predict what will happen, although the outlook at present is not good. Clearly, the official designation of national park carries lower priority in Japan than it does elsewhere in the world. Now is a good time to visit Miyake-jima, before it is too late.

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Table Talk

Japanese Restaurant Shin'akashi

When I visited Britain in June to attend a high-tech forum at the picturesque Leeds Castle in the county of Kent, I took the opportunity after the meeting of traveling to Edinburgh, Scotland, where I had a chance to sample two local specialties—haggis, made of sheep entrails, and kippers, or smoked herring. I confess I did not really take to haggis, but I found the kippers oily and very tasty, without any fishy smell. I couldn't resist asking for seconds.

After returning to Tokyo, I could not but feel indignant that the prices at Tokyo restaurants are so high by international standards. It is my impression that, of all the many cuisines to be found in the city, Japanese food is the most expensive of all. As if in apology for the high prices, the restaurateurs will tell you that "these bowls cost several tens of thousands of yen each," or "this hanging scroll cost several million yen," or "the atmosphere of the room is perfect."

Yet I wonder if there is anyone in the world whose eyes would not pop out

on hearing that at Kitcho, the most prestigious restaurant patronized by top political and business leaders, a dinner will cost as much as ¥70,000 (nearly \$520) per person including liquor and tax. At other prestigious restaurants the customer is charged ¥30,000–40,000 for a meal.

What do foreign visitors and residents think of all this? Do they consider it the height of madness? Do they ascribe it to the peculiar nature of the Japanese people, who murmur not a word of protest when land and food prices soar sky high? Or do they take it as a matter of course that such prices are charged because the people who patronize such restaurants derive satisfaction from paying them? It all depends on the values of the individual, yet I, as a Japanese, am deeply ashamed of this situation.

So, as a partial remedy, let me here introduce a Japanese restaurant which I can proudly recommend to foreigners without any reservations.

Shin'akashi is operated by a man born and raised in the port town of Yaizu on the Pacific coast and who knows all there is worth knowing about fish. Every day, he buys from the Tsukiji fish market what he believes to be the very best of the day. The fish is served raw and sliced as sashimi, or broiled, boiled or fried, and whichever way it's done, it tastes as good as, if not better than, that offered at any of the famous restaurants of Tokyo. Order in advance, and you can even eat sashimi of *hamo* (pike conger), scarcely ever

available in Tokyo, and have it at a reasonable price.

In early summer, I am never satisfied until I've had Shin'akashi's *katsuo-notataki*, bonito roasted on the surface and sprinkled with grated and marinated Japanese radish and minced chives. After the fish course come *zosui* rice gruel and *nyumen* thin noodles boiled with soup, both of which are excellent. The restaurant's woman manager has a crisp but agreeable manner. This is the right way to experience genuine Japanese cuisine.

In addition to its regular chairs and tables, Shin'akashi has three cosy private rooms. The price, including liquor, tax and service, is moderate at around ¥10,000 (about \$75) per head. This is a Japanese restaurant you can enter without fear.

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

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