

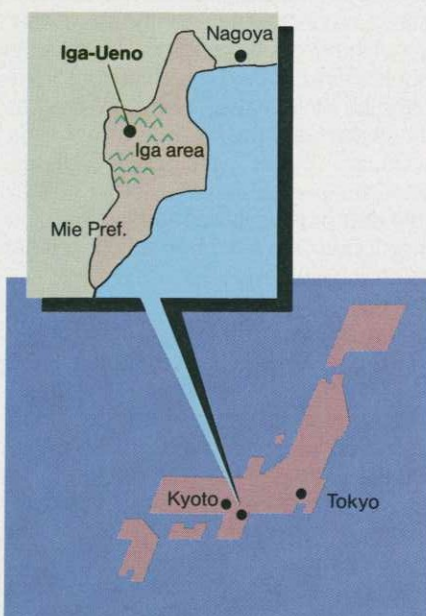
Outing

Iga-Ueno: Birthplace Of Ninja and Basho

Apparently the United States has been hit by a ninja boom. Even Japanese television stations sometimes air American films made for TV in which assassins dressed in black and carrying long swords on their backs stealthily make their way among the skyscrapers of New York and spring an attack on some gang leader in his luxurious penthouse.

In Japan ninja appeared as important heroes in kabuki plays, *yoruri* ballads and entertainment novels in the Edo period (1603–1868). They retain their popularity today, starring in period dramas and animation films on TV, in comics and in home video games.

The popular kabuki actor and producer Ennosuke Ichikawa, who gave a well-received performance in Paris a few years ago, includes a ninja drama in his repertoire. With its swift action, quick changes of costume and dynamic switches of stage setting, a ninja drama brings out most effectively the attractions, techniques and beauty of kabuki as a form of entertainment rather than an art.



Schoolchildren listen in awe to a female guide dressed in a ninja-style costume in the Ninja House. The adjacent museum displays weapons including these throwing blades.

The most popular of the many ninja about whom stories have been passed down from generation to generation are probably Ishikawa Goemon and Sarutobi Sasuke. Ishikawa Goemon was a real person—the leader of a band of robbers that operated in and around Kyoto in the 16th century. Caught in 1594, he was punished by being boiled in a cauldron of oil along with his fellow robbers.

Ishikawa Goemon began to appear in kabuki plays and other stories toward the end of the 17th century, and before long he acquired the character of a Robin Hood, stealing from the rich to give to the poor. The character enjoyed enormous popularity among ordinary folk through the Edo period. Unfortunately, he has no fans at all today—maybe because poor people have all but disappeared from our society.

In contrast with Ishikawa Goemon, Sarutobi Sasuke is still popular. A purely fictitious character, he first appeared as the hero in a series of entertainment novels for young people known as Tachikawa Bunko, which started being published in about 1910. In the stories, Sasuke stages resistance against Tokugawa Ieyasu, who later gained control of Japan and set up the Edo shogunate in 1603. Using his unmatched skills as a ninja, Sarutobi Sasuke goes on a rampage around the country. The complete absurdity of the tales turned them into an immense hit; the series reportedly was reprinted more than 1,000 times.

From Sarutobi Sasuke originated the present-day stereotype of the ninja, which is a far cry from what the ninja were really like. Apart from a few fanatics, nobody has taken up the ninja as a serious topic of research. A visit to the metropolitan library in Hibiya in central Tokyo revealed just one volume on the ninja. I wonder how many research books on Superman there are in public libraries in New York?

In the northwest of Mie Prefecture, almost in the center of the Iga Basin which is surrounded on three sides by mountains rising 600 to 1,000 meters, lies the quiet castle town of Iga-Ueno.

Origins of ninjutsu

Because of its closeness to Nara and Kyoto, both of which served at some time as Japan's capital, the Iga Basin, despite its small size, had strategic importance from ancient times, standing on one of the transportation routes to the east. After Todo Takatora, a trusted retainer of Ieyasu, became the lord of the area in 1608 after the end of the Warring States period (1467–1568), Iga-Ueno prospered as a typical castle town of the Edo period.

As a tourist spot, Iga-Ueno calls itself the "ninja town" and the birthplace of the Iga school of *ninjutsu*—the art of ninja. Other schools of *ninjutsu* include the Koga and Negoro schools, but they derived from the Iga school. It was the Iga area that produced ninja as a professional corps which specialized in espionage.



Haiseiden, a building intended to represent the poet Basho with his familiar hat and walking stick.



Ueno Castle, rebuilt in 1935, is a symbol of Iga-Ueno.

nage, guerrilla-style warfare and combat.

Iga-Ueno's tourist highlight is the Ninja House, located near Ueno Castle, which stands in the center of the town. Belonging in the past to a minor ninja, the house was moved to its present site and reconstructed to its former state. Though it looks just like any other thatched farmhouse, this house features various secret devices, such as escape routes for when the enemy attacked and hiding places for weapons. The guides, of course, are attired in ninja costumes.

On display in the adjacent small museum are various weapons and equipment used by the ninja, with explanations in English as well as Japanese. According to Makoto Nakamori, the curator of the Ninja House, the number of inquiries from foreigners has been increasing recently. "Usually they ask such things as whether the ninja really disappears when he utters a spell. I wish they would understand that real ninja were not like that at all," remarked Nakamori.

So what were the real ninja like?

According to the explanatory panels in the museum, the origins of *ninjutsu* can be found in Shugendo, a mixture of esoteric Buddhism and mountain worship that originated in Japan at the end of the 6th century. The followers of this religious order attempted to gain magical powers by climbing steep mountains and hardening their minds and bodies through ascetic practices. Until receiving official approval at the beginning of the 8th century, Shugendo was considered heretical and remained in conflict with the authorities. Therefore its unique tactics of warfare developed gradually among the group's disciples. Eventually it created what is called the *yamabushi-heiho* method of fighting, characterized by the use of

espionage, the employment of guerrilla tactics by which a small number of people can overcome a large number, and psychological tactics to surprise the enemy.

These tactics were handed down from generation to generation in the mountainous Iga district, where there were many esoteric Buddhist temples and Shugendo training sites, and provided the foundation for the development of the Iga style of *ninjutsu*.

Since no single lord emerged to take control of the Iga area even in the middle ages, 60 or so smaller families jostled with one another for power, joining forces to defend Iga against external enemies and repeatedly fighting one another internally through espionage and guerrilla warfare. In the process three large ninja groups took shape: the Hattori, Momochi and Fujibayashi groups.

In the Warring States period, the number of ninja increased, and ninja groups swelled in size. Since it became difficult to maintain a group in the Iga region only, the groups came to hire themselves out to more powerful lords in other regions. In 1581 the ninja groups in Iga were dealt a devastating blow in an attack by the warlord Oda Nobunaga, who was trying to unify the country. After fleeing Iga, the ninja groups came to be used by the warlords in their places of exile.

Lost role

Tokugawa Ieyasu, who put down the other warlords and unified the country, used the espionage and guerrilla tactics of the ninja most effectively. In 1590 Ieyasu established a spy group called the Iga-gumi, made up of Iga ninja and led by Hattori Hanzo. Ieyasu stationed this group

in Edo to help with the defense of the capital and also dispatched them to the provinces to check on the lords he had just conquered, expose any illegal acts, nip any signs of resistance in the bud, and thereby reinforce the stability of his government. (As a matter of interest, the Hanzomon gate of the Imperial Palace takes its name from the fact that Hattori Hanzo's residence was located in front of it.)

The military and political tactics of the ninja were useful until the reign of the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu, after which the Tokugawa shogunate became so stable and the domestic situation so peaceful that the ninja had no role to play. Except for keeping a few of their special duties, therefore, the Iga ninja were absorbed into Edo's legal police force.

In 1716 the eighth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune, established a special intelligence organization under the direct control of the shogun, using not the Iga ninja but the ninja of the Negoro school. Ironically the ninja that appear in TV dramas these days are mostly this kind of ninja, although these were quite different from the original ninja in terms of their role and organization. The ninja had lost their pride and become watchdogs for the establishment.

Another of Iga-Ueno's tourist landmarks is the birthplace of the famous haiku poet Matsuo Basho. Born in Iga in 1644 as the son of a samurai, Basho entered the service of a local samurai family until 1666, when his lord died. Basho then left Iga to train as a haiku poet in Kyoto and other places. He received recognition as a master in 1678 in Edo. Basho traveled throughout Japan from the Tohoku region to the Chugoku region, writing accounts of his journeys. He died

while on a journey in 1694 at the age of 51.

In March 1689 Basho set out from Edo on a long journey to the Tohoku district. Some people have suggested that this famous journey was actually made at the behest of the Tokugawa shogunate, which wanted Basho to act as a spy and report on conditions in the region. Basho's pupil Sora, who accompanied him on the trip, worked for the shogunate. Moreover, an analysis of the diary of the

journey shows that they traveled distances in a single day that no ordinary person could possibly have covered. Only trained ninja could have done it.

The idea is fascinating, though portraits of Basho and his style of poetry hardly evoke the image of a ninja. Nevertheless, it might make a good cartoon—a haiku poet dashing through the mountains on a mission of espionage.

In Iga-Ueno there remain his birth-

place and one of the hermitages that he is said to have adored. Since many haiku lovers visit the town, boxes have been set up at tourist sights so that they can drop in a poem. The haiku received are judged four times a year. No doubt English haiku would be especially welcome.

Ritsuko Misu
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Journal of Japanese Trade & Industry

Table Talk

Russian Restaurant Sungary

The recent thaw in the Cold War between the superpowers and President Gorbachev's *perestroika* policy have focused worldwide interest on Russia, so what better time to pull aside the curtain for a look at a Russian restaurant in Tokyo?

In the time of the Czars, Russian cuisine was said to be the most luxurious, the most European of all. Together with Italian cuisine, it strongly influenced French cooking, now considered the best in the world. Sixty times larger than Japan, the Soviet Union embraces both Europe and Asia, and so have its gourmands. Indeed, Russian food appears to have sprung from the foods of central Asia, the oldest cuisine in the world.

Today, Russian cooking gets a less than enthusiastic press. Most tourists have far from pleasant experiences at restaurants in the Soviet Union. Some say the menus lack variety, and that waiters refuse to serve the foods put on the menu. Others complain of a shortage of restaurants themselves, and recall endless waits for their meals to arrive. And then there are the complaints about the bad

manners and atrocious service of waiters and waitresses in Russian restaurants. Personally, I do not put all the blame on Soviet restaurant operators. Service at some restaurants in capitalist countries can be even worse.

But, unlike their finicky brethren, the foreign residents of Moscow have to assimilate themselves to their environment, like it or not. The lesson of my four years in the Russian capital is that once you learn to accept the inevitable, you will find meals at Moscow restaurants anything but mean. How about *Tabaka* chicken broiled in a brick oven, or *Salyanka* soup from Ukraine chock-full of vegetables and meat or sturgeon. And then there is *Bliny* (caviar or raw salmon with pancake, topped by cream and minced onion), *Gorshok* (meat and mushroom stewed in a little pot), *Shashlyk* (spit-roasted mutton) and much more that is well worth a patient wait.

Among some 30 Russian restaurants in Tokyo, Sungary (named after a river in China's Northeast region), which originally opened in Shimbashi 35 years ago, is surely one of the best.

Chef Kokawa has devoted himself to Russian cuisine, and he invites cooks from Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev every other year to tap their expertise and maintain his restaurant's high standard. The effort has more than paid off. Sungary is popular among cuisine-conscious young Japanese women and foreign diplomats. Interestingly enough, Americans outnumber all other foreign customers.

The wine list includes Chinandary

white wine and Mukuzany red wine, both in high demand in the Soviet Union.

And in fact, Sungary, with its modest 56 seats, has an atmosphere reminiscent of Aragubi, one of the best-known restaurants in Moscow.

Recommended menu: Salami (¥700); hors d'œuvre (¥2,500); Salyanka soup (¥700); Siberian quenelle (¥750); Beef stroganoff (¥1,800); Kiev chicken cutlet (¥1,700); Ukraine-style stewed beef (¥1,800); Shashlyk (¥1,500) and Piroshki fried quenelle (¥200).

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

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Open 4 p.m. to midnight all year round
Reservation necessary.

