

## Hakone—Never Miss a Trick

Story and photos by Bill Tingey

For those living in Tokyo at least, Hakone is close enough to the metropolis to be visited leisurely in a day. The abundance of greenery and its altitude make it a calming, cool retreat from the rigors of the city especially in the summer; and a glowing canvas of autumn colors awaits the visitor in the fall. Although generally shy at most times of the year, Mt. Fuji is often visible in winter, making a visit very worthwhile; and during the hot muggy months of the rainy season, the deep greens, mountain mists and icy blue hydrangeas provide the right kind of therapy to relieve city dwellers from any part of Japan.

But Hakone's therapeutic value is not the only reason for visiting this mountain resort. It goes without saying that the scenery is bound to please, with arborous mountains and Lake Ashi being the mainstay of its landscape vocabulary. The area's geological heritage is also represented by such sites as Kowakidani, Owakudani, and Ojigoku—places where sulphurous steam drifts on the air to produce a splendor of imagined hell where the earth's crust is thin. If you have a mind to, you can boil an egg in a pool of water heated in Mother Nature's cauldron, sometimes

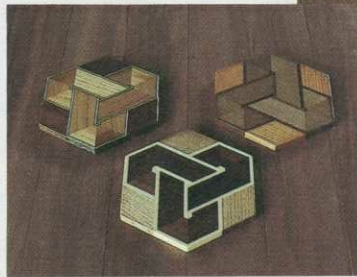
Hakone can be most easily reached on the Odakyu Line from Shinjuku Station. Other attractions of particular interest to foreign visitors include the Chokoku no Mori—the Hakone open-air sculpture museum; and a number of hot springs which can be enjoyed during a stay in the area. Remember, because it is a popular place with Japanese, it is as well to plan the time of your visit carefully, in order to avoid the crowds.



Top right: End-grain veneers curl from the plane

Bottom right: Hakone marquetry—a traditional melee of woods, colors and patterns

Below: More contemporary examples of the craft are equally appealing



not so far below the surface.

The deep valleys and steep mountains here have never made reaching and moving about in Hakone easy. Modern means of transportation have made the task of the visitor much easier but in some cases no less thrilling than in the past. The Hakone Tozan Railway that rises from close to sea level to 600m in a matter of 15km is an especially interesting way to reach the heart of the area. From Odawara to Hakone Yumoto, this standard-gauge mountain railway shares tracks with the Odakyu meter gauge line, thus producing some complex turn-outs. The steep gradient also

makes train reversing a necessity and provides an opportunity for ascending and descending trains to pass on the mostly single track running through dense woodland. But even this hard-working mountain railway gives way to a cable car after Gora.

Ancient routes clung to precipitous paths or followed valley floors and were controlled by the authorities during the Edo period of feudal rule, in order to monitor the passage of people on what was part of the highway between the ancient imperial capital of Kyoto and the newer seat of the Shogun in Edo. A replica of the Sekisho or Hakone Barrier in Hakonemachi is now a reminder of those days which were depicted by Hokusai in his epic series of woodblock prints of points of interest along this well trodden arterial route.

It was the almost constant stream of travellers along this route which helped to foster a local craft, itself almost totally dependent on the great variety of timber in the vicinity.

Hakone marquetry, or *yosegi zaiku*, requires several small pieces of wood of different colors and grains to be put together to form a single material. The end-grain veneers, or *zuku*, made from this material are applied to a carcass as decoration, or otherwise articles can be formed using a kind of patchwork of different woods. Several pieces of different wood are bonded together in an organized fashion to

make boxes or other small items. Some are made to tease—faces of the box must be moved in a certain sequence before it can be successfully opened.

Many woods from the mountains around Hakone are used for this craft, but none more indicative of the area's geology and topography than *jindai*. This is a generic name for wood which

has been buried for many years, either by a landslide or by seismic disturbance. When one of these trees or pieces of wood is discovered, its color is more or less as it was when it was living, until exposed to the air. It then turns a dark blue-black.

Of course, compared to this and other tricks of nature here in Hakone, the feats of the railway engineer may

not seem so dynamic. Nevertheless, along with the landscape, craft and heritage here, they deserve a considered look.



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## TABLE TALK

### Mugen-an



In May 1993, Japan Economic Foundation, with which I was associated, co-hosted the third EC-Japan Aspen Conference in Kyoto. The 50 Japanese and European delegates included former cabinet-level politicians, eminent businessmen, and high-ranking government officials.

We talked about the further necessity to develop common economic policies between Japan and the nations of Europe. There was heated discussion over Japan's huge trade surplus. But we set aside business at the end of the day. Even argumentative conferees dropped their obstreperousness, and slipped into the bus seats, chatting amicably as we proceeded to the evening's entertainment.

The full-course Japanese dinner at *Kyo-yamato*, a first-rank restaurant in Kyoto, was the highlight of the evening. The memorable dinner was followed by another delight: 40 beautiful *geiko* from Gion and Pontocho towns dancing in the Kyoto tradition. The most impressive was Gion's traditional and refined *Teuchi*.

An ancient city in a serene, natural environment, stately temples and shrines hewn

by time, elegant dances, and delightful cuisine—Who could be enveloped in such richness and not be enchanted? Even the Europeans, whose esprit and sense of irony are rooted in their culture, doffed their hats.

We were also entertained at *Nomura-Hekiunso*, in an atmosphere and setting redolent of Kyoto-gosho and Katsura Detached Palaces. The Kyoto dances, *koto* and *noh* performances by the Kongo School were riveting. These experiences will stay with me for a long time.

The beauty of Japan, praised by German architect Bruno Taut and the French writer and statesman Andre Malraux, exists in nature as strongly as it exists in the aesthete's heart. Japanese should be proud of this heritage, and point it out to visitors from other lands.

Back in Tokyo, I asked myself which restaurant offers similarly tasty cuisine at affordable prices in a splendid atmosphere like Kyoto's. The answer came immediately, and it was without reservation—*Mugen-an* in Shibuya. For diners from faraway lands, Japanese can introduce the following with pride.

Walking down wide granite stone steps, guests come to a lantern. Appropriately shrouded in an atmosphere befitting its name "Mugen" or "reverie and fantasy," the room is tranquil and brilliantly refined. *Mugen-an*'s primary bill of fare is seafood cuisine. Seasonal catches are shipped directly from the San'in region near the Japan Sea. Sasaki, a veteran chef, honed his Japanese culinary skills at Amanoya Inn, the oldest inn in Yugawara, Hakone. Behind the grand solid-piece wood counter, the chef's skill is fully displayed. All dishes—in a bowl, raw, grilled, or boiled—are equally satisfying to the eye and the palate.

It is said that one develops a feeling that saké is not good enough to gratify the drinker. One soon desires to imbibe from a superb quality goblet, and that desire escalates to sipping saké while contemplating a fine hanging scroll. Rest assured that any-

one who seeks good food at *Mugen-an* also finds contentment in its elegant dishes and high-quality art. *Mugen-an* serves pure-rice saké by the same name, California white wine, and "Tamanohikari" *shochu* (distilled spirits) from the Fushimi region. Prices are very reasonable. *Mugen-an* is often packed to capacity, so a reservation is recommended.

#### Hori Yoshimichi President, Fukui Oil Storage Co., Ltd.

Lunch menu:

Shokado—¥1,500; Sashimi course—¥1,800; Yumegozen—¥2,500; Small party course—¥3,800

Dinner menu: Soup and three-side dish dinner—¥5,500;

Yumekaiseki (full-course)—¥6,000, ¥8,000, ¥10,000, and up

Above prices do not include liquor.

#### Mugen-an

1-13-10 Jinnan, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

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