

## Nagano— Japanned Olympics

Story and Photos by Bill Tingey

The edifices of Gothic architecture in Europe drew more than the religious to marvel over their sheer size and soaring dusky interiors, made all the more "heavenly" by their stained glass and ethereal light. These buildings were a manifestation of the celestial.

In Japan, the larger of the country's Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines



The picturesque post town of Narai

Stacking boxes and trays—a modern interpretation of traditional localized techniques



were, historically, magnets to the ordinary man and woman who could not help but be impressed. The ponderous volume and elegant design of these structures must have conveyed a very special air of reverence and artistry that we can understand but never appreciate in the same way. They are, nevertheless, wooden marvels with significance and heritage.

But in the modern world, religion is not the spur to building it once was. Events such as the Olympic Games, however, now necessitate the building of arenas and stadia which in their own way lure people to experience something about the age they live in; and the arenas for the XVIII Olympic Winter Games to be held in Nagano will be no exception.

The Aqua Wing, venue for Ice Hockey and Ice Sledge Hockey during the following Paralympics for example, features a massive sliding roof. Symbolic of contemporary structural possibilities and a desire to enjoy the elements when possible, the roof will benefit swimmers when the ice-rink is converted after the



The M-Wave reflects the age, the area and the culture

Games to give way to a 50 meter and a 25 meter pool as well as a diving pool.

The Figure Skating and Short Track Speed Skating will take place in the White Ring. Here, too, conversions will take place when the competitions are over, and the ice will be replaced by the wooden flooring of a gymnasium. Similarly, Big Hat, where the ice hockey hulks will battle, is destined to become a multipurpose arena.

The permanent versatility of the M-Wave Speed Skating arena is perhaps the least of its attributes. Already used for the 1997 Speed Skating World Championships, it is one of the world's largest covered rinks, providing space for a double 400-meter standard track. The curved stands at either end can be moved to form a smaller circular arena, and the whole area can be covered with artificial turf for field sports. The larch-laminated ceiling members and fair-faced concrete provide a welcome warmth and interesting contrast to the interior. The exterior side walls climb steeply to form a roof topping what in section resembles a series of steadily smaller Ms that from outside appear to tuck into one another. This helps to give the whole massive structure, measuring some 43 meters high by approximately 400 meters in length, an intriguing sense of telescopic collapsibility, somehow so indicative of Japan. In fact, the building is perhaps the most expressive of national and local character since the Yoyogi National Gymnasium built for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and designed by Tange Kenzo.

The medals for these Winter Olympics in Japan are also bound to be recognized as special. Basically they are lacquered, or Japanned, using the aged and refined tree sap known in Japanese as *urushi*. The medals were made in Kiso, a narrow valley running southwest to Nagoya through the prefecture where the games take place.

By train take the Asama Shinkansen from Tokyo to reach Nagano in about 90 minutes. On the main Chuo Line to Nagoya, change at Shiojiri Station and take a local train to Kiso-Hirasawa and see *Gallery Chikiriya* (Tel: 0264-34-2002) and walk about 10 minutes north along the main road to the craft center (Tel: 0264-34-3888). A lacquer market is held in Hirasawa in the first week of June. The post town of Narai is the next station down the line. Visit [http://www.nagano.olympic.org/home\\_e.html](http://www.nagano.olympic.org/home_e.html) for information on the Olympic arenas. See <http://www.wnn.or.jp/wnn-craft/eng/index.html> for information on the Winter Olympic medals and other traditional crafts.

Kiso lacquer ware can also be seen and purchased at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo (Tel: 03-3403-2460). For other tourist information, contact

Japan National Tourist Office in English (Tel: 03-3201-3331), or access <http://www.jnto.go.jp>



The distinctive post towns along this valley are quaint and full of charm, and are home to a lacquer-ware industry dating back some 600 years. A number of styles exist but *Kiso ware*, as it is known, was very much an everyday item and found in homes and inns up and down the country. These days it is sometimes more stylish, but still durable.

At Hirasawa, many aspects of Kiso

lacquer ware can be seen at the *Kiso Kurashi no Kogei-kan*, a craft center comprising information and exhibition spaces. Much closer to Kiso-Hirasawa station is *Gallery Chikiriya*.

Here there are many different variants of this indigenous ware, including some modern interpretations and uses of traditional localized techniques. These reflect the age, the nature of the material, and the culture of the area and of Japan

just as much as the M-Wave does. Both must be applauded, especially when the idea of "thinking globally and acting locally" is a major contemporary concern.



In cooperation with the  
JAPAN TRADITIONAL  
CRAFT CENTER

## TABLE TALK

### Tasty Memories of Huang Shan

This summer, I went to Huang Shan, a mountainous area I had long wanted to visit in Anhui province. Designated by UNESCO as part of the world's cultural heritage in 1990, Huang Shan ranks as one of the 10 most scenic Chinese spots, along with the Great Wall, the Imperial Palace, Xian, Guilin, the Three Gorges, West Lake in Hangzhou, the Summer Palaces at Chengde, the Humble Administrator's Garden of Suzhou, and Sun Moon Lake in Taiwan. Named after a legendary Chinese figure called the Yellow Emperor, the Yellow Mountains, as they are known in English, consist of a massive 154km<sup>2</sup> plateau with 72 peaks rising some 1,800m above sea level. The picturesque scenery is amazing, with its sea of clouds, fantastic crags, hot springs and famous pine trees to charm the hordes of tourists who go there.

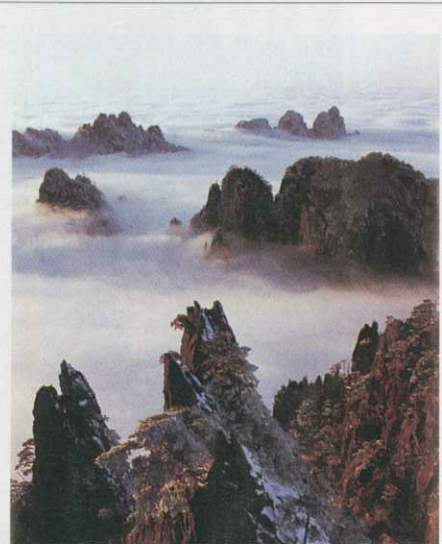
An added appeal is that although the 1,500m plateau can be reached by car or cable car, these so-called conveniences of modern civilization will take the would-be climber no further. They still have to rely on their own legs to carry them the last 300m up a seemingly endless flight of stone steps to the top. If they do not have the stamina, then they have to straggle behind, but for those who do make it, the feeling of exhilaration when they stand breathlessly on the 1,864m summit of *Lianhua Feng* (Lotus Flower Peak), or on the 1,750m summit of the *Feilai Feng* (the Peak that Flew from Afar), or on top of any of the other famous

peaks, will remain with them for the rest of their lives. However, at the end of the cable car line, there are palanquins and bearers ready to carry those who doubt their climbing abilities to the summit for a sum of \$100 both ways. This has opened up the door to Huang Shan for worthy elderly people so they too can enjoy the view from aloft.

Huang Shan is a prosperous agricultural city with a population of 3 million. Besides tourism, it is famous for its Chinese ink made from pine soot and animal glue, as well as the local *Mao Feng* tea. The shopping streets are of great interest because they remain as they were in the Southern Sung dynasty.

Huang Shan is only one hour by plane from Beijing, where I spent a night. It was a year since I had last been there and I was struck by the speed at which buildings had sprung up. One gymnasium with a capacity of 80,000 spectators, for example, had already been completed and there it stood before my very eyes just three years after construction work had begun. New housing estates had been built in various parts of the city and all the streets were overflowing with lively activity as usual. I got the impression that if the Chinese overall economic denominator continues to grow at its present rate, and the Chinese people as a whole begin to idolize money and forsake their traditional Confucian ideals in favor of more affluence, then the responsibilities of the leaders and those running the country will become much heavier to bear.

Generally speaking, however, most Chinese people today eat a balanced diet and go around with cheerful faces. Some even enjoy the occasional sight-seeing trip, so it seems as though they are heading towards the 21st century with confidence. People often rave about Japanese



China National Tourism Administration

food such as *sushi* rather than American or European cuisine, because the national average life-span of the Japanese people is the longest in the world. However, there is an ancient saying in China, too, that food and medicine are one and the same thing. And as far as taste and of course health foods are concerned, China is far and away a leader in this field.

I personally enjoyed many kinds of dishes from the Jiangnan district of China while I was in Huang Shan, but it is also possible to sample the delights of Jiangnan cuisine in Tokyo, too. If food and medicine indeed spring from the same source, then a visit to *Tenzan* (B1 Fuji Bldg., 1-5-3 Yaesu, Chuo-ku, Tokyo. Tel: (03) 3275-2115) will do you no harm. I sampled the menu soon after my return and much to my delight, I found that the food lived up to my expectations, tasting just as I had remembered it in China.

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