

Skirting the Inland Sea

Story and photos by Bill Tingey



The great torii gate marking the watery approach to Itsukushima Shrine

Why does the Inland Sea seem to epitomize Japan in so many ways? The almost incongruous mix of beauty and bustle coupled with its compactness are representative, while life on its islands and along its shores is a distillation of so much that is truly Japanese. Literally hundreds of punctuate this stretch of water between the main island of Honshu and the smaller more isolated Shikoku. Many of the islands are inhabited, some are only arborous cones, but others are treasure houses of history and culture.

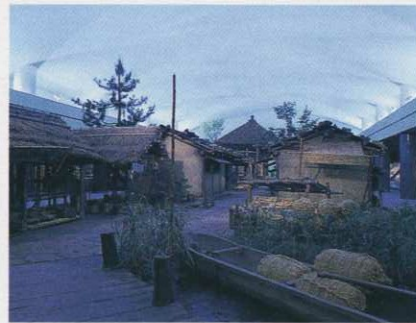
One, not far from Hiroshima, is the sacred island of Miyajima, which literally means "shrine island." It was so hallowed that religious regulations once forbade births and deaths on the island, and even now burials are made across the water at Ono.

The focus of worship here is the famed Itsukushima shrine standing others have stood since 593. present arrangement, however, dates from the 12th century. It occupies a position at the head of a shallow bay so that at high-tide the whole edifice appears to floating, its numerous cypress bark roofed buildings with their

vermillion colored posts and 273 meters of passageways glimmering in reflection. It is said that the sacredness of the island is one reason the shrine was built out into the sea, thus making it unnecessary to set foot on this hallowed island where the gods reside.

The peace and tranquility are preeminent, especially early in the morning and at dusk, when the crowds are absent. The tame deer wandering the island help to enhance the atmosphere that is further embellished by the lapping of the sea around the shrine. Occasionally, ancient dances are performed on the stage in front of the main worship hall, accompanied by classical and stately music.

Equally classical is the *koto*, or plane harp, many of which are made east of Hiroshima, at Fukuyama, where production has been going on for at least two centuries. Although based on Chinese prototypes, the Japanese version became established during the Kamakura period (1165-1333). The wood used is paulownia, which is both light in



A medieval community comes alive at the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History

weight and color. instruments are made of timber from China, where the trees grow quickly therefore have a very open grain. Concert instruments, on the other hand, are ideally made from wood grown in the north of Japan, where winters are harder. The consequently much closer and produces an instrument with a better sound.

For all its apparent sophistication, however, the method of production is verging on the primitive. The bowed and barreled soundbox is



Sound enhancing herring-bone pattern being applied to the back of a koto soundbox

roughly sawn from a log, then adzed and planed into shape. After being thoroughly dried, a herring bone pattern is chiselled on the back to improve the quality of the sound. The upper surface is then charred by

Hiroshima can be reached by train or by air. Take a train from Hiroshima to Miyajima-guchi and a ferry across to Miyajima. Accommodation on the island is limited. The Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History is close to Fukuyama station on the Sanyo mainline. *Koto* are available at specialist stores or at the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo (Tel:03-3403-2460). Other Japanese crafts can be found at <http://www.wnn.or.jp/wnn/craft/eng/index.html>. For tourist information contact the Japan National Tourist Office in English (Tel: 03-3201-3331), or access <http://www.jnto.go.jp>



dragging a red-hot iron over the surface. Next it is rubbed down and then polished with a wax, an excretion from the Chinese beetle. Decorations of rare wood and ivory are added to complete this distinctive instrument, with those from Fukuyama ranking among the best.

Much of the heritage of the area is interestingly presented at the Hiroshima Prefectural Museum of History in Fukuyama, the recreation of part of a medieval community being particularly outstanding. It helps to color our impressions of the contemporary

melee to be found along the shores and among the islands of this sea of history, culture and surprise.



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T A B L E T A L K

Oden restaurant Otafuku



It is bitterly cold in January and February in many parts of Japan and it is the season when everyone appreciates a steaming hotpot cooked at table for dinner, whether it be a formal or informal occasion. Hotpots such as fondue, bouillabaisse and paella can be found in other countries round the world, but Japan has such a variety of hotpots or *nabe*, like *sukiyaki*, *fugu-nabe*, *mizutaki* or *yudofu* for instance, that it is possible to recall the names of between 10 and 20 different dishes with very little forethought.

One of the main reasons why Japanese people love this form of cooking so much is probably because they enjoy the homely atmosphere created when people gather round a single pot on the table. However, it also undoubtedly has a lot to do with the affinity of *miso* and soy sauce, the seasonings used to flavor the different *nabe*, and rice which is at the core of Japanese eating culture. Every household and work place has its *nabe* maestro who gives a dish its characteristic flavor by being very strict about

how a hotpot is cooked from the order in which the ingredients are added right down to how the food is divided and served.

One example of *nabe* is *oden* which is a slowly cooked hotpot of various tofu products, fish sausage, vegetables and hard-boiled eggs. Oden, as we know it today, is an abridged version of *dengaku-dofu* which was a dish of grilled tofu cooked on skewers and topped with miso.

Places well known for their oden first appeared towards the end of the Edo period and it has since found a permanent niche in Japanese cuisine. Today there is a wide variety of oden restaurants ranging from places such as *Yasuko* or *Ogura*, where a good deal of entertaining is done in the center of Ginza, to the humble street hawkers barrow. Oden is a great favorite because it is a good accompaniment with saké and it also goes well with rice.

Otafuku in Senzoku near Asakusa, needs no introduction because it is so well known. There are actually more seats than one first imagines from the facade of the building but it is always full except at the height of summer, and customers have to resign themselves to lining up outside at the peak of the season during the fall and winter. Steaming pieces of various kinds of oden, almost too numerous to mention, simmer in a large pot until served by the master of the restaurant or his son. One variety that I can heartily recommend is *tsumiire* which is a kind of dumpling. Made of sardines, these dumplings are so moreish that they are difficult to

resist.

Because oden is basically made of fish, vegetables and seaweed, it is low in calories and it also makes one feel pleasantly satisfied. Indeed, it is ideal for those who are worried about middle age health problems such as obesity.

Various seasonal vegetable dishes and fresh *sashimi* can also be enjoyed at Otafuku. One can relax and forget all the stress of life while relishing the delicately flavored oden and sipping warm saké taken straight from a cask. Otafuku is the nickname given to a lucky Japanese beauty and it would be nice to go there in the company of such a woman.

Otafuku

1-6-2 Senzoku, Taito-ku, Tokyo
Tel: 03-3871-2521

Hours: Tuesday to Saturday:

5:00p.m. to 11:00p.m.

Sundays and holidays:

3:00p.m. to 10:00p.m.

Closed: Mondays

Hori Yoshimichi

President, Fukui Oil Storage Co., Ltd.

