

## Kobe: Gateway to Japan

Kobe, appropriately enough, is considered along with Yokohama a gateway to Japan, and both cities' history and development offer many points of similarity. Kobe and Yokohama were born out of the provisional commercial treaty (*Ansei no kari-joyaku*) that opened five ports to trade with foreign countries. Although these two cities grew in modern times, their history goes back many centuries. In this respect, Kobe perhaps beats its rival. The history of Hyogo, a commercial center near Kobe in ancient times, goes back to the distant past. First known as Muko, where the Sillan envoys from Korea were quartered, it was rebuilt for trade with Sung China and, renamed Hyogo in the middle ages, it became the key port for trade with Ming China, and also thrived as an important port on the Seto Inland Sea, Kyoto in its background.

The foreign concession in Kobe was located approximately where the department store

Daimaru stands today. Although at present the seashore is some distance away, at the time it was quite close. When the port was opened, the population of Kobe numbered some 20,000, but now stands at about 1,400,000, ranking it seventh among Japan's cities. Kobe's location is certainly one of the most beautiful, not only in the country, but also in the world. Its beauty is akin to that of Hong Kong and Rio de Janeiro, all harbor cities built along the sea at the foot of mountains. I first set foot in Kobe exactly 30 years ago, when I was appointed as a French language teacher in Kyoto. I still remember vividly the lush slopes of the Rokko mountains overlooking a narrow strip of land, and the bay largely open to the sea. It is no wonder that sailors as far back as the 8th century found there a good shelter for their boats and ships. Now that I have been living for more than seven years in Kobe, I fully appreciate its climate, typical of the Seto Inland Sea area: a comparatively warm winter and cool summer, with fine days prevailing.

Kobe is often remembered as the place where things happened before anywhere else: it was one of the first cities in Japan to accommodate a large foreign community; Japan's oldest golf club, the Kobe Golf Club, opened there in 1903; in 1878, the first coffee shop made its debut there, ten years earlier than in Tokyo. Kobe's coffee shops have acquired such a reputation that amateurs in Tokyo are quite delighted if you offer them a package of coffee from Kobe. Thus it is not surprising

that Kobe usually purchases 50% of Japan's total coffee imports.

Black tea is also high on the city's shopping list, with 26% of Japan's total black tea imports going to Kobe. The confectionery industry too is thriving, and such names as Morozoff or Goncharoff are well known all over Japan. You can be sure I don't get a stipend from either firm, but I can truly say that whenever I want to please a person fond of real bittersweet chocolate, I bring along a few bars from Kobe.

After the sweets, the drinks! *Sake* brewing is thought to have started about 300 years ago in Nada Gogo, the area which today includes Nada-ku, Higashinada-ku and Nishinomiya city. There are more than 60 *sake* breweries and over 100 *sake* warehouses in the district. *Sake* brewed here is called "*Nada-no-kiippon*" (fresh from Nada's cellars). The reason for this fine *sake* production is thought to be the very high quality of the water. This is rather easy to believe when you remember that for many years Kobe has been famous for its Nunobiki mineral water and that the city itself recently started selling "Kobe water." The vineyards for "Kobe wine," red and white, are located behind Mount Rokko, the dry light soil perfect for grape-growing.

Kobe to be sure is a place to find good food. It is difficult to enjoy better meat than the world-famous "Kobe beef," that is if you go for a slightly fatty tenderloin, but its price is hard to swallow. Whenever I take visitors to department stores and we pass the food counters,



their eyes bulge out of their sockets when they realize that one mere kilogram costs over ¥50,000 (about \$210). Of course tasty food is always expensive, and when you take into account all the work that was required to get such palatable chunks of meat—from the massages to the choice of proper music to entice satisfactory growth—you may think it a bargain. For those who prefer fish or foreign cuisine, Kobe is again a paradise. I must confess that I go readily for a nice meal of *sushi*. In spite of the fact that *edomae* originated in Tokyo, it is available in tasty abundance, and I praise myself for having discovered what I consider the best *sushi* shop in the country, a little back of the main street Tor Road. As for foreign food, there is an endless variety of the highest quality.

When you walk the streets of Kobe, you'll be surprised by the extraordinary number of fashion shops. Tradition has it that, soon after Kobe Port was opened, a French woman, appropriately enough, started a shop where she sold dresses and hats, this marking the beginning of the apparel industry in Kobe. The shop's superior techniques, handed down to present clothing manufacturers, have earned the city a reputation for elegance and creativity. The so-called Kitano district, which became famous after a popular television series almost ten years ago, attracts an ever-growing number of young people who throng to its bargain sales in renovated old houses. Fashion demands ornament, and pearls became an important sector in the city. Most likely for-

eigners fascinated by the "mysterious treasure of the Orient" urged pearl exports, making Kobe a world center for pearl trading.

To write about Kobe without mentioning the big ventures upon which the city has embarked in recent years would be to do it an injustice. In 15 years, at a cost of ¥530 billion (\$2.2 billion), an artificial island, called Port Island, was reclaimed from the sea. To celebrate the completion of this gigantic undertaking, in 1981 Kobe city held an international fair, which drew 16 million visitors from home and abroad. The earth and sand used for reclamation were taken from the mountains located in the western part of Kobe; this daring operation received much publicity from the press which described it as "the mountain that goes to the sea." The last stage of this complex process is right now being observed with the holding of the Universiade in Kobe. The park, used for the main events of the 1985 "Student Olympics," covers a space of 55 hectares, with an athletic stadium, tennis courts and so on. It was built on the spot where the earth was taken away. Furthermore, another artificial island called "Rokko Island" has been under construction since 1972. In short, Kobe is definitely a city that thinks for the future, while preserving its past. An interesting lesson to meditate.

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# Bookshelf

## Modern Japanese Literature in Translation

For a long time, Japan has run a seemingly unshakable deficit in its balance of publishing, far more books being translated into than out of Japanese. Recently, however, the situation has begun to change as people in other countries have become more interested in Japan and more receptive to Japanese writing. Yet where to start? Quite arbitrarily, I have selected some representative works which I would recommend on the basis of their universal appeal, translation readability, and retail availability.

Soseki Natsume, who studied in England early in the 20th century, was critical of his country's indiscriminate rush to modernize and attempted in his works to effectively combine Western individualism with traditional Japanese thought processes. Two of his major works are *Kokoro (Kokoro)* and *Grass on the Wayside (Michikusa)*.

With a critical eye trained on Western litera-

