

Outside Tokyo

Oku-Noto: Brilliant Mixture

It is said that the Noto Peninsula resembles the head of a bird turned to the right, its wings encompassing the entire area of Honshu. Though its farthest reaches are not more than 125 kilometers or so from Kanazawa, Noto remains both remote and overlooked.

Physically and culturally, Nearer Noto (Noto-kuchi) and Farther Noto (Oku-Noto) are distinct. Nearer Noto includes most of the neck and mouth of the bird. Much of the land here is loose sand, good for little more than scrubby trees, though vineyards have been planted on a small scale. The west coast of Nearer Noto has an excellent sand beach, which stretches in an arrow-straight line for 40 kilometers or so. Oku-Noto is the head and beak of the bird. Here is some of the loveliest country in Japan—a brilliant mix of very much and very little.

Changing sky

The land itself exemplifies this. Beyond the town of Anamizu, where Oku-Noto provisionally starts, the country is underpopulated. There are but few true towns, and these are scattered. Cultural virtues, tangible and intangible, and tourist stops are scarce. There is no place to rush off to. But there is ample opportunity to look at and experience the land directly. A few kilometers' travel in any direction, and this country changes abruptly and sometimes dramatically. It is a little like Wales in this respect. Even the sky changes. The ambient light on the east and west coasts is quite different, and different again in various places in the interior of the peninsula.

The east coast of Noto defines the mouth of the bird's head. It is sheltered and gentle and focuses on Notojima, the island "tongue" of the bird in the large bay

that forms the mouth. This bay shore is an arabesque of coves and inlets.

The coast road north from Anamizu respects the convolutions of the topography enough to make the drive to the town of Suzu a splendid afternoon's outing. The light off the water changes and beguiles; vistas permute rapidly and radically; villages and hamlets appear at the bottom of slopes and along strands; land and water and sky fade and meld into each other. This is a place of mist and fogs, where distance just turns back on itself and gets lost, rapidly followed by time.

The west coast of the peninsula gets the direct brunt of the prevailing winds. Here are cliffs and storms and entire hamlets huddled behind woven bamboo screens. Here sky and land and sea are crisply defined. The land bites into the sea, which, in turn, often responds with force—a great contrast to Noto's sleepy east coast.

On a shallow bay lies the town of Wajima, whose economy for the last century and a half has been centered on the production of lacquer ware as well as on its much older role as a fishing port. Wajima lacquer is famous throughout Japan, particularly for its durability. The town today is one of the Great Attractions of Oku-Noto, both for the lacquer and for the morning market, which is held almost every day of the year, rain or snow.

Farm and fishing wives bring fresh and preserved produce for sale, ranging from a few mushrooms or beans piled on a small square of plastic to elaborate stands displaying an abundance of dried and preserved and bottled fish and sea products. Though the morning market is almost entirely directed at the tourist trade today, there are still fine things to be found. Not least are the fresh garden vegetables and fruit and fish directly off the boat. Preserved foods of good quality are fish sauce (*ishiru*), the liquid seasoning made in the same fashion as the ubiquitous *nam pla* of Thailand and ancient Rome's *liquamen*. There are two types: sardine and squid. Flying fish fillets are dried and used to make stock (*dashi*). Though a little expensive, the quality of stock made with this ingredient is worth the price, and these dried fillets have plenty of cre-

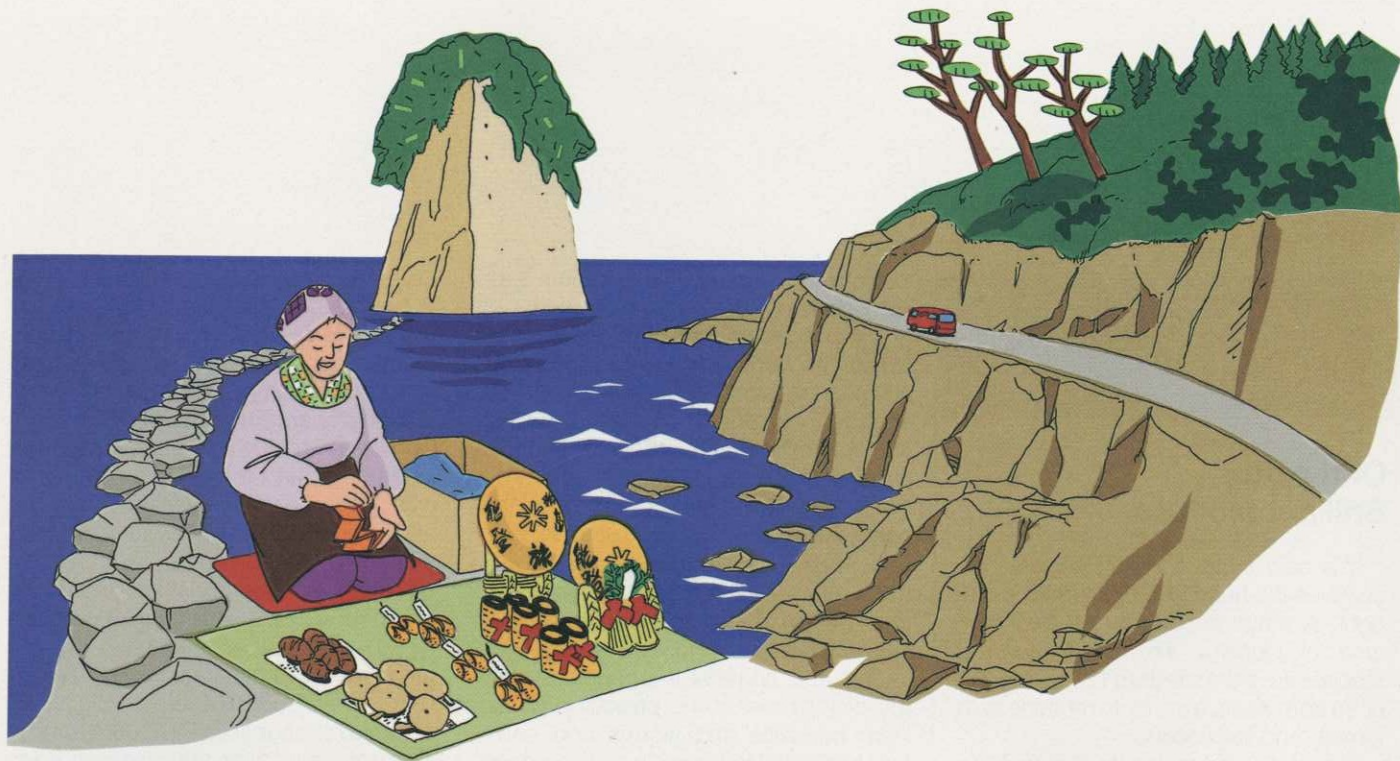
ative uses in Western cooking as well.

A tour of a lacquer workshop should be part of the Wajima experience. The numerous lacquer ware shops are generally a disappointment. Lacquer objects of any quality are truly expensive, and designs tend to be either too conventional or too pretentious. Lacquer is a community craft and very conservative. Innovative and interesting designs, when they appear, are usually part of group or one-man exhibitions held at urban department stores. A departure from stereotyped, middle-class kitsch may be found at the Ichinaka shop (0768-22-0154), Daitetsu (0768-22-0790), at the TefuTefu gift shop (0768-22-6304) and in the work of lacquer artist Isaburo Kado (home: 0768-22-1804). No English is spoken. Recommended lodgings are the Yashiki Ryokan (0768-22-0138), which is small, unpretentious, inexpensive and friendly, or *minshuku* Hegura (0768-22-1018). The other hotels and *ryokan* are pretty much stamped out of the national stereotype mold.

Lacquer show

Back to lacquer. The Inachu showroom on the main road just north of town, facing the sea, houses a lacquer factory behind glass, so visitors can watch the process and get some idea of how lacquer ware is made and the patience and skill involved. Putting this workshop behind glass is a clever idea not only because it keeps visitors' dust and dirt and disturbance out of the workplace, but also because it pro-





fects visitors from the reek of lacquer and accidental contact with the wet substance. Lacquer contains urushinol, the same toxin found in poison oak and ivy, and allergic reactions to this may be severe. Fully hardened lacquer elicits no such reaction.

Weather is capricious and dramatic in this part of Japan. The transitions before and after winter see wild fluctuations between sunshine, snow, rain, hail, sleet, what have you, as if every cloud was determined to dash about being important.

Autumn and spring are very beautiful, and exploration of the countryside is best undertaken at these times. Unfortunately, the local roads are not named or readily identified. So be it.

Yet, without exception, roads are excellent. It is just the signs, directions and maps that are chancy. If you like, you can rent a car in Wajima.

Tiny hamlet

The coast road south of Wajima to Kami-Ozawa and then over a mountain pass to the temple town of Monzen is a must. Kami-Ozawa is the tiny hamlet that fences itself against the main force of the sea wind by wrapping itself in great woven bamboo mats. The road leaves the coast here and rises into the mountains, passing what is certainly one of the most scenic elementary schools in Japan, situated just below a series of waterfalls.

The town of Monzen is famous for the Sojiji temple, a Zen temple of respectable history that has many branches throughout Japan.

Using Wajima as a departure point again, on the Anamizu road, which follows a river valley east, a 10-kilometer drive (15 minutes at most) brings one to the village of Mii ("Three Wells"). Here there are culs-de-sac and back roads that are worth every moment of getting lost. There is no lovelier countryside in Japan.

About one kilometer before the road enters the main village of Mii, a road branches off to the left. This is the first turnoff after the short tunnel coming from Wajima. This turnoff follows a river valley as it narrows. On the left, farmhouses hug the valley edge. The mountains are clothed in a mixture of broad-leaved trees and conifers. The latter are mainly Japanese cedar (*sugi*), and the local variety of *hiba arborvitae*, known in Noto as *ate*. This is one of the few places in the world where *ate* trees are grown. A few kilometers up the road, one passes the site of the new Anamizu-Wajima road, scheduled to be finished in eight or 10 years. Now the road is little more than a bulldozed scar on the hills.

A little beyond this, the road takes a sharp turn to the left. Immediately beyond this turn, on the right across the stream, is an unobtrusive hut that almost certainly will be emitting a thin trail of smoke from a

chimney in midsummer as well as winter. This is the paper workshop of the late Shusaku Tomi, now run by his daughter-in-law. (The smoke comes from the wood fires used to heat the iron surfaces for drying paper.) This is very much worth a visit (0768-26-1314). Tomi-san makes a wide range of unusual papers with inclusions from the hills and roadsides and sea—flowers, leaves, seaweed, whatever strikes her fancy. She also continues the practice started by her father-in-law of making cedar-back paper in various degrees of refinement, as well as excellent calligraphy practice paper.

A ways farther, and the road makes a sudden right-angle turn. The traveler can choose to trace his/her footsteps back, and be surprised how different this valley looks from a new angle, or follow the road on, either to the main drag from Anamizu to Suzu, or, at the end of the hamlet of Yoromi, make a left and go through another hamlet—Tome. The Tome road ends at a T junction. Right takes one back to the Anamizu-Suzu main road. Left goes to the little town of Yanaida. From there it is an easy few kilometers to the Tokikuni houses—the major tourist attractions of the area and quite worth a visit. These are the houses of the local *daimyo* families. The Upper Tokikuni house is impressive and elegant. The Lower Tokikuni is unforgettable.

The road back to Wajima goes along the coast and passes the intensely ter-

raced patch of rice fields call the Thousand Paddies (*senmaida*). It was once said that these slivers and bits of terraced land reflected the moon one thousand times. Today, road improvement has largely obliterated whatever charm this spot once held.

And back to Mii. From the heart of the village (that is, the station), go a few kilometers east to the second turnoff on the right. About three or four hundred meters after turning, a small road on the right crosses the railroad tracks. Turn into this and follow it to the hamlet of Uchiya. There is nothing to see here but beauty. This is a

cul-de-sac, so there is no place to go particularly. Such peace and loveliness is a great treasure. The hamlet itself has maybe two dozen houses. In the hamlet, a road branches to the right, passes a large Buddhist temple, then turns to gravel. If your car is not low-slung, go on. This gravel road connects with another paved road at the top of a stream valley. A left brings one quickly to the main road from Anamizu to Monzen. Right takes one deeper into the uncharted ways of the mountains. The only warning is that pavement is sporadic, and the gravel surface in places emulates a streambed. The

mountains are steep and the cedar and *ate* forests thick. Here one will get thoroughly lost. That is what such beautiful places are for. Not to worry. Enjoy. Just follow roads downward and you are pretty sure to come out on some well-traveled artery. The point is, do you want to.

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has been commuting to
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Table Talk

Pantagruel

Tokyo is a city in constant change. Yet even in the midst of this ceaseless flux, there is no neighborhood whose appearance has changed more than Hitotsugidori in Akasaka. Although the old small shops in the area are still in the same business as before, the outward aspect of the street and its environs has no resemblance to days gone by. Office buildings soar from the site of the old practice driving course. The chic geisha restaurants which once waited behind tall, wooden fences for their clientele have been swallowed up inside modernistic buildings.

There is still hope, however. The TBS Kaikan building is still a landmark for the disoriented, and it still offers a fine selection of cosy, urban restaurants.

Zakuro specializes, as always, in excellent *shabu-shabu*. Saxon comes up with gourmet curry dishes. Tops, which specializes in chocolate cake, changed the postwar Japanese notion that Western cake equaled strawberry shortcake, and introduced genuine Western cake to appreciative Tokyoites.

All these establishments are still going strong, and so are some tantalizing newcomers. When we visited the building for

the first time in quite some while, we noticed that an Italian restaurant has set up shop and is prospering with a heavily foreign clientele. And last, but hardly least, there is the French restaurant Pantagruel.

Formerly this space was occupied by Shido, a high-quality, and high-priced, restaurant. Three years ago, however, the owner decided to open a more informal establishment, and Pantagruel is the happy result. Anyone who eats there will realize at once that Pantagruel makes a conscientious effort to provide tasteful dishes for a very reasonable price.

Let me introduce the cheapest dinner course, which I enjoyed on a recent summer evening. First, white asparagus with salmon. The sauce on the Hokkaido-grown white asparagus was perfectly tart. One of the standards by which to judge a restaurant is the salt and vinegar flavoring of its dishes. Pantagruel had it just right.

Next, pie-encrusted fish, a type of snapper. The pie effectively captured the flavor of the oily snapper. From the cut edge of the crust, one could see sheet after sheet of almost transparent layers.

Sorbet came between this and the next dish, roast lamb. The meat was soft and fresh, with the parsley-garnished edges slightly burned. The trimmings included fried mushrooms and summer vegetables stewed in the style of southern France. It was a dish perfectly conceived, and totally delectable.

The dessert and coffee, too, were wonderful. There was a pick of eight dessert

items. Gateau classique looks heavy to the eye, but has the refined taste of high purity chocolate with a light touch. The neat dessert offerings were orthodox, yet each possessed individuality and called for applause.

Pantagruel, I am told, is the gourmet hero of a French novel of the same name.

There are several dinner courses priced at ¥6,000 (about \$43 at the rate of ¥140/\$) and up. Lunches start at ¥2,200 (\$15). The prices are moderate, yet the interior appointments and service are good. Private rooms are available. Reservations recommended.

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

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Open every day; 11 a.m.-3 p.m.
5 p.m.-9:30 p.m.

