

# Warren Peace

By Yukichi Amano

Replete with holidays, the end of April and beginning of May is referred to as "Golden Week" in Japan. Golden Week 1991 saw over 70 million Japanese take to the roads and the airways in pursuit of pleasure. This is a lot of people. In fact, it is over half of the total population. Little wonder that Golden Week is referred to as the time of the annual mass migration.

Of course, most of these people were just visiting their parents and grandparents, were off on little one-day excursions, or, at most, spent a night at a hot-spring resort. The mass migration in pursuit of pleasure does not mean that the Japanese are transformed lemming-like into happy-go-lucky leisure-mongers for the week. Still, there is considerable travel-and-leisure demand, and leisure has been accounting for a steadily increasing proportion of household expenditures.

## Taste for travel

Parallel with the rise of leisure pursuits has been an increase in overseas travel. Over 10 million Japanese traveled overseas in 1990 alone. Even when you discount for the repeat flyers, this is still an awesome figure. Over 10 million people—one in every 12 Japanese—going overseas. This is, I suspect, a fairly high percentage of the population by any standard.

Travel has become popular with everyone, and I myself know a number of young people who are frequent travelers. They work hard for a while, and then they take a vacation and spend their hard-earned money going somewhere. Although they cannot afford to be constantly going back and forth to the United States or Europe, they think nothing of popping down to Hong Kong for the weekend. Since I am not that fond of traveling, I sometimes wonder when the Japanese became such a nomadic people.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are other young people who spend all of their free time cooped up in their

rooms playing video games, watching videotapes or laser discs, and interacting on electronic bulletin boards. I know a lot of these people too.

One of them recently bought a 100-inch liquid-crystal display television set. The receiver itself is small, but it throws a 100-inch picture on the screen mounted on the opposite wall. It is not that big a room, but the television is able to project a 100-inch picture from only three meters away. It is a really ingenious device.

Right now, he is using his 100-inch TV and the latest Dolby sound system to enjoy *Back to the Future II*, *Aida* and other popular productions. Watching him, I get the feeling that this is someone who is a frequent and far-flung traveler even though he never goes anywhere. That hulk you see in front of the giant screen is just the shell of the person, and his spirit is off into outer space, to Milan's La Scala and elsewhere.

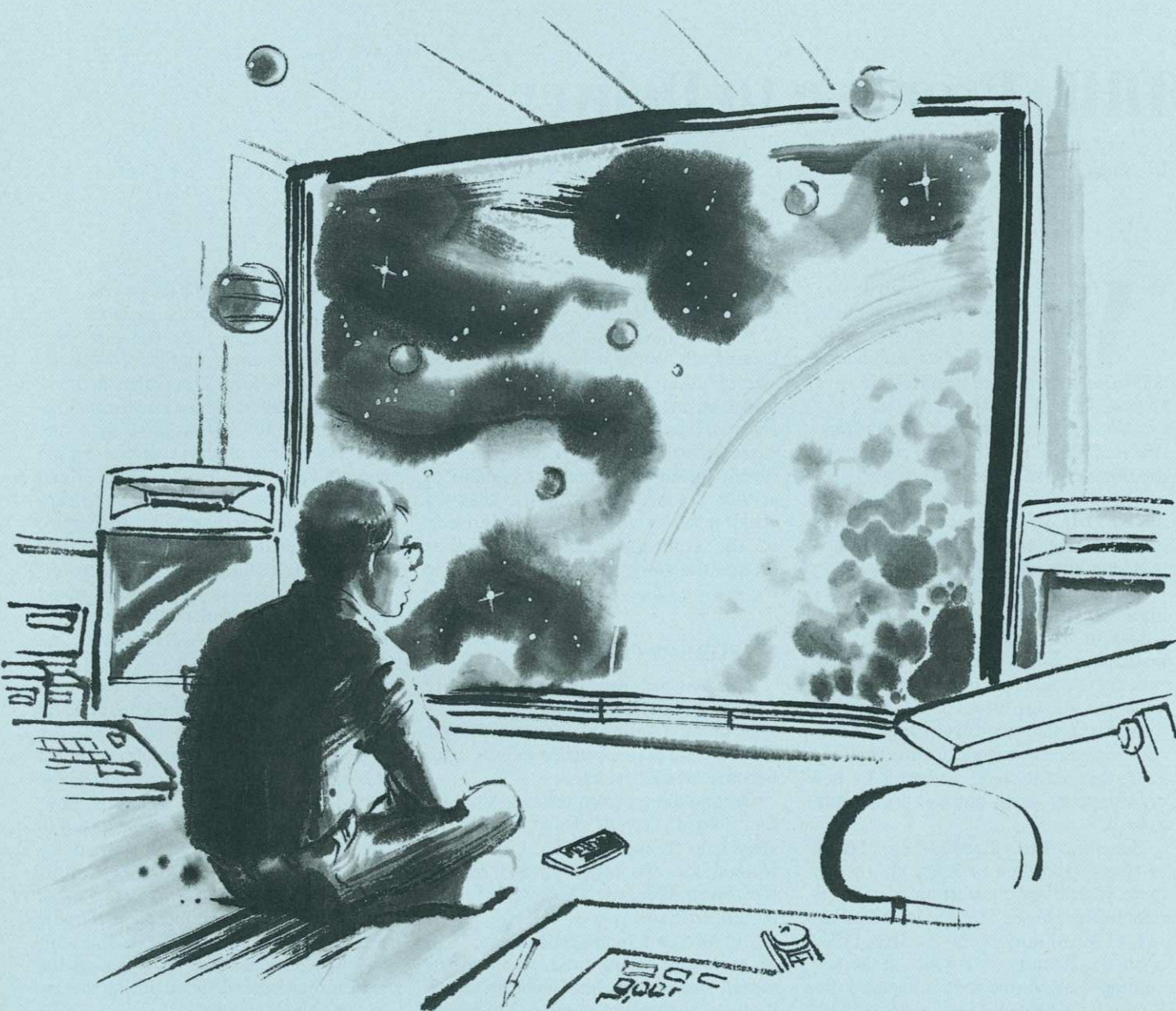
In Japan, these introvert stay-at-homes are called *otaku-zoku*. They are people who enjoy exploring the vicarious inner world of the mind. It is estimated that there are now as many such "armchair adventurers" as there are people traveling overseas, and these homebody travelers are a large and growing proportion of the population.

Either kind of travel—at home or overseas—is expensive. Money is not everything. It is just that you cannot do much of anything unless you have some.

If you wanted to fly to Hong Kong for three days, it would probably cost you about ¥300,000. And if you wanted to buy a 100-inch TV, this is also going to set you back at least ¥300,000. Since the average starting salary for a new college graduate is about ¥170,000, this represents about two months' salary. It is no trifling amount, but there are all kinds of youngsters who think nothing of spend-



For the increasing number of Japanese who enjoy traveling abroad, there are now over 2,000 vacation packages available.



ing that and more on pleasure trips and electronic gadgetry. No wonder the rest of the world thinks the Japanese are so rich.

### Not so rich

Outward appearances notwithstanding, I personally feel that most Japanese do not feel as rich as the statistics would indicate. There are many reasons for this, among them the absurd overcrowding of our conurbations and some ridiculously high prices, but I suspect housing is the primary culprit.

As Europeans and Americans never tire of pointing out, most Japanese homes

are little more than rabbit hutches. I myself live in a little hutch in Yokohama, and I can attest to the truth of this criticism. It is not that I want to live in such cramped quarters. But if I wanted to escape the rabbit hutch and buy a sty or a stable, it would cost me at least ¥300 million in Tokyo today. I might have ¥300,000, but I certainly do not have any ¥300 million. I'm a columnist, not a bank robber.

As a result, most Japanese are petty-rich. They have a little money to spare, but not enough to buy an apartment. So they spend their loose change on overseas travel, on the latest audiovisual equipment and on other pleasures.

In fact, there are a lot of apartments

that look small and squalid from the outside but have been decorated and furnished in high-tech luxury. More and more, these are not so much rabbit hutches as they are hideaways where people can forget their cares and live in peace.

(This is the third of five essays by Yukichi Amano.)

*Yukichi Amano is a popular columnist and critic on advertizing and mass-media commercials.*