



As a European, I feel very fortunate to have established very close ties with a Japanese family a great many years ago. I visit them regularly and with them I discover not only the highlights and musts for tourists visiting the country but I also the other Japan - its rural countryside, charming small villages, mountains, Onsens, way of life, festivals, Japanese cuisine, and so on...

After an excellent flight with Lufthansa across Russia, I arrived in time at Tokyo Narita airport. Meals served during the flight were already an introduction to Japan: soba (buckwheat) noodles, sushi and rice dishes. My luggage came through very quickly and I went through Customs without any problems. My friends were waiting for me in the arrival hall and two hours later, thanks to the navigation system installed in our car, we reached their home in Machida, a Tokyo suburb. Here, individual private houses line up closely together and their small gardens compete with one another in beauty and colorfulness.

After the traditional welcome ceremony with tea and handing over of gifts, my tiredness was blown away. I was back in Japan... my home from home.

My friends prepared a delicious dinner with vegetables from Okinawa, various mixed pickles, stuffed lotus roots, tempura, rice with shrimps and mushrooms and of course, miso soup which features in most Japanese meals. Just after dinner, dried home-made ume bosi (a kind of plum) was served with some plum spirit. I took a quick shower and stepped into a traditional bath tube to relax in very warm water. I slept so soundly that I remained unaware of earth tremors caused by a light earthquake during the night. The program of the day consisted of shopping and walking around in Machida. Every time I visit Japan I marvel at the kind and courteous service I get from people. I could spend hours trying to select a camera, try it on the spot, getting all the information I need without being tackled by a shop assistant firmly intent about finding out whether I should buy it or not. Besides, the underground and the railways run like clockwork, keeping time just like Swiss watches. A pleasant atmosphere prevails all over the place - people talk in hushed tones, there is no pushing, no jostling and faces look relaxed and radiate an inner eternal smile. Not once, have I been, as a foreigner, looked upon as an oddity. This explains partly why I regard myself as being one of the crowd, sharing unforgettable moments with them.

The other Japan: small villages, mountains, Onsens and many other things

Our travel adventure for this visit starts tomorrow. First with a car trip to the Japanese Alps followed by a train journey on the Shinkansen, the high-speed train, to Japan's two former ancient capitals, Nara and Kyoto, then on to Hijema, Miyajima, and finally Hiroshima. My Japanese friends have arranged it all; they will be my guides, I only have to follow them and enjoy...



Gujo Hachiman Castle

On the way to Shirakawago

We left Tokyo very early in the morning to escape the usual traffic jams. After a two-hour ride, we stopped at a highway rest station for breakfast. We were lucky; the weather was quite fine and cleared up so that we could see Mount Fuji from the restaurant. We continued our journey using a meandering highway and



In Love with Japan

by Christine Richter
(a series of three articles)

riding through many tunnels leading up to Nogaya. During that journey, we rode past tea plantations established in the mid-19th century. The historical background indicates that after the abolition of the four-class-system, the local 'bushis' (nobility) had to find gainful employment and, thus, they decided to grow tea. After another two hour-drive we reached Gujo Hachiman, a nice little town on the Yoshida river. The most famous sightseeing spot is the castle, a Unesco World Heritage Site. From the castle, there is a wonderful view over the town and its surroundings. The

nascent autumn hues and the bright blue sky added a special touch. Indeed, the castle has a bewitched charm as it seems to float over the valley like a gliding eagle.

Leaving behind us Gujo Hachiman, we crossed gently wooded hills and mountains passing by the Mihoro dam where one can still admire 400 year-old cherry trees. Before the sun disappeared behind the mountains, we reached Shirakawago, our next stop.

A well-preserved sanctuary of rural country life in Japan

My friends told me that there might be no better place to see how life used to be in Japan than here, in Shirakawago. The village lies in a valley in the northern part of the Gifu Prefecture. Its wooden houses, called gassho-zukuri, with their thatched roofs made out of grass are unique and this village was listed by the Unesco World Heritage in 1995. Several of these houses have been turned into guesthouses and we spent our night in one of them (Minshuku) - an incomparable experience. We slept on tatamis under thick feather beds as the temperature during the night went down below zero. The evening meal was served around the fireplace. Sitting on the floor we enjoyed local specialties such as freshly prepared fish from the alpine rivers, washed down with slightly warmed up sake, the Japanese rice wine.



As is customary in the Japanese countryside, we went to bed early and got up early. Thus we had enough time before breakfast to stroll through the villages, look at typical houses, surrounded by rice fields and small gardens, full of vegetables and

in the midst of a green and mountainous landscape. Onsen means hot spring and is the Number One holiday activity in Japan. Onsen are also described as villages with hot springs and hotels, especially the ryokans which are traditional Japanese gue-

completely your body (everything is provided soap, shampoo, etc...). Only after that you enter the quasi-holy room or rooms with the hot bath tabs or swimming-pools (also outdoor). I stepped in the hot water and let it cover my body that only the head was outside. I closed my eyes and a feeling of happiness appeared. Words cannot describe what you feel when you are outside in such a pool late in the night and gazing at the stars and the moon. At that very moment, your whole being is in a state of total bliss. Now I can understand why a day in an Onsen does you a world of good.

Here you really feel the warmth and profound spirit of Japanese hospitality. Nothing reminds you of the world outside: no telephone, no television, no noise, and no desk in your room.... Only the peace of Nature is part of the architecture - and this peace is transmitted to you. Believe me, one day in an Onsen equals several weeks in the most luxurious hotel. The 14-course dinner consisting of local seasonal delicacies and breakfast next morning, were served in the restaurant awaking all of our five senses.

On the way back to Machida, Tokyo

After a last bath, we left the FUKUCHI Onsen for another highlight of the trip: the Shinhotaka Ropeway. The double-decker gondola (the first one in Japan) takes you above the clouds to an altitude of 2156 meters in only 12 minutes. A breathtaking panorama of the Northern Japanese Alps with many peaks of 3000 meters under golden/red autumn colors waited for us. However, very quickly dark clouds appeared over the mountains and after a few minutes, a faint drizzle started to fall. Once in the car, we decided to stop over at one of the biggest Wasabi farms before returning to Machida. Wasabi, in taste similar to horseradish, is a part of the Japanese cuisine and its green paste is always served with sushis. In one of the nearby restaurants, we tried soba noodles with wasabi and finished our meal with a wasabi ice cream, delicious, delicious...

Later that evening, full of new impressions and renewed energy, we reached our home in Machida, ready for our next travel experience...

Our first Onsen, a hot spring experience

In the early afternoon, as planned, we reached our Onsen, called FUKUCHI, set

sthouses. This will be my first experience of this kind and I am very curious about it all. According to Onsen addicts, nothing lets you forget so quickly about the hassles, tensions and stress of modern life like a few hours' stay in an Onsen. It really feels like a rebirthing experience. Upon entering an Onsen, you feel as though you are entering another world. You will exchange your shoes at the entrance for slippers and the owner or staff will welcome you and offer tea before accompanying you to your room. Here you exchange your clothes against the Yukata, a light cotton kimono and put a Tanzen (thick jacket) for the colder season over it. So we did immediately. The Yukata (and Tanzen) are generally worn from the arrival to departure and with these dresses you walk around not only in your hotel but also in the village. With my beautiful Yukata and a specific bag (also provided) I went to have my first Onsen bath experience. Bathing is a central element of Japanese society and it is not just to get clean. It is a social and spiritual experience. In the first room you completely move away your clothes, in the second room you will clean



Gujo Hachiman

