

## ***A Tourist in Japan Part 3***

### ***Life in the Ryokans***

To protect the tatami matting which covers the floor of all individual rooms and much of the public spaces, shoes are not permitted. But this does not mean that one merely removes one's shoes. These are put into nearby cubicles. Also there is a "two zone" system in effect, which prohibits socks from touching the outside and then coming inside. One sits on a platform, takes off one's shoes, places them where they belong, and then swings around and up onto the platform without the socks touching the ground. Reversing the process when leaving is a good deal easier. None of the guest rooms has its own bathroom. In a corridor usually close by, there are several separate toilets for men and women and a separate bathroom. There are several showers in the room draining into a single drain. One is expected to wash and rinse oneself thoroughly before getting into the tub. In our first inn, the tub was large enough for three men or women, although elsewhere it is often designed for one. The fairly hot water is re-circulated and changed very frequently. The back, legs and feet seem to benefit the most, but the whole body enjoys

ample, cotton kimono every day. This immediately absorbs what the towel had not dried. Dinner is communal with everyone kneeling or sitting on cushions around a long table that is about 18 inches (ca. 45 cm) high. One eats what the host provides. This is not as rigid as it may appear, since the evening meal consists of a number of different dishes and one does not have to eat what does not appeal. On the whole we found Japanese food well prepared and tasty. I must admit, however, that I far prefer a simple breakfast at home, to a Japanese breakfast which often includes green tea, soup, rice, fish, pickled cabbage, other veggies, etc. With the evening meal beer and saké may be ordered. We stayed away from wines which were often expensive or unfamiliar or both. Japanese beer is very good and much of it is produced by three breweries: Kirin, Sapporo and Asahi. Saké is pleasant, particularly when warm, and a regular connoisseurship surrounds it, since it was the standard tippie before the introduction of beer in the 19th century.

The price of the accommodation includes breakfast and dinner. Since we were on a tour, I do not know how much the various Ryokans charged. I did see a list of Ryokans and their prices in a Kyoto tourist

brochure and conclude that these traditional inns are considerably cheaper than hotels which usually, as in North America, do not include breakfast in their rates. Apparently there are also hybrid Ryokans which make various concessions to travelers. I am glad that our tour stayed with the authentic inns. The outside of the Ryokans varies considerably. The one at Mt. Koya had a lovely traditional garden behind it. Others are in

less distinguished neighborhoods, but they all seem to have some attractive landscaping.



a luxurious sensation. I was surprised by the thinness and small size of the towel supplied to each guest. I did not know that each guest is provided with a fresh,

## Asuka

The time we spent in the Asuka area, after Mt. Koya, was as far as one can get historically from such great cities as Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. In Asuka we saw a good deal of the Honshu agricultural countryside. Rice culture that is apparent in other regions as well ranges from brilliantly green fields to places where the brown sheaves of the harvested plants are drying and are leaning on racks before threshing. October was too late for harvesting of fruit trees with the exception of persimmon trees, which hung heavy with their large, light orange fruit. We also saw cabbages, beets and similar vegetables in the fields. The Asuka landscape is one of gentle hills. But here and there we came across quite steep hillocks which were the

burial mounds of the nobility.



After the introduction of Buddhism in Japan around the 6th century, cremation became the accepted manner of disposing of the dead. Before that, persons of substance were buried in burial chambers and were given "companions" in the form of figurines as

well as other items deemed to be of probable value in another life. We admired them in a very good regional museum. The clay figurines had an uncanny resemblance to those which have come to us from Central and South America and are usually referred to as "Pre-Columbian." Another example of so-called Japanese pre-history was a very large 12 x 4 feet (ca. 3.6 x 1.2 meters) stone tortoise the significance of which is unknown. The Asuka region is by no means only interesting for these ancient artifacts since a good deal is known about the Asuka period 593 - 710 A.D. It is acknowledged that there was an intention to establish an imperial court there and with it the seat of government. However, the consorts of the emperors were unable to produce male heirs. This was considered a bad omen and the capital was established at Nara instead.

During our stay in Asuka we visited a Saké distillery where we were treated to a description and history of the product. We also took a long walk to visit a Buddhist temple which boasted a well-known garden, and on the way came upon a large house that was being built. I noticed the absence of concrete bags or



steel rods. All the posts and beams were made of wood. Ian, our tour guide, engaged one of the workers in conversation and he told us that these components were imported from Finland, Canada and the United States. Wooden construction is allowed only up to three storeys, but apparently preferred. We also noticed how friendly the man speaking to us was and how ready to answer questions from a group of wandering strangers. From Asuka we took the train to Nara, historically a perfect choice. The capital remained in Nara for a century and then it relocated to Kyoto and stayed there for more than a thousand years.

*Author : The Editor  
Date of publication : March 2005*