

# Japan to Russian Eyes

Igor Yu. Avdakov

I visited Japan for the second time in April 1996 at the invitation of Osaka University of Economics and Law to conduct research on Japan's transportation economy.

The University was generous in giving me the opportunity to see Nara and Kyoto as well as Tokyo and Osaka. The remarkable number of castles and shrines bears witness to the Japanese passion for their cultural heritage, which is an amazing fusion of tradition and modernism.

In Kyoto, precious relics of bygone years are lovingly kept. The famous Nijo Castle, the Tokugawa Shogunate residence built in 1603, still stands in perfect beauty. The Golden Pavilion and its blinding treasures are embraced by a meticulously-kept Japanese garden. Of the Emperor's Castle and many other interesting spots, I especially like the Higashi Honganji, a temple with two majestic statues of the Buddha.

The Zen triangular garden at Ryoan Temple is quite different from the pleasant gardens that usually surround ancient temples. It is the modesty of this garden which furnishes a harmonious threshold to the Stone Garden where one sees only 15 stones. The longer one stares at the stones, the more vivid the imagination becomes and each visitor leaves the garden with their own interpretation. For

my part, I think of the Stone Garden as the Universe and the stones as the planets. Interestingly, no matter how one tries, there is no position where all 15 stones are visible—much like the ultimate Buddhist truth that can never be fully comprehended.

Nara is remembered for Todaiji Castle and Kasuga Shrine. Todaiji is known for its majestic Buddha in the Great Buddha Hall and for the park where thousands of tame deer roam peacefully. Kasuga is impressive in its own right as a beautiful Shinto shrine adorned with 3000 bronze and stone lanterns.

My brief stay in Osaka did not allow me the chance to see the picturesque scenery of Osaka's shoreline, nor visit Osaka Aquarium and the famous Mikimoto Pearl Island where pearls are cultured. However, I was deeply impressed by Shitenno Temple, for it is one of Japan's oldest castles built in Prince Shotoku's era. A greater part of the castle was destroyed in World War II, although it was restored later. My favourite pastime in Osaka was strolling through the Ninomaru Garden while admiring Osaka Castle, which is especially majestic and solemn when lit up against the background of skyscrapers.

Many castles and shrines in Japan are still surrounded by parks and gardens. It dem-

onstrates how the Japanese strive to preserve the legacy of the past while coming to terms with progress. Perhaps, it is this national pursuit to harmonize traditions and contemporaneity that makes Japanese society so vibrant and appealing.

During my stay, I was fortunate to go cherry blossom viewing at Mt. Yoshino near Nara. For many Japanese, the cherry blossom season means not just holidays, but a time to celebrate with one's heart and soul. The scenery throughout the country turns various shades of pink as the sakura blossom. The blossoms at Mt. Yoshino were beyond all my expectations—a marvellous bloom of thousands of sakura in two stages, the shimo and naka. While viewing, it occurred to me that the Yoshino blossoms are symbolic of Japanese society—beauty and strength in organization and order. Even the celebration was well-planned with a cableway for older people to reach the slopes, and restaurants and food stalls serving Japanese and western food.

Yoshino is a historic place where ascetic Buddhist monks used to live. On my way back from Yoshino, tired yet satisfied, I realized the monks had selected this place well. Its serene environment helps one stay aloof from earthly pleasures to devote oneself to Zen meditation.

My tight schedule allowed me to see only



Osaka Castle

(Japan National Tourist Organization)



Stone Garden at Ryoan Temple

(JNTO)

few places in Tokyo—Asakusa's Kannon Temple, Ginza's modern shopping and entertainment district, Tokyo Tower—the view of the capital from its vantage points.

However, I was lucky enough to visit the restaurant of the legendary Otsuru-san (JRTR No. 7). This good-natured and wise woman, notwithstanding a burdensome life and advanced old age, still keeps herself busy with various daily chores while talking to patrons until her restaurant closes. She showed me the vegetables grown in her home town and delivered to her restaurant in Tokyo—mouse radish that indeed resembles a white mouse, and fukinoto, a root crop widely believed to bring the new strength of spring, because it is harvested from under the snow. Meeting Otsuru-san left me with a feeling of warmth and respect for the hard-working Japanese who had overcome many difficulties and losses in their times.

Tokyo is quite an unusual place where the business rhythms of a modern city interact closely with traditional culture. Only in Japan can one see women clad in either western-styled business suits or traditional kimono, while men commute in ultramodern vehicles—all against a background of high-rises, ancient palaces and shrines. Amazingly, everything is not in contrast but in harmony.

My research entailed travelling by shinkansen and commuter trains and I was pleasantly surprised by their speed and comfort. It was a quick and cozy ride from Narita Airport to Tokyo. I would not have noticed the speed if it had not been for the fast-changing scenery. The train's route can be traced on an electronic map in each carriage showing the location at every moment. On my way from Tokyo to Osaka in a double-decker car, I was especially impressed by the cordial relationship between passengers and railway employees. The service was attentive yet unobtrusive; the passengers well-behaved. Most talked calmly



*The Author Amid Cherry Blossoms at Mt Yoshino*

*(Author)*

among themselves in booths that can rotate to face each other, some were busy sampling regional cuisine served in partitioned lunch boxes, others read books and some just dozed off.

Osaka is well-served by a transportation infrastructure of electric trains, subways and buses. During the peak commuting hours, the overcrowded subway is still governed by politeness and strict order, while railway employees work fervently to keep the train schedules punctual.

Traffic rules are observed dutifully by both pedestrians and drivers. Occasional petty offenders pay heavy fines. Police officers, operate unhurriedly along the roads, sporting both patience and self-discipline. While I hope to see more of Japan someday, I am sure her ancient marvels and modern creations will hold great appeal to the Russian people. However, Russian tour-

ists face many obstacles in visiting this picturesque and remarkable country; they have to bear the high cost of living, the long wait before being issued a visa, the Japanese requirement for a minimum of 15 in a tourist group, and the unwillingness to work with individual tourists, etc.

In September this year, I attended the 16th Russia-Japan Symposium for Peace and Stability in Asia and The Pacific Region and for Promotion of The Russia-Japan Relationship. While listening to high-ranking officials from both countries talking about improving relations and establishing friendly ties, I recalled fond memories of my visit. What better way is there to achieve mutual understanding than to have people of both nations visit and make friends with each other! Such is my wish and long-cherished dream for our two peoples. ■



### **Igor Yu. Avdakov**

Dr Igor Yu. Avdakov graduated from Moscow State University in 1977 and works as a senior research fellow at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. His doctoral work was on economic problems of industrial infrastructure in Asian countries. He has published on transport in Asia, and economic problems in Russia.