

## Still Playing Their Part— A Look at Temples and Shrines in Modern Japan

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When I first arrived in Japan I stayed with a fellow American friend of mine who was living in Osaka. He taught English during the day, and with nothing better to do during those hours, I went to the downtown Kinokuniya bookstore to look around. It was while I was browsing there, when a young Japanese woman approached me and inquired about myself. I thought the woman was just being friendly (I realize now that she was probably more interested in practicing her English), but I gave her my friend's number and expected never to see her again. It was a little surprising then when she called that night asking if I wanted to go to Kyoto for sightseeing the following day. I had nothing else to do so of course I said fine. The next day we met, took the train to Kyoto, and then walked around and looked at temples finishing up by eating at a ramen shop. For anyone who has been here a while, it doesn't sound like too spectacular a day, but at the time, for me, it was amazing.

Everywhere you looked there was something new and unusual to see—and I had this friendly, pretty young woman who was going out of her way to show me around, what more could you ask for? I like it that soon after arriving in this new country, without any pre-planning, I was visiting various temples & shrines in the old capital. It was to be the beginning of a long relationship with these structures. Not long after that I moved to Nagoya for work, which is less well known for its historical sites, although it does have a few large temples. The place where I eventually moved was near a small neighborhood shrine. Everyday when I rode off on my bike for work I'd pass it. Sometimes I'd see black-suited older people apparently attending a funeral, occasionally there would be a priest walking about, and of course during the summer there was a *matsuri* (festival) with most of the neighborhood out enjoying themselves. I came to appreciate that

the shrine functioned as a center to the local neighborhood. Before this eye-opener, along with many tourists to the country, I sort of looked at shrines and temples as historical artifacts. In the same way that castles or some churches are seen in Europe—they are beautiful and impressive, but had had their time, and now were just tourist attractions. Anyone living in Japan will soon come to see that shrines and temples still play probably just as large a role in people's lives as they did long ago in the past—maybe even more.

It was during one winter while I was still in Nagoya that some friends and I decided to take a bike trip around Shikoku Island during the New Year's break. Shikoku is the smallest of the four main islands that make up Japan, and is still off the beaten path for the most part. We traveled down by van, with the bikes loaded on top, sleeping in a tent at night and stopping along the way to see sites. On the 2nd day of the trip we went to see Himeji Castle, but arrived too late in the day to enter the castle itself. Like most castles in Japan, it had been destroyed during the war, but had been rebuilt using most of the same material from the earlier building. I had been living in Nagoya a few years by then but I still hadn't made it inside Nagoya Castle. I had read there was an elevator in it (so much for authenticity I thought) and for whatever reason was never too impressed by the sight of it.

Himeji Castle though, even just from the outside, was an unmistakably grand building—probably why it was chosen as a backdrop for a scene in the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*. The castle is not surrounded by buildings, and the full impressive structure could be well appreciated. Since we couldn't enter into the castle itself, as it was so late in the day, we walked about the surrounding grounds and along the moat. It's my idea that castles can only fully be appreciated

when see up close and from afar. The next day we crossed over the Japanese inland sea to the island of Shikoku and did a few couple days of biking around the hilly terrain that makes up the Western side of the island. We had been sleeping anywhere which looked convenient (including a cemetery one night), and it as we drove around in the twilight that evening we came across a large wooden temple. It was set slightly behind a wide gravel area for parking, but didn't have any cars in it. After a cursory check to see whether anyone was about, and seeing no one, we laid out our sleeping bags on the wooden flooring that projected out from the back of the building. Thinking that no one would notice us there, we promptly fell asleep. The next morning very early on, I was awoken by the patter of socked feet moving by. When I opened my eyes I discovered that various monks were moving about, but taking care not to bother their uninvited lodgers. By the time we roused ourselves out of bed, there were not only monks moving about, but several hundred people climbing the nearby cement stairway, which lead to the main temple further up. By chance we had chosen a temple holding a festival that day—so fortunately we were situated at the back of the temple. Still, feeling conspicuous, we gathered our sleeping bags and prepared to leave—but not once did anyone say anything to us or give us a disapproving look. As we drove away from the temple, both my friends and I remarked that we'd have to keep temples in mind as a possible sleeping spot in the future as well—one which wasn't holding a festival preferably.

Now I'm living in Tokyo. Of course I'm not sleeping at the back of a temple these days, but there's a shrine less than two blocks away. When friends from overseas come to visit, I take them to Meiji-Jingu shrine in Harajuku, or to the famous Nikko area, which is chock-a-block full of

temples; so even now I continue my association with these structures. My feeling is that they would exist even without their religious connection. Many guide books on Japan play up their religious importance to the average Japanese; but in fact most Japanese are rather non-religious. Almost everyone though will make at least one visit to a shrine or temple every year in some capacity—whether it be a funeral, a birth, a wedding or one of the many types of traditional events that bring families to the temples and shrines. And that maybe is the most interesting thing about them—that even in this age of rapid innovations in technology, temples and shrines still continue to play an integral part in modern Japanese society. ■

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Many Japanese visit shrines for traditional events that bring families to the temples and shrines.

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