

I. TOURISTS OR TRAVELERS

When it comes to traveling, there are two types of people, those who like to and those who don't. In many cases both types actually do travel, but the don'ts only travel because they have to (like those on board the Nautilus) or to prove to themselves that home is the best place of all.

You have all heard of the latter type. They return and tell you, "I couldn't get a decent bottle of (American) beer in all of Germany," or "Give me Jones Beach over the Riviera any time."

However, this story concerns two people who loved to travel better even than talking about it afterwards. But then of the people who love to travel there are two types, tourists who must see all the sights listed by the travel agents, and travelers, or those who don't. This tale concerns one of each type who by the nature of their work assignment traveled together. It wasn't always easy to determine which was which, that is, who wanted to see the famous sights and who didn't. But at least on any one day one usually did and one didn't.

But who are these people? Fred and I. And who is Fred? Fred is an overgrown Swede, built in general like an inverted metronome, large shoulders tapering down through slender hips to rather spindly legs. His brown straight hair is rather too long in front with a cowlick in back. A long straight nose makes him look a great deal like John Wayne. He has long arms, large hands and works diligently on filling out his midsection. His appetite is prodigious.

He is a bachelor and his portentous appetite extends also to women. And Fred is curious. Curious about foods, women, people in all walks of life, stray dogs, department stores, pictures in art museums, and native customs. He is not curious about churches, temples, and other archaic institutions.

I am not a bachelor. With five boys to raise it would be rather indecent to be one. I do not look like John Wayne but more like a university professor. I am curious about books, world politics, famous sights, and Fred's customs.

When Fred and I found we were likely to be sent to Japan I immediately obtained all literature available and read about Japanese religion, politics, and points of interest. For example, that the places to visit were Nikko, Kyoto, Nara and the Inland Sea. The things to see were Shinto and Buddha shrines and temples. The thing to drink was Sake, and the thing to eat was sushi and sukiyaki. Fred finished painting his house.

On the air trip over I brought along selected tidbits of literature so that Fred could catch up on his Japanese readings. He got Sports Illustrated from the stewardess and would have read it except he got too busy discussing the merits of Scotch whiskey with his other seatmate (a pretty girl).

I continued my reading. I read about self-appointed Japanese girl guides. Young girl guides. Day and night guides. Specializing in men travelers. The pitch? They want to learn English. They want a sponsor for schooling in the states. They want to get ahead. And they are willing to put their backs into their labors.

Finally, after one break in the monotony for refueling at Wake Island we set down at Haneda Airport, Tokyo.

"Come on, Fred. We're not going to Hong Kong tonight. Let's get off."

"OK, John, OK. Let's go out forward."

"As a matter of fact, John, if you'll look half-way down that belt you'll see the box. And that explains why the conveyor system is stopped. Now I wonder who would be stupid enough to send a box like that in the baggage."

"Yeah, you'd think people would know better, wouldn't you, Fred?"

"Listen to all those comments."

"I hear 'em, Fred. Some of those passengers aren't very happy with Japanese technology right now, to say nothing about the box."

"I don't blame 'em. I'm going to yell too. Hey, get that thing going. I've got to get out of here."

"Sounds good, Fred. Try another."

"What about getting that stupid box off so our luggage can come up?"

"I think you'd be a little more effective if you knew some Japanese, Fred, but your vocal technique is superb."

"Come on, come on, we haven't got all night."

"You got 'em going, Fred. Look at those pint-sized porters trying to pick the box up."

"That's the way to push that box around guys. Wonder whose box it is."

"Don't overplay it, Fred. The belt is moving again. But I'm not going to claim that box. We might get mobbed."

"What box? Go on, check through customs and get us some yen. When this batch of people clears out I'll claim the box."

"So be it."

About fifteen minutes later with 7200 yen in my pocket I saw Fred again. "Where's the box?"

"I checked it. We'll see about moving it tomorrow. Maybe someone at the branch office will have an idea."

"Yeah, let's be off. Monorail or limousine?"

A couple of days later, on Sunday, with things squared away about the box, our ship schedules and travel to Sasebo, we decided to be tourists and go to Nikko.

After we'd pulled out of Asakusa station I started briefing Fred on the tourist sights in Nikko. The great thing is to see the three monkeys. "What three monkeys? We've got a zoo in San Diego."

"See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

"I never do," Fred replied.

"No, those are the monkeys. In wood. Under the eaves of the sacred stable."

"Another shrine. In Europe, cathedrals. In Japan, shrines."

"There's another part to that, Fred. At home, churches."

"Are we going to Nikko to see a shrine?"

"They've also got a lake, a waterfall, and about three dozen hairpin turns on the way."

"Speaking of hairpins, did you notice that girl back there? She spoke to us in English in the station. I'm going back to talk to her."

And so ended the briefing. Soon we were getting off the train in Nikko, the three of us.

"John, this is Noriko. Her mother lives in Nikko. She's willing to show us around after she stops to see her family."

I knew there was something I'd forgotten to tell Fred. About the girl guides. It was probably just as well. At least now he was stumbling into it naively. Had I told him, he'd be out looking for them.

"First we take bus. You come with me. My mother and brother be glad to see you," Noriko said.

In a grove of trees on a hill north of Nikko is a housing project. New, small, modern, Japanese. The bus stopped a hundred feet away and we climbed up some steep steps to a multiple housing unit. Noriko went ahead. A few words in Japanese. A few hurried shuffling sounds, and a big smile.

"This my mother. My brother Suochi not dressed yet. He come later."

We were welcomed with a bow and ushered into a large room, about ten feet square, with smaller alcoves opening onto it. In the middle sat a table the size of a card table. The table didn't properly stand or sit, it kind of squatted. It loomed about 18 inches off the floor with no visible means of support. From all sides a blanket drooped down to the straw mat on the floor. Having left our shoes outside I was glad when I sat down at the table to note a decided increase in temperature under the blanket. After all, it was December and in a word it was cold. Under the table was a pit about two feet deep. In the pit was an electric heater. The pit made it possible to sit naturally and not fold your feet under you. A very efficient space and heat conservation scheme. Efficient, that is, if you are only interested in keeping your feet and legs warm.

Tea was soon served and Suochi joined us, looking a little like the proverbial morning that follows a specific type of evening's entertainment. I was rather glad he did. I was half expecting a shogun with samurai sword.

Norika continued her family chat in Japanese. The only part of the conversation we understood was "Hi, hi" which seems to mean "yes" or "no" or "maybe" or "I'm still listening" or perhaps it just acknowledges that the listener is still awake. We also understood her concluding remarks:

"John, Fred want see Lake Chuzenji and Kegan Falls. We be off. See you next week."

Norika, Fred and I caught a local bus. We made short work of the Kegan waterfall then made for an old inn on the lake for lunch. A roaring fire in the fireplace and some warm sake soon thawed us out. Sukiyaki, thin strips of beef with vegetables, soy bean curd, and potato noodles, together with more sake, completed our thawing out and got us better acquainted with Norika.

The sun was flitting further westward and we finally hurried back to the bus station. I'd heard that in Japan there were more people per square inch than anywhere. But not until we got on the Sunday afternoon bus returning to Nikko did I really understand. It's the first time I'd ever been crowded into any place so solidly that every other person had to breathe out so the remaining people would have space to expand their lungs to breathe in. There was no such thing as a vicarious experience. Smell and touch replaced vision and hearing as primary sensory inputs. I now understand why Japanese women tend to be flat in most of the same regions where Norwegian girls are buxom. The Grimm brothers must have visited Japan before they wrote about the gingerbread man.

But Japanese people are polite. They courteously allowed us to squeeze off the bus in front of the shrine. In fact they helped a little with timely pushes.

"Well, Fred, now you know how a coin feels when it goes in and out of those slot machines."

"I do indeed. Is my face flushed? Those characters squeezed all my blood up to my head."

"You're OK, Fred, but you'd better take a couple of deep breaths to fill out again."

"Yeah, then I can quit holding my pants up and let my belt take over."

The bus burrowed on without us with no noticeable decrease in load. The sides were still bulging but with us off there was hope they wouldn't burst.

"We go to temple now, boys. Up this walk."

Just as we turned the corner to see the famous Nikko shrine we heard four load bongs from a giant bell.

"What's that, Norika?" Fred asked.

"Four o'clock."

"Why are they closing all the gates?"

"Four o'clock."

"You mean we came all the way to Nikko and now won't see the three monkeys?" I asked.

"Not after four o'clock."

The train trip back to Tokyo was a spectacle of Japanese youth: guitars, bottles, food, noise, and motion. Fred took Norika home, while I returned to our hotel to write this story. Did we see the sights of Nikko? Perhaps not. Did we learn more about Japan than the tourists who saw the monkeys who neither speak, hear nor see evil. Probably.