

## Kimonos and Green Tea

By PETER DESBARATS

# Japanese Hospitality Never Forgotten

(Last of a Series)

They say: One month in Japan and you have good memories for the rest of your life. Three years and you can't wait to get out. Five years and you'll never leave.

After three weeks, Edo-san McNally and I left Japan in a hypnotic trance. Many of the memories were impossibly Lafcadio Hearn — five-tiered pagodas, temples, ornamental bridges and mountain landscapes copied from Hiroshige prints. But these things are as much a part of modern Japan as transistors and population control and green tea in plastic bottles, and they are what I am going to remember in this final article.

Edo-san — a few soft chords on the samisen, please.

About two hours' drive from a rock'n'roll bar in downtown Tokyo, where hostesses in tight pedal-pushers and padded bras bump and grind beside every table, Naraya Inn nestles in a valley of the Hakone mountains. No one really knows how long it has been there.

Edo-san and I arrived late in the evening after a long train trip aboard "The Swallow" from Hiroshima and a hair-raising drive over the mountain passes from Atami. Here and there along the road, between patches of fog and drifting snow, the headlights picked out broken sections of steel guard rail. I prayed. Edo-san passed the Suntory.

The owner and maids of the Naraya Inn bowed low as we alighted from the car. Edo-san slipped out of his loafers and I took off my half-wellingtons — an affectation that in three weeks convinced hundreds of Japanese that all Canadians tromp around in big black boots. The large slippers reserved for foreign guests were produced and we padded down a wide interior hallway to the room. At the entrance we removed the slippers and walked in stockinged feet across the straw tatami mats to the low table in the centre of the room. As we sat down on cushions the maid, Tomoko Satomi, shuffled into the room carrying a tea tray. She handed us steaming towels and poured hot green tea into exquisite ceramic cups uncluttered by handles. With the tea came a dark spade-shaped sweet jelly. Every Japanese inn has a distinctive confection which is always the first food that a guest receives.

After tea and a smoke, Edo-

san and I stripped and Tomoko helped us into our kimonos. There is no such word as shyness in the Japanese vocabulary — in that sense. When Adam and Eve clapped on fig leaves, the Japanese must have been looking the other way.

First came the yukata, the light under-kimono that also serves as pyjamas and as a summer kimono. Then the heavy outer kimono and the belt wrapped around the waist

twice and knotted at the back. Cigaretts and matches in one of the sleeve-pockets.

Every good Japanese inn provides yukatas and kimonos with distinctive patterns printed or woven into the cloth. One memorable day in Beppu on the southern island of Kyushu, when Edo-san and I ventured through the town in our kimonos, everyone knew that we were staying at the Suginoi Hotel. The biggest tourist attraction in Beppu

that day was not the hot springs or the wild monkeys or the chair-lift to the top of the mountain but the six-foot kimonos strolling through the town on hush puppies and half-wellingtons. We spent most of the day taking photographs of Japanese taking photographs of us.

Tomoko led us to the main bath at the Naraya. Incidentally — one for men, one for women. We took off our kimonos in the anteroom and

walked down a few steps to the bath which was the size of a small swimming pool and about three feet deep. First we squatted beside the bath, scooped up the scalding water in tin pans and doused ourselves. Then, into the bath for five minutes at a slow boil. Japanese don't merely bathe. They cook. Then, out of the bath, soap, rinse and a final soak until done. Dry with a damp towel, wrap in kimonos and place contentedly beside

the low table in the room where Tomoko is preparing a sukiyaki dinner over a portable gas fire. Soup, raw fish, Chinese pickle, beef-vegetable sukiyaki, unidentifiable but delectable relishes in small bowls, hot sake and tea. Burp. Pat belly. Look satisfied. Wave aside numerous compliments on skill with chopsticks and try to conceal rice that has dropped on lap.

After dinner, massage. The bed mats were unrolled on the floor and Hideko Suzuki tied us into ama-style knots for an hour. I played "Squid-jigging Ground" on the harmonica. Edo-san sang. Hideko howled.

News and "spo'tnews" on television. Something was happening on earth. Pictures of soldiers shooting each other. Is it war? Who cares.

Night. Last cigaret, lying on the floor wondering why western beds have legs. The mysterious West. Water running into the pool in the garden beneath the window. Snow.

The Japanese call it "a silver world" and snow is treated as an artistic achievement. We saw the great temples in Kyoto the morning after a small snowstorm and everyone, puddling around in soaking-wet shoes, congratulated us on our luck.

After breakfast — soup, fish, rice, seaweed and soy sauce, pickles and tea — we were guided into the garden to admire the snow and feed the carp. Oh yes — another bath before breakfast of course. Ancient Japanese gentleman also in bath. We felt particularly hairy.

Apparently there is a saying in Japan that a man with hair on his chest is a good man. Good saying.

At mid-morning, Miyoko Aoki arrived to conduct a short urasenke-style tea ceremony.

Edo-san and I knelt in our kimonos, bowed, drank, looked suitably peaceful and contemplative and tried to say appropriate poetic things about the bowl in which the frothy green tea was served.

After lunch, we left the Naraya Inn for Tokyo. The owner bowed. Tomoko bowed. Miyoko bowed. Hideko giggled. Edo-san and I cleared our throats and said, "Domo arigato," and, "Sayonara." Great gasps of admiration at the sudden disclosure that we are, as they say in Quebec, bilingual.

"How far is it to Tokyo?" asked Edo-san.

"About six and a half centuries," I replied.



Mie — spoken "mee-ah" — is a Nagoya bar hostess.



The resort city of Beppu on the southern island of Kyushu. As always, mountains and people.