

## How About Japan?

by Sarah Outram

*I am often asked what I think of Japan, and usually answer no more than "I like Japan" or "I am enjoying it here". Sometimes I would like to say more. Although I have been here only a little over half a year, I have made quite a few trips and seen some of Japan`s sights. What is it that has made an impression? What do I remember? Here, then, are some of my memories and thoughts of Japan.*

### *On Kinkakuji : strange photos*

*I visited Kyoto last September. The Kinkakuji is incredibly beautiful. My friends and I posed in front of the classic scene, and some people took our picture. One kind person took a picture using my friend`s camera. It`s a nice picture, and we enjoyed our visit.*

### *On To – ji : a helpful monk*

*On one of the days that I visited Kyoto, there was a severe typhoon warning. Fortunately for me, it didn`t arrive, and the attractions we visited were almost deserted, since noone in their right mind would sight – see when there is a severe typhoon warning.*

*In the afternoon , we visited To – ji, a massive temple with many different buildings housing various treasures. One has some large Buddha statues. We slipped into this large dark display hall just before it closed. Fortunately the custodian who locked us in heard us shout. Freed back into the very large and by now eerily deserted main compound, we headed for the exit , which was by then locked. After wandering around for a few minutes we at last spotted someone : an old monk. He was very friendly, asked us what we thought of Japan, and guided us to a side exit.*

### *On Fuji : join the queue*

*In August I climbed Mt. Fuji with a group of other JETs. There were some fools among the group who assured us it was fun, and they were definitely right. We climbed at night, and the sky above was clear, the moon was full, and there was a view over a sea of cloud. Near the top the path narrowed and we entered a 1 1/2 hour queue to pass onto the top of the crater : a long thick snake of people trailed halfway down the mountain, with one aim – to reach the top before sunrise. As the sky greyed, the steady shuffle ceased, and everybody turned towards the sun.*

### *On Hakone : fog and steam*

*The only problem with climbing a mountain is that you can`t really see what it looks like. So, in order to experience the picture – postcard views of Fuji, I headed to Hakone on a day when there was extremely thick fog. Fortunately Hakone also*

*has some attractions which can be seen from less than three metres away: hot springs and boiling pools. The steam from the pools mingled with the fog, dripped from the trees and curled around the signs proclaiming "Danger – poisonous gases. Do not stay in this area too long". We stayed long enough to eat a blackened egg, boiled in one of the steaming pools. It tasted like an egg, but the ephemeral surroundings made it an extremely enjoyable egg – eating experience.*

*On Kamakura: light side, dark side*

*It was a beautiful, hot day in Kamakura. We wandered down some quiet, narrow and empty streets and up lots of steps to a small shrine to foxes. The cool mugicha tasted good. In the busier areas we visited Kamakura`s Great Buddha, inside which you can walk. Inside was dim and warm. Outside, the strong sun heated the bronze Buddha, so from within, the side facing the light felt very hot to the touch, while the side in shadow was invitingly cool.*

*On Nara: English homework*

*Nara also houses a big Buddha (a bigger Buddha in fact). At this temple there were impressive numbers of school tour groups. Quite a few kids came up to us with notebooks and asked us to write a message and sign our name. It was part of their "English homework challenge" while on their trip, to collect messages from some foreign tourists.*

*On rice harvesting: cotton gloves*

*Grab the rice, cut the stems, tie the sheaf with straw. The hands get very dirty, so an old lady offered me a pair of cotton gloves. These were soon sodden and dirty but I kept them on, and was very glad I did so when I accidentally grabbed a large praying mantis along with one of the bundles of rice. The frogs and salamanders preferred running away to pretending to be a rice plant.*

*On a train station: close to home*

*Once, I missed my station. Getting out at the next stop, I found myself at a small country station. One double platform, a small pedestrian bridge over the tracks, a sleepy wooden ticket booth and green fields stretching out in to the distance. The atmosphere and appearance were so similar to those of small rural English stations that I was almost surprised by the appearance of the next train exactly on time.*

*So, there you have it: a random collection of some of the things which stick in my memory. I enjoy these memories, and am sure I`ll make many more over the next year. So, look forward to next year`s gripping installment!*