

11: Kyoto

A dull, warm and sticky morning. I woke at about 7.30 and, after I had taken a quick shower, went out to buy something for breakfast. I walked to the local supermarket, where I got myself a tub of instant noodles. Back in the guest house I poured in a little hot water and rang Finn, an Irish lad whose telephone number Dee and Elly had given me. I got through to him and he invited me to his house later this morning. I then made short work of my noodles – not bad at all – and ate half of a huge apple. I set off a little later and, as planned, met Finn at a crossroads nearby. He took me to the Japanese house where he was living; it was a cute little place tucked away in a maze of quiet alleyways. When he invited me to stay the night here, I explained that I had already told Mrs Tani that I would be sleeping at her place tonight, and therefore arranged to stay in Finn's house tomorrow and the following night. He then made me a cup of coffee, introduced me to an American girl and invited me to sit with them while they ate their breakfast.

I left later, and, following their instructions, caught the number six bus to Ōhara, a rural district north of the city in the mountains, which, I had read, is noted for its beauty. Although the weather was far from perfect, the wooded mountains looked quite spectacular as they were shrouded in mist. What spoiled the view, however, was the presence of buildings everywhere: the area was highly populated and traffic roared up and down the narrow road. Garish plastic signs, souvenir shops and ugly electricity cables lined the route.



Ōhara, north of Kyoto

I got off the bus, and, following the signs, started walking to the Jakkōin nunnery. On the way I saw bright green fields and some old rustic dwellings with interesting *irimoya* thatched roofs. In between the fields and houses were tacky restaurants and yet more souvenir shops.

Although the nunnery did not seem to be far away, I had to keep on walking. Soon I found myself in a forest, climbing up a rough, rocky path. After some fifteen minutes of stumbling about, I began to suspect that I had taken a wrong turn. At last I found a signpost pointing back the way to the nunnery. Hot and bothered, I retraced my steps and searched for the entrance. At last I found it; like so many other places

here in Japan, it had been badly signposted. It was a tiny, modest affair, with a miniature garden, but it was quite attractive. I lingered for a while, avoiding the crowds, took some photographs and left just as a group of schoolgirls came in.



Jakkōin nunnery, Ōhara, north of Kyoto

I then made my way back to the main road, stopping to take a few photos of the attractive houses and fields, and looking into the restaurants in order to see what sort of lunches were on offer. As there was nothing that looked particularly interesting, I pressed on, crossed the road and hit off for the Sanzen-in temple. I finally stopped at a pleasant little restaurant, where I sat in Japanese style on a cushion, with a view of a rushing stream before me, and enjoyed a tasty meal.

When I resumed my walk to the Sanzen-in, I met up with a group of schoolgirls and their male teacher. The man spoke to me in excellent English; it came as no surprise that he taught the language. He must have said something to the man at the ticket office, for I was ushered in with the girls. The temple was quite attractive, with pleasant gardens and an interesting main hall, from which we were able to view the oldest building at the other end of a moss garden, framed by maple and cedar trees. However, most of the time here was spent chatting to the friendly teacher, who seemed happy to talk to somebody who spoke English fluently and with a different accent. Like so many people here, he had learned to speak American English.

I left him and his young charges at the bus stop and, as it had started to rain, I hopped on a bus bound for central Kyoto. As we drove off, it poured with rain.

I arrived back at Mrs Tani's place by about four o'clock, feeling rather cheesed off – thanks, no doubt, to the bad weather and mounting exhaustion. I washed a few clothes and then, as I had plenty of time to spare, decided to go to the Daitokuji to try some *zazen* ('sitting meditation'), which I had seen advertised. When I discovered that a girl in the hostel was also preparing to go, I waited for her. She was already steeped in Zen and quite used to this type of meditation. In the meantime, a lad, who like me was curious and wished to have a go at this, decided to join us. Although something inside me told me that this was not quite up my street, I thought it was no harm to try it at least once.

Leaving in a bit of a rush, we arrived at the temple just before six o'clock and went inside. We were greeted by a pleasant, middle-aged monk who spoke sufficient English for his needs. The girl explained that we two lads were novices and would be

doing this for the first time. The only others joining us were Japanese: two young men and one girl.

First of all, we removed our shoes and socks, donned a pair of uncomfortable temple sandals and prepared to enter a little hall. Following instructions, we stepped inside with the left foot first, made a *gasshō* or deep bow with hands joined, walked around to our seats (cushions on *tatami* mats placed on a high platform above the floor), bowed again, removed our sandals and climbed up to our cushions. Folding our legs, we sat in semi-lotus position, our hands forming a *mūdra* or sacred symbol. It was explained to us that we must sit up straight, look down at the floor, and empty our minds. When we were all ready, the monk beat a little gong, banged a pair of clappers together, and we fell silent.

Focusing on the patterned floor, I concentrated on breathing regularly and just listened to the constant shrieking of the cicadas outside. In the distance I could hear the hum of traffic on the main road, people talking, and a dog barking. Slowly I managed to relax and empty my mind of its usual random thoughts, though it was a strain to retain this unfamiliar upright posture. The session seemed to go on forever. After a while the monk got up and walked around in a rather threatening manner with a large stick. He tapped me on the back with it – it gave me a tremendous jolt – and corrected my posture. Unsurprisingly I had slumped forwards. I glanced at the Japanese girl, who was sitting bolt upright and looking very composed.

The monk then returned to his seat. I could sense him glancing at his watch. Then, after another eternity, he banged the clappers – the loud, sharp sound shattering the stillness of the evening – and struck the gong. We then walked round the hall twice and returned to our *zazen*. I was amazed to discover that only half an hour had passed – it had seemed like an eternity!

During the second sitting I became fidgety and my thoughts came rushing back. When, towards the end of the session, I began to twitch and shift, the clappers and gong were sounded and we relaxed. To finish, we chanted a Buddhist *sūtra* or sacred text (it was written in the Latin script and translated for us) and then, after more bowing, it was over. An interesting experiment, I reflected, though I doubted that I had achieved anything by partaking in it. All I had got out of the session were stiff legs.

I then left my companions to find some supper. I traipsed around in the drizzling rain – I seemed to have lost my sou'wester – but could find nothing to my taste. By now I was weary of a diet of stodgy noodles and rice, and was not in the best of moods. At last I found a small restaurant where I sat down to a meal of rice, meat, salad and pickles.

After a fruitless search for my sou'wester, I returned to the guest house, where I settled down to bringing my diary up to date. I finally hit the sack shortly before midnight.

This morning I woke early and got up at about seven o'clock. I slipped out, bought a filled roll at the shop on the corner, returned to the guesthouse and had breakfast. Afterwards, I wrote some postcards. It was a dull, damp and cloudy morning – it looked as though rain was on the way. Later I paid Mrs Tani ¥3,900 (about £15) for the three nights (dirt cheap!); she bowed in thanks and presented me with a little packet of paper handkerchiefs – very useful indeed! She was a lovely lady: so kind, helpful and tolerant. I had really taken to her and her little house.

Having left my heavy luggage with her, I somewhat reluctantly set off for the Katsura Imperial Villa, which I had booked to visit while in the Old Imperial Palace

last Thursday. What a lousy morning to view such an important place! In the meantime I had heard from a lady that visitors were only shown around the tea houses and not brought into the villa itself to see the rooms. I was disappointed to hear this, especially as this was one of the places in Japan that I had been looking forward so much to see.

I borrowed an umbrella and caught a bus down to the south west of the city. The journey seemed to last an eternity. At last I hopped off, and with little time to spare – I had to be there before ten o'clock – I hurried along the road. Suddenly the back strap of my left sandal broke. I cursed; then, seeing a lady in a shop, begged her for a safety pin. She hunted around for one, and finally gave me the one pinned to her dress. This lasted for a minute or two and came undone. Cursing again, I caught another bus going in the same direction. I alighted near the villa but still had to walk a distance before I arrived at the entrance. In order to keep going, I dragged my feet in the Japanese manner so that my sandal stayed on.

Once again, my passport and permit were checked several times when I finally arrived at the villa. I was greatly relieved to discover that I was not the last person to arrive. We waited for a while until a lady guide appeared, greeted us and took us off on our conducted tour. Although she had a charming manner and was good humoured, her English was far from perfect. By now I had discovered that, in general, most Japanese people are poor learners of foreign languages.



Katsura Imperial Villa, Kyoto

Just as I had been informed, we were simply shown around the tea houses and grounds. In the poor, dull light, the place made little or no impression on me. Even the famous tea houses looked uninteresting in such dark and dismal conditions. I took some photos, especially when we passed the important but locked-up Shōin building, but did not bother taking too many. Just as I expected, the conducted tour turned out to be very unsatisfactory – I had no desire to join any more of them.

One hour later I traipsed off into the drizzling rain, feeling cheated off and not knowing what I should do next. I posted several postcards and waited for a bus. While waiting, there was a terrific downpour; using my borrowed umbrella, I sheltered a Japanese lady whose small umbrella had been blown inside out.

Some time later, I arrived at the train station. I walked to the Tourist Information Centre, where I got some useful hints and tips, and spoke to a pleasant English lady. I was due to go to the Shugakuin Imperial Villa at 1.30 p.m., but as it was still pouring rain, I stayed put. I returned to the station, sat down in a restaurant and ate a meal that was more attractive than filling, and then had a look round the place. I bought another pack of postcards and two Fujichrome films at ¥1,000 (£4) each, which I thought was very reasonable. It was only later that I discovered that the price of processing was not included!

Finally I took a bus back to the Daitokuji. As it had stopped raining when I arrived, I walked around to see if the Zuihō-in was open – this was the sub-temple that had been closed the other day. I was delighted to discover that it was open and so paid to go in; the girl in the ticket office told me, in Japanese, that it would be open until 5 p.m. This temple was rather unusual in that it was founded by the *daimyo* (feudal lord) Otomo, one of the early Christians in Japan, in the sixteenth century. The temple was built in 1546 and the gardens, which were created in 1961, included a Garden of the Cross and a statue of the Virgin Mary. Otomo and his wife were buried here.

While on the subject of Christianity, it should be mentioned that many Japanese people are Christians and that there are churches tucked away somewhere in various places, though so far I had found none in my travels. Religion seems to be treated in a somewhat different and rather casual manner here: it is not unusual for a people to be married according to Shinto tradition and buried in the Buddhist manner. Then, if a Japanese person decides to become a Christian, he or she simply adds this new faith to the other two – and nobody is surprised. The strange ritual that I was put through in Nara certainly contained Shinto elements: the clapping and bowing being two typical examples. Although Sunday is a day of rest, it is not a holy day as such (though it is treated as the Lord's day by Christians); the reason for this is because Japan, like most of the world, uses the Western calendar.

Inside the Zuihō-in temple, I sat down to enjoy the fine rock and raked sand garden that was the temple's main attraction. A young, cheerful Japanese monk came along, joined me and chatted to me in perfect English. When I mentioned to him that I had tried some *zazen* meditation yesterday evening, he invited me into the inner sanctuary, slid across the wood-and-paper door, sat me down and gave me an impromptu lesson on posture and breathing. He left me to talk to some Japanese visitors and returned after a short time. Closing the door, he asked me to sit in the semi-lotus position. He then gently pulled back my shoulders to stop me slouching, adjusted my back, placed his hand inside my shirt to check my chest and diaphragm, then moving downwards under my trousers checked my stomach and lower abdomen, then slowly edged down towards my groin...

At this point I stopped him, stood up, bowed curtly and left as he mumbled an apology. So much for Japanese monks in a temple that had Christian origins! I

shuddered at what might have happened next, and cursed the fact that I seemed to be attractive to homosexual men. I had had a narrow escape from one when I was in Paris back in 1981, had to fend off a couple of them at work in RTÉ, and had had an unpleasant and unsettling experience with one when I was just fourteen years of age. From now on I would have to be more circumspect.

I left and walked back to Mrs Tani's guest house, where I collected all my things; included was my sou'wester, which one of the American lads had found on a wooden post in the Daitokuji temple. I said goodbye to everyone and travelled on the 205 bus to Finn's house, which I found easily. There I said hello to a youngish Venezuelan lady, Estella, and went off for a cheap, hot meal in a nearby restaurant. On my way back I bought an apple and began to eat it in the house. The Venezuelan lady appeared again and I had a long and interesting conversation with her about life here and the Japanese people. From her I learned that living and working here was tough both for the Japanese and Westerners. Working hours were long; accommodation was expensive and generally restricted to rooms in a small house. The two houses that I had stayed in – Dee's and this one – had no proper bathrooms; showers and baths had to be taken in public baths, which meant extra expenditure. Several times I had noticed how expensive everything is here. Most Westerners work in the country just for a couple of years and leave because of the pressure and pace of life.

When two Japanese friends of Estella arrived, I retired to my poky bedroom and wrote my diary and some postcards. Later Finn and I walked to the local *sentō* for a bath, then returned for a cup of tea and bed. Apart from this evening's conversation and convivial surroundings, this was a day in my life best forgotten.

I woke at seven o'clock this morning after an excellent night's sleep – it had been so quiet – and got up soon afterwards. Feeling in good spirits, I was determined to forget about yesterday's ups and downs. As Estella was washing herself, I popped out to post some cards but found the post office closed. Finding a little cobbler's shop just round the corner, I gave him my broken sandal to fix. The man, who spoke a little English, said that he would have it ready by tomorrow morning.

When Finn woke up later, we had breakfast together. I had bought a couple of rolls when I was out and about, and now discovered that they had chocolate inside – they tasted dreadful! Finn left just before ten o'clock and I sauntered off soon afterwards. It was a rotten day once again and had turned quite cool – I had to put on a vest for the first time here. I also felt a little shivery, as if I was catching a cold.

I walked down to the end of the road and caught a bus that brought me to Yamagoe, in the western part of the city, along a rather devious route. I hopped off and headed for the Daikakuji, passing Hirosawanoike pond and then across some bright green fields. I was in the outskirts of the city here, almost in the countryside; before me were dramatic wooded hills.

I finally arrived in the grounds of the temple, situated beside another lake, where I found groups of students picnicking. I had to scout around in order to find the entrance. It was a pleasant temple, with many outbuildings and small gardens, but despite its importance (it had been an emperor's palace in the ninth century AD), there was nothing particularly special about it. In the dull light it looked rather dour. The main attractions here were the screens painted by members of the Kanō school. Modern reproductions of these had been placed in the rooms; some of the originals, along with statues and other exhibits, were in the Shinden or treasure house. I was surprised to discover that they had recorded commentaries in English here.



Daikakuji, Kyoto

I wandered around for about an hour and then went off in search of some lunch. This I found in a restaurant across the road. I ordered a bowl of hot *kitsune domburi*: this consisted of rice topped with slices of fried *tofu* and leeks – quite tasty.



Kōryūji, Kyoto

I then set off at a brisk pace and spent about three quarters of an hour walking to the Kōryūji, heading first of all for Arashiyama, where I stopped briefly to look at the river and mountains at a recommended beauty spot, but this turned out to be quite an anti-climax. Undoubtedly the poor weather and lack of sunshine did not help. I then turned back in the direction of the suburbs and soon arrived at the Kōryūji temple, which turned out to be tiny. The main attraction here was the museum, where, along with other fine Buddhist statues, the ancient and elegant Miroku Bosatsu of the Asuka Period was to be seen. This lovely statue, illuminated by a spotlight, was the oldest of its type in Kyoto and, although it was very simple, it was extremely beautiful. Having

read about it and had seen it illustrated in a book, I now derived great satisfaction from seeing it. It was not very big and was black in colour.

Back outside again, I found and had a look at the lecture hall, which had been erected in 1165. As the sun came out for a minute, I quickly snapped a photograph.



Zuiki Matsuri, Kitano Shrine, Kyoto

I then left and caught a couple of buses to the Kitano Shinto Shrine (which I had already visited), and arrived there by about four o'clock. As I had learned that there was festival, the *Zuiki Matsuri*, taking place here at this time, I expected to see crowds of people, but only a few were walking around. It was not until about 4.45 p.m. when something began to happen. To the sounds of drums and music, a colourful procession came down the road and entered the grounds of the shrine. It consisted of a long line of priests and novices in various extraordinary costumes, followed by children in classical rig-outs. Following the children were musicians playing flutes and *shō* (the reed wind instruments described earlier), and a drummer. At the rear, three *mikoshi* (portable shrines) were carried by groups of men. Although it was all very sober, it was not at all solemn. This is what I liked about the Shinto religion: it seemed to be quite informal and was always colourful. As the procession wended its way to the main shrine, I managed to slip in and take some photos, despite the low light, and was out before people were asked to leave. From outside I watched the bearers put down the portable shrines and store them away.



Musicians (*shō* in front, flutes behind), *Zuiki Matsuri*



Mikoshi (portable shrine), *Zuiki Matsuri*, Kitano Shrine, Kyoto

After this, the doors of the shrine were flung open and it was all over. I had expected to see a little more ceremony than this. I left, caught another bus and walked back to Finn's place through the grounds of the Shimogamo Shrine. It looked lovely, deserted and lit up; I could see some fine buildings beyond the closed doors.

Back at the house, I collected my washing gear and went round to the *sentō* for a good, hot bath. Next, I went to a little students' restaurant that Finn had recommended and there had an excellent and very adequate meal for just ¥500. It was really good value for money.

Back in the house I managed to fix a small electric fire for Estella and then sat down to write my diary. While I was doing this, Estella came to my room bearing a little box. Inside was a little Chinese ornament – quite a fine object with the face of either a deity or a demon – which she wanted to give me as a gift. I was reluctant to take it, but she insisted. However, as she did not know what exactly it was, she said that she would hold on to it and ask the girls in her English-language class what exactly it was. I was very touched by her generosity.

As I felt a little under the weather with an oncoming cold, caused no doubt by the changeable weather, I retired to bed early. As I intended to start travelling around this region tomorrow morning, I needed to stay in good health.