

12: Osaka and Kōyasan

Having stayed in Kyoto for about two weeks, my plan is to set off and visit some places nearby: the city of Osaka (where I want to experience *bunraku* – the puppet theatre), the sacred Mount Kōya (Kōyasan), the Shinto shrines at Ise, and the fishing village of Toba.

This morning I wake early after an uneasy sleep; I have been tossing, turning and dreaming a lot of rubbish during the night. Delighted to discover blue sky and bright sunshine outside, I get up at 7.30. I breakfast on my second disgusting chocolate roll, and at 8.30 go outside to collect my sandal, which has now been successfully mended.

As Estella is washing and Finn is still asleep, I leave, catch a bus to the train station, buy a ticket for just ¥300, and travel in great comfort to Osaka. The journey is unexciting: just miles of suburbia. The fact that the sun is shining lifts my spirits, though my cold is starting to annoy me.

Forty-five minutes later I arrive at the Umeda station in Osaka, where, following the signs, I make for the underground. I jump on a train and travel to the Namba station, where I am directed to an information office. Although the staff here speak practically no English, I manage to make myself understood and book myself for two nights in rather exclusive-looking monastery lodgings at ¥6,000 (£24) per night on Mount Kōya. I then pay ¥2,000 for train tickets, thank the staff and leave. I feel more at ease now that this is all fixed up in advance.

Out in the street I ask a policeman the way to the nearest bank. I find it easily and, as the automatic doors open for me, a man bows to me. I ask him where I can change some *toraberu chekku* (travellers' cheques). When he conducts me to one of the counters, I notice that other staff members, mostly female, are bowing to customers and telling them where to go. Although this custom is typically Japanese, I have not encountered it in Kyoto; I sense that people here in Osaka are more traditional and less used to foreigners.

After a slight delay, during which a Japanese man jumps the queue and I am shown to another counter, I eventually collect my money (¥50,000) and leave. I am glad to have done this, for at the rate that I am now spending money, I will soon run out of it!

Next I attempt to find my way to the National Bunraku Theatre. Although I believe that it is not far away, I cannot get my bearings at all. I ask several people; however, as time begins to run out, I decide to catch a bus. Failing to find a bus stop in the vicinity, I go down to the underground again and catch a train.

Up at street level again, I ask a girl in a shop for directions and she tells me that the theatre is in an adjacent street. I arrive there at about 11.40 a.m., with just twenty minutes to spare. The lobby is very modern, clean and smart, and it is filled with well-dressed and well-heeled people. Many of the ladies wear traditional costume. They bow to me and greet me respectfully. I notice that everyone here seems to be more polite. When I discover that free green tea is being dispensed at a little stall, I take a cup; because of my sore throat, the hot liquid is very welcome.

At the ticket office I manage to purchase a second-class ticket at the student price, ¥2,100 (£8.40). When I am asked to produce my student card, I make as though I am about to take it out of my bag, then suddenly realize (!) that I've left it behind in the youth hostel (!). The lady believes my story, laughs and asks me to choose a seat. It is near the back, but it will do.

The idea of going to such a large theatre to watch a puppet performance seems rather bizarre until I fully understand what is involved. When the show starts precisely

at midday, the curtain opens to reveal quite a large stage. The puppets, I discover, are about half life size, and each one is operated by three men dressed entirely in black. At first the presence of the operators proves to be rather distracting, but after a while one's attention shifts to the puppets themselves and the operators almost seem to disappear from view. The puppets, who are all dressed in colourful traditional costume, are so lifelike and are manipulated so skilfully that they seem to become human, despite some rather non-human conventions. They walk, albeit in a rather stylized manner, talk, gesticulate, argue, fight, laugh, cry and perform various incredible feats. Every human emotion is portrayed: some scenes are tender, some decidedly gruesome, and others are quite humorous.

The sets are equally impressive: there are boats on the sea, rooms in houses, and there is even some very realistic rain and a thunderstorm. The performance is divided up into a series of plays that are obviously linked, though, as usual, the plots are so complicated as to be almost impossible to follow – I soon give up the attempt. The title of the first part, which lasts from midday to 4.45 p.m., is *Ahiya Doman Ouchi Kagami* ('The White Fox of Shinoda'), and was written by Izumo Takeda in the eighteenth century. I am most impressed by the musicians, who are in a little box on the right. A singer voices all the spoken lines and a *shamisen* player twangs his instrument, supplying mood music and effects. I am suitably amazed by the singer's versatility. Every so often the singer and *shamisen* player are changed using a swiftly revolving platform.

Although some parts of the drama are a little slow moving, I enjoy it all immensely. As the story progresses, it becomes more exciting, dramatic, fast-moving and bizarre. There are fights, bloody killings (some very emotional, some horribly gruesome and others quite funny, especially when one character's head is split in two), and there is a scene that includes supernatural beings, which is very far-fetched. In it is a fox, a court lady with an extending neck, little demons, and all sorts of strange happenings. By this stage my printed description of the plot does not seem to tally with the action on stage, and so I pay no more attention to it.

There are intervals now and then. During the first one I am able to enjoy a light lunch of sandwiches and tea.

When the performance finally ends, I use one of the telephones in the theatre to ring the local youth hostel and reserve a bed for the night. I then make my way downstairs, where I am given a packet of paper tissues by a man who is presenting them to customers. Together with Mrs Tani's recent present and a couple of packets given to me at the train station this morning, I now have a good collection for my oncoming cold!

After taking a quick look at a collection of *Ukiyo-e* ('Floating World') woodblock prints in an exhibition room – they are all of theatrical interest – I leave and walk back to the Namba train station. I walk around the nightlife area and, after a fair amount of hunting, finally find a reasonably-priced restaurant. I notice that meals here, at least in this part of the city, are very expensive.

After I have eaten, I catch an underground train bound for the Nagai station and squeeze myself into a crowded carriage. The journey takes quite a long time. When I arrive at my destination, I go out to the street and ask a lady for directions to the youth hostel. She tells me that she will bring me there. She unlocks a bicycle, puts my bag on the back, her shopping in the basket at the front, and walks with me to the hostel. It is quite a distance away, and it is situated within a sports centre, in a park. Our conversation, though quite limited, is in Japanese. At the hostel, I thank her for her kindness and bow goodbye to her.

Inside, I check in and pay; when I am told that breakfast will consist of stodgy bread, an egg and milk, I decide to do without it. The hostel, I discover, is basic but good enough. At seven I take a welcome hot bath and then apply myself to my diary. Much to my surprise, the Swiss snorer (whom I have encountered in Kyoto) and his wife come in, followed by a German couple whom I have already met and seen at the theatre.

I retire to bed at ten o'clock, after the 'lights out' signal. Although sleepy at first, I soon wake up when I hear a couple of mosquitoes buzzing around. I try to catch them, but to no avail. The Swiss snorer then swings into action. At this stage I get up and move myself into an adjoining dormitory, where I quickly fall asleep.

Up at seven this morning and out by eight. I am sorry that I have not ordered breakfast, for it looks tasty – it is not what I was told it would be yesterday evening.

It is fine and sunny outside: an ideal morning for travelling to Kōyasan. As it is quite difficult trying to find my way out of the park, I ask the way to the underground station and eventually find it. I travel back to the Namba station, where I walk quite a long distance in order to reach the Nankai line. Here I learn that I can catch a train at 9.14 a.m. I buy a couple of rolls, which I eat on the platform by way of breakfast; they are actually tasty for a change!

The train arrives and sets off at 9.14 on the dot. It stops at some local stations, then speeds on for a stretch. At one stage a crowd of lively and rather noisy schoolchildren jump on board. One little lad's flask leaks and his seat becomes wet. As the scenery around here is quite uninteresting – more ugly suburbs – I bury my nose in my Japanese phrase book for a while. Much to my disgust, it begins to cloud over again.

The farther south we travel, the more mountainous the terrain becomes. A few stops later, the crowds in the train melt away and it becomes quieter. After the town of Hashimoto, we begin to approach the mountains. They form a grand spectacle: high, sheer peaks, all wooded, and some shrouded in mist. When we begin to climb slowly, I am able to peer down into green gorges, where traditional farmhouses can be glimpsed. However, we still have not left modern civilization behind – far from it!

Finally, after an interminable journey of twists and turns, we arrive at the little station of Gokurakubashi, where we clamber aboard a cable car. This brings us to the top of Mount Kōya in five minutes. Waiting for us is a bus, which brings us through a very touristy-looking small town. I am amazed to discover such a place on the top of a mountain. I travel straight to my destination: the Shojoshinin temple, where I shall be staying. When the bus arrives there, I pay ¥260 for the short journey and hop off.



Shojoshinin temple



Shojoshinin temple, Kōyasan

The temple turns out to be quite small and a little tumbledown. Judging by the photos in the brochure, I had believed that I would be staying in a more upmarket establishment. A lady working in the garden takes my voucher and fetches a young monk to show me the way. Donning plastic indoor slippers, I follow him along the squeaky corridors until we come to a tiny room with paper *shōji* (sliding doors) and a view overlooking a delightful garden with a fish pond, in which carp are swimming. Although the room is very basic and feels cold, it is typically Japanese.



View from my room in the Shojoshinin temple, Kōyasan

As soon as I have settled in, a lad appears with tea and a cake, both of which are very welcome. I am presented with a large colour map of the mountain top and a wooden rice ladle. When I have finished my tea and have sorted out my things, I amble around the place and take some photographs. By now there is some weak sunshine outside. The temple is quite charming; in it is another garden and a large, barn-like kitchen area that I find quite interesting: it has massive, rough-hewn beams and huge ovens for steaming rice. Having had a peep at some of the other guest rooms, I come to the conclusion that my humble room is probably the most genuine of them all, for some appear a little too *deluxe* for a temple. After I have enquired about dinner time this evening, I set off to have a look around the little town.

It's midday now, I'm hungry and in need of something to eat. Just across the road is a cheap restaurant where I order a simple bowl of *kitsune udon* (noodle soup containing fish cake, deep-fried *tofu*, scallions and soy sauce). The lady who serves me is very friendly and presents me with a little brochure in English about Kōyasan.

Afterwards, I return to the temple, where I wash my teeth and set off again. I walk towards the west end of the little town along a busy street lined with souvenir shops and restaurants. On the way I notice very well-dressed monks, wearing white cotton gloves, driving large, expensive cars. I immediately conclude that a lot of money is being made from the crowds of pilgrims and visitors here. I believe that I can detect a faint whiff of corruption hanging in the air.



Kongōbuji, Kōyasan

I eventually arrive at the Kongōbuji, the main temple and headquarters of the great Shingon sect. Although it looks like an impressive old temple from the outside, I do not bother visiting it as it seems that there is little of importance to see and there is a ¥350 admission charge. I merely sit on a bench and eat a tasty satsuma orange that I have bought on the way here. I have paid ¥450 for three of these tiny oranges – more than I have paid for my lunch! However, I feel that am in need of some vitamin C in order to fight off my cold.

I leave, continue westwards and take a look at the large and vulgar Daitō or Great Pagoda of 1936, with its faded red paint and modern statues inside, then the elegant little Miedō with its row of lanterns. After a quick look at the Kondō or Golden Hall (rebuilt in 1932) and some of the other temple buildings, I walk to the Reihōkan or Treasure House and pay ¥500 to look at the exhibits. I recognize a couple of portraits of Kōbō Daishi, who was born in 774, went to China to study, and returned to found the Shingon sect of Buddhism here. As well as being a great teacher of religion, he was also skilled as an artist, sculptor, calligrapher and author, and was a leader in educational enterprises and social work. Here in the Reihōkan are many fine statues and examples of early calligraphy, which I stop to admire. Although I realize that the exhibits here are quite important, there are not many to see and so I am out of the place fairly soon.

I then walk a short distance towards the Daimon, or Great Gate – the original main entrance to the town – but as the street is so noisy and uninteresting, I turn back. I then go hunting for the Fudō-dō, stumbling across a couple of interesting little temples, one containing a Zen stone garden. Here I learn from some youths that I am

in the wrong place altogether. Heading northwards, I walk along a quieter street lined with temples, all of which seem to contain lodgings for guests. Some are traditional, others relatively modern. I realize now that the one in which I am staying is quite unique.

By now it is extremely cold; although I am wearing my thick jumper, I am freezing. This is probably due to the altitude as well as the weather. As it is now gone four o'clock, I begin to walk back the way I have come. I stop in a shop to look at some magazines (one of which is a *very* hard-core pornographic publication), and buy another notebook to serve as a diary.

Arriving back at my lodgings, I make ready to have a bath, but there seems to be no sign of life: I cannot find a bathroom that is in use. I return to my cold room, wait until I manage to catch the attention of a youth and ask him to light my oil heater. He firstly fills it, then uses a match to light it.

I then wait for dinner, which I understand will be served at 5.30 p.m., but there is no sign of any food. I can hear people scurrying about. I then hear a crash; a lad has dropped a load of dinner trays and the food has landed on the *tatami* mats. There is then a delay of half an hour, during which I assume that fresh helpings of food are being prepared and the mess is being tidied up. Members of the staff seem to be in a great hurry and can be seen dashing about all over the place. The people staying here, who are mostly Japanese, are walking around with little white towels. Have they come from their evening baths, I wonder? I am unable to get any information.

At last I am called and brought round to a room in which the low tables – or rather trays with feet – have been arranged in two rows. Some ladies are already here, waiting. I remove my slippers, excuse myself and take a vacant cushion opposite them. On the cushion is another wooden rice ladle, which I put to one side. I wait a few moments; a middle-aged couple come in, excuse themselves, and sit down beside me.

Not surprisingly, the food here is vegetarian. There is a great variety on offer and most of it is quite tasty. A young monk gives us containers of hot rice and bowls of soup. I am glad of these hot dishes, for most of the food is served cold. I tackle my helpings and have difficulty in managing some of the small dishes and cutting the *tofu* with the unusually long chopsticks. The people beside me wolf down their food; I have hardly started when they are finished. Everybody has excused themselves and left by the time I am halfway through my meal.

I finish with a banana and a welcome hot pot of tea. I am so glad of the fruit! I also polish off some leftovers that I find on a tray nearby. By the time I am finished, I have eaten well. I might as well eat as much as I can, for I have paid quite dearly for it!

I then return to my room, where I write my diary. Outside, in the other rooms, is a great hubbub of lively conversation and laughter. It is obvious that the place is full; the atmosphere here seems to be quite congenial.

Having spoken to a young man who has come to make up my bed, I take myself off to *o-furo*, the bathroom. In it I find just one Japanese man and an American, with whom I chat. The latter tells me that he has been here before; not only does he speak Japanese well, but he also speaks and teaches Chinese. When three Japanese men join us later, he carries on a lively conversation with them, explaining where I come from. One of the men sings what he believes is an Irish song, but I cannot recognize it. After the American leaves, the three men fire questions at me in rapid Japanese, almost all of which I am unable to understand. I can hardly find words to reply.

I then leave, walk down a corridor lined with rows of white towels, and return to my room, where I continue to write my diary. Gradually the noise from the other

rooms dies down. It is an interesting experience to stay here, but expensive at £24 a night! I retire to bed at about ten o'clock. As I have a good, thick quilt, the bed is pleasantly warm. Soon I am fast asleep.

I am woken at about 4.30 a.m. by voices and the sound of people moving about. The monks and guests are getting up, sliding doors open, talking, hawking and spitting, then washing themselves at the cold water tap in the semi-darkness. I stay put and after a little while drift back to sleep. I awake with a start at six to the sound of the temple bell summoning the people to morning prayer. There is a sudden rumble of footsteps as people hurry to the *hondō* or main hall. I quickly jump up, dress, splash some cold water on my face and hurry off. I am relieved to discover that I am not the last to arrive; several more Japanese people come in after me. Many of them are dressed in their white pilgrim's costume – a common sight here.

The little hall is crowded and barely lit by candles and a few dim electric bulbs. Two priests dressed in black officiate, beginning with a monotonous chant. From time to time this is interrupted by the sound of gongs and cymbals. The scent of incense wafts its way around the hall. It is a strange experience to be here at such an unearthly hour of the morning, but it is quite interesting to attend the unusual ceremony.

Later, one of the priests rises and begins calling out people's names in a high-pitched voice. These are people who have asked for prayers to be said for their ancestors. One by one they step forward in order to receive certificates stating that the prayers have been said. Some of the people go the wrong way and are put right by hissed instructions from others.

When this is over, some *sūtras* and prayers are said by everyone together, the syllables set to a steady rhythm. I have heard this type of chanting before in other temples. After a few more bangs on the gong and some ceremonial bows, the morning service is over and one of the priests begins talking to the people.

At this point everyone files out and makes for a large dining room, where a breakfast of rice, soup, a type of cold omelette (I think!), dried seaweed, a little dish of vegetables and pickles is served. This time the meal is eaten at a more relaxed pace. However, most of the people rush off when they have finished.

I linger a little longer, then make for the gents' bathroom. As there are no electrical sockets in the bathroom, I use my safety razor and some hot water. Thanks to my poor technique in using razors of this type, I manage to cut my throat a little. Back in my bedroom I discover that I have an electrical socket – which means that I can use my electric razor here!

As the sun is shining outdoors – I have taken the precaution of putting on my tee shirt over my vest and under my shirt – I leave and go outside. However, as it is now only eight o'clock in the morning, it is still quite chilly. I set off at a brisk pace and walk to the other end of the town, stopping at the Nyonindō nunnery. However, as I can discover no proper entrance and no other buildings (if indeed there are any), I move on and return by the same route, though stopping at nearly every temple in order to have a look around. Most of them are modest; some are old and interesting, while others look rather new. As I have all day, I take my time.

While admiring the fine stone garden in front of the Fukuchi-in, a young man approaches me and, speaking in excellent English, asks me where I am from. When I tell him, he amazes me by his remarkable knowledge about Ireland and its culture; he knows about James Joyce and William Butler Yeats. Soon we are deep in conversation. He tells me that he is a priest in this temple; later I discover that he is actually the second chief priest. He explains that he was born here on Kōyasan and

entered the temple when he was a child. Dressed in jeans and a casual jacket, he certainly does not look like a priest! As I had noticed yesterday, the priests here look very well off. This one, Haruki, is certainly very well read and broad-minded: he knows quite a lot about Western culture, has been to Greece, knows what a harpsichord is, and has listened to music by Mozart and Bach. He tells me that he also knows about the trouble in Northern Ireland and is interested in the Celtic way of life and its influence on Catholicism.

Haruki then brings me into the temple (a rather slick, modern one), shows me the equally modern-looking gardens at the back and, having invited me to sit down, talks to me at length about everything he can think of. Obviously he is interested in practising his English. He tells me that he is planning to visit America, tour around Europe and go to England in order to 'brush up his English'. Although he has learned some basic English at school, he tells me that he has only seriously studied the language during the last three years. His vocabulary is quite astounding and he has all the colloquial catch-phrases at the tip of his tongue. We end up exchanging addresses and then, shaking hands, we part. Having had a bad experience with a monk just a few days ago, this makes a welcome change; I have found Haruki to be a very likeable man.

I now find my way back to the Kongōbuji (the headquarters of the Shingon sect, which I skipped yesterday) and decide to visit it. As I am able to slip in behind a crowd of Japanese tourists, without paying, I am delighted! It turns out to be quite a fine temple, with painted sliding screens inside, which I feel must have been created by the famous Kanō school of painters. One set has gold backgrounds; another is executed in black ink on plain white backgrounds. Following the tourists, I find myself in a corner overlooking a large and beautiful rock and sand garden. As it is so striking, with branches of maple leaves that have already assumed their autumnal colouring, I take a photo of it. I then wander around the corner to see more – something nobody else bothers doing.

Next comes a large, modern hall, where I am handed a paper package containing something. I help myself to a cup of tea from a machine; having drunk it, I look inside the paper package. It contains a colour brochure about the place and a couple of sweet cakes that I should have eaten with the tea!

I then complete my tour of the temple by going around the back of the building, where I find some more painted sliding screens and a huge kitchen area much the same as the one in the temple where I am staying.



Daitō, Kōyasan



Mountains from the Daimon, Kōyasan

From the main temple I walk through the area that I passed yesterday and stop to take a photo of the Daitō in the sunshine. Today I walk as far as the Daimon (Great Western Gate), which I had skipped yesterday. I discover that the gate is completely enveloped in corrugated iron, but that the view from the road overlooking the surrounding mountains is quite spectacular. I decide to photograph it.

Afterwards I foot it back to the town centre, where I stop for a bowl of *tsukimi soba* (buckwheat noodles, eggs, scallions, carrots and a broth of soy sauce and other ingredients). It is hot and filling, which is just what I need. I stay for a while in the restaurant, enjoying the warmth of the dining room.

I then set off once again and pop into various little temples in order to have a look at them. Many turn out to be rather disappointing. I am glad that I am staying in the one that I have chosen, for it certainly seems to be the best of the lot! I also peep into some of the souvenir shops and buy a plastic soap box for myself.



Okunoin Gobyō cemetery, Kōyasan

Later I find myself at the famous Okunoin Gobyō cemetery, where I walk for some considerable time amid tall pine trees and cedars, passing endless gravestones, *stupas*, little stone temples and dressed statues of Jizō, similar to the little statues that I had seen in Kamakura. It is dark here because of the great trees, and consequently colder. After a little while my peregrinations here become a little monotonous. However, I am cheered up when the sun comes out and I begin meeting groups of pilgrims, all dressed in white, some with wide straw hats, others with staffs, and most of them with little tinkling bells. I manage to take several photos of them.



Pilgrims at Okunoin Gobyō cemetery, Kōyasan

I then follow them and their guide to the strange and mysterious Tōrōdō, where three thousand lanterns glow dimly and a priest intones a litany over loudspeakers. Although this is a modern temple, it is fascinating and full of atmosphere. Outside it, incense burners billow forth clouds of scented smoke. Around the back is the small but very sacred wooden mausoleum of the great saint of Kōyasan and the founder of the Shingon sect, Kōbō Daishi. I stand here and listen to the prayers chanted by the fervent pilgrims. This indeed is a very holy place for them; one lady leaves weeping. I can sense a deep sense of awe in this dark, mysterious forest.

I then follow some of the pilgrims down underneath the temple, where I see more lanterns and thousands of tiny statues of the Buddha.

I finally leave the cemetery and slowly make my way back to my lodgings, which I reach shortly after four o'clock. Inside I eat another orange, enjoy a very hot and relaxing bath, and, at six o'clock, my dinner is brought to me in my room. I wonder why I have been afforded such special treatment; perhaps yesterday evening's accident had upset the usual routine. Nonetheless, I feel that the service is somewhat erratic here. My *yukata* (the light cotton kimono used for sleeping) was taken this morning and I got the impression that the young monk I spoke to had not realized that I would be staying here again tonight.

The meal is much the same as it was the previous evening, though with a few minor changes; once again, I eat plenty. Afterwards the trays are taken away, the *futon* and quilt are brought, and the strange oil stove, which I am unable to operate, is lit for me. Left on my own, I apply myself to my diary. It has been an enjoyable day except for the chilly weather and my cold – I have been snivelling all day. I notice that I'm not the only one affected by the weather, for I have heard the Japanese people complaining of the cold, snivelling and hissing through their teeth – especially this morning. I retire to bed soon after nine o'clock.

Although I am half woken this morning at 4.30 by the same hustle and bustle as yesterday, I decide to stay put. Because of my cold, I have no desire to sit for the best part of an hour in the temple hall, so I stay put in my warm bed. I hear the bell sound at six, but doze off again and surface about half an hour later. When I venture out of my room shortly afterwards, I am called for breakfast, which I eat with some Japanese people in a fine room with gold screens and a *tokonoma* – the alcove in which a scroll of calligraphy is displayed. The meal is exactly the same as yesterday's. Afterwards, we are served tea in our empty rice bowls.

I then shave – this time with my electric razor – and, when ready, leave the temple just before 7.30 a.m. I walk down the road and catch a bus to the cable car station. I am a little anxious about the time, but I should know better: the Japanese, as usual, have worked everything out, and I arrive at the station with about five minutes to spare. We descend to the musical accompaniment of *Edelweiss* and, when we reach the little railway station, board the train bound for Osaka. As it is such a lovely sunny morning, with the wooded mountains looking so splendid, I wish I had more time to spend here!

On the train I chat to a pleasant young couple from the island of Kyūshū, just south of Honshū where we are now. They leave when we stop at Hashimoto city and I continue to Osaka on my own. I arrive there soon before ten o'clock and set off on the underground railway for the Umeda station. There I collect my Japan Rail Pass (which, in theory, I should have been using since yesterday) and then, chancing my arm, I telephone the Mainichi Broadcasting Station – one of my colleagues at work has given me the number. A lady answers ('*moshi-moshi!*') and says something to me in Japanese. I ask her, in Japanese, if I can speak to somebody in English and she replies, '*Chotto matte, kudasai*' ('Please wait a moment'). After a short pause, a man who speaks perfect English greets me and tells me that his name is Mr Yoshikazu. I explain to him that I work for our national broadcaster in Ireland and wonder if I can visit the Mainichi station. He very kindly says that I can, and tells me how to get there. It is easy: all I have to do is board a train bound for Kyoto and get off after a few stops.

After a little bit of confusion over trains (due to the fact that I had left my piece of paper with the details beside the phone), I catch one of the local ones, hop off at the appropriate stop and board a private minibus that brings me and some other people

straight to the broadcasting station. At the reception desk I ask for *Yoshikazu-san* (Mr Yoshikazu) and within a few minutes a pleasant young man appears and hands me his business card. I apologize for not having a card (something that is essential in Japan when meeting somebody for the first time, so that each party can determine the rank of the other and therefore use the appropriate level of vocabulary). Mr Yoshikazu smiles, tells me not to worry, and writes down my name.

As it is very near midday and time for lunch, I am invited into the little staff restaurant, where I am treated to a meal of spaghetti and an iced orange drink, and given a brochure about the station. Mr Yoshikazu is very hospitable and kind to me. We get on well together and chat about ourselves and our work in television.

When we have finished lunch, I am brought on an extensive tour of the station. Although the building is rather old and tatty – and some of the equipment is out of date – most of it is very impressive indeed. I am quite astonished to discover that the continuity studio is fully automated and that the entire system in use is duplicated, using a second computer programming system, so that if the main system develops a malfunction, the second one kicks in immediately. This feature, which ensures that the station cannot ‘fall off the air’, is something that we do not have at home. I am shown the telecine and videotape area that is used for commercial breaks, the main videotape area, the editing and dubbing departments, the central apparatus room (where troubleshooting and the fixing of faults are taken care of), the master control room (which is most impressive), the transmitter and the fibre-optic system for sending the signal to Osaka. The latter is a recent innovation. Another thing that amazes me is the casual, almost lazy atmosphere in the place, despite the fact that there are programmes being transmitted live from the various studios. I am told that they broadcast from 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. the following morning.

It is only when we enter a live studio, where a rather inane quiz programme is about to start, that we see a little bit of bustle. This just occurs at the beginning, when a news flash has to be transmitted; once this is out of the way, things settle down. Despite the furious pace of the programme, the director sits back and gives an occasional instruction, leaving everyone else to do their own thing. No doubt every member of the crew knows the show backwards. The vision mixer does all his own switching from one camera to another (some of it rather sloppily) and the director adds all the various captions to the pictures. There is no sign of a production assistant, who generally sits beside the director and takes note of the time. The whole show seems to happen by itself. When I am brought into the lighting control room, I find the operators seated with their feet up on their desks, the controls for the exposure and quality of the camera pictures all set to automatic! I am completely taken aback – I had never expected to encounter such a relaxed atmosphere within a Japanese business premises!

After we have watched the quiz programme for a little while, Mr Yoshikazu brings me to the news studio, where a new set is being assembled. Some of it looks quite rough and ready, which surprises me, though the overall effect is very impressive. This, the smallest studio, is more or less equal to our second largest one at home.

Finally, we take a look at the props and outside broadcast areas, then go to Mr Yoshikazu’s office. Here I am introduced to his pleasant English-speaking lady assistant and served coffee. When I feel that I have taken up enough of these kind people’s time, I make a move to leave. I am taken down to the grounds outside; just as we arrive, a minibus appears and I clamber inside, thanking my host for everything. Trust these Japanese – everything has been timed perfectly and has gone like

clockwork. I have thoroughly enjoyed this visit, even though I did not particularly want to be reminded of work while on holiday.

I now catch a train back to Kyoto, where I telephone the Uno House, a cheap *ryokan*, and reserve a room for tonight. I then go to the Tourist Information Centre in order to check information about travelling to Ise, take a look at the notice board, then travel by bus to the Uno House. Here I discover that I am sharing a room with a pleasant young Canadian chap. At six o'clock we both go out to have a cheap evening meal in a local restaurant. Back at the house, I take a bath and spend the rest of the evening writing my diary.