

13: Ise, Toba, and festivals in Kyoto

After a good night's sleep, I wake at seven and pop out to buy a filled roll, which I eat in the kitchen of the *ryokan*, with a cup of tea. I then set off once again for the train station, where I buy some more rolls of film and sit out in the sun until the train bound for nearby Ise arrives. It leaves at 9.22 and as it is a slow local train, it takes forever to get there. It is comfortable enough, though the carriage is old and is inclined to rattle and shake. Not many people are travelling in it this morning.

During the first part of the journey the scenery is nondescript and rather boring, but later it becomes more rural and mountainous. Despite this, the landscape is marred by the presence of electric pylons, houses, factories and chimneys. Only very briefly do we pass through a wild, mountainous region with narrow valleys, tiny fields, and hay drying on wooden frames. Shortly afterwards we are back in a flat, monotonous landscape.

We finally arrive at Ise, where I have come to see the Jingū, or Grand Shrine, which is the most sacred Shinto shrine in Japan. Having seen photographs of it in rural surroundings, I am somewhat surprised to discover that I have arrived in a large, modern town. I walk down a street lined with smart shops and exclusive restaurants, and at the end find the entrance to the grounds of the Outer Shrine, the Gekū, which is dedicated to Toyouke-Ōmikami, the goddess of farms, crops, food and sericulture. Although it is past midday and I am feeling a little hungry, I decide to go in; this turns out to be a good decision as I almost have the place to myself. At this point, the sun disappears behind a thick bank of cloud – until now the weather has been perfect.



Gekū shrine, Ise

After walking through a forest and passing under several *torii*, I eventually come to a compound where the sacred shrine is located, though it is almost hidden from view by a series of high wooden walls. I can sense that there is a great air of exclusiveness about this important shrine, despite the fact that its structure is so simple. This, in fact, is a perfect example of the original, and therefore purest, form of Japanese architecture – long established before any Chinese influence was introduced to these islands. I can only glimpse at its interesting roof made of plain cypress wood and thatch from a distance, and, once inside the first wall, peep around a corner at it. I am

just about to take a photo when a guard rushes in and stops me. If only I hadn't hesitated! The security here is very heavy; I had noticed that there were dozens of guards at the main entrance. Staying more or less where I am, I gaze around, watching people coming into the sacred precincts, praying, clapping their hands, then leaving. A lady appears with a baby dressed in what looks like a special colourful kimono; I wonder if she is about to implore the god and spirits of the shrine to protect her child.

Leaving the complex, I retrace my steps and travel by bus to the Inner Shrine or Naikū, some six kilometres south of Ise. When I arrive, I notice some restaurants near the bus stop. I choose one, order a bowl of noodles and afterwards buy a couple of *yakitori* (skewered meat and vegetables) from a nearby stand. They are quite tasty and will hopefully keep me going for a while.



Naikū shrine, Ise



Building in Naikū shrine complex, Ise

I then set off for the Naikū. Here the grounds are much larger and more pleasant, as they are surrounded by wooded mountains. The path takes me through a forest, where everything is dark and mysterious, though now the sun begins to shine and

sparkle through the leaves. Eventually I reach the main shrine, which is just as fine – and as elusive – as the first one. This one is dedicated to Amaterasu-Ōmikami, the sun goddess. Enshrined here is the Mirror, one of the *Sanshu-no-Shinki* (Three Sacred Treasures). Here I have no opportunity whatsoever to take a photo, for the guard keeps his eye on me all the time. Instead, I photograph some of the other buildings and pretty spots about the place, walk around the complex again, and end up watching part of a videotape of various colourful ceremonies held here during the year. As the place is lifeless, I have obviously come at a bad time.

Back outside the grounds, I make enquiries about catching a bus to Toba, the fishing port nearby, and discover that it will cost me ¥840 (a little over £3). As I consider this excessive, I walk to the road leading to Toba with the intention of hitch-hiking. However, as there is so little traffic – I discover that it is a toll road – I give up and catch the next bus.



The mountains and islands approaching Toba bay

Despite the expense, I am glad that I have made the journey, for the journey is quite spectacular. At first I am the only passenger on what turns out to be a luxurious coach. We drive up a twisting road into the mountains, where we look down over more mountains and then the rugged bay of Toba, in which a myriad of small islands can be seen in the deep blue sea. It is quite a dramatic sight. After just a couple of stops – one at a lookout point – we tumble down into Toba. This turns out not to be so exciting, as the journey over the mountains has been more spectacular.



Toba seafront

Toba is not exactly a fishing village, but a fine modern town overlooking a wide bay, beyond which can be glimpsed some of the islands. I scout around the seafront and pier, enjoying the fresh sea air and the sunshine. On the pier are dozens of colourfully-dressed men fishing; I notice that all of them are using quite sophisticated equipment.

I stay here for about three quarters of an hour, then amble towards the train station. I catch my train just in the nick of time; I have written two departure times in my notebook: 16.24 and 16.28, and it leaves at the earlier of the two! On the train I admire the view of the coastline and chat to a young Australian couple who get off at Taki. I am then on my own for the rest of the long journey. I watch the sun set behind the mountains, drift off to sleep, and later apply myself to learning a little more Japanese from my phrase book.

I finally reach Kyoto by 7.33 p.m. and go off in search of some food in one of the station restaurants. I order a small piece of trout with salad and rice. At another table, a French couple are ordering wine, steak and chips. The waitress has quite a job attending to her fussy customers, and arranging the knives, forks and soup spoons.

I then leave and board a bus for the journey to Uno House. However, for some unknown reason, it turns left when I expect it to turn right and I find myself in an unfamiliar area of the city. As it is becoming late and I am getting a little anxious, I hop off and catch another bus across the city to save time. Fortunately I am able to arrive at the *ryokan* well before it closes at ten o'clock. I chat to some new lads in our room and finally go to bed.

Today is another public holiday and there are festivals everywhere. Having slept long and well, I rise at about eight o'clock and set off at nine. It is a dull, overcast morning. I travel by bus to Finn's house, which I find locked. I manage, however, to open my bedroom window, push my bag inside and take out the Kyoto Monthly Guide from the plastic bag of unnecessary luggage that I have left here. I then travel by bus to the Daitokuji, where the annual *mushiboshi* or 'treasure-airing day' is being held.

I pay ¥1,000 (£4) for a ticket and enter the main temple, which I have not been able to visit before, with a young American couple; the girl looks Japanese. Here we find hanging scrolls on display; their boxes have been laid out in the verandas. Unfortunately, as the rooms are so dark, it is quite difficult to see the paintings. Some clever people have brought torches. I am able to help some Americans identify the various works of art; some of the Americans have copies of the *New York Times*, in which an article has been published about the exhibition.

I find several old and important works of art here: paintings that I have seen illustrated in a book that I have read at home. As well as these masterpieces, there are numerous second-rate scrolls of a much later period, most of them painted in garish colours. Although I realize that what I am attending is an important exhibition, I do feel a slight sense of disappointment. I realize that there are more treasures that have not been displayed here, and I am sorry that I cannot see them after having read so much about them. There is also the possibility that some of the important exhibits on show may be good reproductions – what the public is allowed to see apparently depends on the weather and the mood of the monks.

After we have viewed the paintings and scrolls of calligraphy, we find ourselves in a room where tea is being served. I sit on my haunches with a crowd of people, eat one of the cakes that are being passed around, and accept a bowl of bitter green tea

from a monk who bows to everyone. After drinking the tea, I examine the *tokonoma* (alcove) and the tiny but exquisite painting of flowers displayed in it. This is by the famous Chinese painter Mu Qi (Mu Ch'i). I have just seen his noted Guanyin triptych in one of the other rooms: a fine set of hanging scrolls painted in black ink.

Having spoken to some of the Americans, I make my way to the Kōtō-in (which I have already visited), in order to see the treasures there. This time I pay ¥500. Here the main attraction is a collection of paintings by the Chinese artist Li Tang (c. 1050–1130) of the Song dynasty. Once again, I recognize many of them from book illustrations. These are breathtaking landscapes painted in monochrome ink.

One may wonder why Chinese landscape paintings are to be found housed in a Japanese Buddhist temple. The answer is that the original purpose of painting subjects such as lofty mountains shrouded in mist – or water – was not for decoration; such deceptively simple compositions were designed as an aid to the practice of meditation. Pictures painted on silk scrolls were traditionally kept in precious containers, and only unrolled in quiet moments, to be looked at and pondered over as one might open a book of poetry and read, then re-read, a beautiful verse. Buddhism, and particularly Zen Buddhism, encourages deep, meaningful meditation and utilizes such artwork as a subject or starting point.

It is interesting to note that the scenes depicted in scroll paintings were never drawn directly from nature; although the artists were often inspired by real-life scenes, they painted them at home, never exactly as they had seen them, but in a manner that captured what they believed was the essence of the scene. They learned to paint mountains, pine trees, plants, water, fish, birds and so forth not from studying nature, but by copying these elements from the old masters. This explains why the style of painting has changed so little over such a long time.*

It is certainly worthwhile coming here to see these wonderful works of art. I linger for a while, examining them, then leave.

My next destination is the Fushimi Inari Shinto Shrine, where an important festival is taking place: the *Koin Taisai* (Annual Grand Festival for Devotees). I am aware that it has already started, but my aim is to be there by one o'clock, when the main event is due to begin. I travel by bus to the main train station; as usual, the journey takes a long time. When I arrive at the station, I discover that I have left my rail pass in my main luggage in Finn's house. I try to board a train without it, but do not succeed. Annoyed by my stupidity, I walk to the nearby station of a private line and pay just ¥90 to travel to the shrine. Having wasted a considerable amount of time, I arrive at 1.30 p.m., when many of the people seem to be leaving.



Fushimi Inari, Kyoto

* E. H. Gombrich: *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd 1975), pp. 108–112

I discover that the various buildings of the shrine have been decorated with colourful banners and have tables laden with food and bottles of sake. Apart from this, the atmosphere is quite subdued. An official ceremony is in progress: a solemn and slow reading of prayers by colourfully-dressed priests. There is a large congregation of people and a sizeable group of well-dressed dignitaries. After some deep and strange chanting, punctuated by long, pregnant pauses, music is played over a loudspeaker system, and three young girls dressed in pure white (no doubt signifying that they are virgins) perform a slow-moving dance. It is an interesting spectacle.



Ceremony at Fushimi Inari, Kyoto

After this, a priest begins to call out the names of various dignitaries who make their way to the altar, one by one, reverently place a *tamagushi* offering – a sprig of *sakaki* (a sacred tree) with strips of white paper attached – on a low table, then bow, clap their hands twice, and bow again. Some of these people must be of high rank, for the congregation stands with them and follows their actions.

I leave at this point, as the ceremony is becoming a little monotonous, and go off in search of something to eat. I find a restaurant that serves a type of *sushi* that I have not tried before. It is served with a bowl of noodles and – strangest of all – a bag of crisps. It all tastes quite good. During the meal I chat to a young couple in poor Japanese and they reply in pidgin English.



Dancing, Fushimi Inari

Back at the shrine again I mingle with the people, watch another group of girls performing slow dances to a small audience, to the accompaniment of traditional music played on drums, *koto* (the plucked zither-like instrument) and a flute. In the first dance, the flute is completely out of tune with the *koto*; the fault is rectified by the start of the following one. I notice that the scale used in this music is the scale most frequently used in Japanese music, consisting of just five notes, two of them being semitones. Music written in this mode always sounds wistful or mournful as it appears to be in the minor. The notes of the ascending scale are: c, d \flat , f, g, b \flat ; descending, they are: c', a \flat , g, f, d \flat . Music written for the *koto* generally uses this scale.



Folk dances, Fushimi Inari, Kyoto[†]

At the same time, in another shrine building, there is folk dancing: rather bizarre dances performed to the accompaniment of a wheezy flute and three drums battering out odd, irregular rhythms. Men and women wearing strange, colourful masks appear and prance around. In one dance we see a snapping dragon; another features a fearsome fox, then weird goblins with colourful comic faces gambol around. In another dance, the dancer keeps changing his mask: at one moment he is a black man with big, round eyes, and, a moment later, he is a peasant woman.

This time I notice that many of the pieces are played in one of two versions of the Chinese five-note scale: either c, d, e, g, a or c, d, f, g, a. These scales seem to be used in folk and more popular types of music. Determining what type of scales are used in very ancient music, such as in Shinto rituals or Nō plays, is extremely difficult, as anything seems to be permissible.

I sit on some steps, watching and wallowing in the festive atmosphere. I also chat with a group of Americans. Later one of the Americans joins me and we chat until we decide to leave.

On our way out, shortly after four o'clock, we discover a stall where colourful headbands are being handed out to a crowd of young children. My American acquaintance manages to procure one for me. We then walk to the train station, where I catch a train to the Sanjo Keihan station. I then walk through the touristy Gion area,

[†] From here on, all the photographs were shot on new Fujichrome film



Fushimi Inari, Kyoto

and realizing that the restaurants here are too exclusive and expensive, I catch a crowded number eleven bus, and travel to the Koryūji (which I have already visited), where the *Ushi Matsuri* or Bull Festival is about to start. I meet a young French couple on the bus and stay with them. We arrive at the temple by six o'clock, but as there is nothing happening save for a bonfire and some lighted paper lanterns, we go off in search of something to eat. The French couple only want coffee and a sandwich, but I buy a takeaway meal of rice, deep-fried chicken and salad. I walk back to the temple, plonk myself down on a step beside the great bonfire, and, despite the stares of a group of local people, make short work of my tasty meal. I then throw the containers into a nearby bin and apply myself to the happenings that are supposed to begin at seven o'clock.

I then join a group of people behind a rope for a long wait, during which Shinto priests arrive in drabs and drabs, bearing tall poles with a couple of lanterns fixed to the tops. They stand in rows along a path, lighting the area. All this is done to the accompaniment of slow drum beats provided by drummers in the main temple. In the meantime I chat to an American lady and her son; understandably, the boy is becoming bored and fidgety.

At last, after an hour-long wait, a procession appears. It consists of four ogres (men wearing crude paper masks) and a priest impersonating a god (indicated by a white mask), who rides on the back of a small black bull. The ogres and the god are clad in white robes. Faintly illuminated by the dim lanterns, it seems as though these dream-like beings have emerged from the depths of some mysterious, dark abyss. They turn a corner, and, accompanied by boy drummers and lantern bearers, they make their way out to the nearby streets.

Following the crowd, I walk to another temple building, where we foreigners manage to procure good seats. It is curious that this ancient Shinto festival is taking place in a Buddhist temple; this is another example of the casual attitude shown towards the various religions here. Sitting at the edge of the veranda, I chat with some Americans whom I have met earlier at the Fushimi Inari shrine. It is amusing how I keep bumping into people whom I have met before. The lady I spoke to earlier had seen me three times in different places here in Kyoto.

There is another long wait, during which we pass the time chatting. Before us is a wooden platform with bamboo poles and a roof. On each side are large blazing bonfires. It is something of a miracle that the structure does not catch fire. Quite a number of people have gathered around the clearing, their faces glowing red and

orange in the firelight. Earlier a priest has been praying at a little fire within the temple, but by now he has left.

At last the procession returns. First of all, the lantern bearers file in and line the compound. Then come the four ogres, the god and the bull. The god is helped down from the bull and staggers up to the platform while the bull is led away. He then sits in the centre of the platform, surrounded by the four ogres. The pure white robes stand out against the darkness, yet blend beautifully with the light brown of the roofed wooden platform.

A priest now approaches the platform and presents the god with a paper scroll. The god begins to read what is written on it very slowly and in a high-pitched voice, holding the scroll up high and tilting his head back so that he can see it from under his mask. He just unrolls a little at a time. The first few words are chanted solo; the four ogres join him thereafter. This is a long and rather monotonous ritual that lasts for about an hour, but the suspense is palpable. Watching this strange scene, illuminated by the firelight and with the five unearthly faces in the middle, feels as though I am witnessing a ritual that has come from the very distant past. The atmosphere is electric.

There is momentary consternation when a young attendant, who has been standing almost motionless by the platform, suddenly collapses. He has either fainted or his knees have locked. The guards nearby rush to his aid and carry him into the temple. Another attendant takes his place and continues what his colleague has been doing: banging a metal staff on the ground during the pauses of the long recitation. At the top of the staff are rings that jingle at each stroke. What a strange ceremony! Even though I have no clear idea of what is happening, I am fascinated and feel privileged to be one of the spectators.

Towards the end of the recitation, the guards clear the way to the temple, and link arms to form human walls. Then suddenly, without any warning, the ceremony is over. The chanting stops abruptly and the five other-worldly beings make a mad dash for the temple, and once inside, slam the door shut. For some strange reason, the crowd has not reacted as anticipated: the people are expected to run after the five men and rip off their masks. I am told that if one of these stolen masks is hung over the door of a house, it is supposed to bring good luck. The fact that the paper masks can be bought at a booth nearby may explain why the people make no attempt to steal them. This then, is the rather surprising climax of the evening's ceremony.

At this stage, the crowd begins to leave. I peep into the temple at the unmasked priests and walk out to the street, where a number 11 bus speeds past – I have just missed it. I walk to the next stop, where I discover that the bus I have seen is the last one. A Japanese lad advises me to walk back and take a train to the city centre, where I will be able to catch a bus. Rather annoyed, I jump on to the next train and soon arrive at a part of the city that is still a long way from Finn's house. Then, much to my chagrin, I realize that I have missed the last bus here as well. What a country – it is not yet eleven o'clock! There is only one option left: to take a taxi. As there is a taxi rank right beside me, I hail one and the driver presses his button to open the back door for me. I tell the driver where I need to go. As I have anticipated, the journey is long and it costs me ¥1,060 (£4.24).

When I finally arrive at the house, Finn emerges from his bedroom to greet me and I bid him goodnight; by now everyone else is asleep. I spend some time repacking my bag and sorting things out, then read part of a guide book belonging to Finn. It is quite late by the time I go to sleep, but no matter – it has been a very interesting day.