

16: Eiheiiji temple, Fukui and Kanazawa

This morning I wake soon after seven o'clock and am down for a Japanese breakfast half an hour later. My companions in this hostel are a taciturn lot – not one of them says a word. It is a raw, misty morning and it is still raining. Looking at the view of the bay from the window of the hostel, the strange beauty of the place slowly begins to make some sort of impression on me. Before me now is an almost monochrome scene as depicted in one of the many Japanese scrolls that I have seen during my stay here: a serene landscape painted in shades of grey, muted blue and green, and with mountains shrouded by small wisps of white mist. Now I am glad that I have come here.

After breakfast I dash outside and catch the ferry just before eight o'clock. The fare costs ¥420 – dear enough. The boat is full of secondary school students: mostly girls wearing dark uniforms with white collars, sailor style. We stop at a small village on the way to pick up some more. It is interesting to observe a conglomeration of tiny shacks at the water's edge, each one with a boat under a shelter. This is another glimpse of rural Japan and the past. Thankfully the boat is not geared up for tourism.



Amanohashidate

We arrive at the main port of Amanohashidate shortly afterwards. As I have plenty of time to spare before catching my train at 9.24, I wander around an old Shinto shrine that I suspect must have been originally a Buddhist temple because of a three-storeyed pagoda that I find on the premises. I then make my way to the water's edge, where I admire the peaceful scene and take a photograph of it, even though I cannot see the famous sand bar properly from here. I eat an orange and walk to the station, where I spruce myself up and wait for the train.

It arrives at the appointed time; I climb aboard and we are off. After passing through some interesting mountainous scenery and stopping at various small towns, we arrive at Nishi-Maizuru, the terminus, where I must change to another train. I buy an *ekiben* or station lunch box for ¥600. This is the first time that I am about to sample one of these attractive wooden boxes containing genuine Japanese food.

I set off in a train bound for Tsuruga shortly after half past ten. This is a bigger and more comfortable one than the last one, though it is also quite scruffy. The scenery continues to be dramatic: high mountains peeping through the mist, small paddy fields, and fine bays offering dramatic views of the sea. During the journey, a very

pleasant Japanese man approaches me and starts a conversation in English; he tells me that has worked for two years in Morocco. As he is more used to speaking French, we switch from one language to the other. We chat until it is time for him to leave and then I travel alone. At midday I eat my cold lunch of rice, fish and vegetables, which I find very tasty. The food is very artistically arranged in various compartments within the box, and looks very attractive as the colours are beautifully arranged. Included are small disposable wooden chopsticks in a paper holder, and various condiments, including some fiery *wasabi*.

I finish my lunch in time to get off at Tsuruga shortly after half twelve, then change to another train for Fukui. This is an express train, better again in quality, but with dirty windows. We set off almost immediately, whizz through a long tunnel, and arrive at the large, featureless city of Fukui at 1.23 p.m. Here I buy a ticket for the train to the Eiheiji Zen temple up in the mountains and transfer to this minor local line. I am soon aboard, and finally I arrive at the Eiheiji shortly after two o'clock.



Eiheiji temple and monks at work, Fukui

Having placed my luggage in a locker, I walk up to the temple. The little town here is very touristy; coaches disgorge crowds of Japanese people at the temple entrance. Taking advantage of the confusion, I manage to sneak in with one of the groups without paying. I am glad that I have not bothered to pay, for my initial impression of

the place is not very favourable: it seems to be too big, too modern, and too institutionalized. We are directed to a large assembly room, where hundreds of us sit on the *tatami* mats and listen to a monk lecturing us on the temple and its buildings. At last we are let loose and are free to go walking around the complex.

Certain parts are quite pretty, but overall the place is large and rambling. Because of all the tourists, it is noisy. Nonetheless, I decide to take my time and see the place properly. This proves to be a wise decision, for the crowds begin to leave after a while and the place falls silent. I am now able to appreciate my surroundings a little better. I notice that many of the monks are busy working in the grounds. They are dressed in dark robes, and wear what look like white towels around their heads.

When I feel that I have seen enough, I return to the train station. As I have just missed the train at 3.15 p.m. and as the next one will leave an hour later, I decide that it is too late to go to Kanazawa today. Because the temple accommodation is too exclusive and expensive, I walk to the youth hostel, where I get a bed for the night. It is a fine, clean place. In the main hall I find a young boy practising on a slightly out-of-tune piano. As I am familiar with the piece, I play with him and help him.

Leaving my luggage in the semi-Japanese style room (no beds but a carpeted floor for the *futon*), I go out for a walk. I take a winding path up the mountain through the forest, following the course of a little stream. It feels very pleasant to be out in the middle of nowhere, away from everybody and everything. The path soon peters out and becomes overgrown, and so, as there is nowhere else to go, I return to the little town and the Eiheiji. By now it is very quiet and there is not a tourist in sight. As I wander around the outside of the temple, a Japanese lad approaches me and greets me. He tells me that he has seen me on the train and is now anxious to try out his English with me. He speaks it very slowly and with great difficulty, but he is determined to make himself understood. As he means well, I chat to him slowly and answer his many questions. We wander back to the hostel, stopping at a shop to buy a bottle of Japanese Suntory whiskey, and sit down to a tasty meal of fish, salad, vegetables and *sashimi* (thin slices of raw fish).

After our meal, we walk back to the temple. My companion explains that he is studying Zen meditation here for a few days and now invites me to join him this evening for the first session – depending, of course, on whether I will be allowed to accompany him or not, for one is supposed to make a reservation. He speaks to the officials, who grant me permission to enter.

Inside, we follow the crowds to the large modern assembly hall. It is obvious that there are quite a lot of people staying here. As I notice the sliding doors rattling nearby, I wonder if we are experiencing a minor earth tremor. When we are all seated, the half-hour session of *zazen* begins after a short introduction. It is far from satisfactory as there are too many distractions. Two monks walk up and down, giving everyone a sharp slap on the back with their long wooden sticks. It does not hurt; it is merely a way of keeping the sitter awake and alert.

After the session we are allowed to relax and are given a long talk. As it is all in Japanese, I cannot understand a word. Finally, a monk goes behind a panel, pulls something and a screen comes down. We now watch a very interesting film about the temple, shot during the four seasons of the year. The winter scenes are the most dramatic of them all. Although the place looks beautiful in the snow, I guess that it must be bitterly cold – especially if one is sitting motionless in meditation! It has been worth coming here this evening just to see the film.

Afterwards, my new acquaintance and I return to the hostel, where I begin to write my diary. My companion then invites me to a nearby tea house. I accept his invitation,

although by now his friendliness and kindness is becoming a little embarrassing. He has already invited me to his house in Kobe on the 23rd (today is the 17th October). Although this is feasible, it will put my plans out of joint. As he is so insistent, for he wants so desperately to practise his English, I feel that I cannot let him down and so have reluctantly accepted this invitation.

In the 'tea house', which is really a bar, he treats to me to a glass of whiskey with water and ice, followed by a very tasty green tea liqueur. I notice that he and some other young men in the bar are getting rather tipsy and lively. My friend telephones the hostel and obtains permission for us to stay out until 10.30 p.m. When we return, the bottle of whiskey purchased earlier is produced and shared by us and two other Japanese lads in our room. Eventually I manage to excuse myself so that I can write my diary. It is about 12.30 a.m. when I finally go to bed.

This morning I wake before seven and am ready for breakfast by 7.30. I have to wake my companion, who is out for the count. As he has drunk too much last night, he is almost silent at breakfast. When I return to our room after washing, he is back in bed, fast asleep. I make a hasty getaway by slipping out and catching the 8.10 train back to Fukui.

At this hour of the morning, the scenery is magical: bright sunshine now breaks through the mist that envelopes the high mountains. The few people on the train look sleepy, including a lone Zen monk with a shaven pate. His white *tabi* socks contrast with his dark robes, and he wears traditional *geta* or wooden sandals. Despite the supposed life of austerity, all these monks seem to be quite well fed; indeed, many look very self-satisfied and well off. Yesterday I have seen several of them in a car. By now these monks are beginning to give me the creeps, for I feel there is something very odd about them. I suspect that many of them may be homosexual; certainly the over-friendly young monk in Kyoto was. I have decided that I have had enough of Buddhist temples for the time being!

For some unknown reason we have to change to another train half way; we reach Fukui shortly before nine o'clock. As I have time to spare until I catch the next train, which will take me to Kanazawa, I eat an orange and spruce myself up. I then set off on a slightly crowded and not very clean limited express train just before 9.30, which takes off at a good speed. The scenery is pleasant enough but not very exciting.

I arrive in Kanazawa at about 10.20. It is a warm, sunny morning – ideal for sightseeing. I leave my luggage in a locker and, using a map that has been given to me, set off immediately to see the sights. I walk along busy and rather nondescript modern streets where, at one point, I see a small group of Zen monks in dark robes and wide straw hats begging, just as I have seen them doing in last night's film. I try to take a photograph of them but the traffic blocks my view.

I eventually arrive at the Eastern Geisha District, which turns out to be a maze of narrow alleyways and old wooden houses. Here it is much quieter and more typically Japanese. I slow down and spend some time ambling around the crooked little streets, peeping into doorways and visiting some small, interesting temples that are up in the nearby Higashiyama hills and have to be approached by climbing flights of steps.

This quaint corner of the city has a wonderful atmosphere. It is named after the profession that has been – and no doubt still is – taught and practised here: that of the geisha. Most Westerners believe that geishas are prostitutes, but this is most definitely *not* the case; they have constantly been confused with *oiran*, high-class courtesans who wear similar traditional dress, and *yūjo*, common prostitutes. Since 1958, prostitution has been criminalized in Japan. Although geishas are generally hired for

entertainment by men, they also can provide entertainment for groups of men and women. They wear traditional clothing and wigs, use white makeup on their faces, and go through a long training process that involves learning how to behave in a suitably formal and correct manner, converse sensibly about many different topics, recite poetry, tell stories, sing and play music, and play various (and often very silly) games with their guests – especially when they get a little too drunk. Nowadays it generally costs a small fortune to hire a geisha for an evening's entertainment.

I eventually find my way out of this fascinating old quarter and head for the main area in the centre of the city. First of all, I go to the tourist area in order to get some information about travelling around the Noto Peninsula, which I discover is rather inadequate. Then, as I am by now feeling tired and hungry, I find a pleasant little restaurant where I sit Japanese-style at a low table, eating a bowl of the local *soba* or buckwheat noodles, which is cool and refreshing. As the background music is traditional and played on a *koto*, the atmosphere here is quite pleasing. I feel fine once again after my meal and a few cups of tea. The bill comes to just ¥450.



Kenrokuen Park, Kanazawa

I now wander back out into the sunshine and pay a small fee to visit the famous Kenrokuen Park. The information sheet that I have been given begins, 'Welcome to Kenroken. You have now come to one of the most beautiful landscape gardens in the world.' This sounds quite promising. Rambling around this extensive park – or rather this series of gardens – proves to be quite pleasant, especially when I keep in the

shade of the tall trees. The best area is the intimate and very beautiful corner around the Yūgaotei tea house, a tiny cottage with a thatched roof. The open stretches with views of the modern city, which are not so interesting, are crowded with Japanese tourists and students. Although the park is big by Japanese standards, I have soon seen everything worth looking at, and am ready to leave.

Next I walk to the nearby Seisonkaku Villa, a former samurai mansion, but I discover that it is undergoing restoration. As the admission fee is a little too expensive at ¥400, I decide not to bother going in. I have brought only a little money with me, leaving the rest in my bag, which is at present in the station locker.



Samurai houses, Nagamachi district, Kanazawa

I then wander around the small Kanazawa Shrine, a sacred well, another samurai house (also being restored), then out to the main streets. My next stop is the old samurai Nagamachi district. To get to this, I pass through a rather sleazy area, losing my way as I do so. Although the official samurai houses are not up to much, and certainly not worth visiting, the area in general is quite interesting. Ambling around the narrow streets lined with unusual old wooden houses, tiny gardens and long walls, is like stepping back in time. Old ladies in sombre traditional dress smile at me, bow and wish me '*konnichiwa*' ('good day') in reply to my greeting. After I have finished exploring the area, I walk to the nearby Oyama shrine. Here I meet a tall Dutch chap

who has a very negative approach to everything Japanese; nothing seems to please him. I wonder why on earth he has come here.

After chatting to him for a short while, I find my way back to the train station and telephone the youth hostel. I manage to secure a bed but am told that I am too late to order dinner, even though it is only a little after four o'clock. I retrieve my luggage and am just in time to catch the number 20 bus to the hostel. I hop off at the appropriate stop, wander around the rather sleazy district and eventually find it. It turns out to be a small, though exceptionally smart and clean hostel, almost like a miniature hotel. I check in, go up to my small *tatami*-mat room and relax. By now I am tired and hungry.

Soon afterwards, a Japanese lad pokes his head around the door and, in excellent English, invites me to join him and a friend for a meal in a cheap restaurant that he has read about. I accept his offer and we leave. I am surprised by this young man's openness: he tells me that he has lived a life of sorrow. He suffered a lot of misery as a youngster, when he had to undergo an operation for a cleft lip. He is now feeling bereft after his mother's recent death. He was been educated by the Jesuits – hence his excellent command of the English language.

The restaurant he brings us to specializes in fish; the entrance is like that of a fish shop, with men chopping and preparing fish on slabs. We climb a narrow staircase and are shown into a Japanese-style room, where we discover that the prices here are higher than expected. We are advised to go downstairs, where everything is cheaper. We return to the ground floor, which is well and truly Japanese – there are no touristy gimmicks here! We have an excellent meal of fish with rice, vegetables, fish soup and pickles; tea is also supplied. The bill comes to a fairly reasonable ¥600. Having eaten well, I feel much better afterwards.

When we finish, the two lads decide to go out for a walk. I return to the hostel, where I have a good, relaxing bath. Later I go down to the entrance lobby, where I get another Japanese lad, who has recently gone around the Noto peninsula by motorbike, to pinpoint various towns on my map, which I have discovered to be hopelessly inadequate. While he is doing this, the lad who had invited me to the restaurant returns with his pal, and has a long discussion with the warden on my behalf. Between them they work out a timetable of buses that will take me round the peninsula in two days. It takes them some time to do this; once they have worked everything out, I am called over and everything is explained to me. After a couple of minor adjustments are made, I am happy. I thank them for their help and kindness, for they have certainly gone out of their way to help me. I am delighted with their plan, for it has solved all my problems.

I then return to my room, where I write some of my diary. Later the Dutch fellow appears – it turns out that we are sharing the room – and, after some more complaints about things Japanese, we prepare for bed by laying our *futon* on the floor. We turn out the light at 10.30 p.m.