

17: The Noto Peninsula and Takayama

I am up soon after 6.30 a.m. It is a dreary and cloudy morning; an annoying discovery as I have planned to travel around the Noto Peninsula today. I eat breakfast at seven and then, as I have time to spare, I walk to a nearby temple (not very interesting) and then explore the surrounding area, which includes another geisha quarter. Here I find more fascinating old wooden buildings. Yes, Kanazawa does have something of that old-world charm that is mentioned in the guide books – once one has left the noise and bustle of the main streets. After I have wandered around some of the alleyways, I return to the hostel. I then collect my luggage and travel by bus to the railway station. I ask an official where I can catch the express bus to Hakui, and discover that I am in the right place. After a short wait, it arrives on the dot of 9.40 a.m. The ticket is quite dear at ¥1,100 (£4.40), considering that this is for just a small part of the journey.

The bus drives through the uninteresting suburbs of Kanazawa and continues along a featureless road until it finally reaches the coast. The scenery is rather boring at first, but soon it improves. At one stage, just before we reach Hakui, we pass a long, straight beach. Hakui turns out to be a large, modern town. I clamber off the bus, wander around, then catch a local bus to Togi at 11.03.



Noto Peninsula

Once again, the scenery is not particularly interesting and I doze off for a while. When I wake, I discover that the bus is now winding around hills as it follows a twisting road, turning around hairpin bends and plunging down into narrow valleys. Up, down and around we go, bumping and swaying as we zoom past tiny paddy fields with people bent double working in them, little wooden buildings, and then tiny fishing villages with old wooden houses in small, sheltered bays. The coast here is really rugged: there are steep cliffs, rocks and tiny wooded islands out in the sea. The wind whips up the waves, and a fresh gust of sea air blows in through the window. At last I feel that I am out in the wild countryside, in contact with nature, and away from the large, ugly cities. The scenery here is truly magnificent and I am glad that I have ventured around this part of the main island. The expense of the journey no longer bothers me. I had thought about hitch-hiking, but now realize that I would have had

little or no luck, as the bus is often the only vehicle on the road and I am the only passenger in it. We pass several tourist coaches travelling in the opposite direction.



Noto Peninsula

After a very adventurous and thrilling journey, I arrive in the small town of Togi soon after midday. I try my hand at hitch-hiking for a few minutes, give up, and go in search of some food. I am unable to find any restaurants or shops selling sandwiches. Eventually I find a *sushi* shop, where I buy a takeaway lunch of fish and rice. I demolish this back at the bus station, and wash it down with a can of tonic water, which I get from a dispensing machine.

About an hour later I hop on another bus; this one is bound for Monzen. Once again we travel through some dramatic coastal scenery and pass rural villages. Here I can see women working in the fields; they are wearing blue clothing and what looks like white towels wrapped around their heads. I am delighted not to see too many signs of tourism here; certainly I seem to be something of a novelty for the schoolchildren! I notice that the people here are much more shy.



Sōji-ji temple, Monzen

I arrive at Monzen just before half past two. As I have a long wait for two hours here, I walk to the nearby Sōji-ji temple, which is quite pretty. Despite several groups of Japanese tourists and guides with their infernal loudhailers, the place is quite

peaceful. I linger here for a while, soaking up the atmosphere, then telephone the youth hostel in Wajima in order to reserve a bed for tonight. I speak to an elderly man who only speaks Japanese, and have difficulty in making myself understood. I hope that everything will be in order.

Back in the main street I buy two more films and wander around the town, which is quite rural and has many old wooden houses. As usual, the schoolgirls giggle nervously at me behind their hands, and the boys shout, ‘*Harō – bye bye!*’ However, ladies in traditional dress bow and greet me with great deference. When I have seen everything, I return to the bus station, retrieve my luggage from under a bench where I have left it, and wait for the bus to Wajima, today’s final destination.

The bus arrives at 4.20 p.m., sets off immediately, and drives through the slowly darkening countryside. This time we do not hug the coast, but go tumbling over hills and mountains, past fields and farmhouses. Although some people and schoolchildren hop on and off the bus now and then, there are very few passengers.

When we finally arrive at the large and uninteresting town of Wajima shortly after five o’clock, it is almost dark. After some enquiries that I make in my halting Japanese, I finally am given directions to the youth hostel and set off on foot. I get lost at one stage, but am put right by a policeman. I soon find it – it is beside a temple – and check in. Because I was cut off this afternoon before I had time to give my name and order supper, there is no evening meal for me. After I have taken a welcome bath, I walk to a nearby shop, where I buy a tasty takeaway meal of chicken and rice, which I eat in the dining room of the hostel with a cup of tea.

Having written a few sentences of my diary, I get the chap in charge to help me plan tomorrow’s timetable, then go off with a couple of Japanese girls and a lad, who speaks English, to a demonstration of Gojoju-daiko drumming (which is normally performed on a beach) in the nearby tourist centre. The hall is full of local people, many in traditional clothing. First of all, we are given a long and very wordy introductory talk, and then the lights are dimmed.

The performance does not last very long – just as well, for the drumming is very noisy, especially in such a small space. Men wearing fierce-looking masks, pretending to be warriors, prance around and bang a large *daiko* or drum with great dexterity. The rhythms are fast, exciting, and when the others join in, very syncopated and intricate. All the performers play with great skill; although the show is very touristy, it is well worth attending. It is over in just twenty minutes.

Afterwards we are invited to take a look at various local products in the shop: gaudy knick-knacks made of lacquer on sale for prohibitive prices. I glance at them and return to the hostel, where I sit down again to write my diary, but end up chatting to a Dutch chap. At ten o’clock we say goodnight and go to our dormitories. As the Japanese lads in my room are in high spirits and are laughing and guffawing loudly, I sit down to write a little more of my diary. Two of the chaps have bad colds; they sniff loudly and cough continuously. I have learned yesterday that it is considered impolite to blow one’s nose in public, which explains why people here have the disgusting habit of sniffing back their mucus noisily and – presumably – swallowing it. This evening I notice that the lads with the colds only blow their noses when they are in the toilets and when the lights are finally turned off. I therefore surmise that the Japanese do not like to be *seen* blowing their noses. I have also discovered that when people have colds here, they often wear masks over their noses and mouths when out and about, which makes them look like surgeons. The lady in a shop where I had bought an apple in Monzen this afternoon was wearing one of these. I presume that this is an attempt to stop the person’s infection spreading to others. If so, it is an

excellent idea, and shows consideration for other people. Different countries, different customs.

This morning I wake at seven; a few minutes later the music starts and there is an announcement over the loudspeakers. However, everyone else in the little dormitory is still fast asleep. I am the third person to appear for breakfast; the two girls who had gone to the drumming session with me yesterday evening are already in the dining room. As I discover that they are also going to Sosogi (my next stop) this morning, we decide to go together. The only thing that concerns me is that they tell me that the bus will leave at 8.10 – not 8.05 as I have been told.

The lads soon appear, looking very sleepy and groggy. I eat my breakfast quickly, get myself ready, and at ten to eight the girls and I set off. Although the girls are in no particular hurry, their timing is perfect. I see the ordinary bus leave at 8.05; it turns out that the bus we are to take is a JNR bus. I produce my pass, but have to buy a special ticket for ¥400. At least this is cheaper than the ordinary bus.

My delight quickly changes to horror when I realize that I am on a tourist coach. We have a young lady guide who talks non-stop, at breakneck speed, as if her life depends on it. It becomes very irritating after only a few minutes, even though I have no idea what she is saying. I imagine it is something along the lines of, ‘Good morning honourable ladies and gentlemen my name is Namiko and I am your guide for today we will be travelling through some very beautiful scenery on our way to Sosogi this morning if you will very kindly look to the left you will see some very fine traditional wooden houses as we leave Wajima and if you will very kindly look to the right you will see one of the oldest temples in this region...’ On and on it goes; perhaps the purpose of this barrage of words is to keep the people on board, most of whom are elderly, awake and alert.



Terraced fields near Wajima

When we drive out to the coast, we immediately stop at a tourist centre. I do not bother paying ¥300 to go inside, but walk around in the sunshine, enjoying the scenery and eating my last orange. It is a beautiful morning, and the sun shines from a clear blue sky. Shortly afterwards we are back on the bus and set off for a thrilling drive along the very dramatic coastline. This is the area that I have seen depicted in photographs; I now feast my eyes on vistas of terraced and irregular-shaped paddy fields sweeping down hillsides towards the sea. When we stop at a viewpoint, I open

the window and take a photograph. As I am on the wrong side of the bus, a young man removes his bag and lets me sit beside him. I am now able to enjoy the coastal view properly and chat to the lad in slow, simple English.



Tokikumi houses near Sosogi, Noto Peninsula

Near Sosogi we stop again, this time to visit two historic houses: the ancestral homes of the Tokikuni family. The first one is really charming: a rustic dwelling with a fine interior and classical gardens. While the tourists are being shown around by

another guide who addresses them through a loudhailer (she never stops talking either), I go off on my own, wander around the rooms and admire the gardens. The tea room, kitchen area and *doma* (a mud-floored work room) are of particular interest; in the latter can be seen huge, rough beams supporting the roof, above which I can see the thatch. In the kitchen there is a traditional *irori* or open hearth, over which a large pot hangs from a large hook, which is adorned with a large wooden fish; the hook is hung from the high ceiling by means of a long length of rope.

After visiting this first house, we clamber aboard the bus – there are more explanations from the guide – drive a few feet, and get out again to see the second building. This is a more modest affair with an *irimoya* thatched roof: a composite hipped-gable style unique to Japan. Although rather plain-looking from the outside, it is quite impressive inside. The house contains several classical rooms complete with *tatami* mats, as well as a rustic kitchen and *doma*. I photograph the light coming through the wooden shutters in the *doma*. According to a little brochure that I have been given, this house was built in 1590. No date has been given for the other dwelling.

Once we have seen around this house, we board the bus and drive off. I resume talking to my Japanese companion. I am in the middle of writing my name and address for him when the bus suddenly stops and the guide begins calling me. My companion explains that this is my stop. As I have mentioned to the girls this morning that I was going to Sosogi (but intended to travel on this bus to its final destination, Ushitsu), they had taken me literally and had told the guide this. Everyone now turns around to stare at me and I am told to hurry. I quickly glance at my schedule and discover that I will be in time for the next ordinary bus to my following destination, and decide to get off this crazy tourist coach as I have been driven insane by the guide's constant commentary. I grab my bags and leave. In my confusion, for I have been taken completely by surprise, I leave my camera behind (I had put it down to write my name and address), and my companion runs after me and hands it to me. We wish each other a hasty farewell and I jump off. The guide rapidly directs me to the correct bus stop, points to my connection on my timetable, bids me farewell and the coach drives off.

What a relief! I do not mind paying the fare on the ordinary bus – anything to get off that dreadful coach! How do the Japanese people take such a barrage of non-stop amplified word-weaving? Some of them had looked bored stiff and were not bothering to look at the scenery; others were ready to fall asleep.

As I now have time to spare, I wander along the seafront while waiting for my bus. When I return to the stop, four motorbikes and a car draw up and hands wave to me. It turns out that these are the lads from last night's youth hostel. They ask me where I am going; I explain to them that I am waiting for a bus to Kinousa, though I drop a hint that I will be glad of a lift to wherever they are going. The hint obviously causes them some confusion; they are probably not used to somebody making a statement, then hinting that something else may be preferable. After they have talked among themselves a short distance away, I am waved to come and join them. This is done in the typical oriental manner: instead of the hand being raised and waved towards the person who is beckoning, the hand faces downwards and scoops, almost like a JCB, towards the person beckoning. This can be rather misleading for Westerners, as it looks as though we are being shooed away.

I join the lads and am invited to pose with them in countless photos with the sea as a backdrop – we are at an Official Viewing Point. I am then directed to the very comfortable and impressive sports car with automatic windows and locks. Pop music

blasts from a super-duper hi-fi system. Although the two lads in the car do not speak much English, it is pleasant enough travelling with them. As we drive smoothly along the fine coast road, we stop at a few more viewing points (having ignored the excellent and breathtaking scenery in between), and take more photographs of each other. At one point I am treated to a can of rather horrible and gritty coffee juice. Money seems to be no object to these fellows. They are all good-natured and laugh a lot; unlike Irish lads of a similar age, they are by no means rough.



Cape Rokko, Noto Peninsula

Eventually we arrive at Cape Rokko, where the car is driven into a car park and we clamber up steps to a tiny lighthouse. Although there is little to see from this northernmost tip of the Noto Peninsula, except the sea and a sign pointing to Vladivostok, it is an Official Viewing Point and so more photographs are taken. Goodness knows what the Japanese people do with these countless photos of themselves in various places!

On our way back to the car, we stop at a tourist kiosk, where the lads buy cans of juice, ice creams and some type of disgusting-looking dried fish on a stick. Out come the cameras again; the backdrop this time is a fine view that I have discovered.

We finally leave the place and return to the motorbikes and the car. As I have mentioned that there is a train I can catch from Suzu at 12.22, we put the boot down and go zooming along the twisty roads, passing more impressive scenery. Suzu turns out to be farther away than expected, and also difficult to find. I mention that it is not so important and that I can go farther with them and catch a later train. Another place that may be handier is mentioned, but the lads in the car seem determined to find the elusive town of Suzu.

At last, after many wrong turns and stops in order to ask for directions, we eventually arrive at the little station in Suzu, but some fifteen minutes too late for the train. The lads make enquiries for me; I am told that the next train will be at 2.10 p.m., and that the officials in the station have worked out a timetable and route for me to get to Takaoka. This actually suits me better, for if I had caught the 12.22 train, I would have arrived in Takaoka far too early.

The lads now dump me here, say goodbye and drive off. Although I have enjoyed the novelty of travelling with them, I realize that I have had quite enough; the Japanese style of sightseeing just does not suit me! I now go off in search of food and end up in a tiny restaurant, where I eat *rāmen* (Chinese wheat noodles) and vegetables

swimming in a bowl of hot, peppery soup. This is not the ideal type of food for a hot day like today, but at least it is food! Afterwards I relax, write a little more of my diary, then chat with an Australian couple. Their daughter is a strange girl with almost albino-like features; she is living here and studying the language. She has a very bad manner.

As we are travelling on the same train, we make our way back to the station, stay together and chat during the journey. At one stage I have to rush to the loo, where I discover that I now have a dose of the runs. Feeling a little queasy, I rejoin my companions, chat, look out at the scenery as best as I can (the blinds have been pulled down), then doze off. As it is a local train, it is noisy, crowded and moves slowly.

At Ushitsu, the group of people who have been on the tourist coach suddenly appear and wave to me. After a rapid conversation, the young Japanese lad whom I have sat beside approaches me and asks me if I have left my jumper on the bus. As soon as he mentions this, I suddenly realize that I have. Inwardly I curse the guide who had rushed me; this was the first time that I had been put under pressure here in Japan and this has been the consequence. I am annoyed, but not too put out, for the lad gives me a telephone number that I can ring. This at least gives me some hope of retrieving the jumper.

At Anamizu we get out to change to our express train, but discover that we have to stay on the same one, which, from now on, becomes an express. We clamber on board again, much to the amusement of the Japanese, and sit in different seats. I am now able to talk to the young man, resume our conversation, and exchange addresses. He asks a friend to photograph us together and promises to post the photo to me.

Once again I fall asleep for a while, and am woken to say goodbye to the Australians at Hakui. After an uneventful journey, I get off the train at Tsubata a little later and say goodbye – for the last time! – to the Japanese people, who have all been very kind to me. No doubt they think that I am quite crazy! I now change trains and travel to Takaoka, where a youth hostel in a local monastery has been recommended to me. It is a short enough journey.

In Takaoka station I treat myself to a semi-European meal in a restaurant (I feel badly in need of some familiar food) and set off in search of the youth hostel. This turns to be rather difficult, for at first I am unable to get information, and then I cannot understand the directions that are fired at me in rapid Japanese. Because of this, I keep getting lost. The hostel is only signposted at one spot, where the direction indicated is quite ambiguous. As it has by now turned into a bitterly cold and windy night, I feel quite cold without my jumper.

At last I find the monastery, which is located in a quiet corner of the suburbs, and check in at 8.30 p.m. Mercifully, the lady in charge speaks English perfectly, with a slight American accent. She is extremely good-natured and pleasant. It is wonderful to be in a real temple: a building of wood, plaster and paper screens, with no modern sophisticated fittings or touristy additions. I am led along a dimly-lit corridor to a room. The lady slides the *shōji* or sliding door back to reveal a genuine Japanese room with *tatami* mats and a *tokonoma* (alcove), in which a hanging scroll is displayed; it depicts a Buddhist monk painted in ink. In the room is just one other guest: a tall, bearded German, who speaks perfect English. We chat for a good while, but I have to rush off to the loo several times. I then settle down to write a little of my diary, but as it is cold (we can now hear rain outside), I soon stop, take out a *futon*, select a thick, warm quilt, and go to bed after taking a hot shower. Despite the patter of the rain, the place is completely silent.

I wake at about seven o'clock this morning and get up soon afterwards. It is still very cold and raining outside. Looking out of a window, I discover a classical garden in a courtyard. It is quite a delightful place. I use the loo again, shave, wash and am ready to leave by eight o'clock. Before leaving, I ask the lady in charge to see if she can obtain any information about my jumper by ringing the telephone number that I have been given, but after making three or four calls, she tells me that nobody seems to know anything about it. I will just have to forget about it and apologize to my mother, who knitted it.

Before leaving, the German chap and I take a quick look around the temple, which we discover is quite deserted and tumbledown, then head off for the train station. Fortunately it has stopped raining and the sun is shining by now, though it begins to drizzle a little when we arrive at the station.

By now I am a little unsure as to what to do, especially as the weather is not particularly good. Should I return to Kyoto or go to Takayama as originally planned? I enquire at the ticket office and discover that a train to Takayama will be leaving now, and that I can catch a train from there to Kyoto in the early afternoon. I therefore make an instant decision to go to Takayama, one of the places that I have been determined to visit. Shortly afterwards I am on the train and heading for the mountains.

The journey at first is uninteresting, but after Toyama and well on our way to the Japanese Alps, the scenery picks up and the sun comes out. The mountains are on a grand scale and are wooded; there are some fine views here and there, as well as glimpses of autumnal colours. Unfortunately the scenery is not pristine, for we regularly pass through ugly towns of steel and concrete. The views, even when they are good, are spoiled by the dirty windows of the train. Only at one stage are we treated to really breathtaking scenery, when we pass beautiful wooded mountains, valleys and rivers. Just as the views are becoming really captivating, we plunge into a tunnel and are swallowed up by the darkness. However, I enjoy the journey and am glad that I have decided to come this way.

高山

Taka Yama
(High Mountain)

Finally we enter a wide, built-up valley and, after a little while, stop at Takayama shortly before midday. In the station I buy a plastic bottle of tea as I am feeling rather dehydrated, and speak to an Australian girl who tells me of a cheap place where I can leave my luggage. Following her instructions, I carry it to a small bicycle-hiring shop nearby and leave it there for a small sum of money.

Map in hand, I then set off to explore the town. Once again, it is not the quiet little town that I have been led to believe, but a very touristy and busy small city. The fact that it is Sunday and that everybody has come here for a day out does not help! I attempt to walk to the Hiei Jinya shrine, but get hopelessly lost – I discover that my map is useless. It seems that all Japanese maps are inaccurate. I eventually find the shrine, which is pretty enough; its approach up a flight of stone steps is flanked by lanterns, but it is in bad condition and repairs are in progress. I then walk up another street and arrive at the touristy old quarter. I drop down to the Takayama shrine, where I find an outdoor market being set up. As there are many people queuing to go inside, I decide against visiting it. I make do with a glance through the entrance and move on.



Old quarter, Takayama

I next walk up the narrow Furuimachinami, a street lined with old, dark wooden houses, most of which have been converted into souvenir shops and restaurants. I continue to another street, the Sannomachi, which has more of the same, and is jammed full of Japanese tourists. I pass various little museums, but as they are so tiny and rather unimportant, I do not bother to visit them. However, I do stop at the Yoshijima-ke, the large and fine dwelling of the Yoshijima family, and pay to go in. It contains a fine suite of *tatami*-mat rooms, a kitchen and a tea room, where I am served tea by the hearth, and a large mud-floored *doma* or work room near the entrance, where one can view the massive roof beams. Although relatively modern (it was built in 1908), this family home is quite interesting and well worth the visit. Having seen photographs of it, I am glad to have seen it for real.

Out in the streets again, I wander up to the Hachimangū shrine, which is on a hill. It is quite spectacular, especially at the main *torii* or gateway, where there is a picturesque dash of autumnal maple waiting to be photographed. Again, this place is thronged with tourists, and amplified voices and music waft from within. I wander around the place, ignoring the museums, then make my way back to the old quarter, where I investigate some more old houses that have been turned into museums. By

peeping inside I am able to see enough. As the sun is shining and the place looks cheerful, I take a few photos.



Hachimangū shrine, Takayama

I make my way back the way I have come, then head northwards to the Shorenji temple (I think!) and Shiroyama Park, where a castle had once stood. As there is nothing to see here, I walk farther north to the Higashiyama Teramachi (Temples of East Hill). This area, away from the tourist quarter, has far more charm: the streets are narrow and winding, and are quite picturesque. Here I meet the local people, see schoolchildren sketching, and come across some toddlers in a kindergarten. I wander around the small temples, which are pretty enough to make me change the film in my camera and take a few photos.

As time is getting on, I make my way back to the train station along the busy main street, stopping briefly to watch some children taking rides on a miniature steam train. I retrieve my luggage, buy a wholemeal bread roll in the station, and board a rather crowded train at 2.51 p.m. Although it is crowded, I cannot help notice (as I have done several times before) that the seats around me are left empty.

I eat my roll, which is very tasty, with a bottle of cold tea, then sit back to admire the scenery. I watch it until the sun sets, then spend the rest of the journey, which is more or less uneventful, writing my diary. While I write, a man reluctantly sits near me; I can sense him staring at me. Eventually he picks up his bags and moves to another seat.

I finally arrive in Kyoto at 7.40 p.m. and take the number 205 bus, which once again turns left at a junction instead of right, and I find myself travelling through unknown suburbs. The journey comes to an end at a big bus depot. Bewildered, I get out of the bus, not knowing what to do next. A teenage girl who has been on the bus notices my confusion, leads me out of the depot, and indicates that I wait with her. By now an icy wind is blowing up the deserted street. Various buses leave the depot but the girl ignores them. At last the correct bus appears and the girl puts out her hand to stop it. The door opens and I invite her to enter before me. She vigorously shakes her head and waves me on. As I clamber aboard, she stays put and says something to the driver. I now suddenly realize that she is not travelling with me – she has just been kind enough to wait with me in the cold and make sure that I get on the correct bus. Amazed at the girl's kindness, I thank her before we move off. I wonder if any teenage girl at home would help a confused foreigner of my age.

At 8.30 I arrive at Finn's place, where I meet Tamara (the American girl), and go off in search of something to eat, for I am ravenously hungry by now. I end up in a little restaurant that I have been in before, and dine on a hot bowl of rice with vegetables and a little meat.

Back at the house, I meet Finn and, after talking to him for a while, we go off for a bath. When we return, we bid each other goodnight and go to bed. However, I read for some considerable time, making plans for the next few days, and finally go to sleep at 1.30 a.m.