

## 18: Kyoto, Tsumago and Magome

Although it is cold, this morning is bright and sunny. As I am in no hurry, I take my time about getting up, washing, buying some bread and bananas for breakfast, and also purchasing a packed lunch. I do some repacking, organize various bits and pieces, then have a leisurely breakfast. Tamara and her mother, who are staying here, eat their breakfast upstairs. Later I amble outside, go to a local shop, and buy a bottle of whiskey for Finn and the household as a token of appreciation.

Soon after half past ten, Tamara's mother and I head off on borrowed bicycles to the Imperial Palace in order to see today's Shinto celebration, the Jidai Matsuri. Tamara has advised us to go early and arrive at eleven, an hour before the event begins, in order to see all the participants preparing; this, she has explained, will enable us to see all the costumes at close quarters and avoid the crowds. However, Finn has warned me that the procession is very slow-moving and boring.



Preparations for the Jidai Matsuri, Kyoto

We arrive at the palace grounds by eleven, park the bicycles under some trees, and walk off to mingle with the people. We discover that the participants are already dressed in their colourful costumes, preparing for the procession. Most of them are guzzling food from lunch boxes or snoozing in the sun. It is refreshing to see them

behaving in such an informal manner; many of them are laughing and joking, and there is a fair amount of horseplay. The costumes, which look magnificent, represent styles of different periods in Japanese history, from the earliest times to the last century. Included are fierce-looking warriors in armour, samurai warlords, gentry, court ladies, imperial dignitaries, archers, peasant women with flowers, and so on.



Preparations for the Jidai Matsuri, Kyoto

There are also fine carriages, gaily caparisoned horses, and even a black bull. It all looks quite fantastic; people dash hither and thither to snap photos. I follow suit, taking shot after shot.

We take a leisurely stroll around, looking at everything, and are just back at the palace entry when the procession starts at midday. On the way, a jovial Japanese man pushes a paper cup into my hand and, crying, 'sake, sake!' pours me a generous helping of the fiery rice wine. I am supposed to knock it back in one go, but can only manage it in three. I wonder what effect it will have on me!

We meet Finn at the roped-off area. I watch the procession for a short while, and realizing how slow-moving and boring it will be, decide to leave. Although I feel a little tipsy, I manage to cycle back to the house. It is great having the use of this racing bicycle, despite the fact that the saddle is too low for me and it is a little difficult to pedal.

Back at the house I throw off some clothes – by now it is boiling hot – and, as it is well past midday, I eat my lunch of *sushi* outside, sitting on a rock in the garden beside the tea house. Because of today's excellent weather and the fact that I am in no hurry whatsoever, I am in great form. I now feel that I am *living* in Japan (or rather in Kyoto) instead of travelling around and being a tourist. It is delightful to feel at home in a real Japanese house, complete with wooden floors, *tatami* mats, paper screens, and even a tiny rock garden with a tea house.

Afterwards I spruce myself up and take off again on the bicycle. This time I head towards the eastern mountains and the Kita Shirakawa area, where I have read that there are old houses with thatched roofs. Once again, because of the vagueness of the map that I possess, I go wrong a couple of times. At last I find the area and scout around, but can find no houses answering the description.

In the end I give up and press on to the Shisendō temple – one that I have not visited. This one is up a steep hill in a quiet and pleasant corner of the city, where the streets are narrow and the houses are small. The Shisendō is small too, but very peaceful and attractive; it was built in 1641 as a hermitage. I pay a small entrance fee, go in, sit on the *tatami* mats and look out at the fine garden of rocks and shrubs. Not many people are here today. After I have looked around the temple, which is more like a villa or ordinary house, I don a pair of Japanese sandals with a thong between the big toe and the next, and go shuffling around the garden. It is not spectacular; it is just very pleasant. Having taken a few photos, I leave, visit a nearby shrine (a rather modest affair), then cycle back to Finn's place.

At the house I leave back the bicycle, collect my jacket, and set off for the nearby Demachiyanagi Station of the Keifuku Electric Railway line. I hop on a train bound for Kurama, the venue for this evening's great Shinto Fire Festival. This, I have been told, is supposed to be very exciting – one of the best festivals.

The train is packed. I find myself seated beside a well-built, bearded man. He turns out to be a very pleasant German from Munich, and we soon get talking. He has come here with a group from his university in order to study Japanese sociology and employment. I am surprised to learn from him that there is quite a lot of unemployment here in Japan; the reason why this does not show up on official statistics is because many of the unemployed people are not registered as such. He and his companions have visited a poor district in Osaka where the people are all unemployed. Many of these people are workers who had been employed on short-term contracts and left jobless afterwards. The German group has also discovered that a man's working life can be quite short here, and a woman's even shorter.

We spend the journey chatting to each other and to a Japanese lady who speaks a little English. We also laugh and joke with groups of giggly schoolgirls, who come and go.

As I have decided to fall in with my German companion's plans, we alight at the second last stop and walk to the Kurama temple. The German has been advised to do this by the staff of the Tourist Information Centre. It is an excellent idea, for it is good to go walking up the hills. Here we are far from the city, and it is pleasantly peaceful. We walk at an easy pace, conversing and enjoying the surroundings. By now the sun has disappeared behind the hills and already it is turning cool.

We finally reach Kurama, where we pay a quick visit to the Kibune shrine (a small complex), then begin the long and hard climb up Mount Kurama. We have certainly chosen the difficult route! Up and up the rough steps we toil, twisting and turning as we follow the contours of the mountain. On the way we pass some Shinto shrines and meet some Westerners. Two of them are German girls. We stay together and chat; my companion talks to one of them in German, and I talk to the other in English. Together we descend from the top of the mountain to a rather unattractive modern temple. The only redeeming feature is that the scenery looks quite magnificent from here in the fading light of the setting sun.

As there is nothing happening at this temple, and as the festival is supposed to start down in the street at about 5.30 p.m., we decide to press on and go all the way down, despite the fact that we are tired enough already.

When we finally reach the bottom and the entrance gate, we find the place lit by paper lanterns and a large crowd gathered behind rope fencing all along the main street of the village. Although nothing is happening, there is a great air of expectancy. As we have emerged at the top of the steps leading to the gateway, where benches have been placed for sitting, we decide that we have found the best place to see everything, and decide to stay here. As all the restaurants are full, we just have to go without food for the time being and eat later.

We now settle down for a long wait; like previous events, there is a certain vagueness about times and what to expect. Two Japanese ladies in kimonos sit beside me. As they speak a little English, we talk together and one of them gives me her name and address near Tokyo, on the way to Nikko, and invites me to stay at her place when I travel to Nikko soon. A tall bearded lad with a Japanese girl then appears and joins us; he is Australian, lives in Kyoto and speaks Japanese excellently. He and the girl are very pleasant and friendly; the girl, who speaks English quite well and understands it when spoken slowly, tells me that she works in the sports department of the Mainichi radio station in Osaka – the television section of which I have visited! The Australian, who does not speak with an Australian accent at all, translates a rather drunk Japanese man's explanation of what will happen later.

At last, at about six o'clock, something begins to happen. Down in the street below a line of people forms: they are bearing flaming torches of all sizes, from massive ones carried by several men, with great flames leaping from them, to tiny ones held by toddlers in colourful kimonos. Most of the people in the rest of the procession (which is actually rather lifeless) are dressed in various costumes; some of them are very skimpily clad despite the bitter coldness. As we have now begun to shiver, we draw around a large log fire that has been lit beside us. We now have the choice of roasting by the fire or shivering in the cold. The former, of course, is the more comfortable of the two.

The procession, which has now headed off towards the left and away from us, goes on for ages. From where we are, we can see very little of it, and so we move down a little to the police booth. There is heavy security all round, and there are frequent announcements and warnings over the loudspeakers. We can now hear the dull thud of a *taiko* drum being struck and the tinkling of small bells somewhere nearby.

As there is not much to see or do, I now strike up a conversation with the Australian chap and the Japanese girl. I am invited to partake of some of their good brown bread and cheese, which is very welcome. The lad seems very interested to hear what I have seen and done here in Japan; he declares that I have chosen the best route and have seen all the best things on offer. He seems genuinely astounded by what I know about Japan and my ability to pick up a little of the language.

At this stage the Germans descend down to the street. Thinking that they are going off in search of food, I follow, but discover that they have had enough and are about to leave. I find a booth where I buy a hot plate of *oden*: assorted ingredients, such as eggs and fishcakes, stewed in broth. It is expensive, but is filling and hot.

I return to my new-found friends and eventually, at about nine o'clock, something begins to happen. The way is cleared and the young men carrying the massive torches congregate on the steps of the temple and, in the bright light of the flames, begin chanting something that sounds like 'o-saiyo o-dai-ei, o-saiyo o-dai-ei!' over and over again, to the accompaniment of clapping. This slowly builds to a climax as they work themselves up into a trance-like state.

At this stage, four Shinto priests in blue costumes and characteristic black hats with long antennae step forwards, clap their hands and pray silently before two *mikoshi* or portable shrines that have been placed before the entrance gate. As these are eight hundred years old and are starting to rot, they cannot be used any more from this year on, much to everyone's disappointment.

The prayers over, a gang of scantily-dressed young men with headbands, all fired up with sake, come forward and, after more preparatory chanting, shoulder one of the heavy wooden *mikoshi* and make off with it down the steps and up the street. Two long ropes have been tied to the back of the portable shrine so that people are able to hold on and follow it.

After another wait, during which we warm ourselves at the fire, the young men return and, after the same procedure, make off with the second *mikoshi*, jolting it about as they do so.

As nothing seems to be happening once again, except more parading with flaming torches through the streets below, and as it has gone past ten o'clock, we three decide to go into the nearest restaurant for something to drink as it is now open to the general public. As soon as we sit down, we are given tea and hot *oshibori*: wet towels that we immediately apply to our faces and hands. The Australian fellow then orders three cups of cocoa – a drink that I have not had for some seven weeks. It is gloriously hot and tasty; the fellow tells me that the best cocoa in Japan is served here. The girl now gives me her name and address and I do likewise for her. I surprise them both by writing 'Radio Telefís Éireann' phonetically in Japanese *katakana*, though I have to rely on their help a good deal.

When it is time to leave and ask for the bill, I am not allowed to pay. The Australian kindly pays for everyone, even though one cup of cocoa costs ¥500 (£2). Before we go, we help a couple of Americans, who have just arrived, to order a meal of *soba* and leave one of the men struggling with the noodles and sauce, the chopsticks in his left hand. It looks so awkward! I have never noticed any left-handed people in Japan; I am told that it simply is not encouraged.

By now most of the people have left, and the roads outside are almost deserted. We amble up a street illuminated by paper lanterns and small fires in braziers placed outside the wooden houses. It turns out that nearly everyone has thrown open the outside wood-and-paper *shōji* to display their family treasures: painted folding screens, ceramics, chests, flower arrangements and so forth. (Doing something like this at home would certainly be asking for trouble!) The elegant displays look magical in the dim but natural light. With people dressed in traditional clothing coming and going, it is like stepping back into the past – what is happening before our eyes is like a scene from a Hiroshige or Hokusai woodblock print. This open exhibiting of treasures is such a lovely idea. Looking into the houses, we can see *tatami* mats, *kotatsu* or foot-warmers under low tables, and tables covered with thick quilts, which

can be wrapped over one's legs. In some houses we can see rather nasty-looking old American clocks, various bits of gaudy bric-à-brac, television sets, and even a piano. The latter, a black upright, looks quite incongruous among the Japanese furnishings.

When we reach the end of this wonderful street, we return along another one. Here we meet with some friends of my companions, American and Japanese, all of whom speak Japanese as well as English. Here we are given cups of hot sake (very welcome!) and even share a bowl of noodles with fish. Everyone is quite tipsy and in good form – there is a lot of laughter. This is the first time that I have drunk hot sake – this morning's helping was cold, and had been poured from a cardboard carton. The hot sake certainly warms one's insides, but it is relatively tasteless.

Shortly afterwards, a Japanese man joins the group and begins to treat us to yet more sake. He speaks French well and continues to do so for a lark, claiming that he is a French man. We are then joined by a Japanese lad who keeps producing little bottles of hot sake from his pockets like a magician. As the party progresses, everyone becomes more mellow. My little plastic cup is topped up several times until I have drunk enough and refuse any more helpings.

At midnight we say goodbye and totter towards the train station. On the way, my Australian friend stops to buy a bag of pickled mushrooms, a speciality of the region, then is given a packet of biscuits by a Japanese lad when we reach the station. We then board a crowded train and, as the Australian is still ravenously hungry, he shares the last of his brown bread and cheese with us, then the mushrooms (unusual), the biscuits (also unusual) and finally some raisins. The Japanese passengers must be either amused or horrified to see us barbarians eating so much in public.

Eventually we arrive at the terminus in Kyoto, where I say goodbye to my extremely generous and friendly companions, then walk briskly through the Shimogamo shrine, now lit up, and return to the house. As the front door is locked, I climb in through my bedroom window, put my pyjamas over my underclothes and dive into the warm sleeping bag. It has been quite a fascinating day, despite the fact that this evening's festival has been so slow-moving and rather anticlimactic. It seems to me that it is a festival for the participants rather than for the onlookers. Nonetheless, attending both festivals today has certainly been an interesting experience.

Another superb morning: bright and sunny. I am up at seven o'clock, feeling fine, and – amazingly – I have no after-effects from yesterday's sake. Leaving the bottle of whiskey and a note for Finn, who has not yet woken up, I say goodbye to Tamara, and am out of the house and on a bus by eight o'clock.

So it is now goodbye to Kyoto. As it is such a lovely day, I am sorry to leave this fascinating city. It seems that now may be a better time to start my visit! Apart from one or two blazing red maple trees, I have seen very little by way of autumnal colours here. However, I now feel a great sense of satisfaction from having seen Kyoto, the cultural capital of Japan.

As I have missed the train to Takayama by about five minutes (I have mixed up the times), I decide to change my plans and visit a couple of small villages, Tsumago and Magome, on my way to Matsumoto. I have read about these unique and unspoilt places in a book belonging to Finn, and am now interested to see them. I therefore now hop on board a *Hikari* or super express *Shinkansen* (bullet train) and travel at top speed to Nagoya, arriving there by about 9.30. Just as I have expected, it is a boring journey.

At Nagoya I change to another express and go zooming off to Nakatsugawa. As the scenery is uninteresting at first, I write some of yesterday's diary, but when we approach the mountains and the views become more spectacular, I put it away. At this point I am joined by a group of lively men, who sit down beside me, laughing and talking among themselves.

Eventually we reach Nakatasugawa, where I hop on to a local train with a Dutch lady and two Americans. As they are also bound for the village of Tsumago, they are able to tell me how to get there by bus, and about the worthwhile two-and-a-half hour-long walk that one can make to the next village, Magome.



Tsumago village, Kiso district, Nagano prefecture

When we get off at Nagiso station, I make some enquiries and get some brochures, and we board the bus that takes us to Tsumago. This turns out to be a pretty village of old wooden houses; in bygone days it was an important post town along the Nakasendō or mid-mountain highway. Most of the buildings date from the Edo or Tokugawa period – the period between 1603 to 1868, at the end of which the modern city of Tokyo was established. Although I have feared that Tsumago may have

become very touristy, it seems that it has not, and I fall in love with it immediately. I head straight for the tourist information office and book a night in a local *minshuku* (guest house). I communicate in my basic Japanese and am given a map to show me where it is. I set off immediately for the *Daikichi minshuku*, quite a posh but pleasant establishment, where I am shown to my traditional Japanese room with its miniature *tokonoma*. As I step on to the *tatami* mats, the woman in charge nearly has a fit – I have not taken off my outdoor shoes! How can I have forgotten such a basic but important rule? I immediately back off, bow repeatedly and humbly excuse my dreadful gaffe, saying, ‘*Dōmo sumimasen – shitsurei itashimashita*’ (‘Please forgive me, I’ve made a terrible mistake’).

I leave my luggage here, and following the customary tiny pot of tea and sweet cake, I depart and go in search of somewhere to eat. I find a restaurant nearby, where I demolish a bowl of hot *soba* (buckwheat noodles). As soon as I have finished my meal, I set off to explore the fascinating little village. There are some tourists and touristy souvenir shops, but not many. Here everything is on a smaller scale, restrained and more tasteful. I take out my camera and, as the light is good now, begin to snap some pictures. With its backdrop of high and noble mountains, the place is very photogenic. It feels great to be here, away from it all.



*Irori* area of the Okuya Folk Museum, Tsumago

However, it is not so when I stop to visit the Kyōdōkan Okuya, or Okuya Folk Museum. Inside is a typical group of Japanese tourists being lectured by a loquacious guide. I pay the modest entrance fee, read the short English introduction and visit all the rooms after the tourists have been in them. Gradually I get to see them all.

It turns out that this building was, at one time, a typical Edo-period *waki honjin* or inn for *daimyo* gentry travelling along the Nakasendō highway to and from Edo, the then capital (now named Tokyo). The other official route at that time was the Tōkaidō (‘Eastern Sea Route’), made famous by Hiroshige’s woodblock prints depicting *The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō*. Both of these routes connected Edo with Kyoto. The inn contains many fine rooms, most of them with *tatami* mats, impressive *doma* and *irori* (work and hearth) areas, and small but elegant gardens.

I finally leave shortly after two o’clock, examine the rest of the lovely village, stop to photograph some of the interesting buildings, then, satisfied that I have seen enough, start off on my trek to Magome. Following the map and the signposts (everything is very clear), I walk briskly along narrow roads and paths, sometimes

uphill and sometimes downhill, cross over the rushing Kiso river, pass through forests, stop here and there to admire the magnificent mountains, and pass tiny villages with tiered paddy fields nearby. I meet nobody along the route, except for some local people outside their houses or in their fields. Although it is wonderful to



Tsumago

walk through pure countryside, the views are still marred by modern intrusions such as nasty-looking buildings or steel pylons carrying huge bundles of electric cables.



Magome Pass

Some time later I ascend the Magome pass ('801m above sea level' according to my map), from where I can see the mountains extending away to the south. From here I descend rapidly to Magome village. Here the scenery is better and more expansive. The sun is beginning to set by now, and it is becoming cold again. As it had been so hot earlier, I had removed my shirt, so that I am down to just a vest and tee shirt. I now move quickly to generate heat.

I arrive in Magome long before I had estimated that I would. I have completed the walk in two and a quarter hours: a quarter of an hour less than the Dutch lady's estimated duration, and considerably shorter than the three hours mentioned in my

brochure. I note the time of the next bus – 4.34 p.m. – take a quick look at the sweet little village (very pleasant but not as impressive as Tsumago), and arrive back a couple of minutes late for the bus. I wait a while, but conclude that I have missed it.



Magome village

In order to fill in the time, I wander back through the village at a leisurely pace and take a better look at it as the tourists have left by now. Like Tsumago, its buildings are old, though more modest. It looks wonderful in the light of the setting sun. On my way back to the bus stop, I meet the Dutch lady and her American companions again. We thank each other for our mutual help and depart.

Just before I reach the bus stop, I sit down to soak in the peaceful atmosphere – it is very quiet now – and take time to reflect. Although the place has great charm, it seems to lack a certain amount of atmosphere. Because of the intrusion of various modern elements, such as posh cars and signposts, it just does not seem to be thoroughly Japanese – especially as most people are dressed in Western clothing. It must have been wonderful to be here during the last century or even fifty years ago.

The bus eventually arrives – late – and I hop on board; I am the only passenger. We drive quickly through the darkness, making no stops, and arrive at Tsumago by ten to six. I arrive back at the *minshuku* just in time for dinner at six. It is a delicious and thoroughly Japanese meal with a great variety of dishes: soup, *tempura* (deep-fried seafood, meat and vegetables), rice, fish, vegetables, pickled vegetables, a bowl of something that looks like curd, some other items that I cannot identify, a couple of dried insects, and tea. As all the dishes are tasty, I eat everything – including the insects, which are crunchy.

Afterwards I begin to write my diary from yesterday. A lad comes in to remove my tray and light the oil stove for me. Later I take a bath, in a lovely wooden tub at last, wash some clothes and resume my writing. I finally stop at midnight and prepare for bed. It has been a most interesting day.