

Visiting Japan: Director's Cut

Kundo Koyama is the creator of many popular TV and radio shows. One of his works, *Iron Chef*, has been aired in many different countries. He also writes essays and novels and is known as the screenwriter of *Departures*, winner of the 81st Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. In addition, he provides consulting services for hotels, restaurants, local governments, and many other organizations across the country. Appointed as tourism advisor for the Japan Tourism Agency in 2010, Koyama offers some personal tips about traveling in Japan.

One of the joys of traveling in Japan is having a meal. Whether it is costly or not, it will leave you satisfied. For example, Kitcho in Arashiyama, Kyoto is very expensive, but it offers the essence of Japanese culture, including

inexpensive. One day, I happened to find a small fried food shop at a shopping mall in the Sumida ward of Tokyo. The shop has a popular touch in that it serves the food wrapped in a piece of paper as soon as it is fried. I bought a croquette for only 90 yen. It was delicious.

Japanese Shinto shrines have a unique atmosphere that cannot be found in any other country. We feel as if we are purified when walking on the forest approaches of Ise-jingu shrine in Mie Prefecture or Izumo-taisha shrine in Shimane Prefecture. I believe that anyone would feel the same, no matter where they come from.

In Japan, there are many scenic views where ordinary people lead ordinary lives. Let me take for example my own hometown of Amakusa in Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyushu. There



The Catholic church in the picturesque fishing town of Sakitsu in Kumamoto Prefecture.

the dining spaces and the hospitality. Dining there is just like enjoying works of art.

On the other hand, you will from time to time encounter very tasty items that are quite

is a tiny port town, Sakitsu, that is home to an old church. Here, Minatoya Ryokan Bekkan is a small inn mainly serving anglers. The French ambassador to Japan once stayed there over-



Rows of individual sleeping compartments in the stylish new nine hours capsule hotel in Kyoto

night and was fulsome in his praise of the view from the inn. Actually, I also went and stayed there. A combination of a small fishery village in a morning mist with the silhouette of the cathedral was absolutely stunning.

I imagine that many hesitate to visit Japan on the grounds that Japanese people do not speak English. It may be true that English may not be fully understood in Japan, but wherever you are in the country, many locals try hard to serve foreign visitors despite the language barrier. So you are unlikely to face major difficulties. That said, I suspect that you will have a wonderful adventure in our country, as I believe that you could not feel safer or have a more mysterious time anywhere else in the world. You will enjoy unforgettable discoveries and encounters with ordinary people as well.

If you visit Kyoto for example, it is of course good to stay at a *ryokan* (Japanese-style inn), but it can also be fun to stay at a capsule hotel. Kyoto has a number of capsule hotels providing cool, budget accommodation, such as nine hours in the Teramachi district. After reaching

your accommodation, how about going to a public bathhouse instead of just taking a shower in the hotel? Then, you will come across a real facet of the city, quite unlike its face as a tourist site. After taking a bath, drop into a nearby small restaurant or *izakaya* pub. There are always good-natured regular customers to enjoy an evening with. You will have a great time as you and they communicate using body language. To go for a second drink, ask them to take you to a spot they recommend. It will

surely be a nice place known only to the locals. I hope that you will have an adventure like this in Japan.



Author, screenwriter and radio personality Kundo Koyama

TADASHI AIZAWA