

Japan 2017

I left it to my 70th year to visit Japan. It is half way around the world from home and takes a lot of jet lag to get there. It was well worth the trouble. The people are attractive; the women in the main well dressed and petite, overweight people are rare except when fattened-up to be Sumo wrestlers. Young men seem fragile, glabrous and effete. Both sexes dress with greater elegance and with a sense of style now sadly absent in England.

It is a country without parallel with a culture that is ancient and in some important ways unchanged - culture shock would be too weak an expression, so much here is alien. The Japanese psyche is impenetrable to a foreigner. It is one of the few countries outside Europe never to have been colonized, which may in part explain its exoticism. In order to comprehend the leap of understanding that brought Japan headlong into 20th C, one must appreciate that it was a closed mediaeval society until 1863.

We have seen too many films about wartime Japan to remain uninfluenced by the aggressive and cruel national character portrayed therein. *Bridge over the River Kwai* with a ramrod-stiff Alec Guinness as the unbending British colonel who helps the Japs build the bridge and so becomes a party to their torture; *A Town Like Alice* in which an English woman prisoner on a death march falls for an almost-martyred Aussie from the outback whose crime was to steal a chicken; *Empire of the Sun* a true story of a English boy living in Shanghai interned and starved with his family by the conquering Japanese army; and my favorite *Merry Christmas Mister Lawrence* another true story of the wartime imprisonment of Laurens Van der Post, brilliantly played by David Bowie, and his 'tortured' relationship with the handsome Japanese commandant. For me, the seminal moment in the film is the opening sequence. A brutal camp guard is about to be hanged after the war, he is visited in his cell by Van der Post and during their civilized exchange it becomes apparent that the soldier accepts his fate with equanimity but cannot comprehend why he is being executed for doing what every soldier of the Emperor was expected to do to those who submitted to the dishonour of being captured alive.

We take it for granted that the Germans are deeply ashamed and feel guilt for the actions of their country during the Nazi era; I am not convinced that one can say the same about the Japanese. Their main Shinto war shrine at Yasukuni, includes the names of 1,068 war criminals yet the former Prime Minister, Mr Koizumi, made annual visits from 2001 to 2006, albeit in a personal capacity. Japan still finds it hard to apologize for certain war crimes and in particular to the Korean sex slaves forced to work in their army brothels. On our visit we saw the flag of the rising sun, a potent symbol of the old military Japan, in a shop window; Germany would not allow a swastika to be so displayed.

There is debate about the complicity of Emperor Hirohito in the decision to attack Pearl Harbour and to wage an aggressive war in WWII. The army command that controlled pre-war Japan reported directly to the Emperor. It is now believed that General McArthur sanitized Hirohito's role for understandable

political reasons. His presence on the throne helped to ensure public obedience to the occupying forces and acted as a bulwark against the rise of communism, so he was probably not the puppet monarch in the war years that history has claimed. Maybe Private Eye got it right with their 1971 cover to mark the Emperor's only state visit to Britain, 'A nasty nip in the air'.

The only overt trace of an addiction to cruelty evident in modern Japan is an interest in the violent and sexualized 'Manga' comic books. Otherwise, the overwhelming impression is one of excessive calm, politeness and good order. In this lies a clue; the Japanese are obedient and formal to a fault. But I suspected that behind the perfect, polite surface might lurk suppressed anger. The agonized look on the face of a person, particularly a woman, who thinks she might have offended or done something wrong reveals a side of their character; they obsessively obey and defer to those above them. Loss of 'face' is a cardinal fault so no one takes any risks. Women habitually put a hand in front of the mouth when laughing or more likely giggling. It seemed to me, judging by our two female tour guides, that women are not allowed to express an opinion about anything that matters.

It is hard, and that is an understatement, to get a truthful answer to any searching question about Japan no matter how good their English or how westernized they appear. You will either receive a formulaic answer or the question will be sidestepped. After a while, this starts to grate and you long to scream, 'tell me what you really think'. We asked about the feared gangsters and their fabled tattoos but were told the problem was under control yet public baths forbid entry to men with tattoos contradicting this assertion. I had the feeling that they have something to hide.

Japan is a land of contradictions; it is modern, Americanized, addicted to status symbols and clever technology yet the Japanese are superstitious. The salary man, and it is still mostly men that are business executives, work long hours and drink hard after work with their male colleagues; women seem subservient. You see men in large groups in bars and restaurants at seven in the evening. Skyscrapers dominate the skyline for miles outside Tokyo. Shopping malls full of European brand names are ubiquitous as are neon signs. Trains run on time putting Mussolini's efforts to shame – in fact manifestations of efficient modernity can be seen on every street corner.

Another contradiction is their obsession with hygiene and health contrasted with their acceptance of smoking in some restaurants. The hygiene obsession takes many forms from bottom-washing loos and love of hot baths to the wearing of face-masks as protection against pollen and germs, even on rainy days; avoid hay-fever but allow others to inhale your toxic smoke?

And yet there is another Japan, the traditional, obedient Japan where people think first of their duty to the polity rather than of their individual self-interest. Perhaps this is why they emerged into the post-war world as expert copiers rather than innovators. Big business for all its efficiency often becomes sclerotic as initiative is discouraged in favour of deference. It is the Japan of the Geisha,

those doll-like women whose role is to serve and entertain men; it is the world of the tea ceremony, the Buddhist temple and the Shinto shrine.

For those of us who come from countries with a diverse population mix, the xenophobia comes as a shock. The Japanese do not encourage immigrants and have kept their nation relatively racially pure. In London it is rare not to hear foreign languages spoken, in Japan it is hard to be understood unless you speak Japanese. The London underground is multi-racial the Tokyo equivalent appears mainly Japanese.

How can modern citizens go to a Shinto shrine to wish for good fortune in health, exams, job promotion or just to make more money and yet not seem to be worshipping a god but merely petitioning one of hundreds of spirits good and bad who require propitiation in order to guarantee succeed in life? When I asked who they thought was listening, as usual I got no answer. Buddhism and Shinto sit happily side-by-side, most Japanese worship at both shrine and temple and these supremely logical people see no incompatibility or conflict.

The Japanese character and artistry are best expressed in their gardens. You will see enough boulders and raked gravel to satiate your interest in Zen. Their trees, mostly pines and cedars, are tortured and shaped into a wonderful artifice of green pom-poms with twisted and gnarled trunks revealing glimpses of blue sky in between. The flowers they like best are tree blossoms; the 'Sakura' or cherry blossom season is a festive time where people travel long distances to see the finest blooms at the perfect moment. Gardens are like pictures designed to be looked at rather than walked in although they do have strolling gardens, like miniature parks with pretty bridges over streams and ponds replete with artistically marked Koi carp. Their gardens are poetic, philosophical and contemplative expressing their Buddhist origins. Like the front they present to the world, there is never a fig-leaf out of place.

Japan is a strange mixture of tradition and modernity, often sickly pretty but with a repressed undercurrent – buttoned-up is the phrase that comes to mind. Politeness vies with xenophobia. Childish cartoon images contrast with tailored minimalist artistry. Modern art is not greatly in evidence except in architecture and creativity is best expressed in technical design. Even their best music is electronic such as that composed and played by Kitaro.

Japan is part of this world but not of this world; it is distinct and wishes on many levels to retain that sense of separation. It seems to have got away with maintaining a racial purity bordering on superiority that in Europe would be unthinkable. It seems to me that the Japanese have assimilated only as much as they want and that is not much below the surface.

As much as I enjoyed the traditional inns (ryokan) and the thermal hot spring baths (onsen), the ravishing mountain scenery, the efficient and comfortable bullet trains (shinkansen) and the dazzling cityscapes I found the elaborate set dinners with ten courses too bitty, raw and fishy and I longed to get back to our comfortable hotel in Tokyo and tuck into a decent steak and chips.

