

## 15: Izumo Taisha, Matsue and Amanohashidate

This morning I wake at about quarter to seven. Shortly afterwards, music is played over the loudspeakers, but nobody stirs. At seven o'clock an announcement is made repeatedly about breakfast; I am the first down to eat. We are served traditional fare, which this morning includes a raw egg in a little bowl. I have come across this before in traditional meals, but up to now do not know how I am supposed to eat or swallow it. I watch my companions; one of them whips it up using his chopsticks, adds some soy sauce, then pours it into his rice and stirs the mixture together. Curious to find out what it tastes like, I do the same. As it is rather gooey, I doubt that I will try this again.

After breakfast I eat a large, juicy Japanese pear. Then, as I have time to spare, I walk to a nearby Shinto shrine with my companions. Here I notice some unfamiliar-looking orange-coloured fruit on a tree, and am told that it is a *kaki* or Japanese persimmon. A lady appears and invites us to help ourselves, telling us that these are special *Tsuwano-gaki* (Tsuwano *kakis*). As I have just eaten the pear, I put mine aside for the moment.

We have a look round the shrine, which does not look particularly interesting in the dull morning light, then return to the hostel. I am able to leave just in time to catch the local bus to the train station. As I have time to spare until the train arrives, I write a postcard home and buy a packed lunch for just ¥250. I finally board a comfortable express train at 10.15 and set off for Izumo-shi (Izumo City), passing through Masuda.



Japan Sea coast

Once again I journey through spectacular scenery, especially when we skirt the coast. As we pass more rugged bays and wooded islands out in the wild sea, the weather begins to brighten up. I now begin to notice some autumnal colours appearing in the trees. The train does not travel too fast, and I have ample time to admire my surroundings. When we pass through Hamada City, I am glad that I have decided not to stop and visit a Japanese lady I met on the Trans Siberian train – the place looks horrible!

At 12.30 I make short work of my lunch, which is quite delicious. Shortly after one o'clock I hop off at the rather ugly city of Izumo and board a tiny train bound for Izumo Taisha: a famous Shinto shrine which is second in importance to the grand shrines at Ise (which I was not allowed to photograph).

The train sets off shortly afterwards and I arrive at Taisha soon after 1.30 p.m. Having put my luggage into the station locker, I go striding up the main street to the shrine. It is quite a distance away, but I am glad of the walk – despite the presence of heavy traffic. I quickly discover that this place is very built up and commercialized. There seems to be no getting away from this!



Shrine complex, Izumo Taisha

The shrine is situated in a large park at the foot of some high mountains. As it is Sunday, there are a lot of people here and there is a festive atmosphere. I see a group of people doing some exercise that looks like Chinese *taiji*. In the first building I encounter (not the main shrine), a service is taking place. I hear low chanting by a priest, who waves pieces of white paper attached to a stick over a small congregation, then a girl performs a dance that is accompanied by drums and a flute. The drummer is especially interesting. When the dancer finishes, she tinkles some tiny handbells over the congregation. Fast music then signals the end of the ritual.

While watching this, I chat to an Italian woman nearby. She is from Rome and speaks English quite well. Eventually, when another service begins (it is just more of the same), we wander round to the main shrine and have a good look at it. This shrine is built in the same pure Japanese style as the ones at Ise, although it was reconstructed in 1874. Fortunately there are no guards here and it is far more accessible because of this. Much of it, however, is fenced off, though the Italian lady and I manage to see a good bit of it by peeping around corners. As I am scouting around the building with my camera, some little girls, who are sketching the shrine, greet us. As we walk away, one of the girls comes running after us and presents us with a piece of paper, on which two tiny chocolate animals have been artfully arranged. She invites us to take them with a polite '*dōzo*' ('please'); when we thank her, she and her companions all bow together. It is a very touching gesture – again it strikes me that this would probably never happen at home. Although most of the young boys I have met so far tend to be rather cheeky, the girls, on the other hand, can be delightfully endearing.

After we have exchanged addresses, the Italian lady leaves and I explore the place on my own. Apart from the main shrine, there seems to be nothing much else to see. Nonetheless, it is pleasant place in which to linger; the information I have states that there are twenty acres of grounds here. While I wander around, the sun keeps coming out and going in as clouds are blown across the sky. I do not bother to visit the treasure house, but leave when I have seen enough, and walk back to the train station.

I am in time to catch the 4.21 train back to Izumo-shi. A Japanese business man (and one-time army man) sits beside me and chats in excellent English. He is rather tipsy as he has been celebrating with friends. At Izumo-shi, he escorts me to the train for Matsue and, as he is travelling there too, comes on board with a young lady whom he has previously described as 'my friend', but now introduces to me as 'my wife'. She is not pretty and is wearing too much makeup. I notice that she seems to be shying away from the man constantly. Something is not right.

By now the clouds have blown away and the countryside smiles in the late afternoon sunshine. We finally arrive in Matsue – a large, modern city – by about 5.20 p.m. Once again, my preconceived picture of Matsue has been shattered; it does not seem to be the old-world town as described in the guide books. In the station I try to telephone the youth hostel, but the number is engaged. The tourist information service is closed. I finally get through to the hostel and reserve a bed, but discover that I am too late for dinner. Instead I eat a tasty enough Western meal in the station restaurant: spaghetti with some type of shellfish and a plateful of salad.

I then leave to catch a bus to the hostel. As I have not the slightest idea of where I need to go, I am delighted to have the assistance of two German girls, who accompany me there. The bus journey lasts thirty minutes and we have to walk a short distance from the stop to the hostel, which turns out to be rather basic.

After I have taken a bath and washed some clothes, I join the girls to exchange notes, information and experiences. One of them, with the help of a Japanese lad, works out a timetable for trains going to Fukui from here – a complicated procedure. Afterwards, I write my diary and go to bed. An interesting day.

My intention was to be up at 6.30 this morning, have breakfast and be out by 7.30, but there is no waking-up music from the loudspeakers until seven o'clock. As I have slept soundly until then and will have no time for breakfast, I resign myself to the fact that I will have to catch the next bus at nine o'clock.

As the German girls have left by now, I have breakfast with an Australian mother and daughter whom I have met some days ago in Kyoto. I take my time, then set off with them and catch the bus at nine. I leave them at the station, walk to the nearby information centre and ask about travelling to the Kamosu shrine by bus. I head off for the bus stop, but because of the confusion and the fact that the buses do not have numbers (the destinations are written in characters, which I cannot read), I eventually lose patience and give up the attempt. Annoyed at the amount of time that I have wasted, I walk briskly back to the station, where I manage to catch a bus for the local castle. This journey results in my going back in the same direction that I have come. In doing so, I end up wasting even more time and money.

By the time I have reached the stop for Matsue castle, I have calmed down and I set about enjoying myself. It is a fine, fresh morning and everything gleams in the sunshine. Although this is a large, noisy city, it is not unpleasant. Most of the buildings are modern, and everywhere looks clean and prosperous.

The castle turns out to be quite magnificent and a delight to the eye. This is the first Japanese castle that I am about to visit; I have deliberately avoided the other

well-known ones at Nagoya and Osaka, knowing that they have been destroyed in the past and reconstructed with modern interiors. The one here in Matsue was built in 1611; although it had been reconstructed in 1642, it is far more like the original building. The combination of the stone base, the white plastered walls, the wooden beams and window frames painted black, is very striking. The setting is also very beautiful, with trees and lawns on all sides. For a small fee I go inside; though there is little to see, the visit is worthwhile. I admire the thick, rough-hewn beams and examine some of the interesting samurai-period exhibits on display. As I am in no hurry, I take my time.



Matsue Castle



Samurai houses, Matsue

When I have seen everything, including the fine view of the city and the surrounding mountains from the top of the castle, I leave and wander up to a street that runs beside the moat, where most of the interesting sights are concentrated. It is a pretty street lined with trees, brilliant white walls and some old houses. The first place I visit is a *katchiu-yashiki* or former residence of a samurai. This small, simple wooden house was built in 1730; the *shōji* or outer wood-and-paper sliding doors are all thrown open so that one can see into the *tatami*-floored rooms. Like most



traditional Japanese houses, there is little to see, but it is interesting nonetheless. I linger, look at the tiny garden and, bowing to two very shy and giggly girls, who do not seem to know how to behave in my presence, I leave. It seems to me that I am quite a novelty here, for I see very few Westerners about.



Rooms in Lafcadio Hearn's house, Matsue

Passing a delightful restaurant with its own garden and attractive surroundings, I walk on to the residence of Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who came to live here, adopt Japanese dress and manners, teach English and write many books about Japan. He had been born on the Greek island of Lefkada to a Greek mother and Irish father, and had later been moved to Dublin, where the family lived in Gardiner Street. However, he was abandoned first by his mother, then by his father, and finally by his official guardian (his father's aunt). At the age of nineteen he was sent to America, where he worked as a newspaper reporter. He was then sent as a correspondent to the French West Indies, where he stayed for two years. He travelled to Japan in 1890, where he was lucky enough to be offered a job teaching in a local school here in Matsue. The winter of 1891 was so severe that Lafcadio fell dangerously ill. The daughter of a local samurai family, Koizumi Setsu, who had learned of his perilous condition, made up her mind to help the unfortunate foreign teacher as a nurse and housekeeper. Lafcadio was so moved by her kindness that he decided to marry her.

They set up house together and then, after living for just fifteen months in Matsue, the couple moved to Kumamoto, where Hearn taught in the city's High School. In 1894 the couple settled in Kobe, where Lafcadio had accepted a job as editorial writer for the Kobe Chronicle. He became a naturalized citizen here, married Setsu and changed his name to Koizumi Yakumo. The couple subsequently had four children. In 1896 he was appointed Professor of English at the University of Tokyo and spent the rest of his life there. Having started life as a Greek Orthodox Christian, he changed to Roman Catholicism and then, in Japan, he became Buddhist.

I am delighted to visit his house here, for it is quite enchanting. It is a small, simple, yet intimate home, opening out on to a beautiful garden at the front and a more modest one at the back. The bright sunshine makes the place look absolutely magical; I take out my camera to photograph the gardens from the two main rooms. As I have the place to myself, I read Hearn's own description of the house written in English, then leave when a group of Japanese tourists enter.

As it is now half past twelve and is quite hot, I walk back to the lovely restaurant and order a dish that is special to this region: *warigo-soba*. This consists of buckwheat noodles served in three bowls, one on top of another, along with dried bonito, dried seaweed, sliced onions, grated radish and soup stock to add to the mixture as flavouring. Although served cold, it is quite delicious. I am also given tea to drink. In another room, some businessmen are eating, and in another, a group of VIPs. Outside, in the lovely garden, I notice that two German ladies (mother and daughter, I presume), whom I have met earlier, are lunching with a Japanese friend. They all look well heeled.



Shinto wedding bride, Matsue

When I finish my meal and join them, I discover that a Shinto wedding ceremony has just taken place. I am just in time to see the bride, beautifully dressed in the traditional narrow kimono and a wide *obi* or belt, being led away. Wearing the clumsy wooden *geta* or traditional sandals, she walks awkwardly, escorted by three other ladies in elegant kimonos. I notice that she is wearing a wig and, on top of it, a spectacular hat. I and several others nearby manage to take a photograph of her. It is truly a magnificent sight. For some strange reason, there is no sign of the bridegroom. When the bride is helped into a taxi and driven off, I am invited to join the others in a

photograph and, after I have complimented the ladies on their beautiful clothes, I leave.

From here I walk to the nearby Lafcadio Hearn Memorial Museum, where I look at manuscripts, photographs, objects and books pertaining to the famous author. As the descriptions are printed in English, I am able to read them and thus acquire a certain amount of knowledge about Lafcadio, about whom I have known very little. I discover, with a certain amount of interest, that Hearn believed that the reason for the Japanese people's propensity to be poor at creative thinking and coming up with original ideas was due to their traditional diet being low in protein and nutrition. He concluded that Europeans were the best thinkers and creators in the world because, by comparison, they were far better fed. Certainly I have noticed a certain lack of imagination here, and a tendency for most people to think and behave in exactly the same way as everybody else.



Meimei-an tea house, Matsue

I then walk up another street to the Meimei-an tea house, a delightful little wooden building with an unusual thatched roof. It is an enchanting place in a peaceful, rustic setting: a garden with stepping stones, bamboo fences, trees, bushes and a *machi-ai* or waiting place. I have the place to myself except for when a group of Japanese tourists come in, then leave minutes later.

I now try to find a temple with its own tea house, but quickly realize that my map is leading me astray (not for the first time!). I eventually discover where it is, but there is very little to see: the temple is of no importance and the tea house does not seem to exist.

I then decide, as I have time to spare, to try once again for the Kamosu shrine. I march down to the bus stop, passing an old, forgotten – yet interesting – shrine on the roadside, which is not marked on my map. After a short wait, I finally board the correct bus for my destination. It takes fifteen minutes to get to the terminus; I now discover that I am out in the suburbs, in the middle of nowhere. It is quite a pretty area, with small fields, pleasant little houses and in the distance, wooded hills.

Finding my way to the shrine proves to be easy and I am soon there. It is a small, modest, though very important building, built in 1346. Two ladies leave just as I arrive and then I have the place to myself. The wind now blows through the trees and it becomes rather cold. Once I have seen the shrine, I return to the bus stop, where I



discover that I have just missed a bus. In order to fill time and stay warm, I wander around the place. I meet some toddlers emerging from a school; all of them are very shy and stare at the strange-looking *gaijin* in their midst. It is wonderful to see so many children here travelling to and from school unescorted – proof that there is no fear of danger for them.



Kamosu shrine, Matsue

Back at the bus stop again, I speak to two little girls who have never heard of Ireland, and at last board a bus bound for the train station. I spend the journey watching the driver operating his formidable array of controls. As well as driving, he has to open and close the front and back doors, move the tape machine on to the next announcement when no stop is made, and so on. The ticket machine accepts any type of coin or banknote, and gives the correct change. Everything works perfectly and operates like clockwork. I have noticed that bus and taxi drivers here – who incidentally all wear immaculate white cotton gloves – drive carefully and never rush.

I arrive at the train station soon after 5.30 p.m. to discover that there is no bus to the youth hostel until 6.15. There is nothing I can do but wait. I pass the time by wandering around the nearby shops, where it is warm, and finally travel back to the hostel. Now I can appreciate why this bus route is not so frequent: many of the streets are so narrow that cars coming in the opposite direction have to back into laneways in order to let the bus pass.

Although I think that I am late, dinner is served just as I walk in the door. Apart from the *sushi* dish, the meal is not very appetising: the main item on the menu is a rather indigestible hamburger served with a dollop of nasty tomato ketchup. Hungry, I make short work of it all. I then write my diary, take a break from writing in order to have a bath, then resume until bedtime.

I wake at some ungodly hour (it is dark and I cannot see my watch) and get up at 6.15. It seems to be another fine morning. Looking out at Lake Shinji from the dining room, I eat breakfast before seven o'clock. Half an hour later I am on the bus and on my way to the train station. The suburbs look quite beautiful bathed in bright sunshine at this early hour of the morning.

As I have plenty of time to spare at the station, I sit in the sun and finish yesterday's diary entry. At 8.45 I board a very dirty and scruffy old train for Tottori. This is quite a change from the sophistication of the east coast. As the train is quite full and I am unable to find a decent window seat, I stand in the space between two carriages and watch the scenery from there. In true Japanese style, everybody has pulled down the blinds on the sunny side of the train – nobody here is interested in the sun or the scenery!



The view from where I am standing is pleasant enough at first, but it soon deteriorates; from now on ugly industrial areas, scruffy towns and villages, acres of tiled roofs, corrugated iron, and miles of electric cable quickly flash by. When some people leave at one of the many stations, I nip back into the carriage, where I manage to secure a good window seat. Because the window blind is down, I am denied a view of the mountains on my right (the east).

After a not particularly interesting journey, I arrive in the large, ugly city of Tottori shortly after eleven o'clock. I have hoped to have a glimpse at the famous sand dunes here, but can see none. As I have time to kill, I wander around the busy streets until I finally find a post office, where I pop a postcard to mum and dad into the box and buy an airmail letter. On my way back to the station, I buy a packet of sandwiches and some *mikan* (Japanese oranges) for lunch. In the station, I sit down and start to write a letter home.

At 12.44 I board a more comfortable, though still not very clean limited express train bound for Toyooka, where I will have to change again to another train. I eat my sandwiches, look at the scenery (a little better this time), and fall asleep for a while.

Eventually I arrive at Toyooka, another nondescript city, and board a small local train going to my destination for today: the famed beauty spot of Amanohashidate ('Bridge to Heaven'). I have heard many differing reports about this place; when I see it, I will judge it for myself. At least it will be a convenient resting place.

The people on this local train are quite lively and there is a babble of excited voices in the carriage. Most of the passengers are elderly, and all of them are chatting and laughing loudly in their cracked, incisive voices. The women, dressed in traditional clothing, are bent double with age, are toothless, and have smiling, wrinkled faces. Here at last is a glimpse of old Japan. I sit opposite what I presume is a monk, who wears dark brown robes and a cap that looks rather like a Muslim's. He is with a large boy who now and then looks at a book of stories told in cartoon strips. Everyone, I notice, has brought plenty of food for the journey, and are constantly nibbling at something.

We set off shortly before half past two and the train chugs through some almost unspoilt countryside. As it is definitely more rural here, I am glad that I have taken this slower but more interesting route. We pass forests and tiny fields squeezed in between mountains. Like the previous trains that I have travelled on in this region, the names of the stations are announced in the characteristic sing-song voice over the loudspeakers when we approach and leave them. The train takes its time; at one station we stop for ages.



Amanohashidate (Courtesy: 663highland)

At last we reach Amanohashidate just before four o'clock and I hop off. From the station I can see the town's main attraction: a narrow, twisted and wooded sandbar, which stretches across Miyazu Bay and connects with a peninsula on the other side. For some inexplicable reason one is supposed to view this with one's head between one's legs, so that it appears upside down!

I decide to do nothing of the sort, and head off across the narrow strip of land to the youth hostel, which is on the other side of the bay. Although I know that it is possible to catch a ferry, I decide to walk as I am by now in need of some exercise. By now the sky has clouded over and the place looks grim. What a waste of time coming here!

When I realize the length of this narrow sandbar (some three kilometres), and feel the weight of my bag bearing down on my shoulder, I begin to regret my decision to walk to the hostel. It takes me about three quarters of an hour to reach the other end and the little port. After a little bit of confusion, I eventually arrive at the youth hostel, which is up a steep hill, overlooking a view of the unusual bay. The place looks good and there are *tatami* mats in the rooms. As the warden speaks no English, I have to communicate with him in my poor Japanese. It turns out that I have arrived too late to order dinner, and so I have to make do with bed and breakfast. The bath is ready shortly afterwards; I am glad of it as I am quite tired and feeling grimy.

Although it is drizzling rain by now, I go out in search of somewhere to eat, but every restaurant seems to be closed. For such a supposedly famous beauty spot, it is very dead here. By now I am ravenously hungry. I meet a man who directs me to a Western-style tea room, where I find one of the lads from the hostel. He helps me with the menu, which is written in Japanese, and I decide to have the 'meat spaghetti' with salad. It is quite tasty, though not as filling as I would wish it to be. When asked what I want to drink, I order a cup of lemon tea. This, much to my disgust, pushes the price from ¥650 up to ¥950.

After the meal, I walk back to the hostel in the rain with the Japanese lad, finish my letter home, then write my diary before going to bed.