

LONELY PLANET JOURNEYS

LOST JAPAN



Alex Kerr

Alex Kerr was born in Bethesda, Maryland, USA, in 1952. He first came to Japan when his father, a Naval officer, was posted to Yokohama from 1964 to 1966. He has lived in Kameoka, near Kyoto, since 1977. Alex holds degrees in Japanese Studies from Yale University and Chinese Studies from Oxford University, and is a passionate and knowledgeable collector of East Asian art. He writes and lectures in Japanese, and is associated with the Oomoto Foundation, a Shinto organization devoted to the practice and teaching of traditional Japanese arts.

The original edition of *Lost Japan*, written in Japanese, won the 1994 Shincho Gakugei Literature Prize for the best work of non-fiction published in Japan. Alex is the first foreigner to win this prestigious award.

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Lost Japan

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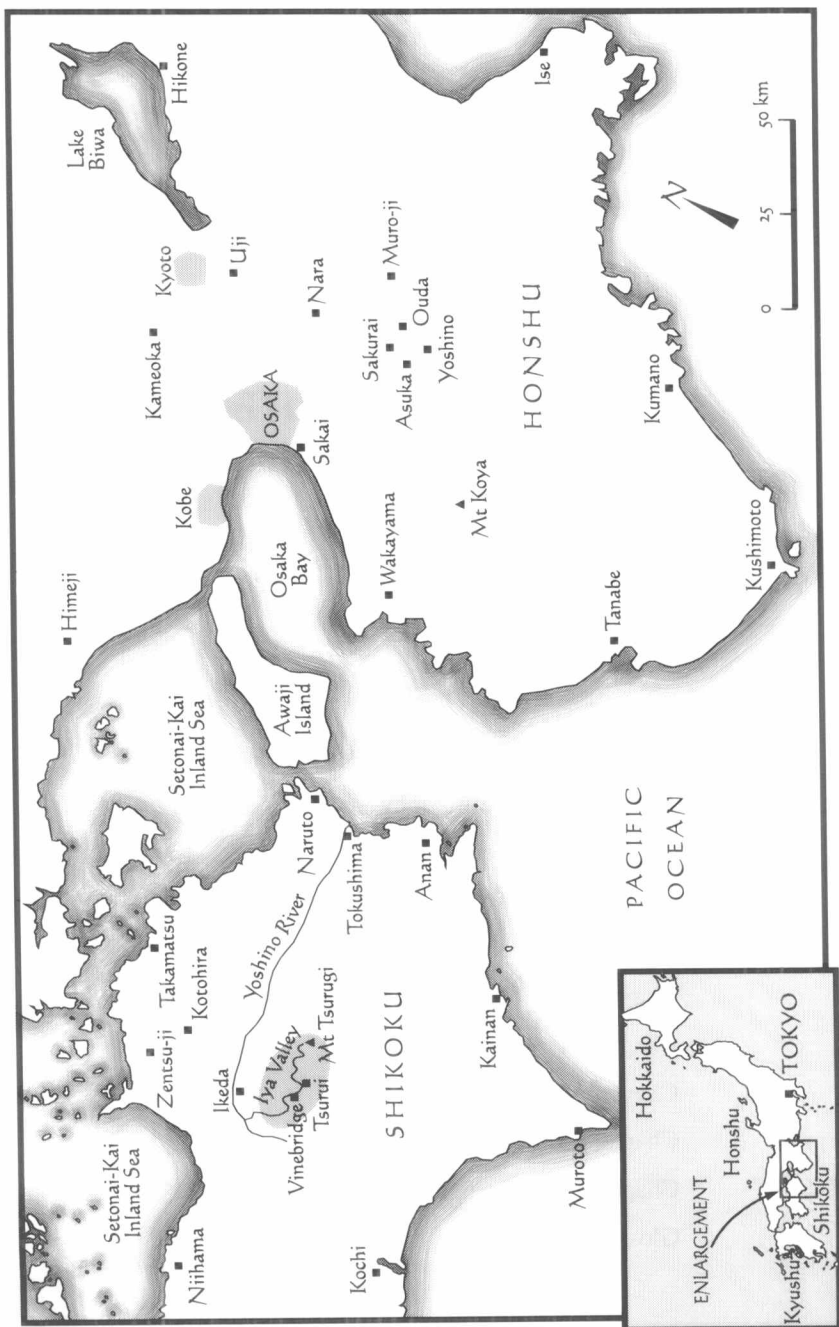
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JAPANESE HISTORICAL PERIODS

Jomon	10,000-300 BC
Yayoi	300 BC-300 AD
Kofun	300-710
Nara	710-794
Heian	794-1185
Kamakura	1185-1333
Muromachi	1333-1576
Momoyama	1576-1600
Edo	1600-1867
Meiji	1868-1912
Taisho	1912-1926
Showa	1926-1989
Heisei	1989-

CHINESE DYNASTIES

Chou	1100-221 BC
Qin	221-207 BC
Han	206 BC-220 AD
Three Kingdoms	220-280
Jin	265-420
Southern Dynasties	420-589
Northern Dynasties	386-581
Sui	589-618
T'ang	618-907
Later Liang	907-923
Later T'ang	923-936
Later Jin	936-946
Later Han	947-950
Later Chou	951-960
Liao	916-1125
Sung	960-1279
Western Xia	1038-1227
Jin	1115-1234
Yuan (Mongol)	1271-1368
Ming	1368-1644
Ch'ing (Manchu)	1644-1911

PREFACE

In Kabuki, there is a form of on-stage costume change known as *hikinuki* (literally, 'pulling out the threads'). The dancer wears two layers of kimonos, the upper one being lightly stitched with long threads. At the climactic moment, stagehands dressed in black pull the threads, the actor throws off the outer kimono and reveals himself in a completely new costume.

This book has been through several *hikinuki*. Its first appearance was in the form of a series of fifteen articles I wrote in Japanese for the opinion magazine *Shincho* 45 from February 1991 until December 1992. The title of the series, modeled after Proust, was *Ushinawareshi Bi wo Motomete* (*Remembrance of Beauty Past*). Each article dealt with a facet of my life in Japan since I arrived as a boy in 1964 – Kabuki, art collecting, Osaka – using these as windows into present-day Japan's cultural crisis.

When I finished the series, *Shincho* suggested that the articles be published as a book. So I revised the articles, cutting one on the Japanese religious world, and adding more detail about the teaching of traditional arts and my experience of the business world in Tokyo during the 'Bubble Years' of the 1980s. But when

it came time to publish, we found that somebody else had just released a book with exactly the same title – so I had to look for a new one. Miyoko Ogawa at the Tankosha publishing house came to my rescue. “What you are describing is the feeling of watching someone walking down an alley and turning onto the main street. Just after they have turned, a last glimpse remains lingering on the retina.” So the book came out in July 1993 as *Utsukushiki Nippon no Zanzo* (*Last Glimpse of Beautiful Japan*).

At the time, nobody imagined that the book would stir up as much attention as it did. But it touched on issues over which there is wide public debate. I was asked to give lectures and participate in panel discussions. In the process my thoughts underwent another transformation. The give and take with questioners in the audience and other panelists provided valuable insights into how the Japanese public and cultural elites are responding to these problems.

Meanwhile, I had been thinking of making an English translation, but every time I sat down to put it into English, I despaired. It was a sobering experience for someone who had spent decades blithely translating other people. Not even one paragraph would go into English acceptably. It was not only a matter of words. When I wrote the original articles, I was thinking exclusively of a Japanese audience. For readers outside Japan, the text would have to be radically revised. Baffled by my inability to translate myself, I let the book sit for almost two years.

It was Nicholas Jose and Claire Roberts who showed me the way. “Don’t even try to translate your own work,” said Nick. “Get somebody else to do it, and then revise.” As for the title, Claire came up with the elegantly simple ‘Lost Japan’.

Luckily, at the Oomoto Foundation where I work, there is a

young American, Bodhi Fishman, just graduated from Amherst in Japanese Studies, with good language ability and a talent for editing. I cast the whole thing into Bodhi's lap. He produced the English translation, which I never could have done on my own, and then edited the revised English version, to which I had added thoughts drawn from the experiences of the last two years. The chapter on Southeast Asia was cut due to lack of space, but other chapters were enlarged, notably those dealing with Kyoto and Osaka.

So the book has been through five *hikinuki*: from articles, to book, to lectures, to Bodhi's translation, to the final English version. However, after all the changes of kimono, I have tried to stay as close as possible to the spirit of the original.

CHAPTER 1



LOOKING FOR A CASTLE

The Egg in the Dungeon

When I was six, I wanted to live in a castle. I suppose many children dream of living in a castle, but as they grow older the dream is forgotten. However, in my case this desire lingered on until adulthood. My father was a legal officer with the United States Navy, and we lived for a time in Naples, Italy. There was a castle on an island in the harbor called the Castel dell'Ovo (Castle of the Egg). Legend has it that Virgil had presented an egg to the castle, and had prophesied that if the egg ever broke, the castle would be destroyed. But after hundreds of years the egg was still intact in the dungeon, the Castel dell'Ovo still stood, and I wanted to live there.

Practically every day, when my father returned home from work, I would follow him about, repeating, "I want to live in a castle." I was extremely persistent, so one day my father grew exasperated and told me, "A great landlord called Mr Nussbaum owns all the castles in the world, so when you grow up you can rent one from him." From that time on, I waited expectantly for the day when I could meet Mr Nussbaum.

A typical Navy family, we moved constantly. From Naples,

my father was transferred to Hawaii, where we lived by the beach on the windward side of Oahu. Sometimes, large green glass balls encrusted with barnacles floated in on the tide. My father told me that the fishermen in Japan used them to keep their nets afloat. Torn from the nets by storms, the balls floated all the way across the Pacific Ocean to Hawaii. This was my first experience of 'Japan'.

When I was nine, we moved to Washington DC. I entered a private school there, which taught Latin and Chinese to elementary school students. The school was at once hopelessly behind and ahead of the times. Stern Mrs Wang, our teacher, made sure that we copied our Chinese characters correctly, hundreds to a page. For most of the other students it was drudgery, but I loved the look and feel of the characters. Mrs Wang showed us pictures of Beijing, and temples perched on mountain precipices, and in the process memories of Italy faded and my daydreams began to focus on China.

After three years at the Pentagon, my father was transferred to Japan, and in 1964 we went to live at the US naval base in Yokohama; I was then twelve years old. This was the year Japan hosted the Olympics. In retrospect, 1964 was a great turning point for Japan. The previous twenty years had been spent rebuilding a nation which had been devastated by World War II. The next thirty years were to see an economic boom unprecedented in history, as Japan transformed itself into the richest country in the world.

Although the American Occupation had ended in 1952, signs of the US military presence were everywhere in Yokohama, from the special currency we were issued to foil the black market (printed with the faces of movie stars instead of presidents) to the ubiquitous military police. Outside the military base, the few

foreigners living in Yokohama made up a small group of long-time expatriates, many of whom had been living there for decades. The yen was 360 to the US dollar, four times the rate today, and the foreigners lived well. My mother's childhood friend Linda Beech was living in Tokyo and had gained great notoriety as a teacher of English on TV. She would appear underwater in scuba gear and shout, "I'm drowning! That's d-R-(not L)-o-w-n-i-n-g!" Linda was the first of the 'TV foreigners' who now populate Japan's airwaves in great numbers. Today, foreigners in Tokyo eke out a living in cramped apartments; in contrast, Linda and a group of expat families owned villas at Misaki, on the coast.

I was excited to find that the Chinese characters I had learned in Washington were also used in Japan. Within a few weeks I had taught myself *hiragana* and *katakana* (the two Japanese alphabets), and once I could read train and bus signs, I started exploring Yokohama and Tokyo on my own. When the weekend came, Tsuru-san, our maid, packed a boxed lunch for me, and I traveled the train lines south to Odawara Castle, and north to Nikko. People were always friendly to an American boy asking directions in Japanese. Slowly, my interest in China shifted to an interest in Japan.

Although the country was poised on the verge of a huge economic boom, the old Japan was still visible. All around Yokohama, even in the heart of the city, there were green hills, and many traditional old neighborhood streets remained. I was particularly captivated by the sea of tiled roofs. On the streetcars, most women over forty wore kimonos in fall and winter. Western-style shoes were still something of an innovation, and I used to enjoy studying the footwear of streetcar passengers, which consisted of a mixture of sandals, *geta* (wooden clogs)

and some truly amazing purple plastic slippers. After dusk fell, you could often hear the clapping sound of *geta* echoing through the streets.

My favorite things were the Japanese houses. At that time there were still many magnificent old Japanese houses in Yokohama and Tokyo. Linda Beech had introduced my mother to a women's group called the Nadeshiko-Kai (Society of Pinks), so-named because Japanese women are supposed to be as lovely as *nadeshiko* flowers (pinks). In those days consorting with foreigners was still something special, and the Nadeshiko-Kai drew its Japanese membership from the elite. Once a month, the ladies would visit each other's homes, so there were many opportunities for me to view great houses, as I was able to go along as well.

Among the houses I visited was a large estate at Hayama, a resort town near Misaki, about an hour south of Yokohama. I recall being told that the house belonged to the Imperial Family, but it seems inconceivable today that the Imperial villa would have been made available to US military personnel, even in those twilight post-Occupation years. The estate must have been merely in the neighborhood of the Imperial villa. At the Hayama villa, I saw neat tatami mats for the first time. From the sunny rooms on the second floor, Mt Fuji could be seen floating in the distance.

Another great house was the mansion of former prime minister Shigeru Yoshida in Tokyo, featuring an enormous living room with dozens of tatami mats under a huge coffered ceiling. My favorite place was the little complex of Japanese-style country houses belonging to Linda Beech and her friends on the Misaki coast. I can still vividly recall the rows of pine trees atop the cliffs at Misaki, blowing in the ocean breeze.

The grand old Japanese houses were not just houses. Each house was a ‘program’ – designed to unfold and reveal itself in stages, like unrolling a handscroll. I remember my first visit to the house of one of the ladies of the Nadeshiko-Kai. Outside, high walls gave no indication of the interior. We entered through a gate, passed through a garden, and continuing on, met another gate, another garden, and only then the *genkan*, or entranceway (literally, ‘hidden barrier’).

On arriving at the *genkan*, we were surprised to find that the lady of the house got down on her knees to greet us, her head touching the tatami. It was the sort of greeting royalty might receive; it made me feel that entering this house was a great occasion. Once inside, we passed along a hallway; this was followed by a small room and another hallway. Finally, we reached a spacious living room, absolutely empty except for some flowers in the *tokonoma* (alcove). It was summer, the doors to the hallways and living rooms had been removed, and a breeze from the garden swept through the whole house from one end to the other. However, only the surrounding passageways received light from the garden, so it was dark inside the large tatami room. A secret space removed from the outside world, it conjured up the feeling that I had been transported back to an ancient time, long before I was born. To me, that house had become my ‘castle’: I knew that Japan was where I wanted to live my life.

In 1966 we moved back to Washington DC. After graduating from high school in 1969, I entered the Japanese Studies program at Yale University. However, the course was not what I expected. Japanese Studies at the time revolved almost wholly around economic development, post-Meiji government, ‘theories of Japaneseness’ (known as *Nihonjinron*), and so on, and deep inside I began to wonder if Japan really was the country I wanted