

TRAVELERS' TALES GUIDES

NEW
GUIDEBOOK
SECTION

JAPAN

true stories of life on the road



EDITED BY DONALD W. GEORGE
AND AMY GREIMANN CARLSON

TRAVELERS' TALES GUIDES

JAPAN

TRUE STORIES OF LIFE
ON THE ROAD



Collected and Edited by

DONALD W. GEORGE AND
AMY GREIMANN CARLSON

Series Editors

JAMES O'REILLY AND LARRY HABEGGER

TRAVELERS' TALES, INC.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94133

Travelers' Tales Japan

Collected and Edited by Donald W. George and Amy Greimann Carlson

Copyright © 1999 Travelers' Tales, Inc. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America.

Travelers' Tales and *Travelers' Tales Guides* are trademarks of Travelers' Tales, Inc.

Credits and copyright notices for the individual articles in this collection are given starting on page 405. We have made every effort to trace the ownership of all copyrighted material and to secure permission from copyright holders. In the event of any question arising as to the ownership of any material, we will be pleased to make the necessary correction in future printings. Contact Travelers' Tales Inc., P.O. Box 610160, Redwood City, CA 94061.

Cover and interior design by Judy Anderson, Susan Bailey, and Kathryn Heflin

Cover photograph: Copyright by Sisse Brimberg/National Geographic Image Collection.

Two dolls made by Ms. Yasuko Hara, who has been making dolls for fifteen years. The dolls' bodies are made of paper-clay and the clothes are made from dyed washi (traditional Japanese handmade paper).

Map by Keith Granger

Page Layout by Cynthia Lamb, using the fonts Bembo and Boulevard

Frontispiece by Basho excerpted from *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa*, edited by Robert Haas.

Distributed by: O'Reilly and Associates, 101 Morris Street,
Sebastopol, California 95472

ISBN: 1-885211-04-X

CRITICAL ACCLAIM
FOR *TRAVELERS' TALES* —

"The *Travelers' Tales* series is altogether remarkable."

—Jan Morris, author of *Journeys, Locations, and Hong Kong*

"For the thoughtful traveler, these books are an invaluable resource. There's nothing like them on the market."

—Pico Iyer, author of *Video Night in Kathmandu*

"This is the stuff memories can be duplicated from."

—Karen Krebsbach, *Foreign Service Journal*

"I can't think of a better way to get comfortable with a destination than by delving into *Travelers' Tales*...before reading a guidebook, before seeing a travel agent. The series helps visitors refine their interests and readies them to communicate with the peoples they come in contact with...."

—Paul Glassman, Society of American Travel Writers

"... *Travelers' Tales* is a valuable addition to any pre-departure reading list."

—Tony Wheeler, publisher, Lonely Planet Publications

"*Travelers' Tales* delivers something most guidebooks only promise: a real sense of what a country is all about...."

—Steve Silk, *Hartford Courant*

"These anthologies seem destined to be a success... *Travelers' Tales* promises to be a useful and enlightening addition to the travel bookshelves. By collecting and organizing such a wide range of literature, O'Reilly and Habegger are providing a real service for those who enjoy reading first-person accounts of a destination before seeing it for themselves."

—Bill Newlin, publisher, Moon Publications

"The *Travelers' Tales* series should become required reading for anyone visiting a foreign country who wants to truly step off the tourist track and experience another culture, another place, first hand."

—Nancy Paradis, *St. Petersburg Times*

"Like having been there, done it, seen it. If there's one thing traditional guidebooks lack, it's the really juicy travel information, the personal stories about back alleys and brief encounters. The *Travelers' Tales* series fills this gap with an approach that's all anecdotes, no directions."

—Jim Gullo, *Diversion*

OTHER TITLES IN THE SERIES

Thailand

Mexico

India

A Woman's World

France

Spain

San Francisco

Hong Kong

Food

Brazil

Paris

Gutsy Women

Italy

Nepal

The Road Within

Gutsy Mamas

A Dog's World

Love & Romance

The Fearless Diner

The Gift of Travel

There's No Toilet Paper on the Road Less Traveled

Women in the Wild

A Mother's World

Safety and Security for Women Who Travel

America

TRAVELERS' TALES GUIDES

JAPAN

TRUE STORIES OF LIFE
ON THE ROAD

*Misty rain,
can't see Fuji
—interesting!*

—BASHO (1644–94)

Preface

TRAVELERS' TALES

We are all outsiders when we travel. Whether we go abroad or roam about our own city or country, we often enter territory so unfamiliar that our frames of reference become inadequate. We need advice not just to avoid offense and danger, but to make our experiences richer, deeper, and more fun.

Traditionally, travel guides have answered the basic questions: what, when, where, how, and how much. A good guidebook is indispensable for all the practical matters that demand attention. More recently, many guidebooks have added bits of experiential insight to their standard fare, but something important is still missing: guidebooks don't really prepare *you*, the individual with feelings and fears, hopes and dreams, goals.

This kind of preparation is best achieved through travelers' tales, for we get our inner landmarks more from anecdote than information. Nothing can replace listening to the experience of others, to the war stories that come out after a few drinks, to the memories that linger and beguile. For millennia it's been this way: at watering holes and wayside inns, the experienced traveler tells those nearby what lies ahead on the ever-mysterious road. Stories stoke the imagination, inspire, frighten, and teach. In stories we see more clearly the urges that bring us to wander, whether it's hunger for change, adventure, self-knowledge, love, curiosity, sorrow, or even something as prosaic as a job assignment or two weeks off.

But travelers' accounts, while profuse, can be hard to track down. Many are simply doomed in a throwaway publishing world. And few of us have the time anyway to read more than one or two books, or the odd pearl found by chance in the Sunday travel section. Wanderers for years, we've often faced this issue. We've always

told ourselves when we got home that we would prepare better for the next trip—read more, study more, talk to more people—but life always seems to interfere and we've rarely managed to do so to our satisfaction. That is one reason for this series. We needed a kind of experiential primer that guidebooks don't offer.

Another path that led us to *Travelers' Tales* has been seeing the enormous changes in travel and communications over the last two decades. It is no longer unusual to have ridden a pony across Mongolia, to have celebrated an auspicious birthday on Mt. Kilimanjaro, or honeymooned on the Loire. The one-world monoculture has risen with daunting swiftness, weaving a new cross-cultural rug; no longer is it surprising to encounter former headhunters watching *All-Star Wrestling* on their satellite feed, no longer is it shocking to find the last guy at the end of the earth wearing a Harvard t-shirt and asking if you know Michael Jordan. The global village exists in a rudimentary fashion, but it is real.

In 1980, Paul Fussell wrote in *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* a cranky but wonderful epitaph for travel as it was once known, in which he concluded that "we are all tourists now, and there is no escape." It has been projected by some analysts that by the year 2000, tourism will be the world's largest industry; others say it already is. In either case, this is a horrifying prospect—hordes of us hunting for places that have not been trod on by the rest of us!

Fussell's words have the painful ring of truth, but this is still our world, and it is worth seeing and will be worth seeing next year, or in 50 years, simply because it will always be worth meeting others who continue to see life in different terms than we do despite the best efforts of telecommunication and advertising talents. No amount of creeping homogeneity can quell the endless variation of humanity, and travel in the end is about people, not places. Places only provide different venues, as it were, for life, in which we are all pilgrims who need to talk to each other.

There are also many places around the world where intercultural friction and outright xenophobia are increasing. And the very fact that travel endangers cultures and pristine places more quickly than it used to calls for extraordinary care on the part of

today's traveler, a keener sense of personal responsibility. The world is not our private zoo or theme park; we need to be better prepared before we go, so that we might become honored guests and not vilified intruders.

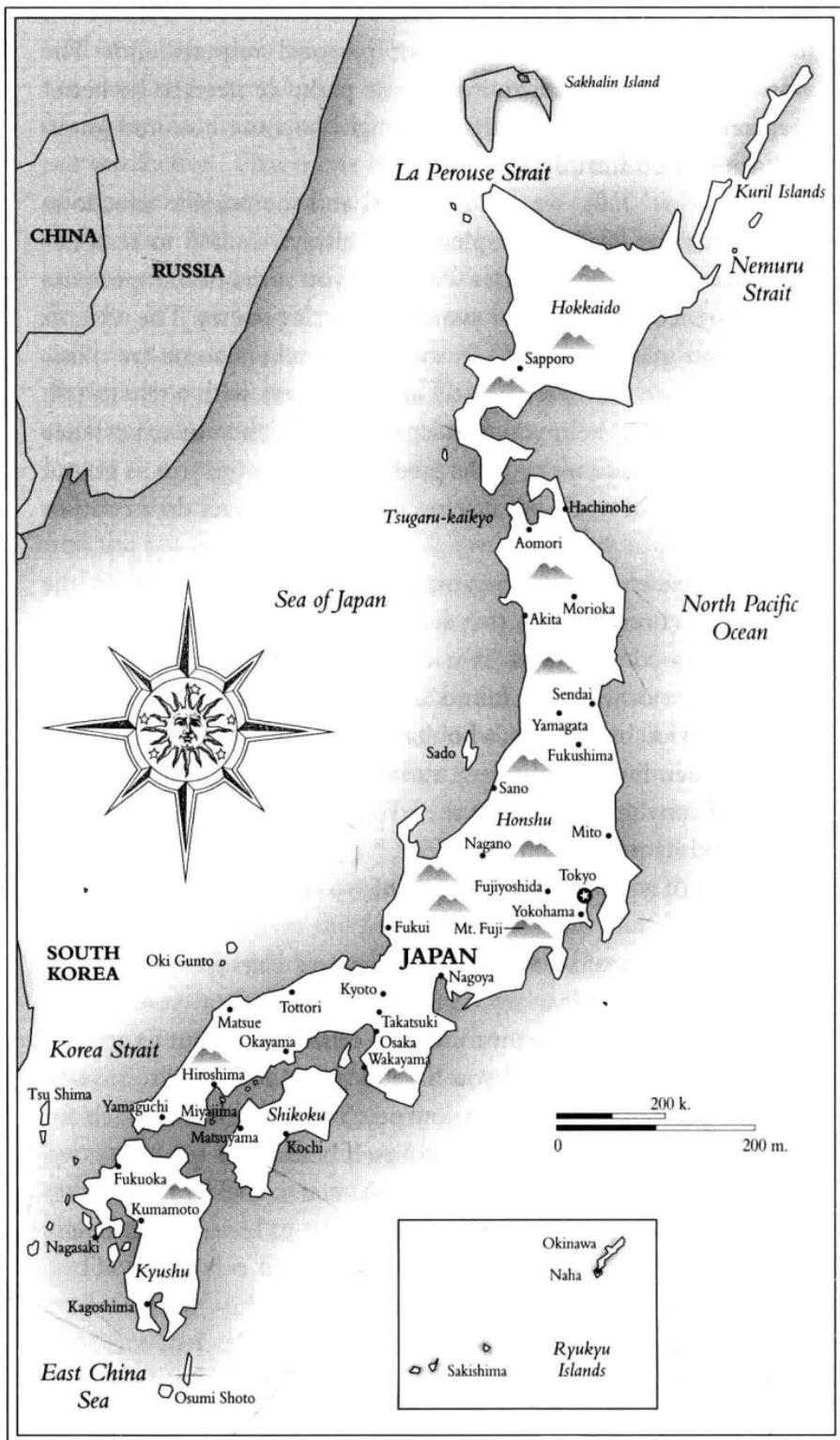
In *Travelers' Tales*, we collect useful and memorable anecdotes to produce the kind of sampler we've always wanted to read before setting out. These stories will show you some of the spectrum of experiences to be had or avoided in each country. The authors come from many walks of life: some are teachers, some are musicians, some are entrepreneurs, all are wanderers with a tale to tell. Their stories will help you to deepen and enrich your experience as a traveler. Where we've excerpted books, we urge you to go out and read the full work, because no selection can ever do an author justice.

Each *Travelers' Tales* is organized into five simple parts. In the first, we've chosen stories that reflect the ephemeral yet pervasive essence of a country. Part Two contains stories about places and activities that others have found worthwhile. In Part Three, we've chosen stories by people who have made a special connection between their lives and interests and the people and places they visited. Part Four shows some of the struggles and challenges facing a region and its people, and Part Five, "The Last Word," is just that, something of a grace note or harmonic to remind you of the book as a whole.

Our selection of stories in each *Travelers' Tales* is by no means comprehensive, but we are confident it will prime your pump. *Travelers' Tales* are not meant to replace other guides, but to accompany them. No longer will you have to go to dozens of sources to map the personal side of your journey. You'll be able to reach for *Travelers' Tales*, and truly prepare yourself before you go.

—JAMES O'REILLY AND LARRY HABEGGER

Series Editors



Japan: An Introduction

What is it about Japan that so enchants foreigners?

Partly it is the beauty of the country, from the palm-lined beaches and turquoise waters of Okinawa to the wide-open plains of Hokkaido, the hot spring-cradling Japanese Alps to the ever-green-cloaked mountains and glistening rice paddies of Kyushu and Shikoku.

Partly it is the ancient, intricate arts and crafts, from flower arranging and tea ceremony to pottery and *sumi-e* painting, the music of the *shamisen*, the movement of the Buyo dancer and the Noh and Kabuki player, the poetry of the *haiku* master and the woodprint maker.

Partly it is the bottomless depths of Zen Buddhism, and the disciplines and rites of martial arts such as *karate* and *kendo*.

Partly it is the entrepreneurial energy and manufacturing expertise of Tokyo and Osaka, and partly it is the spare tranquillity and aesthetic refinement of Kyoto and Nara.

Partly it is the cuisine—from the freshest *sashimi* to the miniature masterpieces of *kaiseki ryori*, lighter-than-air *tempura* to seaweed-wrapped rice balls, noontime bowls of handmade *udon* to midnight bowls of street-stall *oden*, all washed down with a steaming thimbleful of *sake* or a frothy glass of ice-cold beer.

And partly—and perhaps most persuasively of all—it is the kindness and sensitivity of the Japanese people, who will go to astonishing lengths to procure a special gift, direct visitors to their desired destinations, return a forgotten wallet, or see a friend off.

The truth, of course, is that all of these attributes interact in amazingly complex and compelling ways, creating the whole of

Japanese culture and countryside—a whole that is as enchanting as it is enigmatic.

This is not to suggest that everything in and of Japan is unblemished. On the contrary, as anyone who has lived in Japan knows, the culture is fraught with frustrations for the non-native: a powerful collective code of belief and behavior that seems to exclude all non-Japanese; a complicated inferiority-superiority mechanism that deflects visitors from ever probing into the real heart of the culture; racism directed against non-white visitors and residents; a long-hours work ethic and a sexual role-stereotyping that seem to run exactly counter to contemporary Western attitudes of family nurturing and gender equality.

These too are all interlocking pieces of the grand Japanese puzzle.

But frustrating and infuriating as Japan can sometimes be for foreigners, in its entirety it is a place that rewards persistence and open-mindedness with enthralling enlightenments, lessons that can change one's life—from the riches of artistic sparseness to the splendors of recreated nature to the self-completing gifts of group harmony.

Both of the editors of this collection have lived in Japan, and both of us have found Japan mysteriously and ineluctably woven into our lives.

When you love Japan as we have come to love Japan, editing an anthology like this is especially daunting: there were so many good literary works that had taught us so much that it was almost paralyzing to have to choose among them. And as we undertook more reading and research, there was a powerful temptation to simply keep reading—and so postpone the choosing forever in a state of blissful, perpetual preparation. But at last, hard choices were made.

Now that our task is finished, one inevitable sadness is that not all the authors and works worthy of inclusion could be contained in this comparatively slim volume.

The other great sadness is that we can't simply sit down with all of the chosen writers—and with all of you reading them—and

order some *sushi*, open some *sake*, and just enjoy all these tales together, as they should be enjoyed.

But let's do it in mind, anyway. We'll set the blanket under the cherry boughs here, and wait for the first faint breeze to stir the branches. See, there they fall, the first tremulous harbingers of summer, and fall, and winter—and, yes, spring. Now let's sing and dance and drink and, by all means, read—and celebrate all these stirring word-blossoms around us.

—Donald W. George and Amy Greimann Carlson

Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xv
JAMES O'REILLY AND LARRY HABEGGER	
<i>Map</i>	xviii
<i>Introduction</i>	xix
DONALD W. GEORGE AND AMY GREIMANN CARLSON	

Part One ESSENCE OF JAPAN

<i>Taiko</i> Drumming	3
ALAN BOOTH	
The Magic of Miyajima	9
DONALD RICHIE	
I Feel Coke	22
PICO IYER	
When the Heart Becomes Quiet	27
JOHN DAVID MORLEY	
Smo	38
BRAD NEWSHAM	
Somebody Stab Him Again	45
DAVE BARRY	
The Essence of Japan	50
DONALD RICHIE	
When the Cherries Bloom	57
DONALD W. GEORGE	
Into the <i>Denki Furo</i>	62
JEFF GREENWALD	

P's And Q's and Envelope Blues BRUCE S. FEILER	67
Illiteracy and the Attacking Toilet KEVIN O'CONNOR	78
Tea with an Old Friend LINDA BUTLER	83
Back to Izumo, Back to Springtime GREG DVORAK	89

Part Two

SOME THINGS TO DO

The Great Tokyo Fish Market T. R. REID	99
Department Store Panic JIM LEFF	110
Bilingual Laughter CATHY N. DAVIDSON	115
The Indoor Slopes of Tokyo JONATHAN ALTER	119
Transcendence SUSAN ORLEAN	124
Sandbath Resurrection JAMES D. HOUSTON	141
<i>Of Gomi and Gaijin</i> STEVE BAILEY	147
Osaka: Bumpers and Runners ALEX KERR	151
Ryoanji Reflections DONALD W. GEORGE	160
The Arithmetic of Beauty KATHERINE ASHENBURG	164
Rain Droppings BRAD NEWSHAM	169

- An Alchemy of Absences 177
PICO IYER
- Monster in a *Ryokan* 183
MARY ROACH

Part Three

GOING YOUR OWN WAY

- Unforgettable 191
JAMES D. HOUSTON
- Land of Wonder, Land of Kindness 200
RAY BARTLETT
- The Tangerine Buddha 208
MICHAEL FESSLER
- Grief 218
CATHY N. DAVIDSON
- Dance Through the Wall of the Body 236
DAVID MURA
- In Search of Beauty 245
ALEX KERR
- Capsule Cure 254
STEVEN WARDELL
- A Yen for Cleaning 263
LOUISE RAFKIN
- Love Boat, Japanese-Style 271
CLEO PASKAL
- A Queer Night in Tokyo 277
MARIANNE DRESSER
- Red Lights and Green Tea 283
BRUCE S. FEILER
- Rice Harvest 294
LEILA PHILIP
- Last Train to Takatsuki 304
MICHAEL WARD