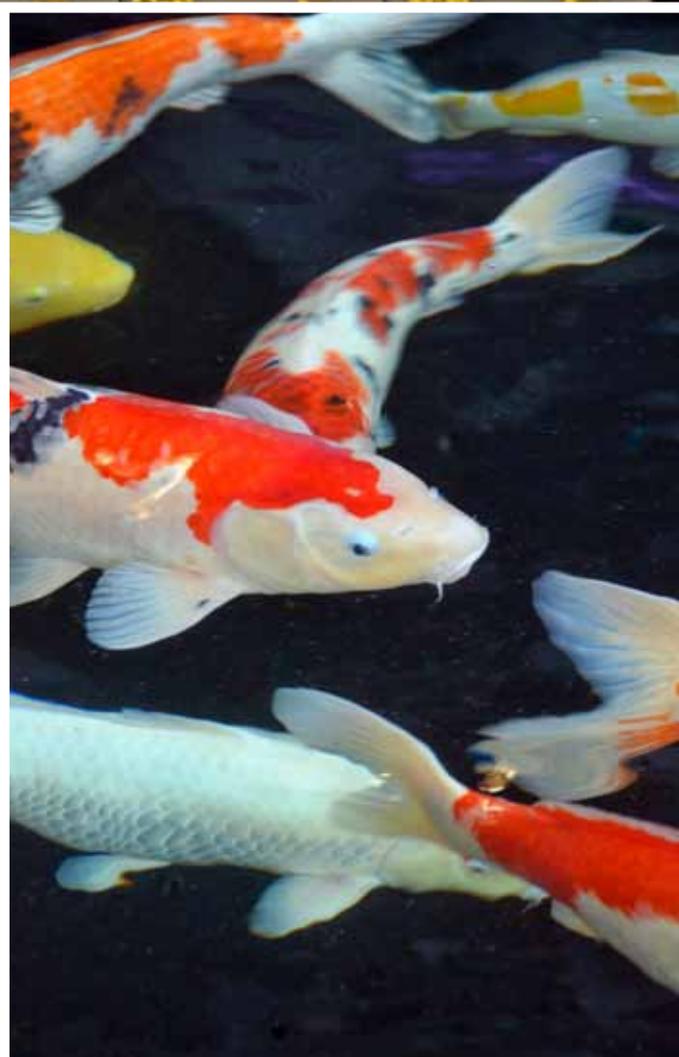




SAKE, SUSHI, SADO AND GEISHAS

Hello from Japan!, writes **Mike Smith** after he explored Sado and Niigata, which may not be as well-known to foreign visitors as other parts of Japan, but they are well-worth a visit

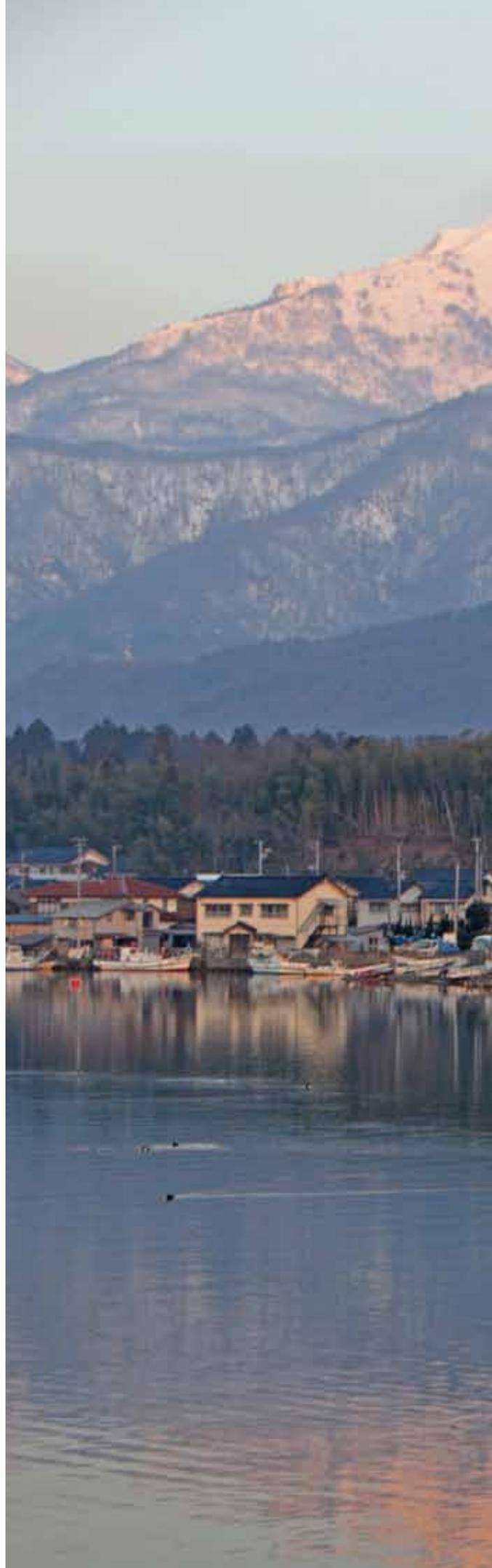


*Row, row, row your boat,
Gently down the stream.
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.*



I

wasn't dreaming, but the tarai bune or tub boat I was in at Ogi Port on Sado Island off the west coast of Japan was straight from a fantasy and brought the popular nursery rhyme to mind. My oarswoman was dressed in a traditional folk outfit and a big hat which protected her against the elements.





Exploring Sado

Originally designed for easy access into narrow waterways, tub boats are still used by fishermen and seaweed collectors, but can also be rented by tourists for a quick trip around the bay. It was all a bit twee, but good fun and very photogenic!

Sado is a large island of 855sqkm and was once a place of exile for criminals and undesirables, which was not why I was there. It is now home to numerous festivals, cultural events and wonderful scenery dominated by a rugged coastline and two mountain ranges, which was why I was there!

There was no need to leave my onsen (traditional Japanese hotel with hot spring) for stunning views. Sunrise from my balcony was beautiful as the snow covered mountains behind Lake Kamo took on an orange hue. Shivering, and my breath condensing, I watched the soaring black kites and rare Japanese crested ibis and egrets flying overhead. A perfect start to the day putting me in the right frame of mind to explore!

Gold Digger!

The goldmines of Sado were massive and ranked amongst the most productive in the world a couple of hundred years ago. Their owners back then were a nasty bunch who frequently abducted homeless people and exploited children to do the hard dangerous underground work.

After 400 years the mines ceased operating in 1989, yet remain open to the public. The robot miners in the well preserved Sodayu Tunnel were very impressive as was the reproduction of the Yawaragi ceremony near the exit. Performed on the first working day of the year the ritual is to placate the mountain god so that the veins become softer and easier to mine.

A Lunch to Die For? Fugu!

More examples of excellent robotics which move, narrate and dance were seen at the Sado Historical Museum that depicts the story of several exiles including Emperor Juntoko and the monk Saint Nichiren.

We had lunch in their restaurant. My jaw dropped as the chef describing our food casually introduced the final piece of sashimi; fugu or puffer fish, the most famous and potentially lethal Japanese raw fish dish. I lived to tell the tale, it had an



interesting taste and I have new bragging rights, but I preferred the tuna!

Continuing our island tour we stopped at Tatakao Kan where an extremely fit young man was beating the big Taiko drums. Made from 600 year old trees and cow leather for the skin, the sound was deep and very loud. It's a very competitive and entertaining form of music and for me was a great way to relieve stress before dinner.

To Sake and Sushi

We were up early the next morning to catch the Jetfoil for the one hour return trip to Niigata City, the capital of Niigata prefecture. There was a sake festival in town with an anticipated participation of 100,000 guests!

I knew it would be fun even before the man in front of me staggered first to his left then to his right, regained his balance and thrust out his cup and asked for a refill of Japan's most popular alcoholic drink.

The queues outside, numerous hilarious posters warning about the intoxicating



effects of sake, the smoky aroma of grilled food and a happy crowd, some in kimonos, welcomed us to Niigata Sake no Jin, the largest sake trade fair in Japan where Niigata's 90 sake brewers join together to promote their brew.

Premium Product

I can bluff my way when discussing wine, but have no idea where to start with sake,

particularly as there is seldom any English on the bottle. Kichihei Saito, Chairman of Niigata Sake Brewers Association, was on hand to give me a little education.

Niigata prefecture grows half of Japan's rice. As rice is a key ingredient of sake along with along with water, a microorganism called koji, and yeast it is natural that many of the premium sake producers are in the area. The fermented



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brew of sake has a slightly higher alcohol content than wine at 13 – 18%, but interestingly has a much shorter lifetime. Once a bottle is opened it is best to drink the contents. That works for me!

Saito-san explained, “Like wine, there are many types of sake depending on the quality of the ingredients, the degree of rice milling and brewing methods, but in the end it all comes down to personal taste.”

Free Flow

On that note I clutched my porcelain sake cup and made my first selection. The portions were small so I took advantage of the free flow and tried many different brands, stopping occasionally to take photographs of bizarre doe eyed anime cartoon characters, steal a glance at Miss Sake 2014 and just drink in the atmosphere. I’d sum it up as being rather like a NATAS Fair or IT show in Singapore, but inspired by Munich’s Oktoberfest with gallons of sake rather than beer. Cheers!

The festival was set in the tallest building in Niigata so I went from one high to another as I rode the lift 125m to the Toki Messe Observation room for a 360 degree panoramic view of the city.

Kiwami Set Menu

Niigata has a number of interesting museums and family villas, but it is really a city to experience, so after sake I figured it was logical to learn more about sushi. With lots of rice and a long coastline that supports an active fishing industry it’s not surprising that Niigata has some great sushi restaurants.

Sitting cross legged on tatami mats at a very low Japanese style table is not my idea of comfort but it is the classic way to enjoy high class sushi with friends. To make life easier we ordered a “Kiwami” set menu consisting of nigiri or hand moulded vinegar flavoured rice with a slice of seasonal fresh seafood on top. The young bluefin tuna, salmon roe, northern shrimp





dragon appeared near the temple before disappearing into 1000 pine trees that had mysteriously appeared a few days earlier.

Almost Done

The light was starting to fade, but there was still time to get some photos of the magnificently restored Tokyo Station before heading to the Obaida area for dinner and last minute shopping.

Obaida has a strange mix of malls and sights including a copy of the Statue of Liberty, a giant statue of Gundam (an anime robot) and the Toyota Automobile Museum which helped pass the time before going to Haneda Airport for the redeye flight back to Singapore.

Sado and Niigata offer an alternative view of Japan and are easily accessible by public transport. Tokyo is simply a great city! 

and yellow tail with a touch of soy sauce and a hint of wasabi giving added spice were particularly tasty

Sasandango

We'd barely finished lunch when someone suggested trying yet another rice dish, sasandango; glutinous rice and red beans wrapped in bamboo leaves. I wrongly assumed we would be having a quick snack, but no we had to make our own! A quick demonstration from the owner and it was my turn. Getting the leaves around the rice was easy, but I'd be damned if I could tie the knots to hold it all together without assistance. Fortunately we didn't have to hammer the sticky rice outside!

After a night at the Okura Hotel it was time to bus back to Tokyo.

Gosh! Geisha and a Dragon.

Determined to see as much of Tokyo as possible we started at Asakusa Temple that dates back to the 7th Century. Suddenly the clanging of cymbals broke the peaceful atmosphere and security was moving us to one side. To my amazement an 18m golden dragon was being paraded towards us, with a carriage full of Geisha musicians, secretive Japanese female entertainers with white make up on their faces and wearing elaborate kimonos being towed behind it.

The crowd pushed and shoved to touch the dragon's head as it sprang to life. A dragon dance is performed to commemorate the opening of the Showa Hall of the temple in 1958. It is based on a legend that hundreds of years ago a golden

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