Landing on Another Planet

Mark Power

I went to Japan with few expectations. My guidebook insisted that if I were on a tour of the whole country then Miyazaki - both city and prefecture - should not delay me for more than a day or two. The single most important ‘attraction’ in the area, it continued, was *Seagaia*, one of the largest indoor beaches in the world.

But I’m attracted to places with little to recommend them. There is always something, and if you look hard enough, there is often far too much. Which, as it turned out, is what happened in Miyazaki. Indeed, when I first arrived I might just as well have landed on another planet, and for a few days I felt overwhelmed by it all. But, over time, I began to make some sense of it, although three weeks is scarcely long enough to scratch the surface.

Miyazaki is a large and rural prefecture in Southern Kyushu boasting a warm and sunny climate. It is very safe - I never once felt threatened for myself or my things - indeed legend has it that you can leave anything anywhere in Miyazaki and it will still be there when you return.

I had the use of a car, and therefore most of what I saw was accessible by road. This was a conscious decision I made before leaving England. I also chose locations that the public could readily get to - I wanted no special access. And I made a point of avoiding those places local people insisted I should see (and I had many recommendations) because the basis of ‘European Eyes on Japan’ is self-explanatory; it is about what we the photographers find interesting, not what others think we should.

If you see a country from a car you are left with a particular impression; if, instead you were to trek into the mountains or to explore the same city for three weeks then you would experience something quite different. From a car you are always detached,

distant - it's rather like watching a movie. You see a lot, while paradoxically seeing very little. What I did see was a Japan where the urban and the rural constantly clashed, where the stamp of man upon the landscape was ever present, where every square inch was being put to some use.

Most potent were the hundreds of miles of concrete plastered onto the sides of roads. Towering over tiny cars, near vertical hillsides wore smooth grey jackets, or, more often, were covered in pre-caste concrete blocks, delicately hugging the curve of the rock surface below in bizarre geometric patterns resembling a Brigette Riley Pop-Art painting. I saw this blatant curbing of nature as indicative of two quite distinct national characteristics. Firstly that the landscape was tidied, neatened, nature packaged for consumption in the same way that a Japanese might delicately wrap a gift. Secondly it suggested a mistrust, perhaps even a fear of nature, that it somehow must be kept at bay, somewhere 'over there'. But in a way that is understandable; on only my second day a volcano erupted in the far north of Japan which was so powerful it made the international news headlines.

I had seen this bizarre landscape before in the photographs of Toshio Shibata (as I had further experienced Japan through the work of Araki, Moriyama, Hatakeyama, Miyamoto, Sugimoto and others) but I marvelled at its delicately brutal beauty, another paradox. This, along with an extraordinary capacity to get roads, dams, bridges and electric power plants to the most inaccessible of places, left me in a state of some awe.

Back in the towns, meanwhile, it was not much different. As my guidebook suggested I did go to Seagaia, and had first-hand experience of the crushed shell beach and wave pool backed with an enormous photograph of a blue sky and real plastic rocks. To be fair though, it was not trying to be anything other than what it was, and on the whole it was well done. But here was nature packaged for easy consumption again - and this time you didn't even have to go outside.

The surf in Seagaia is good enough to attract major competitions, while in car parks adjoining real beaches were the requisite camper vans and four-wheel drives of the amateur surfing crowd. This was my introduction to the Japanese obsession with sport. Baseball was the constantly on the television, and there were pitches everywhere. I learnt that young boys who once dreamt of being Sumo champions now long for a career in professional baseball. But most memorable were the golf driving ranges, enormous constructions of steel and green netting, which dominated the urban landscape. I made several visits to these modern day cathedrals, whose fairways resembled an English meadow in flower, and they were always busy. Not so, I noticed, the ‘real’ course in Aoshima, bathed in glorious late evening light but completely empty. Proper golf, it seems, is only for the very rich in Japan.

Miyazaki was once a holiday destination for many Japanese, and a popular location for honeymooners. Not so any more, in this age of cheap international flights. I was astonished to discover that it was cheaper to get from Tokyo to a Phillipine resort than to fly to Miyazaki. Cape Toi, a beautiful spot in the southern part of the prefecture, is now virtually bereft of visitors, and the enormous hotels built during the boom years lie rotting and empty.

What else do I remember as I sit here in my office back in England? The jumbled mess of wires and cables dominating every street corner, hanging precariously in front of buildings it was virtually impossible to see. Heated toilet seats, self-closing taxi doors and the Japanese obsession with gadgets and games of all kinds. The enormous gambling palaces. Too many traffic lights. Enthusiastic garage attendants. And an impression of wonder, of joy, and a hope of returning some day.

Mark Power. Brighton, England. April 2000