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GETTING COZY IN KOYA-SAN - A SINGLE PARENT SOJOURN TO JAPAN **by Brenda Elwell, CTC**

My most enduring memory of our 1991 December trip to Japan was that of cold feet. Winters in Japan are purported to be dry and crisp, unlike the humid spring/summer season. Unfortunately the weather gods did not smile on us.

My daughter had chosen to spend the fall semester of her junior year of college at Temple University's Tokyo campus. The kids and I thought it would be an exciting adventure to forgo our usual Christmas extended family gathering and instead spend the holidays in Japan and Hong Kong. After a few dry crisp days in Tokyo we headed by bullet train for Kyoto, ancient capital of this island nation. We had pre-reserved three nights in a ryokan, a typical Japanese inn, partly to save money, but mostly to experience Japanese culture first hand.

The first thing we had to do upon arrival at our ryokan was to remove our shoes and place them with dozens of others in the center area of the tiny lobby. It was easy to spot how many Americans were staying at the inn. High top sneakers were in fashion then and stood out from the low-cut leather shoes worn by most other foreigners. We were given "hallway shoes," heavy open-backed shoes, which were two-thirds the size of my big American feet, as were the steps leading to our room. Miraculously I only stumbled twice on the way up. Our Japanese hostess, whose English was limited to a few words and lots of sign language, explained that when we walked in our room we were to wear only our socks. "Hallway shoes" had to be carried to the other side of the room. From there we walked down another hallway to the bathroom, where, it was explained, we were to don "toilet shoes." Toilet shoes were never supposed to leave the toilet.

It rained almost the entire three days we were in Kyoto. Undaunted we carried out a full sightseeing schedule of the exquisite temples while we slogged around the streets in our perpetually wet sneakers. Our room at the ryokan was unheated and the adjoining hallway opened to the outdoors so the air got pretty chilly but once you were tucked into your futon, you were toasty warm. The hard part came when you had to get up in the middle of the night and run to the bathroom. The harder part came when you forgot to leave your toilet shoes in the toilet and then had to run back down that chilly hallway

to do a quick shoe exchange. Even under the warm futon it took awhile for my feet to unfreeze.

We left Kyoto for a full day's complicated train journey to Koya-san. Our destination was a Buddhist monastery, atop a remote mountain, where we had secured an overnight stay. (One of my daughter's Japanese friends had called ahead, the only way to make reservations). By Japanese standards, the monastery was a bargain - \$100 for the three of us, including lodging, dinner, and breakfast (all vegetarian of course). We arrived Koya-san after dark, fifteen minutes before the monastery served dinner and closed for the night at 6:00 pm. The town consisted of a few shops, in the process of closing, some homes, but no hotels or restaurants and no public signs of any kind. I started to panic, but my daughter used her rudimentary Japanese to ask directions and eventually, on the fourth try, we were directed to a dark path through a wooded area that led to the monastery.

Now well acquainted with the routine, we dutifully left our shoes on the porch, under an outdoor overhang, and scurried down a dark hallway. My kids zigged left and I zagged right, groping the walls, when I heard them yell "Over here, Mom!" I turned to the voices, stepped over the threshold, and was immediately transported back one thousand years in time. The softly lit room was hung with beautiful silk paintings depicting scenes from ancient Japan. Directly in front of me was a smiling, dimpled, shaven-headed young monk. He was seated cross-legged behind a low-slung black-lacquered table, which I quickly realized was the registration desk. Days of cold, intensely damp weather had wrecked havoc on my knees so I stood there, both transfixed and dubious, wondering how best to lower myself gracefully onto the tatami mats. Forgoing grace for expediency, I grabbed my daughter's hand, plopped down on the mats, and handed over the equivalent of \$100 in Japanese yen.

We were taken to our spacious room and immediately served a delicious light dinner and hot tea by two young monks. My children were hesitant to try some of the strange looking foods but I gobbled up everything in sight. It was all exquisitely prepared and presented. The monks then rolled out three futons, pinwheel style, around a central kerosene heater. That night I would have a full belly and warm feet! We donned our hallway shoes, perched outside our sliding door, and scuffled across the long open-air balcony to the bathroom. My teen-age son, having had stomach cramps during the day, headed for the toilet first. He emerged a few minutes later with the smile of Buddha on his face and said, "Mom, here we are, on this remote mountaintop, 10,000 miles from home and 10,000 feet in the air and the toilet seat is heated. Only in Japan!"

After a cozy night's sleep we were awakened at 5:45am by a loud gong calling us to the morning's religious service. After throwing on all our clothes, including hats, coats, and gloves (but no shoes), we were guided down the dark hallways to an interior tatami-filled room, where we were joined by two teachers from Scotland, also guests at the monastery. As the service began I was struck by the similarities between this ceremony

and the ones I knew as a child growing up in an Eastern European Catholic community in New Jersey:

- The Buddhist monks, like the Catholic priests, were all bald, (except the monks were so by choice).
- I couldn't understand the service (This time it was in Japanese instead of Latin)
- The altar was filled with offerings of food.
- Incense was used throughout the service.
- There was a lot of chanting.
- The service was long, over an hour, and mercifully, I still knew how to doze sitting up.

When the service was over, all of us - monks, Scots, my kids and I - gathered in our room for breakfast. Sharing our futons and kerosene heater we kept each other warm as each of us used our limited Japanese or English to communicate. We were soon joined by the head monk who slipped in next to me and began playing "toesies" with my feet. Not knowing quite what to do in this situation, I whipped out my business card and handed it ceremoniously, Japanese style, to the head monk. He studied it carefully, then left the room for ten minutes and returned speaking in slow, but enthusiastic Japanese. I understood enough words to realize he was inviting me to come back and contact him personally for reservations. Then he pulled out the monastery's business card from his robe. It was written entirely in Japanese characters except for some numbers preceded by one prominent word to which he pointed triumphantly. The word was "FAX."

By now it was time to leave. Feeling full and happy from the glow of new friendships, the hot tea, and warm toasty feet, we scurried out to the front porch area with our luggage. It had snowed during the night but my shoes had remained dry under the overhang. As I lifted them up to put them on my feet, my worst fears were confirmed. My high top sneakers were frozen solid.