

JAPAN, THE NEXT CRUISING FRONTIER, PART 1

Kirk R Patterson

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From Dream to Reality

I have spent most of my life dreaming about sailing beyond the horizon on my own sailboat. I subscribed to half-a-dozen sailing magazines, read hundreds of sailing-related books – classic stories of exploration and adventure, diaries of those who went around the world, ‘how-to’ manuals – and I talked and talked about ‘being a sailor’. But life intervened. Finally, at 54, I decided it was time to stop talking and start doing. So I quit my job in Tokyo, moved back to Victoria, Canada and bought *Silk Purse*, a 40ft steel cutter. I had never sailed before, except for a couple of cruise-and-learn courses more than 10 years previously, but from Day 1 I sailed her solo. *Sailing for Dummies* was my constant companion.

Four years after buying *Silk Purse* – four years of learning to sail, of trying to master the rudiments of boat maintenance and repair, of planning, preparing and worrying – I was finally ready (or so I hoped) to embark on a long voyage. I set my sights on being the first foreigner to do a full circumnavigation of Japan, but before that I had to deal with the little matter of crossing the Pacific.

Leaving Victoria on a sunny spring day in 2012, my Pacific crossing did not get off to a smooth start. A few days out of Victoria I was hit by a storm that forced me to pull into Newport, Oregon for repairs and medical attention. From then on I had what I

remember as an excellent passage to Honolulu, although my log is a litany of complaints and fears. I had planned to spend just a week in Hawaii but repairs took longer than expected. Then the typhoon season started in the western Pacific, so I ended up staying 11 months. I worked as a bartender in Waikiki to top up the sailing kitty, resuming the voyage to Japan the following year with a 37-day, 4000 mile passage to Hakodate on the northern island of Hokkaido. The first half of the trip was heaven, the second half was hell, but *Silk Purse* and I made it there in one



*Bartending in Waikiki while waiting
for the typhoon season to finish*

piece, and on 1st July 2013 we were ready to start the Japan circumnavigation.

Fast forward to 2020 and I had completed the full circumnavigation of Japan but

*Festival
participants
at Yuge on
the Seto
Inland Sea*



taking three years instead of the two that had been planned. Then, with the goal of writing a Japan cruising guide, I continued to explore the country for another three

years. Along the way I met and married a wonderful woman in Fukuoka (she is being groomed to take over the family business, the largest marina management company in Japan), so, after four different ‘tours of duty’, I have once again settled in Japan – this time for life, I think.

Why Cruise Japan?

After six years of cruising Japan I have come to believe that it is one of the world’s best – albeit least known – cruising grounds. There are many positives and very few negatives. Of course, it’s not for everybody – it’s not for people who want to spend leisurely times at anchor near tropical islands; it’s not for people who want to socialise with other cruisers; and it’s not for people who are only comfortable dealing with people who speak English.

Cruising in Japan can often be frustrating, especially when trying to overcome language and cultural barriers, doing bureaucratic paperwork, or dealing with the occasional bone-headed official. But the frustrations pale in comparison to its wonders. Japan is for cruisers who want to get off the beaten track, out of their comfort zone, and into a unique cultural world. These are some of the reasons that Japan is such a great place to cruise:

- *Friendly people* – every foreign cruiser I have met in Japan has said that the No.1 attraction of cruising Japan is the people, who are friendly, courteous and helpful. The Japanese word *omotenashi* is often translated as ‘hospitality’, but it is much more than that. It is a multilayered term that includes pride in, and responsibility for, taking care of guests (not just ‘visitors’), putting the guest before self and anticipating (and responding to) the guest’s needs. Cruisers experience the *omotenashi* spirit every day.
- *Great security* – Japan is incredibly safe. Theft is virtually unheard of and in all my time cruising Japan I have never locked my boat or anything on her, even when leaving her



The Goto islands off the west coast of Kyushu



to return to Canada for the winter. In fact, I don't even know where my lock is now.

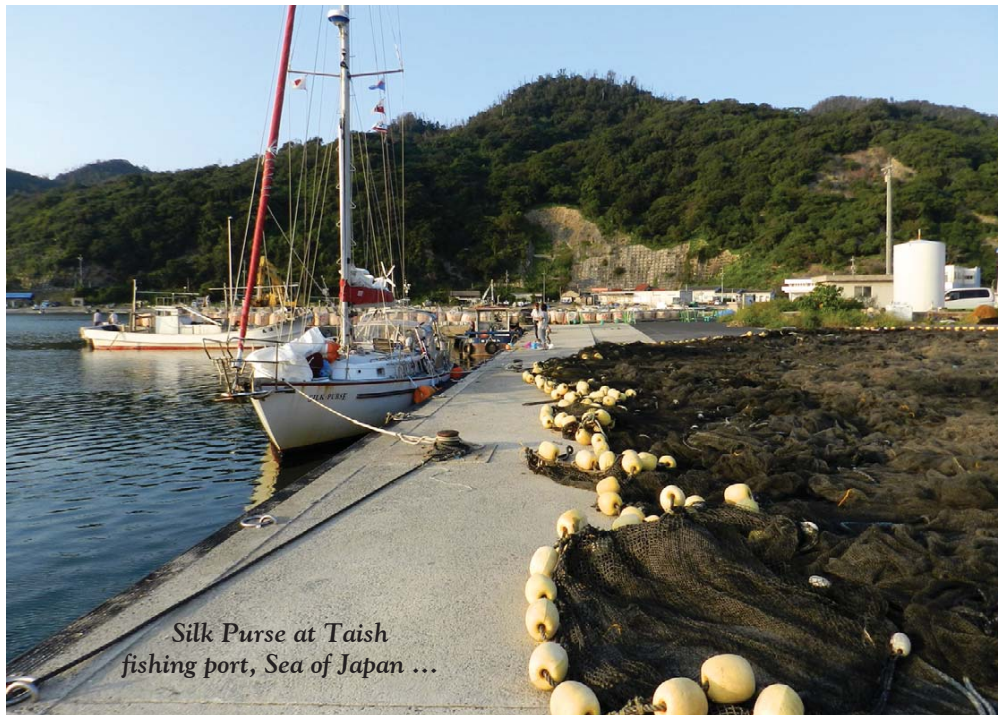
- *Beautiful scenery* – I made landfall in Japan on the northernmost island of Hokkaido and then did a clockwise circumnavigation of the island. At the end I said to myself, 'There can't be any place with more beautiful and impressive scenery than Hokkaido'. Then I cruised down the Sea of Japan coast and said to myself, 'There can't be any place with more beautiful and impressive scenery than the Sea of Japan coast'. That was repeated when I sailed in western Kyushu ... through the Ryukyu Islands ... around Shikoku ... in the Seto Inland Sea ... and up the Pacific coast.

The fact is that, contrary to general perception, Japan is a very big country. To put it in a European context, from north to south it's like going from central Norway to Tunisia. From east to west, it's about the same as going from London to Moscow. With that size comes tremendous diversity of scenery. One never gets bored with cruising Japan, though it takes time to really explore.

- *Rich history and culture* – Japan has a long, complex history and a rich culture. The

Traditional 'utase' fishing boats at Amakusa, Kyushu

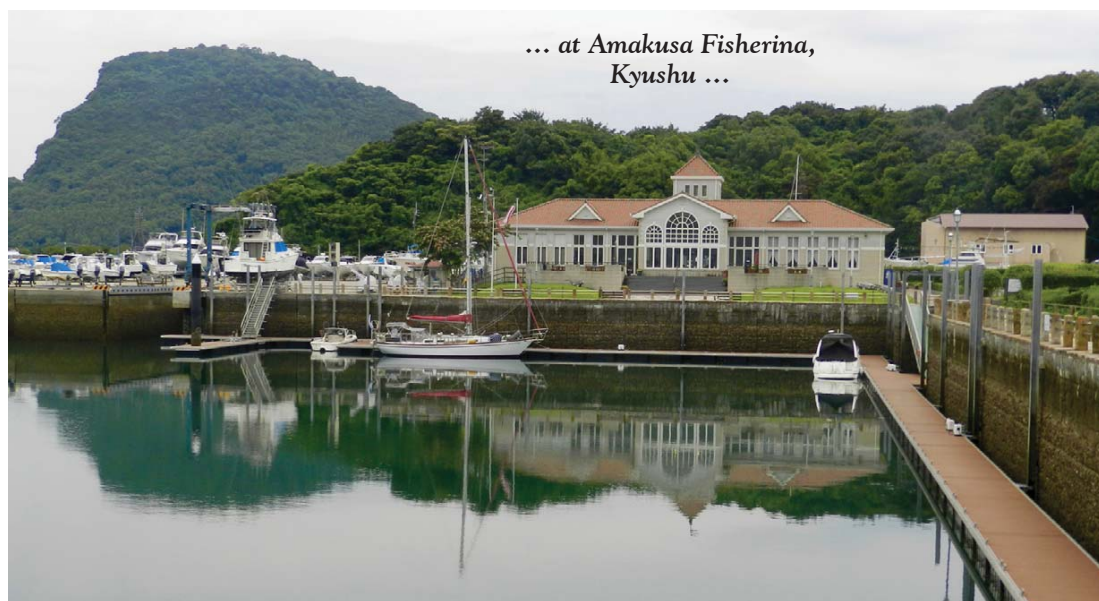




*Silk Purse at Taish
fishing port, Sea of Japan ...*

Japanese islands have been inhabited for over 30,000 years and the Japanese nation and people trace their origins back about 2000 years to the area around present-day Kyoto. From there they expanded outward to inhabit all of what we now refer to as the Japanese archipelago, with Hokkaido and the Ryukyu Islands only becoming part of Japan in the latter half of the 19th century.

Japan's indigenous religion is Shinto, which goes back to the mists of time, while Buddhism entered the country in the 6th century. The two religions have generally



*... at Amakusa Fisherina,
Kyushu ...*

co-existed peacefully and are often complementary. Together they are not only responsible for many of Japan's architectural landmarks but have also helped shape Japan's aesthetics and values.

The emperor has always been Japan's head of state, but his control waxed and waned depending on power struggles with regional lords and within the imperial court. For much of Japan's history, real power was wielded by the Shogun (military dictator). In an attempt to protect the Shogunate's power, Japan closed itself off to the outside world, albeit not completely, from the early 1600s to 1868. That Isolation Period, which ended with the Meiji Restoration, has been likened to a hothouse that nurtured and enriched Japanese culture while shaping attitudes toward foreigners that continue to today.

As one cruises Japan, the manifestations of Japanese history and culture are all around ... in the shrines and temples, in the castles, in every little fishing port, in



... and at an unused dock near the Watazumi Shrine, Tsushima, Nagasaki

the homes of its people.

- *Many alongside mooring options* – one surprising aspect of cruising Japan is that one rarely anchors. Most harbours offering good protection are either fishing or commercial ports, where anchoring is normally prohibited, while others contain aquaculture operations. Fortunately there are many other, generally cheap, options. These include Japan's 2500+ fishing ports, more than 100 marinas, 170+ *Umi no Eki* (Sea Stations) offering visitor berthing, 30 or so *fisherinas* (small marinas run by local fishing co-operatives), and sundry unused pontoons which can be occupied for a day or two. See page 5 of the December 2019 Newsletter at <https://>



Enjoying a delicious meal in a converted 'funaya' (boat house) at Ine on the Sea of Japan

oceancruisingclub.org/members/Newsletters for more details of these.

- *Good anchorages* – particularly in many of the Ryukyu Islands in southern Japan, in the Goto Islands off Kyushu's west coast, in Tsushima's Aso Bay, and in some parts of the Seto Inland Sea.
- *Delicious food and drink* – Japanese cuisine is considered one of the best in the world, and for good reason – fresh ingredients, meticulous preparation, and eye-pleasing presentation. And that also goes for non-Japanese food. It's almost impossible to get a bad meal in Japan. Combine that with popular Japanese liquors – *saké*, *shochu* (Kyushu), and *awamori* (Okinawa), as well as beer, of course – and you will eat and drink well when in Japan.
- *Relaxing Baths* – Japan has more public baths per capita than any other country and the Japanese are more bath-obsessed than any other nationality. Japanese cruisers generally evaluate a mooring spot based on how close it is to a bath and on how nice the bath is!

An outdoor seaside hot-spring bath on Yakushima, one of southern Japan's Ryukyu islands



Circumnavigating Japan

It is impossible to relate my three-year circumnavigation of Japan in detail, so what follows are some of the highlights from the first year, during which I sailed around Hokkaido and then south through the Sea



Sasa-san (right) with a member of the Hamaonishibetsu Fishing Co-operative who shucked freshly harvested scallops for us

of Japan to Fukuoka, Kyushu. Highlights of years two and three – from Fukuoka to Japan's westernmost and southernmost points, then north through the Ryukyu Islands to Kyushu, Shikoku and the Seto Inland Sea; and from the Seto Inland Sea up the Pacific coast to Hakodate, Hokkaido – will follow in a future issue.

Starting in Hakodate, where I'd cleared into Japan, I did a clockwise circumnavigation of Hokkaido island. I sailed 1130 miles over 38 days, of which 27 were travel days and the rest spent waiting for weather and sightseeing. While sailing around Hokkaido I passed Japan's northernmost and easternmost points.

At my first stop, the small fishing port of Matsumae, I met Sasa-san, who was also planning to go around Hokkaido on his 28ft motor sailer. Perhaps feeling sorry for me and my ignorance of the unique aspects of cruising Japan, he took me under his wing. He taught me how to pick out mooring spots in fishing ports, how to secure to the high concrete walls, how to differentiate between dangerous and benign fishing nets, and much more. He often pulled in to a port ahead of me to scout out mooring options and he often helped me push off in the morning. At Hamaonishibetsu on Hokkaido's north coast we each received several large bags of scallops that we feasted on, breakfast and dinner, for a week.

Eastern Hokkaido is famous – or rather infamous – for its fog. One town is called Kiritappu, which literally means lots of fog ... and it certainly lived up to its name when I visited there. At times I could barely see my bow and I could only guess at the location of the extensive fishing nets that 'guard' the harbour entrance.



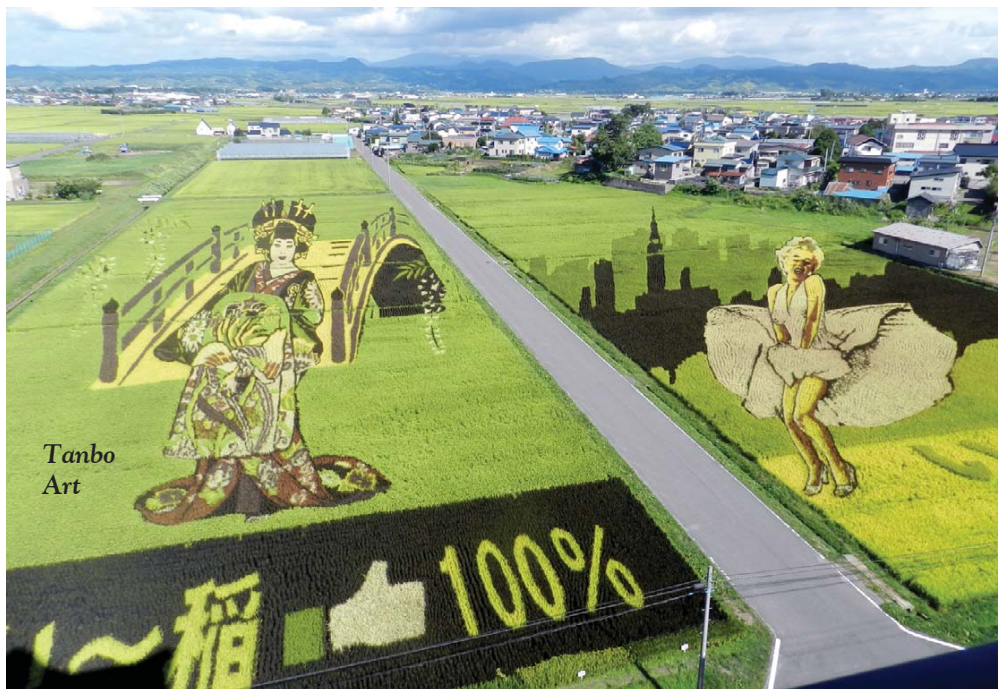
*Looking for the entrance to
Kiritappu, Hokkaido*

After returning to Hakodate and a delay caused by dealing with some electrical issues, a chill was in the air. Fall was coming, so it was time to head south before the north winds started blasting down from Siberia and made the Sea of Japan too treacherous. The passage from Hakodate to Fukuoka was 900 miles and took 36 days, 20 travel days and 16 waiting for weather and sightseeing.

After a calm crossing of the often-boisterous Tsugaru Strait which separates Hokkaido from the main island of Honshu, I arrived at the rather nondescript fishing village of Ajigasawa, Aomori. Relaxing in the cabin a couple of hours, later I heard a voice calling – it was a local journalist who had heard that a foreign sailboat was in town and wanted to interview me ... which he did. That night I joined him and his friends for dinner. Over copious amounts of *sushi*, *sashimi*, *yakitori* and more, and untold glasses of beer and *saké*, we discussed Ajigasawa's main problem, one shared by virtually all of Japan – a shrinking, ageing population. Apparently my alcohol-induced brilliance impressed them so much that, at the 3rd or 4th bar, they called the mayor's secretary (at about midnight) and made an appointment for me to meet the mayor at 0900 next morning to discuss how to revitalise the village! So there I was, in my cleanest *Silk Purse* shirt and only a bit fuzzy-headed, proposing a plan for an Ajigasawa Renaissance to the mayor. I'm sure he had only a fuzzy idea of who I was or why I was there, but it was a very convivial morning nonetheless.

The following day the Ajigasawa journalist took me on a two-hour drive to see one of Aomori's major tourist attractions, Tanbo Art. *Tanbo* means rice paddy and they use various types of rice, each of a different colour, to create a magnificent mural. There's a different design each year – that year it was of Marilyn Monroe and a *geisha*.

Continuing south, two days later I entered the small fishing port of Toga, Akita. A walk around the town revealed that it had once been a prosperous beach resort, in addition to having had a vibrant fishing industry, but now it was almost dead. All the inns and shops were shuttered and there were only a few old fishing boats in the harbour. Strolling along the beach, I met a woman walking her dog, so I asked if there was a public bath in the town. She replied that there used to be several nice public baths but that they had all closed years ago. She wondered why I was asking, so I pointed to *Silk Purse* and told her I was staying the night and had hoped to have a bath but it wasn't that important. Returning to my boat there was a car parked nearby. The driver said, "My wife said you're looking for a bath. Why don't you come to our place?" Arriving at their home, the bath had been drawn and fresh towels put out for me. Afterwards they invited me to stay for dinner – a magnificent feast of vegetables from their own garden and local fish. Over dinner they told me that the town used to have several thousand people but now there were only about 50 and that they (in their 60s) were



the youngest. They had promised the government that they would stay to turn out the lights (literally) before going to the big city to join their children and grandchildren. It was a delightful evening but a depressing conversation.

A few days later I stopped at Ogi on the island of Sado. Entering the harbour I had to dodge tourists in *tarai-bune*, tub boats paddled by women in traditional Sado garb. *Tarai-bune* date back to the 1860s and were used for gathering abalone, snails and seaweed but now they are mainly used to give visitors a unique and enjoyable experience. As I arrived

Tourists enjoying a 'tarai-bune' ride



in windy conditions, though, my main focus was trying to avoid running them over.

One of my favourite spots in six years of cruising Japan was the small fishing port of Fukuura, Ishikawa. Being a very well-protected natural harbour it is one of the oldest ports on the Sea of Japan coast. It was mentioned in the *Nihon Shoki* chronicles (completed in 720 AD) as the best place for seafarers going to/from Korea, and it was one of the most popular stops for *Kita-Mae* trading boats plying the coastal waters of the Sea of Japan in the 18th and 19th centuries. Shortly after Japan opened up to the West in 1868, Fukuura became the location of the Sea of Japan's first Western-style lighthouse and first coast guard station. Today the town is, like all Japanese towns, dying, but wandering the silent, narrow lanes lined with traditional homes overlooking the harbour, one feels transported back to ancient times.

Just a few days south of Fukuura is perhaps the most special, unique cruiser destination in all of Japan – the small fishing port of Ine, Kyoto. With steep mountains rising sharply from the shore, flat land for housing is at a premium so the bay is lined with about 350 *funaya* boat houses. In times past fishermen would 'park' their boats in the 'garage' and live upstairs, though today most boats are too big to fit under the houses so are anchored out front. It's a magnificent site. There is an excellent, well-protected spot for visitors to moor, nearby is a *funaya* that has been converted into a lovely inn/restaurant, and a bit further away is a *sake* brewery that has welcomed cruisers from around the world – and has the boat cards to prove it. Ine is also an excellent typhoon hole. I sat out a typhoon there which made an almost direct hit on Ine, with winds outside the bay hitting 80 knots and gusting to 100, but only 15–20 knots inside.

Yet another memorable stop a few more days further south is the town of Hagi. A major castle town in the 17th and 18th centuries, in the 1850s Hagi was home to a small school for young samurai who went on to hold senior positions in Japanese politics, industry and the military, wielding influence greatly disproportionate to Hagi's small size and remote location. Today one can visit the tiny two-room school-house, pass by stately samurai homes and explore the town's many temples and shrines.

The entrance to Fukuura fishing port, Ishikawa





'Funaya' boat houses at Ine, Kyoto

After almost 40 days in small, dying villages on 'the backside of Japan', I experienced culture shock as I approached Fukuoka, one of Japan's most dynamic cities with a population of 1.5 million. As I pulled in to Fukuoka's main fishing port, my Hokkaido cruising friend Sasa-san was waiting on the dock to give me a warm welcome (after leaving



*Rendezvous
with Sasa-san
at Fukuoka,
Kyushu*



*Silk Purse
berthed in
Fukuoka
City Yacht
Harbour*

Hokkaido, he had cruised down Japan's Pacific coast). I had planned to continue to Okinawa and leave *Silk Purse* there for the winter, but three consecutive typhoons and a prolonged campaign to force a rat to disembark made me decide that Fukuoka City Yacht Harbour would be a good place to leave her while I returned to Canada for three months.

In Part 2 of this article I will share some of the highlights and adventures of the second and third years of my Japan circumnavigation and present some 'how to' information for those considering cruising Japan.

