

Kumano Nachi-taishi shrine at the site of the tallest waterfall in Japan



# Strangers in a Strange Land

## *Gaijin Sailing in Japan*

By Wendy Hinman and Garth Wilcox  
(Pacific Northwest Station)

AS WE SAILED *VELELLA*, OUR WYLIE 31, FROM TAIWAN to Japan, the temperature dropped dramatically, reminding us that we were leaving the tropics where we'd sailed the last seven years. A wall of low clouds awaited us at the Tropic of Cancer like a barrier, testing our resolve. A 9-degree rise in water temperature indicated that we'd reached the Kuroshio current that would push us northwards. So did the turbulent water.

After days alone at sea, as we got closer to our landfall at Ishigaki Island, Garth and I were surprised by how many ships we encountered near what we thought was a small port. Then we realized that the island serves as an intermediate stop between Shanghai and Taiwan, dissipating the friction between the two countries. With variable winds and the Kuroshio sweeping us more than 30 degrees from our heading, we couldn't give the port of Ishigaki our exact arrival time, as we were required to do.

We entered Japan through the Ryukyu Islands, sprinkled like stepping stones linking Taiwan with the main islands of Japan. The Ryukyu Islands were once a mighty kingdom, experiencing a golden age during the 15th-17th centuries with strong links to China until the Satsuma

kingdom invaded in 1609. Okinawa, site of the last great amphibious operation of World War II, is the best-known of these islands. The United States occupied and administered the islands until they reverted to Japanese ownership in 1972, though the U.S. military still leases land for bases in Okinawa.

Excited to have finally reached Japan after years of anticipation, we tied alongside a floating steel pontoon that stretched out from a concrete pier. We shared the marina primarily with 50-foot wooden fishing vessels laden with nets, buoys and outriggers and a few idling dive boats, awaiting customers. Officials quickly checked us in, but perplexed us by requesting our exact itinerary. At the mercy of winds and currents without enough fuel to effectively motor even if we'd wanted, we couldn't anticipate how far we might get in a day and all the possible ports where we might need to stop. Spring storms, forcing us to leap-frog low pressure systems, would dictate where we could move and when.

The fact that many bays and islands carried the same names compounded our confusion, though later we saw the advantage to having four Takeshimas to choose from along our route. We did our best to fill



Velella moored in Ishigaki

Being suddenly illiterate was a challenge. As many expatriates noted, if you don't read Kanji in Japan you are out of luck even if you are a fluent Japanese speaker.

out the forms, but remained ignorant that many ports we planned to visit were considered closed ports for which we needed advance permission. Gaining permission, we soon learned, was often difficult because it required we file paperwork in the main office for each prefecture, which was often located far inland.

Japanese officials treated all foreign yachts like ships and expected to be notified of all movements within the country. Every time we moved the boat, we were expected to fill out cumbersome arrival and departure paperwork as though we were checking into and out of the country. The sea patrol always asked our expected time



A small village pier



A fisherman presented us with a complimentary fresh squid.



Japanese fishing boats. In Japan, fishing boats rigorously assert their rights.

of arrival at our next port before we'd even departed the current port or could ascertain the actual wind and wave conditions we'd be facing. We did our best to follow the rules, but sometimes had to plead ignorance and beg for forgiveness for our transgressions after the fact. The officials were always friendly and efficient, though afraid to stray from the rules or offer suggestions.

Arriving in April during the transition between the northeast and southwest monsoons gave us three months to explore as much of the country as possible during the quietest typhoon period of the year.

First we worked our way northward through the remote southern islands. The Ryukyus feel separate from "mainland" Japan. The islands offer a beautiful setting for vacationing mainlanders with a warmer climate, pretty turquoise waters and white sandy beaches. What impressed me most was the abundance of flowers that grew in every open patch of land and the floral baskets and pots that lined the streets of towns we saw. The streets, souvenir shops, and dive boats seemed almost abandoned so early in the season. Away from town, we found quiet rural settings filled with rice paddies.

On Kyushu, the natural shelter offered by Nagasaki's outlying islands and the hills on either side of the narrow channel made for a well-protected harbor in a picturesque setting. While Nagasaki is best known as the second atomic bomb site, its history before the war intrigued us. From the mid-1600s to 1855, Nagasaki was the only port open to the outside world and all trade, western technology and culture passed through it. Consequently, Nagasaki evolved into an important scientific and cultural center where people flocked to study. At the site of the bomb blast and related museum, we encountered no animosity toward Americans about the war. Instead we met young people eager to practice their English with tourists and a resolve that this destruction must never happen again.

After Nagasaki, we explored the lovely islands west of Kyushu before cutting into the Inland Sea. Several times, especially in these islands, we'd identify a promising bay on the chart only to find it filled with rows of buoys marking nets, traps or pearl farms. We shared a tiny bay with a fisherman in Takeshima, who presented us with a squid



Wendy in Amami-Oshima in the Ryukyu Islands

we'd watched him catch.

Our route into the Inland Sea took us through Kanmon Kaikyo, the 9-mile narrow cut between the islands of Kyushu and Honshu. We faced heavy shipping traffic and had to time our travels to avoid adverse currents as strong as 13 knots. We set out at the end of the countercurrent, as is recommended, but a new complexity was added to the mix when the engine cut out just as we reached the narrowest section of the channel. With the wind against us, we had to short-tack the narrow band between the channel markers and rocky shore. Delayed by the extra distance and time it took to beat, we found ourselves bucking oncoming traffic as the tide turned.

Getting across this narrow, busy track felt like running in front of a train. But we had no choice; we would get swept through that passage whether our bow faced forward or not. We were tacking the boat every two minutes, in standing waves with four knots of current, while trying to avoid three supertankers in a 100-yard wide stretch of channel. In the midst of all this, the sea patrol came on over the VHF radio wanting to know our destination, time of arrival and the number of people aboard. Not satisfied with our terse responses between tacks, they seemed to have endless questions and need for clarification. If they could have picked a worse time, I can't think of one. Somehow we managed to satisfy them while maneuvering well enough to keep from turning into kindling. A half hour after we finally got out of the channel, we heard that the current was running eight knots.

Just as we started to relax, a man on a fishing

boat started waving flags frantically, pointing to a line of nearly-submerged tiny white buoys stretched to another nearly-invisible float in the distance. We tacked away. As we headed in the other direction, another fisherman started waving and honking. Lines and nets strung across a large area next to a major shipping lane surprised us, but we were learning that Japanese fishermen pushed the right of way rules as far as they could.

By the time we cleared this fishing group we were exhausted yet hundreds of fishing boats still dotted the horizon, along with countless ships, some cutting the corner outside the shipping lanes. We'd estimated our time of arrival in Shikoku to be 5 p.m. the following day. As the day wore on, the wind died to nothing, and I mean nothing: zilch, zip, nada.

Not even a ripple on the water. Near a busy shipping lane, surrounded by hordes of fishing boats doing the unexpected while we had limited steerage in foggy conditions, we endured a long, tense night. It was only the first of several. We were swept back and forth with the turn of the tide in no wind and fog, straining our patience and our nerves.

We never did reach our planned stop in Shikoku. Shortly after Garth diagnosed and fixed our engine problem, the wind finally picked up. But by then, we'd wasted so much time bobbing around, we had forfeited precious sightseeing time. Typhoon season wouldn't wait.

When we finally sailed into Wakayama, several days late, we dis-



Celebrating a happy reunion with Yuki and Tomi.

covered that a new marina, bridge and island were blocking the bay, all features that didn't exist on our 1986 charts. We were glad we'd gathered brochures featuring aerial photographs and GPS coordinates and cross checked them with our charts to help puzzle through the mystery. By the time we reached the dock, we were sure that we'd violated every rule the sea patrol had ever conceived. We'd never stopped where we'd declared we would and had been mostly MIA for days. Yet, officials greeted us with a smile, nodded sympathetically when we explained, and offered us small souvenirs. Our friends Yuki and Tomi, world cruisers we'd met in New Zealand, had a different reaction when we told them that we'd sailed through Kanmon Kaikyo. They shook their heads in amazement.

From Wakayama, we left our boat for a brief side trip by train to Kyoto, where we explored temples and quaint tea houses. We witnessed the debut of a geisha through the generosity of an elderly stranger who appointed herself our tour guide.

Back on our boat, we followed Yuki and Tomi's suggestion to stop in Katsuura-wan, Japan's largest tuna fishing port and whaling center on the southern coast of Honshu. There we soaked in natural hot springs and beautiful natural onsen (baths). Nestled into the surrounding heavily-forested, old-growth mountains, was Kumano Nachi-taishi, a stunning national shrine at the site of Japan's tallest waterfall. Though known for its cities of neon-lit skyscrapers, Japan features hundreds of miles of sparsely populated areas with untouched natural beauty, many best seen by sailboat. Again foggy, light wind conditions with heavy shipping and fishing traffic made for a frustrating sail. While Japan may not be the ideal place for pig-headed purists who insist on sailing when there's no wind, our efforts were well rewarded.

From Katsuura-wan, we sailed northeast to Yokohama. There we planned to meet other friends and jump off for North

**Rooftop shiisa; While most buildings were modern, older traditional wooden structures with heavy tile roofs were still visible with shiisa (guardian lions) sitting atop them. Many shiisas were fierce and intimidating, others were more comical.**



America in early July to beat the Pacific Northwest fall storms. Shortly after we arrived, a typhoon formed east of the Philippines. This time of year, typhoons normally move westward towards Vietnam, but this one curved up towards Japan, burning a path through the string of islands we'd left only a month earlier. Sailors who'd remained aboard in Amami-Oshima, a delightful island of family farms and rocky bays, reported notable damage to their boat when a fishing boat dragged anchor into them. We were glad to be nestled in a marina when the typhoon turned for Tokyo. We waited out the storm on our boat, secured by a complex web of lines and protected by large typhoon fenders we'd scavenged on a beach. We weathered the storm without any damage, but remnants from the typhoon lingered for days delaying our departure and adding hundreds of rough miles to our 5,000-mile North Pacific crossing.



**Dried squid selling for 900 yen.**



**Mystery foods in a Japanese market**

Japan has a reputation for being expensive, but we found many savings that eased the strain on our budget. We discovered that many marinas granted free or heavily discounted moorage to foreign yachts. Tying alongside fishing piers cost nothing. Customs, immigration, and port clearance incurred no fees. We often found free Internet access at the library (sometimes read-only) or open Wi-Fi signals. Grocery stores offered discount days for produce, and because they sold only the highest quality fruits and vegetables, little went to waste. Surprisingly, avocados, for which we pay dearly in the U.S., were actually cheaper in Japan.

Most importantly, the Japanese people were extremely kind and generous. As foreign visitors (gaijin or outside person), we captured their interest. We met some of the most adventurous people in the country; individuals who defied stereotypes, including mountain climbers,

**Wakayama Castle**



**Along with the paparazzi, we got to witness the exciting debut of a geisha in Kyoto.**

world travelers and accomplished sailors. People visited our boat to bring gifts or to extend an invitation to dinner or cocktails and went out of their way to help us get propane or find our way around. Many took us sightseeing, proud to share their country with us. Their hospitality was like no other we'd encountered, and it made cruising Japan much easier and more affordable, as well as delightful.

Many people spoke English, though not the majority. Nodding and smiling had served us well in other countries we'd visited, and so it did in Japan. People came to our boat interested in practicing their English and universally eager to be welcoming ambassadors. For those who knew little or no English, an article written about us in Kazi, a national sailing magazine, helped bridge the language gap. We had no idea what the article said about us until our visitors' comments helped reveal its contents.

Supermarkets featured recognizable imported foods --including a good selection of pasta and sauce, coffee drinks and custard desserts -- but most items at the market were a mystery. We examined packages, wondering whether the contents were sweet or sour, needed to be cooked or should be eaten raw. Sampling produced mostly satisfying results and only occasionally did we nibble something truly vile.

Being suddenly illiterate was a challenge. As many expatriates noted, if you don't read Kanji in Japan you are out of luck even if you are a fluent Japanese speaker. Everywhere else we'd sailed, even when I

couldn't pronounce things properly or form complete sentences, I could at least read signs and deduce their meaning. But street signs and place names were usually written only in Kanji. I often had to carefully compare shapes to cross check against a map, a brochure or a ticket machine--a tedious process. Few

universal symbols like we see in the U.S. for bathrooms, entrances and exits exist in Japan. After wandering around a large, multi-level train station for a frustrating half hour one day, I finally had to solicit help to find the exit. Recycle bins, written only in Kanji were often a mystery. The Japanese have a complex recycling system and even when we could see the kind of trash already in the bins, we found it perplexing to sort our garbage. No matter: people offered to take our garbage and sort it for us.

Even though sailing in Japan was challenging, the country was one of our favorite stops during a 7-year, 34,000-mile odyssey to 19 countries. Fog, light wind, typhoons, and strong currents along with heavy shipping and fishing traffic made sailing in Japan strenuous. Limited information, language barriers and complicated regulations oblivious to the peculiarities of sailboats added to the complexity of our voyage. But our experiences with the culture, natural beauty and Japanese hospitality made the land of the rising sun a highlight of our seven year 34,000-mile voyage.

Visit our blog at <http://yachtvelella.blogspot.com>