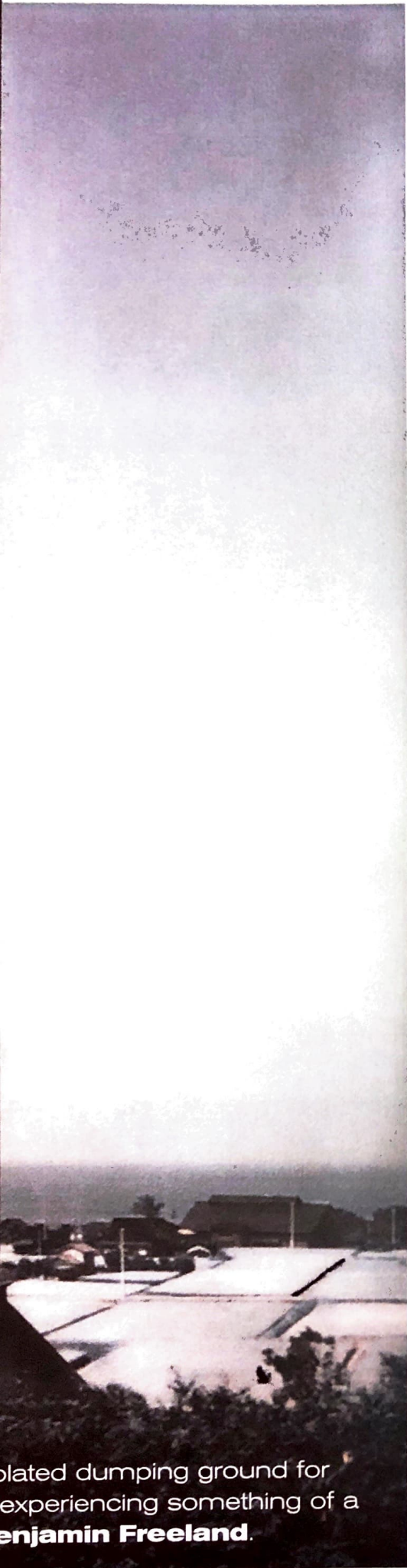


★ Weekend NAVIGATING NIIGATA

BACK ON THE BEATEN TRACK

Once viewed as little more than a
Japan's undesirables, Sado Island
cultural renaissance, write



blated dumping ground for
experiencing something of a
Benjamin Freeland.

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COURTESY OF KODO

JAPAN IS FIRST AND FOREMOST AN ISLAND COUNTRY – WITH 3,000 OF THEM IN all – and yet in stark contrast to other archipelago-based nations such as Indonesia and the Philippines the name Japan rarely, if ever, conjures up images of islands in people’s minds.

This curious paradox can largely be attributed to the country’s abundance of alternative postcard images – misty green mountains, ancient religious monuments, high-tech urban images of the future and so on – but there is definitely more to it than this.

Japan’s smaller islands have traditionally been ignored and even shunned, dismissed as untamed, perilous frontier lands. In some cases they have been forbidden outright, in others used as dumping grounds for prisoners and other undesirables. Several islands have at one point or another served this purpose, but none so notoriously as Sado-ga-shima, Japan’s sixth-largest island, long the empire’s last place on earth.

Even today the island feels remote and neglected, too far from the mainland to be seen with the naked eye, enveloped in fog much of the year and in winter regularly besieged by heavy snows and icy winds that killed many an exile in days of old. Nevertheless, this eclectic mixture of isolation, hardship and heroic defiance gave birth to a cultural vitality best exemplified by the island’s best-known ambassadors – Kodo, the world-renowned exponents of taiko drumming, who through their international prestige and annual musical extravaganza Earth Celebration have finally earned some respite for this island.

History has dealt Japan’s peripheral islands more than their fair share of bad hands, and Sado is certainly no exception. Almost immediately after the establishment of mainland control in the eighth century, this windswept outpost was converted into a penal colony, its isolation and harsh conditions making banishment there the most severe punishment available to authorities short of the death penalty.

The next millennium saw a whole host of iconoclasts and provocateurs sent to the island, including Kamakura emperor Juntoku (for his role in an abortive 1221 coup against the Kamakura Shogunate), radical Buddhist preacher Nichiren Daishonin (exiled for three years from 1271 before being pardoned) and the legendary noh dramaturge Zeami Motokiyo (exiled in 1434 for reasons that remain unclear).

Banishments to Sado were halted around 1700 when enormous gold deposits were discovered in the hills of the island. This, however, led to a new wave of exiles to the island in the form of conscripted itinerants from the cities of the mainland who were pressed into slave-like labor in the island’s mines. The discovery did, however, result in something of an economic boom for the island, drawing migrants from throughout Japan, helping bestow upon the island a culture and dialect distinctly different from neighboring Echigo province (modern Niigata prefecture).

The early twentieth century saw a number of Sado islanders figure prominently in mainland artistic and intellectual circles, from Meiji era modern art pioneer Tsuchida Bakusen to inter-war political philosopher and ultra-nationalist icon Kita Ikki. The island, however, continued to suffer political and economic neglect, reverting to a poor backwater place with the waning of the gold rush, and with a population that has been steadily declining since 1950.

Nevertheless, tourism and a cultural renaissance spearheaded by the Kodo troupe have helped breathe new life into the island, turning the place into something of a small artistic powerhouse. Furthermore, it has drawn yet another wave of exiles, namely students who arrive every year join Kodo’s legendarily arduous training camp, exiles who, unlike their ill-fated forerunners, are all volunteers. >>

AT A GLANCE

GENERAL INFO: At 885 square kilometers in size, Sado is Japan's sixth largest island (after Okinawa). Even though only a small portion of the island is actually urbanized, it is officially classified as a city within Niigata prefecture. As with the rest of Japan, spring and fall are the most pleasant seasons; winter on the island is famously harsh and summer can be unpleasantly hot, particularly around the time of Earth Celebration. A sturdy hat and some heavy-duty sunscreen are essential if attending this event, as the majority of events are outdoors.

GETTING THERE: While the island is accessible by air (an average of four flights are available every day to and from Niigata city), most visitors arrive by one of three ferry services: the heavily used Niigata-Ryotsu link (serviced both by a car ferry and a high-speed jetfoil ferry), the Naoetsu-Ogi link (which services the town that hosts Earth Embassy) and the less popular but shorter Teradomari-Akadomari link. All ferry services are operated by Sado Kisen.

GETTING AROUND: Sado Island is large enough to make renting a car an attractive option, with car rental services available in Ryotsu and elsewhere. Buses connect the island's towns but they are not particularly frequent, making a car a more flexible option. Bicycle rental is another option for exploring remote parts of the island, but Sado's hilly terrain makes for some fairly strenuous cycling.

LODGING AND FOOD: Accommodation on Sado runs the gamut from campsites that are favored by Earth Celebration crowds to luxury ryokans. The Yahatakan Ryokan, located on the western edge of the Kuninaka Plain, gets excellent reviews, as does the mid-range Sado Pension, which offers aromatherapy and vegetarian cuisine. Ryokans and guesthouses are numerous and tend to cluster around the populated centers of Ryotsu, Aikawa and Ogi. Not surprisingly, Sado is known for delicious seafood, including a wide array of sushi and sashimi and a few daunting local delicacies, notably sea snail. The island is home to seven sake distilleries, many of which offer tours and complimentary samples.

Events: Earth Celebration, which takes place yearly (usually in August), is the best known but by no means the only festival of note on the island. Sado is home to numerous yearly matsuri, including the Tsuburosashi Fertility Festival, which is held in June and features phallic symbols and suggestive dances galore. The young trainees of the Kodo troupe figure prominently in many of the island's festivals, offering them an opportunity to demonstrate the fruit of their considerable toil.

From a distance, Sado's craggy shores and brilliantly green fields could easily be mistaken for Newfoundland or the west coast of Ireland, and a drive around the island, 885 square kilometers in size and vaguely S-shaped, reveals a land as bucolic and unspoiled as one is likely to find anywhere in Japan, with century-old farmhouses, green meadows, lush forests and ancient temples dotting the landscape.

The island's neglect may have been something of a blessing in disguise in that it has thus far spared it much of the reckless development that has blighted much of Japan's landscape, and Niigata prefecture in particular, home of former prime minister and pork-barrel public works spender extraordinaire Tanaka Kakuei. Indeed, Sado's reputation for ecological consciousness has been bolstered in recent years by its much-heralded campaign to bring the island's iconic bird, the Japanese crested ibis (*toki*), back from the brink of extinction through a breeding program.

The larger northern half of the island is covered by the O-Sado mountain range, with peaks over 1,000 meters. The smaller Ko-Sado range is located in the southern half of the island. These ranges are intersected by the Kuninaka Plain, which is primarily agricultural and contains most of the island's population.

With the gold rush long consigned to the history books, fishing and agriculture remain the backbone of the island's economy (with a notably robust sake industry stemming from the island's rice cultivation), but it has been the tourism industry that has helped fuel Sado's cultural renaissance.

The island offers a wide range of tourist attractions, many centered around the gold rush era, located in and around the former gold boomtown of Aikawa. Visitors are invited to pan for gold or peruse preserved mine shafts inhabited by robotic miners designed to replicate the horrific conditions in which Sado's miners once worked.

Buddhism has a palpable presence on Sado, with numerous temples dotting the island, most of them connected to the sect founded by the island's most famous religious icon, Nichiren. While the island's physical beauty and compelling history invariably have had much to do with this, no force has done more to bolster the island's international reputation than Earth Celebration, now entering its nineteenth year, and the 50-member taiko group that manages the event and maintains a year-round home base at Sado's so-called "Kodo Village."

In a fashion befitting Sado international ambassadors par-excellence, the members of Kodo (a name which is alternately translated as "heartbeat" and "child of the drum") and their numerous understudies characterize better than anyone the endurance and resolve in the face of hardship that have long been the hallmarks of the Sado experience.

Each year a new wave of aspiring Kodo-ites arrive on the island to embark on an intensive two-year-long training program. Students live in a commune in which they are required to grow their own food, run 10 kilometers over a mountain every day (including in the dead of winter) and otherwise eat, sleep and breathe drumming. They endure bloody knuckles and total physical exhaustion on a daily basis, all for the far-from-guaranteed chance of being asked to join the Kodo family.

The results of the arduous physical training is apparent to all who witness the group in action, and it's hard to imagine a more dazzling combination of artistry, rhythm, athleticism and martial arts-type intensity in any one performance. Since the group's foundation in 1981, Kodo has established itself as one of the world's most commercially successful world music acts and has participated in countless music festivals and cultural events around the globe, and enlisted a bewildering array of collaborators.

Equally committed to promoting taiko drumming and other traditional Japanese musical forms worldwide and highlighting similarly talented exponents of music from around the world, Earth Celebration, which the troupe launched in 1988, has become their annual pride and joy, which usually features Kodo alongside a headliner from overseas (past guests have included world-renowned Indian percussionist Zakir Hussain, the Doudou N'diaye Percussion Orchestra from Senegal and American jazz drumming legend Elvin Jones) along with a host of other taiko groups and other performers.

The quality of the music, coupled with the conviviality of the event, makes Earth Celebration an event not to be missed. In its nearly 20-year history, Earth Celebration has arguably become Japan's finest music festival of any kind and its international esteem continues to grow.

Heir to a long and troubled history and home to a unique and indomitable culture, Sado Island has a tremendous amount to offer the visitor, and thanks to the matchless publicity that Kodo and Earth Celebration have done for the place, Japan's isle noire of yesteryear appears to have finally earned itself a permanent place in the sun. ★

