Sakawa Rivermouth, Shonan; So deep in a bay that some years it never even breaks. You'd be lucky to see it like this.

Giri and Ninjo

Japan's Enduring Mystery

BY TOR JOHNSON

Katsu Kawaminami was a Japanese surfer and shaper living in Guam. One day in the lineup, Katsu heard about an American family sailing their yacht across the Pacific. That night, my brother and I were on our parents' sailboat anchored in the harbor. We had sailed from Hong Kong, where we'd picked up the boat and cruised the Philippines and South Pacific to Guam. Now we were headed across the North Pacific to Alaska via Japan.

The annoying sound of a car horn on shore interrupted our peaceful evening as we swung at anchor far out in the harbor. A car had pulled up straight ashore from us, the lights were flashing and the horn blaring.

"Go see who that is," my father ordered.

"Aw, Dad, it's just some drunks. They'll beat me up." I was sixteen.

"Go see who it is," he repeated in that captain's voice that allows for no argument.

It was a long row to shore. From behind the headlights, a sun-blackened and reef-scarred Japanese with wild hair stepped out.

"I go with you to Japan," he said in accented English.

"Uuuhhh, lemme go ask the Captain," I said, taking the easy way out, certain Dad would say, "No."

I rowed slowly back out to the boat, only to be told, "Go back and bring him out here. I wanna meet this guy." The Captain always has had great respect for tenacity.

Katsu had always dreamt of sailing a yacht across the open ocean, arriving home romantically from the sea. Plus, airfares home were expensive and he figured it was a free ride home. He was wrong. Katsu paid well for his ride.

It was Katsu's first and undoubtedly his last ocean crossing. The sea was choppy and mean and Katsu felt every single roll. He was incredibly sick, so sick he couldn't even get out of his bunk. The mere sound of his spewing into a bucket down below was enough to make even us hardened salts, who'd been on the boat a year, feel sick. Late on the fourth night at sea, he finally dragged himself out of his bunk and wobbled unsteadily up on deck. My brother and I had the night watch, and we had some weed that the Mariana Islanders had given us. One of us sat on my father's hatch cover so he couldn't come up unannounced and bust us smoking. After a few hits, Katsu miraculously recovered from his seasickness and began telling surf stories. He became a regular visitor on the night watch.

KEN HIMOTO

How Japan Made a Man of Me

Katsu turned out to be a bit of a legend in Japan. The moment we reached the Ogasawara Islands, an outer archipelago of Japan, he went to work. Using his undeniable charm, he invited the entire local women's tennis team aboard for a sail, without even asking permission from our captain. Once again Dad obliged, Mom gave a tolerant smile, and soon we were having blowout sake parties aboard neighboring boats.

All this was an eye opener to me as a young kid. At the end of one party aboard a friend's boat, I found myself alone with not one, but two Japanese girls. It was my first time with a girl, and I had no idea what to do with one at that point, let alone two. I was getting very nervous, when much to my relief, one of them finally left. I was alone with a slightly chubby girl with silky-smooth skin who I now realize must have been acting far more drunk than she really was, sort of pouring herself on me. She showed me something strange, simple, and wonderful. I remember thinking "So *this* is what it's all about!"

There was a tearful good-bye, but in the next harbor something even stranger occurred. Katsu, my brother Alex, and I were asleep late at night in our bunks in the forepeak. We heard loud voices abusing us in Japanese from the dock. Katsu got out of bed and told the guys to go home. They were a completely drunk crew off a nearby ship, and they didn't like Katsu's retort. So they threw a lit cigarette down the hatch. This got Katsu riled, and he gave them a tongue-lashing that burned their ears. One of them tried to climb aboard, and my father, who by now had come on deck to see what the trouble was, turned him around in midair as he stepped off the dock, then sent him flying back to his friends.

After that, things quieted down and we went back to sleep assuming they'd given up, but when we got up in the morning we found them passed out on the dock with long, straight sushi knives in their hands. I picked one up and looked at the blade. The Japanese have long produced the sharpest sword blades in the world, and these were like surgical tools. Slitting our throats would have been so easy. We took the knives and frog-marched the drunks back to their ship, where they got a bit of discipline from their captain. He later sent a crate of orange juice as a gesture of apology.

On the main island we were relieved to discover that attacks with sushi knives were not normal Japanese behavior. Actually, we were received with such amazing hospitality it was almost embarrassing. Fishermen invited us to their homes for hot baths, an unbelievable luxury for us, living on a

Kohei, Chiba. Put one of Japan's top pros together with a great water cameraman and this is what happens. Offshore island near Tokyo.

Nakayama lineup. What do you want, a map with an X on it?

sailboat where every drop of fresh water is precious. They never allowed us to leave without having dinner.

We tried to camp at surf spots, but local surfers refused to let us sleep on the beach. They took us home, fed us, and heaped our arms with presents. Several times we were forced to back out the door with our arms full of gifts, just to avoid accepting anything else from our hosts.

We left Japan and carried on across the Pacific, stopping in the Aleutian Islands, then down the West Coast and finally home to Santa Cruz, California.

Yet, Japan had stuck in my mind as an exotic place of incredible beauty and unbelievably gracious people. I signed up at the local Cabrillo College, and saw they had a Japanese language class. Japanese is supposed to be difficult, and I was fairly certain that learning it would be beyond me. I enrolled anyway. I listened to my classmates butcher the language for a few days until I realized, to my own amazement, that I had some sort of gift for learning the language.

In the years that followed, I took time between studying Japanese at UC Santa Cruz and grad school at the University of Hawaii to surf the typhoon season in the southern islands of Japan. When my Japanese got good enough, I worked as translator at the ASP surfing contests. It was on one of these trips that I discovered the incredible rivermouths of Shikoku.

Hitchhiking with my board, I caught a ride as far as the base of an immense long, tall bridge. I began walking across the span, and looking down, I realized the mouth of this river had a sandbar, and what looked like surf. Farther along, I began to realize it was the biggest and most perfectly formed bar I'd ever seen. Six-foot, hundred-yard rights were peeling off so hollow and uniform they appeared to be

Adam Faunce is one of the longest lasting Gaijin in Japan. He seems to have a knack for appearing when it's on—a crucial skill in Japan.

standing still. The river was clear and green below, slowly flowing out to a bar formed of rounded river pebbles. There was no one in sight. I was looking at one of the best river-mouths in the world, a surf traveler's dream, front, center stage, almost as though I'd rented a helicopter and flown to the ideal vantage point.

Japan has some of the best waves in the world, yet at the same time, it's one of the most fickle places. It's a place that takes a lot of patience to surf. Like an addiction, you know how good it can be, and you'll chase that high no matter what. The reason Japan is so capricious is that their swell is generated by typhoons, which concentrate violent winds in a very tight area. With such a relatively small storm, the position, duration, and course have to line up exactly to produce good surf. Yet the truth is, there are some incredible reefs and rivermouth banks that sometimes produce waves that compare to Indonesia and Hawaii.

Japan has a reputation for small surf, a reputation those who really know how good it gets don't bother to dispel.

One guy who knows is Hawaiian surfer Don Johnston. Don has probably ridden as many barrels here as anyone. Don is one of those underground guys who you see absolutely destroying large, challenging Hawaiian surf and wonder, "Who is that guy?" He'd never admit it, but I have video evidence of Don surfing a certain unnamed Japanese river-mouth that looks about as good as a wave can get—three barrels, and maybe ten moves on one wave.

Don shapes for the best surfers when he's home in Hawaii, and travels to Japan every year to build boards for the lucrative Japanese industry. The average Japanese surfer shells out over $1,000 for the boards. Nearly everything is expensive in Japan, and they seem to think that if it has a famous name and it costs more, it must be better. Not that the shapers who travel to Japan make that kind of money, but Don and others from the surfing centers of the world are paid reasonably well to hide in a room, mow out hundreds of boards, and sign them with their famous shaper's name.

Broiled or Boiled?

Natural disasters are commonplace in Japan. Typhoons (hurricanes in the West) cause death and destruction (and perfect surf) every fall. I've met just a few people, mostly surfers, who enjoy the awesome experience of the power of these vicious storms. They actually look forward to being hit by one. There must be something in the psyche of surfers, like mountain climbers, that makes us enjoy being close to a power that is so fierce, wild, and obviously beyond control that we pale into insignificance. There is a point where we get a glimpse of our rightful lowly position in the scheme of things and realize with a Zen-like clarity that it wouldn't matter one grain of sand if we were just swept away. The ocean goes completely out of control; an entire house implodes and blows away as one heap. During a typhoon on a recent trip to Shikoku, I was checking the surf during

Southern Japan Left. Unrideable. OK, sometimes it's rideable.

Takuji Aota. When it's like this, it's hard to avoid the barrel.

a typhoon and saw one of those tiny little mini-cars they sell in Japan rolling around in 10' shorebreak. A young office worker had taken the company car down to the coast with his girl, strictly against regulations. They were watching the immense storm waves from a ramp on the cement breakwall when a storm surge came up the ramp and gently picked up the car with its terrified occupants. They were dragged down to the beach and nearly out to sea, but the wheels caught on the sand. The two escaped before the next wave devoured the car. News footage later showed the car rolling in the surf, and the wet, but safe, office worker fretting about the fact that he'd probably lose his job over this.

If violent storms aren't enough to keep one humble, there is plenty of seismic activity going on. Japan is unique in that it sits on the edge of the volcanic convergence zone between the Pacific and Continental plates, which is why there are so many active volcanoes. Recently, an island just south of Tokyo, Miyake-jima, had to be evacuated just before it exploded. Sakura-jima, down in the southern island of Kyushu, causes ash damage and mayhem in the nearby city of Kagoshima on a regular basis. And that's only two of the many volcanoes now erupting or ready to blow any time.

Slipping between the plates causes frequent earthquakes, as everyone saw during the devastating 1995 Kobe earthquake. Related tsunamis born of the displacement when the plates move are another serious danger.

Add to this landslides and floods, and you realize the Japanese have had a pretty rough go of it. They have to rebuild their houses between one disaster and the next, so it's no wonder they have the reputation of being so tenacious and hard working.

Kirby Fukunaga backdooring wide open Shikoku. Almost as good as Town in summer.

Natural disasters also explain the traditionally strong respect and understanding for nature, embodied in their shrines and houses and gardens where the goal is perfect harmony between nature and structure. At one point in Japan's past, religion, art, poetry, nearly all aspects of life revolved around nature and living in harmony with it.

This is what makes it so strange that modern Japan seems to exist in complete disregard for nature. It's almost as though with prosperity has come the desire to completely control nature, rather than live in harmony with it.

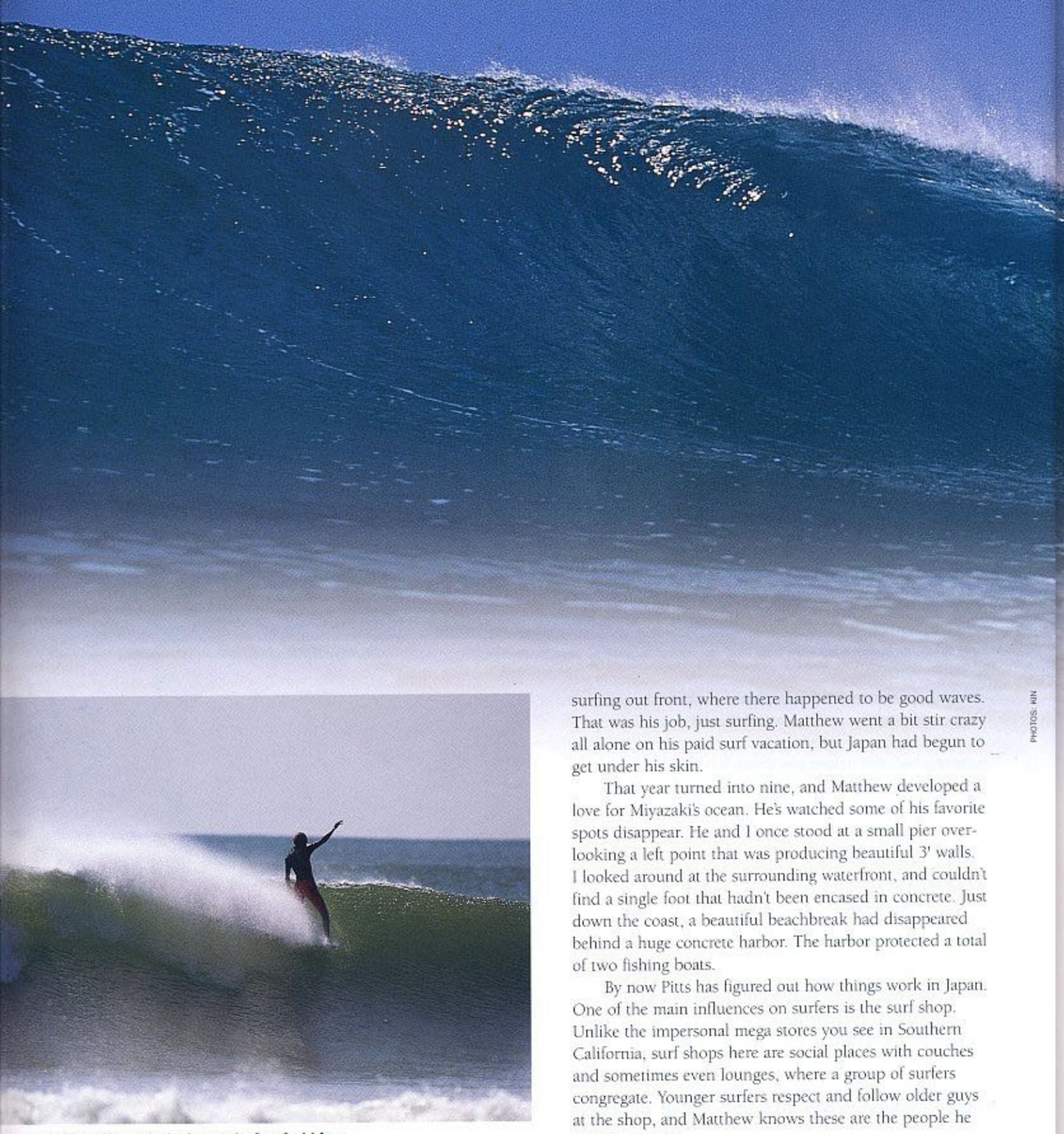
Cover it in Concrete

According to a 1993 Japanese government survey, an amazing 55 percent of Japan's coastline is covered in concrete. With typhoons and tsunamis, it makes some sense to protect yourself from storm waves and erosion. But the fact is that concrete often causes more erosion by creating vertical waves that suck out the sand, unlike the naturally occurring beach-break that takes sand away in winter and redeposits it in summer. This fact is, of course, conveniently overlooked by a construction industry that uses government funds to create immense meaningless projects every year, devouring surf spots and natural environments at a ferocious rate. In return, politicians get kickbacks and votes. Toward the end of every tax year, you see frenetic construction going on in a last bid to spend the budget so that next year's construction figures, which are based on last year's, will be just as high.

KEN

Japanese beachbreaks make California look bad on the right day.

Matthew Pitts is an Aussie pro who has lived in the southern island of Kyushu for about as long as any foreign surfer. Over the years, he has become more and more concerned with the environment. Nine years ago he moved



Morihiko. Samurai live for battle. Surfers live for this day.

David Kinoshita—a master in search of perfect trim.

PHOTOS: KIN

to Japan to complete the required year of residency for the Japanese pro circuit. Matthew picked up the envious job of "surfer" at a new resort on an island called Tanegashima. He was hired to give the resort an international image by surfing out front, where there happened to be good waves. That was his job, just surfing. Matthew went a bit stir crazy all alone on his paid surf vacation, but Japan had begun to get under his skin.

That year turned into nine, and Matthew developed a love for Miyazaki's ocean. He's watched some of his favorite spots disappear. He and I once stood at a small pier overlooking a left point that was producing beautiful 3' walls. I looked around at the surrounding waterfront, and couldn't find a single foot that hadn't been encased in concrete. Just down the coast, a beautiful beachbreak had disappeared behind a huge concrete harbor. The harbor protected a total of two fishing boats.

By now Pitts has figured out how things work in Japan. One of the main influences on surfers is the surf shop. Unlike the impersonal mega stores you see in Southern California, surf shops here are social places with couches and sometimes even lounges, where a group of surfers congregate. Younger surfers respect and follow older guys at the shop, and Matthew knows these are the people he needs to reach.

"If I tell surfers at the beach not to leave their cars idling with the air conditioner on while they surf, they might look at me like, 'Who does this guy think he is?' But if I get the established locals to understand what I'm saying, they'll tell the younger guys, and they'll have those cars switched off in a second, you know, saying, 'Sorry, sorry.'"

He tries to ask at every contest to make an environmental announcement, and prints brochures and hands them out to surfers.

"Unless surfers act responsibly and set a good example, no one will take us seriously," Pitts says.

No Need to Go Outside

In marked contrast to all this, there's Matthew's side job. Matthew works as a performer at Seagaia's Ocean Dome, an immense indoor wave pool and theme park, complete with a volcano, water slides, and barreling surf. Some years back, the management had some problems with a part of their Vegas-style show in which a performer gets rolled by a wave. They went through several professional dancers who kept getting injured by the shorebreak, which pounds on a concrete beach, until they had the bright idea of using a pro surfer for that scene. Matthew, light and quick, was used to taking a beating and could roll with the wave. He took the job, which required him to wear an absurd blue gladiator's outfit and act the part of some mythical warrior. The good part was that he got to ride some excellent waves, even when the ocean was flat, while getting paid for it.

So it was that on a recent surf trip we hit Matthew up for a private surf at Ocean Dome.

The pool's computers are usually programmed to produce gutless little beachbreak for wading kids and a few bodyboarders. But while we were in Miyazaki, Matthew convinced Seagaia management to show our group of traveling pros, accompanied by photographer John Callahan, what the Dome could really do.

The quality of the waves is truly amazing. Huge pumps suck water up into a series of chambers, which is suddenly dropped by valves in a pattern controlled by computer: the right side for a mean right, center for a sucky Ehukai sandbar-style peak, left for a long left. Maybe because the waves are produced by a surge of dropping water, they're very powerful and quick.

You paddle out into a dead calm, larger-than-Olympic-sized pool, past the volcano, and to the far wall. There, you splash around, nervously asking the pool attendants where the wave will come. Nothing happens. Then there is an eerie whirring sound. Water is being sucked into huge hidden chambers behind the walls. A current begins to pull you out of position. Suddenly, a high computerized pinging sound signals that a wave is about to be created. You turn around and get ready to paddle. Suddenly a huge surge appears against the wall and comes heaving at you. You paddle madly to catch it. The wave materializes straight out of the wall like magic, and you've got to be in position or you'll miss it.

The wave is so steep and powerful that you are lucky to make the drop into a square pit of a wave. If you make it, you get a great little tube and maybe a move before it hits the Astroturf in a few inches of water. If you're a split-second late paddling, and we all did this, you end up going over

Shikoku. Maybe the most jealously-guarded spot in Japan.

PHOTOS: KEN SOLOMA

Shikoku is one of the best rivermouths in the world a few days out of the year.

the falls, getting driven into the concrete at the bottom of the pool. I got pinned on the concrete bottom fairly hard, and although I didn't want to admit it, I was basically humbled. By a wave pool.

The ceiling is movable and slides back in layers so that the whole dome is basically a convertible. We continually cajoled the staff to open the roof so that we could shoot photos with sunlight until they finally relented and opened it for us. Suddenly, an offshore wind began to blow as the atmosphere was sucked out and replaced by outside air. It was the strangest, unearthly feeling to see this artificial, humid environment pierced by the sun's rays. It looked for all the world like a sunrise seen from a spaceship.

Later on, we met the man who makes these waves happen, an engineer named Mr. Kai. Somehow I never imagined Poseidon, God of the Sea, as a diminutive Japanese engineer in a perfectly-pressed gray uniform with a pocket protector. But there he was. Kai-san had a sort of knowing smile as though he knew he was shaking our world and exactly how it was done down to the second decimal point.

I once read a strange science fiction book by Ben Elton called *This Other Eden*, in which the earth becomes so polluted that everyone moves into "biospheres," personal enclosed domes with safely controlled atmospheres. Oceandome was exactly like that. The atmosphere is completely artificial. It's damp and humid, a tropical paradise that smells of chlorine.

Officials in Miyazaki, where the Oceandome was built as a hand-in-hand partnership of private industry and government, seem to have completely disregarded the natural environment around them. The surrounding coast,

Masatoshi Ota, Shikoku. Light place, light time, nice right.

once a beautiful long beach, is encased in concrete, and vast areas have been landfilled out to sea to make more room for huge, expensive projects like the Oceandome.

I often hear Japanese say, "Our ocean is dirty. The water is brown and ugly." As though it's too late. It was just like in Ben Elton's book. People moved into their personal biospheres when they lost faith in the environment. Yet the strange truth is the ocean is actually beautiful in Japan. The north flowing "Kuroshio," or Black Current, brings clear, warm South Pacific water to Japan, like the Gulf Stream on the American East Coast. Coastal waters warm up to the point where you can surf in trunks in the summer outside Tokyo, which has a latitude as high as San Francisco. Mahi-mahi, a tropical fish, can even be caught right outside Tokyo Bay. The fact is that the coast here truly is a magically beautiful place with awesome surf and a misty, exotic feel, something few Japanese seem to realize.

Maybe the reason the Japanese have so little knowledge of their own environment is that the Japanese lifestyle of hard work and high tech just doesn't leave time to go to the beaches to see what the water is really like. Most people's impression of the ocean is limited to an occasional glimpse of the muddy brown water of Tokyo Bay.

It's sad that Japanese seem to have lost sight of what they have, but then, there are more and more people going to the beaches, more people surfing, living an ocean lifestyle. With this, hopefully, will come more awareness, more interest in preserving their natural assets. Maybe some day the Japanese will come back to the old Shinto values where each tree, each rock was believed to have its own soul and must be respected for that.

Adam Faunce, Shikoku.

Most American surfers think of Japan as a small-wave stop on the contest circuit. Not so.

Whalesong

The Japanese have always eaten whale. Many Japanese friends of mine actually have fond memories of the whale meat commonly served in school lunches when they were kids. Many see whale as food, and they see no reason why it should be treated any differently than another mammal, like cattle, or like any other seafood. Unfortunately, they don't know whether the species they are eating is endangered or not.

Around eight years ago, when Matthew was still new to Japan, he entered an ASP contest on an island not far south of Tokyo called Niijima. He was "free-surfing" alone, down the beautiful white sand beach, when he saw a tall fin angling directly at him. Niijima is notorious for sharks, so by the time the fin got ten feet away, he was in shock. Then he realized that it wasn't a shark, but a pilot whale, much like a large dolphin. The whale swam right up to him, actually bumped into him, then went on toward the sandbar, intent on beaching itself. Pittsy was just as intent on saving the whale. He pushed it off the beach and back out to sea, refusing to let it commit suicide. Later at the contest awards ceremony, the mayor had presented Matthew with an award for being "A friend of Nature of Miyazaki," or some such thing. The award included an envelope with a few large bills in it. Matthew went away happy.

A year later, he was having a beer with some friends when a Japanese woman journalist said, "That was too bad about that whale in Niijima."

There was an awkward silence, while everyone waited for Matthew to reply.

Someone said quietly, "He doesn't know."

"Know what?" said Pitts.

Forced to tell the story, they said, "Some local fishermen were watching you with that whale. They went out and caught it for food."

Satoshi Sekino, a Japanese pro and friend of Matthew's, had been furious. He had argued on the grounds that it was not their whale to kill. Apparently, under Japanese law, the first person to touch a whale is the owner of that whale and no one else can take it. The entire issue had been resolved in typically Japanese fashion. There was absolutely no confrontation. A simple handover of cash.

Whale is still served in a few restaurants in Tokyo, more as a delicacy now than anything else. They see it as a perfectly valid renewable food resource. Americans see it as a perfect example of their arrogant disregard for the environment. It remains one of those sticking points in our relationship.

Could do with a bit of cooking

We sat at a low table in an upscale sushi bar. Around us were large tanks teeming with beautiful fish. My friends had brought me here as a special treat.

"The freshest fish anywhere," they said.

A plate of sashimi, or raw fish, was brought out and carefully laid in the center of the table. The fish itself was

Niijima natural volcanic hot springs. Not a bad way to relax after a session. Now where's that sushi?

artfully arranged in the middle of the plate. I had just begun to develop a taste for raw fish and tentatively took a piece of the clear white flesh in my chopsticks. Just as I opened my mouth to swallow it, the fish in the middle of the plate did the same. It opened and closed its mouth, moved its fins, and looked at me accusingly, as if to say, "How could you?" I dropped my chopsticks in surprise. The fish was completely intact except that all its flesh had been removed in a split second. One second it was swimming, the next it was lying there surrounded by its own flesh, watching us eat it.

Japanese food is definitely an acquired taste, and I am still learning to like some things. For instance, I still prefer my food dead before I eat it. Yet, Japanese food is one of the finest pleasures in the world once you learn to like it. The art lies in bringing out the true flavor of the ingredients. It's a simple, yet difficult style.

The other great pleasure that takes much less practice is the traditional *onsen*, or hot spring. Each type of mineral bath is said to have its own health benefits. The ultimate Japanese experience is to find a surf spot with an *onsen* right on the beach and great sushi from the sea in front of you.

JAN LENEP

Kohei Chiba, Shikoku. But mostly Japan has small waves. No, really.

Yakuza Locals

For thousands of years, Japan was a group of feudal states with each area having its own warlord. The subjects of each of these *tonosama* obeyed his every command and gave their total devotion. Japanese are still clannish, and the concept of *uchi/soto* (family/outsider) goes a long way to explain why Japanese, who are so hospitable to foreigners, can be so feudal when it comes to those outside their social circle, like outsiders from other parts of Japan.

Kyushu lineup. This could all be replaced by a concrete breakwall in the near future.

On our recent trip to Miyazaki, we surfed a remote spot near a graveyard. The sun was out, the wind was offshore, and the green waves sparkled in a way that absolutely compelled you into the water. After we had surfed until our arms gave out, we sat on the concrete breakwall and watched a large group of Japanese enjoying themselves. There were a few talented surfers and one Japanese photographer. A couple of local kids began hassling the cameraman, saying they didn't want any exposure here, pressuring him to leave.

Matthew stepped in, "Hey, you're wasting your time. You know there are plans to build a breakwall over this entire break. I've never heard you say a word about that. If you don't protect this place, how can you pretend you own it? You'd be better off using that energy to keep the breakwall out." He had a point, so I backed him up, "You guys might lose the whole thing. Think about it. You should try to keep this place for your kids, not just for a few of you guys, for today."

Localism the world over is 90 percent greed and narrow-mindedness, and it's the same in Japan. The difference is that it's an attitude the Japanese can't afford to have. Considering the challenges to their environment, Japanese surfers need to work together, not against each other.

One of the most respected surf photographers in Japan is Kin Kimoto. Nearly as well known by the American surf mags, Kin divides his time between the North Shore and Japan, keeping a plane ticket ready during the typhoon season so he can fly to Japan and catch notoriously fickle, but perfect, spots at their best. Over the years, he has been in a position to get images no one else can because of his knowledge of rare Japanese surf spots and connections with the locals. I met with Kin one day at Haleiwa's Coffee Gallery to cadge some of his incredible shots of Japan for this article and ask him about Japanese localism.

"So, how is localism different in Japan from, say, here in Hawaii?" I asked him.

Kin looked at me with his slightly wild-eyed stare. "Here in Hawaii surfers take over a spot because they ride it better than other people. Those are the heavy locals, the best surfers. In Japan, where the average surfer is only average, a group of older surfers may own a break. They get all the best waves. Then they fall down on most of them."

Localism has skewed things so much in Japan these days that sometimes you will pull up to a beach and find the best surfers riding the worst peak on the whole beach. Some of the locals are heavy into martial arts, and some are *yakuza*, the Japanese form of Mafia that controls illegal drugs, gambling, and prostitution. It pays to be a bit humble because you never know who you might be dealing with.

Strangely, foreigners are usually exempt from localism hassles. It's as though they just don't know the rules, so they aren't expected to follow them. There is a sort of mystique around foreigners that often leaves Japanese confused as to how to treat them. In crowded Japan, there is a definite pattern for social interaction, and most Japanese have grown up in a society where every move is dictated by strict rules of behavior. For instance, respect is given based on age and social standing. Even the language one uses toward, say, an older person of higher social standing, is completely different from the language one speaks to a friend. Foreigners don't play by the same rules, they are outside the pattern. Japanese often have no idea how to react. Most often the response is one of overwhelming hospitality and welcome.

"Japanese are good people. If you act well, they treat you well.

"It's the land of '*giri* and *ninjo*,'" Kin said. *Giri* and *ninjo* are two unique and obscure Japanese concepts having something to do with duty and honor."

"Come on, Kin, you know I can't translate that!" I said. Whole books have been written about this, none of which actually explain the concepts. Generations of eager students of culture, business, and language have puzzled over the concepts and come up with nothing but a mystery.

"Exactly," he said with that slightly unsettling glint in his eye. I thanked Kin, the inscrutable Japanese, and left the coffee shop, clasping a page of his priceless slides that represent years of his patience and dedication. Yet, somehow, I had the feeling he was holding more slides back for some reason.

I could have sworn I heard him laugh as he walked out the back door. ⊗