

Japanese Roads

It did not take long to discover that although Japan has a first world economy, it has third world roads. Not only do they have large potholes, the roads are so narrow that two cars passing each other can easily exchange notes. To make matters worse, the newer roads have one-half foot curbs, which are difficult to see without sidewalks attached to them. As I drove down the street and saw an oncoming car, I quickly moved over (to the left in this case) as far as I could, only to hit the curbing and then bounce back. There were several times when I bent the under side of my fender. After a while I asked myself, "Why am I doing this?" In my mind, I pictured myself ramming into an oncoming car. I imagined I was too close to the center, and the road seemed to close in on me. I would sit tense behind the wheel, holding my breath, dreading the moment the oncoming car approached. Of course, I never came close to touching the other car, but each time was torture for me. Living in the western part of the United States for so many years, I grew accustomed to wide open spaces. This claustrophobic feeling stayed with me for several months. I hated driving in Japan and hated myself for being such a wimp. But as the bills came in for dented fenders and scraped doors, I knew I had to get control of myself, or else depend on others to take me places. Hitting curbs, stone walls and guardrails is not my idea of fun driving. After several months I mastered my fear---somewhat. When I saw an oncoming car, I learned to stay where I was, and let the other driver move over if it was necessary. It was a challenge for me, and I must say, after a while I began to enjoy driving my little Mazda.

Japanese roads are a combination of narrow roads, few sidewalks, and hundreds of cars everywhere. Many old people and children are on bicycles. As a result, you don't drive in a straight line down the road. Instead you weave in and out to avoid the pedestrians, bikers, illegally parked cars, and anything else that's in the way. To get around these nuisance factors, whenever there were no on-coming cars, Randy would drive in the middle of the road as fast as he could so he could get to where he was going. That is the Japanese way. I couldn't quite get up the nerve to do this, at first. But as time went on, I found myself doing the same. It was fun. Some men would drive in the middle of the road until they saw an on-coming car, then they would play "chicken" and see who would move over first. Needless to say, there were some head-on collisions. Quite often the police would leave the wrecked cars on the side of the road for days to remind people. The old people (or should I say senior citizens) are a problem. They dart out on the road with their bicycles and never bother to look to see if a car is coming. It's up to you to watch out for them. They are worse than children. Someone claimed that these old folks feel it is their fate if they are hit. I sometimes wonder if they are not used to so many cars, since they were riding bicycles long before cars became popular. They nonchalantly pull out on their bicycles, looking neither left nor right, maneuvering their bikes, oblivious to the traffic.

Cars are everywhere on these wretched roads. Women also drive. At times, I saw women driving with small children sitting on their laps. A few times I saw babies strapped to their mother's backs while they drove. More than likely, the men drive the bigger cars, mainly the 1500 cc engines or larger, such as the 1700 cc Toyotas, and the women drive the little 700 cc, aptly named the "little woman's car."

A few months after we settled in our house, we decided to drive up to Fukuroda Falls to see the changing colors of the leaves. It was autumn and the weather was beautiful. Our friends drew a map and explained to us how to get there. They said, "You can't miss it." How many times did we hear these famous words? It was our first venture out into the countryside. We did

pretty well and followed all the prescribed landmarks, but at some point we missed our turn. We got off the main highway and were soon driving on a mountainous road. We even joked and I remember saying, "Wouldn't it be something if we saw a huge truck coming our way?" No sooner did I say that when a large touring bus came careening around a corner. We couldn't believe our eyes. We have driven in Europe and have seen some narrow roads, but this was ridiculous. Randy swerved over (to the left) to let the bus by. I thought surely this was the end for us. As it turned out, we sat hanging off the side of the road looking down into a grove of dense, tall bushes. The bus driver didn't even acknowledge us. Not even so much as a wave of thanks. We backed out of that mess and continued to drive until the road was wide enough to turn the car around. We continued to look for the falls, but to no avail. Disgusted, we headed for home. A few weeks later, we tried again. This time we found it, but by then most of the leaves had fallen. Later we discovered that our friends neglected to tell us that they hadn't found the falls the first time either.

To a newcomer, driving in Japan is a challenge. But as time passes, you become familiar with the roads and all their idiosyncrasies. The main problem, other than the roads themselves, is the language. A few of the highways are numbered, but most are not. Most of the signs are in *Kanji* (Chinese characters,) but some are in *Romangi*. *Romangi* is a written system used for phonetically transcribing Japanese into the Roman alphabet. (This system applies to any language not using the Roman alphabet, such as Russian or Greek.) For example, the word "*tomodachi* (friend) is written in *Romangi* as such. In Japanese it is written entirely different, although it is pronounced the same in both languages. So you're driving along following all the landmarks and road signs, hoping they're numbered, and you come across a string of signs in *Romangi*, and you think you're home free. Not so, the next thing you know the signs are back to *Kanji*. Utter confusion, but somehow you find your way. After all, there are just so many roads on which to get lost. We found having a compass in the car also helped. We bought one shortly after we arrived in Japan.