



Philip tackles a tight corner in Echigo, Niigata



On a gourmet tour of Japan - by motorcycle

When Rotary of Bangkok South member Philip A. Baechtold teamed up with his friend Peter "Brock" Brockway for a two-month motorcycle and food adventure in Japan, little did they know just how amazing their journey would be. Here Philip tells their story

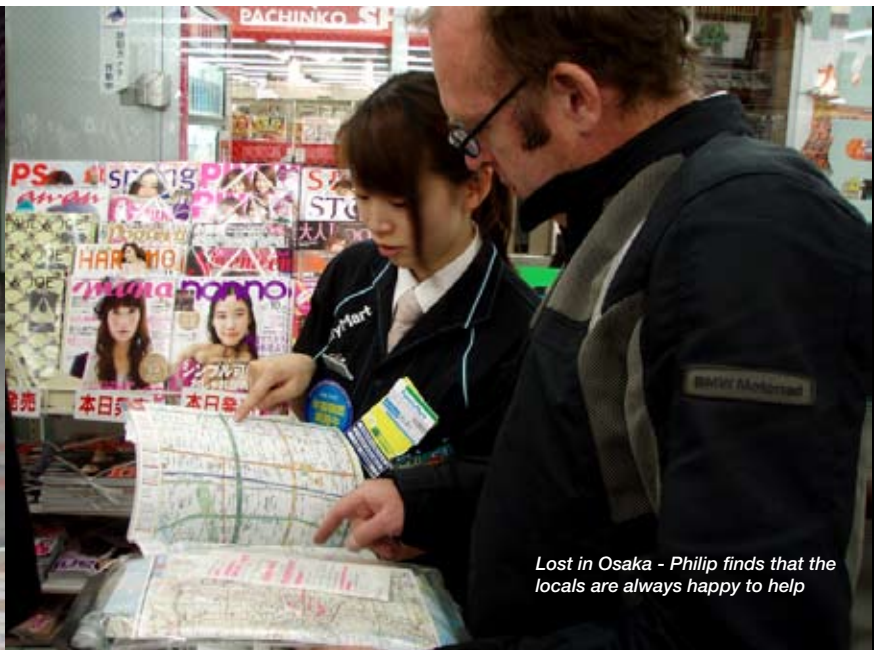
MONTHS before my Rhode Island buddy Brock and I met in Tokyo for our motorcycle tour of Japan, our preparations began. While I spent six months studying Japanese in Bangkok, over in the US Brock made inquiries at the Japanese consulate in Boston about touring Japan on a motorcycle. He was told: "Don't you know that there are excellent train and bus networks in Japan?"

I lived in Tokyo at the age of 22 and I got to know the city inside out. In my 5 years there what I failed to see though was the rest of the country. But I could tell you how to make love to a girl in a Kimono - basically don't take off her Kimono because

she'll never get it back on again without the help of her mother.

On September 12, 2008, the weekend the world's financial system disintegrated – which dented my savings 10 times more than the expenses of this entire trip – Brock and I rented two big HONDA ST1300 "Pan European" bikes with "Catholic Converters" in Odaiba, Tokyo.

Now you should know that a bike trip allows for little baggage – which is why women generally don't like them. It's a real exercise in minimalism, and some people really wonder why I ride a motorcycle. To me it's the solution: I don't know for what problem, but it's definitely the solution.





Brock strikes a pose in Shikoku Sanchi



A learning experience - Brock meets a school teacher in Hokkaido

Our route took us 3,000 kms from Tokyo to the Island of Hokkaido and to Japan's most northern point, then 5,000 kms south through Honshu and Shikoku to Kyushu, and eventually 2,000 kms back up along the Japan Sea coast and through the Japan Alps to Tokyo.

Speed limits are somewhat more seriously enforced than in Thailand, so to enjoy the ride we often got off the main road and headed into the mountains or down coastal roads. Here Japan offers the best riding: over ridges, into gorges, through amazing countryside, with the friendliest people on earth...and fantastic food!

The first night in Ginza we ate at a small Izakaya whose owner didn't want to let us in for fear that we couldn't speak some Japanese, or eat his raw squid swimming in black ink. But the meal was delicious, and we realized that two pints of Nama Beeru (draught beer) will help you eat anything.

Being rejected in Japan is quite common and you get used to it. Often, restaurants or hotels are just plain full, but sometimes the establishment is saving itself the embarrassment of serving foreigners.

However, once you are in a pub that is full, you'll be amazed to see newly arriving guests turned away and asked to come back another day. The aim is not to maximize, but to serve

those guests best that are already there. You also develop a technique for finding good places, and more often than not they are the ones that seat no more than a dozen, where no westerners go and where no English is spoken. It's wonderful when you slide open a door, move aside the Noren curtains, and are greeted by the Chef personally: "Irrashimase!" (Welcome in!)

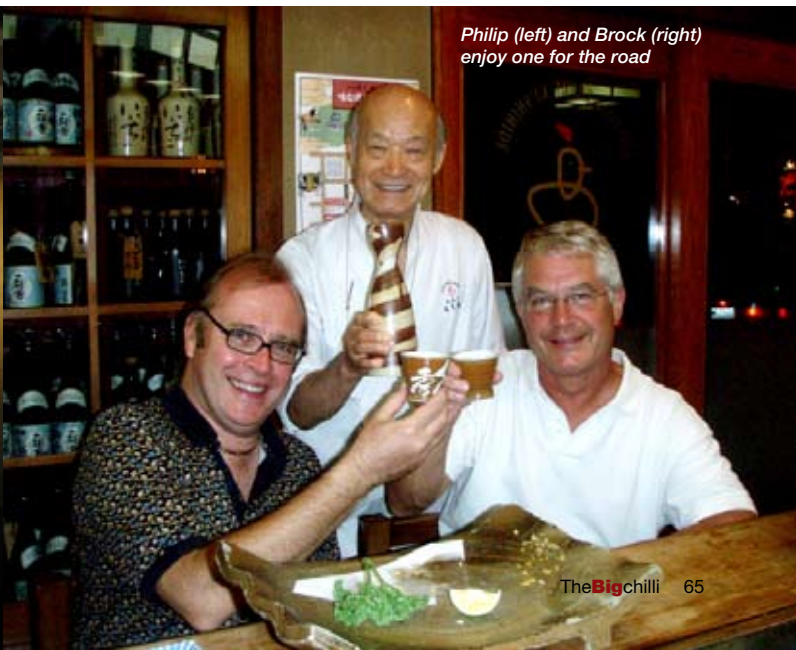
It's in these Sushi-yas and Izakayas that you rarely pay more than Y5,000 per head (1,500 baht). You get the best attention and meet other guests who end up telling you what to eat and drink. In a Sushi-ya in Otaru, Hokkaido, a patron from Tokyo who sat next to us taught us how to gradually increase the intensity in texture and taste of our fish during our meal, and also the correct way to drink Sake.

Sashimi – be it raw tuna, mackerel, scallops, octopus, squid, oysters, sea urchins, sea snails, star fish, slugs or any other unidentified floating object – triggers the most unusual sensations. To the eye it's moist, colorful, silky, lustrous and sometimes shocking; to the nose it's oceanic and fresh; to the teeth it's either soft, chewy or even crunchy; to your palate it's brackish and raw.

Occasionally, Sashimi is presented as an art, as absolute perfection. But mostly it's really quite plain and straightforward, crude, natural and fresh, though never casual or random. Some say eating Sushi is war, but to me it's a celebration of the sea



Just like Titanic - Philip's singing goes down well in this karaoke bar in Fukui



Philip (left) and Brock (right) enjoy one for the road

Brock and Philip get to grips with Japanese culture



Cheap Sake - headache assured!



Fancy a piece of raw chicken?

“Some say eating Sushi is war, but to me it’s a celebration of the sea and its creatures that have been unfortunate enough to jump on to your plate”

and its creatures that have been unfortunate enough to jump on to your plate.

Among the more exciting dishes we tried was sea urchin in scrambled eggs that looked like: “No thank you, I’ve eaten.” But what can you do if the Inn-owner is sat right next to you, watching every morsel of food enter your mouth (you may let it slip through your chopsticks a few times, but eventually you swallow it).

We also sampled raw beef in Matsushima, which the Chef seared for a second in front of us with a big blowtorch. Another highlight was Fin of Blue Marlin soaked in Jellyfish sauce that looked like a creature from the movie Alien. You suck the flesh from between the bones, and you can’t refuse it because it’s the specialty of the house. “Two more beers please.”

At Kesenuma, the biggest fishing port in northern Japan, you’d think they bring in the entire marine life of the North Pacific every morning: hundreds of tons of Tunas, Sharks, Swordfish, Salmon, Scallops, Mackerel and Crab; a bloody spectacle. The auction worth millions of Yen proceeds unnoticeable, but the stink of fish-guts gets stuck to your shoes for weeks.

Eating raw food does not stop with fish and beef. In Matsushima, Shikoku, the Lonely Planet asks: “Have you ever thought of eating raw chicken?” So when we entered Kushihide Tori Ryori Honten, the chef immediately knew we’d come for Ehime chicken sashimi. No menu required. To Brock it seemed unthinkable to eat raw chicken, but here we were in Japan, the only place in the world where you might do such a bizarre thing. It turned out to be quite okay. The red meat was more tasty than the white, and the big jug of Nama-Beeru we kept handy was not seriously required. We cleaned up our plates. Still, I won’t be looking for Chicken Sashimi again too soon.

On our trip we had a discipline - to ride on every day, how ever much we liked a place. We also rode without daily destination. Of the places I’d love to visit again are Hokkaido, the mountain ranges of central Japan, the coast of Tottori, and Shikoku Island.



Grilled Shishamo - three fish and two drinks is a puzzling combination



Furasato's Izakaya in Tarayama
"I used to be rich" he says

Shikoku was a discovery. Unknown Japan: remote, scenic, mountainous, rugged, colorful, and beautiful. The people friendly but also willful, strong-minded and independent. The roads narrow and isolated with little traffic; the mountain routes unique. The best we'd ever ridden. When again we lost our way and finally met up with a couple, they just laughed and said: "This is Shikoku!" and sent us back the way we'd come.

To characterize the Japanese people I'd say that they are practical, consistent, precise, serviceable and friendly. If in a post office and all counters are busy, you can expect a new counter to be opened for you to serve you immediately. And I'll never forget the manager of a small business hotel in Akita, who ran around clearing his small parking area so that we could park our motorcycles in a wind-sheltered spot.

The Japanese are also heavy drinkers, which is fine with me! To me it's a sign of civilization if you can get a beer at 3:30 in the afternoon (Ginza Lion Beer Hall).

Of course there are cameras everywhere, unmarked police cars, public loudspeaker systems, and other failures.

In Takayama, a most picturesque and boring place in the Japan Alps, we stumbled into the Bar of Kenichi Mori called "Desolation Row," as in a Bob Dylan song. Ken played one vinyl record after the other and kept repeating: "This bar is a mistake." We ended up comforting him until 2am and had difficulty making him accept money for the three bottles of wine and whiskey we drank.

The national drink of course is Sake and there are 10,000 different labels. The top stuff is "Dai Ginzoushu," which is made of the essence of rice grain and is cellared similar to wine in France. It matures in drums at 16 C. We became experts and learned that you should drink good Sake neither hot nor cold, but Jo-on, which indicates "cellar temperature." Of course as a Gaijin, you'll never be expected to understand such finesse. But the next time you're in a Japanese pub, order your Sake "Jo-on" and the world will come to a stop.

Sometimes in Japan you're asked: "Where are you from?" - well, what difference does it make where I'm from? In fact,

I noticed that nobody gave a damn that Brock was from "America," but when I mentioned Switzerland, everybody broke out in cheers. So Brock learned to say he's from "Boss-tonn" which gave him even bigger cheers because of the "Red Sox" baseball team and their Japanese pitcher "Daisei."

Often you'll need a small magic word to get attention: "Sumimasen." Without it you'll be talking to the wind. Sumimasen unfreezes anonymity and signals the receiving brain that it's being spoken to. The response "Hai" – contrary to popular belief – does not mean "Yes," but more "I've heard that you said something."

Anyway, once the ice is broken, you'll find hospitality better than anywhere else.

When inquiring about directions (we didn't have GPS) we ended up being assisted with telephone calls, or being led to a destination by a car or by a pedestrian. In one case we were even served a great seasonal dish of Samma sashimi garnished with the most intense garlic. The main problem was convincing our drunken guides that there was no need show us the way to the hotel by driving ahead of us in their cars.

It was with similar advice that we discovered Minshuku Hakutu in Ogiishi, right by the sea. A gas station attendant, after scrutinizing whether we spoke, ate and slept Japanese, drove ahead for 3 km and took us to this Inn where we were not only the only guests that day, but the first foreigners – EVER!

Kasaya San, the Inn-owner, cooked dinner at our table, and supervised our eating of Cuttle-fish Shabu-Shabu, Hirame-no-Enkawa (fillet of Flounder), Tara cooked in salt, Hoke in Miso-sauce, Tako in herb-butter, and fresh, reddish mussels. Meanwhile, his wife kept us – and Kasaya San – amply supplied with beer from the vending machine in their living room. All for less than 2,000 baht, including accommodation.

This trip was the best motorcycle riding and the best food I have ever experienced, in a great country. We didn't find the Japan you'd imagine, but the one you'd hope to discover. And we received great hospitality from the Mafia in Wakkanai to the Bar Ladies of Kagoshima. Kampai!