



Nick Zoa

Yokota Air Base
Tokyo, Japan
End of Term V 1982

The runway at Yokota Air Base near Tokyo is 3.5 kilometers long – long enough to handle some of the giant military transports that fly in and out of Yokota. During the day, the runway is busy with military aircraft. The Education Center was next to the runway. The ear-shattering jets sometimes made it hard to teach. We often had to pause for a few minutes during class when the F-15s were doing touch-and-goes.

At night, the runway was quiet. No planes landed or took off out of consideration for our Japanese neighbors. This meant that the runway was dark, vacant and usually unguarded. I owned a Kawasaki 250. It was lightweight and easy to handle. It was a fast bike, with neck-snapping acceleration. I used to take my Kawasaki out onto the runway late at night. Even with Michiko riding on the back of the bike, we could peg the speedometer at 200 kph and still have room to slow down before coming to the soundwall at end of the runway.



It was on this Kawasaki that I had one of my favorite motorcycle adventures. In August 1982, during the break between Term V and Term I, I rode north from Tokyo up the east coast of Japan. This was my first excursion into Japan on my own. I loved it.

My motorcycle began to cough and lose power not long after I left Tokyo. I opened my owner's manual to learn how to maintain the engine. Although I'd been in Japan long enough speak the language, I realized that I was going to have to learn to read Japanese as well. After some practice, I could sound out キャブレター as carburetor.

My Kawasaki owner's manual got me started on the long learning curve to reading Japanese. This was going to be a valuable lesson because northern Japan didn't have much English signage in those days.

With the bike running smoothly again, I enjoyed the ride north up Japan's rugged Pacific coast. This was before the days of the GPS and the iPhone. I didn't book reservations in advance, nor did I have a guidebook. I had paper maps to show me where the roads went. I stayed in *minshukus* (family-run bed & breakfasts) along the way. I always reassured my gracious hosts that I didn't mind sleeping on a futon on a tatami mat, and that I loved Japanese food – with the possible exception of *natto* (fermented bean paste).

I rode up the Shimokita Hanto, which is the axe-shaped peninsula at the extreme north end of Honshu, the main island of Japan. This is a sparsely populated part of Japan. It's also a fairly flat part of Japan. One sunny afternoon, on a long, straight stretch of highway with no villages nearby, I couldn't resist winding out the engine at 200 kph. Then, I noticed a flashing blue light in my rear view mirror. Whoever was following me was having a hard time catching up with me. So, I slowed down and stopped on the shoulder to give him a chance to say *Kon'nichiwa*.

I wasn't expecting much of a conversation, so I left my helmet on. When the officer in blue arrived, he grabbed his ticket book, yanked off his helmet and marched towards me. His aggressive behavior, even from a Japanese policeman, surprised me. I took off my helmet. My long hair spilled down onto my shoulders. In my warmest Tennessee accent, I said "Howdy! How're y'all doin' today?"

When he saw that I was a *gaijin* – who apparently spoke no Japanese – he stopped in his tracks. His shoulders slumped. I suspect that he was disappointed not to be able to give me a well-practiced lecture about motorcycle safety and traffic laws. Instead, he closed his ticket book. He looked at his boots for a moment. Then, fixing his eyes on mine, he said simply "Your mother. She worries." Then, he turned, walked slowly to his motorcycle and road back to where he had come from. I didn't speed after that. I appreciated this warning. It was a very civilized way for a policeman to express concern for my health.

Not far up the road, I came to a rustic *minshuku* on the beach facing the sparkling waters of the great Mutsu Bay. I think I was the first foreigner my hosts had ever seen. I was certainly the first long-haired American wearing a black leather jacket riding a motorcycle that they'd ever seen. When I walked into their restaurant and took off my helmet, they shouted "Peter Fonda, Easy Rider!"

They treated me like a celebrity and wanted me to stay for a few days. We came to a business arrangement which made everyone happy. I was welcome to pitch my tent on their beach, use their hot springs and enjoy all the fish, rice and beer I could consume. In exchange, I stood outside the restaurant next to my motorcycle at mealtimes, wearing my black leather jacket, waving at passing motorists, and shouting "Irasshaimase!" (Welcome!) Many cars stopped to see what was going on. There were frequent "Peter Fonda, Easy Rider!" exclamations. I got a lot of practice speaking Japanese and drinking Sapporo.

Coming to Oma, at the north end of Honshu, I put my bike on the ferry to Hokkaido. Hokkaido, like Alaska, has a short and beautiful summer. Also like Alaska, Hokkaido has active volcanoes. I had a glorious week riding the circuit around Hokkaido. I

climbed active volcanoes, stayed at campgrounds and youth hostels and hung out with college students on holiday. In those days, there was no tunnel between Hokkaido and Honshu. To return to Honshu, I put my Kawasaki on the ferry from Tomakomai to Hachinohe.

From there, I followed the highway down the west coast of Honshu to the fabled Oga Peninsula, a rugged spur that sticks out into the Sea of Japan. There's a haunting tradition associated with this place. The Oga Peninsula is the home of the Namahages. Like our Santa Claus, the Namahages know which children have been naughty and nice. On the appointed night in mid-winter, they slip quietly into all the homes in Japan to deliver toys and sweets to the good little boys and girls.

This is where the similarities between the Namahages and Santa Claus end. The Namahages are not plump, jolly, old men with kind words and big smiles for everyone. Namahages have fangs, horns and look like ogres. After they've delivered gifts to the good children, they eat the bad children. I've never forgotten this twist on the Santa tradition. Perhaps this explains why Japanese children are so well-behaved.



Namahages on the Oga Peninsula

Continuing down the west coast of Japan, I came to Niigata. There, I put my bike on the ferry out to Sado Island, famous for being Japan's only source of gold in ancient times. This island is a charming, out-of-the-way part of Japan that doesn't get many visitors, especially no foreign visitors. I was welcomed as usual and enjoyed the hot springs and spelunking in the old mines.

The last week of my month-long road trip coincided with Obon. This is when half of Japan visits their grandparents' villages to pray for and honor their ancestors. On Sunday afternoon, on the final day of this holiday, everyone drives back to Tokyo. The resulting traffic jam that year was astounding. The four-lane highway was backed up bumper-to-bumper from one side of Japan to the other – from the Sea of Japan to the Pacific Ocean. I was glad to be traveling by motorcycle instead of by car. I white-lined

between stopped cars all the way back to Tokyo in about two hours. On Monday morning, the traffic news reported that cars were still backed up bumper-to-bumper.

Monday evening, I was back at the Education Center with a new group of students, introducing them to the basics of classical mechanics: Energy, momentum and velocity. After class, I had stories to share with my students about Japan.