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# JOHN LENNON SLEPT HERE

Getting into the spirit of Karuizawa

Steve Gillick

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23 JAN 2016: There is a local story that when John Lennon first came to the town of Karuizawa in 1976, he walked into one of the cafés and was immediately asked to leave. The owners didn't know who he was. All they knew was that a long-haired hippy-type guy with an English accent was in their shop and he didn't blend in with the rest of

the patrons. But later, after amends were made, John and Yoko, with their son Sean in tow, would often bicycle into town, especially to the French Bakery on the main street, to buy croissants and enjoy a coffee or tea.



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For Beatles fans –and travellers--of all ages, it's stories like these that resonate and endear them to certain destinations. John and Yoko adopted the upscale Hotel Mampei, not far from Yoko's parent's summer home, as their get-away during the summers of 1976 through 1979. Today, visitors can explore the Hotel and visit Room 128 where the Lennons stayed each summer. You can drink Royal Milk Tea, a drink that John supposedly introduced to the staff at the hotel Café, and enjoy a delectably delicious lunch in the main dining room, as we did. You can even visit The Bar and chat with Takamichi Ozawa the bartender who shyly admits that he served fruit juice and red wine to John Lennon on numerous occasions.

For Canadians, Karuizawa has two special connections. Firstly, it's a sister city to Whistler,

BC and even has three of its own Ski areas in and around the city. Secondly, one of the main reasons why Karuizawa exists as a resort town is due to a Canadian born Anglican Minister, Alexander Croft Shaw who, after doing missionary work in Japan for many years, settled in Karuizawa in 1886 due the cool summer breezes, the forests, the mountain views and that fact that it was near, but far enough away, from Tokyo. The idea caught on and by the early 1890s Karuizawa was regarded as a major get-away. Today, expansive summer homes, many with their original 19th century clay pipe chimneys, are peppered along the green moss covered road that threads its way through the forest.

Karuizawa is located on a 1000 meter high plateau in Nagano Prefecture, one hour by bullet train from Tokyo Station. Historically the town was a post stop on the Nakasendo Way (now a popular route for adventure travellers) which stretched from the old capital city of Kyoto to Tokyo, the new capital.

The first thing you notice as you start climbing Usui Pass Observation Point a.k.a. Sunset Point are the signs warning visitors to be on the lookout for the Tsukino Waguma, the Asian Black Bear, identified by a crescent moon shape on the chest. Just as we were reading the sign, we saw leaves shaking and heard a bell tinkling and thought that a bear was approaching from the nearby treed area. It turned out to be just a trekker wearing a bear bell. Apparently bears, themselves, don't wear bells!

Despite the bear scare (we saw none) it's worth the short climb to Sunset Point to see the incredible vista of mountain ranges, such as the Joshu, Nikko

and Southern Alps, each exhibiting vivid shades of dark and light blue on the horizon. On a clear day, you can see Mt. Asama, an active 2568 meter Volcano that last erupted in 2009. One theory for the meaning of Karuizawa relates to the volcanic rock (karu ishi) and the nearby marshes (sawa).

Close to the lookout lies one of Japan's unique treasures: The Kumano Shrine. Two prefectures meet in this area, Nagano and Gunma, and the land on which the shrine sits is actually split between the two, with the Kumano Kotai Jingu (or Shrine) in Nagano and the Kumano Jingu in Gunma. Each shrine has its own Chief Priest and its own souvenir shop selling its own good luck amulets, despite the fact the buildings are only a few meters apart.

The site is entered through a torii gate. Two stone guardian dogs dating to around the 16th century stand on either side of the staircase, ready to dissuade evil spirits from ascending to the shrine platform. At the gift store, small statues of crows are available for purchase, recalling the legend of the founding of the shrine by Prince Yamato Takeru whose effort to reach the mountain summit was hindered by a thick fog. A three-legged crow dropped green leaves for the Prince to follow up to the summit.

On the shrine platform, an 850 year old tree marks a Power Spot: a place that purportedly enhances life and energy and purifies the mind and body. In fact, Japan has many Power Spots including Mt. Fuji, Tokyo's Imperial Palace, the Yamadera Shrine in Kyoto and the Itsukushima Shrine (the iconic red Torii gate that stands in the water in Miyajima, not far from Hiroshima). Pilgrims from all over Japan - and the world, for that matter - venture to

Karuizawa to avail themselves of the positive flow of energy, something to note for those travelers seeking meditative, inspirational or spiritual escapes.

In the town itself, aside from downhill skiing, there is golf, curling, birding, art galleries, the botanical gardens and shopping. A large indoor mall sits alongside the Prince Hotel complex. In an area that rivals Tokyo Disneyland in size, the Prince offers a choice of 3, 4 and 5 star accommodations as well as an onsen or hot spring with indoor and outdoor bathing areas.

But the most famous shopping area is Ginza-dori, the main street of Karuizawa, where visitors flock to the cafes, bakeries, Nakayama's Jams (made with fresh local fruits), and various shops selling sweets, vegetables, pottery, home decorations, sake, and locally produced Niagara wine (that has no connection to Canada's Niagara Region).

And in the spirit of spirits, back at the twin Shinto shrines near Sunset Point, visitors acknowledge and beckon the kami (spirits) by ringing the bell and clapping their hands twice. Secreted under the wooden roof of the shrine are a number of frightening creatures that scare away evil spirits, including fearsome dragons, scowling guardian dogs, known as Shishi, and forbidding beasts known as Baku, displaying the head of an elephant, the eyes of a rhinoceros and the paws of a tiger, and who lie in wait to devour bad dreams. There is the belief that if you put the image of a Baku under your pillow before you go to sleep in the New Year, it will set the tone of pleasant dreams for the rest of the year!

Karuizawa complements the needs of a number of

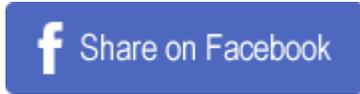
travel audiences: Beatles fans, skiers, trekkers, resort-goers, shoppers, golfers, history buffs, photographers, foodies, and those seeking the sounds of silence. Travellers looking for a break from the hustle and bustle of Tokyo would do well to explore Karuizawa, a destination ideal for overnight escapes or 'day trippers'. John Lennon would have been intrigued by both.

## Karuizawa



John Lennon Slept Here. Room 128 Hotel Mampei





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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