

Lake Biwa: Springtime Awakening

The mainsail shook with a snap, startling a raft of drifting teal, as the wind backed another 20 degrees. Early spring breezes swirl off the face of Mt. Hira, to slap at the sail from different directions. Snow still powders the top of the mountain above the tree line and the air carries its chill. In the sky, the last thinning gray clouds of winter signal a change in season. Overhead, a gaggle of geese fly north. Lake Biwa yawns, a waking after a long winter's rest.

The flashing colors of three windsurfers catch the eye, as they streak along the shoreline. Two long, narrow, gray skiffs roll nets of *moroko* over their low freeboard. The silver bodies of the little fish reflect the sun's growing strength, as it punches holes in the gray clouds. The raft of gree-winged teal settle back down as the yacht's mainsail fills and the headsail pulls taught against the jib sheet. The trim yacht heels and heads off to the east. The ducks resume their feeding in preparation for their flight north, to the tundra marshes of Siberia.

A lone hawk

A lone hawk spirals high above the lute-shaped lake. Martial notes radiate from the lake's deep northern oval, but the hawk's stinging eyes focus to the south. A melody of Buddhist fatalism rings from Lake Biwa's bulging north, but its martial cry is tuned from the crowded, narrow southern end. Man's intrusion over the jade-colored waters momentarily breaks the hawk's burning gaze where the bow-shaped span of Biwako Ohashi bridge stretches across the narrow, passing man's carriages from shore to shore. The hawk spirals ever higher, broadening its view of the fields that rest along the lake's flat, narrow shore. It watches a *tanuki* scurry through the reeds and then spots its prey, a fat field mouse scampering along a paddy dike.

A sleek, French-built Bénéteau, the *La Vie*, locks in a friendly club match with a high-bowed, American-built C&C, the *Bostonian*. The air freshens and they

knife through Lake Biwa's wind-rippled surface heading north for Chikubu Island. The protruding sticks of a large arrow-shaped fish trap jut up through the water's surface, looking like a giant Indian nailed on the lake.

The lake's ancient name chants in the curling rhythm of the waves along the western shore—Omi, Omi, Omi. Charcoal glows in grills as rough-hewn picnic tables are spread with the day's fare. The sweet smell of grilling trout drifts off the glowing embers and mingles with the pine scent, spilling down from the shadowing mountains. Two small buntings dart off a branch of budding willow to filch a crumb or two in their tiny beaks. The laughter and boasting of holiday sailors and casual travelers fill the air with hospitable tones. The noon sun brings renewed life all along Lake Biwa's 235 km shoreline.

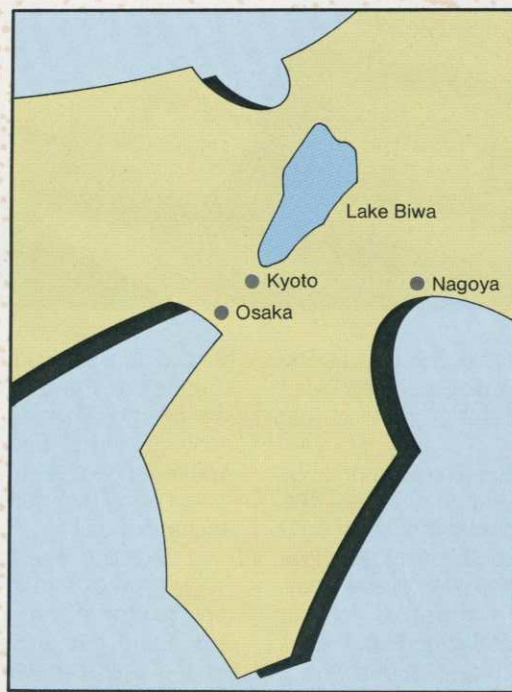
A brilliant white excursion boat throttles back off Chikubu Island as the *La Vie* and *Bostonian* spin around for the reach home. The island's steep cliffs, studded with cedars and bamboo, blend with the

waters of the lake in a portrait of greens, and the mellow earth-tones of Tsukubusuma Shrine create a pastel of quietude. With over 40 meters of water under their keels, the two racers rush south by southwest for the white rocks of Shirashi. A heron cries as the excursion boat throttles back up for its long run home to Hama-Otsu.

Mist and mountains

Low-slung clouds settle over the top of Mt. Hira, shrouding it in a foggy mist. The ripples on the lake dance between the wood poles of a timeworn raft, where freshwater pearls grow. A flight of bean geese wedge north overhead. In the distance, the whine of jet-skis shrieks and the head turns toward the sound. Only the spraying rooster-tails are visible.

Fishermen charge past on their way home, and farmers pull at weeds in cabbage patches ashore. Mangetsu-ji Temple floats out from the shore, its vigorous lines mirroring a venerable Otsu-e painting. A late afternoon shadow shades the village of Katata and Shizuka-ro





ryokan readies for the evening trade. The stone steps in the garden are swept clean and tight-woven baskets are filled with fresh charcoal.

A train's beckoning whistle sounds as farmers quit their fields for the day. The sun drops fast behind the sheer mountains, leaving the clouds over Lake Biwa tinted in a violet blush. Along village lanes, housewives wash vegetables for the coming meal and stoke the bath fires. A child cries, and old man laughs, and a

gander honks a warning to its mate. The sounds carry and blend across the waters of Lake Biwa. A great red warbler quavers from its perch in an orange tree. And far in the distance the rhythmic evening bell of Mii-dera Temple rings an enchanted call.

At dockside, the slick *La Vie* chants in winning mock and the proud *Bostonian* dips its bow in losing recognition. Sport fishermen gather in rowdy boasting around a glowing kerosene heater, while

the two young anglers proudly display their catch of Biwa-ko black bass. Three weary hikers trek the last kilometer off Mt. Hiei, along a bubbling stream. And a solitary deer nervously laps its evening drink under the heron's cedar perch.

The moon's beam lights Lake Biwa in a romantic dream, as lights from the lofty hotels reflect in the water like tiny stars. The Mississippi stern wheeler replica, *Michigan*, glows in ready for a dinner cruise across the lake. Around the train

stations, neon-art twists seductive messages. But along the village lanes, only the glow of bath fires and moonbeams light the night. The soft glow from a *toro* stone lantern illuminates the garden of the Shizuka-ro.

Rising moon

The air turns cool and crisp with the waxing of the moon. Charcoal braziers redden and *sake* cups clink in total warming. A kimono-clad matron laughs easily with her guests, as she talks about the lake. Her knowledge stems from 10 generations, its reverence is deep and yet

tempered by modern understanding. She haltingly slips into English so a foreign guest can understand. Paintings and early photographs appear, to set the scene of times past.

Three-sectioned bowls arrive, holding *sumiso*, *nihaisu* and *shoga-joyu* for dipping. Large trays of fresh *moroko* from the lake appear for grilling over the braziers. Onions and mushrooms join the savory minnows on the grill and another round of *sake* lightens the mood. When the last *moroko* disappear into a hungry mouth, thick clay pots of honey-colored liquid find a nest over the glowing coals.

The brazier boils the *nabemono* into a rich nectar.

Tea and a plate of fresh fruit complete the meal. A hot bath in an ancient wooden tub awaits. Louvered windows emit the chilled night air along with the melodic light of the moon. The steaming water caresses tired muscles earned on the lake. A freshly crisp *yukata* provides a cocoon of warmth. The straw scent of tatami and the petal softness of futon, embrace the warm dreams of Lake Biwa to come.

W. W. Williams
An Osaka-based writer

Table Talk

Bistro Bonne Femme

The funeral for Emperor Showa was held on February 24, attended by representatives of 164 of the world's 167 countries. It was the largest funeral to be held for a world figure in modern times.

The funeral was an occasion for hundreds of foreign journalists to write about Japan. Through their newspapers and television, people overseas were introduced to many aspects of this country, ranging from its economic power to the highest consumer prices in the world. There were no cases of self-immolation by fanatical emperor-worshippers, and little interference in the funeral rites by terrorists. Most Japanese felt relieved that the funeral for the late emperor was carried out without unpleasant incident.

Emperor Showa has been criticized in various ways at home and abroad. I personally think that it would have been better for him and for Japan if he had abdicated at the time Japan lost the war in 1945. Yet as a human being, Emperor Showa possessed many qualities which appealed greatly to many Japanese—the love between him and the empress, his pure and serious personality, and his modest daily life.

It is said that this very human emperor was fond, somewhat surprisingly, of oily food. His favorites were broiled eels, beef steak and mackerel pike. He also liked sweet potato and taro. The story of his delight with the escargots he ate on his two visits to Paris is famous.

Escargots have become easier to eat in Tokyo these days as French restaurants continue to multiply. But few enjoy the popularity of Bistro Bonne Femme, an orthodox French restaurant whose offerings are basically traditional French dishes, and which is so popular that you should make reservations even for lunch if you don't want to be disappointed. Stepping inside on an average day, you will find French and American diners occupying about half of the 30 or so seats. The remaining tables are usually taken by groups of women. This itself attests to the restaurant's popularity.

Lunch is priced at ¥2,500, ¥3,500 and ¥5,000. It comes with dessert and coffee, and the portions are ample. In the evening, there are set dinners at ¥6,000, ¥7,500 and ¥9,000 as well as à la carte selection. Among the à la carte dishes you might want to sample the *salade tiède de pigeonneau sauce acide et douce* for ¥2,600; *aiguillette de saumon et barbue marinés* "blinis à la mousse caviar" for ¥2,800; *filet de bar au basilic ou au vin rouge* for ¥2,800; *saumon mi-cuit au céleri-roue* for ¥2,700; *noisette d'agneau en croûte de sel* for ¥3,400; and *aiguillette de canard au St. Hubert*

ou à la purée d'olive for ¥3,700. House recommended wines are the Chablis 1986 for ¥7,000; Puligny Montrachet 1983 for ¥12,000; Muscadet 1987 for ¥5,300; and Château Lagrange 1983 for ¥10,000.

With Bistro Bonne Femme now entering its sixth year, chef Totoki and manager Minami have not lost their enthusiasm for making their restaurant one which their patrons will enjoy.

(Yoshimichi Hori, editor-in-chief)

Address:

Tameike Suzuki Bldg. 1st Floor
3-13, Akasaka 1-chome, Minato-ku
Tel: (03) 582-0200

Business hours:

Lunch 11:30 a.m.—2:30 p.m.

Dinner 5:30 p.m.—9:30 p.m.

Reservations necessary.

Closed on Sundays.

