Into the rising sun

Japan remains an obscure sailing ground, despite being a highly developed country. **Nick** and **Jenny Coghlan** enjoyed a surreal cruise

Everybody had warned us that the Japanese love paperwork. So as Bosun Bird, our Vancouver 27, worked her way northwards through the islands of the western Pacific, every so often we'd crank up the Iridium satphone to find out what we needed to do before entering the country. By the time we reached Guam, the American territory and military base that was to be our jumping-off point for the 1,400-mile crossing to Kyushu, we were getting desperate. We finally got hold of a seemingly helpful young lady: *"You are very welcome. Please send now fax with exact arrival time and place. Thank you." "OK. Can we send an email instead?"* (Repeat this exchange several times, until the lady quietly hangs up.)

Finding a fax these days is challenging; the Guam Mission to Seamen finally located a dust-covered machine in their junk cupboard. It was with nostalgia and amazement that we plugged it in, and there was that long-forgotten whirring and beeping. With a mental shrug – who can estimate an arrival time after a crossing of 1,400 miles? – we sent a message and put to sea.

Next day, on the horizon to starboard we had the low flat outline of Tinian: from here the Enola Gay, an American B-29, took off before dawn on August 6 1945, to drop the first atomic bomb. Idly, I wondered if it was going to be possible to talk to Japanese about the war.

It soon turned into a rough passage. But most worrying was the shipping. We'd installed an AIS receiver in New Zealand, anticipating heavy traffic in these waters. It was difficult as we closed on Kyushu not to feel panic as the tiny screen of our chart-plotter showed up to 40 targets at a time. But at last, after a nervous night dodging small fishing boats with unfamiliar light arrays (and none of them with VHF) we motored into the calm waters of the great bay of Kagoshima-wan.

> 'Phil shrugged with a smile: "That's Japan for you. Just strangers making you welcome"'

Unknown territory

An unfamiliar scent of spruce wafted towards us. A high-speed hydrofoil buzzed past at 35 knots; a propeller plane with that famous red-sun symbol flew low to take a look at us. And at the head of the bay, Sakajima volcano was having one of its frequent bouts of activity.

We zigzagged in to the port through a maze of concrete breakwaters. Out of the corner of my eye I saw fifteen or so men, mostly in uniform, standing sharply to attention on one pier. One of them saluted. We paid no further attention, occupying ourselves instead with a newly learned tie-up routine (nose-in, at right angles to the wall, secured on each quarter to buoys). Old friends Mel and Phil, on Mira, had beaten us by two or three days and welcomed us, babbling with their news; Mel had an ugly waffle-shaped scar on her thigh, from when they'd taken a knockdown and she'd fallen on the stove.

By sheer chance, and for perhaps the first and last time ever, Bosun Bird had arrived exactly when we said we would. Yes, we now realised, those men in the Toyota blazers, peaked caps and white gloves were our reception committee. Two-by-two they clambered down, each pair presenting us with the same long and baffling 'General Declaration.' The final couple politely gestured that we should land, and ushered us into their car. We had no idea what was going on. More arcane paperwork at their office, smiles, then they drove us back. In the cockpit we found a case of Kirin beer, a large watermelon and two packages of sushi. Phil shrugged with a smile:

"That's Japan for you. Just strangers making you welcome."

Cruising Japan has its challenges. For one, the bureaucracy never gives up. For every single destination other than four or five designated Open ports, you must have specific entry permission. Early on, we learned that it is wise to request permits for every conceivable stop. But the officials are charming.

As we waited patiently in Hiroshima one morning for our next list of authorised ports to be typed up, the woman in charge of the office pulled some coloured squares of →

NICK AND JENNY'S BOAT

BOSUN BIRD
Vancouver 27

LOA: 26ft 9in

LWL: 22ft 9in

Beam: 8ft 5in

Draught: 4ft 2in

NICK AND JENNY COGHLAN; ALAMY

ABOVE
Exploring on Japan's coastal walks

ABOVE RIGHT
Ishii-san, at the wheel of Skal, takes us on a tour of his home waters, Osaka Bay

THIS PICTURE
Mount Fuji is the dramatic backdrop to many moorings

THIS PICTURE
Buddhist temple, Kii Peninsula, Japan

RIGHT
A quiet overnight stop on an island in the Inland Sea

FAR RIGHT
There were translation issues on both sides

THIS PICTURE
Itsukushima shrine, Hiroshima Bay

LEFT
Traditional dancer at Shimoda (Tokyo Bay)

paper from under the counter. She patiently instructed us on how to fold them so as to make origami cranes.

Sailing inshore waters in summer is generally tranquil, the winds light and variable: you may need to use your engine a lot. We did need to keep an eye open for warnings of typhoons (the North Pacific equivalent of hurricanes/cyclones), but the two to three days' notice that we always had, coupled with the large number of typhoon-proof artificial harbours, meant that this was not a major concern.

In many areas, there are strong tides and currents to compete with, too. Kanmon Kaikyo, the strait between the great islands of Kyushu and Honshu, runs at up to 11 knots: large illuminated boards at either entrance indicate the current speed, direction and tendency (rising/falling) in real time. There are few natural anchorages anywhere: fishing harbours take up every imaginable nook, and tying up to vertical and barnacle-encrusted walls when the tidal range is 15ft is challenging. We learned wherever possible to search out floating pontoons, feigning linguistic ignorance when some official would appear and make the universal hands-crossed 'not permitted' gesture.

Gaijin gaffe

Then there are those infamous cultural challenges. Every Gaijin (foreigner) who travels to Japan has his or her gaffe to recount, and we were no exception. Having been shown by a friend all the rituals that must be scrupulously observed in Japanese public baths, we ventured for the first time on our own. The captain was luxuriating, naked and alone in neck-high hot water, with a magnificent view over the South China Sea, when there was a rustle. The paper sliding door to the men's section slid open. There stood a naked woman, with her hand to her mouth in a silent "Oh!"

I thought, "Silly her, wrong side," and dozed off again. Ten minutes later in came a most apologetic bath attendant: "So sorry, captain-san, wrong side!" How could this be? Well, in the spirit of gender equality, each day the men's and women's sides were reversed, so everyone could have a turn with the view.

ABOVE
The 1,400-mile crossing to Japan, starting in American territory, Guam

But the bucolic islands of the fabled Inland Sea, possibly the only place where old Japan lives on, were unforgettable. Tiny villages are built round harbours, their narrow streets lined with centuries-old wooden houses, many of them closed up as the young people have all gone to the cities. On one such island, a Buddhist monk introduced himself to us on the pontoon, in flawless English. He was the designated yacht-greeter; he'd worked in Silicon Valley. Would we like to come and see his temple?

He took us out to lunch, and then we climbed the hill in sultry summer heat, insects buzzing. After we had had green tea on the floor in his spotless, spartan wooden home, he took us into the woods. A small granite marker had a haiku inscribed on it. It was 1,000 years old, and referred to this very spot, to the heat, the cicadas and the rustling of the stream at our feet.

> 'A Buddhist monk introduced himself to us on the pontoon, in flawless English'

Travelling by sailing boat gave us a kind of club membership, an entrée to Japanese society that many visitors otherwise find elusive. Michan, who liked to crew for racers at Kagoshima, became a friend and interpreter, puzzling with us over her own culture and checking with her pocket translator as she took us from temple to shrine; at our farewell, she had Jenny try on her grandmother's kimono. Ishii-san, whom we met over endless toasts of sake and shochu on his boat Skal, at Hirado, phoned the manager of his distant marina at 0100 that night, to arrange winter berthing for us.

Nearly all the Japanese cruisers seemed to be middle-aged men singlehanding, who didn't know how to cook, so we were invited out constantly.

And the war? I hesitated. But one day a sailing friend we made in Fukuoka, Nori-san, took us to a small museum at an airfield that had been used to launch kamikaze missions in 1945. Eventually he opened up.

"I was four. I can remember the B-29s coming over. My elder brother, he was 16. He ran away to become a pilot. It was the patriotic thing to do."

He paused for a long time. "Later we found out what had happened. All the records still exist. He was one of a flight of six. Three crashed before they reached Okinawa. He was shot down. I don't think I can ever forgive our leaders from that time. Only 16."

Japan turned out to be the most foreign, exotic yet hospitable place we have ever visited.

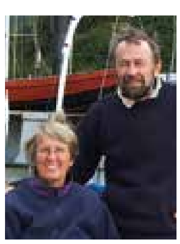
Fifteen months on from Kagoshima, we were waiting at Shimoda, at the entrance to Tokyo Bay, for a gap between typhoons before launching into our 3,500-mile crossing to Kodiak, Alaska.

A local schoolteacher had taken us under her wing. One day she took us to meet another friend, the abbess of the local monastery. We knelt uncomfortably as the abbess conducted the arcane tea ceremony and said a few formal words. Then the abbess looked at us, smiling and expectant.

"Nicholas-san, Jenny-san," said our teacher friend. "I brought you here because it is in this temple that the Shoguns would always come to be blessed before making the final sea crossing to Edo (Tokyo). The abbess has just wished you well, in the same way that her predecessors did, for hundreds of years."

The abbess bowed towards us and put her hands together. In hesitant, careful English, she said simply:

"Good wind."



ABOUT NICK AND JENNY COGHLAN
Nick and Jenny Coghlan are dedicated cruising sailors, based in Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, Canada. They have sailed far and wide, from Alaska to Easter Island

NICK AND JENNY COGHLAN; CALISTA PAXTON