



PHOTOS: TONY MCNICOL

Choshi: Sushi, Sea and Sembei

Japanese press tours, like most Japanese excursions, tend to be blessed with near-perfect organization and execution, so it was pretty surprising when our bus to the Chiba seaside didn't turn up. A flurry of snow in Tokyo the previous night had iced up the road. Yet, some quick thinking from our somewhat panicked young guide (I think the server of a cellphone navigation service somewhere must have melted) helped switch our journey to one by train.

The end of the line was Choshi, a small town on the eastern tip of Chiba, also the easternmost point of Honshu. Chiba Prefecture is keen to promote the area as a quick trip from nearby Narita, perhaps as a final excursion for overseas visitors before flying home. The Chiba coast also makes an excellent weekend escape from the metropolis. It is two and a half hours by bus from Tokyo Station, or an hour and 50 minutes on the Tokyo Sobu Line.

Our hotel was right by the Pacific Ocean, at a place called Cape Inubo (barking dog). As we looked out over the jagged coast and pitch-black sea that night, the foreboding moniker seemed apt enough. Dinner was a terrific spread, and was

preceded by a 10-minute run down all its culinary minutiae. Personally, though, I had some trouble listening to the cook's explanation. Most of my attention was taken by the *odori-awabi* (dancing abalone) squirming on a small candle burner. "Some of you may feel a little sorry for the abalone, but please watch anyway," said our host cheerfully.

Our course, the seafood (even the abalone), was fantastic. Nearby Choshi port had Japan's largest catch in 2006. Northern and southern currents meet at the Inubo promontory, bringing with them a huge variety of fish—over 300 kinds at last count. The sushi lunch at Choshi port is highly recommended. It doesn't get much fresher; the dock is just on the other side of the road!

Mid-winter is off-season for Choshi, but our hotel was pleasantly quiet and the rugged coast spectacular. One suspects that the area's isolation makes it a perfect spot for a novel's illicit winter getaway. Or, perhaps, a setting for a TV murder mystery? I half expected someone on our press tour to keel over the *miso* soup at breakfast.

A special service offered by the hotel is a "sunrise call" to get you up in time for Japan's earliest

By the time the Bubble burst, they had produced four fantastically incongruous Portuguese, Dutch, Swiss and Greek stations. Luckily, the other six stations are still close to their original condition.



daybreak. If you want, you can watch the sun rise over the sea from the warmth of the hotel's *rotenburo* outside hot spa. Mercifully, they let you snooze on if it is cloudy.

It was overcast at dawn, but when I wandered out with my camera around 8:00, the clouds had mostly cleared. The view over the sea was breathtaking. At the tip of the promontory is Inubo lighthouse, built in 1874 by Englishman Richard Henry Brunton. The Meiji Era (1868-1912) engineer is often known as the "father of Japanese lighthouses." On a clear day you can see Mt. Fuji from the peninsula. Twice a year, on the 15th of October and 28th of February, the sun will set directly behind the volcano.

Not far from the hotel is a viewing platform with the snappy name of "Seeing-the-Round-Earth Observatory." From here you can see an almost 360° horizon. Set into the floor of the platform is a map of the Japanese archipelago, with the Philippines to the south prominently marked, perhaps because the town of Choshi is twinned with Legaspi. I remembered meeting the Filipino wife of the hotel manager the day before, and I couldn't help imagining her or, perhaps, some of the Filipino entertainers the hotel employs gazing out over the frozen Pacific to a faraway home.

Inubo is one of the stations on the Choshi Dentetsu, a light railway line built in 1913 that runs

down the promontory. The train came relatively quickly to this area because of local soy sauce factories wanting to send their product to Tokyo by rail. It has also long transported seaside tourists.

There are just 10 stations along the line. In 1963 the railway was bought by a bus company, which promptly decided to shut it down. Only dogged opposition by employees and locals forced them to abandon their plans. Exasperated, no doubt, they sold the railway to a construction company. That was in 1989, at the height of the economic Bubble. The new owners decided to rebuild the stations in various international architectural styles. By the time the Bubble burst, they had produced four fantastically incongruous Portuguese, Dutch, Swiss and Greek stations. Luckily, the other six stations are still close to their original condition.

The line is also famous for its *nure-sembei*, a rice cracker dipped in soy sauce as it is being made, and slightly chewy, not crunchy. The railway runs a *sembei* factory and sells the crackers at train stations and Tokyo department stores. You can also take rice cracker-making lessons at Inubo Station if you phone ahead to reserve a place.

The railway has been a loss-making venture for most of its history, but in recent years has managed to make a modest profit out of the local tourist industry; Choshi is proving popular with train fans and nostalgic retirees. The *sembei* are also proving a hit. Believe it or not, two-thirds of the railway company's cash now comes from its rice crackers.

Hotel

Grand Hotel Isoya: www.grandhotel-isoya.co.jp/ (Japanese). Tel. 0479-24-1111

Sembei-making

To reserve a place for sembei-making lessons (in English), call Inubo Station at 0479-25-1106



Tony McNicol is a freelance writer based in Tokyo.

