

VISIONS OF

THREATENED WITH RADICAL REDEVELOPMENT, THE RARE EDO-PERIOD PORT TOWN OF TOMO-NO-URA HAS BEEN GRANTED A REPRIEVE. FOR JUST HOW LONG, NO ONE KNOWS.

VANISHING JAPAN

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For more than 1,000 years, Seto Naikai, Japan's great Inland Sea, has served as a vast commercial highway, linking the islands of Kyushu and Shikoku with southern Honshu. Its 440-km coastline is punctuated with beautiful bays, inlets, and promontories. Within the sea itself are more than 3,000 tiny islands, fewer than a third of which are inhabited—most mere volcanic islets that barely break the water's surface. It is a harmonious blend of land and sea that has long been celebrated in Japanese art.

Over the past century, however, Seto Naikai has undergone a dramatic transformation, from an inland waterway ringed by numerous small hamlets to a host of some of the nation's largest and most heavily industrialized cities such as Osaka, Kobe, and Hiroshima. With the emergence and expansion of these metropolises and the commercial infrastructure to support them, an age-old way of life has slowly faded from the landscape. Yet, if one looks closely, glimpses of old Japan can still be found in a few isolated fishing villages, among them Tomo-no-Ura, an Edo-Period (1603–1868) port town nestled in a small cove embraced by deep green mountains.

Sited on the tip of Honshu's Numakuma Peninsula, a mere 15 km from Fukuyama, Tomo was spared the industrialization that claimed so many villages in the wake of the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when Japan began its rapid march toward modernization. At that time, the island nation also began to enhance its land-based transportation with an ambitious network of railroads and highways that soon eclipsed Seto Naikai as western Japan's most important commercial thoroughfare. Tomo was also spared serious damage from natural disasters such as typhoons and earthquakes, which frequently rock Japan.

As a result, time has stood still in Tomo, which retains its narrow winding streets, closely spaced houses, and serene Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples that dot the verdant landscape between sea and summit. It also boasts a wealth of Edo-Period architecture few coastal towns can match. Just how long Tomo will be able to retain its distinctive character, however, remains uncertain. For the tiny port lies at the heart of a radical redevelopment scheme that will alter its waterfront beyond recognition.





Settled some 1,300 years ago, Tomo's sheltered inlet offered a safe haven for ships plying the inland waterway. In antiquity Tomo was known as shio machi no minato, or the "port of waiting for tides," being located where tides from east and west collide, cancelling each other in an effervescent sea of foam that has inspired many an artist, writer, and composer. A poem in the Manyōshū, or "Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves," the earliest-extant anthology of Japanese poetry, compiled ca. A.D. 760, includes a description of "the foamy waves of the Tomo Inlet, fishing boats, under full sail." In 1927, this same sea inspired composer Michio Miyagi (1894–1956) to pen one of the most revered works of traditional Japanese music, *Haru no Umi*, or *The Spring Sea*. Although blind, Miyagi captured the beauty and mood of the sea of Tomo inlet with a lively and poignant composition of the lapping of the waves and gentle sound of fishing boats moving through the water.

Tomo reached its apogee in the Edo Period when its harbor facilities were built. These included a stone beacon with a large lantern that functioned as a lighthouse, landing stairs that allowed for the secure mooring of boats at all stages of the tide, breakwaters, a careenage for cleaning and repairing boats, and a harbor watch-house. So busy was Tomo's port during this period that its shops remained open around the clock.

Today, Tomo's breakwaters and landing stairs are still in use, serving the dozens of fishing boats and small ships that enter the port each day. Tomo, home to some 7,000 people, retains its ancient townscape of elegant wooden houses, shops, and warehouses, broken only by a few "modern" or Western-style buildings, which stand awkwardly among the old ones. These are for the most part government offices, schools, or ungainly business hotels. In the late Edo Period, some of Tomo's older buildings were converted into prosperous breweries, which continue to make homeishu, an herbal sake said to ensure longevity, for which the town is famed.

As in many other old Japanese towns, much of Tomo's distinctiveness lies in the richness and beauty of its temples and shrines, of which there are a dozen. Many date back to the Heian and Kamakura periods (A.D. 794–1333), an age when Japanese arts and architecture flourished and Buddhism took root in Japan, the Inland Sea providing a route for its dissemination. Among these

TOMO-NO-URA AS IT APPEARED IN THE 1930S, BEFORE A NUMBER OF "MODERN" HOTELS AND GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS WERE ADDED TO ITS SKYLINE. IN 1983, PLANS WERE DRAWN UP TO RADICALLY ALTER ITS EDO-PERIOD WATERFRONT, FACING PAGE, TO MAKE WAY FOR A HIGHWAY AND PARKING FACILITIES. FOR THE MOMENT, THESE PLANS APPEAR TO BE ON HOLD.





are the Numakuma, a Heian Shinto shrine dedicated to the kami of the sea and navigation, with its old archery court and a stage for Noh plays; the loji, built ca. 826, among the earliest Buddhist temples in Japan; the Fukuzenji (ca. 950) sited on a tiny promontory overlooking Tomo, with its elegant wooden hall; Taichoro (1690), which opens onto a most exquisite blend of sea, islands, and mountains; and the Bingo Ankokuji (ca. 1270), one of the finest examples of the Kamakura architecture. Among the most beautiful is the Honsenji (ca. 1358), known for a black pine tree that until recently sheltered its grounds. Although it rotted away several years ago, the tree still appears with images of the temple in many Tomo brochures and travel books. However, what now remains is only its large trunk, which is being preserved carefully with a fence around it. It is a major attraction for visitors, perhaps evoking in them a feeling of longing for what has been lost.

In 1983, plans were drawn up to “modernize” Tomo’s waterfront with the construction of a bridge over its inlet that would support portions of a new highway, its landward side filled in to accommodate a suite of parking lots. The redevelopment was part of a broader state-sponsored movement to promote industry in rural areas of Japan to ease and, if possible, even reverse migration into the major cities.

Although Tomo and its environs, together with a large part of the Inland Sea, were designated as Japan’s first national park in 1934, there was no provision for any of the city’s historic buildings, leaving its waterfront fair game.

Initially, the Tomo project made slow progress, thwarted by budgetary constraints and strong public opposition. By the late 1990s, Japan, hoping to reinvigorate its economy, substantially increased its spending on public works, enabling projects that had been on hold to begin moving forward. Encouraged by this financial boost, the local government took steps to carry out the planned redevelopment, with no regard for the substantial changes that would occur in the environment. To counter public pressure, the government offered to reduce the planned land reclamation from 4.6 to 2 hectares. At the same time Tomo’s city center was also declared an historic district. The port area was not included in the landmark designation, leaving it at risk. In February of that year, the amended proposal passed the Hiroshima Prefecture Assembly, which has jurisdiction over Tomo.

While those living along the waterfront were alarmed by the proposed alteration to the landscape—some have persistently refused to leave, in spite of large offers of compensation—propo-



nents of the project have seen the redevelopment as a way of invigorating the economic life of the town, whose population is aging. By making it more automobile-friendly, they hope to attract more visitors to Tomo and at the same time reduce traffic congestion. Alluding to the environmental consequences, they argue that the project should be seen as a part of the “natural growth” of a town that has gone through many changes during its history. Therefore, they assert, one should not intervene, but “let history take its course.”

Until recently, it seemed that little could be done to stop the project. That was until a group of concerned citizens and preservationists came together and formed Umi-no-ko, or Children of the Sea, a local NGO spearheaded by Hideko Matsui. Working with urban planning faculty at Nihon, Tokyo, and Hiroshima universities, Matsui was able to marshal a cadre of students to carry out a series of studies to assess the impact of the development and any alternatives to it. In addition, several historic preservation symposia were held to highlight Tomo's plight.

In light of the impending redevelopment, Tomo was also nominated to, and ultimately included on, WMF's 2002 list of 100 Most Endangered Sites. In the wake of the listing, a site visit and press conference held in May 2002 put the town in both the national and international spotlight and attracted some 45 academic institutions and preservation organizations to take up Tomo's cause.

Although this opposition has temporarily blocked the bridge project, it has not eliminated it, and the threat to this traditional Japanese port city remains. This past May, WMF awarded Tomo a \$100,000 grant through American Express to carry out the restoration of Uoya-Manzo, an Edo-Period merchant's house, which will serve as a proving ground for future preservation projects in the ancient port, should it survive.

It might appear paradoxical that such changes have been proposed in a culture long admired for its ancient tradition of reverence for nature and its refined esthetic sensibilities. Yet

A STONE BEACON TOPPED WITH A LANTERN, ABOVE, STILL GREETES SHIPS ENTERING TOMO'S HARBOR. TO THIS DAY, TOMO HAS RETAINED ITS TOWNSCAPE OF NARROW WINDING LANES AND CLOSELY SPACED HOUSES, ALBEIT WITH THE ADDITION OF MODERN CONVENIENCES SUCH AS TELEPHONES AND ELECTRICITY.





RESTORING A MERCHANT'S HOUSE

Among the derelict, but historically significant buildings within Tomo-no-Ura's ancient harbor district is the late Edo-Period Uoya-Manzo, or "Old Merchant's House." Built ca. 1850, the house was the site of the first shipwreck negotiation settled within the confines of newly adopted Japanese Maritime Law in 1867. During the Late Edo and Meiji Periods, the building served as a travelers' inn and tableware shop; more recently it was a kimono emporium.

In 2003, the building's last owner sold it to a local preservation group, Tomo Machizukuri Kobo (Tomo Community Studio), which has since embarked on the restoration and adaptive reuse of the house as a visitor's center, museum, and guesthouse. Plans call for a faithful restoration of the building by local artisans using traditional materials and techniques. Edo-Period elements obscured by later additions such as a modern façade on the house's western side will be removed.

Completion of the restoration, which has been underwritten in part by a WMF grant from American Express and which will serve as a model for future work in the port town, is slated for January 2005. Tomo-no-Ura was included on WMF's 2002 and 2004 lists of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. The Edo-Period fishing village remains at risk until radical redevelopment plans for its waterfront are shelved forever. ■

A MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY MERCHANT'S HOUSE AS IT LOOKS TODAY, ABOVE, AND A MODEL OF HOW IT IS TO LOOK FOLLOWING THE RESTORATION OF ITS EDO-PERIOD FAÇADE, BELOW. INTERIOR SPACES WILL BE RESTORED BY LOCAL ARTISANS USING TRADITIONAL MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES.



almost all natural landscapes, or even what one may consider untouched wildernesses, bear a human imprint. Tomo's present landscapes too are a product of the interplay between geological forces and human activity. The land embracing the inlet, for instance, once consisted of several small islets before they were joined together to produce the current landmass. Similarly, the present shoreline has only a short history. This interaction between nature and culture is a dynamic process, and illustrates that present natural landscapes were the result of earlier interventions. But this does not justify that we should approve uncritically every intervention, such as the current one in Tomo. On the contrary, this means taking on more responsibility for conserving wisely, especially since technology has become so powerful, enabling us not to only alter the physical environment but to eradicate it completely.

The promoters' promise for economic growth and technological modernity is short-sighted. The expected economic returns are likely to be trivial. Tomo may not draw many visitors if parking lots, tall concrete buildings, and a steel bridge cutting through its horizon overwhelm it. But, if carefully preserved, it could become an even greater treasure. Considering its location in a region that has already lost too much to heedless industrialization, Tomo's preservation as an oasis of natural beauty and history becomes an even more urgent issue. For the moment, the project appears to be on hold. We can only hope that attention will be paid to the long-term preservation of physical landscapes that embody the natural beauty and history with which Japan has been so blessed. ■