

## LEISURE/TRAVEL

## Famed hideaway beats heat

By PATRICK JOHNSTON

The epic battle between the Heike and the Genji 800 years ago has inspired countless works of art, literature and drama in Japan. It has likely inspired an equal number of tourist resorts. And why not? It was probably the single most exciting event in ancient Japanese history and a good excuse to try and draw in sightseeing crowds.

Yunishigawa, a tiny spa town nestled in the northern Tochigi mountains, has its place in the Heike/Genji story. Heike fugitives put the village on the map when seeking refuge in the region after their defeat by Genji forces, living in relative isolation there for centuries afterward. Remnants of the Heike remain to this day. Fortunately for Yunishigawa, the town has a lot more to offer than dying memories of a clan that was virtually wiped out by its enemy.

Yunishigawa sits about 30 minutes into the mountains from the spa town of Kinugawa. It's a pretty hair-raising 30 minutes as the road climbs quickly, twisting and turning up into what is essentially a completely different climate. In winter, while the Northern Kanto plains may have barely a trace of snow Yunishigawa will have 2 meters; spring comes at least a month later than in the valley.

It was the wild climate and isolation that first brought the Heike to Yunishigawa. With just about all of Japan on their trail they needed a place where no one would bother to look for them — Yunishigawa fit the bill perfectly.

Not surprisingly, some of the Heike's biggest legacies in Yunishigawa are the things they did to make sure no one would find them. Mindful of roaming spies, early inhabitants did not allow the raising of roosters (too noisy) — a tradition that lasts to this day.

For similar reasons, even now, they do not fly carp flags during the Children's Day holiday at the beginning of May. The Bankyu hotel, the oldest inn in town, was reputedly built by descendants of the Heike. Worried about informants recognizing their Heike heritage they changed their name from the Chinese character for Taira (another name used by the Heike clan) to a similar looking "Ban."

The legacy reflects survival, not grandeur, and nothing stands in the town that really shows the greatness of the once-proud clan. A cordoned off Heike grave had a few barely noticeable tombstones (I counted one, although my guide said there were three). Heike no Sato (Heike village) tries to recreate the spirit of the early inhabitants but, as the buildings are only seven years old they hardly represent much of a legacy.

Even the Heike cuisine shows the stricken nature of the clan. When the first Heike arrived in Yunishigawa the men were so unhappy at the thought of having to live so far from the splendor of Kyoto that the ladies of the group went into the forest, gathered whatever food they could and prepared, for lack of a better word, a feast. This included some great forest specialties like lizard, mountain roots, and bear.

Actually these days Heike Ochiudo Ryori (cooking of the Heike exiles), when served over an open pit and with all the frills of a Japanese inn, is one of Yunishigawa's finer pleasures.

A pleasure comparable almost to the baths. Like many mountain towns in Japan Yunishigawa has its share of hot springs. In a town of less than a thousand people there are dozens of registered-hot-spring baths, many of them with rotenburo that look out

onto a wild and dramatic hillside.

In the summertime the temperature rarely gets as high as 27 or 28 degrees and the night are cool, making the baths comfortable even at the height of the season. Yunishigawa also has a number of parks and wilderness areas for those wishing to get in a bit of nature while escaping the sweltering Kanto plains. During winter rotenburo enthusiasts can indulge themselves in the dry, silky snow that falls regularly on the area.

As for the Heike 800 years ago, Yunishigawa's biggest asset today is its escape appeal. High in the mountains, surrounded by steep woody hillsides, it is as far away from the bustling humidity of the big city as any place.

Progress, however, has been catching up with Yunishigawa. Thirty years ago hard surface roads and electricity did not service the town. In the next 10 years the town plans to build a dam just below the city, the purpose ultimately to sell water to Tokyo and Yokohama. Con-



YUNISHIGAWA, AN ANCIENT hiding place for the Heike clan nowadays provides a peaceful mountain hideaway for weary travelers. Cooler than the Kanto plains, rotenburo can be enjoyed in summer, too. PHOTO BY PATRICK JOHNSTON

struction will lead to the submerging of the present road, more water for the big cities and new development in the

form of hotels and tennis courts for Yunishigawa.

Escapists had better act quickly.

## Lawn-bowling revived French pastime

By PETER MIKELBANK  
The Washington Post

MARSEILLE, France — To understand the contradictions of the French, you must first watch them in their public gardens, or better, going off into the country to play with their children each summer.

Come rain, drought or raging brushfire, it is pétanque they play, which despite possessing all the thrill and physical challenge of big-time checkers has doubled its popularity in a decade.

Alternatively called boules, it is a peculiarly French-natured game played beneath shading plane trees, a no-frills, low-tech, determinedly snail-paced game played out before village church and cafe, beside the road, anywhere, really, where there is a small and level patch of grass. It goes on dawn to dusk, but only in France.

More than just a sport of dust and grudges where players loft a cast-iron ball against their opponents' balls, it is a sedentary sport allowing, condoning — hell, encouraging — chain-smoking and heavy drinking

during play.

It is a sport whose demonstrated appeal cuts across all other distinctions: It is played by Monsieur le Président de la République, and it is played by the local butcher. It is played by the village baker and the Mafia hit man.

Marseille has 3,000 clubs, according to Henri Bernard, president of the national pétanque association, and more than 80,000 licensed woman players. Pétanque, says Bernard, appeals to the French "because it doesn't require much equipment, it's cheap and you don't need to be in any great physical shape to play. It's a game where a woman can beat a man and a player in his 80s can beat an 18-year-old."

Credit pétanque with Liberté because it's so inexpensive, everyone is free to play. No courts, lessons or prohibitively expensive equipment. Credit it with Fraternité because, according to the Fédération Française de Pétanque et Jeu Provençal, 584,000 voluntarily purchase permits to compete within its organized leagues (and

haps as many as 17 million play occasionally.)

Credit it with Égalité as well because, grandfather to granddaughter, all play with balls of the same weight.

Boules (meaning "balls") first rolled over the Alps from the Italian game of bocce late in the last century. The French, however, deciding to play with smaller, heavier cast-iron balls, created Jeu Provençal around 1870, and its more urbanized version, pétanque, took impassioned root here around Marseille's portside cafes in 1910.

It is a particularly working-class sport, played by two teams of two, three or four players. Dragging a heel in the dust, players scratch out a start line, toss a small target ball (the *cochonnet*, or "cute li'l pig") approximately 15 feet away and then begin arguing.

As in lawn bowling, the object of pétanque (meaning "with feet together") is to group your three balls as close as possible to the target ball, with an extra point given for slamming an opponent's

Matches can last minute or hours, depending on how often players break to measure distances with home made rulers, argue local politics or simply adjourn for a round of pastis, a cloudy, anise-flavored liquor. Drunk by adults and children alike, it is as much a part of pétanque as the ground over which the ball rolls.

Until French law banned alcohol and tobacco firms from direct sports sponsorship in 1985, Marseille-based Pernod Richard promoted the sport heavily for 50 years, organizing village tournaments and clubs and cosponsoring (with Marseille's Communist daily) an annual four-day national tournament attracting 6,000 players and more than 100,000 spectators.

In its last year of full sponsorship, says company president Jean-Marie Laborde Pernod-Richard spent \$2 million promoting amateur pétanque.

These days much of Pernod-Richard's sponsorship has been assumed by American soft-drink manufacturer