



Bang!

It's now August, and August in Japan means fireworks!

Pretty much every region of this country plays host to a fireworks display sometime each summer, and my own home of Ome City is no exception; our show took place last night. We have had nothing but sullen skies, sudden thunderstorms, and torrential downpours for weeks on end now, but the weather gods cooperated perfectly yesterday, bringing clear skies, with a light breeze just strong enough to keep us cool (and not incidentally, strong enough to clear the smoke from the explosions, keeping everything beautifully clear for the viewers.)

Most fireworks festivals are held in river-side parks, but ours takes place in a park located part-way up the hills that surround our city. This makes it visible from pretty much anywhere in town, and even people like me - who live far across the river on the opposite hillside, can see the whole thing clearly. I watched part of it from an upstairs window, part from a neighbouring parking lot, and the rest while strolling through the back streets near my home, catching glimpses of the colourful explosions between the houses here and there.

I have mixed feelings about the typical Japanese fireworks display. I think most Westerners looking at Japan from afar would think of Japanese culture as being fairly 'refined' and 'delicate'. Japanese cuisine is perhaps the best example of this viewpoint - small portions, presented with exquisite detail. You don't stuff your face at a Japanese banquet!

But at a Japanese fireworks festival, you get stuffed, and stuffed, and then when you just can't 'eat' any more, you get stuffed again!

Our show went on for about 90 minutes, and I can't count the number of times I said to myself, "Ah, that must have been the Grande Finale; you can't possibly top that!" But after a pause of a minute or so - to reload? - another Star Mine shot up into the air, and yet another extended scene began. Honestly speaking, I find it all a bit too much, and that is why I took a stroll during the show last night; I can't possibly just sit there and watch the whole thing in one go.

As dramatic as this show was though, the fireworks displays we see these days are somewhat muted in comparison to what was common back in what is now described as the 'Bubble Time' - the era in the mid 80s when Japan was a global financial powerhouse, and money was 'easy' and everywhere. A typical Japanese fireworks display is sponsored by each local Chamber of Commerce, and during the course of each show, an announcer informs the crowd that "The next set piece is brought to you by the 'Tanaka Construction Conglomerate' ...", or whatever company paid for it. Companies of course competed with each other to provide the most expensive and flashy displays, and when companies were 'rich' back then, it resulted in displays of staggering length and complexity.

My first experiences of Japanese fireworks festivals was in the countryside where my children's grand-father lived, and we were located right between two major local cities - Shingu and Kumano. These two competed vigorously with each other to provide the most spectacular show possible, and some of the pyrotechnics

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were beyond belief. The highlight of each Shingu show was the 'Niagara'. A long cable had been stretched high in the air across a wide river bed, with explosives tied to it at intervals, and at the appropriate moment, this was ignited from one end. As the impulse travelled along the length of the cable, each unit began to drop a stream of sparks, and for a few very long minutes, we saw before us a stunning cascade of fire streaming down from the invisible cable, looking indeed exactly like a Niagara of fire.

The folks over in Kumano City, a few kilometers up the coast, had their own tricks. Their festival took place on the beach, right next to a place where there were many caves which had been formed by sea erosion. Gigantic fireworks were placed in these caves, and the jets of fire - and staggering 'booms' - which resulted when these were set off made an indelible experience. I can still remember the feel of the earth shaking beneath us as they went off. And they had one more special feature to close out their show. Most of the fireworks at Kumano were launched from barges anchored well off the beach, but when we saw a small craft coming into view - very close to the shoreline - we knew the climax had arrived. Men on board prepared each Star Mine and then tossed it overboard behind the boat, where a few seconds later it went off underwater, sending a gigantic half-dome explosion up where we could see it. And it was so close to us that the beach received a rain of torn bits of paper and wadding, and whatever else had been inside. It was terrifying, and absolutely spectacular!

Welcome to Japan - home of delicacy and refinement!

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