

# The Shame of Morinomiya

¥15,000 is not a bad deal for a three-day stay in the centre of Osaka, a location nudging the castle and barely a stone's throw from the New Otani where money speaks every inch of the way and where aspiring yuppies and *courtiere*-clad clientele sip Darjeeling tea and partake of tiffin in the glittering lobby. With such favourable terms however, there are bound to be snags. Unfortunately, the accommodation is in the second basement down several flights of steps with no lift. They are mean about the lighting, in fact the lights are only switched on for passing visitors. Naturally it's draughty, damp and cold, especially freezing in winter as there's no heating. Sorry too, there are no beds or even blankets and food is provided irregularly or not at all. Surprisingly the place is packed which means there's not much room to sit down. The major drawback is that once you enter they won't let you leave again. Oh, I forgot to mention they are a bit picky about customers: you have to be homeless, sick, injured, abused, thrown away, unwanted and stray – and only dogs qualify.

I had heard about Morinomiya. I had seen pictures of the place and its inmates. But nothing had quite prepared me for the actual horror scene I witnessed. Indeed Morinomiya, Osaka Prefecture's (not city) *hokensho* is dubbed the Auschwitz of Osaka and indeed it is. Ironically my visit was sandwiched between the Flower Expo, where billions of yen have been lavished for a six-month flower extravaganza, and picking up a parcel at the New Otani. The contrast couldn't have been more marked. Osaka Prefecture spends ¥300,000,000 a year of taxpayer's money to kill around 20,000 dogs (puppies don't count in these statistics) which averages ¥15,000 per dog. It's not its fault it has to carry out this grisly

task; the blame lies squarely on the shoulders of irresponsible people who abandon, give up or fail to spay the dogs in their care. The Prefecture merely performs a mopping-up operation, as it does with other rubbish, to keep the place tidy and fit for 'humans' to live. But the way it does this should be condemned. Morinomiya is a disgrace to the Prefecture and no amount of window-dressing like the Flower Expo can hide this black spot.

Let me add before some rise to accuse me of Japan-bashing that not all hokensho are this low. Indeed Nagoya has a very modern facility where the public are free to visit, where animals are offered for re-homing and where people are given advice on how to care properly for pets as well as plenty of PR. Morinomiya is out of bounds to the public and the only pretext for entry is to say you've lost your dog (as I did). Unless you can prove ownership, no animal is released however hard you plead or offer to give it a good home.

For those uninitiated with the hokensho practices, let me explain. Each *ku* has a hokensho which is responsible for public health and hygiene. If someone finds or sees a stray dog(s) they notify the hokensho which is morally bound to go out and catch it (them). Theoretically, any dog wandering unattended or unleashed is illegal, as it should be registered and tied by law. (Hence the number of stress-ridden, miserable, barking dogs one sees chained everywhere). When people give up keeping their dog (the reasons are often petty or plain mean) they can take them to the hokensho. Likewise puppies/ cats/ kittens which they can't get rid of. If you creep round the back of any *ku* office you can see the cages used for trapping dogs and steel-shuttered concrete cage where people put unwanted 'pets'. The animals are then transported to the central hokensho where they are held a mandatory three days (in case the distraught owner appears) and are then killed. At Morinomiya the gas chamber lies comfortingly beside the inmates. Clubbing dogs to death used to be practised (in Wakayama until last year), but it's apparently

hard to find 'skilled' operators any more – gas is more modern. Euthanising individual animals by painless injection is considered too troublesome and costly. Dogs which have bitten someone are held a miserable two further weeks in case they develop rabies. Japan has had no case of rabies for the past 33 years!

The people who carry out this daily slaughter must be pretty tormented too. How can a child answer his classmate's question "What does your daddy do for a living?" with "He kills dogs"? The vet (there are supposedly three on duty) who guided me down to the bowels of the basement was courteous, seemingly untouched by witnessing this routine misery. My first impression was of total silence, even after the light had been switched on. A place which housed over 50 dogs would normally be alive with barking, whining, tail-wagging if a stranger walked in. This place had a deathly silence. The dogs (the spirit gone from them) were sitting, standing, lying immobile, shivering, trembling, many facing the wall, and scarcely a head turned to look at me. Only their eyes betrayed any emotion – pools of fear, total despair. These animals had already given up any hope of life. All were sopping wet – the floor is hosed down daily, the vet explained. Soggy dog biscuits mixed with excrement lay untouched. Not even a starving dog would eat in these circumstances. Around their necks were the tight wire nooses that had dragged them from their freedom – some tied to the car bars ("to stop them killing each other"). One dog, racked by pain, lay close to death – the three day law won't bend to put it out of its misery. A pile of puppies in a box, some dying embryos, lay huddled seeking meagre warmth from each other. How many? I couldn't count. One or two of the dogs gave flickering signs of life as I tried to comfort them through the bars – a sad Tosa going blind, toy dogs once pampered but now hairless with skin disease. Couldn't I carry home one or two? I knew it was futile to ask, futile to save some and leave the others. We retraced our steps upstairs to the office. On the notice board was chalked '10 dogs, Osaka Prefectural

Hospital’ – destined for days (weeks?) of torture by elitist doctors in the name of medical progress – ‘the quiet ones’ the vet said. It was hard to come out into the sunshine with the cherries in full bloom and see the well-dressed, well-heeled people strolling along, enjoying life, while beneath their feet such hell existed. I’m still haunted by those eyes.

As things stand now, the image of the hokensho is rock-bottom with the public; the people that work in that particular section are despised for the job they do and the animals suffer accordingly. Little effort is made to get to the root of the problem, namely people’s irresponsibility. Much of the money used for destroying animals could be put to better use in educating the public and in subsidising spaying. Fewer dogs and cats mean people are inclined to take better care of them and the hokensho would have less to deal with. Osaka Prefecture is now considering re-locating its hokensho; yet to be decided is where and what facilities it should include. This would be an excellent opportunity to wipe the slate clean and to make its hokensho a model for the rest of Japan. A park (Tsurumi perhaps), where people can get information and advice on how to care for pets and where animals are offered for re-homing. If the people working for the hokensho had pride in the place they worked and their job, there would be a greater chance the animals would receive more humane treatment.

Anyone wishing to visit Morinomiya to see things for themselves can contact me % K.T.O. – but it is not a place for the fainthearted.

*Elizabeth Oliver*