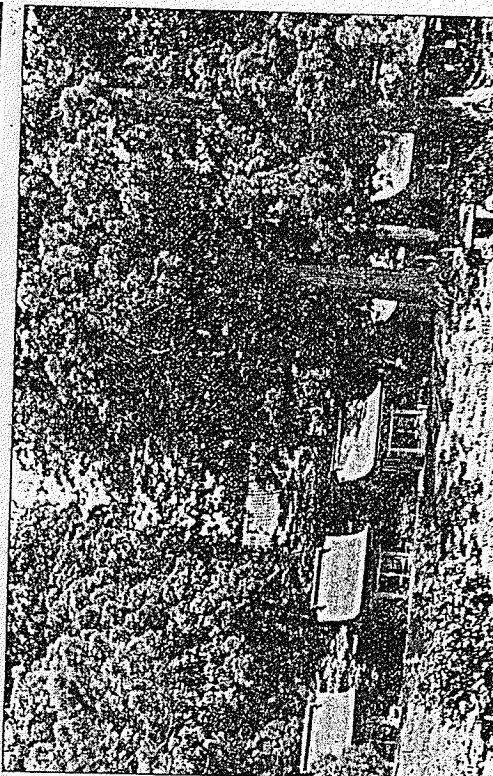


TRAVEL



A buddha and his gardeners are on display, left, in a shrine in Yamagata Prefecture. Small shrines, right, line the edge of Dewa Shrine along Haguro Mountain.



KAREN CUBIE

Welcome to the Land of the Ancient Shrines

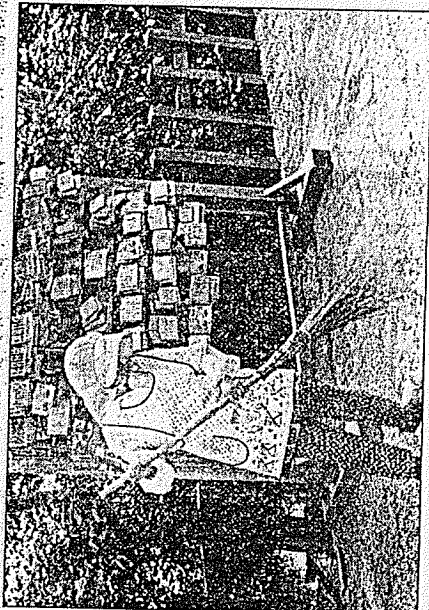
Real Japan lies north of Tokyo



View from Japan
KAREN CUBIE

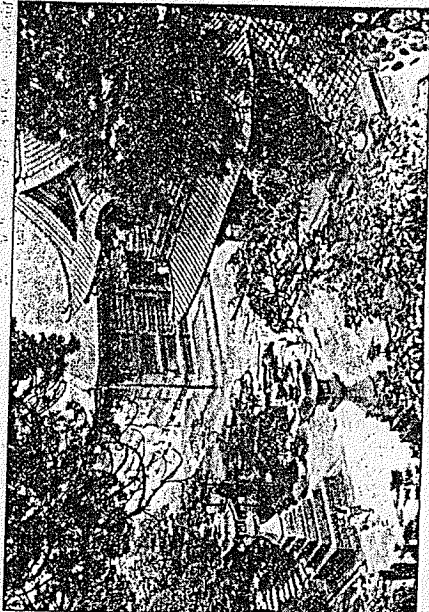
CHIBASHI, Japan — "A long time ago the ruler of this area had a beautiful daughter named Hagihime, Saitosan, my traveling companion, whispered to me as I peered through the mountain mist at a Japan I thought had disappeared long ago. It was the first day of my three-day tour of Tohoku's Yamagata Prefecture, and we girls return to that river, and offer (its water) to the deity," Saitosan said. □ I peered through the mountain mist at a Japan I thought had disappeared long ago. It was the first day of my three-day tour of Tohoku's Yamagata Prefecture, and we girls return to that river, and offer (its water) to the deity," Saitosan said. □

"He loved her very much," Saitosan continued, "but she fell ill, and although he did his best to care for her, no one could cure her. One of her maids began praying to a deity that her mistress would be cured, and one night, the deity appeared to her in a dream. "Go to the River," the deity told her." Saitosan pointed to the water rushing down the hillside along the road. "Get some water, and give it to Hagihime to drink." A miracle happened, and Hagihime was cured. Every year, during the Hagihime festival in August, two or three young



A gardener, left, sweeps outside a rack of prayer cards at the Dewa Shrine in Haguro Mountain in Japan. Visitors, right, stroll past the Zenpo Shrine.

had driven hundreds of miles north of the hustle and bustle of Tokyo to reach this area where the mystery and simplicity of ancient Japan can still be found. The bus ride had stopped at several dingy lake-side resorts before we reached Yamagata, and I was beginning to fear



step climb to an ancient shrine. Stone pillars topped with small piles of rocks reaching toward Niwano lined the muddy steps. Narrow paths wandered away from the main trail led to obscure shrines. Finally, we came to a cleared area on an

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word. After a lunch of raw tuna, ayu (fish), and rice, we visited the Dewa Shrine on Haguro Mountain, one of three mountains worshiped by believers in mountain deities. The nearby Yudono and Yamanaka mountains also have shrines. Mountain deities are supposed to live in mountains, Saitosan told me. "Believers who worship these mountains can also become deities if they go through certain training."

Believers must periodically climb mountains, bathe beneath mountain falls in water, and starve themselves for periods of time. "Finally, after many years of training, they can attempt miracles," Saitosan continued.

Believers can try to cure others, but they must wait for a drought. When a be-

liever performs a successful miracle, he is considered a deity." On the last morning of the tour, we were greeted by another spectacular mountain view at the Dainichibu Shrine when we climbed off the bus to view a 200-year-old mummy.

"A 19-year-old Buddhist monk decided he wanted to someday become a mummy," Saitosan whispered, translating the shrine priest's speech. "After training for many years, at the age of 70 he began to perform the steps for mummification."

For six years, he fasted from all crops. For another six years, he fasted from all noodles or soba (buckwheat noodles). He alternated between those fasts until he was in his 90s. Finally, when he began to also refuse water, he started to die.

"Then he had himself buried alive," Saitosan told me as we passed by a child's idol draped in children's clothing and bibs, and hidden beneath a pile of worn and dingy dolls.

After three years, his body was dug up, washed, dressed, and stuck in a glass display case for all pilgrims to view.

I looked at the withered body, propped up Indian-style inside its display case, and it stared back at me. A sign near the case declared, in Japanese: "Christians, Keep Out!"

"How could anyone make becoming a mummy the purpose of his life?" I asked Saitosan as we left the temple.

"I guess it's a symbol of patience to the Japanese," she answered.

As we climbed into the bus, I realized

that during the whole trip, I had not seen a single other foreigner. Unlike most of the Japanese tourist spots I'd visited in the Tokyo area, there had not been a single English sign.

When we arrived in Tokyo 14 hours later, I was relieved to stretch my legs and escape the oppressive odor of dried squid filling the bus. But as I looked around the terminal at the enormous western-style office buildings, I wondered what they had replaced so long ago, and if today's international city had ever been as beautiful and simple as Tohoku.

Karen Cubie is spending a year in Japan teaching English. She grew up in Kingston and graduated from Silver Lake Regional High School. Her next article will explore the changing face of Japanese society.