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Retracing My Father's Footsteps in Japan

And I feel some of the sadness he must have felt

By Kat Avila | Web Published 6.30.2003

"It is well the Fates lead me here. Oh, Taya no dokutsu (Taya Cavern), the skies were gray with rain, and the darkness of your cavern walls damp and cold, my soul also quiet and sad because Taya no dokutsu we will not last forever."

-- From my father's journal

On the train to Ofuna, I sit across from an aged man who bears an uncanny resemblance to my father, Alfred Avila, though this man I'm staring at is Japanese and of a slightly smaller frame. Some time later, a salt-and-pepper-haired woman boards the train and sits next to the man. She, of course, reminds me of my mother. It is a bit spooky.

I finally found out where Taya Cavern was located from the parents of a private student of mine. Since April, when I arrived in Japan, I had been making inquiries about the cave my father had visited 30 years ago on his 40th birthday, January 25, 1973. No one knew about the cave. An earlier trip to the city of Ofuna had been unsuccessful. This deepened my curiosity all the more.

Outside the train it's humid. I



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need to take the No. 71 bus to the cave site. After sitting in the late morning sun for 45 minutes and watching three No. 72 buses go by, I figure the No. 71 bus isn't coming. It turns out the no. 72 bus goes by the cave.

Four hundred yen pays for an entry ticket and a short, thin white candle. I peer down the refreshingly cool, dark corridor of the cave from the sunny outside entrance. There is some modern lighting in the cave in the form of strategically placed light bulbs. When my father passed this way, he only had a candle. It probably made the cave seem bigger and more mysterious. My candle goes out three times. But it's more of an inconvenience since it's difficult to closely examine the religious carvings in the cave walls without the light. I wish I had remembered to bring a flashlight.

The cave was carved out as part of the training of the disciples of the Buddhist Shingon sect from about 1192 to 1720. They fasted for days and meditated within the maze-like cave. Less than a third of the 1500-meter cave is now open to the public as the rest of the cave is too dangerous to enter.

When I press against the moist wall with my finger, a spot of clay comes off. No wonder many of the religious figures no longer have faces. Included are 107 Kannons, Goddesses of Mercy, with the names of the temples each is associated with identified below. I walk through the cave twice. The first time was for the novelty of being deep in a cave alone. Well, there are others in the cave, but I only know that because I can hear their subdued

murmurings. Though I don't feel cold, I can see my breath mist up when I exhale forcefully.

The second time I walk through I notice a couple of women who appear to be praying at every religious altar within the cave. But I don't pay too much attention to them as I am busy trying to spot all the things my father saw - family crests and flying dragons; the Chinese zodiac and ceiling bat carvings in another section; fierce-looking, sword-wielding life-size protectors; and so on.

One of the prayerful women approaches me when I look up from my notebook scribbles. She points out two holes in the tunnel that poke through to other sections of the tunnel. I had passed those holes earlier but had thought they were natural openings. She points out they are the moon (quarter moon) and sun. If it were not for her, I would've have missed several other items of interest as well.

Returning to the outside humidity and the glare of the bright sun, I take a last look back at the cave of mystery and times gone by. The erosion of the carvings will continue. In another hundred years it may become difficult to make out even the outlines. And I feel some of the sadness my father must have felt...because none of us can last forever.

Kat's father Alfred Avila was the author of the book Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest. He passed away two years ago.

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