

matt jones

From the *Weekend* edition of *The Daily Telegraph* (London), January 9th, 1993.

A city that carries on with the stubborn pride of the survivor

By **Matt Jones**

The city did not meet my expectations. I was pleased. I arrived in Nagasaki fearing that I would be infected by the sadness of war, as if it were hanging in the air like residual radiation. But the only living things that weep in modern Nagasaki are the willows that line its narrow rivers; the only painful groans come from the old streetcars as they limp through the city.

Relics of the event that turned the name of this southern Japanese city into a household word are displayed at the Atomic Bomb Museum in Urakami. When listed they read like ghastly items on some satanic inventory: Two bleeding ovaries, one incinerated hand melted onto glass, dead bone marrow.

Then there are the statues of Christ and His angels, discoloured and disfigured by the heat and the blast; the waxwork models of keloid scars; and photographs – monochrome pictures of a monotone landscape: Twisted, flattened, a battlefield like any other except that it was created in an instant and contaminated for a lifetime.

However, the city does not bask in the uncertain fame of an atomic past. The August 9 memorial service is not listed in the tourist brochure's calendar of annual events and the local girls who walk in the Hypocenter Park come not to view the ruins of Urakami Church but to photograph visiting foreigners for their dormitory walls.

Nagasaki's most popular attractions are remnants of a remarkable past that began in the 13th century, when the town was named after Nagasaki Kotaro, an official of the Kamakura government. Built by foreign traders and missionaries, the distinctive temples, churches and houses are grouped around the old harbour in the south of the city, an area which escaped the fury of the bomb.

Glover House, Japan's first European-style bungalow, annually attracts one million more visitors than the Atomic Bomb Museum. Built in the 19th century, it was the home of the Scotsman Thomas Glover, who introduced the steam locomotive and the phone to Japan. Today, rowdy groups of schoolchildren sweep through its gardens to the accompaniment of bagpipes and the distant percussion of machinery in the Mitsubishi shipyard.

(more)

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Nagasaki/Page 2/...

With its blend of old and new, Nagasaki appears to have evolved like any other Japanese city, as if the great catastrophe had never occurred. Underneath the high-rise hotels, pinball parlours and wide avenues, however, there lies a quiet dignity – the stubborn pride of the survivor.

Nagasaki has enjoyed the best of times and endured the worst of them. It is strong and obstinate, like the palms that grace its gardens; cheerful and elegant, like the hydrangea, the city flower. “No more Hiroshimas,” cry the anti-nuclear protestors, confusing the city with an event. If only there were a few more Nagasakis.

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