

PALIN EPISODE THREE

I am now on Sado Island, a small butterfly shaped island fluttering off the north west coast of Japan.

The weather is dull warm and hazy. Typhoon Ryan is heading for Japan. Not that anyone seems worried; it's the fourteenth typhoon of the season.

We drive across the island dotted with rice fields to a pension near the world - renowned Kodo Drummers apprentice school. This is the reason we have come to Sado Island.

Arriving at the hotel I'm in for a shock. Having heard that the Kodo apprentices do a daily run as part of their training I had asked if I could join them. They've just rung the hotel to say they're delighted to have me. The run leaves at 5a.m. On the dot.

The next morning I'm woken by alarm at 4.15 a.m. I tiptoe out of the hotel to find the island still shrouded in darkness. Up at the school the eleven young apprentices, eight men and three women look blearier than I do, and they've been getting up before five every day, except Sundays for the last six months.

It's not easy to join The Kodo, (which translated means both "heartbeat" and "children of the drum") but once accepted pupils are required to spend a year living communally in a spartan, highly disciplined regime—no tobacco, alcohol, T.V. or radio— and practising five or six hours drumming a day. While I was being told this I noticed a dusty T.V. set in the corner.

"Yes, we do **have** a television" I was told "but we don't have an aerial. So we can only watch videos."

"What sort of videos?" I ask.

"Oh videos of drumming."

After the run its breakfast time. We are seated on the ground around one long table and served fermented bean curd. After the fermented bean curd the raw egg that follows is like ambrosia. The hardest part is eating the egg, with a pair of chopsticks.

At nine the first period of instruction begins. The apprentices sit straight backed on the floor and begin to hit the drums to a rhythm dictated by the sound of a flute and the striking of a small gong. A senior Kodo player walks among them loosening wrists and correcting shoulder positions. They keep going continuously and powerfully for forty five minutes. When they stop the effect is extraordinary. If there is such a thing as a deafening silence this is it. Total calm descends. Nothing and noone moves for a minute or more. After a short break they play for another forty five minutes. At the end of it they are all dripping with sweat.

One of the girl students who looked shattered ,explained to me " On a good day I don't notice it. The energy comes from here" she indicated her stomach "and goes

through my breast, shoulder, arm and finally into my drumming. The drums become the sound of my heartbreak.” I think she meant **heartbeat** but it was a nice Freudian slip.

After a years apprenticeship only one or two students are deemed good enough to join the elite at the Kodo village a few miles away. Here conditions are more comfortable and the atmosphere more relaxed.

When I was there they showed me the giant drum, O-daiko which weighs 1,000 pounds and can be moved only on a heavy black wood scaffold. Only two men in the world know how to play it properly.

One of them—Eichi Saito, showed me the Kodo stance and handed me the sticks. The sound was tremendous. Saito can play this drum without a break for fifteen minutes. I released the sticks after fifteen seconds.

I already had two soft pink blisters to show for it.