

“DEAR KIND, PERSON” — HIROSHIMA: A TALE OF THE UNEXPECTED

by Robert J. Sanger

ROBERT SANGER is a founding subscriber of *Nikon Owner* and has contributed a number of articles for the magazine. He is a world travel photographer and writer, and the creator and owner of the world travel images library Blue Planet Images. For many years until his current incarnation as a travel photographer, Robert followed a career in the shipping industry as a broker for ship sales and was frequently involved with new shipbuilding projects. He purchased his first Nikon over twenty years ago.

Robert Sanger was pivotal in the organization of the *Nikon Owner* trip to Japan and spent literally weeks and months of his own time, using his considerable expertise and knowledge of the world travel industry to ensure that it was both memorable and successful. As editor Gray Levett remarked *“Without Robert’s involvement this trip would still be just a dream.”*

In this article, Robert tells us about his unique personal experience as he visited Hiroshima at the end of the trip.



In planning a visit to Hiroshima during an extension of my stay in Japan, following the end of the Nikon Owner Tour in April

2006, I had wondered beforehand how I would react both emotionally and through my photography to what I was going to see and experience.

What turned out by chance to be my emotional “high” of the visit was indeed unexpected, and proved to be an encounter that touched my heart in a manner that I shall never forget.

As our “Nozomi” or “Super Express” Bullet Train from Tokyo slowed down on its approach into Hiroshima Station, I found myself having difficulty reconciling the modern city that I was now seeing with my recollection of the shocking images of utter devastation that had been shot here just days after the Atomic bomb blast at 8.15 a.m. on the 6th of August 1945, when I was nearly two years old. Could this truly be the same place that had been virtually obliterated from the face of the Earth, within my own lifetime, with the loss of some 200,000 lives from the blast and subsequent radiation illness?

Some twenty minutes later, having checked into my 14th floor room of the steel and glass tower of the ANA Hotel, close to the Peace Memorial Park, I marvelled at the panoramic view

over the reborn city with its wide tree-lined boulevards, skyscrapers and the distant encircling mountains whose outlines seemed strangely familiar. It then occurred to me that these were the self-same mountains still framing the city today, which I had seen in the pictures of the flattened city on that day in August 1945. As the ancient Chinese poet Li wrote many centuries earlier about the aftermath of man’s wars: *“Nature destroyed, mountain and river remain”*. As it so happens the Japanese version of my family name is “Mountain River” which I am told is very auspicious, being two Yin and Yang words for the elements of rock and water.

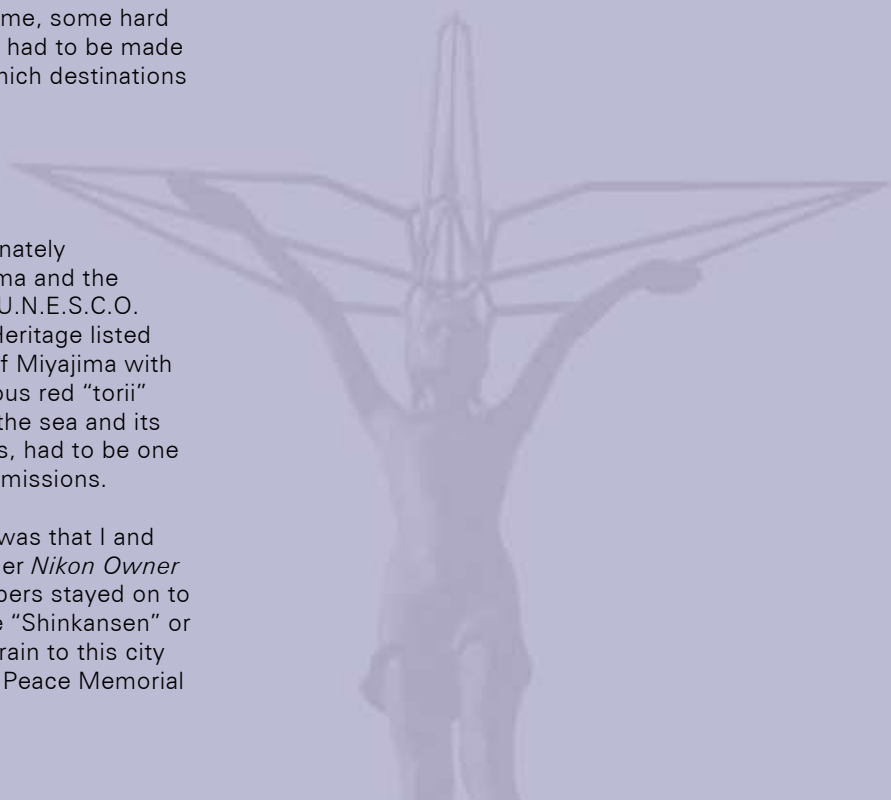
In planning the itinerary for the 2006 Nikon Owner Tour to Japan within a two weeks’ time-frame, some hard choices had to be made as to which destinations to omit.

Unfortunately Hiroshima and the nearby U.N.E.S.C.O. World Heritage listed island of Miyajima with its famous red “torii” arch in the sea and its Temples, had to be one of the omissions.

Thus it was that I and four other Nikon Owner subscribers stayed on to take the “Shinkansen” or Bullet Train to this city with its Peace Memorial



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Peace Park and its iconic "A-Bomb Dome" that is the sole, stark, physical remnant of the ruined city – a city that is now dedicated to the cause of *world peace* free from nuclear weapons – a forlorn hope I fear.

Despite travelling together, each of us photographers instinctively preferred to explore the Peace Memorial Park and to experience our personal reactions to what we were about to see on our own.

Foreign visitors are of course drawn to Hiroshima in the knowledge of what happened here on that fine summer morning in August 1945, just as everyone was going to work. What I had not realised until I started to wander around the Peace Memorial Park, looking for interesting angles and compositions for photographs, is that groups of immaculately uniformed Japanese school children from all over Japan can be seen coming here all year round with their teachers as part of their education and to hold group commemorative ceremonies at the Children's Peace Monument. During the commemoration to the memory of the many thousands of child victims of both the initial A-bomb blast and the many thousands more who died in the following years from radiation sickness, they lay their garlands of

multi-coloured paper cranes – a symbol to the Japanese of longevity and happiness – on the memorial.

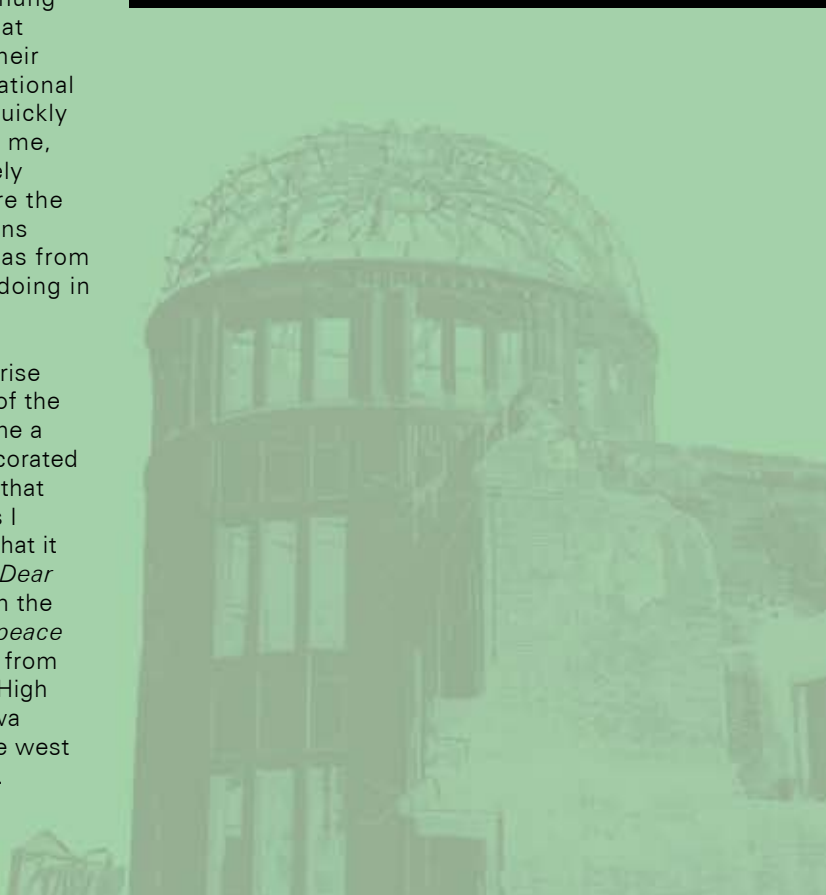
Walking around the Park taking photographs, I was anxious to avoid intruding into the silent acts of remembrance and prayer, especially at the Cenotaph. It was whilst here that I became aware of a small group of Japanese High School children watching me and nervously talking amongst themselves and giggling. As they came across to talk to me I expected the familiar request to a travelling professional photographer that I take a photograph of them.

It was the girls who took the initiative, whilst the boys hung back, nervously at first trying out their English conversational skills, which it quickly became clear to me, were impressively good. There were the opening questions about where I was from and what I was doing in Hiroshima.

Imagine my surprise then, when one of the girls handed to me a bulging hand-decorated envelope saying that it was for me. As I opened it I saw that it was addressed "*Dear kind Person*" with the message: "*May peace prevail on Earth*" from Kawakita Junior High School in Ishikawa Prefecture on the west coast of Honshu.



"INSIDE WERE SIX INDIVIDUALLY HAND-DECORATED CARDS FROM EACH OF THEM. I READ THEM ALL OUT ALOUD TALKING IN TURN TO EACH OF THEM AS I READ THEIR CARD."





Inside were six individually hand-decorated cards from each of them. I read them all out aloud, talking in turn to each of them as I read their card. There was Ryo with whom I laughed when he confirmed to me what he had written on his card: *"I belong to the school Track & Field Club but I don't like running"*. Then there was Maiko in the school table tennis team, Nahomi and Aoi both in the school softball team, Mami with an English teacher friend in Osaka whom she was to visit in the summer vacation and finally Okuchi telling me about the beautiful river in Kawakita.

It was clear that the children had taken much time and care to make these cards and envelope. I thanked them for showing them to me and tried to hand them back to show to someone else after me, but they said *"No, no"* and insisted that this was gift for me to keep. I was embarrassed and at the same touched by this beautiful gift to me, a complete stranger from half a world away.

Needless to say we all agreed that this moment had to be recorded with a "team photo". I set up my camera on delayed shutter release on my tripod below the steps in front of the Cenotaph, looking towards the A-Bomb Dome beyond, and we

had much fun taking some photographs whilst we all made the "Peace" sign to camera.

Despite generally overcast and rainy weather I got my photographs of Hiroshima, brightened with occasional splashes of colour from the cherry blossom and the vivid rainbow colours of the garlands of paper cranes that the children had laid on the Children's Peace Monument. My enduring memory though was not created that day by photographs but by my chance and brief encounter with the children and teachers of Kawakita Junior High School with their beautiful messages of hope for world peace to a stranger from faraway. ■



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For further on-line information:

Japan National Tourist Office ("J.N.T.O"): www.jnto.go.jp
J.N.T.O. London Office: www.seejapan.co.uk
Hiroshima City Tourism: www.hiroshima-navi.or.jp
Hiroshima Peace Site: www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp
Blue Planet Images: www.blueplanetimages.com

