17 Surfing

Taken with a grain of salt

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2020 will be a big year for surfing – especially in Japan, where surfing currently recovers from a decade-long slump. Surfing sociologist Mizuno Eri estimates there are 250,000 surfers, 80% male, down from 750,000 a few years earlier. Surfing is marked as hip and fashionable, as in previous booms, when sun-tanned “hill surfers” sporting the right shabby chic cruised in cars with boards tied to their roof through Roppongi, but never close to the shoreline.

Japan never ranked high on the global travel circuit of surfers, for reasons of excess in costs and scarcity of space in the waters at popular spots. Yet the country has a shoreline of almost 30,000 kilometers, with countless beach-breaks, rivermouths, and pointbreaks. The best season to surf is summer, when an average of 15 to 20 typhoons track north over Japan and create a short-lived swell in the surrounding seas. A two-to-four-foot surf is common, but typhoons may create waves of up to 40 feet.

Making surfing Olympic was made a strategic priority for the International Surfing Association (ISA) in 1995. Since then, ISA membership increased from 32 nations to 106, reaching non-traditional surfing destinations such as Iran, Sierra Leone, and Russia. At Tokyo 2020, 20 men and 20 women will compete on shortboards. Judges will score speed, power, and flow of rides of four athletes each in 25-minute heats and decide who continues to the next round. Chances are good for Igarashi Kanoa, the youngest surfer ever to win the US National Championships at age 14 and Matsuda Shino, age 16.

Rumors had it that surfing’s Olympic debut would happen in a Slater Wave pool, rather than adventuring the unpredictability of ocean tide and weather. Japan has been a forerunner in artificial waves and surf lagoons, starting with Tokyo Summerland in 1967 and Blue Wild Yokohama in 1992. Putting the contest into a pool would have set the event on an immutable schedule and facilitated comparing surfers’ performances. Keeping Olympic surfing salted brings problems for TV programmers but pleases Mabuchi Masaya, mayor of Ichinomiya where the contest will be held. With the havocked Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors just 300 kilometers up the coast, Olympic surfing in Ichinomiya will be a powerful message to demonstrate that the waters are safe.