

FYI

NISHINARI WARD

In Osaka, a place the homeless call home

Nishinari draws in the forsaken of the nation

By ERIC JOHNSTON

Staff writer

It was no surprise to many who know the area that Tatsuya Ichihashi, facing charges of murdering British teacher Lindsay Ann Hawker, has a connection with Osaka's Nishinari Ward.

Ichihashi, arrested in November after evading a nationwide manhunt since March 2007, found a construction job there and managed to remain undetected until he was finally apprehended at Osaka ferry terminal last month.

Nishinari is home to one of Japan's largest and most famous concentrations of day laborers, many of whom are homeless. It has long been a place where not only the country's most wanted criminals but also people simply down on their luck have flocked to find work ranging from day labor to prostitution.

Where exactly is the Nishinari district and how big is it?

It is located in the southern part of the city, just south of Tennoji. There are several train stations in the area, including JR Shin Imamiya Station. About 132,000 people live in the roughly 7.4-sq.-km area.

How many are homeless?

Official numbers are hard to come by and unofficial estimates can range dramatically. The most recent survey, compiled in March, found 3,724 total homeless in the city of Osaka, which has 24 wards including Nishinari, with 624 living in makeshift tents in municipal parks or beside roadways. In the late 1990s, when Osaka's homeless population swelled to 9,000 officially and 15,000 unofficially, aid workers estimated that as many as 10,000 homeless were in Nishinari at some point of time. Many people in Nishinari are also semihomeless, able to afford a place to stay if they have some money but back on the street again when times are tough.

How was Ichihashi able to stay anonymous in Nishinari for so long?

Within Nishinari itself, there is an area called the Kamagasaki, or Airin, district. It is home to thousands of itinerant construction workers, many of whom are homeless and destitute. Those who were once company employees, who got laid off for economic reasons, were fired because of personal problems, or fled their homes, gather to seek work and live in the anonymous atmosphere that Nishinari, and especially the Kamagasaki area, provides. In short, it's fairly easy for someone, even someone the police are hunting, to find a job in Nishinari.

There was a nationwide manhunt out for Ichihashi. Wouldn't somebody there have spotted him?

Those familiar with Nishinari, and especially Kamagasaki, say it would largely depend on whether he lived there and attempted to fit in. There are several communities of day laborers in Nishinari and people who have lived there a long time can be quite clannish and tend to avoid newcomers.

There were reports from Nishinari as early as April 2007, a few days after Hawker's body was discovered in Ichihashi's apartment, that he had used a public phone there to call his parents, but investigators failed to turn up any proof he'd been there.

Ichihashi was not living in Nishinari at the time of his arrest.

It is unknown how long he stayed in Nishinari, but he may have avoided the permanent residents made up of older homeless men, kept a low profile, and was seen as simply another guy trying to get work in Nishinari without attracting attention.

Is Ichihashi the first notorious person on the run to evade police by passing through Nishinari?

Not at all. Fusako Shigenobu, a former member of a Red Army faction who was arrested near Osaka, had been the target of a three-decade international manhunt for her role in a number of terrorist incidents in Europe and Israel during the 1970s. Although Shigenobu had been believed to be hiding out abroad before she was caught in the Osaka suburb of Ibaraki, it was later discovered she had entered and left Japan secretly several times over the years and had a safe house apartment in Nishinari rented for her by supporters.

The area has a history of violent uprisings by day laborers. What sparks them?

Often, mistreatment by police or authorities of a day laborer, perceived or real, has been the spark that has set the Kamagasaki district literally ablaze.

In 1961, a day laborer was involved in a traffic accident, lying on the ground dying, speaking to witnesses and waiting for an ambulance that didn't arrive until 20 minutes after he died.

That sparked a riot outside Nishinari Police Station that lasted for two days and involved 2,000 rioters and 6,000 police.

In October 1990, another riot occurred over mistreatment of day laborers. It lasted six days and several stores were set on fire.

And last year, the day before the Group of Eight finance ministers met in Osaka, a riot broke out after a day laborer claimed he'd been tortured by police. That riot lasted six days.

There are two names for the day laborers' district in Nishinari Ward, Kamagasaki and Airin chiku. Why is that?

After the 1961 riots and uprisings in subsequent years, the central government decided in 1966 to improve the district's image by changing the official name from Kamagasaki to Airin. Older day laborers usually use Kamagasaki in conversation, while media outlets and officialdom tend to use Airin.

The Nishinari area, in addition to large numbers of male day laborers, is also home to another kind of itinerant worker, is it not?

Adjacent to the Kamagasaki district, not more than a 15-minute walk from Shin Imamiya Station, is the Tobita district, home to dozens of two story Edo-style buildings with "hostesses" from all over Japan, who are well-dressed and sit demurely on view just inside the entrance while older women stand outside attempting to snag passing men.

Osaka's version of Tokyo's Yoshiwara red-light district managed to get around a 1958 law banning prostitution by officially recasting themselves as restaurants. Like male day laborers, women working in Tobita are often on the run and hiding out.

The city of Osaka has gone out of its way to ensure the outside world knows little about the area. During the 1990 Flower Expo, Tobita was closed down lest international visitors to the expo see it. Tobita will be found on very few Japanese maps of the Nishinari district, and virtually no foreign-language maps.

So Nishinari is an area that tourists avoid?

Quite the reverse. The bohemian atmosphere of Nishinari, its hotels that offer rooms for as little as ¥1,400 per night and its incredibly cheap restaurants make Nishinari especially popular with foreign tourists who either desire a walk on the wild side, away from the Michelin-ranked restaurants and gleaming, modern Umeda and Shinsaibashi districts, or who are on an extremely limited budget.

One of the more popular restaurants in the wintertime is Hyakuban, a former brothel converted into a restaurant that rents out rooms for private "chanko nabe" pot dish parties.

On the walls are fading photos of famous writers, artists, politicians and sports figures from long ago. Although one has to walk past yakuza gangster offices and Tobita's traditional red-light establishments to get to it, the restaurant is popular, and customers tend to be from all over Osaka, other parts of Japan, and other nations.

In fact, today one can see young East Asian tourists walking along the streets or Western tourists bicycling around Nishinari.

There is a surprising amount of English-language information in the area now, and there are even tours of the area offered by English-speaking guides.

Official support from Osaka for Nishinari's international tourism efforts is often hesitant at best, so many of the tourism initiatives have been developed without, and sometimes in spite of, involvement by the city's bureaucrats.

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The Weekly FYI appears Tuesdays (Wednesday in some areas). Readers are encouraged to send ideas, questions and opinions to National News Desk

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