



# **An Interview with Tokyo-based writer and author Rob Goss**



**E**ye-Ai caught up this month with Tokyo-based freelance writer and author Rob Goss for an in-depth interview. Rob is the author of four books with Tuttle Publishing, the NATJA Gold Prize-winning Travel Pack Japan, Travel Pack Tokyo, the photo book Tokyo: Capital of Cool, and the upcoming Travel Pack Kyoto & Nara. He has also worked for publishers like Fodor's, Insight Guides and Rough Guides, as well as magazines that include Time and National Geographic Traveler. He is currently working on a new Japan-wide photo book, a book about Japan's traditional inns and onsen, and a first collection of short stories.

*Eye-Ai: You are originally from the U.K. What first brought you to Japan? I understand that you've been in Japan for 15 years, did you initially plan on staying for long, and do you get back to the U.K. very often?*

RG: I came over in 1999 as a teacher and worked in teaching for six years, first doing English conversation classes at NOVA and then mostly business and college classes through ECC. To be honest, I really didn't like the teaching industry here at all, so that six years felt like a very long time! As for the plan, it was to stay for a year or two to pay off my student loans and save up to go back to university, but then I met my wife (something good that came through NOVA!) and all the plans went out the window.

Fortunately, we manage to return to England quite often, typically for long summer trips. As happy as I am in Japan, for my sanity it's important to spend regular time back in Devon and elsewhere outside of Japan. The occasional absence makes the heart grow fonder.

*Eye-Ai: You mentioned that you find living in Tokyo to be comfortable, and that you love your job and the self-employed lifestyle. What makes that particularly agreeable for you?*

RG: Lots of things. It can be crowded, but I can also take the dog for his evening walk and barely see a soul. It's the same on a run along the Arakawa. There's a lot more

greenery in Tokyo than it is given credit for; lots of places to unwind. Tokyo is also quite safe in many respects, which is important as a parent, even though the prospect of a major earthquake obviously is very real. There's the convenience, too. We are only minutes away from all the basics and more: doctor, dentist, library, supermarkets, parks, riverbank, gym, pool, station, restaurants, and have access to all sorts of interesting opportunities and experiences. I think I enjoy Tokyo a lot more now that I do a job I like; as an unhappy teacher I ended up being negative about all sorts of things for a while. Of course, even dream jobs have their bad moments and stresses, but I love being a writer and especially a self-employed one. I couldn't imagine changing that. I wouldn't trade all the time I get to spend with my family for anything. I would hate to have to commute, deal with office politics, and do all the other pointless, time-wasting things



that come with following company policies. From a work-life-balance perspective, the flexibility to write when and where I want is priceless, as is being at the point where I can afford to say yes or no to any assignment that comes my way and focus only on projects I actually have an interest in, that pay fairly, and are with nice people who are good (and honest) at what they do. Being self-employed isn't a fit for everyone, but rightly or wrongly, I don't worry about work drying up or things like that. A little over-confidence or delusion goes a long way to being a contented freelancer!



*Eye-Ai: How did you get into writing about Japan? Your travel writing has covered the wilds of Hokkaido in the north to the beaches of Okinawa in the sub-tropical south. I'd imagine that you are either traveling or writing absolutely all the time. It is very impressive that you can make a living as a freelance writer in Tokyo. How do you juggle all that you do?*

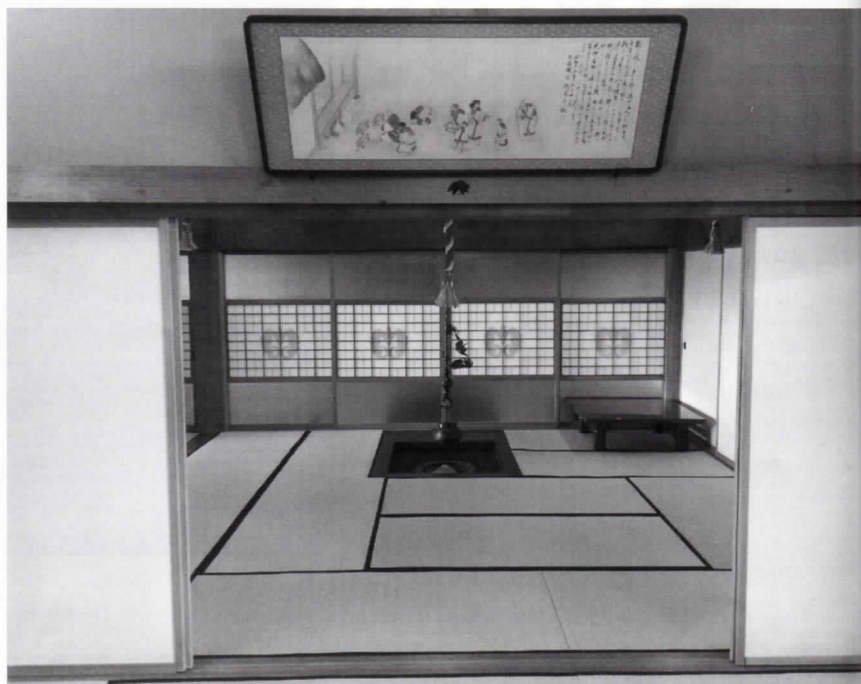


RG: One of the good things about teaching was that I had a lot of free time. After a few years, I realized I was going to be here for a while so I needed to use that time to work toward something I wanted to do. While still teaching I did a post-graduate diploma of journalism via distance learning with the aim of getting into media. I ended up selling some of my course work to magazines and the assignments gradually grew from there. By odd luck (and it sounds silly now), early on I was too nervous to contact English publications in Japan, as it felt too small a community and too personal if I got rejected, so I targeted larger, anonymous-feeling overseas publications and they actually bought things. With just a simple bio and portfolio online, others started finding me. Considering I was so inexperienced, it suggested a shortage of English-language writers in Japan or a lack of writers marketing themselves effectively overseas, so I kept at it. These publications also turned out to pay a lot more than Japan-based English-language publications, which made a full-time career much more realistic. There were (still are) thousands of them to target, too. After

a transition period from teaching to a part-time editing job at a magazine, I had enough work to go fully freelance about seven or eight years ago.

Back then, I focused a lot on articles, but that's turned to books in recent years. Doing a smaller number of long-term projects doesn't feel like I'm juggling much compared

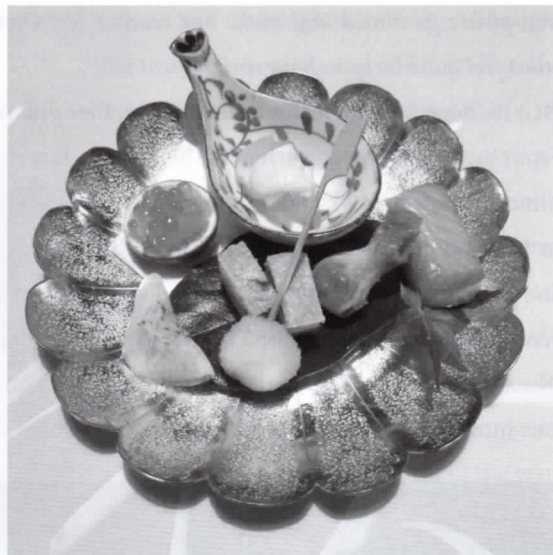
to churning out articles. That works for me – I've never been one for hustling gigs, chasing news or a constant deadline scramble. At the moment I have four books on the go (all coming out in 2016) and on top of that I probably accept about 30 to 40 features or travel articles a year plus two or three book updates or edits. I also try to keep about 20 percent of my schedule free for coming up with ideas and working on things that don't pay much now, such as poetry or short fiction, but that I hope will make up a greater part of my work in the future. It might sound like non-stop work and travel, but in an aver-



age month I'm on the road no more than three or four days and it's a fairly laidback existence only occasionally punctuated by a crazed log jam of work.

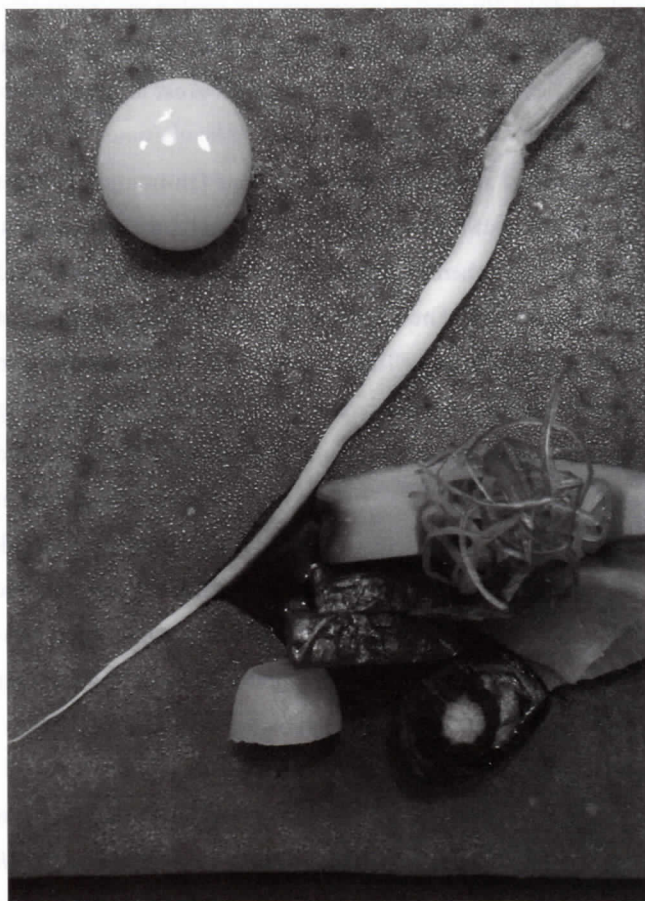
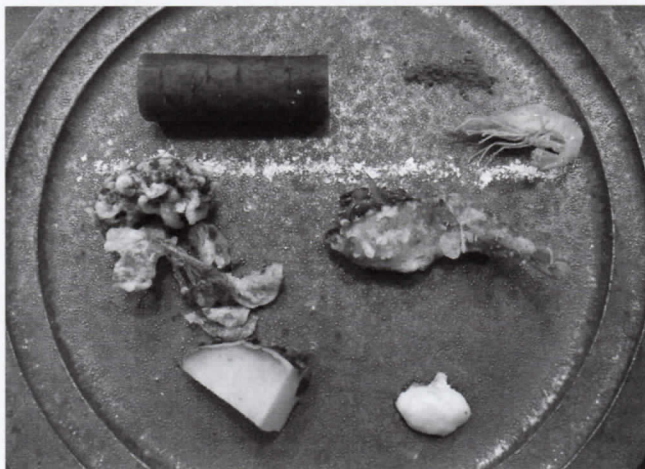
*Eye-Ai: I've often wondered how a travel guide like Fodor's or Lonely Planet comes together. I mean, the mind boggles with all the details. How does one mere author possibly cover all the spots*





in one location? Of course Lonely Planet has a tribe of writers and then travelers as well contribute. Could you talk about from start to finish what went into your Tuttle Travel Pack books in this respect? How long does the whole process take?

RG: With a Tuttle Travel Pack (or any of my books with Tuttle), it begins with us coming up with a basic idea for the book – i.e. Kyoto and Nara – and then I outline the whole book. For a Travel Pack that means planning out the upfront introductions, the top sights for mini features in chapter one, the focus of a bunch of day tours for chapter two, the “best of” choices for restaurants and so on for chapter three, and finally basic travel info in chapter four like where to find a doctor and how to ask for a bill. That takes a month or so of back and forth, then I take a three- to six-month period researching and writing (with travel, too) before finally delivering a first draft. I won’t be working solidly on the book in that time; I’ll be balancing several other books in different stages of production and have other projects coming and going. After Tuttle does the design and initial edits, we then both do tweaking and checking, checking, checking until you never want to see the book again! It then goes to the printers. From initial idea to book in hand is probably a year. The process then continues with marketing, which thankfully is something Tuttle does almost all of for me, so I don’t have to waste time pimping myself on social media, for example – that time is best spent working to become a better writer.

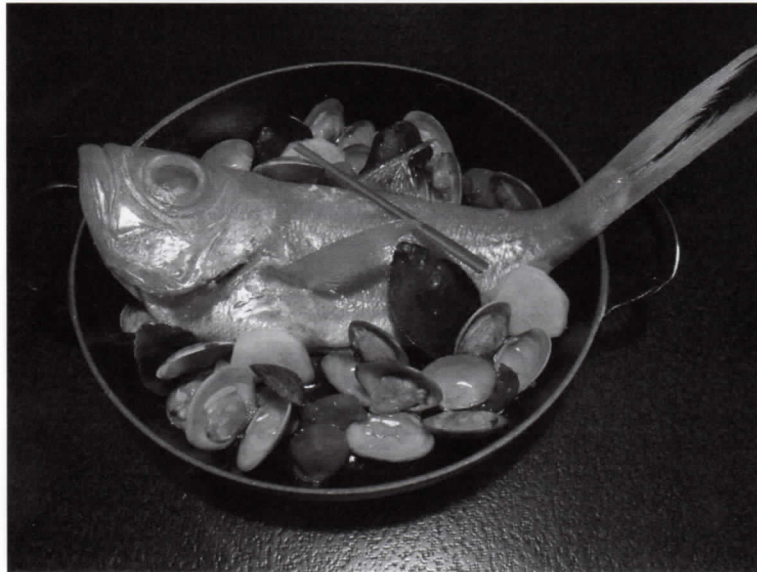


Eye-Ai: I can only imagine that the ‘research’ for your next book on traditional inns and onsen has been quite enjoyable. What have been some of the most sumptuous stays and meals, and



*yes, please go ahead and make our readers feel envious. You must feel quite lucky to have such a great job!*

RG: It's been incredible. It's been an altogether different world from anything I've experienced before. So far, I've visited almost 20 of the 40 ryokan that will be in the book, staying at half and getting shown around the others. Aside from the food and all the regional specialties I've tried, the highlights have included a private geisha performance in Atami, a trip to Niseko where I had an open-air bath on my balcony looking out into the Hanazono woods, and stays at some of Kyoto's



most historic inns. Getting to talk to ryokan owners about the history and traditions of inns has been a great learning experience, too.

I don't expect any sympathy at all – and I'm not going to get any, am I?! – but believe it or not, it is also hard work at times. With any travel there's the challenge of balancing home life and parenting – when I'm away, my wife has to do everything at home on top of her job. The travel isn't entirely a holiday either. A day on the road for the ryokan book will likely mean visiting a couple of ryokan with my co-author (photographer Akihiko Seki) for photo shoots, tours and interviews, before staying at another and setting up office there for the night to get work done on the ryokan book and other projects. There's also the danger my wife will murder me if I keep texting her food photos when she's at home with quick-boil udon! And the souvenir shopping for wife, son and dog is costing me a fortune.

*Eye-Ai: You also write on other aspects of Japan, and not just travel. What have some of these writing projects been? Which have been the most rewarding and interesting for you? You must*

*be learning something about Japan literally all of the time.*

RG: From time to time, yes. It's nice to have a bit of variation. It ranges from features on sustainability to interviews with craftspeople. I really enjoy those kinds of craft interviews, to get to go into someone's workshop and watch them make something incredibly skillful look so easy. I have a lot of admiration for artisans and the way they dedicate themselves to their craft. In part, it's because I have no talent for art or crafts myself, in part because so many seem to be so calm, content and modest in what they are doing. Maybe there is a book in that one day!

*Eye-Ai: You write haiku and senryu as well, and published your first collection of poems Red to White in 2014. What attracts you to this particular form of poetry? I understand that you've mentioned that you find it "addictive." Why is that? What subjects are of interest to you in your poetry and fiction?*

RG: I think it's for the same reason I like any writing. Good writing for me has a tempo or rhythm to it, plus a brevity that comes from using the right words – like the classic Orwell essay on writing where he talks about using strong nouns and verbs instead of overdoing the adjectives and adverbs.

With short-form poetry and short or micro fiction that's especially true. Every word counts. I like the idea that with something so brief you can give the reader a key to unlock their imagination or trigger an emotion. On a more selfish level, it's also quite therapeutic to take a moment or an experience and express it through a poem or story; short-form is ideal for capturing the emotions we all feel at some point or other, the glimpses we see of other people's lives, the things we see in society that trouble us or warm us. The addictive part is the quest to get it right.

*Eye-Ai: You made the very refreshing comment that if you as a foreigner don't like something about Japan, you don't have to choose between grateful silence and going home. There is often "good guest" pressure when you are the foreigner, and while it can be acute in Japan, it of course doesn't just exist in Japan. How have you negotiated taking a stand for something you don't like? Do you think it helps when you have a family, given that you have more at stake?*

RG: It's an odd thing that "good guest" pressure. In my



experience, it's something I've seen from other non-Japanese far more than from the Japanese. There is a type of Japanophile or non-Japanese resident who refuses to see anything wrong with Japan and reacts quite vocally to any and all criticism. Why, I don't know. Likewise, I have met people here who can't see anything right with the country. Almost nothing is simply black and white. Every place has its various shades of good and bad, things other places can learn from and aspects that can be improved. Pretending otherwise is only to the detriment of society.

Take "Japanese only" signs or landlords refusing to rent to foreigners. I've heard other non-Japanese try to play down this kind of thing, justify or simply discount it – you know, "it's not as bad as in Country A," "They probably mean Japanese-language only," "It's up to the Japanese to decide what's culturally right or wrong here, don't impose your cultural values," and even "it's only for the Chinese." Why would anyone of any nationality who cares for Japan or who is raising a family here choose to make excuses for that kind of behavior? I bet most Japanese would be appalled, too, if such things were made an issue here by the local Japanese-language media.

I have a stake here and I hope I am contributing something positive to the society in which I live beyond merely paying taxes, and that includes raising a son who I hope will be proud of his Japanese heritage. There's a lot for him to cherish. But that also means having the right to voice an opinion when necessary (and without having to naturalize first), not follow the lead of Nikko's Three Monkeys.

*Eye-Ai: Another issue you've spoken about recently is copyright infringement. Would you talk a little bit about that? In this day and age of everything being available on the internet, it's been my experience that people often mistake any image or written material online as being free to grab and use. In Media Arts classes in many junior colleges in the States, a core class is now copyright law so that students who go on to freelance understand their legal rights.*



RG: That's good to hear. Although to be honest, and it might horrify some people to read this, I'm not so concerned by non-media infringing on my rights. I've seen books of mine entirely scanned online and even page by page videos on YouTube, but I doubt that really affects sales much. And text doesn't get grabbed by say hobby bloggers or non-media businesses in the way that images do – it must be a real headache for photographers and artists.

What annoys me is when people in media, who absolutely should know better, misuse work or just act unprofessionally. One example I encountered was a publication in Japan giving permission to a third-party to reuse work of mine that had originally appeared in that publication. Thing was, I still owned it. It should have been obvious, too, because as an independent worker, without expressly signing away rights to any creation, the creator retains all rights to it beyond that initial usage. That's basic. To compound things, after the fact there was almost no contrition; at least not once I asked for a reprint fee. I could reel off more examples and go on and on about the lack of professionalism I've seen in certain parts of Japan's local English-language media, but suffice to say I'm happy working with media outside of Japan and my sole remaining client here. That's about as tactful as I can be! And ultimately, we can't really moan too much; publications only get away with treating writers badly if we don't stand up for our rights. It's our responsibility to set and uphold the standards we accept in terms of contracts, fees and professionalism. If that means firing a client, fire them. There are plenty more fish in the sea. To keep my working life as positive and rewarding as possible, at the very least I figure I owe it to myself to be very selective about who I work with. Life's too short for anything else. ♥

