February nights in Nagasaki – or late in January if the Chinese New Year comes early – are lit up by thousands of colourful lanterns strung along the main streets. In the heart of the city crowds throng the Shinchi ‘Chinatown’ quarter and stroll through the ornately painted west gate to a little park across the road, where variety shows are held in a sea of illuminated floats. This Lantern Festival is not particularly steeped in tradition, but is one of various events that illustrate the importance of tourism to the Nagasaki economy. It is also a cultural legacy of the unique status this city once held during the centuries of Tokugawa rule, when it flourished as the only designated port for incoming foreign ships and their merchandise.

The Dutch also left their imprint on Nagasaki. Just a few steps away from Shinchi lies Dejima, site of the Dutch factory which, for over two hundred years, housed the only Europeans permitted to trade. Once it was a fan-shaped island built in the bay and accessible from the shore only over a short wooden bridge. Now it is surrounded by reclaimed land, ringed by multi-storey car parks and tramway lines as modern urban Nagasaki, ever short of space, encroaches on the narrow estuary at the head of the bay. For several years now a reconstruction project has been gradually restoring the island to its original shape. Walls and moats are being built to separate its wooden buildings and stone warehouses from the bustling street life around. A few miles up the coast another example of this influence has taken shape at the resort of Huis ten Bosch (‘House in the Woods’). Built in the 1990s entirely in Dutch style, the complex has a town square, church, several hotels, self-catering cottages, windmills and canals. Naturally, springtime is a riot of tulips.¹
For Japanese visitors these are just some of the ‘exotic’ features to be found especially in Nagasaki, and other parts of Kyushu. For residents it is a more a natural outcome of living on the shores of the East China Sea and the cosmopolitan level of cultural influence this has sometimes fostered. Nagasaki remains a favourite destination for parties of schoolchildren enjoying the educational trips organized by junior and senior high schools from all over the country. Visitors arrive in their coachloads, and a highlight often included at some stage in the tour is a journey by cable car up Mt Inasa. At 1,092 feet high, the observatory platform at the summit affords panoramic views over the natural amphitheatre of Nagasaki Bay. After sunset, the city lights scattered across the slopes on all sides combine to form, together with similar scenes at Kobe and Hakodate, one of Japan’s ‘three famous nightscapes’.2

Hemmed in by wooded mountains, Nagasaki Bay is a long narrow stretch of water now filled with fishing boats, ferries and the occasional warship. In times past Chinese and Dutch vessels were moored here, successors themselves to an earlier generation of Portuguese and Spanish galleons. With the aid of binoculars, visitors to Mt Inasa can make out the roofs of neo-colonial villas and church steeples on the far side of the bay, which were built in a subsequent age of mail steamers in the late nineteenth century. Looking west and far out to sea, the Gotō Islands can also be seen on a clear day, still home to communities that preserve the Kakure Kirishitan faith of their forbears. Facing inland to the east, a long red brick line can be identified as the walls of Urakami Cathedral, built in 1959 after the original building was destroyed by the atomic bomb. Nearby is the large open space of the Peace Park, a symbolic reminder of the disaster that befell Nagasaki on 9 August 1945. A walk through this park takes the visitor past rows of monuments donated in friendship, mostly by former allies of the Soviet Union. In terms of scale, however, these pale into insignificance before the massive statue – half-Buddha, half-Zeus – that forms the backdrop for commemorative ceremonies each year. By the foot of the statue people hang long chains of colourful paper cranes, often made by schoolchildren in a collective effort before they arrive.

Besides tourism the main pillar of Nagasaki’s economy is the shipbuilding industry, as shown by the docks of the Mitsubishi Shipyard that dominate the Akunoura shore at the foot of Mt Inasa. This also has Dutch origins, as it was engineers sent from Holland who developed...