

# Hashima: Battleship Island of Japan



by Ir. Ooi Liang Chye



Hashima, the Battleship Island



The reinforced concrete wall



The author in front of the Mine Administrative Building (red), the Water Reservoir and the Lighthouse (on the hill)

**HAD** I not been informed earlier, I would have probably passed by this island, Hashima, and could have mistaken it for a huge battleship. The seawall embankments of this island make up the hull while the multi-storey reinforced concrete apartments and other buildings could easily be mistaken as the superstructure of a ship. It was a sight of wonder and bewilderment. Hashima, the Battleship Island, also commonly known as *Gunkanjima*, is actually an island with an extensive but now completely abandoned seabed coalmine.

When I was in school, I was taught that Japan is a country void of natural mineral resources. That was one of the reasons that the Japanese started their expansion and invasion of other countries and led them into World War II. However, there is a small island called Takashima where coal was found in 1695 and later in 1810, a much smaller island, Hashima, was also found to have coal.

Mitsubishi Ltd. Partnership started a full-scale seabed coal mining operation on Hashima in 1890 and the small barren rocky island was expanded stage-by-stage through land reclamation until it had reached its present size and shape which is three times of its original size. Hashima is now 480m long and 160m wide. It lies 19 kilometres south of Nagasaki port which incidentally became the shipyard for battleship construction during the era of wars. The extensive mine tunnels reached down to more than 1km below sea level and stretched out horizontally to more than 2km.

The population on the island fluctuated with its coal mining activities. Besides office and administrative buildings, multi-storey apartments, hospital, schools and a shrine were built on the island. These structures were constructed strong enough to withstand the sea storms and typhoons. A swimming pool with seawater was also constructed. At one time, the population of this island was 5,000. This was 7 times the density of population in Tokyo at that time.

There were a lot of hardships and sacrifices that the population had to endure such as shortage of fresh water, food and vegetables, all of which had to be transported from the main island.

The supply of energy, difficulties in communication with the main island, the raging seasons and also the unexpected storms and typhoons for which Japan is well-known for were also part of the hardships which the residents of Hashima need to endure.

The Hashima coalmine was closed in 1974 due to the decrease in the demand of coal for energy generation, when the demand shifted from coal to oil and nuclear power. The island was abandoned and was subjected to the destructive forces of the storms and typhoons which had damaged a lot of the structures. However, from 2009, the authorities have begun to look into protecting and preserving the island as an industrial heritage site.

If you happened to be in Nagasaki, the second city which had once suffered from the atomic bombing and which also is the setting for Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, an opera popularly known among the Japanese, it is definitely worth your while to visit and take a look at this unique Island. ■



The School Building

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