

DESTINATIONS

The Natural Wonders of Japan's Least-Traveled Island

A writer explores the ancient forests, artisanal crafts, and geothermal baths on the island of Kyushu.

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AS JAPAN'S "OPENING UP" coincided with cherry-blossom season, it seemed like "everyone" — me included — was headed to the country. While parts of Japan are well-trodden by international tourists, much of Kyushu, Japan's southern island known for its dense ancient forests, active volcanoes, boiling thermal springs, traditional artisans, and out-of-this-world food, remains surprisingly under the radar for many western tourists — though perhaps not for long.

Yakushima Island's Forests

As I land on Yakushima Island in a small propeller plan, the lush green alpine peaks I can see from the air disappears into cloud cover. By design, this airstrip is too short to accommodate jets. Locals joke

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that it rains 35 days a month here, and, as a result, flights and ferries are often rescheduled. I'm ecstatic that I've been allowed in. Walking out onto the tarmac, my first breath is one I will never forget. When the sweet, cedar-scented cloud vapor fills my lungs, I can feel every cell in my body relax.

I've longed to visit Yakushima, the round island south of Kyushu designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site of natural beauty, ever since I saw the film "Princess Mononoke," Studio Ghibli's mythical ecological parable inspired by the island's enchanted forest. Recently, I read Suzanne Simard's "Finding the Mother Tree," which describes one of the oldest living trees on Earth, a Jōmonsugi cedar located in these forests, estimated to be between 2,100 and 7,000 years old.

My day in the Mononoke forest begins on a narrow trail along a rushing river in the Shiratani Unsuikyo Ravine. My guide, [Junichi Aida](#), tells me that the Japanese government promised its people two things: free and clean air and water. "Yakushima," he says, "is the only place in Japan that still delivers both." He plunges his water bottle into the river that's so clear, I can make out patterns in the granite boulders shimmering beneath the surface. Being that the ice-cold water here flows from the mountains and doesn't soak through granite, it tastes crisp and soft, unlike any water I've ever had. This, Aida explains, is the secret to the shochu and sake brewed here.



For the next six hours, I wander past thick cedar trunks stretching into the clouds. The forest is filled with moss-covered boulders, 1,900 varieties of plants, and rare endemic freshwater blue crabs sidestepping around the ancient trees. I feel as though I'm inside a natural cathedral bursting with extraordinary, intelligent life. Noticing teensy ferns beneath the canopy of the behemoth trees, I begin to grasp that this is a delicate organism that is both ancient and newborn, big and small.

I retire to the secluded [Sankara Hotel & Spa](#), where I dine at the Japanese-French restaurant Okas. Chef Chiharu Takei finds inspiration from the surroundings here, delivering the most delicately presented meal of local, seasonal ingredients, including flying fish, sea

urchin, hamaguri clams, fresh peas, microgreens, rapeseed, and mushrooms grown on-site, and a cut of the melt-in-your-mouth wagyu Kagoshima beef. His final course, almost too cute to eat, pays homage to Princess Mononoke: Light merengue in the shape of *kodama* (mythical forest spirits), the ghostly cloudlike creatures from the 1997 film, sit atop a local tonka orange and cream puff. I float back to my serene villa overlooking the ocean, leave my windows open, and doze to the sound of rain in the lush forest outside my door. I sleep better than I have in months.

Fukuoka, the Birthplace of Tonkotsu Ramen, and the Train to Nagasaki

Going from Yakushima to Fukuoka — the birthplace of tonkotsu ramen and its famous broth made of pork bones — is like falling out of Middle Earth as a forest nymph and landing in a metropolis of noodles. I opt not for noodles but for Masato Tanaka's izakaya — a memorable feast of seafood, from sashimi to baked bonito, served on small plates. Although I'm full, I can't help but meander back to my hotel through Fukuoka's famous late-night *yatai* (food stalls) to take in the sights and smells.

For the next leg of my Kyushu tour, I board the 36+3 luxury train for Nagasaki. The train's name refers to Kyushu being the 36th largest island in the world. The "3" part of the name is meant to represent the people the train brings together: passengers, Kyushu locals, and railway staff. The railway operates five scenic daytime routes around Kyushu, with stops in seven prefectures. Designed by Eiji Mitooka, the train's interiors are a maximalist's dream of modern tonal color schemes patterned with traditional plant and tree motifs. Private compartments are available with either Western-style couches or *tatami*-mat floors. *Shoji* window screens and partitions are decorated with Okawa Kumiko, a type of wood-joinery latticework made without using nails. The one outstanding detail in the rich, colorful interiors is the inclusion of Danish designer Louis Poulsen's artichoke lamps. A brief stop midway to Nagasaki allows for a tour of the Saga prefecture's historical sake breweries. The real joy of the trip, though, was staring out the window at the passing farms, villages, and mountains while eating the train's gorgeous lunch-course bento box of sashimi, prawns and octopus, lemon steak, rice, and miso soup.



The Crafts of the Goto Islands

Like Yakushima, Fukue, the largest of the Goto Islands off the coast of Nagasaki Prefecture, is another sparsely populated natural sanctuary. The Goto Islands are known as the “Islands of Prayer” because Japanese Christians hid here when Japan banned Christianity in the seventeenth century. The islands are also the birthplace of Nizo Yamamoto, the animation art director and background artist for numerous Studio Ghibli films. It is something to be in the places depicted in works such as “The Girl Who Leapt Through Time” and “Spirited Away.”

I’m staying at the Yukio Hashimoto-designed Goto Retreat by Onko Chishin. Included in a stay here is a private *onsen*, or hot spring, on each room’s oceanfront balcony, as well as dinner from award-winning chef de cuisine Kou Takahira. His multicourse meal is a visual and culinary delight of local, seasonal seafood, produce, and Goto Beef, a delicacy so rare even in Japan that some wonder if it actually exists.

My guide, Will Liew from the boutique travel service Wondertrunk & Co., introduces me to the island with lunch at Tsubaki Chaya, or “Camellia Teahouse,” overlooking Kojushi Beach. Seated at an *irori*, a traditional Japanese grill, I am offered local sake and shochu, as I enjoy isaki fish and the star of the meal: the ultra-thin, slippery, chewy Goto udon served over savory dashi broth. Goto udon’s preparation is what makes it unique. First, the noodles are hand-stretched and twisted, then rubbed with camellia oil, made from pressing the seeds and flowers of camellia trees that grow wild across the island. The camellia oil ensures that when dried noodles are cooked in hot water, they remain firm with a silky texture.



After lunch, Liew takes me on a scenic drive around the island, where the smooth roads run like black velvet ribbons, curling over hills saturated in shades of green and clinging to oceanside cliffs that drop into topaz seas. Though I rarely get on a bicycle, I can see this would be any cyclist’s paradise just as Liew rattles off an exhilarating list of the secret coastal caves, beaches, and mountains featured on his tours.

Japan is also a crafters’ paradise, but Goto in particular is home to many under-the-radar artisans committed to perpetuating traditional practices. We park in front of a thatched-roof home with a cow mooing in the adjacent pasture. Inside, Koichi Miyazaki, a craftsman in his early 30s at the Okemitsu workshop, is seated at a bench, smoothing a wooden bucket called *oke* with a hand plane, cedar shavings curled all around his feet. Miyazaki leads us through his

workshop, pointing out the buckets, pails, and barrels he has carved using, as he says, “the technology of human hands.” The basins his teachers, his teacher’s teachers, and now he have made are used by chefs, breweries, and households across the country to hold rice, sushi, miso, and soy sauce, as well as bath and spring water.

Miyazaki is one of only 10 remaining craftsmen in Japan who produces this type of oke basin by hand. “As things get mass-produced,” he says, “I question if those new things are worth it. With my oke bins, there is a long history. Trial and error have perfected the process when something has been made the same way for hundreds of years. It’s a successful process. Why change that?”

Nearby, Miyazaki’s brother Haruki works as a blacksmith and uses Edo-period knife-making methods to craft exquisite kitchen blades, as well as bespoke farming and fishing tools, featuring his signature hand-carved camellia wood handles. Haruki’s wife, Natsumi, makes leather sheaths for his goods, also by hand. Haruki explains that some ingredients call for special tools for food preparation. Eels, for example, require six very specific types of knives to be properly prepared for eating.

Inside Haruki’s workshop, he demonstrates the loud and intensely physical *warikomi* process, which involves splitting a piece of hot iron and inserting a piece of steel, then forging both materials into one new piece. As sparks fly, I notice lullaby music in the background. When I ask about it, Haruki smiles and says, “My wife chooses the Ghibli film music. It’s calm.” The juxtaposition of the loud metal demonstration and a calm soundtrack strikes me as a perfect reflection of the stark contrasts at work here: young artisans resurrecting an old craft one knife, one bowl at a time.



The Baths of Beppu

Driving into Beppu, a small city in northern Kyushu, the skyline recalls a steaming Dickensian industrial cityscape akin to his fictional *Mudfog*, with plumes of water vapor venting into the skies across the city. But there's nothing industrial about Beppu: For over three centuries, it's been a destination resort for rest and healing through its mineral-rich pools, heated by the volcanically active geothermal field spanning over 6,000 square feet beneath the surface.

My guide, Tomoko Ryu, walks me through the *Jigoku Meguri*, the for-viewing-only tour of the eight different types of natural hot springs known as the "hells" of Beppu. It's easy to understand why these pools were associated with demons and mysterious deities when they were first discovered: A vaporous blood-red pond, a hole full of bubbling clay, and a steaming pool of milky cobalt would appear deadly to me too. It's hard to fathom that these are natural wonders of bicarbonate, chloride, hydrogen carbonate, iron, sulfur, calcium, and light are not an ecological disaster.

Beppu Beach Sand Bath, a small, no-frills bathhouse, offers bare-bones, gender-separated changing rooms and a steady stream of local regulars, but no crowd. At the front desk, the attendant hands me an ankle-length cotton *yukata* (robe). Once on the beach, an attendant digs a shallow, body-sized hole and instructs me to lie in it. She sculpts the sand under my head into a pillow so I can see the aquamarine shoreline and then covers the rest of me with warm thermal sand that's so heavy I can't move under its weight. I doze off for about 15 minutes until she digs me back out. My robe is soaked with sweat, and my face glows. In the women's bath, I shower off the sand and relax in the spring-fed onsen. Once I'm dressed I feel incredibly light, detoxed, energized, and hungry.



I head to the old part of Beppu, the Kannawa Onsen district, where narrow stone streets meander around public, century-old bath resorts. I stop for a snack at Enma for their *jigokumushi* “hell steaming” experience, where ingredients are cooked in a hot spring fumarole. I opt for dumplings, which I savor while my bare feet soak in a mineral bath underneath the table. I’ve never eaten steamed dumplings this way before, and, while it is antithetical to any kind of hygienic standards I didn’t know I had, I’m surrounded by locals doing the same and just go with it.

Finally, I returned to my hotel, the ANA InterContinental Beppu Resort & Spa, a luxury retreat overlooking Beppu Bay. Having recently reopened, the design of the region’s first international luxury hot-spring resort is a thoughtful, complete homage to Japanese craftsmanship. Woven bamboo, a traditional craft of Beppu, is on display and incorporated in the interior motifs. I’m happy to arrive here, where I can relax in the property’s several healing hot pools and onsens that are much more private than the many in town. For my final meal in Kyushu, I linger on delicate bites of Oita flounder, tilefish, and charcoal-grilled wagyu filet mignon delicately plated with cherry blossoms and start plotting my return trip to the region. ●