

GOKKAN

JAPAN OF THE FIVE SENSES



関西

SPIRITUAL KANSAI

GoKan Spiritual Kansai

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KANSAI Tourism Bureau
The Exciting Journey, KANSAI

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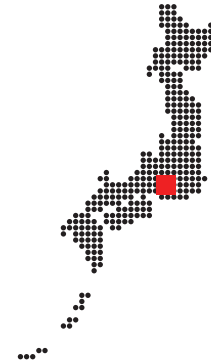
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The Path of Spirituality



The Kansai region (関西地方, Kansai-chihō) or the Kinki region (近畿地方, Kinki-chihō), lies in the central region of Japan's main island Honshū. The region includes the prefectures of Mie, Nara, Wakayama, Kyoto, Osaka, Hyōgo and Shiga, sometimes Fukui, Tokushima and Tottori. While the use of the terms "Kansai" and "Kinki" have changed over history, in most modern contexts the use of the two terms is interchangeable. The metropolitan region of Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto (Keihanshin region) is the second-most populated in Japan after the Greater Tokyo Area.



SBNR Spiritual But Not Religious

Spiritual Kansai

How the Intrinsic Value of Japan is seen by the rest of the world.

I have been making some researches about SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious - Non Religious Spirituality) phenomenon since 2014.

Those researchers started while I was in charge of directing the launch of the Japan House LA with the professor of the University of Southern California William Duncan from the Institute of the Japanese Studies.

While making some researches about the western interest among the Japanese culture, Professor Duncan told me:

« The interest that the rest of the world have for Japan can not be taken superficial, indeed it is a more fundamental change ».

What I truly encountered is the idea of considering the interface between Japanese culture and the fusion of different cultures from the perspective of SBNR.

Since that particular day, this has been my greatest motivation.

According to the Pew Research Center study, 1 of 5 people in the US are SBNR and 83% are actually young people. In Europe 34,7% of people that believe in SBNR are said to have 4 characteristics. And those 4 characteristics of this SBNR population are :

- 1- Mindfulness
- 2- Being aware of the environment, Nature Thinking.
- 3- Humanity, Greatness and Integrity
- 4- Post-Capitalism

This is strongly motivated by the SDGs, natural living, positive influence and social good.

And on the top of that, travel to Asian countries and interest in Eastern thought, including Japanese culture, has been particularly strong in recent years, with visits to Asian countries growing at 7% and Japan at 19.4%, while the global tourism market is growing at 3.4% per year.

In a report on SBNR published by Harvard University, Professor Daly Katerlein said:

“The cause of the SBNR phenomenon is a major change that threatens the fundamentals of the social environment, such as terrorism, natural disasters and pandemics. People are wondering if there is anything they can do to improve society with their own moral character, rather than the values they have in the past. SBNR could be the driving force behind the new American dream”.

We do believe that the upcoming changes in SBNR's social power will become an increasingly important issue.

While the whole Corona issues have changed the paradigm of values around the world, I feel that the SBNR has been making rapid progress.

Paying visit to Tokyo will be only once while visiting rural areas are increasing.

Especially in the Kansai area, there is a growing interest in experiences that allow people to encounter spiritual cultural values such as Kumano Kodo, Koya-san, Mt Hiei, visiting Ise and holy pilgrimage.

In addition to the tourism sector, in gastronomy, the infatuation of vegetarianism such as vegan, the correlation between the increase in vegetarian menus and SBNR, the expansion of corporate management incorporating Zen, also known as mindfulness leadership, and CMO (Chief Meditation Officer) should not be overlooked.

Feeling the importance of interpreting the aspects of Kansai from this SBNR perspective, we decided to collaborate with experts in each field to create a special issue on the theme of "Spiritual, Kansai".

We hope that this content will be an opportunity for readers to explore the tangible and intangible value of Kansai.

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巡 礼 P I L G R I M A G E



Location: Kumano Nachi Taisha Grand Shrine 熊野那智大社
〒649-5301 和歌山県東牟婁郡那智勝浦町那智山1
Photographers: Angelo DI GENOVA & Geoffrey HUGEL
Author: Angelo DI GENOVA



The path

The rain has just stopped. The vegetation damps awakening its colors. The mist that caressed the treetops is dissipating and the waterfall eventually appears. The sound of the rain has gone and now only the sound of my footsteps can be heard on the rough cobblestones of the path that criss-crosses the holy mountain. At the end of the path, a complex of temples. The geometry of the curves of the buildings contrasts with the random landscape.

At first, it seems more difficult than anywhere, to define wherever we are in a place dominated by Shinto kami or the Buddhist pantheon. A complex mix that forces us to ask ourselves some questions. In the area of Yoshino, on Mount Koya, but also on the paths to Kumano, it is possible to sense the very essence of Shugendō, this spiritual tradition that unites the different Gods, with the same delicacy as two hands joining to pray.

Beyond all divine representations, even more than the Buddhist statues, the true God of this region is the nature surrounding the spot. The sun illuminating the tips of the trees. The water flowing from the top watering the roots. The moss recovered every damp surface. The buds are ready to appear under the snow and then the leaves turn from green to red in an endless cycle.

The Shugendō is composed of Buddhist monks attached to temples open to teaching principles of En no Gyōja, the founder of this school of thoughts. Some monks may also, if they are willing to make the effort, dress up for different rituals during the year, the clothes of the yamabushi, the ascetics of the mountain, with the characteristic clothes and sound of the horagai, a large triton shell used as a musical instrument. Another surprising aspect of Shugendō is that it is not necessary to be a monk to become a yamabushi. There are many men, office workers for example, who dress up as the yamabushi when needed. Especially to take part in fire ceremonies, which are important moments in the rituals of Shugendō.





Kinpusen-ji Temple

The Kinpusen-ji temple, located in the heart of the village of Yoshino is considered as the biggest temple of Shugendō. Its main building, with a 34 metres high, is the second largest old wooden construction across Japan, after the Todaiji Great Buddha Hall in Nara. It houses three statues of Zao-Gongen, a divinity who appeared in the mind of En no Gyōja when he retired to pray for 1000 days at the top of Mount Omine. The lonely hermit had no brush or paper to reproduce what appeared on his mind so he took his dagger and carved the features of the god in a cherry tree trunk. And just like that, began the long love story between the cherry trees and the mountains of Yoshino.

*Usefull information about the statues of Zao Gongen :
These impressive statues, about 430 years old,
can only be seen for about a month every year
in the middle of autumn.*



Kanshin-ji Temple

This temple, located in Kawachi-Nagano down the south of Osaka, was founded by En no Gyōja, the ascetic who initiated the tradition of Shugendō. Later on, the place has been renovated and completed by Kukai, the well known monk founder of the Shingon Buddhism. Located halfway between Mount Koya, Nara and Kyoto, Kanshin-ji Temple has always been an important stopover for pilgrims. In addition to the beauty of its landscapes in autumn or its buildings and statues, there is a very interesting little secret hidden in it: a symbolic version of the ohenro, the pilgrimage route of the 88 temples of Shikoku. Around that place, it is possible to find numbered paving stones wrapping themselves around statues of Kukai and En no Gyōja to miniaturise the famous route. This shortened version allows those who cannot afford to make the real pilgrimage a chance to follow the spiritual footsteps of Kukai.





“ The heat of the flames, the beat of the Taiko drums, the ethereal chanting. Then the hiking. ”

I vividly remember my first experience of Shugendō many years ago in eastern Kansai, in the mountains of Mie prefecture. I was invited by a practitioner of the aesthetic religion to overnight at a remarkably elaborate thatched-roof inn he operated, and participate in an emotive fire chanting ceremony before being escorted into the nearby mountains to undertake a gruelling hike along a precariously steep and sparsely maintained hiking path open only to the mountain monks and those who they accompany. Despite to this day considering myself agnostic to all forms of faith, the experience left me with a profound appreciation for the livelihood of mountain priests in rural Japan, together with a deeper understanding of the discipline and perseverance in wider Japanese society.



Shugendō is a syncretic religion, harmoniously combining elements of pre-Buddhist mountain worship, regional folk-religious practices, as well as Shintoism, Taoism and Vajrayana. The doctrine follows the belief in attaining spiritual wisdom through training and discipline, in the form of mountain worship. In Shugendō and many of the religions practiced in Japan, mountains, and caves and valleys in particular, are revered as sacred areas where the spirits of those departed reside. A form of transitional gateway between this world and the next, making them a source of power in the religion.

The faith emerged during the Heian period (794-1185), a golden age of cultural enlightenment in Japanese history in which both the novel and haiku poems also became commonplace. The religion gradually grew in popularity until the Meiji era (1868 - 1912), where the government explicitly segregated Shintoism and Buddhism, thereby rendering the Shugendō belief system, which was an amalgamation of those and other religions, incompatible with the law of the time. It was officially banned in 1872, resulting in many important cultural artifacts of the religion being destroyed. It wasn't until the end of World War II and the advent of religious freedoms, where the Shugendō religion was revived in Japan and it continues to live on today, albeit in a more modest capacity.

Shugendō practices are distinct from those of other religions in Japan in their intensity. Practitioners, known as Yamabushi, are mountain priests who undergo rigorous training and strict diets in the pursuit of enlightenment. The challenges of the monks are sometimes referred to as 'Mountain Austerities', each of which comprises three key elements; the mountain as a sacred area, the Yamabushi, who have the potential to ascend into a sacred being (to literally become a Buddha in their own body), and finally the mystic training on the mountain, the process by which the practitioner attains ascension. Originally, the process of these austerities consisted of the monks entering the mountains in Autumn, secluding themselves in caves, and throughout winter continually dousing themselves in freezing cold water while fasting for long periods at a time. Through continual daily prayer, the monks would emerge from the mountains the following Spring, sometimes having experienced visions during their stays away. More recently, Shugendō training has come to encompass all four seasons, and a wider range of austerities. Yamabushi priests train in various locations throughout Japan; with Kansai, in central Japan considered one of the main regions for active training.



Heading south along the Kii Peninsula, the largest cape in all of mainland Japan, and due south of Osaka and Kyoto, lies a complex series of pilgrimage trails collectively as the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage. The trails, while varied, can at times be appropriately punishing. These routes form not only the basic training of the Shugendō mountain monks, but also link the most important spiritual monuments of the region; the temple-top mountain complex of Mount Koya (also known as Koya-san) located close to Osaka, emotive Ise-jingu to the east, Kumano Hongu Taisha in the heart of the Kii-Peninsula, and Kumano Hayatama Taisha and Kumano Nachi Taisha shrines to the south-east. For those with even a passing interest in the remarkable architectural achievements, all five should be essential locations while traveling in Japan. Based on the cultural and historical significance of the routes, in July 2004 the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trails were designated a UNESCO World Heritage site as part of the “Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range”.

Through this designation, wider awareness and increased ease of access, a number of the Kumano Kodo sections are today increasingly undertaken by both non-religious visitors and pilgrims alike. Heading north to south, the Kohechi trail connects Mount Koya to Hongu Taisha, over a number of breath-taking mountain passes. Likewise, the Nakahechi, which heads east toward Hongu Taisha and eventually Nachi Taisha and Hayatama Taisha on the eastern coastline, also affords spectacular mountain scenery. Finally, the Ise-ji route, featuring the oldest remaining sections of the trail, links Nachi Taisha and Hayatama Taisha to Ise Jingu further north, while skirting the eastern coastline with beautiful views of the Pacific Ocean.

All three trails retain sections of the original forested walks, making for excellent natural, spiritual hiking. All of the routes have also developed small local economies around the pilgrimage, enabling visitors to take in comfortable family-run inns and Onsen hot springs as they travel, both of which are very welcome after hikes of up to 15 to 20km each day. However, for me the real highlight of the Kumano region is the hospitality and kindness of the people, both in local businesses, but also in the curious residents who are always more than willing to lend a hand to those pilgrims who have lost their way or are in need of a drink of water.

The Kumano Kodo has become better known outside of Japan in recent years, and in 2015, as one of only two worldwide UNESCO pilgrimage trails, officially started a joint pilgrim certification process with the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St James), the other pilgrimage, which is a network of routes in Spain and France in Western Europe.

In addition to offering authentic cultural experiences, visitors learn both about the welcoming kindness of locals in rural Japan, but I would also suggest that such hiking affords an insight into a fundamental tenet of wider Japanese society; that Shugendō shares parallels with what is perceived to be one of Japan's positive natural characteristics, the act of Nintaiyoku; or the concept of self-betterment through practice. This is true of school clubs, which students and teachers undertake into the evenings five to six days a week. This is true of the Japanese office workers working long hours. In Japan, it is commonplace to be very good at just one hobby. Likewise, in setting the goal of undertaking a section of Kumano Kodo pilgrimage, the sense of achievement at arriving at one of the important spiritual monuments of the region, whether that be Nachi Taisha shrine and waterfall, the emotive temples atop Mount Koya, or the iconic parade up to Ise Jingu, is a truly unique and rewarding feeling.

While unsuitable for most hikers (and controversially, to this day, off-limits to women), perhaps the most demanding of the routes in this region is the trail climbing Mount Ōmine in Nara. At the very summit of the mountain is the monastery Ōminesanji, the founding temple and present headquarters of the Shugendō sect. The area is one of the most common training locations for modern pilgrims and along this mountain range, Yamabushi undertake three challenging and dangerous austerities:

The Kane Kake Iwa challenge: Atop a 30-foot climb, a rock juts out over the valley below. To ascend to the summit, the priests must use an attached length of chain to first swing underneath the rock and then ascend the chain to the top.

The Nishi no Nozoki challenge: From a 60m cliff jutting out, junior priests are held out, head-first over the edge and must atone for their faults in this position.

The Byodo Iwa challenge: Yamabushi must climb up a sheer rock tower over a deep precipice. These practices reveal the daily struggles the monks face in pursuit of ascension, but I think back to my time hiking with the Yamabushi priests fondly. As the rain fell and I drew heavier breaths at the steep ascents required to climb the mountain, I took strength from the unwavering commitment the monks must give each day. While I was infrequently taking breaks to draw breath, the Yamabushi stopped only to blow their elaborate, beautiful conch shells. Their energy and unrelenting commitment motivated me to continue.

In recent years, with dwindling numbers of Yamabushi priests and indeed innkeepers in rural Japan, I believe visitors to regions like Kumano stand not only to attain a deep experience and understanding of Japanese culture during their time here, but also offer a sustainable path forward to support these cultures to continue. It is a delicate balance in offering an authentic form of such experiences, in a safe and responsible way, that is mutually beneficial for everyone.

By Adam DOWNHAM

冥想 MEDITATION



Location: Temple Daikoku-ji Temple 大國寺
〒669-2223 兵庫県丹波篠山市味間奥162
Photographers: Angelo DI GENOVA, Geoffrey HUGEL & Xavier ANDUJAR
Author: Angelo DI GENOVA

The monk seats in silence. Only the sound of the fabric of his kesa (monk robe) can be heard each time he bends to take the lotus position. He lights up a stick of incense planted in a bowl of ashes. The smoke escapes from it as it burns, symbolizing the time passing by. The meditation can eventually begin and will last until the entire stick turns to dust. To watch these impassive monks meditating is already amazing. A surreal aura emanates from them.

With my Western outlook and my Christian-influenced upbringing, It must be said that I have strong memories of my first steps taken around the spiritual Japanese places . This offers enough inspiration without being as complex as other religions based on too many tenets. Being invited to participate in some religious rites of temples and shrines without having to take vows or perform baptisms is a miracle. Every man and woman seemed welcome without any value judgement or questioning of their own convictions and differences. A tolerance that forces respect and opens up a new approach to spirituality to the newly arrived visitor.

I experienced my first introduction to the methods of zazen when I arrived at the Hakujukan in Fukui. This original place, an annex accommodation of the Eihei-ji, the main temple of Zen Buddhism Sōtō, offers a modern approach to temple accommodation. Japanese style but luxurious, the Hakujukan also offers the services of a Zen Concierge who is a certified trainer from the Eihei-ji temple and allows you to penetrate into this complex world in a very smooth way.



Practicing another zazen type alongside Takahashi-san, a monk from the Daianzenji temple in Fukui, I quickly understood that breathing was the basis of all meditations. Whatever the currents are, being conscious of how to breath and mastering it is already meditation. Something as natural as inhaling and exhaling air can then become really challenging. Because we never take the time to think that this is what we are doing at that specific moment. Here, it is a question of connecting to this unconscious act that is essential to life. We are immediately brought back to our human condition and to the most basic need, that is breathing.



Calligraphy

Breathing during meditation, to eat the monks' cuisine. Usual things, which cannot be considered difficult to carry out and yet which reveal all their importance in Buddhist spirituality. This is also true when it comes to writing. By hand, with a brush, ideograms, certainly, but still, the practice requires such concentration that the trajectory of the vision seems to shrink to only focus on the essential objective of the ritual. The heat of the body increases and, even without realizing it, we nearly end up into a meditative state.

Buddhist vegetarian cuisine

The Shōjin ryōri cuisine of the monks does not work in one way. Whoever receives the meal is also required to maintain essential principles. To eat is to receive life. It is to pay homage to the one who is going to gather it, to prepare it to serve it to you. Making the effort to prepare a meal is already honoring it. Waste has to be avoided and as is the tradition in Japan, it is appreciated to eat without leaving a single grain of rice in your bowl.

Like all the things that seem simple on the surface, cooking Shōjin ryōri is actually very complex. Based on the quality of the products, we are talking about fine cuisine without any artifice. The delicacy of the broths, the freshness of the vegetables cooked to perfection. Sweet but also full of taste. Once the meal is over, the stomach is full, but not heavy. We can definitely enjoy the feeling after having this delicious experience. Mind and body seem to be purified.





On my first visit to the Kansai region of Japan (a place I now call home), I once heard a Zen riddle that asks, “How can you drink tea from an empty cup?” A reply was given “An empty cup is better than a full cup, because you can always add to an empty cup.” The riddle expresses the concept that less can sometimes make us feel more satisfied and content, and was a pleasant realization for me at the time. On a deeper level, Zen can be seen as a way towards cultivating mindfulness.

Many visitors to Japan have a keen interest in traditional culture, especially Zen, and the Kansai region is where much of its presence can be experienced today. Over the centuries, Zen in Japan has created its own distinct culture. Specifically, its emphasis on the values of simplicity, naturalness, and harmony have largely shaped the development of Japanese aesthetics and all of the various Japanese arts – in the way of tea, landscape design, architecture, Japanese cuisine, calligraphy, ink painting, haiku poetry, incense appreciation, ikebana flower arrangement, noh drama, shakuhachi music, kendo, Judo and kyudo archery. The focus of all the arts lies in negating the self – rising above the self to become completely at one with what one is doing. To reach that stage, there is only one way:

ZEN IN JAPAN

What we know as Japanese ‘Zen’ is a form of Buddhism that developed earlier in 7th and 8th century China, when Buddhism spread from India to China and interacted with the indigenous traditions of ‘Daoist’ spirituality. The character for ‘Zen’ 禪 is the Japanese way of pronouncing the older Chinese word ‘Chán’ 禪, which itself derives from the ancient Sanskrit term ‘Dhyāna’. Dhyāna means meditation, so Chán Buddhism or Zen Buddhism literally means a type of Buddhism that emphasizes meditation. Chán Buddhism continued to thrive in China during the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties and eventually spread to Vietnam, Korea and to Japan from the 12th century. Japanese Zen teaches that enlightenment can be achieved through strict mental and physical practices such as zazen, or sitting in silent meditation, and the actions of being in the present moment. Zen Buddhism’s emphasis on self-discipline is also a key reason why it became highly regarded among the warrior class during Japan’s medieval period, a tumultuous time in Japan’s history when feudal warlords vied for power. This was a time when life was particularly perilous, and therefore seemed even more precious. Much later in the 1960’s and 1970’s Zen became very popular outside of Asia, and today it is practiced around the world.

ZEN SECTS

At present, there are three main Zen sects in Japan: Rinzai Zen, introduced during the 12th and 13th centuries, Soto Zen, introduced during the 13th century, and the Obaku Zen, introduced during the 17th century. During the early medieval period, several emperors and much of the ruling samurai class would convert to Rinzai Zen, and they would often build temples and sub-temples, or donate their residences to Zen monasteries, many of which still remain today. In particular, Zen temples in Kyoto during the Kamakura period (1185-1333) and Muromachi period (1336-1573) were at the center of the artistic, cultural, and intellectual life of medieval Japan. They wielded immense influence, both culturally and politically.

RINZAI SECT

The Japanese priest Myōan Eisai (1141-1215) introduced Rinzai from China to Japan in the late 12th century, first in northern Kyushu and then in Kyoto. The methodology of Rinzai Zen is called ‘kanna-zen’, which combines seated meditation and working with a kōan. A kōan is a story, dialogue, question, or statement that cannot be solved by logic. It is given by a master to a disciple to continuously ponder at all times, when meditating or going about daily monastic life. A well-known example is:

“ What is the sound of one hand clapping? ”





The kōan acts as a catalyst for the disciple to fully and completely empty the mind of delusions of attachment. Kōans, originating from Chinese masters, have been collected and passed down over the centuries. The Rinzai canon contains over 1,700 kōans. Fourteen branches of the Rinzai sect exist in Japan, with most of its head temples located in Kyoto, such as Myōshin-ji, Nanzen-ji, Tōfuku-ji, Daitoku-ji, Tenryū-ji, Shōkoku-ji and Kennin-ji.



SOTO SECT

Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253) was the founder of the Soto Zen sect in Japan. The methodology of Soto Zen is called mokusho-zen, in which practitioners sit silently with an open mind (zazen), without any kōans to wrestle with. Sitting and practicing zazen intently is called ‘shikantaza’. Although Dōgen studied kōans when he was young, he didn’t employ them in Soto Zen.

In Rinzai Zen, when monks do zazen, they face inward, toward the center of the zendo hall, while in Soto Zen, they face the wall. The head temples of Soto are Eihei-ji temple in Fukui Prefecture, and Soji-ji temple in Yokohama. The Soto sect spread mostly among lower samurai and the common people outside of Kyoto.

OBAKU SECT

The Obaku sect of Zen was introduced much later, around 1660 when the Chinese priest Ingen Ryūki founded Mampuku-ji temple near Uji, just south of Kyoto city. Obaku Zen retains the flavor of its origin in China and it employs not only zazen and kōan practice, but also chanting of the ‘nembutsu’ (recitation of the Buddha’s name) to see the Pure Land of Buddha in oneself.

Most Zen sub-temples are closed communities whose primary aim is to guide practitioners to spiritual enlightenment, and so they are serious about maintaining privacy. Fortunately for visiting present-day seekers of Zen, many larger Zen temples offer the opportunity for laypersons to practice zazen in an authentic setting, and sometimes the experience is accompanied by a bowl of Japanese green tea.

DOING ZAZEN – SITTING ZEN

The type of zazen advocated by Dōgen Zenji, founder of Soto Zen, is seated meditation, which he attested that “zazen is satori in and of itself”. Zazen consists of adjusting one’s body (choshin 調身), adjusting one’s breathe (chosoku 調息), and adjusting one’s mind (choshin 調心), with the aim of attaining a state of no-mind in which body, breath, and mind are in unison.

Sitting - to sit zazen, wear loose clothing and sit on a thick cushion. There are three ways of sitting: full-lotus (kekkaфуza), half-lotus (hankafuza), and ‘seiza’ - the traditional way of sitting in which the feet are tucked underneath the pelvis. Zazen can also be done seated in a chair.

Hand placement - bring the hands in against the ‘tanden’ (the area of the lower belly about four finger widths below the navel) and place your right open palm over your left open palm.

Centering - relax your shoulders, tuck your chin in, and straighten your back. After crossing your legs and hand placement, slowly sway your body from left to right like a pendulum until you come to a full rest. Then repeat the same motion from front to back until centered.

Eyes and mouth - open your eyes halfway, and focus on a spot on the floor about one meter away. Close your mouth, and place your tongue gently behind your upper teeth.

Breathing - place your concentration into your tanden, just below your navel. Inhale naturally and then exhale calmly and slowly. The exhalation should be longer than the inhalation. Let your breaths flow in and out naturally, breathing from the tanden. As you breath out, count each breath silently from one until ten, and then repeat. The breath is a mirror of the mind.

Mind - while sitting quietly, observe whatever is happening. Let the things you can see, sounds you hear and thoughts within your mind arise and dissipate without attachment.



ZEN AND TEA – SIPPING ZEN

The saying ‘chazen-ichimi’ 茶禅一味 means that the taste of tea and Zen are one and the same. The Japanese ‘Way of Tea’ developed out of the tea drinking etiquette cultivated in the meditation halls of Zen monasteries. Tea wakes and soothes both mind and body without intoxicating them, and is therefore seen as a symbol of Zen.

Earlier in Tang dynasty China, Zen practitioners discovered that drinking green tea helped keep them awake during long sessions of zazen, and so the foundations of tea drinking became established among Zen monks in China. Later in 1191, Myōan Eisai, the founder of the Japanese Rinzai Zen sect, brought green tea back with him to Japan after his ascetic training in China. Tea drinking eventually became more formalized in Zen monasteries in Japan, where it was called ‘sarei’. Accordingly, green tea became a feature of Zen life, with the preparation and consumption conducted according to Chinese practice. With the passage of time, the tea ritual was adapted further to Japanese tastes, and among leading contributors were prominent Zen priests of the day, such as Ikkyū Sōjun (1394-1481) and his disciple Murata Jukō (1423-1502), both with close ties to Daitoku-ji temple in Kyoto, a place considered by major present-day schools of Japanese tea (Chanoyu) as their mecca. During the 16th century, tea gatherings spread increasingly to the warrior and merchant class, who not only used them for recreation but also as a way to practice Zen. As with the aesthetic tastes of the day, small, thatched-roof teahouses came to be built, called ‘soan’ and they were partly based on small, detached residences of retired samurai or government officials. Prosperous merchants in the port city of Sakai (Osaka) – who were also tea masters trained in Zen – used their wealth and energy to advance the arts of the time, especially the art of tea (Chanoyu).





SHOJIN RYORI – TASTING ZEN

Shojin ryori is a cuisine based on Zen monastery cooking. The food is prepared with the aim of purifying the body and mind. Strictly vegetarian, shojin ryori follows the Buddhist admonition of not killing, using no meat or seafood, and only grains, vegetables, seeds and seaweed. A typical meal may include boiled vegetables along with sesame tofu (goma-dofu) and a vinegar dish such as daikon radish. Whatever the ingredients, they will be accompanied by rice, pickles, and miso soup.

In Zen monasteries, shojin ryori originally consisted of a simple set of dishes called ‘ichijiru-issai’ 一汁一菜, or “soup plus one dish” from which Zen monks were able to maintain health on a minimal amount of nutrition. On special days, ‘ichijiru-sansai’ 一汁三菜 or “soup plus three dishes” was also served. The idea was to ingest just enough food to survive, without pandering to greed. This frugal eating style is

known as ‘oryoki’, which Zen monks learn early on in their training. The Zen ritual of oryoki also emphasizes mindful eating, and has much to teach us about eating economically and well.

In Dōgen Zenji’s book ‘Tenzo Kyōkun’ (Instructions to the Cook) he wrote: “It is an important practice to make meals sincerely. One should not waste any ingredients, and bring forth the taste of each food to its maximum effect.” In essence, preparation of the food is treated as a spiritual practice by which one cultivates mindfulness. The fundamentals of shojin ryori: quality natural ingredients, arrangement of seasonal foods in various colors, and the wasting of nothing, have gone on to greatly influence the wider world of Japanese cuisine, and for this we can be grateful.

by Andy MOSER

“ Taking a slow walk for about two kilometers along a muddy path under a large tree, with the sunlights shining through the trees around. Sartre murmured, "This is the most beautiful cemetery in the world, where nature and death have merged. ”

Asabuki Tomiko, "28 Days in Japan with Sartre and Beauvoir"

At Koyasan Okunoin Cemetery, more than 200,000 gravestones are found along the path leading to Kukai's mausoleum among the 800-year-old Japanese cedar trees. When the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre visited Japan with Simone de Beauvoir in 1968, the author Asabuki Tomoko served as their interpreter. Sartre, the standard-bearer of modern thought at the time, was a renowned atheist who never joined his hands to pray in front of God or Buddha. But when he visited Okunoin at Koyasan, Asabuki heard Sartre describe it as "the most beautiful cemetery in the world where nature and death merge." Okunoin is a symbolic place that reveals the unique aspects of Koyasan.

Koyasan, along with Yoshino and Kumano, was registered as a World Heritage Site in 2004 as "Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes " in the Kii mountains. In Koyasan, there is a belief that Kukai (posthumously known as Kobo Daishi), the founder of Koyasan, is in eternal meditation at the inner sanctum. For that reason, a meal called Shojinku is served twice a day at his mausoleum.

Offering meals to Kukai, who became one with nature, can be seen as a ritual of mutual exchange between humans and nature. This is a way to return the blessings of nature. This expresses directly our worldview of being embraced by nature, living and dying in nature. Sartre's words could be said to have hit the mark.

At Okunoin, the tombs of the founders of other sects of Buddhism, including Shinran and Honen, are found. In addition the graves of past warring feudal lords and nameless commoners harmoniously coexist at Okunoin. Furthermore, the "Korean Soldiers' Memorial Tower" was built in 1599 by Shimazu Yoshihiro and Tadatsune to commemorate the war dead during Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea, and notably that monument honors not only the fallen on the Japa-





nese side but also enemy combatants.

The belief that even those who were in conflict with each other in life can exist in harmony in the mandala world that encompasses the entire universe is central to the thought of Koyasan.

Foreign tourists visiting Koyasan often describe their impressions as being like coming home, or that it is very peaceful. Perhaps that feeling is not unrelated to the long history of Koyasan, which has embraced and accepted foreign things while preserving their individuality. Nowadays, diversity and inclusion are two of the characteristics of Koyasan.

Kukai founded a temple for Buddhist training in Takano, a place held by the goddess Niutsuhime-no-Okami. Therefore, it was originally conceived that gods and buddhas, normally dissimilar things, can be brought together eventually. At the back of the Danjogaran, a three-dimensional representation of the esoteric doctrines of Buddhism, there is a shrine called Miyashiro, where Niutsuhime-no-Okami and 3 other Shinto deities are enshrined as the landowners of the whole Koyasan area. This is why the priests of Koyasan call these deities Myojin-san and believe in them the same way they believe in the Buddha. This kind of coexistence between gods and buddhas dates back to the origin of Koyasan, is one of the reasons the area received "World Heritage" status.

Kukai wrote a letter to Emperor Saga asking for permission to use Koyasan to found a place for Buddhist training. He wrote that, "Koyasan is surrounded by high peaks on all sides and is rarely visited by people."

Koyasan went on to become a major tourist destination, attracting 1.5 million visitors per year, of which 100,000 were from foreign countries. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 the numbers of visitors dwindled, and the situation at the time of the establishment of Koyasan was unintentionally recreated. Covid-19 caused serious economic damage to Koyasan, but at the same time provided an important opportunity for us to pause and reflect on what kind of place Koyasan was originally.

By Zenbo HIDAKA



“ Small fish swallows big fish ”

There is a common notion that the large overcomes the small, and that therefore size does matter. We see this a lot in advertising and popular culture: bigger, stronger, faster. The world of Zen holds to another truth, a different perspective, that the small surpasses the great.

At first this doesn't seem logical or possible, but in experience it often turns out to be true. In Zen it is a reference to the small self awakening to the larger self through enlightenment. The acorn becomes an oak tree. The child is father to the man. It isn't through competition that the small surpasses the great, but rather through growth and transformation.

Many of the Zen inspired traditions, from Tea Ceremony to Swordsmanship to Shodō cultivate mindfulness through attention to detail in mind and body, through ritual refinement and practice. This creates the kind of transformation in which the small surpass the great.

Very different worlds of Shūji vs Shodō

Though both use a brush, a useful way to understand Shodō, or The Way of the Brush, is to compare it to its distant cousin Shūji, or Letter Practice.

Shūji is a subject taught in school, usually by a homeroom teacher, and generally only through Elementary or Middle School. Shodō is a lifetime study with no graduation. Shūji focused on the single dimension of legibility. Shodō is multi-dimensional, paying attention to calligraphic style, space dynamics, asymmetrical balance, the lifeline of the strokes, and the Four Treasures of Shodō (Brush, Paper, Sumi ink, and Inkstone).

Shūji aims at producing characters similar to printed fonts emphasizing the meaning of the words. Shodō focuses more on tone, beauty and balance of the characters, as a musician would do in performance.

Shūji seeks to standardize and eliminate individual habits. Shodō seeks to bring out the spirit of the characters and the character of the person holding the brush.

Shūji like its sister Penmanship, cannot compete with artificial intelligence and technology in terms of reproducing perfect letters. Shodō expresses human qualities which can never be reproduced by computers and technology.





Shodō can be many things, an art form, a method for mindfulness, way to decorate interiors, beautiful store signage, or in Zen a form of spiritual practice.

Shodō in Zen Buddhism

Zen makes interesting distinctions with Shodō and uses it in particular ways. The brush paintings of Zen Masters are actually referred to as Ink Traces (Bokuseki), the implication being that they are visual traces left by an enlightened mind, not a form of artwork. These Bokuseki are often brought out to display on special occasions such as in the alcove of a Tea Ceremony. They are not on permanent display, because it is considered that the Zen Master himself is present at the ceremony, with a message for the guests to ponder and discuss. The message usually refers to a Zen Kōan or parable for meditation, often something deep like the small fish swallows the big fish. At times Bokuseki reference themes and nature scenes from poetry, and may even appear with a Sumie or Ink Painting. These range from fierce images of the Bodhidharma or Founder of Zen, to simple brush impressions of seasonal things found in Nature, to humorous impressions of people and situations, often a reference to a well known Zen Parable. A common form appearing in Bokuseki is the Zen Circle or Ensō, an incomplete and imperfect circle representing the cyclical nature of life, and that Zen training starts with a Beginner's Mind and never ends. A famous example is the Ten Ox Herding Pictures, originating in 12th Century China, as a story depicting the ten stages of practice leading to enlightenment, and ultimately a return to daily life.

Shodō appears in Buddhism in another form of practice which involves copying the Sutras with a small brush (Shakyō). The Sutras are the scriptures of Buddhism, the words of Buddha as recalled by his disciples, which originally came from Sanskrit but were translated into Chinese and are still written that way. This provides monks and lay practitioners a way to concentrate the mind in a meditative state, and gradually reflect on the meaning of the teachings of the Buddha.

You do not need to be a monk or practicing Buddhist to enjoy or benefit from Shodō, even in these forms. Shodō did not originate with, but was rather adopted by Buddhist temples as a means of enhancing their practice and attaining enlightenment.

Shodō as a Liberal Art

Shodō was originally cultivated by the Literati, or educated class of enlightened thinkers who practiced the Five Excellences to cultivate character: Calligraphy, Painting, Poetry, Tea, and Martial Arts. In effect, Shodō is one of the original Asian Liberal Arts, and it could convey lessons in philosophy, poetry, history, art, and the humanities. In China it was required training and testing for civil servants and military leaders, leading to the expression, Mastery of Sword and Brush (Bunbu Ryōdō). The Japanese Samurai adopted Shodō along with Neo-Confucianism, although they also drew on other spiritual sources such as Zen, Shinto, Christianity, and even Mountain Shamanism in a typically Japanese syncretic approach to being spiritual but not religiously religious.

Calligraphy in Japan developed its on stream and calligraphic form in the poetry and calligraphy of the Heian Court. In the Heian Period (794~1185) the capital city of Japan was Heian-kyō, which is modern day Kyoto. The Poetry and Calligraphy of this period is considered to be quintessentially Japanese, and is still quite popular among Japanese people today. Other forms of Japanese literature include Haiku and Haiga (Poetry Paintings), which have a huge following today, though more as literature than as calligraphy practice.





Shodō as a Way from Mystery to Mastery

While Shodō can be appreciated from the outside for its beauty, literary, and poetic qualities, it is only through practice that you can move from Mystery to Mastery in understanding Shodō. Practice means learning from a teacher, making copies of Master works (Tehon), and challenging yourself to new heights through obtaining ranks and participating in Calligraphy competitions. The exposure to various styles of Calligraphy and the discipline of submitting your best work each month has a subtle effect on your mind, body, and character over time. It is said to work on you like Chinese medicine, bringing you into balance gradually over time, and without side effects.

The Tehon is like a mirror, for it reflects both the mind that you aspire to, and the mind that you are now. Much of your practice involves closing this gap. This process of copying masterworks is often misunderstood. The eye at first is very lazy at noticing detail, and the hand moves almost unconsciously by years of habit. It takes practice and feedback to be able to calm the monkey mind that thinks it knows, and create a state of mindfulness that can be expressed in the brush.

In the beginning the brush seems to have a mind of its own. Like an untamed horse it does what it pleases, and does not respond to your feeble commands. Moreover, it cannot be rushed or forced, because it magnifies every detail of your perception, mental and physical state. However, if you learn how to master the brush and work with quality materials, it becomes easier to see and easier to control. With so many variables in the materials and in the person holding the brush, there is always an element that is beyond your control, but over time this becomes not a mistake, but often a delightful discovery. Beginners barely glance at the Tehon, and then make a poor copy, often blaming their brush or materials. With Mastery you humbly learn from the brush and materials, and spend most of the time looking at the Tehon or the images it impresses you with, barely glancing at what you are writing. Even when you do original painting without a Tehon, you still draw on the images you create in your mind, and the resources you have learned in the past.

Shodō demands breath control, centered posture, full body engagement, and sensory imagination on a par with the best of classical and jazz musicians, so much so that even a short piece can leave you drenched in sweat, but full of energy and not fatigued. It is a fascinating world, which has much in common with music. Yet much of it remains shrouded in Mystery, due to language, cultural, and geographical barriers that keep it in isolation. My quest over nearly 5 decades is to serve as a guide to the wonderful world of Shodō, and bring it to its rightful place as one of the Five Excellences of the Asian Liberal Arts.

By William REED

感謝 GRATITUDE



Location: Yamamoto Noh Theater 山本能楽堂
〒540-0025 大阪府大阪市中央区徳井町1丁目3-6
Photographers: Xavier ANDUJAR, Angelo DI GENOVA & Geoffrey HUGEL
Author: Geoffrey HUGEL

The Yamamoto Noh Theater is located in the metropolis of Osaka.
A Noh theater that has existed for the past 93 years. Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the lord who built the Osaka Castle in the 16th century was a great admirer of the Noh. He liked it so much that he even took the stage himself. Thus, to prolong the pleasure as it was for the famous lord, this theater offers workshops and other introductions to traditional Japanese performing arts.





Ningyo Joruri is an art traveling through 500 years. This art combines the dramatic narration told by a Tayu, music played on the shamisen, and puppets which requires to be manipulated by three people for each.

The puppets, which weigh 6 kilos on the scales, are carved out of wood. The painting of the face is made with shell powder and the hair is made with real human hair. Inside the head is hollowed out to place a system of strings used to move the eyes, mouth or eyebrows. The body is completely gut to insert the arm. One of the puppeteers is in charge of the head and the left hand, the second of the right hand, and the third manages the legs and gives the puppet the power of walking.

Inside the head is hollowed out to place a system of strings used to move the eyes, mouth or eye-

brows. The body is completely gut to insert the arm. One of the puppeteers is in charge of the head and the left hand, the second of the right hand, and the third manages the legs and gives the puppet the power of walking.

The life breathed into these inanimate bodies thanks to the skill of the manipulators is such an amazing experience. Even so they are visible on stage, their presence is very quickly forgotten when you get caught up into the game.

Every day, at the Awa Jurobe Yashiki Puppet Theater and Museum in Tokushima, it is possible to attend two performances of Joruri.

Indeed, this is particularly interesting to see the processes of doll making and the handling systems on site. The work behind each performance can this way be better appreciated.





Saga Dainenbutsu Kyogen

In the enclosure of the Seiryō-ji Buddhist temple, soul of Arashiyama, it is possible to find a building hiding a stage. There are regular performances of Nenbutsu Kyogen, that should not be mistaken with the comic kyogen of the intermissions of the Noh. It's commonly said that the religious theme created forms as Buddhism interpretation. Each performance ends with a ceremony with a priest.

The actors, all men, masked and have no lines of text to say. Everything is done through movements and gestures, which are deliberately exaggerated to be explicit. At the back of the stage, three musicians set the tempo of the show, the rhythm of the gong, the drum and the flute.



The workshops of the Yamamoto Noh Theater in Osaka allow to appreciate the beauty of the centuries-old masks.

「暗き燈に民のよろこび秋祭」

“

*Dark lights,
people's joy,
autumn festival.*

”

山口誓子
YAMAGUCHI Seishi (1901-1994)





祭り MATSURI

Location: Osaka City 大阪市
〒540-0002 大阪府大阪市中央区大阪城1-1
Photographers: Xavier ANDUJAR, Angelo DI GENOVA & Geoffrey HUGEL
Author: Geoffrey HUGEL

Whatever is the season, festivals set the rhythm of Japanese life as a true metronome. These typical and popular festivals, which bring together people no matter the age or social status and origins took place for the first time several centuries ago, are landmarks of the current year. They are special occasions for the local people or the inhabitants of the town to celebrate a tradition that keeps going through time. Sometimes it is a whole year of preparation and rehearsals that are necessary for the festival to be celebrated in the most safe and smooth conditions.

Even if they are mostly associated with Buddhist or Shinto celebrations, there are matsuri to celebrate everything. For example, one can be held to pray for a good rice harvest or fertility, repelling demons or preventing disasters, or celebrating the birth of Buddha. There are thousands of them all over Japan and take place any time of the year.

Gion Matsuri (picture on the left)

Among the most famous festivals in the country, the Gion matsuri has a special place as it has taken place since 1200 years. The festival is held during the month of July and the whole city of Kyoto revolves in unison around these numerous celebrations. The highlight consists of a long procession of floats made of wood and ropes, entirely assembled by hand, decorated with the most beautiful ornaments from all over the world, and reaching a height of up to 25 metres. Beyond its appearance as a rolling gallery, it is above all a rite aimed at calming the deities responsible for the flooding of the Kamo River.

Tenjin Matsuri (picture on the right)

Another major festival is the Tenjin matsuri that takes place around the nearby city of Osaka. Two days of festivities under the protection of the God of studies and arts, marked by a procession of 3000 costumed extras and 100 floats, part of the procession taking the Okawa River under the glow of a great fireworks display that sets the sky on fire.

“ A colourful summer Yukata. The clip-clop of wooden Geta sandals. Generation to generation, Japanese communities pass on a tradition unique to their home town. ”

Some years ago, I visited the Toba Islands; a small archipelago to the south east of Kansai, with a close friend. I have many fond memories of the local island customs here, with one particularly humbling moment still vivid in my mind.

Towards the end of the second day before our return ferry to the mainland, I stumbled on a secluded beach behind a small rustic neighbourhood, empty but for a makeshift old bench occupied by an elderly grandmother, well into her 80s with beside her. She was singing sweetly a traditional folk song to the young girl, and accompanied by the serene lull of the waves, and the orange hue of the lowering sunset, the scene was beautiful.

This was to me at once both transition and permanence. A baton handed from one generation to another, perfectly preserving long-held traditions. To stumble into such a moment, and feel no need to document such a wonderful event in anything other than my old notebook, attests to how much this window into the daily island life here affected me. Reading back my notes, I now come to realise this transition and permanence serves as the perfect metaphor for the small communities on these islands and wider rural Japan.

I learned that the song that the old woman was teaching was a chant commonly sung at the local festivals in the region.

On Matsuri

Some communities sail fiery lanterns down the streams beside their rice fields. Some carry heavy wooden structures through the busy streets of the city, crowded with spectators instead of the bicycles and cars typically passing. Others open their houses and their rare, historic treasures for passing visitors to enjoy. The array of temporary events to experience in Japan is world class and can initially seem overwhelming, but each offers an authentic and unique insight into the local culture of their region.





Matsuri is the Japanese word for festival, but the term has come to incorporate a broad range of different events, hosted throughout Japan, throughout the year. To understand the evolution of the Japanese festival to the present day, it is helpful to look at these events as three distinct types of celebration; from the traditional, to the transitional, to the modern interpretation. While by no means an exhaustive list, for each of these categories, I'd like to introduce some of the better-known and lesser-known Matsuri which offer a deeper understanding of, and a rare insight into, the traditions and evolving customs of local Japan.



The traditional Matsuri

The most common form of Matsuri is that of the traditional spiritual ceremony, generally sponsored by a local temple or shrine. Much like this local spiritual institution, the annual town or village Matsuri is a source of bonding and pride for the local townspeople and plays an important role in the community. True to the duality of being both a somber spiritual event and also a celebration, some are quiet and contemplative, others loud and lively, but most traditional Japanese Matsuri typically consist of a number of key elements:

Mikoshi Shrine – A sacred palanquin, or portable shrine, carried on the participants shoulders to transport the deity of the hosting Shrine to its temporary home during the event.

Kakegoe chanting – A group of volunteers carry the Mikoshi on their shoulders, and can typically be heard chanting the phrase Wasshoi while transporting the extremely heavy object. The chant is instantly recognizable, and builds the tension and excitement of the event.

Dashi (and Yatai) – These are the main kind of festival float on show at Matsuri, pulled along the parade route with ropes. It is common for participants to sit atop certain Dashi floats, which are sometimes adorned with elegant accoutrements such as lanterns or dolls.

Yatai (the other form) – another core staple of traditional Matsuri are mobile food stalls or carts, where merchants offer snacks, drinks and entertainment for children.

By Adam DOWNHAM



精神 S P I R I T



Location: Konkai-Kōmyō-ji Temple くら谷 金戒光明寺
〒606-8331 京都府京都市左京区黒谷町121
Photographers: Angelo DI GENOVA & Geoffrey HUGEL
Author: Geoffrey HUGEL

If Japanese castles resist admirably through the passing time, what can be said about the samurai who served and gave his life to protect them? Well, their caste was abolished during the Meiji revolution a century and a half ago, as they were no longer considered useful along modern society.

However, their spirit still survives today through bushido. This "warrior's way of living" is a moral code with principles strongly inspired by Zen, such as stoic endurance, and Shinto values such as respect for the fatherland and the Emperor.



武士道 BUSHIDO



Some martial arts can be inspired based on this code, like kendo or iaido. Practitioners are then the heirs of the technical know-how and spirituality of the samurai.

Attending a demonstration by Master Takeda, one of the greatest specialists in iaido, was an unique and unforgettable experience. His piercing gaze betrayed absolute confidence in his skills. He undeniably possesses a strong aura that forces respect.

The straw bales are ready for a Battodo session, the art of cutting. He moves forward taking tiny steps, now alone in his own world, concentration is at its peak. Then, in a fraction of a second, he draws his katana and comes

to cut once, then twice the log in front of him. The speed and precision of the movements is impressive and the contrast between the approach and withdrawal phases, which are very slow for the first phase and very fast for the cutting phase is breathtaking.

The sword is now in its sheath. And no doubt that after this demonstration, the soul and the spirit of samurai is still alive in some men to perpetuate the legend.



From the photographs of the late 19th century, Kurosawa masterpieces like “Seven Samurai”, classic manga like “Lone Wolf and Cub”, to videogames like the wildly popular “Ghost of Tsushima”, stoic samurai warriors have captured the public imagination for as long as we have known about Japan.

Their razor-sharp swords, distinctive armour, and mysterious codes of conduct even influenced iconic Hollywood movies like Star Wars. But how much do we really know about the samurai and their way of life, and what lessons can we learn from this ancient warrior class?

“The Way of the Horse and Bow”

The samurai appeared as a hereditary military class in the Kamakura period (1185-1333). Serving the Shogun, they were entrusted with the security of estates across Japan. Samurai were expected to be model warriors and citizens and set an example for the common people to live up to.

As a professional warrior class the samurai were well armed, and the sword played a key part in their daily life. The two swords thrust into their belts were undeniable symbols of their social status. But for a significant portion of Japanese history, archery was considered the most vital martial skill for the samurai, and the way of the warrior was even referred to as kyuba-no-michi "the way of the horse and bow".

Ogasawara-ryu is a school of etiquette, archery, and horsemanship founded during the Kamakura period and still practiced today. For the samurai, learning the way of the bow began with first mastering the body and mind through the practice of simple movements such as sitting, standing, walking, and bowing.

“The martial way begins and ends with courtesy.”

As adults we tend to think we already know how to walk but looking around on any busy street you can see all kinds of gait, many of which are inefficient. Posture with slouched shoulders, head jutted forward, and toes splayed outwards does nothing to display confidence. The samurai learned simple lessons such as standing straight with their ears above their shoulders, walking with feet straight, sitting as if slowly sinking in water, and standing as if smoke rising from a fire.

Paying constant attention to the body and eliminating unnecessary movement led to good posture and movements that were efficient, effective, and graceful. For the pragmatic samurai understanding the reasons behind each movement was also very important, and samurai culture lacks any overly showy or fancy movements.

This mindful thinking about the body and the environment around fitted very well with a new kind of Buddhism that was brought to Japan during the Kamakura period. It also confronted an issue that the samurai faced daily as professional warriors – death.

Zen and the Samurai Mind

Samurai society was heavily influenced by Confucian thought which provided a rigid social hierarchy to follow. Respect for parents and ancestors, one’s lord and domain, and an acceptance of the role laid out for you by heaven were key tenets for the warrior class. The mental state of the samurai however was essentially defined by Buddhism.

Buddhism came to Japan around the 6th century, but it wasn’t until the Kamakura period that Zen was introduced. With a strong emphasis on dhyāna, the meditative training of awareness and equanimity, Zen suited the mentality of the samurai well. The shedding of attachment and realization that existence is essentially empty also reconciled the constant problem of death.

“It is the very mind itself that leads the mind astray - of the mind, do not be mindless”

In the Soto school of Buddhism, a practice called shikantaza “just sitting” gives some insight into the benefits the samurai may have felt from practicing Zen. Sitting cross-legged on a cushion, posture erect, eyes cast downwards, the practitioner simply follows their breath in and out, allowing thoughts to pass by like clouds blown across the sky.

By avoiding attachment to thoughts, it is possible to observe the workings of the mind, and with practice eventually to control these thoughts as they arise. With no attachment or cognition, it is possible to simply react to situations as they unfold. The metaphor of the moon reflected perfectly on clear water is often used to describe this heightened but unagitated state of mind.

“The muddy creek does not reflect the light of the moon.”

This is not to say that all samurai practiced meditation, and the role of Zen in the martial arts has been overplayed. Some samurai found use for the older esoteric sects of Buddhism such as Shingon and Tendai, using the mudra and Sanskrit seed syllables called bonji as protective magical charms.

Katori Shinto-ryu, one of the oldest schools of Japanese martial arts, incorporates the esoteric Buddhist practice of kuji – nine magical signs which with practice can be quickly made with the practitioner’s hands. Instead of requiring hours of meditation the samurai could fast track themselves to the required mental state much as modern sports players do by performing a small gesture or ritual before making a set play.

Despite calling on the various kami and Buddhist deities for assistance, the samurai were highly practical with an understanding that their own actions alone would determine their fate. Miyamoto Musashi, one of Japan’s most famous swordsmen made this clear in his treatise Dokkodo.

“Respect the gods and buddhas, but do not rely on them.”

The samurai found a way to consolidate the esoteric and psychological teachings of Buddhism into their daily practice as warriors. With a lack of scientific explanation, metaphors from Buddhism were used to explain the states of mind the samurai might find himself in when confronted with an enemy or involved in a battle. This was nowhere more sharply realized than in the way of the sword.

“The Way of the Sword”

Towards the end of the Sengoku period (1467-1615) samurai society began to place more importance on the sword as their weapon of choice, and as the peacetime of the Edo period (1603-1868) began, hundreds of schools of swordsmanship appeared around the country.

These martial arts largely derived from a few progenitor schools founded in the mid to late Sengoku period by samurai who had transcendental experiences at religious sites like shrines and temples. Legends of long nosed demons called Tengu instructing warriors on secret techniques, swallows being slashed in two mid-flight, and other fantastical stories pervaded adding a layer of mystery and the supernatural.

These schools broke into subbranches over time and proliferated all over the country. Masterless samurai called ronin sometimes brought their martial skills to the attention of a powerful lord to try and secure employment. Other samurai were invited by the lord to teach their skills in a particular domain. Yet others came up with their own innovations founding their own schools.

Each school had its own techniques and philosophy, and the majority were operated much like secret societies requiring the signing of a secret oath called kishomon to join. The oath often made promises related to avoiding slandering one's teacher, fighting other schools, and revealing secrets learned, accompanied by a clause outlining the Buddhist and Shinto deities that would offer punishment if the vow were broken. The document was sealed with blood to show the seriousness of the student.

As with etiquette and archery, the samurai intended to make movements that were efficient, effective, and graceful. As a result, traditional Japanese swordsmanship is rarely flashy and uses only the bare minimum of movement. Twirling swords, high kicks, and exaggerated poses have no place in true Japanese swordsmanship.

Practice of the sword was intended more than anything to cultivate the mind. Through intense practice and extreme concentration, the samurai hoped to attain the state of munen-muso, free from attachment, preconception, and able to respond instantly.

“Polish and sharpen your beloved sword, secure it firmly into its scabbard, say nor do nothing rude or offensive, always have correct manners, and never draw your sword.”

The martial arts of the samurai were a system of education for a warrior class, intended to create better human beings and model citizens. As a result, all traditional schools frowned on wanton killing, and in the many writings left behind by the samurai one thread remains clear – that sword are not to be brandished in anger.

To be a cultured gentleman and a model to the other merchants and peasant classes, strength alone was not enough. It was for this reason that the samurai were also encouraged to put effort into learning the cultural arts – the way of the brush.

“The Way of the Brush”

Samurai of the early Edo period had lived through bloody conflicts of the Sengoku period and had to adjust to the new peace under the Tokugawa Shogunate. Alongside the martial arts practice of calligraphy, the tea ceremony, flower arranging, poetry, incense appreciation, noh theatre and many other arts flourished, and to be seen as a cultured gentleman it was necessary to have knowledge of bunbu ryodo, both the sword and the brush.

“As a samurai, I must strengthen my character; as a human being I must perfect my spirit.”

The martial and cultural arts place importance on the learning of kata, prearranged forms that impart not only the basic movements of the school, but also the mental state with which they are supposed to be performed.

Learning the cultural arts was much the same as the martial arts and required the samurai to progress through the stages of shu, ha, ri - literally to obey, detach, and leave. At first the student must simply copy the teacher without question. Traditional Japanese teaching methods mainly consisted of mitori geiko (learning by watching), with hardly any explanation offered.

Once the basics have been learned the student experiments by applying the techniques, learning what his physicality allows and how to ingrain the essence of the school into his being. Finally, the student departs from the model of the teacher completely having absorbed the teachings fully. This brings the student back full circle once more concentrating on the basics – the most fundamentally important part of any art, never forgetting shoshin-no-shin, the mind of the beginner.



The cultural and martial arts were two wheels of a cart for the samurai, and it was inconceivable to practice only one without cultivating the other. The symbiotic relationship between the two not only developed individuals of great character and resolve, but also warriors with practical skills that could contribute not only to the defence of, but also the development of society.

The Samurai and Death

“The way of the samurai is death.”

So spoke Yamamoto Tsunetomo, a retainer of the Saga domain in the late Edo period. Disgruntled with what he saw as the softening of the warrior class since the end of the Sengoku period, he narrated a series of aphorisms to a young disciple who compiled them into a work called “Hagakure”.

The samurai were certainly well acquainted with their own mortality, whether through fighting in actual wars as in the Sengoku period, or simply by being at the mercy of their lord – who could simply order them to end their life by slicing open their own stomach in the seppuku ritual.

This is not to say that samurai should be ready to die easily or throw their lives away, but rather come to terms with mortality and the fact that death could come at any time. Living in this way freed the samurai to act with volition, live a life of meaning, and if the time came have no fear in the face of the inevitable.

To cultivate this mindset required dedication and continuous effort, and the martial, cultural, and spiritual practices of the samurai, if practiced with sincerity, could lead to such an elevated state of mind. This mentality has much in common with the western stoic school of thought, and far from being merely fatalistic, the mindset it produces is one of clarity, rational decision, and action unfettered by the distractions of the untrained mind.

The Samurai Mind Today

Japan closed its borders to the outside world for more than 200 years during the Edo period, creating a unique environment for the culture of the samurai to grow with little outside influence. The martial and cultural arts and the spiritual practices of the samurai have survived until today, and dedicated students and teachers are keeping the traditions of old Japan alive for future generations.





There are close to 100 schools of archery, swordsmanship, spear, jujutsu, and other martial arts such as the sickle and chain weapon kusarigama, or shuriken still being practiced in Japan today. These are joined by kendo, judo, kyudo, and the other so called gendai budo, arts which were created after the abolition of the samurai class following the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

Tea ceremony, flower arranging, incense appreciation, and many other traditional arts are also still practiced widely, each giving deep insights into the way of the samurai, and allowing us to directly experience their movements and mindset better than any history book ever could.

These are living traditions passed down through the generations over hundreds of years like the flow of a river. While the banks might become narrower in places, sometimes deep or shallow, occasionally parted by rocks, the essence of the mind that practices them is the same even though the times they are practiced in have changed.

For those of us today living in a busy modern society, studying the samurai mind can give us insights into our posture, attention, focus, and concentration, as well as fostering the determination needed to carry out our goals to the fullest.

In the mid-1500s, lord Tadayoshi of the Shimadzu clan left a treatise for his samurai on the ideal daily behaviour of a warrior. His opening words offer the following caution.

“Listening to or repeating the wisdom of old is useless without action.”

We need to act, not just mull over the words of the samurai of old. What better place to do this than in Japan itself, learning from the traditions that the samurai themselves created and studied.

by Alex BRADSHAW



鍛造

鍛造 THE FORGES



Location: Futuno-Masataka Forge 布都正崇鍛刀場
〒632-0092 奈良県天理市小田中町16
Photographer: Angelo DI GENOVA
Author: Angelo DI GENOVA

“ From the flames is born the material. From concentration is born the object.
Whether for katana or kitchen knives, perfection exists only in the precision
of the craftsmen's gestures. ”

Forging a blade

Japan has a strong reputation when it comes to forging blades. When we think about the Katana of samurai, what comes in mind of everyone immediately is actually the sharpness of the blade. The temperatures reached in Japanese furnaces made possible to obtain alloys of very high quality. It is possible to imagine the workload involved to forge a katana when visiting the Futuno-Masataka Forge in Tenri, around the south of Nara. In the stifling heat emanating from the blaze, the craftsman works the steel brick to remove impurities and create specific layers until a soft core is obtained covered with hard steel.

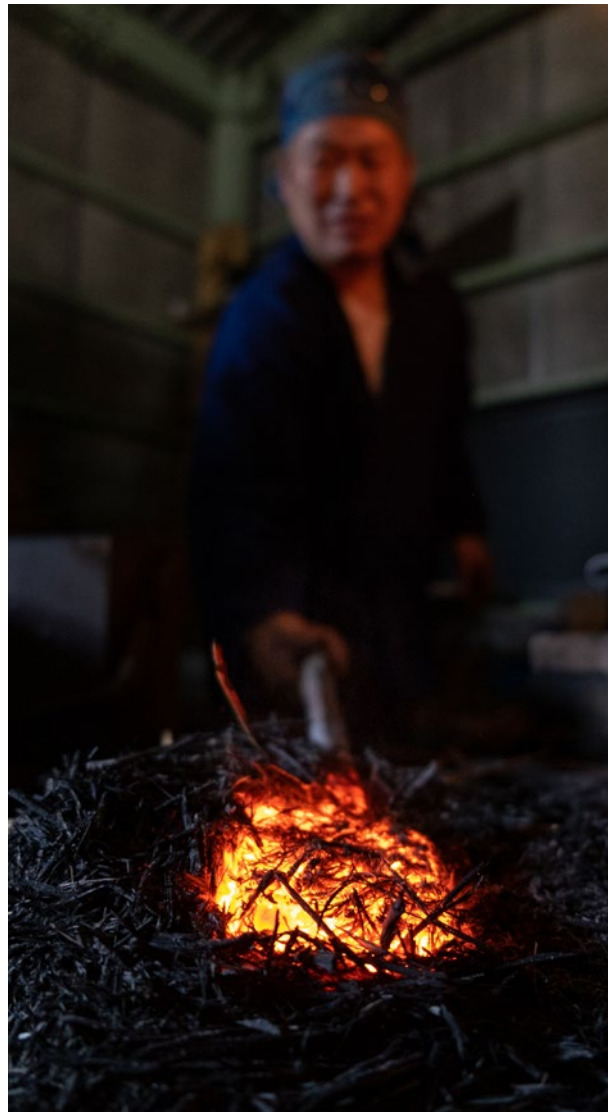




Forging the knives

When it comes to kitchen knives, Japan definitely reaches a really high level in matters of quality especially in Sakai. This city is today the traditional heart of the craft techniques of knife forging. Old forges are still scattered throughout the city.

It is possible to appreciate the techniques and knowhow by paying a visit to the Sakai City Traditional Crafts Museum where magnificent knives are displayed, but also all sorts of handicrafts made in the surrounding area.





城 CASTLES



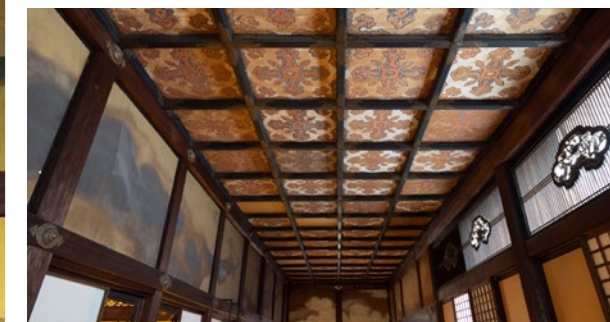
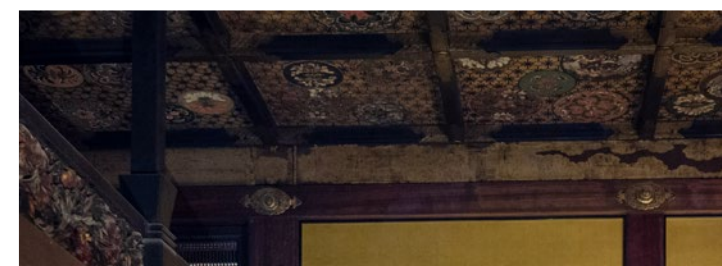
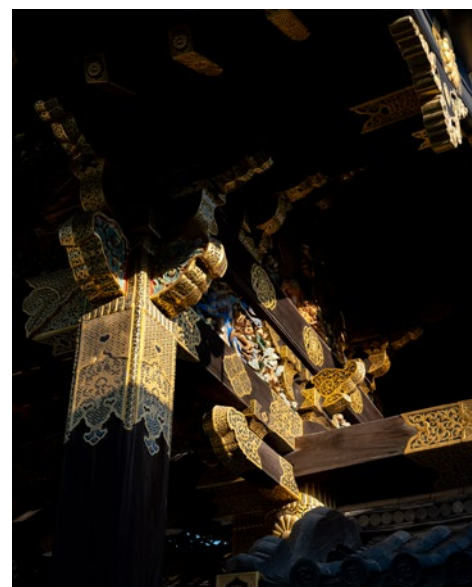
Location: Nijo-jo Castle 元離宮二条城
〒604-8301 京都府京都市中京区二条通堀川西入二条城町541
Photographers: Angelo DI GENOVA & Geoffrey HUGEL
Author: Geoffrey HUGEL



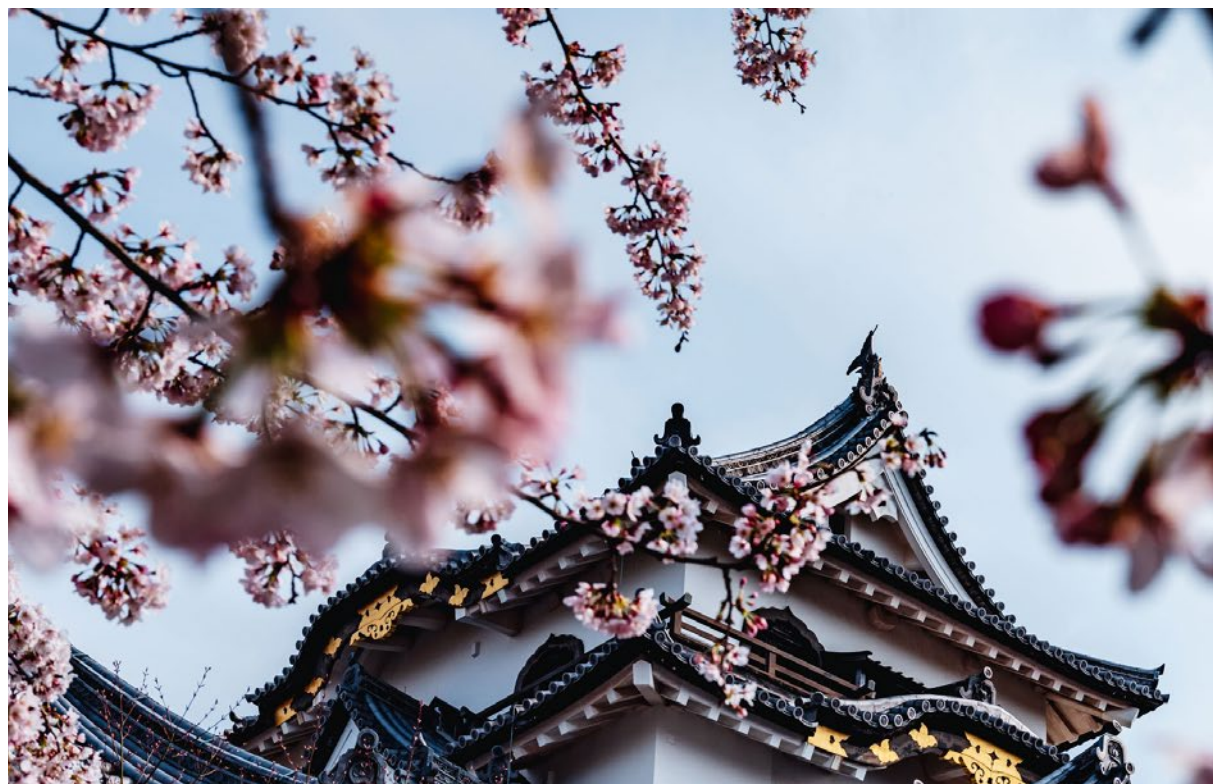
Entering the grounds of a Japanese castle is always a solemn moment for me. Is it for the beauty of the place, or the whole historic story behind the place? Well, I would probably say a bit of both. But in a more specific way, it is for the dungeons and their majesty that always fascinate me. It actually means so much to me that this is most of the time a reason for me to choose a city to travel to.

A castle can be considered as the symbol of a city, the heart and the soul of it I might say. It is the pride of its inhabitants, who in the past witnessed it as a protection, and who today see it as a proof of the past, that needs to be preserved for the future generations. Whether original structures have to be restored or re-built exactly as they used to be, they still seem to have an important place into our society after all.

Originally intended to be as impregnable as possible, a series of obstacles were built to block the paths in order to keep the dungeon and the Shogun safe. One or two large enclosures with impassable walls, often with a moat, large fortified gates, a few defensive turrets here and there, stairs with irregular steps, dead-ends, and other hidden traps. The whole structure was built with a difference in height as the fortresses are often perched high up on a small hill to dominate the city and have an unobstructed view of the surroundings, to impress the armies of other samurai enemies, to show off its power and wealth.



NOWADAYS, **THE PATH** IS ALL MARKED
OUT AND FORTUNATELY
WITHOUT ANY OBSTACLES TO AVOID
IF YOU WISH **TO STAY ALIVE!**



Hikone Castle

Last but not least, a word about Hikone and his stylish little castle laid on the shores of Lake Biwa. It is a very nice architectural achievement, coupled with an original design, which is worth the travel. It is also one of the few fortresses to be classified as a national treasure, just like Himeji.

Himeji Castle

Although even if they have many points in common, they are different enough from one to another to pay a visit to the fortresses without getting tired of it, quite the contrary. Among the most beautiful representatives, it is impossible not to mention the well famous Himeji, the majestic white immaculate fortress is one of the oldest and best preserved medieval structures. The tangle of its walls and buildings make this labyrinth an astonishing and unmissable place. In fact, it is not surprising that the place is used regularly to be featured in the scene of film shoots.

Nijo-jo Castle

Also worth to be mentioned on this list, the atypical Nijo-jo Castle in Kyoto, and its Ninomaru Palace, home of the Shogun in the ancient capital Heian. The fortress is particularly famous for its nightingale floor which, through the friction of nails on other metal parts, emits a sound similar to the song of a nightingale as soon as you step on it, making it impossible for spies and assassins to sneak in. The interior is magnificent, with many rooms becoming more and more decorated as you sink inside. Unfortunately no more dungeon as it was destroyed more than two centuries ago and has never been rebuilt since.



“

To reach the final objective, there will be some steps left to take through the vegetation of cherry, maple and pine trees.

”

Throughout Japanese history, the Kansai area was one of the most contested regions of all, with various warlords all vying for the valuable lands and staking out their battle won territories with protective castles. Many were simple Yama-jiro, hilltop fortresses built on mountain peaks shaved flat to form baileys and surrounded by trenches, earthworks, gates and palisades. They featured guard houses, living quarters, kitchens, stables and defensive watchtowers. As warfare increased, so too did the size, the role and the complexity of the samurai castle. Yama-jiro became bigger and more elaborate, Hirayama-jiro, larger castles built on hills and the flat-lands around the base, and the larger, grander Hira-jiro, highly fortified castles built on plains were developed and refined.

Japanese castles were more than just military installations, they were symbols of authority, and as such they were beautifully constructed, possessing both form and function. No two castles are the same, the positioning, the layout, the structural design of the keeps, watchtowers, gates and palaces, and many of the defensive devices differed greatly too. Indeed, the samurai were proud of their military, and their aesthetic senses. Most castle visitors tend to focus only on the iconic tenshu, the tower keeps, completely misunderstanding that the keep is not the castle! A castle is not a building, but a fortified location, consisting of moats, walls, gates and structures. Thousands of castles once dotted the Kansai landscape. Some were destroyed in battle or were simply abandoned when no longer needed. After 1590 when the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi gained control of the nation, there were 204 active domains, with most daimyo warlords possessing one or two major castles and numerous smaller castles to protect their fiefs. Hideyoshi ruled that only the daimyo under his direct command be allowed castles, forcing many warlords to abandon their fortifications. In the early 1600's the Tokugawa clan became dominant, and a similar law, the Ikkoku Ichijo rei, permitted only one castle per domain, and so many more castles were discarded. Others were destroyed by earthquake or typhoon, from lightning strikes and accidental fire, and so slowly but surely, numbers were reduced.

In 1868, the 260-year reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate collapsed and national control was restored to the Emperor Meiji. Financially unable to maintain the upkeep of these feudal era structures, many castles were demolished. Many surviving castles were destroyed during WW2 aerial bombing. Thankfully, some of the more historically important and most fascinating castles can be found in the Kansai region. Here are a few Must-See locations;



National Treasure Himeji Castle

Graceful, stunning, iconic! Hyogo Prefecture's National Treasure Himeji Castle is the largest and best preserved of the 12 original remaining castle keeps. The elegant white plaster covered main tower complex is said to resemble an egret taking flight, hence Himeji Castle being called Shirasagi-Jo, or "White Egret Castle".

Completed in 1609 following the Battle of Sekigahara, Himeji's keep stands 31.5 meters high atop a 14.85 meter stone base. The main keep complex is a box shape configuration with the main tower connected via defensive corridors to three smaller sub-keeps around a small central courtyard. Himeji has the most remaining structures of any castle. The tower keep was designated a National Treasure in 1931, while 74 other structures are Nationally Important Cultural Properties. Himeji Castle and Nara's Horyu-ji Temple became Japans' first World Cultural Heritage sites in 1993. Give yourself plenty of time to explore the keep, turrets, walls and moats of this magnificent castle.

Nijo-jo Castle, The Shogun's National Treasure

Nijo-jo Castle in central Kyoto City was built by Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1603, and completed in time for his investment as Shogun. Nijo-jo served as the Shogun's official lodgings in the capital, the venue for Kyoto's political rituals, to protect the Imperial family and from 1884 as the Imperial

Villa.

This castle saw the rise and the fall of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Tokugawa Ieyasu was invested as Shogun, and 14 generations later, the last Shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, resigned his post here in 1867, restoring control of the nation to Emperor Meiji, ending the feudal period.

Nijo-jo Castle's five-story tower keep, from which the Emperor enjoyed views of Kyoto, was destroyed by lightning in 1750, and only the stone base remains. Instead, Nijo-jo's exquisite gardens, stunning gates and the Ni-no-Maru Palace are the focal points. The elegant palace features over 30 rooms including the most splendid O-hiroma, formal audience chambers, where the lord met with his vassals. Over 3,600 gold-leaf gilded partitions inside the lavishly decorated palace featured delicate artworks painted directly onto the gold, and 1,016 of these works are listed as Important Cultural Properties.

Six of Nijo-jo's remaining buildings have National Treasure status, another 22 structures including the main gates and turrets are Important Cultural Properties. Nijo-jo Castle's Karamon gate with its glittering gold fittings and exquisitely carved is an iconic Kyoto scene and a particularly popular photographic spot. The castle was registered as a World Cultural Heritage site in 1994.

Hikone Castle, Saved by Imperial Decree

While most castles were slated for demolition at the end of the feudal period in 1868, Hikone Castle was spared from destruction on the orders of Emperor Meiji, who, having seen it while passing through the Hikone area, considered it beautiful enough to warrant preservation.

Hikone Castle now remains as one of just five National Treasure keeps. The hilltop castle was constructed on the orders of Ii Naomasa, awarded the region for his efforts in the Battle of Sekigahara. Naomasa later died of wounds sustained at Sekigahara, and so his sons oversaw the completion.

A number of other structures classified Important National Cultural assets also remain, including the Tenbin Yagura Turret, the Nishi-no-maru Sanju Yagura, the Taikomon Turret, and the original stables. The extensive Genkyu-en and Rakuraku-en daimyo gardens are beautiful year round, and feature a number of traditional structures and tea houses, along with one of the few remaining castle lord's residences.

Should attackers ever make it as far as the modern ticket office, there were more surprises in store. On entry, the sloping path to the main bailey looks gentle, almost easy, however the design is deceptive. Created to hinder the advance of intruders, the pacing distance and height of each step varies, making it difficult to maintain momentum, particularly for heavily armored warriors under combat conditions.

At the top of the slope, attackers would find themselves confined to a deep defensive trench below the Rokabashi Bridge, then make three left turns spiraling up heavily guarded ramparts to cross the bridge, all under full view of the wide Tembin Watchtower. The bridge was collapsible, effectively cutting off access to the main central bailey.

Hikone keep's interior design using odd-shaped timber beams is of great interest, particularly as it was constructed from the recycled remains of nearby Otsu Castle's keep, damaged during a battle. Below the castle is a fascinating museum designed to resemble the lord's mansion, dedicated to the ruling Ii clan, and containing original suits of armor, weapons and items used by the warrior family. Shiga Prefectures' Hikone Castle is ideal for understanding samurai castle defenses.

Sasayama Castle, Masterpiece of Todo Takatora

Sasayama Castle, also known as Kiriga-Jo (Paulownia Castle), is a flatland castle in Hyogo Prefecture's Tamba region. In 1609, Tokugawa Ieyasu ordered 20 daimyo to complete the entire complex within six months, as it was to be used as a stepping-stone in Ieyasu's desire to attack

Osaka.

Todo Takatora, one of the foremost samurai castle architects of all time, was responsible for the simple yet highly effective design and impressive stone walls. The three main gates are well positioned, and surrounded by rare Umadashi, special defensive ramparts around the gates. Sasayama had a tower keep base built, however a keep was never constructed. Instead, two three-story yagura watchtowers and 13 two-story watchtowers protected it. One story regarding the lack of a tower keep was because Sasayama was so well designed, the Shogun Ieyasu feared that it could be used against him if ever taken. In truth, plans for the keep were abandoned as Ieyasu was desperate to wipe out the rival Toyotomi clan in Osaka and wanted to commence construction of Nagoya Castle.

Sasayama Castle was demolished in 1871 after the feudal period, however the O-shoin, main palace building, survived until 1944, before being gutted by an accidental fire. The palace was reconstructed in 2000 using old photos and architecture plans of Kyoto's Nijo-jo and Nagoya Castle's palaces. Parts of the old castle town still also exist, along with a number of traditional samurai houses now preserved by the local government.

Takeda Castle, The Castle In The Air

At certain times of the year when the weather conditions are right, the basin surrounding the ruins of 353 meter high Takeda Castle fills with fog, leaving only the mountaintop and the stone hewn ruins of Takeda Castle peeking out above, giving it the image of floating in the clouds. Built around 1443, today only the stone wall ruins remain, and so Takeda Castle is known as the Machu Pichu of Japan.

Designated one of the Top 100 Castles of Japan, Takeda Castle was built by shaving the mountain tops and ridges flat to form baileys, and carved to create steep sides, which were then encased in walls of stone sourced from local mountains, cut and carried up the steep, narrow paths and set by hand. This, like all other castles, was done without bulldozers, cranes or trucks to assist. Discover your inner Indy Jones exploring the ruins of Hyogo Prefecture's Takeda Castle.

The Gravestones of Fukuchiyama Castle

Fukuchiyama Castle was built by the warlord Akechi Mitsuhide on the orders of his liege lord, the first of the national unifiers, warlord Oda Nobunaga in 1579. Mitsuhide chose the site well, utilizing a large hill in the middle of the Fukuchiyama Basin surrounded by the natural moats of the Yuragawa River.

Three years after completing Fukuchiyama, Mitsuhide betrayed Nobunaga, killing him in 1582. The reasons why remain one of histories greatest mysteries. Fukuchiyama remains one of his greatest achievements.

Castles had to be constructed in great haste, lest the enemy attacked before completion, and in his rush to get Fukuchiyama Castle done, Mitsuhide used gravestones from local temples and stone lantern bases in the keep's stone support. Over 500 such stones can be seen within the walls. Demolished after the Edo period, Fukuchiyama's keep was reconstructed in 1986, and now serves as a fascinating museum, proclaimed one of the extended Top 100 Castles of Japan.

Kansai's Castles

The Kansai region is literally covered in castles and castle sites, most towns have at least one if not more sites. Each castle differs in size, design and each has a wonderful story to tell. This list barely scratches the surface, but provides a starting point to see and discover the power, the might, and the creative spirit of the samurai.

by Chris GLENN





侘 び 寂 び W A B I S A B I



Initially consumed for its medicinal virtues, tea quickly became the national drink across Japan. In the west part of the world, matcha green tea is best known for the tea ceremony, a ritual that seems as fascinating as it is mysterious. Not any art can symbolise the spirit of wabi-sabi as much as the way of the tea ceremony and all the traditional codes, erected by Sen no Rikyu, an emblematic tea master from Sakai, in the south of Osaka.



茶道 TEA CEREMONY



Location: Zuiho-in Temple 瑞峯院
〒603-8231 京都府京都市北区紫野大徳寺町81
Photographers: Angelo DI GENOVA & Geoffrey HUGEL
Author: Geoffrey HUGEL

To appreciate the art of drinking tea, we were welcomed at the Zuiho-in temple in the Daitoku-ji complex in Kyoto. As soon as we entered his lair, another world opened up to us. A first garden welcomes us with its angular path. The function is to make a break and invite the visitor to forget the frenzy of the outside world. After taking off your shoes, it is time to contemplate the dry garden, created by the famous landscape artist Shigemori Mirei. The scene depicted is the replica of a sacred mountain, a long, thin peninsula, a rough sea and a lonesome island.

In an adjacent room, the priest Maeda, octogenarian, has been preparing tea for six decades. The master of the wooden house drinks some of the breuvage every morning with his family. The light timidly shines through the window and it is in a hushed atmosphere that I will be able to enjoy its benefits.

Invited first to eat a small pastry, which has to prepare the palate and counter the bitterness of the tea, I watch my host repeating a thousand times the precise and unchanged gestures of this ceremony. A spatula of matcha tea, a ladle of hot water and a few beats of the whip later, I was eventually able to receive the precious beverage. The recipe seems simple but everything is codified and pushed to the extreme.

It's not just about drinking tea. It is above all a bubble where you forget your problems. Surrounded by relaxing nature and a contemplative garden, there is now neither past nor future. It is a unique moment where nothing else matters, and which will remain engraved for eternity.

If there is a single word that sums up an immediately recognizable Japanese aesthetic, it is probably the word “wabi-sabi”. Easy to remember, those rhyming words are familiar to anyone who has an interest in Japan and Japanese art, and immediately conjure images of rock gardens, moss, a roughly made tea-bowl - the Japan many come from all around the world to experience first hand. Literally, the expression is made up of two words, “wabi”, meaning originally loneliness but later used to refer to a simple, subdued beauty, and “sabi”, which means the beauty that comes with age, or patina. But ask most Japanese what “wabi-sabi” actually means, and you will most likely be answered with little more than a shrug. Not because nobody knows, but because it is so difficult to put into words. Tellingly, in a recent interview with a Japanese writer, Hosai Matsubayashi, the 16th generation in his family to head the Asahiyaki pottery in Uji, Kyoto, described wabi-sabi as a kind of “primitive beauty”, finding it easier to use the English word, “primitive”. Asahiyaki was founded by the artist and aristocrat Kobori Enshu in around 1600, specifically to support the booming trend for the tea-ceremony at the beginning of the Edo period. The notions of “wabi” and “sabi” had already been around for centuries, but Enshu is said to have fixed the expression “wabi-sabi” in the Japanese lexicon, and from the outset the Asahiyaki was given the aesthetic “kirei-sabi” as its core aesthetic - a slightly more decorative extension of the original wabi-sabi idea. The pottery maintains that aesthetic to this day. So if anyone knows what wabi-sabi means it ought to be Matsubayashi. And yet when asked to explain by a Japanese interviewer, he used an English word.

In many ways, the fact that it is almost impossible to pin down wabi-sabi is in itself the very essence of wabi-sabi, and with it many other elements of Japanese thought, as well. Several years ago, I was in the mountains in Tokushima enjoying a Korean barbecue dinner with a group of Japanese friends that included a senior Yamabushi - a mountain ascetic monk. The fact that we were all eating a dinner of grilled beef is in itself a nice example of how inconsistent and fluid things can be in Japan. Traditionally Yamabushi don't eat meat, and yet here we were enjoying a Korean barbecue and beer together. As we ate, we were asking our Yamabushi friend about shugendo and the Yamabushi way, and he turned to me with a big grin and said “You'll never get it, you think too much!” There was a burst of laughter around the table - that certainly put me in my place! But it says a lot about the Japanese way of thinking about things. Where we in the west are conditioned from a young age to try to compartmentalize and understand things with logic, Japanese thought has actively



avoided that logic until very recently, finding it human-centric and limiting, and has preferred a more natural, fluid way of understanding things.

To explain something of how the wabi-sabi aesthetic came about, most Japanese writers go back to the long prehistoric Jomon period that extends from 14,000 to 300 BCE. Japan was a hunter-gatherer society at that point, and it is thought there was limited horticulture. But unusually for hunter-gatherer societies, the Jomon Japanese produced sophisticated and elaborate pottery, which is usually associated with agriculture-based societies that stay in one place, since pottery is heavy and takes time to produce. It is thought that the reason the Jomon societies managed to settle while maintaining a hunter-gatherer lifestyle was that Japan was rich in food sources, so the Jomon were able to build settlements while at the same time as living from what nature provided, rather than growing food for themselves. This rich and abundant nature became the focus of Japanese spirituality and religion, as it did in many societies around the world at the same time. But unlike other countries, in Japan that focus has remained at the core of much thought and philosophy throughout history, and to a certain extent still remains so today. The Japanese Shinto faith, despite having been used at various points for political and social ends, is principally a nature-based belief system, something like a mix of animism similar to the ancient Celtic or Native American beliefs, which says there are “kami” - gods or spirits - within all things, and polytheism much like Hinduism.

The worship of nature naturally led to a sensitivity to the changes in the seasons, and the impermanence of life. Those are themes common among artists and writers around the world, but in Japan they were to become a central part of understanding the world, and that thought began to be reflected in art works. In 538 (or 552) Buddhism was introduced to Japan from Korea, and with it art and culture began to flourish in Japan. The history of Buddhism in Japan is complex, but one of the most important concepts, which was to go on to heavily influence Japanese aesthetic, was the concept of “ku”, and the Heart Sutra. The Heart Sutra says that all things are empty, and constantly changing, which reinforced the understanding of transience the Japanese already had in their view of nature. As Buddhism spread, and Japanese society became more sophisticated, so contact with the outside world increased. In 758 the Great Buddha Hall at Todai-ji was opened, and was to remain the largest wooden structure in the world right up until 1998. And it held the largest bronze statue in the world, the great Buddha. It is said that people travelled from all over the world along the Silk Road for the opening of the Great Buddha Hall, and the central courtyard was the venue for one of the largest international festivals of music and prayer the world had ever seen. Certainly, by this time Japan was well aware of cultures and thought from around the world. But where the continent and cultures further west focussed on solid, man-made expressions showing off man’s ability to capture nature in all its perfection, the Japanese preferred to work with less concrete materials that changed over time, mainly wood and paper. The Great Buddha at Nara and its counterpart in Kamakura are anomalies - there are very few bronze or stone art works in Japan. Certainly the Japanese were technically capable of producing them, and yet they chose not to. Similarly with architecture. It is often said that Japanese houses are made of paper and wood because the country is so prone to earthquakes, but so are the Korean peninsula and China, so that theory doesn’t really stand up. And again the Japanese were well aware of stone architecture, and had plenty of stone to work with, but they chose to work with wood.

In art works, too, images of transience and change were common. The Tale of Genji, written in 1008, is full of references to autumn, and “ahare” - sorrow and pathos. Similarly, the only piece of pottery from the same period to be an important National Treasure is a large pot, decorated with a simple scratched line motif representing autumn grass. The Japanese were certainly not averse to elaborate decoration and grandeur, but above all, rather than a “host of golden daffodils”, it was in a single, fragile autumn leaf at the very end of its life that they found beauty at its pinnacle.

But in the end it was politics which was to secure wabi-sabi at the heart of the Japanese aesthetic. Politics, and tea. Tea had been introduced to Japan from China in the Nara period in the 9th century, and as tea became more popular the focus began to move from the tea itself to the utensils used in preparing and drinking it. A sophisticated aesthetic, combining tea and the Japanese taste for transience, began to build up and by the 15th century it was combined with a revitalized Zen Buddhism to become a form of spiritual practice based on tea drinking. In the late 16th century Sen no Rikyu became tea master to the great daimyos Oda Nobunaga, and then Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Rikyu developed and refined the rustic tea room and simple tea bowl still known today that are perhaps the most obvious expressions of wabi-sabi, but at the same time Hideyoshi was using the tea ceremony to cement his power across the country, and as tea and politics became inseparable, so Hideyoshi’s flamboyant tastes and the rustic simple style of the tea ceremony were more and more at odds. So important was the tea ceremony to Hideyoshi’s power base, that, fearful he would be undermined, he ordered Rikyu to commit seppuku - ritual suicide - and the Way of Tea was nearly lost for ever, and with it the ultimate wabi-sabi expression.

But instead wabi-sabi became something of a symbol of anti-authority, and as Hideyoshi’s power waned and Tokugawa Ieyasu took charge of the country, so tea and wabi-sabi began to spread through society. Ieyasu established a firm class system of samurai, farmers, artisans and merchants, and then Kobori Enshu, who we met at the beginning, began to introduce the tea ceremony to the samurai classes, and with it the concepts of “wabi-sabi” and “kirei-sabi” became a mainstay of the Japanese way of life.

It is this wabi-sabi, perfected in the 16th century, that is still to be found all over Japan today, in between the vending machines and convenience stores. On a quiet afternoon at Ryoan-ji temple in Kyoto, you can still sit in front of the karesansui rock garden, built over 500 years ago, and as you gaze allow your imagination to fill the simple rocks and gravel. Wabi-sabi may be difficult to put into words precisely because, just like the rock garden, it is a half-prepared canvas, designed with just enough to inspire each of us to complete it with our own thoughts and experiences, only to discover our experiences are insufficient and irrelevant, and can be thrown out and returned to emptiness. Zen.

by Tom VINCENT

古民家 KOMINKA



Location: Miyama Kayabuki-no-Sato 美山 かやぶきの里・北村
〒601-0712 京都府南丹市美山町北
Photographers: Yann BECKER, Angelo DI GENOVA & David MICHAUD
Author: Angelo DI GENOVA



Iya Valley 「祖谷溪」

Landlocked in the mountains, in the heart of Shikoku Island, lies the Iya Valley. A lot of effort has to be made to reach this mysterious place. In the 12th century, after many battles, the samurai of the Taira clan who went through a defeat, went to take refuge in this cut-off region in order to keep living in peace.



HERE WE CAN FIND **A BIT OF ANCIENT JAPAN**, WITH ITS PLOTS OF CULTIVATED LAND AROUND **RURAL WOODEN HOUSES** CLINGING TO THE STEEP MOUNTAINS.

Living in harmony with nature, without going against it, this is perhaps how the kominka, the old traditional Japanese houses, are conceived. Indeed, with regular earthquakes, Japanese people have understood that the telluric forces that shake buildings must be accepted instead of trying to block it. This is the reason why kominka have no foundation and stick on the ground, to move when the earth trembles. When you enter into these sophisticated houses, the boundary between inside and outside is palpable. In fact, this is like an extension of nature that can not be appreciated around European counterparts. The materials still enjoy their original character, the wood has a colour and a typical smell. The tatami smells like straw, the walls of washi paper delicately diffuse light through. It feels good.

The Residence of the Kawamoto family

In the heart of a hamlet, in Tottori Prefecture, this is the house of the Kawamoto family. It is a very large country house with several buildings, some of them were built around the Edo period. The beautiful interior gardens have been arranged around a main building with a beautiful thatched roof. Inside, some pieces of art and calligraphy blend well with the rustic side of the exposed beams and mud walls. The Kawamoto house may be classified, but doesn't look like a museum. You can still feel the life running through the veins of the place which adds a certain charm. It is a beautiful testimony of the aesthetics of ancient Japan.



“The terrain has helped to preserve the region from too much modernism. The lack of attention that this valley has suffered for centuries is today its greatest treasure.”

癒し HEALING

Location: Misasa Onsen 三朝温泉
〒682-0123 鳥取県東伯郡三朝町三朝
Photographers: Yann BECKER & David MICHAUD
Author: Angelo DI GENOVA

Water has always played a major role in Japanese culture. Along the Shinto religion, it said that water acts as a purifier. It symbolically washes away all the impurities. The water that falls from the sky, penetrates the earth through the top of mountain, rushes through it and comes out charged. A charge of energy will be called the holy places. A mineral charge will be called by Onsen!

熱

In a bromance, you know that the flaws exist, sometimes gaping, huge flaws, but because you just like being around them, you deal with the bad things because the good things more than make up for the detriments. You will never hear me make blanket statements about how Japan is so much better at everything. Like all of us, we have flaws, and I recognize the places Japan needs help, try my best to correct when possible and when not avoid those brick walls which have made my head so tender from beating up against for two decades. But, I am also happy to gloat about the things Japan does well and some things it does very, very well. The one thing that Japan without a doubt does better than anywhere in the world is the O-Furo (bathing) experience.



温泉 ONSEN



Location: Arima Onsen 有馬温泉
〒651-1401 兵庫県神戸市北区有馬町
Photographers: Yann BECKER & Xavier ANDUJAR
Author: Angelo DI GENOVA



Bathing is a relaxing moment in Japan. A moment when everyone returns to the state of nature, without any fakeness. It is also a way to share a moment with strangers. Back to the state of nature, everyone is busy washing their body before the grail, entering into the hot water and sitting in the water, in silence, almost motionless.

Arima Onsen

This historic spa resort, located in the mountains north of Kobe, is intersected by a landscaped courtyard for a pleasant walk. As you get closer to the stream of water you soon realise that this water is not like any other. Charged with sulphur, it covers everything the water caresses with an orange colour. A colour that often comes back to Arima, between two vapour emanations.

The heart of the resort is particularly pleasant, with beautiful traditional houses and charming shops. There are also ashiyu, small thermal baths set up in the town where passers-by can soak their feet while chatting with their neighbours.



Ryokan Kotobuki-tei

In this ryokan of the Yunoyama Spa in Mie Prefecture, there is the Suiunkaku, a beautiful listed building. We can appreciate a very large tatami room surrounded by a glass gallery. The hostel has several private baths, consisting with very different styles.



Ryokan Izanro Iwasaki

A renowned Ryokan of the Misasa spa resort in Tottori Prefecture, Izanro Iwasaki has a historic building where renowned guests, artists and members of the imperial family have stayed. The baths are particularly spacious and alternate between mineral and wooded environments.

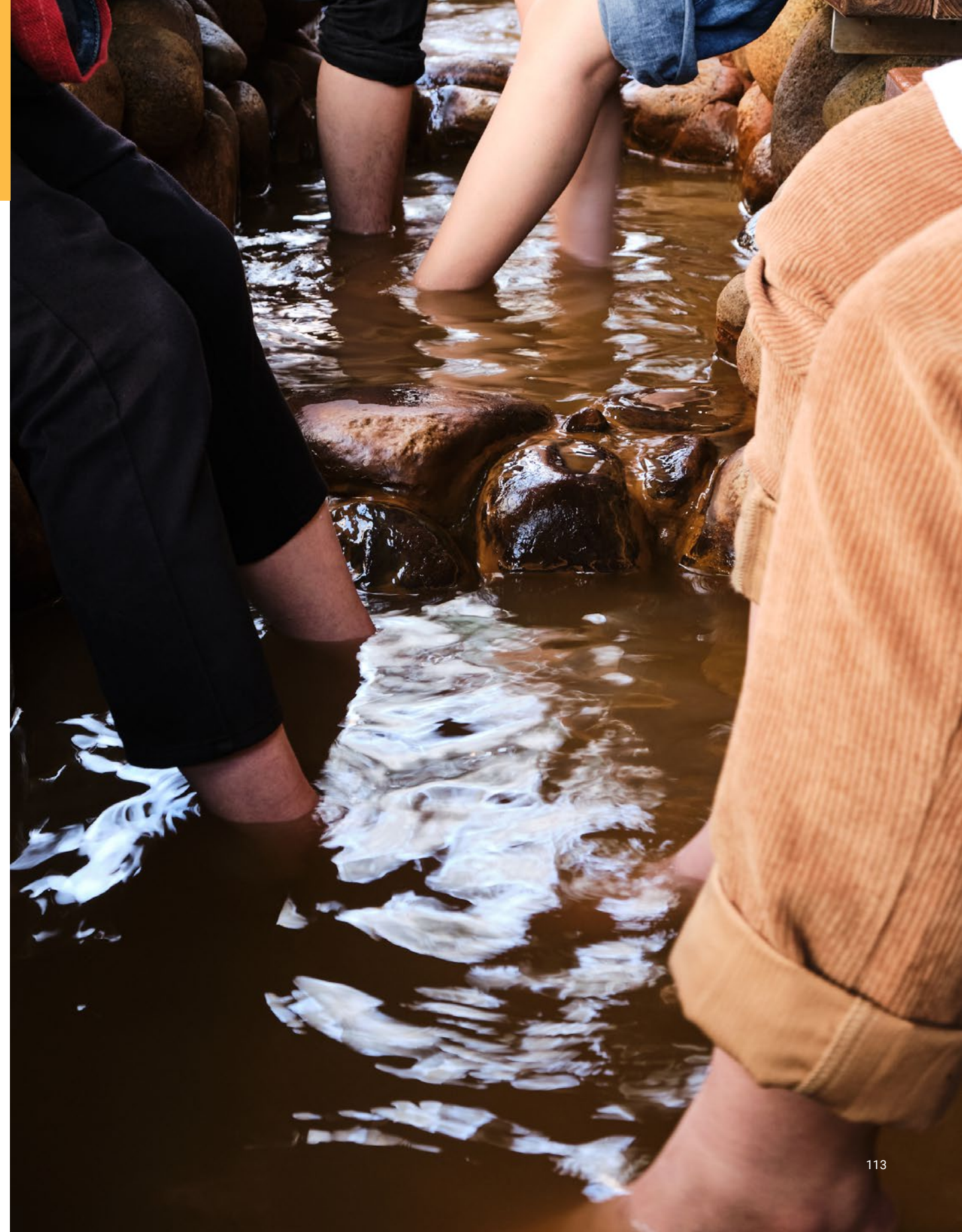
When people hear that I've been living in Japan for over 20-years, the first thing that they usually say is, "Wow, you must really be in love with that place!" While it's true, some people have developed romantic notions of Japan and its culture, people, and gadgets, I can easily state that my relationship with Japan is not a romance, but rather a "bromance". In a romantic relationship, everything is perfect -- rose-colored, happy, and your partner can do no wrong. In a bromance, you know that the flaws exist, sometimes gaping, huge flaws, but because you just like being around them, you deal with the bad things because the good things more than make up for the detriments. You will never hear me make blanket statements about how Japan is so much better at everything. Like all of us, we have flaws, and I recognize the places Japan needs help, try my best to correct when possible and when not avoid those brick walls which have made my head so tender from beating up against for two decades. But, I am also happy to gloat about the things Japan does well and some things it does very, very well. The one thing that Japan without a doubt does better than anywhere in the world is the O-Furo (bathing) experience.

From the smallest one-room apartments in the heart of Tokyo to the most gorgeous 5-star resorts, there is no doubt that the Japanese living experience revolves around the O-Furo. Bathing and purity can be traced back to Japanese Shinto beginnings where cleanliness really is next to godliness. Even 1000 years ago when "barbarians" began visiting (read, invading) Japan, the extraordinary hygiene of the Japanese, and extraordinarily bad hygiene of the visitors, was always commented on in texts describing such incursions.

So it's no wonder that the Japanese bathing experience has evolved to GOAT status around the world. Let's take a quick look at the typical Japanese bath and all of its accouterments. In even the most basic home the bathroom will really be the bathroom. No toilets or sinks that would disturb the serenity or introduce potential biological hazards should ever be present. Only in the urban areas where space is a premium that few can afford are the toilets sometimes combined into the same room as the bathtub -- but this is a sacrifice no-one wants to make and "Bath-Toilet Betsu (separate)" is a housing condition that even the most cash-starved students sometimes would abide.

The O-Furo-Ba (literally bathing place) is a self-contained, watertight unit. There is no need to worry about un-wieldy shower streams soaking the towels and precious wallpaper or a bath overflow causing the downstairs neighbors to participate in your bath. The water in the O-Furo stays in the O-Furo. This allows for one of the greatest joys in bathing -- stepping into a nearly full tub and have to water flow over the edge as your body creates your own personal Tsunami of hot water. The result is something that no sane person would try to achieve in the West, a perfectly filled tub with nothing but a bubble of surface tension holding the water in. This kind of maximum soakage is typically only available in chlorine vs detritus hot-tub experience, far from cleanliness.

As you walk into an O-Furo, the first thing you will notice is that there is a space next to the bath for washing yourself because of course, you will want to clean off all the dirt before you get into the crystal clear water. The Western way of washing oneself in the bath is the biggest Japanese head-scratcher of all time -- why would anyone want to bathe in their own filth?! Other thoughtful additions are a stool to sit on while cleaning, you never know how great it is to NOT stand-up while showering and just let to warm water wash over your relaxed body. Additionally, you will see a scoop or a bucket. You can either use this to ladle the water out of the bath next to you or while you are scrubbing down your body, turn the water from the showerhead to the downward-facing spout and fill up the bucket while you don't need the shower water -- saving the planet here one shower O-Furo at a time! Once you have a full bucket, you can then pour the





water over your body as you imagine a warm waterfall dumping lining water all over your body. A sensation that is just starting to gain popularity in the west with the “pour over” showerheads.

So, now that you are squeaky clean, you now have permission to enter the bath. You will notice that the shape of the bath is slightly different than what you may be used to. It’s deeper and slightly less elongated. This allows for complete body emersion -- all the way up to your chin is ideal. Shallow, long tubs don’t let you do that because the more you shrink down into the water with your upper body, the more your legs float up and out of the water.

Some of you may be asking yourself, “Hey, you never even talked about putting the water in the tub!” Well, the fact of the matter is, I didn’t! With Japanese tubs, you set a temperature and press a button and ten minutes later, you have a perfectly heated tub automatically filled to your prescribed depth. No more turning on the cold water, running it to the correct temperature, plugging the tub only to have it heat up, or get colder half-way through. And god-forbid you get

hooked on a 20-minute PewDiePie video and forget about the bath completely and flood your house.

So, you think that sounds good? Well, hold your bath salts, the Japanese have also taken this bathing experience to the outdoors in what’s called a Rotenburo. In a Rotenburo (outdoor bath), you get the opportunity to relax in the amazing sensations of a Japanese bath while being exposed to the elements. Usually, the more elements the better. Being outside in the freezing temperatures and falling snow as you are protected by the depths of your hot water is an indescribable experience so I will not even try. Just please -- do it! (Even more fun is to just is to roll around in the snow in your birthday suit, knowing all the while that the warm paradise of the Rotenburo is just a few meters away!)

by Sean NICHOLS



日本酒 SAKE



Location: Kokuryu Sake Brewing Corporation 黒龍酒造
〒910-1133 福井県吉田郡永平寺町松岡春日1丁目38
Photographers: Xavier ANDUJAR & Yann BECKER
Author: Angelo DI GENOVA

Water again. This time it is the source of the quality of the rice. The latter has been used for centuries to brew sake, the national alcohol in Japan. Composed of rice, water and ferment, the beverage also has a religious character, in the same way as wine in Judeo-Christian cultures.

Since I have been living in Japan, I have tasted a lot of different sake. I've always found incredible the variety of tastes that can be obtained from such a simple and neutral raw materials. Especially since the brewers always explain that to brew sake, as surprising as it can be, the most important element is not the rice but purity of the water. A visit to a brewery allows you to see the number of steps involved in the process of making the sake. The various warehouses, often sheltered from outside light and temperature variations, hide vats that keep the beverage at different stages of production. As the process progresses, the smell of the cooked rice is gradually left to appreciate the smell of the fermentation. The finished product, which flows into a small glass, looks remotely like water. But when you get closer you can see a slightly yellow colour and

a much thicker robe. Just like wine, sake can be drunk and appreciated above all with food. An harmony that some people almost describe as divine.

Kokuryu Sake Brewing Corporation

Located in the Fukui region, the Kokuryu brewery skillfully combines modernity and ancient know-how. The historic building, which is about 100 years old, is decorated with a magnificent sugidama, a ball of cedar branches used by sake brewers to indicate that a new batch has just arrived.

Proof of Kokuryu's renown, its best sake is regularly selected by Japanese airlines for their first-class customers.

In terms of taste, the sake produced here can be associated with protein-rich foods, such as crab for example, another speciality of this region bordering the Sea of Japan.

日本酒



Nishiyama Shuzojo, co., Ltd.

Nestled in the Tamba region, this brewery makes Kotsuzumi sake by drawing water from the nearby River Takeda. The company has three listed buildings including a magnificent kura, a traditional warehouse designed to be more resistant to fire and other natural disasters.



THE MAGIC WILL SOON BEGIN, UNDER THE METICULOUS EYE OF THE CRAFTSMEN, THE GRAINS OF RICE WILL BE **TRANSFORMED INTO A DIVINE BEVERAGE.**



WHILE THE FERMENTATION IS GOING ON, **THE SUGIDAMA CAN BE PREPARED,** STILL MADE BY HAND.

In an everyday casual setting, should you try to rationalize to someone why it is they should order a glass or purchase a bottle of sake, you'll be hard-pressed to find a convincing argument. Not that sake is a bad choice – I'd argue it's a rather exceptional choice, seeing as I've more or less committed my livelihood to that very premise – on the surface it's just not readily apparent why you should choose it over the ever-growing list of more accessible and affordable options.

Sake has a transparency problem, in that if you're not committed to putting in the time, you'll likely struggle to decipher exactly what's what. Sake also has a minutia problem, in that the industry can't seem to distance itself from the swamp of details that it's layered upon itself over the past several generations in attempt to justify the beverage's "value" within an ever-more-competitive drinks market filled with products backed by either centuries worth of broad cultural relevance or marketing campaigns with astronomical budgets, and in some cases, both.

More often than not, you're either left out in the cold, or you're buried deep in the weeds. You're either denied access, or you're so tangled up in an ever-growing lexicon that it's tough to know exactly where it's all rooted.

When it comes to sake, in attempt to provide more information, the art of being selective as to what information is actually important to the majority of the population has largely been neglected. More information can be satisfying and empowering, but without any meaningful point of reference to return to in order to gauge the value of that information, what you're left with is noise. Failing to commit to any relevant point of reference has effectively provided ambitious drinkers and connoisseurs with more than enough disjointed information to sift through to help them understand, from a technical standpoint, what it is they're about to ingest, but in the process has largely left them in the dark as to whether it all adds up to anything. Despite the accrument of knowledge, it's easy to get lost as to why anyone should actually care.

At the same time, there are brilliant programs for sake education now scattered all across the globe, organized and hosted by some of the most talented, dedicated and passionate people you could hope to encounter. If you're reading this, and you haven't already, you should partake in one – or several.

At the beginning of most of these tastings or seminars, hosts tend to dedicate a few moments to expound upon sake's endless integration into thousands of years of myths and legends, how it's woven into centuries of ritual, celebration and ceremony, and the Japanese peoples' deep veneration for the majesty of the rice harvest and the resulting deep spiritual groundwork that sake has laid for communities anchored in the shared practice for thriving well. That unified experience has over centuries manifested into the idiosyncrasies that have grown to define regional qualities of sake that, for those given the opportunity, have ushered a steady stream of endless discovery feeding a current generation of insatiable beverage connoisseurs inspired by character and authenticity.

However, many informative experiences, after briefly elucidating this spiritual and more personal allure central to the human experience, most often derail into that previously mentioned lexicon removed from any real sense of place, both physical or spiritual. The sake industry as a whole is generally characterized by an allergy to specificity, and while arguably part of the appeal, this reluctance (or a presumed inability) to anchor sake's sense of place to any sort of

tangible road map has unintentionally relegated one of the world's most inspiring and delicious beverages to the ranks of drink options trapped in eternal limbo as an on-again off-again liquid curio.

But if the industry were to commit to anchoring some form of initial way point – something unchanging and constant that would chart the kinds discovery that would fuse reality with spirituality in the world of sake – there would then exist a real, tangible way for a world of sake-curious to tap into that magic from the get-go. A "birthplace" of sake rooted in universal values needs to be clearly established.

Kansai represents that birthplace.

It's ok, you can say it.

In Nara, for example, you have clearly defined, concrete, uncontested locations that represent:

1. Japan's spiritual epicenter of sake (Ōmiwa Shrine, which just so happens to also double as the oldest shrine in Japan – period).
2. The birthplace of modern sake-making (Shoryaku-ji Temple), which is conveniently responsible for,
3. A method of sake production (bodaimoto) considered not only the progenitor of all modern sake-making, but also arguably the only example of a truly original "style" of sake to be associated with a specific region (Nara) in all of Japan.
4. In the town of Yoshino, you have vast forests of Yoshino sugi (Yoshino cedar), the only industry-wide recognized timber resource and accompanying crafting ecosystem supplying centuries of wooden casks, tanks and tools that have permeated, sustained and evolved sake production and fermentation practices throughout Japan for hundreds of years.

And that's only looking at Nara Prefecture.

What if the god(s) of wine, the birthplace of modern winemaking, arguably wine's only definitive regional style, and the natural resources supplying nearly the entire industry with French Oak barrels and traditional winemaking tools, all existed in plain sight and could be accessed within an afternoon on a busy itinerary? You would have an undeniably alluring pilgrimage laid out for an entire world of wine professionals and wine lovers.

That's what Nara is for sake. Within a roughly 20km radius exists the tangible cornerstone for nearly everything culturally, spiritually, and technically permanent associated with sake. Unlike the ever-increasing and evolving lexicon weighing down the communication of this spectacular beverage, forcing it into a perpetual losing battle with fly-by-night drink options backed by millions of dollars in marketing campaigns, the characteristics defining Nara's relationship with sake make it the bedrock of the beverage's cultural and spiritual identity. Nara inherently has everything that it needs to be considered the indisputable first stop on a sake pilgrimage. That's not because it's "better" than other regions, but because it's rooted in clear, meaningful, universally unwavering qualities that connect the beverage to both its human and spiritual significance.

It also doesn't hurt that, in the current modern context, Nara is arguably one of Japan's more dynamic and unpredictable sake producing regions. Despite being the birthplace of modern sake making, it doesn't actually rank particularly high in any of the typical metrics used to characterize a "top producing region," whether it be production or consumption volume, a long-running string of accolades, or percentages of "premium" product on the market. On the flipside, how-



ever, since these makers don’t have a “modern” expectation reflected in the market, imposing consumer expectations or financial obligations to live up to, what they lack in stylistic consistency translates into a sea of endless discovery. In a region labeled as the “birthplace of sake,” as a consumer, you’re blessed with a place that fuels curiosity and a sense of possibility.

For a region (and its producers) to be rooted in its spiritual and cultural relevance is arguably the most exciting beverage landscape you could ask for. Seeing as how sake is still far from permeating anything resembling any sort of global scale cultural relevance in the same way that, say, beer or wine have, Japan is in a position to construct a rich narrative that not only equates Japan with sake, but also identifies places throughout Japan that have made timeless contributions to the beverage’s significance. Isolating a region like Nara for the reasons mentioned above doesn’t only serve to highlight its meaningful contributions, it also establishes a foundation for defining other regions on their own terms.

There’s a reasonable argument for building a fence around Nara and claiming it the sake holy land, but to do so would do the greater Kansai region (and the sake category as a whole) a great disservice. Because for what Nara represents as a collection of “firsts” and “only” qualities solidifying it as a stronghold for deep spiritual and cultural relevance, along with early technical prowess that laid the groundwork for the incredible sake that we take for granted today, the neighboring regions represent arguably equally significant contributions that make them the logical “next stop” on the sake journey, further laying the foundation for extrapolating distinct sake destinations across Japan.

While Nara as a region often gets largely left out of the lengthy and diverging tale of sake, neighboring Hyogo and Kyoto prefectures are no stranger to being heaped with praise across

every sake-related curriculum on the planet.

Those two regions alone are responsible for more than 40% of all the sake produced in Japan. As a result, in modern contexts they’re often referred to off-handedly as “home of the big boys,” but in such a deeply entrenched industry stretching back centuries, cementing that degree of presence doesn’t happen overnight. The fact that Hyogo and Kyoto were hotbeds of brewing innovation for hundreds of years, sorting out for the entire nation not only how to make great sake, but also how to get it to the people, established these regions as the power players that they are today. It’s this rich history and cultural relevance embedded throughout the Kansai region that helps other regions to stand out, as well. It’s important to remember that the sake being crafted and praised throughout northeastern Japan isn’t just exceptional in terms of quality, it’s exceptionally unique in the context of what came before it and around it. What regions like Niigata, Akita, Fukushima, Yamagata and Tochigi have been able to accomplish in modern contexts is, in the backdrop of the world’s reexamination of quality in relation to its authenticity, now being proactively married with foundations established throughout Kansai over centuries. What you’re going to wind up with is better, more distinct and exceptional sake everywhere. Should the Kansai region decide to collaboratively work to connect the dots for a future population of sake-curious, collectively the region has the evidence, authenticity, quality, relevance and spiritual significance to establish itself as a living microcosm of the sake experience. In the process, the entire sake-producing landscape will get the foundation and freedom it needs in order to flourish, both collectively, as well as each region individually on its own terms.

First, they just need a little nudge in the direction of home.

by Justin POTTS

KANSAI IS THE REGION **WITH THE MOST NATIONAL TREASURES AND IMPORTANT CULTURAL PROPERTIES** IN JAPAN.

AMONG THE TEN CITIES **WITH THE RICHEST HERITAGE**, EIGHT ARE IN KANSAI.





DIGEST

The delights of traveling around the Kansai area

If in Europe we like to say that all roads lead to Rome, in Japan we can surely say that all roads lead to Kansai. Situated in the heart of the archipelago, this region has always played a central role in the history of the country. A political influence, with the first imperial palaces and majestic castles. Then with a commercial aspect, with large harbors open to the rest of the world, but also a religious aspect, thanks to an astonishing grouping of the main temples of the country's most influential spiritual currents.

The philosophy of Pure Land, the majority of Buddhist schools in Japan, have their headquarters in Kyoto. Zen, and its three variants, are divided between the former capital and the province of Fukui. Esoteric Buddhism, for its part, can be experimented at Mount Koya for the Shingon, while Tendai Buddhism has always been enthroned at the top of Hiei-zan, the mountain in between Kyoto and the Lake Biwa which is Japan's largest lake. Even the paths leading to Shugendō, a spiritual tradition that fuses Shinto, Taoism and Buddhism, meet at Yoshino, a territory famous for its landscapes of mountains planted with cherry trees. One lifespan would not be enough to appreciate all the riches that can be found all around the Kansai. At this point to say that the Kansai area is the Mecca of Japanese spirituality, there is indeed only one step.

It is in the curves of the mountains, in the lines of the coasts, in the veins of the roads and in the soul of the inhabitants, that the horizons of the traveller who slumbers inside us are drawn.

A delicate gesture that invites you to take a seat under a sunshade facing the traditional garden. The benefits of the on-sen as remembering the journey taken along the old pilgrimage routes that were walked on all day long. The position of the meditating body at the same time so simple but also so complex. The immutable arts that are passed on from generation to generation. The master armed with a katana holding his breath before his demonstration. The wind blowing through the maple trees taking away its yellow leaves that remains the autumn season to decorate your plate for dinner. The intense green of a cup of tea in which to plunge your thoughts. The world begins to breathe and around the Kansai, a region where authenticity is not incompatible with hospitality, echoes of a forthcoming journey are already beginning to appear even though you haven't yet returned home.

by Angelo Di Genova

Photographer & Author



ENDLESS ADVENTURE

The Kansai region, like Japan, is a place where we constantly discover new things,
and who invites us to come back! You have been warned!
For more information: www.gokanmag.com



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The Adventure Goes On

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