

This page: Luscious landscape gives way to the occasional rooftop in Hakone.

Opposite: Food laid out in the garden restaurant in Kyoto's Buddhist temple, Daitoku-ji; a geisha on the streets of Kyoto





Hidden Japan

Tranquil spas, temples, hot springs, geisha and samurai – these are the mysterious, beautiful aspects of Japan the neon glitz of Tokyo can't prepare you for. Jane Hughes uncovers some of its treasures. Photographs Polly Farquharson





As the tiny train zigzags its way up the lush mountainside, it's hard to believe we are only an hour away from the neon heart of downtown Tokyo. Brilliant pink azaleas bloom next to delicate wild orchids, eliciting oohs and aahs of delight from a group of chattering women passengers in white sun hats and baggy trousers. Now and then, through groves of bamboo and young maples, we catch glimpses of a river glinting in the valley below.

We are deep in the Hakone National Park, backdrop to Mount Fuji and weekend playground for escaping Tokyoites. The area - a hotbed of volcanic activity - is scattered with spa towns, some dating back hundreds of years. Plumes of steam rise from rocky crevices high in the mountains and local lore has it that if you eat an egg hardboiled in the hot water that bubbles out of the ground, you'll add seven years to your life.

It's nearly 10 years since I first visited Japan and it's exhilarating to be back. Japanese friends used to compare their society to an

onion - made up of many layers without a central core. During the three years I spent here as a freelance writer, I was fascinated by the idea of peeling away these layers and exploring the country's 'hidden' experiences.

In the intervening decade, Japan has imprinted itself firmly on British consciousness. If you haven't been reading *Memoirs of a Geisha*, you've probably been eating sushi from Marks & Spencer or buying your vests from Muji. Meanwhile, the aesthetics of Japanese design - from fashion to interiors and gardens - have never been more popular.

When I returned to the country, along with *Red* ◀

Above: The colourful walkways of Miyajima's Itsukushima shrine. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** The active crater at Aso; breakfast in a Kyoto coffee shop; the wonderful bathroom in the Tamaki ryokan, Gora, is the perfect place to relax; Miyajima's striking torii gate is a big draw for tourists; the stunning landscape around Hagi; rush hour in the laid-back town





A glimpse of a temple on the island of Miyajima

Miyajima – with its pagodas peeping through the forest canopy, and mountains that drop into the bay – embodies the very essence of the Orient

photographer Polly Farquharson, I found a country less frenetic than in the adrenaline-fuelled boom of the early 1990s but no less absorbing. Our journey began in Tokyo and took us – mainly along the route of the high-speed Shinkansen train – down through the main island of Honshu and southwest into Kyushu.

The Shinkansen, or Bullet train, was introduced in the 1960s but it's still an incredibly futuristic, exciting way to travel. Seeing city sprawl give way to wooded mountains reflected in the glassy sheen of rice paddy terraces is surreal.

Hakone was our first stop, reached by switching from the Shinkansen to the local Odakyu line, before being ushered on to the Tozan mountain train by a friendly old lady. We were staying at the family-run Tamaki *ryokan* (Japanese inn) in Gora, a spa town, and here we had our first chance to relax, Japanese style.

Staying in a *ryokan* is like entering a cocoon, free from daily concerns. You change into a *yukata* (cotton robe) and – if you're a hot-spring fanatic like me – head straight for the bathroom to scrub off the day's grime and sink into a large bath. You then eat a meal of appetising tidbits served in your room, drink lots of sake, maybe take another bath, and fall asleep on your futon. Breakfast usually includes rice, miso soup, fish, eggs, tofu and vegetables. Then it's time to head out into the world again.

From Gora you can join the circular sightseeing route around Hakone, switching from cable car to a ropeway which carries you over a spectacular plunging gorge, to a boat cruise across the Ashino-ko lake, inside the crater of a volcano. On the far side is the barren landscape of Owaku-dani, where sulphur gas spews out of cracks in the yellowed earth.

You can also reach this point by bus and enjoy amazing views of Mount Fuji – a tremendous presence, even when partly

obscured by haze. A man in a hut was selling freshly boiled, life-prolonging eggs in bags of six. Everyone – including schoolchildren – was buying and eating six each, discarding the shells on the ground to cries of 'Aah, it's hot!'

We travelled on to Kyoto, Japan's capital until 1868 and still considered its cultural heart. Kyoto's palaces and more than 2,000 temples and shrines were spared the wartime bombing that flattened other cities, but its historic streets proved less immune to postwar development. Today, you have to look beyond the high-rises to experience the real essence of this intriguing city.

The joy of exploring Kyoto is to stumble across old neighbourhoods with narrow alleys of wooden, lattice-fronted houses, dusty craft shops and the aroma of incense wafting from the temples at every corner. Staying at the Sawai *ryokan* is the perfect way to experience such a place.

Sawai was one of the oldest tea-houses in Kyoto before it was turned into an inn by its sprightly septuagenarian owners, Mr and Mrs Tsuchiya, and it's easy to imagine the geisha gliding down its dark wooden corridors. From my narrow balcony I could see the real thing; kimono-clad geisha clattering past in wooden sandals. It was Saturday evening and the noise of the shoes mingled with tinkling hair bells and calls of greeting, which grew louder and less inhibited as the night wore on.

On Sunday morning the only signs of life were at the local coffee shop, where we ate a breakfast of toast, boiled egg and salad

for £3 each. A short walk away was the blue-green Kamo-gawa river, overhung by restaurant verandas and paddled in by storks, and its wonderful trails that meander along the foothills, linking ancient Buddhist temples and gardens.

For lunch, we ate in the garden at Izusen, a vegetarian restaurant in the Zen Buddhist temple of Daitoku-ji. Under a leafy canopy we drank green tea and sweet plum wine, followed by bowls of crispy vegetable tempura, soup flavoured with aromatic leaves and an array of tofu dishes.

On our second night, Mr Tsuchiya invited his four guests to supper and his wife, Sachiko, decided that we should all go out. Before long, the Tsuchiyas were dragging us off to their regular karaoke haunt, where they regaled us with Japanese folk songs as the *mama san* – a former geisha – broke into dance.

Leaving Kyoto we continued our journey southwards to the sacred island of Miyajima in the Inland Sea, a short train and ferry ride from Hiroshima. For me, Miyajima – with its temples and pagodas peeping through the forest canopy, and mountains that drop sharply away into the calm bay – embodies the very essence of the Orient.

Raised on stilts at the shore is the Itsukushima shrine, dedicated to goddesses of the sea. At high tide, both the shrine and its towering red *torii* gate appear to float on the water, a sight that attracts a lot of tourists. Yet most are gone by 5pm and staying the night means you have this magical island to yourself.

In the evening I followed a trail inland, crossing streams and breathing in the scent of cedar and pine. From the windows of our spacious rooms in the Kokumin *shukuba* (public lodge), the views looking out over the bay were simply stunning. ☛

From Ogori on the Inland Sea, it takes an hour and a half by bus to cross the mountains to the small pottery town of Hagi on the isolated Japan Sea coast. Hagi's location – around a pine-fringed sandy bay – is stunning, and much of its samurai legacy has been preserved, including the homes of renowned warriors. We rented bikes from the station (don't expect anything high tech) and set off to the western part of town. Life here has a leisurely, almost timeless quality and wandering around the austere-looking samurai homes only intensified my sense of the past.

Hagi's pottery is highly regarded in tea ceremony circles and tea bowls by leading artists fetch thousands of pounds. But there are plenty of shops about town where you'll find beautiful pieces at reasonable prices.

At the Fujita *ryokan* at the edge of a lovely river, we were served a delicious meal, and the quiet setting proved a contrast to the vibrant, noisy city of Fukuoka in Kyushu, where we spent the next night.

Fukuoka is a convenient point from which to visit the hot springs sprinkled around Mount Aso, one of the biggest volcanic craters in the world. Ever since I first set eyes on the village of Kurokawa – straddling the steep valley of the Kurokawa River on Aso's northern perimeter, I've wanted to go back. The village is dedicated to bathing and its cobbled alleyways and footbridges are thronged with people in *yukata* wandering from bath to bath. There are over 20 to try and a day pass will get you into all of them.

Yet everything about our own *ryokan*, Sanga, was so exquisite I was tempted to stay put. A little way from the village, Sanga's buildings are set into the hillside



Letting off steam in Hakone, above.

A display of traditional pottery vases and jars from one of Hagi's many craftsmen, below



and grouped around a gurgling brook. The owners, Mr and Mrs Goto, have created a retreat that combines natural beauty with unfussy hospitality and superb food. (Be aware: horsemeat is a local speciality and you may be invited to try some.)

Polly and I shared a lovely wooden house. The bottom of its large stone bath was lined with pebbles and when I slid open the window screen, a stream cascaded down the rocks inches from my nose. A visit to the indoor sulphur pool brought a visible sheen to my skin, but my favourite bath was the outdoor women's pool, surrounded by trees and big enough to swim a few lazy strokes in. In the evening, wooden lanterns lit the path and steam rose off the water. The next morning, the surface of the bath was covered in blossom.

Having got this far, we decided to take the Aso sightseeing bus across the original crater and up to the active peak of Mount Nakadake. If the ropeway to the summit is open and you can handle the sulphur gas, it's an incredible sight, for deep inside the volcano is a molten aquamarine lake.

The bus dropped us at Tochinoki spa, where we spent our last night at the Oyama *ryokan*, overlooking a roaring 40-metre waterfall. When I was last here, the *ryokan* occupied buildings nearly 200 years old at the foot of the gorge. However, the bank has been eroded so much that it has had to be rebuilt in a safer position.

Some things, like Oyama, had changed since my earlier travels. Yet I found the same hospitality and felt the same sense of wonder at the experiences we encountered. Luckily, Oyama had rebuilt its outdoor bath, too, and as I sank into the deliciously warm water, it felt good to be back. ■

RED ROUTE TO JAPAN

● **When to go** March to May or September to November. The rainy season is in June and summer is very hot and humid in most places – late March to mid-April is cherry-blossom time and the autumn foliage is from late October to November. Avoid the week-long public holiday in early May.

● **Getting there** The Japan National Tourist Organisation provides information on different regions, accommodation and travel. Call (020) 7734 9638, or log on to seejapan.co.uk or jnto.go.jp. ANA has direct daily flights from London to Narita Airport, Tokyo. Prices start at

around £700; call ANA World Tours on (020) 7478 1922 for reservations.

Vouchers for Japan Rail passes (which give unlimited travel on most JR trains, buses and ferries across the national network) can be purchased in the UK and exchanged for a pass in Japan. A seven-day pass costs around £170; a 14-day pass, £260. You need to pay extra if you travel on private rail lines.

● Where to stay

The President Hotel, Aoyama, Tokyo, from £120 for a twin room and £80 for a single. Call 0081 3 3497 0111.

Tamaki Ryokan, Gora, from £80 per

person with two meals. Book by fax on 0081 460 23105, or log on to hakonetamaki.com.

Sawai Ryokan, Miyagawa-cho, Kyoto, £30 a night without food. Call 0081 75 561 2179.

Mori-no-Yado Kokumin Shukusha, Miyajima, from £60 per person with two meals. Book by fax on 0081 829 44 2248.

Fujita Ryokan, Shin Kawa, Hagi, from £40 per person with two meals. Book by fax on 0081 838 261240.

Hotel Il Palazzo, Fukuoka, £120 for a twin room. Call 0081 92 716 3333.

Sanga Ryokan, Kurokawa Spa, from £80 per person, including two meals. Book by fax on 0081 967 44 0570.

Oyama Ryokan, Tochinoki Spa, from £80 per person, including two meals. Book by fax on 0081 9676 72256 or reserve a room through the numbers below (a charge will be made).

You can reserve rooms through Japan Travel Bureau, (020) 7663 6153, and Japan Travel Centre, (020) 7255 8283.

● Useful books

Japan Guide (Open Road Publishing, £13.95); **Japan's Hidden Hot Springs** by Robert Noff (Charles E Tuttle, £7.95).