



# BIG ON JAPAN

FROM BREATH-TAKING  
NATURAL WONDERS TO  
BUSTLING AND WELCOMING  
CITY LIFE, **ANDY WASLEY** AND  
HIS HUSBAND FOUND JAPAN  
THE PERFECT PLACE FOR  
THEIR HONEYMOON



*“Onsen occupy a special place in Japanese affections, as tightly bound up with the country’s identity as sushi and sake”*



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: HOTEL IYAONSEN’S RIVERSIDE ONSEN; DANRIN-JI, AN ANCIENT BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN KYOTO; MOUNT HOTAKA AND RIVER AZUSA IN KAMIKOCHI

My husband and I slipped into the steaming water of a private thermal pool, took deep breaths, and relaxed. The geothermically heated water lapped gently up to our necks, and dissolved minerals fizzed softly against our skin. A few metres away, a thundering river tore past, its silted water churned milky white over slick black stones as, overhead, wispy clouds drifted sedately across the forested mountainside. Here in Japan’s Iya Valley, miles from the frenetic hyper-sprawl of Tokyo and a week into our honeymoon, we took a moment to reflect on our journey – and to the two weeks still ahead.

Japan is a complex enough place to all but guarantee you’ll finish a holiday wanting to stay to discover more. But given enough time it’s possible to plan a superb tour of at least some of this incredible country. We’d taken two years to plan and save for our three-week September honeymoon, and were able to visit many of the key attractions in the south of the country. Our

visit to the Iya Valley was a high point.

Iya Valley is a deep rift in the Shikoku Mountains, a range named for the smallest of Japan’s four main islands. Famous for its epically beautiful landscape – which burns orange with autumn foliage later in the year – its remoteness and relative lack of attention in tourist media means it has seemingly rare qualities in this otherwise crowded country: solitude and silence. We stayed at the superb Hotel Iyaonsen, an LGBT+-friendly luxury spa famed for the hot baths – onsen – in which we relaxed on our first night.

Onsen occupy a special place in Japanese affections, as tightly bound up with the country’s identity as sushi and sake. As Iyaonsen’s planning director, Toshihiko Fujikawa, explained: “Japan is a workaholic country, and onsen help people rest and relax – they’re good for the skin and good for the soul. We see many visitors who take a rest here, far from the crowded cities; it’s a blissful place for them.”

Onsen are almost hypnotically relaxing:

sanctuaries for harried salarymen and visiting honeymooners to take a break from the world. For an introduction to onsen culture, Iyaonsen is hard to beat: the hotel is set up to make sure visitors are fully immersed in Japanese custom and tradition, from the steaming baths to the sumptuous nightly twelve-course tasting menus of traditional food and assorted sake.

Iyaonsen was our luxury stay. Japan is an expensive country, so alongside our occasional blow-out visits we wanted to try to save our money for food and experiences. Thankfully the country has a hard-earned reputation for hospitality and offers a rich selection of reasonably inexpensive guest houses (ryokan). These offer visitors affordable opportunities to visit places that are far from the main hotel centres, opening up some of the country’s less-widely publicised locations.

The first stop of our tour was in such a spot: Yakushima, a tiny subtropical island south of Japan’s main island chain. There we stayed in a

traditional Japanese ryokan, Pension Blue Drop – a typically warm and welcoming spot, entirely gay-friendly and well within our budget. Blue Drop’s owner, Yuki, gave us a thorough introduction to the island’s food culture with a sashimi feast and home-made plum wine. Outside, as the island’s chorus of cicadas fell silent, the Milky Way arced spectacularly over the ryokan in pristine dark skies. Could there be a more romantic start to a honeymoon?

Among Yakushima’s major attractions are its mossy cedar forests, which are said to have inspired Hayao Miyazaki’s 1997 Studio Ghibli masterpiece, Princess Mononoke. Studio Ghibli fans can immerse themselves in the Mononoke mood with a visit to Yakushima’s carefully maintained forest parks. We visited Shiratani Unsuikyo Ravine, a World Natural Heritage site with a number of well-marked trails.

The ravine is a place of almost inexpressible beauty, full of mysterious, twisted tree roots and moss-clad boughs. Yakushima experiences more

rainfall than anywhere else in Japan, and recent storms had left the trees glistening with fresh rainfall. Mushrooms and toadstools sprouted from the trees’ glossy limbs, which stretched over rivers punctuated by roaring waterfalls. Cicadas chirped loudly, accompanied by the less musical sound of Yakushima macaques. Lost in this mysterious place, we might as well have been playing our own roles in Princess Mononoke.

We wanted to make the most of this kind of natural beauty. Yakushima and the Iya Valley are both top spots for forest trekking, rafting and hillwalking – but, as mountain lovers, our real draw was Kamikochi, a highland region deep inside Japan’s largest island, Honshu. Part of the Chūbu-Sangaku National Park, Kamikochi is dominated by the Hida Mountains – Japan’s “Northern Alps”. It’s a superb spot for serious mountaineers and recreational walkers alike and promised mountaintop views that would rival anything we’d seen on our travels, from the Canadian Rockies to the Himalayas.

We took a demanding day walk to the summit of Mount Yake, an active volcano overlooking Kamikochi’s central valley. We found the volcano’s lower reaches dominated by thick forests, alive with butterflies. As we climbed higher the trees gave way to fields of bamboo; then all greenery disappeared, as the landscape gradually revealed the rocky trail to the summit. The bare rocks felt warm to the touch, and sulphur-yellow fissures hissed with superheated steam. Quickly, our ascent had turned from a mountain day walk to a close encounter with the planet’s deepest and most elemental forces.

Japan has more than enough mountainous and forested terrain to keep any outdoor



## INTRODUCTION TO ONSEN

**Onsen** – hot baths, often volcanically heated – can be found across Japan and should be on your to-do list for a taste of traditional Japanese culture. Many hotels have onsen or, at least, hot baths, and will provide advice on how to use them. People bathe naked, and must shower thoroughly before stepping in to the onsen. Note that tattoos – even small ones – are widely associated with organised crime in Japan, and for this reason many onsen will not admit people with tattoos.

enthusiast occupied. Equally, though, it offers plenty to those looking for cultural encounters or urban adventures.

Nowhere is this more the case than in Kyoto, the country’s former capital – home to about 1,500 ancient temples. Here, more than anywhere else, planning ahead paid dividends. We found a good planning base – and plenty of advice – in Jam Jar, a stylish gay-run guest house close to Kyoto’s historic geisha district, Kamishichiken.

Jam Jar’s owner Danny Matheson and his husband, Kazuo, have transformed a traditional machiya weaving house into a laid back and comfortable lounge with two traditional – and highly in-demand – traditional tatami mat rooms. A stay here allows visitors time to plan their temple tours and to help preserve a piece of Kyoto history (many of these beautiful machiyas are being torn down and replaced with apartment blocks). Danny offers tours of local temples – including the nearby Kitano Tenmangu, which offers same-sex wedding ceremonies – as well as food-and-drink themed guided walks. (He’s offering a 10 per cent discount on tours for Pride Life readers.)

Some of Kyoto’s temples – notably its famous Golden Temple, Kinkaku-ji – are busy enough to have acquired a rather Disneyland feel. Thankfully, more serene places do exist. I slipped





## WAY TO GO

### ACCOMMODATION

#### Our top five LGBT+-friendly picks:

**Iya Valley:** Hotel Iyaonsen, iyaonsen.jp. Luxury spot with a traditional – if decadent – air. Rooms start at ¥19,590pp (£135pp).

**Kyoto:** Jam Jar Lounge & Inn, jamjar.com/en. Gay-run traditional guest house; owner Danny can arrange and lead tours of Kyoto (10 per cent discount for Pride Life readers). Rooms booked via Airbnb, starting at ¥12,000 per room during the low season (£80).

**Tokyo:** Ryokan Sawanoya, sawanoya.com. Friendly traditional Japanese guest house. Rooms start at ¥5,616pp (£40pp).

**Naoshima:** Tsutsuji-so yurt, tsutsujiso.com/english. Kooky resort with Mongolian yurts overlooking the Inland Sea. Yurts sleep up to four guests and are seasonally priced at ¥3,780/¥4,320pp (£26/£30pp)

**Hakone:** Ashinoko Hanaori, hanaori.jp/ashinoko/en/. Modern lakeside hotel with an unmissable dinner buffet and sake menu. Rooms start at ¥21,060pp (£150pp).

### FOOD AND DRINK

**Osaka:** Bar Nayuta, bar-nayuta.com. Bespoke cocktails and house rules insisting on relaxation and friendliness.

**Fukuoka:** Bar Leichardt, Tel +81 92-215-1414. Key stop for whisky lovers, with more than 1,600 bottles to choose from. Close to yatai food stalls.

**Hiroshima:** Koishi Sake Bar, koishi-sakebar.com. Excellent sushi paired with a selection of award-winning sake.

**Tokyo:** Jazz House Alfie, alfie.tokyo. Nightly jazz and cocktails with a great selection of Western-style food.

**Naoshima:** Sparky's Coffee, Tel +81 87-897-6606. Excellent coffee, filling rice dishes and desserts close to the island's main port.

### GETTING THERE

Flights to Japan can be very expensive, so shop around. We booked with Air France ten months before travel, for £450pp return flights.

### GETTING AROUND

International visitors can purchase a Japan Rail Pass from authorised travel agents before leaving for Japan; these can save thousands of yen on rail travel. A two-week pass costs around £310 and covers travel on local and national rail networks including most shinkansen (bullet train) services. Metro and some bus travel can be paid for using pre-paid IC cards, available from most stations. Drivers need an international driving permit, available from many post office branches.

### TOURIST INFO

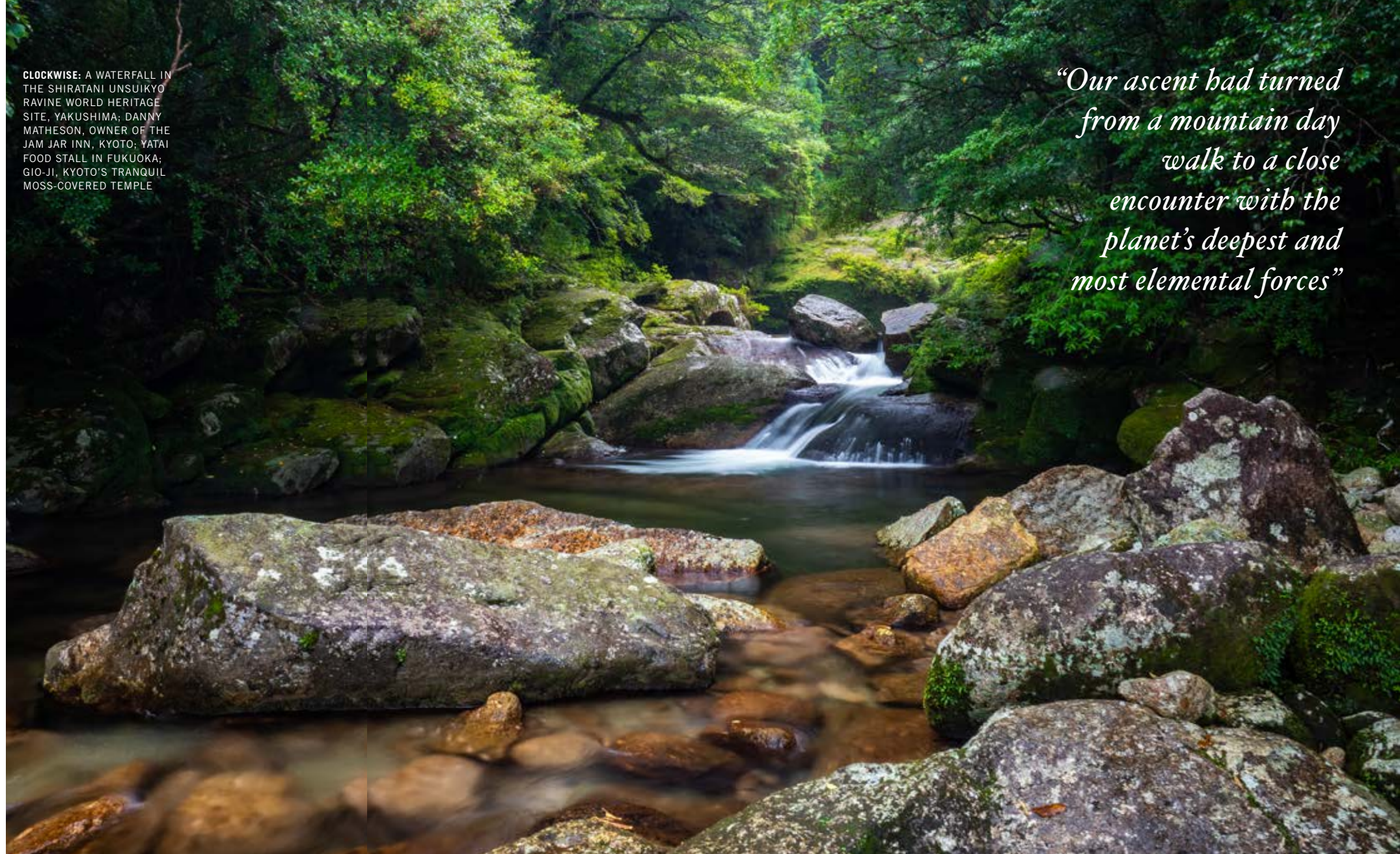
seejapan.co.uk offers an itinerary builder and advice on key spots. Information about the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games is available at tokyo2020.org/en

### GAY INFO

Pride Life partners IGLTA offer advice on visiting Japan at [iglta.org/asia-and-middle-east/japan](http://iglta.org/asia-and-middle-east/japan). Tokyo's Ni-chome district is home to Japan's largest gay scene; tours and introductions to the district's many small bars can be arranged with a number of providers listed with IGLTA.

Tokyo Rainbow Pride is on 28-29 April 2019: [tokyorainbowpride.com](http://tokyorainbowpride.com)

CLOCKWISE: A WATERFALL IN THE SHIRATANI UNSUIKYO RAVINE WORLD HERITAGE SITE, YAKUSHIMA; DANNY MATHESON, OWNER OF THE JAM JAR INN, KYOTO; YATAI FOOD STALL IN FUKUOKA; GIO-JI, KYOTO'S TRANQUIL MOSS-COVERED TEMPLE



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away from the selfie groups in Kyoto's northern Arashiyama District and visited three of the city's quieter temples.

Gio-ji is a true gem: a tiny, ancient temple entirely covered with moss. It lies next to two other ancient temples – Takiguchi-dera, with its narrow stone steps between silent statues and towering trees, and Danrin-ji's incense-infused central pagoda and bamboo garden. Attendant staff and worshippers were more than happy to talk to me about each temple's history and current use. The temples' deep silence repaid itself in these brief encounters with people keen



ALL PICTURES: ANDY WASLEY. COM @ANDYWASLEY

to share their culture: more so, perhaps, than spending time in a jostling queue for one of the “main attractions”.

For visitors who need something a little livelier than mountains and temples, Japan promises a dizzying selection of bars, clubs and nights out. Gay culture is centred on Tokyo's Ni-chome district, close to the city's major shopping district, Shinjuku. With more than 300 small bars to choose from, some of which are almost proudly hard to find, it's a must-see destination.

Those who are less inclined to visit the scene will find plenty of alternative places to enjoy food

and drink. Many of our favourite places shared Ni-chome's bars' hard-to-find and proudly independent atmospheres. We loved Bar Nayuta, a tiny cocktail bar in Osaka where owner Hiro mixed bespoke drinks for us on request. Situated close to the city's bustling American Quarter, Nayuta's nondescript address lent it an air of exclusivity; a similar atmosphere filled Fukuoka's superb Bar Leichardt, where owner Yu offered us an unrivalled selection of Japanese and international whiskies.

Apart from the whisky, Fukuoka earned our affection as an outstanding place for food. Food lovers might find Japan's incredible selection of excellent restaurants hard to tackle; often, we decided to stop trawling through review sites to just take a chance on the country's many streetside ramen restaurants, cafes or sushi bars. Fukuoka's famous yatai street food stalls were ideal places to visit with an open mind (and a little patience – they are very busy).

In fact, even when we had settled on a particular restaurant but found it booked up or closed, we never failed to find an outstanding alternative. Our experience of Naoshima – a kooky, art-filled island in the Seto Inland Sea – was typical. After a long walk from our beachside yurt we found our top pick closed, and headed for the nearest café.

Umikko was by far the cheapest restaurant we visited, but its noodle pancakes (okonomiyaki) were some of the best comfort food we ate.

Naoshima itself should be top of the list for anyone interested in seeing some of Japan's finest galleries and public art. The island has built its reputation on offering visitors access to some of the country's very best artworks, from Yayoi Kusama's iconic polka-dot pumpkins to galleries full of traditional and contemporary works. The island's Honmura district is home to the excellent Art House Project, a series of six historic buildings that have been adapted to house modern art installations. Nearby, the Chichu Art Museum is home to monumental works by Tadao Ando and James Turrell, alongside a series of Monet's Water Lilies canvases.

Over the course of three weeks in Japan we packed in a lot: amazing adventures, beautiful art, outstanding food, incredible drinks and more than a little retail therapy. Even so, we finished our visit to Japan feeling certain we'd barely begun to explore it properly. As the country prepares to welcome the Olympic Games in 2020 we already see an excuse to visit again. We took two years to plan our first visit to Japan, and it has left us looking ahead to a lifetime of wanting to see more.