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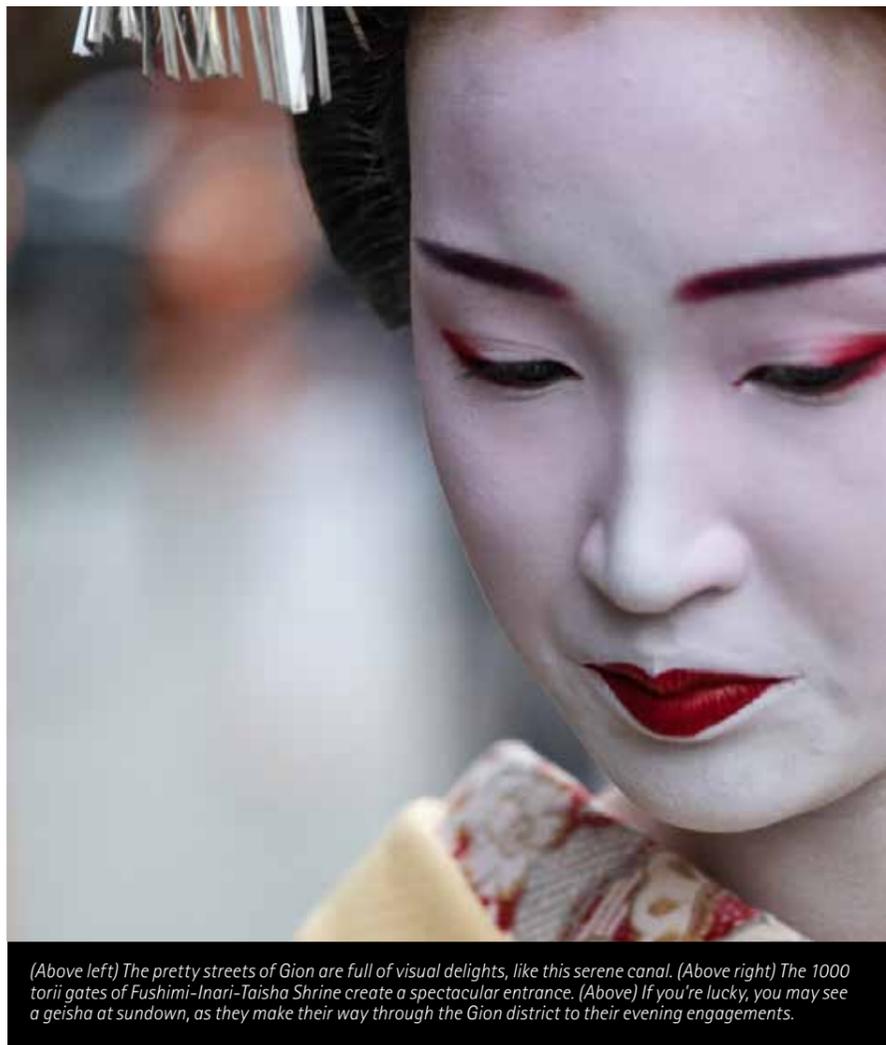
From the charming hot spring town of Kinosaki Onsen where visitors dress up to strip down, to a heritage fishing village unchanged in 300 years on the Sea of Japan... **Rhonda Bannister** veers off the tourist trail to discover the captivating treasures of Kyoto Prefecture



**A**fter the tourists have left and the streets are quiet, the ancient area of Gion in Kyoto appears straight from the pages of *Memoirs of a Geisha*. This is one of Kyoto's best-preserved historical areas, and Japan's most famous geisha district – let your imagination roam and you can almost hear the click-clack of their wooden shoes hurrying along stone streets and alleyways. Sadly, this enchanting culture is becoming part of history. Thousands of geisha and maiko (apprentice geisha) once called Kyoto home; now there's only around 300, so the chances of seeing this elusive beauty are limited ... but still, we tried.

We spent hours walking the streets around our Gion hotel, stumbling upon one treasure after another. Willow-lined canals with upmarket tea houses; twisting alleyways full of shops and cosy sake bars; lovely wooden merchant houses and riverside restaurants where you can dine alfresco on the deck. We didn't spot a real geisha but we did see plenty of pretty young ladies dressed up in colourful kimono – tourists in hired costumes playing the part of one of Japan's most iconic and intriguing cultural symbols.

When you come to Kyoto, it's mandatory to visit at least a couple of the 2000 temples and shrines – but it's a truly staggering choice. With only two days at our disposal before heading on to Kinokasa, a ruthless cull was needed before we ultimately decided on the World Heritage-listed Shimogamo Shrine in the sacred Tadasu-no-Mori forest, and the incredible 1000 vermilion torii gates of the Fushimi-Inari-Taisha Shrine. Only 1998 temples left to go! Another must: marvelling at the towering Arashiyama Bamboo Grove in the west of the city is a non-negotiable, and so worth it. It is simply otherworldly.



(Above left) The pretty streets of Gion are full of visual delights, like this serene canal. (Above right) The 1000 torii gates of Fushimi-Inari-Taisha Shrine create a spectacular entrance. (Above) If you're lucky, you may see a geisha at sundown, as they make their way through the Gion district to their evening engagements.

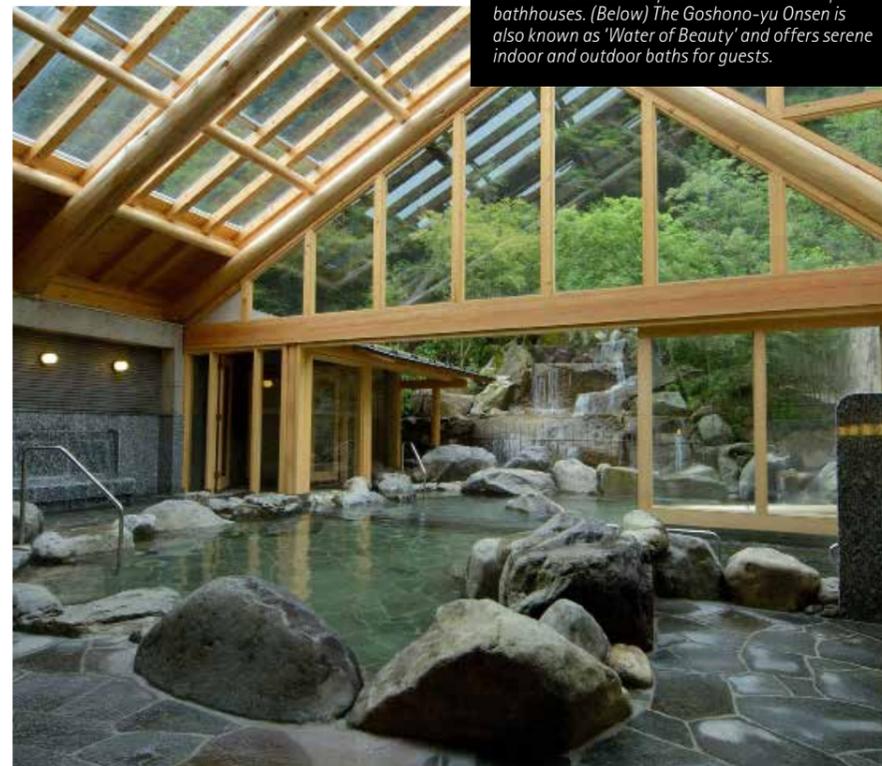
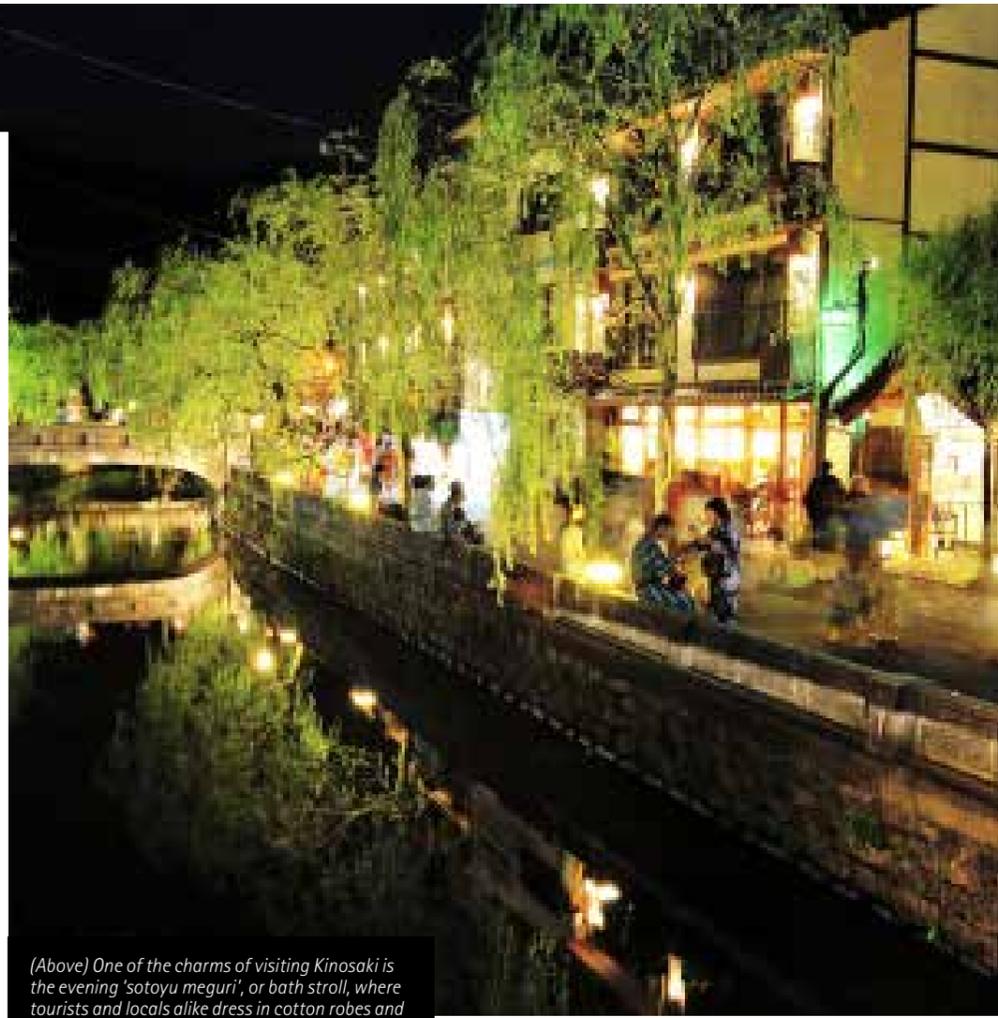
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## Chilling in a hot spring

Delving deeper into the Kyoto Prefecture (an administration area that's a little like a state or territory), our next stop was around 100 kilometres north, on the Sea of Japan. Kinokasa Onsen is defined by its seven public bathhouses, dozens of ryokans (a traditional Japanese inn) with private hot spring baths, and a warm welcome wherever you wander. The town is adorable at first sight. The further we roamed the streets and laneways, criss-crossing the willow-lined Otani River on little stone bridges, the more enamoured we became – especially in the evening when lanterns bathe the river and trees in their seductive glow.

The mystical history of Kinokasa Onsen reaches back 1300 years when a Buddhist priest received a vision from an oracle telling him to pray for a thousand days for the health of the people. Legend says that in addition to prayer, he fasted the entire time and on the last day, a hot spring shot up from the ground. Pretty impressive, but it was the modern history I found interesting, a tale of terrible loss and recovery. In 1925, the town was destroyed by the Tajima earthquake and the subsequent fire, where almost 300 citizens of the village

(Above) One of the charms of visiting Kinokasa is the evening 'sotoyu meguri', or bath stroll, where tourists and locals alike dress in cotton robes and wooden sandals to explore the town's seven public bathhouses. (Below) The Goshono-yu Onsen is also known as 'Water of Beauty' and offers serene indoor and outdoor baths for guests.



perished. When rebuilding, the local people decided to keep the traditional architecture of the three-storey wooden buildings, so today the town looks as though it has stood for centuries.

Checking into Mikiya, a luxury ryokan strategically placed near several bathhouses, we were introduced to the rituals of onsen bathing. It's a quintessential Japanese experience, even if going the full monty in front of a group of strangers may sound daunting! It certainly did to me the first time I took the plunge, but it's surprising how quickly you adapt. More than just relaxation, onsen bathing is also a traditional purification ritual and a social occasion where neighbours can gossip freely in the male and female segregated baths. A big part of the charm of Kinokasa is that everyone dresses up in a cotton robe (yukata) and wears socks and timber thongs on platforms (geta) before cruising through town, spa hopping!

Suitably dressed and shod and eager to join the parade, we sallied forth – for about three seconds. The problem became apparent as soon as we stepped outside. Instead of walking, I was shuffling like a crab along the stone footpath, trying to keep my shoes on. All around us couples and families in identical dress made →



(Left) Take the Ropeway to the top of Mount Taishi for incredible views of the Maruyama River. (Right) After being devastated by an earthquake in 1925, Kinokuni locals chose to rebuild their village in traditional style, retaining its charm. (Below) In years past, visitors to Kinokuni were required to visit Osenji Temple before bathing in its hot springs.



it look easy, so steady with resolve (if nothing else), I stumbled to the closest onsen where I soaped, rinsed and joined the other naked ladies in the steaming water. High five, mission accomplished – then I just had to shuffle home!

Some aspects of traditional Japanese culture take practice, like walking in geta or looking civilised while eating. Luckily, the Japanese people are so polite they would never publicise your faux pas. But still, you cringe a little inside, as I did at breakfast the following morning. A traditional Japanese breakfast is a small smorgasbord of delicious dishes, with flavours tending towards the savoury or umami. On this occasion, we were greeted by grilled fish, pickled vegetables, tofu, a pot of bubbling fermented yoghurt (I think), par-boiled runny egg, miso soup and rice. We brought our best chopsticks game to the table but still managed to leave a mess befitting a couple of barbarians.

Vowing to polish our skills for the next Japanese sojourn, we took the Ropeway (cable car) to the top of Mount Taishi where the view of the Maruyama River and surrounding mountains is spectacular. Stopping on the way down, we visited the Onsenji Temple (AD 738) to gaze upon the sacred 1300-year-old Bodhisattva (a Buddha-like figure) called Juichimen Kannon. Two metres tall with 11 heads, this goddess of compassion and mercy is only unveiled every 33 years and will return to hiding in April 2021. What fortunate timing to see a designated national treasure.

**“This astonishing country has thousands of stories to tell, including many about the samurai”**



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(Above) Explore the ruins of the ancient Izushi castle, perched on a hilltop high above the city. (Below left) Izushi's kabuki theatre is the oldest in the country, making it the perfect place to take in a performance of the classical Japanese dance-drama. (Below right) Handmade soba noodles are a speciality of Izushi, with awards handed out to those who can eat the most plates!



## A samurai town

This astonishing country has thousands of stories to tell, including many about the samurai: a class of hereditary warriors which arose in the 10th century and became the highest-ranking social caste in pre-modern Japan. Known for extraordinary courage in battle and their loyalty to the great lords and the Shogun, samurai tales are woven through Japanese legends and folklore. So, we couldn't pass up a chance to visit a samurai town nearby.

An hour south of Kinokuni by road, Izushi is a hidden gem and home to the remains of a hilltop castle that would have been magnificent when built in 1604. Izushi isn't on the tourist trail so there are not many Westerners wandering the streets – surely reason enough to come here? The winding flagstone streets are a showcase of traditional architecture steeped in history from the Edo period, including samurai residences, a kabuki playhouse (Japan's oldest theatre and still in use today) and the Shinkoro clock tower.

Climbing a steep set of stairs under a tunnel of red torii gateways, we came to an Inari shrine overlooking the entire castle town and beyond. It was breathtaking – and just the ticket to whet our appetite for lunch! Izushi is home to more than 50 soba noodle shops so it would've been impolite not to try a few plates. Slurping noodles, tasting the local sake and beer, and browsing the historic local shops had us convinced this was our kind of samurai town. →

## Finding my Zen

When first researching our trip, I came across a blog by a local Japanese woman who wrote enthusiastically about spending a day in a heritage fishing village on the Tango Peninsula. It sounded so enticing we included a special side-trip, travelling by train from Kinokuniya to Amanohashidate: gateway to the village of Ine.

Amanohashidate, which roughly translates as 'bridge of heaven', is a 3.6-kilometre natural land bridge spanning the mouth of Miyazu Bay. Thickly forested with thousands of pine trees and skirted by white sandy beaches, it's one of Japan's most iconic scenes – head to the mountaintop by cable car for the best aspect. Known as 'Kyoto by the Sea' this area is home to lovely townships and famous shrines and temples; we were sorry we could only see the highlights. Next time!

As it's quite remote, you can only reach Ine by car or bus. So, we hit the road up the Tango Peninsula – a stunning drive where forest-clad mountains stretch across the landscape before sweeping down to kiss the sea. It was late afternoon when we arrived at the observation deck overlooking the small fishing village of Ine and our home for the night, Nagahama Funaya: one of only 15 historic boathouses that have been converted into lodgings.



Looking across at the weathered wooden houses huddled together at the water's edge is a charming vignette almost unchanged in 300 years. No tourist hotspot, this is a perfectly preserved working fishing village of 230 boathouses and a way of life very few international travellers would know about, let alone have experienced. What a treat.

One of the UNESCO-recognised 'world's most beautiful bays', Ine is unique. It's the only village of its kind left in the country, with typhoons claiming the others over the years. Because Ine Bay faces south and a mountain range blankets its north side, the village is protected from the Sea of Japan and is now a nostalgic reminder of the past.

Being greeted by our host, who had practically no English just as we had no Japanese, was an exercise in pantomime as he showed us to our quarters on the first floor, pointing out the essentials. The glassed-in verandah offered panoramic views across the darkening bay and a box seat to watch fishing boats coming and going and hawks and gulls diving for scraps.

We then wandered the village on foot, stopping at the 260-year-old Mukai Shuzo Brewery, which produces one of Japan's most distinctive sakes, made from an ancient variety of red rice. The rose-hued brew is so good that Copenhagen's Noma and New York's Jane restaurants serve it. Even if you don't make it to Ine, you can purchase its signature sake, known as Ine Mankai, online in Australia for around \$100 – and worth every cent.

(Above) The peaceful fishing village of Ine is rarely frequented by tourists. (Right) A mountain range shelters the village from destructive winds and storms. (Below) The traditional wooden funaya, or boathouses, of Ine appear to hover over the water's edge, with a 'garage' for boats at sea level and modest living quarters above. A handful have been converted into guesthouses.



(Right) The beautiful bay at Amanohashidate is known for its 3.6km natural land bridge, which is covered in a thick forest of pine trees. (Below) Visit the tiny, family-run Mukai Shuzo Brewery in Ine to sample a variety of unique sakes.

It's a tiny sleepy village, so in no time we were home and ready for dinner. The pristine waters teem with red snapper, sardines and herring, yellowtail, abalone, rock oysters and more, so we weren't surprised to find dinner was a feast of the freshest sashimi, tempura vegetables and rice washed down with a few glasses of sake. A humorous after-dinner conversation in 'Japanglish' with the cook, who proudly showed us photos of her grandchildren, was a reminder that we don't have to speak the same language to enjoy the company of others when travelling – even without Google Translator!

Later, after rearranging the furniture and unrolling our futons, we sat on the balcony for an hour listening to the sounds of silence and watching the full moon rise, its golden glow throwing a gentle pathway of light across the tranquil water of the bay. A pervasive sense of calm washed over me, and in that humble, beautiful place I experienced what I can only describe as a feeling of absolute Zen. →



PHOTOS: ADOBE STOCK/KAZOKA303030, KOOKOOKOO, DAN BANNISTER @SILVERNOMADS, DREAMSTIME/CHUNG-CHANG WU



## The Details

### GETTING AROUND

Travelling around Japan by train is relatively easy especially if you purchase a Japan Rail Pass before you go – it's only available to overseas visitors and must be purchased from your home country. You can purchase online and exchange the voucher at the airport when you arrive in Japan to start using it immediately. Find out all you need to know at [japanrailpass.com.au/how-it-works](http://japanrailpass.com.au/how-it-works)

### KYOTO

When visiting Kyoto you can take advantage of a fabulous initiative from Kyoto Artisans Concierge, which organises lessons in the arts and crafts for interested tourists. A bespoke and immersive experience based on your interests is a wonderful way to spend a few hours in the studios of craftsmen and bring home a personal souvenir created by you – highly recommended. You can choose which ateliers you visit from a selection including pottery, lacquerware, woodblock prints, dyeing and more. See the courses at [kyotoartisans.jp](http://kyotoartisans.jp) and for information on visiting Kyoto: [kyoto.travel](http://kyoto.travel)

### KYOTO BY THE SEA

If you are looking to create a holiday itinerary that includes getting off the tourist trail to enjoy regional delights including food and textiles, we highly recommend exploring Kyoto by the Sea and the Tango Peninsula. The area is a scenic wonderland with forested mountains, white sand beaches, hot spring resorts, quaint villages and towns and some of Japan's most important shrines and temples, such as Moto Ise Kono Shrine, Chionji Temple (which took 8,780 carpenters to build!) and Nariaiji Temple, one of the temples on the Pilgrimage Route through western Japan. Kyoto by the Sea and the Tango Peninsula can be accessed by train and bus from Kyoto and Osaka but if you prefer a road trip you can hire a car when you arrive (organise first). The roads are fantastic and driving in this part of Japan isn't hard. [uminokyoto.jp](http://uminokyoto.jp)

### THE SILK ROAD

If you're a fan of textiles you won't want to miss a visit to Yosano and the Silk Corridor, not far from Amanohashidate. The town is an amazing intersection of preservation and active industry, while the historic road has been preserved, with many buildings dated to the Edo period. Here you can learn about the ancient silk weaving industry and have your photo taken wearing a kimono. [tangoopen.jp](http://tangoopen.jp)

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Nishimuraya Hotel Shogetsutei

This elegant hotel is the largest Kinosaki Onsen ryokan. There are 98 rooms and suites – 84 Japanese-style and eight with private open-air baths. It's a hotel that caters to every style of traveller in every season, and you could spend many days here just enjoying the amenities. The highlight of our stay was the exquisite multi-course kaiseki meal which is always based on seasonal delicacies no matter where you travel in Japan. [nishimuraya.ne.jp/shogetsu](http://nishimuraya.ne.jp/shogetsu)

#### Nishimuraya Honkan Onsen

Rated the 'Best Onsen Ryokan' in Japan by Lonely Planet, this sister property to Shogetsutei was founded in 1854. Part of the Relais & Chateaux chain, Nishimuraya Honkan Onsen (pictured above) has serene, minimalist rooms and suites overlooking or opening onto the divine gardens. For a special occasion choose a room or suite with a private hot spring bath. [nishimuraya.ne.jp/honkan](http://nishimuraya.ne.jp/honkan)

#### Mikiya Ryokan

A charming, traditional wooden ryokan with a history that dates to the late 17th century, staying here is an authentic experience. Recent renovations have added modern conveniences, but its history is still very much alive in the decor and service, and the building remains faithful to the spirit of times gone by. The beautiful, serene gardens entice you to sit and contemplate their graceful design. [visitkinosaki.com](http://visitkinosaki.com)

#### Ine

To book Funaya Nagahama in the historic fishing village of Ine, visit [ine-kankou-pp.check-xserver.jp/wp/e\\_inn/nagahama](http://ine-kankou-pp.check-xserver.jp/wp/e_inn/nagahama) 