

Resorts

JAPAN



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Trip notes

FLY

Japan Airlines flies from Melbourne and Sydney to Osaka's Kansai airport. Phone 1300 525 287, see au.jal.com

RIDE

Kinosaki Onsen is accessible by train from Kyoto (two hours 30 minutes) and Osaka (two hours 40 minutes) and JR rail passes can be used to visit the town.

STAY

Ryokan Mikuniya, Kinosaki. Rates start from 8100 JPY (\$92) a person sharing a room with no meals. Rates for a traditional Japanese banquet style dinner of Tajima beef and breakfast served in the room costs from 17,280 JPY pp sharing a Japanese style room, includes yukata rental and a pass for seven public onsens. Visitkino saki.com Ryokan Koyado Enn, Kinosaki. Rates from 7560 JPY a person a night sharing a Japanese room, no meals. Koyado.net

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Daniel Scott was a guest of Toyooka City Council



Oh, for heaven's soak

Japan's rituals are never more evident than in the onsen or the ryokan, writes **Daniel Scott**.

It's beginning to snow as my train nears the small town of Kinosaki Onsen, lending an ethereal veneer to the hills north-west of Kyoto. Arriving at the station, I can see the steamy breath of several people huddled outside, among them Noro Randria, my "local" guide. Randria is a young French Madagascan, whose obsession with Japanese culture led her to come to the hot spring resort of Kinosaki to live and work.

Also clopping along nearby are a Japanese couple wearing yukata – a traditional wraparound robe secured around the waist with an "obi" band – as well as socks, wooden sandals and warm overcoats.

"The whole of Kinosaki is like one big ryokan or Japanese inn," explains Randria, "with the station like the front door, the roads its hallways and each inn a different room."

"So, rather than always have to get changed to walk between their accommodation and Kinosaki's seven bathhouses," she says, "people slip on yukata, which each ryokan lends guests for free."

According to legend, the discovery of Kinosaki's hot springs dates back to the Asuka period in the sixth and seventh century when an oriental white stork was



witnessed bathing its wounds in the waters. Officially, though, it was the Buddhist priest Dochi Shonin who first brought attention to the springs during the eighth century Nara period.

A temple dedicated to Shonin, the Onsenji stands at the far end of town on the slopes of Mount Daishiyama, and it's here that most visitors come to give thanks before embarking on their ablutions.

Reached via a cable car, the top of Mount Daishi normally heralds views over the whole town and nearby coastline, but today the surrounds are dank and mushy.

Yet, back on street-level, even in these wintry conditions, Kinosaki, rebuilt in traditional style following an earthquake in 1925, seems compact and pretty.

Wiry cherry blossom trees line the banks of the central Otanigawa

Magical: (From top) at night, Kinosaki has the feel of a fairytale; Goshonoyu bathhouse.

river and three-storey wooden ryokan are interspersed between the sotoyu (public bathhouses).

It's now also the November-March Matsuba crab season, a specialty of this region's cuisine along with Tajima beef. There are extravagant representations of crustaceans above shops and restaurants all around town.

Lovely though it is outside, I'm keen to check in to the cosy Mikuniya ryokan, half-way down the main street, and to experience my first Kinosaki bathhouse.

After adorning myself in a yukata, incongruously worn over my thermal underwear and with sneakers as I find the wooden sandals too uncomfortable, I wander self-consciously across town and am drawn first into the grand entrance to the Goshonoyu bathhouse, next to a shrine.

As I store my shoes in a locker in the foyer, a young Japanese family arrives, Dad and Mum with 10-year-old son and eight-year-old daughter, separating to enter the male and female sections.

Inside the male changing room, I undress and notice how the father leads his very serious-looking son through the bathing ritual, passing on the centuries-old etiquette.

The same-sex nudity isn't that confronting and it's all matter-of-fact inside the bathhouse. However, brandishing only a hand towel for modesty, I'm grateful to slip into the first bath, one of several open cubicles with side rails to hold and upwelling bubbles to soothe aches and pains.

Being British of origin I love a bath, indeed it was the only way to get warm in the bad old days of crappy uni accommodation in relentlessly rainy, cold Manchester, and so I take to the onsen like a lucky duck, sinking up to my neck in the steaming water.

I also see a long soak as a creative space, doing much of my reading in the tub and often jotting ideas into a notebook, and it seems I am not alone.

Over the centuries, Kinosaki has attracted many writers and artists, including 20th-century Japanese author Shiga Naoya, who wrote stories about the town.

At night, Kinosaki has the feel of a fairytale, with paper lanterns along the riverside, lights reflected in the water and visitors wandering about in their yukata.

Nonetheless, once back in my tatami-matted room at the ryokan,