

01. Japan



Photography by Lauryn Ishak

Away from its neon megacities, Japan slows down to reveal authentic culture and customs along with extraordinary natural beauty. By Alexandra Carlton.

As the world locks its eyes on Tokyo for the 2020 Summer Olympic Games, we will be bombarded with images showing a hyper-modern city of frenetic intensity. Many visitors to Japan see little or nothing else, dashing between the metropolis of Tokyo and the former capital Kyoto on the country's famously efficient Shinkansen (bullet trains), dutifully ticking off the non-stop nightlife of the former and the beautiful but crowded shrines of the latter.

But beyond the busy cities, in countless regional beauty spots, is the Japan that has shaped a unique culture, a gentle world of mannered tea ceremonies and elaborate rituals, where the delicate art of origami and the patient nurturing of bonsai plants are visible manifestations of Zen.

Just an hour from Tokyo is the woodsy, cedar-scented Mount Takao, a natural wonder far less overrun by visitors than its famous neighbour, Mount Fuji. The Kiso Valley, with its tiny villages, spectacular mountains and gorges – and historical thoroughfares that retrace the footsteps of ancient feudal lords – is only a few hours away by train. And Northern Kansai, north-west of Kyoto city, is rich with cultural and natural heritage: picturesque fishing villages, colourful blooms and traditional hot-spring towns.

The thumping rhythms of the big cities may be Japan's heartbeat but these quiet rural hamlets are the country's serene soul.



The streets of the Northern Kansai spa town, Kinokasa Onsen (opposite and left); grilled chicken wings at a guesthouse in Kyoto Prefecture (below)

Mount Takao

○ 50 minutes from central Tokyo

Ascend any of Tokyo's skyscrapers on a clear day and it's impossible to miss the snow-capped monolith that is Mount Fuji, about 120 kilometres south-west of the city. You could join the thousands of visitors who hike to its summit every day in peak season or you could stay closer to Tokyo and make the climb less travelled to the top of the serenely beautiful Mount Takao. It's just under 600 metres and the gentle walk winds past Buddhist shrines and tea houses, making it an invigorating fresh-air daytrip away from the pace of the capital.

At the summit, you'll be rewarded with far more vibrant views of Mount Fuji than you get from Tokyo – and even better ones if you take the unmarked path to the lesser-known Momijidai lookout, an easy 10-minute walk from the top.

Enjoy lunch at the peaceful Ukai Toriyama (ukai.co.jp), a traditional Japanese restaurant set on two hectares of cultivated cherry trees and maples with a tumbling natural brook. Meals are served in dining rooms with floor-to-ceiling views of the gardens. Afterwards, wander among the trees and koi ponds to watch chefs grilling river fish over coals or seek out the timber water wheel that was once used to grind buckwheat for soba noodles.



The Kiso Valley

○ Three hours from Tokyo

Straddling two prefectures, Nagano and Gifu, and situated in the shadow of the imposing Mount Ontake, the verdant Kiso Valley is so low-key many urban Japanese haven't even heard of it. Yet its tapestry of feudal-era towns, crystal-blue gorges and mountain shrines makes it one of the best areas (within easy reach of Tokyo) to enjoy a true taste of traditional Japan.

Base your stay at the elegant Tsutaya Tokinoyado Kazari (hotel.qantas.com.au/tsutayatokinoyadokazari), a luxurious traditional inn surrounded by produce