

## Yvonne Gordon explores the castles, shrines, hot springs and cities of beautiful western Japan

**T**he red torii gates curve up the hill into the distance to the shrine on the hill top. On the right, cliffs overlook the sea. The gates are designed to separate the sacred world from the secular world – the red colour is to banish evil spirits.

These distinctive red gates are one of the symbols of Japan and while shrines like Fushimi Inari in Kyoto are well known, this is the lesser known Motonosumi Inari Shrine in a peaceful coastal setting in Western Japan.

I am here on a week-long exploring trip, going to some of Japan's more remote places.

We started out in the city of Fukuoka on the northern side of Kyushu Island in the southwest. Japan's sixth largest city is a modern metropolis, a mix of glass and steel buildings, industry and bright city lights, but there are pockets of tradition, and around the riverfront in the evening, paper lanterns sway outside cosy ramen and sake restaurants that are full of character.

One of the highlights of Western Japan is a visit to Matsue castle. Built in 1607, this is one of the last medieval castles in Japan and it's regarded as a national treasure.

We remove our shoes to enter the wooden castle and ascend steep wooden stairs to each floor. Each level has different artefacts on display from traditional costumes to weapons and art. From the top, we can see over the city and down to the castle's trees and gardens, where the first buds are on the cherry blossom trees.

Matsue, which has a population of 200,000, has a 'friendship city' status with Dublin. This is thanks to author Patrick Lafcadio Hearn, who was born in Greece in 1850 but had an Irish father and grew up in Ireland.

He later moved to Japan and became a teacher and writer in Matsue. There is a small museum and you can visit his former residence.

One of the nicest treats about exploring

# Gateway to JAPAN

**RED ALERT:**  
The colourful  
Motonosumi  
Inari Shrine

**pick  
of the  
WEEK**



Japan is enjoying the onsen hot springs. It's a volcanic country so there are thousands of hot bubbling onsens, and they are a feature of many hotels and traditional inns.

We check in to a ryokan (inn) to try the typical experience. The building looks modern from the outside, but inside, the rooms have traditional tatami mat flooring and sliding shoji room dividers – made with paper set in a wood or bamboo frame.

There's a low table and a zaisu chair with no legs, and no other furniture. When guests are at dinner, in the evening, the futon is set up on the floor

**TEA TIME:**  
Enjoy a tea  
ceremony



for sleeping. It sounds spartan but the mattress and pillow, which has buckwheat in it, are so comfortable, I have one of the best night's sleep of the trip.

Another lovely feature of staying at a Japanese hotel is the traditional Japanese yukata – a casual cotton robe, similar to a kimono but lighter and usually worn between the hotel room and the onsen.

I open the wardrobe to find a selection of different sized yukatas – some floor-length and all with large sleeves and an obi sash to tie it all in place. It's comfortable, and for warmth, there's also a short haori coat to wear over the robe.

When staying at an onsen hotel or ryokan, guests usually wear the yukata to dinner and breakfast so we do the same and there's something homely and relaxing about slipping into a robe rather than dressing up for the dining room. There are also sandal-like slippers to wear, plus a special bag to carry towels or room keys.

The onsen experience itself is fun too – if at first a little unnerving. Swimsuits are not worn – you wear your yukata to the changing room and leave it in a basket.

At first I worry about going through the

**“THERE  
ARE  
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HOT SPRINGS”**

### Getting there

Return air fares from Dublin to Fukuoka, via Hong Kong, cost from €711.97 with Cathay Pacific until March 31 and from €918 from April, including taxes, charges and 30kg luggage, see [www.cathaypacific.com](http://www.cathaypacific.com). British Airways fly direct from London Heathrow to Osaka from March 31 from €699 return, see [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com). For internal flights, check out the Japan Airlines Explorer Pass ([www.world.jal.co.jp/world/en/japan\\_explorer\\_pass/lp/](http://www.world.jal.co.jp/world/en/japan_explorer_pass/lp/)) or for trains, the Japan Rail Pass costs from around €266 per week (arrange via your tour operator).

wrong door from the changing room, but onsens are divided into male and female baths and the steam from the rooms, plus being allowed to use a small towel when walking to the bath itself, protects some modesty.

The first part of the onsen ritual is to wash thoroughly (the idea being that you enter the bath water clean, rather than to get clean in) so there are special bathing stations with stools and plenty of soaps, shampoos and lotions.

Once squeaky clean, you can then relax in the hot water for as long as you like – most onsens have a variety of pools

**SPA BREAK:**  
The Ice House



■ Show your love this Mother's Day and escape to the wilds of Ballina, Co Mayo with an overnight stay at the Ice House Hotel. Check in and chill out in Chill Spa where mum will be treated to a VOYA warm oil candle full body massage, followed by an illuminating anti-ageing facial, hot oil scalp massage and pressure point foot massage.

Continue relaxing in the refurbished thermal suite and outdoor spa terrace with hot tubs, before enjoying afternoon tea. From €180 per person sharing, call 096 23500 or see [www.theicehouse.ie](http://www.theicehouse.ie).

at different temperatures (the average is around 40°C) and some have outdoor pools too and plus a cold plunge pool.

After the soak, there are more lotions and potions, plus hair products and hairdryers, all lined up at beauty stations.

I am soon addicted to the onsen ritual – enjoying pre-breakfast soaks to get set up for a day of exploring, and winding down at the end of the day with a post-dinner soak to ease aching muscles and get set for a night of restful sleep.

Over the next few days, we visit a sake brewery to find out how sake is made using steamed rice, water and yeast.

The sake of each district of Japan has its own taste – because of the different rice and water used. Here in the south, the sake is sweeter to match the cuisine, whereas in the north it is drier to match the saltier food.

We also take a stroll in a traditional Japanese garden, with ponds, streams, ornate bonsai trees and bridges, where the first spring buds are showing on the trees. We tuck in to lots of sushi and sashimi (raw fish), miso soup, ramen, green tea and even steamed eel, which turns out to be one of my favourite dishes.

At the end of the week, I take a bullet train to Osaka, where the big city skyline is a surprise after a week of exploring smaller towns, and I travel on to Tokyo,

where my first port of call is an urban adventure tour starting in Akihabara aka 'Electric Town' – full of electronic billboards, electronics shops, gaming centres and anime and manga.

We visit a ghost subway station, a craft brewery and a former school converted to an arts centre and best of all, I learn all about life as a local in Tokyo from the guide Silvia, who answers my many questions.

My last stop in Tokyo is a tea ceremony, chado – the way of tea, at the Shizu-Kokoro school. I've had a glimpse of a tea ceremony during the week, and am keen to learn more about how you can experience mindfulness in the tea room.

In the small teahouse, as we sit on tatami mats, teacher Mika Haneishi explains how chado can cleanse the spirit, as she shows us how to prepare the matcha and serve it in a bowl.

It's a calming experience in a busy city – and an insight into the fascinating culture of a country where I feel like I have just tapped the surface... ■

**MEDIEVAL  
WONDER:**  
Matsue  
Castle has  
a lot of  
history



### Find out more about Japan

For information on exploring Japan, see [www.seejapan.co.uk](http://www.seejapan.co.uk)

For tailored trips, contact Japan specialists Unique Japan Tours ([www.uniquejapantours.com](http://www.uniquejapantours.com)), InsideJapan Tours ([www.insidejapantours.com](http://www.insidejapantours.com)) and JTB Europe ([www.japanspecialist.co.uk](http://www.japanspecialist.co.uk)).

The New York Times Journeys Tokyo Past, Present and Reused tour in Tokyo costs from €121.78, ([www.urbanadventures.com](http://www.urbanadventures.com)) and for a 90-minute chado tea workshop (€30), see [www.shizukokoro.com](http://www.shizukokoro.com)

Dunboyne Castle Hotel & Spa has teamed up with Fairyhouse Racecourse for the BoyleSports Irish Grand National for a special Easter package on Sunday, April 21 until Tuesday, April 23, with B&B and two tickets to one day of the Fairyhouse Easter Festival, from €175 for two people. Dunboyne Castle Hotel & Spa is just over 10km from Fairyhouse (transfers not included). See [www.dunboynecastlehotel.com](http://www.dunboynecastlehotel.com) or call 01 801 3500.

**AT THE  
RACES:**  
Dunboyne  
Castle



## TAKE PRIDE IN NYC

2019 is the year of Pride in New York City to mark the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, a pivotal moment in LGBTQ history.

There are several events taking place throughout the year that embody NYC's welcoming spirit.

They include: Love & Resistance: Stonewall 50 at New York Public Library, Bryant Park, Manhattan (until July 14)

Explore the emergence of the LGBTQ civil rights movement through photographs from pioneering journalists alongside the library's vast archives from LGBTQ history.

Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe at

the Guggenheim (until January 5, 2020)

Robert Mapplethorpe's collages and photographs are on display, as well as the work of contemporary artists who reference the artist.

PRIDE at the Museum of the City of New York (from June 6 until November). Examine NYC through the lens of photographer Fred W. McDarragh, who created an encyclopedic archive of culture and politics for The Village Voice. The exhibition features images of cultural icons such as Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan, with attention to gay liberation, anti-Vietnam War marches and the women's movement.

For more information visit [www.nycgo.com/year-of-pride](http://www.nycgo.com/year-of-pride)

## EASTER FAMILY BREAKS

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\*Offer applies to 2 adults & 2 children



**CLAYTON HOTEL**  
LEOPARDSTOWN | DUBLIN



**TOKYO:**  
Electric  
Town is  
high tech