

WeekendTravel

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THE JAPAN BUCKET LIST

Travelling to the Rugby World Cup?
Pól Ó Conghaile, Yvonne Gordon, Alex Meehan
and *Conor Power* pick 25 unforgettable
things to do in the Land of the Rising Scrum



Sci-fi cityscapes. Perfectly pruned parks. Bullet trains. Samurai castles. Cat cafés. And the food... oh, the food. Velvety sashimi; udon noodles that quiver in your mouth; ramen you'll remember forever. Compiling this week's travel guide to Japan, we could have gobbled up the entire magazine. Narrowing it down to 25 experiences made us feel like Joe Schmidt agonising over his final squad.

If you're travelling to the Rugby World Cup, you're in for a treat. Ireland's pool matches swing from Yokohama to Shizuoka, Kobe and Fukuoka, with possible knock-out games in Yokohama, Oita and Tokyo. All are universes unto themselves, but barely scratch the surface of a country that feels at once perfectly normal and completely alien.

Whether you go now, or later, you're in for an unforgettable holiday. Japan is what happens when an unstoppable force (the future) meets an immovable object (the past). Pinballing from Huruju Lane and hi-tech toilets to pretty palaces and serene Shinto temples can be overwhelming... every visitor has their Bill Murray moments. But that's half the fun, and everywhere you go, you'll find friendly people ready to forgive your faux pas.

Our advice? Dive in. *Kampai!* — *PÓC*

1 EAT OKONOMIYAKI

Where: Dotonbori, Osaka

Why: Osaka has a word — *kuidaore* — that roughly translates as “eat yourself into ruin”. Dotonbori is the place

to do it. Under a *Blade Runner*-style blast of neon (with extra spider crabs), jump down the foodie rabbit hole with a plate of *okonomiyaki*. These astounding savoury pancakes literally translate as ‘fried-whatever-you-like’ — expect liberal squirts of mayonnaise, flappy flakes of bonito tuna waving back up at you and lashings of Worcestershire-like brown sauce. You're welcome. — *PÓC*

Details: [insideosaka.com](https://www.insideosaka.com), for a great *okonomiyaki* guide
If you like this, try: When in Kobe, eat beef. The area is famous for sweet, richly marbled Wagyu with a low melting point. Try it at a *teppanyaki* table.

2 SEE THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS

Where: Mount Yoshino in Nara

Why: There might be a couple of cherry blossom trees in your neighbourhood back home, but the spring blooming season is such a big deal in Japan, viewing them even has its own word — *hanami*. Cherry blossom festivals are abundant throughout the country — April in Kyoto and Tokyo can be crowded with visitors, for example — and it's popular to picnic under the trees. With 30,000 trees at four different levels, Mount Yoshino in Nara is the ultimate viewing spot and has UNESCO world heritage status. Be aware that the exact weeks of blooming time change each year, according to location and weather. — *YG*

Details: Admission free; [visitnara.jp](https://www.visitnara.jp)

If you like this, try: Viewing plum blossoms in a plum park, for a less crowded experience. The *ume* trees begin to blossom a little earlier, in February or March.

3 RIDE A BULLET TRAIN

Why: It's an iconic image of Japan — a sleek-nosed *shinkansen* sliding through the countryside. To ride like a local, book your seat in advance, grab an *ekiben* (bento box) at the station, queue in super-orderly fashion (in 2017, an operator apologised when a train left 20 seconds early), and sit back as it accelerates to speeds of up to 200mph. Why can't every train system work like this? — *PÓC*

Details: A Japan Rail Pass (japanrailpass.net) allows unlimited travel on all JR and most *shinkansen* trains for seven, 14 or 21-day periods. Tourists must buy these outside Japan, validating an ‘exchange order’ on arrival. Prices from ¥29,650/€250 in Ordinary Class or ¥38,880/€332 in Green Class.

If you like this, try: Train station curries. Yes, really. These mild, gravy-style curries are a cult unto themselves... and taste far better than they look.

4 HAVE A DRINK IN THE SKY

Where: The Tokyo Dome Hotel

Why: Tokyo has no shortage of interesting places to drink, but the standing bar on the 43rd floor of the Tokyo Dome takes some beating when it comes to views. You'll pay a little more for a beer or a cocktail here but there's no cover charge, it's not crazy expensive and if you arrive at dusk, watching Tokyo's famous lights come to life is a stunning experience. Not one for those scared of heights — the glass lifts that take you into the sky are also an experience. — *AM*

Details: tokyodome-hotels.co.jp

If you like this, try: Made famous by the movie *Lost in*



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Translation, the New York bar on the 52nd floor of the Park Hyatt is also well worth a visit; there's a new Alain Ducasse restaurant at the five-star Palace Hotel, too.

5 SHARE AN ONSEN WITH A STRANGER

Where: Kagoshima & Fujinomiya
Why: In a country with volcanic fault lines constantly bubbling underfoot, hot springs are hard to avoid. The *onsen*, or hot spring bath, is an integral part of Japanese social life. Strip off and ease your bare body into a huge hot bath with your fellow man or woman (there are usually separate areas for each). Try the private *onsen* at the Tachibana Ryokan in Fujinomiya for its view of Mount Fuji, or the rooftop *onsen* at the Shirokuma Hotel in Kagoshima for its view of the smoking volcano of Sakurajima. — CP
Details: ryokantachibana.com; okura-nikko.com
If you like this, try: Spot bathing snow monkeys at Jigokudani Monkey Park; en.jigokudani-yaenkoen.co.jp

6 TAKE AN ELECTRIC BATH

Where: Spa LaQua, Suidobashi, Tokyo
Why: Speaking of baths, one of the most unusual in Tokyo is Spa LaQua, an actual natural hot spring bath with water pumped from 1,700 metres underground. Visitors can try out lots of different kinds of baths including some that pass mild electric currents through the water, as well as baths with different temperatures and mineral compositions. Men and women's bathing areas are segregated, but swimsuits aren't allowed and neither are tattoos. It's an excellent place to recharge your batteries, costing around €22 for admission. — AM
Details: laqua.jp/en/
If you like this, try: There are thousands of *senjo* (bath houses) and *onsen* (naturally heated spas) dotted around Japan. A trip is *de rigueur* on any trip.



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7 EAT RAMEN IN 8 MINUTES

Why: Ramen is Japan's comfort food, a bowl of soul that unites everyone in slurpy happiness for a few hundred yen. But there's more to your average *ramen-ya* than meets the eye. Wheat noodles, umami-rich broths, toppings and sauces can take days to prepare from age-old recipes (many shops do just a single style), though they're best eaten before the noodles grow too puffy. Eight minutes is optimum, ramen nerds say. Start with *tonkatsu*, the creamy pork variety, and go from there. — POC
Details: Brian MacDuckston is your go-to ramen guy in Tokyo and Osaka. Find his tours, classes, blog posts and reviews at ramenadventures.com.
If you like this, try: Continue your slurp-fest with a bowl of fat sanuki udon noodles in Kagawa Prefecture.

8 SKI PURE POWDER

Where: Hokkaido Island
Why: If you're a powder-junkie looking to carve fresh tracks in the snow, Hokkaido Island is the place to go in winter, with regular snow fall and an average annual depth of 21m. At Kiroro, you can ski 22 ski and snowboard trails and 14 off-piste runs, plus a special 'powder ride' for the ungroomed powder thrills. There's also a ski and snowboard academy for lessons, plus a fun snow park — and a traditional *onsen* for a post-ski warm-up and muscle soak. — YG
Details: kiroro.co.jp
If you like this, try: Ski shoeing or snowshoeing at Lake Akan, Hokkaido, (tsuruga-adventure.com) or drift-ice walking on the Sea of Okhotsk (shinra.or.jp).

9 SEE A SHINTO SHRINE

Where: Fujinomiya, Shizuoka Prefecture
Why: The Sengen Taisha Shinto shrine is one of the most visited in Japan and has mesmerising views of Mount Fuji. Shinto is a religion with no founder and no scripture. Anyone is welcome to enter a shrine, wash their hands and

say a prayer. This one is often used as a departure point for those making the pilgrimage up Mount Fuji (only allowed during July and August). — CP
Details: fuji-hongu.or.jp/sengen
If you like this, try: A Buddhist temple. Like Shinto shrines, they're dotted all over the country. Many Japanese move freely from one religion to the other: born in Shinto, married in a Christian church and buried in Buddhist ceremonies.

10 WALK DOWN HARUJUKU LANE

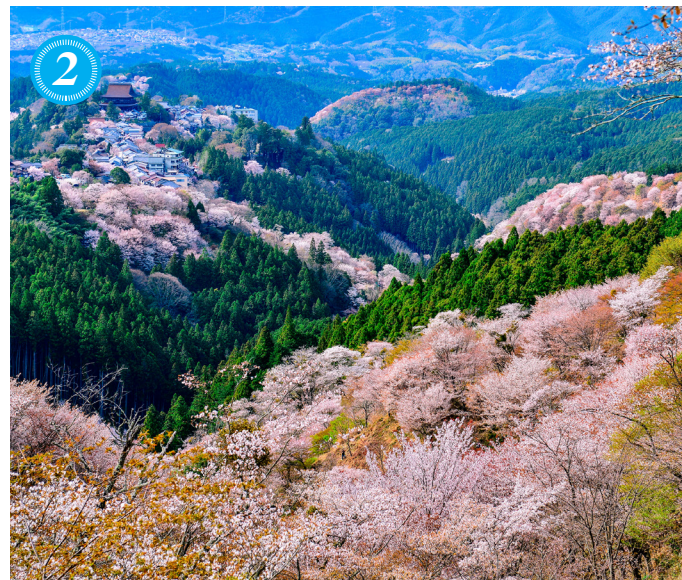
Where: Tokyo
Why: Takeshita Street, also known as Harujuku Lane, is the street fashion capital of Tokyo, and the birthplace of teen fashion in Japan. A visit here for people watching, shopping or to pick up a unique souvenir is a must for anyone interested in pop or *Kawaii* culture. Expect to see lots of goth-hybrid French maid outfits, platform shoes and unusual make-up jobs, cat cafes, candyfloss stores and more. Weirdly, this is also a great place to pick up unusual flavours of soft-serve ice cream and novelty crepes from street vendors in the area. Weekends find the area thronged, but that said, Sundays can be super-colourful. — AM
If you like this, try: There really isn't anywhere else like this. Possibly anywhere in the world.

11 EAT A KAISEKI MEAL

Why: The delicate dishes of this traditional multi-course Japanese dinner take hours to prepare and often draw on centuries of tradition. Tables are set out with a selection of colourful dishes, usually artistically arranged, sometimes with edible flowers and garnishes. Dishes are either simmered, grilled or steamed and include lots of sushi and sashimi plus meat, miso soup, vegetables, tofu and rice. The attention to detail is exquisite. — YG
Details: From €50 to €350pp (not including drinks), depending on where you eat the meal.
If you like this, try: The traditional Unagi no Seiomushi (eel steamed in a bamboo basket) at Ohana (ohana.co.jp) in Yanagawa, Fukuoka.

12 LIVE THE OKINAWA WAY

Where: Okinawa and the Southwest Islands
Why: Okinawa was propelled to Western fame in the early noughties, when bestselling book *The Okinawa*



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Way shone a light on the population's healthy diet and long lives. There's more than one island, of course (over 160, in fact), though tourists and honeymooners tend to split their time between shopping in the capital, Naha, and beach resorts further north on the main one. Those willing to put in the time with a self-drive holiday can find a rich antidote to Japan's frenetic futurism. Fun fact: Okinawa was also the setting for *Karate Kid, Part II*. — POC
Details: visitokinawa.jp; japan-guide.com
If you like this, try: Can't make it to Japan's southernmost prefecture? Take a boat tour of the 260 islands in Matsushima Bay. It's one of the famous 'Three Views of Japan' recommended by Edo scholar, Hayashi Goto.

13 SEE A SAMURAI CASTLE

Where: Odawara, Kanagawa Prefecture
Why: 2019 is the 65th anniversary of Akira Kurosawa's iconic movie, *Seven Samurai*. Odawara Castle in Kanagawa combines one of the most impressive views in the region and the chance to visit a small samurai museum. There has been a castle on this site since 1416 and while today's pile mostly dates from the modern era, it still houses a great museum, expansive battlements and boasts amazing views of the Sea of Japan and the neighbouring mountains of Hakone. For extra fun, approach from the original street entrance and count the number of ways invaders could be killed on their way to the castle itself. — AM
Details: jcastle.info/view/Odawara_Castle
If you like this, try: The Edo Tokyo Museum documents the history of old Tokyo, with life size reconstructions of period buildings and lots of dioramas. edo-tokyo-museum.or.jp

14 GO GOGGLE-EYED IN GINZA

Where: Tokyo
Why: Ginza isn't just a riot of neon. It's also the most exclusive shopping district in Tokyo, home to Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci and the upmarket Mitsukoshi department store. For something different, visit the world's



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largest Uniqlo store. Pronounced Uni-Glow, this cult clothing store has 12 floors of fast fashion, with the emphasis on quality t-shirts, down coats and casual clothing at good prices. It's great for bargains and souvenir clothing, and while Japanese sizes generally run one size smaller than Irish — XL is L, L is M etc — the Ginza outlet also stocks XXL which is helpful for taller and broader Westerners looking for a good fit. This outlet has English-speaking staff, and if you bring your passport, you can shop tax free. — AM
Details: uniqlo.com/jp/shop/ginza
If you like this, try: GU is a Uniqlo-owned chain of discount clothing retailers all over Japan. There are 24 in Tokyo alone. gu-japan.com



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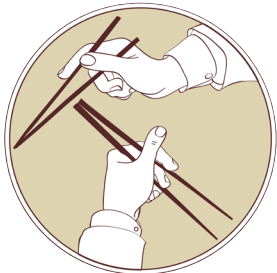
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CRYSTAL
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Etiquette: Dos & don'ts for travel in Japan



As pithy and practical as it is, the timeless travel maxim ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’ also needs some unpacking. In Japan, social rules, norms and customs — as well as the law of the land — exert a strong control. Japanese culture places a huge emphasis on being able to ‘read the air’, and sense what’s appropriate behaviour and what’s not. That’s not to say the Japanese don’t like to have the craic — they do — it’s just that they do it a little differently.

1 Keep it clean: Japanese soccer fans are famous for their clean-up efforts after games. Japan is for the most part spotless. If you can’t find a bin (there are hardly any in Tokyo) hold onto your rubbish until you find one at a station or accommodation.

2 Phones on silent: Chatting on your phone on any form of public transport is a big no-no. Keep it on silent mode — or ‘manner mode’ as they say in Japan. Also, bar the bullet trains, people generally refrain from eating and drinking on public transport.

3 Smoking areas: Unlike in Ireland, you can smoke in most bars, restaurants and cafes in Japan. However, smoking while walking is frowned on, and even banned in some areas. Find a designated spot.

4 Tipping: When eating out you don’t need to tip, but taxi drivers won’t mind if you round up by 100 or 200 yen (€1-2).

5 Chopsticks can be fun and frustrating. Don’t stick them upright in your food, or pass food with your chopsticks to another person’s chopsticks. Both actions have parallels in funeral rituals. Best also to keep chopsticks out of your hair. And your neighbour’s.

6 Temper tantrums: Don’t lose your temper. Just as you’ll rarely see public displays of affection in Japan, so it goes with public displays of anger. Lose the head, and you’ll be regarded the same way as a petulant child throwing a tantrum.

7 Learn some lingo: Try out a *cúpla focal*, or in this case ‘*konichiwa*’ (hello), ‘*arigato*’ (thank you) and ‘*ohayo gozaimasu*’ (good morning). If you do buy a drink or a round in Japan, you’ll receive gratitude. But don’t expect a drink in return.

8 And finally: A smile goes a long, long way in Japan. Above all, as an Irish friend of mine living here suggested, do act like a normal person. You’ll have a blast.

— JJ O’Donoghue is an Irish journalist living and working in Kyoto



15 STAY AT A RYOKAN

Where: Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park
Why: For a taste of old Japan, a stay in an authentic *ryokan* — or inn — is a must. A favourite is Fukuzumiro in the resort town of Hakone, around 1.5 hours south west of Tokyo. Easily accessible by train, this ancient inn is registered as a unique cultural property of Japan and was built in 1890 entirely of wood. It has natural hot spring baths, rice-straw tatami mats on the floors, sliding paper walls and doors, exquisite traditional *kaiseki-ryori* cuisine and a stay is an excellent contrast to the neon craziness of the city. It costs around ¥22,000/ €180pp for B&B with dinner. — *AM*
Details: fukuzumi-ro.com/eng/japaneseguesthouses.com
If you like this, try: Nikko and its neighbouring region of Kinugawa Onsen are also home to lots of hot spring resort hotels and *ryokan*, two hours north east of Tokyo.

16 TRY A TEA CEREMONY

Where: Shizu-Kokoro school, Tokyo
Why: Climb the stairs of this authentic tea house, right in the heart of Tokyo, and you’ll learn how a *chado* tea ceremony can quiet the mind and cleanse the spirit. Teacher Mika Haneishi spent years learning this ancient tradition and during the 90-minute workshop, where you sit on tatami mats, she’ll show you the correct and mindful way to prepare the matcha (made from green tea powder). — *YG*
Details: Tea workshop €30; shizukokoro.com
If you like this, try: A tea ceremony experience and visit to the antique Meimef-an Tea House, Matsue.

17 STAY AT A HOTEL RUN BY ROBOTS

Where: Near Nagasaki on Kyushu Island
Why: Check into the Henn-na-Hotel, and you’ll be greeted by a cast of multilingual robots that look like characters from *Blade Runner*. It doesn’t stop there. After you unlock your room for the first time, a face recognition scan allows you access using just your looks. Your bedside robot obeys commands to turn the lights off or the television on. Next door is the Huis Ten Bosch; a theme park including fun rides, a robot restaurant and various technological-advanced experiences housed in a recreation of Holland composed of millions of Dutch-imported red bricks. — *CP*
Details: h-n-h.jp; rooms from around €135
If you like this, try: A capsule hotel. Function is king with these stacks of pods, each the size of a single bed. Don’t expect creature comforts. first-cabin.jp; unihotels.com

18 DRESS UP IN A KIMONO

Where: Yanagawa city, Kyushu Island
Why: Dressing in a traditional kimono is an art that has been lost through the generations in Japan, so going to a specialist shop to be kitted out for the day is a fun outing. An experienced dresser will wrap you in the different layers, which include waist straps and obi sashes — and you can even get your hair and make-up done, before spending the day sightseeing around town in your outfit. — *YG*
Details: Kimono rental (including zori sandals) around €30; see kogasin.com or @kogasin on Facebook.
If you like this, try: Fast forward a couple of centuries and dress up as a Pokemon or Mario character to hit a ‘*purikura*’ photo booth in Tokyo’s Akihabara ‘Electric Town’.

19 GRAB A GLIMPSE OF A GEISHA

Where: Kyoto
Why: Global fascination with Japan’s geishas was sparked by Arthur Golden’s 1997 novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and the subsequent movie (you see the thousands of vermillion *torii*, or gates, that featured in the film at Fushimi Inari-taisha temple). Geishas, and their apprentices — known as *maiko* — are classically-trained entertainers that spend years perfecting Japanese etiquette and arts like calligraphy, dance and tea ceremony, echoing centuries of cultural refinement in their shows and company. The best places to see them are Ponto-cho and Gion in Kyoto — where you can book a show, a walking tour, or even catch them floating between appointments. Do respect their space and time and forgo the selfie requests, however. — *PÓC*
Details: insidekyoto.com
If you like this, try: Walk the Philosopher’s Path in Kyoto, a romantic, canal-side trail lined with temples, pagodas, cherry trees, kimono shops and craftspeople at work.

20 GET THE INSIDE TRACK

Where: Kyoto, Yokohama, Fukuoka, Tokyo
Why: Japan can be an overwhelming place, so consider joining a small walking tour to get your bearings and an insider steer. City Unscripted offers tours like ‘Eat Like a Local in Yokohama’ and ‘The Ultimate Tonkatsu Ramen Experience’ in Fukuoka, priced at roughly €60 for three hours. I took a tour of Tokyo’s Koenji neighbourhood recently with Daniela Baggio Morano, one of the company’s guides, and she was leading me down lantern-lit laneways and into hidden vinyl and vintage stores in a fraction of the

time it would have taken me to find them myself. — *PÓC*
Details: cityunscripted.com. See also airbnb.com/experiences/kyotolocalized.com and tokyolocalized.com
If you like this, try: For longer walking tours, from the Nakasendo Way to the Tokaido trail, see walkjapan.com

21 CATCH SOME KIBUKI THEATRE

Where: Iizuka, Fukuoka, Kyushu Island
Why: The Kabuki style of dance-drama theatre, with its elaborate make-up and costumes, was a popular form of entertainment in Japan before television took hold. This area once had 48 Kabuki theatres and the Kaho Gekijo Kabuki Theatre is the last remaining one — a wooden structure built in 1931, it has open box-style seating for 1,200 and a revolving stage. It still has concerts and plays through the year and during a tour you can see backstage — and under the revolving stage, which takes 12 people to turn. — *YG*
Details: €2.50; free tours on non-performance days.
If you like this, try: See a traditional performance from the Ainu people, with song and dance, at Lake Akan Ainu Theatre in Hokkaido; akanainu.jp/en

22 NUCLEAR MEMORIES IN NAGASAKI

Where: Kyushu Island
Why: The second nuclear weapon to be deployed in war, on a living city, detonated over Nagasaki at 11.02am on August 9, 1945. The Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum documents and interprets what happened before, during and after that moment. Exhibits range from objects exposed to the bomb (including a clock stopped at 11.02) to a replica of the weapon itself — nicknamed ‘fatman’ — and the horrendous effect of fireballs, heat rays, blast and radiation on the city. WWII history dominates, but Nagasaki is a surprisingly colourful city. — *PÓC*
Details: nagasakipeace.jp
If you like this, try: Hiroshima was where the first atomic bomb was dropped, on August 6. Visit the Peace Memorial Park for a sombre tribute.

23 SAY SLÁINTE WITH SAKE

Where: Himeji, Kansai
Why: Although it’s often referred to as rice ‘wine’, sake has much more in common with the rapidly-churned-out gin. It’s made from rice fermented using a mould as a kind of accelerator — at least, that’s as much as



I learned before my eyes started to glaze over on a boozy tour of Nadgiku Sake Brewery with a lively host. Because it’s brewed from rice, it accompanies just about any Japanese meal more perfectly than you could imagine. — *CP*
Details: nadagiku.co.jp
If you like this, try: Don’t miss Himeji Castle, arguably Japan’s most spectacular. It’s one of eight original Samurai castles left in the country. himejicastle.jp

24 HIKE MOUNT HAGURO

Where: Yamagata Prefecture, Tohoku
Why: Mount Fuji is Japan’s most famous mountain, but just a couple of hours north of Tokyo lies an off-radar land of national parks, ancient forests and hot springs — and hardly any western tourists to share it with. Climb the 2,466 stone steps of Mount Haguro, a sacred mountain studded with ancient cedar trees (or book a guided experience with Yamabushido), before taking a train to Aomori Prefecture’s Towada-Hachimanti National park. There, you can walk or cycle the 10-mile Oirase River Gorge... another of Japan’s National Geographic-worthy landscapes. — *PÓC*
Details: tohokukanko.jp/japan-guide.com
If you like this, try: Mount Fuji’s official climbing season is July to mid-September, before the snows set in. A climb shouldn’t be taken lightly, however.

25 SEE AN ART ISLAND

Where: Naoshima, Setouchi
Why: Naoshima is Japan’s ‘art island’. Though just three square miles in size, it’s home to the Chichu Art Museum, set in a hillside overlooking the coast. Star turns include pieces by Monet, James Turrell and Walter De Maria, as well as Yayoi Kusama’s Instagramable sculptures of polka-dot pumpkins. Stay nearby at Guntu, a 19-bed floating hotel on the Seto Inland Sea (guntu.jp), or newly restored traditional houses known as *kominka*. — *PÓC*
Details: benesse-artsite.jp
If you like this, try: The Venice of Japan? That’ll be Kurashiki in Okayama Prefecture, an Edo period canal area strewn with mosey-friendly museums and galleries.

NB: All prices/info subject to change. For more to see and do in Japan, visit seejapan.co.uk.