



Places

Far from the madding crowd on Japanese trails

Away from the hustle and bustle of Tokyo lie the sacred, ancient paths of central Japan, writes **Yvonne Gordon**

At the base of Mount Ontake in Japan, a stone staircase disappears up a steep hill into the forest. At the top is a sacred shrine with stone carvings of deities, watching down over those who ascend the path. In Japan's native Shinto religion, which worships nature, mountains are sacred places and Mount Ontake in central Japan, the country's second highest volcano – after Mount Fuji – at 3067m, is particularly worshipped. I've come here to walk some of the ancient trails, like the Ontake Kodo, to experience spiritual paths and learn more about Japan's history and culture. It feels a world away from the skyscrapers, robot cafes and bullet trains of Tokyo, where I first landed. A few days on the trails of central Japan's Nagano area gives an insight into traditional, more rural Japan, and the feudal lords, monks and pilgrims who walked these roads in times past. You can stop overnight in traditional inns in the old "post towns" (rest stops) which provide lodging and food just as they did for pilgrims.



For centuries, Mount Ontake was a spiritual place for Shugendō practitioners, who climbed the mountain to seek purification. The Shugendō faith, or mountain asceticism, has elements of Shinto and Buddhism. Climbing the mountain was only open to the ascetics, who went through a 100-day purification ritual before they could ascend. This included living in caves, and cleansing under waterfalls four times a day. Around the base of the mountain, there are thousands of carved stones – reijinh. Local guide Yukinobu Koshi explains that they are monuments to ancient ascetics who completed the 100-day rituals and climbed the mountain. One carving depicts a man who did this 53 times. After the 1700s, the mountain was opened up to everyone to climb, so today's visitors don't need to undertake the 100-day challenge. We start our walk by ascending the hundreds of mossy steps up into the forest to the Omata Sansha Shrine, which was created for those who could not climb the mountain itself. At the top, Yukinobu leads us in a blessing, where we bow, clap and make a coin offering to the three guardian deities, asking for a blessing for our onwards journey.

We then follow the 9km Ontake Kodo Trail, which leads along a stony path through woods of oak, maple, elm and cedar, across wooden bridges and streams. We pass reijinh monuments and stone deities along the way as we navigate up and down hill paths where tree roots have been made into steps. Parts of the trail lead down steep zig-zagging descents with ropes and chains supporting the way. It's hot but a shower of rain cools us down, and after around three hours we reach the 30m-high Kiyotaki Falls, where we will try takigyō (waterfall meditation), part of the ancient Mount Ontake purification ritual. We prepare by dressing in the white clothing of the mountain ascetics. Then meditation leader Kouji Kurumizawa chants two sets of prayers in Japanese, the first to purify our body and the second to purify our mind. Then he leads each of us in turn to the waterfall, where the cold mountain water thunders down the rock face. I'm not sure how long I'll withstand the waterfall – but surely the many freezing Irish waves which have broken over my head during winter surfing outings must be an advantage? Kouji places me under the waterfall and then retreats to one side. It's cold and the water pressure is strong, but I focus on my breathing and manage to



stay the duration (around three minutes) until he leads me out. At a ryokan (traditional inn) in Otaki village, we have a colourful lunch of soba noodles and local rice with miso, red and green peppers, pickled tomato and cucumber and a red drink made with the Japanese herb perilla. Outside the win-

dow, the mountain has taken on wisps of mist. Another day, we walk some of the ancient Nakasendo Trail. This was a trade route in the Edo period from 1603 to 1868, running 540km between Edo (present-day Tokyo) through the Kiso mountains to Kyoto, and we plan to walk 9km between the post towns of Magome and Tsumago. Starting in Magome, a paved path leads us past rows of old wooden houses, an old post office and a bakery. The trail soon opens out into open countryside, and then forest, with cherry, elm and the famous Kiso-Hinoki cypress, which was used for building houses and shrines. Kiso is also the name of the valley. The air is filled with the sound of cicadas. We pass a river with a waterwheel, carved stones with distance markers and small Shinto shrines along the way. It's no longer a difficult and hazardous trail to traverse, thanks to the abundance of boardwalks and bridges. There are some roads, but the route is mostly quiet. "I love the atmosphere of the Kiso Valley because it's surrounded by mountains, so the colour of the plants, trees, sky and everything is so deep," says our guide Yukinobu. "You can also feel the balance of history and nature."

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At the end of our walk, the town of Tsumago with its rows of traditional wooden houses and flower boxes sits under lush, forested mountains. Thanks to its protected status, there are no electricity cables or modern signs, giving it an old-time feel. We buy coffee and traditional sweet snacks made with rice, nuts and fruit.

That night we stay at Onyado Tsutaya, a ryokan in the post town of Kiso Fukushima. The inn dates back to the Edo period and the traditional rooms have futon bedding on traditional tatami mats. There's an open-air onsen (public bath), with water from the mountain hot springs, perfect for easing hiking muscles. Dinner is a feast of small plates with jelly noodles, ginger, pickles, rice, sashimi of local white trout and Japanese beef.

Our final walk is on the 10km Togakushi Kodo Trail, which connects five Shinto shrines and was used by ascetics and ninjas (warriors). One of the most scenic parts is the 2km-long Okus-hasando Suginamiki path, lined with more than 200 old cedar trees. Each shrine on the trail is dedicated to a different god, such as the god of the arts, or the god of wisdom, and along the way we pass through the huge decorative wooden Zuijinmon gate.

We spend the last night at temple lodge Shukubo, rising at 4am to join the monks at Zenkoji Temple, which is 1,400 years old. As dawn rises, we join other pilgrims to watch the early morning prayer service.

We then move to Daikanjin Temple to try zazen meditation, where a monk talks us through how to sit in the correct posture, control our breathing and relax our minds. It's a calming experience and a nice way to end the trip.

If visiting Japan's big cities to do bucket-list sights, walking these trails is a great way to get away from the crowds and travel back in history, experiencing some of the old Japan as well as its nature and mountains.

To get there, I flew on Finnair from Dublin via Helsinki to Tokyo and then got the bullet train to Nagano to join the tour, leaving again by train. Arriving back in Tokyo after the meditations and hikes, it takes a while to get used to the crowds and noise again. But then I remember that ancient trails like the Nakasendo lead to this point, and that calming forest paths are never far away.

GETTING THERE

● Yvonne was a guest of Nagano Tourism Organization and Oku Japan. For more information about the Kiso Valley, visit go-nagano.com/en. Oku Japan offers guided and self-guided tours in the Kiso Valley and Nakasendo from €1,050; visit okujapan.com/region/nakasendo. ● Finnair flies from Dublin to Tokyo Haneda via Helsinki daily (finnair.com). Return flights start at €993 (economy) and €2,275 (business). Japan Rail Passes start at €317 for seven days; visit japan-rail-pass.com



Swoon lagoon – Venice is undoubtedly beautiful but at what cost?

Coughing up time at the zoo to protect the fragile city of Venice

ROSLYN DEE



The mayor of Venice, Luigi Brugnaro, thinks that insisting daytrippers cough up €5 for the privilege of entering the city on certain dates next year is going to have them all heading to Verona or Padua instead. Is he for real?

Venice, a city with which I have enjoyed a 30-year love affair, is nowadays totally overrun with daytrippers. They clamber off the buses in Piazzale Roma at the top of the Grand Canal or step out of the train station just a few hundred metres further down that famous waterway with not a suitcase in sight between the lot of them.

There they are, set to tramp all over this fragile city for a few hours so that they can tick Venice off their “must see” travel list.

They jam the narrow streets that run between St Mark's Square and the Rialto Bridge, they elbow their way past residents waiting patiently to board the waterbuses, they plonk themselves down on crumbling steps as old as time to munch their takeaway sandwiches, they stock up on cheap tat from foreign-owned souvenir shops and then they leave a few hours later having contributed absolutely nothing to the city other than human traffic. And what traffic – almost 80pc of those who visit Venice are daytrippers.

Ah, come on, I hear you say, surely everyone has a right to visit Venice in whatever way they want to, especially when the cost of staying or eating in the city itself is astronomical.

Well, b*****s, is my most polite response to that argument. I have stayed in perfectly fine and reasonably priced two- and three-

star hotels for decades and when people waffle on about €9 cappuccinos and €15 glasses of prosecco it makes me want to scream. Of course, you'll pay that in the likes of Florian's on St Mark's Square – it is reputedly the oldest cafe in the world, after all, having celebrated its 400th anniversary during Covid.

Suffice to say that when I spend extended time in Venice (in a reasonably priced apartment) my morning cappuccino costs me €1.60, a plate of, say, spaghetti vongole (clams) costs around €12 and a glass of local wine sets me back about €2/2.50. Oh, and that ubiquitous, sickly-sweet Aperol Spritz (Spritz Select, the genuine Venetian article, is a much better drink) ranges between €3 and €5 in most neighbourhood bars in the city. So, please, don't give me all that “Venice is a rip-off” malarkey.

It is, though, undoubtedly under threat from those who visit in their droves; with over 20 million tourists a year in a city with a population that has dipped below 50,000, something has to give. And it has to be those who drop in for a few hours as if visiting a museum before heading off to the mainland again having contributed next to nothing to the Venetian economy who are being targeted.

Venice isn't a place to just come and gawk; yes, it's beautiful but it's also a living, breathing city where kids go to school, artisan traders make their living, locals work in long-established shops, and students attend the Ca' Foscari university. It's a city that lives its life on the water in the most

amazing way and it must be protected and respected.

In recent years, the monstrous cruise ships have finally been told to sling their hook elsewhere, a good start, and a well-earned victory for the “No Grandi Navi” activists. As for this newly-approved €5 entrance fee for daytrippers come April, however, what kind of pathetic attempt at stemming the flow is that? Charge them €50, I say – that will soften their cough and make them think twice about swanning around before heading back across the lagoon to their hotels in Mestre and beyond.

Apart from upping the 2024 entrance fee by several multiplication factors, Signor Brugnaro and his fellow councillors need to tackle the explosion of cheap souvenir shops.

With their “Murano Glass” stickers which on closer inspection reveal that the pieces in question are made “in the style of Murano Glass”, they are an insult to the genuine Murano glassmaker families who have been perfecting their extraordinary skills for generations.

Every morning, for years, I used to walk past a shoe shop in the Santa Croce district, owned by a man who lived with his wife just a couple of streets away. Now it's a souvenir shop selling €4 bracelets and €8 vases – all “Murano Glass”, don't you know. Yeah, right.

Over the years I've got to know a Venetian printer called Gianni Basso whose premises lies on a backwater street on the northern reaches of the city. Earlier this year, when I popped in one day to say hello, he was in full flight. “Here, it is Venice,” he told me, pointing to the ground beneath his feet. Then, gesticulating dismissively towards the Rialto area where tourists constantly jostle for selfie-taking space on the famous bridge, Gianni virtually spat out his punchline: “Over there it is a zoo.”

And it will take a lot more than a €5 entrance fee for a few peak-time weeks of the year to empty that “zoo” and to turn back the tourist tsunami that is currently destroying one of the most precious and fragile cities in the world.



It's a city that lives life on the water in the most amazing way