TAKING THE SLOW ROADS
Living heritage on a guided walk in Japan

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It seems impossible that last night we were stumbling through the neon frenzy of Tokyo’s Kabuki-cho. Now we are in Ena, a tiny town a few hours from the capital via Nagoya, where we have just met our Walk Japan group. The wooden-walled ryokan we are sleeping in tonight has been here since 1624, and the three women looking after us are the 14th, 15th and 16th-generation innkeepers.

Ena was one of the 69 post towns of the Nakasendo, an ancient road connecting Kyoto with Edo, modern Tokyo. One of the five highways, or gojoud, that took on huge importance during the Tokugawa shogunate, the Nakasendo is now a road into Japan’s past. It’s 150 years since the Meiji Restoration brought to an end the fascinating Tokugawa era and 260 years of peace and unity, paradoxically under a military dictator and a restless warrior class, that followed 150 years of continuous civil war. This hard-won peace did not keep itself, of course.

As we set off on our trail walk, one of the lords under control through the ingenious sanchi kotai system. The lords spent alternating years in Edo, leaving their wives and children as hostages in the capital when they returned to their own domains. This had no real purpose other than to drain the lords’ resources while giving them a strong disincentive to rebel.

It also necessitated good roads to and from Edo and the creation of numerous post towns to supply them and their retainers. This is why we find ourselves in Ena, about to walk a surviving rural section of the Nakasendo called the Kiso Road, through the scenic Kiso Valley in central Honshu.

This five-day tour is a short one for Walk Japan, which leads tours all over the country, teeming with wildlife, including orcas, winter snow-shoeing, a temple pilgrimage, and an 11-day Nakasendo walk that goes all the way from Kyoto through Hakone, Sekijabara (site of the conclusive battle won by Tokugawa in 1600) and several historic post towns to finish at Nihonbash in Tokyo: the bridge to which all roads lead.

Our group of 11 walkers — a family of four from New York, three New Zealanders, a mother and daughter from Melbourne, and my partner and I — is lucky to have as our tour leader Llewellyn Thomas, the managing director of Walk Japan. The unassuming Englishman is immensely experienced, funny and full of stories both droll and dreadful. (It being Japan, about half of them end with “... and was compelled to commit suicide.”)

You can do this walk on your own, but the value of a guide can’t be overstated. Having a fluent and chatty Japanese speaker who gets stories out of everyone and sees beyond the surface of things makes the experience much richer and more immersive.

At Ena, we visit a museum dedicated to artist Utagawa Hiroshige who, executively, and sometimes imaginatively, captured some of the scenery we are about to see. There is a huge private collection of prints, plus a print-setting-up that allows us to try our hand. We leave with some smudgy approximations of ukiyo-e masterpieces and a renewed respect for the craft.

Back at Ichikawa ryokan, bathed and in our yukatas, we have our first kaiseki dinner, a succession of small, exquisite dishes — usually including salmon or ayu, a local river trout, seasonal vegetables, soja noodles, miso and pickles — with lashings of beer and sake. Breakfast is just as opulent, minus the sake. Walking begins next morning, after a short train and taxi ride, at Ochiai. Takashi Miike’s incredibly violent film 13 Assassins is set here, but there’s no mud or flying heads today. It’s late May, the end of spring; the last cherry blossoms have fallen and the countryside has burst into green. We pass small farms and rice paddies that reflect the sky: wildflowers bloom by the road; it’s warm but not yet humid, and utterly serene.

Writers in the 17th century described high-society ways teeming with palanquin bearers and retainers, the air ringing with the cries of
hawkers. Thomas asks us to picture the princess Kazunomiya travelling from Kyoto to Edo in 1683 to marry the 14th shogun, Tokugawa Iemochi, with a combined escort of about 25,000 retainers, plus some diabolically heavy luggage. Today we are almost alone on this narrow road, except for a fit older gentleman we meet perusing an information board. He mentions, offhand, that he has already walked the Nakasendo from Tokyo to Kyoto (about 500km) and is on his way back. He tells us he is 77.

Humbled, we make our way to Magome, a beautifully preserved post town of dark cypress buildings, swallows nesting in the eaves. This is the childhood home of Toson Shimazaki, author of the bleak realist novel Before the Dawn. Shimazaki, author of the bleak realist novel Before the Dawn. He mentions, offhand, that he has already walked the Nakasendo from Tokyo to Kyoto (about 500km) and is on his way back. He tells us he is 77.

On day three we head off early and beat the crowds to Tsumago, another incredibly photogenic post town, where we visit the preserved waka-honjin — the second-most important inn — its cypress rafters black with the soot of centuries. Taking a slight detour, we walk over the Jizo Pass through wisteria-lined forest, clapping to warn off bears (rare but two of our group who prefer to avoid them are catered for). Our last wooden building is the imposing Matsumoto-jo, one of just four original castles in Japan to survive without rebuilding. Called Crow Castle for its menacing black aspect, it is a thing as much of beauty as militarily important. The hotel is untouched but the restaurant is gutted. I mention this only to drive home the impossibly way the emergency is handled by everyone, not least our unflappable tour leader, and because it makes us reflect on the extraordinary survival of centuries of the many wooden buildings we have admired and slept in. The hotel is untouched but the restaurant is gutted. I mention this only to drive home the impossibly way the emergency is handled by everyone, not least our unflappable tour leader, and because it makes us reflect on the extraordinary survival of centuries of the many wooden buildings we have admired and slept in. The last wooden building is the imposing Matsumoto-jo, one of just four original castles in Japan to survive without rebuilding. Called Crow Castle for its menacing black aspect, it is a thing as much of beauty as militarily important. The hotel is untouched but the restaurant is gutted. I mention this only to drive home the impossibly way the emergency is handled by everyone, not least our unflappable tour leader, and because it makes us reflect on the extraordinary survival of centuries of the many wooden buildings we have admired and slept in. The last wooden building is the imposing Matsumoto-jo, one of just four original castles in Japan to survive without rebuilding. Called Crow Castle for its menacing black aspect, it is a thing as much of beauty as militarily important. The hotel is untouched but the restaurant is gutted. I mention this only to drive home the impossibly way the emergency is handled by everyone, not least our unflappable tour leader, and because it makes us reflect on the extraordinary survival of centuries of the many wooden buildings we have admired and slept in. The last wooden building is the imposing Matsumoto-jo, one of just four original castles in Japan to survive without rebuilding. Called Crow Castle for its menacing black aspect, it is a thing as much of beauty as militarily important. The hotel is untouched but the restaurant is gutted. I mention this only to drive home the impossibly way the emergency is handled by everyone, not least our unflappable tour leader, and because it makes us reflect on the extraordinary survival of centuries of the many wooden buildings we have admired and slept in.

Penny Durham was a guest of Walk Japan.