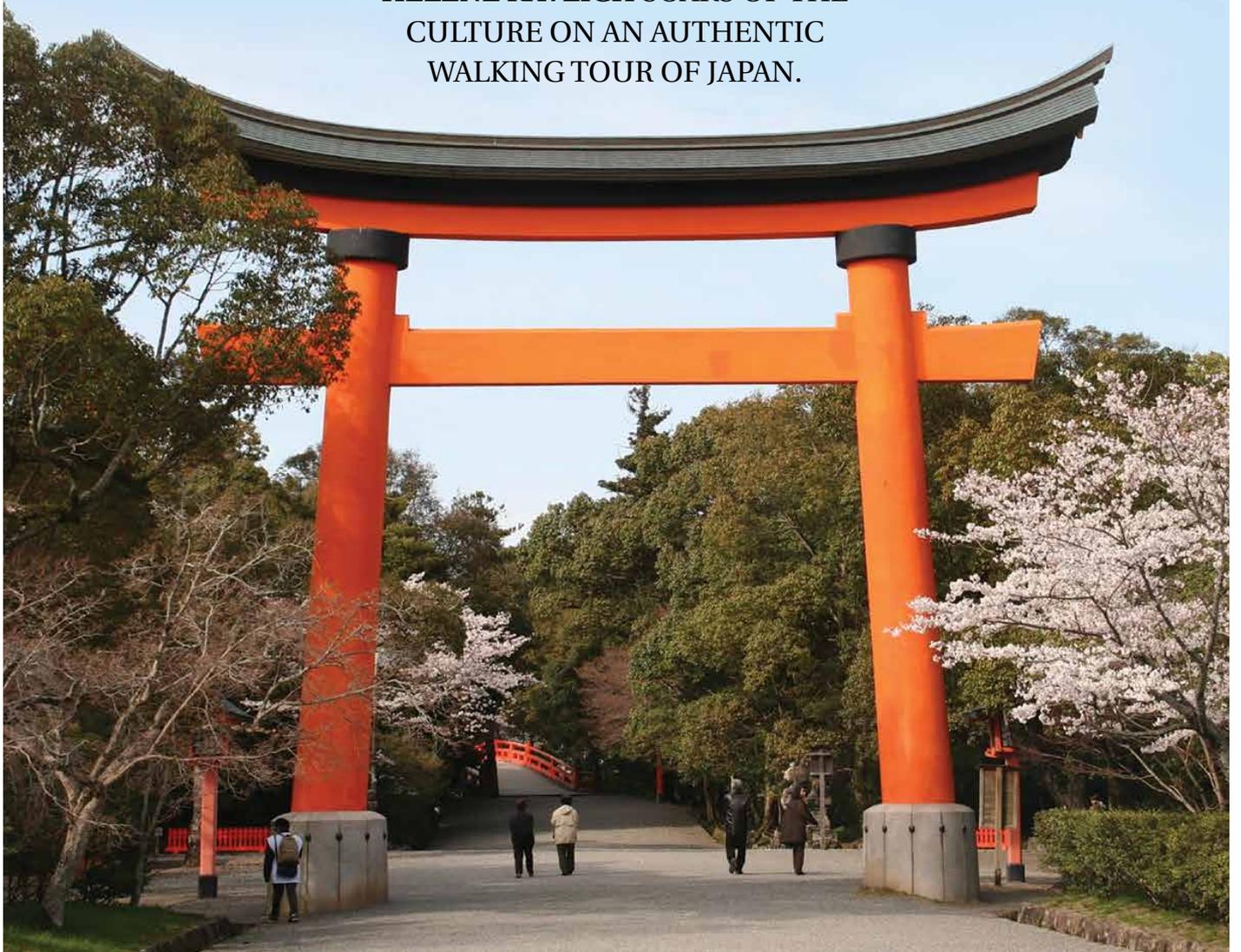


WALK JAPAN

HELENE RAVLICH SOAKS UP THE
CULTURE ON AN AUTHENTIC
WALKING TOUR OF JAPAN.



Inside Fuki-ji, a temple that includes one of the simplest and most beautiful Buddhist structures in Japan.



An example of some of the tour's simple yet delicious fare.



Daily yoga and meditation sessions in unique settings are not to be missed.



As my first introduction to Japan, it was definitely an unusual one. While many begin — and often end — their trip to Japan on the bustling streets of Tokyo or the slopes of Niseko, I was one of a select group exploring the wonders of rural Kunisaki, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

A glimpse into the past while looking firmly to the future, my journey began in the city of Fukuoka after a Cathay flight via Hong Kong from my home in Auckland.

After a day and a night exploring what is a laidback and very pretty city, I joined a diverse group of travellers at busy Hakata Station to officially kick off what is known as the Kunisaki Retreat.

Our tour guide was the Japan-born, UK-raised Kate Kinoshita, a veritable encyclopaedia when it came to Japan's history, mindset and customs. Like all Walk Japan guides, she imparted knowledge from the get-go, as we boarded the award-winning Sonic Express train for a one-and-half-hour journey to Yanagigaura in Kunisaki.

Talking to my fellow travellers it was clear that many of us had one thing in mind: an authentic travel experience, without compromising on the little luxuries in life.

We travelled through the beautiful countryside of Kunisaki to our accommodation for the next two nights and the first of our Japanese inns, which were to be a feature throughout the tour. Ryokan and minshuku are the most commonly used accommodation on all Walk Japan tours, and despite not having the added extras that a five-star hotel may deliver, they serve an important purpose.

Firstly, they provide truly tangible glimpses of the experiences of Japanese travellers of old and offer an authentic touch like no others. Some of the inns are quite rustic in style, while others are more modern with some of those aforementioned added extras.

As is traditional, in some inns bathing and toilet facilities are shared which could prove a little challenging for some, but the trade-off is one of the most unique glimpses into rural Japanese life that you may ever encounter.

Set in a pretty hamlet, our first inn is adjacent to Fuki-ji, a temple that includes one of the simplest and most beautiful Buddhist structures in Japan. As well as being run by the monk who tends for the temple's family, the inn also has the first of many onsen thermal hot springs of the tour.

The onsen is a great way to relax anytime and also the perfect opportunity to immerse yourself in the local customs and guarantees a stellar night's sleep.

Early morning meditation in the temple and a yoga session begin our first official day on the Kunisaki Retreat, the latter led by the amazing Cheiko, an ex-professional ballerina, gardener and Tokyo resident who is an eight-year veteran of Walk Japan retreats.

Her enthusiasm is infectious and her manner more than accommodating for the beginners in the group. Her regular appearances every day become something we all look forward to — bendy or not.

After breakfast is an introduction to one of Japan's favourite pastimes, the making (and eating) of soba buckwheat noodles. We knead and roll out the dough before cutting it into noodles, which are then served up for lunch.

An afternoon walking through the countryside helps wear off a truly huge meal, while exploring the centre of Walk Japan's Community Project. The paths we follow have been reopened as part of the project and take us on a journey through the serious issues of an ageing and falling rural population common throughout Japan, an issue Walk Japan is passionate about highlighting.

A highlight is taking tea with long-time shitake farmers, Mr and Mrs Wakasaki, before falling back into the rhythm of rest, onsen, massage and dinner.

The next morning dawns with meditation, yoga and breakfast, before an introduction to the Japanese art of chado, the tea ceremony.

We then transfer to the nearby castle town of Kitsuki for a short walk around the old samurai quarter, featuring buildings from feudal, Edo Period Japan. It's clearly a popular pastime as the streets are filled with visitors and the photographic opportunities numerous — it's definitely a must-do as the buildings and their carefully manicured gardens are not to be missed.

Later, we visit a local sake brewery where Mozart is played constantly to enhance the brew, followed by a sample or two of their internationally awarded products.

On day four we experience another classic Japanese art that both challenges and delights, ikebana flower arranging with a local expert who loves using local wildflowers and plants. After a thorough drenching as we attempt to forage, it's time to put our skills to the test — with varying degrees of success!

Next up was the drive to the north coast of the Kunisaki Peninsula to Imi, an example of a depopulated town that is revitalising itself through art. Lunch is at an elegantly rustic art gallery and cafe, which has been created within a restored traditional wooden structure that once housed the local sake brewery.

A passenger ferry then transports our group to Himeshima, an island in the Seto Inland Sea. From a distance through the fog, Himeshima appears mysterious and has an unusual vibe due to its remoteness. The name adds to the mystery, as Himeshima translates directly to "Princess Island".

Himeshima's most famous export is the kuruma ebi (tiger prawn), which can be seen on the plates of gourmets across Japan. It's best to eat them on the island itself, though, and at our inn just a short walk from the quay we do exactly that.

The island is a maze of streets, houses and vegetable plots, and our dinner is a veritable feast prepared using locally caught, fresh fish from some of the best fishing grounds in the Seto Inland Sea.

The next day we hike to Sennin-do, a small shrine perched atop a cliff overlooking the sea. It presents us with another classic Japanese scene, and I couldn't be happier.

After a ferry back to the mainland we walk through the grounds of Kyu-Sento-ji. Little is left of this once-powerful institution except for stone Buddha statues and hundreds of monks' gravestones, and although the hike is largely uphill, it's worth it.

Take walking poles if you're that way inclined — although the Japanese thoughtfully provide more organic, often bamboo versions at the beginning of many of the more precarious climbs.

Even higher up, Itsutsu-ji-Fudo clings to the side of a giant rock and provides us with grandstand views over the Seto Inland Sea, Himeshima, Honshu and Shikoku.

It's also where we visit British sculptor Antony Gormley's controversial work, *Another Time* — a life-sized iron figure that looks eastward from atop a mountain ledge.

It is a breathtaking experience — not just because it's a strong piece of art or that the location offers a stunning vista of verdant treetops and rolling hillsides, but because it also involves a bit of a trek!

Another personal highlight is meeting Mr Goko Imakuma, the head priest of Sento-ji and self-appointed guardian of the artwork.

Walk Japan provides truly tangible glimpses of the experiences of Japanese travellers of old.



British sculptor Antony Gormley's controversial work *Another Time* admires the landscape.



"Other people say it doesn't match the local scenery, the priests have complained that it's immoral because the statue is naked," he told the *Telegraph* a few years ago. "They can only see it as a naked man, but I prefer to look at it as a work of art. And anyway, if the monks are concentrating on their meditation as they are walking the pilgrims' route then they should not notice that there is a naked man up here."

Needless to say, he is lots of fun and a worthy keeper of Gormley's work. After this we retire to nearby Akane, another Japanese inn with onsen hot spring baths that has an almost alpine feel, and another early night.

After breakfast, we transfer to Makiodo, a temple building that has become a treasure house of Buddhist relics. Yet another hike through the forest takes us through to Tashibu-no-sho, a village with some of the most picturesque countryside found in Japan.

We walk through the area to Midozo, a once disused farmyard barn that has been refurbished as a community café. After another yoga session, we have a slap-up lunch made up of local produce including foraged, seasonal wild vegetables before heading to Kumano Magai-butsu, the largest Buddha relief carvings in Japan that date back over 900 years.

Then for our last night in Kunisaki, we return to Fuki-ji and the familiarity of our first inn of the Kunisaki Retreat, for an unforgettable culinary celebration of our time together in Kunisaki.

With just the right amount of action versus relaxation, this particular tour of Japan was exactly what the doctor ordered. Our group was a true mix of ages and nationalities, but all agreed that it was an experience never to be forgotten. When embarking upon a journey like this you want a good guide and a great group, and I most definitely had both. **W**

Cathay Pacific flies from Auckland to Fukuoka several times a week via Hong Kong, visit www.cathaypacific.com for more information. For more of what Walk Japan has to offer, visit www.walkjapan.com