

Asia and Australia holidays

A snowshoe trek through Japan's frozen north

In the footsteps of the poet Matsuo Basho, Natalie Whittle joins a new tour to the remote villages and hot springs of Yamagata

Natalie Whittle MARCH 30, 2018

We stand at the foot of a Japanese maple tree, waiting to drink. Through a pindrop-quiet, pristine white valley, we have snowshoed our way to a rare refreshment: Japanese maple sap.

Shin Konno, our bearskin-wearing guide, crouches down and starts digging the snow from the base of the tree, sending soft powder fluttering off its branches. He tapped the trunk a few days before and now, putting aside his shovel, lifts a container filled with the sap. “*Oishii*” (delicious), he declares, as we sip the ice-cold, just-sweet wood water from little cups.

Earlier that day, in bright morning sunshine, we had put on our snowshoes in the back lanes of tiny Nakatsugawa village, where the roads are lined with tall, ploughed hedges of snow. In some parts of Tohoku, in the north-east of Japan's main island, it lies four metres deep; one village even hosts an annual Snow Digging World Cup. (In 2018 Japan beat Russia to take home the golden shovel trophy.) The region's staggering snowiness feels otherworldly: snow stacked in fat layers on rooftops, snow smothering lamp-posts, snow giving strange shapes to what is usually thin air.

Shuffling on from the maple forest towards a mountain hut, Konno-san, an expert hunter, points to big bouncing tracks of a hare and the neat hoof marks of a mountain goat. Later, he pauses over what looks like the prints of a wild boar, but they're such rare creatures here that he shakes his head at his own guess.

Ten tourists, shod in snowshoes, are just as unusual a sight here. This is Japan's unexplored country, the wild northern reaches that poet Matsuo Basho set off to discover in the 17th century, recording in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* the cold sweat that accompanied him across mountains and roads that most travellers turned back on, fearing bandits and other dangers. He was also impressed, as it is hard not to be, by the enchantment of this countryside, and the crackling personality of the people who live here.



A forest near Nakatsugawa © Takuya Ugajin

Hundreds of years after Basho, Tohoku and Yamagata Prefecture cling on to a threadbare population of mostly elderly Japanese. Though the government is trying to incentivise younger families to settle here, the long snowy months are a deterrent (the snow will not fully melt till late spring).

Our group, a mix of intrepid walkers from Singapore and Australia, is the first to try out a new snowshoe trek through the region organised by tour operator Walk Japan. It is a nine-day adventure that combines parts of Basho's journey with sections of the once fashionable *toji* circuit, a tour of *onsen* (hot spring) towns once prescribed as a winter cure for multiple ailments. On our modern tour, each day is split between snowshoeing and bathing or exploring, with some delicious food in between at charming small inns and *ryokans*. By the end of the tour, I have heard new words for both snow (*botan yuki*, for example — the very specific “peony” snow) and water (*unagi yu* — the hot “eel” slippery spring water that softens up the skin).



Lunch at the minshuku (B&B) near Nakatsugawa

From the forest where we sampled the maple sap, we drive to lunch at a nearby *minshuku*, or bed and breakfast, run by an eighty-something woman who has lived here all her life and now delights in meeting her foreign guests. You would not guess her age from either her appearance or the fabulous lunch she serves, with her old school friend (also in her eighties) drafted in to be her waitress. We sip *imoni*, a mountain vegetable stew particular to the region, and eat crispy tempura and fire-baked miso trout, while her stories are translated gamely by our excellent Walk Japan guides, Takuya Ugajin and Tetsuo Nakahara.

With them, we had our first short walk on snowshoes the previous day, slowly getting accustomed to the foot-feel. Within a hundred metres on these plastic paddles, we walked across the prints of a *tanuki* or forest badger, much better-equipped with its paws. Snowshoes are legwork, lungwork, and they also have a progressively irritating habit of slipping off just as a snowstorm or a snow fog shows up.



'Snow monsters' on Mount Zao

But they are carefree compared with the traditional Japanese snowshoe, the bamboo-and-rope *kanjiki*, which we wear for an early highlight in the trip: the descent of Mount Zao. This popular ski station, arranged over a cluster of volcanoes, is famous for a phenomenon we first glimpse from the cable car: a forest of frozen fir trees, known as “snow monsters”, or *juhyo*, for their imposing, misshapen white coats. It's an extraordinary sight, the firs frozen in their thousands, each one paralysed in a unique snowy pose by the storms that blow in from the Sea of Japan.



On the road up to Zao, we'd passed fields of pick-your-own blueberry bushes, popular among summer visitors. Tohoku also grows shiitake mushrooms and tomatoes for ketchup; as we step into the biting wind at the last cable car stop, it is hard to imagine the heat of the sun returning. With fingers that freeze in minutes, we hurriedly fix the rope bindings of the *kanjiki* around our ankles.

Led by two local guides, one sporting a fox-fur hat, we are taking the slow route down Jizo-san, the mountain, making the first tracks of the day between the fir trees. The snowshoe convoy is slow and careful; as if there might be some kind of etiquette among these giants so indisposed. Though they are disconcerting, I can see why they have also been called “snow monks” — in their white habits, they have a silent serenity to them.

We're a week away from the first cherry blossoms in the south of the country, and there is an admiring pause to inspect the sapling branches of a lone Japanese rowan tree. Some of the firs, meanwhile, are dead: at night the cable cars light up the forest, attracting moths, who eat the needles. At the lower side of the mountain, the “monsters” get even bigger, less battered by cross winds, and even larier with snow. The knots that tie the *kanjiki* slip undone at intervals, and it's a blissful reward to stop and reset halfway down; Takuya and Tetsuo produce flasks of hot chocolate and coffee, and hand around a box of sweet almonds.

Our dinner that evening is a cheerful affair at an *izakaya* (pub) in Kaminoyama Onsen, the small town where we are lodging in a chic but simple *ryokan*. The pub is run by a young couple, and they bring an inexpensive but fresh feast of sushi and sashimi, yakitori and stranger tastes such as slippery cod's ovaries, washed down with sake. In the night, I'm woken by shaking walls. An earthquake tremor. The Japanese aren't too troubled in the morning, but it is a reminder that we're on febrile territory — just 130km from the town in Fukushima where the great earthquake struck in 2011.

Our next challenge is an ascent — 1,015 steps to the top of Risshaku-ji temple, known as Yamadera. Covered in moss when Basho climbed them in *The Narrow Road*, the steps are icy on our visit; I advise ringing the good luck bell at the foot of the walk when you start, not when you finish. We grapple our way up, following in the footsteps of the Buddhist monks who have practised here for more than 1,000 years and make the daily ascent as part of their training. The view is stunning, but it's a tough walk in both directions, far from the peace of the haiku Basho composed here, noticing the silence broken by a cicada.



The view from the top of Ginzan Onsen town © Tetsuo Nakahara

We drive on to Ginzan Onsen, a prized bathing town and former epicentre of an Edo period silver rush. Tucked into a narrow river valley with a rushing waterfall, its quaint wooden houses look across at one another over the River Ginzan, magically lit up at night in the snow. At the banks of the river, young Japanese sit taking selfies while they enjoy the hot spring footbaths. After a lunch of buckwheat tea, soba noodles and tempura, the temple-tested legs face another outing.

Two local guides, one Japanese Alpinist and his friend, both over 65, strap us into the *kanjiki* again. It's a more overcast day, chillier. Snow begins to fall. We start up a steep path that follows the river as it snakes out of the town. Months of snowfall have made smooth deposits of snow, sometimes thick like the reed thatch on the local samurai houses, sometime overhanging the water's edge in bulging white domes.



Ginzan Onsen by night

All the while, more snow, though our guide is quick to spot fresh pawprints of a *kamoshika*, or serow, a protected, Narnia-like creature that can't be hunted. Our unusual destination is just ahead: an abandoned silver mine, last in use in 1689. Although it's dark inside, a ferrous smell leads us along a rusted metal walkway; stalagmites of ice rise from the mine floor. We're assured that it's safe, but after a long day, this place spooks me. The exit is half covered by snow, the guide shovels a path out. More scrambling home. A soak in the open-air *rotumburo* at our *ryokan* in the late evening is much more peaceful, looking out at a screen of snowy night with the faint sound of the waterfall.

Still in Basho's footsteps, in the morning we take on the Natagiri Pass, a mountain crossing that we tackle on plastic rather than bamboo snow shoes. Climbing up from the road into fluffy snow, it is an immediately beautiful walk under boughs of snowy cedar branches and larches standing splinter-straight, caught with little taches of snow. Our 80-year old guide has come dressed up as Basho, complete with traditional reed hat and raincoat, and keeps pace with the pack half his age. It is a fabulous walk: a sweeping view from the pass, followed by an easy descent through a beech forest.

Naruko Onsen is our stopover for the next two nights. The water here is sublime. I love the public bath next door to our *ryokan*; a small, densely atmospheric place with piping-hot sulphuric water in cedar wood baths and a palpable sense of onsen relaxation and gossip past. Up the hillside is a private *rotumburo* that also belongs to the inn; from here you can bathe alone in the open air, looking over the evening town and into the hills.



Snow covered houses in Hijiori Onsen © Takuya Ugajin

Our last stop, the wonderful but tiny Hijiori Onsen, takes us via a *kokeshi* doll maker, the traditional wooden totem of the region, meant as a gift to offer on the return from a *toji* sojourn. As the area depopulates, the skill of making these souvenirs is dying out — the maker we visit learnt from his own father, who shortened his apprenticeship from 10 years to five, perhaps seeing the future that lay ahead.

Some last bathing in the healing water sets in a deep feeling of relaxation. The next day, the big first storm of spring, *haru ichiban*, disrupts our travel plans to the place where the tour ends, the city of Sakata. Local trains are cancelled, and instead we drive to the station; waiting for a snow plough to clear a dangerous block of snow that's been marked as an avalanche risk, we almost miss our connecting train.

The snow is in charge in Yamagata Prefecture. But it has a distinct magic. Just be prepared to do up your rope shoelaces in a blizzard.

Natalie Whittle is executive editor of Life & Arts

Details

Natalie Whittle was a guest of [Walk Japan](#). The Tohoku Hot Spring Snow Tour is a nine-day, eight-night fully guided snowshoe tour for up to 12 participants; it costs from ¥480,000 per person (£3,394) including accommodation, train transfers from Tokyo, snowshoe rental and baggage transfers. For more on visiting Japan go to [seejapan.co.uk](https://www.seejapan.co.uk)

Follow [@FTLifeArts](#) on Twitter to find out about our latest stories first. Subscribe to [FT Life](#) on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2018. All rights reserved.