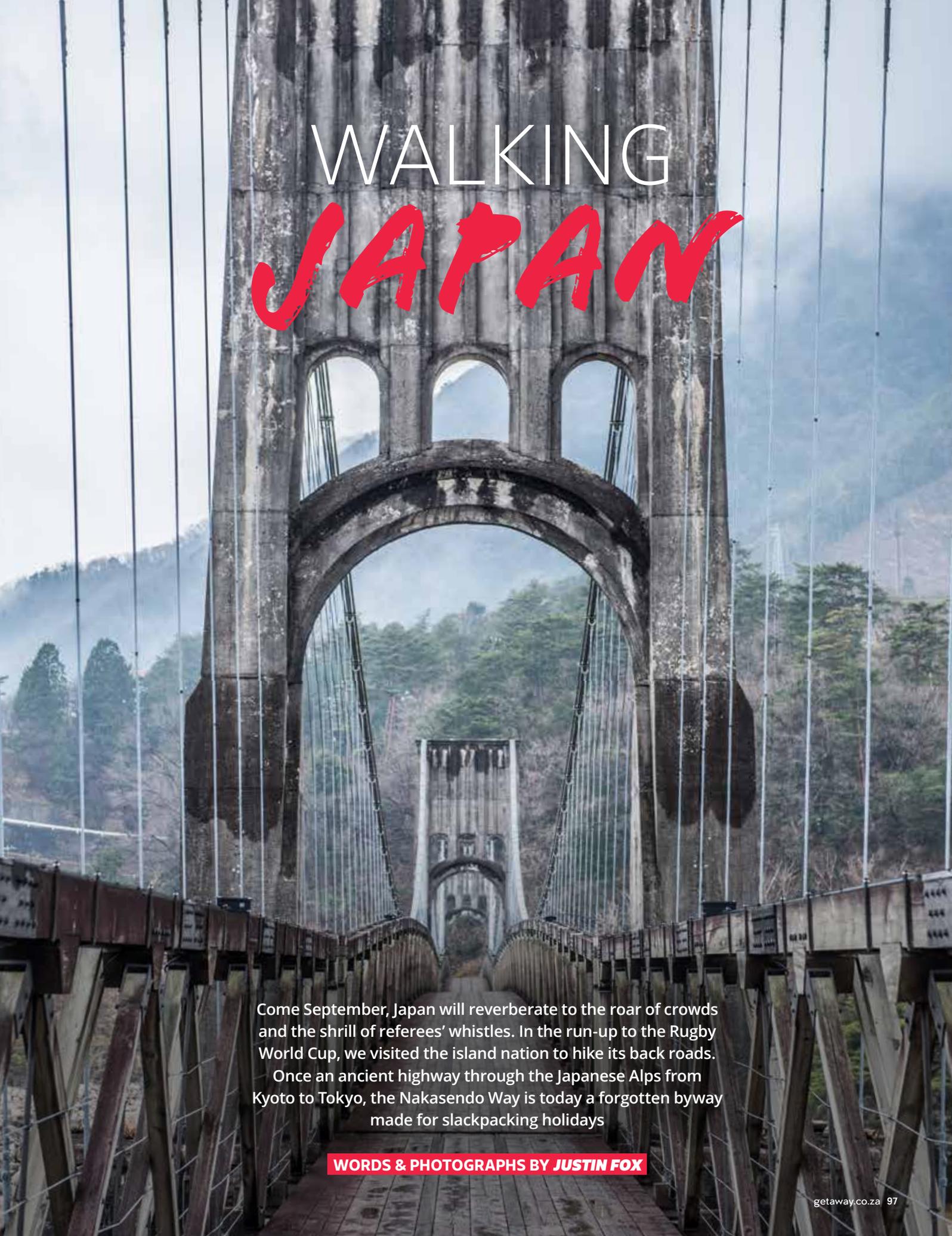




The heritage village of Tsumago was the 42nd (of 69) post towns on the Nakasendo Way. OPPOSITE Momosuke-bashi is a 247-metre footbridge over the Kiso River in Nagiso.



WALKING JAPAN

Come September, Japan will reverberate to the roar of crowds and the shrill of referees' whistles. In the run-up to the Rugby World Cup, we visited the island nation to hike its back roads. Once an ancient highway through the Japanese Alps from Kyoto to Tokyo, the Nakasendo Way is today a forgotten byway made for slackpacking holidays

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN FOX





had always wanted to visit Japan in cherry-blossom season. The chance eventually came when I was put in touch with Walk Japan, a company that offers tours ranging from easy city walks to tough alpine treks. I chose their Nakasendo Way, a route that follows a feudal highway through Honshu Island.

After 27 hours of flying and transit via Joburg and Hong Kong, I arrived in Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital, shattered and jetlagged, but still determined to see the city's essential sights. Fortunately, there was a day to spare before the hike. Armed with a map, rudimentary instructions and Google Translate, I climbed on a bus and set off.

First up was the Zen Buddhist temple of Kinkaku-ji, an ethereal pavilion seemingly suspended above a pond. The building functions as a *shariden*, supposedly housing the Buddha's ashes, and its top two storeys are coated with gold leaf creating a surreal effect.

Next was the temple of Tenryū-ji. Founded in 1339, this complex has a gorgeous bamboo forest, a place of clacking stems and luminous green light. By now, the jetlag was catching up with me, but I wanted to visit one last spot and made my way across town to Fushimi Inari Taisha. This Shinto shrine has hundreds of *torii* (gates) that thread their way up Inari Mountain. Set against dark forest and grey sky, the bright-orange *torii* and hordes of young worshippers in colourful kimonos had the photographer in me hopping around in delight.

I returned to the hotel just in time for the 6pm meeting with my 10 hiking companions (Australian, American and Taiwanese) and our Japanese guide. Shima Enomoto made the introductions and gave



TOP Young women of Kyoto come to pray at the Shinto shrine of Fushimi Inari Taisha. **ABOVE** Traditional umbrellas at the golden-pavilion temple of Kinkaku-ji, Kyoto. **OPPOSITE** This beautiful bamboo forest lies on a hill behind Tenryū-ji Temple, Kyoto.

us the lowdown on the trek ahead. She also told us how she'd left her high-powered banking job in the USA to follow her passion for walking and Japanese history. She's done the Nakasendo more than 20 times and proved a wealth of insider knowledge.

Briefing us on etiquette, Shima explained that we'd be staying in country inns where the customs around food, dress, bathing and sleeping (never lay your futon down facing north, as it implies death) would be quite different to what we were used to.

Dinner that night was a 12-course affair that gave us ample chance to practise our chopstick technique and sample local dishes. The coming days were a culinary eye-opener with everything from horse carpaccio and blowfish to eel and caramelised crickets. Fortunately there was rich plum wine and sake to ease some of these foreign bodies down my conservative gullet.

Strolling back after dinner, we stopped

beside Sanjo-ohashi Bridge at a sculpture of two baggage-toting men. That would soon be us. 'These are typical Edo period travellers and this spot marks the end of the Nakasendo Way,' said Shima. 'From here, we'll be heading east for the next nine days, bound for the corresponding bridge in Tokyo.'

The Nakasendo dates back to the seventh century and was a well-maintained route with carefully spaced post towns offering shops, inns, stables and porter services. The tree-lined highway featured distance markers, stone lanterns to light the way at night, barrier stations (checkpoints) to prevent unauthorised transit and teahouses for refreshment. There were also shrines, temples and statues of deities for the protection of travellers.

The Nakasendo found its greatest importance during the Edo period (1603–1868) when shoguns of the Tokugawa family ruled Japan. Regional *daimyo* (feudal lords) and their vast entourages had to >



LEFT Biwa Pass has the longest section of original pavestones (more than 600 metres) laid to stabilise the path.

BELOW The jagged peaks of Mount Myogi seen from the top of Usui Pass.

OPPOSITE Fukushima Sekisho Museum is a restored barrier station (checkpoint) on the Nakasendo Way.



report to the shogun in Edo (Tokyo) every second year. As a consequence, Japan's five main highways boomed. They also became important pilgrimage and trade routes. Control of these arteries gave the shogun effective control of the nation.

Long since bypassed by motorways, trains and political change, the Nakasendo fell into disuse at the end of the 19th century. But thanks to a revival of interest and tourism, many sections have been restored and offer tantalising glimpses of old-world Japan.

The next afternoon found us walking through open fields north-east of Kyoto. 'This is Sekigahara, the setting of perhaps the greatest battle in our history,' said Shima. 'The forces of eastern and western Japan clashed here in the autumn of 1600. Shogun Tokugawa's victory – bringing to an end centuries of conflict – helped usher in the Edo period, two-and-a-half centuries of peace.'

We crisscrossed the battlefield, visiting the sites of the generals' camps, their hillside positions marked by flags bearing family crests, and the valley floor where more than 150 000 soldiers fought. I tried to picture the scene on that fateful morning when the mist

'GREAT SAMURAI IN THEIR COLOURFUL ARMOUR, BOWMEN READY TO UNLEASH THEIR RAIN OF ARROWS'



lifted to reveal the armies in place, banners fluttering, cavalry preparing to attack. Great samurai in their colourful armour, bowmen ready to unleash their rain of arrows. A battle to change the course of history.

That evening, we arrived at our first *ryokan*. These traditional inns typically feature tatami-matted floors, sliding doors, paper walls and futons. The interiors are sparsely furnished and elegant. The gardens feature moss, topiary and stone bridges.

Our hostess, Mrs Hibi, told us that Masuya Inn had been in her family for more than 800 years, and she had the certificate to prove it. Under her breath, Shima gently reminded us of our etiquette. There were, for instance, three different sets of slippers for various parts of the house. I took careful note – the catastrophic mistake of arriving at dinner in my toilet slippers was a thought too ghastly to contemplate.

We took turns in the communal bath (first a shower, then a 10-minute wallow for each hiker, followed by a bathe for the host family) after which we donned a *yukata* (robe), sash and fur jacket, before enjoying a traditional hotpot served by the innkeepers.

It was a finger-numbing, sub-zero start

the next morning for our first full day of walking. The route led through rice paddies and forests with soft leaves silencing our footfall. The hills were covered in cypress, oak and cedar. Plum and cherry trees lined our path. Daffodils announced the spring in splashes of audacious yellow.

By the third day, our limbs were getting into the hiking groove. The route grew more mountainous as we entered the Kiso Range, also known as the Japanese Alps. When Shima said we'd be going 'mostly downhill' we now knew the opposite to be true. Forest signs warned of bear and wild boar. We carried bells to scare off the bears, but I thought the tinkling sound might just as well attract them to our lunch packs.

On lovely Biwa Pass, we encountered the longest section of original, moss-covered pavestones. We hiked up the meandering path listening to the call of nightingales, gentle light filtering through the trees. At the bottom of the pass stood a Buddhist temple and adjacent shrine where a 1300-year-old cedar tree is worshipped as a *kami* or Shinto god.

All along the route, we came upon reproductions of woodblock prints from

the Edo period. These depict various Nakasendo scenes, often with Mount Fuji in the background, and feature all manner of travellers. The most famous artist was Hiroshige, a master of the woodblock form during the 19th century.

A print museum in Ena, a small town on the route that celebrates his work, had a practical section where we tried our hand at basic printmaking before visiting the main exhibit. One long wall depicted Hiroshige's Nakasendo images: inns, pack animals, bridges, post-towns and mountain roads. Here a pilgrim travelling on his own, there a *daimyo* with full entourage.

Each night we stayed in a different *ryokan*. Our hosts were invariably kind, humble and generous to a fault. By now, we'd mastered the slippers-bathing-*yukata* drill. Some of the larger establishments had their own, single-sex onsen (hot springs) where naked guests could wallow in steaming ponds and spa-baths.

Each meal comprised ingredients sourced locally or foraged from surrounding forests. There was amago fish (eaten with head and tail), sea urchins, wild boar (shot by the innkeeper), bamboo shoots, daikon radish, rape flowers, lily bulbs, seaweed, somen noodles, dashi broth and so much more. Most of it was tasty, all of it unusual.

Each town had a unique character. Postcard-perfect Magome ticked all the boxes with its waterwheels, cobbled lanes, koi ponds and museums but was packed with tourists. Prettiest of all was Tsumago. This post town was the first to be restored >





LEFT This pretty moss garden lies within the walls of a reconstructed waki-honjin (high-class inn) for *daimyos* (domain lords) in Tsumago.

MIDDLE Hikone Castle, on the shores of Lake Biwa, was one of the spoils of war after the Battle of Sekigahara.

BOTTOM Wayside shrines, statues and poetic inscriptions dot the Nakasendo Way. Our guide, Shima Enomoto, is kneeling.



back in the 1970s to revive a dying heritage in Japan's headlong technological rush.

Tsumago's main street was lined with dark-wood and latticed facades (telephone polls and electricity wires have been removed), the hills beyond dissolved in dreamy mist. There were bright flower pots, boughs laden with cherry blossoms and sliding doors that led to immaculate, minimalist interiors.

Our days of walking unfolded in an easy refrain. The weather warmed and the landscape grew increasingly colourful as trees exploded into blossom. Peaks remained white-capped, the streams and waterfalls boisterous with snowmelt. Occasionally we'd spot deer, macaque or pheasant. We were distracted by shrines and manicured gardens; teahouses and bento-box meals provided refreshment. At one lunch stop high on a mountain pass, the owners served homemade pizza and entertained us with a harmonica and shamisen guitar before cajoling us into a lively sing-along.

Some days were short and easy, an amble of 10 kilometres or less. Others were of the harder core, 25-kilometre variety and involved stiff mountain passes that included Jusan, Nenoue and Torii. 'Mostly down' became decidedly up. The path was ice-covered in places, the wind freezing. Usui Pass was our last big hurdle and we topped out at an alpine lookout point that offered the serrated peaks of Mount Myogi to the

east, Mount Asama's snow-dipped volcano to the west and, faraway to the south-east, the grail of Tokyo.

Our descent was long, slow and slippery. The wind roared through the maple trees and it began to snow. There were sore limbs, there was grumpiness, there were blisters. Epithets were muttered. At last, thankfully, we reached a tiny station surrounded by plum blossoms where a train waited to speed us to the capital.

Our tired, happy band stepped from the train in downtown Tokyo during rush hour and was swept along in a tide of humanity. Wide-eyed, we stared at the shining buildings. We felt like centuries-old country yokels amid the city's slickness and sophistication, the skyscrapers and suited throng.

Shima drew us to a halt and pointed at Nihonbashi Bridge. 'Finally, the end of our journey,' she said. 'This, then, is the eastern terminus of the Nakasendo. We call it "kilometre zero", the point from which all distances in Japan are measured.'

I thought of Sanjo-ohashi Bridge back in Kyoto and the 533 kilometres we had covered, 150 of them on foot. Our long walk had given us a window on rural Japan, thrusting us

into a remarkably intimate engagement with the land, people and culture. And it had opened our eyes to vastly different ways of living, eating, thinking and being ... which is what all the best journeys should do. **Q**

**"MOSTLY
DOWN"
BECAME
DECIDEDLY
UP"**



Plan your trip

HOW TO GET THERE

Flights to Japan start from R10 000 with Emirates. emirates.com

NEED TO KNOW

South Africans need a visa. I acquired mine (R360) at the Japanese consulate in Cape Town. za.emb-japan.go.jp

WHEN TO GO

Spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November) are generally the best times, with little rain, clear

skies and mild temperatures. You'll also get to see the spring cherry blossoms or colourful autumn leaves.

ABOUT WALK JAPAN

Founded in 1992, Walk Japan designs tours to discover the Land of the Rising Sun. It has a wide range of scheduled walks, but also offers private,

customised tours tailored to your interests. Wherever possible, you stay in local, Japanese-style accommodation. When a hotel is used, it's of the three- to four-star variety. Guides are selected for their enthusiasm, friendliness, knowledge of the country and ability to communicate. Walk Japan has been recognised as

one of the 200 Best Adventure Travel Companies in the world by *National Geographic*.

ABOUT THE NAKASENDO WAY TOUR

This is an 11-day walk from Kyoto to Tokyo with scheduled departures from March to June and from September to November. The maximum group size is 12. It's fully guided and suitable for anyone who can walk for more than three hours (daily walking distances are moderate, 8–24km). Transport can be arranged for those who want a more relaxed day. Baggage is sent on to the next destination each morning.

BOOKING AND COST

Nakasendo rates start from R63 884 pp. This includes guides, 10 nights' accommodation, all breakfasts and dinners, most lunches, luggage transfers, entrance fees and transport during the tour. Rates for shorter tours, such as the excellent two-day walking tour of Tokyo, start from R3 649. walkjapan.com



In 1968, residents of Tsumago began restoring the town's historical sites. Today the main street is one of the jewels of the Nakasendo Way.