



# Japan: a hiker's guide

Natural beauty accented by history, religion and culture in a uniquely Japanese way make the country a treasure trove for walkers of all abilities.

Story by Steve White

PHOTO: MATT JEPSON



MT FUJI ASIDE, THE MOST FAMOUS VIEWS of Japan are man-made. Contemplative temple-scapes in Kyoto. The Tokyo skyline with its Eiffel-esque tower. Teeming Shibuya crossing. Yet heavily forested, hugely mountainous and volcanic to boot, Japan is a country with enormous natural appeal.

Hiking there opens up surprising vistas, and also leads you to realise that the well-known and more hidden sides of Japan are much closer than you might suppose, and not simply in a physical sense. The mountains and forests open a window on the Japanese themselves. Despite a fetishistic pursuit of modernity, their culture retains an abiding connection with, and respect for, nature's unforgiving moods.

The country's volcanoes and earthquakes are an important part of this of course. But there's also an obsession with nature's ephemeral qualities: the passing of the seasons, epitomised by the beauty of blossom – cherry or otherwise – and the riot of colour that heralds the terminal decline of autumn leaves.

Trail access is aided by the country's famed infrastructure. The shinkansen bullet trains are themselves a quintessential sight. Though prices are on the high side, so are standards. Where else does your train conductor bow on entering and leaving your carriage?

If you self-drive or bike around, the roads are like billiard tables and motorists unfailingly polite and rule-abiding. If all else fails, this has to be one of the best places to hitchhike: clearly something awful must have happened for you to be without a vehicle, so courtesy dictates that people help you save face.

The diligence and care are there in trailside ryoken and mountain huts too, usually well maintained and run to a tightly honed routine. Many serve hearty meals in communal settings – a good place to share trail stories and tips with similarly-minded locals.

Places like these help visiting hikers feel more of a connection. But the best way to break the barrier between you and locals is simply to have a bath! Onsen – hot springs – are an obsession and part of the joy of exploring the countryside is discovering natural onsen, or *rotenburo*.

**{ The temple bell stops  
but I still hear the sound  
coming out of the flowers – Basho }**

Many Japanese don't classify themselves as strict adherents of either Shinto, the national religion, or Buddhism – following a blend of the two. One of the most visible signs of this is little trailside shrines – often photogenic – common especially

at junctions and near important landmarks. Many of these are dedicated to Jizo, one of the most beloved of all divinities, who transcends his Buddhist roots with a crowd-pleasing mix of compassion and absolution.

Usually a simple stone figure clad in a red cap, bib or skirt, he is protector of children and promises salvation for all, especially for pilgrims and travellers. That has made him a sort of patron saint of hikers, embodying fortitude in the face of come-what-may on the mountains.

Watching out for Jizo shrines also helps refocus your gaze from distant vistas to the close-at-hand. It's the kind of 'living in the moment' you'll see Japanese hikers enjoying: taking time to watch the play of water or light, or stopping to listen to the wind or a snatch of birdsong.

Some take it further and practise forest bathing – *shinrin-yoku*. Relaxing their pace, they eschew goals of distance and altitude in favour of meditation and honing their senses. They ascribe many health benefits to this form of mindfulness.

Even your own trail-scarred hiking shoes or boots are worthy of examination. Time-worn objects are celebrated in Japanese thinking, part of a concept they call *wabi-sabi*, the poetic beauty of impermanence.

Another more direct way to cement your connection with the countryside is by eating



#### LIFE AMONG THE PEAKS

Bountiful volcanic soils have encouraged the Japanese to accept the more volatile moods of mountains like Mt Aso (shown left) that dot their islands. Meanwhile, even at 3,000 metres (above), sprawling mountain huts attend to the needs of hikers bound for summits such as that of Yurigatake.

*sansai*, mountain vegetables. There is a long history of foraging in Japan and modern trends have only made this more popular. It's best to leave the harvesting to the experts, but in mountain areas you'll often find simple restaurants where they cook mushrooms, ferns and other vegetables plucked from the hillsides, usually served with noodles.

**{ Every day is a journey,  
and the journey  
itself is home – Basho }**

Given the curiosity that many visitors have about aspects of Japanese culture, it's not surprising that most trekking operators there make it central to their itineraries.

Llew Thomas, Managing Director of trekking company Walk Japan, explains: "There are tons of places in the world where you can hike in beautiful and largely unspoilt nature," he says. "If you want to do this in Japan, it means tough days in mountains which would exclude 95% of Walk Japan's traditional customer base. For us, it's all about the history of human interaction with the land, and unique cultural aspects to the walks and life in Japan in general."

A popular first hike for those entirely new to Japan is the *Nakasendo*, once a route connecting



#### The dread Daikiretto

I STOOD TRANSFIXED AS ONE-BY-ONE the figures reached the highest rung of the ladder fastened to the rock and stepped off, horribly exposed, silhouetted briefly against the late afternoon sky then disappearing.

I was outside Yurigatake Sanso hut, over 3,000 metres up in the Hida Mountains, or Northern Alps. Above me loomed Mt Yurigatake, a spear-tip pointed heavenward. Backlit, its keen edges looked as though freshly knapped. This peak was the expected aperitif ahead of a bellyful of boulder scrambling. Suddenly, I had lost my appetite.

My day had started easily enough, following the easy corrugations of the valley, hiking steadily amid clots of day hikers. Then, around midday, I reached a minor junction at which point the trail began to swing round to face the high ridge I had been paralleling.

That ridge is one of the most storied in all of Japan, rising and falling about the 3,000-metre contour and including Mt Okuhotakadake, at 3,190 metres, Japan's third tallest mountain.

There's a lot of talk about this trail, online and elsewhere. Some of it is rather breathless, shameless commentators even accentuating the first syllable – *Die-kiretto*.

Still, as I turned to face it, I paused to imagine how the impressively saw-toothed ridge would look up close. Then, I threw myself into the climb up to it that lasted the rest of the afternoon.

Topping out, several hours later, I was first awed by the mountain hut – bigger than any I had ever seen in decades of hiking on four continents.

That's when I properly took in the beak of rock to its right, and the stick of hikers working their way up to its iron ladders.

My book casually suggested climbing it before settling into the hut. But tired, and intimidated by the number of people wearing helmets (something I hadn't remotely considered), I opted out.

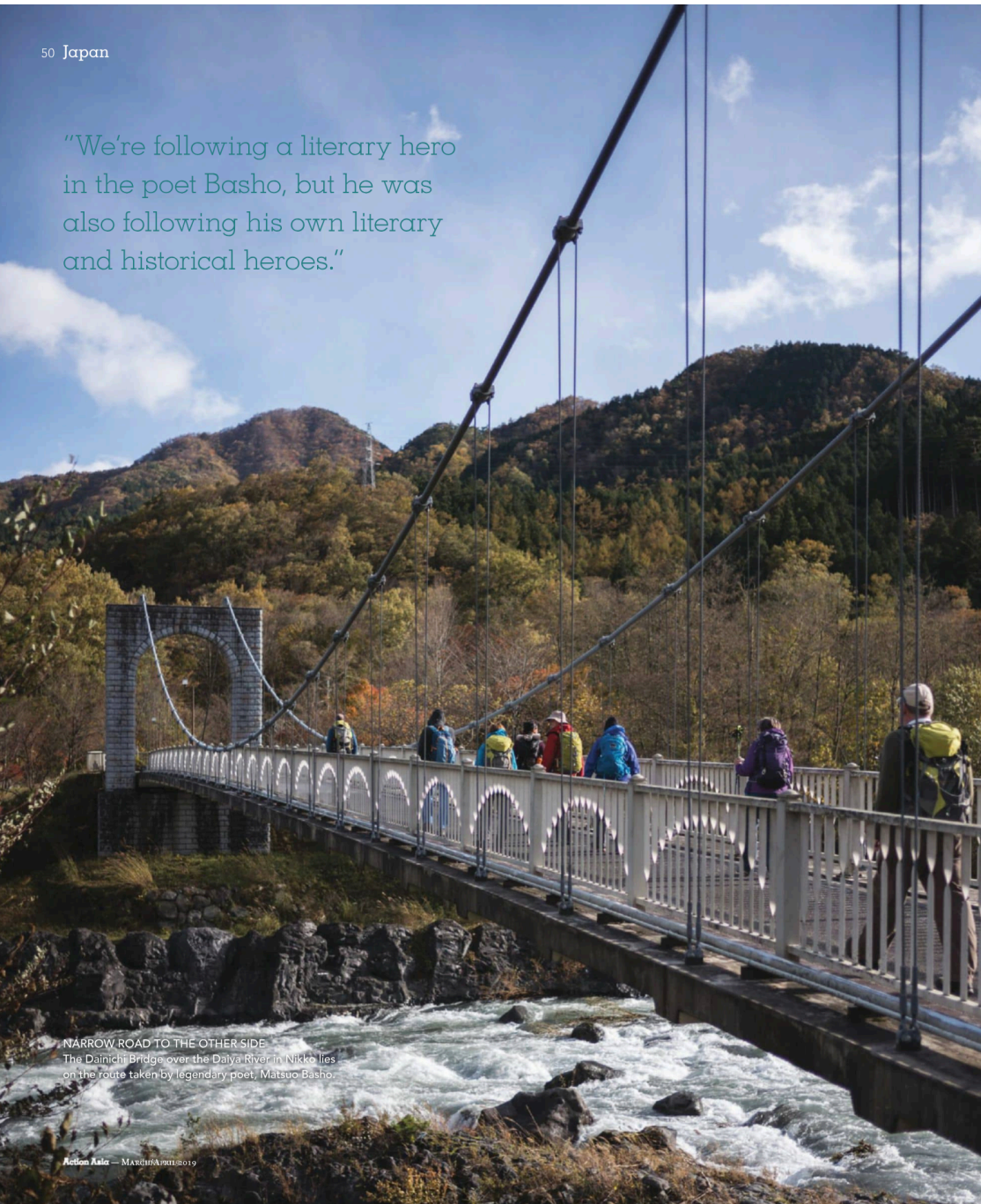
I cursed myself for so easily talking myself out of it and worried what that would mean for the ridge I had come to climb. I just hoped that some hot food and a night's sleep would settle my nerves.

At dinner, 400 of us lined communal tables and I chatted with my neighbours, many in their 50s and 60s, some older. Most said they were headed straight back down next day and mention of the Daikiretto brought exclamations and face-giving comments about my bravery and strength. I said nothing about the peak outside that probably half of them had already mastered.

Next morning, the hut was full of energy from early as people kitted up. The sun crept into the sky and I crept out to look up again. I felt good and knew suddenly I was up to it.

Twenty exhilarating minutes later I was atop Yurigatake, the Northern Alps at my feet. I savoured the wonder of it and knew beyond all doubt that the glow would propel me the next two days, come what may.

“We’re following a literary hero in the poet Basho, but he was also following his own literary and historical heroes.”



**NARROW ROAD TO THE OTHER SIDE**  
The Dainichi Bridge over the Daiya River in Nikko lies on the route taken by legendary poet Matsuo Basho.



**GO WITH JIZO**  
Trailside shrines to the patron saint of travellers, such as this one in Shikoku, are a common sight.

PHOTO: WALK JAPAN (LEFT), OKU JAPAN

Edo (modern-day Tokyo), with Kyoto. Most trekking companies offer some variant on this route, chaining together restored sections, with nights spent in charming wood-built ryokan.

The 17th-century poet, Matsuo Basho, walked the Nakasendō, and his perambulations inspire other itineraries today. Walk Japan, for instance, have their ‘Narrow Road to the North’ route, starting in Nikko, north of Tokyo and named after the poet’s most famous work.

“The walk is not challenging,” Thomas says, “but I’m a history fan and I love the multiple historical layers to the tour. We’re following a literary hero in the poet Basho, but he was also following his own literary and historical heroes, and so while following his story, we get involved in theirs too, from both his perspective and ours.”

Another popular option that pierces the surface of Japan’s fascinating culture is the **Kumano Kodo**, a network of pilgrimage trails connecting three important shrines on the Kii Hanto peninsula, not far from Osaka.

Samantha Marino of hiking operator Oku Japan cites its UNESCO World Heritage listing as key – the only other pilgrimage with this status is the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. There’s even a Dual Pilgrim programme now for people who have done both.

“There is an engaging spiritual element that

draws in a lot of people,” she says. “Think forest bathing, experiencing the serenity of a quiet trail surrounded by nature, and the history involved – as well as the physical challenge.”

Such is the popularity that the usual route is becoming busy at peak times. Walk Japan and Oku Japan now offer alternatives using more challenging trails, as does Australian adventure operator, World Expeditions.

Sue Badyari, CEO, says demand has spiked with the new options but points out that even so, many are booking are looking for a little helping hand: “Hikers are typical of our demographic – 50 plus – although there has been strong interest from families too. Because we offer self-guided trips, with luggage transfer and accommodation booked, the product appeals to older people.”

Indeed, the self-guided approach is increasingly common across companies and locations, allowing hikers to set their own pace while, depending on their interest, deepening their experience with the background information supplied to them.

Comparing alternative pilgrimage trails, Thomas points out: “The Omine Okugake Trail is a genuinely challenging experience, and not widely promoted. The Nakahechi route of the Kumano Kodo that almost everyone walks today was used by the imperial family and other very

important personages, the tougher Kohechi route of the Kumano Kodo was used by commoners, but the Omine Okugake is a route for Shugenja mountain ascetics.”

The Shugenja followed a syncretic mix of Shinto, Taoism and Buddhism, all underlain with still older animist beliefs. They believed spiritual power came through discipline and testing themselves – worth bearing in mind before you take on the Omine Okugake perhaps.

Another of Thomas’ favourites lies in the far south of Japan, off the bottom of Kyushu: “The traverse of **Yakushima Island** is excellent and can be done at most times of the year, he says. “Limited facilities make this less crowded, especially if you choose one of the less well-known routes into the interior.”

The entire island of Yakushima is a World Heritage Site. Key to this listing are its groves of ancient *sugi* – cedar trees – that arrow into the sky, evoking a gigantic roofless temple. There, the mossy trunks and rocks deaden sound and seem to turn the air itself an emerald green.

Higher up, the trees shrink, harried by the wind and impoverished by the soil into twisted skeletons. The views open wide, displaying the teeth of the interior’s mountains, more worn molars than ferocious canines.

Discerning faces and figures in rocks and



**THE RIVER OF TIME**  
An old temple on the Kumano Kodo trail, preserved for centuries, overlooks a waterfall, incomparably older yet endlessly changing.

clouds is a universal pastime, but the Japanese are especially keen on anthropomorphising nature.

One of the most famous examples is the *juhyo*, or snow monsters, of **Tohoku**. Winter at this northern end of Honshu comes courtesy of Siberia, frigid gales blowing across the Sea of Japan to blast the hills. These leave behind rime-plastered fir trees, stooped and stunted under the onslaught, standing as legions of 'white walkers'.

Though Zao Onsen is the most celebrated site, the 'monsters' appear on other peaks too. They make an unusual focus for hardier hikers who can find more snowshoeing and trekking opportunities in Hokkaido's winter wonderland.

The signs are that trail options and seasonality will continue to expand as hikers become more

familiar with Japan, and Thomas encourages even independent hikers to take heed: "The trade routes in the Alps and on Yakushima will still be absolutely overwhelmed by local hikers at certain times of the year. Travelling slightly off season and doing less well-known routes is a good plan."

The hikes mentioned here are just a few of the most obvious starting points for your exploration. Each offers a perspective on a country too often thought of solely in terms of its cultural and architectural icons. Use them as a springboard for discovery of nature, but also of the people and their culture.

As the great Basho himself said: "Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought." **AA**

The trade routes in the Alps and on Yakushima will still be overwhelmed by local hikers at certain times of the year.

PHOTO: OKU JAPAN

### Other trails to try

From the short to the very, very long

**MT ASO** – a day-hike around the crater rim of Japan's largest active volcano, in the north of Kyushu.

**MT FUJI** – a one- or two-day cultural and physical adventure as you hike with throngs of locals of all ages. Don't underestimate the weather.

**SHIRETOKO** – a two- or three-day walk along the spine of Japan's northeastern extremity, with bears and foxes for company.

**SHIKOKU PILGRIMAGE** – a 1,150-kilometre monster, linking 88 temples. Though busy with pilgrims in places, it retains a deeply tranquil traditional air.



PHOTO: WALK JAPAN

### PRACTICALITIES

#### When to go

Most of central Japan has warm, wet summers and mild winters. The period from May to October can see typhoons swoop in, sometimes bringing severe disruption and flooding. Either side of this period, the spring and autumn are favourite times to visit, marked by clearer conditions and picturesque phases of vegetation. Hokkaido is generally cooler, with considerable snowfall in winter, while Kyushu is warmer, with very humid and wet summers.

Beyond the seasons, check the local holiday schedule: trails can be overrun with locals at these times so avoid whenever possible.

#### How to get there

Besides frequent departures for Tokyo and Osaka from all over Asia, there are increasing

numbers of flights to regional centres such as Sapporo, Nagoya and Fukuoka. These can be much more convenient for your trailhead.

#### How to get around

Shinkansen bullet trains access most major cities across Honshu and Kyushu, and up into Hokkaido. Local lines and buses fill in most of the gaps. Domestic flights can be competitive for longer runs, while groups or families will find car hire a reasonable alternative.

#### Further info

Carry good raingear year-round, especially if going up high. A bear bell is necessary in much of Hokkaido – less so in Honshu.

Many major cities have well-stocked outdoor shops. Local brands such as Montbell

offer good quality and can be more affordable.

Vending machines are a feature of Japan and can be found even on some trails and in mountain lodges. They're a handy source of beer at the end of a long day and some dispense hot drinks.

#### Contacts

There's plenty of info online about the more established trails. Below is a list of travel/hiking specialists who offer guided and self-guided adventures that help deepen your appreciation of the cultural and historical context.

Blueflower, <https://blueflower.la/Japan/>

Oku Japan, [www.okujapan.com](http://www.okujapan.com)

Walk Japan, <https://walkjapan.com/>

World Expeditions, <https://worldexpeditions.com>

#### PEACE AMONG THE PINES

Snowshoe tours are growing in popularity. While walking in them takes getting used to, the reward is the beauty and stillness of winter in the forest.