



Hot Springs And Gourmet Bites In Noto, Japan

A newly launched walking tour of Japan's rural Noto Peninsula offers unique access to its gastronomic specialities and onsen resorts, while allowing for a glimpse into how an earthquake-blighted region is getting back on its feet.

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Japanese restaurant Somamichi quite literally stands out. It is the only building still upright on a street of collapsed structures in Monzen-machi, a fishing town in the Noto Peninsula which was devastated by a magnitude 7.6 earthquake on New Year's Day 2024. Over a year later, ruins abound, former residents still live in temporary housing, and the nearby Kaio Fishing Port remains unusable after the seabed lifted it up by 4m, exposing breakwaters and concrete structures once submerged.

In a former publishing house that miraculously survived, Chef Yutaka Kitazaki has reestablished his restaurant after losing his original space to the quake. Inside, its restored wooden interiors and mid-century furnishings stand in almost surreal contrast to the desolation outside.



Somamichi (left) and a house destroyed by the earthquake.

A native of the prefecture, Kitazaki had returned from chef stints in Kyoto and Kanazawa to cook in the land that defines his cuisine and is determined to stay the course.

Lunch, served on prized Wajima lacquerware, highlights the region's bounty elegantly: Beetroot hummus with local greens, grilled sea bream from Nanao Bay atop a parsnip and sake lees sauce, garnished with crisp seaweed from the coast. Kitazaki refuses to relocate, believing that "just by doing what we do, we can help bring life back to this place".



Walks are an integral part of a Walk Japan trip as it allows travellers to immerse themselves in the local landscape.

Our small group of eight, journeying with travel company Walk Japan, unanimously agrees — his cuisine alone makes the trip worthwhile.

This meal is just the start. Walk Japan, known for its in-depth tours to Japan's lesser-travelled regions, has launched a five-day, four-night Onsen Gastronomy: Noto Tour, exploring the region's culinary treasures and restorative hot springs.

REBUILDING A COMMUNITY

Chief executive officer Paul Christie had long envisioned a tour here, because it is a region still largely undiscovered by foreign visitors. So when he received a call for help from local activists, his team fast-tracked the itinerary — to quickly allow travellers a way to experience the peninsula's cultural and gastronomic richness while contributing to its recovery.

Our tour leader Kaho Shoji, a Noto native, was in her hometown of Nanao when the quake struck. Though her family was mostly physically unscathed, she lets on that the emotional toll of the disaster lingers. But with forward-looking drive and the same pragmatic resilience seen across the region, she has instead harnessed her intimate knowledge of the region to curate experiences that showcase what still thrives.



The chef and sushi at Chiyosushi.

In Nanao, she arranges an omakase meal at Chiyosushi, a sushi-ya helmed by a third-generation sushi master who uses fresh seafood from the Noto Peninsula. A post-prandial stroll leads us to small businesses she has known for years, like Torii Shoyu, a boutique soy sauce brewery which ferments soy in traditional wooden barrels; and Takazawa Candles, famed for its handmade candles. Both businesses were disrupted by the quake but fought to revive themselves through community support. As always, I leave with small souvenirs, but this time, each purchase feels like I'm contributing in some small way to the rebuilding of this area.

Our trip is also peppered with unexpected culinary discoveries, like the award-winning Malga Gelato. Selling his sweet treat at an unassuming roadside stand, gelato artisan Taizo Shibano has earned international acclaim for his pistachio gelato, but it is his regional creations that make this stop truly special. Exhibit A: The intriguing *huri* (yellowtail) gelato is an improbable yet balanced fusion of sweet and umami that lingers on the palate.



Kimura Isao Shouten.

THE LOCAL ONSENS

We also experience Noto's defining treasure — its onsen culture. The peninsula has long been revered for its mineral-rich hot springs, its waters infused with sea salts believed to promote circulation and skin health. Across the region, traditional ryokans offer a taste of this quintessential Japanese wellness ritual, which comprises a soothing soak in the steaming hot baths before settling down to a multi-course omakase dinner.



At Hotel Yubana, savour a multi-course Japanese meal along with a selection of local sakes.

At Hotel Yubana in Hakui, the onsen waters feel almost velvety, leaving the skin with a dewy, hydrated smoothness. After unwinding in the steaming bath, we gather for a kaiseki-style feast, featuring locally brewed sake and the finest seafood from the surrounding waters, with delicacies like *fugu* (pufferfish) and *nodoguro* (blackthroat seaperch), a prized fish beloved for its rich, buttery flavour.

A highlight is a stay at Hyakurakuso, a luxury ryokan along the Noto coast with a solid bedrock foundation that kept its main structure mostly safe from the seismic upheaval, even though its fishing pier and waterfront restaurant were washed away by the subsequent tsunami. But its onsen offerings remain above par — besides a unique cave onsen bath, the property also has several private baths for those who prefer solitude or feel more comfortable easing into hot spring culture away from strangers.



A private bath at the ryokan.

And of course, there is Wakura Onsen, a rare seaside hot spring town with a 1,200-year history that once drew nobility and samurai to its healing waters. Like much of the peninsula, it was not spared from the destructive effects of the quake and the 22 hot spring hotels lining the shores of Nanao Bay suffered varying levels of damage. Notoraku, the ryokan we stay at, reopened in November but visitors have not yet returned in full force. So for now, those who make the journey are rewarded with a rare sense of tranquillity, making this an unruffled, deeply personal experience at one of Japan's most storied hot spring towns.

On my final day, as I make my way back to Kanazawa, the prefecture's capital city, with my body soothed from onsen pampering and fresh, nourishing food, I realise something even more profound. It is the quiet resilience of the people, their determination to not be defined by tragedy, and their ability to rebuild and move forward that will draw me back again to this beautiful region.