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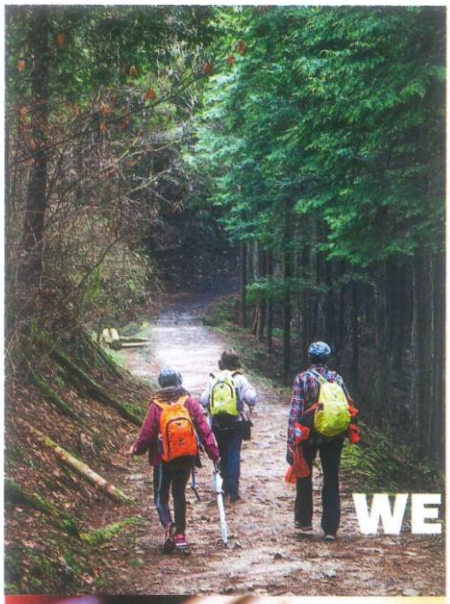
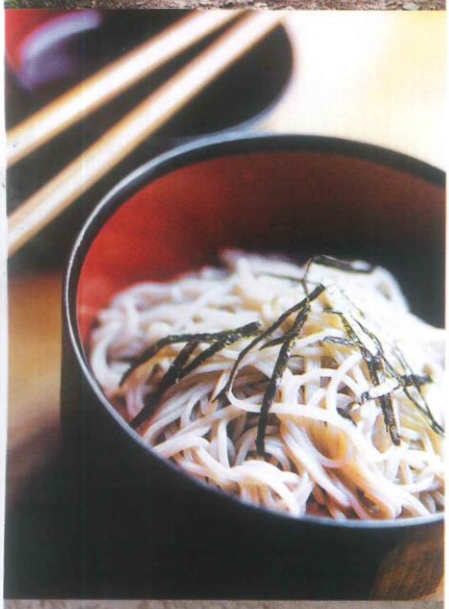
PACE AND QUIET

Beyond the bullet trains and the high-speed cities lies another Japan: sedate, remote — and yet so accessible. **Andrew Eames** takes it easy, walking the Nakasendo Way

Back on track: hiker on the Nakasendo Way; left, local man in Magome; floral decoration outside a shop in Tsumago; Japanese jasmine green tea





Way ahead: left, on the walking trail in the Kiso Valley; *soba* noodles with seaweed; traditional hats. Opposite, Mount Ontake; wooden shophouses lining a road in Tsumago

WE TOOK A STEP BACK IN TIME

that spring morning as we reached the Magome Pass. Ascending from the south in soft sunshine on the second day of our hike following the Nakasendo Way, we entered a floating world of flooded paddy fields beginning to freckle with an early show of the season's crop. In the bright calm, the watery terraces were like mirrors to the sky, filling the landscape with light, and silhouetting conical-hatted rice farmers bent over in the quarter-past-six position.

As a scene of pastoral perfection, it might have sprung from a 19th-century work by master artist Ando Hiroshige – a Japanese woodblock print in which we walkers advanced like the signature pilgrims of his stylised landscapes. In the distance rose an etching of mountains, coloured in with a mix of cypress, cedar, maple and feathery bamboo. Enormous carp kites flapped in the breeze and a bush warbler emitted the liquid notes of a nightingale.

There was a sense of curated wilderness to this part of the Nakasendo Way, which runs for 530km from Kyoto to Tokyo. We were walking the 'Kiso Road' stretch – for five days, between the cities of Nagoya and Matsumoto – and the lane we were on wound its way up through clutches of low-slung cedar-wood houses. Well-tended azaleas and peonies lined the walls.

Amid a gurgle of watercourses, the village of Magome clambered upwards in a mosaic of roof tiles, waterwheels and *sake* shops. It was a pitstop 'post' town, founded to service porters and travelling dignitaries during the Edo period (1603-1868), centuries that brought prosperity and unity to Japan. So far, so timewarped, but – as one of the places where the ancient Nakasendo Way and the modern road system intersect – it was also a modern hive of bus tourists, which was disappointing for me, coming fresh from travels in 21st-century Japan, with its electric crowds and glaring neon futurism.

Only the previous night – at the end of our group's first day of walking – we'd celebrated our immersion in bygone tranquillity in the town of Ena, with an *onsen* (hot tub) soak, prior to dinner in traditional *yukata* robes. Now I was eating *soba* (buckwheat noodles) in a cafe packed with tourists making appreciative slurping sounds as loud as the ripping of cartridge paper.

My disappointment soon waned. The Nakasendo Way is one of five national arterial routes established during Japan's feudal period. The other four routes have long been swamped by Japan's ahead-of-the-curve urbanisation: the robots and capsule hotels, the white-gloved taxi drivers and the mouse-voiced shop girls. But the Nakasendo passes through mountains and a scattering of post towns, promising a peek into the Japan of shoguns and samurai where, centuries ago, travellers ate and bedded down in those cedar-wood inns. So said our guide, Ted (an American who'd lived in Japan for 24 years), leading us on from the top of the village.

While we walked, Ted talked. Not so long ago most of Japan was completely off-limits to outsiders – as we were reminded, passing a warning sign that still stood at the village exit: 'If you see any Christians on the path, report them.' Usually, said Ted, so they could be executed. As recently as 150 years ago, he told us, the Land of the Rising Sun was relying largely on its own two feet – ›

barely aware of wheels, while in London, the Underground was getting into gear. Only in the latter half of the 19th century did Japan enter into a period of transformation that had taken Europe 400 years to achieve.

We went unreported and therefore unexecuted, and in an hour we'd walked up to the highest point of the pass. Descending the northern side, suddenly woodblock-print Japan was behind us and the ancient wilderness took its place. The temperature dropped, the forest crowded in and mountain cherry trees jumped back into blossom. There were bells to ring every kilometre or so to warn any roaming bears of our passing (to my ear it sounded as if we were ringing their dinner gong).

We were entering a world of light-fingered maples and scowling pines, of filtered sunlight trying to break through; of peering down into deep gorges and looking for any shadowy shapes that might be on the move in our direction. It was as if we'd stepped back into the Dark Ages, the perfect place and moment for Ted to reveal the reason why development has stayed away: the Japanese still regard the mountains as the lair of the dead.

Refuge – and relief – materialised about 2km further on, as we stopped at a 200-year-old teahouse. Smiling and bowing, resplendent in robes and straw hat, the attendant offered pickled plums with the green tea. Speaking via Ted, he explained that Westerners were now his best customers. But as he pointed to visitor figures proving how the trail had grown in popularity I drifted off. Gazing around, I savoured an oasis of old Japan, pin-drop-peaceful amid cedar wood darkened by age and wood smoke; sliding-screen doors; a mud floor smoothed by centuries of bare feet; a pot-bellied stove for winter; a firepit over which the kettle hung; and *tatami* mats for the comfort of travellers stuck in bad weather.

We weren't stuck, but it was getting chilly, and our thoughts turned to checking in at our *minshuku* (a traditional travellers' inn) for a warming *onsen* soak. We were a diverse group, ranging from a retired Australian duo to a Silicon Valley web developer, but nothing unites folk like a naked communal wallow in piping-hot water, discussing the day's progress – and what was for dinner.

That night's stop – the Maruya *minshuku*, in the small hamlet of O-Tsumago ('wife's basket') – turned out to be a simple guesthouse of polished floors and *shoji* paper screens for windows. It started serving travellers back in 1789, and has been run by the same family for generations. Cross-legged, we ate an elaborate feast of stream-reared trout from the hamlet, with bright-blue pickled aubergine, before climbing wooden stairs to slumber on futons with buckwheat-stuffed pillows. I say slumber – some among us spent the night cursing close encounters with the low beams in the sleeping areas separated by sliding *fusuma*. Too much *sake* with dinner, perhaps?

The best cure for sore heads was a crisp, mist-wrapped morning, which we ambled through, descending to big Tsumago, a museum-piece post town of low-slung timber inns and cafes. At such an early hour only swifts animated the main street, but we couldn't hang around anyway. A couple of kilometres down the valley lay Nagiso, and the next stretch of our Nakasendo pilgrimage, by train, along the local Chuo line. Would it be just the ticket? If nothing else we could put our feet up.

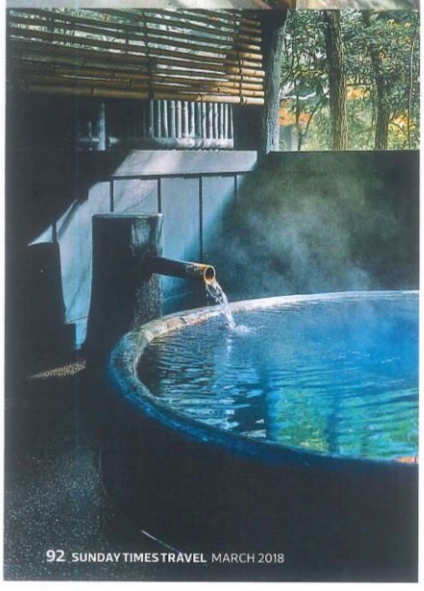
What we got was a weird and wonderful window on another Japan altogether, starting with the train conductor who moved through, bowing stiffly to each carriage. According to Ted he would continue to bow even if the carriage was empty, out of respect for his badge, his training and the train company. In the cab at the front, the white-gloved train driver put on a performance of his own. In his glass cabin, in full view of the passengers, he sat gesticulating at the timetable and saluting the signals outside, as if conducting an imaginary orchestra. >

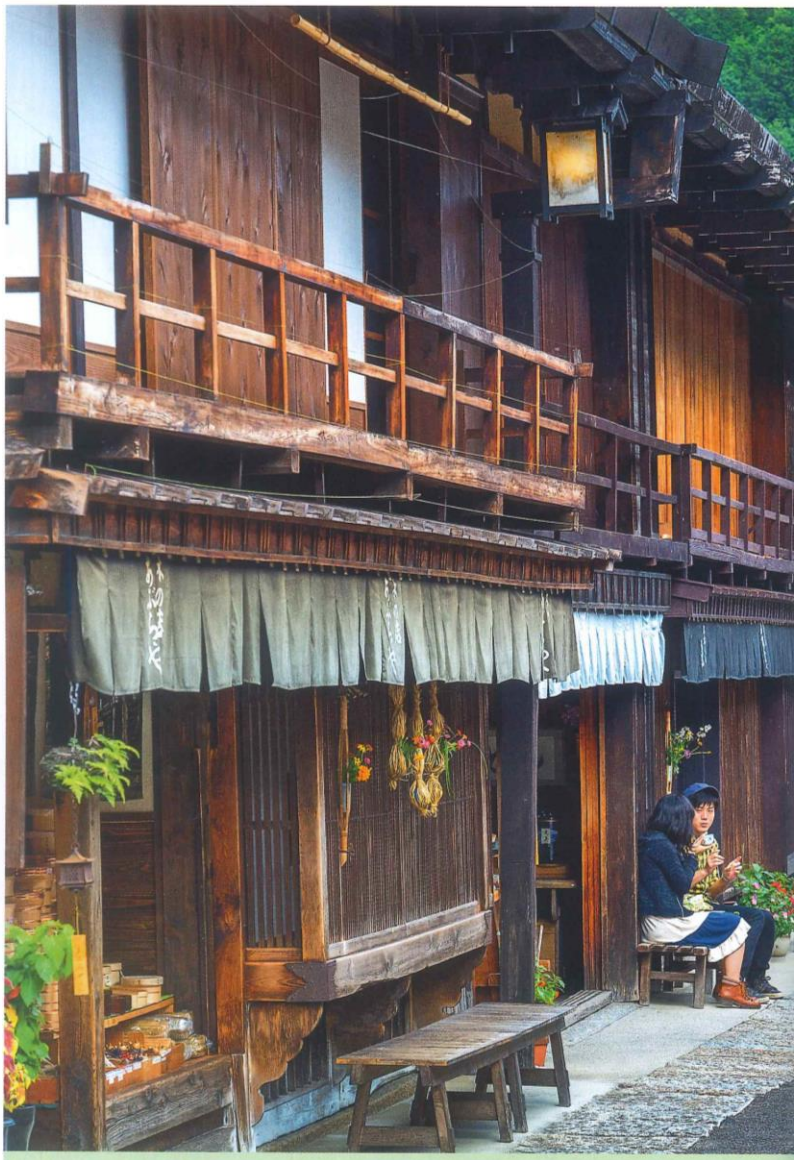
Budding romance: cherry trees in springtime bloom

UNDERSTANDING LOCAL LORE

Wondering what that badger-like figure is positioned outside most cafes and inns? The one with especially large furry testicles, wearing a hat? It's Tanuki, a character from Japanese folklore, said to bring wealth to a business

CHERRY TREES BLEW POWDERPUFF KISSES ACROSS THE FIELDS





Sign language: left, bear alert on the trail to Magome; traditional footwear at rest; Japanese *onsen*; above, houses in Tsumago

WE COOLED OUR HEELS ON THE TERRACE OF THE KAIDA NO POPPOYA — 'PUFFING VALLEY'

The high-speed expresses of mainstream Japan – their poster boy the bullet train – may be miraculously efficient but are ultimately sterile, with interiors like an aircraft fuselage and the countryside passing in a blur. By contrast we spent an afternoon of slow bliss aboard the Chuo local as it wobbled along narrow-gauge tracks like an elephant on a bicycle, squealing around tight corners past lumber yards and vegetable patches, along valley floors stitched with bridges and linked by tunnels.

I was sorry when we had to disembark for our third night – more so on clapping eyes on Kiso-Fukushima, a place of no real distinction wedged into a tight-walled river valley. Here, unlike in Magome and Tsumago, most of the original Nakasendo buildings had been subsumed into the modern town; a pity, since Kiso-Fukushima was one of two crucially important checkpoints, where travellers had to show their carved wooden passes if they wanted to proceed.

The checkpoint gateway still stood, and in its day it must have been a place of great stress, because the gate officials had the power to carry out summary executions on those they deemed not to be carrying the correct travel authority – another reminder that liberated modern travel has much to recommend it...

We got up early on day four and struck out from the Nakasendo, climbing for an hour from Kiso, up one of the side passes, penetrating deeper into the mountains and taking a step even further backwards in terms of season. Here, up at 1,335m across the Jizo Pass and on the high Kaida plain beyond it, the much-vaunted *sakura* blossom was still in full rampage, the cherry trees blowing each other powderpuff kisses across the fields.

Looming over it all at 3,067m was the snow-topped Ontake volcano, one of Japan's best-loved outdoor spaces. In 2014 it reminded the nation of its primeval volatility by erupting without warning, killing 63 hikers. We viewed the innocent-looking white-top from a safe remove, cooling our heels on the terrace of the Kaida No Poppoya ('puffing valley'), a cafe with a refreshing splash of the Japanese eccentricity we'd come to love. Here Ted had arranged a special lunch of Japanese pizza and apple cake made by owner and chef Hideji Ando, whose only English word was 'stationmaster', which he uttered, pointing to his stationmaster's cap.

As it transpired, Hideji had in fact never been a railway worker in the real world, but he was train driver, signalman, fat controller and everything else in Kaida No Poppaya – at least he was when it came to his pride and joy, a model railway which ran around the cafe garden.

After we'd eaten, he ran the trains one by one, making smoke and puffing sounds while his wife Mitsoko played *Chattanooga Choo Choo* on the harmonica. The two of them then sang us a song about the volcano, after which Mitsoko completed the performance with a solo, while *Thomas the Tank Engine* raced around her feet.

After this endearing diversion up the Jizo Pass we had another day on the Nakasendo: another pass, another post town; more bear bells to ring, more cedar-wood teahouses to visit and more 200-year-old paving underfoot, the same that has supported centuries of pilgrims, merchants and samurai. And when finally we emerged, blinking, into the bright lights of modern Matsumoto, it was with a pang, as if we were saying farewell to our own peaceful sliver of storybook Japan.

PHOTOGRAPHS: 4CORNERS, ALAMY, GETTY, OFFSET, STOCKFOOD

map: Scott Jessop

Get Me There

Go packaged

The guided five-day Kiso Road tour with experts **Walk Japan** (00 81978 522778, walkjapan.com) includes four nights' accommodation, most meals, all local travel from Nagoya to Matsumoto, baggage transfers and entrance fees; from £1,450pp (flights extra). **Macs Adventure** (0141530 1991, macs adventure.com) has a 10-day tour to Tokyo and Kyoto, with five self-guided days on the Nakasendo from £2,075p (with some meals, but not flights).

Go independent

Finnair (finnair.com) flies from Heathrow, via Helsinki, to Nagoya, from £529 return. **BA** (ba.com) flies to Tokyo from £525 return.

Where to stay

Walk Japan (as above) uses four addresses (NB: websites existing in English are included for information, but the places are really for pre-booked groups). The family-run **Ichikawa** (travel.rakuten.com/hotel/Japan-Gifu_Prefecture-Ena-Ryokan_Ichikawa/104604/; £105pp, half board) in Ena is a *ryokan* (inn), with *onsen* and *tatami*-matted rooms. In O-Tsumago, the **Maruya** (tsumago-maruya.com/english; £53pp, half board) is more basic, with shared bathrooms. In Kiso-Fukushima the modern **Iwaya Hotel** (£51pp, half board) has an *onsen* and a restaurant. Hotel **Kagetsu** (matsumotohotel-kagetsu.com/english; doubles from £60pp, B&B) in Matsumoto is more Western-style.

Get around

All transport is included in the tours. Otherwise a **Japanese Railpass** is cost-effective. A seven-day pass costs £189, from insidejapantours.com.

Further information

The Nakasendo Way runs from Kyoto to Tokyo; see **nakasendoway.com**. The **Kiso Tourist Federation** publishes a leaflet on the Kiso section: go-centraljapan.jp/lsc/lsc-upfile/pamphlet/01/55/155_1_file.pdf. See also **seejapan.co.uk**.