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PAUSE
AND
REFLECT





TAKING IT IZU

The search for ancient Japan takes **Stanley Stewart** off the beaten path to the Izu Peninsula - a land of hot springs, cloud-shredding peaks, empty coastal headlands and hospitality traditions unchanged for 400 years

I am not sure what a samurai would make of a heated toilet seat. The idea seems to run a little counter to their ascetic disciplines - to *bushido*, the way of the warrior. Japanese toilets are the bullet trains of the WC world, an early stop on the thrilling learning curve for the first-time visitor to Japan. They open automatically, light up and rinse themselves the moment you enter the cubicle, a fanfare for your arrival. Wall-mounted control units offer a bewildering array of options: rear cleansing, front cleansing, an exciting oscillation function. There are buttons for water flow, pressure, angle. As for the seat heaters, I've never been able to get them any lower than "roast".

Such is modern Japan - smart, high-tech, a place of unexpected conveniences and barely believable inventions, a place so spotless, so perfectly ordered, so thoughtful that the visitor finds himself struggling to upgrade his own behaviour and expectations, in order to fit in. But like many visitors, I had come in search of ancient Japan, that illusive ideal so eloquently captured in Japanese painting - a kind of elegant stillness, a Zen-like peace scarce amid the neon and hurrying crowds of Tokyo. I longed for an older, simpler country, an echo of the Edo period, a place that might have been recognisable to a samurai. And I wanted to find it

Right: **Asaba ryokan, with its lake and Noh stage.**
Above: **a Superior Garden View room at Asaba**

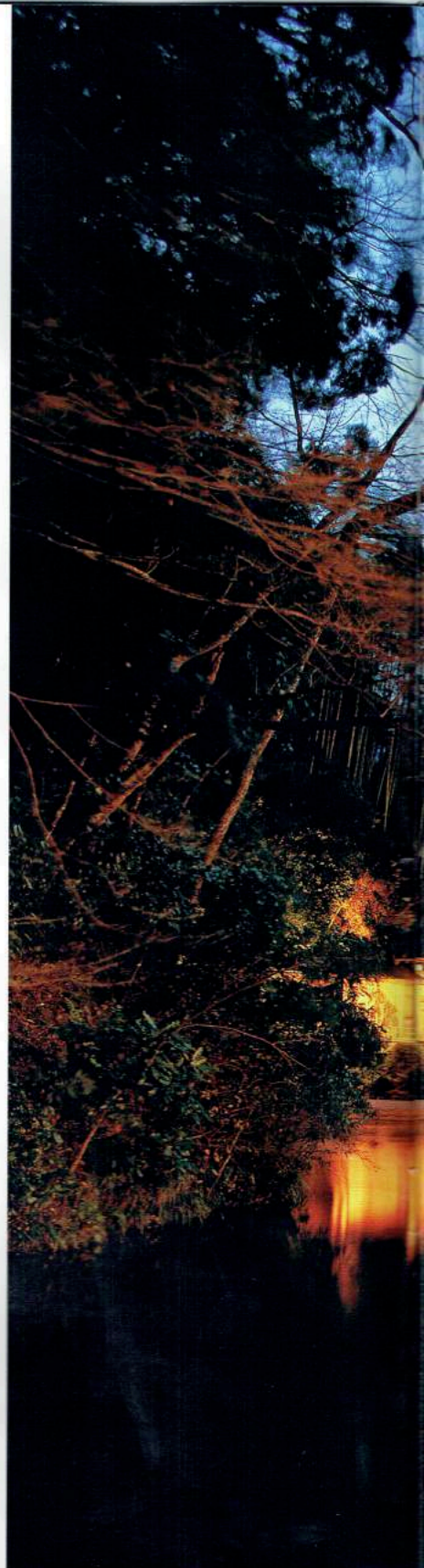
without being sucked into the throngs of Kyoto, with its tour groups and Chinese teenagers in rented kimonos.

I booked a seat on the bullet train from Tokyo to Atami. The driver bowed, the platform attendants bowed, the conductor bowed and we set off southward at over 300km an hour on a line as smooth as silk. Beyond the windows, Japan was a blur of modern housing and flattened rice paddies, of straight raised roads and electricity pylons. It was neat, domesticated and just a little dull. But at Atami, I ventured further south by car into a more interesting world, along the coast of the Izu Peninsula, a mountainous thumb sticking out into the Pacific.

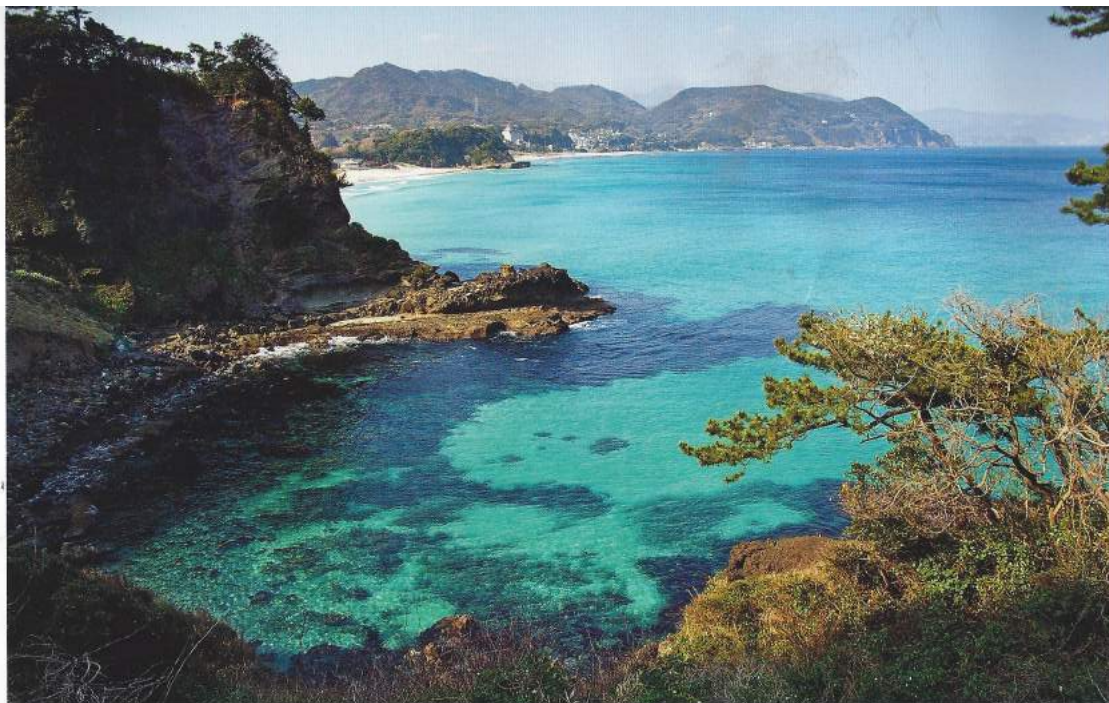
Trekking trails wound through forests. Homesteads of grey tiled roofs climbed valleys towards cloud-shredding peaks. With the ocean sparkling on my left and mountains looming on my right, I started to come over all emotional.

It wasn't just the landscapes. It was the driving - the giving way to others, the patience, the civility, the stunning politeness of the Japanese. I normally drive in Rome, where such politeness would quickly find me impaled on the handlebars of a passing Vespa. Here, on the Pacific coast, gliding southward in my hybrid Toyota, I found this delicate thoughtfulness, this eagerness to be co-operative, immensely moving. It felt nostalgic, a remnant of a more innocent age.

The mountains of Izu Hanto are hot-spring country: there are said to be 2,300







Clockwise from left: picturesque headlands punctuate the coast of the Izu Peninsula. Izu's microclimate makes it one of the first places to see cherry blossoms each year. An exquisitely presented *kaiseki* meal at Ryokan Kurashiki

The mountains of Izu Hanto are hot-spring country; there are said to be 2,300 here. The Japanese love nothing more than lounging in a hot tub with naked strangers. Unless it is gazing at cherry blossoms

in the peninsula. The Japanese love nothing more than lounging in a hot tub with naked strangers – unless it is gazing at cherry blossoms. With a curious microclimate, Izu is also one of the first places in Japan to see the cherry blossoms (early February to early March), and down in the Kawazu Valley, romantic couples were strolling along the riverbank beneath pink clouds of blossoms, presumably as a prelude to a bit of bathing nudity. At the top of the valley I came to the ryokan of Amagiso, a traditional Japanese inn of wood and tatami mats, rice-paper walls and kimonos.



The first ryokan is a bit like first love, a comedy of errors with a lot of fumbling and misunderstanding. Ryokan etiquette can be a minefield. At Amagiso, a plump woman patiently took me through the do's and don'ts – here naked, there not naked, here washing, there just soaking, here robe, there shoes – before depositing me in a room so minimalist that the only furnishings were a low table and a vase with a single flower. I put my bag in the raised alcove until I was informed it was an altar. I wandered into the toilet to inspect the high-tech apparatus, unaware that I should be wearing the special toilet sandals. Then I set off for the hot baths in my *yukata* – a belted cotton robe – naively wrapping the right side over the left, a manner signifying death.

Hobbling on sandals several sizes too small for me, I descended long flights of steps into the gorge on whose lip the ryokan was perched. At the bottom, beneath a waterfall, I found a series of hot pools. Easing myself into the steaming water, I lay back and gazed at the cherry blossoms, the silver threads of the waterfall, the feathery jungle of ferns and bamboo, the moss-covered cliffs and, far above, the clouds snagging in the branches of pine trees. Mists curled up

the valley and the colours seemed to run into one another. I'd found my Japanese painting.

The next day I followed the coast road round a series of headlands, past a couple of fine beaches, to Shimoda, the port where a sudden arrival brought old Japan to an end: in 1854 Commodore Matthew Perry of the US navy dropped anchor here. For the Japanese, this was the fateful Arrival of the Black Ships, as Perry's iron-hulled vessels were called. For two centuries, since the Edo period, Japan had been closed to the outside world. But by the mid-19th century, pressure to open its ports had begun to build. When the Americans first turned up, in 1853, the emperor decreed they should be rebuffed. But it quickly became clear that this wasn't going to do the trick. Over the next 20 years, treaties were signed, ports were opened, and the shogunate – the government of Japan's military lords – collapsed. Japan was setting itself on a new path that would make it a modern nation and one of the world's leading economies.

The old quarter of Shimoda is centred on Perry Road, named for the foreigner whose arrival had such a profound effect on Japan. Ironically, it is everything you might want of old Japan – a canal reflecting willow trees, a row of wooden houses with latticed walls, small humpbacked bridges. At the far end of the street is Ryosen-ji, the 17th-century temple where Perry signed the Treaty of Peace.



and Amity beneath a magnificent cherry tree, unaware of its momentous role in Japanese history. Next door is the Ryosen-ji Treasure Museum, with its collection relating to the black ships. There are unflattering portraits of Perry and his companions with protuberant noses, wonderful Japanese paintings of the arrival of the ships and equally wonderful illustrations from western journals of early Japanese envoys wearing silk robes and bemused expressions dwarfed by western giants in frock coats at the White House and on Broadway.

From Shimoda I headed up the wilder western coast of the Izu Peninsula. Overlooking a white-capped sea, the road twisted between rock and pines. And then, suddenly and dramatically, Mount Fuji appeared far across Suruga Bay, some 50km distant, afloat on clouds. Fuji is in the habit of making sudden unexpected appearances. I was two days in Tokyo before she dramatically manifested at sunset on the skyline beyond the city – ethereal, iconic, hovering somewhere between shadow and substance.

My next stop was Asaba (pictured on previous pages), one of the finest ryokans in Japan, in the same family for over five centuries. A quiet hush creeps along wide passageways of blond woods and white walls. Beyond the windows is a reflecting pool and a wooden Noh stage. Guests retreat into the elegant seclusion of their rooms; the only time I encountered any was in the baths.

I had my own personal attendant. She shuffled in and out, bowing, speaking in a soft, melodious voice. She served me a *kaiseki* dinner – sashimi, sushi, tempura, miso soup, a tiny slice of pork, a single shrimp, fried

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We strolled through the cobbled streets, dropping in on a 100-year-old brewery where they play Mozart to the sake as it ferments in the wooden vats



From top: **Mount Fuji** seen across Suruga Bay. **Shinkei-en Garden at the Ohara Museum of Art in Kurashiki**

bamboo shoots and seaweed, steamed yuba – each dish a minor artwork, elegantly presented on delicate porcelain, garnished with edible flowers and fresh herbs. While I dined, an unseen Man Friday unrolled my bed in the room next door.

In the early morning, in the outside pool, I joined three naked Japanese gentlemen, their bodies smooth and sleek as seals. Swaddled with steam, surrounded by reflections of bamboo and floating clouds, our heads floated on the surface, silent and inscrutable. The usual clues – dress, speech, manner – were all absent. Sharing the slow uncoiling of cares and stress in the hot baths, we were unknown to one another, an anonymity that was as soothing as the spring water.

Two days later, I was in Kurashiki lunching with my new best friend, Ritsuko Nakamura. One of the largest cities in Japan in the 17th-century Edo period, Kurashiki is now a pleasant backwater. The historic district at its heart is a network of streets lined with two-storey merchants' houses of whitewash and dark wood, of willow-framed canals lined with galleries, museums and artists' studios. I was staying in Kurashiki ryokan, a former sugar merchant's warehouse overlooking one of the canals; Nakamura is the manager and hostess. We discussed the traditions of *omotenashi*, or Japanese hospitality, with its astonishing attention to detail, with its impulse to anticipate and enhance the guest's desires. Like much in Japan, an idea polished to perfection.

After lunch we strolled through the cobbled streets, dropping in first on a 100-year-old brewery where they play Mozart to the sake as it ferments in the wooden vats. We stopped to visit the kimono draper. Once a year he opens his spare cedar house so people can view the 250-year-old azalea bush in bloom in his miniature courtyard. For 150 years his family has been supplying some of Japan's best kimonos. On the walls are black and

white photos of famous visitors – Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and the great English potter Bernard Leach.

They came to see the ancient old town, and for the art. Named for the cotton magnate and collector who did much to preserve the old town, the Ohara Museum of Art is famous for its collection of western pieces. I admit to prior scepticism; I hadn't come to Japan to look at second-rate Monets. But I needn't have worried; the European works amassed by Ohara in the 1920s and 1930s are a revelation – wonderful paintings worthy of a diversion from traditional Japan. But there is also great modern Japanese work here, challenging without losing the delicate aesthetic typical of the country.

That evening I asked a long-standing expatriate resident what impressed and annoyed him about his adopted home. He said they were one and the same thing – the Japanese passion for perfection, their determination to achieve the perfect outcome without ambiguity or error or compromise. Nothing was casual here, he said. It is impressive, if occasionally exhausting for a resident.

The ryokans, the trains, the driving, the traditions of *omotenashi*, the politeness and thoughtfulness you meet at every turn, even those modern deluxe toilets, with every kind of facility: all are part of the Japanese obsession with the highest standards, their polite but decisive refusal to accept the second rate. What you discover when you seek and find the illusive old Japan, then, is that its ideals survive, vividly, in today's attitudes. ♦

THE INN CROWD

Stanley Stewart travelled as a guest of **Ampersand Travel** (020-7819 9770; www.ampersandtravel.com), which offers bespoke tours of Japan. A 12-night itinerary, including accommodation at ryokans Kurashiki, Amagiso and Asaba, as well as the Aman and the Mandarin Oriental in Tokyo, starts from £5,750 per person, with British Airways flights, private transfers, some private guiding and first-class bullet-train tickets. **Asaba**, 3450-1 Shuzenji, Izu-shi, Shizuoka 410-2416 (+8155-872 7000; www.relaischateaux.com), from £670. **Hotel Amagiso**, 359 Nashimoto, Kawazu-cho, Kamo-gun, Shizuoka 413-0501 (+8155-735 7711; www.amagisou.jp/hotel-eng), from £150. **Ryokan Kurashiki**, 4-1 Honmachi, Kurashiki, Okayama 710-0054 (+81864-220 730; www.ryokan-kurashiki.jp), from £410. **British Airways** (0344-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies three times daily from London Heathrow to Tokyo from £650.

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