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2023-2024

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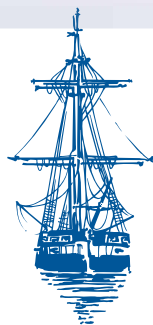
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Destination Paradise

2023-2024

STARS AND STRIPES

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FACEBOOK



INSTAGRAM

Front page photo – With travel opening up in the Pacific, Ha Long Bay in Vietnam is again a hotspot.

Background photo – Suzanne Murray's daughter admires the lantern she made in Vietnam.

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"Travel is about the gorgeous feeling of teetering in the unknown."
- Anthony Bourdain

Has the travel bug finally bit you? Our suitcases are dusted off and we're "teetering in the unknown." Where have your travels taken you? Swinging over the rice terraces of Bali, down the tiny alleyways of Hanoi for a piping hot bowl of pho, or on an incredible bike ride surrounded by Japan's lush green landscape? Living in the Pacific offers many opportunities to explore.

If, like us, you love to travel and explore, then this magazine is for you. Destination Paradise is our love letter to hitting the road, learning about others and, in turn, getting to know ourselves. It is an invitation to see the world, how to do it and how you can bring along your friends and family, too.

As you flip through this magazine, you'll see others like you who've sought out adventures during their time in the Pacific. You'll find travel tips from readers urging you to seek out the unknown, get off base and make the most of your time in this beautiful region.

Inside you'll hear from Taeko McFadden, who sent us two great travel tales about cycling in Japan and a quick trip to Malaysia.

Turn to Page 23 to get a great guide to enjoying Bangkok and Phuket on a girls' trip from Dr. Rosie Ortiz-Torres. Every story you'll read in these pages is written by your neighbors, friends, and coworkers right here in the Pacific.

Once you're done reading these awesome stories and perusing the exceptional photos provided by the writers, know that you can find plenty more travel, food and culture tips in our community papers and websites – japan.stripes.com, okinawa.stripes.com, guam.stripes.com and korea.stripes.com – which serve up culture stories, restaurant reviews, and the latest happenings on and off base.

Don't forget to check out Stripes Pacific on Facebook for more stories, helpful videos and fun contests. While you're at it, follow us on Instagram @starsandstripespacific for even more great content to get you started on your journey in the Pacific.

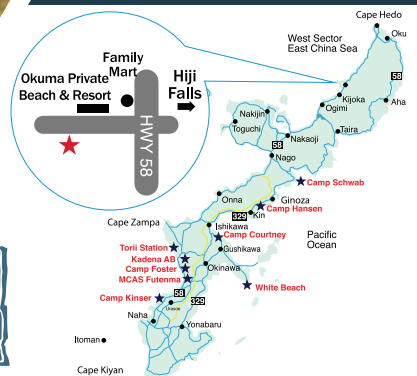
And, after you do your research and head out on your adventure, keep us in mind. We love to hear from our readers! You might even find your story in these pages next year! Reach out and tell us what's on your mind. I promise we'll get right back to you.

In the meantime, join us as we explore the gorgeous feeling of teetering into the unknown through written word and photos. Safe travels!

Denisse Rauda
Publishing and Media Design Editor
Stars and Stripes

Okuma Beach

A collage of nine hexagonal images arranged in a honeycomb pattern, showcasing various activities and amenities at Okuma Beach. The images include: a close-up of a pizza with toppings; a wooden cabin with a green roof; a green tent at night; a person water skiing on a board labeled 'LIQUID FORCE'; a group of three people on a red and black inflatable labeled 'AIRHEAD'; a person playing mini-golf; a person on a green and yellow jet ski; a close-up of a massage; and a grilled fish dish with a lemon wedge.



“I’ve been to 20-plus countries in this part of the world, but here the landscape is unique: a cross between western Texas and Mars, at least as seen in NASA photos.”

Mongolia: A land that time almost forgot

Story and photos by
RON ROMAN

MY PARADISE
Mongolia



Russia

Ulaanbaatar

Gobi Desert

North Korea

South Korea

China

In October, my Better Half (Yeon Hee) and I decided to hit the road for Mongolia (Latin for “Land of the Mongols”), one of the few remaining major tourist destinations in Far East Asia we hadn’t yet gotten around to despite our living long-term in Korea. I had always been told (and believed) that October is the time to go. Going earlier was said to be too dusty owing to the proximity of the Gobi Desert; going later was just too darn cold. We couldn’t have been more wrong. We now recommend going in late spring or the summer. October nights can be freezing.

Arriving inside Chinggis Khaan International Airport outside the capital Ulaanbaatar (note: spelling often varies), we were met by our group’s tour guide, nicknamed Auggie (“Baby” in Korean) and a dozen other Korean travelers from Seoul. Auggie was a full Mongolian, had studied tourism at a Seoul university, spoke Korean with somewhat of a North Korean dialect and had almost no English. Even at the airport, one of our first impressions was that Mongolians look more Korean than Koreans; if you visit, you’ll see for yourself. We headed for our tour bus. In the interest of brevity, the following are just a few highlights.



Author with wife standing lonely amid the deserted landscape.



One of the many crazy-looking cairns dotting the countryside.



Holding up high a trained Mongolian eagle.

Barren terrain

We headed east out on the national highway (Terelj Road), where the lay of the land looks truly eerie. I’ve been to 20-plus countries in this part of the world, but here the landscape is unique: a cross between western Texas and Mars, at least as seen in NASA photos. The rock formations are especially weird; they look like huge, smooth, rounded dominoes, often precariously placed atop one another and ready to tumble onto the wayward trekker. The land, mostly flat, is composed of light-brown grassland, dry that time of year, for almost as far as the eye can see. Myriad horses, which are small and stocky, graze on the horizon. (Mongolian horses tend to be smaller than their European counterparts, yet more rugged). On all but the clearest of days, dust will be everywhere. (The country has one of the highest rates of lung infections as a result, particularly in children.) After a couple of hours of driving, you realize just how barren this country is.

We stopped at a roadside department store to load up on snack items – locally produced beers (labeled in Russian), US-made Lay’s potato chips, etc. – all the while not knowing the cost, since price labeling on items was haphazard. Auggie said fruits and vegetables would be expensive, given the barren terrain and harsh climate. Meanwhile, on our way to Gura Tourist Camp, Auggie entertained us with some Mongolian language lessons: “San ban ho” is “How do you do?” in conversational Mongolian; Russian is used for reading and writing. But enough of first-grade language lessons...

Please pass the side dish

Finally, after two hours on the bus, we came to Dung-Ji (Korean) restaurant to wolf down a lunch of kimchi chigae (kimchi stew, fiery in taste and temperature) and assorted side dishes. (If ever taking a Korean tour, remember: if there’s a Korean restaurant nearby, that’s where you’ll eat your next meal; expect to feast on as much Korean cuisine as you will local.) The Korean couple opposite us at the dining table wasted no time in digging in. The woman, to the dismay of my wife, preemptively claimed the cabbage salad side dish as her own, and promptly took it upon herself to gobble up the entire thing. We had been forewarned: try to carefully choose those who sit with you come chow time.

Back on the bus, my wife broke out some chocolate from the department store. (Korean restaurants traditionally don’t serve dessert. Too bad. To the Western palate, the cuisine is overly salty and sour, so postprandial sweets are most welcome.)

We slogged onward to our next destination: a horseback riding camp. Increasingly noticeable are the barrenness and scant population. “Lovely country! Lovely town!” exclaimed my Big City Girl wife. On the way over, we made a quick stop to walk around a rock pyramid, designated as a well-wishing monument, to throw three stones on top as a way of wishing for a safe trip, according to Auggie. (These well-wishing cairns are everywhere). Then, we hopped back on the bus. It was only mid-October and already bitterly cold and windy.

Speakin' Mongolian

Hello: Sain uu

My name is: Minii neriig

Goodbye: Bayartai



The facade of one of many historical museums in Ulaanbaatar.

Horseback riding and hiking

Arriving at the Green Sky Resort, it was time for horseback riding. Mongolian horses tend to be short and stocky, as I mentioned, because they have been bred over centuries to adapt to the rugged terrain. It had been a while since I last had ridden. The rugged mountains off in the distance were spectacular. Riding high, I felt like a trooper in Chinggis Khaan's army of old. This feeling didn't last long, however; soon, my testicles hurt. (Male readers may know what I mean; other readers can skip this part). We completed a full circle and came back to guzzle down mat, a white, semi-bitter root drink mixed with cow milk inside a yurt, the traditional circular domed tent used by nomads. Then we were on the bus again for a bumpy ride on unpaved roads pockmarked with the sleaziest potholes you've ever experienced. This is common; most roads in the countryside are potholed and barely paved.

We came to a provincial park offering splendid views of jagged mountains circumnavigating the entrance and were told to hike up the path leading to their base. It would take 40 minutes. Alongside the trail spaced every 10 meters or so to the top were pithy Buddhist aphorisms in English with their Russian translations below. Example: "There are three types of people, so there are three types of Buddhism for them." Hmm. Any Buddhist readers out there?

Going up, my chest hurt owing to the high altitude, I surmised; racing down to be the first to return I didn't skip a breath, but like an idiot had worn wooden-like dress shoes. Soon, my feet were hurting bad. The temperature was dropping fast. In Mongolia, be sure to bundle up except in summer. Weather may change in a New York minute.

Just before dusk, we were on the road again, only to stop soon at a big yurt-shaped souvenir shop featuring a specialized version of locally produced horse-oil shampoo and soap. Everyone passed on these items, yet local knick-knacks and gewgaws were purchased by some. Outside, it was already getting dark. I had been up since 4:30 a.m. and was ready to punch out for the day.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



Overlooking downtown Ulaanbaatar.



Costumed dancers on stage as part of the traditional troupe performance.



Exploring deserted plains on the legendary Mongolian horses.



Inside a traditional nomadic yurt.



Well-stocked roadside department store.



The Chinggis Khan National Memorial and Museum.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

Hunkering down for the night

After a short while, we pulled into our overnight abode: a no-frills, bare-bones yurt. The wood fireplace was already hot, but it was still chilly inside. Time to unpack and make a beeline for the restaurant nearby to munch on a simple Mongolian meal of roasted lamb, baked potatoes, sliced and whole carrots, coleslaw, and plain white rice washed down with a bottle of ice-cold local beer, the name of which I can't recall, the label being printed in Russian. A quite simple meal which tasted genuinely homemade. Time to hunker down for the night. Given the circular structure of yurts, double beds are impractical. Both of us were bushed—and soon fast asleep—in separate beds. (Well, I didn't say this was our honeymoon, did I?)

Upon entering the yurt, it had been too chilly; quickly, though, it was too hot. No fancy central heating here. In the middle of the night, we had to go out to crack open the door and anchor the handle to get a more balanced temperature for the night. We were away from city lights. Outside, the canopy of stars proved breathtaking. Back inside, the yurt proved comfortable. Morning call would be at 7; breakfast was at 8.

Breakfast was lamb soup (a first for me), rice, eggs, sausage (with hardly any meat, mostly flour, according to my wife), white "toast" that hadn't been toasted, and instant coffee. Nothing to build a gourmet appetite upon, yet adequate. Though we may have been ensconced in a comfortable restaurant, my wife still blurted out, "Everything here is rough and tough!" perhaps musing over the night spent in our no-frills yurt. The pithy description well characterizes the countryside.

I went to the restaurant toilet. Reminiscent of what she had just said, sure enough, there was no toilet tissue in the stall. I had discovered that after I...

Everybody packed their bags and headed for the bus. The landscape was dotted with tourist yurt resorts. In the distance, I spotted a fellow on "camel buck," the famed Mongolian two-hump camel, one of the few places in the world where this breed is found. We drove on, up to a walk leading to the Tuul River where we got off for a good mile-and-a-half stroll dodging livestock dung everywhere. The river was clear and clean and swimmable in summer, according to Auggie. Also common are half-sunken rubber tires in the soil serving as boundary markers. I thought this was weird.

Memorial and museum a must

On our walk back to the bus, a driver with a huge eagle stopped by our entourage, offering to let us take individual photos, at two bucks apiece, holding the clawed beast up high at arm's length, as if in a triumphant pose. Several of us gladly ponied up the cash for the privilege. It was then back to Gurda Lodge Resort for lunch and then to Chinggis Khan National Memorial and Museum.

Don't miss this national memorial and museum if you visit Mongolia. It's astounding. Less grandiose, but equally informative, at least on a historical scale, is the other national museum of Mongolia once you're back in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. Of course, there are myriad attractions to visit in the city, too numerous to list. Just grab a brochure.

Depending on the season, particularly, Ulaanbaatar may appear somewhat drab and run-down, a result of the influence of old Soviet-style architecture with exception of the more modern downtown area. For sure, expect to find it dusty anytime. Construction of new, soaring high-rises dots the city's horizon as far as can be seen, even on a clear day. It's definitely a city on the move.

Not much later, it would be time to bid good-bye to Auggie. We exchanged email addresses, and I promised to forward this article to him if it's published. I hope he likes it as much as you do!



Mannequins of royalty at the National Museum.

Author's Bio:

Ron Roman taught English and the humanities for the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC) all over the Pacific since 1996 until the COVID-19 crisis (2020). His critically acclaimed apocalyptic doomsday thriller "Of Ashes and Dust" was published by Histrion Books (Nov. 2022) and is available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and retail book vendors everywhere.



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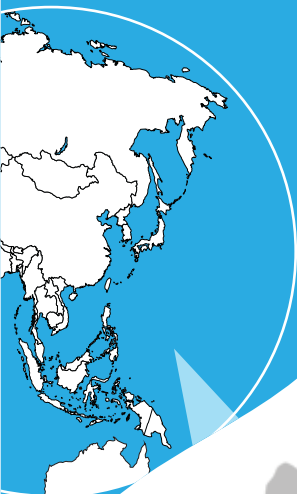
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“Even as a 10-year-old kid, I was thrilled to be so far away from the hustle and bustle of Tokyo. For me, it was the first taste of the United States, and it was paradise.”

Guam: My first taste of the U.S.

Story and photos by
AIKO SETOGUCHI

MY PARADISE Guam



AB. Won Pat
International Airport



All smiles after graduating from college in New York.

In the summer of 1996, my mother took me to Guam, a tiny island sitting on the southern left edge of the Pacific Ocean. The island is known for its military bases among Americans, but for us Japanese, it was known for shining beaches.

Mom booked a late-night flight from Narita, and we arrived on the island in early morning. When we landed at the airport, the island was still asleep, wrapped in dim blue, steamy air. Trees with deep green leaves that stood around the runway were the first ones to greet us.

We soon headed to a hotel that sat just by a quiet beach. Once in the hotel room, Mom opened the window and we soaked ourselves in the morning breeze of the South Pacific.

Even as a 10-year-old kid, I was thrilled to be so far away from the hustle and bustle of Tokyo. For me, it was the first taste of the United States, and it was paradise: blue sky, shining beach, and a breeze that brought the quiet sound of waves.

Mom ordered room service, and 30 minutes later our breakfast arrived. Placed in front of me was a white box that looked like it could hold a whole cake in it. I didn't know what was in the box since I didn't understand English back then and had no idea what she ordered.

As soon as the waiter left our room, I asked Mom if I could open it. Seeing my excitement, she smiled and said, "Sure." When I opened it, my excitement grew stronger. Inside the box were ham sandwiches with white bread beautifully cut into rectangular shapes and a small, bright yellow plastic bag. At the time, I had never seen anyone put a bag of food in a sandwich box, and it awoke my curiosity. When I opened the bag, a

bunch of potato chips popped out!

The presentation and the occasion – a bag of potato chips in a box for breakfast – appeared very special to me. Since that day, Lay's potato chips has been my favorite snack.

During our

stay on Guam, I encountered so many never-seens and never-dones – finding lizards climbing walls of the balcony; swimming with fish and taking a nap on the beach; eating purple-taro ice cream, brown breakfast sausages, and a Burger King cheeseburger. They were all so rare, so American, and so paradise for the city girl from Japan.

When I was eating my first bag of Lay's potato chips on Guam, I was 10 years old and never imagined I would attend a

college in New York. But less than a decade later, I was picking up my second bag of Lay's, this time in a large size, at a supermarket on Broadway.

In college, I got to learn a bit more about Guam from

Andy Nathan, an expert on military affairs in the Pacific region. I also got to hang out with Phil, an amazing friend who is a son of a U.S. Navy sailor.

I thank Mom and Guam for giving me such great first memories of the United States and my future in the country. Guam will always be my piece of paradise.



Happy 10-year-old me on Guam.



I love New York.



My mom and I loved our trip to Guam in 1996.

Speakin' Chamorro

Good morning: Buenos dias

Good afternoon: Buenos tatdes

Good evening: Buenos noches

Good luck: Suette

“There’s no better place to experience the food, music, arts and crafts of the Chamorros than at Guam’s night markets and village festivals that bring together residents and visitors alike to celebrate the culture of this far-away island.”

Celebrating the Chamorro culture of Guam

Story and photos by
JOYCE MCCLURE

MY PARADISE
Guam



Photo courtesy of Guam Visitors Bureau



Read more travel stories from
Joyce McClure and other writers at
<https://www.goworldtravel.com>

“Hafa Adai!” When arriving in the northern Pacific island of Guam, visitors are greeted with this traditional Chamorro welcome as they step off the plane and begin their journey into the island’s ancient culture.

Located in the Western Pacific Ocean between Japan and Australia, Guam is one of the U.S.’s five inhabited island territories. It sits on the edge of the Marianas trench, the deepest surveyed point in the world, and is only 900 miles north of the equator in the region known as Micronesia.

First settled more than 4,000 years ago by people arriving from the Philippine Islands to the west and subsequently from the Caroline Islands and Southeast Asian islands including Indonesia, the ancient Chamorro culture that evolved from those early settlers is still much in evidence today with 37% of the population identifying as Chamorro.

Chamorro culture

There’s no better place to experience the food, music, arts and crafts of the Chamorros than at Guam’s night markets and village festivals that bring together residents and visitors alike to celebrate the culture of this far-away but accessible tropical island.

One of the most popular night markets is held every Wednesday night in Chamorro Village. Located in the capital city of Hagatna, it’s open every day of the week, but Wednesday evening is when the mouth-watering smoke of barbeque permeates the center court, where Guam food trucks and stalls offer a veritable buffet of local foods and fresh fruit juices amid the Spanish-inspired buildings.

Farmers sell their produce and dance groups often entertain the crowd while a karabao, or water buffalo, one of the most well-known images of Guam pulling a two-wheeled cart, is on hand to give rides to children and stand calmly chewing its cud for selfies.

Originally from the Philippines, karabao were introduced to Guam during the Spanish occupation (1668-1898) for farming and today are the image of a slower-paced and less populated time prior to World War II.

Join the crowd and swing and sway to a local band that plays both modern and traditional island music in the village’s main pavilion where families and friends gather to enjoy the warm night air.



Handmade shell jewelry



Handmade carvings



Tropical dresses



Coconut art

Chamorro Village



Tropical fruit drinks



Fresh coconut



Mission of the village

The mission of Chamorro Village is to promote made-on-Guam products and small businesses that are much in evidence among the shops and booths where handmade jewelry, clothing, food products including locally produced honey, bath products like fresh-pressed coconut oil, and arts and crafts are on display.

Some of the island's master wood carvers also sell their artwork and furniture made from the durable ifil tree with its rich, dark red wood that is the territorial tree of Guam.

The authentic Ancient Chamorro crescent-shaped sinahi, or moon, necklace is also available at the market and comes in many sizes and materials including giant clam shell, whale bone and basalt.

Just look for the "Made on Guam" label and strike up a conversation with the friendly artisans to learn more about their crafts.

Speakin' Chamorro

Welcome: Bienbenidu

Hello: Hafa Adai

How are you?: Hafa tatamanu hao?

I'm fine: Maolek ha yu

Malessos' Gupot Chamoru-Crab Festival

One of the most popular fiestas is the Malessos' Gupot Chamoru/Crab Festival in the southern village of Merizo.

A three-day event starring the local land crab, it's held annually in March and features great food and barbeque, live music and dancing, carnival games, culinary competitions and contests that includes a crab-catching contest.

More than 2,000 crabs are released and contestants ages 8 and up scramble to catch as many as they can. Children receive small cash prizes, and the adults get to take home their haul.

Get there early because the stuffed crab and crab cakes sell out before the end of the day.

Other festivals throughout the year include Agat's three-day Mango Festival in late May that celebrates Guam's unofficial fruit. Whether pickled, juiced, or straight off the tree, this festival is dedicated to the juicy, red-gold fruit.

The *donne'*, or hot red pepper, is a staple of Chamorro cuisine, adding heat and spice to almost all dishes from pickled mango and papaya to barbeque marinades and the signature dipping sauce, *finadene*. Mangilao's *Donne'* Festival takes place in September with cooking competitions challenging everyone to see who can stand the most heat. The hotter, the better.



Land crab

More fun festivals

The village of Talofofo is a favorite place for hikers where cascading waterfalls rush through green valleys into rivers that run past caves full of stalagmites and ancient cave drawings.

Held annually in April at Ipan Beach Park, the Talofofo Banana Festival celebrates the village's signature fruit. Among the favorite offerings is a deep-fried banana wrapped in a crunchy lumpia wrapper and covered with caramelized brown sugar.

The coconut, or *niyok*, is the star of two festivals that take place in Agana Heights in March and Inarajan in May. The fruit is one of Guam's most important native plants and appears on the Guam seal and flag.

Inarajan is known for its historic district with narrow streets lined with houses built over a hundred years ago.

Residents fill front yards and porches, and music pours out as they walk to Gef Pa'go Cultural Village along the sea where vendors, tours and games take place. Buy a young coconut bursting with fresh coconut juice and sip the refreshing nectar.

At the height of the festival, a Coconut Queen is crowned and seated at the center of the parade on a Coconut Throne pulled behind a truck to the cultural village where families cheer on their relatives as they participate in various competitions.

Among them is coconut-husking with adults racing to tear apart coconut husks using a traditional husker, or *heggao*, made from a pointed wooden stick.

Each of Guam's 19 villages also has its own lively, annual feast day, or *fiesta*, to celebrate its patron saint.



Dance pavilion



Loaded corn



Mama Ree's Sweet Treats



For more island information and a current calendar of events, visit the Guam Visitors Bureau

Author's Bio:

Writer/photographer Joyce McClure joined the Peace Corps as a Response Volunteer in August 2016 and traded the island of Manhattan for the island of Yap after a long career as a senior executive in marketing communications. When her service ended, she stayed on for five years and recently moved to Guam.

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Guam Reef Hotel offers hospitality and high quality entertainment venue. Located in the center of the shopping and entertainment district and within walking distance of all the exciting Tumon attractions.



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Guam Reef Hotel has 426 well-appointed stylish rooms and is located in the heart of Tumon. Our Beach Tower and Infinity Tower offer you a wide range of rooms from modern minimalist to rooms with panoramic views of Tumon Bay. All rooms include a flat-screen TV, hot/cold water dispenser and free Wi-Fi for your pleasant stay.

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“It has pristine beaches, amazing hiking area, beautiful mountains, and endangered animals. It is truly an interesting and must-visit place in Asia.”

Short trip to Malaysia

Story and photos by
TAEKO MCFADDEN

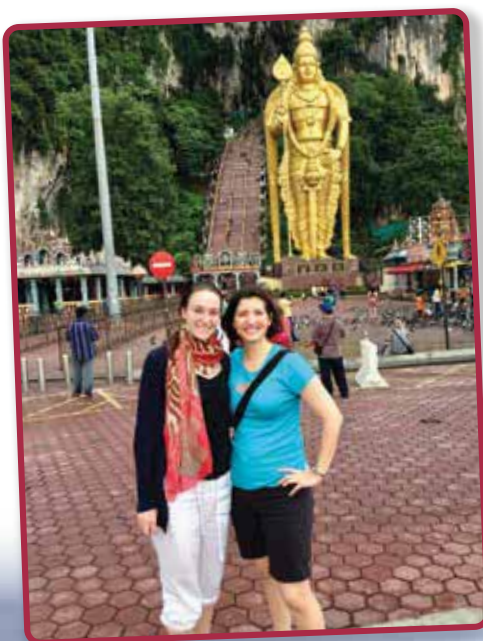
MY PARADISE
Malaysia



What are some of the top destinations in Asia that pop into your mind? Places like Thailand, Bali, Singapore, and Vietnam probably made the top of the list. How about Malaysia? If it didn't land close to the top, this may change your mind.

Malaysia is very culturally and ecologically diverse. Its capital, Kuala Lumpur, is a modern business hub with famous skyscrapers. It has pristine beaches, amazing hiking area, beautiful mountains, and endangered animals. It is truly an interesting and must-visit place in Asia.

I was fortunate to take a short trip to Malaysia several years ago with a close friend, but since the trip was less than a week, we limited ourselves to visiting only two places: Kuala Lumpur and Georgetown, Penang. Wow, did we have a great time!



At Batu Caves complex.



Georgetown.

First stop, Kuala Lumpur!

To maximize our time in KL, my friend and I took a highlights tour that included all the major sites of the city. We visited the National Palace, home to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, or “King of Malaysia.” We also swung by Sultan Abdul Samad Building, also known as the Merdeka Square. Built in 1897, the building is a fantastic example of old Moorish brick architecture featuring a copper dome and clock tower, providing a welcome contrast to the modern high-rises of KL.

Next, we ventured north of KL to Gombak, Selangor, to see the Batu Caves, a religious complex comprised of 400 million years old limestone grottos. The temple dedicated to Murugan, the Hindu god of war, was built in the 1890s, and is one of the most popular Hindu temple and shrines outside of India. An impressive, 140-foot-tall gold statue of Lord Murugan greets visitors before the 272 steps ascending up to the temple, shrines, and caves.

In 2018 (after my visit), the temple's steps were painted in different colors, creating a stunning, vibrant carpet that leads visitors into the caves. The limestone formations and shrines inside the cave were beautiful and worth climbing all those stairs. For the adventurous sort, Batu Caves is the center of rock climbing in Malaysia with over 160 routes around the area. Will I see you clinging to the side of the cliffs on my next visit?

Visitors would be wise to mind the monkeys inside the caves. They will grab anything that looks like food, so be careful.

We drove past the Petronas Towers, made famous by the 1999 film *Entrapment*. It was the world's tallest building (1,483 feet) until 2003 and required 36,910 tons of steel to build, the equivalent of over 3,000 elephants. You can take tours inside for amazing vistas over KL.

Malaysia is home to sizable Chinese and Indian populations, along with the majority Malay Muslims. So don't forget to visit KL's Chinatown around Petaling Street to visit temples and sample delicious Chinese food. We also visited the Golden Triangle area known for its nightlife of bars, clubs, and restaurants around Jalan P. Ramlee, where you can party until the early hours of the morning if you want.

Speakin' Malay

Please: Tolong

How much?: Berapa?

Can you speak English?:

Bolehkah anda berbahasa Inggeris?

Where is the toilet?: Di mana tandas?

Thank you: Terima kasih

You're welcome: Sama-sama.



Petronas Towers.



Kuan Yin Temple.



Inside Kuan Yin Temple.



Altar inside Kuan Yin Temple.

Georgetown, here we come!

Alas, we had to leave KL and headed to Georgetown, Penang. Unbeknownst to us, Georgetown is a UNESCO World Heritage Site as an example of a historic British colonial town, developed from international trade beginning in the 1800s. It is also known as Malaysia's foodie town thanks to its delicious street food.

When people in KL found out that we were headed to Georgetown, they all responded with "oh, so you are going there to eat?" It wasn't the initial intent, but food played a big role in our visit.

One of the highlights of our visit was the Snake Temple (or Temple of the Azure Cloud), a Taoist Temple built in 1805. The temple houses several Wagler's pit vipers (de-venomed) put to sleep by incense that hang on stands throughout the temple.

We strolled down the Street of Harmony which is where five different religions have places of worship—definitely not a common sight. At the Street of Harmony you'll find:

- St. George's Anglican Church, the oldest Anglican Church in Southeast Asia, built in 1818.
- Kuan Yin Temple, or Goddess of Mercy Temple, built in the early 1800's and embodying the practice of Feng Shui to achieve harmony and balance.
- Sri Maha Mariamman Temple is the oldest Hindu temple in Penang, built in 1833.
- Masjid Kapitan Keling Mosque for the Indian Muslim community and offers public tours.
- Acheen Streen Malay Mosque, or Lebuh Aceh Mosque, built for Malay-speaking Muslims.

Foodie heaven

To satisfy our inner foodies, we visited popular hawker centers such as Chulia Street Night Hawker and Gurney Drive for a blend of Chinese, Indian, and Malay flavors such as fried roti, dim sum, char kway teow noodles (signature Penang dish with stir fried rice noodles, similar to Pad Thai) and nasi lemak (national dish of Malaysia).

Get there early if you want to try the popular stalls before they run out of food. For us, the gem was the Kapitan Restaurant recommended by a local taxi driver. If you like Indian food, this is the place to go. I ordered the Tandoori Chicken set, which was so amazing. I didn't have time to stop to take a photo.

To work off dinner, we walked around the area to see Georgetown's colorful buildings and street art. You can get the full experience by lacing up your walking shoes or hopping on a bike to explore the city. There are so many different styles and techniques that you won't be bored.

This was a fantastic trip and even years later, I still think of the great time we had. I definitely cannot wait for my next visit to beautiful Malaysia!



Georgetown street art.



Sri Maha Mariamman Temple.

Other spots to add to itinerary

Unfortunately, we couldn't see more of Malaysia on this trip, but here are some spots on my list for the next time:

- Beaches in Langkawi, the Perhentians, or Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park – Malaysia's beaches are beautiful and often less frequented, even untouched, compared to other countries.
- Taman Negara National Park, Pahang – The largest national park in peninsular Malaysia has the longest rope walkway in the world and features multiple hikes for all experience levels.
- Sepilok, Sabah (Northern Borneo) – Home to several sanctuaries and rehabilitation centers with the aim of rescuing, rehabilitating, and releasing in the wild a variety of species not often seen outside of Malaysia. Plan for two days since it takes about a day to travel to Sepilok and a day to see multiple centers.
 - Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre
 - Borneon Sun Bear Conservation Centre
 - Rainforest Discovery Centre
- Climb Mt. Kinabalu – At 13,435 feet, Kinabalu is the highest mountain in Malaysia and considered an important biological site with over 5,000 species of plants, birds, and fungi. Due to the risk of altitude sickness, all hikers must be accompanied by a licensed guide.



MAP OF
GEORGETOWN
ARTWORK



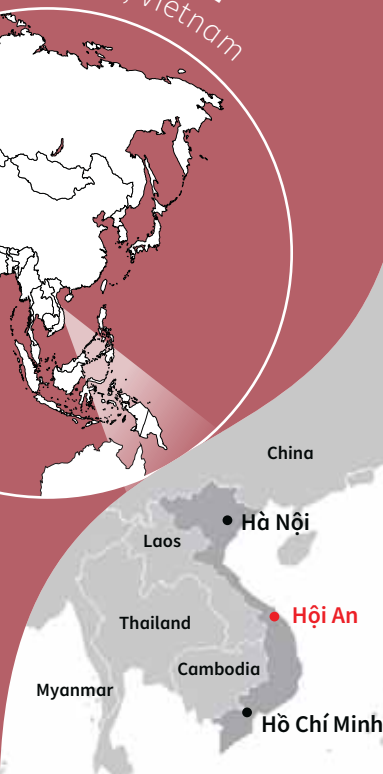
Sultan Abdul Samad Building.

“Since this was our first time in Vietnam, I wanted to make sure our itinerary had plenty of cultural activities, rest and relaxation, time to spend enjoying the local custom clothing market, and a little bit of nightlife.”

Escape for taste of Vietnamese hospitality, cuisine

Story and photos by
DENISSE RAUDA

MY PARADISE
Hoi An, Vietnam



Since it was my friend's birthday, and a big one at that, she wanted to celebrate it big, with an adventure to make lasting memories. Our plans weren't initially for Vietnam, but after spending five days exploring Hoi An, a busy central coast city with a mix of Japanese, French Colonial and Vietnamese architecture, I am so glad we went.

I didn't know what to expect, but what I found in Hoi An was a beautiful escape with delicious food, unbelievable beaches, fun activities and lovely people willing to share stories and tips about their home.

Vietnam is known for hot, humid summers prone to flooding. Our visit in late March was just before the stifling heat set in, and though we expected a little bit of rain, we were lucky to have sunny days and slightly warmer temperatures perfect for an escape from Tokyo's chilly spring.

Since this was our first time in Vietnam, I wanted to make sure our itinerary had plenty of cultural activities, rest and relaxation, time to spend enjoying the local custom clothing market, and a little bit of nightlife. Though our intent was not initially to spend our entire time in Hoi An, this beautiful city kept us busy and even left us with some activities to try for a future visit. And believe me when I say that I'll definitely be returning asap!

Here are some activities we enjoyed while visiting beautiful, historical Hoi An.



Ba Na Hills, Da Nang

Ba Na Hills is a resort in the Trường Sơn Mountains west of Da Nang, or about an hour away from Hoi An. This spot is famous for its Golden Bridge, seemingly held by two gigantic hands reaching to the heavens. The area is a goldmine for Instagrammable photo spots and tends to draw a crowd of locals and tourists.

Since our hotel was about an hour drive away from Bana Hills, we booked a tour in advance through Airbnb. The tour guide arranged our transportation and our tickets to the resort and cable car rides.

There are many social media videos describing Ba Na Hills as a sort of Disneyland. During my visit, I understood that it very much is. The resort

has constructed facades and gardens to look like an Italian village in the mountains with strong Disney or Las Vegas vibes.

The Golden Bridge is hands-down a selfie spot with crowds to boot, but the views of the surrounding landscape and coast from above were breathtaking. You won't regret the beautiful photos you can get here. Our guide, Tam, knew all the right places and poses for us to get great Instagram pics.



**BOOK A TOUR
OF BA NA HILLS
WITH TAM**





Take a food tour

Since this was a celebratory trip, we made sure to book a tour with a local guide for cocktails and small bites around Hoi An. Our Friday night private tour with Rosie was amazing and took us to great bars serving interesting cocktails with local ingredients. One of the bars had a mezcal flight (mezcal is from Mexico, not Vietnam), which included orange slices seasoned with spicy cricket (yes, the insect) salt.

If alcohol is not your thing, there are non-alcoholic options as well. Or, try a coffee tour instead. Vietnam has some of the best coffee, coffee drinks and teas and Rosie also hosts a coffee drink walking tour around Hoi An during the day.

For my friend's birthday dinner, we booked a private dinner cruise on the Thu Bon River in Hoi An. The food was delicious, and it came with a free welcome cocktail, but we also paid for a bottle of sparkling wine. It was a bit windy on the boat, but we enjoyed our meal and despite a few snags (the boat was temporarily caught in some of the fishermen's traps), we had a great time. The cruise ended with us launching paper lanterns into the river to wish for good luck, a perfect way to mark a birthday.



HOI AN COCKTAIL
WALKING TOUR



THU BON RIVER
DINNER CRUISE

Speakin' Vietnamese

Hello!: Xin chào!

How are you?: Khỏe không?

Very good, thank you.: Được rồi, cảm ơn cô.

What is your name?: Tên bạn là gì?

Relax at the spa

Like many other vacation spots in Asia, spa treatments in Vietnam are a must. Fortunately, our hotel had a spa right next to the lobby, so we didn't have to go far to enjoy a luxurious afternoon.

Best of all, the treatments are affordable – even for a hotel spa – for all budgets. For a manicure, pedicure, body scrub, full body massage and facial, including time in the sauna, we spent about \$50 per person. The price might be suspicious, but I can assure you the service was as good, if not better, than any spa I've been to in Japan and in the States.

Not only did we enjoy one spa day, but we loved it so much we made sure to enjoy another set of spa treatments after check-out since we didn't have to be at Danang Airport until 8 p.m. Check reviews for reputable spas when you visit and get ready to enjoy maximum relaxation!

Hit the night market

To sample the local fare, buy souvenirs and experience the local culture, you've got to check out the Hoi An Night Market. Grab a Bahn Mi, a refreshing coconut drink and peruse the designer-inspired goods. The night market is on the edge of the river so you can also take a small canoe out to place lanterns here.

After the market winds down at around 10 p.m., hit the bars, pubs and clubs in the area. These are mostly for backpackers and foreigners, but some offer live bands and karaoke, so why not?



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Get a custom 'fit

If you're like me and love clothes and shoes, you'll want to make time to check out Hoi An's many tailor shops. This town is the center of bespoke clothing and shoes. Our obsession with clothes and shoes is part of the reason why my friend and I spent so much time in Hoi An instead of exploring Da Nang and elsewhere.

Hoi An's shopping district has hundreds of shops dedicated to custom suits, dresses, and more. And, best of all, these outfits can be done in record time. We ordered a lot of clothes, so it took a couple of fittings to get the fit right, but we ended up with one-of-a-kind outfits and shoes to remember our trip to Vietnam for years to come.

If you're looking to get custom clothing, I would suggest you adjust your expectations, however. The prices go up depending on the material and turnaround depending on difficulty. We went to Friendly Shoe Shop for our custom shoes and those took multiple fittings over the span of three days. The ladies at the shoe

shop suggested Phuong Nam Tailor Hoi An for clothes. Our clothing took longer (about four days) and required multiple fittings (some more than once per day) to finish. If you're only ordering one item, like a bridesmaid dress or suit, you can probably get away with a day for turnaround.

The experience was great and the employees at both the shops were talented and made sure our items fit to perfection. I would definitely go back again, especially since I now know what to expect.



Tips for easy travel in Vietnam

- ☐ Grab a SIM card at the airport.
- ☐ Download Grab app for taxis and food delivery.
- ☐ Opt for a motorbike taxi.
- ☐ Don't forget your water shoes!



A trip I didn't want to end

After spending five days in Hoi An, my only regret was not planning a longer trip to travel to other areas. I also could not understand why in all the time I've lived in Japan, I'd stayed away from Vietnam. I had such an amazing time and met some friendly people genuinely interested in sharing the history and culture of their hometown. I absolutely fell in love with Vietnam and am desperate to get back as soon as possible. Catch me at the bahn mi stand!

Must-try foods

You'll never run out of delicious options to try while anywhere in Vietnam. If you've traveled to other Asian countries, you know you should be careful when trying street food stalls. I suggest packing Pepto, Immodium, hydration powders and antacids because you never know how your stomach will react to the new foods you're introducing.

That said, these are all food and restaurants I recommend for some delicious treats in Hoi An.

- **Bahn mi:** These perfect sandwiches are inexpensive and so delicious. Every food stand and restaurant have their own take on this, so try as many as you can! I tried the late Anthony Bourdain's recommendation in Hoi An and thought it was okay (pro tip: sit inside to get your bahn mi faster and try their coconut coffee, too). My favorite bahn mi is actually from a food cart on a street corner in Da Nang.

Recommendation:

Bánh Mì Phượng - 2b Phan Chu Trinh, Cẩm Châu, Hội An, Quảng Nam 560000, Vietnam

- **Fried spring rolls:** Nearly every restaurant serves up these delectable fried spring rolls with sweet chili sauce for dipping.

- **Cao lau:** This is a Hoi An take on udon noodles recommended by the owner of the tailor shop. The noodles are tossed with herbs, crackers and a little bit of broth and topped with lime juice and chili oil. According to Quang Nam's tourism site, this delicious noodle dish is a blend of the Chinese and Japanese influences that arrived in this port town during the 17th century.

Recommendation:

Noodle House - 13 Đ. Bạch Đằng, Cẩm Châu, Hội An, Quảng Nam 560000, Vietnam

- **White rose dumplings (Bánh bao bánh vạc):** These steamed dumplings are another Hoi An specialty. Delicate rice paper is stuffed with ground pork, shrimp, and mushrooms and then wrapped to look like a rosebud.

Recommendation:

White Rose Restaurant - 533 Đ. Hai Bà Trưng, Phường Cẩm Phố, Hội An, Quảng Nam, Vietnam

- **Pho:** You can't visit anywhere in Vietnam without trying one of their signature exports! Even though it was hot during our visit, I wanted something light and healthy for a late lunch and the chicken pho I had at Noodle House provided that comfort. There are a variety of meats to choose from for your pho, but the chicken was delicious.

- **Coconut coffee, egg coffee:** Vietnamese coffee is extraordinary and what the dozens of cafes in Hoi An serve up is delicious. Coconut coffee is like an affogato, but instead of vanilla ice cream they use frozen whipped coconut milk with Vietnamese coffee poured over. Egg coffee is usually served warm and involves beating an egg yolk with sweetened condensed milk until it creates an incredible foam to pour over Vietnamese coffee. It sounds weird but it's delicious.

- **Chè Thái (coconut milk dessert):** This dessert is coconut milk topped with fruit, jelly, and crushed ice in a big bowl. We were introduced to this dessert soup by Rosie our cocktail tour guide when she took us to PHỐ CHÈ - Hội An. The shop offers many different options, including durian, but we really enjoyed the che xoai sago, a mango che thia, and the tau hu hoang kim, a tofu pudding topped with passion fruit and pineapple jelly.

Recommendation:

PHỐ CHÈ - Hội An - 88 Phan Chu Trinh, phường Minh An, Hội An, Quảng Nam, Hội An, Vietnam

- **Foods to skip!** I usually don't suggest skipping on the experiences, but these were not great, a waste of money and time. So, avoid pre-cut fruit at the market (better to be food safe than stomach sorry), rolled ice cream at the night market, and mango pancakes.



Bahn mi



Sa Tê



Fried spring rolls



Vietnamese coffee



Pho



Cao lau

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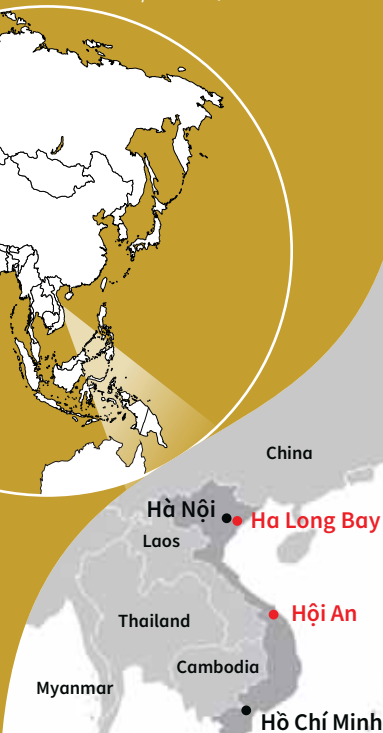
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“The stunning landscapes, hidden caves, and warm hospitality of the locals made it an extraordinary trip. This journey will leave you feeling refreshed and renewed.”

Cherished family memories in Vietnam

Story and photos by
SUZANNE MURRAY

MY PARADISE
Vietnam



Ha Long Bay

After the hustle and bustle of visiting Vietnam's Capital, Hanoi, it was refreshing to be welcomed aboard our relaxing 2-day cruise through Ha Long Bay. Ha Long is located in northeastern Vietnam and is a captivating destination that we knew would offer us a once-in-a-lifetime experience to see breathtaking natural beauty.

The crew and staff were so attentive and kind to our family from the start. During our two days, we were able to see and explore all of these beautiful places: Hanoi, Lan Ha Bay, Ha Long Bay, Cat Ba Island, Da Chong Islet, Trung Trang Cave, Ao Ech, and Frog Lake.

We made a visit through dark and light caves by bamboo boat where we were able to see the beauty of Lan Ha Bay. The bamboo boat glided through caves as we viewed many stalactites and stalagmite formations throughout. It is truly amazing to see firsthand what nature has crafted over millions of years. We felt so grateful to be able to witness such beauty while also being surrounded by the most gracious locals.

The food included on our trip was nothing short of amazing and we were delighted to enjoy such fresh and delectable seafood cuisine along with so much more. All meals and excursions were included in our cruise which alleviated extensive coordination or added cost. Each meal was carefully prepared and presented while we enjoyed the backdrop of the bay's serene waters and sunsets. We also attended a cooking class on the ship's roof and learned how to make spring rolls. After, we enjoyed drinks and swimming in the pool and hot tub located on the roof as well.

Our journey to Ha Long was a truly unforgettable experience in a breathtaking destination. The stunning landscapes, hidden caves, and warm hospitality of the locals made it an extraordinary trip. This journey will leave you feeling refreshed and renewed.



Ha Long Bay.



Cruising along in Ha Long Bay.

Hoi An

Our journey to Hoi An, Vietnam, was nothing short of magical, offering many experiences that immersed our family in the vibrant culture and traditions of this charming city. From savoring delectable local cuisine to exploring ancient landmarks, and engaging with the warm-hearted locals, Hoi An left a lasting mark on our hearts.

Historic My Son: The first stop in our journey to Hoi An was the My Son Sanctuary. This beautiful location is set in the mountainous region of Duy Xuyen District of Quang Nam Province in central Vietnam. The sacred Thu Bon River flows gently through these Hindi-inspired ruins that were constructed between the 4th and 15th centuries. These religious monuments have stood the test of time and war and continue to show their beauty to this day.

Adventures around Hoi An: We headed back to Old Town, Hoi An and had various custom clothes made by some wonderful local seamstresses. Soon after we took a trip down the That Cha River on coconut basket boats, which was a wild ride for some of us! For lunch we had some of the best seafood cuisine we have ever tasted at a local restaurant right on the beach.





A fun coconut boat ride on That Chat River.



Amazing food in Hoi An.



Lamp-making in ancient Hoi An.



Ba Na Hills.

✎ The food was all freshly caught and prepared on site. After lunch we stopped at a small vendor and made our own authentic Vietnamese lanterns to bring home with us.

Heartwarming local hospitality: The gracious and kind-hearted people of Hoi An made our visit even more memorable. Everywhere we went, we were greeted with smiles and genuine hospitality. Whether it was a friendly chat with a local shopkeeper or a heartwarming encounter with a street vendor, their warmth and openness made us feel welcome and cherished. On countless occasions, the locals would look at our three children and tell us we are so lucky. We even had a special hand-painted sign made with ours and our children's names and the word Lucky. We love that our children are able to see a new part of the world and have these experiences that they will remember for a lifetime!

Marble Mountain's mystique: A visit to the Marble Mountain was an adventure that led us to discover awe-inspiring caves, sacred pagodas, and ancient Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries. The panoramic views surrounding countryside and the sparkling sea from the mountain's summit were breathtaking. We purchased a beautiful marble chess set for our son while there as a special memory for him.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22



Hoi An Memories Show.



Hoi An.



A sanctuary at Marble Mountain.



My Son Sanctuary.



Xa Loi Tower, Marble Mountain.



Author and family are all smiles in Vietnam.



Foggy Ba Na Hills.



Try lantern-making in Hoi An.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

Sun World Ba Na Hills: This was a stop that the kids really enjoyed! Sun World is an Amusement Park not too far from downtown Da Nang. We had quite the climb up the mountain in a cable car as Sun World Ba Na Hills is coined the “heaven on earth” with its spectacular climate and beautiful natural landscape. We experienced many different types of weather as we climbed to the top. While there we were able to walk through a French village, watch a few shows and walk across the Golden Bridge, which was officially voted by TIME magazine as one of the “Top 10 best destinations of the world 2018”. The kids enjoyed spending time in the indoor game zone, wax museum and dinosaur displays.



Insightful guided tour: Having our own driver and local guide for some of these trips enhanced our journey, as they shared insightful stories and anecdotes about Vietnam's history, culture, and livelihoods. Their passion for their country's heritage enriched our experience and deepened our connection with the local way of life.

Hoi An's blend of delicious cuisine, warm-hearted people, cultural treasures, and immersive experiences made it a captivating destination. The lantern-lit river, the vibrant streets, and the rich traditions painted a vivid tapestry of Vietnamese life. Our adventures in Hoi An were truly unforgettable, leaving us all with cherished memories and a yearning to return and experience its magic once again!

Lantern boat ride on Hoai River: As dusk descended upon Hoi An, the city came alive with the soft glow of all the beautiful handmade lanterns. The serene boat ride on Hoai River was a magical experience as made a wish while releasing floating paper flower lanterns into the water. The illuminated river and the flickering lanterns created an enchanting ambiance that felt like a fairytale.



Pottery Village.

Creating pottery at Pottery Village: An interactive pottery-making experience in the charming Pottery Village allowed us to unleash our creativity. Under the guidance of skilled artisans, we molded clay into unique pottery pieces, forming unforgettable memories to cherish, including clay whistles all three children made to drive us just a little nutty!



Lots of fresh produce in Vietnam.



Hoi An.



A ride up to Ba Na Hills.

“Thai culture is enticing, and the people were friendly. We filled our hearts and our bellies with so much pad Thai, mango sticky rice, and fresh coconut drinks.”

Girls' trip to Thailand

Story and photos by
ROSIE ORTIZ-TORRES

MY PARADISE
Thailand



If you're seeking an affordable and adventurous trip that won't break the bank, then Thailand is for you. Even better if you can pair with friends for added fun and further savings if you're on a budget.

Many of the activities and tours we took were kid-friendly, so a family trip would also be just as great. If you book in advance, you can easily nab a roundtrip ticket from Japan for under \$500 per person.

For our trip, my friends and I split our time between Bangkok and Phuket for three days each. Our flight was direct to Bangkok, and booking an additional domestic roundtrip flight to Phuket was simple and under \$100.

A great tip is to book your driver in advance as this makes it convenient for airport pick-ups and drop-offs. The majority of drivers also have the best recommendations for local insights and tourism deals. More importantly, they do not make you feel obligated to go with their recommendations and accommodate your plans as much as possible. We went with recommendations from friends on Facebook and Instagram when choosing our drivers. It's easier to have one driver for your entire trip, but we had one in Bangkok and another in Phuket.



Author and friends enjoying Thailand.



Phi Phi Islands.

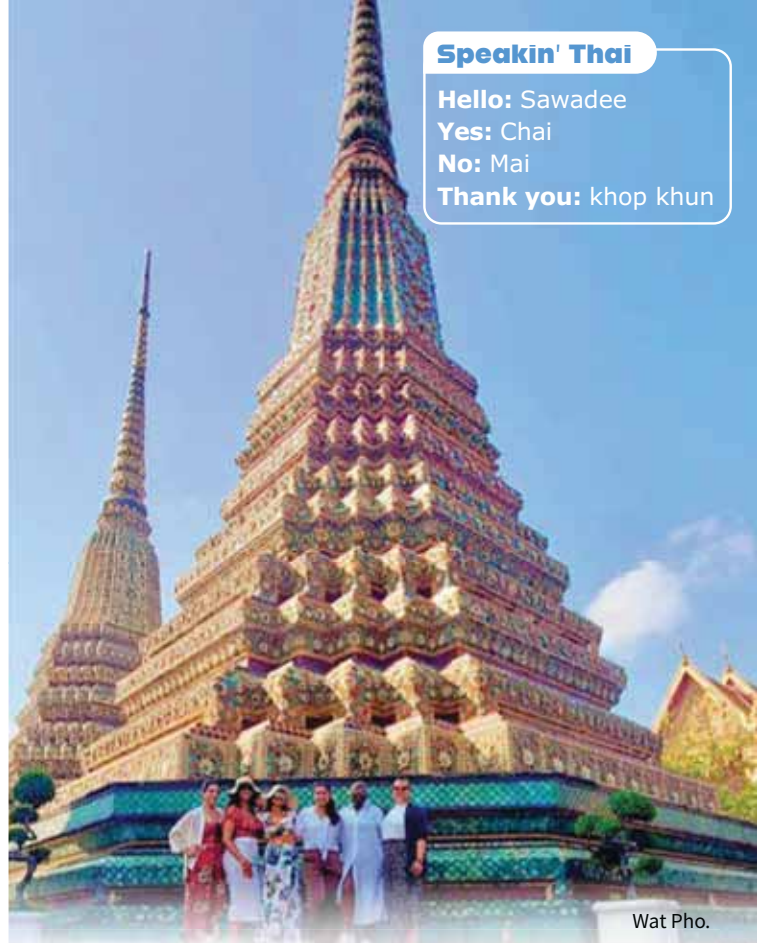
Speakin' Thai

Hello: Sawadee

Yes: Chai

No: Mai

Thank you: khop khun



Wat Pho.

Quick trip to Phuket

Our trip to Phuket with, its lovely beaches and island tours, was honestly more enjoyable than Bangkok. We loved our seven-bedroom villa with private pool, which was walking distance from the beach below. The beach had many activities, food and drinks to spend a day in the sun.

The three days in Phuket were packed with activities and we could've done more but we ran out of time. Here are the fun spots and activities in Phuket: Phi Phi Islands day tour, Patong Beach, Pullman Beach Resort, Three Monkey's Restaurant, and endless beach sunrise/sunset views.

Buzzing through Bangkok

In Bangkok, we spent time exploring Khao San Road, a backpacker district, and Wat Pho, a famous temple known for its reclining Buddha. We also took a tuk-tuk ride through the busy streets, shopped at MBK Mall, the floating markets and took in the views while enjoying some roof top dining. If you're looking for the nightlife, floating markets, temples, and exotic foods, then Bangkok is for you.

A memorable holiday

Overall, we were very satisfied with the trip at both locations and captured so many memorable photos. Thai culture is enticing, and the people were friendly. We filled our hearts and our bellies with so much pad Thai, mango sticky rice, and fresh coconut drinks.

If Thailand has been on your list, definitely start planning as you will not be disappointed. Happy travels!



Enjoying the nightlife.

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“Once a popular and easy getaway for U.S. service members stationed in the Philippines, and currently a very popular weekend and holiday spot for Filipinos, Baguio holds a place in my heart as a paradise.”

Baguio: Coolest city in Philippines

Story and photos by
JEROME BAQUILAR

MY PARADISE
Baguio, Philippines



Manila • Baguio

Malaysia

Baguio has a long history of being the coolest city in the Philippines, perhaps most famously having started back in the late 19th century when then-Governor of the Philippines, William Howard Taft (who would go on to become the 27th President of the United States of America), started the process that made Baguio the capital of the Philippines during the summer months. This was due to the pleasant, cooler weather compared to the rest of the country, thanks to its nearly mile-high elevation. But more on the “cool” stuff later.



Skating at Burnham Park.



Camp John Hay, where you'll find the American flag flying next to the Philippine flag.



Boating at Burnham Park.



Mines View Park.



American influences

As you can probably tell from the first paragraph, the city of Baguio has a lot of “Americana” in its history. The city’s urban design was created by American and world-famous architect Daniel Burnham, who also had the cities of Cleveland, San Francisco, as well as Manila, Philippines, on his urban planning resume. Burnham’s design of the city was centered on Burnham Park, one of the top attractions of the city and one of the few places in the Philippines where you can easily ride a rowboat, at Burnham Lake.

If you’re from Kansas or have been stationed there, it might warm your heart to travel on Leonard Wood Road, which connects the central city to some of the tourist attractions on the east side. Camp John Hay, a former U.S. Air Force installation and originally a U.S. Army base, continues its legacy as a recreational area with many facilities and features dating back to its days as a military base. And with its abundance of trees, hilly landscape, and golf course, it may remind military members and veterans of places such as Tama Hills or even Camp Zama in Japan.

Top spots to see

Aside from being the most American city in the Philippines (or perhaps even all of Asia?), there are many other reasons for tourists both from abroad and other parts of the Philippines to visit Baguio.

Mines View Park might be the most scenic spot in the city, if not all of the Philippines, with a vantage point offering a view of the mining areas and mountain range to the east of the city.

Our Lady of Lourdes Grotto offers a similar experience, except with a view of part of the city and closeup views of the many trees and flowers at the site. You don’t have to be religious to come away worshipping the experience at the Grotto, but might need to be at least

Cosplayers at Session Road.





Chalk Art on Session Road.

✎ somewhat fit to walk the 252 stair steps leading up to it! And the altitude makes it even more challenging!

If you're short on time but love scenic spots, simply traveling to (or out of) Baguio from the "lowlands" on any of the main, winding mountainside roads leading to the city (Kennon Road, Marcos Highway, and Naguilian Road) gives you lots of great scenes of the mountains, city, and even the ocean! One of the highlights is the occasional fog that adds a unique accent to the scene; combined with the trees, mountains, and even the city scene, it makes the city look magical, mysterious even. The Baguio fog often makes its appearances in the cooler times of year, from November to February, but it also frequently appears when it's raining, especially during the rainy season from July to September.

Interacting with the city

Once you get enough of the views in and around the city, there are also more "interactive" ways to enjoy and connect with the city. Wright Park, named after the Philippine governor at the time who directed the development of the park by, yes, Daniel Burnham, is a wooded area most famous for horseback riding. The aforementioned Burnham Park has various activities available for visitors; aside from row boating, you can rent and ride bicycles of various types, roller skate at the rink, or simply walk around the park and take in the scenery and the many flowers at the park.

If you want to give zip lining or even paintball a try, Camp John Hay is your place for that. With the adrenaline rush from those activities, you'll be in the vicinity of a variety of good food (and buffet-style dining) to feed that appetite, both at the camp and the adjacent Baguio Country Club.

Food scene

Speaking of food, the dining scene in Baguio is also unique. With so many different restaurants of various cuisines, from local Filipino dishes to international ones, all over the city, you can enjoy almost anything here. And the coffee culture is on par with the food scene here; with the cooler weather, it's a natural fit, and the cafes are popular not just with Baguio citizens but perhaps even more so with visitors from the lowlands, finding a source of warmth in a climate significantly cooler than their hometown.

Sundays on Session Road

So, about the coolest part of Baguio, it can be described with one word, or one day: Sunday. That is when Session Road, the city's main street, closes to vehicles and opens up to the artistic and fun types of the city



Speakin' Tagalog

Hello!: Kamusta

How are you?: Kamusta ka?

Excuse me.:

Ipagpaumanhin nyo po.

Goodbye.:

Paalam, (Sa muling pagkikita.)

What's your name?:

Ano ang pangalan mo?

My name is...:

Ang pangalan ko ay.

(and beyond). Chalk artists create beautiful scenes right on the asphalt of the road, musicians perform on the street, various vendors sell their artistic creations, dancers perform for the curious crowds, and cosplayers get into character to pose for and with everyone who wants a photo (and taking those photos happens to be the creation of another work of art!).

Session Road is like the streets that close in Tokyo on Sundays such as at Akihabara and Shinjuku, but with a lot more action, organized attractions, and fun! The number of cosplayers on Sundays at Baguio far exceed what Harajuku used to have. In a city so full of things to see and do, the scene at Session Road on Sundays is the best for me; you get to take in the vibe and personality of the city and its people.

Truly paradise!

Once a popular and easy getaway for US service members stationed in the Philippines, and currently a very popular weekend and holiday spot for Filipinos, Baguio holds a place in my heart as a paradise, as it will always be the coolest city in the Philippines (literally) and one of the coolest cities in Asia (figuratively).



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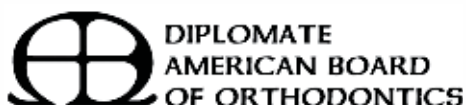
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“It rained on and off during my trip, but on my last day the rain was particularly heavy and unpredictable. Luckily the night before I made a reservation at Hermit’s Hut tea house. I love a bougie experience and this place didn’t disappoint.”

Last-minute trip to terrific Taipei

Story and photos by
CHRISSY M. YATES

MY PARADISE
Taipei, Taiwan



Taipei

Solo travel can be exhilaratingly fun. It can also be exhausting. With no one else to chime in on plans, it can be overwhelming to figure out what to do and see.

I was originally supposed to travel to Taipei in the spring but had to cancel due to illness. This time I decided to tack on a three-day trip to the end of a group trip I took to South Korea. Honestly, early June isn’t the best time of the year to visit Taiwan due to the heat, humidity and rain.

Still, I had a great time and am so happy I got to visit such a beautiful country. Here’s a selection of some of the things I did.



Raohe Night Market.



Inside Ciyou Temple.



Hit the ground eating

Since I landed in the afternoon, and knew I had early dinner plans, I decided it was best to go see what Taipei-only foods I could find at the airport before I went and dropped my bags at my hotel. I dragged my suitcases to the basement floor of Taoyuan Airport’s Terminal 1 and went to the food court where I found Taiwan Snack. There I had a bubble tea (50 TWD, \$1.60) and a deep-fried food variety combo (200 TWD, \$6.52) that included boneless deep fried chicken with salt and pepper, french fries, fried mushrooms, fried deep sea squid, fried tofu, and fried pork blood sausage cake. The last item being a Taiwanese specialty. It reminded me a bit of blood sausage, though sadly not as peppery. The texture was a bit sticky and gooey thanks to the rice the blood is mixed with.

Slurp up some soup dumplings

Soup dumplings, or xiaolongbao, are one of the must-try foods in Taipei. If you are going to eat at the famous Taiwanese chain Din Tai Fung, I suggest trying a set menu at their Taipei 101 location so you can go up to the top of the tower after you eat. I also suggest reservations. Even though it was a Wednesday night when I went, the sign showed a 70-minute wait for walk-ins. The set menu included the original xiaolongbao, shrimp shumai, spicy wontons, hot and sour soup, stir fried water spinach, and more.

However, my favorite place was a takeout-only joint and where I met up with a friend. Tang Bao Hung’s xiaolongbao is so popular that you need to place your order in advance. Three varieties are available — original, garlic and mala (a numbing spicy seasoning made from Sichuan peppercorn and dried red chili peppers). We ordered all three. These were as filling as they were delicious. The dumplings are larger than the ones at Din Tai Fung and an order includes eight pieces. My friend taught me a new way of eating them too. Instead of nipping the side with your teeth to drain the broth into the spoon to slurp, you bite the top off and suck out the broth then stuff it with the ginger and scallions that are served on the side, pour a splash of vinegar on top, and devour. It took a bit of practice, I might’ve gotten a squirt or two of soup on myself but it was worth it. My favorite were the garlic ones and the slightly sweet, black vinegar really complimented the juicy pork filling. One downside to this spot is it’s takeout only, but there’s a nice park nearby with a few tables or you could bring a blanket and have a picnic.

Nibble through night markets

One mistake was booking an evening tour that included going to Raohe Night Market right after dinner. It meant I didn’t have much room for all the wonderful treats that awaited me at this lively location. I watched as fresh donuts were made in one booth, while the one next to it served fresh watermelon juice, and next to that one a vendor was using a blowtorch to cook beef cubes. Everything looked and smelled amazing. I only had

✎ room for a watermelon juice that I sipped as I wandered from stall to stall that were selling dried fruit, grilled seafood, fried quail eggs, sausages, crispy milk doughnuts, taiwan sweet potato balls, bubble tea, fruit juices and more.

Two days later, I visited Ningxia Night Market. This smaller market was recommended by the tour guide who took me to the mountains earlier that day. I arrived around 10:30 p.m. and it was still quite busy. A line formed at the entrance for the fried sweet potato balls, but I decided to first walk the full length of the market before I jumped in line for anything. I came hungry this time and filled up on fried quail eggs with wasabi sauce, gua bao/"Taiwanese hamburger" (a steamed bun filled with tender and perfectly seasoned pork belly and pickled greens), stuffed squid, and fried rice. I even saw some items I thought were exclusively American county fair foods, like fried oreos and roasted corn (70 to 80 TWD). The price of most items ranged from 50 TWD to 70 TWD. Here you can also try the Michelin-rated taro balls, but the line was a bit too long for me.

Shop local

The friend who introduced me to Tang Bao Hung and I hopped a train after our lunch to go to Songshan Cultural and Creative Park. The building on the grounds that once was home to the Songshan Tobacco Factory is now two floors of artists spaces, cafes and various craft shops. It was a great spot to buy locally-made souvenirs and support Taiwanese artisans. I picked up some leather goods, postcards, magnets and even some kitschy plant markers.

Nearby is the Eslite Spectrum Shopping Centre, which includes an impressive 24-hour bookstore at the top that even has a section in English. I also enjoyed spending some time looking at the translated covers of various Western books.

Tea farm tour and tea tasting

I didn't just eat my way through Taipei. One morning I woke up really early to head up to the nearby Xiangshan, or Elephant Mountain. My tour guide explained how Taiwan came to be known for its tea and I discovered my new favorite type of oolong, the honey scented Oriental Beauty. I also participated in a gongfu tea ceremony in the historic Pinglin Old Street. The many steps in the brewing process are designed to not only serve the tea at its optimal temperature but also focus on appreciating different aspects of the tea, such as its color, scent and taste.

It rained on and off during my trip, but on my last day the rain was particularly heavy and unpredictable. Luckily the night before I made a reservation at Hermit's Hut tea house. I love a bougie experience and this place didn't disappoint. I ended up staying there for hours trying different teas and learning about the different ways of preparing each tea while chatting with one of the co-owners. It was a peaceful and relaxing experience.



Stinky tofu



Songshan Tobacco Factory



Shaved ice with grass jelly



Pinglin Old Street

Foods to eat

• **Stinky tofu:** Despite the name, this fermented food was tasty deep fried with a mild flavor. I got to try the barbecued version during my walk down the Shengkeng Old Street area.

• **Grass jelly:** Made from a plant called

Chinese Mesona, which is an herb in the mint family. It can be made into tea or served with shaved ice.

• **Bubble tea:** A combination of tea, milk and balls made of tapioca or fruit jelly served with ice.

• **Peanut candy:** A crunchy outside with a peanut powdery center, I first tried these during my tea ceremony in Pinglin Old Street area.

• **Dried fruit:** My favorite was candied licorice olives, which have a sweet bitter flavor.

• **Fresh fruit:** Dragonfruit, jujubes (looks like a green apple), and apple mango, all of which you can pick up at any of the outdoor markets.

• **Fami-Ice:** Available at FamilyMart convenience stores with rotating seasonal flavors.

Other spots of interest

• **National Palace Museum:** Houses the largest collection of ancient Chinese artifacts and artworks in the world.

• **Taipei 101:** The tallest building in Taiwan and offers great nighttime views of the city.

• **Xiangshan (Elephant Mountain):** It'll take about 30 minutes to climb all 600 steps to get to one of the most Instagrammable spots in the city. Here you'll be able to see Taipei 101 against the surrounding green, lush landscape.

• **Ciyu Temple:** Can't miss this if you go to Raohe Night Market in Songshan District.

• **Ximending Night Market:** More of an entertainment and shopping district that has been called the Harajuku of Taipei. It's very crowded with street performers, restaurants and retail shopping.



Fami-Ice



Taipei 101

Taiwanese tea with peanut candy

Speakin' Mandarin

Hello: Nǐhǎo (Nee how)

Thank you: Xièxiè (Shieh-shieh)

You're welcome: Bù kèqì (Boo kuh-chi)

Good morning: Zǎo (Zhow)

Goodnight: Wǎn ān (One-un)

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20%	\$328	\$302
30%	\$507	\$467
40%	\$731	\$673
50%	\$1,041	\$958
60%	\$1,320	\$1,214
70%	\$1,663	\$1,530
80%	\$1,932	\$1,778
90%	\$2,172	\$1,998
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“There are more than two dozen hot spring hotels and bathhouses scattered around Atami; the larger ones offer foreign-language support.”

Retro seaside fun in Atami

Story and photos by
SARAH B. HODGE

MY PARADISE
Atami, Japan



A convenient 1.5-hour train ride from Yokosuka, Atami (the town's name means “hot sea”) has been a famous hot spring destination for over a millennium. The city experienced a massive building boom during the 1980s bubble economy and was a popular weekend getaway for company retreats hosted at Atami's many hot spring hotels.

Today, the town has a charming, slightly worn feel with its 1980s condos, dated entertainment like the Atami Adult Museum, Atami Castle (a recent construction), and delightfully retro kissaten (coffee shops) and old-school covered shopping arcades dotted around town, but that just adds to the fun.

How to get there: JR Tokaido and Ito lines or Tokaido Shinkansen

Getting around town: Grab English-language maps and information at the small tourist information center next to the station, then hop the Yu-Yu Loop Bus outside Atami Station for an easy way to get to the major tourist destinations. A one-day pass is 700 yen for adults and 350 yen for children.



Ryokan Kiunkaku.



Hot springs

Atami's seven hot springs are rich in chloride and sulfate. There are more than two dozen hot spring hotels and bathhouses scattered around Atami; the larger ones offer foreign-language support. For a quick dip, there are several footbaths around town, including the free Ieyasu-No-Yu right outside JR Atami station. Towels are available from the vending machine for 100 yen. Another free footbath can be found at the lovely Atami Plum Garden.

Fun fact: Shogun Ieyasu Tokugawa loved Atami's hot spring waters so much he transported them to Edo Castle!

Ryokan Kiunkaku

A melding of traditional Japanese and Western architecture, Kiunkaku was originally the private villa of a shipping magnate. Built in 1919 and converted to a ryokan in 1947, Kiunkaku hosted a number of notable Japanese writers and other celebrities until its closure in 1999; today it is owned by the city of Atami and is open to the public as a museum. Although most of the signage is Japanese, there's a free app and audio-guide available in English that unlocks the secrets of Kiunkaku. Standouts include the landscape garden, stained glass windows, and Roman baths. The lovely Yasuragi Café overlooks the traditional gardens.

Address: 4-2 Showacho, Atami, Shizuoka 413-0022
Yu-Yu Bus stop #13



MAP

Geisha and cherry blossoms

Elegant geigi (geisha) are most frequently associated with Kyoto, but did you know there are still geisha across Japan? Although numbers are far smaller than pre-WWII, you can still find these skilled performers in Tokyo, Nagoya, Kanazawa and Atami. There are free dance performances in conjunction with the Atami Cherry Blossom Festival, or you can catch a week-end performance at Atami Geigi Kenban (<https://atami-geigi.jp/>). Atami's cherry blossom festival in January is one of the earliest in Japan and features a variety of free entertainment, including enka singers and geisha performances.



MAP

ACAO Forest

Boasting 12 gardens, a shrine, and numerous photo spots, this is a pleasant way to pass an afternoon. They also offer flower-flavored drinks, baked goods, and several dining options.

Price: Adults 1,000 yen, children 500 yen
Address: 413-0101 Shizuoka, Atami, Kamitaga, 1027-8
Yu-Yu Bus stop #11



MAP

Izusan Shrine

Atami's 2,000-year history is deeply entwined with Shinto. If you're up for a steep but rewarding climb, brave the 837 stairs to small-but-scenic Izusan Shrine, where Minamoto no Yoritomo, the first Kamakura shogun, sought refuge and met his future wife (hence the matchmaking charms and reputation as a “love shrine”) and Ieyasu Tokugawa was said to worship. The shrine's iconic dragons are the guardians of Atami's hot springs and said to be the source of its hot spring waters (the red dragon represents fire and the white dragon represents water).



MAP



Retro coffee shop.



Izusan Shrine.



Heiwadori Shotengai.



MOA Museum of Art.



Atami Plum Garden.

MOA Museum of Art

Commanding a spectacular view of Sagami Bay, MOA Museum of Art offers a number of national treasures and important artworks including Korin Ogata's red and white plum blossom screen, tea-leaf jar with wisteria design by Nonomura Ninsei, and a Tokugawa tea ceremony room crafted of entirely of goshiki. Founder Okada Mokichi, an avid art collector, also founded the Hakone Museum of Art in Gora.

In addition to the galleries, MOA boasts a beautiful Japanese garden, tea ceremony room, and several Japanese restaurants.

Shimizu Bus #8

Atami Plum Garden

Located 10 minutes on foot from JR Kinomiya Station (Ito Line) or a 10-minute taxi ride from JR Atami Station, the Atami Plum Garden is home to some of Japan's earliest blooming plum varieties. The annual plum festival showcases nearly 500 plum trees from nine different varieties.



MAP



MAP



Atami's mascot Atsuo.



Atami manhole cover.



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“Experienced and intermediate riders can complete the Shimanami Kaido in one day. However, I recommend more casual riders, like me, split it up over two days to allow for sightseeing with multiple detours.”

Cycling Japan's Shimanami Kaido

Story and photos by
TAEKO MCFADDEN

MY PARADISE
Shimanamikaido, Japan



View from Shiratakiyama Temple

Cycling is a favorite pastime and sport in Japan, so it's not surprising that the country is home to one of the top cycling routes in the world.

The Shimanami Kaido, one of the seven best cycling routes according to CNN in 2015, is a 70-kilometer-long (43.5 miles) cycling route across the Seto Inland Sea. It was opened in 1999 and connected Hiroshima and Ehime Prefectures across six islands (Mukaishima, Innoshima, Ikuchijima, Omishima, Hakatajima, and Oshima) through a series of six bridges designed to accommodate cyclists with ramps at three-to-five-degree inclines.

The route is open year-round, and you can start either in Onomichi in Hiroshima Prefecture on the island of Honshu or Imabari in Ehime Prefecture on Shikoku. There are multiple routes across the islands, but the blue course is the most popular. The entire way is clearly marked with a blue line, thus, eliminating the need for maps or GPS.

To boost tourism, officials waived the 500-yen bridge tolls for cyclists through March 31, 2024, so don't wait too long to tackle this ride!

Experienced and intermediate riders can complete the Shimanami Kaido in one day. However, I recommend more casual riders, like me, split it up over two days to allow for sightseeing with multiple detours. I saw many riders, from serious cyclists to families with small children.

Along the route, cyclists can stop at over 150 rest areas, including retail shops, guesthouses, and more, which provide amenities like air pumps, bike stands, benches, water, and toilets. So, there is no need to push yourself too far because there is something for everyone along the route. The important thing is to enjoy the ride and soak up the beautiful scenery of the Seto Inland Sea and the islands' small towns.

Don't have a bike? The bicycle rental system is fantastic, so there is no need to bring your own bike unless you are a serious rider. You'll find dozens of bicycle rental terminals along the cycling course.

A cross bike rental (a hybrid bike with flat handlebars) costs 2,000 yen (about \$15) daily. Return the rental to the same terminal you picked up and get your 1,100 yen deposit back. If you split the route up over two days and return the bike at the other end, the rental should cost around 5,100 yen. Tandem bikes (3,000 yen/day) and electric-assist bicycles (2,500 yen/day) are also available at some rental terminals. Still, they must be returned to the original pick-up spot.

Rental bicycle reservations aren't required but are recommended during peak season or weekends. These rentals include a free helmet to borrow, or you can bring your own. I also recommend getting a seat cushion if you aren't accustomed to riding for many hours and long distances. You will thank yourself later!

For more advanced riders, you can rent through bike retailer Giant (two locations at Imabari Station and Onomichi Station) for 4,000 to 15,000 yen per day. However, Giant requires advanced reservations and charges an additional fee of 3,300 yen to return bikes at a different location.



Coast of Hinai-hana Peninsula near Kurushima Kaikyo Bridge.



The adventure begins

For my excursion, I started in Onomichi and split it up over two days, which is easily achievable over a weekend. On Saturday morning, I rented a cross bike at Onomichi Port. I took a short ferry ride (adult and bike cost 70-110 yen) that leaves every 5-10 minutes to Mukaishima Island. After that, I took a detour to Iwashijima Island and visited the Itsukushima Shrine on the beach.

Next, I crossed the Innoshima Bridge (1.2km) to Innoshima Island. Along the route, I detoured to Shiratakiyama Temple, with around 700 stone Buddhas overlooking the sea. The view was amazing and worth riding up the steep hill to the top.

For the third island, I biked across Ikuchijima Bridge (790m) onto Ikuchijima, Japan's No. 1 lemon producer. I stopped at Dolce, a famous gelato and sorbet shop for cyclists. Ikuchijima is also known as an island-wide art museum with 17 outdoor art pieces throughout the island.

After, I turned in for the night at Juicy Fruits B+B close to Setoda Sunset Beach, known for its white sand and clear blue waters. The food was fantastic and came with a stunning sunset. The owner also makes lemon preserves from his own lemon orchard. If you stay here, purchase a jar as a souvenir— you won't regret it.

Day 2

I woke up tired and sore but was looking forward to the last half of the route. Ikuchijima also has lemon benches called the "lemon grove," which some say are great for social media photos. I, however, found that they are perfect rest stops on the ascent to Tatara Bridge (1480m) towards Omishima island.

Crossing over to Omishima, Ehime Prefecture is the halfway point for the trip. Unfortunately, the blue course only covers the northeast part of Omishima, so you'll quickly find yourself crossing the Omishima Bridge (328m), the shortest bridge on the tour, onto Hakatajima. From there, I made my way to Hakata Beach, a popular local swim spot.



Tatara (1480m)

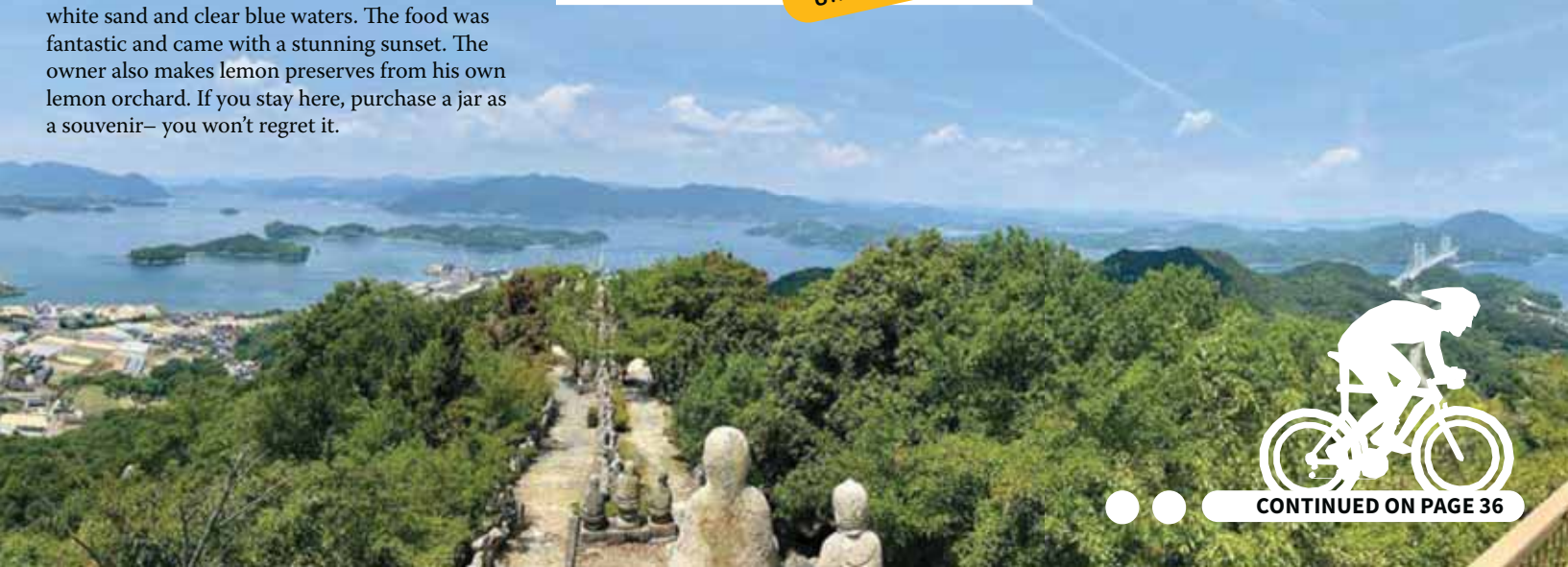
Hakatajima is known for its salt production, and one of the detours features a salt factory if you are interested. Hakata Beach offers salt soft serve ice cream, and the line can be long, but it's worth it on a hot day.

I couldn't rest at the beach forever, so I hopped back on my bike and crossed the Hakata-Oshima Bridge (1165m), comprised of a box girder (325m) and suspension (840m). The inclines of this leg were challenging even with the shallower grade for cyclists. Still, in the end, the views of the beautiful Seto Inland Sea islands are totally worth it.

Of the entire trip, the Oshima portion was the most difficult to cycle. There is a hill in the middle, so crossing that at the tail end of the tour wasn't pleasant. I also had to tackle the climb up to the Kurushima Kaikyo Bridge (4105m) over to Imabari on the final island of Shikoku.



Omishima (328m)





CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35



Hakata Oshima (1165m)

The Kurushima Kaikyo Bridge was completed in 1999 and is the longest suspension bridge in the world. To maintain a shallow incline, the bridge has an impressive corkscrew ramp on the side. You can watch cyclists going in circles down to the bottom from the bridge.

After arriving in Imabari, it was a final push to return the bike at the train station and make my way home. This fantastic trip pushed me out of my comfort zone since I'm not a long-distance cyclist.

It is challenging, but you don't need to be an avid cyclist to enjoy the Shimanami Kaido. Set your own pace and enjoy the ride and the scenery. I hope this goes on your travel list — you won't be disappointed!



Kurushima Kaikyo (4105m)

Hop on a bike

Onomichi -> Imabari: There are multiple options from Tokyo. One is to take the Tokaido Shinkansen to Shin-Onomichi (3.5 hours), then the JR Sanyo Line train to Onomichi Station (8 minutes). To return from Imabari, you can ride the JR Yosai Line to Okayama Station (2 hours) and then take the Tokaido Shinkansen to Tokyo (2 hours).

Imabari -> Onomichi: One option from Tokyo is to take the Shinkansen to Fukuyama Station (3.5 hours), then hop on a bus to Imabari Eki Mae (1.5 hours). To return from Onomichi, take the JR Sanyo Line train to Shin-Onomichi Station and the Shinkansen to Tokyo.

Author's Bio:

Taeko McFadden is originally from Virginia and was previously a U.S. Navy commander with the Seventh Fleet at Yokosuka Naval Base. McFadden is currently a commander at the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) in Fort Belvoir, VA. Follow her on Instagram @TaekoMcFadden



GIANT BIKE RENTAL



GUIDEBOOK



GENERAL GUIDE AND REGULAR BIKE RENTAL

Speakin' Japanese

Let's hit the road!: Shupatsu shimashou / Dekakemashou.

Lots of hills to climb: Noborizaka ga ooi desu.

What a beautiful view: Nante utsukushii keshiki deshous.

My legs are sore: Ashi ga itai desu.

Are you tired?: Tsukare mashitaka?

I'm thirsty: Nodo ga kawakimashita.

Time to take a break: Sorosoro kyuukei shimashou.

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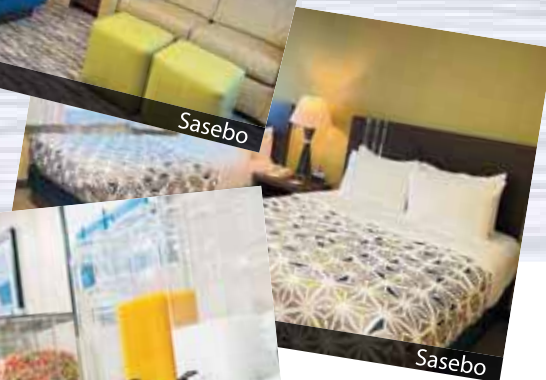
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“Apples are its most famous export, but garlic, scallops and squid are also in plentiful supply in Aomori. All are used in the amazing local cuisine, making the Aomori experience a delicious escape.”

Aomori: Japan's land of summer fests, winter fun

Story and photos by
ROBERT ZUCKERMAN

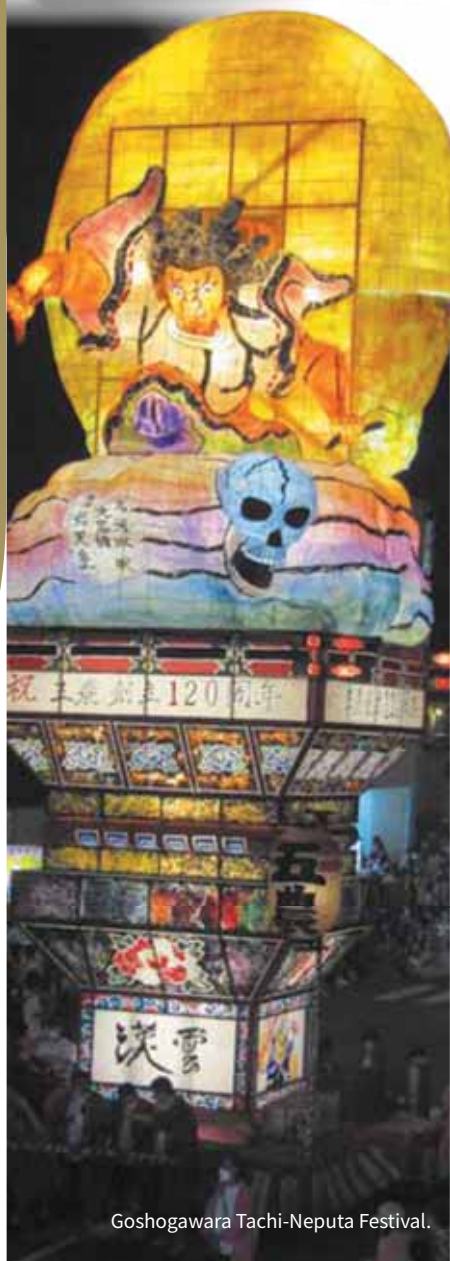
MY PARADISE
Aomori, Japan



Aomori

• Tokyo
• Osaka

Aomori Prefecture, located at the northern tip of Japan's main island of Honshu, is famous for its natural beauty, and delicious food. Apples are its most famous export, but garlic, scallops and squid are also in plentiful supply in Aomori. All are used in the amazing local cuisine, making the Aomori experience a delicious escape. Beyond food, the prefecture has many attractions throughout the year to keep you well-fed and entertained.



Goshogawara Tachi-Neputa Festival.



Goshogawara Tachi-Neputa Festival.

Aomori's special festivals

During a recent visit, I was able to attend three of Japan's most renowned festivals, Nebuta in Aomori City, Neputa in Hirosaki and Tachi-Neputa in Goshogawara. Each has its own dazzling display of illuminated motion and sound, floats of various shapes and sizes depicting ancient mythological stories of both Chinese and Japanese origin.

Hirosaki's Neputa, with over 300 years of history, is the oldest of the three. Aomori City's Nebuta is a more recent development and is the most commercial of these spectacular illuminated float festivals. Many of the dashi, or floats, in the Nebuta Festival are commercially sponsored by banks, major corporations and other institutions. If you miss these festivals during your visit, both Hirosaki and Aomori City have museums dedicated to the history of the festivals with extensive displays of the floats.

Goshogawara's Tachi-Neputa, or standing Neputa festival, is truly spectacular. Like the Hirosaki Neputa, this too is entirely run by volunteer teams. Tachi-Neputa floats are 23 meters or 103.5 feet tall, requiring a team of 50 to maneuver these glowing towers through the streets of Goshogawara. Unlike most Japanese cities and towns, the electrical lines of Goshogawara are purposely submerged beneath the street surface. This is to ensure the Tachi-Neputa dashi have clear passage as they wind their way along the parade route every year.

Though Hachinohe's Sansha festival did not happen in 2022, I was fortunate enough to see one of its floats on display at the Aomori Jyu-Shi Matsuri, or 10 City Festival. A sampling of floats and/or performers from the 10 major cities of Aomori Prefecture can be seen closeup in a single venue. This festival's venue changes yearly with a decade-long rotation. I therefore was quite lucky to see this festival just outside the main gate of Misawa Air Base during a regularly scheduled TDY.

Great outdoors and great onsen

Aomori also has some of Japan's most beautiful nature spots. One of these is the Oirase Kyookoku or Oirase Gorge, located less than an hour drive from Misawa Air Base. Its rambling river is a beautiful getaway spot year-round but is spectacular when fall hits peak colors.

The prefecture is also home to many onsen hot springs that are as relaxing for visitors' wallets as they are for their bodies. Misawa alone, for example, has 10 onsens within its city limits each only charging a mere 350 yen or \$2.50 for a relaxing time at the spa. Soap, shampoo, and towels are additionally charged so be sure to BYOS (bring your own stuff). In the winter months, don't miss soaking in the rotenburo, outside baths, at many of the local onsen like Hirahata Onsen, which is outside Misawa's Falcon Gate. Soaking in the hot springs with the snow falling is truly fantastic.



Oirase Gorge fall colors.



Hirosaki Neputa Festival.



Tanbo art.



Aomori Juu-Shi (10-City) Festival.



Takayama Inari Shrine.



Hachinohe Sansha Festival.



Misawa Aviation Museum.



Goshogawara Tachi-Neputa Museum.

Plenty of museums

After spending time outdoors, head inside any of the prefectures many museums. The Aomori Prefectural Museum of Art displays traditional pottery, lacquerware and wood block prints. For modern art, plan a trip to the Hirosaki Art Museum. History buffs will enjoy strolling the Sannai-Maruyama Archeological Site, which was recently designated a UNESCO site. The Jomon Period site dates back to between 3900-2200 BCE. You can actually see archeologists at work and enter the living site's original buildings to see how the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago used to live.

For aviation enthusiasts, the Misawa Aviation and Science Museum is the place to go. Here, Miss Veedol, the first plane to successfully cross the Pacific, is on display among other interactive displays, including a flight simulator and a zero-gravity experience. Should your group feel hungry during your visit, be sure to grab one of Aomori's best hot-dogs at Jack & Betty's inside the museum, which is managed by Misawa Sky Plaza, a great shopping venue just outside the Misawa Air Base main gate.



Jomon Archaeological Museum.

Sites for the eyes

One of my favorite Shinto shrines, Takayama Inari Jinja, in Aomori's Tsugaru region, is within a stone's throw of Shariki Base. With nearly 1,000 bright orange torii gates laid out in the shape of a dragon, this shrine is a sight to behold.

Another site to behold is the famous tambo, or rice paddy art. Every year the Aomori locals painstakingly plant the rice paddies in order to appear as famous works of art or historic scenes. During previous visits, I've caught the rice paddy rendition of the Mona Lisa, and recreations of Yayoi and Jomon Period hunting scenes. In the past, paddy art has included scenes from Star Wars and other modern works.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 40

See Japanese culture up close!

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Hirahata Onsen.

Aka Noren Barayaki lunch.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

Savor the local fare

On the epicurean side, Aomori has local palette-pleasing cuisine. Specialties include ika katsu dango (fried minced squid balls), kuraniniku (blackened garlic), hotate (scallops), Misawa's original barayaki (hotplate mix of beef and caramelized onions) which can be enjoyed Fridays through Mondays at Aka Noren, just outside the base's main gate, and of course apples used in all forms.

Sample apple brandy, a specialty drink, at the Sun Apple Mohodori Distillery just across the street from the Tachi-Neputa Museum in Goshogawara. Mohodori's brewmeister, Naoya Yoshioka, was trained in Washington state. To make the brandy, only the top-quality apples are used. The remaining apples processed at the distillery are used to make some of the best apple juice I have ever tried. Tastings are available on site.

Visitors to Aomori have many activities and delicious delicacies to choose from and make your experience as Aomori as apple pie.



Mohodori Distillery.



Naoya Yoshioka.



Oriase Apple Dessert.



Misawa "Burning Bush" winter scene.

I would like to extend a thank you to Ms. Misa Hirayama, Ms. Emily Chen and Mr. Takeshi "Andy" Isobe of the Aomori Tourist Bureau for planning my Aomori adventure so well. Also, thank you to Mr. Qiao Wang of Misawa's own Aomoriya Resort, which is next to Misawa Station and has grounds that are a sight to behold.

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Festival Food Truck at Sky Plaza

“Do I dare leave the path, to venture into this sea of space? It’s a vast unobstructed openness that’s consuming, that I could get lost in.”

Crossing paths at Negishi Forest Park

Story and photos by
TAIYO REIMERS

MY PARADISE
Yokohama, Japan



Cherry blossom season at the park.

Beneath a ceiling of light blue, lies a carpet of green. It rolls like a velvet blanket, lined by dense hedges of maple, zelkova, and cherry. At times, a host of clouds dot the sky; formations crisscrossing and drifting with the breeze that rises from beyond the tree line – Negishi Forest Park rests on a cliff overlooking Yokohama. Most times, it’s a blank, cloudless canvas.

The walking path rises and falls with the topography of the park, taking walkers around its periphery, through an archway of greenery surrounded by grass and leafy detritus. A small pond, a grove of plum trees, down hills and up steps, benches dot the path. A group of runners dash by. Occasionally, I come across a wall of earth, or a metal fence looming at the top of an elevated hill.

Through the gaps of the forest cover, the park’s centerpiece comes to view. It’s a space that’s hosted elementary school picnics and cherry blossom viewings. On summer mornings, recordings of radio exercise programs with a piano soundtrack fills the silence. In the evening, the 5 p.m. going-home bell rings across its expanse. Do I dare leave the path, to venture into this sea of space? It’s a vast unobstructed openness that’s consuming, that I could get lost in. I’m the main character of my own movie, in the limelight, when navigating the plot of no-path. The outside world is closed out, besides the breeze, birds, and sounds that flow over; they know no borders.

Take to the skies, where kites soar in January, thousands of cherry petals drift to the tune of the wind in April, and legions of crows cry with the cicadas in August. They come from across the hedge that borders the park, where the remnants of the Negishi housing detachment still stand.

The park extends over a dormant street, which while walking across one can see Mt. Fuji looming in the distance. Benches surround an unnaturally round patch of grass that slopes up at its center. Townspeople, young and old, run, walk their dogs, or run after their dogs. Some carry portable radio sets broadcasting the listener’s favorite enka. Others read newspapers, while blissfully surrounded by pigeons pecking at breadcrumbs (perhaps to the park administration’s frustration).

At the overlook, the wind rises from the valley (across

from which once stood the housing units of military dependents) to brush the branches and roll the leaves with a crackle in November. Far down below, children play tag or jump on the jungle gym, and in the sand box. A slide extends a part of the sloped area down the hill – I imagine a popular attraction for the children. Basketball dribbling echoes off the vined, concrete wall of the grandstands, a foreboding structure with windows like eyes, staring blankly towards the Miura Peninsula.

It’s a silent onlooker of generations gone by, to the development that has become of the greater Yokohama area. An iconic skyline, with Landmark Tower at its center, spreads across the view it sees, telling of a time far from when the Imperial Navy occupied the building to use it as a printing press, or when the U.S. Navy used it as an administrative building. Rays of sunshine – gold as honey – pour over the edge of the grandstands, sparkling through the waving branches of trees and rustling leaves. A deep purple hue lights the sky at dusk in December.

It’s an atmosphere that suggests a natural origin – as if it’s always been this way, and always will be forever. Yet the trees were planted when the land was returned, on what was a 9-hole golf course used by U.S. military members, built on an area spared from the air raids of Yokohama during World War II. Over a century ago, it was the first western horse racetrack in Japan, hence the concrete grandstand. The walls of the track, and the roads leading to it remain mostly the same, but the park itself is no stranger to change.

Negishi Forest Park, as its name implies, is just a park. It’s a ways from JR Negishi Station, although buses to the area are frequent. There isn’t much beyond beverage and ice cream vending machines, as well as small, local eateries in neighboring Yamamoto-cho.

When I was younger, the clouds seemed distant. Nowadays, I feel as though I could reach out a hand, and just touch them; they feel closer. Yet, the sky is still blue, and the breeze still blows like it did so long ago, reminding me of what was, and pushing me towards what has yet to come. The clouds that drift by are a reminder of the many paths that have, and that will, cross at Negishi Forest Park.



VIEW VIDEO



The grandstands.



Military dependent houses across the valley.



Trees in Negishi Forest Park.

“The path urges you to slow down, admire your surroundings and, in turn, relax your mind.”

Hiking Japan's Michinoku Coastal Trail

Story and photos by
ALVIN DEWALT

MY PARADISE
Tohoku, Japan



Hachinohe
Horinai
Miyako
Sendai

• Tokyo
• Osaka

The Michinoku Coastal Trail stretches just over 1,000 kilometers. It's rather new, completed in 2019 as part of efforts to showcase Tohoku and the recovery from the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami disasters. It's a unique trail, traversing through jagged coastlines, up mountain peaks, through fishing villages and out-of-the-way local towns.

Stunning, rugged coastal snapshots are what first drew my attention to the Michinoku Coastal Trail. During my morning coffee-time routine, I usually wake up searching Google News for stories about Japan and the world. I was in the mood for a tale of escape and the 1,000-kilometer trail seemed to be a good cure for COVID-19 claustrophobia.

So far, I've completed four 5-day hikes, totaling 340 kilometers.



First tunnel.



Tsunami gate.



Tsunami boulder.



Serow close.

Sōma to Sendai [103 kms] – April 2022

I am hiking in stages, starting with a five-day trek south to north, from Sōma to Sendai.

At the time, I did not realize the majority this segment would take me through tsunami-ravaged landscape. In fact, given a choice, I would not have planned a hike through a disaster area. There are so many other beautiful places in Japan I want to visit.

You see, even though we were not in the path of the 2011 tsunami and our house was not damaged by the powerful earthquake, the event left memories of trauma I wanted to forget. Its memory is woven into the fabric of the collective consciousness for everyone who was in Japan on March 11, 2011.

Hachinohe to Horinai Station [90 kms] – Nov. 2022

Since my first hike of the trail was in the south, I started my second part in the north—a wise choice. Absolutely stunning scenery. It's just a less than four-hour hike along the coast from Same Station to Ōkuki Station. Perfect for folks in Misawa and easy enough to make it a family outing.

Further south, around the town of Noda, I saw that most of the buildings near the coast and pretty far inland were new structures. The tsunami severely devastated much of the town. Yet, I sensed a kind of vitality in the area. Amid the destruction, I saw evidence of rebirth.

Horinai to Iwaizumi [77 kms] – April 2023

The area known as the Japanese Sea Alps starts south of Fudai and extends all the way down to Miyako City. On my third hike along the trail, these sections were the most picturesque on the trail thus far, but you must earn those magnificent vistas.

I met two guys working up in Misawa on the trail. They were hiking in one day almost the distance I covered in a day and a half. I gave them a few bits of advice and wished them luck. We met again at the train station. They were exhausted, but so impressed by the trail that they were already making plans for their next hike.

Iwaizumi to Miyako City [67 kms] – April 2023

Yikes, almost the entire section takes place in the Japan Sea Alps. Luckily, I was still in good shape from the previous hike, less than a month before. Still, when I started out each day, I wondered if I could make it. These five days were the most strenuous, but well worth it.



Valley of the crops.

Thoughts on the trail

When I started the hike, I just wanted to get out and see all those stunning views I'd read about. But on my first trip, it was mostly through devastated land that was once lush forest. It was depressing, monotonous, and not too exciting to hike. Those long treks, ranging from eight to 10 hours a day, changed my perspective in so many ways.

I became more aware of the central purpose of the Michinoku Coastal Trail, which is to support Tohoku. And to support Tohoku in a personal way, getting to know the land that was devastated and the people whose lives were deeply affected by loss. In a way, through the experience, one becomes part of Tohoku.

Each step takes you closer to the land and its people. According to the trail's website, fewer than two percent of foreign travelers make their way to Tohoku. Aomori, Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima Prefectures are Japan's hidden gems, not yet overrun by tourists.

Those long walks and hikes change your perspective on life. The path urges you to slow down, admire your surroundings and, in turn, relax your mind. For thousands of years, humans have survived and thrived on land by foot. It's amazing the wonders a simple, natural act like putting one foot in front of the other can do for our minds and lifespan.

Before you plan to tackle the Michinoku Trail, a few words of caution. While some sections are an easy stroll and nice for a family outing, others require quite a bit of physical strength and stamina. And you need reliable GPS since parts of the trail are not well maintained. Prepare for the conditions and hit the path to explore the beauty and resilience of Tohoku.

Hit the trail



Michinoku Trail
official website



Hiker's trail tips
(Japanese only)

Author's Bio:

Alvin DeWalt is a Navy veteran and retired DODEA teacher. He has lived in Japan since 1999. Although he is 72 years old, he still leads an active life. You may contact him for further information at: alvindewalt@yahoo.com



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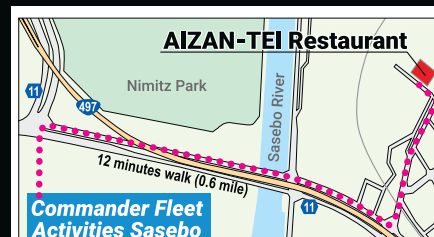
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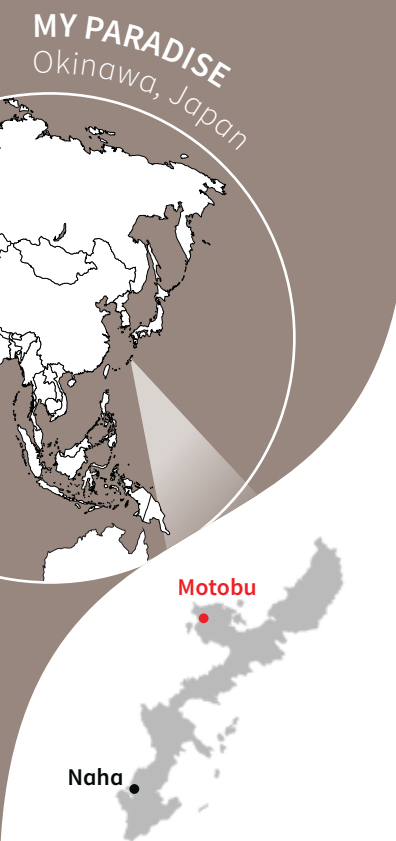
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“Since that first time in Bise Village almost a decade ago, we began following my grandfather’s footsteps around the Pacific Theater.”

Retracing grandpop's steps on Okinawa

Story and photos by
STEPH J. PAWELSKI



Between the attack on Pearl Harbor and the Battle of Okinawa, Japan experienced years of continuous rollbacks as many of their islands and territories, controlled by the Japanese Imperial forces, were reclaimed by Allied forces in the west Pacific region. By April 1945, the United States military was finally in Japan and Iwo Jima, part of island chain, was secured. The U.S. was getting closer to Tokyo, the capital of Japan.

Occupying Okinawa, the largest plot of land in this region, would enter the U.S. in the final stages of War World II. This poor chunk of land would provide naval facilities to protect the invasion fleet and air bases that would bring American bombers within 372 miles of Japan, a distance that could defeat the Japanese Empire. The Japanese military became desperate.

The Japanese military knew the United States would ultimately win the battle for Okinawa, but their mission was to delay them on the island for as long as possible.

After 82 days of fighting on Okinawa, there was no more hope in the capabilities of the Japanese Imperial Army. The last day to the Battle of Okinawa was June 22, 1945. An American flag was flown over the southern end of the island, both the American and Japanese commanders were dead, the Japanese 32nd Army was wiped out, and U.S. servicemen were battered. As the defeat of Japan in WWII came, so did many more American service members to ensure Japan would no longer be a threat.



Bise Village.



The author's grandfather in Motobu in 1945.



Pawelski and family stand in same spot as her grandfather did decades ago.

My (maternal) grandfather, Louis Lautenbach, was drafted into the Army near the end of World War II. Very soon after the war, U.S. service members had different experiences with the people in Asia. Grandpop had a positive experience with the Japanese and Okinawan people.

He bought postcards and took many photos of his travels while stationed in Okinawa, Tokyo, Nagoya, Kyoto, as well as in the Philippines. He wrote brief descriptions on the back of most photos.

Once my family began noticing the passion I had finding and exploring battle-related sites on Okinawa, these black and white photos were sent to me. One picture is of him standing in front of a shrine. On the back, Grandpop wrote, “Sacred Shrine, Motobu, Okinawa – June 1945.”

A surprise nearly 70 years later

It was March 2013, our first spring on Okinawa. It was going to be a mommy day with our two children, ages two and four at the time, while my husband did a few things around the house. To my surprise, the “to do” list was completed Saturday morning; it was going to be a fun-filled family day in Motobu!

As we pulled into Ocean Expo Park, our children sound asleep. I was hoping to go back the same way we just came to explore a few culture assets and recognized locations in this area until Hannah and William woke up. However, I was assured that we would stop at these places on the way home and to find something closer to the aquarium.

Jeff and I agreed to explore Bise Village – a quiet and old neighborhood tucked away by farmland and fields, with dirt roads to travel in and out of the village. Large Fukugi trees line the roads and paths. They provide shade from the sun and protection from wind and rain during typhoon season.

After parking in a small dirt lot, we began walking around and bought souvenirs at the village's shell shop. We noticed privately owned restaurants and old stone walls dividing personal pieces of property



Side-by-side photos of author's grandfather and son in Motobu.



Side-by-side photos of the Imperial Palace front.

➤ in a grid-like pattern. The sound of waves echoing through its narrow paths attracted us to the oceanfront property where pieces of sea glass and tropical shells were found.

Even though our children enjoyed discovering a cave on the beach as well as playing in the tidal pools that high tide left behind, they were patiently waiting to leave for the aquarium. I was certain to return to Bise Village. The residences, here, open their village to visitors.

Once everyone was buckled in the car, Jeff began driving to the Ocean Expo Park. Our electronic map said to "make a left," but that road was too narrow to fit the van. We continued driving until coming to a wider road to exit the village on.

By that time, I was flipping through the photos that were already taken that day when, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a cement structure representing Okinawan culture. I told Jeff to stop and jumped out of the van before it came to a complete stop. I was experiencing déjà vu!

I compared this shrine to two black and white photos of a "sacred shrine

(in) Motobu, Okinawa." I finally found the exact spot my late grandfather stood in June 1945!

Before this day, I spent hours driving main roads, dirt roads, and trails, talking to historians at the Motobu History Museum, as well as researching shrines in northern Okinawa. I couldn't find any information about the shrine in Grandpop's picture. I questioned the shrine's current state of existence due to the island's history, weather, and present-day influences. To my surprise, it stood the test of time.

A piece of grandpop

Personal pieces of paradise are created when an adventure leaves a person speechless with a feeling never experienced before. Before PCSing from Okinawa in 2019, we visited the Ocean Expo Park and Bise Village regularly. I sat and stared at this 30- by 50-foot piece of land that is a part of the world... and a world of its own. Relaxed feelings of amazement and glee were felt when being at my piece of paradise in the southwest Pacific. This shrine leaves me speechless and certain that Bise Village in Motobu, Okinawa, will forever hold the spot that my grandfather and I have shared, halfway around the world and decades apart.

Since that first time in Bise Village almost a decade ago, we began following my grandfather's footsteps around the Pacific Theater. He was on mainland Japan, after Okinawa, and visited the Imperial Palace and its hotel in Tokyo. My family and I took a trip to mainland and found the spot where he stood in front of the Imperial Palace. Comparison photos were created which included the postcards that Grandpop and my family both bought of the same location.

The Imperial Hotel, built by Frank Lloyd Wright, has since been moved to Meiji Mura, 215 miles northeast of Tokyo. That family adventure was to there in 2016 and, of course, comparison photos were created.

Unfortunately, our six years on Okinawa quickly came to an end. We moved to Sacramento, California in 2019. That was when I regretted never getting a family photo of Jeff, Hannah, William, and me in front of the shrine in Bise Village. We had to come back before Jeff hit 30 years in the Marine Corps! Luckily for us, Jeff was able to get orders back to Okinawa after three long years of being away from my personal piece of paradise.

During this time on Okinawa, I am hoping to find at least one... maybe two more sites, where my grandfather stood while in Nagoya, Japan, as well as the Philippines!



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“The island is dense with sacred places and scattered tombs that can be found by wandering off an unmarked side trail or going a little farther afield from a popular tourist spot.”

Uncovering Okinawa's legends, myths

Story and photos by
DAVID KRIGBAUM

MY PARADISE
Okinawa, Japan



● Churashima
● Katsuren Castle
● Naha
● Nanjo

Okinawa abounds with legends and myths, surprises where least expected and rare animals that can't be seen anywhere else. The island is dense with sacred places and scattered tombs that can be found by wandering off an unmarked side trail or going a little farther afield from a popular tourist spot. These aren't particularly spectacular in and of themselves but the stories they tell can walk the line between myth and history, sharing the fate of kings, heroes, villains, and even follow the path of a goddess, making the everyday just a little bit more exciting and interesting without having to stand in line or pay admission (which can suck the wonder out of anything).

Over the four years I've lived here, I've kept a running journal of visits, lore and creatures. The more I've learned through traveling the island, the easier it's become to add to that understanding and appreciate the island around me. Between all the special places to stumble across and the stories, there's a fantastic quality that makes it feel more like the fiction of an open-world game like Skyrim than a common duty station.



Tamagusuku.



Katsuren-jo morning.



Hamagaa Utaki.



Yanbaru Kuina.



Hyakuna.

A goddess' ruins

Nanjo City is a treasure trove for early Okinawa history as the island's mythic origin tale takes place here. On Hyakuna Beach, it's said Amamikyo, the creator goddess, first came to her creation. The beach itself attracts a mix of visitors like beachcombers, yoga enthusiasts and family but it seems the legend isn't the best known reason for visiting. Despite this, there's a sacred place just in the rocks behind the beach with a stream running through it; this is Hamagaa-utaki, where she spent her first night before moving on. Short drives away are Amami-kyo's Tamagusuku Castle, multiple other castle ruins, and Sefa Utaki, the island's most sacred site. The castle ruins are all free to explore and while not maintained as well as the famous UNESCO castles, each has a special personality and aura. Nanjo has a tourism map with these places on it, but you can also easily wander from point to point and just find something...

Near the beach's backside are Okinawa's original rice field, miifuda, and the sacred springs that feed it. These are marked on said map. But taking the stairs between them to a marked path leading to the top of the hill, I noticed a trace to the side. It was unmarked but clearly something had trample a narrow path. Following it in a low crouch through the tunnel of trees and brush, I first saw a small altar standing alone, which led to a striking sight: a rocky tomb under a cliff with a single large tree hanging off it. A friend translated the memorial stone as "Lord Tenbu". Looking it up, I learned he was the "ancestor of rice planting" and his quiet resting place overlooks that original field.

The ogre's tomb

At Katsuren Castle, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, they tell the story of Amawari, a proud and noble lord who brought prosperity to his people and led a failed insurrection against the Ryukyu Kingdom. His wife, a princess, fled her husband with the help of her servant Ufugusuku Uni; "uni" is the dialect term for "oni" or ogre. A massive man skilled in martial artists, he helped whisk her away and would return for Amawari's head leading a royal army. For his reward he married the widowed princess and was given rule over Chibana.

Today, Amawari is celebrated and his Katsuren Castle treasured; but not far from Camp Shields and Kadena Air Base are the least impressive castle ruins in Okinawa, as nothing remains and even the park itself feels half forgotten. Following an overgrown and unmaintained trail around to the back side leads to maintained tomb, that of Uni Ufugusuku, the great ogre who defended the kingdom. When the first Sho dynasty ended he fell from favor and either was killed or took his life here.

Also, like a good Skyrim dungeon, there's an immediate exit so no backtracking is required, there's stairs leading down to a dirt parking lot and a residential neighborhood. Yeah, I could have started there but no signs lead to the tomb.

Kuina spotting!

Northern Okinawa's biodiversity is so full of unique flora, fauna, and creatures that its now part of a UNESCO world heritage site. The colorful Yanbaru Kuina, or Okinawa Rail, has become symbolic of these elusive animals. The rail's bright orange break and legs, olive

Okinawa: 'The Land of Evening Calm'

Story and photos by
AINUN NAIM QAZI

MY PARADISE
Okinawa, Japan



• Ginowan
• Naha
• Nanjo
• Itowan

We have lived in Korea, which is called "The Land of Morning Calm." I loved the morning sunrise in Korea. We have also lived in Okinawa for many years and enjoyed its sunset. I remembered that right after rain, when clouds are shattered and sun was expected to set, photographers with all sorts of cameras assembled at the beach to capture the beauty of sunset.



Author's Bio:
Ainun Naim Qazi is a retired environmental protection specialist and lives near Toguchi Beach on Okinawa.
(nqazi@aol.com)

"When I admire the wonders of a sunset or the beauty of the moon, my soul expands in the worship of the creator."

— Mahatma Gandhi

After I left Okinawa, the memory of the sunset stayed with me. After serving the Department of Defense for over 27 years, I retired and moved to Las Vegas to live an interesting and peaceful life. Well, life was interesting, but not peaceful. After a few months, we decided to move elsewhere. Florida was one choice (retiree's favorite) or Okinawa, where we can watch the sunset each day.

We voted for Okinawa and moved near Toguchi Beach. Now, each day after dinner we walk along Toguchi beach with our camera, capturing the beauty of sunset. Sometimes the setting sun transforms the sea into a vast lake of molten gold.

We also have visited other beaches of Okinawa: Emerald Beach in Motobu, Naminoue Beach in Naha, Ginowan Tropical Beach in Ginowan, Sunset Beach in Chitan, Mibaru Beach in Manjo, and Nashiro Beach in Itoman, Okuma Beach, Torri Station Beach, and White Sands Beach.

Walking through the sandy beaches of Okinawa, its spellbound natural beauty of picturesque small islands and clear waters, and its splendid calm and tranquility, we dubbed it "The Land of Evening Calm."

If anyone wants to visit a place for tranquility, calmness, peace and beauty, come to Okinawa.

➔ body and black and white belly make for a striking sight which even Okinawans may go their whole lives without seeing except in photos, warning signs, and on merchandise. It's Japan's only flightless bird but it runs fast. Its existence was first officially catalogued in 1981, so it's both rare and somewhat mysterious as even researching those in captivity can only tell so much about the endangered species.

Once my wife and I were visiting locations used in the recent asadora, Chimudondon. It led us to the Churashima Nature School, an old elementary school that has been repurposed to support the growth of baby sea turtles born in an aquarium so that they can be released once they're big enough. Visiting the little turtles was free and they were very cute, like hungry baby birds. Striking up a conversation with the staff, she told us that she'd seen many Yanbaru Kuina in the wild and that we were almost guaranteed to see them along a certain stretch of road but only if we arrived prior to 8:30 a.m. After that, the increase in road traffic would scare them off.

A few weeks later we followed her instructions and as soon as we got to the stretch of road, my wife threw on the brakes. A kuina darted across the road and into the bushes! Within an hour we had seen two more, including an even rarer baby kuina whose legs and beak had yet to turn orange. By the end of the day between there and pure luck in a few other spots, we'd seen six kuina (and a wild boar). I'd tell you where the road is, but it wouldn't be much of a quest if you didn't have to talk to someone and receive it first, would it?

If you want a guaranteed kuina encounter, visit the Okinawa Rail Learning Center. So far there's no Kuina in local zoos, though that may change, but you can watch their rail, Kuta-kun, in his large terrarium and learn all about his species. He's quite friendly and loves showing off.



Uni Tomb.



Baby sea turtles.



Katsuren
Castle and
Amawari Park



Okinawa Rail
Learning Center
(Kuina Forest)



Churashima
Nature School

Hyakuna Beach (Yaharadukasa)
Plus Code 4QQW+QP Nanjo, Okinawa

Hamagaa Utaki
Plus Code 4QRW+3H Nanjo, Okinawa

Chibana Castle Ruins
5 Chome-12 Chibana, Okinawa, 904-2143
Plus Code 9R76+58 Okinawa

Follow us on Instagram! @StarsandStripesPacific

“I volunteered to be a personal driver for my mom on weekends. We went to many Buddhist temples in Korea.”

Turning an eye toward temples in Korea

Story and photos by
SONMI KO

MY PARADISE
South Korea



North Korea

- Seoul
- Camp Humphreys

Jeju Island

My sister is a devout Christian and tithes every month. My mother is a Buddhist and spends money on hanging lanterns at temples, buying Buddhist supplies and giving offerings to wish for the well-being of our family.

I am an atheist spending money on travel and beer.

As an old, but not married daughter, I thought I should play the role of a good daughter. I volunteered to be a personal driver for my mom on weekends.

We went to many Buddhist temples in Korea. They were always widely open to everyone, no matter if they believe in Buddhism or not.

I've come to like a temple's peaceful atmosphere, mysterious scent of incense and tolerance to strangers.

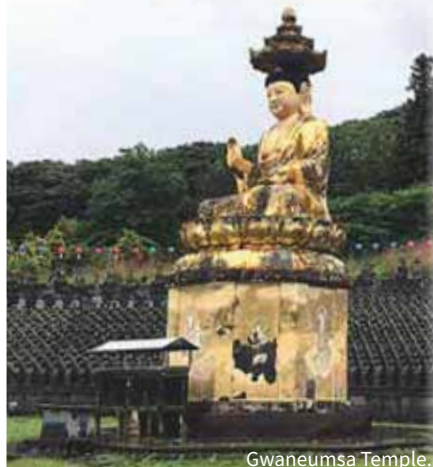
While my mom was praying, I enjoyed hanging around the temples.



Wishing stones in front of Samseonggak.



Gwaneumgul Cave.



Gwaneumsa Temple.



Jabisa Temple.

Top temple

One of my favorite temples is called Jabisa and it's located near Camp Humphreys.

This temple is believed to have been built around the 16th century by monks and generals. The group were cruising by boat and got marooned during a typhoon. So, they built a temple.

On Buddha's birthday, they make and provide Buddhist vegetarian dishes to visitors for free.

In the front yard, there are five-story stone pagodas and 12 zodiac sign structures carved in rock with the stories of the rat, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, chicken, dog, and pig.

In the main temple you can see a big golden Buddha statue against hundreds of little Buddhas in the background. The big Buddha looks benevolent rather than solemn, and thousands of Lotus Lanterns are suspended from the ceiling.

My favorite part of the temple is the wooden floor in the Buddhist sanctum. It is always shiny and clean. Even in summer, the wood floor is pleasantly cool and the scent of wood through open doors gives tranquility.

Prayer answered

On a Sunday afternoon in the summer of 2022, my mom and I went to Jabisa. After mom's prayer, we walked around the cozy temple and ran into a monk. As my mom and the monk exchanged greetings, she suddenly talked to the monk about my situation.

My mom knew now badly I wanted a promotion and transfer to another office. I did not expect her to talk to the monk about this, so I tried to stop her. It was too late.

The next thing I knew, we were in the temple office and the monk was typing my address on his computer. The monk suggested a 100-day prayer. It means the monks pray for my situation for 100 days and it costs \$100.

My mom was pressuring me silently with her eyes to pay for it. I did not have cash, but an online payment option was also available at the temple. I was disappointed to find that the temple instituted such a secular system, but I reluctantly transferred the money as packs of Bud Light floated in my head.

Two weeks later, I was promoted and transferred to the other office.

Gwaneumsa Temple

In the summer of 2023, my mom and I went to Jeju Island. She wanted to visit Gwaneumsa Temple, located at the foot of Mt. Halla. If my mom wasn't there, I would have gone to the mountain, not the temple.

The magnificent scale of the temple, combined with the beautiful natural scenery of Mt. Halla was very impressive, as the droves of foreign tourists there could attest.

There are two caves on the temple grounds. The one called Haewolgul is a cave where Haewol, the founder of Gwaneumsa Temple, trained and prayed for three years.

Inside the Haewol Cave, there were several candles that visitors had lit while making a wish or saying a prayer. The heat from the candles made the inside of the cave very warm.

It was a mysterious atmosphere in the narrow cave filled with the

Let's Take a Virtual Vacation

Singapore



VIEW VIDEO!

Perhaps after watching the Hollywood movie "Crazy Rich Asians," Singapore has been on your mind as a great place to vacation. This small island country is where old-meets-new and where influences of European, Chinese, Malayan, and other cultures collide. This virtual vacation will take you to the Raffles Landing Site for some Instagram-worthy pics, to the equally-photogenic Marina Area for a glimpse at a future-oriented cityscape. If you're hungry you'll want to try the Hainanese chicken rice, a well-seasoned steamed and chopped chicken on rice that is also steamed in chicken soup, topped with ginger and chili sauce. – Takahiro Takiguchi



Australia

Join us for a trip down under to the Australian Gold Coast. This area is rich in natural beauty, aboriginal culture, arts and delicious cuisine. We'll shop 'til we drop at Surfers Paradise, a coastal suburb with a wide sand surf beach, plenty of stores and a vibrant nightlife. A visit to Australia wouldn't be complete without cuddling with a koala. Let's make some new furry friends at the Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary which is home to one of the largest collections of the country's native species. – Takahiro Takiguchi



VIEW VIDEO!

➤ smell of burning candles.

As I approached the entrance of Gwaneumgul, the other cave on the grounds, I could see my breath because it was quite chilly even though it was early summer. It was even colder inside cave. I thought it was the best place for a summer vacation spot.

The cave was made into a prayer room, and there was a fundraising box to pray for peace in Ukraine.

Stone cold

In front of Samseonggak, which enshrines the gods of wealth, longevity and fortune, there was a wishing stone.

I read the sign that says how to use the stone. First, compose yourself and lift the stone and feel the weight.

Second, make a wish carefully and lift the stone again. If the stone is not lifted easily or if you feel that the stone is pulling from the bottom, it is a sign that the wish will come true.

The round stone weighed quite a bit, but it was easy to lift. As instructed, I made a wish that I found deep in my heart this year and tried to lift the stone again.

I couldn't move it a bit.

Speakin' Korean

Hello: Annyeong-haseyo (안녕하세요)

Thank you: Gamsa-hamnida (감사합니다)

Are photos okay here?:

Yeogiseo sajin jjigeodo gwaenchanayo? (여기서 사진 찍어도 괜찮아요?)

Where is the restroom?:

Hwajangsil-eun eodie isseoyo? (화장실은 어디에 있어요?)

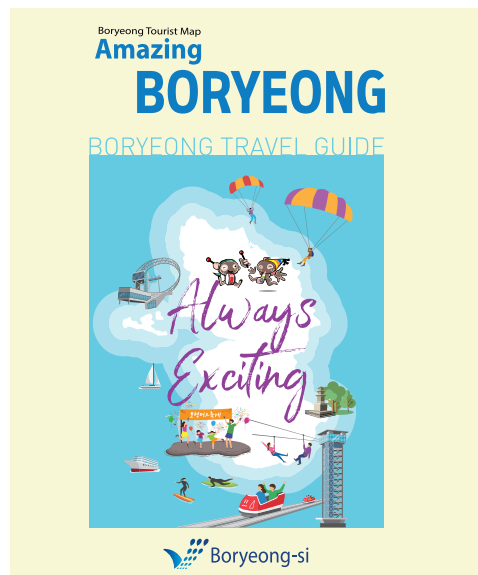
영월군
YEONGWOL COUNTY



Beautiful Places To Travel in Yeongwol

흥식
이향





Always Exciting City Boryeong

Boryeong, Korea's Representative Marine Tourism City. The blue sea in the west and the deep green mountains in the east, Boryeong is the place where they harmonize together. When you come to Boryeong, enjoy nature while walking on the forest path, trying to put your feet in the calm sea water, and looking at the wonderful sunset on the west coast. Follow the locations of the pictures and make your own trip to Boryeong.



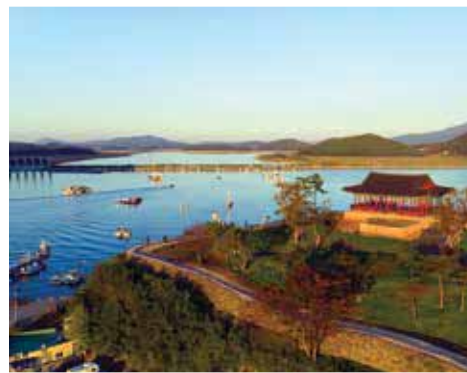
Transportation guide >>>

Car	Seoul-Gyeongbu Expressway Cheonan Interchange → Onyang → Hongseong → Gwangcheon → Boryeong			
	Seohaean Expressway Daecheon Interchange → Boryeong			
Bus	Daejeon-Honam-Seochon Expressway Yuseong Interchange → Gongju → Cheongyang Interchange → Boryeong			
Train	Boryeong Bus Terminal ☎ 1688.0137			
	Intracity Bus ☎ 041.932.3350 boryeongbus.net			

Train	Train	Northbound (Daecheon → Yongsan)		Southbound (Yongsan → Daecheon)		Travel Time
		First	Last	First	Last	
	Mugunghwa	06:29	21:13	05:37	20:45	160 min.
	Saemaeul	06:56	19:58	08:37	17:55	150 min.

Daecheon Station ☎ 041.935.7788/1544.7788, 1588.7788

Boryeong Cultural Tourism: <https://www.brcn.go.kr/eng.do>



Chungcheong Suyeongseong Fortress



Boryeongho Lake



Boryeong Mud Festival



Jukdo Island (Sanghwawon)

BORYEONG

Top 10 tourist spots

2

Jukdo Island (Sanghwawon)

There is a trail covering the island and furthermore the Korean Garden is spread over the entire area.



5

Muchangpo Beach

Muchangpo Beach is the site of a miracle revealing the sea route.



8

Cold Air Bath Tunnel

The natural wind of a closed mine becomes cooler even when the outside temperature rises.



3

Seongjusan recreational forest

While in Boryeong, you must not miss the beautiful Charyeong Mountain Range.



6

Oeyeondo Island

This scenic island is surrounded by several neighboring islands.



9

Boryeongho Lake

You can enjoy the beautiful scenery and blue waters of the lake when you drive.



1

Daecheon Beach

Daecheon Beach is Asia's only white sand beach and serves as the site for festivals throughout four seasons.



4

Gaehwa Art Park

Gaehwa Art Park is a large-scale art complex featuring Herb Land, Music Hall, Birim Park, and Mosan Art Museum.



7

Chungcheong Suyeongseong Fortress

This tall-standing stone castle performed the important function of preventing foreign invasion into the West Sea.



9+

Oseosan Mountain

Take a hike around the Oseosan Mountain to experience the waves of silver grass spreading like watercolor paintings and the sunset in the West Sea from the top form a beautiful spot.



Best festivals

If you visit Boryeong, check out one of these fun festivals.

Apr.



Jusan Spring Flower Festival

Cherry Blossom Song Festival, Harmony Event, etc.

● Donggo-ri-Geumam-ri, Jusan-myeon
● Jusan-myeon / Jusan Spring Flower Festival Promotion Committee
041 . 930 . 0808 / 041 . 930 . 4706

July



Boryeong Mud Festival

Activities, events, planned exhibitions, night events

● Daecheon Beach Mud Square
● Tourism Division / Boryeong Festival and Tourism Foundation
041 . 930 . 6561 / 041 . 930 . 0891

Muchangpo Beach Opening

Opening ceremony, ceremony performance

● Muchangpo Beach
● Beach Management Division / Muchangpo Tourism Council
041 . 930 . 6810 / 041 . 936 . 3561

Aug.



Muchangpo Fantasy Sea Path Festival

Torch fishing, clam catching activities

● Muchangpo Beach
● Tourism Division / Muchangpo Festival Promotion Committee
041 . 930 . 6561 / 041 . 936 . 3510

Oct.



Seongju Mountain Autumn Leaves Festival

Folk art contests, exhibitions and promotions of regional specialties, etc.

● Seongjusan Mountain
● Forest Park Division / Autumn Leaves Festival Promotion Committee
041 . 930 . 4060 / 041 . 933 . 5301

Dec.



Cheonbuk Oyster Festival

Oyster-tasting events, singing contests, etc.

● Oyster Complex, Jangan-ri, Cheonbuk-myeon
● Cheonbuk-myeon / Cheonbuk Oyster Festival Promotion Committee
041 . 930 . 0804 / 041 . 930 . 4646

Daecheon Winter Sea Love Festival

Night in lights, romantic tour, etc.

● Daecheon Beach
● Tourism Division / Boryeong Festival and Tourism Foundation
041 . 930 . 6561 / 041 . 930 . 0891

Top 9 must-try tastes

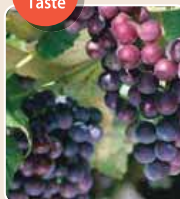
First Taste



Cheonbuk Grilled Oyster

The oyster comes with a unique scent and flavor. Cheonbuk oysters, offer excellent taste and nutrition.

Second Taste



Sahyeon Grapes

Sahyeon grapes are the sweetest in Korea.

Indulge in the excellent taste and scent of grapes from Sahyeon-ri, Nampo-myeon, which also have the highest sugar content in Korea.

Third Taste



Webfoot Octopus

Try the chewy texture

Dip in vinegared chili paste and take a bite to enjoy the excellent chewy taste.

Fourth Taste



Spicy Raw Stingray Salad

Chewy, sweet and sour
Add various seasonings to a freshly caught stingray, and you have a chewy, sweet and sour delicacy.

Fifth Taste



Blue Crab Soup

Have a cup to enjoy the deep and rich taste.

The low fat, high protein crab meat is accentuated by the deep and rich taste of the soup.

Sixth Taste



Boryeong Laver

Crisp and delightful flavor and scent

Made with the highest quality ingredients grown in the clean waters of the West Sea, it has a crispy and tasty flavor.

Seventh Taste



Pen Shell Dishes

Pen shell dishes offer a unique combination of rich protein and low calories.

From roasting, hot pot, salad, shabu-shabu, porridge, and fry, you can try the various dishes of the pen shell.

Eighth Taste



Grilled Clams

The freshly caught seafood is cooked on a grill.

Don't forget to try some of the scallops, clams, conchs, shrimp, cockles, abalone, and many other fresh seafood from Boryeong on the grill!

Ninth Taste



Noodle Soup with Seafood

The soup offers a unique combination of the scent of the sea and chewy noodles.

Add the scent of the sea with various seafood and add to the fun by having it with chewy noodles.



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**DINING &
LOUNGE**



**SPECIAL
EVENTS**

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CLUB**



**POOL AND
JACUZZI**

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