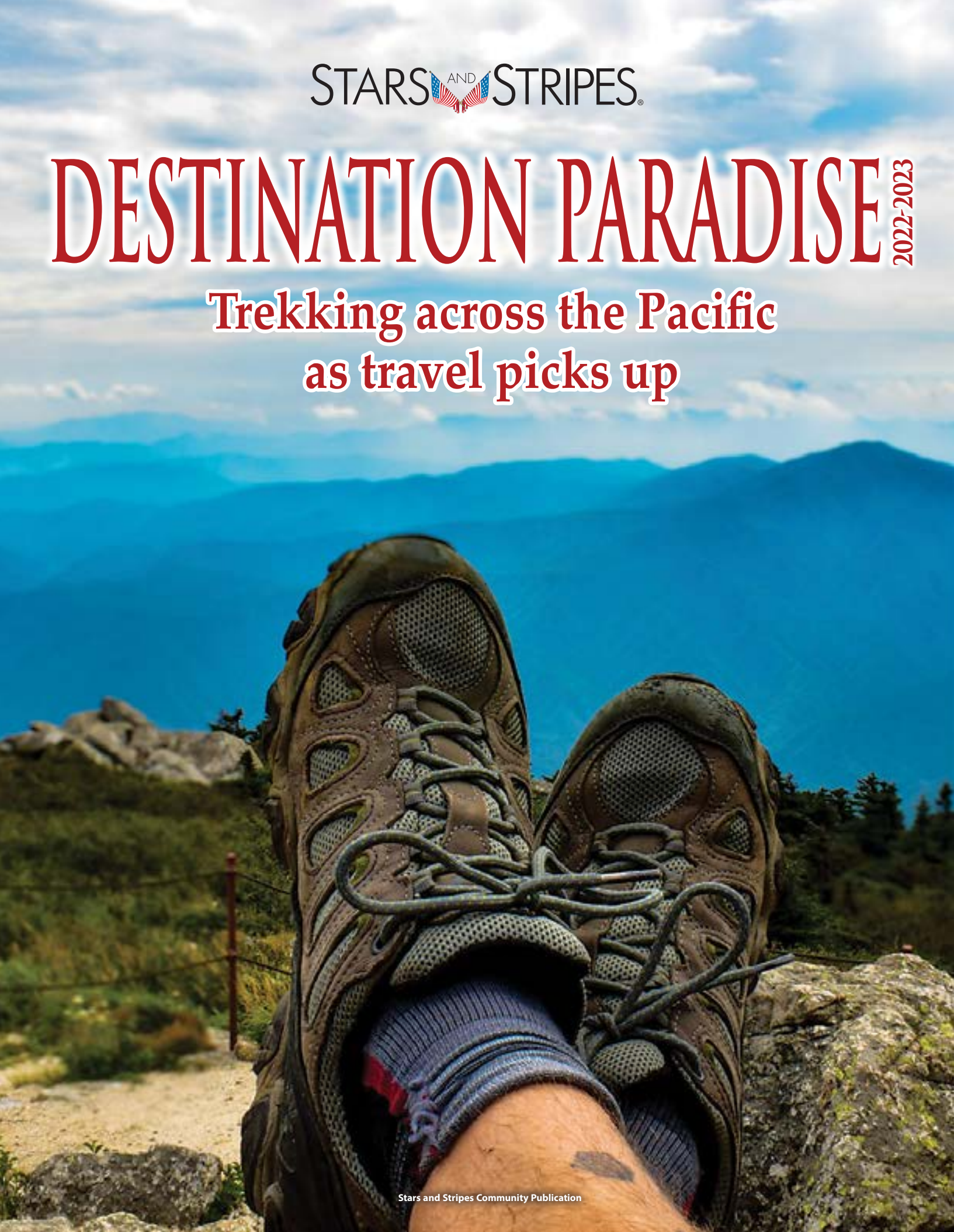


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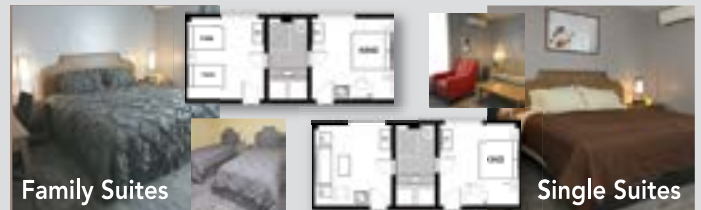
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"Live life with no excuses, travel with no regret."

- Oscar Wilde

We're finally seeing a light at the end of the tunnel! Borders are opening and people are traveling (some carefully, others not-so-carefully). Though the last few years had put our plans on hold, many of us have managed to feed our travel bug close to home while keeping ourselves and our loved ones safe.

Living in the Pacific offers many opportunities to explore. Whether it's through physical travel, cooking local fare, or discovering cultural experiences, the ways we travel are limitless.

Every year, we gather your travel tales and exciting photos for this magazine. And, every year we're impressed by your stories, your efforts to enjoy life in the Pacific and the plans you carefully make to show your family and friends a fun, enriching time.

This magazine continues to be a love letter about our desire to see the world. As you flip through this magazine, you'll see stories from readers like you. Readers who sent in their travel tales to inspire you to continue to seek out the unknown, get off base, go forth and learn a little about your surroundings and yourself. Inside you'll hear from Yashira M. Rodriguez Sierra who writes about her first trip to Tokyo and Ron Roman, who tells of his trip to Ulleung Island in South Korea. Every story you'll read in these pages is written by your neighbors, friends, coworkers right here in the Pacific. Let their stories give you travel inspo for your next adventure!

Our commitment to bringing you great travel ideas and stories does not end with this magazine, nor does it end with travel. In addition to our newspapers 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 the local bases, don't forget to check out Stripes Pacific on Facebook for more stories, helpful videos and fun contests.

As we slowly start to get back outside, keep us in mind. We love to hear about your adventures and so do our readers like you! 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 travel through written word, photos and videos while we dream up where we'll go next.

Denisse Rauda
Publishing and Media Design Editor
Stars and Stripes

STARS AND STRIPES

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Front page photo

Kyle Haney, who completed a one-year tour in South Korea in June 2022, took this shot while relaxing at Daechongbong Peak in beautiful Seoraksan National Park.



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“I was given an opportunity to live out that lifestyle with my one-year assignment in Korea. I quickly realized how fortunate and blessed I was, and I didn’t squander a single weekend.”

Seizing the day in South Korea

Story and photos by
KYLE HANEY



Carpe diem; Latin for “seize the day.” It’s a phrase that implies one is grabbing at every opportunity that comes their way and making the most of it, daily. It’s two words that perfectly sum up what Dylan Thomas meant about not going gentle into that good night.

These days, this term is usually associated with something incredible happening on an Instagram reel or a TikTok channel. But my question to every profile where I see this quote used is: Are you actually seizing the day, or are you trying to make people think you are? Remember folks, social media is just the highlight reel of someone’s life; rarely is it their real life.

With that, it bears reminding that Carpe Diem was never meant to settle as a hashtag on a social media platform. The term was meant to be a statement that sums up a way of life. It’s not “seize the moment” or “take advantage of a good opportunity”; it’s squeezing every ounce of action out of each day you’ve been given.

I was given an opportunity to live out that lifestyle with my one-year assignment in Korea. I quickly realized how fortunate and blessed I was, and I didn’t squander a single weekend. For me, carpe diem was my

mantra as I explored every possible inch of Korea in the 365 days I had there.

I truly believe this article will give you an example of Carpe Diem in action and, hopefully, inspire you to do the same.

1. Hiking national parks

In the one year I was afforded in South Korea, I was fortunate enough to hike eight of Korea’s 22 National Parks: Gyeryongsan, Juwangsan, Seoraksan, Woraksan, Songnisan, Buhaksan, Odaesan, and Hallasan. Here are my Top 3 favorite parks and the reasons why (largely explained via photos because, you know, a picture is worth a thousand words.)

1. Seoraksan

If you’ve followed my blog/posts for a while, you know I go crazy over some good mountain views. Waterfalls, valleys, hikes, sunrises, sunsets; everything is just better when it’s somewhere in or near the mountains. Seoraksan is the best place for mountainous terrain in all of Korea.

Best spot in the park: Ulsanbawi Rock at Sunrise
Runner up: Towangseong Falls.





2. Songnisan

I visited Songnisan twice while in Korea. This park earned my respect through its challenging hikes and impeccable views from the summits, and I'd like to think I earned its respect by sweating my brains out on my way to its summit lol. I'll never forget stopping to appreciate the lily ponds just outside the park. Bright bursts of white color contrasted beautifully against the sea of dark green leaves. Furthermore, I'll never, ever forget the beauty all around me during the fall time. More on that later because it deserves its own category.

Best spot in the park: Literally anywhere in the fall
Runner up: Sanggoam Temple.



3. Juwangsan

Was the drive to Juwangsan from Osan or Camp Humphreys long? Absolutely. But was it worth it? Without a doubt. Only at Juwangsan did I find one of Korea's most photographed spots: a massive, naturally created crevasse that split two rock faces, allowing visitors to pass through a towering void with a gentle walking path designed for hikers of all levels.

Best spot in the park: The walking trail leading to Yongchu Pokpo Falls.

Runner up: the view from Gamebong Peak



VIEW KYLE'S MAP FOR HIS
NATIONAL PARK HIKING STORIES



2. Avoid Instagram hotspots

Thousands of westerners flock to Korea every year for all sorts of reasons: work, play, tourism, and business just to name a few. However, in their short amount of time, it seems they all find time to create a blog with some catchy title with their flagship post being "Top 10 Things to see in South Korea"...

...Clearly, I am guilty of this!

However, without a true carpe diem attitude, these posts will largely point you in the direction of tourist traps or sights pummeled with people taking selfies. Booooooring. Carpe diem is about getting off the beaten path! It's about visiting the things that appear only the slightest bit attractive because you never know what you



might find.

That's how I found Homigot in Pohang.

Now, Pohang isn't exactly somewhere that's widely written about, and rightly so. Pohang's claim to fame is steel production, so it's an industrial city. If you're like me, steel production isn't exactly something you're dying to check out after a hard work week.

However, you could be missing a diamond in the rough by not visiting Pohang: The Hands of Harmony statue on

Homigot (Tiger's Tail Cape). These towering, steel hands found on Homigot face each other some hundred yards apart and represent coexistence and harmony. The right-hand sculpture stands in the East Sea while the left is on land at the Homigot Sunrise Plaza.



FULL POHANG STORY



3. Sensory overload at Donghwas Temple



It's extremely easy to Google "temples near me" while living in South Korea and end up in a tranquil place within minutes—even without a car! But, with so many temples to choose from, you can quickly become inundated by the sheer amount that are available for visiting on the Korean peninsula.

However, one distinct temple stands out in my year of exploring: Donghwas. This temple was the most memorable temple I experienced in all my exploring of South Korea due to its size, location, energy, and remoteness.

I'll never forget making a spur-of-the-moment trip to Daegu, hopping on a bus, and landing amongst the chants of monks during a prayer session. I distinctly remember the relaxing sound the river made as I wondered the grounds, listening to the gentle waterfalls all around.

While it was surreal to be entranced by Buddhist prayers floating around on the breeze, the best part was stripping my shoes off and

STORY CONTINUED TO PAGE 8

having an incredible, meditative grounding experienced in the middle of the river flowing around the temple.

FULL DONGHWA STORY



4. Jeju. 'Nuff said.



Ah, Jeju. So good, I had to go back twice! The first time was during the winter; not particularly recommended lol but definitely nothing you should shy away from either.

I remember my plan on "Jeju Round One" to hike Hallasan and summit the highest peak in South Korea. It seemed pretty cut and dry but, as fate (read: weather) would have it, that plan changed quickly. A wicked snowstorm blew in the night of my arrival and slapped the

mountain so hard that any chance at reaching the top was all but gone. I made the decision then and there that I'd come back in the spring, before I PCS'd, and attempt it again.

On "Jeju Round Two: Spring Edition," I not only climbed the highest mountain in all of South Korea, but because I was only one week from

my PCS, I successfully knocked the final item off of my bucket list.

The hike wasn't memorable for the views, the journey, or the weather, though those factors were all amazing. Rather, what will always reside in my mind was the fact that this hike was the pinnacle of a year's worth of carpe-ing the effing diem. And what better way to celebrate that accomplishment than from the top of a mountain.



FULL JEJU STORY



5. Getting chills at DMZ

I'll never forget the sign that hung on the entrance to the Freedom House inside the Joint Security Area (JSA), "Entering this room will entail entry into a hostile area and possibility of injury or death as a direct result of enemy action." Sounds enticing right? Well, if you have a screw loose like me, it does.

The most memorable part of the trip wasn't seeing the barbed wire fences, the memorials for those killed defending the Republic of Korea, or even the North Korean propaganda village. The most memorable part of the trip was the haunting realization that the only cars coming out of the DMZ are the same that went in.

Let that sink in for just a minute. Unless reunification happens, the vehicles driving north from Seoul will only ever see license plates that look like their own. Kiddos will never have the chance to reach over and slug their siblings' arms and say, "North Korea."

FULL DMZ STORY



6. Busan: My favorite city

Why is Busan my favorite city in South Korea? Easy, the nightlife is amazing, the



food is delicious (and unique to Busan), AND they have the best brewery in all of South Korea. That last claim is coming from a Colorado native where you can't throw a rock in Denver without hitting a brewery.

I visited Busan for the first time in the dead of summer. Temperatures seemed to keep climbing all throughout June and into July, and as I mentioned earlier, I'm a Colorado boy. We like snow where I come from!

I'm used to hot days, sure... hot, dry days. The kind where your body does that whole 'sweating' thing and then science does that whole 'evaporation' thing, cooling you off.

On a Korean summer day, where humidity is 102 percent, that whole 'evaporation' thing fails and what happens is you just sweat your brains out until your clothes are ruined. This is where Busan shined: a sweet release from all that heat with a dip in the ocean.

I remember hopping off the KTX and literally B-lining it to Haeundae Beach, where my clothes nearly flew off my body and I dove into the East Sea. From there, I stumbled down a couple of side streets closer to the city's center to find the coolest brewery in all of South Korea: Gorilla Brewing Company.

I'm not sure of the actual story behind the establishment, but from what I do remember, the brewery is owned by an Australian Expat and his Korean wife. The Aussie speaks Korean with an Australian accent, and the wife speaks English with a Korean-Australian accent. That alone should be a reason to visit. Oh, and the beer is out of this world.



FULL BUSAN STORY



7. Korea + Fall = Immaculate, unforgettable beauty

Remember what I said about those hot, Korean summer days? If you couldn't tell by read-



ing between my lines, I didn't favor them. They were sticky, gross, and filled with entirely too many bugs for my liking. But you know who did love all that sunshine and heat? The trillions of trees covering the entire landscape.

And they proved it in the fall.

Each and every leaf that danced on each and every branch across the Korean landscape burst into flame once the sun began setting lower and lower into the sky. What was a lush, dense canopy teeming with life was now slowly showing its mortality as it gradually lost its daily battle with Jack Frost.

As the greens disappeared, they were replaced by vibrant reds and oranges. It was as if all the energy each tree had absorbed over the summer months was trying to beacon back to the sun in one final farewell. Korea in the fall was the prettiest landscape I've ever had the pleasure of hiking in, and my words just cannot do this paradise justice.

FULL STORY ON
KOREA IN FALL



8. Snowboarding In Korea!

Full disclaimer: the reason I'll always remember snowboarding in Korea is because I challenged myself to go off the biggest ramp in the park and did it. However, the crash that ensued is what will always stick with me, physically and metaphorically.

You might not think Korea would be a choice destination for snowboarding and by comparison, you would be right. Compared to the Rockies, or Japan, Korea offers little compared to these snowy meccas. However, if you're stationed (or living) there and need to scratch the itch, one of Korea's many ski resorts will be sure to help alleviate your needs.

Try these resorts:



Phoenix Park Ski Resort

This resort is my number one choice because of the amazing terrain parks (yes, plural) it offers and because they offer a U.S. military discount on tickets. This is the infamous mountain I alluded to earlier when I said a specific crash will always stick with me lol. The jumps are high, the park is well maintained, and the experience was better than the other parks overall.

Yongpyong Snow Resort

Coming in at number two, Yongpyong is Korea's largest ski resort, meaning there's plenty of room



to spread out. Korean ski resorts can get overwhelmed on the weekends so, it makes sense to visit Yongpyong if you're looking for room to get away from folks on the slopes.

High1 Ski Resort



If you've got a family, High1 is the place to go. Do the kiddos or beginners need gentle

groomers? Do the adults need to bomb down a black diamond? Does the whole family want to skip skiing for the day and try sledding and tubing? If you answered yes to most of these, High1 is the place to go.



FULL REVIEW ON
SNOWBOARDING

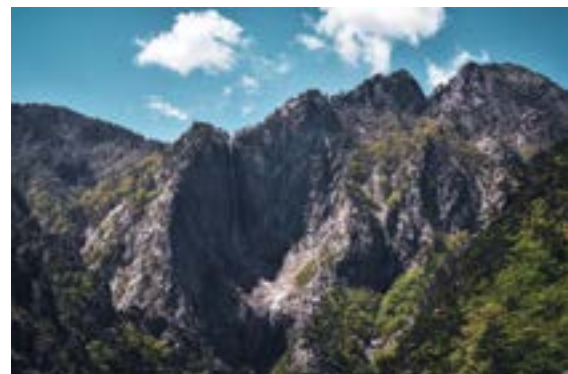


9. Journey to Middle Earth

I mentioned earlier that Busan was my favorite city and while that is true, it's only by a hair. Coming in at a very close second is Sokcho: the gateway to Seoraksan National Park.

Ever wondered what it would feel like to walk around middle earth? Take a moment and imagine what it would look like. Do you picture tall, jagged cliffs with lava somehow spewing out from beneath them as orcs or some other fabled creature grunt and yell as they prepare their weapons for an inevitable battle?

Well, that's kind of what Seoraksan National Park feels like, minus the orcs lol. I'll always remember the tall, jagged peaks to the north stretching upwards to the sky, forming a valley that felt as though Hell itself was just below me. The rocky peaks seemed to create the illusion of some unearthly creature's spine, desperately clawing his way through the earth to terrorize those trampling all over him.



STORY CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

STORY CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

To the south, I'll always remember the endless mountain tops orchestrated in a uniformed fashion as they retreated from the sea. From the top of Daechongbong Peak, I distinctly remember the mist gathering at the base of each mountain, delineating where one mountain stopped and another began as it nestled into each valley.



SEORAKSAN AND SOKCHO



10. Cherry blossoms Cherry blossoms are a lot like an exploding star: lots of buildup for about a split

second of absolute beauty, and then, nothing. If you want to see them in full bloom, your timing must be perfect. While Korea in the fall is incredible, it's much more of a slow burn so, you can afford to put it off a weekend or two and still catch all the beauty. With cherry blossoms, not so much.

Thankfully, I timed my visit to Jinhae to see the cherry blossoms just right. With good timing, I was extremely fortunate to see thousands of these natural wonders in full swing.

I remember all the sights and smells of spring in Jinhae being so refreshing. I remember that I couldn't help myself from stopping and smelling everything I saw with color. From gardens

with tulips and daises to the actual blossoms themselves, I ensured that I appreciated all the beauty that seemingly sprung up from everywhere I looked.

The sight I'll never forget though, is the view of Jinhae from the Jinhae Museum of Changwon City. In all directions, like white, wildfires racing down the edges of the surrounding mountainsides, cherry blossoms burned up the landscape. No matter where I looked, pink and white bursts of color caught my eye among the yet-to-bud trees covering the hillsides.

FULL CHERRY BLOSSOM STORY



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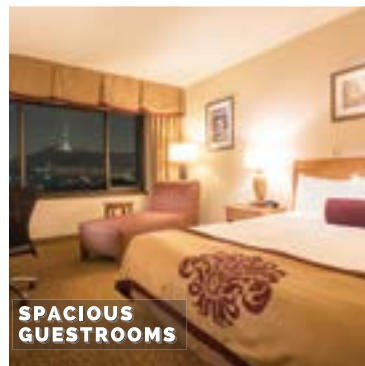
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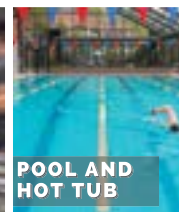
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“For years, I was wandering for so long looking for paradise, but I realized my travel just mirrors my mind. Now I know that depending on the direction of my mind, I can find a paradise wherever I am.”

Jeju: Island of Healing

Story and photos by
SONMI KO



Halla Mountain



Hwangwooji Seonnyeotang

I was convinced that I was abandoned from everything after the failure of my business. All relationships with people were crumbling, and at the same time my, longtime boyfriend dumped me.

I walked away from reality.

I wandered in 11 countries and regardless of my intention, the wandering lasted for five years. When money was needed, I stayed in the same place as long as one year to work. I was excusing it as a time for healing, but I knew it was just an escape from reality. And the escape masquerading as healing did not take me to paradise. Even watching the view of Milford Sound on a cruise along Fiordland coast in New Zealand was unenjoyable.

In Vang Vieng, Laos, on the way back to the hotel room after drinking beer heavily as usual, I heard a voice say, “You’ve done enough, go back home.” The voice didn’t come from somewhere outside and it wasn’t my ego either. I was drunk so I might have been confused, but it seemed like the sound came from somewhere in my inner self.

Eventually, my escapee life ended. I came back home to Korea.

On reality’s persistent demand, I faced all the emotions that I had tried to suppress

a long time and allowed it to stay there as it was.

I did my very best to welcome the reality.

For years, my mind shuttled between heaven and hell. It

was insanely long and boring period, but at that time I didn’t run away because I already knew

that it was inescapable. Surprisingly, I felt my mind get lighter and clearer as days and months passed.

In May of 2021 when travel restrictions were eased for a while, I went to Jeju Island by myself.

In the early morning, I drove along the winding road to Mt. Halla. The foggy look of the mountain was majestic and gentle. Walking along the silent mountain path, I saw a baby deer. I got the feeling that the huge, generous mountain was embracing a puny little thing and the word LOVE came to mind. It was a beautiful, warm and cozy feeling that I couldn’t have even felt at Angkor Wat in Cambodia while I was on the run.

The next day, I went to the Hwangwooji Coast. I walked down 85 stairs to the Seonnyeotang, a hidden natural pool known as The Bathtub of Fairies. The pool was surrounded by rocks of fantastic shape and held clear seawater. It looked like a huge bathtub and the view was just like a beautiful painting. Although it was a bit chilly, a couple of people were swimming in the natural pool.

After spacing out watching the ocean for about an hour, I walked the beautiful coastal path along Hwangwooji Beach. I was met by a majestic 20-foot-high rock called Oedolgae, which was formed during a volcanic eruption 500,000 years ago.

I was thirsty so I went back up the 85 stairs and ordered a glass of carrot juice at the cafe near the stairs. They grow a lot of carrots in Jeju. Drinking my tasty juice, I looked at the glorious view of the natural bathtub and thought to myself, “Everything is perfect.” The word HEALING came to mind, which was perfect because many Koreans call Jeju the “Island of Healing.”

For years, I was wandering for so long looking for paradise, but I realized my travel just mirrors my mind. Now I know that depending on the direction of my mind, I can find a paradise wherever I am.



“The people of Jeju and Seogwipo take pride in their food and will go out their way to help you out and ensure you enjoy their cuisine.”

Sensational Seogwipo

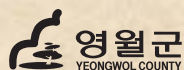
Story and photos by
GIULIANA VODENIK



I'm currently stationed at Camp Humphreys in South Korea with my 12-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son. My family's paradise destination is a small town south of Jeju Island called Seogwipo. This town is full of amazing seafood restaurants all run by locals who catch their fish daily. I'm from Florida, the Orange State, but I have to say Jeju oranges are the best I have tasted in my life! Seogwipo's lovely cafes that serve

up delicious desserts make you never want to leave!

The people of Jeju and Seogwipo take pride in their food and will go out their way to help you out and ensure you enjoy their cuisine. Seogwipo has a beautiful beach and a beautiful temple that overlooks the city. This quiet but beautiful town is a must-visit. We have been to many places in the world, but Seogwipo is by far the best!



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“We spent hours traversing the various trails while fighting off the steep trailways and spiderwebs between the low trees.”

Songdo Beach more than just sandy shores

Story and photos by
JORDAN COOK

Songdo Beach may not be the star of Busan, but it is definitely a diamond hiding in the rough. One step into the Songdo Beach area gives visitors many of the things that make South Korean beaches great, such as the smell of salt water and seafood. As is typical with many tourist locals within South Korea, there is a colorful sign for photo ops with friends, families and, most commonly, couples.

As is customary in most if not all tourist locations in South Korea, there was a cable car to provide an easy means of transport from the lower beach area up to the breathtaking cliff-side. It goes over the open water and has the option for a glass bottom, which creates a sense of flight when riding in it despite being safe as can be in the very comfortable and spacious cable car. I would recommend taking the cable car and it will only set you back 20,000 won for the glass bottomed car, which is truly a steal considering the experience during the trip and on the other end.

There is also a walkway that goes out over the water in between the inland beach and the wave breakers that separate this area from the sea.

On the walkway, there are grates where you can look directly down over 30 feet below to the beautiful blue water. The walkway ends up branching off at a patch of rocks in the sea that allows for a more up-close and personal experience with the deeper sea without the need to go swimming far from the shore.

I went with a friend who, like me, is quite fond of travel. This meant that we were up for the challenge of hiking the cliffside once getting off the cable car. We spent hours traversing the various trails while fighting off the steep trailways and spiderwebs between the low trees. This type of adventure may not be for everyone, but for those who crave adventure and want to experience beautiful views, I would say it is well worth the journey.



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“Ulleung is still pristine and not commercialized, so go there soon. Word is the Korean government is planning to build an airport. It’ll lose much hidden and pristine luster if that happens.”

Ulleung: Your secret Korean island getaway

Story and photos by
RON ROMAN



Downtown Dodong from atop cable car observatory deck.

In July, my wife Yeon Hee and I decided to give Ulleung Island in the East Sea another go after honeymooning there years ago. This time we took Erik, an old friend. Along the way, we’d do a layover on Dokdo Island (claimed by Japan as Takeshima) about 87 kilometers to the southeast. Both islands are only accessible by ferry. As such, Ulleung is still pristine and not commercialized, so go there soon. Word is the Korean government is planning to build an airport. It’ll lose much hidden and pristine luster if that happens.

The ferry from Kangneung on Korea’s east coast takes a little more than three hours to Jeodong Port just north of Dodong, the island’s main entry port city. Clutching our overstuffed luggage, we trudged our way to the Ara Hotel lobby. This quaint but comfortable lodging is probably best known for its goofy English poems and pithy aphorisms splashed over guest room walls. How’s this? “He felt that has whele life was semd kind of dream and he skcnetatiscs was edeted whole it was and wecher they were enjoying it.” Gulp!

(Okay, stop your snickering). Any translators out there? No? Well, forget it. Still a great place to stay.

What next follows is a partial list of our activities We unpacked and walked out to the “Come On In Restaurant” my wife had seen featured on the Internet. There we chowed down on an eclectic selection of Korean buffet-style food for only 10,000 won. Great deal. Back to the hotel.

I was more than bushed from driving the 225 kilometers to Kangneung. Back inside our room, we watched the old movie *Core* starring Hilary Swank. (Whatever happened to Hilary Swank?) Soon I was dozing off ...

Doing Dokdo

Next morning under Parrish-blue skies, the three of us made our way back to the same ferry terminal to ship out to Dokdo. Both my wife and I received ferry time text messages. Result? Different terminal/different harbor. My better half quickly phoned a call taxi; it arrived on the dot. A 15-minute wild ride on narrow, bumpy roads cost 15,000 won instead of the 8,500 won on the meter. Rip-off? She said she’d investigate later. (It turned out to be legit. We encountered no evidence of tourist rip-offs during our stay). Trip reminder: bring plenty of Korean cash in case your credit card isn’t accepted, plus your foreign ID — everywhere. Even Korean nationals need to show their ID on hops between the peninsula and the islands.

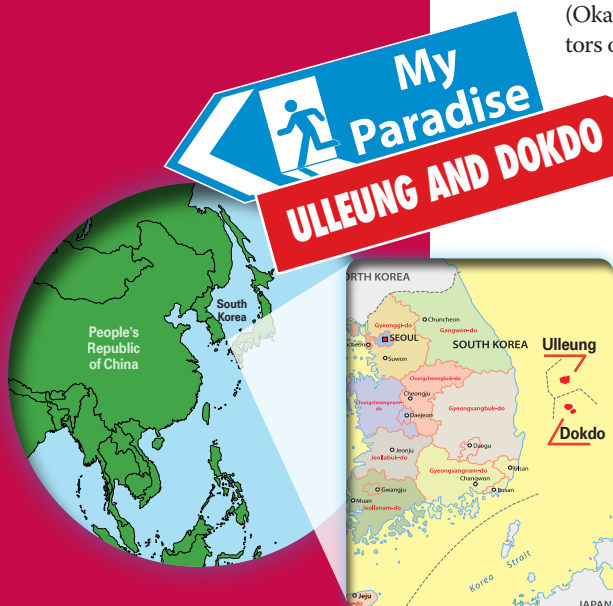
At the Sadong Terminal we got our tickets and were on our way for a 90-minute ride out to Dokdo for a 40-minute stay on the concrete pier on the eastern islet

, weather/tide permitting. (Dokdo is comprised of West and East islets.) Erik started rolling in his ferry seat; my wife thought he was seasick, but no: “I’m only moving to the music inside my head!” he exclaimed. He looked like he had gone one-too-many rounds in the ring with Mike Tyson. But he survived and we got off.

The islet is deserted except for sharp, jagged rocks, a contingent of Korean guards, and ubiquitous seagulls. Once on the pier, the passengers (about 150) took photos and mingled with the



Meeting with guard Kim, Tae Hyun on Dokdo





Author and wife at Bongnaepokpo Falls.



Dinner Gourmandize Bistro featuring Detroit Pizza.

➤ gulls and guards. Mr. Kim Tae Hyun was one of the guards. He spoke decent English and said this place was his duty assignment. Dressed in an all-black outfit with only his eyes peering out from behind his pitch-black headwear, he looked like a guy decked out and sweating beneath a Muslim burqa. Pity the fellow; it was scorching hot, well into the 90s. Such is the call of police duty, eh?

Once on the return trip to Ulleung, expect to see a Korea-produced patriotic film espousing Dokdo as historically Korean territory in the “East Sea,” not in the “Sea of Japan,” as claimed on Japanese-created maps.

Beautiful Ulleung

Back on Ulleung we made a beeline for snacks and drinks. Try the island’s famous pumpkin shik-kae (pumpkin rice wine). Smooth and sweet. Ulleung is known for its pumpkin-based recipes, especially pumpkin rice wine and yeot (hard candy).

Next up: Doko Cable Car (though located in Dodong). Met Chance and Minjin visiting from the US on their own honeymoon. Great view of Dodong and surrounding seas from atop the cable car station platform. Warning: climbing to the top observatory deck is arduous. Not for the weak. Erik had a hard time even descending. Stopped in

a store to buy him a cane. I wound up lugging him to our evening restaurant, Army-style, something I hadn’t practiced since I was on active duty.

Inside our restaurant, far from the cable car, we bumped into Chance and Minjin. Small world. Then it was time for dessert at the convenience store next door. We ate outside. Out popped Chance and Minjin—Chance munching the same dessert as I was. My alter ego or just coincidental fellow trekker?

The next morning for only 1,500 won each, we hopped on the tourist bus traveling counter-clockwise around the island. Who got on with us? Chance and Minjin. (Reminder: The island is not all that large!). We all sat together, by now bosom buddies. The bus makes a full loop around the island showcasing some of the most breathtaking scenery in Northeast Asia: lush, verdant valleys bursting with assorted pines, firs, and evergreen trees aligning deep gorges swollen with roiling waters from the monsoon and cascading down steep mountainsides. The coastline below features the craziest-looking rock formations shooting skyward like black fireworks bursting out in the daytime. After about two and a half hours, we had come full circle.

We then took a taxi to Naesujeon Pebble Beach. Actually, it should be named “boulder beach.” Not

a grain of sand in sight. Yet there’s pristine water. Just be sure to enter from the side stairway; it’s too slippery to enter from the rocks.

Back in Jeodong, if you’re tired of island seafood, chow down on Western food at the Gourmandize Bistro. Excellent selection of fusion foods: an eclectic combination of cross-over foods from various nationalities. It’s a bit pricey, but worthwhile.

Up early, we boarded a taxi for Bongnaepokpo (Falls). Definitely check this out. The falls plunge down a narrow three-layered funnel into a large pool below. Lots of white butterflies blanket the area. The fragrance of the forest permeates this place. An unusual variety of bird songs do as well. You’re one with nature here. And now for the trip back

It was time to pack our bags and bid goodbye to Ulleung and return to the mainland with only our memories of Korea’s Secret Island Getaway.

That would be enough.



—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 apocalyptic doomsday thriller novel

“Of Ashes and Dust” is scheduled for a Nov. 22, 2022, release by Histria Books.

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“It boasts temples, jungles and breathtaking beaches, the food is incredible, it is tourist friendly and the people are incredibly welcoming.”

Run away to Land of Smiles

Story and photos by
ERICA EARL



I was in the need of some escapism by the end of 2021. After a death in my family, a friendship breakup and dealing with the universally shared uncertainty of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, I was desperate to run away, even if only for two weeks. After all, we do call it a getaway, and that was exactly what I needed to do to start 2022 as a healthier person.

For anyone with dreams of planning a similar holiday to the sunshine of Thailand, here is what I did right—and what I did wrong—to help you plan your perfect trip.



Why Thailand?

Before my trip to Thailand, I realized that outside of Japan, I had never traveled Asia except for parts of Israel that are technically part of the continent. Thailand is an amazing destination for checking the “I’ve visited Southeast Asia” box for several reasons. It boasts temples, jungles and breathtaking beaches, the food is incredible, it is tourist friendly and the people are incredibly welcoming. Thailand is even nicknamed the Land of Smiles.

It feels like a big adventure, but within the boundary of a novice traveler who may feel intimidated at the notion of going somewhere like Vietnam, Cambodia or Nepal (although I highly encourage extending your horizons to those countries as well).

Thai winter is like an idyllic midsummer’s day, and as mentioned about the food, it has usurped Italy as my favorite country to eat in because of dishes like green curry, pad Thai and fresh, outrageously cheap seafood (more on that later).

The Itinerary

After doing some preliminary research on the things I felt were imperative to see on my trip, I made the following itinerary. It had a nice balance of the big city, temples, jungle and beach.



Days 1-3: Bangkok

Bangkok is the easiest, and cheapest, option for finding direct flights from Tokyo. It's a buzzy city filled with temples and an impressive skyline. Seeing the contrast of the ancient and the modern is a surreal view. What separates the Thai temples from ones in Japan are the glass and stone mosaics that, when struck by the sun, make the entire structure glitter and sparkle as if struck by magic. In addition to temples, Bangkok and its surrounding areas are known for floating markets. The most popular floating market for tourists is Damnoen Saduak, located about an hour and a half drive from Bangkok. If you want something closer, visit Khlong Lat Mayom, a floating market that is still within the city limits of Bangkok but feels completely separated from the city. It is also less crowded than Damnoen Saduak. Take a longtail boat through the canals past temples, orchid farms and residences and buy and sample fresh fruits, flowers and souvenirs from the docks. The floating market was one of my highlights from Bangkok. My other must-see recommendations are:



Wat Arun: Translated as Temple of Dawn, this Wat Arun is a remarkable sight at sunrise or sunset.

Wat Pho: A complex of multi-colored, tiled temples and home to a massive reclining golden Buddha, measuring an impressive 50-foot tall and 150-foot long.

Grand Palace: Google Bangkok and the Grand Palace is going to be among the first

images that appear. Built for the royal family in 1782, the palace is an architectural work of art. The grounds also house the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, made of gold, jewels and jasper stone.

For the above three places, wear clothing that covers your knees and shoulders and be prepared to remove your shoes in certain areas. You will not be allowed inside if you are considered immodestly dressed.

Sky Bar: Unlike most places in Thailand, dinner and drinks here are expensive, but it's worth it in my opinion to throw down around \$25 for a cocktail with ingredients like lychee, Thai chili and passionfruit for the incredible nighttime views that you really won't find elsewhere in the city. Featured in the second Hangover movie, Sky Bar is located a dizzying 820 feet above the streets of Bangkok on the 63rd story of the State Tower.

Cabbage and Condoms: Yes, you read that correctly. This safe-sex themed restaurant is surprisingly beautiful on the inside and includes several rooms themed after the various regions of Thailand. The restaurant helps support family planning organizations around the country.

Chiang Mai: Days 4-6

From Bangkok, venture to Chiang Mai. I chose the train to appreciate the passing mountains, golden Buddhas and temples, but if a 10-hour train journey sounds more than you can bear, flying is also an option.

Located in the mountainous northern region of Thailand, Chiang Mai is known for its natural springs, lantern festivals and elephants.

I visited the Elephant Jungle Sanctuary, an organization that rescues elephants from logging, riding tours and circus shows. In 10 years, if I remember nothing else from my trip to Thailand, I will remember walking alongside a herd of elephants to a natural spring to bathe and feed them. The half-day tours at the sanctuary included education around keeping these precious beasts safe, feeding and bathing time and an opportunity to play with the elephants and pet them.

I would highly recommend avoiding places that allow elephant riding or lying down next to a sedated tiger and instead choose places



that promote conservation.

Chiang Mai is also known for its night bazaars, marketplaces open until midnight or later that encourage haggling over prices. For lovers of horror, stop by The Castle, a Halloween-themed bar featuring a haunted house walk through, Dracula theming, drinks that the staff light on fire and a zombie apocalypse-themed rage room designed for patrons to destroy everything inside.

Chiang Mai is also one of Thailand's entertainment capitals and home to some fun and glitzy cabaret and drag shows that parody Disney and Broadway. For the unversed, just make sure you go to a real cabaret, not a ping pong show. If you had to Google what that is, that's a sign to double check before entering the theater.

Phuket: Days 7-8

My time in Phuket was a bit rushed in an attempt to check it off my list. Phuket, particularly Patong Beach, is known as being a party area, with a colorful downtown and neon rows of bars, restaurants and clubs.

After one day of the Miami-like atmosphere, I impulsively signed up for a tour of the somewhat-nearby (see, about two hours by bus) Phang-Nga Province for an action-packed day of ziplining, white water rafting, ATV riding and a tour of the Monkey Cave Temple. Despite the thrill of the other activities, the Monkey Cave Temple stood out for being a uniquely Thailand experience. I felt like I was cast in a reboot of Indiana Jones while exploring a series of golden statue-filled caves as wild monkeys ran by.



Krabi: Days 9-16

I saved my entire last week for Krabi, something I recommend doing if you want to see several islands but also feel like you aren't being rushed. I took a ferry from Phuket, but if you decide to skip Phuket, flying is also an option. Characterized for its clear bright blue water, limestone cliffs and several beaches accessible only by boat, you won't want to miss Krabi. It's seriously otherworldly, the images of beaches conjured up in your mind when you hear "paradise." It looks like you are vacationing inside a postcard or the screensaver on your desktop from 2007 that you may have caught yourself gazing at longingly at work, too pristine to be real.

Popular areas include the Phi Phi Islands,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20



Film aficionados may appreciate Krabi for its appearances in *The Man with the Golden Gun* from the James Bond franchise (Khao Phing Kan) or the Leonardo DiCaprio flick *The Beach* (Maya Bay).



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

Hong Island and Railay Beach, all accessible via speedboat or longboat. Activities include snorkeling, kayaking, rock climbing or simply sitting on the beach, drink in hand, taking it all in.

Film aficionados may appreciate Krabi for its appearances in *The Man with the Golden Gun* from the James Bond franchise (Khao Phing Kan) or the Leonardo DiCaprio flick *The Beach* (Maya Bay).

DiCaprio may have won a Golden Raspberry for worst actor for that role, but that doesn't change the fact that Maya Bay is stunning. Unlike in the film, Maya Bay is no secret, and the gorgeous cove only reopened to tourists after closing in 2018 to preserve its coral reefs after a rush of tourism following the film's release caused damage to the environment, according to locals.

For food, I recommend splurging a little at The Grotto, a restaurant inside a beach cave on Railay Beach.

Phi Phi Islands and Railay Beach are my top destinations of Krabi, and I will forever revisit them in my dreams.

What I would change

Despite this trip being nearly perfect, there were a couple of things I would do differently to make it even better.

One would be allotting a couple days for Chiang Rai. Chang Rai is known for the White Temple, a privately owned art exhibit that blends Buddhist traditionalism with modern

art. I regret not seeing it as people who have gone say it looks spectacularly dreamy and Tim Burton-esque.

For food, the best culinary experiences were the street food, and I would have selected to eat more of it if I had it to do over. For only \$1-\$3, you can have a satisfying dish. I did an electric scooter and food stall tour in Bangkok which allowed me to meet some locals and try the likes of Kluay Tod (deep fried mini bananas), Pad Kra Pao, mango sticky rice and spring rolls. I was wary of getting sick, but in my two weeks there I only got sick one time from an American chain of music memorabilia themed restaurants that I will not name but rhymes with "card frock" on a night that nothing else was open.

Lastly, I would apply more sunscreen. While lounging on a longtail boat over the clear water staring up at the towering cliffs, I got caught up in the beauty and my daydreams and forgot to reapply. I got one of the worst sunburns of my life that led to me looking like my skin was getting degloved, so even in winter, don't forget!

When to go

Thailand doesn't really have seasons in the traditional sense, more like "warm" and "unbearably hot" and "rainy."

To avoid monsoons and enjoy the most favorable temperatures, visit in dry season between November and February, favoring mid-to-late January or February to miss the boom of winter holiday tourists.

This timing works out well, because Thailand is basking in the sun during the time of year

where most places are so cold the air hurts your face.

How to go

The timing worked out perfectly that I was able to book a trip to Thailand under the Test and Go schema, which allowed applicants into Thailand after receiving approval from the Thai government, two negative COVID tests and 24 hours of quarantining at a government-approved hotel.

At the time I went, Test and Go was cancelled in December with growing concerns for the relentless Omicron variant, and I was among the last batch of foreign tourists accepted into this program, and fortunate to take my leave—the first time taking leave in over one year—right before Yokota Air Base was placed on lockdown again.

With lightening restrictions, things have changed since my visit. Go to the U.S. Embassy website to see more information on the ever-changing requirements for testing, entry, and re-entry into Japan.

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JAPAN



KOREA

“If you love festivals, but hate making your way through crowds of tourists, head to the remote island of Yap in the western Pacific Ocean where the tourists are minimal and the welcome is maximal.”



Yap a festive island getaway

Story and photos by
JOYCE MCCLURE



Burning Man. Mardi Gras. SXSW. They're on every bucket list of not-to-be-missed festivals. But do the crowds make you think twice about going? If you love festivals, but hate making your way through crowds of tourists, head to the remote island of Yap in the western Pacific Ocean where the tourists are minimal and the welcome is maximal.

One of four states in the Federated States of Micronesia, this 38.5-square mile island is renowned for maintaining its traditions and tropical beauty as the daily way of life.

Fun festivals

Known as the Land of Stone Money due to the massive discs of stone currency that have been used for centuries as legal tender and are still in use today, three annual festivals take place throughout the year when the culture is celebrated by and for local residents.

On or around March 1st, Yap Day starts the year off when two days of festivities are set aside to celebrate the unique Yapese culture. Yap Day officially begins with the blowing of the conch shell and a Stone Money carry ceremony.

What to see and do

During the third weekend of June, Summer Festival brings friends and families together to celebrate the beginning of summer at the Living History Museum in Colonia, the only town on the island.

In early December when the trade winds are most reliable, the Yap Traditional Navigation Society and its respected Master Navigators host the Canoe Festival. The island's navigation history and the art of celestial navigation are on display with a parade of hand-carved sailing canoes and canoe races. Demonstrations include bamboo raft making, weaving of traditional canoe sails and the making of coconut husk rope.

Famous throughout the Pacific for the traditional dances that tell stories about the island, its history and people, each festival features dance competitions between villages. A marketplace offers local food and handicrafts. During their stay, visitors also enjoy diving among the resident population of manta rays and other sea life in the surrounding protected reef, exploring historical World War II memorials erected throughout the island, hiking the centuries-old stone paths that connect the villages, and identifying the flora and fauna that are found nowhere else in the world.

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“Many cities offer one or two-day transportation passes that include unlimited train, bus, or subway rides – check the nearest tourist information center for more information or to purchase.”

Travel junkie's tips, tricks for Japan

Story and photos by
SARAH B. HODGE



A local recommendation from a Japanese photographer friend (Yuushien, Matsue)

Don't rely on Google Maps

I had about a three-hour window in Hachinohe between my bullet train arriving and the Hoshino Resort bus picking me up and decided it would be fun to squeeze in a visit to Tanesashi-kaigan... the problem was that I hadn't accurately checked the return train or bus schedule and ended up stranded as no transportation was running between 11 and 1 pm. When I called the local taxi service, they said it would take an hour (!) to reach me. Luckily a kind local gave me a ride to the nearest train station, but I had the same problem... the next local train wasn't scheduled for another hour, which meant I would miss the only bus that day to Oirase and would likely face a \$200 taxi ride. I still ended up paying \$40 for a taxi to take me back to Hachinohe Station and made my bus connection with about 30 minutes to spare, but moral of the story: don't rely on Google Maps timetables, especially in rural areas with limited service. It's better to get a paper timetable from the local tourist information center or station!

find on the Japanese-language homepage (but not the English versions); Google Chrome is a lifesaver for translating webpages. You may also have to book through the official Japanese-language website to get these special deals as they're not listed on sites like Expedia or Booking.com.

Score discounted bullet train tickets with SmartEX app

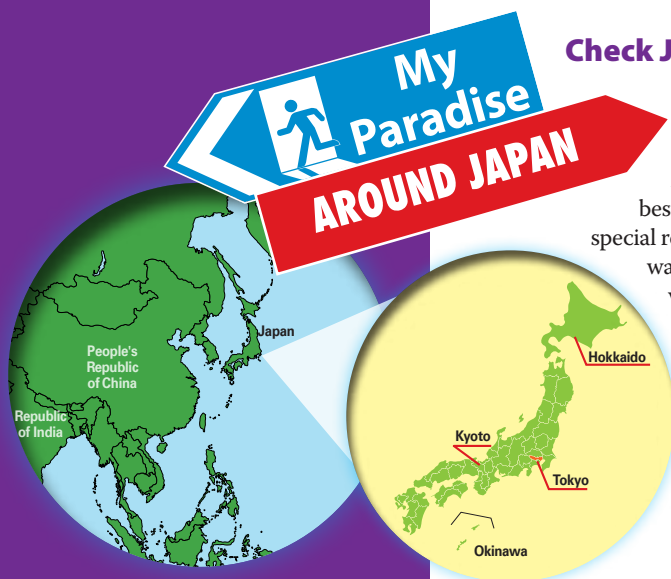
If you book through JR's official smartEX app, you can save up to 40% on one-way and round-trip bullet train tickets (including green car seats) for the Tokaido Sanyo Kyushu Shinkansen that runs between Tokyo, Shizuoka, Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka, Hiroshima, Hakata, Kumamoto and Kagoshima. Using the app has saved me a lot of money on early morning departures. You can easily change reservations up to four minutes before departure without penalty. (Note this does not include other lines like the Hokkaido Shinkansen or Hokuriku Shinkansen connecting Tokyo and Kanazawa.)

Discount tickets, passes available from local railways

One of the great things about domestic travel in Japan is that many railways offer special discount tickets that can include round-trip train fare, meals, and included souvenirs. One example is Keikyū's Misaki Maguro Kippu, which features train travel on the Keikyū line to and from Misaki + unlimited bus travel within Misaki, a tuna meal at any of the 25 listed restaurants, a choice of activities (hot spring, craft activity, glass-bottom boat ride), a tuna souvenir from one of the participating shops, bicycle rental for one day and making a glass souvenir, all for around \$30! Also, some regional rail passes are now available for residents of Japan, including the JR East passes covering Tohoku and Nagano. ➔

Check Japanese version of hotel websites

Many ryokan and hotel websites offer bare-bones English-language pages, but for the best deals, info on special events, special restaurant menus, etc., you'll want to head over to the Japanese versions. This is particularly true for package deals; girls' travel (joshi tabi) is intended for female friends shopping and traveling together, and sometimes includes kimono rental or other fun perks. Many hotels will have special packages for "girls' travel," family plans, etc. that you can





Take advantage of local transportation passes

Many cities offer one or two-day transportation passes that include unlimited train, bus, or subway rides – check the nearest tourist information center for more information or to purchase. (Be sure to check the fine print; many times this does not include private railways, which you will have to pay extra for.) This has definitely saved me a lot of money while maximizing sightseeing! And many major tourist destinations have a loop bus that will take you to the most famous sights; it can be fun just to ride around familiarizing yourself with the town layout.

Kids are king in Japan

The Japanese love kids, and you'll find that nearly every chain restaurant and hotel has child-friendly menus and high chairs (this info can often be found on the Japanese-language pages). There are transportation, hotel, and restaurant discounts depending on your child's age. Nursing rooms and multipurpose restrooms are common, including in train stations. Many hot spring hotels offer private baths where families can bathe together. There are a number of great family-friendly attractions like Fuji-Q Highland, Sanrio Puroland, the Anpanman Museum, Tokyo DisneyWorld and Legoland, and many kid-friendly museums offer in-house cafeterias with children's menus.

Get a feel for local culture with goodwill guide

There is a fantastic network of free guides available through the Goodwill Guide network; I've used them multiple times on trips around Japan and have featured them in my articles for Stars and Stripes. Many of the guides I've met are retirees who enjoy practicing English and sharing their local culture. Although there is no cost to book a guide, you're expected to pay for their transportation and lunch, and I always bring small souvenirs as a gesture of appreciation. <https://www.japan.travel/en/plan/list-of-volunteer-guides/>



Come on in, the water's fine!

In hot springs resorts, you don't necessarily have to be a hotel guest to use the onsen; many hot springs (including some in hotels) are open to visitors for a nominal fee / towel rental. There are numerous hot springs to choose from around Japan, including Hakone (Kanagawa), Kusatsu (Gunma), Gero (Gifu), Beppu (Oita), Noboribetsu (Hokkaido), and Ibusuki's sand baths in Kagoshima. Also, some hot spring towns offer a special ticket that allows you entry to multiple hot springs over a one or two-day period. Each area's spring water is said to have special properties that help with a variety of conditions (usually posted in Japanese). Just remember to check the onsen's tattoo policy in advance.

Sign up for a food tour or cooking class

Being a foodie, cookbook reviewer and cookbook collector, I've taken hundreds of cooking classes in the US, France, Croatia, Hungary, Taiwan and Japan. I try to take a local cooking class each trip, as well as purchase a local cookbook in English. One of my favorite ways to meet new friends and eat great food in Japan is through a home-based cooking program like Niki's Kitchen, which features instructors preparing food from their home countries in their own kitchens. I've had the pleasure of learning about food from France, Serbia, Middle Eastern cuisine, Poland, and

others in Tokyo kitchens, as well as study traditional Japanese cuisine with renowned Japanese cooking expert Elizabeth Andoh through her Taste of Culture program. Many commercial guidebooks also include hands-on cooking experiences and market tours (which are particularly fun in Kyoto's Nishiki Market, Kanazawa's Omicho Market, and Tokyo's Tsukiji Market).



Kyoto cooking class

Get crafty

If you're the hands-on type, you will find dozens of unique hands-on craft experiences around Japan, including indigo dyeing, pottery making, glass blowing and cutting, Kamakura woodcarving, making traditional paper umbrellas, kintsugi (repairing broken china with lacquer and gold), making temple seal books and more... check out websites like Viator and TripAdvisor for lists of available activities. Not only will you have a cool souvenir, but it's a great way to make new friends and learn about traditional culture at the same time!

<https://www.viator.com/Japan-tours/Craft-Classes/d16-g26051-c33939>



Kyoto Railway Museum

Train fans rejoice!

It's no secret that Japan is home to some hardcore train fans and photographers... so for fans of railway memorabilia, check out the several excellent train museums in Omiya, Kyoto and Nagoya. Omiya's Railway Museum, Kyoto Railway Museum and Nagoya's SCMaglev and Park all offer fantastic interactive displays, rolling stock including shinkansen, streetcars, steam, freight and diesel, model trains and driving simulators for the little ones, and amazing gift shops. Bonus: JR Kyoto finally extended the local line and there is now a train stop directly at the museum; when I first visited several years ago, it was about a 30-minute walk from Kyoto Station.

<https://www.kyotorailwaymuseum.jp/en/>
<https://www.railway-museum.jp/e/>



Eating well on the go

When traveling by train, don't miss the chance to grab an ekiben- railway bento box. They are sold in stations and on platforms and feature local products and seasonal dishes (you can even get a super-cute bullet train E7 bento that makes a great souvenir!) Although eating on local trains is frowned upon, it's common on long-distance trains. Bullet trains feature attendants pushing carts with hot and cold beverages, snacks, ice cream and bentos, but on other trains, you'll have to buy food and drinks before boarding.

If you're staying in some hotel chains like Dormy Inn, you may be lucky enough to get free ramen included with your stay. Most hotels offer included breakfast in the room rate; if you're staying in a higher-end hotel that offers multiple restaurant choices, it's worth checking out the various restaurants, which usually include Japanese, Chinese, and French. One of my absolute favorite things in Japan is the traditional Japanese breakfast, which consists of grilled fish, miso soup,



Ekiben (Bento)

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26

pickled vegetables and small side dishes served with white rice or okayu. If your plan doesn't include breakfast, you can always pick up cheap eats at the nearest conbini, but another wallet-saver is to visit a traditional coffee shop (kissaten) or chain like Hoshino, Komeda, Beck's or Dutour and order the "morning set," which usually consists of black coffee, toast, and an egg for a few dollars.



Japanese breakfast

Go local

Sure, Japan's big cities are great, but I love discovering the charm of off-the-beaten path locations as well.

Part of the fun is immersing yourself in local culture – try to catch local music, festivals, and be sure to stock up on local omiyage (food souvenirs) for coworkers and friends! Ask Japanese friends and colleagues for their recommendations, or look on Japanese-language travel sites; some of my favorite finds are the ones that aren't mentioned in English-language guidebooks. If you're not able to visit more remote prefectures in person, look for Tokyo's antenna stores selling regional foods and crafts and promoting local tourism, like the Aomori Hokusai Tokyo Store, Washita (Okinawa), Hokkaido Foodist, and stores representing Nara, Hiroshima, Kanazawa and others.



Tea ceremony at Taihoan

The art of tea

Green tea was first imported to Japan by Buddhist monks who had studied in China. Today, the tea ceremony still has deep roots in Zen, and you can experience the tea ceremony (or even study it – there are several major schools) at a number of locations in Kyoto and Tokyo. Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum has a gorgeous teahouse and hosts an English-language tea ceremony. <https://www.teien-art-museum.ne.jp/programs/performance.html> Other options include Houan (Kamakura), Tea Ceremony Camellia, Kimono Tea Ceremony Maikoya, and Taihoan in Uji (Uji is regarded as growing the best matcha in Japan and specializes in green tea stores and restaurants).



Find your Zen

I have many friends who are Zen priests around Japan, and many Zen temples offer guided meditation in English, including Kenchoji (Kamakura), Tokozenji (Kanazawa Bunko), Dokuonji (Oppama) and Shunkoin (Kyoto).

If you are looking for a unique spiritual experience, I highly recommend the one-night Sanzen experience at head Soto temple Eihei-ji in Fukui Prefecture, founded by Dogen Zenji in 1244. For experienced practitioners



Meigetsuin, Kamakura

ners of Zen, there is a three-day, four-night International Zen workshop that consists of eight to ten 40-minute periods of zazen per day, cleaning, lectures, and formal meals eaten with oryoki (nesting bowls). Entering Eihei-ji's grounds is like stepping back in time; during your meditation retreat, you must surrender your phone, camera, and all personal belongings to focus solely on meditation and work (accommodations and baths are shared). You can also visit the temple as a tourist, but will not have access to many of the inner areas. For those looking for a more casual Zen experience at Eihei-ji, the new boutique hotel Hakujuken on the temple grounds offers temple food, meditation and other Zen arts in its sleek, stylish Japanese rooms:

<https://daihonzan-eiheiji.com/en/zen.html>



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“My first stop in Shibuya was to see the beloved Hachiko statue. Prior to my trip, I read the sad and beautiful story about the Akita dog who waited for 10 years for its owner outside Shibuya Station.”

A dog's world in Shibuya

Story and photos by
YASHIRA M. RODRÍGUEZ SIERRA



My tour in Japan would not be complete without a visit to Tokyo, one of most fascinating cities in the country. Tokyo is known for its tall buildings and for being fast-paced, but it also has things I love like art, interesting stories, and nature. I knew there was a lot to see, so before traveling to the city, I made my own schedule to catch as much as I could in Tokyo's Shibuya district.

On the day when I finally arrived and stepped out of the train station in Shibuya, the calm and silence I had experienced in other places in Japan was gone. Noise came from all directions, the big screens with Japanese commercials, thousands of people rushing everywhere. Right away, I was overwhelmed and quickly came to the realization that Tokyo is totally different from the rest of Japan! And though I also realized that it would be impossible for someone to see the entire city in a short trip, it did not stop the rush of excitement I felt to be in one of the most famous cities in the world!

Dog's day afternoon

My first stop in Shibuya was to see the beloved Hachikō statue. Prior to my trip, I read the sad and beautiful story about the Akita dog who waited for 10 years for its owner outside Shibuya Station. Hachi, as he was affectionately called, waited for Hidesaburō Ueno, his human who was a professor at the University of Tokyo. Part of Ueno and Hachi's routine was to walk to the station together every morning. One day, Ueno suffered a fatal stroke at work and died, but Hachikō continued to wait for his owner, not knowing that he would never return.

During his wait for Ueno, Hachikō suffered a few setbacks himself, including getting severely attacked by a group of dogs. Eventually, a news reporter and former student of Ueno's published a story about the faithful companion in 1932, which brought national attention to Hachi's tale. In 1934, a statue by Teru Ando was erected in the dog's honor. In 1935, when Hachikō passed away, he was buried at Aoyama Cemetery next to his owner. They were finally reunited. During World War II, the government took down Hachi's statue because it was metal and needed for weapons' manufacturing, but a new one was made and erected in 1947 by the original sculptor's son Takeshi Ando.

Visitors to the National Science Museum in Tokyo's Ueno district can also check out a stuffed Hachikō made from the preserved fur of the loyal dog.

The statue is just outside the Shibuya Station and right in front of Shibuya Crossing, so it can be difficult to get a good picture during the day because there are so many people. I returned in the morning to get better photos of Hachikō.

After I stopped to see Shibuya's famous Akita dog, I continued to the Crossing, a very busy pedestrian intersection. As chaotic as it is organized, people flow into the intersection from all sides as vehicle traffic comes to a complete standstill. What makes this intersection famous is that thousands of people cross at the same time taking over the intersection every two minutes!

Shibuya from above

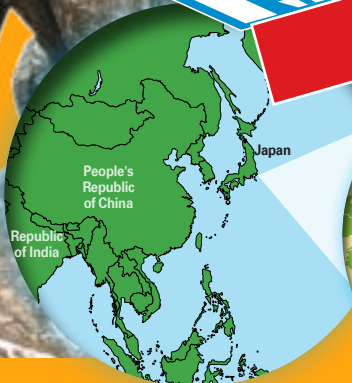
To get a better look at the crossing from above, I made my way to the second floor of Shibuya Mark City, a big department store with an indoor pedestrian bridge that overlooks the crossing. I was surprised to not see tourists on the bridge, so I think it's one of the least known places to see the crossing for free. This building has two towers, one with 23 floors and the other with 31.

In front of Mark City is Shibuya Scramble Square Tower, the tallest building in the Shibuya area. This building has an outdoor observation desk named "Shibuya Sky" located on the 46th floor, which offers a 360-grade view of Tokyo. This building is 230 meters high and is 47 floors above ground! I went up to the 14th floor to visit Shibuya meets Akita (Hachifull), a Hachikō-themed souvenir. What I loved the most of this store is the extraordinary and beautiful wood sculpture of Hachikō on display in front of the store! I made sure to pick up some postcards, a stuffed dog, and a few more items to take home.

After leaving the building, I headed to Hikarie Tower. This structure is 183 meters high, is the 52nd tallest skyscraper in Japan and the 40th tallest building in Tokyo. What makes this building different is the flashy decoration with an interior and exterior blue LED lighting.

The Tokyo Metropolis has so much to offer, and a single trip is not enough time to see everything. And even though it's a noisy city, Tokyo is worth exploring because it offers everything I love, including art, stories, nature and design. I will definitely be back soon!

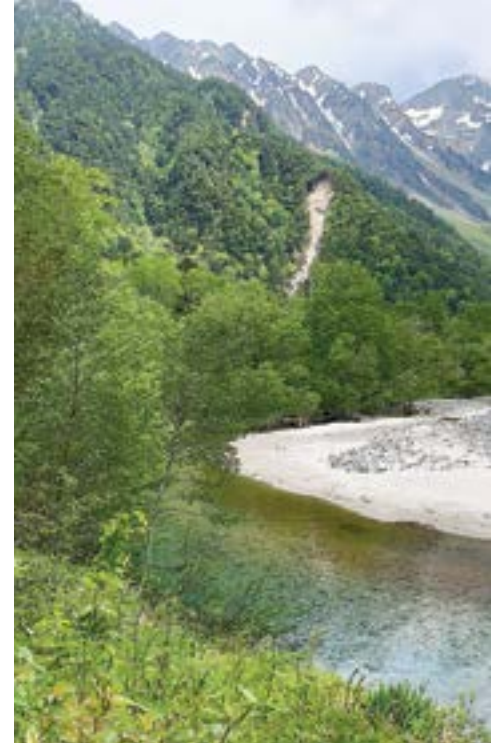
Yashira M. Rodríguez Sierra is originally from Caguas, Puerto Rico. She is assigned to Sasebo Naval Base. Rodríguez enjoys nature and moving to Japan was a dream come true. Before joining the Navy she was an artist and journalist.



“The monkeys are playing all around us, some getting quite close! It is incredible to be so immersed in the wild that the critters live among you. It’s not a zoo. It’s Kamikochi!”

Camping in Kamikochi

Story and photos by
HAZEL GRAY



Monkeys. Everywhere. They stare at us, and we are careful to not stare back. Out come the cameras to capture the scene — the surprising picture that greets us as we round the bend in the trail and reach our campsite. We have just finished backpacking five miles on a relatively flat trail along the Azusa River in Japan. It took us about three hours from start to finish, including several scenic stops along the way. As we scout the land for a suitable spot to pitch our tents, we hear the cheerful din of other campers mixed with the magnificent song of the surrounding forest. Welcome to Kamikochi!

We have come on an Outdoor Rec trip, departing Yokota Air Base at 5:45 a.m., on a Saturday and riding on a bus for about four hours to the Kamikochi parking lot. (Because we were riding a bus, we were able to drive all the way to the Kamikochi lot — regular vehicles are prohibited from entering Kamikochi and must pay to park and take a bus

to access the National Park.) We take a short hike down to Taisho Pond, where we get a clear view of Mt. Yake (YA-kay), an active volcano that still smokes visibly. The scenery is fantastic, with the clear blue water, mighty trees, lush foliage, fish dancing in the lake, and

even a few monkeys relaxing in the open spaces. We eat our pre-packed lunch beside the river underneath the Kappa-bashi bridge (Mom’s yaki-imo are sooo tasty!!) and begin backpacking up to our campsite: Tokusawa.

After pitching our tents, we hike around the Tokusawa area before dinner. The air temperature is almost too hot during the day, but it got quite cold when the sun dropped behind the mountains. We are thankful we packed our warm layers. Kamikochi is exhilarating and gorgeous, but I could not have enjoyed it even half as much as I did if I had not been with my family.

My true paradise is the unseen place of family experiences. Our trips are memorable because we do them together. I even look back fondly on the not-so-fun places we have been to because we were all there. **TOGETHER.**

We rinse our dishes and brush our teeth in the portico by the lodge. Before we climb into our tents, we gaze at the stars. They peep out, one at a time, as the sun drifts deeper and

deeper behind the belt of mountains. We immediately spot the Big Dipper, but it takes some time before we find the North Star and other familiar constellations. It is wonderful to look up and see the billions of celestial pinpricks forming beautiful pictures in the inky night sky. When it is too cold to stay out comfortably, we scramble into our tents, where it is nice and warm.

Have you ever listened to the song of silence? It’s enchanting. Unfortunately, if you are trying to do so now, you will most likely hear the clattering of dishes, the rumbling of the car engine, the tumbling of clothes in the dryer, or the boisterous laughing of your neighbors. But if you were to really get away to a quiet place and listen, you will





hear absolutely nothing. You will not even hear the grass rustling or the tree branches swaying. The silence descends like a stifling blanket and you feel almost alone in the world. Almost, but not quite. Beyond the dense veil is a wonderful music, bursting with life and energy! When you learn to listen beyond the earthly sounds and hear the incomprehensible world, you feel truly enlightened.

As I lie in my cozy sleeping bag that night, not twitching a muscle, I listen past my regular heartbeat and into the depths of creation itself. It lulls me to sleep.

We wake up with the sun in the morning and repack our backpacks after a quick breakfast. The monkeys are playing all around us, some getting quite close! It is incredible to be so immersed in the wild that the critters live among you. It's not a zoo. It's Kamikochi.

The sunrise reflecting off the Kurasawa Mountain range is stunning! We take a few more pictures before donning our backpacks and starting back to the Kamikochi parking lot. Many other campers have already left. Some go back the way we are going, but others continue along the trail and up toward the mountain peaks for a long and intense hike. There are no robust campsites where they are going, but there are basic lodges where they will be able to rent a bunk for the night and have a hot dinner and breakfast. Maybe we will return and explore up there sometime soon.

By the time we get back into the bus, we are exhausted. We collapse into our seats, our limbs yielding to gravity. But fatigue to us is a sign of a successful adventure. In everything we do, we are always happy in the end because we do it as a family. We experienced Kamikochi together, and that is what really counts. Family is my paradise, wherever we are.

Japanese camping

Campsites in the US are typically private and spacious. When you pay for a campsite in Japan, however, you pay for a space just big enough for your tent. An open space large enough to fit one or two US campsites can be overcrowded with nearly a hundred tents! Fortunately, the neighbors (though all strangers) are considerate and don't come close to your area. Also, open fires are prohibited, so be sure to pack other means of cooking and staying warm.

Monkeys

In English, they are called "snow monkeys." In Japanese, they are translated literally to "monkeys." They are commonplace in rural Japan, but Kamikochi in particular is full of them! They love staring at visitors, but you must not stare back. They will take it as a challenge to fight... You will lose.

Spicy noodles

The three of us split the five cup noodles we packed for dinner. I got a standard, my dad got a curry broth and a Shin Ramyun (spicy), and my brother ended up with the two spiciest ones! They were the Samyang Buldak Hot Chicken Flavor Ramen and 2X spicy of the same kind! Of course, he did not know they were spicy, but when he made the regular Samyang Buldak, the sauce smelled so hot that he was suspicious. My dad took the first bite and as soon as he crammed his mouth with a generous helping, his eyes widened and filled with tears, his face flushed crimson, and he whooped passionately, slapping his leg in surprise!



Whoopie!!
How
SPICY!!!
Meanwhile
everyone
in the
vicinity was
falling over
laughing,

including other Japanese campers. We deemed the dish inedible. Only after preparing the noodles from the 2X spicy pack and mixing them into the first one to dilute the sauce could my brother manage to consume it. Even that was still extremely spicy. We can only imagine how the 2X spicy pack tasted on its own!

Tokusawa ice cream

The Tokusawa campsite is one of the furthest official sites along the trail. Next to the campground is a lodge with a shop and restaurant. Here you can buy the famous Tokusawa soft cream for ¥350. It is delicious! And huge!

Natural spring

"Furoike" (translates to "Old Lake") is a freshwater spring towards the end of the trail to the Tokusawa campsite. In the fall and winter, the spring is frozen solid, but now you can see the thousands of tiny bubbles gurgling up to the surface, each one transfiguring the crystal reflection of the trees above.

Bears

There are bears! We never saw any, but one was sighted on the day of our hike near the springs only an hour before we were there....

Reverend Walter Weston

The British Reverend Walter Weston, an Anglican missionary to Japan in the 19th century, was the first Englishman to hike the Kamikochi area and he dubbed the mountain range the "Japanese Alps." He published his travels, "Mountaineering and Exploration in the Japanese Alps" in 1896. Kamikochi is home to his memorial.

Wild mountain vegetables

In many places throughout Japan, you can find some of the delicious greens that are served at your favorite restaurant growing wild — and Kamikochi is no exception! If you look around while you're there, you can see anything from fuki (butterbur) to kogomi (ostrich fern).

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“You could easily fill up every day at Yoron Island with exploring so make sure you leave time to watch a sunrise or sunset!”

When You're on Yoron

Story and photos by
ALLIE WHALEN



If you're ready to do some island hopping from Okinawa, you're in the right place! Yoron Island (pronounced almost exactly like "you're on") is an other-worldly beautiful destination in the East China Sea just north of Okinawa. I've got an itinerary for you that will fill up 3 days, but also leave you with time to sit in a hammock and relax at the beach. You could easily fill up every day at Yoron Island with exploring so make sure you leave time to watch a sunrise or sunset!

Yoron Island is the perfect adventure for a long weekend if you're ready to explore some of the remote islands around Okinawa. I wouldn't recommend trying to fit Yoron into a day trip because of the length of the ferry ride from the Motobu Port. It is about a 2 1/2 hour ferry ride with ferries only servicing the island a couple times a day. If you leave first thing in the morning, you can make it to Yoron for lunch but the last ferry leaves around 3 p.m. - that barely leaves time for exploring! I wouldn't necessarily recommend staying just one night either, although it's doable if you want to mark Yoron off your bucket list. We camped for 2 nights/3 days and still want to go back to see more of the island! If you're ready for the ultimate adventure on Yoron, [read all about the campground](#) and what to expect.



Things to do on Day 1

- 1 After leaving the port, head to the "town center" and check into your campground spot (if camping) at the [City District Office](#).
- 2 Let the kids get their wiggles out at the playground, or just enjoy your first beautiful [Yoron beach](#).
- 3 Grab lunch and coffee at [Meedafu's Yui Hostel and Coffee](#).
- 4 Check out the [A-coop grocery store](#) and get extra supplies for camping or s'mores.
- 5 Find your spot at [Yurigahama Campground](#) (or bungalow) or hotel and get settled before heading back out for more adventure and a Yoron sunset!
- 6 Enjoy a super fresh [sushi dinner](#) in the town center.



Things to do on Day 2

- 1 If you camped it will be super easy to wake up with the sun and walk out the to beach to catch a beautiful sunrise.
- 2 After a walk on the beach begin the day with a drive around the island. As you drive along the road that circles the island and hugs the coast, you will find lots of amazing places to stop and explore ([like this beach](#) with large sand dunes and rock formations just off the beach.)



- 3 Stop at [Yoron Seaside Garden](#) for coffee or tea and some snacks. There





port. They have a small pharmacy and are well-stocked on motion sickness medicine for kids and adults.

Some other helpful websites

- [Yoron Island Tour Guide](#) - this website is published by the Yoron Tourism Association and is easily translated to English. It has all the info you'll want to access including hotels, restaurants, and beaches.
- Motobu to Yoron Ferry - this website will walk you through the process of reserving a ferry ride and deciding if you want to take a car. There are two ferry companies (A-Line and Marix) that service Yoron.
- If you go at the right time of year (usually summer at low tide and full moons), you will be able to take a boat a short distance to the [Yuriga-hama Sand Bar](#). There is also some incredible, world-class scuba diving all around here!



- You don't need a car to travel around Yoron but it sure makes it easier! There are some car rental places on the island as well as bike rentals and even a couple taxi services. We took our car and had an easy time reserving a spot for it on the ferry. If you're camping (especially with children!), then a car will be extra helpful. If you can pack minimally, then bikes would be a blast!

If I've left you with any questions, just shoot me an email or find me on [Instagram](#) and I'll be happy to walk you through it all! And if you have the opportunity to visit Yoron, you know I want to see your pictures!!



Allie Whalen is a culinary artist and amateur photographer with a love for the outdoors. She shares her experiences online where she writes about simple and holistic ways to take care of yourself and the world around you. She is a military spouse based in beautiful Okinawa. Allie and her family enjoy the rugged, tranquil life on the northern parts of the island. You can find Allie's blog at [alliemwhalen.com](#), where she chronicles her adventures in learning and living by the sea.



is a small admission fee but it's totally worth it! I can almost guarantee that you've never seen a more beautifully landscaped garden with a more incredible view of the ocean. There's even a secret beach located on the property that can only be accessed from the garden.

- 4 Visit the [Yoron Ethnic Village](#) and see how some of the homes on Yoron used to be built.



- 5 Grab lunch at a [pizzeria](#) in the part of town that's designed to look like a Greek village and walk around the beautiful white and blue buildings.



- 6 Choose any beach and explore it until a couple hours before sunset!

- 7 No trip to Yoron would be complete without a trip to the [Southern Cross Center](#). It is Yoron's official museum and you'll learn all about the island as well as have some of the best views of the island. The center is one of the highest points on the island which also makes it one of the best places to watch the sunset. Save this part of the trip for late afternoon/early evening. Trust me, dinner can wait!



- 3 If you haven't had soba yet on your trip to Yoron, this is the perfect opportunity. Yoron Island has its own type of soba noodle and one of the [best places](#) to try it is near the tiny Yoron airport. The soba noodle is made with seaweed (mozuku) and I'm sure you'll love it!



- 4 After an early lunch of mozuku soba head down to the ["secret beach"](#) below the restaurant. You'll find some of the softest sand, swings, hammocks and even the popular angel wings!



- 5 Before you head to the port make sure you have all the souvenirs your heart desires! The [souvenir shop](#) has everything from mozuku noodles and Yoron Island cookies to shells and t-shirts.



- 6 If your fear of any motion sickness on the way home starts to rise up, swing by the ["home improvement store"](#) close to the



Things to do on Day 3

- 1 You'll have to get checked out of your hotel or take down camp this morning, but it's also your last chance to watch a sunrise on Yoron!
- 2 The ferry usually heads back to Okinawa around noon so you'll have a few hours to explore a little more. The Ajinezusakae Shrine is a quiet and peaceful area to walk around. The torii gate is picturesque and the grounds have beautiful, mature trees.



“Full of unadulterated natural splendor, rare animals that live nowhere else on Earth and smaller human enclaves throughout which move at a different pace, northern Okinawa feels like a whole different island.”

Northern Okinawa Getaway

Story and photos by
DAVID KRIGBAUM



Ie Shima

Even people on a tropical getaway sometimes need a getaway from the every day. Living and working on one of the U.S. bases in central Okinawa, it's easy to get into the daily ticket-punching routine that goes on in every workplace, but there's an escape just a few hours away and you don't even need to get a plane ticket.

Full of unadulterated natural splendor, rare animals that live nowhere else on Earth and smaller human enclaves throughout which move at a different pace, northern Okinawa feels like a whole different island. Now with Okinawa's Yambaru National Park area along with the Amami Islands declared a UNESCO world heritage site, there's no better time to spend a few days up north and enjoy this other Okinawa. I'll say it once here so I don't repeat myself, but there's so much up there that feels like an unreal adventure setting.

Ie Shima

A ferry ride off the Motobu Peninsula will take you to a low slung island crowned with a single peak set against the blue sky. This

is Ie Shima and we spent a day for my favorite things, namely World War II sites, Okinawan caves with legends attached, and rum. The ferry itself was part of the experience as it glided over the glassy sea reflecting back the sky with nary a heavy bump.

Our first visit, after getting a rental car, was to where famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle was killed. Pyle covered the war in Europe on the ground with the Army, earning a reputation as a writer who cared about the lives of soldiers. As that war

began winding down, he shifted to the Pacific and it was here he met his end April 18, 1945. When visiting his obelisk, walk all around as there is another memorial plaque on the back from the crew of USS Cabot.

Also in this corner of the rural farming island is the Red 1 invasion beach (marked as GI Beach on Google Maps) with white sand and glowing blue

waters. The definitive vacation island beach, it brings to mind a quote from the John Wayne film *Donovan's Reef*, "Hard to believe that war has ever been within a thousand miles of a place as peaceful as this."

Beside the beach is the cave Niya-Thiya, where a large rock is said to grant wishes to those who can lift it. The cave itself has water-side openings from which we watched the waves crash into the cliff side.

We finished our time on island walking to the peak of its only mountain, Gusukuyama. This affords a 360 view of the flat island, Okinawan mainland and even more misty shapes of islands beyond which beckons the adventurous spirit to find out what lays on their shores, though that will have to be for another time.

Sold at the Michi no Eki road station just below the summit is Santa Maria rum. Most



Niya-Thiya



➤ Japanese rum is made by sake and shochu distillers and tastes suspiciously like sake. But this rum made with Ie Shima sugar cane is the real deal. We picked up a few bottles and their wonderful natural cane syrup for making even better Mai Tais once we returned home from our trip. But first, a return to the Okinawan mainland and one of the western coast road's best overlook.

Kayauchi Banta

It's not a point, but the western road rides coastline and is a continuous unobstructed



view of blue sea, blue sky and green mountains complimented by the wind blowing through the open window

and your poor taste in music (80's idol J-Pop, because I'm trash at heart). There are a few sightseeing stops where you can admire the coast along the way, but for the best one my wife took us up to Kayauchi Banta overlook. It's off the main road on a hill following a narrow road which cuts through the split in a massive rock. Before the coastal road was built, this "backtracking trail" was the only route north. The passage through rock cleft was so narrow people can only traverse it single file.



Daiseikirinzan

Daiseikirinzan

The main event of our visit was Daiseikirinzan near the northern tip. A limestone karst thrust upward through subtropical jungle, looking down on the surrounding area. I've never seen anywhere quite like it. The many rock formations are natural art at its finest and the enveloping jungle gives it a surreal exoticism.

In case it wasn't fantastical enough, it's also part of Okinawa's largest sacred place, the land of Ashimui. Four peaks compose this land, which is said to be the profile of the goddess of mercy, Kannon. They represent the physical and celestial worlds with the space between them being a spiritual one. Some of the rocks here are power spots with special attributes such as healing and childbirth.



Hedo Misaki

We finished out the day at Okinawa's northernmost point, Hedo Misaki, just before sunset. The rocky protrusion juts over the sea without a protective railing, allowing the adventurous among us to go all the way at our own peril. I gingerly crawled along the sharp blackened limestone on hands and knees as far as I dare, watching a father and his children casually chilling at the far point. My wife, like some tiny Japanese cross between a ballerina and a mountain goat, bounced across the rocky tips with ease. Despite her child-like demeanor, she chided me to be careful as one would an elementary school student. Then she went back to carefree dancing to the tip. The view in the photos speaks for itself.

Gihon-Ou's Tomb

With the sun going down, we had just enough daylight for a second final stop, much to my wife's chagrin. Gihon-Ou was a 13th century northern king whose rule predated the island-wide Sho dynasty. The last of his dynasty, his rule was marked by natural disasters and plagues, causing him to abdicate and take his bad luck with him. He walked off into the jungle near Hedo Misaki and was never seen again.

The stone house-shaped mausoleum is a far cry from the opulent multi-generation mansion-like mausoleum Tamaudum, beside Shuri-jo Castle in Naha. Viewed in dying light filtered through the jungle canopy, it has an almost ethereal lost world quality, if you ignore the dual-language sign and the cleaning supplies in the corner. Just walking up its broken stone stairs buried under a layer of undisturbed leaves felt surreal, as small creatures stirred in the jungle, matching my movement step for step.

For those who caught site of the giant concrete bird overlooking Hedo Misaki, that is an Okinawa Rail, also called the Yanbaru Kuina.

This little road runner is Japan's only flightless bird species and it only inhabits northern Okinawa. It wasn't even officially identified until 1981, and previously locals had called it "agacha," which means "nervous or always hurried person." Sadly, due to encroachment and invasive species, the rails have dwindled in number to under 1,500. For this reason, there's been an effort to breed them and bump their numbers back up. You can even meet a real one at the Okinawa Rail Learning Center.

Okinawa Rail Learning Center

Most Okinawa rails are very shy but the one who lives here is friendly, loves cameras, and attention. His name is Kuuta-kun and he's possibly the only rail you'll ever see. He lives in a large terrarium replicating the rail's natural environment. According to the staff, he's very intelligent, responds to his name and will follow the staff and guests around through his glass. I'm not a big animal person, let alone a bird one, but we somehow just watched him for 90 minutes straight, it's hard

not to fall in love with the little guy. Next time we're up that way we look forward to stopping by and seeing him again.

Since this is closer to the eastern shore of Kunigami Village in the Yanbaru area, it's best to see on the way back down after making it up to the tip. I recommend staying in one of the nearby hotels such as the Ada Garden Hotel. It was comfortable and recently renovated.

There is more to do and see than we did, so before going do some research and find what appeals to you.



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“Starting with my arrival through to the end, my journey unfolded into a fabulous Andean adventure filled with spectacular daytrips and delicious food. It was not exactly a trip for dieters!”

BIENVENIDOS ECUADOR

Story and photos by
ROBERT ZUCKERMAN



Ecuador Arrival

I'd wanted to visit South America ever since graduate school as my roommate and other friends came from there. When travel started to open up again and the opportunity to head to Ecuador presented itself, I was ready. A flight from Tokyo to Quito will take you over 24 hours, but I promise the trip to this beautiful country is well worth the effort.

My flight arrived in Quito in the evening where I was graciously greeted by my guides. I enjoyed a light dinner of empanadas and a cold shrimp soup before turning in for the night.

Starting with my arrival through to the end, my journey unfolded into a fabulous Andean adventure filled with spectacular daytrips and delicious food. It was not exactly a trip for dieters!



clothing served up the first of many Ecuadorian epicurean delights I enjoyed on my trip. Here, the backdrop of San Pablo Lake and Mount Imbabura created a magnificent view.

After lunch, we strolled around the resort grounds and watched the black ducks in the lake and multicolored llamas. Next, we visited the Otavalo Market in the Plaza de Ponchos where indigenous people are selling textiles, feather paintings and more. The afternoon rains were more refreshing than bone-chilling and a great time was had by all as the shelf above the minibuss seats overflowing with souvenirs proved.



Otavalo, Imbabura

Our first full-day tour was to the Otavalo area located in Imbabura Province. At a low altitude, by Ecuadorian standards, this area sits at 2,532 meters or 8,307 feet above sea level. Surrounded by volcanoes including the mountain which lends its name to the province, this region has much natural beauty to behold. After spending some time admiring the deep river canyon from the roadside, we stopped for lunch at Puerto Country Inn Restaurant where staff in traditional

Quilatoa Crater Lake

The next day we ventured to what would be our highest point of the trip, both literally and figuratively. We went winding through the magnificent Andes Mountains, stopping along the way for such local delicacies as bizcochos and cevichochos. With energy built up on our long mountainous journey, we were ready to view one of the



Speakin' Spanish

Helpful travel phrases

Due to its geographical location and diverse landscape, Ecuadorians speak Spanish with Amazonian, Andean and Equatorial Coastal variations, according to Translators Without Borders. Below are a few key simple phrases for traveling in Latin America's Spanish-speaking countries, but remember that each country has a unique dialect and might also utilize other languages like Portuguese, English and indigenous languages native to the area.

This food is delicious! La comida es deliciosa.

Excuse me. Disculpame.

I don't speak Spanish. No hablo español.

My name is ___. Nice to meet you! Me llamo ___. ¡Mucho gusto!

Where is ___? / How can I get to ___? ¿Dónde está ___? ¿Cómo ir a ___?

➤ most breathtaking views I have ever seen.

Quitator Crater Lake is about 12,500 feet above sea level, and its turquoise blue waters are unbelievable.

We enjoyed strolling the trail and taking many photos here. There is a small indigenous

Quecha village along the shore which still, to this day, receives daily supplies via donkey. Tourists are permitted to make the journey down to the village, but it is one long hike back up so that was not on our itinerary.

Our next stop was the Rumipamba de la Rosas-Hosteria Restaurant, which prides itself on its all-American menu complete with Americana décor and a 1950's-era juke box. I indulged in an amazing off-menu local chicken specialty complete with roasted plantains, local corn varieties and more.



we learned about the local nature, culture and historical significance of the surrounding area. We also tried our hand at balancing an egg on a nailhead at the exact 0-latitude point. I, unfortunately, failed at this, but many in my tour group were successful and received a certificate as proof.

For lunch, we went to El Crater Restaurant on the edge of Mount Pululahua where we enjoyed scrumptious meals with corn and either beef or flounder.

Though it was quite foggy up top, the meal was once again an amazing experience.



Mount Cotopaxi

The next day we journeyed to Mount Cotopaxi, an active volcano which last erupted in August 2015. The area, which is part of a national park, demonstrates the effects of a recent eruption versus what we saw in the landscape at Quítoa Crater Lake the day before. Here, you can see wild horses running about in the rocky grasslands looking for food and the pink boulders lying astray are a sight to behold. Though Cotopaxi was sheepishly fogged at the top, we had a

lovely stroll along its lagoon. After, we warmed up with a cup of coca tea and small empanadas.

We then headed to the historic Hacienda Santa Ana, founded in the 1600s by Jesuit missionaries, where I enjoyed what would be my most favorite lunch of the whole trip. For a mere \$22, we had a four-course meal which included delectable dishes all prepared from ingredients grown within the hacienda grounds.

After lunch, we enjoyed a siesta on the bus ride back to Quito.

Intiñan Museum

After a couple of days of enjoying nature, our third day was made up of visiting museums on the zero-degree latitude. At Intiñan Museum,

Old Town Quito

Next on our itinerary was to slow down a bit and check out Old Town Quito, which, at the time of my trip, was preparing to celebrate Ecuador's Independence Day.

First, we stopped at the National Basilica, a centerpiece of Spain's effort to convert locals to Christianity. The architecture interweaves the local culture into the building's features thanks to local artisans who contributed to the project. Instead of the standard gargoyles used in European cathedral architecture, the



National Basilica's exterior birds and turtles of the Galapagos Islands.

Next, we went to the Iglesia de la Compania de Jesus, also known as the Golden Cathedral. The interior sanctuary is complete covered in gold leaf and photos here are not permitted. The site was built by Jesuit missionaries between 1605-1765 and it is a jaw-dropping sight. Here, too, you can appreciate elements of native Inca culture in the building design.

Though we were all a bit tired, we still made it to San Ignacio where we were guided to the cool basement's vast wine cellar. Here we dined on a special corn bread wrapped in banana leaf, chicken or beef empanadas and other house specialties. Our final sightseeing spot of the day was the Virgin Mary statue overlooking Quito in all its glory.

La Carolina Park

On our free day with no planned itinerary, I made my way to La Carolina Park, about a six-block walk from the hotel. This vast nearly-166-acre park smack in Quito's central district is a nature center with greenhouses exhibiting Ecuador's bountiful flora.

I look forward to making future trips not only to Ecuador, but to other countries on this vast continent as well. In closing, let me say, muchas gracias, Ecuador!

Dedication to a friend

I write this story out of absolute joy as I truly enjoyed my time discovering the Andes region of this climatically and culturally diverse country and look forward to future visits to explore other regions of Ecuador.



That said, I am also writing this in deep sadness. I am dedicating

this story to my late graduate school roommate, my first true friend from South America, Francisco A. Espinosa. Francisco was a very caring guy who certainly loved people as well as his tequila. Though I was hoping to reconnect with him while visiting his hometown of Quito, this did not turn out to be possible.

He was assassinated on September 2, 2011. His perpetrators shot him four times in the head while he was at the gasoline stand returning

home from his office, ending his life instantly. This case made headlines in Ecuador as it was one of the first times such perpetrators were sent to jail for their crimes. I write this in his memory to introduce his beautiful homeland to the American military community.

I hope many readers will have the opportunity to visit this beautiful country!

May Francisco A. Espinosa forever rest in peace.

Virtual Vacations



Hanoi



CHECK THE VIDEO!

War and conflict might be what many think of when they think of Vietnam. But the country is a thriving location with history, culture and delicious food you'll love exploring. In this video, we'll take you to beautiful and busy Hanoi where we'll visit the Hanoi Cathedral and Opera House, Hoan Kiem Lake and more. We'll save you a bowl of pho!



Guam



CHECK THE VIDEO!

For this virtual journey, we head to "Where America's day begins" – tropical, beautiful Guam! This a snorkelers' paradise and one with easy access from anywhere in the Pacific. We'll head to Chamorro Village for some good eats and local shopping, then to the Latte Stone Park for a trip back to ancient Guam. We'll also try some delicious Chamorro foods like kelaguen and finadene sauce. A stop in Guam also requires a visit to Two Lovers Point for a beautiful view of the crystal turquoise waters and some beautiful photos. Whether you're stationed outside of Guam or will soon PCS to the island, you won't want to miss what we have in store for you in this online tour.



Manila



CHECK THE VIDEO!

Hop on as we head to the capital city of the Philippines. Here, old meets new with the Spanish-influenced architecture and towering skyscrapers. We'll take a look at Old Manila, the city-center, where Fort Santiago and Manila Cathedral offer you a close-up look at the city's history and future. In this feature, we'll also stop in and look at former U.S. military installation, Clark Air Base, which is now having a second life of its own as a public park and airport.



Bali



CHECK THE VIDEO!

Take a trip to tropical and exotic dream destination Bali! Here we'll make virtual stops at one of the country's oldest temples for an amazing view and a taste of local traditional dance. Then, we'll swing from the palm trees above the Jatiluwih rice terraces for some adventure and great views. Later, we'll pick up some tasty satay chicken and mee goreng fried noodles. Let's go!



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There is still so much of the world we have left to see, so join us as we revisit our favorite locations in the Pacific and highlight the must-see spots.

Taiwan



CHECK THE VIDEO!

Come along as we travel to exciting Taiwan for majestic mountains, pristine beaches, cheerful people and delicious cuisine. Here you'll see traditional architecture comingle with cutting-edge skyscrapers. Our trip will take us to Chiufen Town, the inspiration for Hayao Miyazaki's "Spirited Away" animated film, and for some shopping at the 111-year-old Shilin Night Market. We also make sure to grab some Paigu Chaofan, a pork sparerib and fried rice dish. Tasty!

Singapore



CHECK THE 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. The flavorful dish will have you wanting more.

Australia



CHECK THE VIDEO!

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.

Hawaii



CHECK THE VIDEO!

Get ready for some aloha time with a quick virtual trip to Hawaii. There is a lot to see and do here so get ready as we head out a beach day at Waikiki, a look at island history at the tribute to King Kamehameha in front of the State Supreme Court, and some hiking at Diamond Head. Hungry? That's great, because we're also going to Ewa Beach for some tender and juicy Kahlua Pork and a show!

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC IS STILL IMPACTING TRAVEL, AND DESTINATIONS AROUND THE WORLD HAVE DIFFERENT COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS IN PLACE. IT'S IMPORTANT TO CHECK AND ADHERE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICIES AS YOU'RE PLANNING ANY FUTURE TRIPS.

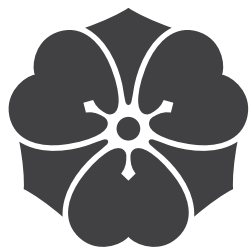
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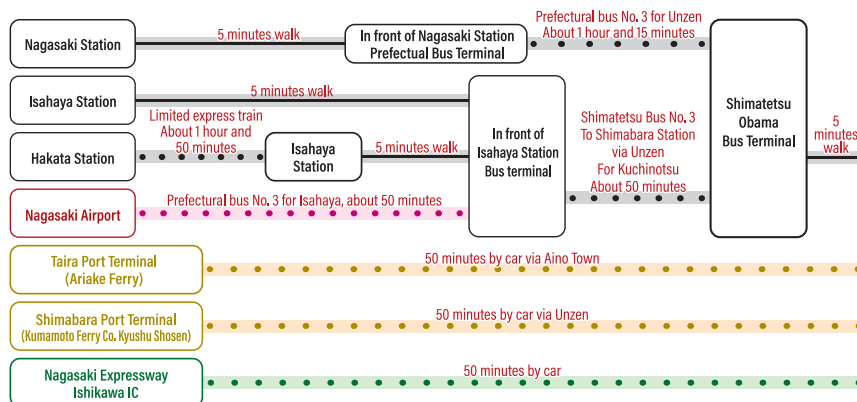
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