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FACEBOOK



INSTAGRAM

Cover photo - Kyle Haney hangs out on a mountain cliff along Ha Giang Loop in Vietnam.

Background photo - Erin Henderson shared this shot from her trip to Central India.

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Kids' take on Pacific travel
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• A visit to Korea
• Taiwan's Moon Festival
• Vacation in Hawaii

“Travel is the only thing you buy that makes you richer.”

- Unknown

There's a big world out there to experience and care for. When we travel, we get to, for a short period of time, immerse ourselves in different cultures, customs and, hopefully, learn a thing or two about a new place and ourselves.

In the Pacific, we have the privilege of living that experience daily and also travelling to nearby places many of us never dreamed possible.

I never imagined I'd walk the marble pathways of the Taj Mahal, admire Seoul's skyline from atop a skyscraper in Jamsil, or sip on Singha beer at a night market in Bangkok. And I'm richer for those experiences.

I know I'm not alone. Every page of Destination Paradise magazine tells the tales of the journeys of fellow travelers who are abundant sources of how to get out there and explore.

Every word is a testament of the love for this big world and the adventures that await around every corner. This magazine is dedicated to the adventures we've had and those yet to come.

Join Kyle Haney as he retells his exciting motorcycle trip in Vietnam. Sit back and hear from 6th-grader Adriana B. Anderson who will take you on an Okinawan island-hopping adventure through whimsical prose.

The following tales of wanderlust and

excitement are all by fellow colleagues, neighbors and maybe even friends who, just like you, are enjoying their duty stations in the Pacific.

Are you ready to join us? At Stars and Stripes Pacific, we want to hear about your travels near and far. We love hearing from our readers and want to include you in future issues of Destination Paradise!

When you're done, check out our community papers and websites - japan.stripes.com, okinawa.stripes.com, guam.stripes.com and korea.stripes.com. These are fountains of information, including culture stories, restaurant reviews and the latest happenings on and off base.

Join us at Stripes Pacific on Facebook and on Instagram @starsandstripespacific for more stories, helpful videos and fun contests.

This magazine, our community papers and websites are for you! So, reach out and I promise we'll get right back to you.

We can't wait to share your story!
Safe travels!

Denisse Rauda
Publishing and Media Design Editor
Stars and Stripes



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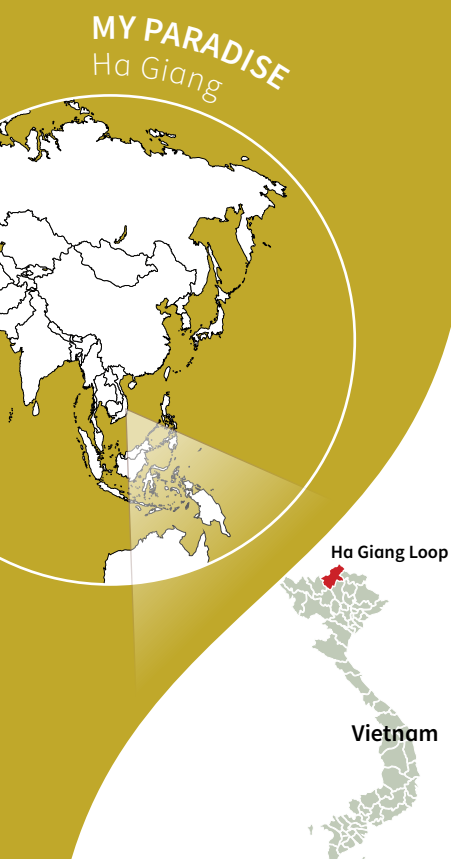
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“What surprised me most was not the scenery but the joy. Pure, unfiltered joy. Every curve of the road, every joke told at dinner, and every small moment stitched together into something unforgettable. I did not expect this trip to feel so freeing, so fun and so full of life.”

Ha Giang Loop motorcycle journey

Story and photos by
KYLE HANEY



The Ha Giang Loop is still something of a well-kept secret. At least, that's how it felt to me once I discovered it. I've traveled extensively thanks to the military, from backpacking across the Alps, riding my motorcycle through Austria and Switzerland, snorkeling in the Greek Islands and downing liters of beer at Oktoberfest. And the list goes on! But never once had I heard anyone recommend riding a motorcycle through Vietnam's northern mountains.

When I told my coworkers about my upcoming trip, they looked puzzled. These were people who'd spent over a decade bouncing around Asia. Yet, none of them had ever heard of the Ha Giang Loop. It made me feel that I was either crazy for considering such an adventure or had just stumbled upon something great.

How I found Ha Giang Loop

It wasn't until I messaged a friend, asking the broadest of travel questions that I got my answer: "Hey man, what should I do in Vietnam if I have 7 days?" He was living in South Korea at the time and had been to Vietnam before. His answer came with doctorate-level advice, and he's the reason I did the Ha Giang Loop.

Not only did he know I'd be floored by Vietnam's mountainous terrain, but he was sure I'd equally love the homestay dinners shared with local families each night, adding culture to an already outstanding backdrop and making it even richer. Plus, he added, who doesn't want to cruise through remote mountain roads on a bike?

That was it. I was in. The few photos he sent sealed the deal: terraced rice paddies reflecting the sky above, roads as twisty as a bowl of delicious pho, and roadside snacks that looked straight out of a Michelin kitchen. Without hesitation, I took my friend's advice and messaged a company called Ha Giang Adventures to book a four-day ride.

The ride was set for the middle of my Vietnam itinerary. I was going to explore Hanoi and Ha Long Bay for a few days, then set off on this adventure. With sunshine and blue skies in the forecast, I figured I had timed it perfectly. After a few laid-back days at Ha Long Bay smoking cigars where King Kong was filmed and kayaking past monkeys, I was ready to trade calm waters for curvy roads.

Day 1: Road to the Loop

Waking up at 5 a.m. on vacation isn't hard if the payoff is worth it. I've done it to watch the sunrise over the East Sea from Seoraksan National Park in Korea, and again from a mountain-top in Switzerland, blanketed in silence. This time though, it was to catch a van for a six-hour drive from Hanoi to Ha Giang. Not relaxing, but worth it.

I grabbed my coffee, loaded my bags, and hopped in the shuttle van for the six-hour ride from Hanoi to Ha Giang. Our first stop was at another hotel in Vietnam's Old Quarter. I was told we'd pick up the rest of the folks going along on this adventure. I didn't know it yet, but these three girls and I would form an accidental



motorcycle gang. A gang that didn't carry guns or run drugs, but one that would cannonball into icy pools below a waterfall in Vietnam's northern frontier.

Getting there half the ride

Three hours in, I learned my first essential Vietnamese phrase: "I have to pee." In fact, it was the only phrase I learned throughout the entire trip, other than the usual "please" and "thank you." After a roadside coffee and bathroom break at a place called the Gateway to Ha Giang, the drive changed. The curves got tighter, and the mountains grew taller. A few of the girls groaned as we wound through hairpin turns. I, on the other hand, was grinning the entire time.

Around noon, we reached the Ha Giang Adventures headquarters in Ha Giang. A group of cheerful guides welcomed us under a shaded overhang with sweeping views of the valley. Mountains rose like green fortresses all around us, and there was a stillness in the air. While the others sat down for lunch, I walked the grounds, trying to take it all in. The jungle air had a combination of wood smoke and something delicious I couldn't quite pinpoint.

I didn't fully know what the Ha Giang Loop would bring, but something in me already knew: this was going to be one for the books.

Taste of what's to come

That first lunch set the tone: grilled meats, sticky rice, fresh veggies and hot broth made up exactly what I didn't know I was craving. But even more memorable was how we ate: family-style. We shared plates while passing bowls and pouring tea for one another, all while sharing stories. That rhythm became one of the best highlights of my Ha Giang Loop adventure — one just as meaningful as the roads and views.

After we finished eating, the guides called us over to a large map on the wall. It showed the entire four-day route from Ha Giang all the way to the border of China and back! Our lead guide walked us through the itinerary, and while I tried to pay attention, all I could think about was getting on the road.

License trouble

Before this trip, I'd learned there were two ways to experience the Ha Giang Loop: ride your own bike or ride on the back of one of the other motorcycles. Obviously, I chose the former! I even went to AAA and got an International Driver's License with the motorcycle endorsement so I'd be ready to ride.

But that didn't matter...

Turns out, Vietnam doesn't recognize the American version of that license! I was so bummed that I had come all this way and

was at risk of having to ride shotgun. The guide told me I could face a steep fine if I was caught riding anything over 50cc. I was crushed. I'd been picturing myself winding through these mountains on a motorcycle for weeks. Riding on the back of someone else's bike wasn't just disappointing, honestly, I thought it would be embarrassing!

Little scooter that could

Then the guides came up with a solution. They wheeled out a scratched-up 49cc scooter with duct tape on the seat and Cold War vibes all over it. They rolled it out of a shed like it had survived a dozen other loops and was ready to rust in peace. Nevertheless, I swung my leg over and sat down. The suspension groaned like I'd awaken a lying dog. I turned the key on, pressed in on the ignition switch, and the engine sputtered to life. I grinned ear to ear as I realized I had a ride all to myself!

With lunch and the safety brief over, it was time to roll out. We packed light, bringing only what could fit in the backpacks the tour provided. For me, that meant a few shirts and boxers, my camera and GoPro, swimsuit, and of course a couple cigars. It was all I needed.

We rolled out of the compound and coasted downhill into Ha Giang. Our first stop would be a gas station, followed by a mountain pass, and then finishing at Munn Homestay. This would be our first overnight!

Liftoff

Riding through Ha Giang town felt like lining up on a runway. Each storefront flashed by as the mountains drew closer. And then, just like that, we took off!

We didn't hit a straight road again for the next four days.

Twisting through mountain passes, the grin on my scruffy face grew and grew, and eventually stayed put whenever I was on my little scooter. The road was just breathtakingly wild, every turn framing endless views worthy of being on a postcard. I'll admit that the scooter was a tad sketchy, but the Ha Giang Loop had officially begun.

And I was all in.

Day 2: Music, mountains, magical Loop

Waking up to Vietnamese birds singing across the jungle canopy was something I never imagined I'd experience. Sure, I knew I'd eventually visit more countries in Asia besides South Korea, but sleeping this deep in the wild? That hadn't crossed my mind,

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not even as a daydream. I stretched my arms and legs, let out a long yawn, and gently pushed aside the mosquito net. My feet hit the cool wooden floor, and I walked toward the patio overlooking the pond.

Now that the sun was rising, I could finally appreciate how beautiful my surroundings were. Mountains framed the horizon like a painting, but the pollution hung in the air like a haze. Unfortunately, it would remain with us for most of the journey. That smog was the only thing I could honestly complain about, and it paled in comparison to everything else.

I stepped out of my bungalow and made my way toward a small table where empty coffee cups were waiting for us. Like a moth to flame, I drifted toward the rich aroma of Vietnamese coffee. Even now, I can say without hesitation: it's the best coffee I've ever had. I've sampled Starbucks, Dunkin', Kona from Hawaii, and pour-overs from hip cafés worldwide. Nothing compares to Vietnamese coffee.

Phong's painful music translation

As I sipped my coffee, the rest of the group still asleep, a man and his young child wandered around the homestay grounds. They admired the scenery like newcomers to paradise. I watched them for a while and felt lucky to be here, too. The child eventually ran to his mother, and the man returned to their car. That's when he pulled out a guitar.

For the next half hour, he strummed through what I assumed were popular Vietnamese songs. The melodies drifted across the morning breeze. As if cued by

the music, my favorite tour operator, Phong, walked over with a coffee in hand and sat next to me. I asked if he recognized the songs or knew what they were about.

He took a long sip and said, "I don't know... it sounds like... pain?" Then, with exaggerated effort, he gestured to his stomach and made a tragic, grotesque frown. I guess he thought body language might get the point across better than words. It certainly did. I burst out laughing, mostly at Phong's face, while imagining someone crying into a bucket as they sang Vietnamese ballads. We both chuckled and listened to the man continue his performance — his voice full of heartbreak, whether we understood it or not.

Hemp weaving and Tham Ma Pass

After breakfast, our guides loaded up our gear and we hit the road. I waved goodbye to our Homestay, already grateful for the memories made there. Our first destination was a hemp textile workshop just north of Chợ Kem. Our guide had visited the family there dozens of times and built a friendship with them, which meant we got the rare treat of seeing the whole process.

They showed us everything. From planting and harvesting the hemp to weaving the strands into dresses and shoes using old machines, it was mesmerizing. My favorite tour operator, Phong, said that it's traditional that Vietnamese brides and grooms wear handmade hemp clothing on their wedding day. Mostly the color black if you can believe it!

Though they didn't have much for sale, I spotted a handwoven table runner that I knew would look perfect back home in Napa. The woman working one of the



looms smiled warmly as she handed it to me. I loaded it into my rucksack before strapping it to my little scooter-that-could.

The weather was once again perfect. Despite the smog, the ride was truly breathtaking. Rather than continuing along the main highway, our tour guides took us on a more scenic shortcut through amazing landscapes. Cruising up switchbacks, we eventually landed at coffee shop called Thôn Sáng Cán Tỷ.

As if I thought the views couldn't get any better, this amazing hidden gem provided cold refreshments with arguably the best view of an amazing valley down below. This was the view I came here to see. This was the view I'd remember as a postcard from an adventure along the Ha Giang Loop.

Continuing down the other side of the valley was blissful. Leaning side to side as you ease on and off the throttle was like being in a trance. A series of tight curves later, our tour operators took us to Tham Ma Pass.

This is one of the most iconic spots on the Ha Giang Loop, and for all the right reasons. From the lookout, we could see the road coiling through the valley in perfect S-turns. I hadn't seen such perfectly laid roads since my adventures across the Swiss Alps. We stopped for photos, then wandered over to a roadside café where a woman grilled skewers over a tin-barrel flame.

The others started eating without hesitation, so I grabbed a skewer and bit in. It was smoky, spicy and delicious. I had my doubts about the meat, but I figured if the guides were eating it, I'd survive. Spoiler alert: I didn't get sick. Not even close. So, if you ever find yourself contemplating a roadside snack along the Ha Giang Loop, I'd say: go for it!



Royal Palace and lunch fit for king

We rode on for another hour through the scenic switchbacks of the Đồng Văn district. My stomach started grumbling again, a clear sign that I was ready for some more delicious Vietnamese food. Before eating though, our guides brought us to one of the most historic stops along the Ha Giang Loop: Dinh Vua Mèo (King Mèo's Palace).

Built in the early 1900s, the palace still stands strong with six vertical houses and four horizontal wings. Sixty-four rooms in total. At its peak, it could house a hundred people! I kept imagining the palace as the ultimate house party venue. Tons of space and a killer mountain view. What more do you need?

After about 30 minutes of wandering through stone courtyards and admiring the woodwork, our guides led us across the street to a small restaurant. The table filled quickly with big bowls of rice, sizzling omelets, grilled meats, marinated tofu and a standout vegetable dish: Vietnamese Rock Mustard Greens (Cải mầm đá). I devoured it.

Twice I had to ask them to bring me another dish. It was so good! To this day, Cải mầm đá is the most delicious vegetable I've ever eaten.

That lunch hit like a sedative. If it weren't for the surrounding mountains, I might've dozed off. Instead, I got back on the bike and refocused. We still had miles to go along the Ha Giang Loop, and I wasn't going to miss a moment.

Vietnam-China border

One of our final stops of the day was also one of the most unexpected: the physical border fence between Vietnam and China. We parked our bikes near a tiny roadside café and followed a dirt trail toward a tall, rusted barrier. On the other side was China, a country I was very familiar with. Well, their military at least. I am an intel guy after all!

I'd studied the region for years thanks to my job, so I was excited (and a little nervous) to stand this close. Our guide explained that, before COVID, you could walk freely across the border here. But after the pandemic began, China installed this barrier to keep outsiders out... or maybe their own citizens in?

While it may not have been the most scenic stop on the Ha Giang Loop, it was certainly the most surreal. I never imagined my motorcycle tour would take me to the edge of one of the Great Power Competitors!



'Rock Ass' and gravel-skidding crash

We rode on as the sun began its slow descent. After a full day on a scooter, I was experiencing what I jokingly call "rock ass." It's a numb, hardened pain you get from sitting too long on a stiff bike seat. I shared the term with the guides, who cracked up and started using it themselves. From that moment on, "rock ass" became our inside joke.

Just as twilight faded, our guides pointed us down a steep, rocky road. It looked more like a washed-out hiking trail than a road. Massive potholes, loose gravel, and trenches lined the path. I gulped and pressed the "I believe" button in my head, then followed the lead guide down the mountain.

We slid and skidded for over 20 minutes. Somehow, I managed to stay upright. But as I neared the base and tried to stop, I stupidly grabbed the front brake. My tire hit loose gravel and locked up. In a final burst of panic, I turned the handlebars (never a good idea) and laid the bike down right in front of the guide!

Luckily, I was only traveling about five miles per hour. No damage done... except to my pride. The guides laughed it off and gave me a helpful reminder: rear brake only on gravel. I nodded sheepishly as I recovered my scooter.

Moonlit river ride and hidden retreat

We left our bikes near a riverside shack and were told we'd be taking a boat to the next homestay: Nho Quế Retreat. It was nearly dark now, and I was getting a little nervous. We used our phones as flashlights to walk a quarter mile down to an unlit dock. I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a little like this was the "end of the trip," so to speak.

It was the exact opposite. The boat ride down the Sông Nho Quế was as quiet as it was peaceful. Only the hum of the trolling motor and the chirping insects filled the air.

Towering mountains flanked us on either side, their outlines just visible in the moonlight. The river's surface reflected the moon-filled sky like glass. In the distance, a few lights from the retreat grew brighter with every ripple of the water.

We disembarked and walked up a stone path where the retreat staff greeted us warmly. They showed us to our rooms. Once again, the girls got their shared space, and I had a massive suite to myself with probably the biggest bed I've ever seen! Two of the walls in my suite were glass, opening to the river view. With the silhouettes formed by the mountains all around us, I couldn't wait for sunrise.

Happy water and chopsticks

After a hot shower that washed off the day's dust and sweat, I made my way to the open-air common room beneath our cabins. A gentle breeze drifted through as we gathered for dinner. We had our usual meal of perfectly cooked food and poured tiny glasses of happy water to toast the day.

That night, we thought it'd be fun to introduce the guides to the card game "Spoons." The best part was that we didn't have spoons; only chopsticks. So, we used chopsticks! The chaos that followed was pure comedy. People lunged, tripped and shrieked trying to grab the final chopstick before it disappeared. Laughter echoed through the mountainside retreat.

The Ha Giang Loop had delivered again. From morning guitar melodies to near-wipe outs, and riverside reflections to chopstick battles, Day 2 was unforgettable.

Day 3: River reverie to mountain majesty

Waking up at the Nho Que Retreat was like surfacing from a dream and finding yourself still in it. I lay stretched across a

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massive bed; warm sheets tangled around my legs. Pushing the curtains aside, I was struck silent by the view.

Towering mountains loomed on all sides, their jagged silhouettes softened by early morning light. Below, the Nho Quế River carved a gentle bend through the valley floor, still and silvery in the dawn.

I grabbed my camera, walked down to the river's shallow banks and walked in. Mist drifted over the water as the sun began peeking above the mountaintops. The light spilled across the landscape, golden and slow, like honey over stone.

I snapped a few shots, then stopped to take it in. It was one of those rare mornings when nature, time and mood all felt aligned.

After breakfast (and another flawless cup of Vietnamese coffee), our guides told us to leave our gear in our rooms. We were heading out on one more adventure before returning to our motorcycles. As if the Nho Que Retreat wasn't already enough of a highlight, they had even more planned! We followed them down to the riverbank where a long wooden boat waited.

Drifting through giants

The boat was narrow but sturdy, with room for maybe 20 people. I took a seat at the bow, letting the breeze hit my face as we glided downstream. Warm sunlight flickered through the trees, and birds called out from the jungle-laced cliffs above.

It felt like the kind of scene you see in a movie; one so beautiful it risks being fiction. I didn't know riding the Ha Giang Loop would deliver moments like this when I least expected them.

Just then, we rounded a corner, and the cliffs closed in on both sides. We'd entered the legendary Tu Sán Gorge: the deepest gorge in all Southeast Asia! Steep walls rose 700 to 800 meters straight up on either side of us. I looked up, and thanks to the morning sun's brightness, could barely see the tops. Just water below, stone beside, and the sky above.

There was no noise but our small boat and the river itself. I wasn't prepared for how quiet it would be. The silence added gravity to the moment, much like when I'd toured the ancient Gothic churches of Europe; except here it was like we'd stepped into nature's cathedral.

Once through the gorge, we docked for a moment to pick up a few Vietnamese travelers from a riverside landing. They were thrilled to join us, especially after learning we were Americans! We all took goofy pictures together, laughing like old



friends. Somehow, even surrounded by these vast cliffs, it was the simple moments, like sharing a laugh with strangers, that stick with me to this day.

Goodbye Nho Que, hello Happy Road

Eventually, the boat turned back. We passed through Tu Sán again, this time with new faces and new stories onboard. Once back at the retreat, we packed our bags, said goodbye to our generous hosts, and climbed aboard one final boat that ferried us upstream to where we'd arrived the night before.

From there, we hiked up a short trail to reclaim our motorcycles. The route was steep but nowhere near as sketchy as the previous night's descent. With daylight on our side, the trail revealed just how stunning the canyon really was. Each switchback offered another breathtaking glimpse of the river below and the mountains beyond. I couldn't believe we had spent the night in a place so remote and beautiful.

After 20-30 minutes of climbing, we crested the ridge and rejoined the main road. It felt surreal knowing we had just left one of the most beautiful corners of the Ha Giang Loop.

Phong's hometown market

It was Sunday now, and Phong, one of our guides, wanted to show us the market in his hometown. We retraced some of previous day's route before veering off to Chợ Đồng Văn. Unlike the massive street markets in Hanoi or Saigon, this one was smaller, and much more intimate. It felt like a Vietnamese version of a farmer's market.

Unfortunately, this wasn't my favorite stop. Some of the animal treatment we saw was rough and a few people in our group were visibly upset. One girl, a vegetarian,

asked if we could move on. The guides quickly agreed and we hit the road again. Despite the unpleasantness, it felt like the honest and raw Vietnam; the one without a filter.

Memorials and mountain views

Next up was Mã Pí Lèng Pass, one of the most iconic stretches of the Ha Giang Loop. We parked the bikes and visited the Youth Volunteer Monument, a tribute to the 1,300 young locals who helped build the Happy Road in the 1950s and 1960s.

They did it with basic tools and incredible willpower — no machines, just sweat and stone. Hard to imagine something like that happening in the U.S.

Right behind the monument stood the Happy Road Museum, where we browsed old photos and displays. It gave depth to the route we'd been riding, adding history to every curve and cliff.

Hiking to edge of world... sort of

Behind the museum, a small trail led to Mỏ Đá Tử Thần, also known as Death Rock. The hike was short, maybe a mile, but worth every step. We reached a rocky outcrop that jutted straight out from the mountainside.

From this ledge, the view was beyond words. The Happy Road curved like a ribbon below us, and the cliffs dropped off into hazy green valleys.

Everyone took turns snapping dramatic photos on the edge. Despite the touristy vibe, it was still incredible. The adrenaline, the scenery and the laughter all added to the experience.

Sunset through the saddle

Back on our bikes, we rejoined the Happy Road and continued west. The next stretch was the longest of the day, but none



of us minded. Twisting and turning through the northern mountains of Vietnam never got old. We took a few quick coffee breaks, but mostly we just rode, letting the wind and views carry us forward.

As the sun began to set, we reached a wide overlook on the far side of a valley. Between two massive peaks, the sun dipped low, casting golden light across everything. It was the most stunning sunset I'd seen in Vietnam. We paused, took a few photos and just stood there, silent. Moments like these are why people fall in love with Ha Giang Loop.

Arrival at Chien's Lodge Du Gia

With the last bit of light fading, we reached our final destination for the night: Chien's Lodge Du Gia in Yên Minh. The place was unreal. A gentle river ran through the resort and each guest room sat on stilts above the water, connected by glowing boardwalks.

I dropped my gear in my room and drew a hot bath in a wooden barrel tub. As the water crept up my chest, I stared through a floor-to-ceiling window that looked out over flooded rice paddies. Cranes walked calmly across the fields, their white feathers catching the last light of day. After hours on the road, I could feel my soul floating back to the surface.



Final feast with fireside vibes

Once dressed, I wandered out to the open-air dining area. I ordered a cold beer, lit a cigar and took a deep breath. The sounds of nature filled the space between sips and exhales. I thought I had already found relaxation on this trip, but this was another level. The peace of that moment is still with me.

Eventually, the rest of the crew joined me. We gathered for one last dinner, our final night together on the Ha Giang Loop. We shared plates, clinked glasses and traded stories. The happy water flowed and so did the laughter. We teased each other like old friends, made inside jokes and talked about our favorite moments from the ride.

That night, as I looked around the table, I felt something shift. My soul was on fire, in the best possible way. This trip was everything I'd hoped for, and somehow, even more. Day 3 had been full of movement, but also moments of stillness and reflection. As we toasted one last time, I knew this wasn't just a motorcycle loop — it was the kind of adventure that etches itself into your memory forever.

Day 4: Bittersweet ride back

Day 4 came too soon. You know that feeling when you sense the end of something great before it's over? That's exactly how I felt waking up in Du Già. The sky outside was soft and gray at first, but soon the sun began peeking above the jagged mountains. I slipped out of bed, grabbed my camera and stepped outside to catch some photos of the morning light bouncing off the nearby rice paddy fields.

At first, the air was still and calm. Our homestay sat just beyond a small main street, so I wandered toward it to stretch my legs. With each block I passed, the pace

of life shifted. Motorbikes buzzed by, shopkeepers rolled open their shutters, and vendors began setting up their stalls.

The quiet of the rice paddies faded behind me, replaced by the energy of a waking town. Before long, I realized I'd traded my peaceful morning for a bustling street scene and I turned back toward the homestay to enjoy breakfast instead. I wasn't ready to jump back into the chaos of city life, not yet.

Breakfast, quotes and slow start

As I sat down at the table for my last Vietnamese mountain breakfast, I felt the familiar weight of nostalgia creeping in. I thought of that Andy Bernard line from *The Office*: "I wish there was a way to know you're in the good old days before you've actually left them." I knew I was in them. But, at the same time, I was also realizing what Robert Frost once said: "Nothing gold can stay."

The guides soon joined me at the table, followed by the girls in our group, who looked a little worse for wear. They had decided to wander into town the night before for a few more "happy waters," and it showed. As we gathered around the table, Phong told us we'd make one last stop before beginning the long ride back to Ha Giang. We were headed to Ba Tien waterfall, tucked away in the middle of a primeval forest in the Thâm Luông Village.

The hike to reach it was short, maybe 10 minutes, and the forest was still cloaked in morning light. When we broke through the trees, we saw the waterfall: about 20 meters high, a curtain of white water crashing into a pool below. Mist rose into the sunlight, scattering rainbow colors across the clearing. We were among the first visitors that morning, and the place felt untouched.

Vietnamese Polar Plunge

Phong mentioned that people could swim in the pool and I didn't need to be told twice. I stripped down to my boxers, climbed onto a rock off to the side and ran for it. The moment I hit the water, the shock of cold stole my breath. It was brisk enough to make me second-guess the decision, but also refreshing in a way only mountain water can be.

I came up grinning, though shivering and motioned for the others to join. Two of the girls were brave enough to follow, smartly pulling swimsuits from their bags. Their laughter filled the clearing as they splashed into the icy pool. Soon, a few more visitors trickled in, and they too tested their

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courage against the chill.

Climbing out, I wrapped myself in one of the towels the guides had brought along. That's when I spotted a small shack nearby, something like a rustic tiki bar. To my surprise, they were serving hot coffee! I ordered one and sat back with the steaming cup in hand, watching the water crash into the pool below while more tourists shrieked at their first plunge. Between the rainbow mist, the coffee's warmth and the lingering chill on my skin, it felt like one of those fleeting perfect travel moments.

Eventually, we returned to the homestay and that's when I had to wait for the girls to get ready, which pushed our departure about 20 minutes later than planned. By then, though, I wasn't bothered. The ride back to Ha Giang awaited, but Ba Tien had given me one last rush of joy before the road took over again.

Soreness meets road

It's funny how fast emotions can shift. A few minutes earlier, I had been wishing for just one more day on the Ha Giang Loop. Yet, the second I swung a leg over my small steel horse, my body let me know it had other ideas. Three days of riding had left me sore in places I didn't even know existed. The padded seat now felt like a slab of stone, and every bump in the road reminded me that the end of the trip was, in fact, near.

Still, once the engines roared to life and we set off, the familiar rush of the road came back. We weren't chasing scenic stops anymore. No border crossings, no mountain hikes, no surprise detours; just open road and the steady hum of our motorcycles carrying us home.

Final ride

The ride back to Ha Giang headquarters was bittersweet. I wanted to keep exploring the mountains, but I was also ready to see more of Vietnam beyond this loop. For a

couple of hours, we rode through valleys and villages, stopping here and there for coffee or a quick stretch. The group was quieter than usual, each of us probably lost in our thoughts, processing the trip and its impending end.

Eventually, we rolled into the headquarters. For the final time, our tour operators unloaded our bags from the bikes and stacked them neatly on the ground. That small ritual, repeated each day, suddenly felt like closure. And just as my body reminded me how sore I was, my stomach reminded me how hungry I'd become.

Thankfully, the staff had prepared one last meal for us.

One last feast together

We gathered around a long table, sharing steaming dishes of rice, vegetables and meats. Laughter filled the room in bursts. Sometimes it was from teasing, other times

it was the uncontrollable kind sparked by inside jokes that no one else would ever understand.

I made a point to look around the table and memorize the moment. Pure joy radiated from every face. In my line of work in the military, that kind of genuine happiness isn't something I see often. Most smiles are polite, most laughter forced (unless it's fueled by too much alcohol). But here, it was real. It was the kind of unfiltered joy that comes only from shared adventure and trust built over long roads.

Goodbye, Ha Giang Loop

After lunch, we exchanged contact information, hugged it out and lined up for one last group photo (my idea, naturally). Cameras clicked, capturing the moment we all knew would live longer in memory than in pixels.

Then, just like how it all began, we climbed into a van and braced ourselves for



the six-hour drive back to Hanoi. This time, though, the ride felt different. The motorcycles were behind us and the adventure was concluded.

Though the Ha Giang Loop was over, the fire lit inside me would stay long after the wheels stopped turning.

In conclusion

Looking back, the Ha Giang Loop gave me more than winding roads and mountain views. It gave me mornings filled with music and coffee, lunches in small villages where time slowed down, and nights of laughter around simple tables.

The highlights were endless, from gliding down the Nho Quế River to hiking to viewpoints high above the valleys, weaving through mountain passes and sharing the road with people who started as strangers but quickly felt like family.

What surprised me most was not the scenery but the joy. Pure, unfiltered joy. Every curve of the road, every joke told at dinner, and every small moment stitched together into something unforgettable. I did not expect this trip to feel so freeing, so fun and so full of life.

If you ever get the chance, take it. Ride the Ha Giang Loop. Go with a group or go solo, but go. You will find yourself grinning on the back of a motorcycle, soaking in mountain air, and realizing, maybe for the first time in a while, that you are right in the middle of your own good old days.



For more great travel stories by Kyle, check out globetrotterkyle.com



What to know

■ What is the Ha Giang Loop?

The Ha Giang Loop is a multi-day motorcycle route in northern Vietnam, famous for its dramatic mountain scenery, winding roads and cultural encounters with local ethnic minority villages. Most travelers complete it in 3 to 5 days, I did mine in 4.

■ Do I need to know how to ride a motorcycle?

Not necessarily, but it's more fun (if you ask me). Many travelers hire a guide or "easy rider" who drives the motorcycle while you sit on the back. That's how all the girls on my trip enjoyed the Ha Giang Loop. If you're experienced and have the right license, you can rent and ride your own bike.

■ Will my international driver's license allow me to ride the Ha Giang Loop?

Short answer: No. You'll have to ride something under 50cc or ride on the back of another licensed rider's bike.

Long answer: if you're from the United States, and you have an international driver's permit, chances are it is not accepted in Vietnam. Yes, this includes the one from AAA. "But Kyle, my AAA driver's license lists Vietnam and says, 'Not party to 1949 convention; International Driving Permit honored', so it must be good, right?" Wrong. Only a few countries' driver's licenses are not accepted in Vietnam, and the US is one of them.

■ What happens if I don't have the right license to ride?

Many travelers just ride without one. However, police occasionally check documents, and if you're caught, you almost certainly will have to pay a fine. Conveniently for you, the fee will be however much money you have on you at the time; if you're picking up what I'm putting down. In my case, I rode a scooter that was under 50cc, and that's perfectly legal according to their laws. Anything over that requires a license.

■ Is the Ha Giang Loop safe?

Yes, with caution. The roads are steep and winding, but guides know them well and prioritize safety. Wearing a helmet, sturdy shoes and protective gear is highly recommended. Thankfully, the fine gentlemen at Ha Giang Adventures supply all of that for you!

■ When is the best time to go?

The best seasons are spring (March–May) and autumn (September–November) when the weather is mild and clear. Summer will bring those lush green rice fields, but it'll also bring rain. Personally, if I did it again, I'd do it in the Autumn. Spring had too much pollution in the air, and a rain storm would've been nice to have so we could see the mountains too, even three ranges over like they said you could on a clear day.

■ What should I bring on the Ha Giang Loop?

Pack light. Essentials include multiple changes of sturdy clothes (e.g., jeans, long-sleeve t-shirts), a rain jacket, sunscreen, toothbrush/toothpaste, phone chargers, and cash (ATMs are rare in small villages). Your homestays usually provide basic toiletries and meals. If you use Ha Giang Adventures like I did, they'll provide a backpack for you and a large water bottle; no need to bring those.

■ Where does the Ha Giang Loop start?

Almost every tour begins in Ha Giang City, about six hours north of Hanoi by bus or van. From there, the adventure begins in the mountains.

■ Why is the Ha Giang Loop worth it?

The Ha Giang Loop is worth it because it combines jaw-dropping landscapes with authentic cultural experiences. Every day brings new highlights of towering mountain passes, riverside villages, hidden waterfalls and evenings spent sharing meals with locals or fellow travelers. It's one of the most unique adventures you can have in Vietnam.

■ Which Ha Giang Loop tour should I go with?

Easiest question to answer: Ha Giang Adventures. Master riders, exceptionally friendly (and funny), knowledgeable, personable, patient, fun, respectful, world-class — these are just a few words I'd use to describe this amazing group of operators. Don't waste your time looking around at other companies to save a few bucks, just go with these guys and thank me later. And no, I don't receive commission from recommending them, they're just that awesome!

Speakin' Vietnamese

Hello: Xin chào (sin chow)

Thank you: Cảm ơn (gahm uhn)

Yes: Vâng (vuhng)

No: Không (khome)

Please: Làm ơn (lam uhn)

Excuse me /Sorry: Xin lỗi (sin loy)

Goodbye: Tạm biệt (tam byet)



“Phu Quoc is definitely a tourist destination with a European theme. The location does not really give you the authentic Vietnam vibe you’d experience like in Hanoi or DaNang, but the people there are great and we really loved the opportunity to spend six days there.”

Phu Quoc fun touristy town

Story and photos by
EARL JONES

MY PARADISE
Phu Quoc



Central Village clock tower.

Long before the invention of the World Wide Web, I used to look at National Geographic magazines and say, “I’d love to photograph far away places and share those images with the world.” Well many years later, that dream has come true.

My wife and I have traveled to about 17 countries and out of the 17, Vietnam has etched a place in our hearts. We’ve experienced DaNang, Hoi An, Ha Noi, and most recently Phu Quoc.

Phu Quoc is a Vietnamese island off the coast of Cambodia in the Gulf of Thailand. If you’re looking for tropical weather and high-end resorts, then Phu Quoc is for you. I discovered this location skimming through social media and found it interesting because of its Mediterranean-themed Sunset Town, the headquarters of our stay. Here one can take in beautiful sunsets while hanging out at the Kiss Bridge, with views of the prominent Central Village Clock Tower. Every night crowds gather to experience fireworks as it provides an electrifying backdrop to the clock tower as well as reflecting off the sea.

Kiss Bridge and more

On our first full day, we ventured out to see what Sunset Town had to offer. One of the draws to Sunset Town is the Kiss Bridge, a two part curved bridge that spans the length of

the shores of the nearby beach but does not connect. The concept is for a couple to start from opposite ends of the bridge to meet at the center to kiss. There’s a lot of dedication involved with this attraction because of the distance to travel and fighting the crowd in the process.

Other options are available such as shopping and an abundance of restaurants. This location will not allow you to go hungry or get bored. There are many scooter rental shops if you want to venture around or outside of Sunset Town, just make sure to have an international drivers license. We didn’t do that, instead we paid to be driven around in one of many fancy Xe Buggies to see all of Sunset Town. As the sun goes down, the town comes alive with nightly water and light shows, as well as, fireworks.

Aquatopia Water Park

The following day was an opportunity to hop on a cable car to venture out to

Southeast Asia’s largest water park, Aquatopia Water Park on Hon Thom Island. This is no ordinary cable car ride; It’s about an 8-km ride with amazing views of small islands surrounded by blue waters and masses of fishing boats. After about a 15-minute ride, we arrived to the huge water park and the fun began. The



Aquatopia.

park offers separate space for children, families and adventure game areas. The day could easily be spent there with the selection of water slides, restaurants and an added bonus, a beach. Take the free shuttle from the water park and about five minutes later you're at Thom Beach. Unfortunately the water park and beach shut down around 4:30 - 5 p.m., but if you're there early enough, it still can be a full day's worth of fun and you'll still have an opportunity to experience a beautiful cable car ride back to Phu Quoc Island.

With a little energy left, we took a walk on the Kiss Bridge since it was a part of our water park ticket package. Many are there to take in the sunset like what you'd see in Florida's Key West. Once the sun sets, it's restaurant time. We stopped for waffles and ice cream because that's what we do on vacation. During this time an outdoor performance began with a fireworks display. By this time we were not new to the fireworks, but yet I would still run out amongst the crowd to see them. After a full day of walking and sun, it was time for us to head back to the hotel for Netflix to put us to sleep.

Grand World

With the arrival of a new day, we headed out to Grand World, about an hour drive from Sunset Town. It's a large theme park with a contemporary art urban park and a 400-meter artificial canal with gondola rides. Our first experience there we entered the largest bamboo cottage in Vietnam named Bamboo Cottage Phu Quoc, also known as Bamboo Legend. Built with thousands of bamboo trees, this structure stands 15 meters tall. It's amazing and worth seeing.

Also on the same grounds are contemporary

sculptures for you art lovers. Just across the way are shops, restaurants and massage parlors. Be prepared to be asked if you'd like a foot massage, which is not a bad idea since there's so much ground to cover. If you do find yourself exhausted from walking, you can always grab a gondola ride on the canal.

As the day turns into night, the night markets are setup for more shopping and eating. With the introduction of night lights, Grand World is even more beautiful and festive with water and laser shows.

In the same neighborhood is VinWonders. Another theme park, but with actual amusement park rides and water parks. The park offers pools for swimming and water slides for cooling off from the sun. For those seeking a different adventure, experience VinWonders' adrenaline-pumping European-themed rides and roller coasters.

If you're like me, those adrenaline seeking days are far behind. Instead, seek out the beautiful gardens, castle, Vinpearl Safari, and my favorite, The Sea Shell aquarium shaped like a giant sea turtle. The amazing three-story facility is home to over 255,000 marine creatures spanning 300 species, a claim I will not challenge. The underwater tunnel really gave me a very memorable experience without having to be in the depths of the ocean.

VinWonders is not a park that stays open very late. Once the sun sets and darkness appears, get set for a multimedia show known as the "Once" Show. It features fire, water, and 3D projection mapping on the castle. Not a super huge park like Disney World, but still a couple days there would be good to really experience the attractions and restaurants.



Grand World Canal.



Sunset Town Aerial.

A different vibe

Phu Quoc is definitely a tourist destination with a European theme. The location does not really give you the authentic Vietnam vibe you'd experience like in Hanoi or DaNang, but the people there are great and we really loved the opportunity to spend six days there. I recommend getting there soon before it becomes overcrowded.



About the Author

Earl Jones has been in Sasebo, Japan since 2022 photographing and video recording various locations on Kyushu Island and other East and Southeast Asian countries. You can find more of his work on Instagram: @theartcreatorphotography

“Even when a tiger doesn’t appear, there is no shortage of wildlife to hold your attention. Giant gaur, rambunctious langurs, elusive leopards, sloth bears, as well as wild dogs, wild boar, and countless bird species await.”

Chasing tigers through Central India

Story and photos by
ERIN HENDERSON

MY PARADISE
Central India



Tigress Roma at Tadoba National Park

The jeep whips into reverse as I scramble to secure my cameras on the seat beside me. Adrenaline surges through my veins as we quickly maneuver into the perfect position to watch Roma emerge from the treeline. After a brief detour off the road to mark a tree, she appears, walking straight toward us along the clay path. She comes closer with every step until we’re forced to give her space, backing up periodically as she continues her approach. For the next 30 minutes, she calmly strolls down the road—her territory—seemingly unbothered by the audience gathered to watch. More than happy to put on a show, Roma commands the attention of everyone lucky enough to witness the encounter.

Our trip in search of Royal Bengal tigers began in the capital of New Delhi. I should backtrack and say the journey started well before that. Obtaining a visa for India, one could say, was a journey in itself. Myriad amounts of information required, pages consistently timing out while applying; only the persistent and strong-minded persevere. But this visa process adequately equips you for the chaos you seem to drop into upon arrival in Delhi. For me, chaos is where I thrive, photographically speaking.

After a few hours of sightseeing in New Delhi,

visiting landmarks like Humayun’s Tomb and Qutb Minar Complex, which is home to the 1,600-year-old Iron Pillar of Delhi, that has somehow resisted corrosion despite centuries of heat, rain, and extreme weather, my travel companion Rachel arrived. We enjoyed a late room service dinner, followed by sleeping in, a lovely breakfast, and loads of caffeine. Then we were ready to sport our all-white linen uniform—mine held up around my waist with a very thin string and a prayer— and dive into the Holi festivities at our hotel.

For years I have seen vibrant images and videos of people covered in colors in India, and knew one day I wanted to see this in person. Holi is a Hindu spring festival that originated to celebrate the triumph of good over evil and to set aside societal norms and rankings (the caste

system) during the celebration— a gathering where everyone was allowed to show up as they were and simply be together. In addition to celebrating good over evil, it also marks the end of winter. Holi is traditionally celebrated throughout India and Nepal on the last full moon of the lunar month of Phalguna (the twelfth and final month of the Hindu traditional lunar calendar).

Though Holi is celebrated throughout India, the throwing



Humayun’s Tomb.



Holi celebrations.

of colors and flower petals originated in Northern India. The popularity of the color throwing festivities has taken off, and is now celebrated throughout India and around the world, predominantly among South Asian communities.

When I envisioned the Holi festivities, I pictured myself in the throngs of people covered in colors. What I learned during my planning and chatting with our travel advisors in India, was that these festivities are deemed not safe for foreigners in some areas with very large crowds, especially women, as there are extremely high rates of groping and alcohol consumption is quite high during the festivities. Unfortunately for women, groping still occurs more than it should in India.

So, we celebrated at our hotel among other guests, happily using the natural powders that didn't stain our bodies. I did request a driver to take us through town so I could see how the locals were celebrating. During my brief walk around the old town, my driver/bodyguard glued to my side, I smiled with the locals and allowed a few to color my face, no groping involved. Everything seemed quite calm at that point, but seeing the unease on the driver's face, I jumped back into the car and he took us back to the hotel. Still, I have that yearning to be a part of a larger celebration in the future, taking proper safety precautions.

The next day, it was time to say goodbye to Delhi and fly to Raipur, where we would begin our tiger safaris. Our first park was Kanha National Park, where we stayed two nights at Bagh Villas, a lovely, tented boutique accommodation near the park. Bagh Villas, a 10-tent luxury jungle resort, led by husband-and-wife team Lia and Akhilish Nair, prides itself on its eco-sensitivity. They support the local

community by sourcing produce from local farmers, hiring locally, maintaining their own on-site organic gardens, and running the jungle camp on solar power as a part of their sustainability efforts. The accommodation and outstanding service set our tiger quest off on a high note.

Excited for our first safari, we eagerly jumped in the jeep after a 4:30 wake-up call. Though the days see temperatures in the 90's, the mornings in early March are still very cool, making for a pleasant ride to the park, with a blanket and a heating pad for warmth.

Each morning and afternoon before your game drive, your guide has to check in with the gate and procure the paperwork with your zone assignment for that drive. While we sat and waited in the open-top jeep, we were suddenly bombarded by a group of five local gentlemen, all vying for photos of, and with us. We happily obliged as they were very kind and simply curious about the two of us traveling together to this area of India. After becoming the wildlife spectacle ourselves, we finally made our way into the park. Within five minutes, we had our very first fleeting sighting of a male tiger crossing into the woods.

We thought this was a fantastic omen to kick off our time in Kanha, but we soon learned that, after five safari drives, spotting these elusive striped creatures was a bit harder than we expected. Kanha Tiger Reserve became a reserve forest in

1879, a wildlife sanctuary in 1933, and finally a national park in 1955. It spans a total area of 1945 square kilometers (just under 751 square miles). Kanha is a very large park, and at the time of our visit, there were an estimated 115 tigers and 30 cubs, making frequent sightings difficult given the park's size relative to the number of tigers.

The park itself is stunning, and we saw some of the best sunrises and sunsets of our trip there. In our five game drives at Kanha, we had two tiger sightings (one that I consider a real sighting). The first fleeting one, and the second when our jeep got stuck, and we lucked out getting to spend thirty minutes watching DJ-9 by the water. My photography portfolio from Kanha consists of many langur glamor shots, but that's how safaris go. The animals decide if you get to see them.

Our next destination was Pench National Park, a much smaller park than Kanha Tiger Reserve at just 758 square kilometers (293 square miles). Pench is said to have been the inspiration for Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book." After my first drive through the park and witnessing a leopard sleeping in a large banyan tree, I was immediately transported to my childhood, watching Mowgli climb trees, surrounded by his jungle friends.



Sleeping leopard at pench national park.

We stayed at Pench Tree Lodge, another eco-resort with 10 cottages and 6 tree lodges housed on 40 acres. I decided to skip a morning game drive to rest and kick a lingering headache, which turned out to be a mistake. Rachel saw both a leopard and a tiger underneath the banyan tree, keeping a watchful eye. What a sighting! In the four drives I went on at Pench, I saw one leopard and had two great tiger sightings. Our guide and driver, Radhe with Pugdundee Safaris, was phenomenal and extremely knowledgeable, making our time at Pench a wonderful experience.



Inside tent at Bagh Villas.

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Though our energy was beginning to wane, our spirits were restored by great sightings, and we loaded up and made the last four-hour drive to our final safari destination, Tadoba National Park, also known as Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. In 1986, Andhari Wildlife Sanctuary was established and later merged with Tadoba National Park in 1995,



Mom langur and her baby.

becoming the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. Spanning 1727 square kilometers (roughly 667 square miles), Tadoba is estimated to have 89 adult tigers in a recent tiger census, plus around 50 cubs and sub-adults. They do not count sub-adults and cubs in the official census,

since they have not yet established their own territory.

Tadoba ended up being my favorite stop of the trip. Our accommodation at the Bamboo Forest Lodge was a welcome, luxurious respite. The rooms were very large, the air conditioning crisp, the food wonderful, and the spacious shower a sanctuary for removing stubborn red clay after our long game drives.

In addition to fantastic accommodations, we had our first female naturalist of the trip. Irene Jose obtained her Master's degree from MA College, Kothamangalam, Kochi, Kerala, and had accumulated a wealth of knowledge in her two years as a naturalist. Her love for the jungle was contagious. We chatted and joked comfortably throughout our drives, and our time spent with her was the best way to conclude our trip. That, and our fantastic tiger sightings on four out of five drives.

Our last day brought a brief sighting of a mother (Junabai, T-82) and her four cubs as they traversed the buffer zone. After waiting out the sighting in the hopes of one last glimpse of the babies—while Junabai waded in the water around us—our permit time had concluded, and we raced back to the gate to avoid fines and penalties. After a quick tour of Maharashtra's cleanest village, Satara, it was time to jump into the car and head to the airport for our evening flight back to New Delhi.

With fourteen game drives under my belt, I can proudly recognize the calls of langurs and sambar deer when they sound the tiger alarm. Listening for those calls

and racing to track the movement is part of the thrill. Without cell phones in the parks or radios connecting drivers, sightings depend on your guide's experience, instincts, and a healthy dose of luck.

Like a safari in Africa, nothing is guaranteed, but that uncertainty is what makes every encounter special. And even when a tiger doesn't appear, there is no shortage of wildlife to hold your attention. Giant gaur, rambunctious langurs, elusive leopards, sloth bears, as well as wild dogs, wild boar, and countless bird species await. Perhaps the greatest surprise, though, was how little I missed my phone. Relinquishing my cell phone for six to eight hours a day was a digital detox I came to welcome each day, allowing me to be more present on the drives and soak in the quiet of the Indian jungles.

Traveling to India for tiger safaris was a unique experience and well worth the journey. While some sightings can feel a bit hectic, the parks have made significant efforts to reduce overcrowding by banning cell phones and limiting the number of vehicles permitted in each zone. If you've ever dreamed of seeing a tiger in its natural habitat, consider this your sign to start planning a trip to India. And, if you only have time to visit one park during your travels, I would highly recommend Tadoba.

Information before you go!

- The best time for sightings is February to April, when it starts to warm up, but it is not yet unbearable. The heat drives tigers to the watering holes, which makes them easier to spot. If you love heat, then May to June is also a great time for sightings.
- Stay hydrated and bring plenty of electrolyte packets. I'd also recommend a small, portable fan or a cooling gel you can put in the fridge each evening and wear around your neck during afternoon drives. I resorted to dumping water on a towel and keeping that around my neck to stay cool.
- Hats, sunglasses, insect repellent, and sunscreen are a must.
- You will get dusty after every drive due to the dry climate before the monsoon season and open safari vehicles.
- No cell phone use permitted in the parks; you will need to bring a camera to document your sightings.
- Your travel advisor or lodge will coordinate your safari permits. You can choose your zones, or leave it up to the lodge based on your preferences. You can choose from morning, afternoon, or full-day drives (though I would not recommend a full-day in the heat).
- The game drives are much longer than in

Africa, usually around four hours, twice a day. We started only doing three hours in the evenings (the hottest part of the day), which worked out nicely for us.

Remember, these are your drives, and you can control how long you stay out. Don't be afraid to speak up if you've had enough.

- The lodges around the parks are all-inclusive, meaning room and meals are covered during your stay. Extras like soft drinks, alcohol, massages, etc., are not included.
- As mentioned previously, the visa application website is stressful. Start the e-visa process at least two months before your arrival in case of issues. <https://indianvisaonline.gov.in/evisa/>
- In addition to the visa, you also need to fill out an arrival card prior to landing to speed up your immigration process. Screenshot or print out the confirmation. <https://indianvisaonline.gov.in/earrival/>
- Use a travel agent to coordinate your travels to India. We used Travel Inn India, which specializes in curating B2B trips for photographers. As an experienced traveler, I would not travel to India without having everything pre-arranged with local guides and drivers. For your personal trip, inquire with <https://www.pugdundeasafaris.com> or India Someday.
- Only buy bottled water from trusted vendors, and ensure the caps are sealed and the label intact. Some street vendors in larger cities refill bottles with tap water to resell them, which may not bode well for your stomach. All of the lodges provide filtered water during your stay.
- The national parks close to visitors for three months each year during the monsoon season (usually July through September).



About the Author

For the past 16 years, Erin Henderson has documented stories through her lens, capturing the people, places, and experiences that shape travel, food, conservation, and military communities worldwide. In recent years, she has expanded her storytelling into travel writing. After two years in Korea, she is now based in Stuttgart, Germany. Explore more of her photography and travel stories at erinhendersonmedia.com or follow her on Instagram @erinhendrsn.

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Terrific Tokyo

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
HADLEY MCGOLDRICK,

Tokyo Tower



There are a lot of fun things to do and explore in the big city of Tokyo, Japan!

There are lots of parks including Disneyland and DisneySea to enjoy. They also have many cool and delicious foods to experience. Tourist spots can be found in many places to explore. There are so many places to enjoy while visiting Japan.

Among the parks in Japan, Disneyland and DisneySea are two that visitors especially enjoy. While there are many rides to enjoy at Disneyland, there are a few that a lot of people enjoy at DisneySea.

Ramen

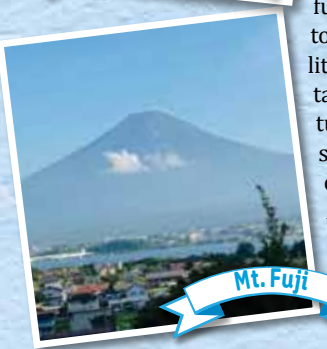


Splash Mountain is a water ride that gets those riding it wet when they are going down the drops in the ride. There is also a space ride called Starters. It is so cool because there is a screen that takes people's pictures and the screen also looks like it is flying in space. There are also fun rides at DisneySea, too. Indiana Jones is a little bumpy ride that takes people through a tunnel and they can share the excitement of Indiana Jones' Adventures. Another ride called Journey

DisneyLand



Mt. Fuji



people through fire and goes around a huge volcano! Both Disneyland and DisneySea are really wonderful to visit.

Kids' take on

The different types of foods in Japan are amazing! There are many seafood options like amazing sushi. Sushi is raw seafood like fish and it is usually served with rice. There is very good barbecue with chicken and fish and sometimes comes with soup or sauce to put on the meat. Japan is famous for their ramen, too. Ramen is a bowl of cooked noodles and comes with toppings like vegetables, eggs, and meats, sometimes it comes with rice. These are some of the most amazing foods to try in Japan!!

Another fun thing to do in Tokyo is to go to the local destinations. One of the main destinations to visit is Japan's biggest mountain called Mt. Fuji. It is a ride from Tokyo by train, but worth the ride. There are some cabins that overlook Mt. Fuji and have a playground with a wonderful view of Mt. Fuji and can be booked or hotels if visitors plan to stay. Tokyo has a really big tower called the Tokyo Tower that is 1,092 ft. When looking down, there is a great view of the big city. Another destination is Tokyo Sky Tree which is a big large tower and it is 2,080 ft tall. It is great to go see at night because it has wonderful lights at the top of the tower that run all night and light up the city. These are some of the fun local destinations in Tokyo.

There are many reasons that people enjoy visiting Tokyo in Japan. Disneyland and DisneySea are both great parks for fun adventure. There are so many great foods to eat and enjoy while visiting. Last, there are many wonderful local destinations to explore. These reasons make Tokyo, Japan a great place to visit!

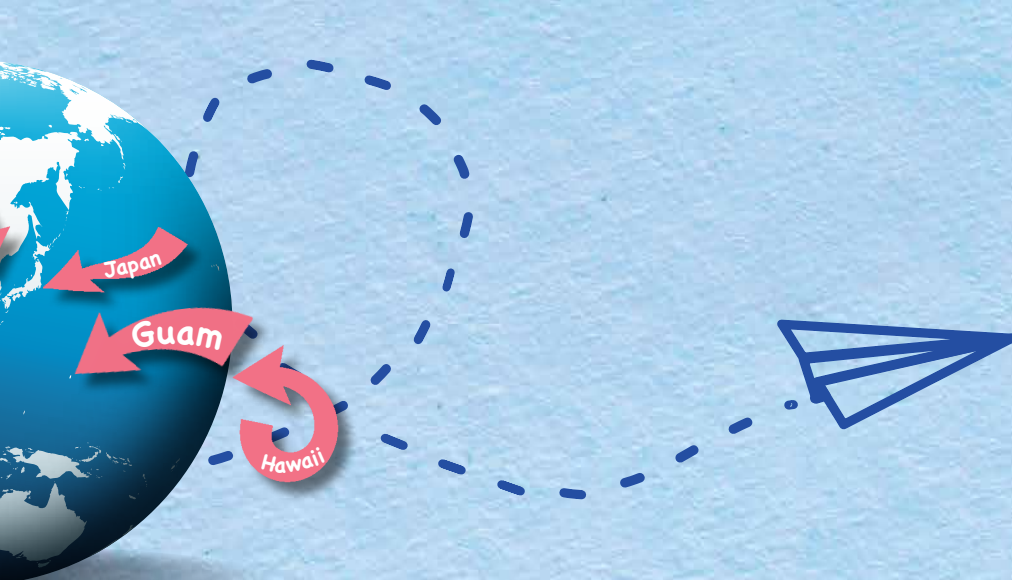


Shibuya

Disney, Shibuya & 7-11

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
INAYA CAMACHO,

I visited Tokyo, Japan. I liked it because it was so much fun! I liked riding the train to get to all of the places we wanted to go. My family and I went to Disneyland. We liked the roller coasters because they were scary and fun! In Shibuya, we visited the Hachiko dog statue. It is there because the dog waited there for his owner for a long time. We visited the 7-11 and ate yummy sushi. I got to get delicious dumplings, but it was candy! Tokyo, Japan, was cold, but it is fun to visit!



Pacific travel

are The Hyundai, Lotte World Mall and COEX Malls. The malls are so neat to go to because of the different



activities they have. There's a library that has books that are never ending. There are aquariums with whales and sharks. There are many different items to shop for that cannot be found on Guam like K-pop merchandise, different flavored nuts and beauty products. Then there are temples to visit. There are thousands of temples in Korea because of its 1,700 years of Buddhist history and practice. There are many activities that include opportunities for ceremonies,

meditation and overnight temple stays. Koreans usually wear hanboks, which are traditional clothing in Korea. Women wear a jacket with a shirt and men wear a jacket with trousers. A couple of popular temples are Bongeunsa Temple and Guinsa Temple. The malls and temples are a great experience to enjoy something new while there.

Korea has so many places to eat tasty food. Some Korean foods are Korean BBS, bulgogi and kimchi. These are so unique and good to eat. Street food is also very popular. Instead of sitting, customers have the unique experience of buying food from the street, then stand while enjoying their treats. There are japchae (glass noodles), tteokbokki (spicy rice cakes), mandu (dumplings) and kimbap (rolled meat). Don't miss the Korean corn dogs, cream bread and long 32-cm ice cream cone. It is highly recommended to try while visiting along with other delicious items.

The weather can get very hot too super cold. One of the recommended times to go is fall or spring because it is not too cold or too hot. In the fall, there will be red, green, yellow and orange leaves all around Korea. In the spring, there are pretty cherry blossoms everywhere. But whatever season visitors decide to go, they will be treated with awesome shopping, great experiences and delicious traditional food.

Fun at DisneySea

STORY AND PHOTO BY
ADDISON LEON GUERRERO,

I was lucky I got to visit Japan. One of my favorite places to visit was DisneySea! There were lots of fun rides, yummy snacks, and places to shop. My top favorite ride was Sinbad's Storybook since it was so funny! My other favorite ride was Rapunzel's Lantern Festival because there were so many nice details. My favorite snacks were Mickey-shaped nuggets and the delicious white chocolate popcorn. There were also stores to shop in. They had key chains, stuffed animals, and colorful headbands in the shapes of the characters! I hope to go back again because I had so much fun at DisneySea! Others will enjoy it too and should try to visit!



A visit to Korea

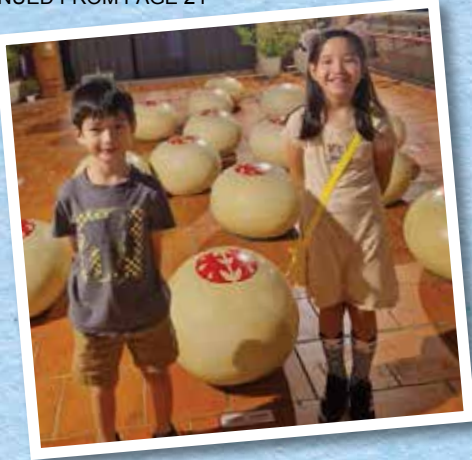
STORY AND PHOTOS BY
LAYLA JADE DANAQ

Korea is a destination with so many exciting places to visit and such great places to eat! There are many fun amusement parks to enjoy. There are also giant walls and beautiful temples to visit.

Everland, Lotte World, LEGOLAND and Seoul Land are great amusement parks. These places are cool to experience and have so much fun. Everland has a roller coaster called the T Express, a ride that has step drops that may feel a bit scary but it is so much fun to try. Lotte World has a ride called Gyro Drop, a ride with terror that goes so fast you should try counting to 10 and it's over. One of the most popular rides is Black Hole 2000. This ride is so high in the sky you might see stars. In LEGOLAND, on the best rides is The Dragon. It is so cool because the ride is medieval-themed with castle and dinosaurs roaming around. These parks have all kinds of neat playgrounds, rides and roller coasters for everyone to enjoy.

Other places where visitors can go are malls and temples. The malls are massive. They have pretty buildings, with awesome entertainment and really good food. Some of the best malls





Taiwan's Moon Festival

STORY AND PHOTO BY
ISAAC ABBET

The Moon Festival in Taiwan is held in October. My family and I visited Taiwan for the Moon Festival and got to see the full moon. We had a nice lunch together at a Taiwanese restaurant at a big round table. We had delicious chicken and moon cakes that had egg yolk in the middle. We also visited the Taiwan Building. It had 101 floors, but we were only allowed to go to the 99th floor. There was also a Lego Store in the city to see Legos. We were very happy to visit Taiwan for the Moon Festival. I think other visitors will enjoy it too because it was so cool!

Kids' take



Vacation in Hawaii

STORY AND PHOTO BY
AJ PANUSKA

I visited a cool island called Hawaii with my family. We went to an amazing pineapple farm. There was pineapple ice cream. My cousin and I both had the pineapple ice cream covered in chocolate. It was so cold and tasty! We also went to the beautiful beach two times! I tried to dig a big hole in the sand at the beach to find treasure or shells. It was so fun! I also went to where the movie "Jurassic Park" was filmed. It had just rained, so it was muddy but had lots of green grass. There were fake dinosaurs to look at. Hawaii is a cool place to visit on vacation!

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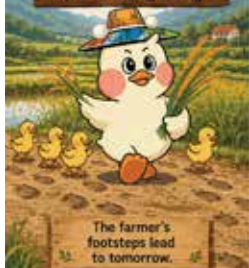
9. 19. (Sat)

Eunha
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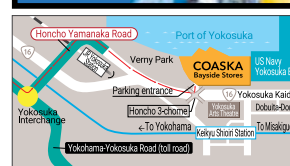
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“Overall, my trip to Guam was special. Between the natural beauty, cultural experiences, and great food, it is a destination I would recommend to anyone looking for a relaxing getaway.”

Special trip to Guam

Story and photos by
YERIANYS PADIN CARO

MY PARADISE GUAM



For spring break this year, I went to Guam, and I was really looking forward to the warm weather. To be honest, when I arrived, it reminded me so much of my home, Puerto Rico. The beaches, the breeze, and the island atmosphere immediately made me excited to explore.

One of my favorite parts of the trip was visiting Talofofo Falls. I took a cable car down to the falls, and the view was incredible. Seeing the waterfall from above and then up close was great.

I also recommend visiting Two Lovers Point, which offers stunning ocean views. Another highlight was Fish Eye Marine Park, where I was able to walk into an underwater observatory and see marine life up close, which was a unique and unforgettable experience.

Spending time at Tumon Bay was another favorite part of my trip. The water is clear and calm, making it perfect for swimming, relaxing, and snorkeling. It is also a great place to take a sunset walk and enjoy the peaceful ocean views.

I also had the opportunity to see the Fish Eye Island Cultural Dinner Show, which I truly enjoyed. The performances were engaging and showcased the culture and traditions of the island.



Of course, you cannot leave Guam without trying an açaí bowl from The Mighty Purple Cafe. It was one of the best I had. I also shopped at the Micronesia Mall, where I went to Macy's and took advantage of a promotion that included a free pair of shoes.

Overall, my trip to Guam was special. Between the natural beauty, cultural experiences, and great food, it is a destination I would recommend to anyone looking for a relaxing getaway.

Make sure you bring sunscreen, flip flops, and your favorite bathing suit. Enjoy!

About the Author

Yerianys Padin is a recent graduate from Zama Middle HS. She is currently pursuing fashion and entrepreneurship while also building her modeling career. You can follow her on Instagram @yval.official.

“I realized that most of Okinawa’s most memorable adventures are not even on the main island. They start with a breathtaking drive across a bridge or a short flight to other islands.”

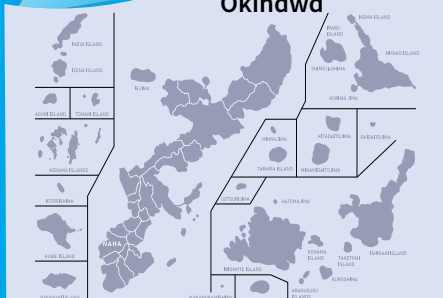
Beyond Okinawa’s main island

Story and photos by
ADRIANA B. ANDERSON

MY PARADISE
Okinawa’s main island



Okinawa



Club Med Ishigaki Kabira Bay.

What do you picture when you hear the word Okinawa? Maybe you picture scenic sandy beaches and palm trees on the main island. That’s exactly what I used to think before I started exploring Okinawa with my family. I was born in Okinawa almost 12 years ago, but I don’t remember much from that time because I was so little when we left. When my family moved back to Okinawa in 2023 and we started exploring, I realized that most of Okinawa’s most memorable adventures are not even on the main island. They start with a breathtaking drive across a bridge or a short flight to other islands. Let’s dive in!

Scenic drive to Kouri Island

If you’re looking for a quick road trip, Kouri Island would be the right place for you. On one of my visits, I looked out the car window and was greeted by crystal-clear, deep-blue water that bordered both the bridge and Kouri Island. When I reached the island, I realized this place was truly a miniature paradise.

My family discovered a café, Brulee and Coffee Parethi, which was set in a modern wooden house with turquoise Shisa dogs overlooking the sparkling water. It was the perfect place to slow down, listen to the birds and enjoy the view. It had a variety of drinks, sandwiches and desserts.

A seashell museum is located near highest part of the island. To get there, we got our tickets and boarded a self-driving vehicle, which maneuvered up a hill full of tropical flowers and

to the museum, which housed more than 10,000 varieties of seashells. All of them had unique textures, like smooth or spiky, and came in all sorts of sizes, shapes and colors. Kouri Island was a great place for my family to take a car ride, even on a busy weekend, and it could be yours, too!

Four islands, four adventures

If you’re looking for a place to have a real mini tropical vacation, take a quick airplane ride to the Yaeyama Islands (Ishigaki, Taketomi, Iriomote, and Yubu). When my family went there, we took a quick flight from Naha Airport to Ishigaki Island.

As the plane was descending, I was greeted with shimmering waters in shades of “Tiffany Blue” that I couldn’t take my eyes off, except for quickly closing my eyes and taking a mental picture to remember the view forever.

There were plenty of excellent hotels, but my family went to Club Med. This resort was all-inclusive, which made the trip extra relaxing. Every day there was something new to try. My favorite part wasn’t just the food or the beach — it was meeting kids from all over the world who were exploring these beautiful Yaeyama Islands just like I was.

My family and I loved snorkeling in the bay near the hotel. When I jumped into the water, cool waves gently splashed against my face. It was one of the most refreshing and satisfying feelings I’ve ever experienced. The water was clear as glass, and I could see about 50 feet





Guide with Shamisen and Bull.

below the surface, with beautiful underwater views. The coral-covered rock formations rose up from great depths, looking like underwater cliffs. Colorful blue and yellow fish were darting here and there through the coral reefs. I even swam with a sea turtle. It was like being in the underwater world in Star Wars, only much more beautiful.

Afterward, we took ferries from the Ishigaki Port to the neighboring islands. First, Iriomote Island, a Japanese national park and home to an animal that lives nowhere else except here, the Iriomote cat, a critically endangered subspecies of the leopard cat. The best way to explore the island is with a tour guide who will explain the history of the island and show you around on land and by boat. The boat tour was very relaxing because I could see mangrove trees as the rushing water passed the boat. Towards the end of our journey, we did spot the tail of an Iriomote cat hiding in the bushes!

Yubu Island was accessible from Iriomote Island by a water buffalo-powered cart ride! When we went there, we hopped onto the cart and looked out. A sparkling sand path, palm trees, turquoise waters and a guide playing a shamisen welcomed us warmly. The gentle sound of this traditional Okinawan musical instrument mixed with the slow splash of the water buffalo's footsteps made the ride feel peaceful and unforgettable. This island is pretty small, but it is covered with palm trees and walkways. It has a beach, making it the perfect place to slow down and enjoy the scenery. My family and I also loved walking around the island, taking pictures of resting water buffaloes, and observing the island's delicate nature.

Taketomi Island is close to Ishigaki Island and is much larger than Yubu Island. It is only accessible by ferry, which gives the island a peaceful, quiet feeling. The island had many traditional Ryukyu-Era houses, with traditional red roof tiles and wooden frames. It was amazing that these homes had been preserved for so long and were in good condition. The island has a beach famous for its star-shaped sand, which was really cool because you could pick up one grain of sand and find a beautiful look-alike of a starfish, full of tiny details and smooth/spiky textures. I

Speakin' Japanese

I love Okinawa!
Okinawa ga daisuki desu/Okinawa daisuki!

There are so many islands to explore!
Hijō ni ōku no shima o bōken deki masu."

Let's take a ferry.
Ferri ni norima shou.

Kouri jima made doraibu shimashou.
Let's drive to Kouri Island.

Water buffaloes are big!
Suigyuu wa ookii desu.

couldn't believe something so tiny could look so much like a perfect little star.

Before my family started traveling in the Pacific, I thought that Okinawa was just the main island. Although I still enjoy it, I realize that I discovered a hidden paradise on its neighboring islands. Even today I picture Tiffany-blue waters from the car and airplane windows, hear the calming shamisen during the water buffalo ride, spot the tail of an elusive Iriomote cat, and remember holding a tiny grain of star-shaped sand in my hand. These memories always remind me that some of my greatest Okinawa adventures started beyond the main island. Maybe they can turn into your favorite memories, too.

About the Author

Adriana B. Anderson, a rising 6th-grader at the Okinawa Christian International School. She's traveled to 29 countries on 4 continents. Born in Japan, she has lived in Japan (twice), USA, and Germany. She is a proud "military brat," a daughter of USMC MGySgt Andy B. Anderson (III MEF, G-3 Operations Chief).



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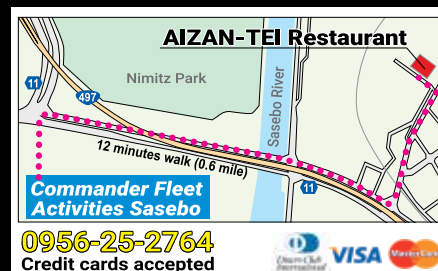
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Are you ready to travel with toddlers?

Story and photos by
Erin Henderson

It's a beautiful day in Hallstatt, Austria and my family is waiting in line to ride a funicular to the top of Hallstatt to enjoy the views overlooking the city. Thankfully, the line wasn't very long, so we only had to wait for one group to go up before it was our turn. Our kids, ages 2 and 3, stand in line, rattling off questions nonstop like they often do. We inch closer and stand next to a wall with a large metal plate. I look down in time to see my two-year-old daughter get THAT look in her eyes, you know, the one where you know she is about to do something unpredictable.

You will either want to run away from the aftermath or wish you could pull a disappearing act. My old dog Zeke (rest in peace) would get the same look in his eyes before taking off like a shot down the street with me chasing him down the road, looking like a mad woman. Sure enough, she sticks her tongue out and proceeds to lick the entire length of the metal plate on the wall. My husband and I scrambled to grab her, but it was too late. The saliva damage had been done, and the laughter from the people standing in line was palpable, especially those without kids.

This charade was mild in the grand

scheme of things, and we laugh about it now. You know what we didn't laugh about at the time? We were sitting in Hoi An, Vietnam, enjoying a relatively calm dinner (is that even a thing with two littles) when disaster struck. Sitting next to our then 8-month-old daughter, my husband caught a whiff of something hairy in the air. OK, a standard diaper change is needed, no problem. Oh, these were fools' thoughts. As a military man who typically remains much more composed than me in these situations, I look across the table to see sheer panic and hear, "We have a situation." A situation was stating it mildly. We remove her from the seat, now laden with, well, you know, and rush her to the restroom. Thankfully, we had a friend traveling with us who stayed with our two-year-old son during this time.

Upon entering the bathroom, one quick assessment and I knew that the adorable outfit I had bought her for this trip was now a goner. We stripped her down and opened the diaper bag, and now we REALLY have a situation. One wipe, one long-sleeved shirt, and one diaper remained inside. If you haven't caught on to the magnitude of the problem, one wipe will not remedy the horror show in front of us. We looked around and discovered this fancy bathroom had washcloths for drying off hands; one

was about to be sacrificed for the greater good. We stuck her little booty under the faucet, got her cleaned off, and eventually made our way back to the table. When we sat, my husband flagged down the waiter and ordered a strong bourbon.

I could go on to brag about my daughter's ability to puke in each country we visit, but I don't want you to get too excited. I also shouldn't let her have all the glory in this story; my son has bolted through immigration in Nepal (while we were waiting in line), threw himself down on many an airport floor, and attempted to jump on a moving luggage carousel. Why, why did I open with this? The absolute truth is that traveling with kids is hard. We know raising them is hard, so this should not come as a surprise.

If you are considering diving into the world of toddler travel, welcome, and may the odds ever be in your favor. Here are some tips and musings I have put together while reminiscing about our two children's travels to Vietnam, Nepal, Bhutan, Cambodia, Iceland, Scotland, and many more. My husband and I were avid travelers when we met, so it only made sense to us when we had children and found ourselves stationed overseas that we would bring them along with us.

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Sejong national arboretum.

Are you ready? Ok, let's do this.

- 1 If you are not an experienced traveler before children, start slow. Take a weekend road trip nearby, try short flights to acclimate your children to flying, and find your rhythm.
- 2 Have a way to carry your baby or toddler on you. Strollers, especially if you are traveling in Asia, are less than ideal in busy cities. We invested in the Osprey Poco backpacks for both our children, and our daughter still rides in hers to this day. This frees up your hands to shop, eat on the go, and document your journey. It's also an excellent way for the children to grab a nap if you cannot get to lodging when they typically nap.
- 3 Speaking of naps, we usually try to maintain our nap schedule when we travel. Depending on the day's activities, it's not always possible, but when I plan, it's usually with a built-in nap or rest time at midday for everyone.
- 4 Curb your expectations. Don't build this trip up in your mind and set unrealistic expectations for your family, especially your children. Young children won't always sit still in the restaurant or be able to make it through that three-hour tour of the Vatican you are planning. Set realistic expectations and go with the flow of your children. If you find your travel inspiration online, make sure you are
- 5 seeking out travelers who are actively traveling with children versus people without children. Kids are the unknown variable, the component that completely changes the format of a trip. For good or for bad, kids, especially toddlers, will change how you travel.
- 6 Plan one or two big activities for the day, but be flexible. In addition to nap time, we try to find a park or activity solely for the kids. We want to mold future travelers but also honor that they are small children, and their wants and needs vary from ours.
- 7 Travel with a few comforts of home, but don't overpack. If your child has a favorite snack you might not be able to get during your travels, bring that along. We carry a sound machine with us on every trip since both children sleep with one at home, and they never leave home without their favorite blankies.
- 8 Know there will be times when it's stressful. Travel can be unpredictable, and when you add a few toddlers to the mix, watch out. Things will happen: delayed flights, your daughter puking in the back of the shuttle, flat tires in the middle of Vietnam (yeah, that trip was wild for us). Your reaction will make or break the journey.
- 9 Invest in a good travel car seat. We bought the Pico Way-B travel car seats (suitable for ages two and up) we travel with. They fold in half and can both fit in a large backpack. When our daughter was younger, we would arrange cars through hotels and request a car seat, but sometimes, you cannot get one depending on where you travel.
- 10 If you are flying a long distance, surprise them with something new and bring along the mess-free water coloring books you can grab on Amazon. Prepare to walk the aisles and keep them entertained as much as possible. If that looks like a tablet for you, go for it. Our children's tablets are strictly for planes and trains and have educational games, coloring programs, and a few shows to entertain them.

So, at this point, you might think, "I'll just wait until the kids are grown to travel again." And for many, that is the path they desire. It's wholly ok to recognize that jumping into traveling with toddlers is not for you. It costs more to travel with kids and it's more stressful. So, why even travel with them? Why do we do it?

Even through all the stressful moments and oftentimes chaos of travel, with each trip, our children get a little bolder. They get more confident and are exposed to cultures worldwide that my husband and I never experienced growing up. We learn as a family about a new place, the people, and how they live. We learn about new traditions and foods; sharing that with our children is an experience (for us) we cannot replace. Traveling as adults has undoubtedly made us more empathetic humans, and we have fully embraced living life abroad with our two small children. We hope our children grow up wanting to continue to explore this beautiful world with an open mind, spreading kindness wherever they embark.



Ulsanbawi Rock Trail Peak family photo.

About the Author

For the past 16 years, Erin Henderson has documented stories through her lens, capturing the people, places, and experiences that shape travel, food, conservation, and military communities worldwide. In recent years, she has expanded her storytelling into travel writing. After two years in Korea, she is now based in Stuttgart, Germany. Explore more of her photography and travel stories at erinhendersonmedia.com or follow her on Instagram @erinhendrnsn.



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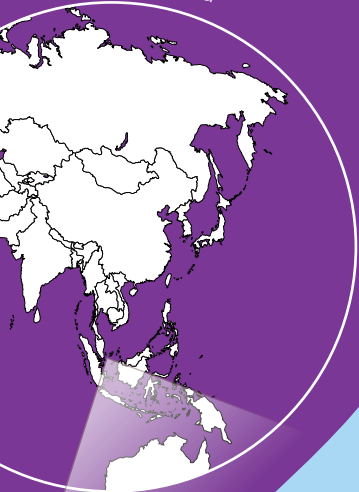
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“The feeling of standing among people moving to the same ancient rhythm is something special.”

Enduring spirit of Chingay in Malaysia

Story and photos by
AUSTIN HOWTON

MY PARADISE
Malaysia



The anticipation for the Grand Deities Procession, or Gu Miao You Shen, built long before the parade itself. People filled the streets of Johor Bahru.

People stood on every crevice of available concrete and asphalt, positioning their cameras and their children. On the street, vendors hawked food and goods.

The air was muggy. A sunburn slowly spread across my neck. Sweat dribbled down my forehead, into my eyebrows.

Aunties talked to each other in excited tones, looking for a viewing lane to glimpse the door of the Old Chinese Temple, where the procession would start.

The drums began to beat.

At first, the sound was faint. Quickly though, the inundating beat flooded my eardrums.

Heads turned. Children climbed onto their parents' shoulders to get a view. Smartphones rose above the crowd.

I traveled to Johor Bahru from Singapore that morning crossing the Johor-Singapore Causeway into Malaysia. I had a quick brunch

of Malaysian-style Mee Siam with a cup of Kopi at Hock Kee then ventured into Johor Bahru's City Centre shopping district.

JB, as the city is locally referred to, is a bustling gateway city of nearly two million people. During the Chingay festival, the normally car-crammed City Centre roads were only open to foot traffic — and there were a lot of feet.

Chingay ushers in the Lunar New Year and is rooted in the traditions of the historic Johor Bahru Old Chinese Temple. The temple honors the five deities worshipped by the city's five major Chinese dialect communities. These revered figures include Yuan Tian Shang Di representing the Teochew, Hong Xian Da Di representing the Hokkien, Gan Tian Da Di representing the Hakka, Hua Guang Da Di

representing the Cantonese, and Zhao Da Yuan Shuai representing the Hainanese.

During the Grand Deities Procession of Chingay, the five deities travel the streets of Johor Bahru and bestow blessings and protection to the residents for the year ahead.



Speakin' Malay

Thank you:
Terima kasih (te-ree-mah ka-seh)

Yes
Ya (yah)

No
Tidak (tee-dak)

Goodbye
Selamat jalan (s'la-mat zha-lan)

You're welcome
Sama-sama (saa-ma saa-ma)

I don't understand
Saya Tak Faham
(saa-yah tak faa-haam)

Where is the bathroom?
Di mana tandas
(dee ma-na tan-das)



What began as a religious observance evolved into a massive cultural event that attracts visitors from across Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the globe.

Rapid drumbeats reverberated through the buildings in City Centre. Cymbals clanged. Firecrackers erupted.

"Hang ah! Ong ah! Huat ah!" The crowd chanted the phrases from Singaporean Hokkein in unison, forming a joyful prayer for abundant blessings and massive success.

The first deity palanquin emerged though the temple door adorned with elaborate decorations. The carriers vigorously rocked the palanquin back and forth.

"Hang ah! Ong ah! Huat ah!" The crowd chanted louder.

The synchronous rock of the palanquin symbolized the waking of the deity to rise, ward off malevolent forces and bless the city with prosperity.

Incense drifted through the air. There was a sense of reverence and excitement.

"Hang ah! Ong ah! Huat ah!"

The procession moved slowly, but the atmosphere was always lively.

Lion dancers bounded through the

streets with astonishing agility. Dragons, hoisted by kids, twisted and surged through the crowd like living creatures with captivating, fast and precise movements. Every leap and turn was met with cheers and chants from spectators packed along the route.

"Hang ah! Ong ah! Huat ah!"

The crowd became part of the performance with each chant.

The elderly watched traditions they had known since they were children. Young families introduced their kids to customs passed down through generations. Visitors stood beside locals.

Each deity followed with new colors. The crowds stayed motivated as the hours passed.

"Hang ah. Ong ah. Huat ah."

Eventually, the drums faded.

The deities shaking in the palanquins disappeared into the distance. Performers moved on. Spectators slowly dispersed. Volunteers cleaned firecrackers from the street.

What makes Chingay in Johor Bahru unforgettable is not its size, with around 500,000 spectators, its performances or even its rich traditions. Rather, it is the

excitement and energy of the event. The feeling of standing among people moving to the same ancient rhythm is something special.

For visitors from Singapore, the festival is remarkably accessible. Johor Bahru, the second largest city in Malaysia, sits just across the border, reachable by bus, train, taxi or private vehicle. Crossing the Causeway during Chingay can require patience, particularly when crowds return home after the celebrations; however, the journey is short compared to the amazing cultural experience that awaits.

I remember the sight of kids sprinting between moving floats to get pictures with a dancing lion. An old woman in deep prayer while the crowd engulfed her. The smell of used firecrackers. The enduring spirit of Chingay in Johor Bahru.

About the Author

Austin Howton is a U.S. Air Force Contracting Officer and licensed attorney that has been stationed at Kadena since November of 2023. He enjoys reading traveling, and exploring the intersections of law, government and global affairs.



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“When planning a visit, it’s worth considering that November is ‘Kamiarizuki,’ when all gods are said to gather at the shrine and visitors may witness special events and ceremonies.”

Shimane: Land of legends

Story and photos by
DAVID KRIGBAUM

MY PARADISE
Shimane



Izumo Taisha.

There is a province on the Sea of Japan coast, on the shady side of the mountains, where legends are the direct precursors of history and there’s no clear boundary where one ends and the other begins. It is Izumo, “Chief Province of the Gods,” and as part of quiet Shimane Prefecture, makes for a splendid getaway.

The only proper place to begin this story is the oldest shrine in Japan, **Izumo Taisha Grand Shrine**. No one knows when Izumo Taisha was founded, though it was already ancient when the earliest chronicles of Japanese history were written. The shrine’s origin story is that the god Okuninushi ceded the land to the sun goddess Amaterasu for her descendants to rule in exchange for the shrine’s construction. Amaterasu is the ancestor of Japan’s imperial family, who still reign to this day.

The Homotsuden Treasure Hall is a must-visit site to learn about the shrine and its iterations over the millennia. Built on an even bigger scale than any shrine standing today, its treasures live up to the name with National Treasures and cultural properties representing not only religious, but cultural artifacts of Japan, including musical instruments and armor in splendid shape.

As the Honden Main Hall can’t be visited, its magnificent, clouded ceiling painting is replicated in the Treasure Hall. The clouds and Izumo Province’s name are derived from a poem written by the god Susanoo-no-mikoto, brother of Amaterasu.

When planning a visit, it’s worth considering that November is “Kamiarizuki,” when all gods

are said to gather at the shrine and visitors may witness special events and ceremonies. Kamiarizuki is based on the lunar calendar, so the exact dates change every year.



Izumo Taisha-Mae.

On the main approach to the shrine, I recommend architecture and train fans visit the Art Deco **Izumo Taisha-Mae** train station.

Not as ancient as the shrine, but still a vestige of an earlier era and it has a preserved 1920s train that can be entered.

About an hour’s drive from Izumo is the “Chief City of the Province of the Gods,” Matsue. The old castle town is capital of Shimane and was home to one of Japan’s most beloved adopted sons, Lafcadio Hearn. Hearn was a world-traveling Greek-Irish author who came here in 1890 to be enthralled by the old Japan, even as it gave way to a new, modern nation. Helped by his Matsue-born wife, Setsu, he would bring tales and observations of his new adopted homeland to the outside world. Their images adorn everything in the town and historic landmarks oft bear his commentary.

It’s best to start your Matsue visit early in the morning while fog still shrouds the city so you may see the imposing citadel of **Matsue Castle**



Matsue Castle.

in the mist; a defiant vestige of the past on its little green island surrounded by a sea of modernity. Not only is it an original castle, but one of the five extant National Treasure castles. The castle is well-kept and its unique points are well-explained, particularly how the wooden beams that support the structure were assembled and strengthened.



Lafcadio Hearn Museum.

Visiting the **Lafcadio Hearn Museum** and Residence across the castle moat will help the uninitiated learn about Hearn and why he's such a famous literary figure in Japan. The museum is entirely bilingual and covers Hearn's life, with its current special exhibit delving into Setsu's life. It shows how his journey, along with the influences of people and ideas he came across, made him into who he was.

Beside it is the house Hearn rented for five months in 1891. It belonged to the Negishi family, hereditary retainers (samurai) of Matsue Domain, and is a modest abode despite being so near the castle. Negishi Iwai, the landlord's son and a student of Hearn's, preserved the house to keep his mentor's memory alive. Hearn loved the house's gardens and writing at his desk by them; visitors today still see the same inspiring view he had over a century ago.



A legendary encounter to be had is the "bake-turtle" in the cemetery of **Gessho-ji Temple**. The giant stone tortoise's mundane origin is that Daimyo Matsudaira Harusato constructed it for his father to praise his virtues and wish him a long life. His father may have died before it

was completed in 1781, but it's the thought that counts.

Its legendary origin is of a rampaging monster that terrorized people at night; the

temple's chief priest approached it with the teaching of Buddha. The turtle lamented that it was incapable of controlling its behavior so allowed a monument to be placed on its back to stop it. It now protects people by "remaining motionless."

Regardless of how the turtle got here, visitors are encouraged to stroke its head and pray for long lives.

Yaegaki-jinja Shrine's origins go back to the legend of Susanoo-no-Mikoto. He was banished from heaven and cast down to Izumo. Here he saved a princess and slayed the eight-headed, eight-tailed dragon by getting it wasted on powerful sake then cutting off its heads and tails. As one does.

What is now Yaegaki-jinja is where that princess, Kushinada, hid and used it's pond as a mirror and for drinking water. After slaying the dragon, she and Susanoo married and built their home there. For further cultural connections, Susanoo is the brother of Amaterasu, and while dismembering the dragon he discovered Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi, a sword that is now part of the Imperial Regalia.



Yaegaki-jinja Shrine.

The shrine itself is popular for matchmaking, marriage and childbearing. The same Mirror Pond Kushinada visited is popular for divining future partners. A coin is placed on a piece of paper and set on the pond. If the coin sinks close to where you set it, your partner will come from nearby. If it sinks quickly, you'll meet your match quickly.

Hearn's wife Setsu gave it a go in her youth; her paper floated to the back edge of the pond accurately suggesting her spouse would come from very far away.

This was the only stop on our Matsue visit that wasn't walkable and required about a 10-minute drive from the city center.

Though Shimane is low on most travel priority lists, this was only part of what we saw on our trip. Shimane has far more to offer and it didn't require much



How to get there

Izumo Taisha (Izumo Oyashiro) Grand Shrine

195 Kizuki-Higashi, Taisha, Izumo City, Shimane Prefecture, 699-0701



Izumo Taisha-mae Station

Taishacho Kizukiminami, Izumo, Shimane 699-0711



Matsue Castle

1-5 Tonomachi, Matsue, Shimane 690-0887



Lafcadio Hearn Memorial Museum and Residence

322 Okudanicho, Matsue, Shimane 690-0872



Gessho-ji Temple

179 Sotonakabaracho, Matsue, Shimane 690-0875



Yaegaki-jinja Shrine

227 Sakusacho, Matsue, Shimane 690-0035



digging to find future trips worth taking back to this underappreciated prefecture.

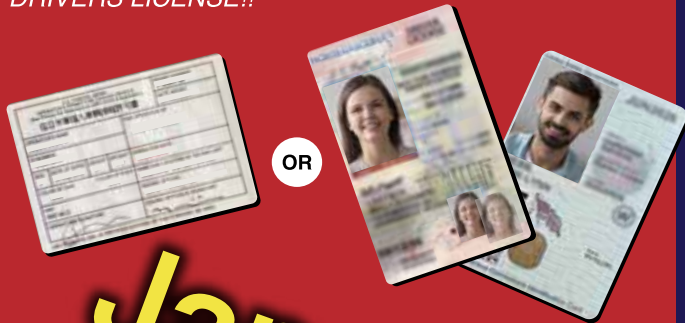
We drove from Sasebo on the highway, which took about seven hours, though flights are available into Izumo Airport and trains also make their way into these

hinterlands. For those familiar with the Kanto Plain or the major cities, the railway network isn't as comprehensive, so driving is recommended to get around.

For a local taste of Matsue, you can't go wrong having the ubiquitous shijimi clam soup.

There are also plenty of Shimane craft beers to sample and several beer halls in the city; I indulged to my heart's content and found none of their libations lacking.

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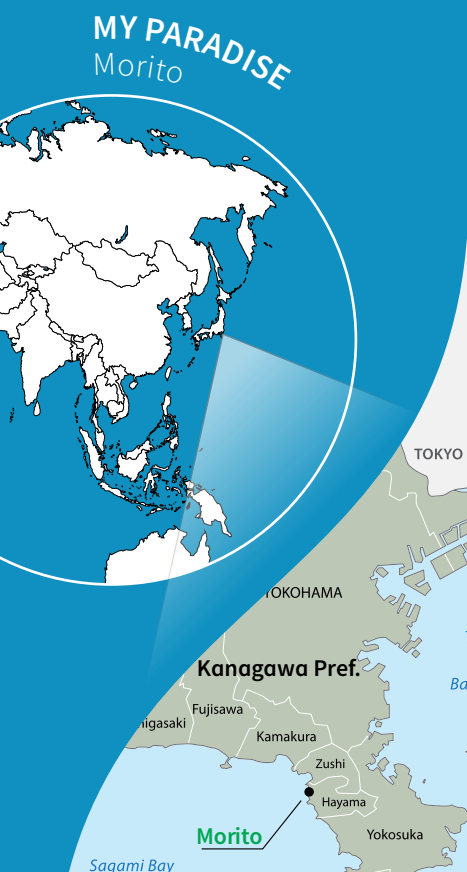
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“Though my boys and I were at first puzzled by how to pray properly according to local tradition, we formed a short line behind Japanese visitors and closely observed how they prayed.”

Morito Coast, a sacred place

Story and photos by
MARIA PIA OELRICH



My sons take a moment to view

Paradise is where you make it, at least it is for me, for us. We are a family of four, and while my husband is out at sea, my sons and I make a point of visiting places around the area. We conduct pre-surveys to determine what we want to explore before we take Dad there. In our case, we are consistently running around between hockey and school commitments while trying to adjust to our new life here in Yokosuka, Japan.

While we conduct these surveys to find paradise for Dad, we focus on finding magical places near us. These magical places must be an hour away at most, a paradise within the chaos of daily life. During this spring, and out of those chaotic days, we found one, the Morito coastline in Hayama.

Morito Coast

The Morito Coast is located about a 30-minute drive from Yokosuka Naval Base. Starting from the main base, go to the national Route 16 to Yokohama Rd./Honcho Yamanaka toll. We recommend taking this road, as it has a small toll fee (200 yen) and showcases the beauty of the peninsula. While driving across the peninsula, one can enjoy the picturesque views along the road that immerse you in the daily life in these fishing towns.

The national road connects you to more everyday areas, while bringing you back to a familiar joy, Starbucks. The famous coffee chain has a branch in Hayama that is about midway to the coastline. This place is a marvel of engineering where the light hits just right, and it feels like you are in heaven, and if you are extremely lucky, they might still serve one of their specialty drinks.

The juxtaposition of this drive helped us recognize that Japan is more than a place or a moment in time. It is a space where ancient beauty is a marker between the old and the new, where technology makes you feel like you're a thousand light years ahead, yet encapsulated in a time where Japan's cultural identity is preserved.

Visit to Morito Daimyojin Shrine

As you continue the drive to the Morito Daimyojin Shrine, be prepared for the road to slowly narrow down. The best place to park is to follow the directions to the shrine and prepare to wait between cars passing. At one point, the road can only take one car at a time.

As you walk in, remember to clean your hands one at a time and then rinse your mouth at the Chōzuya. As soon as you pass the Chōzuya, you will notice a small shrine with



W Mt. Fuji from afar before climbing on rock formations on the Morito Coast.

knotted white pieces of cloth. These knotted wraps are designed to resemble thunderbolts, which symbolize prosperity. Prosperity is significant because this shrine is one of the seven sacred shrines (Nanasebari) from the Kamakura period, according to Japan Travel site. At Morito Daimyojin, visitors can pray for the prevention of disasters and request for lovely weather, the Japan Travel article about the shrine said. In addition to prayers, one can also pray for good health and fortune.

Though my boys and I were at first puzzled by how to pray properly according to local tradition, we formed a short line behind Japanese visitors and closely observed how they prayed.

As the line moved, soon it was time for the group of three in front of us to take a turn. We noticed that they lined up parallel to the building, standing perfectly still. Then, they bowed and went on to clap three times, in perfect synchronization.

They open their hands on the third clap in an oran's stance that slowly but surely becomes their hands joined in prayer, as we would do in church. With their hands

joined, they stood there praying. In reality, it must have been less than a minute. The minute was something that captivated us while we reflected and whispered about what we saw amongst ourselves about our unspoken mentors. After they had that minute, they bowed once more and walked to the left of the shrine.

30 seconds of mindfulness

Then, it was our turn. The boys and I tried it to do as the group before. At the moment, we were not sure what each of us was praying, but we knew we had found a moment where each of us contemplated the silence within, in an introspective way, what it feels like to enjoy paradise. I know that the moment I stood across the shrine. Praying to a foreign entity, to a deity that wasn't mine, but I visualized my own prayer, my own god, my own thoughts, stuck in a moment. We experience our own paradise. The boys attempted to find their own way to make sense of the moment. Once we were done with our own 30 seconds of mindfulness, we bowed and followed to the left of the path.

One of the shrine buildings to the left had a small store where visitors can purchase goshuin, a shrine stamp or hand-drawn calligraphy made in your own book or card provided by the shrine. At the counter, with a small donation, you can have your own goshuin from the Morito Daimyojin Shrine.

Continue your walk to paradise, following the pathways to the right to get to the beach's coastline. As you walk through, you will see two activities where you can gamble, with the prospect of learning about your possible luck or attaining a small souvenir. Make sure to have cash for donations to participate! Once you finish, continue straight to the coastline.



Monument for Yujiro Ishihara, known as the "Japanese Elvis."

Speakin' Japanese

Let's take a drive.

Doraibu wo shimasho.

The Morito coastline is beautiful.

Morito Kaigan wa kireidanaa.

Let's visit the shrine.

Jinja ni ittemimasho.

We should pray for good health.

Kenko wo inoranakucha.

Let's take a selfie.

Jidorishite mimasenka.

I wish dad was here.

Otosanga isshonara yokattanoni.

Japanese Elvis

Right before you reach the coastline, take a moment to contemplate the scenery where you'll likely see the monument for famous Japanese actor, singer and producer Yujiro Ishihara.

The monument is strategically located on the entrance to the beach behind the Morito Daimyojin Shrine because it is a poetic love tribute to Ishihara by the sea. Known as Japanese Elvis, Ishihara was a teen idol and, according to the Los Angeles Times, he passed away in 1987. His monument can be admired before turning to the left and going down the steps to the beach.

While you are there, if it is sunny enough, you can see Mt. Fuji in the distance, and the Najima Torii Gate, the halfway point between the coastline and Mt. Fuji. The boys stood right in front of Mt. Fuji to contemplate the distance between them and the view of such monumental places beyond our reach. After they did that, because my small surveyors are 11 and 13 years old, they went on with their urge to climb each and every rock that they could find in the area. We found an enormous rock formation, where the boys played for about a good 45 minutes. They looked for critters.

Once the boys were done playing at the shore, we made our way back up the stairs. At the top, there is a path for a short hike, which takes you to a view of the coastline surrounded by a monument. The boys and I enjoyed this very much, took selfies and relished the moment. We slowly made our way to the car and thought it was our piece of paradise that we will share with Dad when he's back home with us.

“Tsushima’s characteristic topography is its steep, mountainous terrain. Dotting the roadsides are eulalia-like grass plants similar to what is seen in Korea, especially in October.”

Tsushima Island: Pearl of the East Sea

Story and photos by
RON ROMAN

MY PARADISE
Tsushima



Tsushima

Kyushu



The 70-meter suspension bridge.

My wife, Yeon Hee, and I taxied from our downtown Busan hotel to Busan Ferry Terminal at dawn under expanding sunny skies that heralded a promising trip to Tsushima Island nestled between Korea’s biggest port city and Japan’s main island of Honshu. We met our tour guide, Ms. Lee Hee Sook, at 7:10 a.m. sharp and dropped off our passports. As a permanent resident of Korea, I didn’t need a visa. The fast-speed Panstar Tsushima Link ferry departed promptly at 8:40 a.m. Because it’s high-speed, you can’t stay on the boat’s open-air top deck: “too dangerous,” our boat attendant said. Because it was a group tour, most things were prepaid.

Though the seas were gentle, not 30 minutes into the ride my wife exclaimed, “I feel like throwing up!” Such a sensitive soul, indeed. I pointed out the women’s restroom. Moments later, she was back; more moments later, it was time for another run to the latrine. Upon returning, she said, “I think there was something wrong with the potato sandwich.” Hmm ... I was unwell myself with a terrible cold and cough, so this was an inauspicious start to the “promising trip.” Then she raced back for a third time. In what used to be a four-hour ride, we landed in little more than an hour.

As we disembarked lugging our baggage, I stumbled down the ramp as if staggering on Dream Street after getting slugged by Mike Tyson. When we got to Hitakatsu Port International Terminal, I was apprehensive while passing through immigration. The vicious cold and cough I was battling along with a slight fever could be worsened. Luckily, there were no quarantine cameras.

First stop: money exchange. Just north of 150 yen to one U.S. dollar. The dollar was especially strong in late October 2025. (The international APEC Summit was going on that week in Gyeongju.) Though barely 11 a.m., it was time for lunch. Japanese restaurant lunches, like all restaurant meals here, tend to be lean and mean. No wonder obesity isn’t a problem here! All 17 members of our tour chowed down on a simple, rather stark, meal of thick noodles in seaweed soup, sliced liver, kimbap, more rice side dishes, and an almost-tiny slice of persimmon for dessert. Drink: plain water.

We hopped back on our tour bus and began an introductory tour to Mt. Eboshi at the



Gateway to Kaneishi Castle ruins.

southernmost point of the northern half of the island, which is divided by two canals to facilitate commerce by ship. Tsushima is mountainous and thickly wooded, with tall, muscular cedar trees. You'd think you were driving through a small sequoia forest in northern California. It was mid-day and when gazing into the forest, but it looked almost dark. Sunlight struggled to light up the ground. Though I had been here before many years ago to swim and camp, this trip felt as new as the first. Half of our ride was through long tunnels burrowed into the landscape. Tsushima's characteristic topography is its steep, mountainous terrain. Dotting the roadsides are eulalia-like grass plants similar to what is seen in Korea, especially in October.

Our bus wound its way up a convoluted mountain road to 60 meters shy of the summit. We hiked the 60 meters up the stairs to the observatory for the most panoramic view in the entire island. To the northeast on a clear day are the mountains of Busan.

Once back on the bus, we rode and stopped to walk over the bridge crossing Manzeiki Strait dug out in 1900 by the Japanese Imperial Navy as an expedited navigation route. The bridge arches over the strait at a height of a 15-story building and offers a great photo opportunity of the village and waters below.

Before we got to our hotel, our bus stopped, and we had to endure a ridiculous several-hundred-meter walk hauling our luggage container with its damaged roller, transforming a would-be stroll into a most unpleasant trek. We surmised buses wouldn't be able to navigate the narrow stone road. I cursed our bad luck. After several tortuous minutes, we arrived at the Tsutaya Hotel in downtown Izuhara. After checking in and dropping off our luggage, it was time for our tour guide to lead everyone along the riverwalk bisecting the downtown district. Unlike bustling Korea, Japanese towns and small-city downtown districts tend to be deserted even in the middle of the day, except for an occasional stray cat. We walked to Kaneishi Castle ruins, a spacious scenic historic spot situated in a well-manicured garden dating back to the 16th century. It's a great place to relax.

Next up was a short stopover at a Shinto temple, which are plentiful throughout the country. They are usually somber and dour-looking, this one no exception. We soon were on our own for the rest of the evening. Time for dinner, though not included in the tour package.

I'm not particularly fond of Japanese cuisine, which I consider too bland, so the



Panoramic view of Tsushima Island from the north.

Better Half and I ate Western fast food at an MOS Burger and later walked back to the hotel. It would be a tough night ahead. I hit the sack by 8—and hacked and coughed till after 11. I swallowed a few cough tablets purchased back in Busan before catching a few hours of snooze before the 7 a.m. alarm screamed, and woke up more dead than alive. Downstairs, breakfast beckoned. Breakfast would be totally Japanese and without coffee (pronounced “co-hee” in Japan), only water. Hmm. Well, I did say it was a package tour, didn't I? Actually, there was nothing to complain about; overall, accommodations were quite nice.

Back upstairs we grabbed our already-packed bags, went downstairs and dragged our luggage to the bus (again several hundred meters away), stopping at a convenience store to get that prized coffee, which tasted as bitter as you can imagine. And the weather wasn't that good, either, with overcast skies.

Back on the bus, we climbed up and over a mountain road showcasing the most spectacular forest scenes imaginable. Finally, we arrived at a signless local nature park/arboretum near a river gorge now swollen from recent rains. We crossed a roughly 70-meter suspension bridge towering over the raging waters and then began a leisurely stroll along the riverside. Soon, we were back riding down the mountains to the ocean on the same road we had come from and heading for “The Ruins of Ofunae,” designated a historical site by Nagasaki Prefecture. The harbor was called “The Bay for the ships; it was

built in 1663, one of the symbols of the Tsushima Clan” during the so-called isolationist period. (At the harbor ruins, I made an international call to the kennel housing our doggie Janggoon (“Little General” in Korean.)

Next up was Komodahama Shrine, memorializing those who died in battle against an invading Mongolian force named Genkoh in 1274. Every November 12th, a commemorative service is held here to honor their sacrifice “to the nation,” according to a signboard.

Soon, it was lunchtime in the southeast part of the island in the same district we had eaten dinner the night before (Tsushima is only 82 kilometers long). Our waitress spoke Japanese, Korean — and excellent English with me.

Note: English is not as widely spoken here as on the Korean peninsula. The meal was a typical bento-style lunchbox menu: several small pieces of meat, some vegetables, dried pickles and seaweed and ever-present rice.



Entrance to Komodahama Shrine Park.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 38

Now, everybody walked to the home of late 19th-century novelist and Korean translator Nakarai Tosui, who died in 1926. Except for a large signboard at the entrance, everything was in Japanese, so perhaps you can skip this site unless you know Japanese or are with a translator.

Then it was a harrowing, winding and narrow ride up the mountainside to the top of Kamizaka Park, elevation 358 meters, to the observatory overlooking the entire island. It's a great spot for taking in all the scenic splendor, a visual highlight for one's tour here, overlooking what some describe as Asowan Bay and the purportedly fictional Oboredani Valley. Skies had now cleared for decent photos.

After all the day's trekking, it was time to relax at the local hot springs: Yuttari Land. Though not as elaborate as other hot springs in Japan, given how Tsushima is small and slimly inhabited with a declining population of 28,500, it's adequate: showers, three small pools, and one medium-sized outdoor pool, at least on the men's side. Sexes are segregated, yet this reminded me of the time I went on a Misawa AB tour in 2010 while on temporary assignment. Our Japanese tour guide had reassured some prudish Americans that the hot springs we were visiting was strictly segregated. Once inside and with everyone completely naked in the pool, we couldn't see six inches beyond our noses, the mist that thick. The mist



"Korea View" observatory overlooking the northernmost point of the island.

evaporated. I found myself standing face-to-face not a foot away from a USAF captain's wife I had been talking to on our trip over. Later, I found out Aomori Prefecture, home to Misawa AB, was the only place left in-country where everybody bathed naked together.

Our driver headed out on Rt. 48 for what felt like eternity. The weather couldn't quite make up its mind: sunshine, rain, sunshine, rain... Mountain roads here can be even more treacherous when only a little slippery. Finally, we came to our designated restaurant for supper: a veritable smorgasbord of food items, too many to elaborate here. Japanese food, like Korean, tends to be salty. I yearned for a cold beer, but alcohol and cough medicines don't mix. Ice-cold water had to suffice.

Then it was back to the bus and off to Daemado Hotel in Hitakatsu. Come nightfall it was a complete ghost town, even though it was Halloween, with not a trick or treat in sight. We partook of the holiday by watching a Halloween show on TV.

After a less-than-restful snooze, it was up and at 'em at 7:30 a.m. for the usual local hotel-style breakfast: no eggs, bread, or even milk for coffee. Yet it was nice dining and looking out the window at the ocean. (Clearly the island doesn't cater to Western tourists. Other than Yours Truly, I didn't see a single Westerner. Most tourists appear to hail from Korea; as such, establishments obviously cater to the majority of foreign cultural preferences. Store signs in Korean are common.) Dining hours were from 7 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Japanese are known for being among the most punctual people in the world. At 8:31 a.m., the place was all but deserted.

Though my inner physical condition was still lousy, once outside it looked like a promising final day on Tsushima; skies were sunny. Back on the bus, we rode to a forested area on Rt. 39, where we walked alongside a bubbling brook cascading over rock beds and graced by towering cedar trees on either side. Sunlight barely peeked through, casting dour shadows on the forest floor amidst the cawing of crows overhead.

Next up was a duty-free shop to buy and savor some exquisite chocolate, a mistake that killed off any appetite. Then we drove over to "Korea View," the northernmost point of the island and only 49.5K from Korea. There's an enclosed observatory on top (it can be very windy), and you can see the Korean coastline in the distance on a clear day. A coffee stand is nearby as well as the ubiquitous vending machines. (In Japan, outdoor vending machines are everywhere.)



Our trustworthy tour guide, Ms. Lee, Hee Sook.

On the ride down, it appeared we'd collide with another oncoming tourist bus. And then another. Even the major highways here, presumably double lanes, are more like one-and-a-half. Driving is dangerous everywhere. Large vehicles habitually park to the side for others oncoming. It turned out to be a short ride to a public beach. Though it was now November and the water chilly, three intrepid souls dared the temps and waded all the way in. I wanted to join; my condition said otherwise.

Lying on the soft sand and looking into the sky suddenly made me realize how sick I still was. That said, I was so grateful to be here and experience the moment.

We returned to the bus and our hotel to say good-bye to our driver and later our tour guide before retrieving our luggage. Sightseeing activities were over. My Better Half made a beeline for the nearest drugstore for anti-motion sickness medicine before we embarked on the ferry back to Busan.

She's truly a traveling partner always one step ahead of it all.

About the Author

Associate Professor Ron Roman taught with the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC- Asia) since 1996. He retired from full-time employ and later as adjunct during the COVID-19 crisis (2020). He continues to write and has acted in numerous Korean TV dramas and motion pictures like *Operation*



Chromite portraying Admiral Forrest Sherman opposite Liam Neeson as General Douglas MacArthur. His alternate-history apocalyptic doomsday thriller *Of Ashes and Dust* was a November 2022 release by Histria Books. It was a 2023 Finalist for the Chanticleer International Book Award (CIBA) Global Thrillers category. A Poetic Rhapsody of the Soul, a poetry book, was released in July 2026 by Windtree Press. Cf. www.writerronroman.com.



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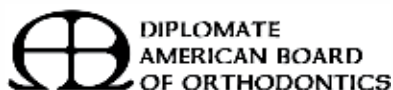
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