

Wash and go in Japan

Cultures collide on a journey that takes in three cities and a hike through the Kumano mountains

WORDS ROBIN MCKELVIE

AM as bemused as Bill Murray in *Lost In Translation*. I haven't even the excuse of being distracted by the charms of Scarlett Johansson nor a middle-age crisis, but Japan is proving hard to pin down. My hotel is the perfect microcosm. It has a ridiculously over-qualified toilet that not only offers to wash parts of me I've never seen, but to massage them too. My suite, though, is cloaked in a simple sheen of smooth pine panels, a hint at another altogether more natural, timeless Japan. I'm about to discover both on a journey to three of Japan's largest cities and a hike through the Kumano mountains.

My first hotel in Tokyo is the new Aman (www.aman.com), arguably the plushiest address in town, which is saying something in a city known for its luxury retreats. Impressively in a metropolis of around 13 million people it creates a sense of space and calm, with harmonious hardwoods and traditional architecture. I'm impressed too at the slick Mandarin Oriental (www.mandarinoriental.com/tokyo), where I enjoy a traditional style *onsen* (hot bath) in their spa with the nefarious neon lights of modern Tokyo blinking back at me. I'm starting to find these contrasts all very Japanese.

I come across the two sides of Tokyo dining out too. I witness the famous tuna auction at Tsukiji Market, before sampling simple, boat-fresh sushi. At the Mandarin Oriental's Sora Sushi at the other end of the scale I savour a three-hour sushi feast prepared by a master sushi chef with my own sake sommelier. Meanwhile the Peninsula's Peter Grill conjures up the finest steak I've ever tasted outside Scotland (a 300g Gifu Hida-gyu fillet), while the Hotel Palace's GO shows me just how poor some of the "traditional" teppanyaki restaurants in the UK are.

Still bemused by a country that assaults all the senses I take the Shinkansen, or bullet train, whooshing at over 300km/h through rice paddies with the backdrop of Mount Fuji making me feel like I am looking at

a postcard rather than gazing out a window. I arrive in Osaka to find it even more bustling than Tokyo. On my first walk I come across the 2.5 Base "cos play" café, where the worlds of dressing up, Japanese anime and café culture crash together.

Then it's on to Kuromon Ichiba Market. Gone is anything avant garde. Instead a stall owner slices Kobe beef and grills it in front of my eyes as they have done for 20 years. I then join office workers dicing with death sampling the notoriously poisonous puffer fish.

If Osaka offers only flashes of the traditional, Kyoto is traditional Japan writ large. Zen Buddhist and Shinto temples hold their own amid the neon and skyscrapers, taking up swathes of the city centre and sprawling up its hillsides. I wander around Gion in the early evening, snatching glimpses of geishas scurrying to clandestine appointments.

Richard Farmer, a tour leader with Inside Japan (www.insidejapantours.com), guides me around a city that has become his favourite. "It is easy to see why Kyoto is the city that the Japanese themselves love to visit. It combines the old and the new seamlessly, with one eye always on taking nature into



account too," he enthuses as we recline in the calm of the Zen rock garden at one of the city's Unesco World Heritage listed temples. The crowds hurry past, mainly Japanese tourists, many dressed in kimonos as they take their own journeys into Japanese tradition.

After a week immersed in urban Japan I break free of the cities and enter a world of thick forests, rugged mountains and remote temples that still informs and inspires the cities today in everything from their food to their hotel décor.

I find it surprisingly wild for this

ultra-modern country. I'm walking not just in wild boar country, but also brown bear country too. I don't see either on my five-day hike from Takijiri to Nachi-san, but I do chance upon monkeys and a brace of venomous pit vipers in virginal forests where I half expect to see a pterodactyl.

The trail I follow is the Kumano Kodo. It has been a rough and testing route of pilgrimage for centuries. I climb between isolated temples and the ruins of tea houses in the shadows of the country's imperial masters who once passed this way. That these





COUNTRY OF CONTRASTS Clockwise from above: a traditional temple in Kyoto; geishas in Gion; Robin McKelvie on the Kumano Kodo trail; Osaka is even more bustling than Tokyo

pilgrimages are still popular in a country I find generally secular says a lot about the sense of tradition and heritage that runs deep within the Japanese character.

I stay en route at small inns (ryokan) in traditional villages that have little awareness of themselves as being such. These authentic inns all have in common a warm welcome and an *onsen*. Each night I soak in the warmth, meeting Japanese hikers and a sprinkling of foreigners. After the *onsen* it is on to the multi-course feasts that I get used to in Japan. I am used to the décor too. My wood-floored and panelled rooms costs a fraction of a night at the Aman, but they both tie into the same aesthetic traditions.

I arrive at the coast to find a tsunami warning in place. This follows the typhoon I caught the end of as I touched down and the earthquake that swayed my hotel room in Tokyo. In Japan you have no choice but to feel acutely aware of nature in all its power and beauty. Maybe this in part explains how the natural and traditional have become so interwoven with the modern here. This comes across constantly whether you are in a luxury Tokyo hotel or rambling over a remote mountain pass in a country that now beguiles me rather than just bemuses me as I fly out of Narita as another typhoon approaches. □



FACT FILE

- * Etihad (www.etihad.com) flies from Edinburgh to Tokyo via Abu Dhabi. Economy returns from £563.49. Flat beds available in business class.
- * Self-guided trips on the Kumano Kodo with Scottish specialist walking operator Macs Adventure (www.macsadventure.com) start at £715, including accommodation.

DO NOT DISTURB THE VILLAGE AT MACHRIHANISH DUNES, ARGYLL

THE Village at Machrihanish Dunes in Argyll advertises that there are three ways to get there. The well-heeled can fly into the tiny Campbeltown Airport with what appears to be a shed for a terminal building. Flights come from Glasgow twice a week. Those coming from the central belt can take Paul McCartney's *Long & Winding Road*; he wrote the song about the drive over the Rest and Be Thankful pass and down the east coast of the Kintyre peninsula. Or in summer, the adventurous can come by sea, hopping on the Kintyre Express fast RIB which connects Campbeltown with Troon in Ayrshire and Ballycastle in Northern Ireland.

We did none of these, tootling across instead from the Cowal Peninsula on the Portavadie Ferry for a late autumn weekend break.

The Village at Machrihanish Dunes describes itself as the quintessential Scottish seaside resort. It is a collection of properties and facilities spread over a couple of miles; at its heart is the Machrihanish Dunes golf course, but there are also two historic hotels, beautiful stone guest cottages, a spa and five restaurants and pubs. It is tucked into the southwest corner of the Mull of Kintyre in an alternately rugged and rolling landscape, where you are never far from the sea. From points of the peninsula you can see the Ayrshire coast, Arran, Bute, Jura, Islay, Gigha and Northern Ireland.

WINING AND DINING

The key to the Village at Machrihanish is choice, so you can go formal or pubby and still get the same quality. There is a light lunch available at the golf club but for an evening meal, both the Ugdale and the Royal Hotel have traditional pubs as well as more formal dining rooms. The restored Old Clubhouse Pub at Ugdale is a great place to start with a post-round, pre-dinner drink but we moved on to The Kintyre Club to eat. It has a very exclusive feel – but then it is only open to members of the historic charitable club or guests at the hotel or cottages. The room is late Victorian grand with wood panelling and rich wallpaper and the food is beautifully cooked and presented. We dined on local steaks, fresh halibut and seafood linguine, served by charming staff. Breakfast the next morning was of particular note, again the quality of the local ingredients shone through and the deliciousness swept away any guilt at eating so much food in the same venue twice in 12 hours.

The Royal Hotel's restaurant is another beautiful room, overlooking Campbeltown harbour. Here there is a more relaxed atmosphere and menu – there are steaks but also burgers and fish and chips.

BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

Although you can take your pick of accommodation, ranging from hotel



to self catering, every choice is high quality although not necessarily expensive depending on the time of year. Picking between the two sites, The Royal Hotel offers Campbeltown on the doorstep with stunning views of its harbour, while the Ugdale site is quieter and more self contained. Both have transport between them and the golf course laid on.

ROOM SERVICE

We stayed in the Ugdale Golf Cottages which are charming stone properties equipped with all mod cons. Two en suite bedrooms in each means they would be equally suitable for two couples or a family. The decor is 'tasteful Scottish' tweed and natural fibres and they are very well equipped, with three TVs, a kitchenette and walk in double power showers.

WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

Machrihanish Dunes has been described as "the most beautiful natural golf course in the world" and there is the older Machrihanish Golf Club next door too. The other half enjoyed an exhilarating 18 holes at the back end of the season but now that the resort is quiet there are some good deals to be had and still plenty to do. The spa is a fabulous treat, whether you have played golf or not. We also walked the tidal causeway to Davaar Island to see its lighthouse, meet its herd of resident goats and discover the Victorian cave painting – a magical place.

GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

Whether you are planning a golf getaway or a pampering treat, Mach Dunes has the perfect package. □

Kirsty McLuckie

Winter offers at the Ugdale Hotel till 31 December or the Royal Hotel until 29 February include a choice of accommodation, a bottle of wine, daily breakfasts and a second person for just £1 more, starting at £89 per night. Call 01586 810000, or visit www.machdunes.com