



MEMOIRS FROM JAPAN

Looking beyond Japan's pop culture image as the country of Godzilla and geishas, **Jeroo** and **Gustasp Irani** discover the Land of the Rising Sun's hot springs and warm people in its cold winter landscape

The complexity of the Japanese language can be daunting but all you need to know to get by in Japan are two words: *kampai*, which means 'cheers!' and *arigato* or 'thank you'. When you raise glasses of sake, say *kampai* to bond with your hosts, and thank hospitable locals with *arigato*. The Japanese are in tune with their ancient mores while embracing the 21st century, and these niceties will help you sink into their culture with no effort at all.

OLD-FASHIONED JAPANESE WARMTH

At the 86-room Hodakaso Yama-no Hotel and Ryokan (a *ryokan* is a Japanese-style inn) in the Okuhida *onsen* or hot springs region, a short drive from historic Takayama city and around three hours from Tokyo, the presence of our guide-cum-interpreter is reassuring. Over dinner, laid on a low table in a private dining area, a rare Japanese sake is uncorked. *Kampais* ripple around the table ▶





and one slips into an enchanting world of little courtesies and small pleasures while a sense of peace and order hovers over the dinner. An 18-course Japanese banquet, served by an elegant kimono-clad waitress, comprises delicacies that simmer in exquisite lacquer bowls and boxes. There are grilled bounties of the ocean as well and choice meats that bubble in a hot pot.

HOT SPAS ON A WINTRY DAY

The warmth of the welcome seems to match the heat generated by the hot springs that spit and hiss way below in the bowels of the earth, outside the hotel. After that sumptuous feast, we step outside into a snow-mantled landscape and burrow down to the hot springs area in a cable lift.

The *onsen* is an utterly romantic space wreathed in curls of mist and smoke. You can book a private *onsen* or hot springs enclosure if you'd like to share this experience with your partner. The area is lamplit and in the distance, the blurred outlines of a forest and a mountain range unfold.

The churning water is between 38° C and 40° C. Slip

Clockwise from above: Locals unwind in a public hot springs foot pool; stroll through the snow wall at the ropeway; gawk at icicle sculptures en route to Takayama; a light flavoursome sashimi platter

in slowly and allow its freshness and warmth to work on your bare body like a healing balm. Even as bathers warm themselves on rocks, snowflakes flutter down and sting you like a million pinpricks. The experience is both mystical and therapeutic. The hot springs are said to be good for rheumatism, athletic injuries and one's complexion.

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On emerging from the womb-like pool, a razor-sharp cold wind lashes our bodies, while we hurry to the warmth of the hotel. The lobby is filled with guests floating around in *yukatas* (casual cotton kimonos), ruddy-cheeked and well-scrubbed after their hot springs dip. There is a woody fragrance as a fire crackles in a bar where couples celebrate with a glass of sake. ▶



Clockwise from above: A local informs tourists of the temperature; evergreen trees speckled with snow lie over the valley in the Alps; an armour in a shop window in Kanazawa; a rickshaw puller in Takayama

JOURNEY TO THE JAPANESE ALPS

The morning ushers in a white and muffled world, unveiled outside our window like an abstract painting; the bare tree limbs stoically bear their load of snow, a couple of laughing snowmen hold fort on expanses of pristine ice, and snowy mountains shimmer in the distance.

The Japanese Alps are a short drive away. Japan's first double-decker ropeway bears us upwards, and below, mist settles over the valley. Evergreen trees streak snow-speckled mountains. High in the chilly wilderness, the Northern Alps rear into the sky. High ice banks rise around the platform, and some tourists abandon the safety of the platform and walk (in rented footwear) through a maze hewn out of banks of snow and ice.

A VILLAGE FROM ANOTHER ERA

Later, back at the base station, we've come down to earth. A 90-minute drive through unending tunnels that slash through granite-hard mountains



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finally ends at a lonely village of a few hundred souls, which is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Located in Shirakawa-go, a remote district situated between the towns of Takayama and Kanazawa, it is best known for its steeply-slanted straw-roofed 12th century farmhouses called *gassho-zukuri* or 'hands clasped in prayer'. Solid cedar wood pillars support the structures and within, the homes are decorated with understated

elegance. These simple homes were built to withstand earthquakes, typhoons and harsh winters when in the old days the region was generally cut off from the rest of the country.

MODERNITY AND MEMORIES

In the evening we head to Takayama. En route, we watch in fascination as icicles hang from trees and the earth seems to hold its breath as though ▶



FACT FILE: TAKAYAMA



Getting there

Luxury: Fly first class on Emirates from Delhi and Mumbai to Tokyo for ₹2.8 lakh and ₹2.9 lakh respectively for a return ticket.

Mid-range: Malaysia Airlines flies business class from Delhi and Mumbai to Tokyo for ₹93,000 and ₹1 lakh respectively for a return ticket.

Budget: Air India flies Delhi and Mumbai to Tokyo for ₹49,000 and ₹46,000 respectively for an economy class return ticket. The JR Takayama line from Tokyo to Takayama has a three-hour scenic journey around a gorgeous mountain-scape. Fares are ₹8,500 per head. Or take the Keio and Nohi buses from Shinjuku in Tokyo to Takayama for ₹4,000 per head.

Where to stay

Luxury: The Hodakaso Yama-no Hotel, (0081) 578892004, offers rooms for ₹9,250 per night.

Mid-range: Asunaro Traditional Japanese Inn, www.yado-asunaro.com, (0081) 577335551, offers rooms for ₹5,000 per night.

Budget: Ayun Takayama Central Hotel, (0081) 577333500, offers rooms from ₹2,425 per night.

Clockwise from above: Shirakawa-go, the heritage village, is known for its steeply slanting roofs; a bird cage at the entrance of a restaurant in Takayama; an artistically presented Japanese meal

Takayama's narrow streets beckon, with vintage inns, cedar merchant houses, shops, shrines and temples with gardens and sake breweries.



in awe of its own beauty. High snow banks safeguard this earthly paradise where the sacred Hak San Mountain range hovers on the horizon.

Takayama, with its narrow streets, studded with vintage inns, gleaming cedar wood merchant houses, shops, shrines and temples with cool gardens and sake breweries dating to the late 16th century, beckons. This handsome city is also a modern metro encased in the moist green of the hills. Here you might collide with a tourist dressed as a samurai or a geisha, stray into a temple to whisper a prayer, caress an ancient Shinto shrine, or sit by the river and

contemplate how old and new Japan co-exist harmoniously. Duck into some boutiques, buy lion and lacquer masks, nibble on traditional hand-grilled rice crackers and stop at some of the sake breweries for a spot of sake tasting. Large green cedar balls hang outside breweries to indicate that young sake is available within.

Tourists sit at tables with locals for a spot of sake tasting; the strong fruity wine leaves us lightheaded.

Beaming faces around the table utter a chorus of *kampais*, and the air is laced with bonhomie.

After all, in Japan, you only need to know two words! •

