



Newsletter 1: April 2021



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# *Japan, A Tradition of Innovation*

Japan is one of the most beautiful countries to explore. Its phenomenal landscapes are matched by the tranquility of its temples and soothing

qualities of its traditional hot spring *onsen* baths. As a destination for a “wellcation,” Japan is second to none

and offers a range of possibilities, from contemporary to traditional.

We invite you to travel beyond the city limits of Tokyo, with its contemporary buildings, to the glorious regions beyond, all of which have their insider secrets.

We encourage you to discover Japan's traditions and innovations both on and off the beaten track.

Here we have rounded up our eight exciting experiences for you to enjoy.

While we will miss you this summer, we promise that our time apart will make travel experiences all the more exciting when cross-border travel is resumed. We are looking forward to seeing you in Japan.



### *Relaxation*

## Hot Springs Hotels

An abundance of modern and traditional hot spring *onsen* baths is scattered across the landscape of Japan's mountainous archipelago, from north to south.

And visitors are spoilt for choice when it comes to deciding where to stay overnight – with offerings including traditional *ryokan* inns steeped in history and a new wave of *onsen* design hotels.

At the traditional end of the spectrum is Nishimuraya Honkan, a *ryokan* dating back 150 years situated in the atmospheric hot spring town of Kinosaki, in Hyogo Prefecture – home to exquisite seasonal gardens and relaxing soaking waters.



### *Art*

## Spotlight: Kengo Kuma in Tokyo

Quiet and contemporary, serene and minimal, with a clean-lined mix of natural materials and quality craftsmanship – the work of Japanese architect Kengo Kuma is often instantly recognizable.

As Tokyo counts down to the Olympic Games this July, an impressive showcase of Kuma's work will take center stage in the form of the New National Stadium. The gently curved stadium consists of countless layered eaves of light wood.

It has been dubbed the Timber Temple, with wood sourced from Japan's 47 prefectures, and has a circular rooftop walkway packed with greenery (with Mount Fuji views on a clear day).

Gora Kadan in Hakone's (Kanagawa Prefecture) dense green mountains, not far from Mount Fuji – once an Imperial family retreat – also ticks all the traditional boxes, along with a luxurious dose of five-star *omotenashi* hospitality (pick a room with a private outdoor *onsen*).

Meanwhile, a more contemporary *onsen* experience is showcased at the recently opened Hoshino Resorts KAI Kirishima, a luxury hot spring hotel, complete with a scenic *onsen* bathhouse in a field of silvergrass. A modern take on a traditional *ryokan*, the hotel – a mesh of contemporary design and natural materials – spans the slopes of Mount Takachiho Kirishima-Kinkowan National Park, in Kyushu's *onsen*-rich Oita Prefecture.

The 49 guestrooms blend modern minimalism with warm touches of regional craftsmanship, as reflected in the clay bed headboards of volcanic white soil known as *shirasu*, depicting a contemporary motif inspired by the surrounding mountains.

Organically textured white wall guestroom lamps are also made from local Satsuma *washi* paper, while guests can also slip into 100 per cent flax *yukata* gowns and use traditional cotton *furoshiki* textiles as bags during their stay.

Center stage, however, are no doubt the views: guestroom beds face an entire wall of windows, framing soothing views of the surrounding forests and grass plains, with the distinct form of famed volcano Sakurajima in the distance.

Another modern gem is Amanemu, a rural outpost of Aman Resorts on a forested hilltop near the sea in Mie

Kuma's admirers, however, need not confine themselves to the new stadium: countless examples of his work are scattered across the capital and beyond, showcasing his quietly modern take on traditional Japanese aesthetics.

One project by Kengo Kuma and Associates is littala Omotesando store and café, a head-turning new Tokyo flagship for the progressive Finnish design brand, which has just opened in the Omotesando district in February.

A blend of Finnish and Japanese aesthetics, the minimal Nordic-inspired space is home to expanses of natural woods and lighting fixtures with glass parts, mouth-blown at littala's factory in Finland, alongside interlocking *chidori*-style timber and a curated collection of iconic littala design pieces.

Another nearby Kuma creation is a museum surrounded by forest located along the approach to Meiji Jingu, one of Japan's most important shrines (near the Harajuku end of Omotesando).

Designed to "dissolve" into the surrounding greenery, Meiji Jingu Museum is a serene mesh of angular roofing with tapered edges and clean-lined walls of glass plus *yamato-bari* wood paneling outer walls.

Another more established Kuma structure can be found a short walk from Omotesando: SunnyHills, a pineapple cake store, complete with an intricate bamboo basket-inspired façade, constructed from 5,000 meters of wooden strips.

Prefecture. Here, life revolves around *onsen*-soaking – the hotel is home to private baths in clean-lined Kerry Hill-designed pavilions and an expansive hot spring complex in its world-class spa.

Meanwhile, Asaba – a 17<sup>th</sup> century sanctuary in Shuzenji on the Izu Peninsula (Shizuoka Prefecture) – straddles past and present. The traditional setting (*tatami* mat floor, sliding screens, *ikebana* blooms) wraps around a pond, with private *onsen* bathing plus timeless contemporary touches from a Lee Ufan painting to the lines of a Harry Bertoia chair.



### *Relaxation*

## Luxury Cruise Train

The Kyushu Railway Company that created the Seven Stars has come up with a new sightseeing train, the enigmatically named 36+3.

Designed by Eiji Mitooka who also created the ultra-luxurious Seven Stars sleeper train, it features a copper bar carriage, cabins with shoji screen doors, intricate lattice wood paneling and tatami flooring – all encased in sleek black and gold paint.

Meanwhile, one of Kuma's latest ventures - opening this October – is the International House of Literature at Tokyo's Waseda University, dedicated to the works of perhaps Japan's greatest living writer: Haruki Murakami.

Spanning six stories, the sugar cube-like building – also home to a café – is wrapped in flowing waves of pale bamboo, with interior glass ceiling panels, swathes of blonde woods and floating staircases. More than a place to read books, the space has been created to encourage discussion, philosophical thinking and friendly interactions.



### *Relaxation*

## The Charm of Setouchi

1000-year-old temples, tidal *torii* gates, art islands, elegant gardens, folk houses, castle towns, soaring mountains, yawning gorges, hot springs, scenic straits, pristine beaches, finless porpoise and peregrine falcon – Setouchi is one of Japan's most bountiful regions. Spread over seven prefectures and 350 islands scattered in the Seto Inland Sea, the Setouchi Islands, that are situated within Setonaikai National Park, can easily be visited on a day

It's a jewel box on wheels with white-gloved staff. It has six carriages, transports up to 103 passengers and the design of private cabins and seats differs between each carriage.

Gliding through all seven of Kyushu's prefectures along five different routes, passengers can book a seat for a single day, hop on and off on different days or cover the full five-day loop.

Japanese and Italian-style dishes prepared by local restaurants using ingredients sourced along the train's path – can be added, with different menus available on each route. Also changing daily is the scenery; on the Hakata to Kumamoto to Kagoshima-Chuo line you'll travel along the beautiful blue coastline.

From Miyazaki to Beppu you can ogle local farms, gold sand coves, and steam emanating from hot spring towns. Monday's run from Hakata takes in rippling rice fields, sea caves and pottery towns, and ends in Kyushu's dynamic capital Nagasaki (don't miss the chance to tuck into a big bowl of *champon*, a favorite local *ramen* dish; buttery, bold and swimming with pork slices, seafood and fresh vegetables). Car 3 sells snacks, *sake* and souvenirs but there are also stops along the way to allow guests to visit tourist sites and shop for local artisanal products. Services run all year round.

trip from Osaka or Hiroshima but with so much to see it's worth sticking around a while longer.

For an authentic local experience try a holiday rental from newly established Japanese company Setouchi Cominca Stays, which has a selection of historically important homes (including Ori, a Meiji-era *miso* factory townhouse in Uchiko) on its books, all of them between 100 and 250-years old.

Cominca's emphasis is on preservation; safeguarding the style and structure of each building. Meanwhile this helps create jobs and boost tourism to lesser-visited parts of Japan such as the historic merchant town of Uchiko, known for its splendid *kabuki* theater, with streets barely altered in 100 years. The word "Cominca" (Kominka is the Japanese way to spell out) means a traditional Japanese style house. It comes from the word "Ko" which means old, and "Minka" which means a private house. It is a combination of the two words.

Setouchi Cominca has three homes in the area. The first, Kozako-Mori is an 100-year old farmhouse with an outdoor living area with a firepit for sunshine-y breakfasts and after-dark barbecues. Chojaya dates back 200 years and was once the fanciest house in the village.

It has a mountain location, spectacular views of the sunset and a bathtub big enough for a couple of sumo wrestlers. And Furosen House in the Valley of the Hermit, is a historic home ringed by thick stone walls in the depths of a remote valley.

For long walks, bicycle rides, leaf-peeping and birdsong book the Shobara house, ringed by rice fields,

apple farms and rippling mountains. And if you are concerned that history means few home comforts, take heart since luxurious modern touches have been applied by stealth so inside wooden walls and behind *shoji* screens you'll find soaking tubs and electronic toilets in the bathrooms, fitted kitchens and fast wi-fi. Private chefs can also be arranged at all of the properties.

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Photo by Universal Studios Japan ©Nintendo

### *Cities*

#### **Super Nintendo World**

Good news for Nintendo fans around the world: Japan's long-awaited Super Nintendo World theme park opened its doors in Osaka this spring.

Super Nintendo World, located within Universal Studios Japan, brings to life for the first time a raft of cult Nintendo



### *Tradition & Cities*

#### **On the samurai trail in Aizu-Wakamatsu**

Famed for its *samurai* history, Aizu-Wakamatsu is having a moment. At its heart – both symbolically and geographically – is Tsuruga Castle from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Wander the surrounding streets and get lost in a maze of cobbled alleys, pretty gardens and torii shrine gates, spliced with award-winning sake makers and

games and characters, ranging from real life Mario Kart rides to Bowser's castle.

Nintendo's first foray into the world of theme parks, the entire space is designed as an interactive game, with visitors able to purchase a smartphone-linked Power Up Band upon entry, enabling them to collect virtual coins and play against enemy characters.

Visitors arrive by walking through a large green pipe that leads to the ornate lobby of Princess Peach's castle. Once inside, a key highlight is Mario Kart: Koopa's (Bowser's) Challenge!, a ride that involves donning AR goggles while travelling in a four-seater vehicle, hurling turtle shells and overturning opponents' cars.

Other attractions include the Yoshi Adventure, which allows visitors to take part in a treasure hunt for eggs while riding on the famed dinosaur following Captain Toad (known as Captain Kinopio in Japan).

Visitors can take selfies with a colorful cast of characters (there is a meet and greet with the cult twins Mario and Luigi among others) and refuel with Nintendo-themed treats at Kinopio's Café such as Mario Burgers and Super Mushroom Pizza Bowls.

Nintendo fans unable to travel in Osaka in person can still virtually explore the park – with a recently released digital walkthrough on the website. An interactive online map can guide virtual visitors through the park, exploring various rides as well as facilities such as cafes and gift shops.

Legendary Nintendo game designer and Super Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto has also led a video tour

dainty tea houses.

Elsewhere, you'll find Ouchijuku, an ancient post town where *samurai* used to stop on the long annual walks required to pay respect to the shogunate in Tokyo.

The tiny town's Edo-era cottages, shops and *minshuku* (Japanese inns), with their wood-paneled walls and chunky thatched roofs, have been beautifully preserved and contain a variety of fascinating museums and sensational *soba* noodle restaurants.

It's all at its most magical in winter blanketed in a thick coat of snow. And then there's Aizu's martial arts scene. Wannabe warriors can try their hand at *kendo* bamboo sword fighting at the martial arts school Butokuden or undertake *samurai* training at the Aizu Clan Samurai School, where instruction covers everything from *kyudo*-archery, to calligraphy, to zen meditation and tea ceremonies.

And when you need to rest your weary bones, you'll find no shortage of magical hot springs – the kind that don't stink of sulphur. At Ashinomaki train station, you can bathe your feet in steamy pools while waiting for your ride. Or for a longer rest stop, stay at the Ookawaso Hot Springs Resort, which has a wonderful location cleaved into the hillside above the Ookawa River.

Spacious river view rooms come in Japanese or Western style and there are nightly recitals of traditional Japanese music in the lobby. But it is the hotel's sensational collection of *onsen* which steal the show, with dozens of indoor and outdoor pools, some set on terraces amid the pine trees and maples with the sound of the river rushing below.

through Super Nintendo World, offering overseas fans a further glimpse inside the attraction.

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### *Cuisine*

#### **The secret of Longevity: fermented food, sake and amazake**

Fermented foods might be one of the world's latest wellness crazes but there is evidence that these tangy health-giving dishes have been staples of the Japanese diet since the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Dishes such as *miso* (a soybean paste), *nattō* (sticky round soybeans) and *amazake* (rice *koji* porridge) are packed with millions of beneficial



### *Outdoor & Nature*

#### **How to Enjoy Hanami (cherry blossom viewing)**

Skyscrapers, *sumo*, *sushi* – and *sakura*. Perhaps one of the most enduring symbols of Japan are the pale pink *sakura* cherry blossoms that annually burst into cloud-like bloom across the country.

The cherry blossom season has long been a highlight of the Japanese calendar – and it's worth booking a

probiotic gut bacteria, as well as vitamins, minerals and folic acid and are thought to contribute to Japanese citizens' extraordinary longevity – Okinawa, in southern Japan, has the highest number of centenarians found anywhere in the world, as well as the lowest risk of premature death.

Even *sake*, brewed from fermented rice, is believed to reduce cholesterol, lower high blood pressure and help prevent osteoporosis and diabetes, when drunk in moderation. It's a positive to keep in mind as you explore Japan's rich sake heritage. There are thousands of craft breweries across the country, many of which are open to tours and tastings.

Asahikawa in Hokkaido is home to the Otokoyama Sake Brewery and Museum, a prestigious brand which has been around for more than 340 years. And, only 40 minutes by train from Hiroshima, there's a whole sake brewery neighborhood, the Saijo Sake District, where visitors can experience eight ancient breweries.

flight now in order to witness the most picturesque time of year in Japan in person next spring.

The season commences as early as January in southernmost Okinawa before slowly edging up the archipelago (its progress minutely documented in cherry blossom forecasts), passing through Tokyo late March to early April, before continuing up to northern Hokkaido.

One dreamy spot to appreciate the cloud-like blooms is Yoshino-Kumano National Park, an idyllic natural wilderness. This expanse of mountains, valleys and hidden pilgrim routes, it straddles Mie, Nara and Wakayama Prefectures. The park is also *sakura* nirvana, with the green slopes of Mount Yoshino in particular transforming into a symphony of pink flowers every spring.

Across the country, the *sakura* season marks a symbolic time of fresh new beginnings – particularly in Tokyo, where it often coincides with the start of a new financial and academic year. But wherever the blossoms appear, it generally means one thing: it's time to *hanami*.

The custom of *hanami* – which directly translates as “flower viewing” – dates back centuries, with the first *sakura* party understood to have been held in Kyoto by Emperor Saga as early as 812.

Today, for some, *hanami* can mean a solitary, contemplative stroll beneath the blooms (in Tokyo, top spots range from the scenic riverside pathways in Nakameguro, lit with lanterns after dark; to the lush gardens of Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden near Shinjuku's skyscrapers).

For others, *hanami* involves a fully-fledged picnic (along with several thousand others – and a healthy quantity of *sake*) in a famed beauty spot or in a city park on a picnic blanket laid out beneath a sea of pink. *Bento* boxes can easily be picked up at local convenience stores – or the basement *depachika* food halls of department stores in cities.

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