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TRAVELLER

UK EDITION // APRIL 2022 // £5.10

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Georgia

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Ibiza

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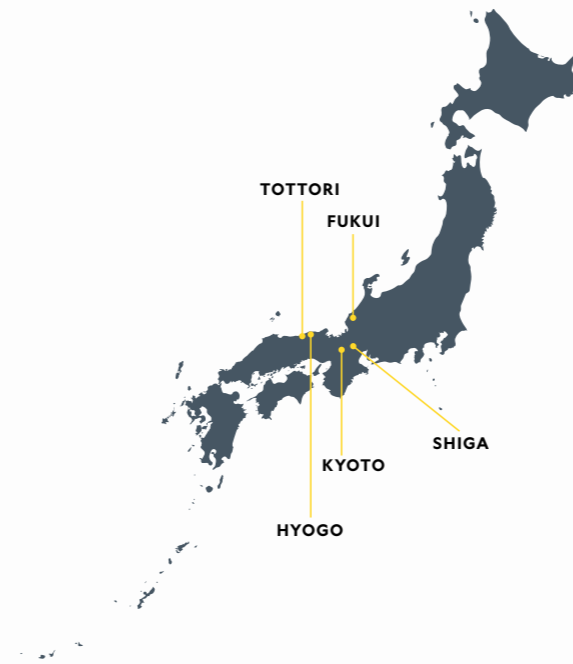


ALSO: GENOA // ICELAND // ISLAY // ISTANBUL // NEWCASTLE // WARSAW // LGBTQ+ TRAVEL



KANSAI A journey from west to east

On the northern coast of Japan's Kansai region, natural drama and a rich culture combine to spectacular effect. From the windswept coastline and tiny fishing villages to ancient temples that teeter on the sides of mountains, a trip through Kansai will stir the soul. Words & photographs: Ben Weller



The northern coast of Kansai sketches a rocky line along the Sea of Japan. Rich in natural and historical treasures, the fishermen, farmers and craftspeople here have a deep reverence for the province they call home, preserving age-old traditions while acting as stewards of the sea, fields and forests. This seven-day odyssey through Kansai starts in the San'in Kaigan UNESCO Global Geopark, before pushing eastward along the coast, and plunging south along the shores of Lake Biwa. Expect towering dunes, white sand beaches, centuries-old temples, and fishing villages that live according to the rhythm of the sea. Whether reading sutras with monks, venturing out on a commercial fishing vessel, or strolling the willow-lined streets of a hot springs town, every step of this journey offers the potential to connect with the land, its history and, above all, its people.

DAY ONE Tottori

Begin your journey in Tottori, in Kansai's northwest, with its other-worldly sand dunes, sea cliffs and hidden beaches. The dunes are jaw-dropping, though the climb up is steep. To get down, however, there's the option to sandboard, paraglide or even climb aboard a camel. Next, visit the San'in Kaigan Geopark Museum of the Earth and Sea, before exploring the coastline with Uradome Coast Island Cruises. These hardy vessels navigate the rocky islets dotting the shore, offering the chance to see the area's fascinating geology. End the day at the nearby Sand Museum, displaying exquisitely carved sculptures from the world's top sand artists.

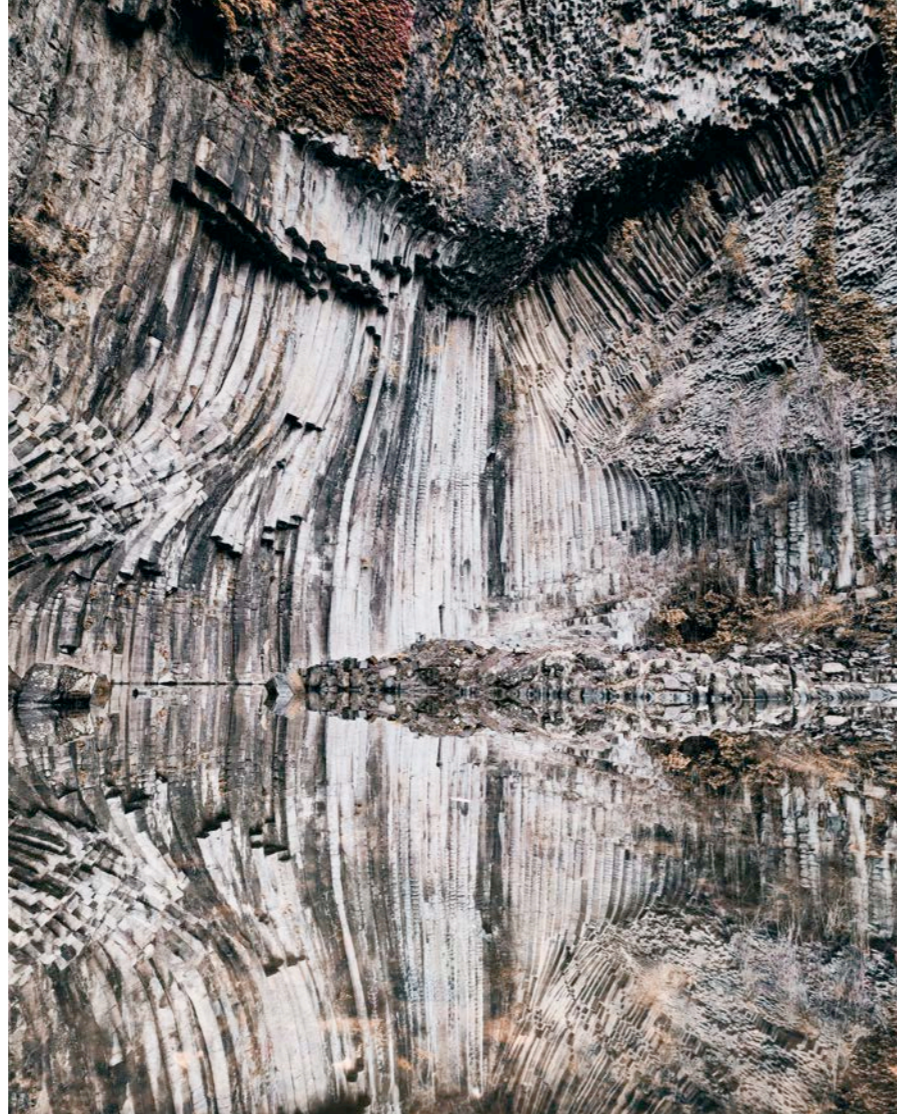
The Tottori Sand Dunes cover a vast area, rising skywards for an incredible 150ft; a veritable sand mountain on Kansai's western coast. The shoreline is dominated with rocky outcrops, which play host to impressive colonies of cormorants, and are surrounded by the crystalline waters of the Sea of Japan.



DAY TWO

Hyogo

Next, head east into Hyogo Prefecture and deep into the San'in Kaigan Geopark, a UNESCO-recognised site, where evidence of the formation of the Sea of Japan can be witnessed. The Hyogo Park of the Oriental White Stork is also well worth visiting. This majestic bird species was decimated by pesticides used in rice agriculture but locals rallied, bringing in safe farming methods and reintroducing storks to the wild. Even the schools here serve organic rice in children's lunches. Spend the night in Kinosaki Onsen, a hot spring town where people bathe so often they stroll the streets in traditional yukata robes. While there, enjoy a delicious, seasonal meal at Sanpou Nishimuraya Honten. The restaurant's modern counter seating encircles a traditional irori (a hearth over which stews are cooked for several hours, making the meat incredibly tender). Comfy seats in the upstairs salon overlook the dining area, making it a great place to relax after your meal.



Genbudo Caves were formed over 1.6 million years ago, after magma from a volcanic eruption cooled, contracted, and cracked; the passage of time starkly visible in the layers of rock that lie beside one another like the pages of a book. These otherworldly rock formations were designated as a national natural monument in 1931, recognised for their unique appearance and composition.

A willow-lined river runs through Kinosaki Onsen, a resort town known for its warm hospitality and even warmer waters. Traditional, wood-fronted shops sell fine art and local crafts, while a ropeway takes travellers to the town's temple, Osenji; it's a local custom to pray for permission to enter the hot springs.



DAYS THREE & FOUR

Kyoto

Onwards to the white sands of Kotohikihama Beach, in northern Kyoto, which stretches for more than a mile. The quartz content in the sand is so high it makes a singing sound when you walk on it, and efforts to keep the coast clean are extensive and wide-ranging. Learn about how residents protect their home at the Kotohikihama Singing Sand Museum, before spending the rest of the day at the beach. Then dive even deeper into local life at Ine, a little fishing town on the Kyotango Peninsula. People here live in *funaya* (wooden boathouses that sit right on the water) and guesthouses are the best way to experience fishery, immersing yourself in the area. Take a boat taxi tour of the bay, eat the day's catch, and fall asleep to the sound of the waves lapping against your window.

Kikue Ashihara is 79 years old and lives in a *funaya* in the town of Ine. Like most residents, she grew up on the water, and knows every mood and swell of the ocean. She makes her living from the sea, which is rich in fish such as yellowtail tuna, blowfish and crab. →



DAYS FIVE & SIX

Fukui

In Fukui it's time to slow down, soaking up the history and beauty of this mountainous coastal region. Seafood lovers will want to stay at a fisherman's inn in Wakasa, and head out on an early morning set net fishing expedition. This is also the home of Eihei-ji, one of the most revered monasteries in Soto Zen Buddhism, a practice that has profoundly influenced Japanese art, culture and philosophy. After spending some time here, visit Echizen, where you can work side by side with local craftspeople making your own knives, washi paper and lacquerware.

At Kawamura, a fisherman's inn in Wakasa, the day's catch – a rainbow-coloured array of sashimi – is served up every evening. Most accommodation in the town is run by fishermen, so the freshest seafood is available at excellent prices. Near Wakasa Bay, the Mikata Goko are a cluster of five lakes, all with water so clear they mirror the sky. A leisurely cycling tour along their shores is a great way to see the area, as is the chair lift to the Rainbow Line Summit Park, where dazzling panoramic views stretch out across the water.



Founded in 1244 by Zen Master Eihei Dōgen, Eihei-ji is a practising monastery where only the most committed students of the Soto Zen school of Buddhism live and train. In Soto Zen, enlightenment is found in the practice of daily life as Buddha, such as eating, sitting and sleeping. At Eihei-ji, generations of monks have diligently carried on the teachings of Dōgen, maintaining a tradition central to Japanese culture. There's gravity in a pilgrimage to this mountain temple, intensified by the enormity of the place. The massive gates, long corridors, and the ancient trees surrounding the temple walls are a reminder of Dōgen's lasting presence. Hushed voices, the shuffling of slippers, the swish of a monk's robe—the quietude amplifies the weight of this endeavour. For all visitors, the magnitude of Eihei-ji is a humbling, equalising force.



Sunlight filtering through the towering cedars in the late afternoon is beautiful to behold. Next door, Hakuju-kan is a modern Zen-inspired inn operated by the temple, where guests can dine on shojin ryori, vegetarian Buddhist cuisine prepared by temple-supervised chefs, or sample some of Fukui's finest beef and seafood. In the morning, accompanied by the inn's zen concierge, visitors can join the monks for a morning service, adding their voice to over a hundred others chanting sutras in the cavernous and dimly lit Dharma Hall. Sutra readings are followed by a guided tour of the temple. Eihei-ji is a place to quiet the mind, and a reminder to appreciate the simple things. →



The craftsmen at Takefu knife village are known across Japan for their diligence and skill. This co-operative project brings artisans together to work under one roof, reducing costs and ensuring the tradition of handmade Echizen knives continues to flourish. Visitors can watch them at work, buy some of Japan's finest knives, and even try their own hand at knife-making in the on-site workshop.



Takumi Ikeda is a knife-maker, inspired to learn the skill from his uncle, who also works at Takefu knife village. "Japan has a great history of knife-making," he says. "I want people from abroad to know more about our knives, and Japanese people to learn about the traditions of our land." Ikeda feels a deep connection with the mountains, sea and rivers that surround the village in this wild, wonderful part of Japan.

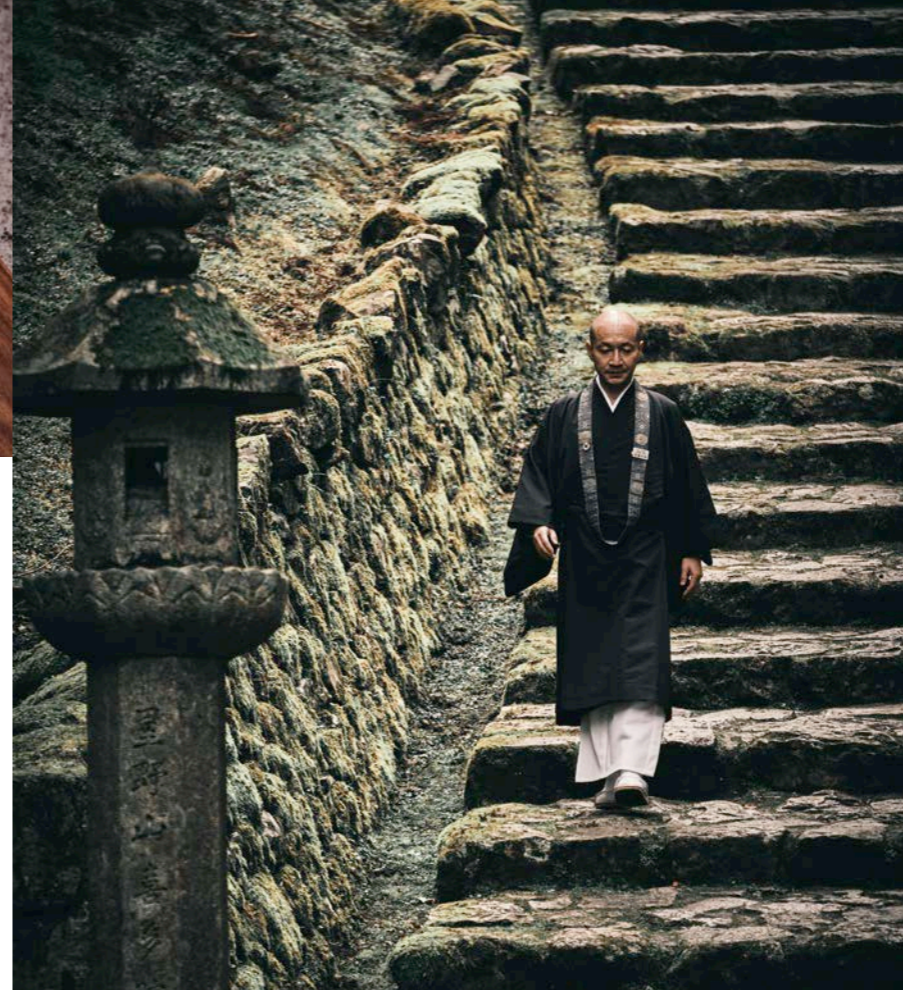


DAY SEVEN

Shiga

On the final day of your journey, head south along the shores of Lake Biwa, Japan's biggest lake, and undoubtedly one of its most beautiful. At the southern tip, close to the city of Kyoto, lies the temple complex of Enryakuji. This is the headquarters of a Buddhist sect called Tendai, founded in 788. The Japanese warlord Oda Nobunaga, threatened by Tendai's influence and its army of fierce warrior monks, burned the complex to the ground in 1571, but it was later rebuilt and remains one of the most important religious sites in Japan. Pause here, and spend some time reflecting at the temple, before enjoying a meal at Minemichi, a roadside diner with spectacular views across the still waters of Lake Biwa.

Monks like Eishuu Tsukuma live and study at Enryakuji, learning the ways of Tendai Buddhism which blends together Indian and Chinese philosophical and religious ideas. That everything is interconnected is at the heart of Tendai, and as such, nature plays a crucial role in the lives of monks at Enryakuji. "We're surrounded by the life of the mountain," Eishuu says. "In Japan, before we eat, we say, 'itadakimasu', meaning we're taking from nature. When we've finished, we say, 'gochisousama', thanking nature for everything it gives to us. For hundreds of years, monks have trained in the mountains, and nature is a huge part of that training."



PLAN IT

Getting there

Japan Airlines and British Airways fly to Kansai International Airport from London Heathrow.

Best time to visit

You can enjoy trekking in early summer and crabs on the Japan Sea coast in winter.

For more information go to the-kansai-guide.com/en/exciting/



With Kinki District Transport Bureau

TRACING THE ORIGINS OF Kyoto's capital culture

Revered for its skilled artisans and deep affinity with the spiritual world, Kyoto has long been considered Japan's cultural heartland. Indeed, for most of its history, the city of Kyoto was the country's capital, with a past tracing back as far as the 6th century. Centrally situated, flanked on one side by the Sea of Japan and divided by the Tanba Mountains, this is a place both geographically and culturally diverse. Within the prefecture, the art of the Japanese tea ceremony flourishes, as do age-old traditions such as kimono weaving, tie making and whittling bamboo into intricate lacquer ware.



THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY

Chado, meaning the way of tea, is at the very heart of Japanese culture. Introduced to the country by monks returning from China, tea was once reserved for the aristocracy. The drink is now ubiquitous, but the tea ceremony, centred around matcha, remains a revered practice. At Urasenke, visitors can participate in the ritual with a tea master, marvelling at the precision, artistry and sense of anticipation. At first it may seem like a solemn affair but in fact, it's a time to rejoice. As the master executes each step with beauty and precision, a sense of wonder descends. Finally, it's time to take the tea bowl in your hands, turn it in thanks and to avoid placing your mouth on the front, and bow to have a sip.



THE ART OF BAMBOO CARVING

Nagaokakyo, located in the southern part of Kyoto, is famous for its high-quality bamboo, and for the master craftsmen who meticulously whittle the wood into tools used in the Japanese tea ceremony. The whisk, ladle and ikebana vase are crucial to the ritual, and it takes a great artist to carve them, a skill often passed down through generations. Traditionally, Japanese calligraphy brushes are also crafted from bamboo, the slight nuances between size and shape significantly impacting strokes. Flower arranging, also known as Kado (the way of flowers), dates back to the Heian period, and vases woven from bamboo reeds have long been popular in Japan, their muted colours contrasting wonderfully with the flowers placed within them. A visit to the workshop at Takano Chikko will give a glimpse into the world of bamboo whittling, as well as the opportunity to buy their products.



THE BEAUTY OF HANDCRAFTED POTTERY

Bowls from which tea is sipped are just as important in Japanese culture as the tea itself, and indeed the history behind them is almost as long. More than 400 years ago, after tea was brought from China to Japan and planted in the fertile soils of southern Kyoto, its popularity spreading throughout the country, the Asahi kiln was created. The Asahi-yaki workshop has been passed down from father to son for generations, and is known for producing some of the country's most beautiful pottery. Over the centuries, the workshop, which is located on the banks of the Ujigawa river and can still be visited today, has provided tea bowls to nobility, warrior rulers and, of course, to tea masters. Today, its pottery is treasured by families across Japan, used for drinking the country's many famous tea varieties, from sencha to matcha. To try a steaming bowl of some of the country's finest tea, head to Magouemon, a 230-year-old company known for its Honzu Matcha. Plants here are grown beneath a layer of reeds and straw, ensuring sunlight falls lightly on the leaves. The result is a cup of matcha with a uniquely sweet taste, one that has not changed for centuries.



THE STORY OF SILK KIMONOS

As Kyoto's culture flourished, it also became more refined, and the elite demanded the finest silk kimonos for tea ceremonies, and other outings in the city. This led to an explosion in *chirimen* silk weaving, particularly on the Tango peninsula. This silk crepe, softly textured and perfect for dyeing, is produced by a hand loom-weaving process. Today, Tango produces 70% of Japan's silk, predominantly for kimonos which are still worn to special occasions.



THE FINEST TIES IN JAPAN

Luxury goods like scarves and ties, made entirely by hand by weavers at independent companies such as Kuska, in the region of Tango, are works of art in themselves, fusing tradition and fashion beautifully together. Founded by Kyoto local, Yasuhiko Kusunoki, who learned the craft from his father and grandfather, Yasuhiko wanted to continue the 300-year-old tradition of *chirimen* silk craftsmanship. ●



PLAN IT

Getting there

Japan Airlines and British Airways both fly direct to Kansai International Airport from London Heathrow.

Best time to visit

Kansai is wonderful year-round. Spring sees the cherry trees blossom, and the landscape bursts with bubble-gum pink. In May, it's time for the tea harvest, while summer, with its warmer weather, comes with clear skies and matcha ice creams. The landscape explodes with colour in the autumn, before it's blanketed in snow in the winter months.

For more information go to [the-kansai-guide.com/en/feature/item/02](https://www.kansai-guide.com/en/feature/item/02)



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