Honolulu Star-Advertiser | 8 Apr 2018

The Japan Alps

In winter, mountain towns offer snow, sake … and monkeys

By George Hobica
Special to the Star-Advertiser

It was coming on winter in Los Angeles, and I was missing snow. Brought up in Vermont, I missed snow's comforting (snow does have a smell, you know). I missed its soft crunch under my feet. And coincidentally, I was also missing Japan, a land that has fascinated me ever since third grade when, for a show-and-tell project, at the suggestion of Mrs. Reggolino, who also had a Japan thing going on, I built a traditional Japanese home out of balsa wood and paper, complete with shoji screens (yes, I was a precocious child). Some places I visit only once and see no need to return. Others, such as Japan, I have visited multiple times. I love the food and culture but mostly I love the people and the respect they show each another and to visitors.

For example: Although children are as rambunctious here as anywhere, in the Japan Airlines airport lounge once I noticed a mother bringing her fidgety child inside an enclosed phone booth to avoid annoying others (and listened to a public address announcement asking people to make mobile phone calls inside those booths for the same reason).

And while I'd visited many times since that trip in 2011, I'd never made it beyond Tokyo.

So here I was again, this time in the depths of winter, in the Japanese Alps, and there was snow. Healthy helpin and deep. My journey took me to Tsumago, Magome, Takayama, Shirakawa-go and Gokayama, getting around by train and road.

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I knew about Mount Fuji, but I had no idea until I opened my Michelin Green Guide that Japan contains nearly of sparsely inhabited mountains. In fact, I further learned, mountains cover two-thirds of Japan and most of these areas are uninhabited, so 127 million people live in the remaining topography.

Tsumago-juku, an old "post town" surrounded by mountains, is one of the 69 such towns along the Nakasendo, a stone-paved route dating from the 17th century, designed to connect Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and Kyoto. Today, many of the original historic buildings remain.

In one of them I encountered Jun Ohara, a true local "character" as my friend Sumiko called him as we left his shop house. He grew up in Tsumago (population 630), studied art and fashion in Tokyo, and returned to look after his elderly parents. In the traditional house of his birth, one of 223 restored and preserved buildings in the town, he makes men's and women's clothing in fabrics, patterns and color combinations like nothing you've ever seen. He designs and weaves the cotton fabric himself (he won't reveal where the yarn originates) in patterns he designs. He even built the looms they're woven on. The indescent fabrics in greens, blues and burnt orange, one of which depicts Edo-era firemen, based on historic drawings, will definitely get a conversation going anywhere in the world. He's opening his first purpose-built shop in Osaka this spring and some of his creations are one of a kind. "I just want to support myself doing something I love," he tells me with Suzuki translating.

From Tsumago I visited Magome, another post town of restored traditional homes and shops, about a three-hour walk along the Nakasendo (you can also travel by bus, and for $5 the tourist office will forward your bags between the two towns if you do opt for a stroll). Here, among other relics, I saw a mill wheel powered by water melting from the mountain snow, ancestral for grinding grains. Many structures date from the 17th and 18th centuries.

In Takayama, surrounded by mountains reaching 10,000 feet in altitude, I visited several local sake breweries offering tastings, one of which has been in operation since 1695, and a museum housing the elaborately decorated floats paraded through town each year during twice-yearly festivals. Gourmets, however, come here for the area's famous forb-tender hida beef which, some say, rivals better-known Japanese varieties.

The trip from Takayama to Shirakawa-go and Gokayama, both UNESCO World Heritage sites, will take you three hours along twisting roads, but it's worth it if you can't prefer larger and f rakawa-go. snow each Japan's mo lages are in mount here the 18th ce steep that pr prevent ac Many of the guests, pro (you'll be a futons and for between with breakf other offe

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The thatched-roof structures of Shirakawa-go are suited for the more than 30 feet of snow that fall each year in the village.

No bath in Hot Spring in Jigokudani is home to macaque monkeys who like to bathe to escape the cold. Visitors can cross paths ways through the sulfurous steam that gives the area its name — "Hell's Valley."

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lo-lane, two-lane roads, take a coach tour if r not to drive. The nater of the two, Shi- ssea over 20 feet of winter making it one of wheat regions. Both vil- mous for their gasho- houses, dating from d 19th centuries, with hatched roofs designed to w from gathering. on welcome overnight visiting local and lodging keeping on traditional uring shared facilities), 1,250 and 2,000 a night set and dinner, while rooms. The nearby and

luxe-developed Gokayama sees fewer tourists and when I toured Suganuma and Ainokura, two smaller gasho-cultural villages in the area, I was only one of a few visitors and I could enjoy strolling around without distraction.

The last stop on my tour before heading back to Tokyo by Shinkansen bullet train from Nagano, was to Jigokudani (roughly translated as "Hell's Valley" owing to its active hot springs spewing constant plumes of sulfurous steam), home to wild troops of Japanese macaque monkeys that, in winter, enjoy steeping in the warm waters. On my visit the monkeys were merely drinking from a pool of steaming water rather than bathing in it, so camera-toting visitors waited patiently but to no avail, for the creatures to jump in. Perhaps the air temperature wasn't quite cold enough.

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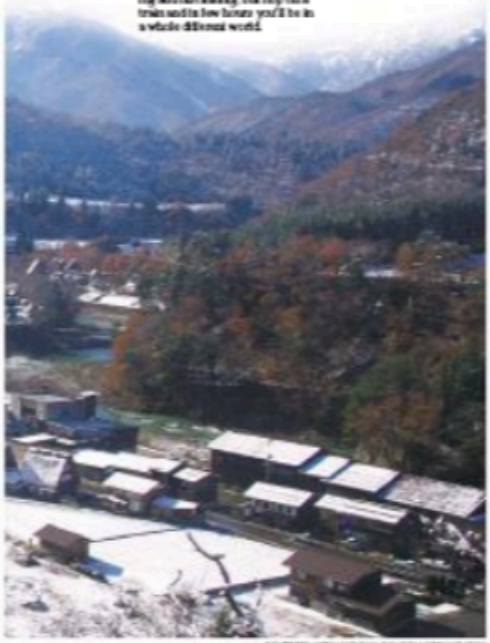
Speaking of cold, yes it's pretty chilly in the Japanese Alps in wintertime, so bundle up. But they're also beautiful in spring, summer and especially in the fall when the foliage is in full color. On my next visit to Japan I hope to explore other rural areas. Tokyo is exciting and fascinating, but hop on a train and in few hours you'll be in a whole different world.



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