





# THE HEART OF JAPAN

Two of Japan's most treasured pleasures – fine dining and *onsen* bathing –  
unite on an eye-opening walking tour around the island of Kyushu

---

WORDS BY JOCELYN PRIDE









The private dining room of Amane Resort Seikai, a contemporary Japanese *ryokan* (inn) perched waterfront in Beppu city, Kyushu, is abuzz. Sporting black *yukatas* (robes) tied with a maroon obi sash, our group bonds over laughter and snippets of conversations like: “How did you go in the *onsen*?” and, “Isn’t it cool wearing a bathrobe to dinner?” It’s night one of our five-day journey through Oita and Kumamoto prefectures with Walk Japan.

“*Itadakimasu*,” says our guide Jon Finger, raising the aperitif, a pink *nigori sake*. “This is how we give thanks to the chefs, sun, water, nature – everything that’s made the meal possible.”

Over the next couple of hours, we’re introduced to *kaiseki* dining – storytelling through food, where every bite and sip reflects a sense of place and seasonality. “At each *ryokan* we go to the chef will prepare a *kaiseki* dinner. They’ll all be different, but follow a similar pattern – sashimi, steamed, fried, rice, miso soup, sweet,” Jon explains.

Tonight, course after course appears, presented as mini masterpieces on an array of hand-crafted ceramic bowls, glass jars, wooden boxes and platters. From the gleaming slivers of sashimi to baby fern porridge, wagyu beef with young wood sprouts and miso dressing, sweet-fish dusted with *nuka bijin* (a type of rice bran) powder and tempura shrimp with *kuromame* (black bean) dipping vinegar, everything is sourced locally and garnished with intricate splashes of revered cherry blossom and other spring flowers. Then there’s the regional *sake*, both sweet and dry – paired with each course by sommelier Tsuda san, who describes how the national drop brings out the flavours in food and acts as a palette cleanser.

Like the exquisite food, we soon discover *onsen* (hot spring) experiences bring another rich dimension to life in Japan’s southernmost main island.

*“Course after course appears, presented as mini masterpieces on an array of hand-crafted ceramic bowls, glass jars, wooden boxes and platters.”*

PREVIOUS PAGE  
Steamy moments across  
Kyushu © Jocelyn Pride

OPPOSITE Exploring Japan  
on foot is the ultimate way  
to see the countryside





*“Between bathing and banqueting for breakfast, lunch and dinner, we explore Kyushu on foot. With a rural atmosphere, the island oozes olde world charm, history and natural beauty.”*

**ABOVE, LEFT** Serene shrines dot the Kyushu countryside © Jocelyn Pride

**ABOVE, RIGHT** Fine dining at the end of a day of walking © Jocelyn Pride

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Kyushu never fails to impress © Kitinut/iStock

## THE ART OF BATHING

Mountainous and volcanic, Kyushu is home to thousands of natural hot springs, gurgling through a tapestry of forests and fields dotted with towns and villages.

“An *onsen* is a good place to start for anyone wanting to understand Japanese culture,” says Jon, who moved here from Australia nine years ago with his Japanese wife and young family. “It can be a social occasion as well as relaxing.”

However, etiquette is everything.

Whether it’s a private or shared *onsen* (separate area for men and women), the protocols are the same – a complete wash before entering the water, nude bathing only, don’t let hair or the towel touch the water, and quiet conversations only.

I’m surprised how quickly I leave modesty at the door of our nightly ryokans, and embrace soaking in women-only *onsens*, in addition to the private baths.

## ONSEN HOPPING

Water temperature and mineral content varies between baths, as does the scenery. Locally known as the ‘onsen at zero metres above sea level’, Shiosai no Yu at Amane is the ultimate ‘infinity’ bath. One morning, cocooned in the open-air onsen, I watch in awe as the rising sun paints the sky crimson, giving the illusion I’m floating over Beppu Bay.

My biggest challenge while soaking in the onsen at recently renovated Enokiya Ryokan – not far away, on the banks of the Oita River – is staying awake. Located in the centre of Yufuin, a pretty village with a European spa town vibe, the calming water is soft, clear and has the Goldilocks factor – not too hot and not too cool.

At Lamune Onsen – a playfully artistic building made from charred cedar and white plaster with quirky sculptures



---

## COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Walk Japan's headquarters is in Kyushu, where they have run a community project to help rural areas maintain a sustainable future. The project provides employment for local people, helps restore and regenerate the land and supports local family-run businesses – they've also opened a school for children to learn English. Guests on tours within the area have the opportunity to visit the office and find out more about the work being done.

---





throughout the garden – I feel like I'm bathing in warm champagne. Tiny silvery bubbles cling to my skin and explode into a fizzy swirl each time I move my arms or legs. And lounging on large river stones in the Tolkien-esque *onsen* of Ryokan Sanga, surrounded by forest with rain pelting into the steamy water, takes some beating for ambience.

### CONNECTING TO COUNTRY

Between bathing and banqueting for breakfast, lunch and dinner, we explore Kyushu on foot. With a rural atmosphere, the island oozes olde world charm, history and natural beauty. Starting with Beppu's 'hells' – a series of eight springs too hot for bathing, bearing names like 'blood pond hell' and 'sea hell' – we wander through the hotspots of town stopping to snack on eggs and even cake steamed by the precious water.

Other days we hike along pilgrimage trails lined with ancient stone statues; through forests where towering cedar and beech trees block the light; and across open fields laying fallow in preparation for the fast-approaching rice planting season. We pause to check out crops of shitake mushrooms being cultivated on wooden posts; spot ferns and pockets of tiny flowers that grace our dinner table at night; peek into caves where Buddhist deities stand grandly; learn how to bow when entering a Shintō shrine; and marvel at the glades of cherry blossom speckled across the ruins of Oka Castle.

And at days' end, tucked into my futon, sleep comes easily and deeply. There's definitely something in the water.

### JOURNEY NOTES

The fully escorted five-day 'Onsen Gastronomy: Oita and Kumamoto' is one of Walk Japan's signature tours, and runs at various times throughout the year. The maximum number of guests per tour is 12 and there is no minimum group size. Rates start at JPY 360,000 per person (about AUD\$3,485) inclusive of transport while on tour, all meals, drinks and accommodation. [walkjapan.com](http://walkjapan.com)



**TOP, LEFT** Lush moments on the trail © Kanonsky/iStock

**TOP, RIGHT** Refuelling after a day of walking © Jocelyn Pride

**OPPOSITE** Cherry blossom trees in full bloom © Jocelyn Pride



