

JAPAN'S NEVER-ENDING PULL

By Elaine Masters



Sometimes, it can be so hard to leave. The best trips end with the feeling, "I'll be back." Whether true or not, it makes moving on or going home a bit easier. Each time I've left Japan I've felt that. Each trip was during a different stage of life and with very different travel buddies.

My Introduction to Japan

Traveling with locals is one of my favorite ways to get acquainted with a new country. On the first trip to Japan, my then-husband, five-year-old son, and I leaped at the invitation to visit friends who had returned to their Tokyo home. I brought a small folding stroller so my busy boy could rest as we ran around with our hosts, but I didn't foresee his rebellion. He jumped out on a hot Tokyo street to push his stroller in and around crowded sidewalks. It was mortifying and exhausting to manage, and we soon ditched the stroller. We learned to let his needs dictate our pace more often. Traveling with our small boy also opened opportunities like joining other families to play with Legos in the middle of a Tokyo shopping center or watching TV and bringing home a passion for Japanese cartoons, especially "Totoro."

One morning, our friends drove us to the mountain town of Hakone for a weekend at a *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inn). As we first rode into the vacation village, I looked up from my fidgeting son to spy a broad green lawn with an immense statue of a boldly dressed woman carrying a big purse. Niki de Saint Phalle's sculpture, *Black Power*, towered over the entrance to the renowned Hakone Open Air Museum. We ended up chasing my boy through the park-like acres dotted with internationally acclaimed artworks. I've always wanted to return to enjoy the park at a slower pace.

Japan Take Two

Ten years later, I jumped at the chance to return to Japan for a very different trip. My new husband was going to meet his Japanese business partner and another family for a ten-day tour. Eleven Americans pooled requests into an itinerary that included a pre-dawn, back-stage pass through the Tsuji Fish Market, to photos with Snow Monkeys, and to soaking in ancient *onsen* baths. We walked through Kyoto's iconic Inari Gates and stepped too quickly past the Nishiki market food stalls. Again, I felt the strain of our pace, always wishing to stop more and wonder instead of rushing onward.



One indelible image was watching my 16-year-old son's face materialize through the foggy glass door of our Kyoto Temple Inn. The relief in his eyes when he saw me was priceless. He'd flown from Los Angeles to Osaka on his own, been picked up at the airport by our host's employee, and had dinner at an izakaya before finally arriving near midnight to join our tour.

Traveling in a large group with leaders to answer questions and manage day-to-day pivots is wonderful when you're new to a country, especially when you don't speak the language. Going on one's own is rife with risk but also with opportunity.

Third Time Will Be the Charm

My artist sister called the morning that she saw a *New York Times* article about the top places to visit this year. "Did you read about the Setouchi Triennial in Japan?" she asked. I had and encouraged her to go with one of her artist friends. She countered, "No, will you go with me?" And so, my third trip to Japan will be personally honed instead of relying on another's agenda. There'll be hours to stroll the Imperial Palace, a day to study every foot of the Hakone Museum, and several days to ponder the sculptures dotting the Setouchi Islands.



We'll end the trip, our personal pilgrimage as two women of a certain age, by hiking a small portion of the World Heritage Kumano Kodo trail. The ancient route extends 156 kilometers through sacred forests. Over three days, we'll see only highlights but still step where emperors, monks and warriors have meditated on life. My sister and I will stand in the mist from the largest waterfall in the country, pause in ancient temples, and sleep on tatami mats in a riverside *ryokan*. Before returning home, we'll have time to see the Katsurra Fish Market and sip Matcha in Uji where green tea is harvested. We'll interact with the Art Lab Light installation in Tokyo and then ride to the mountaintop Miho Museum, built by I.M.Pei, who created the Paris Louvre Pyramid. I can't imagine doing this trip at any other time in my life, and as the airplane rises from the Narita airport to return me home, I'll look out the window and whisper, "I'll be back, Japan."



Opposite page: Mt. Fuji blossoms; This page, from top: Himeji Castle, Japan, Courtesy CCC; breakfast at the Ryokan; the author in front of a temple

