

EAST



THE HARMONY ISSUE

+

Meet Vietnam's ancient ethnic groups
Fall in love with Pico Iyer's Japan
Explore Earth's wildest jungle
Win our competition to travel the world!

The harmony issue

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What's in a word?

2020 marks the twentieth anniversary of InsideJapan, and to celebrate we've given our magazine a new look and feel. After two decades our love for travel shines just as bright as when we first started out. What we don't love is the kind of travel that takes more than it gives. You know what we mean: the kind that inundates the world's beautiful places with crowds and takes advantage of the people it should benefit most. But it's important to realise that, when done properly, travel has immense potential for good.

As Japan marks the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and looks forward to international unity in the 2020 Olympics, it's time to put our values in focus. Harmony between humanity and nature is at the foundation of Asia's Buddhist-influenced cultures, and we want to lead the industry in bringing harmony back to travel through thoughtfully curated experiences, environmentally sustainable choices, and genuine personal connections. Positive, empathetic, fun travel to thrill and amaze: in the end, it's all about balance.

Four Japanese concepts for a more harmonious 2020

調和

Mottainai 勿体無い

A feeling of regret resulting from a valuable resource going to waste. Ties into recycling, sensible levels of consumption, and working to preserve the environment.

Ikigai 生き甲斐

Often said to be the Japanese key to happiness. Roughly translates to 'reason for being', and refers to the innermost value or belief in your life that brings joy and purpose.

Ichigo ichie 一期一会

Translating as 'one time, one meeting', this reminds us that each encounter we have with one another is unique. Nothing can be repeated, everything must be treasured.

Kizuna 絆

The bonds and connections that hold people together. Voted as kanji of the year in 2011, after the earthquake and tsunami.

Keen to explore these concepts further?

We've put together a tour you'll love: **Path to Happiness**. On this trip we make use of those beautiful, almost untranslatable concepts that pepper the Japanese language, as a lens through which to explore the country.

For more detail, give us a call on **0117 244 3466**.

Precious Heritage

Vietnam is changing - *fast*. As 2020 arrives, the nation looks to the future, and the Vietnamese youth flock to cities filled with opportunity and excitement. Time passes differently out in the countryside however, where in many small communities, tradition reigns. As with the advancement of any country, embracing the new brings with it a sudden urge to preserve heritage and tradition.

It was this notion that motivated photographer Réhahn to spend the last nine years travelling all over Vietnam, documenting all 54 remaining ethnic groups as part of his 'Precious Heritage' project. The Precious Heritage Museum, founded by Réhahn in Hoi An, displays the whole range of striking portraits. It's a must for anyone visiting the city; a rare insight into the lives of Vietnam's remotest people, and a celebration of their inimitable cultures.

Photography by RÉHAHN Words by GRAEME GREEN

W: rehahnphotographer.com **IG:** [instagram.com/rehahn_photography](https://www.instagram.com/rehahn_photography)

Precious Heritage Museum in Hoi An is free to visit at 26 Phan Boi Chau, Hoi An



O Du

With virtually no information available online, it took me two days to find the O Du; the smallest ethnic group in Vietnam. I was lucky enough to meet the chief who was initially reluctant to part with a costume. I later learnt that the O Du only have five complete original costumes left.





“Legend has it, scholars wrote the ancient language on rice cakes, but the language disappeared when they became hungry and ate them.”

Ro Mam

There are now only 12 of the Ro Mam's traditional costumes left, and I was honoured to be given one, as well as a pipe and a basket, to showcase at my museum. The remaining 11 white costumes are kept safely by the Ro Mam as treasures, as they know no one makes them anymore.



La Hu

The La Hu has no written language and most of them don't speak Vietnamese.. legend has it that a group of scholars once wrote the ancient language on rice cakes, but the language disappeared when the scholars became hungry and ate them.

Xo Dang

I met A Dip, who is 76 years old. He is the only artisan in the village who still makes traditional bamboo baskets and the last one to play the traditional instruments of the Xo Dang people.



Brâu

Traditionally, the Brâu wear heavy jewellery that strains their ears to create large and long, hanging earlobes. Depending on their level of income, they use either ivory or wood. As young people reach the age of puberty, they have the four front teeth of their upper jaw evenly filed. It's considered a coming of age ritual for them.



Dao Man

The Dao have up to nine local subgroups. Each has its own traditional costume; the different features helping to distinguish one subgroup from another, like the colour of their headscarves and the particular way of tying it. The women use indigo to dye their costumes and the batik technique to create beautiful patterns.

Rhythm and blues

There's often a stark contrast between expectation and reality when it comes to island holidays. Increasingly it seems many resorts are devoid of cultural relevance; they've become so well-trodden and warped by heavy tourism that little of what first drew people there remains. There's got to be more out there, right?

Worry not; it's still totally possible to reclaim that sense of serenity. The world is still full of unspoiled nature, and the rhythms of island life exist today as they have for centuries. There are still places you can go to truly connect with tradition and nature to have a free-spirited experience - and, if we travel sustainably, there always will be. You just need to know where to look, and as luck would have it, we do. Here are some of our favourites.

A small request: we've all seen the documentaries on plastics in the ocean. Spot a bottle bobbling around in the surf? Pop it in the bin, and gain a little good karma.

Words by DAN HACKETT





Ogasawara

Tokyo Prefecture, Japan

Isolated evolution

For those who find their tranquillity in solitude, these islands are about as remote as you can get; 600 miles from the mainland, and only accessible via 25-hour boat ride. This volcanic archipelago of subtropical islands is known as "the Galapagos of the East" thanks to its unspoiled biodiversity. Here you can see wildlife that exists nowhere else on earth; birds, reptiles, crabs, and fruit bats, all of which evolved here in total isolation. To take it all in you can try whale watching, swimming with dolphins, snorkelling, and hiking through the jungle. Out of around 30 islands, only two are inhabited. For those seeking far-flung havens, Ogasawara is a gem.

Con Dao

Vietnam

History hopping

Accessible by propeller plane from Ho Chi Minh City, the clusters of 16 islands known as Con Dao are mostly uninhabited. A common pastime is sailing between the islands, exploring breezily. On Con Son, the largest island at 20 square miles spot sea cows offshore, eat fresh seafood, and learn about the island's complicated past at an abandoned French prison. Antiquated architecture is a common site around the islands. Con Dao is a history buff's dream, and testament to the healing that the passage of time allows: old Buddhist temples sit alongside crumbling machine gun nests and dilapidated French villas, now overgrown with vines and flowers.

Koh Trong

Cambodia

The inland island

Islands surrounded by ocean are so 2019. The four-mile island of Koh Trong is situated in the middle of a Cambodian stretch of the river Mekong and is delightfully car-free; your transport options are motorcycle or horse and cart. The pace of life is as slow as you'd imagine, and from autumn to spring the island is ringed by white beaches (in the green season the river obscures them). Accommodation ranges from quaint homestays to villas. Explore picture-perfect local villages, see endangered freshwater Irrawaddy dolphins and mud turtles and visit a floating village just off the island.



Yakushima

Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan

Fairy-tale forests

The island of Yakushima is a place of genuine wonder. In this sub-tropical climate, ancient forests cover almost every inch of land; from narrow beaches to mountain peaks rising out of the ocean to staggering heights. It's hard not to feel emotional in the presence of trees that have survived for millennia, or when watching giant turtles lay their eggs in summer. Teeming with wildlife and imbued with a palpable mysticism, it's no wonder Yakushima was the inspiration for the atmospheric setting of Miyazaki's seminal animation Princess Mononoke.

Wa Ale Island

Myanmar

Diver's paradise

Just off Myanmar's southern coast, this island deserves to have its picture beside the dictionary definition of 'tropical paradise'. The Wa Ale Island Resort truly has it all; fall asleep to the sounds of crashing waves, watch leatherback turtles nesting from the comfort of your beach-facing balcony, and explore flourishing mangroves. The resort includes in-house diving and watersport instructors, which is handy as the Lampi Marine National Park is close by, featuring some choice diving sites, and the famed 'Black Rock' dive location is only an hour's boat ride. There's a huge amount of indigenous wildlife too – head out with a guide to learn about the gentle balance of the island's ecosystem.

Feeling inspired by all these lovely shades of blue?

Hop on over to our websites at insideasiatours.com and insidejapantours.com or chat to our lovely travel experts on **0117 244 3466**.



Wa Ale Island, Myanmar
"Don't suppose you know the way
back to the kayaking school?"

Meet the monks of Beopjusa

On seven ancient mountaintops sit seven ancient monasteries.

There is *Tongdosa*, the beginning of the passage to enlightenment, and *Buseoksa*, Temple of the Floating Stone. There is *Bongjeongsa*, the phoenix's landing site, and *Seonamsa*, home to the Ascending Immortals. There is *Magoksa* to the west, once a hideout for thieves, and in the south there is *Daeheungsa*, with its hall of a thousand laughing Buddhas. Finally, there is *Beopjusa*, the Residence of Dharma, on the slopes of Mount Songnisan.

These sacred temples watch over South Korea and are together known as the Sansa. They've existed for over a thousand years, through the rise and fall of empires, and today each is decorated in its own rich folklore. While these sites were for centuries high-inaccessible to foreigners, a South Korean cultural scheme known as 'Templestay' now encourages travellers to come and experience the serenity of life in a mountaintop temple. Last autumn, in a bid to escape the hubbub of inner-city life, we did exactly that.

Travel by ANNA TATTERSALL. *Words* by DAN HACKETT



The temple is just outside the quiet market town of Songnisan. Arriving by bus in the town centre, it's immediately apparent there are few westerners here; all shop names and road signs are written in Korean characters. Ginkgo trees line the streets, their leaves golden against the clear sky, and local fruit sellers call out with a smile as you pass their stalls.

To enter the temple, you pass beneath a stunning *iljumun*, a one-pillar gate, so-called because the gate's huge roof appears to be supported by a lone pillar when viewed from the side. *Iljumun* are common features of Korean Buddhist temples and represent purification; visitors must leave their desires outside when venturing further. It feels a little bit like stepping back in time.

Soon after, the spartan grounds of Beopjusa temple open up. A thought inevitably flashes up: what do they do all day here? Several dozen buildings, monuments and shrines are spread out across the bare grounds, the edges of their multi-coloured roofs curling up like a genie's shoes. The focal point is an enormous golden Buddha statue,

30 metres tall, the largest of its kind in Korea. Its placid eyes watch as you cross the temple ground to be greeted by a representative of the temple; a monk clad in neat grey robes (and a little grey beanie too; the evenings get chilly). With basic English and a wide smile, he gives his salutations, and the Templestay experience begins.

Hidden Relics

After arriving and depositing belongings in the spartan wooden dormitory, visitors are given a tour of the complex. It's a delight following the monks through the grounds as they point out relics and treasures; a five-storey wooden pagoda, an ancient stone fountain shaped like a lotus flower, and a carving of a five-metre high Buddha in a rock face, all but hidden by the red leaves of a maple tree. There are dozens of prime locations for a little sitting and pondering.

One thing becomes increasingly evident throughout the tour; life here is minimalistic and disciplined, and in that sense, everything feels very, very simple. Even after only several hours spent wandering the grounds, it seems almost

comical to think of how stressful daily life can be away at home. Yet here, in the mountains, all the usual things that nibble away at one's calm – bills, politics, social media – seem charmingly absurd.

Humble Tasks

While roaming the grounds you'll likely see monks going about their business; reading sutras and meditating, or cooking, cleaning and gardening. Those travellers looking to get pally with Beopjusa's robe-clad residents may struggle; many of the monks speak little or no English. In no time at all though the quiet begins to feel natural; a welcome respite from the clamour of lively Korean cities like Seoul and Busan. In this calm atmosphere, without distractions, there's nowhere to flee from one's own thoughts; no mobile phone to leap into the moment your ponderings go deep. It feels healthy.

At mealtimes, guests and monks eat together in the dining hall. Even though conversational topics are rather limited, there's something very wholesome about sitting down to dine with the monks. The food is nutritious, and though it may not win a Michelin

“Beopjusa offers a glimpse into an unfamiliar world: quiet, contemplative, traditional, reverent, and above all, simple.”

star anytime soon, the monks make excellent hosts, offering smiles and second helpings in equal measure. Everybody pitches in to wash the dishes after eating; a very grounding – if surreal – experience. You may well be visiting Beopjusa mid-way through a glamorous tour of South Korea; you may be leaving for Seoul in just a day or two, but for a moment, you are a functioning part of a mountaintop temple, scrubbing plates amidst the clatter of a busy kitchen.

After dinner, it's early to bed. Once the sun's gone down, there's not a lot more you can do – it's lights out in the guest dormitories at 9pm. Even this, which in any other location would be frustrating, has a certain charm. Life is straightforward in the mountains. When you can no longer see, you sleep.

Mountains are Sacred Places

The monks gently rouse the slumbering guest dorm at 4am: it's time to wake the earth. Every dusk and every dawn, the monks and guests of Beopjusa gather in the temple grounds under a blue-black sky, guests wrapped up against the cold in thick coats, the monks in

their robes. There, by torchlight and in reverent silence, a succession of huge drums are beaten, building to a deafening cacophony. Each drum is thought to awaken a different element of the world: the earth, the sea, the sky and the underworld. Whatever your beliefs, it's difficult to remain unmoved in the presence of such faith, discipline and ancient tradition. It's thrilling to realise there is still a little mystery left in the world.

Once the earth is awake, practitioners of Korean Zen Buddhism must bow 108 times - kneeling up, then leaning forward and pressing their palms and forehead to the floor. Guests are encouraged to take part in this practise. The number 108 comes from the six senses times three aspects of time (past, present, future) times two conditions of the heart (pure or impure) times three possible attitudes (like, dislike and indifference). The bows are hard for beginners, and they're supposed to be. The focus on physical activity is meant to fully occupy your mind and body, cleansing and connecting them.

A light breakfast follows, then, led by the monks, it's time for a 40 minute hike

up through the forest to Su Jeong Bong peak, winding up through the forest. The way is littered with great boulders, into which scripture has been carved by monks from centuries past. On the mountaintop, a meditation session is a stunning way to round off the experience. Sitting with legs crossed and eyes closed for the next hour or so, the surrounding forest and the valley below becomes a sensory paradise: the breeze in the autumn leaves, the songs of foreign birds, the smell of bark and moss, and the slow warmth that grows as the sun rises higher in the sky.

Beopjusa offers a glimpse into an unfamiliar world: contemplative, traditional, reverent, and above all, simple. When the time comes to leave the temple there's a sudden reluctance to leave this gentle place; to pass beneath the *iljumun* once more and wade back into the 21st century. However, even as the usual flow of life starts once more, in quieter moments it's pleasant to picture the monks of Beopjusa still up there on their mountain, donning their beanies, bowing on their mats, and waking the earth with their drums.



Anna Tattersall;
Senior Travel Consultant; Japan and South Korea

Travelled to South Korea October 2019

Highlights: Exploring the winding streets of traditional hanok villages, Jeonju's quirky street art and watching the evening illuminations at Gyeongju's Wolji Pond. Also finishing the trip on a high with Korea's signature fried chicken and beer in the bustling Hongdae district of Seoul.

If you are interested in travelling to our new destination, South Korea, give us a call on 0117 244 3466



A conversation with Pico Iyer

Pico Iyer is a much loved essayist and novelist, the son of a philosopher and religious scholar. Born in England to Indian parents who relocated to California, he has spent much of his life on the move, and writes often of his delight in living between the cracks, outside fixed categories. His work has seen him travel the world; here he talks to us about why he chose to settle down in Japan.

Interview with PICO IYER by JAMES MUNDY

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Tell us how you came to live in Japan

I was flying from Hong Kong to New York and I had a completely unwanted 20-hour layover at Narita airport, near Tokyo. Killing time before my flight, I decided to take a free shuttle-bus into the little town of Narita, and found myself walking around its narrow streets lined with wooden houses, all the way up to its central, thousand year-old temple - all on a late October day of radiant sunshine and the first pinch of coming darkness and cold. Somehow, I was so moved by even this neglected airport town - it felt so familiar in a way I could never explain - that, by the time I boarded my plane for JFK that afternoon, I'd decided to throw over my glamorous-seeming job with Time magazine in midtown Manhattan and move to Japan. I remain amazed and delighted that even a brief layover in an airport town, the equivalent to Queens or Hounslow, could transform my life in a morning. When finally I moved full-time to Japan in 1987 - as described

in my book *The Lady and the Monk* - I took residence in a tiny temple along the eastern hills of Kyoto, and then an even smaller guest-house room nearby, knowing that whatever unfolded there would be a perfect complement to my go-go life in New York city.

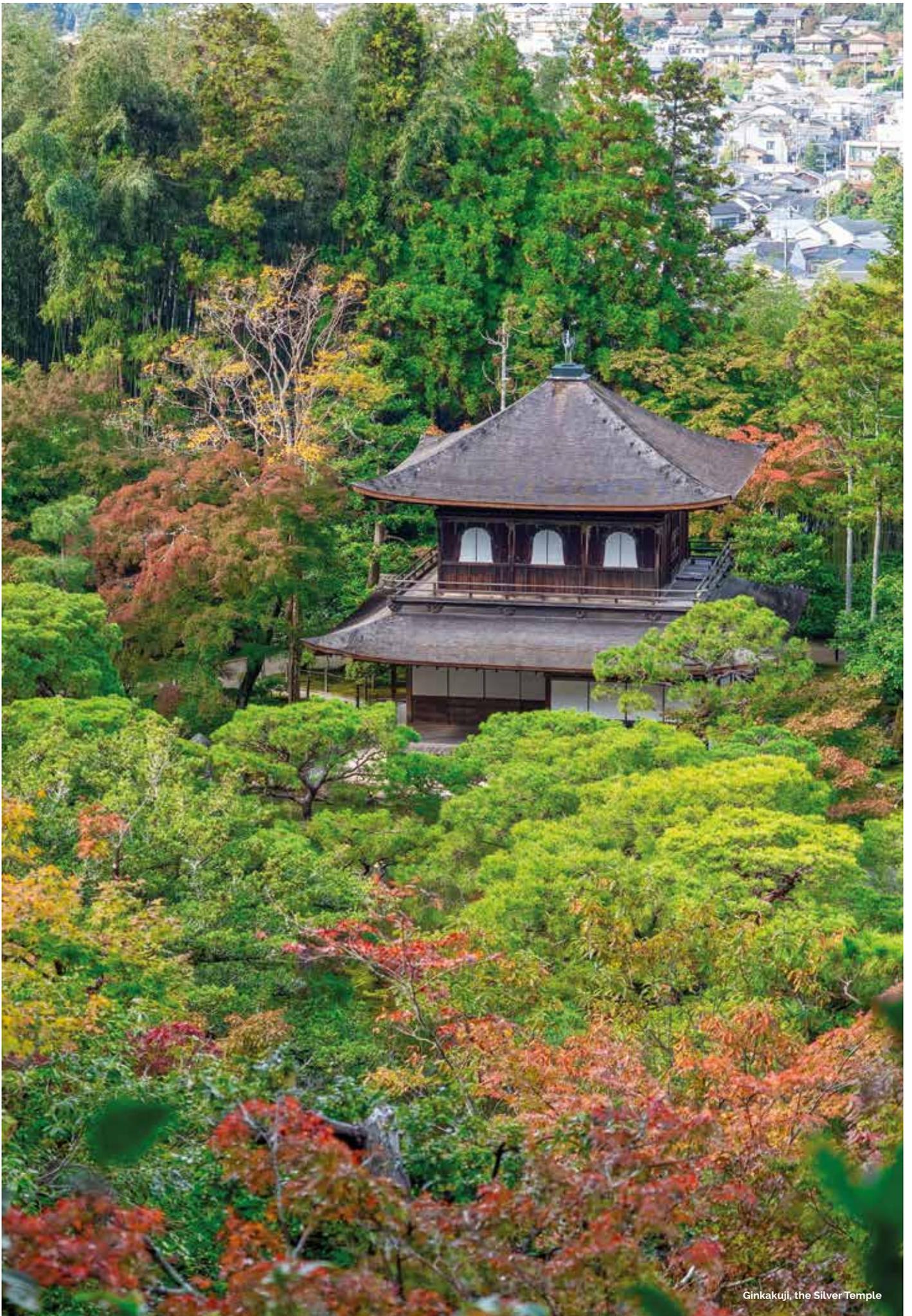
You famously don't consider yourself to have one home. What keeps bringing you back to Japan?

Japan is the kindest place I've met in my 45 years of constant travel, as well as the most gracious, the strangest and the most unfathomable. I can never take it for granted or begin to think I'm on top of it, even after 32 years of living there. Which means that every trip to the local market brings a surprise and I never imagine I can anticipate or understand everything around me. I've never been somewhere so considerate, where people instinctively think of others before themselves and are so hesitant to impose; all qualities that I'd love to

learn. Indeed, in forsaking my apartment on Park Avenue for a bare room on the backstreets of Kyoto, lacking even a toilet and telephone and visible bed, I felt I was leaving an MTV video for a wise and seasoned elder who, over fourteen hundred years, had learned how to live with suffering, with change and with reality.

How do you think Japan has changed over the years?

Under the surface, I'm not sure Japan has changed very much at all. Of course, its fashions and trends spin around with revolving-door intensity and it reveres the moment more furiously than any place I know. But sometimes I feel Japan shifts every second on the surface so as never to change deep down. Geopolitically, this can make for problems. I feel that Japan is ever farther from the wave-length of the rest of the planet; in terms of English proficiency, it famously scores lower than every nation in Asia except for Laos. But



Ginkakuji, the Silver Temple

culturally this sense of difference can be a huge blessing; it makes Japan more distinctive, unlike anywhere else I know. Maybe that's another thing I love about Japan: that it forces me to see things in non-binary terms and to look a little below the surface.

Do you have a favourite place in Japan?

And why?

The single most beautiful place I've seen in Japan - or anywhere, perhaps - is the island of Naoshima in the Inland Sea, and the museum on the neighbouring island of Teshima.

Naoshima and the islands around it are one of the coolest, most contemporary, and most cutting-edge collections of architecture and art I've ever seen - and yet all of them fundamentally take one back to the classical Japanese principles of simplicity, clarity and emptiness. Unlike any such venture I've seen, the Benesse art project has a unity of vision, which means that every installation or canvas chimes with every other, so that each one of them deepens all the ones around it and you end up inside a kind of symphony far greater than the sum of its parts.

Most of the pieces in the Chichu Museum, say, on Naoshima, are really chapels of contemplation. They don't just give you something to see; they teach you how to look.

I would go so far as to say that you can get more of ancient Japan, deep down, in these super-contemporary settings than you can find anywhere - other than a 350 year-old *ryokan* or a very special temple. I suppose the Naoshima project is a classic example of how Japan can create something wildly futuristic - and novel - that in truth gives you ancient Japan with startling clarity and beauty.

Where would you recommend for visitors to Japan?

When friends visit Japan for the first time, I urge them to spend as much time as possible in Kyoto, the subject of my first book on Japan written 30 years ago. Many visitors are, I think, shocked when they arrive in Kyoto to be greeted by a 22nd century train station and a crowded

city of skyscrapers more modern and full of commotion than Detroit. The longer they stay, the more, I suspect, they'll slip into a subtler and slower rhythm of a kind that I (and maybe they) have never found elsewhere and that might not be so different from that of Kyoto in the tenth century.

They'll never get to the bottom of it or exhaust it. Not many cities have 1,600 temples within them, and even fewer have so many silent backstreets that are no less rich and enchanting. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if many a visitor finds as much stillness and beauty in a serene Kyoto neighbourhood as in any celebrated temple.

"Kyoto feels like a poised, elegant and very sophisticated courtesan who's known how to enchant newcomers for twelve hundred years"

Unlike its sleepy and unworldly older brother Nara, Kyoto feels like a poised, elegant and very sophisticated courtesan who's known how to enchant newcomers for twelve hundred years or more and can dazzle them still even in old age, with her latest exquisite design or unexpected flourish of modernity.

What would be the one aspect of Japanese culture that you would like to exist everywhere?

Thoughtfulness. It's a cliché, I know, but every first-time visitor to Japan seems to come home with variations on the same story: the woman who went three hours out of her way to guide the lost foreigner back to her hotel; the convenience store worker who ran after two foreign guests to offer them, free of charge, an umbrella, because it had just started raining; the person too shy to speak English who nonetheless travelled all the way across town to the foreigner's

hotel room to hand him the cellphone he'd forgotten on a train.

What did you least expect to see or do in Japan?

I was never a huge baseball fan until I came to Japan; now I advise all my friends to go to a game while they're visiting, even if they have little interest in baseball. For one thing, you'll see a very different side of Japan - boisterous, loud, very welcoming. If ever you find the people around you in Japan shy or distant, go to the baseball stadium (especially, maybe, Koshien, in Osaka), and you'll see a very different side of the country as its passions come out. Suddenly, old ladies you've never met will offer you their fried octopus, while large men dressed from head to toe as tigers will enfold you in a bearish hug. Everything is exotic, from the Yakult Swallows' fans waving transparent umbrellas every time their team hits a home run to the groups of cheerleaders guiding the bleachers in dance-steps as trumpets play "La Cucaracha". In the ballpark even a foreigner becomes part of the team, not an outsider at all.

Beyond the obvious, how does Japan inspire your writing?

Japan has taught me to cherish silence more than words, to keep out as much as possible and to engage the reader in a conspiracy. Not to try to lecture her, as once I might have done, but rather to engage her in a conversation whereby, as in a haiku or a *sumi-e* pen-and ink drawing, it's she who fills in all the spaces with her imagination. For the book I brought out this April, called *Autumn Light*, I spent sixteen years taking things out. I'd gathered about 8000 pages of notes, since I annotate every day I spend in Japan, and I spent most of those sixteen years trying to deepen a Japanese sense of focus and resonance and clarity so as to subtract and subtract and subtract till there was almost nothing left but a moment or two, and the memory (or ghost) of all that wasn't there.

Japan has taught me about absence: how someone you love can be more present when you enter her room and see all her things than when she's

standing two feet in front of you. It's taught me how silence leaves more space for the imagination than any words, and how silence brings us together where words often push us apart. And it's taught me how, when you enter a classic tatami room with nothing but a scroll and a vase in it, you bring all your attention to that scroll and vase, and therefore find the world therein.

How much time do you spend in Japan?

Unfortunately, my job has been keeping me away from Japan a lot and I have an 88-year-old mother who lives more

or less alone on a mountaintop in California, so much of the time I'm there, keeping her company.

Still, I'll always long to spend all my hours in Japan. I've always felt at home everywhere, but last year I was visiting a university in California and a student asked, "Don't you ever get homesick?"

"Oh no," I said, "I'm used to travelling," and then suddenly I stopped myself and said, "actually, I am homesick, deeply homesick now, for Japan. I never realised I'd find a home as deep inside me as Japan has become."

Pico Iyer travelled to Naoshima with InsideJapan Tours in 2018. His latest books on Japan, Autumn Light and A Beginner's Guide to Japan, came out in 2019.

“Japan is the kindest place I've met in my 45 years of constant travel, as well as the most gracious, the strangest and the most unfathomable.”



Beyond retreats

Every year, growing numbers of people jet off on retreats to boost their health and happiness. Wellness is about far more than juice cleanses and folding your legs behind your head atop a mountain, however. According to mental health charity Mind, there are five main areas of our lives in which we can focus our efforts to improve our overall wellbeing: connecting with others, staying active, learning new skills, being present, and giving generously.

If your new year's resolutions include a focus on travel and wellness, why not combine them? We've scoured Southeast Asia to find the locations where you can experience adventure, growth and challenge, together with opportunities to raise awareness, shift perceptions and truly connect with people keeping their vibrant traditions and unique ecosystems alive.

Words by DAN HACKETT



"I told you you'd break it if you kept waving it around."

Cardamom Tented Camp

(Botum Sakor, Cambodia)

Exercise

Reaching from the Cardamom Mountains to the coastal wetlands, Botum Sakor is one of Asia's most pristine wildernesses. Guests staying at the incredible Cardamom Tented Camp can get stuck into activities including patrolling and trekking with Wildlife Alliance forest rangers, setting up camera traps to monitor local wildlife and learning survival skills of the forest. You can also help with finding and recording wildlife footprints and trails, cataloguing flora and fauna, exploring river systems by kayak, and hiking along the surrounding trails. The camp works wonders for building a sense of purpose, combined with enjoying natural beauty and plenty of exercise.

Bho Hoong village stay

(Vietnam)

Connect

Located in the spectacular Truong Son mountain range, Bho Hoong offers an insight into the lives of Vietnam's fascinating hilltribes. Guests stay in traditional stilt bungalows, and can observe the practices of local people, partake in crossbow shooting, handicrafts, and motorcycle touring, and bond with the locals during the evening's feasting and dancing. The revenue goes to educational, health and environmental initiatives, and tourism is kept at a manageable level by limiting access to the village. The project brings prosperity to the Co Tu community without commodifying their culture or paving the way for a mass influx of tourists. If you're hoping for genuine connection with local people, this is your chance.

Dine around for a cause

(Siem Reap, Cambodia)

Give

One highlight of the foodie scene in Siem Reap is a selection of restaurants providing training to disadvantaged Cambodian youth. Rather than sitting down for dinner at a single restaurant, spend the evening travelling by tuk-tuk between a variety of culinary social enterprises to enjoy some of the finest Khmer cuisine while supporting the education of at-risk youth. This mutually-beneficial experience is incredibly fulfilling; you can enjoy a culinary journey while helping some of Siem Reap's best social enterprises, learning about how the programs are run, and enjoying some truly mouth-watering cuisine.



Learn to cook on an organic farm

(Hoi An, Vietnam)

Learn

Just outside Hoi An, hidden away, there's an organic farm. Here you can listen to inspiring stories about how to use food for healthy living, and how they are educating local farmers about this environmentally-friendly method of farming. After getting hands-on picking ingredients for a cooking class, visitors can learn a few of the secrets of Vietnamese cooking, creating five traditional dishes. There's also the chance to get hands-on making rice flour with the old stone grinder, rice paper with copper vessels, and to invent a personal organic juice recipe. Once everything is prepared, sit down to feast on your delicious creations.

Nam Nern night-safari

(Nam Et Phou Louey, Laos)

Live in the Moment

This night safari is a boat-based tour into the heart of the Nam Et-Phou Louey National Protected Area. Starting out with Wildlife Conservation Society guide, those seeking an electrifying, sensory experience can sail down the Nam Nern River after dark, into the moonlit forest. In the depths of the jungle the boats' engines are switched off, leaving you to float gently downstream as your senses are roused by the rhapsody of nocturnal wildlife. This is a fantastic chance to spot some of Laos's endangered species, and the proceeds go toward wildlife conservation and sustainable employment for local residents.

Spiritual awakening

(Luang Prabang, Laos)

Give

Luang Prabang is famous for striking images of orange-robed monks lined up receiving alms. The experience is far from solitary however, with crowds arriving each day. Break away from the tourist trail and experience true Laotian life by spending a morning at Ban Chomphet village across the Mekong river, where Buddhist tradition is strong. Here, you can join with locals to prepare offerings for the morning's alms ceremony in a tranquil environment. There are hillside temples close by too, where you can discuss Buddhism with the monks, learn about their way of life, and even partake in guided meditation; perfect for refreshing body and mind.



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Real Fukushima

On the 11th of March, 2011, the fourth largest earthquake since records began struck off the north-east coast of Japan, causing a tsunami with waves up to 40 metres high. Heading inland at 435 miles per hour, the tsunami battered the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, triggering hydrogen explosions at three reactors. Millions went without power or water, 160,000 people were evacuated, and 16,000 lost their lives in the earthquake. Overnight, Fukushima went from being a name unknown in the western world to one synonymous with catastrophe.

After almost a decade, the exclusion zone around the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant has been reduced, and gradually, residents are returning. The **Real Fukushima** project was created with the intention of providing visitors with an insight into the disaster area and its efforts to begin anew. We talked to founder and tour guide **Karin Taira** about the relief effort, the area's samurai history, and the tenacity of the Japanese spirit.

Interview with KARIN TAIRA by RUTH HUBBARD

Tell us a little about yourself?

After growing up in Tokyo, I studied in the UK about ten years ago. I was in Bangladesh working at a small NGO when the disaster occurred. I felt that I could do nothing for Japan during the hardest time. That's why I wanted to do something for Japan when I returned. Since 2015 I've been working for this region.

How was Real Fukushima founded?

I met Shuzo Sasaki, who was the head of the regional office of Fukushima Prefecture Government in 2017. I'd decided to start a tour project by myself at the time, and he visited me to work together because he thought developing a tour for international people was very important. That's why we started Real Fukushima. From there it took two years to receive my Japanese national government tour license.

What do you want people to experience?

We want to show what's really happening here, without political motivations or bias. There's a lot of misleading perceptions of Fukushima Prefecture which come from the media. There are a lot of fake photos and fake news articles which tell unbelievable stories:

frogs with eight legs due to radiation, things like that. Fukushima's case is very important to learn about. Nuclear accidents are not a local problem, but an international issue. That's why we wanted to develop a tour for people from overseas. When you come to this area you'll learn how sad the nuclear accident was for the local community, but also you'll see lots of progress for the recovery as well. We show both sides, I think.

Many people are surprised to see how well the revitalisation progress is going. They say they thought Fukushima would be a devastated no-mans-land. When they come, they are surprised to learn people are returning. They see progress. The town is still quite empty, but the people who have returned are positive and encourage each other. Without new jobs it remains difficult for young people to settle back, but we will do our best and keep fighting.

Could you tell us some positive stories?

The government has made huge progress with decontamination and revitalisation, while at the same time local people have been doing lots by themselves to create something new or something small but wonderful.

In addition, the Fukushima prefectural government has created an initiative to install solar panels and windmills, and are aiming to have 100% renewable energy by 2040. Some local restaurants have returned, and they offer really good meals! A handful of farmers have returned too, and they're more positive towards organic agriculture, because they are more aware of the effects of pollution. They have very good quality food here, but people are still cautious of Fukushima produce, even though all food is checked thoroughly and radiation levels are 'non-detected'. Also, each reopened town has a new community centre planted by the national government to encourage people to return.

Then there's the Olympics. If more international people come and see the current status of Fukushima then we'll be very happy.

The Tohoku people are well known for their samurai history. What do you think makes the 'Tohoku spirit'?

Many people would say resilience. They are very proud of this region because it has a long samurai history, some say a thousand years. One feudal clan called Soma dominated this region for 750 years.



The Soma clan – weren't they famous for horseback riding?

Yes. Each summer in Soma City we have a historic horse samurai festival, where hundreds of local people become real samurai. They wear armour and ride on horses, and they have races and ceremonies at traditional shrines.

What do you think the future holds?

The government are focussing on renewable energy and robotics, because for the decommissioning of the power plant they need more high-tech robots. Human access is limited because the reactors have such high levels of radiation. Before this disaster the biggest industry here was nuclear. Thousands of people worked at the nuclear power plant, but now we need alternative industries to create jobs for this region. While it will be a long way to see the outcome, we are all hopeful for the future of Fukushima.

In 2020 the Olympic torch relay begins in Fukushima, in what was once the exclusion zone. Will you be attending?

Of course!



Into Danum Valley

Unsurprisingly, getting to the heart of a 135-million-year-old rainforest, cut off from all human influence and habitation, isn't the easiest thing to do. But it's not impossible. Borneo's Danum Valley may only accept a limited number of visitors at a time, but those lucky few find themselves in one of the most biodiverse places on earth. Welcome to one of Earth's last true wildernesses.

Starting out from the coastal town of Lahad Datu, hop into a 4x4 and head west ten miles. Make a right at the rusting signposts and leave the highway behind; from here on out, the traffic thins as the trees thicken. You'll know you've reached the 'front door' of Danum Valley Conservation Area when, after half an hour, the road becomes a dirt track. From here it's another two hours to reach your bed for the night. If you see monstrous grey shapes shifting beyond the treeline, don't worry. That'll just be the elephants.

Travel by CLAIRE ALLISON. *Words by* DAN HACKETT

Untouched nature

The Danum Valley Conservation Area is home to a breath-taking variety of nature and is one of the world's most pristine ecosystems. The 438km² valley has over 15,000 varieties of plant, and is teeming with rare animal life. Visit and you can expect to spend your days enjoying nature from treetop walkways, hiking, swimming beneath waterfalls, and – if you're lucky – catching a glimpse of some spectacular and elusive creatures.

The jungle is home to Asia's highest concentration of orangutans and pygmy elephants, and eagle-eyed trekkers may spot monitor lizards and sun bears

padding through the undergrowth. Each day, dawn is heralded by the howls of gibbons, and come nightfall – 6pm sharp – the chirping of cicadas indicates the hour just as effectively as any timepiece. Once darkness has fallen, clouded leopards prowl in search of unsuspecting mousedeer, and all sorts of fluttering beasties rise from the forest floor. This one's for the adventurers only.

Wild things

Danum Valley isn't a place you go to tick animal sightings off a list; this is somewhere you go to experience one of the earth's truly wild places. This is real rainforest, which means every wondrous thing you see here is pure chance.

Observing nature in this unobtrusive way ensures the survival of these unique animals and the harmonious ecosystem they live in.

The Danum Valley Conservation Area is truly unique. While much of Borneo's rainforest has been cut down in recent years, Danum Valley has remained untouched: no hunting, no logging, and negligible human impact on the ecosystem. Environments like this are incredibly precious, and the opportunity to visit and support the local conservation effort is a great honour. If you're keen to answer the call of the wild, here's everything you need to know.



“Welcome to
one of Earth’s
last true
wildernesses.”

“Observing nature in this unobtrusive way ensures the survival of these unique animals existing in their fragile ecosystem”

Stay

The place to stay in Danum Valley is the luxurious Borneo Rainforest Lodge; a wooden stilted lodge with genuine 'wow' factor. It's not cheap; every stay is a two-night minimum all-inclusive package, including transfers, guided jungle trekking and activities. But rest assured, from the moment you step down from the vehicle, you're in for a treat. The lodge prides itself on customer service. It's all the little touches: the cold drink and warm welcome from your jungle guide upon your arrival, and the binoculars waiting in your room. Meals are buffet style; an assortment of Asian and Western dishes, with certain dishes made to order.

Top tip: Premium Deluxe rooms are *nice*. We're talking 97m², floor-to-ceiling windows offering uninterrupted views of the rainforest, and, the *pièce de résistance*, a semi-alfresco shower opening out to a private plunge pool. The perfect setting for a tippie from the fully stocked bar, set to the cacophony of cicadas.

Activities

Naturally, much of your time will be spent trekking in the jungle. A typical three day/two night stay will include a guided morning hike through the forest surrounding the lodge up to a viewpoint, where - after taking a moment to brush away the unavoidable beads of perspiration - you'll get a real perspective of the sheer scale of the landscape you're immersed in. There's a 26m high rainforest canopy walkway to traverse during the day, and after dark you'll take part in either a night drive or a night walk. Optional activities include tubing down the Danum river, wild swimming in the Elephant pools or easing those tired muscles at the on-site spa.

Top tip: Leech socks are highly recommended - they're much cheaper to buy in Borneo than back home!

Combine with...

If you're looking to extend your Borneo adventure, there are some great spots nearby. Due to the scale of Danum Valley, wildlife sightings aren't always guaranteed. Double your chances by combining a Danum Valley stay with a few days on the Kinabatangan River; another wildlife hot spot a couple of hours north. Or to guarantee at least one picture of Borneo's star attraction, include a night in Sepilok and a visit to the Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre. Top off your Borneo escape with a few nights of pure indulgence at Gaya Island Resort, a five-star eco-luxe resort off the coast of Kota Kinabalu, home to tangled mangroves, a beach, and villas with views of Mount Kinabalu.





Meet the locals:

Danum Valley is home to...

- Orangutans
- Clouded leopards
- Sun bears
- Pygmy Elephants
- Macaques
- Frogs
- Snakes
- Tarantulas
- Monitor lizards
- And over 270 species of bird!

Essential Info:

Fly to: Lahad Datu Airport

Transfer time: 2hrs 30 mins drive; mostly on unsealed roads.

Weather: Hot and humid, average temp: 25-30 °C

Best time to travel: During the dry season from the end of March until early October the weather is milder, with less rain and a higher chance of seeing wildlife.



Claire Allison;
Marketing Campaigns & Events Co-ordinator
Travelled to Malaysia and Borneo October 2019

Highlights: Spotting a kingfisher on a night safari in Danum Valley and arriving at the summit of Mount Kinabalu in time for sunrise.

If you are interested in travelling to our new destination, Borneo, give us a call on 0117 244 3466



Hiroshima's survivor trees

This year marks 75 years since the end of the Second World War, and Hiroshima is prosperous once more. While almost the entire city was levelled on the 6th of August, 1945, against all odds 170 trees survived the atomic blast. Over the ensuing years, the City of Hiroshima, arborists, and citizen volunteers have lovingly tended these miraculous trees, known as *hibakujumoku*. In many ways, these trees mirror the compassion of Hiroshima's citizens, their hardiness, and their hope for the future.

Amanda Chambers is a British artist whose work focuses on our relationship with the past, particularly moments of socio-political importance. Her work features low tech, hand-crafted designs, aiming to bring the historical subject and the viewer closer together. Here, Amanda tells us about her time in Japan creating a series of works inspired by the *hibakujumoku*.

Words by AMANDA CHAMBERS

It was a little daunting dealing with such a well-known incident - how can one begin to say something new? But I think we return to these momentous events because they still have traction, and as the world appears still very unstable in both political and environmental terms, the story of the *hibakujumoku* is particularly relevant.

The themes of survival, hope and resilience were at the heart of this project. I felt it was particularly Japanese to allow nature to tell us something about ourselves. But I also felt that it was the Japanese people I was honouring with this work. My contact with Japan has changed my outlook on life, so I hoped

the project mirrored the human story of survival and resilience shown in the aftermath of the bombing. In visual terms, the project was highly experimental. A lot of the finished works were fragile and impermanent, and this was an important connection to 'Wabi-Sabi' - the Japanese aesthetic philosophy that inspires my work.

The process was also unpredictable, and I enjoy this aspect of surprise when a work is encouraged to take on a life of its own. A good example was firing the Tsubaki (Camellia) husks. I was using an electric kiln and had no idea what the effect would be. But on slowly opening the lid, I saw the husks had reduced to ash and had formed what looked like the





© Amanda Chambers



Camellia (Tsubaki) buds fired on clay



Wood kiln firing October 2018



Bamboo ash on clay

symbol for radiation. Using a wood kiln was also essential to the project. It was a deliberate and symbolic act to bring actual fibres from the Hiroshima trees back to the flames - to commemorate the conditions they had endured.

Several pieces survived the process – one covered in straw emerged with a ghost like swirl of ash – reminding me of the river in Hiroshima. Another simple sculpture of tree stumps survived the most volatile area of the kiln – the fire box – and made it into the final show.

Although my work often deals with conflict and loss there is an underlying message of hope. The survivors in

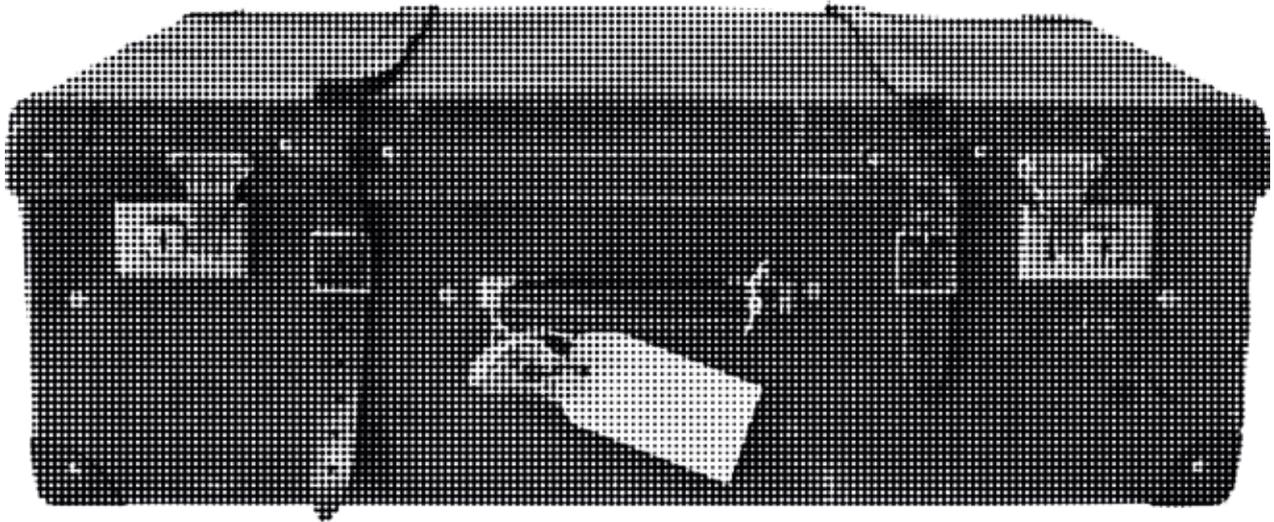
Hiroshima, who looked up at the green shoots from the blackened trees, needed to see hope somewhere. Today, projects like Green Legacy Hiroshima who nurture seeds from the Survivor Trees and send them around the world, provide a positive message in a growing climate of uncertainty. I believe art can also rise to the challenges we face and provide both a commentary and a spirit of optimism.

Nature is universal. It has the extraordinary potential to connect us despite our cultural differences. It has so much to tell us, so much we still don't know. It's not too late to start listening.

W: amandachambers.co.uk

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