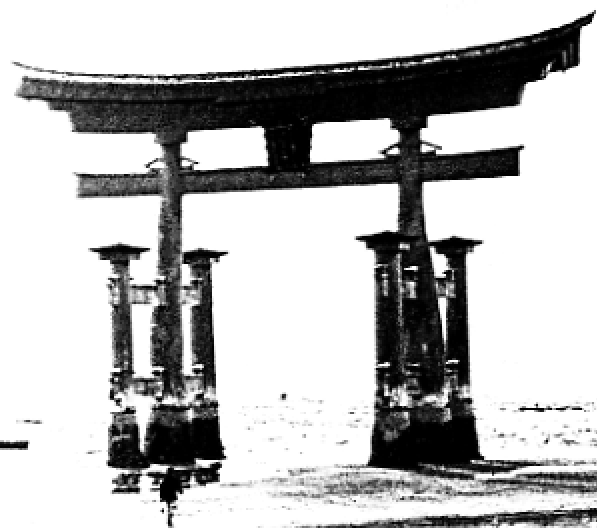
Hidden Japan

Long a symbol of Japan, the torii or grand gate of Miyajima's Itsukushima Shrine is the backdrop for a group photo.

In pursuit of what its people love best—from temples to torii, from tempura to tofu—Ann Hood travels across Japan, contemplating its aesthetic mix of water and stone. Along the way, she learns how to become a Japanese tourist

Photographs by
Håkan Ludwigson



M

AYUKO IS WAITING, MAP IN HAND. A bookish seventeen-year-old from a small city outside Tokyo, she lived for a year with me and my family, all the while instructing me on the places we must visit in Japan. Special to her for their beauty, remoteness, or national significance, these destinations are to take us across this island nation, from one coast to another, then to the mountains, and then again to the water: Kamakura, Miyajima, the Japanese Alps, the Noto Peninsula, and Hoshi Onsen; shrines, temples, bridges, and *onsens* (hot springs), all hidden treasures.

We have met up in Kamakura, an hour south of Tokyo. This ancient town has sixty-five temples and nineteen shrines, and I fear Mayuko wants us to see them all. When I emerge from the cool, dim metal interior of the eight-hundred-year-old, thirty-seven-foot bronze Daibutsu, or Great Buddha, she calls out, "Hase Kannon," and hurries down the street. The day is blistering, and I know there is a beach nearby, but I can't see it and, at the moment, it's hard to believe. I complain and Mayuko laughs, hiding her mouth behind her hand. She leads me through the entrance gate and up the stairs of Hase Kannon Temple. "Look," she says, and my gaze follows her pointing fingers to a grand view of the nearby sea. "The water is always close by."

In Japan, you are never more than sixty miles from water. Sometimes this is easy to forget, because any glimmer of sea or ocean is hidden behind dense forest or the high Japanese Alps. But you cannot forget for long: in Japan, water has a way of appearing when you least expect it, of making its presence known no matter where you may be.

We study the eleven-faced gilt statue of Kannon, bodhisattva of mercy. At thirty feet, it is Japan's tallest wooden statue. We take turns giving the octagonal prayer wheel a spin for good luck. Mayuko is ready to push onward, but I pause at still more stairs leading farther into the hills. "Very sad," she says. "Jizo." The bodhisattva Jizo is the guardian of children. At the top of the stairs are hundreds of miniature likenesses of Jizo, standing like small tombstones, surrounded by offerings of dolls and Hot Wheels and stuffed toys. These days, this site has evolved into a shrine to *mizuko*, or "water children," the spirits of stillborn, miscarried, or aborted babies. Mayuko shows me how to scoop water into a ladle and throw it at Jizo, as I watch my own two children moving playfully among the statues.

Mayuko marches us another thirty minutes uphill to the Zeniarai-Benten Shrine, dedicated to the goddess of good fortune. I am about to rebel when we arrive at what appears to be a stone cave. I duck to enter the shrine, which is dark and moist, and I hear the sound of gurgling water. A meager rivulet dribbles across the cave floor. Mayuko empties her pockets of all her yen coins and instructs us to do the same. Stooping, we wash our money, in hopes that it will double or triple later on.

We are wet, and our yen are wet, as we head back down the hill. Temples, baths, hot springs, lotus ponds, rivers; rocks, gardens, mountains . . . I remember that besides plants, the key elements of a zen garden are water and stone. All the spots we visit reflect, in their way, the important relationship on this island between stone and sea.

THE JAPANESE OFTEN TALK ABOUT "THE three best": the three best gardens, the three most beautiful views, the three most beautiful mountains, the three best temples, *onsens, ryokans.* Mayuko is sending us to the island of Miyajima in the Seto Inland Sea to see the Itsukushima Shrine, one of Japan's three best.

After the Great Buddha, Mayuko most wants us to see the fifty-two-foot-tall red torii, or shrine gate, of Miyajima, rising out of the water as we travel to the island by ferry from Hiroshima. In photographs and postcards, it looks vermilion, but up close, its once-bright red has faded to a dull brick. The lack of vibrant color does nothing to diminish the majestic illusion that the torii floats above the water. Originally built in the late twelfth century, when worshipers entered the Itsukushima Shrine between its camphor pillars, the torii is one of the largest in Japan. Our ferry motors past rather than through it, giving the modern passengers every possible angle, every photo op. Most seem to have

Tenaga-zo, a character from one of the city's festival floats, graces Kaji Bridge in Takayama.

Miyajima's Five-Storied Pagoda, which dates from the early fifteenth century, incorporates Chinese and Japanese motifs.

The Japanese often talk about "the three best": The three best gardens, the three most beautiful views, the three best temples. The Itsukushima Shrine on Miyajima is one of Japan's three best

Steam rises ethereally from the 110-degree water. Outside, a waterfall tumbles pink and gray onto black rocks that form another bath. I spend much of the day moving from one pool to the other

Water bubbles up naturally from the pebbled floor of one of Japan's most famous baths, at Hoshi Onsen's Choju-kan Inn.

We nibble octopus and sip sake as we wander the stalls along Wajima's Chuo-dori, which deal in trinkets, lacquerware, and all forms of fish

come just for that purpose, pausing onshore for another photograph with Itsukushima behind them and then taking the next ferry back to the mainland. But Mayuko has told me that the right way to visit Miyajima is to stay at least one night. She has recommended the *ryokan* Iwaso.

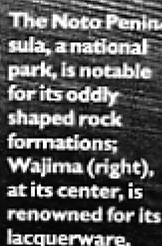
The Iwaso's courtesy bus picks up guests at the ferry terminal: All I have to do is call. But each time I call and give my name, someone hangs up. Tame deer are wandering in and out of the ferry building. After the third call, I move my family outside to formulate a plan.

As soon as we step into the hot sun, we are surrounded by dozens of deer that live on the island. An especially frisky one with giant antlers steals a map from the back pocket of my husband, Lorne. In the midst of their tug-of-war, a minibus pulls up with IWASO painted on its side. The deer wins, eating the map as we are whisked away along winding roads through thick woods, past dozens more deer, to a spare, elegant inn where two women wearing lavender kimonos await us.

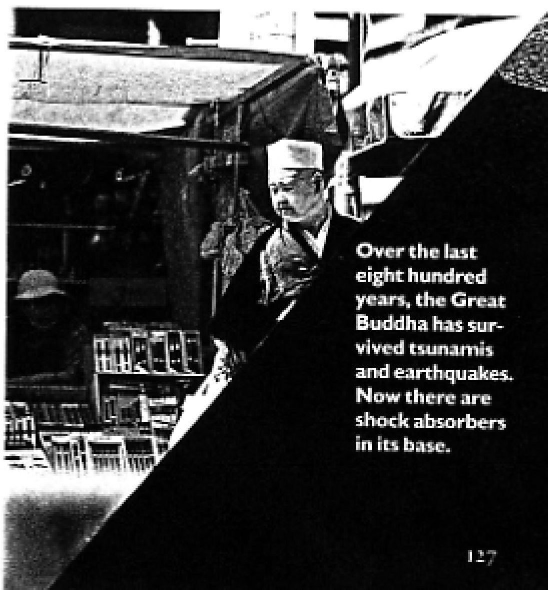
Neither speaks much English. Even in our short time in Japan, we have learned to ad-lib. Speaking no Japanese, we point a lot, hand Mayuko's written instructions to helpful people, and hope for the best.

In this case, it is clear what these women want: our shoes. They stare at our feet, discuss, debate, and stare some more. "Papa-san have big feet," one of them says before scurrying off. Moments later, she brings back slippers in surprisingly accurate sizes, and they take our shoes. They motion for us to follow them down hushed corridors.

Maple trees flourish on Miyajima, and the maple leaf is the island's symbol. In our room, leaning against large chalk-blue-and-cream-colored cushions and looking through our window into the woods, we are served tea and maple leaf–shaped cakes filled with sweet, fer-

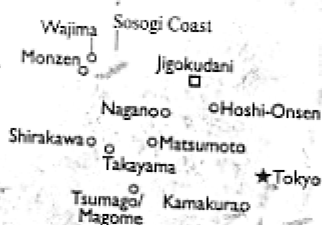


The Noto Peninsula, a national park, is notable for its oddly shaped rock formations; Wajima (right), at its center, is renowned for its lacquerware.



Over the last eight hundred years, the Great Buddha has survived tsunamis and earthquakes. Now there are shock absorbers in its base.

To experience the traditional life of Japan, its temples, *ryokans*, seascapes, and mountain paths, turn to page 164.



mented bean paste. The women are especially smitten with Grace, my four-year-old, and they have fun fitting her with a miniature *yukata*, or cotton robe, and hot-pink sash. The rest of us are each given a white one with a navy blue print and a brown sash.

When we emerge, robe clad and clutching the small white towels used for bathing, the women are clearly disappointed. Only Grace's *yukata* is being worn properly. They cluck and adjust, reversing how we've closed the robes, puffing them out above the sashes, just so, retying the sashes. Finally we are ready. "Oh no," one of the women shrieks, pointing to my husband's bare feet. He is sent back to put on his slippers. Once again they check us over and then send us on our way.

Each inn has its own, sometimes complicated, bathing schedule. Times in the separate men's and women's baths rotate, with the men getting the bigger, better-lit, and more beautiful ones during prime hours. But at Iwaso, even the women's bath is gorgeous. The room looks vaguely Roman, with busts and columns and a big, deep tub with very hot water. No dirt or suds are permitted. One washes first on a small wooden stool next to a handheld showerhead, rinsing with a bucket. The shampoo and soap smell of cedar, and the water for rinsing is perfectly warmed.

Upstairs in our room, dinner is served, course after delicious course: homemade gravlax; asparagus, mushroom, and shrimp tempura; sushi and sashimi; clear broth with baby clams; fried shrimp; miso soup; rice and pickles; cold beer in giant bottles. The presentation is both whimsical and exquisite: Sprigs of thyme and delicate fresh flowers are used as garnishes, and some dishes show off cucumber and radishes cut into the shape of a grasshopper or a dragonfly.

The next morning, with a soft rain falling, Lorne and I take a walk to the shrine. Unlike our grand arrival at Miyajima the day before, when the torii stood in high water, it is now low tide and the otherworldly gate and shrine rise in the mist above thick, goopy mud. In front of the buildings that make up the shrine, a group of about twenty young schoolchildren are practicing tai chi in the dawn light, while the sacred deer amble past the sixth-century stone gods and lanterns. The shops that line the street beside the shrine are closed; their plastic food displays fill the windows—noodles and sushi and *okonomiyaki*, a regional specialty that resembles an omelet. In the hills above us, a five-story pagoda glows orange against the gray sky. We leave this tranquillity with regret.

I WONDER AS I STAND SURROUNDED by the Japanese Alps, is it possible that the ocean is only sixty miles away? My map assures me that the Sea of Japan is just to the north. Takayama is a mountain city small enough to navigate on foot and charming enough to have me scurrying to find a room to stay an extra night. The Japanese come to eat the local Hida beef, sample the region's famous sake, tour the museums, and stroll the streets of the late-nineteenth-century merchant quarter, the Sanmachi Suji, with its wooden, lattice-front buildings. We do not see another Westerner during our entire stay.

Surrounded by immense national parks, Takayama is encircled by ten-thousand-foot peaks, making it one of Japan's most breathtaking (in both senses) cities. Walking its grid of streets, I am immediately struck by the profusion of fat blue morning glories creeping up the buildings and trees dripping pink and white blossoms—and the plethora of cafés. After so many days of green tea, the smell of freshly brewed coffee makes me swoon. Every few hours, I stop in another café and am never disappointed. Whether *(Continued on page 200)*

The unique architectural style of Shirakawa-go's *gassho-zukuri* houses earned the village designation as a World Heritage Site.

Map by Joyce Pendola

(Continued from page 128) the place is dark and smoky or has vinyl booths and chrome stools at the counter, like an American diner of the fifties, in each one I say, "I really like it here."

The carnivores among us, especially my son, Sam, can't get enough of the grilled Hida beef sold on skewers in the streets. We stop for these almost as often as we do for coffee. Big wooden signs in several languages—including, happily, English—point the way to the town's museums. Buzzed on caffeine, and bellies full, we explore the Sakurayama Hachimangu Shrine area, a complex of buildings on a hill housing the shrine itself, as well as the Hida Folk Art Museum, the Inro Museum, and the exhibition halls of the Lion Dance Ceremony and the Takayama Festival Floats—enough museums to keep us busy, each holding surprises to keep us amused.

Touring the large floats, which have been used in the Autumn Festival for the past three hundred years, we listen to an English tape so soft and scratchy that we can't really understand what it says we're looking at. Even so, the floats are impressive, some as tall as twenty-three feet, and gaudy, with colorful decorations and ornate carvings. The price of admission also gets us into the Sakurayama Nikko-kan, an exhibition hall next door, where we are bewitched and completely befuddled by an exact replica, one-tenth the size, of the Toshugu Shrine in Nikko—all twenty-eight buildings. While we marvel at this miniature city, the lighting changes to simulate sunrise, and then sunset.

The performances of the *karakuri* (mechanical dolls) in the Lion Dance Ceremony Exhibition Hall are absolutely stunning. We follow a small crowd into an auditorium and listen to a traditionally clad Japanese woman give an introduction—in Japanese. I am beginning to think we should leave, when the audience gasps: A mechanical samurai, his sword held high, swoops over our heads to attack another samurai. The battle is followed by an acrobat flipping and leaping like a Flying Wallenda. Then a mechanical geisha appears and performs a tea service. The automaton chooses Sam and Grace, first serving them tea, then sweets. Having previously sat through robotic presidents stiffly giving speeches at Disney World, we are all dazzled by the show.

As I climb the stairs that lead to the shrine above the museums, I am captivated by Japan. Surprises are hidden everywhere; nothing is exactly what it seems. Even as I lift my gaze, there is the Main Hall, then a stone torii with a golden rope and bells, and, in the distance, the Japanese Alps. Just beyond them, I can see, lies the Sea of Japan.

As we make our way north by car toward the sea, just in case I had any doubt that Japan is dominated by water, Typhoon 17 hits. I don't think I've ever seen it rain so hard for so long. Our plans to visit Kanazawa, home to great cuisine and also to one of the three best gardens—the famous Kenroku-en, the "Garden of Six Qualities," built in the 1670s—are entirely washed out. Still, we carry on, following Mikyuko's instructions that to see the true Japan, we must visit the Noto Peninsula, a windswept spit of emerald land where traditional rice farming and fishing are still the main occupations. We're driving because train service is spotty in this isolated countryside; in winter, even the roads are closed.

Bright orange, red, and yellow flowers burst through the gray rain as we drive through little villages of tile-roofed houses along the Kingo coastal road. Around a bend, two jagged rocks jut from the sea. Unbelieving, I see a golden rope strung between them over the crashing waves, marking a Shinto shrine. Two bells swing crazily in the wind, and atop the taller of the rocks stands a bright red torii.

The Noto Peninsula is a challenge. Maps are vague, towns and sites are spelled several different ways, and we must navigate while driving on the left. Here, the sea is always present. There is salt in the air, and around every corner we catch glimpses of the raging surf or the distant light from the white lighthouse on the Saruyama Cape, nine hundred feet above sea level. Past the farmers harvesting rice paddies, we continue on. The rains subside. Horizontal bamboo poles ten feet high line the curving dirt roads, and bright green rice hangs from them to dry.

As we approach a rice paddy, I wonder why the people working it are so still. Then I realize that these are not people at all; I am watching scarecrows dressed in old clothes, with odd faces topped by the coned straw hats of the farmers. Getting closer, I recognize one of the faces: I am looking at Ronald Reagan. These scarecrows are wearing old American Halloween masks.

Another dirt road takes us past people in rubber boots and straw hats, wheeling wagons heavy with rice. They hand the bundles up to others who have climbed the bamboo to fasten the rice to the poles. We stop to stretch our legs. Blue morning glories and yellow sunflowers are everywhere. Old women, their backs bent and their faces weathered, come to touch the blond heads of my children. At eight years old, Sam stands as tall as or taller than the farmers. We press on, occasionally passing an old man on a bicycle waving to us. The rice pad-

dies eventually give way to the mountains. From the top of a ridge, we look out at the peninsula's vivid colors: Green rice paddies run down to blue sea; the white lighthouse cuts into the still, blue-gray sky; a brown hawk flies in front of me, so close I think I could touch it.

We go as far as Wajima, a city we've been told is best seen on foot. Around a curve, the river that cuts through the city comes into view. Beside it, we find the crowded Asaichi, or morning market. Old women squat on the ground selling homemade pickles—mouth-puckering sours of every vegetable imaginable. Stalls along Chuo-dori sell trinkets, the city's famous lacquerware, sake, and fish in all forms—head on, flapping in tanks, salted, fried. Everyone is eager to give samples, so we nibble octopus and sip sake as we wander.

Behind the main streets is a labyrinth of small roads where tile-roofed homes boast lush gardens and vendors sell sashimi from carts. Children in school uniforms follow us along Ekimae-dori, pointing and giggling as, our mouths on overtime, we munch on potato fritters from one store, spring rolls from another, and soy-marinated rice balls from still a third. Wajima's manhole covers are decorated with intricate designs: leaping fish, a weathered face in a straw hat, or, my favorite, the city's famous Gojinjo drummers, men in ferocious masks with seaweed hair meant to scare away enemies. At one bend in the road, I stumble upon an old temple with worn wooden structures and stone statues of gods. A woman, stooped with age, sweeps the temple grounds. Around the next, a baseball game begins. The teams chant melodically, then face each other and bow.

JAPAN IS ITS LOTUS PONDS, ITS shrines erected in the sea, the hot waters of its traditional baths, its waterlogged rice paddies, the water rituals at its temples, and its *onsens.* Choju-kan, a remote inn at the Hoshi Onsen in Gumma Prefecture, is tucked into the mountains, deep in the woods. A holy man named Kukai is said to have discovered its hot spring twelve hundred years ago. The inn itself was built at the turn of the nineteenth century and became popular with travelers crossing the nearby Mikuni Pass, where three prefectures—Gumma, Nagano, and Niigata—meet. Our room sits beside the river that flows through these woods, and its constant, gentle sound soothes me through the night.

Although the men's chestnut-wood bath is the most photographed in all of Japan (and rightly so, with its high, arched ceiling and filtered natural light), to me the inn's hot spring baths are the real draw. A large, edgeless pool creates an illusion of ocean, its bottom made of stones of various sizes and colors, and around it large, flat stones for sitting. Steam rises ethereally from the 110-degree water. Outside, beyond the pool, a waterfall tumbles pink and gray onto black rocks that form another bath. I spend a good part of the day moving from the indoor pool to the outdoor one, my skin growing pink and wrinkled.

That night, I fall asleep to the sound of the gurgling water outside my window. At one-thirty in the morning, I wake up, hungry. Lorne and I pilfer a bag of M&M's from one of the kids' backpacks, and we sit by the window, watching the water race past. It is the middle of the night, and the thought of those hot pools is irresistible. On our way, we stop at the vending machine and buy two large cans of beer.

It is just us, icy-cold Sapporo, and water everywhere we look. The pools are lit by giant stone lanterns, and that diffused light combines with the vaporous cloud rising into the chilly night air to make the atmosphere and everything in it otherworldly. It is easy to believe that anything is possible here. Outside, we stretch out on the large, smooth stones in front of the waterfall. As we sip our beer and watch the hot steam rise into the black night sky, a gentle rain begins to fall. As I soak in the hot water, I lift my face to the rain. I am, happily, waterlogged. □

CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ADVANCE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS, INC., PUBLISHED THROUGH ITS DIVISION, THE CONDÉ NAST PUBLICATIONS INC. COPYRIGHT © 2002 BY THE CONDÉ NAST PUBLICATIONS INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Condé Nast Traveler (ISSN 0893-9683), 4 Times Square, New York, New York 10036, is published monthly by The Condé Nast Publications Inc., 4 Times Square, New York, New York 10036, which is a subsidiary of Advance Publications, Inc. Steven T. Florio, President and Chief Executive Officer; Jill Henderson Bright, Secretary; Eric C. Anderson, Executive Vice President–Treasurer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, New York 10001, and at additional mailing offices. Authorized as second-class mail by the Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada, and for payment of postage in cash. Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. R123242885. Single copies: U.S., $4.50; Canada, $5.50. For back-issue inquiries, call 800-777-0700 or write to *Condé Nast Traveler,* Box 37629, Boone, Iowa 50037-0629. For subscriptions, address changes, and adjustments, write to *Condé Nast Traveler,* Box 37629, Boone, Iowa 50037-0629. Amoco Torch Club members write to: Amoco Torch Club, Box 9014, Des Moines, Iowa 50306. Eight weeks are required for change of address. Please give both new and old address as printed on last label. SUBSCRIPTION INQUIRIES: Please write to *Condé Nast Traveler,* Box 37629, Boone, Iowa 50037-0629, or call 800-777-0700. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within eight weeks after receipt of order. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at Box 37629, Boone, Iowa 50037-0629. Volume 37, Number 10.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

Postmaster: Send address changes to *Condé Nast Traveler,* Box 37629, Boone, Iowa 50037-0629.