

Step back in time

Karen Bowerman walks Japan's ancient Nakasendo Way,
with more than a few surprises en route

JAPAN

WE'VE BARELY BEGUN OUR FIVE-DAY TREK THROUGH THE KISO VALLEY IN CENTRAL JAPAN when, at the edge of a dense cedar forest, we come across a post with a sign and a bell. The sign's in English as well as Japanese, which seems to suggest it's important.

"Ring the bell hard!" it urges.

"Against bears."

Everyone pauses; our trail leads straight through the trees. I spot a bright yellow poster with an unmistakable silhouette; if bears can prowl, then this one's doing just that. I turn to our guide, Julia Maeda. "There are bears?" I remark, as casually as I can. (This definitely wasn't mentioned in the pre-tour briefing.) "Oh yes," she replies. "You can ring the bell if you like, although judging from the noise we've been making, I should think we've scared them away already." I ring the bell, regardless.

Julia, from Walk Japan, is leading us through forests, mountain passes and post-towns, as we explore the Nakasendo Way, one of the country's ancient highways; Nakasendo translates as 'the road through the mountains'. The 483 km route used to link Kyoto, home of the emperor, with Edo (now Tokyo), where from the 12th century, samurai leaders, or shoguns, governed Japan.

The Nakasendo gained importance in the Edo period (1603-1868), when the Tokugawa shogunate demanded the country's 300 feudal lords made regular trips to the capital. It was a shrewd political move; travelling was costly and time-consuming and reduced the risk of rebellion. In those days, the Nakasendo was a busy route for travellers, samurai, itinerant merchants and pilgrims sharing the road with the feudal lords. Now largely forgotten and quiet, the road provides a pleasant path through scenic countryside and, also, the history of Japan. ▶



PADDY FIELDS, LILIES AND ONIONS

Today, much of the Nakasendo has been built on, but the section we're walking, the Kiso Road, has been preserved. We're heading northeast from Nagoya to Matsumoto. The plan is to hike the best bits and travel the rest by train.

This in itself proves quite an experience. On my first morning, as we wait on the platform, I find myself 'conversing' with a high-tech vending machine, which dispenses my can of hot 'Mr Boss' coffee, and thanks me for my custom.

A few hours later, after hiking to a shrine decorated with wooden penises (for fertility), I'm trying to communicate with a local. He serves me green tea with a welcoming smile - but not a word of English. In a country of gizmos and futuristic, neon-lit cities, the Kiso Road takes you back to bygone Japan. Our trek begins at the hamlet of Shinchaya, on a path through paddy fields, farmhouses and gardens of lilies and onions. We stop at a wayside shrine, a sacred rope strung across its entrance, and at a storehouse once used for food and silk kimonos. Julia points out what looks like the letter K on its whitewashed walls. "It represents water," she says. "Villagers would have painted it, thinking it would repel fire."

Fire was a serious hazard. Magome, the first post-town we visit, burnt to the ground in 1895. Its wooden houses have been rebuilt, but I notice that a replica 18th century 'fire hydrant' (three shelves of wooden buckets) has extinguishers hidden beneath. Magome is popular with day-trippers but Julia knows a quiet inn where, behind latticed, rice paper windows, an elderly woman in a headscarf scurries between tables. I order the local speciality, goheimochi - rice balls in a sticky, nutty sauce.

That afternoon, we tackle the Magome Pass. Stones depicting Jizo, the protector of travellers, rise from mossy banks to wish us safe ascent. A few hours later, we spot the hamlet of O-Tsumago and our ryokan (traditional inn). A water wheel groans in the garden; swallows nest in the eaves.

We enter through a sliding door. I take off my hiking boots, step immediately onto the tatami (straw matting) and bow to the owner. She greets me in Japanese. I feel rather smug that I'm not thrown by all the slippers. There's a pair for the wooden floor (but not for the mats), a pair for the bathroom and boundaries for the wearing of each.

But the etiquette of bathing has me stumped, and in the manner of 17th century travellers, we're visiting the local onsen (hot springs) before dinner. As we sit in the minibus wearing matching yucas (cotton kimonos) and little beneath, I feel as if we're being shipped to an asylum. Julia explains the routine: we need to strip off completely, "scrub ourselves ►



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Lily pool; a post-town along the Nakasendo Way; road sign; ancient stone path



TOP: Tsumago Tea House **RIGHT** Mountain scenery; a simple supper; flip flops for the ryokan

senseless” then take a dip. But I’m already in trouble; I’ve wrapped myself in my yucata in the way reserved for the dead.

SAMURAI AND SHOGUNS

At the springs, I’m given the tiniest of towels. It’s bigger than a flannel but smaller than a tea towel and flimsier than both. I wonder where best to employ it. Apparently, I should let it cover my front and forget about the rest. A fellow walker suggests we need to ‘man up’. Her plain-speaking cuts through our primness and once we’re in the water, it’s divine.

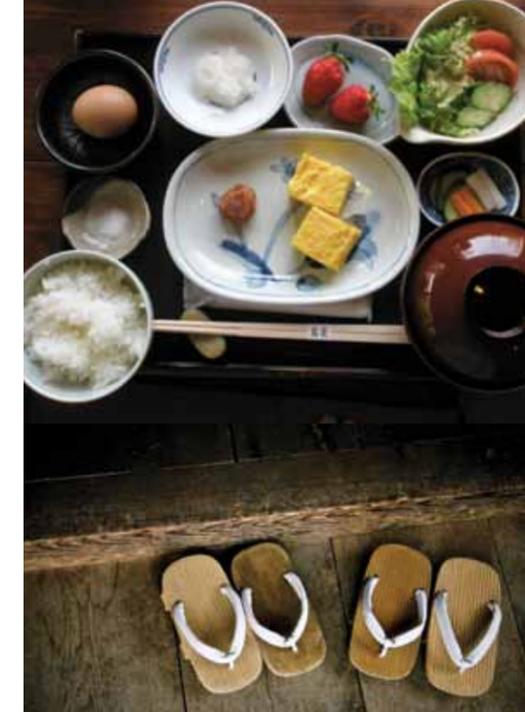
Back at the inn, supper is served at a low table. We sit on cushions on the floor. Numerous bowls offer soba noodles, radish, rape flower and river trout. That night, I sleep on a futon with a straw pillow - it might as well have been a rock. The walls are so thin you can hear every rustle. But I tune in to the stream outside and fall asleep in seconds.

Over the next few days, we trek through forests, fields and mountains. The Kiso Road never fails to delight. But it’s the characters associated with it that enthral me most. Among them is Princess Kazunomiya, who travelled the Nagasendo with a 35,000-strong entourage, and the biker geisha from Nagiso who sped round the valley with her lover in her sidecar.

On the last day, I come across a character of my own: a café owner-cum-‘station master’ who demands a sing-a-long. “Yoi! Yoi! Yoi!” he cries, cueing us in for the chorus.

Afterwards, he throws on a cap and shows off his train set. Locomotives chug round his garden. This is life on today’s Kiso Road. I leave the samurai and shoguns behind me, and request another sing song. ❶

Photographs: Walk Japan; Shutterstock illustration: Clare Nicholas



WAY TO GO

Walk Japan runs a five-day, fully guided Kiso Road tour from Nagoya, as well as numerous other walking holidays in Japan, summer and winter. Prices from £1,000pp, including accommodation, breakfast, evening meals and transport (flights extra). Expect to walk around 13km a day on the Nakasendo Way trip (walkjapan.com).

HF Holidays offers a 12-night Imperial Japan tour with stays in Tokyo and Kyoto, two days walking the Nakasendo Way, a visit to the ‘snow monkeys’ at Nagano and two nights in a lakeside resort at Hakone, with views of Mount Fuji (0345 470 8558, hfholidays.co.uk).

For more information on Japan, visit the **Japan National Tourism Organisation’s** website, seejapan.co.uk.