

A vertical photograph of a forest stream. The water flows over numerous large, moss-covered rocks, creating white water rapids. The surrounding forest is dense with tall, thin trees and lush green foliage. The lighting is soft, suggesting a shaded forest environment.

Japan's Highway of PRINCESSES

The forested mountains of Japan's Central Alps are home to the Asiatic black bear.
Photos: Campbell Phillips

In his first feature contribution to the magazine, editor *Campbell Phillips* searches for wilderness in the heart of Japan

Ring bell against bears,' the hand-painted sign proclaimed, accompanied by a line of kanji and a cartoonish illustration of a bear, below which hung a brass bell.

"Maybe we should ring the bell, just in case?" Anna asked.

The path ahead slipped down through tall cedars on the shadowed side of the hill which, coupled with the bear warning, created a sense of foreboding. However, the sky above the canopy was bright blue and I could see our path would quickly emerge again from the gloom of the woods. Besides, I wouldn't mind seeing a bear.

"How about we just go carefully?" I said. "The bears are sure to steer clear of humans and we're not very far from the last town. It seems unlikely we'll run into any."

Within five minutes of beginning the descent on the darkened hillside, stepping carefully over the path's rough stones, we heard a bell ring out clearly somewhere below us. A few minutes later another chimed out from the mountains ahead. It appeared there were more bells in these woods than bears, and more people besides. I wasn't likely to get quite the wild experience I'd been hoping for.

My partner and I were descending into the Kiso Valley in Japan's Central Alps, following the path known as the Nakasendo Way – the ancient walking route that connected Edo (now Tokyo) and Kyoto. The area is rich in cultural sites and offers a mixture of both alpine, rural and wilderness landscapes, so I had been looking forward to hiking in the region for a long time. A bear sighting would have taken the experience to another level.

Although Asiatic black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*) are present throughout Honshu (Japan's largest and most populous island), I had discovered that their population is controlled by local hunting groups and individuals not due to be culled are scared away from population centres in order to minimise the chance of a negative encounter. The bells ringing in the woods of the Kiso Valley meant there was almost no chance of spotting one in the wild. In fact, I was more likely to sample bear meat at a local ryokan (traditional Japanese inn) than I was to see one on the loose.

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The Nakasendo Way cuts a path stretching 534 kilometres through the middle of Honshu. For much of Japan's feudal history this route (or the collection of ancient

roads that comprise it) could be considered the major arterial, shuttling goods, people and information back and forth between the two major capitals. Due to the frequent friction that existed between Edo and Kyoto, the Nakasendo could almost be seen as a linchpin or perhaps a seesaw. It was the axis along which power between the west and east was balanced.

Throughout the Edo period (1603-1868), various Emperors found their court challenged by the rising power of a shogunate in the west. As history has shown in cultures the world over, these problems are most expediently solved with a fortuitous marriage between the two feuding families. At least seven princesses were married into the Imperial court during this era of Japanese history, delivered along the Nakasendo Way on lacquered palanquins. It is for this reason that the route has also been dubbed Hime no kaido, 'The Highway of Princesses'.

The layering of Japanese history means that this route has evolved according to the needs of the time, and today is criss-crossed by formed roads, railways and various other paths along its length. In the more built-up areas the path itself is asphalt, while at its wildest it becomes unformed grit winding between alpine conifers. For sections in between these two extremes, the path is clad in what's known as ishidadami – a traditional style of stone paving that lends the landscape a depth of history and wonder. Walking on these sections of the trail forces you to wonder how many thousands of others have made the same journey, including legendary characters such as the expert swordsman Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645), or haiku master Matsuo Basho (1644-1694).

The original route included 69 station or post towns, which constituted the major resting stops for messengers, travellers and betrothed princesses alike. To walk the whole of its length would take most walkers more than a week (tour companies offer a guided, 11-day option), and it is generally considered of moderate, but not extreme, difficulty. Where many tourists would simply hop on the shinkansen to travel between Tokyo and Kyoto in around 3.5 hours, walking the Nakasendo provides a novel cultural experience that no amount of urban tourism can instil. Even better, travellers to the region can tailor the length of their walking route according to the amount of time they have and their proficiency as a hiker. Accommodation ranges from

ryokans and hotels to dedicated campgrounds; the route can therefore be made to cater for just about any breed of walker, from mild to wild.

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Our journey along the Nakasendo began when we alighted at the train station at Nakatsugawa, Gifu Prefecture. Just under 330 metres above sea level, Nakatsugawa has long since evolved beyond the post town it once was into a small city of over 53,000. We had arrived at lunchtime on a day in early October, and so the weather was exceedingly pleasant – somewhere between 20 and 25 degrees. In the mountains that surround Nakatsugawa, the maples and ginkgoes were only just beginning to blush with autumnal colour. After a light meal in the centre of town, we made some last-minute adjustments to our packs before picking up our route heading northeast towards the foothills of Mount Ena. This was the shortest day of walking during our time on the Nakasendo (we travelled just over six kilometres in the entire afternoon), but it also contained some of the more steep ascents of the entire journey, which were then rewarded with fantastic views of the Kiso River, the surrounding pastures, occasional villages and proud mountain peaks. The first few hours were spent walking swiftly uphill and then down again to reach the small post town of Ochiai, beyond which the Kiso flows through a series of deep gorges. After three hours of some of the most serious inclines either of us had walked in recent years, every little shrine and temple offered a much-needed pause that we would use to take a sip of water and allow the sweat to cool on our brows. We crossed a bridge over the Kiso as an unidentifiable raptor circled lazily above us before embarking yet again on another steep

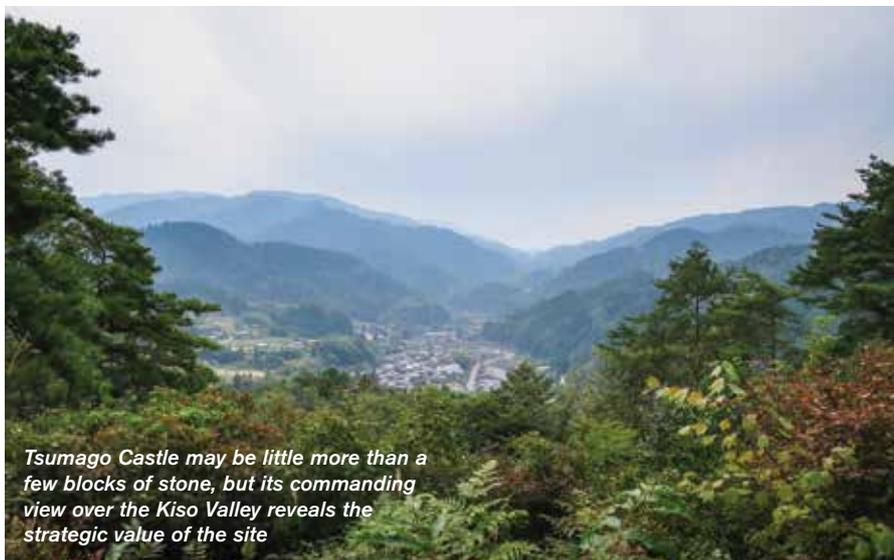
climb, which marked the last sealed section of journey for the day. Crossing a country road we encountered our first real woods of the journey, as well as our first stretch of ishidatami.

The air temperature became much cooler in the dappled shade of the trees and the ishidatami followed only a slight incline as we neared our destination for that night – Shinchaya. It was here that we had booked lodgings at a ryokan and we were pleasantly surprised to find we were the only guests that evening. In fact, we'd not encountered a single tourist all afternoon; the only other hiker had been an elderly (yet spritely) Japanese man with a camera, backpack and rolled up sleeping mat strapped to his back. This sense of exclusivity wasn't to last long as the next day we embarked on the section of the Nakasendo that is renowned for being the most unchanged over the centuries since the golden age of the Edo Period. We had left Shinchaya that morning, striking out for

Magome post town, the main thoroughfare of which bears uphill towards Magome Pass, which marks the entrance to the Kiso Valley. Magome itself is something of a tourist destination due to the writings of Shimazaki Toson, which largely describes the area during the Meiji Restoration of the late 19th Century. As a result, thousands of tourists descend on the town each year, with a few hundred descending on the town in the hours that we were passing through. Up in the mountain passes and down again into the Kiso Valley, the Nakasendo alternates between formless gravel and ishidatami and is frequented only by the occasional walkers. It is here we spent our time haunted by the tolling of bear bells, hopping over mountain streams and stopping at the local teahouse for lunch. While we may not have spotted any black bears, we could sense the presence of the natural heritage everywhere. The pristine waters supported a multitude of frogs,



A welcoming tanuki statue greets visitors in Tsumago



Tsumago Castle may be little more than a few blocks of stone, but its commanding view over the Kiso Valley reveals the strategic value of the site



birds and insects, and while they went unseen, we were nevertheless aware that the mammals were never far from hand. Mountain goats, racoon-dogs (tanuki), foxes and deer knew better than to spend their afternoons by the side of the walking track. Stopping briefly at Odaki-Medaki Falls (the twin falls where Musashi is said to have foregone his lust for a woman in order to continue his studies in the art of swordplay), we continued through a woodland habitat that combined the beauty of the Japanese maple, cedar and bamboo all in one, before eventually arriving at the hamlet of O-tsumago, which lies just a 10-minute walk from Tsumago post-town. Tsumago is also known for its importance in terms of its cultural heritage, and the local museum describes life in the valley from pre-history, through feudal times and right through to the industrial revolution during the Meiji Restoration. It is here that we learned the entire valley was used as a kind of giant

Mt. Ena emerges from the alpine haze

timber mill from the 1700s and into the 20th Century. The Kiso River was also privatised in Meiji's time and the resulting hydroelectric dams and stations stick out of place and time as artefacts of Japan's prior nationalist zeal. After exploring this area we spent the night in O-tsumago before doubling back for a long day of walking towards the next major town – Kiso-Fukushima.

The walk to Kiso-Fukushima surpasses 20 kilometres, the first half or so of which is primarily uphill and luckily we had awoken to the coldest day (around 16 or so degrees) that we experienced during our entire stay in Japan, with the mountain peaks shrouded in clouds the entire day.

Just outside of Tsumago we took the opportunity to visit the ruins of Tsumago Castle, a hilltop fort of which all that remains are a few weathered stones. It is said that this castle was the site of an historic battle in 1584 in which a few hundred local Kiso fighters stood against thousands of enemy soldiers. The view it commands over the town of Tsumago proves why the site was chosen as a strategic hold.

The way proceeded through a mixture of forested and sculpted landscapes, alternating between the tree-clad flanks of mountains and well-tended Japanese gardens with the occasional shrine in between. We were gradually returning from the remnants of Japanese cultural antiquity to the bustling modernity that immediately springs to mind in thinking of Japan today. Arriving in Midono reinforced this impression, with its two, broad iron bridges, railway line and imposing hydro plant.

This is the quintessential, natural-cultural experience that can be had in Japan. Yes, there are regions of Japan (see Hokkaido) that offer something closer to a typical wilderness experience, but nowhere is the border between nature and stewardship more blurred than it is in the Central Alps. From the very earliest hunter-gatherer tribes of the region to every proceeding migration and social revolution ensuing it, the local Japanese culture has ingested, absorbed and inculcated its surrounds in such a way that there is no definition between natural and cultural heritage anymore. This was confirmed for me in the one instance we came within any proximity of a bear near Magome Pass, the only indication of which was a profusion of firecrackers set to scare the animal off, which we could hear from a kilometre or two away. For me, the heavily populated cedar forests of Japan lie in stark contrast to the many wilderness areas we find available in Australia, which rather demonstrate a lack of stewardship than of too much stewardship. [W](#)

THE NAKASENDO WAY

Travel

Flights to Japan vary significantly in price, but the Autumn period is often considered off-peak for international tourism, so try to book for this time well in advance.

Japan is much easier to get around if you've pre-booked a Japan Rail Pass prior to departure at any travel agent licensed to sell them. JR Passes are sold for seven, 14 or 21-day timespans.

Tours

Tours of the Nakasendo are readily available, however Walk Japan offers a self-guided service that simplifies the entire process. Its guidebooks are renowned for their detail, maps and even tips for ensuring against cultural faux pas.

Alternatively, travellers can seek to make their own way by contacting local tourism boards and information centres. English maps are available from most train stations.

Accommodation

Booking ryokans is the most convenient way to travel along the Nakasendo, and this is arranged through your tour company or via tourism boards. Few of the inn owners speak English, so it's important to learn at least a few key phrases before you go.

It is possible to camp along the route as there are several privately owned campgrounds. However, this isn't generally encouraged for unaccompanied western visitors.



www.walkjapan.com