

# A Different Sort of Discovery

By Gracia Ong

It's no secret: the eye-popping, ear-blaring sensorial overload of New York City is the buzz that keeps some going, and the frenetic pace of high-strung Hong Kong leaves others clamouring for more. But for some of us, after you've seen one city, you've pretty much seen them all. If you, too, seek a different sort of discovery than *Amazing Race*-type "7D5N Super Value Discover Europe" tour packages or the *farang*-clogged getaways of Bangkok, why not soak up what the stunning Seto Inland Sea has to offer? Be it the lively shopping arcade of Hondori or the weeping willow-lined city of Kurashiki, there is definitely something for everyone.

Gear up for a journey in search of tranquil nature and spectacular views, and fuelled with gastronomic delights, you might just make the best discovery of all – that of peace and contentment, as the blazing sunset dips into the inland sea.



This is the fabled inland sea, a region rich in local colour and charm. Separating the islands of Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu, this used to be one of the busiest transport lines in Japan during the Edo period. Often called "the land of fair weather", it is known for its moderate climate, so take some time to discover the fresh seafood and succulent produce borne of the surrounding prefectures and cities.

## Getting around

Driving around Japan is not as intimidating as you would have thought. Equipped with a reliable ride and the reassuringly crisp voice of the GPS, feel your anxieties unfurl as you cruise on well-paved roads alongside courteous drivers. Then again, getting lost is all part of the charm – what better way to explore little roads opening to scenic nooks, before stopping for a wander.

The highlight of driving across the many islands is undoubtedly the Shimanami-Kaido, or the Nishiseto Expressway. Spanning 80 km over nine islands and ten bridges, the route stretches from Imabari in Ehime Prefecture, crosses the inland sea, and continues into Onomichi in Hiroshima Prefecture. Coasting along the highway across a variety of bridges, one is left awestruck by the panoramic views of the inland sea, and the reflection of cable-stayed bridges zipping away one after another in your side mirror.

# Five experiences not to be missed

## 1. Picture perfect Itsukushima

Miyajima, or Shrine Island, lies mere minutes outside Hiroshima by high speed ferry. Visit Mount Misen and Itsukushima Shrine, which consists of multiple buildings such as a prayer hall and noh theatre stage connected to each other by boardwalks. Attesting to its fame as one of the most scenic spots in Japan, the Ryobu-style O-torii Gate seemingly floats above water in vermilion majesty, a startling contrast with the azure blue sea and lush green mountains.

*Stroll along...* the main shopping street of Omotesando. After tiring of the touristy vibes, duck into Machiya Dori for some respite and coffee. This old style street with its white walls and timber lattice work blends together traditional and modern architectural elements, and leads to quirky little ryokans, galleries and sake shops offering samplers at 100 yen a pop.

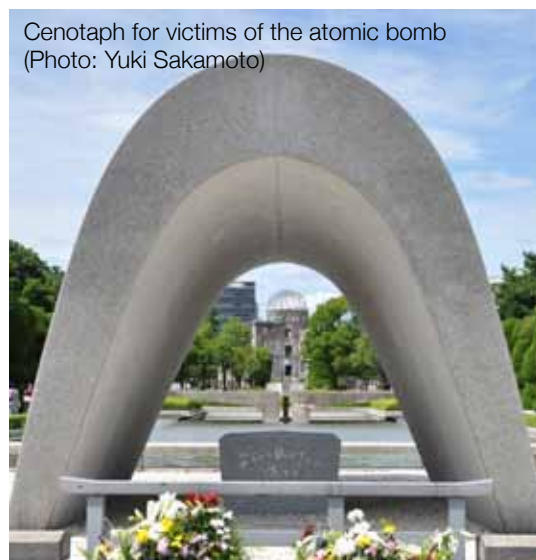
*Beware the photobombing...* if you find deer persistently stalking you and sneaking into your otherwise Kodak moments. Roaming freely around the island, these deceptively docile cervine will not hesitate to nose through your pockets and eat the guidebook out of your hands.



O-torii Gate at Miyajima



Would have been five, but a pesky deer made off with one



Cenotaph for victims of the atomic bomb (Photo: Yuki Sakamoto)

## 2. For the history buff: Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park

Standing conspicuously amidst modern structures in central Hiroshima today is the Genbaku Dome, the spot where the first atomic bomb detonated almost directly overhead. Today, the dome's skeletal ruins mark a sobering reminder of the ravages of war.

*Visit the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum...* which confronts with painful, all too real reminders of the vestiges of a nuclear age. Between the museum and the dome stands the cenotaph for victims of the atomic bomb. A stone chest below holds a register of these names, of which there are over 220,000.



A must visit, but the display of human suffering can be rather heartwrenching

## 3. Soak your worries away in Dogo Onsen Honkan

To visit Japan without soaking in an onsen would be a pity, but to miss out on Dogo Onsen Honkan when in the city of Matsuyama, only the oldest and most famous hot spring in the country, is somewhat of a blasphemy. A magnificent castle-styled public bathhouse dating back to 1894, it's interior is a maze of stairways, passages and rooms, all of which bustle steamily with bathers and staff.

*Legend has it...* that a white heron immersed its injured leg into hot water gushing out of a crevice in some rocks, and later found it healed. People who witnessed the situation followed suit, and the onsen's fame and popularity quickly spread.



Quite the experience, though a crowded public bathhouse, vastly different from a relaxing hotel onsen, might not be for everyone



Dogo Onsen Honkan served as inspiration for Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*

**4. Break away to Tomonoura**

There are few lovelier ways to day trip than exploring Tomonoura, a quaintly romantic harbour town for which time has stood still.

*Enjoy the view from...* Taichoro, a guesthouse attached to the main hall of the Fukuzenji Temple located atop a gentle hill. Showcasing a magnificent sea view, it was praised as “the greatest view in Asia” by Korean delegates en route to Edo in 1711. As you drink in the sight of the two facing islands, it’s not hard to see why such praise was lavished.

*If you loved Hayao Miyazaki’s Ponyo...* you will understand why he loved Tomonoura. This beguiling gem remains unmarred by tourists, and formed inspiration for *Ponyo on the Cliff by the Sea* during Miyazaki’s two-month stay.



This is as idyllic as it gets, so don’t forget your picnic basket



Idyllic days in Tomonoura

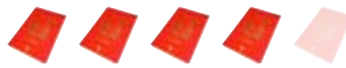


Plump, sun-ripened peaches

**5. Fruit picking at Tomomien Fruit Farm**

Sunny Okayama provides an ideal climate for sweet, bountiful harvests. The enthusiastic *obaasan* brings you around the farm, gesturing emphatically that no pesticides are used, and teaches you the right way to pluck fruit.

*Savour your bounty...* from white peach to Muscat grape – fresh from the branch and still warm from the sunshine – and enjoy, literally, the fruits of your labour.



What’s available for picking depends on the season. Don’t miss the chilled peaches – fragrant, delicious and utterly decadent with nectar dripping down your hands

**Savour**

**1. Hiroshima-yaki vs Osaka-yaki at Benbe**

If you could pick only one item out of a list of gastronomic delights, make it *okonomiyaki*. A savoury pancake containing a variety of ingredients and cooked on a *teppan* grill, it differs from its *Osakan* cousins where ingredients are mixed before cooking. *Hiroshima-yaki* contains layers of batter, cabbage and pork, jazzed up with the addition of noodles and drizzled with a generous amount of piquant sauce. There is a dizzying array of choices available at *Benbe*, but go for the *tempura squid*, topped with a mound of verdant scallions that crunch brightly with each bite.



Scallion topped Hiroshima-yaki



An all round crowd pleaser except when fighting over the last piece



A sweet treat

**2. Don’t forget your colleagues**

Snack on *momiji manju*, a sweet confectionery adorably shaped into the form of a maple leaf, distinct to the *Hiroshima* and *Miyajima* areas. Traditionally encasing a red bean filling, these soft sponge cakes have been updated to contain anything from chestnut to cheese, and make a tasty souvenir to hunt down.



A pleasant snack, and makes a good gift for colleagues and friends



Flame-grilled oysters  
(Photo: Yuki Sakamoto)

### 3. Kakiya: the world is your oyster

Don't miss out on oyster season that begins in October. Hiroshima oysters are quite the delicacy, and with a large percentage of oysters being exported for consumption, how could the audience be wrong? At Kakiya, try them charcoal grilled, dredged in panko and deep fried, braised on rice, in hotpot with miso paste or even in soup – all in one sitting of course.



The whiff of grilled oysters draws you in, and their flavour is excellent. It's all too easy to overindulge in one sitting



Trio of sushi at Ganyutei  
(Photo: Yuki Sakamoto)

### 4. Spoil yourself at Ganyutei

If you are feeling particularly luxurious, then a kaiseki dinner at Ganyutei is for you. Located on a hill overlooking the city of Hiroshima, the views afforded are simply stunning. Procure yourself a private room, where you can linger over the comprehensive wine list and exquisite cuisine. Begin your dinner with an aperitif of *umesbu rokku* (umesbu on the rocks), smooth and headily fragrant. The courses that follow highlight local seasonal ingredients and each – ranging from the grilled dish to the vinegared dish – is beautifully executed. Of particular mention is the mackerel sashimi, with its firm flesh and clean finish, arched beautifully on ice. Ganyutei is a clear winner, scoring visually as well as on taste.



Hands down the best dining experience of the entire trip

### 5. Bizarre eats

When in Japan, the food scene leans towards the adventurous, what with okonomiyaki-flavoured potato sticks and oyster-flavoured candy drops. The ice creams are pretty intriguing too, and ninja warriors with their *Fear Factor* palates can venture into *homeishu*- (a medicinal liquor), sweet potato-, or even salt-flavoured soft serve territory.

## Stay

### Bella Vista Sakaigahama

Try the contemporary chic Bella Vista Sakaigahama, not your usual many-storied soulless lodge for the night. Perched on a hill overlooking a wide expanse of sea, this could well be one's little slice of heaven. Warm, unobtrusive staff keeps the place well oiled and the talented chefs competently tantalise your taste buds. Awaken to the spectacular sunrise and enjoy your well-deserved break. **SMA**



Be treated to incredible views daily

### Sights

- **Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park**  
1-2 Nakajima-cho, Naka-ku  
Hiroshima
- **Dogo Onsen Honkan**  
5-6 Dogo Yunomachi, Matsuyama-shi  
Ehime  
[www.dogo.or.jp/pc/honkan](http://www.dogo.or.jp/pc/honkan)
- **Tomomien Fruit Farm**  
218 Kamiuchi, Akaiwa-shi  
Okayama  
[www.hakutou.jp/tomomien](http://www.hakutou.jp/tomomien)

### Savour

- **Benbe**  
2-7-7 Otemachi, Naka-ku  
Hiroshima  
[www.benbe.jp/en](http://www.benbe.jp/en)
- **Kakiya**  
539 Miyajima-cho, Hatsukaichi-shi  
Hiroshima  
[www.kaki-ya.jp](http://www.kaki-ya.jp)
- **Ganyutei**  
12-18-12 Furutadai 2 chome, Nishi-ku  
Hiroshima  
[www.ganyutei.jp](http://www.ganyutei.jp)

### Stay

- **Bella Vista Sakaigahama**  
1344-2 Urasaki-cho, Onomichi-shi  
Hiroshima  
[www.bella-vista.jp](http://www.bella-vista.jp)

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