



The Cat Bus at Ghibli Park.

All images by Emily Lovell

# EXPLORING JAPAN: BEYOND KYOTO

In this two-parter, Emily Lovell hops on a bullet train and discovers offbeat experiences and historical attractions, from Chūbu to Chūgoku

THE FIRST LEG of my latest trip to Japan was a chance to maximise my rail pass and explore the Kyoto area beyond its temples and shrines. I discovered the perfect combo of quirky days out, history and culture, all easily accessed as day trips.

My trip kicked off in Nagoya, a short(ish) bullet train ride from Tokyo, to visit the magical Studio Ghibli Park. Then on to Uji, a lively 'tea town' near Kyoto, to feast on matcha everything. In the historical 'Ninja town' of Iga Ueno I learnt more about Japan's masters of stealth. Then Osaka beckoned, for a day of fun at Super Nintendo World and weird encounters at a Buddhist hell temple. I left town in style, on the super-fast, super-cute Hello Kitty bullet train.

Join me next month as I travel to the Chūgoku region for more adventures! But first...

## IMMERSE YOURSELF IN MOVIE MAGIC AT STUDIO GHIBLI PARK

Located just outside Nagoya, Studio Ghibli Park transports you to a magical wonderland dedicated entirely to Ghibli's iconic animated films. This isn't

your traditional theme park though – there's not a roller coaster in sight. Instead, you'll explore five immersive themed areas, set within the sprawling grounds of the Aichi Expo Memorial Park.

Ghibli's Grand Warehouse is bursting at the seams with all things Ghibli including a cinema playing animated shorts and exhibitions showcasing everything from memorabilia to mouth-watering Ghibli movie food. You can even insert yourself into famous scenes from your favourite films.

On the Hill of Youth, browse the antique shop from *Whisper of the Heart* and peer inside a mini version of The Cat Bureau from *The Cat Returns*. Take a stroll to Mononoke's Village where you'll be greeted by the Demon Spirit and Lord Okkoto from *Princess Mononoke*. From here you can ride the Cat Bus to Dondoko Forest and explore Satsuki and Mei's cosy house from *My Neighbour Totoro*.

The park's newest and largest outdoor area, Valley of Witches, is inspired by Ghibli's witch-themed films. Howl's Castle is the spectacular centrepiece, magical inside and out, springing to life several times an hour with >>>



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Uji's main street.



Byodoin Temple.



The Tea Train in Uji.

### NINTENDO EATS

Located at Super Nintendo World, Kinopio's (Toad's) Cafe is well worth a visit for delicious Nintendo-themed food in a sit-down restaurant. And there's the chance to meet-and-greet Mario, Luigi and Princess Peach. You might spot Toad wandering around too!

>>> moving parts and puffs of smoke. Fans of *Kiki's Delivery Service* can grab a pastry from her bakery and explore her family home.

Some areas of the park are off limits unless you have a premium pass, so I recommend you get one to access all areas. And don't forget the gift shops!

### MATCHA AND MORE AT UJI, KYOTO'S 'TEA TOWN'

Just a short train ride from Kyoto is the scenic riverside city of Uji, famous for its high-quality green tea, produced in the region since the 12th century. Uji boasts a rich cultural history, with many serene temples and shrines dotted throughout the city. It's also featured in Murasaki Shikibu's famous novel, *The Tale of Genji*, which you can explore at the city's dedicated museum.

Immerse yourself in Uji's tea culture by strolling down bustling Byodoin Omotesando, where the smell of matcha fills the air. You'll find sweet and savoury green tea treats on the menu at most eateries, from ice-cream sundaes and waffles to noodles and takoyaki (fried octopus). There's a mix of modern and ancient tea cultures to enjoy, whether you'd prefer to sip a matcha latte at Starbucks or sift through sencha at Tsuen, the oldest tea shop in the world.

Take part in a tea-tasting at Takumi no Yakata tea house or get hands-on at Fukujuen tea manufacturer where you can roast hoji-cha, mill matcha or learn the etiquette of tea ceremonies.

With 1000 years of history, UNESCO World Heritage Site Byodoin Temple is a must-see, with its striking Buddhist architecture and serene, reflective pond. Uji is dotted with many other charming temples and

shrines, mostly located along its picturesque river. Take a leisurely stroll to discover them all, including Koshiji temple where the "nightingale" floors squeak to warn of intruders, or Ujigami, believed to be Japan's oldest standing shrine.

### EMBRACE OSAKA'S DEVILISH SIDE

Osaka is an urban, busy city where eating out, shopping and nightlife are the main attractions. So visiting temples or shrines might be low on your to-do list when you're there (unlike in neighbouring Kyoto where you have around 2000 to choose from!). However I have a couple of suggestions which offer something a little different to Kyoto's elegant offerings.

First up is Namba Yasaka shrine, in Osaka's lively Namba district. Located off an unassuming side street, you'll discover a colossal 12-metre high lion's head with giant gold teeth, known as the Lion's Hall, which is said to swallow evil spirits. People visit to pray for good luck, particularly for academic and career success.

The lion's mouth also transforms into a stage where traditional performances take place, such as *Shishimai*, a lion dance that's said to bring good fortune and drive away evil. If you're lucky enough to visit on the third Sunday in January, you'll get to enjoy a tug-of-war, celebrating a local legend where one of the shrine's deities defeats a giant snake.

Buddhist hell temple Senko-ji is well worth the trek to the outskirts of Osaka if you're into attractions of the unusual kind. Its location in a retro-looking shopping arcade sets the tone, and you'll find yourself exploring the teachings of Buddhist paradise and hell in a kitschy



Namba Yasaka shrine.

## “FOR NINTENDO ENTHUSIASTS, NO TRIP TO OSAKA IS COMPLETE WITHOUT VISITING SUPER NINTENDO WORLD AT UNIVERSAL STUDIOS JAPAN.”

temple complex.

Buy a pass for 100 yen to get entry to the Jigokudo or ‘hell hall’, where you answer questions from Yama, judge of the afterlife, to find out whether you’re heading to paradise or hell. Inside, you’ll be invited to summon him by banging a gong. Cue smoke and creepy video. If that’s all been a bit much, head to ‘land of the spirits’ instead with soft lighting, a reclining buddha, and a buddha-filled underground room where you can sit and meditate.

### POWER-UP AT SUPER NINTENDO WORLD

For Nintendo enthusiasts, no trip to Osaka is complete without visiting Super Nintendo World at Universal Studios Japan. As you emerge through the iconic green pipe into Mario’s world, prepare to be immersed in a primary-coloured wonderland, with all your favourite characters and classic elements from the game brought to life before you.

“Mario Kart: Koopa’s Challenge” and “Yoshi’s Adventure” are the two main rides, and you can also take part in Key Challenges – which are made all the more fun if you get a Power-Up Band. Link your band to the USJ app via your smartphone and take part in fun games and challenges around the park to unlock keys. Collect virtual coins by hitting big yellow question blocks with your band (strangely addictive), track your progress and challenge other people in your party to a bit of healthy >>>



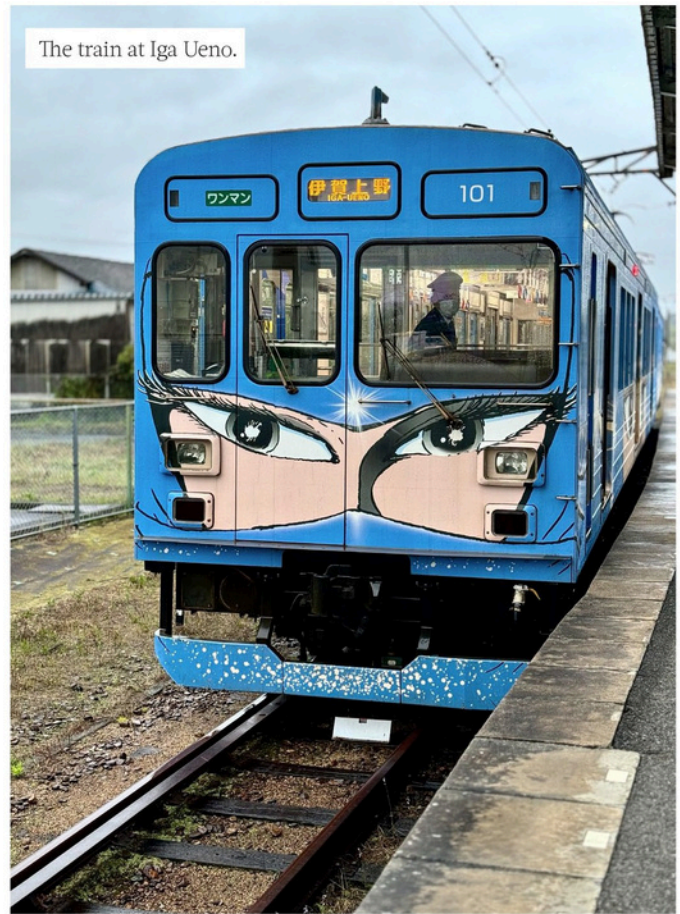
### MANGA TOUR

Japan Journeys have been organising trips to hot spots in Tokyo and beyond for 20 years. On their Manga Tours you can experience an expertly curated holiday that includes trips to Akihabara, Nakano Broadway, the Ghibli Museum and more! See the itinerary at [www.japanjourneys.co.uk](http://www.japanjourneys.co.uk).

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As Ninjas go, this one is a bit obvious...



The train at Iga Ueno.

“IGA EMBRACES ITS HERITAGE WHOLEHEARTEDLY WITH LOTS OF NODS TO NINJA AND BASHO AROUND THE TOWN, FROM STATUES TO GIFT SHOPS SELLING NINJA MERCH GALORE. MAKE SURE YOU HOP ON A NINJA THEMED TRAIN ON YOUR WAY HOME!”

### K-POP ADVENTURES

If a trip to Korea is more your style, head on to [www.ktastictravel.com](http://www.ktastictravel.com) to enjoy a guided tour of some of the hottest spots in Seoul!

>>> competition!

The park gets very busy, but with a bit of pre-planning you'll have loads of fun. Top tip: buying a (pricy) Express Pass guarantees you entry into Super Nintendo Land. Without one you can try and nab a time slot via the USJ app when you enter the park, but they get snapped up quickly. With the Express Pass you also get a time slot for the popular rides, which cuts your queuing time massively.

### CHANNEL YOUR INNER NINJA IN IGA UENO

During the feudal era, Iga Ueno was renowned for its Ninjitsu training school, the birthplace of the Iga-ryu style. Today, the Iga-ryu Ninja Museum is one of the town's main attractions, offering a fascinating insight into the history of Ninja and how they lived, their disguises, weapons and training methods. The replica ninja hideout reveals secret compartments and trap doors used to conceal items and evade capture, and there's even a high-energy show featuring weapon demonstrations.

A short walk away, impressive Iga Ueno Castle, built in 1585, showcases artefacts such as battle-worn weapons and armour. It's renowned for its high walls, >>>



Iga Ueno Castle.

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“TAKING THE HELLO KITTY SHINKANSEN (BULLET TRAIN) IS A MUST FOR FANS, ESPECIALLY SINCE IT’S HER 50TH BIRTHDAY THIS YEAR.”

### BASHO

Iga is also known for being the birthplace of Basho, Japan’s most famous Haiku poet. Today, you can visit Basho Memorial Museum and even take a look inside Basho’s Birth House, where he wrote his very first haiku.

>>> highlighting the skills of the Ninja who managed to infiltrate it. Climb to the top for panoramic views of the surrounding countryside and a glimpse of “Haiseiden”, a building inspired by the shape of Basho’s hat – see boxout.

Iga embraces its heritage wholeheartedly with lots of nods to ninja and Basho around the town, from statues to gift shops selling Ninja merch galore. Make sure you hop on a Ninja themed train on your way home!

### TRAVEL IN STYLE WITH HELLO KITTY

Taking the Hello Kitty shinkansen (bullet train) is a must for fans, especially since it’s her 50th birthday this year. The high-speed, super-cute Kodama train runs most days and travels from Shin-Osaka to Hakata station in Fukuoka

and back again, stopping off at popular destinations along the way. Reserve a seat just as you would for any other bullet train, and travel in style!

Get your paws on themed merch in the “Hello Kitty Plaza” carriage at the front of the train or snap a selfie with Kitty-chan in the neighbouring “Kawaii Room”. Then settle down in your pink and purple seat for a relaxing ride.

My Hello Kitty themed journey took me from Osaka to Himeji, home to one of Japan’s most iconic castles, then further into Chugoku.

Grab a copy of next month’s NEO and follow more of my adventures, including a trip to Fukusaki, a town dedicated to Japanese yokai (monsters) and a ferry ride over the Seto Inland Sea to the quirky art island of Naoshima. ●

