

Japan's art island, Naoshima.



All images by Emily Lovell

EXPLORING JAPAN: ADVENTURES IN CHUGOKU

After last month's escapades around Kyoto, Emily Lovell heads to Chūgoku to uncover more hidden gems and iconic landmarks.

EVERY NEO READER should take a trip to Japan at least once in their lives, and although Tokyo is the most popular place to visit by far, if you stray away from the beaten path you'll discover an incredible wealth of towns, villages, castles and islands to visit. Join Emily on the final stretch of her journey around the Land of the Rising Sun! - Ed.

I started the second leg of my journey from Chubu to Chugoku by jumping on the Hello Kitty bullet train to visit Himeji's iconic and best-preserved castle. Then it was over to Okayama, my base for the week, to explore the sunny Chugoku region and chill out at the serene Koraku-en garden.

In Fukusaki's spooky yokai town, I spent a solid eight hours cycling around to meet all its resident monsters. Followed by more biking fun on arty Naoshima island, to enjoy stunning sea views and colourful outdoorsculptures.

Kurashiki was next on my itinerary, known for its quaint historic quarter and picturesque canals, lined with cute shops and cafes. And finally, I ended my Chugoku adventure on a high, climbing the steep

slopes of Onomichi to reach Senkoji temple, bumping into one or two feline friends on the way!

MARVEL AT MAJESTIC HIMEJI CASTLE

No trip to the Chugoku region would be complete without visiting Himeji Castle, Japan's largest and most visited castle. Known as the "White Heron Castle" due to its pale exterior, it's a UNESCO World Heritage site and a masterpiece of Japanese castle architecture.

Built in the early 1600s, Himeji Castle has miraculously survived wars, earthquakes, and natural disasters. Its complex defensive systems, including maze-like paths and hidden gates, showcase the ingenuity of its designers. Climb to the top of the main keep for awesome views of the city and surrounding countryside.

WANDER THROUGH HISTORY IN KORAKU-EN GARDEN

Located in the heart of Okayama, Koraku-en Garden is one of Japan's Three Great Gardens and a beautiful example of Edo-period >>>



Himeji Castle

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YOKAI

For a dose of more spooky spirits, check out Thersa Matsuura's *Uncanny Japan* podcast, and her written work, *The Book of Japanese Folklore*.

>>> landscaping.

It's a vast space, designed for walking, with paths that lead you through scenery that changes with the seasons. Spring brings plum blossom, summer has vibrant irises, autumn is ablaze with maple leaves, and winter blankets the garden in snow.

You can easily spend half a day here enjoying the flora and greenery and spotting curious, colourful koi in the huge ponds. There are even temples, a tea house and a No theatre stage to explore.

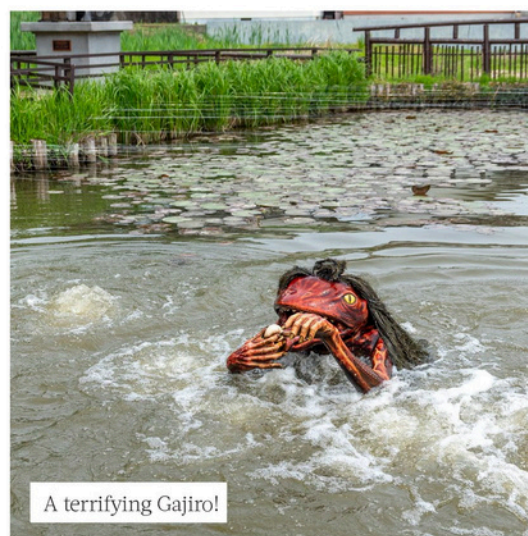
One of the garden's highlights is the Enyo-tei House, overlooking the koi pond. From here, you can see Okayama's "Crow" Castle, nicknamed for its black exterior.

Head to the Asahi River bridge for more castle views – you might even spot a peach-shaped boat or two, a nod to local legend Momotaro, aka 'peach boy'.

MEET THE MONSTERS OF FUKUSAKI YOKAI TOWN

A short trip from Okayama takes you to Fukusaki, a quirky town that embraces the weird world of yokai – Japanese folklore monsters. Tourism has been booming since the yokai were installed all over the town – from the university, tourist info centre and park, to local shops and businesses.

On arrival, grab a map, hire an electric bike, and gear up for some serious exercise as you explore the town and hunt down its odd residents. You'll discover animatronic creatures waiting to spring to life, plus yokai on benches that you can snap a selfie with. Don't miss Gajiro, an amphibious yokai with red scaly skin and stringy hair lurking in a watery tunnel near the station,



ready to pop up and give you a gruesome "welcome to Fukusaki".

If you're short on time, head to Tsujikawayama Park which has yokai a-plenty waiting to meet you. Hover around the pond until the water starts to bubble and you'll be rewarded with an appearance from another Gajiro several times an hour. Nearby, a winged, upside-down tengu yokai bursts out of a creaky suspended hut with a dorayaki (a filled pancake, usually stuffed with delicious sweet bean paste) in its hand before whizzing down a zipwire above you.

From Konaki-jiji (an old man that cries like a baby) to Nekomata (a two-tailed cat) there are many weirdly wonderful yokai to find, just be prepared to put in some serious effort if you want to catch 'em all!

ENJOY HISTORIC CHARM IN ARTY KURASHIKI

A short bullet train ride from Okayama, Kurashiki is a picture-perfect town known for its beautifully preserved Bikan Historical Quarter. Once a bustling rice distribution centre, Kurashiki has retained its Edo-period charm, with white-walled kura (storehouses) lining the willow-fringed canals. Today, these kura have been converted into museums, galleries, boutiques, artisan shops and cafes. From cute to classy, there's something for all tastes.

Kurashiki is renowned for its high-quality denim production, so you could head on over to Denim Street to shop for jeans and other denim goods. Get your paws on cute gifts at the Rilakkuma Denim Shop, dedicated to San-X's cute bear character or tuck into various blue-hued food.



“GETTING LOST IN ONOMICHI’S MAZE-LIKE ALLEYS IS ALL PART OF THE FUN, WITH HIDDEN GEMS AROUND EVERY CORNER.”

If you're shopped-out, stroll around the Ohara Museum of Art, Japan's first privately operated Western art museum, to marvel at the impressive collection of art including works by Monet and Matisse. Or hop on a leisurely canal ride through the historic area, led by boatmen in Edo-era outfits.

CLIMB THE SLOPES OF CAT-OBSSESSED ONOMICHI

Onomichi is a quaint hillside town overlooking the Seto Inland Sea, known for its picturesque temple walk, connecting around 25 temples via narrow, winding alleys. Each has its own unique charm but if you make it to the summit, you'll be rewarded with the final boss of temples, Senkoji, set dramatically into the cliffs.

For arty types, nearby Onomichi City Art Museum, designed by the acclaimed architect Ando Tadao, is a must-visit. Look out for the cat 'hotel' too, where you can pet the resident cats and purchase postcards to help keep it running.

For spectacular views of the Seto Inland Sea, head to the Senkoji Park Observation Platform. If the steep climb to the summit seems daunting, you can take the ropeway instead, enjoying a bird's-eye view of Onomichi on the way.

Getting lost in Onomichi's maze-like alleys is all part of the fun, with hidden gems around every >>>



MANGA TOUR

For your own stress-free holiday, check out Japan Journeys! They have been organising trips to hot spots in Tokyo and beyond for 20 years. See the range of tours on offer online at www.japanjourneys.co.uk.

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Getting lost in Onomichi is part of the fun!



Le Jardin Charme B&B.

“ONOMICHI IS A QUIANT HILLSIDE TOWN OVERLOOKING THE SETO INLAND SEA, KNOWN FOR ITS PICTURESQUE TEMPLE WALK, CONNECTING AROUND 25 TEMPLES VIA NARROW, WINDING ALLEYS. EACH HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE CHARM BUT IF YOU MAKE IT TO THE SUMMIT, YOU’LL BE REWARDED WITH THE FINAL BOSS OF TEMPLES, SENKOJI...”

AN ISLAND NATION

There are 14,125 islands in Japanese territory, and around 430 of them are inhabited. Over 7000 of these islands were discovered last year after the Geospatial Authority of Japan conducted a thorough digital survey. For the purposes of their investigation, the organisation counted any island land area with a circumference of at least 100 metres.

>>> corner. The Path of Literature features stones engraved with the musings of famous poets and authors. Feline fans will love ramshackle Cat Alley with its cat-themed shops, cafes, shrines, and art.

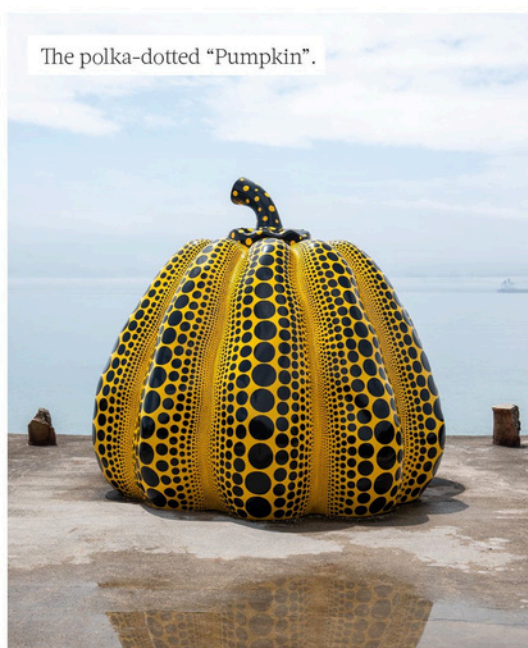
Cycling enthusiasts can start their journey along the Shimanami Kaido, a 70 km-long cycling route connecting Honshu to Shikoku.

If you’re after somewhere unusual to stay, check out Onomichi View Hotel Seizan, a retro-looking Thai-style hotel complete with Tuk-Tuk. Le Jardin Charme B&B has charming, kitschy french decor and a secret cafe in the garden.

ART AND ARCHITECTURE ON NAOSHIMA

Known as Japan’s “art island”, Naoshima is a small, tranquil spot in the Seto Inland Sea, but it packs a big punch when it comes to contemporary art and architecture.

If you’re based in Okayama, jump on a train to Uno Port and take a short ferry ride over to the island. Renting an electric bike on arrival is highly recommended. It’s not just about feeling the >>>



The polka-dotted “Pumpkin”.

EXPLORING JAPAN: ADVENTURES IN CHUGOKU



Take a trip to cat-obsessed Onomichi.

"NAOSHIMA IS DOTTED WITH QUIRKY, COLOURFUL OUTDOOR SCULPTURES, THE MOST FAMOUS BEING YAYOI KUSAMA'S ICONIC POLKA-DOTTED 'PUMPKIN'."

YAYOI KUSAMA

Kusama's tallest and most recent sculpture, *Pumpkin* (2024) was displayed by The Round Pond in Kensington Gardens, London this year.

>>> wind in your hair as you whizz through the hills, but also about covering as much ground as possible, especially if your time is limited to just one day.

Naoshima is dotted with quirky, colourful outdoor sculptures, the most famous being Yayoi Kusama's iconic polka-dotted "Pumpkin," perched on a pier by the sea. Expect to queue on busy days if you want to snap a selfie!

The island is also home to several art museums, including the Benesse House Museum and Chichu Art Museum, designed by architect Tadao Ando to blend seamlessly with the landscape.

The Art House Project in Honmura features several traditional houses which have been transformed into

art installations, blending the old with the new. The Naoshima Bathhouse (I Love Yu) designed by Shinro Ohtake is one of the more unusual projects, with its colourful, recycled materials and eclectic mix of art. Take a soak and enjoy a unique blend of immersive art and relaxation!

Grab a back-issue of last month's NEO to read about the first leg of Emily's adventure, where she explored the Kyoto area beyond its temples and shrines, from Super Nintendo World to Iga 'Ninja' town. We hope these stories inspire you to embark on your own journey to Japan, to discover a country full of rich culture, history, and remarkable landscapes. ●



Naoshima.



Onomichi.