

Exploring a culture, step-by-step

Paul Christie, chief executive officer of Walk Japan—one of National Geographic’s pick of the top 200 adventure companies on Earth—shares what hidden gems one can find touring the heart of Japan on foot.

words CHARLENE CHOW

What brought you to Japan for the first time in 1987?

I came to pursue my language studies. I did a home stay in Kawagoe, just outside Tokyo. I felt at home right away. My host family literally said, “My house is your house”. I remember eating *oden*, a hotpot or stew with many ingredients. It’s still a favourite of mine because I associate it with that time of my life.

How did you get started leading tours for Walk Japan?

About 19 years ago, I was working in London with Japanese television companies on news and documentary programmes. Colleagues introduced me to Walk Japan and asked if I would like to lead tours. I did so for a number of years before I moved to Kunisaki in 2002. I continued tour-leading and I would give suggestions to the founders of Walk Japan—two academics from Hong Kong University—

which they would take up, so eventually I asked them to make me a partner. That was 12 years ago.

What is the advantage of discovering a place through walking?

You become part of everyday Japan and you get to interact with the locals. As we get into the rural areas, you see the problems Japan faces such as an aging and declining population. We can talk about these issues while we’re walking because we are a small group—12 people maximum plus the tour leader. We walk at a slow pace and the way the tour days are spaced out offers a relaxed experience. We do go to the touristy places, but these visits are minimised.

What is the most memorable walk you’ve led?

It has to be the Nakasendo Way (which is 544km long but we cover about 130km of it in 11 days). It’s a wonderful introduction to Japan. It follows one of five ancient highways that ran from Kyoto to Tokyo. The former has its own ancient history and the latter has the Edo culture, which I argue has a bigger impact on modern Japanese society than Kyoto’s. As we’re walking along the highway, past residential areas and rural areas, you start to see the geography of the country quite clearly. It’s a gourmet trip as well. The nearer we get to the mountains the less sushi-type food we encounter and the more local river fish, game and mountain vegetables we eat.

Tell us a few interesting ryokans you’ve found on the Nakasendo Way.

We’ve had relationships with some of these places for 24 or more years. Guests will get an idea of how the



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- 1 Paul Christie
- 2 Nio Guardian Deities, Futago-ji, Kunisaki
- 3 Hikone Genkyuen Garden along the Nakasendo Way
- 4 *Kinmedai* from Toutei
- 5 Beach on the Izu Geo Trail
- 6 Wasabi

quality of inns in the countryside vary, from simple, elegant accommodation where there are paper-thin walls and you can hear your neighbours, through to a pricier accommodation that’s more private but still very Japanese. One *ryokan* that is very atmospheric is Maruya in Tsumago. It’s family-run, the wooden stairs creak and you can hear a river flowing all night. One of the higher-end ones is called Yamakayu, located at the Kaida Plateau. It’s also family-run and has *onsen* baths.

Why did you choose to settle down in Kunisaki Peninsula, Kyushu?

Kunisaki is a bit off the beaten track and it’s beautiful. It was a big centre of Buddhism over a thousand years ago. That died out, but the remnants of Buddhism remained and Shintoism emerged. Walking through the area, you’d come across Buddhist statues, altars, or tumble-down huts that monks may have used many years ago. If there’s one temple to visit, it would be Fukiji which was built as an Amida Buddha Hall. It is the oldest wooden structure in Kyushu and the simplest, most elegant building of any Buddhist institution anywhere in Japan.

What are some of the local dishes in Kunisaki?

The signature dish is *dango-jiru*, a flat noodle vegetarian dish, only common to Oita Prefecture. The best food I’d recommend here is prepared by a catering group run by some ladies called *Suzukake-no-kai* (named after the *suzukake* or Plane tree). They are farmers, so they grow the food they prepare, which is mainly vegetarian. In nearby Beppu, there is also a wonderful noodle shop called *Kirintei*. The signature dish there is *onmen*. The noodles flow down a hydraulic ram straight into hot water, before being served to you. The meat served is lamb or mutton, which Japanese don’t normally eat outside Hokkaido.

Walk Japan’s newest tour, which starts this November, is the Izu Peninsula, 150km from Tokyo. What are some of the culinary treats one can expect to find there?

The peninsula is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean and has access to a great range of fish. We do not recommend this tour to anyone who does not like seafood. I can’t recall eating meat there. Depending on the season, you can enjoy seafood like spider crab, squid, lobster and sea bream. A common fish found in the area is the *kinmedai* or golden-eyed snapper. One of the *ryokans* we go to on the tour called Toutei serves this dish very well. It has a great view too, sitting by a beautiful pristine beach.

What is your favourite place for a good meal in Japan?

I often frequent *Sha Sha*, a small, 10-seater, L-shaped bar-cum-eatery in Shimbashi, a business district in central Tokyo. It’s like a family there. Most of the customers know each other. Even when a new one arrives, he is welcomed in. Being near Tsukiji market, the fish is very fresh.