En Route

ON TRACK TO EXPLORE JAPAN

SPECIAL SECTION:
HIGHLIGHTING
HOKURIKU

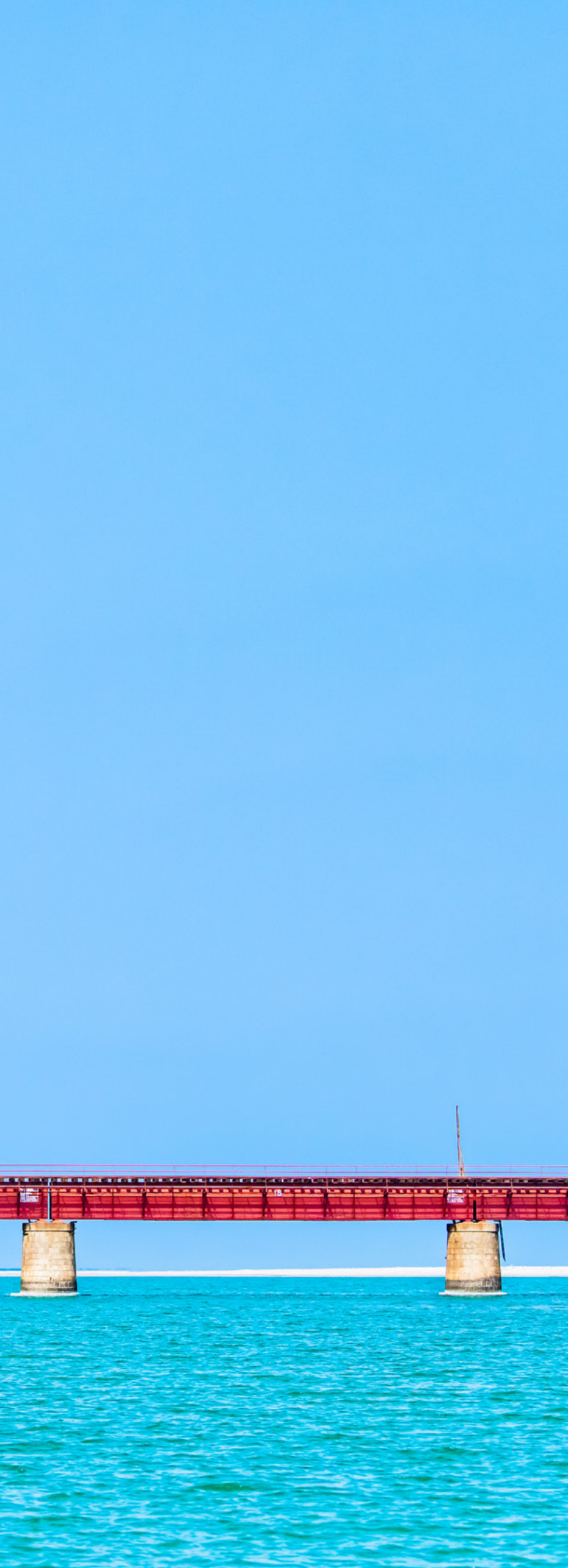
CHASING DREAMS AND TRAINS
Photographer Hirokazu Fukushima snaps trains across Kyushu

CHAMPIONING THE CONTEMPORARY
Touring the many modern art spaces of Hokuriku

FROM RUBBLE TO REVIVAL
How a new train station helped revitalize a small Tohoku fishing town

TW SPECIAL EDITION

All Aboard!



ED'S NOTE

Welcome to the first edition of *En Route*, a magazine celebrating the wonder of train travel. Not only is it more environmentally friendly than flying, studies have shown travel on the tracks can be less stressful and more fulfilling. It doesn't hurt that Japan's rail network is often touted as one of the world's best, impressing passengers from around the world with its punctuality, speed and efficiency. This national lifeline not only connects remote regions to bustling metropolises, it connects people, too. Train stations are easy-to-find landmarks, making them vital meeting points for new and old acquaintances alike. Meanwhile, raised rail tracks house stretches of entertainment hubs, with bars, restaurants — even live venues — beneath the thundering trains. Join us as we explore the many ways to enjoy this magical form of transport beyond your daily commute.

We've also dedicated a section to the Hokuriku region, which will be even easier to get to and around from March next year, thanks to the extension of the Hokuriku Shinkansen line. Visitors will be able to zip all the way to Tsuruga in Fukui Prefecture with this new addition. We hope our selection of highlighted destinations inspires you to take advantage of this new route when it opens.

Cover: Photo by Hirokazu Fukushima
Left: Kyoto Tango Railway train crossing Yura River Bridge, Kyoto Prefecture

20F Roppongi Hills Mori Tower
6-10-1, Roppongi, Minato-ku
Tokyo 106-6131

(03) 6804-6226 /(03) 03-6804-6374 (fax)

info@engawa.global

For ad sales inquiries, please call
(03) 6804-6226 or
email: info@engawa.global

広告に関するお問い合わせ先
電話：(03) 6804-6226
メール：info@engawa.global

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HIGHLIGHTING HOKURIKU

Left: Torokko Electric Railway at Kurobe Gorge, Toyama Prefecture

Trainspotting

"The train is a small world moving through a larger world."
— Elisha Cooper, *Train*

Train on the Tadami Line crossing the bridge at Tadami River Bridge No. 1, Fukushima Prefecture

SNAPSHOTS

Traintastic news from around Japan

Words by **Kenji Hall**

Osakana Darake bento box. Photo courtesy of JR East

Ekiben Extraordinaire

It's the most coveted collection of culinary awards in Japan's train sector — the Ekiben Grand Prix. Hosted annually by East Japan Railway (JR East) since 2012, the awards recognize the best railway station bento box meals — ekiben — sold along dozens of commuter and shinkansen routes in northeastern and central Japan. The public votes on their favorites in 10 categories, with top honors going to the ekiben that scores highest for taste, artful presentation and packaging. It's a big deal in the ekiben business, an industry that got its start in 1885 and now accounts for a sizable share of Japan's ¥10 trillion bento market. Last year's overall Ekiben Grand Prix winner: Osakana Darake (Full of Fish), a fish lover's mix of cooked and raw mackerel, saury pike, salmon, flounder, scallops and squid from Tsugaru city, Aomori Prefecture. This year's winner will be announced in December.

More info: *www.ekiben-ajinojin.com*

Abandoned No More

In Japan they're known as "lost lines": hundreds of kilometers of terminated railway routes that once served as lifelines for local communities. More cars, fewer residents and the exodus of young people to big cities have doomed many of these local commuter lines. But some communities are finding ways to repurpose their defunct railway routes — as novelty tourist trains, walking paths, bicycles-on-rail rides and railyard museums. Railway journalist Norihisa Matsumoto's 2019 book *Haisen Tanbo Nyumon* (*Abandoned Railway Exploration Guide*) has helped bring attention to many former train lines that are now operated as historical trails. Earlier this year, Annaka city, Gunma Prefecture, experimented with the idea, opening up sections of its former Shin'etsu Main Line for limited-offer guided walking tours (with detours to local restaurants) for the first time since the line closed in 1997.

More info: *haisen-walk.com/en/about-en*

Megane Bridge in Annaka city, Gunma Prefecture

Haga Utsunomiya LRT

Dream Tram

The Haga Utsunomiya LRT is the kind of public works project that officials hope will transform Utsunomiya, a mid-sized city in Tochigi Prefecture, into a model of compact urban living. Opened in August, the tram line — nicknamed the Lightline — rumbles along the city's streets to 19 stations, connecting the shinkansen railway station to school campuses, sports facilities and commercial districts as well as parts of neighboring Haga town. It's Japan's first newly built tram network in 75 years, and Utsunomiya is counting on its ¥68.4-billion investment (with sleek yellow-and-black trains made by France's Alstom) to revitalize the central business district. Like many regional cities, Utsunomiya is trying to find solutions to suburban sprawl, a sizable carbon footprint and too many cars. The new transit option benefits economically disadvantaged residents, but it's also ideal for seniors, who are expected to make up a third of Utsunomiya's residents by 2050, from a quarter of the population of 513,000 now, and will become increasingly dependent on public transport.

More info: *u-movenext.net*

On The Right Track

How interwoven public and private spheres spawned Japan's modern railways

Words by **Cezary Jan Strusiewicz**

They have been called the greatest privatization success story in Japan's history: railways. Their on-time record is the envy of the world. In its best year in nearly six decades of service, the Tokaido Shinkansen carried more than 477,000 passengers a day along its 550-kilometer route between Tokyo and Shin-Osaka stations — and yet the average delay per train was less than one minute. It's hard to fathom how such a busy rail corridor could achieve such precision. What made it possible? One key moment: the breakup of the government-owned Japanese National Railways into regional Japan Railways companies in the late 1980s. Today, the efficiency and safety records of JR and other private railway operators suggest that the government had a minimal role in developing rail transport. A closer look, however, reveals a more complex story about the evolution of Japan's modern railways.

Opposite page top: Illustration of a steam locomotive on the Takanawa Railroad in Tokyo, Utagawa Kuniteru II / Ichiyosai Kuniteru II, 1870
Above: Illustration of a steam locomotive departing Shimbashi Station (upper half) and Ginza's prosperity (lower half), Utagawa Kunisada III, 1873

Laying the Tracks

Japan's first railway route officially opened on the morning of October 14, 1872. Under a clear sky, a steam locomotive with nine cars, carrying Emperor Mutsuhito, government leaders, diplomats and other dignitaries, made its way from Tokyo's Shimbashi Station to Yokohama Station. It would be some time before the 53-minute trip was affordable to the masses. At the time, a third-class ticket between the only two stations cost the equivalent of ¥5,000 today. (The same trip now takes less than 30 minutes and costs under ¥500.) The train cars had few amenities and notably lacked toilets, and stories spread of passengers making use of open windows to answer the call of nature. One former samurai is said to have been fined for sticking his buttocks outside to fart. But these were growing pains for a new form of transportation that would have a lasting impact, connecting far-flung regions and urban centers and setting the country on a path to modernization.

The Shimbashi-Yokohama railroad was the result of an ambitious public works project spanning several years. The locomotive, train cars and rails had to be imported from the U.K. Before long, the private sector came barging in. First among the private railway entrants: Nippon Railway, in 1881. Its model of operating trains between Tokyo's Ueno Station and Tohoku's Aomori Station — but leaving the track-building to the government — would be widely copied by others. In a country whose land is more than two-thirds mountains, imagine the savings of not having to bore tunnels or cut paths through forests and the peace of mind of not having to scoop up land through eminent domain.

Opposite page left: Steam engine on the Shin'etsu Line stopping at Isobe Station, ca 1901-1902.
Center: Map of the Japanese National Railways System showing the new Tokaido Shinkansen line (in red) and conventional lines, effective as of October 1964

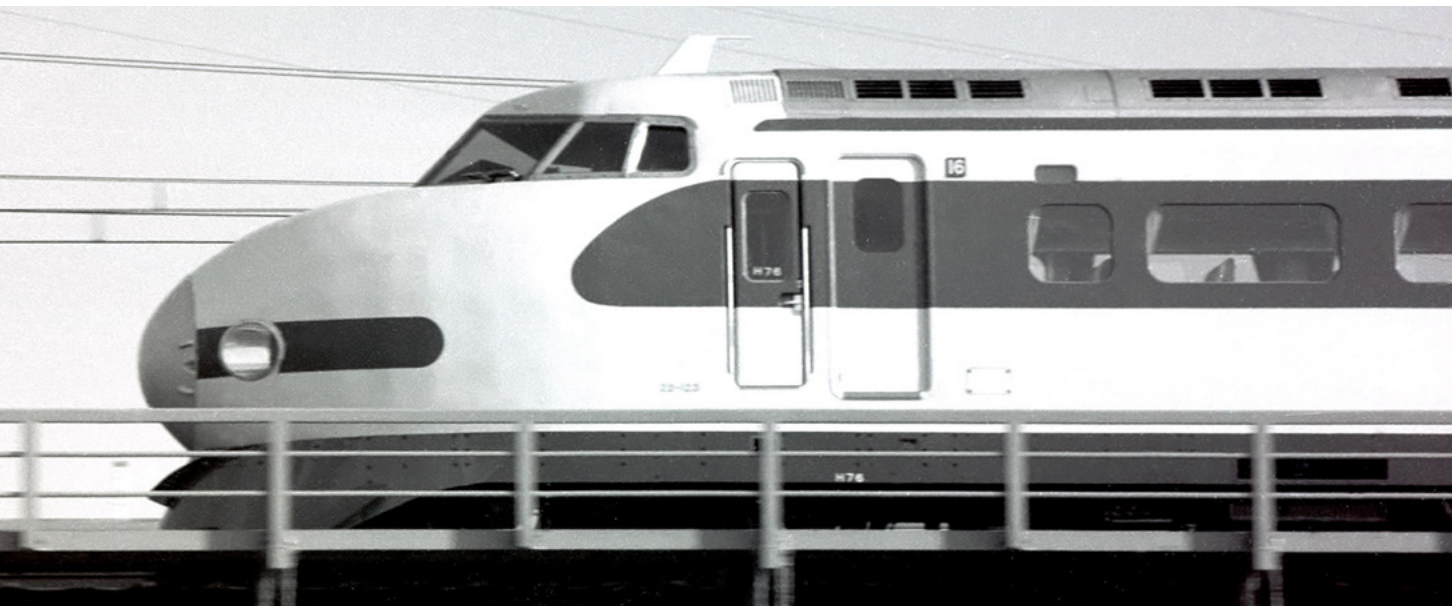
The 1892 Railway Construction Act (RCA) amounted to an endorsement of that arrangement. The RCA channeled public funds to new lines in rural places, enticing private railways to expand into faraway regions that otherwise were too sparsely populated to seem worth the investment. The government saw railroads as a way of tying together — economically, geographically, culturally — the country's four main islands. It might have funded a national rail system on its own had the public coffers not been depleted by the Satsuma Rebellion, a samurai uprising that was crushed in 1877 and dramatized by the Hollywood film *The Last Samurai*. By 1905, more than three-quarters of Japanese railways were privately owned.

Picking Up Steam

But the government soon stepped in to assert control. Citing train delays during the Russo-Japanese War, the government announced that it was nationalizing the railways in 1906. A Ministry of Railways, formed in 1920, was put in charge of the Japanese Government Railways (JGR) and the newly created Board of Tourist Industry tasked with promoting railways to attract foreign travelers. New lines opened and innovative ideas flourished. Between 1906 and the end of World War II, the publicly funded Railway Research Office developed rust-resistant materials, made improvements to the efficiency of engine boilers and even invented a type of paint to discourage bees from building hives that interfered with train brakes.

By 1949, when officials decided to replace the Japanese Government Railways with the Japanese National Railways (JNR), roughly 70% of the country's train lines were state-run. For a while, things went smoothly for the government. Car ownership was still more than a decade off, and trains had a head-start in becoming the country's dominant mode of transportation.

In the 1960s, more cars took to the roads, and JNR's operations suffered. Service disruptions were all too frequent: Unions protesting against onerous workloads and meager pay raises staged strikes, slowdowns and walkouts. In response, JNR hiked train fares and cut back on rush-hour trains, angering the public. Trains were vandalized or set on fire. In one instance, an enraged mob took a stationmaster hostage. By 1981, despite efforts at reforms, JNR's debt had swollen to a staggering $87 billion and its standing with the public was at a historic low. With little hope of a turnaround, the government resorted to privatizing JNR in 1987, making way for the former state-run railways to reorganize as regional JR companies. The government was no longer in the train business. But it was hardly a clean exit.



Opposite top: JNR 583 Series train by Wanted-man, licensed under CC BY 4.0, 1985
Opposite bottom: A specially decorated 0 series shinkansen running as an imperial train between Shin-Yokohama and Tokyo by Shellparakeet, licensed under CC BY 4.0, 1977
Above: Linear Chuo Shinkansen L0 improved test car by w-ken0510, Pixta

Running Smoothly

Government officials knew better than to hand over a broken train system with spiraling debts and expect the newly privatized JR companies to have a quick fix. Taxpayers had to chip in, shouldering ¥14 trillion of JNR's debts. For railways in less-populated areas, the government devised a special subsidy program that treated trains as a public good. With the extra funds, regional rail operators could keep fares low while paying for costly overhead — ensuring that traveling by train anywhere from northern Hokkaido to southwestern Kyushu remained affordable.

Meanwhile, the government continued to bet heavily on new train technologies. The state-funded Railway Technical Research Institute (RTRI), which took over for a former government lab in 1986, has explored ideas for safer, speedier, more comfortable trains that are also more energy-efficient. One high-profile RTRI-led project is the next-generation magnetic levitation (maglev) shinkansen. These ultrafast trains rely on magnets to lift off their tracks, zipping forward on special guideways at frictionless speeds of 600 kph. When Central Japan Railway completes the first phase of its maglev line, the new Linear Chuo Shinkansen will shorten the trip from Tokyo to Nagoya from 1 hour, 39 minutes to just 40 minutes.

The government's involvement is, of course, only part of the Japanese rail industry's story. Private enterprise deserves plenty of credit for the sector's stellar reputation. Today more than 100 privately owned rail companies manage much of Japan's 27,700 kilometers of track. Many of those businesses have turned train stations into city-building projects, creating jobs and lifting local economies. Entire communities, with shops and schools and parks, have sprung up along railway lines in once out-of-the-way places. There are now more luxury sleepers and fine-dining cars and tourist trains than ever before stopping in small towns and rolling through stunning landscapes. In the next few years, plans are afoot for Shinkansen extensions in western Kyushu, north-central Japan and Hokkaido that could improve access for remote communities and even bring in tourists. Overlapping public and private interests in Japan's railways has never been free of messy entanglements, but they've also managed something that even early visionaries could not have dreamed of: a national train network that ranks among the world's finest and restores faith in the romance and wonder of rail travel.

Railroad Rendezvous

At Japan's railway museums, delve into history, science and hands-on fun

Words by **Helen A. Langford-Matsui**

Japan has come a long way from its first 29-kilometer railway line, opened in 1872. Today, more than 200 railway companies operate 27,700 kilometers of tracks for shinkansen, monorail and local commuter lines. It's no surprise that the country has legions of devotees — known by the catch-all "densha otaku" (train geek) — and dozens of museums dedicated to trains and all things rail-related. Fancy yourself an aficionado, too? Take the fast track to train heaven at the following museums.

The Railway Museum
Saitama City, Saitama Prefecture

If you've ever dreamed of driving a steam locomotive, you're in luck: This museum is home to Japan's first realistic steam-locomotive simulator. You can also try your hand at operating commuter and shinkansen trains — or take a miniature train out for a spin on the tracks around the premises. There are demonstrations of various train-related tasks, and, for toy train enthusiasts, model trains that speed around a large, intricate diorama.

More info: *www.railway-museum.jp/e/*

Kyoto Railway Museum
Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture

This mammoth museum boasts 54 retired trains and rail cars. You'll find 20 kinds of steam locomotives as well as diesel and electric locomotives. There are shinkansen, old-school bonneted express trains, dining cars, sleeping cars, freight cars and a first-class passenger car with an observation deck. Ever wanted to know how train couplers or track switches work? Or maybe you were curious about the evolution of train turnstiles. It's all here, along with simulators, a railroad bicycle that you can pedal around and a short ride on passenger cars pulled by an actual, working steam locomotive.

More info: *kyotorailwaymuseum.jp/en/*

The SCMaglev and Railway Park
Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture

At the SCMaglev and Railway Park, you'll learn about the ultrafast superconducting magnetic levitation (maglev) technology powering the Chuo Shinkansen — currently under construction — that is expected to shorten the Tokyo-Nagoya trip from 1.5 hours down to 40 minutes, and get a close look at an extensive lineup of rolling stock. Among the 39 railway vehicles on display are steam and electric locomotives, shinkansen and earlier maglev trains. There's also a Doctor Yellow, the beloved yellow-painted shinkansen that inspects and tests the safety of high-speed tracks.

More info: *museum.jr-central.co.jp/en/*

Tips for a Smooth Trip

Before you go, be sure to find out whether you need tickets for the interactive experiences — some are available for advance purchase. A smartphone (or app) might come in handy for accessing multilingual audio guides.

Tobu Museum
Sumida Ward, Tokyo

This small but popular museum's collection goes beyond the usual steam locomotives and electric trains. It also has a tramway, bus and ropeway gondola. Check out the model trains, mock-ups, bus and train simulators, and diorama featuring 170 computer-controlled model trains. The Watching Promenade is a fun bonus for diehards: the track-level windows offer a close-up of the wheels and motors of trains arriving at and departing from Higashi-Mukojima station.

More info: *tobu.co.jp/museum/en/*

Full Steam Ahead

Find more encounters of the railroad kind in Japan.

Romancecar Museum
Ebina, Kanagawa Prefecture

There's plenty to see and do here: authentic trains, a diorama, interactive experiences and a rooftop terrace with views of tracks.

More info: *www.odakyu.jp/romancecarmuseum/*

Tokyo Metro Museum
Edogawa Ward, Tokyo

Familiarize yourself with Tokyo's underground metro and play subway driver on the simulators.

More info: *www.chikahaku.jp/en/*

Kyushu Railway History Museum
Kitakyushu, Fukuoka Prefecture

Get to know Kyushu's railroads with the museum's diorama, driving simulator and nine trains.

More info: *k-rhm.jp*

Usui Pass Railway Heritage Park
Annaka, Gunma Prefecture

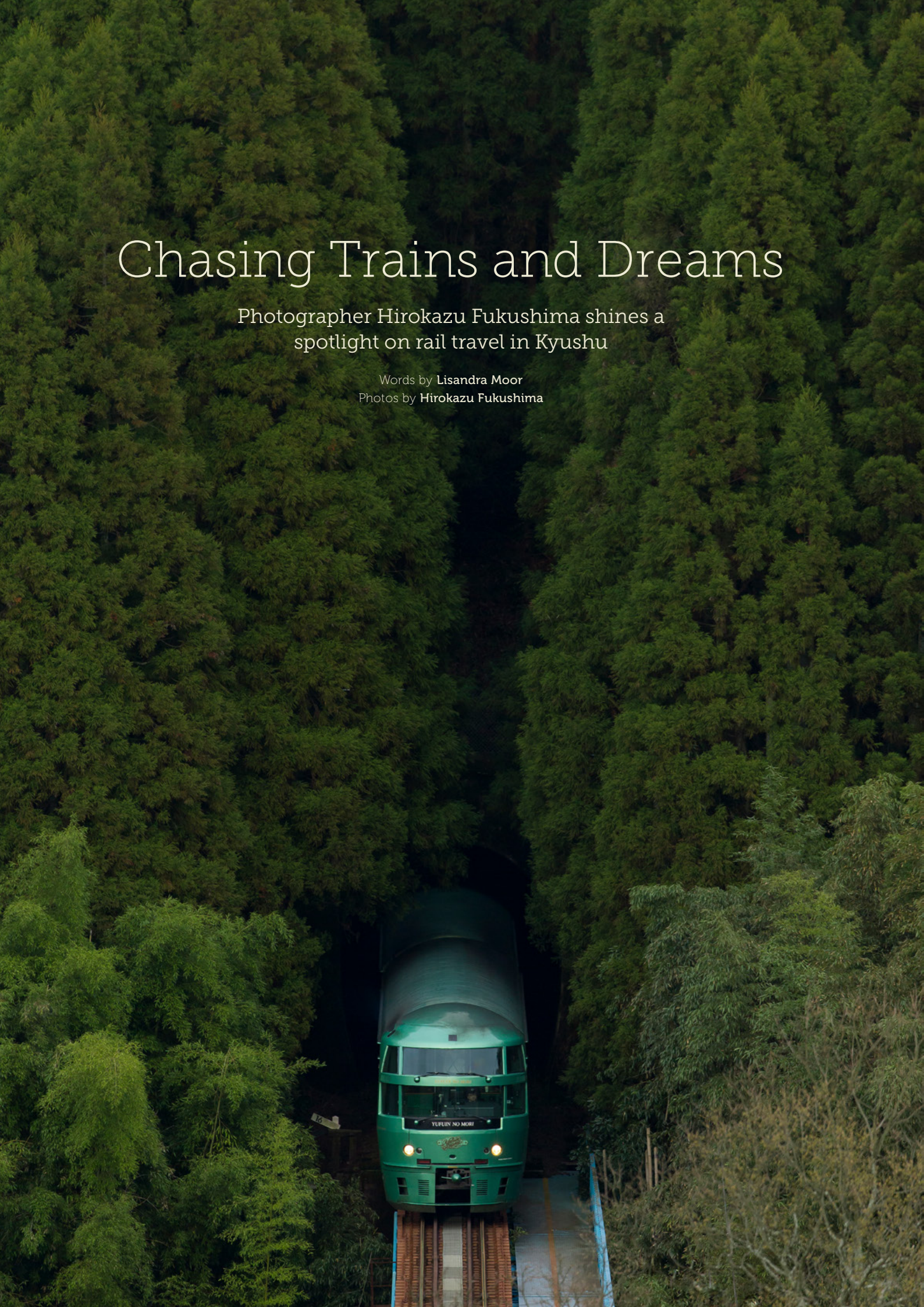
Drive a real EF63 electric locomotive — that is, once you've completed a day-long practical skills course and passed the exam (in Japanese only).

More info: *usuitouge.com/bunkamura/*

Chasing Trains and Dreams

Photographer Hirokazu Fukushima shines a spotlight on rail travel in Kyushu

Words by **Lisandra Moor**
Photos by **Hirokazu Fukushima**



It takes dogged determination to be a train photographer. Or at least the kind who can capture in an image what Hirokazu Fukushima calls the “essence” of a railway journey. Fukushima is an authority on the subject. Over his prolific career spanning nearly two decades, the 48-year-old Fukuoka native has shot hundreds of assignments — for railway advertisements and magazine spreads, tourism posters and websites — aboard trains and along tracks all over Japan. Today, Fukushima, who runs his own agency Frap Inc., is the go-to photographer for Fukuoka-based Kyushu Railway Company (JR Kyushu), a regional rail operator that’s one of the industry’s most innovative.

Rarely is the essence that Fukushima is looking for, or the environment where he’s shooting, the same. Much depends on the train, the season and the scenery. Fukushima might fill the frame with the Yufuin-no-Mori’s bulbous front car exiting a bamboo forest — green against green — or the Kyushu Shinkansen barreling through the year’s first snowfall. But he’s just as likely to focus on the backdrop of the journey. He shot the mustard-colored Aru Ressha train as a small, distant object beyond a big, bright yellow blur of spring wildflowers. He showed the coastal Omura Line’s two-car train off to one side, rounding a bend above the ocean in the fading light of dusk. His images taken from inside of trains depict the everyday of students commuting to school, interior details of artisanal kumiko woodwork and glimpses of rice fields and mountains through blurred window frames.

Above: Hirokazu Fukushima on assignment in Kyushu
Opposite: Yufuin-no-Mori, Oita Prefecture

Preparation and Patience

To get images that will draw people in, Fukushima spends a good deal of time on reconnaissance work. He has to familiarize himself with the routes and lay of the land. He studies maps and pores over train timetables. Scouting out vantage points and anticipating where the light will fall and how everything will look are essential.

But even with the most thorough preparations, plenty can go wrong on a shoot. A few years ago, Fukushima was hired to work on promotional materials for the Seven Stars in Kyushu, JR Kyushu's seven-car luxury sleeper train with 10 elaborately furnished suites, a lounge and Japanese tea room. He wanted the quintessential Kyushu backdrop and knew the perfect place to get it: Aso Station, near Aso-Kuju National Park. "The Seven Stars arrives at Aso Station at exactly 6am," Fukushima said. 'Just before it arrives, it passes by a hill where you can see the five peaks of Mount Aso, illuminated by the morning sun." It should have been straightforward and quick — but almost never is — and his patience paid off. "The first time it rained. The second time it was cloudy. And the third time the train was delayed and the timing was not right," he recalled. A month later, after multiple visits, Fukushima finally managed to get the shot that he had envisioned.

There's something dreamy about being a railway photographer in a country where trains command superlatives. Japan has the world's busiest train terminus (Shinjuku Station), the fastest train (the under-construction Chuo Shinkansen maglev line) and the longest suspended monorail system (Chiba Urban Monorail), but it also has hundreds of railroad lines and tens of thousands of kilometers of tracks crisscrossing and connecting every region with somewhere else. The country's diehard train geeks, known as densha otaku, go to extremes to ride and photograph and record the sounds of their favorite trains, and their fanaticism begins at an early age.

Fukushima admits to being one of them: He got hooked at the age of 3. "When I turned 5, I started using my dad's single-lens reflex camera to take photos of trains," he said. Riding the rails and documenting his adventures was just a hobby until one day, Fukushima spotted a promotional poster for a multiple-ride train ticket, known as Seishun 18. "I immediately thought, 'I want to take photos that will make people feel something.'"

Top: Nishi Kyushu Shinkansen Kamome, Nagasaki Prefecture
Middle: Omura Line, Nagasaki Prefecture
Bottom: Seven Stars in Kyushu, Kumamoto Prefecture

Top: Kyudai Line, Oita Prefecture
Bottom: Kitto Line, Miyazaki Prefecture

Picking up Steam

Fukushima's first job as a photographer was with a commercial studio working on promotional campaigns. But he never stopped taking pictures of trains. Eventually, someone on JR Kyushu's advertising team noticed Fukushima's photos and asked to use them on posters, pamphlets and calendars. By then, he was in his 30s and ready for a change. But it wasn't until 2013, when he signed on as a pre-launch support member for the Seven Stars in Kyushu train, that he decided to quit the studio and open his own photo agency specializing in trains.

With JR Kyushu projects, the objectives can vary. Sometimes, he's promoting the train; other times, it's the destination, which can be in any of Kyushu's seven prefectures. Occasionally, it's both. Even for a train buff like Fukushima, the job can be taxing, with shoots scheduled in the early mornings or late at night. Getting the dramatic light and backdrops is tricky when train schedules don't align with good shooting conditions. It's also hard to get a sharp, focused image of a sleeper train traveling at 100 kph or a shinkansen zipping by at 260 kph. For Fukushima, the transition from winter to spring — when the snow is gone but the trees are still bare and flowers have yet to bloom — is the "season that tests a photographer's ability." "I have to read the light more carefully than usual and think hard about the composition," he wrote in an essay for *Canon Photo Circle* magazine last year.

While trying to create images that convey the enjoyment of slower rail travel, Fukushima might be sprinting to meet a deadline. At times, he's had to set up as many as 22 remote-controlled cameras and one video camera to make the best of his only chance to get the needed shots. Once in a while, he snaps an image that gets to the heart of how he feels about his home turf. One of his personal favorites shows the SL Hitoyoshi, a steam locomotive sightseeing train, back when it ran on the Hisatsu Line between Kumamoto and Hitoyoshi stations. It captures the train crossing the Kuma River over the Kumagawa Daiichi Bridge, which was recently damaged by torrential rain. What makes the photo special are the children. "There is a nursery school next to this bridge, where children always play in the river, and they always wave to me when the SL Hitoyoshi goes by," he said. People waving at trains is common around Kyushu — and it's become a genuine expression of the warm hospitality that Kyushu residents, including Fukushima, are eager to show visitors.

Ticket to Ride

What's so inspiring about Japan's trains? For one, they're such a vital part of people's daily lives. "Railroads only exist because of people, and thus the two are inseparable," Fukushima explained. And seeing the uniformed railway staff go about their work with such professionalism, dedication and pride gives him a boost. "I'm always so motivated by them. They're always engaged in their work," he said.

Working in the industry hasn't dampened Fukushima's enthusiasm for trains. When he's shooting for himself, he tends to look for quiet scenes of daily commuter life on less popular train lines around the country, rather than focusing on the high-profile trains that most people have heard of. He loves sleeper and sightseeing trains but is just as effusive about regional lines like the Sagano Romantic Train in Kyoto or the 89.3-kilometer-long Kushiro Shitsugen Norokko in east Hokkaido. For Fukushima, nothing compares to riding a local line, staring out the window at the passing vistas. Or napping. Or sipping hot tea. Or chatting up the passengers who rely on it to get to work, school or the next town over. "It's a great way to meet locals," said Fukushima.

More Info

Follow Hirokazu Fukushima on Instagram at *@hirokazu_fukushima*.

Top: Ebinoiino Station, Kitto Line, Miyazaki Prefecture
Bottom: JR Kyushu SL Hitoyoshi, Kumamoto Prefecture

Kyushu By Train

There are rail travel options for every budget. Here are the train lines and rail passes that shaped Hirokazu Fukushima's career:

Seishun 18

For only ¥12,050, JR East's Seishun 18 ticket lets you hop on and off all JR trains nationwide, bus rapid transit routes (but not city buses) and the ferry to Miyajima in Hiroshima Prefecture for any five days that you choose in spring, summer and winter. It's similar to a JR Pass for residents. Be sure to check the dates when the limited-offer Seishun 18 tickets are valid.

Where to buy: Seishun 18 tickets are sold at JR service counters in major railway stations around Japan.

More info: *www.jreast.co.jp/multi/en/pass/seishun18.html*

Seven Stars in Kyushu

Seven Stars launched in 2013 as JR Kyushu's most luxurious sleeper train. Itineraries include visits to pottery and woodworking villages, scenic coastal sunsets and hot spring pit stops. Tickets are popular and require booking months in advance, so be sure to plan ahead.

More info: *www.cruisetrain-sevenstars.jp/english/*

SL Hitoyoshi

JR Kyushu Railway has been operating this century-old steam-powered locomotive train on a sightseeing route along the Kuma River between Saga and Kumamoto prefectures since 2009. It's a slower, more jostling ride than modern commuter trains, and the wet steam and coal smoke that puffs from the engine's smokestack is the real thing. Service is scheduled to end in March 2024.

More info: *www.jrkyushu.co.jp/english/train/sl.html*

Aru Ressha

Launched in 2015, the Aru Ressha is a sweets-themed luxury sightseeing train that connects Hakata Station in Fukuoka Prefecture to Yufuin Station in Oita Prefecture. The old-school and lavish wooden interiors are based on a luxury train that the railway ordered in 1906 from J.G. Brill in the U.S. but never used. The real attraction is the menu: seasonal dishes created by Yoshihiro Narisawa, the renowned owner-chef of Narisawa in Tokyo, using the bounty of small farms and fishing fleets in Kyushu and Okinawa.

More info: *www.jrkyushu-aruressha.jp/en/*

Note: Advance registration is necessary at least 14 days before the desired date.

36+3

The 36+3 debuted in 2020, taking passengers along five scenic routes on different days of the week around Kyushu (Sasebo–Hakata, Hakata–Kagoshima, Miyazaki–Oita/Beppu, Oita/Beppu–Kokura/Hakata). Choose the lunch plan for a reserved seat and bento box lunch of local delicacies. The train gets its name from Kyushu's status as the world's 36th-largest island and the "surprise, impression and happiness" that comes with the service.

More info: *www.jrkyushu.co.jp/english/train/36plus3.html*

Off-the-Rails Cuteness

Five Wakayama trains that transport visitors to the kawaii side of Kansai

Words by **Alina Joan Ito**

Wakayama has Adventure World pandas, white sand beaches, the historic Kumano Kodo trail — and a fleet of adorable trains. For many visitors, traveling by rail is part of the allure of exploring this rural stretch of the Kansai region.

Tama Den

She's known as the cat that saved a railway. Tama was Kishi Station's friendly resident calico until the railway operator named her the stationmaster in 2007. That designation — the first for a cat in Japan — came with a custom-fitted hat and brought Tama national feline fame. Soon, visitors were flocking to this 14-kilometer line linking rural communities to Wakayama city. The influx rescued the Kishigawa line from the brink of extinction. Tama passed away in 2015 but not before the railway operator (now called Wakayama Electric Railway) had rolled out its Tama Den train with a cat-themed livery: whiskers on the front car, cat-shaped seat backs, paw prints on the floors, shelves of cat books and illustrations of calico cats plastered everywhere. Kishi Station, the last of the line's 14 stops, now has a gift shop, museum, cafe and two new feline bosses, Nitama (Tama II) and Yontama (Tama IV).

More info:
https://wakayama-dentetsu.co.jp/train/tamaden/

Ichigo Densha

There are many ways of traveling to Wakayama's strawberry farms during the January-to-April picking season. By far the most festive is Wakayama Electric Railway's Ichigo Densha (Strawberry Train). The two-car local debuted on the Kishikawa Line in 2006 with wooden benches and tables and strawberry-decorated upholstery, and was the first of the railway's themed trains — there are now five — created by designer Eiji Mitooka, who also dreamed up the luxury sleeper train Seven Stars in Kyushu.

More info:
https://wakayama-dentetsu.co.jp/train/ichigo/

Umeboshi Densha

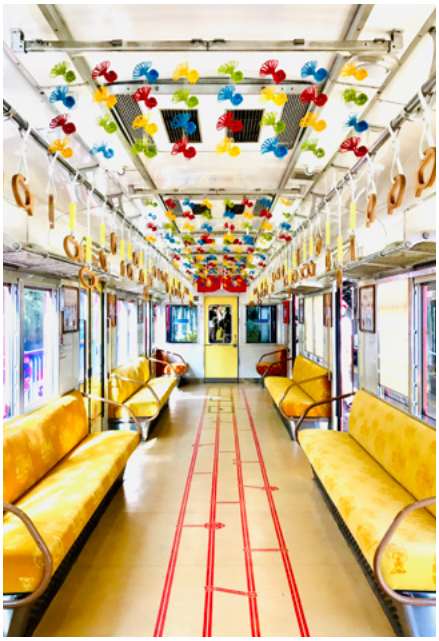
Mention Kishu — the former name for Wakayama — to people in Japan and you'll likely hear about the region's delightfully sour umeboshi, or pickled plums. According to local lore, Kishu's farmers struggled to grow much until a feudal lord suggested that they plant ume trees. Today, Wakayama's orchards produce more Nanko plums for umeboshi than any other prefecture, and the Wakayama Electric Railway's Umeboshi Densha train on the Kishikawa Line pays tribute to this mainstay of the region's agricultural economy. Vibrant scarlet on the outside, the train, designed by Eiji Mitooka, features wooden benches, washi-covered ceilings and elaborately patterned kumiko woodwork window frames.

More info:
https://wakayama-dentetsu.co.jp/train/umeboshi/

Medetai Densha

Trains masquerading as fish make the rounds on Nankai Electric Railway's 12-kilometer, seven-station Kada Line, near the fishing ports and beaches at the northwestern edge of Wakayama Prefecture. The railway says its Medetai trains — a play on words that means joyous but also a nod to the region's impressive catch of red sea bream in March and April — are meant to give passengers the feeling of being under the sea as they cover the 12-kilometer stretch between Wakayama Station and Kada Station. The trains' sea life motif extends to the ceilings, seat covers, floors, windows, shades and dangling handles, and varies with each of the four versions (in shades of pink, sky blue, red and black).

More info:
https://www.nankai.co.jp/kada/medetai.html



Panda Kuroshio

Rauhin, Yuihin, Saihin and Fuhin are the biggest family of giant pandas in Japan and the hands-down fan favorites at Adventure World, a zoo and marine park in Shirahama, Wakayama Prefecture. Their likeness is also on a train: Since 2017, West Japan Railway (JR West) has promoted these lovable black-and-white fuzzballs with its Panda Kuroshio limited express. The trains have a panda face on the front car and illustrations inside on headrest covers and sliding doors, and passengers are treated to a two-and-a-half-hour scenic ride along the coast of the Kii Peninsula as they shuttle between Shin-Osaka and Wakayama's Shirahama Station, near Adventure World. JR West calls the newest of its three Panda Kuroshio trains the Sustainable Smile Train because it promotes the UN Sustainable Development Goals — or maybe it's because all the passengers are so happy to be on board.

More info:
https://www.jr-odekake.net/railroad/kuroshio/pandakuroshio/

FROM RUBBLE TO REVIVAL

The small fishing town of Onagawa rebuilds its fortunes and future with a train station and plaza

Words and photos by **Manami Okazaki**

Above: Devastation in Onagawa after the tsunami, April 2011
Opposite page: Black-tailed gulls chase a fishing boat in Onagawa Bay

One of the first things visitors see when they leave the train station in Onagawa, Miyagi Prefecture, is the ocean. In this small fishing town of 5,900 residents, the water's edge begins just beyond a downward sloping plaza of shops. On a recent scorching Sunday in early September, the place is abuzz with activity. Families fish for sardines, kids practice skateboard jumps at a skate park and a rock band plays in a nearby field. Tourists and locals mix in the shops on the bayfront plaza. Inside the airy modern train station's bathhouse, seniors gather for a revitalizing midafternoon soak.

It's a picturesque scene — the sea, the festive crowds, the sense of a promising future. And Onagawa's residents don't take any of it for granted.

Defiance Against Defenses

The 2011 earthquake and tsunami that laid waste to much of Japan's northeastern coastline hit Onagawa hard. The 15-meter waves left more than 800 of the town's residents dead or missing (making up roughly 8% of the 10,000 inhabitants) and almost every home was damaged or swept away. The tidal surge deposited cars on top of buildings, boats far from shore and commuter train cars on a hill above the twisted tracks. Eventually, Miyagi prefectural officials settled on a public works solution to minimize future damage and casualties in Onagawa and other communities: Build a seawall.

But Onagawa residents resisted. A wall wouldn't necessarily stop a tsunami and might even add to locals' fear and anxiety about living there. Not having a view of the ocean could also leave the town vulnerable: What if residents weren't able to see the tides suddenly and dramatically draw back — a possible tsunami warning sign? More importantly, such an imposing structure would distance residents from the source of many of their livelihoods. "To live, we need to be able to see the ocean," said Takuma Endo, who works at the Onagawa Tourism Association.

Onagawa took matters into its own hands, devising a plan to carve out a nearby mountain and rebuild on higher, safer ground. "We made it so we could protect the people. We work with the sea, and love the ocean — that is our natural state," added Endo.

Local Station Succession

Perhaps the most potent symbols of the town's rebirth and resilience are the new train station and bayfront plaza. The last stop on the Ishinomaki Line, the rebuilt Onagawa Station was designed by renowned architect Shigeru Ban as a multistory community gathering spot, instead of just the railway depot that it had been. Ban, in the aftermath of the tsunami, also designed cardboard-and-canvas privacy partitions for emergency shelters and, for Onagawa, temporary housing units made of stacked shipping containers. He was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2014 for his post-disaster efforts here, elsewhere in Japan and abroad.

The new station, completed in 2015, has a bathhouse, shops and a third-floor loft with views of Onagawa Bay, and it's 150 meters inland from its previous location, creating distance from the sea. The building has won widespread praise for its wooden lattice ceiling structure and striking curved rooftop evoking a gull's wings — and also for the excitement that it has brought to the town center.

A Prospering Plaza

Extending from the station to Onagawa Bay is the Seapal-pier plaza. The retail complex of wooden buildings, designed by Tokyo-based Azuma Architect and Associates, has added a new dimension to the local fisheries-led economy: a tourist attraction and a vibrant nightlife scene. It's given local business owners like Yoshikatsu Aihara, of Aihara Fruits, a second chance. The crushing waves robbed him of everything — not just his shop but also the home he used to run his business.

The plaza also has helped to lure a new generation of younger entrepreneurs and artisans to Onagawa. There's a scuba diving store, an artisanal soap maker, a store specializing in streetwear, a guitar shop and a bar run by a local graffiti artist — not exactly the kinds of retailers you'd typically encounter in one of Japan's more remote fishing communities. The plaza's decorative tiles, which feature fish and boat motifs, are the handiwork of one of the shops, Minatomachi Seramika Kobo. Owner Narumi Abe said her ceramics atelier grew out of an informal gathering of housewives that had met for years before the disaster. "We wanted to get back to our hobby, but we didn't know how to do something for the town. Then we met Shigeru Ban who helped facilitate the donation of a kiln from Kyoto University," Abe said.

Onagawa officials had a good idea of what stores should go in the plaza and what kinds of facilities residents would need, said Rie Azuma of Azuma Architect and Associates. "There was a committee for town planning, including design, which briefed us in advance," she added. During the rebuilding phase, visitors came from as far away as the southwestern island of Kyushu, and some were so taken by the place that they ended up staying.

Even on a weekday, a sizable crowd has turned up at Seapal-pier. People form lines for the locally caught grilled clams and rice bowls

topped with raw scallops. On the grass, children eat shaved ice under a cerulean sky. “I’m happy to see people coming back to visit after the earthquake. And I’m especially happy that people from the town are using the facilities,” said Azuma. “When I saw children running around the plaza, I thought, ‘This was a good project.’”

Generation Alpha Aspirations

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, Endo, the Onagawa tourism official, had his doubts about the town’s future. There were no trees, no buildings. Hardly anything of the old town was left to be salvaged. Endo’s two children were still in primary school, and he didn’t see how he could raise them here. “There was nothing. However, it was my kids who wanted to live in Onagawa. They liked it! As a father, I had to show them that I would contribute to the recovery, too. Everyone who came back wanted to help, so we were all pushing for the same thing,” he said.

Many of the town’s elders in their 60s and 70s who might normally have steered the reconstruction process stepped aside to let younger members of the community take the lead. “That’s why there is a skate park in town,” Endo added. It was an act of grace and generosity that gave Endo and others in the community hope and an empowering sense of ownership. “I felt a sense of responsibility because the project we were about to build was the first step toward creating a new town,” he said. “I felt that the people of Onagawa were thinking about the future rather than looking back to the past.”

Above: Onagawa Station, which houses the Yupo'po bathhouse
Opposite page left: Inside the Yupo'po bathhouse. Photo by Hiroyuki Hirai, courtesy of Onagawa Onsen Yupo'po
Opposite page right: Yoshikatsu Aihara of Aihara Fruits, inside Seapal-pier

BREAKING NEW GROUND

Music, art and fashion converge at Osaka's hottest new venues, Yogibo Meta Valley and Yogibo Holy Mountain

Words by **Lisa Wallin**, photos by **Anna Petek**

We're standing on what many hold as sacred ground, amid a construction site teeming with activity in Osaka's Namba area. Paint cans, stepladders and the hum of power tools surround us as diligent workers drill, hammer and scrape the walls with precision. Above, a distant rumble — likely the Limited Express Rapi:t shuttling travelers between Namba and Kansai Airport stations — serves as a gentle reminder that there is a world beyond these walls. This space, now part of the recently revamped Namba Ekikan, an under-the-tracks shopping and entertainment facility, has been anointed as the future home of live venues Meta Valley and Holy Mountain. Although the echoes of construction fill the air for now, these forthcoming cultural hubs are poised to transform this hallowed ground starting October 28.

Building on a Legacy

In the midst of this bustling activity and freshly painted walls, one pillar stands out: It's covered in torn band stickers and graffiti. Much like the senjafuda votive slips pilgrims plaster on temple and shrine ceilings as proof of their piety, these remnants tell a story of those who came before. The pillar serves as a poignant reminder of the legendary concert hall and nightclub Namba Rockets, which used to occupy this spot until its sudden closure in February 2016.

While official reasons for Namba Rockets' demise remain fuzzy (speculations included bankruptcy of a parent company and a general decline in profits), it is clear that it made a mark on the area and the industry. Over its 25 years in business, Namba Rockets played host to iconic acts like L'Arc-en-Ciel, Luna Sea, Dir en Grey — especially during their early years — and many more. Though it always stayed true to its visual-kei rock roots, the venue also evolved as a stronghold of minimal techno featuring DJs like Fumiya Tanaka and Denki Groove's Takkyu Ishino.

Meeting the Visionaries

We're on-site to meet Hayato Taguchi and Hirokazu Yamazaki, a duo of so-called slashers — multitalented professionals whose careers span industries — in their early 40s and 50s who collectively wear a slew of impressive hats, including CEO, designer and musician. Taguchi, together with Fuminori Akamatsu (absent for this interview) co-founded Selebro Inc., the driving force behind Meta Valley and Holy Mountain. Meanwhile, Yamazaki, president and head designer of Metronome Inc., was enlisted to bring their visionary venues to life.

Taguchi and Yamazaki's shared history and love for music that brought them together to embark on this extraordinary endeavor. Both are accomplished musicians: Taguchi, the former drummer for the heavy rock band Lost (currently on hiatus); and Yamazaki, the guitarist for the post-rock quartet Toe.

Hayato Taguchi
Selebro Inc. CEO / Founder of Zestone Records / Former Lost drummer

Hirokazu Yamazaki
President of Metronome Inc. / Head designer for Meta Valley and Holy Mountain

A Timely Blessing

Selebro Inc.'s decision to establish its cultural haven in Osaka is not just about a love for the city but also a connection to one another. They firmly believe that Osaka's vibrant live music scene deserves a space that fosters creativity and connections reminiscent of the welcoming live houses they all frequented during their formative years. Serendipitously, this location became available just as they were brainstorming new directions for the company. The illustrious venue's vacancy was just the push they needed to venture into other musical machinations. Further solidifying their belief that this was the right move was support from Yogibo, a furniture and lifestyle essentials company. Yogibo was impressed with Selebro Inc.'s vision and was eager to sponsor the project via a naming rights partnership.

On the topic of collaborating with long-time friends, Taguchi says, "It's fascinating because everyone brings their unique experiences and perspectives to the table, which I respect. We strike a balance, considering things both from an artist's perspective and as a business. Collaboration becomes indispensable when faced with difficult decisions."

A Cultural Hub on the Horizon

One of Selebro Inc.'s primary goals is to create a music and art scene that's more open and inviting. They aim to recapture the spontaneity of the past, where friends would casually meet up at gigs just for fun. Yamazaki's designs for Meta Valley and Holy Mountain reflect this, establishing them as spaces where chance encounters and meaningful connections are not just possibilities but integral elements of the experience.

Yamazaki explains, "These days, live houses have become enclosed spaces where concerts are organized, tickets are sold and attendees simply go home afterward. It's become a very standardized formula. In our younger days, we'd drop by live houses without any plans or tickets, entering through the back door to hang out after work. We'd meet fellow bands and musicians and just talk. Many of the friendships I formed at age 18 are still cherished today. This is more than just a venue; it's a culture we want to revive here."

Taguchi confirms that music venues played a pivotal role in forging lifelong connections, both professionally and personally. "Without live houses, those of us at Selebro Inc. — and also Yamazaki — would have never crossed paths," he reflects.

Mapping Out a New Future

Taguchi envisions Meta Valley and Holy Mountain as places that leave a lasting impact beyond Japan's borders, much like the international venues he grew up admiring. "When I go abroad, I often visit places that I've heard of or seen in movies; I want to know what they're like in real life. When I went to New York, I checked out CBGB and Madison Square Garden — two venues that are legendary and beyond 'just' the music. I want Meta Valley and Holy Mountain to become like that; that would be amazing," he says.

Meta Valley and Holy Mountain: The Deets

Holy Mountain — the smaller of the two adjacent venues with a max capacity of 240 people — was the first to be named. The moniker was inspired by Alejandro Jodorowsky's 1973 film *The Holy Mountain*. While the movie's story is very much of its time, its themes denouncing conformity and the mundane feel appropriate for this future cultural revolution taking place under the train tracks. Holy Mountain offers an intimate setting for art exhibitions and apparel pop-ups as well as live performances.

Meta Valley is, at least in name, the polar opposite of Holy Mountain. While the latter is inspired by spiritual revolution, the former's namesake is drawn from the high-tech world of California's Silicon Valley. It accommodates up to 600 people and offers a café and pub serving craft beer, wine, vegan fare and more.

Together, the venues aim to meet a wide range of needs, including circuit events, exhibitions, distribution events and esports.

More info: *selebro.co.jp/metavalley/*

Namba Cultural Terminal 2023

Meta Valley and Holy Mountain's weeklong opening celebration event, Namba Cultural Terminal 2023, welcomes visitors to experience the convergence of culture, art, music and fashion. As Osaka's hottest new venues, they promise an unforgettable journey into the heart of creativity and connection. Acts throughout the week include heavy-hitters Crossfaith, Brahman, Envy and Crystal Lake, as well as punk veterans Good4Nothing and more.

Where: Holy Mountain and Meta Valley
When: Oct 28–Nov 3
More info: *selebro.co.jp/metavalley/schedule/*

Local train on the Toyama Chihou Railway crossing Joganji River in front of the Tateyama mountain range

Highlighting Hokuriku

"Along the coast the sea roars,
and inland the mountains roar —
the roaring at the center,
like a distant clap of thunder."

— Yasunari Kawabata,
Snow Country

BIG IN JAPAN

Three Hokuriku sculptures prove that size matters (sometimes)

Words by **Lisa Wallin**

Royal Squid

Not many municipalities would think to promote themselves with a colossal eldritch beast, but that's exactly what Noto, in Ishikawa Prefecture, did. To showcase its fishing fleet's haul of surumeika (Japanese common squid) — one of the biggest in Japan — the small port town built the Ika King (Squid King) in March 2021.

The fiber-reinforced cephalopod sculpture, measuring 13 meters across and 4 meters high, sits outside Squid Station Tsukumall, a roadside stop along Noto Uchiura Route 35 facing Tsukumo Bay. Despite its popularity, the Ika King's inception was mired in controversy. Noto made headlines at home and abroad when it was reported that the town mostly spent funds from the central government that were meant for COVID-19 relief — roughly ¥25 million, covering more than 90% of the squid's construction costs. Only about ¥2 million came from Noto's own coffers.

But the town's big bet seems to have paid off. Local officials reckon that the Ika King has helped attract at least ¥600 million in tourism spending — 22 times the cost — and even more in free publicity.

More info: *ikanoeki.com*

Top Idol

Quick: Name Japan's three oldest giant bronze Buddhas. The statues at Todai-ji temple in Nara and Kotoku-in temple in Kamakura immediately come to mind. But what about the one at Daibutsu-ji temple in Toyama Prefecture's Takaoka city? Probably not. The Takaoka Great Buddha is a 16-meter-tall seated behemoth that was completed in 1933 after nearly three decades of construction. Its metalwork — a prized Takaoka craft — was both an aesthetic choice and safety precaution. Made of wood when it first went up in 1745, the statue burned down twice, in 1821 and 1841, before the temple settled on a bronze version. Visitors can go inside the statue, which has paintings, scrolls and other artifacts.

More info: *www.takaokadaibutsu.xyz*

Dinosaur Comeback

Visitors to Fukui Prefecture will likely have heard of the region's famed triad of crabs, washi paper and dinosaur fossils. What better way to generate buzz than with a monument combining two of the three? When prefectural officials unveiled the Whitesaurus in 2009, the Tyrannosaurus rex-inspired fictional theropod dinosaur was made of white washi paper. Four years later, it was moved to Katsuyama to serve as a landmark for the nearby Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum, and it quickly became a tourist draw. Then, in 2016, the Whitesaurus' head fell off. (Apparently, its paper shell was too flimsy.) Local officials sprang into action, launching an online crowdfunding campaign and temporarily substituting the damaged dinosaur with a giant egg. Restored in late 2017 with donations of around ¥8.5 million, the 7-meter-tall, 17.5-meter-long Whitesaurus is identical to the original — except this time it's made of a sturdier fiber-reinforced plastic instead.

More info: *enjoy.pref.fukui.lg.jp/en/*

Championing the Contemporary

Tour the modern art spaces of Hokuriku

Words by **Jennifer Pastore**

Blessed with natural beauty and a geographically diverse landscape extending from the Sea of Japan to the Japan Alps, the Hokuriku region flourished as a center for commerce and creativity. Known for an industrious streak in areas such as agriculture and medicine, it developed a robust economy that has supported artists and artisans for centuries. Crafts including ceramics, lacquer, metalwork, textiles and papermaking gained international renown, fostering a culture of innovation that has shaped the larger world of Japanese design.

Today Hokuriku continues to celebrate its creative spirit, fusing traditional aesthetics and methods of making with contemporary art. Home to popular destinations like the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa and the garden Kenroku-en, the Ishikawa capital shines as the cultural center of the region. Still, there is no shortage of places across Ishikawa, Toyama, Fukui and Niigata worth visiting for their legacies and ongoing contributions to art, craft, architecture and philosophy. The area displays an unmatched talent for exhibiting art in astonishing locations like rice fields, temples and disused buildings. Its many festivals and events make for excellent getaways. Here are a few under-the-radar Hokuriku spots for art and culture sure to inspire and offer fresh vantage points on Japan.

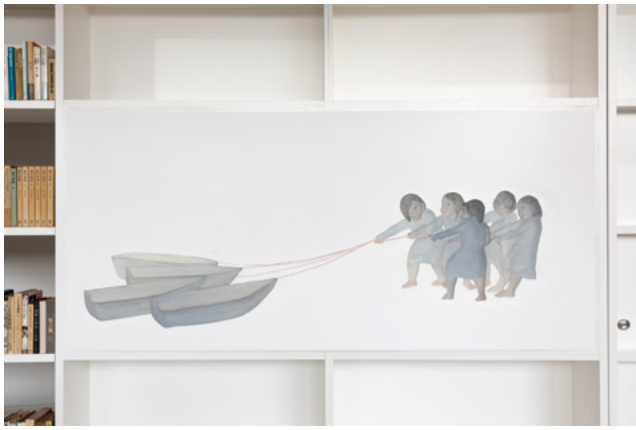
House of Light

James Turrell's House of Light in the secluded mountain town of Tokamachi, Niigata Prefecture, offers the chance to stay inside a work of art. Turrell, a pioneer of the 1960s light and space movement, is renowned for his installations investigating the "materiality of light" through experiences of space and color. He designed this meditation retreat in the region's traditional architectural style for the 2000 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. Influenced by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*, a classic text on Japanese aesthetics, House of Light features tatami, a tokonoma alcove, shoji doors and an engawa wooden porch. It also integrates contemporary and Western elements, such as neon fiber-optic lighting in the bath and a retractable skylight for daily sunrise and sunset viewings.

House of Light accommodates up to 16 lodgers nightly. The fee starts at ¥25,000 per party. Individuals can stay at a cost of ¥5,000~6,000, but may be asked to room with others. The kitchen and bath are limited to overnighters. For those unable to stay, the house can be toured for ¥600. The space can also be rented for daytime meetings (reservations required). Please note that the venue is not wheelchair accessible.

More info:
www.hikarinoyakata.com/english/

Opposite page: "Light Bath" bathing space
Below left: "Outside-in" room during the day
Below right: House of Light at night
All photos courtesy of House of Light



Left: 目 [mé] "movements." Photo by Keizo Kioku
Above: Michiko Nakatani, *Voice from afar*. Photo by Osamu Nakamura

MonET

Museum on Echigo-Tsumari (also known as MonET) is a key hub for Echigo-Tsumari Art Field, an ongoing creative project spread across the Niigata Prefecture countryside. The building, designed by the architectural firm Hiroshi Hara+AtelierΦ, was repurposed as a contemporary art museum for the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale in 2012. It now holds works by prominent artists such as Kohei Nawa, 目 [mé] and Carsten Nicolai. Luminaries such as Daido Moriyama and Christian Boltanski have also presented work here. An inner courtyard features a reflecting pool by Leandro Erlich, a virtuoso of visual tricks. This year marks a new endeavor for the museum, with a series of guest-curated exhibitions bringing cutting-edge media artists, printmakers and painters to the site. The grounds also include a museum shop, community salon and hot springs.

More info:
www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/travelinformation/monet/

Matsudai Nohbutai Field Museum

Matsudai Nohbutai Field Museum is another Echigo-Tsumari Art Field attraction in Tokamachi, Niigata. The site encompasses the Matsudai Nohbutai building, open all year (closed Tue & Wed, except holidays), plus 40 artworks dotted around satoyama mountainside rice terraces, which can be toured in spring through early fall. Matsudai Nohbutai houses works by leading Japanese and international contemporary artists, including ex-Soviets Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, known for collaborative projects exploring dreams and ideals, and Tatsuo Kawaguchi, who has contributed installations reflecting his experience as an educator.

Be sure to grab a bite at the restaurant Echigo-Matsudai Satoyama Shokudo. It offers teatime treats and, on weekends and holidays, serves up dishes made with fresh, locally grown veggies in a "satoyama buffet." Diners can admire photography installations by the French artist Jean-Luc Vilmouth.

More info:
www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/travelinformation/nohbutai/

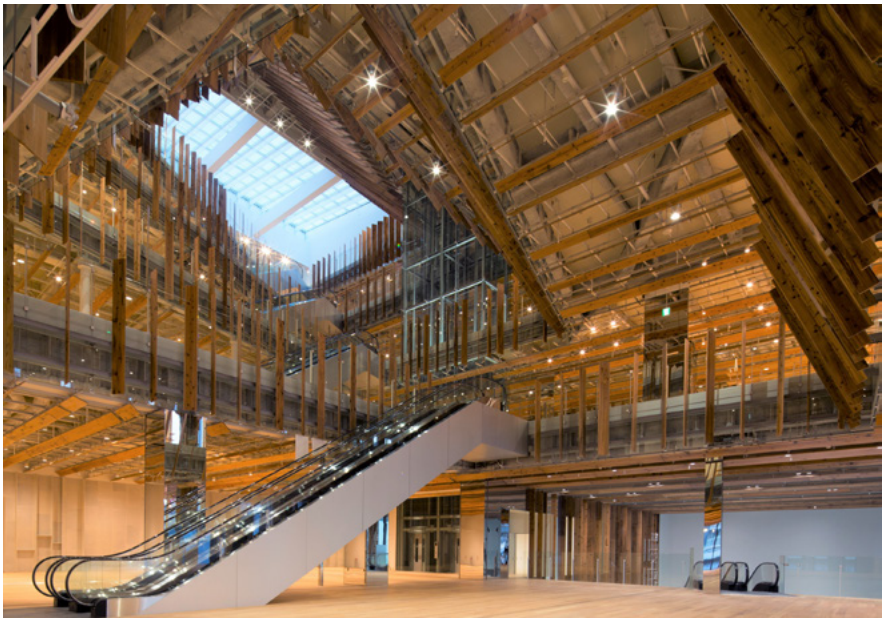
Toyama Glass Art Museum

Toyama Glass Art Museum in Toyama city is both a treasure trove and crowning jewel of contemporary glass art. Spanning six floors of the Kengo Kuma-designed Toyama Kirari building, the museum showcases glass artworks and installations from around the world. Its exhibitions demonstrate the full expressive potential of glass, presenting works in all colors of the rainbow taking forms that range from oozing liquids to metallic solids.

The dynamic Toyama Kirari civic center pays architectural homage to the area's glassmaking tradition. Its facade is inspired by the massive ice walls of the Tateyama mountain range. Inside, soft light pours through an atrium built with locally produced cedar boards, glass and mirrors. Riding the escalator or transparent elevator through the dazzling space is an experience of art in itself.

Permanent exhibitions feature glass art from Toyama city's collection, while the Glass Art Passage displays work by artists affiliated with the prefecture. The unmissable Glass Art Garden introduces the phantasmic world of glass master Dale Chihuly. Special exhibitions focus on pieces created since the 1950s. A solo show by the celebrated contemporary artist Aiko Miyanaga, known for her enigmatic mixed-media glass sculptures, runs November 3–January 28, 2024.

More info:
toyama-glass-art-museum.jp/en/



Above right: Aiko Miyanaga, *waiting for awakening -chair-*, 2017. Takamatsu Art Museum, *Miyanaga Aiko: Rowing Style*, installation view. Photo by Keizo Kioku
©MIYANAGA Aiko, Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery

Right: Toyama Glass Art Museum interior
Photo courtesy of the museum

Left: Koichiro Azuma, *Rotating Absence*. Photo by Keizo Kioku
Right: Jean-Luc Vilmouth, *Café Reflet*. At Echigo-Matsudai Satoyama Shokudo. Photo by Ayumi Yanagi

Top: Yoshiro and Yoshio Taniguchi Museum of Architecture, Kanazawa
Above: Yushintei tea room at Yoshiro and Yoshio Taniguchi Museum of Architecture, Kanazawa
Photos by Toshiharu Kitajima

Yoshiro and Yoshio Taniguchi Museum of Architecture, Kanazawa

Yoshiro and Yoshio Taniguchi Museum of Architecture, Kanazawa reflects the styles and celebrates the achievements of Yoshiro and Yoshio Taniguchi, a father and son both designated Persons of Cultural Merit. Yoshiro is known for fusing traditional Japanese design and Western modernism in landmark structures such as the Hotel Okura and National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo. He also directed the Meiji Mura architecture village in Nagoya. Yoshio's claims to fame include the 2004 MoMA redesign, as well as prominent Japanese museums such as the Gallery of Horyuji Treasures in Tokyo.

This museum, designed by Yoshio and built on the site of Yoshiro's former residence, serves as a hub of architectural culture. Its permanent exhibition space reproduces Yoshiro's blueprint for the main Japanese-style room and tearoom of Akasaka Palace, a State Guesthouse and National Treasure. Special exhibitions on architecture and cities are held twice a year. "Cityscapes in Anime Background Art" (on until Nov. 19) presents background scenery from six sci-fi films from around the 1990s, when hand-drawn animation was at its peak in Japan. Other displays include books and location photos used to create the art, video interviews and architectural visions of future cities.

More info:
www.kanazawa-museum.jp/architecture/english/index.html

Cocono Art Place

Cocono Art Place is located in Ono, Fukui Prefecture, a castle town called "Little Kyoto in Hokuriku" that also embraces contemporary art. Striving to "boldly take on the new while preserving and utilizing the old," Ono has a history of collecting contemporary art thanks to its citizens' enthusiastic participation in the "Little Collectors Movement" started in the 1950s. Fluxus member Ay-O and postwar printmaker Risaburo were among the artists favored by Ono residents and now showcased at Cocono Art Place. Opened in 2018, this community-centered facility aims to pass down the town's deeply rooted culture of art appreciation to the next generation with exhibitions and events held in a renovated minka folk house dating back more than 120 years. Retaining traditional architectural elements such as tatami, fusuma and lacquered wooden beams, the Good Design Award-winning building comprises three galleries, an inner terrace, a café and a shop selling handicrafts and work by local artists. The abstract wood sculptor Takashi Iwamoto is featured in an October–December exhibition. General admission is ¥300.

More info:
www.cocono-art.jp

Cocono Art Place terrace

Left: Exterior Corridor and Water Mirror Garden
Above: Water Mirror Garden and Contemplative Space
Photos ©D.T. Suzuki Museum

D.T. Suzuki Museum

The D.T. Suzuki Museum opened in 2011 as a tribute to the scholar and Buddhist philosopher Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870–1966). This sleekly minimalist facility in Suzuki's hometown of Kanazawa consists of three wings with gardens, a reading area and a room exhibiting his writings, photographs and calligraphy. The highlight of the stone and steel structure, designed by Yoshio Taniguchi, is a courtyard with a shallow pool and space for reflection modeled on the hojo contemplation huts of priests and recluses.

Several thematic shows expressing Suzuki's ideas are held each year. In addition to practicing Buddhism and teaching at universities in Japan, the Nobel Peace Prize nominee lived abroad and contributed to the international Zen revival of the 20th century. The current exhibition (ending Nov. 26) spotlights the institution's relationship with The Japan Folk Crafts Museum in Tokyo. It's a great chance to visit before the space closes for repairs until March 2024.

More info:
www.kanazawa-museum.jp/daisetz/english/

Hokuriku Art Festivals 2023–2024

Get a taste of Hokuriku's creative community at these annual events across the region.

Go for Kogei 2023

An annual festival combining contemporary art and traditional crafts from Toyama, Ishikawa and Fukui. This year's edition features work by 26 artists in Toyama city along the Fugan Canal. Those who cannot make it in 2023 should add the 2024 edition to their calendars now as it already promises to be equally spectacular.

Where: Toyama city, Toyama Prefecture
When: Until Oct 29, 2023
More info: *goforkogei.com/en*

Echigo-Tsumari Art Field 2023

Spread across the vast Echigo-Tsumari area, this event helps bridge the gaps between Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale sessions held every three years. Sites include museums, the Kiyotsu Gorge Tunnel, fields, and former houses and schools. Check the website for tour routes and special programs.

Where: Southern Niigata Prefecture
When: Until Nov 5, 2023
More info: *www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/event/2023artfield/*

Oku-Noto Triennale 2023

The seaside town of Suzu on the tip of the Noto Peninsula hosts this international art festival occurring every three years. Top-notch artists such as Chiharu Shiota install works that highlight the area's unique culture, making the most of its geography and architecture.

Where: Suzu city, Ishikawa Prefecture
When: Until Nov 12, 2023
More info: *oku-noto.jp/ja/index_en.html*

Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale 2024

Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, the original contemporary art festival aimed at rural revitalization, marks its ninth edition in 2024. This massive event in the Niigata countryside now encompasses hundreds of artworks and draws hundreds of thousands of visitors. In addition to indoor and outdoor displays by creators from around the globe, the triennale features artist-designed, site-specific lodgings.

Where: Southern Niigata Prefecture
When: Jul 13–Nov 10, 2024
More info: *www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/news/20230721/*

Fall in Love with Fukui

Spend three days exploring Fukui's ancient traditions and modern innovations

Words by **Helen A. Langford-Matsui**

Stunning landscapes, delicious cuisine, a rich history and a culture entwined with Zen Buddhism — Fukui Prefecture and its eponymously named capital city, a former castle town, tick off many items on a Japan traveler's wish list. Soon, convenience will be added to the ranks, as in the spring of 2024, the Hokuriku Shinkansen is set to open its latest extension, making Fukui city a short three-hour trip from Tokyo.

Wondering how to spend a few days in the city and its environs? Check out our sample itinerary below.

Above: Fukui Station showcases three species of dinosaur found in — and named after — Fukui Prefecture.

Below left and right: Tokoyama Sake Brewery dates back over two centuries. Ninth generation master brewer Shinpei Tokoyama proudly conveys the sophisticated flavors of their Jozan brand. Photos by Lisa Knight.

Day One:

Get to Know Fukui City

Start your trip off with a visit to Fukui's tourist information center, located outside the station's west exit. There, you can receive advice and support from English-speaking staff and connect to Wi-Fi. The center is also a pickup and drop-off point for electric-assist rental bicycles.

More info: *bit.ly/WelcomeToFukui*

Tokoyama Sake Brewery

Fukui is known for its high-quality rice and pristine water. Combined with koji and yeast, these ingredients are nurtured by brewers into the region's many prized sake brands.

Tokoyama, the oldest brewery in Fukui city and maker of the Jozan brand, began operations in 1804. The current toji (master brewer) is ninth-generation head Shinpei Tokoyama, whose passion for his brew — and his birthplace — is palpable. He's especially committed to using Fukui-cultivated rice, and he envisions future events where Jozan sake is paired with local specialties. Drop by the brewery to pick up a bottle at the on-site salesroom. Tastings can be arranged upon request.

More info: *jozan.co.jp/about.php*

Day Two:

Discover the Castle Town's History

Like many former castle towns in Japan, Fukui has a long, proud and well-documented history. Get a feel for the city's past by exploring its historical sites.

Dinosaur Plaza

The moment you disembark at Fukui Station, it becomes abundantly clear that the city adores dinosaurs. There's a good reason for this: Approximately 80% of dinosaur fossils found in Japan were discovered in the prefecture.

Dinosaur Plaza, located outside Fukui Station's west exit, is Fukui's enthusiasm for dinosaurs made manifest. While it may not be an actual fossil site, the plaza's three life-sized animatronic dinosaurs, footprint fossils and dinosaur artwork do an excellent job of hyping up one of Fukui's claims to fame.

More info:
enjoy.pref.fukui.lg.jp/en/spot/spot-16/

Left: Tranquility reigns at Yokokan Garden.

Below: For a more immersive Yokokan Garden visit, events and experiences such as Zen meditation can be arranged upon request.

Further below: Chief priest of Sho-onji Temple, Gyosen Asakura, combines dance beats and light shows with Buddhist chants.

This page: Photos by Lisa Knight.

Fukui Castle Ruins

After getting a taste of Fukui's ancient history, skip forward approximately 120 million years to a more recent past with a visit to the Fukui Castle Ruins. Though the castle is no longer, the stone walls and water-filled moat remain. Other parts of the castle have been rebuilt, including a bridge across the moat. The ruins are especially popular during sakura season.

More info:
enjoy.pref.fukui.lg.jp/en/spot/spot-28/

Yokokan Garden

More Japanese architecture is on display at nearby Yokokan Garden. The pond in this traditional strolling garden features a colorful school of mesmerizing koi. You'll also find a reconstructed sukiya-style building replicating a Matsudaira clan villa. The original structure was destroyed during a WWII air raid and rebuilt in the 1980s. Miraculously, the garden survived the bombing.

More info:
fukuisan.jp/en/yokokan/index.html

Fukui City History Museum

Flesh out your knowledge of Fukui's history and add context to your explorations thus far with a visit to this museum just a stone's throw from Yokokan Garden. Exhibits cover everything from the area's ancient history to the air raids of 1945 and beyond.

More info:
enjoy.pref.fukui.lg.jp/en/spot/spot-70/

Sho-onji Temple

After exploring Fukui's past, make your way to Sho-onji to see how one Buddhist priest is mixing modernity with ancient Buddhist practices. Gyosen Asakura, the temple's chief priest, introduced techno music and projection mapping into certain services in May 2016 to provide younger generations with a new way to encounter Buddhism.

While the full version of this one-of-a-kind techno service is held just twice a year for special ceremonies, projection mapping and music play in the main hall on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays when the temple's café, Show-on G, is open. With light radiating from Amida Buddha, the temple's central object of worship, and glinting off the temple's intricate carvings and plentiful goldleaf, the hall is transformed into a world of light and color.

More info: *show-on-g.com*

Left and below: Take in the otherworldly beauty of Tangando with a stroll around the grounds, being sure to look inside the hermitage's remaining original building. Sumptuous meals made using seasonal ingredients are always on the menu. Photos by Lisa Knight.

Further below: Dimunitive Hokojima's rugged peaks offer unique views on Fukui's coast.

Day Three:

Soak Up Nature

Though the city of Fukui has a population of almost 257,000 people, it's filled with areas where wilderness abounds.

Asuwayama Park and Riverside

This verdant area is considered one of Japan's top 100 cherry blossom destinations — and with good reason. About 600 cherry trees line a 2-kilometer stretch of the riverbank, creating a canopy of pink in spring. Other seasons offer ancient burial mounds, museums, play areas, a mini zoo and several observation decks overlooking the city.

More info:
bit.ly/AsuwaShrine

Tangando

Next, head to Tangando, the former hermitage of an Edo-period physician to the elite. Located in a quarry where shakudani-ishi (green tuff) was once cut by hand, the hermitage is now a traditional Japanese restaurant serving kaiseki cuisine in three buildings spread out across the moss-covered grounds. The monthly menu features seasonal ingredients, many of which are Fukui-grown.

More info: *facebook.com/ryotei.tangandou*

Hokojima Island

For the afternoon, travel to the coast to explore the geological wonders of Hokojima. The small island consists of a 50-meter-tall cluster of columnar jointing partially eroded by the wild waves of the Sea of Japan. Gorgeous by day, it's also a spectacular spot to watch the sun set.

More info: *fuku-e.com/spot/detail_1480.html*

Watariglass Studio

Just down the coast from Hokojima, you'll find Watariglass Studio. The studio specializes in blown glass and is a great spot to pick up souvenirs from a local artisan. A variety of workshops are also available.

More info: *watariglass.com*

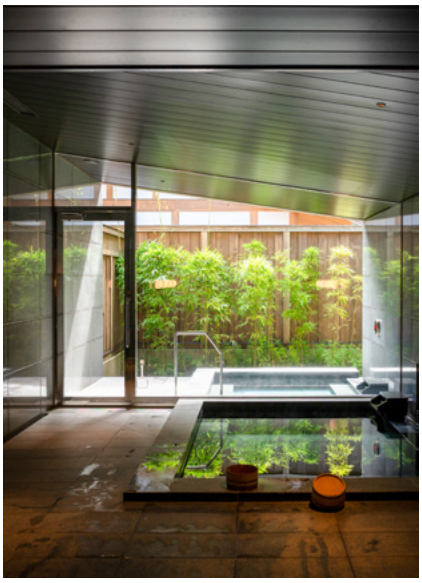
Asuwayama Park boasts roughly 3,500 cherry trees. From cherry blossom tunnels lining the Asuwa River (left) to the roughly 370-year-old weeping cherry tree of Asuwa Shrine (above), this part of Fukui city transforms into a spectacular floral display from late March to mid-April every year.

Gourmet and Stay Experiences

Deepen your Fukui experience by dining on regional cuisine and bedding down in hotels that immerse travelers in local culture.

Machi Deli Kakure Wa Syokudou
This cozy eatery makes use of many local ingredients and serves regional and seasonal dishes, including winter's renowned Echizen crab. Chat with the amiable owner as you dine on Fukui treats like rakkyo (pickled Japanese scallions) and more.
More info: *kakurewa.com*

Amida Soba
Sate your hunger with a Fukui specialty: Echizen oroshi soba. The dish of buckwheat noodles, named after the former province of Echizen, is served with grated daikon and a dashi-based sauce. Amida Soba serves juwari (100% buckwheat flour) soba at its two branches in Fukui city.
More info: *amidasoba.com*



Hakujukan
Experience Fukui Prefecture's rich culture of Zen Buddhism at Hakujukan, Eiheiji Temple's sleek and comfortable hotel. Eiheiji, located deep in the forested hills just beyond the Fukui city limits, is a head temple of Soto Zen Buddhism, and a stay at Hakujukan allows you to encounter the temple's ancient practices.
More info: *hakujukan-eiheiji.jp/en/index/*

Hotel Riverge Akebono
Echizen city, to the south of Fukui city, has manufactured washi paper for over 1,000 years and is considered one of Japan's three major centers of washi production. A stay at Hotel Riverge Akebono lets you admire Echizen washi up close, with works from washi artisans featured throughout the hotel.
More info: *riverge.com*

This section: Photos by Lisa Knight.

Gems To Visit Outside the City Limits

Dive deeper into Fukui with trips to other areas of the prefecture.

Eshikoto
Overlooking the Kuzuryu River, this new facility from the Kokuryu Sake Brewing Corporation offers the 20-and-over crowd a spectacular spot to savor high-quality sake. Enjoy a drink and a meal at the on-site Apéro & Pâtisserie Acoya restaurant and relish the pastoral scenery of mountains through the facility's floor-to-ceiling windows.
More info: *eshikoto.com*

Takefu Knife Village
Pick up a blade or two forged and polished by the world-renowned craftspeople of Takefu Knife Village, heirs to the 700-year-old Echizen Uchihamono tradition of knife-making. Workshops are also available.
More info: *takefu-knifevillage.jp/story-en*

Maruoka Castle
Of the many castles you can visit in Japan, only 12 are originals. One of those is Sakai city's Maruoka Castle, which dates to 1576. Ponder centuries-old construction techniques with a walk around the inside. A museum delving into the history of the castle is located nearby.
More info:
enjoy.pref.fukui.lg.jp/en/spot/spot-20/

Hakusan Heisenji Shrine
Green moss carpets the grounds of this shrine that began life as a temple in 717 CE. With an interesting history and ethereal atmosphere, Heisenji makes an excellent destination for a culturally rich escape into nature.
More info:
enjoy.pref.fukui.lg.jp/en/spot/spot-18/

Handmade in Toyama

Traditional crafts come to life through firsthand experiences

Words by **Patrick St. Michel**
Photos by **Ben Cooke**

I'm turning a pipe clockwise as quickly as possible, terrified that the glob of molten glass on the other end is about to plunge into fire below. The professional monitoring me assures that everything will be fine, and with a few twists, the red-hot substance wraps around itself, safe from dripping into oblivion.

During my first foray into glass blowing at the Toyama Glass Studio, I realize how much care and craft goes into the creation of something seemingly as simple as a wine glass.

Craftsmanship defines Toyama. Nestled between mountains and sea, this Hokuriku city can be reached by a just-over-two-hour shinkansen ride from Tokyo Station. I've come here to see how it became such an attractive destination for those creating tangible items with their hands — and to take my own shot at Toyama-style craft.

Becoming the Glass of Fashion

Glass manufacturing crystallizes Toyama's celebration of craftsmanship. The art has been present in the region for centuries but has enjoyed a renaissance in recent decades. Enter Toyama Glass Studio, located about 30 minutes away from the city center and next to the Toyama Institute Of Glass Art. Walk around the grounds and you can peek into studios where students and local artisans alike work. Not far from there is Clié, a café featuring a showroom full of art pieces made at the studio, along with drinks served in glasses crafted here too.

Visitors can experience glass blowing — with an assist from one of Toyama Glass Studio's experienced artists — by creating their own wine glass. Guests draw a rough idea of what shape they want and select colors before heading off to a sweltering workshop to create it. It's a process requiring detail and finesse.

A trip to the more centrally located Toyama Glass Art Museum becomes even more meaningful after my dabbling in glass blowing — these complex pieces become even more impressive after actually getting first-hand experience trying the craft out.

Sampling the Food of Love

Toyama's craftsmanship tradition manifests itself in many ways along Iwasemachi. A short car ride from Toyama Station or accessible via the city's public tram system, the area feels straight out of Edo-era Japan. Devotion to crafts both old and new lines the street, showcasing craft beer bars, sake breweries and more. The carved creations of woodworking studio Iwasaki Kobo are especially entrancing. Ranging from natural pieces of gnarled wood to finely detailed sculptures, the works here are sought after nationwide.

At the far end of Iwasemachi is Shamisen Rakuya, a long-running store selling shamisen, a traditional Japanese stringed instrument. Visitors can enjoy a small concert from the affable owner and learn more about the instrument while also getting the chance to create their own version of it using a cardboard box as a base. It's an ideal introduction to craftsmanship for kids, and you get a crash course in playing afterwards.

Creating great food and drink requires an equal amount of dedication, and a special experience held on the second floor of Saseki, a sake tasting room in Higashi-Iwase, highlights how far that focus goes to perfection. The sake and wagashi pairing course gives guests the chance to try five varieties of sake sourced by the first-floor store alongside five Japanese-style sweets. On their own, both culinary arts take years to master. Together, they reveal new dimensions to one another, enriching them even more.

Within This Wood

One of my final stops in the city is to Tanihata's wood workspace. Founded in 1959, Tanihata creates dazzling wooden panels hiding intricate designs. They've appeared at world-class stores, hotels, restaurants and beyond.

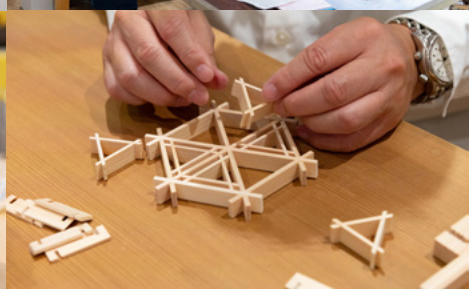
A visit to where it happens, though, reveals just how much work goes into creating these award-winning fixtures. At the end of the tour, I'm given a miniature version of a single panel to create on my own. It's frustrating to try to replicate what they do. It ultimately leads to further respect for their attention to detail that has made them globally recognized.

Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow

Toyama is a hub for handmade work, but visiting the city isn't just a chance to see it — it's also an opportunity to get your own hands a little dirty and truly understand the work that goes into parts of life that are sometimes taken for granted.

Three days after my glass blowing experience, I settle down for a sumptuous meal at DoubleTree by Hilton Toyama, where representatives from Toyama Glass Studio bring along my finished glass. Once a big blob of skin-scorching liquid, it's now a tangible object.

The wine tastes just a little bit sweeter coming from something I crafted in Toyama.



More Info

To find out more and book your own curated Toyama craft adventure, visit the websites below.

Team Travel Kuramoto Co., Ltd.
3F Shin-Chuo Bldg, 4-2-9 Kyutaro-machi
Chuo-ku, Osaka Prefecture
Web: *team-travel.co.jp/oversea/*
Email: *info@teamtravel.jp*

Bespoke Japan Travel Co., Ltd
Web: *www.bespokejapantravel.com*
Email: *operation@bespokejapantravel.com*

Good Luck Trip
Web: *bit.ly/GLToyama*

Ryokan Retreats

Two must-visit Hokuriku wellness destinations

Seifuso: Garden Delights

The founding of one of Hokuriku's most charming hot spring resorts, Awara Onsen in Fukui Prefecture, was entirely serendipitous. In 1883, when the town was still known as Juraku Onsen, a farmer was digging a well to irrigate his fields when he struck the ground and scalding hot water — estimated at 80 degrees Celsius — gushed out of the earth and transformed the region's fate forever. Several hot spring inns opened their doors within the same year, solidifying Awara Onsen's status as a premier Hokuriku retreat.

Decades later, Seifuso would join the foray of high-class inns in this nostalgic resort town. The hotel boasts one of Hokuriku's most spectacular open-air garden baths, enveloping guests in a traditional Japanese garden landscape as they soak in the healing geothermal waters. Other unique baths include Shiragaki pottery tubs and the silk bath, where tiny bubbles under a veil of milky white water are said to help soften the skin. Several guestrooms have open-air baths attached and there are two private baths available for reservation, offering further options for those seeking a more secluded stay.

Enraku: Natural Harmony

With almost 90 years in the hospitality business, Enraku stands out as a continuous innovator, always striving to reach new levels of excellence. Using the captivating terrain of Unazaki Onsen's Kurobe Gorge as its canvas — every room at Enraku faces the breathtaking waters of the Kurobe River — the inn makes every moment a luxury.

Several of Enraku's spacious rooms have recently undergone an upgrade, creating sumptuous spaces to rest, relax and observe the magnificence of the natural world outside. Folding glass doors allow guests to invite the warbling birdsong, invigorating forest scents and the gentle roar of the Kurobe River into the room. Enjoy the immersive experience while soaking in an open-air bath, or close the doors to observe the view in quiet solitude. The type of bath depends on the room, with the grayish blue Towada-ishi stone and ceramic baths as two of the inn's most exquisite options.

Art lovers will appreciate the recently opened Seikei cultural salon, where the spectacular view of Kurobe Gorge is accented by transcendent artworks by the likes of Gyokudo Kawai, among others. Drop by in the morning for the inn's free morning coffee service to quietly peruse the pieces on display. A particularly well-timed stay at Enraku may offer the opportunity to enjoy a mini concert featuring the salon's Bechstein grand piano.

No stay at Enraku would be complete without sampling its delectable cuisine. Sourcing ingredients from around Kurobe, the depths of Toyama Bay and further across the prefecture, Enraku showcases the best of Toyama's gastronomic delights. Savor seasonal delicacies that may only be available during a short time, making your meal a unique experience with every bite.

More Info

Enraku
347-1 Unazuki Onsen,
Kurobe City, Toyama Prefecture
Web: *www.enraku.com*

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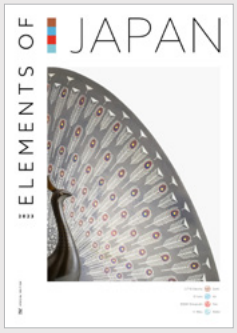

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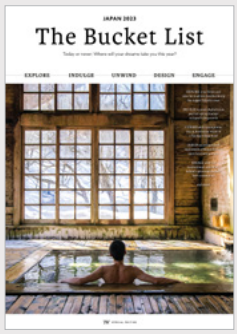

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Lisa Wallin

Creative Director
Rose Vittayaset

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Manami Okazaki
Jennifer Pastore
Patrick St. Michel
Cezary Jan Strusiewicz

Project Managers
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“En route, le mieux c'est de se perdre.”
— Nicolas Bouvier, *L'Usage du Monde*

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