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THE VOICE OF TOKYO
Volume 1, 2025

A Tale of Art and Obsession

A new biopic chronicles the turbulent life of the legendary photographer Masahisa Fukase



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MEET THE TEAM

Introducing the team behind this month's issue

Cover photo by Solène Ballesta



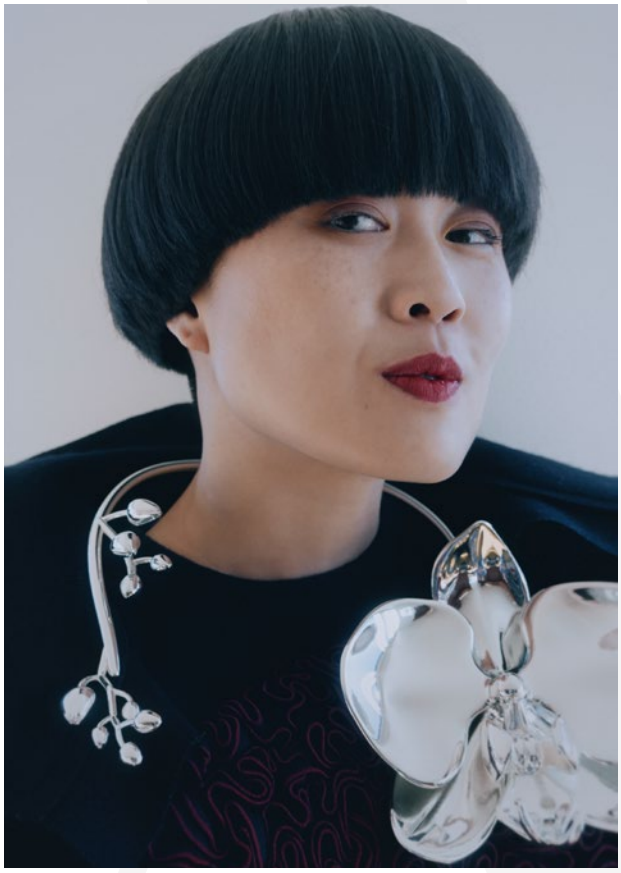
Liam, Executive Director: It's fair to say that I'm the least fashionable member of the TW team, so I always welcome any sartorial tips. After reading our feature on construction worker fashion [p.33], I can now be found strutting around the office in nikkapokka and tabi boots. Stylish and practical.



Alina, Editorial Content Creator: I loved getting to speak with Atsuko Okatsuka and learning about her approach to comedy and life in general [p.18]. I think we should all laugh more at the absurdities of life and strive to spread joy.



Ben, Digital Content Creator: Getting out in Tokyo with my camera when working on a neighborhood guide [p.8] is always enjoyable. There are few better ways to know a place than to photograph it.



What was your favorite part of creating this latest issue?

Ynes, Editorial Content Creator: Visiting Ryokan Oomuraya in Ureshino Onsen [p.48] and enjoying an unparalleled listening experience surrounded by state-of-the-art hi-fi equipment in the ryokan's cozy lounge. The sound quality (and vinyl collection) was truly incredible.





Christian, Website Content Manager: As a lover of both onsen and vinyl records, I found reading about Ryokan Oomuraya fascinating [p.48]. Relaxing to some smooth jazz on vinyl after a hot bath is a new dream of mine.



Solène, Art Director: The highlight was shooting the cover with Atsuko Okatsuka at Andaz [p.18] — truly the best time! She's the funniest person, bringing nonstop laughs and great energy.

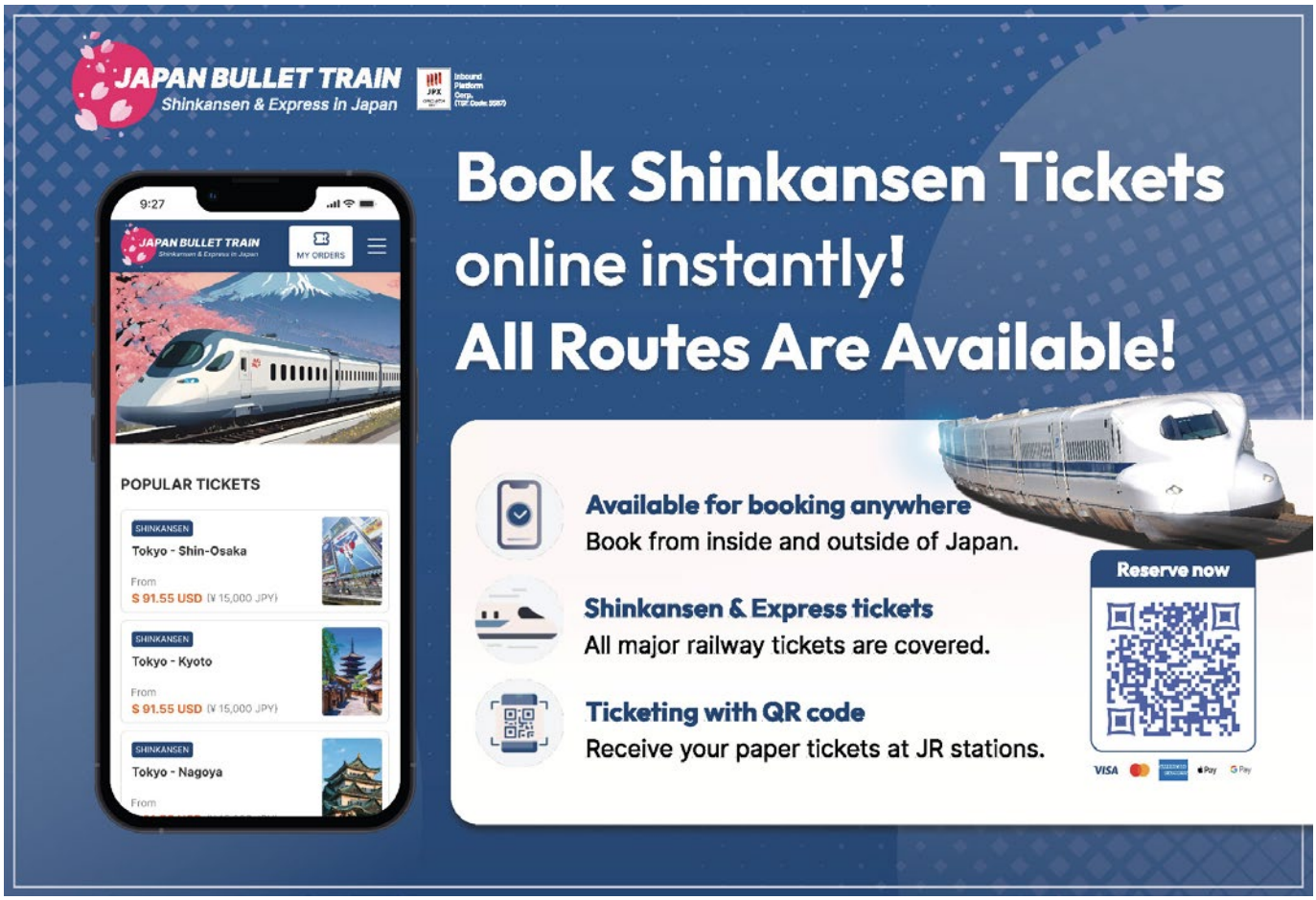


Eugenie, Editorial Content Creator: My conversation with David Stanley Hewett about his journey as a leading contemporary artist in Japan [p.30]. I learned so much about Japanese craft history and the importance of diligence for creatives!



Lisa, Digital Content Director: Finally sharing my favorite hotel in Japan. I was tempted to gatekeep it, but I realized that keeping it alive matters more. You can read all about it in our In-Depth section [p.38].


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RADAR



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Neighborhood: Tsukishima

Edo-era scenery, riverside views and incredible monjayaki

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Trends: The Spirit of Japan

Culturally inspired cocktails at Punch Room Tokyo

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Style: Mikio Sakabe

Daring, futuristic silhouettes infused with elements of fantasy

Tokyo Towns Built Upon the Sea

Explore the quaint neighborhoods of Tsukishima and Tsukuda for Edo-era scenery, riverside views and incredible monjayaki

Words and photos by Ben Cooke





There was once a time when Tsukishima, a quiet Chuo ward district in the Sumida River estuary, didn't exist. A small artificial island, it was created in the late 1800s using earth dredged from Tokyo Bay during the construction of a shipping channel. Neighboring Tsukuda has undergone quite a few changes as well: Before the development of Tsukishima, it was its own little island inhabited by fishermen.

As these places have grown and developed, a lot has changed. The high-rise apartments that have become synonymous with Tokyo now dot the skyline, but on the ground, much of its early, old-town charm remains woven through the side streets, just waiting for you to find it.

Moon Island Monja

Tsukishima, which translates to "Moon Island," is often associated with monjayaki. Perhaps best described as okonomiyaki's less-put-together cousin, monjayaki — also known as monja — is somewhat like a large, savory pancake. Its base is typically made from wheat flour, water and cabbage, on top of which you'll usually find other vegetables, meat and seafood. What sets monjayaki apart from okonomiyaki is its consistency. With the addition of liquid stock, the monja mixture is runnier than that of okonomiyaki, meaning it doesn't set like a pancake, instead remaining deliciously gooey on top, with a nice bit of crisp on the bottom.

But what does this have to do with Tsukishima? Running almost the entire length of the neighborhood is the Nishinaka-dori shopping street, more affectionately known as Monja Street. Here you'll find what may be the most densely populated assortment of monjayaki restaurants in all of Tokyo. And it's not just a few — every second or third store is filled with the do-it-yourself grill tables synonymous with cooking and eating monja, creating a level of competition that sees many restaurants offering a unique spin on the classic Tokyo dish.







Down by the River

After filling up on monja, explore this part of the city with a walk along the neighboring Sumida River up toward Tsukuda. Heading north along the waterfront, you'll be treated to a number of viewpoints along the river that offer impressive panoramas of the surrounding skyline. You may notice that the white arch of Chuo-Ohashi Bridge, when viewed from the correct position along the bank of the Sumida River, perfectly frames the iconic Tokyo Skytree that rises in the distance.

Venturing through Tsukuda, you might come across a small white tower with a distinctly historical feel. This is the Ishikawa Island Lighthouse, a faithful recreation of a lighthouse built in 1866 that once stood in the same spot and guided merchant ships to the nearby market. Conveniently, it now sits atop a public restroom.

A few meters away, you'll find an enormous red torii gate marking the entrance to Tsukuda's Sumiyoshi Jinja. First established in 1646, the shrine is dedicated to the god of safe sea travel, drawing in fishermen and their families, whose lives depended on the ocean. Today, it's still visited regularly by locals as a place of prayer.

Heading back toward Tsukishima from Sumiyoshi Jinja, you'll encounter the scarlet Tsukuda Kobashi Bridge, which, as something of a centerpiece in the area, creates an interesting contrast against the distant skyline of high rises. But perhaps the most intriguing spot tucked away in this part of town is Tsukuda Tendai Jizo-son: a hidden shrine dedicated to Jizo, a Buddhist deity who protects children. Aside from its unusually small size and somewhat secret location in an extremely narrow alley, what makes this shrine most interesting is the enormous tree — said to be around 350 years old — growing straight through the ceiling.

An Accessible Island

Although Tsukishima and Tsukuda are surrounded by water, the area in which they're located is easy to access. From Tokyo Station, it only takes 10 minutes to reach Tsukishima: Walk to Yurakucho Station and take the Yurakucho Line three stops to Tsukishima Station. From there, exploring the area on foot is both easy and recommended to ensure that you don't miss any of the Edo-era scenery. Getting in those extra steps is also the perfect excuse for that second serving of monja, should you desire one.





The Spirit of Japan

At Punch Room Tokyo, each cocktail tells a story about Japanese history and culture

Words by Matthew Hernon

Located in the Edition Hotel, Ginza, Punch Room Tokyo has a unique and compelling concept: It's inspired, as its name suggests, by the rich history of punch. The drink originated on trade ships and eventually made its way to the tables of aristocrats, while still retaining the adventurous and international spirit from its merchant ship origins. Punch Room channels this dual sense of luxury and exploration, with an expansive menu and interior design inspired by 19th-century private clubs in London — sumptuous and lush, with low lighting.

The concept of Punch Room Tokyo's menu is "wonderland," and its drinks tell a story of Japanese culture as seen through the eyes of the outside world. Here are some of our favorites from the bar's new "Wonderland Vol. 2" menu.

More Info

To learn more about Punch Room Tokyo, visit *editionhotels.com/tokyo-ginza/restaurants-and-bars/punch-room/*.



Revenge of Taiyaki-kun

Japan's best-selling single of all time, "Oyoge! Taiyaki-kun" by Masato Shimon is a children's song about a taiyaki who is tired of being cooked on a hot plate every day. What would happen if the fish-shaped cake rebelled and planned a counterattack? This cocktail is Taiyaki-kun's sweet yet spicy revenge. It's a stylish espresso martini with a piquant togarashi kick and a hint of passion fruit that produces a tingling sensation in the mouth.

Wasabi Sonic

An extremely popular drink in Tokyo, the gin sonic is a refreshing highball cocktail made by mixing gin with equal parts tonic water and club soda, which allows the nuanced flavors of the juniper-flavored spirit to shine. In this case, wasabi is added to give the cocktail a savory, spicy taste. It's one of Punch Room Tokyo's most popular drinks, and for good reason.





Kappa & Yuzu

A playful homage to the mythical water creature known as the kappa, Kappa & Yuzu is an easy-to-drink highball-style cocktail. It includes doburoku — an ancient type of sake that's unfiltered — and some yuzu to create a sour taste. To finish things off, there's a small cucumber, as that, according to legend, is what a kappa loves to feast on.

Korakuen & Matcha - Old Fashioned

Three of the cocktails on the Wonderland Vol. 2 menu are based on the Three Great Gardens of Japan: Kenroku-en in Kanazawa, Korakuen in Okayama and Kairakuen in Mito. Korakuen & Matcha is arguably the pick of the bunch. Inspired by a tea ceremony held in the garden to honor the Zen Buddhist priest Eisai, it's an old-fashioned cocktail, made with matcha and flavored with peaches.



Bamboo Katana Martini

A mild drink with a pleasant aroma, the Bamboo Katana Martini is a combination of two cocktails: bamboo, a 19th-century Japanese drink that blends sherry and dry vermouth, and a wet martini, using Roku gin and kumazasa tea. Infused with a bamboo leaf and finished with a green peach compote on a mini katana, it's a creative alternative to the classic gin martini.





MIKIO SAKABE

Infused with daring, futuristic silhouettes featuring elements of fantasy, Mikio Sakabe's ethereal designs create luminescent ripples in Tokyo's fashion scene

Words by Eugenie Shin, compiled and photographed by Solène Ballesta

With a singular talent for envisioning avant-garde yet wearable garments and footwear, Mikio Sakabe is a household name in the contemporary global fashion sphere. Grounds, the fantastical shoe label he co-founded in 2019, is characterized by an intriguing synthesis of futuristic and organic contours. The label has garnered a huge fanbase, with its shoes even appearing in the "Super Shy" music video from K-pop group NJZ (formerly NewJeans). The designer's unrestrained creative approach and whimsical compositions trace back to his eponymous fashion label, established in 2007.

Born in Nerima, Tokyo, in 1976, Sakabe always loved clothes but did not initially set out to become a designer. He originally studied mathematics, but fell into fashion while taking an art foundation course at Central Saint Martins, where a tutor pointed out his potential for fashion design. The rest is history. From dreamy, airy gowns worn by cultural icons like Björk to stark, statuesque silhouettes coveted by tastemakers around the world, Sakabe's works cannot be contained in just one aesthetic category. "I would define my brand as an interpretation of a distinctly Asian, androgynous sensibility through the lens of Tokyo style," Sakabe says.

> "My brand is an interpretation of a distinctly Asian, androgynous sensibility through the lens of Tokyo style."

According to Sakabe, what distinguishes Tokyo fashion is its stunning plethora of subcultures and eclectic tastes, branching out from a common root: an emphasis on street style. Among the city's countless troves of sartorial treasures, he highlights several standout shopping locations. To keep your finger on the pulse of Tokyo's sneaker scene, Sakabe recommends the Grounds flagship store in Harajuku. "I also like Harajuku's Three Treasures Harakado, as they work with young Japanese designers, and I often go to Sheep [in Laforet Harajuku], an interesting boutique that promotes Japan's unique culture."











Models: Analicia @*analistra*
Celia @*celia_demary_*
Makeup: Phoebe Lin @*feebz_*



More Info

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https://mikiosakabejennyfax.store/

IN-DEPTH



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The Joy of Atsuko

How Atsuko Okatsuka became one of the most captivating voices in comedy

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High Fashion

The surprising style influence of Japanese construction worker uniforms

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Back to the Future

Inside the Showa-era halls of the spectacular Hatoya Hotel



The Joy of Atsuko

With her irreverent humor, masterful storytelling and iconic bowl cut, Atsuko Okatsuka is one of the most original and captivating voices in comedy today

Words by Alina Joan Ito, photos by Solène Ballesta

The comedian Atsuko Okatsuka is artfully sprawled across a sofa in the largest suite at the Andaz Tokyo Toranomon Hills, clad in a cascade of deep plum-colored tulle, an ornate silver neck piece and an architectural jacket. Light streams in from the floor-to-ceiling windows, illuminating her freckled skin as a photographer rapidly clicks away. The whole room is rapt, watching her ease with the camera, until Okatsuka suddenly raises her arms, swathed in voluminous black sleeves that cover her hands, and takes stock of her own pose. "It's giving dead seal washed up on shore," she gleefully proclaims.

Okatsuka, who is Taiwanese-Japanese and currently based in Los Angeles, is in Tokyo to perform eight sold-out shows as part of her international Full Grown Tour. It's been a whirlwind few years for her: She's been interviewed by the likes of Stephen Colbert on *The Late Show* and Chelsea Handler on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*; she was named one of *Variety*'s Top 10 Comics to Watch in 2022; the same year, she became the second Asian American woman to have a comedy special on HBO with "The Intruder," which was also named the best debut comedy show of the year by *The New York Times*.

> "I really like observing things and making a situation better. There's always something funny in sadness."

Okatsuka's comedy has an unmistakably silly quality to it. She cavorts around the stage making exaggerated facial expressions, often delivering her punchlines with a childlike frankness. This silliness lends itself well to lighthearted topics, but her real genius lies in using it to navigate darker themes. She has a sharp eye for absurdity, effortlessly transforming it into something unexpectedly, almost improbably, hilarious.

Growing up, "I was always wanting to point out the absurd in a situation," Okatsuka says. "I really like observing things and making a situation better. There's always something funny in sadness."

She continues, "That's I guess where my quote-unquote passion for comedy comes from — wanting people to not feel alone and to cheer people up."



'Technically, It Was a Kidnapping'

Okatsuka's comedy heavily references her own life and, well, there's quite a lot to reference. She was born to a Japanese father and a Taiwanese mother who met on a Japanese dating show in the 80s. They divorced shortly after she was born. In her early years, Okatsuka lived in Chiba, first with her father, then with her mother and grandmother. Her mother struggled with her mental health — she would later be diagnosed with schizophrenia — and as her struggles became more pronounced, Okatsuka's grandmother decided to take action. She brought her daughter and then-eight-year-old granddaughter on what she initially described as a two-month vacation to Los Angeles to visit family.

Instead of returning to Japan after the two months were up, however, the three women continued living in a family member's garage, undocumented, for seven years. Okatsuka's grandmother had brought her to the States out of love, from a desire to protect her and give her a better life, but for a long time, Okatsuka wondered if she'd been kidnapped. She even did a *This American Life* episode devoted to the question.

The answer, as it turns out, is yes. "My father had full custody of me, and [my grandma] told us it was just a two-month vacation and then didn't bring me back … So, yeah, technically it was a kidnapping," she says. You can see why her ability to find humor in even the most serious of circumstances has come in useful.



Image courtesy of Live Nation

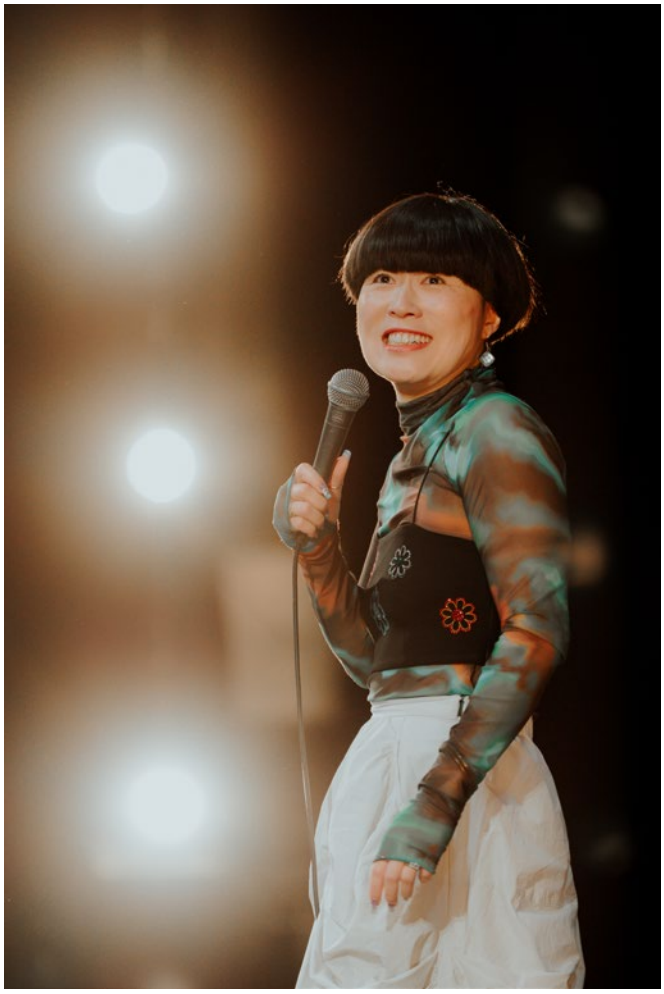


Image courtesy of Live Nation

> As a comedian, you're like an anthropologist or a sociologist, To be able to know what works universally, you kind of have to be a mind reader. And I love that.

Growing Up Between Cultures and Generations

At age eight, thrown into a new country, Okatsuka had to acclimate to a new culture and learn a new language. "I watched *Scooby-Doo* to help me learn English," she recalls. "I think you can see that in my comedy — I'm a bit cartoonish. I use my eyes and physicality a lot. I don't use difficult English words. All of that is because there's three cultures in me."

Given her mother's mental health issues and her father living far away, Okatsuka was raised almost exclusively by her grandmother, which came with its own unique struggles. "When I went through puberty, when I got my period, how to talk to boys — she didn't know how to help me. She was like, 'I married the first boy that talked to me. I haven't dated since 1950.'"

Okatsuka's close relationship with her grandmother is something she touches on in her sets. It also appears on her social media, in videos that spotlight their shared sense of humor and joy in each other's company — dancing together in the grocery store or at a hospital appointment, for instance, or joking around while underwear shopping at T.J. Maxx. "She's my best friend, but I joke that it's Stockholm syndrome. People are complex, right? Now I'm her caretaker, like how she cared for me when I was young. It's full circle. It's what *Mufasa*, the movie, is about, probably."

Musing on their closeness, Okatsuka assumes an air of pontification. "I always say, if you're trying to get the approval of your parents, stop doing that, because they're too busy still trying to get the approval of their parents. Skip your parents. Your grandparents are who you'll get along with. Because you didn't disappoint your grandparents — they're disappointed in your parents." As with a lot of things she says, Okatsuka is kind of joking, but also most definitely not.

Finding the Absurd

Something else about Okatsuka: She's really great at going viral. The short videos she posts on her Instagram are delightful and strange, showcasing her talent for storytelling and awareness of what draws people in. "As a comedian, you're like an anthropologist or a sociologist," she says. "To be able to know what works universally, you kind of have to be a mind reader. And I love that."



Image courtesy of Live Nation

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Dress:
Satoshi Gotanda *@satoshigotanda*

Accessories:
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Xanadu Tokyo *@xanadutokyo*

Shoes:
Maison J.Simone *@maisonjsimone*
Hi65 *@ _hi65_*



Image courtesy of Live Nation



Her first-ever internet sensation occurred during the pandemic: the #DropChallenge, where participants suddenly stop whatever they're doing and drop into a low squat to the beat of Beyoncé's "Partition." Those who have heeded the drop challenge include celebrities like Serena Williams and the cast of *Saturday Night Live*; the original version had a mask-clad Okatsuka sinking to the ground in a variety of public places beside her bemused grandmother.

"That was just me and my grandma having fun in Little Tokyo," she says. "It's not a new song, but I always loved that beat drop, so I was like, 'What if my whole body also goes down, every time, everywhere I am?'"

It's easy to see the universal appeal in something like dropping it low to Beyoncé. But Okatsuka manages to find it in incredibly niche and bizarre situations as well. Take, for instance, the insouciant vlog she posted of herself and her husband getting married at City Hall, seven years after their actual wedding, because they realized that they'd never actually filed their marriage certificate. Or the video documenting her first-ever meeting with her 50-year-old half-brother at a ninja theme park in Japan, where she breezily and warmly asks him what he's been up to for the past few decades. Or a clip from one of her live sets, where she talks the crowd through a 7.1 magnitude earthquake that struck shortly after she got on stage. ("I am not equipped for this … I went to art school," she jokes.)

Okatsuka's ethos is clear in each of these: Life is full of absurdities, so you might as well laugh — or, better yet, find someone to laugh at it all with you. "[If you're] being your authentic self, if you have fun, it's going to show, and people are going to want to join in," she says.

Beneath the Bowl Cut

Any profile of Okatsuka would be incomplete without mention of her iconic bowl cut. "I got this hair in 2018. I was hosting a game show, and I wanted to create a look that felt like me," she says.

It is — as she notes in another video, which shows her alongside an identically coiffed toddler — a haircut one often sees on Japanese babies. For her, that was part of the appeal. "This is the hair I had when I was a kid. People are embarrassed about this haircut that their parents forced on them, but I thought, 'What if I rocked this hair that people were made fun of for?' I also just thought it was very fashion and very chic, and I've kept it since."

> "If you're being your authentic self, if you have fun, it's going to show, and people are going to want to join in."

Okatsuka is known for her eccentric, maximalist sense of style — bright colors, swooping silhouettes, patterns on patterns and large, sculptural earrings, often in the shape of food. Her approach to fashion, at its core, is similar to her view on comedy: driven by the desire to make others happy. "I want other people to feel good," she explains. "I don't see myself all day, but other people do."

It's a simple but moving sentiment, one that's mirrored in Okatsuka's approach to her art, and to life in general. For her, humor is primarily about connecting, about moments of shared silliness and absurdity, often in spite of serious situations. "Stand-up comedy is literally saying something that people are like, 'Oh, my God! That's so true!'" she says. "It makes people feel seen."

More Info

Atsuko's comedy special will be available for streaming in June 2025.
In the meantime, find her on Instagram at *@atsukocomedy*.



A Tale of Obsessive Love

Director Mark Gill on his biopic of the acclaimed photographer Masahisa Fukase — and his second wife, Yoko, whom he photographed relentlessly

Words by Matthew Hernon

British director Mark Gill was flicking through *The Guardian* newspaper in 2015 when he came across an article about the late Japanese photographer Masahisa Fukase. At the time, Gill's first feature-length film, *England Is Mine* — a biographical drama based on the early years of singer Morrissey before he joined The Smiths — was in its post-production stage, and he was starting to think about possible ideas for a second movie.

Fukase's story instantly intrigued him. Born in Hokkaido in 1934, Fukase is best known for his haunting photographs of ravens, which were taken in a period of intense grief after the dissolution of his marriage to his second wife, Yoko Wanibe. A passionate, obsessive man of great talent, Fukase lived a tumultuous life that culminated in tragedy: He died in 2012, having spent two decades in a coma after suffering a traumatic brain injury from a fall at his favorite bar, Nami, in Shinjuku's Golden Gai area.

In October 2024 — nine years after he first read about the supremely gifted yet tortured artist — Gill premiered his biopic of Fukase's turbulent life at the Tokyo International Film Festival. Released nationwide this month, it's titled *Ravens* and stars recent Golden Globe recipient Tadanobu Asano, who is superb as Fukase, a complex individual fighting his inner demons. It's an uncompromising and, at times, heartbreaking story about a man who Gill says tried to "push photography in a new direction."



Life Through a Camera Lens

From early on in his career, Fukase was known for his deeply introspective pictures. His first solo exhibition consisted of two series of photographs — one titled *Kill the Pig*, displaying scenes of blood and gore at a slaughterhouse in Tokyo, and one titled *Naked*, which included images of his first wife, Yukiyo Kawakami, and a harrowing picture of their stillborn child. He regularly photographed Kawakami. However, with his second wife — who is usually referred to by just her first name, Yoko — Fukase seemed to take things to another level.

The photographer was, by all accounts, obsessed with Yoko. During the later years of their marriage, he captured her image every morning from the window of their fourth-floor apartment as she headed to work — photos which later became his iconic *From Window* series. "I think that book is a good barometer of their marriage," says Gill. "It starts out with a lot of joy, but you can gradually see her becoming tired and, in some pictures, annoyed."

Feeling suffocated, Yoko was convinced that they were together purely for the sake of his photography and that her husband only ever saw her "through the lens of a camera," as she later wrote. In 1976, she left him. Their divorce hit Fukase hard. Severely depressed, he returned to the town where he grew up and found refuge in the ravens that would flock around his local train station. A metaphor for his inner turmoil, the pictures he took during this time led to his best-known collection, *The Solitude of Ravens*, which in 2010 was selected by the *British Journal of Photography* as the best photobook published between 1986 and 2009.

Meeting Yoko

When Gill first saw *The Solitude of Ravens*, he found the images "really haunting." The fact they were taken in response to Yoko leaving added an extra layer of meaning, making them feel even more powerful for the Manchester-born filmmaker. He was fascinated by the obsessive love story, but, occupied with other work, Gill had to put the potential project to the side for a while. He returned to it after a couple of years and received some funding, which allowed him to write a script, working alongside his producer, Megumi Fukasawa Ishii. He was also able to take a research trip to Japan, where he was given the opportunity to interview Yoko.

"Before that, I actually bumped into her in London's Michael Hoppen Gallery, which was exhibiting *The Solitude of Ravens* in 2016," recalls Gill. "I mentioned the idea of the film, but I think my words got lost in translation. When I met her again a few years later, she said she remembered some British guy talking to her about a movie. At first, she was a little guarded, but that didn't surprise me. She's a woman in her 80s, who's had a whole life outside of Fukase. It must feel strange to be defined by those 13 or so years she spent with him."

The more they spoke, the more Yoko warmed to Gill, and they eventually moved from meeting at a neutral venue to her apartment. He says she told him everything about their marriage, including some things that he felt weren't appropriate for the film. Gill, who describes Yoko as a "sharp, strong-willed and very blunt individual," was never going to reduce her to a mere muse. In his eyes, it's as much her film as Fukase's. When the photographer complains about Yoko stealing the attention from him, his lifelong friend and supporter Morio Shoda (played by Sosuke Ikematsu) replies, "Yoko is a star. In one way, she is why your work sings."

> "I knew he [Asano] could play both ends of Fukase's character: the wild man and the quiet guy. Every day, he delivered something I enjoyed."





Realizing His Vision

Having spent time with her, and encountered her power and charisma firsthand, Gill was concerned that he would struggle to find the right actress to play the role of Yoko. His casting director then sent him *It Feels So Good*, an erotic film starring Kumi Takiuchi. "I just thought she was magnetic when I watched her on the screen," he says. "I didn't understand the dialogue in the movie because it didn't have subtitles, but I believed everything she was doing. It was absolutely astonishing to watch. I knew we had found Yoko. She was magnificent."

As for the role of Fukase, there was only one name on the director's list. "I saw Asano in *Ichi the Killer* and a couple of other films like *Journey to the Shore* and asked the producers if we could get the first script to him," says Gill. "We first met via Zoom in 2021 when he was filming for *Shogun*. Even then, I could feel his passion for the project. He's just got a movie star face. I knew he could play both ends of Fukase's character: the wild man and the quiet guy. Every day, he delivered something I enjoyed."



> "With *Ravens*, I made something I wanted to see, and a lot of people have told me it's like nothing they've seen before."



One of Gill's most interesting innovations in this film is the introduction of a character called The Raven — a human-sized, feathered creature that embodies Fukase's inner monologue, and which only Fukase can see. The director believes it is this "fantastical element" that distinguishes it from other biopics.

"I wanted to go down that surrealist route with *England Is Mine* by introducing characters like Oscar Wilde and Ziggy Stardust," he says. "In the end, though, I was talked out of it. I didn't back myself up then, but I'm glad I did this time. These days, it feels like many directors are making movies to please audiences rather than making them for themselves, which means they're less likely to take risks. With *Ravens*, I made something I wanted to see, and a lot of people have told me it's like nothing they've seen before."

More Info

Ravens was released nationwide in Japan on March 28, 2025.
Follow the film's official Instagram account: @*ravens__movie_jp*.



Japan's Evaporated People

Filmmakers Andreas Hartmann and Arata Mori on their new documentary, *Johatsu: Into Thin Air*, which focuses on people who purposefully vanish without a trace

Words by Matthew Hernon

Every year, between 70,000 and 90,000 people are reported missing in Japan. While the majority, including teenage runaways and senior citizens with dementia, are eventually located, some manage to vanish without a trace after engineering their own disappearances. They are known as johatsu, from the Japanese word for "evaporation" — "evaporated people" who hope to never be found.

The term "johatsu" first came into use in the 1960s. It exploded into the public consciousness in 1967 following the release of Shohei Imamura's pseudo-documentary film *A Man Vanishes* (Japanese title: *Ningen Johatsu*), which chronicled the abrupt disappearance of a Niigata salesperson. In the 70s, the word was commonly used in the media to describe people looking to escape the hardships of daily life: workplace stress, for instance, or unhappy marriages.

After Japan's economic bubble burst in the 90s and increasing numbers of people fell into debt, the phenomenon became even more widespread. In 1994, Masanori Kashimura published a book titled *The Complete Manual of Disappearance* to provide advice on how to start a new life from scratch. Several companies also emerged around this time, offering to help people discreetly relocate.

There are many reasons why someone might decide to disappear: Some are escaping loan sharks, while others are fleeing abusive relationships, stalkers or oppressive employers; there are also people running away from the shame of failed businesses or ruined reputations. In their documentary *Johatsu: Into Thin Air*, which was released in November 2024, German filmmaker Andreas Hartmann and Japanese director Arata Mori delve into the turmoil that these evaporated people face — as well as the suffering of those they leave behind.

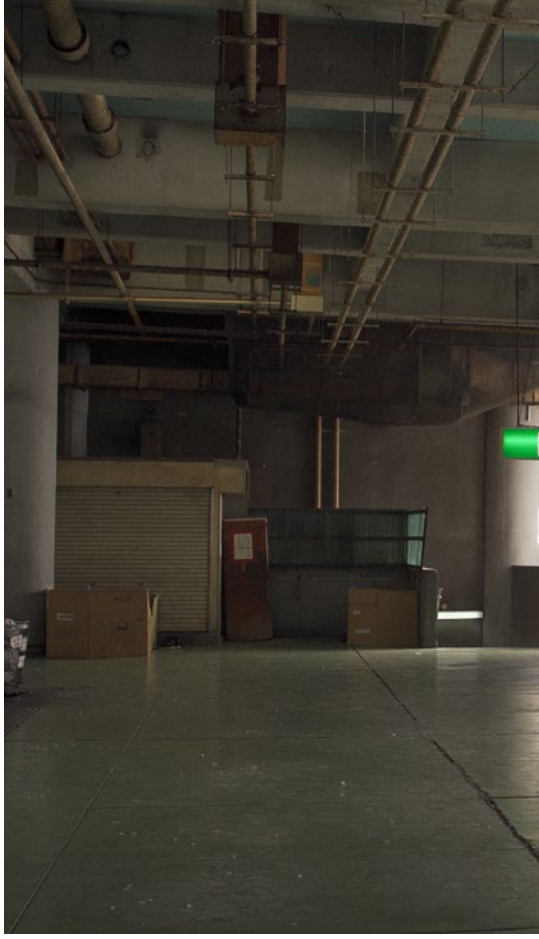
'Night Movers'

The specialized businesses that help people vanish are known as yonigeya, which the film translates as "night movers." Their customers are often desperate; for some, reaching out to a yonigeya feels like the only alternative to suicide.

One of the documentary's main subjects is Saita, the founder of one of Japan's best-known night movers, Yonigeya TSC. (She prefers to go by just her last name for safety reasons.) Saita, too, is a johatsu — on its website, the company bills itself as the "only private organization run by experienced domestic violence and stalking victims" in the country.

A typical transaction begins with a phone call to discuss the details of the case. There's then a face-to-face meeting, usually at the client's house (if it's safe to do so), to provide a better understanding of the place the person hopes to escape. Once everything's been agreed upon, preparations will begin to transfer the customer to a secret location.

The final step of the process is where the film begins: In the opening scene, we see Saita and an employee in a car, waiting for a man in an abusive relationship to escape from his home. After a few minutes, the client, his face pixelated, hurriedly gets into the vehicle, and the trio quickly drives away. He'd managed to get out when his partner went to take a bath.



> "I'd never heard anything like this before, where workers are forced to pay. It clearly messed with them psychologically."

Discreet Disappearances

In the pre-production process, Mori and Hartmann contacted several night movers. They decided to focus on Yonigeya TSC for two reasons: They felt Saita was the most cooperative and that she had the most compelling story.

Beyond Saita, the film introduces viewers to several johatsu, including one of her staff members, Sugimoto. Shamed by the failure of









his business, he told his son he was going away on a three-day work trip, but never returned, leaving his wife to take care of the children. Another of the documentary's subjects, Kanda, was driven underground almost four decades ago due to debts he owed to the yakuza.

There's also a couple, whose names aren't given, living in a spare room in a love hotel in the middle of nowhere. They fled their home after being regularly threatened by their boss. The harassment was intense; according to the pair, any mistakes they made were punished with fines, which meant they were never sure how much they were going to be paid.

"Just listening to their story was traumatic," says Mori. "You hear about so-called black companies in Japan, but usually it's at a large firm, where people are overworked. I'd never heard anything like this before, where workers are forced to pay. It clearly messed with them psychologically, and even now, they can't leave the love hotel, so it's like they're in a prison."

Mori and Hartmann don't merely focus on those who have vanished — the documentary also follows a devastated mother in search of her son. Since police in Japan are unable to initiate an investigation unless there's proof of a crime or an accident, her only option is to hire a private



detective. Japan's strict privacy laws, however, make it an extremely difficult task. ATM transactions can't be tracked, access to phone records is forbidden and security camera footage is not open to the public.

"It's not just the people who are fleeing from their lives who are suffering," says Hartmann. "We, therefore, felt it was important to show the opposite side of the johatsu world, from the perspective of a mother who's been left behind and is desperately trying to find answers. She didn't make the decision to leave, but she has to deal with it."

> "I spoke about this project to close friends; many of them said they knew someone who had disappeared."

Shedding Light on a Taboo Topic

Hartmann decided to start working on *Johatsu* after completing another documentary, *A Free Man*, about a Japanese individual who chooses to be homeless. Both deal with similar themes: the pressures of a rigorously performance-oriented society, and just how far some people will go to escape them.

Mori, who was born in Japan but has lived overseas for nearly two decades, felt drawn to the project as soon as he heard about it. Researching for the film proved to be an eye-opening experience for him. "Of course, I knew the term johatsu, but I didn't realize how prevalent it was in Japanese society," he says. "It's generally seen as a taboo topic — but when I spoke about this project to close friends, many of them said they knew someone who had disappeared."

Although the documentary has been well received at various festivals around the globe, the original version of the movie won't be distributed in Japan. That was the promise the two directors made to the film's protagonists. An alternative version, which was created using deepfake technology to hide the identity of the participants, made its Japan premiere at the 20th Osaka Asian Film Festival.

More Info

For more about the documentary,
visit *aratamori.com/johatsu* and *andreas-hartmann.com/film/*.



All That Glitters

Inside photographer Yuri Horie's glittering, technicolor, maximalist world

— *Words by Kim Kahan, photos by Yuri Horie*



Colors. Glitter. Feathers. Sparkles. The protagonists in Yuri Horie's world do not go by half-measures. She's captured images of dekotora, which stands for "decorated truck": hulking machines brightly outfitted in neon, gold and LED lights; of heavily tattooed lads sporting black and gold robes adorned with fur for Coming of Age Day; and of extravagantly groomed male gyaru posing in front of the Shibuya 109 department store. "All or nothing" seems to be the motto that unites her subjects — the brasher, the better. And Horie photographs them in a way that matches, or maybe even magnifies, their energy.

Horie dials into our interview from her bedroom, the wall behind her covered with a fantastic assemblage of images that inspire her, ranging from posters of the galaxy to some of her own prints. It's exactly the sort of home environment that you'd expect from someone whose photos are so distinctive and bursting with pizzazz.

From K-Pop to Photography

Before dekotora, Horie was into K-pop. The obsession started in middle school, inspired by her younger sister. Horie went further, founding a Korean culture society at university, learning the language and even studying abroad in South Korea.

It didn't stop there. "When I graduated, I basically got a job to fund my trips to Korea," she says. "I'd go once every two weeks, just on the weekends." This job happened to be in the camera industry. The company let its staff borrow cameras on their own time, and thus Horie's foray into photography began, albeit without any major aspirations; she'd snap pictures

of her friends, many of whom worked in fashion.

Her proficiency in Korean led friends in the industry to invite her to translate and interpret for them, and eventually one of them brought her to Seoul Fashion Week. “There were so many fashionable people there,” she says. “It wasn’t just the shows and celebrities — it was everyone who hoped to have their picture taken.” She photographed the scene to her heart's content, without a specific publication in mind. That’s when it clicked for her: “More than photography, I loved meeting people. That’s what made it exciting for me.”

When she got back to Japan, Horie decided to try selling her images to magazines, making anything from ¥100 to ¥500 per street snap. “It doesn’t sound like much, but imagine selling 50 photos at ¥500 each — it all adds up,” she tells TW. This became her new way to cover her flight fees. As her work began to appear in magazines across Japan, she caught the eye of some big names in the Tokyo fashion scene: *Nylon Tokyo* and *Drop Tokyo*.







> “More than photography, I loved meeting people. That’s what made it exciting for me.”

Pursuing Her Passion

This is how, just two years after her first stint in Korea, Horie found herself employed as an in-house photographer at *Drop Tokyo*, doing street fashion photography for them regularly, going around Tokyo with her camera in hand and approaching people with cool outfits.

“There were several photographers employed for the street snap pages,” she says. “I realized that no matter how much you sync your editing with other photographers, your own style still shows.”

In 2022, she went freelance. Working with a range of clients, she started to notice something. “I’d get people hiring me with huge mood boards that looked exactly like another photographer, and I’d think: Why didn’t you hire them? It got me down, and that’s when I decided to focus on what I really liked.”

What did you like? I ask. "Events, festivals — those sort of old cultural traditions that might be dying out," she says. She loves to shoot at Coming of Age ceremonies, which are held across the nation annually to celebrate those turning 18 or 20 that year (depending on the municipality). Typically, men wear suits and women wear a special type of kimono called furisode — but certain towns and regions are known for going all-out.

"Some people just don't want to bother with [the ceremonies] anymore, but I really admire those who still embrace them with gusto," Horie continues. She admires this same sensibility in dekotora, whose owners spend huge amounts of money on making them look unique and ornate: "Some of those trucks cost around ¥100 million!"

Romanticism of the Renegade

The title of Horie's first photobook, *Roman*, comes from the phrase "otoko no roman," which loosely translates to "romanticism of the male renegade." Her distinctive style bursts from every page — hyperbolic sparkles and movement everywhere. Photos from a Coming of Age ceremony in Kitakyushu are a particular highlight. Hardcore, tough-looking men swagger around with over-the-top hairstyles, owning their campy black and gold jackets. Turn the page, and you'll find dekotora in all their glory, sparkling lights and glitter galore.

Horie was adamant that she wanted people to enjoy the book's launch "like a theme park." She held an exhibition, which opened in May of last year, featuring







> "I'm not a minimalist by any means. I'm always a maximalist."

experience boxes, things to touch, feel and smell, and its own purikura photo booth. One of the rooms was pitch-black. Viewers were challenged to use their phone lights to find black-and-white prints scattered throughout in a sort of conceptual scavenger hunt.

Shortly after the exhibition, she was enlisted to take behind-the-scenes photos of Megan Thee Stallion and Yuki Chiba on set at the shooting for their "Mamushi" video. Her photos of the pair see them crammed into the frame, surrounded by a sea of bodies, each clamoring to be seen. It's dynamic and artfully chaotic — the embodiment of a true Yuri Horie shot. An offhand comment of Horie's makes a lot of sense: "I'm not a minimalist by any means. I'm always a maximalist."

More Info

Follow Horie on Instagram at *@yuri_horie_*.

High FASHION



Between tabi shoes and billowy nikkapokka pants, it feels like every stylish person has started dressing like an old-timey Japanese construction worker

Words by Ynes Sarah Filleul, photos by Solène Ballesta

In Tokyo's Shinjuku district, where gleaming skyscrapers pierce the clouds, a group of construction workers navigate scaffolding with balletic grace, their distinctive silhouettes marked by their traditional uniform — billowing nikkapokka pants and split-toe tabi boots. Meanwhile, across the world in Paris, similar silhouettes float down haute couture runways. While this may seem like some kind of style synchronicity, it's far from it — many of today's top fashion designers draw direct inspiration from these classic workwear staples.

The Heritage of Working Heights

Japanese construction work has been broadly divided into different specialized trades since the Edo period: sakan (plasterers), daiku (carpenters), and tobishoku (scaffolders and high-altitude construction workers). The term "tobishoku" is made of two components: The first part, "tobi," originates from the pickaroon (tobiguchi) used to lift wood for scaffolding; the second, "shoku," means "work." However, the Japanese word for "flying" or "jumping" is also pronounced "tobi," giving the word another, more literal interpretation. "Flying work" aptly describes the daring acrobatics of these workers as they move effortlessly across steel beams and scaffolding.





Tobishoku garments, particularly the distinctive nikkapokka pants, are thought to have emerged from a fascinating cross-cultural exchange: Dutch knickerbockers meeting Japanese ingenuity. But while their Western cousins were designed for countryside pursuits, nikkapokka pants — also called nikka in colloquial Japanese — were engineered for harsh outdoor environments and the vertigo-inducing demands of high-altitude construction work. With their baggy, wide legs, nikkapokka are easy to move around in; some people even believe that the extra fabric functions like a sail, allowing for a heightened awareness of wind direction. The tapered ankles aren't merely aesthetic, either — they prevent the trousers from getting caught on equipment.

Despite shaping the skylines of modern Japan, construction work remains an unseen and underappreciated part of everyday life. The towering structures of big metropolises like Tokyo and Osaka stand as testaments to decades of craftsmanship, yet the people who build them often fade into the background. Much like the structures they create, their traditional uniforms — nikkapokka pants paired with tabi boots — are now stepping into the limelight through high fashion's embrace.

From Scaffolding to Spotlight

At the heart of tobishoku style is Toraichi, the heritage brand that's been outfitting Japan's construction workers since 1959. The company's designs showcase an almost obsessive attention to functional detail: a reinforced waistline stitched using sashiko, a traditional Japanese embroidery method, strategic pleating for movement and fabric choices that balance durability with comfort.

Toraichi's influence has also extended into streetwear through collaborations with top Japanese fashion brands. In December 2024, it partnered with A Bathing Ape (BAPE) to release a capsule collection inspired by traditional tobishoku garments, putting a streetwear spin on traditional items like the dokajan — a heavy-duty work jacket — and, of course, nikka pants. Similarly, Moussy's SS24 collection, created in collaboration with Toraichi, reinterprets classic construction apparel with modern, stylish silhouettes for women. It contains items like belted nikka and cropped jackets made with the workwear brand's durable fabric.



Maison Margiela's iconic leather tabi boots, while often credited with introducing the split-toe design to high fashion, actually draw from centuries of Japanese practical footwear design, specifically the jika-tabi (which can be literally translated as "tabi that touch the ground"). Margiela's initial interpretation has spawned countless variations like ballerina flats and Mary-Janes, inspiring a new generation to appreciate this distinctive aesthetic.

Some contemporary Japanese brands, like Moonstar, have embraced the tabi silhouette in their own way as well; Moonstar's heritage-inspired take, with thin rubber soles and a minimalist black or white canvas upper, is immensely wearable. The Kyoto-based textile brand Sou Sou sells tabi shoes and socks with bright, pop



art-esque designs. Since 2009, the brand has collaborated with the Kyoto-based shoemaker Kikkabo on a line of leather tabi — including, alluringly, tabi clogs that can be worn as slip-ons, too.

The Decline of Traditional Workwear

While nikkapokka pants and tabi boots have enjoyed a resurgence in the fashion sphere, their presence on actual construction sites in Japan is fading. In recent years, an increasing number of work sites have banned nikkapokka pants due to safety concerns. The loose, billowy design, despite having its own practical advantages, is believed to increase the risk of workplace accidents like tripping or entanglement with machinery.

Moreover, perceptions of nikkapokka pants have shifted. While some view them as an emblem of craftsmanship and pride, others associate them with unruly behavior. That's because historically, these baggy pants have also been linked to Japan's yankii subculture, a rebellious youth movement known for young delinquents sporting flamboyant pompadours and a defiant attitude. Bosozoku — rowdy biker gangs that peaked in the 80s — are also known to wear nikka. Construction companies, aiming to maintain a professional image and minimize complaints from the public, have moved toward streamlined, modernized uniforms that prioritize safety and practicality over tradition.

Tabi boots, on the other hand, remain a staple on construction sites. While standard work boots with enhanced grip and structural support are becoming more common, workwear brands continue to upgrade tabi with safety features like spiked soles for traction and durable uppers designed to withstand sharp objects — ensuring they endure both harsh environments and the test of time.

The Future of Functional Fashion

As sustainability and longevity become increasingly important in fashion, the enduring appeal of tobishoku offers valuable lessons. These garments were designed to last, to serve a purpose and to improve with wear — principles that resonate strongly with contemporary consumers seeking both style and substance.

The influence of tobishoku style extends beyond mere aesthetics. It represents a broader shift in how we view the relationship between work and fashion, between function and form. In an era where authenticity is increasingly valued, the rise of tobishoku style feels less like a trend and more like a recognition of timeless design principles. Whether worn on construction sites or city streets, these garments carry forward a legacy of Japanese craftsmanship and practical innovation — a testament to design that truly stands the test of time.

The Way of the Artist

One of Japan's most acclaimed artists, David Stanley Hewett is equally fascinated by ancient artisanship and the samurai spirit

Words by Eugenie Shin



Hewett standing in front of his paintings at the Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo

What does it mean for an artwork to be authentic? David Stanley Hewett, who has spent his life studying traditional Japanese artistic techniques, has dedicated the better part of his extensive career to the pursuit of this elusive quality.

Now based in the tranquil, mountainous town of Karuizawa, Hewett arrived in Japan in the late 80s to study ceramics. He has since developed an original style of pottery, which is but one facet of his prolific oeuvre. He's perhaps best known for the *Bushido* series — large-scale paintings featuring carefully applied Kanazawa gold leaf topped by dramatic, inky swooshes of thrown paint, inspired by a laborious study of history and traditional Japanese screen-making.

Hewett's signature gilded canvases act as evocative bridges between antiquity and modernity in the various spaces they occupy: galleries around the world, luxury hotels, a Shinto shrine and even the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

In Search of Imperfection

Creativity has been integral to Hewett's life and identity for as long as he can remember. In his youth, he developed a deep love for ceramics, which bloomed into an all-consuming passion after he attended a Japanese pottery show as a college student. "I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen," he recalls.

Hewett moved to Tokyo after graduating from the University of Massachusetts with a degree in Japanese history. He spent three and a half years training under a potter, teaching English on the side to support himself. Thus began a lifelong inquiry into the meticulous methods and refined artistic sensibility of Japanese craftsmanship.

An Enduring Craft Reimagined

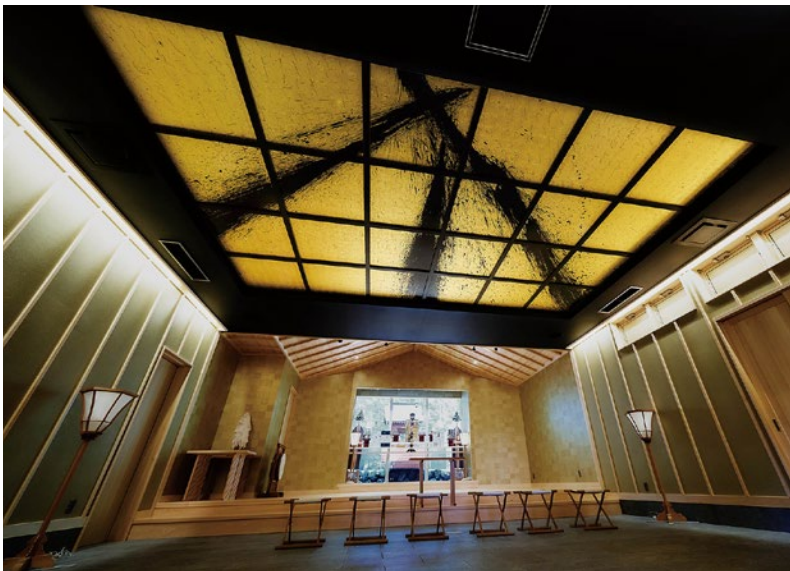
A serendipitous encounter with Japanese byobu (traditional folding screens) at the Mitsui Memorial Museum in the early 2000s would alter the course of Hewett's career. The screens on display, dating from the 12th to 14th centuries, were missing much of their original pigment, making their subject matter hard to distinguish. Yet, as Hewett recalls, their luminescent gold leaf backgrounds had remained intact.

"I looked at it not as an old piece of art that was falling apart," he explains. Instead, he imagined it as a contemporary, abstract work. "I took it out of its context … and thought, Wow, this is an amazing opportunity for exploration." For Hewett, that meant finding one of the country's few remaining traditional screen-makers to train under. Staying true to Heian-era craftsmanship made the process of building each screen incredibly labor-intensive: Each one took him around six months. But it was important to him to honor the process.

Hewett taking a break from painting in Nagano



Hewett's ceiling painting at Kumanokotai Shrine in Karuizawa





Hewett's paintings at the St. Regis Osaka



Eventually, Hewett transitioned to working on canvas and wood. His work retains a deep connection to the original form; many of the pieces in the *Bushido* series are separated or segmented in a way that's directly inspired by byobu screens. "In my abstract work, there are a lot of references to traditional themes," he notes. "I'm pulling out themes in terms of subject matter, but also in terms of technique."

As the series' name implies, Hewett draws deep artistic inspiration from bushido, a moral code concerning samurai attitudes, behavior and lifestyle. When he first encountered this philosophy as an exchange student at Hokkaido University, it struck a deep chord with him, and it grew even more resonant after his experience in the United States Marine Corps. It's a worldview he has come to understand on a personal level: One moment of adversity can reveal the result of decades of training and preparation.

This "moment of revelation," as he calls it, is often literalized in the *Bushido* paintings by a splash of dark paint, thrown boldly across a gleaming, painstakingly realized gold leaf surface. There is, as Hewett notes, no room for error. As he marks the canvas with a decisive swing of his arm, the calligraphy brush in his hand resembles a sword.

The Pursuit of Authenticity

The artist's strong connection with samurai culture stems from more than just intellectual curiosity. As a former infantry Marine and lifelong creative, Hewett feels drawn to the duality of samurai: In addition to being dedicated warriors, he explains, they also exerted a great deal of influence in cultural realms such as poetry, painting and tea ceremony.

Hewett's works resonate deeply with his audience. Akie Abe, wife of the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is among them; she selected the subtle yet compelling "Majime" as a gift to the first lady of the United States in 2017. Another of Hewett's works can be found on the ceiling of Kumanokotai Shrine, a center of Shinto spirituality in Karuizawa.

Yet, when asked about his greatest accomplishment as an artist, Hewett says it's still to come. "I think that achievements are fun, but they're not the goal. For me, the goal is creating."

Of course, he enjoys working on collaborative projects and commissions. Hewett's paintings take center stage at some of Japan's finest hotels, permanently displayed at The Imperial Hotel and The Peninsula Hotel in Tokyo, The Ritz-Carlton Tokyo and Kyoto and many more. And last year, he held a major joint exhibition with Living National Treasure Manji Inoue, a revered hakuji (white porcelain) potter, at Onishi Gallery in New York City.

More than his long list of accolades, however, Hewett values his well-earned credibility as an ambassador of Japanese history and craft. "I think the reason my work resonates with people so much is that I've done the work," he says. "I was an apprentice to a potter. I went and learned how to make screens the traditional way. I went and learned how to do Nihonga Japanese painting."

Hewett's painting at Sushi Sho New York



After a 32-year journey in Japan — amounting to more than half his life — Hewett still itches to learn and experiment. Each time he splashes the canvas, he can't predict the exact outcome; it is the beauty in this exciting uncertainty that propels him to continue creating. "There's an element of chance. Throwing the paint is embracing that and saying, 'I'm going to do it anyway,'" he muses. "Even though there's a risk, I'm going to do it anyway, because that's what I'm here to do."



The Hewett Gallery in Karuizawa

More Info

David Stanley Hewett Studio & Gallery
3945 Nagakura, Karuizawa, Nagano 389-0111, *hewett.jp*

Staff are available to guide you, but to ensure a personalized experience, an advance booking is recommended.



Back to the Future

Inside the unique charms of Hatoya Hotel, an enduring icon in Shizuoka that celebrates the Showa era's golden age

Words and photos by Lisa Knight



Perched on a mountain overlooking the sleepy beach town of Ito stands a dazzling white hotel that seems somehow lost in time. From its front emerges a distinctive, spaceship-like tube, stretching out across the parking lot like an extended arm; on its roof are three gigantic, rusted katakana characters that glow neon at nighttime: ha - to - ya.

This is Hatoya Hotel, an opulent remnant from Japan's past — built before the pop of the bubble era, with views all the way out to the twinkling horizon. It's a place I've been strangely obsessed with for a number of years. I love places that ooze nostalgia: kissaten, retro gaming parlors, faded hotels. But Hatoya Hotel stands in a league of its own; some say that it's as close as you can get to traveling back in time, and this feels like a fair assessment.

From the moment that the hotel appears before you, the era we now inhabit begins to fade away. Once you step in the lobby, you're in a new and separate dimension — not the modern world we're living in, but the modern world we dreamed of.

Pigeon Magic

Hatoya Hotel first opened in 1947, when a businessman named Seiji Haraguchi purchased a 14-room traditional inn called Hatoya Ryokan. It is believed that the original owner was a magician who excelled at tricks with pigeons. (The "hato" in Hatoya means "pigeon.") After buying the hotel, Haraguchi expanded it significantly, and in the 60s, it increased in popularity with an iconic TV commercial that many Japanese people, young and old, will remember with fond nostalgia. It begins, "If you're going to Ito, you must go to Hatoya …" In 1975, sister hotel Sun Hatoya opened nearby, right on the seaside.

The lobby immortalized in those ads stands virtually unchanged today, still glittering with chandeliers and mirrors, though it's notably less bustling. I found the place almost deserted when I arrived. At the reception desk, a kind-faced man suddenly appeared, as if by magic, to welcome me in for check-in. Next to the lobby, room wear is laid out for guests to pick up — yukata with pigeons printed all over. Continuing on, you'll find the hotel's signature aerial corridor.







A Hopeful Future

Hatoya Hotel's main hallway is its architectural pièce de résistance, connecting the lobby to the secondary building. It has a curved ceiling lined with glittering lights, and its walls are bisected by a row of small, eye-shaped windows. The entire space is coated in a rich shade of orange.

In many ways, the hotel embodies the optimistic architectural visions of the Showa era (1926–89), when the future was an unknown and exciting place. At the time Hatoya was built, Japan was experiencing unprecedented transformation and economic affluence, and this was reflected in its bold and futuristic design choices. Stepping into the spaceship-esque tunnel feels like the boundary between here and there. The first time, my skin prickled, and I felt strangely emotional as the edges of reality softened around me.

A testament to its former opulence, Hatoya Hotel spans several levels, with amenities to keep you occupied for your entire stay, from a fluorescent-lit gaming parlor to an indoor pool to secret karaoke and mahjong rooms. Walking through the enormous, red-carpeted building, I wondered what was behind many of the closed doors. Despite its size, it feels like a permanent liminal space, frozen in time. It's a bit like playing around in an old museum.

The hotel also has several onsen baths, outfitted luxuriously with volcanic stones from the Izu Peninsula. A classical sculpture of a reclining female figure reminiscent of Venus sits in the corner, and a cascading rock waterfall also acts as a cold plunge pool. Once I'd immersed myself to my heart's content, I wandered in my yukata through Hatoya's many halls and sitting areas, drinking beer from vending machines and getting my back gnawed at by an old massage chair.

I sang karaoke at Bar Hana, the most exquisite bar I have stepped foot in, with its mahogany trims and flocked velvet sofas covered in cigarette burns that were put there well before I was born. At 9 p.m., the in-house ramen restaurant opened its doors for late revelers and ramen lovers, serving up a soy sauce broth with boiled pork, green onions, seaweed and bamboo shoots. Returning to my room, I slept silently and deeply.









A Meeting Place

The thing that most intrigues me about Hatoya Hotel is that it represents how the future was imagined: smooth curves, bright colors and an optimism that glistened in every design choice. Where some might see a charmingly retro space brimming with anachronisms, I see an unmistakable sense of hopefulness and excitement, palpable even after all these years. Everything stands suspended between what was and what could have been: the past that has yet to recede and the future that never arrived, meeting at a hotel on a mountain.

Hatoya Hotel has always been a place of time travel for people — it's just that the direction has changed.

More Info

For more information about Hatoya Hotel, visit *hatoyahotel.com/home/index.html*.

A Map to Hidden Treasures

With its bespoke travel packages, Untold Japan provides visitors with a rare level of immersion in Japanese culture

Words by Alina Joan Ito









In an age of algorithm-fueled recommendations and AI-generated itineraries, planning a trip is easier than ever — at least in certain ways. For those who genuinely want to wander off the beaten path, this new era poses a unique conundrum: How can you be sure the "hidden gem" you're reading about is actually a hidden gem and not just a tourist destination that's been cleverly rebranded as such?

The luxury tour company Untold Japan aims to help with that. It steers guests away from well-known hot spots, offering bespoke tours that transcend simply seeing Japan — a private dinner hosted by a geisha, for instance, or a stay at a historic inn along a legendary samurai trail.

What most sets the company apart is its values: It sees travel as a transformative experience, one that can bridge cultures in a way that's truly reciprocal. As such, its tours are devised with respect and sustainability in mind, prioritizing tradition and regional revitalization.

A Pandemic Project

Untold Japan was established two years ago by Joshua Lassman-Watts and Christian Closs, a pair of friends with a passion for exploring the country's lesser-known areas. It was an enthusiasm that had bloomed during the pandemic, when Japan's borders were closed to foreign travelers. Both Lassman-Watts and Closs were based in Japan, and both suddenly found themselves without work in a country devoid of international tourists. They took the time to truly explore, and thanks to Closs' decade-long experience as a tour guide, they were able to visit off-the-radar areas and get to know them intimately.

Inspired by the unforgettable, crowdless travels they had, Lassman-Watts and Closs put their heads together to create the bare bones of Untold Japan. "We spent six months or so putting together a terrible website, a terrible plan and getting all the connections we could," Lassman-Watts says. "It was just a template, but the idea and concept were there. We want a luxury tour company that gives back. We take people to places that are off the beaten path, but [where you can] have a real connection — where the people want us there."



Joshua Lassman-Watts, Founder & CEO Untold Japan



Untold Japan launched its website on April 1, 2023, as the country was readjusting to an influx of foreign visitors. Within the week, the company had an astonishing 1,000 inquiries, and it's only continued to grow since its explosive start. In 2024, it won Best Luxury Tour Operator in Tokyo in the Luxury Lifestyle Awards, and it's been featured in media outlets like *National Geographic* and *The Guardian*.

Genuine Interactions

As part of its mission, Untold Japan employs a fleet of bilingual tour guides who can help guests bridge language barriers and immerse themselves more fully as they travel. "It's not just about going to a shop and buying something," Lassman-Watts emphasizes. If you just ask questions, he continues, you'll often discover a fascinating story — the person working at the store will "turn out to be the seventh-generation doll maker or something. That's what matters: for that story to be put out there more."

Untold Japan has a broader mission of raising awareness about smaller, often overlooked areas that would benefit from increased visitors. Lassman-Watts shares the example of a community in Mie Prefecture, where the centuries-old tradition of pearl farming, once vital to the area, was in danger of disappearing. However, after the construction of a hotel that attracted tourism, the area experienced a remarkable revitalization, extending even to the pearl farm.

Today, Untold Japan partners with the hotel as part of its Untold Hotels initiative, sending visitors to the region. "I went to the farm recently myself, and they've just hired two 24- or 25-year-olds," Lassman-Watts says. "They're like the first 20-something-year-olds to work there for years. We're not a direct part of their development, but the fact that we can take guests there and tell that story is amazing."

The Art of Connection

Untold Japan specializes in the delicate art of Japanese introduction. Lassman-Watts references the phrase "Ichigensan wa okotowari": "We don't accept first-timers." "From an English perspective, it's really rude, right? But in Japanese, it's pertinent, it's good. It keeps [the establishment] pure. Anyone can't just come in and make a mess — there has to be an introduction, and the responsibility then falls on the person who's introduced you," he explains.

Untold Japan's network of trust is arguably its most valuable asset. From working closely with a teahouse in Kyoto to arrange private meetings with geisha — who are famously private and hard to meet without proper introduction — to securing highly desired sumo tickets, Untold Japan acts as a socially savvy middleman, connecting international guests with some of Japan's most exclusive experiences.

"Japan is one of the only countries in the world where money can't buy you everything," Lassman-Watts says. "Connecting is one of the most important things we do."

More Info

Book your own Untold Japan tour at *untold-japan.travel.*



The Heart of Hakuba Valley

Hakuba Valley is more than its pristine snow: It's also a place where Japanese tradition and warm hospitality can be experienced to the fullest

Words by Alina Joan Ito, photos by Hiroya Nakata



Arriving in Hakuba Valley is like stepping into a postcard — the snow-draped peaks of the Japanese Alps stretch endlessly against a crisp blue sky, and charming alpine villages nestle into the foothills, their rooftops heavy with fresh powder. The site of several events during the 1998 Winter Olympics, it's one of Japan's biggest, best known and most legendary ski areas, consisting of 10 interconnected snow resorts spanning Omachi city, Hakuba village and Otari village.

The high quality of Hakuba Valley's snow is common knowledge among skiers and snowboarders, but the area's appeal extends far beyond its exceptional powder. Dotted with traditional ryokan inns, steaming onsen baths and family-run eateries, Hakuba Valley is suffused with local charm and an unmistakable sense of Japanese culture. This isn't merely apparent in the landscapes, lodgings and cuisine — it can be felt, too, in the welcoming atmosphere that fills the valley.





Hakuba Valley is a place where deep-rooted local traditions and an extensive history meet modern comfort and world-class facilities. What bridges these two worlds is the spirit of omotenashi — the Japanese philosophy of wholehearted, anticipatory hospitality, where every detail is designed to make guests feel welcomed and cared for without them even needing to ask. Omotenashi is evident even in the efforts to keep the mountains accident-free: "We want to make the slopes a safe place for everyone," says Yoichiro Ishihara, the captain of the Happo-one Ski Patrol. "We've researched and worked with designers from Tokyo to create signs that are easy to read, even in bad weather."

Mountain-Hopping

One of Hakuba Valley's main draws is the fact that visitors can easily travel between all 10 of the resorts there: Hakuba Happo-one, Iwatake, Able Hakuba Goryu, Hakuba 47, Jigatake, Kashimayari, Sanosaka, Tsugaike, Hakuba Norikura and Cortina. Each is





iconic in its own right, with its own unique charms and characteristics.

With an all-access Hakuba Valley Day Pass, you can ski or snowboard at any of these on the same day without purchasing separate lift tickets. The Hakuba Valley Shuttle Bus also provides free transportation for Hakuba Valley Day Pass holders, seamlessly connecting major resorts, ski bases and accommodations.

Over 100 lifts are spread across the valley, including several gondolas, one of which was newly upgraded in December. "These new gondolas are designed to be rideable for people who usually aren't able to go on gondolas. I'm really proud of how we ensure the safety and comfort of our guests," Ayumu Takamizawa, who works at the slopes of Iwatake, notes.

The ease with which you can travel between these destinations is not only great for accessibility reasons. It also allows you to soak in the distinct ambience of each town: the lively après-ski scene and historic inns of Hakuba village, Omachi's tranquil hot spring retreats and Otari's deep connection to traditional mountain life, with small, family-run lodges.

Yohei Otani, a manager at the Hakuba Valley Promotion Board, says that the region's long history gives it a distinctive character. Although the name Hakuba is now synonymous with a peerless alpine sport experience, it was once a tranquil rural area. "Worldwide, most ski resorts are constructed specifically to be a resort, and hotels and facilities are built [with that in mind] — but in Hakuba, it's the opposite," he explains. "Our ancestors already had a village, and skiing was added later."

Hospitality With History

Although the towns in Hakuba Valley may not have originally been constructed with tourism in mind, the region has embraced its influx of visitors wholeheartedly. Within Japan, it's widely considered to be the birthplace of minshuku: family-run, guesthouse-style lodgings that offer a warm and homey experience.

During the Taisho era (1912–1926), Hakuba village's reputation as a high-altitude destination grew, attracting a steady stream of mountaineers and skiers with its remarkable snow and natural beauty. Local farmers and guides began opening their homes to these travelers, offering them modest lodgings and home-cooked meals. At first glance, the Hakuba of today looks quite different: a sprawling, buzzing ski hub that caters to visitors from around the world. But its heart remains unchanged — an abundance of minshuku can still be found in the area, and the minshuku spirit radiates through its more upscale and less traditional accommodations as well.

Even as it's grown into a famous international ski destination, drawing in millions of visitors a year, Hakuba Valley has retained its warm and welcoming atmosphere, honoring the traditions that shaped it. "Everyone here is just so interesting," Alexandria Owen, a member of the sales promotion division of Able Hakuba Goryu, says.

Owen notes that Hakuba Valley is a place where people from all walks of life — from professional athletes to photographers, from international guests to local residents — are united in a shared love for nature and snow sports. The staff, many of them locals, invite visitors in with fascinating local insight. "They'll casually tell you about the whole story of Hakuba, and how they grew up here."





Between hosting the Olympics, its famous snow and sheer size, Hakuba Valley has a lot of grand qualities that contribute to its world-class reputation. Less apparent from the outside — but equally significant — is the rich local culture of the valley and the work that goes into its hospitality: the slope grooming teams who prepare the snow for the next day, the ski patrol who ensure safety on the mountains, the lift operators and guesthouse staff. Their commitment goes beyond work; it's a reflection of their deep passion for Hakuba Valley and their desire to share its beauty and traditions with the world.



More Info

Explore Hakuba Valley firsthand and purchase your Hakuba Valley Day Pass at *hakubavalley.com/en/ticket_en/onlinewebshop_en/*.

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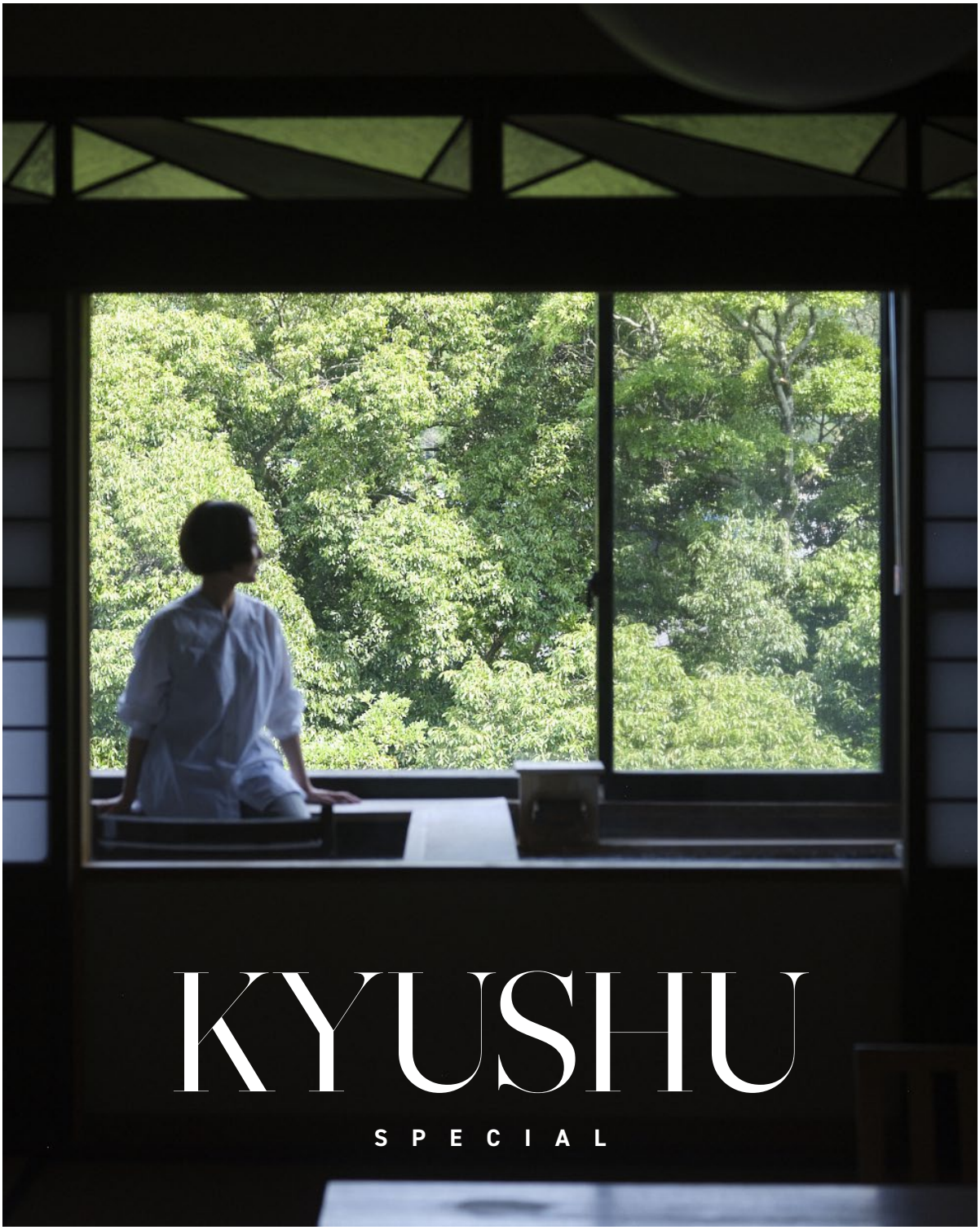
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Hot springs that once healed ancient warriors and gods



A Symphony of Spaces

Ureshino's historic Ryokan Oomuraya has stood for over two centuries; in recent years, it's evolved into a stylish haven for vinyl lovers

— *Words by Ynes Sarah Filleul*

In Ureshino Onsen, a charming and historic town in Saga Prefecture, a soothing melody drifts through the corridors of Ryokan Oomuraya: the soft crackle of vinyl mingling with the gentle burble of hot springs. At the helm of this cultural symphony stands Kenta Kitagawa, the 15th-generation owner who inherited the Japanese-style inn at age 25.

With this space, Kitagawa has done something extraordinary: He's transformed one of Japan's long-standing hot spring inns into a haven for audiophiles and onsen enthusiasts alike. Under his stewardship, the ryokan has evolved into a place where centuries-old hospitality meets modern artistic expression. With a collection of around 3,000 records, state-of-the-art speakers scattered throughout the space and its own library, it now bills itself as an "inn where you can enjoy books and music after a bath."

Oomuraya's legacy runs deep. Although its exact founding date is unknown, it has long stood as an important cultural crossroads — it was documented in the writings of author Ota Nanpo in 1805, and it also appears in the travel journals of Ino Tadataka, the renowned cartographer who mapped Japan's coastline in the early 19th century. In addition, the inn served as a favorite retreat for master calligrapher Gochiku Nakabayashi (1827–1913), whose surviving work still graces the lobby. Poet Mokichi Saito later immortalized this same piece in verse, writing of how Nakabayashi's brushstrokes captured the essence of his stay.

Immersed in Music

Today, Kitagawa orchestrates a different kind of cultural exchange, one that resonates with both traditional and contemporary sensibilities. Prized calligraphy scrolls share wall space with monochrome portraits of John Lennon and Paul McCartney, and vintage jazz records stand on weathered bookshelves side-by-side with dog-eared Japanese novels.

At the heart of Oomuraya's musical metamorphosis lies the Yukemuri Lounge, where vintage JBL Olympus speakers and McIntosh amplifiers breathe life into the inn's expansive record collection. After a soak, guests can sink into plush seating while the sound system's warm tones fill the air. The space transforms into a record bar as evening falls, becoming Music Bar Oomuraya. Behind the counter, bartender Tae Uchimura, a music school graduate turned mixologist, crafts cocktails with fresh fruit and local ingredients.

Descending to the first basement floor, guests will discover Yuagari Bunko, a library space with custom furnishings and a carefully curated collection of books that tells the story of Ureshino and its community. It has its own high-end audio system, too, creating a serene and sophisticated atmosphere ideal for reading. The space is also sometimes used as a venue for live music performances and other cultural events.









Unique sonic experiences can be found scattered throughout the ryokan. There's a headphone listening room on the second floor, and on the third floor, tucked behind a curtain, a listening booth offers a rotating selection of CDs. Perhaps most ingeniously, speakers disguised as rocks surround the men's bath, delivering ambient compositions created exclusively for Oomuraya by Shigeru Kishida of the band Quruli. (The women's bath shares this calming soundtrack.)

Each guest room tells its own story through design, and each was built with acoustics in mind. The Western-style Botan (peony) room, for instance, has a midcentury modern aesthetic, featuring a curved archway leading to a dome-shaped bedroom. The architectural details — from the expertly crafted earthen walls to the indirect lighting from paper lamps — create a cocoon-like atmosphere perfect for immersing oneself in music. Many of the rooms offer Bluetooth-connected CD players, allowing guests to create their own soundtrack against views of lush greenery outside. The Ayame (iris) room even comes with its own record player.

> “Unique sonic experiences can be found scattered throughout the ryokan.”

Soaking in Harmony and Tradition

At its heart a traditional onsen resort, Oomuraya has two public baths and four private ones, which are available by reservation. (Some of the guest rooms also have their own private baths.) The women's public bath, Uruwashi-no-yu, was newly renovated in November 2024; natural light cascades in through its large windows. The men's public bath, Tsukikage-no-yu, also recently upgraded, opens out onto the Ureshino River and allows full immersion up to the shoulders.

The waters here are drawn straight from the source at Ureshino Onsen, known as one of the three great beautifying hot springs of Japan. These high-temperature sodium bicarbonate springs are said to leave skin feeling radiant and silky smooth, creating a bathing experience that's both therapeutic and aesthetically enriching.



Guests who opt to have dinner included with their stay will be treated to kaiseki multicourse meals that showcase the region's specialties, like Saga wagyu beef and seasonal vegetables. Dessert consists of the hotel's signature Oomuraya milk pudding, crafted exclusively with ingredients from Saga. This delicacy is also available to take home as a souvenir, as is Ureshino's famous onsen yudofu — tofu simmered in the same mineral-rich hot spring waters that fill the baths, creating a silky texture.

Through this harmonious blend of tradition and innovation, Ryokan Oomuraya doesn't just preserve history — it composes it anew for each generation. Under Kitagawa's thoughtful leadership, this storied inn has evolved into a unique cultural space where the rhythms of contemporary life flow seamlessly into centuries of tradition, creating an experience that resonates long after the last record has finished playing.

More Info

To book a stay at Ryokan Oomuraya, visit *oomuraya.co.jp/ryokan/*.







How Kumamon Took Over the World

In just 15 years, Kumamoto Prefecture's mischievous, wide-eyed local mascot has become an international icon

—

Words by Aya Sato

In Kumamoto Prefecture, he's an inescapable presence: a heavily built black bear with an often mischievous but friendly expression and bright red cheeks that grab your attention like traffic lights. You'll see him everywhere — at the airport immediately upon arrival, on government buildings, on local produce and even adorning garbage trucks. This is Kumamon, a larger-than-life figure who has become an icon of not just Kumamoto but of Japan as a whole.

"He has become more than a symbol for that region, more than merely a strategy to push its tourism and farm products," wrote the journalist Neil Steinberg in an article for the BBC. "He is almost regarded as a living entity."

Celebrity Status

It's hard to overstate Kumamon's influence. In 2019, his merchandise sales reached a new record — over ¥150 billion. He has over 800,000 followers on X and over 100,000 on Instagram. Kumamon Square, his "head office" and gift shop, has greeted over 3 million visitors since opening in 2013, with foot traffic consisting of many tourists who came to Kumamoto Prefecture specifically for the chance to meet the bear in person.

When he's not engaging in online shenanigans, Kumamon works for the government as Kumamoto Prefecture's official "sales and happiness manager" — promoting tourism, merchandise, cuisine and the overall spirit of Kumamoto and Kyushu culture nationwide and beyond.

According to Eri Kotaka, a staff member at Kumamoto's Tokyo Branch Office, the celebrated mascot often incites a passionate reaction from Tokyoites. "When Kumamon appears … it's like they've seen a celebrity," she says.

In some ways, Kumamon is a classic yuru kyara mascot, with his simple, endearing design and close connection to a specific region in Japan. ("Yuru" comes from the Japanese word "yurui," or "wobbly," and "kyara" is from the katakanized word for "character.") Unlike your typical cartoon or adorable fictional creature, yuru kyara simply exist to promote local communities or organizations, acting as cute, non-threatening representatives for often cold and faceless groups or corporations. You can find a mascot for nearly anything in Japan — the Metropolitan Police Department has Pipo-kun, the National Tax Agency's e-Tax system has E-ta-kun, and Funabashi city has the genderless magical pear fairy named Funassyi.

But among yuru kyara, Kumamon stands out. He's perhaps the most famous yuru kyara success story, largely credited as one of the variables that sprouted the massive surge in Japanese mascots over the last 15 years. It's now estimated that there are over 3,000 yuru kyara nationwide, with creative backstories and cute designs — many dreamed up in an attempt to replicate Kumamon's secret magic.





Images ©2010 Kumamoto Prefecture Kumamon

Kumamon's Rise to Fame

Kumamon's rise to prefectural symbol and international recognition is actually a bit of an accident. The character was created in 2010 to promote Kumamoto Prefecture. The region was preparing for the opening of the Kyushu Shinkansen Line's northern section, which would connect Kumamoto to Japan's major cities. To draw tourists in, the prefecture launched a campaign — called Kumamoto Surprise — to tout its many natural and cultural assets. Kumamon was simply meant to be an embellishment to the Kumamoto Surprise campaign's logo.

At the time, Kumamoto Prefecture was mostly seen as an agricultural area. Some visitors came to see Mount Aso or Kumamoto Castle, but the prefecture wasn't considered much of a tourist destination, especially internationally. Kumamon changed everything. He first made headlines through a cleverly orchestrated publicity stunt, in which the governor of Kumamoto held a press conference in Osaka to declare that his special assistant — an adorable, bipedal black bear — had disappeared. The reason, he explained, was that the bear was supposed to be handing out 10,000 business cards to passers-by in the city, but had abruptly gotten sick of his task and run off. Thus a legend was born. Kumamon brought in a jaw-dropping ¥11.8 billion in merchandising sales in just the first six months of 2012, just two years after his official debut.

> To many, Kumamon is not a character but a neighbor and a friend.

What, exactly, makes him so popular? His cuteness certainly helps, but it's arguably Kumamon's personality that's really captured so many hearts. "Despite his mischievousness, he is kind to children and the elderly," says Ayaka Honda, the Kumamon division chief, "and I think his nimble movements allow for nonverbal communication even without words."

Kumamon is silly, sometimes disobedient and has human-like problems. "He disappeared because he got tired of handing out business cards … He failed at dieting, so he has some human aspects," continues Honda.

Seeing Kumamon's success, the Kumamoto government decided to waive the licensing fees that traditionally accompany popular characters. Domestically, anyone can use Kumamon's image royalty-free, as long as the product originates from Kumamoto or promotes the prefecture. This is why you'll see Kumamon's face plastered everywhere, amassing a library of hundreds of thousands of pieces of merchandise.

Connecting the World, One Bear Hug at a Time

Beyond his profitability, Kumamon serves as a gateway ambassador for international relations, establishing and maintaining connections with various countries thanks to his soft power charms.

The bear has visited China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States, France and Thailand to foster Japanese relationships abroad. Together with Governor Ikuo Kabashima, Kumamon raised funds for the reconstruction of Notre Dame Cathedral. He visited the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Center to motivate American athletes ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. When a 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck Kumamoto in 2016, students and fans in Shanghai collected donations and notes of encouragement for Kumamon and Kumamoto residents. Kumamon himself visited disaster areas to provide emotional support.



Despite Kumamon celebrating his 15th birthday on March 12 of this year, Kumamon shows no signs of slowing down — his next big gig is at the highly anticipated Expo 2025 world's fair in Osaka, where he'll join the expo's own mascot, Myaku-Myaku, as an official special supporter.

To many, Kumamon is not a character but a neighbor and a friend. Wherever he goes in the next 15 years, he's sure to bring hugs, laughter and the reminder to not take life too seriously.





More Info

For more information on Kumamon's activities in Kumamoto Prefecture and beyond, visit *kumamon-land.jp*. You can also follow Kumamon on X at *@55_kumamon* and on Instagram at *@55_kumamontai*.

Ginza Kumamotokan, Kumamoto's antenna shop in Tokyo, is open every day from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. You can find them online at *kumamotokan.or.jp* or on Instagram at *@ginza_kumamotokan*.



Retro Wonderland

Tucked away in Oita's Bungotakada city,
Showa no Machi is a perfectly recreated Showa-era town
that feels like a hidden time capsule

Words by Kim Kahan

After landing at Oita Airport and driving for one hour, passing rice paddies and tiny hamlets until the landscape turned urban — green swathes replaced with gray buildings and rows of trees — I was greeted with an unexpected sight. "Bungotakada Showa no Machi," the sign spoke softly, faded into hues of dirty white and orange — an unassuming entrance into what would become one of my favorite spots I'd visited that year.

I was in Bungotakada city in Oita Prefecture for unrelated work reasons, staying in a business hotel nearby. As dusk fell, I headed out in search of something to eat, accompanied by the faint sounds of karaoke that wafted through the streets. It was like stepping into a parallel universe. I passed numerous fellow night strollers as I wandered the town, lit with bulbous Showa-style streetlamps. Had I traveled back in time?

The Origins of Showa Town

"Showa no Machi" translates to "Showa Town," a reference to the Showa era: one of the most recognizable periods of Japanese history, covering as it does the 63 years from 1926 to 1989 — a huge period of upheaval in the country.

> "The Showa era encompasses a wide range of looks and tastes, from the retro-futuristic 1950s and 60s to the wild maximalism of the 80s."

The start of Showa, nearly a century ago, was marked by the rise of militarism. Mid-Showa, the country had just lost World War II, and American influence was muscling its way in. Rock 'n' roll took off, Western-style clothing was all the rage and yoshoku (Western-style food) boomed in popularity. Toward the end of Showa, Japan had once again changed: It had globalized and experienced a time of exponential economic growth. The conclusion of the Showa era overlaps with what's known as the bubble economy, which ran from 1986 to 1991. Informally known as the bubble era, this period saw a large, albeit unsustainable, surge in wealth, and it exemplifies a particular aesthetic: opulence and glam, made possible by all the extra money floating around Japan at that time.

The Showa era encompasses a wide range of looks and tastes, from the retro-futuristic charm of the 1950s and 60s to the wild maximalism of the 80s; today, when people reference Showa aesthetics, they're trying to conjure up a sense of nostalgia, usually one associated with the era's middle years, from the 50s to the 70s.

Bungotakada Showa no Machi is 500 meters long, with three main streets, each lined with storefronts that burst with the spirit of the 50s and 60s — a time when Bungotakada was still a bustling maritime hub and the shopping street was at its peak. In subsequent years, as people moved to the suburbs and large retail stores followed them, the city gradually fell prey to the effects of depopulation. By the 1990s, the once-busy area lay quiet and forgotten.





> Foodwise, the essence of Showa is on display in every establishment, permeating everything from sample packaging to replica menu items in shop windows.





Restored With the Spirit of Showa

But the city of Bungotakada was not going down that easily. In 2001, it unveiled an unusual revitalization project, designed to breathe life back into its streets. While many of the revitalization efforts in Oita emphasize the region's fascinating Edo-era history — castle towns, samurai relics, beautifully preserved ruins — Showa no Machi took a different approach. It designated seven stores built in the Showa period as "certified Showa no Machi shops," recognizing them, too, as important cultural sites.

Fast forward to 2025, and the original seven shops have been joined by 51 more, selling items ranging from food to toys to lifestyle goods. Showa no Machi boasts two museums showcasing various Showa-related paraphernalia, one of which contains a full replica of a Showa-era classroom. Elsewhere, there's an electronics shop where old and new gadgets share shelf space. You'll find retro record players, boom boxes and the like alongside modern-day electronics like flatscreen TVs. On Sundays and national holidays, visitors can even ride in a real, refurbished bus from the 1950s.

Foodwise, the essence of Showa is on display in every establishment, whether souvenir shop or restaurant, permeating everything from sample packaging to the replica menu items featured in shop windows and entranceways. Of course, there's a dagashiya: a vintage penny-candy shop filled to bursting with a cacophony of old-time sweets you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere else.

Ambling around, you'll be treated to classic vending machines, globe-shaped Showa-era streetlamps and even a Showa-style portable gas pump accompanied by a sign advertising gasoline, kerosene and diesel at their 1962 prices. Such is Showa no Machi's authenticity that the area is a popular location for filming period movies and TV dramas, with some crews even taking advantage of the vintage bus.

> On Sundays and national holidays, visitors can ride in a real, refurbished bus from the 1950s.



Across the bridge, you'll find Tamatsu Platinum Street, which continues with the retro theme. Kitschy paintings and trick art decorate the ground: Make your way through a diminutive maze and walk among hyper-realistic chess pieces adorning a checkered path. Other spots to enjoy include a nostalgia-evoking Showa-era hairdresser's window, a cozy working movie theater housed in a 70-year-old former bakery and a shop serving hand-rolled Bungotakada soba, a regional specialty.

More Info

For more information on Showa no Machi and other sightseeing spots in Oita, visit *discover-oita.com*.



Peaceful Landscapes Forged in Fire

Ecotourism in Aso city, home of Japan's largest active volcano

Words by Alina Joan Ito

Between approximately 300,000 and 90,000 years ago, a series of four massive volcanic eruptions shaped what is now the Aso caldera — one of the largest on Earth. It extends approximately 17 kilometers east to west and 25 kilometers north to south and contains Mount Aso, an active volcano with steaming craters, as well as vast grasslands where cattle graze. Legend has it that in ancient times, a god split open the caldera's rim, allowing dammed-up water to escape and create the fertile plains that ring the volcanic crater.

The citizens of Aso city call this mystical caldera home. Surrounded in every direction by cliffs that rise as high as 700 meters, the landscape gives those who enter a sense of stepping into a vast celestial diorama — so small, yet watched over by some larger being.

The constant smoke billowing from Mount Aso's highly active peak, juxtaposed against the vast expanse of greenery, lends the city an otherworldly energy. It's a fascinating place to experience the majesty of nature in all its forms, from bucolic swaths of grasslands to violent plumes of volcanic smoke.

Volcano City

Aso is characterized by the presence of Mount Aso, one of the most active volcanoes in the world. (It last erupted in 2021.) The volcano consists of multiple peaks, and its many viewpoints are accessible by car or on foot. However, access to Nakadake crater — its most active and dynamic vent, known for its steaming, turquoise-colored acidic lake — is restricted when gas levels become dangerous or when volcanic activity intensifies. The city highly recommends checking the volcano's current status before visiting.

The most popular ways to visit Mount Aso are by driving to the easily accessible crater-viewing area or by hiking one of the many trails that wind through the caldera's scenic landscapes, including one that leads to the peak of Mount Nakadake and offers a spectacular view of the active crater below. For visitors wanting to make the most of their volcano-viewing experience, helicopter tours depart from a local zoo called Cuddly Dominion. There are a few different flight options, and the most popular course will take you on a seven-minute loop around the whole Nakadake crater, allowing you to peer into the fuming waters at its center. There are other ways to view Mount Aso from on high as well: As long as weather conditions permit, visitors can ride in a hot air balloon or paraglide, both through guided experiences offered by the outdoor activity shop Aso Nature Land.

> "The landscape gives those who enter a sense of stepping into a vast celestial diorama."





A Cycle of Rebirth

The Aso grasslands are a sight to behold year-round: verdant in summer, a pale gold expanse of Japanese pampas grass in autumn, snowcapped in winter — and then torched and returned to ashes to welcome the multicolored rebirth of spring.

This unique region is maintained through noyaki, or controlled grassland burning. Every year, as winter comes to a close, select parts of the Aso grasslands are set ablaze, leaving behind a black expanse of ashes. From this desolate-seeming landscape, the rare Oriental yellow violet blooms in profusion, dotting the black terrain in a constellation of gold signaling the seasonal renaissance.

Noyaki is a 1,000-year-old tradition started by early settlers in the region to promote the growth of new grass for cattle, kill pests and prevent the overgrowth of trees. Beyond its agricultural purpose, this practice holds significant environmental benefits. By maintaining the open grasslands, noyaki helps preserve Aso city's unique ecosystem; it also encourages biodiversity, as the fresh growth attracts insects and small animals. Moreover, the controlled burn helps reduce the risk of large-scale wildfires, as it removes dry, combustible materials. The practice also prevents the encroachment of forests, ensuring that the wide, expansive vistas of Aso remain intact.

The grasslands can be enjoyed on foot or by car, but an exciting alternative is to explore the sprawling area on horseback. The Yume Daichi Green Valley ranch offers tours around the grasslands that are safe for beginner riders, with attentive instructors providing guidance before and throughout the experience. Feeling the sturdy warmth of an animal allows visitors to feel more connected to the expansive land before them.

> “Each year, select parts of the Aso grasslands are set ablaze, leaving behind a black expanse of ashes.”

Cycling tours are also an excellent way to see Aso. Book a bokuya (pastureland) ride for a guided biking experience that will take you through the city's grasslands, including areas that are normally off-limits to the public. Unlike standard routes, a bokuya ride leaves the main roads behind, ushering you instead into open pastures where you'll follow trails that locals have used for generations. Included in the rate is a grassland conservation fee, which helps with environmental preservation.





Born from a volcano with lands that return to ash at the end of every winter, the city of Aso has a mythic quality to it — like a phoenix, burning and resurrecting each year. Whether you're exploring its volcanic craters, cycling through its vast pastures or connecting with its ancient traditions, Aso provides a profound and awe-inspiring experience. It's a place where nature's raw power and human tradition coexist, where the land is constantly reborn and where visitors are invited to witness and be part of a living, breathing landscape.

More Info

Learn more about Aso city and plan your visit at *asocity-kanko.jp/en/*.



Legendary Onsen Hopping

Discover Kyushu's healing springs through tales of old

— *Words by Alina Joan Ito*

Surrounded by the ocean and characterized by its spectacular mountain ranges, Kyushu is a land of natural abundance. Its fertile soil and subtropical climate make it rich in nature's gifts while its volcanoes fuel an abundance of onsen. In Japan, hot springs have long been revered for their healing properties, and Kyushu — believed to be the land where the gods first descended to earth — is home to many with mystical origin stories.

Journey through Kyushu's legendary hot springs and immerse yourself in tales of miraculous healing and divine encounters.





Unzen Onsen: Blessed by a Four-Faced Goddess

Nagasaki Prefecture

Unzen Onsen, a historic hot spring town nestled in Unzen-Amakusa National Park, boasts mineral-rich, highly acidic waters believed to have antibacterial and beautifying effects. In this quaint area, you can also find Unzen Jigoku, or Unzen Hell — a geothermal area filled with steaming vents and boiling springs. The gushing water, billowing steam and faint yet distinct scent of sulfur in the air combine to create an eerie and otherworldly landscape.

Situated within Unzen Jigoku is Onsen Shrine, also known as Shimengu. The shrine has a long and deeply mystical history. According to legend, over 1,000 years ago, the monk Gyoki followed Unzen's towering plumes of volcanic smoke to their source. There, he encountered a luminous serpent, which transformed into a four-faced goddess and proclaimed herself to be the guardian deity of Kyushu. This divine being, called Oshimen — which translates to "four-faced" — has been venerated ever since.

Reference to a four-faced deity even appears in the *Kojiki*, the oldest existing record of Japanese history, and several smaller shrines honoring this divine protector are scattered throughout Nagasaki's Shimabara Peninsula to this day. While steeping in Unzen's sulfuric springs, perhaps you'll feel a celestial presence.

More info: *unzenonsen.unzen.org/e_ver/*





Tsuetate Onsen: Kobo Daishi's Miraculous Staff

Kumamoto Prefecture

In the valley of Oguni town, you'll find Tsuetate Onsen, a hot spring town bisected by a river, where plumes of steam rise from the earth. A bustling entertainment district and luxury travel destination during the Showa period, it almost feels frozen in time — a pocket of history, impeccably preserved.

The waters of Tsuetate Onsen are incredibly hot, bubbling to the surface at 100 degrees Celsius before being cooled to a comfortable temperature at the many spas in the area. As they're high in metasilicic acid, they're thought to leave bathers feeling supple and energized.

The name "Tsuetate" is derived from two kanji characters meaning "staff" and "stand." The name is believed to have been bestowed by the legendary monk Kobo Daishi, who visited the onsen town during the Heian period. As one legend has it, the waters of Tsuetate Onsen were so revitalizing that, after the monk dipped his wooden staff in the spring, branches and leaves sprung from it. Kobo Daishi was so impressed by the waters that he wrote a poem declaring that those who visit Tsuetate Onsen would leave town no longer in need of any sort of walking assistance.

More info: *tsuetate-onsen.com/english*

Beppu Onsen: Springs That Cured the God of Healing

Oita Prefecture

With around 3,000 hot spring sources, representing one-tenth of all onsen vents in the country, Beppu in Oita has the largest volume of hot springs in all of Japan. It's composed of eight onsen districts — Beppu Onsen, Kannawa Onsen, Myoban Onsen, Kankaiji Onsen, Hamawaki Onsen, Kamegawa Onsen, Horita Onsen and Shibaseki Onsen — each with its own unique culture. Kamegawa, for instance, is known for its warm sand baths, while Kannawa stands out for its use of herbal steams.

Beyond its renowned waters, Beppu is also teeming with legends. Its hot springs, of course, play a notable role. It is said that the waters of Beppu Onsen were used by the healing god Sukunahikona and Okuninushi, one of Shinto's central deities and the original ruler of the earthly world. The two gods were visiting Iyo-no-Kuni (modern-day Ehime Prefecture, Shikoku), when Sukunahikona fainted from illness. Okuninushi piped in water from across the sea, reaching all the way to Beppu Onsen to draw its therapeutic waters. Doused in these healing springs, Sukunahikona made a miraculous recovery.

Beppu's illustrious reputation as a healing center has continued throughout the ages. It's thought to have been responsible for healing samurai of the Otomo clan during the Kamakura period, and it was written about by the neo-Confucian scholar and botanist Kaibara Ekken in the Edo period. Paying a visit to Beppu, visitors can find themselves in the same silky smooth springs that rejuvenated gods and warriors.

More info: *enjoyonsen.city.beppu-jp.com*







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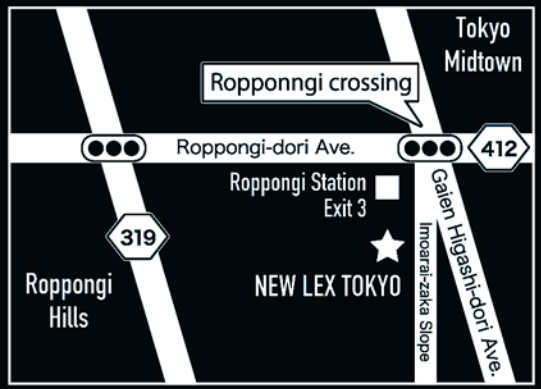
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Two notable Tokyoites describe how they'd spend an ideal day in the city

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Music

Must-listen albums according to singer Nina Utashiro

Frank Gehry, Frank & Berta Gehry House, 1978. C Frank O. Gehry. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles



‘Living Modernity: Experiments in the Exceptional and Everyday 1920s–1970s’ at The National Art Center, Tokyo

"Living Modernity" explores the home as an innovative space of beauty and the architectural ideas of the 20th century that have shaped contemporary living standards. Showcasing examples from Japan, Europe, America and Brazil, the exhibition traces the evolution of modernist housing through an impressive roster of architects and mixed-media displays, spanning original blueprints to immersive VR experiences. A major highlight is the first full-scale realization of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s unfinished “Rowe House,” brought to life through the gallery’s ambitious first crowdfunding effort. Sure to delight fans of interior and architectural design, alongside anyone who has ever taken pleasure in a Zillow scrolling session.

The National Art Center, Tokyo Until June 30
nact.jp/english/

THE ART WORLD

Our pick of the city’s best exhibitions

Compiled by Victoria Bennett



Tomo Koizumi Jumpsuit 2020 S/S. ©The Kyoto Costume Institute. Photo: Korota Takeshi

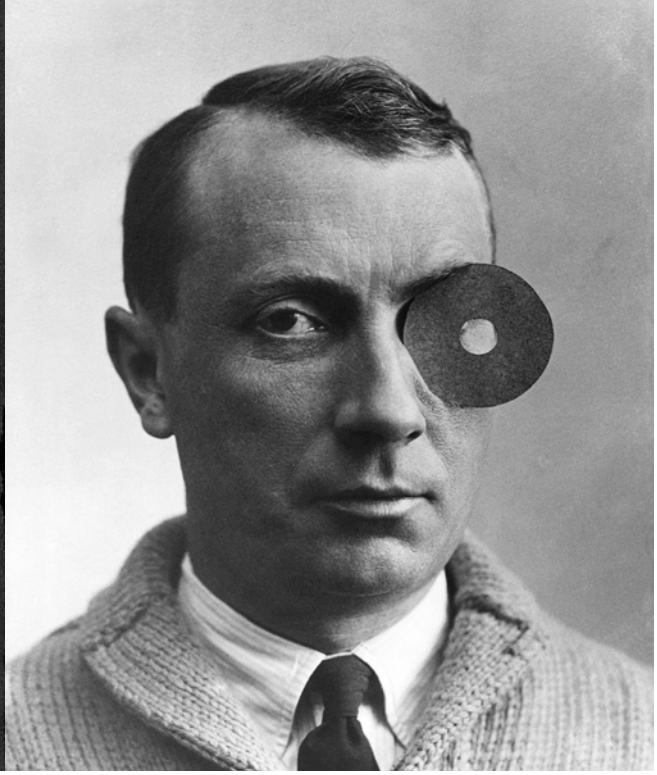
‘Love Fashion: In Search of Myself’ at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery

Enter a world of sartorial fantasy through the archives of the Kyoto Costume Institute, where fashion provides a lens for exploring our innermost dreams and desires. From luxurious historical garments to modern silhouettes and contemporary statement pieces, the displays traverse centuries of style while examining the deep connection that clothing has with human nature and the self. Is the art of dressing up adornment, or subversion? In a dream world, what would you choose to wear?

Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery From April 16 until June 22 *operacity.jp/en/ag/*



Nic ALUF, Sophie Taeuber with the Dada-Head, 1920, Stiftung Arp e. V., Berlin/Rolandswerth



Jean Arp with the Navel-Monocle (photographer unknown), c. 1926, Stiftung Arp e. V., Berlin/Rolandswerth VG BILD-KUNST, Bonn & JASPAR, Tokyo, 2024 C4762

‘Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Jean Arp’ at Artizon Museum

Both celebrated artists in their own right, Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Jean Arp were a creative power couple of the last century, influencing aesthetics across sculpture, painting and graphic design. The Artizon Museum shines a spotlight on their inspirational partnership, highlighting 88 works that showcase Taeuber-Arp’s signature geometric style against Arp’s more fluid, organic forms, and the synergy between them. From collaborative pieces to individual works, this show offers a rare glimpse into the relationship between one of avant-garde’s most influential duos.

Artizon Museum Until June 1 *artizon.museum/en/*



‘Ari Bayuaji: Sounds of the Ocean’ at Mizuma Art Gallery

Rooted in sustainability and craftsmanship, the intricate work of contemporary Indonesian artist Ari Bayuaji is brought to Japan for the first time in this solo exhibition. Known for his large-scale works that repurpose discarded plastics into vibrant woven textiles and sculptures, Bayuaji bridges environmental concern with human ingenuity, offering a quiet reverence for nature and an optimistic meditation on patience and the power of transformation.

Mizuma Art Gallery From April 9 until May 7 *mizuma-art.co.jp/en/*



Calm Ocean at Dawn, 2024, Woven plastic and cotton threads, plastic chords, 167 x 119 cm. Photo: Miyajima Kei. Courtesy of Mizuma Art Gallery.

TW Social

This month, we check in on the community to see what's going on in Tokyo's vibrant social scene

By David Schneider



Emmy wining show "Shogun" Casts. From left)Tokuma Nishioka, Tadanobu Asano, Hiroto Kanai, Moeka Hoshi, Yuuka Kouri, Yuki Kedouin.

Four distinguished guests at The Hollywood Reporter Trailblazer Award Gala. From left to right: Carlos Peña from Japan Breeze, former Yokohama baseball star Alex Ramirez, Kathy Knowles from Kimpton Hotels, Vice President of Disney Resort Japan Jim Doyle.





Attending The Hollywood Reporter Japan Trailblazer Award Gala at The Peninsula Tokyo. From left to right: Caiya (Carolyn Kawasaki), Shagun Gupta and Girolamo Panzetta.

Sumo champion-turned-entertainer Konishiki with his spouse at The Hollywood Reporter Japan's Trailblazer Award Gala.





At The Hollywood Reporter Japan Trailblazer Award Gala. From left to right: MC Clara Bodin with a friend, and Kazutoshi Kobayashi, President & CEO of Kose, with his spouse.



Emmy-nominated actor Tadanobu Asano with distinguished members of Tokyo's diplomatic corps. From left to right: Chilean Ambassador H.E. Mr. Rodrigo Rojas, Jamaican Ambassador H.E. Ms. Shorna-Kay Richards, Tadanobu Asano, and U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission Katherine Monahan.

The Hollywood Reporter's Asia Bureau Editor, Patrick Brzeski, award winner Tadanobu Asano, and THR Japan Chairman, Tsukasa Shiga, celebrating together at the Trailblazer Award Gala.





Three distinguished grand dames celebrating at The Trailblazer Award Gala at The Peninsula Tokyo. From left to right: Ishii Mitsuko, Member of the House of Councillors, Akiko Santō, President of the House of Councillors of Japan, and Dewi Sukarno.

His Royal Highness Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan and Her Imperial Highness Princess Takamado celebrating 70 Years of Friendship at a special reception marking the diplomatic milestone between Jordan and Japan, held at Meiji Kinenkan.





Photographer Benjamin Lee and Asako Hirano, Japan Market Manager of Bottega Spa, celebrating the unveiling of a limited-edition of BOTTEGA bottles in Ginza.



From left to right: The Greek Ambassador's wife, His Excellency Mr. Nicolaos Argyros, Greek Ambassador to Japan, world-class Greek violinist, Leonidas Kavakos and a member of the orchestra.



Attending The Hollywood Reporter Japan Trailblazer Award Gala at The Peninsula Tokyo. From left: acclaimed actor Masaya Kato, renowned casting director and producer Yoko Narahashi, and Satch Watanabe.

Irish Ambassador to Japan Damien Cole and Ukrainian Ambassador to Japan Sergiy Korsunsky celebrating Belgium's King's Day at the Belgian Embassy.



Young Italian/Japanese violinist Mina Aoki Girardelli at the Italian Ambassador's residence concert with H.E.Mr. Gianluigi Benedetti, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Italy.





French Ambassador Philippe Seton and Belgian Ambassador Antoine Evrard celebrating Belgium's King's Day at the Belgian Embassy.



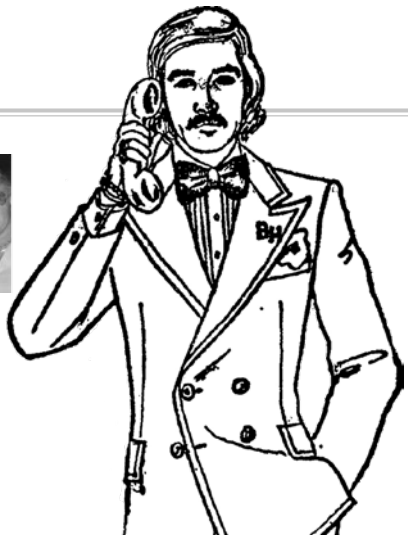
Egyptian Ambassador H.E. Ayman Aly Kamel and his spouse, Ghada Kamel, celebrating his receipt of the prestigious and rare Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star, in front of the Imperial Palace. This distinguished honor, awarded by the Japanese government, recognizes Ambassador Kamel's exceptional contributions to strengthening diplomatic relations and fostering cultural and economic ties between Egypt and Japan.

Bill Hersey's Partyline • *Connecting Communities Since 1970* •

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These pages are dedicated to the late Bill Hersey, Tokyo Weekender's original society columnist who wrote for the magazine from 1970 to 2018. Originally called "Bill's Party Line," the column featured visiting celebrities and local VIPs, and helped to connect expat communities within Tokyo, with Bill achieving legendary status amongst his peer group and our readers.

Perfect Days

Notable Tokyoites share how they'd spend a perfect day in the city

My Perfect Day: Yurié Collins

Yurié Collins is a comedian, actress and social media sensation. From her stand-up sets discussing the horrors of dating in sharp and hilarious detail to her skits with fellow Japan-based content creators, Collins is an expert at bringing laughter to people in Japan (and far beyond). Here's what an ideal day in Tokyo looks like for her:

My perfect day in Tokyo is ...

One that embraces spontaneity and allows for mindfulness. I like to start the day by putting my hands together to say thank you for this new morning. In the bustle of a big city, it's easy to forget how lucky I am to be able to pursue my dreams. After that, I'd start my ideal day with a morning visit to the gym. (All the girlies who lift heavy say *woo*!)



Although my mother lives in Wakayama, where I'm from, I'm fortunate that she comes to Tokyo quite often for work. I love kicking it with her in **Shin-Okubo**, Tokyo's biggest Koreatown. Our favorite restaurant there is **Kurumu**, an amazing Korean barbecue place. We also like to get K-beauty essentials, like face masks, at **Irohani**, a small but very well-stocked cosmetics store.

Another thing I love to do is to buy magazines. I always have the best time looking through the selection at the **Tsutaya Books** in Daikanyama — they have great photo books, too.

As a performer, I cherish a good place to write and reflect. My go-to spot is **Nelken**, a coffee shop in Koenji. The vibe is so magical; it's quiet and atmospheric, with classical music playing and lush seats and curtains made of red velvet.

A perfect day would of course have some stage time. I love performing at Shibuya's **Tokyo Comedy Bar** — my dojo. After a show, there's nothing better than hanging out with the other comedians; they're the best. A bar I really like is **The Music Bar - Cave Shibuya**.

Tokyo's best kept secret is ...

Not so much of a secret, but finding a snack bar with karaoke is the best way to make friends in Japan. Something about singing allows people to put down their usual social guard, and it's a great way to meet people who are from a totally different field. I often go to **Karaoke Bar Asoko** in Shibuya. It's always a fun and chill spot, one where you can bond with strangers.

A spot I've always wanted to try is ...

The fake Shibuya crossing they use to shoot movies! It's called **Ashikaga Scramble City Studio**, in Tochigi Prefecture. Unfortunately, it costs hundreds of thousands of yen to rent, which is why I haven't tried it yet.



I've also always wanted to go to **Bar Centifolia**, a cocktail bar in Azabu-Juban where the bartender does elaborate performances. I know it's super popular, but I can't help but want to experience the lure of that bar master. Yes, drama!

More Info

Follow Yurié on Instagram at *@babypinkhaus*.



My Perfect Day: Mike Sunda

Mike Sunda is a London-born creative strategist who's been based in Tokyo since 2013; he's also written extensively about Japanese society and culture as a freelance journalist. He's the co-founder of the studio Push Japan, and recently executive produced the music video for Megan Thee Stallion's "Mamushi." Here's how he'd spend an ideal day in Tokyo:

My perfect day in Tokyo is ...

I'm completely useless until I've had my first coffee; anyone who knows me knows that my perfect day would begin with a stop by **Good People & Good Coffee** in Ikejiri-Ohashi, where I've lived for over seven years. The owner, Tomoshi-san, represents everything I love about Japan: He is committed to his craft, values culture and community over all else and isn't afraid to tell people to clear off and go to Starbucks if they want to use a laptop.



I enjoy my work, so I'm torn whether my perfect day would be a weekday or weekend. If it's the former, after coffee, I'd head to Hiroo, where our office is located. I enjoy people-watching while having a solo lunch, which I might do somewhere like **Priya** — an Indian establishment frequented by investment bankers and diplomats — or sitting outside in **Arisugawa-no-miya Memorial Park** with a burrito from the nearby **440Broadway** food truck.

On a weekend, my perfect day would be spent taking it easy with my partner in our neighborhood. A stroll around **Setagaya Park** almost inevitably leads to bumping into friends, so a short excursion can easily turn into a two-hour diversion. Lunch at a local spot like **Savoy** or **Hongkongmen Shinki** might be followed by a glass of wine at **My Eats&Drinks** — a tiny, cute shop that sells onigiri and natural wine.

I enjoy cooking more than eating out, but my repertoire is pretty much limited solely to pasta. There's a low-key Italian spot in Nakameguro called **Bacione** where I buy things like guanciale and taleggio. And if friends are in town then I'll likely take them for a drink in the evening — I'm friends with the team at **Lobby**, which is a great local bar for a conversation over wine or cocktails, or there's **Bar Coda** down the road for a night of cigarettes and whisky. The hangovers are worse after that one.





> A stroll around Setagaya Park almost inevitably leads to bumping into friends, so a short excursion can easily turn into a two-hour diversion.

A lot of my friends overseas are DJs, so if they're in town then I might venture to see them play somewhere like **WWW** or **Vent**, but these days my Saturday nights are more likely to be spent watching Premier League football at **The Footnik**, in Ebisu. And it's only a perfect day if Arsenal wins.

Tokyo's best-kept secret is ...

The boat races in Heiwajima. Not a single smartphone in sight, just retired men dressed in tracksuits, chain-smoking and gambling.

A place I've always wanted to try is ...

Shelter, a listening bar in Hachioji. Its reputation amongst audiophiles is second to none, but Hachioji isn't exactly a casual night out that you can taxi home from.

More Info

Follow Mike on Instagram at *@mksnd*.



MUSIC

Singer and lyricist Nina Utashiro raps glam and horror to the EBM scene — and shares five favored albums

Words by Kim Kahan

Nina Utashiro is wholeheartedly dedicated to her craft. Formerly known as Thirteen13, the German-Japanese singer and creative director made the switch to her real name in 2021 with the release of "Aria," a sexy, gothic-clad romp that signaled a new, more serious intent.

"Aria" was the first single from Utashiro's debut album, *Operetta Hysteria*, which was released the following year. Described as a lockdown-inspired project, the English-Japanese bilingual album is massively accomplished for a first outing, with dark, brooding beats and vocals bordering on hysteria morphing and twisting throughout each song. Utashiro's 2023 single, "Better," a TW favorite that year, saw Utashiro partner again with producer Akira, who also worked on *Operetta Hysteria*. Over Akira's sensual track, Utashiro's vocals — alternately screaming and rapping — build to madness before receding, carrying the hysteric operetta beyond that first album.

In addition to her music credentials, the infinitely cool Utashiro boasts a fashion background that's evident in her visual aesthetic: gothic glam wrapped and then frayed around the edges, exposing a dark, raw core. It's easy to dismiss artists who focus as much on the visuals as they do the sound, yet Utashiro's distinctive sonic aesthetic is only enhanced by her innate ability to create images and performances that express that aesthetic visually.

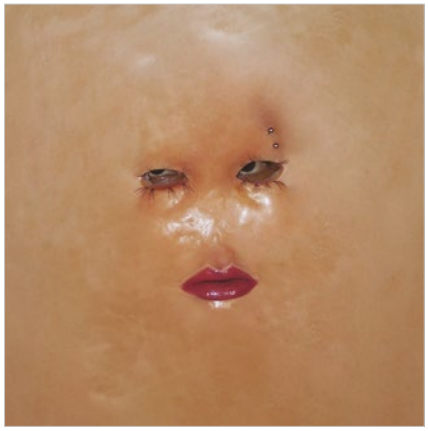
This is an artist who embodies "go hard or go home," and she knows exactly what she wants, tying each component of her artistic identity together with a black leather ribbon. To witness this synergy, catch her live: Utashiro's performances are accompanied by visuals and costumes that combine aggressive with glamorous.

Nina Utashiro's new EP, Undress to Kill, *is forthcoming in 2025.*

Five Albums To Add to Your Playlist



***Cowboy Carter* by Beyoncé**
This has newly become one of my favorite albums of all time. “Daughter” is otherworldly. I enjoy country music’s storytelling and songwriting a lot, and I’m very happy Beyoncé did her own version of it. It’s an epic bit of traditional storytelling, with B’s flawless, bold voice.



***Alias* by Shygirl**
I love listening to this EP when I’m getting ready to go out. “Slime” has this bit where she says, “She came to fuck,” which gets me going every time. Her delivery for this track has this dark, venomous energy that’s irresistible.

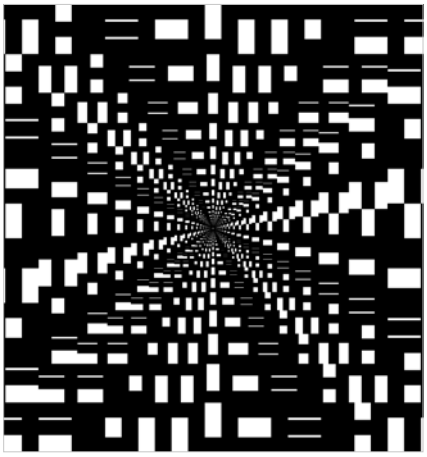
***I Love You Jennifer B* by Jockstrap**
[The combination of] Taylor’s production and Georgia’s angelic voice is a mismatch made in heaven. “Angst” is so beautiful that it gets me teared up. They’re both incredible musicians making sounds with otherworldly amounts of versatility, and it feels like a whole multidimensional experience.





***The Blixky Tape 2* by 22Gz**
I listen to this when I miss New York or want to fight somebody. I’ve been getting into New York drill lately, and I think he’s the best. “Joke’s Up” is a bop. The flow is stupendous and hits well for when I want to feel unstoppable.

***The Cut Off* by Perc**
This is the album that I blast when I need to clean my house. I don’t know why, but it organizes my brain and makes me very productive. It's pretty simple and direct, and there’s something about it that helps me zone in. “Static” is my favorite.



Events

Tokyo ushers in spring with an eclectic mix of music, from dance and hip-hop to jazz and indie

Superfuzz Presents: Sextile

Party promoters and DJ collective Superfuzz bring the post-punk EBM group Sextile over for its Japan debut. Support on the night comes from the local band Bed.

DATE: April 3
PRICE: ¥5,500
VENUE: Circus Tokyo
INFO: superfuzz2019.zaiko.io/item/369495

Rainbow Disco Club

RDC returns in April, featuring a host of key names in the world of underground dance music. This year’s highlights include Gilles Peterson, Kode9 and Eris Drew & Octo Octa.

DATE: April 18–20
PRICE: ¥27,000
VENUE: Higashi-Izu Cross Country Course
INFO: rainbowdiscoclub.com

Pop Yours

The seminal Japanese hip-hop festival returns for its fourth year, bringing the cream of Japanese rap and hip-hop to Chiba for the weekend. Don’t miss Nene, Watson and former TW guest Charlu.

DATE: May 24, 25
PRICE: ¥24,000
VENUE: Makuhari Messe
INFO: popyours.jp/m2025

Kamasi Washington

Kendrick Lamar collaborator Kamasi Washington — aka one of the coolest saxophonists in the business — returns to Tokyo for two dates in a sophisticated setting.

DATE: May 23, 28
PRICE: ¥16,400
VENUE: Billboard Live Tokyo
INFO: billboard-live.com

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