

Tokyo Weekender

Volume 2, 2025

# TW

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creativity

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of the breakout stars of  
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# CONTENTS

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## RADAR

### THIS MONTH'S HEAD TURNERS

#### 8 NEIGHBORHOOD GUIDE: KAPPABASHI

A small corner of Tokyo famed for its ties to kitchenware and a mythical creature.

#### 10 STYLE: TIARA'S SELECTION

Insider and tastemaker Tiara curates an exciting selection of designers to watch.

#### 16 NARISAWA: FROM EARTH TO TABLE

Chef Yoshihiro Narisawa transforms foraged ingredients into culinary works of art.

#### 18 TRENDS: SERVING IN STYLE

Four distinguished Japanese bartenders share their stories — and their signature cocktails.

## IN-DEPTH

### COFFEE-BREAK READS

#### 22 ENTERING A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Emmy-nominated actor Takehiro Hira on his most iconic roles — and what's next for him.

#### 28 UNABASHEDLY ALAN

Alan Takahashi opens up about his time on *The Boyfriend* and his hopes for Japan.

#### 32 KURUMI NAKATA: DREAMING BIG

The actress and model is carving out her own space in the entertainment world.

#### 35 TOKYO DRIFT, REIMAGINED

The Clutch Kickback Motor Series is not your typical automotive event.

#### 38 HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN

Artist Yuki Otani sees kintsugi as a path to personal healing and emotional release.

#### 42 BORDERLESS CREATIVITY

Photographer Boa Campbell creates work that serves as a bridge between cultures.

#### 46 CARING FOR THE WORLD

Gifu's Central Japan International Medical Center is setting the gold standard for cancer treatment and preventive care.

#### 48 AESTHETIC MEDICINE IN JAPAN

Kumiko Clinic offers a personalized approach to body contouring.

#### 50 DIVE HEADFIRST INTO LUXURY

The head spa Kläre offers a relaxing and rejuvenating experience like no other.

## TRAVEL

### KANSAI SPECIAL

#### 52 KYOTO'S FLOATING VILLAGE

Known as the "Venice of Japan," Ine is famed for its boathouses set along a glittering bay.

#### 54 A SERENE OVERNIGHT STAY IN CENTRAL KYOTO

A charming 24-hour itinerary that will take you away from the crowds.

#### 56 MONUMENTS OF SHADOW AND LIGHT

Awaji Island is home to some of Japan's most striking modernist architecture.

#### 58 THE FLOWER TEMPLES OF KANSAI

These sacred spaces in Nara and Kyoto are renowned for their sublime floral displays.

#### 60 JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF JAPANESE SPIRITUALITY

At Koyasan, travelers can experience a brush with the divine.

## GUIDE

### CULTURE ROUNDUP

#### 66 ART WORLD

Our pick of the best new exhibitions across the city.

#### 68 TW SOCIAL

What our TW community has been up to lately.

#### 70 PERFECT DAYS

Two notable Tokyoites share their ideal day in Japan's capital city.



Tokyo Weekender

Vol. 2, 2025

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Published by ENGAWA Co., Ltd.

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# MEET THE TEAM

Introducing the team behind this month's issue

Cover photo by Solène Ballesta



**Liam, Executive Director:** I'm an absolutely massive fan of *Shogun*, so when Takehiro Hira agreed to be our cover star for this issue, I was beyond excited [p.22]. The interview was everything we could have hoped for, with Hira's infectious charm, humor and wit on full display.



**Alina, Editorial Content Creator:** Chatting with Alan Takahashi [p.28] for this issue was some of the most fun I've ever had during an interview. It was such an honor to bask in his infectious positivity and kind-hearted approach to life.



**Ben, Digital Content Creator:** Getting back to my mechanic roots and among Tokyo's world-class car scene [p.35] was a great way to spend a weekend(er). Eighteen-year-old me would be jealous (and very confused as to how we got there).



## What was your favorite part of creating this latest issue?

**Ynes, Editorial Content Creator:** Meeting the wonderful Kintsugi Lady, Yuki Otani, in her quaint Ogikubo studio [p.38], and having a super fun convo with the amazing Boa Campbell about identity, culture and creativity [p.42]. Oh, and the head spa [p. 50] was heavenly!



**Christian, Website Content Manager:** Reading about the real-life water temple on Awaji Island [p.56] brought back so many childhood gaming memories of playing through water-themed dungeons. I'm just glad there's no boss waiting for me at the back of the temple.



**Victoria, Art Director:** Learning how the Expo '70 artist Taro Okamoto tried to conjure ancient magic using his paintings [p.67], and getting inspiration for new trips while designing the Travel section.



**Eugenie, Editorial Content Creator:** Learning about Chef Yoshihiro Narisawa's journey as a leader in innovative sustainable cuisine [p.16], and introducing the gorgeous modernist architecture in one of my favorite Kansai destinations, Awaji Island [p.56]!



**Callie, Editorial Director:** The interview with kintsugi expert Yuki Otani [p.38] made me cry as I was working on it! But I also loved hearing behind-the-scenes *The Boyfriend* stories from Alina after her amazing profile of Alan Takahashi [p.28].

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# RADAR



8

**Neighborhood:  
Kappabashi**

Kitchenware and mythical  
creatures abound

10

**Style:  
Tiara's Selection**

An exciting selection of  
designers to watch this year

18

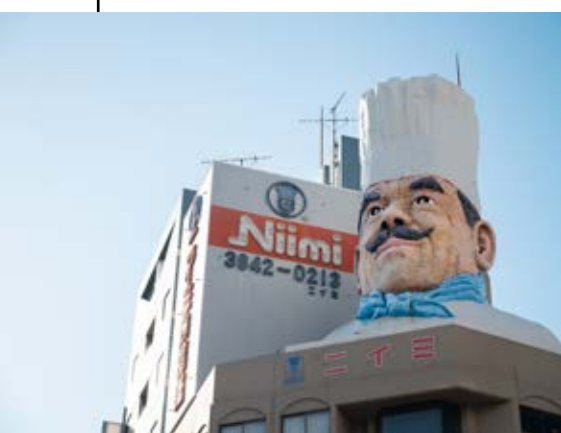
**Trends:  
Serving in Style**

Four distinguished bartenders  
share their stories

# Mythical Creatures and Kitchenware in Kappabashi

A small corner of Tokyo brimming with color and culture

— Words and photos by Ben Cooke



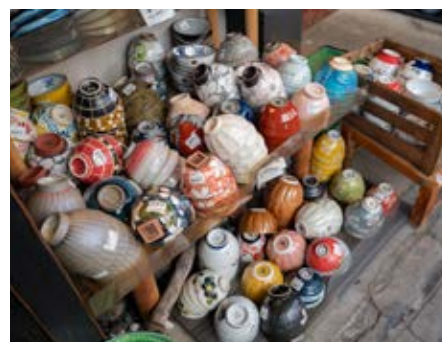
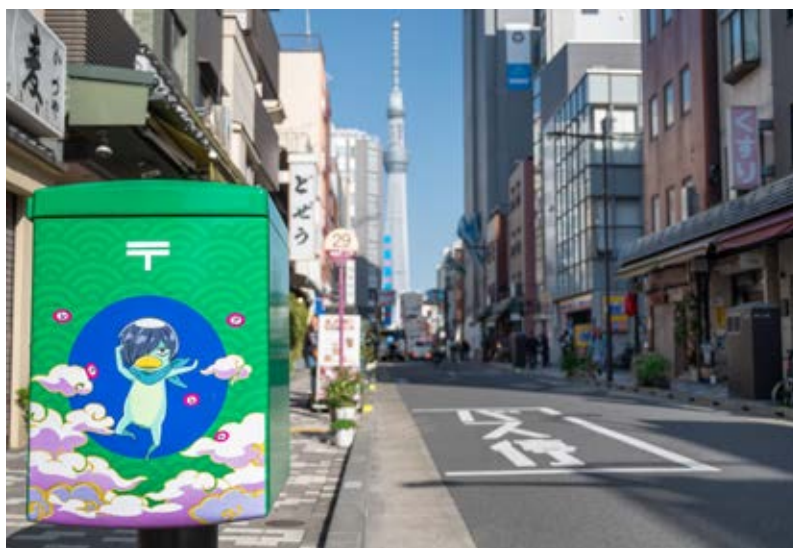
**K**appabashi is a neighborhood best known for two things: kitchen supplies and a Japanese mythological being, the kappa. The latter is best described as a bipedal turtle-like creature known for causing mischief in and around waterways and for having a taste for cucumbers. But what does any of this have to do with Kappabashi?

There are two theories regarding the origins of this niche part of Tokyo, both explained by a sign that stands in the area. The first is that around 160 years ago, the area was prone to flooding. Tired of this, a local man, Kappaya Kihachi, took it upon himself to carry out drainage works, but the project struggled — something noticed by some nearby kappa, with whom he was apparently on good terms and who helped him complete construction.

The second story says that samurai and foot soldiers would hang raincoats (kappa) out to dry by a bridge (bashi) in the area. So the name translates to either raincoat bridge or mythical-water-dwelling-creature bridge. Whichever one you decide sounds closer to the truth, there are plenty of interesting ways to spend an afternoon here.

## Kitchen Connoisseurs

Kappabashi as a neighborhood is centered mostly on a single street, commonly known as Kappabashi Kitchen Street.



Depending on which end you arrive at, locating this street is as easy as looking out for an enormous bust of a mustached chef rising from the roof of a building. You'll also know you're in the right place when every shop is selling either kitchen knives or tableware. Or when you begin noticing images and statues of your friendly neighborhood kappa in shopfronts and on overhead signage.

Known for their exceptional sharpness, Japanese kitchen knives have made a name for themselves globally in recent years. Inbound tourists from around the world can be found all along Kappabashi Kitchen Street looking for blades to add to their collections, with some stores even offering engraving services that allow each knife to be personalized with the owner's name.

On Kitchen Street, you'll find wares crafted in modest, earthy tones alongside items with vibrant, hand-painted designs.



The selection feels endless: everything from plates and bowls right down to chopstick holders. There are also a number of specialty chopsticks stores, such as Hashitou, where customers can test drive (without food, sadly) different styles, lengths and materials to find a pair perfectly suited to their hand.

### Make Food, Eat Food

Replica food, which is often found on display outside restaurants and cafés as a means of physically displaying the menu, is a big business in Japan. Some of Tokyo's best fake food can be found right in the heart of Kappabashi at Tokyo Biken and Ganso Shokuhin Sample-ya. Both of these stores sell a variety of plastic Japanese dishes, both full-size and in a more practical, keychain variety.

At Ganso Shokuhin Sample-ya, customers can also

book a replica food workshop to make their own non-edible confection. This workshop, which goes for 40 minutes and costs ¥3,000 per person, allows participants to make two tempura items and one piece of lettuce using traditional wax methods. Reservations are necessary to participate and can be made online via the Ganso Shokuhin Sample-ya website.

If you're looking for food you can actually eat, most options are found on the side streets that branch off of Kappabashi Kitchen Street. Notable mentions include Shochiku-en Cafe, a vegan and gluten-free eatery with a delicious menu including Margherita

pizza, a yakitori burger and tiramisu, and Coffee Cisz, a small kissaten with a large record collection perfect for a caffeine hit paired with a retro vibe.

### Local Mythology

Today, Kappabashi very much owns its contemporary kitchenware identity. But this modern image doesn't mean the area has lost touch with its roots. Those with a keen eye will spot cute (and some not-so-cute) kappa characters all over, many of them designed to dress up shopfronts and windows. There's even a human-sized gold one midway along Kitchen Street.

But it's in the backstreets at Sogenji Temple that you'll find perhaps the most intriguing kappa artifacts. At the base of this small temple are a number of concrete kappa statues, which are often left with offerings of One Cup sake and their favorite snack of cucumbers. But what's most interesting is found at the top of the stairs inside the hall. If you look closely through the glass on the left-hand side, you might notice the mummified hand of a kappa, neatly displayed in its own little case. As for whether it's the genuine article or not, we'll leave that up to you to decide.

Getting to Kappabashi from Shibuya Station is as simple as catching the Ginza Line through to Tawaramachi Station; the trip takes a little over half an hour. If you're in Asakusa around hot spots such as Senso-ji Temple, Kappabashi Kitchen Street is well within walking distance.





# Tiara's Selection

Insider and tastemaker Tiara curates an exciting selection of designers to watch this year

*Words by Eugenie Shin, compiled and photographed by Solène Ballesta*

Seeking inspiration in a hyperdigital age means sorting through a dizzying stream of regurgitated aesthetics, fleeting microtrends and predictable personas — but Tiara, a Tokyo-based graphic designer and model who prefers to go by a mononym, crafts visual worlds that could never get lost in the shuffle. Her vision is layered and original; her Instagram profile looks like a series of stills from arthouse films, brimming with rich jewel tones, art deco references and whimsical, storied ensembles.

“As a graphic designer, I’m always thinking in shapes, contrast and composition,” Tiara says. “I collect scenes — from old movies, vintage posters, moments on the street — and piece them together like a moodboard in motion. I love

elegance that feels a little unexpected, like a sharp shoulder with a soft drape, or a classic shape with a surreal twist.” This element of juxtaposition is precisely what she enjoys most about the city’s fashion scene. “Tokyo fashion is full of contrasts ... Everyone is telling their own story through clothes, without following a single rulebook.”

“  
Tokyo fashion is full of contrasts... everyone is telling their own story through clothes, without following a single rulebook.”

When asked about the best places to shop in Tokyo, Tiara highlights three spots. “Solakzade, a mysterious jeweler and optician in Jingumae, is full of character,” she notes. “For designer gems, I recommend Super Dot Market in Aoyama; it’s curated like a gallery and periodically offers great discounts. For bold, nostalgic pieces, check out Bed in Harajuku.” Tiara also lets us in on four of her favorite brands right now, pulling pieces that embody their distinct vocabularies.



### **Mame Kurogouchi**

Established in 2010, Mame Kurogouchi is a womenswear brand that weaves together the designer's own experiences with tradition and nature. Through figure-hugging silhouettes and graceful contours, the brand pays tribute to a timeless yet contemporary sense of femininity. "Kurogouchi creates a beautiful tension: soft, feminine and structured all at once," Tiara says.

The S/S and F/W 2025 collections expand the designer's exploration of "katachi" ("form"), drawing inspiration from the book *The Forms of Japan* (1978) and its depiction of traditional lacquerware. Kurogouchi endeavored to bring to life the lacquerware's inherent grace, dignified spirit and striking color contrast through richly textured fabrics and meticulous pattern making.

### **More Info**

@mamekurogouchi

[www.mamekurogouchi.com](http://www.mamekurogouchi.com)



## Yohei Ohno

“Yohei Ohno always adds a twist — unexpected cuts, sleeves or colors that make you do a double -take,” Tiara notes. Like Tiara, Yohei Ohno draws much of his inspiration from various fields of art, especially design and architecture, which is apparent in his bold and poetic visual language.

Since its inception in 2014, Ohno’s eponymous label has garnered attention for its evocative form-making and stylish practicality. “Lately, my focus has shifted toward how forms can seamlessly integrate into the everyday lives of the people who wear them,” he explains. Ohno’s deep curiosity toward the body as a site of expression is reflected in his experimental, sculptural designs that boldly challenge traditional definitions of femininity.

## More Info

@yohei\_ohno

[www.yoheiohno.com](http://www.yoheiohno.com)





## Fetico

Fetico, capturing the creative vision of designer Emi Funayama, emphasizes the beauty of the female form by reinterpreting classic styles. "Fetico embodies feminine strength, with sculptural pieces that make me feel both sexy and powerful," Tiara says. Often inspired by vintage clothing and design sensibilities of enigmatic bygone eras, Funayama works in collaboration with Japanese textile producers and artisans.

The brand's S/S 2025 collection began from Funayama's serendipitous encounter with a pair of 1980s tapered pants and a bustier at a vintage shop in Paris. Intrigued, Funayama delved into fashion magazines from the period, coming across American supermodel and actress Veronica Webb, an icon of sophistication and her muse for the collection. "I am fascinated by those who keep certain things hidden. Models posing coolly in magazines, women in films with secrets — they spark my imagination," Funayama says.

## More Info

@fetico\_official  
[www.fetico.jp](http://www.fetico.jp)

## Harunobumurata

“Harunobumurata’s minimalism is whispered, with a sense of intimacy — never cold, always compelling,” Tiara remarks. Founded by designer Harunobu Murata in 2018, Harunobumurata is a luxury fashion label that brings together the finest materials and techniques from Italy, where Murata studied and worked, and Japan, his home.

Breaking free from established notions of what a garment can be, Murata’s works maintain an effortless sense of simplicity, while playing with abstraction, geometry and movement. The S/S 2025 collection, titled “But the Idea, the Essence of Things,” derives inspiration from modernist sculptor Constantin Brâncuși’s oeuvre, exploring the hidden meanings behind refined, serene forms. The breathtaking collection features flowing fabrics fixed in time, with smooth fabrics seemingly carved from stone.

### More Info

[@harunobumurata](https://www.harunobumurata.com)

[www.harunobumurata.com](https://www.harunobumurata.com)



### Follow Tiara

[@tyrnbl](https://www.instagram.com/tyrnbl)

[www.tangotable.com](https://www.tangotable.com)

[youtube.com/@TYRNBL/videos](https://youtube.com/@TYRNBL/videos)

# Narisawa: From Earth to Table

Chef Yoshihiro Narisawa's satoyama philosophy transforms local, foraged ingredients into profound culinary expressions

Words by Eugenie Shin



The chef's journey to become a master of his craft wasn't a straightforward one. Though Tokyo is today seen as one of the world's most glittering culinary capitals, with a whopping 183 Michelin-starred eateries, the city's fine dining scene didn't always possess its current abundance of cultural influences. At just 19 years old, Narisawa was among a group of bright-eyed Japanese chefs who ventured abroad during the bubble economy to train under foreign connoisseurs. What they brought back formed the basis for the explosion of tastes we associate with Tokyo today.

"I started my training in traditional Japanese cuisine before heading to Europe, where I felt I could gain more insight into the intricate, storied sphere of fine dining,"

Tucked away in an unassuming nook of the elegant neighborhood of Aoyama, Narisawa (stylized as NARISAWA) is an experimental fine dining restaurant acclaimed for its innovative and cerebral approach to sustainable cuisine. Narisawa's omakase-style menu fuses a variety of culinary techniques with the Japanese concept of satoyama. Traditionally, satoyama refers to rural landscapes where humans live in harmony with nature; in recent years, it has come to symbolize sustainability, a deep respect for the earth and the integration of humans and the natural world.

Established by Chef Yoshihiro

Narisawa in 2003, the two-Michelin-starred restaurant has earned international recognition for its quality, innovation and commitment to environmentally conscious gourmet dining — securing a Michelin Green Star, 14 consecutive years on the World's Best Restaurants list and numerous other accolades.

## A Pioneer of Fine Dining

Narisawa grew up in the restaurant industry; it was a path he always wanted to follow. "My family ran a restaurant, and I was constantly surrounded by delicious food bringing smiles to people's faces," he says. "I knew I wanted to inspire the same joy as a chef."





Narisawa explains. Throughout the late 80s and early 90s, he studied under some of the world's most revered chefs — including culinary legends Paul Bocuse and Joël Robuchon.

### In Harmony With Land and Sea

Returning to Japan in 1996 after a transformative tenure in France, Italy and Switzerland, Narisawa opened his first French-inspired restaurant, La Napoule, in Kanagawa. It was only after he established his eponymous restaurant in Tokyo — originally named Les Créations de Narisawa — that the chef encountered satoyama culture and began to develop his signature culinary philosophy.

While hand-selecting ingredients for his restaurant menu at a mountaintop farm in Nagano Prefecture, Narisawa was struck by the incredible quality of vegetables grown at an altitude of 1,000 meters, which some might assume to be unfavorable conditions. “The location experiences drastic temperature changes between day and night, but this uncompromising climate is what cultivates the rich, uniquely delicious flavors of its produce,” Narisawa explains. This experience was formative for him, revealing the

profound and complex relationship between the forces of nature and his work as a chef. “I gained a new appreciation for the tremendous impact of the natural environment on our ingredients.”

As Narisawa points out, 70% of the Japanese archipelago is covered in forests, meaning that space for cultivation is limited. As such, the people of Japan have always had a deep respect for natural resources and seasonal shifts, using only what they need. Narisawa defines this way of thinking as the heart of satoyama culture. “Through our innovative satoyama cuisine, we pay homage to the wisdom of our ancestors,” he says.

### The Art of Satoyama

Driven by his deep respect for the natural world and a commitment to local ingredients, Narisawa is always exploring new ways to showcase foraged elements in a way that amplifies their inherent flavors. His culinary creations — inventive, intricate and at times astonishingly complex — aim to convey the spirit of nature through a thoughtful harmony of taste and presentation.

For instance, the iconic Satoyama Scenery and Essence of the Forest dish uses various wild plants gathered in Ishikawa Prefecture, alongside other traditional Japanese ingredients, to create a gastronomic landscape: “moss,” “earth” and “branches” composed of ingredients like dried tofu residue, bamboo charcoal and candied burdock root. Narisawa extracts the aroma and

flavor of thinly shaved cedar and oak wood — a process similar to making dashi soup stock — to create the titular Essence of the Forest, served in a cup on the side.

What is truly striking about Narisawa's vision of sustainability is that it extends beyond his culinary philosophy. The chef has been vocal about maintaining a sustainable work-life balance at his restaurant, going against the notoriously long hours and stressful lifestyles of restaurant staff around the world. “We want to ensure that our staff can work in good health and balance work with family life,” he says. “We have a closing time of 8 p.m. and have an efficient clean-up process to encourage staff to get proper rest.”

This humanistic approach to management ultimately echoes the chef's core objective for the restaurant, which inspired his cooking journey all those years ago. “We want guests who come to our restaurant to enjoy their meal and leave feeling happy. Simply put, I want to delight people through delicious food,” he states.

### More Info

You can learn more about Chef Narisawa's food journey and recipes in his book *Satoyama*, photographed by Sergio Coimbra and published by Taschen.

Narisawa reservations are available at [narisawa-yoshihiro-en.com/reservation](http://narisawa-yoshihiro-en.com/reservation).



# *Serving in* STYLE

Four distinguished Japanese bartenders share their  
stories — and their signature cocktails

*Words by Matthew Hernmo,  
portraits by Lisa Knight*



## Hideyuki Saito

Returning to Japan after working in five different countries, Saito now oversees The Tokyo Edition's Lobby Bar and Gold Bar at Edition.

### Was it always your ambition to become a bartender?

No. I kind of stumbled across it. After moving from Osaka to Tokyo, I worked at a restaurant and the manager there asked me to take care of the bar. I didn't look back.

### Tell us about your experiences working overseas.

First was London, which is a city with a real cocktail culture. People are very knowledgeable about their drinks. New York has so much energy and the bars are always full. In Thailand and Vietnam, I learned a lot about food culture. Then in Qatar, it

was different again — you can only drink in certain areas and people really splash the cash. It was interesting adjusting to the contrasting markets.

### How did you feel returning to Japan?

Japan hadn't changed much, but my mindset had. I had a deeper appreciation for the food and drink culture here, and that's continued to grow as I've been working at Lobby Bar and Gold Bar at Edition.

### What's the allure of those bars?

There's nothing else like them in Japan. Gold Bar at Edition is an intimate space inspired by the



golden age of cocktails, whereas Lobby Bar looks out onto Tokyo Tower and is filled with natural light while also being surrounded by greenery. They both have special atmospheres and unique beverage programs.

### What's your signature drink?

Reimagined daiquiri? It's a sophisticated reinterpretation of a classic cocktail featuring Japanese pastis, fresh basil and a yellow cherry tomato.

**MORE INFO:** Follow Gold Bar at Edition on Instagram at [@goldbaratedition](#)

## Yasuhiro Kawakubo

A multiple award-winning bartender, Kawakubo has created a captivating cocktail menu at Punch Room Tokyo.



### Why did you want to become a bartender?

At 15, I bought various cocktail books. One in particular, titled *Cocktail Technique*, inspired me. I felt cocktail making was similar to art or classical music. Wanting to reinterpret classic cocktails, I began mixing drinks. Four years later, I left my home in Ibaraki Prefecture for Tokyo and started knocking on bar doors in Shibuya, trying to get a job.

### Did that work?

No, but I eventually found work at a darts bar through a newspaper ad. After a year there, I trained as a classical bartender in Tokyo before building up my experience abroad in Singapore, Paris and Sydney. I learned so much in each country.

### Why did you decide to return to Japan?

My old boss called me back to work as bar manager at The Bvlgari Ginza Bar, where I trained many young bartenders. Then, Punch Room Tokyo opened last year, and I was given the chance to run it.

### What marks Punch Room Tokyo out from other bars?

It's a hotel bar without a counter and large tables, which is rare. We don't want any division between the bartender and the customers. The style is also unique, taking inspiration from 19th-century London clubs. It was designed by Ian Schrager and Kengo Kuma, so there's a mixture of Western and Japanese sensibilities.

### What's your signature cocktail?

Bamboo katana martini. It combines a wet martini and a 19th-century Japanese cocktail called Bamboo. With an ABV of just 14%, it's perfect as a pre-dinner drink.

**MORE INFO:** Follow Kawakubo on Instagram at [@japanesecraftspirits](#)

## Satomi Mizugishi

A former bartender at Jigger & Pony — a cocktail establishment in Singapore that was ranked number five on the World's 50 Best Bars list in 2024 — Mizugishi is now working as a bar consultant in Kyoto.

### What sparked your interest in cocktails?

My mom. After dinner, she used to drink those canned cocktails, which were very popular at the time. When I was of legal age, I joined her, starting with gin and tonic.

### What was the appeal of mixing drinks?

It felt like I was in a chemistry class, which was my favorite subject at school. I was really into it and took bartender classes while I was at university. Most see bartending as a part-time job — I saw it as a career.

### How did the opportunity in Singapore come about?

Aki Eguchi, a legendary bartender from Jigger & Pony, came to do a guest shift at Trunk Hotel while I was there. He was impressed with the way I worked the bar and interacted with guests in English, so he offered me a job.

### What are the big differences between Japan and Singapore?

Bars in Singapore are better at marketing themselves. It's a tiny country, yet the number of its bars in Asia's top 50 list is



always in double digits. There are many amazing bars in Japan, but they aren't making any noise in the world. As a consultant, I want to help make that happen.

### What's your signature cocktail?

I don't think I have one, but many people say my cocktails are very spirit-forward, though easy to drink.

**MORE INFO:** Follow Mizugishi on Instagram at [@satomi.ngo](#)

## Masato Ishioka

A 2024 Diageo World Class Japan champion, Ishioka is set to launch his own bar in Hokkaido.

### You started out as a pastry chef, right?

Yes, I graduated from a confectionary school in Sapporo and left for Tokyo, where I worked at various shops. I enjoyed it, but I developed a passion for cocktails as well.

### What was the attraction?

I started to study mixing after purchasing Kazuo Uyeda's cocktail book. I then visited various bars to find inspiration for new flavors. Though it's a different industry, I think in terms of creativity, there are similarities between making pastries and cocktails.

### Why did you decide to focus on cocktails?

While working as a chocolatier in Ginza during the less busy

summer season, I had the opportunity to move to The Bvlgari Ginza Bar as a trainee. I loved being able to interact with customers, which you can't do in the kitchen. Immediately, I knew it was where I wanted to be.

### Can you tell us about your new bar in Sapporo?

I can't say too much yet, but the focus will be on cocktails and local ingredients. I'm very excited.

### What's your signature cocktail?

Chocolate martini. Previously, I focused on classic cocktails because I didn't want it to look like I was a pastry chef playing a bartender. But then I thought it would be a shame if I didn't utilize my skills, so that's what I started to do.

**MORE INFO:** Follow Ishioka on Instagram at [@masatoishioka](#)



# IN-DEPTH



22

## **Brave New World**

Inside the groundbreaking life and career of Takehiro Hira

35

## **Tokyo Drift, Reimagined**

The Clutch Kickback Motor Series — an automotive event like no other

38

## **How the Light Gets In**

Artist Yuki Otani sees kintsugi as a path to emotional healing



# Entering a Brave New World

Emmy-nominated actor Takehiro Hira speaks about some of his most iconic roles to date — and what's next for him as his international star continues to rise

Words by Matthew Hemon, photos by Solène Ballesta

It's safe to say that Takehiro Hira is one of Japan's most sought-after actors right now. The 50-year-old Tokyo native, who currently resides in Hawaii, began his career in the Japanese entertainment industry just over 20 years ago, starring in a wide range of television dramas, films and stage productions. Known for his charisma and his powerful screen presence, he typically plays complex, morally ambiguous characters, often with a sense of quiet intensity.

In recent years, he's been focusing more on international productions, winning critical acclaim for his performances in series like *Giri/Haji* and *Shogun*. Earlier this year, he reached a Hollywood milestone: appearing in a Marvel film, as Prime Minister Ozaki in *Captain America: Brave New World*.

As his career continues to skyrocket, Hira's ability to seamlessly transition between Japanese and international roles demonstrates both his versatility and the growing global demand for talent. With a mix of critically acclaimed series and major Hollywood projects under his belt, Hira is positioning himself as a standout figure in the entertainment world — a true symbol of the changing tides in global representation and storytelling.

## A Different Path

Hira comes from a family of actors. Both his parents were renowned stage and screen performers — his late father, Mikijiro Hira, was often described as "Japan's best Shakespearean actor," while his mother, Yoshiko Sakuma, debuted in 1958 and made her most recent film appearance in *Earthquake Bird* alongside Alicia Vikander more than six decades later.

Hira had no desire to follow in his parents' footsteps as a child. "It was a bit like the situation with Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*," he says. "For whatever reason, I just felt like I wanted to go in a completely different direction to them."

At age 15, he decided to head to the United States, "to try and find myself," as he puts it. He ended up staying for around 10 years, becoming fully fluent in English in the process. He studied in Rhode Island, first at Moses Brown School and then Brown University, where he entered the

applied mathematics department. After graduating, he cycled through a variety of jobs, including as a care provider for autistic children, a tempura chef, a project manager at the health information provider WebMD and as a financial analyst at an investment company.

“  
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about messing  
everything up.  
Every morning,  
I walked to Meiji  
Jingu to pray that  
I wouldn't.  
”



"The harder I worked, the emptier I felt," he says. "The financial world was too cutthroat for me. I was 27 and felt it was time to ask myself what I really wanted to do in life. Without hesitation, it was acting. Even though it was a path I'd previously avoided going down, the influence of my parents was always there. I felt if I didn't give it a try, I would always regret it."

### A Family Affair

Hira made his theatrical debut at age 27 in the 2002 stage production *Rokumeikan*, a drama written by Yukio Mishima. He appeared alongside his parents, though it was a bit of a complex situation. They'd all been cast separately; his mother and father hadn't spoken to each other since their divorce 17 years earlier. And neither was initially pleased about Hira

taking up acting — particularly his mother, who threatened to walk away from the production if he was in it. She relented, but, according to Hira, refused to look him in the eye even when they were on stage together.

The play was a success, and Sakuma eventually softened her position. Hira, meanwhile, went on to garner a strong reputation as a stage actor, appearing in several Shakespeare plays, including Yukio Ninagawa's production of *Hamlet* at the Barbican in London in 2004. He later played Iago in a Japanese production of *Othello* and, off the back of that, was offered a starring role as Prince Tokugawa Yoshinobu in the NHK taiga drama *Atsuhime*.

"It told the story of the final three shogun, and I was the last one," he explains. "The drama had been such a huge ratings success with the first two — I was worried about messing



Fashion by HOMME PLISSÉ ISSEY MIYAKE

everything up. Every morning, I walked to Meiji Jingu to pray that I wouldn't. Fortunately, the ratings remained consistent even with me in it."

He is, of course, just being modest. Hira was lauded for his performance and went on to feature in several NHK dramas. Legendary director Takashi Miike was also impressed with his work and cast him in several films, including the 3D samurai drama *Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai* and the legal comedy flick *Ace Attorney*. Working with Miike — whom he describes as "crazy" in a positive way — boosted Hira's career even further.

### Going Global

In 2019, the former financial analyst made his international television debut alongside Kelly Macdonald and Will Sharpe in Joe Barton's British-Japanese gangster drama series *Giri/Haji*, which loosely translates to "Duty/Shame." Told in both English and Japanese, the stylish, cross-cultural thriller follows a Tokyo detective (played by Hira) who travels to London to track down his missing brother, uncovering a tangled web

of crime and family ties; it was described by one BBC executive as "unlike anything we've ever seen before on British TV." The program was nominated for six BAFTAs — including a leading actor nod for Hira.

The following year, he appeared in William Olsson's erotic drama film *Lost Girls & Love Hotels*, as the yakuza love interest of a troubled American expat drifting through Tokyo's nightlife, played by Alexandra Daddario. The *Chicago Sun-Times* described his acting as "mesmerizing." At this point in his career, Hira had made the decision to focus all of his attention overseas.

"I decided to quit Japan the day I auditioned for *Lost Girls & Love Hotels*," he says. "Of course, I didn't have the part at that point, but I felt it was the kind of acting I wanted to do, and to work in international productions." He was so committed to this vision that he decided to move abroad. "My wife, who was four months pregnant then, said fine. As it was my decision to leave, she chose the place, opting for Hawaii.

"It was a risk, but I'm glad we did it," continues Hira. "Hawaii's amazing and I love being part of global productions. However, there were times early on when I felt out of my depth as everyone was so good. I remember on my first day filming for *Giri/Haji*, I had a scene with Will Sharpe. It seemed to flow so effortlessly for him. I thought I should just go home, as these actors were on a different level."





Fashion by Y3

## The Shogun Effect

Then came *Shogun*, where Hira starred alongside a host of Japanese legends and rising talents. The epic historical drama, based on James Clavell's 1975 novel of the same name, follows the collision of cultures in 1600s Japan as an English navigator washes ashore and becomes entangled in a fierce power struggle between feudal lords. Hira took on the role of Ishido Kazunari, a powerful and calculating rival to Lord Yoshii Toranaga.

As soon as it premiered, the series took the world by storm. At the 2024 Emmy Awards, it received the most nominations of any show that year — including an outstanding supporting actor in a drama series nod for Hira. His castmate, Tadanobu Asano, was nominated in the same category.

In contrast to Kazunari — a cold and cunning political antagonist, brought to life through Hira's measured, commanding

performance — Asano plays Kashigi Yabushige, a flamboyant and unpredictable daimyo who straddles the line between comic relief and genuine menace. Although both actors were widely praised for their work, neither got the Emmy in the end. "I was hoping Asano would win it," says Hira. "He had to work so hard, falling from cliffs and things like that, whereas my character just sits in the ceremonial hall the whole time bitching about Toranaga."

With his characteristic modesty, the actor admits that he was uncertain about even attending the awards. "It was a big surprise when I heard I was nominated, and I was in two minds about going because it felt too big-league for me," he recalls. *Shogun* ended up taking home the prize for best drama, and Hira joined the rest of the cast onstage to accept it. "Looking down to see people like Meryl Streep and Robert Downey Jr. in the audience felt surreal," he recalls.

Hira says he's been invited back for the second season, though his tenure in the role may be limited by circumstance: "My character is based on Ishida Mitsunari, who was executed after the Battle of Sekigahara, so I probably won't be around long."

## A Bright Path Forward

At least he knows what to expect. That wasn't the case with *Captain America: Brave New World*, part of the ever-expanding and tightly guarded Marvel Cinematic Universe. The studio is famously secretive, and Hira only received his lines a day and a half before he was due to start filming. All he knew ahead of time was that he was playing the Japanese prime minister.

The role was small, but it marked a major career breakthrough — appearing in a Marvel film, one of the most globally visible and commercially influential franchises in modern cinema, is no small feat. It also saw him working alongside Harrison Ford, who plays the US president. "He's such a gentleman and a real professional, who works the camera perfectly," says Hira. "Acting with him was special."





By now, Hira is accustomed to working alongside legendary talents. In the period action drama *Tornado*, out this spring, he appears alongside revered British actors like Tim Roth and Jack Lowden. In the comedy film *Rental Family*, also slated for release this year, he features alongside Oscar-winner Brendan Fraser. His next project is *Karosshi*, which has been described as a corporate thriller with a samurai twist. Confirmed cast members so far include Teo Yoo, Cynthia Erivo and Isabel May. According to sources, Hira will play the villain.

Hollywood has long struggled with representation for Asian actors, but Hira's rising profile suggests that the tide may be turning. His continued success serves not only as inspiration for other actors but also as a reflection of a changing industry. "It's a good time for Asian actors to be working internationally, as there are many more parts these days," he says. "Being able to speak English helps a lot, and I'm still working hard to improve my language skills. I'm also determined to become a better actor. If I don't do that, I won't get the roles and, as I don't really have any hobbies, that would be a big problem."

### More Info

Keep up with Hira's latest projects on Instagram at [@takehiro49](#).

# Unabashedly

# ALAN

The Brazilian-Japanese Netflix star discusses a childhood of being different, always choosing kindness and a multicultural worldview

Words by Alina Joan Ito, photos by Solène Ballesta

When Netflix released *The Boyfriend*, Japan's first same-sex dating program, it became an overnight sensation, praised for its honesty, slow-burn romances and lovable cast. One of its breakout stars was Alan Takahashi, a Brazilian-Japanese IT worker with an infectiously positive personality and a 1,000-watt smile. Although he joined the cast later in the season — in the third episode, to be precise — Takahashi's presence immediately became a focal point of the show, thanks to his ice-breaking extroversion and willingness to wear his heart on his sleeve.

With *The Boyfriend's* sudden success, the cast members have seen themselves catapulted into the spotlight, put in the lofty yet precarious position of representing the LGBTQ community in a country where that representation lags behind. Takahashi's life has changed significantly — on social media, he can be seen dancing with his co-star, the jet-setting go-go dancer Usak; attending fashion events; modeling for various brands; and even MCing at Japan's national qualifier for Miss International Queen, the world's largest transgender beauty pageant. And he's moved to Tokyo from Nagoya.

Despite his sudden shift into the limelight, the 30-year-old remains as warm, open and engaging as he appears on TV. As his stint on *The Boyfriend* revealed, remarkable emotional depth lies underneath Takahashi's blinding charm, the result of a life spent not quite fitting in yet continuously finding the strength to be himself.

## A Childhood Between Cultures

Takahashi was born in Brazil and moved to Japan at the age of 2, raised mostly by his single mother, a Nikkei Brazilian (a Brazilian of Japanese descent). They lived in Nagoya, part of a community of *dekasegi* — a term often used to refer to Nikkei people, especially those from Brazil or Peru, who migrate to Japan for work. So, despite living most of his life

in Japan, Takahashi grew up surrounded by Brazilian culture and language, using Japanese only in school. "I really feel like half-Japanese, half-Brazilian is the best way to describe myself," he says. "The values of both cultures that I treasure are very much alive inside of me."

Takahashi has had a bubbly personality and a slight mischievous streak his whole life, traits that weren't always accepted by the conformist society of Japan. "I liked running around outside and climbing trees. I was called the Tarzan of Higashiura-cho [my neighborhood]," Takahashi recalls.

“  
Why do I have to be identified by  
the people I like? I don't like labels  
and being put into a box. I'm just a  
human trying to be happy.  
”

He continues, still smiling, "I overheard my classmates' parents telling their kids to stay away from me because I was different, and some teachers didn't like me, even though I never felt like I was doing anything wrong. I was excluded and bullied for how I looked and talked, and there were times when being raised by two cultures was tough. But I was always guided by my love for expressing myself, my love for music and dance, my love for Brazil."

In hindsight, Takahashi realizes much of his community was rooting for him as well. "A lot of Brazilian parents from my neighborhood really supported me. The Nikkei kids in my school didn't want to be bullied and adapted to the Japanese lifestyle, but a lot of adults around me appreciated how I stuck with my heritage. There were times when I felt lonely, but as an adult, I realized I was never alone."

Costume : VIVIANO  
Jewelry : MARIHA



## The Alan Effect

Takahashi continued living in Nagoya, close to his mom and his younger sister, into adulthood. When he was cast in *The Boyfriend* at age 28, he was a full-time office worker. Joining a reality show — especially one that focused so closely on intimate relationships — was far out of his comfort zone, but it was a challenge he wanted to try.

*The Boyfriend* follows nine men between the ages of 22 and 36 as they share a house and go on dates. They have a modest daily allowance, which they can augment with money they earn at a coffee truck they operate together. As in many dating shows, the cast lived in their own bubble for the duration of filming. “Living isolated with a group of strangers for a month with the intention of wanting romance, that’ll be broadcast

on Netflix for the whole world ... I was quite nervous, and I got in my head a lot.”

*The Boyfriend* is mild and wholesome compared to its Western counterparts — the relationships generally progress slowly and cautiously, and the men mainly get to know each other through a series of polite conversations and shared moments working alongside each other in the coffee truck. Takahashi’s entrance stirred things up; from the moment he appeared, the atmosphere changed. In contrast to his castmates, he vocalized his feelings quickly and pursued his love interest in a very direct way. He was immediately interested in Kazuto, a mild-mannered chef who was particularly popular among the show’s participants, going so far as to describe his attraction as “love at first sight.”



“  
Watching the show back, I realized  
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needed to hear myself.

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“I think the way I get close to people was different from some of my castmates, and I’m sure my castmates at first didn’t know how to interact with me. I learned a lot about paying attention to the people around me and being careful with the timing in which I tell people my feelings,” he reflects.

He wasn’t just straightforward in his romantic efforts; he also discussed, openly and candidly, the struggles he faced growing up in Japan with a single mother. In one scene, he describes his father’s arrest when he was 6 years old, recounting that he was tasked with taking care of his younger sister. “That’s all I have,” he says, smiling sadly. “That promise is the only connection I have with my dad.”

Takahashi has found the public’s response to his arc on the show to be overwhelmingly positive, which has helped him feel understood. “I realized there are a lot of people like me in the world. I received a lot of warm comments about how people found a new perspective on life or how they could relate to my actions on the show,” he says.



## A Lesson in Kindness

Although Takahashi didn't leave with a new boyfriend, the experience helped him see himself in a new light. Given his confidence and ease in approaching others, he often became a sounding board or confidante for other members — for instance, college student Dai, who came to him with frustrations about his relationship with the mysterious artist Shun. In the scene, Takahashi advises him to speak directly to his love interest, without worrying about what might happen or fretting about others' opinions, and to be kind and forgiving, both to himself and to Shun.

"Kindness truly has magical powers," he says, wiping away a tear. "Grab Shun's hand and go talk to him right now. I think it's an important time." This scene left commentators on the show struck by Takahashi's empathy and warmth.

"Watching the show back, I realized the words I gave people were things I needed to hear myself," he muses. "It makes me happy that those kind words are documented forever on Netflix, and it was a reminder that I should give myself the kindness that I give easily to other people."



He continues, "I feel like I've been looking for allies my whole life, trying to improve myself so I can be surrounded by people who understand me. But now, I learned how to simply appreciate the people who accept me for exactly who I am. I think it's taken a lot of pressure off of me, and it's a kinder world to live in."

Evident from his unapologetic persona on the show, Takahashi has always had a knack for expressing himself completely, without trying to conform to expectations. At the root of this is a desire to be seen — and understood — fully. His queerness has been very public since his time on *The Boyfriend*, but he doesn't always appreciate the hyperfixation on his sexuality. "Why do I have to be identified by the people I like? I don't like labels and being put into a box. I'm just a human trying to be happy."

“  
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between.

”  
It's clear Takahashi has spent a lot of time thinking about Japanese society, where his open-minded and flexible nature doesn't always conform to the societal norm of rule-following and respecting tradition. "I want Japan to nurture the strengths it already has while looking at the world more. Japanese leaders can learn a lot from other cultures, and I think it would make Japan less fixed in its ways," he affirms.

"Whether it's more freedom in education, clothing or self-expression, I think it's important to teach Japanese kids it's alright to be themselves. I want Japanese education to not make ideas black and white, but show the whole rainbow between."

## More info

Follow Takahashi on Instagram at  
[@alantakahashi\\_official](https://www.instagram.com/alantakahashi_official).

*Kurumi Nakata*

# DREAMING BIG

With bold ambition and unwavering charm, the actress  
and model is carving out her own place in Japan's  
entertainment world

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*Words by Matthew Herson, photos by Solène Ballesta*



Growing up surrounded by rice paddies and mountains in the rural city of Sano, Tochigi Prefecture, Kurumi Nakata yearned for the unknown world of Tokyo. An exotic place that appeared in the Ai Yazawa manga books she read, it had the aura of a distant land. From a young age, she knew it was where she was supposed to be.

“

Working as an actor has been my ambition since I was daydreaming in my room as a child.

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With no place to go after school, Nakata spent lots of time in her bedroom, which she covered with pictures of movie stars and models from the magazines she pored over. At the time, she was an impressionable teen enraptured by fashion styles that didn't seem to exist in her hometown. Wanting to share her passion, she started a blog and

subsequently made connections with like-minded individuals. She then happened to visit the famous Bunka Fashion College entrance ceremony, as her friend was attending.

That chance encounter marked the beginning of Nakata's foray into the creative world she had once only imagined.



### Making Her Debut

The Bunka Fashion College entrance ceremony is an event that feels less a formal rite of passage and more a spectacle of self-expression, with new students arriving in inventive, bold and eye-catching looks that showcase their sense of personal style. “There were many photographers there because it's basically more like a fashion show than an entrance ceremony,” recalls Nakata. “I was just a high school student who was visiting in the hope of seeing some vibrant outfits. Then, someone from the magazine *Zipper* snapped my picture ... Being a girl from the country who had been reading that magazine since I was 10 — it felt like a dream.”

From there, Nakata began to chase her aspirations more earnestly. At age 18, she moved to Kawasaki to live with her grandparents. Though not officially in Tokyo, it was close enough, and allowed her to model part time at night while studying during the day. Her ultimate goal was to work in movies, so she enrolled in

the cinema department of Nihon University College of Art, which she was drawn to mainly because of award-winning screenwriter Kankuro Kudo, who also attended the college. It was his stories that sparked Nakata's interest in acting.

It wasn't a straight path to films, though — after graduating, she worked mainly as a model and supplemented her income with sponsored posts on her social media pages. Her first significant TV appearance came not as an actor but in more of an advisory role as she featured alongside her sister, Minori, in the popular reality TV series *Terrace House: Boys & Girls in the City*.

The premise of *Terrace House* is straightforward: Six strangers — three men and three women — live together in a stylish home, navigating romance, friendship and career ambitions. Unlike many Western reality shows, the cast members are all free to come and go as they please, and can even have friends and family visit. Kurumi was just in a few episodes; she'd occasionally stop by the house to visit her younger sibling and give her dating advice. Despite this lack of airtime, she made a big impression on both viewers and the panel, with many calling for her to be a regular on the show.

One of her most memorable moments came during an event that's become legendary among *Terrace House* viewers: The Meat Incident. Minori's on-show

love interest, Tatsuya Uchihara, had received a premium cut of wagyu beef from a work client — which Minori and a few other cast members cooked and ate without his knowledge. Outraged by the slight, Uchihara retreated into his room and refused to emerge or speak to anyone. It was only after Kurumi visited the house that he opened up.

"I always seem to be the advisor," she says, laughing. "It was a big surprise to get that kind of attention for *Terrace House*, as I was just a viewer who popped in for a couple of minutes here and there to support my sister. I didn't expect anyone to notice what I did, but I'm glad they did."

### A Long-Awaited Breakthrough

Although Nakata had started receiving quite a bit of recognition, she never lost sight of her ultimate dream: acting. She refused to let her growing profile cloud her vision. "Things weren't going as I'd planned. I went to Tokyo to work as an actor, but I wasn't getting any jobs, and most of my money was coming from Instagram," she recalls. "That wasn't why my parents paid for me to go to college."

“

I just hope I can be part of something that big someday.

”

Her breakthrough role finally came in 2018, in the oddly titled true story, *A Banana? At This Time of Night?*. The movie centers around Yasuaki Kano (Yo Oizumi), an eccentric individual who suffers from muscular dystrophy. Nakata plays Kana, the best friend of Yasuaki's crush, Misaki Ando (Mitsuki Takahata).

She impressed with her performance, and has seen steady progress in her career since, both as an actor and model. Listening to

her speak, it's evident how grateful she is for the opportunities she's been given. She mentions how fortunate she was to be cast in the second season of *Alice in Borderland*, despite only being in one short scene. Even the unsuccessful auditions that used to get her down, she now takes positives from, using them as motivation to keep pushing her on to the next level.

"If I fail to get a part, it means they were looking for someone different, which is fine," Nakata says matter-of-factly. "There will be other opportunities. Honestly, I feel very lucky with the roles I've been given. The one I'm proudest of so far was playing a thief in *Kumokiri Nizaemon*, a historical drama on NHK. It's like an Edo-period version of *Ocean's Eleven*. It was a big part, and I'd never been in a historical drama before, so there was a lot to learn before, such as how to dance and wear a kimono. I loved being involved in that."

If Nakata needed any advice before taking on the role, she didn't have far to look. Her husband, Tadanobu Asano, has appeared in several historical productions, including Takeshi Kitano's *Zatoichi*, Martin Scorsese's *Silence* and as Kashigi Yabushige in *Shogun*, for which he won a Golden Globe. The pair met around a decade ago at a live house, where he was playing with his band and she was performing in an idol cover dance group. They announced their marriage on social media in 2022.

"He's always biased, telling me my performance is amazing," says Nakata with a smile. "The advice he gives me is to keep on practicing, as nothing comes easily. He knows how determined I am."

"Working as an actor has been my ambition since I was daydreaming in my room as a child," she continues. That sense of ambition has carried her a long way — and it doesn't seem to be fading anytime soon. "My big goal is to appear in a major Japanese drama or film, on the scale of something like *Harry Potter* or *Game of Thrones*. I know *Shogun* is an American production, but I think it showed that there are great stories here and that, more than ever before, people want to watch them, even if it means having to read subtitles. I just hope I can be part of something that big someday."

### More Info

Follow Nakata on Instagram at [@kurumi\\_nakata](https://www.instagram.com/kurumi_nakata).



# Tokyo Drift, Reimagined



From stadiums to waterfront parties, The Clutch Kickback  
Motor Series is not your typical automotive event

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*Words and photos by Ben Cooke*

**M**y first full-time job straight out of high school was as a mechanic. Since then, I've spent a lot of time around cars, in cars and under them. Naturally, I've also attended my fair share of car meets and automotive events. From vintage club cruises that ended overlooking Paris from the steps of Sacré-Cœur, to impromptu meets masterminded by local hoon taking over McDonald's parking lots in the rural suburbs of Australia, I'd wager that I've seen most of car culture and the spectrum of community that exists within it.

But one thing I always felt during these gatherings was a sense of transience. Even in cases where the organizers receive prior permission, if a large number of cars gather in a public space, it's not uncommon for authorities to shut it down after one too many engines gets revved. This means it's often only a matter of time until people have to move on, taking their high-octane chariots with them and leaving spectators with little to look at besides one another.

Utilizing a grassroots approach, The Clutch Kickback Motor Series — an international event series that

blends car culture with music and nightlife — is well on the way to changing this.

### Small Team, Big Dream

You'd be forgiven for thinking that large-scale operations involving hundreds of cars and even more spectators would take an army to organize. But at its core, Clutch Kickback is the work of just three people: founder and CEO Cameron Hurd, executive producer Katerina Grusheva and brand director Shion Shibuya. The trio, each with their own event management experience and love of cars, met organically in Tokyo, and the rest, as they say, is history.

"We kept running into each other in various contexts," the team explains. "We all have our car friends and our nightlife or fashion friends, but rarely do you meet cross-communal people who you'll

“  
Like-mindedness brought  
us together, and since then,  
friendship has kept us going.  
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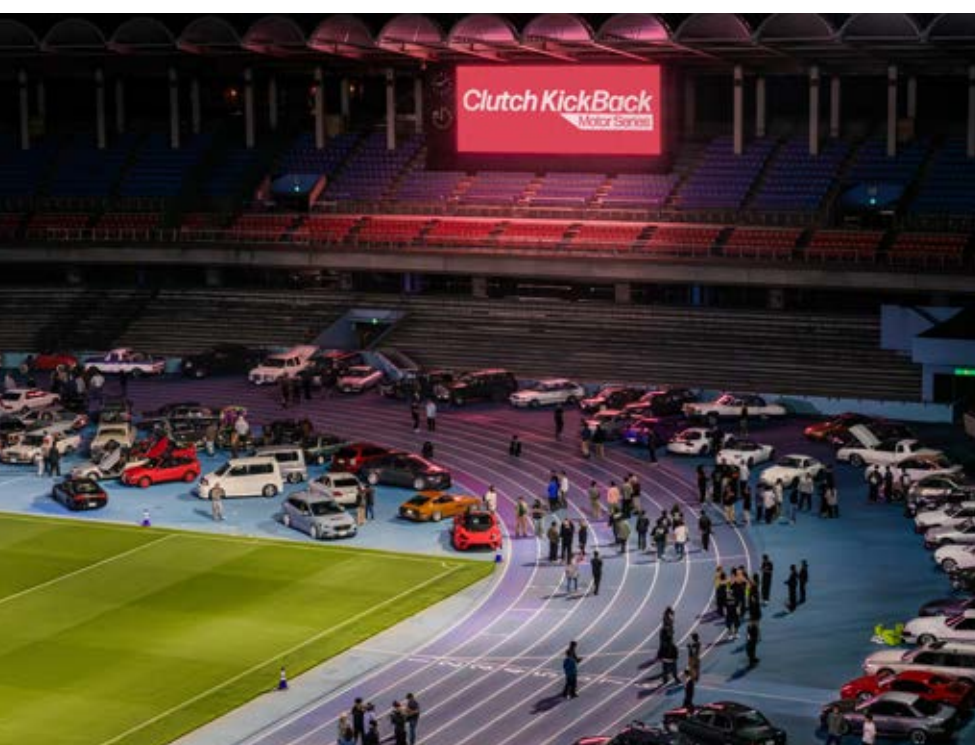
see at a Verdy event on Saturday and a drift event on Sunday. Like-mindedness brought us together, and since then, friendship has kept us going.”

And kept going they have. Since its inception in 2022, Clutch Kickback has curated events across nearly every automotive format imaginable. The collective has hosted high-octane drift days at racetracks, where spectators can watch modified cars slide by at breakneck speeds, smoke streaming from screeching tires. It also puts on more low-key gatherings at popular Tokyo spots, using online RSVPs to release last-minute location details. The brand hasn't missed a beat since it took off — and its most recent offerings, set across a single weekend in April 2025, were its most ambitious to date.

### From Streets to Stadiums

When I arrived at the location of the Friday night activation, I was sure Google Maps had led me astray. I was standing outside a stadium in Kawasaki typically used for soccer matches and athletics meets. In the distance, I heard the low rumble of engines and the murmur of voices. Perhaps this was the place after all.

As I got closer, I saw a line of cars pulling into the parking lot beside the stadium and noticed they weren't stopping. Instead, they were heading into the stadium along with other spectators. I followed.





Hundreds of cars, ranging from street-driven domestic models to battle-hardened drift machines, lined the track. The Jumbotrons atop the bleachers at either end of the stadium glowed with highlights from previous Clutch Kickback events and music videos as a laid-back mix of hip-hop and electronic music drifted from the speakers tucked up in the rafters. The Clutch Queens, a subgroup of young women within the organization headed by members Lani Schaaf and Dani Amaya, mingled with the crowd, all in awe of the cars on display.

The transience that I was so used to experiencing in these moments — waiting for the lights to shut off or the police to arrive — never came. Hosted in conjunction with lifestyle brands Car Service and HUF, this was the real thing, where anyone, regardless of their knowledge or involvement with the scene, could come and hang out for an evening.

### A Bayside Block Party

Two days later, I found myself in the middle of Kiranah Garden, a luxury resort-style space overlooking Tokyo Bay and the iconic Rainbow Bridge. In addition to a typical scene of pools, palm trees and open-air cabanas, the garden had been transformed, ornamented with



an array of highly modified classic Porsches, a diamante-encrusted Lamborghini and numerous other one-of-a-kind cars that looked incredible against the waterfront backdrop. This was the Clutch Kickback Block Party.

Throughout the day, spectators came and relaxed amid the vibrant festival atmosphere, which included pop-up fashion and food stores, DJs by the pool and a live demonstration by Japanese rope artist Beni Shibari, who applied her craft to a mainstay of Japanese automotive royalty, the Honda NSX. American rapper Xavier Wulf was in attendance with his own car, soaking up the vibes with other like-minded enthusiasts, while professional choreographer Lily Yurika performed live at sunset.

That evening, as the sun disappeared beyond the Tokyo skyline and the cars departed for their respective garages across the city, my only question was: What's next? After the weekend that was, seeing these cars in settings typically unrealized in the automotive scene, it was hard to imagine what more there was to do. Shortly after, as the trio behind the kickback wound down the event and saw everybody off, I got my answer.

"Bigger and better events and activations across the globe!" Hurd explained. "We'll always find inspiration through Tokyo's culture, and as we scale, the vision will remain the same: curating moments through music and motorsports."



### More Info

To learn more about Clutch Kickback and to keep track of its upcoming events, download the Clutch Kickback app or follow the brand on Instagram at [@clutchkickback](https://www.instagram.com/clutchkickback).

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a dark, textured button-down shirt, sitting at a wooden workbench. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a workshop with warm, golden light. A prominent feature is a vertical kintsugi lamp, which is a glass tube with a wavy, glowing pattern inside. Other lamps and a clock are visible in the blurred background.

# How the Light Gets In

In the Japanese art of kintsugi, cracked or broken objects are mended with gold — something artist Yuki Otani sees as a path to personal healing and emotional release

— Words by Ynes Sarah Filleul, photos by Lisa Knight

**O**n a quiet side street in Tokyo's Ogikubo neighborhood, sunlight streams through the windows of a small antique studio filled with ceramic fragments, brushes, powdered gold and bowls in various stages of repair. The air carries the earthy scent of lacquer while the yellow and silver trains of the Chuo-Sobu Line occasionally rumble by.

This is the workplace and studio of kintsugi artist and teacher Yuki Otani. If you're even slightly interested in Japanese culture, you're likely familiar with the concept of kintsugi: the practice of repairing broken pottery with lacquer and gold, highlighting cracks rather than hiding them. Despite being a centuries-old practice, it resonates strongly with many people today, both within and outside Japan. It's easy to understand why; kintsugi offers a potent visual metaphor, an acknowledgment and honoring of fractures, an understanding that healing has its own unique beauty.

Otani, who goes by the name "Kintsugi Lady" online, uses ceramic repair as a conduit for emotional renewal. Her students, she notes, are often not just mending broken pottery, but healing parts of themselves.



### Golden Scars

The word "kintsugi" came into Otani's life during a period of recovery and reflection. Amid the stillness that followed a major surgery, she came across a simple phrase that resonated deeply: "All my scars are golden." The phrase is from "Kintsugi," a song by British singer-songwriter Gabrielle Aplin. The words gave shape to feelings she hadn't yet been able to fully face — the quiet ache of a body changed and the sense that the future she had once imagined was beginning to slip away. Her physical scars were healing little by little, but she didn't yet know how to tend to the wounds in her heart. The words worked like a quiet remedy — something she hadn't known she needed.

That realization drew her to try kintsugi for herself. In learning to mend ceramics with gold, she began to see how care and beauty can emerge from change. For Otani, it became its own remedy — reminding her not to strive to erase her pain, but rather to live alongside it with grace. “To me,” she says, “kintsugi is a way of letting time become part of the beauty.”

As her understanding of kintsugi deepened, Otani — who splits her time between Japan and the United Kingdom — began to notice its quiet echoes in her own cross-cultural life. “My life itself feels like kintsugi,” she says. “Not fully one thing or another, but a space in-between

where different values meet and something new is created.”

Otani’s works often blend materials from both Japan and the UK. One notable piece is a Japanese teacup fused with a shard of British ceramic she found at a London flea market. It fit perfectly, as if by fate. This form of kintsugi is called yobitsugi, or “call-and-join,” where a missing piece is replaced not by the original but by something wholly different.

“It’s about finding harmony through what’s been carried forward,” she says. “It’s also about gently honoring what something has been while listening closely to what it might become.”



“  
Kintsugi is a lens for how we see the  
beauty in the world, and how we  
choose to live in it.  
”

### Fixing More Than Objects

Kintsugi Lady’s workshops, held in Tokyo, London and occasionally elsewhere, are about far more than technique. Participants come from all over the world, bringing with them not only broken bowls and cups but sometimes also fractured pieces of themselves.

A woman attending her first workshop in Japan remained quiet through the session, silently concentrating. She returned a few days later and began to share her story, telling Otani that her home country was in the midst of war. Something about the process of kintsugi had spoken to her — not in words, but in the quiet, attentive rhythm of repair. “My country is now in the middle of conflict, but one day, when things are stable, I want you to come teach kintsugi there,” she told Otani. That parting promise — “Let’s meet again” — felt like kintsugi itself.

“It felt like we were both trying to tend to our hibi — a Japanese word that means both ‘daily life’ and ‘cracks’ — with care, and carry them toward a better future,” Otani says.

In another session, a British woman painstakingly repaired a vase that belonged to a shop she once ran with her late husband; a honeymooning couple mended a mug full of memories; a mother and daughter from Taiwan laughed about the plate their cat had broken, now transformed into a “collaborative art piece.” Even an office worker in a business suit, emotionally drained from her work, left a workshop saying, “Kintsugi blew all my stress away.”

These moments, Otani says, are proof that kintsugi isn’t just about objects — it’s a way of being. “It’s a lens for how we see the beauty in the world, and how we choose to live in it.”

## A Reverence for Imperfection

In a world driven by disposability and constant consumption, kintsugi asks us not only to consider what we throw away but to reflect on why we do so. “People often think it makes sense to replace what’s broken,” Otani says. “But kintsugi invites us to

pause, to touch the flaw and to listen to the story it carries.” Often, she adds, the pieces that undergo kintsugi aren’t antiques or art objects but rather everyday things like bowls, plates and cups — items with quiet histories and personal significance.



In this way, kintsugi becomes not only a sustainable practice but a form of emotional ecology — a way of reimagining how we define care, worth and connection.

Otani has also begun incorporating materials that reflect this way of thinking into her artistic practice. Through a kintsugi volunteer initiative in the earthquake-affected Noto Peninsula, she met people who harvest and refine urushi — the natural lacquer essential to the craft. “Many of the people I’ve met there, who harvest and refine urushi, are not only the foundation of this tradition, but also survivors. Despite the hardship, they continue working to protect what’s been passed down.”

She now uses some of that lacquer in her workshops, allowing participants to connect with Noto not just through stories but through the material itself — letting their hands encounter a place and its people through the act of mending.

This experience also led her to begin planting her own lacquer trees, nurturing a future in which people, craft and nature grow together.

## A Future Melded Together

Otani is currently developing workshops in collaboration with overseas museums and educational institutions, and she hopes to publish a book that captures her reflections and experiences through the lens of kintsugi. Her approach is not about instruction, but about creating open spaces where people can explore and respond to the practice in their own way — through the textures of their personal stories and cultural backgrounds.

“Kintsugi is about fixing — but it’s never fixed,” she says. “It takes many forms. It’s simply a quiet way to care for something loved. For some, it’s art. For others, a path to healing. What matters is that each person can find their own way into it.”

## More Info

At Gallery Rokujigen in Ogikubo, Otani offers a simplified, one-day version of her kintsugi sessions. To book, DM her at [@kintsugilady](#) on Instagram.

# Borderless Creativity



The photographer and filmmaker Boa Campbell creates work that serves as a bridge between cultures

—  
*Words by Ynes Sarah Filleul*

**I**n the ever-shifting landscape of contemporary art and photography, multidisciplinary creative Boa Campbell moves with rare fluidity between worlds. With Euro-Japanese heritage and Australian roots, Campbell creates work that embodies the tension of existing between cultures.

As a creative director, filmmaker, director, producer and photographer, she's cultivated her own visual language that feels both dreamlike and

grounded. Her images juxtapose traditional and modern elements with striking intimacy — whether capturing subjects in sharp, geometric silhouettes against the electric pulse of Kabukicho's neon maze; positioning figures in sleek, obsidian, samurai-like garments against the imposing staircase of a Japanese temple; transforming models into exotic birds with sculptural attire against a lush jungle backdrop; or freezing the moment billowing fabrics catch wind on a sunny Parisian rooftop.



“

I used to feel torn between cultures, like I had to choose a side, but over time I realized the dissonance is actually a kind of key.

”

At first, she felt a sense of not fully belonging anywhere, leaving her disoriented, but this in-between existence eventually became her creative superpower. "I used to feel torn between cultures, like I had to choose a side, but over time I realized the dissonance is actually a kind of key. It lets me create a hybrid without adhering strictly to one or another."

This appears in her visual approach, where she creates images that feel both familiar and slightly otherworldly. "It's not about mixing for the sake of it," she says. "It's more like shape-shifting — absorbing the energy of a place, letting it rewire how I see and then letting that show up in the work."

Campbell's creative journey has taken her all over the globe — she recently relocated to Paris after six years in Tokyo. Through our conversation, we explore how her cross-cultural perspective shapes her distinctive visual style and her approach to capturing authenticity in an increasingly curated world.

### Between Worlds

"I was a hallway person," Campbell says of growing up biracial in Australia. "I had keys to many doors but no fixed home." The daughter of a strict Osaka-born mother and Australian father, she spent her early childhood in an off-the-grid community in the mountains of outer eastern Victoria, Melbourne. However, after the local school closed down, she had to finish elementary school in the closest country town, where she first encountered racism and identity struggles.



## Finding Her Way

Campbell's creative spark ignited early. "I was always cutting up fashion magazines as a teen," she remembers with a laugh. "Making what I now know were moodboards before I even knew what they were."

She first encountered photography in high school, but didn't immediately click with the medium — "the technical side clouded the poetry," she says. A supportive media arts teacher later sparked her interest in visual storytelling, and she started making documentaries about Melbourne's electronic music scene, editing them onto VHS tapes. "That early encouragement cracked something open. Later, in university, I leaned deeper into photography and film — quietly building the visual language that felt like mine."

After graduating, Campbell moved overseas to Sardinia, then Dubai. Then, following her father's passing in 2016, India became an unexpected sanctuary. "India's intensity — chaotic, vibrant and open — was a lifeline," she explains. "Unlike Dubai's polished vibe, India's raw energy [really] fueled my creativity."



Japan, her next home, offered different inspiration through its visual richness and attention to detail. "Japan's visual intensity — the typography and colors everywhere — inspires me daily," she notes.

Now based in Paris, Campbell is discovering yet another creative rhythm. "Paris feels quieter, less visually stimulating, but it's refreshing socially after Japan's isolation," she observes. "There's a dialogue, a roughness, a humor that brings out a different side of me."

## Tales From The Bridge

When Campbell talks about her filmmaking, her eyes light up. Her short film series *Tales From the Bridge*, which she started working on in 2023, represents a new chapter in her artistic output; it's perhaps her most intimate work to date.

The first installment, "Tales From The Bridge: The Artist & The Muse," shot in Tokyo's Nakano district, follows a

calligrapher and her muse through a wordless narrative about connection and intimacy. Over the course of seven minutes, the viewer watches as The Artist abandons her calligraphy paper, opting instead to leave her designs on the skin of The Muse, culminating in an ecstatic embrace. Shot in black and white, mostly in breathtaking close-ups, it's elegant, sensual and saturated in a sense of longing, suffused with the desire to touch and be touched. Now, Campbell is working on the second film in the series, titled "Tales From The Bridge: The Misfit." This project represents an even deeper exploration of her Japanese heritage through her own perspective: that of the misfit, someone who doesn't belong anywhere, yet belongs everywhere.

Working on the first film in the series proved to be a profoundly emotional experience. "I cried so

much making that thing," Campbell says. The final product is slow, sensual and stripped down. "I'm resistant to over-editing or flashy transitions in film," she says. "They can age quickly. I prefer clean cuts, timeless frames and small moments that breathe."

This film has already received international recognition, winning awards and reaching semi-finalist status at independent film festivals across Italy, France and Australia.

### The Balancing Act

Although she dabbles in many mediums — beyond film and fashion and lifestyle photography, she's also done art directing, graphic design and even origami — Campbell doesn't rely solely on her art to support herself. She also does voiceover work, which provides steady income while protecting her visual creativity.



“  
I'm drawn in by an emotion,  
a strange object, a face that  
holds a world.  
”

"Relying solely on visual projects in Dubai burned me out, zapping my passion," she explains. "Voice work lets me be selective with visual projects, keeping my creativity alive without financial pressure."

When selecting projects, Campbell gravitates toward visual intensity, anything that elicits a strong reaction. "I'm drawn in by an emotion, a strange object, a face that holds a world," she says. "I like things that feel heightened — visually or emotionally. A bit surreal, a bit intense."

Given her protean output — the way in which she incorporates new cultures and experiences into her creative vision — Campbell is in a state of constant evolution, always primed to learn or try something new. When asked what advice she'd offer younger creatives, the artist responds, "Enjoy the process, not just accolades. I got caught up in proving myself, but that's not sustainable."

She recalls a Hunter S. Thompson quote: "But why not float if you have no goal? That is another question. It is unquestionably better to enjoy the floating than to swim in uncertainty."

"Be kind to yourself, and don't let pressure overwhelm you," she adds.

### More Info

Find Boa Campbell on Instagram at [@boacampbell](#), and check out her work at [boacampbell.com](#).





# Caring for the World

Gifu's Central Japan International Medical Center is setting the gold standard for cancer treatment and preventive care

*Words by Alina Joan Ito*

**N**estled in the heart of Japan, the brand-new Central Japan International Medical Center (CJIMC) stands as a beacon of excellence in global health care. With state-of-the-art facilities and highly advanced technology, coupled with an intense focus on quality of care, CJIMC is emerging as a premier destination for international patients seeking top-tier medical services in Asia.

"Having seen medical care from all over the world, I designed this medical center with a global approach, equipped

to treat patients from all backgrounds. The facility is supposed to feel more like a hotel than a hospital," explains Dr. Jitsuhiro Yamada, the chairperson of Central Japan International Medical Center and a past international president of Lions Clubs International.

CJIMC caters to patients of all backgrounds and nationalities — among them, medical tourists who come to Japan specifically to access cutting-edge care at a comparatively low cost. The facility offers a wide variety of services, including comprehensive health screenings and checkups, but what perhaps

stands out most is its Proton Therapy Center, which is home to one of the world's most advanced and innovative radiation oncology treatment systems.

## Revolutionizing Cancer Care

At the heart of CJIMC's Proton Therapy Center lies the Varian ProBeam 360°, a highly advanced proton therapy system made in the US. Unlike traditional radiation therapy (which uses X-ray and gamma ray particles), the ProBeam 360° uses a proton particle beam, which

is able to accurately zero in on tumors; this allows for unparalleled precision in targeting cancerous cells while minimizing damage to surrounding healthy tissues, proving particularly effective for treating cancers in delicate locations.

"Cancer is the scariest diagnosis a patient can receive," Dr. Yamada says. "We've integrated the ProBeam 360°, a highly effective, third-generation proton therapy equipment." This cutting-edge treatment is offered in very few locations worldwide. "We're working hard to make it easier for international patients to receive cutting-edge cancer treatment here."

The Proton Therapy Center is led by Dr. Nobukazu Fuwa, one of Japan's most respected radiation oncology experts, and treatments are delivered on an outpatient basis. Each treatment session usually takes 10 to 15 minutes, meaning that patients spend just a fraction of their day in the hospital. Though it varies based on cancer type and severity, Dr. Yamada says that proton therapy can sometimes conclude in around 21 sessions — for example, in the case of prostate cancer — allowing patients to receive a full course of treatment in a single month.





“

We're working hard to make it easier for international patients to receive cutting-edge cancer treatment here.

”

It's an especially appealing option given the high costs of healthcare in America. "With proton therapy that uses the American-made Varian system, even after purchasing round-trip airfare to Japan and getting gifts for your family here, the total cost would still be lower than just receiving treatment in the US," notes Dr. Yamada.

### A Leading Force in Preventive Medicine

Beyond specialized treatment, CJIMC is also a hub for preventive care and comprehensive health screening. The hospital offers full-body checkup packages designed to detect health issues at their earliest, most treatable stages — including

full-body cancer screenings, cardiovascular system screenings and brain screenings. As such, it's an ideal destination for health-conscious travelers seeking peace of mind.

The full-body cancer screening course includes an MRI, blood testing and a PET/CT scan, a combined imaging test that shows both the metabolic activity and detailed anatomy of one's body. In America, PET scans can cost several thousand dollars, and insurance can refuse to cover the examination if it's deemed not medically necessary.

CJIMC is also equipped with an Elmammo PET scanner, a PET imaging system dedicated exclusively to breast cancer

detection. This groundbreaking technology delivers highly accurate results without the discomfort of traditional mammography, making it an extremely popular option for female patients.

### International Support and Accessibility

Recognizing the increasing demand from international patients, CJIMC works with English-speaking coordinators to assist with every step, from scheduling and payment to medical interpretation and aftercare support. Patient privacy and comfort are a top priority, and the facility's staff work hard to ensure that every international visitor experiences seamless, compassionate and culturally sensitive care.

Although some overseas visitors may not be familiar with Gifu, it's centrally located and easy to reach from any of Japan's major cities. Situated just over an hour from Chubu Centrair International Airport and within easy reach of Nagoya, the hospital is easily accessible by high-speed rail, expressway or plane.

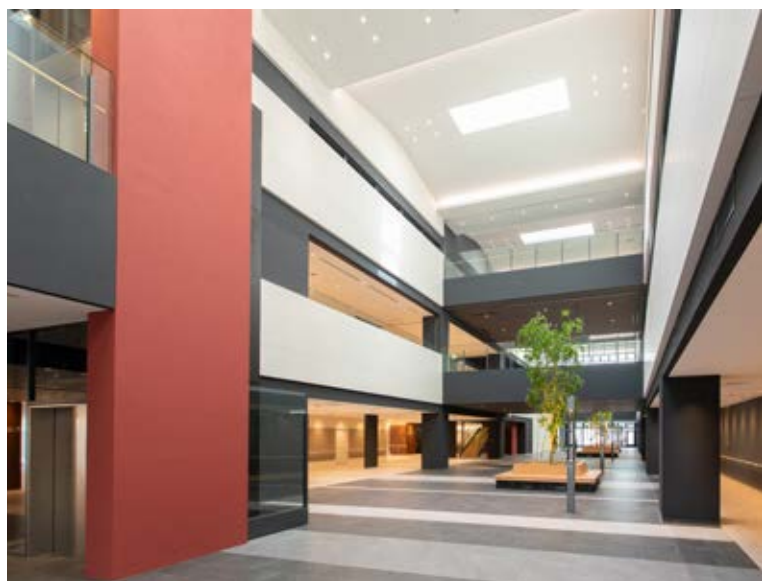
Moreover, Gifu's beautiful

nature and rich cultural heritage offer a peaceful and restorative environment — ideal for recovery and rehabilitation. Patients can experience the tranquility of Japan's heartland while receiving world-class medical care.

### Elevating Global Health Standards

As the world becomes more interconnected, the need for trusted, globally accessible health care providers continues to grow. With its fusion of cutting-edge technology, medical expertise and patient-centered care, Central Japan International Medical Center is poised to become a global leader in modern medicine.

Whether it's the quiet dignity of individualized care or the seamless integration of some of the world's most advanced medical innovations, CJIMC embodies the values that have long placed Japan at the forefront of health care globally. "I always teach new doctors that the center of medicine is not the doctor, but the patient. Patients come to us troubled by illness, and it is our job as doctors to use our knowledge to support them," says Dr. Yamada.



### More Info

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T: +81 574-66-1100 | W: [cjimc-hp.com](http://cjimc-hp.com)

# Aesthetic Medicine in Japan



## Kumiko Clinic offers a personalized approach to body contouring

*Words by Gabrielle Doman*

With its reputation for hospitality, high-quality care and cutting-edge technology, Japan is becoming one of the world's leading destinations for aesthetic procedures. The current favorable exchange rates have further driven its appeal as a prime location for affordable and reliable treatments.

Among these, a popular procedure is Cryolipolysis\* — more colloquially known as fat-freezing — a nonsurgical body-contouring treatment that aims to provide patients with targeted fat reduction. The procedure utilizes cold exposure to freeze fat cells in specific areas, causing them to

die. Sessions usually last around 40 minutes to an hour, and the procedure is performed using a hand-held device.

Dr. Kumiko Shimojima, the director of Kumiko Clinic, specializes in this procedure; she's also a faculty member for Allergan Aesthetics, a leading medical aesthetics company, in the field of body contouring and facial injection treatment. "I opened my clinic 11 years ago with a policy to stick with nonsurgical procedures," Dr. Shimojima says. "I compared lots of different devices, including both heat and cooling treatments, and found fat-freezing treatments the most effective for fat reduction."

## How It Works

Typically, fat loss is achieved by decreasing the number of calories one consumes while increasing the number one burns. Dr. Shimojima says Cryolipolysis can function as a complementary treatment for those who want further shaping and contouring.

The science behind fat loss is rooted in fat cell behavior. Weight gain typically occurs when fat cells expand; weight loss takes place when they shrink. Cryolipolysis, conversely, causes fat cells to die, at which point they are metabolized and eliminated from the body. The process relies on the fact that fat tissue is more sensitive to cold temperatures than other surrounding tissues; targeted cold exposure thus causes fat cells to break down and be naturally eliminated by the body's metabolism over several weeks. The procedure results in a 20% to 30% reduction in fat cells in the treated area after one session, with results typically visible after two sessions.\*

General dieting approaches can't target specific areas, Dr. Shimojima notes, so they can result in unintended outcomes. "Sometimes, traditional fat loss methods might mean you lose more fat than you want to from your face or breasts, for example. Fat-freezing offers more targeted contouring."



## Japan: A Global Leader in Aesthetic Medicine

All medical procedures come with risks, so prospective patients should ensure they are well informed before making a decision. It's also important to choose a practitioner who is experienced, qualified and using high-quality equipment.

Dr. Shimojima notes that the Cryolipolysis machine she uses has been cleared by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and it has obtained regulatory approval in Japan as well. "The treatment is one of very few to have received regulatory approval in both the US and Japan, which has a screening process to check safety and efficacy of the product," she says.

At Kumiko Clinic, Cryolipolysis treatments are customized based on individual desires. Japanese doctors are known for their meticulous care, notes Dr. Shimojima, and this is true in the field of aesthetic medicine as well. "We place a lot of importance on *omotenashi*" — a Japanese word that refers to heartfelt hospitality and the thoughtful anticipation of guests' needs — "and treat patients in a delicate and attentive way to ensure their comfort. We care about the small details, ensuring patients have a cushion for comfort or a cup of tea to promote relaxation."



## Technology Meets Omotenashi

Dr. Shimojima and her team use a detailed consultation and assessment process to determine the most effective treatment plan. "In our clinic, both the consultation and assessment are conducted by doctors, whereas in many other clinics, assessments are carried out by nurses or medical staff," she explains. This attention to detail allows for a higher level of precision.

The clinic offers a variety of applicators to accommodate different body areas, including the abdomen, thighs, arms and chin. By carefully selecting the right applicator and treatment plan, patients reach more targeted results. As an Allergan Aesthetics-certified trainer for botulinum toxin and hyaluronic acid injections as well, Dr. Shimojima also offers complementary treatments alongside Cryolipolysis. For example, once fat cells on the chin have been treated, she may suggest hyaluronic acid injections to treat the lower face.

Due to this level of expertise in nonsurgical procedures, exemplified in its doctor-led assessments, Kumiko Clinic has become a premier destination for those seeking aesthetic treatments — combining advanced technology with Japan's meticulous approach to patient care.

## More Info

For more information about Allergan Aesthetics Beauty, visit [allerganbeauty.jp](http://allerganbeauty.jp)

\*Source: Manstein Dieter et al. "Selective Cryolysis: A Novel Method of Non-invasive Fat Removal." *Lasers in Surgery and Medicine* 40, (2008): 595-604.

This article does not intend to endorse or promote any treatments that are not officially approved in Japan.



# Dive Headfirst Into Luxury

A high-end head spa tucked in the heart of Ginza, Kläre offers a relaxing and rejuvenating experience like no other

Words by Ynes Sarah Filleul, photos by Annie Ziesmann

**H**idden on the seventh floor of a discreet Ginza building lies one of Tokyo's best-kept wellness secrets. Kläre isn't simply another luxury salon — it's a revolutionary head spa experience. Its services are crafted with the precision and attention to detail that Japan is renowned for worldwide.

In German, “Kläre” means “crystal clear.” It's an apt name for the salon; step inside and you're immediately transported from the bustling streets of Ginza to a tranquil sanctuary. For your session, three private treatment

rooms with distinct lighting concepts are available: Himmel (Sky) is the brightest, Vogel (Bird) has moderate light and Wald (Forest) offers a deeper, more serene atmosphere.

## The Ultimate Head Spa Experience

My session began with a detailed scalp analysis, conducted by a hair diagnostician using a specialized microscopic scanner. This comprehensive assessment examines everything from hair growth patterns to scalp conditions like premature hair loss or excess oil production.



Once you're settled into a sumptuous salon chair and draped with soft blankets and warm facial towels, your hair will be enveloped in a steam-filled turban designed to open your pores and hair follicles. What follows is perhaps Japan's most thorough scalp cleansing regime.

As a forest-scented aroma oil creates rich lather on your scalp, expert fingers work through your pressure points, loosening deep muscle tension. The pinnacle of relaxation arrives with the distinctive “head soak” — essentially an onsen bath for your scalp, in which a gentle waterfall of carbonated spring water cascades from a faucet positioned at the hairline.

## Cutting-Edge Technology

After the head soak, Kläre's clinical-grade Scalp Serum Pro is applied — the salon's own professional-grade scalp serum made with human stem cell culture extract to support scalp regeneration and healthier hair. This is followed by an advanced EMS (electrical muscle stimulation) treatment using a patented brush-like device. Fine electrode pins stimulate often-neglected head

muscles while enhancing serum absorption.

The experience extends beyond the scalp, and finishes with a sequence of hand massages targeting tense areas around the neck, shoulders and shoulder blades.

## Visible Results

The session concludes with a blowout by a spa therapist at a marble sink, followed by a before-and-after scalp analysis. In my case, it revealed a visible transformation: Previously yellowish, dull skin gained a pearl-like translucency, my clogged pores were cleared and my scalp became noticeably more hydrated, fresh and subtly radiant.

After the treatment, you'll be left feeling refreshed, rejuvenated and ready to enjoy your time in Japan in style.

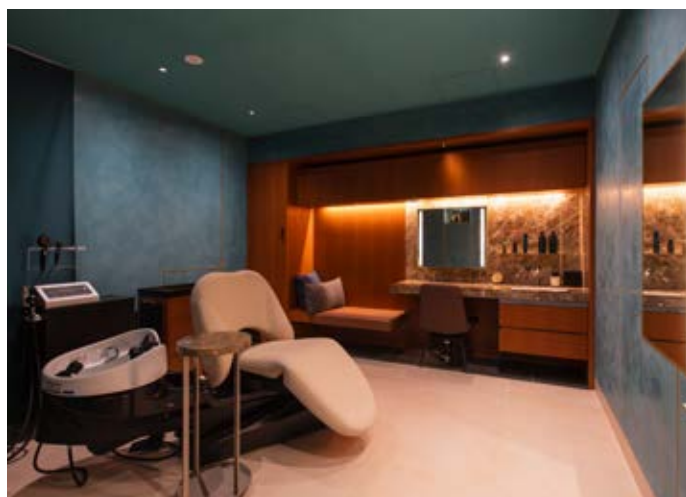
*This article describes the high-concentration human stem cell culture scalp treatment, which costs ¥43,000 (tax included). A shorter course, with fewer steps and no human stem cell culture extract application, is also available.*

## More Info

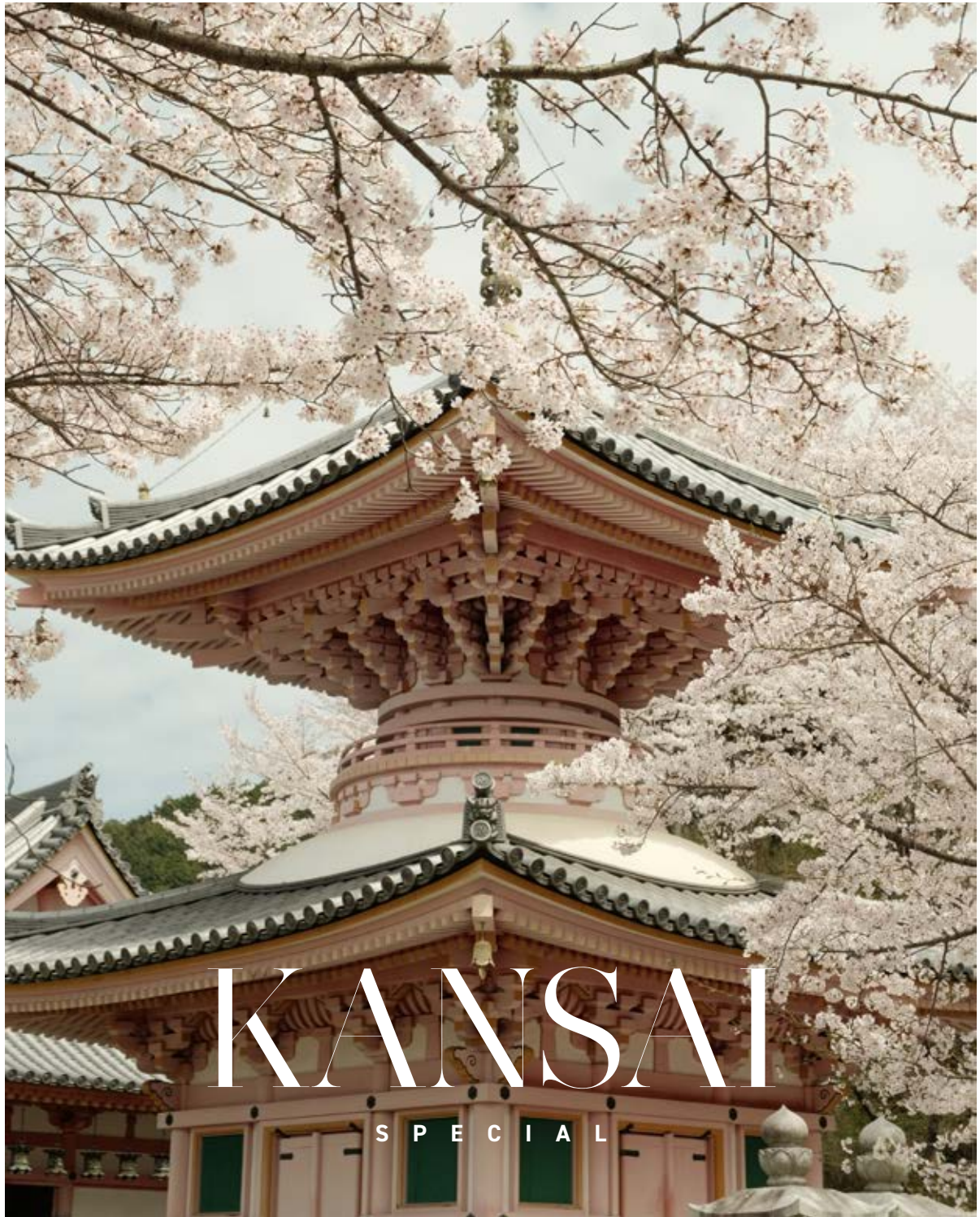
Kläre, 7th Floor, Matsumoto Kiyoshi Ginza 5th Building,  
5-5-1 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo  
[klare.jp/en/](http://klare.jp/en/)

Opening Hours: 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. (last appointment at 7 p.m.)

Please note that English-speaking staff may not always be available on-site.



# TRAVEL



52

## **Kyoto's Floating Village**

With its famed bathhouses, Ine is known as the "Venice of Japan"

56

## **Monuments of Light**

Breathtaking contemporary architecture on Awaji Island

58

## **Flower Temples**

Tucked away in the mountains of Kyoto and Nara



# Kyoto's Floating Village

Known as the “Venice of Japan,” the picturesque fishing village of Ine is famed for its historic boathouses set along a glittering bay

— Words by Eugenie Shin

Away from the gleaming splendor of Kyoto's golden pavilion and bustling historic walkways lies a sleepy seaside village, untouched by the accelerated rhythms of metropolitan life. Here, you will find a dazzling watercolor of emerald waters and lush green hills divided by a winding ribbon of wooden boathouses.

Situated at the northernmost edge of Kyoto Prefecture, Ine is a coastal fishing village known for its quaint charm, cultural preservation and the vibrant waters of its bay. Often called the “Venice of Japan” due to its picturesque waterfront and historical significance as a site of trade, Ine is widely regarded as one of the country's most beautiful villages.

Ine has a small population of around 1,800 residents, most of whom work in the fishing and agricultural industries, and it lies about 15 kilometers north of the scenic Amanohashidate sandbar. Given its far-flung location, the village is a bit of a trek to access via public transportation from Kyoto and Osaka stations — but its enchanting scenery has made it a popular spot for adventurous travelers in recent years.

## The Living Heritage of Ine

While there are many seaside fishing towns across Japan, what distinguishes Ine is its rows of traditional boathouses, called *funaya*. Some 230 boathouses line Ine Bay. With roots in the Edo period, they've survived destructive ocean events and typhoons for centuries, thanks to the protective embrace of the surrounding mountainscape and the village's south-facing direction.

Traditionally, the two-story boathouses are multipurpose, with the sloping first floor acting like an aquatic garage for the owner's boat. The second floor once served as living quarters, though residents of the village today typically have a separate main house across the street and use boathouses as an extended work or living space. Some of the buildings have also been converted into atmospheric cafés or shops, and even into overnight accommodations for guests.

## Cruise Around the Bay

For the best panoramic view of *funaya*, take a boat tour around the bay. Smaller sea taxi tours guided by local fishermen provide a more intimate experience and insight into life in Ine. Another option is to take a larger sightseeing cruise, which offers shade in the hotter months. Boat tours can be arranged at the Ine Tourist Information





“  
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and the vibrant waters  
of its bay.  
”

Center upon arrival. Advance reservations are not required for either tour, unless your party is more than 15 people.

Biking around the bay is also a great way to take in the scenery, with guides and e-bike rentals available. To admire the boat-houses and bay from afar, head to Funaya no Sato Park, a roadside station that houses a tourist information office and an observation deck.

### Savor Local Delicacies

With its long tradition of fishing, the village has an abundance of incredible seasonal seafood to try. Serving sashimi, salt-grilled fish, kaisendon (seafood bowls) and more, Ine's dining establishments specialize in capturing the fresh flavor of the day's catch. From the end of April to mid-August, for instance, you can feast on Ine's famous iwagaki (rock) oysters, also known as the "milk of the sea" due to their mild taste. From November to February, you can sample winter yellowtail, which has long been the village's pride and joy.

Some scenic and delicious eateries include Aburaya and Funaya Kajiya, where you can savor seasonal seafood set meals and iwagaki oyster feasts while admiring a beautiful view of the bay. At the first-floor café of Funaya Miyabi — a serene funaya-turned-lodging — you can try traditional Japanese sweets such as mitarashi dango and sip on matcha right by the water.

Lovers of sake should check out Mukai Sake Brewery, which boasts the distinction of being the closest sake brewery to the sea in Japan. Established in 1754, the brewery is known for its unique red rice-based sake, Ine Mankai, or "Ine in Full Bloom." Beloved for its sweet, rosé-like flavor, Ine Mankai has even been purchased by members of the imperial family.

Since 1999, the brewery has been led by head brewer Kuniko Mukai, who made waves at the time of her appointment as one of Japan's first female head brewers.

### Picturesque Seaside Stays

With stunning views of the curving row of boathouses, crystalline waters and the lush green mountains beyond, inn stays at Ine are an unforgettable experience. But if you're looking to stay overnight at a traditional boathouse, keep in mind that most funaya inns are typically fully booked three months in advance, as spaces are limited and some establishments only accommodate one group per day.

For those looking to book a place well in advance, options include Water Front Inn Yosasou, Funaya Kura, Funaya Fuga and Funaya Raku.

### More Info

To learn more about Ine and plan a visit there, visit [ine-kankou.jp/en](http://ine-kankou.jp/en).





# A Serene Overnight Stay in Central Kyoto

A charming 24-hour itinerary that will take you away from the crowds — at least for the most part

Words by Matthew Hernon

The buzzword of 2024, overtourism is a major issue in Japan these days, and nowhere is it more apparent than in Kyoto. Known for its delicate balance of ancient traditions and modern artistry, Japan's old capital is a widely favored destination for travelers hoping for a tranquil experience during their stay here. What many find when they arrive, however, is a city struggling to cope with the sheer number of people.

Avoiding large crowds in Kyoto is difficult but not impossible. On the outskirts of the city, you'll find calmer districts that are well worth exploring. For those who only have a short time in the area, though, heading out too far may not be a viable option. Fortunately, there are several charming spots toward the center of the city that don't feel overbearing, as I found out during a recent trip.

Below, find recommendations for a short jaunt to Kyoto that will allow you to stay centrally located and enjoy the best of the city's culture without sacrificing tranquility and calm.

## Stay: The Royal Park Hotel Kyoto Umekoji

The Royal Park Hotel Kyoto Umekoji is located just one stop on the train from Kyoto Station, or a relatively short walk through the picturesque Umekoji Park. As it was cherry blossom season when I visited, I opted for the latter.

Located near the Kyoto Railway Museum, the hotel is popular with train enthusiasts and even has a special railway-themed room, featuring bedding decorated with images of trains and shinkansen-shaped pillows, as well as pictures of the N700 and 500 series bullet trains



alongside Doctor Yellow, the iconic diagnostic train. My room didn't have any of that, but it did come with a delightful view of the iconic five-storied pagoda of To-ji Temple.

Other amenities include a large public bath, ideal for a soothing soak before taking advantage of the hotel's impressive obanzai Kyoto breakfast buffet, which features a variety of dishes, including its signature beef curry.

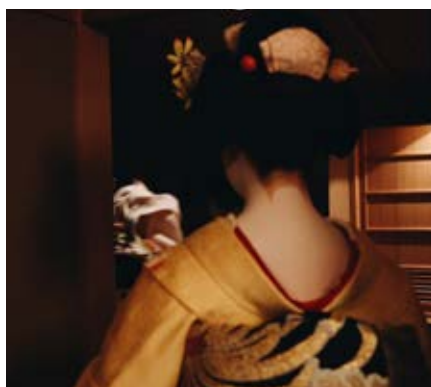
More info: [royalparkhotels.co.jp/en/the/kyotoumekoji/](https://royalparkhotels.co.jp/en/the/kyotoumekoji/)

## Dine: Kyoto Wagyu Ryori Issekisancho

Kyoto Wagyu Ryori Issekisancho is the newest branch of the renowned Tokyo-based Issekisancho restaurant group. All of the hospitality group's eateries are designed with a distinctive concept tailored to their location — and having eaten at the group's impressive sushi and yakitori establishments in Tokyo, I was eager to see what its Kyoto restaurant was like. It didn't disappoint.

A 10-minute walk from the Royal Park Hotel Kyoto Umekoji, this wagyu restaurant is located on a nondescript street, yet the entrance projects a sense of luxury. Heading inside, I was enthusiastically greeted by a kimono-clad server who ushered me past the elegant private dining rooms to a huge counter in front of an open kitchen. The setting was intimate and inviting, with the interplay of light and shadow adding to the warm yet sophisticated atmosphere.

The restaurant offers a variety of courses to choose from, including a “Welcome to Japan” set for international guests. Included in it are several succulent wagyu dishes with beef sourced from renowned producers nationwide. The standout from my meal was the pure Tajima Usunaga beef, an ultra-exclusive wagyu brand from Kobe. It’s acclaimed for its exceptional glossy marbling that gives the meat its soft, melt-in-your-mouth texture.



Along with the beef, the course also included an assortment of appetizers as well as snow crab, lobster, udon and shaved ice. Everything was prepared immaculately, and the service was first-rate. I decided to finish the evening with a gentle stroll toward Toji Temple’s pagoda to get a closer look at Japan’s tallest wooden tower, which looks magnificent when illuminated at night.

**More info:** [tablecheck.com/en/issekisancho-kyoto](http://tablecheck.com/en/issekisancho-kyoto)



## See: Museums and Temples Where You Can Avoid the Crowds

First on our list: The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. A 25-minute train journey from Kyoto Station, it’s located across from a giant torii gate that marks the approach to Heian Jingu Shrine, which famously featured in Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation*. Despite being situated next to an extremely popular tourist site, the museum itself has a peaceful feel to it.

Its collection of around 13,000 works includes paintings, sculptures and crafts, with the museum’s main focus being on artwork from the Kansai region. It also boasts some terrific views of the torii gate and the Okazaki Canal. The best place to enjoy the latter is from the terrace of the museum’s eatery, Cafe de 505. Enjoying a light pasta lunch in front of the cherry blossoms as canal boats passed below was one of the highlights of my trip.

From the museum, it’s less than 10 minutes on foot to a perfectly manicured oasis of peace hidden behind a high wall. Murin-an Garden is a classical Japanese promenade garden created by prominent landscape designer Ogawa Jihei VII in the 1890s; it adjoins Murin-an, the former garden villa of two-time Japanese prime minister Aritomo Yamagata.

Featuring gentle streams and waterfalls, it makes for an idyllic saunter. Guests can also enjoy matcha and Japanese sweets in the main house while overlooking the garden. The epitome of serenity, it’s a delightful place to avoid the crowds, as it requires a reservation in advance and there’s a limit to the number of visitors per hour.



From the peace and quiet of Murin-an Garden, it’s another roughly 10-minute walk to Nanzen-ji Temple, one of Kyoto’s most famous tourist spots that’s usually bustling with people. Rather than following everyone up the steps to the temple, though, I recommend veering to the side to the entrance of Tenjuan, a subtemple of Nanzen-ji.

Inside are two small, idyllic gardens: a karesansui (dry landscape garden) with paving stones crossing a stretch of raked gravel and a pond garden with a mossy pathway and stepping stones lined up in the water. With no one else around, one feels a million miles from the hustle and bustle of city life. Cherish that feeling while you can, before it’s time to head back to the crowds at Kyoto Station.

## More Info

The National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto: [momak.go.jp](http://momak.go.jp)  
Murin-an Garden: [murin-an.jp/en](http://murin-an.jp/en)  
Tenjuan: [en.kyotokk.com/tenjuan.html](http://en.kyotokk.com/tenjuan.html)





# Monuments of Shadow and Light

A subtropical paradise famed for its panoramic vistas, Awaji Island is also home to some of Japan's most striking modernist architecture

— Words by Eugenie Shin

The mesmerizing, swirling curls of cerulean and ivory that form the Naruto whirlpools — the world's largest vortex — are just one facet of Awaji Island's prismatic beauty. Floating on the Seto Inland Sea, Hyogo Prefecture's Awaji Island is a picturesque escape in Kansai. It offers lush fields of seasonal flora, charming beaches, hot spring resorts and culinary gems. The island is also one of the country's top onion-producing regions, affectionately known as Onion Island for its sweet, fragrant bulbs.

Beyond Awaji Island's allure as an Edenic vacation destination lies a rich cultural history and dynamic artistic landscape. Creation myths describe the seaside oasis as the first island of Japan — formed by the god Izanagi and goddess Izanami, who emerged from primordial chaos and stirred the ocean's depths with a heavenly spear.

Today, the island's mythological sites coexist in fascinating juxtaposition with its modern architectural interventions. Defined by Tadao Ando's geometrical forms, Awaji Island's architectural collection is a dream for aesthetes and photographers alike.



## The Water Temple

The main hall of Honpukuji is unlike any other Buddhist sanctuary in Japan — topped not by a grand roof but rather by a vast, elliptical lotus pond that reflects the serene rhythms of the sky and surrounding greenery.

The spiritual structure, also known as Mizumido (Water Temple), was reimagined by Tadao Ando in 1991. Instead of leading visitors upward toward the altar, Ando envisioned a dramatic descent: A shadowed staircase bisects the aquatic mirror, drawing you into the temple's interior.

The temple's outer entrance is pure and minimalistic, composed of a white gravel path and gently curving concrete walls that signify a subtle transition from the mundane to the spiritual. Inside awaits a latticed corridor in rich vermilion hues, culminating in Honpukuji's main altar. As the special head sanctuary of the Shingon sect's Omura school, the temple enshrines Yakushi Nyorai, the Buddha of healing. Visit in the afternoon to experience the temple's core at its most surreal, as rays of sunlight shroud the chamber in a crimson glow.





## Awaji Yumebutai

It's hard to imagine, but this lush, expansive complex was once a wasteland — stripped bare after a large-scale excavation in the process of building Kansai International Airport. Tadao Ando endeavored to transform the space entirely, enhancing Awaji Island's scenic splendor with modern architectural elements — designing tranquil gardens, a conference center, a chapel, an open-air theater and other sites where humans and nature could coexist.

With a name that means “dream stage,” Yumebutai embodies the distinct, graceful contours and evocative minimalism of its architect, standing in seamless harmony with the island's serene natural beauty. Smooth concrete planes and precise geometric forms cast ever-changing patterns of shadow and light, yielding limitless opportunities for photographers — or just for quiet moments of contemplation.

## The Circular Forum and Oval Forum

Close by, the Circular Forum and Oval Forum stand at the center of Yumebutai. As their names suggest, the two structures are open-air spaces made of exposed concrete, resembling a stadium or amphitheater. From ground level, wanderers can observe disks of the sky above.

The Circular Forum has several slopes within layered walls, which visitors can ascend and descend to experience the space from varying perspectives. At the top is an observation area that overlooks Yumebutai. The Oval Forum features taller, imposing curved walls, accented with an asymmetrical sundial.



## Hundred Step Garden

While one could spend a whole day wandering around Yumebutai, a must-visit gem is Hyakudanen, or the Hundred Step Garden, created in remembrance of the victims of the 1995 Great Hanshin Earthquake. Perched atop a sloping hill, the unique spectacle consists of one hundred square terraces, arranged in a curious cascading grid formation reminiscent of an M.C. Escher print.

Each square contains a quadrant of symmetrical flower beds composed of seasonal flora. In his typical fashion, Ando fuses nature and artifice by framing the garden's vibrant organic forms with rigorous precision. As a living work of art, Hyakudanen evokes both awe and contemplation.

## Zenbo Seinei

Tadao Ando is not the only Pritzker Prize-winning architect to enhance Awaji Island's artistic and spiritual landscapes: Shigeru Ban is the visionary behind a breathtaking wellness facility named Zenbo Seinei in the heart of the island.

Opening its doors in the spring of 2022, the retreat is an elongated treehouse-like building made of Japanese cedar and other wood, rising above a vibrant forest. Here, patrons can participate in zazen meditation and yoga on a 100-meter-long wooden deck, take in fresh air and enjoy original vegan cuisine. Overnight stays are also available and include activities like guided meditation, calligraphy and tea ceremony.

## More Info

To learn more about Awaji Island, visit [awajishima-kanko.jp/en/](http://awajishima-kanko.jp/en/).



# The Flower Temples of Kansai

Tucked away in the mountains of Kyoto and Nara, these sacred spaces are renowned for their sublime floral displays

Words and photos by Whitney Hubbell

**A**s old capitals of Japan, Kyoto and Nara have long been centers of faith and tradition, the mountains around them revered as sacred spaces bridging the natural and the divine. Scattered throughout this topography are isolated temples and shrines, each with its own deep history and profound beauty.

Among these secluded mountain temples, a few are known among locals for the way they come alive when flowers bloom — cherry blossom petals drifting through the air in spring, hydrangeas blooming in quiet clusters come early summer or spider lilies and cosmos carpeting the ground as autumn approaches. Though these places are a wonder to visit year-round, they take on an even more otherworldly feeling when their signature flowers bloom.



## Tsubosaka-dera: Takatori, Nara

Tucked in the mountains of Nara Prefecture, not far from Mount Yoshino, sits Tsubosaka-dera. Though it's not as well known as Yoshino for its cherry blossoms, anyone who visits during this season can witness the temple's large seated Buddha statue floating in a cloud of sakura — a quiet spectacle all its own. The temple is also beloved for its pale pink pagoda, which makes for stunning springtime photos.



The name “Tsubosaka-dera” means “jar on a hillside temple.” According to legend, the temple was founded in 703 by the monk Benki, who apparently had a beloved glass jar. While practicing asceticism on the mountain, a vision of Kannon, the goddess of mercy, appeared inside it, and so he placed the jar in a hermitage on top of the mountain. This is said to be the temple's origin. A few centuries later, Sei Shonagon mentioned Tsubosaka-dera in *The Pillow Book*, where it's included in her list of temples with miraculous powers. **More info:** [tsubosaka1300.or.jp](http://tsubosaka1300.or.jp)

## Gansenji: Kizugawa, Kyoto

Deep in the forested mountains of southern Kyoto Prefecture, an isolated pagoda rises from the greenery. This three-story wooden pagoda is part of Gansenji, which, according to the temple's documents, was founded in 729 by the celebrated Buddhist priest Gyoki.

Mystically serene in every season, Gansenji is a great spot for viewing both cherry blossoms and autumn colors, but early summer is when Gansenji really comes alive. Every June, when the hydrangeas bloom, the temple grounds are filled with white, pink, blue and purple tiny clouds against the lush green of the surrounding forest, and lotus flowers fill the pond.

**More info:** [gansenji.or.jp](http://gansenji.or.jp)



### Hasedera: Sakurai, Nara

Nestled in the mountains near the ancient town of Sakurai in Nara Prefecture lies the sprawling temple complex of Hasedera. Founded in 686, Hasedera is the center of the Bunzan school of Shingon Buddhism, and the temple complex consists of 30 buildings dotted around the hillside.

Leading up to the main hall is the temple's famous covered wooden staircase of 399 steps, which is lined with peonies in the early spring and leads to an outdoor staircase decorated with hydrangeas in early summer. The main hall at the top offers a spectacular view of the temple complex and its surroundings, particularly during the cherry blossom season and when the leaves change in the autumn.

**More info:** [nara-yamato.com/en/hase\\_en](http://nara-yamato.com/en/hase_en)



### Shojuin: Ujitawara, Kyoto

During the summer, more than 2,000 wind chimes adorn this remote temple in southern Kyoto. The soft clinking of the decorated wind chimes, heard from the beginning of July until mid-September, is the origin of Shojuin's nickname, Furinji — the Wind Chime Temple.

Though the Wind Chime Festival is a summer event, the temple offers seasonal beauty year-round, best viewed through the reception hall's heart-shaped window looking out onto the garden. The hall's ceiling is also decorated with 160 colorful paintings of flowers and other Japanese art, creating a splendid scene overhead.

**More info:** [kyototourism.org/en/sightseeing/426](http://kyototourism.org/en/sightseeing/426)



### Butsuryu-ji: Uda, Nara

Situated in Nara Prefecture, Butsuryu-ji has become well known for the spider lilies that turn the temple grounds into a carpet of vibrant red every year in early autumn. The temple is also popular locally as a sakura viewing spot due to its famous 900-year-old resident, Sennen-Zakura, a huge cherry tree that greets visitors along the entrance path.

Butsuryu-ji was founded in 850 by the monk Kenne, a disciple of Kobo Daishi. Behind the main temple buildings, carved into the mountainside, is an ancient-looking stone chamber, which is generally accepted to be Kenne's grave.

**More info:** [enntourism.com/spots/butsuryu-ji-temple](http://enntourism.com/spots/butsuryu-ji-temple)



### Hannya-ji: Nara City, Nara

Every year in early autumn, a meadow of cosmos blooms around this temple on the outskirts of Nara city. The "Hannya" of the temple's name is a transliteration of the Sanskrit word for "wisdom," but today, Hannya-ji is more often associated with these flowers, and is nicknamed the Cosmos Temple.

Hannya-ji is rumored to have been founded in 629 by the monk Ekan, who came to Japan from one of the three kingdoms of ancient Korea. Many of the buildings and artifacts at the temple have been designated Important Cultural Properties, in particular the gate entrance, a National Treasure dating to the 13th century.

**More info:** [narashikanko.or.jp/en/spot/detail\\_10017.html](http://narashikanko.or.jp/en/spot/detail_10017.html)



# Journey to the Heart of Japanese Spirituality

At Koyasan, an ancient mountaintop temple complex in Wakayama, travelers can experience a brush with the divine

— Words by Alina Joan Ito

Almost 1,200 years ago, one of the most famous Japanese monks, Kukai, entered his eternal meditation on the eastern peak of Mount Koya. The monk, known posthumously as Kobo Daishi, slipped into death mid-prayer.

Shingon belief states that though his physical body perished, his spirit still remains on Mount Koya, awaiting Miroku Nyorai, Buddha of the Future, and watching over one of Japan's holiest mountains. To this day, two shojin ryori (traditional Buddhist vegetarian cuisine) meals are brought to Kobo Daishi's mausoleum every day to sustain the monk's spirit.

In the late summer of 2023, along with my mother and grandmother, I visited Mount Koya — or Koyasan in Japanese, which is how I prefer to refer to it. My grandmother had walked the Shikoku pilgrimage, a route connecting 88 temples said to have been visited by Kobo Daishi in the ninth century. Although not officially part of the circuit, Koyasan is considered its spiritual beginning and end, as it's the revered monk's final resting place. She wanted to complete the journey while her legs were still strong enough to make the trek.

## Holy Pilgrimage

Koyasan refers to a mountain basin and its surrounding peaks, as well as the temple complex that spans the area. Found in Kansai's Wakayama Prefecture, it's a tremendously important site in Japanese Buddhism. The birthplace and spiritual center of Shingon Buddhism, the mountainous area was home to over 2,000 temples in the Edo period, 117 of which remain.

These 117 temples are still open to visitors today. It's possible to take a cable car or bus to the top, but the spiritually or athletically inclined can ascend to the peak using ancient pilgrimage trails. Among these is Choishi Michi, the original main trail, a 23.5-kilometer hike that winds through the forest.

"After climbing a steep mountain path, a religious city suddenly appears, lined with temples and monastic lodgings. The air is clear, and a solemn atmosphere filled with tradition surrounds you," Nobuhiro Tamura, the former chief administrator of a temple on Koyasan and current head operator of a Koyasan tour company, explains. "It is a place where you can get a glimpse into the original landscape of Japan, where

“

As soon as I crossed the bridge, a whole-body shudder coursed through me. I held my breath instinctively.

”

many people with deep faith in Kobo Daishi still live.”

It might have simply been the temperature drop and the misty weather, but Koyasan's ambience left me feeling chilled and mystified on my journey there. Visitors enter the complex through Daimon, a 25-meter-tall gate flanked by guardian statues, marking the symbolic threshold between the secular world and the sacred mountain temple town. As we passed through, our guide pointed out the route that would lead to Fudozaka-guchi Nyonin-do, the only surviving women's hall of the seven that once stood on the perimeter of the temple complex. Women weren't allowed to enter the holy grounds until 1872, and even then, they faced strict restrictions and resistance. It wasn't until the early 20th century that they received full and equal access.

Instead, female pilgrims would hike the perimeter of Koyasan and go to surrounding sanctuaries with direct ties to Kobo Daishi in order to experience a fraction of the area's holy energy. The difficult and even dangerous route became known as Nyonin Michi, now a symbol of devout, resilient female worship.



I looked to my grandmother and mother, the three of us comprising three generations of women, casually visiting a mountain we would have once been barred from. I suddenly felt a rush of pride and appreciation. I stood a little taller and tilted my head up, beckoning the energy around me.

### Kobo Daishi's Resting Place

Some of Koyasan's main highlights include the Danjo Garan, the central temple complex; the Tokugawa mausoleum enshrining Ieyasu and his son Hidetada; and, of course, Okunoin, the site of the mausoleum of Kobo Daishi and the largest cemetery in Japan. The cemetery is home to over 200,000 tombstones, including a rocket-shaped tombstone modeled after Apollo 11 and a Yakult-shaped tombstone.

To enter the site of Kobo Daishi's mausoleum, visitors must cross Gobyobashi Bridge, beyond which food and photography are not allowed and talking must be kept to a minimum. The tour guide asked us to bow to Kobo Daishi and meditatively cross the bridge, one wooden plank at a time. My gaze zeroed in on the planks as if one misstep would reveal me to be careless or disrespectful.

On the other side of the bridge awaits Torodo Hall, a sanctuary illuminated by 20,000 lanterns. Guests aren't permitted to enter the mausoleum itself, but may instead pay respect from outside of the monk's eternal meditative place. As soon as I crossed the bridge, a whole-body shudder coursed through me. I held my breath instinctively and felt an all-encompassing presence around me, understanding me, protecting me. I looked over to my mother, and she returned a quick, wide-eyed nod. "Iru ne," she said. *He's here.*

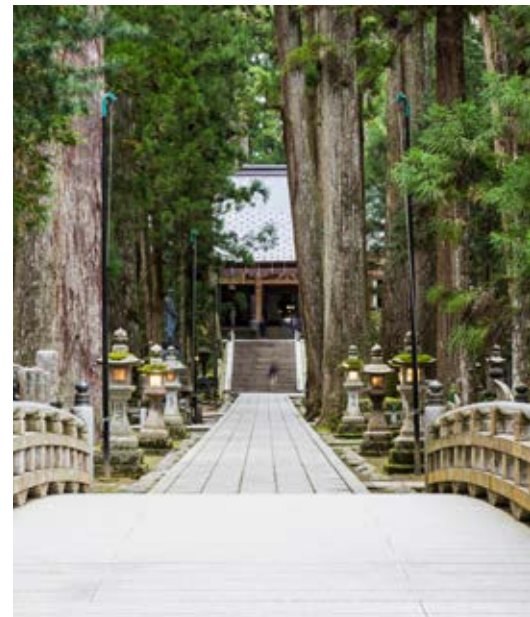


“  
Staying at a temple  
makes for a wholly new  
level of immersion in  
the culture of Koyasan.  
”

### Temple Lodging

For those looking to deepen their spiritual experience even further, Koyasan also presents guests with the opportunity to stay at a temple lodging, called shukubo. "There are around 50 shukubo, and many of them can be booked easily online," Tamura notes. For visitors coming between March and November, he advises booking far in advance. "On the other hand, if you prefer a quieter experience, winter is a peaceful season with crisp, clear air — just make sure to come prepared for the cold."

Staying at a temple makes for a wholly new level of immersion in the culture of Koyasan. Shukubo experiences offer spiritual understanding through lived experience and actual religious practice, allowing guests to eat, pray and sleep like a monk on temple grounds.



A shukubo experience provides the chance to slow down and find profound meaning in quiet, everyday moments: walking through the temple's impeccably polished wooden corridors, trying thoughtfully prepared shojin ryori meals, engaging in rituals such as gongyo (daily sutra chanting) and goma (a fire ritual prayer) and admiring carefully maintained gardens. Staying at a shukubo also allows guests to explore Koyasan at night; the red temple buildings of Danjo Garan have a completely different ambience when illuminated in the evening.

There's something to be said for experiencing the entire 24-hour cycle in Koyasan, watching the sun dip in the evening and welcoming the sunrise the next day, practicing gratitude and reflection for the things we take for granted, guided by the spirit of Kobo Daishi.

### More Info

Book your own trip to Koyasan  
at [awesome-tours.jp/en/](https://awesome-tours.jp/en/).



**OMOTENASHI**  
SELECTION



## Isso Tea

Isso Tea brings a fresh perspective to Japan's rich tea tradition. It utilizes carefully selected tea leaves, all sourced from Japan and certified as organic, and combines them with thoughtful, eco-friendly design — including bilingual flavor notes and brewing guides. Each blend is crafted to suit today's lifestyles, without losing the elegance and spirit of authentic Japanese tea culture. Every sip of Isso Tea is a celebration of quality, beauty and sustainability, spreading the charms of Japanese tea throughout the world.

### More Info

[bit.ly/3GzxCTp](https://bit.ly/3GzxCTp)



## Sunsun Sponge and Sunseven HighR Solid Detergent

Daily routines feel a little brighter with the Sunsun Sponge and Sunseven HighR Solid Detergent by the Dainichi Corporation. Known for their lasting strength, rich lather and quick drying capabilities, Sunsun Sponges pair perfectly with the gentle, powerful cleaning of Sunseven solid detergent, which is enriched with soothing minerals and collagen in order to be especially gentle on one's hands.

Thoughtfully crafted by a family-owned company with over 50 years of care behind every product, these two items transform the simple act of washing dishes into something a little more joyful.

### More Info

[bit.ly/4iPAA3K](https://bit.ly/4iPAA3K)

Discover the artistry of everyday life through Omotenashi Selection — a curated showcase of exceptional Japanese products recognized for their craftsmanship, innovation and deep cultural value. Hand-selected for their quality and beauty, each item is thoughtfully made, elegantly packaged and designed to enrich your daily rituals with the spirit of Japanese hospitality and tradition.



## Kikkomanhonten Goyogura Soy Sauce

A symbol of craftsmanship and tradition, Kikkoman's Goyogura soy sauce is crafted with the same traditional methods used for the Imperial Household. Carefully made with the finest domestic soybeans, wheat and salt, and aged slowly in kioke (wooden vats), it offers a rich, layered flavor that enhances everything from sashimi to hearty dishes. The limited edition Goyogura Namashoyu (raw soy sauce), aged through a special double-fermented technique, adds rich taste and delicate freshness to every bite. Beautifully packaged, both special soy sauces bring a taste of Japan's culinary heritage to your table.

### More Info

[bit.ly/4m0zYen](https://bit.ly/4m0zYen)



## Saunality Skincare for Sauna and Bath

Rooted in the philosophy of mindful care, Saunality skincare was born from Japan's love of sauna culture and a deep respect for nature and science. Handmade in small batches in Saga Prefecture, each formula uses Japanese botanicals and pure ingredients to nourish deeply without weighing down the skin. Elegant, thoughtfully designed packaging adds beauty to your routine. Whether after a sauna session or at home, Saunality brings a touch of Japan's wellness spirit to your everyday life, setting a foundation for future happiness and contentment.

### More Info

[bit.ly/4cUAOoP](https://bit.ly/4cUAOoP)

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# GUIDE



66

## **Art World**

Our pick of the best exhibitions in Tokyo

68

## **TW Social**

What our TW community has been up to lately

70

## **Perfect Days**

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

*Grave of the Fireflies* © Akiyuki Nosaka/Shinchosha, 1988



## 'Isao Takahata Exhibition: The Man Who Planted Japanese Animation' at Azabudai Hills Gallery

Studio Ghibli co-founder and filmmaker Isao Takahata (1935–2018) will be celebrated with a retrospective this summer to mark the 90th anniversary of his birth. Takahata is said to have set the emotional tone for Ghibli; his deeply humanistic storytelling and ability to balance trauma with tenderness, as seen clearly in his devastating wartime parable *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and in the beautiful introspection of *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2014), made him a legendary figure in animation. Co-organized by Ghibli, the show will trace Takahata's creative journey, from early influences and lesser-known works to his philosophy and processes.

**Azabudai Hills Gallery** From June 27 to September 15  
[azabudai-hills.com/en/azabudaihillsgallery/](http://azabudai-hills.com/en/azabudaihillsgallery/)

# THE ART WORLD

Our pick of the city's best exhibitions

Compiled by Victoria Bennett



Images courtesy of Design Ah! Exhibition.Neo

## 'Design Ah! Exhibition Neo' at Tokyo Node

NHK's *Design Ah!* series has been Japan's playful gateway to design-thinking for over a decade, teaching viewers young and old to see wonder in everyday objects through gorgeously simple visuals and sound. This family-friendly exhibition at Tokyo Node turns everyday actions into interactive installations: transforming "walking," "eating" or "holding" into ideas to ponder and explore. Visitors ascend to the 45th-floor gallery (a journey studded with hidden surprises) to encounter 360-degree immersive works that dissolve the line between observer and participant. Here, design isn't a lesson but an understanding felt in the body and shared across ages.

**Tokyo Node** Until September 23 [exhibition-ah-neo.jp/](http://exhibition-ah-neo.jp/)





## ‘Premonition and That Period’ at Taro Okamoto Memorial Museum and ‘Taro Okamoto and Tower of the Sun’ at Taro Okamoto Museum of Art

As the wooden structures of Expo 2025 become Osaka’s latest landmark, it feels apt to rediscover the radical mind behind Expo ’70’s iconic "Tower of the Sun" sculpture: Taro Okamoto. Two shows highlighting the artist’s work are taking place in Tokyo this summer: The Taro Okamoto Museum of Art in Kawasaki will host a show dedicated to the artist’s Expo ’70 vision and anti-modernist controversy, while the Okamoto Memorial Museum in Minami-Aoyama will focus on his 1963 painting "Premonition" — its swirling black strokes marking a turn from joyful primitivism to something darker — revealing how during the 1960s, Okamoto became increasingly inspired by nature and mysticism, feeling a “magic” in rural life that he sought to channel through his canvas. For Expo pilgrims, these are a nice homage to the free-spirited predecessor: Where "Tower of the Sun" dazzles, his work from the "Premonition" period mesmerizes.

**Taro Okamoto Memorial Museum** Until June 29 [taro-okamoto.or.jp/en](http://taro-okamoto.or.jp/en)

**Taro Okamoto Museum of Art** Until July 6 [taromuseum.jp/exhibition\\_english](http://taromuseum.jp/exhibition_english)



## ‘Tsutaya Juzaburo: Creative Visionary of Edo’ at Tokyo National Museum

Long before modern media empires, Tsutaya Juzaburo (1750–1797) — publisher, tastemaker and career-launcher of famous ukiyo-e artists — orchestrated Edo’s cultural renaissance. The Tokyo National Museum will explore how Juzaburo’s skill in anticipating trends and connecting creatives revolutionized Japan’s visual culture — elevating ukiyo-e to an artform and bringing literature and biting satire to the masses. Peppered with iconic prints and rare documents, this exhibition is a showcase of creative curation from the man who turned woodblock prints into cornerstones of Japanese art history.

**Tokyo National Museum** Until June 15 [tnm.jp](http://tnm.jp)



Tōshusai Sharaku Kabuki Actor Otani Oniji III as Yukko Edobei, 1794. Met Museum collections

# TV Social

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

By David Schneider



Leslie Kee and Ellie Chim Pom celebrating the special issue of SUPER in collaboration with Marc Jacobs at the launch reception party at Creative Space Academia Harajuku.

Attending Leslie Kee's SUPER & Marc Jacobs reception party at Creative Space Academia Harajuku: From left to right: male model, Kissbomaru, Nagisa Amano, CEO of DIVINE model agency, Taisei and Ryosuke Eto.



Celebrating the winners of the Today's Woman Plus Size Beauty Contest, hosted by National Director and founder Steven A. Haynes. From left to right: winner of the Most Elegant class, Shino Asai; Steven A. Haynes; and winner of the Most Sophisticated class, Kimiko Kitamura.

From left to right: Jamaican reggae singer Mr. Dave McAnuff; H.E. Ms. Shorna-Kay M. Richards, Jamaican Ambassador to Japan; Ghanaian jazz musician Mr. Dela Botri; and H.E. Mrs. Genevieve Edna Apaloo, Ambassador of the Republic of Ghana.



Celebrating Chilean winery "Caliterra & Takún" and its new partnership with importer Fuji Trading at the Ambassador's Residence. From left: Mr. Toru Sato, General Manager, Liquor & Food Headquarters, Fuji Trading Co., Ltd.; Mr. Yuya Kondo, General Manager, L'ecrin; Ambassador of Chile to Japan, H.E. Ricardo G. Rojas; Mrs. Nury Disegni, Trade Commissioner, ProChile Japan; and Mr. Jaime Rivera, Regional Director Asia, Errázuriz and Caliterra Winery.



New Zealand Ambassador Hamish Cooper and embassy guests enjoying an evening of New Zealand art and wine at the New Zealand Ambassador's official residence.

The Ambassador of New Zealand, Hamish Cooper, and his spouse, Ms. Misako Kitaoka, hosting an evening of New Zealand art and wine at the New Zealand Ambassador's official residence.



H.E. Mr. Diego Alejandro Dalton Rosales, Ambassador of El Salvador to Japan, celebrating the 90th anniversary of diplomatic relations between El Salvador and Japan with guests.

The four key partners of the inaugural Race Against Dementia & Shiga Sports Japan charity luncheon at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. From left to right: Tsukasa Shiga, CEO of Ceremony Co.; Mark Stewart, Chairman of the Trustees; Mr. Masaru Hiraiwa, Director of the National Center for Geriatrics and Gerontology; and Yukitoshi Fujisaka, Director of Honda Racing Corporation.



Hosting the inaugural Race Against Dementia & Shiga Sports Japan charity luncheon at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. From left to right: Tsukasa Shiga, CEO of Ceremony Co., and Mark Stewart, Chairman of the Trustees.



Attending the inaugural Race Against Dementia & Shiga Sports Japan charity luncheon at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. From left to right: James Nepaulsingh, Executive Director of the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan; Dr. Lucas Witoslawski, Deputy Delegate of the German Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Japan; Marie-Claire Joyce, Trade Counsellor at the British Embassy Tokyo; Filippo Cibrario, Country Manager of Pirelli Japan, and his spouse.

Auction winner Shigeru Sato, CEO of ABLE & PARTNERS INC., with renowned racing driver Ryo Hirakawa at the inaugural Race Against Dementia & Shiga Sports Japan charity luncheon at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. Mr. Sato successfully bid on two exclusive paddock passes for the Japanese Grand Prix, including a special meet-and-greet with Mr. Hirakawa in Suzuka.



Happy auction winners of an exclusive Honda Hot Lap VIP weekend, Stefan Nilsson and spouse Ikuo Yamanaka, at the inaugural Race Against Dementia & Shiga Sports Japan charity luncheon at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo.



Happy auction winners of the special anniversary edition of Bernd Mayländer Safety Car suit at the inaugural Race Against Dementia & Shiga Sports Japan charity luncheon at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. From left to right: Paul Tange and his spouse.

Vanessa Georgoulas (right), Senior Editor at Speedweek magazine, with Geoffrey Bowman at the Tokyo American Club Nibonbasbi branch, celebrating the fourth anniversary of its opening.



From left to right: Kishida Yuko, wife of former Prime Minister Kishida Fumio; Ishiba Yoshiko, wife of Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru; Indonesian Ambassador to Japan Heri Ahmadi; H.I.H. Princess Takamado; Nuning Ahmadi, wife of the Indonesian Ambassador to Japan; Iwaya Kazuko, wife of Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi; and Hayashi Yuko, wife of Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi Yoshimasa.

## 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: Labianna Pinklady Joroe

Labianna Pinklady Joroe is a Brazil-born, Japan-raised drag queen and sexual wellness educator. After launching her drag career in Nagoya in 2018, she moved to Tokyo, where she uses performance and counseling to promote consent and intimacy across cultures. Here's how she'd spend a perfect day in Japan's capital city.

### My perfect day in Tokyo is ...

Pretty much summarized in three words: coffee, culture, food. I love to grab a coffee and walk around a neighborhood, vibing with the atmosphere. One place I absolutely love is **Dope Nakano**. The area of Nakano in general has a fantastic atmosphere; it's known for its old-school charm, vintage shops and maze-like shopping arcades where you can find everything from punk zines and faded adult mags to antique kimono and woodblock prints. And this little retro café has the perfect combination of nostalgia and fresh atmosphere.



The concept is *fujun-kissa*, "fujun" meaning "impure." "Junkissa" translates to "pure café" or "classic coffee shop" in Japanese. It refers to a type of traditional Japanese café, often characterized by its nostalgic, retro atmosphere and focus on coffee and tea, rather than serving alcohol. Dope, conversely, is impure — it has a bar menu and a bit of a nightlife feel, with neon lights and Japanese hip-hop playing on vinyl. The nitro coffee served with Showa-era pudding is a must.

In the evening, I'd grab a bite at **Alamas Cafe**, a Mexican queer bar and café located in Shinjuku Nichome, the biggest queer neighborhood in Japan. Then I'd put on my makeup, high heels and a dress for a full night of entertainment in the area.

### Tokyo's best-kept secret is ...

**Platform3**, a little queer-oriented bookshop located right by Higashi-Nakano Station. It's run by Loneliness Books and TT Press, and it feels cozy and cultured at the same time. Here, you'll find a carefully curated collection of books and zines that touch on everything from gender and feminism to solidarity and loneliness, all with a focus on the diverse voices of Asia. It's a great community spot — a place to connect and reflect.

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

**Yoshiwara Atochi** in Asakusa. It's the site of the former Yoshiwara Yukaku, once the largest legal red-light district in



the area. Established in the early 17th century by the Tokugawa shogunate, it was known for its lavish courtesans and intricate wooden teahouses. Though little remains today, the area once played a major role in shaping the city's social and economic life. As a sexual educator, I've always wanted to visit for its rich history of intimacy, gender and erotic expression.

### More Info

Follow Labianna on Instagram at [@labianmajoroe](https://www.instagram.com/labianmajoroe).



## My Perfect Day: Rebecca Thorn

Originally from New Zealand, Rebecca Thorn is the general manager of Hotel Indigo Tokyo Shibuya. With years of experience in the hospitality industry — six of them in Tokyo — she has discerning taste and is skilled at curating a wonderful time. Here's how she'd spend an ideal day in her city of residence.

### My perfect day in Tokyo is ...

After a busy working week, I love starting my weekend with coffee in bed — my luxury when I have days off. In my job as the general manager of a hotel, quiet time is rare, so I really value it.

Next, I'd head to **F45 Training Hamamatsucho** for my daily workout. I've been going to F45 for over four years now and make it there four to five times a week; it's a great mixture of functional cardio and strength group classes. Not only are the classes great, but it has excellent trainers and the members are more like a community — it's a very diverse environment with a great vibe. This would be followed by coffee at **Byron Bay Coffee Company Daimon**, a post-workout ritual for gym members for years now.

Afterwards, I'd head home, then out for lunch and shopping in Harajuku with friends. Harajuku is within walking distance for me, and I love it and the walk there — Shibuya

and Harajuku both are such eclectic, inclusive and welcoming neighborhoods. For lunch, I'd go to **Vegan Bistro Jangara**, a popular vegan place that's just a two-minute walk from Harajuku Station. I am vegetarian, and this spot is perfect — I especially recommend its vegan tonkotsu ramen.

Then, I'd hit up my favourite shops in Harajuku: **Desperado** in Tokyu Plaza (a perfect representation of Shibuya fashion, highlighting unique pieces from both international and Japanese designers) and **Ragtag** on Cat Street, one of Tokyo's most beloved vintage stores. On the way home, I'd grab coffee from **Coffee Supreme** in Kamiyamacho — so good to have NZ coffee nearby.

For dinner, I'd catch up with friends at **SG Low**. If I could recommend a place to someone visiting Tokyo for one night only, this would be it. It's a small speakeasy-style modern izakaya with a lively atmosphere and great food and



“ I love walking and exploring these quiet streets that are deserted — finding cool cafés, street art and more. ”



drinks. It caters to different dietary requirements, makes great recommendations and has an incredible drinks list highlighting lemon sours and highballs. Do yourself a favor and order the mentaiko mac and cheese!

This would be followed by a cocktail at **Swig**, a new-ish cocktail bar with great music, hospitality and a diverse crowd of locals and tourists. Or maybe a yuzu-infused gin and tonic at **Tight**, a tiny space tucked upstairs in Nonbei Yokocho.

### Tokyo's best-kept secret is ...

The quiet backstreets off the busiest areas. I love walking and exploring these quiet streets that are deserted — finding cool cafés, street art and more.

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

I've been lucky enough to have ticked off most places on my list to try, but next up is Tencups in Shibuya — I am slow off the mark but excited to go!

### More Info

Follow Rebecca on Instagram at [@rebecca\\_thorn\\_](https://www.instagram.com/rebecca_thorn_).

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