

Hidden treasures in Japan's heartland

By Gloria Chow

The central prefectures in Japan are full of hidden treasures, from the very modern to the very traditional



Nagoya

To an average foreigner, Nagoya is a much less familiar name. Every year many of us flock to Tokyo, Sapporo and Osaka. Yet Nagoya seems to be the very last destination that one would think of.

So when I was invited to Nagoya and the nearby four prefectures by the local tourism board, I wasn't expecting too much. To me, Nagoya was just an industrial city with a famous castle. But after five days of travelling, I found that my journey was just too short.

In five days, I travelled through four prefectures – Shizuoka, Gifu, Mie and Aichi. Each one has its very own appeal:

Shizuoka – where the flowers bloom

My first destination was Hamamatsu in Shizuoka prefecture. I spent my first night at a peaceful onsen hotel in the Kanzanji Hot Spring area, overlooking the Lake Hamana. We had a traditional Japanese-style dinner, with sashimi, shabu shabu, shark-fin soup...The presentation of the dishes revolved around the autumn season, offering a taste of nature.

The next morning, we went down to the lake to visit the construction site for Shizuoka International Garden and Horticulture Exhibition, Pacific Flora 2004, Japan. The event will be held from April 8 to October 11, 2004. About 60,000 species of plants from 22 countries around the world will be exhibited in this annual event held in different countries every year.

The huge site occupied the size of more than 50 Tokyo Domes. In order to gain an overview of this gigantic garden, we were led to the top deck of the observation tower. There we could see the main pavilion, exhibitor gardens, horticultural gardens, the outdoor stage, etc, all in the process of construction. There will be a canal through the garden, offering scenic cruises for the visitors. In addition, electric cars will run around the site, and passengers would be able to enjoy the lake view.

Among all the attractions, I was particularly interested in Monet's garden, where the garden of Claude Monet, master of impressionism, will be recreated. Imagine his masterpiece 'Water Lily' to be reproduced in real life! Also, on the outdoor stage, a set of amplifiers in the shape of flowers will conduct the sounds of nature to the audience, including the sound of the wind and the songs of birds.

Next we visited the Museum of Musical Instrument, located within 'Act City', a landmark of Hamamatsu city. Hamamatsu is the city of music where musical instrument makers such as Yamaha, Kawai and Roland have their main offices. The Museum boasts 950 musical instruments collected from Japan and overseas, from the ornate Fortepiano used around the time of Mozart (its sounds are quite different from the modern piano) to the Chinese pipa.

Hamamatsu is also the city of cars. World leading car manufacturers such as Honda and Suzuki have chosen to establish their headquarters there. After the tour, I enjoyed lunch at a restaurant at Act City, with a panoramic view of the mountains around Hamamatsu. Unfortunately, it was a misty day and Mount Fuji was hidden in the mist of clouds.

Gifu – a river runs through it



We arrived at Gifu on a bright sunny afternoon. Our first destination was Shirakawa-go, a World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO since December 1995. As soon as we left the railway station, we jumped into the car and hurried to the site, as it was two and a half hours away.

gassho-style houses

We drove through dozens of mountains and tunnels, and arrived at Shirakawa-go just before sunset. The village was made up of gassho-style thatched-roof houses. We visited one of the family houses, where the ground floor was the living room with a traditional stove in a corner. Up the steep stairs was the storage space for the family's crops. I could imagine that the house must be a cozy place when it snowed in winter. In fact, the unique architectural style was developed to survive the severe nature, and the locals still live inside those houses. The thatched roofs require replacement every 30 to 40 years, and since the roofs are huge and very steeply sloped (almost 60 degree), the work requires tremendous efforts and money. However, one would certainly agree that it is worthy after seeing such a valuable heritage.

Takayama



After that we headed back to the hilltown of Takayama, a traditional town which shares some similarities with Kyoto. It is famous for biannual festivals, old street, also hot springs and traditional crafts, such as wooden furniture, lacquerwork, and kimono (Japanese traditional costumes). The next day we began our day with a visit to one of the town's morning market near Jin-ya, the

Historical Government House. The Jin-ya was built in 1615 but the existing buildings are the result of reconstruction in 1816. From the outside, it resembled a palace on a small scale, with strong walls and an imposing gateway.

The morning market was indeed a must-see. Farmers' wives from nearby villages showed off their fresh produce such as vegetables, fruits and pickles. There were many varieties of apples, and the taro and the tulip were so big that they were simply a delight to look at. Nearby was an old street with traditional shops, selling local specialties including miso and sake. Trials were offered to everyone but I was afraid to get drunk with too much sake in the morning. We also tried a delicious street snack – 'skewered dumplings' before we headed to a tea house for a secret visit.

The tea house we visited belonged to a team member of the Takayama Festival, held twice a year in the months of April and October. Huge floats with *karakuri ningyo* (mechanical dolls) are displayed in front of the temples during the festival. Each of the floats is manipulated by a local team, and I was fortunate to meet one of the participants. He revealed to me two of the valuable dolls they used at the festival, which design could be traced back to two hundred years ago. He also told me that the team would practise in the secret room inside the teahouse before the festival. He had been a team member since he was a small child, and now he was teaching the next-door kids to manipulate the dolls.

To learn more about the festival, we headed to the nearby museum where some of the festival floats were on display. They had been used for many years but their colours were still vivid and some of them were even gold-plated. Although I did not have the chance to witness the festival, I could feel the exciting atmosphere by watching the video in the museum.

There was so much to see in Takayama but we must catch the train to Mie, the third prefecture on my itinerary. The two-hour train ride was one of the most scenic journeys I

ever had – the rail ran along the path of a big river, which laid among the misty mountains. Autumn leaves coated the mountains with beautiful colours, and the running river was dotted with little ducks, dams and waterfalls.

Mie – a treasure land of pearls and seafood

In the evening we arrived at the seaside city of Toba in the Mie prefecture. Toba has many offshore islands that make it a favourite holiday destination for surfers and seafood lovers. It is also famous for its cultured pearls.

We visited at the Mikimoto Pearl Island, the home of cultured pearls just before sunset. Inside the Pearl Museum, we learnt about the process of pearl creation to pearl production. On the second floor was an exhibit of extravagant pieces of jewellery constructed with pearls. Some of the impressive exhibits included an ancient pagoda paved with pearls and a shiny globe plated with pearls, gold and some other colourful jewels.



Mikimoto Pearl Island

As the day drew to a close, we went to the seashore to witness how the women divers worked. Dressed in traditional white working clothes, they dived deep into the sea to collect oysters. Their husbands watched them carefully on a boat and pulled them up through a rope.

The next morning we left Toba and headed to the mountain area of Mie, searching for a ninja residence. I had watched a ninja walking in the air and playing tricks in cartoons, but what about a real ninja?

In fact, nowadays the ninja is an off-market profession, however, the martial arts of ninjutsu is still well preserved. At the Iga Ninja Museum, we entered a ninja house and learnt about the secret behind the walls. The house looked like a typical Japanese farmhouse on the first glance, but hidden in the house was revolving walls, secret passages, hidden doors and concealed swords. I was asked to try the tricks out, and luckily, I didn't fall into the traps!



We also visited the Ninja Museum to learn about the history of ninja, their daily life, their special techniques and the many varieties of weapons. I was amazed by the fact that a ninja could tell the time of the day by looking at the size of a cat's

Iga Ninja Museum

pupil. Next we went to the Ninja Demonstration Zone for a thrilling show on ninja fight. After the show, I was invited to throw some sharp weapons on a wooden block. Really, it's not as easy as it looked!

Aichi – from the high-tech to the tradition

Time was running out, and I had only an afternoon for my last destination, Nagoya in the Aichi prefecture. Our first stop was Garden. To the world, Noritake represents the history of western-style tableware made in Japan. Inside the beautiful historical garden, you will find a museum, a craft centre, a restaurant, a café and several shops.



It was a fine sunny afternoon. We had a quick bite at the café, which served its customers with Noritake tableware, and then went to the next-door craft centre. There we saw how a piece was made from scratch and how the painters hand-painted each piece with their masterful techniques.

Noritake-no-Mori Noritake Craft Center

Upstairs at the museum, we saw some collection of Old Noritake that was produced over the span of a century. They were great works of art that stood the test of time. I was amazed by the smart and innovative design of some old tableware, such as the mustache cup.

I wish I could have more time to shop for tableware, but we must set off for Toyota Automobile Museum. It was quite far away from the city centre, but was certainly worth a visit. Not only did it showcase Toyota's cars, but also well-preserved antique cars that were made in Japan, the United States and Europe, as well as the latest high-tech models. We were lucky enough to have the honor to ride on one of the antique cars. The museum also dedicates a room for the beautiful crystal mascots by Lalique.



Toyota Automobile Museum

We found ourselves caught in the traffic as we left the museum for the city centre. I noticed that there was a lifted path being constructed above the roads. It was a maglev train path to the site of World Expo 2005, to be held near Nagoya.

As it got darker, we finally arrived at the Osu shopping district in Nagoya, where trendy boutiques, restaurants and second-hand stores could be found. We dropped in one of the

Japanese pubs and ordered a variety of fried and grilled dishes. They were excellent to go with wine and my plum soda was not bad indeed.

We finished our dinner quickly as we had an important appointment with the master of karakuri ningyo – the maker of the mechanical dolls we saw at Takayama. His name is Tamaya Shobei. With the help of the local tourism board, we were able to visit his apartment/workshop in Nagoya. He was a quiet gentle man, but no doubt a very experienced karakuri master. Not only did he reproduce the ancient karakuri ningyo, he also generated his very own creation.

Inside the living room/workshop, Tamaya-san demonstrated his art with a tea-serving doll and revealed the magic inside the wooden body. A single doll is made up of seven kinds of wood, and the spring inside the head was made up of whale baleen. He also showed us the instruction menu that he inherited from generations of karakuri master. He is now the only karakuri master in Japan, the ninth generation after his father. He will go to Europe to demonstrate the art of karakuri ningyo in January next year.

From the very high-tech industrial products to the very traditional crafts, central Japan has it all. It is also a paradise for the eyes - the beautiful Lake Hamana and Mount Fuji in Shizuoka, the spectacular mountains and rivers of Gifu, the refreshing sea breezes of Mie, and the city lights of Nagoya... every area has its own appeal. The Flora Expo in 2004 and the World Expo in 2005 will certainly draw more visitors to central Japan, and I am ready to join them.