

JAPAN



A peek inside ancient Japan

A world away from the fast-forward capital of Tokyo, the island of Shikoku offers visitors a glimpse of forgotten Japan, writes **Paul Ewart**

GONGS, flutes and drums resound as the colourful Japanese dance troupe on the stage in front of us twist and turn expertly to the beat. The men move determinedly, while the women, resplendent in light kimonos and strange, conical hats, move with more grace. Then it's my turn.

Against my protests, I join the throng on the stage. My arms flailing, I try to overcome my innate lack of co-ordination to try to emulate the slick movements and precisely timed steps I've just witnessed, but I end up aggressively karate chopping the air while bobbing exaggeratedly from side to side. Enforced public dancing is my idea of hell on Earth.

Suddenly, a white garland is placed around my shoulders. I'm confused – do losers get garlands? Nope, it turns out I've won second place! I'm amazed. Later, however, I ask someone to translate my certificate and I'm told it's an award for "individuality". Hmmm.

This is the "awa odori". A dance with a proud 400-year history, originating from the Tokushima prefecture on the island of Shikoku. It has become one of the most representative dances of Japan and as such is now performed worldwide. It's so big it even has its own festival, which pulls in a crowd of more than 1.5 million spectators annually, making it the largest dance festival in

the country. And in between festivals, the Awa Odori Kaikan – where I've just publicly humiliated myself – offers daily performances alongside a permanent museum showcasing the history of the important dance.

It's just one of the unique cultural offerings found in Shikoku, in Japan's southwest. Shikoku is one of the four large islands constituting the country. Here you can forget the bright lights and big city of Tokyo – this island remains a mystery to the average Japanese, let alone foreigners, who rarely venture this far. But for those that do there are attractions aplenty.

While Awa Odori is undoubtedly the region's biggest cultural drawcard, its most famous culinary one is even more renowned: the udon noodle, specifically the "sanuki" udon. The most popular type of udon noodles in Japan today, sanuki is the ancient historical name for Shikoku's Kagawa Prefecture, which makes it the

birthplace of the udon, of sorts. It's said that the best noodles in the country are here, which makes sense in a prefecture with under one million residents where there are more than 800 udon noodle shops. Visitors can experience the back-breaking process that goes into making the noodles in one of the local udon-making classes.

Shikoku is the also birthplace of the most revered figure in Japanese Buddhism, Kobo-Daishi, and home to one of the oldest pilgrimages in the world. Shikoku Henro – or "88 temple pilgrim walk" – has had countless pilgrims circle the mountainous island to visit its 88 temples on foot for more than 1200 years. Each leg represents a stage of the path to nirvana:

awakening, austerity and discipline, enlightenment and nirvana, with the entire 1500km pilgrimage taking 40 days or more. However, you don't have to spend months walking to get your Zen-fix. You can easily walk



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SHIKOKU

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part of the route in a few days or simply take in a temple or two.

Or if that sounds too exerting, opt for a gentle stroll around Takamatsu's Ritsurin Garden. Widely lauded as the best garden in the country, this picturesque park is comprised of a series of ponds, streams, delicate bridges and viewing hills, all of which – in true Japanese style – have been subtly arranged to mimic mountains, rivers, lakes, and forests.

To counter the activity, allow at least a full day or two to relax in the hot spring or onsen town of Dogo Onsen, in the northeastern outskirts of the city of Matsuyama. This is reported to be the oldest onsen in Japan, with a history stretching back more than 3000 years. It's also one of the best places to hit the mat and experience a stay in a traditional ryokan.

For the uninitiated, a ryokan is an old-style Japanese inn which typically features tatami-matted rooms, communal baths, sliding screen "shoji" doors, cushions for seating and a single low table, which is replaced at night by maids with a sleeping futon.

After checking in, I undress and attempt to put on the yukata (cotton robe), provided for guests. As I worry about whether my Obi belt is tied correctly, an old Japanese woman enters my room with a welcoming green tea. Taking in my confusion she titters and then promptly undoes my belt and re-ties it, instructing me step-by-step ... in Japanese.

Dressed to impress, I emerge into the chilly evening and follow the other spa-goers — all Japanese and all clad in yukata, clutching mini raffia buckets

containing towels and soap – to the historic communal bathhouse in the centre of town, the Honkan.

Dating back to 1894, this wooden three-storey castle-like structure is a darkened maze of stairways, passages, changing rooms and pools, all of which bustle with bathers and staff. Here, you check your inhibitions in at the door – along with your shoes.

For onsen virgins, there are various rules to follow. First – and most importantly – before entering the steaming waters, you need to be clean. It's with this in mind that I proceed to furiously scrub myself in front of a room full of naked Japanese men.

When I'm sure that there can be no question of any lingering dirt on my body, I submerge into the water.

Forgetting that I'm in a large bath with a bunch of nude strangers, my mind starts to drift. As my tight muscles slowly relax in the mineral-infused waters, I think to myself: "Communal bathing isn't all that bad."

The writer was a guest of the Japan National Tourism Organisation.

HIDDEN TREASURES:

(clockwise from main) Ritsurin Garden; Awa Odori dancers continue a proud tradition; Ritsurin Garden features many beautiful historic trees; pilgrims in the grounds of the Iwaya-ji Temple; learning how to make udon; and a five-storied pagoda Shoryuji temple in Kouchi. Pictures: iStock, Paul Ewart

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