

Wild WAYS

DISCOVER A PILGRIMAGE TRAIL IN A RURAL POCKET OF SOUTHERN JAPAN THAT OFFERS NOURISHMENT FOR BOTH BODY AND SOUL.

Words ALEXIS BUXTON-COLLINS

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAMY/CHARLES O. CECIL

While tens of millions of tourists visit Japan each year, few end up in regions such as Kunisaki, a bucolic peninsula where the Self-Guided Kunisaki Wayfarer walk cuts through rugged forest trails and quiet country lanes.



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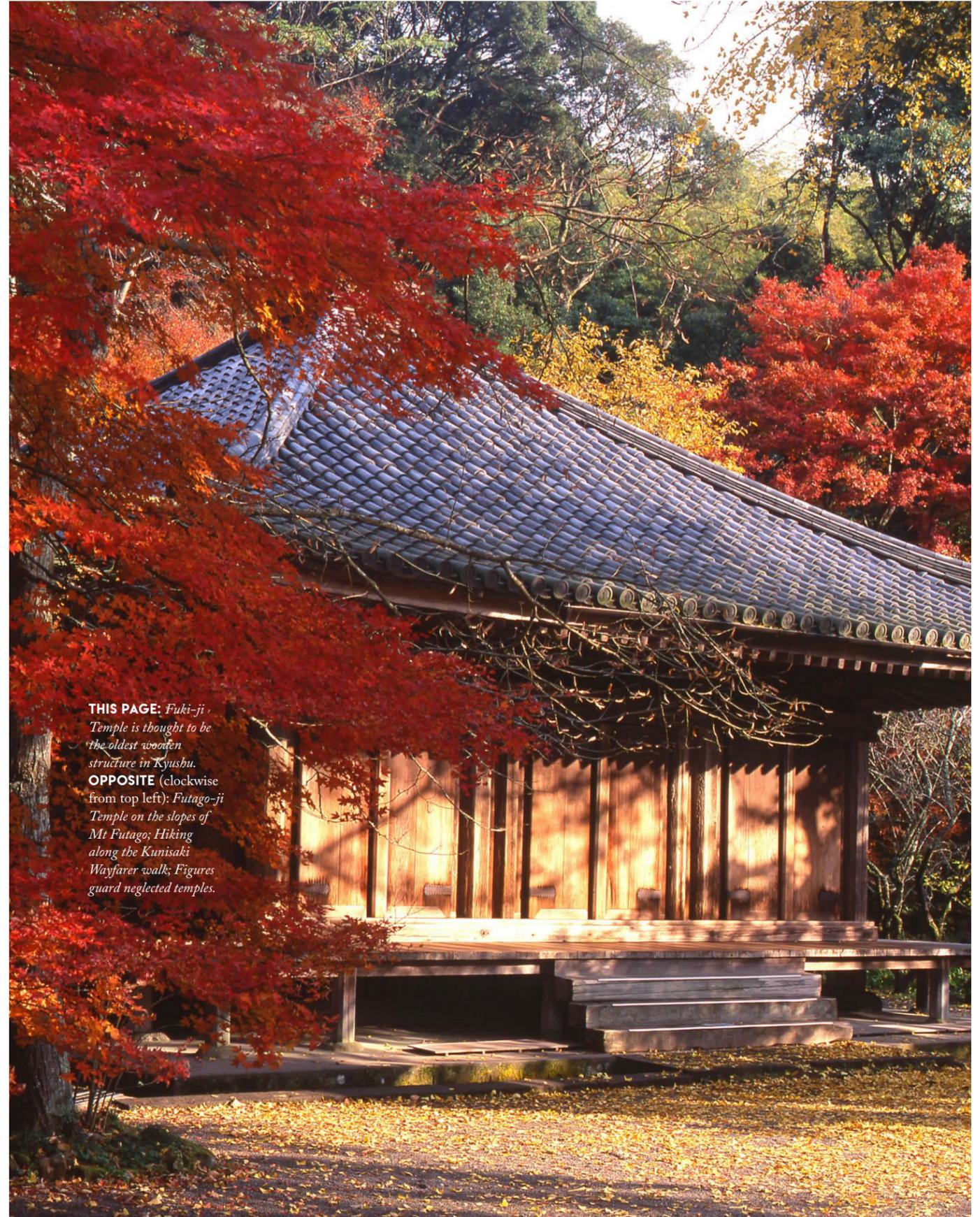


Every hiker has a different way of marking the end of a long day's walk. I've known people who celebrate by letting out an almighty whoop, emptying any remaining liquid in their water bottle over their head or quietly disappearing into the bush to meditate. But for my money, nothing can beat watching tendrils of steam lazily unfurl around me and feeling my muscles gradually relax as I lower myself into the blissfully warm waters of a traditional Japanese onsen.

This is my nightly ritual at the end of each day on the Self-Guided Kunisaki Wayfarer walk. And it's a keenly anticipated full stop during the six-day, five-night walk around Kyushu's rural Kunisaki Peninsula. I trek for more than 73 kilometres along raised paths between fields filled with perfectly spaced rice plants, follow overgrown trails linking long-neglected shrines and navigate narrow country lanes that pass so close to houses I can smell what the residents are having for lunch.

I walk through tightly packed forests where pale light filters through the canopy to illuminate arrow-straight cedar trunks and *momiji*, bright red maple leaves so delicate they look like filigreed jewellery. When the way ahead opens up, the variegated foliage is broken by spires of vertical rock that >>

PHOTOGRAPHY ALAMY/MATTFOTO/STOCKIMO (UMBRELLA DETAIL)

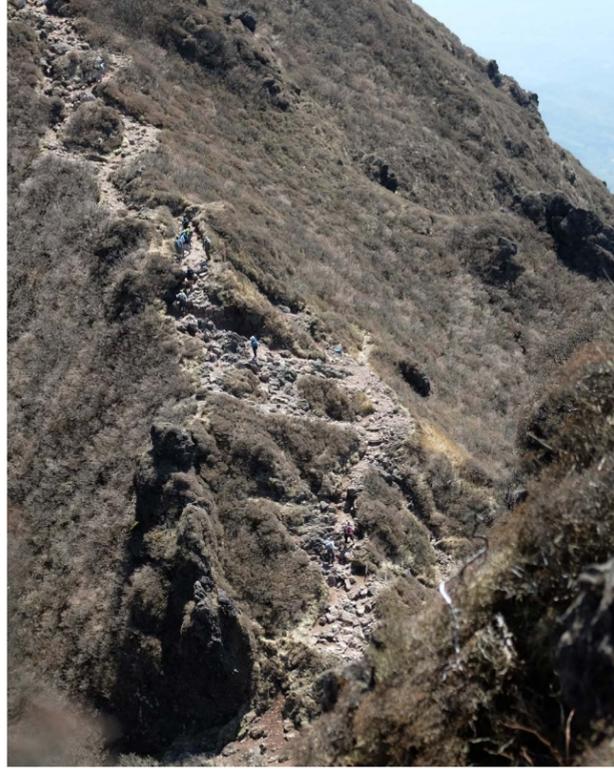


THIS PAGE: *Fuki-ji Temple is thought to be the oldest wooden structure in Kyushu.*
OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left): *Futago-ji Temple on the slopes of Mt Futago; Hiking along the Kunisaki Wayfarer walk; Figures guard neglected temples.*

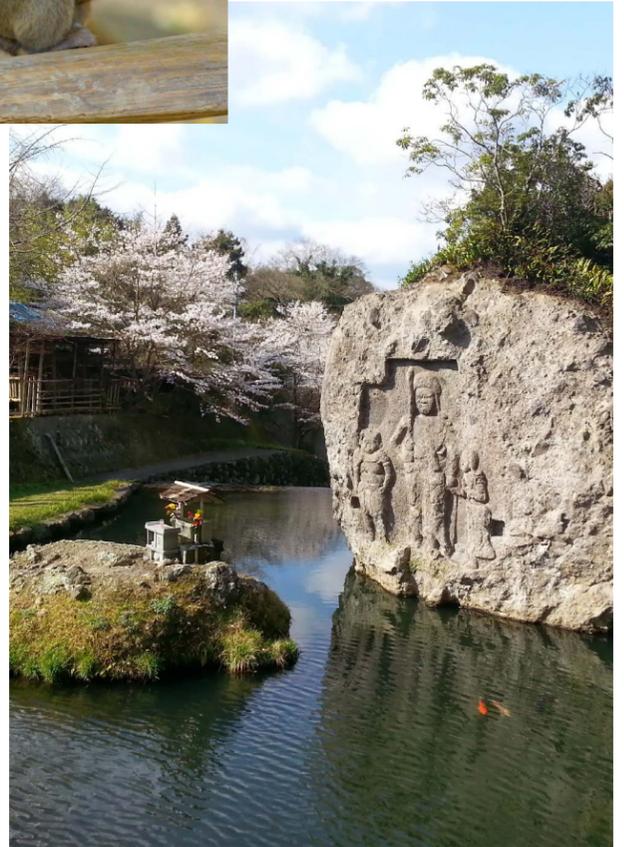


Conscious Traveller

Many parts of rural Japan are struggling with ageing populations, low birthrates and scant job opportunities but Walk Japan has helped to revitalise the Kunisaki Peninsula by locating its headquarters in the region. The company has renovated several old buildings (including the traditional farmhouse where the offices are located), and the food and lodging on its Kunisaki walks support independent local operators. Since 2007, Walk Japan has also spearheaded a Community Project that employs locals to manage agricultural and forest land, donates fresh produce to local organisations and helps rehabilitate former forestry plantations.



FROM LEFT: *The route can be rocky but Walk Japan can suggest optional detours; The Japanese macaque is found on the island of Kyushu; Stone carvings hint at the region's deeply religious past.* **OPPOSITE:** *Monks and pilgrims have walked the ridges of Kunisaki for more than 1000 years.*



would make any Katoomba resident homesick. And because I'm visiting in late autumn, the slightest breeze brings a shower of fiery red, orange and yellow leaves down onto the trail.

Some 25 million international tourists visited Japan in 2023, but only a fraction of them made it beyond the major urban areas and vanishingly few ended up in regional areas like Kunisaki. The peninsula's largest town has just 50,000 inhabitants and I'm constantly struck by how quiet this bucolic region is. I don't see another person for hours at a time, which allows me to tune into the sounds of nature all around me. With only the noise of birds chasing each other through the trees and fallen leaves crackling underfoot, I'm soon lost in my thoughts. By lunchtime on the first day, I'm composing haikus.

*Scarlet momiji
And golden ginkgo leaves make
A wondrous carpet*

One of the best places to observe this seasonal display is right next to my accommodation for the first two nights. Dating back to the 12th century, Fuki-ji temple is purportedly the oldest wooden structure in Kyushu and the broad plaza surrounding the handsome temple is strewn with a fiery carpet of autumn foliage, while those leaves still clinging to the branches frame the structure beautifully.

The neighbouring ryokan is run by the family of the temple's head priest and after soaking away the day's aches in the onsen, I don my *yukata* robe and head to the dining room. A Malaysian couple at the next table are doing the same walk, and the multi-course *kaiseki* dinner provides plenty of time to get to know one another.

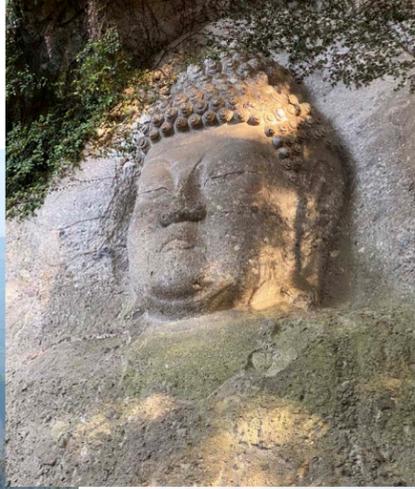
"I usually do one really tough hike in the jungle every year," Geoffrey tells me, while Aishah prefers more social walks with her girlfriends. Both agree this self-guided trek sits nicely in the middle. "I walked the Kumano Kodo with a group of friends but it was so easy that we just put the instruction book away and followed the path," Aishah says. "This is much more adventurous and wild; we didn't see anyone on the trail today, and the book made it like a treasure hunt with lots of little clues to follow!"

As the name suggests, the Self-Guided Kunisaki Wayfarer is intended for independent walkers, but a comprehensive guidebook keeps me company just about every step of the way. The impressively detailed instructions ("Follow this lane parallel to Rt. 655 for roughly 360 metres, passing a section of newly planted citrus trees. Reach a forested trailhead lane diverging to the left...") are simple to follow. If I do somehow make a wrong turn, the inclusion of distances and photos helps me realise my mistake almost immediately. And while much of the route follows a similar path to the long-distance Kunisaki Hantou Minemichi Long Trail, the team at Walk Japan has devised several alternative routes that minimise walking time on paved roads in favour of wilderness paths.

Optional detours also allow walkers to bypass sections that are especially steep, slippery or rocky. It means the length of the trail can vary from 45 to 73 kilometres, but it requires fitness and common sense rather than hardcore outdoor skills. And with the exception of two short cab rides, every day begins and ends with me walking through the doors of my accommodation. That means that I'm inevitably enjoying my daily soak within minutes of pulling off my boots.

The Kunisaki Peninsula may lack the name recognition of the Kumano Kodo and Shikoku pilgrimage routes, but this region was attracting monks and ascetics in search of solitude long before Japan's cities were transformed into neon wonderlands connected by bullet trains. The local Rokugo-Manzan belief system blends >>

PHOTOGRAPHY: JINTO (JAPANESE MACAQUE AT TAKASAKIYAMA MONKEY PARK)



FROM FAR LEFT: *The views open up as the trail progresses northwards; A time-worn Buddhist carving; Torii gates symbolise sacred grounds.*
OPPOSITE: *Looking over a village nestled in a verdant valley.*



Buddhist, Shinto, Taoist and folk beliefs, and I quickly lose count of the shrines and temples lining the path.

Monumental Buddhist sculptures stare impassively out from rock walls where they were carved more than 1000 years ago while mass-produced statues are slowly disappearing under a layer of moss that disguises their youth. Figures of cheeky foxes and fearsome warriors guard the entrance to overgrown temples and bright red *torii* gates point the way to shrines hidden deep in the forest. One temple is set so far into a cave that I need to use my phone as a torch when I visit, while another complex extends across the slopes of an entire mountain and a third is perched above the glassy obsidian walls of an old volcano crater that provides an ideal sunset viewing spot. People may be short on the ground, but this is a land of many gods.

As the trail progresses northwards, the views open up with every successive ascent. Razorback ridges behind me are softened by the dense forest that covers them, the surprisingly narrow cultivated valleys in between a visual representation of man's tenuous foothold on this wild peninsula. Ahead of me, the land gradually slopes down until it reaches the placid waters of the Seto Inland Sea.

At Nakayama Senkyo, narrow towers of rock erupt from the greenery and hang suspended above the trees, sheer sides leading up to narrow platforms crowned with small tufts of vegetation. Inevitably, a pilgrimage route connects most of these seemingly inaccessible spires. But I can't see another soul.

On most days I don't pass a single shop, so my hosts send me on my way with onigiri rice balls or bento boxes packed with the same disregard for the laws of physics as Mary Poppins' handbag. Even more

With only the sounds of birds chasing each other through the trees and fallen leaves underfoot, I'm soon lost in my thoughts.

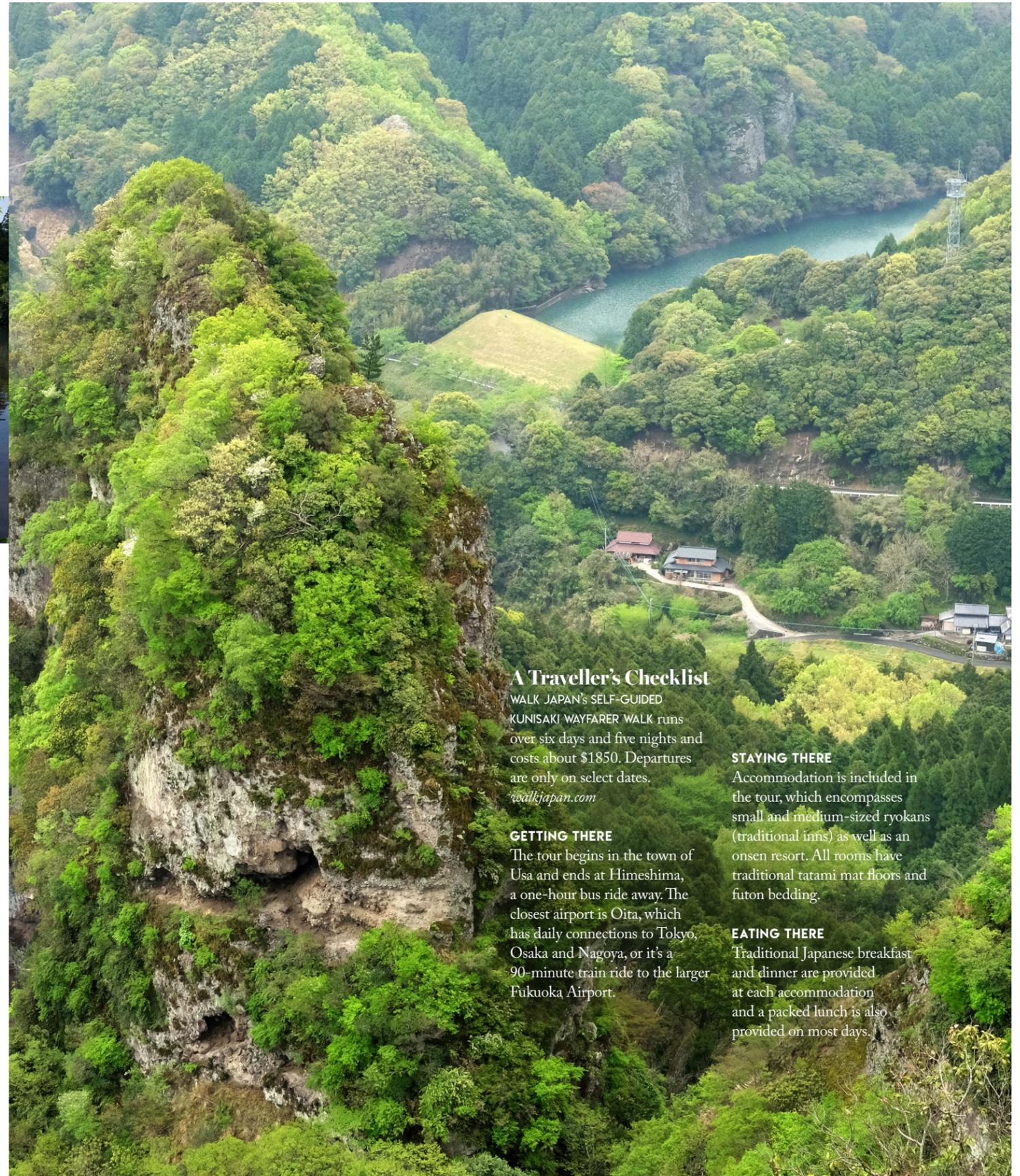
elaborate are the multi-course dinners that unfold over several hours each evening. Because my Malaysian co-walkers and I are usually the only English speakers present, each meal is inevitably punctuated by a giggle-filled game of charades when we have to cook one course at the table. Somehow, the endless stream of sashimi, tempura, pickled shiitake mushrooms, wagyu fillets and *chawanmushi* egg custard never leaves me feeling overfull. And like any good planners, the Walk Japan team knows to save the best for last.

The small island of Himeshima, where we spend our final night, is sleepy even by Kunisaki standards, but the century-old ryokan I stay in rustles up a seafood banquet that would draw envious stares in any metropolis. My last supper disappears in a haze of squid, octopus and whitefish sashimi, bowls of miso and chawanmushi that reveal hidden fish fillets and enormous *kuruma-ebi* (tiger prawns) that could provide a meal on their own. While the guidebook gleefully informs me that "these are often eaten in *odori* 'dancing' form"

(i.e. while still living), sampling them grilled and in sashimi form is enough to satisfy my hunger.

Later that night, I lie back on my futon and indulge in another cherished post-hike tradition. Counting the things I'm grateful for over the course of the day, I let the visions of a steam-filled onsen, extravagant dinner and lush coastal views blur and multiply until I drift off to sleep counting my blessings like jumping sheep. **IT**

PHOTOGRAPHY ALAMY/MATTFOTO/STOCKIMO (UMBRELLA DETAIL); ALEXIS BUXTON-COLLINS (SCULPTURE)



A Traveller's Checklist

WALK JAPAN'S SELF-GUIDED KUNISAKI WAYFARER WALK runs over six days and five nights and costs about \$1850. Departures are only on select dates. walkjapan.com

GETTING THERE

The tour begins in the town of Usa and ends at Himeshima, a one-hour bus ride away. The closest airport is Oita, which has daily connections to Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya, or it's a 90-minute train ride to the larger Fukuoka Airport.

STAYING THERE

Accommodation is included in the tour, which encompasses small and medium-sized ryokans (traditional inns) as well as an onsen resort. All rooms have traditional tatami mat floors and futon bedding.

EATING THERE

Traditional Japanese breakfast and dinner are provided at each accommodation and a packed lunch is also provided on most days.