



The Ise Jingu, a Shinto shrine in Mie prefecture is over 2,000 years old and considered Japan's religious and spiritual heart

# Heart of Japan

Steve Williams bypasses Tokyo and Osaka to explore Central Japan, and sees another side of the Land of the Rising Sun

If you ever go to the Land of the Rising Sun, here is my advice — give yourself more time to explore Central Japan. Once you have been there, you'll see that it is well worth it. Central Japan, or "Chubu", is absolutely fascinating; with sights and sounds you won't experience if you head straight to the usual suspects. Chubu has a long list of attractions: ancient shrines, quaint villages, ornate castles, ski resorts, beaches, numerous Unesco World Heritage sites, magnificent mountain scenery, spectacular coastlines, hot springs, plastic food artisans, gardens that are a blaze of colour, the traditional cherry blossoms and a certain mountain — an icon of Japan you may have heard of.

A quick geography lesson — the Chubu region is right smack in the middle of Honshu, Japan's largest island. The region is made up of nine prefectures — Aichi, Fukui, Gifu, Ishikawa, Mie, Nagano, Shiga, Shizuoka and Toyama. It is quite easy to navigate around Chubu, which has a wide-spread rail network that is being expanded, a spider web of expressways, and the excellent Central Japan International Airport (Centrair) where my five-day, whistle-stop tour of Central Japan began.

You know you're in Japan when the airport has a "Samurai Lab" — I initially thought I'd see some warriors being created

Frankenstein-style. Sadly, that is not the case, though there is Samurai armour on display, plenty of history and Centrair is very impressive, a man-made island in Ise Bay about 35km south of Nagoya and a definitive hub for flying, training and ferrying from Nagoya to cities in the Chubu region and beyond. Compact and with an abundance of natural light, Centrair has an observation deck where you can indulge your inner child by watching the planes take off and land while taking in the smell of jet fuel — quite a rare experience in an airport these days. The airport also has an excellent hotel, the Centrair Hotel, that I can recommend.

### Highlights of Chubu

The first stop was Ise Jingu, a 2,000-year-old Shinto shrine in Mie prefecture. Being Japan's religious and spiritual heart, it also serves as the centre for all Shinto shrines in the country. And it's actually more than just one shrine, a sprawling complex comprising an inner and outer shrine and 123 detached shrines. I couldn't help wondering who had walked here over the millennia as I gazed up at the centuries-old cedar trees of the Sacred Forest.

Shinto shrines are minimalist in their designs, in contrast to far more ornate places of worship such as Buddhist temples or

Catholic churches. The sounds of hammering echoed through the forest as preparations were being made for the time-honoured *Shikinen Sengu* ceremony to be conducted in 2013, when the main shrine buildings will be destroyed and reconstructed on an adjacent site in a process of renewal. The ceremony started in the seventh century, and is performed every 20 years; next year will see the 62nd *Shikinen Sengu* at Ise Jingu. Allow yourself a bit of time to wander around Ise Jingu — there is a lot to take in, and you really don't want to rush it.

The city of Toba has two interesting attractions. One is Toba

Aquarium — one of the best aquariums I've seen as it is quite spread out and not cramped and claustrophobic like many seem to be. The displays are excellent, and some of the standout residents include dugongs, manatees, walrus and finless porpoises.

The other Toba attraction is Mikimoto Pearl Island. Kokichi Mikimoto was the first to succeed in culturing pearls here and the island has informative exhibits on the history of his work and cultured pearls. There are also demonstrations by the female pearl divers or *ama*. Before the advent of modern cultivation, they dived and foraged for pearl

oysters. Women were considered better suited to free diving, as the fairer sex apparently can hold their breath longer than men, and have an extra layer of body fat that helps while diving.

As we watched the display dives by the *ama* in their traditional white diving robes, their unique breathing pattern to protect themselves from the bends was audible — a long whistling sound known as *isobue*, described by some as a "mournful melody". *Ama* are still active in the region, diving for abalone, shells, sea urchins and seaweed, but this ancient practice is in danger of dying out, as few young women are taking up the rigorous occupation. There is also a display of antique pearl jewellery and a pearl gallery where you can purchase unique products from the Mikimoto pearl farms. Unlike many similar retail outlets I've encountered in tourist attractions around the world, the staff is very knowledgeable and, thankfully, do not go for the hard sell. Definitely worth a visit.

I'm not really an amusement park kind of guy, but the floral displays in the Nagashima Resort (the resort closest to Nagoya) were absolutely stunning — the kaleidoscope of colour in the greenhouses and outdoor gardens was incredible. The resort is massive, the amusement park section is set some distance from the



The Mitsubishi HII-B rocket at the architecturally-stunning Nagoya City Science Museum





Gujo Hachiman is the ancestral home of plastic food and there are numerous 'food replica' shops displaying replicas of food ranging from traditional Japanese delicacies to pizzas and hamburgers

gardens and features the world's largest wooden rollercoaster and an assortment of other rather terrifying-sounding rides, a water park, giant ferris wheel and more. If you are travelling with kids, see the flowers and gardens first. My walk around the gardens was accompanied by the ubiquitous piped-music (what is it with Asian gardens and piped music?), and I was rather amused to hear a very slow tinkling xylophone instrumental reworking of the classic 1980 disco hit *Funkytown*.

#### Town and country

Gazing down on Ogimachi Village from a lookout high above, it didn't seem real — it looks more like one of those elaborate model railway displays. I almost expected a giant hand to come down and adjust one of the houses. A Unesco World Heritage site, Ogimachi is tucked at the foot of Mt Haku-san in the Shirakawa-go region in the northwest of Gifu prefecture. The rice fields are laid out like a patchwork quilt, embracing the farmhouses, some more than 250 years old. A river runs through the village. Just beautiful. The village is famous for the traditional *gassho-zukuri* or "constructed like hands in prayer" houses, describing the steeply sloping roofs that rise to a point in order to withstand the deluge of snow that blankets the area in winter. I explored the Wada House, a private residence with some parts open to display life in the olden days. At 6pm, a chime echoed throughout the village, advising the workers that it was time to go home.

Not too far from Ogimachi, the experience is quite different. Gujo Hachiman is more of a town rather than a village, with a history going back to the 16th century, and picturesque in a different way. The best way to discover this riverside town is on foot, strolling through the narrow streets, taking in the art galleries, museums and houses with their meticulous small potted plants out



Mikimoto Pearl Island has informative exhibits and an interesting demonstration by the female pearl divers, or *ama*

front, a smile and a wave reciprocated by the elderly lady tending her front garden — language is no barrier. The Yoshida River runs through the centre of town and spring-fed canals can be seen throughout, good not only for photo opportunities as the pure water is used for washing clothes and vegetables.

Speaking of food, I've always been fascinated by those plastic food displays you see in restaurants. Much to my delight, Gujo Hachiman is the ancestral home of plastic food, supplying around 80% of Japan's restaurants. There are numerous "food replica" shops displaying plastic food ranging from traditional Japanese delicacies to pizzas, hamburgers, hotdogs, even a monster jug of beer. I saw the artisans at work, crafting intricate, waxy morsels, and even tried my hand at making something. My plastic dessert tart is a work of art. I purchased numerous fridge magnets — strictly in the name of research, of course. Ogimachi Village and Gujo Hachiman should definitely be on your Chubu itinerary.

#### Castle walk

Another highlight in the mountain region is the Shin-Hotaka Rope-

way — a cable car that ascends over 1,000m up the side of the Hotaka Mountain Range. There are two parts to the ride. The second part is in a double-decker cable car (a first for me) and from a vantage point of 2,150m, there are spectacular views of the mountains and valleys, with some remnants of snow. The area is also popular for hiking, which made me tired just thinking about it, as exhilarating as it no doubt would be.

Japan is famous for ornate castles and Chubu doesn't disappoint. I explored Japan's oldest; Inuyama Castle completed in 1537 and quite rightly designated a National Treasure. This castle is quite rare as although some parts have been renovated over the years, the tower is original. It is well worth climbing up the rather steep and narrow steps inside to the top of the tower, as apart from the great views, you can see displays of delicately painted screens, as well as Samurai armour and weapons.

Sadly, Nagoya Castle is not original — constructed in 1612 by the shogun of the Edo government, most of its buildings were destroyed in World War II and some were subsequently rebuilt



Nagoya Castle is not original — constructed in 1612 during the Edo government, most of the castle buildings were destroyed in World War II and rebuilt in 1959



'Cat cafés' are becoming quite popular in Japan

in 1959. The castle is understandably a landmark of the city and is famous for the *shachihoko* — the two mythical golden sea creatures that adorn the top of the tower. Inside the tower are exhibition rooms displaying the fascinating history of Nagoya. While you're visiting the castle, make sure you inspect the reconstruction of the buildings that were damaged during the war. The first of these is due to open in all its original glory next year.

Time was not on my side, but escorted by Rie from the Nagoya Convention & Visitors Bureau, we wandered for a few hours through the city, past the architecturally stunning Nagoya City Science Museum, which features the world's largest planetarium. After that, my inner-child was quite excited by the Mitsubishi HII-B displayed outside the museum. The name does sound like a pencil but it is in fact an "expendable

launch system" (that's "rocket" to you and me). There are many other striking buildings in Nagoya and Rie took me to what became another highlight — a "cat café", which are quite popular in Japan. I can confirm that unlike the very affectionate cats in a similar café I visited in Seoul recently, Japanese cats define the word "aloof" but are still very cute.

In the end, I didn't even get to Mount Fuji but the places I visited are highly recommended if you do end up in Chubu. **E**

*We all have a story — Steve Williams enjoys discovering and telling them*

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