

A DAY TRIP AROUND OITA

MAIN:
A road through
dense greenery.

FAR RIGHT:
Shabu shabu,
simply translates
as swish-swish.

It was 9.30 am when I set foot in Fukuoka, one of five prefectures in Northern Kyushu and I was excited to have returned to Japan after 25 years. This was a 3-day trip around the island of Kyushu and my journey which commenced from the Fukuoka Airport began with a scenic bus ride towards the prefecture of Oita.

Oita, located on the North East coast of Kyushu is mainly a commercial and industrial city but its vast volcanic area that occupies a greater portion of the prefectural territory boasts the abundance of hot springs, one of its main attractions for locals and travellers alike.

It would take approximately 2 hours to get to Oita and I made myself comfortable in the bus. The greenery outside the bus window shone like shimmering emeralds automatically uplifting body, soul and spirit. The sun gleamed brightly on the tall conical evergreen Cedar trees that peppered the landscape as far as the eye can see. The lowlands in somewhat of a conclave within the forest were home to strawberry and persimmon fields.

A Meal along the Way

The mountainous backdrop and the bright blue sky filled with fluffy cotton clouds guaranteed us for a bright summer day ahead and before I knew it was time for lunch. As I alighted from the bus, Mt. Yufu which is locally called “Bungo Fuji” (Mt. Fuji of Oita) because of its double peak appearance could be seen in the distance. We had stopped at what looked like a sweet

shop called Kashi Kobou Goemon but behind it was a restaurant called Syokusai that served Pork Shabu-shabu.

Shabu-shabu is a Japanese dish with thinly sliced meat and a variety of vegetables and sauces boiled “hot pot” style in a skillet (nabe) at the table. Fire from lit camphor cubes boil the water and a variety of typical Japanese side dishes like steamed rice, miso soup, steamed egg and pickled vegetables are served as accompaniment. The spread was large and thus my first taste of Japan was off to a great start amidst breath-taking scenery.

Exploring the Surroundings

Next stop was at a small Floral Village in Yufuin located on a flat river basin surrounded by mountains that has transformed itself into a mini European town with small cottages selling food, curios, trinkets, wine, dog accessories and clothes.

Down at the village, it appears that everyone is obsessed with Snoopy. They had Snoopy ice creams, printed clothes,





stationery, bags and almost in literally everything. I understand the Japanese fascination for local cartoon characters like Hello Kitty and My Melody but to find a character from the Peanuts comic strip by Charles M. Schulz all over this small town was unexpected and mildly amusing too.

We were soon back on board our bus and on our way to Beppu located some 10 kilometres away. Famous for their Onsen (hot springs), Beppu is the world's second largest source of thermal spring water after Yellowstone National Park. As the bus moved through the city, I could see steam rising from vents in the



ABOVE: Mt. Yufu is a stratovolcano with two peaks.

CENTRE: Quirky stores on Yunotsobo Kaido Street adjacent to Yufuin Floral Village.

RIGHT: European styled cottages.

FROM LEFT: 1. Umi Jigoku (Sea Hell) at 200 metres deep features a pond of boiling blue water.

2. Hot mud and clay gushing out at Oniishiboju Jigoku (Mud Hell).

3. Snoopy is not the only favourite dog in town!

earth, as if the city was located atop a gigantic bowl of hot water that was perpetually boiling!

Jigoku, a Japanese term for hell is what the city of Beppu calls their 8 hot springs, where the water gushes out at temperatures as hot as 150 Celsius. I got to visit two of the eight jigoku's. Umi Jigoku (Sea Hell) at 200 metres deep features a pond of boiling blue water at temperatures of 98 degree Celsius. The blue colouring is from the iron sulphate in the water. Oniishiboju Jigoku (Mud Hell) is named after the mud bubbles which emerge from boiling mud pools with temperatures sometimes higher than 100 degree Celsius.

Besides the mud pools, there is a small shallow clear water hot spring for visitors to soak their



feet in. There is no entry charge for the shallow feet pool; however it will cost 600 Yen per person to enter the adjacent public bath. There is something unnerving yet fascinating about the jigokus. Imagine the ground on which you stand has molten lava flowing beneath it! It's not something most of us are used to.

Lodgings for the Night

As the sun begun to set, it was time to check into the hotel. We arrived at Beppu Hanabishi Hotel. It was a simple 3 star hotel by any standards. There was nothing to rave about this rather dated hotel except some features like the hotel facing Beppu Bay, has both an indoor and

“
THE GREENERY OUTSIDE
THE BUS WINDOW SHONE
LIKE SHIMMERING EMERALDS
AUTOMATICALLY UPLIFTING
BODY, SOUL AND SPIRIT.
”

outdoor onsen and a buffet dinner that serves free flowing beer.

The hotel has two types of room choices, either a traditional Washitsu meaning “Japanese-style room” with tatami flooring, sliding fusuma doors and rather flat comforters for sleeping on the floor or yoshitsu meaning “western-style room” with a dressing table, old carpeted flooring and a real bed.

Booking hotels can be hard for a traveller especially if the official hotel website does not offer an English translation. The best option would be to either find one that does, or go through hotel booking platforms that offer hotel descriptions and rates in English.

My day trip was filled with breath-taking scenery of green, a small village and the mountains beyond and finally the scenery of boiling earth. Never before in one day have I experienced earth change its landscape so dramatically. After 25 years, this is my reintroduction of Japan. Soon to follow... my day trips through Kumamoto and Fukuoka.



TRAVEL TIPS

Oita is a beautiful prefecture to explore if you have more time. You could spend the day visiting the other six jigoku's in Beppu, spend time in the various onsen spas in Yufuin, and visit the Takasakiyama Natural Zoological Park or the Oita Marine Palace Aquarium.

Flight Information

Jetstar Asia is the first low fares carrier to fly between Singapore and Fukuoka via Bangkok, offering travellers direct access to the island of Kyushu and beyond. Visit www.jetstar.com for flight bookings and more information. **AS**