



Travel Industry TODAY



HOME

ABOUT VIDEOS COLUMNISTS CONTACT SEARCH



EXPLORING THE ENTRANCE TO THE MOUNTAIN FOREST

Satisfying Niche Interests in Yamaguchi

Steve Gillick

SHARE ON FACEBOOK



19 APR 2013: Yamaguchi prefecture is tucked away in the north-north east corner of Honshu Island, in the Chugoku region of Japan. It's an area in which one can absolutely fascinate over the small towns, history, nature and ambiance, before continuing eastward toward Kyushu to explore its own bounties of pottery, fugu snacks and the fiery attractions of volcanoes, mud baths and shochu (Kyushu's home grown alcoholic beverage of choice).



Get TODAY Tomorrow

- informative
- provocative
- opinionated
- infuriating
- revealing
- amusing

... essential

SUBSCRIBE NOW!

The historical translation of “Yamaguchi” is the “entrance to the mountain forest’, but literally the name means Mountain (Yama) Mouth (Guchi) and refers to the Chugoku mountains and the ancient volcanoes in the region. For travellers looking to go beyond the standard tour itineraries and discover Japan from a different perspective, Yamaguchi is a real gem.

My friend and I checked out one of our favourite Tokyo hotels, the Hilton Shinjuku to walk the 15 minutes to Shinjuku Station, take the train to

Shinagawa Station and then switch to the monorail to Haneda airport. On the way we caught a glimpse of Mt. Fuji's snow covered peak, emerging from a pre-dawn greyness into the first light of the morning. The total travel time was under one hour.

The flight to Ube airport was about 90 minutes and then we took the bus to Shin-Yamaguchi and a final bus to the former castle town of Hagi. We went there for three reasons. First, to visit the pottery shops, second to explore the old samurai mansions, and third to visit the temples. We got off the bus and wandered through a maze of small streets until we found the Hagi no Yodo Tamoe Ryokan, (a traditional Japanese Inn that includes dinner and breakfast) checked in, rented bicycles and started to explore.

Hagi is a relatively small town on mostly flat ground, so bicycling is the perfect way to get around. The pottery area is famous for "Hagi ware", traditional pottery known for its humble forms and the use of a translucent white glaze made of feldspar and ash. But in fact we were the ones who were humbled once we started to look around.

Now I should say from the get-go that I am not a ceramics expert in any way shape or form and I would not know a kiln from a microwave. So why spend an entire day looking at the shops? I happen to collect sake cups (to go along with my sake collection-hic!) and Hagi ware is known for simplistic beauty and superior craftsmanship (as well as the supreme friendliness of the shop owners in explaining the respective artist who created the masterpieces that each shop sells). Sake cups sell anywhere in equivalent Canadian dollars from \$25.00 to \$150.00 and become prize possessions of sake aficionados (aside from the

fact that it makes the sake taste sooo much better). And in addition to the white glaze, Hagi ware is also characterized by a small chip in the bottom of each piece that historically, made the produce unacceptable to be given as a gift of tribute to the ruling feudal lord of the Mori clan, and allowed that piece to be sold to merchants. The tradition has continued to this day.

We spent a good part of the morning and early afternoon visiting shops, even after we found the ultimate sake cup souvenir. I should say that when travel professionals think of niche markets, they usually consider the biggies: adventure, cruise, luxury and spa, but often the smaller or sub-niches are more meaningful to the individual traveler. Ceramics may be the niche, Hagi-ware is a sub-niche and sake cups are a sub-sub niche. This is why it is so important to interview clients to dig down into their hidden list of 'what interests me' and then provide them with the opportunity to fulfil their wish list.

Hagi's other treasures include back streets where one can visit the interior of old samurai houses. The daimyo or feudal lord would live in the Castle, which in Hagi's case, was built in 1604 but was mostly destroyed in 1874. The lord's retainers—the samurai warriors who pledged to defend the feudal lord--- lived in the nearby castle town or Jokamachi, and some of these samurai mansions have survived and offer a glimpse into the past. One of the niche interests of travellers to Japan is the samurai era and many will in fact want to travel to certain places to soak up the history and stories of that time period (For example, the nearby island of Ganryu-jima, between Honshu and Kyushu, is the venue where the historic duel took place between the almost legendary

swordsmen Myamoto Musashi and Sasaki Kojiro in 1612).

The ruins of Hagi Castle are only a short bicycle ride away, as are the Tokoji and Daishoin Temples where members of the Mori clan are buried. The traditional simple yet powerful architectural lines of the temples, complete with fields of lanterns and the tranquility of zen gardens, offer a serene place to wander, learn and reflect. This too is a sub-niche for travellers to Japan, and emphasizes 'silence', 'meditation', 'religion' 'temple architecture' and 'gardens'.

Back to our Ryokan after a very fulfilling day we soak in the hot bath, don a yukata (a kimono) and flip flops (provided for each guest) and then make our way to the dining room where we sit cross legged at a table about 2 ♦ feet off the ground and savour the flavour of delicious sashimi, rice, grilled fish, steamed vegetables and miso soup, along with Sapporo beer. A Japanese businessman at the table next to us hears me speak English and invites himself to sit at our table, buys a round of beer and in a hilarious, somewhat inebriated state, engages me in teaching him about Toronto and Canada. One of those memorable encounters.

After an equally delectable breakfast the next morning, we headed out to Akiyoshidai National Park. As we approached the park the landscape turned from an almost scrub brush appearance to karst (limestone) outcroppings and spires, and we also passed fields that showed the results of yamayaki ♦ the tradition of setting fires to re-energize the soil and stimulate crop growth. The main attraction in the park is Akiyoshido, the largest limestone cave in Japan. While only one of the nine kilometers of the cave is open to the public, it's still

a fascinating journey into centre of the earth to see the cave formations including the ubiquitous stalactites and stalagmites (to keep them straight, remember the saying that ‘when the mites go up, the tights come down’). We are the only visitors in the cave and we do one of those “there are 6 billion people in the world and at this point in time we are the only ones on the planet appreciating this cave right now”. This too reflects niche interests: caving, geology, adventure, silence, uniqueness. And in the area there are many walking trails on the karst plateau, so the visit turns into adventure both above and beneath the ground.

We took the bus back to the city of Yamaguchi and spent the following day exploring the Rurikoji Temple with its five-storied pagoda, the Joeiji Zen Temple and garden and the very modern Xavier Memorial Church, dedicated to the visit of St Francis Xavier to the city in 1551.

Yamaguchi prefecture is one of those more off-the-beaten-track destinations for North American tourists who tend to favour the Tokyo-Kyoto corridor when they visit Japan. But sometimes getting off the track is the best way to learn and understand a country. The ‘Entrance to the Mountain Forest’ provides a glimpse of Japan that is unique, satisfies many niche interests, and answers the ‘what else’ that many travellers in all age groups are seeking these day when they set out to explore the planet.



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once