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GET READY FOR HOKURIKU

North Western Japan Beckons with a Bullet

Steve Gillick

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13 NOV 2014: Hokuriku, meaning 'northlands', is the coastal region of Japan that stretches from Niigata through to Kanazawa, up to Wajima and then south to Fukui. And along the way vistors can travel through the spectacular Kurobe Gorge, scamper over stunning rock formations at Tojinbo,

revel in the power of the raging Sea of Japan in Takaoka, visit the 1000 rice fields of Wajima, wander through the serene grounds of Eihei-ji Temple, climb a samurai staircase in Maruoka, soak in soothing hot springs in Kaga, and reflect on the perfect tranquility of Japanese gardens in Kanazawa.



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Are you ready for Hokuriku?

In 2014 Lonely Planet listed Hokuriku amongst the top ten `best in travel` for natural beauty and cultural riches. And starting in the Spring of 2015 travellers will be able to take the new Shinkansen or Bullet Train to Kanazawa.

Having thoroughly enjoyed a visit to Niigata in the past, we embarked on a ten-day trip to sample some of Hokuriku`s other bounties.



Our first stop was the small resort town of Unazuki Onsen where we boarded a cog train that travels along the edge of Kurobe Gorge, showcasing mountains, trees and beautiful vistas. We got off at the last of four stops and wandered past small onsens (hot springs) and along pathways that passed under huge, scary, rocky outcroppings where signs warned that visitors were basically on their own if the cracking rocks decided to give way while they strolled beneath.

In Takaoka we enjoyed a courtesy tour that included one of the three Great Buddhas in Japan, a tour of Zuiryu-ji Temple (designated a national treasure), and a special behind-the-scenes look at two of the gigantic floats used in the Mikurumayama Festival in May. Afterward we drove to the coast to see the raging waters of the Sea of Japan and glimpse the mountains that form a backdrop to one of the star visual attractions in Hokuriku.

But more was to come...



Kanazawa, the capital of Ishikawa Prefecture is a great city to explore and this is made easy with the loop bus that stops at all the major areas of interest: samurai houses, the old geisha district, the vast grounds of Kanazawa Castle, the beauty and symmetry of the nearby castle garden (a must for horticultural niche travellers) and the contemporary art museum.

And any visit will be enhanced with a trip to the centrally located Omichi market to buy fishcakes, grilled fish and eel, raw scallops, mackerel sashimi, fat oysters, succulent crab and local vegetables. We bought little samples of lots of seafood, complete with small bottle of sake, for an inexpensive picnic dinner in our hotel room.

A local train took us to Kaga, where we checked into the Yamashiro Onsen, a Ryokan hotel with beautiful, large Japanese-style rooms (you sleep under comfy futons on the tatami mats on the floor). We spent time in the roof top hot bath (indoor and outdoor) and it was so relaxing and soothing. A buffet dinner and breakfast complete the 'onsen' experience.

Heading north to Wajima, we enjoyed one of those Seinfeld-esque episodes where the main activity was based on doing 'nothing'.

Nothing but strolling, eating, saying hello to the locals, visiting the temple, looking at the sea and appreciating another side of Japan.

We had incredibly fresh sushi for dinner at Sukezushi, then the next morning took a local bus to appreciate the 1000 rice fields (beautiful wind-swept terraces extending down to the sea). Back in town we visited the morning market to savour grilled squid, sample sake (at 8:00 am), munch on crunchy pickles and enjoy chatting with the

vendors. It's amazing how many had been to Niagara Falls!



Using the city of Fukui as our next base, we headed east to the Zen Buddhist Temple in Eihei-ji.

The mood of tranquility is established as soon as you enter the grounds: incredible cedar and pine trees, Jizo statues (protectors of children, mothers and travellers), a small waterfall and the temple cemetery. Afterward you can tour the main hall. It's a contemplative experience, certainly contrasted against the street of souvenir shops just outside the grounds.

To the northeast of Fukui, the town of Maruoka features a small morning market with friendly, chatty vendors (more Niagara Falls veterans), a few sake breweries (more sake samplings at 8:00 am) and a beautiful wooden castle on a hill. The central tower, built in 1576 still remains. Inside the castle

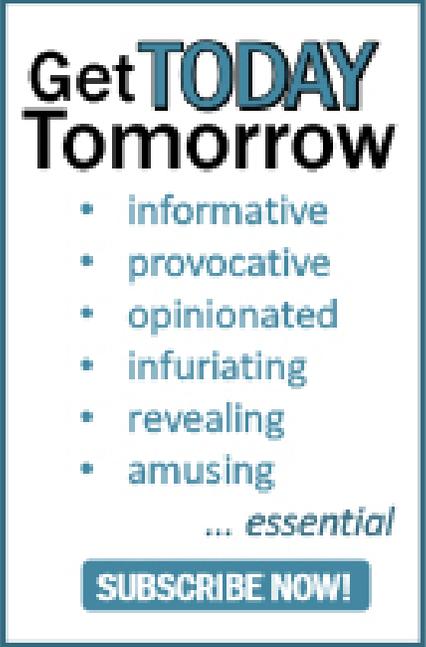
you can climb the 'steep samurai staircase', designed to prevent invaders from storming the upper levels. Most visitors are only able to ascend by hauling themselves up using a rope!



And then there is Tojinbo, a series of basalt cliffs formed by volcanic action 12 million years ago. Visitors can scamper over the totally awesome rocks and cliff formations. (Those familiar with Ireland's Giant's Causeway will love this). The views of the nearby cliffs, the craggy rocks and the crashing waters of the Sea of Japan are spectacular, to say the least. Even on crowded weekends you can always find a quiet nook to privately reflect on the scenery.

On a side trip to Wakasa we rented bicycles to visit Kumagawajuku, a village created in 1589 to serve as an accommodation venue for those making the journey to Kyoto. Many of the old buildings are a photographer's delight. At one home we met Yasuhide Ogino who proudly told us that he was the 12th generation to inhabit the property, originally built in 1811.

Our last stop was just outside of Obama. This was our second town of 'nothing to do'; nothing except revel in the scenery and the seafood.



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We chose to stay in the tiny village of Tagarasu at a fisherman's bed and breakfast, at it was one of the best decisions we made. We spent the entire afternoon at the port where we watched the noisy gulls, the swooping hawks and a very focussed heron. We met a friendly cat who insisted on adopting us, and then made our way to the local shrine at the base of a lighthouse where we discovered a lava-formed cove with aquamarine waters and brilliant green spruce trees, all under a deep blue sky.

We returned to the B & B for a dinner to rival all other dinners, that consisted of tender aji (mackerel) sashimi, sweet shrimp with blue eggs, squid, sea shell with soy sauce, boiled horse-face fish, steamed crab, seafood and vegetable tempura, miso soup, rice, sake and tea. It was a memorable feast and we ate it all.

Hokuriku is a region of Japan waiting to be discovered by overseas travellers. Perhaps it serves as the ideal location for the 2nd visit to the country, after the initial Tokyo-Kyoto introduction. But for those looking for visual and

experiential adventures, culinary surprises and those serendipitous wonders that make travel so enjoyable, this is the place to be.

HOKURIKU



Pathway along the Kurobe Gorge





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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Jen Savedra EDITOR
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