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GODZILLA IS ALIVE AND WELL ON OSHIMA ISLAND

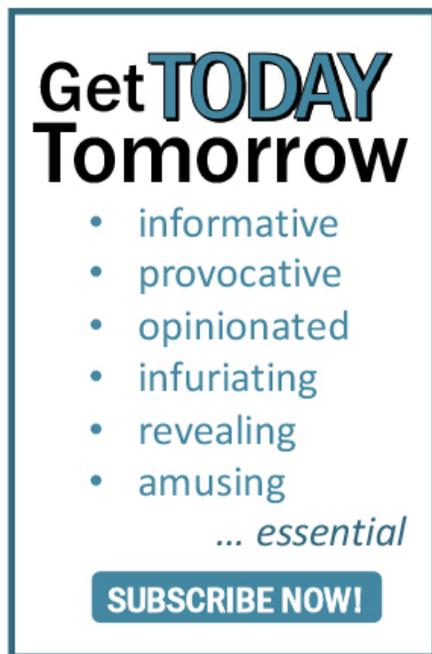
Steve Gillick

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27 NOV 2017: Godzilla is alive and well, at least in the hearts and minds of travellers to Oshima, one of Tokyo's volcanic Islands just east of the Izu Peninsula. A two hour jet-foil whisks travellers

from Tokyo to Okada Port and, with Mt. Fuji plainly visible across the Pacific Ocean, Mt. Mihara, an active volcano that last erupted in 1986, looms over Oshima. Inside the volcano, for those with equally active imaginations, the terrifying beast, Godzilla, is entombed.



His escape from the volcano was 'documented' in the 1984 movie, *The Return of Godzilla*, filmed on the island, which many now regard with 20-20 hindsight, as a premonition of the volcanic eruption that would occur two years later.

In fact, Mt. Mihara has a history of erupting every 35-40 years but unlike the eruption in 1950 when locals ran to the edge of the molten lava flow to make souvenir ashtrays, this last eruption was off limits. Newspaper headlines announced that the God Fire (Gojinka) had resulted in the evacuation of the Island's 10,000 residents along with 2000 tourists.

The spirit of fun and amusement about Oshima's Godzilla heritage (our hotel sold Godzilla Honey Pie and cheese cookies), is one of the endearing

characteristics of Island residents that makes a visit to the island an absolute pleasure.



Makito Terada, the Owner of Uminosei, makes salt from sea water. The company offices in Tokyo and Oshima are a magnet for Chefs looking to micro-manage the ingredients in their cuisine. Aside from Terada-san's entrepreneurial aspirations, ('san' is an honourific used to address males and females), he explained that his goal was to enhance the enjoyment of the Japanese food culture, as salt is the very basis for the foods that all Japanese enjoy, including miso, soy and pickles.

But the advice from the Oshima native was that in order to truly enjoy Japanese food "you have to be here to try it". He cautioned that food is not just a 'mouth' thing. "You have to touch it, smell it, feel it, breathe the air, experience the scenery and communicate and eat with local people. Only then can you really say that you ate Oshima food and on a larger scale, Japanese food. It's all about making connections with the destination.

Fujii Torao, the wood carver has his studio/coffee shop in a round building that looks like a mini-planetary that offers visitors "a calm, soothing atmosphere for coffee and chat". When Torao-san's father passed away 18 years ago, he wanted to honour his father's craft that started in the 1930's when he began to create wooden dolls to preserve and depict the old ways of life on the island.

Torao-san still sells some of his father's 12,000 dolls, along with his own creations, and he even offers wood carving workshops.



Takada-san is the 4th generation owner of Takada Seiyujo, a company that produces pure Camelia (Tsubaki) oil for cosmetics. His great-grandfather, a Lumberjack, started the company when he was 40 years old and now Takada-san, at age 40, continues the tradition using 100 year old pressing equipment to squeeze the oil from the Camelia seeds. Both domesticated and wild Camelia's may be found just about everywhere on the island, and locals often bring seeds to the factory for cash sale or trade for the oil

And then there is "Tomo", the owner of Tokyo Von Ten (Tokyo Vision of New Earth), a café tucked away in Habu (Floating Wave) Seaport. With New Age music playing in the background, Tomo serves us Taiyaki, a delicious fish-shaped red bean pastry, for which his café and guest-house are famous. Tomo relates that when he was younger he would hang out near the Ebisu Shrine in Tokyo. Ebisu represents fishermen and is one of the Seven Happy Gods. After Tomo bought the café, workmen discovered a statue of Ebisu during the renovation, which Tomo saw as a meaningful sign that inspired him to carry on the work of spreading "Happy Energy" in the beautiful setting of Oshima's port.

And the natural attractions on Oshima are inspiring to say the least. A visit to the Museum of Volcanoes provides a preview of what visitors are about to witness for themselves, and includes the Volcano theatre where you can vibrate in your seat as you watch scenes from the 1986 Mt. Mihara eruption.

Lunch at Zakoyakiyomaru provides a taste of the ultra-fresh pickles, salad and sashimi that is the hallmark of island cuisine. But when it comes to dipping our raw fish into soy sauce mixed with wasabi, we are told that wasabi is not grown naturally on Oshima. Residents mix the seeds of hot green peppers into their soy sauce. We tried it and it was umai! (delicious)

And if it's heat you are after then you've come to the right place. Hot springs and public baths are available in public outdoor facilities (bathing suits are mandatory) as well as the traditional inside/outside baths at our accommodation, the Oshima Onsen Hotel (no bathing suits allowed).

In further pursuit of heat, the absolute highlight of our stay on the island was a 4 ½ hour walk from the Mt. Fuji sunset lookout on top of Volcano Mountain, to the steaming crater on Mt. Mihara, with commentary from our very personable guide, Ms. Kana Nishitani. The walk began on a trail of black volcanic debris that passed by petrified flowing and oozing rocks. The trails of the flows of magma from the 1986 eruptions are still evident but signage reassures hikers that the speed of the lava flow was slower than that of a person walking. As we climbed higher (the trail was never super-steep—more like a gradual incline) we walked on sharp, jagged pieces of lava as well as paved paths. We saw remnants of lava fountains where debris formed huge rocks (one looked just like Godzilla!)

and we stopped by a Torii gate that marks the entrance to the shrine that was miraculously spared during the last eruption.



The Mt. Mihara crater is still steaming with water-vapour and the multi-coloured rock scenery and 'black desert' where most of the volcanic ash was carried by the winds, provides amazing photographic opportunities.

The walk back to the hotel takes you from sparse vegetation to dense forests of curving trees along with the spectacle of trees actually growing out of volcanic rocks.

At the south end of the Island the 'rock cut' provides an eye-popping glimpse of the layers of earth formed from volcanic activity over the past 20,000 years. Nearby lies Sano-Hama, a soft sandy black beach that has to be seen to be believed. And everywhere, the shrill whistling of the Hiyodori

birds, the flittering of the Mejiro (a white-eyed bird) in the berry trees, and overhead, the Tombies, black-eared kites, soar.



Oshima is an experience that, like the food, has to be felt, tasted, seen, breathed and experienced along with the stories and smiles of the local residents. An island visit makes for a great extension to a stay in Tokyo, and one that showcases the drama, beauty and tranquility of nature...despite that fact that Godzilla is anxiously waiting inside the mountain for the next volcanic eruption.

A rectangular graphic with a teal border. At the top, the text "Get TODAY Tomorrow" is displayed, with "TODAY" in a large, bold, teal font and "Get" and "Tomorrow" in a smaller, bold, black font. Below this is a bulleted list of six adjectives: "informative", "provocative", "opinionated", "infuriating", "revealing", and "amusing", all in a teal font. At the bottom of the list, the text "... essential" is written in a smaller, italicized, teal font. At the very bottom, there is a teal button with the text "SUBSCRIBE NOW!" in white, bold, uppercase letters.



The star of the 1984 movie, filmed on Oshima, in honey pie form



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