



Nowhere but Niigata – A taste provoking journey of discovery. Travel magic occurs when your personal features of a 'place'. It's the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

Sake and the Spirit of Niigata

The choice was difficult.

We could spend our last five days in Tokyo, a city that we had visited many times before where our friends beckoned us: the observation level of the Metropolitan Building to see Mt. Fuji, shopping for books at Shinjuku, or at Disc Union for used CD's, or for clothes at Muji and Uniqlo and then over to Tokyu Hand store to shop for just about anything you can imagine.

But this was too easy as it pandered to our comfort level. I've surmised that too many travellers fall into the happy routine and therefore rarely consider that all-important 'what else' when they think of travelling again.

So we made plans to spend most of our time in a brand new setting and chose Niigata Prefecture. Niigata is just 100 minutes northwest of Tokyo by bullet train. The surrounding area is known for its susceptibility to earthquakes, a variety of onsen (hot springs) and ninety-one sake breweries, but it was the last two features that were high priorities.

SEARCH

discoveries Useful Links



Shibata Castle

personality and needs mesh with the personality and

avourite haunts
Kinokunya in
ds department

his deceptively

gata City is 90
earthquakes, the
h on our list of



Kimono's detail at the museum



We checked out of the Niwa Hotel in Tokyo, a beautiful, small four-star property that oozes culture and Japanese decor, a garden entrance as well as a garden on which to gaze during meals (Niwa means garden), staff, free internet and a tasty breakfast buffet.

A rainy stop in Shibata

While our unplanned reception on arrival was cold and heavy rain, we shrugged it off, took out our 'to do' list, umbrellas and ventured forth.

The first stop was all of 2 minutes away from the train station: lunch at Nagashima restaurant. We sampled to test out the spirit of the place. You see, in traditional restaurants, the server brings the 1.8 litre bottle, sets the table along with glasses and saucers (or very shallow bowls). She then sets each glass in the saucer, and pours sake so that it overflows the glass and fills the saucer. You then bend forward to sip the sake (lest you rudely wastefully spill even one drop); after which you pour the excess sake from the saucer into the glass. This goes on to perfection and the sake itself was very clear and dry with only a tiny aftertaste that whispered 'smoooooth taste buds. We were off to a good start!

For lunch I ordered the chirashi which consisted of sashimi (raw fish and seafood) on a deep bowl of rice. I also ordered Katsu-don, which is deep-fried pork on a bed of rice. Both dishes were very fresh, well prepared and quite provoking (you've heard of thought provoking? Well, when your taste buds need time to recuperate from a good experience, we call that 'taste-provoking').

The rain was still happily pouring down at the time we finished lunch so we bundled up against the cold, umbrellas open and headed out toward the Ichishima Shuzo, the local sake brewery, about 15 minutes away.

They say that necessity is the mother of invention. Learning to steady my camera with both hands while I held up the brilliantly coloured leaves on a Japanese Maple Tree (this was November, after all), AND holding an umbrella with my arm, provided us with our afternoon Cirque de Soleil manoeuvre, but it worked, and the raindrops didn't ruin the camera lens.

The Ichishima brewery was not in production, as most sake is made at the beginning of each year. But the areas showcased the barrels, wagons and other wooden implements from days gone by (the brewery was founded in 1790) and the gift store was open and it goes without saying that no good sake brewery gift store is worth visiting unless it provides free samples of the product. This was the, uh, educational part of the visit. And we craved more.

Outside, we grabbed a taxi to take us across town to Shibata Castle, with its crooked, cracked stone walls that have withstood earthquakes and sieges since the Castle's completion in 1654. Not all the castle buildings were destroyed; some were bound together by the castle moat and the bright red and yellow leaves of the trees that stood as sentinels and neighbours.

In the turret by the entrance, you can visit the second floor museum, accessible by a very steep, narrow staircase, with a rope to help you ascend and descend. The purpose of this was to allow only one person at a time to gain access to the higher castle floors, from a defensive point of view. We wandered the ground floor, took photographs and then caught the local bus to our next stop; the town of Tuskioaka Onsen, about 30 minutes away.

Second stop : Tuskioaka Onsen

When we arrived around 4:45 pm, it was already dark outside. We were directed to the tourist information centre, a convenience store, where we paid 500 yen apiece (about \$7.50 US) and in return we each received one booklet with 5 tasting coupons.

The sake cup was white with a blue ring on the inside bottom. We were told that this helps to gauge the clarity of the sake by looking at the filled cup and seeing how clear the blue ring is. So, properly armed, we took a meander through town and we were off.

The sake sampling covers 30 different venues in the town, some in hotels and some in restaurants. Between 2 and 4 sakes and with your coupon book, you choose to sample one of the sakes, and then move on to the next venue. It's actually a fun way to explore the town but also, as you have to enter each building to take a sample, you get to check out each place. What a great marketing promotion! And as a matter of fact, there was one called the Senkei, that really impressed us, and we made a mental note to consider staying there the next time we visit the area.

We spent about an hour wandering and sampling as well as recording our own sampling notes along the way (for reference and purchases). By 6:00 pm we had used up our coupons so it was time to indulge in one of the hot springs. We went to the small public bath house to ease our bodies out of the cold and the rain and into the 52 degree Celsius water. Just relax.

offers soothing
arden), friendly



Restaurant Nagashima in Shibata

st, opened our

ed the sake to
of sake to the
d pours out the
needlessly and
s was all done
th' to my taste



Chirashi at the Chuoshok's market

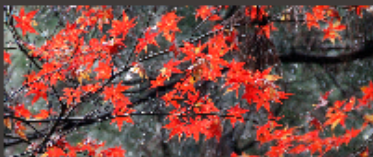
rice. My friend
red and taste-
n an incredibly



Sake tasting in Tuskloka

ld, popped our
ay.

took photos of
umbrella under
stayed off my



But the display
was founded in
orth its weight
ed knowledge.

Maple leaves in the fall

walls that have
open but they
both sentinels



Outdoor onsen at Murasugi

w and shallow
on at a time to
s, took some
es away.

office, really a
ake cup and a



Sake tasting in Agano

e clarity of the
ap of the small

ach site offers
move on to the
aste the sake,
one old hotel,
ne we're in the



way (for future
ne onsens. We
C waters, and

Swan Lake



While the heat was soothing...for a while, we had to get out after about 15 minutes, so we got dressed back to Niigata City for the evening.

Seafood, hot springs and a thousand-or-so-ducks

Day Two was just as adventurous as our first day.

We left the hotel quite early and took a train to the station by the Central Market, where we understood 15 minute walk to the market itself. It turned out to be a full one-hour walk, but the rain held off so it was and we were soon to discover, really worth the effort. Our reward was a market building filled with fresh fish and vegetables; a perfect setting to wander, take in the fresh smells of the produce, enjoy the friendly banter and photograph the colour and chaos of a busy Saturday morning market.

The added-value feature was that there were a few small restaurants on site and we were well overdue for our long walk. One of the vendors recommended Chuo-shokudo (literally, 'central restaurant') where we ate seafood with rice and tea. The word 'delicious' (oishi, in Japanese) doesn't begin to do justice.

Murasugi and its onsens

After another look around the market, we asked a cashier at one of the shops about getting back to the train and a friendly customer in the next aisle joined the conversation and offered us a ride in his van.

This time we took the train to Suibara, where we boarded a local bus to visit one of the onsens for which the Murasugi is famous. The bus driver was very friendly and carried on an animated discussion with my Japanese friend and just before our stop, he asked one of the passengers to show us the way to the onsen. We walked through the woods, accompanied by the most spectacular display of changing leaves you can imagine. The trees, festooned in bright colours, was trying to outdo its neighbour and as a reward, each tree became a subject for a photograph.

Exiting the woods, we wandered the narrow, crooked streets of the village where two onsens were located, one on each side. One was outdoor, one was indoor. Now all morning it had been threatening rain, and now a snowy, hazy day. The temperature was below freezing and so in the spirit of being adventurous, we decided to tackle the outdoor one first. And I mean that everything was outdoors including the change room and lockers. We bought two admission tickets from the vending machine, only to find a sign on a small mail box nearby suggesting that no one was allowed to use the onsen so "please deposit your paid ticket in this box". Trust the honour system!

We put our clothes in the lockers and then stark naked, walked, very briskly I might add, on the slippery rocks into the onsen's 42 degree Celsius waters. And just in time for now it started to hail quite aggressively. We covered ourselves with our towels but we were already wet, so no need to get out of the warm waters. Sliding down in the water we were neck-deep, we enjoyed the peace and tranquility of the rock and tree setting, as well as the hail, then some rain, and then more snow. A short time later we changed into our winter clothes, walked around the indoor onsen, and repeated the procedure: clothes in the locker, shower, sit in the onsen for 15-20 minutes, then shower, change back into winter clothes and walk back through the picture-book colours of the trees in the bus stop.

The same bus driver picked us up so now we were old friends. He gave us a bit of a tour of the area as it was a designated route, which included a temple and access to the "Five Heads Mountain" which is one of the local attractions. We vowed we would explore the mountain on our next visit but now we had to wing our way to the next destination.

The Swan Lake

About 30 minutes later, we said our good-byes at Lake Hyoko. It's nicknamed Swan Lake for the thousands (and about three dozen swans) that fly from Siberia each year to converge on the waters to feed, be fed, socialize and network with each other in their own version of an Aviary Facebook. We bought duck-shaped rice cakes (which resembled white Rice Krispies) and joined the crowd who like us, had braved the pouring rain and cold winds to see the ducks and swans. But the attraction of the area went further, with twisted, mysterious trees around the lake, the dark waters and misty mountains in the distance, accompanied by the cacophony--the natural sounds of the lake and local residents, which included ducks, swans and people.

After warming up with a nice hot coffee at the nearby store, we were off again on a local bus to our final destination in nearby Agano, with a visit to the Ichigozakura Shuzo -sake brewery.

Again, this brewery was not in production at this time of year but they offered a tour, so we put on our winter hats, and took the short tour in Japanese (with Mitsuru, my translator on hand) before the main event of purchasing and photos with the brewery staff. It was a very friendly time.

and journeyed



it was about a
not that taxing
h, seafood and
of the vendors,

closer look...

breakfast after
we had fresh



e train station,

e small town of
apanese friend,
d along a path
ne. Each tree
model for my

Inari

temple, Agano



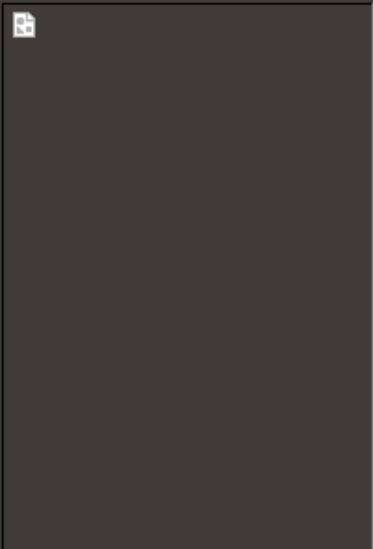
almost side by
nail was falling.
outdoor onsen
mission tickets
on duty at this

Squids at Niigata market



y stones to the
ered our heads
ater so that we
then the snow,
d the corner to
nutes, get out,
e woods to the

After the meal...



he followed his
e of the area
Swan Lake!

ands of ducks
and otherwise
ck food (which
to be with the
ke, backed by
dtrack – of the

Goro, one of the best Izakayas in Niigata

stop of the day

Photos: Steve Gillick

ry nets on our
datory tasting,

Back in Niigata City, we had reserved dinner at Goro, one of the best seafood restaurants in the city, disappoint. The sake was delicate and smooth, the pickles, fish and seafood dishes were fresh and expected. The open kitchen, around which we sat on bar stools, and the service was wonderful. Another exceptional experience in Niigata Prefecture.

Niigata City

We had a train reservation back to Tokyo on the afternoon of Day Three, which allowed us time for exploration, this time in Niigata City.

We walked to downtown Niigata to see the Art Park, and spend some time in Bandaijima Pia, the vegetable and liquor market buildings. We bought crackers to bring home as well as some souvenir sweets for friends. The service of the sushi restaurants was too strong to resist. We chose Benkei, which serves kaiten sushi: freshly prepared sushi that travels around the counter area on a conveyor belt. You choose whatever dishes you want and then at the end of the meal, the server adds up the different coloured plates; each colour representing the price of that dish. The sashimi and miso soup were fresh and delicious.

Another taste-provoking moment but also a great way to end our short stay in Niigata prefecture.

A next visit?

So now we are back in Toronto and already thinking of the next trip to Japan in 2013, my 12th trip to Japan. Of course we will see and explore new places but somehow I am pretty sure we will justify another trip to Niigata. It is interesting, refreshing and rewarding to just wander and discover, and of course there are still more things to see and do.

While nowhere but in Niigata can you experience what we did on this trip, each area of Japan has its own rewards. There is no such thing as "seen one town...seen them all". Over the years we have fallen head-over-heels for different towns and cities in Japan for their own unique personalities.

Niigata prefecture, for me, is one such place.

Steve Gillick

www.talkingtravel.ca

[Back](#)

Travel by Interest

[Accessible Tourism \(1\)](#)

[All inclusive \(1\)](#)

[Cruises \(17\)](#)

[Cultural Tourism \(12\)](#)

[Eco tourism \(18\)](#)

[Family & Kids \(44\)](#)

[Frugal Traveller \(5\)](#)

[Gay Tourism \(5\)](#)

[Gourmet Travel \(27\)](#)

[Health & Spa \(14\)](#)

[Hotels \(27\)](#)

[Islands & Beaches \(11\)](#)

[Long Stay \(17\)](#)

[Luxury Travel \(6\)](#)

[Romance and Honeymoon \(18\)](#)

[Sport, Outdoor & Adventure \(63\)](#)

[Weekend Getaways \(8\)](#)

[Women Tourism \(14\)](#)

[Home](#) [About Us](#) [Terms of Use](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Advertise](#) [Site Map](#)

Transferring data from www.euphoriamagazinevoyage.com...

and it did not
tly prepared in
nal day in the

for a bit more

etable, seafood
ds, but the lure
prepared sushi
the end of the
sh. The sushi,

he country. Of
gata. It was so
s for us to see

ts own hidden
over-heels with