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# THE GALAPAGOS OF THE ORIENT

## Tokyo's Ogasawara Islands Beckon

Steve Gillick

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13 DEC 2013: \$28.00 is a small price to pay for peace of mind. In preparation for the 25 and a half hour ferry ride from Tokyo to Chichijima, and with lingering memories of not-so-pleasant past experiences at sea, I purchased trans-dermal patches to be applied behind the ear, sea-bands -

one for each wrist - to stimulate acupuncture points, Gravol tablets-just in case the first two didn't work, and Advil, in case the whole affair gave me a headache. I don't think I went overboard with my concerns, but I used the patches and the sea-bands and whether they in fact worked or not, I was perfectly fine during the long ferry rides to and from the island.



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Known for many years as the Bonin Islands (from the Japanese word bunin, meaning 'no people' or 'uninhabited'), Ogasawara takes its name from Ogasawara Sadayori who claimed (some say falsely) that he was granted the islands in 1593. Ogasawara itself is an archipelago of over 30 subtropical and tropical islands, with only two of them inhabited: Chichijima, or Father Island, has a population of roughly 2000 and Hahajima, or Mother Island, has a population of 400.

Over the years I have visited Tokyo on many occasions so it was time to expand my horizons. The islands lie 1000 km south of Tokyo, but belong

to Tokyo Prefecture, and so with the suggestion and support of the City of Tokyo, I made plans to explore 'the other side of Tokyo'.

The attractions of Ogasawara lay in beaches hiking, boating, sailing, snorkeling, scuba diving, sea-kayaking, whale-watching (in season), swimming with wild dolphins, fishing, conservation, as well as the sheer uniqueness of experiencing the destination (what many travellers refer to as the 'what else' in travel). Plus it is important to note that the Ogasawara group was formed by underwater volcanoes 48 million years ago and were never attached to a land mass. They became home to a number of unique species of flora and fauna, a fact that has given rise to the nickname, 'The Galapagos of the Orient'.

After spending a few days in Tokyo, we arrived at Takebasha Pier and at 10:00 am we departed on the Ogasawara Maru. Our First Class room was on the second level and contained two bunk beds, a window, a small television and the opportunity to use the public washrooms and showers. Other levels of First Class include rooms for two people, some with en suite washrooms. Second Class can consist of either a large dormitory with mats, blankets and pillows on the floor, or a dormitory of bunk beds.

When you take into consideration time for sleeping, eating, becoming mesmerized by the emptiness of the ocean and the swelling of the waves, taking photos, watching a bit of television, reading, chatting, people-watching and having an Asahi Beer or two, all of a sudden it is 11:30 am the next day and exactly 25 ♦ hours after we left Tokyo, we arrived at Chichijima.

We checked into the Seafront Hotel (about an eight-minute walk from the Ferry Dock-it's a very small town), had a bowl of ramen noodles at a local restaurant, and then met Katchan, our guide for an orientation tour of the island.

We stopped at amazing lookouts to enjoy vistas of the city, the harbour and the smaller islands in the area. We learned about Octopus Trees (the many root shoots resemble Octopus arms) and tasted the tangy fruit. We found secluded, beautiful sand and stony beaches where snorkelers were exploring the waters, and we discovered Second World War military buildings partially hidden by the encroaching forest.

We had dinner that evening at Marujo, a seafood izakaya (restaurant/bar) and sampled unbelievably fresh sushi and sashimi, including two traditional island specialties: Kame sashimi (raw turtle) and shimazushi, made with sawara (also called wahoo) fish, marinated in soy sauce and prepared with spicy mustard. So good.

The next morning we met our boat, the Pink Dolphin for a seven hour circle tour of the island. This was a day of absolute wonderment; sunshine, incredible land formations, wild dolphins cavorting with snorkelers, secluded sandy beaches, mysterious caves, curious albatrosses, two smiling goats, and three foot waves that quickly calmed down to resemble a soothing, rolling, meditative carpet. The day was an opportunity to swim, snorkel, photograph and become absolutely entranced by the features of the island that contributed to the Ogasawara group being named a UNESCO Natural World Heritage site in 2011.

On the Friday, we took a two-hour ferry ride to

Hahajima Island, 50 km to the south. While Chichijima is known for its beaches, Hahajima is known for hiking and trekking and upon arrival, we met Tamotsu Hayakawa, a proudly 69 year old naturalist who would guide us on our three-hour hike.

To be succinct, it was an awesome experience.

Hayakawa had worked for many years in preserving the Hahajima Meguro, a small yellow bird with white circles around its dark eyes. Today, the entire population of 14,000 birds can only be found on Hahajima. Hayakawa was a master of bird calls and with his help we were able to find and photograph a few Meguro during the day. But he also had oodles of energy and while we were huffing and puffing to follow him up the sometimes steep mountain paths and staircases, he seemed to ascend effortlessly.

We passed through forests of tangled trees and fan leaf plants, each vying for the attention of the sunlight, stood on Mount Kofuji to gaze at the blue ocean water, the rocky islands and the crescent shape of Minamizaki beach far below. We clamored through a cave, still housing rusting guns from the Second World War, and then descended to the beach to listen to the waves and enjoy more beautiful scenery.

After an overnight at the comfortable Nanpu Hotel it was time to head back to Chichijima and then board the afternoon ferry for the return trip to Tokyo.

While the islands are mostly geared toward Japanese speaking visitors, they do attract Europeans, Americans and in this case, two

Canadians. I found enough people who spoke a smattering of English and, mixed with my even less smattering of Japanese, I got along fine and had a memorable time. I would return at the drop of a hat!

The Ogasawara Islands are most likely something that few travel agents and travellers know about, but they do deserve attention. They respond to many travel niches and are ideal for travellers of all ages. Throughout the trip I kept thinking of the Monty Python line ♦ ”And now for something completely different”. In the case of the Ogasawara Islands, this line is absolutely true.

For more information, visit

<http://www.ogasawarakaiun.co.jp/english/guide/>.





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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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