

Spotlight on Ōita

Resting up for the big game

The World Cup kicks off a year from tomorrow. Katarina Williams offers a fan's guide.

One of the best things about following a Rugby World Cup is that you will have plenty of down time to explore all that Japan has to offer.

And there is plenty of incentive to get off the "Golden Route" that links Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto.

Ōita, in the south, will not only host an All Blacks pool match, but has also been handpicked by team officials as a pre-tournament training camp venue.

One of its big drawcards is its large number of hot springs, known as onsens. Like Māori, locals use the springs for bathing and cooking.

In nearby Beppu city, visitors can feast on what is essentially a Japanese hangi, where items like spinach, egg, potato, seafood, chicken and corn are cooked in geothermal steam. Food is put in bamboo flax baskets and placed in cooking steam ranges called Jigoku-gama.

I visited **Jigoku Mushi Kobo Kannawa** where a large meal ordered using a vending machine cost ¥540 (about NZ\$7.50).

One of the more quirky uses of the geothermal activity takes place at the **Beppu Beach Sand Bath**. Visitors strip down to a yukata robe, lie down in a specially prepared area before being covered by heated black sand – your head positioned on a brick as you look out to the ocean.

Bathers then lie back and relax for around 15 minutes, before heading to a segregated onsen to shower, wash and bathe.

For those who want to experience nature, a visit to the

Usa Jingu Shrine**Ōita fast facts**

- Flights to Ōita from Tokyo Haneda Airport: **1.5 hours**
- From Osaka: **1 hour**
- Getting to Ōita city centre from airport: **65 minutes** (fare: ¥1550, about NZ\$21)
- Shinkansen (bullet train) from Osaka: **3.5 hours**

Takasakyama Natural Zoological Garden should be on the to-do list. It's home to about 1300 macaque monkeys that roam freely around the grounds.

Just a short stroll away is the **Umitamago – Ōita Marine Palace Aquarium** – which features a giant tunnel tank, walrus and dolphins.

For a more cultural experience, a visit to the **Usa-jingu Shrine** which incorporates aspects of Shinto and Buddhism is a must-see.

It is the head shrine of around 40,000 around Japan dedicated to Hachiman – the god of war and military power – and was built in 725.

Those wanting to taste an authentic tipple should pay a visit to the award-winning **Kayashima Sake Brewing Co** in Ōita. Founded in 1873, the company produces 100,000 bottles of Sake on site each year.

Post-match soak**How to onsen respectfully:**

Naked ambition: With complete nudity mandatory, stripping off in front of a group of strangers can be a disarming experience.

American James W. Taylor has earned himself the prestigious honour of being an "onsen master" – having bathed in every onsen in

Umi Jigoku in Beppu

Beppu city. He says anyone shy about stripping off should not worry about it. "Almost all onsens are segregated. It's rare you find one that's mixed... it shouldn't be any different than getting changed in the locker room at the gym."

"I have decided it doesn't matter. You could be tall, short, overweight, underweight – it really doesn't matter."

Wash before you bathe:

Onsen bathers should scrub and wash themselves thoroughly before entering. Most Japanese baths have small stools where you can sit and scrub yourself clean.

When you enter the

water, be sure to make a peaceful and quiet entrance without making a splash. Your hair should not touch the water.

Towel usage: You may be given both a large and a small towel – but they both have distinctive uses.

The large one is used for drying yourself before entering the onsen, and should be left in the changing room. The smaller one can be taken outside with you, but it must not be put in the water.

Never wring out a towel, as this is considered rude – never rinse your towel in the bath or let it touch the water. Many bathers pop their towel on their heads while they are soaking in an onsen, but it's acceptable to leave it on the side.

Ink and onsens: Visitors with tattoos may struggle to be allowed entry to onsens as they are still considered taboo to many Japanese because of their association with yakuza, or gangs.

Those with small tattoos were encouraged to buy a waterproof bandage to cover it up.

For those with lots of ink, it might be worth paying for a private bath called a kashikiri-buro, or search ahead of time for a tattoo-friendly onsen.

The breakdown

An authentic ryokan breakfast.

Bask in the Land of the Rising Sun

Buy a rail pass

Make the most of your match-free days by investing in a Japan Rail (JR) Pass allowing you to explore Japan efficiently and in comfort.

These gems allow you to hop aboard the famed Shinkansen (bullet trains) and the Narita Express (which operates between Narita Airport and Tokyo) at a fraction of the price for locals.

However, there are a few caveats to be aware of, so make sure you read up on it.

Hire a wi-fi hotspot

While technology in Japan is good, finding reliable free wi-fi without being tethered to a Starbucks or McDonald's can be challenging.

Hiring a wireless hotspot means you can stay connected without worrying about a painful roaming bill when you arrive home. I hired one for 10 days, picked it up on arrival at Narita Airport, was given a free local sim card – all up it cost about \$90. Returning it was easy: put it in the pre-paid post bag provided and pop it in a post box.

Keep cash handy

Surprisingly, many eateries and

retailers – particularly in smaller centres – don't accept credit or debit cards, so having some yen in your wallet is always a good idea.

Tokyo's subway network is easier than it looks

With 290 stations, 13 Metro lines and carrying 8.7 million passengers a day, Tokyo's Metro can be a daunting prospect. However, its reliability, cost-effectiveness and punctuality means it's worth persevering with.

Pick up a PASMO Card when you arrive and reload it as needed – it's cheaper than buying individual tickets and can also be used in vending machines and convenience stores – bonus!

Stay at a ryokan

In June, about 80 per cent of Japan's Airbnb listings disappeared virtually overnight, thanks to new laws that forced all homeowners to gain official approval before listing their properties.

But fear not – there are plenty of other options ranging from capsule hotels to the nation's more-than-900,000 hotel rooms. Instead of playing it safe, why

not step out of your comfort zone, slip into a yukata (a casual kimono) and spend a night or two in a ryokan?

In existence since AD705, rooms at these traditional inns feature sleeping futons, low tables and tatami mats, authentic food and artwork, and sliding paper doors – all exuding a distinctive Japanese ambience.

Learn some basic Japanese

Being able to say the basics will help in most situations – if all else fails, the locals will appreciate your efforts.

Downloading Google Translate – which can be used offline – can also prove very useful.

Japanese toilets are a bit... errr... different

Japanese bathrooms are an interesting experience. Most public bathrooms are converted to Western-style toilets, but be warned. The seats are warmed, which is an odd sensation.

Many are equipped with buttons, transforming them into warm-water bidets and even allowing users to make a flushing noise or music.



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