

# FIJITIME

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## Romantic Rendezvous

*From the comfort our new lounge to the  
far flung places of the earth*

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Romantic Places to  
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RV Adventures in New  
Zealand's South Island

**JAUNTY JAPAN**  
Cherry Blossoms, Neon  
Lights and Zen Moments



# JAPAN

## Neon Lights & Zen

By RACHNA NATH

Naked, with goose bumps, soaking in a 40 degree mineral bath deep enough to cover my bosom is how I would best sum up my most memorable experience of Japan.

This experience, my first, was in a quiet onsen on a hotel rooftop and I was a little awkward at first -- because I'm a conservative Fijian and being stark naked in a pool with strangers is not something we do every day in the islands. Or at all, ever.

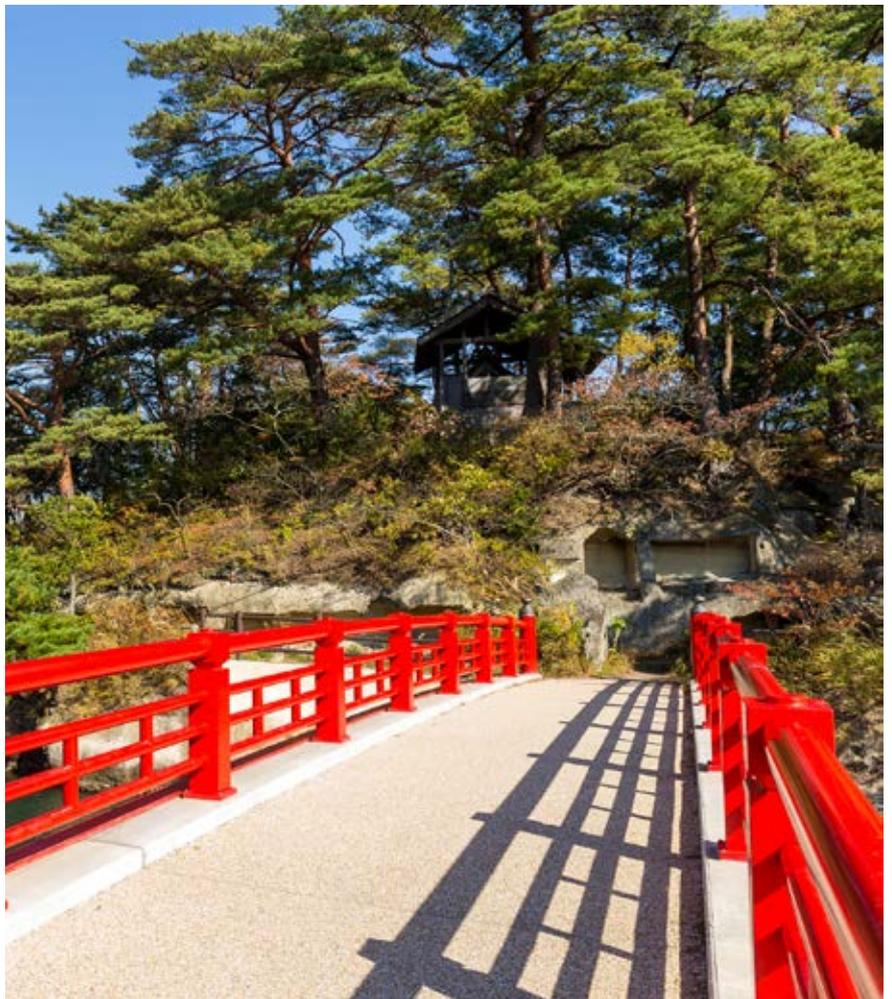
It was in Matsushima, a coastal town four and half hours drive from Tokyo, a must-see for its famous pine-clad islets and Zen temples. The onsen has roots dating back to 712, used by injured Samurai warriors to heal their wounds, later spreading to the wider population. Traditionally men and women bathed together and although there are now separate baths, mixed bathing still occurs in some areas.

I like to think I'm quite adventurous. I'm all for trying out different cuisine, but I was hesitant about the onsen so timed my visit for 11pm, just an hour before it closed when I expected fewer people would be there.

I was one of the few wrapped in a yukata, a casual version of the kimono. Naked elderly women strolled happily about, preparing for the bath. I put my yukata in one of the little baskets provided, hoping no-one was looking as I tried to blend in -- rather difficult when you are the only dark skinned person there.

A tiny towel the size of a facecloth provided the only ounce of modesty, which I used to me get to the showers for the thorough rinse bathers have before entering the pool.

The hand-held shower stalls are equipped with a little wooden stool and a basket with shampoo and soap. The idea is to sit down with your back to the pool and clean up. Two doorless cubicles at the end had overhead shower heads, which I preferred to coping with the little stools.



The coastal town of Matsushima is perfect for Zen moments



The bustling city of Tokyo



Cherry Blossom lined waterways of Japan



Zen pond garden and cherry tree at Ryoan-ji in Kyoto

#### **MUST-SEE CITIES AND ACTIVITIES:**

**\*TOKYO** – experience the nightlife and don't forget to visit the Robot Restaurant, enjoy the views from Tokyo Skytree tower, ride the world's first bullet train, visit the imperial palace and the very colourful Tsukiji Fish market

**\*KYOTO** – experience authentic Japanese tea ceremony at WAK Japan, visit the Golden Pavilion and enjoy some good shopping along the infamous Shoji Street.

**\*MATSUSHIMA** – take a boat cruise in the Matsushima Bay, visit the Zuiganji Zen Buddhist Temple, and try out Japanese-style restaurant Un-gai to appreciate Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese.

Then came a 20 metre walk across to the pool which I managed to achieve without making eye contact with anyone, and lowered myself into the water. A quick glance around reveals the women in the pool smiling and nodding their approval. Then I realised I was supposed to move the face towel covering my modesty and place it neatly on my head, like the others.

The natural hot water is wonderful and I began to feel more relaxed almost immediately. With eyes closed, I leant against the rocks and soak it up.

When I opened my eyes, I discovered I was the only one left in the hot pool. Surely I didn't scare off the locals. Of course not, there's only 20 minutes left to closing time.

Though 7000 kilometres apart, Japan and Fiji are island countries with culture firmly rooted in customs, some still relevant today; with strong family ties and respect for tradition, such as the ritual of the onsen.

The experience left me feeling liberated with a sense of accomplishment. After my bath I confidently walked out of the pool, this time with the towel on my head, and head to the showers. Maybe it was because no-one was actually around, or just maybe I learnt a thing or two about the Japanese way of life.

#### **ZEN MOMENTS**

Few places can boast a quintessential balance between modern life and a rich imperial culture as Japan does. Beyond the neon-lit streetscapes, extravagant street fashion and tantalising fresh seafood, Japan has a fascinating spiritual side.

Kyoto's most iconic Zen temples, Ryoan-ji translates to the Temple of the Dragon of Peace. Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the temple's Stone Garden features distinctive rock creations and smooth small river pebbles in linear patterns that are intended to assist mediation.



Traditional Japanese tea tray



The writer in a Kimono

The Stone Garden has four secrets and is a puzzle of sorts. Its 15 rocks are arranged so that only 14 can be viewed at any one time. Some say the rock formations represent a tiger carrying a cub across the stream, others believe it depicts an ocean accented with small islands, but true zen believers will argue the garden signifies the incompleteness of the things of this world.

If you appreciate Zen Buddhism, then visit the breath-taking Golden Pavilion, Kinkaku-ji. Originally built in 1397 as a residence for shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, the temple has burnt down numerous times throughout history. The present structure was rebuilt in 1955 and is richly adorned in gold leaf that

reflects in the mirror pond, making for great photography in every season.

**THE WAY OF TEA**

A good cuppa is widely appreciated in the Pacific. The Japanese Way of Tea ceremony is as ritualistic as a yaqona ceremony.

The ritual of serving green powered tea dates back 1000 years when the first tea leaves were brought back from China by Japanese priests for religious purposes. Today the tea ceremony is considered an art and spiritual discipline, although there is increasing understanding of its health benefits and appreciation of its cultural importance.

**DAY IN A KIMONO**

You haven't truly experienced Japan if you haven't worn a kimono, the national dress of both men and women. It is a full length robe with a sash, obi.

It does feel heavy at first, but it's a beautiful garment. Women's kimonos often are bright coloured while men's are often dark or with bold colours. While not everyday wear, in Japan, it is worn with pride on special occasions such as weddings, graduations or coming of age ceremonies.

 *Fiji Airways will begin flights from Nadi to Tokyo from July.*