



JAPAN WONDER LAND

Every now and then, you find a destination so rich in culture, history and creativity you know you'll be back again. With its unique ancient traditions fused with thriving modern life, Japan is just such a place.

WORDS BY SUE WALLACE

There's a bright yellow pumpkin sculpture covered in black polka dots perched on the beach on Japan's island of Naoshima. Crashing waves provide the perfect backdrop as eager Instagrammers dangle selfie sticks to snap the perfect shot.

It's the iconic work of avant-garde Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, who has made a name for herself with her quirky pieces and installations. She has her own museum in Tokyo that's so popular daily visitor numbers are limited.

Once a sleepy destination not really on the tourist map, Naoshima is now one of the 12 art-focused islands that participate in the eclectic – and incredibly popular – Setouchi Triennale art festival.

The island's underground Chichu Art Museum, built into a hillside overlooking the southern coast, is home to some of Monet's stunning pieces, plus installations by American artists James Turrell and Walter de Maria.

The Benesse House Museum is another show stopper, where the art challenges your imagination and leaves you in awe of the creativity. And touring the Benesse Art House Project – where artists take empty houses in residential areas and turn the spaces into galleries and studios – becomes an adventure, as we engage not only with the beautiful pieces, but also with the local community.

The island visit is part of Abercrombie & Kent's 14-day 'Wonders of Japan' cruise on Ponant's *Le Soléal*, a chic ship that is polished to the nines and offers every comfort.

This page: Japan is home to beautiful traditional gardens, including the Kenrokuen garden in the city of Kanazawa.

Opposite page, top to bottom: The beautiful Buddhist Bulguksa Temple in South Korea; There are a range of dining options onboard, from casual to more formal.

The Tokyo Olympics will take place from 24 July to 9 August, 2020.

It's calm water cruising on the Seto Inland Sea and Sea of Japan as we visit the cities of Takamatsu, Hiroshima, Karatsu, Matsue, Kanazawa, Sado-ga-shima, and Noshiro; as well as wilderness areas and far-flung ports.

Embarkation is in Osaka after two days of sightseeing in Kyoto – home to roughly 2,000 temples and shrines, 16 of which are designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

We also cruise to South Korea for a day, and visit the ancient capital of Gyeongju to see the beautiful Buddhist Bulguksa Temple with its many coloured lanterns, and the excavated tombs at Tumuli Park.

SECRETS BROUGHT TO LIGHT

The 177 passengers on the ship hail from around the world – but we are all connected by our deep interest in Japan's history, culture, arts, technology and creativity.

Each day we head out on tailored excursions to see some of Japan's biggest attractions and uncover its hidden secrets, with experiences ranging from pottery production to traditional tea-making ceremonies. Expedition director Suzana Machado D'Oliveira confides that Japan is one of her favourite places to visit, and it now heads many 'hottest destination' lists – especially with next year's Tokyo Olympics fast approaching.

"We try to tailor tours to suit all interests – for the active, there's hiking on wooded trails; for those who like art, there are plenty of museums and galleries; for those



THERE'S
PLENTY
OF TIME
TO ENJOY
ALL
THAT LE
SOLEAL
HAS TO
OFFER



SAIL AWAY

Guests can enjoy the 'Wonders of Japan' cruise on *Le Soléal* from 13-26 June, 2020. The cruise is inclusive of tours and alcoholic beverages – but book quickly, as it's limited to 199 guests. For more information, contact Abercrombie & Kent on 1300 590 317. abercrombiekent.com.au

TIP

Take slip-on shoes and socks – shoes need to be removed to enter shrines and temples.

who love gardening, Japan has some of the best gardens – and there's always shopping and dining opportunities off the ship," Suzana says.

TRIBUTE TO PEACE

There are many highlights on this cruise, but perhaps the most poignant is a visit to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Museum – which honours the victims of the first atomic bomb, dropped on 6 August, 1945.

We wander through the famous peace park and contemplate the horrors of atomic warfare. And when we enter the museum, the exhibits are sobering. There's a damaged clock that froze at 8.15am, when the bomb exploded, plus the safe of a chemist where you can see that the money and treasures were carbonised. A photo of a young woman who was wearing a flowered kimono shows how the fabric motif was burned onto her skin.

Later we hear from bomb survivor Keiko Ogura, the director of Hiroshima's Interpreters for Peace. She was just eight years old when the bomb exploded 2.4km away from where she was, and she believes it's important to tell of the horrors she saw to prevent it happening again.

Despite the tragic history recorded in the museum, we leave uplifted by the optimism of so many.

Delightful Japanese gardens also come under the spotlight. We visit the Kinashi area of Takamatsu, one of Japan's major bonsai production centres, and appreciate the

artistry involved in styling the tiny trees. We also head to Ritsurin Garden, considered one of Japan's finest historical gardens with its hectares of ponds, bridges, hills and trees.

Meanwhile, Shukkeien Gardens – which translates as 'shrunken-scenery garden' – has miniaturised scenes of views of valleys, mountains, and forests. And the peony village on Daikonsima Island is famous for its 20 varieties of peony.

Gardening expert Simon Rickard enlightens us about the Japanese way of gardening, and provides entertaining lectures back onboard. He is joined by art experts Marjorie Williams – from the Cleveland Museum of Art – and Aya Louisa McDonald – professor of art history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas – who shed light on Japanese art.

Most fascinating is the Japanese concept of 'wabi-sabi' which is all about things being imperfect, incomplete and impermanent. "It applies to everything," says Simon.

He goes on to explain, "An English garden is like a voluptuous woman in a tight corset, [while] a Japanese garden is about restraint and serenity."

GET ONBOARD

It's the quality of tours and lecturers that entice many Abercrombie & Kent fans to return time and time again. "You learn so much more about a country when you have lecturers who are so well qualified," says Mary Fitzgibbons from Australia, who has clocked up seven tours.

Despite a busy itinerary, there's plenty of time to enjoy all that *Le Soléal* has to offer – with its subtle décor and eclectic art. From afternoon tea in the Grand Salon, to drinks in the Observatory Bar, it's a great way to travel.

Delicious French-inspired menus feature on the ship, with hearty buffet breakfasts served in L'Eclipse on Deck 2 and Le Pytheas on Deck 6. Lunch is enjoyed on deck with plenty of choice – and specialty multicultural dishes served by the pool are always popular.

Dinner can be a casual buffet affair or a more formal occasion with five courses in the dining room.

My cabin is spacious, with a veranda that's perfect for sea gazing. The bed is so comfortable it's hard to leave, and there's plenty of wardrobe space and a compact ensuite.

Onboard entertainment is a real highlight, and there is something for everyone – from movies to performances by *Le Soléal* dancers to the high energy show, *Métropolitain*, in the theatre. There's even a tribute to Frank Sinatra.

Some shows also hark back to the region we're visiting, with musical performances by dynamic Japanese groups and a kabuki show focusing on aspects of Japanese culture. There are also great dockside performances, ranging from enthusiastic *taiko* drummers to young dancers.

We reluctantly disembark in Sapporo with a deeper appreciation of Japan – yet still wanting to discover more.

It's Suzana Machado D'Oliveira who has the last word. "We have cruised 1,574 nautical miles and visited five Japanese islands; two countries; and countless temples, shrines, gardens and samurai castles – we now leave Japan lighter in worries, heavier in kimonos, more courteous and less rushed, with less yen but certainly more zen," she says.

But it seems there's a little wabi-sabi in there – no visit to Japan can ever be complete. You soon find you need to return again and again. 

VISIT MINDFOOD.COM

In addition to the art and gardens, Japan is a foodie's paradise, and there is so much to delight all tastes. If you've got a sweet tooth, here are some of the tasty treats that should be on your Japanese dessert bucket list. mindfood.com/japanese-desserts