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ART OF THE SUBLIME

Creative forces at work on a tour of Japan

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It's still early on a warm night in Kanazawa, but things are already getting a little rowdy at the next table. We are at a little izakaya in this ancient castle town, and halfway through a string of perfectly plated courses: devil's tongue jelly, chunks of wobbly red tuna on a perilla leaf, a plate of firefly squid.

To our left, a table of Westerners struggle with variations of the seiza position, dubbed the "foreigner's nightmare", in which you kneel on the floor, feet tucked beneath the buttocks. To our right, a table of beery office workers are celebrating not just the end of the working week but, perhaps, the ascension of Crown Prince Naruhito to the Chrysanthemum Throne.

Kanazawa, on the central north coast of the main island of Honshu, which will be my springboard for an art journey from Kyoto's Aoi Matsuri Festival to the Setouchi Triennale on the art islands off Kagawa prefecture, on Shikoku island.

It's my first visit to Japan before. As a veteran arts journalist, I'm excited. I've covered arts events from St Petersburg to Mumbai but have always been curious to see Japan, to discover why it's often spoken of as an outlier when it comes to arts and aesthetics.

Over the next nine days, I come to understand. Art seeps into everything outside the traditional frame of canvas and festival, often for no obvious reason. Why the elaborately beautiful manhole covers I see from the small resort town of Yamanaka to the port of Takamatsu, for example? Why the culinary theatre of kaiseki, the Japanese haute cuisine tradition that becomes my favourite food-as-art experience? Why the artful arranging of skewered baby octopus at Kyoto's Nishiki Market, or the careful pruning of trees at Kenrokuen garden in Kanazawa?

What lies behind the urge to beautify the everyday? My guide is a slim bible, an obscure though suddenly hip 1933 gem, *In Praise of Shadows*, by Japanese literary titan Junichiro Tanizaki. It doesn't explain what makes this nation prize beauty in all things, but it does give me a working guide to the inexplicable prettiness I see over the next nine days, from the sensual curves of Kanazawa lacquerware (a good bowl is akin to cradling a baby, Tanizaki writes) to the lovely machiya, or town-house, so bereft of light. My guide, Richard, a droll British-born, Japanese-speaking, SOAS University of London graduate and Zen scroll



The concrete shells of Teshima Art Museum, top; Yayoi Kusama's yellow pumpkin on Naoshima, above; Aoi Matsuri Festival in Kyoto, left

collector, tells me why. For the Japanese, shadow is prized, not light.

In a mass-produced world, Kanazawa is an artisanal heaven. Here, ancient traditions thrive: 400-year-old gold leaf craft; beautiful Kutani porcelain; lovely children's toys. Business is brisk in the elegant teahouses and shops in the historic Higashi Chaya district, where we gorge on green tea and miso ice creams while watching the passing theatre of young Asian tourists in trendy rented geisha makeup and kimono (a real geisha wouldn't be caught dead taking selfies).

Kyoto, too, is an eye-opener. Here, in this ancient cradle and incubator of Japan's traditions, I watch one of its biggest cultural festivals, Aoi Matsuri, a ceremonial appeasing of the deities predating Kyoto's establishment as the national capital.

But it is the art islands off Kagawa, the final leg of my art journey, that lingers and resonates. Here, an art-led rejuvenation project seeded in 1985 by Benesse publishing titan

Tetsuhiko Fukutake has turned the once struggling region into a burgeoning contemporary art hub. The Setouchi Triennale, held every three years since 2010 across a chain of 12 so-called art islands in the Seto Inland Sea, attracts a sizeable international audience.

What's not to like about the partnership of art, nature and architecture in these astonishingly pretty former fishing villages, reached only by ferry and remote enough to entice jaded art world regulars? The art, a mix of permanent and new commissions rotated each iteration across the various sites, is uniformly excellent. Big art brands dominate.

Naoshima, the main art island, is Yayoi Kusama territory. It's hard to miss the avant-garde octogenarian's retina-scorching 1994 Yellow Pumpkin sitting pertly on an old wharf like alien flotsam, surrounded by young Kusama devotees snapping selfies in co-ordinated yellow and black polka-dotted outfits while nearby five Korean women happily hunt for four-leaf clovers; they

IN THE KNOW

Setouchi Triennale contemporary art festival spans multiple islands and takes place over three seasons. The final season for this year's festival, the autumn sessions, run from September 28 to November 4. A wide range of permanent exhibitions can be seen at any time of year before the next triennale in 2022.

Inside Japan's 12-night Hidden Japan group tour includes two days in the Setouchi region, with a visit to Naoshima art island; from \$7315 a person, twin-share. The company also has a 15-night Japan Arts Trail self-guided trip, which takes in all of Japan's top art destinations, including Naoshima; from \$9234 a person, twin-share.

Cathay Pacific operates more than 70 flights a week to Hong Kong from Australian ports, with a seasonal twice-weekly service from Hong Kong to Komatsu from April to October.

■ insidejapantours.com
■ setouchi-artfest.jp
■ cathaypacific.com

apparently fetch a pretty penny back in Seoul.

At nearby Honmura village, six traditional homes, distinctive with their smoked cedar frames impervious to fire, salt and insects, have been turned into tiny art galleries. Inside the gloom of the 200-year-old Kadoya hut, I sit, hypnotised, by Tatsuo Miyajima's 1998 work, *Sea of Time*, a rippling pool filled with 125 blinking digital counters. I learn that Miyajima invited some of the villagers to place the counters in the pool. One elderly local, since deceased, told his family: "When I am dead, don't visit me in the cemetery, visit me here." It's a perfect expression of the artist's view of death and infinity — "keep changing, connect with everything, continue forever".

Storm House, a traditional house where you can sit, safe and warm, as a manufactured fierce thunderstorm hits, is surreal fun. But for me, Christian Boltanski's *Les Archives du Coeur* (2010) is a standout. Since 2008, the French artist has been recording heartbeats all over the world; more than 60,000 are archived in this space. We walk through a womb-like tunnel, the Heart Room, buffeted by darkness, the dull thrum of what art critic Ren Fukuzumi called an "exploding" heart. I grope blindly in the dark with only a single lightbulb blinking like a giant eye.

It's an unexpectedly moving experience. I'm not alone. Local guide Aya tells me about a French woman who alarmed staff when she