



Above, from left: Nishiki Market in Kyoto; Higashi Chaya district, Kanazawa; Teshima Art Museum interior

was found quietly weeping in one of the recording booths last year. She had travelled all the way to this remote spot, windswept and almost hidden by a tunnel of bamboo groves, to listen to her late husband's recorded heartbeat.

So on to the architecture of the art islands. It is the true star, hidden in plain sight deep below the surface. Pritzker Prize-winning Tadao Ando's Chichu Art Museum, a stunning, subterranean play of angle and light, is an eye-opener. Its five Monets from the Water Lilies series are a big drawcard, but it is James Turrell's Open Field that impresses. I climb the stairs to a blue wall, through which I step into another room, like entering a fourth dimension. Nearby is Walter De Maria's Time/Timeless/No Time, an unsettling temple dominated by an obsidian orb. Both works make me trip, clutch walls, question my position in space. This is good art.

But it is at our final stop at artist Rei Naito

MORE TO THE STORY

Japan has more than 3000 onsen. They can be found in every prefecture, from remote mountain hot springs to polished city hotel baths and, as it turns out, onsen as art exhibit.

Naoshima Bath (I Love Yu), an art installation and public bath house, is a kitsch marvel of Edo-era erotica. It features tiled murals of female abalone divers and, inexplicably, a giant elephant statue dividing the men's and women's baths.

I'm at rustic ryokan Kagari Kisshoutei

in Yamanaka Onsen. The resort town is home to a 1300-year-old hot spring tradition said to be founded by a roving monk, Gyoki, and praised by the likes of 17th-century poet Basho. I'm about to take the plunge, so to speak, into the hotel's onsen, a marvel of natural design, with its waterfall, steaming lagoon and artfully arranged rocks.

Onsen are as much a social lubricant as healing therapy in Japan, I learn. Nakedness is obligatory; in the buff, a special kind of platonic friendship called hadaka no tsukiai (naked communion) is said to develop, even between complete strangers.

I'm an onsen virgin, however, and a little nervous at the thought of baring all, even in the interest of social harmony. At my last public thermal spring experience, Iceland's Blue Lagoon, I could wear a cossie. How about that? No, I'm told. A large towel? That's a no, too.

Steeling myself, I abandon all modesty and jump in. I last less than 10 minutes in water hot enough to boil eggs (onsen tamago, or steamed hot spring eggs, are an actual thing) but I emerge slippery, stress-free and happy as a (steamed) clam.

■ kagari-kisshotei.com

and architect Ryue Nishizawa's Teshima Art Museum that I find my ultimate art win. Imagine a white turtleshell with two teardrop apertures to let in sun, wind and air, surrounded by terraced rice paddies and olive groves.

Inside, the vast space is bare. This museum is the art. Silence is enforced: cough, laugh or

take a selfie at your peril. Under my bare feet, water droplets snake and coalesce in random patterns across the concrete floor. I examine them, puzzled. Suddenly a security guard materialises. Careful, she signals. These lines of water are why we are here. I choose a spot and sit cross-legged, hypnotised. After a while, I see tadpoles, sperm, comets, shooting

stars, eels. The silent space is full of barefoot people. One woman falls asleep. Others sit in seiza or lie curled up.

Art in a water droplet? It's a surprisingly moving, transcendental experience, and one that sums up Japan in a nutshell.

Sharon Verghis was a guest of Inside Japan.

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