

Post-tsunami Japan is open for business

LYNDA SKINNER
MISSION BEACH, QLD

FOLLOW THE READER

My relatives pleaded with me not to go to Japan so soon after the devastating earthquake and tsunami on March 11. My friends said I must be crazy. Almost every one I know was against it. "What did the trip co-ordinators think? Surely they wouldn't go ahead if they thought our lives would be in danger."

My husband encouraged me. "It will be the trip of a lifetime," he insisted. As it turned out, of the five groups from around the globe that had completed arrangements for this language study and homestay program, ours was the only group that didn't cancel. Good on ya, Aussies, I say.

On April 17, our group arrived safely and we presented ourselves at the language school. We were about 360km from the radiation no-go zone in Fukushima but some of us had entered via Tokyo and had felt the aftershocks, which caused a small hiccup in our confidence.

The people of Kanazawa gave us the red-carpet treatment. We were nine insignificant men and women representing a country that showed confidence in a nation reeling from a monumental disaster.

On the second day, we were escorted to the prefectural offices where the charismatic Minister for Tourism spoke to us in Japanese, the language we were attempting to study and hadn't yet begun to grasp. But this was no barrier to the emotion his speech evoked as he talked about the terrible plight of the families who had lost everything.

We willingly promised to be tourism advocates and take

home the news that Japan is still open for business. We were each presented with a small gift as a token of appreciation.

As we filed out, the minister shook hands with all of us and thanked us. Our hearts were filled with compassion, our eyes with tears.

We all completed the two-week program, studying Japanese in the mornings and experiencing culture in the afternoons. We lived with Kanazawa families who readily accepted us into their homes and lives; nothing more or less than all the groups that had gone before.

But this little band of unknown Australians managed to take a message of support to a people in need.

We represented the get-up-and-go spirit of our nation, and I am bloody glad we went.



RANT OR RAVE
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{ JOURNEYS: THE SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY }

A fine time on the fly

A fishing adventure can be a bonding experience

HAMISH BROOKS

THE fishing trip to Angler's Rest is starting to lose its lustre. My partner Charlotte and I are having a dispute about the best route to Omeo. We are going up the Hume Highway through Omeo to Angler's Rest (which is what her mum recommended).

We have stopped for a souvlaki and some petrol at Mt Beauty. It's dark, and we have another two hours of driving ahead. The souvlaki skewers look strangely dangerous in our hands, but we decide to eat rather than use them as weapons in a duel.

An hour later it's nearing 11pm and we are driving over Falls Creek. I have my head out the driver's-side window in an attempt to spot the reflectors in the fog. Even though I can't see it, the recently sealed road is miraculously faithfully rising to meet the wheels of the car.

I am conceding Charlotte's mother's directions may have had some merit after all when a large wombat rolls out of the bush like a boulder. I slow down, serve and await an impact that doesn't arrive. With a dexterity for which wombats are not commonly known, this one has slowed its blind charge just in time. Eventually the fog thins and we make it to the camping ground in one piece.

In the morning we share porridge out of the one pot I packed. It is not adequate preparation for two exhausted fly fishers to rectify the trajectory of their holiday, but it has to do. One member of this travelling party has never tried the notoriously difficult art of fly fishing; the other, who fomented the pre-souvlaki tension by declaring he didn't really want to teach her, has done it for 17 years.

The beautiful Middle Creek is the place for Charlotte's first fly fishing lesson. Tumbling out of the hills and bush and wending its way through a cattle farm, the stream looks like a fly fisher's dream. Before long I am quoting Norman McClean's wonderful fishing story *A River Runs Through It*. Charlotte is struggling under a barrage of obscure analogies as I try to explain to her the mechanics of casting. "Power comes not from everywhere, but from knowing when to put it on," I say, quoting from the beginning of the book.



IGOR SAKTOR

Tumbling out of the hills and bush and wending its way through a cattle farm, the stream looks like a fly fisher's dream

"It's like hammering in a nail. The rod works like a catapult, a slingshot. You have to load it up," I continue. "Move the rod between 10 o'clock and two o'clock on a two-beat rhythm."

We move up the stream to a nice deep run overhung with willows. I take the rod from Charlotte and tell her I'll show her again, and then I promptly catch a little rainbow trout. The two-beat rhythm example works for Charlotte and so instruction moves on to knots, flies and where to cast.

Fishing gets under way in earnest and I catch little browns and rainbows on a Parachute Adams as we make our way up the tree-lined stream. I hook into a nice brown in a slow-moving, shaded stretch of water lined with tussocks of grass. An exceptional day's fishing has already been had when Charlotte, trying to dis-

tangle her line from everywhere about her, snaps the tip off the rod I have lent her.

It has been such a lovely day, we glide over this moment like the clear water in Middle Creek glides over sunlight and stone. We return to our camp site of cold beer and leftover spaghetti bolognese from home, cooked in and eaten from our one pot.

We may have packed only one utensil but we have brought three rods, so we can both still fish the next day. We will head to the Bundarra River, which gurgles, drifts and sweeps out of the high country and through farmland. It provides a cold, healthy home for many fish.

The morning is ominously grey but after a few casts, as if our fishing rods possess a power of atmospheric influence, the clouds part and sunlight drains into the valley

for the rest of the day. I catch about 15 little trout, fishing a grasshopper pattern with a gold beaded nymph suspended beneath it. The fishes' healthy, shining flanks are speckled with reds and browns and streaked with gold, silver and pink.

A nice big brown trout takes the nymph late in the afternoon but Charlotte is too far away to hear my cries for a photo. She remains fishless but with a disposition as sunny as the day. We retire to the Blue Duck Inn for one of its famous steaks. While the redness of our faces could be attributed to a day without sunscreen and the swift consumption of beer and wine, the rosy tinge is surely also that of happiness.

The next morning we fish the Mitta Mitta; it cuts a path in the steep valley below the road and the water is fast and loud in the gorge

and competes with the wind for our words. The water and air whirper to each other the secrets of eternity while two mildly baffled humans lie metal, fur and feathers on to line to try to catch creatures that seem to be in the secret.

The times I take Charlotte's rod from her to demonstrate where and how to cast, I catch large browns, one of which changes off downstream, with me stumbling after it. This does not happen before I chivalrously give back the rod to Charlotte to reel it in, but I wrestle it back when I get a fuller sense of the size of the fish.

A bit after midday we sit and have tea by the river before heading back to the car and home to Melbourne. The drive back over Falls Creek is beautiful in the daylight. We are happy and on the boulder-like alpine wombats must be soundly asleep.

{ WHAT IN THE WORLD }

QUEENSLAND'S new-look Hayman (Hayman.com.au) has reopened after five months of "rectification works" in the wake of cyclones Anthony and Yasi; Hayman is to be employed for retaining all its employees during the project, with 250 choosing to stay on to assist with repairs and work with celebrity landscape designer Jamie Durie to revitalise the tropical gardens.

and daily breakfasts • Hyatt Regency Coolangubra on the Queensland Sunshine Coast (coolangubra.hyatt.com) has a two-night BabyMoon Package for parents-to-be from \$380 a night per couple, with breakfast, gift pack from Arambury and choice of two extras, such as a pregnancy massage, meals at two of the resort's restaurants or 18 holes of golf at its PGA Championship course • Prestige Bali Villas (prestigebalivillas.com) has a range of specials, including accommodation discounts, complimentary car and driver for one day, in-villa dinner and massages and one night free for each 12 booked.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

Awash with food and wine and into the spin cycle

Continued from Page 1

here is the estate is set up to demonstrate sustainability and includes gardens with more than 360 varieties of tomatoes (planted in May and ripe from July to September), dahlias (from October to late May) and a garden of medicinal plants.

If you take advantage of forest walks and avid, here can easily fill half a day.

Just east of the Prieure de Saint Jean du Grais, founded in 1127 by the count of Anjou, who later became the king of Jerusalem, and Hugh de Payns, who launched the Knights Templar. As its opening hours are erratic, we have to be content with the view from the outside.

At the end of the day we cycle up a driveway to our hotel, Chateau d'Artigny, which is the prettiest of castles. There's history here, too, but it's recent — it was built in the 20th century.

Again the emphasis is on good food and a note in our room explains the dress code to suit the dramatic gold and aquamarine painted dining room: "Evening dinner is the highlight of the day for which an elegant form of dress would be greatly appreciated by your fellow guests."

We call for an iron and it's more than worth the effort. We eat one of the best meals we have had in France. The Loire menu includes crayfish tails, foie gras with white asparagus, kidneys and aise, and a Loire river fish.

In spring, long French days start at 6am and don't end until 9.30pm. We walk after dinner under a sky lit by a full moon.

We leave Chateau d'Artigny after breakfast and head into the countryside through wide forests and past locals working their fertile and garden allotments.



SUSAN BREDOW

Saumur Chateau is ideally situated for a wide-ranging view of the surrounding countryside

outside Laynes but we choose to visit only Chateau de Langeais, another home of French royalty who lived like nomads, albeit in absolute luxury, travelling from one magnificent edifice to the next. The idea behind this was to make their presence felt throughout the kingdom.

Chateau de Langeais has a very good collection of furniture of the flamboyant gothic style from the 15th to mid-16th century.

We lunch on andouillette (made from pork intestines) and an excellent local white wine. The whites are preferable here and more suited to our palates than the thin and rather sharp reds.

With a few deviations and a return turn after lunch, we arrive at the grand establishment Domaine de Beauvais at about 4.30pm. After a day of riding more than 60km, we are happy to run a bath and lie down, looking at the ancient wood-beamed ceiling.

The hotel is a 16th-century

manor house set in 140ha of gardens and forest. The emphasis is on nature and good food. A menu of escargots, salmon, prawns, pollock and baby pork is no disappointment. We are tired, though, and find the slow-paced fine dining service almost too drawn out.

Our hotels have been selected by the tour organisers for their history, character and dining with emphasis on local produce. We are grateful for the effort we are putting into our pedalling each day, which takes most of the guilt out of the large and irresistible meals each night.

Day four starts with the sound of a bicycle pump being pushed by Sebastian. Today he is to drive us to Chinon about 50 minutes away — where he is to start our ride. This has been arranged so we can spend our last two nights at an ancient priory in Chenetbute, about 15km from Saumur.

It feels a little strange not to be

pedalling, but it gives us a chance to ask our host about things we have seen and want to know more about. We stop to admire Chateau d'Ussé, also known as the Sleeping Beauty castle. The myriad turrets and dormers made it a perfect setting for French writer Charles Perrault's famous fairytale.

On the bikes again, we stop for coffee in the town of Candès St Martin, about 20km out of Chinon. At a table perched on cobblestones in the small town square, we are in the shadow of a 12th-century church, the heads of its many statues knocked off during the French Revolution.

But the highlight of the day is riding through troglodyte caves near Turquant. Many Parisians have done up ancient cave dwellings in the area and use them as weekenders.

Although for much of the day we follow marked bike routes, we see few other cyclists. It's now we realise that we are totally happy



At a table perched on cobblestones, we are in the shadow of a 12th-century church, the heads of its many statues knocked off during the French Revolution

doing this trip self-guided. We don't have to wait for anyone and are free to stop and start at will.

We may be doing it easy by not carrying any gear apart from what we need during the day, but we feel an uncustomary sense of adventure, and we relish it.

Our last two nights are spent at a former Benedictine priory near Saumur. It's a long way up a steep hill (we get off and push) but worth it when we get there for the views over the Loire River and region. There has been no rain here for about six weeks and the river's level has fallen, exposing sandy beaches along the shores.

Over a mesmerising view of the river below there are the traditional dinner offerings of foie gras, served hot and cold, with the bitter flavour of rhubarb against the sweetness of the lamb. There's red mullet and cod, liver and pigeon. By the time we take in three amuses-bouche as well as our entrees, main courses, cheese

and desserts, we are adding more kilocalories to the next day's ride.

We plan to do a lazy 20km on our last day in the Loire but manage to clock up 30km. We set off to Saumur via the top road, which winds through the countryside past farms, until we discover the French national equestrian centre, the Cadre Noir, just above the town. There are training and riding demonstrations here, but check the times of the shows in English before you go, as there are only a couple each day.

We climb more hills than on previous days. It's quite a haul up to the chateau atop Saumur, but well worth the effort for the outlook. The chateau is only partially open; extensive rebuilding works have still not fully repaired damage by bombs in 1940.

There are exhibitions of rare tapestries and a good collection of historical riding tack.

Saumur is a horsey town but we steer clear of the tartare de cheval (steak tartare with horse meat) on the lunch menu at a restaurant in the town square.

We are happy trundling through France on our bicycles and a little disappointed to leave them. After five days of riding in the Loire Valley we have had only a taste, albeit rich, of the French countryside, and as the train pulls out of Saumur for Paris we start planning our next cycling trip. We'll explore Burgundy or Bordeaux, or perhaps Champagne. We'll let you know.

Checklist

Discover France specialises in cycling tours. Trips are of different levels, graded 1-3 depending on the length of each day's ride and the amount of hill climbing. Loire Valley tours start at €495 (\$670) a person, including accommodation with breakfast and dinner for four days and five nights, to the Grand Loire Deluxe Tour at €1695 for seven days and six nights. More: discoverfrance.com. • au.franceguide.com

{ A LITTLE FLIGHT READING }

Holidays (P&O/Edge Crime/Spot Media, \$40)



A Deadly Cambodian Crime Spree (Shamini Flint (Piatkus, \$22.99))



IT'S a fine indication how dining at sea has changed that a cruise line should compile a collection of its best cuisine. P&O Cruises has done just that, assembling 60 recipes, with easy instructions and full-page photographs. It's a lovely way to extend the holiday, imagining oneself back at a floating diner with a sea-salty name like Windjammer or Neptune, tucking into, say, red snapper with mango salsa and a lemon and marzipan tiramisu with toffee sauce, the thought of kilojoules thrown to the ocean breezes. I do feel a twinge of regret, however, that there are not more cocktails in the mix.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

IT'S book four in Shamini Flint's Inspector Singh Investigates series about the portly Singapore detective who likes to get his teeth into difficult cases as well as a good lunch. His superiors are always looking for opportunities to dispatch him out of station and this time he's been offered up to hold a watching brief on behalf of ASEAN at a Cambodian war crimes tribunal. But then a witness is killed and our renegade inspector must leap into action. It's an altogether grittier read than the earlier Singh novels and presents often harrowing insights into the cruel rule of the Khmer Rouge. Singh reminds me of H.R.F. Keating's Bombay detective of the 1960s, Inspector Ghote, who never gave up until soundbites were brought to book.

SUSAN KUROSAWA

HOTEL OF THE WEEK



IN *Travel & Indulgence's* regular online feature, co-contributing editor Christine McCabe presents the Fairmont Pacific Rim in Vancouver. Check the T&I website for the latest hotel, resort and villa developments, with galleries and insider tips. More: theaustralian.com.au/travel.

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