



The fall colours are brilliant – in Japan

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Some ascents on our trail along the Kunisaki Peninsula are tortuous, but the view is spectacular.

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Oh darn. I must have stepped in some dog poop. I haven't seen a dog since arriving in Japan a few days ago, although I heard one barking at the Buddhist temple earlier this morning. The soles of my boots look clean, but the smell is unmistakable.

I'm still scraping my boots on the grass when one of our guides appears and clears up the mystery. When female ginkgo biloba trees shed their seeds in the fall, he tells me, they smell just like dog excrement. Sure enough, the ground at our feet is littered with the distinctive fan-shaped leaves of the ginkgo tree and the seeds that are the source of the foul air around us.

I usually prefer to travel independently, but during my 10-day tour in Japan our local guides prove invaluable, offering insights into the culture, history, geography and, yes, botany. Some places here may be relatively easy for Westerners to navigate on their own, but the Kunisaki Peninsula on the island of Kyushu isn't one of them. Cut off from the rest of the island by a series of mountainous ridges radiating from an extinct volcano, the peninsula is far removed from Japan's top tourist destinations.

About 50,000 people live here, a number that has been dwindling over the decades as young people move to the cities. We see numerous abandoned houses and fields. "The population was double in some of these villages," explains our lead guide, Mario Anton (you know the world is a small place when your born-in-Japan guide is a 6-foot-something fellow whose parents moved to Japan from New York in 1975).

My small group – a few Australians and Americans, a couple of Swedes and three other Canadians – is here with Walk Japan, a company that specializes in hiking expeditions throughout the country. As we meet one another the first day at the train station in Fukuoka, the largest city on Kyushu and starting point of the tour, we all agree that walking is the best way to immerse yourself in a place.

But it's more than that: We're leaf peepers. It's nearing the end of November and here on the most southerly of Japan's four main islands, fall foliage is at its glorious peak, including those stinky ginkgo trees, whose leaves turn a delicious saffron yellow.

And where better to admire the lacy leaves of Japanese maples tinged red, orange and gold than in their mother country? Our route will take us on forested trails, over spectacular ridges and bridges and alongside rice paddies so old that they have been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Soon after a taxi drops us at the trailhead to begin our second day's adventure, we come to a steep slope with chain links bolted to the rock. Mario opens a box filled with white polyester gloves. You're going to need these, he tells us. The gloves sport little rubber dots on the palms, which will give us a better grip on the chains.

We must look ridiculous wearing identical white gloves on a warm fall day, but who's watching? In 10 days of walking, about five to seven hours a day, we come across only a couple of solo hikers and one group of about 20 Japanese who tell us they have come from a town about 400 kilometres

away. Otherwise, we have these mountains to ourselves.

In some places, the ascents are tortuous and we have to pull ourselves up, hand over hand, onto the craggy, windswept ridges. But even rubberized gloves can't help when there's nothing to hang onto. Twice we come to narrow stone bridges that span a yawning gap. There are no handrails.

I'm not scared of heights and have climbed mountains higher than these, but the first bridge defeats me. It's only a couple of metres long, but it's arched, which somehow makes it look riskier. And if I cross once, I must cross twice; this section of trail comes to a dead end at a small shrine just on the other side. I stop, along with half the others in our group, and wait for the braver ones to return.

Blame the Buddhists. According to Mario, these trails date back to the first century, when a religious ascetic named Ninmon is said to have walked these mountains and slept in their caves in pursuit of a simple Buddhist lifestyle. "Some people say he was just a legend," Mario says, adding, "he's not in the historical literature."

For an imaginary person, Ninmon sure left a legacy. His followers created roughly 150 kilometres of challenging trails that lead to a variety of religious sites, from simple wooden shrines to ornate temples, to sprawling complexes with stone pagodas, bamboo gardens, koi ponds and orange *torii* gates.

Combined with the dramatic fall foliage, the effect is otherworldly. "*Torii* means 'in the heavenly realm,'" Mario explains as we walk under the towering gates at Usa Jingu, once a powerful Shinto shrine that these days attracts few visitors.

We learn that Ninmon and his followers also liked to test themselves by standing under cold waterfalls, but we're too soft for that. At the end of each day we can hardly wait to shed our clothes, scrub ourselves clean and slip into the steaming hot *onsen* baths at that night's lodging. Along with my

annual obsession of viewing fall colours, this is one ritual I could get used to.

IF YOU GO

Walk Japan's Kunisaki trek is a fully guided, 10-day tour that includes accommodation in traditional Japanese inns, many with onsen baths and most meals. This year's final tour runs Nov. 19-28. The price, not including airfare to Fukuoka, is 396,000 yen (about \$3,900). walkjapan.com

The writer was a guest of Walk Japan, which did not review or approve this article.

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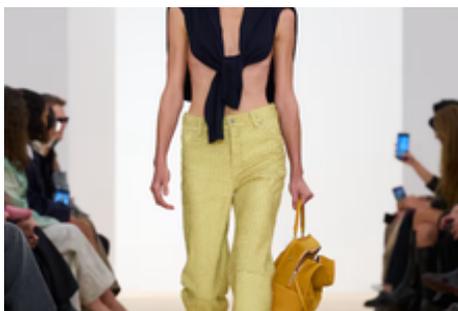
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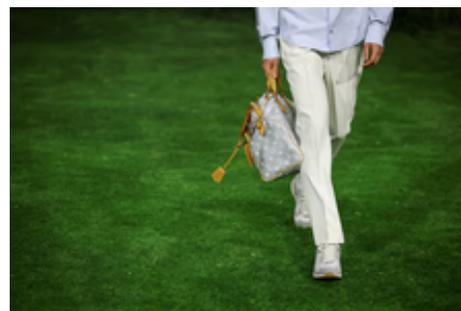
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