



Japan

Into the blue

The secret to longevity in Okinawa's Blue Zone might have something to do with sea grapes, sake and saltwater swims, writes Huw Kingston.



BEST THINGS TO DO IN OKINAWA – SCAN TO WATCH ESCAPE VIDEO.



Nakijin in northwestern Okinawa. Clockwise from below left: Mishiko prepares a feast at Yambaru Hotel Nammei Shinshitsu; paddling a sabani boat; a fig tree near Nakijin Castle; Emiko, owner of Gajimaro Cafe & Bar; the heart of Naha.



Right: A magic dish conjured from seasonal produce at the Asbo Stay Hotel's Alo Edesse restaurant. Below: The ruins of Nakijin Castle.



Ordering coffee at Tokyo's Haneda Airport, I was much relieved when the barista accepted my 1000-yen note. Way back in 2008 I knew I was going to Japan. As a snow addict, I knew the temptation of skiing powder in Hokkaido could not be resisted for long. So, with our currency strong,

I bought \$1000 worth of yen. Numerous planned trips came, but I never went; something always got in the way. Now here I was, 15 years later, hoping my too-long-under-the-mattress notes were still legal tender.

But it was swimmers, not skis, in my luggage as we took off for Naha, the capital of Okinawa. Warm sand, not snow, the expectation in this most southerly Japanese prefecture. Okinawa means "rope in the open sea", a good descriptor for this string of subtropical islands stretching more than 1000km.

We drove straight to the northern end of the main island, to the fabled Blue Zone – one of those global hotspots where age seems not to weary and centenarians are commonplace. As a newly minted Seniors Card holder, might I pick up some tips?

At Nakijin village, the tiny Mijukumono restaurant was the first in a week-long feast of tastebud treasures, freshness abounding in the salads and sashimi, and a first taste of sea grapes, a sort of vegetarian caviar.

The lunch set us up for the stiff climb to the ruins of Nakijin Castle, a centre of the Ryukyu Kingdom that ruled Okinawa for some 450 years. The kingdom paid tribute to Japan and China, but was ruled by neither. Then, in 1879, it was returned to the Japanese emperor. Okinawa retains its own language and an animist religion reflecting a simple respect for nature rather than ornate temples.

Photography: Huw Kingston (except Naha and Nakijin beach)



ESCAPE ROUTE

Numerous airlines fly from Tokyo or Osaka to Naha, the regional capital of Okinawa. September to May is the best time to visit, as June to August is peak rainy season. japan.travel



Adventurer and writer Huw Kingston has capsized, slid, fallen and tripped in some of the most spectacular parts of the world.

Our walk, passing giant figs and tangled vines, was accompanied by a symphony of cicadas, differing from the tunes played by their Australian cousins. As one of the most ancient creatures on Earth, such circadian rhythms seemed apt in the Blue Zone.

After breakfast at our hotel on Khouri Island, it was good to get on the bikes and pedal away some calories. Gentle riding at first, back across to the main island via a 2km bridge, then along the west coast. On cue, a hot sun came out as we began to climb into the hills. And climb. At Gajimaro Cafe & Bar, Emiko along with her daughter Tomiko and daughter-in-law

Yuko, handed out cooling glasses of iced shiikwaasa (a local lemon), before preparing pizzas – an influence more American than Italian. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, the US occupied Okinawa, holding it until 1972. American bases remain with more than 20,000 servicemen and women on the islands. Enjoying cake made with mugwort, a locally grown herb, with shiikwaasa jam, we watched as big black butterflies sucked nectar from bright-orange flowers.

Dropping back to sea level, we rode along the coast to little Jashiki village. "I'm not sure how best to translate this," said our host and guide Risa, by a boulder inscribed with characters. "But, basically, it says the white of the surf brings to shore the white of the semen to create life."

If the Blue Zone might offer long life, it is new life that is missing. Risa told us that there had not been a birth in Jashiki for 20 years. To encourage vitality, culture and economy, Risa's employers, two local sisters, recently created Yambaru Hotel Nammei Shinshitsu, converting traditional houses to comfortable accommodation and offering a range of local experiences.

"Each morning, before breakfast, I dived into the inviting warm sea – an ocean onsen of sorts."

Bookings are limited to 40 per cent of bed nights, ensuring villagers never feel overrun by visitors.

We stayed two nights in Jashiki. On the first, Mishiko came to the house to cook a feast of freshness and, on the second, a haikai-meister – traditional chef – lit the charcoal to present a barbecue of epic proportion. Each morning, before breakfast, I dived into the inviting warm sea – an ocean onsen of sorts.

This was a good lead into more active ocean pursuits. Teppei Hentona hails from a once royal Ryukyu family, but now gets his hands dirty as a shipbuilder. A builder specifically of the sabani, a traditional canoe made of Japanese cedar and held

together with bamboo nails, and seating usually four paddlers and one oarsman. We took off for a couple of hours' paddle, my mind drifting to thoughts of paddling such a craft the length of Okinawa.

On our fourth day we drove back down the island to Kin town and, soon after arriving, we were plunged into darkness. We'd descended 30m into a deep limestone cavern, home to more than 13,000 bottles of awamori, the Okinawan version of sake. There is,

though, a catch if you want to visit the cave. Buy a bottle of awamori for your newborn or new partner, perhaps, and pay for it to be stored for five, 12 or 20 years before cracking it open in celebration.

Jostling for position with the bottles are large tubs of tofu soaking in awamori. We tasted this in Choraku restaurant in Kin town – a tiny cube more than enough, so rich is the taste. The restaurant specialises in taro, a root vegetable harvested locally from December to April.

A canoe tour after lunch had us paddling up the coastal Okukubi River in search of mangroves and migrant birds, many resting up on their own long journeys to or from Australia.

The final night in Okinawa was at the modern Asbo Stay Hotel near Kin. If the food all week had been spectacular, our last dinner at the hotel's Alo Edesse restaurant was a fireworks display of culinary magic by chef Sadayuki Yamanaka, who has spent a dozen years in Michelin-starred restaurants in France. After plucking up the courage to desecrate the artwork on each plate, every mouthful was sublime.

Kin is also home to a US marines base and, for contrast, we headed after dinner to the bar district near the base. We stepped from Japan to France, then straight into America, downing weak beer and line-dancing with young American recruits.

Exercise before a long flight is always beneficial. Fittingly, en route to the airport back at Naha, we stopped for a karate lesson. The Ryukyu Kingdom gave this martial art to the world and an imposing young instructor provided a taste of both the traditions and the moves. My legs went higher and wider than I'd seen them go for years.

Japan, finally we've met. And on an Okinawan visit that offered a perfect introduction to the culture, food and landscape, and a chance to finally offload some musty, hoarded banknotes.

Huw Kingston travelled as a guest of the Japan National Tourism Organization.