

Cruise Itinerary

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Ten destinations in ten days sounds like a traveller's nightmare, doesn't it? But when you visit them on a cruise like this, it's a dream, says VERNE MAREE.

Japan's hidden Treasures

Though big enough for only about 120 passengers, the *Spirit of Oceanus* is the biggest and most luxurious of American company Cruise West's fleet of small ships. The beauty of their relative smallness is that they can dock at more out-of-the-way places, mainland ports, and islands that the big ships cannot access.

Itinerary

Tokyo is not on the itinerary. But, according to my colleague Michael Riches, that's probably a good thing, as it would be a waste to spend only a day or two in that city. "Go back and spend ten days there," is his advice.

I gather from articles by our cruise-guru freelance writer Heidi Sarna that the majority of cruises do *not* include land-tours. She finds these often expensive, and generally chooses to make her own arrangements for sightseeing. This cruise was different – each day was a full day of sightseeing, all of which, including lunches, was covered in the price of the cruise.

The itinerary gets a big thumbs-up. It's a wonderful mix of both mainstream and eclectic sites, with museums, temples and shrines nicely leavened with opportunities for shopping and hanging out on your own. The whole caboodle was efficiently





managed by Meriwether, who gave daily briefings and ensured a smooth flow of the complex logistics. Her young sidekick Kate, once an exchange student to Japan, gave a tea ceremony demonstration, origami lessons, and talks on local etiquette and customs based on her experience of living in the country. With ninety potentially difficult passengers to please, the unflagging enthusiasm and cheerfulness of this pair was a marvel.

Apart from the ten highlights covered later in this article, we

saw so much more: a green tea factory in Kagoshima; a museum commemorating the 1,036 mostly young kamikaze pilots who met their deaths in the dying days of the Second World War; a Buddhist temple famous for its eccentric monk with a passion for flying squirrels and a penchant for inventions; Okayama's Kurashiki district, where canal-side rice storehouses from the Shogunate-controlled Edo Period have been converted into cafés, shops and museums, including Ohara Museum, whose amazing

collection boasts a clutch of French Impressionists and its pride and joy: an *Annunciation* by El Greco.

On the morning of the seventh day, we awoke in the South Korean port of Ulsan. In nearby Gyeongju, we were treated to a Korean wet market bursting with a thousand varieties of *kimchi* and the biggest, reddest octopuses I've seen. Boisterous schoolchildren thronged the World Heritage site Bulguksa Temple, and the fascinating excavated 8th century tomb in Tumuli Park, all disarmingly eager to practise their English on us. And lunch was the traditional *bulgogi*, beef marinated in soy sauce, sesame oil and garlic, cooked on a tabletop griddle with vegetables, and eaten wrapped in lettuce and sesame leaves. Mouthwatering.

Education

Three buses were provided each day for the 90 passengers, led by a tour guide from the Japan Tourism Board. They travelled with us throughout the trip – except to South Korea, where local guides were provided.

Issued at the start of the cruise with little radio receivers with earphones, at each site – park, museum, temple or whatever – we could wander around but still hear our guide's detailed commentary without having to cluster around him or her. What a godsend!

This page, from left: Tea plantation in Kagoshima; Wet market scene in Gyeongju, South Korea; Colourful South Korean temple – so different from the more restrained Japanese ones

Opposite page, from top: Kikuya Residence, Hagi; Kurashiki canal scene; Hagi pottery; Yakushima Island

Impressions

Vending machines: There is said to be a vending machine for every twenty Japanese people. Our favourite was one that ground, brewed and served a dozen varieties of coffee while displaying a video of the process to keep you entertained.



Washlets: Toilets that pamper your bits with heated seats, botty-sprays and “women” sprinkles, fan-dry them, vacuum out any smelly air, and – for the über-shy – even make a flushing sound to camouflage the tinkling of your wee.

Baths: Apart from the most high-tech Toto washlet imaginable, our Osaka hotel (the Crown) boasted a superb modern Japanese bathroom. You perch on a low stool in a scrubbing and rinsing area, first getting clean before you soak yourself up to the neck in hot water in the adjacent big, deep bath.



Apart from the comprehensive information provided by our guides, no effort was spared to immerse us in Japanese culture. Onboard historian Gerry Jordan – a delightful Englishman with an affinity for Asian and particularly Southeast Asian history, he spent a number of years in Singapore teaching history at NUS – gave a series of fascinating and insightful lectures in the lounge.

Food and Service

Breakfast, dinner and some lunches were served onboard, either in the lovely dining room or more casually at the outdoor bistro on the fifth deck (except dinner). Sometimes we had lunch on shore. One day we had a version of a *kaiseki* meal at a *ryokan* (upmarket guesthouse), on another a traditional Korean beef barbecue, and on our last day, take-away *udon* soup slurped on the wharfside; but the culinary highlight for us was a tiny sushi bar we winkled out for ourselves just off the Motomachi shopping arcade in Kobe.

I was amazed by the adventurous palates of our fellow passengers, mainly Americans in their sixties and seventies. The same generation of British passengers would be a different kettle of fish. Seating wasn't pre-allocated, so we got to meet many of the guests during the course of the trip – generally a delightful, well-educated and well-travelled bunch of people.

The ship's food was varied and plentiful, breakfast being full American and the other meals offering a choice of two appetisers, soups and salads, four main courses and a couple of desserts. And the service was efficient, warm and friendly.

Facilities

Described as all-suite accommodation, the cabins on this ship are all of a good size. We were charmed with the little balcony off our fifth-deck cabin; being able to open doors and step outside made all the difference. And a walk-in wardrobe and nifty little drawers throughout mean plenty of room to stow your stuff away.

We thought the website reference to a library of VHS videos was evidence that the site hadn't been updated for years, but no – there they were. Another area for improvement is the ship's ineffective internet system. Apart from temporary security issues that disallowed internet access while in port, the service, when it did operate, cost US\$25 an hour and was feeble at best.

The absence of a swimming pool wasn't an issue in the sometimes chilly spring weather, and as far as I know, the hot tub on the bistro deck went unused. But with a busy schedule of daily tours, briefings and – of course – eating too much, it wasn't that kind of cruise anyway.

Getting There

Singapore Airlines flies to Osaka daily at 1.10am and arrives at 8.40am. Japan Airlines also has daily flights, departing at 11pm and arriving at 6.25am. The flight time is 6 hours, and Japan is one hour ahead of Singapore. Cruise West's (www.cruisewest.com) agent met us at Kansai Airport and saw us onto a minibus for the hour-long hotel shuttle service to Kobe, where we spent the first night at the five-star Hotel Okura before hooking up with the tour group in the morning. www.cruisewest.com

TOP 10 Treasures

Most of us don't want to spend all our time in Japan visiting museums, temples, shrines, and gardens, however instructional or beautiful they may be. What we want is a bit of the best of everything that this fascinating culture has to offer. That's what Cruise West gives you, and here are our top ten experiences.

1 Himeji Castle, Kobe

Known as the White Egret for its colour and shape, this UNESCO World Heritage site is the best example of medieval castle architecture in the country, according to *Frommer's Japan*. From its 1333 beginnings as a fort, Himeji Castle was developed by 1618 into the magnificent structure it is today. You can climb the main tower or donjon's steep and slippery stairs to marvel at its massive beams and amazing construction, and to enjoy the view from the top. In late spring, some of the 1,000 cherry trees were still in bloom – particularly the double-blossom variety, which blooms about a week later than most others. Roy visited Himeji in the late sixties, soon after the donjon was dismantled, reconstructed and opened to the public for the first time. Since our visit, Himeji has been closed until 2014 for another round of restoration.



2 Korakura Garden, Okayama

Voted one of Japan's top three landscaped gardens – the other two being in Mito and Kanazawa – Korakura is virtually unchanged since it was laid out in 1700 for the pleasure of a feudal lord, or *daimyo*. Formally meandering paths take you through 11 hectares of pine, cherry and plum trees, azaleas, hydrangeas and bamboo groves, prettily dotted with tea houses and other recreational buildings beside picturesque ponds, rivers and streams. Unlike most Japanese gardens, it has large expanses of lawn.



3 Doi Pearl Farm, Uwajima

Famed for the pearls it farms, Uwajima on the west coast of Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands, is a delight. As the *Spirit of Oceanus* docked, we were welcomed by an energetic performance by a group of traditional drummers aged between 70-something and 90-something. (This place is not far from Okinawa, famous for having the world's highest number of centenarians for its population.)

The orange orchards and rice paddies that lined the road to the Doi Pearl Farm and Gallery gave way to a vista of blue sea dotted with the buoys from which oysters in nets are strung for between one and three years. Watching women workers painstakingly seed one oyster at a time with a tiny nucleus made from ground river-mussel shell, then witnessing the opening of a series of mature shells to reveal the perfect jewel within each one, was a revelation. There was no option but to treat my credit card to a string of what the brochure says are "the most beautiful pearls in Japan". And earrings to match.



4 Ibusiki Onsen, Kagoshima

One of Kyushu Island's top spas, Ibusiki, at its southernmost tip, is famous for its black volcanic sand that is naturally heated by subterranean hot springs. Our *onsen* experience at Hakusaiken Ryokan was splendid.

After a delicious *kaiseki* lunch at the *ryokan*, the fun began. Wrapped for modesty in cotton *yukata* (gowns), we lay down in rows on the warm sand, and busy attendants shovelled the hot stuff over us to bury us up to the neck. The process is extolled for its health benefits, and I could have stayed *much* longer than the recommended 15 or 20 minutes. But the *onsen* itself was calling. Divided into women's and men's sections, it's where you abandon all modesty, strip off completely, scrub, shampoo and rinse yourself clean, and then lie around stark naked in a series of hot and hotter pools, both indoors and outdoors.



5 Yakusugi Land, Yakushima Island

The average tourist to Japan does not get to Yakushima Island off the southern tip of Shikoku, which is one of the four main Japanese islands.



Yakushima Island is made special by its range of micro-climates, representing every climate found in the country from the bitter snow of Hokkaido in the north to the subtropical balminess of Okinawa Island in the south. It's also famous for its phenomenally high rainfall: it's said to rain for 35 days a month. (This is not a typo.)

Yakusugi Land is Japan's first Natural World Heritage Site, and is most famous for its ancient cedars. From the stumps of trees cut down during the feudal Edo Period (16th to 19th centuries) grow second-generation cedars, often three at a time, which are now huge trees in their own right. You can do anything from a 30-minute walk to a 150-minute walk through this moss-covered wonderland and gasp at venerable living monuments that have been growing for an almost unimaginable 3,000 years.



6 Peace Museum, Hiroshima

Like its counterpart in Nagasaki, this outstanding museum records in chilling detail the destruction of Hiroshima in 1945 when the first atomic bomb was exploded over the city, but does not shy away from Japan's history of militant imperialism, including the forced labour imposed on thousands of Chinese and Koreans. In fact, an estimated 20,000 Korean forced labourers in Hiroshima died on that dreadful day.

Excellent descriptions in English are available throughout the museum, which shows what Hiroshima was like before the bombing, why Hiroshima was selected as the bombsite, and the horrific effects of the atrocity perpetrated upon the city and its people that continue to this day. Equally, it illuminates the current threat posed by nuclear proliferation and calls for a ban on nuclear arms. Unavoidably distressing and deeply sobering, this museum and the adjacent Peace Memorial Park are nevertheless a must.



7 Itsukushima Shrine, Miyajima Island

Miyajima Island, a popular tourist destination for the Japanese, is a short ferry-ride from Hiroshima, but we anchored off it and went ashore on the ship's own Zodiacs. It was chilly and raining, but not hard enough to dampen the adventure.

Apart from its plethora of shopping, snacking and dining opportunities in quaint traditional streets – oysters and conger eels are specialties here – the island is famous for its tame deer. But its main attraction is the exquisitely sprawling Itsukushima Shinto shrine and its “floating” torii gate; built out in the water, the gate seems at high tide to be floating. Characterised by the brilliant vermilion paint used throughout, and covered walkways across rippling stretches of water, this shrine is a thing of beauty. And we witnessed a *bugaku* performance for the Shinto deities, a celebratory dance based on a legend that goes back to AD 550.

8 Toko-ji Temple, Hagi



Not many foreign tourists get to Hagi, near the western tip of Honshu Island. Toko-ji Temple was one of the feudal temples of the Mori feudal clan and was founded by an Obaku Zen priest in 1691. The main feature of this site is an impressive cemetery for

the first, third, fifth, seventh and ninth shoguns of the clan. Even with a bunch of Western tourists in it, this moss-covered resting place had a wonderfully serene and atmospheric feeling, an amazing sense of place.

We also visited Hagi's charming old quarter, where you can wander peaceful streets in leisurely fashion, stopping to have a look at some of the numerous feudal-era houses that are now museums. Be sure to try the ice cream flavoured with the summer oranges for which Hagi is famous.

Hagi is also famous for ceramics. At Nosoka-san's pottery kiln, where Hagi *yaki* has been made since feudal times, I miscounted the zeroes (it's *so* easy to do that!) and blew the already-blown budget on two modest mugs.

9 Shikoko-mura Traditional Village, Takamatsu

This so-called "open air museum" on the slopes of a hill on the outskirts of Takamatsu comprises a reconstructed village featuring traditional rural houses and farm buildings.

Most memorable were: a circular building housing a sugar-cane press, once powered by an unfortunate and presumably very dizzy ox; a farmers' *kabuki* theatre, where we were lucky enough to see a dramatic rehearsal under way; a tea hall, nothing more than a small pavilion used for tea ceremonies and for lovers' trysts; a lighthouse designed by a British engineer, and two lighthouse-keepers' houses; and an extensive bathhouse. A few hundred years ago, when its Japanese farmer owner was soaking squeaky-clean in near-scalding water up to the ears every day, his stinky Western counterpart would no more have thought of building a bathhouse than flying to the moon.

Near the exit, we had coffee at the exquisite "Western-style" Wasa Down Ijinkan Tearoom, complete with gorgeous spring flower-boxes and a red British phone-box.



10 Dotomburi, Osaka

As I'd never visited a major Japanese city, we tacked a night in Osaka – the third-biggest metropolis after Tokyo and Yokohama, and only a half-hour away from the port of Kobe – onto the end of our cruise.

The Cross Hotel was the perfect choice, near vibey Dotomburi's warren of shopping arcades and narrow lanes. The area is full of urban delights, from gorgeously funky J-Pop wannabes with monstrously bouffant dyed hairdos (men *and* women), drainpipes, Doc Martens, miniscule skirts and perilous heels, to after-office drinkers, whose only claim to sobriety is their dark suits.

Lunch was a feast of various tempura, boiled octopus, *chawanmushi* (egg custard) and utterly delicious steamed baby conger eel in a friendly restaurant on the pedestrianised Dotomburi Street. Dinner was more difficult, as we wandered into a clubby area with sharp-looking bouncers and hostess-bars. After a *chuhai* (the potato, rice or barley-based whisky known as *shoju* with soda and lime) at a Korean-style bar, we ended up by mistake at a Thai joint. Being too hungry to search further, we stayed – and like everything else in Japan, it was good. **So good.** 🍷

