

Green

Islands



The Yaeyamas' surprisingly sweet surf. OPPOSITE: Hibiscus in bloom on Ishigaki island.



YUSUKE OKADA/AMANN IMAGES/ORBIS, OPPOSITE: NAOKA KIMOTO

SUBTROPICAL CLIMES...
SUBLIME SURF...
TRADITIONAL MATRIARCHY?
IT MIGHT NOT SOUND LIKE JAPAN, BUT THE CORAL- AND CULTURE-RICH YAEYAMA ISLANDS ARE THE COUNTRY'S TERRA INCOGNITA. **ADAM H. GRAHAM** HEADS SOUTH TO GORGE ON TACO RICE AND SWIM IN A SEA OF STARS.



I'm in a deep, leaf-shaped pool under a black sky twinkling with an infinity of stars. A young Japanese woman is whirling me around the water on foam pool noodles while I fix my gaze to the sky. The adults-only treatment is called the Tinnu Floating Experience and it's supposed to relax me and connect me with the constellation. It's late. I already ate dinner and threw back a few glasses of *awamori*, a potent Okinawan *shochu* made with long-grain rice. As I spin in the warm water, my sense of depth becomes distorted and suddenly it feels like I've been catapulted into space. There are no recognizable terrestrial sights in my periphery and each star seems graspable.

This lack of grounding is a bit ironic considering I'm actually in an earthly paradise, one of the lushest places in Japan. The breezy island of

Taketomi is one of the Yaeyama Islands, the southernmost chain of the Ryukyu Archipelago in Okinawa Prefecture. These off-the-radar subtropical islands are considered Japan's most remote, though they're a mere 100 kilometers east of Taipei. A nature lover's paradise, they've increasingly become a second home to Japan's urban dropouts who seek a greener and slower lifestyle. But they're also Japan's oldest occupied islands with a human history dating back to the Paleolithic era. Eleven of the 32 islands are inhabited, and one—Sotobanari—is home only to a naked 80-year-old Japanese hermit. This is Japan's Hawaii and it's a stark contrast to the rest of the country.

I'd already been in Japan for my husband Ralph's sabbatical and after two months of heavy



Glass-bottomed boats in Kabira Bay. FROM TOP LEFT: An Ishigaki local; a *shisa* guards against evil on a *kawara*-tiled roof on Taketomi Island.



FROM TOP: LEFT: PIERRE ADEN/VEEEM/GETTY IMAGES; JTB PHOTO/GETTY IMAGES; B.S.P./CORBIS

drinking, eating and shopping in Tokyo, we needed a sunny break. So we booked a budget flight to the Yaeyamas for a tranquil two-week stay and planned on doing absolutely nothing. But we were surprised at just how much there was to do when we started reading about it. We found blog posts about surfing, hiking, birding and snorkeling. There were secret beaches, sacred promontories, coral reefs—of which some were double-barrier and eight were newly discovered in 2014 on the deep-ocean floor off Nagura Bay, leading the islands to apply for UNESCO inscription. There

was the archeological wonder of Shiraho Saonetabaru Cave, site of 24,000-year-old human bones, four millennia older than remains previously thought to be Japan's oldest. There was even a small city for rainy days. When we told our friends back home in Switzerland we were Yaeyama-bound they shrugged; they'd never heard of it. But when we told our Japanese friends, smiles and looks of envy washed across their faces, so we knew we were onto something.

Getting to the islands is easy. A three-hour flight from Osaka brought us directly to Ishigaki, the main island and airport. From the plane, I felt the sun getting stronger as we neared the equator. We spent the first two nights unwinding on tiny, flat Taketomi, reached by a 10-minute ferry from Ishigaki's port.

The five-square-kilometer island is home to 323 residents who've made it a model of cultural sustainability by adhering to ancient traditions and strict development rules. One example is the Hoshinoya Okinawa resort, where we planned to pamper ourselves for two nights before heading to neighboring Ishigaki. Hoshinoya's 48 guest pavilions huddle around a 6.5-hectare lot meant to replicate an ancient Okinawan village. The villas are surrounded by *gukkus*, pockmarked coral walls enclosing a private garden, while on the red-tiled rooftops perch Okinawan deities called *shisa*, said to ward off evil. After settling in, I shuffled across the room's soft



FROM LEFT: NADYA KIMOTO; TSUNEO YAMASHITA/GETTY IMAGES; UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES



Taketomi is the birthplace of Okinawa, and these *on* (or *utaki* in the regional parlance), sacred forest temples marked with torii gates, are where *onarigami* gods are worshipped. Tourists are explicitly forbidden from entering them, but even if we were local, we'd be barred for being men. *Onarigami* is Japan's only matriarchal culture and it's still respected and adhered to today by the island's residents.

The next day we took the ferry back to Ishigaki Port, which is everything

Taketomi isn't—busy, populated, overdeveloped and in some parts downright dodgy. Fortunately the rest of Ishigaki—35 kilometers long and 18 kilometers wide—is gloriously empty and the emerald, mountainous island sprawls northward, offering endless terrain to lose yourself in including weathered beachheads, swaths of jungle, and clustered groves of Yaeyama palms, a fern-like endemic palm tree creeping up the sides of Ishigaki's lush mountains.

Most tourists stay in the city, which—though it does boast some upscale shopping boutiques like Mahina Mele—is a shame since Ishigaki's best parts are on the outer fringes. Getting a rental car is a must. We picked one up at Paradise Rent-A-Car and headed to Beach Village Nosoko to settle in and exhale. It's 30 minutes away on the island's remote northwestern

coast accessed by going through the Omotodake Tunnel that cuts through a lush swath of jungle and marked with a roaring *shisa* deity and, in our eyes, a threshold to a rarefied world.

The pink four-room hotel had a view of both the ocean and the lumpy green Mount Nosoko. It's connected to the beach—which we could see, hear and smell from our deck—by a two-minute foot path, where we often walked early mornings and evenings. The young Tokyo-transplant owners, Nobu and Naoko Amano, were laid-back but attentive and kind. When it rained one afternoon, they moved our hang-drying clothes inside. For an extra ¥500, they bought us a pre-lit charcoal grill to cook on. Best of all, they had a pet goat.

The next 10 blissful days were filled with easy-going excursions around the island. At Ibaruma Sabichi, we trudged through beachfront caves dripping with salty stalactites and encountered Buddhist shell shrines watched over by ruddy kingfishers, bright crimson birds perched on Sakishima-*suou* trees. In Banna Park at the island's center, we spotted more birds like the endemic Ryukyu minivet and flycatcher.

Extraordinarily colored flowers and butterflies with long polka-dotted tails, cobweb-like wings, and candy-red dragonflies with bulging red eyes reminded us we were in another world. We snorkeled the reef just offshore at Yonehara Beach, which teemed with

tatami mat floors to slide open the front and back windows and let the warm breeze blow through. “You don't get this in Tokyo,” I said to Ralph above the buzzy hum of cicadas. The immediate serenity that Taketomi brought was almost unnerving.

Hoshinoya's activities emphasize local culture and include live music in the Yuntaku Lounge, grass-toy making, deep breathing full moon exercises, and a spa using indigenous ingredients like *mozuku* seaweed and *getto*, an Okinawan healing herb. For dinner, we feasted on clam flan and Japanese beef tartare at the restaurant's outdoor patio then listened to the plucky *sanshin* music being played against the island's wind. I could feel myself decompressing and slipping into island time.

We used the hotel's complimentary bikes to tour the island, rolling down bumpy crushed-

coral lanes past a *gukku* overflowing with purple bouganvillea and hibiscus. On Kaiji Beach, we discovered *hoshizuna*, star-shaped grains of sand said to be the exoskeleton remains of marine protozoa—though ancient folklore says they're the children of stars eaten by sea serpents. At Yarabo, a wooden shack nestled under the shade of *kyangi* and screw-pine trees, we slurped the famed Yaeyama *soki soba*, wheat noodles topped with pork ribs stewed in *awamori* and local brown sugar. And we visited Yuga-fukan, an informative cultural museum of Ryukyu history filled with handwoven relics and giant clamshells resembling local *sfogliatella* pastry.

“Taketomi may not have convenience stores, but we have Muyama, the six important *on*,” the museum's director said. Locals believe that



Sandy villages with coral walls epitomize Taketomi. TOP, FROM LEFT: Line 'em up to surf 'em down; in awe of the clear waters and sunny skies.

marine life. We discovered secret beaches, roadside ice-cream trucks, and tucked-away smoothie shops frequented by local surfers like Café Bons-Bois marked with a surfboard sign at Urasoko Bay. We hiked up Mount Nosoko, and visited the Uganzaki Lighthouse, a sacred oceanfront promontory especially popular with surfers in the winter months that was abloom for us with fragrant Easter lilies. Locals say it's where the gods first descended to Earth. The longer we stayed on Ishigaki, the bigger it felt.

At the lovely Nei Art Museum we admired the breezy, vivid tropical landscape paintings and befriended the painter's widower Yougo Katori who invited us for tea and spent an hour telling us all about the local art. "It's not easy to capture the spirit of a place," he said in his studio. "But Nei understood what a gentle island Ishigaki is."

Ishigaki grows coffee beans, soy, sugarcane and pineapple, which feature prominently in local dishes. We felt fully nurtured by the big warm bowls of fresh tofu at the red-tin shed and scattering of picnic tables that make up Tofu no Higa. We also discovered another kind of comfort food in taco rice, a delicious hybrid that's exactly what it sounds like, supposedly invented by a Japanese chef on a U.S. military base in Okinawa who was trying to cook classic Americana for homesick servicemen, but didn't have access to corn tortilla shells. For Americans like me who grew up eating tacos once a week at the school cafeteria, the dish is somehow Proustian, in spite of its double bastardization. A version of it at Re:Hellow Beach, a vegetarian-friendly deck restaurant on Maezato Beach, also beloved by surfers for its summer swells, was especially

We feasted on clam flan and beef tartare, to plucky sanshin music played against the island's wind

FROM LEFT: NAOYA KIMOTO; PIERRE ADEN/EVERETT/GETTY IMAGES; NAOYA KIMOTO

good and topped with toothsome slices of *goya*, Okinawa's bitter melon.

There's a staggering variety of seafood and seaweed on Ishigaki too, but the island is most known for its meat. *Moromi* pork comes from pigs fed *awamori*, high in citric acid, which tenderizes the fat. Ishigaki beef comes from local cattle that graze on grass rich in ocean minerals and feed flecked with coral calcium. You can try the meats in chewy wheat-soba-noodle stews like beefy *gyu soba* and do as the locals do and sprinkle them generously with *piyashi*, a regional

peppercorn, and *koreigusu*, the spicy bottled sauce of red chili peppers marinating in *awamori* seen on virtually every table on the island. But in my opinion, the best Ishigaki beef dish is at Mengate, a ramshackle wood restaurant where sukiyaki with Ishigaki beef is served in a western-style cast iron skillet with enoki mushrooms, homegrown tofu and leeks.

Desserts are not to be skipped, especially if you like ice cream. Yukisio is known for its soft-serve and variety of flavored salts to sprinkle on it. There, I chose plain milk ice cream with hibiscus salt, but sought out more unusual flavors at Miru Miru, a hillside café overlooking the bay and serving scoops of purple yam, island banana, salt and brown sugar.

We went to a different restaurant every day and still felt like we hadn't seen it all.

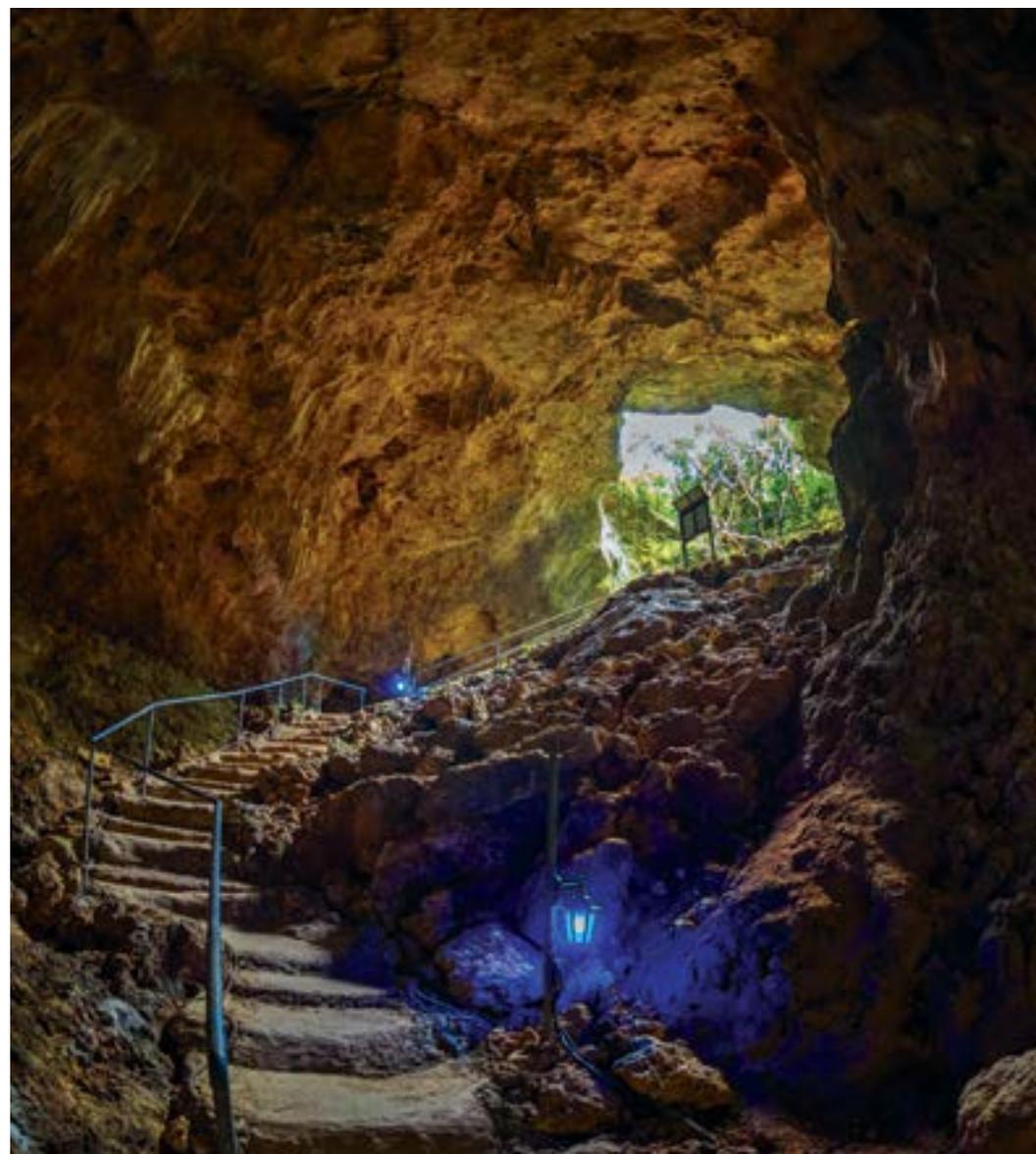
But our best moments were spent at Nosoko Beach. During sunrises, we walked through the shallow clear water on the vacant beach strewn with

Uganzaki Lighthouse. FROM FAR LEFT: Get your fill of chewy wheat soba noodles; underground adventures.



coconut husks and seashells. After a rainstorm, we jogged past the earthy banana trees encircling Mount Nosoko. We seared Ishigaki beef on our grill while cracking open cans of Orion beer and sitting in the dark stillness listening to the hoots of the Ryukyu

scops owls, noting the occasional neon-blue firefly flit past. This kind of unplugging is not an easy find in Japan, a country where it's rare to feel alone. While there was no heated pool to spin around in, the night sky was especially black and vivid. It was just us and the trillion stars above. ☺



THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Peach (flypeach.com), **Japan Transocean Air** (jal.com) and **ANA** (ana.co.jp) fly to Ishigaki Airport from Tokyo, Osaka, and Okinawa's Miyako Island and capital Naha, while **China Airlines** (china-airlines.com) started regular flights from Taipei last year.

HOTELS

Hoshinoya Okinawa Taketomi, Taketomi-cho,

Yaeyama-gun; 81-50/3786-0066; hoshinoyataketomijima.com; doubles from ¥90,000.

Beach Village Nosoko 1048-10 Nosoko, Ishigaki-shi; 81-980/89-2181; www5.plata.or.jp/bvn; doubles from ¥12,340.

RESTAURANTS

Yarabo 107 Taketomi, Taketomi-cho, Yaeyama-gun; 81-980/85-2268; *soba*

bowls ¥700-¥1,100. **Mengate** 10-19 Misaki-cho, Ishigaki-shi; 81-980/82-8065; Yaeyama *soba* ¥600.

Tofu no Higa 570 Aza-Ishigaki, Ishigaki-shi; 81-980/82-4806; *yushi-tofu* dishes ¥350-¥650.

Re:Hellow Beach 192-2 Maezato, Ishigaki-shi; 81-980/87-0865; rehellow.com; *meal for two* ¥3,000.

Miru Miru 1583-74 Shinkawa, Ishigaki-shi;

81-980/87-0885; mirumiru-honpo.com; *gelato* ¥320.

Café Bons-Bois 148-311 Fukai, Ishigaki-shi; 81-980/88-2838; *meal for two* from ¥1,500.

MUSEUMS

Nei Art Museum 1585-105 Shinkawa-tomisaki, Ishigaki-shi; 81-980/83-6303; nei-museum.net.