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by Adam H. Graham — photographs by Gentl and Hyers

Home to a giant complex of Shinto shrines that inspired none other than the poet Bashō, and an ancient tradition of amulet-wearing female divers, the Ise-Shima Peninsula is a portal into Old Japan.



To

Be

honest,

I was getting tired of lobster. My husband, Ralph, and I had been in Mie Prefecture's Ise-Shima Peninsula—otherwise known as Japanese Lobster Country—for three nights already and had eaten every conceivable incarnation of the crustacean. Don't get me wrong. The lobster around these parts, about four hours south of Tokyo by train on Honshu's Pacific coast and host to 2016's G7 summit, is absolutely delicious and more of a seasonal dish than a luxurious one. Skeptics argue that the clawless, spiny *Ise-ebi* variety is inferior to Maine lobster, but I found it every bit as tender. The region, after all, has been an official source of seafood for Japan's imperial family since the fifth century, so who were we to judge? We'd just tried it in so many forms: sashimi, sushi, sautéed, cooked alive on a grill, even lobster ice cream (after seeing a gaggle of Japanese teenagers in plaid skirts giggling and licking soft-serve cones, how could we not?).

In the city of Ise's shopping area, packed with low-slung food and souvenir stalls, we picked up lobster every which way, but also bags of pearl salt, jars of seaweed jelly, and sealed packets of marbled Matsusaka beef, more tender than Kobe. Ralph and I had similarly grazed our way through food arcades in other cities during previous trips to Japan, including a recent two-month stay for Ralph's sabbatical from his architecture firm in Switzerland, where we live. During those visits, I observed that there are typically two types of foreign travelers in Japan: those drawn to the wacky, like sake KitKats and French-maid cafés; and those who see past its neon glare and recognize the elegance of the everyday—the Shinto-shrine aesthetics and respectful customs.

Ise-Shima is a place that will appeal to the latter. Like lobster soft serve, the stub-shaped peninsula is not for everyone and is not ideal for first-time Japan travelers. When I first read about its bounty of lobster and mysterious amulet-wearing ama divers—female seabed foragers who plunge the coastline's depths for urchin and abalone—I imagined a rugged Japanese Maine, a sort of Down East. But in reality, Ise-Shima, or just Shima for short, is more like the Chesapeake Bay—defined by a sprawling, sedentary network of deep inlets that fan out from Ago Bay like veins of a leaf. It's an elusive



© PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: A DIVER OFF MIKIMOTO PEARL ISLAND; PEARLS IN THE MIKIMOTO PEARL MUSEUM. THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: SORTING NETS; DIVER RYOKO KOYAMA; DIVER REIKO NOMURA; DIVER SHIGEMI OGAWA.



destination that is neither dramatically rocky nor lined with white beaches. One could drive past it and think it totally ordinary, maybe even boring.

In some ways, the entire Mie Prefecture is everything Tokyo and Kyoto are not. It's located within the culturally rich Kansai region but short on international tourists, UNESCO-inscribed temples, and Daimaru and Takashimaya *depato* that many associate with Japan. Even the *shinkansen*, Japan's famed bullet train, doesn't come here. What the prefecture does have is water. Mie's coastline stretches for 680 miles, encompassing calm interior bays, the rowdy Pacific, and 29 inlet-slucied municipalities, including Toba, Shima, and Ise, where most visitors stay. According to the Japanese, Mie best represents Japan's coexistence between human and nature. Fittingly, then, the prefecture is also the birthplace of Matsuo Bashō, the beloved 17th-century poet and traveler who helped popularize haiku. His famous frog haiku, translated into dozens of languages, captures the subtlety of the watery region:

*The old pond;
A frog jumps in—
The sound of the water.*

DURING THE LONG Edo period (1603–1868), foreigners were barred from traveling to Japan. Domestic Japanese could only travel within the country under the guise of making pilgrimages. Ise Jingū—Japan's most sacred shrine complex, dating back to the third century and considered the spiritual home of Shinto cosmology—was the most popular pilgrimage by far. So venerated was the shrine that the Japanese believed everyone should visit once in their lifetime.

To reach this mecca, we left the bustling shopping district and walked over the Ujibashi bridge marked by two unpainted *torii*, gates believed to separate the daily world from the sacred realm. Once we crossed the river, we followed the pebble path to the Isuzugawa riverbank, where we joined pilgrims and other tourists making ablutions by washing our hands and mouths in the cold, clear water. Then we passed under lanky cedar and pine trees and traced the flowing white and azure robes of priests as they disappeared between creaking jade-green bamboo stalks.

At first glance, Ise Jingū resembles any other Shinto site, but it's actually the size of Paris and home to 125 different shrines, mossy walls, and courtyards within courtyards within courtyards, each more sacred than the last. Its unadorned grand shrine, Kotai Jingū, is made entirely of Japanese cypress using no metal nails or screws, in a unique style. It's rebuilt every 20 years in accordance with Shinto practice and was last rebuilt in 2013, its 62nd iteration. So subtle and plain is the shrine that the 19th-century Japanologist B. H. Chamberlain wrote, "There is nothing to see, and they won't let you see it."

Many modern visitors echo the sentiment. But seeing beyond the nothingness is the great challenge of a visit, made easier for me by traveling with a Swiss architect who has an eye for construction, corners, and all the "nothings" that I might otherwise

OPPOSITE: THE KAGURA-DEN, OR SACRED DANCE HALL, AT THE ISE JINGŪ SHRINE. BELOW: GARDENS AT ISE JINGŪ.



Map by Peter Oumanski



© KIMIYO HAYASHI'S HAUL AT HER AGO BAY AMA HUT.

overlook. The most artful design, Ralph frequently reminded me, is not something one should notice.

Amaterasu-Omikami, the sun goddess, is enshrined at Kotai Jingū. It's also reportedly home to an ancient bronze mirror that hasn't been seen by human eyes for over a millennium. We made our way to a fence and clapped and bowed with a group of Shinto pilgrims in front of the white silk curtain shrouding the mirror's chambers. Suddenly, a gust of wind swept down and teasingly lifted the curtain. The crowd—ourselves included—let out a collective gasp. Most chuckled quietly and self-consciously at the rapid drama of it all, while others were moved to tears by such a seemingly close encounter with the divine. Before we could fully recalibrate, a school group of Japanese children in matching yellow hats walked past us in duckling formation, smiling and waving, waking us out of our sedative state, as if a reminder from the deities themselves that life marches on—literally, in this case.

Because Shima was Japan's *it* destination for some 250 years, it's considered the birthplace of *omotenashi*, Japanese-style hospitality, and hotels here have their moments, too. The recently opened Amanemu, a clustering of 24 suites and four burnished-cedar villas snaking around a seaside glen, is an especially understated design, even for an Aman. The steep-roofed villas are inspired by Japanese farmhouses but deliver the discreet symmetry that architects and Aman junkies like Ralph have come to expect. Interiors



⊙ CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: AN ONSEN IN AN AMANEMU SUITE; LUNCH AT THE HACHIMAN KAMADO HUT; AN AMANEMU ARRIVAL PAVILION; BONITO, AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT IN JAPANESE CUISINE; A VILLA AT AMANEMU.



amulets to ward off sharks and evil deities lurking in the sea. Our ama, Miwako, entered the hut wearing a white bonnet, a giant smile, and cherry-red lipstick. She presented us with a neatly arranged bouquet of seafood she'd be grilling for us. Like most amas, Miwako was older, in her 60s. The reverence of women in Shima is atypical for Japan. Here, they're seen as more powerful than men, an influence that may connect back to Amaterasu-Omikami.

We naively thought that Miwako would be sheltered, maybe even Amish-like in her worldview, but her outlook was quite modern. While she stoked the coals and tended to the squirming lobster on the grill, Ralph asked her if she always wore her bonnet. "No, I take it off when I drive home from work," she quipped, which was a good icebreaker since we never imagined she drove a car (or had a sense of humor). We all laughed, and I asked her about the hardest part of her job. "Finding new amas," she said. "We're dying off, and young women don't want to dive anymore." There are currently 2,000 amas in Japan, with an average age of 65.

While the ancient ama tradition may be endangered, the ama huts have helped raise awareness of the divers through food. And Miwako's was expertly cooked. Her scallops, grilled on the half shell, were plump and juicy. Her slices of squid, which

we doused in lemon, mayonnaise, and *shichimi tōgarashi*, were perfectly springy. And her humble grilled Ise-ebi was sublime.

Other moments—less profound but no less stirring—occurred during a morning visit to the small city of Toba, the peninsula's shabby northern gateway. After walking for 30 minutes along the stone trails of its forested hills past temples and shrines, we descended into Toba's power-line-tangled back streets. People see photos of Japanese cities and assume they're loud and frantic, but catch a city off guard on a Tuesday morning, as we did, and its tranquility will surprise you. The miniature houses with front stoops guarded by potted plants and tanuki (raccoon dog) figurines had a stillness about them. Old ladies walking home with bags full of wakame and *mozuku* seaweed smiled and wished us *ohayou gozaimasu* (good morning). It was magnificently hushed, minus the guttural caws of crows and occasional chimes of crosswalk signals, a pleasant sound heard across Japan.

Shima isn't all contemplation and quiet, though. There are aquariums, lighthouses, and hiking paths. There's a cruise on the *Esperanza*, a three-masted Spanish carrack. There's Mikimoto Pearl Island, the birthplace of cultured pearls and home to an aquatic ama performance reminiscent of Florida's Weeki Wachee Springs mermaids (though more badass, given that they swim in the frosty open ocean, not the confined waters of a natural spring). There's even a bath fortified with pearl protein at the Shiojitei Spa. But it was easy enough to avoid this more touristy stuff by simply turning down a side street, like we did in the small town of Daiocho



are filled with requisite Japanese touches like *washi* paper, charcoal-granite *ofuro* (soaking tubs), and rattan butterfly chairs.

Like Ise Jingū, Amanemu is so subdued it's almost dull. But it's an ideal spot to do nothing for a few days, which is exactly what we did—gloriously—while wearing our soft beige *yukata* robes, drinking warm sake, and bird watching from our veranda.

The hotel arranged for us to meet an ama diver at Satoumi An, an ama hut where the hardy women meet to sell and cook the seafood they've foraged. While many divers are approachable, it can be hard to engage beyond the very basics unless you speak conversational Japanese or get a formal introduction. We arrived with a guide who could translate, removed our shoes, and sat down on the tatami floor by the warming fire pit.

Ama tools dating from Japan's Jomon era (10,500–300 B.C.) have been excavated in the area, but historians believe the occupation has only been exclusive to women since the eighth century. Having more subcutaneous fat apparently helps them better withstand the water's cold temperatures, which can dip into the 50s; today, most amas use wet suits but no other scuba equipment. They dive for 50-second intervals, some going as deep as 65 feet, but remain tethered to wooden tubs used as buoys and storage. Most don white *tenugui* scarves on their heads and



YOUR ISE-SHIMA SHORT LIST

WHEN TO GO

An abundance of seafood means there's always something in season: abalone, from March to September; rock oysters, from April to July; and Ise-ebi, from October to April. It's cooler, between 40 and 70 degrees, from October to May; temps can top 90 in summer, which is the best time to see the ama divers.

GETTING THERE

You can fly nonstop from the U.S. to Osaka or Tokyo's Haneda or Narita airports. All three arrival airports are within six hours of Ise-Shima by car or train. Americans planning to rent a car (note Japan is a left-side driving country) need an international permit, which must be obtained before arrival.

WHERE TO STAY

The understated [Amanemu](#) has 24 burnished-cedar suites (and four two-bedroom villas). Like all Aman resorts it has a great pool, which overlooks pearl rafts floating in Ago Bay. In the city of Shima, on a small island just off the peninsula, the sprawling mid-century [Shima Kanko Hotel](#) has both a classic main building with 114 rooms (the public area was redone in 2016) and an all-suites addition, as well as restaurants, gardens, pools, a spa, and a gym, on a manicured ridge overlooking a cove. Also in Shima, the rustic [Hiogiso](#) is a dockside ryokan with a cypress *onsen* and tatami-floor guest rooms.

TWO MUST-HIT RESTAURANTS

[Edokin](#) is a discreet *izakaya* on Toba's outskirts with sushi, sashimi, and bowls of udon. It has an extensive selection of local *shochu* and sake too. [Satoumi An](#) is a tidy and humble ama hut where divers grill all manner of seafood—barracuda, Ise-ebi, scallops, squid, turban snails, and *uni*—over a fire pit. A.H.G.

Nakiri, where we found Katsuo Ibushigoya, a smoky bonito workshop atop Shima's sea cliffs. Its proud bonito master, Yukiaki Tenpaku, sold us several grades of flakes and bonito jerky, while his wife brought us delicious samples of hot dashi. Neither spoke a word of English, but we felt incredibly welcome. Another detour led us to Edokin, a hidden *izakaya* on Toba's outskirts serving dishes as good as anything in Tokyo. Its kind waitress handed over a handwritten translation of the five-page menu, followed by glasses of sweet potato *shochu*, plates of fried tofu, and bowls of Ise udon, made with especially toothsome noodles, black sauce, and raw egg.

Our last

night

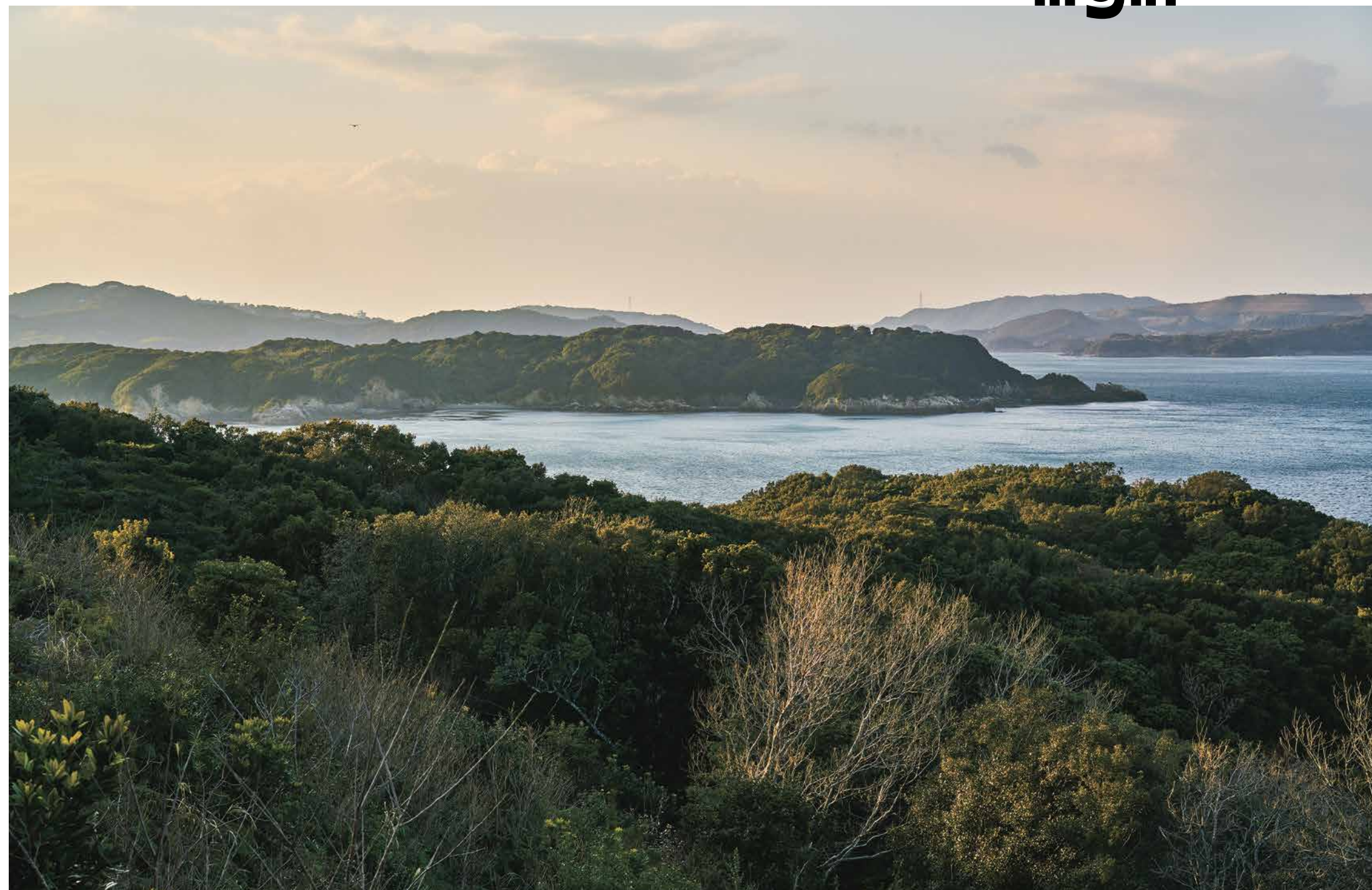
in Shima was spent at Hiogiso, a rustic ryokan. Its fourth-generation owners, Tomiko and Takanobu Watanabe, run the inn, which overlooks a wooded cove facing Ago Bay and is a master class in omotenashi. Our spacious tatami room had a wraparound terrace directly on the harbor and views from every window. There's a courtyard with a cypress ping-pong table made by Takanobu's brother and a cozy woodstove lounge with elegantly carved figurines and driftwood pieces that channel Shima's unfussy vibe.

Tomiko didn't speak English, but Takanobu, a former Mikimoto employee, did, and he invited us aboard his cabin cruiser for a sunset sail, which he

promised was the best way to see the peninsula. The boat slipped past pearl rafts and scrubby islets before reaching the open bay, where overlapping mountains stretched into the horizon, resembling an ancient Chinese ink painting. Here, in postcard-perfect form, was Ise-Shima—an elusive spectacle of ancient Asia that so many seek but never find. Yet the view left me conflicted. Its magnificence was a betrayal of all that was humble and hidden about the place. All of Shima's subdued charms had been ours alone to admire, and suddenly, now, it flooded the big screen with the promise of a world-class destination.

We returned to port just as the sky began turning into a splatter of pinks, coppers, and oranges. Back ashore, we dipped in Hiogiso's hinoki cypress *onsen*, which hangs over the harbor in a wooden bathhouse, allowing us to watch the blue hour wash over the woody cove. In the quiet of the bath, I was reminded of another Bashō haiku:

*Unnoticed by worldly people,
The chestnut tree
Is in full bloom. ♦*



© AGO BAY, AS SEEN FROM THE ISE-SHIMA PENINSULA'S PEARL ROAD, BETWEEN TOBA AND UGATA.