



That's so Showa

Off the west coast of Japan, **Adam H. Graham** visits Sado Island seeking an immersion in the nation's golden age, and discovers a shingle-roofed, pine-rigged, Midcentury time capsule.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: At the weather-beaten Seisuiji Temple; rice paddies like billiard tables; the Noh theater at Daizen shrine.

COURTESY OF SADO TOURISM ASSOCIATION (3)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Feeding seagulls on the ferry to Sado Island; fresh don at Izakaya Shiratsuyu; Sushi Chozaburo offers Sado-style sushi.

IT WAS SUPPOSED to be a relaxing 15-minute cruise. But our glass-bottom boat was barreling over swells in Senkakuwan Bay off the west coast of Japan towards Sado Island. Before we boarded, the brusque captain stood next to a paint-chipped gumball machine stuffed with seagull food and asked us if we were prone to seasickness. It was a warning this wouldn't be a smooth sail. Though it was a sunny October day and the sky was perfectly blue, the Sea of Japan was heaving like the waves in a Hokusai print. We spiraled around the bay like a leaf in a whirlpool, passing jagged, honey-hued skerries, pine-spiked islets topped with Shinto *torii*, and a Buddha-stuffed blue grotto. Suddenly, a perky jingle rang out over the boat's speaker followed by a scratchy automated voice recording—a woman speaking in Japanese baby talk—welcoming us aboard then launching into a kitschy, canned narration. I looked across the glass at the only other passenger aboard, my friend and native islander Terue, and she chuckled and said, “That’s so Showa!”

“That’s so Showa!” is a phrase I’d heard before from Japanese friends, but I didn’t exactly understand the aesthetic or tone it represented. Japan’s Showa era lasted from 1926 to 1989 during the reign of Emperor Hirohito and included the nation’s most jam-packed chapter of historical events: its war-path cry, A-bomb destruction and phoenix-like rise to golden-age prosperity. In between were Olympics, newfangled foreign foods, and new art, cinema and architecture movements. For many Japanese elders, the Showa era is a period of success to be replicated, like America’s nifty fifties, Victorian England, or 1920s Shanghai. Others interpret its vapid superficial qualities as desperate attempts to catch up with and be validated by the West. But for most Japanese today, Showa is more about a nostalgic feeling than a political statement, and often cited when experiencing a bit of

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TONY MCNICOLL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; COURTESY OF SADO TOURISM ASSOCIATION (2)



vintage Japan in old-fashioned shops, *izakaya* or rail stations that embody this dynamic period.

Japanese eras are tethered to the reigns of emperors and often envisioned and named as catalysts for change. This year, Japan bid adieu to Emperor Akihito’s Heisei era, which lasted three decades, and subsequently entered the new harmonic Reiwa era. The jump forward gave some much-needed perspective to Japan’s action-packed historical past and helped crystallize Showa’s ideas, designs and aesthetics even more. And while these 20th-century aesthetics can be found across Japan, Niigata Prefecture’s mountainous Sado Island, an 855-square-kilometer island off Honshu’s northwest coast, embodies Showa in spades.

Sado is home to 55,000 residents and bereft of 7-Elevens, bullet trains and international



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Along the canals of the fishing village Shukunegi; Sado Grand Hotel, a Midcentury masterpiece on brackish Lake Kamo; skewers in one of Yakitori Yajima's two vintage outlets.



tourists. To get there, I boarded a two-hour Joetsu Shinkansen from Tokyo to Niigata City, and then jumped on a one-hour, 70-kilometer jet-foil ride to Ryotsu Port, one of three entryways to the butterfly-shaped island. There, drenched in florescent light, the retro, jade-colored ferry terminal was an amuse bouche of Sado's Showa-era design, replete with vendors' handmade signs hawking local sake, dried persimmon and jars of local oysters. I've been to Japan more than a dozen times and visited several remote islands, but I could tell immediately that Sado was different. And since the island has no Uniqlo or Muji, people on Sado dress and look extremely different, with slightly dated fashions and less cosmetic polish.

Ryotsu Port itself is a low-slung ramshackle of faux half-timber shops, buzzing neon signs, and jumbled nests of telephone wires. There are windowless *izakaya*, 1960s-era *kissaten*-style coffee shops, and old-timey street lamps looming above it all. While Sado has a few five-star resorts with scenic oceanfront onsen, I opted to stay at the **Sado Grand Hotel** (sadoh.grrr.jp; doubles from ¥6,274), a 1964 Midcentury masterpiece designed by Japanese architect Kiyonori Kikutake, one of the founders of Japan's Metabolist Architecture movement, which emphasized organic designs. The elongated and

cantilevered three-story structure stretches across a bank on brackish Lake Kamo, each room offering a sliding-glass door opening to views of the water and the landscape manicured with native grasses and *niwaki* (pruned evergreens). At the affordable nightly rate, I was beginning to think that Showa-era prices were also part of the deal here.

Over the next three days, Terue drove me around her island (car rentals, taxis and public buses are all practical options if you don't have a native friend), showing me Sado's sights, Showa and otherwise. We spent an afternoon strolling the canal-lined fishing village of Shukunegi, its shingle houses, 1920s-style weathered soba-noodle shops, mossy waterfalls and woodsy shrines. We tiptoed around the derelict Seisuiji Temple lurking in an overgrown cedar grove. Its caved-in ceilings and sun-bleached statues of Jizou with a face frozen in surprise date back to 808 A.D. but could have been lifted from the cels of a Studio Ghibli anime. We visited sake breweries like **Hokusetsu** (sake-hokusetsu.com; free tasting and tours available from May to October with reservation) the exclusive bottler for Robert DeNiro and Chef Morimoto at Nobu. And we stopped in at seaside shrines, like Yajima, a rocky Shinto island connected by a scarlet arched footbridge.

Sado's restaurants were especially steeped in Showa realness. While the Meiji era may have revolutionized Japan's food and dietary habits, the Showa era executed and cemented those trends, popularizing sushi, ramen, yakitori and Wagyu around the world. At **Sushi Chozaburo** (81-4 Niibo; 81-259/22-2125; meals ¥1,300–¥3,200; omakase sushi platter ¥3,000),

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we feasted on the septuagenarian chef's excellent Sado-style sushi like Oma tuna and Aomori *uni* sourced from local fishermen and arranged on asymmetrical, pink airbrushed plates that recalled high '80s Patrick Nagel prints. The dimly lit **Yakitori Yajima** (208-110 Kawaharadasuwamachi; 81-259/57-2225; meals ¥1,300–¥1,900), with its weathered dark-wood bar and vintage cigarette advertisements, plated up succulent Datedori chicken skewers and *tsukume* (gingered chicken meatballs) cooked slowly over charcoal. A second location features Mondrian-style shoji screens, a nod to Le Corbusier and his modernist Japanese Showa-era contemporaries like Junzo Sakakura and Yoshiro Taniguchi, who brought the international aesthetic to Japanese architecture. After dinners, I'd return to my comfortable tatami-mat room in my very own mod pad of a hotel to sip sake and watch the moon emerge from the lake, like so many in Japan did before the current social-media era made us eternally distracted. Sado's lack of modernity, sometimes enforced by a weak Wi-Fi signal and spotty reception, was strangely comforting and made me truly live in the moment that I might otherwise miss out on by scrolling and swiping.

Sado is mostly known for being an island for exiles, including many monks, samurai, poets and even the 11th-century Emperor Juntoku. "Exiles to Sado stopped around 1700,

but some elders in Japan still mistakenly think Sado is dangerous," Terue said while we whizzed past endangered crested ibis nesting in rice paddies and rice thrush drying on roadside racks in her Toyota. One of the exiled here included Zeami Motokiyo, who popularized Noh Theater in the 15th-century Muromachi Period and helped make Noh a stronghold on Sado. Hamochi Village's thatched Kusakari shrine is home to Sado's most popular **Noh stage** (1698 *Hamochi Hongo*; tickets ¥3,400 per person), where bonfire-lit performances are held all summer. Another main draw to Sado is the **Taiko Center** (sadoitaiken.jp; 60-minute drumming lesson ¥1,800), run by popular *taiko*-drum ensemble Kodo founded in 1981, located on a hill in Kodo Village where I soulfully banged a few Sado-made timber drums, one from a 600-year-old zelkova log. Both Noh and *taiko* drumming nearly disappeared after the Meiji Restoration, but preservation efforts during the Showa era continue to help them thrive today, suggesting that the era was as much about looking outward as it was about reflection—a sign of a true renaissance.

Many Japanese ask themselves if the promise and optimism of the Showa era are gone forever. As the country's population shrinks, especially in places like Sado where the young leave regularly for bigger cities, Showa is becoming less of a memory to those who remember it, and more of a melancholic bygone era. But for those who seek it out in Japan's untouched corners, Showa will always be a state of mind. 🍡



FROM TOP: Keeping the beat at the Sado Island Taiko Center; the Noh theater at Daizen shrine.