

Yourtime

Celebrity hotspot – Tampa Bay, Florida

WHO Jennifer Hudson performs at the Super Bowl.

WHY GO To check out one of the world's top secluded harbours.

THE VIBE Warm, friendly, upbeat and eclectic.

BEST FOR Ybor City, a landmark district known for shopping, entertainment and cigars.

WHERE TO STAY The Seminole Hard Rock Tampa Hotel & Casino (seminolehardrocktampa.com) routinely hosts NFL guests who come for the dining, nightlife, pool and gaming. Rooms from £83 per night.

WHERE TO EAT Catch Twenty Three (001 813 920 0045) offers fresh seafood — mahi mahi, Chilean seabass, grouper — with Latin and Caribbean flavours, and poke seeding. Fish dishes from £12.

WHAT TO DO For an African-inspired adventure, head to Busch Gardens (buschgardens.com) where you can go on rides, see 2,700 animals and enjoy live performances. Tickets start at \$42.

SOMETHING DIFFERENT Check out the Monster Jam, a monster truck rally, at the Raymond James Stadium (raymondjames.com) — the site of the Super Bowl — on 21 February. Tickets £11.

TOP TIP The best secluded beach spot is on Honeymoon Island — a ferry trip away from the dunes of Caladesa Island.

HOW TO GET THERE BA (ba.com) flies direct from London Gatwick to Tampa for £474.30 rtn.

FOR MORE DETAILS tampaguide.com **JENNIFER BAYTON**



On song: Jennifer Hudson sings at the Raymond James Stadium

HEAD TO SOUTHERN JAPAN TO FIND

Taking the Zen path of a pilgrim

BY STEVE NIMMO

DESPITE being told I was too late in the season for whale-watching, two of them suddenly appeared and bopped in my direction. They were sorry specimens, carried on the conveyor belt of a sushi restaurant.

It wasn't the sort of 'whale-watching my wife and I had hoped for, in Kushiro, on the southern tip of Japan, I was learning to expect the unexpected.

Kushiro was the halfway point on my tour of the Wakayama region. Wakayama is a rare bullet-train ride from Tokyo, but a world away from the city's neon lights and busy streets. Here, among mountain landscapes, turquoise rivers and rugged coastline, are ancient pilgrimage routes which were recently awarded world heritage status by Unesco.

BULLET TRAINS

WE HIGGAN our own pilgrimage by taking the bullet train (japoweb.com) from Tokyo to Osaka — a two-and-a-half-hour journey — followed by a three-hour drive south to Tanabe. Travelling around Japan, we found the railways super-efficient and a week's pass for £190 — which you have to try in the UK in advance — got us on some of the amazing 130mph trains. Navigating the region was made easier with map and

timetable downloads from the excellent Tanabe city site (tb-kumano.jp/en/).

TANABE

TANABE was the perfect introduction to the local cuisine and partying culture. In the town's 'entertainment district' we enjoyed a great meal (about £25 per head) and began a Japanese-style pub crawl, starting in a jazz bar and ending with a nightclub at our ryokan, as traditional bars are known.

Drinks cost about £1 and I became hooked on the local sake rice wine. Cold sake is the best quality and it is poured into a glass in a wooden box until both the box and the glass are perilously full. Then everyone shouts 'kampai!' (cheers) before knocking it back. After a few of these drinks the normally restrained locals come out of their shells.

THE PILGRIM ROUTE

AT THE our night of excess we were ready to join the pilgrimage proper. For centuries, pilgrims walked a 49-day round trip here in search of health and enlightenment. These days tourists hike the trails along with mysterious hermit warriors

The 5 best... jungle retreats

MYSORE, INDIA

THE Kalani River Lodge on the border of Nagarhole National Park was rated by *Tatler's Travel Guide* as one of the world's top five wildlife resorts. £107pp per night including full board and excursions. junglelodges.com

AMAZON BASIN, ECUADOR

BUILT in 1986, the Kapawi eco-lodge near the Pastaza River is accessible only by light aircraft and built in partnership with local tribes. From £41pp for three nights and four days including all meals and drinks. ukf-int.org.uk

LAKE ACAJATUBA, BRAZIL

ACAJATUBA Jungle Lodge by Lake Acajatuba is near the largest freshwater archipelago in the world. It's rustic but comfortable with running water and a bar. £387pp for two nights, incl meals and excursions. heliconia-amazon.com/gb/junglelodges.shtml

TIKAL NATIONAL PARK, GUATEMALA

THE Hotel Posada de la Selva is a family-



Amazonian beauty: Acajatuba Jungle Lodge owned lodge with a swimming pool. The terraces of Tikal are 1km away. World of Maya Rainforest Tour (6 days) from \$960 with accommodation and full board. global-travel.co.uk/tour25.htm

KHAOSOK NATIONAL PARK, THAILAND

KHAOSOK Rainforest Resort is home to tree houses, riverside cottages and a luxurious main lodge. Swim in the crystal clear streams and waterfalls, explore the rainforest or go kayaking. Accommodation starts from £8 a day. krabiidlr.com **KELLY ARMSTRONG**

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Travel

HOT SPRINGS, TRADITIONAL INNS AND MONKS ON A MISSION



Steve and wife Laura at the gateway to a temple, chatting with a local, inset



called the Yataiuchi. They are SAS-style, endurance-hardened monks who dress in white with slippers and pompons.

The ancient trails link spiritual sites and towns. Walking them was blissfully stress-relieving and offered stunning views. We did about six miles a day passing through villages and innumerable tree-trunk forests. I encountered a type of little deer with devil's horns, white legs, long spines tucked themselves in the trees. Our journey also introduced me to a particular Japanese shamisen unknown to many westerners: the *osen*.

HOT SPRINGS

ONSEN are natural hot springs usually found in the *ryokan* (see www.ryokan.com) details of *ryokan* along the pilgrim trail. These range from plush spas to more basic wooden bachelors.

Onsen are as central to Japanese culture as the cup of tea is to the Brits — an everyday pleasure, only with more tradition.

In the right context, getting naked in front of people is okay by me, but the onsen experience took some getting used to. The baths were single sex, but bored-looking female onsenites occasionally showed up in the men's. And being Japan, where politeness and etiquette hold sway, onsen



became complicated rituals. It was the pre-bathing ritual of group washing that presented the main challenge. At my first onsen I sat with a row of robed men on a seat with a hole in the middle and started to wash. There was a *rinsoo*, black aluminum, silver liquid soap and a shower head. It felt odd at first but then the enthusiastic bottom washing began. It was a real eye-to-the-floor moment as men of all ages bent over to give themselves a good scrub.

Afterwards, I made my way to the springs where the *achia* from a day's walking waited me. My wife described the women's onsen as similar to the men's — sporty but

buttock-enhancing hikers. If a Japanese woman asks: "Does my bum look big in this?" you should say yes.

ETIQUETTE

WHAT to say and how to behave is difficult to gauge at first in Japan — ritual and etiquette can be a minefield. Everyone seemed to want a business card and how you present it is of the utmost importance. Even bringing your nose in front of people is considered rude. Generally though, there is widespread tolerance of ignorant westerners as it's hard to cause real offence. The closest I came was when I mistakenly drank beer at a Shinto shrine. An *itoko* passed by blazed at me in his best English: "Bring your beer and go from this place!" I gave him an apologetic bow, made like a pilgrim and hit the road. ● JAL offers direct flights from London to Osaka and Tokyo. Prices start at £172. See uk.jal.com for details. For more travel information, go to www.lon.com

DAVIDSON CARONALI: SEE PAGE 51

Harmful warrior: one of the Yataiuchi, dressed in slippers and pompons

Valentine's late deals

IT MAY be a bit of a cliché, but Paris is always a good bet for Valentine's Day. Save £200pp with Kirkor Holidays' package: three nights for the price of two at the four-star La Trémouille hotel in the heart of the city. Prices start from £593pp, including return travel by Eurostar Leisure Select, transfers to and from the hotel, B&B, a Seine river cruise, a carnet of 10 Paris Metro/bus tickets per person, and Kirkor's guide notes to restaurants and sightseeing. Offer valid on departures until 31 March. Go to kirkorholidays.com, or call 020 7593 2283, to book.

BUT if you fancy something a little more offbeat, why not head to Helsinki? Scattered with stylish designer boutiques, hip art studios and markets, the Finnish capital combines great shopping with a vibrant cultural scene. If a day's sightseeing has left you a little frazzled, warm up with a visit to a Finnish sauna, part of everyday local life and a cunning way to get up close and personal with your lover. From £395pp including flights, transfers and three nights' B&B accommodation. Go to blacktomato.co.uk to book.

VENICE is not only one of the most romantic cities in the world, it also plays host to a fantastic carnival at this time of year. And now you can scoop up a credit crunch-friendly hotel deal there, with four-star rooms starting at £50 per night. Stay three nights and you will be able to save a further 30 per cent at the Bemestriali Hotel, only seconds from the idyllic St Mark's Square and the legendary Rialto Bridge. The hotel even has its own water landing for gondolas. Visit hotels.co.uk, or call 0871 200 0371.

WHAT could be more romantic than a weekend tucked up in a cosy fisherman's cabin in the Dordogne in south-west France? Wake up in the peaceful lakeside setting, hop on a tandem bike together (hope you don't happen to bump into anyone you know) and cycle off to get croissants. Later, cosy up next to the wood-burner and enjoy the Valentine's bumper full of local produce. Dordogne self-catering fisherman's cabin, £325 for three nights, 12-16 February, with tandem, hamper, fresh flowers and champers. response4travel.com

EDITED BY OLIVIA WALMSLEY

Sizing matters









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