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Live, Work & Travel

Mar 2-8 2009 Issue 1331 tntonline.co.uk

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HAUNTED

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+ VISAS ■ NEWS ■ FREIGHT ■ SPORT ■ JOBS ■ MUSIC

this week

2-8 March / Issue 1331
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EDITOR'S LETTER

I'm afraid the Home Office has been at it again. Anyone who had plans to get a Tier 1 visa (formerly the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme visa) had better be quick, because from April 1 they'll need a Master's degree.

In the current economic climate, it seems the considerable skills that many Aussies, Kiwis and Saffas bring to the UK economy aren't as important as political nationalism. Check out the story on page 42 of this week's magazine to find how the changes will affect you.

Enjoy the mag.
KRYSTEN BOOTH



11 LONDON

- 11 London Eye
- 12 London Life
- 14 **THAT'S THE SPIRIT:** Explore London's spookiest spots
- 16 Food & Drink
- 18 Spotted

21 ENTERTAINMENT

- 21 Celebrity News
- 22 Look Who's Talking: Daimon Downey
- 24 Cinema
- 25 Culture
- 26 **TNT Life**
- 27 **A DANCE LEGACY:** Tanja Leutke's choreography comes to the UK

28 MUSIC & CLUBS

- 28 Music
- 30 **POWER PLAY:** The Howling Bells bring out a potent new album
- 32 Music Listings
- 33 Clubbing
- 34 Clubbing Listings



30 Aussie rascals Howling Bells



76 Japan's forest temples



64 Whodunnit? Find out on a murder mystery break

36 NEWS & SPORT

- 36 Australia News
- 38 New Zealand News
- 40 South Africa News
- 42 **THE VISA CRUNCH:** Changes to the Tier 1 visa explained
- 45 This week in sport
- 46 Rugby
- 48 Cricket
- 50 General
- 52 **EXPATS UNITED:** Rugby league fans launch a new club in London

55 CAREERS & MONEY

- 55 Careers
- 58 **HIGH FLIERS:** Combine travel and work with a job as a travel agent
- 60 Money
- 61 Coming & Going

REGULARS

- 4 Letters
- 8 Wins
- 146 Desperately Seeking & Dear Reuben

63 TRAVEL

- 63 Global Vision
- 64 **FATAL ATTRACTIONS:** Be a sleuth on a murder mystery weekend
- 66 Late Deals
- 67 **TNT Weekender:** Berlin
- 68 **SWEDE SUCCESS:** Relax in chilled-out Gothenburg
- 70 Hotshots
- 72 Travel Tips
- 73 Travel News
- 74 Gear Up
- 75 On The Road
- 76 **PILGRIM'S PROGRESS:** Hike on a spiritual trail in Japan

67 The best of Berlin



42 How the new visa changes affect you



14 On the trail of London's ghosts

TECHNICAL PROGRESS

Discover the spiritual side of Japan by trekking to the forest temples of Kumano

WORDS MARK STRATTON

Kumano

JAPAN

Spiritual salvation in Kumano has long involved plenty of blisters. As we ascended a 12th-century stone-pitched footpath through mossy forests broad, my hiking companion, told me about the ancient Yamabushi who used to test themselves in these mountains. "They'd march through winter, eat little, and chant mantras," he said. "But if they became sick and slowed the others down, they'd be expected to hurl themselves off the nearest cliff."

This was going a little too far. Yet ever since the 8th-century, pilgrims have endured many hardships seeking out a trio of grand shrines hidden deep in the Kii Peninsula forests on Japan's Honshu Island. The shrines grew from the worship of local forest spirits and the region of Kumano became renowned all over Japan as the place to find eternal salvation. Pilgrims, from emperors to peasants, hiked from Kyoto for 40 days using footpaths known as the Kumano Kodo, to worship at the three shrines.

These days, Kumano retains its mystique and offers a rare glimpse into the spiritual and historical underbelly of the most advanced technological society in the world.

The Japanese still come to worship here, albeit mostly by coach. But for the adventurous, the network of ancient footpaths has scarcely changed in a thousand years, and you can



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Hongu Taisha shrine

Osaka by high-speed train. Journeying down Kii Peninsula's coastline was wildly pretty: canopies of emerald forest jutted into black sandy bays fringed by a cobalt-blue ocean.

The grand shrines were striking. I first visited Hongu Taisha: a 9th-century shrine rebuilt after a flood in 1891. Its immense 34m red-lacquered torii (gate) can be seen kilometres away and draws coach-loads of Japanese visitors. The beat of a thunderous drum, clouds of incense, and the clanging of bells rung by devotees before an open-fronted hall with a trimmed bark roof

“I sensed the awe pilgrims would have experienced”

created a frisson of excitement. The shrine priests were almost as colourful as the shrine, clad in mint-green and white robes with black-lacquered clogs and hats that resembled fruit pastilles.

For my first few days I walked a few shorter sections of the Kumano Kodo and invariably followed the paths with ubiquitous onsens where I could stop for a dip along the way. The



Nachi Taisha shrine and waterfall

River Kawayu onsen was quite superb. The river bubbles with luxurious warm water and bathers dig small shallows in the gravel to enjoy a very public bath.

I wandered down to the river in the yukata robe I had borrowed from a nearby local ryokan (inn), where I had stayed in a traditional Japanese room with a futon mattress spread across straw tatami floor mats.

After my soak, I sampled kaiseki ryori. These intricately prepared meals are worth the splurge. The individual dishes are sculpted works of art: from delicate raw fish and miso



Shinto ritual Morotabune-shinji

SHINTO IN A NUTSHELL

To outsiders, Japanese Shintoism is shrouded in mystery because it bears little resemblance to organised religions we're used to.

Shintoism pre-dates Buddhism in Japan (which arrived around AD650) by many centuries. It has no single all-powerful god, just thousands of local deities inspired by

soup to tempura prawns and beef boiled in a sesame sauce. Food had never tasted better.

This prepared me perfectly for a full day's hike between the grand shrines of Hongu to Nachi. We began at 5am for a 12-hour journey on one of the Kumano Kodo's toughest sections known locally as Nakatsuchi. Beaking dewy cobwebs across the trail, Brad and I hiked up mountainsides thickly forested with maples, camphor trees and leviathan cypresses strung with lichen (trailing like old men's beards). The drums of Hongu drifted on the wind.

There were lots of ancient reminders of the trail's halcyon days. We passed oji (small shrines dedicated to forest deities), poetry-inscribed pillars, and dilapidated teahouses that once revived weary pilgrims. It was hard going. An ascent up ancient stone steps beyond Koguchi village made me breathless; the slippery descent afterwards left my knees begging for mercy.

When we eventually hobbled into the

roughly translated, Shinto means 'way of the gods'. It reveres natural objects, believing anything from trees to rocks possesses a spiritual nature.

When visiting a typical Shinto shrine you'll pass through the torii gate, which represent crossing into the realm of the gods. Pilgrims wash their mouths and hands in a fountain before entering. Worshippers then stop before open-faced halls, ring a bell to wake the gods, bow twice, drop money into an offertory box and clap several times before withdrawing the inevitable photo. Some purchase a small wooden tablet, an ema, and write a wish to bring good fortune.

magnificent Kumano Nachi Taisha shrine just before dark, I sensed something of the awe generations of pilgrims would have experienced on their arrival.

Nachi is not only a Shinto shrine but is also located beside a magnificent Buddhist temple in which (after a night's sleep at the monastic lodgings) we attended a morning ceremony given by lime green-robed monks.

The temple was inspired by the nearby Nachi Waterfall, which at 133m is Japan's highest. Yamabushi, explained Brad, immerses themselves in its freezing waters for purification. But for me, nirvana represented a hot onsen bath and a delicious temple meal.



River Kawayu onsen



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JAPAN'S GREAT OUTDOORS

DIVE OKINAWA

Subtropical seas of Japan's southernmost Ryukyu archipelago make for great diving. Snorkelling and sea-kayaking (pictured left) are also highly recommended.

SHIMANAMI SEA CYCLE

A bizarre yet fun cycling route takes bikers across the island of Shikoku.

CLIMB MOUNT FUJI

Scaling Mount Fuji (3776m) can only be undertaken between late July-late August. Organised two-day summit trips start from \$120. See hisexperience.jp.



Mount Fuji

NEXT WEEK: SCUBA-DIVING

Make a splash off Cuba's Caribbean coast

weather AVERAGES FOR C

JAN FEB MAR APR MAY JUN