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TOHOKU

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**CHUBBY HUBBY**
★ Food, family & the finer things in life ★

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While I have been to Japan many times, the trip to Tohoku that I went on in, in January and February 2013, will be one I doubt I will ever forget. Usually, when my wife and I visit, we spend the vast majority of our time eating and shopping. We are, after all, true blue Singaporeans and these are two of our nation's favourite pastimes. But this trip was different.

First of all, it was instigated by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) and the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) did get involved, but the invitation came from the Embassy in Singapore and the itinerary put together by staff from MOFA. Because of that, while the trip was planned so that I would experience some of Tohoku's more luxurious lifestyle concepts--and enjoy some marvelous food--an equal amount of time was spent speaking to people about the recovery efforts that have been made since the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011. Tohoku was, as I am sure many of you know, the region most affected and devastated by these two natural disasters and the incident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant.

I also spent a significant portion of this trip touring devastated areas, which is not an easy thing to do. But, as someone who started his career in hardcore news and studied political science, and who never imagined he would end up writing about food and travel or promoting food, travel, retail or hospitality companies for a living, this was an experience I would not have traded for anything.

The level of access that MOFA afforded me was incredible. I got to speak to very senior people in ministries, municipal governments and in businesses affected by and dealing with the region's recovery. For that, I am super grateful to them and their colleagues at the Embassy of Japan in Singapore, JNTO and JTA.



Many of those discussions or the discussions I have been having since returning home did not get filtered into Chubby Hubby. Chubby Hubby, after all, is a website that celebrates the best food and travel experiences and encourages its readers to eat something, cook something, go somewhere, do something or buy something. But several of those talks have sparked ideas, ideas that I hope, through collaborations with JTA, other governmental agencies in Japan, or even private sector partners, will come to fruition.

This booklet contains articles that were originally published in Chubby Hubby that resulted from my trip. By no means is this meant to be a comprehensive guide to Tohoku. What it will do though is hopefully encourage you to consider seeing and experiencing Tohoku yourself some day very soon.

Ann Koh



SOME THOUGHTS ON TOHOKU. PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

In early 2013, I was fortunate enough to be invited by the Japanese foreign ministry and its tourism agency to visit Tohoku. The trip was part of an initiative to invite foreign media to tour the region, which many of you will remember was hit by a vicious earthquake and devastating tsunami in March 2011. While some parts of this beautiful region were horrifically damaged and are far from recovery, there are other areas that were relatively untouched by the natural disasters and others still that have already repaired physical damage and are fighting to rebuild their economies. Tourism, especially foreign tourism, is one very big way that the Japanese hope Tohoku can bounce back.

The rest of the stories you will find in this booklet are lifestyle pieces. They are travel and food related articles that hopefully will encourage you to consider this beautiful region when deciding where to go for your next vacation. But before we move into the fun stuff, I also want to spend some time thinking about, and sharing with you, some challenges facing Tohoku as it tries to bounce back two years

after the earthquake and tsunami (and nuclear reactor incident) that claimed lives, destroyed whole towns, wrecked whole industries, and left the region reeling from widespread damage. And I say "bounce back" because two years later, there is still so much more to do; so many homes to build; so many industries to restart; so many communities to rebuild; and so many problems to fix.

There is no simple way to retell the stories that I heard while I was touring Tohoku. Nor was it that easy to sit through some of the stories that I heard. But I think that the act of talking about what happened is healthy and I was happy to try and listen to what the survivors I met had to say. The stories, of course, while centered around the same natural disasters, were all unique in their own way. In Shiogama, known across Japan as the city with the highest density of sushi shops in the country, the owner and head chef of Sushitetsu—the city's most highly rated sushi restaurant—showed me photos of the flood and how his restaurant was almost entirely submerged by water.





Mrs Abe of the Hotel Kanyo

In Sendai, I visited the airport because I wanted to meet and speak with Junichi Ishimori, its Director, who, along with many of his staff, was trapped in the airport for 3 days after the tsunami hit. Sendai Airport is 13.6 km south-east of Sendai itself, but just 1.2 km from the ocean. During the tsunami, waves as high as 5.5 metres crashed into the terminal, causing damage to the first two floors and relocating several of the 200 cars parked outside that day inside the building. 1,700 people were in the airport at the time of the disaster-700 passengers, 400 local residents who had evacuated to the airport thinking it was the safest place to go, and 600 staff members and small business/kiosk owners. Mr Ishimori spoke to me about bravery. And the sheer admiration he has for his team. He told me in particular about one employee who witnessed (from the roof of the airport) her home being destroyed; her grandmother, she knew, was inside and most likely dead. Nonetheless, she refused to take time to grieve and worked tirelessly to look after the evacuees and passengers, whose welfare she and her colleagues took on as their personal responsibility. Ishimori-san is also one of the rare people I met who have the ability to find a bit of humour in what was one of the darkest days in his country's recent history. As I left, he passed me a small present. It was a box of egg custard buns (hagi no tsuki) that

are a specialty of Sendai. Ishimori-san said that these were once his favourite sweet treat. But over the 3 days that he, his colleagues, the evacuees and passengers were trapped in the airport, they basically lived off airport snacks. What was once his favourite local food souvenir is now something he can't bear to eat.

What was particularly interesting to me was Ishimori-san's thoughts on how to increase foreign tourism numbers in Tohoku. As the head of the region's largest airport, this is, of course, something he is very interested in. Further, since the central government has decreed that foreign (and domestic) tourism is a necessity in rebuilding Tohoku's economy, it's something many people are thinking and talking about. I asked Ishimori-san directly what he thinks has to be done.

Three things from our discussion stood out. First, Ishimori-san said that Tohoku needs to increase resources that will appeal to and attract foreign tourists. He advocates creating "world's best" attractions that will garner international attention. "We should build something like the world's best and biggest aquarium," he said. "We need such attractions. Because even if I run the best, most efficient airport...no matter how great this airport is, people won't fly to Sendai to see the airport. We need to create things they want



The site of the new Isobe Community Centre

to see.” The second point was more of a question, and one that Ishimori-san hasn’t yet come up with a solution to. “We have large stretches of empty land now, because of the tsunami. We need a clear and visionary plan to do something with this land.” What Ishimori-san left unsaid but was clear, is that development of this kind and scale cannot be left to individual towns or cities; it’s something that needs to be addressed by the regional or central government. Which dovetails nicely into the third point I found particularly noteworthy. Ishimori-san sees a vital need to promote the region of Tohoku as a whole, something which can only be done if all the various stakeholders are able to come together and work together. He told me that right now, and before the disasters, there was no sense of promoting the region—each town or city or prefecture did their own thing. “Compare, for example,” he told me, “the number of onsens and golf courses in Tohoku versus, say, Hokkaido. Tohoku has many more of both. But if I compare visitor arrivals in each region’s main airports, Hokkaido gets one million visitors a year, while we see two hundred to three hundred thousand only. Hokkaido has done a brilliant job of building a regional brand, something we lack.”

Tourism is a issue that Mrs Abe, owner of the Hotel Kanyo in Minamisanriku, is also trying to address.

Minamisanrikyu was one of the towns most severely damaged by the tsunami. Over 80 percent of the town disappeared in an instant, leaving behind the single largest death toll of any town in Japan. Before the tsunami, Minamisanriku was a beautiful little town, with a thriving salmon fishing industry and picture-perfect views that drew travellers from across Japan. Mrs Abe told me that she’s worried, worried about all the businesses that have been destroyed by the incident and worried because so many of them may never be able to start up again or be replaced. Like others in her region, she knows that tourism is one of the keys to the future. To try and build a capacity to service foreign guests, she’s enrolled many of her staff in English conversation courses. She’s also set up a daily tour, led by a local survivor, that leads guests through the ruins of the town. It’s an emotional hour-long experience, as the guide talks about lost friends and tells the story of local heroine Miki Endo. This 24 year old city worker broadcasted evacuation announcements, refusing to leave her post, even as the 16 metre waves crashed into the building she was broadcasting from. Only a small number of her colleagues, who clung to the antenna on the roof of the building survived.

When we met, Mrs Abe told me that the only real redevelopment of what was once the town-centre has been the removal of debris. She's desperately waiting for someone to do something, to see and hear a real plan for how her town and other towns like hers will be brought back to life. For her and many others like her, it's a frustrating situation.

One project that I saw in Tohoku that was particularly inspiring was a hydroponic lettuce farm, set up in Rikuzentakata. Like Minamisanku, Rikuzentakata was almost entirely wiped out by the tsunami. Much of what was once farmland is now, because of high-levels of sodium and debris, unfertile. After assessing the area, the city government designated certain sections of such farmland for hydroponic farming – the only kind of agriculture possible at that point. Enter Takaaki Abe, who grew up in Aomori, the northern most prefecture of Tohoku. Mr Abe, a former banker, had started Granpa Co, a hydroponic farming business in 2004. Eager to help his home region, when he heard about the designated hydroponic farming sites in Rikuzentakata, he quickly agreed to build a farm there (of course, it helped that the government also gave the Granpa farm in Rikuzentakata a 300 million yen subsidy).

The farm started operations in August 2012, employing twenty

local staff to help manage 8 pods/farms, with five more soon to be set up. Granpa's hydroponic systems are amazing to see. Vegetables are grown in water, on rotating metal wheels, set inside giant climate controlled and ultra-bright bubble tents. The system, I was told, is patented and is something unique to Granpa. At the Rikuzentakata farm, they grow three varieties of lettuce: frill, red coral and greenspan. They can harvest 470 heads a day during warmer months and 300 a day in the winter. The product here is fantastic – yes, I did sample the different kinds of lettuce. And this farm supplies Subway sandwich outlets across the region, Tokyo Disneyland, and Aeon, a nationwide supermarket chain.

I was super-impressed with this project. And I was glad to hear that many municipal governments within Tohoku are studying this project. So much of Tohoku's coastline, and so much of its bordering farmland are still unused wastelands. Developing these areas into hydroponic farm zones makes sense. These farms can be set up just about anywhere, so why not in places that are being underutilized or that cannot be developed for different reasons? These farms can bring in revenue. And they can create employment. There are, from what I could see, only positives about replicating this project across the region.

Another positive development that I happened to visit was in Soma, a coastal city in Fukushima. Parts of this city were totalled by the tsunami, including and especially one residential area called Isobe. Three hundred and forty four buildings and homes in that area were washed away, including the local community centre. Mr Koyama Kenichi, a city worker whom I met in Soma, told me that while funds from the central government were made available to rebuild municipal buildings and temporary homes, facilities like community centres were not supported. That said, a new Isobe community centre is being built, funded entirely through donations that came in through the Singapore Red Cross. This new community centre is one of four facilities made possible through donations from the Singapore Red Cross. Kenichi-san took me to the site. It is built on high ground, next to a middle school that acted as an evacuation centre during the disaster. Work has, in fact, just begun. Kenichi-san asked me to pass along his city's thanks to everyone in Singapore. For communities that have had to deal with a tragedy as great as the 2011 tsunami, such centres, while seemingly non-essential to some bureaucrats when drawing up budgets, are, he said, truly vital in rebuilding and restoring hope.

Tohoku has a long hard road ahead of it. Tourism is just one

way that the region can hope to rebuild its economy. But to be able to welcome more foreigners, the stakeholders in the region also need to invest in tools and skills. People like Mrs Abe, who has started English conversation classes for her staff, are doing what is right and necessary. Resources too should be developed. There are few guides to Tohoku in English or other languages that target today's travellers. Given how great the onsens and sake breweries are in this region, guides centered around those topics would certainly be welcome.

I also really like Mr Ishimori's idea that Tohoku should build one or more world class attraction. But such developments cost money. It also requires true regional masterplanning. I can only hope that the regional government, the central government and agencies like the Japan Tourism Agency can work together to put together a true masterplan for the region and gain access to the funds to make their ideas a reality.

There are others like Mr Ishimori that have interesting ideas. In Rikuzentakata, Deputy Mayor Takashi Kubota wants to turn the devastated coastline into a national park. In Ichinoseki (in Iwate prefecture), the gentlemen who run the chamber of commerce there launched the Naka Tohoku Mochi Summit, a festival celebrating this versatile Japanese rice



The municipal building where Miki Endo was broadcasting from

dumpling (that can be served sweet or savory) that they hope becomes a huge tourism draw (last year, 3,000 people attended). And while all these ideas are great, as Mr Ishimori opined, all of these stakeholders need to start working together more closely. So that Tohoku the brand can start to be better developed and promoted.

Tohoku also needs to rebuild in so many other ways. Communities need to be rekindled. Towns need to be rebuilt. Industries need to either be redeveloped or alternatives need to be kickstarted. It's a region with a very tough road ahead of it. But one very much deserving of your attention. And, if possible, your help.

Shower here before oozing into your onsen



TOHOKU IS JAPAN'S HOT SPRING PARADISE

There are few things as relaxing and pleasurable than taking a bath-Japanese style-in natural hot spring water. For those of you who have yet to experience the joys of the onsen (the Japanese term for hot springs and baths using their waters), you have no idea what you are missing. I, myself, didn't until a few years ago. For most of my life, I've been a shower person. I truly didn't see the point of and never appreciated baths. But then, for a consultancy gig I had undertaken for a hotel collections company, I spent two and half weeks visiting some of Japan's most beautiful and unique boutique hotels and inns, several of which boasted onsens among their main selling points.

That trip was a revelation. I came back home wishing I had built a large, Japanese style, overflowing bathtub in my own home. Onsen waters are quite amazing. Hot, of course, but also therapeutic and healing (different onsens, because of distinct mineral content, may have different healing properties). After soaking in an onsen, you feel remarkably better. Use them repeatedly and you feel pretty darned amazing. Also, there's no

better way to get ready for a great night's sleep than lounging in piping hot onsen waters for a few minutes.

Japanese style bathing is very different from bathing, well, almost anywhere else. You don't go into a public (or even private) bath dirty. First, you shower, scrubbing yourself clean. And only then do you slide yourself into the hot spring waters. In most onsen areas, you will find hotels that have private facilities open to guests as well as a public bath that townsfolk can patronize, for a small fee. Further, different hotels will offer guests a range of choices. Some will only have communal (but same sex) baths, while others will allow you to reserve a smaller bath for a half an hour or so. And the more luxurious ryokans (inns) and hotels will even have rooms and suites with their own private onsens. For onsen-beginners, and people that are a tad shy of strutting their stuff in front of strangers, finding a ryokan or hotel with private baths or baths you can reserve is very important.

While you can find nice onsens all over Japan, Tohoku-Honshu's



An outdoor onsen at Satonoyu

(the main island) northeast region, which consists of seven prefectures-boasts over 4,000 natural hot springs, making it in my book, Japan's onsen capitol. And the best place to go if you're thinking of experiencing some of the country's best onsens.

My trip to Tohoku kickstarted with a bullet train into the Fukushima prefecture in order to get to Higashiya Onsen, where the Saitoh family have been running the Shosuke-no-yado Takinoyu onsen-hotel for the last 131 years. The hotel is gorgeous, situated right at the entrance of this hot springs resort town. It offers a smartly engineered mix of Japanese tradition and modern comforts, including Western style beds and flat screen TVs. Shosuke is used to welcoming foreign guests, many of whom are visiting friends and relatives working in Aizu, the closest major town. The hotel has 60 rooms and 8 onsens, all of which can be reserved for private use. Several of the rooms also have a private rotenburo (open-air hot spring bath), which is a real luxury. The baths here are all beautiful, many with postcard-perfect views of the local scenery. Their rooftop onsen was particularly magnificent.

For the Saitohs, showcasing Japanese tradition is very important. One of the ways they achieve this is through a nightly performance, which takes place in a beautiful

theatre they have built on the side of the hill that faces their lobby. Guests can comfortably sit in the lobby and watch live Noh performances or, if the weather is too cold, a projected sound and light show which tells the story of Aizu's history. Showcasing local produce is equally important. Ninety percent of the food served in their restaurant comes from the local area; which is something the Saitohs have always practiced, but now, post-earthquake and tsunami, something vitally important in rebuilding the livelihoods of the farmers and fishermen of Fukushima.

I next visited Tatsumiya Sanso Satonoyu, a much more traditional ryokan in Fukushima that has some of the most gorgeous rotenburo I have ever seen. The first photo to the left is of one of their outdoor hot spring baths. Of course, Satonoyu also has indoor baths as well-the inn has six onsens in total-all of which can be booked for private use.

Satonoyu is hidden down a steep and narrow road, inside the Bandai Asahi National Park. It is surrounded by a beautiful virgin forest. During warmer months (when I visited it was zero degrees Celsius outside), guests can explore the area via walking paths that the ryokan's owner has set up throughout his property. This is a place for escaping the hustle and bustle of the world; a place to



go when you want to experience true, classic, and formal Japanese hospitality. While Satonoyu does not receive too many foreign guests, it is very popular among Japan's elite, including members of the royal family.

Perhaps the most stunning of all the onsen ryokans and hotels I visited during this trip was Yunishi Ichijoh, located at Kamasaki Onsen in Miyagi prefecture. This stunning property was founded in 1560 and has been run by the Ichijoh family through 20 generations. The current scion is Mr Tatsuya Ichijoh, a visionary who has transformed his family's property radically over the last decade. Previously, Ichijoh was a traditional inn, frequented mostly by senior citizens who came to treat their ailments through long soaks in the hot spring waters. But Tatsuya, hotel school-trained and who had worked in some of Tokyo's top international hotels, wanted to create a new kind of ryokan, one that epitomized luxury at all levels. His plan would require extensive renovations as well as a total mindset shift among staff.

Today, Ichijoh is a truly luxurious accommodation that, to me at least, represents the future of upscale yet still intimate hospitality in Japan. The staff are startlingly young, well-groomed and immaculately outfitted in dark suits. Almost all of them also speak passable English. The rooms are lushly furnished, with state of the art

audio and visual systems, super-comfortable Western beds and other amenities that make spending the night here a true pleasure. I was thrilled to spot plusminuszero's Naoto Fukasawa-designed humidifier, as well as M's System's MS Series speaker (something I've coveted since first seeing one in the Ritz-Carlton Tokyo), in my room. I was also lucky enough to stay in one of two rooms with a private onsen. The bathing room was very smartly designed so that it can be opened up to the elements in nice weather. Ichijoh also has an additional six onsens, two of which are "medicated" baths that some claim are able to heal skin wounds and even burns.

Dining at Ichijoh was also a wonderful experience. I was surprised and thrilled to see a wine list with wines recommended and stocked by Berry Bros & Rudd, the UK's oldest and most iconic wine merchant. My overall stay was a pretty near perfect experience. The only downside was that my wife was at home in Singapore with my son; I would have loved for her to have been with me. Tatsuya has truly accomplished his goal of creating a new level of luxury and setting a new standard of service in the ryokan trade. He's done such a good job in fact that JTB has been bringing other ryokan owners to Ichijoh to learn from him, hoping to raise the overall standard across the country. One of the towns that was hit the

hardest by the tsunami was Minamisanriku, in Miyagi prefecture. This once-picturesque seaside village was known for its stunning views and super-fresh seafood. Tragically, the tsunami wiped out almost 95% of the town, claiming also the lives of thousands of its residents. Minamisanriku.

The Hotel Kanyo is Minamisanriku's largest and most iconic hotel. Built high on a cliff overlooking the town, the property suffered only minimal damage to its first two floors when the tsunami hit. In the aftermath, the hotel played a major role in keeping the surviving townspeople together. It housed citizens that had lost their homes as well as aid workers who arrived later. The hotel's owner Mrs Abe built a school and a library in the hotel, which still operate today. And she continues to allow all of the town's senior residents to use the property's stunning onsens for free.

The views of the ocean from the hotel are still amazing. As are both the indoor and outdoor onsens here. Equally amazing is the food served at the hotel. Standouts from an incredible dinner I had there were a whole abalone, slow grilled and served with butter and soy, and a bowl of the some of the best ikura I have ever tasted, served over rice with slices of raw abalone. But the point of coming here isn't the fabulous hot springs nor the exquisite seafood. It is to

lend support to a town very much in need of visitors.

The last onsen I visited was Yabitsu Onsen, located just a short drive from Hiraizumi, an important 12th century UNESCO World Heritage site in Tohoku's Iwate prefecture. Zuisenkaku is a very traditional ryokan-style hotel founded in 1989. The hotel has two indoor and two outdoor baths. The waters here are well-known locally for treating muscle pain, digestive problems, and skin diseases. They are also supposed to be good for physically weak children. Both modest and more luxurious rooms-all traditional-are available here. While few staff speak English well, this is a lovely place to spend the night on the way to Hiraizumi.

Websites for the ryokans and hotels mentioned above:

<http://shousuke.com/>
<http://www.satonoyu.com/>
<http://www.ichijoh.co.jp/>
<http://www.kanyo.co.jp/>
<http://www.zuisenkaku.com/top>

One of the onsens at Hotel Kanyo



BOOZING ONE'S WAY THROUGH TOHOKU



Drink-lovers (like me) have good reason to plan a Tohoku holiday. This scenic region northeast of Kanto (the region in which Tokyo sits) is home to some of the best sake breweries in Japan. While Niigata, which borders Tohoku, and which technically sits in Japan's central Chubu region, may be the one prefecture most famous among foreigners for top-end sake, the producers in Tohoku's prefectures churn out equally exceptional hooch.

Sadly, many of the region's top breweries were damaged by the earthquake (and tsunami) in March 2011. Of the 114 breweries in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima prefectures, for example, 93 were affected, according to the Japan Sake and Shochu Makers Association. Yet despite this, Tohoku's sake sales in 2012 were higher than those in pre-earthquake years. This demand for Tohoku sake was, according to news reports, fueled by both domestic and foreign consumers eager to help the region's brewers. According to a report in the Asahi Shimbun, a questionnaire conducted at a sake festival in Tokyo in the Fall of 2011 revealed that 44 percent of

respondents were drinking more sake from Tohoku than before the March 11 disaster. And, according to one sake brewer, once people tasted and realised how good the region's sake was, the demand continued to rise.

During my recent whirlwind tour of Tohoku, I enjoyed many local sakes. And visited one rather special brewery. Suehiro Shuzo, founded in 1850 and located in Aizu, Fukushima, is one of the region's largest and most famous producers. It also makes the Emperor of Japan's favourite sake (it is called Gensai) Suehiro is also well-known among sake lovers because it was here, in between 1913 and 1915, that the Yamahai method of brewing sake—a method in which the brewer creates his “starter” by allowing the enzymes in the koji he uses to break down rice naturally and undisturbed—was pioneered. The resulting sake is said to have a gamier, wilder, and fuller flavour.

The sake I tasted at Suehiro was all quite special. I enjoyed an aged sake, which had an almost sherry-like quality and their sparkling, which unlike most sparkling sakes,



was more dry than sweet. But it was Suehiro's Daiginjos and Honjozos that really had me swooning. Suehiro's Kira was dry and bracing. The brewery's owner Mr Shinjo Inokichi told me that this sake is very popular in the United States; it is served in some of the country's top sushi bars. Suehiro's Mai Daiginjo was mellow, fragrant and very refined. Mr Inokichi whispered to me that the Conrad Bangkok serves this sake, but marked up some 1,000%!

Suehiro Brewery is open to visitors, and offers hourly guided tours. The tour includes a walk through the brewing areas with explanations of the sake making process, a small museum with displays of the brewery's history and the history of sake making, and a visit to the factory store with a tasting bar where you can sample from and buy nearly their entire product line.

One of the things I was most looking forward to in Tohoku was visiting Nikka Whisky's Miyagikyo distillery in Sendai. I'm a fan of Japanese whiskies. In fact, for the most part, I prefer Japanese whisky to Scottish whisky (my own personal favourite everyday pour is Suntory's Hibiki 17 year old). I was very much looking forward to seeing how Nikka made its whiskies as well as getting the chance to taste and purchase some special products/releases that might only be available at the distillery.

The distillery itself is also really pretty. It made me think of an IT or university campus. Red-brick buildings surrounded by lush scenery on all sides. You couldn't imagine a nicer or more idyllic place to produce such beautiful product.

And boy, did I get to sample some simply stunning product. At the end of the tour, you are led to a large bar. There you will be given free samples of three of Nikka's more standard whiskies. Beyond that bar, down a small staircase, lies a large gift shop. And just past the gift shop, in a discrete corner, sits a small, elegant bar, looked after by one elder gentleman. This is where you can order tastes of the full range of whiskies available at the Miyagikyo distillery.

My guide and I, both whisky lovers, approached the bar grinning like little kids. She immediately went for the top quality stuff, ordering a taste of a 25 year old single cask whisky. I started slow, asking about the 12-year old "Key Malts" that were on display. In particular, I was keen to try the "sherry & sweet", which I was told was aged in sherry casks, and the "fruity & rich", which was aged in bourbon casks. While the former was a tad too sweet for my palate, I really loved the latter, and picked up a bottle for myself and another for a friend. I then moved on to try a few more really superb whiskies, but the one that stood out (for me at least) was a 20-year old



Miyagikyo Single Cask that had been aged in a sherry cask. While this whisky was sweet, it also had immense depth and power. A truly stunning drink. While pricey, I couldn't help but pick up a bottle for myself and one for my brother, also a whisky fan.

After this experience, I'll definitely be planning return trips to Miyagikyo as well as trips to other whisky distilleries across Japan. In fact, I'm already plotting to visit Suntory's Yamazaki brewery when S and I go to Kyoto this coming April.

When I was planning this trip, visiting a beer brewery was not something I had originally considered. But on one of the days, we had a couple of hours to kill on the way to check into our hotel in Sendai, so we decided to pop by the Kirin Brewery in Sendai. This particular factory was very heavily damaged during the tsunami. It wasn't until 8 months after, in fact, that the brewery was able to start shipping product again.

The Kirin Brewery offers group tours to visitors. It's a simple walk through of the facilities, during which the brewing process is explained. After that, guests are ushered to a large hall and, as you would expect, a long bar. Every visitor is allowed up to 3 pints of the various Kirin beers on draught. This is why, in my estimation, the tour is as popular as it appeared to be. As we were sipping our suds,

our tour guide demonstrated the "proper" way to pour a beer. Which was more amusing (to me) than educational.

Suehiro Shuzo (sake brewery)
<http://www.sake-suehiro.jp/top.html>

Nikka Miyagikyo distillery
<http://www.nikka.com/eng/distilleries/miyagikyo.html>

Kirin Sendai Brewery
<http://www.kirin.co.jp/about/brewery/factory/sendai/>
<http://www.visitjapan-tohoku.org.e.cr.hp.transer.com/zone/sendai/program/649/>



MATSUSHIMA OYSTER FESTIVAL AND ENTSUIN TEMPLE

Matsushima, a small city near Sendai in the Miyagi prefecture (in Tohoku, Japan), is worth visiting any time of the year. The Japanese consider the views of Matsushima Bay, teeming with more than 260 small islands, to be one of the most beautiful views in the country. As you may or may not know, the Japanese love making lists. Especially lists that rank things. They are also a people obsessed with natural beauty, man-made beauty and festivals. So, for centuries, they have designated and celebrated things like the country's top three gardens, Kyoto's top five Zen temples, Japan's top three festivals featuring floats, Kamakura's top ten wells, etc. Most famous among the many designations might be Japan's three most scenic places. Selected several hundred years ago, they are Matsushima, Miyajima and Amanohashidate.

But while nature lovers might flock to Matsushima all year round, for me, there was one specific weekend over which I knew I had to visit. You see, aside from its views, Matsushima is also famous for its big, plump, flavourful oysters. And every first Saturday and

Sunday in February, the town hosts its annual Matsushima Oyster Festival. If you're an oyster lover, this is one shindig that you simple must experience at least once in your life!

It's simply amazing being in town during this festival. The night before, every hotel and inn in town is completely full. The hotel I stayed in, The Hotel Matsushima Taikanso, which offer the best scenic views of the bay, was packed with hordes of happy, enthusiastic, foodies who were excited about spending the following day filling their bellies with fresh oysters. Most were, as you would expect, local Japanese, but they had come from all over the country. The festival is very famous domestically. And, because the region was still suffering from the after-effects of 2011's tsunami and earthquake, last year's festival had been cancelled. I was told by staff at the hotel that the response this year had been so incredible, both because people were so excited that it was being held again and also because they were keen to help support the region.



As said earlier, the festival usually lasts the whole weekend. But because the fisheries and oyster farms in this part of Tohoku are still recovering, this year there were only enough oysters for one day. That, however, didn't stop people from coming.

The festival opened officially at 930am but people were in line in the cold winter weather as early as 845am, queuing for both places to set up their own little areas, for bags of oysters they could purchase, and for a free oyster stew that was being dished out to all attendees. By 1030am, all roads into Matsushima were jammed with rows and rows of cars, filled with local travellers who were driving into town to attend the festival that day. I was really glad that I had spent the night at a hotel in town as opposed to trying to drive in on the day itself.

The festival is set up in three main parts. In one large area, attendees can pick out a spot and set up their own grilling/barbecue equipment, chairs, tables, etc. Essentially, they build a little area for cooking and a little area for eating. Many just ate directly over the grill. In another area, for a small fee, you could rent a little area already set up with a grill and chairs. In both these areas, you're expected to cook your own food – basically a giant DIY oyster roast. Upon entering the festivals, you'll encounter large stalls from which you can

purchase big bags of super-fresh and juicy oysters, plus other seafood. The third area hosts a food market. Here you can purchase all kinds of seafood, cooked on the spot in front of you, as well as other yummy things. You can also purchase drinks (beer and locally brewed sake mostly) as well as gourmet products to take home as souvenirs. I had a blast eating my way through several stalls, especially enjoying the oysters grilled in their shell and also deep-fried in batter.

For my American readers, this festival seems similar to the Low-country Oyster Festival held annually in Charleston, South Carolina. If you've been there and enjoyed it, you should definitely consider planning a holiday to Matsushima's festival. Obviously, the oysters served at the these two great oyster roasts are completely different. Which is why I think it would be awesome to be able to visit both (they are held around a week apart from each other) in the same year and compare the differences between them. But that's just me daydreaming again and wishing I had enough dosh to pop into a private jet on the weekends.

While in Matsushima, one of the great things to do is visit Entsuin Temple. Entsuin Temple was built in 1646 next to Matsushima's most important temple, Zuiganji Temple, to house the mausoleum of



Date Mitsumune, the son of the ruling local feudal lord Date Terumune. The temple was built in mourning and is devoted to Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, as Mitsumune died an untimely death at the age of 19. This is a beautiful small temple which, fortunately for me, was just a short walk from the grounds of the oyster festival.

When I was planning my trip through Tohoku, visiting the oyster festival and Entsuin were two things very high on my list. The former for obvious gustatory reasons. And the latter because I had read that at this temple, its staff would help you make your own prayer bead bracelets, which I thought would be really fun.

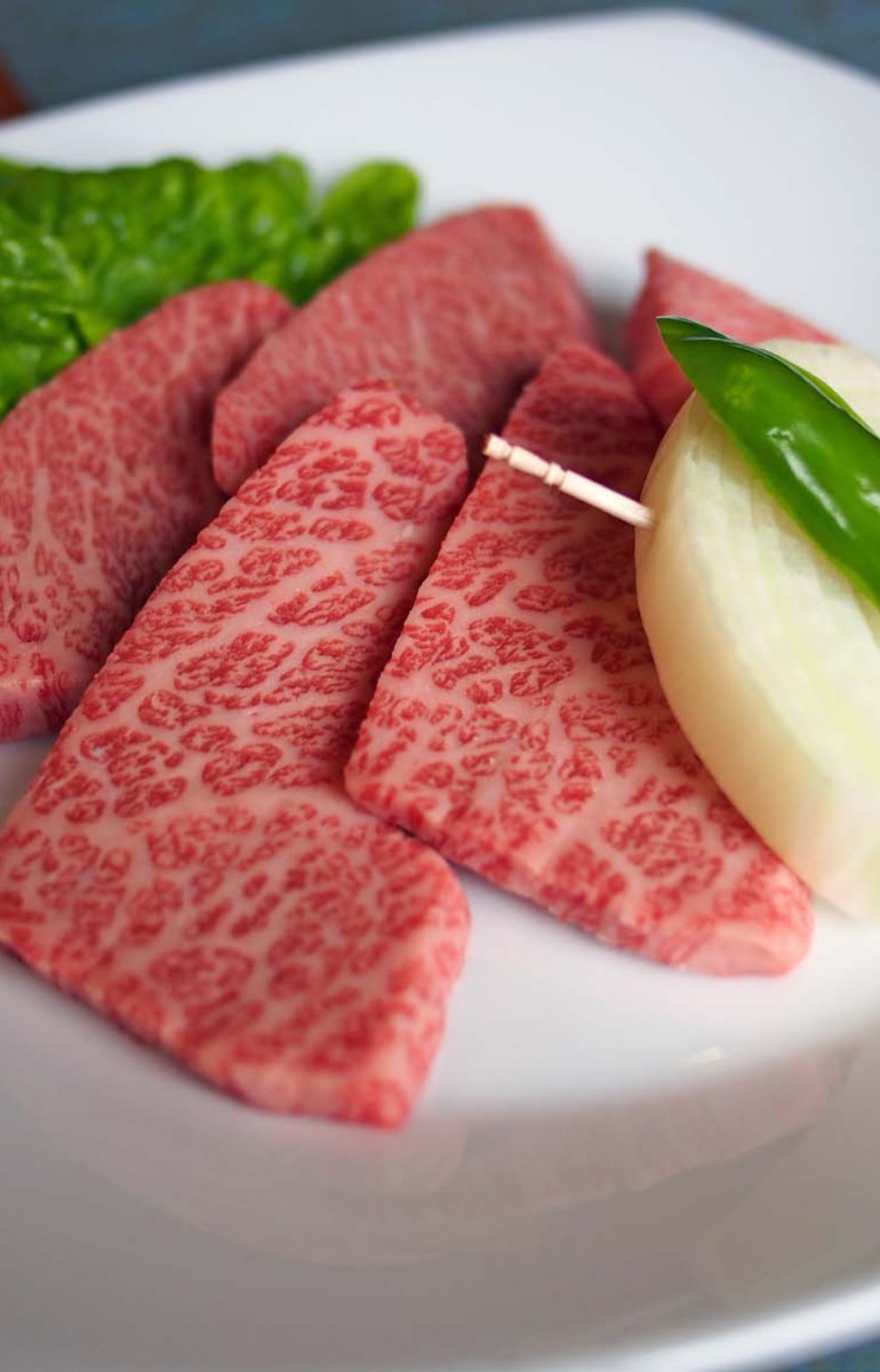
Of course, idiot that I sometimes am, I didn't expect this workshop to be as popular as it was (I only found out after my visit that you can make advance bookings). The bracelet making workshops are conducted in a small tatami room. You take your shoes off and enter. You are then asked to choose a bracelet style from one of four price categories. These depend on the size of the stones you will use and whether you wish to use semi-precious stones or not. All stones/beads have been blessed and each connotes a different prayer or meaning. Interestingly, the temple staff said they would only tell me what each bead stood for after I had made the bracelets; I was to choose based on instinct and only then would they tell me what prayers I had picked.

I decided to make 3 bracelets, one for my wife, one for myself and one for one of my best buddies. As I sat down, I noticed one group of young women to my right. All were very engrossed in their decision-making process. I asked my guide about this and she told me that they (the Japanese), and especially young women, took this very seriously because they really believe that the beads had power. She also said that a lot of young women made these with certain wishes or hopes in mind. And if they chose the wrong beads, they'd be crushed.

It was a really interesting experience. My assigned temple instructor informed me that for each bracelet, I had to pick a larger "head" stone from one tray, and then two identical stones from another tray. These latter two had to match. Five stones would separate the head stone from the two identical stones. Those I could choose freely. Similarly, I could also choose any stones for the others, the number of which varied according to wrist size.

For my wife, I decided to stick with only two stones, howlite and tiger's eye. The temple staff told me that the white howlite is a prayer to soothe and calm one's soul; the tiger's eye is a prayer for financial fortune. Which, I thought, was perfect.

I was in Matsushima for only one night and one day. And I had a fantastic time. I ate wonderfully fresh seafood and attended one of the coolest food festivals I'd ever been to. I had a great time designing some very cool bracelets that have significance beyond just aesthetics. And, of course, I got to see one of Japan's three most scenic views.



EATING AMAZING MEAT AND SEAFOOD IN TOHOKU

Every trip to Japan, to me, means great eating. This recent trip to Tohoku was no exception. Tohoku is known (domestically at least) for having some of the best seafood and meat in the country. The earthquake, tsunami and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, however, hurt the region's food industry severely. The two natural disasters left many farms damaged and fisheries completely destroyed. And the latter incident created huge fears both locally and internationally of whether the region's food would be safe to consume.

With regards to issues of high radiation levels in food products, the good news for greedy folks like me is that thanks to regular and often double or even triple checks (plus many other measures), the Japanese are now able to ensure that only the safest possible food reaches consumers. But, truth be told, right after the nuclear disaster, testing wasn't done properly, partly because the authorities simply weren't ready to deal with a problem that was so devastating and far-reaching.

One man who was seriously affected by the nuclear disaster is Mr Horigome, who owns one of Sendai's biggest wagyu farms (much of which gets graded A5, the highest possible grade for wagyu). After the earthquake, tsunami and disaster at Fukushima Daiichi, he and his peers were all told by the central government that there should not be any affects on his herd, that essentially everything was fine. Two months later, when the issue of food safety was becoming a larger and larger concern, the central government again issued statements that everything was fine. But then, in July that year, his beef (and that of his peers) was found to have high and unsafe levels of radiation.

Horigome-san was both shocked and distraught. This test was part of a random spot check. Which meant that he had no idea if beef that had gone to market previously was also unsafe. All of his shipments were suspended while he searched for a reason. His biggest fear was that he would have to kill off his entire herd and lose his livelihood. Eventually, he discovered that the rice straws that he used to feed his cows had been

contaminated. So while the cows themselves were never exposed to high radiation levels due to the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, crops used to feed them were. And this, he realized, was something that no one had thought about.

Fortunately, he and his peers were able to take measures that naturally brought radiation levels in livestock back down to safe levels. Shipments resumed on 15 November. But by then, the damage had been done. Consumers didn't want to eat Sendai beef. The auction price for his ultra-high quality product dropped by 50 percent. And as feed prices and his overheads remained the same, things became very tough for Horigome.

Fortunately, with rigorous testing and with time, people have slowly begun to trust Sendai and Fukushima beef again. Sales are back up to 90 percent of what they were prior to the disaster.

Seafood is also tested vigorously. While in Sendai, I had the pleasure of visiting the wholesale seafood market and attending the tuna auction. While Tsukiji market in Tokyo hosts perhaps the most famous tuna auction in the world, the majority of tuna being bought and sold there is bluefin. Sendai's auction specializes in bigeye tuna. Mr Seiichi Yamaguchi, the head of the Sendai Central Fish Market, was kind enough to get up extra early to attend the auction with

me. As we walked through the facilities, he explained how checks were being done now at all levels of the supply chain. Radiation monitors have been given to fishermen, to wholesalers, to distributors, etc. At every stage, someone is ensuring that the seafood being caught, processed and sold is 100 percent safe for consumers.

I have to admit, when I was first approached to tour Tohoku, my single biggest concern was food safety. My real concern wasn't about radiation in the air but radiation that had seeped into the ground, that would affect crops and animals, and radiation in the water, that would affect seafood. But after speaking with farmers, distributors, chefs, hoteliers, civil servants and people like Mr Yamaguchi, I have to say I became completely confident that I could safely eat anything served to me at any restaurant or hotel in the region. Which, given the amazing quality of the produce, was a very good thing!

I ate like a king (or a pig depending on your point of view) on this trip. Most of the high-end onsen ryokans and hotels I stayed in provided dinner as part of the nightly rate, so I "stayed in" almost every night. And those meals were exquisite. Every single one of them was a multi-course extravaganza that left me feeling halfway through the trip that I was turning into one A5 grade, heavily mar-





bled chubby hubby. The best of these meals were at Tatsumiya Sanso Satonoyu; at Yunishi Ichijoh, where among other delicacies, I had steamed crab legs, followed by Sendai beef, followed by a mini aka buta (local pork) shabu-shabu, followed by sakura ebi rice; and at Hotel Kanyo, where the two standout dishes were a whole grilled abalone and the best ikura rice I've ever eaten (the abalone is pictured to the left).

But my favourite meals of the trip weren't in the hotels. My two favourite meals were in many ways simpler. But what they lacked in volume, the chefs behind them made up for in skill and passion.

The first of my two best meals was a real shocker. My guide and I had driven into a tiny city called Ofunato because we were asked to visit a small Italian restaurant there called Porco Rosso (Tel 019226080). We were told nothing about the food. We were sent there because chef-owner Jun Yamazaki had been a real inspiration in the aftermath of the tsunami. Knowing that thousands of people had lost their homes, Yamazaki-san dedicated himself to feed as many people as he could, with whatever food he could find. He organized many volunteers to prepare food and to help deliver them, reaching a peak of being able to cater 2000 meals a day to the evacuees. He worked tirelessly, aiming to feed as many

as he could. his mission was to continue "making meals until the disaster victims are able to support themselves." His restaurant stayed closed from March all the way until October that year. And during that time, Yamazaki had worked himself so hard that he actually collapsed and had to be briefly hospitalized. When he did he reopen his own restaurant, he made it his goal to foster links between the local fishing, farming, catering, and manufacturing industries, in addition to developing a sustainable approach to the reconstruction of the town.

Porco Rosso is a charming, intimate little trattoria. The minute we entered, I could somehow predict that the meal was going to be really good. But honestly, I didn't expect it to be as great as it was. Unfortunately, because we were rushing to a meeting in a town 90 minutes away, we only had time for the set lunch, a "quick" four course meal that consisted of antipasti, a small first course, a pasta and dessert. The first course was an elegantly composed plate of small bites, all homemade and all incredible. There was homemade sausage, bacon, terrines, smoked fish, all simply outstanding. At this point, my guide (also a major foodie) started asking Chef Yamazaki's assistant some questions. Chef had lived in Rome for many years before returning to his hometown to open Porco Rosso. No wonder the food was as authentic and



tasty as it was. But the most interesting thing we found out was that Yamazaki had competed on the newly relaunched Iron Chef television show in November 2012... and won! Our next course was super simple but also super yummy, two small pieces of bread, slathered with cheese, grilled and then topped with olive oil and herbs. For my main, I had chosen spaghetti with fresh scallops, fresh sea urchin in a light cream sauce. This pasta, hands down, beats any uni pasta I've been served in Singapore. A delicious dessert trio rounded off a surprisingly charming lunch. Driving away, I was simply shell-shocked. So too was my guide, who said, "he should be in Nishi Azabu (a trendy part of Tokyo), not Ofunato!"

My other favourite meal was a totally unplanned one. My guide and I had changed our itinerary a little bit while on the road. There was one night in which we were originally booked into a classic ryokan, but it was two hours away from Sendai. And that next morning was when I had to be at the fish market at 530am. There was no way I was going to get up at 3am and then drive for 2 hours. Instead, we decided to stay in Sendai, which allowed us to get up closer to 5am. When we checked into our hotel, we asked its concierge to recommend a cool izakaya with great food that was within walking distance. She immediately suggested Inase-Inase, located just

a five minute walk from Sendai station.

Inase-Inase (<http://www.inase-inase.com/>) was not what I was expecting. It was much sleeker and more modern than I had thought it would be. It had one small counter facing the chefs plus a larger common dining room and a private room in the back. My guide and I had booked seats at the counter. Our meals were wonderful. We both ate different things. I had an ahi tataki that was probably the best version of this I've ever had; some wonderfully crisp but still juicy aka buta katsu; simply outstanding tsukune served (of course) with raw egg yolk; and marvelously rich sushi made with Sendai beef. At the end of the meal, I was trying desperately to convince the chef to open a branch in Singapore. It's the kind of place, serving the kind of food, I would eat at on a weekly basis, if I could.

I hope that when planning your next big overseas adventure, you consider Tohoku. It's a region that dearly needs your help (through the dollars you'll spend while there). And trust me, the food is something you'll definitely write home about. Or more likely these days, tweet about.

DECORATING LACQUERWARE IN AIZU WAKAMATSU

As you can see from the articles that have come before this on, there are many things to see and do when vacationing in Tohoku. There are wonderful onsens to bathe in, great drink to be tasted and purchased, and incredible food to eat. There's also a rich cultural heritage to explore. One city worth stopping in is Aizu Wakamatsu, which is the main city in Aizu, in the western part of Fukushima.

Two must-dos in Aizu are visiting Tsuruga Castle and shopping for Aizu lacquer. Aizu lacquerware has a history of over 400 years. In the Edo period, Aizu artisans adopted decorative techniques using gold powder and foils, and the region became one of the nation's foremost producers of beautiful lacquerware. Today, not only can you shop for this beautiful handcrafted product, at some of the top ateliers, you can actually try your own hand at decorating some lacquer pieces.

One such workshop is the 160 year old Suzuzen, known as one of the top producers in town. When you arrive, instead of heading into the main showroom, you walk past it

into a small, crowded work room. Here, Suzuzen's main artisan will let you select a piece to work on. You can choose between small plates, chopsticks with rests, boxes and mirrors. Once you've chosen your lacquerware, you can then decide if you want to use one of several stencils that Suzuzen can supply you with or if you want to make up your own design.

Both my guide and I opted for freehand designs. Using a very thin brush dipped in some kind of white solution, you create the pattern/image you want. My guide opted to paint a small bunny rabbit surrounded by a few abstract flowers. I decided to go really minimalist and opted to paint just one Chinese character, "Shan", which means kindness and is also my son's Chinese name. Amusingly, the "zen" in Suzuzen uses the same character, so initially the artisan thought I had chosen it for that reason (which would have been a really silly reason).

Once the initial pattern has been painted, it is heated and dried slightly, just enough so that it won't smudge when a brush





glides over the surface. Then, you head to another table filled with boxes of coloured metallic powder and another box with gold leaf. You then decorate your pattern with your choice of colours or gold. Once done, the artisan then waits briefly. He uses a chemical to wipe the surface of the lacquer and the colours and pattern are miraculously set. When I asked him if this would wipe away, he said, no, pouring water onto my plate to show me that the colours would not run. It is even food safe for room temperature snacks (like cookies, etc).

It's hard to see in the photo on the previous spread, but for my "shan", I had used gold leaf, some gold powder and a dash of orange-red powder as an accent.

Making these plates was really fun. And the possibilities are end-

less. In fact, I was kicking myself after we had driven off, because by then, I had come up with some really great ideas that I would have loved to have implemented. Of those, the one design I wish I had painted was a Mexican candy skull. I think the contrast of a large Mexican candy skull on traditional Japanese lacquerware would be super cool. But that's just me.

Anyway, if you do make it to Tohoku, consider Aizu. And if you do, be sure to drop into Suzuzen to create your own unique lacquer piece. It's a great way to spend an hour or more.

Suzuzen
1-3-28 Chuo, Aizu Wakamatsu-shi
Tel: 0242-22-0680
<http://www.suzuzen.com/index.html>

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE HIRAIZUMI



One of the most beautiful sites in Tohoku, Japan, has to be Hiraizumi. This UNESCO World Heritage Site in Iwate prefecture is home to Konjiki-do (Golden Hall) within Chusonji Temple, which attempts to recreate an ideal Buddhist world within our realm, and Motsuji Temple, famous for its Jodo (Pure Land) garden grounds. Motsuji is the home of several exquisite “culture of gold” remnants from the brand of Buddhism that developed independently in the Tohoku region far away from the cultural center of Kyoto in the late Heian era of the 11th century. UNESCO recognized this area as a rare example of how local culture could manifest on such a high level during the transitional period from the ancient era to the medieval period.

For more information, please refer to the write-up on UNESCO's World Heritage site here: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1277>

TRAVELLING TO TOHOKU



From Singapore, getting to Tohoku means flying to Tokyo. From there, you can connect by air through Sendai airport or take the Shinkansen. During my trip, I took trains and hired cars to get around the region.

While there are many travel agencies that can help plan your trip -- or you could make the arrangements yourself -- if you have the budgetary abilities to hire an experienced guide and translator, s/he could make all the difference between a good trip and an amazing trip. I whole heartedly recommend Ms Sumiyo Terai. She is very mature and very wise; knows everything there is to know about Japanese culture and history; and she's a great drinker and real foodie to boot. You can email her at puretimes226@ezweb.ne.jp. If you do, let her know I sent you. While you may not get a discount, you can bet she'll plan the very best eating and drinking experience imaginable.



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