

TRAILBLAZING IN JAPAN

HOLIDAYS

From restaurants with fire-breathing robotic gorillas, to sacred shrine-studded mountain trails, Japan is a place where it's possible to travel both forward and back in time, says Kate Hodal

There's a Japanese proverb that warns: "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down." And it's this phrase I'm thinking of as I trip over an ancient spike on a 1,000-year-old pilgrim path in Japan's emerald Kii Mountains.

Hiking along the ancient Kumano Kodo trail - which connects tiny hamlets with winding forest paths, babbling brooks, thatched teahouses and stunning views - the rusty spike is my introduction to Japan's 'abode of the gods', a region considered so sacred that everyone from Edo emperors, to contemporary octogenarians, has graced its mountain paths.

KUMANO KODO

While still relatively unknown to international visitors, the Kumano Kodo is a particularly well-trodden trail: Japanese have been hiking these mountains for more than a millennium, and antique rice paper paintings depict crowds of samurai, Kyoto emperors and kimono-clad women in veils and straw

sandals, traversing the rocks and cedars, in search of enlightenment.

The Kumano Kodo comprises seven sacred trails along the Kii mountain range, taking in Buddhist and Shinto shrines where trekkers have historically come to pray, refocus and engage in purification rituals.

It's one of only two pilgrimages in the whole world with Unesco world-heritage status - the other being Spain's Camino de Santiago - and its cultural significance shouldn't be overlooked.

Japan can sometimes seem overwhelmingly impenetrable to western visitors.

It's a place steeped in ancient rituals, yet also formidably alien. There are ghost-faced geishas ducking into alleyways, toilets with heated seats that flush automatically and cafes where you can pay women in pyjamas to give you a cuddle or remove your earwax.

But the nation's staggering beauty, delicious cuisine, and opportunity to step both back and forward in time, is truly a rare treat.

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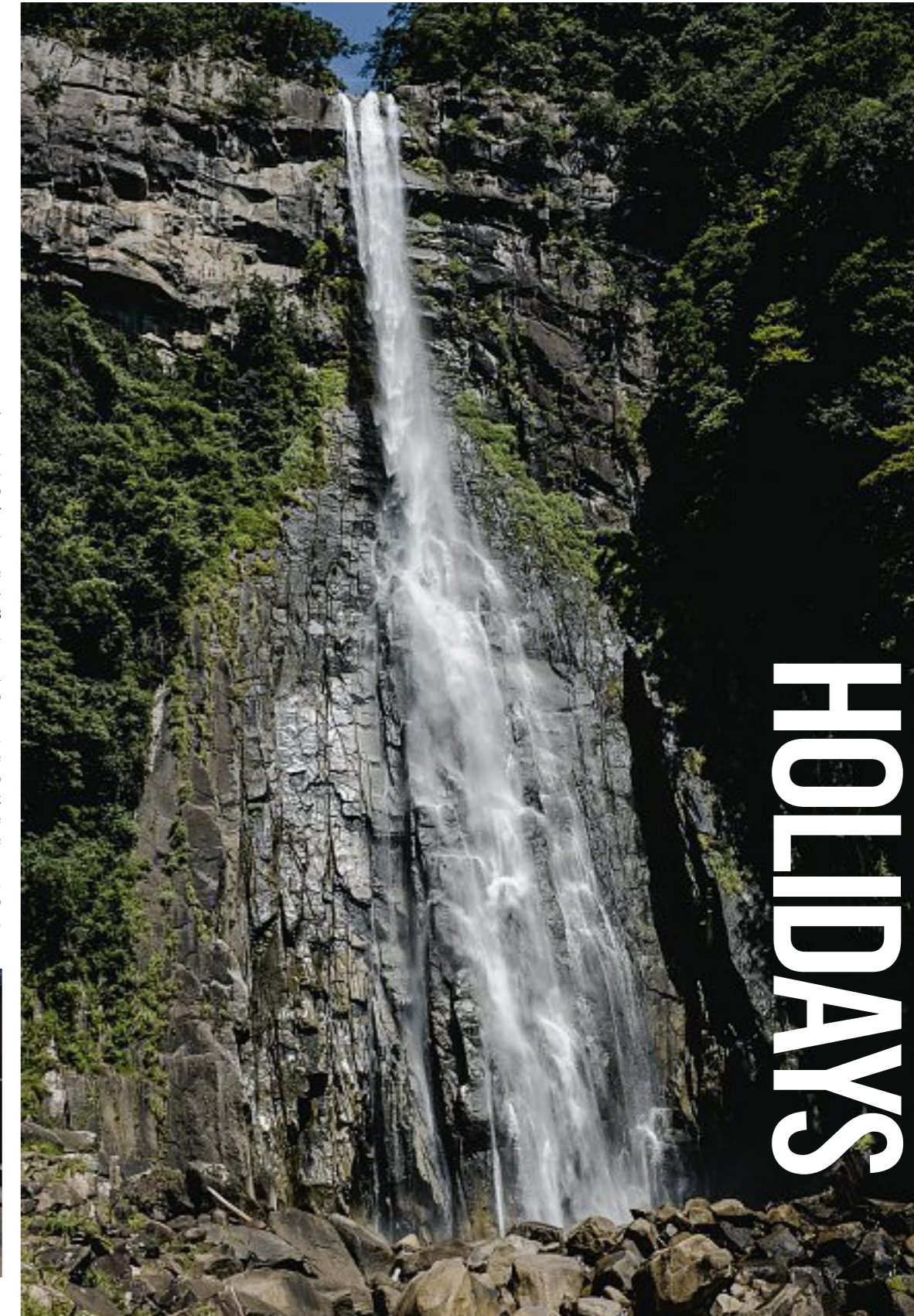
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The Rooftop Bar, Andaz Tokyo



The scramble crossing of Shibuya Station, Tokyo



The Nachi waterfall, considered the mother goddess on the Kumano Kodo trail

TOKYO CHIC

We begin our trip in Tokyo, at one of the capital's newest and most chic hotel additions to the skyline. Built on the site of a former castle in the upscale Toranomon neighbourhood, the Andaz Tokyo is an ear-popping elevator ride up Tokyo's second-highest building.

By day, the city stretches out as far as the eye can see, the Paris-inspired Tokyo Tower and luscious royal parks serving as landmarks. At night, the glittering capital below is best enjoyed with a cocktail from the 52nd-storey rooftop bar.

Around the Andaz are tiny vestiges of

old Japan: a samurai sword shop selling 11th-century swords with gloriously intricate designs and a 400-year old Shinto shrine where locals give thanks to the god of fire, and tourists sit amid koi ponds and fluttering butterflies.

But Tokyo wouldn't be Tokyo without a trip to some of its wackier destinations, so we spend a day in Shibuya, hobnobbing with Japanese teens dressed as Victorian dolls, then head to the nation's only 'goat cafe', where the two resident beasts stare curiously as we sip our bubble tea.

We end the evening at the Robot Restaurant, where a fire-breathing

gorilla swings onto the stage on a trapeze and battles a spider robot.

It's a mad futuristic mix of kabuki theatre, Japanese anime, Liberace sequins and retro Vegas decor - the best fun I've had out in ages.

THE TREK BEGINS

After a few days in the city, it's time to seek some spiritual salvation, so we take a bullet train to Osaka, and connect to another train to Tanabe city in the Kii peninsula, to start our Kumano Kodo hike.

CONTINUED / Overleaf



Sand Valley Villa



Gdansk Golf & Country Club, Poland

chef to reign supreme on a medley of Poland's finest, washed down with multiple nips of neat vodka, the Polish way of doing things. Early next morning I planned to play another quick 9-holes before we departed and when I woke up there was barely a trace of a headache - a vodka clearly of great purity and taste.

We were heading home but there was still time to fit one more round in. Postowo Golf Club, otherwise known as Gdansk Golf & Country Club, is handy for the airport, a completely different prospect from the first two courses and perhaps the most challenging of all three. It didn't look difficult, a fairly gentle parkland with plenty water. But in practice it was a stern test and somehow I couldn't quite rise to the occasion. Maybe the vodka had taken its toll after all. But there most surely will be a next time.

Poland, I have to say, is one of the surprise highlights of 2014 and one I must repeat in 2015.



Gdynia Harbour, Poland

THE HOLIDAY

Direct low cost flight, Wizzair from Glasgow to Gdansk (approx. two hours). Sierra Golf Club: www.sierragolf.pl. Sand Valley Golf and Country Club: www.sandvalley.pl. Gdansk Golf and Country Club - Polstolowo: www.postolowo.com. Warmia and Masuria travel portal: www.mazury.travel. Pomorskie region travel portal: www.pomorskie.travel. Hotel Elblag: www.hotelelblog.eu. Bulaj Restaurant, Sopot: www.bulaj.pl. For more information on Poland visit: www.poland.travel.