

THE AUSTRALIAN

# TRAVEL + LUXURY

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## CREATIVE FREQUENCIES

*Tuning in to design havens, irresistible interiors and artisanal wonders*

### SAMURAI STEPS

Crossing the Nakasendo Way in sensational style

### ADOBE BUZZ

Santa Fe builds on its multilayered legacy

### METROPOLITAN GLAM


Frankfurt polishes up its act with flair



# *Step back in time*

Athletic and aesthetic pursuits converge on a ramble through the forest trails, mountain passes and exquisitely preserved towns of Japan. Private guides, stylish digs and nurturing meals step it up from the age of the samurai.

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**EDO ECHO**  
Kimono-clad staffer at  
The Ritz-Carlton, Nikko.  
Opposite: the Atera Gorge  
dazzles with its emerald-  
coloured rockpools and  
scenic lookouts.

# EXPLORE



## TRAIL MIX

Refreshments served at Atera Gorge. Clockwise from above: Tsumago is one of the best-preserved towns from the Edo period; yellow blooms of Japanese kerria; cedar forest between Nagiso and Nojiri; stone monuments with haiku; the sparse main living room at Zenagi with a Tom Dixon light; a terrace at the resort; sliding doors moment.

## WALKING ON AIR

Walk into Luxury's Nikki King at Nikko National Park. Clockwise from left: picnic at Atera Gorge; bamboo forest between Magome and Tsumago; a guest at Zenagi.

Our journey began over bowls of just-kneaded soba in Magome, a picturesque post town in Japan's Kiso Valley, where aged timber buildings lean over stone lanes and wooden water wheels creak beside narrow canals. One of the better-preserved Edo-period villages along the Nakasendo Way, Magome once sheltered feudal lords, merchants and wandering travellers moving through the mountains between Kyoto and Edo. At this tiny soba shop tucked along one of the town's old masugata streets – built with sharp right-angled bends to slow horses and approaching enemies – the owner stood behind a fogged window rhythmically rolling buckwheat dough into long pale ribbons.

I'd arrived in Japan to join a tour with Walk into Luxury, an Australian company that arranges high-end private hiking itineraries through otherworldly landscapes, including Patagonia, Tasmania and New Zealand. Its latest outing traces sections of the ancient inland highway that once connected Edo – now Tokyo – with Kyoto during Japan's 250-year Edo era (1603–1868). Stretching roughly 540 kilometres across the mountainous spine of central Japan, the route threaded through 69 post towns: small waystations where weary pilgrims could eat, sleep, bathe and change horses before continuing their trek between the two imperial capitals.

Today, the Kiso Valley holds some of the trail's most-atmospheric and timeworn stretches, where mountainsides, cedar forests and small farming hamlets feel suspended between centuries. At a time when slow travel has become tourism's favourite buzz term, the Nakasendo feels like the real deal. Days unfold at walking pace along ancient forest trails and stone paths that have survived beneath the trees for centuries. "Our idea was to create a walk that felt genuinely experiential," said Walk into Luxury founder Nikki King on a crisp day in May. "For travellers wanting to experience Japan beyond the usual Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto circuit."

The multi-day hike kicked off in nearby Nagoya, the nation's industrial heartland, which is often bypassed on the bullet train en route to Kyoto. From there, the landscape gradually folded inwards towards the mountains. Concrete apartments gave way to cedar-clad hills and narrow river valleys until eventually modern Japan seemed to dissolve almost entirely into mist, forest and stone.

The first nine kilometres, between Magome and Tsumago-juku, wound through dense jade forest and deep mountain valleys. At one point we stopped in a cathedral of pencil-thin cedar trunks rising straight into the sky, with dappled sunlight streaming through. Here, our local guide talked us through shinrin-yoku, the Japanese practice of forest bathing. We closed our eyes and stood silently for a moment, listening to the soft trickle of a nearby stream and the rustle of leaves, and taking in the faint scent of damp earth.

By the time we arrived in Tsumago in the late afternoon, most of the daytrippers had already boarded buses back to Nagiso Station, leaving the town wrapped in near-total silence. Dark timber shopfronts selling handmade ceramics and chopsticks leaned along the crooked tarmac street, many built from prized Kiso hinoki cypress, a protected timber once reserved for temples and castles. There were no visible power lines, no cars, no neon signs – only the occasional snap of a wooden door sliding shut and smoke curling faintly from old chimneys.

Once an important crossroads, the town slipped into decline before residents began one of Japan's earliest preservation movements during the postwar boom years. Strict rules prevented buildings from being sold, demolished or radically altered, helping preserve Tsumago – not as a museum piece but as a living town where people still cook dinner, hang washing and go about daily life behind centuries-old wooden façades.

This made our first stay at Zenagi, a private hilltop lodging overlooking the valley, feel even more resonant. Originally built during the Edo period as a kominka farmhouse for a prominent local family, the former 12-bedroom estate, now reimaged as

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a three-bedroom retreat, has been restored with the restraint and precision Japan does so well. Inside, washi-paper walls reinforced with iron and copper divide the rooms, while deep cedar soaking tubs overlook small bonsai gardens slicked with evening rain. Paper and bamboo lamps by artisan Toshiyuki Tani cast a honeyed glow beside sculptural Tom Dixon pendants. Upstairs in my room, a replica yellow Yayoi Kusama pumpkin sat alone on the floor like a pop-art intervention to the otherwise muted interiors.

Like the rest of the resort, the main living room at Zenagi is almost monastic in its simplicity, with tatami mats, dark lacquered timber floors and a handful of rattan chairs beside chunky rectangular windows framing the valley and rice fields beyond. Soft beams of late-afternoon light danced across the floorboards. The house is built around the Japanese concept of *ma* (negative space) where serene emptiness becomes part of the design itself. Dinner that evening was a kaiseki-style nine-course menu that drew directly from the valley outside: river trout ceviche, delicate broths, mountain herbs plucked from nearby forests and crisp crackers scattered with edible flowers. Outside, the landscape slowly became shrouded by fog and darkness.

The next morning, our tramp began near the town of Nagiso, hewing to the Yogawa-Michi forest route in the leafy countryside. Each section of our journey was led by an expert guide from the region, something King said is central to the experience. "That's what makes this walk so special," she told me. "It's just the guests and the guide, so you get a much deeper, more authentic perspective of each route." As the trail climbed gradually through the forest before crossing the remote Nenoue Pass and descending towards Nojiri, we barely encountered another soul besides the occasional farmer gathering asparagus. Near the end of the hike, the landscape suddenly opened onto the rushing Atera River, its retina-popping, Listerine-blue water twisting through the valley beneath steep forested cliffs. The water was so clear the stones at the bottom appeared magnified by the current.

Overnight the weather, mostly clement since our arrival, turned biblical. By morning, cold rain was falling steadily across the valley, soaking the forests and turning the ancient stone paths glossy beneath our boots. From Yabuhara, we climbed towards Torii Pass, named after the shrine gate, built by warlord Kiso Yoshimoto after praying there before battle in the 15th century. Mist hung low between the trees, softening the outlines of the mountains until the entire forest felt washed in shades of charcoal and green.

Hours of rain seeped through our jackets. By the time we descended into Narai-juku – another remarkably maintained post town, often nicknamed "mini-Kyoto" for its storybook rows of dark timber shopfronts and timeworn inns – we were ready to get toasty. Relief came in the form of lunch in a narrow 150-year-old restaurant hidden behind indigo noren curtains. Tatami mats lined the floors and low communal tables stretched beneath amber light from paper lanterns. The restaurant was run by a smiling woman in her eighties with flushed cheeks and quick hands, alongside a team of equally sprightly local women moving briskly between the kitchen and dining room. Outside, rain hammered against the windows while bowls of steaming miso soup, sticky rice topped with charcoal-grilled river fish and sharp local pickles arrived in rapid succession.

After lunch, we checked into Byaku Narai, a beautifully restored hotel spread across four 16th-century buildings, including the former Suginomori Shuzo sake brewery founded in 1703. My suite was a pastiche of old Japan: silk and shoji screens, dark lacquered timber beams, tatami mats and low platform bed. Above the bed, illuminated ranma panels – intricately carved transoms found in Japanese homes – cast evocative silhouettes across the walls like shadow-play images from an old woodblock print. At the back was a small private onsen bath fed by mountain spring water sourced from the nearby Shinano River. I spent most of the evening thawing out in the warm water as mist drifted across Narai's rooftops.

## TAKE THE PLUNGE

Rooms at Byaku Narai have a private onsen. Clockwise from right: Mount Fuji glimpsed from the plane; Ryuokyo Gorge; a guest room at Byaku Narai.



## GARDEN PATH

The private garden of a room at Byaku Narai. Clockwise from below: cherry blossom; a bedroom at Hoshinoya, Tokyo; a server at a lunch spot in Narai; a musician in the entrance hall at Hoshinoya hotel.



**STARRY TREK**  
Nikki King. Clockwise from below: the view at Senjōgahara; a room at the Ritz-Carlton, Nikko; resting poles and boots; stairway between Senjōgahara and Yudaki Falls; Lake Chūzenji in Nikko National Park.



**HEAD OVER HEELS**  
Kirifuri Falls near Nikko. Clockwise from below: a lounge at the Ritz-Carlton, Nikko; a path en route to Senjōgahara; lunch at the Ritz-Carlton's Japanese restaurant; a suite at the hotel; its onsen.



The Nakasendo Trail officially ends in Tokyo, but rather than finishing there, our itinerary paused for a one-night intermission in the capital before continuing north into Nikko National Park. After days of cedar forest and Edo-period villages, Tokyo arrived in a sensory overload of neon crossings, electronic jingles and immaculate department stores. Yet even here, the journey remained tethered to old Japan.

We checked in to Hoshinoya Tokyo, a ryokan disguised as a skyscraper in the middle of the financial district, where guests remove their shoes the moment they arrive, and hushed corridors and rooms are lined entirely in tatami. The interiors are luxuriously sparse, with soft lantern light, shoji screens, cedar and stone. That evening was capped with a refined omakase meal – jewel-like nigiri brushed lightly with soy, delicate seasonal dishes arranged like miniature artworks and sake poured slowly between courses – before sinking into the rooftop onsen beneath the Tokyo night sky.

The next morning, fresh and revived from our pampering stay, we boarded the new *Spacia X* express, Japan's latest luxury train, to Nikko National Park. Inside were deep seats, flattering lighting and a smart cocktail lounge serving sake and craft beer as we slid north out of Tokyo. It was another reminder of how Walk into Luxury excels at combining outdoor exertions with cossetting pleasures. Gradually, the dense cityscape gave way to steep forested slopes, waterfalls crashing over volcanic rock and low clouds drifting across alpine lakes.

On the edge of Lake Chūzenji – Japan's highest natural lake – sits The Ritz-Carlton Nikko, our base for the next few nights. The handsome hotel is a symphony of all-black stone, dark timber and butter-yellow interiors. Triple-height ceilings and enormous windows reveal vistas of Mount Nantai. Couples in expensive puffer jackets lingered beside stone fireplaces nursing whisky-laced cocktails while young families padded between the onsens and their rooms in wide-sleeved yukata robes and wooden hotel clogs.

The days that followed were spent hiking around Lake Chūzenji and into the surrounding mountains. At Kirifuri Falls, water plunged 75 metres into a rocky gorge, casting a fine veil of spray into the air that gives the falls their name: "falling mist". Elsewhere, after a short forest climb, we ascended to the Mount Hangetsu observation deck where the lake curved below in a crescent shape beneath the looming silhouette of Mount Nantai and the layered mountains of Okunikko beyond.

Our final ramble followed the Ryuokyo Valley trail, a six-kilometre walk tracing the Kinugawa River through a gorge carved by volcanic activity millions of years ago. The path clung to steep valley walls above rushing turquoise water, crossing the Musasabi suspension bridge where the river twisted sharply through the inky rocks below. It felt wilder and more untamed than the ordered cedar forests of the Nakasendo Way. Gazing across the valley, I contemplated returning in autumn, when the mountains erupt into deep crimsons, burnt orange and gold.

In a hyper-modern culture so often defined by bullet trains and pedestrian crossings, the trail revealed another side to Japan entirely: slower, poetic and halted in time. Later that afternoon, before driving back to Tokyo, we stopped one last time for soba at a hole-in-the-wall café on the edge of the valley. Steam curled from lacquer bowls as noodles disappeared into dark soy broth. The meal took on a bigger meaning, a final reminder that some of the strongest attributes of Japan are still found in its smallest rituals. ▀

*The writer was a guest of Walk into Luxury, which offers an eight-day Nakasendo Trail and Nikko National Park journey from \$14,995 per person. Shorter itineraries are also available, including a five-day Nakasendo Walk from \$8,650 and four-day Nikko Journey from \$6,750. All include top-notch stays and dining experiences, a private driver and guides, and premium rail with platform escort. [walkintoluxury.com](http://walkintoluxury.com)*