



# JAPAN

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**A** country full of surprises and formalities, exemplary manners and impeccable hospitality, mouth-watering sushi, full-contact sumo wrestling and stunning golf courses. Even though Japan is not often thought of as a golf destination, there are over 2,000 courses across the country, many of which are beautifully designed and meticulously maintained. After my golf trip to Japan last year, I can confirm that playing golf in Japan is a real treat.

Flights are direct from the UK to Tokyo, but my final destination airport was Nagoya via Hong Kong. Arriving at Nagoya was like arriving into an exceptionally-clean

shopping mall, with shops and restaurants to divert the weary traveller's eye, although my eye was firmly set on my bed for that night!

Japan is split into counties known as prefectures: Nagoya is in the Aichi prefecture and about three hours west of Tokyo. My golf trip was to start in Mie (pronounced 'mee' or 'mee-ah') prefecture next door.

Playing golf in Japan is a different experience. Caddies take your clubs and put them on carts ready to play as you make your way to the clubhouse reception where you'll be given a wallet. In this wallet is your locker key and a players card. Once golf-ready, leave everything in the locker and just bring your wallet and players card which now acts as your personal credit facility; anything you buy from the pro-shop, the bar or the snack hut is put on credit against your name and you simply settle up one final bill before you leave.

I played three golf courses in Mie prefecture:

Nagashima Golf Club on day one, with a steady nine holes getting you into the correct time zone. Nagashima, built in 1991, was easy on the eye and quite playable, but needed pretty much every club in my bag! Twenty-seven holes of golf are available at Nagashima, each completed nine is met with a short break in the clubhouse, players card at the ready, awaiting the tee time allocation for the next nine holes. Nagashima's sculptured fairways blend seamlessly into the backdrop of the landscape with the only definition being the different colour green to guide you gently around doglegs and towards the holes. An undulating but quite walkable course, the four-seater caddy remote-controlled buggy trundled along by itself down the path as the golfers walked down the fairway with the clubs carefully organised on the back, ensuring easy access for the caddy. Water was in play for some holes creating a mirror for the rising hills in the background.

Only playing nine holes enabled us to visit the flower gardens afterwards at Nabana no Sato. Anyone who thinks about Japan is sure to have an image of some kind of flower, usually the famed cherry blossom whose season spans in excess of a month starting south and heading north as the weather improves, leaving in its wake a number of festivals celebrating the trees in bloom. At that time of year, the begonia was prevalent, its mass displays creating flowered carpets tumbling down the walls in a riot of colour. Who would have thought the humble begonia could be so artistic.

Sadly while playing Tsu (pronounced Sue) Golf Club the heavens opened. Again, a course of variety with some deep pothole bunkers befitting a British links course! Seemingly carved out of the landscape, Tsu is another relatively new course built in 1990 by the course designer Masashi Ozaki Sato, offering challenges of long fairways and tough but reasonably large, receptive greens. The weather did not detract from the game in hand and playing with three Japanese local men members gave me great insight into their textbook style of golf, perfect swings and hitting a

country mile, yet soft around the greens. We were in great humour as we plodded our way around in the wet, challenging me to hit some quite difficult shots, reciprocating the challenges bestowed upon them on previous holes. Elevated greens and interesting course design left a great impression on me to return again. Food was served in the clubhouse afterwards and while I had been given miso soup before, I wasn't quite prepared for miso itself, the taste was beefy, yet the texture was quite unpleasant. To my Japanese playing partners' delight my face told the story! Miso is fermented soy beans and used quite a lot in Japanese cooking.

The final game of golf was at Nemu. Nemu golf course is perfectly manicured, offering twists and turns as you finish one hole and pop out of the woods to be greeted with an inlet of clear blue sea and a golden sandy beach edging its shores. Having vista views

one can really appreciate the irregular-shaped bunkers with their white sand in sharp contrast against the vibrant green fairways. A large-scale course redesign in 2015 by American Damian V Pascuzzo flipped holes around to embrace the views over Ago Bay, to

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hit shots over the inlet and maximise the natural terrain. Positioned as a seaside course, it does not have the links feel or style as we know in the UK but does, in my opinion, sit as a combination quality cliff top and parkland course of exceptional views and playing holes.

It wouldn't be unusual to spend a full day at the golf club, play golf, eat lunch, have a few drinks then visit the onsen.

The best onsens are natural warm hot spring volcanic baths with no chemicals added. There to help erase that memory of the rubbish shot out of the bunker on the 18th! Strict rules apply when entering the onsen. First, you don't wear shoes; you leave them at the threshold or where indicated.

Secondly, you must wash before entering the onsen bath, by way of a small personal cubicle, a flexible hose and a small seat to sit on. There is usually everything one might need for washing, and the final rule - you will be naked! Don't worry, onsens are split into female and male facilities. Often there will be multiple baths of different temperatures from plunge pools to larger sprawling cave-like baths for peace and harmony and quite often

with a view over the gardens. Afterwards, wash down again and move conveyor-like onto the drying phase with big fluffy towels provided before getting dressed and leaving the onsen feeling refreshed and having forgotten the 18th hole!

The Iga area of Mie is said to be the birthplace of the Japanese ninja. It now boasts a museum where you can learn ninja culture and see the original weapons on display. Ago Bay

in Mie is home of the 2016 G7 summit and proudly displays the round table with flags representing countries attending at the Shima Kanko Hotel.

Mikimoto Pearl Island is also in Mie, where in 1893 Kokichi Mikimoto devised a way to culture the modern-day pearls. We watched the Ama ladies dive for pearls in their traditional all-white costumes covered from head to toe. A distinctive whistle gently emitted by a small breathing tube became as characteristic as the pearls themselves. Visiting the shop afterwards gives you the opportunity to see the craftsmanship in setting the pearls in a variety of ways to display their beauty.

And what better way to dine after the trip to Mikimoto Island than an Ama hut where the ladies, dressed in their traditional attire, prepare and serve the freshly-caught seafood over open coals for unique tastes of the sea.

Food in Japan must be one of the most colourful experiences I have ever engaged in. Carefully thought-out meals are presented often on trays full of various little pots, some lidded, some not. Sushi is likely to take centre stage, along with probably miso soup and

certainly rice. Kobe beef is known as the best beef, often confused with Wagyu beef. Wagyu is the collective name meaning simply 'Japanese cattle'. In Mie the local beef delicacy is Matsusaka beef, a highly sought-after beef, treated the same way as Kobe but not exported to international markets. Cows are lovingly fed on beer and massaged with sake for three years to give the distinctive marbled effect and mouth-watering taste.

The next stop on the Japanese adventure was a trip on the Shinkansen, or bullet train. The Shinkansen was first proposed in the 1930s and became a reality in 1964 with the first high-speed train reaching up to 130 mph. The bullet train name came from the shape of the trains and still resembles a bullet today. Ten million-plus people ride the Shinkansen regularly and their safety record is unblemished. The more modern trains can reach up to 200 mph as a routine cruising speed. As you can imagine everything is timed to perfection, the train arrives and departs on time. It isn't easy to take luggage on the train: a small hand bag is fine, but the rest of the luggage is transported by a super-efficient road network service and is ready for your arrival while you enjoy the train ride.



Whether you just want to play for fun, practice or play in a tournament, Nagashima Country Club is an excellent place to play golf.





Breathtaking views from the 17th hole of the Fuji Country Club golf course.

We arrive in Shizuoka prefecture, home of Mount Fuji. It is little known but Shizuoka boasts the best green tea production, which by arrangement you can pick and enjoy the fruits of your labour. In contrast, there is also craft whisky production, located in cypress-built buildings for

## *everything is timed to perfection*

warmth, delivering locally-rooted whisky in harmony with nature. Many Japanese beers are also brewed in Shizuoka. From blonde to heavy darker beers, there is a taste to suit all beer drinkers. The fertile soil of Shizuoka clearly is the foundation for all good things.

Golf in Shizuoka is, as you can imagine, quite spectacular with Mount Fuji, commonly known as Fuji san (san being the honorific title for Mr, Mrs, Ms etc) ever present. Fuji Country Club celebrated its 60-year anniversary in 2018.

Proud members of Fuji Country Club show off the clubhouse and 18 holes with Fuji san choosing not to make an appearance on the day of the photographs! It is shy they say with a wry smile. Hard to believe as it looms over you at 3,776 metres!

Designed by Mr Shiro Akaboshi, Fuji Country Club first opened in 1958 with support from expats and locals alike, with the plan of encouraging employment in the locality and encouraging tourists into Gotemba, Shizuoka.

Sadly we were unable to play the golf course but were treated to an incredible lunch! A quick scoot around the course does mean I want to go back though.

The Fuji Course at Kawana Golf Club is in the Top 100 in the world. With a hotel on site, this little corner of Shizuoka is worth the pilgrimage to visit and stay a few nights. The Fuji course hosts an annual ladies' competition every April. It is often on people golfing bucket list, so I was keen to take a look myself – and I wasn't disappointed either. The hotel on site has an incredible onsen, and while the restaurant for

the golfer is a little lacking in character, the main restaurant is warm and welcoming. Both serve great food. There are two courses in Kawana, Fuji and Oshima. Both are 18 holes. I played only the Fuji course.

Walking the course, the caddy pushes a trolley which accommodates all four golf bags. She is spritely, darting here and there for the golfers, but enjoys walking the course too. That said, on the odd occasion where there is a steep incline, the clever Japanese have got that covered too. There is a remote-control buggy to ride to the top, a driverless buggy which picks you up and deposits you at the top before retiring back to collect the next group. There is no controlling the speed: it was slow, but it did give you a chance to breathe in the fresh sea air and take in the stunning views across





The Kawana Fuji course is often called Japan's Pebble Beach because it is a golf resort set on cliffs near the ocean.

the course towards the ocean. The first hole is an elevated tee to shoot down a long fairway, a nice easy relaxing shot to prepare you for the course ahead. From there the course meanders around, up and down hills and pops you back on the top again part way round. The classic par 3s with elevated tees to target greens are more of a challenge than you'd think! Finishing hole 11 doesn't prepare you for the 12th hole. The iconic 12th hole with the ocean on the left and the sprawling fairway ahead is a sight to embrace. Opening in 1936 and designed by C.H. Alison the fertility of the natural landscape has been maximised to please golfers and non-golfers alike.

I cannot write about golf in Japan without mentioning the people themselves. The Japanese people are the most humble people I have met. They are willing to please and go the extra mile to make your trip the best it can be. Their knowledge of the English language isn't great, but luckily the language of golf is pretty international. Any other obstacles can be overcome with translating apps. Caddies generally don't get a tip, nor do they expect one, although sometimes a small monetary reward is given if they have done an outstanding job.

- *Japan will be hosting the Rugby World Cup across numerous prefectures this year.*
- *The Akashi-Kaikyo Bridge is the longest suspension bridge in the world at 3,911 metres, and connects some of the islands to the mainland.*
- *Face masks are worn not to keep pollutants out, but because the wearer has a cold and wants to be considerate to others.*
- *Japan has in excess of 2,300 golf courses.*
- *The climate in Japan is seasonal. However the central and northerly prefectures can experience snowfall while the southern ones are basked in sunshine.*
- *Snoozing during the day? 10- to 20-minute power naps are not discouraged.*
- *Japan is made up of 6,852 islands.*
- *The Japanese name for Japan is 'Nippon'.*
- *With Shinto and Buddhist cultures, there are many shrines to visit for a true authentic feel for the history of Japan.*