

Big in Japan

Kansai is said to be the food and culture capital of Japan. Here to review several of its more than 300 golf courses, including venues with two greens on every hole and ones with yellow rough, is Sarah Forrest



Despite the cool autumnal feel, the warm welcome is ever present by the people of Japan as I landed into Kansai International Airport.

This is my third time to Japan, and I'm delighted to be seeing more from this beautiful unassuming country located in the Pacific Ocean just 587 miles east of South Korea.

Two quick and efficient train journeys and I'm

at my first destination in Shiga Prefecture.

Landing in the morning gives me time to play nine holes, and that is exactly what I did at Ryuo (pronounced R-uro). Playing with a delightful Japanese member, we went about tackling the front nine of this 6,600 yard (5,076 yards off the front tees) parkland course.

Ryuo Golf Course is part of the Prince Chain of hotels and golf courses. With easy access to the main highway, it is a great stop-off point when tripping around Japan. Beguiling its relative early establishment of 1982, the course

has water and trees aplenty; the condition of the course was brilliant. I particularly liked the two greens: It makes sense when weather is a contributing factor to have two greens, one in play and one 'resting' and, to combat the yardages, a simple-yet-effective solution at Ryuo GC is to have two sets of yardage markers too, one on the left fairway for the left green and one on the right for the right green. Greens were really good, and rolled well too.

A 40 minute transfer takes me to Lake Biwa Otsu Prince Hotel for a few days.

Situated on the Biwa Lake, the largest fresh water lake in Japan, and the view from this imposing tower towards mountains and across cities was extraordinary.

Thinking an early night was in order, I was easily talked out of that silly idea and was tantalised out for the night to the Matsukiya Omi Beef restaurant. Now we've all heard about the beef from Japan, and the lavish attention adorned on this precious commodity. The piece of beef on offer on tonight's menu was valued at \$2,000, so savour it I did.

Matsukiya style of dining is similar to that of a fondue, the beef is finely sliced and added to vegetables to be cooked as you like over a wide 'frying pan' over an open flame, adding soy sauce, sugar beet and water as needed.

After a day of meetings and

golf in Asia

discussions, the following day I was back on the golf course. This time playing the better known course of the area, and also a Prince property, **Seta Golf Course**. A 54-hole complex, I had the opportunity to play the West course. Despite its relative flat field, the 12 lakes came into play at every opportunity. Playing late autumn is a nice time of year, in fact the weather was cold but the playing conditions were great, especially with the crystal clear blue ponds perfectly reflecting the colour in the changing trees. Weirdly, the fairways are green, surrounded by yellow rough. The grass used in the rough goes dormant during the winter months but remains thick and challenging! Couple these contrasting colours with the blue sky and the mountainous backdrop, and you've got a picture postcard to bash a little white ball around.

Before leaving Shiga Prefecture, another first for me in



Japan was a ride on a tram – not just any tram but the longest cable railway in the country, called the Sakamoto Cable Railway, which opened in 1927. Taking 11 minutes to complete this wonder journey through the hillside, I was surrounded by tall imposing trees to the top where Mount Hiei awaits to show the vista views and offer the UNESCO Enryaku-ji temple, all overlooking Lake Biwa.

Moving away from Shiga and into Hyogo (He-yo-go) Prefecture via the incredibly interesting Takenaka Carpentry Tools Museum; I was showcased all that is good about woodwork in Japan.

Basing ourselves at the ANA Park Hotel for a few nights meant we were within easy reach of Kobe, the sixth-largest city in Japan, and a dinner cruise on the lake onboard Concerto, a large commercial boat cruising the lake with

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live musicians and great food, the saké flowing, an unforgettable experience was had.

Whilst not entirely unfamiliar with auctions, a live fish auction was a new experience. Managed by a cooperative, the fish is sold fresh off the boat. Watching slippery octopus making a bid for freedom whilst trying to identify who bought the fish and for how much for, was beyond my novice auction experiences.

What better thing to do after a live fish auction than to visit Kikusui, one of the best sushi restaurants in the region? Freshly prepared in front of your eyes, you can but marvel at the dexterity of these craftsmen at work, producing the coloured sushi with an amazing fresh taste.

Himeji Castle is a World Cultural Heritage Site and an imposing, white six-floor building atop of a hill. A series of walls spiral around the castle, as do strategic ponds dug for protection purposes, but once inside the walls the building simply shines with eye-catching architectural designs.

The Shinkansen (bullet train) quietly glides into the station to quickly whisk



us back to Kobe and dinner at the Plasir Kobe restaurant. Kobe beef, the marbled beef simply cooked to enhance and intensify its flavour produces unadulterated quality and taste.

Nine holes of golf the next day bought me to Hanayashiki (hannah-ya-she-kye). Playing the **Yokawa Country Club** was a treat as the course snakes around providing reflective ponds in the late autumnal sky. The clubhouse is a futuristic looking 'War of the Worlds' style over various floors giving the best views of the course and surrounding countryside as you go about your leisurely lunch in this relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

A new hotel that night was the Nesta Resort Kobe, a large, family-orientated resort with everything the family might want from hotel rooms to timeshare-type apartments on offer but that night, as a special treat, was the Irori restaurant, a special long table with a barbecue-style dining in the middle of the table. Fish are unceremoniously staked on wooden skewers tilted towards the white hot charcoal sticks for cooking. Raw food is placed on a mesh grid to cook for yourself – creating a great atmosphere.

One final game of golf awaited, this time at **Tokyu Grand Oaks Golf Club**, a great 18 holes with the sun treating us to warmth beyond expectations to enhance this beautiful parkland course. Gently undulating winding fairways with the ever-present yellow thick rough offset the vibrant green fairways and bright blue sky. A must-play for golfing visitors.

Mie in Kansai also has other courses to consider playing. **Tsu Country Club** brings you 18 holes of golf set amidst the most beautiful backdrop of the hills as it meanders around the countryside bringing into play the deep bunkers and narrow entrance to the large greens and thought-provoking holes. The onsite accommodation is a mix of simple hotel room styles to a two bedroom lodge. A warm welcome awaits you from the most amazing food and talented chefs.

Another one of note is **Nemu Golf Club**, a slightly hilly 18 holes with views over the Pacific to die for. Arguably the best seat in the house of the halfway hut is in the ladies' toilets, but you don't need to go to the bathroom to experience these views of course, you can see them from the golf course as the holes nip and tuck around this beautiful natural part of Japan. Despite it

being on the coast, it plays more like a parkland than a links course.

Mikimoto Pearl island is also worth noting if visiting the nearby Mie Prefecture. In 1893, Kokichi Mikimoto devised a way to grow 'cultured' pearls. Watch the female divers demonstrate their prowess as they dive for oysters to open for food and maybe, just maybe, a pearl will be inside.

Golf in Japan is more than just golf, when visiting a country with such diverse cultural differences, one has to make time to do many things outside golf, that said with in excess of 2,300 golf courses, you will be spoilt for choice!

The full, unabridged version of this piece is available on the travelling lady golfer blog tab at golfgurugroup.com, please take a look and let me know your thoughts, would you go to Japan for golf? TGB

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