THE

RITZ-CARLTON

MAGAZINE

STARRY NIGHTS
IN TENERIFE,
MAUI AND OMAN

A WEEKEND
IN BAHRAIN

THE BEST
OF BOSTON

THE *OKINAWA* WAY

LAID-BACK LIVING AND CLEAN EATING
ON JAPAN'S IMMORTAL ISLES

SPRING 2017

SPRING 2017

Contents

ANDREW FAULK

FEATURES

ISLANDS

Weary of the concrete jungle, residents across Japan flock to the white-sand beaches and azure waters of the sub-tropical Okinawa Prefecture, where the laid-back locals and distinct culture weave a spell of their own.

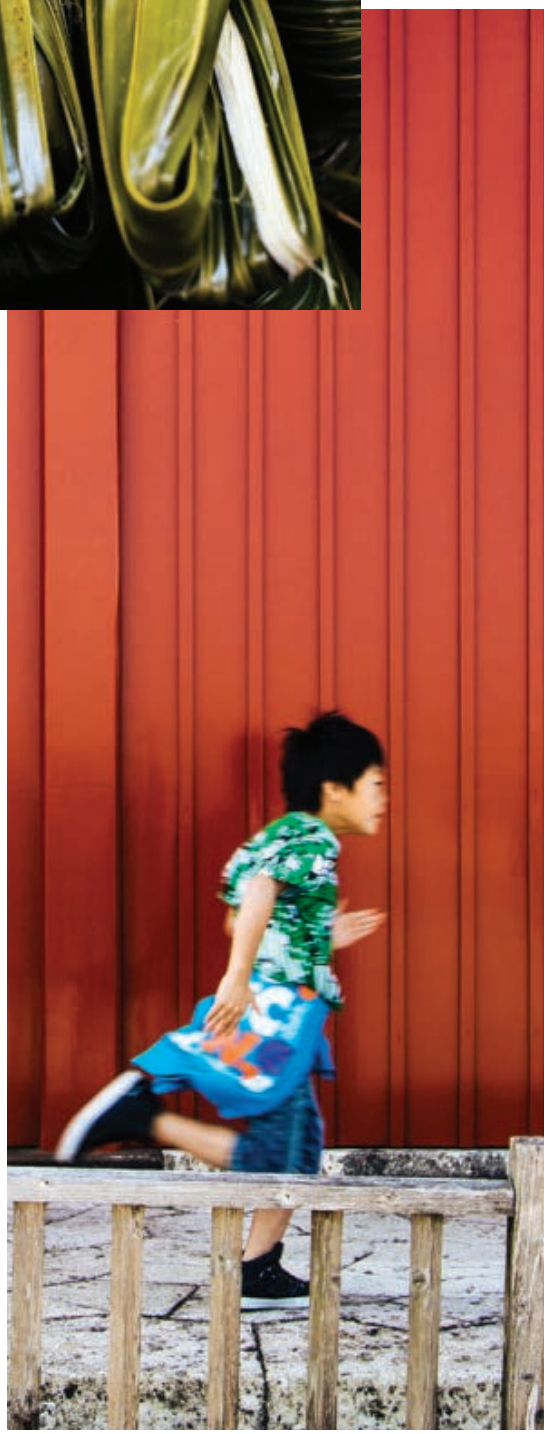
By JONATHAN DEHART

Photographs by ANDREW FAULK

FERRIED AWAY

From left: An employee of Shuri Castle in Naha dressed in Ryusou, traditional Okinawan costume; many of Okinawa's islands are accessible only by ferry.

APART



Arriving in Naha, the subtropical capital of Okinawa Prefecture, you could be forgiven for thinking you were somewhere far from Japan — on a balmy isle in Southeast Asia, perhaps. Naha is the gateway to 160 islands (47 of them inhabited) strung like pearls from Japan's southernmost main island of Kyushu, a dotted line leading to Taiwan. These slivers of land feature tangled jungles, mangrove swamps, white-sand beaches and coral reefs — enough to keep weary office workers from Japan's concrete jungles exploring for a lifetime.

But the islands' eclectic culture is every bit as alluring as the terrain. The main contributor to this culture is the ebb and flow of history, which I've set out to discover as I begin my journey at Shuri Castle, just east of downtown Naha. Perched on a hilltop overlooking the capital's urban expanse, Shuri-jo (as the castle is called in Japanese) was originally built in the 14th century during the ascent of the Ryukyu Kingdom that once ruled over the islands. Despite being razed during World War II, when it served as the Japanese Army's headquarters, Shuri-jo was restored to its former greatness in 1992 and later designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Strolling through the rambling castle grounds, I spot a number of reminders of Okinawa's cosmopolitan past. Until being overtaken by the mainland Japanese in the 16th century, the islands did brisk trade with China, Taiwan and Indonesia. These relationships influenced everything from architecture and textiles to food and music. Even today, the islands of Okinawa feel fundamentally un-Japanese.

A number of architectural frills evoking flourishes from Ming dynasty China catch my eye: red walls, opulent gates and ceramic dragons winding around a traditional red-tiled roofline. But above all else I notice the profusion of shisa, as the lionlike talisman is known, warding off evil spirits around doorways and on rooftops throughout the complex.

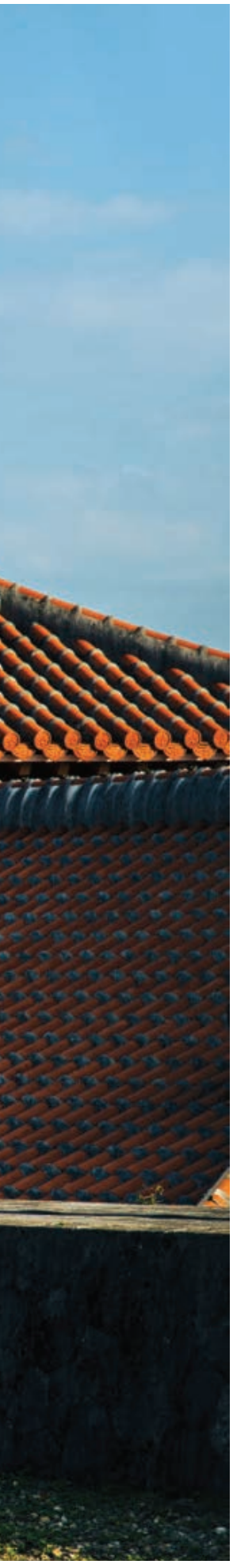
I file away these observations for later and leave the castle grounds. It's lunchtime, so I walk to Ashibiuna, an inviting restaurant just a few minutes' walk from the castle, slipping off my shoes at the entrance and settling on a tatami mat on a veranda. The view before me is reminiscent of Ryoan-ji's famed Zen rock garden in Kyoto, but with a tropical twist: a sand garden raked in concentric circles, brightly flowering plants and stone lanterns. A CD of wistful ballads accompanied by the three-stringed sanshin, Okinawa's iconic instrument, plays in the background.

The restaurant's generous set menu includes sashimi, mozoku seaweed with vinegar, pickles, rice, soup and fruit. I order fu-chanpuru, stir-fried wheat gluten, served

ISLAND TREASURES

Clockwise from far left: Sannin leaves at Makishi Public Market; a traditional Okinawan sanshin, lacquer-necked instruments covered in python skin; a boy runs down a street in Naha, Okinawa's capital.

"... I spot a number of reminders of Okinawa's cosmopolitan past. Even today, the islands of Okinawa feel fundamentally un-Japanese."



with bean sprouts and leek; and soki soba, white noodles in a light pork-bone and chicken broth, with spareribs and leek. Koregusu, a hot sauce used throughout the islands made from chilies pickled in awamori, a strong local spirit, adds extra kick.

After lunch I head to Shuri Ryusen, a family-owned shop near the castle that is renowned for its bingata, the islands' vibrant hand-painted cloth. The first floor of the shop is brimming with vivid handkerchiefs, hair scrunchies, handbags, pillows, scrolls and more, emblazoned with fish, birds, flowers and local scenes; some of the designs resemble batik cloth. The palette and patterns are believed to be the result of combining Japanese, Indian and Chinese dyeing techniques. But today the art form is quintessentially Okinawan.

To see the pros at work I make my way up to the third floor. Entering the long, narrow room, I am struck by a lengthy row of outstretched bingata scrolls hanging down each side of the room's vaulted ceiling. An artist poring over a piece of fabric looks up from her work and greets me. She points to an unfurled scroll with an intricate scene of intertwined birds. "Some of these designs take up to three months to finish," she tells me.

The next day I set out to explore downtown Naha. It bears mentioning that the city was flattened during World War II, a fact reflected in the gray high-rise buildings, souvenir shops, convenience stores and other trappings of modern Japan that line the main artery of Kokusai Dori (International Avenue). But Okinawa's traditional culture is thriving if you know where to look.

To start the day I sit down to a hearty lunch at Mutsumi, a greasy spoon that has been serving local classics since 1958. Mutsumi is a model of no-nonsense dining: wooden tables covered in clear plastic, no-frills swivel office chairs for seats, a wall-mounted TV playing a local variety show and elderly regulars reading newspapers and nudging cups of coffee. Photos of the food choices are conveniently plastered on the walls.

I choose the "special set," which includes tonkatsu (breaded pork cutlet), omelet wedges stuffed with cheese, Okinawan soba and an unlikely item: Spam. U.S. troops based on Okinawa-Honto after World War II came bearing the canned mystery meat, which has been deftly appropriated. The fare is simple but satisfying. In Okinawa it's wise to dispense with images of delicate concoctions on lacquerware trays that feature so prominently in Japanese cuisine. Think simple, stir-fried and homegrown, a surprisingly healthy combination. Okinawans, after all, are among the longest-lived people on the planet. Even in ancient times the Chinese called Okinawa the "Island of the Immortals." This has been attributed to a diet rich in a number of key ingredients, among them bitter melon, which is lauded for its cancer-fighting properties; tofulike fu; mozuku seaweed; umi-budo (sea grapes); and the ubiquitous beni-imo, a deep-purple sweet potato loaded with vitamins A and C, fiber, folic acid and beta carotene.

Fortified, I aim to learn more about the aforementioned sanshin. To satisfy my curiosity about this exotic, lacquer-necked instrument covered in python skin, I head to a shop called Chindami Sanshinten. Tucked down a quiet side street off Kokusai Dori, the shop is where renowned sanshin maker Higa-san plies his trade. Originally brought to Okinawa from China in the 16th century, the instrument was first used by the Ryukyu court. It went on to become the precursor to the shamisen, which in popular culture is closely associated with geisha.

Upon entering Higa-san's shop, I am subsumed into the world

THE OKINAWA WAY
Clockwise from far left: Fresh octopus at the Makishi Public Market; the red clay tile rooftops that are typical of Okinawa; a vendor at the Makishi Public Market.

“Okinawans are among the longest-lived people on the planet. Even in ancient times the Chinese called Okinawa the ‘Island of the Immortals.’”

JOY RIDE
Travelers on the 15-minute ferry ride from Ishigaki to Taketomi-jima.

of sanshin. Wooden parts and fingerpicks are scattered about. Taiko drums of various sizes litter the space, which resembles a workshop more than a showroom. Posters of sanshin stars adorn the walls. As I peruse the elegant instruments, a customer in his mid-20s enters to have the master take a look at his kit, which he believes to have a problem. After briefly chatting, Higa-san turns a few knobs and shreds out a finely tuned riff. "Seems fine to me," he says, handing the instrument back to its owner. "Just needed a small tweak." The young man sighs in relief and thanks him profusely. "Anytime!" Higa-san says, before humming a tune and starting to work again on a piece of wood.

Leaving Higa-san's shop, I head to Makishi Public Market, where I pass merchants hawking pineapples, mangoes and papayas as well as freshly caught fish, from scarlet octopus to lobsters and parrot fish. Customers can buy these fish and take them upstairs to be cooked on the spot by one of many restaurants.

My next stop is the Tsuboya Pottery District, on Yachimun Street. Churning out ceramics since 1682, the shops still overflow with awamori cups and leonine shisa figurines, which usually come in pairs: one with the mouth open to bring good fortune, the other with the mouth closed to prevent it from escaping. While many of the shops feel redundant, Kiyomasa Toki bucks the trend. Just off the main street, the shop has been shaping clay into elegant objects for more than 300 years.

Walking east on the atmospheric street and up a short hill, I find myself at the entrance of Nuchigafu, a restaurant and teahouse. The historic building overlooks the kiln and residence of the illustrious Arakaki family. While the restaurant serves exquisite fare, I have come to try something lighter, a local specialty called buku buku cha. It contains polished white rice, brown rice, and is topped by crushed peanuts. My waiter brings me the cold drink in a lacquer bowl and briskly stirs it with a bamboo whisk, whipping up a surprisingly large mound of foam.

ARTIST COLONY
From left: A man in the Tsuboya Pottery District practices his craft; artisans have been making ceramics in the area since 1682.

The next day I board the monorail and head to Naha Airport, where I will take an hourlong flight to the island of Ishigaki, the gateway to the far-flung Yaeyama Islands, at Japan's southernmost edge. Arriving in Ishigaki City (population 48,000) in the early evening, I have worked up an appetite after a day of traveling. So I go to my restaurant of choice, an izakaya called Usagi-ya.

A young man wearing a kimono seats me at the corner of the bar, next to a retired couple visiting from Chiba Prefecture, just east of Tokyo. We exchange pleasantries and a man at the front of the restaurant begins to croon and play a sanshin. A second man plays an acoustic guitar. After the song finishes and the applause subsides, everyone in the bar raises a glass in unison and shouts a hearty "Kampai!"

During a brief lull I order a green papaya salad and teppanyaki hot plate with locally sourced beef and vegetables (green and yellow bell peppers, bitter melon, potato wedges, bean sprouts and a citrusy ponzu-daikon dipping sauce). As I wait for the food, I look around at the restaurant's wooden interior. It is dimly lit, and sanshins hang from the walls and small taiko drums rest on stands. The chopstick rest is made of coral and the bar in front of me is lined with bottles containing local labels of awamori, a high-proof distilled drink made from Thai rice. Which reminds me, I need to order a drink. I request a glass of the local firewater on the rocks. Soon after, my food begins to arrive. The portions are massive, the ingredients fresh and the beef cooked just right. Just before the

music resumes, my drink arrives. Everyone raises a glass again. "Kampai!"

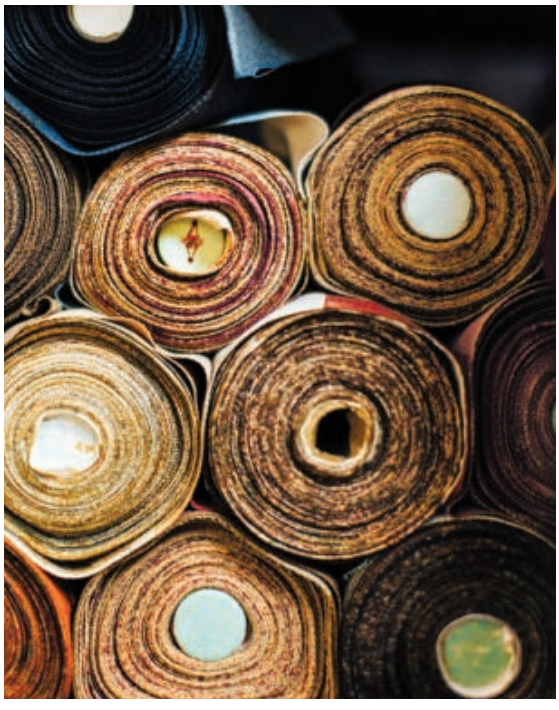
As the next song begins to play, I'm warned by a waiter to watch out behind me. I turn around and see a well-built member of the staff gyrating and holding a medium-sized taiko drum, which he hammers with a large stick, almost grazing me with each swing. The entire restaurant is soon on its feet, clapping, swaying their hands in the air and singing along to the chorus.

Is this really Japan?

At the end of the show I am introduced to the musicians. Yuu, the guitarist, is originally from Tokyo but moved to Ishigaki six years ago to work as a diving instructor. Maki, the sanshin player and singer, was born and raised on Ishigaki. Yuu and Maki take me and a few other audience members to a local watering hole. Over drinks, Yuu reflects on his life since leaving Tokyo. "It's totally different here," he says. "I don't think I can ever go back."

Resisting the temptation to stay out late, I awake early the next morning to a clear blue sky and 75-degree temperatures to visit one more island, Taketomi-jima. After a 15-minute ferry ride I arrive at the sole dock and walk toward the sleepy town (population 316) at the center of the island. There are no stoplights, no supermarkets and no convenience stores. I am struck by the butterflies flitting across the path as I walk, as well as the profusion of flowers.

The town's streets are of crushed coral stones and largely devoid of cars. The traditional homes clustered in the center are protected from strong winds and typhoons by coral stone walls or fukugi trees. Most of the terra-cotta rooftops also have shisa perched on top, and are elevated on stones to protect against dampness and insects. Their overhanging roofs are meant to maximize shade and keep air circulating, a perfect combination of form and function.



I buy a ticket to ride through the idyllic streets in a cart pulled by a lazy water buffalo named Hakuhachi-kun. As the buffalo plods along, the driver, Tsuhara, begins to strum a sanshin and sing a famous local love song called "Asadoya Yunta." No one knows for sure where the tune originally came from, he says. "Some of the lyrics are Japanese, but some are unclear. We think they may have come from Malaysia." He adds that a group of scientists came to the island and found that a significant percentage of its residents have DNA that can be traced back to the Malay Peninsula.

With a few hours left until the last ferry departs for Ishigaki, I rent a bicycle to crisscross the island on my own. Cycling through the quiet streets, soaking up the calm, I make my way to Kondoi Beach. I pass a few graveyards and a rustic Shinto shrine with none of the pomp seen elsewhere in Japan. I arrive at the beach and enjoy the splendid view from the shore.

Before returning, I ride a few minutes up the road on a whim and discover a humble concrete pier. Walking to its end, I look out to the next island, Kohama-jima. Beyond Kohama is the larger and more popular island of Iriomote-jima. And beyond that, scores of other islands, each with its own character, waiting to be explored. ◆

LOCAL OFFERINGS

From top: Buka buka cha, a local drink that's served cold and stirred up with a bamboo whisk; rolls of bingata, the island's vibrant hand-painted cloth.

OLD-WORLD ELEGANCE

The Ritz-Carlton, Okinawa is celebrating its fifth anniversary this spring, but with traditional Ryukyu-style architecture and a prime hillside position overlooking the legendary Kise Country Club and the East China Sea, the elegant 97-room property blends seamlessly with its stunning scenery, paying tribute to the area's rich history while offering all of the modern comforts.

–Amanda Friedman

TEE TIME

Situated within the premises of the Kise Country Club, the hotel is surrounded on three sides by its 18-hole championship golf course — considered to be one of the best and most difficult in Japan — which spans from a deep mystical forest to the sea. This year, the golf facility's owner, Kanehide, will be marking its 70th anniversary with a celebratory JPGA Major competition hosted from May 11–14.

HISTORY 101

From the 15th to the 19th century, Okinawa Island was the center of the Ryukyu Kingdom, an independent empire that ruled over the surrounding isles and played a central role in the maritime trade networks of the era. Today, nine ancient structures and ruins remain and have been recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Much of the hotel's architecture has been inspired by Ryukyu's famous Shuri Castle, with traditional red clay tile roofs, white walls and a holy water pond. Guests can further immerse themselves in the history with cultural programs that include musical lessons, traditional soap making and pottery classes.

THE ROYAL TREATMENT

The property's stunning two-level ESPA spa is a destination unto its own, located in a two-story freestanding structure that's connected to the hotel via a bamboo tunnel and a beautiful garden pathway. For the ultimate experience, request Ryukyu Nature Elements, an exclusive treatment inspired by Okinawa lifestyle, which is influenced by the lunar cycle and features local products such as sea salt, Alpinia flowers, honey and sea clay.

CULTURAL CUISINE

The resort offers multiple dining options, but for a local specialty, visit the traditional Okinawan restaurant Gusuku and order the Agu Pork shabu-shabu. Originally from China, Agu is a brand of pork that now only exists in Okinawa, and prepared shabu-shabu-style in a hot pot is the best way to savor its taste. Pair it with awamori, the region's signature local spirit, made from Thai rice.