

Main: Happo One, Hakuba, Nagano. **Insets:** a shrine and waterfall near Takayama, Gifu

Back Roads of JAPAN

At first glance, a self-driving holiday in bustling Japan might seem too much to conquer, but Diane Godley found having a car gave her and her family the freedom to explore treasures far from the usual tourist sights

“Hey, there’s a waterfall up there, shall we take a look?” I ask when I see a signpost on the side of the road. My family and I are driving along Route 158, one of Japan’s national highways, headed for Hakuba located in the Japanese Alps in Nagano prefecture, on Honshu, the main island of Japan.

“Why not?” was the general consensus. After all, we were not in a hurry. We had less than 150 kilometres to drive to our alpine destination, and the mid-October autumn weather was overcast and drizzling lightly.

We turned up the side road surrounded by lush mountain forests, and just as we were approaching a corner, without warning, we were forced to stop. Wildlife on the road. Now that’s something we didn’t expect to see in Japan.

“Do you think it’s a goat?” I ask.

“No, maybe a deer,” says someone in the back seat.

The four of us couldn’t agree what it was we were looking at before it high-tailed into the forest. What we did agree on was that it was a particularly unusual, dare I say ugly, specimen of nature.



Left to right: enjoying the mountain views from an outdoor *onsen*; breakfast of

TYPHOON WARNING

We picked up our hire car in Takayama – an historic village in the Gifu Prefecture and the gateway to the Japanese Alps – on the day a typhoon was to hit Japan's main island of Honshu. We'd spent the previous day wandering through its narrow streets. Lined with wooden merchants' houses and latticed windows, the buildings date back to the Edo Period (1603-1868) and are safeguarded against future development by a Traditional Buildings Preservation Area law.

Many of these historic houses have been converted into museums and shops, which sell all manner of handicrafts and delicacies from the local Hida area, such as *gyuuman* (beef in soft dough buns); *mitarashi dango* (gelatinous rice formed into little round dumplings); *matcha* (green tea) ice cream, sake and craft beer. The most famous food from this area is Hida beef, a breed of Japanese black cattle farmed in the clean mountainous region. Traditionally,

strips of the marbled meat are cooked over a flame at your table, at around the princely sum of \$50 for 100 grams.

Our hire car was a little (but welcoming) metal box on wheels. Most Japanese cars seemed to be in this cube style (no doubt to fit on the narrow roads), and although ours looked small from the outside, there was plenty of room inside for my husband and I and our two lanky teenagers. The boot was another story. Fortunately for us, we had this in mind when we packed our suitcases back in Australia, exchanging a couple of large cases for four carry-on sized bags. These fitted perfectly and gave us a little extra room to buy a bag for all our souvenirs.

As our friends and family back home kept a nervous vigil on reports of the escalating scale of the typhoon, it heralded its arrival in Takayama with just a bit of drizzle. However, the rain didn't dampen our spirits. As we had a car we could drive to some of the attractions on the outskirts of town and stay dry, plus we'd just had



ramen and *mitarashi dango* (rice dumplings); reflections in the pond at Happo One

ten glorious hot days in the south of Honshu.

The cancellation of the morning markets along the Miyagawa River that runs through the centre of town should have given us some indication of how seriously the Japanese take their weather warnings. We headed out of town to the Hida Folk Village, but it was closed. Museum Hida, closed. Even the Teddy Bear Eco Village had shut up shop. Everything was quiet. In fact, there were no locals on the street at all, just Western tourists like us wondering whether we should be more worried. So we spent the afternoon driving through the narrow streets exploring. Sometimes the roads led to a shrine, sometimes dead ends, and once the start of a forest walk where we saw a flyer warning tourists, in four languages, that bears had been seen in the these woods.

Bears?

In Japan?

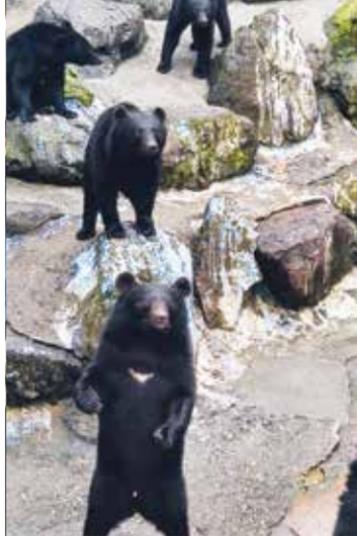
How did we not know that there was still wildlife roaming around pockets of Japanese wilderness?

MOUNTAIN SPA

Apart from strong winds overnight, we woke to find Takayama was pretty much untouched by the typhoon, although unfortunately other areas of Japan weren't so lucky. By the following day the rain had set in. One of the items on my bucket list while in the Japanese Alps was to visit an *onsen* (hot spring), so we couldn't think of a better outing on a drizzly day than to head up into the mountains where onsens are plenty.

There are two ways to drive through the mountains in Japan: the high road (the longer, scenic route), or the low road (through tunnels, the quick way). With low-lying clouds, on this occasion we took the quick route, as visibility was getting poorer the higher we drove.

The first of our many hot spring experiences was an open-air onsen located on the side of a river and ensconced under a pedestrian bridge. Being a public onsen, there was only an honesty box to collect our money. And, as this was a rather misty



From left: a mountain shrine; enjoying a hot spring foot spa; the Bear Ranch

morning, we had it all to ourselves. As beautiful as the location was, the water temperature was a little tepid and we soon got dressed and went looking for a more established facility.

We found another onsen about ten minutes up the road. It had separate bathing areas for men and women and a variety of pools at different temperatures where we soaked up the mineral salts for as long as we could handle the mostly very hot water. With the exception of our 16-year-old son, who found the nudity too confronting, we all loved the experience and vowed to repeat it as many times as we could while in the alps. And at around \$10 a pop, this is one of the few things in Japan that is very affordable.

On our way back to Takayama we saw a sign for a Bear Ranch. Piqued by the sign we'd seen the day before fluttering in the wind, we couldn't

resist taking a look. We paid our entry fee and bought a bag of dried fruit to feed the bears.

Like other Asiatic black bears, the Japanese black bear (*Ursus thibetanus japonicus*) has a pale yellow crescent marking on its chest. Standing between one metre to 1.5 metres and weighing up to 120 kilograms, it is considered small among bear species. Extinct in many regions of Japan due to the rapid loss of habitat after World War II, the population of black bears on Honshu is considered healthy.

No road trip is complete without a pit stop. Unlike anywhere else I've travelled in the world, you can be assured wherever you stop in Japan the toilets will be immaculately clean. I wouldn't be going too far in saying that stopping at a public convenience in Japan was a pleasure: warm water to wash your nether

regions, many with air-drying facilities, plus never once did I find a toilet roll holder empty.

The next day we headed further into the alps to our next destination: Hakuba, the village that hosted the Japan 1998 Winter Olympics. We figured it would only take a couple of hours to get there so we made regular sightseeing stops along the way – the first being the waterfall where we saw the odd creature on the road, which we later discovered was a Japanese serow, described in Wikipedia as “a Japanese goat-antelope”.

If we'd been driving in Australia, the sign to the waterfall would have been just a blur as we sped past. In Japan, however, there is a very good reason why we didn't miss the turn off and why we avoided hitting the serow; the speed limit. At 50km/h on regional roads and 40km/h in villages (80km/h on motorways), you can enjoy a leisurely drive through the provinces and visit out-of-the-way places not on *shinkansen* (bullet train) routes. Thanks to this year's Summer Olympics, a lot of road signs are now written in English as well as Japanese. They also drive on the left. In fact, the hardest part about driving in Japan is keeping under the speed limit!

Although still misty, the views of the mountains were spectacular; forested hillsides in burnt autumn hues threaded with long wispy clouds. They looked just like a Japanese landscape painting. We took a short trek along

a river and stopped at Asahi Dam, but the goal for the day was to visit Kamikochi, a nature reserve in the Azusa River Valley said to offer Japan's most spectacular mountain scenery. Unfortunately, the drizzle had turned to steady rain and clouds were very low by the time we got there, so we opted to press on and visit one of the many free foot spas dotted around this part of the country instead.

HAKUBA TREK

We arrived at our apartment, Hakuba Ski Condos, in a fog of cloud. But according to the weather forecast, the following day looked favourable and we told Bob, the friendly Canadian manager, of our intentions to get up early to walk up the most popular mountain, Happo One (pronounced On-ay). The next morning, we had two surprises in store for us; a view of the mountain from our living room, and a picnic basket at our front door with all the ingredients to make waffles for breakfast. Bob was one special manager. We were ecstatic! We'd been in Japan for nearly two weeks and, frankly, we were hankering after Western food. Our moods lifted.

It took one gondola and two ski lifts to get to the start of the walking track for Happo One. We were starting at an altitude of 1800 metres. Today's goal was to walk to Happo-ike Pond at 2080 metres. Anyone attempting to trek further was required to have proper mountaineering equipment.

With the Japanese trekkers decked out in the latest hiking gear and boots, and bells jingling on their backpacks to scare away bears, we felt like amateurs. For me, the 280-metre trek to the pond was tough going. Not only did the thin-ish air make it hard on my lungs, but loose rocks underfoot made the boardwalks ended made it hard work – less so for my teens.

Like everyone else, we stopped at Happo-ike Pond to take photos of the three mountain peaks reflected in the mirror-like water. The clouds were well beneath us and the sun bright and high, creating the perfect setting to photograph the mountains soaring nearly 3000 metres into the sky.

This is where I left my gang, who had decided to press on up the mountain – without one scrap of mountaineering gear between them, but with all the food. I walked back at my own pace, ending a hard day's climb with a bowl of ramen and a soak in an onsen.

Hiring a car in Japan gave us the freedom to roam where we wanted, when we wanted. It allowed us to stumble upon places and have little adventures that you won't find in any guide books – and avoid getting wet when it rained. We travelled to locations not on the rail route and roads less travelled by international tourists – giving us a more authentic cultural experience. And, the price we paid for a week's car hire (plus petrol and tolls) was comparable to a seven-day shinkansen pass for the four of us. **R**

HIRING A CAR IN JAPAN

Driving in Japan is pretty straightforward: they drive on the left-hand side and from a leisurely 40km/h in villages to 80km/h on motorways. Plus signage is clear and easy to understand.

- There are numerous car hire companies in Japan, both international and local (Toyota Rentacar, Nippon Rentacar, Orix Rentacar, Times Car Rental, Nissan Rentacar and Ekiren). All charge similar prices. We chose Toyota (www.rent.toyota.co.jp) because we weren't required to provide credit card details up front, and it was easy to organise different locations for car pick-up and drop-off.
- We recommend organising your car hire before you leave, which can be done up to three months before your trip.
- To drive in Japan you'll need an International Driving Permit.
- Our car hire for eight days cost around AU\$1000 against AU\$1200 the seven-day JR Rail Pass cost for the four of us. Tolls are calculated by the car and paid with the car hire.

