

Mystical Miyajima

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HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

The beauty of Miyajima is far greater than its size. That first glimpse of the O-Torii gate, resting peacefully a few hundred metres out to sea, is one of the most unique experiences in all of Japan. Behind this elegant gateway is an island no more than 5km wide, abundant with natural charms and ancient temples.

As high-tide comes in the rising sea surrounds the O-Torii and floods the mud-flats beneath the Itsukushima Shrine. For over 800 years this ebb and flow has been symbolic of the spiritual cleansing that is so characteristic of the Shinto religion.

Entering the shrine itself demands an act of cleansing too. Just as a Torii gate marks the entrance to every Shinto shrine, flowing water is always present so that visitors can cleanse their spirits by drinking fresh from the cup.

The water at Itsukushima has flowed down from Mt Misen, peaking 500 meters above the shrine and several kilometres inland.

For much of the year this naturally pure flow begins life as a heavy mist that tumbles into the untouched forest. Droplets cascade off leaves and eventually collect to form small streams along the descending valley.

Where the water is still just a trickle you can hear frogs croaking, lots of them. At first I wondered if some clever park official has decided to play a soundtrack of jungle noises, to make the experience more real. This is Japan after all.

Once I stood still for long enough I realised the croaks were coming from all directions, along with the calls of birds high in the tree tops. The forest is bursting with life and song.

Walking through this unspoiled wilderness gives you a sense of the style that has inspired Samurai gardens down the centuries. Layers of maple leaves arch over pathways like careless brush strokes taken from red and green palettes. The variety of deciduous trees, pines and flowering shrubs are as numerous as the frogs.

Occasionally the trail leads across a stream as the water gathers volume and strength on its way down the mountain. No ordinary bridge will suffice, not in Japan. It must be a bright red bridge of simple design and meticulously elegant proportions.

Artful touches like bridges and lanterns blur the line between forest and garden, and as you continue down the hill the village below slowly emerges out of the scenery.

Arriving back in town you might find that there are more wild deer roaming the streets than the national park. With each ferry load of people coming across from Hiroshima the deer try their luck at stealing a quick snack. Often the best they can manage is to put a hole in your map or chew on a small child's hat.

The locals are very fond of the deer, and half the village is employed to scoop-up droppings during the day to keep the esplanade clean for visitors. The only place on Miyajima you won't find deer is the Buddhist temples and pagodas.

One reason for this could be the extraordinary number of steps that must be traversed before you reach any of the Buddhist sites. Enlightenment doesn't come without effort you know.

The Five-Storied Pagoda is easily the most rewarding temple to visit for the least number of steps. I counted less than one hundred. The pagoda itself is modelled on the Chinese designs of the 15th century, but has been given an unmistakable touch of Japanese style that compliments the O-Torii gate.

The most elaborate and inclusive of the temples is Daisho-in, but there are twice as many steps to climb. Once you enter the temple grounds you are surrounded by prayer halls, monuments and statues. Buddhist, Shinto and Dao beliefs are all represented.

You don't even need to reach the halls to start your offerings of devotion however, as the long stretches of steps are lined with scripture-wheels – each roll inscribed with a sutra, to be spun as you ascend.

Daisho-in can be seen not only as a temple, but a series of reflective gardens and hidden treasures. Natural elements from Mt Misen are still cultivated within the temple grounds, but with the inclusion of carefully placed statues featuring Buddha, disciples, kings and deities.

Some statues are worshipped with incense, some are cleaned with water and others are welcomed with the beating of drums.

Every taste is catered for including a whimsical series of statues that depict Chinese zodiacs, each engaged with a playful young Buddha. If you're not sure which sign you were born under, just drop a few coins in front of all them.

The next best place to spend your Yen is back in the village, where the aroma of grilled oysters and fried fish-cakes can fill your head with cravings. The biggest queues on main street are for Momiji Cakes – little cream filled delights baked in the shape of a maple leaf.

Traditionally they were made with red-bean paste centres, but the modern taste of Japanese tourists extends to custard, chocolate and almonds. Each Momiji is individually wrapped and sold in gift boxes, ready to take home to your loved ones.

I purchased a small box with the best of intentions, but found myself sitting by the water with a view of the O-Torii and within a few minutes I had eaten the lot.

I had to be quick, the deer would have got to them if I hadn't.

So with the Momiji a mere memory, I went back to the Five-Storied Pagoda and left a small non-edible token of thought for my loved ones back home. Surrounded by the rich colours of maple leaves and the musky scent of incense I was reminded again of Miyajima's harmonious balance between nature and religion.

This is the island where the tide washes beneath the shrine of Itsukushima and reflects the O-Torii's orange pillars.

