

SNOW REPORT

HOTHAM ❸ 94cm

Lifts: 11/13
Conditions: Good to very good packed snow cover softening later for skiing and boarding. Cross-country trails groomed to Dinner Plain, but there are some bare patches.

Inside run: Australian Children's Championships this weekend with more than 100 of the best under 12s and under 14s. Progressive dinner — \$50 for a set menu at three restaurants in Dinner Plain tonight and tomorrow night. Bookings: 5159 6665.

MT BULLER ❸ 53cm

Lifts: 22/25
Conditions: Good to very good packed snow cover softening later for skiing and boarding. Terrain parks open.

Inside run: The spectacular Heineken Abom mogul challenge starts at 9am tomorrow morning on the Summit. The hottest mogul event on the Australian calendar draws some of the world's top freestylers. Fine weather expected for the weekend.

FALLS CREEK ❸ 77cm

Lifts: 13/14
Conditions: Good to very good packed snow cover softening later for skiing and boarding with a fair cover on some of the front-side home trails. 32km of cross-country trails groomed.

Inside run: The terrain parks are still in great shape around Ruined Castle for all levels. The huge Stylewars freeride competition was on this week and some of the best competitors from Australia and overseas battled it out on a 36.5m jump. Bliss'n'Esoo play at the closing party tonight.

MT BAW BAW ❸ 35cm

Lifts: 5/7
Conditions: Good firm-packed snow cover for skiing and boarding, softening later. Toboggan slope open.

Inside run: Fun Club kids activities all weekend. Karaoke tonight with DJ; live band tomorrow night at the Alpine hotel.

LAKE MOUNTAIN ❸ 1cm

Conditions: Patchy snow cover for sightseeing and snowplay.

Inside run: There is not enough snow for cross-country skiing. It's a 1km walk to the snowline for sightseeing and snowplay. Gate entry has been reduced to \$20 a car.

MT BUFFALO ❸ 1cm

Conditions: Small patches of snow around Cresta Valley for sightseeing only. Not enough snow for cross-country skiing or tobogganing.

Inside run: The cafe is open at Dingo Dell from 9am-4pm this weekend, then winter operations close for the season.

For 24-hour snow, road, weather and event information, ph: 1902 240 523 or go to www.vicsnowreport.com.au for free daily email updates.



Glimpsing the geisha

Away from the crowds and neon lights, Japan is a land where art and nature blend, writes Ewen Bell

THE true character of Japan is not easily uncovered. It hides like a geisha behind a mask of graceful greetings. But there is more to Japan than drinking sake in a Tokyo bar or taking photographs of Mt Fuji. When the make-up is removed you find a greater depth of character that reflects centuries of tradition and artistic style.

On the western edge of Kyushu, the most southerly of Japan's four main islands, the city of Nagasaki is well known to foreigners for its rickety electric trams and a vibrant nightlife. Nagasaki has historically been the port of entry for curious travellers seeking to understand Japanese culture and is a blend of international influences and Japanese kitsch.

A few blocks behind the laneways of Shianbashi, in downtown Nagasaki, is Temple Row — a network of quiet streets lined with temples and tombstones that reflect Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist beliefs.

The more elaborate temples such as Kofukuji manage to represent all three, but most are small and individual in character.

Each temple is a time-weathered centre of devotion and learning, maintained over the years by generations of dedicated followers.

Enter any temple in Nagasaki and you are greeted by scenes of great aesthetic beauty, for religion and art are never really separated in Japan.



Cemetery: Daikoji Temple.

At Enmeiji temple dozens of Buddha statues rest under the shade of a cherry tree, offering cause for reflection and contemplation.

At neighbouring Choshoji temple a solitary statue of Sakyamuni Buddha is ritually cleansed and washed by worshippers in symbolic representation of the spiritual path they seek.

The Shinto religion makes use of flowing water, but as a means to cleanse the spirit of the visitor. A modest fountain and drinking ladle are always on hand when you enter a shrine. Etiquette requires you wash your hands or sip from the water to help purify your soul.

Identifying a Shinto shrine is easy — entry is always through large torii gates, usually painted red.

On the island of Miyajima, a short ferry ride from Hiroshima and four hours by bullet train from Nagasaki,

you can admire the view of the "floating" torii of Itsukushima.

In centuries past the Itsukushima shrine could be reached only by boat.

The magnificent torii gate rests peacefully above the water at high tide, so small boats can pass beneath its arch before landing.

Cultural icons don't get much grander than the Itsukushima torii gate, but Miyajima has other memorable hidden treasures.

A short street leads away from the shoreline to the modest entrance of Daisho-in temple.

After climbing a long stairway lined with ancient scriptures brought from India by a Chinese monk, you enter a wonderland of elegant halls, sutras and statues set into gardens.

DEITIES are framed by artistic scenes that encourage deeper contemplation. Trees, leaves and flowing water creates a sense of connection.

Outside the city of Matsue, a five-hour train journey northwest of Kyoto, the Adachi Museum has dispensed entirely with the divide between garden and art.

It's worth a visit for the beauty of the artefacts hanging on its walls, but the star attractions at Adachi are the gardens, which are viewed from behind glass.

Guests sit quietly on comfortable benches and absorb the scenery.

Appreciating the art of Japanese gardens demands a little imagination. A simple rock can take the form of a benevolent turtle spirit; a bed of stones can represent the flowing energy of a river; a tree can be shaped to invoke the wisdom of a priest.

A recurring theme is the idea of "borrowed scenery", whereby the



foreground view is arranged to take advantage of the wider view — anything from a nice tree next door to a 16th-century castle such as that at Himeji.

The town of Himeji is halfway between Osaka and Hiroshima, and was once the seat of power for Shogunate rulers.

Himeji-jo is a white-walled castle that sits atop the town's highest hill. Its towers, baileys and gardens extend in all directions beneath it.

No other castle of this grandeur survived the ravages of World War II bombing. Several have been rebuilt, but they lack the authenticity and subtlety of Himeji-jo.

The main towers, built from solid

timber more than 400 years ago, rest on stone foundations that have been laid with extraordinary precision. Layers of white plaster protect the timber walls from fire.

Access to the towers and other buildings throughout Himeji-jo is excellent, and it's possible to take in the commanding views its former rulers would have enjoyed.

Himeji-jo is spectacular when seen from the gardens, which provide inspiration for many artists. Each day they stake out their position with a view of the castle, using their bicycles as easels.

Their work is aesthetically appealing, but a glance at the castle on the hill is a reminder you can't beat the real thing.



Photo opportunity: (main) 400-year-old Himeji castle attracts many visitors.

Through the looking glass: (above left) the garden of the Adachi Museum is viewed through a window.

Imposing: (above) one of the many characters in Nagasaki's Temple Row.

Hidden treasures: (top) Daisho-in's modest entry belies what lies within.

Sculptures: (below) statues abound in Daisho-in's elaborate gardens.

THE DEAL



➔ **Getting there:** Qantas, Malaysia Airlines and Singapore Airlines fly into cities across Japan. Fares from \$1700 including taxes. Call Flight Centre 13 31 33.

➔ **Touring:** GAP Adventures' 14-day Discover Japan tour includes Himeji, Nagasaki and Miyajima. From less than \$3100. Ph: 9642 4111. www.gapadventures.com.

➔ **More information:** For latest news and detailed guides on Japan see the Japan National Tourist Organisation www.jnto.go.jp/eng