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Special Feature

Japan, a Place for Relaxation and Soothing Comfort



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Special Feature

Japan, a Place for Relaxation and Soothing Comfort

- 04 Key Words for the Japanese Way of Relaxation and Soothing Comfort
- 10 Stay in a *Ryokan* and Savor an Atmosphere Like a Japanese Home
- 13 Unwinding with Animals
- 14 Good Times at a Japanese-Style Hot Spring
- 18 Mechanical Engineering Adds Zest to Life
- 22 Tasty Japan: Time to Eat! Yuzu
- 24 Strolling Japan Mount Koya
- 28 Souvenirs of Japan *Nioi-bukuro*

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花

hana

Famous beauty spots show off their flowers (*hana*) in many parts of the country. Superb vistas change with the season, attracting many lovers of nature.

Wisteria trees rest on trelliswork over an area of 1,000 square meters. Underneath is another world to entrance the eyes. Best seen in late April and early May. (Ashikaga Flower Park, Ashikaga City, Tochigi Prefecture)

Cover photo: When the *shoji* sliding windows are open, a garden as beautiful as any picture of nature appears. (Funda-in Temple, Kyoto. Photo: Terada Shinsuke/Aflo)

Special Feature

Japan, a Place for Relaxation and Soothing Comfort

Take a break. Enjoy a change of pace. Focus on tranquility. Interact with nature and spirit... Japanese culture has developed ways to refresh the mind and body through relaxation and soothing comfort. Deep within the culture lies a wisdom that can show people caught up in today's busy world how to savor life.



satoyama

Satoyama refers to an ideal place where life is lived close to rice fields and vegetable gardens, where hills and forests are a part of everyday experience. People feel drawn to the relaxing scenery and the slower pace of this kind of country living.

This community of old houses, famous for their thatched roofs, is included on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites. (Shirakawa Village, Gifu Prefecture. Photo: Aflo)

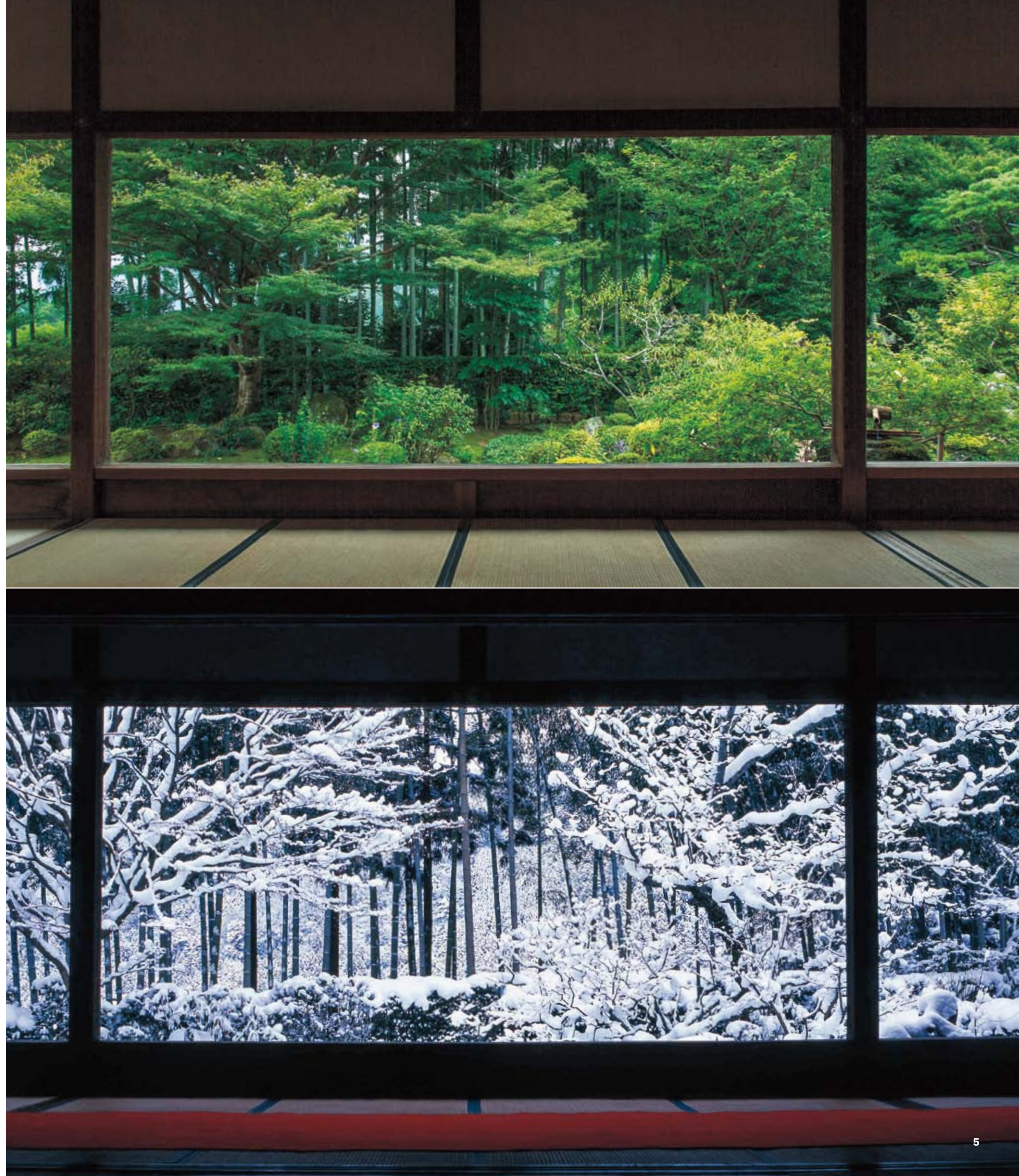
Key Words for the Japanese Way of Relaxation and Soothing Comfort

It is natural to desire relaxation and peace of mind. What are some of the ways and places the Japanese have chosen to find it? Nature, beautiful scenery and culture hold the key to soothing comfort, offering concepts and practices handed down from generation to generation.

Gardens (*niwa*) in Japan have developed in many forms since the 7th century. Each unique in its own way, they can best be admired at temples and traditional dwellings. It would be hard to find a more perfect place for meditative moments and tranquility.

庭 niwa

The columns form the sides of a huge frame for the eyes to admire the garden. The view offers a picture of every changing season, from the green leaves of spring (top right) to the heavy snowfall of winter (bottom right). (Hosen-in Temple, Kyoto. Photo: Nakata Akira)



祈り inori

The *shimenawa* straw rope indicates the boundary between the secular world and the sacred land of the shrine. Inside that line awaits a place of tranquility where the gods are asked for favors and thanks are given. This is *inori*.

The *shimenawa* rope is about 13 meters long and weighs about 5 tons. It demonstrates the majesty of the site, which is dedicated to a chief deity who is represented in Shinto tradition as the creator of Japan. (Izumo Taisha Grand Shrine, Shimane Prefecture. Photo: Aflo)





道^{do}

Sado (the way of tea), *shodo* (calligraphy) and *kado* (flower arrangement) are three of the various *do* (ways) that help us face our inner selves through the repetitive practice of traditional *kata* forms. These forms, handed down from one generation to the next, offer a path to serenity.



Top left: Part of the interior of the Taian teahouse at Myokian Temple in Kyoto. (Photo: Inoue Hakudo)
 Top right: *Sado*, the way of tea, cultivates the mind and spirit through the practice of established forms of etiquette. (Photo: Miyamura Masanori)
 Bottom left: Just about everyone in Japan has experience in *shodo* (calligraphy) since it is taught as a regular course called *shuji* in elementary school. (Photo: Aflo)
 Next page: *Kado* (flower arrangement) recreates beauty through *kata* forms for placing flowers, stems and/or leaves in a pot. (Photo: Aflo)

Stay in a *Ryokan* and Savor an Atmosphere Like a Japanese Home

Take off your shoes, stretch out your legs on the *tatami* floor, and delight in the Japanese cuisine. Take a good look at the building's natural materials, the interior design and the green of the garden. Japanese inns, called *ryokan*, offer you a comfortable and relaxing experience in a traditional environment.

Photos: Kawabe Akinobu

Collaboration: Hakone/Tonosawa Onsen Spa Fukuzumi-ro (Ashigarashimo-gun, Kanagawa Prefecture)

Top: The hanging lantern adds elegance to the garden.
Bottom: Traditional architecture making full use of natural materials, green in the garden, impeccable service provided by *nakai* staff—these all help define the experience awaiting you at a *ryokan*.



If you come to Japan and want to savor the atmosphere of authentic Japan, surely nothing could be better than a night at a *ryokan* inn, rather than in a hotel. Dwellings built the traditional way are becoming increasingly rare in Japan, but a *ryokan* lets you experience all the delights of an older style of living, easily.

The most distinctive feature of a Japanese home is the fact that shoes come off upon arrival. Just inside the main door is the *genkan*, an entrance acting as an interface between the outside world and the home. You leave your shoes at the *genkan*, then step up and in, free of restricting footwear, able to unwind as you want.

In most cases, when you stay at a *ryokan* you can expect only one room for eating, spending time and sleeping. But do not fear that one room will not be enough—when night comes the low table and legless chairs will be moved out of the way or folded out of sight. They are replaced by futons and bedding from the closet, placed on the floor to make an instant bedroom. Traditional Japanese furniture generally offers plenty of mobility for using space efficiently.

Once in their rooms, guests usually change out of their travelling clothes and take a break, sipping tea from the tea set and eating Japanese sweets or snacks. The caffeine in the green tea makes one pleasantly alert and eases the weariness that comes after the day's travel.

Go ahead and stretch out on the *tatami* mats. The smooth fibers feel nice and smell like finely chosen dried grass. Expect to be surprised: you may not be used to lounging on the floor, but it is actually quite enjoyable.

The sliding paper doors (*shoji*) are left open, revealing a garden, while inside the room in a small alcove (*tokonoma*) hangs an illustration or a work of calligraphy. Under the illustration is a flower arrangement. The tranquility adds to the visual enjoyment of the moment.

You can usually expect that a hot spring is part and parcel of a *ryokan*. Spend time simply soaking in the steaming water before supper, and hunger will arrive when the time is right.

After your bath, nobody will think anything of it if you amble down the corridor dressed casually in a cotton dressing gown-type *yukata*, worn next to your skin. At a *ryokan*, *yukata* are worn in bed instead of pajamas, and also anywhere on the *ryokan* grounds. You can think of the grounds as an extension of your room, rather than a formal public area.

Once back in your room from the bath, your dinner awaits, laid out while you were away. When you finish eating, staff members called *nakai* will clear things away without a sound, professional to the core. Then, like magic, they lay out the bedding.

Comfort and relaxation. Every part of a *ryokan* pursues these ideals, and all you do is let yourself be pampered. This is the charm of a stay in a *ryokan*.



1

The *okami* (proprietress) greets arriving guests with a heartfelt "*irasshimase!*" ("You are truly welcome!")



5

Even though you cannot see the real Mount Fuji from here, the *shoji* window shades give a playful representation to entertain the eye.



2

A guest room for traditional living: *tatami* mats, *shoji* sliding paper doors that transmit light, a low table, a garden outside the room, and calligraphy in the *tokonoma* alcove (far right in photo).



6

Take off your shoes, and come in direct contact with the *tatami* mats, for a sensation that is actually quite relaxing. (Photo: Aflo)



3

Take your mind out of overdrive; serve yourself some tea with the tea set waiting in your room. The cares of the road fade away.



7

After the bath, sit in a rattan-work chair and cool off in the whispering breeze beside a bubbling brook.



4

Take time out before dinner in the spa bath. Then enjoy the touch of a cotton *yukata* gown next to your skin.



8

Dinner arrives in the room at just the right moment. A *ryokan*'s traditional cuisine is a work of art to be enjoyed without formality.



Wild Japanese monkeys relax in a hot spring, in a wintry tableau. (Jigokudani Yaen-koen, Nagano Prefecture)

Unwinding with Animals

The rich natural environment of Japan is home to an abundant diversity of animals. Many have developed close relationships with people, becoming almost like companions. Cute to look at, they help us unwind and can be encountered at zoos or tourist spots in different parts of the country, or as beloved pets.

Photos: Aflo and The Yomiuri Shimbun

The Shiba dog is an ancient breed still in existence today in Japan. Small in size, it has been loved for centuries.



The march of the penguins is a big attraction at this zoo, which is well known for its style of ethological exhibitions, showing the animals' original native behavior and capabilities. (Asahiyama Zoo, Hokkaido)



Sika deer at Todai-ji Temple in the historic city of Nara. They have been said to be messengers of the gods.



This aquarium has the world's best variety of jellyfish displays. (Kamo Aquarium, Yamagata Prefecture)





Good Times at a Japanese-Style Hot Spring

A soak in hot water relaxes the mind and body, and for Japanese people it is a custom they definitely want to enjoy. Natural hot waters bubbling to the surface have been a source of comfort in every part of the country since ancient times. We asked a leading expert on hot springs to explain the history and science of spas in Japan, in order to discover their mystique, their reputed therapeutic benefits, and their culture.

Written by Matsuda Tadanori Photos: Aflo

Above: An open air hot tub is called a *roten-buro*. Bathe in the great outdoors and your spirit will feel released. (Ashinomaki Onsen Spa, Fukushima Prefecture)



This steaming water gushes from the ground, a true blessing of nature.

Hot springs are the best source of soothing comfort for the Japanese. Especially favored are open air baths, with the sky above and nature all around. There you can commune with nature, and you might even feel at one with the grand scheme of things, immersed in water.

A mountain stream whispers in the ear, a kindly breeze caresses the bare skin, aromas from the mineral waters of the spring waft to the nose... The leaves on the trees, so green and fragrant, turn to brilliant colors if it's in late autumn, then flutter down.

Perhaps the reason open air bathing holds such an appeal is that our genes might be ingrained with the ability to reset our five senses when we bathe in the bosom of nature. Ruins unearthed in Nagano Prefecture in 1964 suggest that the Japanese have had a relationship with spas for a good 6,000 years.

I think of a shower as one aspect of the West's "wash and rinse away" culture, and of the Japanese love of soaking up to the shoulders in a hot tub as one aspect of Japan's "soak in comfort" culture. This may suggest the true comfort found in hot springs.

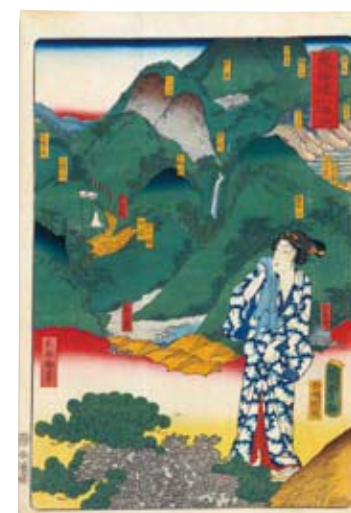
Japan's indigenous religion, Shinto, uses the word *kegare* to describe immorality or impropriety. Defilement can be cleansed with water in a purification ritual called *misogi*. Doing *misogi* at a hot spring was called *yu-gori*. It would seem that the custom of spa bathing was motivated by a desire not so much to wash grime from the body but to cleanse the mind and

spirit through *yu-go-ri* (literally, "spa water to abandon defilement").

In the old days, the *misogi* ritual was closely tied to a belief in the revitalization that occurs by becoming a new self. Revitalization makes one young again. Hot springs have long been regarded in Japan as a way to rejuvenate. Modern science tells us that the antioxidant power in mineral waters can reinvigorate cells, providing an anti-aging effect. As we grow older our cells become more susceptible to oxidation, and "cellular rust" forms. On the other hand, bathing in spa waters can take away this rust by reducing oxidation. The high antioxidant effect rejuvenates, as science shows.

"At a hot spring, rise above your consciousness and follow Mother Nature." This maxim appears in 19th century guidebooks extolling the therapeutic benefits of spas. For me, it expresses an awareness of the healing power of a hot spring. Its steaming waters, born from the energy of the planet, are pure, and perhaps we would do well to develop a better frame of mind by soaking ourselves in them. It might be worthwhile to practice a "Way of Hot Springs," preparing for a bath at a spa while striving for *muga*, a state of mind without egoism, without worldly thoughts—in other words, attaining a spiritual state of perfect selflessness, called *mushin* in Buddhism.

So, how about coming to Japan to soak in a hot spring?



This 19th century *ukiyo*e woodblock print depicts a woman enjoying a hot spring cure in Hakone. *Tokaido Meisho E* series entitled *Tokaido Hakone Toji* (Famous Views of the Tokaido: Hakone Hot Springs). (Property of the Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture Image Archives)

Matsuda Tadanori
Matsuda Tadanori is a doctor of medicine and an expert on hot springs. He is currently professor at the Mongolian National University of Medical Sciences. Author of *Edo no Onsen-gaku* ("A Study of Hot Springs in the Edo Period"), *Onsen Kyoju no Tojiyoku* ("Professor Hot Springs and Spa Healing"), *Onsen Kyoju no Nihon Hyakumeito* ("100 Great Spas Recommended by Professor Hot Springs"), and other works.



Top: Luxuriate outdoors at a hot spring against a wintry backdrop. (Shirahone Onsen Spa, Nagano Prefecture)
Bottom: *Yumomi* means stirring the water to cool it down. This performance of *yumomi* is now part of a show that includes humorous songs. (Kusatsu Onsen Spa, Gunma Prefecture)



Top: The natural light of the sun filters through the glass doors, while inside a lamp glows softly, promoting relaxation. (Aoni Onsen Spa, Aomori Prefecture. Photo: Kuroda Hiroshi/Aflo)
Bottom: A different type of spa—just let the hot, moist sand fill the air with steam all around you. Warm your body through and through, while listening to the waves. (A steaming sand spa in Kagoshima Prefecture)





Going out in a wheelchair is a daunting experience with limited places you can go, but WHILL can solve that. The futuristic design accented in black and white has users of this electric wheelchair effusive: "Now I've got more opportunities to go out!" and "When I'm in a WHILL, I'm riding in style."

WHILL's performance is another big attraction. Tilt the control levers to roll in the direction you want. Maneuverability and design translate into stress-free comfort on the go. There are 24 small tires on each front wheel to permit omnidirectional turning with rotation centered over the rear axle, and a powerful four-wheel drive mechanism. All this means mobility in every direction, and expanded potential to handle abrupt changes in level or rough terrain like a gravel road.

With this new way to get mobile, "Where am I able to go?" becomes "Let's just go!" WHILL, delivering personal mobility and a happy ride. (From WHILL, Inc.)

Performance and style make the WHILL electric wheelchair fun to ride outdoors, and comfortable, too. Far left: With 24 small tires on each front wheel, a stable 360-degree wheelchair pivot is now possible. Center left: Tilt the controller by hand to roll effortlessly in the direction you want. Near left: Use the remote control app on your Bluetooth-equipped smartphone to move the wheelchair when not riding in it.

Mechanical Engineering Adds Zest to Life

Innovative technologies and design concepts are enabling the creation of new devices and mobility aids that bring greater convenience to everyday life and make it more fulfilling. Meanwhile, in medical institutions, the home and elsewhere, communication robots offer companionship, "conversation," and a helping hand. Technical advances are adding warmth to the relationship between people and machines, and opening up new frontiers for the future.

Photos: Aflo, Huis Ten Bosch Co., Ltd., Murata Manufacturing Co., Ltd., National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, Natori Kazuhisa, Panasonic Corporation, Robo Garage Co., Ltd., SoftBank Corp., Waseda University, WHILL, Inc., YUKAI Engineering Inc.,

The world's first hotel staffed by robots to welcome you

In a world first, robots now welcome guests to a hotel in Japan. At Henn na Hotel ("Hotel Bizarre"), arriving guests are greeted not by humans but by robots. One of them is a humanoid at the front desk—it looks like a woman wearing the hotel uniform, and it blinks and makes eye contact while making room arrangements. Another serves as a porter, carrying luggage, and yet another works in the cloakroom. The hotel is eco-friendly too,

using advanced technologies to reduce power consumption and waste. Management looks forward to further advances in technology to bring robotic automation to more than 90% of the hotel's services. Perhaps hotels staffed by robots will one day offer new levels of convenience and enjoyment, revolutionizing accommodations worldwide! This hotel is in the Huis Ten Bosch theme park in Sasebo City, Nagasaki Prefecture.



Left: A humanoid named Actroid and a dinosaur bot are among the robotic staff at the hotel's front desk. They can do their job thanks to a combination of voice recognition and conversation engine technologies. Above: Even the hotel cloakroom is staffed by a robot that will look after your belongings for you.



ROBOT 1



Pepper

Pepper is the world's first personal robot capable of "communicating" with human-like emotions. Using a camera and sensors, it recognizes our expressions and voice tones, and then processes this information in its neural circuit network to determine and then express its own feelings. Data governing Pepper's reactions is stored in a cloud-based, artificial intelligence (AI) databank, offering feedback on what to do next. Yes, it is just a robot, but it improves on its abilities by interacting with humans. Height approx. 128 cm; weight approx. 28 kg. (From SoftBank Corp.)

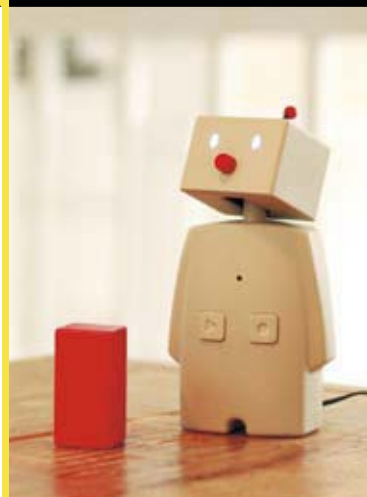
ROBOT 2



KIROBO

This communicating robot, named KIROBO, had an extended stay on the International Space Station, from August 2013 to February 2015. After passing tests to determine performance in conditions of zero gravity, noise and vibration, it hitched a ride to the space station on the unmanned space cargo transporter, KOUNOTORI 4. At the station, astronaut Wakata Koichi and KIROBO successfully tested person-robot communication in space. Performance tests including swimming, walking and jumping in space were successful. Height approx. 34 cm; weight approx. 1 kg. (From Dentsu Inc., Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology of the University of Tokyo, Robo Garage Co., Ltd., Toyota Motor Corporation)

ROBOT 3



BOCCO

BOCCO was developed as a way to communicate with children in the home when parents are away. Send a message to BOCCO by smartphone or other device, and BOCCO will read it aloud to the child at home. The bot's sensors detect when doors and windows open or close, and when lights are turned on or off. Then it sends alerts to say how things are going at home. BOCCO's design and movements are cute enough to win any kid's heart. Height 19.5 cm; weight 220 g. (From YUKAI Engineering Inc.)

ROBOT 4



PARO

PARO looks like a baby seal, but no, it is a robot with sensors to detect light, recognize sounds and sense touch. It uses that information to "read" its surroundings and react accordingly. Equipped with artificial intelligence, it remembers its name and what to do to make its owner happy. More than 20 years of research and clinical trials have proved that interacting with PARO has a therapeutic effect on people, boosting relaxation and motivation. PARO is recognized in the United States as a medical device, and today more than 3,000 of them are in use in about 30 countries. Length approx. 57 cm; weight approx. 2.5 kg. (From the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology)

ROBOT 5



Jukusui-kun

This little bear was developed for people who suddenly stop breathing for a few moments while asleep. The disorder, called sleep apnea syndrome, makes sufferers anxious about going to sleep, but it can be relieved through a change in sleeping posture. Jukusui-kun is a bear-shaped pillow with a microphone inside to check for loud snores, and a hand sensor to measure blood oxygen levels. When breathing stops, one of the bear's robotic paws signals it is time to turn over. A valuable piece of advice for worry-free sleep. Length 85 cm; weight 1.7 kg. (From Waseda University)

ROBOT 6



HOSPI-Rimo

The development concept behind HOSPI-Rimo is to promote spontaneous video communication with hospital patients and long-term care facility residents. The monitor "face" facilitates remote video conversations among nurses and patients, and helps caregivers to keep an eye on residents. Relatives and friends living far away can still "visit" easily. The robot can also go where help may be needed, taking the place of a nurse, and this is expected to reduce the workload of hospital staff. Another feature: the four cameras, one each for the front, back, left and right, make it easy for HOSPI-Rimo to move about on its own while checking for obstacles, and to be operated from a remote location. Height approx. 130 cm; weight approx. 100 kg. (From Panasonic Corporation)

ROBOT 7



Murata Cheerleaders

The 10 members of Murata Manufacturing's cheerleading team dance about on balls. One expects them to fall off their spherical bases, but subtle adjustments keep them upright. One would think they would bump into each other, but teamwork prevents that. Their job is to cheer on those watching, perking up their spirits. The performance is aided by technical advances like gyro sensors to correct tilt, and ultrasonic microphones and infrared sensors to accurately determine location. Thanks to the sensors inside the little bodies, the team brings joy to many people. Height approx. 36 cm; weight approx. 1.5 kg. (From Murata Manufacturing Co., Ltd.)

Communication Robots on Parade

The new lineup of robots does not wait for a command from a human before moving. They offer companionship and communication. In homes and hospitals, long-term care facilities and elsewhere, cute communicating robots are brightening up people's lives.

Yuzu

Brightening Japanese Cuisine with a Tangy Fragrance

Photos: Natori Kazuhisa Culinary collaboration: Araki Noriko



Top: Yuzu fruit has lots of seeds and not much juice, so the rind is used more often than the flesh. (Photo: Aflo)
Left: Simmered small taro garnished with a topping of yuzu rind. The rind is sliced, shredded, or grated to release its aroma.

A bright yellow peel and a tangy aroma: these are the charms of a fruit called yuzu. Yuzu grows on a broad-leaf evergreen shrub in the *rutaceae* family. After seeding, the tree takes at least a decade before it bears fruit, but it is more frost-hardy than any other citrus tree and even grows in Japan's Tohoku region, where the weather is relatively harsh. The fruit ripens in autumn (around October) until the onset of winter. Unripe fruit sport a dark green peel and are picked in summer (generally July) and sold as *ao-yuzu* ("green yuzu").

Japanese people have long used yuzu in their cuisine. Most often, the fruit has a lot of seeds and not much juice, so the rind is used more than the flesh. The rind is peeled thin or chopped fine, then used in clear soups or hot pots to bring out the flavor. Here is one way to prepare it: place clear soup in a bowl, add small pieces of minced rind and cover the bowl. This traps the fragrance inside the hot

pot until, at the table, you remove the cover and release the aroma with the steam, delighting everyone waiting to eat.

In the kitchen, yuzu is used in a variety of ways. One dish that takes full advantage of its ability to charm is *yuzu-gama* ("yuzu pot"). The peel of the fruit itself becomes a little bowl, served in formal meals like New Year's dinners and *kaiseki ryori* banquets. To make it, slice off the top of the fruit, scoop out the inside, then stuff with ingredients such as a vinegared preparation. The yellow peel provides an accent to the meal and creates impact with its color. Moreover, the rind delicately transfers its aroma to the ingredients inside. "Aroma is one important element to make a meal tasty, and when winter comes I'd say we need yuzu. It's not too expensive in Japan and not hard to find, and just a little adds zest to the meal. It's a great little ingredient," says culinary expert Araki Noriko.

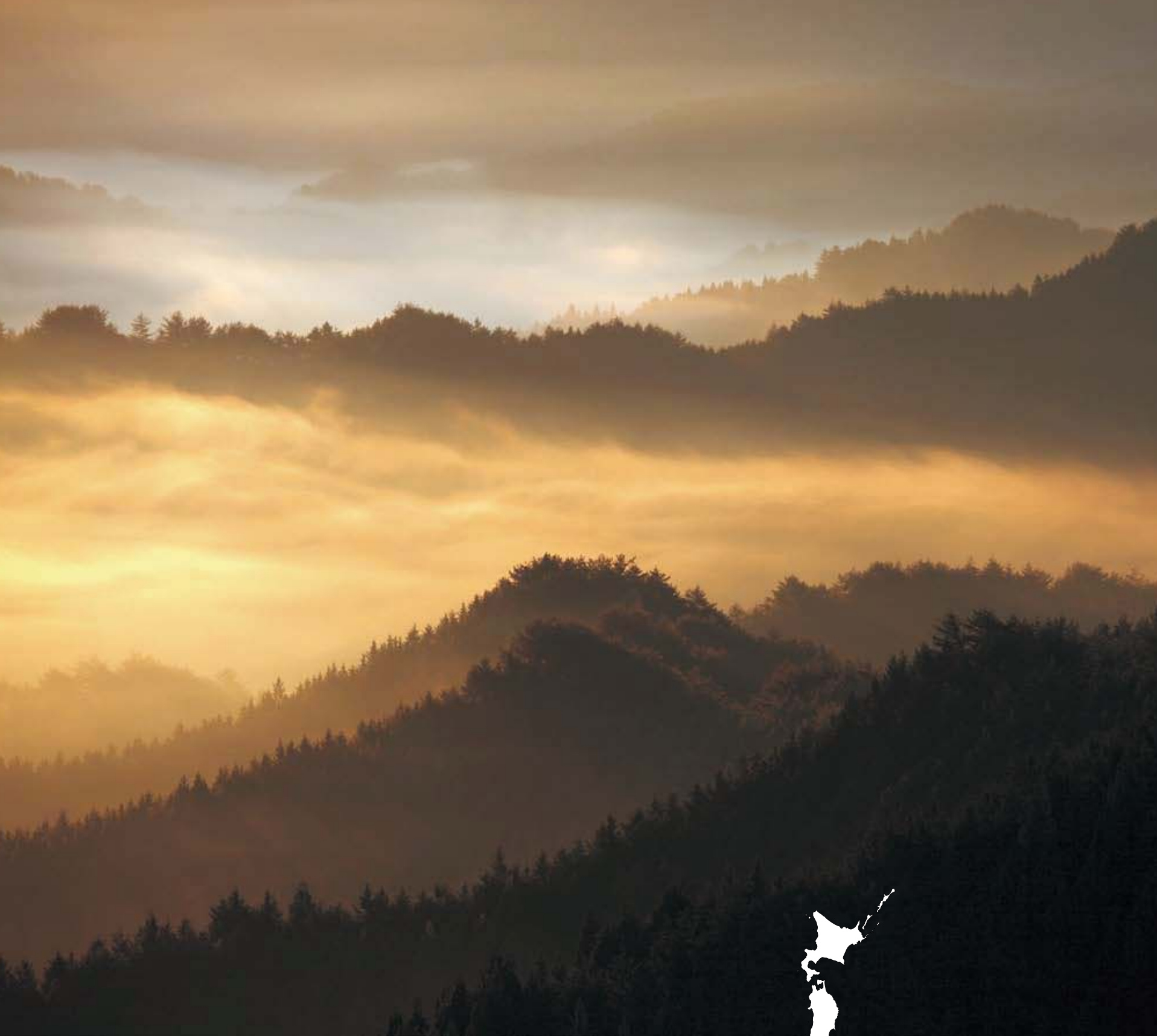
The juice is strongly acidic, and when mixed with soy sauce or a broth it makes a tangy sauce called *ponzu*, for hot pots and steamed dishes. Unripe *ao-yuzu* can be used to make a seasoning—mash it, then mix in green chili and salt. The recipe comes from Kyushu and the seasoning, called *yuzu kosho* ("yuzu pepper"), is widely used as a condiment for soba noodles or an extra flavorful salad dressing.

The Japanese use yuzu for another purpose other than for food. In Japan, on the shortest day of the year (winter solstice, generally December 22), it is customary to fill the bathtub and then float pieces of the peel or the fruit with the peel on the water. People say that soaking in hot *yuzu-yu* water with the fragrance wafting up brings warm comfort and refreshment, not only to the body, but to the soul.

An aroma for the dining table and the bathtub! Yuzu brightens up life in Japan, and soothes the mind, too.

Yuzu-gama ("yuzu pots") take full advantage of the fruit's shape, color and aroma. Inside the pots are (from foreground) salmon roe; pickled daikon radish and carrot; and boiled *komatsuna* greens and *shimeji* mushrooms.





Mount Koya

A pilgrimage to
a celestial place

Photos: Miyamura Masanori/Aflo

An early morning haze hangs over the Mount Koya highlands, creating a truly sublime scene.
The temple complex here is celebrating its 1,200th anniversary in 2015.



Above: In the foreground stands the main gate of the head temple, Kongobu-ji. The main hall seen beyond the gate has beautiful illustrations on sliding *fusuma* doors (*fusuma-e*) and a most impressive garden.

Left: Konpon Daito (Great Central Pagoda) is the main building in the Danjo Garan Temple Complex. Inside the pagoda are five statues of the Buddha and 16 pillars adorned with depictions of the world of *satori*, the spiritual awakening of Buddhism. (Photo below by Terui Sohei)

Right: Statue of Seitaka Doji, one of the eight Hachidai Doji attendants of Myo'o, a demi-deity venerated in esoteric Buddhism. Property of Kongobu-ji Temple.





Above: Monks carry plain wooden boxes containing a traditional *shojin ryori* vegetarian meal, on their way to the Torodo. The ritual, called Shojingu, has continued without a break for 1,200 years. It is performed twice every morning, at 6:00 and 10:30.

Right: One of the simple pleasures of a pilgrimage to temples or shrines is the *shuin-cho* notebook. Religious institutions will stamp pages for you to show you were there. The cover is made of beautiful Japanese *washi* paper. The stamp of a temple in your *shuin-cho* makes a good souvenir to remember your visit by.



A full-course, traditional *shojin ryori* vegetarian meal served at a temple lodging (Seinanin). One dish, *goma-dofu* (white sesame paste with *kuzu* powder kneaded in), is sure to form part of the meal. Souvenir options include: cute bell-shaped *kosuzu monaka* wafers stuffed with bean jam (upper right); and *sasamaki anpu*, which are steamed *manju* buns made with wheat gluten and rice flour (*nama-fu*), wrapped in *sasa* bamboo leaves (lower right).



The mascot Koya-kun made his first appearance this year, when the temple complex is celebrating its 1,200th anniversary. You might see him if you visit the temples on a weekend or holiday.

Wakayama Prefecture is situated to the south in the middle of Japan's main island of Honshu, and the Kii Mountains there have been venerated since ancient times. High in the mountain range, the area known as Mount Koya (elevation around 900 meters, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site), has been regarded as a sacred place in Japanese Buddhism for 1,200 years, ever since the priest Kobo Daishi (Kukai) founded a monastic center for the esoteric Shingon sect there in 816.

The entire area of Mount Koya is considered to be a place of prayer—117 religious buildings are scattered

about within its temple complex, the most revered being Kongobu-ji Temple. Among these religious buildings, the spot where Kobo Daishi first established the monastic center is called Danjo Garan, and here you can see pagodas and temple halls whose architectural design reflects esoteric concepts. Walk under Chu-mon Gate and the first remarkable building to strike your eyes is Kondo, the "Golden Hall," where various religious rituals are held. Beside it rises Konpon Daito, the Great Central Pagoda, 48.5 meters high and the symbol of Mount Koya. Inside on the pillars and walls are illustrations of the Buddha and Bodhisattva saints,

three-dimensionally forming a world of mandala imagery that represents the spiritual awakening achieved through the Buddha's practice. When the pagoda is illuminated at night, the aura it creates against the sky is truly impressive.

In the entire area of Mount Koya, the place considered most sacred within the complex is Okunoin, the location of the mausoleum where the temple founder, Kobo Daishi, is said to be meditating to this day. People think of him as virtually alive, still holding out his hand to help those in need, and they feel that this place offers the most direct opportunities to venerate him. Here, twice a day, food is brought to him in the Shojingu ritual. The pilgrims' path to Okunoin is surrounded with cedar trees that are several hundred years old, creating a mystical atmosphere.

If you plan to stay the night, no place is better than a temple lodging where you can experience some of the spiritual practices of Mount Koya. There are 52 of these lodgings (*shukubo*) within the complex, and they all offer breakfast and supper, featuring carefully prepared dishes of traditional *shojin ryori* vegetable origin meals. Early in

the morning you can participate in a religious service when sutras are chanted and rituals of veneration are performed before an altar. At some lodgings you can try your hand copying a sutra, or you can meditate in the Ajikan way, following the Shingon Buddhist practice of sitting in the lotus position and focusing on your breath. Surrounded by nature in this tranquil part of Japan, your spiritual practice can bring a revitalizing peace of mind you may not experience anywhere else.

Along both sides of the national highways that run east-west past the temples are shops selling food, drink, Japanese confections and souvenirs. For souvenirs you may want to look at the *goma-dofu* (sesame paste kneaded with *kuzu* powder to make a firmly set delicacy often used in *shojin-ryori*), confections, and items unique to a religious place, like *juzu* prayer beads and *shuincho* notebooks for holding impressions of the red seals of temples and shrines.

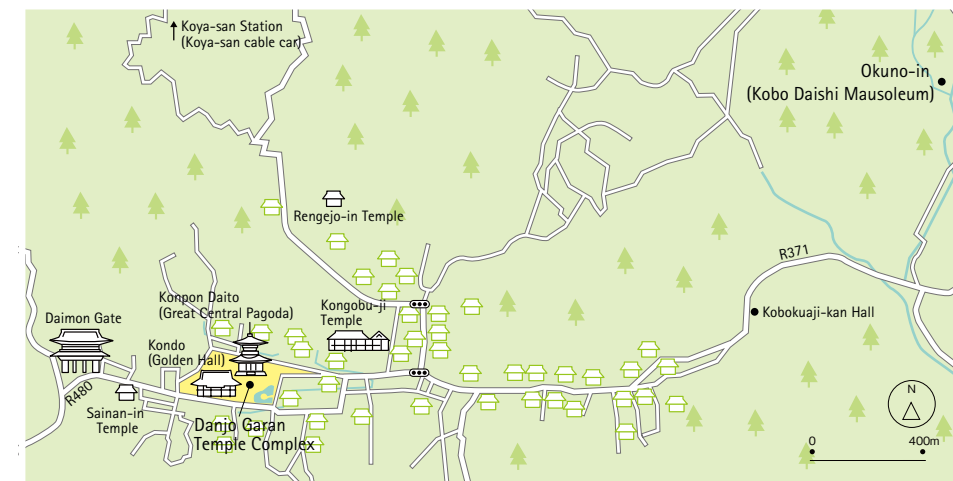
For some quiet moments during your travels, this sacred spot not far from the heavens may be ideal.



Above left: One of the special experiences in the Mount Koya area is the practice of Ajikan, meditation. At Rengejo-in Temple, visitors sit in quiet contemplation, and listen to a monk's explanations.

Top right: Come to Sainan-in Temple for a unique experience: making your own handwritten copy of teachings from a sutra.

Bottom right: Near the pilgrim's path to Okuno-in is Kobokuaji-kan Hall. There you can make *juzu* prayer beads to take home as a souvenir of your travels.



Mount Koya Area Map

●Getting there
From Kansai International Airport, take a train on the Nankai Line to Tengachaya Station (about 35 min). Then take the Nankai Koya Line to Gokurakubashi Station (90 min). Next, board a Nankai Koya-san cable car and alight at Koya-san Station (5 min). From there, buses leave regularly for the Daimon Gate entrance to the complex, and for Okuno-in.

●For more info
Koya-san Shingon Sect, Kongobu-ji Main Temple:
<http://www.koyasan.or.jp/en/> (English, French & Japanese)
Koya-san Shukubo Association
<http://eng.shukubo.net/> (English & Japanese)
Rengejo-in Temple (temple lodgings):
Tel: +81-736-56-2233 (0736-56-2233 if calling from within Japan)
Sainan-in Temple (temple lodgings):
<http://sainanin.com/e> (English & Japanese)
Kobokuaji-kan Hall (where you can make *juzu* prayer beads):
<http://www.16.plala.or.jp/koubokuajikan/> (Japanese language website)



Grace Yourself with a Wearable Fragrant Sachet

Nioi-bukuro

Photo: Kuribayashi Shigeki Collaboration: Shoyeido Incense Co.

Colorful silken threads are woven to make a small pouch, which is then filled with scented materials like cloves or sandalwood. This is a Japanese-style sachet, a scent bag called *nioi-bukuro*, made to be worn nestled against one's chest or placed in a drawer or a shoebox, where it transfers its fragrance delightfully to clothes and shoes. You can buy one in a souvenir store in many popular tourist destinations, or in an incense shop.

Traditional Japanese culture includes an appreciation of pleasant aromas. In *kodo* ("the way of fragrance"), aromatic wood is burned following established forms of etiquette, giving practitioners a different appreciation of the world. This aesthetic is sometimes also expressed through *waka* poetry, with the writer letting inspiration come from the different aromas.

The tradition lives on today in the *nioi-bukuro* pouch—which involves a culture of enjoying the fragrance as representative of the character of the person wearing it. These special sachets go back to around the 8th century, when an incense called *ebiko* was used to keep insects away from things like clothing and books. During the Edo period (1603-1867), *nioi-bukuro* were often made in the shape of a kimono sleeve and worn as a fashionable part of a woman's etiquette.

You might enjoy giving a *nioi-bukuro* to a person, choosing the scent that best matches the impression you have of them. The little pouches create precious aesthetic moments as you interact with the aroma. You may just discover the unique aesthetic sense of the Japanese who value this form of communication through fragrance.

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<http://www.mofa.go.jp/> (Ministry's official website)

<http://web-japan.org/> (Website providing information on Japan)