



PHOTO: LISA SHURE

# DOWN HOME INAKA

Jody Godoy forays into Fukui

**W**ITH A SHOULDER UP AGAINST Mount Haku, and one long arm stretching down to touch Kyoto and Shiga, Fukui Prefecture is where Kansai and Hokuriku meet. Compared to its southern neighbors, Fukui is quite rural, a source of divergent reactions among its visitors. Murasaki Shikibu cried bitter tears of disappointment on her arrival; Dogen settled happily into the mountains to found Zen's Soto sect. More recently, a cult group inimical to radio waves found their ideal

hideaway in the hills outside the city of Fukui, and a group of international residents emblazoned the prefecture on a shirt with the slogan, "I Heart Inaka." A well-known guide book concluded that there's "no real reason to linger here," but intrepid travelers will beg to differ. With time to explore the prefecture's secluded beaches and mountain temples, it becomes clear that there is more to this *inaka* (countryside) than meets the eye.

## Wakasa Bay

Every year, priests at Jingu-ji in Obama send a tribute of holy water to Nara's Todai-ji. The story goes that the Wakasa god first sent the water as an apology for missing a gathering there. He had gone out fishing and lost track of time; easy to do with so many distractions – the irregular peninsulas, white sandy beaches, and quiet coves in southern Fukui among them.

The shallow crystal-clear waters off Mizushima, a small sandbar island near the Tsuruga Peninsula, draw crowds when the ferry is running in July and August. But the island isn't far from shore and some clever visitors manage to get there in the boats of local fishermen in the off-season, finding they have the unspoiled island

to themselves. Several other beaches on the peninsula are extremely popular in the summer, including Wada Beach with its glassy waves, and Suishohama Beach for its pristine white sands. However, unlike the rocky Echizen Coast, there is no shortage of beaches here. On a drive along the shore, passing rustic houses and verdant fields that play against the subdued indigo of the Japan Sea, it's possible to find less visited spots.

A cycling tour is another way to enjoy the warm spring sun and coastal breezes. Surrounded by lush hills, the five interconnected lakes of Mikata are a popular destination. Starting from Mikata Station, a 23-kilometer ride around three of the lakes will take around two-and-a-half hours. Cycles are available for rent at the station, and reservations are necessary in the busy spring season (0770-45-0113). For some protein and a little culinary adventure on the way, try ostrich *kushikatsu* (kabob) at Jomon Plaza on the south shore of Mikata Lake. If reservations are made, there's also a *teppanyaki* (grill) course, including ostrich heart, liver, and gizzard (¥1100-¥1580, 10:00-15:00 on weekends, 11:00-15:00 weekdays, closed Tue., 0770-45-1515). The birds are raised nearby and help keep the lakeside orchards

free of weeds.

### Eiheiji

Tucked away in the hills above the Kuzuryu River in Fukui, Eihei-ji is the main training temple of Soto-shu, the largest Zen sect in Japan. Though Eihei-ji now receives its share of day-trippers, the atmosphere remains one of religious devotion. The complex is built on a hill, and monks in black walk up and down the cool wooden stairs. When two meet, they press their palms together and bow.

Those eager to follow the rigorous 3:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. schedule can spend three nights and four days as lay practitioners, joining in everything from four *zazen* meditation sessions a day to vegetarian *shojin ryori* meals (0776-63-3102, apply at least a month in advance; single afternoon *zazen* sessions are also available). Eihei-ji is a great place to gather one's thoughts amongst the 600-year-old cedars, or just let them fade away along with the temple bells resounding in the valley's placid dawn. For a less structured kind of solitude, follow the hiking trail from the waterfall behind Eihei-ji over the mountains to Kippo-ji. The small, picturesque temple where Dogen Zenji practiced during Eihei-ji's construction receives few visitors but is well worth the trip.

Signs everywhere near Eihei-ji advertise the local specialty, *goma dofu*. To make a meal of the thick, creamy sesame pâté and other varieties of tofu, try Sachiya, located on a hill overlooking the rice and buckwheat fields of the valley (¥525 for a *goma dofu* sampler, full courses from ¥2,730, 0776-63-1167). Made from buckwheat, soba noodles are another cherished food in Fukui. Faster-growing and heartier than rice, soba was once looked on as a homey, unfashionable food, but recently the high-protein, low-fat dish has become more popular. The typical Fukui variation, *oroshi soba*, consists of a bowl of chilled soba noodles in soup with a mound of grated *daikon* radish and bonito flakes on top. Made with mostly buckwheat and very little wheat flour, the best noodles are dark. The grain is said to thrive in mountainous and hard-to-cultivate places like Imajo, where you can sample soba from 30 or so restaurants at the Imajo Soba Festival on May 25 (Minami Echizen-cho Commerce and Tourism Bureau, 0778-47-8002).

### Heisen-ji

A 45-minute drive from Eihei-ji is Heisen-ji, known for the plush and vibrant green moss that blankets the path and tree-trunks. In summer, the giant cedars offer some respite from the heat, as does the handmade soft serve at a small stand nearby. In the stillness of the forest, it's hard to imagine the place as it was in the Muromachi era: a powerful religious center with over 15,000 priests and warrior-monks and a corresponding amount of internal strife. One particularly meddlesome priest was thrown off a sea cliff by his fellows. With such volatile neighbors, it's no wonder



The shallow, crystal clear waters off Mizushima ▲

that when the local farmers razed Heisen-ji in a rebellion, their victory gave the area (Katsuyama, or "victory mountain") its name.

Heisen-ji is dedicated to the worship of Hakusan, a Shinto deity and one of Japan's three holy mountains – a 90-minute drive north into Ishikawa Prefecture takes you to the trail heads. For good views of Hakusan from near Heisen-ji, and a claim to one of Japan's 100 famous mountains, hike up the 1,523-meter Arashimadake (the trail starts at Kadohara's ski grounds). Kyogadake offers equally good views and fewer hikers on a peak-bagging mission. Legend has it that Heisen-ji's priests buried sutra scrolls there during the assault on the temple (1,625 meters, start from near the Okuetsu Heights Youth Nature House). For a nice stroll rather than a strenuous hike, a trail leads up Mitsugashira (779 meters) from Heisen-ji itself.

On the way down from the mountains, stop by Grill Yamada for a bowl of sauce *katsudon*. This hearty Fukui favorite is a bowl of *koshihikari* rice (a Fukui variety grown all over Japan) with a couple of whole, deep-fried pork cutlets soaked in *tonkatsu* sauce on top. The dish has been popular ever since Takahata Masutaro created it in 1913 as a part of the then-innovative *yoshoku* (Western-style) menu at his Europa-ken restaurant. Perhaps the secret is in the sauce – while ordinary *tonkatsu* sauce is made with sake, Fukui's is red wine-based (Grill Yamada 11:00-14:00, 17:30-20:00, 0779-88-8856. There are several Europa-ken locations, including one near Fukui JR Station: 11:00-20:00; closed Tuesdays, 0776-21-4681).

### Fukui-ben

Fukui-ben is the local dialect spoken mostly in the

north of the prefecture and characterized by a plaintive, sing-song intonation. Crack a smile on a local face with these phrases.

**Tsuru-tsuru ippai:** Full to the brim, to the point where the surface is actually convex with tension. A characteristically Fukui-ben phrase best used when ordering a beer.

**Chaga-chaga:** The equivalent of *mechakucha* ("all messed up") in standard Japanese, this phrase is sure to get a laugh. When your TV reception's *chaga-chaga*, people in Fukui might say it's *jami-jami*.

**Hoya:** Fukui-ben for the affirmative *so, so*, *hoya hoyo* is as Fukui-ben as it gets. When combined with the dialect's penchant for substituting *ya* sounds for *da* and other sounds and using the *-te* ending, *so desho* becomes *hoyaro* or *hoyatte*.

### Getting to Fukui

The Shinkansen still doesn't run to Fukui, but there are frequent limited-express trains into Fukui Station from the north and south. The trains stop at Tsuruga Station, but getting from there to the beach takes some patience with the local trains and buses. From Fukui Station to Eihei-ji, take the Echizen Tetsudo Katsuyama Line to Eiheiji-Guchi Station; there are frequent buses to the temple from there. For Heisen-ji, take the same line to the last stop. Buses from there only run three times a day, but luckily Katsuyama Station lends bicycles for free in good weather. Coming by car is the easiest way to make the best of a trip into Fukui; the Hokuriku Expressway and Route 8 in the north, and Maizuru-Wakasa Expressway and Route 27 in the south are the primary roadways. **KTO**