

Inside the real Japan

fact file



Spectators cram every vantage point to get a glimpse of an authentic Itako bride.

Pictures: Norman Burns

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It's a familiar cry to most tourists — so much to see, so little time . . . and the tricky assignment of avoiding the tourist traps and experiencing the “real” culture of a foreign country.

If you're visiting Japan, the answer to this dilemma could be as simple as turning right instead of left from Narita Airport and heading to the Suigo (waterfront) district of the towns of Itako, Kashima and Sawara.

It's an area that goes under the radar of most visitors and yet is closer to the airport than metropolitan Tokyo (80km from the arrivals hall) itself.

Sandwiched between the Tone River, which flows right into Tokyo, and the Pacific Ocean coastline, with myriad waterways and lakes in between, this is rich rice-growing country.

The approaches to Itako are flanked by lush green paddies as far as you can see; farmers' cottages dotted among them, looking like life-sized dolls' houses.

The waterfront district is a precinct of supreme beauty, with surprisingly sophisticated dining and “living” traditions, all of which can be explored over a few days. It's also a great contrast to the mega-sprawl of Tokyo.

Of course, events like Itako's charming Iris Festival are only held at certain times in the year, as is the Festival of Floats in the quaint canal-crossed town of Sawara. Don't worry, though, if your itinerary doesn't coincide with festival fever. There's plenty more to see.

Take the 2660-year-old shinto shrine in Kashima, a town mad on football thanks to the exploits of the local J. League team Kashima Antlers. The shrine and associated temples are impressive enough (you enter through a massive gate carved out of 100 tonnes of granite) but what makes this well worth a special trip is the setting — a magnificent forest, right in the middle of the town, that looks like it was the inspiration for Avatar's planet Pandora.

The tenets of shintoism, Japan's indigenous religion, are a little tricky to grasp, but basically nearly everything — rocks, trees, rivers, the sky, animals, or anything seen as important to life, such as fertility — can be kami, or spirits akin to deities.

Believers come to the shrine to pray for good fortune, good health or innumerable other reasons. Kashima sees a lot of Antlers fans, and players, seeking divine luck on the pitch. You can also check out the statue of Brazilian legend Zico, who took the Antlers to the very top in just their first season, outside Kashima Stadium. He, too, has taken on kami-like status and is known as sakka no kamisama, or God of Soccer.

The shrine is a great place to wander and chill out but you'll need a couple of



One of the massive floats carried around Sawara during the Festival of Floats.



Dancers among iris beds during Ayame Festival.



Old houses are not just museum pieces in the picturesque, canal-crossed town of Sawara.



hours to see it all. Inside the vast, tree-shaded grounds is a deer park and a museum with displays of samurai weaponry including a 2m sword (Futunomitama-no-Turugi), one of Japan's national treasures and said to be owned by the god Takemikazuchi-No-Okami himself.

One tip though: there is little English signage and unless you speak Japanese you'll probably need a guide. The local tourism association can arrange one.

Once you've been all kami-ed out, just metres from the shrine's exit is a great soba noodle restaurant, just the ticket to fuel up for a wander through Kashima's beautifully kept streets.

A half-hour's drive from Kashima is Sawara, a town where the Japan of the Edo era (1603-1868) lives on. Sawara is just so cute you want to cry.

Tiny shops, in the 17th or 18th generation of family ownership, line the historic district. Many have their own family “museums” out the back, all jammed with a fascinating array of knick-knacks and heirlooms.

Shopkeepers are unfailingly polite in inviting you in to what essentially is still their backyard for a nosey. There's no “hard sell” and Sawara is perfect for travellers who like to wander and not get hassled to buy anything — although you will certainly want to, from beautiful

handmade paper and prints to antiques, fabrics and papier-mache sculptures.

The town has a reputation for producing artisans and craftsmen. One of its famous sons is Ino Tadataka, the first man to map Japan — by walking the entire country (when he was already over 50) in the early 1800s. His maps were highly accurate and his old Sawara home has been preserved as a museum.

Another highlight is the Baba Honten Brewery, which has been making sake on the same main street site since 1681.

There are two other musts in Sawara: lunch at Mujian restaurant and dinner at the magnificent Kittei. Both serve French-Japanese fusion food at its finest.

Every summer Sawara attracts more than just fine diners when thousands attend the Festival of Floats. Enormous floats, featuring famous mythical heroes, heroines and villains and each weighing several tonnes, are carried by competing teams through the narrow streets.

Some of the floats are more than 100 years old and display stunning craftsmanship. It becomes a highly charged contest to see which team can “spin” their giant float in the tightest possible circle. Some of the floats are on display at — yes, you guessed it — The Festival of Floats Museum.

Back in Itako, flower power takes centre stage. During the Ayame Matsuri (Iris Festival) more than a million of them, from 500 species, are in bloom.

This is also when you can “gatecrash” a traditional wedding — well, you and about 5000 other spectators.

It's called Itako hanayome-san (Itako bride) and essentially is a re-enactment of when the river was the main conduit for all business — weddings included. Now largely ceremonial, brides in traditional dress are escorted to a boat by their parents, and ferried up the river to a groom waiting at a hotel.

Not all the weddings are purely make-believe; a tip is to look out for the “bride's” female friends. If they are all dolled up, it's the real thing.

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