



# THE WAY BACK HOME

The Japan of my expat childhood was a magical, wonder-filled place. Twenty years on, would the Tokyo suburbs of my youth have anything to offer a discerning traveller? There was only one way to find out.

TEXT ARWEN JOYCE

**T**he official Japanese calendar tracks time according to the reigning emperor and so Emperor Hirohito's death in early 1989 marked the end of the Showa era. When my American family left Japan later that year, it marked the end of an era for us as well. After three tours overseas, my father was posted back to the headquarters in Washington D.C. and lived there for the rest of his life. Four years earlier,

he was stationed at Yokosuka Naval Base—40 miles south of Tokyo—and moved his young family into a house in Hayama, a seaside town on Sagami Bay. The years we spent in Japan between my fifth and tenth birthdays were a magical time of conveyor-belt sushi and green tea ice cream, cherry blossoms and Azalea festivals, Shinto shrines and Tokyo Disney Land.

**Above:** The ubiquitous cherry blossoms adorn Japan's landscape with their delicate colours. The paper lanterns, a significant part of Japanese culture, symbolise good fortune.

**Right:** Grandpa Joyce and I at the Great Buddha in 1987. We were dwarfed by the magnitude of this bronze structure.



It was a wait of more than 20 years, before my mother and I finally returned to this land—one of anime, Pocky sticks and Pocari Sweat. For two weeks in the spring we wore out our Japan Rail passes visiting new cities and old friends. Being the first time I saw the country through adult eyes, two things surprised me. First, I was astonished to find that after two decades the language I had studied at such a rudimentary level still sounded familiar and I was able to manage the bare minimum of communication. Perhaps what surprised me more was that Yokohama, Hayama and Kamakura in Kanagawa Prefecture—which I remember as small neighbourhoods explored from within a protective family bubble—are charming destinations worth visiting, even if you didn't grow up there.

### SCHOOL ON A HILL

The desks, lockers and classrooms that once seemed so large have now shrunk to miniatures since I last strolled through the halls of my grade school in

Yokohama. St Maur's former elementary school principal, who taught fifth grade when one of the small desks on the first floor was mine, was kind enough to give us a tour. The school now boasts shiny new computers and science labs, and even has its own Twitter account. A few sights brought back a sense of familiarity—the uniforms are still a familiar red and grey plaid and the auditorium, where I played a variety of parts in school musicals, still retains its high ceilings and wooden pews.

The school's location in a quiet neighbourhood on a hill is a legacy from the mid-19th century when Japan first opened to trading with the West. Yokohama—now Japan's second largest city and a short, direct train ride from Tokyo—was a small fishing village prior to the arrival of US Navy Commodore Matthew Perry in the 1850s. After a trade agreement was reached, the first American and European settlers in Japan were confined to a hill called the Bluff in modern-day Yamate-cho.

Clockwise from below: These now retro vending machines were an important part, growing up; A guide map of the Bluff area of Yamate Hills; Mom tries out a traditional breakfast at a *ryokan*.

Anwen Joyce





Clockwise from above: The Joyce and Tanabe families forged a bond that is going strong until this day; The Museum of Modern Art gives a spectacular view of the Sagami Bay; Travelling via rail would be the best way to enjoy the scenic routes and neighbourhood locales.

It was here that they built western-style churches, homes and schools, including St Maur in 1872.

My childhood memories of Yokohama are likewise confined to the Bluff. It was here that I tried every brand of Japanese sweet at the penny shop. It was also where I studied Hiragana on flash cards; one of three writing systems that make up the almost impenetrable but impossibly beautiful Japanese language. It was also where I began to appreciate the joys and challenges of living as an expatriate—a feeling I have been happily chasing around the world, ever since.

Leaving the school, my mother and I meandered through the leafy Motomachi Park and took a turn through the Yokohama Foreign General Cemetery. This plot of terraced green on the side of a hill was

set aside by the Japanese as the burial site of a member of Commodore Perry's crew in 1854. We took our time examining names and dates carved on mossy headstones before catching a train to Zushi for another walk down memory lane.

### FEELING AT HOME

Bonsai trees, flowering shrubs and stone lanterns adorn the immaculately tended gardens of our former neighbours' homes. In Hayama, where I learned to ride a bike and went trick-or-treating with Japanese friends, there was familiarity with the new. Every small detail—the sloped roofs of the houses, their tiles like shiny black fish scales, the way tatami mats give off that faint pleasant scent of fresh straw, or holding a silver 50 yen coin—unearthed long buried memories.

Hayama, a pretty beach town, is the location of one of the Imperial family's summer homes. We arrived on the doorstep of Noriko Tanabe, a slip of a woman with insatiable energy, who offered to show us around. Noriko has been teaching Japanese to Americans on the Yokosuka Naval Base for 30 years; my father was her first private student. Our families remained close through all these years, and she and my mother now have something else in common; both were widowed at a very young age.

Our first stop was the Museum of Modern Art, which opened an annex near Isshiki Beach in 2003 to complement the existing exhibition space in nearby Kamakura. On a cloudless day you can see clear across Sagami Bay to Mount Fuji from the museum's outdoor viewing terrace. We strolled past soba shops and small boutiques back to Tanabe-san's home where a decadent home-made banquet awaited us.

Ariwen Joyce





The feast began with a lacquered tray of hors d'oeuvres and assorted sashimi including some rare delicacies: the richest fatty tuna belly and creamy ankimo or monkfish liver. After a quartet of salads and an intermezzo of hot anchovy and garlic dip with crudité's, my mom and I were stuffed to the gills, but the best was yet to come. A beaming Tanabe-san carried in a heaping platter of spare ribs which had been slow cooked for hours in homemade plum wine. At the end of the meal nothing remained but a pile of clean white bones. Each beautifully presented dish illustrated the Japanese penchant for flawless entertaining.

### VISITING THE BIG BUDDHA

When my father's father came to visit us in Hayama in 1987, my family took him to see the Great

Buddha (Daibutsu) on the grounds of Kotokuin Temple in Kamakura—the former capital of feudal Japan. I held my grandpa's hand and craned my neck, mouth gaping wide, to gaze up at the Buddha; the second largest in Japan measuring over 13 feet tall. Cast in bronze in 1252, the Buddha is just as colossal and majestic today as I remembered it. It is also hollow and for a few extra yen you can have a peek inside.

A 15-minute walk from Kamakura station in the opposite direction along a pedestrian path lined with hundreds of cherry trees is Tsurugaoka Hachimangu—Kamakura's most important shrine. Founded in 1063 and dedicated to the patron god of the warrior samurai class, it was developed further and moved to its current site in 1180 by

**Clockwise from above: Megan and I at a shrine; Yokohama is place replete with childhood memories for me, and this sign stands testimony to the good times; Mount Fuji at sunset.**

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the first shogun of the Kamakura government. The shrine is surrounded by ponds and gardens and comprises a number of halls, a small museum and a stage for dance performances. During the first few days of January, over two million visitors pour into the shrine, which is a popular place to bring in the new year.

Our return to Japan, at long last, came at a difficult time for the area we used to once call home. After the tsunami in 2011 and related nuclear plant crises, St Maur's enrolment dropped from 500 to 400 students and Tanabe-san estimates that one third of the foreigners living in and around Hayama moved away. But these communities at Tokyo's doorstep—a stone's throw from one of the largest US Naval bases in the western Pacific—are quickly bouncing back and are welcoming and charming visitors now, similar to the way they did when I lived there in the late 1980's. With Yokohama's international heritage, Hayama's winsome waterfront appeal and Kamakura's ancient sites, these towns south of Tokyo have much to offer whether seen with the wide-eyed wonder of a child or visited as a well-travelled adult. I feel lucky to have experienced both. ■

José Fuste Raga/Age/Dimedia

A typical Japanese tea shop, amid bamboo trees in Kamakura.

## QUICK FACTS

### GETTING THERE

Jet Airways' codeshare partner, All Nippon Airways has direct flights to Tokyo from Mumbai.

### ACCOMMODATION

Yokohama has hotels that suit every style and budget category. The well-appointed Yokohama Royal Park Hotel offers soaring views out over the harbour ([www.yrph.com/en](http://www.yrph.com/en)). For an authentic *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inn) experience in Japan's former feudal capital, book a Japanese-style room at Kaihinso Kamakura ([www.kaihinso.jp](http://www.kaihinso.jp)).

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