



A traditional Japanese home in Nagiso, one of the country's most well-preserved villages

# Walking The NAKASENDO WAY

**CORRINA ALLEN KIERSONS** shares how this iconic walk in Japan became a lesson in what to hold onto and what to let go.

**I**T'S HEART STOPPING, ALL OF IT: the freshly flooded rice paddies reflecting sky and mountain. The bamboo forests, each tall stalk in a solitary race to the sun. The ancient ishidatami paving stones made mossy and soft with time. The meticulously cared-for Shinto shrines.

Japan's Nakasendo Way, an Edo-period trade route, begins in the heart of Kyoto at Sanjo-ohashi bridge, weaves upwards through the Japanese Alps to the picturesque and perfectly preserved mountain town of Tsumago, through the resort town of Karuizawa (where John and Yoko would go to escape the crowded capitol), and ends at the Nihonbashi bridge in Tokyo. The trail is 534 kilometres long and marked by 69 post-towns where tired travellers find dinner and a place to sleep at traditional Japanese ryokan inns. For nine consecutive days, I walked an average of 20 kilometres of this route, winding around peaks and across switchbacks, climbing ever upwards – as much as 715 metres in a single day. It was sweaty. It was physically and psychologically challenging. I have blisters as keepsakes. I'd do it again in a second.

I inherited a love of long walks from my mother and grandmother. As a child, they'd take me for after-dinner strolls, looping around the quiet suburban streets of South London, Ontario at magic hour. As an adult, walking is when and how I do my best thinking – I don't know if I fully

realized that until I couldn't do it anymore. Last year, a series of small injuries were summed up one August afternoon, totaling two paramedics, one ambulance ride and zero ability to sit, stand or walk. My spine, occasionally stiff and inflexible, felt like an iron rod fresh from the forge. Someone was quality testing an invisible set of serrated knives on my sciatic nerve. Even after two hospital-administered doses of morphine, I was unable to separate standing from screaming. A somewhat muted form of that agony would stay with me – sending me to live with my mother, forcing me to rely on my 92-year-old grandmother's unused walker, trapping me indoors, cancelling my social life and stealing my sleep – for three months.

When the pain finally disappeared, I walked around like Samuel L. Jackson's supervillain, Mr. Glass, straddling the border between “completely healed” and “completely terrified at the possibility of backsliding into suffering.” There are both worse and better places. My list of irrational fears included: What if someone bumps into me on the subway? What if my dog pulls too hard on her leash? What if I twist a centimetre too far in yoga class? I'd had months of physiotherapy, but it hadn't touched the damage the injury had done to my confidence. So I signed up to walk the Nakasendo Way with Walk Japan, hoping to clear that mental hurdle.

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Top to bottom: Flooded rice paddies reflect the sky in Gifu prefecture. Ancient paving stones dating back to the Edo period still line parts of the Nakasendo Way. Geishas greet visitors in Kyoto's Higashiyama district

“Over and over, each new vista proves the climb worthwhile.”

of tropical Okinawa all the way up to the northern island of Hokkaido, home to the Indigenous Ainu people. In May, I walked their Nakasendo with a group of lively Australians, New Zealanders and two couples from Hong Kong. These were expert travellers, many of whom had done walking tours before and, unlike me, knew the benefit of hiking poles, proper boots and the types of packs that didn't have to be taken off, opened, and rummaged through each time you wanted a sip of water. Lesson(s) learned.

During the Edo period, a royal entourage (meaning around 10,000 people – or “squad goals,” if you're Beyoncé) would trek the Nakasendo, taking three days to pass through a single town, carrying everything a royal “needs” for a long journey. Imagine: carved wooden trunks standing four feet high stuffed with silk kimonos and jewelry, luxurious pieces of furniture, precious artwork, official papers and documents –

and not the kind you store in your Google Drive. I carried a water bottle, a camera, my wallet and phone, and many, many band-aids. Also, the occasional tin or two of Asahi (a Japanese beer). I couldn't figure out why it felt so heavy.

The story of the Nakasendo Way is that what goes down, must go (gaspingly) up again for a total elevation gain of a few thousand metres over the course of the trail (insert homage to my asthma inhaler here). Yet over and over, each new vista proves the climb worthwhile. Leaving the main street of the hilly post-town of Nakatsugawa on day six of our walk, we bought matcha ice cream and enjoyed it on a café terrace that revealed a stunning view of Mount Ena and the Kiso Valley, previously hidden by the village's close-set buildings. On day eight, our lunchtime hosts in Kiso-Machi led us to their garden patio so that we could gaze up at sacred Mount Ontake while sampling their homemade miso-and-local-mozzarella



pizza. (With apologies to Naples, it was the best I've ever tasted.) Further along the path, we climbed a hill to visit a farm where small, tobacco-brown horses grazed in the shade of wooded fields. Day nine's highlight was a thundering waterfall where our guide-in-training dunked his head in the cascade and was reborn (or something like that). The days passed and my pack began to feel lighter.

More than ice cream, pizza and beer, it was our nightly dinners that fueled the next day's walk. Over hearty meals made up of many small courses featuring local ingredients and regional specialties, we learned that it was customary to refill each other's sake cups and to never leave our chopsticks sticking upright in a bowl of rice. Our guide, Kaho, told us that Japan is an old country with old traditions, sometimes impossible to trace back to their origin. But what's important is that they're still alive. Pay attention and you'll start to see them everywhere, Kaho said: at shrines where locals deposit tiny hand-knit hats for Buddhist jizo statues, an act of kindness towards these protective deities; in remote

post-towns, where artisans continue to craft the same products their ancestors once made: lacquer bowls, ceramic tea cups, combs carved from sakaki wood; and in the way that strangers greet each other with a sing-song “Konichitwa” each time they cross paths.

On the seventh day of walking – undoubtedly the longest and toughest – our group reached Ōkuwa in the late afternoon. We had some time before a short train ride would take us to dinner and our inn for the evening. While everyone headed to a nearby café for a celebratory drink, I indulged in my own tradition. I grabbed a cold can of Asahi from a small shop on the town's narrow main street and sat sipping it outside Nojiri train station, looking up at the Kiso mountains made pink by the sun's descent and inhaling the perfume of flowering freesia. Another three days of walking lay ahead but the fear I'd been carrying for months was already somewhere behind me on the trail. I was free of it – and sobbing with relief as traditionally too-polite-to-stare locals passed by. ④

## When You Go

While the Nakasendo Way walk begins in Kyoto, most flights from Canada will land you in Tokyo. This is a good thing. You'll want to start your journey early so that jet lag will have worn off before the hike begins. Check-in to the serene **Capitol Hotel Tokyo** for its luxurious levels of peace and quiet (plus a view that can't be beat). From there, take the train to Kinosaki, an onsen town near the Sea of Japan where **Nishimuraya Hotel Shogetsutei's** private and public onsen baths will have you limbered up for the long walk. Order the kaiseki dinner: course after delicious course is served right in your room by their elegant staff. Finally, get to Kyoto a night or two before you meet up with your **Walk Japan** tour group and spend some time at the newly opened **Kyoto Yura Hotel MGallery**. Street-facing rooms feature tatami mat sitting areas that overlook the Nakasendo's starting point, the Sanjo-ohashi bridge. Last but by no means least: break in your hiking boots.



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