BOARDING PASS
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Tales from the land of the rising sun

ESCAPING THE SUMMER HEAT IN NIKKO

Nikko was a dream. Although my family and I went to Japan in August, the mountain rain cooled down the air. The series of pine covered hills kept hiding and then reappearing from amidst the clouds and the rain, so the view of the landscape changed constantly. At night, I could actually hear the running stream nearby through my open window.

During the busy hours of the day, however, it is a world heritage site, and the Chuzenji Onsen areas become highlights for tourists. The centuries old heritage site holds magnificent temples and the ornate Toshogu shrine, and a beautiful red bridge that once only the emperor was allowed to cross. The Chuzenji onsen area is where you'll find Lake Chuzenji and the famous Kegon falls.

Whether you are on a day trip from Tokyo, or a traveller staying overnight, here's a quick guide to Nikko.

Getting around: Nikko is very easy to get around, with all points of interest easily accessible by bus. We got a bus pass from the station, which we used to get to the nearby World heritage site, as well as make the journey to the Chuzenji Onsen, which is a bit further away.

Food: At lunchtime, I got a taste of two dishes, considered Nikko specialties — cold soba noodles with dipping sauce, and Yuba.

The cold soba noodles is consumed in summer as a respite from the heat. Yuba is made from the skin which forms on top of boiled soy milk, lending it a chewy texture. My personal favourites were the desserts I tried near the bridge — the Nikko pudding, made with extra cream, and taiyaki, filled with custard.

Lodging: For many, Nikko is a day trip from Tokyo, but we decided to spend two nights there to really take in the fresh mountain air. We chose the Nikko Station Hotel II for its close proximity to the station, bus stop, and supermarket. Our rooms came with beautiful views of the mountains, and all day free green tea and coffee. In the morning, there was a delicious free breakfast of rice, vegetable curry, omelette, salad and bread.

KIMONO FITTING IN KYOTO

Having mastered the art of draping a sari at a fairly young age, I've always been curious about the elaborate process of dressing in traditional clothes around the world. It was while visiting temples across Japan that I came across the exquisite garment known as the Kimono. Hundreds of kimono clad women strolling in the gardens, with summer flowers in their hair, transformed the scene into something out of a painting. The flowing robes, with colourful patterns and contrasting obis (a kind of thick belt), wrapped into intricate origami like shapes, were each works of art.

My curiosity was piqued, so one summer's day in Kyoto, I stepped into a traditional kimono fitting store in a busy little street near the Kiyomizudera Temple. The tiny store was run by two women, one handling the customers and their hair, and the other dressing them.

Now, you don't just wear a kimono, but rather, get fitted into one. This is because, similar to the sari, a kimono is generally meant to be one-size-fits-all. An expert help is required for those unfamiliar with the garment. Because kimonos can be expensive, many prefer to simply rent it for the day, as I was about to.

The first step was choosing the outfit. Turns out, this was not the season for rich silk kimonos. It was summer, and a lighter garment called Yukata was in vogue. I desperately wanted to wear one of the many gorgeous heavy kimonos hanging on the racks, with the gold cranes and moss green leaves, but it was 32° C outside, so it would be murder to even try. However, I was not disappointed for long. Where the kimono was rich and luxurious, its sister, the yukata, was light and airy, and a joy to wear, as I was soon to find out. All I had to do was pick an outfit. Spoilt for choice, I looked at the lady helplessly.

"Japanese girls like pink. Do you like pink?" she asked.

I professed my undying love for the colour and the matter was settled. The actual dressing took almost ten minutes.