



It is easy to see why Matsushima Bay (above), with its 260 islands such as Kanejima (below), forms one of the classic Three Views of Japan.

ST PHOTOS: LEE SIEW HUA

Steps of a poet

I retrace the journey of ancient poet Matsuo Basho, who travelled Japan's isolated north on foot



Iwalk in the isolated north of Japan for five days, my senses awakened as I traipse through whispering cedar forests in misty rain.

It is a quest composed of many little sojourns that reveal the beauty of Japan – a trek on an ancient highway, a cruise around the pine-clad islands of Matsushima Bay, a climb up 2,466 steps to Mount Haguro.

It is all very poetic. After all, I am retracing the quixotic foot journey of poet-wanderer Matsuo Basho, who penned the timeless travelogue *Narrow Road To The Deep North* in the 17th century.

Written in an era of social turbulence, his classic, a blend of prose and haiku, evokes the Japanese sense of beauty and the transience of life.

In middle age, the feted poet sold his house and devoted five months to traverse a 2,000km route in the spring of 1689 with a disciple-friend, Sora.

They were walking on the edge of civilisa-

tion in those days, for beyond lay a terrifying terrain of bandits and barbarians who roamed the mountains.

So the north, which includes the tsunami-hit prefectures of Fukushima, Iwate and Miyagi, was an unexplored land that evoked mystery for Basho.

Today, this Tohoku region is still remote and little visited by non-Japanese. I barely see foreign faces on my sojourn with a dozen walkers on the first Basho Tour hosted by pioneering adventure company Walk Japan (www.walkjapan.com).

A 10-day trip, which starts in Tokyo and ends in Kyoto, costs 418,000 yen (\$5,350, see story on facing page). I ask for a compressed five-day version.

Like Basho, I begin my road trip in Tokyo, though we hop onto a blazing bullet train to Sendai, slicing off the urban sprawl in a couple of hours to focus on the far north.

We walk 8 to 10km a day, a dreamy stroll compared to the 30 to 40km clocked by the tough-minded poet.

But it is enough time and distance for me to savour the haiku moments of each day, whether we are looking at a salt cauldron in Shioyama or stopping at shrines to think about the afterlife.

Each new day brings a stream of highlights, which inspire my travel companions to write haikus on the move while I tweet instead. I have yet to compose any haiku about nature, though I have taken much delight in the following episodes.

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POET MATSUO BASHO

Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) penned the poetic travelogue *Narrow Road To The Deep North*, a Japanese literary gem.

The feted poet, son of a minor samurai, embarked on several major journeys. Most famously, in 1689, he spent five months walking nearly 2,000km from Edo (old Tokyo) to the outposts of Japanese civilisation.

These are today's Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate prefectures, which few foreigners have visited, even before this northerly realm was scarred by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

The poet, who wrote with melancholy and wit, was travelling dangerously, for bandits and barbarians roamed the mountains just beyond these lands. Undaunted, Basho, who was influenced by Chinese poetry and Taoist philosophy, walked along the rugged Sea of Japan coast, traversed forests and popped into villages, observing a changing mediaeval Japan.



A statue of Basho in a Hiraizumi garden.

Accompanied by disciple and friend Sora, he made his pilgrimage in straw sandals to places of natural beauty and literary significance. He stopped at shrines and historic zones. On the road, the celebrity poet taught poetry to his distant disciples. He perfected *haibun*, a blend of poetic prose and haiku.

Today, many still walk parts of the Basho trail. Like him, they may wonder about the vanished Fujiwara clan (866-1184), which reigned at a time when Hiraizumi, Japan's latest World Heritage Site, rivalled Kyoto in splendour.

A thicket of summer grass Is all that remains Of the dreams and ambitions Of ancient warriors.

In such lines, Basho's appeal is for all times, when he conveys the impermanence of human glory.

Lee Siew Hua

Narrow Road To The Deep North is available at amazon.com for US\$10.42 (\$\$13).



MATSUSHIMA BAY, LONGEVITY PINES

The bay with its pine-clad islands is one of the beloved Three Views of Japan. The other two are the Amanohashidate sandbar in Kyoto and Itsukushima Shrine in Hiroshima.

On a 50-minute cruise, we view the islands and their twisted pines, which symbolise long life and joy.

The place in Miyagi prefecture is lovely with a touch of whimsy. Locals say a tiny islet looks like the crest of a wave, and for me it does conjure up The Great Wave Off Kanagawa, a woodblock print by artist Hokusai.

Then there is a cigar-smoking man, a heron taking flight and a fanciful pot island. Kanejima island apparently sounds like a bell when waves crash through its four crevices. Basho longed to visit the bay and later described the sight: "Islands are piled above islands."



The trees in Hiraizumi, Japan's latest World Heritage Site, are starting to change hues with the arrival of autumn.



Rice-stalk stacks are often seen next to homes in Hiraizumi (above), while the ancient Dewa Sendai Highway (above right) is now an enchanting trail that is clearly sign-posted.

HIRAIZUMI, ANCIENT WARRIORS

The moment I step off the local train into little Hiraizumi, I love its manicured beauty and intimate scale, which allows us to walk in minutes to its Motsu-ji Temple and gardens, and the trails beyond.

Hiraizumi is Japan's newest World Heritage Site. The status was conferred in June 2011 and this uplifted northerners greatly three months after the tsunami, earthquake and nuclear scare.

Hiraizumi, 40km from the Pacific Coast, was spared the devastation. Indeed, its trails and temples are pristine,

while the kabuki-like story of its powerful Fujiwara family, which reigned during the 11th and 12th centuries, still intrigues the modern soul.

Under the Fujiwaras, Hiraizumi rivalled the old capital Kyoto in splendour, and the town in Iwate prefecture retains an exquisite spirit now. It feels like a less-explored gem, when I look at the quiet autumn-tinged gardens styled as a Buddhist "pure land paradise" by the Fujiwaras.

Basho, catching echoes of the family's vanished glory, compared their ancient warriors to "summer grass".



DEWA SENDAI HIGHWAY, ENCHANTING FOREST

I imagine soldiers and sojourners such as Basho on this ancient national highway, which had its origins in 702 AD and was influenced by Chinese systems.

The Edo highway is now a forest trail, wild and lovely, that is profusely signposted in Japanese and English. The boards carry facts and little narratives, such as the one about the merciful monkeys that sheltered and offered sake to a runaway ruler.

In mist-like rain, I trek through gorges with hairpin bends and over streams like Basho. But he had less fun than me. He was questioned by barrier guards on the highway, who viewed him with intense suspicion as he came from a land of ninjas.

He also slept at an inn in Yamagata prefecture infested by fleas and lice, he complained. When I visit the lovingly restored inn, however, my trek-weary toes are warmed by a fireplace built into the floorboards and I am soothed by the hot tea poured by a storytelling host.

The inn, built with chestnut pillars, also has glass cases of straw sandals, replicas of those worn by Basho.

MOUNT HAGURO, SECRET GARDEN

I am daunted when I hear that we will climb 2,466 stone steps, while hauling an overnight knapsack, up to Mount Haguro.

There is a road up the mountain to our inn, which stands within a Shinto shrine complex. But I am following Basho, so I walk up. Uncharacteristically, I pack very lightly, including a dab of moisturiser and a walking pole.

But Mount Haguro is a joy to traverse. The steps turn out to be gentle, each stone beautifully cut in the 1600s. The 600-year-old cedars are majestic, and I hear the sound of a conch shell blown by priests. Halfway up is a tiny teahouse, where I am soothed by matcha and a panorama.

That night, I am further soothed by a hot onsen bath and a lavish multi-course dinner, like our other nights.

Canadian Sue Joel, 71, a retired engineer on my Basho tour, also joined a Walk Japan trip three years ago on the Nakasendo Way, which maps out the "post towns", rest stops for travellers in old Japan, in the heart of Japan.

"You see things in a much different way while walking. You experience the country and the people in a more intimate way," she says. "It's a wonderful combination of history, culture, tradition and physical exercise."

Indeed, on the road, curious Japanese chat with us on country lanes. We see Basho statues and poignant tsunami memorials everywhere in the north, including on Mount Haguro, where the colourful flowers for the youngest victims are searing. But I know the northerners are also intent on recovery.

Like Basho, we relish nature and gripe when the path is tricky. But I also love his resilience and his delight in the northern world.

Basho, restive, witty and sometimes melancholy as he travelled through a changing mediaeval Japan, sought beauty and significance on the road.

We travel for much the same reasons today.



The 2,466 steps to Mount Haguro sound daunting, but the path winds through cool, lovely cedar forests and the steps are gentle.



Walkers lingering at a tiny teahouse midway up the mountain.



Vivid green matcha (green tea) and delicate pastries are served at the tiny teahouse.

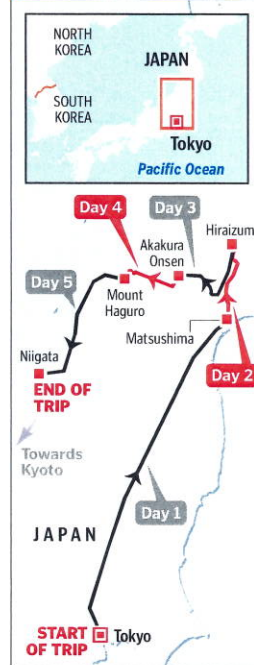


Memorials to victims of the 2011 tsunami and earthquake. The colourful flowers represent children.



A 1,000-year-old cedar and five-storey wooden pagoda, on the upward path to Mount Haguro.

BASHO TOUR



ST GRAPHICS

GETTING THERE

Walk Japan (www.walkjapan.com), an established adventure company that takes Japan lovers off the beaten track, has started a new Matsuo Basho Tour based on the poet's travelogue, Narrow Road To The Deep North. A 10-day walk in the Tohoku region of north Japan - starting in Tokyo and finishing in Kyoto - costs 418,000 yen (\$5,350).

This includes land transport, stays at traditional Japanese inns and small hotels with onsen baths, as well as gourmet dinners where everyone relaxes in yukata robes. The price excludes airfare. My trip is a compressed version, involving the first five days.

READ THE STORY

www.straitstimes.com

Read Lee Siew Hua's tweets and blogs of the tour in our Big Story



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