



PRIOR TO visiting, I figured I'd find Japan fascinating but not particularly surprising. After all, I've studied karate and been a member of a Zen Buddhist meditation group. I've read lots of books about the Land of the Rising Sun and chatted to Japanese backpackers about their homeland. But during my two weeks in the country a line from *Game of Thrones* kept running through my mind: "You know nothing, Jon Snow." If you're interested in learning from my ignorance, please read on for an account of the three major things I had wrong about Japan.

JAPAN IS EXPENSIVE

Japan isn't one of those third-world destinations where you can live like a lord for three bucks a day but it's not as pricey as everyone seems to believe either. At the time of writing, it's possible to get a Sydney to Tokyo flight for south of \$1000 and once you're there it's entirely feasible to travel in a reasonable level of comfort on a budget of around \$100 a day. You can buy a seven-day Japan Rail pass that will see you whizzing between major cities, frequently in that famous bullet train, for around \$300.

Geisha's grace
the streets
of Kyoto.
Paul Dymond

Food and alcohol is startlingly inexpensive - even in the heart of the most touristy districts, you can chow down at a restaurant while knocking back a few Kirin beers for around half of what it would cost you at an equivalent establishment in Sydney or Auckland.

What's more, many attractions are free and lots of everyday things that wouldn't even be attractions in most nations most definitely are in Japan. Kyoto Station, for example, is public transport's version of St Peter's Basilica, a futuristic stainless steel cathedral. Fifteen floors high, it contains a vast shopping mall (called The Cube) and a 10-storey high Isetan department store, not to mention an art museum, theatre and countless restaurants and bars. But you don't even need to spend a cent on any of that to have a good time, just make your way up to the Skyway tunnel and drink in the spectacular views of Japan's original capital for nothing.

Likewise, getting up before dawn to wander around a city's seafood bazaar might not normally appeal, but the enormous Tsukiji Fish Market, which handles 2000 tonnes of edible marine products every day, is one of Tokyo's most popular tourist attractions. It's completely free, though you should get there early if you want to grab a spot at the auction where giant tunas are sold to the highest bidder.

The majestic Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and picture-postcard gardens you'll find throughout Japan are typically either free or cheap to enter and there's no charge for activities such as wandering around the streets of Gion, Kyoto's geisha district, rubbernecking at the painted ladies that look like they've time-travelled from another century.

Long story short, if you've been hesitating about hitting Japan out of fear it will send you broke, dither no longer.



Kyoto Station
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YOU ONLY NEED TO VISIT THE METROPOLISES

If someone hadn't convinced me otherwise, I would have visited the usual suspects – Tokyo and Kyoto – with possible day trips to neighbouring regions such as Nara and Osaka. Thankfully, I did opt to spend a few days somewhere I'd never heard of. It was Takayama, a traditional medieval town about 300km away from Tokyo, which given the nature of the nation's superb trains, it only involves a rapid but still scenic two-hour train ride through Japan's version of the Alps.

Especially after spending time in one of the antfarm megalopolises (some bits of Tokyo pack in 30,000 people per square kilometre), quaint villages within striking distance of the capital, such Takayama, Shirakawa-go, Ogimachi, Suganuma and Magome-Tsumago are a chance to unwind, ideally while feasting your eyes on the natural landscapes that have inspired generations of Japanese artists and rest your weary muscles in an onsen (a bathhouse drawing water from a nearby hot spring).

You're not likely to find any pumping nightclubs but you'll have the opportunity for the kind of serendipitous experiences that linger in the memory long after you've forgotten your formulaic trip to the top of Tokyo Tower or walk through a Shogun's castle.

My most memorable night out in Japan involved a dinner at a small Takayama restaurant where the giggling staff introduced my travelling companion and I to a whole lot of dishes you don't find on the menus of Japanese restaurants in any Western country (the Japanese love their offal so much they've constructed a range of culinary delight utilising the tongues, uteruses, stomachs and "gristle" – whatever that is – of various quadrupeds).



The quaint villages of Takayama, top, and Shirakawa-go, above. Shutterstock



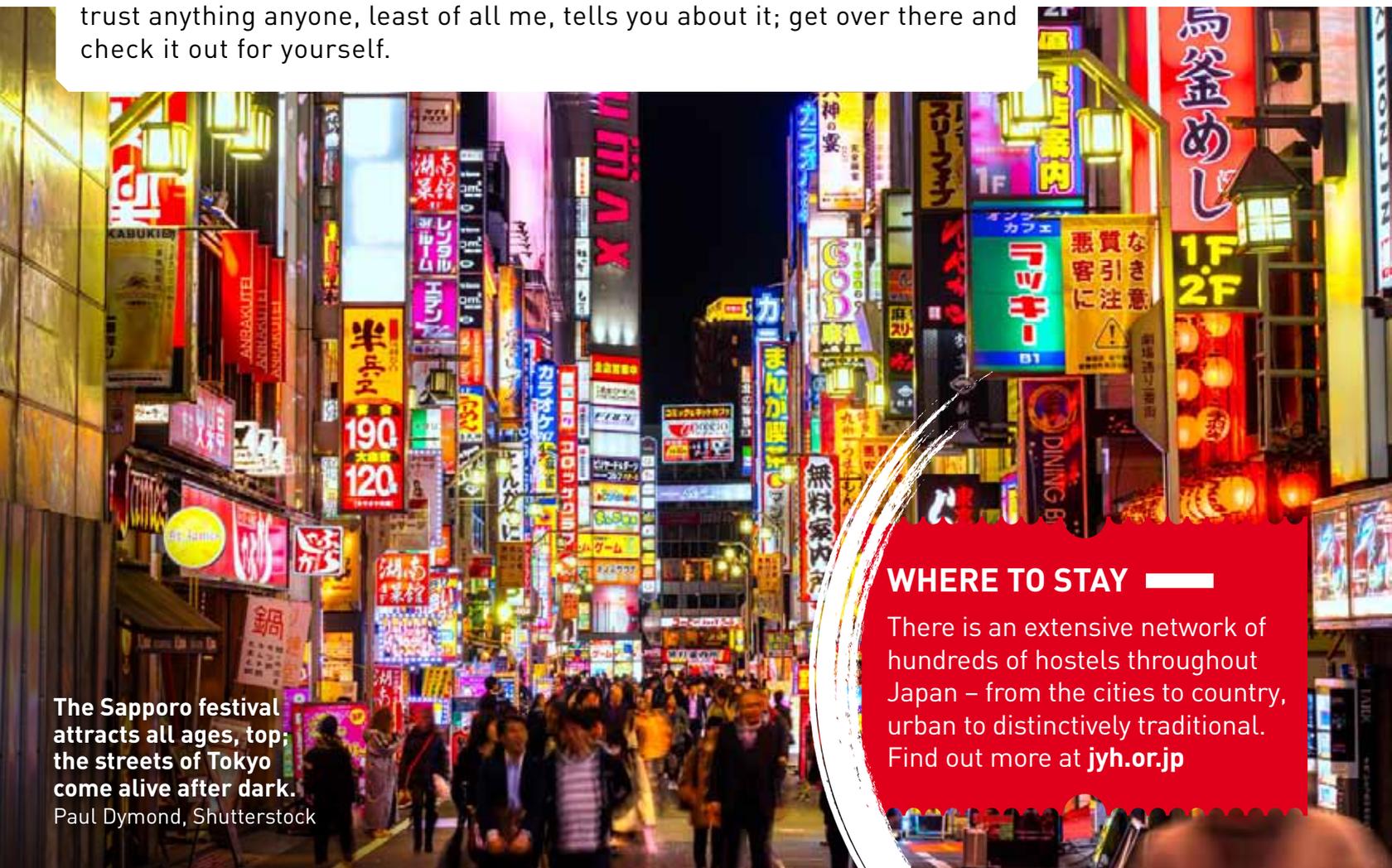
Following that, we headed to what we'd been informed was a nearby jazz club only to walk through the door to find ourselves in a darkened space not much bigger than a living room. For the next few hours, the elderly owner of the 'club' happily crafted us cocktails while explaining, via no more than sign language and the playing of many vinyl LPs, the history of jazz from Jelly Roll Morton through Miles Davis to Herbie Hancock.

JAPANESE PEOPLE ARE [INSERT ADJECTIVE HERE]

Everyone knows Japanese people are excessively polite or smugly racist or deeply conformist or disturbingly freaky or serenely spiritual or greedily materialistic or just plain weird.

Well, maybe, but during my time there I discovered the Japanese could be politely racist (be prepared to be very courteously denied entry to certain venues on obviously spurious grounds) and that while plenty of the locals seemed to conform to corporate drone salaryman/demure housewife stereotype, lots don't. Trust me I looked, but I didn't come across a single respectable businessman brazenly perusing tentacle porn on a crowded train and when I headed into Tokyo's red-light district of Shinjuku all the pimps were, for reasons I never discovered, African-American rather than tattooed Yakuza with missing fingers. Whilst the internet assures me they do exist, I didn't come across any cat cafes, toilet-themed restaurants or used-panties vending machines in my travels either.

Japan was easily the most foreign of the many foreign countries I've visited. It's impossible to get a realistic impression of it until you've visited and, even then, it remains bewilderingly uncategorisable. So don't completely trust anything anyone, least of all me, tells you about it; get over there and check it out for yourself.



The Sapporo festival attracts all ages, top; the streets of Tokyo come alive after dark. Paul Dymond, Shutterstock

WHERE TO STAY

There is an extensive network of hundreds of hostels throughout Japan – from the cities to country, urban to distinctively traditional. Find out more at jyh.or.jp