

# Only in Japan

Hollie-Rae Merrick visits a rising star on the cruise scene on *Diamond Princess*

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**“M**ake as much noise as you can and the bears won’t come and attack us.”

Those were the wise words of our tour guide, Kimi, as we set off on a four-hour hike through the Shirakami-Sanchi mountain range.

In fact, they were Kimi’s first words to us, right before we were shown evidence of bear scratches on trees and animal-like footprints on the very route we were set to stride along.

I’d heard Japanese culture was quirky, but I certainly didn’t expect to be walking anywhere

in the vicinity of black bears. However, as it turned out, I didn’t have anything to worry about because, according to my guide, bears wouldn’t come near us thanks to my Barbara Windsor-style cackle. Every time the nerves made me laugh, the whole group would giggle, making more than enough noise to keep the bears away. Of course, they probably wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with us anyway, but it was still a relief.

That shore excursion to the mountains was an opportunity



**The shore excursion to the mountains was an opportunity to delve into local life**

to delve headfirst into local life in the Aomori prefecture of northern Japan. This Unesco World Heritage Site is where many Japanese city folk head for camping trips, hiking

adventures and nature retreats. The lush green surroundings, with picturesque streams and waterfalls, were the perfect antidote to a hectic 72 hours in Tokyo, our choice of pre-cruise stay before boarding *Diamond Princess* in neighbouring Yokohama.

## TURNING JAPANESE

When I rocked up at the cruise terminal in Yokohama, a 40-minute drive from central Tokyo, the passenger mix took me by surprise. Asian guests





typically make up about three-quarters of those on board, but despite the ship being very much targeted at the Japanese market, the reality was quite different on our sailing, with 18 nationalities on board.

The 2,670-passenger ship itself has recently been decked out to cater for the Japanese and Asian markets. It spent two weeks in drydock in 2014 and Princess Cruises spent \$30 million on enhancements, ranging from a new Japanese bathing area and a sushi bar to boutique restaurants and shops.

Many cruise lines have shown an interest in growing their markets in Asia, and Japan in particular has been a massive hit for Princess Cruises, with sailings from Singapore and Japan second only to the Mediterranean in their popularity with British guests over the past few months.

**ALL AT SEA**

Our sailing was split between four sea days and four ports of call – Aomori (where we faced the bears, sort of),

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Akita, Hakodate and Vladivostok in Russia.

During our sea days, we started off doing what any other British couple would do – sitting by the pool with a fruity cocktail firmly in hand. However, within a few hours a sense of guilt came over us as we watched the Asian passengers have a go at everything on the day’s roster. If there was a game of golf by the pool, there would be hundreds queueing to hit a tiny ball across the deck, and the very mention of a break-dancing lesson would have the room full of wannabe dancers. So we decided the only way to truly



experience an Asian cruise was to get involved.

It might not be what we’d normally do on holiday (my boyfriend Matthew would usually sit in the sunshine as long as humanly possible, while my pale skin would have me huddled under a parasol avoiding every ray) but we were going to embrace each minute. When in Rome – or rather, Japan – and all that jazz.

By the end of the trip, we’d learnt to speak a teeny bit of Japanese, and could write our names and a few phrases in Japanese characters. Plus, on a less-cultural note, we’d also sung numerous hits during the karaoke nights on board. Mariah Carey has nothing on me.

**SPLASH TIME**

To embrace the local lifestyle even more, I headed to the onboard onsen, or Japanese bath to you and me. The area is serene and calming, and was one of my favourite places, but be warned: this isn’t for the shy and retiring. In Japanese culture, it is considered unhygienic to wear clothes in the baths, and the one on board *Diamond Princess* is no different. Luckily, I was the only person in the Izumi bathhouse at the time and therefore not too embarrassed about going au naturel, so if you’re looking for a dose of relaxation without forking out for spa treatments, it’s definitely worthwhile.

For those not so keen on stripping off, choose an itinerary that ventures outside Japan, when there are time slots available for guests who prefer to keep their bikinis or Speedos on.

Onsen aside, another highlight was the food. The menu in the main dining room was a melting pot of western and eastern-style dining. There’s a more traditional Japanese menu available most nights, but also a fine mix of European dishes.

If passengers are celebrating something special, or just want to try something other than the main dining room, recommend a booking at



Princess Cruises offers a nine-night cruise on *Diamond Princess* from £799 cruise-only, based on a July 8 departure from Tokyo and including calls at Kushiro, Otaru, Hakodate and Aomori, based on two sharing an inside stateroom with meals, 24-hour room service and onboard entertainment. Flights are extra. [princesscruises.co.uk](http://princesscruises.co.uk)



**FAST FACT**

Cosmos Tours & Cruises has added a Japan cruise-and-stay, twinning six nights on land with a nine-night Princess Cruises sailing



TOP: Yokohama  
ABOVE: Balcony stateroom  
LEFT: Japanese bath, or onsen



## Introducing Columbus

### Another new addition to the CMV fleet

Dedicated to the British cruise market, the impressive *Columbus* will sail year round from London Tilbury commencing on 9th June 2017. Carrying about 1400 passengers, this mid-sized cruise ship enjoys an impressive reputation on the British market and will provide the popular, more traditional British cruise experience CMV is known for.

Refitted in August 2015 with additional upgrading in April 2017, *Columbus* will offer a wide choice of dining options and lounge bars, a three decked central Atrium, tiered main show lounge, a British themed pub and casino, entertainment venues, dome observatory, library, bridge and card room, crafter's studio, two heated pools and wellness centre.

**On sale, on-line Thursday, 31st March 2016**

[www.cruiseandmaritime.com](http://www.cruiseandmaritime.com)





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➔ Sabatini's or Kai Sushi. The former is one of my favourite restaurants at sea: although it comes at a fee, the Italian cuisine is authentic and delicious. Then top it off with after-dinner drinks at Crooners Martini Bar or the Wheelhouse Bar.

## LAND ADVENTURES

Prior to my sailing, everyone I spoke to seemed surprised that I was venturing to northern Japan, rather than the usual twinning of Tokyo with the likes of Kyoto or Osaka. But as the country prepares for the Rugby World Cup in 2019 and Tokyo gears up for the 2020 Winter Olympics, the government is on a mission to encourage tourists to go beyond the better-known cities. The tourist board is trying to shine a spotlight on the likes of Aomori and the island of Hokkaido, and I was lucky enough to visit both.

Each of our ports of call was extremely diverse: we followed our trekking adventure through the natural

landscapes of Aomori with a focus on Japanese culture and heritage in Akita. While most of the 2,670 guests on board headed to the samurai villages in the mountains around Akita, we ventured off to explore the quaint town itself, and spent our day sampling local delicacies in fish markets.

Next on the agenda was a quick foray into Russia, where we called at the Russian military port of Vladivostok. The city, which sits at the end of the Trans-Siberian Railway, is one of only a handful of places in Russia where a visa isn't needed, even for cruise guests.

Looking out to the city from my balcony cabin, I couldn't help but notice the military presence. There were battleships on either side of the ship and, having clambered landside, we saw a military parade taking place in the city centre. Army base aside, the city is pretty (if you look past the Soviet-style high-rise flats). It has a very retro feel, and compared

**BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Hakodate; Hollie-Rae hiking in the Shirakami-Sanchi mountain range; and Hirosaki Castle, Aomori

with the over-the-top opulence of St Petersburg, I enjoyed this slightly bizarre place. The locals claim it's a Russian version of San Francisco, but while it does have a tram, a large golden bridge and fairly hilly terrain, that's where the resemblance ends.

My favourite port of call was saved for last in Hakodate, a gem of a city on Japan's northernmost island Hokkaido. Most passengers head to the cool Red Brick Warehouse district for a bite to eat and to sample the local 'dancing squid' delicacy, while others venture to the 150-year-old Goryokaku Fort or nearby Yunokawa hot springs.

After dark, we joined what felt like every passenger on the ship, heading to the top of Mount Hakodate by way of a cable car. I can see why it's so popular - the view from the top is stunning, with our guide claiming it as one of the best in the world.

It's definitely near the top of my list, and has left me wanting another dose of Japan. 

