

GTMA 2020 Travel Writer Award

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Rob Goss - BGTW

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Article 1

How rugby is re-energising Japan's Iwate prefecture, eight years after the tsunami.

A gentle breeze ruffles the surface of Yamada Bay as our fishing boat idles among a flotilla of scallop beds. Around us, patches of water glint like signalling mirrors. Sat on deck in the mid-morning sun, only the occasional chug of a passing boat breaking the tranquility, it's difficult to imagine the devastation wrought here eight years earlier.

Back then, on the afternoon of 11 March 2011, the tsunami hit. Not a foaming mega-wave like you see in movies, but an unrelenting dark mass of water that chewed and churned everything in its path. When it had finished, close to 20,000 people in Japan's northern Tohoku region had lost their lives.

The tsunami doesn't get much coverage outside Japan these days, but on 25 September, when Fiji take on Uruguay in the Rugby World Cup in the town of Kamaishi – 15 miles down the coast from Yamada Bay – Tohoku will be back in the spotlight. And as I found during a trip around Iwate, one of the six prefectures in Tohoku, it won't just be a time for remembrance. Many locals hope it will highlight both their recovery and all the region has to offer travellers.

My time in Iwate begins in the Tono Valley, an hour inland from Kamaishi, with a day cycling around yellowing rice paddies on the trail of Tono's colourful folk tales, which were documented in the early 1900s by folklorist Kunio Yanigata in the now-classic *Tono Monogatari (Legends of Tono)*. The 118 legends are a mix of superstitions and myths starring creatures like the "kappa", a cucumber-eating pond-dweller with a mischievous habit of pulling people into the water.

I meet kappa all around the valley – sometimes in the form of a menacingly wizened statue, other times a cheerfully rotund character on street signs and souvenirs – though no kappa tale is quite as juicy as the story of the farmer's daughter that I hear at Denshoen, a collection of preserved farmhouses that now serve as a craft, culture and folklore museum. The daughter, goes the tale, took a horse as her lover, much to her father's dismay. In fact, he was so unimpressed he hung her equine beau from a mulberry tree, prompting the distraught daughter to kill herself so she and the dead horse could elope to heaven.

The attraction of travelling around Iwate for me isn't just being deep in nature; it's experiencing rural traditions. After Tono, I get more of both when I visit the 1,600m Mount Hachimantai in the far north of Iwate, a place known for its stunning autumnal colours, hiking trails and hot spring (onsen) bathing. I visit Toshichi Onsen, a rocky patch of mountainside dotted with steaming vents and milky outdoor baths that – in a bit of a throwback you sometimes find in Tohoku – include baths for nude mixed-gender bathing. I then spend the night at a traditional inn in Hachimantai's Matsukawa Onsen area, where I have a tatami mat room, a dinner that includes grilled river fish and mountain vegetable tempura, and I end the evening soaking in a piping-hot open-air bath surrounded by reddening maples.

But it's Kamaishi that grabs me the most. It's while there that I venture up to Yamada Bay, where from April to October fishermen run charters during which you can sample local specialities – scallops, oysters and a chewy kind of sea squirt called *hoya* – pulled straight from the sea.

From here, you can also hike Michinoku Coastal Trail, which reaches 450 miles through Tohoku, from Hachinohe in Aomori Prefecture all the way south to Soma in Fukushima

Prefecture, and includes a 16-mile section that passes through Kamaishi. I walk a small part of it one afternoon and its somewhat awkward “Alps of the Ocean” tag soon makes sense, with jagged rock formations that look like miniature mountains punctuating the shore. I visit the cliff-top Sekihozenji temple on one side of Kamaishi, too, where a pure-white 48.5m statue of Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, stands guard over local fishermen. Climb the 100-plus steps inside Kannon and you get to share her sweeping bay views.

In Kamaishi, I also learn about the town’s rugby heritage; how with steel-industry backing, the “northern ironmen” of Kamaishi’s now-defunct Nippon Steel RFC won seven straight national championships in the 1970s and 1980s and how the new 6,000-seat stadium, built for the Rugby World Cup, will serve as a hub for community sports and events post-World Cup.

Leaving more of an impact on me than anything, I find out why the Rugby World Cup coming to a town of just 35,000 matters so much to the many locals I meet. People like doctor and Kamaishi Seawaves RFC director Toshio Hamato, who lost his parents, wife and the youngest of his three daughters – just 19 months old – when the tsunami destroyed the family home. Mr Hamato uses one word that comes up time and again in the conversations I have in Kamaishi. Hope.

“After the tsunami it felt like there was nobody and nothing left here. But having the Rugby World Cup to build towards gave us hope,” he says. “Like rugby, you get knocked down, then you get up again. When the World Cup comes, we want to show everyone who visits – and everyone around the world who has helped with our recovery – that we are up again.”

Article 2

The cat who saved a Japanese rail line.

On a bright May morning at Japan’s Idakiso train station, a small cat basked in the sun as her photo was taken by a group of tourists before getting a tummy tickle from a toddler. While the white, tan and black kitten purred and meowed in the arms of a visitor, one of the station workers looked on with a grin, interjecting only to gently reposition the cat’s brimmed conductor hat whenever it threatened to slip over her eyes.

“Having her around the station makes everyone happy,” he said, as the cat playfully swiped at a tourist’s iPhone. “I sometimes forget that she is my boss.”

Meet Yontama, the latest in a line of feline stationmasters that has helped save the Kishigawa railway line in Japan’s Wakayama prefecture, a largely mountainous and rural part of the country famous for temple-studded hillsides and sacred pilgrimage trails.

This story began in the late 1990s with a young calico cat called Tama. The kitten lived near Kishi Station – the final of 14 stops on a 14.3km line that connects small communities to Wakayama City, the region’s hub – and would frequently hang out by the railway, soaking up affection from commuters.

Over the years, Tama’s sweet nature and photogenic features made her popular with the commuters, and adoring onlookers affectionately began referring to her as Kishi’s ‘stationmaster’. But by the mid-2000s, a combination of low ridership and financial problems threatened to close down the rural rail line, and the line’s 14 stations were finally unstaffed in 2006. But fortunately, it wasn’t the end for the railway or the beloved feline’s role in it.

“In 2006, the current president of the Wakayama Electric Railway, Mitsunobu Kojima, was asked by residents to revive the Kishigawa Line after the previous owner had announced it was to be abolished,” said Keiko Yamaki, an executive for Ryobi, the company that owns the Wakayama Electric Railway.

Yamaki explained that the owner of a local convenience store near Kishi Station, who had become Tama’s guardian, had also decided to move on, but before leaving he requested that the railway look after Tama. “Our president has always been a dog person, but when he met Tama that was it,” Yamaki said, while swiping through images on her phone of Kojima happily cuddling the station’s ‘cat master’. “He fell for her.”

In a big way. Soon after adopting Tama, Kojima ordered a customised stationmaster’s hat for his little cat, and in January 2007 he officially named Tama the ‘Stationmaster of Kishi Station’ – the first feline stationmaster in Japan.

As stationmaster, one of Tama’s duties was to be the face of the railway and appear in promotional material and media coverage. She also got paws-on at the station, sometimes greeting passengers from atop a table set up by the ticket gates or from the behind the glass window of her ‘office’ – a converted ticket booth equipped with a litter tray and bed.

Tama was so adored by riders and railway staff that a painted portrait of her was soon commissioned, which now hangs alongside numerous glossy photos of her in Kishi Station’s souvenir shop – where visitors can buy everything from Tama badges and keyrings to Tama-branded candy.

In lieu of a ‘salary’, Tama got all the cat food she needed. She received a promotion, too: in 2008, she became a ‘super station manager’ and was even knighted by the prefecture’s governor. In the process, she received a dark blue ceremonial gown with white lace neck

ruffles, and thousands of tourists began coming to the small, single-platform station to see her.

In fact, according to a 2008 study by Katsuhiko Miyamoto, professor at Kansai University's School of Accountancy, Tama's purring presence at the station is estimated to have attracted 55,000 more riders on the Kishigawa Line than were expected in 2007, and during her full reign as stationmaster from 2007 until 2015, she contributed upwards of 1.1bn yen (£7.85m) to the local economy. With the help of its whiskered manager, Wakayama Electric Railway says the annual number of passengers on the Kishigawa Line has increased by almost 300,000 from 2006.

To capitalise on the region's Tama craze, in 2010 the railway hired award-winning industrial designer Eiji Mitooka – known for his sleek Japanese bullet trains – to completely redesign the train's exteriors and interiors as a Tama-themed line. The Tamaden railway was born.

In an ode to Tama, the outsides of Tamaden's two white carriages are now decorated with paw prints and 101 cartoon images of Tama, including Tama enjoying a satisfying stretch, cheerfully licking a paw and mischievously poised to pounce. The front of the train even has little whiskers, while inside are old-fashioned wooden floors and shelves of children's books. As a finishing touch, when the doors open at each station, a few meows purr through the PA system – an actual recording of Tama.

By the time Tama passed away in 2015, she was 16 years old and had appeared in prominent TV shows, magazines and newspapers across Japan. Thousands of people attended her funeral at the station, leaving piles of flower bouquets and cans of tuna outside.

The 'Honourable Eternal Station Master', as she is now called, was then memorialised with a phone box-sized shrine on Kishi's platform, and in the Japanese Shinto religious tradition, she was elevated to the status of a goddess of the Wakayama Electric Railway. In honour of what would have been Tama's 18th birthday in 2017, she even had her own commemorative Google Doodle. And four years after her death, her Twitter account has more than 80,000 followers and is still growing.

"The Tamaden really has become very popular with people of all ages," Yamaki said. "We see lots of children and families and older people bringing their grandchildren. But also people into trains, couples and lots of overseas travellers come to ride the trains and see the stationmasters."

Nowadays, one of Tama's former apprentices, eight-year-old Nitama (literally: 'Tama Two'), serves as the Kishi stationmaster, with four-year-old Yontama ('Tama Four') functioning as her feline assistant five stations away in Idakiso. Both work 10:00 to 16:00 with two days off a week: Monday and Friday for Yontama; Wednesday and Thursday for Nitama. And Tama Three? She's currently an employee of Japan's Okayama Electric Tramway and serves as the acting director of the Okaden Museum.

While Tama and her successors have played a major part in the Kishigawa Line's revival, Yamaki is keen to point out that the railway's revival hasn't solely been due to the cats. The

railway also hired Mitooka to create several other themed trains to help attract tourists, including a strawberry train (Ichigo Densha) and a pickled plum train (Umeboshi Densha) – both fruits that Wakayama is well known for.

In 2009, Mitooka also designed a new building for Kishi Station, a small thatched structure in the shape of a cat's head. Little ears stick up from the roof, the entrance serves as a mouth and two oval windows rising from the slanted roof resemble eyes – each glowing yellow when the lights are on in the evenings.

“The station comes alive as a cat when the eyes light up,” Yamaki said. “They say cats ward off evil and misfortune. Maybe the station does.”

Maybe so. After all, throughout history, cats have been considered to be spiritual animals and a symbol of good luck in Japan. The famous Maneki-neko cat figurines, with their beckoning left paw, are said to bring good fortune to businesses, which has led them to be placed inside storefront windows across the globe.

There are also shrines and statues across Japan dedicated to cats – such as Nekogami (Cat God) Shrine in Kagoshima, where two cats were enshrined by a feudal warlord in honour of their military service. More than 10 Japanese ‘cat islands’, where hundreds of felines roam free, have become popular tourist destinations; as have Tokyo’s many pay-to-pet cat cafes. And this is to say nothing of Hello Kitty, one of Japan’s most beloved cartoon characters.

In a nation that seems especially fond of felines, Tama and her successors have not only brought plenty of good fortune to the Kishigawa Line, they’ve also carved a place in many Japanese people’s hearts.

But what does Yontama think about it all? She just looked up and sweetly meowed.

Article 3

Model Citizens

Amid a mass of commuters and tourists, one of the first things that greets people coming through the bullet train ticket gates at Shin-Osaka Station is a Bunraku puppet in a glass display case. Standing about four-feet high in a red kimono ornately decorated with cherry blossoms and gold threading, the puppet has a portly white-painted face and a look of contemplation. Its head is adorned with a glistening silver headdress.

With area’s like the tourist-filled Dotonbori functioning like a neon-lit yin to the traditional yang of Kyoto 35 miles to the west, Osaka is known far more for its modern energy and hustle than traditions. But when it comes to Japan’s oldest form of puppetry, which in 2003 was designated by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Osaka is the undisputed puppet master.

Originally called Ningyo Joruri, Bunraku was born in Osaka around 400 years ago with the merging of puppets (ningyo) and a form of theatre called Joruri, which incorporated narration with musical accompaniment on the three-stringed shamisen. Japan's second city is where Bunraku legend Takemoto Gidayu opened the first major Bunraku theatre of the Edo era (1603-1868) and where his contemporary Chikamatsu Monzaemon—sometimes called the Shakespeare of Bunraku—penned more than 100 of Bunraku's first plays; a mix of historical dramas and everyday tales of love and life.

Today, Osaka is home to the National Bunraku Theatre, which hosts several three- to six-week runs annually. The city is also where you find third-generation puppet maker Masayuki Hishida, one of the leading Bunraku craftsmen in Japan.

Visiting Hishida's small workshop in the suburbs of eastern Osaka, it's packed with puppet parts in various stages of production—a few half-carved heads here, some arms and legs there, and half a dozen finished, kimono-clad models on display. Call them beautiful and Hishida will smile, then the passion for his craft will flow.

"They are beautiful, but a puppet that is just beautiful is no good. It has to convey emotion, too," Hishida says, picking up a female puppet. "An old woman like this is especially hard to craft and use because the mouth doesn't move—old women never speak—so the art is to reflect emotions with the eyelids and brows, the movement of the arms and by tilting the head."

By way of a quick demonstration, Hishida raises the puppet's right hand to its mouth and angles the head ten or 15 degrees to one side so she takes on a forlorn look. Another shift of head position gives a subtle sense of anger brewing in the old lady's face.

Hishida says he is unusual in that he makes both the heads and bodies of puppets, as traditionally these are crafted by separate artisans. Just making a head is a process that depending on the puppet's role—and there are 40 or so common roles that each require a different head—can stretch over three to six months with Hishida working on multiple puppets at a time.

The process begins by carving the head from a solid block of Japanese cypress, after which it is split in two vertically in front of the ears and hollowed out, so it can have the mechanisms for controlling the eyes, eyebrows, mouth and any other moving parts added and connected to a controlling stick called a dogushi. After that, the head for most types of doll is painted white with a pigment made from oyster shells and then decorated with other natural materials, such as a rust-based powder for red lips. Craftsmen elsewhere will then make the hair.

One reason the process is so long—the intricacies of crafting aside—is seasonality. "Varying air temperatures and humidity affect the wood as well as the application of paints, so I tend to work on different tasks in different seasons," Hishida says. "Winter air, for example, is ideal for working the wood, while spring conditions are better for painting."

Though the craft of puppet making has seen gradual changes over generations, for the most part the same materials and techniques have been used since Bunraku began. Look inside

the head and silk thread is still used to pull the mechanisms, while preserved whale baleen is used for springs. Look next to the patch of tatami where Hishida sits to carve puppet heads and there are no machines, but rather dozens of wood-handled chisels and other tools, many of which were handed down by his father and grandfather, themselves leading Bunraku puppet makers in their day. And as Hishida is keen to stress as he discusses his role in Bunraku, the act of handing down or passing on is integral to his craft, as it is with traditional artisans in all sorts of fields in Japan.

“Really very little has changed in the 40 years I’ve been doing this and the 400 years Bunraku has been in existence,” Hishida says. “My job isn’t to reshape the craft. Like others before me, I’m just renting it until the next generation takes over.”