

Kazurabashi vine bridge, Iya Valley.





# Oboke Flow

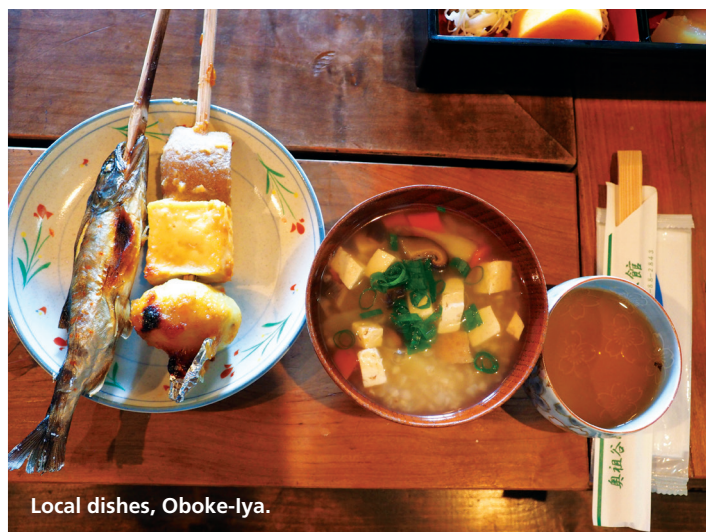
WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS JANE HODGES

VENTURE OUT OF JAPAN'S BIG CITIES TO  
OBOKE-IYA, THE VERDANT MOUNTAINOUS  
INTERIOR OF SHIKOKU ISLAND, WHERE NATURE  
AND TRADITION SOOTHE THE SOUL. ►





Local salted Iya River trout



Local dishes, Oboke-Iya.



The thickly wooded mountainsides of the Iya Valley and the emerald green Yoshino River that cuts through the Oboke Gorge are the green beating heart of Shikoku – the least known and visited (even among the Japanese) of Japan’s ‘big four’ islands. This Oboke-Iya region of the Tokushima Prefecture was once the haunt and hideout of Heike Clan warriors fleeing defeat in the 12th century, and nowadays offers off-the-beaten-track adventures that few would connect to a Japanese holiday – mountainous scenic drives (yes self-driving in Japan is achievable – more on that later), river boating and white water rafting, walking and hiking, and revitalising body and mind in the open-air natural hot spring onsen baths.

The region can be done as a self-drive

in a day from Takamatsu or Matsuyama cities; or you can train it from Takamatsu to Awa-Ikeda Station and catch the Tourist Bonnet Bus – a refurbished retro school bus that tours the main attractions (Japanese-only commentary); but the beauty of this serene landscape is best appreciated by self-drivers who plan at least an overnight stay. Many come just to stay at a traditional onsen hot-spring ryokan inn or mountain hotel. Most inns also welcome day visitors to soak in their onsen natural mineral baths during the day and sample home-style local dishes cooked on an open fire hearth. Try the chicken and buckwheat porridge, bamboo skewered salted river trout and dekomawashi – skewers of potato and tofu basted in miso paste. Hotel Kazurabashi has three outdoor baths perched on a cliff, offering stunning

mountain views. Do read up on onsen etiquette, so you know the drill and are not thrown by the ‘no bathing suits’ rule! Weather permitting (May to November), you can see and feel the seasons change amid cherry blossoms in spring or stunning leaf displays in autumn by pitching a tent or staying in a cabin at Oky-Iya Campgrounds overlooking the Iya River. Bed linen, camping and cooking equipment can be hired.

### Float your boat

A must-do is floating down the crystal clear waters of the Yoshino River in the Oboke Gorge – either bobbing about in an Oboke Yuransen Pleasure Boat – on the snaking calm reaches or whitewater rafting the rapids with Happy Raft.

And don’t leave without plucking up





Traditional fire hearth cooking  
Oboke-lya Shikoku.



Traditional fire hearth  
cooking Oboke-lya Shikoku.



the nerve to cross Iya-Kazurabashi – a traditional vine bridge – it's a 45 metre-long, two metre-wide, five tonne thrill-a-minute balancing test suspended 15m above the Iya River. It's reconstructed every three years – so fear not!

Also recommended is hiking Mount Tsurugi, made easier by catching the Kanko Tozan Lift, which lets you off to complete a 40-minute climb to the top. Be sure to do the winding but beautiful drive to see the Kita Clan Samurai House – built by the Lord of Awa in 1763 – it features a traditional thatched roof, an internal open hearth fire cooking pit and an 800-year-old cedar tree in the garden.

Exploring this unexpected and delightful Iya- Oboke region is easier than you think. Just go with the furo – that's Japanese for flow! •

## TRAVEL FACTS



### Best time to travel

Oboke-lya is a destination for all seasons but its outdoorsy attractions are best appreciated in Spring (mid-March to May – cherry blossom time – avoid the busy Golden Week last week in April and first week in May) or Autumn (from mid-September to November vibrant Autumn leaves pepper the gorges and mountains).



### Getting Around

**Hire a car:** at first thought, it may seem daunting, but self-drive is by far the best option around Oboke-lya (as it is everywhere on Shikoku) where attractions are spread out and not all are accessible by train. Spectacular scenery is to be had on the drive along National Highway 32, which follows the snaking course of the Yoshino River. Viewing platforms along the route allow you to take in the power of the river as it cuts through the gorge. And take heart, the roads are great with the help of an English speaking GPS (make sure the car rental company you choose has one available for hire), and your mobile phone to research on the go, you should be able to find your way with little hassle. If you do get lost there's always a local who will do all they can to help.

**Train:** If you're not keen on driving you'll need to use the JR Train system. The most economical way to use JR Trains is to purchase a JR Rail Pass from your travel agent prior to leaving Australia – it can't

be purchased on arrival. Other train lines are privately owned. Purchase and add credit to a Suica travel card (available at most urban train stations) and simply tap on and off. Purchase your All Shikoku Rail Pass prior to arriving in Japan or at JR Train stations for discounted rates and unlimited rides on Shikoku's six railways. Available to foreign visitors staying up to 90 days. Visit: [email] <http://shikoku-railwaytrip.com/railpass.html>



### Travel tips

Rent a mobile Wifi Router so you always have internet access – invaluable for keeping in touch with fellow travellers and accessing the GPS on your phone when you're on foot. Pick one up from Narita or Kansai International airports or some companies will deliver a device to your hotel [email] [www.jnto.go.jp/eng/arrange/essential/internet.html](http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/arrange/essential/internet.html)



### Where to stay

Hotel Kazurabashi (Onsen baths and traditional cuisine) [email] [www.kazurabashi.co.jp/](http://www.kazurabashi.co.jp/)  
Oky-lya Campgrounds [email] [www.iyakei-camp.jp/](http://www.iyakei-camp.jp/)



### More information

Iya-Oboke attractions, touring routes and accommodation: [email] [www.miyoshinavi.jp/english/](http://www.miyoshinavi.jp/english/)  
[email] [www.japan-guide.com/e/e7825.html](http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e7825.html)

Shikoku & Iya-Oboke: Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) [email] [www.jnto.org.au](http://www.jnto.org.au)