

Okinawa, Japan

🌐 Offbeat Japan; fine beaches, unique culture and spectacular diving

➔ Fly UK-Tokyo (12hrs); from there, flights serve the Okinawa Islands

📅 Jan-Feb (shark-spotting), Jul-Sept (for diving)



4

ATLANTIS OF THE EAST

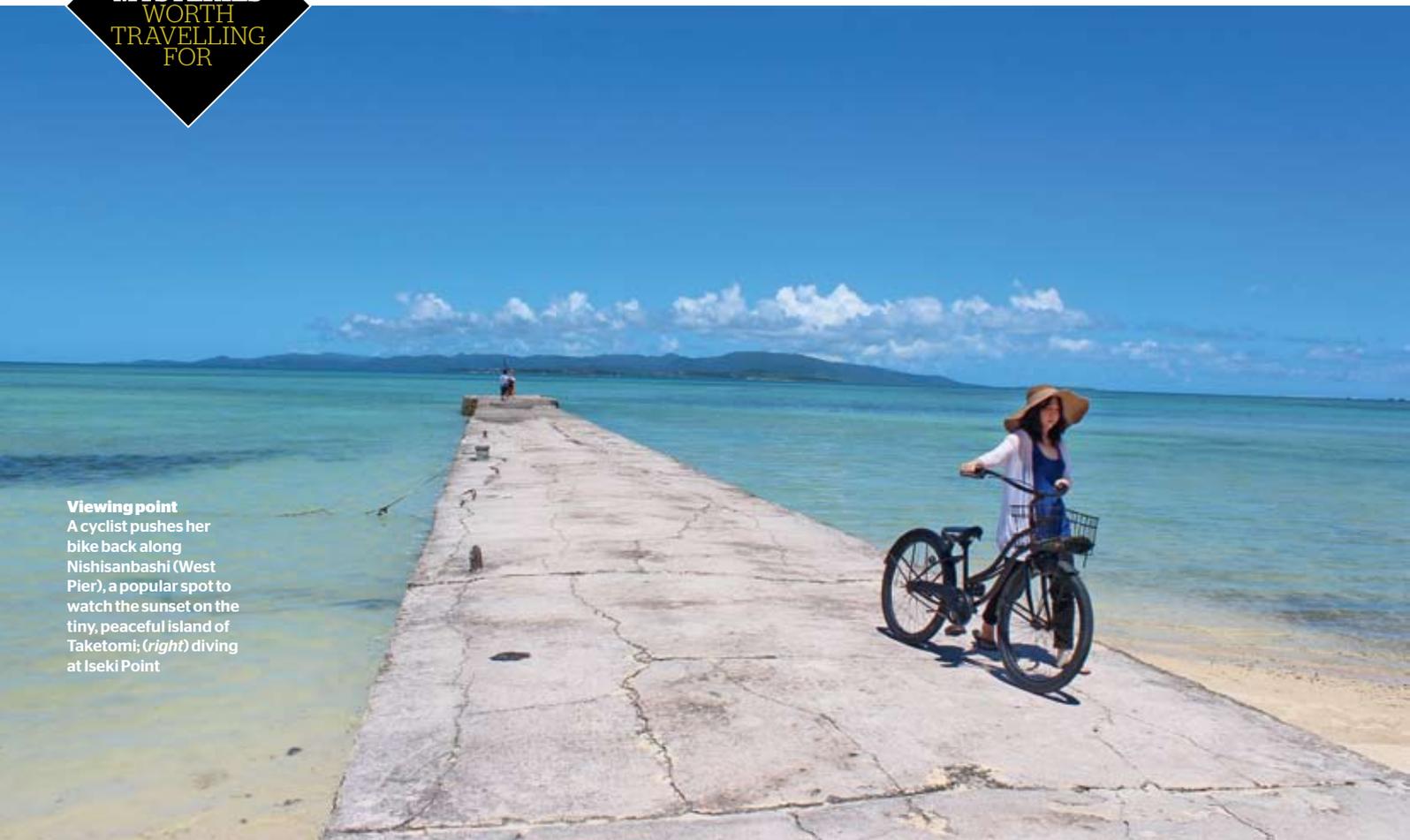
At the westernmost point of Japan lies the mysterious monument of Yonaguni - was it made by man, martians or Mother Nature? A dip underwater is the only way to find out...

Words Graeme Green

A diver is seen from behind, floating in a deep blue underwater environment. The diver is wearing a full scuba suit and is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the frame. The background shows a vast, hazy underwater landscape with distant, low mountains or hills. The foreground is dominated by a large, textured, and somewhat jagged rock formation that appears to be part of a submerged structure. The overall lighting is a deep, monochromatic blue, creating a mysterious and serene atmosphere.

20
MYSTERIES
WORTH
TRAVELLING
FOR

Deep sea spectacle
Divers float above the
submerged stone
structures, which lie off
Yonaguni island



Viewing point

A cyclist pushes her bike back along Nishisanbashi (West Pier), a popular spot to watch the sunset on the tiny, peaceful island of Taketomi; (right) diving at Iseki Point

“**T**here it is: the monument,” diver Moe Hatori announced dramatically, like she was unveiling a work of art. I’d come to Yonaguni, Japan’s remote, westernmost island, to explore the mysterious underwater ‘monument’ off the coast, the rumoured remains of an ancient civilisation, the so-called ‘Atlantis of Japan’.

However, the ‘monument’ Moe showed me was a 30cm replica, painted grey, of how the Iseki stones (as it’s also known) looks – and it was as close as I was going to get to the real thing. Just as I landed on the rugged Pacific island, a typhoon hit, writing off the planned expedition. “You can take photos,” Moe chuckled, circling the ‘monument’, snapping away with an imaginary camera – click, click, click. I had to see the funny side, too. After all, it’s not like I’d travelled 11,000km on four different planes in order to look at a mock-up model. Oh, actually, it was.

Secret of the sea

Yonaguni is one of ten inhabited islands in the subtropical Yaeyama chain at the southern tip of Japan, just 110km from the Taiwanese coast. There’s not much here except a few villages and some wild-roaming horses. Diving’s the main draw. The islands are surrounded by clear waters, beautiful corals and colourful fish. In the winter months, especially January and February, large schools of hammerhead sharks can be seen.

But it was the story of the underwater ruins that drew me. Local diver Kihachiro Aratake discovered the formations on the southern side of the island, off Iseki Point, in the mid 1980s, while scouting for good sites to view hammerheads. Divers report structures that look like Mayan pyramids, large steps or terraces with clean right-angles in the stone, ‘corridors’, ‘roads’ and other shapes, including one referred to as the Turtle Stone.

There’s debate over whether the monument is natural, man-made or even the work of visiting extra-terrestrials. One floated theory suggests they were constructed by an ancient civilisation on dry land, then covered by rising sea levels somewhere between 8,000 and 12,000 years ago, which would mean they pre-date the Egyptian pyramids. Another theory, doing the rounds on the internet, is that the monument would’ve been beyond the abilities of early man and could only be the work of visiting aliens.

It’s very possible, though, that the right angles and formations are simply the work of nature. Geologists point to examples on land and below the sea of rock eroding and breaking off in clean-cut, seemingly man-made shapes.

Halfway between the two camps is an idea that the stone structure is natural but man-modified, a pre-existing formation that was cut and otherwise altered by an ancient civilisation. Who, if anyone, did that is up for debate, but some believe it’s evidence of the fabled lost continent of Mu, a Pacific version of Atlantis.

“The stones are definitely man-made,” said Moe, who’s dived and snorkelled the monument. “I believe these structures are made by the people of Mu thousands of years ago or maybe the first humans. The stones are so close to the land and just below the ocean, so it’s easy to understand the effects of moving land and the Ice Age and why the >



WHAT REALLY LIES BENEATH...

Raf Jah, Tanzania-based writer and diver, managed to get underwater at Iseki Point

"Most of the diving in Yonaguni has cliff-like walls and huge boulders perched on rocks, with swim-throughs and caves. The water's clear and full of jack, trevally and nudibranch. The walls are covered in waving, brightly coloured soft coral with small reef fish swarming all over them.

The exception to this is the ruins at Iseki Point. I dived the ruins in January 2013. It was exhilarating. We descended from a large metal boat and shot down to 18m. The sea wasn't cold, but it was choppy. We swam up and down passages, around what looked like solid buildings. The largest stones looked like Mayan pyramids. The current swept us along.

In contrast to the rest of Yonaguni, the walls were smooth and barely covered with algae. As we made our progress, I twisted to look at the structures. They had sheer walls, steps with 90° angles and cut terraces.

The pathways between the stones looked distinct. We climbed back up to the shallows to what the locals call the upper terraces. These are the most interesting parts; they looked like they'd been hewn and look down on the large 'boulevard' to the other stones opposite.

I think the right angles are a little too precise to be natural. In my opinion, the stones are man-modified. Also, there's stone at the ruins that comes from the other end of Yonaguni, which suggests they're not natural.

The dive was fascinating. My greatest regret is not spending a week diving the ruins to fully grasp the layout of the area."

I holed up in the guesthouse and waited for the storm to pass, holding out hope of diving the ruins in the following days'

stones are where they are now. There are many stories, but this is the one I believe to be most true because the stones are so perfect."

And aliens? "I think that's a dreamful story. But it could be a possibility."

I was looking forward to getting under the water and seeing the monument my own eyes. But the typhoon, an occasional occurrence here during summer months, means the ocean around Iseki Point was far too dangerous to dive. The mystery of Yonaguni, for me, would have to remain a mystery.

Worth the journey

I was gutted – but this wasn't a wasted trip. En route, I stayed on Okinawa, sampling the famously healthy, tasty local food (heavy on fish, tofu and local veg). I also visited Shuri Castle, former government HQ when the region was the independent Ryukyu Kingdom, and the Peace Memorial Park, which commemorates the lives lost in the Second World War Battle of Okinawa. On the north coast, I stopped at the Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium and saw giant tanks containing manta rays, sharks, whale sharks, dolphins and turtles – a tantalising glimpse of what's in the islands' waters. I still held onto a dim hope that I might get into the ocean.

I got a chance for some typhoon-free diving on Ishigaki, a short flight from Okinawa. The water was warm and clear, deep blue,

with virtually no current. I saw moray eels, peeking hermit crabs, clownfish and a turtle.

On the road across the island, I spotted what looked to be aliens. However, the strange, colourful creatures turned out to be the work of local artist Hisashi Katsuren. Standing figures with large black eyes are, he explained, Kijimuna, local spirits believed to live in trees; the large, grinning dog/lion hybrids are his take on *shisas*, like the Chinese lion guardians found across the region, a sign of China's influence here. "I love the traditional shisas because they're very strong and graceful," Hisashi told me. "But I couldn't do them well. One day, I made them freely with my imagination and I liked it. This was my art."



I moved on to nearby island Iriomote to kayak up the mangrove-lined Hinai River and hike to the top of Pinaisara, the largest waterfall in the Okinawa region.

On Taketomi, my favourite of the islands, just 4km by ferry from Ishigaki, I rode a rickety bicycle around the tiny dot of land, stopping to swim in white-sand bays. Locals and tourists gathered on the west pier in the evening to watch the sun set over the ocean. In the morning, I toured the peaceful village on a water-buffalo cart. Shima Hidetada, the vehicle's driver, plucked a *sanshin* (Okinawan banjo-like instrument) and sung hearty ballads as Yoko, the 600kg water buffalo, ambled along. >



A stick marks the spot
 This marker stands next to Hirakubo lighthouse, a remarkable ocean viewpoint at Ishigaki island's northern point

◀ Wind stopped play

Finally: Yonaguni. The predicted typhoon hit overnight, powerful winds and rain lasting through the next day. I holed up in the guesthouse and waited for it to pass, holding out hope of diving the ruins in the following days. But conditions around Iseki Point were likely to be unsafe for some time. Reluctantly, I gave up.

Before I flew out, Yurji Shiraishi, owner of the guesthouse, gave me a tour of the wind-battered island. Wild horses and cows wandered the hills and sauntered across the road at the eastern point around the lighthouse at Cape Agarizaki. We stopped on the southern clifftops, Yurji pointing to a towering rock out in the ocean being hammered by fierce waves. The ocean swell was huge. The water looked treacherous. Under the surface, Yurji told me, is where the Iseki stones are. "Dangerous – no diving,"

Yurji said, as if it needed confirming.

We drove to the lighthouse at Irizaki. A stone memorial there marks Japan's westernmost point. On a much clearer day, it's possible to see Taiwan. A map covers the floor of the lighthouse. Yurji pointed out tiny Yonaguni and the short distance from the island to Taiwan and, not much further, the great landmass of China.

I looked out at the tempestuous ocean, disappointed not to have seen the monument, but glad I'd had a chance to experience the diverse, often beautiful Yaeyama islands. If aliens did choose this particular place on earth to spend some time, I'd have to say this: they have impeccable taste. I just hope they had better luck with the weather. ■

Okinawa, Japan

VITAL STATISTICS

Country capital: Tokyo (Okinawa Prefecture: Naha)

Population: 127 million (Okinawa Prefecture: 1.4 million)

Language: Japanese

Time: GMT+9

International dialling code: +81
Visas: Not required by UK nationals

Money: Yen (¥), currently around ¥150 to the UK£. Many shops only take cash. Many ATMs don't accept foreign cards; look for Japanese postal ATMs – these do. Traveller's cheques are accepted at most banks. Tipping is little practised in Japan; if you wish to leave a tip, put the money in an envelope first.

When to go

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|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun |
| Jul | Aug | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec |

■ Spring temperatures turn summery in March. Mid-May to June is rainy season.

■ Typhoons most likely at this time. Currents around the Iseki stones are unpredictable.

However, it's also summer, so the best time to hit the beach and to dive (especially Jul-Aug), unless a typhoon hits. Best time for spotting Pacific manta off Ishigaki.

■ The cooler winter season – though rarely below 10°C. January-February is the best time to see hammerhead sharks off Yonaguni.

Health & safety

Tap water is drinkable. Crime levels are low and street crime is rare. Medical treatment is of a high quality but can be expensive; insurance is always recommended: visit wanderlustinsurance.co.uk.

Further reading & information

DK Eyewitness Japan (DK, 2013)
Japan (Lonely Planet Country Guides, 2013)

www.seejapan.co.uk - Japan National Tourism Organization
www.okinawastory.jp/en - Okinawa Tourism
www.yonaguni.jp/en - Information on diving on Yonaguni

More online

Visit
www.wanderlust.co.uk/140
for links to more content:

Archive
11 prime places for cherry blossom - online
Tokyo: calm and chaos - issue 132, Nov 12
Kiso Valley - issue 127, Mar 12

Planning guides
Japan guide

Footnotes

The trip

The author travelled with **InsideJapan** (0117 370 9751, www.insidejapantours.com), which offers a 14-night *Mysteries of the Ryukyu Kingdom* trip from £2,116pp. The price includes stays in Tokyo (3 nights), Ishigaki (3 nights), Iriomote (2 nights), Yonaguni (3 nights), Naha (1 night) and Zamami (2 nights), plus all domestic flights, transport between destinations, some meals, one day diving in Yonaguni and a day trekking and kayaking on Iriomote with a nature guide.

Getting there & around

British Airways (0844 4930787, www.ba.com) flies to from London to Tokyo-Haneda. Flight time is around 12 hours; returns cost from £835.

JAL (0844 8569 700, jal.com), **ANA** (020 8762 8977, ana.co.jp) and **Skymark** (skymark.co.jp) operate frequent flights from Tokyo to Naha on Okinawa (£55-375 return). There are also

multiple daily flights from Haneda to Ishigaki (£135-300) and between Ishigaki and Yonaguni (£80-235). There is a daily service between Naha and Yonaguni (£50-100).

There are regular **ferry services** from Ishigaki port to both Iriomote (40 minutes) and Taketomi (20 minutes), plus a twice-weekly ferry between Ishigaki and Yonaguni (4.5 hours; approx £48 return).

If you rent a car – handy on islands such as Ishigaki and Okinawa – you'll need to buy an **International Driving Permit** before reaching Japan; see www.postoffice.co.uk/international-driving-permit.

Accommodation

The author stayed at: **Hyakuna Garan** (Okinawa; www.hyakunagaran.com), doubles from ¥105,000 (£695) including breakfast and dinner; **ANA InterContinental Resort** (Ishigaki; www.intercontinental.com), doubles from ¥18,400 (£122); **Eco Village** (Iriomote; eco-village.jp/kyaku), doubles from ¥17,100 (£114) including dinner and breakfast; **Hoshinoya Okinawa** (Taketomi; global.hoshinoresort.com/hoshinoya_okinawa), doubles from ¥48,000 (£317).

