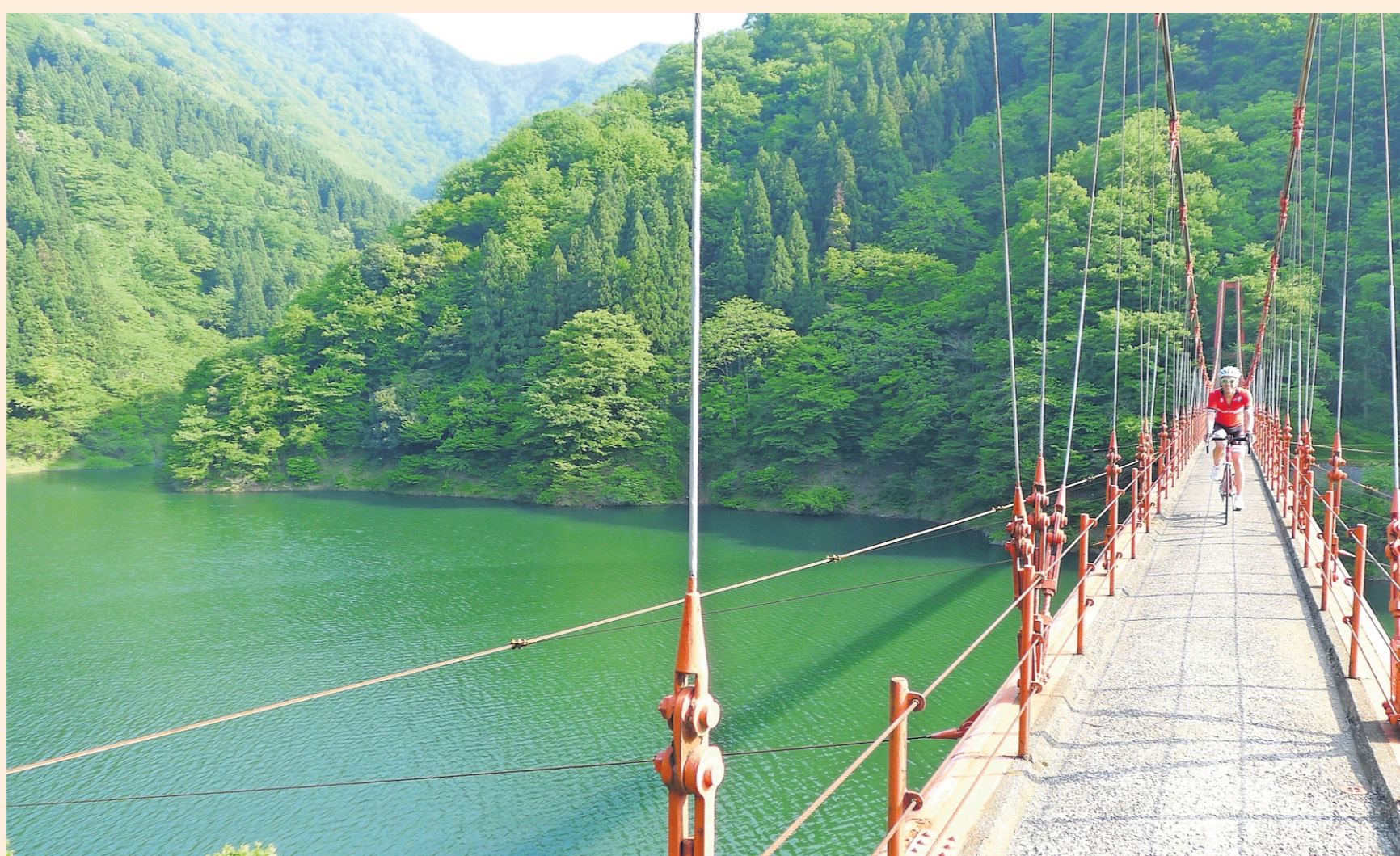


Blood is throbbing at my temples, the air is rasping at my throat, and my brain is blaring Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff" on repeat. The steep road before me will not relent. Three hours ago I was in the concrete matrix of Tokyo; now I'm climbing through a vibrant green forest of cedar and pine, having pedalled past glistening rice paddies, the occasional Shinto shrine and a Buddhist temple.

A mildly eccentric bike engineer called Takuya Kodama had handed me my bike outside the arrivals hall of Noto airport on the Noto Peninsula. It came with a handlebar-mounted Samsung tablet navigation system and Takuya's tips on the ideal cycling rhythm. He played the disco hit on a portable CD player while



bopping up and down for emphasis, and now I'm carrying that comically incongruous soundtrack through the raw, verdant beauty that surrounds me.

Noto Hanto, the Noto Peninsula, juts out 100km into the Sea of Japan, midway down the country's west coast, and is a one-hour flight north-west of Tokyo. It is as peaceful as Tokyo is frenetic. Every now and then I pass a person, typically aged, leathery-faced and hunched, toiling over rice paddies or the immaculate gardens of neat, wooden houses in tiny rural villages. They pause to see a western tourist on a bike; we nod our heads at one another and warmly exchange a *konichiwa*.

I'm cycling this serene landscape on a Butterfield & Robinson trip that begins here, in Ishikawa prefecture, and ends in Kyoto, the cultural heart of Japan. We are 15 guests — Canadians, Americans and one couple from Germany — and three guides, including Takuya. The company's modus operandi is active travel, usually cycling or walking, between fine restaurants and hotels (where your luggage appears every evening before you do). We average between 40km and 60km per day.

The Noto Peninsula is sparsely populated, with few cars on its well-maintained roads. George and Martha Butterfield, the ebullient duo who founded the travel company 50 years ago, are part of our group and they marvel at just how perfect the conditions are for biking. "As good as Burgundy!" says George.

Also part of the group are Arthur and Trudy Golden, keen to retrace a bike route they took together 18 years ago. And it's fitting that they should return in 2017: Arthur is the author of *Memoirs of a Geisha* and this year marks the novel's 20th anniversary.

It was a bold move for a male American author to voice a geisha, one of the most enigmatic female personas in existence. The gamble paid off: the book sold more than 4m copies in English, was translated into 40 languages, became an Oscar-winning film and was — for westerners at least — a glimpse into the mystique of Japan. Arthur has agreed to help our guides explain the puzzle of Japanese culture that we'll encounter on our journey.

We stay in a series of *ryokans*, traditional inns in which we observe some of Japan's beguiling customs and courtesies. We remove our shoes at the

On the geisha trail

Japan | 20 years on from 'Memoirs of a Geisha', Stephanie Drax joins its author,

Arthur Golden, on a celebratory bicycle tour from the Noto Peninsula to Kyoto



entrance, change into the *yukata* (cotton robe) laid out for us in our rooms, and pad about on varnished wood or cool *tatami* mats; we sleep on futons in simple bedrooms delicately adorned with sliding paper screens, a single flower and painted scroll; we eat exquisite *kaiseki*, multiple dishes of local ingredients presented with breathtaking artistry; and we bathe in *onsen*, hot spring baths with mineral-rich water that feels like silk on the skin. Arthur explains the formalities of bathing in the communal, gender-separated *onsen*: shower and scrub yourself clean first, and then slip into the water. It's a national pastime and part of popular consciousness, but the ritual finds root in Japan's indigenous religion: "Shinto is about purification and cleanliness, and you'll find it in every element of the culture," he says. "It's also a religion that concerns itself with the purity of nature, so the baths will often be in settings that reflect that."

At Lamp No Yado, a *ryokan* embedded in a craggy shoreline, the private *onsen* has a large window that frames the Sea of Japan. In the mountain village of Yamanaka, Kayotei (one of Japan's most celebrated *ryokans*) also has a private bath, one that invites you to gaze over folds of forested hills. Being naked in nature has never felt so civilised.

In the fishing town of Wajima, we visit the Juzu shrine at dusk. Evening light streams through the slats of the handsome wooden structure and paper lanterns glow as we are given a Shinto blessing for our journey. Suddenly, several men burst in with masks of bark and wigs of seaweed, clacking sticks, banging a large drum and yelling cries of war. The sound reverberates through my chest. Their shadows loom large on the wall behind as they drum wildly and posture with menace.

From top: a bridge outside the town of Yamanaka Onsen in Ishikawa prefecture; guide Sakis Mits in the *onsen* at Kayotei; making paper using a bamboo screen; Kenroku-en garden shrine in Kanazawa

Sven Erik Heur, Donald Saxton

Right: a geisha in traditional costume at the Ritz Carlton hotel in Kyoto

Stephanie Drax

i / DETAILS

Stephanie Drax was a guest of Butterfield & Robinson (butterfield.com), which offers a week's trip from Noto to Kyoto from £7,280 per person, including meals, transfers, private tours and expert guides but not international flights. The next departures are in May and October

This is a *Gojinjo-daiko* performance, a style of Japanese drumming specific to this region and a rare spectacle. The men are re-enacting for us the story of villagers fending off the feudal lord Uesugi Kenshin, whose samurai warriors invaded Noto's beaches in 1576. The peasant farmers and fishermen used their makeshift costumes, drums, hoes and sickles to successfully scare their enemies away.

We continue to explore the rural charms of the peninsula by bike. Our route takes us along the coast, past squid trawlers and leaping dolphins, *torii* gates and the spectacle of Senmaida, 1,000 ancient terraced rice fields sloping into the ocean. Our guides Takuya, Ross McLean and Sakis Mits do an admirable job of top and tailing our string of cyclists, periodically steering us to their pop-up snack spots with fresh sashimi, succulent oranges and tart Fuji apples.

On one day, we circumnavigate Notojima, a volcanic island, stopping at the extraordinary Glass Art Museum set within a hilltop complex that looks like a space station; we lunch on cold soba noodles and crisp tempura in a quaint restaurant that materialises out of lush farmland, and we finish at a small Buddhist temple. Takuya explains the complex disciplines used in the meticulous garden, which features a 400-year-old cedar tree and a small fishpond teeming with giant koi.

When Takuya was 15, before he became a bike engineer and guide, he says he briefly trained to be a gardener. He dreamt of trimming trees to look like big bonsai. Like *The Karate Kid*, he had much to learn — beginning with how to walk. "You must move fast, but with flat feet — to leave no footsteps" he tells me. Just when he thought he'd mastered it,



his teacher threw an object and Takuya ran clumsily to catch it. He failed the test. At Kenroku-en Garden in Kanazawa, one of the great gardens of Japan, Takuya's story gives me fresh admiration for the workers using their fingertips to clear fallen leaves. They move lightly, with precision and pride. The 11-hectare garden is a living work of art: great bursts of irises and azaleas, gnarled trees, stone bridges, ponds and carpets of moss have all been calculated and coaxed to look entirely natural.

Dedication is poured into all of the Japanese artisanal practices we encounter: from the creation of lacquerware, to the ritual tea ceremony and the brewing of sake. In a humble cottage, we watch in awe as *washi* (fine Japanese paper) is made by hand. The third-generation papermaker mixes the bark of a mulberry tree (*kozo*) with ash and water; he beats it to a pulp with a stick for an hour to break the fibres before making slurry. He scoops and shakes a layer of slurry in a bamboo filter tray to interlock the fibres and form a thin sheet of paper, using a deft flick of the wrist to ensure it is an even thickness.

When it is still wet he lays natural embellishments into the sheet; today it's a wisteria, but it might be sea shells, maple leaves or cherry blossom petals.

In Yamanaka we have a long, exhilarating descent under a canopy of cypress trees before we hop off our bicycles for the last time and transfer to Japan's ancient capital of Kyoto. Strolling the narrow lanes of Gion, Kyoto's renowned geisha district, is atmospheric — particularly when an off-duty geisha (or *geiko* in Kyoto dialect) teeters by in a kimono. Arthur translates the Japanese signage on traditional wooden buildings, pointing out an *okiya* (boarding house) where geisha initially live and train, and an *ochaya* (teahouse) where geisha entertain with music, dance, games and witty conversation.

It was Arthur's fluency in the language that sparked a conversation about Japanese attitudes towards the appropriation of their ethnic symbols. He so shocked a waitress when he spoke Japanese that she leapt back in a fit of giggles. "Sometimes foreigners seem to cross a line if they speak Japanese," he explained. "Though Japan has absorbed cultural influences, they've built protective mechanisms surrounding their own identity — things that are distinctly Japanese — and that includes the language."

What an imposter I must appear then, on our final night together, when I'm ceremonially dressed in a kimono at our hotel, the elegant Ritz Carlton Kyoto. Kimono CosPlay (costume play) is a craze in Kyoto and you will see many people — both foreign tourists and Japanese youth keen to embrace their heritage — sightseeing in traditional Japanese robes. It gives me an insight into the complexities of kimono dressing — several layers of fabric are held in place with a series of knots, bows and tucks. After being pulled at and tugged tight, I walk out on to the streets of Kyoto in wooden sandals, bound for a banquet dinner at the Yoshikawa Inn.

Two young geisha slip quietly into the dining room to dance for us, resplendent in full make-up, *shimada*-styled wigs and silk kimonos. Their movements are restrained yet fluid, their gestures delicate and their gaze disarming. I feel awkward beside them. They are demure as they pour sake and speak softly of the rigorous preparation required to look and perform as they do. They hold us all utterly in their thrall.

Even when you see Japan with the benefit of Arthur's understanding of the country, it's hard to fathom its unique disciplines. But perhaps there's symbiosis at work here: the Japanese keen to hold their culture close, so tourists happy for it to remain a challenge — otherworldly and perplexing. After all, what's the point of an easy ride?

Danger and delight: a dispatch from Antarctica

Spectre expedition | In his latest update, Leo Houlding tastes success but has a close call with a crevasse

Houlding, Mark Sedon and Jean Burgun are three weeks into a groundbreaking expedition to kite-ski across Antarctica and climb one of the world's most remote mountains, the Spectre

Finally, 13 days after the aeroplane dropped us in the midst of the high-polar plateau, we caught our first glimpse of the Spectre. Mark went ahead to film our glorious arrival, skiing behind our kites and hauling massive sleds across the glacier towards the mountain of our ambition.

Suddenly I was yanked violently backwards. I tried to use the kite to fight the pull but it was useless. I looked around and to my horror saw my pulk [sled] had vanished through the snow into a crevasse and was pulling me towards it. I was reaching down to try to release it when to my great relief I came

to a halt — the pulk had lodged on a deep snow bridge before I had been pulled after it down into the icy depths.

Jean came to my aid and within a couple of hours we had descended into the crevasse and hauled out my heavy pulk. Remarkably nothing was damaged and I was fine. Had I lost my pulk, it would have been an evacuation scenario. Had I been pulled down the crevasse too, it could've been much worse. Less than 1km from the end of the kite journey we were so nearly struck by disaster. As Jean says: "Irony always wins."

We are currently camped in one of the most spectacular and remote places one could possibly imagine. I'm typing on my iPhone in my tent, sending this through a 3.5 kbps satellite connection. The Spectre looms ominously above, both magnificent and menacing. When bathed in sunlight and free from wind, it is the most perfectly beautiful mountain. But when the sky darkens and the freezing wind blows, the Spectre's towering ramparts cast a murderous shadow. You simply will not survive for long out here in a storm without shelter.

The weather has been far more unstable than we anticipated, changing drastically about every six hours. Our original

objective, the South Pillar of the Spectre, is a huge and difficult wall. To attempt it in the light and fast alpine style for which we are equipped, when we are so remote and exposed, we would need a spell of stable, good weather. Without that, it is a level of commitment too far.

Therefore we decided to focus on the less imposing north side of the mountain, previously climbed only once, in 1980 (the year I was born), during a US geological expedition. Professor Edmund Stump and his late brother Mugs, one of the finest alpinists of his day, spent five weeks exploring the geology of these mountains by snowmobile after being dropped off by Hercules ski-plane. They made several impressive climbs including the Spectre, for which they also suggested the name.

The day started out sunny and calm, making the peaks much less intimidating. We set off at 8am and accessed the upper part of the mountain via the same couloir as Ed and Mugs. It is a complex, steep face of rock walls and snow chimneys. Although there were clearly lots of possibilities, we could not see a continuous line to the top and from close up it appeared much steeper and harder than from afar. Following what we felt was

the most logical line, we soon found ourselves in much more serious terrain than we were expecting. Jean led a difficult section of mixed climbing. Using crampons and ice axes designed for ski touring to climb vertical rock interspersed with ice and snow is extremely challenging. The sky clouded over worryingly fast, though it remained dead calm. I led up a snow chimney, wedging myself between vertical rock and snow that crumbled beneath my feet — falling not an option here — as the weather continued to deteriorate.

We began to feel extremely vulnerable and exposed. High on that difficult peak at the far end of the Transantarctic



The team reach the Spectre's summit

mountains, it is fair to say we were probably the most remote humans on Earth, with no hope of help or rescue if anything were to go wrong.

When we felt for certain we must be close to the summit, we struck a 25-metre-tall vertical cliff. Already facing a long, complex descent from this point, pushing further started to feel deeply committing. Had the freezing wind kicked up then we would certainly have retreated, but even with thick cloud, the lack of wind gave us the confidence to continue with the hardest section.

A long, spectacular ridge traverse led around a block the size of a house and then, finally, on to the summit. In truth, it was not a joyous moment. We all felt extremely anxious about our descent and being so completely at the mercy of the weather. We could see our camp, our survival zone, so tiny and so far below. With little celebration we turned and descended the final section of the ridge, then began rappelling down.

We arrived back at our tents after a 21-hour round trip, exhausted, relieved and happy. Almost immediately the wind began to blow again.

The bad weather that has dogged us meant the kite journey to get here took

twice as long as expected and that has greatly limited our climbing time. Jean and I managed to grab the second sunny day in three weeks to make a difficult but enjoyable first ascent of one of the other Organ Pipe peaks — previously unnamed as well as unclimbed.

And now, so soon, we must depart this most beautiful and hard-to-reach arena. For \$100,000 we could be collected by aircraft from right here, but we don't have that money and that is not our quest. Tomorrow we begin a 300km walk on skis pulling 100kg pulks back up to the hostile high plateau. We hope to be at our drop-off point in 20 days. There we should pick up the favourable katabatic winds to enable us to kite the 1,100km we need to cover before our expedition is over. I am beginning to wonder what I was thinking. But spirits are high and we are proud of our time in these mountains. We have summited safely and cautiously and now we begin the long journey home to our families. That is a satisfying and wonderful feeling.

For the full background on the expedition see ft.com/spectre. For a live map, see spectreexpedition.com