

The Oki Islands, a Well of Creativity on a Natural Fortress of Solitude

Oki Island is a remote island some three hours by ferry from mainland Japan in the Sea of Japan. It was used in the 13th and 14th centuries as a place of exile for influential emperors who could upset the balance in the political centers of Kyoto and Kamakura.

One such person was the 82nd Emperor, Gotoba. He has been recorded as being a genius with an ability to master all things. He was a noted poet, horse rider, fencer, archer, and even swordmaking. Gotoba surrounded himself with the best swordsmiths in the land to teach him the art, and he produced many examples himself that even today are designated as Important Cultural Properties. Today, Emperor Gotoba is recognized as an artist who had boundless creativity.

Not only did he make swords, but he is also recorded as being a connoisseur of regarding the sword for its intrinsic artistic qualities. His love and participation in the art raised the status of swords and swordsmiths from being mere weapons and craftsmen, to sublime art and artisans. Emperor Gotoba has continued to inspire generations of swordsmiths for 800 years. Even today, master swordsmiths aspire to obtain recognition of reaching Emperor Gotoba's level of artistic sense by devoting swords to Oki Shrine and a new project is underway to invigorate the art.

Gotoba spent his exile in what is now known as Ama Town. Surrounded by nature and far from his home in the capital, Gotoba relied on his artistic creativity to fortify his new existence. It is said that he continued to make swords here. He even composed some of his most notable poetry that was inspired by these Islands. He created new sports such as a unique type of Bull Fighting. It could even be argued that Gotoba's creativity may even have increased since residing in Ama.

The Oki Islands abundance of natural beauty has led to it being designated a UNESCO Global Geo-park. It is easy to imagine how inspired by the natural landscape and sea, Emperor Gotoba possibly transformed those images in the form of hamon (patterns of the hardened edge) onto the metal canvas that we call Japanese swords. The jigane (steel surface) of the blades also resembles wood grain patterns, and the natural curvature of the blades resemble that of drooping branches.

You too can experience this natural fortress of solitude and rejuvenate your creativity by visiting the Oki Islands. You can stay in the coastal Ento Hotel in which most rooms have scenic views (some with glass walls) facing out to the Sea of Japan. Or, you could try Glamping on the beach and meditate while the sun sets to the sound of the gently lapping waves of the crystal-clear sea.

Oki Islands remote location also means that it has been relatively untouched since Emperor Gotoba's time. It is in some ways like an 800-year old time capsule. You can still visit the sites where Emperor Gotoba composed his Katsuta Pond poem, or Saki Harbor where he composed his, "New Lord of these Islands" poem. You can even still walk some of the same paths or view the same unpolluted night sky with a clear view of the universe and ponder your existence as probably did Emperor Gotoba.

Experience the essence of Japanese culture through its deep connection with nature and emphasis on harmony which is also expressed in the traditional hospitality called, Omotenashi. The inhabitants of the Oki Islands also pride themselves on being completely self-sufficient. The people of Ama have a saying, "Nai mono wa nai: We have everything we need!" This means, simply living in harmony with nature and valuing the community.

For the artist traveler always wants to get off the beaten track from the regular tourist cities of Japan, it doesn't get much better than the Oki Islands. Dive into the well of creativity to see what inspired the great Emperor, and see what you too can discover. Can you hear Emperor Gotoba calling you? Just be careful, once you realize that you have everything you need, you may never want to leave.

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