

Inunaki Mura
The Howling Village of Japan

Japan is an incredibly popular country. The land of the rising sun, so they say. In fact, the Japanese for Japan is Nihon, which directly translated to Sun's Origin. What an image! It's flag, so simple, depicts that very sun.

If you've ever visited, you will have seen that golden-red light yawn in to waking, rising tall behind the spearing, edifying skyscrapers of Tokyo, or slowly and effortlessly trickling its honeyed warmth across the myriad hulking mountains – heavily forested, beautifully bare, or capped with frightfully bright and glistening snow – that can be spotted from near anywhere.

That promising dawn calls the brave and bold deer in to Nara park, whilst reflecting a rippling twin in the serene ponds of masterfully constructed gardens. It discloses the secrets of night, bursting the temples and shrines in to their striking, inherent wonders – immense and extravagant, or humble and half-hidden, both!

It casts glinting diamonds on the surface of the ocean, whilst warming the soft and fine sand of seaside towns and fishing communities. Or offers an omnipresent warmth, should the soothing local Onsen not catch your fancy.

Perhaps you've seen a more rural pocket of the country, in which the coming day offers the sight of waking sunshine crawling listlessly across neatly maintained farms, the flowing rivers, placid rice fields, or – if the season is right – tickling the stark, stunning vividness in to the brief and beautiful cherry blossoms.

Everyone, whether visited or not, will have an image evoke in their mind when they think of Japan. Perhaps some will think of the stern, stolid faces and precise singing blades of the feudal Samurai, others may dart to the more nimbler legends – ninjas, with their spinning shurikens and lethal poisons; blending in with society as if they are not trained dealers of death. Or, if you're more regal; maybe the famous emperors and empresses. Mayhaps the poised, elegant and terribly beautiful geishas? Hypnotically beautiful Kanji strokes, and silken kimonos each a piece of art within their own right.

Some of you, more innocent, will think of the food! The sushi and sashimi, udon and miso, fried chicken and takoyaki (fried octopus), obento, teriyaki, rice! Of course, there's the anime culture, too, which draws in a crowd of its own – even those who aren't ardent fanatics will have most likely had a Japanese anime entertain their youth at one point or another.

It can't be argued that the name of the country alone sparks crackling branches of wonder and amazement, but Japan has a whole other side to it. As the aforementioned sun retires after a day of beauty, it retreats from sight, and though the neon streets of cities may offer a different world of beauty, noise and awe, that paint over the dark streets as if they were a canvas made for them, the rest of the country is plunged to near darkness.

In the Inaka, the countryside, mists rise highlighted by the weak lampposts or the brave lanterns – the fields plummet in to vast ocean of darkness, and the entire world changes. For some a world of unquestionable peace.

To others... A world of horror, demons and spirits, Oni and monsters. Twisted, malevolent creatures that stalk the flatlands as silent as a shadow – some shaped like us, others deformed and hideous to behold. Some creatures, it is said, lay waiting aside the invisible rushing rivers with mischief and intentions of malcontent. Pale white skin, slick black hair and gaping mouths; ethereal beauty that will steal your soul; roaming, rattling skeletons that advance toward any lone traveller; pariahs that live in the wild, and will claim the lives of any who stumble by; extending limbs that ensnare and squeeze the breath from you - it's endless.

Should you be unfortunate to be lost whilst hiking, and desperately navigating your way to reach the foot of the mountains as these spectral mists rise, perhaps that silhouette your peripherals caught lurching behind a thin, gnarled tree is just your imagination. Perhaps it is not. The stars will twinkle silently above, as you feel your breath hollowing, and as a gust of wind tickles at the sleeping leaves, causing them to rustle their annoyance, you may even hear a scuttle, a soft footstep, a whispered slither as something approaches, ever closer.

I have been on many hiking trips with a friend I made here. Even in the cities, hiking is a popular hobby seeing as they don't need to travel far. It's easy to wake early on a Saturday, hop on a train to the nearest mountain, pass a shrine with the bows, claps and prayers, before you're ascending the unsteady terrain. Most of the mountains have tried and tested trails, that lead you via a path to the best viewing points – often littered with the tired tourists who are at their wits end at this point, flashing selfies and shots of scenery, because *that* is the reason the braved it in the first place.

There is a mountain in Kyoto that goes as far as having an endless army of bright orange Torii gates marching the entire length of the mountain, and with its popularity, having the warming glow of lanterns chase the falling night away.

The hiking is exhilarating, but sooner or later, when you've hiked through all the mountains in your locale, and even those of neighbouring towns – the ones that you can just about make out through the distant, dancing mists or haunting, advancing fogs... well, the exhilaration fades. You've seen that view, and though it's breath-taking, it's been done. Completed. You want more, to experience more.

Luckily, the one colleague-turned-friend, Kazunori Nishimoto, I hiked with most shared my ennui. He spoke very little English, and I spoke very little Japanese. I believe this was a reason we enjoyed each other's company so much. There was no small talk. No conversation for the sake of conversation. We knew the drill, we knew what to pack. We would meet with our coffees and good morning, "Ohayou gozaimasu," from me, "Good morning," from him. I never understood why we used each other's language for that, but it was the expected. Then, we'd get to boarding the train, or bus with our tired eyes tickling over the different languages in our own books. Then, the train would lull to a stop, and we would get out to begin the hike. We'd offer little comments of beauty, or interest, or laughter as we stumbled up mulchy, sodden, dry, flat, whatever terrain, but mostly it was quiet – a way to have company, but enjoy solitude in one harmonious fashion.

Then we would reach the peak (not always the 'official guide's' peak, either) in which we would sit, proud and tired, looking over the evening sprawl of colourful houses or the night's weak glowing lampposts and orange flickering lanterns in the low distance, like fallen, sleeping stars. He'd unsheathe his flask, and we'd both share his strong, but welcome whiskey, and let it burn warmth in to our bodies to fight against the unchallenged breeze; gently mussing our hair, or noticeably tugging at our coats. To sit there, on top of the town, watching as the land of the setting sun would once more be reclaimed by night, it was heaven, truly the epitome of contentedness! We'd stumble through a little more conversation, then carefully make our way back down to rinse and repeat the week until we hiked again.

But that need for something more I mentioned, it took conquest over us. And when I was sitting in the office, to have him come over with a battered old article, curling at the edges and stained with age, and then heard the words, "Translate. We will visit!" I was curious.

The fading image on the article showed a four stacks of heavy bricks in front of a heavily graffiti'd tunnel. Then, I got to translating – a slow task for me, considering I was there purely to teach English (like most foreigners I've met here do).

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Dog Howling village, literally. The name itself already had me interested. Then I saw read there is a gate, that leads in to the town, stating that “the constitution and laws of Japan do not apply here.”

Immediate excitement. Perhaps akin to a moth and flame, but still, I was compelled all the same.

We lived in the Fukuoka Prefecture of Japan, which was on the bottom of the main islands, Kyushu. This village, Inunaki Mura, sat in a remote and sequestered area of that very prefecture, blooming with heavy forests so thick that the town itself could not be seen. This is not uncommon – I’ve stumbled upon immense and awe-inspiring structures that, from the outside, are completely concealed by a canopy of mottled dark green, yellow, orange, red and light green.

When I did more research, to find that it was only accessible via a single tunnel – the one in the picture - which caved in on the men constructing it, my kindling morbid intrigue roared to a blaze. I read that some say the howling of dogs that can be heard is not from the dogs at all, but from the calls of the spirits trapped in the tunnel, angry and vengeful at their fate.

There are those who believe that the cries are those of the villagers who were killed; some reports say a killer swept through the village in a mad rage, frothing at the mouth, and slaughtering anyone unfortunate enough to be outside that crossed his path, before breaking his way in to houses – slipping through open doors, or barging in with brute force – and brutally stealing the life of those within with a crude, sharpened hatchet. In the midst of the town, you can hear their screams howling in the gusts, or the imprint of helpless, hapless defeated cries of the vulnerable unable to avoid their impending fate.

Other reports say it was a plague, that stole the village of its people. That it swept through in a terrible, sudden wave, swift and wraithlike, siphoning the health and life from all within – young to old – until their bodies dropped, rotted and festered, and allowing the sickly sweet scent of mortifying flesh to be plucked up by the wind, and borne in the surrounding bosky thickets in which canine packs roamed, hungry and vicious.

And still, this place, so unsuspecting, so terrible and famous amongst Japanese citizens, had another claim for its ghastly infamy. That the dam built nearby backed up the water, so the levels continued to rise until people slipped in to the treacherous hazard, and gulped down the icy water before succumbing to its depths.

There’re reports of spirits seen roaming, still crying for the help they would never get. Calls of mercy from within the dilapidated houses. Bodiless groans of anguished sickness as life fizzled from them. That criminals on the run flee here, as behind those gates, they are free from justice. That murders have happened here; immolation, planned, sacrifices. Footsteps, demons, watch as those living explore the town that will become their tomb. Drowned villagers look up from the murky depths, through water-ravaged faces and blank white eyes, wishing to yank the living in to a similar fate. And all this if you can even get past the tunnel, in which the perished builders will either lure you to a spot in which the tunnel will collapse once more, and have you join them... or cry for you to return the way you came, and avoid losing your life.

Perhaps I’m mad for wanting to trade truly halcyon views, for the murky, shadowed, secluded and evidently innumerable cursed scape of an abandoned village, but of all the demons and ghosts I’ve mentioned above, I’ve yet to see one... maybe this will be my chance. We’re heading there alone this weekend, and I can’t wait to update you with what we find!