

PERFECTLY BALANCED

Sake, spas and street food, with a side order of karaoke and culture? No, it's not too good to be true: it's just another day in Kobe, finds **Hannah Summers**



Photograph by Sean Pavone/Shutterstock

Some cities get a raw deal. They sit in the shadow of the big players, always there but rarely visited, cast aside for the glory-seekers – the Tokyos, Osakas and Kyotos. In among all those cities is Kobe, a cosmopolitan, waterside metropolis in the south of Japan. It's subtle with its charm. Though it lacks the frenzy of Tokyo, the free-spirited gritty vibes of Osaka, and the tranquil tea houses of Kyoto, Kobe is calm and endearing, with a side of bars, breweries and – not least – beef. That kobe you've been splashing out on in the UK? This is its birthplace.

Sake sessions

But first, a drink. You'll have your pick of thousands of sake breweries on a trip to Japan, but each region's product tastes different depending on the rice and water used. The Hyogo prefecture, in which you'll find Kobe, full of sake houses, its history dating to the 17th century when methods were very

Japan's famed fermented rice wine is the country's national drink, and is often served as part of a special ceremony, where it's gently heated and sipped from cups.

much about hard graft and wood. Today, with the introduction of high-tech machinery, the Nada district accounts for 30% of the country's production, with 40 breweries to choose from. If you're going to get steaming on sake – and I really recommend that you do – this is certainly the city for it.

My pick is the Shushinkan brewery, because nowhere else will you dress up like a surgeon and sip the Japanese wine at the same time. While many of the breweries in the region offer tasting rooms, this one lets you go into the factory – kitted out in scrubs, hair nets and blue shoe cover things – to see the process in action, from rice polishing to filtration (it's fascinating stuff, promise). At the end you'll try every sake under the sun, from the fruity to the vaguely spicy, from the hot and comforting to the cold and gloriously gluggable.

It doesn't stop there: the adjoining restaurant, Sakabayashi, serves curious Japanese cuisine that goes big on the *neba neba* – a phrase used to describe the texture of slimy, slightly gloopy food. You'll have a lot of that. The best bit though is the restaurant's tofu, which is handcrafted in the brewery itself, and is paired with the sake – because in Kobe, that's a thing.

Culture and calm

Time for a gallery. The waterfront Hyogo



BRIGHT LIGHTS, SMALL CITY: [clockwise from here] Sunset on the waterfront; a statue of Gigantor; Kobe beef; one of the city's shrines



Photograph by Hannah Summers

KOBE IS A CALM AND LAID-BACK CITY, AND YOU'LL NEVER FEEL HARASSED OR HURRIED HERE

Prefectural Museum of Art is a handsome, raw-looking concrete building designed by Japan's world-famous architect Tadao Ando. Inside, its wide, sweeping staircases and severe lines lead to a maze of rooms showcasing the range of the country's artistic talent, from Japanese modern art masterpieces to quirky sculptures. Take some time to wander around; exhibitions roll through the galleries every few months, and even if you're the most reluctant art appreciator, you'll find something that'll wow.

Kobe is a calm and laid-back city – you'll never feel harassed or hurried here. It's modern and cosmopolitan, and you won't find the bright neon lights that you'd envisage from a major Japanese city. That being said, you'll feel a new sense of calm as you ride the cable car up the mountain to the Nunobiki Herb Gardens, home to 75,000 – yes, 75,000 – herbs, spread across 14 gardens. If flowers aren't your thing, the panoramic view over Osaka Bay and Kobe are some of the best vistas in the city.

Meanwhile, the Nunobiki Falls, which

EXPERIENCES



are reached from a steep forest path behind the train station, are a peaceful stop-off point on a hike through Kobe's mountain trails. I didn't have the time or the stamina, but I did see eager, sweaty locals tackling the slopes of Mount Rokko.

After dark

Street food's a big deal in Japanese cities and Kobe has its own take on it – with **kobe beef**, naturally. Head to Chinatown and you can get your fill of cheap pork buns and the most delicious street wagyu you can find – thick melty strips of it, seasoned, sliced and draped into a soft bun with a thin layer of lettuce. All for a couple of quid. It's a great pre-karaoke snack, and for that, Big Echo

Prized kobe beef has to fulfill a specific set of criteria to be labelled as such. Some of the kobe cattle are played classical music, and massaging the cows is common, too.

is my pick. Pay for a private booth (the norm here) and settle in to an hour or two of Meatloaf, Cher and Celine Dion. Sake will be delivered to your room, ▲

EMBRACE JAPAN'S CULTURE AT AN ONSEN

Inn Gobosho, an old house with winding staircases and corridors that give way to private living rooms that also act as your bedroom. Remove your shoes, slide into your slippers – it's the rules – and settle into a tea session complete with silky kimono and traditional Japanese music. While the historic inn has its own private onsen, it's the food here that really got me.

And for that you need to be prepared to go with the flow. Forget choosing your own dishes (you won't know what they are anyway): instead, you'll be presented with a tasting-menu-style meal complete with suspicious yet delicious flavours and, most of all, textures. Think sushi, tofu, tempura, insanely good melt-in-your-mouth (kobe) beef, and a soup the consistency of phlegm, crammed with unidentifiable edible objects. Try it all – the sake will help – and retreat to your roll-out matt-on-the-floor 'bed'. Breakfast takes a similarly adventurous path – rice (good), lightly fried fish with pickles (good) and a whole tray of different types of tofu, from soupy to wobbly (very good).

All cleansed out? My final stop back in Kobe is a gritty burger joint with lightly seasoned burgers that let this supersonic beef do the talking. It feels like a dirty little secret in this relaxed and cosmopolitan city, but the kind of secret you feel compelled to share. It's called Wanto. You're welcome. 

Photograph by Hannah Summers

CALM AND COLLECTED: [this image] Laid-back Kobe is full of traditional Japanese architecture; [below] the city's signature dish

and tambourines are supplied. Japanese bar culture is addictive – forget our big rooms crammed with people and try Kobe's intimate 12-seater drinking dens. You'll find them in the backstreets around Sannomiya Station and they are prime **bar-crawl** territory.

An evening with the onsens

Strolling the cities is all well and good, but to truly embrace the history and culture of Japan you need to spend a day or two soaking your weary bod in some healing warm water, aka an onsen. The small village of Arima is just a subway ride away from

Virtually all of Kobe's best bars are within walking distance of one another, so you can take in as many as you like with relatively little effort required. Cheers!

Kobe and is a pretty little tranquil maze of quaint cobbled streets, which lead to seven warm-water onsen springs, temples, shrines and centuries-old wooden

buildings that feel a world away from the gleaming straight lines of Kobe. No wonder, then, that the place has become a pilgrimage destination for stressed-out Japanese looking to relax.

But a visit here is about more than a hot-water soak. Ditch the hotel room for a traditional sleep in a Japanese inn such as

GETTING THERE

For more information, visit seejapan.co.uk; nightly rates at ANA Crowne Plaza start from £88. anacrowneplaza-kobe.jp; British Airways fly from London Heathrow to Tokyo from £817 return, ba.com. From there, catch the Shinkansen to Shin-Kobe station (around three hours).



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