ADVANCED JAPANESE

Reverence for the handmade runs deep in Japan's culture. Now an enterprising Englishman is opening doors (ever so discreetly) to its top artists' studios. **Danielle Demetriou** samples an extraordinary fixing service

I am sitting in an industrial car park in a Tokyo suburb on a drizzly Wednesday morning, waiting. A metallic clank shatters the silence as a garage door begins to roll up; slowly and steadily, like a theatre curtain, the grey, urban tableau transforms into a vivid, otherworldly burst of colour.

Centre stage is an atelier with bright canvases stacked against white walls, clusters of squeezed paint tubes, overflowing ashtrays and a random scattering of unfinished bronze sculptures. Hauling up the door is a smiling young man in a navy wool hat, round gold-wire glasses and paint-spattered boots, who greets us with a quick bow of the head before asking us to step inside.

It's not every day you get invited into the world of Yukimasa Ida (pictured overleaf). A soaring star of Japan's contemporary art scene, the 29-year-old is famed for his distinct portrait style, faces often blurred into abstraction by haphazardly layered oils forming an impasto of raw jewel shades. (His collectors include Leonardo DiCaprio and Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa, the man who broke auction records with his $110.5m Basquiat purchase in 2017.)

Arguably as remarkable as his artworks, though, is the fact that this visit is happening at all. My encounter with Ida was masterminded by People Make Places (PMP), a Tokyo-based outfit that designs trips across Japan tailored to the most precise personal interests. Be it a passion for rare, cultish Japanese denim, unusual *nihonshu* sakes or the finest examples of the art of *kintsugi* (ceramics repaired with gold), PMP creates ultra-specialist itineraries that delve far deeper than conventional tours.

One area where PMP excels is contemporary Japanese art. This is no small thing: Japan's art world is famously tricky to navigate, with its minefield of cultural and linguistic barriers to entry, plus, more often than not, the absolute need for insider introductions.

Above: Hajime Sorayama in his Tokyo studio. Right: the 11.9m-high robot that he created for Dior's 2019 runway show in Tokyo

PMP circumvents these challenges through its impressively well-placed contacts to help its clientele – which includes international auction houses, contemporary museums and many private collectors – delve deep behind the scenes.

These bespoke tours aren't just about Sugimoto, Nara, Murakami or others in the pantheon of Japanese global art stars (though PMP can, given the time and the spending budget, arrange access to many of them). Instead, for genuine collectors and appassionati, PMP arranges private introductions to artists and makers who are celebrated in Japan – from contemporary painters to third-generation potters – but have perhaps not yet penetrated the world stage.

My own experience started with breakfast at the Aman Tokyo. I was whisked past a minimalist festive *ikebana* display (this hotel doesn't do Christmas baubles) and led to a window table in the restaurant, where PMP's founder, Charles Spreckley, a 42-year-old British journalist and editor who has lived in Tokyo for over two decades (during which our paths have crossed a number of times) was waiting for me. Softly spoken, perennially calm and unwaveringly discreet (first point of order at our breakfast: I'm not allowed to publish client names – although I am allowed to say he was in the process of designing a trip for mega-donors to a major California museum), Spreckley explains, while tucking into a delicate medley of small dishes, that it all boils down to PMP's invaluable expert "friends". "Japanese culture is entirely based on respect – for people, processes, objects, nature and other people's work. Connected to that, there is a culture of patience and dedication and thoughtfulness. It's about the process more than the reward. Because promoting yourself can feel or appear disrespectful, it takes time for talent to come to the fore."

As if on cue, PMP "friend" number one, Shu Kuge, appears. A former comparative

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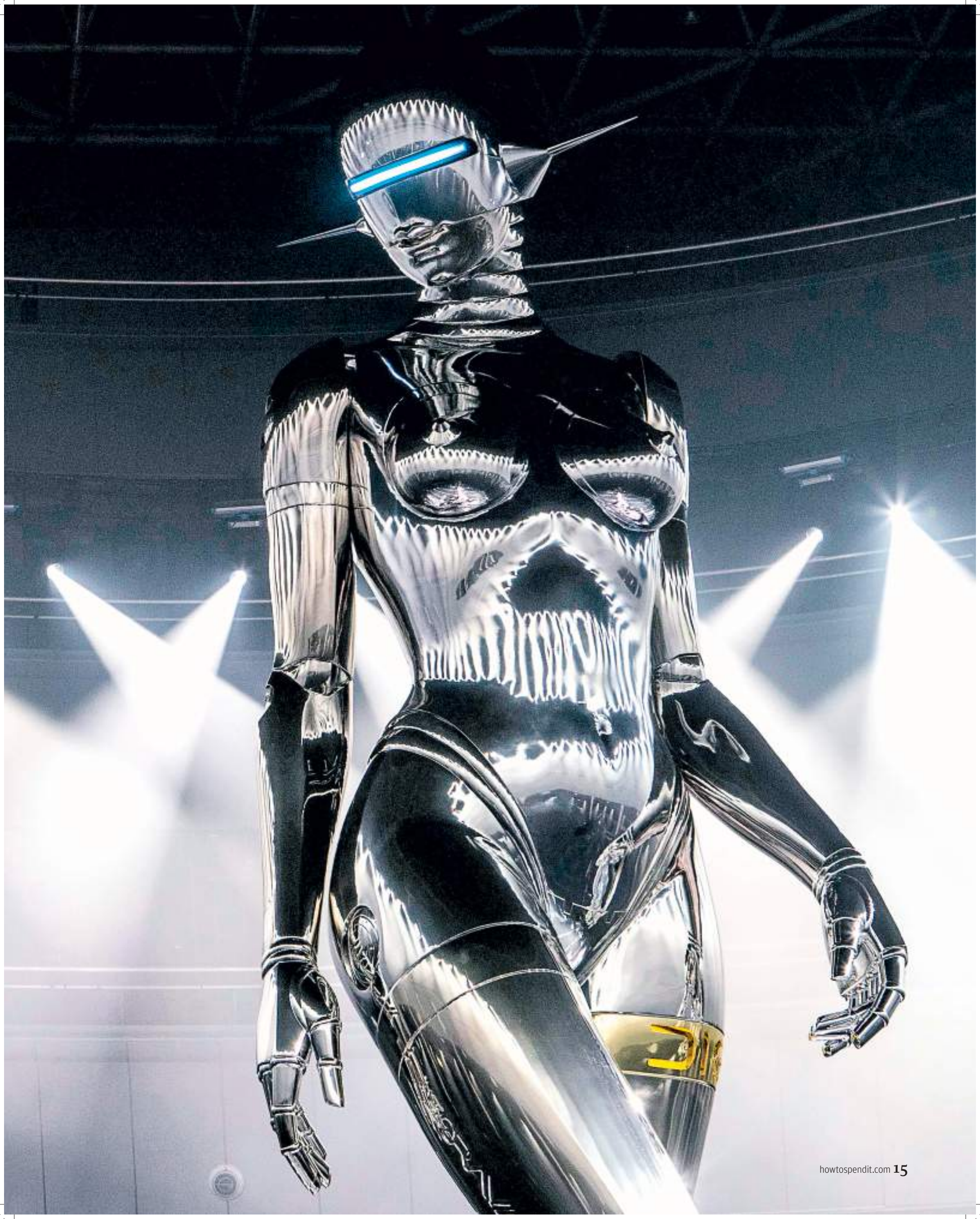

literature professor and artist who lived in California for decades, Kuge is as entertaining as he is stylish, in mustard tweed jacket, fashionable glasses, neon watch and yellow-and-blue trainers. After a mood-setting whizz around the National Museum of Modern Art, lingering in front of the delicate modernity of century-old silk screens depicting snow-covered pine trees, we are off, on the drive to Ida's studio in the Machida suburb.

When we arrive, Kuge politely produces some Henri Le Roux chocolates – a thoughtful (and typically Japanese) gift for the artist, who is standing amid 360 degrees of unfinished artworks and cluttered tools. "I moved here six months ago," smiles Ida. "I'm really good at making a mess."

Almost immediately we gravitate towards an epic three-panel work-in-progress at the rear, with abstract swathes of colour framing a cast of familiar figures (I spy the Pope, Audrey Hepburn and a Rembrandt-esque bathing woman among them). "It looks huge, but from a cosmic perspective it's very small," explains Ida, lighting the first of a continuous trail of cigarettes. As I sit on a hastily produced chair, a cup of politely proffered water on the stepladder next to me, he continues: "My interests lie in humans and history. You often encounter a person just once in a lifetime – the Japanese saying for this is *ichi-go ichi-e*. This theme of encounters, a moment happening just once, runs through all my work."

For the next hour, Ida smokes, laughs and ruminates as the conversation meanders from the influence of his artist father and teenage rebellion (he tried to stop painting but it didn't last) to his need for isolation. It's an exchange that is insightful, inspiring and – a precious anomaly, in the normally strictly controlled and protocol-saturated culture of Japanese meetings – refreshingly relaxed.

After zooming back into the neon circus of central Tokyo, we pull up outside a nondescript old apartment block. I follow Kuge into a rickety elevator and trundle up to a 12th-floor apartment; swapping shoes for fluffy blue slippers at the entrance, we follow a dark corridor into a small room packed with a dizzying explosion of seemingly unrelated paraphernalia – stuffed rabbits, books, robots, black lace underwear, erotic sketches.

Holding court is a small man in a hot-pink T-shirt sitting at a table crowded with persimmon fruits, mugs of tea, a model of a breast-flashing woman and a robotic Mickey Mouse: he is Hajime Sorayama (pictured on previous pages), the 72-year-old artist-illustrator famed for his simmeringly erotic female robots (pictured on previous pages) and for designing the original Sony AIBO robot dog.

"Can you advertise my work?" he asks cheekily, releasing the first of many amused hoots during a surreally non-linear conversation. He proves to be an expert question dodger (Q: What do you do here? A: It's a secret. Q: Where do you live? A: the Imperial Palace). What he does tell me, among other things, is: he once drew Hitler as a robot with swastika veins; he works mainly overseas because "Japanese clients have no money"; he recently met David Beckham but has no idea what Beckham said because of his cockney accent; he has no interest in putting technology inside his female robots; and the life-sized drawing of a near-naked woman stuck to the ceiling (her pert posterior is directly, unavoidably above my head) is his ex-girlfriend – who was a vampire.

From top: Yukimasa Ida at work on one of his celebrated oil portraits. Ceramicist Shinya Tanoue in his Kyoto studio. One of his shell-like creations with its starburst etched detail and deep turquoise glaze

For all his zany political incorrectness, he clearly has influential admirers – as witnessed by the bespoke Dior silk jacket hanging behind me, custom-made for him by his friend, Dior creative director Kim Jones, to wear to the French house's recent collection presentation in Tokyo (Sorayama created a 11.9m-high female robot sculpture for the runway, and his illustrations will feature in Dior's pre-fall 2019 collection this summer). "Beauty isn't my goal; I just want to do things that haven't been done before," he explains.

A calmer but no less interesting story unfolds the next day in Kyoto. After a journey down on the bullet train, I am met by a sleek black BMW kitted out with bespoke electric-blue woven textile seating – courtesy of its owner, Hosoo, a 17th-century textile company that is a textbook-perfect example of Kyoto innovation.

Currently steered by 12th-generation scion Masataka Hosoo (a presence at global design events from Milan to New York, he's unfortunately out of town when I visit), the textile house balances its historic kimono-production roots with a stream of contemporary projects that range from custom weaves for Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Dior to collaborations with Ritz-Carlton, Ambush and Leica, among others – and not forgetting the singular and ultra-exclusive Hosoo *machiya* residence, where I will be sleeping that night.

In the BMW sits Sara Aiko Coe, another PMP "friend": bubbly, clever and chic, she has a Kyoto-born mother and a father from New Zealand, which positions her perfectly to understand, and translate, the city's closed and socially complex world. Our first stop is the peaceful home of ceramic artists Shinya Tanoue (pictured above left) and Machiko Hashimoto. Passing a traditional *noren* curtain, we wander past pottery wheels before entering a small *tatami* room filled with Tanoue's signature creations: organically curved, shell-like structures (pictured left) with white starburst etchings contrasting with a deep, smooth turquoise glaze. (They are increasingly coveted by serious collectors and museums: the director of

PHOTOGRAPHS: KOKI URANO. ROBERT YELLIN YAKIMONO GALLERY/TANOUE SHINYA

Oregon's Portland Japanese Garden, widely regarded as the most authentic example outside Japan, keeps one on his desk.)

Sipping tea on the sofa, surrounded by shelves of sunlit vessels crafted by his wife, Tanoue talks quietly about his work. "[Each piece] is a bit like an eggshell, just before it cracks. You ask yourself, is there life inside, or has life already started?" he explains.

From above left: third-generation potter Takahiro Kondo. His latest works include ceramic vases in an intriguing state of collapse. Calligraphy artist Tomoko Kawao is notable for her performance art with inks

We are joined by Robert Yellin, a Kyoto-based American pottery expert with wild grey hair, who takes me to his atmospheric teahouse-style home-gallery near the Philosopher's Path. Yellin is a crucial conduit between many Japanese artists and the world beyond Japan's borders (just days earlier, he'd sold a Tanoue work to a major New York collector). In his small exhibition space, my head is turned by the unglazed lines of one 15th-century jar, and abstract paintings by artist Daiki Nishimura (who apparently won the heart of the Aman Tokyo's designer, resulting in a 15-canvas commission for the hotel). "It's great to have old pieces, but it's even more exciting to find someone young and talented and bring them to the attention of the world," Yellin notes.

Later, a slightly different side of Kyoto shifts into focus. I follow Aiko Coe uncertainly through an anonymous-looking car park at the rear of a hospital-style building before a hidden staircase takes us into Art Office Ozasa – a minimal white and concrete gallery showcasing Katsuhito Nishikawa's serene cloud photography. With neat grey hair and black poloneck, gallery director Yoshitomo Ozasa – a powerful, if understated, titan of Kyoto's art world – politely describes how he rather likes being hard to find: "I often show older-generation artists. Younger people want to be loud and have big shows; I don't want to do that. My taste lies with more simple works. The more you promote, the more your value is reduced."

The day concludes watching chefs prepare a Kyoto-perfect contemporary *kaiseki* dinner at Wakuden Muromachi, an intimate counter restaurant with superlative cuisine (the *mibuna* mustard greens with pine nuts and fresh, jelly-like persimmon were among many highlights) and an ambience that masters the balance between intimacy, exclusivity and subtle informality. Then I repair to Hosoo Residence. Located down a quiet alley, the two-storey wooden house, which I have all to myself, was exquisitely restored by Hosoo's top brass, with (among many other exquisite design elements) a striking striped stonework wall in shades of pastels, and chairs upholstered in dazzlingly intricate woven metallic house fabrics. There's also a deliciously comfortable bed, into which I tumble after a soak in the black stone bath overlooking a small white pebble garden.

My final day opens two intriguing doors. First I visit the scenic family home of legendary ceramic artist Takahiro Kondo (pictured top left). A third-generation potter (his grandfather was a Living National Treasure), Kondo is calmly animated as he explains, over a steady stream of tea served in distractingly beautiful vessels, how Kyoto's once tightly-knit pottery community fragmented after the second world war, sparking waves of creative innovation. A private tour of his immaculately tidy workshop offers a precious glimpse into his latest works – white, curved vases, some perfect in structure, others collapsing with petal-like apertures and irregular foldings: "I want to see how things create themselves," he says simply of their extraordinary forms.

In the afternoon I'm driven about an hour out of the city to the studio of avant-garde calligraphy artist Tomoko Kawao (pictured below), celebrated for her large-scale performances (she often uses her body to create "brush" strokes). Warm, charming, with long ink-brush hair, she invites me to kneel at a low table inside the large, near-empty house to learn the rudiments of her art form (with, alas, limited success – the meditative action of rubbing ink into a block, which normally lasts an hour, makes my arm ache after two minutes).

Then comes the PMP moment: a private calligraphy performance. Tension builds as Kawao kneels, eyes closed, in front of a large blank sheet of white paper; then, springing lightly to her bare feet, she plunges a huge brush into an ink bucket before dancing across the paper, the brush leaving dynamic trails of abstract strokes. Then abruptly she kneels again, inviting calm to descend.

It's a serendipitous twist that the word she chooses to paint for me is *isshun* – "one moment" or "blink of an eye". That very Japanese notion of a single, never-to-be-repeated moment in time has long been deeply rooted in the nation's creative DNA – a theme I observed threaded through the textured oils of Ida's paintings, the curved lines of Tanoue's shells, the fractured vases of Kondo. Likewise with my own encounters with all of them – singular moments that, in their aggregate, made for a lastingly memorable foray into the world of contemporary Japanese arts. ✦

Danielle Demetriou travelled as a guest of People Make Places (peoplemakeplaces.com); her four-night, five-day arts itinerary, which includes two nights in Tokyo at the Aman Tokyo and two nights at Hosoo Residence in Kyoto, a full-time guide and private driver, breakfasts and lunches and Green Car-class bullet train travel (but excluding dinners and international flights) costs about £11,580. British Airways flies three times daily from London Heathrow to Tokyo Haneda airport from £646 return.

PHOTOGRAPHS: @ENJOYKYOTO. KIM SAJI. MASAKI MIYANO