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R With deciduous trees throughout Japan erupting into a riot of color over the next two months, there's no escaping the fact that fall is upon us. **Jeffrey Tanenhaus** recommends 10 prime destinations where visitors can bask in autumn's patchwork glory.

Newcomers to Japan are generally taken aback by the local population's steadfast reverence to the foliage found on a humble tree. The fact of the matter is, however, that two times every year – spring and autumn – the ephemeral beauty of trees grips the nation far more than popular TV dramas or baseball rivalries. From September, all eyes turn to the television as nightly news graphics chart the advance of autumn's foliage front

from Hokkaido in the far north to Kyushu in the deep south, leaving a more colorful trail in its wake than the pinkish hue of cherry blossoms that bloom in spring. The procession of red, yellow and orange marching across the country sparks a flurry of activity at Japan's top *kouyou* (leaf-changing) locations, with principal tourist attractions often fading into the background amidst all the color. To celebrate autumn's

pageantry, *J Select* pairs five foliage hot spots with five nearby but lesser-known areas so that you can make the most of your annual leaf-viewing adventure. Time your trip right by tracking the foliage front with these websites (in Japanese): kouyou.nihon-kankou.or.jp and www.walker-plus.com/koyo. For updates in English, try calling the Japan National Tourist Organization's Tourist Information Center in Tokyo at 03-3201-3331.

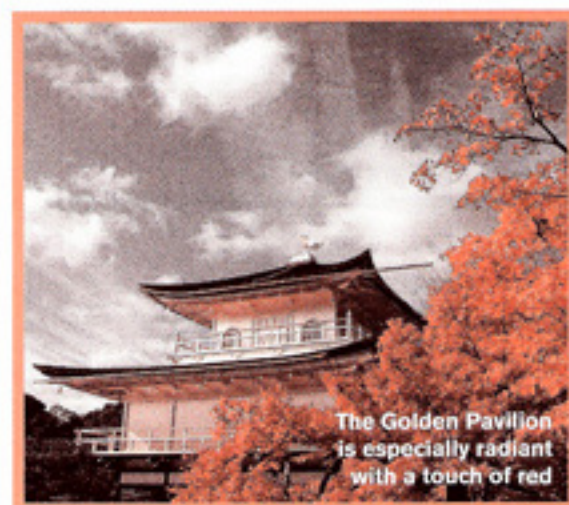


Kiyomizu Temple

KYOTO

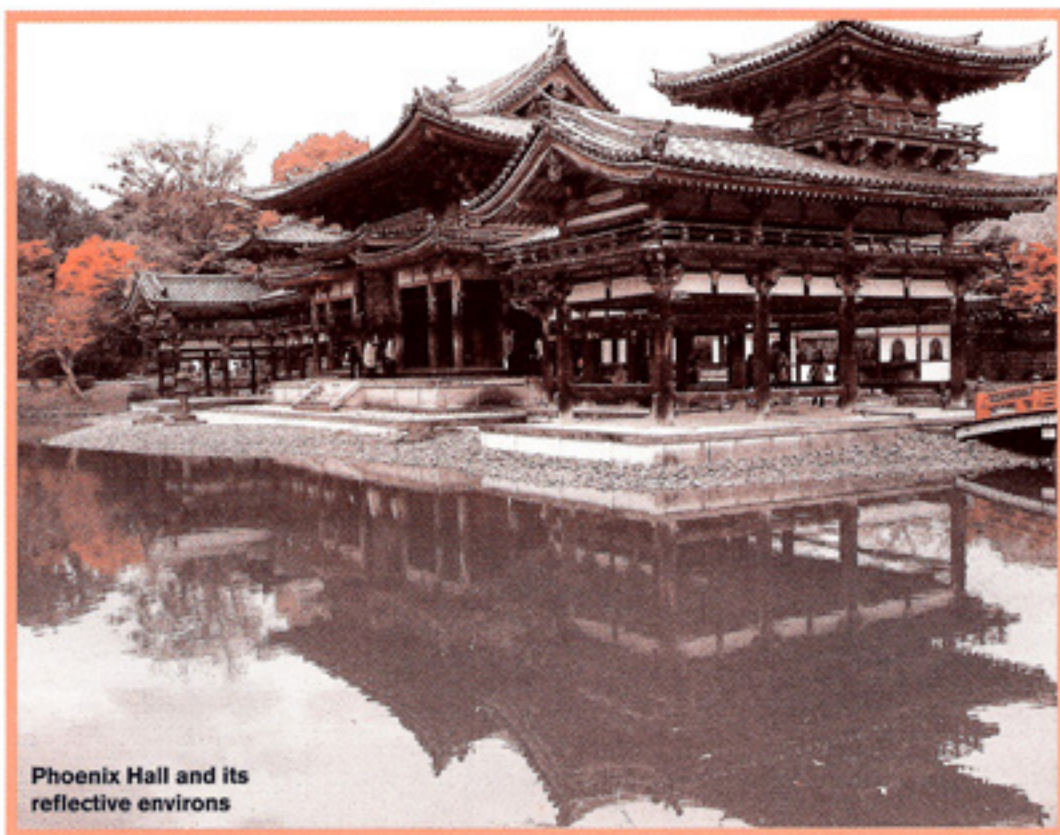
Arguably the country's premier place for *kouyou*, Kyoto's temple setting is hard to beat – even when the leaves are plain green. The wealth of UNESCO sites attests to Kyoto's importance as a window into Japan's feudal past. For a brief period every November, however, nature turns the tables and relegates architectural gems to background scenery. Crimson radiating from Japanese maples outshines gilded Kinkakuji (Golden Pavilion) and Kiyomizu temple, the crown jewels in a city spoiled with cultural riches. Ginkgo

trees dye Kyoto Gyoen National Garden bright yellow while plum and peach trees are among other species shading this park in the middle of the city. Further south, Tofukuji temple's Zen precincts burst with color even though camera-toting tourists seem to outnumber leaves. No matter which temple or shrine your senses steer you, dramatic dashes of color enliven already spiritual grounds with pathways carved around pruned trees and creaky wooden buildings. An autumnal circuit around Kyoto's landmarks showcases quintessential Japan at its ripest moment.



The Golden Pavilion is especially radiant with a touch of red

PHOTOS / JEFFREY TANENHAUS



Phoenix Hall and its reflective environs

PHOTO / JEFFREY TANENHAUS

UJI

Kyoto is understandably number one on everyone's leaf-peeping itinerary. Leave the mobs of matching hat tour groups behind with a 20-minute detour south to Uji, conveniently positioned between the ancient capitals of Kyoto and Nara. Famous for green tea, Uji also boasts the Byodo-in temple World Heritage site. Phoenix Hall sits as the centerpiece of these impeccable grounds fittingly crafted to represent "pure land" according to the beliefs of this Buddhist sect.

Minted on the back of the ¥10 coin, Phoenix Hall's elegant open-air wooden frame has flaring roofs crowned with a pair of phoenix statues. Branching out from the central hall, two side and one tail corridor are said to resemble this mythical firebird with outstretched wings ready to take flight. Flaming foliage lights up trees ringing the pond around the Hall.

End the excursion with a tea ceremony at Taiho-an, a municipal teahouse between the temple and the bank of the Uji River. >>



The garden at Shima, a former geisha house, is now open to the public

PHOTOS / JEFFREY TANENHAUS



The restored Kanazawa Castle

KANAZAWA

Filter out the modernity of this prefectural capital and a microcosm of Japan's cultural, historic and aesthetic highlights emerges. Kanazawa is loaded with traditional treasures such as a "ninja" temple, castle park, three geisha districts and samurai residences. Even for an urban zone, Kanazawa feels green. Kenrokuen makes the short list of Japan's finest gardens, and its allure in autumn is only stronger. Ancient and raised root pines stand senior among maple, plum and cherry trees planted around the park's ponds. Yet Kenrokuen and the castle park aren't the only places to stroll through pampered landscapes decked out for fall. The city's best-kept secret is revealed through exploring temples clustered at the base of Mount Utatsu. Losing your way along paths winding past tile-roofed residences and shaded shrines is an intimate way to immerse yourself in the city that lives up to the cliched epithet "Little Kyoto."

NATADERA

The forested grounds of Natadera, a temple of the Shingon sect of Buddhism, make for a spiritual side-trip from Kanazawa. Founded by monk Taicho in 717 AD, this sanctuary promotes harmony between humans and nature through the vehicle of religion. I visited for more whimsical reasons after seeing a poster of Natadera's hallmark crags while in the Kanazawa tourist office. These peculiarly eroded rocks look like a cut-away of an anthill and feature shallow spaces sheltering religious statues. Shingon followers passed through the natural caves to purify themselves, as can you by using stone steps carved into the hillside. Pointed red and orange maple leaves carpet these and other scenic pathways in fall. Haiku guru Matsuo Basho once stopped by Natadera during Edo times (1603-1867). The poet waxed lyrical about the whiteness of the rocks and the refreshing autumn wind. Catching breezes while absorbing the panoramic view from the observation platform may very well inspire modern visitors to write their own verses.

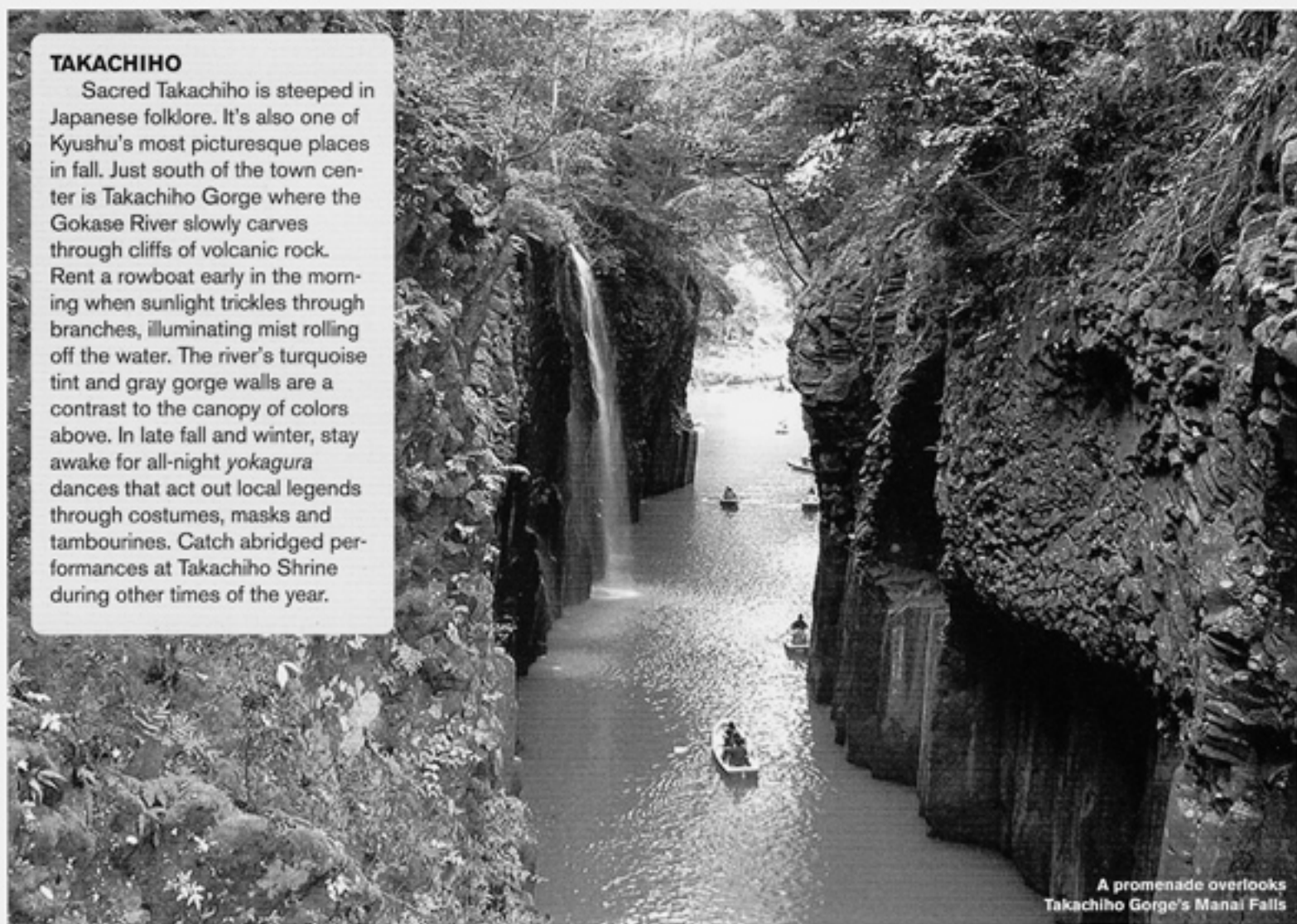


Transitory resins at Natadera's distinctive setting

PHOTO / JEFFREY TANENHAUS

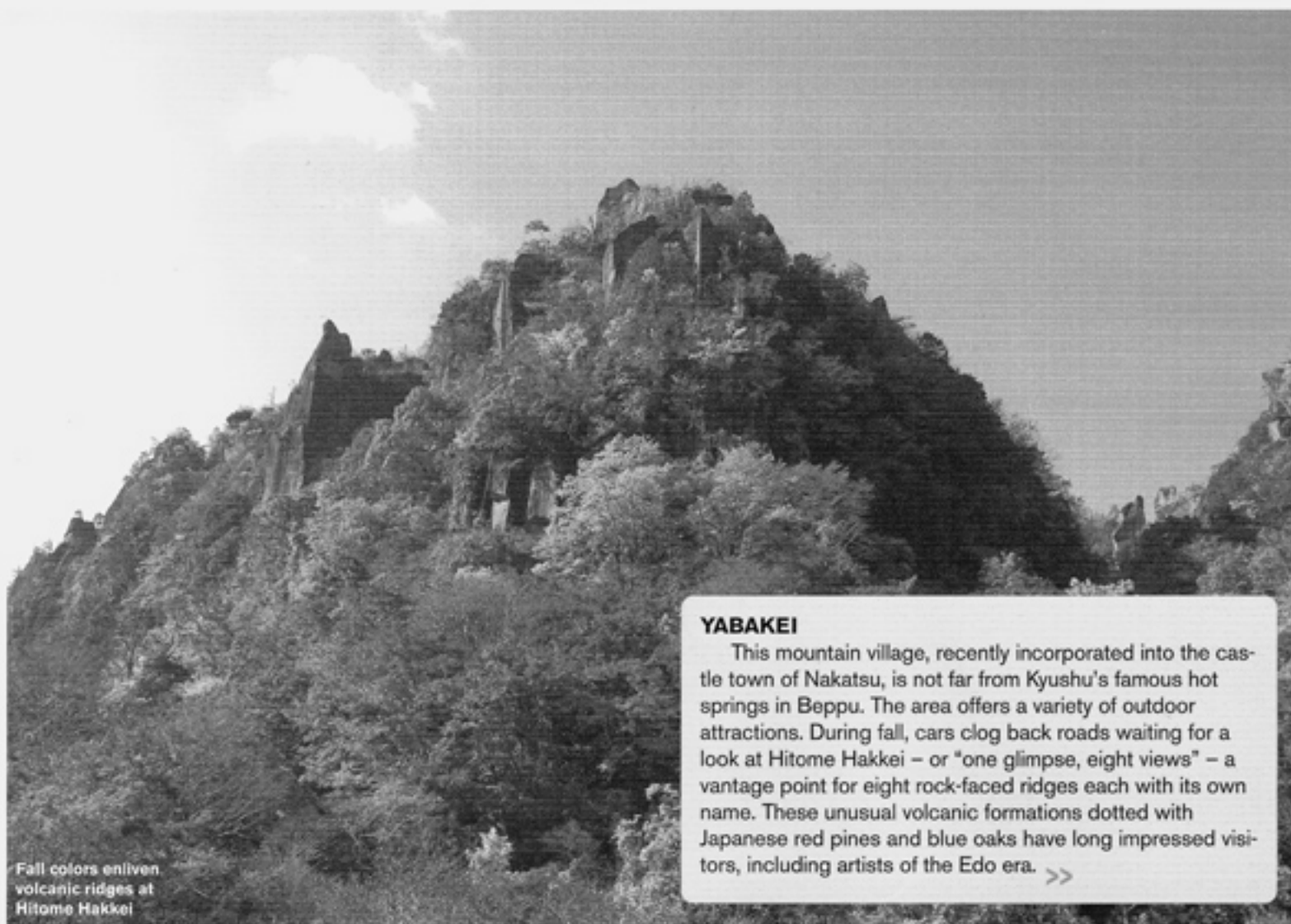
TAKACHIHO

Sacred Takachiho is steeped in Japanese folklore. It's also one of Kyushu's most picturesque places in fall. Just south of the town center is Takachiho Gorge where the Gokase River slowly carves through cliffs of volcanic rock. Rent a rowboat early in the morning when sunlight trickles through branches, illuminating mist rolling off the water. The river's turquoise tint and gray gorge walls are a contrast to the canopy of colors above. In late fall and winter, stay awake for all-night *yokagura* dances that act out local legends through costumes, masks and tambourines. Catch abridged performances at Takachiho Shrine during other times of the year.



A promenade overlooks Takachiho Gorge's Manai Falls

PHOTO / ANDY LIANG



Fall colors enliven volcanic ridges at Hitome Hakkei

PHOTO / TETSUSHI TSUNEMI

YABAKEI

This mountain village, recently incorporated into the castle town of Nakatsu, is not far from Kyushu's famous hot springs in Beppu. The area offers a variety of outdoor attractions. During fall, cars clog back roads waiting for a look at Hitome Hakkei – or “one glimpse, eight views” – a vantage point for eight rock-faced ridges each with its own name. These unusual volcanic formations dotted with Japanese red pines and blue oaks have long impressed visitors, including artists of the Edo era. >>