

Traditional and natural Niihama

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I've been living in Niihama for a year and a half now. Having lived on Honshu and Hokkaido before now, I just need Kyushu and Okinawa to complete the set. I like to think of myself as an explorer of sorts, and as such I have not been disappointed with what I have seen in Shikoku. It's packed with wildlife and beauty. Nowhere else in Japan have I been in a car that has screeched to a halt to allow for wild boarlets to cross the busy main road. Nowhere else have I yet had the chance to eat free pheasant soup after a 10km mountain trek. And nowhere else have I been invited to take part in a fish throwing festival. These are the kind of experiences I cherish and they are in abundance here.

From where I live I am able to travel into the wilderness with the help of my friend's car, with my friend driving it. She often complains when I demand she drive along some precarious ridge in order to get to a remote waterfall I have spotted on Wikipedia. But when we get there it makes the whole journey worthwhile...until we have to drive back over the same precarious ridge to get home again.

Choshi no taki was one such a place. It's a beautiful spot deep in the mountainside that you come to after a short drive beside a river. This is not to be confused with the other river that we found, that runs in parallel with it and which leads to a road where the car wheels get stuck. You try walking up further to see if you are on the wrong road and end up with giant Indiana Jones type spiders, and in the case of my friend hundreds of mosquito bites that came up in lumps and gave her legs the outward appearance of a cucumber.

My most recent fun cultural experience was my participation in the Niihama Memorial day. It is a day in which the dignitaries of Niihama gather and pay their

respects to the puffer fish that have given their lives so that Niihama people can devour them. Every year on the 9th of February the event takes place. It's kind of a pun as the Japanese word for puffer fish is FUGU and you can read the numbers 2(the month) and 9(the day) and fu and ku/gu respectively. It was the 19th time the event had been held. At first we gathered around a small altar and we prayed together with a monk. He then passed out some branches to the mayor and some business owners, which they placed at the altar and bowed deeply. It all seemed wonderfully respectful of the fish. We then all filed out of the shrine building to the dockland area and I was handed gloves to put on.

I was actually standing next to the mayor at this point and we were each then given our own live puffer fish. The mayor explained that on the count of three we would throw our fish in unison into the sea. It was incredibly exciting. I have never eaten puffer fish, and don't really relish the thought, but I'll bet not many people could say that they've thrown one as part of such a prestigious ceremony in their lifetime either.

In England there is no fish throwing tradition. However, there is a sport called welly wanging which requires participants to hurl their rubber boots as far as possible. The welly is launched from the end of the foot, like someone kicking a shoe off. It has become a very serious sport with many precise rules and various techniques. I wonder what a Japanese traveler would think of this traditional English pastime?

I think it's important to really get involved in the traditions of other countries and it's also important to think back to your own country. While I believe puffer fish throwing is a unique experience, I did find some similarities with festivals of England and when you think about your experiences in Japan in this way, when you explore new places you still don't feel too far from home.

