

Bliss above the clouds

After many days of bad weather, Andreas Hofer had lost hope of ever skinning up Japan's iconic Mount Fuji. And then...



The Torij, a traditional Shinto gate, on top of Mt. Fuji



The original meaning of Fuji is 'second to none'. It's a sacred mountain, the spiritual hub of the country, and its geographical centre too. For most Japanese, just to see it, to look at it, has a special significance. No such luck for Hiro Ishizaka, my mountain guide from Sapporo and me, though. We were standing in the tiny front garden of our friends Take and Minori, the owners of Teatime - a small, exclusive B&B located idyllically at the foot of the sacred mountain. And no matter how hard we tried to look, we could see absolutely nothing. It had started to snow, with slow, heavy

flakes. Dense fog was rising from the surface of Lake Yamanaka, spiriting away a handful of rusty excursion ships waiting for summer guests and a couple of soggy swans, which seemed to have lost their umbrellas somewhere. The far shore and the rising hills beyond were shrouded in mist and Fuji-san appeared to be a myth - little more than a dream. Dark clouds obscured the land, and I walked back inside to look with frustration at all the fairy-tale photographs which decorated the house: Fuji in full winter glory; Fuji with cherry blossom; Fuji vested in red-leafed maple and golden sycamore; Fuji in bright sunshine... the Japanese have a nick for kitschy romance. Following the old communist adage that "who doesn't work should at least eat well", we decided to eat out in one of the

trendy fish restaurants on the coast instead.

We were heading south, on the 'Eastern Sea Route', or Tokaido Road, once connecting Edo (Tokyo), the capital of the Shogunate, with the imperial court in Kyoto. It is a six-lane highway today, a far cry

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from the perilous trail which saw courtiers and pilgrims, merchants, courtesans and beggars travelling on it for centuries. The road was made famous by the 19th century artist Hiroshige, in his wood-print series '53 Stations of the Tokaido'.

Yui, one of these former courier stations - number 16 in Utagawa Hiroshige's prints - was where we ►



headed for lunch. A pretty little town hanging on a cliff over the Pacific, it has still managed to preserve some of its ancient character.

Many 18th and 19th century houses built from wooden panels, with rickety porches and drooping eaves can still be seen, as well as Edo period inns, warehouses, shrines and shops - reminders of the erstwhile hustle and bustle along the route.

Hiroshige's '16th Station' depicts

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the once famously difficult Sattatoge Pass, between the villages of Yui and Okitsu - today a fast and easy railway express line complete with a concrete highway towering on stilts along the beaches. Yui, with its lush orchards of orange and medlar trees, overlooks a wide bay formed by the Fuji river estuary. It is the main trading town for sakura-ebi, tiny shrimp harvested in millions and laid out to dry on the beaches in summer. For miles and miles the coast is then covered in bright red, with Fuji as a grand backdrop. We ate sakura-ebi raw, as sashimi and tempura-fried at Kurasawa's, the 'best place' on the Pacific coast to eat shrimp and sazae, the large sea snails painted so delicately by Hiroshige in

some of his still-life pictures.

It was my last day in Japan before heading home, and the weather was miserable, promising to become worse: temperatures above 10 degrees Celsius had turned snowfall into rain overnight. Lake Yamanaka loitered sullenly under a grey sky, dank mist obscuring the shores. Fuji was still nowhere to be seen.

At 7h00 in the morning we drove up to the south side of the mountain. "Don't have high hopes," warned Hiro. "You see the weather. And then Fuji is generally not to be climbed in winter. The summit is icy and windswept, and the access road to the car park (2,500 metres) is closed until spring.

We have to start our ascent much lower, and from a difficult side."

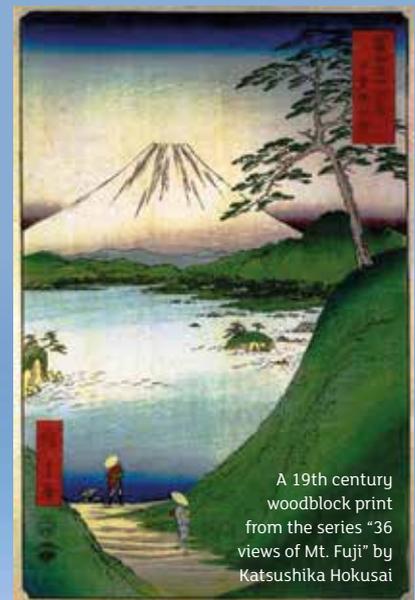
We parked the car at 1,230 metres. To skin up more than 2,500 vertical metres would have been

quite a challenge even in good conditions, but we had to face dense fog and now heavy snowfall, as the temperature had suddenly dropped well below zero again, turning rain into a raging blizzard. There was also a sense of fear. The rumble of massive detonations which could be heard through the fog from the nearby US army 'Camp Fuji' was seriously disconcerting - the bellowing sound reminded me of avalanches breaking off. Every time they fired another mortar, my heart stopped in anticipation of a catastrophe.

Then, quite unexpectedly, two hours and 1,000 vertical metres later, we stepped through quickly thinning

clouds into bright sunshine. All of Japan lay at our feet, under a brown sea of billowing clouds. We were the only people on the mountain on that day - March 8 - and the only people on the island who knew the sun was shining. It took us six long hours to reach the crater peak at the summit - at 3,776 metres (12,420ft) the highest point in Japan. We were sunburnt - but happy. My skin would itch for weeks to come, peeling off in large patches. But the sight of the enormous crater hollow, with the snow-covered weather station on the far side and the bluey white, hoarfrost-crust Torij gate on our side of the rim made it all worthwhile.

We took our skins off, still panting in thin air, hearts pounding in anticipation. Because we knew that there was a well earned reward waiting for us. Alone on the vast, steep slopes of this sacred mountain, tiny, like insignificant impurities on an immensurable, white expanse of powder snow, we now wedged downhill, making our turns wherever we wanted - 2546 vertical metres, in bliss, intoxicated and without ever stopping again. Arigato, Fuji-san... ■



A 19th century woodblock print from the series "36 views of Mt. Fuji" by Katsushika Hokusai



Hofer: On the summit at last!

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