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Tokyo Sugoi! - Episode 17 by Steve Gillick

The Spirit of *Ibasho*: Returning to Chichijima, the Ogasawara Islands, Tokyo, Japan



Beautiful Sea Views from the Denshinyama Nature Trail

The Japanese term *ibasho* carries a special meaning for travelers. It refers to ‘a place to be’ and describes a destination where you experience belonging through connections with the local community and the natural environment.

In the spirit of *ibasho*, my return to Chichijima, twelve years after my first visit, was a highly anticipated opportunity to reconnect with the island's friendly community spirit, wonderful seafood, and stunning natural environment.

The Ogasawara, or Bonin Islands, lie 1,000 kilometers south of Tokyo and are administered by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Accessible by the 24-hour *Ogasawara Maru* ferry, Ogasawara is an archipelago of over 30 subtropical and

tropical islands, with only two permanently inhabited: Chichijima, or Father Island, and Hahajima, or Mother Island. The best-known island, Iwo Jima (Ioto Island), was the site of a pivotal World War II battle.



Dinner at Yohu Izakaya Chara

Our November visit coincided with the annual *Ogasawara Ogamiyama Shrine Festival*, one of the island's traditional *matsuri*, or local festivals. We checked into the Log House Mer, a five-minute walk from the ferry terminal, where we had our own self-contained apartment. We then crossed the road to climb the many stairs leading to the Ogamiyama Shrine, where preparations were underway for the festival's sumo wrestling and karaoke competitions.

Lunch was on the main street at *Gajumaru Shokudo*. *Gajumaru* refers to the banyan tree, of which there are many on the island, characterized by their crisscrossing roots, while *Shokudo* means 'dining place'. For our first island meal, we enjoyed *kanpachi donburi* (yellowtail over freshly steamed rice). Only a few hours later, we enjoyed an equally memorable meal at Yohu Izakaya CHARA, where the super-fresh assorted sashimi, deep-fried black tuna, grouper tempura, and spicy chicken pizza showcased the island's culinary creativity.



Heart Rock

The following morning, we joined our guide, Yoshiko, for the six-hour Heart Rock trek. Entering a protected forest reserve, we hiked through lush forest, past waterfalls, abandoned wartime relics, coffee, banana, and ginger plants, and tangled banyan trees before reaching Heart Rock and panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean and surrounding islands.



(left) Dinner at Marujo sushi restaurant
(right) Chatting with Chef Hideo Kaneko, at Marujo sushi restaurant

That evening, we joined the excited crowds cheering on the contestants in the children's, women's, and men's sumo wrestling matches. The evening concluded with an outstanding dinner at Marujo sushi restaurant, featuring sashimi, shimazushi (Sawara (also called wahoo) fish, marinated in soy sauce and prepared with spicy mustard), turtle chashu, and vegetable tempura.

The next day, we explored the Tsurihama Observation Platform and the Denshinyama Nature Trail, which led us to Miyanohama Beach. While enjoying spectacular coastal scenery, we spotted Japanese white-eyes, Blue rock-thrushes, Ogasawara Brown-eared bulbuls, Japanese Bush Warblers, and Japanese Blueberry hermit crabs.

Back in town, festivities were underway as residents carried the *mikoshi*, a portable shrine, around town, stopping at businesses' front doors to offer blessings for health, prosperity, and good fortune. When the procession reached the souvenir shop owned by our accommodation host, the son handed me a *happi* coat and invited me to join. Chanting, laughing, and pumping our fists as we carried the *mikoshi* became one of the most memorable moments of the trip. Talk about *ibasho*!



Residents carrying the *Mikoshi* around town, from business to business.
Steve also carrying the *Mikoshi*! Photo by Mitsuru Sasaki

On our final day, we visited the Higashidaira Japanese Red-headed Wood Pigeon Sanctuary, protecting one of the world's rarest pigeons, before climbing Mt. Chuosan for one last sweeping view of the islands.

Then came the farewell that perfectly captured the spirit of Chichijima. Yoshiko presented us with flowers to throw into the ocean for a safe voyage. Taiko drummers performed on the wharf as the *Ogasawara Maru* departed. Finally, a flotilla of small boats escorted the ferry from the harbor, with crew members waving enthusiastically before diving into the ocean in a final gesture of friendship.

As Brown boobies skimmed the waves alongside the ship, we sailed back to Tokyo already thinking about a third visit. Chichijima's extraordinary nature, welcoming community, memorable experiences, and exceptional food make it a destination that lingers long after you leave. More than just a place to visit, it's a place where you discover *ibasho*—a meaningful sense of connection to the community.

*All the photos in this article were taken by Steve Gillick and Mitsuru Sasaki (as noted), *Talking Travel*.



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Steve Gillick loves to travel and loves to talk to people who love to talk about travel. He's been at it since 1967 when he visited nine European destinations on a school trip. Steve has had over 400 articles published in consumer and travel trade publications. To date he has explored 85 countries and over 770 destinations. He recently returned from his 23rd trip to Japan. Steve is the author of *A Symphony of Camels: Travel Adventures & Conversations Around the World*, available on Amazon.com

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