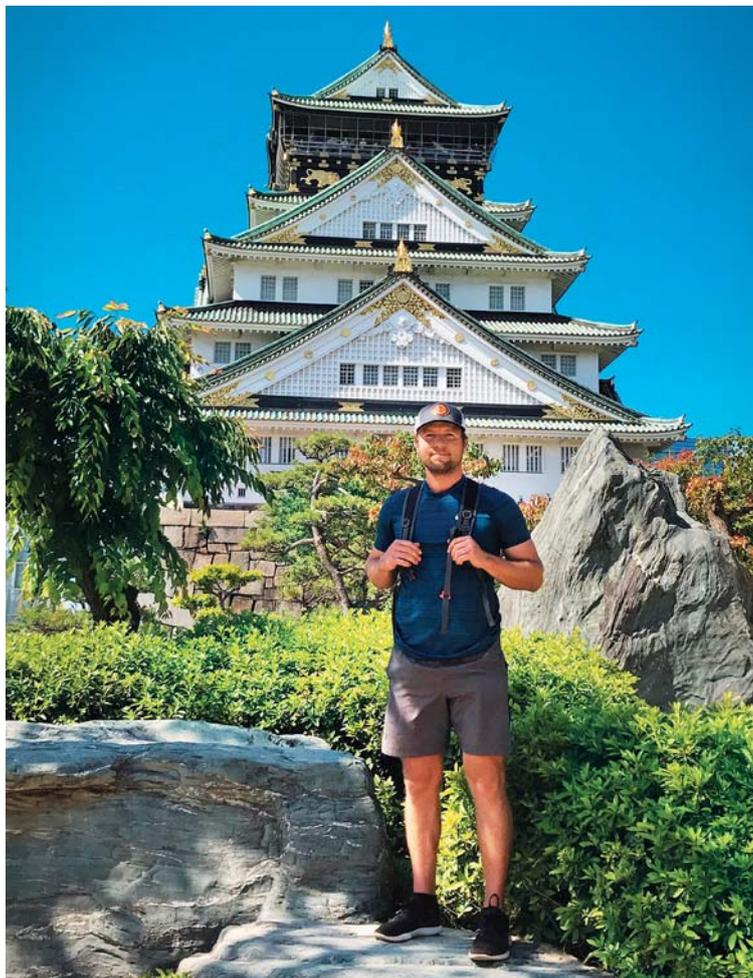


Japan Calling

Dean McArdle travels to Osaka on a whim, and finds his trip to be every bit the exciting adventure he had hoped for.



1. McArdle at Osaka Castle
2. Procession of monks at Shitennoji Temple
3. The Shinsekai area at night with Tsutenkaku tower in the background.
4. The monthly flea market at Shitennoji Temple.
5. Green tea and *mochi* at the tea house in Himeji Castle's garden.

which takes place on the 21st of every month – what luck! Stall keepers were just setting up shop as devotees made their rounds to the different shrines. Prayer wheels were spun, bells shaken, wooden mallets tapped on knees and shoulders, and the smell of incense filled the air.

After visiting the temple, and following the cue of the locals, I turned my attention to the stalls serving up delectable local fare. First, I sampled a plate of *warabimochi*, gelatinous balls covered in sweet soybean flour, before feasting on Osaka's famous specialty, *okonomiyaki* – savoury pancakes grilled on a hot plate. The crepe-like pancakes with shredded vegetables mixed into the batter were drizzled with a deliciously savoury sauce.

Leaving the revered grounds of the temple, I headed into the chaos of Dotombori, Osaka's street food heart. A hive of *takoyaki* restaurants greeted me, with cooks expertly flipping the steaming balls of dough filled with diced octopus at breakneck speed as patrons lined up for a fresh batch. I joined a queue and promptly scalded my mouth by biting into the molten core of a *takoyaki*, which is always best savoured slowly.

Well-fed and happy, I marched up the popular Shinsaibashi-suji shopping arcade, where the eager peruser can find everything



When I decided to quit my job in January, I didn't have a clue as to what I would do or where I would go. After hours of online flight searches, I stumbled upon an AirAsia flight from Honolulu, Hawaii, to Osaka, Japan, at a shockingly low price. Coincidentally, I was already going to be in Hawaii in May for a family trip, so I booked the flight on the spot!

With backpack in tow, I bid "So long" to family and the US, and headed for a country I'd never visited before and a culture all new. The nine hours from Honolulu to Osaka flew by, aided by the giddiness of a new adventure and onboard libations.

On my first day in Osaka, I set out early in the morning, agog at everything my eyes fell upon – I was in Japan! I snapped photos of every side alley and shop, the everyday ho-hum spots locals don't bother to give a second glance, but that incited awe in a foreigner like me. On a recommendation, I strolled through the charming neighbourhood of Shinsekai to Tennoji Park, a green oasis in the metropolis of 19 million, past the steel struts of the city's famous landmark, the Tsutenkaku tower, and locals enjoying their breakfast at alley noodle shops.

My visit coincided with flea market day at Shitennoji Temple,



from traditional medicines to Gucci handbags. Then I turned east towards the towering fortress of Osaka Castle. Though a 20th century recreation, the castle still commands awe. The view from the top alone is worth the reasonable admission fee, and visitors can learn about Osaka's medieval history through the informative exhibits in the museum within.

The next day, armed with a JR East rail pass, I boarded a train and zipped down the coast for a day-trip to Himeji, an hour's ride from Osaka. The city is home to Himeji Castle, or Himeji-jo, a UNESCO World Heritage-listed site.

Also known as White Heron Castle, Himeji-jo dominates its

surrounds from a hilltop perch. Gleaming white and imposing against the blue sky and green hills, one can't help but snap a selfie, or 10! Here, brilliant exterior walls stand in stark contrast to the dark wooden interior, a tribute to the engineering prowess of medieval Japan. Two immense wooden pillars stretch from the basement to the fifth floor of the main keep, anchoring the building for hundreds of years.

In the castle's gardens, brilliant flowers contrast with stoic pines while koi swim in the ponds and streams. A teahouse offers visitors the opportunity to experience a traditional tea ceremony presided by kimono-clad matriarchs

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who guide guests through the ceremony's intricacies. Here, I savoured bitter *matcha* (green tea) paired with sweet *mochi* (Japanese glutinous rice cakes).

In the train back to Osaka, a grin plastered on my face, my thoughts drifted back to the days I scoured the Internet for cheap flights to anywhere, and I couldn't help but think that it was more than luck that brought me to Japan. 📍



GETTING THERE

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