

SHADES OF THE SHOGUN

Marian McGuinness takes a walk back through history in the little known Japanese jewel of a town, Sawara.



SOMETIMES, no matter how brilliant a city is, you just want to leave the megawatt urban landscape, fall down the proverbial rabbit hole and find yourself in a place curiously and curiously.

I'm sitting on a bus having just left the razzamatazz of Tokyo and its buzz of 12 million people.

This Alice is delighting in the changing scenery. I feel like I'm riding through one of Escher's impossible realities as the skyscraper suburbs that have gone on for ever morph into vast green grids of paddy fields bordered by hills of wild bamboo that occasionally bow over the freeway.

I'm heading towards Sawara, the alter ego of Tokyo that is only 70 km northeast of the metropolis and 25 km from Narita International Airport. From the mid-1400s to the mid-1800s, Tokyo, under the

reign of the shoguns, was known as Edo. Sawara, built along the banks of the Ono River, is colloquially called Little Edo. It's a town caught in time.

Few English-speaking visitors come to Sawara. They don't really know about it. As a result, little is written in English and little English is spoken.

My first port of call is the *koryu-kan*, the visitors' centre in the middle of town. If you tee it up beforehand over the Net, volunteer English-speaking guides from the Kotari International Friendship Association will walk you around the sights and interpret for you.

Straightaway I'm transported into an era of Japan that I've only seen in the samurai movies I watched as a kid. Rows of dark-timbered merchant storehouses called *machiya*s border the rickshaw-thin streets. The weeping willow-lined

Ono River is arched at intervals by ancient wooden bridges.

If I just wanted to wander the streets and lanes of Sawara, the map I picked up at the visitors' centre is easy to follow as the icons in the key clearly point out the temples, tea houses, museums and artisan workshops. If you follow the icon of a cat, it will take you through an interesting maze of alleys where even cats can get lost.

The Baba Sake Brewery is my first stop. It's been operating since 1681 and the 15th descendent is still running the show. One thing to consider before sampling is that Japan has a 'zero tolerance' drink-driving policy. So if you're driving, skip the free sampling of the many types of sake on offer in the front office area.

As I'm not travelling back to Tokyo until tomorrow, I have given myself free rein. Each bottle I sample is different from the last. The tastes vary from hot and cold, to smooth, bitter and sweet. My palate is well primed for the next taste sensation.

Sawara originally ferried rice, potatoes and soy sauce to ancient Tokyo, and so my next stop is Shoyo, the soy sauce shop. Its unchanged appearance has made it the site of many films set in ancient Japan.

Inside, it's dark and atmospheric. As well as being able to buy the soy sauce preserved goods, there's a large tasting table. Tempting bowls of soy-sweetened vegetables, fish, clams, octopus and ginger are at the customers' fingertips. At a small kiosk next to the river, you can even try *shoyu* (soy) ice cream, as well as pumpkin, sweet potato and ginger flavours.

Just wandering around the streets clustering the canal-wide river brings you to interesting artisans' shops, such as the paper shop, where you can buy exquisite hand-painted cards, screens and fans, along with reproductions of famous Japanese artworks.

Nearby is a 200 year-old kimono shop where Tomoko, the eighth-generation owner, takes me out the back to show me the family's personal museum of antiquities. Everyone in Sawara is proud of their heritage and these kinds of mini museums can be found in many of the ancient shops.

It's time for tea, and where better than at Cafe Shieto, the atmospheric tea house in the main street where sipping herbal tea and sampling homemade sweets overlooking the white pebble and bamboo garden replenishes the energy.

The antique streetlights that follow the river are adorned with metal silhouettes of

floats paraded in a twice-yearly festival called the *matsuri*.

If you visit Sawara in either July or October you'll see massive, elaborately constructed floats being spun through the streets by teams of virile young men. The festivals were originally created to fend off the raging gods of pestilence, but

"Straightaway I'm transported into an era of Japan that I've only seen in the samurai movies I watched as a kid"

today they are a celebration of the town's heritage.

Having missed the *matsuri*, I get the next best thing as my guide takes me to the Dashi Kaikan, the Float Museum, where I get up close and personal with two of the flamboyant parade floats. They loom like giants, topped with 5 m high intricately decorated dolls that represent the gods and heroes of Japanese mythology.

As day weaves into night I head off to Kittei, a French fusion restaurant. And it's a glorious affair with food prepared by master chefs overlooking gardens of cloud-pruned pines and stone paths. If you're observant, there's quite a chance you'll see a visiting geisha disappearing into one of the private dining areas.

As the moon rises like a warrior spirit over this traditionally cloistered town, I bed down in a *ryokan*, an authentic Japanese inn – one of many in Sawara.

Laid out on the tatami mat is my futon. I change into my *yukata*, a cotton equivalent of a kimono, and head down to the communal hot bath where I follow the washing ritual before soaking my weary body and rejuvenating my mind.

Then I bed down for the night with the smell of straw beneath me and the moon for company shining through the open shutters.

The writer was a guest of the Japan National Tourism Organization.

QUICK INFO

When travelling out of Tokyo, it's mainly a cash society, so carry plenty of yen. For more information or bookings go to www.jnto.org.au or www.suigosanto.com





MAIN IMAGE: A woodblock print from the Edo period by Japanese master Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797-1861), showing warriors fighting on a sinking raft.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Step back in time – a quaint wooden boat; sake barrels at the brewery; traditional soy sauce bottles; the tranquil Ono River; the Sawara Float Festival; a local in traditional dress.

