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A NEW CRUISE TAKES PASSENGERS ON A POETIC PILGRIMAGE THROUGH THE WATERCOLORED WONDERS OF WESTERN JAPAN.

BY AMANDA CASTLEMAN



The 132-cabin L'Austral sails the western coast of Japan on Abercrombie & Kent's 2-week journey.

IT IS NEARLY 4 AM in Shikotsu-Tōya National Park, and dawn is a golden-orange streak across the misty sky as I clamber along a rocky cliff above Lake Tōya. Below, the lilac waters are ethereal brushstrokes in a Japanese watercolor painting, encircling the volcanic Nakajima Island that rises from its center and reflecting the forest-covered hills along its shores.

Burning bright, the sun gilds the symmetrical snow cone of Mount Yōtei—Hokkaido's miniature version of Mount Fuji—and ascends over the mountains, silhouetting the slender trees and delicate spring buds that surround me. Only a handful of early risers are here to bear witness: a power-walking senior, two gardeners, and a pair of photographers with heavy-duty cameras and tripods in tow. I am a *gaijin* (outsider) in this rugged and beautiful region, wild-eyed with jet lag and drunk on the most glorious sunrise of my life. Yet each fellow hiker I encounter stops, bows, and greets me with a polite “*Ohayō gozaimasu.*” Good morning, indeed.



The ship unveils enigmatic treasures long overshadowed.

SHIP, CARP STREAMERS, COOK: JUSTIN WEILER; WOMAN: ELECTRA K. VASILEADOU/GETTY IMAGES; TAIKO PERFORMANCE: PAOLO NEGR/GETTY IMAGES



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To take pleasure in or enjoy; to savor slowly and fully



## Nothing approaches the wild ardor of the remote ports of Japan.



I have come to this idyllic isle—as far from the packed subway cars and neon lights of Tokyo as I can imagine—on *LAustral*, a 132-cabin yacht that Abercrombie & Kent has chartered for its new Wonders of Japan cruise. The 2-week expedition explores Hokkaido—the northernmost of Japan's four islands—and the country's less-frequented western coast, darting from caldera lakes and sacred shrines to cities like Hiroshima and Osaka before crossing the Sea of Japan to South Korea's ancient capital of Gyeongju. Every morning, the ship—a silken cocoon of French seafaring savoir faire on which every experience has been fine-tuned to perfection—delivers my fellow passengers and me to temples and gardens and even medieval castles, unveiling enigmatic treasures long overshadowed by the country's major cities.

Passengers delve deep into the heart of Japanese tradition with lavish lunches, tea ceremonies, and performances.

In previous travels, I have seen my fair share of perfunctory attractions from the railings of big boats—whether in the Caribbean or the Mediterranean, the Mekong or the Northwest Passage—but nothing approaches the wild ardor of the remote ports of Japan. In Muroran, a 50-strong squad of young gymnasts dances with NFL-cheerleader precision, somersaulting and backflipping, their long kimono-style sleeves flapping like butterfly wings. On Sado Island, women in wide-brimmed hats and frilly white aprons encircle *LAustral* in nimble *tarai bune*—tiny washtubs turned fishing skiffs powered by simple wooden oars. And at nearly every port, *yuru-chara*—bouncing costumed characters acting as cheerful municipal mascots—welcome us with cartoonish delight.

The greetings at each destination are only precursors to the



## I stroll through exquisite gardens where every tree has a medical file and workers groom the moss with tweezers.



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Consciousness of space between forms; an interval of peace

adventures that await us. I stroll through exquisite gardens where every tree has a medical file and workers groom the moss with tweezers. I relish the pale blush of sweet bean paste at a tea ceremony, the flavor mimicking spring's blossoming irises. My heart beats in harmony with the powerful *taiko* drums, struck in perfect unison by Sado Island's legendary Kodō drummers. My stomach leaps at lavish lunches comprising a constellation of small dishes and bowls, each containing seasonal delicacies that envelop all my senses at once. Each ritual inspires in its own way: the sushi chef's precision, the tea master's elaborate presentation, the Zen gardener's meditative discipline, the drummers' collective control.

This precise way of living is easy to get used to, especially when paired with the luxuries of *LAustral*. For every tea service and

Matsue's exquisite gardens (top) and Sado Island's traditional tarai bune (above) are among the cruise's highlights.

cheery mascot we encounter on land, a corresponding extravagance awaits onboard. There's the sleek nautical design by Jean-Philippe Nuel, dazzling with Swarovski crystal chandeliers, leather and silk details, and a sophisticated palette of gray, taupe, ivory, and caramel. The Sothys Spa, with its hydrotherapy and hammam services, offers a refreshing escape following long days ashore. In the two restaurants, the cuisine (and wine list) is more European than Japanese—a welcome change for some guests, disappointing for others. And the evening entertainment in the plush theater and three bars varies from lectures to performances, including an excellent production by the Kaikaro geisha of Kanazawa's famed Higashi Chayagai district.

Abercrombie & Kent's service is also attuned to this country's

OPPOSITE PAGE: JUSTIN WELER; THIS PAGE: GARDEN, SHIP'S DECK: JUSTIN WELER; BOATS: HARVESTING: AMANDA CASTLEMAN



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Simplicity, sophistication, spontaneity, and originality

*L'Austral* is a silken cocoon of seafaring savoir faire.



obsession with perfection. I learn this one crisp and clear morning as *L'Austral* glides into the port of Kanazawa. For years, I have longed to experience the region's traditional hot springs in the famed Yamanaka Onsen, located just 35 miles away. But there's a hitch: A discreet tattoo on my wrist and another at the nape of my neck are all but taboo in this land known for its graciousness and obeisance to rules. Body art roils deep waters for the Japanese, who forcibly inked criminals and outcasts for centuries. More recently, tattoos have become the mark of yakuza mobsters, hence today's blanket ban at many of the nation's bathhouses.

While some guides may have simply resolved this culture-clash dilemma with a waterproof bandage, Sumiyo Terai, Abercrombie

The Wonders of Japan itinerary combines French luxury aboard *L'Austral* with Japanese ritual at every port.

& Kent's expert in all things *onsen*, has a more effective solution: She buys out the women's spa at Kagari Kisshotei, Yamanaka's hot-springs hotel near the picture-perfect Korogi Bridge.

An hour later, I am slipping into a solitary steaming pool, my only companions the trilling birds in the trees above and the dappling sunlight dancing across the surface of the mineral-rich water. Just beyond, jagged rocks teeter on the edge of the verdant Kakusenkei Gorge, a natural wonder celebrated by the haiku poet Bashō. I sink deeper still, once again soaking in the wonders of Japan. **✎**

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STAIRS, INTERIOR: JUSTIN WEILER