

In the deep south of the Japanese archipelago



Like Waiheke, Iriomote is only a 40 minute ferry ride from a large city but feels like a different world. Photos Valia Papoutsaki

Dr Valia Papoutsaki has spent her life studying islands, from Europe to Waiheke. Valia is currently in Japan as part of a Japan Foundation Research Fellowship, conducting research on the impact of tourism on small islands. In part one of this three part series she shares her experiences in the Yaeyama Islands.

I recently visited the Yaeyama Islands in Okinawa prefecture, situated in the deep south of the vast Japanese archipelago, which extends from near Taiwan all the way north to Hokkaido, close to Siberia. It was my first time visiting this part of Japan, and all my senses were heightened, absorbing the striking contrasts in both sub-tropical landscape and social organisation.

Ishigaki City, the centre of the entire Yaeyama Islands, felt urban and heavily geared toward tourism - its old arcade has transformed into a bustling tourist thoroughfare, and the once-vibrant fish market now serves burgers and other casual eats.

This island also bears a noticeable military presence, with both the US Navy and the Japanese Self-Defence Force stationed here. These are important islands for Japan's defence as they are very close to Taiwan. Just a couple of weeks after I visited, the Japanese government announced its plan to evacuate tens of thousands of residents and tourists from several of these islands in case China acts on its oft-repeated threat to invade the island territory.

Meanwhile, a 40-minute ferry ride away from Ishigaki, Iriomote feels like

a completely different world. Lush and largely untouched by mainstream tourist development thanks to the strong resistance of its local community, Iriomote has rightfully earned its status as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site. A colleague, who has spent 15 years conducting research on the island, has opened doors to unique experiences for us through her deep connections.

A highlight was a full-day trip on a

traditionally crafted *sabani* boat made by Kyoko-san, a remarkable woman who was taught the rare art of *sabani* building. With only three other individuals on the island possessing this knowledge, there is immense pressure to preserve and pass on the craft, even to women and outsiders like Kyoko-san. We paddled through a breathtaking bay, ventured into a serene mangrove forest, and enjoyed a hearty bento lunch on the beach.

The UNESCO recognition comes with its own complexities. While it brings prestige, it also imposes stricter regulations that have limited locals' access to certain areas. Tourist numbers are now controlled, with caps on visits to specific natural sites like waterfalls, and smaller businesses face challenges complying



The starting point at the Urauchi River, Iriomote Island's largest and deepest river.

Iriomote Island is a reminder of the delicate balance between conservation and progress - and the importance of protecting such habitats for generations to come.

with UNESCO requirements, such as the need to register as officially approved tour guides. Many islanders remain sceptical about the benefits of UNESCO designation, wary of becoming an overdeveloped tourist hub like Ishigaki or Okinawa. They fear their small ferries and limited infrastructure could be overwhelmed by an influx of visitors. This seems to be the plight of small islands, Waiheke included.

In the past, the Iriomote community has successfully resisted large-scale tourist resort developments, and the island's lack of an airport or hospital has helped keep mass tourism at bay - for now.

Iriomote is otherworldly, and as cliché as it sounds, I found it to be an extraordinary place unlike any I've ever visited. It stands as a testament to what we must fight to preserve in the Anthropocene era - a fragile yet resilient ecosystem, a unique cultural and natural heritage, and a way of life that resists the pressures of mass tourism.

This island is a reminder of the delicate balance between conservation and progress, and the importance of protecting such habitats for generations to come, something that became evident after a day trekking through Iriomote's subtrop-



Kanbire Falls, known as 'The Seat for the God', one of the island's most sacred spots.

Photo Valia Papoutsaki

ical jungle.

With almost no flatlands, Iriomote is dominated by mountains. Thick vegetation reminiscent of a tropical jungle blankets the landscape, including towering ferns and dense greenery. The Urauchi River walking trail provided us the perfect opportunity to immerse ourselves in the flora and fauna of this newly designated

UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site.

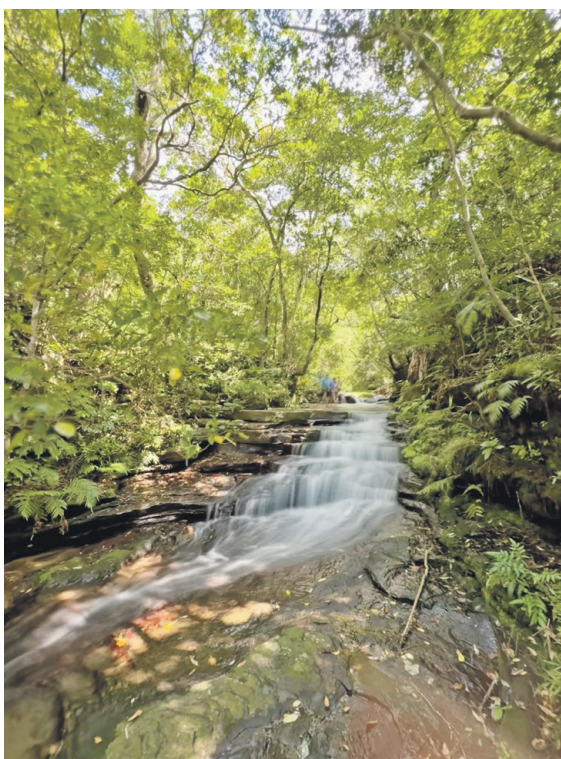
Our journey began with a boat ride from the river mouth led by our eco-guide Nishigori Naoko, taking us upstream through astonishingly beautiful scenery. Along the way, we marvelled at the island's largest and deepest river, flanked by expansive mangrove forests. I appreciated that only one boat operator

is permitted to ferry passengers upstream - a thoughtful measure to minimise environmental impact and preserve the area's pristine beauty.

Stepping into the lush subtropical forest, we followed a well-maintained trail designed to harmonise with nature, passing waterfalls and striking rock formations. Among them was Gunkan Rock (*amagoi-iwa*), historically used by local residents in rainmaking ceremonies. We paused at Kanbire Falls, known as 'The seat for the God,' one of the island's most sacred spots. And we had our alfresco picnic by a heart-shaped pothole, a natural wonder said to hold healing energy.

"When visited calmly,"

Iriomote is a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site.





Iriomote National Park. Photos Valia Papoutsaki



Iriomote's celebrated wildcat (*Prionailurus bengalensis iriomotensis*) is unique to the island and it is estimated that only 100 remain.

the guide leaflet noted, "you are bound to heal both body and soul through the vast, embracing power of nature."

And indeed, despite the day's physical demands, the experience felt deeply

restorative.

Iriomote didn't need the UNESCO recognition, it was a National Park and a well-protected landscape long before that thanks to local island initiatives that

ensured mindful conservation and the development of eco-friendly tourism that didn't overwhelm the island's biosphere.

But not all is perfect in paradise, other

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Islands are not isolated. They are living, breathing ecosystems, intimately connected to the oceans that surround and sustain them. Their delicate environments are both unique and vulnerable.

people's trash has turned up on the island's beaches. During my visit, I couldn't ignore the jarring contrast between Iriomote's well-preserved wilderness - a testament to decades of tireless local conservation efforts - and the rubbish from distant foreign lands washing ashore on its 'paradise lost' beaches.

At the Iriomote Island Eco-Tourism Association, one of Japan's pioneering eco-tourism initiatives founded by a devoted couple who fought to protect the island from overdevelopment, I was stunned to learn just how far this trash has travelled. Labels on plastic bottles revealed their origins: Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and China - some of the worst ocean polluters. While styrofoam (which breaks down into microplastics, infiltrating the food chain) and plastic bottles dominate the debris, I was particularly disturbed to find medical waste among the refuse.

The association works tirelessly to raise awareness and organise beach cleanups, but their efforts feel like a drop in the ocean against this relentless tide of trash. To make a real difference, their advocacy must reach the source - the communities and industries responsible for the pollution. If you ever visit Iriomote, stop by, it's



Iriomote's sub-tropical jungle is also a place of fun. Photos Valia Papoutsaki

an invaluable resource, and their mission deserves global attention, even more so as there is no tourist information centre on the island.

I don't want to misrepresent Iriomote, whose pristine landscapes left a profound impression on me. But islands, contrary to popular belief, are not isolated. They are living, breathing ecosystems, intimately

connected to the oceans that surround and sustain them. Their delicate environments are both unique and vulnerable. •



The islands delicate ecosystems are threatened by global rubbish washing up at their shores.

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