

Taking an Izu Islands tonic

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Through half-closed eyelids, the sea sparkles. A bamboo screen dapples the sunlight, and the world is reduced to contrast, to flashes of light and shade. The air is a hot, distilled essence of summer. Each time the salt dries on my skin, I make the small commute from towel to waves and dive in. The water is azure, clear and cool. When it closes over my head, yesterday and Tokyo both become irrelevant.

Making it to catch the ferry the night before had been a scrambled rush. Our bus ran late in heavy traffic; we arrived breathless at the ticket desk and were met with polite confusion about our reservation. My long-time traveling companion, a student of anthropology, dealt with this and the subsequent rebooking required with his usual admirable patience. I ran out to buy a late dinner of boxed lunches and canned beer. We made the end of the long queue just as it started to move.

The next morning the night ferry dropped us at the port, bleary from a diesel-scented night in reclining chairs and damp from the sea air on the deck. We looked around, wary: we had been warned that Niijima is busy in high season. It was immediately apparent that on the Izu Islands this was not yet high season.

Those of us disembarking the big boat were met by a small handful of placard-holding *minshuku* (guest house) owners



Sea bounty: Sushi doesn't get much better than that served on Niijima Island.

picking up their few booked-in clients; having no reservations as well as backpacks full of camping gear, we walked the few kilometers into town, then through it, and trekked slightly uphill to the windward side of the island and the pleasantly empty green campground where we pitched our tent.

By noon I was lying on Maehama Beach, Niijima's most popular stretch of sand. A breakwater calms the swells 100 meters out, a moored raft half that distance away makes a focal point for swims, and a bit of shade keeps off the worst of the midday sun.

Over the next few days we forgot the city. One afternoon we shared shade and raft with a group of local students, two teenagers shepherding and entertaining a half-dozen much younger ones, and another time we floated there with a family or two. For the most part, though,



Cutting a dash: The wake of the ferry as it departs Niijima Island makes a spectacular, sparkling sight as the speck of land astern recedes into the vastness of the ocean.

we had the beach — indeed, all the beaches — almost to ourselves.

Technically part of Tokyo, the Izu Islands couldn't feel further away from the metropolis. Niijima has neither crowds nor neon. Guidebooks and magazines emphasize that the pace of life is different on the islands, but they don't mention that you'll find your own walk slowing, your heart calming to a more sedate beat, or your oft-racing thoughts decelerating to the pace of meditation.

The tourist brochures and Web sites — as they always do — emphasize the island's sights and activities, but in truth there is very little to do. True, there is an *izakaya* (Japanese-style pub) or two, and we stopped in for a bite and a pint, but found ourselves drawn back early to the campground. Though the nights were warm, we built a small fire on the grate, drank cheap wine from our enamel camping mugs, and caught up on the kind of talk that brought us together in the first place — but that is so easy to let pass by in the hurly-burly world of work, studies, e-mail and television.

We didn't even try to find the bowling alley.

During the days, we rode our rented bicycles from one deserted beach to another, just as empty. The weather was fine, almost too good. Where were all the people? I began to worry about sharks, jellyfish and riptides.

It turned out it was simply shoulder season. It is likely that "busy" on Niijima means something quite different from what it does on the mainland.

The sushi shop where we had Niijima sushi (impeccably fresh fish brushed with a sweet soy sauce) was empty but for us and a government servant who had dropped in from the town office. The ice-cream stand, with its white plastic garden furniture, outdoor television and hand-cranked shaved-ice machine was likewise doing slow — but steady — business.

To escape the sun in the heat of the day we ventured out to the Niijima Glass Art Center, where we were duly impressed by the pale-green glass made from the indigenous rhyolite, a stone found in only two places on Earth. A Japanese couple waited patiently for glass-blowing lessons in the workshop next door, but we



Eye candy: A stunning sunset over Niijima Island (above); a black-sand beach on Izu Oshima (above right); and Izu Oshima seen from the ferry (right).

SKYE HOHMANN PHOTOS

returned to the beach. In the evenings we watched the sun set from the hot salty pools of Yunohama Onsen, where bathing-suited locals and visitors shared an idle moment before the night began.

Like many things in life, it's difficult to get a perspective on Niijima's size without distancing yourself from it. I once read a description of an island which served only to define a long, sweeping beach. Niijima is like that: long and narrow. As the ferry pulled away from the shore, the island shrank rapidly before vanishing into a light sea-haze somewhere before the horizon.

After Niijima, we moved on to Izu Oshima, mostly because we felt we should see more of the islands, but partly because I had never seen black sand. After Niijima, Izu Oshima was impressively large; the name, which translates as "Big Izu Island" is fitting.

On Izu Oshima, the bus ran along a winding costal loop road from either ferry port, and, pointed in the right direction by friendly locals, we walked the rest of the distance from our stop to the sleepy Toshiki campground. We lit sparklers and twirled incandescent messages to each other, signing our names with after-images glowing in the dark night and burnt briefly on our retinas. When our eyes cleared, we lay on our backs and stared up at the myriad stars — dimensions upon dimensions of galaxies stretching out above us.

In the morning, Mount Mihara — Izu



Oshima's troublingly active volcanic peak — was shrouded in cloud, and so we decided that one last swim, rather than a hike to the summit, would be the culmination of our trip. We caught a morning bus back up the coast to Suna-no-Hana, the beach recommended in our guidebook. From above, the empty black curve of sand was seductive, but when we reached the shore we found it littered with flotsam. Maybe because it wasn't high season, there was no one picking up the strewn bits of plastic and barnacle-encrusted bottles.

Minutes after we arrived, a mass-suicide of sardines decided our course — no swimming here, lest there was something really fearful out there that had prompted them to end it all. I realized then that I had been spoiled by Niijima's superb strands — they had turned me into a purist about beaches.

Both Niijima and Izu Oshima are easily and economically reached by overnight Tokaikisen Ferry (¥4,000 to ¥17,000; for details visit www.tokaikisen.co.jp). There is also a much faster jet boat, and both Izu Oshima and Niijima



have airports. Camping on Niijima and at Toshiki campground is free, though there are *minshuku*, *ryokan* and hotels on both islands for those who prefer to sleep in beds or on *tatami*.