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What a year 2016 was! After the holiday festivities and ringing in the New Year, it's time to relax and enjoy a different type of festivity on Okinawa: hanami, or welcoming the spring, most notably through cherry blossom festivals. Okinawa's climate makes it the first prefecture to welcome in these flowers. Check out our feature on places you can enjoy cherry blossom festivals on Oki! We've also reviewed one of the more popular viewing sites, Nakijin Castle, plus some sakura, or cherry blossom-themed snacks in stores. Don't miss reviews of restaurants Bali Noon Bali Moon, Arin Krin Garlic House, and Goen Yakiniku, plus our latest Weird & Wonderful news. You can view the magazine online at: www.totalokinawa.com.

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Goen Yakiniku in Chatan

Goen is actually a chain of restaurants, with 7 locations on island. I visited the Goen in Chatan. Here's how that went.

Goen is a yakiniku eatery, meaning each table has a little grill to allow you to cook your own food. It's awesome! It's modern and high-tech, with iPads at every table for ordering food, extra utensils, and services like fresh grill covers and table clean-ups.

It has English options too, so you know exactly what you're ordering if you don't understand Japanese. It's clean, sleek, cheery, and great for all ages, though watch small children; the grill gets really hot!

Food-wise, it's not vegetarian-friendly. Almost everything contains meat. You can get chicken, beef, pork and offal (intestines, cartilage, and other slightly "out there" choices), as well as rices, soups, curries, taco rice, naan bread and desserts. Soft drinks are included, and are self-serve right by the entrance. You can also get frozen yogurt there too. Alcoholic drinks and non-alcoholic cocktails cost extra.

I tried all sorts! The curry and taco rice were delicious, and the curry even came as a mini option with naan bread, so good! On the grill I served up chicken, beef, pork and garlic cheese sweet corn, as well as weenie sausages. All the tables come with tongs, and you can order extras if there's a few of you all grilling at once. The meat comes out raw, but it's small so it cooks relatively quickly. You can't beat fresh BBQ, and it doesn't get fresher than straight from the grill. Service is quick too; you aren't waiting forever for food to arrive. It's all you can eat for 2,700 yen, so order as much as you like, but anything you don't eat you will be charged for (a half eaten rice bowl isn't an issue, but if order meat and leave most of it cooked or uncooked, they'll bill you the individual menu cost).



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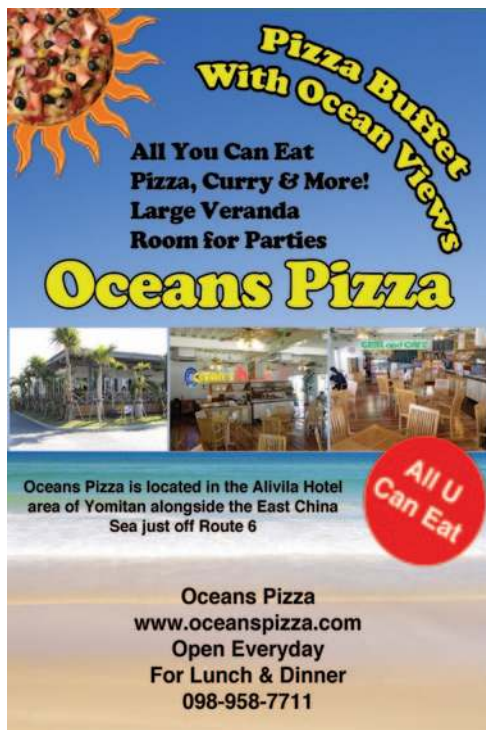
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by Louise Dupuy

Bali Noon Bali Moon

Bali Noon Bali Moon is an Indonesian grill and restaurant located just a short walk from the Plaza House Shopping Centre. Haven't tried Indonesian, but curious? Read on and discover a new favourite cuisine.

Bali Noon Bali Moon is pretty small and cosy, with a long bench stretching from the entrance to the bar area, plus large tables on the right. There's a tiny bar and stools, and two smaller tables and chairs on the left. It has an array of soft, vibrant cushions scattered along it, giving it a homely vibe. Staff are very welcoming and polite, speaking excellent English and highly attentive.

Let's talk business. Food. This was my first time trying Indonesian, and it won't be my last. They had a decent selection, though sadly at time of visit their grill was still being built. I had the Bali croquets to start (Balinese meat stuffed into crisp potato dumplings), which were delicious. I tried a chicken and eggplant curry in a coconut-based sauce, and nasi kuning rice (a fragrant Balinese rice with a yellow hue), which were simply amazing. A good level of spice, packed with flavour, and just a hint of sweet from the coconut. My husband tried the ayam pelalah (a shredded chicken with chilis, herbs and spices dish) and fresh lumpia (fresh vegetables and prawns wrapped in rice paper). The chicken was divine! Sweet mixed with spice to create a taste sensation, and the meat was perfectly cooked. The lumpia were great too, with the ingredients wrapped in a large lettuce leaf and held together with a thin sheet of rice paper. Crisp and fresh. I decided to try dessert too, with the kolak sounding most appealing. It's sweet potato dumplings in a hot coconut milk. This turned out to be a generous portion of little beniimo (a purple variety commonly found on island) dumplings slathered in hot coconut milk. It was the perfect end to a fantastic meal. As far as drinks go, they have a generous wine menu, mostly of European origin, plus beer and spirits, plus a small soft drinks menu.

Price? Actually not bad. We spent just under 4,000 yen, including drinks. This seemed fair considering the amount of food ordered! Portions are generous too, so leaving hungry isn't an option. Everything is served beautifully, customer service is above par, and the atmosphere is peaceful. It's worth every penny.



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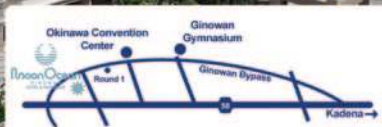




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Spring has sprung! Cherry Blossom Season 2017

by Louise Dupuy

Hanami, which means flower viewing, is a long-standing Japanese tradition of saying farewell to winter and hello to spring, when people gather to marvel at the beauty of the sakura (cherry blossom) flower.

There are actually several types of cherry blossom species, and their colours range from white to a vibrant pink. The most common is the Taiwan cherry tree, which produces a deep pink blossom, and is likely the species you'll see the most photographed!

Okinawa's subtropical climate means it's the first prefecture in Japan to enjoy the appearance of cherry blossoms, which erupt into bloom through Spring for several weeks, before shedding for the rest of the year. On Okinawa, they typically start to appear around the end of January, hitting their peak around mid-February. Turn the page to see our favorite cherry blossom viewing sites.

Best festivals on Oki

A close-up photograph of a cherry blossom branch. The branch is dark and woody, with several light pink flowers in various stages of bloom. Some flowers are fully open, showing five petals and a cluster of stamens. Others are buds, still tightly closed. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue and green, suggesting a natural outdoor setting.

There are quite a few on Okinawa, with the North of the island typically first to experience it's first pink blush. Here are our top pick of festivals:

Nakijin Castle

Nakijin Castle makes for a spectacular hanami site; the steps leading into the old ruins are flanked with cherry blossom trees. For this festival, there is an entrance fee for the castle, which must be paid prior to entry. The best view is the top of the steps; you get to see all of the cherry blossom trees, as well as Nakijin itself and beyond. It's a wonderful photo opportunity.

Don't miss our review of Nakijin Castle on page 18 for even more details on this beautiful historical site!

Motobu

One of the best is held at Yaedake Sakura no Mori park. Take a leisurely drive up Mount Yaedake, and marvel at the sea of pink as you climb. The park too is swathed in cerise, and has music, entertainment, and food to help you celebrate.

Nago Castle

Centred around Nago Castle Park, this is the first festival of cherry blossom season, usually occurring around the last weekend of January. You can enjoy great food, parades, and lots of pretty cherry blossoms. The best (and most tiring!) is the walk up the steps of Nago castle ruins; it's lined on both sides with trees, and the top gives you a great outlook.

Check this out!

For a map to these sites, go to <https://goo.gl/CoLjmv> or scan this QR code with a QR reader app on your smartphone:



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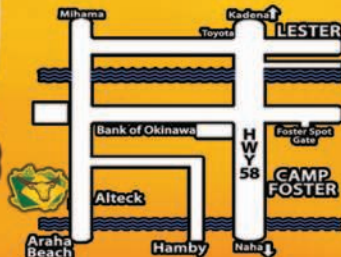
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Weird and Wonderful Japan

Core mystery no more?

Japanese scientists are closer to figuring out the mysteries of earth's core. Many concur that the core is made of 85% iron and 10% nickel. The scientists claim the last 5% is most likely silicon, based on tests of mixing iron-nickel alloys and silicon mixtures at high temps and pressure, which matched sound wave data of the earth's core.

Drink like a fish

Animal rights activists are calling out a Shinto religious ceremony that force-feeds alcohol to a carp, then releases it into a river ... in order to purge people of evil spirits. Sounds pretty fishy to us.

Voodoo without the woo-woo

Nagoya police arrested a 37-year-old part-time private high school instructor for allegedly stalking a female acquaintance. Police say the man emailed the woman several times, asking to go on a date, and after she kept refusing, he left a straw pinned to a photo of the woman outside her home.

Geriatric crime wave

A spike in Japan prisoners age 65 or older has been linked to elderly facing economic hardship, who commit petty crimes like theft, then don't want to leave prison, which provides basic needs of food, shelter, and healthcare. Why change a sure thing, right?



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by Louise Dupuy

Arin Krin

Garlicky goodness at Arin Krin!

Arin Krin is a funny little place. Touted as a garlic dishes specialty restaurant, my curiosity piqued, and I decided to give it a try. I dined with three others; here's how it went.

It sort of looks like an onsen (bath house) inside, with large wooden benches and tables great for seating large parties. It was clean, welcoming, and the staff spoke good English. Menus are available in Japanese and English. It's warm and cosy with a vibrant atmosphere, a wonderful place to dine with friends.

The food is insanely good. I wondered what on earth could be so great about a garlic place, and now I know. Variety. It was really hard to choose, but eventually I settled on bacon and mushroom, cheese and meat eggplant gratin, fried mashed potatoes with cheese, and I sampled some of my companions' food too, including tacos pizza, chicken and mushroom pizza, and deep fried chicken. It's hard to convey in words how good it was. Everything obviously had a garlicky taste, but it wasn't overpowering. The tacos pizza was especially delicious, and so was the gratin. Packed with flavour, fresh and generously portioned. Special mention to the fried mashed potato and cheese. I have no clue how they get it so perfect. Fair-sized balls of creamy mashed potato with a light, crisp shell, oozing with cheese. It was heavenly.

The drinks menu is extensive too, including cocktails, sake, beer, and soft and fruit drinks. We all stuck with non-alcoholic, but the cocktails especially would be enough to tempt me back on a day I don't have to drive or work.

Price-wise, it varies greatly depending on what you order. We spent roughly 2,000-3,000 yen each, including drinks, so quite pricey, however we did order an awful lot of food! The great thing is there's so much variety that you'll easily find something to suit both your taste (as long as that includes garlic!) and budget.



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Sakura snacks

Every spring on Oki, snack and beverage sellers think pink

To tie in with hanami celebrations this spring, we thought we'd let you in on something fun: sakura-themed food! This may be cliché, but at least it's a tasty one! Why not indulge in one of our favourite sakura foods? Here are our top treats.

1. Drinks.

You'll see a lot of these around island, most notably in Starbucks (for the Frappuccino lovers, give the sakura strawberry offering a go), but also in the smaller cafes and eateries. Key's Cafe has a chocolate sakura latte on offer, and it's delicious.



2. Bread.

Even bread gets a hint of pink! If you have a particularly sweet tooth, I can highly recommend the sakura melon bread (bought at Kanehide but available at most supermarkets and convenience stores). It's hard to say if it's true to flavour, as I thought it had more of a strawberry essence, but worth a try nonetheless.



3. Cake.

Of course, we can't have a food feature and not bring up cake, can we? Sakura-flavoured cake, much like melon bread, kind of tastes more like strawberry, but it's still pretty good. Starbucks' cake was a generous size (suitable for sharing actually), moist and sweet, but not too much. Be warned though, the pickled sakura flower that sits atop it is quite bitter in contrast!

4. Corn chips.

Traditionally savoury snacks can't escape a sakura makeover! These Tohato Caramel Corn chips are little bags of heaven! The sakura blends nicely with the corn, creating a pleasing pink hue as well as a taste your tongue will thank you for. Found at Kanehide.



Final tips.

If you're looking to try a wider range than our selection, keep an eye on supermarkets (like San A and Kanehide), convenience stores (like Lawsons and Family Mart), and Malls (like Aeon) for sakura specialties!

Whats your favourite cherry blossom-inspired treat? Let us know on social media!

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Nakijin Castle Ruins

Capture the perfect view of castle, ocean, and Okinawa landscape

Nakijin Castle Ruins sit atop a single hill in the village of Nakijin. This World Heritage site is mostly laid to ruin, but offers a wonderful insight into the past and life in the times of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Let's take a look!

Castle construction started around the 13th century, and completed in the 15th century, and it achieved World Heritage status in December 2000. It's strategically placed, with rivers, cliffs and a steep valley acting as natural defences. Its 360-degree view of the surrounding area is great for taking photos.

For those who are unfamiliar, Nakijin is in the North, beyond Nago. The village it dwells within is serene, with typical Japanese architecture interlaced with native flora. The scenic drive up is a treat. It takes around 2 hours to reach it from Naha, longer on weekends with traffic, but well worth the effort.

There's ample parking, though busy weekends may see you parking slightly downhill, about 3-5 minutes walking distance, with a gentle incline. Facilities include toilets, food vendors and a ticket/information booth. At 400 yen per adult, it's an inexpensive day out (less for children, students and seniors). Be prepared for lots of steps and walking. It's not very stroller or wheelchair friendly I'm afraid.

The ruins are surprisingly complete in places. Due to the nature of the site, the outlying walls had to curve and flow with the landscape, meaning they're wavy, and very pretty. The site is well-maintained and clean, but can be slippery on wet days! The main entrance to the ruins is beautiful; a set of steps cuts through and up, flanked on both sides by sakura trees (they have a festival for viewing them in the spring), with a spectacular view of the ocean. This is a great place for pictures; you can get the steps, the area beyond Nakijin and the ocean all in one shot. Perfect. Meander round and take in the panoramic views, enjoy the flora, or just marvel at the history of the space. Considering this was originally built in the 13th-15th Century, it's in really good shape.



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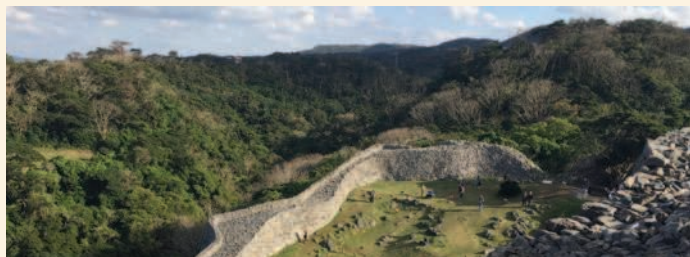
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