

WOMEN OF THE SEA

JAPAN'S FREE DIVERS ARE CHARTING A NEW COURSE FORWARD.

BY KAREN GARDINER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN WELLER

ON A SMALL

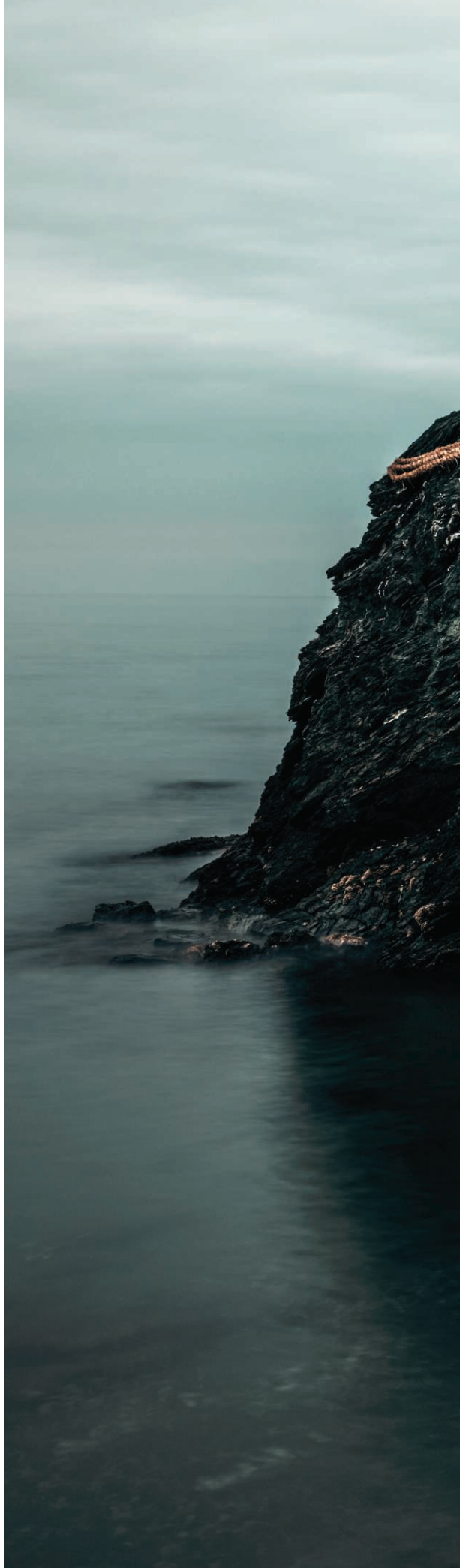
motorboat bobbing in Japan's Ago Bay, Naoko Sugiyama tosses a float into the water and slips in after it. Peering underwater through her mask, she quickly rolls forward and, black flippers pointing toward the cloudless sky, disappears below. Roughly a minute later she's back, holding aloft a large scallop shell. She carries on like this for another 20 minutes, diving and reemerging with sea urchins and turban snails.

"You got so many!" our captain calls out. He seems as awestruck as I am to have a front-row seat to witness one of the country's legendary ama at work.

For around 3,000 years, ama (sea women) have jumped into the cold, dark waters off the Shima Peninsula – in the Ise-Shima region of Japan's main island, Honshu – in pursuit of abalone, urchins, and other sea creatures, aided by little more than goggles and their ability to dive up to 65 feet deep on a single breath, with minimal recovery time between each plunge. It's a hard job, one done mostly by women. Yet in popular culture, depictions of ama as objects of fantasy – from Hokusai's 1814 woodblock print *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* to the classic 1985 Japanese film *Tampopo*, where, in a sexually charged scene, a gangster eats a fresh oyster out of an ama's hand – have overshadowed their strength and courage.

Ama were long misunderstood, even by Japanese people, says my guide, Yuko Muraguchi, because there were so few opportunities to meet them. At Mikimoto Pearl Museum, on an island in nearby Ise Bay, divers have put on choreographed ama performances for decades as travelers watch from shore, but in recent years, Ise-Shima's working ama have also embraced tourism, inviting the public on boat tours to reveal the reality behind the reverie.

These were the ama I wanted to meet. I'd become curious about the white-robed wonder women after watching *Tampopo* (the real ama don't always wear the robes, I'd learn). And although I've been





A Shima must-see: The Meoto Iwa (Wedded Rocks), off the peninsula's north coast.



Ago Bay. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Satoumi-an restaurant and its specialties, and Kimiyo Hayashi at work.

visiting Japan for more than 25 years, I'd never been to Ise-Shima. This corner of Japan, with a densely forested interior and jagged Pacific coastline, sees relatively few international travelers. Its Ise-Jingu shrine – which houses Amaterasu, the Shinto religion's most sacred deity – is a popular pilgrimage spot for Japanese spiritual seekers. But farther south, in the town of Shima, travelers can join ama to spy their underwater treasure hunts.

In the ama world, Sugiyama is an anomaly. She's 47 – young for a profession where the average age is 65 – and unlike most ama, who were born locally, she's from Hokkaido. Sugiyama says she was attracted to the flexibility of a job that allows her to set her own schedule – she works only a few hours a day, selling her catch to local markets as all ama do, leaving her plenty of time to raise her children.

"Aren't you cold?" the captain calls out as Sugiyama treads water below us.

"No problem!" she shouts, before dipping her head back under.

TRAVELERS CAN WATCH AMA showcase their skills on land too. In Koshika, a 30-minute drive south of Shima on the peninsula's southern coast, I meet Kimiyo Hayashi at Satoumi-an, an oceanfront museum and restaurant where ama prepare their catch in a small hut.

"I feel as strong as I did as a girl," the 70-year-old Hayashi declares, as she stokes the coals of a grill and pries open a scallop. She says that underwater, freed from gravity's grasp, she can still dive just about as well as she did when she started working 55 years ago. "I thank my parents for giving me this strong body."



Hayashi in the
ama's traditional
tenugui headscarf.



JAPANESE TREASURES



GO Virtuoso advisors work with **Boutique JTB**, an on-site tour connection in Japan, to create custom itineraries throughout the country. On a four-day tour in the Mie Prefecture, for example, travelers witness the Shima Peninsula's ama in action before dining on their fresh catch, walk the ancient Kumano Kodo trail, and make a pilgrimage to the 2,000-year-old Ise-Jingu, one of Japan's most sacred sites. *Departures: Any day through February 28, 2026.*

InsideJapan's custom jaunts through the country can include time spent in Ise-Shima, including a lunch with ama at one of their seafood huts, among other privately guided experiences. in the region. *Departures: Any day through 2026.*

Remote Lands' ten-day, Kyoto-to-Mie private tour showcases the spiritual side of Japan, from treks along the Kumano Kodo to private Zen meditation sessions with monks in Kyoto. During a day spent exploring the Shima Peninsula, travelers dedicate a morning to Ise-Jingu before visiting the area's ama. *Departures: Any day through 2026.*

STAY Tucked into Ise-Shima National Park's forested hills above Ago Bay, the 28 understated suites and villas at **Amanemu** each have their own terrace and private *onsen*. Spa treatments draw on Japan's ancient bathing culture, while the resort's restaurant celebrates seasonal flavors. The hotel arranges day trips to watch

ama free dive in Ago Bay, followed by a meal back on shore. *Virtuoso travelers receive breakfast daily and a \$100 hotel credit.*

The Shima Peninsula is an easy three-hour train ride east of Osaka, where the new **Waldorf Astoria Osaka**, the brand's first Japanese property, adds a dose of art deco style just down the street from the train station. Its 252 rooms and suites occupy the upper floors of a skyscraper in the new Osaka Grand Green development, framing city views from spacious, minimalist perches. Four restaurants and bars include a French brasserie and a Japanese fine-dining outlet. *Virtuoso travelers receive breakfast daily and a \$100 dining credit.*

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Like many ama, Hayashi followed her mother into the job, learning by watching her dive from the shore (the women don't have any formal training). It's hard to track exact figures, but in the 1970s, there were roughly 9,000 ama in Japan; today, it's closer to 1,300, many of them in Ise-Shima. Those dwindling numbers – along with industrial overfishing and warming coastal waters causing the loss of the seaweed forests and seagrass beds that nurture marine life – have helped forge a tighter-knit ama community. The women come together at places like Satoumi-an and events such as an annual ama summit to champion their traditions and find new ways to support their livelihood. Giving travelers more access has helped, as has a push for more widespread cultural recognition. In 2017, the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs added the ama of Toba and Shima, the region's main towns, to its heritage list of important cultural properties; the two towns have also long campaigned for UNESCO status.

"I've been working here more than going to the ocean," Hayashi says of the restaurant. Satoumi-an helps ama supplement their incomes and provides another platform for the women to share their work. Hayashi, wearing traditional ama white and a patterned skirt, holds court at the hut, dropping a lobster on the grill and chatting with a group of Korean tourists. Yes, she'd rather be out catching scallops and abalone, she tells me, but she's seizing the opportunity to show travelers the real ama, not just the image. And she doesn't plan on hanging up her mask anytime soon: "There's always a way," she says. ♡

An ama demonstration at the Mikimoto Pearl Museum.