



Sometimes the Land of the Rising Sun seems to focus too hard on the future. Claire Barnes finds a dedicated American trying to seed life back into a remote corner of rural Japan and save a taste of the past for future generations.



Alex Kerr
(photograph by Noboru Morikawa)

Valuing Japan's Heritage

If there was ever a place that we would like to keep to ourselves, it would be Chiiori House on the island of Shikoku in Japan. Located deep in the Iya Valley, this is a rural retreat run jointly by locals and seasonal volunteers. It's not a hotel so much as a project. Visitors can stay for just a few days and enjoy the home-grown organic cuisine or stay longer and immerse themselves in Japanese life. There's always plenty to do: cutting wood, planting crops, and the never-ending task of thatching the roof.

The Chiiori project was started by orientalist and author of *Lost Japan* and *Dogs and Demons*, Alex Kerr. Over 30 years he has witnessed the gradual disappearance of the traditional Japanese way of life, and at Chiiori, the derelict farmhouse he bought in 1973, his dream was to save traditional construction techniques and an ancient way of life.

Chiiori is set in the remote Iya Valley, where until recently hundreds of thatched farmhouses perched on the misty slopes of Japan's most dramatic ravines. Since the first road reached into the valley in 1920 the population has drifted away: the few residents are old, there are few children, and the local schools have closed. Even Chiiori wasn't bearing up well. Such buildings need to be lived in: if the open fireplaces aren't often used the materials suffer. Roofs rot and damp sets in. Though the building dates back to 1700 it was obvious that while Alex was occupied with art projects in Tokyo and Bangkok that far from spearheading a new taste for rural tourism in Japan, this building too might crumble back into the forest.

Alex's answer was to hand Chiiori over to a private charitable trust.

A new management team were introduced and local staff taken on: already this has done much to revitalise the village and an influx of visitors will help even more. Alex's dream is to encourage volunteers to restore more houses in the village and bring back farming to the slopes, attracting a new type of tourist and establishing a low-key b&b weekending culture that Japan has never seen before. In this way he hopes to revive an interest in the culture and traditions that endured for centuries before being suddenly swept from the hills by Japan's 20th century industrial revolution.

All visitors are welcome, whether they come to stay and experience a remote part of rural Japan, to help on the farm or work on the building. Thatchers and carpenters are especially needed.

Early signs are that it is working. The Japanese authorities, noticing the newly-thatched roof and the field rescued from cedars, have asked Alex to advise on other communities struggling to find a role in modern Japan. Two villages and an island have already been in contact. He is also involved in restoring eight historic houses in Kyoto that would otherwise have been torn down: these have been restored and are now open for visitors to stay in.

For anyone who wants to relax and take in the cool mountain air, Chiiori is an ideal place to stay for a couple of nights. And of course, if you want to immerse yourself in a fragile mountain culture and pick up a few building and farming skills along the way, you can do that too.

Claire Barnes
Japan Specialist



Iya Vine Bridge



Chiiori House

FACT FILE

A two week trip to Japan including a stay at the Chiiori House and time in Kyoto, Hiroshima and Shikoku Island, starts from £2,400 per person. For further details please contact Sophia, Henrietta, Ben or Claire on 01993 838 210.