

EXPERIENCE ■ IMMERSION

A woman with brown hair and bangs, wearing a black face mask and a black kimono, holds a katana horizontally across her chest. She is in a traditional Japanese setting with a bamboo wall and a decorative figure in the background. The title 'Fight Clubs' is written in large, white, brush-stroke font across the bottom of the image.

Fight Clubs

Enter the world of ancient Japan and learn a thing or two about the ways of the ninja (and much more).

by KRISTY ALPERT



IN A SMALL, DARK ROOM LINED WITH TRADITIONAL SAMURAI WEAPONRY AND PAVED IN WELL-WORN PLANKS OF JAPANESE HARD WOOD, A GROUP OF masked men meet together for the ultimate show down of physical prowess.

If it seems like this scene is straight out of a movie, it's because it is. Once part of an elite group of covert agents or mercenaries in feudal Japan, ninjas have become a thing of cinematic folklore in modern times. However, for a few of those masked men, that scene

is also the very real adventure of a lifetime.

Most kids at some point or another have dreamed of becoming a ninja, and now through award-winning travel company Black Tomato's "Learn the Way of the Ninja in Japan" experience, it's entirely possible to live out that childhood fantasy.

The company crafted a 10-night journey that travels from Tokyo to Kyoto in an effort to unmask the mystery shrouding this ancient profession. There is little documented about ninjas in the historical archives, mainly because each victory demanded the

utmost secrecy for these warriors. Many of the records have been well guarded over the years, and, in most cases, destroyed.

Some legends claim ninjas were disgraced samurai who were given the choice by their masters to either commit *harakiri* (to die with honor) or become a rogue without a master, while other legends hold that they were the equivalent to the skilled operatives and special forces of today; but the real answers can only be found walking in their footsteps and hearing the tales told from the mouths of those who knew them.

黒忍び



Guests start their trip with a visit to an authentic sumo stable to observe professional sumo wrestlers before getting the chance to spar with the athletes (photos courtesy Black Tomato).

Although all of Black Tomato's journeys are tailor-made, most participants choose to start off in Kyoto where guests begin to build their ninja training with a foundation of Zen and an understanding of *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese acceptance of transience, impermanence, and imperfection. Tours through the historic Arashiyama section of the city are led by



private guides, and often by a Buddhist monk, who can explain how the heritage of both the Tenryu-ji and the Sanjusangendo temples play into the ninja legends. After a day spent sauntering through the gorgeous gardens among the cherry blossoms and sidewalks full of *maikos* (Kyoto geishas in training), and a traditional tea ceremony, guests check-in to the lavish Ritz-Carlton Kyoto in the Gion district to rest up before a day spent learning the ancient art of sword dancing and archery.

With a Zen state reached, guests are whisked back to the busy streets of Tokyo to begin the real training and delve further into the history and tradition of the ninja lifestyle. In an effort to display a sharp contrast from Japanese athletes and ninja warriors, guests start their journey off with a visit to a *dohyo*



(sumo stable) to observe these mammoth competitors push their way toward being the sole wrestler left in the ring. They're guided behind the scenes into the locker room by an English language sumo reporter, who offers insights into the sport and helps arrange meetings and photo opportunities with the athletes. Brave souls are invited to enter the ring and go head-to-head with a real sumo wrestler for an unforgettable experience.

Moving from brut manpower to sheer human ingenuity, the group heads off to the techy Mecca of Akihabara for a short tour through what has been nicknamed "Electric Town" due to its shopping district full of video games, anime, manga, and other computer gadgets. Armed with the world's latest tech gear, the group moves on toward the Yanesen district, to end the day on a slower note with a stroll through this Edo-period district of temples, galleries, cafes, and artisan shops before ending up at the Aman Tokyo hotel at the top of the 40-story Otemachi tower.

The homemade green tea scones served in the Aman Lounge provide the sweet sustenance guests will need to get through the power packed day ahead of them as the group takes a short train ride out to meet their sensai to put the final touches on their ninja training. It's inside the Bujinkan dojo where one of Japan's most famous sensais, Yoji Yamamoto, once trained, that the group begins their foray into this ancient martial art. Yamamoto was best

known for once fending off 13 members of the yakuza mafia and walking away with "barely a broken finger," and this historic dojo is where he perfected his craft.

It's not all throwing stars and roundhouse kicks though (that part comes later), as the first phase of training begins with a lesson in mediation and the concept of "ku," or "no-self." The small group then dons traditional attire before heading back to the dojo for a few hours of practicing stealthy stepping, pressure points (kyusho) and manipulations (atemi).

The final day in Tokyo is a culmination of the entire journey, where guests are faced off with real ninja sensais for one more final round of sparring. No faux fighting here; although the blows are never crippling, they are real, and most guests admit that their favorite souvenir from this experience is the few small bruises and scratches they received from fighting with real ninjas while in Tokyo.

The lifestyle of a ninja is one that is cloaked in mystery and tradition, and Black Tomato's bespoke Ways of the Ninja tour through Japan may just be one of the last remaining ways for Westerners to gain access into this ancient martial art and elusive way of life. ■

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