

Lotus Pocus

I was thrilled to discover that I had managed to time my stay at Ottobatake to coincide with a particularly bewitching natural event: the opening of the lotuses on Lake Izunuma. We arrived at the lakeside less than an hour after jumping in Shin-Kun's Honda, and wandered down to a small jetty where half a dozen small river boats were waiting to take us out onto the water. As we boarded, I spied a huge, baby pink petal floating on the surface, a good omen of what was to come...



We glided out onto the twinkling water, the sun hot but tempered by a welcome breeze as the boat propelled us forward. The vegetation was sparse to begin with, the water sprinkled with small lily pads and the occasional pink bud. But as we got further from the bank, the plants either side of the boat became denser and denser, the stems and leaves thickening, reaching up towards us and even above our heads...

And suddenly the boat was slicing its way through a floating forest of ginormous, exquisite lotuses, the stalks of which ended in huge speckled cylinders that reminded me of pepper pots, or – even better – in explosions of silky, pink teardrops, some the size of my head. After frantically trying to capture what I was seeing on my camera, I returned my phone to my pocket and fell into a mesmerised daze, watching these majestic flowers drift past like the courtiers of a fairy tale realm, all sounds muted by the foliage save the gentle lapping of the water against the sides of the boat.



We returned to the jetty around half an hour later, and made our way up the bank to pay a visit to Izunuma's impressive (and largely bilingual)



exhibition room. The place was a triumph of public investment: free of charge and packed with interactive displays, audio-visuals and telescopes through which to zoom down into the lake's delicate ecosystem. I am now dying to return at sunrise one bitter winter's day to watch the geese soar across the water in their hundreds – a spectacle that Sachi promises me is one of Miyagi's most unforgettable.

Do pay this beguiling (and massively overlooked) corner of Japan a visit if you can! Whether in summer, winter or any other time, I'm willing to bet that you'll fall under its spell. I certainly did.

