

WORDS AND PICTURES
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the sea of trees

Bizarre walks through the eerie woodland where many Japanese people have taken their lives →



It's late afternoon during a biting, mid-winter day, and I'm walking through a forest that's a maze of tree roots, slippery moss and loose volcanic rocks. In a clearing, just below a tree and curled up like a baby on a thick bed of dead leaves, I come across the body of a man who looks around 50 years old. His grey, thinning hair is matted, his torso is bare, and his legs are covered only by a pair of woolly socks and black long johns. Scattered around are a briefcase, empty packets of pills, and bottles of liquor (1).

Coming across the body is a shock, but not a surprise. I'm in Aokigahara Jukai forest – which translates as Sea Of Trees – at the foot of Mount Fuji, Japan's distinctive landmark (2). For half a century, Japanese people have been coming here to take their own lives, and it's consequently become known as 'Suicide Forest'.

Rising rates

A sign hanging on a branch reads: 'Danger ahead. No entry beyond this point' (3). Abandoned possessions are everywhere, including items of clothing, bags, wallets and keys (4). Earlier, I found four pairs of moss-covered shoes lined up along the roots of a tree – two pairs belonging to adults, two to children (5). Sometimes there aren't any human remains, and local police suggest wild boars and bears might get to corpses. Many bodies, however, are discovered by monthly sweeps co-ordinated by police and volunteer firemen. According to police, 240 people made suicide attempts in the forest last year and 45 died. The number might be higher, says Masamichi Watanabe (6), chief of Fujigoko Fire Department, which pulls an annual average of 100 people in various states of consciousness.



"It's complicated. For example, there are people who come here to end their lives in Aokigahara Jukai but, uncertain as to where exactly the forest is, take their own lives in neighbouring woodland," he says, adding that the percentage of suicide by overdoses and hanging is similar. "What is certain, however, is that the numbers continue to rise each year."

This is true also of national figures. In May, a National Police Agency (NPA) report showed that 32,845 people committed suicide in Japan in 2009, which is an increase of 1.8 per cent from the previous year, and the 12th consecutive year

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that numbers have reached more than 30,000. The suicide rate in Japan was 25.8 cases per 100,000, the highest among developed nations and almost four times that of the UK, according to World Health Organization (WHO) data.

Complex reasons

In Japan, people in their fifties are the most likely age group to die by suicide, but men in their thirties and forties is the demographic that's shown the biggest percentage increase. The reasons why people take their own lives are complex, and may be a combination of personal and economic difficulties.

"This generation has a lot of difficulty finding permanent jobs, and instead take on temping work that causes great anxiety," says Yukio Saito, executive director of Inochi no Denwa ('Lifeline'), a volunteer telephone counselling service that last year fielded nearly 70,000 calls. "Callers most frequently cite mental health and family problems as the reasons for contemplating suicide, but behind that are other issues, such as financial problems or losing their job."

Hiroyuki Deyama, a former steel factory worker, visited the forest in 2007 after he had a stroke and was unable to work. "I got kicked out of my company dorm and started living in internet cafes and my car," says Deyama, 46. "I did it for six months, but I couldn't see the meaning in going on like that."



Deyama spent two weeks in the forest during winter and made two suicide attempts before he was found by three elderly ladies and a shop owner. "I had nothing with me, no ID, just some money, among it an old banknote that my grandmother gave me when I was younger," says Deyama. "It has always been my lucky charm."

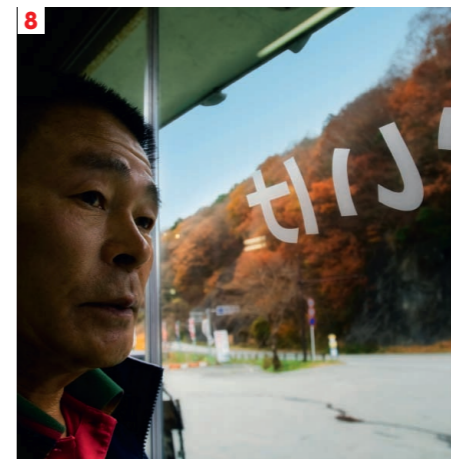
Life-saving schemes

In an attempt to reduce the number of suicides, there are 24-hour patrols of the forest and security cameras. There are also signs that read: "Life is a precious gift from your parents. Think calmly once more about them, your siblings, your children. Please don't fret alone – talk your problems over with them." At the bottom is a helpline number for a group of lawyers in Tokyo who specialise in debt advice (7). The signs were put up by volunteer counsellor Toyoki Yoshida, 38, who once attempted suicide because of debt. He blames the Japanese loans system, which the government is trying to reform. "High street banks provide loans to loan sharks at 2 per cent per annum, and the loan sharks provide people like me with loans at 29.2 per cent," he says. "It's not difficult to amass debts in Japan."

Vigilant local shopkeepers also play a role in suicide prevention. Hideo Watanabe, 64, who owns a lakeside café opposite one of the forest entrances, says he's prevented around 160 suicides (8). "Most people who come to this area for pleasure do so in groups," he says of Aokigahara, which has long been a popular walking destination. "If I see someone on their own I will go and talk to them. After a couple of basic questions, I can usually tell which ones might be here to make a suicide attempt."

Once, a woman who'd tried to take her own life walked straight past his café. "She'd tried to hang herself but it didn't work," he says. "She walked past with part of the rope around her neck and her eyes almost popping out of her sockets. She couldn't see, so I took her in, made her some tea and called an ambulance."

The lawyers and shopkeepers try their best, but Showzen Yamashita, a Buddhist priest at a temple near Aokigahara Jukai, thinks Japan needs more support networks (9). "These people have no-one to talk to, no-one to share the pain or the suffering," he says. "We hold ceremonies in the forest order to ponder how we might make a world that is free of such suffering."



Why does Japan have a high suicide rate?



Japan has the world's 5th highest suicide rate, at 25.8 suicides per 100,000 people, which is almost four times that of the UK, according to WHO. Yoshinori Cho, a professor of psychiatry at Teikyo University and author of the book *Why Do People Commit Suicide*, attributes the high rate to attitudes from Japan's past.

"Throughout Japanese history, suicide has never been prohibited on religious or moral grounds," he says. "Also, apart from on two specific occasions in the Meiji era (the reign of the Meiji emperor, 1868-1912), suicide has never been declared illegal." (It was decriminalised in the UK in 1961).

Honour through suicide dates back centuries to Japan's feudal era when samurai warriors would commit *seppuku* (disembowelment) as a way of maintaining honour rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. *Seppuku* features in numerous films, TV dramas, books and manga.

There have also been clusters of suicides in Japan. After the publication of *Nami no to* (Tower Of Waves) by Seicho Matsumoto in 1960, a best-selling story that ends with the heroine taking her own life in the Aokigahara Jukai, there was a series of suicides.

In 2007, the Japanese government released a nine-step 'counter-suicide white paper', detailing plans for counsellors and helplines. It's earmarked around 14 billion yen (£75m) to help cut suicide numbers by more than 20 per cent by 2017.

But Cho argues that more needs to be done: "Western countries focus their efforts and funds on areas such as mental health and depression, with good results, but in Japan, politicians' interest in such things is low," he says. "Instead they spread out funds with regional governments who then make posters and hold seminars, which is a real waste. I think more substantial mental health measures would yield better results."

NEED TO TALK?

Samaritans is available for anyone in any type of distress on **08457 90 90 90** in the UK or **1850 60 90 90** in the Republic Of Ireland, or by email at jo@samaritans.org.