

## NAOSHIMA – THE BENESSE ART ISLAND

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Yayoi Kusama's zany yellow and black dotted pumpkin welcomes visitors to Naoshima - the Benesse House art site. Her famous sculpture perches at the end of a small jetty protruding into the atmospheric Seto Inland Sea and provides just a tiny hint of what's to come.



Naoshima had long been high on my “wish list” of art destinations so I was thrilled to join an Academy Art Tour, early in 2020, led by one of our favourite lecturers, Dr. Kathleen Olive. This ‘off-season’ tour included a two-night stay at Benesse House/hotel on Naoshima Island. The small number of resident guests staying at Benesse House have unlimited access to the museums and galleries until

11.00pm, well after the regular day trippers have left the island. This was a case of really living “A Night at the Museum”.

One of the 3,000 islands dotting the Seto Inland Sea, Naoshima was once a desolate and depopulated industrial outpost of Japan's rust belt. Now completely reborn, the Benesse Art Site Naoshima brings together the best in contemporary Japanese art and architecture. Naoshima's incredible transformation began in 1987 when Saichiro Fututake, chairman of Benesse Holdings purchased the southern half of the island. For over 25 years, Fututake has been working with leading Japanese architect Tadao Ando and together they have turned Naoshima into one of the world's premier art destinations. Benesse Art Site is the collective name for a variety of art institutions on Naoshima and on neighbouring islands. The Naoshima site consists of Benesse House, Chichu Museum, Lee Ufan Museum, and the extensive Art House Project. Tadao Ando worked closely with the artists to create the perfect “site-specific” spaces for their works which remain on permanent display.



**Benesse House/hotel** is a superb fusion of nature, art and architecture and displays works by Andy Warhol, David Hockney, Yves Klein, Cy Twombly, Richard Long, Bruce Nauman, and others – some of these works decorate the private guest rooms. I “shared” a room with a James Turrell. The design of the buildings is impeccable, the materials used are of the finest quality and the craftsmanship of these buildings is a testament to the Japanese demand for the highest level of quality and their fine aesthetic. As well as being filled with extraordinary works of originality, the hotel is also surrounded by stunning outdoor installations.

Add to this, impeccable Japanese service and hospitality.



**Chichu Art Museum**, designed in 2004, is another site rethinking the relationship between nature and people. It is built mainly underground to avoid affecting the natural scenery. Despite being primarily subterranean, the museum lets in an abundance of natural light that changes the appearance of the artworks and the ambiance of the space itself with

the passage of time, throughout the day and the seasons of the year. This museum displays works by only 3 artists – all concerned with the relationship between light and art.

Five “water lily” paintings by Monet (the only European artist displayed) are showcased under natural light. I was able to stand in this room, alone, for half an hour, to watch the changing mood of the works – one of the many benefits of travelling off-season. Another room features a giant sphere and 27 wooden gold sculptures designed by Walter de Maria. The remaining 3 rooms display works by James Turrell, including one where you walk up a flight of stairs and step ‘through’ a blue light into a room with variable lighting that alters your perception of light and space as you turn around – a very strange and quite disturbing sensation but one that draws you back again and again. I could not help but think of Alice in Wonderland!

**Lee Ufan Museum** only displays works by contemporary Korean-born artist, Lee Ufan., both within the confines of the building as well as dotted around the valley. The Chichu and Lee Ufan Museums are both designed to encourage visitors to reflect on the relationship between man and nature – and it would be difficult to find a more serene, tranquil, and beautiful natural environment in which to contemplate this connection.



The once sleepy fishing village of Honmura is now in effect a living art project in which many of the empty or abandoned houses have been turned into artworks. **Art House Project** worked with artists as well as the local community and now comprises 7 traditional wooden houses, most over 400 years old, which have been converted but have managed to weave in the history and memories of the period when these houses were homes for the residents on Naoshima. Each house features a specific work of art offering a unique ‘experience’. Locals take enormous pride in this project and act as curators and guides. It was incredibly special to wander through

this peaceful village, viewing some the world's most contemporary and challenging works of art while greeting elderly locals going about their everyday business.



Conde Nast Traveler Magazine voted Naoshima one of the top six modern art sites in the world. Naoshima was more than a highlight for me - staying on the island and gaining a little of the Japanese understanding of the harmony between art, man and landscape and opening my eyes to the connections between traditional and contemporary art. I felt completely renewed and refreshed by the experience of visiting Naoshima. Artworks across Naoshima offer not just sights but a fresh way to see. Other islands in the Seto Inland Sea are being developed into exciting new art destinations – providing experiences that challenge one's view and perspective on art.

*Art is everywhere, if only you have eyes to see it.*