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JAPAN

DISCOVER SOME OF JAPAN'S
MOST BIZARRE MUST-SEE
DESTINATIONS

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WEIRD & Wonderful JAPAN

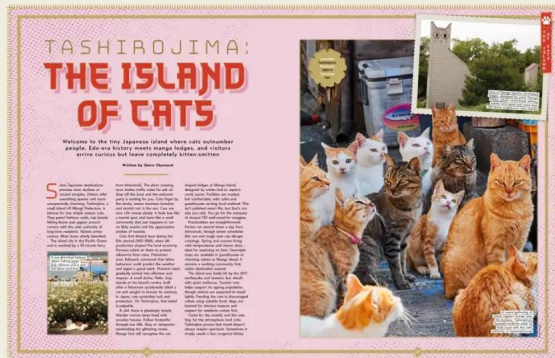
DISCOVER SOME OF JAPAN'S MOST BIZARRE MUST-SEE DESTINATIONS



STRANGE CITYSCAPE
Discover some of Tokyo's most puzzling monuments, bars, parks and restaurants



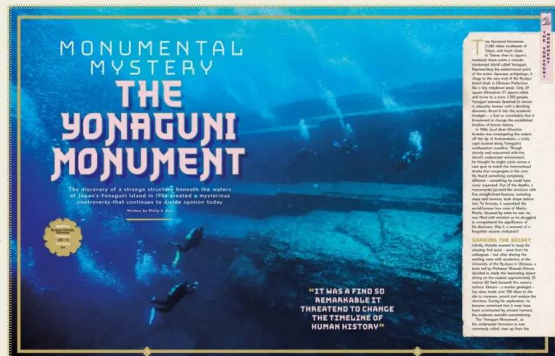
KUMANO'S GATE



UNIQUE ISLANDS
Explore the archipelago's quirkiest islands and meet their cutest residents



ANCIENT & MODERN
Walk through streets where ancient folklore and hi-tech exist side-by-side



UNEXPLAINED SITES
Get up close to mysterious ruins, geological formations and natural wonders

MONUMENTAL MYSTERY THE YONAGUNI MONUMENT

The discovery of a strange structure beneath the waters of Japan's Yonaguni Island in 1986 created a mysterious controversy that continues to divide opinion today

Written by Philip S. Kay

Location
Ryukyu Islands,
Okinawa
Timezone
UTC + 9
Currency
Yen



“IT WAS A FIND SO REMARKABLE IT THREATENED TO CHANGE THE TIMELINE OF HUMAN HISTORY”

Two thousand kilometres (1,242 miles) southwest of Tokyo, and much closer to Taiwan than to Japan’s mainland, there exists a remote, windswept island called Yonaguni. Representing the westernmost point of the entire Japanese archipelago, it clings to the very end of the Ryukyu Island chain in Okinawa Prefecture like a tiny misplaced jewel. Only 29 square kilometres (11 square miles) and home to a mere 1,700 people, Yonaguni seemed destined to remain in obscurity forever until a shocking discovery thrust it into the academic limelight – a find so remarkable that it threatened to change the established timeline of human history.

In 1986, local diver Kihachiro Aratake was investigating the waters off the tip of Arakawabana, a rocky cape located along Yonaguni’s southeastern coastline. Though already well acquainted with the island’s underwater environment, he thought he might come across a new spot to watch the hammerhead sharks that congregate in the area. He found something completely different – something he could have never expected. Out of the depths, a monumental pyramid-like structure with fine straight-lined features, including steps and terraces, took shape before him. To Aratake, it resembled the world-famous Inca ruins of Machu Picchu. Stunned by what he saw, he was filled with emotion as he struggled to comprehend the significance of his discovery. Was it a remnant of a forgotten ancient civilisation?

SHARING THE SECRET

Initially, Aratake wanted to keep his amazing find quiet – even from his colleagues – but after sharing the exciting news with academics at the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa, a team led by Professor Masaaki Kimura decided to study the fascinating object sitting on the seabed approximately 25 metres (82 feet) beneath the ocean’s surface. Kimura – a marine geologist – has since made over 100 dives to the site to measure, record and analyse the structure. During his exploration, he became convinced that it must have been constructed by ancient humans; the evidence seemed overwhelming.

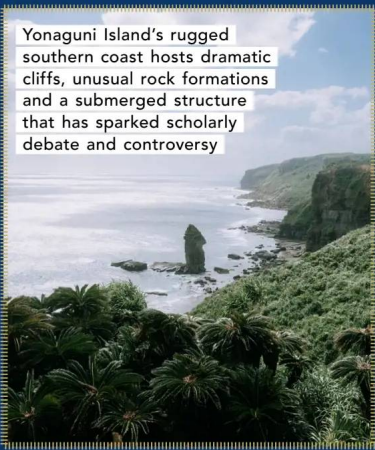
The ‘Yonaguni Monument’, as the underwater formation is now commonly called, rises up from the

“VERY LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT ANY ANCIENT INHABITANTS THAT MIGHT HAVE LIVED THERE”

ocean floor in angular fashion to a platform that rests a few metres short of the Pacific’s waves. According to a 2004 paper written by Kimura, it measures around 270 metres long and 120 metres wide. With several obvious flights of large steps leading towards its upper tiers, it certainly looks to have been worked on, but Professor Kimura’s surveys helped him distinguish an array of other key artificial features, lending credence to his theory that the submerged edifice was human-made.

He identified the foundation of a retaining wall composed of massive stones, a road that loops around the base of the monument, an entrance gateway with a rock-built roof, fan-shaped pool, drainage canals and even relief carvings of turtles. He also claimed to have found tool-mark evidence at the site and a hand-carved shale tablet displaying a couple of enigmatic symbols. This treasure trove of features was, however, not the only indicator of possible human activity; Kimura suggested that the absence of rocky debris near the bottom of the structure gave it the impression of being swept clean.

Yonaguni Island’s rugged southern coast hosts dramatic cliffs, unusual rock formations and a submerged structure that has sparked scholarly debate and controversy



As the underwater investigation continued, it also became apparent that the pyramid-like structure was only the main element of a larger overall site, within which the research team discerned a stadium (with bleachers) and a rotary. At another formation 1.5 kilometres (0.9 miles) away, an imposing face seemed to gaze out across the watery expanse through eyes hewn from solid rock. What was this submerged collection of ruins that lay hidden off the coast of Yonaguni Island? A lost city – or a lost continent, perhaps?

ATLANTIS OF JAPAN

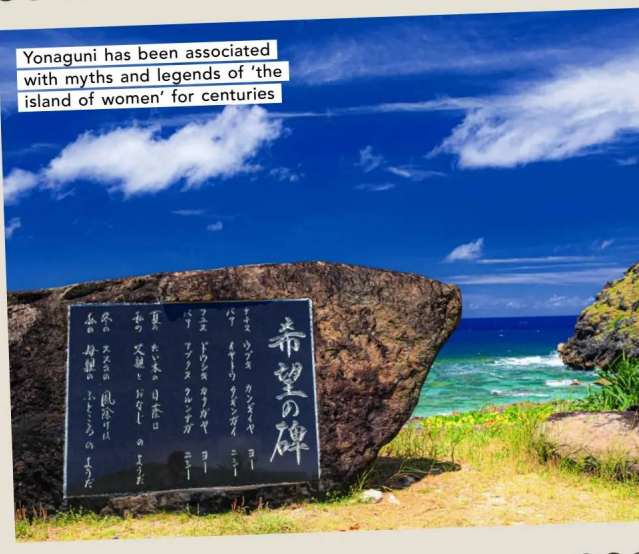
If the Yonaguni Monument was built by humans, it must have been done so before it was underwater. In its current location, the last time that would have been possible was around the end of the last Ice Age, when sea levels were much lower. But that would mean it was constructed some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago – at least 5,000 years before Stonehenge and Egypt’s Great Pyramid. Unfortunately, very little is known about any ancient inhabitants that might have lived in the environs of what is now Yonaguni, let alone whether they would have had the skills and technology to create a monument of such scale and precision. One fringe theory connects the megalithic formation to a legendary advanced lost continent purported to have once existed in the Pacific Ocean. Similar to Atlantis, the landmass, called ‘Mu’, supposedly sank beneath the sea after a series of natural disasters.

The origins of the Mu myth are not easy to discern; it evolved from separate concepts that came together in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The name ‘Mu’ appears to go back to the misreading of an ancient Maya codex – an error made by French scholar Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg (1814-1874), who linked the ancient Mesoamerican document to an imaginary lost land he thought was called ‘Mu’. Following that, another 19th-century antiquarian, Augustus Le Plongeon (1825-1908), connected Brasseur de Bourbourg’s mysterious land of Mu to Plato’s story of Atlantis, which would have placed it in the Atlantic Ocean – nowhere near Yonaguni Island.

Mu’s legendary location went on an ocean-hopping journey when writer James Churchward (1851-1936) associated it with Lemuria, a



Yonaguni has been associated with myths and legends of ‘the island of women’ for centuries

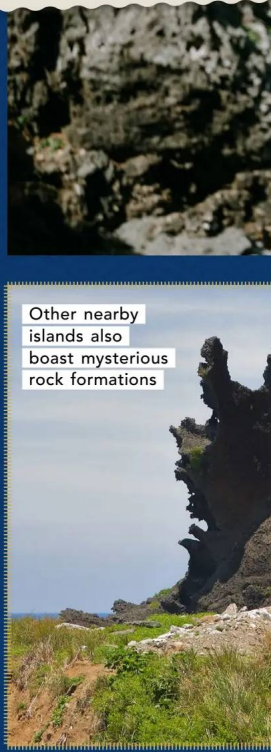


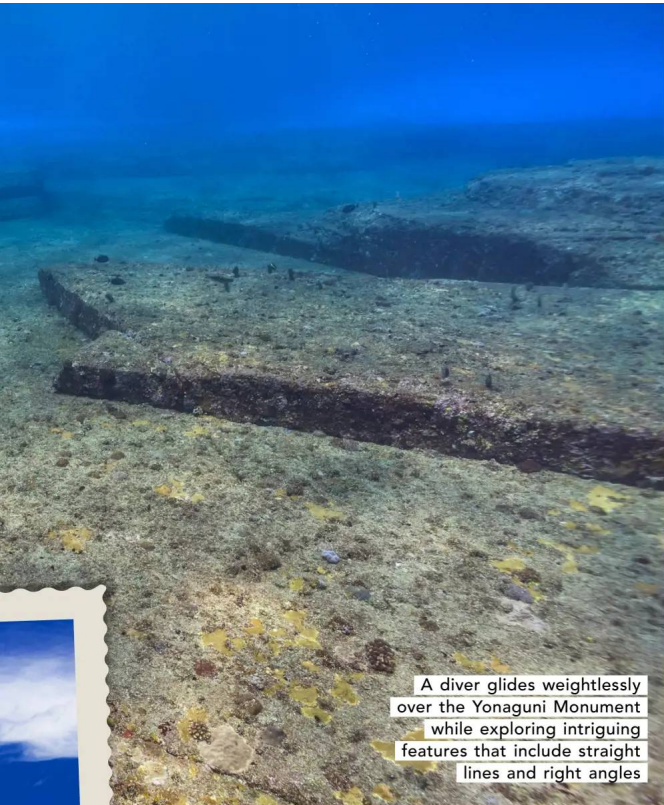
completely different hypothetical submerged landmass that was originally supposed to have existed in the Indian Ocean. Churchward insisted that Mu – or Lemuria – had actually been in the Pacific, an idea he promulgated over several books after having apparently gained access to sacred archaic tablets in India and rubbings of other ancient tablets found in Mexico. Was the Yonaguni Monument the long-awaited proof of Churchward’s assertion, part of a forgotten Pacific continent that explosions and earthquakes had sunk beneath the seas? Probably not.

GEOLOGICAL REALITY

The modern scientific theory of plate tectonics tells us that it’s impossible for a whole continent to simply disappear under the seas the way Churchward described. That doesn’t discount the possibility of Yonaguni’s underwater anomaly having been made by humans, though.

Other nearby islands also boast mysterious rock formations





A diver glides weightlessly over the Yonaguni Monument while exploring intriguing features that include straight lines and right angles



Whatever the true origins of the underwater monument in Yonaguni, debate is certain to rage on



In 1997 – at the height of academic interest in the Yonaguni Monument – Boston University geologist Robert M Schoch visited the site to get closer to the truth. Nobody was better suited to the task. Six years earlier, Schoch had shaken the foundations of Egyptology when he proposed that the Great Sphinx of Giza was older than historians and archaeologists believed. He based his conclusion on erosion patterns that could only have been made by significant rainfall and water weathering, in addition to the likelihood that the local area was arid even before the Sphinx's widely accepted construction date.

His idea was (and still is) controversial. Nevertheless, Schoch was similarly prepared to let the Yonaguni Monument's geology speak for itself, regardless of whether the story it told fit established timelines.

Upon inspecting the strange structure's perfect lines, precise angles and other seemingly artificial features, Schoch determined that it was natural – an outstanding product of geological and hydrological processes. The sandstone, from which the monument and some of Yonaguni's coastal topography consist, can split along its seams, creating the illusion of clean, human-made linear and rectilinear surfaces, ledges, platforms and shapes. Over time, the repetitive erosive action generated by the region's powerful underwater currents may have further broken down or sculpted parts of the rock to fashion some of the curiosities that now exist. But does that really explain everything? What about the turtle carvings? Well, it's possible that the recognition of specific features, such as animals and faces, could be attributed to a phenomenon called pareidolia, which is the human habit of visually translating ambiguous patterns into meaningful images.

ENDURING MYSTERY

Despite the arguments in favour of the Yonaguni Monument being a natural structure, the case remains somewhat open. Professor Kimura still seems to think that the evidence his team recovered suggests that the site was substantially human-made. He now advocates an earlier construction date (as recent as 2,000 years ago), hypothesising that the Yonaguni formation could have first existed on land, but may have slipped into the ocean because of a large earthquake. Although Professor Schoch doesn't agree, he does believe that a very small percentage (less than five per cent) of the structure may have been modified by people long ago.

These days, most geologists see the Yonaguni Monument as the work of nature, but it doesn't prevent those who refuse to accept that opinion from offering alternative explanations – from the idea of it being part of a lost continent to the even more fanciful proposition that it was engineered by extraterrestrials. What does appear certain is that the mystery surrounding the monument is set to live on.



Negotiating the strong currents that surround the Yonaguni Monument requires experience and a high level of technical scuba diving skill

DIVING THE YONAGUNI MONUMENT

Unsurprisingly, the Yonaguni Monument's reputation has made it a popular destination for diving enthusiasts, but it's an adventure that should not be embarked on lightly. The waters off the island's southern coast are notoriously difficult to navigate, with divers often finding themselves at the mercy of fierce underwater currents that are strong enough to rip them away from the structure. Only confident, experienced scuba divers should attempt to explore the site. Several local operators organise dives, but you should book well ahead of your trip, particularly if visiting between January and March – the best time to see hammerhead sharks.

Given its distance from Tokyo and Japan's mainland, getting to Yonaguni is quite an expedition in itself. Flights depart Tokyo daily, but they involve at least one transfer – usually at Ishigaki Island or Okinawa's prefectural capital, Naha. It's also possible to take a ferry from Ishigaki to Yonaguni, but passengers should prepare for rough seas and sudden cancellations. Despite the challenging logistics, diving the unique Yonaguni Monument is certainly worth it, especially if you combine your trip to Okinawa Prefecture with some of the region's other highlights, which range from moving World War II memorials to incredible white sand beaches.