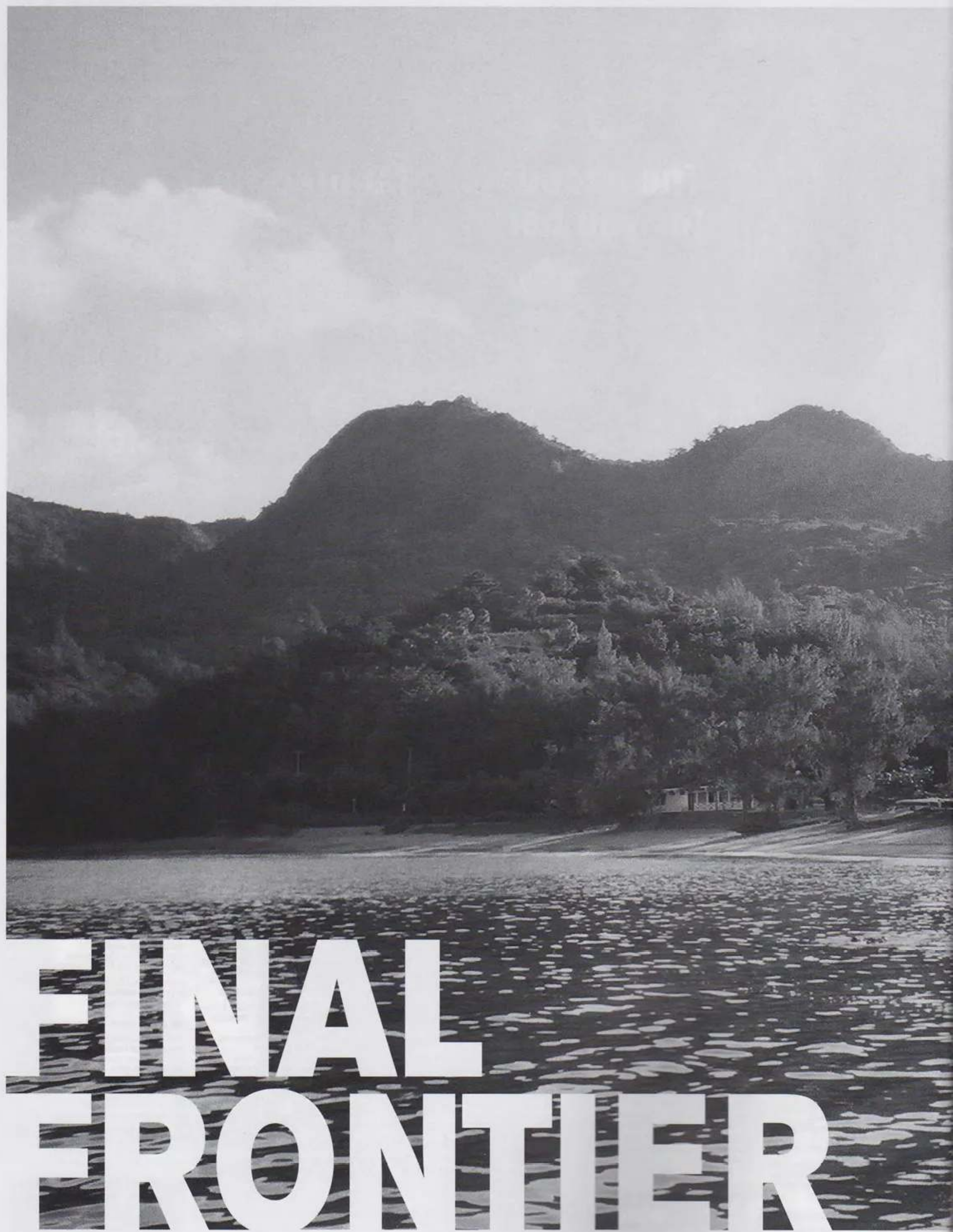


☆ WEEKEND



# FINAL FRONTIER

**Benjamin Freeland** sets sail for the far-flung Ogasawara Islands and finds there's much more to this remote outpost than mere sun, sand and surf.



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ROWING UP ON Canada's west coast with two oceanographers as parents instilled me early on in life with a profound fascination with remote islands. With a house full of hydrographic maps, I gained an early familiarity with such obscure outposts as the Falklands, the Azores, the Faeroes, the Ryukyus and Japan's often forgotten southeastern island chain, the Ogasawaras, better known to the world as the Bonin Islands. My childhood passion for islands remains unabated and has figured prominently in my choices of vacation destinations since my arrival in Japan a year and a half ago.

On my wife's recommendation, we had traveled to Nijijima in the Izu Seven group in March last year. In deciding where to visit during our winter vacation earlier this year, we toyed with the idea of going to Okinawa but ultimately decided against it, figuring it would be overcrowded and expensive. I then began thinking about Ogasawara, that enigmatic subtropical island chain trailing southward below Honshu's eastern elbow, like a flick of ink from a calligrapher's brush. Here was an archipelago with essentially the same climate as the Ryukyus, but one only accessible by a weekly 25-hour ferry trip from Tokyo, in stark contrast to the wide-body aircraft that depart daily from Haneda Airport to Naha. The archipelago seemed mysterious – and this alone seemed reason enough to go.

Take a map of the Asia-Pacific region, draw a line due south from Tokyo and stop at roughly the same latitude as Okinawa, and you will find a group of islands roughly halfway between the Marianas (which include Saipan and Guam) and the Japanese mainland. The Ogasawara (literally "uninhabited") archipelago hugs the fault line shared by the Philippine and Pacific Plates and consists of 20 islands, of which only two, Chichijima (Papa Island) and Hahajima (Mama Island), contain permanent human settlements.

Also included among the Ogasawaras are the Kazan (volcano) Islands located further south, of which the best-known is Iojima (sulphur) Island, better known by its Anglicized name Iwo-jima, site of the second world war's ferocious penultimate battle. Far removed from the Asian mainland, the islands are a treasure-chest of unique flora and fauna, including numerous species of birds, the Ogasawara fruit bat and the islands' famous sea turtles. The islands are perhaps best known to the Japanese as one of the world's premiere whale-watching locations, as the Ogasawaras are regularly visited by pods of sperm and humpback whales, while other awe-inspiring sea creatures such as dolphins and hammerhead sharks patrol the warm waters offshore.

Equally fascinating is the islands' human history. Japanese historians say the islands were first discovered in 1593 by Ogasawara Sayadori, grandson of the lord of Fukashi Castle. With the exception of a few government-commissioned surveying expeditions, subsequent travel to the islands was banned by the Tokugawa Shogunate as part of the nation's *sakoku* (isolationist) policy.

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ABOVE: TAKOIWA (OCTOPUS ROCK), CHICHIJIMA  
LEFT: OGIURA BEACH, CHICHIJIMA

During this time, however, the Ogasawaras became a stopping point for American and European whaling vessels. The first permanent settlement was established in 1830 by a small group of American and European whalers led by Nathaniel Savory, who founded the community of Port Lloyd (now Futami Port) on Chichijima, then known as Peel Island. In 1853, the colony served as the final stopping point for Commodore Matthew Perry on his historic voyage into Tokyo Bay. The Meiji Restoration of 1868, however, saw the Japanese government reassert its claim to the islands. Japanese migration to Ogasawara began in the early Meiji period, and in 1880 the islands were incorporated into the Tokyo metropolis. The islands' mixed inhabitants continued to co-exist peacefully until World War II, when all were forcibly relocated to the Japanese mainland. Following Japan's defeat in 1945, the American occupational administration oversaw the islanders' return. This island periphery remained under US control until 1968, at which time a handful of Chichijima's Euro-Americans opted for American citizenship and resettled in the United States. Japanese migration to the islands since the handover has further diluted the original population, although Chichijima's metis inhabitants still constitute a significant portion of the island's 2,000-odd residents.

Climate, geography, wildlife and history aside, my primary motivation for choosing the Ogasawaras as a destination was the fact that I knew no-one who ever been there, and that virtually none of my expat friends had even heard of them. I was therefore feeling like something of a trailblazer as my wife and I arrived at Takeshiba Pier and awaited the boarding call for the Ogasawara Maru, the vessel that serves as the islands' lifeline, transporting not only passengers but all the essentials of life not produced on the islands.

It was a long, rough, nausea-inducing voyage through open ocean, but by mid-morning the following day the jagged profile of Chichijima homed into view and a warm sub-tropical sun coruscated over the now calmer sea. The unadulterated beauty of the island's landscape washed over my city-ridden senses. Beyond the sleepy town of Omura, the island looked virtually untouched by the hands of man, save a radio tower and the island's famous meteorological station. Accustomed to Japanese landscapes blighted by excessive development and scarred with concrete, I reveled in what must be one of the country's few remaining unadulterated natural vistas.

Chichijima offered everything we had been craving: peace and quiet, beautiful beaches, awe-inspiring scenery and laid-back island hospitality. Our simple hotel was managed by a diminutive, matronly woman from Hachijojima in the Izu Seven, who produced one fantastic meal after another, and all in gigantic portions. The house specialty, shi-mazushi (island sushi), made from fish completely alien to me, was a sublime delicacy.

When we were not hiking in the woods or exploring the beaches, we were meandering around Omura, an incurably laid-back town that brought to mind a subtropical version of some of the coastal towns of my home province of British Columbia. One of the most striking features of Omura was its complete lack of brand-name commercialization. There were no signs of McDonald's, KFC, Disney, Sanrio, Uniqlo or Seven-Eleven anywhere, and virtually everything seemed to be locally produced. About the only reminder that we were still technically in the municipality of Tokyo were the Shinagawa license plates on the cars. And while little of the island's former American presence remains, the Yankee patina is still present in Omura's striking American-built Church of Saint George, and in watering holes with names like Yankeetown and Charlie Brown.

A more sobering side to the islands is equally apparent, however. While one can travel through most of Japan oblivious to the fact that the country was ravaged by a world war only 60 years ago, there is no shortage of reminders of this fact in the Ogasawaras. The cliffs that overlook Chichijima's dazzling beaches are scarred with man-made holes where cannon once stood, wartime tunnels can be seen in the hills surrounding Omura and the rusting remains of World War II vessels can still be seen protruding from the waters offshore.

When asked about the war, the islanders seemed much less averse to addressing the subject than their mainland counterparts, the ghosts of war being a more accepted reality of life in the Ogasawaras. I asked

about Iojima, which I had read was still off-limits to all apart from Japan Self-Defense Forces personnel due to the presence of unexploded ordnances. It transpired that travel there is permitted in certain cases, but it requires a special permit and chartered transportation. Until the local troops moved in to help take some of the pressure off Atsugi Air Base, the entire island of Iojima was designated a war grave and the general opinion of the Ogasawara islanders seems to be that the island on which more than 22,000 Japanese and nearly 7,000 American troops died fighting for is best left alone.

While the ghosts of war still cast their shadows, the islanders' zest for life and over-the-top friendliness will forever dominate my memories of Ogasawara. On our arrival, the ship was welcomed by a group of steel drummers, and our departure was serenaded by taiko drummers and a grass skirt-clad Polynesian dance troupe – a Chichijima craze introduced via Hawaii during the US occupation.

Among the people we befriended were a spirited elderly couple transplanted from Yokohama who managed a teahouse overlooking beautiful Kopepe Beach. They swore they would never move back to the mainland and expressed a hope that the on-again, off-again proposed Ogasawara airport is never built. The proposed airport is a major bone of contention among the islanders who find themselves caught between a desire to preserve their beloved autonomy and pristine environment, and a longing for greater tourist revenue in increasingly trying economic times. The island economy has taken a pounding since the end of the bubble era and our hostess lamented the lack of employment opportunities for the island's youth, which forces many to seek their fortunes on the mainland. An airport would clearly represent a major boon to the Ogasawara economy. Nevertheless, I could not help but side with the Yokohama retirees, as such a development would invariably signal the death of the uniqueness of a place that remains, at least until now, a forgotten Japan.

We re-boarded the Ogasawara Maru for the return voyage armed with seasickness pills, a collection of oddball souvenirs, some priceless rolls of film and an overwhelming desire to return as soon as possible.

#### TRAVEL INFORMATION

Located 1,000 kilometers south of Tokyo, the Ogasawara Islands enjoy a subtropical climate with an average temperature ranging from 18.8 degrees Celsius in January to 28 degrees in July. Like elsewhere in Japan, the summer months are characterized by high humidity and volatile weather conditions. Currently the only regular link between the islands and the mainland is by sea, courtesy of the Ogasawara Kaiun (K.K.)-operated Ogasawara Maru, which departs weekly from Takeshiba Pier, Tokyo, with service to Futami Port, Chichijima. The voyage takes 25 hours and 30 minutes, and costs ¥22,570 per person one-way for a second-class berth. For reservations, phone Ogasawara Kaiun's Tokyo office at 03-3451-5171. A new high-speed vessel, the Techno Super Liner, is scheduled to begin services between Tokyo and Chichijima sometime this year, cutting travel time to Ogasawara to 17 hours. Chichijima is also connected to Hahajima via a daily ferry service operated by Izu Shotokai (K.K.). The trip takes approximately two hours and costs ¥3,780 per person. Boat services to other islands in the archipelago are available for charter in Omura. The western – and populated – side of Chichijima is serviced by bus and taxi, while rental car services are also available. No bus service exists on Hahajima, but chartered taxis and bike rental are available. Lodgings in Chichijima are spread along the west coast of the island, and on Hahajima are clustered around Oki Harbor. The Hotel Beachcomber, overlooking Ogiura Beach, Chichijima, is a fantastic place to stay and serves wonderful island cuisine. Accommodation typically ranges from ¥4,000-¥10,000 per person, and generally includes breakfast and dinner. Package tours including transportation and accommodation are usually available. There is very little English-language travel literature on the Ogasawara Islands. Probably the best source of information available is the Bonin Information Service website ([www.bonin-islands.com](http://www.bonin-islands.com)). Japanese travel literature generally covers the Ogasawaras together with the Izu Seven group. See your local travel agency for more information.

ALL PHOTOS BY BENJAMIN FREELAND



VIEW OF LAID-BACK OMURA FROM A NEARBY HILL; BOW OF THE OGASAWARA MARU, FUTAMI PORT (INSET)