

# Back to the Jurassic

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

This is the wilderness of Amami Oshima, an island plunked in the Pacific between Kyushu and Okinawa just above the 28th degree of latitude. It does not seem of Japan, or of this age. It recalls ancient eras, fossil blocks of time that never knew our species. For the moment, I am caught in the spell of this wild place.

The clouds now overhead arrived last night, riding on a warm, wet, southern wind. Now they brood dark and low, watering these forest-cloaked ridges and valleys with a light rain that occasionally fades to a thick mist. The subtropic air is so freighted with moisture that breathing becomes conscious, deliberate. There is no breeze—not the slightest movement of any leaf—as the fine droplets descend. Nearby, some birds call; one of them, handsome in his livery of rich brown body with deep blue head, wings and tail, flits for a few seconds along the palisade of forest facing the road and then abruptly disappears back into it.

Mr. Ikeda met me before dawn at my hotel, and we drove into these hills while the sky was yet a blanket of nightshadow. For a while, our headlights bored a tunnel in the dark as we switchbacked up narrow gravel roads—steep, meandering, tentative lines hemmed in by dank vegetation that leapt out and reached for us at every turn. But now the sky has at last lightened and I can make out the silhouettes of trunks and branches and vines looming up and over the track. The forest is on all sides, an infinity unto itself; it is astoundingly green and fiercely exuberant with life.

Mr. Ikeda stops. He looks through the windshield at the forest around and above us. "This is a good place," he says. "But make sure you watch out for the *habu*. There are more here than you can imagine." *Habu* are distinctly irascible, highly venomous pit vipers native to these southern islands.

I carefully step into the thick undergrowth and gradually move up the slope above the road. After a few minutes of slow and deliberate progress, with Mr. Ikeda whistling softly to himself as he follows along somewhere behind me, I see what I have come for. There is a great stand of them, with the highest soaring 10 meters above me. *Hego*, they call them here; in English, giant tree ferns. Their great feathery fronds curve up and out and then down in graceful arcs. Above and behind these hego, where a steeper slope intersects the one I stand on, thin white wisps of mist drift up from the dense green and before my eyes condense into an infant cloud. I am watching the planet breathe.

My thoughts wander a little: A recently published 1,314-page comprehensive guide to Japan devotes a grand total of 217 words to Amami Oshima and recommends that the traveler pass it up for other more attractive island destinations. Old Okinawa must have been something like this island is now, and in fact, Amami Oshima was a part of the Ryukyu—meaning Okinawa—Kingdom until the warlords of Satsuma in southern Kyushu forcibly occupied it in the early 17th century. At that time the island was a large and lovely backwater; it has essentially remained so since.

As I move below some of the hego, a small sharp movement betrays a tree lizard of a green too vivid to be real. He stops at an angle high over my head and glares down with a piercing gold eye. Above him, a patch of vapor starts to form the beginnings of a cloud. We look at each other across ages.

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