

2. The following text is an excerpt from *Cherry blossom season*, a piece of travel writing by Catherine Marshall. The author has made a tour of Japan during springtime when cherry blossom trees bloom.

In Tokyo, they amass on the branches like butterflies, aflutter with the least breath of wind. In the countryside, they bubble out from the deadwood, heralding my timely arrival: they have heard the oncoming rumble of the shinkansen¹ as we bullet northwards, and have opened their pink arms in welcome.

5 By the time we reach Kanazawa, they are positively showing off, dripping from trees, clouding the skyline, doming the streets in florescence.

"Two days ago, there were none," marvels Simon Rickard, professional gardener and one of our Botanica guides.

10 Such is the capriciousness of cherry blossoms: they will arrive when they are ready. This doesn't deter couples engaged-to-be-married, who are posing for matrimonial portraits at Kenroku-en Garden, though their weddings are still months away.

Such a response to this spectacle is inevitable, for the revered yoshino² blossom – a cluster of five barely pink petals, each one notched at its apex – casts a magical spell. It represents at once the beauty of youth, the fragility of life and the impermanence of time.

15 But even as new life and young love flourish around us, old age is being celebrated. Rickard leads us to Kasumigaike Pond, where the ancient Karasaki pine, slumped with age, is being upheld by wooden poles.

"The Japanese prop up their old trees," Rickard explains. "They venerate old age."

20 This reconciliation between rebirth and decline is apparent all along the coastline as we cruise from Kanazawa to Matsue, where the last of the almond-scented apricot blossoms are falling to the ground, where the Japanese maples are coming into bud and the weeping cherries are in full bloom.

25 At Hagi, wild cherry trees flush the mountainsides pink. People come early to lay their tarpaulins beneath the vaporous blossom-mantles in Shizuki Park. Later, they'll picnic with their families amid a flurry of whisper-soft petals.

We arrive before the crowds, too, at Tokoji Temple, and roam paths slick with camellia buds and moss. It's a little bit sad and lonely, Rickard says, compared with the crisp, clipped, weeded gardens we've visited in the past few days. A little bit wabi-sabi – that ancient Japanese celebration of rusticity³ and transience and the patina⁴ of age.

30 Wabi-sabi has set in across the Korea Strait in South Korea, too, where the cherry blossoms – planted by the occupying Japanese in the early 20th century – are beginning to wilt. A breeze rattles the trees, launching petals into the air like a plume of pink smoke. But at Gyeongju, the crepe myrtles⁵ are being primed for imminent rebirth: women balance on crates and scrub the tough bark until it shines. Their flowers are more durable than those 35 fickle cherry blossoms, too: clinging steadfastly to the branches, they will bloom for a full three months.

We sail back across the strait to Nagasaki, where the cherry blossoms tell another story, one of revival and resilience. Just months after this city was annihilated by an atom bomb in 1945, much of its flora started sprouting again, says local guide Miyuki Ogawa. And this
40 fledgling growth was supplemented by still more plantings: 1000 cherry saplings alone were embedded in the charred earth by the doctor who devoted his life to researching the bomb's effects on this city's residents, Ogawa says.

We wander up to Glover Garden and look back at the rebuilt skyline from this elevated, fecund place: it's a view filled with creepers and bright annuals and agave – and those cherry
45 blossoms, framing Nagasaki in a halo of light.

¹ shinkansen: Japanese high speed train, known as the Bullet

² yoshino: a species of cherry tree whose blossom is spectacular but very short-lived

³ rusticity: simple country charm

⁴ patina: surface coating caused by the ageing process

⁵ crepe myrtles: a species of tree

– How is contrast used to explore the cycle of life in this passage?
