

J O U R N E Y T O

Japan's Islands

Over 6,800 enchanting islands
waiting to be discovered

JNTO

Japan.
Endless
Discovery.

Get on board and set sail for some of Japan's most idyllic islands

There are over 410 inhabited islands in Japan, each with its own distinctive traditions, culture, history, and events. Visiting these islands has been likened to stepping into a time capsule, as the essence of a bygone era continues to thrive. Approaching by sea, you'll see islands overlapping on the horizon, a scene noted as one of the most beautiful in this Land of the Rising Sun.

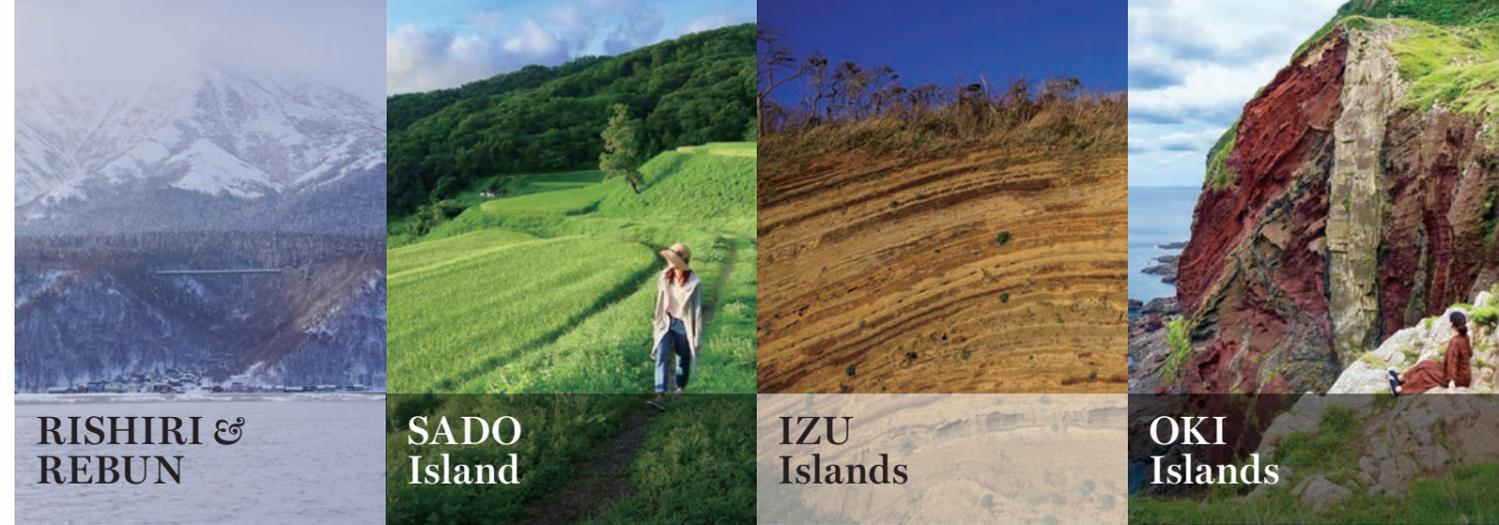
When you land, prepare yourself to be mesmerized by the unique townscapes each island has to offer. As you walk around, notice how time slows down. Nostalgia comes to the fore, filling your heart with the warmth and happiness of a Japan from yesteryear.

It's time to take an adventure well off the beaten path and visit some of Japan's wonderful islands.

Nozomi Kobayashi | AUTHOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER



Nozomi Kobayashi is a travel writer from Japan. She has authored a number of books based on her own travel experiences, visiting 65 countries worldwide and over 100 of Japan's islands. Currently, she is active in a wide range of fields, including giving talks and speeches about her traveling. As a boat trip ambassador for the Japan Passenger Boat Association, she promotes the charm and enjoyment that can be had from boat trips to Japan's islands.



**RISHIRI &
REBUN**

**SADO
Island**

**IZU
Islands**

**OKI
Islands**



**SETOUCHI
Islands**



**GOTO
Islands**



**OSUMI
Islands**



**YAEYAMA
Islands**

RISHIRI & REBUN Islands

*Adventure in a northern
winter wonderland*

Off the beaten path, Japan's northernmost islands, Rishiri and Rebun, are noted for their fine powder snow, ideal for winter sports enthusiasts. Away from the slopes, these peaceful neighbors serve up sumptuous local seafood, warm you up in their hot springs, and wow you with their charming wintertime snowscapes.

*Off to Rishiri Island in
midwinter. Hike with
snowshoes to the top of
Mt. Pon to see the beautiful
view of Rishiri Fuji.*

Take the Heartland Ferry from Wakkanai, the northernmost town in Hokkaido. You can sample the local cuisine at the izakayas on the islands.



After two hours on the Heartland Ferry from Wakkanai, at the northern tip of Hokkaido, we disembarked at Kafuka Port on Rebun, welcomed by minus five temperatures, and the fluffy powder snow. Many flock to the island in spring or summer to see the various alpine plants and flowers, yet in winter, the island transforms into a magical white wonderland.

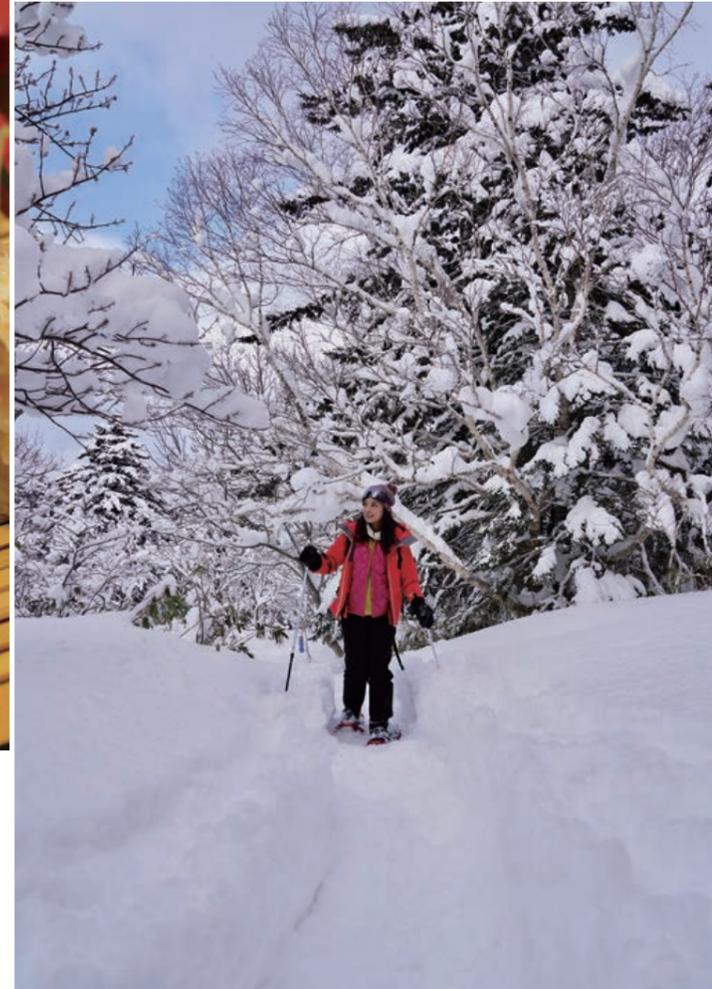
I headed straight out for dinner at a nearby izakaya, eager to sample some of the local cuisines. The island of Rebun has several delicacies, with battera (pressed hokke sushi) and shirako (soft cod roe), particularly flavorsome. Hunger satisfied, I decided to warm up at the Usuyuki-no-yu onsen. There are private baths here, so you can take a dip in this relaxing hot spring without being disturbed.

The following morning, I drove to Cape Sukoton, the northmost point of the island. Lining the road were snow-topped houses, icicles dangling down from the eaves. Passing through Kafuka, I noticed the red 'torii' gates of the Minai Shrine. People have come to pray here for safe childbirth since the indigenous Ainu inhabited the island. It is one of many places in Hokkaido where Ainu traditions remain.

In the vicinity, some old ladies were working hard at the fishing port, removing large hauls of cod from the nets. Intrigued, I stopped off for a closer look, and they quickly invited me over to watch. Fishing has long prospered on Rebun, with most of the islanders involved in the industry.



Rishiri kombu kelp and seafood from Japan's northernmost islands. A fishermen's store selling fresh local catches. The shrines built along the sea, such as Kitanoitsukushima-bentengu, are sacred.



Back on the road, Japan's northernmost lake, Kushuko, came into view. Due to the time of year, it was completely covered in a thick layer of snow.

As I arrived at Cape Sukoton, the freezing north wind was blowing harshly. Despite the cold, the sight of the snow-capped white cape, protruding into the ocean, was magnificent. Apart from the small island of Todojima, just off the coast, the sea stretched endlessly towards the horizon, giving me the impression that I'd reached the very end of Japan.

It was lunchtime, so I called in at Dining Cafe Umi in Motochi. Feeling hungry, I chose the hokke fish hamburger, plus an omelet and rice topped with sea urchin butter. Both dishes were a delight, and I highly recommend giving the cafe a try when you are in the area.

In the afternoon, I went to view two of the island's most famous rock formations, the enormous 250-meter tall peach-shaped Momiwa, along with the cat-shaped Nekoia. You'll find both of them close to Motochi. These powerful natural creations seemed to release a mysterious calming energy, ensuring my day of sightseeing on Rebun had a relaxing conclusion.

That evening I departed for the neighboring island of Rishiri on another Heartland Ferry, a crossing that takes about 40 minutes. In the center of the isle, Mt. Rishiri rises to an altitude of 1721 m, its shape closely resembling the iconic Mt. Fuji, hence its nickname 'Rishiri Fuji.' A number of winter sports can be enjoyed out here, with backcountry skiing, snowboarding, and snowshoeing, all popular.

In the morning, I left the town of Oshidomari, making my way to Mt. Pon, at the foot of Rishiri Fuji, for a spot of snowshoeing, accompanied by a local guide. Mt. Pon is 444 m above sea level, and I had heard it offered up some beautiful views of Mt. Rishiri.

All ready to go, we made our way through a pine forest, venturing past the Hokuroku campsite at the foot of the mountain trail. We

pushed on through knee-deep snow for roughly 15 minutes until we reached the Kanrosensui spring, the source of one of Japan's 100 Best Waters. You can drink from the spring all year round, even in winter, and the icy cold water was delicious.

Again the trail took us through some forest before we eventually reached the top. Rishiri Fuji now exerted a mighty presence in front of us, no wonder it was once an object of worship for the Ainu people. Sadly, on my visit, the summit was slightly obscured by the clouds; nevertheless, it didn't disappoint, as the mountains descending ridgeline, with its ocean backdrop, made for a breathtaking scene.

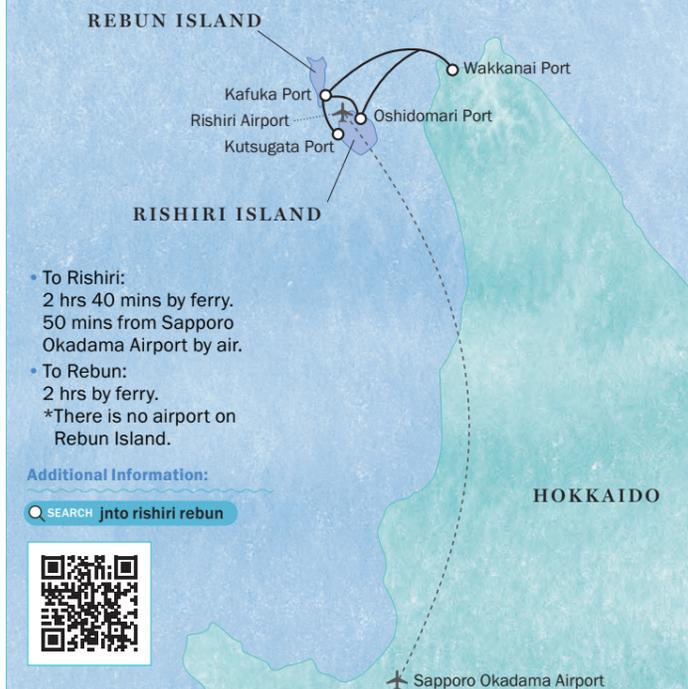
Mountain adventure over, my next destination was a high-grade kelp farm. 'Rishiri kombu' is a nutritious brand of kelp well-known throughout Japan, often used to make stock. The kelp farm's factory was filled with dried Rishiri kombu, which is initially grown out at sea. A farmer explained to me that 'it takes two years to grow and one year to produce the finished kelp.' Such timescales made me think that Rishiri kombu farming was a labor of love.

To bring my northern journey to a close, I drove along the west side of the island to the Kitanoitsukushima-bentengu shrine to say a little prayer. The shrine faces the sea, in the direction of Russia, and as I looked out over the ocean, I thought about all the unforgettable scenery I had witnessed on these rugged winter outposts. This was undoubtedly an icy adventure I'll always cherish. **1**



HOW TO GET THERE

Ferries depart for the Rishiri and Rebun Islands from Wakkanai Port. Direct flights to Rishiri island are also available.



- To Rishiri:
2 hrs 40 mins by ferry.
50 mins from Sapporo Okadama Airport by air.
- To Rebun:
2 hrs by ferry.
*There is no airport on Rebun Island.

Additional Information:



SADO

Island



Sado Island has many rice terraces that are often referred to as an original Japanese landscape. Watching the sunrise over the sea from the Iwakubi-shoryu rice terraces is not to be missed.

The island that time forgot

Domestic travelers have likened setting foot on Sado to stepping into a time machine, and it's not hard to see why. Its unspoiled natural beauty coupled with sights and sounds plucked straight out of a bygone era, offers visitors a rare glimpse into a Japan of yesteryear.

Sado Island sits off the west coast of Niigata and is the largest in the Sea of Japan. The island first came to prominence due to an unprecedented Edo period gold rush that played a significant role in supporting the finances of the ruling shogunate. Home to hundreds of majestic temples, today it hosts the largest array of traditional arts events and festivals to be found throughout the Japanese archipelago.

To get there, I jumped on a morning high-speed ferry from the Port of Niigata and arrived at Ryotsu on Sado's eastern seaboard around an hour later. A gentle sea breeze welcomed me ashore, and the aura of the houses surrounding the harbor instantly gave me a sense of a long-lost Japan. After renting a car for my visit, I drove past Lake Kamo, known for its oyster farming, and off into the countryside to start my adventure.

Seisuiji temple, tucked away amongst the ancient cedars at the heart of Sado Island, would be my first stop of the day. Upon reaching my destination I walked up the mossy stone approach to the main complex. It is said that the temple at Seisuiji is an imitation of the famed Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto, and although it was small, old, and decaying, I was thrilled by its magnificent style and mysterious appearance.

Next, I traveled further south to the port of Ogi to experience a ride in one of Sado's traditional 'fishing tubs.' These have been used by the locals for centuries to catch hauls of abalone and turban shellfish from the nearby coastal waters. I purchased a ticket from the Yajima Taiken Koryukan (Yajima Experience and Exchange Center) and went to board a tub boat in the adjacent harbor, which is noted for its charming red arch bridge that marks the way out to sea.





Take a pleasant drive around the island to enjoy the countryside. Relax by taking a tub boat ride operated by the local women.



Shukunegi, the most fascinating townscape in Sado, retains an old-fashioned Japanese atmosphere. With more than 300 temples and shrines, you will have fun finding your favorite places. Chokokuji, is particularly photogenic.

The tubs are operated by boatwomen wearing quaint straw hats called 'Okesagasa.' It is customary for the local women to wear these hats while dancing to the 'Okesa,' an old Sado folk song, and you'll hear its mesmerizing rhythms flow from the Exchange Center as you bob up and down around the harbor on your mini excursion.

In the Edo and Meiji periods, Ogi acted as a goods storage point for northern-bound merchant ships traversing the Sea of Japan. At the time, almost all the residents from the nearby village of Shukunegi were involved in the shipping industry. The village is distinguished by rows of crowded wooden workers' houses that still stand to this day. Built out of ship planks, they have been designated as 'Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings' by the Japanese government, and three of the private residences are open to the public for a small fee.

I advanced through the mazy streets of densely packed homes on route to the unmissable Seikuro, a splendid 180-year-old shipown-

er's mansion and a testament to the sublime carpentry skills of the early 19th century shipbuilders who lived out on Sado. These master craftsmen were said to be able to erect houses with ease but saved their best efforts for the construction of the 'Sengoku Bune' cargo ships that were also built in the village. A replica is on show at the Ogi Folk Museum in Shukunegi.

With nightfall approaching, I made my way up to Mano village, where I stayed at the Itouya Ryokan, a Japanese style inn, for the night.

The next morning I was up before sunrise and drove east to the terraced rice fields of Iwakubi, the only place in Japan that is recognized as a World Agricultural Heritage site. The gold rush on Sado meant the island witnessed rapid population growth, and as the scale of settlements increased, so did the creation of the rice terraces in order to feed the island's new inhabitants.

Sadly as the gold mines fell into decline, the rice fields followed suit; however, after many years of neglect, they are slowly being restored to

their former glory thanks to the efforts of the local population. As the sun rose and illuminated the rice paddies around me, I was reminded about all the hardships that Sado's ancestors must have faced when cultivating such an unforgiving mountainous landscape.

After leaving Iwakubi, I called in at the historic Sado Kinzan gold mine. It consists of almost 400 km of claustrophobic dark tunnels and was in operation for 380 years. There are numerous routes you can take to investigate the mines, and I enjoyed the Sodayu-kou and Douyu-kou courses that allowed me to view the original hand-dug and industrialized Meiji-era sites. Each takes about 30 minutes to complete.

With only a little time left before I had to return to Niigata, I made one final stop at Chokokuji temple on the way back to the port. I paused to say a little prayer in front of a small 'jizo' statue, and as I did so, I felt it telling me to come back to Sado Island again one day, and with much more still to explore I'm sure I will. **I**

HOW TO GET THERE

Ferries depart for the Sado Island from Naoetsu and Niigata Port.

- To Ryotsu Port: 2 hrs 30 mins by ferry, 70mins by jetfoil from Niigata Port.
- To Ogi Port: 100 mins from Naoetsu Port.

Additional Information:

SEARCH into sado





IZU Islands

*Tokyo's offshore islands
are rich with nature*

Tokyo Metropolis contains over 100 islands, 11 of which are permanently inhabited. The Izu Islands, a group of nine, are abundant in nature, with wild coastal hot springs. On this trip, I went to Izu Oshima and Shikinejima, popular destinations for fishing or relaxing even in the winter.

I boarded a large Tokai Kisen passenger ship at Takeshiba Pier. Our destination would be Shikinejima, 160 km south of Tokyo. As we departed at 10 p.m., I savored the view of Tokyo's glistening skyline. Upon reaching the open sea, the only light still visible were the stars in the night sky. I made my way down to my cabin to sleep, arriving in Shikinejima at 9 a.m. the next day.

Japan is said to be famous for its onsen, hot baths filled with steaming volcanic water. These natural hot springs can be found throughout the nation with water quality and style differing depending on the location. The hot springs of Shikinejima are extremely wild, the high-quality spring water often mixing directly with the ocean. This has led to a number of top onsen critics to name them as some of east Japan's finest.

You'll find three open air seaside baths out here: Jinata Onsen, Ashitsuki Onsen, and Matsugashita-miyabi-yu. All three can be used free of charge, you just need your swimwear. I dropped my luggage off at my accommodation for the night and started my tour of the coastal hot springs. All three are close enough to each other to be done in a day on foot.

I arrived at Jinata Onsen on the south coast after walking through a V-shaped valley that looks like a rocky mountain split by a hatchet. Here the rock pools act as natural baths, and you can see the hot water bubbling up inside them. I placed my feet where the temperature was just right, thanks to the incoming waves of seawater mixing with the boiling hot springs. My body gradually warmed up, while the added sea breeze kept me feeling fresh.

After that, I ventured to Matsugashita-miyabi-yu, which is used by locals throughout the day. Its water is adjusted to be just the right



A great section of tephra layers in a rock face. A spectacular sight that spreads 600 meters along the coast. Izu Oshima, a volcanic island is certified as one of Japan's Geoparks.



temperature 24 hours a day. The hot springs here can be a little hard to find as they are hidden away amongst the coastal rocks, but it does mean you can have some fun exploring all the rock pools in a quest to find your favorite bath.

In the evening, I had a go at gyotaku fish rubbing print at Minshuku Suzutoyo, an inn where fishing lovers like to gather. Gyotaku is a form of art that involves painting fish with ink before pressing them on to cloth to make a detailed print of the fish. This old Japanese custom has become a rarity in modern Japanese culture. Around the inn, you can see gyotaku demonstrating the sizes of fish that can be caught around Shikinejima.

The next morning I went fishing on the pier. Fish can be easily spotted in the highly transparent coastal waters, and despite only catching one fish, I found it to be a relaxing experience.

That afternoon I left for Izu Oshima on the high-speed jet ferry. The island, an hour away to the north, is registered as a Japan Geopark due to its natural beauty, shaped by a series of volcanic eruptions.

When I arrived, I drove from the port to the Tsubaki-hana Garden. More than 400 different types of tsubaki (camellia) flowers come to

Shikinejima has a long history as an island for therapeutic bathing. Fishing and swimming in the beautiful turquoise sea are also popular. Visit unusual inns to practice 'gyotaku' fish printing.

bloom here, and if you make your way to the top of the hill, you get a magnificent view of Mt. Fuji standing tall in the distance across the ocean.

Next, I went east, stopping off at Senzu-no-kiritoshi, a popular photo spot. A narrow staircase runs between two giant trees with thick roots. It is a mysterious place that resembles an entrance to another world.

I then walked around Ura-sabaku, the only desert in Japan, at the foot of Mt. Mihara. Dark brown scoria spread out in front of me, making the place look like a lunar surface. It was very quiet, almost silent even, except for the sound of the wind and my footsteps.

From Ura-sabaku, I went to a village called Habu in the southern

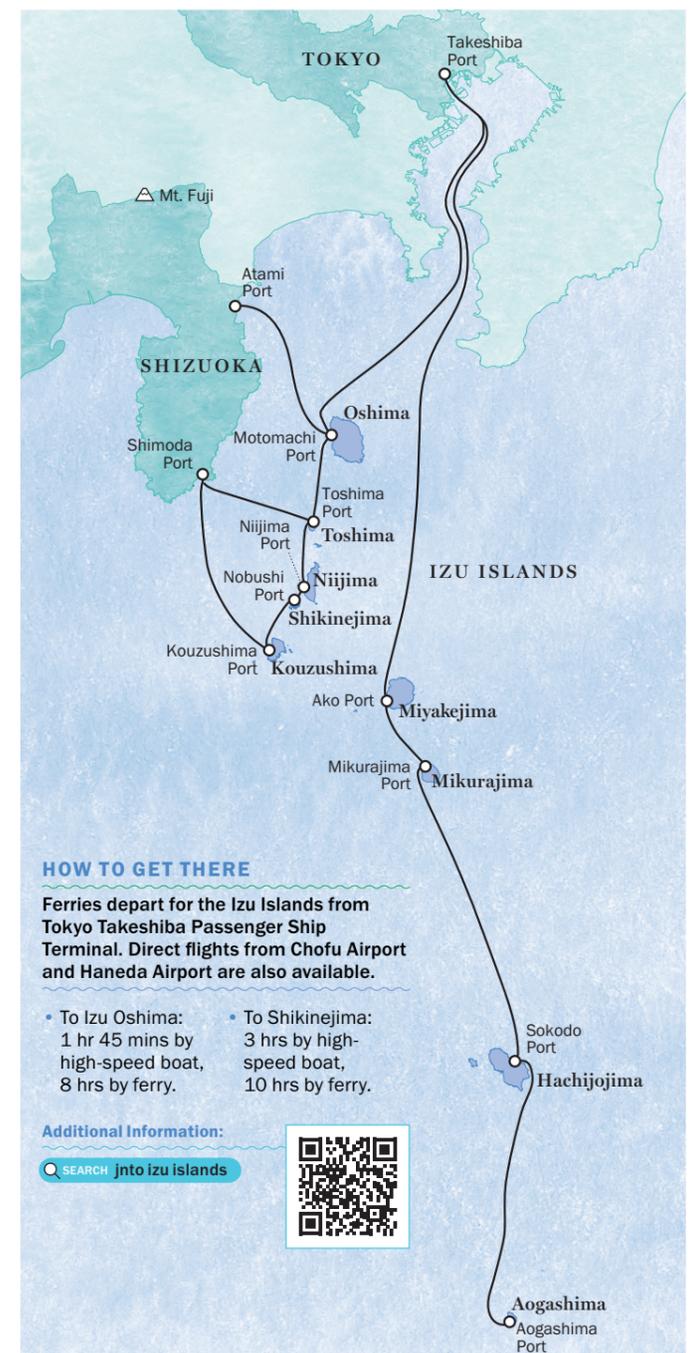
The soil on Izu Oshima varies in color, including red and black. From Akappage, Mt. Fuji looks stunning beyond the sea. Senzu-no-kiritoshi is a popular photo spot.

part of the island. An old-fashioned townscape still remains, and I visited a popular taiyaki confectionery shop called Bonten. As I ate the delicious fish-shaped cakes that are filled with red bean paste or custard, I reminisced about times gone by. The homely family run-shop, now such a rarity in modern Japan, reminded me of a long-gone era.

Driving north in a clockwise direction, I came across a significant section of tephra layers in a rock face, which extends for 600 m along the roadside. Repeated volcanic eruptions during the last 20,000 years have formed a beautiful pattern, and I was fascinated by this natural work of art.

The following day I stopped by the Akappage volcanic vent near Motomachi Port before my ship set sail. Red scoria is deposited around the quay, making a stark contrast with the blue of the sea. Again I could see the iconic Mt. Fuji filling up the horizon.

Time slows down on these peaceful islands, with the hot springs, desert, and views of Mt. Fuji all showcasing that Tokyo has much more to offer than just the bright lights and bustle of the city. **1**



OKI Islands

*Get back in touch
with nature*

Steep cliffs topped with unique flora and fauna rise out of the ocean alongside strangely shaped rocks weathered over millennia. Welcome to Oki, a registered UNESCO Global Geopark, that allows you to get back in touch with Mother Nature.

I arrived in Dogo, the largest and most populated of Oki's four inhabited islands, via ferry from Honshu and headed southwest towards the fishing village of Tsuma to take in the old-fashioned wooden 'Funagoya' boathouses that line the shore of the harbor. These Funagoya are used to protect the fishing boats from the wind and rain and give you a glimpse of a more traditional fishing industry that has become outdated in most parts of Japan.

After Tsuma, I turned my attention to Dogo's three famed Japanese cedar trees. These giant specimens are easily accessible without any need for mountain walks and have been celebrated for centuries due to their colossal size and mysterious shapes that give them an almost otherworldly atmosphere. You'll find the Yao-sugi at Tamawakasu-mikoto Shrine, the six-trunked Kabura-sugi next to Route 316 towards the north of the island, and Chichi-sugi on Mt. Daimanji.

Early that evening, I booked myself onto the Candle Island Sightseeing Boat tour, one of the Oki Islands' most popular tourist attractions. Candle Island is a long narrow rock that protrudes from the ocean. When the sun sets and rests on its summit, it resembles a gigantic candle that has been thrust into the sea.

The scene might be one of Japan's most beautiful natural phenomena, and I was excited to finally get a chance to see it. Sadly it was cloudy during my visit; however, the disappointment was short-lived as the tour also enables you to witness a number of the Oki Islands UNESCO Global Geopark's more interesting coastal rock formations.

My final stop on Dogo was the long-established Japanese confectionery store called Shugetsudo, so I could try their famed Sazae Monaka. This scrumptious sweet consists of wafers filled with red-bean paste shaped like a turban shellfish and is not to

The beautiful Red Cliff of Chiburi. Oki is six million years old and has been shaped by eons of intense volcanic activity and erosion. Its current form was sculpted about 10,000 years ago.



On Kuniga Beach you'll find the most magnificent cliff face in Oki. The islands are home to many unusually shaped rocks such as Saburo-iwa, and Candle Island. Boat tours provide the best views.



Cows and horses graze idyllically on the grasslands of Chiburi's Mt. Akahage. Chichi-sugi cedar, the god of Oki. Seafood, a specialty of the islands, can be eaten at local inns.



be missed. On leaving Dogo, it was time to explore Oki's three other inhabited 'Dozen Islands' (Nishinoshima, Nakanoshima, and Chiburijima). First was Nakanoshima for a semi-submersible undersea boat tour departing from Hishiura Port in Ama Town.

The tour is called 'AMANBOW,' and our initial stop was at a set of rocks named 'Saburo-iwa,' or 'The Three Brothers.' These three slabs stand tall out of the ocean and, like much of the Oki Islands, are capped in lush vegetation. As we continued, I ventured down to the underwater deck to observe the sub-aquatic environment and particularly relished watching fish dart in and out of the white oceanic rocks.

I then hopped over to Chiburijima as I wanted to climb Mt. Akahage. I'd been told that it offered the best views in all of Oki and was eager to experience it myself. It certainly lived up to its promise. The observation deck delivers an exquisite panorama of the 'Dozen Caldera,' an inland sea surrounded by the ring of the Dozen Islands, which was formed by a massive volcanic eruption and ensuing sea erosion.

The vistas of the rugged grassy terrain were captivating, as was the

sweet scent of the white clematis flowers which were in bloom during my stay. Looking over the caldera was a real treat, and I felt like I had stepped foot into one of our planet's most idyllic scenes.

Mt. Akahage also offers up some fantastic sights of its own. The long dry stone walls used to delineate the fields of the historical Makihata rotation farming still stretch for miles. The system made use of crop rotation and animal grazing in order to sustainably cultivate the barren volcanic land.

I traveled to Sekiheki or 'Red Cliff' for the final leg of my jaunt around Chiburijima. Situated on the island's west coast, the rock face looks as if it has been rendered by a great painter, and is composed of layers of bright red magma separated by bands of gray rock. I found the cliff to be a dramatic reminder of the violent forces that shaped the Earth millions of years ago.

My final destination was Nishinoshima, where I headed to Mt. Takuhi, the highest peak in Dozen. My first stop was the Takuhi Shrine, esteemed for its spiritual aura. The shrine sits behind a huge

Japanese cedar tree and is built directly into a cave: it is a wonderful example of the fine integration between the islanders' faith and nature.

The high point of any excursion to Nishinoshima is the Kuniga coast. The wind-battered Matengai Cliff stands 257 meters above the sea and is touted as world-class scenery. You can get a magnificent view of the Kuniga coastline from the walking track near the top of Matengai Cliff, and Akao Lookout, however, taking a coastline cruise is your best bet if you truly want to appreciate its scale and beauty.

The rocky cliffs extend for about 7 kilometers and are accompanied by an assortment of different shaped stacks that have been carved by the waves over many years. One of the most exciting moments of the cruise was when we exited the calm waters of the Dozen Caldera and ventured into the rougher waters of the Sea of Japan.

The change hit me in an instant and made me realize that it is Mother Nature who is ultimately in charge of this distant Japanese outpost: the perfect ending to my journey around the Oki Islands UNESCO Global Geopark. **1**

HOW TO GET THERE

Ferries depart for the Oki Islands from Shichirui Port and Sakaiminato Port. Direct flights from Osaka Itami Airport to Oki Airport (Dogo) are also available.

- To Dogo: 80 mins by high-speed boat, 2 hrs 30 mins by ferry from Shichirui Port.
- To Dozen: 1 hr 30 mins to 2hrs by high-speed boat from Shichirui Port, 2 hrs 30 mins to 3 hrs 10 mins by ferry from Sakaiminato Port.

Additional Information:

SEARCH into oki islands





SETOUCHI

Islands

Islands of countless opportunity and beauty

Setouchi, an inland sea surrounded by Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu, is populated with numerous islands. I traveled to Honjima and Shodoshima, two of the Shiwaku Islands. Each isle has made its mark on Japanese history, the former through its military traditions, and the latter through handed down culinary practices.

Honjima, once called 'Shiwaku-jima,' was home to the revered Shiwaku Navy. Able to maneuver the treacherous local waters, these highly skilled sailors were exceptional ship-handlers, who were often hired by military commanders, or the shogunate. As time passed, they evolved into expert shipbuilders, utilizing their prior knowledge and experience to craft much sought after ocean vessels.

To get to Honjima I took the short 35-minute ferry crossing from Marugame in Kagawa Prefecture to Tomari Port. Around the island, you'll come across artwork and venues from the Setouchi Art Festival, some of which are related to the Shiwaku Navy. A work of particular note is a sculpture of the Kanrin-maru, the first Japanese ship to traverse the Pacific Ocean. Items brought back from the voyage are on display at Shiwaku Kinbansho.

Arriving at Kasashima, I felt like I had been transported into a historical samurai drama. The area is designated as one of Japan's Important Preservation Districts for Groups of Traditional Buildings, and it includes about 100 houses built by the Shiwaku Carpenters, showcasing their trademark imaginative and delicate touches. The houses date from the Edo and Meiji periods, and today at 'Sanagi House,' you'll find the Kasashima Machinami Hozon Center, where you can meet and chat with the locals.

"This architecture has no style or rules. The Shiwaku Carpenters were flexible and made everything in accordance with the customer's wishes," says the old man who also serves as my tour guide. "Everyone



The Kasashima area on Honjima retains the appearance of Japan from 400 years ago. Some houses are more than 100 years old. As you walk around you'll feel like you've slipped back in time.



Shiwaku Kinbansho, on Honjima, is an ex-government office, which was once given the right to govern the island autonomously. From Kasashima, you can view the beautiful Seto Ohashi Bridge.

Shodoshima is one of the most important islands in Japan when it comes to food culture. Tenobe somen noodle making is a popular activity for tourists. Plum ice cream can be eaten at Shodoshima Furusato Mura.

on the island is a descendant of the navy, a descendant of the carpenter!" he continues, with a big smile on his face, clearly taking pride in the skill and craftsmanship of his ancestors.

If you go out to the coastland on the east side of Kasashima, you'll see the Seto Ohashi Bridge. It has been built across the eastern Shiwaku Islands, spanning the complex ocean currents that were once navigated by Shiwaku's sailors. The bridge itself could be classed as a work of modern art, possibly an unintentional homage to the inventive, creative people that have long inhabited the archipelago.

After arriving at Tonosho Port, the entrance to Shodoshima, I headed for my first destination, a 1000-year-old olive tree transplanted from Spain. The tree has a thick trunk, branches, and leaves, giving me the impression it was enjoying life in its 'new' home. Olive cultivation began here more than 100 years ago. It is the only place in Japan that has succeeded in growing olives since the government first tested the idea, mainly thanks to a warm mild climate, little rain, and well-drained soil.

"When people enter elementary school, we are given olive seedlings to plant in our gardens," I was told by one of the locals. Watching the trees grow is important to the islanders, who liken the trees to family members. You'll find olive trees all over the place: by roadsides, in

gardens, or on hills overlooking the ocean, and they help create a truly photogenic scenery.

After lunch at a restaurant called 'Nonoka' in the Kusakabe district, and a wayside plum ice cream, the Yamaroku soy sauce brewery in Hishio-no-sato was next on my itinerary. Soy sauce has been made on Shodoshima for over 400 years due to a climate that is perfect for culturing yeast, while the raw materials required are easily procured, since salt manufacturing, import, and export, has long been active on the island.

I was given a guided tour of the brewery's dark warehouse, by its current owner. The warehouse contains several huge wooden barrels, in which 'moromi,' the base mixture from which soy sauce is produced is fermented. Amazingly, some of the barrels are 150 years old and still in active use.

"This is how soy sauce should really be made," he says. However, nowadays, only 1% of all Japanese soy sauce manufacturers are using wooden barrels in the fermentation process. As the art of making 'real' soy sauce, a cornerstone of Japanese cooking, is seemingly being lost to modernization, it was pleasing to witness the original techniques still being utilized here at the brewery.

Somen noodles, another unmissable aspect of Japanese cuisine,

have also been produced on the island for as long as the soy sauce. Again, access to raw ingredients and a suitable climate has aided this industry, and I jumped at the chance to have a go at 'splitting' and tasting these incredibly fine fresh noodles at Nakabu-an. Chopsticks are used to stretch the noodles and make them thinner and thinner. The dough is very elastic and hard to break, creating a delightfully flavoursome noodle.

I finished off my trip by performing Gomadaki, the Buddhist custom of burning wood sticks, at Mt. Goishizan, where you can look out over the town of Tonosho. I ventured into a small cave-like hole to say a little prayer. As the Buddhist priest's Heart Sutra echoed around the cave, along with the crackle of flames, I reflected on the endless charm of Shodoshima and thought about what an extraordinary time I'd had tracing the history of some of Japan's most iconic food. **1**

HOW TO GET THERE

Ferries depart for the Setouchi Islands from Kagawa, Okayama and Hyogo prefectures.

- To Shodoshima:
35 mins from Takamatsu Port.
70 mins from Shin-Okayama Port.
100 mins from Himeji Port.
- To Honjima:
35 mins from Marugame Port.
30 mins from Kojimakanko Port.





GOTO

Islands



Lunch at Fujimatsu. This restaurant, inside a renovated old house, is well worth a look. The chef is an island native, cooking Japanese cuisine that uses locally sourced ingredients.

A relaxing and healing journey

Many visit Nagasaki's Goto Islands for the Christian churches, registered World Heritage Sites that tell the story of Japan's Hidden Christians, forced to practice their religion in secret. You'll also be able to enjoy leisurely walks, calling in at stylish cafés and restaurants dotted around the archipelago.

There are numerous exciting opportunities for sightseeing on Goto's Fukuejima with Dozaki Church, Takahama Beach, and the Onidake volcano particular highlights. This time, however, I opted for a more relaxing tour of the island.

I arrived at Fukuejima at 11:30 am on the morning jetfoil from Nagasaki Port. The journey takes one and a half hours. Upon arrival, I headed straight for the second-hand bookstore Hondoko Teruteru to meet the owner who would be my tour guide for the day.

Our trip began with lunch at the Goto Cafe, which doubles up as Fukuejima's most popular souvenir shop. Many of the dishes pay tribute to the island's notable tourist attractions, so I ordered a 'Lava Curry' in homage to the Onidake volcano, washing it down with an 'Osezaki Lighthouse Parfait.' The parfait was particularly plentiful, full of sweet potato confectionery, a Fukuejima delicacy. On my way out, I stocked up on souvenirs, including cosmetics containing high-quality oils extracted from the island's famous tsubaki flowers.

We set off for our next stop, the Kojushi Goto Tsubaki Bussankan, by car to observe some salt production techniques. Manufacturers obtain the mineral by boiling seawater in large pots on wood fires. They liken their efforts to creating works of art, explaining that it is necessary to keep a delicate balance of salty, bitter, sour, and sweet flavors to make the perfect salt. The resulting cubic or pyramidal crystals certainly looked as good as they tasted. With a little time to spare, we stopped by the stunning Kojushi beach to sample its golden sands glistening in the afternoon sunshine.



Dozaki Cathedral and Takahama Beach, with its beautiful blue sea, a highlight of any trip to Fukuejima. You can also enjoy visiting local cafes, along with a new bakery in the Fuefuki area.



In Arakawa on Fukuejima you'll find onsen and foot spas. Renovated old houses on Ojikajima are now used as inns and a restaurant. A traditional letterpress printing shop.

Back on the road, we headed for Arakawa, a harbor town in the west of the Fukuejima that was once a lively port of call for fishing boats. Wandering around you still get a feel for its previous incarnation, the narrow alleyways are lined with retro signs of the businesses once popular with the fishermen.

One of the town's main draws is the hot springs. Drop-in facilities are available, in addition to the foot spas at the bus stop. Ready for some relaxation, we made use of the drop-in at the Takenoya Inn ryokan, which has been operating for over 100 years. All freshened up from my soak in the volcanic waters, I spent some time chatting with the old lady who helps run the inn before we went off to the day's final destination, the Osezaki Lighthouse Observatory in Tamanoura.

It is situated among 80 bays with their headlands protruding out to sea. From here the views of the island are mesmerizing. So much so, that I lost track of time until the darkness of night fell after sunset.

The next day I traveled to Ojikajima by ferry. It's a small island in the north of Goto that can be cycled around in a day. Fuefuki, the gateway to this remote outpost, is composed of a fishing port surrounded by a village. It is the ideal size to be explored on foot, so my morning started with a walking adventure.

Narrow alleyways, accessible from Fuefuki Hon-dori street, form a

maze between the quaint houses. In a back alley, I came across a letterpress printing shop called Shinkosha, a rare sight in Japan. For over a century, dignified old-fashioned printing presses have been handed down from generation to generation, and the store now resembles a museum with its movable type lining the walls of the atelier.

Continuing along the same passageway, I made my way down some steps. I was hit by the smoke and aromas exuding from a store called Marujin Suisan. I struck up a conversation with the shop's master, who was making half-dried bonito by placing fish in a wooden box placed on top of a smoking machine, carefully adjusting the intensity of the fire in the kiln below.

Electric bicycles can be rented from Fuefuki, allowing you to get around Ojikajima at an easy-going pace. Now on two wheels, I decided to have lunch at a restaurant called Fujimatsu. It's an eatery tucked away inside a renovated old house in the northeast of the island. The

chef, a native of the isle, dishes up fare that can compete with Japan's top high-end restaurants. Believe me when I say it is worth visiting Ojikajima just for this lunch alone, with the exquisite fish, vegetables, and rice on the menu all locally sourced.

More than satisfied I resumed my cycling tour, taking in the red stones and sand of the Akahama coast, and the tunnel-shaped pine forest called Hime-no-matsubara, before finally returning to the rental

shop in Fuefuki to drop off my bike.

Traveling around Goto at a leisurely pace, I was able to mingle with the islanders and eat delicious food, all while feeling the healing powers of the islands' natural environment. Choosing to follow my heart by going 'off the beaten track' made the trip even more memorable. I believe this is the right way to experience the charms of Japan's remotest islands. **I**

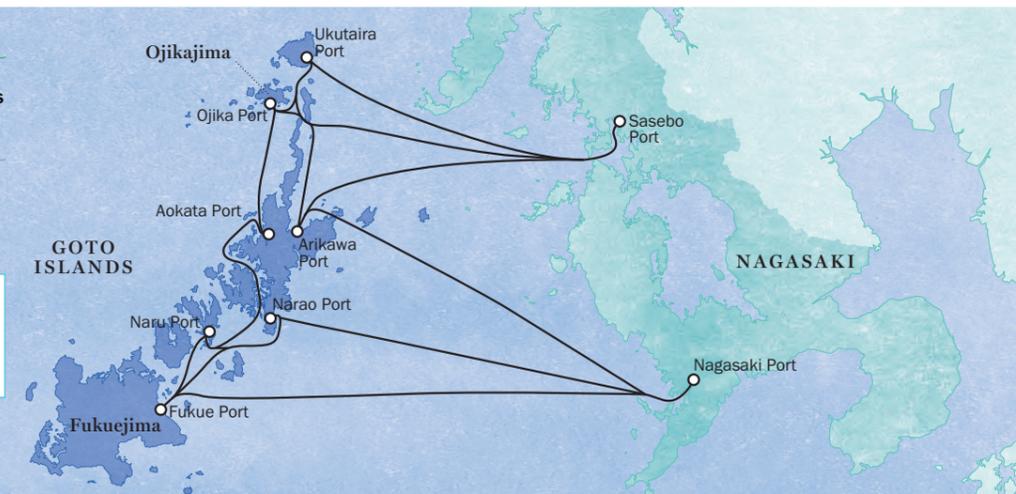
HOW TO GET THERE

Ferries depart for the Goto Islands from Nagasaki Port and Sasebo Port. Direct flights from Nagasaki Airport and Fukuoka Airport to Fukuejima are also available.

- To Fukuejima: 90 mins from Nagasaki Port.
- To Ojikajima: 90 mins from Sasebo Port.

Additional Information:

SEARCH into nagasaki islands



OSUMI Islands

YAKUSHIMA & TANEGASHIMA



Urata Beach on Tanegashima. Its turquoise waters, as beautiful as any from tropical climes, can be enjoyed by non-surfers too. The moss-green world of Yakushima's Shiratani Un-suijyo.



Explore two contrasting offshore islands

Kagoshima's Osumi Islands present two differing isles to traverse. One is Tanegashima. Long, flat, narrow, historic, with its space center, surf, and guns. The other is Yakushima. Tall, circular, mountainous, green, with its ancient cedars, wildlife, and unspoiled forests. Visit both, for each will revitalize you in its own special way.



On Tanegashima, you can see real space rockets on a JAXA facility tour. On Yakushima, try some Yakusugi cedar craft work.



Yakushima has Yakusugi trees that are thousands of years old, including the Kigen-sugi. Okawa Falls boasts of the highest drop in Kyushu.



After a one-hour boat ride from Kagoshima, I docked at Nishinoomote Port in the northern part of Tanegashima. My journey began with a drive down the west coast. As I headed south, I admired the oceanic views, gripped by the heavy swell, along with the shifting colors of the sea and sand.

I passed through the town of Nakatane and negotiated a narrow road flanked by sugarcane fields on both sides. Tall and full of life, these plants reflected the light of the sun as they shook all at once in the wind. A little while later, sugarcane gave way to pink bougainvillea flowers, a timely reminder that I was traveling in one of Japan's southern regions.

My destination was the Tanegashima Space Center in Minamitane. First, I visited The Museum of Space Science and Technology to learn more about the latest space developments. This was followed up with a guided tour of the space center. It grants access to areas usually off-limits to the public, including the launch facilities, rocket warehouses, and control center. Our guide informed us Tanegashima is known as the most beautiful rocket launch site in the world, its launch pad set on the cusp of brilliant blue waters.

Adjacent to the space center is the Takezaki coast, it hosts a number of Japan's top surfing competitions and is recognized as one of Japan's most iconic surf locations. I stopped by to see many surfers riding the evening waves. The sun started to set, turning the sea a vibrant shade of gold as it mirrored the twilight sky. I stood still and listened to the sound of the tide and suddenly felt at peace, opening my eyes just in time to catch the silhouette of a surfer riding a wave in the distance. It made for a fantastic sight.

There are plenty of opportunities to get your feet wet on Tanegashima with the likes of canoeing, sea kayaking, diving, and boat cruises all available. The next day I had the chance to experience canoeing in the world's northernmost natural mangrove forest at Kunigami in Nishinoomote. Time passed slowly while navigating the verdant mangrove tunnels, emphasizing Tanegashima's ability to heal the mind and soul through rest and relaxation.

The passenger boats that connect Tanegashima and Yakushima run several times a day. Upon arriving at Yakushima's port of Miyanoura, I was immediately drawn towards the tall mountains watching over me as alighted. Part of the island is registered as a World Natural Heritage Site, and it is particularly famous for its 'yakusugi' cedar trees. These trees are over 1000 years old and grow naturally 500 meters above sea level.

First of all, I went to take a closer look at the impressive Kigen-sugi Cedar. This 20-meter tall natural landmark is actually an amalgamation of 10 different types of plant wrapped around the huge trunk of a giant 3000-year-old cedar. It is easily accessible and just a short walk from the car park.

About 600 meters above sea level is the Shiratani Unsuikyo Ravine, an area dotted with enormous yakusugi trees. It is one of Yakushima's most popular hiking locations, and rainwear, hiking shoes, and backpacks can all be rented on the island in advance of setting off on your hike. After donating some money towards forest conservation at the information center, I started my walk. Soon I came across a group of

large granite rocks; water was flowing gracefully between them to form a waterfall.

This was one of many alluring waterfalls on Yakushima, which is said to be an 'island of water.' Annual precipitation is four to five times that of Tokyo, and the abundance of water has helped the yakusugi trees grow slowly over the years in spite of the poor soil conditions on the island. As a result, the yakusugi growth rings are extremely fine compared to cedars in other parts of Japan, and the trees are much older.

Back in the forest, a dusky moss-green world was spreading out before my eyes, covering any rocks and stumps in its path. Small shoots were also sprouting to life. As I witnessed the mystery of this microscopic world before me, my heart filled with a pleasant feeling of adventure, the senses of time and direction gradually fading away.

Finally, I reached Taikoiwa Rock, the goal of my hiking trail, which is supposed to have great views of the island. Unfortunately, on the day of my visit there was a thick fog, and I was engulfed in pure white clouds of water vapor. As I laid back on a large round rock, I started to feel like I'd been transported to a distant extraterrestrial planet.

On my way back down through the ravine, a Yaku-shika deer made a surprise appearance, perhaps to wish me luck on my way. These wild deer, along with the Yakushima macaques, are often spotted on the uninhabited western side of the island, but I didn't expect to see one at Shiratani Unsuikyo. It was a fitting end to a wonderful and contrasting journey through Yakushima and Tanegashima.

HOW TO GET THERE

Ferries depart for the Osumi Islands from Kagoshima Port. Direct flights from Kagoshima Airport are also available.

- To Tanegashima: 100 mins by high-speed boat, 3 hrs 30 mins by ferry.
- To Yakushima: 2 to 3 hrs by high-speed boat, 4 hrs by ferry.

Additional Information: [SEARCH jnto kagoshima](#)

The map shows Kagoshima at the top, with a line connecting to Nishinoomote Port on Tanegashima. From Tanegashima, a line goes to Miyanoura Port on Yakushima, and another line goes to Anbou Port on Yakushima. The Osumi Islands are also labeled.

YAEYAMA Islands

Head to the southern islands where ancient traditions live on

Yaeyama forms the southern and westernmost tip of the Japanese archipelago. Surrounded by beautiful seas, you'll be welcomed by a warm subtropical climate. As you walk around the islands, you'll meet the passionate locals who delight in preserving their traditions, culture, and environment for future generations.

A 90-minute drive from the city center of Ishigakijima is the Hirakubosaki Lighthouse. Located at the northern end of the island, many tourists call in to enjoy panoramic views of the neighboring coral reefs. Looking out towards the shallows at the white crashing waves, the alluring shades of blue coral caught my gaze. This was surely the most gorgeous seascape in all of Japan.

From the lighthouse, the next port of call was Shisa Farm near Yonehara Beach. The site was filled with large shisa statues made from the local Yoneko-yaki pottery. Shisa is a mythical guardian: part lion, part dog. And you'll often see them placed at the entrance of houses throughout the Okinawa region to ward off evil spirits.

Pottery certainly has its place on the island. The Ishigaki-yaki pottery, founded more than 20 years ago, is characterized by its 'Yuteki Tenmoku' pattern that resembles droplets of oil. These pieces are a combination of glass and ceramics, fusing together striking dark blues and blacks. Impressively all Ishigaki-yaki and Yoneko-yaki pottery is handmade, making it well worth a visit as you make your way around Ishigakijima.

At Kabira Bay, I had time to stroll in the shallow sea before taking a ride on a glass-bottomed boat. The boat tour has several viewing points, including the gigantic Komon-shikoro corals, crimson red soft corals, giant clams, and resident fish. Seeing the vibrant ocean full of life was a truly memorable experience.



Minsa weave, a traditional Yaeyama craft, is still hand-woven by the locals. Tourists can experience making coasters at the Minsa Craft Center.

Back on land I saw cats sleeping peacefully. It was a fitting scene considering the relaxing atmosphere of the island. Suddenly I was immersed in the aromas of Awamori wafting over from the Takamine Sake Brewery down by the beach. This local liquor is an island specialty and has been made using the same methods for 70 years.

The next morning I took a Yaeyama Kanko ferry from Ishigakijima to Iriomotejima, the largest island in the Yaeyama region. The journey took us past Taketomijima, Kuroshima, and Kohamajima, three more of the islands that make up this far-flung Japanese outpost.

After 45 minutes, we arrived at Ohara Port on Iriomotejima. Straight away, I crossed over to the isle of Yubujima in a buffalo pulled cart. This once inhabited island is now a subtropical botanical garden with lots to see and do. The water buffaloes that take you between the islands had been used for agriculture, supporting the lives of the islanders. Nowadays, they have become a tourist attraction in their own right, but they are still working hard alongside the locals.

As I was driving around the island, I couldn't help but notice the road signs about the Iriomote cat. These wildcats live at altitudes up to 200 meters and have had to deal with human settlements encroaching onto their territory.

To learn more about this subspecies of leopard, visit the Iriomote Wildlife Conservation Center, which introduces the island's flora and fauna. A number of businesses in the area also hold events and campaigns raising awareness for the conservation of the Iriomote cat, in addition to teaching visitors about the local ecosystem and wildlife.

In the afternoon, I boarded a sightseeing boat on the Urauchi River, followed by some trekking to see the Mariyudu and Kanbire waterfalls. On the way to the falls, I navigated the dense jungle, which covers 90% of Iriomotejima. I felt like I would never get tired due to the vast amounts of oxygen being emitted by the deep green forest.

Eventually, I heard the sound of a waterfall. As I listened closely, I could also hear the wind blowing and birds chirping in the distance. The cascading water sent my senses into overdrive. It was a powerful feeling, one that I'll never forget.

The next day I returned to Ishigakijima. This time I tried my hand at Minsa weaving in the Minsa Craft Center. Sat in front of the weaving machine, a local woman taught me how to weave the weft. In Yaeyama, woven indigo belts called 'Minsa-fu' are made for women to give to their men when they are engaged. The strap is made up of alternating patterns consisting of the numbers four and five. The pattern symbolizes, 'a wish for eternal harmony,' representing the love and readiness of the Yaeyama women and their partners who receive the belt.

You could also say this message stands for Yaeyama itself. Its people living in harmony with nature, devoted to preserving their way of life and traditions. Inspired, I wanted to share in this spirit, so as I got back down to weaving, I started to weave with all my might. **1**

Enjoy jungle trekking on Iriomotejima. Visit Yubujima in a buffalo pulled cart, where you will find ice cream stores, cafes, and a butterfly garden.



HOW TO GET THERE

Direct flights from throughout Japan to Ishigakijima, the gateway to the Yaeyama Islands, are available. Ferries depart for the other islands from Ishigakijima.

- To Ishigakijima:
3 hrs 15 mins from Haneda Airport in Tokyo.
2 hrs 20 mins from Kansai International Airport in Osaka.

Additional Information:

SEARCH jnto okinawa



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Japan's
Islands



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