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EXPLORE JAPAN

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KYUSHU

DISCOVER NAGASAKI'S RICH HISTORY, MOUNT ASO'S VOLCANIC
ALLURE, BEPPU'S STEAMING HOT SPRINGS, AND YAKUSHIMA'S
MYSTICAL FORESTS IN JAPAN'S WILD SOUTH

Takachiho's patchwork fields and
forested hills capture the peaceful
essence of Japan's countryside

When planning a trip to Japan, Kyushu might not be near the top of your 'must-visit' list, but it really should be. The region is the perfect antidote to the crowds

of Kanto and Kansai, offering adventurous travellers the chance to get up close and personal with some incredible natural wonders and fascinating history.

The vast 36,000 square-kilometre (14,000 square-mile) island comprises seven prefectures (Fukuoka, Saga, Nagasaki, Kumamoto, Oita, Miyazaki and Kagoshima) and is dominated by active volcanoes.

Over millennia, their eruptions forged the landscape, leaving indelible scars that now make truly spectacular visitor attractions – from smoking calderas and bubbling, sulphurous hot springs to deep gorges that hide spiritual sites linked to Japan's ancient myths and folklore. Along the warm waters of the Pacific Coast, you can enjoy Japan's best surfing, and further afield – on the outlying subtropical island of Yakushima – hike in a forest of massive cryptomeria trees that have stood for thousands of years.

You won't be disappointed with Kyushu's cities, either: Nagasaki has immense historical significance, Kumamoto showcases one of Japan's most impressive feudal castles, and

Fukuoka has possibly the tastiest ramen to be found in the country.

With such an abundance of things to see and do, you owe it to yourself to get away from the well-worn tourist trail to explore the highlights of one of Japan's most rewarding regions.

WELCOME TO KYUSHU: FUKUOKA

As Kyushu's largest city – and the one with the most convenient international flight connections – Fukuoka makes a great entry point to the region. With fantastic shopping and a unique street-food dining culture, it's an ideal place to fuel up before setting off on



a larger tour of the island. The best way to do that is to head out to one of the evening open-air food stalls (*yatai*) that lines the streets of Tenjin district for a big bowl of hearty Hakata ramen, a delicious and extremely satisfying variant of *tonkotsu* (pork bone broth) ramen. Other local culinary specialties worth trying include *mentaiko* (pollock roe), whose combination of spiciness and saltiness complements rice perfectly, and *motsunabe* – a warming offal hot pot simmered with cabbage and chives.

Fukuoka Prefecture's two main cultural draws are Dazaifu and Nanzoin Temple, both of which make enjoyable half-day excursions from the city. Dazaifu lies 15 kilometres (nine miles) to the southeast of central Fukuoka, while Nanzoin is situated the same distance to the northeast.

Dazaifu was the beating administrative heart of Kyushu from the 7th to 12th centuries. It contains a collection of atmospheric, time-worn temples and the informative Kyushu National Museum, but its most famous structure is Dazaifu Tenmangu, a 1,000-year-old shrine dedicated to a 9th-century scholar, posthumously known as Tenjin. One of the region's most venerated cultural treasures, it attracts visitors from all over Japan.

Nanzoin is another highly revered religious site to visit. The Shingon Buddhist temple precinct sits beneath pristine hillside woodland in the town of Sasaguri, but it was originally built on the island of Honshu. After being threatened with destruction by anti-Buddhist authorities in 1886, Nanzoin's head priest pulled off the amazing feat of relocating the complex to Kyushu 13 years later. Today, it houses one of the largest bronze statues in the world: 42 metres (138 feet) long, the Reclining Buddha is a remarkable work of art emulating the Buddha's posture as he entered Nirvana.

NAGASAKI: HISTORY AND INFAMY

Of all Kyushu's cities, Nagasaki is the most well-known. On 9 August 1945, it became the second location in Japan (after Hiroshima) to suffer the horrors of an atomic bomb, and since then, its name has been permanently etched into global consciousness. A trip to

Nagasaki wouldn't be complete without a visit to Nagasaki Peace Park and the sobering Atomic Bomb Museum, but a wealth of other historical sites highlight the important role the area played in Japan's international affairs before the dark events of World War II.

The attractive port city was one of the first locations open to formal foreign trade (initially with Portuguese merchants in 1571), and from the mid-17th to mid-19th centuries, it was the only place in the country Europeans and Chinese were allowed to live and conduct business. On the reconstructed enclave of Dejima, you can step back in time to explore Dutch merchants' lodgings and warehouses on what used to be the tiny island Europeans were confined to. Nearby, in Nagasaki's energetic Chinatown, you can find colourful shops and eateries next to the district where the Chinese community was once segregated.

Further south, Glover Garden's stately mansions offer a contrasting glimpse into the more comfortable lifestyle afforded to the (mostly British) industrialists who lived there during the second half of the 19th century – a comparatively liberal period when Nagasaki served as a hub for the inflow of Western technology and manufacturing techniques during its industrialisation.

The most astonishing tribute to Nagasaki's intercultural history has to be Huis Ten Bosch, a sprawling resort just over an hour's drive from Nagasaki City built to resemble a 17th-century Dutch port town. Spread over 152 hectares (375 acres) on the edge of Omura Bay in Sasebo, it offers accommodation, shopping, dining, museums, theatres and theme park rides. There's nowhere else quite like it, but the more time you spend in its faux European embrace, the less time you'll have to explore real Japan.

MOUNT ASO'S CAPTIVATING CALDERA

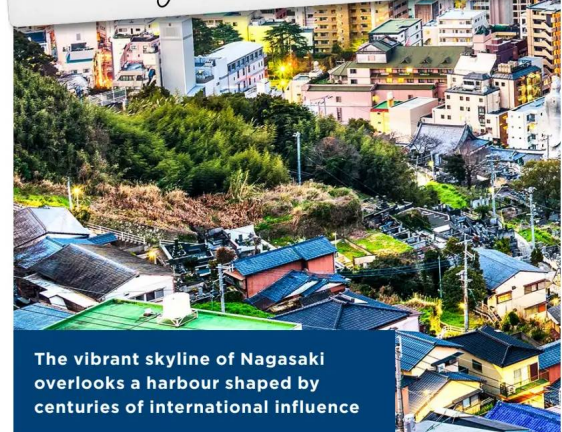
For something that is more traditionally Japanese, you can't do much better than Kumamoto Castle. Although still under reconstruction after being partially damaged in a devastating 2016 earthquake, the elegant design of the country's third-largest fortress is still worth seeing. Its formidable ramparts

Top Tip

For unlimited rides on over 2,000 Kyushu bus routes, consider getting a SunQ Pass.



Dutch-themed Huis Ten Bosch holds live entertainment shows and evening firework displays



The vibrant skyline of Nagasaki overlooks a harbour shaped by centuries of international influence



Nanzoin is the starting point of the Sasaguri Pilgrimage, where devotees visit 88 sacred Buddhist sites throughout the town's mountainous woodland



Slices of succulent pork, freshly chopped green onions, red pickled ginger and more – you can't go wrong with a bowl of Fukuoka's ramen



gaze out from their hilltop perch in the centre of Kumamoto City.

In the middle of Kyushu, rising up from the peaceful farmland of eastern Kumamoto Prefecture, is Mount Aso – the country's largest active volcano. Its past activity created one of the biggest calderas on the planet, and it still periodically bursts to life with sudden ejections of smoke, gas and ash. Despite its volatility, the volcano is an exciting and popular sightseeing spot with surprisingly easy access. Several routes lead through the caldera's rim and up to the summit along roads that are only closed during periods of increased seismic activity or snowfall. When conditions permit, visitors can take a shuttle bus right up to the edge of the Nakadake crater and enjoy an unforgettable (and humbling) view – thick clouds of superheated matter billow into the air in front of you, while far below in the distance, tiny human figures

hike around the scenic plains and surreal ponds of the Kusasenri Plateau.

On the edge of the plateau, Aso Volcano Museum details the area's mercurial history. Beginning approximately 300,000 years ago, it experienced a series of enormous eruptions, culminating in one of such magnitude that the ejecta it spewed out covered Kyushu. The caldera – which has a circumference of over 100 kilometres (62 miles) – formed as the remaining land sank into the void left behind. Eventually, several new peaks emerged at its centre, and people built settlements around and within its imposing walls.

SPECTACULAR TAKACHIHO GORGE

Just 30 kilometres (19 miles) away, in the northwest of neighbouring Miyazaki Prefecture, the town of Takachiho provides an example of Aso's destructive power. Here, the volcano's pyroclastic flows were so powerful that they flooded into the Gokase River Valley. The lava's subsequent cooling sculpted unusual rectangular basalt columns, which now encase the stunning Takachiho Gorge. Today, visitors can access the gorge by car, but it's more rewarding to descend via a hidden

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“MOUNT ASO – THE COUNTRY'S
LARGEST ACTIVE VOLCANO – STILL
BURSTS TO LIFE WITH SUDDEN
EJECTIONS OF SMOKE, GAS AND ASH”

Kusasenri Plateau provides a perfect view of Mount Aso's massive, ancient crater wall

footpath from behind the town's main shrine, Takachiho-jinja. The short hike heads down to the gorge along a tranquil riverside path that is particularly breathtaking in autumn when the fiery red foliage brings the valley to life. For a more romantic way to see Takachiho Gorge, you can rent a rowboat and view the strange rock formations and the beautiful waterfall that cascades over them at close quarters.

It isn't just geological curiosities that bring visitors to Takachiho, though; full of mysterious legends, the town has deep mythological significance. Inhabitants believe that a nearby cave was the temporary

refuge of Amaterasu (Japan's Shinto sun goddess) and that when she emerged, she brought light back to the land. Her story is crucial to the nation's founding, as one of her ancestors (Jimmu) went on to become Japan's legendary first emperor. You can watch part of Amaterasu's tale at Takachiho-jinja, where it's retold in lighthearted hour-long *Yokagura* folk dance performances, and if you visit the town during the winter months – when locals hold all-night dances at home – you might hear traditional *taiko* drums pounding out over the hills and valleys well into the daylight hours of the following morning.

Kyushu's VOLCANOES



Mount Aso might be Kyushu's biggest volcano, but there are many others. Here are some of the most impressive to visit:

Mount Unzen (Shimabara Peninsula, Nagasaki Prefecture). Unzen's 1792 disaster was the deadliest volcanic event in recorded Japanese history: 15,000 people died when a lava dome collapsed, causing a 57m (187ft) megatsunami.

Kirishima Mountains (Miyazaki and Kagoshima prefectures). The stratovolcanoes and craters of the Kirishima range make incredibly dramatic hiking. The tallest peak is Mount Karakuni, which tops out at 1,700m (5,577ft).

Sakurajima (Kagoshima Bay). Known as the Vesuvius of Japan, Sakurajima sits directly opposite Kagoshima City. It holds the title of Japan's most active volcano and frequently showers the city and its residents with ash.

Mount Kaimon (Satsuma Peninsula, Kagoshima Prefecture). Though not as volatile as the other volcanoes on this list, Mount Kaimon's perfect symmetry and ocean-edge location result in a spellbinding sight. A day-hike leads to its summit.



A drive down the dramatic Nichinan Coast reveals incredible ocean views and fascinating shrines

“YAKUSHIMA’S PRIMAEBAL TEMPERATE RAINFOREST IS INHABITED BY MILLENNIA-OLD GIANTS”

BEPPU’S HOT SPRINGS AND HELLS

On the northeast coast of Kyushu, a two-hour drive or train ride from Aso, lie the healing waters (and boiling mud pools) of Oita Prefecture’s Beppu Hatto. Beppu’s hot spring bathhouses, which number over a hundred and are spread throughout eight distinct spa areas, attract millions of visitors from all over Japan each year. The area’s intense geothermal activity (it has almost 3,000 natural vents) gives the resort serious bragging rights to the greatest volume of hot

spring water in the country, and it’s not just quantity that makes Beppu special: the variety of bathing experiences on offer is staggering. You can soak in the sulphuric waters of a traditional inn (ryokan), relax in a herbal steam bath, bask in a pool of mineral-rich mud and even be buried up to your neck in hot volcanic sand – all in the pursuit of wellness.

Beppu is also the home of seven special viewing-only hot springs known as jigoku or ‘hells’. The popular sightseeing attractions, which can reach temperatures of over 100 degrees Celsius (212 degrees Fahrenheit), come with fearsome names describing their

colours and properties: who wouldn’t be impressed by the steaming red water of ‘blood pool hell’ or by the sudden eruption of ‘tornado hell’s’ powerful geyser?

The resort’s famous features can make it quite crowded, so if you prefer a quieter, more intimate hot spring experience, try Kurokawa Onsen instead – a quaint mountain village secreted away between Beppu and Aso.

MIYAZAKI’S COASTAL SANCTUARIES

Miyazaki Prefecture boasts a stunning coastline that’s graced with charming islets, sandy beaches and unique shrines. The crown jewel is Aoshima, a tiny subtropical island located a 25-minute drive south of Miyazaki City. You can reach the island over a footbridge that runs from the end of a lane lined with shops selling mango ice cream and



sweet cheese manju buns. On the other side, a striking torii gate marks the entrance to Aoshima's sacred sanctuary, a vivid vermillion Shinto shrine hidden among palm trees and lush vegetation.

The sweeping beach that stretches away from Aoshima is just one of many in Miyazaki that attracts surfers. Lots of local breaks understandably take advantage of Miyazaki's year-round swells, but with its easy access to board rental stores, Aoshima is a great place to enjoy Japan's waves without having to bother with planning ahead.

Another dramatic Shinto shrine teeters on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Pacific, a 45-minute drive south of Aoshima. Udo Shrine is one of the most popular in Kyushu because its sprawling grounds are built around the cave where Emperor Jimmu's father is said to have been born. Inspired by the connection to Japan's divine family, visitors flock there to seek luck in childbirth

by praying and throwing small clay balls into a hole on a huge turtle-shaped boulder.

ISLAND OF GIANTS: YAKUSHIMA

Kyushu is packed with enough spectacular sights and outdoor activities to keep travellers busy for weeks, but it's the rugged, rain-soaked island of Yakushima that's the region's wildest destination. Despite being 60 kilometres (37 miles) south of the Kyushu mainland, Yakushima is part of Kagoshima Prefecture. Two things make it special: ancient, mist-shrouded cryptomeria forests and Mount Miyanoura.

Yakushima's primeval temperate rainforest is inhabited by millennia-old giants. The incredible cryptomeria (Japanese cedars) are some of the oldest trees on Earth and are so valuable that UNESCO granted a portion of the island World Heritage Site

status in 1993. Today, visitors can walk among them on the trails that snake through Yakushima's mountainous interior, a setting that wouldn't be out of place in a Jurassic Park movie. The largest tree is believed to be the 2,000 to 7,200-year-old Jomon Sugi, a monster that stands 25 metres (82 feet) tall and has a 16-metre (52-foot) circumference.

An island of superlatives, Yakushima also has Kyushu's tallest peak. Mount Miyanoura's 1,936-metre (6,352-foot) summit pierces the clouds that usually gather over the island's centre. Reaching it involves a challenging and very steep one- or two-day hike through some otherworldly scenery, such as giant granite rocks and impossibly balanced boulders that seem to have been deliberately positioned by the hand of an unseen god. Taking in the panoramic views from Kyushu's highest point after you arrive at Mount Miyanoura's summit is certainly a rewarding way to end your exploration of the region.