



CHUBU

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Introduction to the Chubu Region

Welcome to the heart of Japan, a region waiting to surprise you! Tired of the usual Tokyo-Kyoto circuit? The Chubu region offers an incredible mix of nature, culture, and authentic experiences you won't find anywhere else.

Picture this: You wake up to amazing mountain views. Then, you soak in a traditional hot spring. By afternoon, you explore ancient samurai towns. Finally, you enjoy fresh seafood as the sun sets over the ocean. That's Chubu: a compact area packed with diverse adventures. Here, modern technology combines with old traditions. Beautiful landscapes mix with lively cities. The food scene offers everything from fancy multi-course meals to hearty local dishes unique to this place.

"Chubu" literally means "central region," and its location has shaped its unique character. It's been a vital crossroads, connecting Japan's east and west. You can walk through perfectly preserved post towns on the historic Nakasendo highway, stepping back in time. Meanwhile, its rugged mountains have nurtured distinct cultures, making each of its nine prefectures a rewarding discovery.

Traveling on a mid-level budget? Chubu is your secret weapon. Accommodation, dining, and attractions are usually cheaper than in Tokyo or Kyoto. Still, the quality of your experience is excellent. Traveling is easy, thanks to high-speed Shinkansen trains. Local transport links major cities to hidden gems.

This guide is your key to unlocking Chubu.

We will explore nine prefectures.

They are:

- Niigata, Toyama, Fukui and Ishikawa along the Sea of Japan coast.
- Gifu, and Nagano in the mountains.
- Yamanashi, Shizuoka, and Aichi by the Pacific Ocean.

Each section explores what makes each prefecture unique. You'll find details on seasonal attractions, hidden gems, must-try foods, travel tips, and budget-friendly ideas.

So, get ready to explore! Get ready for an adventure! Central Japan has beautiful views, deep traditions, and great tastes that will amaze you.

How to Use This Guide

This guide helps you plan smarter, travel better, and see more of Japan beyond the usual Tokyo and Kyoto route.

It covers all nine prefectures in the Chubu region of central Japan. Each one has its own section with seasonal highlights, hidden spots, local food, access info, and useful planning tips.

Who this guide is for

This guide is ideal for first-time visitors to Japan, especially those over 30. It suits travellers on a mid-level budget who want authentic experiences without the crowds. If you enjoy culture, nature, hot springs, good food, or seasonal events, you'll find something here for you.

What's inside

Each prefecture section includes key attractions by season, suggested activities, transport details, local tips, and cost guidance. You'll also find planning advice at the end of each chapter to help you decide where to stay and how long to spend.

How to use it

You can read the guide start to finish or jump straight to the areas that interest you most.

- Browse by prefecture if you already know your route
- Scan by season if your travel dates are fixed

- Choose by interest if you're looking for hiking, festivals, coastlines, or cultural experiences
- Use the planning summaries at the end of each section for quick travel decisions

Whether you're staying in one region or travelling across Chubu, this guide is built to help you get the most out of your trip.

Suggested Itineraries

5-Day Itinerary: Mountain Towns, Castles, and Thatched Villages

Day 1 – Arrive in Matsumoto Take the Limited Express Azusa from Shinjuku Station to Matsumoto. The journey takes around 2 hours and 40 minutes with no transfers. Arrive before lunch and check in to accommodation near the castle or Nakamachi Street.



Visit Matsumoto Castle in the early afternoon. One of only a few original castles in Japan, it's fully walkable inside and still retains its wooden interiors and steep staircases. Avoid weekends if possible to dodge school trips and tour groups.

Explore Nakamachi and Nawate streets. Look for local shops selling wasabi pickles and traditional crafts. The Yohashira Shrine sits quietly at the end of Nawate and rarely draws crowds.

Dinner tip: Ask your hotel for a reservation at a local izakaya serving basashi (raw horse meat) or sanzoku-yaki (marinated fried chicken). These are two regional dishes you'll rarely find outside Nagano.

Day 2 – Day trip to Narai-juku or Kiso-Fukushima Take a local train on the JR Chuo Main Line. Narai-juku is more photogenic and compact, while Kiso-Fukushima offers better access to hiking and onsen.

In Narai, walk the fully preserved post town street before 11am to avoid daytripper crowds. The lacquerware shops often open a little late, so do the walk first and shop on the return leg. Visit Nakamura Residence if it is open.

Lunch tip: Try gohei-mochi, a rice cake glazed with miso and grilled on a stick. Several stalls sell it, but Tanakaya's version is more consistent.

Return to Matsumoto for the night. If it's Friday or Saturday, some sake breweries in the area may offer limited tastings in the late afternoon. Ask at the tourist centre inside the station.

Day 3 – Travel to Takayama Take the Nohi Bus from Matsumoto to Takayama. The route runs through the Northern Alps and takes just under 3 hours. Sit on the left side of the bus for better views.

Arrive by early afternoon and drop bags at your hotel. Walk the old town streets before they fill up with late arrivals. Most shops close around 5pm, so start with Kamisannomachi and make your way toward Takayama Jinya.

Evening tip: Head to the Miyagawa area for dinner. Look for Hida beef sushi served on rice crackers, or book ahead for a Hida beef grill restaurant. Centre4 Hamburgers is also popular with locals, not just tourists.

Day 4 – Shirakawa-go Day Trip Take the Nohi Bus from Takayama Bus Terminal to Shirakawa-go. The journey takes 50 minutes. Book the round-trip ticket in advance as buses do fill, especially in autumn and winter.



Explore Ogimachi Village on foot. Cross the suspension bridge for the best angle. Visit the Wada House early before tour groups arrive, and skip the crowded viewpoint near the parking lot in favour of the small trail behind the Gassho-zukuri Minka-en. It's quieter and offers better photos in morning light.

Lunch tip: Eat early or bring something. Most restaurants close by 2pm and seating is limited.

Return to Takayama mid-afternoon. Consider visiting the morning market the next day instead of squeezing it in now. Many stalls repeat.

Day 5 – Takayama to Nagoya (or return to Tokyo) If heading to Nagoya, take the Limited Express Hida (about 2.5 hours). If returning to Tokyo, transfer to the Shinkansen at Nagoya.

Before leaving, visit the Takayama Morning Market early. The stalls open by 7am. Look for fresh apple juice or local miso paste. Stop by the small showrooms at Takayama Festival Floats Exhibition Hall if time allows.



If you're heading home via Nagoya, you'll arrive around lunchtime. Stop at Esca Underground Mall right next to the station for hitsumabushi (grilled eel over rice) or kishimen noodles before your final train.

7-Day Itinerary: Coastal Towns, Castles, and Crafts

Day 1 – Arrive in Kanazawa Take the Hokuriku Shinkansen from Tokyo to Kanazawa. The ride takes around 2.5 to 3 hours. Drop bags at your hotel and head straight to Kenrokuen Garden before it closes. Visit midweek if possible to avoid school tours. If you arrive in autumn or cherry blossom season, check for evening illumination events.

Walk next door to Kanazawa Castle Park and continue to the Gyokusen'inmaru Garden for a less-crowded photo stop. For dinner, head to the Katamachi area. Izakaya here serve local specialties like nodoguro (blackthroat seaperch) and jibu-ni (duck stew).

Day 2 – Explore Kanazawa's districts Morning: Visit the 21st Century Museum when it opens. Skip the ticketed exhibitions if you're short on time and explore the free permanent installations. Then walk to the Nagamachi samurai district. Visit the Nomura-ke house, which is compact but beautifully preserved.

Afternoon: Take a short bus or walk to the Higashi Chaya teahouse district. Drop into a gold leaf shop for a hands-on session or buy gold leaf soft serve if available. Walk the backstreets behind the main tourist strip for quieter scenes.

Late afternoon: Visit Omicho Market for fresh seafood. The maguro-don at Mori Mori Sushi or local-style kaisendon stalls are popular and quick.

Day 3 – Noto Peninsula coastal route Rent a car in the morning (Kanazawa has multiple rental agencies near the station). Drive along the western Noto Kongo coast. Stop at Ganmon Sea Cave and Hatago Iwa rocks. If the weather is clear, continue to the rugged Sosogi coastline for dramatic cliffside views.

Lunch tip: Eat at a roadside michi-no-eki along Route 249. These local rest stops serve hot set meals with grilled fish, pickles, and local miso soup. Watch for daily sashimi specials written on handwritten boards.

End the day in Wajima. Stay overnight at a local guest house or inn. Many offer dinner featuring local seafood and Noto beef.

Day 4 – Wajima Morning Market and return to Kanazawa Wake early and walk the Wajima Morning Market before 9am. Look for lacquerware chopsticks, dried seafood, and seasonal vegetables. Some vendors offer hot scallops and miso soup from small stoves. Try freshly grilled iwagaki (rock oyster) if in season.



Visit the Wajima Kiriko Art Museum or, if it's autumn, check for a local kiriko festival float display nearby.

Drive back to Kanazawa by late afternoon and return the rental car. For dinner, explore the Kanazawa Station area or head back to Katamachi.

Day 5 – Travel to Nagoya via Gifu Take the Shirasagi Limited Express to Gifu (about 2.5 hours). Store your bags at Gifu Station and spend a few hours exploring Gifu Castle. Take the ropeway up Mount Kinka, then walk down the forest trail if you prefer a quieter descent.

If travelling in summer, check if cormorant fishing demonstrations are running along the Nagara River at night. Otherwise, continue on to Nagoya in the afternoon (about 30 minutes by local train).

Stay near Nagoya Station or Sakae district.

Day 6 – Nagoya history and food Morning: Visit Nagoya Castle. The Honmaru Palace reconstruction is worth the time, especially for the wall paintings and architecture. Arrive early to avoid school groups.

Afternoon: Head to the Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology or visit Osu shopping street for food stalls and subculture shops.

Dinner tip: Try hitsumabushi (grilled eel rice bowl) at Atsuta Horaiken or a similar local shop. If unavailable, kishimen noodles are the local comfort choice.

Day 7 – Day trip to Inuyama or Tokoname Option 1: Inuyama Castle and town Take the Meitetsu Line to Inuyama (about 30 minutes). Walk the riverside to the castle, one of the few original wooden keeps left. Visit the nearby old streets for snacks and local miso products. Optional stop at the Meiji Mura open-air museum if time allows.



Option 2: Tokoname ceramics town Take the Meitetsu Airport Line to Tokoname. Follow the Pottery Footpath, a signed walking trail with kilns, workshops, and shopfronts still using old climbing ovens. This is one of Japan's oldest pottery-producing towns.

Return to Nagoya by late afternoon and prepare for onward travel.

10-Day Itinerary: Across Chubu – Mountains, Coastlines, Hot Springs, and Cities

For travellers with time to explore both famous sights and lesser-known corners, mixing scenic rail routes, castle towns, onsen, and food stops.

Day 1 – Arrive in Nagoya Fly into Chubu Centrair or take the Shinkansen from Tokyo or Kyoto. Stay near Nagoya Station for access to rail and local buses.

Visit Atsuta Shrine and its peaceful grounds, or explore Osu for snack stalls and electronics shops. For dinner, try Nagoya's miso-katsu or tebasaki chicken wings at a local izakaya.

Day 2 – Inuyama day trip Take the Meitetsu Line to Inuyama. Walk to Inuyama Castle, one of Japan's oldest surviving wooden keeps. Climb to the top for river views and continue through the surrounding castle town for grilled rice dumplings, local miso shops, and coffee houses.

If time allows, visit the Meiji Mura open-air museum or Japan Monkey Park nearby.

Return to Nagoya for a second night.

Day 3 – Travel to Takayama (Gifu Prefecture) Take the Limited Express Hida to Takayama (around 2.5 hours). Arrive before lunch and head straight to the old town. Start at Kamisannomachi, then visit Takayama Jinya.

Late afternoon: Walk to Higashiyama Temple Area or relax in the small Shiroyama Park above the town.

Stay in a local ryokan or guesthouse with onsen.

Day 4 – Day trip to Shirakawa-go Take the Nohi Bus to Shirakawa-go in the morning. Walk the main streets of Ogimachi Village and visit one or two gassho-zukuri homes, like Wada House. Head to the quieter trail behind the open-air museum for a better view without the tour group noise.

Return to Takayama for a second night. Dine on Hida beef or try one of the small counter-only yakitori bars near the station.

Day 5 – Takayama to Matsumoto (Nagano Prefecture) Take the highway bus to Matsumoto via the scenic route (about 2.5 -- 3 hours). Arrive in time for lunch and visit Matsumoto Castle in the early afternoon.

Spend the rest of the day walking the Nakamachi and Nawate districts. Pick up local pickles or craft items, and stop at a kissaten-style cafe.

Stay overnight in the city centre.

Day 6 – Day trip to Narai-juku Take the JR Chuo Line south to Narai Station (about 1 hour 20 minutes). Walk the preserved post town and explore its shops, temples, and bridges. Visit the old inns or take a short forest walk behind the town.

Eat lunch early. Some restaurants close by 2pm. Return to Matsumoto mid-afternoon.

Optional detour: Stop at Kiso-Fukushima instead if you want more temples and fewer visitors.

Day 7 – Matsumoto to Yamanouchi (Jigokudani Monkey Park) Take the train to Nagano Station (about 50 minutes), then transfer to the Nagano Dentetsu Line to Yudanaka. From there, it's a short bus or taxi to the Jigokudani Monkey Park trailhead. Walk the 25-minute forest path to reach the monkeys' hot spring area.

Stay overnight in Shibu Onsen or Yudanaka. Many ryokan here offer access to public baths and include full-course dinner with local ingredients.

Day 8 – Nagano to Kanazawa (Ishikawa Prefecture) Return to Nagano Station and take the Hokuriku Shinkansen to Kanazawa (just over 1 hour). Store your bags and begin with Kenrokuen Garden and Kanazawa Castle.

Late afternoon: Walk through the samurai district of Nagamachi. Visit Nomura House if time allows. Stay near the station or Katamachi.

Day 9 – Kanazawa and Higashi Chaya district Start at the 21st Century Museum or a local crafts studio. Then explore the Higashi Chaya geisha district. Visit a gold leaf shop or drop in for tea in a preserved teahouse.

Lunch tip: Try kaisendon at Omicho Market before the crowds hit. Afternoon options include a visit to the D.T. Suzuki Museum or a sake tasting at Fukumitsuya Brewery.

Day 10 – Return or continue onward Depart Kanazawa by Hokuriku Shinkansen to Tokyo (about 2.5 hours) or take the Limited Express Thunderbird if heading west.

If you have a late train, drop by the Kanazawa Station shopping areas for final souvenirs. Watch for seasonal sweets like sweet potato yokan or gold-dusted candies.

Welcome to Niigata: Art, Nature, and Snow!

Niigata: Snow Country with a Creative Soul

Niigata does not compete with Tokyo or Kyoto, and that is exactly why it stands out. Here, you get something different. In one prefecture, you'll find towering mountains, seasonal traditions, rice paddies, sake breweries, and a hidden art scene in Japan.

This is where winter shapes daily life, not just tourism. Heavy snow supports top-class skiing and rustic onsen. In warmer seasons, villages turn into open-air galleries, seafood is pulled fresh from the Sea of Japan, and hidden festivals carry on with little fanfare. Sado Island alone could fill a trip with coastal views, taiko drumming, and gold mine history.

For those seeking authenticity and good value, Niigata delivers. Travel is easy from Tokyo by Shinkansen. Prices are lower than major tourist areas, and the experiences are rich, varied, and real.

Spring Attractions

Cherry Blossoms at Takada Castle

When spring arrives in Niigata, Takada Castle Park in Joetsu City turns into one of Japan's most magical cherry blossom spots. There are 4,000 cherry trees that burst with soft pink flowers. At night, special lights create a magical feeling. When it gets dark, 3,000 paper lanterns glow softly among the trees. Their light reflects in the castle moat. This makes a mirror world of floating pink clouds. The castle itself, which has been rebuilt, is a perfect background for this spring show. The park becomes a happy place for hanami (flower viewing) parties.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Takada Castle Park, Motoshirocho, Joetsu, Niigata 943-0833.
- **How to Get There:**
 - From Tokyo Station: Take the Joetsu Shinkansen to Joetsu-Myoko Station. This takes about 2 hours.
 - From Joetsu-Myoko Station: Take the Echigo Tokimeki Railway Myoko Haneuma Line to Takada Station. This takes about 10 minutes, and costs about ¥240.
 - From Takada Station: The park is about a 15-20 minute walk, or a short bus or taxi ride (about 5 minutes).
- **Hours:** Park is open all day, every day. Lights are usually on from sunset until 9:00 PM during the festival. (Check exact times each year.)
- **Cost:** Free to enter the park. Special festival events or certain seating might cost money.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid-April is when the flowers are at their best. Arrive before sunset for the evening lights to get a good spot.
- **Tips:**
 - Expect many people, especially on weekends and when the flowers are at their best.
 - Food stalls and restrooms are available during the festival.
 - Wear comfortable shoes for walking.
 - Check the official Joetsu City tourism website for exact festival dates and event times.

Hike the Echigo Mountains

When winter snow melts from Niigata's mountains, spring shows off hiking trails. These trails show the area's natural beauty when it's fresh. The Echigo Mountain Range runs through the eastern part of Niigata. It has trails that are good for different levels of fitness. Early spring brings the special joy of seeing nature wake up after the long winter.

The Naeba-Sanroku Trail is an easy way to see the mountain scenery. This gentle path goes through forests where new leaves make a green roof. Wildflowers add color. Mountain streams, full of melted snow, create small waterfalls and very clear pools. For hikers with more experience, the trails around Mount Hakkai offer harder paths and amazing rewards. You can see wide views across valleys where rice farmers get their fields ready.

Spring hiking in Niigata has good temperatures and fewer people than in summer. The fresh mountain air, the smell of new plants, makes every breath nice.

At a Glance (General Hiking Info):

- **Locations:** Naeba-Sanroku Trail (near Naeba Ski Resort), trails around Mount Hakkai (Uonuma City).
- **How to Get There:** You can usually reach trail starts by local bus from nearby train stations. For instance, use Echigo-Yuzawa Station for the Naeba area or Muikamachi Station for Mount Hakkai. A rental car gives more freedom for getting to trails far away.
- **Hours:** Daylight hours are best for safety.
- **Cost:** Free (unless you use certain paid places or guided tours).
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late April to early June, once snow has melted from lower areas.
- **Tips:**
 - **Gear:** Wear strong hiking boots, dress in layers, and bring rain gear.
 - **Supplies:** Carry enough water, snacks, a map, and a phone that is fully charged.
 - **Safety:** Be ready for changing weather and possibly muddy paths. Tell someone your hiking plans.
 - **Difficulty:** Look up how long specific trails are and how much they go up or down before you go.

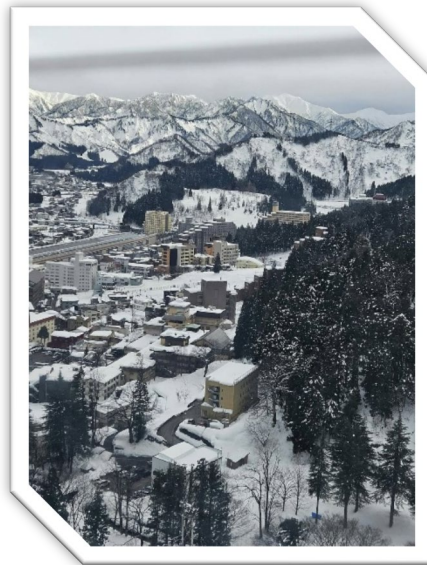
Fuji Rock Festival Preview Events

The famous Fuji Rock Festival happens in summer. But spring brings special preview events for music lovers. They offer a taste of the festival feeling with smaller crowds and often cheaper tickets. Even though it's called "Fuji Rock," the festival has been held at the Naeba Ski Resort in Niigata Prefecture since 1999.

These spring preview events usually have a mix of Japanese indie bands and bands from other countries. The smaller size allows for closer contact with the performers and other music fans. Besides the music, these events show the festival's care for the environment. Food sellers offer early versions of the tasty foods that will be at the main festival.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Naeba Ski Resort, 202 Mikuni, Yuzawa, Minamiuonuma District, Niigata 949-6292.



- **How to Get There:**
 - From Tokyo Station: Take the Joetsu Shinkansen to Echigo-Yuzawa Station. This takes about 70-80 minutes.

- From Echigo-Yuzawa Station: Take a shuttle bus (seasonal) or local bus or taxi to Naeba Ski Resort. This takes about 40-50 minutes.
- **Hours:** Changes for each event; usually afternoon to evening.
- **Cost:** Tickets change by event, but they are usually cheaper than the main festival. Check the official website for prices.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late May or early June.
- **Tips:**
 - **Tickets:** Buy tickets early through official festival places.
 - **Transportation:** Check the official Fuji Rock website for specific shuttle bus times from Echigo-Yuzawa Station during event periods.
 - **Accommodation:** Book places to stay in Echigo-Yuzawa or Naeba far in advance.

Summer Attractions

Nagaoka Fireworks Festival

Experience one of Japan's most amazing fireworks shows at the Nagaoka Fireworks Festival. It happens every year on August 2-3 as part of the city's peace celebration. It started as a way to remember those who died in World War II. Now, it has become a stunning art show. The main part of the festival is the "Phoenix Fireworks." These fireworks show Nagaoka's recovery after being destroyed. These huge fireworks light up the night sky with falling lights that stretch almost two kilometers wide.

Getting a good spot to watch needs a plan. Seats you book ahead of time offer the best views, but they sell out months in advance. Free viewing areas along the Shinano River banks fill up early. The fun mood makes waiting enjoyable. Food stalls serve summer favorites and local foods.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Shinano River banks, between Chousei Bridge and Ote Bridge, Nagaoka City, Niigata.
- **How to Get There:**
 - From Tokyo Station: Take the Joetsu Shinkansen to Nagaoka Station. This takes about 90-100 minutes.
 - From Nagaoka Station: Walk to the viewing areas. This takes about 20-30 minutes. Special shuttle buses might run during the festival.
- **Hours:** Fireworks usually run from 7:20 PM to 9:10 PM on August 2nd and 3rd.
- **Cost:** Free for general viewing areas. Booked seats cost different amounts, usually ¥3,000 to ¥10,000 or more.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Arrive early in the day (morning to early afternoon) to get a good spot in free areas.
- **Tips:**
 - **Tickets:** Buy booked seating tickets far in advance (they often go on sale in May or June and sell out quickly). Check the official Nagaoka Fireworks website for details.
 - **Crowds:** Expect very large crowds. Public transport will be very busy.
 - **Facilities:** Temporary restrooms and many food stalls are available.
 - **Accommodation:** Book hotels in Nagaoka or nearby cities far in advance.

Sado Island Exploration

Summer brings perfect conditions for exploring Sado Island. It's Niigata's largest island off the coast, and it's like its own world. It's just a 2.5-hour ferry ride from Niigata City (or a faster 1-hour trip by hydrofoil). This island is important in history. It offers a fascinating mix of natural wonders, old culture, and gold mining history.

The island's dramatic coastline shows how it was formed by volcanoes. There are unusual rock shapes like the sharp cliffs of Senkaku Bay. Inside the island, the Osado Skyline road offers wide views. Sado's culture is also very old. It was a place where political exiles were sent, and they brought smart cultural ideas. This history lives on in special performances like the Sado Okesa folk dance and the famous Kodo taiko drumming group. Kodo has a festival called Earth Celebration each August.

People who like history will find the Sado Kinzan Gold Mine interesting. It produced a lot of money from the 1600s to the 1900s. The old tunnels are now open for you to explore. Life-sized models show the hard working conditions. Above ground, the perfectly kept samurai-era streets of Shukunegi village show glimpses into the island's rich past. Summer visitors can enjoy swimming and water sports at beaches like Sobama and Sawata. Local restaurants serve very fresh seafood.

At a Glance (Sado Island):

- **Location:** Sado Island, Niigata Prefecture.
- **How to Get There (Ferry):**
 - Sado Kisen Ferry: Runs from Niigata Port (Niigata City) to Ryotsu Port (Sado Island).
 - Jetfoil (High-speed): About 1 hour, around ¥7,000 one-way.
 - Car Ferry: About 2.5 hours, around ¥3,000 one-way (person), about ¥10,000-¥15,000 one-way (car).
 - **Booking:** It's a good idea to book for busy times.
- **Getting Around Sado:**
 - **Rental Car:** Highly recommended for freedom, as local transport can be rare. Car rental places are near Ryotsu Port.
 - **Local Buses:** Connect big towns and some attractions, but check times carefully as they might not run often.
 - **Sightseeing Buses:** Offered by Sado Kisen or local tour companies, good for seeing main sights.

Sado Kinzan Gold Mine:

- **Location:** 1305 Aikawa Kanemachi, Sado, Niigata 952-1501.
- **Hours:** 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM (March-October), 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM (November-February). Last entry 30 minutes before closing.
- **Cost:** Adults ¥900 (Doyu no Warito Course) or ¥900 (Sokodo Course). Combined ticket ¥1,400.

Shukunegi Village:

- **Location:** Shukunegi, Sado, Niigata 952-0711.
- **Hours:** Open all year. Some houses might have specific opening times (for example, about 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM).
- **Cost:** Free to walk around the village. Some specific houses might have small entry fees (about ¥300-¥500).
- **Tips:**
 - Plan your Sado Island trip carefully because of ferry times and transport on the island.

Echigo-Tsumari Art Field

Discover a very big art project in Niigata's Echigo-Tsumari area. It's set among rice fields and small villages. This amazing "art field" is bigger than Tokyo! It has about 200 artworks that stay there all the time. They're mixed into the natural land and old towns. More art pieces also appear during the art festival that happens every three years.

Summer is the best time to see this special mix of modern art and old Japanese country life. The rice fields turn bright green. They look like huge green carpets going down the hills. This creates living artwork. The warm weather makes it comfortable to explore the outdoor art scattered around the area. What makes Echigo-Tsumari truly special is how the art connects with local towns and the land. It talks about things like fewer people living in the countryside, old farming ways, and how humans and nature are linked.

The Echigo-Tsumari Satoyama Museum of Contemporary Art, Kinare, is a good place to start. It offers information and shows that help you understand the larger art field. From there, your adventure begins as you look for art in unexpected places.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Echigo-Tsumari area, mostly around Tokamachi and Tsunan towns, in Niigata.
- **How to Get There:**
 - From Tokyo Station: Take the Joetsu Shinkansen to Echigo-Yuzawa Station. This takes about 70-80 minutes.
 - From Echigo-Yuzawa Station: Take the Hokuetsu Express Hokuhoku Line to Tokamachi Station. This takes about 20-30 minutes.
- **Getting Around the Art Field:** A rental car gives you the most freedom. During the main festival (which happens every three years) and in summer, special "Nohbutai" shuttle buses connect big art spots. Check the official website for times and routes.
- **Hours:** Changes for each artwork or building. Kinare Museum: 10:00 AM – 5:00 PM (closed Wednesdays in winter). Many outdoor artworks are open all the time.
- **Cost:** Seeing many outdoor artworks is free. Some places (like Kinare, or special indoor artworks) might charge an entry fee. For example, Kinare is ¥800 for adults. Festival passes are sold when the big festival happens.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer (July-August) for warm weather and green rice fields.
- **Tips:**
 - **Planning:** The area is big. Plan your route ahead. Use maps and ideas from the official website.
 - **Where to Stay:** There are not many places to stay right in the art field. Think about staying in Tokamachi or Echigo-Yuzawa.

Autumn Fun

Koyo (Autumn Leaves) at Naena Falls

When autumn turns Niigata's mountains into bright reds, oranges, and golds, Naena Falls becomes one of the best places to see them. This 55-meter (about 180 feet) waterfall is sometimes called "Japan's Niagara." This is because of the loud roar of water crashing against huge rocks. It's a lively center for the forest's seasonal color change around it.

To get to the falls, you'll take a nice 20-minute walk through woods. These woods get more colorful as autumn goes on. The path crosses a hanging bridge. It gives you the first amazing views of the falling water, framed by maple and beech trees. The strong contrast between the white water and bright leaves makes for perfect photos.

The colors are usually at their best in late October through early November. This is a little earlier than in lower parts of Japan. Naena Falls is usually not too crowded. This lets you enjoy the beautiful season more peacefully.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Naena Falls, Suginosawa, Myoko, Niigata 949-2224.
- **How to Get There:**
 - From Tokyo: Take the Hokuriku Shinkansen to Joetsu-Myoko Station. This takes about 2 hours.
 - From Joetsu-Myoko Station: Take the Echigo Tokimeki Railway Myoko Haneuma Line to Myoko-Kogen Station. This takes about 20-25 minutes.
 - From Myoko-Kogen Station: Take a local bus (Suginosawa Line, runs not very often) or a taxi to Naena Falls. This takes about 10-15 minutes. It's a short walk from the bus stop.
- **Hours:** Usually open during daylight hours.
- **Cost:** Free.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late October to early November for the best autumn colors.

- **Tips:**

- Wear comfortable shoes for walking.
- The path to the falls can be slippery if it has rained.
- You could also visit one of the Myoko area's hot springs after your walk.

Sake Brewery Tours

Autumn is when sake making starts in Niigata. Many experts believe Niigata makes Japan's best rice wine. As new rice is harvested and temperatures drop, the area's about 90 sake breweries get very busy. This makes fall the perfect time for brewery tours and tasting sake.

Niigata's fame for great sake comes from its good local rice, pure mountain water, cold weather, and hundreds of years of skill. Sake from Niigata usually tastes clean and fresh, with light flavors. This style is called "tanrei karakuchi" (light, dry, and refined).

Several well-known breweries offer tours. They give interesting looks into the traditional way sake is made. At Imayotsukasa Sake Brewery in Niigata City, visitors can watch master brewers at work. The Ponshukan Sake Museum, found inside Niigata Station, offers an easy introduction. You can use tasting machines there to try small samples from dozens of local breweries for just ¥500 (about \$5). This lets you compare different styles. For a deeper experience, the old brewing area of Kashiwazaki has traditional buildings where sake has been made for centuries. Here, breweries like Koshi no Kanbai offer tours if you book ahead.

At a Glance (Sake Tours):

Imayotsukasa Sake Brewery:

- **Location:** 1-1 Kagamigaoka, Chuo Ward, Niigata, 950-0074.
- **How to Get There:** About a 15-minute walk from Niigata Station.
- **Hours:** Tours usually at 10:00 AM, 11:00 AM, 1:00 PM, 2:00 PM, 3:00 PM (Monday-Saturday). Check for English tours.

- **Cost:** ¥1,000 for a guided tour and tasting (booking ahead is a good idea).

Ponshukan Sake Museum:

- **Location:** Inside Niigata Station (CoCoLo Niigata West Area) and also Echigo-Yuzawa Station.
- **How to Get There:** Easy to find inside the train stations.
- **Hours:** Niigata Station: 9:00 AM – 8:00 PM. Echigo-Yuzawa Station: 9:00 AM – 6:00 PM.
- **Cost:** ¥500 for 5 tokens to use in tasting machines.
- **Tips:** Don't miss the "sake bath" at the Echigo-Yuzawa place (costs extra).

Koshi no Kanbai (Ishimoto Sake Brewery):

- **Location:** 1404 Kamishinai, Konan Ward, Niigata, 950-1322 (Kashiwazaki area).
- **How to Get There:** Needs a taxi or local bus from Niitsu Station.
- **Hours & Cost:** Only by booking ahead. Contact the brewery for tour details.

General Tips for Sake Tours: Always check the brewery's website or call them for the most up-to-date tour times, how to book, and if they have English help. Even if you don't drink alcohol, brewery tours can be interesting for their culture and buildings.

Tokamachi Kimono Festival

Experience the beauty of traditional Japanese clothes at the Tokamachi Kimono Festival. It's held every year in October in a city famous for making fabrics since the Edo period (1603-1868). This real community celebration shows the living tradition of kimono culture. This region has made some of Japan's finest fabrics for hundreds of years. It's not just a festival for tourists.

The festival's main event is an amazing kimono parade. Hundreds of people of all ages wear beautiful kimonos. These are not just costumes. They are treasured family items and new pieces. People wear them with pride. The parade goes through the city center. It creates a moving display of colors, patterns, and fabric techniques. Besides the main parade, the festival includes shows of valuable old kimonos. You can also see how traditional dyeing and weaving are done. There are workshops where visitors can try making fabric art.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Tokamachi City Center, Niigata.
- **How to Get There:**
 - From Tokyo Station: Take the Joetsu Shinkansen to Echigo-Yuzawa Station. This takes about 70-80 minutes.
 - From Echigo-Yuzawa Station: Take the Hokuetsu Express Hokuhoku Line to Tokamachi Station. This takes about 20-30 minutes.
- **Hours:** Changes for each event; usually during daylight hours for parades and shows.
- **Cost:** Most events (like watching the parade) are free. Some workshops or special shows might cost money.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid-October (check for exact dates each year).
- **Tips:**
 - Visit the Tokamachi City tourism website for exact festival dates and schedules as the event approaches.
 - The festival happens at the same time as the autumn colors in the nearby mountains. This means you get two great things to see.

Winter Attractions

World-Class Skiing and Snowboarding

Winter turns Niigata into a heaven for snow sports lovers. Some of Japan's best powder snow covers the prefecture's many ski resorts. Cold air from

Siberia blows over the warm Sea of Japan. This creates perfect conditions for lots of good quality snow.

The Yuzawa area is easy to reach by direct bullet train from Tokyo. It has the most ski resorts. These include family-friendly Gala Yuzawa (which has its own bullet train station) and harder slopes at Kagura and Naeba. For those who want deeper powder and harder terrain, the resorts around Myoko Kogen offer amazing experiences away from marked trails. The connected resorts of Myoko offer enough variety for long stays.

Even if you don't ski, you can still enjoy Niigata's winter. You can go snowshoeing, ride snow scooters, or just relax in outdoor hot springs surrounded by snowy views. Most resorts offer gear rentals and ski schools with teachers who speak many languages.

At a Glance (General Skiing Info):

- **Locations:** Yuzawa area (Gala Yuzawa, Kagura, Naeba), Myoko Kogen area (Akakura Onsen, Akakura Kanko, Myoko Suginohara, Ikenotaira Onsen).
- **How to Get There:**
 - **Yuzawa:** Take the direct Joetsu Shinkansen to Gala Yuzawa Station (right at the resort) or Echigo-Yuzawa Station (for shuttle buses to other resorts).
 - **Myoko Kogen:** Take the Hokuriku Shinkansen to Joetsu-Myoko Station. Then take a local train to Myoko-Kogen Station. After that, take a bus to the resorts.
- **Hours:** Usually 8:30 AM – 5:00 PM for lifts. Night skiing is often available. (Varies by resort).
- **Cost:**
 - **Lift Tickets:** Day passes cost about ¥4,500 - ¥6,500 (around \$30-\$45 USD). They are generally cheaper than resorts in Western countries. Multi-day passes save you money.
 - **Rentals:** A full set (skis/board, boots, poles) usually costs ¥4,000 - ¥6,000 per day.
 - **Lessons:** Group lessons are about ¥5,000 or more for half a day.

- **Best Time to Visit:** December to April for snow sports. January-February for the best powder snow.
- **Tips:**
 - **Booking:** Book your place to stay well ahead of time, especially for busy seasons.
 - **Info:** Check each resort's website for detailed maps, snow reports, opening and closing dates, and exact prices.
 - **Onsen:** Combine skiing with a relaxing hot spring bath after a day on the slopes.

Snow Festivals and Illuminations

Niigata is known as a snow country. It celebrates this with lively winter festivals. These events turn the tough weather into times for community fun and art. They offer visitors special chances to see how local culture has gotten used to some of Japan's heaviest snowfall. They create beauty and joy in the white landscape.

The Tokamachi Snow Festival, held in February, has huge snow and ice sculptures. These are made by community groups and artists. This event keeps its local feel. Neighborhoods try to make the best displays. In the old part of Takada, the Illumination Street event creates a different kind of winter magic. Thousands of candles in snow lanterns line the old castle town streets. Their warm light shines on snow-covered old buildings. For a more modern idea, the Echigo-Tsumari region's "Snow Art" project has light displays by artists from around the world. These are set against the snowy countryside.

At a Glance:

Tokamachi Snow Festival:

- **Location:** Different places around Tokamachi City, Niigata.
- **How to Get There:** From Tokyo: Take the Joetsu Shinkansen to Echigo-Yuzawa. Then take the Hokuetsu Express Hokuhoku Line to Tokamachi.

- **Hours:** Changes by event; usually daytime for sculptures, evening for lights.
- **Cost:** Free for most viewing.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid to late February (check exact dates each year).
- **Tips:** Dress very warmly in layers. It will be very cold.

Takada Illumination Street:

- **Location:** Old part of Takada, Joetsu City, Niigata.
- **How to Get There:** From Takada Station (see Takada Castle access).
- **Hours & Cost:** Changes each year (usually January-February evenings). Free.
- **Tips:** Enjoy the warm welcome of local people who might open their homes.

Echigo-Tsumari "Snow Art":

- **Location:** Different places throughout the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field.
- **How to Get There:** Check the Echigo-Tsumari Art Field website for how to get to specific winter art pieces.
- **Hours & Cost:** Changes. Some outdoor pieces might be free.
- **Tips:** A rental car is often needed for full exploring in winter.

General Tips: Check official tourism websites for exact festival dates and times closer to your trip. They can change each year.

Onsen (Hot Springs) in Snow Country

There's nothing quite like soaking in a steaming outdoor hot spring while snowflakes gently fall around you. Niigata has many onsen towns nestled among snow-covered mountains, offering this experience. The area's hot ground activity has created many different hot springs with various minerals.

Matsunoyama Onsen is one of Japan's three great healing hot springs. It has unusually dark brown water. The old wooden bath houses here have stayed

mostly the same for hundreds of years. For an easier experience, Echigo-Yuzawa has many hot spring places. These range from public bathhouses to fancy ryokan with private outdoor baths. It's easy to get there by direct bullet train. This makes it perfect for those who want a snow country hot spring experience. Murakami's seaside onsen offers a different winter experience. People bathing can watch waves crash against snowy shores.

Most onsen towns have options for visitors who are not staying overnight. This is called day-use. But the full experience comes from booking a traditional ryokan. There, hot spring bathing is part of a bigger cultural experience, including special multi-course meals called kaiseki.

At a Glance (Onsen):

Matsunoyama Onsen:

- **Location:** Matsunoyama, Tokamachi, Niigata.
- **How to Get There:** Take a local bus from Tokamachi Station (Hokuetsu Express Hokuhoku Line).
- **Cost:** Day-use fees for public baths usually ¥500 - ¥1,500. Ryokan stays vary greatly.
- **Tips:** Known for its healing benefits and rustic, old-fashioned feel.

Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen:

- **Location:** Echigo-Yuzawa Town, Niigata.
- **How to Get There:** Directly reachable by Joetsu Shinkansen to Echigo-Yuzawa Station. Many onsen are a short walk from the station or a short bus ride.
- **Cost:** Day-use fees for public baths or ryokan range from ¥500 - ¥2,000 or more.
- **Tips:** Perfect for combining with skiing or snowboarding. Don't miss the sake bath at Ponshukan in Echigo-Yuzawa Station.

Murakami Onsen:

- **Location:** Murakami City, Niigata (several onsen towns nearby, for example, Setomitei Onsen).
- **How to Get There:** From Niigata Station, take the JR Uetsu Main Line to Murakami Station. This takes about 1 hour. Local buses or taxis go to specific onsen.
- **Cost:** Day-use fees usually ¥500 - ¥1,500.
- **Tips:** Enjoy seafood and Murakami beef after your hot spring bath.

General Onsen Tips:

- Remember the usual Japanese onsen rules. Wash completely before getting in. Do not wear swimsuits. Tattoos might need to be covered.
- Bring your own small towel and bathing towel, or you can rent or buy them there.
- Look for "日帰り入浴" (higaeri nyuyoku) for day-use options.

Off the Beaten Path

Northern Culture Museum

Discover how rich merchant families lived in Niigata at the Northern Culture Museum. It's in the old home of the Ito family. They made a lot of money trading rice during the Edo period. This amazing estate is in a country area outside Niigata City. It gets far fewer visitors than it should, giving you chances for quiet exploring.

The main building has 65 rooms. They are built with amazing skill. They show building parts rarely seen even in Japan's more famous old places. The garden around it is another highlight. It was designed by a master garden artist. It uses classic Japanese garden ideas while showing views of the working rice fields beyond.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** 200 Soeda, Konan Ward, Niigata, 950-1341.
- **How to Get There:**
 - From Niigata Station: Take the JR Shinetsu Main Line to Niitsu Station. This takes about 20 minutes.
 - From Niitsu Station: Take a local bus (Akiba Bus, for Kameda-go direction) to the "Northern Culture Museum-mae" stop. This takes about 15 minutes. Or a taxi (about 10 minutes).
 - A rental car is highly suggested for easy access.
- **Hours:** 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM (April-November), 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM (December-March). Last entry 30 minutes before closing. Open daily.
- **Cost:** Adults ¥800.
- **Best Time to Visit:** All year; the garden changes with the seasons. Autumn colors are especially beautiful.
- **Tips:**
 - English signs are limited. But the buildings and garden are very beautiful to look at.
 - The museum cafe offers traditional Japanese sweets and matcha green tea with a view of the garden.

Murakami Salmon Heritage

Experience hundreds of years of salmon culture in the old city of Murakami. Here, old ways of keeping salmon fresh have made a special food history. This food still shows what the local area is all about. Salmon may not be your first thought for Japanese food, but it has been important to Murakami's money and food culture since the feudal era.

Walking through the old part of Murakami shows a unique sight: salmon hanging from the roofs of wooden shops. They are slowly drying in the winter air. This old way of keeping fish fresh is called "shiobiki-sake." It creates a special flavor through natural air-drying. The Murakami Salmon Museum (Iyoboya Kaikan) helps you understand this cultural history. It has displays that explain how important salmon fishing was in the past.

For people who love food, Murakami offers amazing chances to taste salmon. It's prepared in ways rarely found anywhere else in Japan. Local restaurants serve full meals with salmon in many different ways.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Murakami City, Niigata.
- **How to Get There:** From Niigata Station, take the JR Uetsu Main Line to Murakami Station. This takes about 1 hour. The city center and museum are close enough to walk from the station.

Murakami Salmon Museum (Iyoboya Kaikan):

- **Location:** 1-20 Ikanamachi, Murakami, Niigata 958-0873.
- **Hours:** 8:30 AM – 5:00 PM (March-October), 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM (November-February). Closed on some national holidays.
- **Cost:** Adults ¥800.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Autumn (October-November) for when the salmon swim upstream to lay eggs. Winter for seeing "shiobiki-sake" preparations.
- **Tips:**
 - Look for restaurants that specialize in salmon dishes.
 - If visiting in autumn, ask locally about chances to see salmon swimming upstream.

Awashima Island

Go to one of Japan's most unusual holy places on Awashima Island. Here, a special old way of worship for women has created a shrine different from any other in the country. This small island in the Sea of Japan is reachable by ferry from Iwafune port. It gets few visitors from other countries, even though it has interesting cultural meaning and natural beauty.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Awashima Island, Niigata.
- **How to Get There:**
 - From Niigata Station: Take the JR Uetsu Main Line to Murakami Station. This takes about 1 hour. Then change to a local train for Iwafunecho Station. This takes about 15 minutes.
 - From Iwafunecho Station: Take a taxi or walk to Iwafune Port. This takes about 15-20 minutes walking.
 - **Ferry:** Awashima Kisen Ferry runs from Iwafune Port to Awashima Island.
 - **Schedule/Cost:** Changes depending on the season.

Planning Your Visit to Niigata

Give yourself at least three full days to appreciate what Niigata offers. In winter, stay in Echigo-Yuzawa for access to ski resorts and hot springs. In spring, summer, or autumn, base yourself in Niigata City or Tokamachi to explore art fields, Sado Island, and local culture.

This prefecture suits travellers who enjoy natural beauty, quiet towns, and food that reflects the land. It is especially rewarding for winter sports fans, sake lovers, and anyone curious about the slower, rural side of Japan.

Ishikawa Prefecture Introduction to Ishikawa

Ishikawa: Traditional Japan without the Crowds

If Kyoto feels too busy and overdone, Ishikawa might be exactly what you are looking for. Its capital, Kanazawa, kept its old town areas intact through centuries, offering you teahouses, crafts, and gardens that feel lived in, not reconstructed. This is one of the best places in Japan to experience traditional culture at your own pace.



The Maeda clan, once one of the country's wealthiest ruling families, poured resources into the arts during the Edo period. That legacy lives on in lacquerware, gold leaf, silk dyeing, and elegant garden design. Outside the city, the wild coastlines of the Noto Peninsula and the onsen towns of Kaga offer natural beauty and quiet places to unwind.

Ishikawa is easy to reach via bullet train from Tokyo, and accommodation is often cheaper than in major tourist centres. It is ideal for travellers who want a rich cultural experience with fewer crowds and a more local feel.

Spring Attractions

Cherry Blossoms at Kenrokuen Garden

Visit one of Japan's top three famous gardens. Kenrokuen turns into a pink wonderland when cherry blossoms bloom. Experience its magic! This big garden, once part of Kanazawa Castle, shows great Japanese garden design. It has lots of open space, quiet spots, clever art, old things, plenty of water, and wide views.

In the cherry blossom season, from early to mid-April, the garden looks amazing. Flowering trees mix beautifully with stone lanterns and winding streams. The famous Kotoji-toro lantern adds a special touch. Many kinds of

cherry trees, including ones that bloom early and late, make the viewing time longer.

The garden is big enough to find peaceful spots even when many people are visiting. Going in the early morning is the most peaceful. You might see misty scenes and flowers reflecting in the ponds. Lights at night during the best blooming time create another magical feeling. The lights change the night garden into a dreamlike place.

Besides Kenrokuen, the Kanazawa Castle Park next to it has more cherry trees in a historical setting. The Sakurabashi (Cherry Bridge) crosses the Asano River. Hundreds of cherry trees line the banks. They form beautiful, tunnel-like passages of flowers. These viewing spots are close enough to walk to, giving different cherry blossom experiences.

The Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art often has special cherry blossom shows in spring. These shows highlight how this flower inspires Japanese artists.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Kenrokuen Garden, Kanazawa, Ishikawa.
- **How to Get There:** Easy to get to by bus from Kanazawa Station (about 10-15 minutes). Many city buses stop near the garden.
- **Hours:** Usually 7:00 AM – 6:00 PM (March-October), 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM (November-February). Hours are longer during cherry blossom lights. Check exact hours and light dates each year.
- **Cost:** Adults ¥320.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Early to mid-April for cherry blossoms. Early morning for quiet, evenings for lights.
- **Tips:**
 - Wear comfortable shoes for walking the large grounds.
 - Expect many people, especially on weekends when the flowers are at their best.
 - Visit Kanazawa Castle Park too.

Kutani Pottery Villages

Spring brings perfect weather to explore the pottery villages in southern Ishikawa. Here, the famous Kutani ceramic tradition has been made for over 350 years. New green leaves sprout on the nearby mountains, and spring flowers bloom. Then, these pottery centers come alive after winter.

Kutani pottery is known for its bright colors like green, blue, yellow, purple, and red. They are used in bold designs. Visiting these villages lets you see the whole process of making pottery, from clay to baking. This often happens in workshops using methods passed down for many years.

The Terai area in Nomi City is where most Kutani pottery is made. It has many kilns. Many workshops welcome visitors. They show how they make pottery, like throwing clay on foot-powered wheels or painting detailed designs. The Kutani Ceramic Art Museum teaches about the history and shows amazing pieces.

Join a workshop for a hands-on pottery experience. You can decorate already-made ceramic pieces or try using the potter's wheel. Finished pieces can be sent to other countries, making unique souvenirs.

Spring adds charm to these visits. Old workshops often show pottery among blooming garden areas. Mild temperatures make walking between studios enjoyable. Clear spring light helps you see the bright colors of Kutani ware perfectly.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Terai area, Nomi City, Ishikawa (and other villages in southern Ishikawa).
- **How to Get There:** From Kanazawa Station, take the JR Hokuriku Main Line to Terai Station (about 20-30 minutes). From Terai Station, take a local bus or taxi to specific pottery areas. A rental car gives more freedom to visit many workshops.

- **Hours:** Changes by workshop and museum. Kutani Ceramic Art Museum is usually 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM (closed Mondays). Workshops are generally open during the day.
- **Cost:** Museum entry around ¥300-¥500. Hands-on workshops vary a lot, from ¥1,500 to ¥5,000 or more.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Spring (April-May) for nice weather and blooming surroundings.
- **Tips:**
 - Look for workshops that offer English help.
 - Allow plenty of time to look at the different styles and products.
 - Think about shipping larger purchases home.

Noto Peninsula Coastal Exploration

Discover the wild beauty of the Noto Peninsula. Spring brings comfortable temperatures and clear skies, perfect for exploring the coast. This remote piece of land reaching into the Sea of Japan is one of Japan's most untouched coastal areas. It has traditional fishing villages, dramatic cliffs, and clean beaches.

The Noto Kongo Coast along the western side has dramatic scenery. It has steep cliffs and unusual rock shapes. The Ganmon Sea Cave, a huge natural arch, looks especially good in spring when clear weather shows off the emerald green waters. Sightseeing boats leaving from Wajima offer views of these shapes from the water.

Spring also brings wild coastal flowers, like Japanese roses (hamanasu), adding color to the rough land. Most of the coastline is not built up, which helps keep these natural places safe.

The peninsula's eastern coast is softer. It has protected bays and traditional fishing villages. Spring marks the start of new fishing seasons, bringing new activity. Morning visits to fishing ports like Ushitsu or Akasaki let you see traditional fishing ways.

For active experiences, spring weather is great for hiking along parts of the Noto Peninsula Long Trail. The trail goes through fishing villages, rice fields built on slopes, and coastal forests. Some parts are good for day hikes.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Noto Peninsula, Ishikawa. Key areas include Noto Kongo Coast (western side) and Wajima City.
- **How to Get There:** From Kanazawa, take the Noto Satoyama Kaido expressway (a road with a toll) by rental car (about 2-3 hours to Wajima). Local buses connect big towns, but they do not run often. A rental car is highly suggested for full exploring.
- **Hours:** Natural sites are open all year, during daylight hours.
- **Cost:** Free for most natural sites. Sightseeing boat tours cost differently (for example, Ganmon tours are about ¥1,000-¥2,000).
- **Best Time to Visit:** Spring (April-May) for pleasant weather, clear skies, and coastal flowers.
- **Tips:**
 - Plan your route, as the peninsula is large and transport can be limited.
 - Bring strong shoes for walking and exploring coastal areas.
 - Think about staying overnight in a traditional ryokan in a Noto town for a deeper experience.

Summer Attractions

Wajima Morning Market

Experience hundreds of years of trading at the Wajima Morning Market. It's one of Japan's oldest markets that has been running all the time, starting over 1,000 years ago. It's open all year, but summer makes it especially lively as the season's gifts from land and sea create a colorful display.

Unlike many markets made for tourists, Wajima's market is still a real trading place for local people and visitors. About 200 stalls fill the street. Many are

run by elderly women called "baba." Their energy and friendly talking make for special memories.

The market shows Noto Peninsula's many different foods. Summer specialties include fresh iwagaki (rock oysters), vegetables grown nearby, and different kinds of seaweed. Besides food, stalls sell Wajima's famous lacquerware, from art pieces to everyday items. You can buy directly from the people who make them.

For the most real experience, arrive early. The market is open from about 8:00 AM to noon. The earliest hours offer the freshest choices. Many seafood stalls can cook what you buy right there. The covered market street gives shade, and nearby shops and cafes offer a break.

Beyond shopping, the market shows a look into old social ways and community life in this distant area. Here, these gatherings are still important for more than just buying and selling things.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Wajima City, Noto Peninsula, Ishikawa.
- **How to Get There:** From Kanazawa Station, take a highway bus to Wajima (about 2.5 hours). The market is a short walk from the Wajima bus station.
- **Hours:** About 8:00 AM – 12:00 PM. Open every day, except for some unplanned closures (ask locally).
- **Cost:** Free to enter. The cost of things you buy changes.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer for seasonal food and a lively feeling. Arrive early for the freshest choices.
- **Tips:**
 - Bring cash, as many sellers might not take cards.
 - Don't be afraid to try samples offered by sellers.
 - Explore the streets around the market for more Wajima lacquerware shops.

Kanazawa Gold Leaf Experiences

Find out why Kanazawa makes 99% of Japan's gold leaf through fun activities. They show amazing skill. Summer's humidity is good for making gold leaf. The thin sheets become too breakable in drier seasons. This is why Kanazawa has been the main place for this craft for a long time.



Gold leaf (kinpaku) has been made in Kanazawa for over 400 years. The Maeda family, who ruled the area, helped it grow. Today, visitors can watch the careful process. Gold is beaten to be incredibly thin, just 1/10,000 of a millimeter. The Kanazawa Yasue Gold Leaf Museum explains the history of this craft. It shows old tools and amazing examples of gold leaf used in art and buildings.

For hands-on fun, several workshops let you try applying gold leaf. You can make your own souvenirs. Put gold leaf on lacquerware, chopsticks, jewelry, or even things you can eat, like soft-serve ice cream and sake. These workshops fit different budgets and art skills.

The Higashi Chaya district, an old geisha area that has been saved, has several gold leaf shops in traditional wooden buildings. Hakuza, a famous one, has a tea ceremony room completely covered in gold leaf. It's a special place for traditional tea.

Summer evenings sometimes have special lights at gold leaf places. This creates magical effects as the shiny material catches light in old settings. The contrast between plain outsides and rich gold leaf insides shows the Japanese idea of hidden luxury.



At a Glance:

- **Location:** Kanazawa City, Ishikawa. Workshops and museums are around the city, particularly near Kenrokuen and Higashi Chaya.
- **How to Get There:** Easy to get to by Kanazawa Loop Bus or walk from central areas.
- **Hours:** Changes by place. The Kanazawa Yasue Gold Leaf Museum is usually open 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM (closed Thursdays). Workshops are generally open during the day.
- **Cost:** Museum entry around ¥300. Hands-on experiences usually cost ¥1,000 - ¥3,000 or more.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer for good conditions for making gold leaf.
- **Tips:**
 - Book popular workshops ahead of time, especially during busy seasons.
 - Many shops sell gold leaf products, from makeup to food.
 - The Higashi Chaya district is perfect for a walk after an experience.

Kaga Onsen Towns

Escape summer heat at the old hot spring towns of the Kaga region. Healing waters and traditional Japanese hospitality make them perfect places to relax. Yamashiro, Yamanaka, Awazu, and Katayamazuru are four special onsen towns. Each one has its own unique vibe. They all share healing waters that have drawn visitors for centuries.

Yamashiro Onsen has a pretty public bath called Kosoyu. It was rebuilt in an old style and offers a visually striking welcome. The main bathing building stands next to a stream. Visitors in yukata (light cotton kimonos) walk between bath houses and inns. Summer evenings bring a fun mood with lanterns lighting streets and the sound of wooden geta sandals clicking.

Yamanaka Onsen is in a forest valley. It mixes hot spring bathing with a 400-year tradition of making things from wood. The town's path next to the river is nice in summer evenings with cool breezes. The public bath Kiku-no-Yu has indoor and outdoor bathing with waters that make skin look good. Craft shops sell beautiful wooden items.

For lakeside views, Katayamazuru Onsen is next to Lake Shibayama. It offers boat rides and walks by the lake between hot spring soaks. The town's modern public bath complex has wide lake views from its outdoor bathing areas.

These onsen towns are special in summer for the tradition of "yu-suzumi" (cooling off after bathing). Visitors in yukata enjoy evening walks, festival foods, and sometimes cultural performances. Many ryokan offer summer-only menus with lighter foods. They often include local specialties like sweet shrimp and Noto beef.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Kaga Onsen Area, Ishikawa.
- **How to Get There:** From Kanazawa Station, take the JR Hokuriku Main Line to Kaga Onsen Station (about 25-30 minutes). Shuttle buses or local buses connect the station to each of the four onsen towns.
- **Hours:** Public baths generally open morning to late evening (for example, 6:00 AM – 10:00 PM). Ryokan check-in is usually at 3:00 PM.
- **Cost:** Day-use fees for public baths vary from ¥400 to ¥1,000 or more. Ryokan stays vary greatly by type and season.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer for pleasant evenings and yu-suzumi traditions.
- **Tips:**
 - Explore each of the four towns for their unique feel.
 - Look for ryokan that offer outdoor baths (rotenburo) for a true experience.
 - Remember standard Japanese onsen rules. Wash completely before getting in. Do not wear swimsuits. Tattoos might need to be covered.

Autumn Attractions

Kenrokuen Garden in Autumn Colors

See Japan's garden design shine in autumn. Kenrokuen Garden turns into a stunning mix of red, orange, and gold. Japanese people often think autumn is the garden's most beautiful season. Cherry blossoms in spring get a lot of attention, but autumn shows off the garden's clever design. The colors blend together in a pleasing way, making the garden look elegant.

The garden has many maple trees, which create the main part of this colorful show. Different kinds of maples change color from mid-November through early December, making the viewing time longer. Kenrokuen is special in autumn because its ponds, streams, and fountains reflect the bright colors of the trees. This creates an amazing visual effect.

Yukitsuri are the famous snow suspensions. They are cone-shaped rope structures. They protect pine trees from heavy winter snow. People usually set them up in early November. This creates an interesting sight. Winter preparations happen at the same time as autumn's last colors. This shows the Japanese appreciation for things changing and not lasting forever.

Morning visits offer the most magical experience. Early mist often floats over the ponds, making dreamlike scenes as sunlight lights up the autumn colors. Lights at night during the best color times make viewing hours longer. They change the experience with dramatic lighting effects.

Besides Kenrokuen, nearby Kanazawa Castle Park and the banks of the Asano River offer other autumn views close enough to walk to. Kanazawa's great bus system connects these different viewing spots. One-day passes offer a cheap way to get to many autumn color places.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Kenrokuen Garden, Kanazawa, Ishikawa.
- **How to Get There:** Easy to get to by bus from Kanazawa Station (about 10-15 minutes).
- **Hours:** Usually 7:00 AM – 6:00 PM (March-October), 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM (November-February). Hours are longer during autumn lights. Check exact hours and light dates each year.
- **Cost:** Adults ¥320.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid-November to early December for the best autumn colors. Early morning for quiet, evenings for lights.
- **Tips:**
 - Look for the yukitsuri structures. They are a unique winter preparation seen in autumn.
 - Visit Kanazawa Castle Park too for different views.



Wajima Lacquerware Workshops

Autumn is the best time to explore Wajima lacquerware. The moderate humidity creates great conditions for this skilled craft. Wajima, on the Noto Peninsula, has made Japan's best lacquerware for over 600 years. They use unique methods that mix beauty with being useful.

Wajima lacquerware stands out because of its ji-no-ko base. This mix of lacquer and powdered clay forms a strong base with many layers. This allows pieces to last for generations with daily use. The lacquering process uses up to 100 layers of urushi tree lacquer. Each layer needs careful drying and skilled polishing.

The Wajima Lacquer Art Museum is a great place to start learning. It shows old and new pieces. Workshops offer tours for a deeper understanding. Visitors can see artists at different steps of making things. They watch as artists prepare the base and add gold or silver decorations. Methods like chinkin, which is carved gold inlay, and maki-e, which is sprinkled pictures, are used.

Workshops that are good for beginners offer hands-on fun. Visitors can decorate small lacquer items, like chopsticks or jewelry boxes. They use simple methods that show the skill involved. Longer workshops that last several days are available for people who are very interested. These usually need to be booked ahead of time and cost more.

Autumn also brings the yearly Wajima Lacquerware Festival in early October. It has special shows, demonstrations, and sales. This lets you meet master craftspeople and see amazing pieces. You can also enjoy cultural performances and food stalls.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Wajima City, Noto Peninsula, Ishikawa. Shops and workshops are mostly around the Wajima Morning Market area.
- **How to Get There:** From Kanazawa Station, take a highway bus to Wajima (about 2.5 hours).
- **Hours:** Changes by workshop and museum. Wajima Lacquer Art Museum is usually open 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM (closed Thursdays). Workshops generally run during the day.
- **Cost:** Museum entry around ¥500. Hands-on experiences usually cost ¥2,000 - ¥5,000 or more.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Autumn (September-November) for good humidity for lacquer work and the yearly festival.
- **Tips:**
 - Ask about workshops that offer English guidance.
 - The Wajima Lacquer Art Museum is a good place to start to understand the craft.

Noto Peninsula Harvest Festivals

Join the autumn harvest festivals on the Noto Peninsula. Experience real country traditions as local farmers celebrate the year's good crops. These events are based on spiritual practices that have lasted for hundreds of years. Many local celebrations keep their original spirit. They show the community's thanks for good harvests.

The most amazing, the Abare Festival in Noto Town, has huge torches up to 20 meters (about 65 feet) tall. Teams of young men carry them through village streets. The torches meet at the local shrine. They are lifted upright in an amazing display before falling in a shower of sparks. This is believed to scare away evil spirits and bring good luck.

All over the peninsula, smaller villages have their own special celebrations. These often have local performances like taiko drumming, lion dances, or unique folk shows. The Kiriko Festivals happen on autumn weekends. Teams of men carry large, lit lantern floats through narrow streets. Each community has its own unique traditions.

What makes these harvest festivals special is how they are part of farming cycles and community life. Watching them gives you a look into Japanese country culture. It shows how growing rice shapes who they are and their yearly traditions.

Visitors looking for real cultural experiences can enjoy these festivals. They show traditions that have stayed the same for centuries. Plus, the autumn colors make the peninsula's forested mountains and rice fields on slopes even more beautiful. Local tourist information centers share details about festival dates. These dates change each year based on when crops are ready and on community events.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Many towns and villages across the Noto Peninsula, Ishikawa. Main festivals include Abare Festival (Noto Town) and various Kiriko Festivals.
- **How to Get There:** A rental car is often needed for flexible access to smaller villages and festival spots. Public transport might be limited during festival times.
- **Hours:** Changes a lot by festival; often evening events.
- **Cost:** Free to watch.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Autumn (September-November), check specific festival dates each year.
- **Tips:**
 - Research specific festival dates and locations through local tourism offices far ahead of time.
 - Expect many local people and few services in smaller villages.
 - Respect local customs and traditions during these events.

Winter Attractions

Kanazawa in Snow

See Japan's elegant city of Kanazawa change with winter snowfall. Its traditional areas become magical. Kanazawa is one of Japan's snowiest cities. Its buildings and culture have learned to deal with heavy winter snow. This has led to a special beauty each season.

The samurai district of Nagamachi feels magical after fresh snow. White blankets cover the stone walls and tiled roofs. They soften sounds all around. The district's water channels, part of the castle town's defenses, reflect bare tree branches and snow-covered walls. This creates perfect chances for photos.

Kenrokuen Garden looks completely different in winter. Snow outlines the shapes of pine trees and gathers on stone lanterns. The garden's yukitsuri (snow suspensions) are cone-shaped rope structures. They protect pine trees from heavy winter snow. These features show how old Japanese methods work with winter. On certain dates in January and February, the garden opens for special evening lights. These create magical scenes as colored lights reflect off snow.

Winter also brings special cultural experiences. Kanazawa's traditional crafts often use winter designs. Gold leaf workshops have unique winter patterns. Traditional candy shops make seasonal wagashi, which show off winter beauty.

For people who love food, winter brings special seasonal menus. These have cold-weather specialties like crab from the Sea of Japan, warm hot pot dishes, and warming sake. Many restaurants have irori (hearth) seating for cozy meals.

Summer attracts many people, but winter gives you a chance to enjoy Kanazawa's culture in peace. Main places are usually less crowded then.

The city's great bus system works well even in snowy weather, making exploring easy.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Kanazawa City, Ishikawa.
- **How to Get There:** Kanazawa Station is a big train hub, easy to reach by Hokuriku Shinkansen. The city's bus system connects all major attractions.
- **Hours:** Changes by attraction. Kenrokuen Garden and other places are generally open during the day. Check winter light dates and times each year.
- **Cost:** Changes by attraction (for example, Kenrokuen ¥320).
- **Best Time to Visit:** January and February for the most snowfall and winter lights.
- **Tips:**
 - Dress very warmly in layers, including waterproof outer clothes.
 - Wear strong, waterproof shoes with good grip for walking on snow and ice.
 - Use the Kanazawa Loop Bus for convenient transportation between attractions.

Yamashiro Onsen Kosoyu in Winter

Experience the perfect match between hot spring bathing and winter views at Yamashiro Onsen's old Kosoyu bathhouse. Here, the 1,300-year tradition of healing baths is at its best during snowy months. This rebuilt public bath from the Meiji era is the main feature of one of Kaga region's prettiest hot spring towns. It creates famous winter scenes as steam rises from its special wooden building against snowy backgrounds.

Winter bathing at Kosoyu is great because of the sharp contrast. The chilly outside air meets the warm hot spring waters, creating a unique experience. These waters are usually kept around 42°C (107°F). This temperature difference creates lots of steam. It wraps bathers in a misty tiny climate. This

adds more feeling than just warmth. The traditional wooden building handles this steam perfectly, making comfortable bathing conditions.

Beyond the main Kosoyu building, Yamashiro Onsen has several foot baths (ashiyu) spread throughout the town. These let visitors enjoy healing waters while staying fully clothed. These public foot baths are popular in winter. They warm cold feet while letting you enjoy the snowy surroundings. The central Ayatori-bashi (Cat's Cradle Bridge) area has the most scenic foot bath. Visitors can soak their feet there while watching steam rise from the stream.

Winter evenings at Yamashiro Onsen are magical. Lanterns light up the snowy streets. Steam adds a soft glow around the outdoor lights. Many ryokan and public places have irori (traditional hearths). Visitors can warm up there after outdoor adventures. They often enjoy local sake or seasonal dishes like crab hot pot.

For a full winter hot spring experience, many traditional ryokan offer overnight packages. These include several bathing options, seasonal kaiseki meals with winter specialties, and cozy rooms with views of snowy landscapes. Even for day visitors, the old buildings, healing waters, and winter views make for unforgettable experiences.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Yamashiro Onsen, Kaga City, Ishikawa.
- **How to Get There:** From Kanazawa Station, take the JR Hokuriku Main Line to Kaga Onsen Station (about 25-30 minutes). From Kaga Onsen Station, take a local bus or taxi to Yamashiro Onsen (about 10-15 minutes).
- **Hours:** Kosoyu is usually 6:00 AM – 10:00 PM. Foot baths are generally open during daylight hours.
- **Cost:** Kosoyu entry is around ¥400-¥500. Ryokan stays vary.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Winter (December-March) for the full snow and hot spring experience.

- **Tips:**

- Explore the town's charming streets and discover its unique feel.
- Try the local "onsen tamago" (hot spring boiled eggs).
- Think about staying in a traditional ryokan to fully experience the hot spring.

Off the Beaten Path

Soji-ji Temple

Discover one of Japan's most important Zen Buddhist training centers at Soji-ji Temple. Here, spiritual practices have continued mostly the same since it started in 1321. Soji-ji is different from many famous temples. It is an active training center. About 200 monks live and practice Soto Zen Buddhism here. This creates a real spiritual feeling that visitors from other countries rarely find.

The temple's large wooden buildings were rebuilt in Yokohama. They replaced the original complex on the Noto Peninsula, which was destroyed by fire. These buildings are true masterpieces of traditional Japanese temple design. The Butsuden (Buddha Hall) holds an impressive statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. The Hatto (Dharma Hall) is the center for daily ceremonies and talks. Visits are special. They let you see real training practices, not just empty ceremonial places.

Morning services start around 4:30 AM and are open to the public. They offer a deep look into the monks' lives. These often involve chanting, zazen (sitting meditation), and formal meals. All are done with strict rules and quiet respect. While not made just for tourists, respectful watchers are generally welcome. This gives a chance for quiet thought and a unique cultural experience.

Beyond the main halls, the temple grounds include various smaller temples and gardens.

Planning Your Visit to Ishikawa

Kanazawa makes the best base for most travellers, with good transport links, historical sites, and food options. Three to four days is enough to explore the city and take a side trip to either the Noto Peninsula or the Kaga hot spring region.

Visit in spring or autumn for the best seasonal colour and festivals. Bring comfortable shoes, as many of the best areas are best seen on foot. Ishikawa suits travellers interested in crafts, architecture, gardens, and slower-paced urban travel with strong local identity.

Toyama Prefecture Introduction to Toyama

Toyama: Mountain Views, Craftsmanship, and Hidden History

Toyama is often skipped by travellers rushing between Tokyo and Kanazawa. That is a mistake. This coastal prefecture offers dramatic Alpine views, historic towns tucked into the hills, and a proud tradition of craftsmanship that still runs deep today.

You will find Toyama shaped by two natural forces: the towering Northern Alps to the south and the deep Toyama Bay to the north. The bay is home to some of Japan's freshest and deepest seafood, including firefly squid and glass shrimp. Inland, mountain villages like Gokayama preserve thatched-roof architecture and seasonal living that has barely changed in generations.

Toyama is compact, scenic, and surprisingly easy to explore. The prefecture is connected to Tokyo by the Hokuriku Shinkansen and has local trains and trams that link city sights with nature spots. For travellers looking to combine mountain landscapes, rural life, and unique local traditions, Toyama is well worth adding to your route.

Spring Attractions

Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route Opening

Take a stunning trip through Japan's Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route. It opens every spring, showing a snow corridor with walls as high as 20 meters. This amazing route goes through the Japanese Alps. It is an engineering marvel. Every April, it changes from a snowy wilderness to a tourist spot thanks to huge snow clearing efforts.

The route usually opens in spring around mid-April. This creates a special seasonal event near Murodo Station, which sits at 2,450 meters, the highest point. Walking between these towering snow corridors is an otherworldly experience found nowhere else in Japan. Pristine white walls contrast dramatically with blue skies. The snow corridor stays open until late June. It slowly shrinks in height, so the first weeks after it opens are especially impressive.

The journey beyond the snow walls is unique. It uses six types of transportation to cover the 37-kilometer route from Toyama to Nagano prefectures. Travelers start in Toyama. They take the Toyama Chiho Railroad. Next, they ride a cable car. After that, they use a highland bus and a trolley bus through Japan's longest tunnel. Then, they take another cable car and finish with a ropeway. Each segment reveals different aspects of the alpine landscape, from forests to open plateaus and dramatic gorges.

The Murodo area has more spring attractions. You can find partially frozen ponds that reflect the mountains. Early alpine flowers also bloom here. Mikurigaike crater lake, close by and often partly frozen, offers great photo spots. Snowy Mount Tateyama reflects beautifully in its clear waters.

You can complete the route in one day, but staying overnight at the Murodo mountain station lets you explore more. It also gives you a chance to enjoy the morning light on the alpine scenery before the day-trippers get there. The accommodation is simple but offers an extraordinary experience of staying amid this high altitude environment.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route, spanning Toyama and Nagano prefectures.
- **Access:**
 - Toyama Side: From Toyama Station, take the Toyama Chiho Railway to Tateyama Station (approximately 1 hour).
 - Nagano Side: From Shinano-Omachi Station, take a bus to Ogizawa (approximately 40 minutes).
 - The route uses various modes of transport (railway, cable car, bus, trolley bus, ropeway).
- **Hours:** Typically 7:00 AM – 5:00 PM (varies by station and season). Operates mid-April to November. Confirm exact opening dates and schedules annually.
- **Cost:** Full one-way route (Toyama to Ogizawa or vice versa) costs approximately ¥12,000 to ¥13,000 for adults. Round-trip options to Murodo are available for less.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid-April to mid-May for the highest snow walls.
- **Tips:**
 - Booking ahead, especially for weekends and holidays, is highly recommended.
 - Dress in warm layers, even in spring, as temperatures at Murodo are cold.
 - Wear sunglasses to protect against snow glare.
 - Allow a full day (6-8 hours) to traverse the entire route.

Cherry Blossoms along Matsukawa River

Enjoy one of Toyama's cherished spring traditions. The cherry trees along the Matsukawa River in central Toyama City bloom in soft pink. This beautiful sight usually happens from early to mid-April. This lovely city waterway runs through the prefectural capital. In spring, it turns into a tunnel of cherry blossoms. They reflect beautifully in the clear water below. It creates perfect photo opportunities and draws locals for hanami (flower viewing) celebrations.

This cherry blossom spot is special for combining natural beauty with historical context. The river flows alongside Toyama Castle Park, where reconstructed castle buildings provide a classic Japanese backdrop for the seasonal display.

Evening illuminations during peak bloom extend viewing hours. Lights shimmer on the river, casting magical reflections. They bring out the blossoms' delicate texture against the night sky. Small food stalls often appear along the riverbanks, offering seasonal specialties and creating a festive atmosphere.

For a different perspective, consider a river cruise on the small sightseeing boats that operate during spring. These short cruises typically last 30-40 minutes and offer excellent photography opportunities without the crowds on popular viewing spots along the riverbanks.

Cherry trees by Matsukawa River are key spots for blossom viewing in Toyama City. Other popular locations include Toyama Castle Park and Fugan Canal Kansui Park. Toyama City is a great place to enjoy cherry blossoms. You can appreciate the beauty without the huge crowds seen in more popular spots.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Matsukawa River, central Toyama City, Toyama.
- **Access:** A short walk from Toyama Station.
- **Hours:** Accessible 24/7. Illuminations typically in the evenings during peak bloom. Confirm exact dates annually.
- **Cost:** Free to observe. River cruises vary (for example, ¥1,000-¥1,500).
- **Best Time to Visit:** Early to mid-April for peak cherry blossoms. Evenings for illuminations.
- **Tips:**
 - Consider a river cruise for unique perspectives.
 - Bring a camera for stunning reflections.
 - Combine with a visit to Toyama Castle Park.



Tulip Festivals in Tonami

Witness spectacular floral displays at the Tonami Tulip Fair, one of Japan's largest tulip festivals. About three million flowers in 700 varieties make a stunning display of colors at Tonami Tulip Park. This yearly event takes place from late April to early May. It changes the countryside and shows the area's rich history of growing tulips, which began in the early 1900s.

This festival is special for its scale and diversity. Well-planned planting patterns form stunning floral "paintings." They look great from the park's observation platforms. These living artworks change every year. They often reflect regional themes or celebrate local culture. The intricate designs can only be seen from above. These displays show sharp geometric shapes. They balance human art with the beauty of nature around them.

Beyond the main park displays, the festival includes various events and activities that provide deeper engagement with local culture. You can enjoy traditional folk shows, farm demos, and food stalls with local treats for a full experience. The festival happens during Japan's Golden Week. This timing creates a festive mood as families come together to celebrate spring's arrival.

For fewer crowds, explore the tulip fields scattered throughout the Tonami Plain outside the main festival site. These working bulb farms offer rustic but equally beautiful floral displays without the festival infrastructure. Local

tourist info centers offer maps of blooming spots. This lets visitors explore tulip farms on their own, highlighting their role in local agriculture.

The festival is in western Toyama Prefecture. This makes it easy to visit nearby attractions. You can explore the historic Gokayama region, known for its traditional gassho-zukuri farmhouses. This allows for diverse day trips. Regular bus services connect Tonami Station with the tulip park during the festival period, making the event accessible even without private transportation.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Tonami Tulip Park, Tonami City, Toyama.
- **Access:** From Shin-Takaoka Station (Hokuriku Shinkansen), take the Johana Line to Tonami Station (approximately 20 minutes). The park is a short walk from Tonami Station.
- **Hours:** Typically 8:30 AM – 5:30 PM during the fair period. Confirm exact dates annually.
- **Cost:** Adults ¥1,300 - ¥1,500 during the fair.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late April through early May for peak bloom.
- **Tips:**
 - Arrive early on weekends and holidays to avoid the largest crowds.
 - Wear comfortable walking shoes.
 - Check for maps of nearby tulip fields for a quieter experience.

Summer Attractions

Kurobe Gorge Railway

Take in one of Japan's best railway trips on the Kurobe Gorge Railway. Open-sided trains twist through a stunning river canyon. You'll see beautiful natural scenery that you can't reach by car. Summer offers great conditions for this adventure. At higher elevations, the comfortable temperatures and lush green forests look great next to the emerald waters of the Kurobe River.

This narrow-gauge railway was built for a hydroelectric dam. It runs 20 kilometers through mountains. The journey is between Unazuki and Keyakidaira stations. Along the way, it crosses 41 bridges and goes through 38 tunnels. The train design has open sides. This lets passengers fully experience the gorge. They can feel the mountain breezes, hear the river's roar, and sometimes see foliage close to the tracks.

You can enjoy the journey as a round trip or in segments. There are four stations where you can explore hiking trails, hot springs, and viewpoints. Keyakidaira, the end point, has great trails. You can walk short paths to view the gorge and the famous Hitokui-Iwa, or "Man-Eating Rock."

Summer benefits from the full operation of all trains and facilities. Lush vegetation thrives from July to September. During this time, Japanese maple trees form cool, green canopies over the tracks and river. The contrast between sunlight filtering through leaves and deep shadows in tunnels creates a rhythmic journey.

For a full experience, think about staying the night at a traditional ryokan in Unazuki Onsen, close to the train's starting point. This hot spring town has healing waters that can beautify your skin. Some baths offer stunning views of the gorge, making the railway journey even better.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Kurobe Gorge, Toyama.
- **Access:** From Toyama Station or Shin-Kurobe Station (Hokuriku Shinkansen), take the Toyama Chiho Railway to Unazuki Onsen Station (approximately 1 hour). The Kurobe Gorge Railway departs from Unazuki Station.
- **Hours:** Varies by season, typically 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM. Operates mid-April to November. Confirm exact operating dates and schedules annually.
- **Cost:** One-way fare from Unazuki to Keyakidaira is approximately ¥2,000 for adults. Round-trip fares are available.

- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer (July-August) for lush greenery and comfortable temperatures.
- **Tips:**
 - Booking tickets in advance, especially for open-air cars and during peak season, is advisable.
 - Wear comfortable shoes for walking at stops.
 - Consider a stay at Unazuki Onsen for a full experience.

Gokayama Folk Festivals

Experience real rural traditions at summer festivals in Gokayama. Here, UNESCO World Heritage villages with unique gassho-zukuri farmhouses showcase cultural performances that are centuries old. These community celebrations are different from commercial events. They keep real ties to farming cycles and spiritual traditions.

The Kokiriko Festival, typically held in early September in Taira Village, showcases one of Japan's oldest folk dances. It is accompanied by distinctive bamboo percussion instruments. This event is unique because it's set among traditional farmhouses. It creates a living museum where cultural performances happen in their original settings.

Summer festivals in Gokayama also feature demonstrations of traditional crafts including washi papermaking, a regional specialty developed during winter months. Visitors can see the whole process, from plant fiber to sheet formation. They can also enjoy hands-on experiences led by artisans. These artisans come from families that have passed down these techniques for generations. The resulting paper represents the ingenuity developed by communities adapting to challenging mountain environments.

Evening events at these festivals feature special lights on the gassho-zukuri houses. The warm glow from paper lanterns shines through the wooden buildings. This creates magical scenes set against the mountains. These nighttime views highlight the organic relationship between architecture and natural setting.

Some festivals offer chances to join community meals. You can enjoy local specialties like sansai (mountain vegetables) and traditional preserved foods. These shared dining experiences provide insights into social structures and food traditions that have sustained mountain communities.

Photography is usually welcome. However, visitors should keep a respectful distance during spiritual events. Also, ask for permission before taking photos of individuals, especially elderly participants.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Gokayama (Taira Village and others), Nanto City, Toyama.
- **Access:** From Shin-Takaoka Station (Hokuriku Shinkansen), take a Kaetsuno Bus. Buses also connect Gokayama with Shirakawa-go and Takayama.
- **Hours:** Festival specific, often in the evenings. Kokiriko Festival is typically early September. Confirm exact dates annually.
- **Cost:** Free to observe.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer/early autumn (for example, early September for Kokiriko Festival).
- **Tips:**
 - Check local tourism information for specific festival dates, as they vary annually.
 - Respect the local customs and privacy of residents during the festivals.
 - Consider staying overnight in a gassho-zukuri farmhouse for a deeper experience.

Toyama Bay Firefly Squid

Witness one of Japan's most unusual natural phenomena as millions of bioluminescent firefly squid create ethereal blue light displays in Toyama Bay during summer nights. These tiny cephalopods are about three inches long. They have unique light-producing organs. When they group together near the surface, they create a stunning blue glow. This spectacle is designated as a Special Natural Monument of Japan.

This experience is special because the squid come close to shore in certain spots. You can watch them without needing boats or special gear. The Hotaruika Museum in Namerikawa City provides the most reliable viewing opportunities. It has facilities specifically designed for appreciating this natural wonder. The museum's seaside location and educational exhibits combine scientific understanding with aesthetic appreciation.

Firefly squid viewing is best from March to May. However, you can still see some in the summer months. Summer also has the advantage of warmer temperatures for comfortable nighttime viewing. Summer also brings the chance to taste these seasonal delicacies in local restaurants, prepared as sashimi or in more complex dishes.

Travelers can explore the coastal areas around Toyama Bay at night. Here, they might see bioluminescence, which offers unexpected and magical experiences. Local fishing ports sometimes see blue glowing patches in the water. This happens when squid get caught with other fish. It shows how this natural wonder connects with the local maritime community.

For those interested in marine biology, the Hotaruika Museum provides fascinating insights into why Toyama Bay hosts such abundant firefly squid. The unique underwater landscape brings deep waters near the shore. This creates perfect conditions for these creatures. They usually live several hundred meters deep but come to the surface to spawn. This scientific context enhances appreciation of the light displays by revealing complex ecological factors.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Toyama Bay, primarily Namerikawa City, Toyama.
- **Access:** Hotaruika Museum: From Toyama Station, take the Ainokaze Toyama Railway to Namerikawa Station (approximately 20 minutes). The museum is a short walk from the station.
- **Hours:** Hotaruika Museum typically 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM (winter season), 9:00 AM – 9:00 PM (spring season with live squid viewing).

Check for specific live viewing event hours and dates, which vary annually.

- **Cost:** Museum admission around ¥800-¥1,000 for adults. Live viewing tours (seasonal) may have an additional fee.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Peak viewing season is March to May, but summer offers viewing opportunities with warmer temperatures. Evenings for bioluminescence.
- **Tips:**
 - Live viewing events at the museum are seasonal and tickets sell out quickly; inquire about availability well in advance.
 - Dress warmly for nighttime viewing, even in summer, as coastal nights can be cool.
 - Taste the fresh firefly squid at local restaurants during the season.

Autumn Attractions

Kurobe Dam and Surrounding Foliage

Experience the perfect harmony between monumental human engineering and natural beauty at Kurobe Dam. Autumn transforms the surrounding mountains into a canvas of red, orange, and gold. At 186 meters tall, this giant arch dam is Japan's highest. It looks especially stunning in October and early November. That's when fall colors frame its structure and the emerald waters of Lake Kurobe.

Autumn visits are special. The dam's sharp geometric shape stands out against the colorful leaves covering the steep mountainsides of the Kurobe Gorge. This contrast offers great photo spots from different angles. The best views are from the observation deck on top of the dam.

The dam's famous water discharge, releasing up to 10 tons of water per second, continues through late October, adding a dynamic element. The dam's power is clear in its thunderous roar and massive spray. When sunlight hits the mist just right, rainbows often appear, adding a brief touch of beauty.

Accessing Kurobe Dam involves a memorable journey on the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route, incorporating various transportation modes. In autumn, this journey turns into a major attraction. Each part shows off the changing fall colors at different heights. Alpine vegetation zones show unique color patterns. This lets visitors see different stages of autumn in just one day.

For the most rewarding experience, consider visiting on weekdays rather than weekends, as autumn colors draw significant domestic tourism. Early morning arrivals offer great light for photos. They also let you explore before bigger groups show up. The clear mountain air and autumn light make mornings ideal for enjoying Kurobe Dam. This spot showcases Japan's connection to its stunning landscape.



At a Glance:

- **Location:** Kurobe Dam, Tateyama, Toyama.
- **Access:** Part of the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route. Access from Toyama via the route (refer to Alpine Route access details).
- **Hours:** Dam viewing area typically open during Alpine Route operating hours. Confirm water discharge schedule annually.
- **Cost:** Included in Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route ticket.
- **Best Time to Visit:** October to early November for peak autumn colors and water discharge.

- **Tips:**

- Arrive early to avoid crowds, especially on weekends.
- Dress in layers as temperatures can vary significantly with elevation.
- Bring a camera to capture the dramatic scenery.

Zuiryuji Temple in Fall

Experience autumn peace at Zuiryuji Temple in Takaoka City. This Zen Buddhist gem showcases stunning fall colors, adding beauty to one of Japan's key architectural sites. This 17th-century temple complex is a National Treasure. It showcases the best of early Edo period Zen architecture. Its elegant proportions and restrained design provide perfect counterpoints to nature's seasonal display.

Autumn visits are special for how the temple's thoughtful design incorporates seasonal change. The carefully raked gravel courtyard becomes a canvas for fallen maple leaves. This creates ephemeral patterns that embody Zen concepts of impermanence. The temple's wooden structures, weathered to a silver-gray patina, provide subtle backdrops, allowing vibrant autumn colors to stand as focal points.

Unlike more famous fall foliage destinations, Zuiryuji typically offers contemplative experiences with space for quiet appreciation. Takaoka City isn't a big tourist spot, so visitors can find peace. Early mornings are best. The slanting light casts dramatic shadows and highlights the colorful leaves.

The temple complex includes multiple buildings arranged according to strict Zen principles. The two-story Butsuden (Buddha Hall) and Hatto (Dharma Hall) are the most impressive. In autumn, the connecting corridors showcase vibrant seasonal colors. They create natural "paintings" that highlight how classical Japanese architecture blends with nature.

To enhance your experience, try to visit during morning meditation sessions. These sessions are sometimes open to visitors, but you need to reserve in advance. Seeing the temple as an active spiritual center helps us understand how seasonal changes connect with Zen practice.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Zuiryuji Temple, Sekihonmachi, Takaoka City, Toyama.
- **Access:** Approximately 10-15 minute walk from Takaoka Station.
- **Hours:** Typically 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM (varies seasonally). Last entry 30 minutes before closing.
- **Cost:** Adults ¥500.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late October to mid-November for peak autumn colors.
- **Tips:**
 - Visit early in the morning for fewer crowds and beautiful light.
 - Allow ample time to explore the grounds and architectural details.
 - Combine with a visit to the Great Buddha of Takaoka nearby.

Shogawa River Cruise

Float through a canyon of autumn colors on the Shogawa River Cruise. Traditional wooden boats navigate calm waters between steep forested hillsides transformed by fall foliage. This peaceful journey offers unique perspectives on the seasonal landscape. Red and gold leaves reflect on the river, creating a beauty you can't see from land.

This river cruise is special for its boat design. Local boatmen skillfully navigate traditional flat-bottomed vessels with poles and oars. They move almost silently through the water. The boats sit low on the water, making connections with nature feel close. Sometimes, branches seem just within reach.

The cruise route goes through places that roads can't reach. It shows off beautiful landscapes that have stayed the same for hundreds of years. Vertical cliff faces draped with maple and beech trees create natural walls of

color. Occasional openings reveal distant mountains layered in softer hues, demonstrating the Japanese aesthetic concept of depth.

Autumn brings ideal conditions, with comfortable temperatures, stable water levels, and minimal rainfall. The seasonal timing of fall colors typically runs from late October through mid-November. While the cruise operates in other seasons, autumn's color palette transforms the experience to truly spectacular.

For the best experience, book the first morning trip. The river is often misty then. Sunlight slowly fills the gorge, creating dreamlike scenes that light up the colorful leaves. Early cruises usually have fewer passengers. This means guides can give more personal attention. They explain the natural features and history of the gorge in detail.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Shogawa Gorge, Tonami City/Nanto City, Toyama. Cruises depart from Komaki Dam (upper course) or Omaki (lower course).
- **Access:** From Shin-Takaoka Station, take a bus to Komaki Dam or Omaki. A rental car offers more flexibility.
- **Hours:** Varies by season and cruise length. Typically operates from morning to late afternoon. Confirm schedule annually.
- **Cost:** Varies by cruise length (for example, around ¥1,000-¥2,000 for a shorter cruise).
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late October to mid-November for peak autumn colors.
- **Tips:**
 - Book the first morning cruise for potentially misty views and fewer people.
 - Wear comfortable clothing and bring a jacket as it can be cooler on the water.
 - Check local tourism information for current operating status and schedules.

Winter Attractions

Tateyama Mountain Range Views

See some of Japan's most amazing mountain views in winter when the Tateyama Range turns into a snowy wonderland. The famous Alpine Route closes in winter, but you can still visit lower Tateyama. Enjoy the beautiful snowy peaks without needing climbing skills.

Winter makes the air extra clear, so you can often see far into the distance and notice even small details on the mountains. The bright white snow pops against the deep blue sky. At sunrise or sunset, the light adds warm colors like gold or pink to the snowy scene.

Several accessible viewpoints provide excellent winter vistas without difficult travel. The Arimine area is easy to reach by car or bus from Toyama City. It offers great views of the range, even in heavy snow. On particularly clear winter days, the reflection of mountains in the partially frozen Arimine Reservoir creates doubled beauty.

The lower stations of the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route stay open in winter, even when the full route closes. Bijodaira Station offers great views of snowy forests and mountains. You can reach it by the Tateyama Cable Car, which runs all year from Tateyama Station. This limited winter operation allows appreciation of alpine scenery without the technical challenges of high-mountain winter travel.

Winter mountain views go well with trips to hot spring towns like Unazuki Onsen. Here, you can enjoy "yukimi-buro," which means soaking in warm waters while admiring snowy scenes. This mix of comfort and beauty shows how the Japanese appreciate winter. They find joy even in the coldest season.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Tateyama Mountain Range viewpoints (for example, Arimine area, Bijodaira Station), Toyama.
- **Access:** Arimine: Accessible by car or bus from Toyama City. Bijodaira: Tateyama Cable Car from Tateyama Station (approximately 7 minutes).
- **Hours:** Accessible during daylight hours. Cable car to Bijodaira has specific operating hours.
- **Cost:** Free for most viewpoints. Cable car fare applies.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Winter (December-March) for snow-covered peaks and clear air.
- **Tips:**
 - Check weather forecasts for clear days for the best views.
 - Dress very warmly with waterproof outerwear.
 - Combine with a relaxing soak in an onsen.

Toyama Traditional Crafts

Explore Toyama Prefecture's long history of handmade crafts by visiting workshops in winter. In the past, farmers made crafts during winter when they could not work in the fields. That tradition continues today. Winter is a good time to see how local materials and location shaped the unique styles in the area.

Takaoka City is known for metalworking and makes about 95 percent of Japan's copperware. This craft has been passed down for over 400 years. In winter, you can watch the full process, from shaping the metal to adding final touches. Because it is cold, artists often spend more time indoors and can show visitors how their work is done.

Inami is famous for wood carving. Winter is the best time for carving because dry air helps the wood stay strong and smooth. Artists there carve detailed patterns on temples, shrines, and old homes. Visitors can watch them work and even try simple carving in special classes.

If you like fabric, head to Johana in southern Toyama. People there have been weaving fabric for 350 years. In winter, weaving becomes the main focus. You can visit the Johana Textile Hall to see old and new cloth and watch how the patterns are made on traditional looms.

Winter is a great time to explore local crafts because people focus more on indoor activities. Many workshops offer longer demonstrations and more chances for visitors to try the crafts themselves. Tourism slows down in winter, but craft-making keeps going strong. The snowy scenes outside and the warm, busy workshops inside create a special mix. These visits help you connect with long-standing traditions shaped by Toyama's unique winter lifestyle.

At a Glance:

- **Locations:** Takaoka City (metalworking), Inami Town (wood carving), Johana (textiles).
- **Access:**
 - Takaoka: Walk from Takaoka Station.
 - Inami: Bus from Takaoka Station or Shin-Takaoka Station.
 - Johana: Johana Line from Takaoka Station to Johana Station, then local transport.
- **Hours:** Varies by workshop/museum. Generally daytime hours (for example, 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM). Check individual facility schedules.
- **Cost:** Free to browse shops/some observation areas. Hands-on experiences typically ¥1,000 - ¥5,000 or more.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Winter (December-March) for peak indoor production and demonstrations.
- **Tips:**
 - Inquire locally about specific workshops offering demonstrations or hands-on activities.
 - Consider purchasing unique handcrafted souvenirs.
 - Some smaller workshops may require advance reservations.

Skiing and Winter Sports

Enjoy top-notch powder snow at Toyama's ski resorts. Here, you can avoid the busy international crowds. The heavy snowfall from the Sea of Japan ensures great winter sports conditions from December to March. The prefecture has a unique geography. Mountains rise steeply from narrow coastal plains. This setup leads to abundant snowfall. Cold continental air moves over the warm sea and hits the mountains.

Tateyama Sanroku Ski Area is just 40 minutes from Toyama City. It offers a great winter sports experience and has facilities for all skill levels. This resort stands out for its dependable snow and stunning views. On clear days, you can see Toyama Plain and the Sea of Japan.

Welcome to Fukui Prefecture!

Fukui: Fossils, Castles, and Quiet Coastal Beauty

Fukui is one of Japan's least-visited prefectures, but that only adds to its appeal. Tucked between mountains and the Sea of Japan, it offers a mix of natural scenery, deep history, and unusual finds you won't see elsewhere.

This is where you can walk through a real samurai-era castle keep, see actual dinosaur fossils unearthed nearby, and enjoy peaceful seaside towns that welcome visitors without crowds. Fukui has a long connection to Zen Buddhism and traditional crafts, and the rhythm of life here still feels deeply local.

It is easy to reach from Kyoto or Kanazawa by train, and costs tend to be lower than nearby tourist hotspots. For those looking to escape the usual routes and discover something more grounded and personal, Fukui offers plenty of reasons to stop and stay.

Cherry Blossoms at Maruoka Castle

Enjoy cherry blossom viewing at Maruoka Castle. About 400 cherry trees bloom around Japan's oldest castle tower that is still standing. This setting perfectly mixes beautiful nature with cultural history. The castle dates back to 1576. This "mist castle" gets its name from a legend about a protective mist. It offers a unique place for spring flowers. This spot stands out from the busy viewing places in big cities.

This cherry blossom experience is special because the castle is high up. You get views of pink blossoms in front and wide scenes of mountains and countryside around. The castle's stone walls and old wooden structure look stunning next to the delicate flowers. This scene captures the Japanese idea of beauty in the mix of what is permanent and what is temporary.

During peak bloom, usually early to mid-April, evening lights transform the experience. Lights shine on the castle and cherry trees. This creates magical scenes where the historic building seems to float among glowing blossoms.

The annual Cherry Blossom Festival happens during peak bloom. It brings cultural flair through traditional performances, food stalls with local specialties, and sometimes martial arts or craft demonstrations. These activities help you understand the castle's historical importance while enjoying seasonal beauty.

Visit early in the morning for fewer crowds. You can enjoy the castle and blossoms in peace before the tour groups show up. The soft morning light is great for photography. The park around the castle provides spaces for hanami (flower viewing) picnics. Local shops in nearby Maruoka town sell seasonal bento boxes.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Maruoka Castle, Sakai City, Fukui.
- **Access:** From Fukui Station, take a local bus to Maruoka Castle (approximately 40 minutes).

- **Hours:** Castle grounds generally open year-round. Castle keep usually 8:30 AM – 5:00 PM. Evening illuminations during peak cherry blossom season (early to mid-April). Confirm exact dates annually.
- **Cost:** Castle keep admission around ¥450 for adults. Grounds are free.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Early to mid-April for peak cherry blossoms. Evenings for illuminations.
- **Tips:**
 - Arrive early in the morning for a quieter experience and good light for photos.
 - Wear comfortable shoes for exploring the castle grounds.
 - Check local information for festival dates and events.

Echizen Daffodil Fields

See one of Japan's most stunning spring flower sights at the Echizen Narcissus Fields. Around four million wild daffodils bloom across the seaside hills, turning them into a bright yellow carpet. This area, found along the Echizen Coast, is the largest place in Japan where wild daffodils grow. The flowers usually reach full bloom from mid-March to early April.

What makes this spot even more special is its setting. The yellow flowers grow on steep hills that lead down to the deep blue Sea of Japan. The colours together are striking. Wooden paths and platforms let you walk through the area without hurting the plants. From these spots, you can enjoy both the flowers up close and the wide view of the coast.

Unlike many cultivated gardens, these daffodil fields remain essentially wild. They have developed naturally over centuries in this unique coastal microclimate. The resulting landscape feels more authentic and spontaneous. Flowers cluster densely in some areas and scatter elsewhere, following the natural contours of the hillside.

The daffodils bloom a few weeks before the cherry blossoms. This means you can enjoy beautiful spring views before the busy cherry blossom season

begins. Because of this good timing, the daffodil fields are usually not too crowded, making it easier to enjoy the scenery in a calm setting.

To make the most of your visit, explore more of the Echizen coast. The area has rocky cliffs, strange-shaped stones, and old fishing villages to see. The coastal road is great for driving or cycling, with many spots to stop and take in the view. The bright daffodils in front of the sea make these scenes even more impressive.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Echizen Narcissus Fields (Echizen Coast), Fukui.
- **Access:** A rental car is highly recommended for exploring the coastal area. Public transport can be limited; check local bus schedules from Takefu Station or Fukui Station.
- **Hours:** Accessible during daylight hours.
- **Cost:** Free.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid-March through early April for peak bloom.
- **Tips:**
 - Consider a scenic drive along the Echizen Coast.
 - Dress warmly as coastal winds can be chilly in spring.
 - Bring a camera for stunning landscape photography.

Dinosaur Museum and Spring Excavations

Visit one of the top dinosaur museums in the world at the Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum. In spring, digging sites reopen and special exhibits show off the latest fossil finds. This museum in Katsuyama City is famous for its big fossil displays. It also conducts active research on nearby dinosaur finds.

What makes this museum stand out is its location. It sits right in the middle of a real dinosaur fossil site, where over 10 new species have been found since the 1980s. Unlike most museums that show fossils from faraway places, this one is part of the discovery. Visitors can see every step, from digging up bones in the mountains to cleaning and studying them in labs, then showing them in displays.

The museum's unique design looks like a big glass and steel egg. Inside, it features great exhibitions that mix science with fun for everyone. Life-size skeletons, often made from local fossils, serve as striking centerpieces. Interactive displays use modern multimedia to explain dinosaur biology, behavior, and evolution.

Spring brings particular energy as the winter closure of outdoor excavation sites ends and new field research begins. This season, special exhibitions show off finds from last year's fieldwork. Visitors get their first look at newly prepared specimens. This link to ongoing research makes visitors feel part of scientific discovery. This sense of involvement is rare in traditional museum settings.

To engage visitors more, the museum has special spring programs. These include guided tours to nearby excavation sites. Here, participants can watch paleontologists at work and even help with basic fossil recovery. You need to reserve in advance for these experiences. They involve moderate hiking and offer unique insights into finding dinosaur fossils.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Fukui Prefectural Dinosaur Museum, Katsuyama City, Fukui.
- **Access:** From Fukui Station, take the Echizen Railway Katsuyama Eiheiji Line to Katsuyama Station (approximately 1 hour), then a bus to the museum (approximately 15 minutes).
- **Hours:** Typically 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM. Closed on the 2nd and 4th Wednesdays (except during Golden Week, summer holidays). Confirm specific dates and holiday closures.
- **Cost:** Adults around ¥700. Special exhibitions and excavation tours may have additional fees.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Spring (especially May/June) for active excavation site tours and new exhibitions.
- **Tips:**
 - Book special programs or tours in advance as they have limited availability.

- Allow at least 3-4 hours to explore the museum thoroughly.
- Consider the combined train/bus tickets for easier access.

Summer Attractions

Tojinbo Cliffs and Coastal Cruises

See Japan's stunning coast at the Tojinbo Cliffs. Here, hexagonal basalt columns shoot up from the Sea of Japan. These impressive formations were shaped by waves over millions of years. Summer is perfect for enjoying this natural wonder. Clear skies show off the dark volcanic rock against the blue waters. Pleasant temperatures make it great for exploring clifftop paths and nearby attractions.

Tojinbo is a special place because of its rare rock shapes. The cliffs are made of columnar basalt, which forms neat hexagon patterns. These shapes were formed about 12 to 13 million years ago when volcanic magma cooled quickly. You won't see rock patterns like this in many other places in Japan. The cliffs are over 25 metres tall and are interesting to both look at and learn about.

In summer, boats leave from a small harbour near the cliffs. These 30-minute rides give you views from the sea that you can't get on land. You can see the rock shapes up close and notice how the waves have worn them down. It's a great chance to take photos, especially when the tall cliffs rise straight up into the sky. The boats also pass through narrow gaps between big rock pillars.

On land, there are safe walking paths with railings at the top of the cliffs. These paths give you many angles to enjoy the view. Some spots have benches where you can sit and take it all in. The best time for photos is in the evening, when the setting sun turns the cliffs golden and highlights the hexagon shapes.

Near the cliffs, you'll find small fishing villages. People still fish in the old ways. Local restaurants serve fresh seafood caught just off the coast. This

makes your visit not only about the views, but also about enjoying the local culture and food.

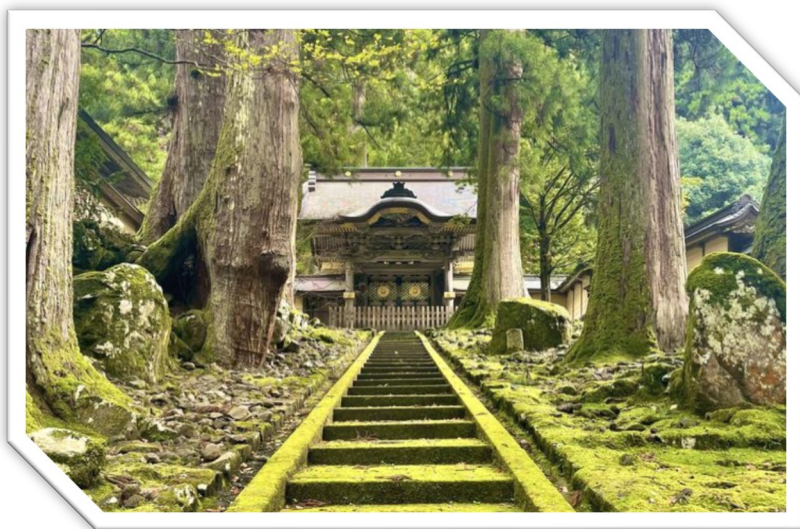
At a Glance:

- **Location:** Tojinbo Cliffs, Sakai City, Fukui.
- **Access:** From Fukui Station, take the Echizen Railway Mikuni Awara Line to Mikuni-Minato Station (approximately 50 minutes), then a local bus to Tojinbo (approximately 10 minutes).
- **Hours:** Accessible 24/7. Boat cruises typically operate 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM (hours vary seasonally and by weather).
- **Cost:** Free to visit cliffs. Boat cruise is around ¥1,500 for adults.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer (July-August) for clear skies and pleasant temperatures. Evenings for sunset views.
- **Tips:**
 - Take a boat cruise for the best views of the cliff formations from the water.
 - Wear comfortable shoes for walking along the clifftop paths.
 - Be cautious near cliff edges and observe safety railings.

Eiheiji Temple Meditation Experiences

Visit the spiritual centre of Japanese Zen Buddhism at Eiheiji Temple. In summer, visitors can take part in meditation sessions at one of Japan's most important training temples. Eiheiji was founded in 1244 by Zen Master Dogen. It still trains around 200 monks who follow strict daily routines that have stayed the same for hundreds of years.

What makes Eiheiji different is that it is a real monastery, not just a tourist spot. Visitors see monks doing their actual daily practice, not acting for show. The temple is deep in the mountains, about 20 kilometres from Fukui City. This quiet setting helps keep its traditions alive and offers a calm, focused experience for guests.



Summer is a good time to visit. The forest around the temple keeps it cool, even when cities are hot. Long summer days also make it easier to walk around and explore the many parts of the temple. The cool shade and peaceful trees show how old Japanese buildings were made to feel comfortable without machines.

If you want to take part, you can join a zazen (seated meditation) session. Monks teach you how to sit and breathe properly before guiding you through the practice. You need to book ahead, but this is a rare chance to try real Zen meditation in its original setting.

Aside from meditation, Eiheiiji's buildings are also worth seeing. There are about 70 structures linked by covered walkways. These paths let people move around in any weather and add to the peaceful feel. The temple's design shows Zen ideas clearly, with simple shapes, natural wood, and strong ties to nature.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Eiheiiji Temple, Eiheiiji Town, Fukui.
- **Access:** From Fukui Station, take the Echizen Railway Katsuyama Eiheiiji Line to Eiheijiguchi Station (approximately 30 minutes), then a local bus to Eiheiiji (approximately 15 minutes).

- **Hours:** Temple usually 5:00 AM – 5:00 PM (hours vary seasonally). Zazen experiences have specific schedules; inquire locally.
- **Cost:** Temple admission around ¥500 for adults. Zazen experiences may have an additional fee.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer (July-August) for lush greenery and comfortable conditions for meditation.
- **Tips:**
 - Dress modestly and respectfully when visiting the temple.
 - Inquire about zazen experiences well in advance, as they require reservations.
 - Be prepared for walking, as the complex is extensive.

Awara Onsen Summer Festivals

Experience the perfect combination of traditional culture and relaxation at Awara Onsen. Summer festivals bring this historic hot spring town to life with dancing, music, and community celebrations. This respected spa, known for its 130-year tradition of healing baths, changes in summer evenings. People in yukata (light summer kimonos) join traditional dances, savor festival foods, and relax in healing waters. This creates a full cultural experience.

Awara's summer festivals are special for their authentic community feel. These events grew naturally as ways for local people to express who they are. The Awara Bonbon Dance Festival in early August is the main event. Hundreds of participants perform traditional circle dances in the town center, with taiko drums and folk songs. Visitors are actively encouraged to join these dances. This creates cultural experiences where you can participate, rather than just watch.

The festival atmosphere spreads throughout the hot spring town. Yatai, or food stalls, line the streets. They offer local favorites like yakisoba, takoyaki, and kakigori. These foods add to the sights and sounds, creating experiences that fully involve visitors' senses.

What makes Awara's festivals different from similar events elsewhere is how they combine with hot spring culture. Participants move between festival

activities and therapeutic bathing throughout the evening. Many ryokan offer special summer packages that include festival participation. This allows visitors to enjoy energetic dancing and music before relaxing in mineral-rich waters.

The yukata, a light summer kimono, is worn by many people during festivals. Both locals and visitors wear it. It looks beautiful and keeps you cool on warm summer nights. Many hotels and inns offer yukata to guests, so even first-time visitors can join in and feel part of the event.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Awara Onsen, Awara City, Fukui.
- **Access:** From Fukui Station, take the Echizen Railway Mikuni Awara Line to Awara-Yunomachi Station (approximately 40 minutes).
- **Hours:** Festival specific, typically evenings in summer. Awara Bonbon Dance Festival usually early August. Confirm exact dates annually.
- **Cost:** Free to observe. Food stalls and onsen stays vary.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer (especially early August for Awara Bonbon Dance Festival).
- **Tips:**
 - Stay at a ryokan to enjoy onsen baths and traditional meals.
 - Try local festival foods from the yatai.
 - Don't hesitate to join in the Bonbon dance!

Autumn Attractions

Ichijodani Asakura Ruins in Fall Colors

Travel back in time at the Ichijodani Asakura Ruins. In autumn, the remains of this old samurai town come alive with colour. Red and gold leaves frame the stone paths and rebuilt homes, making the site feel like a living painting. The Asakura family ruled here for five generations during the Warring States period (1467–1573).

What makes this place stand out is how much of it has been kept or brought back. You can see where samurai lived, where merchants worked, and where people worshipped. Archaeologists found streets, water systems, gardens, and more. Some buildings have been rebuilt so visitors can see how life looked in the 1500s.

Autumn is the best time to visit. The air is cool and good for walking. The forests and gardens around the ruins are full of colour, creating amazing views as you explore the wide, peaceful valley. The lively maples and worn stone foundations show the Japanese idea of wabi-sabi. This concept finds beauty in things that are temporary and imperfect. It fits well when we think about the rise and fall of this once-mighty samurai domain.

For the most rewarding experience, begin at the excellent museum on the site. Excavation finds help us understand daily life in the Asakura period. This background helps us explore the ruins better. We can imagine the busy castle town that once filled this peaceful valley. It was destroyed by Oda Nobunaga's forces in 1573.

The site's valley location makes autumn views stunning. The hillsides, full of colorful trees, act like colorful "walls" that frame the old ruins. Several elevated observation areas offer wide views across the entire complex. Visitors can enjoy the vastness of the old castle town. They can also admire the seasonal beauty that transforms it every autumn.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Ichijodani Asakura Ruins, Fukui City, Fukui.
- **Access:** From Fukui Station, take the Echizen Railway Katsuyama Eiheiji Line to Ichijodani Station (approximately 20 minutes), then a short walk or shuttle bus to the main site.
- **Hours:** Ruins are generally accessible during daylight hours. Museum typically 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM. Confirm closures.
- **Cost:** Free to enter ruins. Museum admission is around ¥300 for adults.

- **Best Time to Visit:** Late October to mid-November for peak autumn colors.
- **Tips:**
 - Allow plenty of time to explore the vast site and the museum.
 - Wear comfortable walking shoes.
 - Consider an early morning visit for fewer crowds and better light.

Echizen Washi Village

Learn about the deep history of Japanese papermaking at Echizen Washi Village. Autumn is the best time to visit, with cool air and bright light that match the needs of this old craft. The village, set in the mountains of southern Fukui, has made paper in the same way since the 6th century. The handmade paper from here is known across Japan for its high quality and is part of a protected cultural tradition.

What makes this visit special is that you can watch the full process. You'll see how raw plant fibres turn into smooth sheets of paper. Local craftspeople, many from families that have done this for generations, guide the work. Unlike machine-made paper, Echizen washi is done completely by hand. The main fibre, called kozo, is cleaned, soaked, and shaped using careful steps that take years to learn.

Autumn helps this process. The light is just right, the air is dry which helps the paper dry better, and the mountain water stays at a good temperature for soaking the fibres. These natural things shaped when and how people made paper in the past.

You can try it yourself. The workshops let you make your own sheet of washi with help from the experts. It's harder than it looks, but fun. It also gives you a new respect for the skill needed to do this every day. You even get to take home what you made.

Don't miss the Paper & Culture Museum. It explains how washi has shaped Japanese life. Not just in writing or art, but also in buildings, religion, and

government. Seeing how this one simple material connects to so many parts of life helps you understand why it still matters so much today.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Echizen Washi Village, Echizen City, Fukui.
- **Access:** From Takefu Station (JR Hokuriku Line), take a local bus (approximately 20-30 minutes). A rental car offers more flexibility.
- **Hours:** Varies by workshop/museum. Generally 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM. Closed on certain days.
- **Cost:** Free to enter the village. Museum admission is around ¥300-¥500 for adults. Hands-on papermaking experience around ¥1,000-¥2,000.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Autumn (September-November) for ideal papermaking conditions and pleasant weather.
- **Tips:**
 - Participate in a hands-on papermaking workshop for a unique experience.
 - Visit the Paper & Culture Museum for historical context.
 - Consider purchasing authentic Echizen washi products.

Autumn Leaves at Nishiyama Park

Enjoy the beauty of autumn at Nishiyama Park, where around 3,500 maple trees fill the hills with red, orange, and gold. The park sits near the ruins of Fukui Castle and was built to show off the changing seasons. From late October to mid-November, it becomes one of the top spots in the area to see fall colours. You'll find both wide open views and quiet paths surrounded by leaves.

What makes Nishiyama Park special is how it was designed. It mixes Japanese and Western garden styles to give different kinds of views. Some parts have trimmed trees around ponds and rocks, showing classic Japanese style. Other areas feel more natural, with big groups of maples showing bright colour from many angles.

Because the park sits on a hill above Fukui City, you can also enjoy views of the city and the mountains in the distance. Platforms along the paths are set up so that the bright trees in the foreground frame the background views. This is a great example of a Japanese design idea called shakkei, or borrowed scenery. Here, nature and the view are arranged together thoughtfully.

Evening illuminations during peak color periods extend viewing hours. Carefully positioned lighting creates dramatic effects among maple branches, reflecting in water features. These nighttime viewings offer completely different beautiful experiences. Darkness focuses attention on illuminated foliage while city lights create twinkling backgrounds.

For a better experience, visit on weekdays. The autumn colors draw many Japanese tourists on weekends. Arriving early gives you great light for photography. It also lets you explore before bigger groups show up. The park is large, so you can usually find quiet spots, even when it's busy. This makes it easy to enjoy the peaceful surroundings away from the crowds.

At a Glance:

- **Location:** Nishiyama Park, Sabae City, Fukui.
- **Access:** From Sabae Station (JR Hokuriku Line), approximately 15-minute walk.
- **Hours:** Accessible 24/7. Illuminations typically in the evenings during peak autumn foliage (late October to mid-November). Confirm exact dates annually.
- **Cost:** Free.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late October to mid-November for peak autumn colors.
- **Tips:**
 - Visit in the evening for illuminated autumn leaves.
 - Wear comfortable shoes as there are many paths and some inclines.
 - Explore different viewpoints for varied perspectives.

Winter Attractions

Ski Resorts of Katsuyama

Enjoy top-quality powder snow without the big crowds at ski resorts near Katsuyama City. From December to March, cold air from the continent crosses the warm Sea of Japan and hits the mountains, creating heavy snowfall. Fukui's location near the coast makes it perfect for winter sports with deep, soft snow.

Skijam Katsuyama is the largest resort in the area. It has 11 ski runs for all levels, modern lifts, and good services. You can rent gear and take lessons with English-speaking teachers. On clear days, you can see the Japan Alps in the distance, making the views as exciting as skiing.

For those looking for deeper snow and fewer people, Ono City Snow Park is a great choice. It has harder runs and a quieter feel. It's not as built-up as places in Nagano or Hokkaido, but it still has good facilities. After snowfall, you can often find fresh tracks here much longer.

Winter fun isn't only downhill. You can also try cross-country skiing in places like Rokuroshi, where smooth trails go through snowy forests. Or join a snowshoe tour, where guides teach you about the local nature while you walk.

Fukui's ski areas stay less busy than Japan's most famous resorts. This means you'll mostly meet Japanese visitors and locals. That adds a cultural layer to your trip, making the experience feel more real and connected to everyday Japanese winter life.

At a Glance:

- **Locations:** Skijam Katsuyama, Ono City Snow Park, and others.
- **Access:**
 - Skijam Katsuyama: From Katsuyama Station (Echizen Railway), take a shuttle bus (approximately 30 minutes).

- Ono City Snow Park: May require local bus or rental car from Ono Station.
- **Hours:** Varies by resort. Lifts typically operate 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM. Night skiing may be available.
- **Cost:** Day lift passes typically ¥4,000 - ¥6,000. Rentals and lessons extra.
- **Best Time to Visit:** January to March for peak snow conditions and powder.
- **Tips:**
 - Check resort snow reports and operating hours before visiting.
 - Consider a multi-day pass for a more extensive experience.
 - Book lessons in advance if needed.

Snow Crab Season Culinary Experiences

Enjoy one of Japan's finest winter foods with Fukui's famous snow crab, called zuwaigani. This prized crab is only available during the set season from November to March. Every winter, fishing boats deliver fresh crabs to ports along the Sea of Japan. This turns coastal towns into lively spots for seasonal food culture. People from all over the country come to enjoy the experience.

Fukui's snow crab is special because of where it's caught. The cold, deep waters off the coast are perfect for growing sweet, tender crab meat. Strict rules help protect the crab population and keep the quality high. Male crabs are only taken once they're fully grown. Female crabs, called kobako-gani, are even more carefully managed.

The town of Echizen is the heart of snow crab life. At its morning markets, you can watch the day's catch being sold to restaurants and inns. These scenes show how experts judge the crabs' quality and why they are so highly valued in Japanese food culture.

To enjoy the full snow crab experience, stay at a ryokan in Awara Onsen or another seaside hot spring town. In winter, many offer special meal plans built around crab. These multi-course dinners usually begin with fresh

sashimi. Next, enjoy salt-grilled legs. Finally, savor the crab hot pot (nabe), which brings out rich flavors from the meat. At the end, rice is added to the broth to make zosui, a warm porridge that captures the leftover richness.

You don't have to spend a lot to try Fukui's crab. In winter, many local places offer special crab menus at different prices. Even small restaurants often serve crab set meals. This makes it easy for visitors with all kinds of budgets to enjoy this famous seasonal treat in a real and memorable way.

At a Glance:

- **Locations:** Coastal cities like Echizen and Sakai, Awara Onsen, and restaurants throughout Fukui.
- **Access:** Varies by restaurant or market. Echizen fishing port is a major hub.
- **Hours:** Crab season: November through March. Market hours are typically early morning. Restaurant hours vary.
- **Cost:** Highly variable. A full crab kaiseki meal can range from ¥15,000 to ¥30,000+ per person, depending on the restaurant and type of crab.
- **Best Time to Visit:** November through March for snow crab season.
- **Tips:**
 - Book a table in advance, especially for high-end ryokan and restaurants.
 - Consider visiting a local fish market early in the morning to see the fresh catch.
 - Don't be afraid to try different preparations of crab.

Planning Your Visit to Fukui

Two to three days is enough to cover the highlights, but you could spend longer if you enjoy slow travel or want to explore the coast more deeply. Fukui City is a practical base, though staying in towns like Obama or Katsuyama gives a quieter local feel.

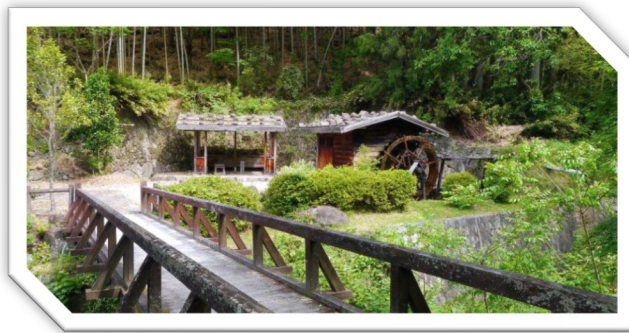
Fukui suits travellers interested in history, science, and peaceful scenery. It is especially good for families, castle fans, or anyone looking for an

alternative to the busy Golden Route. The best times to visit are spring and autumn, though the coastline is beautiful in summer too.

Gifu Prefecture: Japan's Central Wonder and Old Ways

Gifu: Timeless Villages and Mountain Traditions

Gifu delivers some of Japan's most iconic rural scenes. Steep thatched roofs, snowy valleys, and centuries-old traditions are part of everyday life here. This landlocked prefecture connects the old Nakasendo trade route with mountain towns that have preserved their character for generations.



The UNESCO-listed villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama are the main draw, but the appeal goes further. You can soak in hot springs with clear mountain views, walk through post towns like Magome and Tsumago, or experience festivals that still belong to the locals.

Gifu is easy to reach from Nagoya or Kanazawa. Trains and buses cover the essentials, but a rental car helps you reach quieter valleys and smaller towns. If you are looking for preserved history, dramatic scenery, and rural calm, Gifu is one of the most rewarding stops in central Japan.

Seasonal Attractions

Spring

Cherry Blossoms at Gifu Park

See one of the best cherry blossom shows in central Japan at Gifu Park. About 1,300 cherry trees make a stunning pink scene in early April. In the background, **Gifu Castle** sits on Mount Kinka. The park becomes a pink wonderland, bringing people to enjoy its beauty, history, and lively mood. When the blossoms are at their best, the park has a festival with hundreds of paper lanterns lighting up the trees after the sun goes down.

- **Location:** Gifu City, Gifu Prefecture
- **Getting There:** From JR Gifu Station or Meitetsu Gifu Station, take the N line bus (towards Nagarachashi) or the city loop left-hand bus to the "Gifu Park/Gifu Castle" stop. It takes about 15 minutes and costs 230 JPY.
- **Hours:** The park is always open. Gifu Castle and other places inside the park have their own hours.
- **Cost:** Entering the park is free. Gifu Castle has its own ticket price.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Early April for cherry blossoms.
- **Tips:** You can see the cherry blossoms and visit Gifu Castle. You can get to the castle by the Mount Kinka Ropeway (a cable car) or by hiking paths.

Gujo Hachiman Water Town in Spring

Come see the charming "**Water City**" of **Gujo Hachiman** in spring. This old castle town comes alive as clear water flows through canals, streams, and fountains. This pretty town is most lovely in spring. The weather is nice, and flowers are blooming, making it perfect for exploring its unique water culture. The town's special water system, built a long time ago, still works today, with mountain spring water running next to almost every street.

- **Location:** Gujo Hachiman, Gifu Prefecture
- **Getting There:** From Nagoya, take the Meitetsu Limited Express train to Mino-Ota Station. Then take the Nagaragawa Railway to Gujo Hachiman Station. It takes about 2 hours and 10 minutes in total.
- **Hours:** Times change for different attractions; you can always explore the town. Hakurankan Museum: 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM daily (closed Tuesdays and December 30 – January 4).
- **Cost:** It's free to walk around the town. Some places like the Hakurankan Museum cost money to enter (500 JPY for the museum).
- **Best Time to Visit:** Spring for good weather and clear water.
- **Tips:** Go to the Hakurankan Museum to learn about the town's water system. Walk across Miyagase Bridge for nice views.



Springtime Hiking in Hida Mountains

See the mountains of Japan wake up in spring by hiking in the **Hida Mountains**. When the snow melts, bright new plants grow, and the views are amazing. This mountain area, part of the Japanese Alps, is great for hiking as winter ends and paths open up between late April and June, depending on how high up you go. You can see the big change between seasons, with green valleys while snow still covers the high peaks. The Shin-Hotaka Ropeway can take you up into these mountains easily.

- **Location:** Hida Mountains, Northern Gifu Prefecture (near Takayama and Shin-Hotaka Onsen)
- **Getting There:** You can get to the Shin-Hotaka Ropeway by bus from Takayama (about 1 hour). You can get to Kamikochi by bus from Takayama, going through Hirayu Onsen (about 1.5 hours total).
- **Hours:** Shin-Hotaka Ropeway: Open all year (hours change with the season). Kamikochi: Officially open from April 17 to November 15.
- **Cost:** Shin-Hotaka Ropeway round trip: 2,900 JPY for adults. Kamikochi: Usually free to enter, but you pay for transportation.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late April to June to see the change of seasons.
- **Tips:** Take the Shin-Hotaka Ropeway for wide views. If you like harder hikes, explore the Kamikochi valley from mid-April. Wear layers of clothes because the temperature can change a lot.

Summer

Cormorant Fishing on the Nagara River (Ukai)

Watch one of Japan's most special old practices on summer evenings on the Nagara River. **Cormorant fishing (ukai)** has been done for 1,300 years. In this old fishing method, trained birds called cormorants catch fish while tied to a leash, guided by skilled masters. This is a special, old Japanese tradition. The fishing happens after sunset. Wooden boats with hanging fire baskets light up the dark river, making a dramatic sight.

- **Location:** Nagara River, Gifu City
- **Getting There:** From JR Gifu Station, take a bus (about 15 minutes, 230 JPY) to the Nagarabashi Minami - Kawaramachi bus stop.
- **Hours:** The season is from May through October. Boats usually leave between 6:15 PM and 7:15 PM, and fishing starts around 7:45 PM.
- **Cost:** Ukai Cruise (without dinner): 3,200-3,500 JPY. Dinner cruises cost more.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Warm summer evenings for a comfortable view.

- **Tips:** Think about taking a spectator boat to get the best experience. Some boats offer dinner with ayu (sweetfish), which is what the cormorants usually catch.

Gujo Odori Dance Festival

Join one of Japan's most exciting old celebrations at the **Gujo Odori**. Nightly dance festivals turn the streets of Gujo Hachiman into happy community parties all summer long. This amazing festival is more than 400 years old. It's biggest during the Obon period in mid-August (usually August 13-16), when dancing goes on all night for four nights in a row.

- **Location:** Gujo Hachiman, Gifu Prefecture
- **Getting There:** From Nagoya, take the Meitetsu Limited Express train to Mino-Ota Station. Then take the Nagarakawa Railway to Gujo Hachiman Station. It takes about 2 hours and 10 minutes in total.
- **Hours:** Usually mid-July to early September. All-night dances are from August 13-16. Evening dances are usually 8 PM - 10:30 PM (weekdays/Sundays) or 8 PM - 11 PM (Saturdays).
- **Cost:** Free to join.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid-August for the all-night dancing.
- **Tips:** The dances are easy to learn, and visitors are welcome to join. The Gujo Hachiman Tourist Information Center might offer practice sessions during the day.

Hiking and Alpine Exploration in Kamikōchi

See Japan's most amazing mountain views by exploring **Kamikochi** in summer. This untouched valley, at 1,500 meters high, is the start of the Northern Japan Alps. This wonderful natural area is protected in Chubu-Sangaku National Park. It has great hiking, from easy walks by the river to challenging mountain climbs. Cars are not allowed in the valley, which helps keep it beautiful.

- **Location:** Northern Gifu Prefecture (part of Chubu-Sangaku National Park)

- **Getting There:** Take a bus from Takayama through Hirayu Onsen (about 1.5 hours total). Private cars are not allowed; use special parking areas and take a bus.
- **Hours:** Open from April 17 to November 15 each year.
- **Cost:** You pay for transportation. There is no park entrance fee.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer (July-September) for good temperatures and wildflowers. Try to avoid the Obon Holidays (mid-August) because it gets very crowded.
- **Tips:** The area around Kappa Bridge is a main spot. Think about walking to Myojin Pond for pretty reflections.

Autumn

Gero Onsen in Fall Colors

Find the perfect mix of beautiful nature and soothing relaxation at Gero Onsen. In autumn, this old hot spring town turns into a picture of red, orange, and gold. Gero is known as one of Japan's three best hot spring places. The view is stunning from late October to mid-November. The colorful trees on the mountains reflect beautifully in the Hida River.

- **Location:** Gero City, Gifu Prefecture
- **Getting There:** From Nagoya or Gifu City, take the JR Takayama Line Limited Express "Wide View Hida" train to Gero Station. It's about 90 minutes from Nagoya and 60 minutes from Gifu.
- **Hours:** Hot spring places are open all day; specific hours depend on the place.
- **Cost:** Costs change depending on if you use public baths or stay at a ryokan. A yumeguri tegata (bath pass) lets you go to several baths.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Late October to mid-November for autumn leaves.
- **Tips:** Visit Onsenji Temple for wide views of the town and fall colors. Try local sake and special autumn foods like matsutake mushrooms.

Shirakawa-go Autumn Festival (Doburoku Festival)

See real countryside traditions at the Doburoku Festival in Shirakawa-go, a UNESCO World Heritage village. This special event takes place in mid-October and celebrates the autumn harvest. People take part in sacred rituals, watch old-style performances, and drink doburoku, a thick, unfiltered sake. It's a rare chance to enjoy Japanese folk culture while walking among the village's famous steep-roof farmhouses.

- **Location:** Shirakawa-go, Gifu Prefecture (Ogimachi area)
- **Getting There:** You can get there by bus from Takayama or Kanazawa.
- **Hours:** Usually held between October 14th and 19th each year, with the main parties on the 14th and 15th.
- **Cost:** Free to go to the festival.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid-October for the festival and autumn leaves.
- **Tips:** The main part of the festival is when shrine priests make and share doburoku. Look for old lion dances (shishi-mai) done by the villagers.

Takayama Autumn Festival (Hachiman Matsuri)

Experience one of Japan's most wonderful old festivals at the Takayama Autumn Festival. Festival floats (yatai) from the 1600s, beautifully decorated, parade through the charming old town. The fall colors are just right. This festival happens twice a year (in spring and autumn). The October event is truly spectacular. The surrounding mountains offer colorful backdrops for shows that have remained nearly unchanged for over 300 years.

- **Location:** Takayama, Gifu Prefecture (near Sakurayama Hachiman-gu Shrine)
- **Getting There:** You can get to Takayama by Limited Express train from Nagoya (about 2.5 hours) or by highway bus from other cities.
- **Hours:** Every year on October 9th and 10th. The night festival happens on the evening of the 9th.
- **Cost:** Free to go.

- **Best Time to Visit:** October 9th and 10th for the festival.
- **Tips:** The best part is the amazing detail of the festival floats. Watch the night parade when hundreds of old paper lanterns light up the floats.

Winter

Skiing in Takasu Snow Park

Enjoy great powder snow without huge crowds at **Takasu Snow Park**. Heavy snowfall from the Sea of Japan makes perfect conditions for winter sports from December through March. This modern ski resort is in northwestern Gifu Prefecture. It has 10 slopes for all skill levels, and the snow is always good because of where it is located in the snowy area.

- **Location:** Gujo City, Gifu Prefecture
- **Getting There:** Direct bus from Nagoya Station (about 150 minutes). A 15-minute drive from Takasu IC.
- **Hours:** Weekdays: 8:00 AM–4:30 PM; Weekends & Holidays: 7:30 AM–4:30 PM.
- **Cost:** Day Pass: Adults ¥4,900, Children (4-12 years) ¥2,100.
- **Best Time to Visit:** December through March for snow sports.
- **Tips:** There's a special snowboard park, cross-country skiing paths, and snow play areas.

Shirakawa-go Winter Light-Up

Experience Japan's winter magic in Shirakawa-go. The gassho-zukuri farmhouses shine in the deep snow and special lights during the village's famous winter light-up events. These special evening viewings, held on certain dates in January and February, create fairytale scenes. Warm golden light from windows and special lights shine against the pure white snow on the steep, pointy roofs.

- **Location:** Shirakawa-go, Gifu Prefecture (Ogimachi area)
- **Getting There:** You can get there by bus from Takayama or Kanazawa. Special transportation might be arranged for the light-up events.
- **Hours:** Selected evenings in January and February (for example, January 13, 19, 26, February 2 in 2025), usually 5:30 PM-7:30 PM.
- **Cost:** Prices vary; special tickets or bookings might be needed for light-up events.
- **Best Time to Visit:** During the special winter light-up dates for illuminated snowy views.
- **Tips:** It's a very good idea to plan and book ahead because there are limited spots and high demand. Think about staying overnight in a minshuku farmhouse for a unique experience.

Hida Takayama Winter Illuminations and Events

Experience old Japanese winter celebrations in **Hida Takayama**. Amazing ice sculptures, old-style shows, and seasonal food make the coldest time of year special. Different winter events happen around the area from December to March, turning the old town area into a place of artistic ice displays lit up by lanterns and special lights.

- **Location:** Takayama and nearby areas (like Nakao, Hida Folk Village)
- **Getting There:** You can get to Takayama by Limited Express train from Nagoya (about 2.5 hours) or by highway bus. Some event locations might need local buses.
- **Hours:** Different events run from December to March. Hida Takayama Illumination (Nakabashi Bridge): December 1 – March 2. Hida-no-Sato Light-Up: January 11 – February 28. Nakao Kamakura Festival: February 1-10.
- **Cost:** Varies by event; some are free, others cost money to enter.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid-January to February for the most winter parties and snow.
- **Tips:** Enjoy lit-up ice sculptures, old shows, and local winter foods. Hida-no-Sato (Hida Folk Village) also has a special winter light-up.

Historical Sites

Naegi Castle Ruins

Perched on a rocky hill above the Kiso River, the Naegi Castle Ruins reveal Japan's history during the Sengoku and Edo periods. This used to be a strong mountain castle, home to the Toyama family for many years. Today, only stone foundations and parts of its buildings are left. But the place gives amazing wide views of the land around it, including the Kiso Valley. The castle was named a National Historic Site in 1981.



- **Location:** Naegi, Nakatsugawa City, Gifu Prefecture
- **Getting There:** From Nagoya Station, take the Shinano Express train to Nakatsugawa Station (about 1 hour). From Nakatsugawa Eki-mae Bus station, take a bus going towards Tsukechikyo Kuraya Onsen to the Naegi bus stop. Naegi Castle is a 25-minute walk from the bus stop. The total trip takes about 2 hours.
- **Hours:** The Naegi Toyama Historical Museum (nearby): Tuesday-Sunday 9:30 AM-5:00 PM (last entry 4:30 PM). Closed Mondays (or the next day if Monday is a national holiday) and New Year holidays. The ruins themselves are usually open during the day.
- **Cost:** Free to enter the ruins. Naegi Toyama Historical Museum: 330 JPY for adults, free for children under 16.
- **Best Time to Visit:** Any season, but autumn leaves make a beautiful background.

- **Tips:** Visit the Naegi Toyama Historical Museum to see old things and learn more about the castle's past. Wear comfy shoes for the walk to the ruins.

Planning Your Visit to Gifu

Plan for three or four days to explore both southern Gifu and the mountain north. Takayama makes a great base for day trips to Shirakawa-go. Gero offers a relaxing option if you want to add hot springs to your trip.

Gifu works best for walkers, history fans, and travellers who enjoy old streets and traditional food. Spring and autumn are ideal for scenery and weather. If you are walking part of the Nakasendo, make time to slow down and stay overnight in a former post town.

Nagano Prefecture: A Mountain Wonderland

Nagano: Mountains, Temples, and Alpine Escapes

Nagano is where Japan slows down and opens up. This mountainous prefecture has quiet temples, stunning views, historic post towns, and hot springs hidden in forested hills. Whether you are here to hike, ski, or just enjoy cool air and space, Nagano has what you need.

Known for hosting the 1998 Winter Olympics, Nagano still offers top snow resorts, but its appeal goes beyond winter. You can visit one of Japan's oldest pilgrimage sites, stroll along preserved Edo-period roads, or relax in an outdoor bath as steam rises into crisp mountain air. Regional food is also a highlight, especially soba, apples, and wild vegetable dishes.

You can reach Nagano quickly from Tokyo by Shinkansen. Local trains and buses connect most towns and valleys. It is ideal for travellers who like nature, heritage, and a slower pace with plenty of fresh air.

Spring Attractions

Cherry Blossoms at Takato Castle Ruins

See one of Japan's most amazing cherry blossom shows at Takato Castle Ruins Park. About 1,500 Kohigan cherry trees create an unforgettable pink roof over the old castle foundations. This spot in southern Nagano is known as one of Japan's top three places to see cherry blossoms. But it's not too crowded, unlike similar places in big cities. The special Takato-kohigan cherry blossoms are a very rich pink color and grow in thick bunches. This makes for a brighter show than the usual somei-yoshino kind. The Cherry Blossom Festival happens every year from early to mid-April. Special lights illuminate the blossoms at night, creating magical scenes.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Early to mid-April.
- **Access:** Takato Castle Site Park, Inashi.
- **Hours:** 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM (6:00 AM - 10:00 PM at its busiest with lights during the festival).
- **Cost:** ¥600 (ages 16+), ¥300 (under 15), Free (under 6). Cash only.

Kamikochi Alpine Valley Opening

See one of Japan's most amazing mountain areas wake up when **Kamikochi** reopens to visitors in mid-April after being closed for winter. This pure valley in the Northern Japan Alps, 1,500 meters high, is the best example of Japanese mountain scenery. Its clear Azusa River winds between snow-covered peaks. The opening of the season is a big event for nature lovers, as winter rules end and spring arrives to change the land. Kamikochi stays clean due to strict rules. Private cars and buildings are not allowed, which helps keep the area natural and unspoiled.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Mid-April (reopening) and after.
- **Access:** You can get there by bus from Matsumoto Station (about 2 hours, ¥4,000 one-way) or from other bus stations. Private cars are not allowed; use special parking lots and shuttle buses (like Sawatari Parking Lot, ¥700/day + ¥1,500 one-way shuttle bus).
- **Hours:** Open from mid-April to mid-November (exact dates change each year).
- **Cost:** Free to enter, but you pay for transportation.

Zenkoji Temple Spring Festival

Take part in a long-standing tradition at the Zenkoji Temple Spring Festival in Nagano City. This important Buddhist temple has stood for nearly 1,400 years and holds the first Buddhist statue ever brought to Japan. The festival welcomes spring. It features special prayers, cultural shows, and extended hours. You might see rare rituals, including music shows and the Goma fire ceremony. The temple grounds look stunning now. Cherry blossoms are in full bloom, which adds to the peaceful and spiritual vibe.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** April to October (general temple hours for spring). Exact festival dates change.
- **Access:** Zenkoji Temple, Nagano City. You can get there by bus from Nagano Station.
- **Hours:** April-October: 5:00 AM - 5:30 PM; November-March: 6:00 AM - 5:00 PM.
- **Cost:** Entering the temple grounds is free. You might pay for certain areas or events (like ¥600 for the inside complex).

Summer Attractions

Matsumoto Castle and Summer Festivals

See one of Japan's most amazing original castles when summer brings perfect weather to explore Matsumoto Castle. This castle is a special National Treasure, and its striking black outside has earned it the nickname "Crow Castle." Finished in 1594, this amazing building shows the best of Japanese castle design from the time of wars. It has its original wooden insides and a special multi-level shape. Summer visits are extra special because of the castle's natural cooling design. The castle's moats (water around it) change in summer with colorful koi fish and water lilies, making perfect reflections of the castle. Summer evenings bring special lights, and the Taiko Festival in late July adds lively energy with loud drum shows.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Summer (especially late July for Taiko Festival).
- **Access:** Matsumoto Castle, Matsumoto City.
- **Hours:** Regular Hours: 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM (last entry at 4:30 PM); Longer Hours (Golden Week/Summer): 8:00 AM - 6:00 PM. The park around the castle is always free.
- **Cost:** Adults: ¥1,200 (e-ticket) / ¥1,300 (paper ticket). Children: ¥400.

Snow Monkeys in Green Season

See a different side of Nagano's snow monkeys in summer. At Jigokudani Monkey Park, the Japanese macaques act in new ways when the weather is warm. Most people know them from winter photos where they sit in hot springs, but summer visits are just as fun. In summer, you can watch the monkeys search for food, take care of baby monkeys, and interact with each other in playful ways.

The walk to the park takes about 30 minutes through a forest. It's cool and shady, which is nice on hot summer days. Along the way, you might see

mountain plants and animals too. It's a great chance to enjoy nature and learn more about these interesting animals.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** April to October (Green Season).
- **Access:** Jigokudani Monkey Park. Take the Nagaden train to Yudanaka Station, then a local bus to the Snow Monkey Park stop. A 2-day Snow Monkey Pass is available (Adults: ¥4,000, Children: ¥2,000) that covers train, bus, and park entry.
- **Hours:** 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM (Green Season).
- **Cost:** Adults: ¥800, Children (6-17): ¥400, Babies (0-5): Free.

Hiking in the Japanese Alps

Enjoy some of Japan's best mountain views by hiking in the Japanese Alps during summer. Nagano has many trails, from simple walks to tough hikes that take a few days. Summer is a great time to explore, with clear paths, cooler air in the high areas, and longer days for walking.

Nagano covers both the Northern and Central Alps, so you can see many kinds of mountains. If you want an easy way up, the Norikura Skyline road takes you as high as 2,700 metres. More experienced hikers can try part of the North Alps trail, which is known for its challenge and views.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** July to early October.
- **Access:** Main starting points include Matsumoto (for Northern Alps) and Ina Valley (for Central Alps). Kamikochi is a popular place to start, reachable by bus (private cars are not allowed).
- **Hours:** Changes by trail and mountain hut opening times.
- **Cost:** Generally free for hiking, but you pay for transportation and mountain hut stays.

Autumn Attractions

Kamikochi Autumn Colors

See one of Japan's best autumn views when Kamikochi fills with red, gold, and brown leaves. Snowy mountain tops in the background make the colours stand out even more. This quiet valley in the Northern Japan Alps is most beautiful from mid-October to early November. Golden larch trees and red maples cover the area in colour.

The winding Azusa River runs through the valley and often shows clear reflections of the trees and sky. Autumn also brings cool, clear weather that is perfect for walking. The valley closes in mid-November, so this short season is the best time to visit before winter arrives.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Mid-October to early November.
- **Access:** Same as spring (bus from Matsumoto or shuttle from Sawatari/Hirayu parking lots).
- **Hours:** Open until mid-November.
- **Cost:** Free to enter, but you pay for transportation.

Togakushi Shrine and Ancient Cedar Avenue

Experience spiritual traditions among amazing autumn views at Togakushi Shrine. Five sacred shrine buildings connected by old forest paths create a perfect mix of natural beauty and cultural history. This old Shinto place, which started nearly 2,000 years ago, looks its best from mid-October to early November. This is when the beech and maple forests around it show brilliant autumn colors. The amazing path to the Okusha (Inner Shrine) has about 300 old cedar trees lining it, many over 400 years old. This creates an impressive natural church-like space.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Mid-October to early November.
- **Access:** Express buses run every hour from Nagano Station to the Togakushi shrines (about 1 hour, ¥2,000 one-way). A separate bus runs between the three shrines (¥400 per ride).
- **Hours:** Always open.
- **Cost:** Free.

Shinshu Soba and Autumn Harvests

Enjoy the real flavour of Nagano with autumn soba. Freshly picked buckwheat makes the noodles taste their best during this season. Nagano's cool mountain weather is perfect for growing buckwheat, and the area is known for its soba traditions.

In autumn, many restaurants serve "shin-soba," made from new buckwheat. These special noodles have a rich, fresh taste. They go well with other autumn foods like wild mushrooms and chestnuts. For the best soba experience, visit old soba shops in smaller towns like Togakushi or Kaida Kogen.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Autumn, especially for "shin-soba."
- **Access:** Found all over Nagano Prefecture, with many old restaurants in smaller towns.
- **Cost:** Changes by restaurant, usually ¥1,000 - ¥1,999 per person for a meal.

Winter Attractions

World-Class Skiing and Snowboarding

Enjoy some of Japan's best winter sports at Nagano's ski resorts. From December to April, the area gets heavy snow and has many slopes for all

skill levels. The mountains and steady powder snow make Nagano perfect for skiing and snowboarding.

Nagano became Japan's top winter sports area after hosting the 1998 Winter Olympics. Hakuba Valley is the most famous spot, with 11 different resorts to choose from. Smaller places like Nozawa Onsen offer great skiing too, along with relaxing hot springs for after you finish on the slopes.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** December to April.
- **Access:** Hakuba Valley is about 3-4 hours from Tokyo by train and bus. Other resorts are also well-connected.
- **Cost:** Changes by resort. A 1-day lift ticket can be from ¥5,800 - ¥9,800 for adults, with lower prices for children and older people. Renting ski/snowboard sets costs from ¥5,000 - ¥6,000 for a day.

Snow Monkeys in Winter

See one of Japan's most famous wildlife sights when winter turns the Jigokudani Monkey Park into a magical place. Japanese macaques soak in hot, steaming springs surrounded by snow-covered forests. These scenes, known worldwide through many pictures, are one of the easiest ways to see wild monkeys up close. The unique way this group of monkeys started bathing in hot springs shows how well they can adapt. Winter visits are best for seeing them, as monkeys spend more time in the hot springs, creating classic scenes of steam rising around them.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** November to March (Winter Season), especially colder days with snow.
- **Access:** Same as green season (Nagaden train to Yudanaka Station, then local bus).
- **Hours:** 9:00 AM - 4:00 PM (Winter Season).
- **Cost:** Adults: ¥800, Children (6-17): ¥400, Babies (0-5): Free.

Nagano Winter Festivals and Illuminations

Discover the magic of Nagano's winter through its festivals and light events. They highlight the season's beauty and bring people together in warm gatherings during the cold months.

- **Nozawa Onsen Dosojin Fire Festival:** One of Japan's biggest fire festivals, held every year on January 15th in Nozawa Onsen village. It has an intense fire battle where villagers try to protect a large wooden shrine from flames, along with old music and local sake.
- **Nagano Lantern Festival (Nagano Tomyo Matsuri):** Held every year in early February (usually for five days in a row) to remember the 1998 Winter Olympic Games. The area around Zenkoji Temple transforms with thousands of lit lanterns and colorful light shows. The temple shines in the five Olympic colors.
- **Alps Azumino Park Illuminations:** From mid-November to early January, the Hotaka and Omachi areas of Alps Azumino Park are decorated with over 70,000 sparkling lights. The theme changes each year, and food stalls and craft workshops are available.
- **Iiyama Snow Festival:** Iiyama city holds this festival every year in early February. It has big snow sculptures and warm kamakura (igloos).

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Mid-November through February, exact dates change by festival.
- **Access:** Changes by event location; public transportation is widely available.
- **Hours:** Evening hours for lights and fire festivals.
- **Cost:** Generally free to attend, with costs for food/drinks.

Planning Your Visit to Nagano

Allow three to five days depending on how much ground you want to cover. Matsumoto is great for access to the Japan Alps and castle history. Nagano

City is best for Zenko-ji and northern trips. For hot springs and hikes, places like Yudanaka or Kamikochi are perfect.

Nagano is suited to walkers, mountain lovers, and anyone who wants a break from crowded cities. Come in winter for snow, spring for cherry blossoms, summer for highland escapes, and autumn for stunning colour. Local guesthouses and small inns give you a deeper connection to each area.

Welcome to Yamanashi: Nature's Playground!

Yamanashi: Fuji Views, Fruit Farms, and Hidden Nature

Yamanashi is often seen as the prefecture of Mount Fuji, but there is far more to it than just views of Japan's most famous peak. This inland region offers lakeside resorts, wine and fruit country, peaceful temples, and mountain trails that feel worlds away from city life.



The Fuji Five Lakes area is the main draw, offering a mix of sightseeing, hiking, and onsen with clear mountain views. But Yamanashi also rewards those who go further. You can pick grapes or peaches in summer, soak in quiet hot springs all year, or walk the old pilgrim trails that once brought travellers to worship Fuji from afar.

Yamanashi is easy to access from Tokyo by train or highway bus. Most visitors base themselves around Kawaguchiko, but areas like Kofu and Minobu offer a more local feel with fewer crowds. If you want a break with views, nature, and fresh food, Yamanashi is a solid choice.

Spring Fun

Cherry Blossoms Around Mount Fuji

See one of Japan's most famous spring views when cherry blossoms frame perfect scenes of Mount Fuji. It's an unforgettable picture of nature's beauty and Japan's most sacred mountain coming together. This stunning seasonal show peaks from early to mid-April. It transforms the grand Fuji Five Lakes area into a photographer's paradise. Pink blossoms, blue waters, and the snow-covered mountain create a perfect scene.

What makes these cherry blossoms extra special is how Mount Fuji is right there in the background. It creates scenes that have inspired Japanese artists for centuries and keep bringing visitors from all over the world. The northern shores of Lake Kawaguchi offer especially good places to see them. Here, rows of cherry trees along the water make perfect frames for the mountain, which reflects in the calm morning lake.

For the most magical experience, visit in the early morning. Calm conditions often create mirror-like reflections of both the cherry blossoms and Mount Fuji on the lake's surface. These early hours are not just great for photos, but also let you enjoy the view before bigger groups arrive. This helps you feel more connected to these famous landscapes that have shaped Japanese art and feelings for a long time.

The Chureito Pagoda in Fujiyoshida City, near Lake Kawaguchi, has stunning cherry blossom views. This tall red building stands among about 650 cherry trees, with Mount Fuji proudly rising behind it. This carefully arranged scene requires climbing about 400 steps. But it's worth it for perhaps the single most famous view in all of Yamanashi.

Yamanashi's cherry blossom season often begins later than Tokyo's. So, weekends can be crowded during peak bloom. This means you can often enjoy these amazing scenes after Tokyo's famous spots have finished blooming. This timing allows travelers to lengthen their cherry blossom trips. They can shift from Tokyo's city views to the natural beauty of Yamanashi as spring progresses.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Early to mid-April.
- **Where to Go:** Different spots around the Fuji Five Lakes, especially Lake Kawaguchi and Chureito Pagoda. You can get there by train and bus from Tokyo.
- **Cost:** Seeing the blossoms is usually free, but you'll pay for travel.

Shosenkyo Gorge Hiking

Discover one of Japan's most amazing deep valleys when spring brings perfect hiking weather to **Shosenkyo Gorge**. Here, clear waters have carved dramatic rock shapes over thousands of years. This natural wonder is in Chichibu-Tama-Kai National Park. It has about 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) of beautiful trails by the Arakawa River. It's an easy nature experience for hikers of different fitness levels.

What makes Shosenkyo extra special is the amazing variety of views packed into a small area. You'll see stunning sights like Kakuenbo Rock, which stands 180 meters (about 590 feet) above the river. Also, you'll find delicate waterfalls cascading down mossy cliffs. Spring brings magic. Fresh green leaves pop against old granite. This creates bright color contrasts that showcase the gorge's unique rock shapes, formed over millions of years.

The well-kept trail follows the river through the narrowest part of the gorge. There are viewpoints along the way that offer different looks at the dramatic scenery. The path is not too hard, with some bumpy ground but no tricky climbing needed. This means most visitors can enjoy the adventure and really experience this remarkable natural place.

For the best experience, allow about three hours to walk the full trail from Nagatoro Bridge to the Sengataki Waterfall. This gives you time to enjoy the changing views and maybe have a picnic by the river in the peaceful natural surroundings. The trail ends at a ropeway (cable car) that takes you to the Panorama Dai viewing spot. From here, amazing views stretch across the gorge to Mount Fuji on clear days, making a perfect end to your hike.

Spring is a great time to visit. The temperatures are nice, and wildflowers bloom everywhere. This makes the scenery even more beautiful. The season brings more water from melting snow. This creates stunning river scenes that outshine the drier summer months. Spring is a great time to explore Shosenkyo. The seasonal perks and fewer visitors make it even better than autumn's busy leaf-viewing season.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Spring (April-May) for nice temperatures and fewer crowds.
- **Access:** Take buses from Kofu Station to different points in the gorge (for example, Shosenkyo Taki Ue bus stop, about 50 minutes, ¥1090 one-way). There's also the Shosenkyo Ropeway (¥1300 round trip).
- **Hours:** Ropeway runs 9:00 AM - 5:30 PM (until 4:30 PM in winter).
- **Cost:** Hiking is free. You pay for the bus and ropeway.

Fuji Shibazakura Festival

See one of Japan's most colourful flower shows at the Fuji Shibazakura Festival. Near Mount Fuji, fields bloom with bright pink, white, and purple moss phlox flowers. From mid-April to late May, around 800,000 flowers cover the ground like a colourful carpet, with Mount Fuji standing tall in the background.

This festival is special because of the strong colours and beautiful setting. The flowers are planted in patterns, making the fields look like works of art. With snow still on Mount Fuji, the mix of flowers and mountain views is something you won't forget.

The festival takes place near Lake Motosuko in the Fuji Five Lakes area. Spring mornings often give the clearest views of the mountain, so it's a good time to go. Raised walkways help you see the full flower field and take great photos with both the flowers and Mount Fuji in one shot.

There's more to do than just look at flowers. You can try local snacks at food stalls and see smaller garden areas with other spring plants. This makes your visit fun and full, mixing flowers, food, and local culture.

To enjoy your visit more, try going on a weekday when it's less crowded. Come early in the morning for better light and quieter paths. Even when it's busy, the large area means you can still find peaceful spots away from the centre.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Mid-April through late May (usually April 12 - May 25, 2025). Peak bloom often happens after Golden Week.
- **Where to Go:** Located at Fuji Motosuko Resort. Direct buses are available from Kawaguchiko Station (about 50 minutes, ¥1450).
- **Hours:** Usually 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM (longer during peak).
- **Cost:** Admission ¥1,000 - ¥1,300 (adults), ¥500 - ¥700 (children), prices change by date. Parking ¥500 - ¥1,000.

Summer Fun

Climbing Mount Fuji

Take on Japan's most famous mountain adventure by climbing Mount Fuji in summer. From early July to mid-September, the mountain is open to hikers, with better weather and open rest stops. This is your chance to stand on top of Japan's tallest and most sacred peak, which rises 3,776 metres into the sky.

Climbing Mount Fuji is special because it mixes challenge, beauty, and deep meaning. Unlike many tall mountains, it doesn't require special climbing

skills. If you're fit and prepared, you can make it to the top. People have climbed this mountain for hundreds of years as part of a spiritual journey, not just for fun.

The most popular path is the Yoshida Trail, which starts at the Fuji Subaru Line 5th Station in Yamanashi. Along the way, there are mountain huts where you can rest or sleep. Most hikers take 5 to 7 hours to go up and 3 to 5 hours to come back down. Many start in the afternoon, stay in a hut overnight, then climb to the top early in the morning to see the sunrise, called *goraikō*. Watching the sun rise from the peak is a powerful moment in Japanese culture.

If you want a quieter hike, other trails like Fujinomiya, Subashiri, and Gotemba give different ways to reach the top. Some are steeper, others longer and gentler. All the trails meet near the top for the final stretch to the summit.

Climbing Mount Fuji is hard work and you'll need the right gear, but the experience is more than just a hike. At the summit, there's a small Shinto shrine where you can get a stamp or send a postcard with a special summit mark. These small touches help connect your climb to the long history of people who saw this mountain as a link between earth and the sky.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Early July through mid-September (official climbing season).
- **Access:** Different trails; the Yoshida Trail starts from Fuji Subaru Line 5th Station (Yamanashi side), which you can reach by bus.
- **Cost:** A required hiking fee of ¥4,000 per climber (starting from the 2025 season). Staying in mountain huts costs extra. There's a daily climber limit of 4,000 people on the Yoshida Trail.

Fruit Picking in Koshu Valley

Enjoy fresh summer fruit straight from the farm in Yamanashi's valleys. This area is one of the best places in Japan to pick sweet peaches, juicy plums, and tasty grapes. The Koshu Valley is perfect for growing fruit. It has lots of sun, good soil, and big changes in temperature between day and night. These conditions help the fruit grow full of flavour while giving visitors great countryside views.

What makes fruit picking in Yamanashi special is the care farmers put into each piece of fruit. They hand-pollinate flowers, cover each fruit with a small bag, and remove extra ones so the remaining fruit gets more nutrients. Farmers also choose the best types of fruit for the local weather. This hard work leads to fruit that looks and tastes amazing.

Peach picking usually starts in mid-July and continues through August. You'll find types like the huge "Hakuho" and the super sweet "Kawanakajima" in farms all over the area. Many farms offer "all-you-can-eat" experiences for a set time (usually 30-40 minutes). This lets you enjoy tree-ripened fruit at its best flavor. It's a big difference from supermarket peaches. Those must be picked early to survive travel and storage.

August brings the start of grape season, with early types ready to pick while peaches are still available. This means you can experience different fruits on the same farm visit. Yamanashi's grape growing peaks in September. The big "Kyoho" offers a sweet-and-sour flavor. Then there's the honey-sweet "Shine Muscat," which has become Japan's top grape choice lately. It sells for high prices because it's perfectly sweet and refreshing.

For a complete fruit experience, visit fruit cafés throughout the prefecture. They are especially popular in Enzan and Katsunuma, which are major fruit-growing areas. These places provide various fruit-focused food experiences. You can enjoy simple parfaits with fresh seasonal fruits. Or, try fancy desserts that transform local harvests into tasty dishes. This lets you enjoy Yamanashi's fruit culture through both simple and fancy preparations.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Mid-July to August for peaches; August to September for grapes.
- **Where to Go: Koshu Valley**, with many farms in areas like Enzan and Katsunuma. You can get there by train and local transport.
- **Cost:** Varies by fruit and farm. All-you-can-eat peach picking can be around ¥3,000-¥5,000; grape picking around ¥2,500-¥3,500.

Lake Kawaguchi Summer Activities

Have the perfect summer getaway at Lake Kawaguchi! It's the biggest of the Fuji Five Lakes and gives you fun outdoor activities with Mount Fuji in the background. Even though it's easy to reach from Tokyo, the area feels calm and far from the city. It's a great place to enjoy nature, try water sports, ride bikes, and visit local sights.

Lake Kawaguchi is special because it has both great visitor services and beautiful nature. You don't need special skills or gear to have fun here. The lake's clean water is nice and cool in summer, making it great for swimming in some areas. You can also try fun activities like kayaking, paddleboarding, or riding boats. These let you see Mount Fuji from the water, which is a totally different view.

There's also a 20-kilometre biking path that goes around the lake. You can rent a bike easily at shops along the shore. The path is safe and smooth, and it passes through many different places from quiet spots with birds to busy areas with shops and cafés. As you ride, you'll get changing views of Mount Fuji reflected in the lake.

For culture beyond nature, the lake area has several unique museums. The Kubota Itchiku Art Museum displays stunning kimono creations. A master artist revived old dyeing methods to create this wearable art. Kawaguchiko Music Forest is a unique spot. It blends European music boxes and mechanical instruments with Japanese garden design. This creates fun experiences for everyone, no matter their age.

Summer evenings bring special magic to the lake. The setting sun casts stunning light on Mount Fuji. As the temperatures drop, it creates the perfect atmosphere for dinner by the lake. Many restaurants offer outdoor seating with beautiful mountain views. Evening hours are more peaceful. After day-trippers leave, guests can enjoy the lake. Whether they stay in international hotels or traditional Japanese ryokan, the experience is calm and relaxing.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** June to August.
- **Access:** Easy to get to from Tokyo by highway bus (about 2 hours, ¥2,000-¥2,200 one-way) or train (about 2-3 hours, ¥3,000-¥4,000 one-way). Local sightseeing buses around the lake are available (1-day pass ¥1,500).
- **Cost:** Varies by activity (boat tours, rentals, museum entry).

Autumn Fun

Fuji Five Lakes Autumn Colors

See one of Japan's best autumn sights when the forests around the Fuji Five Lakes fill with red, gold, and brown leaves. Snow often covers the top of Mount Fuji at this time, creating a stunning view. From late October to mid-November, the colourful trees and calm lake waters make a perfect match with Japan's most famous mountain. The leaves often reflect in the lakes, adding even more beauty to this peaceful autumn scene.

What makes autumn colors here special is the stunning picture they create. You see the perfect cone shape of Mount Fuji, the flat lakes, and the vibrant forests all together. This creates a visual harmony that has inspired Japanese artists for centuries. The cool blue-white snow on Fuji's peaks contrasts with the warm autumn colors of nearby forests. This creates dramatic color relationships that you won't find in landscapes of just one season.

Lake Kawaguchi is a great place for autumn views. You can find many spots to take perfect pictures of the mountain, lake, and colorful leaves all together. The northern shore offers great views, especially in the early morning. Calm conditions can create mirror-like reflections, making the seasonal display even more beautiful.

For a more active autumn, hike the trails around Lake Saiko and Lake Shojiko. These less developed areas provide a rich forest experience. Visitors can stroll among vibrant maple and larch trees. Clearings in the forest offer stunning views of Mount Fuji, framed by red and gold branches. These trails offer something for everyone. You can pick easy lakeside paths or tackle more challenging forest routes. This way, visitors can choose experiences that fit their physical abilities. Plus, they connect you directly with the beautiful autumn landscape.

November is the best time to enjoy the Fuji Five Lakes. The weather is usually steady, with clear skies and nice temperatures for hiking. Autumn is arguably the best season to enjoy this natural treasure. The mix of reliable weather and stunning scenery creates a perfect experience. This beauty draws more visitors than other seasons. So, if you want a quieter experience, visit on weekdays.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Late October through mid-November.
- **Where to Go:** Different spots around the Fuji Five Lakes, including Lake Kawaguchi's Maple Corridor and Oishi Park.
- **Cost:** Generally free to see, but you pay for travel.

Koshu Wine Harvest

Experience the exciting end of Yamanashi's wine making season during the autumn harvest. In September and October, the vineyards in the Koshu Valley become full of activity as ripe grapes are picked and turned into some of Japan's best wines. Yamanashi is the birthplace of Japanese winemaking, with over 100 years of history, and harvest time is when it feels most alive.

What makes wine from Yamanashi special is its mix of global winemaking ideas with Japanese traditions. The most famous local grape is Koshu, which has been grown in Japan for over 1,000 years. It's used to make light, elegant white wines that go well with Japanese food. Other grapes, like Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, thrive in the area's sunny days and cool nights. This unique climate creates flavors you won't find anywhere else.

During autumn, many wineries open their doors for special events. You can join tours to see grapes being picked by hand, watch traditional wine pressing, and learn how wine is made. These tours often finish with tastings that show how things like grape type and vineyard location affect the taste.

The town of Katsunuma is the centre of wine in Yamanashi. It has many wineries close together, so it's easy to walk or drive between them and try different wines in one day. You can compare how each place makes wine from the same grapes, and learn how small changes in the land and weather create different flavours.

Autumn is also festival season. Events like the Katsunuma Grape Festival fill the area with music, food, and cultural shows. You can try new wines, eat local dishes, and enjoy performances that bring the community together.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** September to October.
- **Where to Go:** **Katsunuma** area is the center of wine production, easy to reach by train.
- **Cost:** Winery tours and tastings vary, usually starting from ¥1,500-¥2,000 per person for a guided tour and tasting.

Autumn Hiking on Mount Mitake

Discover beautiful autumn views while hiking on Mount Mitake. Old paths lead through colourful forests to holy shrines that have welcomed visitors for over 1,000 years. This 929 metre mountain in Chichibu-Tama-Kai National

Park is great for hikers of all levels. The best time to see the autumn leaves is from late October to mid-November.

Mount Mitake is special because it mixes nature with history. People have seen it as a spiritual place since ancient times. At the top is Musashi Mitake Shrine, which is still used for worship today. Visiting this shrine is not just about seeing an old building. It is about feeling part of a long tradition of mountain worship in Japan.

The mountain has many well-kept trails. Some are easy, like the path from the cable car station to the shrine. Others are harder and go to nearby peaks like Mount Odake and Mount Hinode. Whether you take a short walk or a longer hike, you will see stunning autumn colours from maples, beech trees, and oaks turning red, gold, and orange.

To learn more about what you see, stop at the Mitake Visitor Center near the top cable car station. It has displays about the mountain's nature and history. This helps turn your hike into a deeper experience by showing how Japan connects nature and religion.

Mount Mitake is easy to visit from Tokyo, about two hours by train and bus, making it perfect for a day trip. Its lower height also means the leaves change colour a bit later than on taller mountains. This gives a longer time to enjoy the autumn colours as they slowly move down the slopes.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Late October through mid-November.
- **Access:** Take JR Chuo Line to Ome Station, then JR Ome Line to Mitake Station (total approx. ¥950 from Shinjuku). From Mitake Station, take a bus to the cable car lower station (10 mins, ¥340 one way), then the cable car to near the top (¥1130 roundtrip).
- **Cost:** Travel costs apply. Hiking is free.

Winter Fun

Diamond Fuji Phenomenon

See one of Japan's most special winter sights when Diamond Fuji appears. This happens when the rising or setting sun lines up exactly with the top of Mount Fuji, making it look like a bright diamond sitting on the peak. It only happens on certain days and needs clear weather, but those who wait are rewarded with a scene that has inspired artists and photographers for many years.

Diamond Fuji is extra meaningful because it shows the Japanese idea that beauty is short-lived. The moment only lasts a few seconds as the sun touches the mountain before moving on. You can take a photo, but the real feeling comes from being there in that exact moment. This short flash of beauty stays in your memory long after it is gone.

The Fuji Five Lakes area is one of the best places to see Diamond Fuji. Lake Yamanaka is great for sunset views from late October to early February. Lake Kawaguchi is better for sunrise from late February to early April. During these times, many people gather in popular spots, sharing the wait and the joy when the sun and mountain line up just right.

Some places near water make the sight even more special. If the lake is still, you can see both the mountain and the sun reflected on the surface. This "Double Diamond Fuji" creates a mirror image that feels almost unreal in its perfect shape and calm beauty.

Because Diamond Fuji depends on the weather and the sun's position, you cannot always see it, even if you plan carefully. But that is part of what makes it special. The feeling of seeing it at just the right time shows the idea of "en," a lucky connection between people, nature, and timing. When it all comes together, the memory becomes something you will never forget.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Late October - early February for sunset (**Lake Yamanaka**); Late February - early April for sunrise (**Lake Kawaguchi**). Diamond Fuji Weeks at Lake Yamanaka: February 1-22 (2025).
- **Where to Go:** Different viewing points around the Fuji Five Lakes.
- **Cost:** Free.

Winter Illuminations at Lake Kawaguchi

Experience enchanting winter nights at Lake Kawaguchi. Colorful light displays illuminate the lakeside. You'll enjoy stunning views of snow-covered Mount Fuji. From late November through February, these events create a perfect way to enjoy the evening after a day of sightseeing. They also show Japan's talent for turning natural places into beautiful light shows.

What makes these winter lights special is how well they match the lake and the mountain. The displays are designed to highlight the snowy landscape, making the area feel calm and bright at the same time. Visitors can walk along glowing paths, sip warm drinks, and take photos of the lights with Mount Fuji in the background.

Many displays include tunnels of light, moving patterns, and sometimes shows with music. These extra touches make the visit fun and peaceful, giving you a chance to enjoy the winter beauty of Yamanashi in a new and memorable way. They are popular for couples and families looking for a unique evening experience. The cold winter air makes the lights appear even brighter and sharper, adding to the magic.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Late November through February.
- **Where to Go:** Along the shores of Lake Kawaguchi.
- **Cost:** Often free to view, but there might be small charges for special activities or food stalls.

Planning Your Visit to Yamanashi

Two to three days is enough for most visitors. Stay in the Kawaguchiko area for access to lakes, views, and sightseeing. Kofu works well for wineries and fruit farms. Minobu is best if you want a quiet temple stay with mountain air.

Yamanashi is best in spring and autumn, though summer is great for fruit picking and views are clearest in winter. This prefecture suits couples, hikers, and nature-focused travellers. Bring good walking shoes and check Fuji visibility forecasts if views are important to your trip.

Shizuoka Prefecture Introduction to Shizuoka

Shizuoka: Tea Fields, Ocean Views, and a Different Side of Fuji

Shizuoka stretches along the Pacific coast and offers a softer, more relaxed version of Japan. You still get views of Mount Fuji, but also coastal towns, quiet beaches, steaming hot springs, and green tea fields that go on for miles.

This prefecture is where Fuji rises behind tea plantations and where local fish markets serve some of the freshest seafood in the country. It is also home to traditional onsen resorts, historic temples, and one of Japan's earliest centres of modern industry. Whether you want slow coastal walks or train trips through hilly farmland, Shizuoka gives you both nature and comfort.

It is easy to reach from Tokyo or Nagoya by Shinkansen, and local trains and buses link cities, resorts, and hidden villages. Shizuoka is perfect for travellers looking to avoid crowds while still enjoying iconic sights and local food. Spring Fun

Cherry Blossoms with Mount Fuji Views

Experience one of Japan's most famous spring sights. Cherry blossoms frame perfect views of Mount Fuji. This creates an unforgettable picture where short-lived beauty meets Japan's never-ending symbol. This amazing seasonal show usually peaks from late March through early April. It turns the northern Shizuoka landscape into a photographer's dream. Pink blossoms, blue skies, and the snow-capped mountain create a perfect scene. The Fuji Five Lakes area, partly in Shizuoka, and Shiraito Falls both offer great views.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Late March to early April.
- **Where to Go:** Fuji Five Lakes area (like Lake Tanuki), Shiraito Falls.
- **How to Get There:** Varies by specific spot. You can usually get there by car or local buses from main train stations.
- **Cost:** Mostly free for viewing in public areas.

Wasabi Farm Tours in Utogi

Discover the interesting world of real wasabi farming in Utogi. Here, very clear mountain streams create perfect conditions for growing Japan's most unique spice. It's grown in traditional terraced fields that have been used for hundreds of years. This amazing farming area in central Shizuoka offers rare chances to see the full traditional growing process. You can see how they manage the water and harvest the wasabi. Farmers whose families have done this for generations carry out these methods. A restaurant on site offers dishes made with freshly picked wasabi, showing off its special flavor.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Year-round (some tours might need booking ahead of time).
- **Where to Go:** Utogi, Shizuoka.
- **How to Get There:** You need to travel to Utogi, often best by car or specific tours.

- **Cost:** Free for walking around by yourself. Guided tours and tastings might have a fee.

Izu Peninsula Spring Flowers

See the Izu Peninsula change with the seasons as spring brings waves of flowers. This rocky coastal area in southern Shizuoka Prefecture becomes full of bright colours from February to May. Because of its mix of climates, different flowers bloom at different times across the region.

Early in the season, plum blossoms bloom at Atami Baien. In February, Kawazu is known for its early cherry blossoms called Kawazu-zakura. Later in spring, colourful azaleas bloom at Izu Shaboten Zoo. These spots make the Izu Peninsula a great place to enjoy spring flowers over several months.



At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** February (plum blossoms), Late February-early March (Kawazu cherry blossoms), April-May (azaleas).
- **Where to Go:** Atami Baien (Atami Plum Garden), Kawazu, Izu Shaboten Zoo.

- **How to Get There:** You can get there by train (JR Ito Line, Izu Kyuko Line) and local buses.
- **Cost:** Atami Baien has an entry fee (about 300-400 yen during the festival). Kawazu cherry blossoms are usually free. Izu Shaboten Zoo has an entry fee.

Summer Fun

Miho no Matsubara Pine Grove

Experience one of Japan's most famous coastal landscapes at Miho no Matsubara. Here, a grand pine tree grove stretches along the shore. It frames perfect views of Mount Fuji across Suruga Bay. This remarkable natural setting is part of the Mount Fuji World Heritage Site. It offers amazing beauty that has inspired Japanese artists for centuries. Summer brings special magic. The deep green of pine needles looks beautiful against the blue ocean and sky. Refreshing sea breezes provide natural cooling.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Year-round, but especially nice in summer mornings for clear Fuji views.
- **Where to Go:** Miho, Shizuoka City.
- **How to Get There:** Take a bus from **Shimizu Station** (JR Tokaido Line).
- **Cost:** Free.

Shimoda Beach and Marine Activities

Discover some of Japan's best coastal experiences in Shimoda. Here, clean beaches, clear waters, and a pretty harbor make it a perfect summer destination at the southern tip of the Izu Peninsula. This historic port town now welcomes visitors looking for water activities and beach relaxation. It's one of eastern Japan's most beautiful coastal places. You can choose from swimming and relaxing on wide white sands like Shirahama Beach. Or try active things like snorkeling, stand-up paddleboarding, and sea kayaking.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Summer (July-August) for swimming and water activities.
- **Where to Go:** Shirahama Beach, Sotoura Beach, Tatadohama Beach.
- **How to Get There:** Take the Izukyu Railway to Shimoda Station, then local buses or walk short distances to the beaches.
- **Cost:** Free for beach access. Renting equipment for activities will cost money.

Green Tea Plantation Tours

Dive into Japan's most famous tea tradition by visiting Shizuoka's amazing green tea plantations. Here, perfectly kept fields create unique landscapes. They also produce about 40% of Japan's home-grown tea. This farming area offers amazing chances to see the whole tea making process, from growing to preparing. It gives interesting insights into both old methods and new ideas that keep Japan's reputation for making the world's best green tea.

At a Glance:

- **Best Time:** Year-round, but summer has bright green landscapes.
- **Where to Go:** Makinohara, Kakegawa (many plantations offer tours).
- **How to Get There:** Varies by specific plantation. Often reachable by car or local buses from nearby train stations.
- **Cost:** Tours and tastings might have fees, usually from a few hundred to a few thousand yen.

Autumn Fun

Mount Fuji Autumn Colors

See one of Japan's most amazing autumn shows. Fall changes the forests around Mount Fuji into a canvas of red, gold, and reddish-brown colors. This is set against Japan's most famous peak. This magnificent seasonal landscape usually peaks from late October through mid-November. It creates perfect harmony between Fuji's perfect shape and the natural looks

of colorful forests. The Fuji Five Lakes area, especially around Lake Tanuki, offers top viewing spots.

- **At a Glance:**

- **Best Time:** Late October to mid-November
- **Locations:** Fuji Five Lakes area (e.g., Lake Tanuki), lower slopes of Mount Fuji (hiking trails).
- **Access:** Varies by specific spot; accessible by car or local buses from major train stations.
- **Cost:** Free for viewing and most hiking trails.

Izu Peninsula Coastal Hiking

Discover the stunning beauty of the Izu Peninsula. Hike its coastal trails in autumn. This rugged landscape shines in its most spectacular season. This unique area has some of Japan's best coastal walking paths. You'll find clear ocean views, interesting rock shapes, and colorful autumn plants. Together, they make for amazing natural experiences. The Jogasaki Coast is a top spot. It features a 10-kilometer trail that runs along stunning cliff tops and includes suspension bridges.

- **At a Glance:**

- **Best Time:** Autumn (October-November) for comfortable temperatures and clear views.
- **Locations:** Jogasaki Coast, Amagi Mountain range.
- **Access:** Jogasaki Coast accessible from Jogasaki-Kaigan Station (Izu Kyuko Line). Amagi Mountains require transport to trailheads.
- **Cost:** Free for hiking trails.

Kakegawa Castle and Tea Fields

Experience the blend of Japanese history and farming at Kakegawa. A stunningly rebuilt feudal castle stands tall above Shizuoka's best tea plantations. Here, you can truly feel the beauty of traditional Japanese landscapes. This historic city offers amazing cultural experiences. The well-

kept tea fields create a great backdrop for the unique castle silhouette. Autumn brings a subtle transformation to the tea fields, with golden highlights complementing the castle's exterior.

- **At a Glance:**

- **Best Time:** Autumn (October-November) for comfortable weather and subtle tea field colors.
- **Location:** Kakegawa City
- **Access:** Short walk from Kakegawa Station (JR Tokaido Line, Tenryu Hamanako Line).
- **Cost:** Kakegawa Castle admission fee (approx. 410 yen). The Tea Museum may have an admission fee.

Winter Attractions

Mount Fuji Snow Views

See Japan's famous mountain at its best when winter turns Mount Fuji into a stunning white cone against bright blue skies. This stunning natural monument looks its best from December to February. During this time, snow covers the upper slopes completely. The beautiful views have inspired Japanese artists for centuries. Winter often brings exceptional atmospheric clarity, revealing details of the mountain's surface features.

- **At a Glance:**

- **Best Time:** December to February for peak snow cover and clear visibility.
- **Locations:** Lake Tanuki (northern shore), Nihondaira Plateau (near Shizuoka City).
- **Access:** Lake Tanuki: Accessible by bus from Shin-Fuji Station. Nihondaira: Accessible by bus or ropeway from Shizuoka City.
- **Cost:** Free for viewing from public areas.

Atami Hot Springs and Winter Illuminations

Experience winter bliss at Atami. This historic hot spring resort offers healing mineral waters and stunning ocean views. Seasonal light events turn the city into a magical nightscape. Atami has a special microclimate. Its bay keeps conditions mild, so exploring is comfortable, even in the coldest months. Atami has more than just hot springs. It hosts winter events like the Atami Seaside Fireworks Festival, which takes place all year, even in winter. There's also the Itokawa Promenade Sakura Festival. During this festival, the early-blooming Atamizakura trees glow beautifully at night in January and February.

- **At a Glance:**

- **Best Time:** December to February.
- **Location:** Atami City (Itokawa Promenade, Sun Beach, various hot springs).
- **Access:** Easily accessible by Shinkansen or JR Tokaido Line to Atami Station.
- **Cost:** Hot spring facility fees vary. Itokawa Promenade Sakura Festival and Sun Beach illuminations are generally free. Fireworks festivals are free to view.

Planning Your Visit to Shizuoka

Three to four days is ideal if you want to explore both the Fuji area and the Izu Peninsula. Stay in Mishima or Shizuoka City for access to Fuji and tea country, or pick a coastal ryokan in Izu for hot springs and ocean views.

Shizuoka suits relaxed travellers, food lovers, and anyone who wants great scenery without the stress. Visit in spring for blossoms and fresh tea, summer for beaches, or autumn for clear Fuji views. It is a gentle but rewarding stop that balances nature, culture, and comfort.

Aichi Prefecture: A Cool Spot in Central Japan

Aichi: Castles, Crafts, and Urban Energy

Aichi is more than just a stop between Tokyo and Kyoto. Nagoya is Japan's fourth largest city. This prefecture combines industrial strength with rich history. You will find samurai heritage, excellent food, and centuries-old craftsmanship tucked behind modern skylines.



Nagoya Castle, rebuilt with care and detail, anchors the region's samurai legacy. In nearby towns like Inuyama and Tokoname, you can explore preserved streets, traditional ceramics, and cultural sites with far fewer visitors. Aichi is also home to Toyota, and its museums show Japan's industrial rise in a way that is surprisingly engaging.

The Shinkansen stops in Nagoya, and local trains make the rest of the region easy to reach. For travellers who want a mix of city convenience and historical depth without the tourist crowds, Aichi is worth more than a one-night stop.

Things to See All Year

- **Atsuta Shrine (Atsuta Jingu)** Atsuta Jingu is one of Japan's most important Shinto shrines, with a history of over 1,900 years. People say it holds the Kusanagi-no-tsurugi (Grass-Mowing Sword), one of

Japan's three holy treasures. You can walk around its large, calm grounds, which offer a peaceful break from the city. The shrine's Treasure Hall (Bunkaden) shows many old cultural items.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Address:** 1-1-1 Jingu, Atsuta-ku, Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture
- **Hours:** Shrine grounds are open all day, every day. Treasure Hall: 9:00 AM to 4:30 PM (last entry 4:10 PM).
- **Closed:** Treasure Hall usually closes on the last Wednesday and the following Thursday of each month, and from December 25th to December 31st.
- **Cost:** Free to enter the shrine grounds. Treasure Hall for adults is about 300-500 yen.
- **Getting There:** A short 3-8 minute walk from subway stations like Atsuta Jingu Nishi or Atsuta Jingu Tenmachi, or train stations like Jingu-Mae (Meitetsu Line) or Atsuta (JR Line).

- **Osu Shopping District** Osu is a busy and exciting shopping area in Nagoya, with about 1,200 shops and restaurants under covered walkways. It's a cool mix of traditional Japanese goods, trendy fashion, electronics, used clothes, and lots of street food. Osu is also known as a "Geeky Town" and is popular with people who like cosplay and anime. In this area, you'll also find Osu Kannon Temple and Banshōji Temple, which add some history to the lively shopping scene.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Address:** Osu, Naka-ku, Nagoya
- **Hours:** Depend on each shop.
- **Cost:** Free to enter the district.
- **Getting There:** Easy to reach by subway using the Tsurumai Line to Osu Kannon Station or Kamimaezu Station.

Try "Nagoya Meshi" (Nagoya Food)

"Nagoya Meshi" is the name for the special foods of Nagoya and Aichi Prefecture. These dishes are known for their strong flavors, often using Hatcho miso, a dark and rich soybean paste. Trying these unique foods is a must-do when you visit!

- **Hitsumabushi:** Grilled eel served over rice. You eat it three ways: first plain, then with toppings, and finally by pouring broth or tea over it.
- **Miso Katsu:** A deep-fried pork cutlet covered in a rich, savory miso sauce.
- **Tebasaki:** Crispy, deep-fried chicken wings, usually seasoned with a sweet, salty sauce and black pepper.
- **Miso Nikomi Udon:** Thick udon noodles cooked in a hearty, flavorful miso broth, often in a clay pot.
- **Ankake Spaghetti:** A unique local pasta dish with thick spaghetti noodles covered in a thick, spicy, starchy sauce, often with vegetables and sausages.
- **Kishimen:** Flat, wide udon noodles, often served in a hot soup.
- **Tenmusu:** Small rice balls with a piece of shrimp tempura inside.
- **Ogura Toast:** A popular breakfast item: buttered toast topped with sweet red bean paste.

You can find these special foods throughout Nagoya. Look around Nagoya Station, especially on Umaimon Dori and Esca Underground Shopping Street. The downtown Sakae area is also a good spot. Don't miss the busy Osu Shopping Arcades, which are perfect for street food. Lastly, check out Kinshachi Yokochō near Nagoya Castle.

Spring Attractions

- **Nagoya Castle and Park** See one of Japan's most impressive old castles in spring. Nagoya Castle and its park are filled with beautiful cherry blossoms. These flowers stand out against the castle's strong stone walls and golden fish-like ornaments on the roof. This historic place, built in 1612, lets you experience Japan's samurai history mixed

with the beauty of the season. The castle's main tower, rebuilt in 1959, has great historical exhibits. You can also visit the carefully restored Honmaru Palace, which shows amazing painted screens. In spring evenings, special lights make the castle and cherry trees look magical.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Best Time to Visit:** Late March through early April for cherry blossoms. Evening lights usually run until 9:00 PM during the best bloom.
- **Address:** 1-1 Hommaru, Naka-ku, Nagoya-shi, Aichi.
- **Cost:** Adults: JPY 500. Seniors (Nagoya City residents): JPY 100. Junior high school age and younger, and people with disabilities: Free.
- **Hours:** Honmaru Palace entry until 4:00 PM, extended until 7:00 PM during peak cherry blossom season (March 20–April 6). The Main Tower Keep is currently closed.

- **Korankei Gorge Spring Greenery** Find one of Aichi's most beautiful natural spots in spring at Korankei Gorge. The Tomoe River has carved a pretty valley through forest mountains that burst with fresh green leaves after winter. This lovely area near Toyota City offers amazing seasonal beauty as different trees show off new leaves in many shades of green. While the gorge is famous for its autumn colors, spring is also beautiful but less crowded. You'll see delicate textures and bright green tones. Paths let you walk through the forest. Visit Kojakuji Temple in the gorge, which is linked to the tradition of planting maple trees there. Spring brings a special calm to this place, perfect for enjoying new growth.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Best Time to Visit:** Spring for vibrant new green leaves; it's quieter than autumn.
- **Address:** Imori, Asuke-cho, Toyota-shi, Aichi. About 2 hours from Nagoya Station by train and bus.

- **Cost:** Free to walk around the gorge. Sanshu Asuke Yashiki Village (inside the gorge) has a JPY 300 entrance fee.
 - **Hours:** Korankei Gorge area is open 24 hours. Sanshu Asuke Yashiki Village: 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM (last entry 4:30 PM), closed Thursdays (except during Golden Week and November), December 25 - January 2.
- **Okazaki Cherry Blossom Festival**
 - Join one of Aichi's favorite spring parties at the Okazaki Cherry Blossom Festival. About 800 cherry trees line the Oto River here, creating amazing tunnels as their branches meet overhead when fully bloomed. This yearly event, held around Okazaki Castle and its park, turns the historic city into a beautiful flower show. The festival mixes natural beauty, historical meaning (it's where a famous ruler, Tokugawa Ieyasu, was born), and a fun party feel. Food stalls line the riverwalk, and traditional shows add to the cultural fun. Evening lights make the scenes magical, letting you enjoy the blossoms after dark.
 - **Quick Facts:**
 - **Best Time to Visit:** Usually late March through early April for the best blooms. Nighttime lights: 6:00 PM – 9:00 PM.
 - **Address:** Okazaki Park and nearby Oto River and Iga River areas, Okazaki-shi, Aichi. A 10-minute walk from Okazakikoen-Mae Station on the Meitetsu Nagoya Line.
 - **Cost:** Free to enter the festival area.

Summer Attractions

- **Toyota Automobile Museums**

Learn about the exciting history of cars at Toyota's world-class museums. In summer, their cool indoor spaces make them great places to explore Japan's industrial past in comfort. Toyota has two main museums: the Toyota Automobile Museum in Nagakute and the Toyota Commemorative Museum

of Industry and Technology in Nagoya.

Toyota began as a maker of textile machines and later became one of the biggest car companies in the world. These museums tell that story. The Toyota Automobile Museum shows the history of cars from around the world, not just Toyota models. You can see many classic cars and learn how car design has changed over time.

The Commemorative Museum focuses more on how cars are made. It has working machines and hands-on exhibits that explain each step of car production. Both museums are fun and interesting for people of all ages and help visitors understand how cars have shaped modern life.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer, because the comfortable indoor temperatures are a welcome break from the heat.

- **Toyota Automobile Museum (Nagakute):**

- **Address:** 41-100 Yokomichi, Nagakute City, Aichi. A 5-minute walk from Geidaidori Station on the Linimo (Tobu Kyuryo Line).

- **Cost:** Adults: JPY 1,200. Seniors (65+): JPY 700.

- **Hours:** 9:30 AM - 5:00 PM (last entry 4:30 PM). Closed Mondays (or the next day if Monday is a national holiday).

- **Toyota Commemorative Museum of Industry and Technology (Nagoya):**

- **Address:** 4-1-35 Noritakeshinmachi, Nishi-ku, Nagoya City, Aichi.

- **Cost:** Adults: JPY 1,000. Seniors (65+): JPY 600. University students: JPY 500. Junior/High school students: JPY 300. Elementary school students: JPY 200.

- **Hours:** 9:30 AM - 5:00 PM (last entry 4:30 PM).
Closed Mondays (or the next day if Monday is a national holiday).
 - **Combined Ticket for both museums:** Adults: JPY 1,800.
Seniors (65+): JPY 980.
- **Mikawa Bay Cruises and Seafood** Enjoy the refreshing fun of Mikawa Bay with summer cruises. These trips offer beautiful views and cool sea breezes, while showing the area's long history with the ocean. This calm bay between the Chita and Atsumi Peninsulas offers amazing coastal experiences. You'll see old fishing villages, modern ports, and nature, all looking best from the water. Summer brings comfortable temperatures and interesting coastal views. You can also enjoy fantastic seafood, with summer bringing special dishes like pike conger eel (hamo). Look for "Isshiki Kaisendon" in towns like Nishio and Gamagori for an easy way to try local seafood. Besides cruises, you can rent boats, go fishing, or enjoy beach activities in the many small coves.
 - **Quick Facts:**
 - **Best Time to Visit:** Summer for sea breezes and fresh seafood.
 - **Getting There & Cost:** Cruises leave from ports like Gamagori, Toyohashi, and Tahara. Prices vary; for example, a ferry from Takeshima Pier (Gamagori) costs JPY 1,200 for adults during the swimming season (July 1 - August 31).
- **Higashiyama Zoo and Botanical Gardens**

Have a perfect family day out in summer at Nagoya's Higashiyama Zoo and Botanical Gardens. This zoo is one of the oldest and largest in Japan. It features many animal exhibits, large plant collections, and fun rides. This large venue provides excellent value. It features many attractions for one price.

This makes for a full-day experience that blends learning and fun. In summer, the park's design with lots of shade trees, covered walkways, and indoor exhibits helps keep you cool. The zoo has about 500 types of animals, with roomy areas that are always being improved to help the animals behave naturally.

The botanical gardens provide a cool summer getaway. You can check out various plant collections. Visit the rose garden, the tropical greenhouse, or the Japanese garden. There's a fun amusement area with rides for younger kids. This makes it a great family spot, especially during summer school breaks.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Best Time to Visit:** Summer, as the park has shaded areas and indoor spots to stay cool.
- **Address:** 3-70 Higashiyamamotomachi, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya City, Aichi. It's a 3-minute walk from Higashiyama Koen Station to the zoo entrance. Or, you can walk 6 minutes from Hoshigaoka Station to reach the botanical gardens entrance.
- **Cost:** Adults (high schoolers and older): JPY 500. Middle schoolers and younger: Free. Sky Tower combo ticket (adults): JPY 640.
- **Hours:** 9:00 AM - 4:50 PM (last entry 4:30 PM). Closed Mondays (or the next weekday if Monday is a national holiday), and December 29 - January 1.

Autumn Attractions

- **Korankei Gorge Autumn Colors**

See one of Japan's most amazing autumn sights as fall turns Korankei Gorge into a canvas of red, gold, and reddish-brown colors. This beautiful spot shines from mid to late November. It mixes the clear waters of the Tomoe

River with the colorful maple trees by its banks. It's known as one of Japan's top spots for autumn leaves.



The many kinds of maple trees, planted over centuries, create a rich mix of colors. About 4,000 maple trees in the gorge create immersive experiences, with paths where branches meet overhead, forming tunnels of vibrant leaves. In mid-November, the yearly Maple Festival brings culture to life.

This peak autumn event lasts about two weeks and features food stalls and craft shows. Evening lights make the colorful leaves look magical at night.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid to late November for the best autumn colors. Lights are on from sunset to 9:00 PM during the Maple Festival.
- **Address:** Jimori, Asuke-cho, Toyota-shi, Aichi.
- **Cost:** Free to enter the gorge. Parking is JPY 1,000 per entry in November. Admission to Sanshu Asuke Yashiki (inside the gorge) costs extra.
- **Hours:** Korankei Gorge area is open 24 hours. Maple Festival: November 1 - November 30.

- **Inuyama Castle and Town**

Discover Japan's true old castle towns in autumn. Inuyama Castle and its historic area become even more beautiful. This amazing cultural treasure has Japan's oldest surviving original wooden castle tower, built in 1537. It lets you connect directly with nearly five centuries of history. The old wooden castle, sitting on its stone base, looks perfect with the autumn colors of the forest and the Kiso River valley nearby. Inside the castle, you'll find interesting historical details from its original structure. From the top floor, you get amazing wide views of the Kiso River and nearby mountains, especially beautiful with autumn leaves.



The old town around the castle also has traditional buildings, museums, craft shops, and restaurants. The bright red gates (torii) of Sanko Inari Shrine are especially pretty with autumn leaves. Seasonal lights in the evening make the castle and historic areas look magical at night.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Best Time to Visit:** Autumn for historical feel and colors; evening lights for a magical experience.
- **Address:** Kitakoken-65-2 Inuyama, Aichi.
- **Cost:** Adults: JPY 550. Children under 14: JPY 110. Sanko Inari Shrine: Free.
- **Hours:** 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM. Closed December 29-31.

- **Asuke Old Town Autumn Festival**

Experience real traditional culture at the Asuke Old Town Autumn Festival. The celebrations in this well-preserved historic town mix cultural heritage and natural beauty perfectly. This charming mountain town in Toyota City, known for its well-kept old buildings, becomes a living museum in autumn.

Traditional shows, craft demonstrations, and seasonal decorations create a full cultural experience against a background of amazing maple leaves. The festival is truly authentic, continuing traditions that are centuries old. It usually happens in mid to late November. That's when autumn colors shine bright.

People enjoy the season along with traditional performances. Local artists show off their crafts, and you can even try some hands-on activities. For a full cultural experience, stay overnight in a traditional inn. You can enjoy local mountain foods and autumn specialties there.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Best Time to Visit:** Mid to late November for the best autumn colors. Festival activities and Mount Imori lights from sundown to 9:00 PM (November 1 - November 30).
- **Address:** Town of Asuke and area around Korankei Gorge, Imori, Asuke-cho, Toyota-shi, Aichi.
- **Cost:** Free to enter the festival. Parking is JPY 1,000 per entry for standard cars. Admission to Sanshu Asuke Yashiki (inside Korankei Gorge) costs extra.

Winter Attractions

- **Port of Nagoya Public Aquarium and Fuji Antarctic Museum**

Discover perfect indoor activities for winter at the Port of Nagoya Public Aquarium and the nearby Fuji Antarctic Museum. These top-notch spots feature stunning ocean displays and intriguing tales of polar exploration.

They provide fun learning, no matter the weather. This excellent center lets you learn about Japan's varied ocean life and the history of Japanese research trips to Antarctica. The aquarium has dolphins and orcas in Japan's biggest pool, a whirlpool of sardines, and a stunning live coral tank.

The Fuji Antarctic Museum is inside the actual icebreaker ship "Fuji" and shows its history and polar research. These places offer a complete experience for all ages, providing a comfortable escape from winter cold.

- **Quick Facts:**

- **Best Time to Visit:** Winter, as they are indoor attractions.
- **Address:** 1-3 Minatomachi, Minato-ku, Nagoya City, Aichi. A 5-minute walk from Nagoyako Station on the Nagoya Municipal Subway Meiko Line.
- **Port of Nagoya Public Aquarium Cost:** Adults: JPY 2,030. Elementary and middle school students: JPY 1,010. Preschoolers (4+): JPY 500.
- **Fuji Antarctic Museum Cost (single entry):** Adults/High school students: JPY 300. Junior high/elementary school students: JPY 200. Toddlers (4+): Free.

- **Combined Pass for 4 facilities:**

- Aquarium
 - Fuji Antarctic Museum
 - Nagoya Port Building Observation Lounge
 - Nagoya Maritime Museum
- **Cost:** Adults/High school students: JPY 2,440. Junior high/elementary school students: JPY 1,210. Toddlers (4+): JPY 500 (aquarium fee).
- **Hours:** 9:30 AM - 5:30 PM (closes at 5:00 PM in winter and 8:00 PM during Golden Week and summer). Closed Mondays (or the next day if Monday is a holiday). Open every day during Golden Week, July-September, and year-end/New Year holidays.

Planning Your Visit to Aichi

Two to three days is enough to cover the main highlights. Stay in Nagoya for food, shopping, and museum access. Use day trips to reach castle towns, historic craft areas, and open-air museums around the prefecture.

Aichi works well for culture seekers, history fans, and travellers who want to base themselves in one spot while exploring a variety of nearby sights. Visit in spring or autumn for mild weather and festivals. Trains are reliable, and most major attractions are within an hour of the city centre.

Before You Go: Planning Your Trip to Chubu

The Chubu region is big and diverse, but with the right plan, it's easy to navigate. Before you start picking prefectures, here are a few key things to know that will save you time, money, and stress.

Best Time to Visit

Chubu has four true seasons. Each offers something different.

- **Spring (March to May):** Cherry blossoms, hiking trails opening up, and pleasant weather. Great for outdoor walks and festivals.
- **Summer (June to August):** Mountain escapes, beaches, fireworks, and rural festivals. Humid in the cities but cool in the hills.
- **Autumn (September to November):** Crisp air, red and gold leaves, fewer crowds, and peak sake season.
- **Winter (December to February):** Some of Japan's best snow, plus hot springs and illuminations. Ideal for skiing, snowboarding, and quiet travel.

How Long Should You Stay?

- **Short trip (3 to 5 days):** Choose 1 or 2 prefectures, like Nagano and Gifu, or Shizuoka and Yamanashi for a Fuji focus.

- **Medium trip (7 to 10 days):** Pick a mix of mountain and coastal areas. Example: Niigata, Ishikawa, Toyama, and Nagano.
- **Longer trip (2 weeks or more):** Cover the full region at a relaxed pace without doubling back.

Transport Tips

- The **Hokuriku Shinkansen** connects Tokyo with Nagano, Toyama, and Kanazawa.
- The **Tokaido Shinkansen** links Tokyo, Shizuoka, and Nagoya (Aichi).
- Local lines and highway buses cover the rest. Some scenic spots are only reachable by bus or car.
- **IC cards** like Suica or ICOCA work in most areas but not all rural buses.
- **Rental cars** are useful for Sado Island, the Noto Peninsula, and hidden villages.

Useful Passes

- **JR East Pass (Nagano, Niigata):** Good value if you're staying around those areas.
- **JR Central Pass:** Covers Shizuoka and Aichi, but check routes in detail.
- **Hokuriku Arch Pass:** Ideal if you're going from Tokyo through Kanazawa to Kyoto or Osaka.

Budget Tips

- Chubu is cheaper than Tokyo, Kyoto, or Osaka for accommodation and food.
- Local trains cost less but move slowly. Shinkansen saves time if your budget allows.
- Ryokan stays with dinner and breakfast give the best value in hot spring towns.
- Convenience stores and train station bento are reliable and budget-friendly when moving between spots.