

和歌山 Wakayama

Wakayama is a prefecture that many visitors to Japan overlook. But particularly as it is so close to Kansai International Airport, it really is a shame to do so.

The prefecture's name is a combination of *waka* 和歌, a type of Japanese poem, and *yama* 山, meaning mountain, and with so many wonderful mountains (and great coastlines), it would be easy to find a place to inspire your inner poet.

Wakayama is often described as one of Japan's spiritual heartlands. Lying south of Kyoto and sharing a border with Nara prefecture—both historical centres of Japanese culture, Wakayama contains sacred sites and pilgrimage routes that form part of the UNESCO designated World Heritage site known as *Sacred Sites and Pilgrimage Routes in the Kii Mountain Range*.

aristocrats, feudal lords and commoners, all took part in the pilgrimage. The area still receives millions of visitors annually. While some are pilgrims, many are hikers and people enjoying the fantastic natural surrounds—beautiful mountains and ravines, rivers and streams.

Wakayama's coast also attracts many tourists. Thanks to the Kuroshio current from the Pacific Ocean,



Glimpses of Wakayama—(a) Okuno-in at Koya-san, (b) part of the Koya Choishi Michi pilgrimage route, (c) along the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route, (d) Kumano Nachi Grand Shrine and the sacred waterfall—the end of the Kumano Kodo, (e) Shirarahama, a favourite beach resort for people living in Kansai [Osaka, Kobe, Kyoto, Nara], and (f) Oto [Torch] Festival in Shingu every February.



The history of this sacred area dates back more than 1,200 years and it is one of only two pilgrimage routes in the world to receive UNESCO recognition. The other is the Road to Santiago in the province of Galicia, Spain, with which Wakayama has a sister-road agreement to promote links and friendship between the two countries.

The three Shinto grand shrines called the Kumano Sanzan and the temples of Koya-san in Wakayama prefecture are ancient centres of religion in Japan. Mountains were believed to be where the gods lived, and walking the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route was practised by believers in both Shinto and Buddhism. Emperors, royalty,

Wakayama is warm. Today Wakayama is synonymous with *mikan*, a type of citrus fruit, with hillsides covered in orchards. In winter, Japanese plum trees are already blossoming and from these *umeboshi*, pickled plums, will be made—an excellent pairing for another famous local product, soy sauce, said to have been first produced in Japan in Yuasa Town, Wakayama. Have them with the great seafood that the prefecture is also known for.

And yes, Wakayama has no shortage of *onsen* to enjoy—seaside, mountain and even natural riverbed hot springs add to Wakayama's many attractions which we've only just touched on here!

FURTHER INFORMATION

Wakayama Prefecture Tourism www.wakayama-kanko.or.jp/world/english/index.html
JNTO's Wakayama site has an 11-minute video introducing the prefecture's attractions
—www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/regional/wakayama/index.html.

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