

屋之島 Yakushima Island

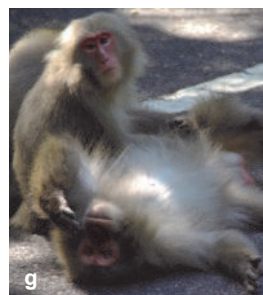


Lying 60km south of the Kyushu mainland, Yakushima Island is part of Kagoshima prefecture. Yakushima was one of Japan's first World Heritage Sites, designated by UNESCO in 1993. It is best known for the Jomon-sugi, the oldest of the ancient Yakusugi cedar trees. Japanese cedar trees (*sugi*) normally live up to 500 years, but on this island the trees grow more slowly. A tree is only called a Yakusugi once it reaches 1,000 years. The Jomon-sugi is said to be more than 7,000 years old, but it is so old that its centre has rotted away leaving the tree hollow and its age a secret to time.

The UNESCO listing recognises the island's unique and rich ecosystem. Inland, two biotic regions meet, meaning Yakushima is the northernmost location for certain plants and the southernmost for others. More than 1,900 species and subspecies of flora can be found, including a remnant of a type of ancient warm-temperate forest only found on the island.



Yakushima is a mere 132km in circumference and is extremely mountainous (photo a). For a small place, the variety in its environment is remarkable. The coasts are subtropical; the inland ranges from warm through temperate to subalpine. The mountains are tall and steep, and the tallest mountain Mt Miyanoura is 1,936m high making it the tallest in Kyushu. Another natural claim to fame is that it is



receives the highest rainfall in all of Japan. It's no wonder the vegetation is so lush, the rivers are full and mosses thrive. The mossy and primeval Shiratani Unsuikyo Ravine (e) is said to have inspired the backdrop for Hayao Miyazaki's classic anime *Princess Mononoke*, a movie with a strong environmental theme.

People have been inhabiting the island for a long time, but largely lived on the coasts. Catching fish was an important resource for the locals and today flying fish and mackerel are specialities.

During the Edo Period (1603-1867), logging cedar became a major industry. It continued on a smaller scale into the 20th century but as early as 1934 part of the island was declared a national park, the Kirishima-Yakushima National Park (in 2012, Yakushima became a separate national park). The Seibu Forest Path is actually part of an original access route for loggers. This is one place where you have a good chance to see the local Yakushika deer and Yakuzaru monkeys (g).

Most visitors to Yakushima are eco-tourists seeking to experience the unique environment of the island. Hiking is the only way to get to many of the best sites such as the peak of Miyanoura (b) or into the forest to see the Jomon-sugi (d). The tree is 1,300m above sea level and said to be the oldest cedar tree in the world. In the words of someone who has stood by the tree:

Upon reaching the end of the five hour Jomon-sugi hike and finally catching a glimpse of the wisened old tree that has stood in silent witness for countless decades, one cannot help but contemplate the fleeting ennui of one's own mortality and the merest blink of an eye that marks our passage of time on this planet...

Even along well trodden paths such as the Jomon-sugi track, it is very important to be well prepared when walking on the island, and particularly for inexperienced hikers, a guide is recommended.

While world heritage listing attracts much attention drawing visitors inland to the forests and valleys, the coasts offer beautiful beaches (f) and *onsen* hot springs such as the Hirauchi sea baths (c) which would be a great way to get rid of any stiffness from the previous day's hiking.

Further information
Japan National Tourist Information

www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/scenic/worldheritage/c_12_yakushima.html

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