

九州 *Kyushu—well worth a visit*

Kyushu is the southernmost of Japan's four main islands and this year one quarter of the new JETs who left from Sydney will be calling Kyushu home while working on the JET programme.

Unfortunately Kyushu does not cross the minds of many people when they are planning travel in Japan—unfortunate, because Kyushu has much to offer visitors.

For those who do choose to visit, there is stunning scenery and fascinating history and culture to reward you.

Largely temperate, the southern parts of the island are subtropical. Volcanoes make for spectacular scenery, be it the quietly fuming Sakurajima facing Kagoshima city or the other worldly beauty of the landscape around Mt Aso. There are many hot springs to enjoy such as the famous Beppu area thanks to the volcanic nature of the island. This has also created rich plains that grow excellent produce.

Kyushu's food culture reflects its international heritage: Chinese and Korean influenced dishes are common, and Kyushu's most famous sweet *kasutera*, a type of sponge cake, came from Portugal. Being so close to Korea it is not surprising that culture from mainland Asia first entered via Kyushu; Fukuoka, Kyushu's largest city was long a major crossroads.

Western influences came into Japan via Nagasaki (which also has strong Chinese influences); it was able to continue trading with Europeans even during Japan's period of national seclusion.

Japan's ancient roots are also to be found in Kyushu. The beautiful Takachiho area is where Amaterasu Omikami, the main female deity in the Shinto religion, is said to have hidden herself in a cave leaving the universe in complete darkness until she was lured out. Echoes of the distant past live on at Yakushima, a UNESCO World Heritage Natural Site—the oldest tree in the forests that cover this island is estimated to be between 6,300 and 7,200 years old. Much spritelier is the around 400 year old Karatsu Kunchi festival which is a designated 'Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property' and runs over three days in early November each year.

Access to Kyushu is much easier than many people might think. There are domestic flights from the main island Honshu and international flights between Kyushu and many neighbouring countries. Trains also cover the island and Kyushu now has its own Shinkansen system which connects with the mainland network.

To learn more about Kyushu

Kyushu Tourism Information www.welcomekyushu.com is an easy-to-use website that introduces the many charms of Kyushu, or as their slogan has it, "the excitement and romance of Kyushu". The site has a wealth of travel ideas and information about the island's culture and history. Brochures and maps are available for download.

Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO) suggests a 3-day model trip around Kyushu www.jnto.go.jp/eng/arrange/attractions/rtp/kyushu/index.html and there is also an informative *Outline of the region* page. To conclude, let's quote how this page starts:

Volcanoes and hibiscus, sunny skies and belly-shaking good humor, dancing Chinese dragons and sugary Portuguese sweets ... Doesn't sound like Japan? Then it's time you headed for Kyushu ...



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Takachiho Gorge

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