

青森 Aomori

Aomori prefecture is on the northern tip of Honshu, Japan's largest island. Surrounded by sea on three sides, the prefecture is known for its beautiful scenery, excellent agricultural produce and festivals attracting many visitors.

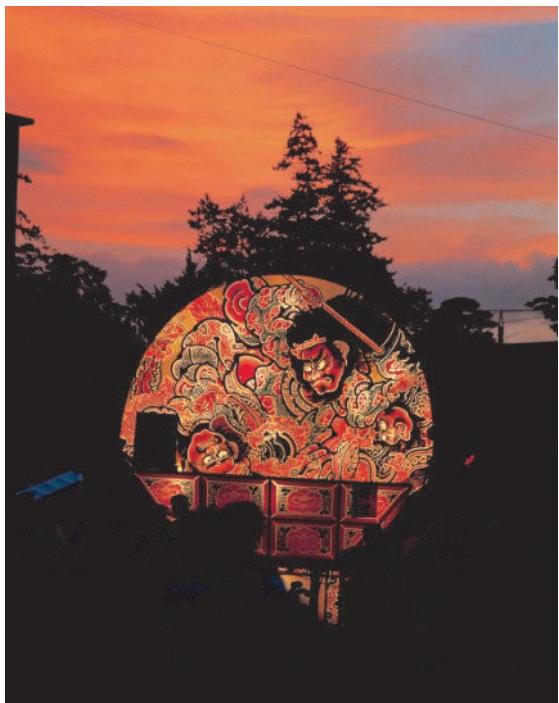
The capital of Aomori is Aomori City, an important fishing and shipping centre since the 17th century. Today it has a population of just over 300,000 people, and it is the administrative centre and a major cultural hub of the prefecture.

While industry has developed around Hachinohe city in the prefecture's east, agriculture has long been the mainstay of the prefecture's economy. Indeed Aomori is one of Japan's premier agricultural areas. Apples are arguably its best known product; the prefecture is the top producer in Japan and produces approximately half of all Japan's apples. Quality is high and perfection sought! Leaves are removed from trees and fruit rotated to ensure evenly reddened apples. Fruits are also bagged to protect against insects. [See www.umai-aomori.jp/english/index.phtml for more.]



The prefecture's name means green forest* and certainly it is blessed with a wonderful natural environment. The Ou Mountains divide the prefecture in two, with cold and snowy winters on the Japan Sea side and milder weather to the east facing the Pacific Ocean. Since 1993 the Shirakami Mountains in Aomori and neighbouring Akita prefectures have been a World Heritage Natural Site. Here you can find the world's largest virgin forest of beech trees. This ancient landscape provides important habitats for many plants and animals.

It seems that people have long been attracted to the area. As Aomori is relatively sparsely populated, it is easy to think that the area may have been only more recently developed. In fact Aomori prefecture boasts some highly significant archaeological remains. The



* In Aomori they often refer to the 'Blue Forests' of Aomori. From the picture of the beautifully green forest along the Oirase Gorge above, you can see the forests are definitely green. In Japanese 'ao' means blue or green.



The Oirase River (Oirase-gawa) is famous for its beautiful forests and ravines. The water moves rapidly from its source, Lake Towada, to release into the Pacific Ocean. The stretch of river known as Oirase Gorge just below Lake Towada is a major attraction.

Sannai-Maruyama village ruins are Japan's largest ruins from the Jomon Period (about 10,500 to 300 BCE). The village is estimated to date from 4,000 to 5,500 years ago. Much of the site was reburied to preserve it, however, several sites have been reconstructed [see image p.7]. The Sannai-Maruyama ruins show that construction techniques were much more advanced at the time than had previously been believed. The ruins lie just under 30 minutes by bus from Aomori train station.

Many Japanese visit Aomori in summer to see the famous Nebuta Festival in Aomori City and Neputa Festival in Hirosaki City. Both feature spectacular floats—huge paper lanterns which are intricately painted and formed. The floats come alive as the sun goes down and they are lit from within. The one depicted left is from Hirosaki's Neputa Festival. Hirosaki Castle is famous for its beautiful cherry blossom festival with some 2,600 trees in the castle grounds.

Aomori is now even closer for travellers by train. In December 2010 the last stretch of the Tohoku Shinkansen was open for regular services. Now it is possible to travel from central Tokyo to Aomori city in 3 hours and 15 minutes, and it will be 10 minutes faster from this March.

Aomori Official Tourist Information <http://en.aptinet.jp/index.html>

The Japan National Tourist Organisation website has good information on Aomori Prefecture and its major sights:
www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/regional/aomori/index.html.

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