

# Yamaguchi Prefecture



Hagi Castle ruins

Yamaguchi is one of the few prefectures to have coastlines on both the Sea of Japan and the Seto Inland Sea or Pacific Ocean. The prefecture is the one at the south-western tip of the Japanese mainland and faces the island of Kyushu. Yamaguchi's southern Seto coastline boasts the JR Sanyo Main Line and the shinkansen line that rapidly delivers passengers to Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo. On the JR San'in Line along the Sea of Japan coast, the fastest trains travel at a much more sedate pace. But that can be an attraction in itself, a leisurely way to see a beautiful coastline with stunning sunsets. And it is here that you find the small former castle town of Hagi, once a hotbed of revolutionary thought.

Even speeding along the southern coast, it's definitely worth breaking up your trip, if only to see the graceful, five-arched **Kintaikyo Bridge** [photo b] in Iwakuni, one of Japan's three famous bridges,



constructed without nails in 1673. On the hill above the bridge is the reconstructed tower of Iwakuni Castle which gives a wonderful view of Kintaikyo and out to the islands of the Seto Inland Sea.

The prefectural capital, Yamaguchi city, is not on the Sanyo mainline, but from the Shin-Yamaguchi shinkansen station, a change to the Yamaguchi Line will take you there. The capital is home to **Rurikoji Temple Pagoda** [c], a designated national treasure. The Yamaguchi Line goes on past the capital to the beautiful castle town of Tsuwano in neighbouring Shimane prefecture. Also accessible by bus from Shin-Yamaguchi are the limestone caves of **Akiyoshido** and the fantastical scenery of the Akiyoshidai plateau lying above them.

Let's continue our journey towards Hagi.

You could go by bus from Yamaguchi City or the Akiyoshi area. Alternatively, you could travel further down the southern coast to Shimonoseki at the tip of Yamaguchi prefecture and switch there to the JR San'in Line on the Japan Sea coastline. Along the way you would pass through the Nagato area. Nagato City is the jump off for the area that has become known as the **Maritime Alps** [a].

Further along the line, we arrive at **Hagi**.

Today Hagi is a quiet town with just over 50,000 people, but there are still many reminders of when Hagi was a castle town belonging to the Mōri clan and the cradle of thinkers who contributed to the Meiji Restoration (1868) when the Tokugawa Shogunate was overthrown and the emperor was returned to power.

The castle ruins, complete with moat, are preserved in Shizuki Park. Samurai homes, some dating from the 1600s, are

found in the surrounding streets, the layout having changed little over the centuries. Bikes are a great way to explore Hagi's picturesque streets which are lined by traditional walls and channels that separate the street from the houses [d]. At the right time of year you might see *natsumikan*, a citrus fruit and famous local product, hanging over walls.



An attraction for history buffs is the school Shōka Sonjuku, which was run by Shōin Yoshida, a pro-imperialist who influenced many young samurai who played key roles in the Meiji Restoration. Among his students was Hagi-born Hirobumi Itō. Itō helped shape modern Japan and became the first prime minister of the Meiji Period.

Hagi is also renowned for its 400 year old ceramic tradition. Hagi-yaki is known for its tea ceremony bowls, traditionally palely coloured and with distinctive knicks in the base. A piece of Hagi ware would make for an excellent souvenir.



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