

Ishikawa: take time to explore

Ishikawa Prefecture lies on the Japan Sea coast. Its capital is Kanazawa city, a name that is becoming ever better known overseas as a great place to visit—and for good reason. Famous for its traditional streetscapes and crafts, Kanazawa has much to tempt travellers. It has a rich history as the centre of one of Japan's strongest *daimyo* (feudal lords) during the Edo Period (1603-1868). Its wealth of traditional crafts was acknowledged when it was appointed by UNESCO as a City of Crafts and Folk Art in June 2009. And the food? The local Kaga cuisine is highly regarded.

Kanazawa describes itself as 'a city made by samurai' and streets such as this one in the Nagamachi samurai district invite you to wander and explore (so too does the Higashiyama teahouse district). During the Edo Period, Kanazawa flourished as the seat of the Maeda family. For almost 300 years, the Maeda ruled the Kaga area as Ishikawa together with neighbouring Toyama was then known. The income derived from the lands under the family's control made the head of the Maeda or Kaga clan the richest *daimyo*. Culture, scholarship and art and crafts were encouraged and duly flourished. Kanazawa's nickname of 'Little Kyoto' gives a good idea of what you can expect to find.

Many of the key attractions are reminders of times past, but Kanazawa is no captive of that past. One of the city's most popular attractions is after all the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa (designed by the same top Japanese architects, SANAA, who are designing the AGNSW's Sydney Modern extension).

There is no question, however, that Kanazawa's long history as a castle town is a source of great interest for visitors.

Kanazawa Castle Park [photo a] includes parts of the original structures with other parts more recently rebuilt using traditional techniques. Visitors gain a sense of the scale of the castle complex from which the Maedas ruled the Kaga area. Walking through the Kahokumon Gate you can't help but be impressed by its size. Moreover, the newness of parts of the castle allows you to reflect on

how this imposing structure must have appeared to people when it was originally built. The commitment to improving the park is ongoing, and as recently as 2015 the Gyokusen'in-maru garden, begun under the third Maeda lord in 1634, was reconstructed.

Nearby lies the famous **Kenrokuen Garden**. Considered one of Japan's 'three great gardens', it has what is possibly the most recognisable lantern in all of the country [b]. Try to visit the garden at different times of the day so that you can enjoy the play of the light, and if you can, early in the morning and late in the afternoon means you can appreciate the garden more quietly.

Kanazawa has around 465,000 people, which by Australian standards is a large city, but when you walk around areas such as the **Nagamachi samurai district**, you feel a world away from modern city life. Certain



buildings can be visited including the Nomura Samurai family residence; it is worth contrasting the Nomura-ke with the humbler dwellings of infantry families at the Ashigaru Shiryokan Museum.

You don't need to know that buildings in the **Higashi Chaya district** are designated as national cultural assets to appreciate the value and charm of this area. Wooden lattices called *kimusuko* are characteristic of *chaya* and enticingly screen the ground floors of buildings along the street [see cover]. Some of the buildings contain restaurants, tea houses and shops to explore.

For lovers of **Japanese crafts**, there is much to be tempted by. Of course, window shopping or visiting museums is an alternative, but there are many excellent souvenir possibilities in Kanazawa and Ishikawa—below are just a few.

The local **Kutani-yaki** is one of Japan's most highly regarded ceramics—porcelain wares known for their coloured enamel glazes. Vivid hues are also part of the appeal of **Kaga Yuzen** hand-painted fabrics, featuring elaborate designs and employing *bokashi* gradations.

Another famous local craft is the manufacture of **gold leaf** and decorating products with the leaf. Kanazawa 金沢 means marsh 沢 (sawa) of gold 金 (kana). It is therefore fitting that the city accounts for 99% of national gold-leaf production. Today you can find all manner of items covered in gold leaf or using it as an accent point.

Ishikawa is also famous for **Wajima lacquerware** which has a depth and beauty borne of a painstaking technique and process. So many crafts found in Ishikawa show a remarkable level of care that speaks of committed artisans.

Kaga cuisine is based on excellent local produce—fish and shellfish from the Sea of Japan are a major and delicious element [photo c]. The Kaga Plain yields quality rice and there are speciality Kaga vegetables. You can eat very well in Ishikawa—and in some style when it is served on Kutani ware. And let's not forget Kanazawa's tradition of Japanese sweets, *wagashi*. Together with Kyoto and Matsue, Kanazawa is considered one of the top places in Japan for confectionary making. This is again thanks to the Maeda family which promoted the tea ceremony during the Edo Period; *wagashi* is an indispensable part of the tea ceremony.

The largest part of Ishikawa Prefecture is the Noto area. The **Noto Peninsula**, surrounded on three sides by the Sea of Japan, is known for its coastlines, including dramatic sights such as Mitsukejima Island [d], called Gunkanjima because it resembles the prow of a battleship (*gunkan*). The Noto area is home to the picturesque **Shiroyone Senmaida** rice terraces [e] which stretch down the mountainside to the sea. Here cultivation is by necessity still carried out by hand. In 2011, it was designated as part of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems. But it is a living tradition—nowadays people visit the Senmaida from October to March to enjoy LED lights decorating the terraces.

Access to the area became very convenient with the arrival in 2015 of the **Hokuriku Shinkansen** which now connects Tokyo and Kanazawa in only two and a half hours. The websites below give information on the different ways to travel to Ishikawa and suggest side-trips and routes for longer adventures.

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The official travel guide for Ishikawa is www.hot-ishikawa.jp/english/ by the Ishikawa Prefecture Tourism League. You can learn about the different areas of Ishikawa—Kanazawa, Noto, Kaga and Hakusan—by watching this video from the same group: www.jnto.org.au/ishikawa-tourism-new-promotional-video

For more about Kanazawa City, the website visitkanazawa.jp is full of beautiful photographs and is very informative.

Ishikawa is keen to welcome overseas visitors and like many regional areas of Japan is actively promoting its attractions, but Ishikawa's engagement with other countries is not restricted to tourism. There is a strong tradition of international exchange, with foreigners visiting Ishikawa to learn Japanese language and culture. In October 2018, a signing ceremony was held in Sydney for the **Ishikawa Japanese Studies Program** (IJSP) agreement, signed by Mr Masanori Tanimoto, Governor of Ishikawa, and Ms Dianne Fitzpatrick, President of Australia-Japan Society (AJS)—ACT. The IJSP is a long-standing program of the Ishikawa Prefectural Government and the agreement aims to expand the number of participants studying Japanese and Japanese culture through home-stay programs which have been running with AJS-ACT for almost 20 years.

