

Many Australians choose to travel to Japan during cherry blossom season, but did you know that there's a part of Japan where the cherries are at their best from mid-January to mid-February? Where?

Japan's most southerly prefecture, Okinawa, is a 1,200km chain of islands that stretches from the bottom of Kyushu down in a westward arc towards Taiwan and the Asian continent. It is in this subtropical environment that Japan's earliest cherry blossoms bloom against mild winter skies.

Beautiful balmy islands with white beaches set off by glorious blue or emerald seas have made Okinawa a popular holiday destination for Japanese domestic tourists. It is not just the environment that makes it so attractive to visit. The pace of life is more relaxed, and thanks to its location and history, Okinawa enjoys a distinctive culture still evident in everyday life.

Ryukyu Kingdom

The Okinawan islands were the domain of the Ryukyu Kingdom for several centuries until it was formally annexed by Japan as a prefecture in 1879. From the late 1100s, smaller provinces were consolidated and by 1429 the main island of Okinawa was under the rule of one king.

The Ryukyu area prospered as a trading nation, trading between China (with which it had a tributary relationship since 1372), Japan and other south-east Asian countries. It dealt in swords and copper from Japan, raw silk, silk textiles and ceramics from China, and pepper, sappanwood, turmeric, sugar and other commodities from south-east Asia. From 1609 it came under the control of the Satsuma lord from Kyushu but the kingdom

maintained its independence so that the trade from the tributary relationship with China could continue.

With trade ties came cultural ties

There are several examples of the back-and-forth of cultural exchange. *Bingata* is a type of Okinawan dyeing method and its textile was worn by the royal and warrior classes on formal occasions during the Ryukyu period. Still manufactured today, the textile is thought to have its origins in Indian, Javanese and Chinese dyeing designs. The Okinawan instrument called the *sanshin*, a three stringed lute, was based on a Chinese instrument; the *sanshin* or *jamisen* spread to mainland Japan and became the basis of today's *shamisen*. Probably Okinawa's best know cultural export is *karate*—said to be a mix of Chinese kung-fu and local Okinawan techniques.

The Ryukyu era and its distinctive culture and history are today recognised internationally. The 'Gusuku sites and related Properties of the Kingdom of Ryukyu' are inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. Part of the Shuri-jo Castle, an element of the Gusuku sites, was destroyed last year by

fire, but will be rebuilt and 80% of the surrounds are already open. In fact, the UNESCO inscription includes nine sites and ruins located around Okinawa ... and one of them, Nakijin Gusuku, is well-known for its cherry blossom festival!



Shureimon Gate at World Heritage listed Shuri Castle in Naha, the capital of Okinawa



A touch of Okinawa in Sydney

On 10 November 2019, Okinawa Soul Festival took place to a sold-out crowd. Okinawa's famous Eisa dance [left] was among the performances the audience could enjoy.

Consul-General Kiya attended and afterwards observed:

As understanding of Japanese culture in Australia is deepening, events such as this increase the appreciation of Japan's various regional identities.

The organizer of the festival was the Sydney Okinawan Club (シドニー沖縄県人会) with participation from Perth and Okinawa. There is even a group called "Sanshin Sydney" which seeks to spread Okinawa's unique music culture for Australians to enjoy!

Seikatsu Kogei: Objects for Intentional Living

This exhibition will present some 50 works by 22 active Seikatsu Kogei artists—for the first time in Australia. Seikatsu Kogei is the Japanese craft movement that began in the 1990s and can be translated as "lifestyle crafts".

The objects on display are made from a variety of materials, including wood, ceramics, lacquer, glass, metal, bamboo, paper and clay.

The Japan Foundation Sydney Gallery

21 February to 23 May 2020

