

Autumn Magic

Step back in time to feudal Japan and appreciate the magic of autumn in Kakunodate

By Jessica Scott

Growing up in the north of Australia, I had never experienced a typical four-season year; leaves were either lush and green or shrivelled and brown. The very first time I ever saw the golden hues and vibrant oranges of autumn was when I lived and worked in Akita Prefecture, Japan, on the JET Programme. Now, I would like to share—in my opinion—the most magical place of all: Kakunodate.



Kakunodate, located in the Senboku district within Akita Prefecture, has a well-earned nickname as the “**little Kyoto of Tohoku**”. The small, historic castle town was established in 1620 and flourished during Japan’s Edo Period (1603 - 1867). While the castle itself no longer remains, the town’s distinctive feudal architecture makes it all too easy to feel like you’ve stepped back in time.



Meandering through its streets, the town has two very distinct areas: merchant and samurai. The samurai district in particular, called *bukeyashiki* (武家屋敷) in Japanese, was once home to 80 families and has gained national and international renown as one of the best places to view **Japanese samurai architecture**.

While many of the homes continue to be lived in as private property to this day, six of them are open to the public, allowing you a true taste of what middle-class and wealthy life was like in Edo Period Japan.

One such manor, home to the Aoyagi family, has been transformed into a large museum, with armoury displays featuring samurai weaponry, galleries and even dynamic try-it-yourself experiences, such as traditional sword holding and donning a samurai helmet.

After working up an appetite admiring the feudal townscape, I would highly recommend trying one of Akita’s local specialties for lunch: **inaniwa udon**. *Inaniwa* is a type of flat noodle that is hand-kneaded and has history dating back to the Edo Period. It’s perfect for warming yourself up on a chilly autumn’s day.



Of course, a visit to Kakunodate just wouldn’t be complete without taking a short detour out of town to **Dakigaeri Gorge**—an idyllic hiking trail with stunning blue water that contrasts against the flaming reds and burnt oranges, tunnels to walk through,



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and a waterfall at the very end. Shuttle buses run out of Kakunodate as a season special, so it’s easily accessible by public transport.

Lastly, if you need even more reason to take a journey north during Japan’s autumn, there’s the **Kakunodate Float Festival** (角館祭りのやま行事), listed as one of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritages. The festival happens in early

September, and showcases a **rare combination of Buddhism and Shinto** with music and giant clashing floats topped with samurai figures.

This festival is still on my wish list of must-sees in Japan!



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