

MARCO  POLO

JAP

Travel with

Insider
Tips

JAPAN
THE NORTH

Powered by

SONAX®



THE NORTH

ANCIENT MYTHS & UNSPOILT NATURE

Wild bears and dancing orcas, holy mountains and dramatic coasts... Most travellers to Japan head west and south from Tokyo, thereby missing out on the rugged charm of the undeveloped north.

The northernmost island of Hokkaido – a little smaller than the island of Ireland – was the traditional homeland of the indigenous Ainu people who venerated bear gods. Since its annexation by Japan 150 years ago, Hokkaido has become a land of farms and vast fields



Refuge for the last of the samurai: Tsuruga Castle in Aizu-Wakamatsu

of vegetables and dairy cattle. The climate is continental European and the straight roads resemble those in the US.

Rocky coastline and forests characterise the unassuming region of Tohoku in the north-east of Honshu island. Here, farmers and fishermen tend their fields and fish for oysters. Since the quake, tsunami and nuclear catastrophe of 2011, Japan's north has focused on its core strengths: rustic hot springs, samurai traditions, wild festivals and unspoilt nature. Those who visit always want to return.

THE NORTH



Nippon Kai



MARCO POLO HIGHLIGHTS

★ SAPPORO SNOW FESTIVAL

Never mind snowmen: these snow sculptures of famous buildings from around the world are true works of art
 ▶ p. 8

★ NISEKO

The best region for deep snow skiing in Japan ▶ p. 8

★ SHIRETOKO NATIONAL PARK

Hike in this UNESCO World Heritage Site, watch bears catching salmon and look out for orcas ▶ p. 9

★ JR GONO LINE

Travel for hours on this cosy slow train and enjoy views of the sea and ancient birch forest ▶ p. 13

★ KAKUNODATE SAMURAI HOUSES

You might meet samurais and geishas at any minute... ▶ p. 15

★ CHUSON-JI

Unbelievable craftsmanship in a temple in Hiraizumi which has lasted for 900 years
 ▶ p. 17

★ MATSUSHIMA

Whether raw or grilled, here you can try oysters straight from the sea ▶ p. 18

★ AIZU-WAKAMATSU

Breathtaking black-and-red lacquerware from the old samurai city ▶ p. 19



SAPPORO

Whether you like beer, grilled lamb and large crabs, or are looking for a break from the humid summer weather, or love to ski or snowboard, then the host city of the 1972 Winter Olympics is the place to be.

From here, it is not far to several ski regions with sought-after powder snow. For the snow festival in early February, Sapporo displays huge, illuminated snow sculptures. Navigating the city should be easy because Japan's fifth-biggest metropolis (pop. 1.97 million) is laid out in a grid like a chess board.

SIGHTSEEING

MOERENUMA PARK (モエレ沼公園)

Sculptor and landscape designer Isamu Noguchi inspired this municipal park on a former landfill site that

WHERE TO START?

Many buses and trains depart from the **main station** and from nearby Odori Park, which stretches through the city centre like a green ribbon. Numerous sights can be reached by hopping on the Sapporo Shiden tram from Nishiyonchome station next to the park (from 200 yen, or with the *Dosanko pass* for 360 yen/day at weekends).

was completed in 2013. You can hire a bicycle and ride along geometrically laid-out paths around a conical

hill, past sculptures and a glass pyramid (end of April to early Nov | 100 yen/hr). Daily 7am-10pm except for 1-3 Jan | admission free | Moerenuma-koen 1-1, Higashi-ku | 東区モエレ沼公園1-1 | Moerenuma-Koen bus station Higashiguchi (east entrance) | moerenumapark.jp | ☺ 1-1½ hrs

INSIDER TIP

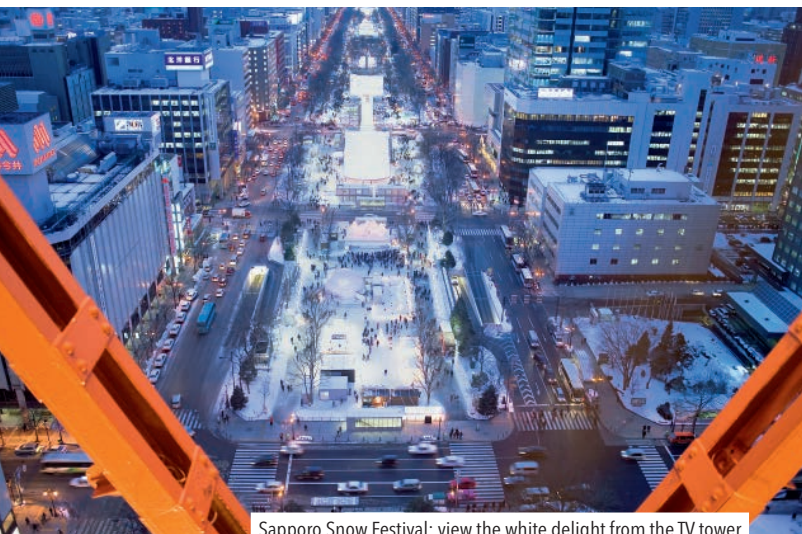
Sightseeing for sporty types

SAPPORO BEER MUSEUM (サッポロビール博物館)

Munich, Sapporo and Milwaukee, the three "alcohol capitals" of the world, are at the same latitude? Wrong! This myth was spread by an advertisement for the Sapporo beer brand. Founded in 1876, Japan's oldest brewery is regarded as one of the best. After a short guided tour, including beer tasting, you can grill lamb à la Genghis Khan at your table in the *Garden Grill*. Daily 11am-8pm | admission free | Higashi 9-1-1, Kita 7-jo, Higashi-ku | 東区北7条東9-1-1 | sapporobeer.jp | Sapporo Beer-en bus station

SAPPORO CLOCK TOWER (札幌市時計台)

In the past, students of the agricultural college were taught in today's clock tower, which was renovated in 2018/19. The clock, which dates from 1881, was manufactured in Massachusetts and has been the symbol for the historical and cultural development of Sapporo ever since. A brief photo stop should be sufficient



Sapporo Snow Festival: view the white delight from the TV tower

to do this Sapporo landmark justice. *Daily 8.45am–5.10pm | admission 200 yen | 2-chome Kita 1 Jonishi, Chuo-ku | 市中央区北1条西2丁目 | Sapporo railway station | sapporo-shi-tokeidai.jp/english*

MOIWA (藻岩山) 🏞️

This wooded mountain south-west of Sapporo offers breathtaking views. In the evening, the city lights sparkle like stars as far as the Sea of Japan. The ride to the viewing platform including restaurant and planetarium – initially by ropeway, then by a mini-cable car – is all part of the fun. *Daily 11am–10pm | ride 1,700 yen, children 850 yen | tram to Iriguchi ropeway station, shuttle bus to the ropeway and mini-cable car | Chuo-ku, Fushimi 5-3-7 | 中央区伏見5-3-7 | sapporo.travel*

EATING & DRINKING

SOUP CALY PICANTE

(スープカリイピカンティ)

The people of Hokkaido love soup curry with lots of fresh vegetables and spices. Try a bowl of this soul food and never have cold feet again!

Daily 11.30am–11pm | Acroview Hokudaimae, Kita 13, Jonishi 3-2-23, Kita-ku | 北区北十三条西3-2-23ア クロビュー 北大前 | picante.jp | ¥

SATURDAY'S CHOCOLATE

FACTORY CAFE (サタデイズ チョコレート ファクトリー カフェ)

Crafted by hand from the bean to the table as well as creatively packed. Chocolate fans simply have to try a hot chocolate, frozen chocolate shake and brownies. *Thu–Tue 10am–6.30pm | Chuo-ku, Minami 2 Johigashi 2-7-1*



Salmon Bldg., 1F | 中央区南2条東
2丁目7-1 Salmon 1F ビル |
saturdayschocolate.com | ¥

SHOPPING

SAPPORO STELLAR PLACE (札幌ステラプレイス)

If you can't find it here, you won't find it anywhere: the shopping mall at the southern entrance of Sapporo railway station is one of the biggest in Japan. It has 200 shops and many restaurants (open until 11pm) serving Hokkaido cuisine at affordable prices. Treat yourself to a massage, manicure or visit to the cinema. *Daily 10am-9pm depending on the shop* | Chuo-ku, Kita 5 Jonishi 2-chome | 中央区北5条西2丁目 | uu-hokkaido.in/corporate/buy/sapporo/stellarplace.shtml

SAPPORO CENTRAL WHOLESALE MARKET (JOGAI) (札幌市中央卸売市場 場外市場)

This experience requires an early start. Have you ever seen crabs with up to 50-cm-long legs? From 6am the salespeople shout about their wares in the wholesale market's outer area (*jogai*) which is also open to visitors. You can taste snacks for free or enjoy freshly caught fish. *Daily 6am-5pm* | Chuo-ku, Kita 11 Jonishi 21-2-3 | 中央区北11条西21丁目21-2-3 | Nijuyonken railway station, Tozai line

SPORT & ACTIVITIES

SAPPORO OLYMPIC MUSEUM (札幌オリンピックミュージアム)

A chairlift takes you to the ski jump

that was built for the Sapporo Winter Olympics 1972 - with panoramic views of the city. **In the**

INSIDER TIP

Feel like an Olympian

museum you can take a virtual jump in a simulator, go cross-

country skiing or dare to try a virtual run in a four-man bob-sleigh at

130kmh. May-Oct daily 9am-6pm, Nov-April daily 9.30am-5pm | admis-

sion 600 yen, children free, chairlift 500 yen, children (up to age 12) 300

yen | 1274 Miyanomori, Chuo-ku | 中央区宮の森1274 | 10 mins by taxi

from Maruyama Koen railway station | sapporo-olympicmuseum.jp/english |

🕒 2 hrs

FESTIVALS

SAPPORO SNOW FESTIVAL

(札幌雪まつり) ★

An extraordinary and spectacular winter festival! The British Museum and the Pyramids of Giza, among many others, have all been formed out of snow in Sapporo. From humble beginnings with students creating statues in the 1950s, this festival today boasts more than 100 gigantic artworks, attracting more than 2 million visitors who can enjoy the illuminated masterpieces until 10pm. Book your accommodation early! *1st/2nd week in February* | snowfes.com/english

NIGHTLIFE

BEER BAR NORTH ISLAND

(ビアバーノースアイランド)

With twelve varieties of craft beer fresh from the keg every day, it will

take some time to try them all! How about a *Coriander Black* to start with? A rarity in Japan, smoking is banned in this beer pub with its tiled walls and wooden bar stools. *Mon-Sat 6pm-midnight, Sun 3-10pm* | Chuo-ku, Minami 2 Jonishi, 4-10-1, Large Country Building 10F | 中央区南2条西4-10-1 ラージカントリービル 10F | northislandbeer.jp/bar.html | ¥

AROUND SAPPORO

1 OTARU (小樽市)

30km from Sapporo / 45 mins by train

This port city (pop. 118,000) is a popular day trip destination for the people of Sapporo. Can you hear German beerhall music coming from one of the old warehouses by the Otaru canal? This houses the *Otaru Beer* microbrewery (*April-Oct daily 11am-11pm, Nov-March until 10pm* | Minatomachi 5-4 | 港町5-4), which is run by a German brewer. It also serves typical German food.

2 NISEKO (ニセコ町) ★

90km from Sapporo / 3 hrs by bus

Australians love this ski resort for its reliable snow cover and the "best powder snow in the world". Niseko (pop. 5,200) consists of four ski resorts with 70 slopes (niseko.ne.jp). The *Niseko Grand Hirafu* ski region allows you to ski until 8.30pm, followed by après-ski. *Niseko Annapuri* is also suitable

for beginners and for those who prefer a quieter atmosphere.

SHIRETOKO NATIONAL PARK

This is as remote as it gets! The ★ Shiretoko Peninsula in the far north-west of Hokkaido is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Although it's largely accessible only on foot or by boat, the national park is a must-visit for nature lovers. The resident brown bears are best watched

from the water. The centre of the densely forested peninsula is covered by a mountain range, including the 1,665-m-high Mount Rausu. You can reach its peak on an arduous but popular hike. Many hikers fix little bells to their backpacks to warn off the bears, although these shy animals are unlikely to approach humans. The islands off Shiretoko are inaccessible: although claimed by Japan, Russia has kept them occupied since the end of World War II.

SIGHTSEEING

FIVE LAKES (知床五湖)

An easy hike leads round the idyllic lakes of Shiretoko Goko, which mirror the mountain range in their still waters. In 90 minutes you can walk around all five lakes, while 40 minutes are sufficient to circumnavigate two of them. From a wooden walkway above a sea of bamboo grass you can see the Sea of Okhotsk. *Park open end of April–end of Nov, during peak season (10 May–31 July) hiking is only allowed with a guide (approx. 5,000 yen), booking recommended | goko.go.jp/fivelakes/?locale=en*

BEAR WATCHING 🐻

An adventure on the northern side of Shiretoko: watch bears catching salmon in the river from the safety of your boat. At approx. 3,000 animals, this is Japan's largest wild population of brown bears. *28 April–25 Oct 6 short tours from Utoro daily (1½ hrs | 3,100 yen) and 2 long tours (3¾ hrs | 6,500 yen) | ms-aurora.com/shiretoko/en*

Mt. Rausu is a great hiking destination on Shiretoko



WHALE WATCHING 🐳

Sperm whales, orcas, dolphins and seals gather on the southern side of Shiretoko near Rausu harbour. Take your camera! *May-Oct 2-3 tours daily | 8,000 yen/2½ hrs | e-shiretoko.com/howtobooking.html*

AROUND SHIRETEKO NATIONAL PARK

3 DRIFT ICE WATCHING

(流水観光砕氷船おーろら)

75km from Utoro in Shiretoko / 1 hr and 20 mins by car

Shiretoko is the most southerly location in the northern hemisphere where one can see drift ice. The ice-breaker *Aurora* departs from Abashiri harbour (*20 Jan-3 April 2-5 tours daily | 3,300 yen/hr | ms-aurora.com/abashiri/en*). Alternatively, from Rausu harbour (*daily Feb-March | 4,000 yen/hr, 10,000 yen/2½ hrs*).

4 ABASHIRI PRISON MUSEUM

(網走刑務所)

80km from Utoro in Shiretoko / 1 hr and 25 mins by car

Abashiri, founded 100 years ago, was Japan's Alcatraz. Those who were spared the death sentence were sent to the coldest point at the northern end of the country. Today you can walk through the corridors of the prison,

which has been turned into an outdoor museum. It is the world's oldest and biggest prison made of wood. The building's posts and wooden ceilings were made from trees which the inmates themselves had to cut and carve.

The former prison canteen now serves original menus made

of rice, fish, vegetables and miso soup

(11am-3.30pm). *Daily May-Sept 8.30am-6pm, Oct-April 9am-5pm | admission 1,080 yen | 1-1 Aza Yobito, Abashiri | 網走市字呼人1-1 | kangoku.jp/multilingual_english/index.html | 🕒 1½ hrs*

INSIDER TIP

Enjoy a prisoner's lunch

HAKODATE

This charming port city in the south of Hokkaido (pop. 259,000) is known for the spectacular panoramic views from Mount Hakodate, which can be reached by cable car, and for the Motomachi quarter on its slopes.

In 1859, Hakodate was one of the first ports to open to foreign traders, and it shows to this day because European, American and Russian influences merge with the Japanese culture. Since 2016 the city, which was hard to reach in the past, has been accessible from Tokyo by Shinkansen bullet train in four hours.

SIGHTSEEING

GORYOKAKU (五稜郭)

The view from the 107-m-tall Goryokaku Tower explains why this imposing 18th-century fortress, which is now a park, is unique in Japan: it is star-shaped! The fortress ditch is planted with cherry trees which burst into bright pink blossom in spring, while in the autumn the fortress is covered in yellow and red leaves. *Daily 8am–7pm, 21 Oct–20 April 9am–6pm | tower admission 900 yen | 43-9 Goryokaku-cho | 五稜郭町43-9 | Goryokaku Koen Iriguchi bus station*

SHOPPING

HAKODATE MORNING MARKET

(函館朝市) 🐷

Next to the railway station, market traders serve fresh seafood. **You can pull octopus, the local speciality, from the tank yourself and have it prepared as a personalised sashimi.** *Daily 6am–2pm, May–Dec from 5am | 9-19 Wakamatsucho | 若松町9-19 | JR station Hakodate*

INSIDER TIP

Catch your sashimi

AOMORI

(四 H4) The port promenade of Aomori (pop. 282,000) is dominated by a gigantic glass pyramid where you can get countless varieties of the city's speciality: apples.

The name Aomori means "green



forest", and the capital of the prefecture of the same name is indeed a centre of forestry and fishery. Situated in the Bay of Mutsu, the city's structure from the Edo period has been largely retained despite bombing in World War II, but sadly the buildings themselves didn't survive. Up until the opening of the Seikan underwater tunnel in 1988, ferries to Hokkaido departed from Aomori. Now that the ferries have gone, the city has become much quieter, except during the *Nebuta Matsuri* festival in summer.

SIGHTSEEING

NEBUTA MUSEUM WA RASSE

(ねぶたの家ワ・ラッセ) 🏠

This museum is a work of art in itself: the building is constructed from a 12-m-tall curtain of vertical, red steel beams. Inside, several original Nebuta festival floats bring to life the spirit of



Nebuta Matsuri: thankfully the fierce warriors are made of paper!

one of Japan's wildest summer events. *Daily May–Aug 9am–7pm, Sept–April 9am–6pm, closed 31 Dec/1 Jan, 9/10 Aug* | admission 600 yen | 1-1-1 Yasukata | 安方 1-1-1 | 1 min on foot from JR station Aomori | 🕒 1-1½ hrs

FESTIVALS

NEBUTA MATSURI 🏯

All hell breaks loose in otherwise quiet Aomori in the first week of August: dancers pull 20 floats through the city's streets, decorated with enormous illuminated and colourful paper lanterns, many of which display historical warriors in battle. They are accompanied by the sounds of thundering drums and piercing flutes. You can hire the right outfit in town – a cotton kimono with a special printed pattern (*yukata*), a yellow belt and red ribbons – and join the dance (*hire fee 4,000 yen, purchase price 7,000 yen*).

There are similar festivals – called *Neputa Matsuri* – in Hirosaki (1–7 Aug) and Goshogawara (4–8 Aug). Definitely book your accommodation early!

AROUND AOMORI

5 TOWADA HACHIMANTAI NATIONAL PARK

(十和田八幡平国立公園)

70km from Aomori / 3 hrs by train

In October, the shores of Lake Towada-ko, the biggest caldera on the main island of Honshu, explodes into a riot of coloured leaves in all shades from bright yellow to deep red. A pleasant way to explore the lake is by sightseeing boat from Yasumiya and Nenokuchi (*duration 50 mins, but not in winter*). On Mount Hakkoda the

leaves change colour as early as late September. JR buses run between Aomori, Hakkoda and the lake (3,090 yen).

6 JR GONO LINE (五能線) ★

34km from Aomori / 40 mins to Kawabe by train

The scenic railway between Kawabe and Higashi-Noshiro (150km) allows

the habitat of the Asian black bear, black woodpecker and Japanese serow – a goat-like mammal. Today, 170km² remain of an unspoilt birch forest that was once the largest in East Asia. From the castle city of Hirosaki you can go on a beautiful half- or full-day hike through the forest. Calculate between two to three hours for the popular return route to the three



Making a cast-iron teapot requires time and patience

you to get comfortable, listen to traditional live music or just admire the scenery: the Sea of Japan and the birch forest. The journey is wonderful at sunset! *Trains may not always run in winter. Booking required. The JR Rail Pass is valid on this train.*

7 SHIRAKAMI SANCHI (白神山地)

60km from Aomori / 75 mins by car
This UNESCO World Heritage Site is

Anmon waterfalls (8km | end of April–end of Nov).

MORIOKA

Located on the banks of three rivers, the capital (pop. 292,000) of Iwate is set in attractive countryside, surrounded by mountains.

The city features several historic buildings and temples as well as castle ruins. A heavy, but durable and popular, souvenir from Morioka is a cast-iron teapot (*nambu tetsubin*), although you may find the turned and painted wooden dolls (*kokeshi*) easier to pack in your suitcase.

SIGHTSEEING

HOON-JI TEMPLE (報恩寺)

It took nine artisans from Kyoto five years to carve 499 wooden Buddhist statues in the 300-year old Hoon-ji

temple. **Can you spot the images of Marco Polo and Kublai Khan,**

a grandson of Genghis Khan? Daily 9am–4pm | admission 300 yen | 31-5 Nasukawa-chome | 名須川町31-5 | 10 mins by taxi from JR station Morioka

INSIDER TIP

Who's who?

EATING & DRINKING

AZUMAYA (東家)

This traditional restaurant at the railway station focuses on food rather than drinks. Sit on tatami rice straw mats to eat *wanko soba*, which is more of an all-you-can-eat challenge than a culinary delight. This is because each portion consists of only a few bites of soba buckwheat noodles; as soon as you have finished your plate, you are served the next one. Most women manage 30 to 40 bowls and men, 50 to 60, although the record is more than 600! Daily 11am–3pm, 5–8pm | 8-11 Moriokaekimaedori | 盛岡駅前通 8-11 | JR station Morioka | ¥

SHOPPING

IWACHU (岩鑄)

Tea served from iron pots tastes milder, and the pots are decorative as well. At Iwachu you can watch the masters at work and choose between traditional and modern designs in their shop. Daily 8.30am–5.30pm | 2-23-9 Minamisenboku | 南仙北 2-23-9 | 15 mins by taxi from JR station Morioka

AROUND MORIOKA

8 SANRIKU FUKKO NATIONAL PARK (三陸復興国立公園)

90km from Morioka / 1¼ hrs to Miyako by hire car

A rugged and beautiful rocky coastline with tiny islands offshore, wind-blown cedars and many small fishing villages – this is the narrowest national park in Japan. It stretches for several hundred kilometres along the eastern Pacific coast and includes the region that was destroyed by the tsunami, which followed the catastrophic earthquake in 2011. However, nature is resilient: for example, between Taro and Miyako is the idyllic beach of Jodogahama which, with its jagged pine trees contorted by the wind and bare rocks, is the perfect photo opportunity – this is how people think of Japan! It is best to explore the region by hire car, although there are some bus and train services too. In many locations, witnesses of the disaster

offer guided tours by taxi or bus. If you have some time to spare and love hiking, check out the 900-km long Michinoku Coastal Trail in the park (tohoku.env.go.jp/mct/english), see also Discovery Tour No.3.

9 TONO (遠野市)

80km from Morioka / 2 hrs by bus

This farming town (pop. 27,000) in the mountains of Kitakami is known throughout the country for the *Tono Monogatari* collection of fairy tales from this area, for example of the water spirit Kappa who looks like a grumpy frog in human form carrying a tortoise shell. In Tono you will find many of these figurines. This agricultural region is also known for traditional farmhouses with thatched roofs which you can admire in the pretty outdoor museum of *Tono Denshoen* (daily 9am–5pm | admission 320 yen | 6 Chiwari-5-1 Tsuchibuchicho Tsuchibuchi | 30 mins by hire bicycle from Tono railway station, 10 mins by taxi). Take off your shoes and have a look inside!

10 KAKUNODATE SAMURAI HOUSES (角館武家屋敷) ★

65km from Morioka / 45 mins by train

There are few locations in Japan where you get the feeling that a samurai or geisha could come round the corner any minute. The former samurai hotspot of Akita has dozens of well-preserved traditional samurai houses, which you may want to see in a rickshaw because the drivers don't just know the best spots but also have

a good sense of humour. Kakunodate is usually quiet; at the end of April or in early May when hundreds of cherry trees are blossoming, it can become a little overcrowded – but it's always beautiful. Daily 9am–5pm (in winter until 4pm) | *Senboku-shi, Kakunodatemachi Bukeyashiki-dori* | 仙北市角館町武家屋敷通り | kakunodate-kanko.jp/language/en/kakunodate | 15 mins on foot from Kakunodate railway station

SENDAI

Expansive, green and modern – Sendai (pop. 1.1 million), the capital of the Miyagi Prefecture, is the perfect starting point for tours to the country's north-east.

The city itself has a lot to offer. Its nickname "city of trees" is due to a wide avenue with tall Japanese zelkovas, an elm species, in its centre. The city's many educational institutions, such as the renowned Tohoku University, give it a lively student atmosphere. The climate is pleasant: not too hot in summer and not too cold in winter.

SIGHTSEEING

ZUIHODEN (瑞鳳殿)

When Sendai's feudal lord, Masamune Date, died in 1636, his family had a grand mausoleum constructed for him, with colourful woodcarvings and a lot of gold leaf on a black backdrop. This exceptional building is awesome.

Daily Feb–Nov 9am–4.30pm, Dec–Jan until 4pm, closed New Year's Eve | admission 550 yen | 23-2 Otamayashita, Aoba-ku | 青葉区霊屋下23-2 | Loope Sendai bus station Zuihoden-mae | zuihoden.com/en

RINNOJI (輪王寺)

At first sight this Buddhist temple is rather unremarkable, but its garden is idyllic and traditional! Koi carp circle in the pond, the trees have been clipped into a perfect shape, and behind it all a three-storey pagoda reaches for the sky. The temple has a long history: founded in 1441 in another location, it was eventually relocated to the north of the city – in order to protect the city from a cardinal direction that was regarded as particularly inauspicious. Daily 8am–5pm |

admission 300 yen | 1-14-1 Kitayama, Aoba-ku | 青葉区北山1-14-1 | JR station Kitayama

EATING, DRINKING & SHOPPING

Sendai is famous throughout Japan for two specialities: a tender piece of grilled beef tongue known as *gyutan* and sweets made from pureed green soy beans (*zunda*) which are also delicious as a shake.

GYUTAN FUKUSUKE HONTEN (牛たん福助本店)

Only a three-minute walk from the west entrance of the JR railway station of Sendai, this restaurant has been serving beef tongue for 40 years, both grilled and as a *shabushabu* meat

LIFE ON THE COAST AFTER THE TSUNAMI

A dozen years after the megaquake on 11 March 2011, which devastated the Fukushima nuclear power plant, memories of the dreadful event are slowly fading. At the time, a house-height tsunami devastated hundreds of kilometres of coastline, leaving 18,500 dead in the region of Tohoku. However, despite the trauma of 2011, the locals show resilience.

As a warning to future generations, the Taro Kanko Hotel in Taro has been kept as a ruin, with only the beams of the lower floors left intact. In Rikuzentakata, you can see a block of flats where the tsunami crushed all balconies and windows up to the

fourth floor. In Minamisanriku, the metal skeleton of the former disaster protection centre points to the sky. When the tsunami approached, 53 people sought refuge on its flat roof, but only 10 managed not to be swept away. There are countless stories of this kind.

In the years following the tsunami, the debris was gradually removed, and factories and settlements were rebuilt step by step. In Onagawa, the symbol for this new beginning is a shopping street by the railway station where, at the entrance, you can dip your feet into hot spring water.

fondue. The ambience is westernised to modern. *Wed-Mon 11.30am-2pm and 5-11pm | Aoba-ku, 1-8-24 Chuo Lovely, KK Bldg. 2F | 青葉区中央1-8-24 ラブリーKKビル2F | ¥¥*

TAMAZAWA SOUHONTEN

(玉澤総本店)

Japanese sweets are less sweet than those in Europe and often consist of sweet beans and soft *mochi* (rice cakes). In this shop in the S-PAL shopping mall you can taste a particularly large variety of sweet delights, for example numerous varieties with green soy bean puree. Sit at the counter and watch how the tea is prepared. *Daily shop 9am-9pm, café 9am-8pm | 1-1-1 Chuo, Aoba-ku | 青葉区中央1-1-1 | JR station Sendai*

FESTIVALS

SENDAI TANABATA MATSURI

(仙台七夕まつり)

Tanabata star festivals are held in many places in the country in July and August. According to a Chinese legend, the two stars Vega and Altair, who represent two lovers, only meet on one day each year. Sendai hosts a particularly big and colourful festival from 6 to 8 August. The shopping streets in the city centre are decorated with joyful paper flags that float from long bamboo poles. Numerous events take place on the side. *sendaitanabata.com/en*

JOZENJI STREET JAZZ FESTIVAL

(定禅寺ストリートジャズフェスティバル)

In September, Sendai hosts a

weekend jazz festival. From morning to evening, on every street corner, hundreds of bands, artists and orchestras, from amateur musicians to professionals, give it their all. *j-street jazz.com/language/english.html*

NIGHTLIFE

KOKUBUNCHO (国分町)

The biggest night-time quarter in the north-east of the country has everything from tiny bars with counters and cosy *izakaya* pubs, to restaurants with international cuisine to nightclubs and red-light establishments. There are 3,000 restaurants between Jozenji-dori and Hirose-dori streets alone, catering for every taste and budget.

AROUND SENDAI

CHUSON-JI ★ 𠂇

100km from Sendai / 45 mins by train

A visit to the extensive temple complex in Hiraizumi, surrounded by both broadleaf and conifer forests, is like time-travelling back to the Heian period. The Konjikido Hall, its roof entirely covered in gold leaf, is an incredible 900 years old and has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. *Daily March-Oct 8.30am-5pm, Nov-Feb 8.30am-4.30pm | admission 800 yen | 202 Koromonoseki, Hiraizumi | 平泉町平泉衣闕202 |*

25 mins on foot from Hiraizumi railway station | 🕒 2 hrs

12 GEIBIKEI GORGE (猯鼻溪)

120km from Sendai / 75 mins by train

This 2km-long, picturesque gorge (not to be confused with the Genbikei Gorge) is best explored on a comfortable

90-minute boat tour, and the skipper will even sing for you.

In winter the crew serves hot soup on

the journey. Daily April-Aug 8.30am-4.30pm, Sept-Oct 8.30am-4pm, Nov-March 9am-3pm | tickets 1,500 yen | 467 Nagasaka Azamachi, Higashiyama-cho, Ichinoseki | 関市 東山町長坂字町467 | JR station Geibikei

INSIDER TIP

Warm yourself up on the inside

13 MATSUSHIMA (松島) ★

27km from Sendai / 25 mins by train

In the town of Matsushima everything is about oysters! You can find numerous varieties of this delicious seafood in the fish market - they're even served as a burger. The Bay of Matsushima, with its 260 pine-covered islets, is regarded as one of the three most beautiful in the whole of Japan. On a boat tour of the bay, the seagulls will feed from your hand. To warm yourself up, you can have a bowl of oyster stew (*kaki nabe*) on the boat. Various operators | daily 10am-4pm, in winter until 3pm from Matsushima, from 9am from Shiogama | duration 25-50 mins | ticket 1,000-1,500 yen | marubun-kisen.com/english

14 SNOW MONSTERS OF ZAO (蔵王の樹氷) ❄️

90km from Sendai / 2 hrs by bus

Every year, the village of Zao falls victim to "snow monsters" (*juhyo*) when cold air laden with moisture sweeps

Walk across to a tiny island in Matsushima Bay





The "Snow Monsters" of Zao

across from Russia. The air is trapped by Mount Kumano (1,841m) and frozen water droplets cover the mountain's conifers with a thick layer of snow and ice. It can be an extraordinary sight as nature creates icy creatures that look like a horde of frozen Godzillas! *Two direct tours every day mid-Dec-mid-March | for bookings phone 0224 85 30 55 | tickets 4,800-6,800 yen | "Juhyo-go" bus from JR station Sendai, end of the village, exit at Sumikawa Snow Park | zaospa.or.jp/english*

15 YAMADERA (山寺)

70km from Sendai / 65 mins by train
First you climb 1,000 steps and then you have to come down again, but it's worth the effort because the peak of Mount Yamadera rewards you with a marvellous 360-degree view of the wooded mountains of Yamagata. Back at the foot of the mountain, have a

look into the Konponchu-do Hall where a ritual flame is said to have burnt continuously since the temple was founded in AD 860 CE. *Thu-Tue April-Nov 9.30am-4pm, Dec-March 10am-3.30pm | admission 300 yen | 4456-1 Yamadera, Yamagata-shi | 山形市山寺4456-1 | Yamadera railway station (Senzan line)*

INSIDER TIP
Eternal flame

AIZU-WAKAMATSU

The proud samurai and castle city of ★ Aizu-Wakamatsu (pop. 120,000) lies just 120km west of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant that was destroyed in 2011.

But its inland position, surrounded by mountains, meant that little of the released radioactivity reached the city. It has been a centre for the manufacture of red-and-black lacquerware for centuries; today, modern designs are produced as well, for example on glass. The region also produces rice wine that is appreciated throughout Japan.

SIGHTSEEING

TSURUGA CASTLE (鶴ヶ城)

For centuries, this towering castle was the most powerful fortress in north-east Japan. During the Boshin War, the last of the samurai retreated there, and as a result the castle, a symbol of feudalism, was destroyed in 1874. It was rebuilt as a museum in 1965. Recent renovation work has given it back its original red roofing tiles. Daily 8.30am–5pm | admission 410 yen | samurai-city.jp/en | Tsurugajo Kitaguchi bus station | 🕒 1 hr

SHOPPING

SUZUZEN (鈴善漆器店)

This lacquerware shop has been in business since the late 1500s! It sells both traditional items and modern interpretations of this old craft. If you book in advance, you can try your hand at decorating lacquerware with shiny powder in one of the 🧑 work-shops. Daily 8.30am–5.30pm | workshop adults 1,300 yen, children 1,000 yen | 1-3-28 Chuo | 中央1-3-28 | Aizu-Wakamatsu railway station | suzuzen.com

AROUND AIZU- WAKAMATSU

16 OUCHI-JUKU (大内宿)

30km from Aizu-Wakamatsu / 2 hrs by train and bus

This tourist village is a must-visit! The former postal station enchants with its thatched houses, artisan workshops, restaurants and variety of accommodation. Try the buckwheat noodle soup (*soba*) and toasted rice cakes with miso. In winter it is simply idyllic! Daily 9am–5pm | Ouchi, Shimogou, Minamiaizu | 福島県南会津郡下郷町大字大内 | Yunokami Onsen railway station, 15 mins by taxi

WHERE TO STAY IN THE NORTH

A ROMANTIC RYOKAN

In 🏠 Mukaitaki (48 rooms | 200 Kawamukai, Oaza Yumoto, Higashiyama-machi | mukaitaki.jp | 20 mins by taxi from Aizu-Wakamatsu railway station | ¥¥¥) you will sleep on tatami rice straw mats and futons in beautifully decorated rooms. In the evening, relax in the hot springs, hidden in a rambling building in the garden. This place is incredibly atmospheric, especially in winter when the inner garden is covered in snow and lit by lanterns.

IMPRINT

© 2025 MAIRDUMONT, **MAIRDUMONT BUSINESS SOLUTIONS**

Marco-Polo-Straße 1, 73760 Ostfildern, Tel. 0711 4502-0,

Mail: b2b@mairdumont.com, b2b.mairdumont.com, www.mairdumont.com

Approved special edition for SONAX GmbH

Sales: Daniela Grewe, Senior Key Account Managerin

This work, including all of its parts, is protected by copyright. Any use subject to copyright law is not permissible and punishable without permission from the publisher. This especially applies for duplications, translations, microfilms, storing and processing in electronic systems.

The content is based on the MARCO POLO JAPAN edition (13th updated edition, December 2023)

Cartography: © KOMPASS-Karten GmbH, kompass.de
using © OpenStreetMap Contributors, osm.org/copyright

Credits:

Cover images: shutterstock: Andriy Blokhin

Photos: mauritius images/age fotostock: (13), L. Vallecillos (6);

mauritius images/Alamy: U. Switucha (18);

mauritius images/Diversion (1/2, 9);

picture-alliance/AP Images: K. Muto (11/12);

shutterstock: weniliou (19)

Mistakes and changes after printing cannot be ruled out despite painstaking efforts by editors and authors. Unfortunately, the publisher cannot take responsibility for any errors or changes.

MAIRDUMONT is not responsible for the content of external links.