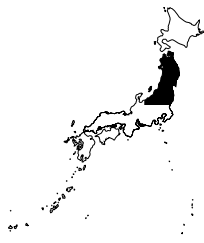


# Northern Honshū

## 本州の北部



May's gentle showers, collected, become the rushing Mogami River...

*Matsuo Bashō, 1644–94*

Northern Honshū remains less travelled than much of the rest of Honshū – a shame, since its rugged mountains, deep valleys, rushing rivers and friendly people make it rich and rewarding for travellers. Numerous dormant volcanoes make for numerous hot springs, and its clean water and high-quality rice have made the area synonymous with sake.

Some of Japan's most curious customs and oddest traditions are alive and well here, as is pride in the area's fascinating feudal past. Travellers who take the time to step off the *shinkansen* trail into the less travelled areas will find jaw-dropping beauty, incredibly kind people and well-preserved examples of the life of olden days. Anyone familiar with the ordered neon chaos of Tokyo will find Northern Honshū a refreshing and revitalising change. Paradoxically, thanks to the *shinkansen* and excellent local trains, this remote region is remarkably accessible, with many of the prime skiing, rafting, boating, *onsen* or hiking opportunities only a few hours away from Tokyo.

The area is comprised of Fukushima-ken, Miyagi-ken, Iwate-ken, Aomori-ken, Akita-ken and Yamagata-ken (collectively known as Tōhoku), as well as Niigata-ken and the island Sado-ga-shima. Tōhoku was called Michinoku, meaning 'back roads', and that isolation has helped to keep ancient traditions alive in the era of the internet and HDTV (high-definition television).

While English isn't widely spoken in Tōhoku (and its northern dialect is impenetrable even to many native Japanese), you will meet helpful, kind locals who often happily go out of their way to assist a traveller in need.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Learn about bloody feudal history and the tragic White Tiger samurais at **Aizu-Wakamatsu** (p501)
- Soak your worries away in the **Sukayu** (p533) lemony-tasting, 1000-person *onsen* bath
- Go *kappa*-hunting at **Tōno** (p521), where these little goblins dwell
- Sample a small but remarkable taste of Hiraizumi's former glory at the **Chūson-ji** (p518) complex
- Ride the famed Dragonbola and tear down the slopes on perfect powder at **Naeba** (p564)
- Get away from the mainland crush on **Sado-ga-shima** (p560), a former island of exile with a rich, quirky history – and lots of persimmons



### History

Originally inhabited by the Ezo people, who are believed to have been related to the Ainu of Hokkaidō, Tōhoku was settled during the 7th to 9th centuries, when Japanese from the south spread northward, searching for arable new land.

In the 11th century the Northern Fujiwara clan ruled from Hiraizumi, a settlement reputed to rival Kyoto for its majesty and opulence. Aizu-Wakamatsu and Morioka were also important feudal towns.

Date Masamune represents the cornerstone of Tōhoku's feudal history. In 1601 construction commenced on Date's castle at the former fishing village of Sendai; the clan would go on to rule for close to 300 years, a reign that ushered in Tōhoku's Golden Age.

Unfortunately, Tōhoku regained 'backwater' status when the Meiji Restoration wiped out clan rule. It subsequently suffered years of neglect, a trend that was reversed only after WWII and the subsequent drive for development heavily based on industrial growth. Iron, transport, steel, chemical, pulp and petroleum were among the major industries that sprouted during this time. These days tourism is a major player in the region's economic health.

### Climate

Depending on when you come, Northern Honshū will either be very comfortable or bone-chillingly cold. Summers are mild and considerably more comfortable than in the south, producing magnificent displays of greenery. In winter, Siberian cold grips the region and temperatures plummet. Snow is at least half of the fun here – making for great skiing, atmospheric *yukimiburos* (snow viewing from an *onsen*'s warmth) and adding winter's white serenity to the mountain ranges.

The Sea of Japan coast – bounded by Aomori, Akita, Yamagata and Niigata prefectures – endures particularly heavy snowfall. This clearly demarcated climate influences the texture of the local culture, most notably in the diversity of Tōhoku's festival programme, and ensures varied culinary harvests, like oysters in winter and mushrooms in autumn (fine seafood is a year-round feature).

### Getting There & Away

The best way to get to the region is via the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* (bullet train) line, which

links Tokyo with Morioka in about 2½ hours, and travels as far as Hachinohe. From there, limited express and local trains run to Aomori and further north to Hokkaidō.

### Getting Around

Maybe it's the influence of the ninja-poet (see the boxed text, p502), but locals seem to chronically underestimate walking times. If they say it'll take 10 minutes, it's more like 15. If they say it's an hour, it's three hours or more. Be especially cautious when planning hikes, especially if they say it'll take most of an afternoon (that could mean you should plan for a week or more). Unless you really do walk as quickly as Bashō himself, you'll find darkness gathering before you're halfway to your destination.

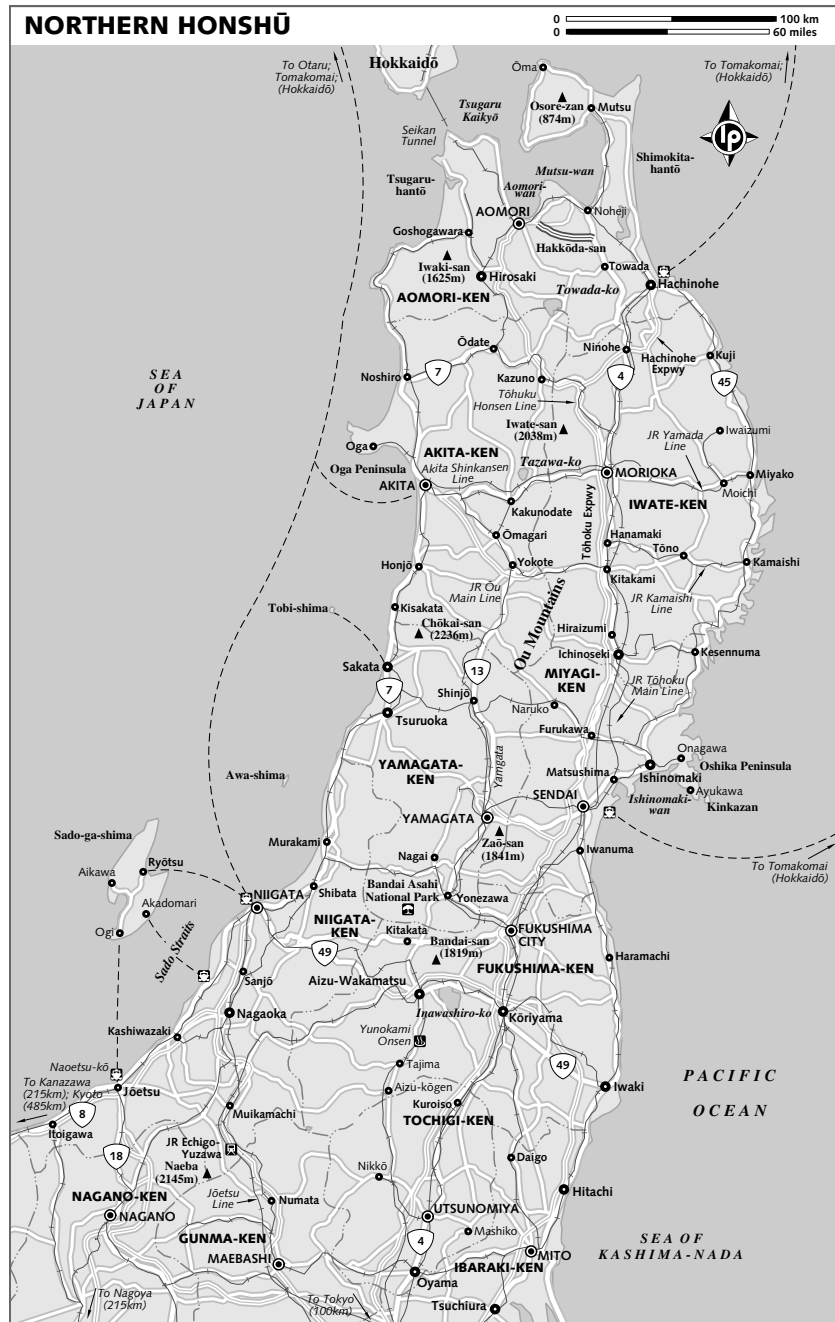
Local transport revolves around three major JR railway lines. Two of these run down the east and west coasts and the third snakes down between them in the centre, closely following the Tōhoku *shinkansen* line. Transport connections in the region have been accelerated with the opening of the Akita *shinkansen* line from Morioka to Akita and the extension of the Yamagata *shinkansen* line north to Shinjō.

Exploration of the more remote parts of Tōhoku is generally possible with local train and bus connections, but car rental is preferable as there is little traffic and most rentals include GPS positioning, making navigation a breeze. Roads and connections can be severely affected by winter weather, which can change on a dime.

Those without JR Passes should consider investing in the JR East Pass (p823), which provides unlimited travel by JR rail in the Tōhoku region for four flexible days, or five or 10 consecutive days, and – unlike the JR Pass – this one can be purchased after you arrive.

## FUKUSHIMA-KEN 福島県

Fukushima-ken, Japan's third-largest prefecture, is closest to Tokyo, though it boasts fewer sites of tourist value than its northern neighbours. At the same time, it shouldn't be overlooked. *Onsen* lovers will be happy to know that the prefecture boasts over 200 hot springs, and sake sippers can delight in numerous local varieties. The Hamadori area, on the coast, was once an important mining



### NORTHERN TŌHOKU WELCOME CARD

The Northern Tōhoku Welcome Card was recently introduced as a special incentive for foreign tourists and students residing in Japan. It provides discounts – usually around 10% – on transport, accommodation and sightseeing throughout Akita, Iwate and Aomori prefectures. Some of the listings in this chapter fall under the scheme, although the list of participants is not as comprehensive as it should be; many major sights are not yet included. Still, it's free and worth keeping at hand.

To obtain the card, print it out from the website ([www.northern-tohoku.gr.jp/welcome](http://www.northern-tohoku.gr.jp/welcome)) or pick up a form from tourist offices throughout the region. Fill in your details and present the card with your passport (or foreign student ID) to obtain the discount; the card is valid for one year. Look out for the red-and-white Welcome Card sticker at participating facilities or download a full list from the website.

area and is now known for its seaside resorts (the tourist board also promotes the output of Hamadori's nuclear power plants – perhaps not the best move, given Japan's dubious safety record). Nakadori, the inland region, is the administrative hub, containing the capital, Fukushima City, and most of the population. Aizu, to the prefecture's west, was at the centre of the feudal war.

### AIZU-WAKAMATSU 会津若松

☎ 0242 / pop 130,000

In the middle of Fukushima prefecture, this quiet, friendly town makes a relaxed base for exploring the Bandai Asahi National Park (p505), but it is most famous for its Edo-period past. It was the capital of the Aizu clan, a reign that came to an end in the Bōshin Civil War in 1868, when Tsuruga castle fell after the clan sided with the Tokugawa Shōgunate against the imperial faction. A reconstructed castle and re-enactments of samurai battles make Aizu an interesting stop as you meander northward, and it is close enough that a day trip from 'the City' is possible as well.

### Information

There's free internet (one hour) at the Tsuruga-jō information desk.

**Aizu Wakamatsu Post Office** (1-2-17 Chūō) On the main street, and has an international ATM.

**Books Fuji** ☎ 22-3592; Ekimae-machi 5-25;

☎ 10.30am-8pm) In the Fuji Grand Hotel; has a microscopic selection of English material.

**ePalette** ☎ 22-4100; 1-20 Heian chō; membership/per hr ¥300/480) For internet access.

**Police box** ☎ 22-1877, main office 22-5454) Right next to the train station.

**Sightseeing information desk** Aizu-Wakamatsu station ☎ 32-0688; ☎ 9am-5.30pm); Tsuruga-jō (鶴ヶ城;

☎ 29-1151; ☎ 8:30am-5pm). The willing staff at both locations can supply you with English-language maps, brochures and thorough directions. The Japanese map is excellent and exactly to scale – it is worth asking for them to circle the places you want to go on that map instead of using the English one.

### Sights

The following, arranged in a ring around the fringes of the city centre, are clearly signposted in English. It's possible to do the lot on foot in a day, but a tourist bus does the loop if you need it (p505).

**limori-yama** (飯盛山) is the mountain where a group of 'White Tiger' samurai killed themselves during the Bōshin Civil War (p504). At the foot of the mountain, the **Byakkotai Memorial Hall** (白虎隊記念館; ☎ 24-9170; limori-yama, Ikki-machi; admission ¥400; ☎ 8am-5pm Apr-Nov, 8.30am-4.30pm Dec-Mar) explains the story, while **Sazae-dō** (さざえ堂; ☎ 22-3163; limori-yama, Ikki-machi; admission ¥400; ☎ 8.15am-sunset Apr-Oct, 9am-sunset Nov-Mar), an 18th-century hexagonal hall, contains 33 statues of Kannon (the Buddhist goddess of mercy). It also has a fabulous spiral staircase that, Escher-esque, allows you to walk up and down without retracing your steps.

Saigō Tanomo is the Aizu clan's chief retainer and **Aizu Bukeyashiki** (会津武家屋敷; ☎ 28-2525; Innai Higashiyama-machi; admission ¥850; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4.30pm Nov-Mar) is a superbly realised reconstruction of his *yashiki* (villa). Wander through the 38 rooms that include a guestroom for the Aizu lord, a tea-ceremony house, quarters for the clan's judge and a rice-cleaning mill presented here in full, noisy working order. Don't miss the samurai lavatory: underneath is a sandbox on wheels, an 'early-warning system' that could be removed so staff could monitor the health of

the warriors. You'll also find the room where Tanomo's wife and children committed suicide, fearing he wouldn't return from combat in the Bōshin War – although the utter impassivity of the wax models re-enacting the scene comically undercuts the drama. There's also a target range where you can try your hand at archery for ¥200.

**Oyaku-en** (御薬園; ☎ 27-2472; Hanaharu-machi; admission ¥310; ☎ 8.30am-5pm, last entry 4.30pm) is a meditative garden complex with a large, central carp pond. Originally a holiday retreat for the Aizu clan, it features a section devoted to the cultivation of medicinal herbs (available for purchase) – a practice encouraged by the lords.

The Aizu clan made **Tsuruga-jō** (鶴ヶ城; Crane Castle; ☎ 27-4005; Oute-machi; admission ¥400; ☎ 8.30am-5pm, last entry 4.30pm) their headquarters. The present building is a 1965 reconstruction, but parts of the daunting walls remain, as does the castle's moat. Inside, there's a museum with historical artefacts from battle and daily

life. Displays are a bit sketchy, although the frequent martial-arts demonstrations, carried out by adepts in full warrior regalia, are engaging. The 5th storey affords a terrific view of the surrounding town and valley, including Imori-yama.

On the castle grounds, **Rinkaku** (茶室麟閣; ☎ 27-4005; admission ¥200, combined castle ticket ¥500; ☎ 8.30am-5pm, last entry 4.30pm) is an evocative, 400-year-old tea house that was rescued from the castle's destruction by a local family and returned here in 1990.

For nonfeudal glimpses into Aizu-Wakamatsu's history, try the **Fukushima Prefectural Museum** (福島県立博物館; ☎ 28-6000; 1-25 Jōtō-machi; admission ¥260; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm, closed Mon & day after public holidays except Sat & Sun), with 400 displays ranging from prehistoric times to recent history.

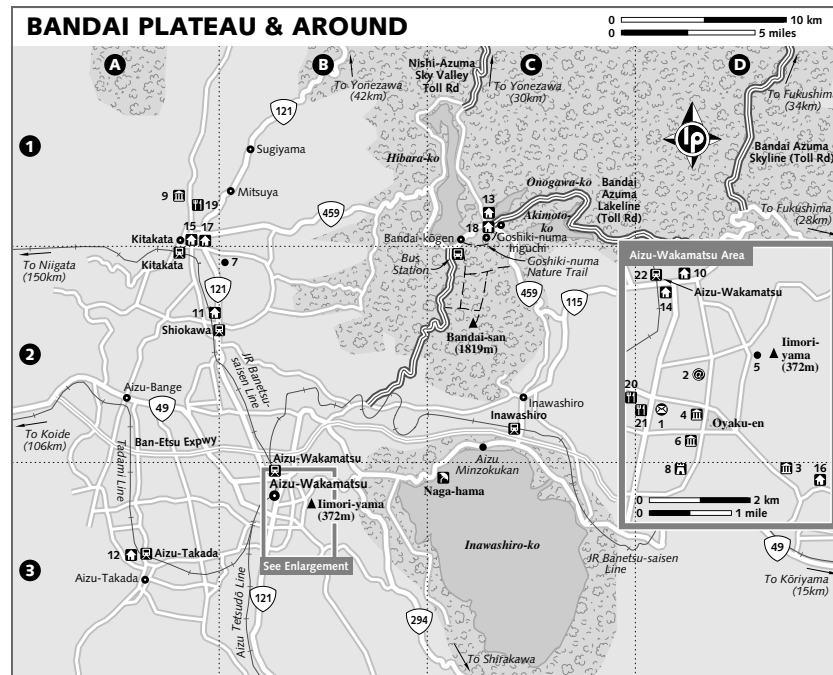
The **Aizu Sake Brewing Museum** (会津酒造歴史館; ☎ 26-0031; 8-7 Higashisakae-machi; admission ¥300; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Nov, 9.30am-4.30pm Dec-Mar) details

## MATSUO BASHŌ: POET OR NINJA?

Regarded as Japan's master of haiku, Matsuo Bashō (1644–94) is credited with elevating its status from comic relief to Zen-infused enlightenment. Bashō was born into a samurai family and in his late teenage years served the feudal lord Yoshitada. Moving to Kyoto and then to Edo, Bashō found success as a published poet, but ultimately found the acclaim to be spiritually unsettling. He turned to Zen and the philosophy had a deep impact on his work: many comparisons have been made between his haiku and Zen *kōan* (short riddles), intended to bring about a sudden flash of insight in the listener. Bashō was also influenced by the natural philosophy of the Chinese Taoist sage Chuangzi, and began to examine nature uncritically. Later he developed his own poetic principle by drawing on the concept of *sabi*, a kind of spare, lonely beauty.

When he reached his 40s, Bashō decided to give his career away in favour of travelling throughout Japan, seeking to build friendships and commune with nature as he went. He published evocative accounts of his travels, including *The Records of a Weather-Beaten Skeleton* and *The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel*, but his collection *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, detailing his journey throughout Tōhoku in 1689, is perhaps the most famous. Like many Japanese, Bashō had initial misgivings ('I may as well be travelling to the ends of the earth', he lamented), but the north's special charms eventually rendered him lost for words, most famously on his encounter with Matsushima Bay – 'Matsushima, ah! Matsushima! Matsushima!' Bashō famously wrote (although recent evidence suggests that anecdote to be apocryphal).

Some people have tried to read even more into Bashō's life and work. In recent times, a bizarre theory has spread. It claims that Bashō was actually a ninja spy for the shōgunate, sent to Tohoku to report on any unrest that might be fermenting in the provinces; accordingly, his haikus are supposed to be coded missives. There's no real evidence for this, but some of the arguments are intriguing. The conspiracy theorists point out that Bashō covered 2500km on foot in 150 days (sometimes 50km a day) at the ripe old age of 46; only certain ninja, they say, were able to accomplish this, using methods of running and walking that used minute amounts of energy. He was also able to gain access to high-level feudal territory, a feat apparently impossible for ordinary people. Adding fuel to the rumours is the undeniable fact of the poet's early employment history (many ninja were also samurai), as well as the nature of his birthplace, in the Iga province – home of the famous Iga Ninja school.



### INFORMATION

Aizu Wakamatsu Post Office	1 D2
会津若松郵便局	1 D2
Books Fuji	(see 14)
ePalette e-パレット千石店	2 D2
Police Station	(see 22)
Sightseeing Information Desk	(see 22)
Sightseeing Information Desk	(see 8)

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Aizu Bukeyashiki 会津武家屋敷	3 D3
Aizu Sake Brewing Museum	4 D2
会津酒造歴史館	4 D2
Byakotai Memorial Hall	
白虎隊記念館	5 D2

### Fukushima Prefectural Museum

福島県立博物館	6 D2
Ōhara Brewing Factory	
小原酒造	7 B2
Tsuruga-jō 鶴ヶ城	8 D3
Yamatogawa Sake Brewing Museum	
大和川酒造北方風土館	9 A1

### SLEEPING

Aizu Wakamatsu Washington Hotel	
会津若松ワシントンホテル	10 D2
Aizu-no-sato Youth Hostel	
会津の里ユースホステル	11 A2
Aizuno Youth Hostel	
会津野ユースホステル	12 A3

Fraser Hotel	
フレイザーホテル	13 C1
Fuji Grand Hotel	
フジグランドホテル	14 D2
Kitakata Hotel キタカタホテル	15 A1
Minshuku Takaku 民宿多賀来	16 D3
Sasaya Ryokan 笹屋旅館	17 A1
Ura Bandai Youth Hostel	
裏磐梯ユースホステル	18 C1

### EATING

Genraiken 源来軒	19 A1
Mitsutaya 満田屋	20 C2
Takino 田季野	21 D2

### TRANSPORT

Aizu Wakamatsu	22 D2
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the history of rice-wine brewing in the area. A fair number of English signs and an English pamphlet make it easy to get a basic sense of the brewing process. Life-size dioramas and old sake advertisements add to the charm. Naturally you can sample the famous tippel for the price of admission.

## Festivals & Events

Aizu-Wakamatsu holds four main festivals, coordinated according to season. The most

prominent is the three-day **Aizu Autumn Festival** (会津秋祭り) on 22 to 24 September, an extravagant procession that threads through the city to Tsuruga-jō, accompanied by a drum-and-ŷife band, a children's parade and an evening lantern parade. The sacrifice of the 20 White Tigers (p504) is dramatised by local high-school boys. The owner of the Aizu-no-sato Youth Hostel is a local expert and can advise, in English, on how to best attend.

### THE WHITE TIGERS

In 1868 a group of 20 teenage samurai, known as the Byakkotai (White Tigers), looked down upon Tsuruga-jō, saw it shrouded in smoke, and concluded that imperial forces had captured the castle. Rather than surrender, they committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide by disembowelment). In reality it was the surrounding area that was ablaze and it would be weeks before the Aizu clan would fall; one lad survived and devoted the rest of his life to passing on the story. This strange tale greatly tickles Japanese sensibilities, with its tragi-comic blend of blind loyalty tempered by utter fertility and a ruthless universe. To the outsider, there's a dark side: Mussolini was so taken with the Byakkotai he donated a grandiose monument to commemorate the event. Topped by an eagle, it surveys the horizon from the top of limori-yama, surrounded by Byakkotai graves and the steady stream of Japanese tourists scanning the horizon to see what the White Tigers couldn't: a fully intact castle.

There's also the **Higanjishi** on the spring equinox, the **Summer Festival** during the first Saturday in August and winter's **Sainokami**, held on 14 January.

### Sleeping

**Aizuno Youth Hostel** (会津野ユースホステル; ☎ 55-1020; www.aizuno.com/e\_index.html; 88 Kakiyashiki, Terasaki Aizu-Takada-chō; dm/r from ¥3100/4200) Away from Aizu's centre, although the pleasing rural setting sweetens the deal. It's a 20-minute walk west from Aizu-Takada station along the Tadami line from Aizu-Wakamatsu (¥230, 20 minutes). Note: seven trains run daily, but only one in the afternoon. Find out your train's arrival time in advance and give the hostel notice – the manager will pick you up from the station (he also escorts guests to a hot spring at 6pm daily). Free bike rental and breakfast.

**Minshuku Takaku** (民宿多賀来; ☎ 26-6299; fax 26-6116; www.naf.co.jp/takaku, in Japanese only; 104 Innai Higashiyama-machi; r incl/excl 2 meals from ¥6300/4200) This cosy place, with well-kept Japanese-style rooms, is east of the Aizu Bukeyashiki bus stop. From there, continue along the road, turn left at the post office and it's just behind, on the left.

There's a slew of business hotels clustered around or near the train station, all at about the same level of cleanliness and comfort, with TVs and phones in the rooms. Of the many options, try these:

**Fuji Grand Hotel** (駅前フジグランドホテル; ☎ 24-1111; 5-25 Ekimae-machi; s/d from ¥4900/9900; ☑) Rates depend on views – you pay more to ensure your room doesn't face the sheer concrete wall next door. It's next to the station, to the right as you exit.  
**Aizu Wakamatsu Washington Hotel** (会津若松ワシントンホテル; ☎ 22-6111; 201 Byakko-

machi; s/d from ¥7350/13,650; ☑) About five minutes' walk southeast of the train station. Roomy and very clean.

### Eating

*Wappa meshi* is a local dish consisting of steamed fish over rice. It's prepared in a round container made from tree bark, which imparts a woody fragrance to the contents.

**Takino** (田季野; ☎ 25-0808; 5-31 Sakae-machi; wappa meshi from ¥1420; ☎ lunch & dinner) An atmospheric, split-level restaurant where *wappa meshi* is served in sublime, subtly balanced combinations. Try the finely shredded crab (*kani*) or salmon (*sake*) versions. From the main post office, facing south, turn left onto Nanokomachi-dōri, at the first light turn right (south); go left at the second alleyway, and it's on the right. Ask the obliging staff at the information desk to mark up a map with the exact location. You'll know you've arrived when you see the large penis (plastered with various bills) in the entranceway. No English menu.

**Mitsutaya** (満田屋; ☎ 27-1345; 1-1-25 Ōmachi; skewers from ¥200; ☎ 10am-5pm, closed 1st & 3rd Wed of each month & every Wed Jan-Mar) At this atmospheric former bean-paste mill, dating from 1869, the speciality is eight varieties of *dengaku*; these are bamboo skewers with deep-fried tofu and vegetables such as taro basted in sweet *miso* paste and baked over charcoal. Herring (*nishin*) is also superb. Facing west from the main post office, walk down Nanokomachi-dōri, then take the second left; it's just near the intersection with Nanokomachi-dōri. No English, but a picture menu makes ordering easy.

**Kagota** (籠太; ☎ 32-5380; 8-49 Sakae-machi; food menu ¥500-1000; ☎ 5-11pm Mon-Sat) Serving mainly local specialities of Aizu Wakamatsu.

### Getting There & Around

From Tokyo, take the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* to Kōriyama (¥7970, 1½ hours), then change to an hourly *kaisoku* (rapid) train on the JR Banetsu-saisen line for Aizu-Wakamatsu (¥1110, 1¼ hours). There are two daily *kaisoku* trains between Aizu-Wakamatsu and Niigata (¥2210, 2¼ hours). Express buses to Niigata run four times daily (¥2000, 1¼ hours).

The **Aizu Town Bus** (まちなか周遊バスハイカラさん; single/day pass ¥200/500) does a loop of the sights. Enquire about bike rental (per day ¥1500) at the tourist info desks.

### KITAKATA 喜多方

☎ 0241 / pop 77,000

An old Kitakata saying reflects this town's view towards commerce: 'A man is not a man unless he has built at least one *kura* [a mud-walled storehouse]'. These days, the town's 2600 coloured *kura* – now functioning as living quarters, sake breweries and workshops – are a perennial tourist attraction, as are its 120 *rāmen* (soup noodles) shops.

Staff at the small **tourist information kiosk** (☎ 24-2633; ☎ 8.30am-5.15pm), left of the station exit, has copies of a small English-language map.

Sample the excellent local sake at **Yamato-gawa Sake Brewing Museum** (大和川酒造北方風土館; ☎ 22-2233; 4761 Teramachi; admission free; ☎ 9am-4.30pm, closed irregularly), five minutes' walk north of the station.

At **Ohara Brewing Factory** (小原酒造; ☎ 22-0074; www.oharashuzo.co.jp; ☎ 9am-5pm) staff play Mozart to the yeasts to enhance fermentation. A visit also includes a Mozart-infused tippie. Last entry is at 4.40pm.

**Aizu-no-sato Youth Hostel** (会津の里ユースホステル; ☎ 27-2054; 36 Hatakeda Kofune-aza, Shiokawa-machi, Kitakata-shi; dm from ¥3200), set among lovely old grounds with well-worn but comfortable Japanese-style rooms, is worth leaving the city centre for. The host is a Byakkotai buff, and a good source of area knowledge as well. The hostel is 15 minutes' walk from Shiokawa station on the JR Banetsu-saisen line. From the station head straight until you hit the first light, then turn left and veer left again when the road merges into Rte 121. Cross the bridge and it's on the left, tucked behind the owner's sake shop.

The **Kitakata Hotel** (キタカタホテル; ☎ 22-0139; 8269-2 Machida; ¥5250), just across from the station, is a standard business hotel, clean but

characterless, while **Sasaya Ryokan** (笹屋旅館; ☎ 22-0008; Chūō-dōri; r per person incl/excl 2 meals from ¥8800/5500; ☑) offers traditional accommodation 1km north of the station.

**Genraiken** (源来軒; ☎ 22-0091; 7745 Ippongiue Kitakata City; sets from ¥800; ☎ 10am-8pm Wed-Mon, last orders 7.30pm) is Kitakata's best-known *rāmen* shop, with a 70-year history and a devoted lunchtime crowd. Head south on Chūō-dōri and look for the red façade.

### Getting There & Around

Kitakata is a relatively easy trip from Aizu-Wakamatsu, accessible by train along the JR Banetsu-saisen line (¥320, 15 minutes). Bicycle rental (per two hours/day ¥500/1500) is available outside Kitakata station, while a **horse-drawn carriage** (☎ 24-4111; tours on demand ¥1300) shaped like a *kura* departs from the train station for an 80-minute tour of the more interesting storehouses. New velo-taxis (three-wheeled bicycles with a covered passenger area) are also a fun way to get around.

### BANDAI PLATEAU 磐梯高原

☎ 0241 / pop 4000

On 15 July 1888 **Bandai-san** (磐梯山; 1819m), a once-dormant volcano, suddenly erupted, spewing forth a tremendous amount of debris that's said to have lowered the mountain's height by 600m, while destroying dozens of villages. Over 400 people died. The aftershock completely rearranged the landscape, creating the plateau Bandai-kōgen and damming local rivers that then formed numerous water bodies. Now Japan's second-largest national park, it's hemmed in by the Fukushima, Niigata and Yamagata prefectural boundaries, and offers stirring scenery and stellar opportunities for hiking and skiing.

### Information

There's a **visitors centre** (☎ 32-2850; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Mon Dec-Mar, to 5pm Wed-Mon Apr-Nov) not far from the Goshiki-numa Iriguchi trailhead and a **tourist information office** (☎ 0242-62-2048; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) to the left outside JR Inawashiro station.

### Activities

The most popular walk follows a 3.7km nature trail around **Goshiki-numa** (五色沼), an area of around 11 lakes and ponds known as Five Colours Lakes, after mineral deposits from the eruption imparted various hues to the

waters – emerald green, cobalt blue and so on – that change with the weather. There are trailheads at the Goshiki-numa Iriguchi and Bandai-kōgen bus stops, the main transport hubs on the edge of Hibara-ko. Bandai-san itself can be climbed in a day with an early start; the most popular route starts from the Bandai-kōgen bus stop and climbs up through the skiing ground to the summit.

### Sleeping & Eating

Several *minshuku* (Japanese B&B) cater to hikers and skiers, and cost from ¥6500 per person with two meals. For more details and other information call the **Goshiki-numa Minshuku Information Centre** (☎ 32-2902).

**Ura Bandai Youth Hostel** (☎ 32-2811; <http://homepage3.nifty.com/urabandai/indexe.html>; [urabandai-YH@nifty.com](mailto:urabandai-YH@nifty.com); dm from ¥2900; ☞ late Apr–Nov; ☑) This friendly old hostel has a super location, next to one of the Goshiki-numa trailheads. There's an 11pm curfew and bicycles for rent (¥1000 per day). It's a seven-minute walk from the Goshiki-numa Iriguchi bus stop, signposted right from the car park. The adjoining camping ground has ¥1000 tents and ¥5000 cabins.

**Fraser Hotel** (☎ 32-3470; [www.012.upp.so-net.ne.jp/fraser](http://www.012.upp.so-net.ne.jp/fraser) in Japanese; [fraser@spajoy.com](mailto:fraser@spajoy.com); r per person incl 2 meals from ¥12,600) This upmarket, Canadian-style option has spick-and-span rooms and a great cypress bath. It's in front of the Goshikunuma-Iriguchi bus station; look in the direction of the Italian restaurant.

### Getting There & Away

The JR Banetsu-saisen line (*kaisoku* ¥480, 29 minutes) connects Aizu-Wakamatsu with the town of Inawashiro (猪苗代). From outside Inawashiro station, frequent buses depart from stop 3 and pass by the Goshiki-numa Iriguchi stop (¥750, 25 minutes), heading onto the Bandai-kōgen Kyūkamura stop (¥870, 30 minutes).

## MIYAGI-KEN 宮城県

Miyagi-ken is a paradoxical gateway between the very rural areas to the north and the rest of Honshū. Its capital, Sendai, is Tohokū's most cosmopolitan city, a fun destination with excellent tourist support and a lively nightlife. Date Masamune developed Sendai into a major culture and trade centre in the 1600s. Miyagi-

ken has several attractions, including Naruko Onsen, a great spot for *onsen* enthusiasts, and Matsushima, a bay studded with atmospheric pine-covered islands, immortalised by Bashō and popular with Japanese sightseers.

### SENDAI 仙台

☎ 022 / pop 1,028,000

Sendai, while nowhere near as big as Tokyo, offers travellers the best of both worlds – you get small-town hospitality in, well, a big town – without the cold-shoulder reception one finds southward in that 'even bigger city'. Sendai is famous for souvenirs of *zunda*, a mildly sweet, bright green paste made from soybeans, and *gyutan*, cow's tongue. People are refreshingly friendly here – a bit of a paradox, as Sendai was demolished by Allied bombing during WWII. Lucky for tourists, residents have long forgotten about keeping any grudges, and the city's wide, tree-lined streets make for relaxing strolls. Buildings such as the Mediateque, with its see-through glass and giant columns, defy description. *Wow*.

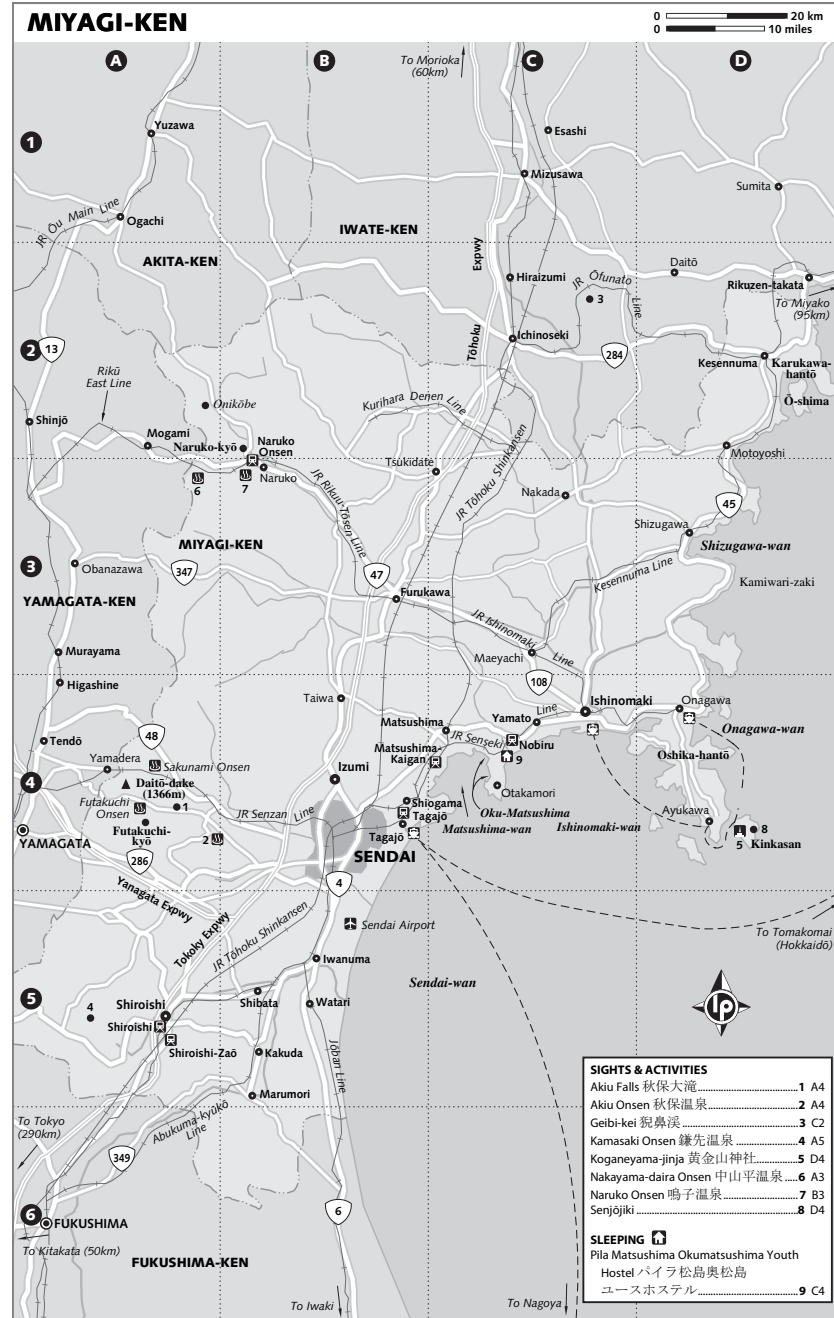
Sendai's Jōzenji Jazz Festival (p511) is a two-day, open-air extravaganza in early September; the Sendai Tanabata Matsuri (p510) tops that, though, with two million visitors each year.

The city also has a compelling history as the stomping ground of the remarkable feudal lord Date Masamune (1567–1636), known as the One-Eyed Dragon (see the boxed text, p509). A number of intriguing sites around town pay tribute to his overarching presence, as does the name 'Sendai' – it means '1000 generations', apparently an indication of how long Masamune felt his clan would rule.

Sendai marks the last place south of Sapporo that you can find a good English bookshop, and is an ideal base to arrange tickets, exchange your rail pass, check email and see some bright lights before heading to nearby rural *onsen* or along the coast.

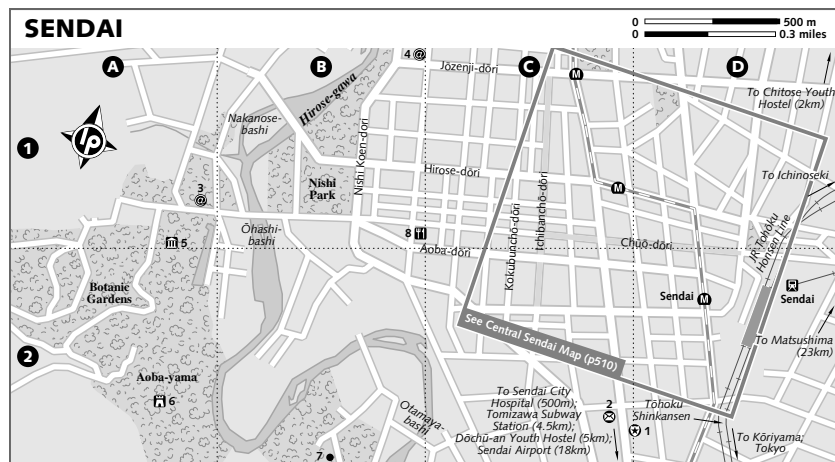
### Orientation

From Sendai station, located east of most of the action, the broad sweep of Aoba-dōri, lined with many of the major department stores, banks and hotels, leads west to a park, Aoba-yama. The main shopping areas are the series of arcades along Chuō-dōri (also known as CLIS Rd) and Ichibancho-dōri, which intersect just east of Kokubunchō-dōri, the main drag of Tohoku's largest entertainment



SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Aku Falls 秋保大滝	1 A4
Aku Onsen 秋保温泉	2 A4
Geibi-kei 狢鼻溪	3 C2
Kamasaki Onsen 鎌先温泉	4 A5
Koganeyama-jinja 黄金山神社	5 D4
Nakayama-daira Onsen 中山平温泉	6 A3
Naruko Onsen 鳴子温泉	7 B3
Senjōjiki	8 D4

SLEEPING	
Pila Matsushima Okumatsushima Youth Hostel バイラ松島奥松島	
ニュースホテル	9 C4

**INFORMATION**

Sendai Central Police Station 仙台中央警察署	1 D2
Sendai Central Post Office 仙台中央郵便局	2 C2
Sendai International Centre 仙台国際センター	3 A1
Sendai Mediatheque せんだいメディアテーク	4 B1

**SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES**

Aoba Castle Exhibition Hall 青葉城資料展示館	(see 6)
Sendai City Museum 仙台市博物館	5 A1
Sendai-jō Ato 仙台城跡	6 A2
Zuihō-den 瑞鳳殿	7 B2

**EATING**

Yabuya Honten やぶ屋本店	8 B1
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district. To the north is Jozenji-dōri, a delightful street lined with lush trees.

**Information**  
**BOOKSHOPS**

**Maruzen** (丸善; Map p510; ☎ 264-0151; 1-3-1 Chūō, Aoba-ku; ☎ 10am-9pm, to 8pm Sun & holidays) English-language magazines and books on the AER building's 1st floor, steps away from the station.

**EMERGENCY**

**Sendai Central Police Station** (Map p508; ☎ 222-7171; 1-3-19 Tsutsubashi, Aoba-ku)

**INTERNET ACCESS**

**Internet kiosks** (2nd fl, JR Sendai station; per 15min ¥100) Located right outside the tourist info booth.

**Media Café POPEYE** (Map p510; ☎ 726-7890; 2-6-4 Chūō, Aoba-ku; per 30min from ¥262, ☎ 24hr) Credit cards not accepted.

**Sendai City Information & Industrial Plaza** (Map p510; ☎ 724-1200; www.siip.city.sendai.jp/netu/room

/indexen.html; 1-3-1 Chūō-, Aoba-ku; per 30min free;

☎ 10am-8pm) On the AER building's 5th floor.

**Sendai International Centre** (Map p508; ☎ 265-2450; www.sira.or.jp/center/en/index.html; Aoba-yama, Aoba-ku; ☎ 9am-8pm) Free; advance reservation necessary.

**Sendai Mediatheque** (Map p508; ☎ 713-3171; www.smt.city.sendai.jp/en; 2-1 Kasuga-machi, Aoba-ku; per 40min free; ☎ 9am-8pm, library 10am-8pm Tue-Sun, to 6pm Sat & Sun, closed 4th Thu of month) Approximately a 10-minute bus ride from JR Sendai station. Take a bus bound for 'Kōtsūkyoku Daigakubyōin via Jōzenji-dōri'. Get off at 'Sendai Mediatheque-Mae' stop.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Sendai City Hospital** (仙台市立病院; ☎ 266-7111; 3-1 Shimizu-kōji, Wakabayashi-ku; ☎ 7am-6pm)

**MONEY & POST**

**Sendai Central Post Office** (Map p508; ☎ 267-8035; 1-7 Kitame-machi, Aoba-ku; ☎ ATM service 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm Sat, to 7pm Sun) Offers international ATM service; and cash advances on foreign-issued credit cards. There is also a branch on the 1st floor of Sendai station (Map p510) with international ATM.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Sendai City Information Office** (Map p510; ☎ 222-4069; www.stcb.or.jp/eng/tbic.html; 2F JR Sendai station; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) Inside the station's west exit, it has possibly Tōhoku's most efficient staff, as well as the traveller's best friend: a map of Sendai that pinpoints every convenience store in town, an extraordinarily handy navigational tool in a country with a *konbini* on every street corner. It also offers a map of nearby hotels, the

closest of which (within a 10-minute walk) are marked by an asterisk.

**Sendai International Centre** (Map p508; ☎ 265-2471; www.sira.or.jp/center/en/index.html; Aoba-yama, Aoba-ku; ☎ 9am-8pm) Features an information desk with English-speaking staff, international newspaper library, bulletin board, CNN broadcasts, free internet access and a Visa ATM.

**Sights & Activities**

Sendai is compact and pretty enough to make a full day on-foot tour a possibility, but if time is money, use the Loope tourist bus (see p513). It includes the following sights during its one-hour circuit.

Masamune Date's mausoleum, **Zuihō-den** (Map p508; ☎ 262-6250; 23-2 Otamayashita, Aoba-ku; admission ¥550; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Feb-Nov, to 4pm Dec & Jan; Loope stop 4), is at the summit of a tree-covered hill by the Hirose-gawa. It was originally built in 1637, destroyed by Allied bombing during WWII and reconstructed in 1979. The present building is an exact replica of the original, faithful to the ornate and sumptuous Momoyama style: a complex, interlocking architecture, characterised by multicoloured woodcarvings.

Also atop the hill are the mausoleums of Masamune's second and third successors,

Date Tadamune and Date Tsunamune. When the reconstruction commenced, the remains of the three lords, as well as personal possessions and items of armour, were excavated. These are now displayed in a museum at the site, as are likenesses of the three. Don't miss the rather curious comparison of the lengths of their noses and the shapes of their foreheads.

**Sendai-jō Ato** (Map p508; admission free; ☎ 24hr; Loope stop 6, regular bus stop 'Sendai Jō Ato Minami') is the second of Sendai's star attractions. Though destroyed during Allied bombing in WWII, the giant, moss-covered walls are as imposing as they are impressive – and the spot makes a great meander. Built on Aoba-yama in 1602 by Date Masamune, it was commonly known as Aoba-jō (Green Leaves Castle), after a nearby spring that flowed even during times of drought. It affords sweeping views over the city, but keep in mind that there's not a lot here other than a stirring statue of Masamune on horseback, views, and little shops and restaurants. For the Japanese it's the spirit that counts, and armed with a little knowledge of the Masamune legend, it's rather easy for the outsider to get caught up in it.

**THE ONE-EYED DRAGON**

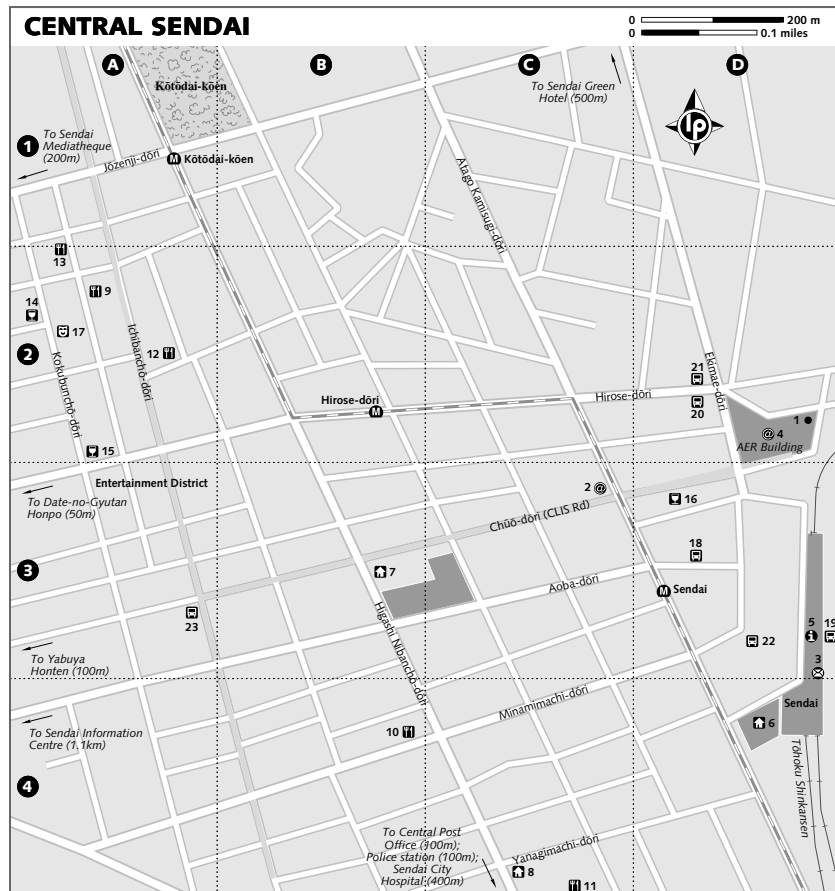
Date Masamune is the most famous figure in Miyagi's feudal history. Nicknamed Dokuganryū (One-Eyed Dragon) after he caught smallpox as a child and went blind in his right eye, he combined military nous with commercial instinct, ranking among the most important lords in feudal Japan. He was also an aesthete with finely developed tastes in *nō* theatre (stylised Japanese dance-drama performed on a bare stage) and calligraphy, and transformed Sendai into a major cultural centre.

Masamune became head of the Date clan at the age of 17 and quickly increased his territory through ferocious skill on the battleground. When Japan was wracked by civil war in 1598, Masamune sided with Tokugawa Ieyasu's victorious faction. For his efforts Masamune was granted control over the Sendai domain, and soon after moved his base of operations to the village of Sendai in order to gain access to the port.

He constructed Aoba Castle in 1601 and then proceeded to build Sendai as a major focus of trade, constructing a salt works and ensuring the region supplied a considerable quantity of the country's grain. He also oversaw the construction of a series of temples, shrines and other sites of spiritual significance. But Date's rule was also remarkable for his developing interest in Christianity. This culminated in his dispatch of Japan's first diplomatic envoy, seeking trade with Mexico and Europe as well as an audience with Pope Paul V.

Many predicted Masamune would soon rise to the shōgunate and control the whole of Japan, but he was never fully trusted by his superiors, due to his unorthodox manner and singular leadership; it was suspected, for example, that Masamune's European envoy was designed to drum up European support for an overthrow of the incumbent shōgun.

But the people of Sendai always remained loyal to Masamune's vision, even today, as illustrated by the recently built Miyagi Stadium: the roof of its west stand is modelled after the unique crescent symbol the warlord wore on his helmet.



If you don't have that kind of knowledge when you climb the hill, you can get it at the **Aoba Castle Exhibition Hall** (Map p508; ☎ 227-7077; Aobajō Ato, Tenshudai, Aoba-ku, admission ¥700; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar). A computer-generated film depicts the castle's former glory; its graphics are so similar to modern video games that Sony PS3 or Xbox aficionados will start expecting samurai warriors to jump out from behind the castle if they don't toss a grenade. You can get English-language headsets.

At **Sendai City Museum** (Map p508; ☎ 225-3074; Sendai Jō Sannomaru Ato, 26 Kawauchi, Aoba-ku; admission ¥400; ☎ 9am-4.45pm Tue-Sun; Loope stop 5) there's a scale model of Sendai castle, along with an exhaustive account of the Masamune era.

Among some 13,000 artefacts loaned from the Date family is his distinctive armour.

### Festivals & Events

**Donto-sai** (どんと祭) On 14 January men brave subzero weather conditions to hop around almost naked, a ritual supposed to bring good fortune for the new year.

**Sendai Tanabata Matsuri** (仙台七夕まつり; Star Festival) Sendai's major event, held from 6 to 8 August, celebrates a Chinese legend about the stars Vega and Altair. Vega was the king's daughter who fell in love with and married Altair, a common herder. The king disapproved, so he formed the Milky Way between them. Once a year magpies are supposed to spread their wings across the universe so that the lovers can meet – traditionally on 7 July. Sendai seems to have stretched the dates a bit, but celebrates in grand style by decorating the main

### INFORMATION

Internet Kiosks.....(see 5)  
 Maruzen 丸善.....1 D2  
 Media Café POPEYE  
 メディアカフェ ポバイ.....2 C3  
 Sendai Central Post Office  
 仙台中央郵便局.....3 D3  
 Sendai City Information Office  
 仙台市総合観光案内所.....4 D2  
 Tourist Information Office  
 観光案内所.....5 D3

### SLEEPING

Hotel Metropolitan Sendai  
 ホテルメトロポリタン仙台.....6 D4

Hotel Richfield Aoba-dōri  
 ホテルリッチフィールド  
 青葉通り.....7 B3  
 Sendai Kokusai Hotel  
 仙台国際ホテル.....8 C4

### EATING

Aji Tasuke 味太助.....9 A2  
 Namaskar ナマスカ.....10 B4  
 SS 30 Building.....11 C4  
 Umai Sushikan うまい鮎鮎.....12 A2  
 Umami Tasuke 旨味太助.....13 A2

### DRINKING

Simon's Bar サイモンズバー.....14 A2  
 Trad Bar Esprit  
 トラッドバーエスプリ.....15 A2  
 Vilevan ビレバン.....16 D3

### ENTERTAINMENT

Club Shaft クラブ シャフト.....17 A2

### TRANSPORT

Bus Stop 34  
 バス乗り場34番.....18 D3  
 Bus Stop 42  
 バス乗り場42番.....19 D3  
 Bus Stop 40  
 バス乗り場40番.....20 D2  
 Bus Stop 41  
 バス乗り場41番.....21 D2  
 Loope Bus & Limousine Bus  
 Stops ループバス  
 リムジンバス乗り場.....22 D3  
 Loope Bus Stop 2  
 ループバス乗り場2番.....23 A3

streets with bamboo poles festooned with multicoloured streamers and holding afternoon parades on Jōzenji-dōri. A couple of million visitors ensure that accommodation is booked solid at this time of year.

**Jōzenji Street Jazz Festival** (定禅寺ストリートジャズフェスティバル) Another highly infectious major festival is held on the second weekend of September when 600 buskers from across Japan perform in Sendai's streets and arcades. Book rooms way, way, way in advance.

**Sendai Pageant of Starlight** (SENDAI光のページェント) Illuminates Aoba-dōri and Jōzenji-dōri with festive lights on 12 to 31 December.

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

**Ourpick Dōchū-an Youth Hostel** (道中庵ユースホテル; ☎ 247-0511; 31 Kita-yashiki, Ōnoda, Taihaku-ku; dm from ¥3150; ☎) This evocative former farmhouse features genial management, bike rental, free internet, home cooking and a fantastic old cedar bath to soak in. Its only drawbacks are that it's quite a way from the city centre, south of Sendai at the end of the subway line in Tomizawa (¥290, 12 minutes), then a further 15-minute walk. Station attendants have a map of the area and small signs guide the way. Head straight out from the station rather than veering right or left, and follow the road until you cross a major (four-lane) intersection. Cross, then take the first right, a smallish street. The hostel is on the left; if you hit the *rāmen* shop you've gone too far.

**Sendai Chitose Youth Hostel** (仙台千登勢ユースホテル; ☎ 222-6329; 6-3-8 Odawara, Aoba-ku; dm from ¥3150; ☎) Closer to the city, this snug hostel, with Japanese-style rooms, is a 20-minute walk from Sendai station's west exit. Take any bus going via Miyamachi from stop 17 at the west bus pool and get off at 'Miyamachi 2

Chōme' bus stop; the hostel is tucked down a small side street three blocks east of the bus stop.

#### MIDRANGE

Sendai's business hotels have what you would expect: TVs in the rooms and slightly cramped quarters. Except at the top end, of course.

**Sendai Green Hotel** (仙台グリーンホテル; ☎ 221-7070; 2-5-6 Nishiki-chō, Aoba-ku; s/tw/d from ¥4100/8200/11,000; ☎) Basic, sparse rooms, although the views over the city are good. There's a spacious lounge area and accommodating staff. North of Jōzenji-dōri, straight ahead from Ekimae-dōri.

**Hotel Richfield Aoba Dōri** (Map p510; ☎ 262-1355; 2-3-18 Chūō, Aoba-ku; s/tw from ¥5700/12,600; ☎) A central hotel with a spiffy 2nd-floor lobby, friendly staff, its own restaurant and surprisingly small rooms. Head straight out on Chūō-dōri and then turn left.

#### TOP END

**Hotel Metropolitan Sendai** (Map p510; ☎ 268-2525; www.s-metro.stbl.co.jp/english/index.html; 1-1-1 Chūō, Aoba-ku; s/tw/d ¥11,550/20,790/20,790; ☎) No surprises here at the Metropolitan. Rooms are sweet, well appointed and comfortably plush. It features Japanese and Chinese restaurants, a Sky Lounge, a gym, an indoor pool and even a wedding chapel, presumably for those who strike it lucky during their stay.

**Sendai Kokusai Hotel** (Map p510; ☎ 268-1112; www.tobu-skh.co.jp/english/english.htm; 4-6-1 Chūō, Aoba-ku; s/d from ¥13,282/20,790; ☎) The Kokusai is a classy option, with a sumptuous baroque dining area, and large rooms done up in brown and cream tones.

## Eating JAPANESE

**Gyūtan** (cow tongue) is much loved by Sendai locals. Apparently the tradition derived from hard times (as so many Tōhoku traditions do) – in the immediate postwar years meat was scarce, so cow tongue was served instead of being thrown out. Expect deep queues and no English at the following first two places.

**Umami Tasuke** (Map p510; ☎ 262-2539; 1st fl, Senchimatsushima Bldg, 2-11-11 Kokubunchō, Aoba-ku; gyūtan from ¥1260; ☎ 11.30am-10pm Tue-Sun; E) Serves excellent *gyūtan* in salted (*shioyaki*; ¥1260) and fatty variants.

**Aji Tasuke** (Map p510; ☎ 225-4641; 4-4-13 Ichiban-chō, Aoba-ku; gyūtan from ¥900, lunch sets from ¥1350; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Try *gyūtan* cooked over charcoal (¥900), or the set menu (*teishoku*; ¥1400) featuring the famous dish accompanied by oxtail soup and rice with boiled barley. It's right next to the small *torii* shrine gate.

**Yabuya Honten** (Map p508; ☎ 222-5002; 2-2-24 Ōmachi, Aoba-ku; mains from ¥900; ☎ 11.30-6pm Mon-Sat) A much-loved *soba* (buckwheat noodles) specialist, Yabuya Honten has been around since 1847 – more than enough time to perfect its craft. The *kamo-zaru soba* variation, served with duck, is terrific.

**Umai Sushikan** (Map p510; ☎ 268-1822; 4-5-6 Ichiban-chō; sets from ¥840; ☎ 11.30am-11pm) This popular restaurant, spotlessly clean and featuring lots of natural wood and friendly smiles, is known for the freshness of its dishes.

## INTERNATIONAL

**Namaskar** (Map p510; ☎ 222-7701; Basement, TK Bldg, 2-2-11 Ichiban-chō, Aoba-ku; lunch set from ¥1200; ☎ lunch & dinner; E) The menu, with its spice-level warnings, has the usual suspects: tandoori chicken, chicken tikka, tandoori king prawns, prawn masala. It's all good stuff, though, and the portions are generous. Beware: the large video screen showing continuous, loud music videos is highly distracting.

There's a clutch of restaurants, covering the gamut of price ranges, at the top of SS30, Sendai's second-tallest building (with 30 storeys, as opposed to AER's 31).

## Drinking

The Kokubunchō area is Northern Tōhoku's largest entertainment district, as noisy and as bright as you might expect, with endless rabbit warrens jammed with hole-in-the-wall bars and clubs.

**Simon's Bar** (Map p510; ☎ 223-8840; 1st fl, Daishin Bldg, 2-9-1 Kokubunchō) This cosy little stand-up bar, with its talismanic name, glass bar and memorabilia, has a lively crowd of Japanese, the occasional foreigner, and a good selection of beers and cocktails. Take the first left after Club Shaft, heading towards Jōzenji-dōri.

**Vilevan** (Map p510; ☎ 225-2222; 3rd fl, Sunsquare-Shōji Bldg, 1-8-22 Chūō, Aoba-ku; ☎ 5pm-1am Mon-Thu, to 2am Fri & Sat, 9am-midnight Sun) A mellow jazz bar, well versed in the history of the genre: it was originally called the Village Vanguard, until the famous New York bar of that name 'suggested' it reconsider. There's live music on Saturday nights and decent vegetarian food.

**Trad Bar Esprit** (Map p510; ☎ 214-3880; 1Bf 2-1-3 Kokubun-chō, Aoba-ku; ☎ 6pm-midnight Sun-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat; E) A popular trend in Japan is the 'olde tyme bar', with loads of wood panelling, photos of leathery jazz men on the walls and bar staff done up like characters from *The Sting*. Esprit is one such place, and its *faux* nostalgia is an easy respite from Kokubunchō madness.

## Entertainment

Kokubunchō is Sendai's maze of seedy clubs, strip shows and hostess bars, and as such it doesn't offer much for foreigners. Try asking at the tourist info centre for new Sendai venues, as they frequently change.

**Club Shaft** (Map p510; ☎ 722-5651; www.clubshaft.com; 4th fl, Yoshiokaya Dai 3 Bldg, Kokubunchō, Aoba-ku) This one's a sports bar during the week, with a high-fibre diet of European soccer and American baseball. On the weekends it's a dance club with house, breaks and hip-hop, as well as 'waving-your-arms-in-the-air-like-you-just-don't-care' retro Manchester nights.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

From Sendai airport, 18km south of the city centre, there are international flights to various destinations in Asia, such as Seoul, Beijing, Dailan, Guam and Shanghai. Domestic destinations include Sapporo, Nagoya and Hiroshima. From Tokyo, the *shinkansen* is so fast that it's not worth flying. Taipei and Changchun routes are also available, as are domestic routes: Hakodate, Komatsu, Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe, Fukuoka and Okinawa.

### BOAT

Sendai-kō is a major port with ferries once daily to Tomakomai on Hokkaidō (¥7300,

14¼ hours); ferries depart at noon every second day for Nagoya (¥6100, 21 hours). To get to Sendai-kō, take a *futsū* (local) train on the JR Senseki line to Tagajō station (¥230); it's then a 10-minute taxi ride. There are also five direct buses from stop 34 at Sendai station, but only until 6pm (¥490, 40 minutes).

### BUS

From stop 42 outside the station's east exit, there are five buses daily to Shinjuku (¥6210, 5½ hours) and Niigata (¥4500, four hours).

From stop 41, north of the station, buses run daily via stop 22 to Tokyo (¥6210, 5¼ hours) at 8am, 11am, 11.40pm and 11.55pm. From stop 40 across the street, night buses to Kyoto/Osaka depart at 7.30pm (¥11,930/12,230, 11 hours), as well as day buses to Morioka (¥2850, 2¼ hours), Akita (¥4000, 3¼ hours) and Aomori (¥5700, five hours).

### TRAIN

From Sendai, the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* line runs south to Tokyo (¥10,390, 1¼ hours) and north to Morioka (¥6090, 45 minutes) for transfers to the Akita *shinkansen* line. Sendai is connected by the JR Senzan line to Yamagata (*kaisoku* ¥1110, 1½ hours) and by the JR Senseki line to Matsushima-kaigan (*kaisoku* ¥400, 34 minutes).

## Getting Around

Airport limousines (single/return ¥910/1640, 40 minutes) from stop 15-2 at the station's west bus pool depart frequently for the airport between 6.25am and 6.40pm.

The Loope tourist trolley leaves from the west bus pool's stop 15-3 every 30 minutes from 9am to 4pm, making a useful sightseeing loop around the city (¥250 per ride) in a clockwise direction. A one-day pass costs ¥600 and comes with an English-language booklet detailing the bus route and sightseeing discounts for pass holders. Passes can be purchased from the bus ticket office by stop 15.3.

Sendai's single subway line runs from Izumi-Chūō in the north to Tomizawa in the south but doesn't cover any tourist attractions; single tickets cost ¥200 to ¥350.

## AKIU ONSEN 秋保温泉

☎ 022 / pop 5000

Considered one of the three most famous hot springs in Japan, Akiu Onsen was the Date clan's favourite, with a saltwater spring

that's said to be a curative for back pain and arthritis. It's also a good base for side trips into the mountains to see **Akiu Ōtaki** (秋保大滝), a 6m-wide, 55m-high waterfall, which is itself designated as one of Japan's three most famous waterfalls (Japanese do love those famous sets of three!). Akiu Onsen is also handy for access to the gorge, **Futakuchi-kyō** (二口溪), with its *banji-iwa* (rock columns). There are hiking trails along the river valley and a trail from Futakuchi Onsen to the summit of **Daitō-dake** (1366m) that takes about three hours.

Hiking maps are available at Akiu Onsen's **tourist information office** (☎ 398-2323; ☎ 9.30am-6pm). The staff can also advise on the hotels, *minshuku* and camping grounds that are scattered throughout the area, though the *onsen* itself is an easy day trip out of Sendai.

## Getting There & Away

Buses leave frequently from stop 8 at Sendai station's west bus pool for Akiu Onsen (¥780, 50 minutes), but only a few continue to Akiu Ōtaki (¥1070, 1½ hours).

## MATSUSHIMA & OKU-MATSUSHIMA

松島・奥松島

☎ 022 / pop 19,400

It's easy to see why Bashō was so taken by Matsushima Bay, for it features around 250 islands covered in pines that have been shaped by wind, as well as rock formations that have been misshapen by the ceaseless slapping of waves, resulting in spectacular monuments to natural forces. This conglomeration is one of Japan's Nihon Sankei (Three Great Sights) – the other two are the floating torii (shrine gates) of Miyajima island and the sand-spit at Amanohashidate. As a result of that distinguished reputation, it's heavily toured, but undeniably picturesque with peculiar charm. Masamune Date was so smitten with one of the rock formations that he offered a reward to anyone who could deliver it to castle headquarters. No one could.

Weekends can be trying in Matsushima, when packed crowds undercut the reflective serenity that so entranced Bashō. On the eastern curve of the bay, Oku-Matsushima is less toured and offers several trails for exploration by bicycle or on foot. Even the train ride is pretty, affording nice glimpses of the ocean, the isles, boats and birds.



## Orientation & Information

There's a Matsushima station, but Matsushima-kaigan is the one you want – it's closer to the main sights.

Outside, the **tourist information office** (☎ 354-2618; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Nov, to 4.30pm Dec-Mar) provides maps. Luggage storage is available next door for ¥300 per day. Inside Oku-Matsushima's Nobiru station, the **tourist information office** (☎ 0225-88-2611; ☎ 9am-6pm) has a few bicycles for rent. From Nobiru you can cycle the 5km to Otakamori, where a 20-minute climb up the hill is rewarded with a fine panorama of the bay.

## Sights

### MATSUSHIMA

**Zuigan-ji** (admission ¥700; ☎ 8am-3.30pm Jan & Dec, to 4pm Feb & Nov, to 4.30pm Mar & Oct, to 5pm Apr-Sep), one of Tōhoku's finest Zen temples, was founded in 828. The present buildings were constructed in 1606 by Date Masamune to serve as a family temple. Look out for the painted screens and interior carvings of the main hall, in the Momoyama style, and the **Seiryū-den** (青龍殿; Treasure Hall) displaying works of art associated with the Date family. The temple is accessed via an avenue lined with tall cedars, with weathered Buddhas and altars to the sides – a frequently spooky, deeply contemplative approach.

The interior of **Godai-dō**, a small wooden temple, opens to the public just once every 33 years. You missed the viewing in 2006, so make do with the sea view and the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac carved in to the eaves, then come back in 2039.

The **Kanran-tei** (admission ¥200; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar) pavilion was presented to the Date family by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late 16th century. It served as a genteel venue for tea ceremonies and moon viewing – the name means 'a place to view ripples on the water'. Today *matcha* (powdered green tea) is served here, and the garden includes the **Matsushima Hakubutsukan**, a small museum housing a collection of relics from the Date family.

**Fukuura-jima** (福浦島; admission ¥200; ☎ 8am-5pm Mar-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Feb), an island connected to the mainland by a 252m-long, red wooden bridge, makes for a leisurely half-hour walk around its botanic gardens.

**Ojima** (雄島) is also connected by bridge to the mainland. It was once a monks retreat and

is renowned for its Buddhist rock carvings, statues, meditation caves and relics.

### OKU-MATSUSHIMA

Natural beauty is the order of the day here. **Sagakei** (嵯峨溪) is a 40m-high scenic canyon overhanging the Pacific Ocean, notable for its crashing waves; **Ōtakamori** (大高森) is a small hill in the middle of Miyato Island offering a terrific panorama, including Mt Zaō and Kinkasan; and **Nobiru Beach** (野蒜海岸) is a swimming beach popular with day-trippers from Sendai. Look twice before diving in, however – there's a lot of trash strewn about.

## Festivals & Events

**Matsushima Kaki Matsuri** (松島牡蠣祭り; Matsushima Oyster Festival) Bivalve aficionados will appreciate this festival held the first weekend in February, where you can purchase oysters and cook them on a 100m-long grill.

**Zuigan-ji Tōdō** The approach to Zuigan-ji is enhanced from 6 to 8 August, when candlesticks are lit along the path for the event.

**Matsushima Tōrō Nagashi Hanabi Taikai** On 17 August; honours the souls of the departed with the O-Bon (Festival of the Dead) ritual, when lighted lanterns are floated out to sea accompanied by an extensive fireworks display.

## Sleeping

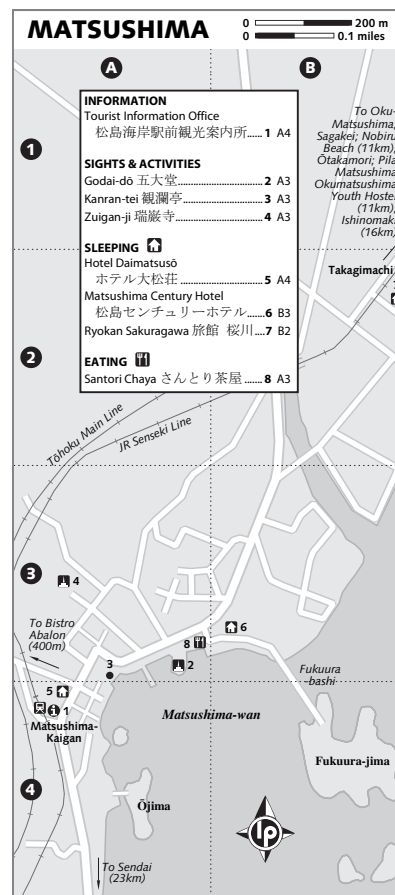
### MATSUSHIMA

**Hotel Daimatsusō** (☎ 354-3601; fax 354-6154; www.daimatsuso.co.jp in Japanese; 25 Matsushima; per person incl 2 meals from ¥8400) Just steps away from the station (to the left as you exit, at the end of the parking lot), with welcoming potted plants to greet you. Not as posh as some places, but clean and convenient, and the upper floors have nice views.

**Matsushima Century Hotel** (☎ 354-4111; www.centuryhotel.co.jp in Japanese; 8 Aza-Senzuji; tw from ¥12,700; ☑) Near the sights, with nice interiors, a pool and sauna. It has Western- and Japanese-style rooms, and rates depend on whether you take a room with a view of the car park or the sea.

### OKU-MATSUSHIMA

**Pila Matsushima Okumatsushima Youth Hostel** (Map p507; ☎ 0225-88-2220; 89-48 Minami-Akazaki, Nobiru, Matsushima; dm from ¥4305) In a lovely pine-clad location just near the beach at Oku-Matsushima. There's bike rental (¥800 per day) and the staff can advise on the best way to tackle hiking trails. To get to the hostel from Nobiru station, walk across the bridge and towards the ocean



for about 15 minutes until you reach an intersection with a blue youth-hostel sign pointing down the road to the right. From there it's about 800m. Staff at the tourist information office can give you a map with directions. A bird-watching blind on the bike trail makes a perfect peek (or photo) that much easier.

## Eating

Matsushima has an unimpeachable reputation among oyster lovers. Neither listed option has an English menu.

**Santori Chaya** (☎ 353-2622; dinner mains ¥1500-2500; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue, closed 2nd & 4th Wed of month) A small, intimate, Japanese-style eatery favoured by locals. It's great for fried oysters (*kaki yaki*) or *sanma sashimi* (raw saury) in season. If

you're feeling adventurous, ask for the *osusume* (chef's suggestion). From Matsushima-Kaigan station, go left out of the parking lot and follow the main road to the third set of lights. You'll find Santori Chaya on the left side of the big parking lot.

**Bistro Abalon** (びすとろアバロン; ☎ 354-5777; 26-21 Sanjūgari Matsushima; lunch/dinner from ¥1200/2630; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Concentrates on French-style dishes like oyster *gratin*.

## Getting There & Around

The most convenient road to Matsushima-kaigan is from Sendai via the JR Senseki line (*kaisoku* ¥400, 34 minutes). Alternatively, boat trips (¥1420, 50 minutes) to Matsushima, along the celebrated coastline, depart from Shioyama Pier every 30 minutes between 9.30am and 3pm from 21 April to November, and hourly the rest of the year. Get off the train two stops before Matsushima Kaigan at Hon-Shioyama (¥320, 28 minutes). The harbour is 10 minutes on foot from Hon-Shioyama station – turn right as you exit.

Otherwise there are loop cruises from Matsushima through the pine-covered islets (¥1420, 50 minutes) between 9.30am and 3pm, but these can be overrun with sightseers.

To reach Oku-Matsushima from Matsushima-kaigan station, take the JR Senseki line six stations east (two stops by *kaisoku*) to Nobiru (¥230).

The sights are eminently walkable. Bike rental is available at the tourist information office inside Oku-Matsushima's Nobiru station, but the crowds and narrow sidewalks make cycling laborious.

## ISHINOMAKI 石巻

☎ 0225 / pop 165,800

Manga-maniacs should be sure to put Ishinomaki on their Go To list. Ishinomaki is littered with tributes to cartoonist Shōtarō Ishinomori, a local hero who created some of Japan's best-loved manga characters, but aside from that and its use as a launching pad for the traveller. An unpretentious port city ringed by scenic mountains, it sits at the mouth of the Kitakami, Northern Honshū's largest river. This location has ensured its status as a major northeastern channel of commerce since the Edo era. The **tourist information office** (☎ 93-6448; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) is just outside the station, and has combo bus-and-ferry timetables for the

Kinkasan bound, as well as info about Ishinomaki (some in English) and a manga-themed map. With Sendai only an hour away there's no compelling reason to stay here.

## Sights

The spaceship-style **Ishinomaki Mangattan Museum** (石ノ森萬画館; ☎ 96-5055; 2-7 Nakase; admission 2nd floor ¥800, 1st & 3rd fl free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mar-Nov, to 5pm, Wed-Mon Dec-Feb, closed 3rd Tue Mar-Nov) is mostly devoted to Shōtarō Ishinomori's work and will appeal most to folks already familiar with the comics Cyborg 009, one of Ishinomori's many cartoon creations.

**Old Ishinomaki Orthodox Church** (旧石巻ハリストス正教会教会堂; ☎ 95-1111; 3-18 Nakase; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Mon-Fri Nov-Mar) is Japan's oldest wooden church (dating from 1880, but no longer in use). Advance reservation (by phone) is mandatory.

An impressive replica of the galleon **San Juan Bautista** (宮城県慶長使節船ミュージアム; ☎ 24-2210; ww51.et.tiki.ne.jp/~santjuan in Japanese; 30-2 Ōmori Watanoha; adult ¥700; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm Wed-Mon) is near the wharf. The San Juan is a monument to Date Masamune's forward-thinking rule; with an envoy of 20, it sailed to Rome as Japan's first diplomatic mission (see the boxed text, p509).

## Getting There & Around

From Sendai, the JR Senseki line runs to Ishinomaki (*kaisoku* ¥820, one hour and 24 minutes) via Matsushima-kaigan and Nobiru.

From bus stop 2 outside Ishinomaki station, seven buses run daily to Ayukawa between 7am and 6pm (¥1460, 1½ hours). It's a wonderfully scenic trip.

Rental bikes (per two hours ¥500), available right outside the station, make a great way to see the town, even though most of the sights are within walking distance.

## KINKASAN 金華山

☎ 0225 / pop 32

Also known as Golden Mountain, Kinkasan is considered one of the three holiest places in Tōhoku, along with Dewa Sanzan (p549) and Osore-san (p533). Its spiritual significance and the fact that it used to be a site for gold prospecting ensure a steady stream of visitors eager for some good fortune to rub off. It's said that if you pay a visit three years running to Kinkasan's impressive shrine, you can kiss your money worries goodbye for the rest of

your life. Women were banned on Kinkasan until the late 19th century, but today, for both sexes, an overnight stay is ideal for those seeking tranquillity.

Along with its shrine, the island features the pyramid-shaped Mt Kinka (445m), a handful of houses around the dock, cheeky deer and monkeys, mostly untended trails, a few leeches and the odd snake. Most visitors to Kinkasan seem to be day-trippers, which means the island is delightfully deserted in the early morning and late afternoon.

## Information

There's no tourist information, no internet and no convenience store on Kinkasan. Before you leave, check in at the Ishinomaki tourist information office, which has Kinkasan information plus timetables for getting to Ayukawa and from there to Kinkasan. Ayukawa is no longer its own town (it merged with Ishinomaki), but there's a small **Oshika tourist information office** (☎ 0225-45-3456; ☎ 8.30am-5pm).

## Sights

Before setting out on foot, take heed: locals advise that it's no longer possible to hike around Kinkasan's northern side because of a landslide; only the southern side is considered safe. If you get lost, head south and downhill towards the sea. The dirt trail that once circled the entire island (24km) along the shore is no longer safe at the northern edge.

Turning left from the boat dock, it's a steep 20-minute walk uphill to **Koganeyama-jinja** (黄金山神社), built in 794 by Emperor Shōmu as thanks for finding the gold used to finish the Great Buddha at Nara's Tōdai-ji.

From Koganeyama-jinja it's a 50-minute hike downhill to **Senjōjiki** (千畳敷; 1000 Tatami Mats Rock), a large formation of white rock on the eastern shore of the island, and a further hour to the lighthouse propping up the southeast corner. It takes roughly 1½ hours to follow the dirt trail along the shore and cross back over the summit to the dock area.

## Festivals & Events

**Ryūjin Matsuri** (龍神祭り; Dragon Festival) On the last weekend in July; features giant dragon floats supported by up to 50 dancers.

**Antler-cutting ceremony** On the first and second Sunday in October, this tradition is meant to stop the deer from injuring each other during mating season.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Koganeyama-jinja** (黄金山神社; ☎ 45-2264; kinkasan@cocoa.ocn.ne.jp; r per person ¥9000) On the shrine grounds, this offers basic temple lodgings with two meals. If you're awake before 6am, you can attend morning prayers. Advance reservations by phone or email are mandatory.

**Minshuku Shiokaze** (民宿 潮風; ☎ day/evening 45-2666/2244; r per person ¥6300) This friendly *minshuku* is 500m south along the headland from the pier. Expect simple but airy rooms, great food and panoramic views out to sea. The owners can also advise on the safest hiking routes. You must book well in advance, though, as the owners actually live in Ayukawa and only come out to Kinkasan if there are customers.

Another option is to stay overnight in Ishinomaki or Ayukawa. **Minami-sō** (みなみ荘; ☎ 45-2501; r per person incl/excl 2 meals from ¥6300/4200; ☎), behind the Ayukawa bus station, is a friendly *minshuku*.

## Getting There & Away

From Ishinomaki, seven buses run daily to Ayukawa.

During summer ferries leave from Ayukawa pier – opposite the bus station – for Kinkasan almost hourly between 8.30am and 3.45pm (one way ¥900, 25 minutes); the last return ferry is at 4pm. Service is greatly reduced the rest of the year. Reservations (☎ 53-3121) are required at peak times.

There are three high-speed catamarans daily between Kinkasan and Onagawa, the eastern gateway to the peninsula, from April to early November (one way ¥1600, 25 minutes). The last departure from Onagawa is at 12.10pm. Some of the boats have open-air fantail decks, which make for a pleasant ride. Onagawa is also the terminus for the JR Ishinomaki line, 30 minutes from JR Ishinomaki station (¥320). From Onagawa station walk straight to the waterfront, turn right and walk about 200m to the pier. The ferry ticket office is down a side street opposite the pier, little more than a hole in the wall on the right-hand side.

## NARUKO ONSEN 鳴子温泉

☎ 0229 / pop 8570

Come to Naruko Onsen to hear the clip-clop of *geta* (Japanese clogs) as *yukata*-clad (Japanese robe) bathers trot from bath to bath.

Stop in a shop window and see an artisan make a *kokeshi* doll (spindle-shaped dolls, often brightly coloured, with round heads) or purchase pottery or lacquerware. Breathe in and smell the sulphurous steam as it rises from street culverts, or stop and soak tired feet in the (free!) *ashiyu* (foot baths). Naruko's charms are quiet, simple and rejuvenating. Like all *onsen*, these waters are said to possess distinct healing qualities. Naruko has a high sulphur count, as well as sodium chloride and sodium bicarbonate, thought to be a relief for the symptoms of high blood pressure and hardened arteries.

The helpful **tourist information office** (☎ 83-3441; www.naruko.gr.jp; ☎ 8.30am-6pm), inside JR Naruko Onsen station, has useful English-language maps and brochures and can also help book your accommodation. It's a dense town; you can easily walk from one end to the other in 25 minutes.

**Naruko-kyō** (鳴子峡), a scenic, 100m-deep gorge, can be reached in 20 minutes (Bashō time, that is) on foot from Naruko Onsen station. Alternatively, buses (¥200, seven minutes) run from 8.50am to 4pm. From the gorge entrance, a pleasant 4km trail leads along the river valley to Nakayama-daira. If you turn right just after the bridge, but before reaching the gorge, you'll find the historical Shitomae checkpoint, the start of a quiet 5km country path along the route Bashō once walked. The last bus back to the station leaves at 4.29pm.

**Taki-no-yu** (滝の湯; admission ¥150; ☎ 7.30am-10pm) is a sheer delight – a fabulously atmospheric wooden bathhouse that's hardly changed in 150 years. Water gushes in from *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) channels. Bring your own towel.

The **Japan Kokeshi Museum** (日本こけし館; ☎ 83-3600; admission ¥320; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Nov, 9am-4pm Dec) features around 5000 *kokeshi* dolls from around the country. During the Meiji era the Tōhoku region was almost totally neglected, with the result that a flood of men and women moved south to find work. Some say that *kokeshi* dolls were symbolic representations of those lost girls, who were often snatched away at a young age.

**Ryukou Suimei-sō** (旅館水明荘; ☎ 83-2114; r for up to 2 people incl 2 meals ¥8000, each additional person ¥1000; ☎) has clean rooms. Walking northwest from the station, it's five minutes down the main street on the left before the railway

tracks. Functional but far from fancy, the **Ko-kumin Shukusha Ryokan Takishima** (国民宿舎ホテル瀧嶋; ☎ 83-3054; 2801 Shinyashiki; r per person incl/excl 2 meals from ¥6650/4150) is across the train tracks, about 10 minutes from the station. If you don't feel like walking elsewhere, go for a skin-scaldingly hot dip in its own basement *onsen*.

### Getting There & Away

From JR Sendai station, take the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* to Furukawa (¥2840, 15 minutes) then transfer to the JR Rikuu-tōsen line for Naruko Onsen (¥650, 45 minutes). Naruko Onsen has infrequent connections to Shinjō (¥950, one hour) for transfers to the Yamagata *shinkansen* line or local trains west to Sakata (¥950, one hour) and Tsuruoka (¥1110, one hour).

## IWATE-KEN 岩手県

Iwate-ken is a quiet place with rich farmland, sleepy valleys and some pretty serious mountain ranges, too. You'll find it feels more provincial – in the best of ways, and stopping in places like Tōno can seem almost like turning back time. Once rife with feudalism, the region was separated into north, controlled by the Nambu clan, and south, under the rule of the Date clan. Later, breakaway clans – Hachinohe (from Nambu) and Ichinohe (from Date) – divided Iwate further. During WWII, the prefecture was devastated and immediately embarked on a rehabilitation process marked by heavy industrial growth. Iwate-ken is the country's second-largest prefecture.

### HIRAIZUMI 平泉

☎ 0191 / pop 8750

Stop here to see some pretty amazing temples and wish that more remained – Hiraizumi's grandeur once rivalled Kyoto's, and the tale of its ruin is one of the most bittersweet sagas in Tōhoku's history. Yet you'd hardly know it from the present looks of this quiet, rural town. From 1089 to 1189, three generations of the Fujiwara family, headed by Fujiwara Kiyohira, created a political and cultural centre in Hiraizumi. Kiyohira had made his fortune from local gold mines and, at the behest of Kyoto priests, he used his wealth and power to commence work on the creation of a 'paradise on earth', devoted to the principles of Buddhist thought

as a reaction against the feudal wars that were plaguing the land. His son and grandson continued along this path. However, Kiyohira's great-grandson, Yoshihira, yielding to both internal and external pressures, brought this short century of fame and prosperity to an end (see the boxed text, p521). Today only a few sights bear testament to Hiraizumi's glory, but they represent a singular experience and are well worth your time.

### Information

Turning right outside Hiraizumi station, the **tourist information office** (☎ 46-2110; h-kankou@khaki.plala.or.jp; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) has English-language pamphlets. The post office, with an international ATM, is 400m northwest of the station heading towards Mōtsū-ji. Free internet access is available at the public library (open 9am to 5pm Tuesday to Sunday), 1500m southwest of the station.

### Sights & Activities

#### CHŪSON-JI 中尊寺

This **temple complex** (☎ 46-2211; admission incl Konjiki-dō, Sankōzō & Kyōzō ¥800; ☎ 8am-5pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-4.30pm Nov-Mar) was established in 850 by the priest Ennin, who was responsible for many of Tōhoku's most famous temples. However, it was Fujiwara Kiyohira who decided in the early 12th century to expand the complex into a site with around 300 buildings, including 40 temples. Ironically, in the face of the grand scheme to build a Buddhist utopia, Hiraizumi was never far from tragedy: a massive fire here in 1337 destroyed most of the buildings, although two of the original constructions remain alongside the newer temples. The site is accessed via a steep approach along a tree-lined avenue. Take your time: the views over the valley, intermingled with Jizō monuments scattered among the greenery, make this an absorbing route.

The approach snakes past the **Hon-dō** (Main Hall) to an enclosed area featuring the splendid **Konjiki-dō** (金色堂; Golden Hall; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-4pm Nov-Mar). Built in 1124, Konjiki-dō is quite a sight, packed with gold detailing, black lacquerwork and inlaid mother-of-pearl (the region was known for its gold and lacquer resources). The centrepiece of the hall is the fabulously ornate statue of the Amida Buddha, along with attendants. Beneath the three side altars are the mummified remains of three generations of the Fujiwara family.

Beside the Konjiki-dō, the temple treasury, **Sankōzō**, contains the coffins and funeral finery of the Fujiwara clan – scrolls, swords and images transferred from long-vanished halls and temples. The sutra treasury **Kyōzō**, built in 1108, is the oldest structure in the complex. The original collection of more than 5000 sutras was damaged by fire and the remains have been transferred to the Sankōzō.

#### MŌTSŪ-JI 毛越寺

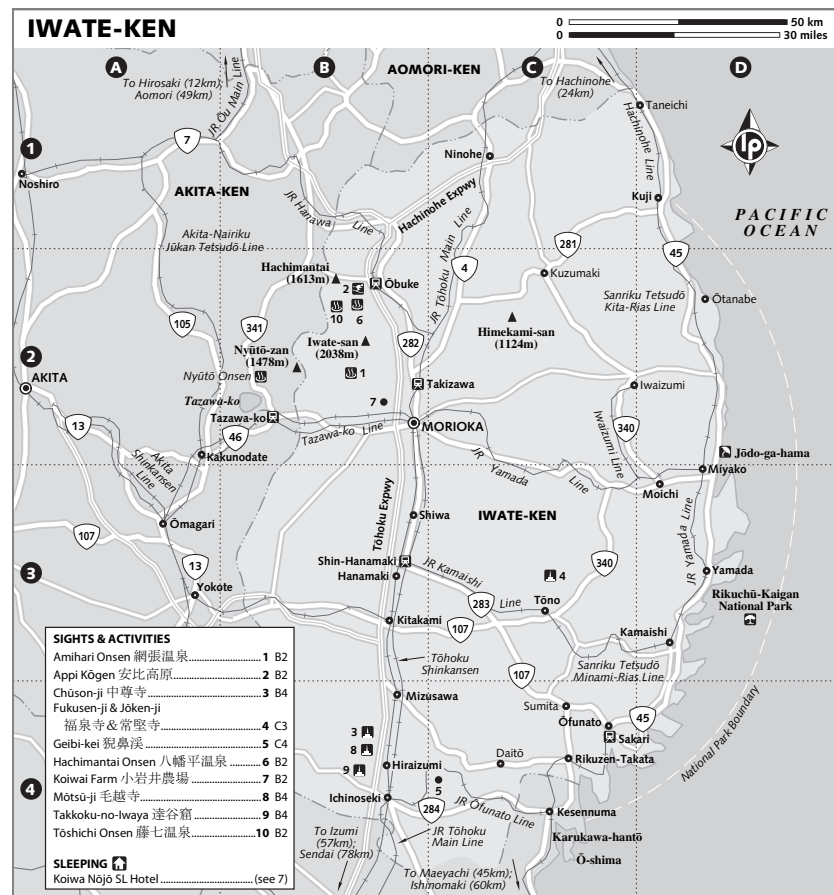
Dating from 850, **Mōtsū-ji** (☎ 46-2331; admission ¥500; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar) once surpassed Chūson-ji as Tōhoku's largest temple complex; it, too, was established by Ennin. Now the temples are long gone and only the beautiful gardens remain, a so-called Pure Land

garden from the Heian era, designed with the Buddhist notion of preserving 'paradise' in mind – it's as peaceful as that implies. The perimeter of the large pond is a popular walk, and along with the rambling greenery may very well make you pause for reflection in the face of Hiraizumi's history. Keep an eye out for emerald green kingfishers (*kawasemi*), which often perch on the rocks or overhanging tree branches. In season (spring and summer), the lotus and iris both have spectacular blooms.

#### TAKKOKU-NO-IWAYA BISHAMON-DŌ

##### 達谷窟見沙門堂

Five kilometres southwest of Mōtsū-ji, **Takkoku-no-Iwaya Bishamon-dō** (☎ 46-4931; admission ¥300; ☎ 8am-5pm, varies per season) is a cave temple,



small but very picturesque, dedicated to the deity Bishamon (the Buddhist guardian of warriors) by the famous general Sakanoue no Tamuramaro. It was built in 801 after Sakanoue's victory against the Ezo, the original inhabitants of Northern Honshū; the present structure is a 1961 replica. You can cycle to the cave along a paved path from Mōtsū-ji in about 30 minutes, longer if you stop to snap a picture or two of the stunning rice fields you'll pass along the way.

### TAKADACHI GIKEI-DŌ 高館義経堂

A small memorial honouring Minamoto Yoshitsune, **Takadachi Gikei-dō** (☎ 46-3300; admission ¥200; 🚗 8.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar) includes a monument inscribed with Bashō's

'summer grass' lament (see the boxed text, p502). The hall is at the top of a small hill with fine views of the Kitakami-gawa. It's 700m from the entrance to Chūson-ji.

### GEIBI-KEI 狢鼻溪

A huge natural gorge, **Geibi-kei** features sheer 100m-high cliffs. **Singing** boatmen on flat-bottomed **boats** (☎ 47-2341; per 90min ¥1500; 🚗 8.30am-4.30pm Apr-Oct, 9am-3pm Nov-Mar, varies per season) regale passengers with local folk songs that echo along the cliffs. Take the bus from stop 7 outside Ichinoseki station (¥620, 40 minutes, hourly) or the train from Ichinoseki to Geibi-kei station on the JR Ōfunato line (*kaisoku* ¥480, 25 minutes). Ask at the tourist info booth if a discount is available.

### Festivals & Events

**Haru-no-Fujiwara Matsuri** (春の藤原まつり; Spring Fujiwara Festival) From 1 to 5 May; features a costumed procession, performances of *nō* (classical Japanese dance-drama) at Chūson-ji and traditional *ennen-no-mai* (longevity dances) at Mōtsū-ji, as well as an enormous rice cake-carrying competition in memory of the giant Benkei (see opposite).

**Aki-no-Fujiwara Matsuri** (秋の藤原まつり; Autumn Fujiwara Festival) A similar festival takes place from 1 to 3 November.

### Sleeping

**Mōtsū-ji Youth Hostel** (☎ 46-2331; 58 Ōsawa; dm HI members/nonmembers from ¥2940/3570; 📺) This hostel is part of the Mōtsū-ji temple grounds and is a relaxing place to stay, especially for anyone wanting a closer look at the temple. There's a 9pm curfew and free *zazen* (seated meditation) sessions in summer. Rates include admission to the garden. Both beds or tatami options are available.

**Hotel Musashibō** (☎ 46-2241; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥8000; 📺) With its own *onsen* and delicious food, this is a nice, centrally located option that is still close to the station. From the station, walk straight for 500m and turn right, pass the temple, then look on the corner after the second road on the left.

**Shirayama Ryokan** (☎ 46-2883; 139-8 Shirayama; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥7500) Simple option that's even closer to the station. Ask in advance if it can offer nonmeal options for less.

### Getting There & Away

From Sendai the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* runs to Ichinoseki (¥3720, 32 minutes), where you

### HIRAIZUMI: A 'BRIEF REMEMBERED DREAM' (BASHŌ)

The dashing warrior Minamoto Yoshitsune grew up with, and trained under, the Fujiwara clan, but left Hiraizumi to fight with his half-brother Minamoto Yoritomo, the great warlord who founded the *shōgunate*, Japan's system of feudal government. Yoritomo was troubled by the Fujiwaras' growing power, eventually ordering his brother's death. Yoshitsune and his loyal retainer, the giant Benkei, disguised themselves as *yamabushi* (mountain priests) and returned to Hiraizumi, where they were taken in by the Fujiwaras...only to be betrayed by Fujiwara Hidehira's son, Yoshihira. Seeing no escape, Yoshitsune killed his family and then committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide by disembowelment). Benkei, so the story goes, defended his master to the very end, remaining standing and blocking the doorway even as his body was 'porcupined' with many arrows, an iconic image that will be familiar to anyone who's seen Akira Kurosawa's films. Yoritomo then ordered the Fujiwara clan to be wiped out and the temples of Hiraizumi to be destroyed – a tragic end to one of the most remarkable periods of the feudal era. There's a twist in the finale: according to local legend, the bodies of Benkei and Yoshitsune were actually those of their doubles. The real duo are said to have fled to Mongolia, where Yoshitsune became...Ghengis Khan.

can either take a bus via Hiraizumi station to Chūson-ji (¥350, 22 minutes) or a local train on the JR Tōhoku Main line (*futsū*, ¥190, eight minutes) to Hiraizumi.

Ichinoseki is connected to Morioka by the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* (¥3720, 38 minutes) and the JR Tōhoku Main line (*futsū*, ¥1620, 94 minutes).

### Getting Around

Frequent buses from Ichinoseki run to Hiraizumi station and on to Chūson-ji (¥310, 18 minutes). **Bicycle rental** (per day ¥1000; 🚗 9am-4pm Apr-Nov) is available next to Hiraizumi station.

### TŌNO VALLEY 遠野

☎ 0198 / pop 30,980

Tōno is a sleepy little town set amid a dramatic valley region, surrounded by rice fields and mountains that harbour a fair population of wild bears. It's an area that will appeal to those with vivid imaginations and those keen on country air, and it is the birthplace of superstitions and tales that run the gamut from odd to the wildly wacky. The town was also the site of some devastating famines due to poor harvests; much of the lore has a food-prosperity theme.

The present city was formed by the merging of eight villages and much of that rural flavour is preserved today: there are still some examples of the local architectural style of L-shaped farmhouses, known as *magariya*, where farmfolk and their prized horses lived under one roof, albeit in different sections (unlike the fertility goddess, Oshira-sama; see the boxed text, p523). Tōno is the heartland of

some of Japan's most cherished folk legends, including the mischievous *kappa* water spirits, whose likenesses are found everywhere. Even if you don't see spirits, you'll see *kappa*-sized pumpkins, loofah squashes the length of baseball bats and horses that could contend with the Budweiser Clydesdales.

### Information

**Cho BORA** (☎ 63-3535; 5-31 Chūō-dōri; 🚗 9:30am-6pm Mon-Sat) There's free internet here.

**Tōno City Library** (☎ 62-2340; 🚗 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) There's also free internet access here, downstairs from the Tōno Municipal Museum.

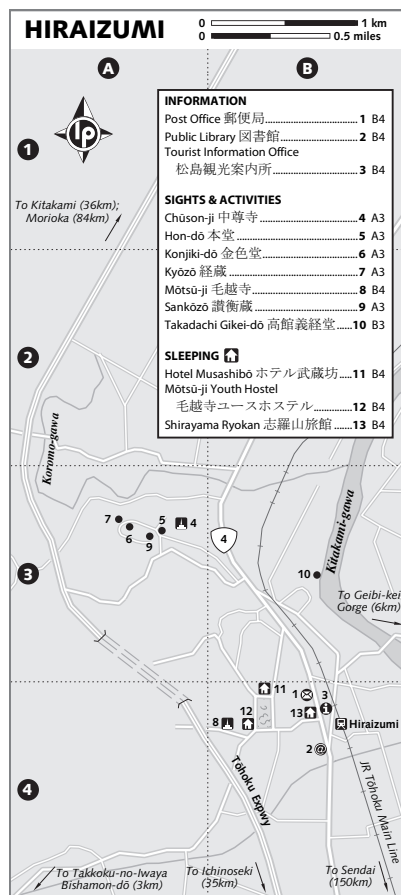
**Tōno post office** (遠野郵便局; ☎ 62-2830; 6-10 Chūō-dōri) Ten minutes' walk southeast of the Tōno train station.

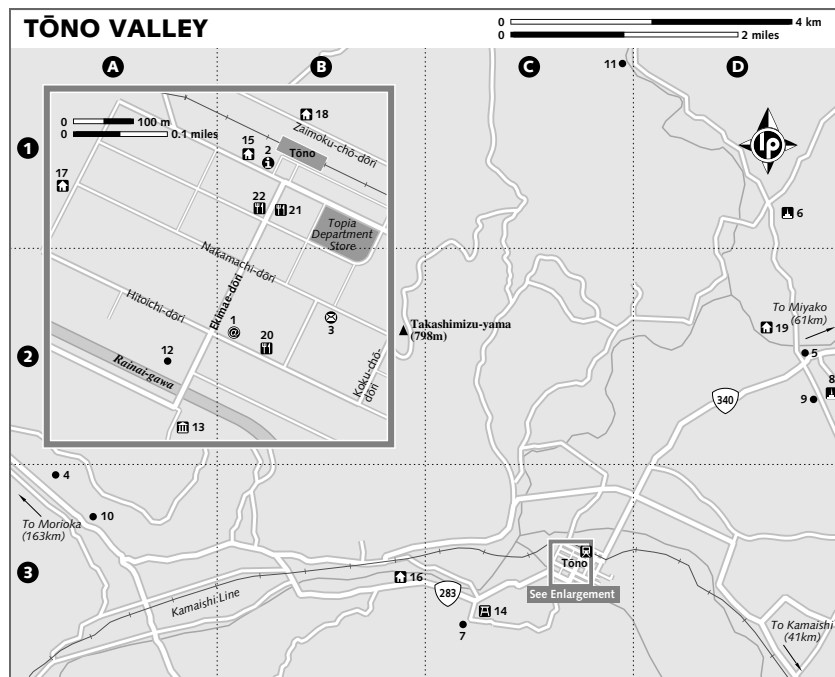
**Tourist information office** (☎ 62-1333; 🚗 8am-6pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-5.30pm Nov-Mar) To the right as you exit Tōno station; staff speak some English and can supply a useful English-language brochure and a map of the three main cycling routes.

### Sights

You'll need some form of transport to make the most of your stay; allow at least two days, but don't plan on much in the way of nightlife. A beautiful way to see the countryside is by bicycle, made easier by a fantastic bike trail that runs alongside the river. Renting a car is another option. Bus tours are sporadically available – ask at the tourist info booth before making plans.

On the upper floors of the city library, the **Tōno Municipal Museum** (☎ 62-2340; 3-9 Higashidate-chō; admission ¥310; 🚗 9am-5pm, closed last day of each month) has exhibits of folklore and traditional





## INFORMATION

Cho BORA ちょボラ	1 B2
Tourist Information Office	2 B1
Tôno City Library	
遠野市立図書館	(see 13)
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## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

Chiba Family Magariya	
南部曲り家千葉家	4 A3
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Fukusen-ji 福泉寺	6 D1

Gohyaku Rakan 五百羅漢	7 C3
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Tsuzuki Ishi 続き石	10 A3
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とおの昔話村	12 A2
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Unedori-sama Shrine	
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## SLEEPING

Folkloro Tôno	
フォルクローロ遠野	15 B1
Minshuku Magariya 民宿曲り屋	16 B3
Minshuku Rindô 民宿りんどう	17 A1
Minshuku Tôno 民宿とおの	18 B1
Tôno Youth Hostel	
遠野ユースホステル	19 D2
EATING	
Ichiriki 一力	20 B2
Shokudô Umenoya 食堂うめのや	21 B1
Taigetsu 待月	22 B1

life, and some engaging audiovisual presentations of the various legends of Tôno.

**Tôno Mukashibanashi-mura** (☎ 62-7887; 2-11 Chûô-dôri; admission ¥310; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a folk village with a restored ryokan, where Kunio Yanagita (see the boxed text, opposite) once stayed. There's also an exhibition hall for folk art. A combined ticket with the Tôno Municipal Museum costs ¥500.

**Fukusen-ji** (☎ 62-3822; 7-57 Komagi, Matsuzaki; admission ¥300; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Apr-Dec) is 8.5km northeast of Tôno station. Founded in 1912, the temple's major claim to fame is the wooden Fukusen-ji Kannon statue (17m high and weighing 25

tonnes), which took 12 years to complete and is supposedly the tallest of its type in Japan. Take a bus bound for Sakanoshita and get off at Fukusen-ji (¥370, eight daily).

About 3.5km beyond Fukusen-ji, **Tôno Furusato-mura** (☎ 64-2300; 5-89-1 Kami-tsukimoushi, Tsukimoushi-chô; admission ¥520; ☎ 9am-5pm) is Tôno's largest folk village, with several different farmhouses, a water wheel and a folkcraft gallery. Buses run hourly from Tôno station (¥490, 25 minutes).

**Tsuzuki Ishi** is a curious rock formation up a short, steep hike about 8km outside the city. The lush aromatic cedar forest is as impressive

as the rock itself. Originally thought to be a natural formation, recent studies indicate it may actually be a dolmen (primitive tomb).

**Jôken-ji** is a peaceful temple 2.5km south of Fukusen-ji, famous for the deity image **Obinzuru-sama** – some believe it will cure their illness if they rub the parts of their body corresponding to the location of their ailment.

Behind the temple is the **Kappa-buchi** pool. Legend has it that *kappa*, belying their impish nature, once put out a fire in the temple; the lion statue was erected as a gesture of thanks to honour this good deed. It is said that if pregnant women worship at the shrine on the riverbank they'll produce plenty of milk, but only if they first produce a breast-shaped offering. The tiny temple is filled with small cloth bags, either red or white, most replete with nipple.

Also in this vicinity is **Denshōen** (☎ 62-8655; admission ¥310; ☎ 9am-5pm, last entry 4.30pm), a small folk village featuring a hall with 1000 Oshira-sama dolls. From Tôno station, take a direct bus to Denshōen-mae (¥300, 15 minutes), or more frequent buses bound for Sakanoshita to the Nitagai stop (¥290, 12 minutes), which is 10 minutes on foot from Denshōen.

**Unedori-sama shrine** is about 2.5km southwest of Tôno station. Women tie a red strip

of cloth to the surrounding pines (using only their left hand) to ensure a healthy birth. In the hills above it are **Gohyaku Rakan**, ethereal rock carvings of 500 disciples of Buddha. They were fashioned by a priest to console the spirits of those who died in a 1754 famine.

Nine kilometres west of Tôno station is the **Chiba Family Magariya** (☎ 62-9529; admission ¥350; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4pm Nov-Mar). This traditional L-shaped farmhouse, with the mountains as its backdrop, has been restored to evoke the traditional lifestyle of a wealthy farming family of the 18th century.

## Festivals &amp; Events

The **Tôno Matsuri** takes place on 14 September with *yabusame* (horseback archery, in this case a 700-year-old event), traditional dances and costume parades through the city to Tonogo-hachimangu shrine. It's a flamboyant spectacle, designed to pray for a bountiful harvest, and is deeply connected with the legends of Tôno.

## Sleeping

**our pick** **Tôno Youth Hostel** (☎ 62-8736; 13-39-5 Tsubibuchi, Tsubibuchi-chô; dm from ¥3200) Spick-and-span, two-storey hostel that's a super base for exploring the valley. The manager speaks some

## THE CURIOUS CUSTOMS OF TÔHOKU

At the beginning of the 20th century, a collection of regional folk tales was published under the title *Tôno Monogatari* (Legends of Tôno). They were compiled by Kunio Yanagita (1875–1962), a prominent writer and scholar regarded as the father of Japanese folklore. The collection was based on interviews with Tôno resident Kyôseki Sasaki, who was born into a peasant family and who had committed to memory over 100 *densetsu* (local legends). What Yanagita and Sasaki unearthed immediately captured the nation's imagination, bringing into rich focus the oral storytelling traditions of a region hitherto almost completely ignored.

The cast of characters and situations is truly weird and wonderful and draws heavily on the concept of animism, a system of belief that attributes a personal spirit to everything that exists, including animals and inanimate objects. One of the more striking tales concerns a simple village girl who married her horse. Amazingly, this was against her father's wishes, so the father hung the horse from a mulberry tree and beheaded it. The girl, clutching the horse's head, then flew off to heaven where she became Oshira-sama, the fertility goddess (today, Oshira-sama dolls are still important ceremonial objects for *itako* mediums; see p533).

Elsewhere, we have shape-shifting foxes; elderly folk who are cast off into the wilderness to die; impish water spirits called *kappa*, who sumô-wrestle passers-by to the ground and who like to pull their victim's intestines out through their anus (ew!); *zashiki warashi* spirits, who live in the corners of houses and play tricks on the residents; and wild men who live in the hills and eat children. Throughout all of them is a common theme: the battle with nature and the struggle to tame the elements – everyday features of rural life, of which Tôno is an exemplar.

*Legends of Tôno* is available, in English, for ¥2000 from the souvenir shop next to the Tôno tourist information office.

English, is quite sociable and is well versed in the local legends (there's a detailed report nightly). Bicycle rental is available (¥800 per day), there's no curfew and there's an extensive manga library. From Tōno station, take a bus bound for Sakanoshita to the Nitagai stop (¥290, 12 minutes). From there, it's a 10-minute walk; the hostel is clearly signposted – minute by minute – along the way.

**Folkloro Tōno** (☎ 62-0700; 5-7 Shinkoku-chō; r per person incl breakfast ¥6300) Standard business hotel that is curiously located right above the station, with Western-style rooms. The train is infrequent, but when it comes you'll know.

**Minshuku Tōno** (☎ 62-4395; 2-17 Zaimoku-chō; r per person incl 2 meals ¥6300) Just behind the station, this is a welcoming place where the host speaks English.

**Minshuku Rindō** (☎ 62-5726; 2-34 Daiku-chō; r per person incl 2 meals ¥6500; 📺) About a six-minute walk from the station, this is a clean, hospitable place with good food and is a decent value.

**Minshuku Magariya** (☎ 62-4564; 30-58-3 Niisato, Ayaori-chō; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥9790) About 3km southwest of the station, this is atmospheric accommodation in a traditional farmhouse. No English is spoken. From the station, take a bus to the *basu-sentā* (bus centre), then walk for 30 minutes. Actually, you might want to catch a taxi just this once (for around ¥1000).

## Eating

**Taigetsu** (☎ 62-2436; meals from ¥600; 📺 10am-9.30pm Thu-Tue) On Ekimae-dōri, 350m south of the train station, this one's good for coffee, *rāmen* and basic snacks.

**Shokudō Umenoya** (☎ 62-2622; meals from ¥650; 📺 11.30am-8pm) Across the road from Taigetsu, Ume-no-ya serves good-value set meals, as well as *rāmen* and omelettes.

**Ichiriki** (☎ 62-2008; meals from ¥800; 📺 11am-8pm, closed irregularly) With its cosy, traditional interior, this restaurant serves terrific seafood – the delectable tempura tofu is recommended for its extraordinary lightness. There are advisory posters on the walls for those wishing to go *kappa* hunting.

## Getting There & Away

The JR Tōhoku line runs from Hiraizumi (¥820, 45 minutes) and Morioka (¥650, 40 minutes) to Hanamaki; the *shinkansen* runs from Morioka (¥2750, 11 minutes) and Sendai (¥5350, 59 minutes) to Shin-Hanamaki. On the JR Kamaishi line, local trains connect

Tōno with Shin-Hanamaki on the Tōhoku *shinkansen* line (¥740, 45 minutes) and Hanamaki on the Tōhoku Main line (¥820, 65 minutes). The approach into town is divine as the train winds through the valley and its mountains. You can also take the (very worthwhile!) scenic route that goes from Tōno to Kamaishi, then along the coast northward, returning inland to Morioka on the JR Yamada line.

There are two afternoon buses from Morioka at 2.15pm and 3.30pm to Kamaishi that stop at Tōno's Topia department store (¥1890, two hours). In the reverse direction, buses to Morioka pass by at 7am and 10am.

## Getting Around

Tōno is one place where car rental is a good idea – try **Kankō Rent-a-Car** (遠野観光レンタカー; ☎ 62-1375), inside the train station. Bicycle rental is available from the tourist office at ¥1000 per day, or from the youth hostel.

## MORIOKA 盛岡

☎ 019 / pop 300,400

A river runs through it, er, rivers that is: the Kitakami, Nakatsu, and Shizukuishi, making Morioka one of the prettiest cities in Tōhoku. The capital of Iwate-ken, in the early Edo period it was the seat of the Nambu clan. With the grand Mt Iwate volcano as its northwest backdrop and some beautiful old buildings, Morioka is a picturesque place, and its people are very keen to share their city's delights with outsiders. The city's *wanko-soba* culinary ritual is a curious custom that's fun to try, and exchange with Canada means that residents are refreshingly nonchalant about foreigners, far more so than in other Tōhoku towns.

## Orientation

The city centre is east of the station, which lies on the southwest corner of the action, on the other side of the Kitakami-gawa. Ōdōri, which heads over the Kaiun-bashi up to Iwate-kōen, is the main shopping street.

## Information

### INTERNET ACCESS

The tourist information centre has free access.

**Cafe** α (☎ 653-1288; 1-6-13 Ōdōri; per hr ¥480;

📺 11am-8am Mon-Fri, 24hr Sat-Sun)

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Iwate Medical University Hospital** (☎ 651-5111; 19-1 Uchi-maru)

## MONEY & POST

**Iwate Bank** (Ōdōri) Exchanges cash.

**Morioka Central Post Office** (盛岡中央郵便局; ☎ 624-5353; 1-13-45 Chūō-dōri; 📺 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat, to 12.30pm Sun, ATM 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm Sat, to 7pm Sun) Downtown, with international ATM. There's also a useful branch with ATM facilities five minutes' walk east of the station.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Iwate International Plaza** (国際交流センター; ☎ 606-1750; 5F aina 1-7-1 Moriokaekinishi-dōri; 📺 9am-9.30pm) An excellent resource for visitors and residents, with helpful staff, a foreign-newspaper library, local 'what's on' information and free internet.

**Morioka Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 604-3305; 1-1-10 Nakanohashi-dōri; 📺 9am-8pm, closed 2nd Tue of each month) On the 2nd floor of Odette Plaza. Free internet access (30 minutes), tourist brochures, phonecards and stamps.

**Northern Tōhoku Tourist Information Centre**

(☎ 625-2090; 📺 9am-5.30pm) On the 2nd floor of

Morioka station at the north exit, next to the *shinkansen* ticket gate. Highly efficient, English-speaking staff and a good supply of regional brochures.

## Sights

Morioka is easily navigated on foot, but there is also a tourist bus. Ask at the info desk for current schedules as they may change.

**Iwate-kōen**, 20 minutes' walk east of the station, is the park where Morioka-jō once stood. Only the castle's moss-covered stone foundation walls remain as a testament to Edo-period life. The park has pleasing views over the city, and the grounds, with varicoloured tree foliage, are pretty. The park also contains the shrine **Sakurayama**, and a totem pole presented by Morioka's sister city in British Columbia; it's a collaboration between a Native North American chief and a local woodcarver.

The Japanese love displays of fortitude, as the many samurai legends forever enshrined in the nation's hearts and minds illustrate.

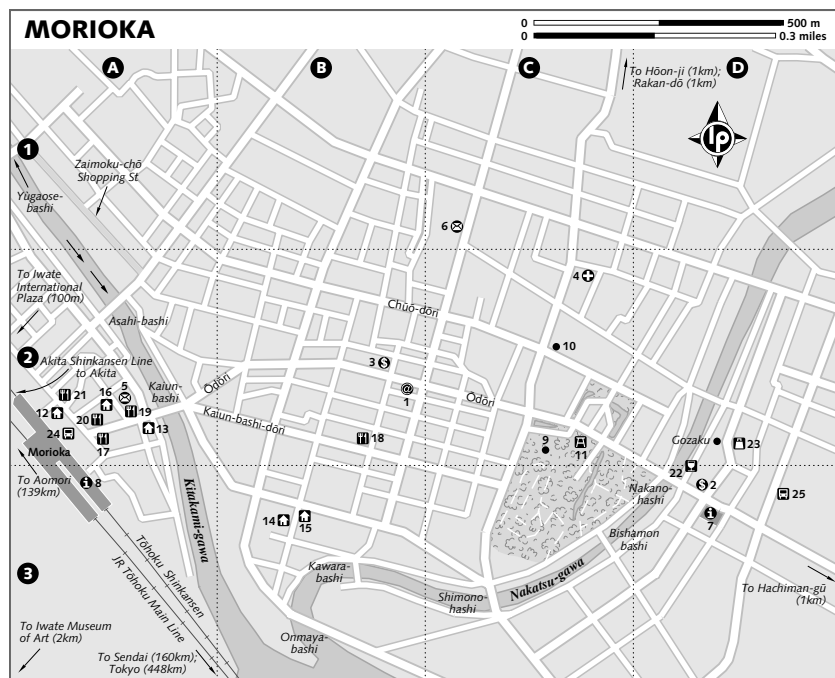
## KENJI MIYAZAWA: A 'MAGIC LANTERN OF FONDLY REMEMBERED GREEN WIND'

Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1933) is one of Japan's best-known writers of the 20th century. Born in Morioka he lived there until his early 20s, although the town and the surrounding environment continued to influence him. Throughout Miyazawa's life, Tōhoku was very much the backwater of Japan. Iwate-ken, in particular, was a land barely struggling to survive, as crops failed and new farming technology proved to be slow making its way north. On top of that, Miyazawa was the son of a pawnbroker and it caused him great anguish and deep shame to observe how his well-to-do family preyed on the poor by taking their property in exchange for lending them money. This experience, combined with an intense Buddhist faith, shaped his life's work.

Miyazawa developed a wondrous cosmology whereby profound empathy is felt between the animal world, the human world and the world of nature. A man is forced to hunt bears to make a living, even though he loves bears and deeply understands their ways and customs; the bears, in turn, understand and respect the bind he is in. Another man chances upon a group of deer; captivated by them, he hides in the grass to observe and before long realises he can understand the deer's 'language'. Foxes boast about their knowledge of poetry and astronomy. Stars in the sky take human form and play the flute. A cellist, rejected from an orchestra because his playing is atrocious, finds peace with the animals who visit him at night to hear him play. This communication between species has been understood as a plea for tolerance of other cultures, particularly as Miyazawa was writing during a time when Japanese society was becoming ever more closed off as the nation moved towards war.

Connections have also been made between Miyazawa's work and the legends of Tōno (see the boxed text, p523); certainly the battle against the elements by poor people is a common thread, as is the belief in animism. But the Tōno stories are filled with casual violence and an often antagonistic relationship towards the natural world. Tōno's legends depict foxes, for example, as a constant torment to humans, whereas Miyazawa overturns the common notion of foxes as cunning and devious, and demonstrates that even the most entrenched stereotypes can be debunked – as in the scholarly fox mentioned earlier.

Ultimately, both realms are deeply infused with the rhythms and paradoxes of everyday Tōhoku life, and both are worthy additions to the library of anyone seeking to go beyond the platitudes of tourist brochures to understand what makes the region tick.



## INFORMATION

Café α カフェアルファ	1 B2
Iwate Bank (Ex-Head Office)	2 D3
岩手銀行 (旧本店)	2 D3
Iwate Bank 岩手銀行	3 B2
Iwate Medical University Hospital	
岩手医科大学附属病院	4 C2
Morioka Branch Post Office	
盛岡中央郵便局	5 A2
Morioka Central Post Office	
盛岡中央郵便局	6 C1
Morioka Tourist Information Centre	
盛岡観光案内所	7 D3
Northern Tōhoku Information Centre	
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Odette Plaza おでってプラザ	(see 7)

## SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES

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## Rock-splitting Cherry Tree

石割桜	10 C2
Sakurayama Shrine	11 C2

## SLEEPING

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ホテルメトロポリタン盛岡	12 A2
Hotel Ruiz ホテルルイズ	13 A2
Kumagai Ryokan 熊ヶ井旅館	14 B3
Minshuku Taishōkan	15 B3
民宿 大正館	15 B3
Morioka New City Hotel	16 A2
盛岡ニューシティホテル	16 A2

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Banya Nagasawa	18 B2
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Cappuccino Shiki	19 A2
カプチーノ詩季	19 A2
Pyon Pyon Sha	20 A2
ぴょんぴょん舎	20 A2
Seirōkaku 盛楼閣	21 A2

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Gen Plaza ゲンプラザ	(see 21)
Kamasada Honten 釜定本店	23 D2

## TRANSPORT

Dendenmushi Bus Stop	
でんでんむし号バス乗り場	(see 24)
JR Bus Station JRバス乗り場	24 A2
Morioka Bus Centre	
盛岡バスセンター	25 D3

This applies even if the display is exhibited by an inanimate object, like the **Rock-Splitting Cherry Tree** in front of the Morioka District Court. This 300-year-old tree, sprouting from the crack in a huge granite boulder, has the locals claiming that it's pushed its way through over time. That's clearly an impossible feat, but it makes for a very charming story.

The **Iwate Museum of Art** (岩手県立美術館; ☎ 658-1711; 12-3 Matsuhaba, Motomiya; admission ¥500; ☎ 10am-7pm Tue-Sun) has works by local artists such as Yorozu Tetsugoro, Matsumoto Shunsuke and Funakoshi Yasutake. It's 2km west of the station. Buses from Morioka station stop 10 (¥290, 12 minutes, five daily between 9.10am and 2.10pm) stop outside the museum; the last bus back leaves the museum at 4.38pm.

**Hōon-ji** (報恩寺) is a quiet Zen temple in Morioka's *teramachi* (temple district), where Kenji Miyazawa lived after being expelled from boarding school. The temple's impressive Sanmon (Main Gate) has a Kannon image, but the real attraction here is the musty **Rakan-dō** (羅漢堂; admission by donation ¥300; ☎ 9am-4pm), a small hall containing 18th-century statues of the 500 disciples of Buddha, each posed in a different attitude. Take the Dendenmushi loop bus and get off at the Honchō-dōri 1-chōme stop (¥100, 15 minutes).

**Appi Kōgen** (安比高原; www.appi.co.jp/foreign\_country/english/index.html; day lift ticket ¥3300), located about one hour northwest of Morioka, offers skiing, snowboarding and kid-friendly activities. For more information visit the website or enquire at Morioka's friendly tourist information counters (p255). Most of the lodgings are quite a distance from the slopes, so plan on using shuttles once you get there.

## Festivals &amp; Events

**Chagu-Chagu Umakko Matsuri** On the second Saturday of June, features a parade of brightly decorated horses and children in traditional dress. Starting outside town, the procession passes near Iwate-kō in the afternoon (the best views are from Nakano-hashi). Iwate was historically famous for breeding horses and the festival allegedly originated when farmers took their horses to shrines to rest them after harvest and pray for their health. The name 'chagu-chagu' is said to describe the sound of the horses' bells.

**Hachiman-gū Matsuri** During the festival from 14 to 16 September, portable shrines and colourful floats are paraded to the rhythm of *taiko* (Japanese drums). There are also displays of horseback archery on the 15th. The parades are thoroughly engaging, and feature traditional Japanese floats pushed and wheeled through crowded streets by huffing, puffing men scantily dressed in sumō-type outfits, headed by a flying V of elegant, dancing women.

## Sleeping

**Minshuku Taishōkan** (☎ 622-4436; 2-5-30 Ōsawakawara; r per person from ¥3700) Faded but friendly, about 10 minutes southeast of the station, with clean, Japanese-style rooms. You'll feel more like you're in Grandma's house than at a hotel; that's a good thing, part of the charm.

**Kumagai Ryokan** (☎ 651-3020; 3-2-5 Ōsawakawara; s/d from ¥4500/8400; ☎) The Ryokan Kumagai is an easy-going place, opposite Taishōkan. The rooms are clean and tidy, and there's a nice Japanese garden and folk-craft displays.

A number of standard business hotels are close to the station:

**Hotel Metropolitan Morioka** (☎ 625-1211; 1-44 Ekimae-dōri; s/d incl breakfast from ¥862/16,747) Upmarket, snazzy hotel next to the station.

**Hotel Ruiz** (☎ 625-2611; www.hyperhotel.co.jp; 7-15 Ekimae-dōri; s/tw from ¥5480/8800; ☎) Reliable business hotel close to the station.

**Morioka New City Hotel** (盛岡ニューシティホテル; ☎ 654-5161; 13-10 Ekimae-dōri; s/d from ¥4980/735; ☎) Across the road from the station. More casual than other business hotels. Has only two of the least expensive rooms.

## Eating

Morioka has a great culinary tradition with some Korean influence. *Jājāmen* (soba-type noodles with spicy sauce) is a local speciality. Famished? Let's see you eat 550 bowls of the local noodle dish, *wanko-soba*. More of a competition between you and the waitress (who tries to refill your bowl faster than you can say you're full), it's a fun culinary tradition that is well worth doing once. We managed to stop at 162, but 552 is the current record for this unique experience, which is best appreciated at **Azumaya** (☎ 622-2252; 2nd fl, Miurabiru Bldg, 1-8-3 Naka-no-hashi-dōri; wanko-soba from ¥2600; ☎ 11am-8pm). The Mariah Carey tunes are oddly incongruous with the otherwise traditional flair. Some staff speaks English.

**Cappuccino Shiki** (☎ 625-3608; 10-6 Ekimae-dōri; snacks ¥420-630; ☎ 9am-10pm Tue-Fri, to 8pm Sat & Sun) An atmospheric old coffee shop that feels like a tavern because of its rustic, dark-wood interior. Serves tasty toasted sandwiches, good breakfast sets and heart-starting espresso.

**Banya Nagasawa** (☎ 622-2646; 2-6-1 Saiei; set meals from ¥2000; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) Here you can select your seafood for grilling as you relax with a beverage of your choice.

Morioka's other speciality is *reimen*, *soba* noodles served with *kimchi* (spicy Korean pickles). **Pyon Pyon Sha** (☎ 606-1067; 1st fl, Jaren Bldg, 9-3 Ekimae-dōri; reimen from ¥735; ☎ 11am-11pm) has delicious cold *reimen* and hot *reimen* sets. **Seirōkaku** (☎ 654-8752; 2nd fl, Gen Plaza, 15-5 Ekimae-dōri; reimen from ¥900; ☎ lunch & dinner; E) also does a mean *reimen*, as well as dishes made from the (gulp!) first, second and fourth stomachs of cows.

## Drinking

No surprises that with all that water, rice, and time on their hands, Morioka-ites make some excellent local sakes.

**Fukakusa** (☎ 622-2353; 1-2 Konya-chō; drinks ¥400-700; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) This tiny 40-year-old bar-café, just behind the old Iwate Bank, has an unbeatable location on the banks of the Nakatsu-gawa. With its cosy wood-pannelled interior, piano, warm lighting and hand-made prints, it's a romantic little hideout, and the charming hostess-owner speaks perfect English and can offer suggestions about the local sakes.

## Shopping

The Morioka region is famous for its *nanbu tetsubin* (cast ironware). **Kamasada Honten** (☎ 622-3911; 2-5 Konya-chō; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) is a fine exponent of the craft, selling affordable gift items alongside tea kettles that cost as much as a small car. It's across the Nakatsugawa near Gozaku, a traditional merchant's area of *kura* (mud-walled) warehouses, coffee shops and craft studios. Try the Zaimoku-chō district, five minutes from the station, home to craft shops for lacquerware and fabrics.

## Getting There & Away

On the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* line, the fastest trains from Tokyo (Ueno) reach Morioka in 2½ hours (¥13,640). From Morioka, the Akita *shinkansen* line runs west to Akita (¥4300, 1½ hours) via Tazawa-ko and Kakunodate, which can also be reached by infrequent local trains on the JR Tazawa-ko line. From Morioka you can continue north to Aomori on the JR Tōhoku Main line (*tokkyū*, ¥5960, 1¼ hours).

The bus station at Morioka station is well organised. It has abundant English signs and a directory matching buses to their relevant stops, as well as journey times and fares. Popular destinations include Iwate-san, Towada-ko and Tazawa-ko.

The easiest access to the Hachimantai area, northwest of Morioka, is also by bus, from stop 3 at Morioka station to Hachimantai Chōjō (¥1320, two hours, three daily).

Long-distance buses leave the station for Aomori (¥3160, three hours), Hirosaki (¥2930, 2½ hours) and Sendai (¥2850, 2½ hours). There are two night buses to Tokyo leaving at 10.15pm and 10.55pm (¥7850, 7½ hours) and one to Yokohama (¥8950, eight hours) leaving at 10.10pm.

## Getting Around

Most local buses depart from the station, although there are also some departures from

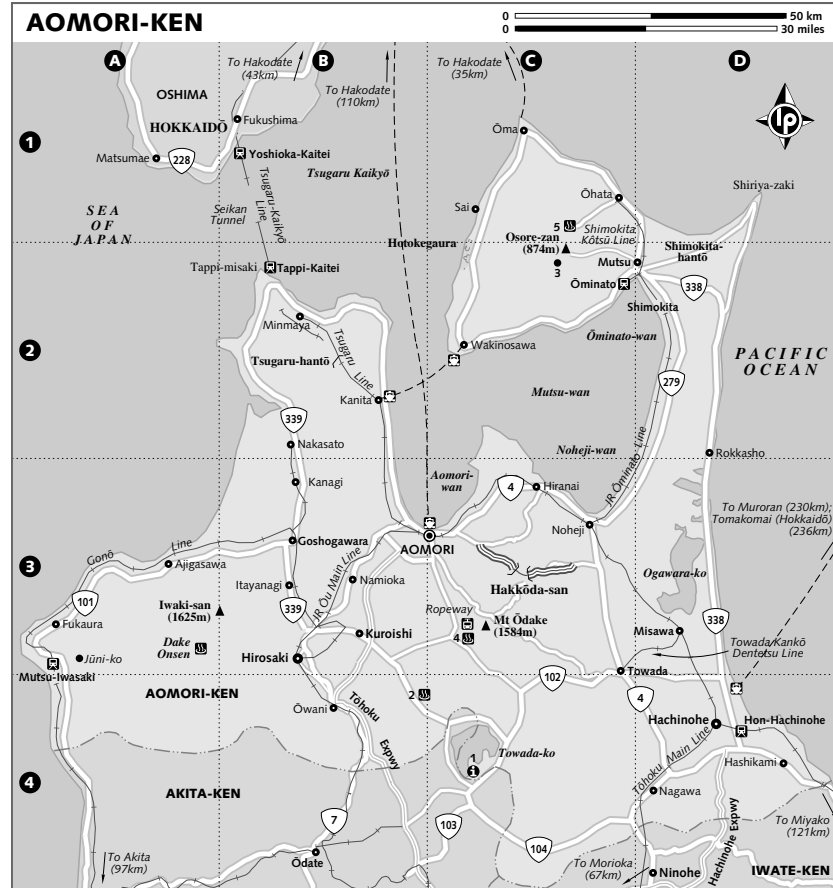
the Morioka bus centre close to Iwate-kōen. The rather charmingly named tourist bus, Dendenmushi (snail; single ride/day pass ¥100/300), makes a convenient loop around the town, departing in a clockwise direction from stop 15 in front of Morioka station (anticlockwise from stop 16) between 9am and 7pm.

## IWATE-SAN 岩手山

The jagged molar of Iwate-san (2038m) is a dominating landmark northwest of Morioka, and a popular destination for hikers. Seven walking trails are open between July and October, but periodically close due to volcanic activity. Check with tourist information in Morioka (p525) for the latest conditions. If you want to stay near Iwate-san, **Amihari Onsen**, at the start of one of the main trails to the summit, has numerous *minshuku*. Railway enthusiasts prefer the **Koiwai Nōjō SL Hotel** (小岩井農場 ホテル; ☎ 692-4316; 21 Apr-6 Nov; r per person from ¥4200) at Koiwai (Japan's largest privately owned farm), where you sleep in old train compartments. From early May to early November, buses from Morioka bound for Amihari Onsen (¥1140, one hour) pass by Koiwai farm (¥720, 35 minutes). Before Amihari, there's a bus stop at Omisaka for the trailhead.

## AOMORI-KEN 青森県

Aomori-ken, at the curious northern tip of Honshū, is split in the middle by Mutsu, Noheji and Aomori bays, all cradled in the arm of the axe-shaped Shimokita peninsula. Volcano strewn, it has some fantastic *onsens* and boasts Japan's biggest apple harvest, its oldest cherry tree and (don't go kissing anyone!) the most garlic produced. Rather than ward off the dead, Aomori's people commune with them: Osore-zan, splendidly sulphurous, is famed for its connections to the spirit world. Lake Towada, at the opposite end of the prefecture, puts on airs as Tōhoku's most popular sight. The world's longest submarine tunnel (54km) connects Aomori with Hokkaidō. Yet despite all these amazing superlatives, the city and surrounding countryside are quaintly provincial. It's a fun place, though the more remote areas may require some advance planning...or a car rental.



## AOMORI 青森

☎ 017 / pop 313,200

You won't find much in the way of ancient architecture in Aomori, as the city was 90% destroyed by bombing during WWII; however, Aomori's people seem to have taken that in their stride. The ASPAM building and the Aomori Bay Bridge seem almost too modern, yet ancient festivals such as the Nebuta – raucously wild, with amazing floats – remind you that traditional ways are alive and kicking here. Aomori is a popular place to break up the journey between Tokyo and Hokkaidō, and serves as a convenient transport hub for Shimokita-hantō, Towada-ko and the scenic region around Hakkōda-san.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Aomori Police Station** (☎ 723-4211; 2-3-1 Shinmachi)

### INTERNET ACCESS

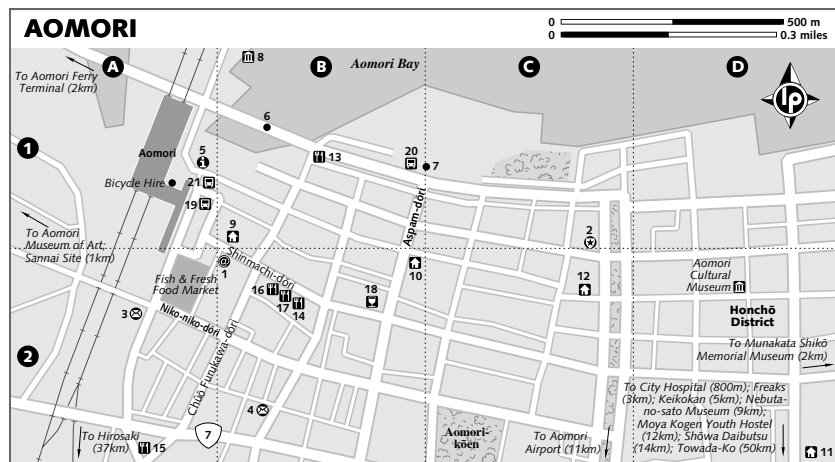
**Ai Plaza** (☎ 735-3232; www.city.aomori.aomori.jp/aiplaza in Japanese; 1-3-7 Shin-machi; per 1hr free; ☎ 10am-9pm, closed irregularly) On the 4th floor of the AUGA building.

**Freaks** (フリークス; ☎ 732-5015; 3-10-11 Midori; per hr ¥473; ☎ 24hr) A 50-minute walk or 10 minutes by taxi.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Aomori City Hospital** (青森市民病院; ☎ 734-2171; 1-14-20 Katsuda)





INFORMATION		SLEEPING		DRINKING		TRANSPORT	
Ai Plaza アイプラザ	1 B2	Aomori Grand Hotel	9 B1	Bar Centanni	18 B2	Aomori City Buses	
Aomori Police Station 青森県警察	2 C1	青森グランドホテル	9 B1	バー・チェンターニ	18 B2	青森駅前市営バス停	19 A1
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Main Post Office 中央郵便局	4 B2	ホテルJALシティ青森	10 B2			JR Highway Bus Stop JR	
Prefectural Tourist Information	(see 7)	Super Hotel Aomori	11 D2			ハイウェイバス乗り場	21 A1
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		EATING					
Aomori Bay Bridge	6 B1	Jintako 甚太古	13 B1				
ASPAM Building アスパム	7 C1	カキゲン 柿源	14 B2				
Hakkōda-maru 八甲田丸	8 B1	コトブキヤ 寿屋	15 A2				

## POST

**Main post office** East of the city centre, with a smaller branch within easy reach of the station. Both have ATM services.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

**Prefectural tourist information counter** (☎ 734-2500; 2F, ASPAM Bldg, 1-1-40 Yasukata; ☎ 9am-6pm, closed irregularly)

**Tourist information office** (☎ 723-4670; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) On the left of the station's central exit. Good English-language pamphlets and an excellent map of the city.

## Sights

The futuristic, pyramid-shaped **ASPAM building** (1-1-40 Yasukata) has a top-floor viewing plaza (admission ¥400). The view out across the bay is great but the perspective is equally as good on the lower (free!) floors.

Nearby, **Aomori Bay Bridge** is also remarkably modern. Climb the stairs at the Bay Bridge's

station end for more top-notch views; the entire structure is a fine sight at night (as is ASPAM), when it illuminates in rotating colours.

Permanently moored in Aomori Bay is the ferry **Hakkōda-maru** (☎ 735-8150; admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-5pm Nov-Mar, to 6pm Apr-Oct). For 25 years, it was the flagship of the famous Seikan line that linked Honshū with Hokkaidō, before the underground tunnel rendered it obsolete. It's now a maritime museum with some interesting displays. In summer it becomes a 'beer garden', surely the most pleasant surroundings in which to have a drink.

The **Nebuta-no-sato Museum** (ねぶたの里; ☎ 738-1230; 1 Yaegiku, Yokouchi; admission ¥630; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) tells the story of Aomori's legendary Nebuta Matsuri, with an exhibition of the mighty illuminated floats used in the festival. Buses to the museum, 9km south of town, leave frequently from stop 9 outside the train station for the Nebuta-no-sato Iriguchi stop (¥450, 30 minutes).

**Shōwa Daibutsu** (昭和の大仏; ☎ 726-2312; 458 Yamazaki, Kuwabara; admission ¥400; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4.30pm Nov-Mar), Japan's largest outdoor Buddha at a height of 21m and weighing 220 tonnes, is an impressive sight. The breezy temple grounds are full of spinning pinwheels left by parents for their dead children. Buses from Aomori station are timed so that you have about an hour to look around before catching the next bus back (¥540, 45 minutes).

The **Munakata Shikō Memorial Museum** (棟方志功記念館; ☎ 777-4567; 2-1-2 Matsubara; admission ¥500; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) houses a collection of woodblock prints, paintings and calligraphy by Munakata Shikō, an Aomori native who won international fame. The building itself is *azekura* style, with walls of geometric wooden planks fitted together without upright supports. Buses bound for Nakatsutui leave from stop 2 outside the train station for the Munakata Shikō Kinenkan-dōri stop (¥190, 15 minutes).

The **Aomori Museum of Art** (青森県立美術館; ☎ 783-3000; 185 Yasuta-Aza Chikano; admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-May, closed 2nd & 4th Mon of month) has a variety of works on display, including rotating exhibits. A large outdoor exhibition of Jōmon-era replicas bring the lifestyles of ancient people to life.

## Festivals & Events

Even Japanese people muddle up Aomori's Nebuta and Hirosaki's Neputa (p534) festivals – not only do they sound alike but both take place at the start of August. The **Nebuta Matsuri** (www.nebuta.or.jp/english/index\_e.htm), held from 2 to 7 August, is renowned for its parades of colossal illuminated floats accompanied by thousands of rowdy, chanting dancers. The parades start at sunset and last for hours; on the final day the action starts around noon.

## Sleeping

It's sometimes tricky to find accommodation in Aomori, due to its status as a stop-off for Hokkaidō-bound travellers. Book ahead, especially for the Nebuta Matsuri.

**Moya Kogen Youth Hostel** (雲谷高原ユースホステル; ☎ 764-2888; 9-5 Yamabuki, Moya; dm from ¥3360; ☎) This modern hostel is 12km from the station. The English-speaking owner loves Ireland and usually has a case of Guinness in the fridge. Buses from stop 9, outside the train station, can drop you off outside the hostel (¥590, 40 minutes). The last bus leaves at 8.20pm.

**Super Hotel Aomori** (☎ 723-9000; http://www.superhotel.co.jp/s\_hotels/aomori/aomori.html; 1-3-14 Hashimoto; s/d incl breakfast ¥4980/6980; ☎) This chain is an attractive option for anyone needing a business hotel. Take bus 4 (¥180) and get off at the NTT building, about 5 minutes away.

**our pick Tako Ryokan** (☎ 722-4825; Yasukata 2-chōme; r per person incl/excl 2 meals from ¥7140/4725) In the town centre, this is a smart option with more charm than a bland business hotel. Japanese-style rooms and (yum!) Japanese meals, mostly local seafood.

**Aomori Grand Hotel** (☎ 723-1011; 1-1-23 Shin-machi; s/d from ¥6500/10,000; ☎) Just east of the station, this hotel has rooms with sea views and is conveniently located. Staff will exchange money after the banks close.

**Hotel JAL City Aomori** (☎ 732-2580; 2-4-12 Yasukata; s/tw ¥9400/16,100; ☎) Six minutes east of the station, near ASPAM, it has international-standard facilities, including a decent restaurant.

## Eating & Drinking

The *tsugaru jamisen* is a version of the traditional three-stringed *shamisen* (guitar) instrument, but with a thicker neck than what's found in other regions. Practitioners are characterised by their rapid, forceful plectrum style. None of the first four places have an English menu, but pictures, plastic food and friendly service make ordering relatively simple.

**Kotobukiya** (☎ 773-7134; 1st fl, 2-1-5 Furukawa; meals from ¥6000; ☎ dinner) Offers nightly dinner shows featuring *tsugaru jamisen* music. Reservations are required and it's a 15-minute walk south of Aomori station.

**Jintako** (☎ 722-7727; 1-6-16 Yasukata; meals from ¥5000; ☎ dinner, closed 1st & 3rd Sun) Another restaurant serving up *tsugaru jamisen* and local seafood.

**Kakigen** (☎ 727-2933; 1-8-9 Shinmachi; dishes/set menu from ¥600/1260; ☎ 11am-midnight) A Korean-Japanese place with some authentic treats such as *makkoli* (Korean rice wine). Good range of seafood dishes, including *hotate* (scallops grilled with butter).

**Nandaimon** (☎ 777-2377; 1-8-3 Shinmachi; dishes/set menu from ¥600/1260; ☎ 11am-midnight) A Korean-Japanese place with some authentic treats such as *makkoli* (Korean rice wine). Good range of seafood dishes, including *hotate* as well as grill-your-own meat ensembles.

**Supage-tei Aomori** (☎ 773-6537; 1-8-8 Shinmachi; dishes from ¥850; ☎ 11am-9pm Tue-Sun) In the basement next door to Kakigen, this has pasta

dishes infused with Japanese-style seafood and an English menu.

**Bar Centanni** (☎ 775-7054; 1-11-16 Shinmachi; ☎ until late) With its industrial aesthetic of concrete and brushed steel, this bar is a minimalist's delight. The soundtrack is organic, though: '60s soul. It's down a small alleyway, which is next to the Doutor coffee shop on Shinmachi.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

There are frequent flights from Aomori airport to major Japanese cities (Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Nagoya) and an international connection to Seoul. Airport buses are timed for flights and depart from the front of the ASPAM building and Aomori station (¥560, 40 minutes).

### BOAT

Passenger ferries to Hakodate leave year-round (¥1850, 3¼ hours), while one ferry departs for Muroran (Hokkaidō) daily at 1.30pm (¥3460). Coming back, an overnighter leaves Muroran at 11.25pm (¥3460, 6¾ hours each way).

The ferry terminal, on the western side of the city, is a 10-minute taxi ride from Aomori station.

### BUS

Between April and mid-November, JR runs five to eight buses daily from stop 8 outside the train station to Towada-ko (¥3000, 4¼ hours); the last bus leaves at 2.30pm. The bus stops at the Hakkōda ropeway (cable car; ¥1070, 50 minutes), then runs via the glorious Sukayu Onsen (p533; ¥1300, one hour) onto the Oirase Valley and the lake.

JR also operates six buses daily to both Morioka (¥3160, three hours) and Sendai (¥5700, five hours), and one night bus to Tokyo (¥10,000, 9½ hours); buses depart from the Highway Bus stop 10 outside the station-side tourist information office.

To visit Osore-zan (Shimokita-hantō), direct buses leave the ASPAM building at 11.55am, 1.55pm and 5pm for Mutsu via Noheji (¥2520, 2¾ hours).

### TRAIN

The JR Tsugaru Kaikyō line runs from Aomori via the Seikan Tunnel to Hakodate on Hokkaidō (*tokkyū*, ¥5140, two hours).

*Kaisoku* trains do the trip in 2½ hours, and on some of these services (¥3150) you take the Seikan Tunnel tour (see the boxed text, p571).

The JR Tōhoku Main line runs south from Aomori to Morioka (*tokkyū*, ¥5960, two hours), from where you can zip back to Tokyo in 2½ hours on the *shinkansen*. The Ōu Main line runs via Hirosaki to Akita (¥3260 4½ hours) where you can pick up the Akita *shinkansen*.

## SHIMOKITA-HANTŌ 下北半島

☎ 0175 / pop 119,600

Also called Masakari-hantō (Axe peninsula) because of its shape, this isolated peninsula has long stretches of sparsely inhabited coastline and remote mountain valleys. At its western edge, **Hotokegaura** (仏ヶ浦) is a spectacular stretch of coastline dotted with 100m-tall wind-carved cliffs, which are said to resemble Buddhas. Stock up with supplies before heading to the peninsula – facilities are limited.

### Mutsu むつ

This is Shimokita's main hub, from where bus services operate across the peninsula. Train connections are centred on Shimokita station, with buses connecting to Mutsu bus terminal. North of Mutsu is Ōhata, where you can get buses to the Yagen Onsen resort. To the east is the cape, Shiriya-zaki, and to the west, Ōma, Honshū's northernmost point. At the bottom tip of the peninsula is Wakinosawa, which is popular with nature lovers, not least for its 'snow monkeys' (Japanese macaques; see www.wakinosawa.com).

The tiny **tourist information office** (☎ 22-0909; ☎ 9am-6pm May-Oct, to 6pm Wed-Mon Nov-Apr) inside Masakari Plaza has few resources; comprehensive information is available in Aomori (p530).

There are numerous accommodation options clustered around the bus terminal. Next to Masakari Plaza, **Murai Ryokan** (むらい旅館; ☎ 22-4755; 9-30 Tanabu-chō, Mutsu; r incl/excl 2 meals from ¥7000/4300) is a safe bet. The rustic **Wakinosawa Youth Hostel** (脇野沢ユースホステル; ☎ 44-2341; 41 Wakinosawasenokawame, Mutsu; dm from ¥2990) is perched on a hillside at Wakinosawa village, 15 minutes west of the ferry pier. The helpful owners drive guests to a local *onsen* (¥200) before dinner, and conduct excursions to observe 'snow monkeys'. Yagen

Onsen offers upmarket accommodation, like **Hotel New Yagen** (ホテルニュー薬研; ☎ 34-3311; r from ¥13,000), with Western- or Japanese-style rooms.

### Osore-zan 恐山

This barren volcanic mountain, with its **Osore-zan-Bodaiji** (恐山菩提寺; admission ¥500; ☎ 6am-6pm May-Oct), is among Japan's most sacred regions. It's a sulphurously atmospheric place that's popular with pilgrims seeking to commune with the dead, especially parents who've lost their children. Several stone statues of the child-guardian deity, Jizō, overlook hills of craggy, sulphur-strewn rocks and hissing vapour; visitors help lost souls with their underworld penance by adding stones to the cairns. With the yellow sulphur tributaries running into **Usori-ko** (宇曽利湖) and ravens warbling about, it's an appropriate setting for Buddhist purgatory – even the name, Osore, means fear or dread.

You can bathe on hell's doorstep at free *onsen* to the side as you approach the main hall (sex-segregated options are on the left). The two annual **Osore-zan Taisai festivals** (20 to 24 July and 9 to 11 October) attract huge crowds of visitors who come to consult blind crones. These *itako* (mediums) contact dead family members for a ¥3000 fee – it's an elaborate show, as the women recite Buddhist sutras and rattle rosary beads to invoke the spirits.

## Getting There & Away

Renting a car in Aomori will save you a lot of time; however, the JR Ōminato line has two to four direct *kaisoku* trains daily from Aomori via Noheji to the terminus at Ōminato – get off one stop before at Shimokita station (¥1890, two hours) for buses to Mutsu. Buses run from the Mutsu bus terminal to Ōhata (¥440, 40 minutes).

From Shimokita station, frequent buses run to the Mutsu bus terminal (¥230, 10 minutes). Three direct buses run daily between Mutsu bus terminal and Aomori (¥2520, 2½ hours); others run via Noheji (¥1260, 1½ hours) onto Aomori (¥1260, one hour).

From Ōma, there are two daily ferries (four in summer) to Hakodate on Hokkaidō (¥1170, 1¾ hours). The JR Tsugaru line travels from Aomori to Kanita (¥480, 48 minutes), from where two ferries run daily (three in summer) to Wakinosawa (¥1120, one hour).

## Getting Around

Buses to destinations across the peninsula run from the Mutsu bus terminal. Between May and October, regular buses run from Wakinosawa to Mutsu (¥1790, 1½ hours), from where four buses leave for Osore-zan between 9am and 4.45pm (¥750, 40 minutes); the last bus back leaves Osore-zan at 7.30pm.

Nine daily buses ply the northern shore of the peninsula, passing Ōhata, Shimofuro Onsen and Ōma before terminating at Sai (¥2260, two hours). Buses for Yagen Onsen start from Ōhata (¥540, 30 minutes). Six JR buses run daily between Ōminato station (not the Mutsu bus terminal) and Wakinosawa (¥1790, 1¼ hours).

Between April and October, round-trip sightseeing boats for Hotokegaura depart from Wakinosawa at 10.45am and 2.45pm (¥3800, two hours), returning from Sai (¥2170, two hours); services are often suspended in poor weather.

## HAKKŌDA-SAN 八甲田山

☎ 017

Just south of Aomori, Hakkōda-san is a scenic region of peaks popular as a day trip with hikers, *onsen* enthusiasts and skiers. The Hakkōda **ropeway** (cable car; one way/return ¥1150/1800; ☎ 9am-4.20pm) whisks you up Tamoyachi-dake to the 1324m summit. From there you can follow a network of hiking trails. One particularly pleasant route scales the three peaks of Akakura-dake (1548m), Ido-dake (1550m) and Ōdake (1584m), and then winds its way down to Sukayu Onsen, which is about 10 minutes by bus beyond the ropeway station, in the direction of Towada-ko. This 8km hike can be done in a leisurely four hours.

**Sukayu Onsen Ryokan** (酸ヶ湯温泉; ☎ 738-6400; r per person incl/excl 2 meals from ¥11700/4350; ☎ 7am-5.30pm) is a place plucked right out of an old *ukiyo-e* woodblock painting – a delight for all five senses. Look at the dark wood, milky water and steam; listen to the gurgle of the water; feel its penetrating heat or massage tired shoulders with its *utase-yu* (massaging stream of water); smell the sulphur; if you dare, taste the water itself – it's lemony, almost like *ponzu* (citrusy sauce). On a cold autumn day relaxing here is hard to beat, and one of the baths is rumoured to hold up to 1000 people (though you'll rarely see more than 25 at any one time). Be aware that this is a mixed-sex bath, and that it's off in the mountains,

away from everything but a few hiking trails. Those who take the time will be happy they stepped off the beaten 'bath'.

Two JR buses leave from stop 8 outside Aomori station and pass by the Hakkōda Ropeway-eki stop (¥1070, 50 minutes). In winter, buses terminate at the next stop, Sukayu Onsen (¥1300, one hour). Guests of the ryokan can take the twice-daily shuttle.

## HIROSAKI 弘前

☎ 0172 / pop 187,600

Tucked about an hour southwest of Aomori, and founded in the 17th century by Lord Tsugaru Tamenobu, this pretty castle town was once one of Tōhoku's leading cultural centres. However, the Meiji Restoration combined Tsugaru's territories with those of the Nambu clan, resulting in the creation of Aomori prefecture, with the city of Aomori as its capital. Unlike Aomori, Hirosaki was spared from damage during WWII (although the castle itself had been previously destroyed by a lightning strike), and the castle grounds are well preserved, with extant keeps and towers, plus numerous beautiful maple and cherry trees. Hirosaki is also the site of the Neputa Matsuri – not to be confused with Aomori's Nebuta but almost as rowdy and just as popular.

## Information

Thirty minutes of internet is free at the Hirosaki station's tourist info booth.

**Freaks** (フリークス; ☎ 29-5255; ☎ 24hr) Internet access. Too far to walk to, but the city bus (¥100; several each hour) goes there in about 15 minutes.

**Hirosaki Sightseeing Information Centre** (☎ 37-5501; ☎ 9am-6pm, later during festivals) Inside the Kankōkan (Tourism building) on the south side of Hirosaki-kōen; has basic information.

**Main post office** (18-1 Kita Kawarake-chō; ☎ 232-4104) Has postal and ATM service available until 9pm weekdays (7pm weekends); 20 minutes' walk northwest of the station.

**Tourist information office** (☎ 26-3600; ☎ 8.45am-6pm) To the right as you exit Hirosaki station; offers a basic brochure/map in English, with some of the friendliest staff you'll find in Tōhoku.

## Sights

The **Tsugaruhan Neputa-mura** (☎ 39-1511; 61 Kamenoko-machi; admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Nov, to 4pm Dec-Mar) has a fine, extensive display, over two levels, of the unique fan-shaped floats that are paraded during the Neputa Matsuri.

Visitors get the chance to bang the massive drums used during the parade, while wearing a Neputa smock, all to the accompaniment of a traditional flautist. Addictive fun.

Just south, the **Genbei craft shop** (☎ 38-3377; 4-3 Ourachō; ☎ 10am-5pm Fri-Wed) has fine examples of Tsugaru lacquerware, nicknamed *baka-nurii* (fool's lacquerware), due to the tedious work involved in applying more than 40 layers of multicoloured designs to its surface.

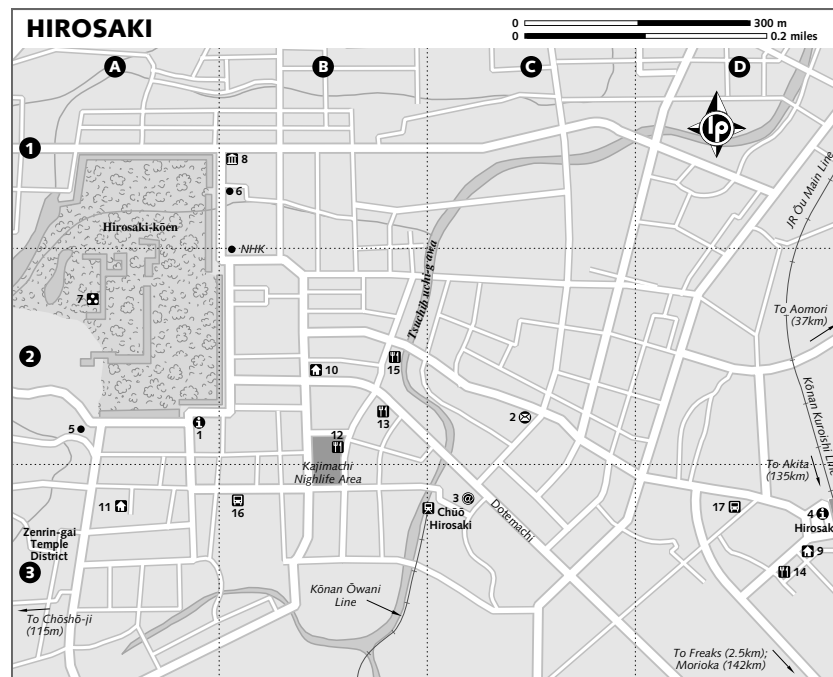
**Hirosaki-kōen** (弘前公園), the castle park, is so pretty that it's amazing that much of it is free. Three moats (with lotus plants and overhanging cherry trees) surround the remains of the original castle, **Hirosaki-jō**, which has gates and three corner keeps. It's a satisfying place for a stroll and attracts big crowds for *hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) during late April and early May. A giant murder of crows descends to roost on the trees each evening. Construction of Hirosaki-jō was completed in 1611, but the castle was burnt down in 1627 after being struck by lightning. One of the corner towers was rebuilt in 1810 and now houses a small **museum** (admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Nov) of samurai artefacts, and a **botanical garden** (admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Nov).

**Fujita Kinen Tei-en** (☎ 37-5525; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr-Nov) is a well-manicured garden outside the southwest corner of the park.

The **Zenrin-gai** (禅林街) temple district is another atmospheric spot, redolent of Old Japan. It follows the central avenue – flanked by temples – to **Chōshō-ji** (長勝寺; ☎ 32-0813; admission ¥300; ☎ 8am-5pm Apr-Oct, 9am-4pm Nov-mid-Dec), the Tsugaru clan's family temple. After passing through the impressive gate, continue past a large 14th-century bell to the main hall, which dates from the 17th century. Turning left, a path through the trees leads to a row of mausoleums built for the early rulers of the Tsugaru clan, who dominated the region around Hirosaki during the Edo period. Also on display is a collection of 500 statues depicting Buddha's disciples. To get here take a bus from stop 6 outside Hirosaki station to the Daigaku-byōin stop (¥170, 15 minutes); from there it's a further 10-minute walk southwest. Otherwise you could do the 30-minute walk or take a taxi (¥1000).

## Festivals & Events

From 1 to 7 August Hirosaki celebrates its **Neputa Matsuri**, a festival famous for its illuminated



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floats parading every evening to the accompaniment of flutes and drums. The festival is generally said to signify ceremonial preparation for battle – the fan-shaped floats are rotated during festival parades so that the heroic *kagami-e* painting on the front and the tear-jerker *miokuri-e* (seeing-off picture) on the back can both be viewed. Like its more rowdy counterpart held in Aomori (p531), this festival attracts thousands of visitors – book accommodation well in advance if you plan to attend.

## Sleeping

Hirosaki has very few budget and midrange options.

**Hirosaki Youth Hostel** (☎ 33-7066; 11 Mori-machi; dm from ¥3045) It's quite hard to see the sign for this hostel that's tucked away on a side street near the castle, but at least there's no curfew. Take a bus from stop 6 outside Hirosaki station to the Daigaku-byōin stop (¥100, 15 minutes); the hostel is 250m west down an alleyway. Look up for the small sign that's almost indistinguishable from the other street signs, before you come to Lawson at the corner.

**Hirosaki Grand Hotel** (☎ 32-1515; 1 Ichiban-chō; s/tw/semi-d from ¥5800/11,000/9000) The lobby and restaurant are snazzy, and the red carpeting will make you feel a bit like you've stepped

into a set for *The Shining*, but the rooms are small and a bit stuffy, with unit baths.

**City Hirosaki Hotel** (☎ 37-0109; 1-1-2 Ōmachi; s/tw from ¥6825/11,550) This swanky place does have grand rooms and is right next to the station. Actually, everything's grand here: the foyer, the restaurant. It even has its own post office branch on the 1st floor.

## Eating & Drinking

**Live House Yamauta** (☎ 36-1835; 1-2-7 Ōmachi; dinner/show per person from ¥3000; ☎ 5-11pm, closed alternate Mon; E) A popular venue run by a family who serve local dishes and give twice-nightly performances of folk music on the *tsugaru jamisen* (p531).

**Anzu** (☎ 32-6684; 1-44 Oyakata-machi; set menus from ¥3500; ☎ 5-11pm, closed irregularly) This is another option for the pleasing combination of traditional Japanese food and *tsugaru-jamisen* performances. No English menu.

**Biru-tei** (☎ 37-7741; Hokusai-kan, 26-1 Dote-machi; ☎ lunch & dinner; E) Over three floors, this monument to consumption hedges its bets. It features an Irish pub (open 11am to 11pm) on the 1st floor, a *Cheers*-style bar with a comprehensive international-beer menu on the 2nd and an *izakaya* (open noon to 1am) on the 3rd.

**Saki** (☎ 33-2122; 9 Hyakkokumachi; sweets from ¥320, sets ¥1000; ☎ 8am-7pm) Excellent daily specials complement a varied menu of either sit-down or take-away meals, breads, desserts and beverages. If you're the *konbini-bentō* (convenience store boxed lunch)-on-the-park-bench kind of eater, the boxed lunches here are a refreshing change. The high tea set is huge, easily large enough for two, and the scones come with real whipped cream.

## Getting There & Away

Hirosaki station is on the JR Ōu Main line north of Aomori (*futsū*, ¥650, 44 minutes) and south of Akita (*tokkyū*, ¥4130, two hours).

Most local buses stop at the train station as well as the Hirosaki bus terminal adjacent to Itō Yōkadō department store. The bus terminal only services connections to Sendai (¥5090, 4½ hours, nine daily) and Iwaki-san (¥1780, 80 minutes, seven daily), with a change at Dake Onsen.

## AONI ONSEN 青荷温泉

This seriously atmospheric but seriously isolated rustic group of **Aoni Onsen Ryokan** (青荷温

泉旅館; ☎ 0172-54-8588; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥9075) seems to exist in a time warp, where oil lamps replace electricity and bathing is elevated to a fine art. Advance reservations are mandatory; the adjoining camping ground charges ¥1000 even if you bring your own tent. You can use just the baths (¥500, open 10am to 3pm). Aoni Onsen is most accessible by car. By public transport, take the private Kounan Tetsudō line from Hirosaki to Kur-oishi (¥420, 30 minutes, six daily); Kounan buses connect with arriving passengers for Niji-no-ko (¥750, 10 minutes), from where shuttle buses run to Aoni (free, 30 minutes, six daily). This journey helps filter out the true *onsen* buffs.

## IWAKI-SAN 岩木山

Soaring above Hirosaki is the sacred volcano of **Iwaki-san** (岩木山; 1625m), a popular peak for both pilgrims and hikers. From early April to late October there are up to eight buses daily from the Hirosaki bus terminal to Dake Onsen (¥900, 50 minutes), where you transfer to a shuttle bus to Hachigōme (¥880, 30 minutes) at the foot of the ski lift. Open mid-April to mid-October, the lift (one way/return ¥410/750, 45 minutes) to the summit (8th station) provides the easiest access, but it's also possible to hike to the top in about four hours starting from **Iwaki-jinja**.

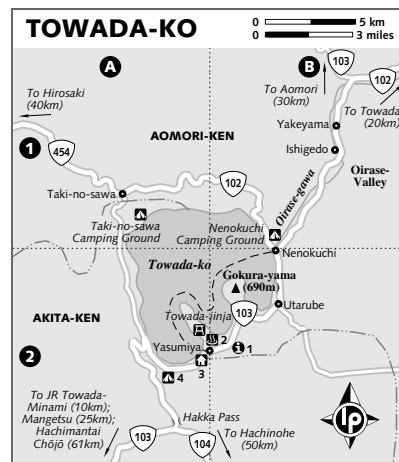
In Hyakuzawa Onsen, **Asobe no Mori Iwakiso** (国民宿舎岩木荘 アンペの森いわき荘; ☎ 0172-83-2215; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥7350) is a safe bet. From Hirosaki bus terminal stop 3, take a bus bound for Iwaki-sō and get off at the last stop (¥660, one hour).

## TOWADA-KO 十和田湖

☎ 0176 / pop 6000

There's no denying that this 327m-deep crater lake (52km in circumference) has some impressive scenery (it's at the top of a 440m mountain), famously transparent water and superb opportunities for hiking and skiing, but people here are oddly unwelcoming – perhaps the only area in Tōhoku where you may be told, 'we're booked solid this evening', in the off season, when there are only two cars in the parking lot. It's best enjoyed as a day trip, unless you've made reservations in advance.

Nenokuchi, a small tourist outpost on the eastern shore of the lake, marks the entrance to the 14km **Oirase Valley Nature Trail**, a three-



hour hike along the lakeshore; you might want to hike it in the early morning or late afternoon to avoid the coach parties. The path ends at Yakeyama, from where frequent buses return to Nenokuchi (¥660, 30 minutes) and Yasumiya (¥1100, one hour).

The tourist hub, Yasumiya, offers numerous boat tours of the lake, the best of which is the one-hour cruise between Yasumiya and Nenokuchi (one way ¥1320). Boats leave roughly every hour from April to early November between 8am and 4pm. You can rent mountain bikes at the dock for ¥1500 per day from April to November.

The hole-in-the-wall **tourist information centre** (☎ 75-2425; ☎ 8am-5pm), just north of the JR bus station, stocks only Japanese-language hiking maps but can help arrange accommodation.

## Sleeping & Eating

There are several camping grounds around the edge of the lake. **Towada-ko Oide Camping Ground** (☎ 75-2368; www.citydo.com/outdoor/akita/0370.html in Japanese; camp sites ¥300; ☎ 25 Apr-5 Nov) is about 4km west of Yasumiya. JR buses from Yasumiya to Towada-Minami pass by the Oide Kyampu-jō-mae stop (¥220, four minutes, two buses a day, depart at 8.45am and 1.10pm).

**Towada-ko Grand Hotel** (☎ 75-1111; Yasumiya-sambashi-mae, Towada-kohan, Towada-chō, Kamikita-gun; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥8400) Offers a choice of Western- or Japanese-style rooms, and a dinner buffet that's ¥3500, but has all the

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trimmings, including fruit sushi. Don't leave here without picking up a stuffed weasel as a souvenir.

**Hakubutsukan Youth Hostel** (☎ 75-2002; dm from ¥360) Rooms here are squeezed into the old wing of the Towada-ko Grand Hotel, but are not available when the hotel is 'booked solid'.

*Minshuku* line the track leading out of Yasumiya away from the lake, but almost all of them close from November through March.

**Kokuminshukuha Towada-ko Onsen** (国民宿舎十和田湖温泉; ☎ 75-2041; www.laketowada.co.jp/e/; 16 Towada, Okuse-Aza; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥6650; ☎ 26 Apr-4 Nov) A few minutes northwest of the bus station, with decent rooms and a refreshingly welcoming owner.

**Mangetsu** (満月; ☎ 0186-37-3340; 20-1 Towada Ōyu Kaminoyu, Kazunoshi; meals from ¥650; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) A great place for handmade *soba* noodles, tempura and other Japanese meals, run by a young chef. There's no English menu, but a very helpful, warm staff make dining here a pleasure. It's 25km towards Akita-ken on Route 103.

## Getting There & Away

There are two bus centres in Yasumiya, one for JR buses and one for other services. Both are a couple of minutes on foot from the pier.

From April to November, JR buses run to Aomori (¥3000, three hours). There are three buses daily between April and early November to Morioka (¥2420, 2¼ hours). From late April to September there is one bus at 8.45am to Hachimantai Chōjō, the main point of access for the Hachimantai region (¥2300, 2¼ hours).

The nearest train station is at Towada-Minami on the JR Hanawa line, with connections to Morioka (*kaisoku* ¥2080, two hours). Up to four connecting buses run daily 8am to 4.40pm (¥330, one hour).

## AKITA-KEN 秋田県

In a country created by volcanoes and peppered with *onsen*, many prefectures claim to be the 'Land of the *Onsen*' and Akita-ken is no exception. Japan's sixth-largest prefecture, it consists of 13 cities, six counties, nine towns and three villages, most of which are close to – or in – an *onsen*. People are as warm as the hot-spring water, making Akita a great place to relax before heading northward to Hokkaidō or going back on down south. The Oū Mountain Range and Dewa Mountain Ranges ensure there's plenty of hiking opportunities.

### HACHIMANTAI 八幡平

Like a row of giant molars, often snowcapped, the peaks of this volcanic plateau south of Towada-ko are popular with hikers, skiers and *onsen* enthusiasts. Cutting across the Iwate-ken–Akita-ken border, the area features four types of volcano and has spectacular views, including Iwate-san (p528).

Hachimantai Chōjō, the main access point for the summit, offers gentle walks, but longer hikes are possible over a couple of days from nearby **Tōshichi Onsen**, a 2km walk downhill from the Hachimantai Chōjō car park. West of the summit, the Aspite Line Hwy, open late April to November, winds past several hot-spring resorts before joining Rte 341, which leads either south to Tazawa-ko or north towards Towada-ko. In winter some roads may be closed due to snow.

There's a small **visitors centre** (☎ 0186-31-2714; ☎ 9am–5pm, closed Nov–Apr) next to the car park at Hachimantai Chōjō, where you can purchase regional contour maps (Japanese only) and consult bilingual hiking sketch maps. However, the best place for English-language information on Hachimantai is Morioka's tourist office (p524) or the office at Akita JR station.

The mountain lodge **Yuki-no-Koya** (ゆきの小舎; ☎ 0186-31-2118; dm from ¥5250; ☎ closed mid-Nov–Christmas & Feb–late Apr) is in a quiet riverside location at Shibari Onsen, on Rte 341, north of the turn-off for the Aspite Line Hwy to Hachimantai. Buses from Hachimantai Chōjō to Shibari Onsen (and connections to the JR Hanawa line towards Morioka) are, at best, erratic. Do a thorough check at the visitors centre or Morioka's tourist information office before setting out.

**Hachimantai Youth Hostel** (☎ 0195-78-2031; http://www.geocities.co.jp/SilkRoad-Lake/5303/; 5-2 Midorigaoka, Matsuo-mura; dm without meals from ¥3990) is 20 minutes by bus east of the summit. Get off at the Hachimantai Kankō Hoteru-mae stop (three to five buses daily, last bus 3.40pm).

### Getting There & Away

Bus services to Hachimantai Chōjō run from 20 April to 31 October, with four buses departing from Morioka station daily (¥1380, two hours, hourly until noon).

*Kaisoku* on the JR Hanawa line run from Morioka to Hachimantai and Kazuno-Hanawa stations (¥1910, two hours), where you can change to infrequent buses departing before noon to Hachimantai Chōjō via Shibari Onsen. Two stops further west on the Hanawa line is Towada-Minami station (¥2080, two hours) for access to Towada-ko. The direct bus to Towada-ko from Hachimantai Chōjō at noon is more convenient.

There are three buses daily from Hachimantai Chōjō to Tazawa Kohan (¥1880, two hours) and Tazawa-ko station (¥1990, 2½ hours); the last bus departs at 3pm.

### TAZAWA-KO 田沢湖

☎ 0187 / pop 13,000

With the atmospheric Nyūtō Onsen, some spectacular views, nice hiking and its own *shinkansen* station, Tazawa-ko has it all. At 423m, it is the deepest lake in Japan. Surrounded by wooded shores, with sandy beaches and boat rentals, Tazawa-ko is fun for kids, adults, couples... just about anyone wanting to slip away for a weekend. In September 2005, it merged with nearby Kakunodate and Nishikimura to create a larger *shi* (city), now known as Nishikishi. Thankfully for travellers, names have otherwise stayed the same.

The main access to the area is via JR Tazawa-ko station, outside of which buses from stop 3 run to Tazawa Kohan (¥350, 10 minutes), the area's hub on the east side of the lake.

Inside Tazawa-ko station, the modern and highly efficient **Folake tourist information office** (☎ 43-2111; ☎ 8.30am–6.30pm) has excellent bilingual maps and free internet. If you're planning on doing any hiking in the Tazawa-ko or Hachimantai regions, ask for detailed contour maps in Japanese, as well as sketch maps in English.

### Activities

Nyūtō Onsen is one of Japan's nicest hot springs, a must visit for any *onsen* buffs. Tucked up at the top of a winding mountain road, this collection of **spas** (each with a different character, and different baths) is famous for its healing waters and its *rotenburo* (outdoor baths). Several offer overnight lodging (see Sleeping, following), and many are *konyoku* (mixed sex). In Tsuru-no-Yu or the streamside Kuroyu, you'll easily feel like you've stepped back into a Japanese woodblock print... or gone to heaven. The former has classic milk-white water, while the latter is particularly beautiful when the maple trees are in full bloom.

Thanks to inconvenient bus schedules, it's wise to check with the tourist information office before heading somewhere. Semi-hourly buses run from Tazawa Kohan to Nyūtō Onsen (¥650, 40 minutes); the last bus back leaves at 6.40pm.

The lake offers boat excursions (¥1170, 40 minutes, from April to mid-November only), swimming beaches and a 20km perimeter road for which you can rent bicycles (¥400 per hour) or scooters (¥1200 per hour) in Tazawa Kohan.

In winter, there's **skiing** at Tazawa-kōgen, about halfway between the lake and Nyūtō Onsen, while a stroll by the lake at sunset is a treat at any time of year. In spring and early summer, skunk cabbage flowers in a nearby swamp, its white blooms carpeting the mud.

Hikers should take a bus from Tazawa-ko station to Komaga-take Hachigōme (8th station) for **Akita Komaga-take** (秋田駒ヶ岳; 1637m). From there, it's a challenging climb to the summit. A popular trail leads across to the peak of Nyūtō-zan (1478m) in about four (Bashō) hours, from where you can hike down to Nyūtō Onsen (another 5km). The whole

thing is an all-day trek – make sure you're properly prepared. After soaking in a few of Nyūtō Onsen's renowned *rotenburo*, you can catch a bus back to Tazawa Kohan (¥650, 50 minutes); the last bus leaves at 6.20pm, but the schedule changes each April.

Direct buses travel to Komaga-take Hachigōme from the bus terminal near JR Tazawa-ko station, via Tazawa Kohan, six times daily during July and August, less frequently on weekends and holidays from June to late October (¥1000, one hour). At other times, you can take a bus from Tazawa-ko to Kōgen Onsen (¥580, 30 minutes), from where frequent buses run to Komaga-take Hachigōme (¥600, 30 minutes). If you're stuck, buses travelling to Nyūtō Onsen stop at Komaga-take Tozan-guchi (¥560, 40 minutes), which is 7km from Komaga-take Hachigōme.

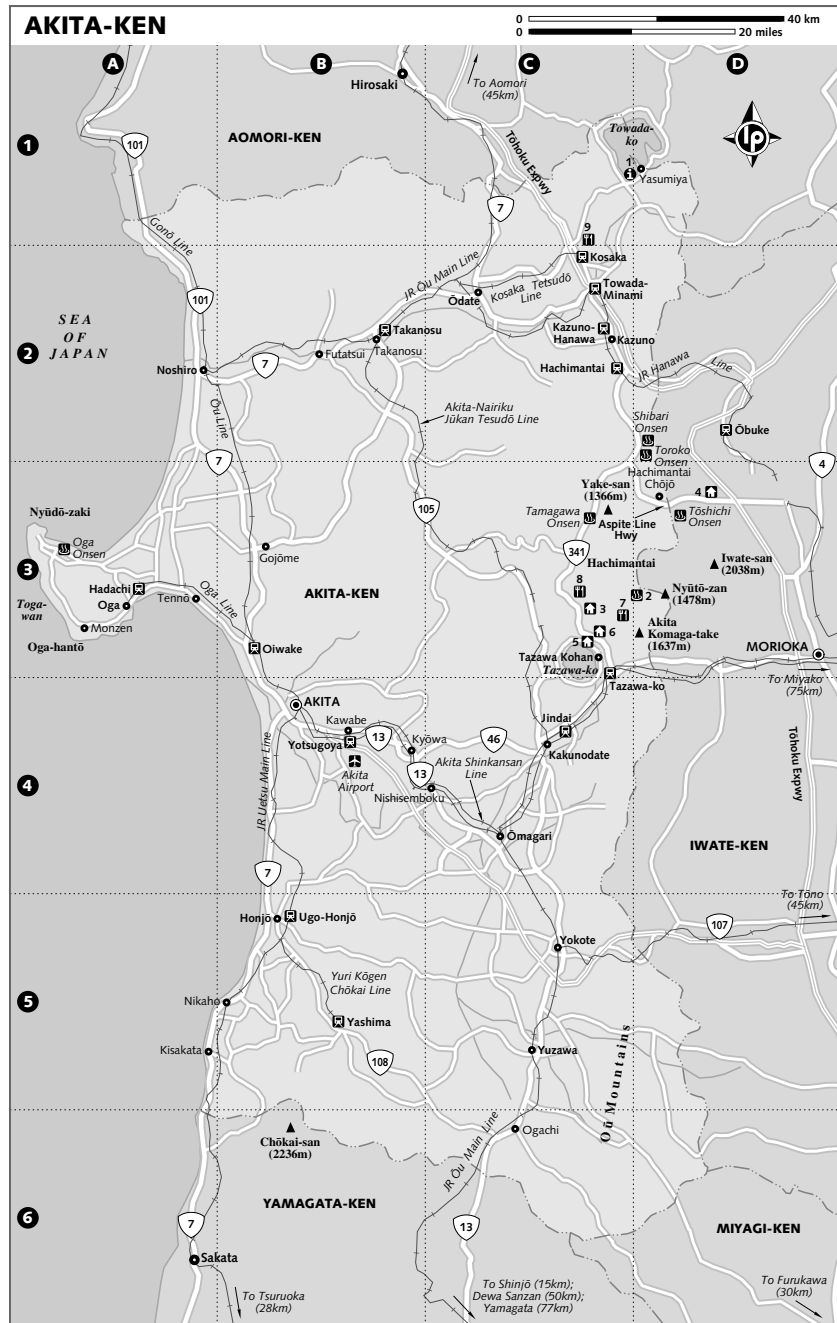
### Sleeping

**Tazawa-ko Youth Hostel** (田沢湖ユースホステル; ☎ 43-1281; 33-8 Kami-Ishigami, Obonai; r from ¥3140) Come here for Japanese meals that are equal to many *minshuku*, served with a friendly smile. It's not in great shape, but the rooms are clean and include TVs, and there's a nice *onsen* downstairs. It's 10 minutes from Tazawa Kohan bus station; coming from Tazawa-ko station, get off at the Kōen-iriguchi stop. The hostel's diagonally across the street.

**Minshuku Beach House** (民宿ビーチハウス; ☎ 43-0396; www.kosui-net.com; 145 Azaharuyama; r incl 2 meals ¥6500) Small, casual *minshuku* with shared baths, a steaming hot *onsen* and worn *tatami* that feels like home. Steps away from the lakeshore, with great sunset views. From the Kōen Iriguchi bus stop continue straight towards the lake – Beach House is the last house on the left.

### HOT STUFF

There's an enduring myth attached to Lake Tazawa concerning a beautiful woman, Takko Hime, and her husband, Hachirōtarō. It's a very long and complex legend, and more than a little odd, but the gist of it is this: Takko Hime drank too much of the local water, believing it would make her even more beautiful. Her greed turned her into a water dragon, a metamorphosis that caused violent storms to whip up the elements, creating Lake Tazawa in the process. Meanwhile, Hachirōtarō had eaten a fish that made him very thirsty. He also drank too much water, bloated out and became a water dragon; the fury of his transformation from man to beast created Lake Towada. Later, he fell in love with the beautiful water dragon, Takko Hime, and began to visit her regularly at Tazawa-ko. The passion of their lovemaking on the lake floor supposedly keeps Lake Tazawa from freezing over in winter.



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## Cafe-Inn That Sounds Good! (サウンドズグット);

☎ 43-0127; www.hana.or.jp/~takk; sanzoku@hana.or.jp;  
160-58 Tazawakohan; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥8800;  
☑ A charming place with an excellent atmosphere. The owners are jazz fans and often host impromptu jazz nights; they also help organise outdoor activities. It's a pleasant 30-minute stroll north of Tazawa Kohan bus station, otherwise call ahead for a pick-up; advance reservations are mandatory during peak seasons.

The Nyütō Onsen area is home to seven rustic ryokan, great for soaking away from it all. At **Tsuru-no-yu Onsen Ryokan** (鶴の湯温泉旅館; ☎ 46-2139; Kokuyurin 50 Senboku-gun, Akita, Towada-Hachimantai National Park; r per person ¥8550, bath ¥500; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun, day use 10am-3pm) and **Tae-no-yu Onsen Ryokan** (☎ 46-2740; r per person ¥12,855, bath ¥1000; ☎ 10am-3pm), rates include two meals.

If you just fancy a dip in a *rotenburo*, stay at the **Nyütō camping ground** (sites ¥1000, plus per person ¥500) and then head for **Magoroku Onsen Ryokan** (☎ 46-2224; bath ¥400; ☎ 7am-5pm) or **Ganiba Onsen Ryokan** (☎ 46-2021; bath ¥500; ☎ 8am-5pm), which has a popular outdoor *konyoku* bath.

## Eating &amp; Drinking

Both of the following establishments are a 15-minute walk north of the Tazawa Kohan bus station, where you will also find a cluster of snack bars, ice-cream stands and souvenir shops.

**Heart Herb** (ハートハーブ; ☎ 43-2424; lunch sets ¥880; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Nov, 10am-4pm Dec-Mar) Has a good café and local food-inspired menus (no English), plus a weekend all-you-can-eat special for only ¥1500.

**Kohan-no-Mori Restaurant ORAE** (オラエ 湖畔の杜 レストランオラエ; ☎ 58-0608; 37-5 Haruyama; set menus/beers from ¥820/480; ☎ 11am-9pm) A groovy place for snacks and local microbrews with its relaxed outdoor deck. There's no English, but picture menus (no beef, just chicken and veggies) make for easy ordering. Try the *korokke* (croquette) set (¥1200) or one of the daily specials.

## Getting There &amp; Away

On the Akita *shinkansen* line, Tazawa-ko is within easy reach of Morioka (¥1980, 33 minutes), Kakunodate (¥1560, 13 minutes) and Akita (¥3280, one hour), and it is only a three-hour trip from Tokyo (¥15,240, 186 minutes). Local trains run infrequently along the JR Tazawa-ko line to Morioka (¥740, 60 minutes) and Kakunodate (¥320, 20 minutes).

If you're heading west, it's easiest to take the bus from Tazawa Kohan via Tazawa-ko station to Kakunodate (¥840, 52 minutes, nine daily); departures before 4.10pm continue to Akita (¥1680, 2¼ hours). From December to March, services to and from Tazawa Kohan, but not Tazawa-ko station, are suspended.

Between 20 April and 31 October, three buses daily leave Tazawa-ko station for Hachimantai Chōjō (¥1990, 2¼ hours); the last bus leaves at 12.40pm.

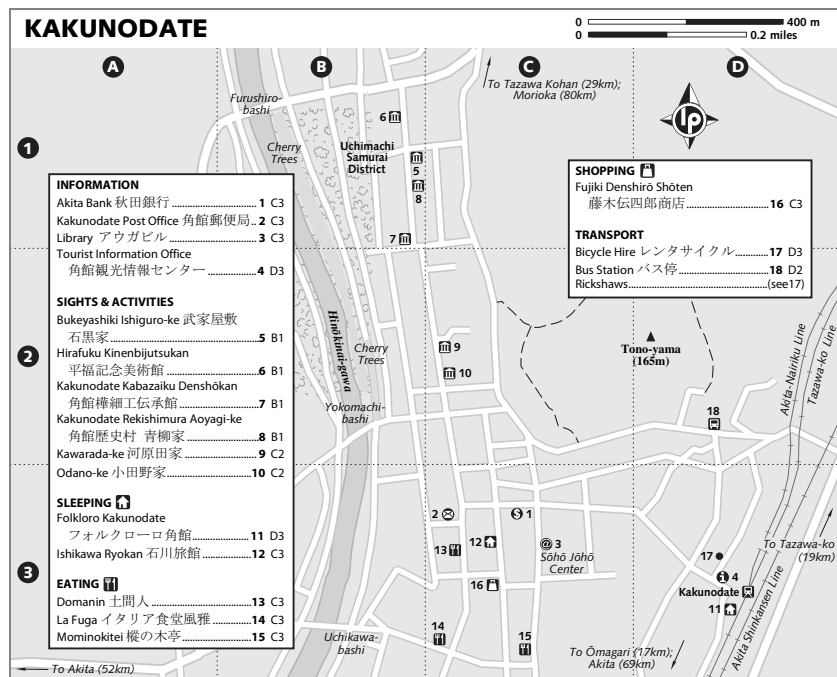
## KAKUNODATE 角館

☎ 0187 / pop 14,390

This quiet castle town was founded in 1620 by the feudal lord Ashina Yoshikatsu, a member of the Satake clan. The location was considered ideal as it was relatively secure, being surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges. Kakunodate is known as 'Little Kyoto', a thoughtful, immersive experience for anyone interested in old Japan. The castle has gone but the feudal layout is very much intact. Wandering through Uchimachi – the samurai district, with its original homesteads surrounded by cherry trees and lush garden expanses – is a splendid way to pass a day, though you may have quite a bit of company during peak holiday times. In September 2005 it merged with nearby Tazawa-ko (p538), but names have remained the same.

## Information

Cash service is available at the **Kakunodate Post Office** (☎ 54-1400) and Akita bank.



Outside the station, you can hire a **bicycle** (☎ 53-3002; per hr ¥300) or a Japanese-speaking **rickshaw driver** (per rickshaw 15/30min ¥2000/5000; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Apr-Nov) to explain the local sights.

**Library** (Sōgō Jōhō Centre; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) Free internet access.

**Tourist information office** (☎ 54-2700; ☎ 9am-6pm mid-Apr-Sep, to 5.30pm Oct-mid-Apr) In a small building that looks like a *kura*, it's outside Kakunodate station. The staff will oblige with reservations and English-language maps.

## Sights

The Uchimachi samurai district is a 15-minute walk northwest from Kakunodate station. It's possible to stroll at any time, but most of the action is from April to November.

**Bukeyashiki Ishiguro-ke** (☎ 55-1496; Omotemachi; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-5pm) was the residence of the Ishiguro family, advisers to the Satake clan; a descendant of the family still lives there, and has opened some of the rooms to the public. The house dates from 1809 and features an ornate gate, thatched roof and two entrances.

The interiors of the **Kawarada-ke** (☎ mid-Apr-Nov) and **Odano-ke** residences can be viewed for free, while further north **Kakunodate Rekishimura Aoyagi-ke** (☎ 54-3257; www.samuraiworld.com/english/index.html; 3 Omotemachi, Shimochō; admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar) is the centrepiece of the district, an agglomeration of mini-museums with folk art and Aoyagi family heirlooms. Not all of the pieces are related to feudal history – in a turn-up for the books, there are also exhibits featuring old-time cameras, gramophones and classic jazz record covers.

**Kakunodate Kabazaiku Denshokan** (☎ 54-1700; 10-1 Omotemachi Shimochō; single/combined ¥300/510; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar) is a museum that houses various exhibits and has demonstrations of *kabazaiku* (cherry-bark craft). The combined ticket also allows entry to the nearby **Hirafuku Kinenbijutsukan** (☎ 54-3888; 4-4 Kamichō Omotemachi; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar), which displays Japanese and Western modern art.

## Festivals & Events

Some of the *shidarezakura* (drooping cherry) trees in the Bukeyashiki (samurai) area are up to 300 years old. On the river embankment,

a 2km 'cherry blossom tunnel' comes alive around April/May – many of the trees were originally brought from Kyōto.

From 7 to 9 September Kakunodate celebrates the **Hikiyama Matsuri**, in which participants haul around enormous seven-tonne *yama* (wooden carts) to pray for peaceful times, accompanied by folk music and dancing.

## Sleeping & Eating

It might be more desirable to stay in Morioka or Akita; not only are Kakunodate's sights easily covered in a day trip from either, but those two cities have more accommodation options for travellers.

Sakura is big here, and you'll find pink 'sakura' udon, sakura sweets and other cherry-related products for sale.

**Ishikawa Ryokan** (☎ 54-2030; Iwasemachi 32; r incl 2 meals from ¥10,500) Close to town, this ryokan, which has been around since Edo times, offers Japanese-style rooms (no surprise there) with private bathroom.

**Folkloro Kakunodate** (☎ 53-2070; Nakasuga-zawa 14; s/tw/q ¥7350/12,600/21,000) This Western-style hotel is next to Kakunodate station; English is not spoken here; prices decrease for multiple-day stays.

**Mominokitei** (☎ 52-1705; mains from ¥1000; ☎ lunch & dinner) Mominokitei has a lovely old traditional Japanese interior and friendly staff, but it's an Italian restaurant, sort of. Take the very Italian entrée of bruschetta, antipasto and garden salad: it's served up Japanese style, arranged into minimal configurations, like sushi would be. Crisscrossed and arranged according to complementary colours, a sliver of capsicum might nestle on a bridge of finely chopped carrot, itself resting on a bed of lettuce. No English menu.

**La Fuga** (☎ 54-2784; 34-8 Kotate; set lunches/pizzas from ¥800/1200; ☎ 11am-2pm Tue-Sun; E) Kakunodate seems to have an Italy fetish. Like Mominokitei, this is one place worth seeking out, with its excellent pizzas and friendly owners.

**Domanin** (☎ 52-1703; 30 Shimonakamachi; single items ¥600, meals from ¥1575; ☎ lunch & dinner until midnight) This funky *izakaya*-style eatery features no Italian dishes, no English either, just an assortment of the usual suspects: try *yakitori* (chicken meat on skewers) or *agedashi-dōfu* (fried tofu) if you need suggestions.

## Shopping

Kakunodate is renowned for *kabazaiku* (household or decorative items covered in

cherry bark), a craft first taken up by poor samurai. It's worth spending more on the genuine article that is made entirely from wood, rather than the cheaper version with a tin inner core.

**Fuji Denshiro Shōten** (☎ 54-1151; 45 Shimoshinmachi; ☎ 9am-5.30pm, closed Sun in winter) High-quality *kabazaiku* can be found here; it has its own workshop nearby.

## Getting There & Away

The Akita *shinkansen* line connects Kakunodate with Tazawa-ko (¥1560, 14 minutes), Morioka (¥2770, 54 minutes) and Akita (¥2940, 43 minutes). Infrequent local trains run on the JR Tazawa-ko line from Kakunodate east to Tazawa-ko (¥320, 20 minutes) and Morioka (¥1110, 1½ hours). Infrequent connections west to Akita require a change of trains at Ōmagari.

Bus runs from Kakunodate to Tazawa Kohan (¥840, 52 minutes) and Tazawa-ko station (¥490, 35 minutes), as well as to Akita (¥1330, 1½ hours). From December to March, these buses do not stop at Tazawa Kohan.

Kakunodate bus station is 10 minutes north of the train station.

## AKITA 秋田

☎ 018 / pop 331,800

Akita, the prefectural capital, is a large commercial city that makes a great base for exploration. People-watchers may want to note that Akita's women are famous for their (supposedly) fair skin, and the term 'Akita *bijin*' (an Akita beauty) is well known. Truth or fiction, it's an interesting anecdote about a city that's not particularly beautiful in itself. Still, Akita has some delicious local cuisine and stages the spectacular Kantō Matsuri, ranked among Tōhoku's top three festivals.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Akita Central Police Station** (☎ 835-1111; 1-9 Meitoku-chō, Senshū)

### INTERNET ACCESS

**Comic Buster** (☎ 884-7472; 2F, ALVE Bldg, 4-1 Higashidōri Nakamachi; per 30min ¥350; ☎ 24hr) Connected to the east exit of the JR station. The building is pronounced 'Aroo-vay'.

**Plaza 1** (☎ 889-3588; 2nd fl, Topico station Bldg, 7-1-2 Naka-dōri; per hr ¥350, ☎ 7.30am-8pm)

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Akita Red Cross Hospital** (秋田赤十字病院;  
☎ 829-5000; 222-1 Naeshirosawa Aza Kamikitatesaruta)

**POST**

**Akita Central post office** (秋田中央郵便局;  
☎ 823-2900; 5-1 Hodono Teppōmachi) Five minutes west of the train station's west exit, in the backstreets near the market.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Tourist information office** (☎ 832-7941; www.akita-fan.com; ☎ 9am-7pm) Opposite the *shinkansen* tracks on the 2nd floor of Akita station.

**Sights**

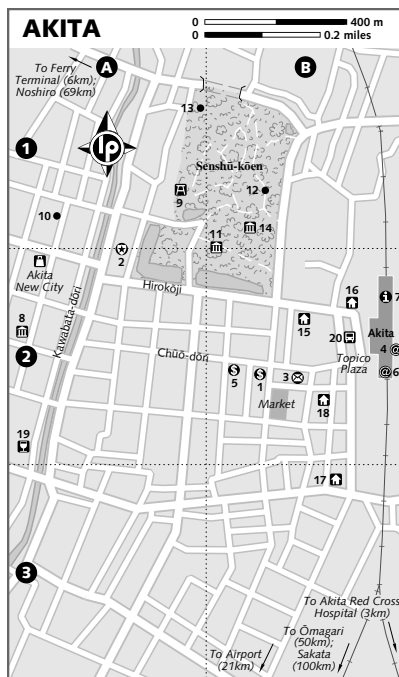
The ruins of Akita's castle, Kubota-jō, are 10 minutes west of the station in **Senshū-kōen** (千秋公園). The castle dates from 1604 but, like many other feudal relics, it was destroyed by Meiji 'enlightenment'. At the park's northern end is **Osumi-yagura**, a reconstruction of one of the castle's eight turrets, with an observation platform that delivers appealing views of the city. Near **Hachiman Akita-jinja**, the **Omonogashira-obansho** guardhouse is the only remaining original castle building, while the tiny **Satake Historical Material Museum** (☎ 832-7892; admission ¥100; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) borders the southeast corner.

The **Masakichi Hirano Art Museum** (☎ 833-5809; 3-7 Senshū Meitoku-chō; admission ¥610; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, to 5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr) is noted for its enormous painting, *Events of Akita*. Reputed to be the world's largest canvas painting, it measures 3.65m by 20.5m and depicts traditional Akita life throughout the seasons.

The **Kantō Festival Centre** (☎ 866-7091; Neburi Nagashi-kan; admission ¥100; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm, 9am-9pm during festivals), 10 minutes west of the park across the river, has exhibitions and videos of

Akita's famous Kantō Matsuri and a chance for you to heft the famous *kantō* poles. It won't be easy: these babies are 10m long and weigh around 60kg.

Five minutes south, past Daiei department store, the **Akarengakan Museum** (☎ 864-6851; 3-3-21 Ōmachi; admission ¥200; ☎ 9.30am-4.30pm), in a Meiji-era, Renaissance-style, red-brick building, has woodblock prints of traditional Akita life by self-taught folk artist Katsuhira Tokushi. A combined ticket with the Kantō Festival Centre is available at either place for ¥250.



<b>INFORMATION</b>	Hachiman Akita-jinja 八幡秋田神社...9 A1	Hotel Metropolitan Akita ホテルメトロポリタン秋田...16 B2
Akita Bank 秋田銀行.....1 B2	Kantō Festival Centre	Naniwa Hotel ホテルなにわ...17 B3
Akita Central Police Station	秋田市民俗芸能伝承館	Ryokan Chikuba-sō 旅館 竹馬荘.....18 B2
秋田中央警察署.....2 A2	ねぶり流し館.....10 A1	
Akita Central Post Office	Masakichi Hirano Art Museum	
秋田中央郵便局.....3 B2	平野政吉美術館.....11 B1	<b>EATING</b> 🍴
Comic Buster コミックバスター.....4 B2	Omonogashira-obansho	Ryōtei Hamanoya 料亭濱乃家.....(see 16)
Iwate Bank 岩手銀行.....5 B2	御物頭御番所.....12 B1	Suginoya 杉のや.....(see 6)
Plaza 1 プラザ 1.....6 B2	Osumi-yagura 御隅櫓.....13 A1	<b>DRINKING</b> 🍷
Tourist Information Office	Satake Historical Material Museum	Green Pocket グリーンポケット...19 A2
松島観光案内所.....7 B2	佐竹史料館.....14 B1	
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>	<b>SLEEPING</b> 🛏	<b>TRANSPORT</b>
Akarengakan Museum	Akita View Hotel	Bus Station バス乗り場.....20 B2
赤れんが郷土館.....8 A2	秋田ビューホテル.....15 B2	

**Festivals & Events**

From 3 to 6 August, Akita celebrates the visually stunning **Akita Kantō Matsuri** (秋田竿燈まつり; Pole Lantern Festival; www.kantou.gr.jp). Starting in the evening along Kantō Ōdori, more than 160 men skilfully balance giant poles, weighing 60kg and hung with illuminated lanterns, on their heads, chins, hips and shoulders to the beat of *taiko* drumming groups. As the aim of the festival is to pray for a good harvest, the arrangement of the lanterns is designed to resemble an ear of rice. During the day, exhibitions of music and pole balancing are held in Senshū-kōen.

**Sleeping**

A lot is happening on the east side of Akita JR station – check there for new business hotels, many of which often offer inexpensive 'campaigns' to attract new clientele. Toyoko Inn, Alpha-1 and other chains are all steps away from the station. Comic Buster's (see Internet, p543) overnight package costs about ¥2000 depending on a whole bunch of options, half the cost of a business hotel. If you're looking for something with more personality, check out the following.

**Naniwa Hotel** (☎ 832-4570; naniwa@beige.plala.or.jp; 6-18-27 Nakadōri; d per person incl/excl 2 meals ¥6680/3980) Meals here are made within the hotel's own homegrown rice, along with other local ingredients. This friendly place also has free internet, free massage chairs and a beautiful 24-hour *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) bath.

**Ryokan Chikuba-sō** (☎ 832-6446; 4-14-9 Naka-dōri; r per person incl 2 meals ¥6800) A Japanese-style spick-and-span choice with decent-sized rooms. It's convenient to the station's west exit; the post office is one street further up on the opposite side.

**Akita View Hotel** (☎ 832-1111; 2-6-1 Naka-dōri; s/tw from ¥9500/17,000; 📺) Opposite the Hotel Hawaii, this lush hotel is perhaps the swankiest in town, with its gym, pool, sauna and upmarket restaurants.

**Hotel Metropolitan Akita** (☎ 831-2225/-2222; 7-2-1 Naka-dōri; s/tw from ¥9200/17,500; 📺) An upscale business hotel, with clean rooms and all the usual features: TVs, phones, full bathrooms. Compared to the discount business hotels, however, this isn't much of a bargain, considering the latter are less than half the price.

**Eating & Drinking**

Local specialities include two types of hotpot. One is *shottsuru* – *hatahata* (local fish) with

green onions and tofu. The other is the fabulous *kiritanpo*, based on rice that's kneaded and wrapped around bamboo spits then barbecued over a charcoal fire. The rice is then cooked in a soy-flavoured chicken broth with noodles, onions, Japanese parsley and field mushrooms. Yum!

Kawabata-dōri is Akita's main nightlife area, a 15-minute walk west of the station. If you're coming south from Sapporo or north from Sendai, Akita's version of the neon jungle will seem quiet and quaint, but there's still plenty to do.

**Ryōtei Hamanoya** (☎ 836-0755; www.hamanoya.co.jp; 3rd fl, Hotel Metropolitan; kiritanpo from ¥2887; ☎ lunch & dinner) This is the real deal: Hamanoya's *kiritanpo* is masterful, both in the preparation and the taste. The hotpot is a perfect blend, the mushrooms, onions and noodles soak the *mochi* (rice cakes) with a subtle mesh of flavours to produce a sticky rice stew. Hamanoya's kimono-clad waitresses prepare this right at your table, with a casual elegance and skill that's as seductive as the dish itself.

**Suginoya** (☎ 835-8903; 7-1-2 Naka-dōri; set menu from ¥1050; ☎ 10am-9pm) On the 3rd-floor restaurant arcade of Akita station's Topico Plaza, Suginoya does reasonable versions of the two hotpots, as well as other regional dishes.

**Green Pocket** (☎ 863-6917; 5-1-7 Ōmachi; ☎ 7pm-midnight Mon-Sat) This little gem is decked out in authentic period panelling, with an old-time piano in the corner, the aforementioned soundtrack, Vivien Leigh prints, and a fabulously decadent selection of scotch whiskies and fine wines – classy. The owner-bartender is gregarious and impeccably dressed in a tuxedo. Weeknights attract a lively older crowd; weekends are quieter.

**Getting There & Away**

There are flights from Akita's airport south of town to Nagoya (¥25,500, 70 minutes), Osaka (¥29,500, 1¼ hours), Sapporo (¥22,300, 55 minutes) and Tokyo (¥22,100, 70 minutes). Buses run from outside JR Akita station (¥890, 40 minutes).

The JR Akita *shinkansen* line runs via Tazawa-ko and Kakunodate to Morioka (¥4500, 1½ hours), cutting the total travel time between Akita and Tokyo to four hours (¥16,810). Painfully infrequent local trains chug along the Ōu line to Ōmagari, where you change to the JR Tazawa-ko line for Kakunodate (¥1280, 1½ hours) and Tazawa-ko



(¥1620, 2½ hours). The JR Uetsu line connects Akita with Niigata via Sakata and Tsuruoka (*tokkyū*, ¥7020, 3¾ hours).

Ten buses run daily from **Akita station** (羽後交通; Ugo Kōtsū; ☎ 863-6570) to Kakunodate (¥1330, 1½ hours) and eight daily to Tazawako (¥1680, 2¼ hours). Direct night buses to Tokyo (Shinjuku) run from the Nagasakiya bus terminal via Akita station at 10pm (one way ¥9450, 8½ hours).

**Shin Nihonkai** (☎ 880-2600) ferries connect Akita with Niigata (¥4000, 6½ hours, Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday) and Tsuruga (¥6700, 21 hours, Sunday, Wednesday, Thursday). Ferries run to Tomakomai on Hokkaidō (¥4400, 12 hours, Monday to Wednesday, Friday and Saturday) as well.

One bus daily at 6.05am runs to Akita's port, 8km northwest of the station (¥390, 30 minutes).

## KISAKATA 象潟

☎ 0184 / pop 13,100

This was the most northerly point Bashō reached in his travels through Tōhoku. Kisakata is a small coastal town near **Chōkai-san** (鳥海山; 2236m), Tōhoku's second-highest peak. Known as 'Dewa Fuji', Chōkai-san is an object of veneration by the same *yamabushi* (mountain priests) who worship at Dewa Sanzan (p549) in Yamagata-ken.

The **tourist information office** (☎ 43-2174; ☎ 9am-4.30pm), inside the station waiting room, has photocopied contour maps for hiking Chōkai-san and information on local sights, such as **Kanman-ji** (甘満寺; visited by Bashō) just north of the town centre.

Next door to the youth hostel is a **camping ground** (camp sites ¥500, plus per person ¥400; ☎ Jul-Sep), while nearby **Minshuku Rofūsō Nihonkai** (民宿ろふう草・日本海; ☎ 43-2228; 63-3 Kanmuri Ishishita; r per person incl 1/2 meals ¥5800/6300) is a simple but effective option.

**Masaen** (マサ苑; ☎ 44-2358; 8-1 Hamadō Aza Kotaki Kisakata-machi; set menus ¥800; ☎ 11am-8pm Tue-Sun) is a fantastic little eatery offering up generous serves of *rāmen* and free coffee. It's 300m west of the station.

## Getting There & Away

Local trains on the scenic JR Uetsu Main line connect Kisakata with Sakata (¥650, 40 minutes) for connections to Tsuruoka (¥1110, one hour 36 minutes). Local trains head north on the same line to Akita (¥1110, 1¼ hours).

# YAMAGATA-KEN 山形県

Yamagata-ken is often overlooked, yet has some beautiful gems that – time permitting – should not be overlooked. At the top of the list is tiny Zaō Onsen, famed for its atmospheric *rotenburo* and, more recently, its ski slopes. Yamadera offers temple buffs some spectacular photo opportunities, while Dewa Sanzan's peaks are revered by *yamabushi* (mountain monks) and hikers. Quieter places like Tobi-shima, Mogami-kyō and Tendō have charm all of their own. Like its neighbour Akita, Yamagata also claims to be an *onsen* capital. Sample all 100 and perhaps you'll be able to make the call for yourself.

## TOBI-SHIMA 飛島

☎ 0234

Tiny Tobi-shima's main attractions are rugged cliffs, sea caves, bird-watching, scuba diving and excellent fishing. You can also organise boat trips out to smaller islands.

The coastal town of Sakata is your best bet for **tourist information** (☎ 24-2233; ☎ 9am-6pm).

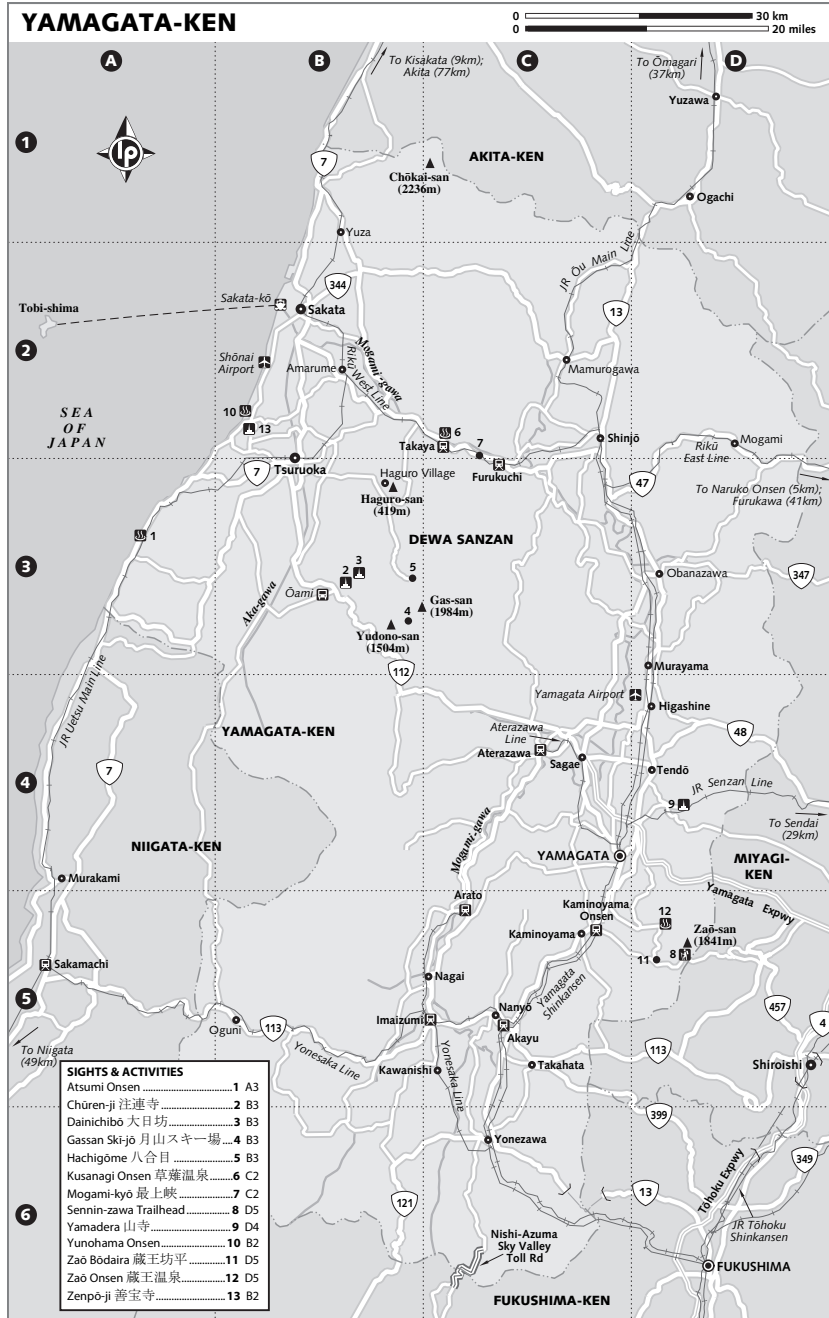
Rates at the island's ryokan vary seasonally from ¥7000 to ¥10,000 per person with two meals; *minshuku* cost around ¥7000 with two meals. **Sawaguchi Ryokan** (沢口旅館; ☎ 95-2246; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥8000), the island's youth hostel, is seven minutes on foot from the ferry pier; bicycle rental is available.

Ferries run at least once (often twice) daily from Sakata-kō to the island (¥2040, 1½ hours); advance reservations (☎ 22-3911) are recommended in summer. To get to Sakata-kō, take the Run Run bus from Sakata to the ferry-terminal stop (¥100). The JR Uetsu Main line runs to Sakata via Kisakata (*futsū*, ¥650, 40 minutes), Akita (¥1890, two hours nine minutes), Tsuruoka (¥480, 30 minutes) and Niigata (*tokkyū*, ¥5130, 2¼ hours).

There are up to seven buses daily from Sakata to Sendai (¥3100, three hours, last bus 6.30pm) via the Tsuruoka bus terminal (¥700, 90 minutes). There is one night bus to Tokyo (Shibuya, Ikebukuro) departing from Sakata at 9.30pm (¥7870, nine hours).

## MOGAMI-KYŌ 最上峡

**Boat tours** (最上川舟下り; ☎ 72-2001) are operated through this gorge on a section of the Mogami-gawa between Sakata and Shinjō, complete with a boatman singing a selection of local folk tunes.



From Sakata, trains on the JR Rikuu-sai line run to Furukuchi station (¥740, 35 minutes); you may have to change trains en route at Amarume. From Furukuchi station, it's eight minutes on foot to the dock. Boats depart up to nine eight times daily from 9am to 4pm (¥1970). The chill of winter weather is offset by an onboard *kotatsu* (heated table). The boat trip takes an hour to reach **Kusanagi Onsen**, where passengers are met by shuttle buses heading to Takaya station on the JR Rikuu-saisen line.

## TSURUOKA 鶴岡

☎ 0235 / pop 144,000

Most travellers come here as an access point for the nearby Dewa Sanzan, but this former castle town in the middle of the Shōnai plain was once an important city in its own right, run by the Sakai-clan, one of feudal Yamagata's most important families.

## Information

**Internet access** (鶴岡市ネットワークコミュニケーションセンター; ☎ 29-7775; 1hr free; ☎ 9am-7.30pm) On the 3rd floor of the Marica building, opposite JR Tsuruoka station.

**Post office** With ATM service, 300m south of the station.

**Tourist information office** (☎ 25-7678; ☎ 10am-5pm Nov-Feb, 9.30am-5.30pm Mar-Oct) To the right as you exit JR Tsuruoka station; can book accommodation and has lots of information about Dewa Sanzan, although little is in English.

## Sights & Activities

Founded in 1950 by the former Lord Shōnai in order to develop and preserve local culture, **Chidō Museum** (致道博物館; ☎ 22-1199; 10-18 Kachū-shinmachi; admission ¥700; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) features Sakai family artefacts, a family residence, two Meiji-era buildings, a traditional storehouse and a *kabuto-zukuri* (a farmhouse with a thatched roof shaped like a samurai helmet). The museum is west of Tsuruoka-kōen, 10 minutes by bus from JR Tsuruoka station. From stop 1 at the station, frequent buses bound for Yunohama Onsen pass by the Chidō Hakubutsukan-mae stop (¥200, 10 minutes).

Seven kilometres west of Tsuruoka you'll find **Zenpō-ji** (善寶寺; ☎ 24hr), a Zen Buddhist temple with a five-tier pagoda and large gateway; it dates from the 10th century when it was dedicated to the Dragon King, guardian of the seas. Note the imposing wooden fish

hanging from the ceilings and the paintings depicting fishing scenes; the latter was donated by local fishing companies hoping to gain favour from the gods of the seas.

Near the temple is a more contemporary attraction, the famous *jimmen-gyo* (human-faced carp). When viewed from above, these curious fish actually do appear to have human faces.

From the station, take a bus bound for Yunohama Onsen to the Zenpō-ji stop (¥580, 30 minutes). If you're in the mood for surf and sand, the beach at **Yunohama Onsen** is a 10-minute bus ride away or 4km on foot.

## Festivals & Events

**Nō performances** (黒川能王祇祭) On 1 and 2 February, these are held at night in Kurokawa village near Tsuruoka; reserve tickets well in advance via the tourist information office.

**Tenjin Matsuri** Tsuruoka's best-known festival, on 25 May, is also known as the Bakemono Matsuri (Masked Faces Festival). People used to stroll around in masks and costume for three days, serving sake and keeping an eye out for friends and acquaintances. The object is to make it through three festivals in a row without anyone recognising you, whereupon local lore states you'll have good luck for the rest of your life.

## Sleeping

**Petit Hotel Tsuruoka** (プチホテル鶴岡; ☎ 25-1011; 2-1 Suehiro-machi; s/tw ¥5000/9800; ㊟) This family-run business hotel, with its choice of Western or tatami rooms, is right next to the station complex. Let staffs know in advance if you need a meal.

**Narakan** (奈良館; ☎ 22-1202; r per person from ¥6500) This modern, clean, friendly ryokan is five minutes along the main street leading out from the station.

**Tsuruoka Hotel** (鶴岡ホテル; ☎ 22-1135; r per person incl 2 meals ¥8400) This atmospheric old place is rather far from the station. Take the Yunohama Onsen-bound bus from stop 1 at the station to the Hitoichi-dōri stop (¥100), then walk back up the street – the hotel is on the right-hand side.

## Getting There & Away

From JR Tsuruoka station, the JR Uetsu Main line runs north to Sakata (*tokkyū*, ¥480, 38 minutes) for connections to Kisakata, and to Akita (*tokkyū*, ¥4020, 1½ hours); it takes a scenic route south to Niigata (*tokkyū*, ¥4330, 1½ hours) across a backdrop of crashing waves.

Taking the train to Yamagata usually requires three changes, one at the very least. Despite the extension of the Yamagata *shinkansen* line to Shinjō, it's still more convenient to take the bus.

A series of scenic local trains along the JR Rikuu-sai and Rikuu-tō lines connects Tsuruoka to Naruko Onsen (Miyagi-ken; ¥1890, two hours 20 minutes) via a change at Shinjō.

Night buses to Tokyo (Ikebukuro, Shibuya) depart from in front of the Tokyo Dai-ichi Hotel in Tsuruoka (¥7540, eight hours). Regular buses between Tsuruoka and Yamagata (¥2400, 1¼ hours) run via the Yudono-san Hotel (¥1370, 50 minutes), which provides access to Yudono-san. Services are often cut back during the winter months due to snowdrifts. Between July and early November, there are also up to four direct buses between Tsuruoka and Yudono-san that stop by the hotel on the way up to the Sennin-zawa trailhead (¥1480, 80 minutes).

## DEWA SANZAN 出羽三山

☎ 0235

Dewa Sanzan is the collective title for three sacred peaks: Haguro-san, Gas-san and Yudono-san. The mountains have been worshipped for centuries by *yamabushi* and followers of the Shugendō sect. During the pilgrimage seasons, you can see white-clad pilgrims (equipped with wooden staff, sandals and straw hat) and the occasional *yamabushi* (equipped with conch shell, checked jacket and voluminous white pantaloons) stomping along mountain trails or sitting under icy waterfalls as part of severe ascetic exercises intended to train both body and spirit.

Theoretically, if you hiked at a military pace and timed the buses perfectly you might be able to cover all three peaks in one day. However, this would leave you no time to enjoy the scenery, and the chances of missing a key bus connection are good. If you want to tackle all three mountains, it's best to devote at least two days; book accommodation and stock up on maps at the Tsuruoka tourist office before setting off.

## Haguro-san 羽黒山

Because it has the easiest access, Haguro-san (414m) attracts a steady flow of tourists. At the base of the mountain is Haguro village, consisting of *shukubō* (pilgrims lodgings) and

the **Ideha Bunka Kinenkan** (いでは文化記念館; ☎ 62-4727; admission ¥400; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Nov, 9.30am-4pm Wed-Mon Dec-Mar), a small history museum featuring films of *yamabushi* rites and festivals.

The orthodox approach to the shrine on the summit requires pilgrims to climb 2446 steps but buses also run to the top. The climb can be done in a leisurely 50 minutes and you might even be lapped by gaggles of sprightly senior citizens; don't lose heart – just take your time and enjoy the views.

From Haguro centre bus station, walk straight ahead through the *torii* and continue across a bridge into beautiful cryptomeria trees that form a canopy overhead. En route you'll pass **Gojū-no-tō**, a weatherbeaten five-storey pagoda dating from the 14th century. It's a stirring sight, with its aged, intricate wooden structure blending in with the trees. Then comes a very long slog up the hundreds of stone steps arranged in steep sections. Pause halfway at the **teahouse** (二の坂茶屋; ☎ 62-4287; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Nov) for refreshment and breathtaking views. If you detour to the right just past the teahouse, you'll come upon the temple ruins of **Betsu-in**, visited by Bashō during his pilgrimage here.

The scene at the top is an anticlimax. There are several shrines, often crowded with visitors except during early mornings or late afternoons, an uninspiring history museum, and a row of shops and eateries. From the top you can either walk or catch a bus back down to the bottom. In summer there are two buses in the morning that go on to Gas-san.

## Gas-san 月山

Accessible from June to September, Gas-san (1984m) is the highest of the three sacred peaks and attracts pilgrims to **Gassan-jinja** (admission with ritual purification ¥500; ☎ 6am-5pm), a shrine on the peak itself. To enter the shrine you need to be purified: bow your head to receive a priest's benediction before rubbing your head and shoulders with sacred paper, which is then placed in the fountain.

The peak is usually accessed from the trailhead at **Hachigōme** (8th station); the trail passes through an alpine plateau to the Kyūgōme (9th station) in 1¼ hours and then grinds uphill for 70 minutes.

The steep descent to Yudono-san-jinja takes another 2½ hours (keep choosing the right fork). After about 45 minutes of this

descent, you also have the choice of taking the trail to Ubazawa, the main ski resort on Gas-san, which has its own cable car. If you continue to Yudono-san, you'll eventually have to descend rusty ladders chained to the cliffside and carefully pick your way down through a slippery streambed at the end of the trail.

For those who can't last the summer without some powder, **Gassan Ski-jō** (☎ 0237-75-2025; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Apr-Jul; per day ¥4600) offers skiers a chance to slide around on snow, but come for the novelty of skiing in July, not because you're expecting great conditions. If you're not up for a whole (pricey) day, you can get per-time tickets for ¥560.

Assuming roads are open, drivers may want to (carefully!) tootle along the snowy roads – sometimes walls of snow tower four to five times the height of the passing cars, a surreal winterscape that's well worth taking time for.

### Yudono-san 湯殿山

Accessible from June to October, the Sennin-zawa trailhead for Yudono-san (1504m) is approached via a 3km toll road from the Yudono-san Hotel. From there it's a 10-minute hike further up the mountain to **Yudonosan-jinja** (湯殿山神社; admission ¥500; ☎ 6am-5pm, closed Nov-Apr). This sacred shrine is not a building but a large orange rock continuously lapped by water from a hot spring. It has the strictest rituals of the three, with pilgrims required to perform a barefoot circuit of the rock, paddling through the cascading water.

**Dainichibō & Chūren-ji** 大日坊・注連寺 Off Rte 112 between Yudono-san and Tsuruoka, these two ordinary country temples house the exotic mummies of former priests who have become 'Buddhas in their own bodies'. The ascetic practice of self-mummification, outlawed since the 19th century, involved coming as close to death as possible through starvation, before being buried alive while meditating. The mummy at **Dainichibō** (admission ¥500; ☎ 8am-5pm) is dressed in bright orange robes and is rather ghoulish. The **Chūren-ji** (admission ¥500; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) mummy, also freakish, is allegedly a reformed murderer who became a powerful Buddhist priest.

Both temples are five minutes on foot from the Ōami bus stop, which is approximately halfway between Tsuruoka (¥950) and Yu-

dono-san (¥910). Buses are spaced about two hours apart, enough time to look around.

### Festivals & Events

Dewa Sanzan-jinja, on the peak of Haguro-san, is the site of several major festivals. During the **Hassaku Matsuri** (八朔祭り), *yamabushi* perform ancient fire rites to pray for a bountiful harvest (31 August to 1 September). During the **Shōrei-sai** (松例祭) festival on New Year's Eve, they perform similar rituals in competition with each other after completing 100-day-long austerities.

### Courses

If you haven't yet found your calling, consider becoming a *yamabushi* in a training camp: **Dewa Sanzan-jinja** (☎ 62-2355) 'Real' *yamabushi* courses that are even more intensive, as well as three-day training programmes for women (¥35,000) in early September. These Buddhist boot camps are not for the faint-hearted.

**Ideha Bunka Kinenkan** On selected weekends in July and September, three- /eight-day courses for ¥34,600/40,000 that include fasting, mountain sprints and 4.30am wake-up calls.

### Sleeping & Eating

There are more than 30 *shukubō* in the Tōge district of Haguro village, charging around ¥7000 to ¥8000 per person including two meals.

**Haguro-san Saikan** (齋館 羽黒山齋館; ☎ 62-2357; r per person incl 2 meals ¥7350) This temple lodging is at the top of Haguro-san, with airy rooms and spectacular views. Rates include two gourmet vegetarian meals; advance reservations are mandatory.

**Yudono-san Sanrōjo** (参籠所 湯殿山参籠所; ☎ 54-6131; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥7350; ☎ closed Nov-Apr) This friendly place can be found beside the Sennin-zawa bus terminal. There's a very good chance that you may be expected to join in prayers.

Saikan and Sanrōjo also serve vegetarian lunches to nonguests from ¥1500; reservations are required.

**Yudono-san Hotel** (湯殿山ホテル; ☎ 54-6231; r per person from ¥8500) This one's a convenient base to start or finish the Yudono-san to Gas-san hike. The rooms are basic but comfortable and the rate includes a vegetarian dinner.

### Getting There & Away

Buses to Haguro centre bus station depart from Tsuruoka roughly every hour (¥680,

35 minutes), continuing to Haguro-sanchō (Haguro summit) less frequently between 7.52pm and 6.47pm (¥990, 55 minutes).

From early July to late August, and then on weekends and holidays until late September, there are four buses from Haguro-sanchō at 7.05am, 8.05am, 11.40am and 2pm, allowing pilgrims to travel towards the peak of Gas-san as far as Hachigōme (¥1240, one hour). Two buses at 6am and 7am also run from Tsuruoka direct to Gas-san Hachigōme (¥1650, two hours) during these times.

Buses from Tsuruoka pass by the Yudono-san Hotel en route to Yamagata (¥1370, 1¼ hours, last bus 3pm), as they do to Tsuruoka via Ōami (¥950, 50 minutes, last bus 6.42pm).

Between June and early November, there are up to four more buses from the Sennin-zawa trailhead at Yudono-san to Tsuruoka (¥1480, one hour 20 minutes), which also pass by the hotel and Ōami.

### YAMAGATA 山形

☎ 023 / pop 255,600

Surrounded by beautiful, often snowcapped mountains, Yamagata is a thriving industrial city with a sizable student population, making for a livelier nightlife and more youthful vibe than in comparable *inaka* (rural) cities. Most travellers use it as a base for day trips to Yamadera, Tendō and Takahata, as well as the skiing, bathing and hiking region around Zaō Onsen.

### Information

Free internet access on the 3rd floor of Kajō Central, at a tiny stand adjoining the digital copy centre, is for information on living in Yamagata only.

**Prefectural tourism information office** (やまがた観光情報センター; ☎ 647-2333; www.yamagatakanako.com/english/index.html; ☎ 10am-6pm) On the 1st floor of the Kajō Central building (joined to the station complex by walkways). Come here for excellent, helpful, English-speaking staff.

**Tourist information office** (山形市観光案内センター; ☎ 647-2266; ☎ 8.30am-8pm) On the 2nd floor of Yamagata station, in a small glass booth. Very helpful staff.

**WIP** (☎ 615-0788; www.wip-fe.com/yamagata; per 1hr ¥410; ☎ 24hr) Just outside the east exit of the Akita JR station, diagonally to the left. Overnight packages here are perfect for a backpacker budget.

**Yamagata Central Post Office** (山形中央郵便局; ☎ 622-2180; 1-7-24 Tōkamachi) Has ATM; a branch

post office is on the 1st floor of the Kajō Central building (☎ 645-9600).

### Sights & Activities

**HIRASHIMIZU POTTERY DISTRICT** 平清水陶器地域

These recently revived kilns along the Hazukashi-kawa (Embarrassed River) turn out beautiful bluish-grey spotted-glaze pieces, nicknamed *nashi-seiji* (pear skin), which are displayed for sale in attached workshops. The renowned **Shichiemon-gama** (七右エ門窯; ☎ 642-7777; 153 Hirachimizu; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm, pottery making 9am-3pm) offers instruction in pottery making at ¥1800 per 1kg of clay. To get there, buses bound for Nishi-Zaō or Geikō-dai run hourly or half-hourly from stop 5 outside Yamagata station to the Hirashimizu stop (¥200, 15 minutes).

The river's name comes from a folktale about a young girl who lost her beau – grief-struck, she looked down at her reflection while crossing a bridge and thought (as would anyone, no doubt) that she looked so awful she was embarrassed to be seen.

### Festivals & Events

**Hanagasa Matsuri** In early August; features large crowds of dancers wearing *hanagasa* (flower-laden straw hats) and singing folk songs. The lyrics are said to derive from the impromptu, often salacious tunes once improvised by construction workers to keep time to the rhythm of their labour.

### Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival

This biennial is unique: it was established in 1989 to mark the 100th anniversary of the municipalisation of Yamagata, and was the first of its kind in Asia. During the festival week in October, films from over 70 countries screen, along with retrospectives, symposiums and a Japanese panorama. All screenings have English and Japanese subtitles and most festival publications are bilingual. See www.yidiff.jp for more information.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Yamashiroya Ryokan** (山城屋旅館; ☎ 622-3007; r per person incl/excl 2 meals ¥6000/4000) A simple ryokan elevated to luxury levels by the friendliness of the hosts. It's 150m north of the station's east exit, next to a fruit shop.

**Tōyoko Inn Yamagata Eki Nishiguchi** (東横イン山形駅西口; ☎ 644-1045; 1-18-13 Jōnan-machi; s/d ¥5880/7980; ☎) If you've seen one, you've seen them all, but if you've got heavy suitcases, a close hotel sure beats lugging them across town. This is a minute's walk from the

station's west exit. If it's full, try one of the new business hotels going up nearby.

There are plenty of places hawking marbled Yamagata beef along Nanokamachi-dōri.

**Sagorō** (佐五郎; ☎ 631-3560; 1-6-10 Kasumi-chō; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) An excellent beef joint serving delicious *sukiyaki* (thin slices of beef) and good old steaks. Look for it on the 3rd floor above a butcher's shop, straight out from the east exit. No English menus.

**Sakaeya Honten** (栄屋本店; ☎ 623-0766; 2-3-21 Honchō; hiyashi ramen ¥700; ☎ 11.30am-7.30pm Thu-Tue) Try this place for *hiyashi* (chilled) *rāmen*, another Yamagata speciality. Facing east from the AZ store, take the first side street to your right. No English menus.

### Getting There & Away

The JR Senzan line connects Yamagata with Yamadera and Sendai (*kaisoku* ¥1110, one hour 21 minutes). The JR Ōu Main line runs south to Yonezawa (*futsū*, ¥820, 45 minutes) and north to Ōma-gari for connections to Tazawa-ko and Akita (*kaisoku* ¥2520, three hours 18 minutes).

The JR Yamagata and Tōhoku *shinkansen* lines connect Yamagata with Yonezawa (¥2060, 36 minutes), Fukushima (¥3110, 1½ hours) and Tokyo (¥11,030, two hours 51 minutes).

Travellers to Tsuruoka are advised to take the bus via the Yudono-san Hotel (¥2150, 1½ hours). Buses start from the Yamakō bus terminal (stop 4) on Ekimae-dōri; most buses stop at Yamagata station before leaving town. There are frequent buses from Yamagata to Zaō Onsen (¥800, 40 minutes). Do not confuse Zaō Onsen with nearby Zaō, as the latter has no connection to the fabled baths.

Frequent highway buses run to Sendai (¥800, one hour) and two buses run daily to Niigata (¥3500, 3¾ hours). A night bus to Tokyo (Asakusa, Ueno) departs at 11.40pm (¥6420, six hours). Reserve in advance for a cheaper Tokyo-bound bus with **Orion Tours** (オリオンツアー; ☎ 022-224-8541; www.orion-tour.co.jp; ¥4500), which goes to Shinjuku and other locations.

### TENDŌ 天童

☎ 023 / pop 63,100

Tendō makes an interesting half-day excursion from Yamagata. It produces around 90% of Japan's chess pieces annually, an exquisite art begun by poor samurai during the Edo

period (their salaries were cut by the Tendō lord, who had fallen upon hard times).

The **tourist information centre** (天童市観光物産協会; ☎ 653-1680; ☎ 9am-6pm, closed every 3rd Mon), on the 2nd floor of JR Tendō station, has details of local attractions, including the eccentric **Tendō Mingeikan** (天童民芸館; ☎ 653-5749; admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-5pm), a folkcraft museum housed in a *gasshō-zukuri* (thatched 'praying' roof) farmhouse. The **Tendō Shōgi Museum** (天童市将棋資料館; ☎ 653-1690; 1-1-1 Hon-chō; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-6pm Thu-Tue) is part of JR Tendō station and displays chess sets from Japan and abroad.

You can see chess pieces being made at **Eishundō** (栄春堂; ☎ 653-2843; 1-3-28 Kamatahonchō; admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm Wed-Mon), a 15-minute walk straight out from the station, just past the Tendō Park Hotel. Across the street, the **Hiroshige Art Museum** (広重美術館; ☎ 654-6555; 1-2-1 Kamatahonchō; admission ¥600; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Wed-Mon Apr-Oct, 9am-4.30pm Wed-Mon Nov-Mar) displays woodblock prints by famous Edo-period master Hiroshige.

On the last weekend in April, Tendō-kōen hosts the theatrical **Ningen Shōgi**, when outdoor chess matches are played using real people as pieces. The tradition is credited to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, who once played a similar match with his son in Kyoto. If you want to become a human chess piece, visit www.ikeychango.com/chess/piece-e.htm.

Tendō is six stops north of Yamagata by local train (¥230, 20 minutes) or 50 minutes by bus from Yamagata station (¥480).

### ZAO-SAN 蔵王山

☎ 023 / pop 13,600

The Zaō Quasi National Park region (not to be confused with Zaō, a town just outside Yamagata) is one of this prefecture's must visits. It's small, but packed with people, hot springs and great powder. Skiing starts in December and runs through April, but even if there's no snow there are plenty of reasons to come here. Good hikes and great baths are the biggies, but it's also fun to just kick back and bask in the friendly atmosphere and relaxed pace. Zaō's simply stunning vistas are gorgeous year-round. That said, if you come in the off season you should expect to have the town pretty much to yourself, with shops and restaurants closing early. The main ski resorts are around **Zaō Onsen** (☎ 694-9328) and **Zaō Bōdaira** (☎ 679-2042). In winter, free

shuttles connect the extensive networks of ropeways and lifts; one-day passes start at ¥4500. Advanced skiers will probably want to pass unless they're with less-skilled friends, and the mountain is small, smaller if any of the upper lifts are closed due to winds or poor snow. But skiing through the 'Ice Monsters' is a wacky thrill, something worth doing once just for the view.

Near Zaō bus terminal, the **tourist information office** (☎ 694-9328; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) has maps and can advise on transport and accommodation options, though the town is small enough that you easily do-it-yourself.

In summer you can make your way up to **Okama** (御釜), a cobalt blue, volcanic crater lake atop Zaō-san, considered by many to be the area's premier sight. Given the right weather, it is indeed beautiful and hiking around it is a joy, with Buddhist statues and monuments hidden among the greenery. The most convenient access is via Katta Chūsha-jōcar park, where the **Zaō Sky Cable** (蔵王スカイケーブル; one way/return ¥700/1200; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) takes you to within spitting distance of the Okama overlook.

There are numerous trails around the area, open except when there's snow. A nice one-hour walk over to Jizōsan-chō-eki leads to the **Zaō Ropeway** (蔵王ロープウェイ; ☎ 694-9518; single/return ¥700/1400; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Nov) down through Juhyō-kōgen (Ice Monster Plateau) to Zaō Onsen. The 'monsters', best viewed from late February to early March, are really frozen conifers covered in snow by Siberian winds; a unique, fascinating winter display.

After a long day of hiking or skiing, you can soak among sulphur-stained rocks at the atmospheric **Zaō Onsen Dai-rotenburo** (蔵王温泉大露天風呂; admission ¥450; ☎ 6am-7pm May-Oct), where each outdoor hot-spring pool can hold up to 200 people. Smaller and much older are two community baths called 'Upper' and 'Lower' (¥200), both on the main cobbled street leading uphill from the bus station. These baths are old school – no soap or towels: just splash yourself clean and hop into water so hot Hell's brimstone will seem chilly in comparison.

### Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation abounds, but advance reservations are essential if visiting during high seasons or on weekends. In nonpeak times some places close, as do many shops and res-

taurants. Either way, it pays to call ahead. Very little English is spoken.

**Ginrei Honten** (銀嶺本店; ☎ 694-9120; www.community-i.com/zao/ginrei.html; 940-5 Zaō Onsen; r per person with shared bathroom ¥3500) is a casual, friendly *minshuku* (love the astroturf carpets!) and souvenir shop. The toilet is shared, and the owners offer a discount coupon for the community *onsen* across the street. Find it by going right from the bus station, cross the bridge and it's on the right corner, just before a large hotel parking lot.

**Pension Boku-no-Uchi** (ペンション ぼくのうち; ☎ 694-9542; www.bokunouchi.com; 904 Zaō-onsen; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥7185), next to the Lawson convenience store, is a friendly, family-run place with its own restaurant and 24-hour sulphur bath.

The comfortable **Lodge Chitoseya** (ロッジちとせや; ☎ 694-9145; 954 Zaō Onsen; r per person incl/excl 2 meals from ¥6825/4515; ☎) is closer to the bus station. Original meals are served with pride, a mix of Japanese-inspired and fusion favourites.

**Shinzaemon-no-Yu** (新左衛門の湯; ☎ 693-1212; www.zaospa.co.jp/top.html; 905 Kawa-mae Zaō Onsen; bath ¥600, meals from ¥1500; ☎ 10am-9.30pm, lunch & dinner, closed irregularly) Luxurious bath cum banquet – come here to soak those ski pains away or to revel in the simple, natural-wood elegance. Food is pricey; the baths are divine.

**Robata Honten** (炉ばた本店; ☎ 694-9565; www.t023.com/zao/index.html; 42-7 Zaō Onsen; dinners from ¥1200; ☎ 11am-11.30pm) An *izakaya*-style eatery with a community bath just outside its door. Come here for *jingis-kān*, a mix of lamb and veggies grilled on a skillet, or excellent broiled *sanma* (Japanese saury).

Buses from stop 1 outside Yamagata station depart frequently for Zaō Onsen (¥800, 40 minutes). To cope with the demand during winter – when there are more than a million visitors to the region – there is a regular bus service direct from Tokyo. Between late April and early November, there are two buses daily at 9.30am and 10.30am connecting Yamagata station, via Zaō Onsen, with Katta Chūsha-jō (¥1800, 1½ hours); buses in the reverse direction leave from Katta at 1pm and 2pm.

### YAMADERA 山寺

☎ 023 / pop 1600

Yamadera, also known as **Risshaku-ji** (立石寺; ☎ 8am-5pm), is a stunning temple complex, a wondrously atmospheric cluster of buildings and shrines perched on lush, wooded slopes; each turn holds a new place with a character



**NIIGATA** 新潟

☎ 025 / pop 812,900

Niigata, the lively capital, has a calm and spacious feel, despite its reputation as a transport hub and springboard to nearby Sadogashima. It's bisected by the Shinano River, which generates a great swathe of blue sky where, in other cities, there'd be skyscrapers (people-watching is a joy along the banks), and street-side ginkgo trees send miniature tornadoes of golden leaves cascading down each autumn. Sake reigns supreme – Niigata City has a huge sake-tasting festival each year and boasts over 100 different *kura* (breweries).

**Orientation**

The Niigata JR station is in the middle of the city, with stuff to do on either side, though much of the tourist action is between the station and the Shinano River. Higashi Ōdori is the main thoroughfare leading north from the station. Across the Bandai-bashi, Furumachi is the downtown shopping district and home to the vibrant Honchō market area.

**Information****EMERGENCY**

There's a police box inside the station.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

**Media Station Banana** (30min free; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7.50pm Sat, 11am-7pm Sun) Inside the station's Bandai exit.

**Stock + Nigata** (☎ 246-1370; www.stockplus-n.com; 1-2-23 Ōdori; per 15min ¥15; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri)

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Niigata University Medican & Dental Hospital**

(☎ 223-6161; 1-757 Asahimachi-dōri)

**POST & MONEY**

**Niigata Central post office** (☎ 244-3429; 2-6-26 Higashi Ōdori) ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat, Sun & holidays) ATM cash service.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Niigata International Friendship Centre** (☎ 225-2777; Kurosoparu Niigata Bldg, 3-2086 Ishizuechōdōri; ☎ 9am-9.30pm Mon-Sat, to 5pm Sun & holidays, closed every 4th Mon) Includes CNN broadcasts, a small library, local information and willing staff. Also publishes the *Niigata English Journal*, a helpful pamphlet of topical events.

**Tourist information centre** (☎ 241-7914; ☎ 9am-6pm) To the left of Niigata station's Bandai exit. Sweet, kindly English-speaking staff, excellent maps and bro-

chures for both Niigata and Sado-ga-shima. Same-day accommodation bookings, often with a discount.

**Sights**

The city centre is easily covered on foot, otherwise a flat rate fare of ¥180 operates on city buses. Further destinations, such as the final two, require buses or trains. Ask at the tourist info centre for up-to-the-minute schedules and seasonal suggestions.

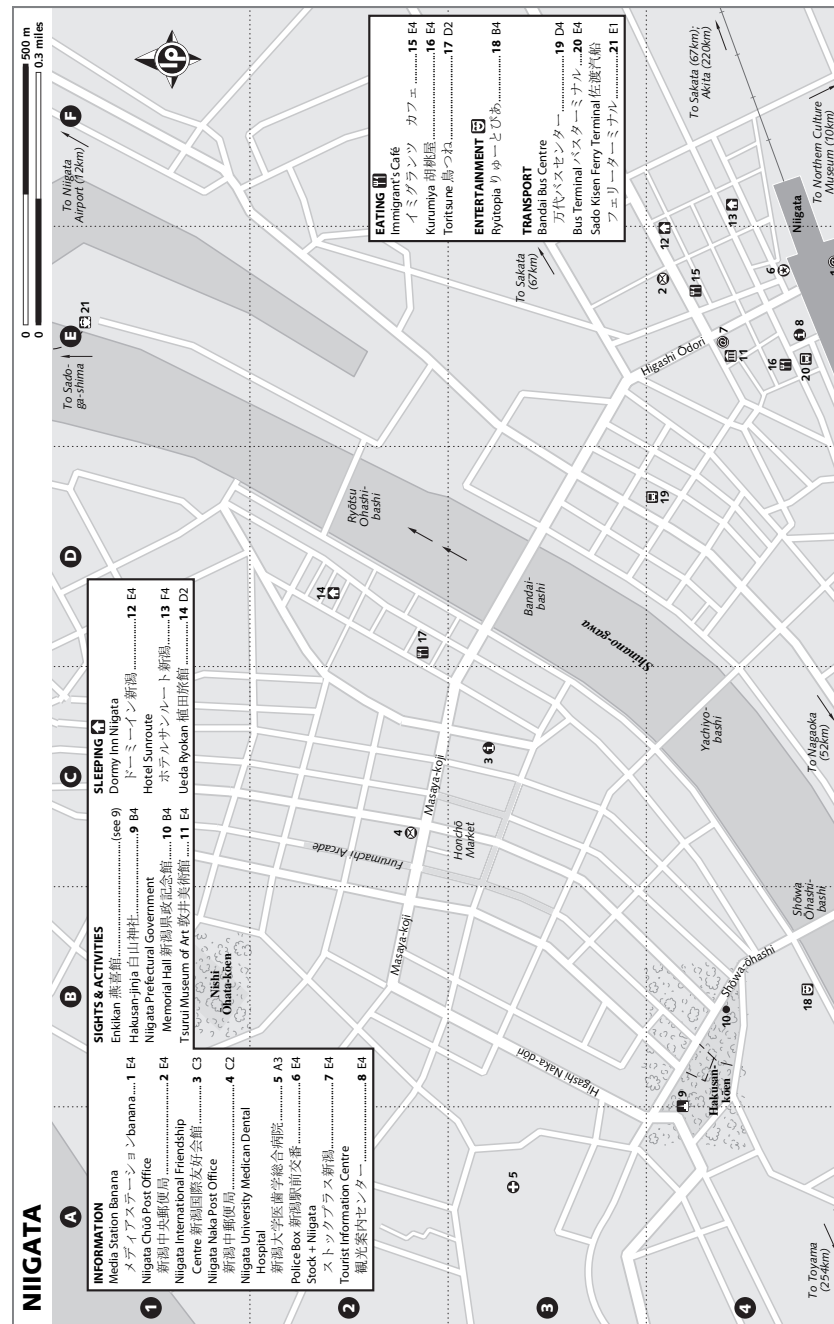
The **Northern Culture Museum** (北方文化博物館; ☎ 385-2001; 2-15-25 Sōmi; admission ¥800; ☎ 9am-5pm Apr-Nov, to 4.30pm Dec-Mar) is 10km southeast of Niigata in an attractive garden complex. Situated among traditional earthen warehouses and individual tea arbours, **Sanraku-tei** is a diminutive teahouse dating from 1890; everything – even the flooring and furniture – is triangular. Buses leave roughly every hour between 10am and 4.40pm from stop 7 at the Bandai bus centre (not the train station) for the Nishi Ohata stop outside the museum (¥500, 45 minutes).

Next to the **Niigata Prefectural Government Memorial Hall** (☎ 228-3607; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun, to 6.30pm Jul-Aug, closed 28 Dec-4 Jan), **Hakusan-jinja** is dedicated to the local god of marriage. The grounds contain a fine lotus pond and the historic teahouse **Enkikan** (admission free, tea ¥300; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed 1st & 3rd Mon of month). Take the buses from stop 13 at the station to Showa Ōhashi (¥180, 15 minutes), in the direction of Irhonechō.

Just north of the station, the **Tsurui Museum of Art** (☎ 247-3311; admission ¥500; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) exhibits Japanese arts and local crafts.

Further off, Lake Hyoko in winter becomes the wintering spot for thousands of swans. Brilliant white, these flocks have been designated a prefectural treasure. At feeding times (noon, 1pm and 3pm) you can see these graceful, beautiful animals, threshed into a food frenzy – think 13kg white pigeons and buckets of popcorn. It's possible to see them just hanging out in nearby fields as well, and some may want to avoid an area where wild animals are specifically overfed to the point that they depend on human handouts for winter survival. Still, they are beautiful, and remain a beloved symbol of winter for many Japanese.

Spectacularly beautiful is the 'Momiji Tani' (Maple Valley) of nearby Yahiko. In autumn, roughly late October to mid-November, an entire valley (albeit a smallish one) turns fiery



scarlet and orange, as these gorgeous trees blush before dropping their leaves for winter's chill. Photographers and tour groups come by the busload, yet it's still well worth ducking onto the beaten path to see. If you time it right, you can catch the Chrysanthemum Festival, held there from 1 to 24 November, where the walkways of Iyahiko Shrine are festooned with flowers.

## Festivals & Events

**Niigata Sake no Jin Festival** Sake aficionados won't want to miss this, held on the third weekend each March. It's a mammoth bacchanal with a blissfully reasonable all-you-can-drink ¥1000 fee, over 170 varieties of sake from a blindfolded tasting contest. Over 170 varieties of sake from all over Japan are available. *Kanpai!*

**Niigata Matsuri** From the first or second weekend (varies yearly) in August, the streets are filled with afternoon parades of colourful floats and shrines. At night thousands of folk dancers parade across the Bandai Bridge. A bumper fireworks display on the final night lights up the Shinanogawa, as a passage of decorated boats carries the shrine of the local god of the sea.

## Sleeping

If you're stuck and are on a backpacker budget, Niigata has several 24-hour internet cafés, but they're located inconveniently far from the station, a 10- or 15-minute bus ride away.

**our pick** **Dormy Inn Niigata** (☎ 247-7755; 1-7-14 Akashi; s/d from ¥5775/7350; 📺) Further down the road, this is a modern and clean business hotel with boxy, featureless rooms and its own laundry. There are a couple of cleanliness options: pay extra for a private bathroom, or pay less and use the public bath and sauna.

**Ueda Ryokan** (☎ 225-1111; 2120 Yonnocho Ishizuechodōri; r per person from ¥3990; 📺) Tucked in the side streets near the Bandai Bridge Lawson, this intimate Japanese-style ryokan isn't fancy, but has clean accommodation and a welcoming host. From the Lawson, cross Ōdōri and follow the small side street past three intersections. When the road narrows, turn right at the next street and Ueda will be on your left, about halfway down.

**Hotel Sunroute** (☎ 246-6161; 1-11-25 Higashi Ōdōri; s/tw/d from ¥8000/13,800/12,800; 📺) The Sunroute is neat, white and bright, with spacious rooms and excellent amenities.

## Eating & Drinking

Niigata is known for the quality of its rice, seafood and, of course, sake. Be aware that at

many restaurants, if you order any alcohol at all you get slapped with a table charge (*otōshi*), and that specials are often listed as costing 'from ¥1000', which may mean your bill ends up more than you expected. This is par for the course here so don't expect complaining to make it go away, but try to ask first if you're pinching your pennies...er, yen.

**Kurumiya** (☎ 290-6556; 1st fl, Tōkyū Inn, 1-2-4 Bentei; dishes from ¥800; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Right next to the train station, this place has a comprehensive selection of local sake, terribly tempting seafood set menus (including fresh sushi and zesty seafood salads) and an eclectic assortment of meat dishes, including horse and (gulp!) whale. The specials (see previous note) are mouthwatering; though no English and no pictures makes ordering a challenge. You're best off asking for *osusume* (chef's suggestion) and letting them decide. Yep, tipplers, they hit you with a table charge if you order a drink, even with the meal.

**Immigrant's Cafe** (☎ 242-2722; www.immigrantscafe.com; Basement Niigata Central Bldg, 1-7-10 Higashi Ōdōri; dishes from ¥600; E) Expats and locals come for good times and an international atmosphere. Asian and Mexican mains are served and there's a happy hour from 5.30pm to 7.30pm Sunday to Thursday. Light electronic beats and a comprehensive drinks list keep everyone juiced up.

**Toritsune** (☎ 229-3074; 2149-2 Ishizuechō-dōri; chicken skewers from ¥100; 🍷 dinner) A nice little hole in the wall, with a friendly, non-intrusive owner who cooks up great yakitori to order over a small fire.

## Entertainment

**Ryūtopia** (☎ 224-5622; www.ryutopia.or.jp; 3-2 Ichibanbori-dōri; dance performances from ¥4000; 🎫 9am-10pm, closed 2nd & 4th Mon of each month) The city's snazziest attraction is a major performing arts centre with a 1900-seat concert hall, a 900-seat theatre and a 400-seat *nō* theatre.

## Getting There & Away

Northeast of the city, **Niigata airport** (☎ 275-2633) has international flights to various Asian destinations. **Kyokushin Air** (☎ 273-0312) links Niigata with Ryōtsu on Sado-ga-shima (¥7350, 25 minutes). Buses run from stop 11 outside Niigata station to the airport every half-hour from 6.40am to 6.40pm (¥370, 25 minutes). A taxi costs about ¥2000.

The JR Joetsu *shinkansen* line runs from Niigata to Echigo-Yuzawa (¥5240, 53 minutes)

and on to Tokyo (Ueno; ¥10,270, two hours); change at Takasaki for the Nagano *shinkansen*. On the JR Uetsu line, there are *tokkyū* trains north from Niigata to Tsuruoka (¥4530, 1¾ hours) and Akita (¥7020, 3¾ hours).

Long-distance buses use the covered Bandai bus centre, which is across the river from the station. Buses link Niigata with Sendai (¥4500, four hours), Yamagata (¥3800, 3¾ hours), Aizu-Wakamatsu (¥2000, 1¾ hours), Kanazawa (¥4580, five hours) and Nagano (¥3060, 3½ hours). There are also night buses to Tokyo (Ikebukuro; ¥5250, five hours) and Kyoto/Osaka (¥9450, 9½ hours). Most buses pass by Niigata station on their way out of town.

**Shin-Nihonkai** (☎ 273-2171) ferries from Niigata to Otaru (Hokkaidō) are excellent value (¥6200, 18 hours, daily except Monday). Buses leave from stop 3 at Niigata station for Rinko-nichōme. For Niigata-kō port, get off at Suehiro-bashi (¥180, 20 minutes).

From the **Sado Kisen** terminal, there are frequent ferries and hydrofoils to Ryōtsu on Sado-ga-shima (p563). Buses to the terminal (¥180, 15 minutes) leave from stop 6 at the station 45 minutes before sailing.

## TO/FROM RUSSIA

Every Monday and Friday **Dalavia Far East Airways** (Tokyo office ☎ 03-3431-0687) flies from Niigata to Khabarovsk, Russia, for connections with the Trans-Siberian Railway. **Vladivostok Airlines** (☎ 279-5105) operates flights every Thursday and Sunday to Vladivostok. For information about obtaining a Russian visa, see p804.

## MYŌKŌ KŌGEN 妙高高原

☎ 0255

A sprawling collection of over 60 ski resorts along the Myōkō-shi mountain range, with massive Mt Myōkō presiding over it all, this area should not be overlooked, particularly since it's so accessible from Tokyo. Many of the resorts are run by the ubiquitous Prince chain, with ski and snowboard facilities comparable to what one finds in places further north, such as Niseko (p589). No surprise, the season starts later than the Hokkaidō counterparts (early to late December), but it is more than made up for by proximity to Tokyo and Nagano, and for its lack of crowds. Snowboarding is allowed at most of the area slopes.

For information, check www.snowjapan.com for up-to-the minute stats, maps and

reviews. Local tourist information, maps and ski reports are at **Myōkō Kōgen Tourist Information** (☎ 86-3911; 291-1 Ōaza Taguchi; 🕒 8.30am-6pm), which is just 100m to the right as you exit Myōkō Kōgen station. There's also info at **Suginohara Tourist Info Centre** (☎ 86-6000; 🕒 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, daily during the ski season) at the Suginohara Kankōkyōkai bus stop.

## Sights & Activities

### MYŌKŌ-YAMA 妙高山

This beautiful mountain, listed as one of Japan's top 100, overlooks it all, and makes for great scenery while you're on the slopes. Hiking is possible when there isn't snow – check at the tourist info booths for trail details and current conditions.

### IMORI-IKE

This pretty pond (er, puddle, really) is famous for its beautiful reflections of nearby Mt Myōkō, which make for great pictures, and for *mizubashou* (Asian skunk cabbage), which blooms in spring and early summer. The white blossoms resemble the more familiar Calla lily, and the green leaves have a distinct pungent odour if stepped on (please don't!). There's a **visitors centre** (☎ 86-4599; director@myokovc.jp; 🕒 9am-4.30pm) and a 500m hiking trail that makes for good birding.

### MYŌKŌ SUGINOHARA SKI RESORT

妙高杉の原スキー場

One of the numerous resorts in the Myōkō Kōgen area, this Prince-run resort, **Myōkō Suginohara** (妙高杉の原スキー場; ☎ 86-6211; http://ski.princehotels.co.jp/myoko in Japanese; lift ticket ¥4000; 🕒 8am-5pm, night skiing Fri & holidays 6-9pm) has nice views of Mt Myōkō and 17 runs, the majority of them at the intermediate level, with beginner slopes close behind, and a handful of 'black' to round things off. Wide and well groomed, the runs have good powder snow and often seem empty compared to other Japanese ski resorts. Piped muzak makes things less serene, but it's easy to overlook when you're tearing down through moguls or cruising beside the snow-covered trees with only a handful of people to share the slopes with. The area caters to both skiers and snowboarders.

Grab a snack at one of the many restaurants and coffee shops at the base of the mountain or head to the **Rāmen Corner** (ラーメンコーナー; parking lot 1; 🕒 8am-5pm) for a noodle fix. The snazzy **Suginosawa Onsen Centre** (杉野沢温泉セ

ンター 杉野沢温泉苗名の湯; ☎ 86-6565; ☎ daily Dec-Mar, closed Wed Apr-Nov; bath ¥450) offers a relaxing soak after a hard day on the slopes.

For off-piste excitement, check out the local telemark experts, **Myōkō Backcountry Ski School** (妙高バックカントリースキースクール; ☎ 87-2392; fax 87-3278; www.myokokogen.org/mbs/english.php) for guided tours through the backwoods terrain.

Myōkō Sugino-hara is about 23 minutes from Myōkō Kōgen JR station.

## Sleeping & Eating

The massive Myōkō Kōgen area has numerous hotels, *minshuku* and ryokan; many of the packages include an overnight stay.

**Canadian House** (カナディアンハウス; ☎ 87-2186; www6.ocn.ne.jp/~canadian/zhome.html; 1394 Taguchi; s/d ¥6000/9000, 5 people in 1 room per person ¥3200; ☎) An inexpensive place with Japanese- and Western-style options, kitchenettes (in some rooms), with pick-up at the station if you call in advance. It also rents bicycles for those wanting to roll around instead of hit the white stuff. Meals are optional, and at extra cost.

**Sun Village Machida** (サン・ヴィレッジまちだ; ☎ 86-6117; 2003 Suginosawa; r per person from ¥8000) Come here for a right-at-the-slopes villa with locally grown seasonal veggies as part of the meals. Rooms are your choice of either Japanese- or Western-style. Find it by (from Myōkō Kōgen station) taking a Sugino-hara-bound bus and getting off at the Onsen Centre stop. Deals for students or seniors are sometimes possible; ask.

**Kumasugi-no-Sato Soba-no-Hana** (くま杉の里そばの花; ☎ 86-6967; noodles ¥700-800; ☎ lunch-dinner Thu-Tue) This small noodle shop uses local produce in its various dishes. Try the *sansai-soba* (mountain vegetable buckwheat noodles; ¥800). No English menu. Take a bus to Suginosawa Ue and get off at the last stop. It's right there, on the 1st floor of the Kuma-no-Sato building.

## Getting There & Away

Package tours out of Tokyo start at about ¥5200 per person, with another ¥500/1000 for ski/snowboard rental gear. Many night departures are available, giving you a whole day on the slopes prior to a return in the evening. Or choose overnight options, which include one night as well (single/double per person ¥11,700/8800). Call **Travel Road** (☎ 042-599-2052; www.roadplan.net; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat

& Sun) or the tourist info booths for package details.

Frequent buses (about nine per day) run from the slopes to Myōkō Kōgen JR station or to Nagano. From there, take the *shinkansen* back to Tokyo (¥7970, 1¾ hours). Bus service runs frequently during the ski season (December to April) and less frequently at other times of year.

## SADO-GA-SHIMA 佐渡島

☎ 0259 / pop 69,500

Sado-ga-shima, where out-of-favour intellectuals were banished, is Japan's sixth-largest island. Persimmons are everywhere, and *hoshigaki* (dried winter persimmon) is a common food, even appearing in the traditional *yōkan* (bean jelly) sweets – some flecked with real gold. The island is a very popular destination because of its natural beauty and atmospheric hiking (the southern and northern mountain ranges are connected by a vast, fertile plain), as well as for the eccentric reminders of its rich, evocative history.

Among those banished here were Emperor Juntoku, *nō* master Ze-Ami, and Nichiren, the founder of one of Japan's most influential Buddhist sects. When gold was discovered near Aikawa in 1601, there was a sudden influx of gold-diggers, who were often vagrants press-ganged from the mainland and made to work like slaves.

Sado is famous for the Earth Celebration, with *okesa* (folk dances), *onidaiko* (demon drum dances) and *tsuburosashi* (a phallic dance with two goddesses).

The best time to visit is between late April and mid-October; during winter, not only will the weather be foul, but much of the accommodation will be closed and transport will be slashed to a bare minimum.

The island is well furnished with guest-houses, youth hostels and camping, but you must book accommodation well in advance in the hectic summer months. Ask the tourist information offices for help if necessary, as only a few of the many options are listed here.

## Festivals & Events

One of Sado's biggest draws is the **Earth Celebration**, a three-day music, dance and arts festival usually held during the third week in August. The focal point is performances by the world-famous Kodo Drummers, who



live in a small village north of Ogi, but who tour eight months a year; all members are required to adhere to strict physical, mental and spiritual training regimens. International guest performers and Japanese artists offer workshops throughout the festival. For more information contact www.kodo.or.jp. You will need to buy tickets and arrange accommodation well in advance.

Other major festivals:

**Kōzan Matsuri** (鉦山祭) Fireworks, *okesa* and float parades on the fourth weekend of July.

**Ryōtsu Tanabata Kawabiraki** (両津七夕・川開き) Onidaiko and Sado's biggest firework display, held on 7 and 8 August.

**Shishi-ga-jō Matsuri** (獅子ヶ城まつり) Beach volleyball and fireworks on 11 August.

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**Ogi Minato Matsuri** (小木港祭り) Lion dances, folk songs, tub-boat races and fireworks from 28 to 30 August.

## Ryōtsu 両津

With its grand mountain backdrop, Sado's main hub is quite pretty, as far as ports go. The central area is a 10-minute walk north of the ferry terminal, which is surrounded by *nō* artefacts; statues pepper the terminal and a giant mask rises above the trees.

The island's main **tourist information centre** (☎ 23-3300; ☎ 8.30am-5pm, to 6.50pm Jun-Aug) is in Ryōtsu, in the street behind the coffee and souvenir shops across from the ferry terminal. Staff speaks some English and provides comprehensive maps, timetables and pamphlets for the entire island.

Check internet at tiny **Clever Cat** (☎ 23-3158; 138-1 Minato; per 30min incl 1 drink ¥700; ☎ 10am-9pm Wed-Mon), near the ferry terminal.

From bus stop 2 outside the terminal, buses (one way, including entry fee ¥960) run to **Sado Nōgaku-no-sato** (☎ 23-5000; ☎ 8.30am-5pm), a hi-tech museum of *nō* drama, with displays of masks and costumes and performances of *nō* enacted by a cast of animatronic actors.

**Kunimiso** (☎ 22-2316; Niibo-Shomyōji; per person incl 2 meals from ¥7000) is one of Sado's most popular *minshuku*, due to its collection of *bunya*



puppets, which the owner likes to demonstrate to guests. It's 15 minutes by bus from Ryōtsu to the Uryūya bus stop, then a long walk. Phone ahead for a pick-up.

**Sado Seaside Hotel** (佐渡シーサイドホテル; ☎ 27-7211; kkmah@mui.bi.globe.ne.jp; 80 Sumiyoshi; r per person incl/excl meals from ¥7500/4875; 📺) is at Sumiyoshi Onsen, about 2km from Ryōtsu. It's cheery enough with free internet, an *onsen*, and an obliging free shuttle service to and from the port. Try for a room with an ocean view.

### Sawata 佐和町

The town of Sawata, 15km southwest of Ryōtsu, is on the main road between Ryōtsu and Aikawa. If you get off the bus 1km east of town at Kaminagaki (¥150, from Ryōtsu ¥510), you can walk for about 30 minutes into the hills to **Myōshō-ji**, a temple belonging to the Nichiren sect, with its sizable, five-storey pagoda.

Near the bus terminal in Sawata, the Silver Village resort stages **bunya puppet performances** (佐渡文弥人形芝居; ☎ 52-3961; Kubotahama; admission ¥350; 📺 4 shows daily Apr-Nov), a traditional form of puppetry that's been a feature of Sado life for over 250 years. From stop 1 outside the Ryōtsu ferry terminal, frequent buses run to Sawata (¥570, 40 minutes) and onto Aikawa (¥390, 20 minutes) on the Hon-sen line.

**Green Village Youth Hostel** (☎ 22-2719; gvyh@e-sadonet.tv; 750-4 Niibo Uryūya; dm from ¥3670), south of Ryōtsu, is among the island's top accommodation options because of great food (¥1500), internet access, friendly hosts and spectacular scenery. From Ryōtsu take a bus bound for Sawata on the Minami-sen bus line and get off at the Uryūya stop (¥350, 10 minutes); continue for 10 minutes and turn left at the first bend. If you tell the driver you're going to Green Village, he'll drop you off a bit closer.

**Urashima** (☎ 57-3751; www.r-urashima.com in Japanese; 978-3 Kubota; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥8000), with its modern space-capsule design, overlooks the beach.

**Tōkaen** (☎ 63-2221; www.on.rim.or.jp/~toukaen/in Japanese; tokaen@on.rim.or.jp; 1636-1 Otsu; s incl/excl 2 meals from ¥8400/4200) is a pleasant *minshuku*. The owners can help you plan all sorts of outdoor activities – hiking, fishing and so on – and they also cook up good vegetarian food. Plus, there's a *shiogama-buro* (rock-salt sauna) that's certainly worth a soak. Tōkaen is a bit out of the way, though. Take the Hon line to the Shinbo Undōkōen-mae stop (¥400, 20

minutes); it's about 3km to the north. Calling ahead is a good idea.

### Mano 真野

This was the provincial capital and cultural centre of the island from early times until the 14th century.

Mano's **tourist information office** (☎ 55-3589; 📺 9am-5.30pm Apr-Oct) rents bicycles (¥1100 per day) and has sketch maps of the hiking trail.

Buses between Ryōtsu and Mano on the No 2 Minami-sen line stop in front of **Konpon-ji** (☎ 22-3751; admission ¥300; 📺 8am-4pm Nov-Apr, 8am-4.45pm May-Oct). This temple, with its thatched roof and pleasant gardens, is where Nichiren was first brought when exiled.

There are several other temples in the vicinity of Mano, many of which lie along a peaceful 7km nature trail that begins just west of Konpon-ji, near the Danpū-jōbus stop. It's a short walk from there to the **Myōsen-ji** (☎ 55-2061; admission free; 📺 9am-4pm) temple, also with a distinctive five-storey pagoda.

The trail then passes through rice fields and up old wooden steps set into the hillside to **Kokubun-ji**, Sado-ga-shima's oldest temple (dating from 741); although sadly neglected, it's still beautiful. Another 3km takes you past marvellous lookout points to **Mano Go-ryō**, the tomb of Emperor Juntoku. From there, it's a short walk down to **Sado Rekishi Densetsukan** (☎ 55-2525; admission ¥700; 📺 8am-5.30pm Apr-Nov, to 5pm Dec-Mar), where more tireless robots illustrate dioramas of Sado's history and festivals, as do various holograms. Next door is **Mano-gū**, a small shrine dedicated to Emperor Juntoku. It's a 15-minute walk back to the main road.

Buses connect Mano with Ryōtsu (¥630, 45 minutes) and Sawata (¥260, 13 minutes) on the Minami-sen line, and Ogi (¥810, 50 minutes) on the Ogi line.

### Ogi 小木

This drowsy port on the island's southern tip is kept in business by a ferry connection to Naoetsu. The **tourist office** (☎ 86-3200) is a few minutes' walk west of the post office (which is behind the bus terminal).

The big attraction here is a ride in a **taraibune** (たらい舟; tub boat; 📺 approx 8.30am-4.30pm), a boat usually made from a barrel and rowed by women in traditional fisherfolk costumes. It looks difficult and it is – those awkward poles at the front are used to steer. You can try your hand at it in Ogi harbour (10 minutes ¥450).

**Minshukū Sakaya** (民宿 さかや; ☎ 86-2535; r per person incl/excl 2 meals ¥7000/4500) has pared-down yet cosy rooms, and is conveniently located a few minutes' walk east of the Ogi ferry terminal.

Buses run hourly between Ogi and Sawata via Mano (¥910, 1¼ hours); direct buses between Ogi and Ryōtsu (¥1070, one hour 25 minutes) run only during certain festivals.

### Aikawa 相川

From a tiny hamlet, Aikawa developed almost overnight into a 100,000-person boomtown when gold was discovered nearby in 1601; private mining continued until the end of the Edo period. Today the population has dwindled to a few thousand and tourism is the main business. There's a small **tourist information centre** (☎ 74-2220) beside the bus terminal.

From Aikawa bus terminal, it's a 40-minute walk up a steep mountain (buses run occasionally in the high season) to the bountiful **Sado Kinzan Gold Mine** (☎ 74-2389; 1305 Shimoaikawa; admission ¥700; 📺 8am-5pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-4.30pm Nov-Mar), which produced large quantities of gold and silver until its demise in 1989. Descend into the chilly depths where you'll encounter robots that dramatise the tough existence of former miners. A further 300m up the mountain is Dōyū-no-Wareto, the original opencast mine where you can still see the remains of the workings.

It takes around 30 minutes to return on foot down the mountain road to Aikawa. On the way you'll pass several temples and **Aikawa Kyōdo Hakubutsukan** (☎ 74-4312; Sakashita Machi; admission ¥300; 📺 8.30am-5pm), a folk museum with more exhibits from the old mine.

At **Nanaura-sō** (民宿 七浦荘; ☎ 76-2735; nanaura@jasmine.ocn.ne.jp; 1586-3 Tachibana; per person incl 2 meals from ¥7000), there are several rooms with balconies overlooking the ocean and the owners speak some English. From Aikawa, take the Nanaura-kaigan line to the Nagatemi-saki-iriguchi stop (¥330), or better still, call ahead for a pick-up. It can also be reached from Sawata, which is the southern terminus for the Nanaura-kaigan-sen line. Note that the Hon-sen line, which also links Sawata with Aikawa, follows a different road. Avoid it.

Aikawa bus terminal, a major transport hub for bus services on the island, has regular buses to Ryōtsu (¥780, one hour), and connections to Ogi (¥910, 50 minutes, via Sawata) and Sawata (¥390, 20 minutes).

### Iwayaguchi 岩谷口

The scenery along the coast road further north is interesting, with its time-worn fishing villages. At Iwayaguchi, you'll find the **Sotokaifu Youth Hostel** (☎ 78-2911; www.sotokaifu-yh.com/en/info@sotokaifu.net; 131 Iwayaguchi; dm from ¥3360) in a tiny fishing hamlet – just the ticket for solitude seekers. Across, on the opposite side of the island's tip, you'll find the **Underwater Christmas Tree** (☎ 23-3687; tu9t-hnm@asahi-net.or.jp; ¥1500 plus diving fee, usually 2 dives and lunch for ¥15,000; 📺 3rd week of Nov), where divers can, yes, go down and see presents, lights, decorations. A similar event happens on Tanabata, with a decorated bamboo.

There are seven buses daily to Iwayaguchi from Aikawa on the Kaifu line (¥1010, 70 minutes).

### Senkaku-wan 尖閣湾

A 20-minute bus ride (¥280) north of Aikawa on the Kaifu line, this bay features striking rock formations that can be viewed on **excursions** (30min ¥850; 📺 4 daily Apr-Oct) in a glass-bottom vessel.

The **Sado Belle Mer Youth Hostel** (☎ 75-2011; http://sado.bellemer.jp in Japanese; 369-4 Himezu; dm from ¥3360) is in the tourist area of Senkaku-wan. From Aikawa, take the Kaifu line to the Minami-Himezu stop (¥310, 20 minutes); from there it's a five-minute walk in the direction of the shore.

### Getting There & Away

**Kyokushin Air** (旭伸航空; ☎ 23-5005) flights link Ryōtsu with Niigata (one way ¥7350, return ¥11,020, 25 minutes, three flights daily, four in summer). Buses between the airport and Ryōtsu bus terminal are currently suspended indefinitely.

Sado Kisen passenger ferries and hydrofoils run between Niigata and Ryōtsu. There are up to six regular ferries daily (one way from ¥2320, two hours 30 minutes). As many as 10 jetfoils zip across daily in merely an hour, but service is greatly reduced between December and February (one way/return ¥6220/11,250). Before embarking, you need to buy a ticket from the vending machines and to fill in a white passenger ID form.

From Naoetsu-kō, southwest of Niigata, there are ferry and hydrofoil services to Ogi, in the southwest part of Sado-ga-shima. Between April and late November, there are four or more regular ferry departures daily (2½

hours) and two hydrofoils (one hour). During the rest of the year the hydrofoil service is suspended and regular ferries run only twice daily. Fares are the same as for the Niigata-Ryōtsu service. From JR Naoetsu station, it's a 10-minute bus ride (¥160) and then a 15-minute walk to the port.

### Getting Around

Local buses are fine on the main routes – between Ryōtsu and Aikawa, for example. However, services to other parts of the island are often restricted to two or three a day and in winter services are sharply restricted.

To explore less-touristed areas, car rental is desirable. There are numerous car-rental firms close to the Ryōtsu terminal; rates start from ¥7000/9000 per day/24 hours. Tell the proprietor your plan, as construction, unpassable bridges or snow may mean the map's routes are unavailable.

If you plan to make extended use of local buses, there's an English-language timetable available from the ferry terminals and tourist information offices. The ¥2000 unlimited ride bus pass, also in English, is a good-value option valid for two consecutive days on weekends only (sightseeing buses excluded). The *teiki kankō* (sightseeing buses) have packaged itineraries with prices from ¥4000 to ¥8000.

Cycling is an enjoyable way to get off the beaten track. Bicycle rental is available in Ryōtsu, Aikawa and Ogi (per day ¥400 to ¥1500).

### NAEBA 苗場

☎ 025

As home to the Fuji rock festival and with some of Japan's best skiing, Naeba might just be a partygoer's perfect little 'town'. Four ski resorts – Tashiro, Kagura, Mitsumata and Naeba – are all linked by the world's longest gondola (5481m!), meaning that you get four ski resorts in one if you come here. The longest run is 4000m long. The Dragondola (return ¥1800), as it's called, can speed up to eight people to dry, light powder that makes for great trips down the slopes. Snowboarders will want to check out the biggest half-pipe within a day's trip from Tokyo, and because there are so many options, beginners can enjoy a day just as easily as advanced skiers. Naeba itself has 33 ski lifts, so there is plenty to do – the only problem is that with such proximity to Tokyo, you may find long waits in lift

lines and at the restaurant. As of winter 2006, a new ski centre has opened up that caters to night-bus arrivals. It's open from midnight until 10pm and has heated waiting rooms and 'nap rooms' for the truly sleepy.

If you come in late July, the **Fuji Rock Festival** ([www.smash-uk.com/frf07](http://www.smash-uk.com/frf07); admission ¥39,800) is a three-day-long musical madness – like Woodstock, only with toilets and less mud – and up to 100,000 people show up to hang out, listen to great bands and enjoy the party atmosphere. While pricey, it's like a trip to mecca for many music lovers.

More sedate pleasures can be found on the 18-hole **golf course** or the **swimming pool** (open year-round).

Get here by taking the *shinkansen* to either Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen or Joetsu, then take a bus or free shuttle. Packages often include round-trip transport and can start at around ¥9300 for day trips. One-way shuttles from Tokyo's Prince Hotel in Shinagawa cost ¥4000; purchase through **Seibu Travel** (☎ 03-5296-9165; ☎ 10am-6pm).

### ECHIGO-YUZAWA ONSEN 越後湯沢温泉

☎ 025 / pop 8660

Echigo-Yuzawa was the setting for Nobel Prize-winning writer Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*, a novel about decadent *onsen* geisha. Today it's the ski slopes that draw people here, but a few items in his memory are on display at the **Yukiguni-kan** (雪国館; History & Folk Museum; ☎ 784-3965; admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Thu-Tue), 500m north of the station. **Gala Yuzawa** (ガラ湯沢スキー場; ☎ 785-6543; [www.gala.co.jp/2007/GALA\\_English/index.html](http://www.gala.co.jp/2007/GALA_English/index.html); ☎ Dec-May; day lift ticket ¥4300) is one of the area's ski resorts. Check [www.snowjapan.com](http://www.snowjapan.com) for the latest conditions.

Hike in summer around **Yuzawa Kōgen**, an alpine plateau accessed via ropeway (cable car; return ¥1300) from the town. Discount coupons may be available.

Echigo-Yuzawa's JR station is so complete you hardly need to step outside. What with its own **onsen** (¥800; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-22 Dec, 9am-8pm 23 Dec-Mar), a **sake tasting bar** (ぼんしゅ館; ☎ 784-3758; [www.ponshukan.com](http://www.ponshukan.com) in Japanese; per 5 samples ¥500), with over 150 varieties of Niigata's and other speciality brews, a salt-tasting table (ever had rose salt before?) and a mammoth *omiyage* (souvenir) shop – with plenty of samples and some odd gifts, such as a dried whole fish wrapped in rope – all that's missing is a station ski slope.

### ROCK FESTIVALS IN JAPAN *Simon Bartz*

Music lovers head to Japan, late July, for the **Fuji Rock Festival** ([www.fujirockfestival.com](http://www.fujirockfestival.com)). There's no better location than the ski resort in Naeba, Niigata Prefecture: mountains rising both sides of a forested valley, and it's littered with several stages. Here you'll find rock, hip-hop, experimental jazz, techno, punk and reggae, all just a two-hour train ride from Tokyo.

As well as foreign acts like the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Neil Young, Franz Ferdinand, Oasis and New Order, there's plenty of home-grown talent. And the organisers are known for their eccentricities and a sense of humour: when Morrissey pulled out of his headlining slot in 2004, the organisers simply hired a Smiths tribute band to take his place.

More than 100,000 people attend Fuji Rock, and it's about ¥38,000 for the three-day pass. Most camp up on a mountain, as accommodation tends to be booked out. What to bring? You won't need your skis so much as some sunscreen and, yes, Wellington boots. Most years see two days of blue skies and sun followed by rain. You may find yourself swimming in mud.

Held in late September, the two-day **Asagiri Jam** festival is perhaps more deserving of the name 'Fuji Rock Festival' – it's located in the beautiful foothills that surround Mt Fuji. Asagiri Jam is low-key, and the line-up isn't announced beforehand. The emphasis is more on creating a good vibe rather than pulling in big names. Dub, techno, jazz and, of course, rock are featured; Television, The Pogues and the late Joe Strummer have all performed. There are no hotels around here, so bring a tent or stay up all night.

The two-day **Summer Sonic** ([www.summersonic.com](http://www.summersonic.com)) draws major international acts and is held during early August in Chiba, next to Tokyo, and Osaka. Chiba's line-up plays the next day in Osaka, and vice-versa. Then there's the three-day **Rock in Japan** festival, set in acres of green fields in Ibaraki Prefecture, a two-hour train ride from Tokyo. In many ways, this festival epitomises the Japanese music scene today – all performers are Japanese – and it spans J-Pop stars to aging crooners.

*Simon Bartz runs a website about Japanese music: [www.badbee.net](http://www.badbee.net)*

If you must leave, there are two exits from the station. The east exit is the main one, with the **tourist information office** (☎ 785-5505; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) to its left outside the station. To the right of the west exit, an **accommodation office** books rooms at the numerous *minshuku*, hotels and ski lodges in town. You pay a ¥2000 deposit and staff issues you with a receipt to take to your guesthouse.

**our pick** Right outside the west exit's little rotatory is the luxurious **Hatago Isen** (旅籠井山; ☎ 784-3361; [www.isen.co.jp](http://www.isen.co.jp), in Japanese; r per 1 or 2 people incl breakfast from ¥11,500; ☎), a beautiful ryokan with extremely tasteful décor designed to recreate the feel of an old traveller's lodge. Though modern niceties such as TVs peep through, they've done a great job. The details make all the difference, whether it be artful screens placed to conceal a plasma TV, or a simple flower in a ceramic vase. You *won't* feel at home here – it's just too beautiful.

Overlooking the town and its own skiing grounds, **NASPA New Ōtani** (NASPAニューオータニ; ☎ 780-6111, 0120-227-021; [www.naspa.co.jp/english](http://www.naspa.co.jp/english); s/tw from ¥7300/12,000; ☎) has luxurious Western-style rooms for up to three people – good value if sharing, and most have excellent views. A small

*rotenburo* is a great way to soak the soreness away. Free shuttles run between the station and the resort and, in winter, to many major ski areas, making it a superb choice for skiers.

**Asahikan** (あさひ館; ☎ 787-3205; [www.asahikan-yuzawa.com/english.html](http://www.asahikan-yuzawa.com/english.html); 1760 Tsuchitaru, Yuzawa-machi, Minamiuonuma-gun; r per person incl 2 meals from ¥8000) is a friendly *minshuku* in an old-style Japanese house. Homecooked meals, tea and coffee, and close proximity to the Yuzawa Park Ski Jō, are all reasons to stay here. Pick-up is possible if you call ahead. Another Asahikan is nearby the station's west exit, so don't get them confused.

**Minshuku Tatsumoto** (民宿たつもと; ☎ 784-2371; [www.dpl-jp.com/yado/tatsumoto](http://www.dpl-jp.com/yado/tatsumoto) in Japanese; 317-2 Yuzawa; r per person incl/excl meals from ¥6000/4000) is very close to the train track. It's cosy, only six rooms. The natural *onsen* is open in the morning as well as at night. Turn right out of the west exit, pass the 7-Eleven and look on the right, about 250m away.

Echigo-Yuzawa station is on the JR Joetsu *shinkansen* line between Niigata (¥5240, 51 minutes) and Tokyo (Ueno; ¥6490, 91 minutes), within walking distance of all the in-town sights, with shuttles to zip you to the ski slopes.

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