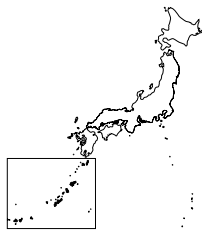


Okinawa & the Southwest Islands

沖縄 南西諸島



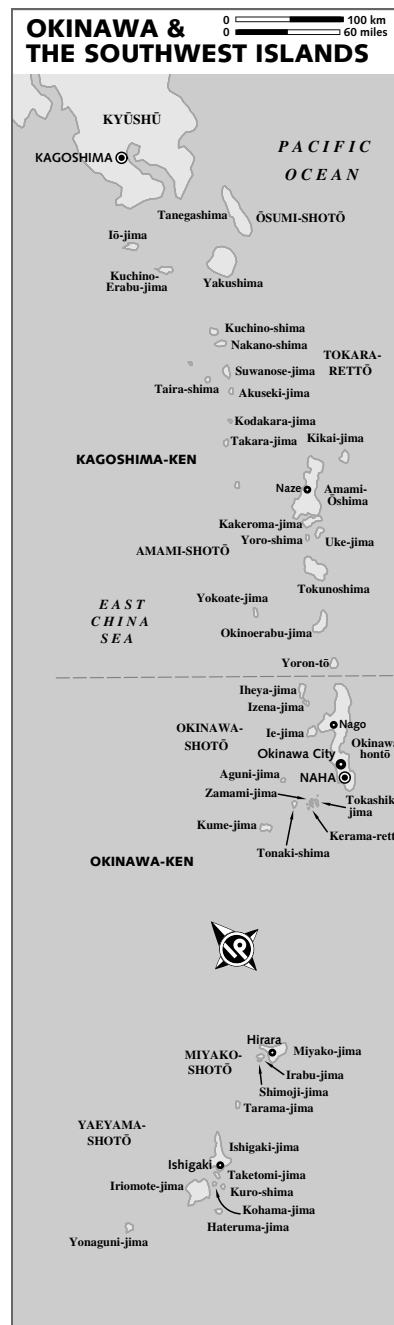
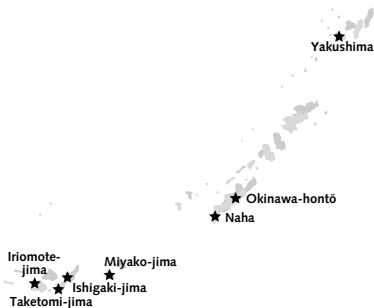
Welcome to the other Japan, where pebble gardens and cherry blossoms give way to white-sand beaches and swaying palm trees. Despite centuries of mainland exploitation and horrific destruction during the closing months of WWII, Japan is in the midst of an Okinawa boom. Today, Japanese mainlanders, both young and old, are flocking to the islands in droves. And it's not difficult to see why – with a year-round balmy climate and plenty of sunshine, Okinawa and the Southwest Islands, or the Nansei-shotō, are the perfect destination for beachcombers, hikers and marine sports-lovers alike.

While package tourism is evident, independent travellers can easily search out unspoilt beauty and relative seclusion. Coastlines are dotted with beaches that run the spectrum from powder-white sand to *hoshi-suna* or 'star sand', which consists of the skeletal remains of tiny animals. Island interiors range from subtropical rainforest to mangrove jungles, while the underwater world teems with colourful fish and vibrant coral reefs. Okinawa and the Southwest Islands were also the centre of the Ryūkyū kingdom, and there are still traces of this rich cultural heritage in the region's architecture, language, music and cuisine.

Okinawa and the Southwest Islands comprise a string of subtropical islands that stretch for more than 1000km from the southern tip of Kyūshū to about 110km from Taiwan. Although the Nansei-shotō is one of the top domestic tourist destinations for Japanese, few foreigners explore this part of the country. It's unfortunate, as the region is brimming with sights, and a glimpse of tropical Japan is a wonderful complement to time spent exploring the mainland.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Commune with millennia-old cedar trees on the Unesco World Heritage island of **Yakushima** (p739)
- Take a deep breath through your regulator as you swim alongside schools of manta rays on **Ishigaki-jima** (p773)
- Trek through virgin jungles in search of the elusive *yamaneko* (mountain cat) on the lush mangrove island of **Iriomote-jima** (p776)
- Admire the *shiisa* (lion-dog rooftop guardian) statues, red-tiled roofs and coral walls of the 'living museum' that is **Taketomi-jima** (p779)
- Soak up the sun by day and kick it in the bars by night with an alternative cast of characters on the laid-back island of **Miyako-jima** (p763)
- Enjoy the tropical hustle and bustle of Naha's **Kokusai-dōri** (p751) before ferry-hopping around the **islands near Okinawa-hontō** (p759)



History

For centuries, Okinawa and the Southwest Islands were ruled by *aji* (local chieftains), who battled for control of small fiefs, and struggled among themselves for power and fame. In 1429, however, the islands were united by Sho Hashi of the Chūzan kingdom, which led to the establishment of the Ryūkyū dynasty. During this era, Sho Hashi increased contact with China, which contributed to the flourishing of Okinawan music, dance, literature and ceramics. In this 'Golden Era', weapons were prohibited, and the islands were rewarded with peace and tranquillity.

With no weapons and little means of defence, the Ryūkyū kingdom was not prepared for war when the Shimazu clan of Satsuma (modern-day Kagoshima) invaded in 1609. The Shimazu conquered the Ryūkyū kingdom easily, and then established severe controls over their trade. While the rest of Japan closed its doors to the world prior to 1853, the Shimazu sustained trade with China under the guise of the Ryūkyū kingdom. The islands were controlled with an iron fist, and taxed and exploited greedily for the next 250 years.

With the restoration of the Meiji emperor and the abolition of the Japanese feudal system, the Ryūkyūs were annexed to Japan as Okinawa Prefecture in 1879. However, life hardly changed for the islanders as they were treated as foreign subjects by the Japanese government, just as they had been by the Shimazu. Furthermore, the Meiji government stamped out local culture by outlawing the teaching of Ryūkyū history in schools, and establishing Japanese as the official language.

As a consequence, Ryūkyū islanders paid a heavy price for their new citizenship in the closing stages of WWII as Okinawa became the only battlefield on Japanese soil. By the time the Battle of Okinawa was over, 12,500 US soldiers and an estimated quarter of a million Japanese had died. Even today, many locals feel that Okinawa was sacrificed to save the mainland.

The post-war history of the region has been characterised by the collusion between Washington and Tokyo, which has transformed the island of Okinawa-hontō into one of the most heavily armed places on earth. For more information, see p748.

Climate

Okinawa and the Southwest Islands experience a subtropical climate, and are much

warmer than mainland Japan, particularly further south.

If you travel in the winter months of November to March, crowds are smaller, accommodation is less expensive and underwater visibility for divers is at its best. However, inter-island ferry services are culled outside the busy summer months.

Summer can be hot and crowded depending where you go. Typhoons, which can turn up at any time between June and October, wreak havoc with ferry schedules.

The average daily temperature in Okinawa in December is 20°C, while in July it is 31°C.

Language

Although the Ryūkyū islands used to have their own distinctive language, this has by and large disappeared. However, you may run into difficulties speaking standard Japanese with one of Okinawa's remarkable number of centenarians.

Getting There & Away

Okinawa and the Southwest Islands are easily accessible from mainland Japan.

While Naha is the hub, with direct flights to major mainland Japanese cities (p814), Amami-Ōshima, Miyako-jima and Ishigaki-jima also have daily direct flights to Tokyo and Osaka. Other outer islands such as Yonaguni-jima, Kume-jima and Zamami-jima can be reached by air with a change of flight in Naha.

If you're heading for the northern islands, it may be best to fly into Kagoshima on Kyūshū, then change to ferries or flights to the islands. There are daily direct flights from Kagoshima to Yakushima, Tanegashima, Amami-Ōshima, Tokunoshima, Yoron-tō and Okinoerabu-jima.

Ferries from Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Kōbe and Kagoshima make their way with varying regularity to the Nansei-shotō. An incredible number of ferries ply the waters between the islands.

If you are arriving in Japan by air, it is worth noting that JAL and ANA both offer 'visit Japan'-type airfares for domestic flights within Japan – as long as they are bought outside Japan in conjunction with a ticket to Japan. Such tickets, if used to Okinawa, are an incredible saving from standard domestic airfares bought within Japan.

Getting Around

Countless aircraft buzz between the islands, though almost as many ferries do the same. There are ferries from Kagoshima to Naha and from Naha to Ishigaki-jima that stop at all the major islands in between.

On the larger islands, you can easily get around via public bus or rental car. On the smaller islands, you can always rent a moped or push bike for the day.

KAGOSHIMA-KEN

鹿児島県

The northern half of the Nansei-shotō is administratively part of Kyūshū's southernmost prefecture of Kagoshima. Heading southwest, there are three main island groups in the chain.

Northernmost is the Ōsumi-shotō, which is home to the island of Yakushima, one of the most popular destinations in the Nansei-shotō. These islands, around 100km south of the Kyūshū mainland, are accessed by ferry from, and back to, Kagoshima.

Next is the Tokara-rettō, consisting of 12 rarely visited volcanic islets, which is one of the most remote destinations in the region. The Tokara-rettō are accessed by ferry from, and back to, Kagoshima.

Southernmost is the Amami-shotō, which is home to the population centre of Amami-Ōshima as well as several more picturesque islands. Located 380km south of Kyūshū, this group has a more pronounced tropical feel than other islands in the Kagoshima-ken. This group of islands is easily accessed by a ferry line that runs between Naha and Kagoshima.

ŌSUMI-SHOTŌ 大隈諸島

The northernmost island group in Kagoshima-ken is the Ōsumi-shotō, consisting of the two main islands of Yakushima and Tanegashima and the tiny islet of Iō-jima. The all-star attraction in the group is Yakushima, a virtual paradise for nature lovers that attracts large numbers of both domestic and international travellers. Tanegashima, which is famous for its rocket-launch facility, sees few foreign travellers, though it is a fiercely popular surfing destination for Japanese. Finally, tiny Iō-jima is a rarely visited gem of a volcanic island with excellent *onsen* (hot

IN DEEP WATER

Although its popularity among the international diving community pales in comparison to other Asian countries such as Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, the Nansei-shotō is a diver's paradise. The waters surrounding Okinawa and the Southwest Islands are home to an outstanding variety of tropical fish and pelagic animals including dolphins, whale sharks, hammerheads and manta rays. There is also a good variety of hard and soft coral reefs as well as a healthy smattering of underwater wrecks, cavern systems and even the odd archaeological ruin. For a good introduction, check out www.divejapan.com/okinawainf.htm, which has maps, photos and information on different dive spots throughout the islands.

Here's the good news: each island is surrounded by a fair number of dive sites, which means that diving in the Nansei-shotō is significantly less crowded than other Asian destinations. Outside the more popular dive sites, it's sometimes possible to have an entire section of reef all to yourself. Here's the bad news: diving in the Nansei-shotō is significantly more expensive than other Asian destinations. Although prices vary slightly between operators, you can expect to pay between ¥8000 and ¥10,000 for two boat dives (including lunch), and between ¥2000 and ¥5000 for full equipment rental.

One of the biggest deterrents for foreign divers is the fact that few operators on the islands speak English. Although there are a handful of foreign-run dive shops on the island of Okinawa-hontō, it helps to have a basic understanding of the Japanese language if you're travelling elsewhere. Fortunately, Japanese divers use a significant number of English loan words, which means you certainly don't need to be bilingual to enter a dive shop. For a quick crash course in the local diving lingo, see boxed text (p777).

In order to dive around Okinawa and the Southwest Islands, you will need to be in possession of a valid dive card. Although most dive shops allow noncertified individuals to go on a 'Discovery Dive', divemasters may feel uncomfortable bringing a foreigner down if there is a significant language barrier. If you're renting equipment, you should know your weight in kilograms, your height in metres and your shoe size in centimetres.

Throughout this chapter, we list recommended dive operators and popular dive spots on each of the main islands. However, just to whet your appetite a bit, here's a list of our top five favourite *daibingu-supotto*; or 'dive spots'.

- **Manta Way** (p778) One of the most famous sites in the Nansei-shotō, Manta Way is located in the straits between Iriomote-jima and Kohama-jima, and is absolutely teeming with manta rays in late spring and early summer.
- **Manta Scramble** (p773) Located off the coast of Ishigaki-jima, this popular dive spot virtually guarantees a manta ray sighting, particularly in spring and summer.
- **Irizaki Point** (p782) If swimming alongside sharks doesn't absolutely terrify you, this famous spot off the coast of Yonaguni-jima is frequented by schools of hammerheads in winter.
- **Underwater Ruins** (p782) One of the most unusual dive spots in Nansei-shotō is also located off the coast of Yonaguni-jima, and is home to a mysterious underwater archaeological ruin of unknown origins.
- **Mini Grotto** (p764) This popular dive spot off the coast of Miyako-jima is home to an elaborate series of underwater caves, which beckon to be explored (assuming you have sufficient experience – and the right equipment).

springs), and it's fairly likely that you'll have plenty of elbow room here.

Yakushima 屋久島

☎ 0997 / pop 14,000

Justifiably designated as a Unesco World Heritage site (Japan's first) in 1993, Yakushima is one of Japan's most remarkable travel destina-

tions. More than 75% of Yakushima is covered with thickly forested mountains, and while the high peaks are snowcapped in winter, the mangrove-dotted flat lands around the coastline remain subtropical. The island's towering terrain also manages to catch every inbound rain cloud, which gives Yakushima one of the wettest climates in Japan.

Yakushima has long been viewed by the Japanese as a mystical island. The old kanji (Chinese characters) for Yakushima meant 'Medicine Island', and the island's indigenous plants have been utilised by herbologists for centuries. In fact, *gajutsu*, a type of native ginger, is still harvested today for use in digestive medicines. However, it's the island's ancient *yaku-sugi* (屋久杉; *Cryptomeria japonica*) cedar trees that inspire most travellers to journey to this primeval wonderland.

Immortalised by Miyazaki's wildly popular anime Princess Mononoke, Yakushima's old-growth forests are an incredible destination for mountain hikers and outdoor enthusiasts. But even if you're not prepared to tackle some of the island's most difficult treks, there are plenty of easy day hikes at the lower elevations as well as a number of rural *onsen* and subtropical beaches to explore.

ORIENTATION

Yakushima's main port is Miyanoura, on the island's northeast coast. From here, a road runs around the perimeter of the island, passing through the secondary port of Anbō on the east coast, and then through the hot-springs town of Onoaida (尾の間) in the south. On the west coast, the road narrows to just one paved lane – drive slowly, and watch out for monkeys and falling rocks.

INFORMATION

Miyanoura's ferry terminal has a useful **information desk** (☎ 42-1019; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) that can help find accommodation, and sells topographic hiking maps. In Anbō there's a small **tourist office** (☎ 46-2333; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) on the main road just north of the river.

In Miyanoura, the **Environmental & Cultural Centre** (☎ 42-2900; admission & film ¥500; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun, daily in summer) is at the corner of the ferry-terminal road. It has bilingual exhibits about the island's natural history and traditions. Subtitles are available upon request in several foreign languages for screenings of an inspiring 25-minute IMAX film.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Onsens

The following *onsens* have their own bus stops.

Onsen lovers will be in heaven at the **Hirauchi Kaichū Onsen** (admission ¥100), just west of Onoaida. Mixed outdoor baths are in the

rocks by the sea, and usable only when the tide is out (tide charts are posted at the island's accommodation).

A tad further west is **Yudomari Onsen** (admission ¥100), which is also located beside the sea and usable when the tide is out. The small bath here has a divider if you're looking for a bit more privacy, though the view is somewhat fouled by the concrete jetty.

In the village of Onoaida is **Onoaida Onsen** (☎ 47-2872; admission ¥200; ☎ 7am-10pm), which is a rustic bathhouse that is divided by gender. Note that the water here is scalding hot, so do as the locals do and pour buckets of cold water on yourself before entering the baths.

Hiking

There are some seriously awesome hikes in Yakushima's mountainous interior, though it's best to seek out local advice before setting out.

An excellent topographic map of the island is the *Yama-to-Kougen-no-Chizu- Yakushima* (山と高原の地図屋久島; ¥840), which is available at most major bookstores.

Although the summer sun may be shining on the coastline, you will need warm, waterproof clothing if you're heading up into the mountains. If you're planning on spending the night out in the wilderness, there is a network of mountain huts along each of the trails. Facilities are basic, and you will need to bring your own food, stove and sleeping bag.

Before heading up into the hills, be sure to alert someone at your accommodation of your intended route.

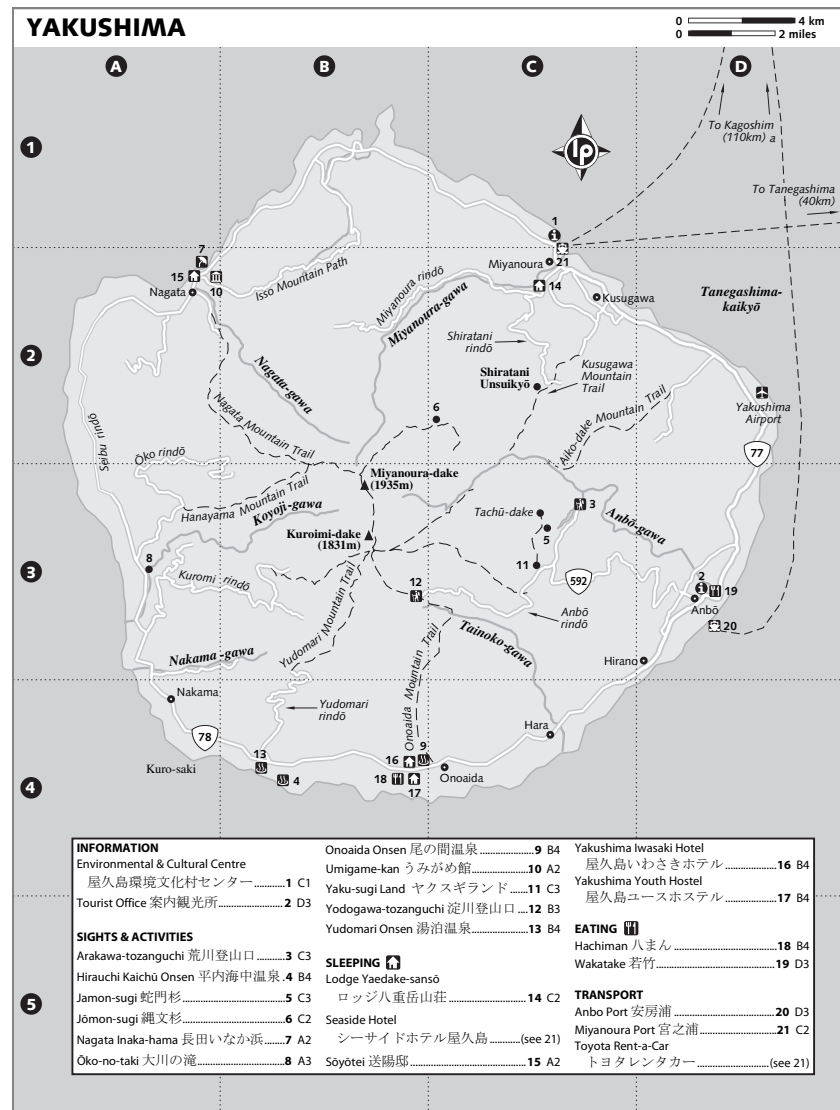
The granddaddy of hikes on Yakushima is the day-long strenuous outing to the 1935m summit of **Miyanoura-dake**, the highest point in southern Japan. To reach the summit, allow 10 hours return from **Yodogawa-tozanguchi** (1370m).

The most popular hike on the island leads to **Jōmon-sugi**, a monster of a *yaku-sugi* that is estimated to be at least 5000 years old. The discovery of this tree in the late 1960s ultimately led to the preservation of the island's forests. To reach the tree, allow at least five hours each way from the trailhead, **Arakawa-tozanguchi**.

If you have the proper supplies and equipment, there are also a number of two- and three-day treks across several mountain peaks. For the complete scoop on the island's hikes, pick up a copy of Lonely Planet's *Hiking in Japan*.

If you're feeling a little less adventurous, consider a visit to **Yaku-sugi Land** (admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-5pm). Despite its theme park-esque name, Yaku-sugi Land is extremely well laid out, and offers shorter hiking courses over wooden boardwalks, and longer treks deep into the millennia-old cedar forest. Although the three shorter courses wind past a few thousand-year-

old trees, it's worth taking the 150-minute hiking course, which passes by the 2600-year-old **Jamon-sugi**. The preserve is a 30-minute drive inland and up from Anbō on a rough and rugged road. It's incredibly picturesque, and if you're lucky, you may see *yakuzaru*, the local species of monkey. There are two buses a day (¥720, 40 minutes) from Anbō.



Based in Miyanoura, **Native Vision** (ネイティブビジョン; ☎ 42-0091; www.native-vision.com in Japanese) runs all sorts of outdoor tours including hiking, snorkelling and kayaking. Day trips cost between ¥3000 and ¥7500.

Other Sights & Activities

On the northwest coast of the island is **Nagata Inaka-hama**, a beautiful stretch of yellow sand where sea turtles come to lay their eggs from May to July. In the nearby town of Nagata, you can visit the **Umigame-kan** (☎ 49-6550; admission ¥200; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Mon) for sea turtle displays and exhibits.

On the west coast and at the last bus stop is **Ōko-no-taki**, which is Yakushima's highest waterfall at 88m.

SLEEPING

There is camping along the coast and in the highland interior, plus an established system of mountain huts along the summit trails.

Accommodation options on Yakushima are scattered around the island, so it's best to phone ahead and make a reservation before arriving on the island. Most places will send a car to pick you up from the ferry terminal or the airport if you let them know what time you will be arriving.

our pick **Yakushima Youth Hostel** (☎ 47-3751; www.yakushima-yh.net; dm with/without meals ¥4400/2800; ☎ ☎ ☎) A short walk from the Hirauchi Iriguchi bus stop just west of Onoaida is this impeccably run youth hostel, which is entirely constructed of local cedar. Accommodation is in Western-style dorms that welcome you with the inviting aroma of polished wood. The hostel also rents out bicycles for trips to nearby waterfalls and hot springs.

Lodge Yaedake-sansō (☎ 42-1551; fax 42-2673; r per person with meals ¥7500; ☎ ☎) This secluded *minshuku* (family-run budget accommodation) features Japanese-style rooms in rustic riverside cabins that are all connected by wooden walkways. There's also a private hot-springs bath where you can soak up the beauty of your surroundings. The lodge is located inland upriver on the Miyanoura-gawa, but if you make a booking they'll pick you up in Miyanoura.

Sōyōtei (☎ 45-2819; http://soyotei.ftw.jp/u44579.html in Japanese; r per person with meals ¥12,600; ☎ ☎) On the northwest of the island near Inaka Beach, this stunning ryokan has a collection of traditional Japanese-style rooms that boast private verandas and ocean views. Guests can also

take advantage of the open-air hot-springs bath where you can close your eyes and listen to the sounds of the crashing surf.

Seaside Hotel (☎ 42-0175; www.ssh-yakushima.co.jp in Japanese; d from ¥13,000; meals available; ☎ ☎ ☎) Overlooking the ferry port in Miyanoura, this popular resort hotel is extremely convenient. Accommodation is in a variety of Western- and Japanese-style rooms, though it's worth splurging for the larger rooms with harbour views.

Yakushima Iwasaki Hotel (☎ 47-3888; http://yakushima.iwasakihotels.com in Japanese; d from ¥20,000; ☎ ☎ ☎) The island's most expensive hotel commands an impressive view from its mountaintop location high above Onoaida. Western-style rooms come in a variety of shapes and sizes, though they're incredibly spacious and oh-so-plush (check out the views of the forests below from the window-side Jacuzzis). Meals are available.

EATING

As most travellers choose to take meals at their accommodation, eating options on the island are surprisingly limited. Fortunately, there are a handful of convenience stores and a supermarket in each of the main towns. Also, most accommodations can prepare a *bentō* box for you if you're going hiking.

Hachimani (☎ 33-8322; ☎ 11am-9pm) Located a few hundred metres west of the Yakushima Youth Hostel in Onoaida, this all-wood bistro-style restaurant (look for the red flags outside) serves up an excellent *yakizakana teishoku* (grilled fish set; ¥750). The restaurant is on the ocean side of the road while the parking lot is located on the opposite side.

Wakatake (☎ 46-3172; ☎ 6-9pm) Overlooking the river in Anbō (look for the hanging red lanterns), this boisterous *izakaya* (Japanese-style pub) is a great spot for chatting with locals and swapping hiking tips with other travellers. Try a fresh *sashimi-setto* (sashimi set; ¥1250) or an ice-cold *nama-birru* (tap beer; ¥450).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

JAC, part of the JAS network, flies from Kagoshima to Yakushima (¥11,000, 40 minutes, six daily). Yakushima's airport is on the northeastern coast between Miyanoura and Anbō. Hourly buses stop at the airport, though you can usually phone your accommodation for a pick-up or take a cab.

Boat

The fastest way to reach Yakushima is by the hydrofoil, though you will need to make a reservation in advance with **Toppy** (☎ 099-255-7888). You can also stop by the ferry terminal a day in advance to buy tickets. Hydrofoils run from Kagoshima's Kita-Futō terminal to Miyanoura and Anbō (one way/return ¥7000/12,600, 2½ hours, four daily). Keep in mind that the jet foils stop running at the slightest hint of inclement weather.

Orita Kisen (☎ 099-226-0731) runs the scenic ferry route between Kagoshima's Minami-Futō and Miyanoura (one way/return ¥5000/8000, four hours, once daily). The ferry departs from Kagoshima at 8.35am, and leaves Miyanoura at 1.20pm.

GETTING AROUND

Local buses travel the coastal road part way around Yakushima roughly every hour, though only a few head up into the interior. However, your best option for getting around the island is to rent a car. **Toyota Rent-a-Car** (☎ 43-5180) is located near the terminal in Miyanoura.

Tanegashima 種子島

☎ 0997 / pop 36,000

A long narrow island standing north-south to the east of Yakushima, Tanegashima is known as the home of Japan's Space Centre, and as a year-round surfing mecca. It also has the dubious distinction of being the spot where firearms were first introduced to Japan by shipwrecked Portuguese in 1543. After the local lord copied the matchlock guns, the firearms spread throughout Japan, which completely changed the balance of power among the feudal lords (who were known as *tanegashimas* from then on).

The island's port of Nishi-no-omote (西の表) is located on the northwest coast of the island, while the airport is about halfway down the island near the west coast. There is a helpful **information office** (観光案内所; ☎ 22-1146; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) in the ferry building at the port. Check out www.tanegashima.info for more information in Japanese.

Tanegashima's **Space Centre** (宇宙センター), on the southeastern coast of the island, is open to the public for free. There is a large parklike complex with rocket-launch facilities as well as a **Space Technology Museum** (宇宙科学技術館; ☎ 26-9244; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) that details the history of Japan's space

program. Note that the museum is closed on launch days.

The coastline in the immediate vicinity of the Space Centre is known as the **Takesaki-kaigan** (竹崎海岸), and is home to a beautiful stretch of white sand that is immensely popular with surfers. The **Nagahama-kaigan** (長浜海岸) on the west coast of Tanegashima is home to a 12km stretch of white sand that is equally popular with surfers. From early May to early August, Nagahama-kaigan plays host to sea turtles laying their eggs.

The **History and Folklore Museum** (中種子町立歴史民俗資料館; ☎ 27-2233; admission ¥160; ☎ 9am-7pm Tue-Sun), near Tanegashima's airport, has displays on the history and traditional lifestyles of the islanders.

A few blocks inland from Nishi-no-omote port, **Ryokan Miharu-sō** (旅館美春荘; ☎ 22-1393; r per person with meals ¥3700; ☎ ☎) is the best choice on the island as the mellow owner also runs a surf shop, and is an incredible source of information. Accommodation is in basic but perfectly adequate Japanese-style tatami rooms, and the staff's cooking will certainly hit the spot after a long day out on the surf.

JAC, part of the JAS network, flies from Kagoshima to Tanegashima (¥11,000, 40 minutes, three daily). Fast-boat services by **Kagoshima Shosen** (☎ 099-255-7888) run from Kagoshima Main Port (Kagoshima-honkō; 鹿児島本港) to Nishi-no-omote (¥6000; 1½ hours, four daily), and **Orita Kisen** (☎ 099-226-0731) runs a regular ferry service (¥2540, 3¼ hours, one daily).

Iō-jima 硫黄島

☎ 09913 / pop 115

Part of the Kirishima volcanic belt, Iō-jima is a gem of an island that is based around an active volcano, and is well known for its wild peacocks and remote *onsen*. Difficult access means that Iō-jima is rarely visited by foreign travellers, and the lack of public transportation on the island means that you're probably going to have to visit most of the sights on foot. However, being one of the most remote destinations in Japan, Iō-jima is the perfect destination if you really want to get away from it all.

For more about the island, the website www.mishimamura.jp has information in Japanese and some great photos.

The eastern end of the island is home to the often-smoking volcano **Iō-dake** (硫黄岳;

704m), while the port is on the southwestern coast.

There are a couple of superb *onsen* on the island that are free to those willing to walk to them. On the north coast, about a 5km walk from the port, is **Sakamoto Onsen** (坂本温泉), a rectangular pool built into the sea. Its depth reaches 1.5m when the tide is in, but when the tide is out the temperature with your finger as the natural flow of hot water from the spring is around 50°C. On the south coast, about a 3km walk east of the port and right below Iō-dake, is **Higashi Onsen** (東温泉). It is a big, hot rock-pool next to the pounding waves that is a must for *onsen* connoisseurs.

Iō-jima has historical links and legends associated with the 12th-century struggles between the Genji and Heike clans to control Japan. At the northern tip of the island, about a 2km walk from Sakamoto Onsen, are the remains of a Heike **castle**.

Right next to the port, the Iō-jima **camping** area is free and open year-round – you can even borrow a tent for free. If you're looking for more comfortable surroundings, **Miyukisō** (みゆき荘; ☎ 2-2116; fax 2-2116; r per person with meals ¥6500; ♿) is a friendly, family-run *minshuku* that is also located next to the port. Accommodation is in cosy Japanese-style tatami rooms, and there's a good chance that the island's famous seafood will be on your dinner plate.

Iō-jima is accessed by ferry from Kagoshima Main Port. **Mishima Soneisen** (☎ 099-222-3141) runs three to four ferries a week, depending on the season, generally leaving Kagoshima at 9.30am and arriving at Iō-jima four hours later (¥3500).

TOKARA-RETTŌ トカラ列島

099 / pop 700

The Tokara group is made up of seven inhabited and five uninhabited volcanic islands, which are strung out between Yakushima and Amami-Ōshima. Since the total population of the island chain is only 700, the islands are virtually untouched, and covered with dense subtropical vegetation and plentiful natural hot springs. In terms of travel in Japan, this is real get-away-from-it-all stuff.

If you're planning a visit, you will need to be self-sufficient as there is virtually no tourist infrastructure in place. At the bare minimum, you should bring a tent, sleeping bag and basic supplies. For more information in Japanese, www.tokara.jp has pictures of each of the islands as well as useful tips for visitors.

Toshima Soneibune (☎ 222-2101) has a ferry that leaves Kagoshima Main Port on Mondays and Fridays, and stops at each island down the chain to Takara-jima (the Monday departure continues on to Naze on Amami-Ōshima). The return trip leaves Takara-jima on Wednesdays and Sundays. Check departure dates and times before turning up as they can vary and are affected by typhoons.

For ¥15,600 you can travel 2nd-class from Kagoshima to Amami-Ōshima. Alternatively, you can get off and on at any of the ports listed below, though you will have to buy a new ticket each time you board the ferry. Note that this option costs slightly more than travelling directly between Kagoshima and Amami-Ōshima.

Travelling from north to south, the ferry visits Kuchino-shima (口之島), Nakano-shima (中之島), Taira-jima (平島), Suwanose-jima (諏訪之瀬島), Akuseki-jima (悪石島), Kodakara-jima (小宝島) and Takara-jima (宝島).

AMAMI-SHOTŌ 奄美諸島

The southernmost island group in Kagoshima-ken is the Amami-shotō, which is based around the island of Amami-Ōshima, the region's main population centre. The island is also a renowned destination for

outdoor pursuits, especially ocean kayaking. Heading south, Tokunoshima has excellent diving, Okinoerabu-jima has intriguing coral-based land formations and Yoron-tō is a popular beach destination. Unfortunately, difficult access means that this island group is not as popular as other destinations in the Nansei-shotō, though there are some amazing experiences to be had here if you're willing to get off the beaten path.

Amami-Ōshima 奄美大島

☎ 0997 / pop 70,000

Amami-Ōshima, the main island of the Amami group, is 380km south-southwest of Kagoshima, and is Japan's third-largest offshore island after Okinawa-hontō and Sadoga-shima in Niigata prefecture. It has a mild subtropical climate year-round and is home to some unusual flora and fauna, including tree ferns, mangrove forests and the rare Amami black rabbit. Although it serves as the main population centre in the Amami-shotō, it's also a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts, especially sea kayakers.

The main city and port is **Naze** (名瀬), which is on the northwest coast and surrounded by hills. The island's tiny airport is 55 minutes away by bus (¥750, hourly) on the northeast coast. There's a small **tourist information office** (☎ 63-2295) at the airport that opens for incoming flights, but nothing at the ferry terminal. For more information in Japanese, check out www.amami.or.jp.

For an excellent view of Naze and its harbour, head 1km south of the port to **Ōgamiyama-kōen** (おがみ山公園), a park with walking trails and viewing areas.

A few blocks north of the bus centre is the **Amami Habu Centre** (奄美観光ハブセンター; ☎ 52-1505; admission ¥750; ☎ 8am-6pm) where you can learn all about the Nansei-shotō's infamous venomous snake, the habu (p760).

Just 15 minutes west of Naze by direct bus (¥280, hourly) is the **Ōhama-Kaihin-Kōen** (大浜海浜公園), a beautiful beach park known for its white sands and stunning sunsets. The park is popular for swimming, snorkelling and sea kayaking in summer, and camping is possible here for ¥300.

Island Service (アイランドサービス; ☎ 52-5346; www.synapse.ne.jp/~island-s/in Japanese) runs a guided sea-kayaking tour (¥12,000, eight hours) and mangrove canoe experience (from ¥2500, from two hours). If you ring up, they

KAGOSHIMA TO NAHA BY SEA

Daily cargo ferries ply the waters between Kagoshima city on Kyūshū and Naha, the main city in Okinawa. These ferries are in good shape, reasonable in cost and an excellent way to either travel directly to Naha or to island-hop along the Amami-shotō. A 2nd-class ticket admits travellers to a large tatami room that is shared with others, while tickets for a private room are considerably more expensive.

Ōshima Unyu (☎ Tokyo 03-5643-6170, Kagoshima 099-222-2338, Naha 098-861-1886; www.minc.ne.jp/aline in Japanese) and **Marix Line** (☎ Tokyo 03-3274-0502, Kagoshima 099-225-1551, Naha 098-868-9098; www.marix-line.co.jp) operate to the following schedule on alternate days (ie between them, there is a daily departure in each direction).

For ¥14,200 you can travel 2nd-class on either company's ferry directly from Kagoshima to Naha or vice versa. Alternatively, you can get off and on at any of the ports listed below, though you will have to buy a new ticket each time you board the ferry. Note that this costs slightly more than travelling directly between Kagoshima and Naha or vice versa – disembarking at each of the ports along the way would cost a total of ¥18,700.

Southbound

Day	Time	Destination
Day 1	1800	Kagoshima-shinkō
Day 2	0550	Amami-Ōshima (Naze)
Day 2	0940	Tokunoshima (Kametoku)
Day 2	1200	Okinoerabu-jima (Wadomari)
Day 2	1400	Yoron-tō
Day 2	1650	Okinawa (Unten-kō in Motobu)
Day 2	1840	Okinawa (Naha-kō in Naha)

Northbound

Day	Time	Destination
Day 1	0700	Okinawa (Naha-kō in Naha)
Day 1	0910	Okinawa (Unten-kō in Motobu)
Day 1	1200	Yoron-tō
Day 1	1410	Okinoerabu-jima (Wadomari)
Day 1	1630	Tokunoshima (Kametoku)
Day 1	2020	Amami-Ōshima (Naze)
Day 2	0630	Kagoshima-shinkō

can arrange for a pick-up and drop you off at your accommodation.

A few blocks inland from the ferry port in Naze is the **Tatsuya Ryokan** (たつや旅館; ☎ 52-0260; r per person with/without meals ¥4500/3000; ㊄ ㊄), which has a handful of attractive Japanese-style tatami rooms complete with satellite TV and en-suite facilities. The owner is also chock-full of information about the island – phone ahead for a pick-up.

Amami-Ōshima is serviced by JTA (part of the JAL network) and ANK (part of the ANA network), with daily direct flights to/from Tokyo (from ¥40,000, 2½ hours, one daily), Osaka (from ¥32,000, one hour 50 minutes, one daily) and Kagoshima (from ¥16,500, 55 minutes, five daily).

There are between five and seven ferries running to/from Tokyo (¥18,500, 37 hours) and Osaka (¥13,500, 28 hours) each month that carry on to Naha. Ferries also operate daily from Kagoshima and Naha (see boxed text, p744).

Amami-Ōshima has an excellent public bus system and buses run to all corners of the main island from the bus centre in Naze. Rental cars, scooters and bicycles are readily available in Naze.

Tokunoshima 徳之島

☎ 0997 / pop 28,000

Tokunoshima is the second-largest island in the Amami-shotō, and is famous for its spectacular natural landscapes. The coastline is awash with rock formations, particularly jagged volcanic rocks jutting towards the sky, while the interior is composed of rugged mountains. Tokunoshima's year-round mild climate also makes it a popular destination for divers. Although the seas around the island aren't as tropical as those further south, there is a healthy reef system of soft and hard corals around much of Tokunoshima.

On the island's east coast is the main port of **Kametoku-shinkō** (亀徳新港) and the main town of **Kametsu** (亀津). Tokunoshima's airport is on its west coast, not far from the secondary port of **Hetono** (平土野). A small **tourist information office** (☎ 82-0575; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) is at the ferry building.

Tokunoshima has a history of **tōgyū** (闘牛大会; bovine sumō) dating back more than 600 years. While there are 13 official fight sites on the island that hold around 20 tournaments a year, the island championships are

held at **Dōmu Tōgyū-jō** (ドーム闘牛場) in the southeast of the island, not far from Kametsu. The big three events for the year are held on 3 January, 5 May and either the first or second Sunday in October – call the tourist office to confirm details.

At the northeastern tip of the island is the **Kanami Sotetsu Tunnel** (金見ソテツトンネル), an impressive 200m-long tunnel of 400-year-old cycad trees leading out to the viewpoint at Cape Kanami. At the northwestern tip is **Mushirose** (ムシロ瀬), an amazing rippled rock formation that disappears into the sea. The **Megane-iwa** (メガネ岩), with two huge holes in the rock that look like a pair of glasses, is on the west coast.

Villa Takakura (ヴィラ高倉; ☎ 84-1185; r per person with/without meals ¥5500/3500) is a popular diver's hotel that organises trips to the island's dive sights. Accommodation is in attractive maritime-themed Western-style rooms with en-suite facilities, though the real reason you're here is to take advantage of the on-site dive shop. Villa Takakura is located near Kedoku on the east coast – phone ahead for a pick-up.

Tokunoshima is serviced by JTA and ANK, with daily direct flights to/from both Kagoshima (from ¥25,000, one hour, two daily) and Amami-Ōshima (from ¥18,500, 35 minutes, two daily).

Daily ferries (see boxed text, p744) head both southward to Naha and northward to Kagoshima.

There are bus stations at the ports of Hetono and Kametoku, and a good public bus system to all parts of the island. Rental cars, scooters and bicycles are readily available in Kametsu.

Okinoerabu-jima 沖永良部島

☎ 0997 / pop 15,000

A raised coral island to the southwest of Tokunoshima, Okinoerabu-jima is known for its intriguing land formations, which include around 300 caves and caverns. Extensive flower farming, especially of lilies, means that from March to May the island is covered in yellow and white flowers.

The airport is at the eastern tip of the island, with **Wadomari-kō** (和泊港), the main port and town, 6km away on the east coast. There is a small **tourist information booth** (☎ 92-1111; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) at Wadomari port on the 2nd floor of the terminal building.

The island has many impressive geographical landforms. **Taminamisaki** (田皆崎), at the northwest tip of the island, has ancient coral that has been uplifted to form a 40m cliff. Over the years, natural erosion caused by the wind, rain and sea has made the point a rugged yet beautiful spot. At the island's northeast tip, **Fūcha** (フーチャ) is a blowhole in the limestone rock that shoots water 10m into the air on windy days.

Although the island's caves are all open to 'unofficial' exploration, organised tours are given at **Shōryūdō** (昇竜洞; ☎ 93-4536; admission ¥1000; ☎ 8.30am-5pm), a few kilometres inland from the southwest coastal road.

The legendary Saigō Takamori (see boxed text, p715) was exiled on Okinoerabu-jima for two years in 1862. He helped foster the islanders' desires to be self-sustaining, and is honoured by a statue in Wadomari's **Nanshū-jinja** (南州神社) temple.

A convenient, comfortable base on the island is the **Kankō Hotel Higashi** (観光ホテル東; ☎ 92-1283; www5.synapse.ne.jp/khotel-azuma in Japanese; r per person with/without meals from ¥6500/4500; ㊄ ㊄), which is next to the ferry port and close to the action in Wadomari. Accommodation is in a variety of Japanese- and Western-style rooms – ask for the ones in the front, which have nice views of the ships coming into port.

Okinoerabu is serviced by JTA and ANK, with direct flights to/from Kagoshima (from ¥24,000, one hour 40 minutes, three daily), Amami-Ōshima (from ¥13,000, 35 minutes, one daily) and Yoron-tō (from ¥7400, 25 minutes, one daily).

Daily ferries (see boxed text, p744) operate services south to Naha and north to Kagoshima.

The island has a good public bus system, and rental cars, scooters and bicycles are readily available in Wadomari.

Yoron-tō 与論島・ヨロン島

☎ 0997 / pop 6000

Shaped like a huge angelfish, Yoron-tō is the southernmost island in Kagoshima-ken. On a good day, Okinawa-hontō's northernmost point of Hedō-misaki is clearly visible just 28km to the southwest. Fringed with picture-perfect white sand beaches, Yoron-tō has a reputation as a tropical paradise, and is the most popular destination in the Amami-shotō for domestic travellers.

The harbour is next to the airport on the western tip of the island, while the main town of **Chabana** (茶花) is just a couple of kilometres east. Beside the city office in Chabana is the useful **tourist information office** (☎ 97-5151; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm), which provides maps, an English pamphlet and can make accommodation bookings. Check out www.yoron.jp in Japanese for more information.

On the eastern side of the island, Yoron's best beach is the popular **Oganeku-kaigan** (大金久海岸), which also features an attractive **camping area** (sites per person per night ¥610) complete with sparkling facilities. Just offshore from Oganeku-kaigan is **Yurigahama** (百合ヶ浜), a stunning stretch of white sand surrounded by a tall coral reef that disappears completely at high tide. Boats (¥1000 return) putter back and forth, ferrying visitors out to it.

The **Southern Cross Centre** (サザンクロスセンター; ☎ 97-3396; admission ¥200; ☎ 9am-6pm), a short walk from the Ishini (石仁) bus stop 3km south of Chabana, is so named as Yoron-tō is the northernmost island in Japan from which the Southern Cross can be seen. The centre also serves as Yoron-tō's museum, and has displays on the history and culture of the Amami islands. The remains of **Yoron Castle** (与論城跡), which was half-built by the Hokuzan king in the 15th century, can be seen next door.

The **Yunnu Rakuen** (ユンヌ楽園; ☎ 97-2341; admission ¥400; ☎ 9am-6pm) is a tropical botanical garden with more than 300 types of plants including hibiscus, bougainvillea, plumeria and golden shower. It's a great place to chill out and breathe in the tropical mood.

Just up the road from the tourist information office is the convenient **Minshuku Nankai-sō** (民宿南海荘; ☎ 97-2145; fax 43-0888; r per person with/without meals ¥5500/3000; ㊄ ㊄), with simple Japanese-style accommodation, shared bathrooms and a laid-back communal atmosphere. It's a fairly easy spot to find, though the staff will pick you up if you phone ahead.

Yoron-tō is serviced by JTA and ANK, with direct flights to/from Kagoshima (from ¥26,000, 1¼ hours, one daily) and Naha (from ¥9500, 35 minutes, one daily).

Daily ferries (see boxed text, p744) head south to Naha and north to Kagoshima.

The island has a good public bus system, and rental cars, scooters and bicycles are readily available in Chabana.

OKINAWA-KEN 沖縄県

pop 1.35 million

The southern half of the Nansei-shotō is Okinawa-ken, which is the furthest south of Japan's prefectures. Heading southwest, there are three main island groups in the chain.

Northernmost is the Okinawa-shotō, centred around Okinawa-hontō and the prefectural capital of Naha. Due to the large presence of American military bases (below), this is undoubtedly the most Westernised destination in the Nansei-shotō. Naha is Okinawa-ken's transport hub, and is easily accessed by flights to/from the mainland and outlying islands as well as by inter-island ferries.

Located 300km southwest of Okinawa-hontō, Okinawa-ken's middle group of islands is Miyako-shotō, which is home to the popular beach destination of Miyako-jima. This group

is best accessed by direct flights from the mainland, or by plane or ferry from Naha.

The southernmost island group is the Yaeyama-shotō, a further 120km southwest, though the westernmost island of Yonaguni-jima is only 110km from Taiwan. This island group, which includes the coral-fringed island of Ishigaki and the nearby jungle-clad Iriomote-jima, is one of the top domestic tourist destinations in Japan. This group is also best accessed by direct flights from the mainland, or by plane or ferry from Naha.

OKINAWA-HONTŌ 沖縄本島

☎ 098

Okinawa-hontō is the largest island in the Nansei-shotō, and the historic seat of power of the Ryūkyū dynasty. Although its cultural differences with mainland Japan were once evident in its architecture, almost all traces were completely obliterated in WWII. For-

tunately, Allied bombing wasn't powerful enough to completely stamp out other remnants of Okinawan culture, and today the island is home to a unique culinary, artistic and musical tradition.

Throughout the past several decades, however, Okinawa-hontō has also played host to a different breed of cultural influence, namely in the form of American imperialism. Today, there are more than 25,000 American military personnel stationed on the island, and their impact on the island's economy and culture cannot be overstated. The highways along the island are lined with used-car dealers, strip malls and fast-food outlets, all of which wouldn't look too out of place in suburban America. In fact, the Westernisation of the island has resulted in a bizarre tourism industry whereby mainland Japanese families visit the island in order to experience American-style steakhouses and to buy American products.

This island is home to Okinawa-hontō's prefectural capital and largest city, Naha, which serves as a transportation hub for the other islands in the group and for the prefecture as a whole. War memorials are clustered in the south of the island, while the central area is home to the military bases, a few historic ruins and some interesting cultural attractions. If you're keen on snorkelling and diving, head straight to the Motobu Peninsula (for info on the best dive spots, see p755) – the further north you go, the more rural things become.

The island also serves as the jumping-off point for several smaller subtropical islets in the Okinawa-shotō, which offer a healthy mix of white-sand beaches, swaying palm trees and blissful seclusion (for more information, see p759).

Naha 那覇

pop 320,000

Although it was completely flattened during WWII, the prefectural capital of Naha was rapidly rebuilt and is presently in the midst of a population explosion. Today, the city sports a swish new overhead monorail and a rapidly expanding skyline of modern high-rise apartments. However, the heart of the city is still very much Shuri-jō, the castle ruins of the erstwhile Okinawan capital that grace the backside of the new ¥2000 bill.

Naha also has a reputation for its boisterous (if at times scandalous) nightlife. Of course,

this shouldn't come as too much of a surprise as American GIs, mainland tourists and college students make for quite a heady mix. The action centres on Kokusai-dōri (International Blvd), a colourful and energetic 2km main drag of hotels, restaurants, bars, clubs and just about every conceivable type of souvenir shop.

Assuming you can find the strength to go easy on the drink, Naha is also home to several interesting areas including the Tsuboya pottery district and a historic series of Asian-style covered markets.

ORIENTATION

Naha is fairly easy to navigate, especially since its main sights and attractions are located in the city centre. The city is also easy to get around thanks to its cheap and efficient monorail system. The line starts from the airport in the south of the city, terminates in the suburbs in the northeast and runs parallel-ish to Kokusai-dōri.

The main drag in the city centre is Kokusai-dōri, while the Tsuboya Pottery district is to the southeast via a series of covered arcades. The Shuri district is located about 3km to the east of the city centre, and can be reached via the monorail.

Note that some of the listings in this section are located near Ōnoyama Park just south of the Kokuba-gawa river, which is about a 20-minute walk from the southeastern end of Kokusai-dōri.

INFORMATION

The prefectural **tourist information office** (Map p752; ☎ 857-6884; ☎ 9am-9pm) is in the arrivals terminal at Naha Airport. This office and its staff are extremely helpful, so you should definitely take advantage of their services before heading into town. English is spoken, and there are English-language brochures, maps of the islands in the Okinawa prefecture and accommodation lists in English.

The city **tourist information office** (Map p752; ☎ 868-4887; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun) has free maps and staff members speak some English. It's just off Kokusai-dōri on the corner with Starbucks. For information online check out the Okinawa Tourism & Convention Bureau's website www.ocvb.or.jp.

Post office ATMs accept international money cards; Naha Central Post Office is next to Tsubokawa monorail station, Tomari-kō Post Office (Map p752) is in the port building,

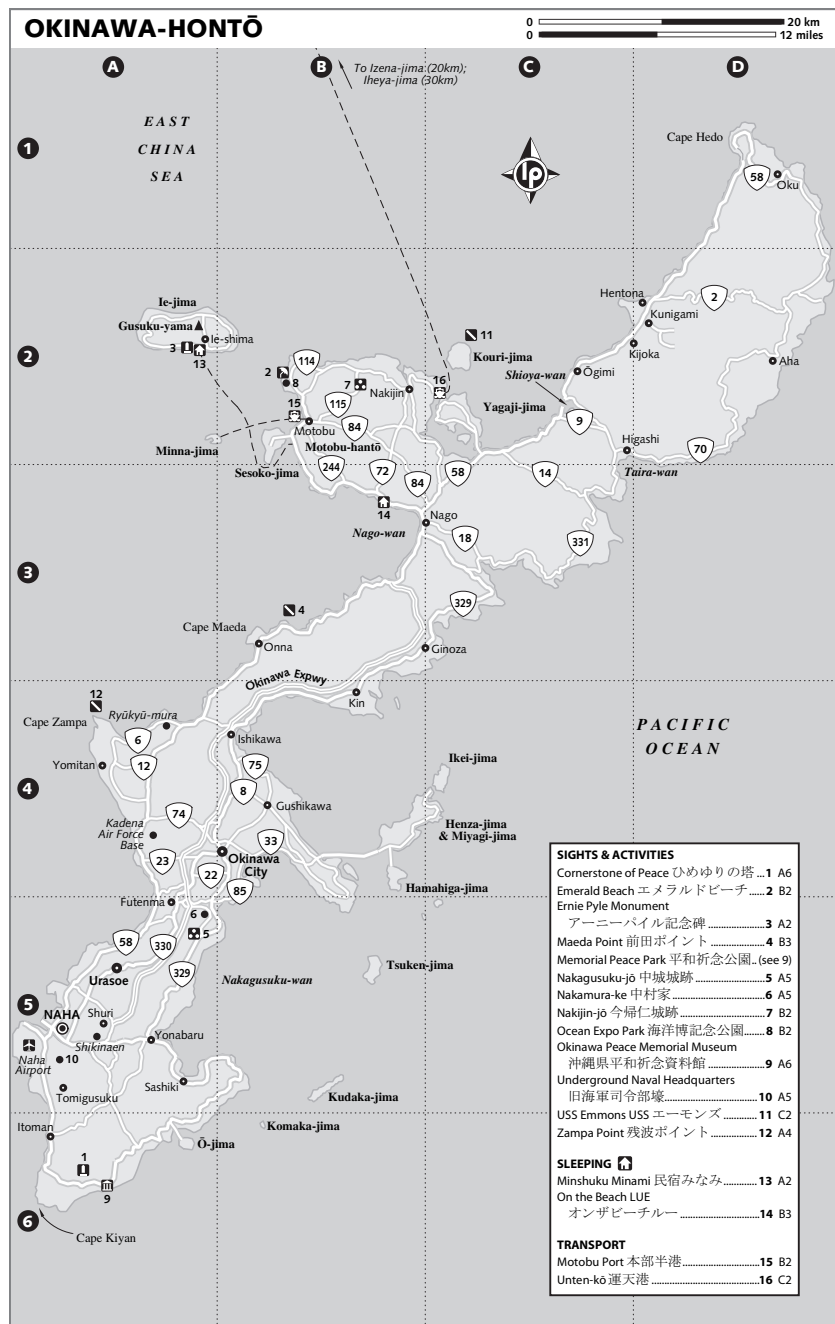
THE AMERICAN ISSUE

After the war, Okinawa had to be restored from complete destruction. While Japan recovered its sovereignty in 1953, Okinawa remained under the control of the US Military Occupation Government, which appropriated whichever land it wanted for military bases. Local protests finally forced Okinawa's return to Japan in 1972. Because of its strategic location, however, collusion between Tokyo and Washington maintained a heavy US military presence in the islands, much to the displeasure of many Okinawans – especially those who had lost their land.

Okinawans found it hard to understand why, with less than 1% of Japan's landmass, they had to play host to 75% of the American military presence in Japan. The thorny issue sputtered along through the Vietnam and Cold Wars, then peaked in 1995 when three servicemen were found guilty of raping a 12-year-old Okinawan schoolgirl. In the aftermath, Governor Ōta Masahide was voted into power on a pledge to end the American military presence. Ōta's demands made little headway in Tokyo though, and in 1998 he was beaten by Inamine Keniichi, a 'pro-American base' politician who argued that the poor Okinawan economy needed the cash that the American bases brought with them. Inamine's attitude was rewarded by Tokyo when Okinawa hosted the G8 Summit in July 2000.

At the time of research, Tokyo had recently decided that the burden of American bases should be shared more evenly around Japan, but was having problems finding prefectures and towns willing to play host. As a result, the American issue featured prominently in the November 2006 Okinawan gubernatorial elections. At the heart of the campaign was the government-sponsored plan to construct a new V-shaped runway near Camp Schwab in northern Okinawa, which was rumoured to be an environmentally disastrous project.

Candidate Keiko Itokazu, who was campaigning to become Okinawa's first female governor, was opposed to the construction of the runway, and went as far as proclaiming that the American bases should be moved out of Japan altogether. However, she was narrowly defeated by Hirokazu Nakaima, a candidate supported by Japan's ruling coalition, who won the ballot on a platform of improving the region's economy. Although he is opposed to the relocation plan, Hirokazu said he would negotiate with the central government on the issue and avoid confrontation. Unfortunately, Okinawans opposed to the US presence view Hirokazu Nakaima's promises as empty political rhetoric, especially considering that the Americans are the lifeblood of the island's economy.



and the Kokusai-dōri Post Office (Map p752) is around the corner from Makishi monorail station.

Net Café (Map p752; ☎ 941-2755; 2-4-14 Makishi; ¥300/480 for the first half-hour/hour of internet access, including free soft drinks and snacks.

There are heaps of travel agencies around Kokusai-dōri. **Nice Ticket** (Map p752; ☎ 866-8988; 2-16-10 Makishi; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) sells discounted airline tickets.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Central Naha 那覇中心街

The city's main artery, **Kokusai-dōri** (国際通り), makes a colourful walk, day or night. Turning south opposite Mitsukoshi department store leads you down **Heiwa-dōri** (平和通り), a bustling Asian-style covered shopping arcade.

If you take the left fork at the first major junction, a short walk beyond the shopping arcade brings you to the **Tsuboya pottery area** (壺屋). More than a dozen traditional potteries still operate in this compact neighbourhood, which has served as a centre of ceramic production since 1682, when Ryūkyūan kilns were consolidated here by royal decree. Most shops sell all the popular Okinawan ceramics including *shisā* (lion-dog roof guardians) and containers for serving *awamori*, the local firewater.

In the neighbourhood is the worthwhile **Tsuboya Pottery Museum** (Map p752; ☎ 862-3761; 1-9-32 Tsuboya; admission ¥300; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), which contains some truly exquisite masterpieces. Here, you can also inspect potters' wheels and appreciate *arayachi* (unglazed) and *jōyachi* (glazed) pieces.

At the eastern end of Kokusai-dōri, a left turn will take you to the reconstructed gates of **Sōgen-ji** (Map p752). The original stone gates once led to the 16th-century temple of the Ryūkyū kings, though it was unfortunately destroyed in WWII.

On the north side of Tomari port is the fascinating **international cemetery** (Map p752), which has a small monument commemorating Commodore Perry's 1852 landing in Naha. The US naval officer subsequently used Okinawa as a base while he forced the Tokugawa shōgunate to finally open Japanese ports to the West.

Garden fans should take a stroll through Chinese-style **Fukushū-en** (Map p752; ☎ 869-5384; 2-29 Kume; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Thu-Tue). All materials were brought from Fuzhou, Naha's

sister city in China, including the pagoda that sits atop a small waterfall.

Nami-no-ue beach (Map p752; ☎ 9am-6pm), near the **Naminoue-gu shrine**, is a small city beach where you can relax without leaving town. It comes complete with lifeguards, jellyfish/shark nets, showers and toilets.

There are countless small karate training places around Naha. For more information, see boxed text (p757).

Shuri Area 首里

Shuri was the original capital of Okinawa, though the title was surrendered to Naha in 1879 just prior to the Meiji Restoration. Shuri's temples, shrines, tombs and castle were all destroyed in WWII, although some impressive reconstructions and repairs, with meticulous attention to detail, have been made. To reach the complex, take the Yui-rail monorail to its eastern terminal, Shuri station.

The reconstructed old residence of the Okinawan royal family, **Shurijō-kōen** (首里城公園; Map p752; ☎ 886-2020; www.shurijo-park.go.jp/index_e.html; admission ¥800; ☎ 9am-5:30pm Mar-Nov, 9am-5pm Dec-Feb), is well worth a visit. There is an excellent brochure in English highlighting the attractions.

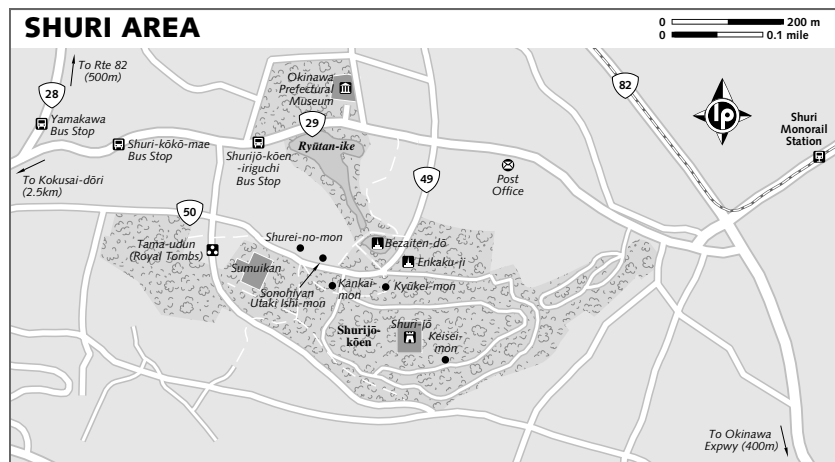
The castle's walls have numerous gates, but the pick is the Chinese-influenced **Shurei-no-mon** (首里の門) which appears on Japan's ¥2000 banknote. As the ceremonial entrance to the castle, the gate was originally constructed some 500 years ago, though it was completely rebuilt in 1958. Today, it's considered to be the symbol of Okinawa.

Also on the grounds is the modest **Okinawa Prefectural Museum** (沖縄県立博物館; Map p752; ☎ 884-2243; 1-1 Ōnaka-chō; admission ¥200; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), which has a number of interesting displays on Okinawan lifestyle, history, culture and natural environment.

Around Naha 那覇周辺

Around 1.6km east of the city is the **Shikina-en** (識名園; ☎ 855-5936; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-5pm Thu-Tue), a Chinese-style garden containing stone bridges, a viewing pavilion and a villa that belonged to the Ryūkyū royal family. Despite its flawless appearance, everything had to be painstakingly rebuilt after WWII. To reach the garden, take bus 1 or 5 to the Shikinaen-mae stop (¥400, 20 minutes).

A three-minute walk from Akamine monorail station (follow the English signs) is the **Naha**



minute walk from the Tsubogawa monorail stations, the island's youth hostel is more along the lines of a deluxe backpacker resort. Although it's definitely pricier than other budget options, dorms here are absolutely spotless, and there are some nice added perks including an on-site *onsen*, rooftop lounge and 24-hour key-card access.

Toyoko Inn Naha Izumisaki Kōsaten (☎ 951-1045; www.toyoko-inn.com/hotel/00076/in Japanese; 2-1-20 Kume; s/d from ¥5500/7500; (P) (♿) (♿)) Just a short walk north of Kokusai-dōri, this newish hotel in the reputable chain of Toyoko business hotels is a good choice if you're a fan of your creature comforts. Western-style rooms are well-decorated with modern furnishings, and the rooms on the higher floors boast impressive views of the downtown action.

Hotel Sun Palace (☎ 863-4181; www.palace-okinawa.com in Japanese; 2-5-1 Kumoji; s/d from ¥7500/9500; (P) (♿) (♿)) Overlooking a canal just north of the Palette Kumoji building, the Hotel Sun Palace is one of the nicest city-centre business hotels. Standard Western-style rooms are transformed into something special with the addition of landscaped balconies – the perfect spot to watch the sunset while sipping a cold Orion lager. The Sun Palace also has an excellent offering of on-site bars and restaurants.

EATING

Naha is the perfect spot to sample the full range of Okinawan classics. For a quick rundown of what's cooking, see boxed text (p769). The following places are on Map p752.

If you're looking for cheap eats, try browsing along the shopping arcade Heiwa-dōri, where you can buy anything from fresh seafood to *andagi* (Okinawan deep-fried doughnuts).

Unlike other islands in the Nansei-shotō, the presence of American GIs on Okinawa-hontō means that most restaurants will have at least one staff member who can speak English. Likewise, the vast majority of restaurants will offer English menus to foreign guests.

Daitō Soba (☎ 867-3889; 1-4-59 Makishi; ☎ 11am-10pm; E) This dinky little noodle house is the perfect spot for sampling your first bowl of *okinawa-soba* (Okinawan-style noodles; ¥450). We like ours with extra *shima-tōgarashi* (pickled hot peppers in sesame oil). It's one block north of Kokusai-dōri on Midori-gaoka Park (look for the red banners and plastic food models).

Asian Dining (☎ 859-6530; 50 Ōnoyama; ☎ 5pm-3am; E) Sure, it's a bit tacky, but there is definite novelty value in eating dinner at the top of a three-storey plastic banyan tree, and the views of the nearby port aren't too shabby. The speciality of the house is Southeast Asian cuisine, though there's also a good offering of Okinawan specialities and other Japanese fare. The tree (which isn't too hard to miss) is right around the corner from the Okinawa International Youth Hostel.

Yakiniku Station Bambohe (☎ 861-4129; 1-3-47 Makishi; ☎ 11am-11pm; E) If you've got a big appetite and quantity is important, head here where an all-you-can-eat *yakiniku* (grilled meat over

table-top hibachi grills), including dessert and soft drinks, will only set you back ¥2000. The restaurant is just off of Kokusai-dōri, across from the covered arcades, and is easily recognised by its bright yellow English sign.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

There is no shortage of drinking and dancing establishments on and around Kokusai-dōri. It seems every little side street harbours a couple of hidden-away drinking spots. The following places are on Map p752.

China (☎ 861-8451; 1-1-9 Makishi; ☎ 5pm-3am; E) This hip *izakaya* offers a great deal – for the first 45 minutes, frosty Orion beers and *awamori* cost ¥100 assuming you order one food plate per person. With the full range of Okinawan delicacies on offer, you shouldn't have too many problems choosing what to eat. China is 100m off Kokusai-dōri on Ichigin-dōri – look for the English sign and hanging red flags.

Helios (☎ 863-7227; 1-3-24 Makishi; drinks from ¥450; ☎ 5-11pm; E) If you have a discerning palette, head straight for this Kokusai-dōri drinking establishment (look for the plastic beer models outside). Although there's nothing wrong with Orion lager, it's got nothing on the expertly crafted microbrews on tap here.

Chakura (☎ 869-0283; 1-2-1 Makishi; cover ¥3000; ☎ 7pm-1am) In the heart of Kokusai-dōri, Chakura is a celebrated 'live house' run by local music maverick Kina Shōkichi. Kinasan and his band, Champloose, perform here nightly (when not touring), starting at 8pm. Although there is a small English sign, Chakura is fairly nondescript, though it's fa-

mous enough that most locals can point it out to you if you're having problems finding it.

Club Cielo (☎ 861-9955; 1-1-1 Ryubu; cover ¥3000; ☎ 11pm-late; E) Smart and sophisticated, Club Cielo is one of the hottest spots in downtown Naha. Although it's going to be a pricey night out, this is a good choice for top-quality music ranging from the latest in American hip-hop to the hottest Euro-electronica tracks. The club is on the 6F across the street from the Okinawan Prefectural Assembly Hall.

SHOPPING

The Japanese love of *omiyage* (souvenirs) is evident the moment you set foot on Kokusai-dōri – whether you're looking for a Hello Kitty beach towel or a plastic habu (see p760) for the kids, chances are you'll walk away with something.

Kitschy tourist junk aside, Okinawa is renowned for its colourful Ryūkyū glassware, a relatively modern folk art that originated after WWII by recycling soda pop and juice bottles used by US occupation forces. Okinawa also has its own distinctive textiles, particularly the brightly coloured *bingata* and *ryūsen* fabrics.

Much of the Tsuboya pottery is in the form of storage vessels, but look for *shisā*, the guardian lion-dog figures that can be seen perched on the rooftops of many traditional Okinawan buildings.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

There are direct flights operating into Naha's airport from 20 Japanese mainland cities as

DIVING ON OKINAWA-HONTŌ

Okinawa's most famous dive spot is the wreck of the **USS Emmons** (Map p750), a US Navy Gleaves-class destroyer that sunk in 1944 around 1km off Kouri-jima, a small island lying northeast of the Motobu Peninsula. Divers can make out the hulk from the depth of 25m, though strong currents, low visibility and the presence of unexploded ordinance make this a challenging dive.

Another popular spot is **Maeda Point** (Map p750), off Cape Maeda, which has a drop-off wall that attracts numerous species of tropical fish including batfish, parrotfish, barracudas and clownfish. For more advanced divers, **Zampa Point** (Map p750), near Zampa Cape, features a huge wall that bottoms out at more than 90m. Be advised, however, that currents can really pick up here.

Although there's no shortage of dive operators on the island, two foreign-owned, English-speaking dive shops are **Reef Encounters** (リーフエンカウンター; ☎ 098-968-4442; www.reefencounters.org) and **IANTD Okinawa** (IANTD 沖縄; ☎ 090-7585-2348; www.iantdokinawa.com). Both shops are in Naha's suburban sprawl and are difficult to find – if you phone ahead, they can arrange a pick-up from your accommodation.

For a quick crash course on scuba diving in Okinawa and the Southwest Islands, see p739.

well as from Seoul, Manila, Shanghai and Taipei. Since Naha serves as the principal transport hub in the Nansei-shotō, flights depart to the major Japanese cities virtually every hour.

Fares are dependent on availability and seasonality – as a general rule, prices are the highest in the summer months, and you can save a considerable amount of money if you book two weeks prior to your flight. Flights to the mainland range from ¥15,000 to ¥40,000 while inter-island flights are typically ¥10,000 to ¥20,000.

Boat

Various operators have ferry services to Naha from Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, Kōbe, Kagoshima and other ports. The schedules are complex (and subject to weather delays), and there is a wide range of fares that vary according to season and availability. Check out **Ōshima Unyu** (☎ Tokyo 03-5643-6170, Kagoshima 099-222-2338; www.minc.ne.jp/aine in Japanese) as well as boxed text (p744).

Long-distance ferries run to/from Miyakojima (¥4250, nine hours) and to/from Ishigaki-jima (¥5350, 14 hours). Note that these services are not daily, and travel times vary depending on the season and the weather. Ferries are culled in the winter months and cut completely at the first sign of bad weather. Call **Arimura Sangyō** (☎ in Japan 869-1980, in Taiwan 07-330-9811) for weekly schedules.

Arimura Sangyō operates a weekly ferry service between Naha and Taiwan, sometimes via Ishigaki and Miyako in Okinawa-ken. The Taiwan port alternates between Keelung and Kaohsiung. Departure from Okinawa is on Thursday or Friday; departure from Taiwan is usually on Monday (2nd class one way ¥15,200/4235TWD, 20 hours).

Naha is also the hub for ferries to other islands in the Okinawa-shotō – for more information, see p759.

There are three ports in Naha, and this can be confusing. From Naha-kō (Naha Port; Map p752), ferries head north to Fukuoka/Hakata and Kagoshima, while Naha Shin-kō (Naha New Port) has ferries to Nagoya, Kōbe, Osaka and Tokyo. Ferries to Taiwan, Miyakojima and Ishigaki-jima may depart from either place. From Tomari-kō (Tomari Port; Map p752) on Rte 58, ferries operate to a number of the smaller islands around Okinawa-hontō, including Kume-jima, Zamami-jima and Aka-

jima. Naha's ferry terminals can be easily accessed by the monorail or bus (see below).

GETTING AROUND

Naha's impressive new Yui-rail monorail makes things easy for getting around Naha. At one end of the line is Naha airport, at the other end, Shuri. The prices range from ¥200 to ¥290 depending on how far you go. Kenchō-mae station is at the western end of Kokusai-dōri, while Makishi station is at its eastern end.

Naha-kō is a 10-minute walk from Asahibashi station, while Tomari-kō is a similar distance north from Miebashii station. Bus No 101 from Naha bus terminal heads further north to Naha Shin-kō (20 minutes, hourly).

When riding on local town buses, simply dump ¥200 into the slot next to the driver as you enter. For longer trips, collect a ticket showing your starting point as you board and pay the appropriate fare as you disembark. Buses run from Naha to destinations all over the island.

Okinawa-hontō is a good place to get around in a rented vehicle, although traffic can be heavy. Numerous car hire agencies around Naha charge from around ¥5000 per day. Ask at hotels, guesthouses or youth hostels about hiring bicycles, scooters or motorcycles.

Southern Okinawa-hontō

沖縄本島の南部

During the closing days of the Battle of Okinawa, the southern part of the island bore the brunt of the American 'typhoon of steel'. Although southern Okinawa-hontō is now a heavily populated residential area, there are some striking reminders of those terrible days.

Note that this section of the island is best visited as a day trip from Naha.

The **Memorial Peace Park** (☎ dusk-dawn), on the southern coast of the island, is a sobering tribute that should not be missed – a reflective stroll through the park reveals war memorials from every prefecture in Japan. The centrepiece of the park is the **Okinawa Peace Memorial Museum** (Map p750; ☎ 997-3844; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), which focuses on the Okinawan suffering at the hands of both the Japanese military and subsequent US occupation authorities. Also of interest is

the **Cornerstone of Peace** (Map p750; ☎ dusk-dawn), which is inscribed with the names of everyone who died in the Battle of Okinawa, controversially listing Okinawan civilians and foreign military personnel right alongside Japanese military commanders. To reach the park, take bus 32, 33, 46 or 89 from Naha bus terminal to Itoman (¥500, one hour, hourly), from where you transfer to bus 82, which goes to Heiwa Kinen-kōen (¥400, 25 minutes, hourly).

Directly south of Naha in Kaigun-go-kōen is the **Underground Naval Headquarters** (Map p750; ☎ 850-4055; admission ¥450; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) where 4000 men committed suicide as the battle for Okinawa drew to its prolonged and bloody conclusion. Only 250m of the tunnels are open, but you can wander through the maze of corridors, see the commander's final words

on the wall of his room and inspect the holes and scars in other walls from the grenade blasts that killed many of the men. To reach the sight, take bus 33, 46 or 101 from Naha bus station to the Tomigusuku-kōen-mae stop (¥230, 20 minutes, hourly). From there it's a 10-minute walk – follow the English signs.

Central Okinawa-hontō 沖縄本島の中部

This heavily populated stretch, which is home to the island's American military bases, is centred on **Okinawa City** (沖縄市). Just a village before the war, Okinawa has mushroomed to a town of more than 120,000 people, and has all the hallmarks of US influence from pizzerias to army surplus stores. The area is also home to an amazing number of artificial tourist attractions where thousands of

OKINAWA: THE HOME OF KARATE

During the 'golden era' of King Sho Shin-O (1477–1526), when trade and culture flourished with China, a law was passed that banned the carrying of weapons in the Ryūkyū kingdom. A century later in 1609, when the Shimazu from Satsuma (now called Kagoshima) on Kyūshū invaded, the weapon less locals could not defend themselves against a well-armed adversary and were conquered easily. The Shimazu exploited the Ryūkyūs greedily and strictly enforced the edict of no weapons for the next 250 years. It was during this period that the *te*, or unarmed fighting techniques of the native Ryūkyūans, began to be developed and refined in secrecy.

As the Shimazu kept up trade with China under the front of the Ryūkyū kingdom, many traders and sailors from China settled in Naha, including many Chinese martial arts exponents. Local *te* practitioners had the chance to practise with, and learn from these people. Later, Okinawans headed to China to study the Chinese fighting arts. The celebrated Higaonna Kanryō and then his successor and top student Miyagi Chōjun spent time studying in Fuzhou in southern China in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

What we now know as the martial art of karate is a mixture of traditional Okinawan *te* and techniques introduced from China. While the original characters for *karate* meant 'Chinese hand', when the martial art was introduced to mainland Japan in the 1920s, the characters 空手 (meaning 'empty hand') were used.

In the years before WWII, karate gained increasing popularity on mainland Japan. After the war, occupying troops took the martial art home to America with them. Hollywood became involved and karate's popularity spread around the globe.

Traditional training continues in Okinawa. There are many styles and countless small *dōjō* (training places) around Naha. The **Okinawa Prefectural Budōkan** (沖縄県立武道館; Martial Arts Hall; Map p752; ☎ 858-2700; 52 Okutakeyama; ☎ 9am-9pm) is a stunning architectural masterpiece in Onoyama Kōen in Naha. It has three floors of training rooms for all martial arts, not only karate, and welcomes visitors. It is a five-minute walk from the monorail's Tsubogawa station.

One style that has become truly international is Okinawa Goju-Ryu. The **Okinawan International Goju-Ryu Karate Federation** (IOGKF; www.iogkf.com) has 45 member countries and is based in Naha. In July 2004 its World Budosai event attracted 750 karate practitioners from 35 countries to Naha for a week. The IOGKF is headed by Higaonna Morio Sensei, who also runs the **Higaonna Karate Dōjō** (東恩空手道上; Map p752; ☎ 864-1673; 65 Makishi; ☎ 8pm-late Mon-Sat). From the monorail's Asato station, walk south on Himeyuri-dōri. After the monorail curves away to the right you'll see a sign for the Higaonna Dōjō just before the Esso gas station on the right-hand side of the road.

yen could easily be squandered on entry fees. While there are a few interesting attractions, you will have to search them out.

Note that this section of the island is best visited as a day trip from Naha or from the Motobu Peninsula (below).

On the east coast of the island and just south of Okinawa City are the castle ruins of **Nakagusuku-jō** (Map p750; ☎ 895-5719; admission ¥300; ☎ 8.30am-5pm). Commanding an enviable position overlooking the coast, Nakagusuku-jō predated stone construction of this type on the mainland by at least 80 years. Although the castle was destroyed in 1458, the remaining foundation hints at its former grandeur. A 10-minute walk uphill is **Nakamura-ke** (Map p750; ☎ 935-3500; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-5.30pm), which is probably the best-preserved traditional Okinawan house on the island. Although the Nakamura family's origins in the area can be traced back to the 15th century, the foundation dates from around 1720. Notice the substantial stone pigsties, the elevated storage area to deter rats and the trees grown as typhoon windbreaks. Both sights are a 10-minute taxi ride from Futenma, which can be accessed via bus 25 from Naha (¥500, one hour, hourly).

Two-thirds of the way up the island is the city of **Nago** (名護), which serves as the junction town for buses to the Motobu Peninsula, and is home to a few interesting sights. The city is centred on a fine old banyan tree, Him-pun Gajumara, which is a useful landmark. The small **Nago Museum** (名護博物館; ☎ 0980-53-1342; 2-11 Tōedo; admission ¥150; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), south of the banyan tree, has some interesting old photographs of traditional *hejichi* (women's tattooing). Next door is the **Orion Brewery** (オリオンビール名護工場; ☎ 0980-52-2137; 2-12 Tōedo; admission free; ☎ 9-11am & 1-4pm Mon-Fri), which offers tours and tastings of Okinawa's much loved brew. Nago is best accessed by the direct express bus from Naha (¥2000, two hours, hourly). Buses 66 and 65 run anticlockwise and clockwise respectively around the Motobu peninsula.

Motobu-hantō 本部半島

Jutting out to the northwest of Nago, hilly Motobu-hantō is home to some of the most attractive stretches on the island, mainly because it's nowhere near as densely populated as the central and southern regions. Motobu-hantō also serves as the jumping-off point for

Okinawa's rugged northern region and for several nearby islets.

SIGHTS

Offshore Islands

Sesoko-jima (瀬底島), which is connected to the peninsula by a 762m bridge south of Motobu, has good beaches and well-developed free camping facilities. The island is famous for its tasty watermelons, which are available from May to September in small stalls. While Okinawa is known for its bovine *sumō*, Sesoko-jima has its own local goat *sumō* version that can be seen in May and November.

Tiny **Minna-jima** (水納島), just 15 minutes from Motobu town by ferry, is riddled with fabulous beaches and snorkelling spots, and is popular as a day trip. The **Minna Kaiun** (☎ 47-5179) ferry service (round trip ¥1600, three to eight daily) pulls in right beside the main beach, which is well developed for day-trippers, and has toilets, showers and food stalls.

The **Ie-jima Sonei** (☎ 49-2255) ferry will take you to the popular offshore island of **Ie-jima** (伊江島) from Motobu-kō (¥580, 30 minutes), 1.5km south of Motobu town. Ie-jima's main attraction is the wonderful view from the top of **Gusuku-yama** (172m), which is a straightforward 45-minute walk from the ferry. Around 10 minutes' walk west of the pier is a **monument** (Map p750) to the US war correspondent Ernie Pyle, who was killed on the island during the early days of the Battle of Okinawa. Buses around the 8km-by-3km island are irregular, though bicycles and scooters can be rented at the pier. There are also two ferries a day from Naha's **Tomari-kō** (Asahi Kankō; ☎ 868-1174) in summer (¥3400, 1½ hours).

Other Sights

A couple of kilometres north of Motobu town is the **Ocean Expo Park** (Map p750; ☎ 48-3748; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Fri-Wed Jun-Aug, 9.30am-5.30pm Fri-Wed Sep-May), which was the site of the 1975 International Ocean Exposition. Worthwhile sights in the park include the 10,000-tonne **aquarium** (admission ¥1800), home to an enormous whale shark; the **Oceanic Culture Museum** (admission ¥170), which displays cultural artefacts drawn from all over Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Southeast Asia; and a **Native Okinawan Village** (admission free), with traditional houses and indigenous plants. This park also boasts the lovely **Emerald Beach** (Map p750), which is a

popular weekend destination for Okinawan families looking for a little fun under the sun. From Nago, bus 70 runs directly to the park (¥800, 45 minutes). Both peninsula loop lines (buses 65 and 66) stop outside.

Set back from the peninsula's north coast and winding over a hilltop, the 14th-century walls of **Nakijin-jō** (Map p750; ☎ 56-4400; admission ¥150; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) look especially wonderful when the cherry trees bloom. The ruins were once visited by Commodore Perry, who compared its stone gate to ancient Egyptian architecture. In the past, this was the head castle of the unruly Hokuzan kings, and contained shrines and sacred houses for *noro* (hereditary priestesses). From the summit of the hill, there are superb views out to sea. Both peninsula loop lines (buses 65 and 66) stop outside.

SLEEPING

There are several free camp sites located on Minna-jima, Ie-jima and Sesoko-jima.

On the Beach LUE (Map p750; ☎ 47-3535; www.luenet.com in Japanese; 26-26-1 Motobu; s/tw/condos from ¥500/8000/12,000; ☎ ☎) This positively adorable beach-side hotel, just a few kilometres south of the bridge to Sesoko-jima, offers a variety of bright, sunny Western-style rooms that all overlook the beach. If you're travelling in a group of three to four people, the detached condos are an excellent deal, especially since they feature well-stocked kitchens. The hotel also has an on-site dive shop and a laid-back beachfront restaurant that serves Western-style fast food and Okinawan seafood cuisine (meals from ¥500). The restaurant is open from 11.30am to 9pm.

Minshuku Minami (Map p750; ☎ 49-2910; fax 49-2910; r per person with meals ¥5500; ☎ ☎) If you're planning to spend the night on Ie-jima, this low-key family-run *minshuku* is conveniently located next to the ferry port. Accommodation is in surprisingly spacious Japanese-style tatami rooms with shared facilities, and there's a good chance that the area's famous seafood will appear on the dinner table.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Motobu-hantō is served by frequent loop lines from Nago – buses 66 and 65 respectively run anticlockwise and clockwise around the peninsula.

From Unten-kō (Unten Port; Map p750), ferries depart for the offshore islands of Iheyajima and Izenajima (p761).

If you rented a car in Naha, and managed to emerge unscathed from the congestion of southern and central Okinawa-hontō, Motobu-hantō is a great place to explore via your own set of wheels.

Northern Okinawa-hontō

沖縄本島の北部

The northern part of Okinawa-hontō is largely undeveloped and comparatively wild and rugged. Because of its hilly terrain, thousands of Okinawan families escaped the obliteration in the south of the island at the end of WWII by hiding out here.

Note that this section of the island is best visited as a day trip from Naha or from the Motobu Peninsula. Since there is no public transportation in the north, you will need a rental car – there is some seriously scenic driving to be had up here.

A narrow road hugs the west coast all the way up to **Cape Hedo** (辺戸岬), which marks the northern end of Okinawa. The point is an incredibly scenic spot backed by hills, with rocks rising from the dense greenery. On a good day, Yoron-tō, the southernmost island in the Amami-shotō, is easily seen only 28km to the northeast. From Cape Hedo, the road wraps around the tip of the island and heads down the east coast. For the next stretch of the drive, the road skirts alongside several fine-looking sandy beaches, though be advised that there are strong currents and rips here. The road then turns inland, though it seems to take forever to get back to what passes as a town – the contrast with southern Okinawa-hontō could not be more extreme.

Islands around Okinawa-hontō

The outer islands of the Okinawa-shotō are a world away from the hustle and bustle of the main island. Life is more relaxed, there is still evidence of traditional Ryūkyū culture and you won't be consistently bombarded with signs of Americana. The islands around Okinawa also offer superb white sand beaches, clear emerald seas and excellent diving and snorkelling.

The closest islands to Okinawa-hontō are the **Kerama-rettō** (慶良間列島), which are just 30km offshore from Naha, and include the main islands of Zamami-jima, Aka-jima and Tokashiki-jima. The Kerama-rettō, particularly Zamami-jima, are a popular destination

HABU SNAKES

Any discussion of the Nansei-shotō eventually gets around to 'deadly' habu snakes. Perhaps it's a reflection of Japan's severe shortage of real dangers, but you could easily get the impression that the poor habu, a species of pit viper, is the world's most dangerous snake, and that there's one waiting behind every tree, shrub, bush and bar stool on the islands. They're hardly so prolific – the most likely place to see one is at a mongoose-versus-habu fight put on for tourists, or floating in a jar of very expensive (and slightly poisonous) sake.

Nevertheless, they are venomous! It's not a good idea to go barefoot when stomping through the bushes, though you should stomp – the vibrations will scare any snakes away. If you do get bitten, take it seriously and seek immediate medical advice as fatalities (though rare) can occur if antivenin is not administered.

for Japanese day-trippers who visit from Naha, though you'll appreciate the islands more if you spend the night.

Usually thought of as a pair, Iheya-jima and Izena-jima are 20km offshore to the northwest of Okinawa-hontō, and are the northernmost islands in Okinawa prefecture. Because they are accessed from Unten-kō on the northern side of the Motobu-hantō, Iheya-jima and Izena-jima are not as popular as the Kerama-rettō, though the island pair is a spectacular destination for hikers.

Ninety kilometres to the west of Okinawa-hontō, Kume-jima is the largest of the offshore islands, and perhaps the most popular destination in the outer islands. Although the island is most often accessed from Naha, there are direct flights to Kume-jima from Tokyo during the busy summer months.

ZAMAMI-JIMA 座間味島

☎ 098 / pop 1050

Zamami-jima has a deserved reputation as an island paradise with some of the clearest waters you will ever see – not surprisingly, the diving and snorkelling here is tops. However, most visitors to Zamami are happy to stay on the boat and keep an eye out for humpback whales, which have returned to the waters in recent years. If you only have time to visit one of the islands in the Kerama-rettō, this is definitely the one.

There is a **tourist information office** (☎ 987-2277; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) at the port. More information in Japanese is available at www.vill.zamami.okinawa.jp.

Furuzamami Beach (古座間味島ビーチ), approximately 1km east from the port, is a stunning stretch of white sand that is fronted by clear waters full of bright coral heads. The beach is also well developed for day-trippers,

and has toilets, showers and food stalls. You can also rent snorkelling gear here (¥1000).

Whale-watching is possible between the months of January and March. For more information, either inquire at the tourist information office or call the **whale-watching office** (☎ 896-4141). Tours run once or twice a day, last about two hours and cost ¥5000.

Natureland Kayaks (ネイチャーランドカヤク; ☎ 987-2187), a three-minute walk from the Zamami port (follow the English signs), operates excellent sea kayak trips. Day trips with everything included cost ¥11,000 and half-day trips ¥7000.

Small fishing boats can also be chartered at the port for a negotiable price (from ¥1000) to take you out to the smaller, uninhabited islands.

The waters around Zamami are home to an impressive number of hard coral heads that are teeming with tropical reef fish. Although there's no shortage of dive shops on the island, a recommended operator is **Joy Joy** (☎ 987-2445), which is run out of the *minshuku* of the same name.

Zamami-jima makes a great day trip from Naha, though you'll escape the crowds and mellow out a bit more if you stay on the island for two days. A good spot to call home for the night is **JoyJoy** (ジョイジョイ; ☎ 987-2445; r per person with meals ¥5500; ☎) in the northwest corner of the village – if you phone ahead, the staff will pick you up from the ferry terminal. Accommodation is in simple Japanese-style tatami rooms that surround a small garden, though the real appeal of staying here is the on-site dive shop.

RAC, part of the JAL network, has one flight a day from Naha to the Kerama Airport (from ¥7000, 20 minutes), which is on Fukachi-jima, south of Aka-jima. There are boat connections to Zamami-jima from the

airport. **Zamami Sonei** (☎ 098-868-4567) has two or three fast ferries a day (¥2750, 50 minutes) and one regular ferry (¥1860, 1½ hours) from Naha's Tomari-kō.

There are no buses or taxis on Zamami-jima, though nothing is too far away. Rental cars, scooters and bicycles are readily available all over the main town.

TOKASHIKI-JIMA 渡嘉敷島

☎ 098 / pop 750

The largest island of the Kerama-rettō is Tokashiki-jima, a long, skinny, north-south standing island that is famous for its outstanding beaches. Tokashiki is also the closest island in the group to Okinawa-hontō, and predominantly caters to beach-loving day-trippers.

Ferries arrive at the port of Tokashiki (渡嘉敷) on the east coast. For more information on the island, check out www.vill.tokashiki.okinawa.jp in Japanese.

The island's most attractive strips of sand are **Tokashiku Beach** (とかしくビーチ) and **Aharen Beach** (阿波連ビーチ), both of which are located on the west coast, and just a few minutes by bus from the port. Aharen is particularly good for snorkelling, while Tokashiku is predominantly a swimming beach. As with Zamami, both beaches are well developed for tourism, and have toilets, showers, food stalls and shops where you can rent snorkelling gear (¥1000).

A popular activity for Japanese tourists is a 40-minute ride on the **Yellow Submarine** (☎ 987-2010; ¥2000), which runs from Aharen Beach. Actually, it's not really a submarine but rather a glass-bottom boat, though you'll still get to see a good variety of coral heads and reef fish.

Tokashiki is an easy day trip from Naha, though Aharen has a relaxed beach scene at night that's worth checking out. Practically on the beach is the **Pension Southern Cross** (ペンションサザンクロス; ☎ 987-2258; r per person with/without meals ¥6500/4000; ☎), a completely chilled-out family-run inn where it's easy to slow down for a bit and soak up the ambience. Accommodation is in a mix of breezy Western- and Japanese-style rooms, the majority of which have great ocean views.

Only 35 minutes from Naha by fast ferry, Tokashiki-jima makes an ideal day trip from Naha. **Tokashiki Sonei** (☎ 098-987-2537) operates two fast ferries a day (¥2210, 35 minutes) and

one regular ferry (¥1470, one hour 10 minutes) from Naha's Tomari-kō.

There is a bus network that runs from Tokashiki to the beaches, though it's a beautiful island to cycle around. Bicycles, cars and scooter, are available all over town.

AKA-JIMA 阿嘉島

☎ 098 / pop 330

Only a couple of kilometres south of Zamami-jima, Aka-jima is a largely undeveloped island of rugged hills and a rocky coastline that sees few visitors. However, Aka is a good destination for divers, and it's certainly one of the quietest islands in the Kerama-rettō.

If you keep your eyes open around dusk you might spot a **Kerama deer** (慶良間シカ), descendants of deer that were brought by the Satsuma from Kagoshima when they conquered the Ryūkyūs in 1609. The deer are smaller and darker than their mainland cousins, and have been designated a national treasure.

The best beach on the island is **Nishibama** (ニシバマビーチ), which has fine yellow sand and is located on the east coast. However, if you're after beaches, you're better off heading to Zamami-jima or Tokashiki-jima.

Pension Shiisa (ペンションシーサー; ☎ 987-2973; www.seasir.com in Japanese; r per person with meals ¥6500; ☎) is a popular dive-and-stay operation that will pick you up at the ferry terminal. Accommodation is in basic Japanese-style tatami rooms, and the owner is a wealth of information on the local diving scene.

RAC, part of the JAL network, has one flight a day from Naha to the Kerama Airport (from ¥7000, 20 minutes), which is on Fukachi-jima, south of Aka-jima. There are bus connections from the airport to Aka-jima along the inter-island bridge.

Zamami Sonei (☎ 098-868-4567) has two or three fast ferries a day (¥2750, 50 minutes) and one regular ferry (¥1860, 1½ hours) from Naha's Tomari-kō. These ferries stop at Aka-jima either before or after docking at Zamami-jima.

There are no buses or taxis on Aka-jima, though nothing is too far away. Rental cars, scooters and bicycles are readily available all over the main town.

IHEYA-JIMA & IZENA-JIMA

伊平屋島・伊是名島

☎ 0980 / pop 1600 & 1900

The island pair of Iheya-jima and Izena-jima complement one another with a good blend of

sandy beaches, unique natural attractions and ample opportunities for hiking and camping. However, since the islands are accessed from Unten-kō in Motobu-hantō (p759) instead of from Naha, they see significantly fewer travellers than the Kerama-retto.

Iheya-jima, to the north, is long and skinny, while Izena-jima, 5km to the south, is shaped more like a ball. Ferries arrive in Iheya-jima at Mae-domari (前泊) while ferries arrive in Izena-jima at Nakata (中田). For information in Japanese, look up www.vill.iheya.okinawa.jp and www.izenajima.jp.

Hillier than its southern neighbour, with five 'mountains' over 200m along its spine, Iheya-jima has some impressive natural assets. For excellent views, you can climb **Torazu-iwa** (虎頭岩; Tiger's Head Rock), the landmark that guards Mae-domari harbour. At the northern end of the island, **Kumaya Dōkutsu** (クマヤ洞窟) is a huge natural cavern nearly 50m deep and 15m tall at its highest point. Next door is the free Kumaya camping ground, which has basic facilities. A couple of kilometres south, **Nentōhiramatsu** (念頭平松) is a 300-year-old pine tree that has been trained to look like an umbrella. At the southern tip of Iheya-jima is the island's top beach, **Yonesaki Beach** (米崎ビーチ), an attractive wilderness beach that also has a free camping area.

Izena-jima has historical links to the Ryūkyū rulers – check out the island's traditions and culture at the **Folklore Museum** (伊是名村ふれあい民俗館; ☎ 45-2165; admission ¥200; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Sun) in Nakata. One-third of the island is the **Izenayama Forest Park** (伊是名山森林公園), which protects vast groves of Ryūkyū pines, and has a number of well-maintained walking trails. On the south coast, the **Futamigaura-kaigan** (二見が浦海岸) is a striking stretch of coastline that is home to some towering standing rocks.

On Iheya-jima, **Minshuku Uchima-sō** (民宿内間荘; ☎ 46-2503; r per person with/without meals ¥5000/4000; ☎) is a few blocks inland from the Mae-domari port, though the staff will pick you up if you phone ahead. This comfortable family-run *minshuku* has a handful of Japanese-style tatami rooms that are tastefully decorated with traditional furnishings.

On Izena-jima, the **Nakagawakan** (なか川館; ☎ 45-2100; r per person with/without meals ¥5000/4000; ☎) is about a five-minute walk from Nakata port near the town centre, though the staff here will also pick you up if you phone ahead.

This traditional ryokan offers spacious Japanese-style tatami rooms with private facilities, and the friendly owner is a good person to talk to about hikes in Izenayama Forest Park.

Iheya Sonei (☎ 0980-46-2177) operates two ferries each day to Maedomari-kō on Iheya-jima from Unten-kō on the main island (¥2380, 1¼ hours). Similarly, **Izena Sonei** (☎ 0980-56-5084) has two ferries a day to Nakata-kō on Izena-jima from Unten-kō (¥1760, one hour). Unten-kō can be reached by bus from Nago.

KUME-JIMA 久米島

☎ 098 / pop 9600

The furthest flung of the outer islands, Kume-jima is a hopping destination in the summer months, though it's not too hard to see why. With palm-fringed beaches, interesting geographical features and excellent locally produced *awamori*, Kume has all the essential ingredients for the perfect Okinawan holiday. Unlike the other islands in the Okinawa-shotō, however, Kume cannot be visited as a day trip from Okinawa-hontō.

The airport is at the western extreme of the island, while the main port of Kaneshiro (兼城) is on the southwest coast. For more information in Japanese check out the website www.kumejima.info.

The action on Kume-jima centres on **Ifu Beach** (イーフビーチ), on the east coast of the island. *Ifu* means 'white' in the local Kume dialect, and not surprisingly, the beach is known for its powdery white sand. Well developed for tourism, this beach has toilets, showers, stalls and shops where you can rent snorkelling gear for ¥1000. Another attractive beach is **Shinri-hama** (シンリ浜), on the west coast near the airport, which is known for its sunsets over the East China Sea. There is a camping area here.

Hate-no-hama (はての浜) beach is something special. A 20-minute boat ride from the Kume-jima main island, Hate-no-hama is a 7km-long sandbar surrounded by emerald green seas. The best way to get there is on an excursion with **Hatenohama Kankō Service** (☎ 090-8292-8854), which runs a tour with lunch included for ¥4500. If you book in advance, staff members can pick you up from your accommodation.

On tiny O-jima, which is connected to Kume-jima's east coast by a causeway, you'll find the intriguing **Tatami-ishi** (畳石), a natural formation of pentagon-shaped rocks that

covers the seashore. Note that Tatami-ishi can only be seen at low tide.

If you're looking for a cool (alcoholic) drink, **Kumejima-no-Kumesen** (久米島の久米仙; ☎ 985-2276; ☎ 10am-noon & 1-4pm) offers the opportunity to check out a real *awamori* factory, which converts local spring water into its headache-inducing product. There are 50 different labels of *awamori* in the factory shop – *kampai!*

Ifu Beach is the place to stay, and there are plenty of choices along the 1.5km waterfront. Although some of the accommodation here can get quite pricey, an affordable yet surprisingly comfortable spot is the **Minshuku Shirahama** (民宿しらはま; ☎ 985-8336; r per person ¥3000; ☎), which offers basic Japanese-style tatami rooms with shared facilities. This *minshuku* is just a few minutes' walk along the coast from the Ifu Beach bus stop.

JTA, part of the JAL network, has five flights a day between Naha and Kume-jima (from ¥9500, 30 minutes), and from June to September a daily flight from Tokyo (¥20,000 to ¥45,000, 2½ hours). **Kume Shosen** (☎ 098-868-2686) runs a daily ferry from Naha's Tomari-kō to Kume-jima's Kaneshiro-kō (¥2650, four hours).

Kume-jima has an efficient bus system, though there are also taxis, rental cars, scooters and bicycles for rent in the main town.

MIYAKO-SHOTŌ 宮古諸島

About 300km southwest of Okinawa and directly en route to the Yaeyama-shotō is the eight-island Miyako group, which includes the main islands of Miyako-jima, Irabu-jima and Shimoji-jima as well as a scattering of tiny islets. Edging closer to the Tropic of Cancer, the Miyako-shotō is the quintessential beach destination, though divers will find ample opportunities for a little underwater fun. The islands are also extremely popular among Japanese *freeters* (alternative lifestyle), which has resulted in a slowly burgeoning reggae scene.

Although Miyako-shotō is experiencing a boom in domestic tourism, few foreigners make it south of Okinawa-hontō. But if you have the time, it makes an excellent stopover en route to the Yaeyama-shotō, guaranteeing a little fun in the sun. The islands are incredibly laid-back, and they're refreshingly Japanese, which is a welcome change if you're coming from Okinawa-hontō.

Miyako-jima 宮古島

☎ 0980 / pop 49,000

Miyako-jima serves as the major transport hub for the Miyako-shotō, and is the most populated and developed island in the group. From the main city of Hirara, boat services fan out to Irabu-jima while the islands of Ikema-jima and Kurima-jima are connected to Miyako via bridges.

In addition to serving as your port of entry to the Miyako-shotō, Miyako-jima is also the main tourist destination in the island group. Unlike the majority of other islands in the Nansei-shotō, Miyako-jima is completely flat, which makes the island perfectly suited for the cultivation of sugar cane. As a result of this unique topography, Miyako hosts the Strongman All-Japan Triathlon, which attracts more than 1500 triathletes every April. However, if you're looking for a more laid-back holiday, you'll be happy to know that Miyako's beaches and dive spots are among the finest in the Nansei-shotō, and the islanders are also famous for their hospitality as well as their love of the drink (see p767).

ORIENTATION

Hirara, Miyako-jima's main population centre, is on the eastern coast of the island. Although it's rather sprawling, Hirara is centred on the rough square formed by McCrum-dōri, Shimozato-dōri and Ichiba-dōri. If you think McCrum-dōri is an unusual name for a Japanese street, you are absolutely correct. McCrum, the American in charge of Miyako-jima after the war, bulldozed a wide road from the port to his inland weather station – the road still bears his name.

A series of highways branch out from Hirara and head along the coastline and into the interior. There are several small population centres along the southern coast, though most of the interior of the island is comprised of sugar cane plantations.

INFORMATION

The **tourist information office** (Mapp766; ☎ 73-1881; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) is helpful, though it can be a little difficult to find (head south on a side street parallel to Shimozato-dōri). The friendly staff can help you book accommodation around the islands, and can provide the useful English-language *Okinawa Miyako Islands Guide*. There's also an **airport information desk** (☎ 72-0899) that is open for all flight arrivals.

It's possible to access the internet for free on the 2nd floor of the **public library** (Map p766; cr McCrum-dōri & Chūō-dōri). The ATMs at the **post office** (Map p766; Ichiba-dōri) accept foreign ATM cards.

SIGHTS

Hirara 平良

Travellers to Miyako-jima have problems prying themselves away from the island's beaches, though there are a few modest sights worth checking out.

Near the harbour is the **mausoleum** (Map p766) of Nakasone Tōmiya, the 15th-century hero who not only conquered the Yaeyama-shotō, but also prevented an invasion from the north. Also near the harbour is the **Hakuai (Kaiser Wilhelm) Monument** (Map p766), which was presented as a gesture of gratitude for the rescue of the crew of a typhoon-wrecked German merchant ship in 1873.

Around 500m north of town along the coastal road is the **Nintōzeiseki** (人頭税石), a 1.4m-high stone used to determine who was required to pay taxes during the heavy-handed rule of the Shimazu, who invaded from southern Kyūshū in the early 1600s.

Next to the small town shrine of Miyako-jinja is the **Miyako Traditional Arts & Crafts Centre** (Map p766; ☎ 72-8022; admission free; ☎: 9am-6pm Mon-Sat), which displays traditional island crafts – be sure to check out the *minsā* weaving looms on the 2nd floor.

Six kilometres east of Hirara harbour is the worthwhile **Hirara City Sōgō Museum** (Map p765; ☎ 73-0567; admission ¥300; ☎: 9am-4pm Tue-Sun), which screens documentary videos of fast-disappearing Okinawan religious rites and traditional island festivals.

Just 200m north of the museum are the **Hirara Tropical Botanical Gardens** (Map p765; ☎ 72-3751; admission free; ☎: 8.30am-6pm), which are home to more than 40,000 tropical trees and plants.

Beaches

Although Miyako is full of secret little spots, there are several large beaches that are popular with tourists and locals alike.

Just a short walk south of the ferry terminal is the surprisingly attractive **Painagama Beach** (Map p765), which is a good place to do a little swimming. Because Painagama is the closest beach to Hirara, locals frequently host late-night beach parties here.

North of Hirara is the lovely **Sunayama Beach** (Map p765), where you can clamber over a

dune and watch the sunset through a giant stone arch. Unfortunately, the scene is slightly tainted (in true Japanese fashion) by the huge safety net that is strung over the arch.

On the southwest coast, beautiful white-sand **Maehama Beach** (Map p765) is often called the finest beach in Japan. Here, a huge sweeping crescent of white sand is met by crystalline turquoise water that's perfect for swimming.

On the southeast corner of the island is **Boraga Beach** (Map p765), which is a popular spot for snorkelling and kayaking. From here, it's a great walk out to the cape at **Higashi Henna-misaki** (東平安名崎).

If you're looking for a more relaxed beach scene, **Yoshino Beach** and **Aragusuku Beach** (both Map p765) on the east coast are laid-back, and are good places to do a bit of snorkelling.

There are also good wilderness beaches on **Ikema-jima** (池間島), off the northernmost point of Miyako-jima, and on **Kurima-jima** (来間島) to the south. Both islands are linked to the main island by a bridge.

ACTIVITIES

Diving

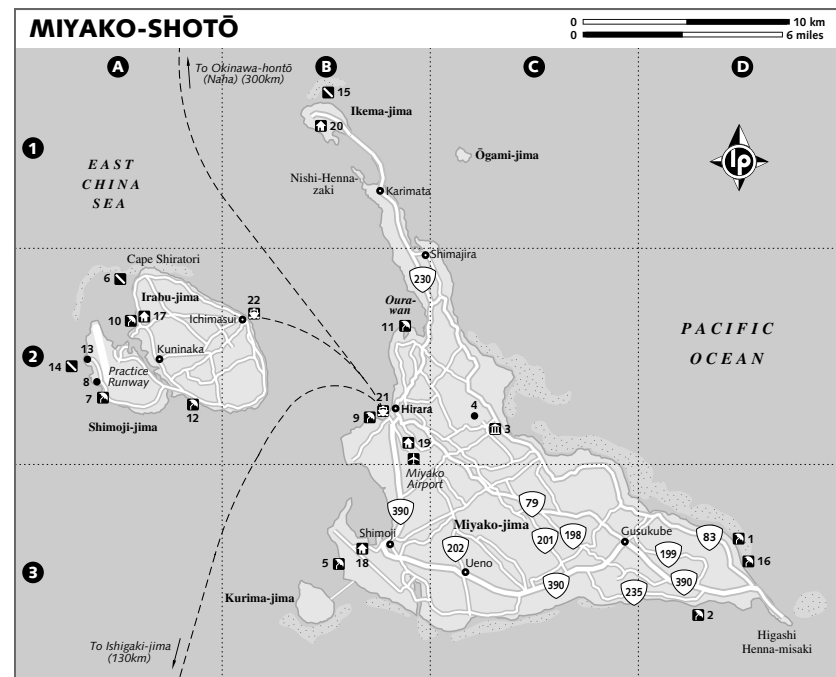
For a quick crash course on scuba diving in Okinawa and the Southwest Islands, see boxed text (p739).

Miyako-jima is a wildly popular diving centre, with more than 50 dive sites and a dynamic range of underwater drop-offs and overhangs. The waters around Miyako-jima are also home to an elaborate system of underwater caves, which can be explored if you're an experienced diver. One popular sight off the west coast of nearby Irabu-jima is the **Mini Grotto** (Map p765), which is a large calcareous cave with impressive rock formations. Other popular spots are the **Yaebishi reef** (Map p765) just north of Ikema-jima and the **Tōri-ike** underwater tunnels (Map p765) off the western coast of nearby Shimoji-jima (also see p768).

A recommended dive operator is the **Good Fellas Club** (グッドフェラースクラブ; ☎ 73-5483; www.goodfellas.co.jp), around 1.1km south of Hirara town centre. If you have your own wheels, it's across from the Family Mart just east of the intersection between routes 390 and 192. If not, phone ahead and the staff can pick you up from your accommodation.

SLEEPING

Accommodation options on Miyako-jima are spread out around the island, so it's best to



SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Aragusuku Beach 親城ビーチ.....	1 D3	Sawada-no-hama 佐和田の浜.....	10 A2	Miyakojima Youth Hostel	
Boraga Beach ボラガビーチ.....	2 D3	Sunayama Beach 砂山ビーチ.....	11 B2	宮古ユースホステル.....	19 B2
Hirara City Sōgō Museum		Toguchi-no-hama 渡口の浜.....	12 A2	Raza Cosmica Tourist Home	
平良市総合博物館.....	3 C2	Tōri-ike 通り池.....	13 A2	ラザコスミカツーリス	
Hirara Tropical Botanical Gardens		Tōri-ike 通り池.....	14 A2	トホーム.....	20 B1
平良市熱帯植物園.....	4 C2	Yaebishi やえびし.....	15 B1		
Maehama Beach 前浜ビーチ.....	5 B3	Yoshino Beach 吉野ビーチ.....	16 D3		
Mini Grotto ミニグロット.....	6 A2				
Naka-no-shima 中の島.....	7 A2	SLEEPING ☎			
Obi-iwa 岩島.....	8 A2	Guesthouse Birafuya		Hirara Port 平良湖.....	21 B2
Painagama Beach		ゲストハウスびらふや.....	17 A2	San Rent-a-Car	
バイナガマビーチ.....	9 B2	Guesthouse Miyako-jima		サンレンタカー.....	(see 22)
		ゲストハウス宮古島.....	18 B3	Sarahama Port 佐民浜漁港.....	22 B2

phone ahead and make a reservation before arriving on the island. Most places will send a car to pick you up from the ferry terminal or the airport if you let them know what time you will be arriving.

There are free camping grounds at many beaches, including Maehama, Boraga and Aragusuku. In the busy summer season, a number of Hirara residents run informal guesthouses (look for flyers inside the ferry terminal and in the airport).

Guesthouse Miyako-jima (☎ 76-2330; www2.miyako-ma.jp/yonaha/index.html; dm ¥2000, 1 week ¥12,000, r per person ¥3000, 1 week ¥15,000; (P) ☎) This bright

and cheery guesthouse has a scenic location near Maehama Beach, and is perfectly set up for budget travellers. Accommodation is in cosy Western-style dorms and private rooms with shared facilities, and there are special rates available for long-term stays. Guests can also borrow bicycles and scooters for free.

Hirayaya (Map p765; ☎ 0980-75-3221; www.miyako-net.ne.jp/~hirayaya/index2.html; dm ¥2000, 1 week ¥12,000, r per person ¥3000, 1 week ¥18,000; meals available; (P) ☎) Located in central Hirara just one block north of Miyako-jinja (look for the light blue curtain that says guesthouse), this laid-back spot is run by a charming young woman who will

do everything to make you feel at home. Accommodation is in brand-new (and still sparkling) dorms and Japanese-style tatami rooms, and there are special rates available for long-term stays.

Miyakojima Youth Hostel (Map p765; ☎ 73-7700; www.mco.ne.jp/~miyakoyh/in Japanese; r per person ¥3000; meals available; (P) ♿) The island's youth hostel is an excellent deal as Japanese-style rooms are surprisingly spacious, and come with spotless en-suite facilities. Unfortunately, the hostel is a 2km (30-minute) hike from the ferry terminal, and is slowly waning in popularity. It's probably best to arrive at the hostel by cab as it is located down a small backstreet quite a distance from the town centre, and is near impossible to find on your own.



Hotel Kyōwa (Map p766; ☎ 73-2288; www.hotelkyowa.co.jp in Japanese; s/d/tr/q with breakfast ¥6000/9000/12,000/15,000; (P) ♿) This towering business hotel, just off McCrum-dōri, is convenient to the port if you're arriving late or planning to get a quick jump to Irabu-jima in the morning. Standard Western-style business rooms are complemented by a good selection of on-site restaurants.

our pick **Raza Cosmica Tourist Home** (Map p765; ☎ 75-2020; www.raza-cosmica.com; r per person with 2 meals ¥10,000; (P) ♿) Run by a friendly young couple, this charmingly eclectic inn, which blends Asian and European design elements, sits above a secluded little beach cove on Ikema-jima. Romantic Western-style rooms offer peace and quiet in truly beautiful surroundings, which makes this the perfect destination for holidaying couples.

EATING & DRINKING

Hirara is home to a good number of restaurants and an enormous number of bars (see opposite). If you can read Japanese, the free *Miyako-jima-Taun-gaido* magazine has listings of local favourites.

Koja Shokudō Honten (Map p766; ☎ 72-2139; ☎ 10am-10pm) One block west of the intersection between Ichiba-dōri and Nishizato-dōri is this nondescript noodle house (look for the plastic food models), which is something of a local legend. For more than 50 years, Koja has been serving up steamy bowls of *Miyako-soba* (¥650), the local variant of the Okinawan classic.

INFORMATION

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SLEEPING

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Hotel Kyōwa ホテル共和.....	9	A1

EATING

Koja Shokudō Honten 古謝食堂本店.....	10	A2
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TRANSPORT

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THE 'COMMUNICATION DRINK'

The friendly people of Miyako-jima have earned a reputation for drinking, and the Izato entertainment area in the town of Hirara is said to have more bars per capita than any other town in Japan.

Miyako even has its unique local drinking custom, called *otori*. This group ritual involves making a speech, filling your own glass (usually with potent *awamori*, the local liquor) and then filling the glasses of all in the room. Everyone drinks up, the leader makes a short closing speech, picks the next victim and the routine starts all over again. Miyako's *otori* is so notorious that even hard-livered Okinawans from neighbouring islands are said to fear the ritual.

If you happen to end up lured into an *otori* and want to sneak out before getting plastered, one local veteran boozier advises, 'Never say goodbye. Just head for the toilet and don't come back!'

A-Dish (デーシーユ; ☎ 72-7114; dishes from ¥750; ☎ 6pm-midnight Tue-Sat; E) A short walk southwest of the ferry terminal (look for the English sign and the funky decorations), A-Dish is a hip little spot that is heaven for discerning gourmards. In addition to exquisitely prepared Okinawan classics, A-dish also serves up delicious pastas and pizzas featuring fresh local ingredients.

Chūzan (中山; ☎ 73-1959; ☎ 6pm-midnight) Two blocks west of the central post office (look for the hanging lanterns outside), this popular *izakaya* is a great spot that offers a variety of locally caught seafood. You can't go wrong with the *sashimi-setto* (¥1250), which washes down perfectly with a tall glass of *nama-birru* (¥450).

Bar Alchemist (バーアルケミスト; ☎ 82-4278; drinks from ¥450; ☎ 6pm-4am Tue-Sat; E) Upstairs from the A-Dish, this eclectic bar is decorated with all sorts of random paraphernalia, though that shouldn't distract you from the stunning sunset views. A few times each month, Bar Alchemist features live acts performing anything from Okinawan traditional ballads to Jamaican-style reggae.

Isla (イスラー; ☎ 74-3451; drinks from ¥450; ☎ 9pm-4am; E) One block west of the traffic light on Nishizato-dōri (look for the Jamaican flag), this Caribbean-themed bar hosts live reggae acts as well as the occasional salsa night. The charismatic English-speaking owner, Chiharu, is a legend behind the bar and on the dance floor.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Miyako-jima is serviced by JTA and ANK, and has direct flights to/from Tokyo (three hours, three daily), Osaka (2½ hours, three daily),

Naha (45 minutes, 12 daily) and Ishigaki-jima (20 minutes, four daily).

Fares are dependent on availability and seasonality – as a general rule, prices are the highest in the summer months, and you can save a considerable amount of money if you book two weeks prior to your flight. Flights to the mainland range from ¥15,000 to ¥40,000 while inter-island flights are typically ¥10,000 to ¥20,000.

Boats

Long-distance ferries to/from Naha (¥4250, nine hours) and to/from Ishigaki-jima (¥2070, 5½ hours) depart/arrive from the harbour. Note that these services are not daily, and travel times vary depending on the season and the weather. Ferries are culled in the winter months and cut completely at the first sign of bad weather. Call **Arimura Sangyō** (☎ 098-860-1980) or **Ryūkyū Kaiun** (☎ 098-868-1126) for more information.

Miyako-jima is also the departure/arrival point for ferries to Irabu-jima and Shimoji-jima (p768).

GETTING AROUND

Miyako-jima has a sporadic bus network that is not very useful for tourists. In fact, there are no buses between the airport and Hirara – taxis cost ¥1000. However, infrequent buses do run from the Yachiyo bus terminal (八千代バスターミナル; Map p766) to Ikema-jima (¥450, 35 minutes), and from the Miyako Kyōei bus station (宮古協榮バスターミナル), 700m east of town, to Higashi-Henna-misaki (¥650, 50 minutes).

The island's flat terrain is perfectly suited to biking, though you'll get around much quicker on a scooter. **Tomihama Motors** (Map p766;

☎ 72-3031; 🕒 9am-6pm) on Nishizato-dōri (look for the English sign) has scooters for ¥2000 a day, and it's possible to circle the island in about three to four hours.

Irabu-jima & Shimoji-jima

伊良部島・下地島

A 10-minute ferry ride from Miyako-jima brings you to Irabu-jima and Shimoji-jima, which are pleasantly rural islands covered with fields of sugar cane and linked by a series of six bridges. Like Miyako, Irabu and Shimoji are a beach-lovers' paradise, and there are ample opportunities for swimming, snorkelling or simply sprawling out underneath the tropical sun.

The islands are best visited as a day trip from Hirara, though there are a handful of low-key guesthouses on the island as well as plenty of free camp sites.

Although there's no shortage of sandy coastline, the best beaches in the area are **Sawada-no-hama** and **Toguchi-no-hama** on Irabu-jima's west coast. With fine yellow sands and turquoise waters, you'd be hard-pressed to find more beautiful spots for an afternoon swim. Both beaches also have small shops where you can rent snorkelling equipment and kayaks; as well there are free camp sites with basic facilities. If you're planning to do a bit of snorkelling, the best spot is **Naka-no-shima**, on the west coast of Shimoji-jima. After walking across an attractive beach of crushed coral, you can snorkel around a series of hard coral heads that are protected by a high-walled bay.

Another interesting sight is **Tōri-ike**, a series of enormous pools on the west coast of Shimoji-jima that are linked to the sea by hidden tunnels. This is a great spot to walk around, though the best place to experience it is underwater. Not surprisingly, this is a popular diving destination for operators on nearby Miyako-jima. About 800m south of the pools is **Obi-iwa**, a 13m-high rock that was thrown up from the sea floor by a tsunami after a massive earthquake in 1771.

If you fly over Shimoji-jima, take a look down at the airport below – the runway appears to be longer than the island itself. This is because it's used as a **practise runway** by JAL and ANA for touch-and-go training. Although the airport is closed to visitors, a great way to spend an hour or two is to park along the northern end of the runway, and

simply watch the planes take off right before your eyes.

our pick If you're really looking to chill out and slow things down for a night or two, the totally mellow **Guesthouse Birafuya** (☎ 78-3380; www.birafuya.com in Japanese; dm ¥2000, s/d ¥3000/5000; 📍 🚗 📺 📶) is a few blocks inland from Sawada-no-hama beach. Built almost entirely out of polished wood, Birafuya features dormitories, Western-style rooms and a communal lounge that are soothing on the eye and completely calm-inducing. The best part about staying here are the delightful staff members, who work hard to foster a warm environment by making everyone feel at home. If you phone ahead, you can arrange to be picked up at the ferry terminal. Bikes are also available for rent; discounted weekly and monthly rates are available.

From the marine terminal in Hirara, **Miyako Ferry** (☎ 72-3263) and **Hayate Kaiun** (☎ 78-3337) operate a total of 30 speedboats a day (¥410, 10 minutes) to Irabu-jima.

The best way to explore the island is by scooter or rental car, which can be hired from **San Rent-a-Car** (☎ 78-5071). To reach its office, turn right at the main road after exiting the ferry and walk straight for about 300m.

YAEYAMA-SHOTŌ 八重山諸島

At the far southwestern end of the Nansei-shotō are the islands of the Yaeyama group, which include the two main islands of Ishigaki-jima and Iriomote-jima as well as a scattering of 17 isles between and beyond. Located near the Tropic of Cancer, the Yaeyama-shotō are renowned for their spectacular beaches, superb diving and lush landscapes. The islands are also a haven for Japanese **freeters** (alternative lifestyles), which means you're bound to meet an intriguing cast of characters during your travels here.

Much like the Miyako-shotō, the Yaeyama islands are experiencing a boom in domestic tourism, though few foreigners make it this far south. This is a shame as the Yaeyama group is arguably the top destination in the Nansei-shotō, and you could easily spend weeks indulging in the diverse sights and activities that the islands have to offer. Increased transportation links have also made the main island of Ishigaki easier to access than ever, and there's an elaborate inter-island ferry network to help facilitate your island-hopping fantasies.

A FOOD LOVER'S GUIDE TO OKINAWA & THE SOUTHWEST ISLANDS

In the culinary lexicon of Japanese food, if *kansai-ryōri* (Kansai cuisine) is a different dialect, then Okinawan cuisine is a different language. Reflecting its geographic and historical isolation – Naha is closer both geographically and culturally to Taipei than Tokyo – the food of Okinawa and the Southwest Islands shares little in common with that of mainland Japan. Since it was only approximately 130 years ago that the Ryūkyū kingdom was incorporated into the country, the southern islands still have a strong sense of being caught between the two behemoth cultures of China and Japan.

Okinawan cuisine originated from the splendour of the Ryūkyū court and from the humble lives of the impoverished islanders. Healthy eating is considered to be extremely important. Indeed, island thought has long held that medicine and food are essentially one and the same. The Okinawan language actually splits foodstuffs into *kusui-mun* (medicinal foods) and *ujinimum* (body nutritious foods). Today, the island's staple foods are pork, which is acidic and rich in protein, and *konbu* (a type of seaweed), which is alkaline and calorie-free.

The humble pig often features in Okinawan food, and every part of the animal is used from top to bottom. **Mimigā** (ミミガー), which is thinly sliced pig's ears marinated in vinegar, might not be at the top of every gourmand's must-try list. However, on a hot, sweltering night in Naha, it's the perfect accompaniment to a cold glass of **Orion** (オリオンビール), the extremely quaffable local lager. **Rafutē** (ラフテー), which is very similar to the mainland **buta-no-kakuni** (豚の角煮), is pork stewed with ginger, brown sugar, rice wine and soy sauce until it falls apart. If you're looking for a bit of stamina, you should also try an inky-black bowl of **ikasumi-jiru** (イカスミ汁), which is stewed pork in black squid ink. Finally, try the **inamudotchi** (イナムドーチ), a hearty stew of pork, fish, mushrooms, potatoes and miso that is said to be reminiscent of eating wild boar.

While stewing is common, Okinawans prefer stir-frying, and refer to the technique as **chanpurū** (チャンプルー). Perhaps the best known stir-fry is **goya-chanpurū** (ゴーヤチャンプルー), which is a mix of pork, bitter melon and the island's unique tofu, **shima-dōfu** (島豆腐). *Shima-dōfu* is distinguished from the mainland variety by its sturdy consistency, which makes it especially suited to frying. Occasionally, you will come across an unusual variant known as **tōfuyō** (豆腐痒), which is sorely fermented, violently spicy and fluorescent pink – try small amounts from the end of a toothpick and do not eat the whole block!

The Okinawan working folks' food is **okinawa-soba** (沖縄そば), which is actually *udon* noodles served in a pork broth. The most common variants are **sōki-soba** (ソーキそば), which contains pork spare ribs; and **shima-tōgarashi** (島とうがらし; pickled hot peppers in sesame oil) and **yaeyama-soba** (八重山そば), which contain thin white noodles akin to *sōmen*.

Others dishes to look out for include **hirayāchi** (ヒラヤーチ), which is a thin pancake of egg, vegetables and meat that is similar to the mainland **okonomiyaki** (お好み焼き). **Yagi-jiru** (山羊汁; goat soup) is an invigorating (albeit stinky) reminder of a past era when goats were traditionally slaughtered to celebrate the construction of a new house. On the island of Miyako-jima, look for **umi-budō** (海ぶどう), literally 'sea grapes', an oddly-textured seaweed that is often described as 'green caviar'. Finally, there's nothing quite like a scoop (or two) of **Blue Seal** (ブルーシール) ice cream, an American favourite that was introduced to the island following WWII.

Okinawans are a gregarious and cheerful bunch who love their food almost as much as their drink. While travelling through the Nansei-shotō, be sure to sample the local firewater, namely **awamori** (泡盛), which is distilled from rice, and has an alcohol content of 30% to 60%. Although it's usually served **mizu-wari** (水割り; diluted with water), this is seriously lethal stuff, especially the **habushu** (ハブ酒), which comes with a small habu snake (see boxed text p760) coiled in the bottom of the bottle. If you're hitting the *awamori* hard, take our advice and cancel your plans for the next day (or two).

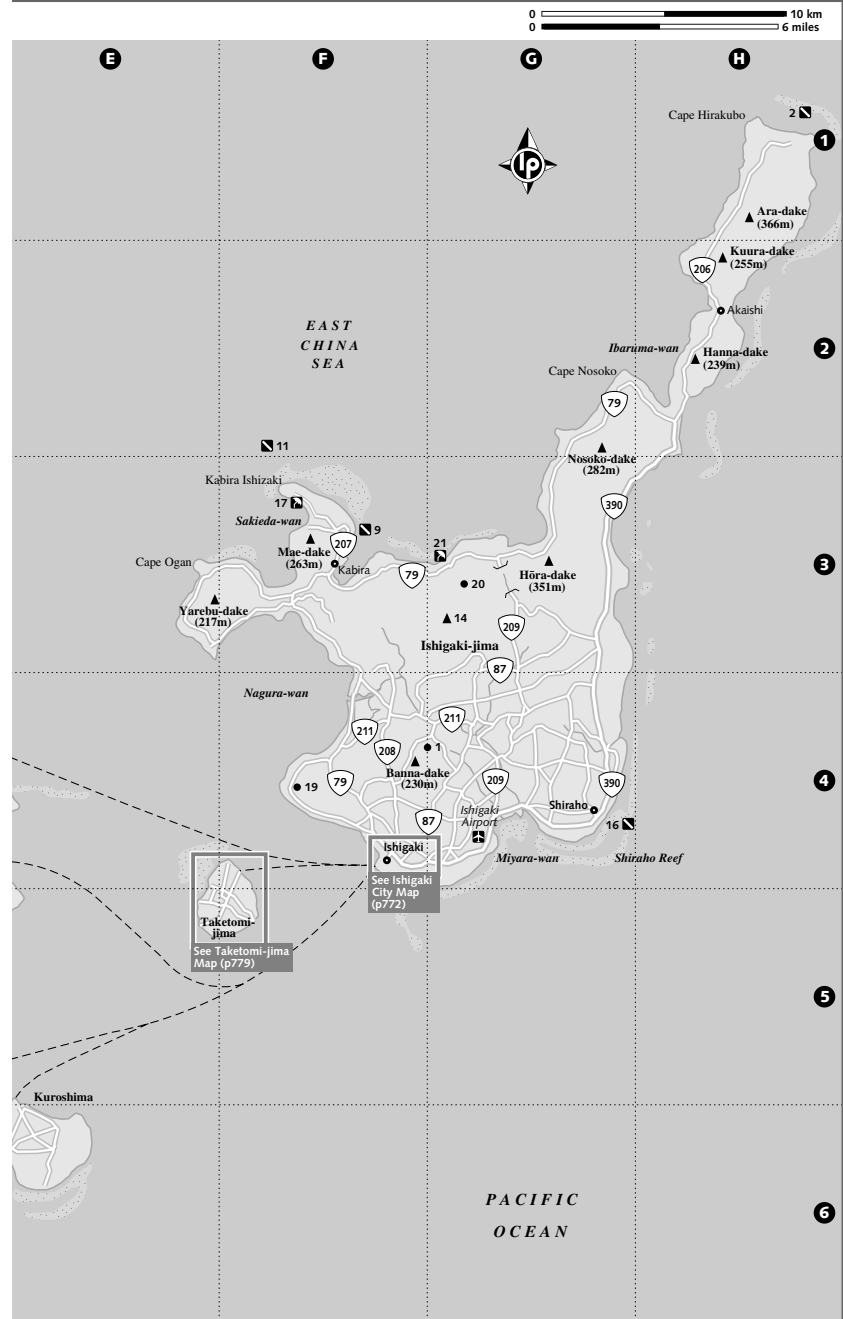
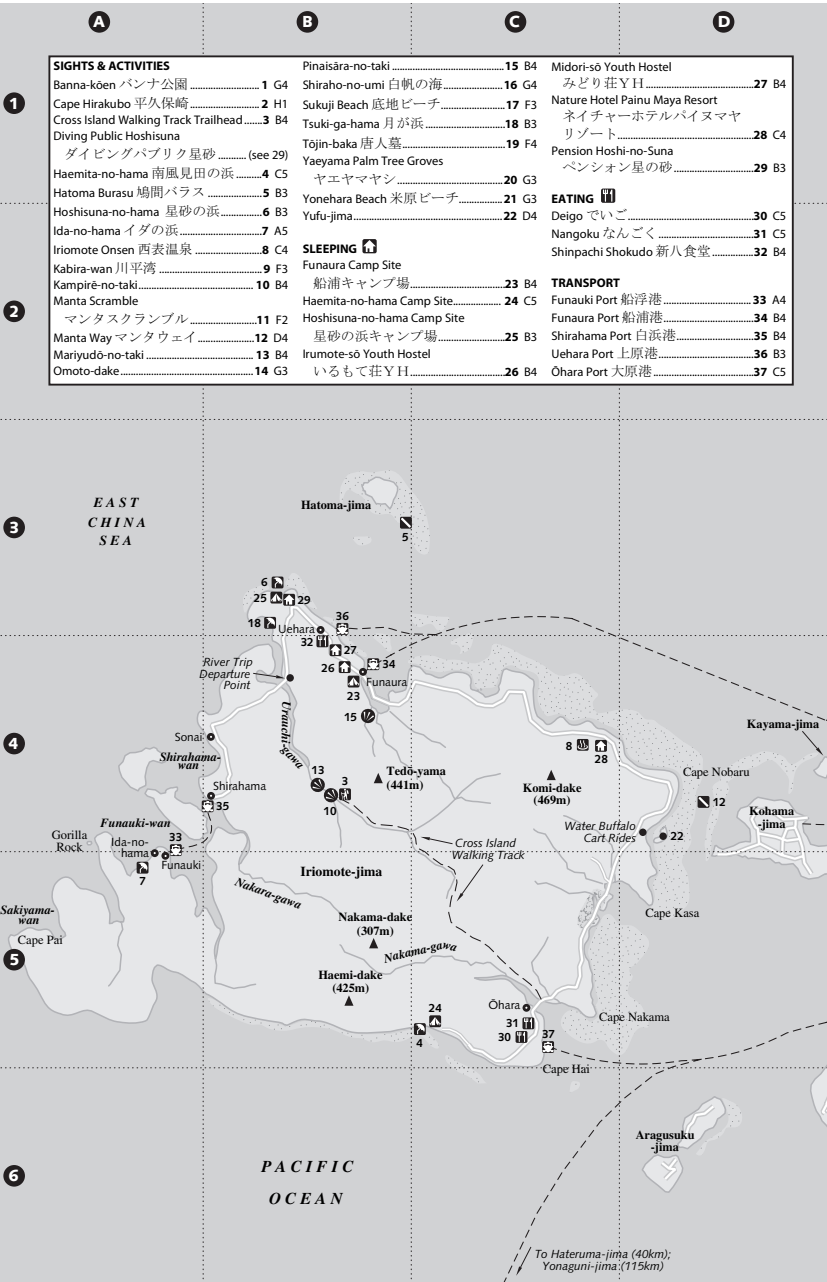
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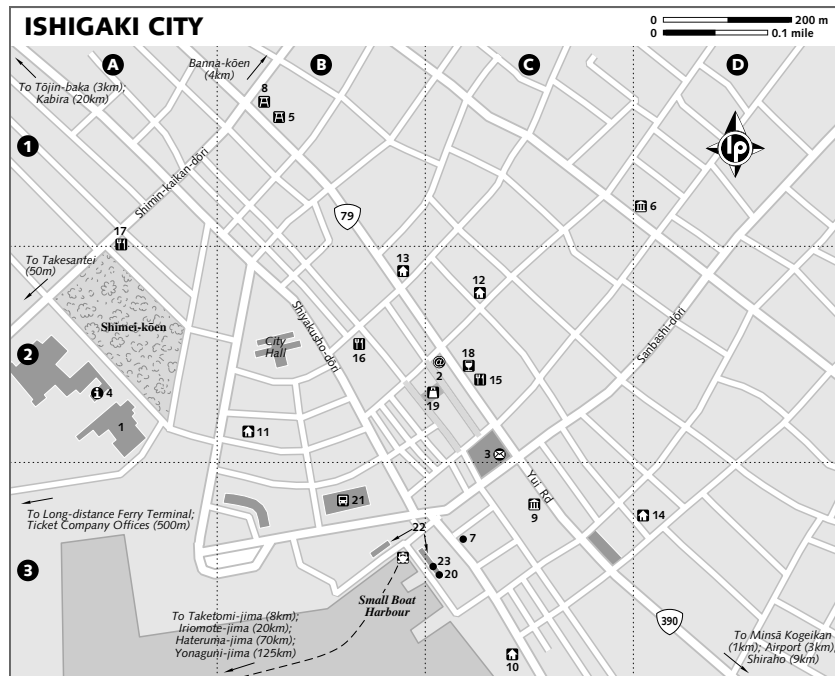
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Located 110km southwest of Miyako-jima, Ishigaki-jima serves as the major transport hub for the Yaeyama-shotō, and is the most

populated and developed island in the group. From Ishigaki City (the southernmost city in Japan), boat services fan out to nearby islands while flights depart for cities throughout the Nansei-shotō and on the mainland.

YAEYAMA-SHOTŌ



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Although the island will most likely serve as your port of entry to the Yaeyama-shotō, Ishigaki-jima should not just be viewed as a transport hub – in fact, the island itself is a major tourist destination. The seas around Ishigaki-jima are chock-full of diving and snorkelling spots, though you might find it difficult to pull yourself away from the island's fine collection of sandy beaches. The mountainous interior is also perfectly suited for day-hiking, and there's no shortage of bars and restaurants in Ishigaki City where you

can unwind over a beer after a day beneath the tropical sun.

ORIENTATION

Ishigaki City, Ishigaki-jima's main population centre, occupies the southwestern corner of the island. The city is centred on its harbour, though you'll find most of the action in the two shopping arcades, which run parallel to the main street. The city is easily walkable, and can be explored in an hour or two.

A series of highways branch out from Ishigaki City and head along the coastline and into the interior. There are several small population centres near the coast, though most of the interior of the island is comprised of rugged mountains and patches of farmland.

INFORMATION

The **tourist information office** (Map p772; ☎ 82-2809; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) occupies the 2nd floor of the building next to the library, and has a friendly English-speaking staff. They can help you book accommodation around the islands as well as provide you with an English-language brochure on the Yaeyama-shotō. If you arrive on the island by plane, there's a small but helpful **information booth** (☎ 88-0638; ☎ 8am-8pm) in the airport. For information in Japanese, check out the website www.yaeyama.or.jp.

Internet access is available at **Ishigaki Net Café** (Map p772; ☎ 83-8684; ☎ noon-3am) and the international ATM at the post office (200m up the main road heading inland from the port).

SIGHTS**Ishigaki City 石垣市**

Ishigaki-jima's sights are more of the natural kind, though there are a few interesting spots in and around the city that are worth checking out if you have the time and inclination.

Located 100m southeast of the post office is the modest **Yaeyama Museum** (Map p772; ☎ 82-4712; admission ¥100; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), which has exhibits on the culture and history of the island, and displays coffin palanquins, dugout canoes, island textiles and festival photographs.

Although the Nansei-shotō didn't really have samurai, **Miyara Dōnchi** (Map p772; ☎ 82-2767; admission ¥200; ☎ 9am-5pm Wed-Mon) is essentially a samurai-style house that dates from 1819, and is the only one left in the whole island chain. To reach the house, walk north along Sanbashi-dōri until you see signs (in English) pointing to the house.

Founded in 1614, the Zen temple of **Tōrin-ji** (Map p272), near the intersection of Shimin-kaikan-dōri and Rte 79, is home to the 18th-century statues of Deva kings, which serve as the guardian deities of the islands. Adjacent to the temple is **Gongen-dō** (Map p272), a small shrine originally built in 1614, which was rebuilt after being destroyed by a tsunami in 1771.

About 3km northwest of the city along the coastal highway is **Tōjin-baka** (Map pp770-1),

a colourful cemetery that commemorates the Chinese labourers who sought refuge on Ishigaki-jima after escaping from British and American taskmasters during their voyage to California.

About 4km north of the city along Rte 208 is **Banna-kōen** (Map pp770-1; admission free), a mountainside botanical garden that boasts more than 2500 species of tropical flora.

Beaches

There's no shortage of sun-kissed beaches, where you can snorkel along the offshore reef or just take a dip before working on your tan.

North of Ishigaki City along Rte 79 is **Yonehara Beach** (Map pp770-1), a famed spot among underwater photographers, and home to a vibrant reef that teems with tropical fish. You can rent snorkel gear (¥1000) at any of the shops along the main road. If you have your own gear, there is a free camp site with basic facilities right beside the beach.

Just west of Yonehara is the equally famous **Kabira-wan** (Map pp770-1), a sheltered bay with fine sand, though swimming here is discouraged due to the local cultured black-pearl industry. However, if you want to check out what lies on the ocean floor, **Kabira Marine** (☎ 88-2335) runs glass-bottom-boat tours (¥1000, one hour) every hour.

Over the peninsula is the white-sand **Sukuji Beach** (Map pp770-1), perhaps the best swimming spot on the island, and the perfect place to kick back and scope out the beach scene.

If you've got a little time on your hands, there are a number of unnamed sandy stretches along the coastline to explore.

ACTIVITIES**Diving**

For a quick crash course on scuba diving in Okinawa and the Southwest Islands, see boxed text (p739).

The sea around Ishigaki-jima is famous among the diving community for its large schools of manta rays, particularly in spring and summer. The most popular place is **Manta Scramble** (Map pp770-1), off the coast of Kabira Ishizaki. Although it's likely that you'll be sharing with a fair number of dive boats, you're almost guaranteed to see a manta (or four).

Another worthwhile trip is **Shiraho-no-umi** (Map pp770-1), off the coast of Shiraho, which is home to rare patches of Ao and Hama corals. Other good dive spots include

the mazelike tunnels at **Kabira-wan** and the reefs off **Yonehara Beach** and **Cape Hirakubo** (all on Map pp770–1).

There are a number of dive shops on Ishigaki-jima, and two recommended places are **Tom Sawyer Dive Shop** (☎ 83-4677; ☎ 8am–8pm), north of the harbour in Ishigaki City; and **Umicoza** (海講座; ☎ 88-2434; ☎ 8am–8pm), next to the beach in Kabira.

Hiking

There are plenty of great hiking trails in Ishigaki-jima's mountainous interior, though it's best to seek local advice before heading out.

An excellent topographic map of the island is the *Yama-to-Kougen-no-Chizu-Ishigaki-jima* (山と高原の地図石垣島; ¥840), which is available at most major bookstores.

Omoto-dake (於茂登岳; Map pp770–1), at 526m, is the highest point in Okinawa-ken, with good views of the island from the large boulder at the top. The mountain can be accessed via a small road branching off Rte 87.

On the slopes between Omoto-dake and Yonehara Beach are the **Yaeyama Palm Tree Groves** (Map pp770–1), the perfect place for a leisurely walk. The 15m- to 25m-tall palms grow wild only in the Yaeyama group, and have been designated a national natural monument.

Good hiking exists on **Nosoko-dake** (野底岳; 282m), the eroded core of a volcano, where a steep 45-minute trek takes you to the summit for excellent views, particularly of the island's northern peninsula. The mountain can be accessed via a small road that branches off Rte 79.

SLEEPING

Ishigaki City serves as the island's principal accommodation centre – the following listings are all within walking distance of the ferry terminal.

our pick **Yashima Ryokan Youth Hostel** (Map p772; ☎ 82-3157; www.jyh.or.jp/english/kyushu/yaesu/index.html; dm ¥2600; ☎ ☎ ☎) East of the Yaeyama Museum, this cosy youth hostel is in a traditional Ryūkyū-style house. Accommodation is in several communal Japanese-style tatami rooms with shared facilities, and there's a (free!) nightly 'Awamori Hour' where guests and staff commune around a long wooden table.

Rakutenya (Map p772; ☎ 83-8713; www.3.big.or.jp/~erm8p3gi/english/english.html; r per person ¥3000; ☎ ☎ ☎) This warm and inviting spot is two blocks north of the covered markets, and has

attractive Western- and Japanese-style rooms in a rickety, old wooden house. The managers are a friendly Japanese couple who speak a little bit of English, and are a fantastic source of local information.

Pension Yaima-biyōri (Map p772; ☎ 88-5578; www.yaima-well.net/ybiyori/index.htm in Japanese; r per person ¥3000; ☎ ☎) Two blocks northwest of the bus station, this welcoming pension offers simple but spacious Western- and Japanese-style rooms with shared facilities. A bonus of staying here is a 'free drink' coupon for Mori-no-Kokage (see opposite), a superb little *izakaya* run by the owner's wife.

Hyper Hotel Ishigaki-jima (Map p772; ☎ 82-2000; www.hyper-ishigaki.com.jp/index.shtml in Japanese; s/d/tr with light breakfast ¥5200/6200/7200; ☎ ☎ ☎) Just east of the harbour along the waterfront, this newish business hotel is a good choice if you're looking for a little privacy or if you just want to crash for the night before catching an early morning ferry. Sizable Western-style rooms feature extra-wide beds and spotless bathrooms – ask for one with a harbour view.

Super Hotel Ishigaki (Map p772; ☎ 83-9000; www.infinix.com.jp/sh/in Japanese; s with light breakfast ¥6000; ☎ ☎ ☎) Four blocks northeast of the city hall is this entirely automated business hotel, which caters exclusively to single business travellers. Minimalist Western-style rooms are fitted with ultra-modern furnishings and stylish trimmings, which makes the Super Hotel ideal if you're in the mood for a little comfortable seclusion.

EATING & DRINKING

Ishigaki City has a good mix of boutique tourist restaurants, cheap but atmospheric local dives and boisterous watering holes (islanders love their drink). If you can read Japanese, the free *Tanoshima* (楽島) magazine has listings of local favourites.

Eifuku Shokudō (Map p772; ☎ 82-5838; ☎ 8.30am–11pm) This hole-in-the-wall, one block northwest of the covered arcade, is easy to find if you look for the plastic models of tasty-looking noodle dishes. Not surprisingly, this is one of the cheapest places on the island for *yaeyama-soba* (¥300), though we recommend the stinky (but oh-so-delicious!) *yagi-soba* (goat sake; ¥500).

Takesantei (たけさん亭; ☎ 88-0704; ☎ 5pm–midnight Mon–Sat) A few blocks south of the park is this intimate *izakaya*, which is one of Ishigaki-jima's most famous spots. Okina-

wan cuisine is the reason why you're here – our recommendation is the locally caught *gurukun* (rockfish; ¥850), which is pan-fried and served with a lime. Although its exterior is completely nondescript, the view of the bustling interior through its windows makes Takesantei easy to spot.

Mori-no-Kokage (Map p772; ☎ 83-7933; Yui Rd; ☎ 5pm–midnight Mon–Sat) Just north of the covered arcade (look for the twinkling Christmas lights), this superb little *izakaya* is our top pick for its warm and natural ambience – there's nothing like the look and feel of real wood. There is a generous selection of local specialties on offer including *Ishigaki-gyuu* (Ishigaki beef; from ¥1200) and the local microbrew, *Ishigaki-shima-nari* (¥450).

Asian Kitchen KAPI (Map p772; ☎ 82-2026; meals ¥1200–1500; ☎ 5pm–midnight Mon–Sat; E) Next door to Mori-no-Kokage (look for the English sign), this trendy Pan-Asian bistro is a good choice if your Japanese is limited. In addition to the local cuisine, KAPI also offers an impressive range of Asian favourites, from Korean-style hot pots to fiery Indonesian curries.

Misushi (Map p772; ☎ 82-3708; ☎ 5.30–11pm) On the corner of the park (look for the coral statues out front), this high-class sushi spot serves impeccable sushi platters amid refined and traditional surroundings. If you're having problems deciding what to order, you can't go wrong with the *sushi-setto* (¥2000).

SHOPPING

Japanese travellers love to shop for *omiyage*, especially locally produced food products and liquors. Not surprisingly, Ishigaki-jima is a shopper's dream, and there's no shortage of potential purchases including sea salt, tropical fruits, Ishigaki beef, seashells and *awamori*.

A good place to shop for *omiyage* is the main shopping arcade, which also has a public market. Upstairs from the market is the **Ishigaki City Special Products Centre** (Map p772; ☎ 88-8633; ☎ 10am–7pm), which lets visitors sample traditional herbal teas, and browse textiles and pearl jewellery.

Also worth a look is the **Minsā Kōgeikan** (みんさー工芸館; ☎ 82-3473; ☎ 9am–6pm), which is a weaving workshop and showroom with exhibits on Yaeyama-shotō textiles. The building is located between town and the airport, and can be reached via the airport bus (be sure to tell the driver you want to stop here).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Ishigaki-jima is serviced by JTA and ANK, and has direct flights to/from Tokyo (3½ hours, three daily), Nagoya (three hours, one daily), Osaka (2¾ hours, three daily) and Fukuoka (2¼ hours, one daily). In summer, there are also several daily flights to/from Naha (one hour), Miyako-jima (30 minutes), Yonaguni-jima (25 minutes) and Hateruma-jima (25 minutes).

Fares are dependent on availability and seasonality – as a general rule, prices are the highest in summer, and you can save a considerable amount of money if you book two weeks prior to your flight. Flights to the mainland range from ¥15,000 to ¥40,000 while inter-island flights are typically ¥10,000 to ¥20,000.

Boat

Long-distance ferries to/from Miyako-jima (¥1890, five hours) and Naha (¥5350, 14 hours) depart/arrive at a terminal west of the harbour (a 15-minute walk along the waterfront). The Okinawa–Taiwan ferry also operates via Ishigaki (see p756 for details). Note that these services are not daily, and travel times vary depending on the season and the weather. Ferries are culled in the winter months and cut out completely at the first sign of bad weather. Telephone **Arimura Sangyō** (☎ 098-860-1980) or **Ryūkyū Kaiun** (☎ 098-868-1126) for the weekly schedules.

Ishigaki-jima is also the centre for all the Yaeyama-shotō ferries, and its small boat harbour south of the city centre is a real hive of activity. The two main ferry operators are **Yaeyama Kankō** (☎ 82-5010) and **Anei Kankō** (☎ 83-0055).

GETTING AROUND

The bus station is across the road from the harbour in Ishigaki City. There are hourly buses to the airport (¥200, 15 minutes) as well as a few daily buses to Kabira-wan (¥580, 40 minutes), Yonehara Beach (¥720, one hour) and Shiraho (¥350, 30 minutes).

Rental cars, scooters and bicycles are readily available at shops throughout the city centre. If you're comfortable on a scooter, it's a scenic four- to five-hour cruise around the island, though you should plan for longer if you want to spend some time relaxing on the island's beaches.

Iriomote-jima 西表島

☎ 0980 / pop 2000

Although it's just 20km west of Ishigaki-jima, Iriomote-jima could easily qualify as Japan's last frontier. Dense jungles and mangrove forest blanket more than 90% of the island, and are home to a variety of exotic wildlife including the rare *yamaneko*, a nocturnal and rarely seen wildcat.

Needless to say, Iriomote-jima is the perfect destination for outdoor enthusiasts, and the island's rugged cross-island trail is one of the most rewarding (and difficult) treks in the Nansei-shotō. The island is also criss-crossed by a series of muddy rivers (which wouldn't look at all out of place in the Amazon). They're easily explored by river boat or kayak. Add to the mix sun-drenched beaches and spectacular diving, and it's easy to see why Iriomote-jima is one of the most popular destinations in the Nansei-shotō for domestic travellers.

In true Japanese fashion, Iriomote-jima plays host to countless day-trippers from Ishigaki-jima, though few people stay on the island long enough to fully appreciate its charms. Although half a day is enough time for a quick river trip, two or three nights on the island will give you enough time to fully explore one of the least-developed corners of the country.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Iriomote-jima has a 58km-long perimeter road that runs about halfway around the coast. No roads run into the interior, which is virtually untouched. Boats from Ishigaki-jima either dock at Funaura or Uehara on the north coast, which are closer to the main points of interest, or at Ōhara on the southeast coast.

If you arrive by ferry in Funaura, there is a small **information booth** (☎ 82-9836; ☎ 8am-8pm) inside the terminal that can help you book accommodation.

SIGHTS

Most travellers to Iriomote-jima are too busy indulging in outdoor pursuits to go sightseeing, though there are a few interesting spots on the island as well as an impressive collection of tropical beaches.

Beaches

The majority of the island's beaches are rocky and have shallow waters, though they are im-

possibly scenic and nearly always abandoned. If you are hoping to swim, **Tsuki-ga-hama** (Moon Beach; Map pp770-1) is a crescent-shaped yellow-sand beach at the mouth of the Urauchi-gama on the north coast.

If you're looking to do a bit of snorkelling, head to **Hoshisuna-no-hama** (Star Sand Beach; Map pp770-1) on the northwestern tip of the island. The beach is named after its star sand, which actually consists of the dried skeletons of tiny creatures.

From **Shirahama** (白浜), at the western end of the north coast road, there are four daily boats to the end-of-the-line settlement of **Funauki** (船浮; ¥410). Once there, it's a mere 10-minute walk on to the gorgeous **Ida-no-hama** (Map pp770-1), which pretty much meets all expectations of a picture-perfect tropical beach.

If you want to have a sandy beach to yourself, head to **Haemita-no-hama** (Map pp770-1), at the extreme western end of the south coast road. The beach wraps around the coast for kilometres on end, and consists of yellow sand strewn with massive boulders. On a clear day, you can see the island of Hateruma-jima (p781) to the south.

Other Sights

If outdoor activities are rained out, a good back-up plan is the **Iriomote Onsen** (Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-5700; admission ¥1500; ☎ 10am-10pm), on the east coast of the island. The *onsen* consists of sex-separated indoor and outdoor baths, a sauna, a mixed *rotemburo* (outdoor baths) and a pool. The grounds are attractively landscaped, and there are nice views of the nearby jungle-clad mountains.

Further south on the coastal road, carts drawn by water buffalo roll through the shallow shoreline over to **Yufu-jima** (由布島; Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-5470; cart ride & park admission ¥1300; ☎ 9am-5pm), a small islet with an excellent botanical garden.

ACTIVITIES

Whether your passion is boating, hiking or diving, chances are you'll find what you're looking for on Iriomote-jima.

River Trips

Iriomote's number one attraction is a trip up the **Urauchi-gawa** (浦内川), a winding brown river that is reminiscent of a tiny stretch of the Amazon. From the mouth of the river, **Urauchi-gawa Kankō** (☎ 85-6154) offers river tours (¥1500,

LEARNING THE LINGO

Feeling a little tongue-tied? The following glossary will have you speaking like a local diver in no time:

Getting Started

I'd like to...	...shitai no desu ga.	...したいのですが。
...go diving.	daibingu o...	ダイビングを...
...explore caves.	kēbu o tanken...	ケーブを探検...
...explore wrecks.	chimbotsusen o tanken...	沈没船を探検...
...go night diving.	naito daibingu o...	ナイトダイビングを...
...go snorkelling.	shunōkeringu o...	シュノーケリングを...
...join a diving tour.	tsuā ni sankā...	ツアーに参加...
...learn to dive.	daibingu o shūtoku...	ダイビングを習得...

Equipment Rental

I want to hire (a)...	...o rentaru shitai no desu ga.	...をレンタルしたいのですが。
...diving equipment.	daibinguyōgu...	ダイビング用具...
...regulator.	regurētā...	レギュレーター...
...buoyancy vest.	Bishidī...	BCD...
...tank.	tanku...	タンク...
...weight belt.	wētoberuto...	ウェイトベルト...
...wetsuit.	wettosūtsu...	ウェットスーツ...
...mask.	masku...	マスク...
...flippers.	fin...	フィン...
...snorkel.	shunōkeru...	シュノーケル...
What is your weight?	taijū wa nan kiro desu ka?	体重は何キロですか。
What is your height?	shinchū wa nan senchi desu ka?	身長は何センチですか。
What is your shoe size?	kutsu no saizu ha ikutsu desu ka?	くつのサイズはいくつですか。
I need an air fill.	tanku jūten ga hitsuyō desu.	タンク充填が必要です。

On the Boat

Is the visibility good?	shikai wa idesu ka?	視界はいいですか。
How deep is the dive?	fukasa wa dono kurai desu ka?	深さはどのくらいですか。
Are there currents?	kairyū ga arimasu ka?	海流がありますか。
Are there...	...ga imasu ka?	...がいますか。
dolphins?	iruka...	イルカ...
sharks?	same...	サメ...
whales?	kujira...	クジラ...
turtles?	umigame...	ウミガメ...
manta rays?	oniitomakie...	オニイトマキエイ...
moray eels?	utsubo...	ウツボ...
garden eels?	chananago	チンアナゴ...
octopuses?	tako...	タコ...
lion fish?	minokasago...	ミノカサゴ...
clown fish?	kumanomi...	クマノミ...

three hours), which include a stop at the nearby waterfalls, **Mariyudō-no-taki** (マリユドウの滝; Map pp770-1) and **Kampirē-no-taki** (カンピレーの滝; Map pp770-1). Here, you can hike around the base of the falls, and take a refreshing dip in a number of swimming holes.

From close to the Ōhara docks it is also possible to take cruises with **Tōbū Kōtsū** (☎ 85-5304; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) up Iriomote's second-largest river, the **Nakama-gawa** (仲間川). The one-hour tour (¥1260) passes through lush mangroves and thick vegetation, and is much

less touristy (and a bit more relaxing) than the Urauchi-gawa excursion.

If you're the independent type, you can rent kayaks and canoes (¥4000 per day) near both departure points for the river tours.

Hiking

There are some great walks in Iriomote-jima's jungle-clad interior, though it's best to seek local advice before setting out.

An excellent topographic map of the island is the *Yama-to-Kougen-no-Chizu-Iriomote-jima* (山と高原の地図西表島; ¥840), which is available at most major bookstores.

Pinaisāra-no-taki (ピナイサーラの滝; Map pp770-1) is Okinawa's highest waterfall. On the hills behind the lagoon, it is visible from boats coming into Funaura. When the tide is right, you can paddle a kayak across the shallow lagoon, and then follow the river up to the base of the falls. A path branches off and climbs to the top of the falls, from where there are superb views down to the coast. The walk takes less than two hours, and the falls are great for a cooling dip.

Just past Kampirē-no-taki, which is located at the end of the Urauchi-gawa trip, is the trailhead for the challenging **cross-island walking track**, which cuts through the island's interior to Ōhara in the south. The 18km hike takes a full day, though it can be tricky to find your way as past trekkers have inadvertently created a confusing network of false trails.

All you need to know about exploring Iriomote-jima on foot is found in Lonely Planet's *Hiking in Japan*.

Diving

For a quick crash course on scuba diving in Okinawa and the Southwest Islands, see boxed text (p739).

Although Iriomote-jima is not as developed for diving as nearby Ishigaki-jima, there is no shortage of dive sites including the famous **Manta Way**. Located in the straits between Iriomote-jima and Kohama-jima, Manta Way is home to large schools of manta rays, especially in late spring and early summer. Another popular spot is the hard coral reef at **Hatoma Burasu**, between Iriomote-jima and Hatoma-jima, where divers can see lion fish, squid, clown fish and moray eels.

A recommended dive operator is **Diving Public Hoshisuna** (Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-6488), which is run out of the Pension Hoshi-no-Suna and

can pick you up from your accommodation if you phone ahead.

SLEEPING

Iriomote-jima's accommodation is spread out around the island, so it's best to phone ahead and make a reservation before arriving on the island. Most places will send a car to pick you up from the ferry terminal if you let them know what time you will be arriving.

If you're looking to save a few thousand yen, there are free camping grounds with basic facilities at Hoshisuna-no-hama, Haemita-no-hama and close to the ferry terminal in Funaura.

Irumote-sō Youth Hostel (Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-6255; www.ishigaki.com/irumote in Japanese; dm ¥3000; (P) (B) (Q)) A top choice is this impeccably run youth hostel, which has a stunning hilltop location overlooking the Funaura port. Accommodation is in comfortable Western-style dorms with shared facilities, and guests can take advantage of the communal kitchens and chill-out lounges. Meals are also available. To reach the hostel, follow the uphill road from the Funaura ferry for a few hundred metres (look for the English signs).

Midori-sō Youth Hostel (Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-6526; www.yasigani.net/yado/midori/midori.htm in Japanese; dm ¥3000; (P) (B) (Q)) Midori-sō, 200m south of Uehara port, lacks the personality of the Irumote-sō, but it's hard to beat its central location. It's still a relaxed place where you can easily meet other backpackers, and has basic but adequate Western-style dorms, share communal facilities and a small kitchen.

our pick Pension Hoshi-no-Suna (Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-6448; www.making.com/hoshinosuna/in Japanese; r per person with/without meals ¥5500/4000; (P) (B) (Q)) With hilltop views of Hoshisuna-no-hama, this welcoming pension is a superb choice if you don't mind being a little far from the ferry port. Western- and Japanese-style accommodation is available in a series of cute beachside bungalows complete with private en-suite facilities. There is also a small on-site bar and restaurant that is perfect for a sundowner as well as a small gift shop and a dive shop.

Nature Hotel Painu Maya Resort (Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-5700; fax 85-5099; d from ¥14,500; (P) (B) (Q) (R)) If you're looking for a splurge, this tasteful resort is a good option, emphasising natural materials over concrete (a rarity in Japan). Spacious Western-style rooms are bright and airy, and guests can take advantage of the on-site

swimming pool, *onsen* and bar-restaurant. The hotel is on the northeast corner of the island.

EATING

With few restaurants on the island, most travellers prefer to take meals at their accommodation (or self-cater). However, there are a few notable spots worth checking out. If you can read Japanese, the free *Yaeyama Navi* (やえやまナビ) magazine has listings of local favourites.

Shinpachi Shokudō (新八食堂; Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-6078; (P) lunch & dinner) Just 200m south of the port in Uehara (look for the red banners outside), this no-frills noodle shop is the perfect spot for a hot bowl of *sōki soba* (¥550).

Nangoku (Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-5253; (P) 11am-9pm) Opposite the Midori-sō Youth Hostel in Uehara port (look for the red banners outside), Nangoku specialises in Okinawan fare. The *champurū* (stir-fry) for ¥650 is filling, though if you feel like splashing out, you can't go wrong with the *inoshishi teishoku* (wild pigmeat set) for ¥1800.

Deigo (Map pp770-1; ☎ 85-5477; (P) 11am-9pm) Just past the Eneos gas station in Ōhara (look for the English sign) is this adorable bistro, run by a friendly young couple. There's no shortage of delicious local dishes, though our recommendation is a bowl of *ika-sumi-soba* (¥700), delicious squid ink-flavoured noodles.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Yaeyama Kankō (☎ 82-5010) and **Anei Kankō** (☎ 83-0055) run ferries to Ōhara (¥1540, 35 minutes), Uehara (¥2000, 40 minutes) and Funaura (¥2000, 40 minutes) from Ishigaki-jima. Although there are several ferries per day to each of the ports, frequency is dependent on the season and the weather.

A few buses each day run between Ōhara and Shirahama (¥1040, 1½ hours), though it's probably worth renting your own set of wheels. Fortunately, there are plenty of rental agencies near each set of ports. The island's youth hostels also rent out bicycles, motor scooters and cars to guests. With plenty of alternative lifestyles on the island, your thumb is also a quick and easy way of getting around.

Taketomi-jima 竹富島

☎ 0980 / pop 300

A mere 10-minute boat ride from Ishigaki-jima, the tiny islet of Taketomi-jima is a 'living

museum' of Ryūkyū culture. Centred on a flower-bedecked village of traditional houses complete with red *kawara* (tiled) roofs, coral walls and *shiisa* (lion-dog rooftop guardian) statues, Taketomi is a breath of fresh air if you're sick of concrete.

In order to preserve the island's historic ambience, residents (one-third of whom are over 70 years old) have joined together to ban signs of modernism such as asphalt. As a result, the island is criss crossed by a series of crushed-coral roads that are ideally explored by the humble push bike. Taketomi is also refreshingly free of other eye-sores such as the ubiquitous convenience store, though there are plenty of adorable 'Mom & Pop' shops scattered around the island.

TAKETOMI-JIMA

0 500 m
0 0.3 miles

INFORMATION

Taketomi Post Office 竹富郵便局 1 B2

Yugafu-kan 竹富ゆがふ館 2 B1

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Kiōhin Shushūkan 喜宝院蒐集館 3 A2

Nagomi-no-dai なごみの台 4 A2

Nishitō Utaki 西塔御塚 5 B2

Taketomi Mingei-kan 竹富民芸館 6 B1

SLEEPING (P)

Minshuku Izumiya 民宿泉屋 7 A1

Ohama-sō 大浜荘 8 B2

Takana Ryokan 高那旅館 9 B2

EATING (P)

Painu-jima ばいぬ島 10 B1

Shinmenabi しんめなび 11 A2

TRANSPORT

Maruhachi Rentals 丸八レンタサイクル 12 B2

Taketomi Port 竹富港 13 B1

Water Buffalo Rides 水牛車乗り場 14 A2

Taketomi-jima is besieged by Japanese day-trippers in the busy summer months, though the island is blissfully quiet at night. If you have the chance, it's worth spending a night here as Taketomi truly weaves its spell after the sun dips below the horizon.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Ferries arrive at the small port (竹富港) on the northeast corner of the island, while Taketomi village is located in the centre. Only 7km long and 2km wide, Taketomi-jima is easily explored on foot or by bicycle.

There's a small **information desk** (☎ 8am-5pm) in the port building, but for the full scoop on Taketomi-jima, head next door to the **Yugafukan** (竹富ゆがふ館; ☎ 85-2488; ☎ 8am-5pm) visitor centre, which has excellent displays and exhibits on the island.

SIGHTS

There are a number of modest sights in Taketomi cillage, though the main attraction here is simply wandering around and soaking up the ambience. On this otherwise pancake-flat island, the ladder-like lookout, **Nagomi-no-dai** (なごみの台) has good views over the red-tiled roofs. **Nishitō Utaki** (西塘御獄) is a shrine dedicated to a 16th-century ruler of the Yaeyama-shotō who was born on Taketomi-jima. **Kihōin Shūshūkan** (喜宝院蒐集館; ☎ 85-2202; admission ¥300; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a private museum with a diverse collection of folk artefacts. **Taketomi Mingei-kan** (竹富民芸館; ☎ 85-2302; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm) is where the island's woven *minsā* belts and other textiles are produced – the *minsā* fabrics used to be woven by young women as a sign of love.

Taketomi-jima is also heaven for beach lovers, especially since the island is virtually free of the tacky shops and restaurants that plague other Okinawan destinations. Most of the island is fringed with beach, and although the water is very shallow, Taketomi is a great place to bring your snorkelling gear. At **Kondoi Beach** (コンドイビーチ) on the west coast, you'll find the best swimming on the island. Just south is **Gaiji-hama** (カイジ浜), which is the main *hoshi-suna* (star sand) hunting ground. Although you are requested not to souvenir more than a few grains (which are actually the dried skeletons of tiny creatures), it's sold in bulk at local shops.

SLEEPING & EATING

Many of the traditional houses around the island are Japanese-style ryokan that serve

traditional Okinawan cuisine. However, don't turn up on the last ferry expecting to find accommodation. Taketomi fills up quickly, so be sure to book ahead.

Takana Ryokan (高那旅館; ☎ 85-2151; www.kit-hi-ho.ne.jp/hayasaka-my/in/Japanese; dm with/without meals ¥3880/2600, r per person with meals ¥8500; ♿) Opposite the tiny post office, Takana actually consists of a basic youth hostel and an attached upmarket ryokan. Basic Western-style dorms in the youth hostel are a great option if you're on a budget, though the charming Japanese-style tatami rooms in the ryokan are a romantic choice if you're travelling with a loved one.

Ōhama-sō (大浜荘; ☎ 85-2226; fax 85-2226; r per person with/without meals ¥5500/3500; ♿) Also beside the post office, this family-run *minshuku* has a light and jovial atmosphere, especially when the owner starts to entertain on the *sanshin* after dinner. Accommodation is in simple yet comfortable Japanese-style tatami rooms with shared facilities.

Minshuku Izumiya (民宿泉屋; ☎ 85-2250; www.wbs.ne.jp/bt/matsuzaki/yado/izumiya.htm in Japanese; r per person with/without meals ¥5500/3500; ♿) On the northwest edge of the village, this intimate *minshuku* is centred on a stunning traditional garden. Japanese-style tatami rooms with shared facilities are inviting, though ask the owners if it's possible to stay in the nearby thatched house.

Painu-jima (ぱいぬ島; ☎ 85-2505; ☎ 10am-6pm) Opposite the Taketomi Mingei-kan (look for the red banners), this dinky little noodle house serves excellent *shima-soba* (Okinawan-style noodles) for ¥550.

Shinmenābi (しんめななあび; ☎ 85-2772; ☎ 11am-11pm) Located near the western edge of the village, this laid-back *izakaya* (look for the white lanterns) serves up hot and steamy bowls of tasty *rafute* (¥650), a traditional Okinawan pork stew.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Yaeyama Kankō (☎ 82-5010) and **Anei Kankō** (☎ 83-0055) run fast, frequent ferries from Ishigaki-jima (round trip ¥1100, 10 minutes, every 15 minutes).

Rental bicycles are great for exploring the crushed-coral roads. **Maruhachi Rentals** (丸八レンタサイクル; ☎ 85-2260; ☎ 8am-6pm) has bicycles for ¥300 per hour and runs a free shuttle between its shop and the port. For Japanese visitors, a popular method of seeing the island is by taking a tour (¥1000, 30 minutes) in a

cart drawn by **water buffalo** (水牛車乗り場; ☎ 85-2103; ☎ 8.30am-5pm).

Hateruma-jima 波照間島

☎ 0980 / pop 600

Sixty kilometres south of Iriomote-jima is the tiny islet of Hateruma-jima, Japan's southernmost piece of inhabited real estate. Just 15km around, Hateruma-jima has some stunning contrasts in geographical features, and is an increasingly popular destination for Japanese travellers who really want to get away from it all.

Ferries arrive at the small port on the north-west corner of the island, while Hateruma village is in the centre. Slightly larger than Taketomi-jima, Hateruma-jima is easily explored by bicycle or scooter. There's a small **information desk** (☎ 8am-5pm) in the port building and in the airport that can help you find accommodation on the island.

A few minutes' bicycle ride west of the port on the northwest coast is **Nishihama** (ニシ浜), a perfect beach of snow-white sand where it is fairly easy to while away a day in the sun. Here, you will find free public showers, toilets and a camping ground. In the opposite southeast corner of the island, directly south of the airport, is the impressive **Takanasaki** (高那崎), a 1km-long cliff of Ryūkyū limestone that is pounded by the Pacific Ocean. At the western end of the cliffs is a small monument marking **Japan's southernmost point** (日本最南端の碑), which is an extremely popular photo spot for Japanese visitors.

Although there's no shortage of family-run accommodation on the island, an excellent choice is the popular **Minshuku Minoru-sō** (民宿みのる荘; ☎ 85-8438; http://park14.wakwak.com/~minoruso/in/Japanese; r per person with/without meals ¥5000/2500; ♿) near the town centre. The friendly owners rent out bicycles, scooters and snorkelling gear, and can also arrange a boat for troll fishing (from ¥50,000). Accommodation is in cosy Japanese-style tatami rooms, accented with traditional fixtures. If you make a reservation, the owners can pick you up from the ferry port.

Ryūkyū Air Commuter (RAC) has one flight a day from Ishigaki to Hateruma-jima (from ¥6500, 25 minutes). Ferries run by **Anei Kankō** (☎ 83-0055) and **Hateruma Kaiun** (☎ 82-7233) each have three ferries a day to Hateruma-jima from Ishigaki (¥3000 and ¥3050 respectively, one hour). There is no

public transport on the island, but rental bicycles and scooters are readily available for hire.

Yonaguni-jima 与那国島

☎ 0980 / pop 1800

About 125km west of Ishigaki and 110km east of Taiwan is the islet of Yonaguni-jima, Japan's westernmost piece of inhabited real estate. Although Yonaguni is about as far-flung as you can imagine in Japan, the island is incredibly popular with domestic travellers. Renowned for its strong sake, small horses and marlin fishing, the island is also home to the jumbo-sized 'Yonaguni atlas moth', the largest moth in the world.

However, it's what lies beneath the waters around Yonaguni that continues to lure travellers to the island in droves. Following the discovery of deep water ocean ruins by divers in 1985, Yonaguni was firmly put on the map as one of Okinawa's best diving destinations. Of course, seasoned scuba vets have always known about Yonaguni, especially since the waters around the island are a favourite haunt of hammerhead sharks.

Yonaguni used to be known as *Dunan*, meaning 'hard to reach' – it's still not an easy place to get to, though you'll certainly be rewarded for your time and effort.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The ferry port of Kubura (久部良) is at the island's western extreme, with the airport between it and the main township at the port of Sonai (租内) on the north coast.

There are small **information desks** (☎ 8am-5pm) in both the port building and the airport, which can help you find accommodation. For more information on the island, check out www.town.yonaguni.okinawa.jp (in Japanese).

SIGHTS

Just as Hateruma-jima has a monument to mark Japan's southernmost point, Yonaguni-jima has a rock (from Taiwan!) to mark the country's **westernmost point** (日本最西端の碑) at **Irizaki** (西崎). If the weather is perfect, the mountains of Taiwan are visible far over the sea, and the country's last sunset of the day is always a beautiful sight.

Yonaguni has an extremely rugged landscape, and the coastline is marked with great rock formations, much like those on the east

coast of Taiwan. The most famous of these are **Tachigami-iwa** (立神岩), literally Standing-God Rock, **Gunkan-iwa** (軍艦岩) and **Sanninu-dai** (サンニヌ台) on the east coast. At the eastern tip of the island, Yonaguni horses graze in the pastures leading out to the lighthouse at **Agarizaki** (東崎).

The giant moths, which have a wingspan of 25cm to 30cm and are affectionately known as *Yonaguni-san*, can be seen at **Ayamihabirukan** (アヤマヒビル館; ☎ 87-2440; admission ¥500; 🕒 10am-4pm Wed-Sun), just south of Sonai.

If you want to sample Hanazake, the island's infamous local brew, head to one of the island's three factories in Sonai. **Irinamihira Shuzō** (いりなみひら酒造; ☎ 87-2431; 🕒 8.30am-5.30pm), **Sakamoto Shuzō** (坂本酒造; ☎ 87-2417; 🕒 8am-5pm) and **Kokusen Awamori** (国選泡盛; ☎ 87-2315; 🕒 8am-5pm) are bunched together in Sonai, and each offers free tastings and sales on site.

ACTIVITIES

Diving

Washed by the rich Kuroshio Current, the seas around Yonaguni-jima are perfectly suited to diving. For a quick crash course on scuba diving in Okinawa and the Southwest Islands, see boxed text (p739).

Local divers have long known about the thrills that await at **Irizaki Point** (西崎ポイント), off the coast of Cape Irizaki. In the winter months, the deep waters here are frequented by large schools of hammerhead sharks. Despite their ferocious appearance and ill-repute, hammerheads are docile and shy when confronted by divers. Although it's fairly safe to jump in the water here, you will need to summon up the courage to not completely lose your cool, especially since hammerheads can reach sizes of nearly 6m.

The most popular dive spot near Yonaguni is the **underwater ruins** (廃墟), which were discovered by chance in 1985 by the Japanese marine explorer, Kihachirou Aratake. According to a group of scientists from the University of the Ryūkyūs in Naha, vestiges of the ruins are comparable to the pyramids of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mexico and Peru. In fact, several analyses also indicate that one of the structures is nearly 8000 years old, which would go against the accepted chronological history of humanity.

Numerous archaeologists, including John Anthony West and Robert Schoch, argue that

the ruins could be largely explicable by ocean erosion and coral reef settlements. Geologists familiar with the area maintain that the structures are mere geologic processes of natural origin, and are consistent with other known geological formations. Whether you believe that the ruins are remnants of the legendary ancient civilisations of Mu or merely a peculiar underwater rock formation, they are still one of the most unusual dive spots you're bound to come across.

There are numerous dive operators on the island, though most people choose to book through their accommodation. One recommended shop is **Yonaguni Diving Service** (与那国ダイビングサービス; ☎ 87-2658; www2.icb.ne.jp/~yds), which is run in conjunction with the Minshuku Yoshimarusō (below).

Fishing

In addition to diving, the seas off Yonaguni are also renowned for **marlin fishing**, and the All-Japan Billfish Tournament is held here each year in June or July. If you're interested in trolling, boats in Kubura can be chartered from ¥50,000 a day – call the **Yonaguni Fishing Co-operative** (☎ 87-2803 in Japanese) for information.

SLEEPING & EATING

Although there are several sleeping options around the island, it's best to phone ahead as Yonaguni is quite a distance to travel without a reservation. The following places will pick you up at either the airport or the ferry terminal.

Minshuku Yoshimarusō (民宿よしまる荘; ☎ 87-2658; www.yonaguniyds.com/html/1p/yosimaru/yosimaru.htm in Japanese; r per person with meals ¥5500; 🍷) Near the ferry terminal in Kubura, Yoshimarusō is ideal for divers, as the friendly owners also operate the on-site Yonaguni Diving Service (above). Simple Japanese-style tatami rooms with shared facilities have nice views of the nearby port, though the real appeal of this *minshuku* is the owners' local diving expertise.

Hotel Irifune (ホテル入船; ☎ 87-2311; www.yonaguni.jp in Japanese; r per person with meals ¥6000; 🍷) If you want to be a little closer to the action in Sonai, this simple business hotel is located near the main post office. Irifune offers fairly standard Japanese- and Western-style rooms, though it's a good option if you're looking for a little bit of privacy.

Fujimi Ryokan (ふじみ旅館; ☎ 87-2143; fax 87-2956; r per person with meals ¥6500; 🍷) One block inland from the Hotel Irifune in Sonai, this intimate ryokan is a good choice if you're looking for more traditional accommodation. Attractive Japanese-style tatami rooms are decorated with local crafts, and the welcoming owners definitely know how to serve a feast.

Hate (はて; ☎ 87-3255; 🕒 11.30am-11pm) Five blocks west of Sonai's only traffic light (look for the bright lanterns outside), this unpretentious *izakaya* is the perfect spot for *nama-birru* (tap beer; ¥450) and *sashimi* (¥500) after diving.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

RAC has two flights a day to Yonaguni-jima from Naha (from ¥20,000, 1½ hours) and two flights a day from Ishigaki (from ¥10,000, 30 minutes).

Fukuyama Kaiun (☎ 87-2555) operates two ferries a week from Ishigaki to Kubura port (¥3460, four hours).

There are public buses and taxis on Yonaguni-jima, though the best way to get around the island is by rental car or scooter. **Yonaguni Honda** (☎ 87-2376) in central Sonai will send a car to meet you at the airport or the ferry terminal if you phone ahead.

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