

# EXCURSIONS

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Kyoto is located in the centre of Japan's Kansai region, which is the cultural heartland of Japan. The Japanese nation was literally born in Kansai and much of its history played out here. Thus, it's hardly surprising that Kyoto is surrounded by some of Japan's most important and interesting sights.

Less than an hour away by train lies Nara, Japan's first permanent capital. Here you'll find a wonderful collection of sights packed into the green expanse of Nara-kōen, a park where hundreds of deer roam free. It's easily the most rewarding day trip out of Kyoto.

Always less than an hour from Kyoto by train, Osaka is a great place to sample the Japanese urban experience – if you're not going to Tokyo, you'll want to spend a day and evening here soaking up the *Blade Runner* ambience.

Another half an hour down the same train line, the cosmopolitan seaside city of Kobe offers pleasant strolling and excellent international food.

Continuing west past Kobe for an hour or so brings you to Himeji, home to Japan's most magnificent castle; it's an absolute must for fans of samurai epics and those with kids in tow.

Finally, if you crave a bit of country Japan, the rural vistas and thatch-roofed houses of Miyama-chō are a great way to take a break from the city.

## NARA

☎ 0742

If it weren't for the incredible riches of Kyoto so close by, Nara might be considered Japan's top destination. The first permanent capital of Japan, Nara is the stage on which the opening act of Japan's imperial drama was played out. It is much smaller than Kyoto and most of the sights are located in Nara-kōen, which can easily be explored on foot. Leading the list, which includes no fewer than eight Unesco World Heritage sites, are Tōdai-ji, with its awesome *daibutsu* (Great Buddha), and Kasuga Taisha, a sprawling shrine hidden amid deep forest.

Nara's two main train stations, JR Nara Station and Kintetsu Nara Station, are roughly in the middle of the city. Nara-kōen is on the east side against the bare flank of a mountain called Wakakusa-yama. Most of the other sights are southwest of the city and are best reached by buses that leave from both train stations (or by train in the case of Hōryū-ji). It's easy to cover the city centre and the major attractions in nearby Nara-kōen on foot, though some visitors may prefer to rent a bicycle (see p160).

## Nara-kōen Area

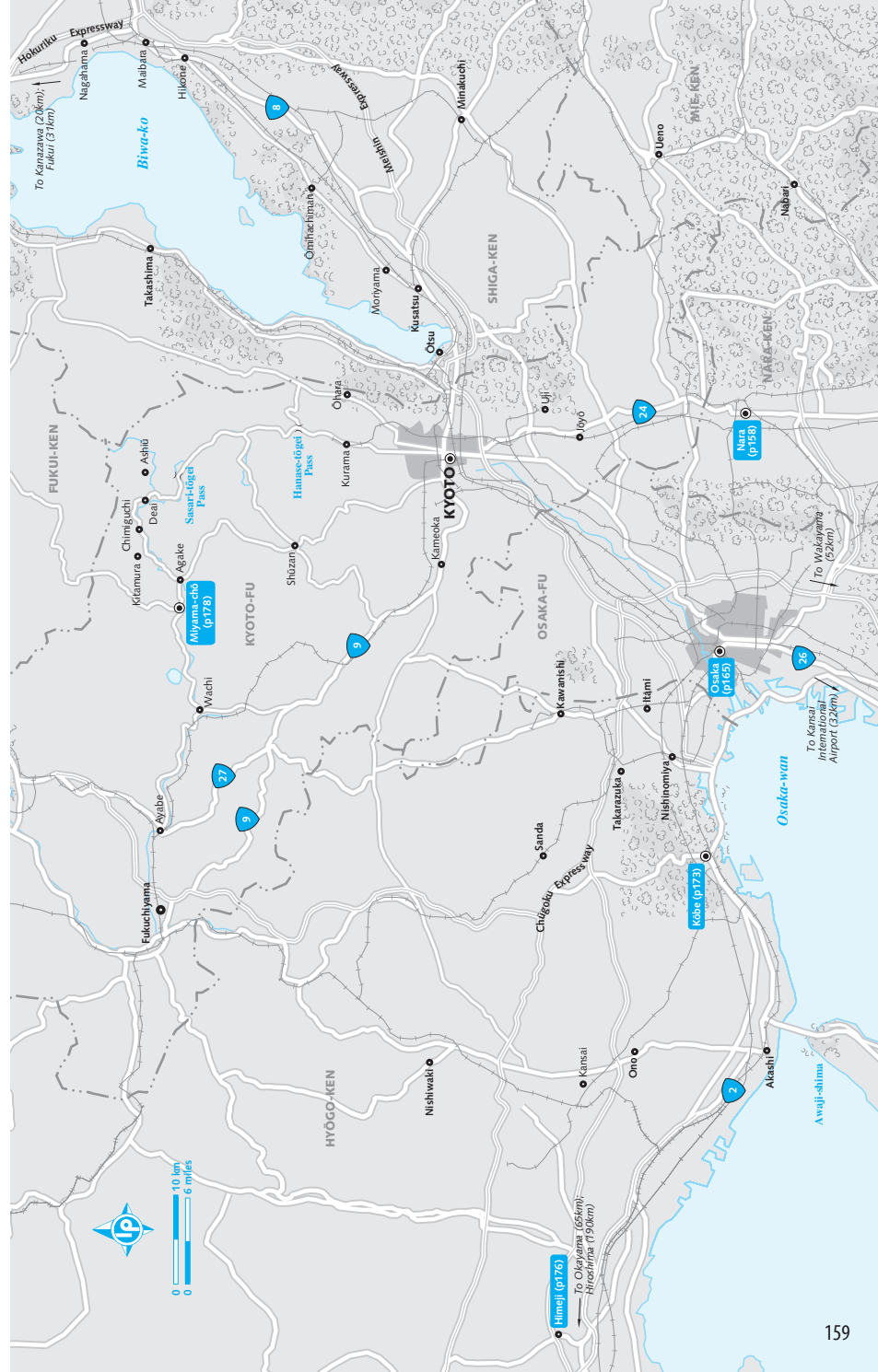
Nara's most important sights are located in Nara-kōen, a sprawling park that covers much of the east side of the city. Created from wasteland in 1880, the park covers a large area at the foot of Wakakusa-yama. The Japan National

Tourist Organization (JNTO) leaflet *Walking Tour Courses in Nara* (also available at the Kyoto TIC; see p199) includes a map for this area. Although walking time is estimated at two hours, you'll need at least half a day to see a selection of the sights and a full day to see the lot.

The park is home to about 1200 deer, which in old times were considered to be messengers of the gods and today enjoy the status of national treasures. They roam the park and surrounding areas in search of hand-outs from tourists. You can buy special biscuits called *shika-sembi* (¥150) from vendors to feed the deer (don't eat them yourself, as we saw one misguided foreign tourist doing).

Nara's main attraction – and a must-see for any visitor to the city – is **Tōdai-ji** (☎ 22-5511; Zōshi-chō 406-1; 🕒 8am-4.30pm Nov-Feb, to 5pm Mar, 7.30am-5.30pm Apr-Sep, 7.30am-5pm Oct), a huge temple complex on the north side of Nara-kōen. On your way to the temple you'll pass through the **Nandai-mon**, which contains two fierce-looking Niō guardians. The gate's recently restored wooden images, carved in the 13th century by the sculptor Unkei, are some of the finest wooden statues in all of Japan, if not the world. These truly dramatic works of art seem ready to spring to life at any moment.

Tōdai-ji's **Daibutsu-den** (Hall of the Great Buddha; admission ¥500) is the largest wooden building in the world. Unbelievably, the present structure, rebuilt in 1709, is a mere two-thirds the size of the original! The *daibutsu* (Great Buddha) contained within is one of the largest



## TRANSPORT: NARA

### Getting There

Distance from Kyoto 37km

Direction South

**Train** Unless you have a Japan Rail Pass (see p188), the best option is the Kintetsu line (sometimes written in English as the Kinki Nippon railway), which links Kyoto (Kintetsu Kyoto Station) and Nara (Kintetsu Nara Station). Take either a *tokkyū* (direct limited express train; ¥1110, 33 minutes) or *kyūkō* (ordinary express train; ¥610, 40 minutes). The latter may require a change at Saidai-ji. Kintetsu Kyoto Station is on the southwest corner of the main Kyoto Station building; go to the south side of the station – the *shinkansen* (bullet train) side – and follow the signs. The JR Nara line also connects Kyoto Station with JR Nara Station. Your best bet is a *kaisoku* (rapid train; ¥690, 53 minutes), but departures are often few and far between.

### Getting Around

**Bus** Most of the area around Nara-kōen is covered by two circular bus routes. Bus 1 runs counter-clockwise and bus 2 runs clockwise. There's a ¥170 flat fare. You can easily see the main sights in the park on foot and use the bus as an option if you are pressed for time or tired.

**Cycle** Nara is a convenient size for getting around on a bicycle. **Eki Rent-a-Car** (☎ 26-3929; Honmachi 1-1, Sanjo; ☎ 8am-8pm) is very close to JR Nara Station and rents regular bicycles for ¥300 per day – unbelievable value. If you can't be bothered to pedal along Nara's mostly flat streets, you can opt for an electric bicycle (¥1500 per day).

bronze figures in the world and was originally cast in 746. The present statue, recast in the Edo period, stands just over 16m high and consists of 437 tonnes of bronze and 130kg of gold.

As you circle the statue, towards the back of the Buddha you'll see a wooden column with a hole through its base. Popular belief maintains that those who can squeeze through the hole, which is exactly the same size as one of the Great Buddha's nostrils, are ensured of enlightenment. It's fun to watch the kids wiggle through nimbly and the adults get wedged in like champagne corks. A hint for determined adults: it's a lot easier to go through with both arms held above your head.

From the entrance to Daibutsu-den, walk east and climb a flight of stone steps, and continue to your left to reach the following two halls. **Nigatsu-dō** (admission free) is famed for its Omizutori festival (p164) and a splendid view across Nara that makes the climb worthwhile – particularly at dusk. A short walk south of Nigatsu-dō is **Sangatsu-dō** (admission ¥500) which is the oldest building in the Tōdai-ji complex. This hall contains a small collection of fine statues from the Nara period.

About 15 minutes' walk roughly south of Sangatsu-dō is **Kasuga Taisha** (☎ 22-7788; Kasugano-chō 160; admission free; ☎ 6am-6pm), Nara's most important shrine. It was founded in the 8th century by the Fujiwara family and was com-

pletely rebuilt every 20 years according to Shintō tradition, until the end of the 19th century. It lies at the foot of the hill in a pleasant wooded setting with herds of sacred deer awaiting hand-outs.

The approaches to the shrine are lined with hundreds of lanterns and there are many more hundreds in the shrine itself. The lantern festivals held twice a year at the shrine are a major attraction (see p164), as are other festivals held at the nearby **Wakamiya-jinja** (Map p162).

Nara's most splendid garden, **Isui-en** (☎ 22-2173; Suimon-chō 74; admission incl Neiraku Art Museum ¥650; ☎ 9.30am-4pm, closed Tue), is a short walk north of Tōdai-ji. The garden dates from the Meiji era and is beautifully laid out with abundant greenery and a pond filled with ornamental carp. It's without a doubt the best garden in the city and is well worth a visit. Next to Isui-en is the **Neiraku Art Museum** (admission incl entry to Isui-en ¥650; ☎ 9.30am-4pm, closed Tue), which displays Chinese and Korean ceramics and bronzes.

Walking to or from Nara-kōen, you can't miss the soaring main pagoda of **Kōfuku-ji** (☎ 22-7755; Noborioji-chō 48; grounds free; ☎ dawn-dusk), which was transferred here from Kyoto in 710 as the main temple for the Fujiwara family. Although the original temple complex had 175 buildings, fires and destruction through power struggles have left only a dozen still standing. There are actually two

pagodas, a three-storey one dating from 1143 and a **five-storey pagoda** dating from 1426. The taller of the two pagodas is the second tallest in Japan, outclassed by the one at Kyoto's Tō-ji by only a few centimetres. In the grounds of the temple, **Kōfuku-ji National Treasure Hall** (Kokuho-kan; admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-4.30pm) contains a variety of statues and art objects salvaged from previous structures.

Just east of Kōfuku-ji, you'll find the **Nara National Museum** (☎ 22-7771; Noborioji-chō 50; general admission ¥500; ☎ 9am-4.30pm), which is divided into two main galleries linked by an underground passage. The western gallery exhibits archaeological finds and the eastern gallery has displays of sculptures, paintings and calligraphy. A special exhibition is held in May and the contents of the Shōsō-in hall, which holds the treasures of Tōdai-ji, are displayed here from around 21 October to 8 November (call the tourist centre to check as these dates vary slightly each year). The exhibits include priceless items from the cultures along the Silk Road. Note that entry to special exhibits costs an additional fee, usually around ¥800.

## Naramachi Area

South of Sanjō-dōri and Sarusawa-ike pond, you will find the pleasant neighbourhood of Naramachi with its many well-preserved *machiya* (traditional Japanese town houses). It's a nice place for a stroll before or after hitting the big sights of Nara-kōen and there are several good restaurants in the area to entice hungry travellers (see p164).

Highlights of Naramachi include the **Naramachi Shiryō-kan Museum** (☎ 22-5509; Nishi-shinya-chō 14; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm, closed Mon), which has a decent collection of bric-a-brac from the area, including a display of old Japanese coins and bills. A good place to check out a *machiya* is the **Naramachi Koushi-no-le** (☎ 22-4820; Gangōji-chō 44; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm, closed Mon). Also in Naramachi is the interesting **Naramachi Monogatari-kan** (☎ 26-3476; Nakanoshima-chō 2-1; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun), a small art gallery with changing displays built inside a fine old *machiya*.

## Temples Southwest of Nara City

Three of Nara's most important temples, Hōryū-ji, Yakushi-ji and Tōshōdai-ji, are located southwest of Nara, well outside the

city centre. All three can be visited in one afternoon. To get to Hōryū-ji, take the JR Kansai line from JR Nara Station to Hōryūji Station (¥210, 10 minutes). From there, bus 73 shuttles the short distance between the station and Hōryū-ji (¥170, five minutes) or you can walk there in 20 minutes. Alternatively, take bus 52, 60, 97 or 98 from either JR Nara Station or Kintetsu Nara Station and get off at the Hōryūji-mae stop (¥760, 50 minutes). From Hōryū-ji you continue by bus 52, 97 or 98 (¥560, 30 minutes) up to Yakushi-ji and Tōshōdai-ji, which are a 10-minute walk apart.

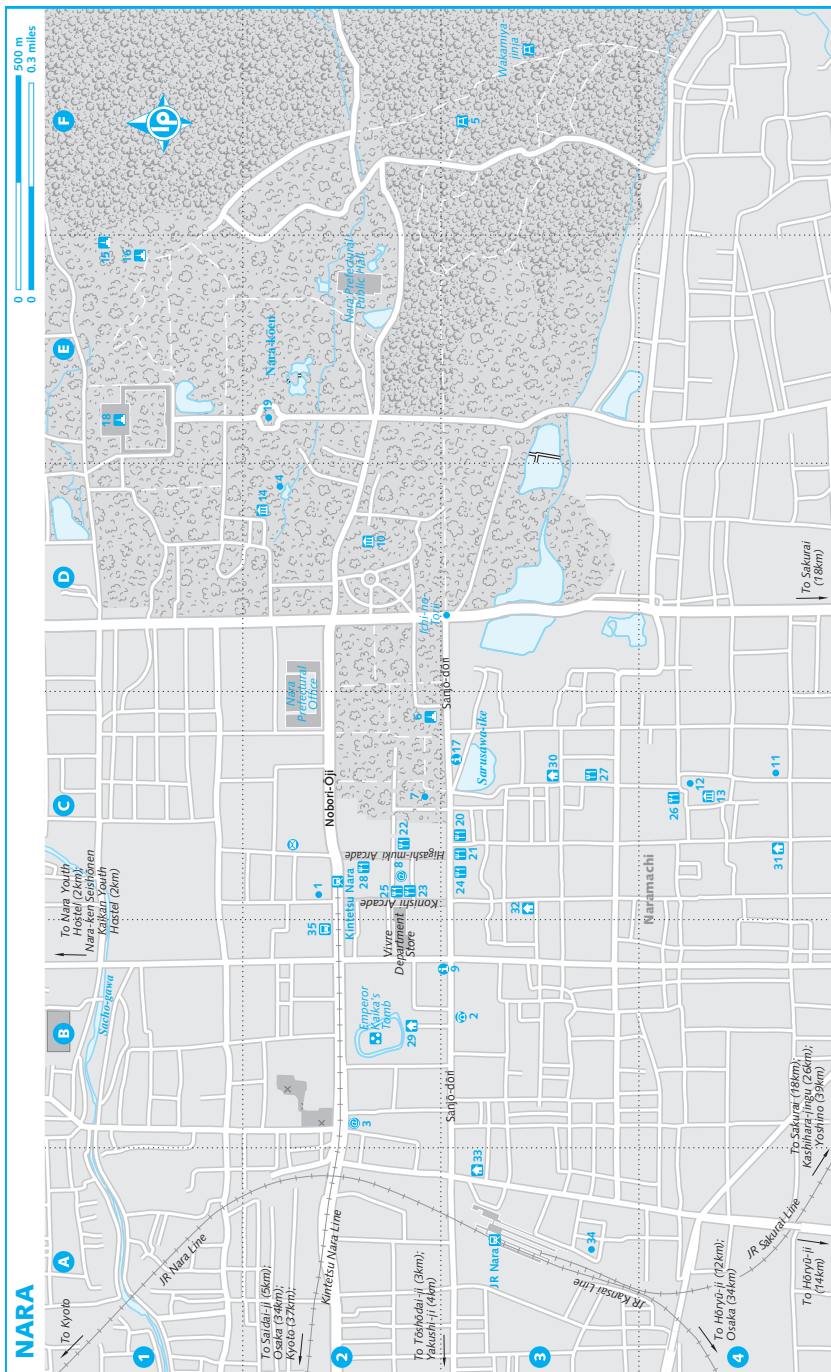
**Hōryū-ji** (法隆寺; ☎ 75-2555; Ikaruga-chō, Hōryūji-sannai 1-1; admission ¥1000; ☎ 8am-4.30pm 22 Feb-3 Nov, to 4pm 4 Nov-21 Feb) was founded in 607 by Prince Shōtoku, considered by many to be the patron saint of Japanese Buddhism. Hōryū-ji is a veritable shrine to Shōtoku and is renowned not only as the oldest temple in Japan, but also as a repository for some of the country's rarest treasures. Several of the temple's wooden buildings have survived earthquakes and fires to become the oldest of their kind in the world. The layout of the temple is divided into two parts, **Sai-in** (West Temple) and **Tō-in** (East Temple).

The entrance ticket allows admission to Sai-in, Tō-in and the Great Treasure Hall. A detailed map is provided and a guidebook is available in English and several other languages. The JNTO leaflet *Walking Tour Courses in Nara* includes a basic map for the area around Hōryū-ji.

The main approach to the temple proceeds from the south along a tree-lined avenue and continues through Nandai-mon and Chūmon, the temple's two main gates, before entering the Sai-in precinct. As you enter the Sai-in, you'll see the **Hondō** (Main Hall) on your right, and a pagoda on your left. On the eastern side of the Sai-in are the two concrete buildings of the **Daihōzō-den** (Great Treasure Hall), containing numerous treasures from Hōryū-ji's long history. If you leave this hall and continue east through the Tōdai-mon you reach the Tō-in. The **Yumedono** (Hall of Dreams) in this temple is where Prince Shōtoku is believed to have meditated and been given help with problem sutras by a kindly, golden apparition.

**Yakushi-ji** (薬師寺; ☎ 33-6001; Nishinokyō-chō 457; admission ¥500; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) was established by Emperor Tenmu in 680. With the exception of the **east pagoda**, which dates to 730, the present





## NARA

### SIGHTS & INFORMATION

- Highway Bus Tickets  
エアポートリムジン  
切符売り場 .....1 C2
- International ATM 国際 ATM .....(see 1)
- International Phone 国際電話 .....2 B3
- Internet Café Suien 水煙 .....3 B2
- Isui-en 依水園 .....4 D2
- Kasuga Taisha 春日大社 .....5 F3
- Kōfuku-ji Five-Storey Pagoda  
興福寺五重塔 .....6 C2
- Kōfuku-ji National Treasure Hall  
興福寺国宝館 .....7 C2
- Media-Café Cocoon  
メディアカフェコクーン .....8 C2
- Nara City Tourist Center  
奈良市観光センター .....9 B3
- Nara National Museum  
奈良国立博物館 .....10 D2

- Naramachi Koushi-no-ie  
ならまち資料館 .....11 C4
- Naramachi Monogatari-kan  
奈良町物語館 .....12 C4
- Naramachi Shiryō-kan Museum  
奈良町資料館 .....13 C4
- Neiraku Art Museum 寧楽美術館 .....14 D2
- Nigatsu-dō 二月堂 .....15 E1
- Sangatsu-dō 三月堂 .....16 E1
- Sarusawa Tourist Information  
Office 猿沢観光案内所 .....17 C3
- Today-ji Daibutsu-den  
東大寺大仏殿 .....18 E1
- Today-ji Nandai-mon  
東大寺南大門 .....19 E2

- Donザドン .....22 C2
- Doutor ドートル .....23 C2
- Kyōshō-An 京匠庵 .....24 C3
- Mellow Café メロウ カフェ .....25 C2
- Nonohana Ohka ののはな黄花 .....26 C4
- Tempura Asuka 天ぷら飛鳥 .....27 C3
- Tonkatsu Ganko とんかつがんこ .....28 C2

### SLEEPING

- Hotel Fujita Nara  
ホテルフジタ奈良 .....29 B2
- Ryokan Matsumae 旅館松前 .....30 C3
- Ryokan Seikan-so 旅館静観荘 .....31 C4
- Ryokan Tsubakisō 旅館椿荘 .....32 C3
- Super Hotel スーパーホテル .....33 A3

### TRANSPORT

- Eki Renta Car 駅レンタカー .....34 A3
- Local Bus Stop 市バス停 .....35 B2

### EATING

- Ayura Café アユラ カフェ .....20 C3
- Bikkuri Udōn Miyoshino  
びっくりうどん三好野 .....21 C3

buildings either date from the 13th century or are very recent reconstructions. The main hall was rebuilt in 1976 and houses several images, including the famous Yakushi Triad (the Buddha Yakushi flanked by the Bodhisattvas of the sun and moon), dating from the 8th century. Behind the east pagoda is the **Tōin-dō** (East Hall), which houses the famous Shō-Kannon image, dating from the 7th century.

**Tōshōdai-ji** (唐招提寺; ☎ 33-7900; Gojō-chō 13-46; admission ¥600; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) was established in 759 by the Chinese priest Ganjin (Jian Zhen), who had been recruited by Emperor Shōmu to reform Buddhism in Japan. Ganjin didn't have much luck with his travel arrangements from China to Japan: five attempts were thwarted by shipwreck, storms and bureaucracy. Despite being blinded by eye disease, he finally made it on the sixth attempt and spread his teachings to Japan. The lacquer sculpture in the **Miei-dō** hall is a moving tribute to Ganjin: blind and rock steady. It is shown only once a year on 6 June – the anniversary of Ganjin's death.

If you're not lucky enough to be in Nara on that day, it's still well worth visiting this temple to see the fantastic trinity of Buddhas in the **Hondō** of the temple. The centrepiece is a seated image of Rushana Buddha, which is flanked by two standing Buddha images, Yakushi-Nyorai and Senjū-Kannon.

Tōshōdai-ji is a 10-minute walk north of Yakushi-ji's north gate.

## INFORMATION

The best source of information is the **Nara City Tourist Center** (☎ 22-3900; Sanjō-dōri; ☎ 9am-

9pm). It's only a short walk from JR Nara or Kintetsu Nara Stations. There are two other information offices in Nara: the **JR Nara Station Office** (☎ 22-9821; ☎ 9am-5pm), and the **Sarusawa Tourist Information Office** (☎ 26-1991; Sanjō-dōri; ☎ 9am-5pm).

While you're at any of the tourist offices, pick up a copy of the useful *Welcome to Nara: Sightseeing Map*.

The tourist centre can put you in touch with volunteer guides who speak English and other languages, but you will have to book in advance. Two such services are the **YMCA Goodwill Guides** (☎ 45-5920; www.geocities.com/egg\_nara) and **Nara Student Guides** (☎ 26-4753; www.narastudentguide.org). Remember that the guides are volunteers so you should offer to cover the day's expenses (although most temple and museum admissions are waived for registered guides).

There is an ATM that accepts international cards on the ground floor of the building opposite Kintetsu Nara Station. In the same building you can purchase tickets for highway buses (to Tokyo etc), airport buses (to Kansai airport) and tour buses (around Nara and surrounding areas).

You'll find an international telephone located on Sanjō-dōri, in front of the NTT building.

For internet access, try the following places:

- Internet Café Suien** (☎ 22-2577; 1-58 Aburasaka-chō; per hr ¥200, per 2hr incl 1 drink ¥500; ☎ 7.30am-11pm) Inside Hotel Asyl Nara.

- Media-Café Cocoon** (☎ 27-2039; Konishi-chō 5; per hr incl drink ¥400; ☎ 11am-10pm)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Nara has plenty of festivals throughout the year. The following is a brief list of the more interesting ones. More extensive information is readily available from Nara tourist offices (see p163) or from the Kyoto Tourist Information Center (TIC; p199).

**Yamayaki** (Grass Burning Festival) To commemorate a feud many centuries ago between the monks of Tōdai-ji and Kōfuku-ji, Wakakusa-yama is set alight at 6pm on 15 January with an accompanying display of fireworks.

**Mantōrō** (Lantern Festival) Held at Kasuga Taisha at 6pm from 2 to 4 February, this festival is renowned for its illumination with 3000 stone and bronze lanterns.

**Omizutori** (Water-Drawing Ceremony) The monks of Tōdai-ji enter a special period of initiation from 1 to 14 March. On the evening of 12 March, they parade enormous flaming torches around the balcony of Nigatsu-dō (in the temple grounds) and embers rain down on the spectators to purify them. The water-drawing ceremony is performed after midnight.

**Mantōrō** (Lantern Festival) The same as the February festival but takes place on 14 and 15 August.

## EATING

Restaurants in this section are open standard hours – from 11am to 2pm and from 5pm to 10pm. Exceptions to this are noted in individual reviews.

**Ayura Café** (☎ 26-5339; Hashimoto-chō 28; set meals from ¥1000) We highly recommend this tiny café for its wonderful (mostly veggie) set lunch or a quick cuppa.

**Kyōshō-An** (☎ 27-7715; Hashimoto-chō 26-3; green tea & sweets from ¥420) An upstairs tea shop where you can enjoy green tea and a whole range of Japanese sweets.

**Mellow Café** (☎ 27-9099; Konishi-chō 1-8; lunch from ¥950) Located down a narrow alley, this open-plan café usually displays their daily lunch special for all to see.

**Bikkuri Udon Miyoshino** (☎ 22-5239; Hashimoto-chō 27; lunch & dinner from ¥650; ☎ closed Wed) A simple place that does good-value sets of typical Japanese fare. Stop by and check the daily lunch specials on display outside.

**Tempura Asuka** (☎ 26-4308; Shōnami-chō 11; lunch/dinner from ¥1575/3675; ☎ closed Mon) Tempura Asuka serves attractive sets of tempura and sashimi in a relatively casual atmosphere. At lunch time try the nicely presented *yumei-dono bentō* (lunch box containing assorted tasty tidbits such as sashimi and rice) for ¥1500.

**Don** (☎ 27-5314; Higashimukiminami-machi 13-2; lunch & dinner from ¥500) The name is short for *donburi* (rice bowl) and this place takes the honours in the cheapest eats category. It's healthy Japanese fast food and there's a picture menu to make ordering easier.

**Nonohana Ohka** (☎ 22-1139; Nakashinya-chō 13; coffee & tea ¥500) With indoor and outdoor garden seating, this café is one of our favourite places for a drink or a light meal when in Naramachi. It has an English menu.

**Tonkatsu Ganko** (☎ 25-4129; Higashimukinaka-machi 19; meals from ¥780) This *tonkatsu* (deep-fried breaded pork cutlet) specialist in the Higashimuki arcade is around the corner from Kintetsu Nara and has an English menu.

Lastly, if you just need a quick cuppa or an eat-in or take away sandwich, there is a branch of the coffee shop Doutor close to Kintetsu Nara.

## SLEEPING

**Hotel Fujita Nara** (☎ 23-8111; Shimosanjō-chō 47-1; s/tw from ¥7500/12,600) This is a clean, new hotel with a convenient location.

**Nara Youth Hostel** (奈良ユースホステル; ☎ 22-1334; fax 22-1335; Hören-chō 1716; dm ¥3150) This clean and newish YH is easy to get to and well run. The reception here is efficient but brusque. From bus stand 7 at JR Nara Station or bus stand 13 at Kintetsu Nara Station, take bus 108, 109, 111, 113 or 115 and get off at the Shieikyūjō-mae bus stop – the hostel is almost directly next to it. Breakfast costs ¥650 and dinner ¥1050.

**Nara-ken Seishōnen Kaikan Youth Hostel** (奈良県青少年会館ユースホステル; ☎ /fax 22-5540; Handahiraki-chō 72-7; dm/r per person ¥2650/3350) This YH is older and less pristine than the Nara Youth Hostel, but the warm and friendly staff more than makes up for this. From bus stand 9 at JR Nara Station or bus stand 13 at Kintetsu Nara Station, take bus 12, 13, 131 or 140 and get off at the Ikuei-gakuen bus stop, from which the hostel's a five-minute walk. The information offices (p163) have maps and directions.

**Ryokan Matsumae** (☎ 22-3686; Higashiterabayashi-chō 28-1; per person without bathroom from ¥5250) This compact little ryokan gets excellent reviews from our readers. Some of the rooms are a little dark, but the feeling here is warm and relaxing. The friendly owner speaks English.

**Ryokan Seikan-sō** (☎ /fax 22-2670; Higashikitsuji-chō 29; per person without bathroom from ¥4200) This traditional ryokan has reasonable rates and a good

Naramachi location. The rooms are clean and spacious with shared bathrooms and a large communal bath tub.

**Ryokan Tsubakisō** (☎ 22-5330; fax 27-3811; tubaki@pc5.0-net.ne.jp; r per person without bath from ¥12,000; ☎) Popular with foreign guests, this excellent ryokan is a homey and wonderful place to stay in Nara. The bedrooms and bathrooms are clean and well maintained, and the owner can prepare vegetarian meals upon request. Highly recommended.

**Super Hotel** (☎ 20-9000; Sanjō-chō 500-1; s/d from ¥4980/6980) Directly across from JR Nara Station, the Super Hotel is a part of a no-frills hotel chain that offers clean, small business hotel rooms at very reasonable prices.

## OSAKA

☎ 06

Kyoto and Osaka are the two poles of the Japanese experience: if you want high culture, old culture and refined culture, you go to Kyoto. If you want popular culture, modern culture and down-to-earth culture, you go to Osaka. As such, Osaka makes the perfect counterpoint to Kyoto and it's a fun day or half-day trip out of the old capital (it's less than an hour from Kyoto by three different train lines).

Osaka's highlights include a fine reconstructed castle, Osaka-jō; an aquarium with a whale shark on display, Osaka Aquarium;

and the neon-strewn entertainment district of Dōtombori. But Osaka has more to offer than its specific sights; like Tokyo, Osaka is a city to be experienced in its totality, and casual strolls are likely to be just as rewarding as structured sightseeing tours.

Osaka is usually divided into two areas: Kita and Minami. Kita (north) is the city's main business and administrative centre. Minami (south) is the city's entertainment district and contains the bustling shopping and nightlife zones of Namba and Shinsaibashi.

The dividing line between Kita and Minami is formed by the Dōjima-gawa and the Tosabori-gawa, between which you'll find Nakano-shima, a peaceful green island that is home to the Museum of Oriental Ceramics. Roughly 1km east of Nakano-shima, you will find Osaka-jō and its surrounding park, Osaka-jō-kōen.

To the south of the Minami area you'll find another group of sights clustered around Tennō-ji Station. These include Shitenō-ji, Den-Den Town and the seriously low-rent entertainment district of Shin-Sekai.

For Osaka's local speciality, head over to Den-Den Town, an area of shops that is almost exclusively devoted to electronic goods. To avoid sales tax, check if the store has a 'Tax Free' sign outside and bring your passport. Most stores are closed on Wednesdays. Take the Sakaisuji subway line to Ebisu-chō Station and use either exit 1 or 2. Alternatively,

## TRANSPORT: OSAKA

### Getting There

Distance from Kyoto 45km

Direction Southwest

**Train** Other than the *shinkansen*, the fastest way between Kyoto Station and Osaka is a JR *shinkaisoku* (special rapid train; ¥540, 29 minutes). There is also the cheaper private Hankyū line, which runs between Kawaramachi, Karasuma and Ōmiya Stations in Kyoto and Umeda Station in Osaka (Kawaramachi–Umeda limited express; ¥390, 40 minutes). Alternatively, you can take the Keihan line between Demachiyana, Marutamachi, Sanjō, Shijō or Shichijō Stations in Kyoto and Yodoyabashi Station in Osaka (Sanjō–Yodoyabashi limited express; ¥400, 45 minutes).

### Getting Around

**Train** Like Tokyo, Osaka has a JR loop line (known in Japanese as the JR *kanjō-sen*) that circles the city area. There are also seven subway lines, the most useful of which is the Midō-suji line, which runs north–south stopping at Shin-Osaka, Umeda (next to Osaka Station), Shinsaibashi, Namba and Tennō-ji Stations.

**Tickets** If you're going to be using the rail system a lot on any day, it might be worth considering a 'one-day free ticket'. For ¥850 (¥650 on Fridays and the 20th of every month) you get unlimited travel on any subway, the New Tram line and all city buses (but not the JR line). Note that you'd really have to be moving around a lot to save any money with this ticket. They are available at the staffed ticket windows in most subway stations.





Den-Den Town's a 15-minute walk south of Nankai Namba Station.

Keep in mind that while Osaka Station (also known as JR Osaka Station) is centrally located in the Kita area, if you're coming from Tokyo by *shinkansen* you will arrive at Shin-Osaka Station, which is three stops (about five minutes) north of Osaka Station on the Midō-suji subway line.

## Kita (Umeda)

By day, Osaka's centre of gravity is the Kita area. While Kita doesn't have any great attractions to detain the traveller, it does have a few good department stores, lots of good places to eat and the Umeda Sky Building.

Just northwest of Osaka Station, the **Umeda Sky Building** (Map p168; ☎ 6440-3855; Kita-ku, Ōyodonaka 1-1-88; admission ¥700; ⌚ 10am-10.30pm) is Osaka's most dramatic piece of architecture. The twin-tower complex looks like a space-age version of Paris' Arc de Triomphe. It has two observation galleries: an open-air one on the roof and an indoor one on the floor below. Getting to the top is half the fun, as you take a glassed-in escalator for the final five storeys (definitely not for sufferers of vertigo). Tickets for the observation decks can be purchased on the 3rd floor of the east tower. In the basement of the towers, you'll find **Takimi-kōji Alley**, a re-creation of a Showa-era market street crammed with restaurants and *izakaya* (Japanese pubs/eateries). The Umeda Sky Building is reached via an underground passage that starts just north of Osaka and Umeda Stations.

## Central Osaka

The main attractions of Central Osaka include the Museum of Oriental Ceramics and Osaka-jō.

With more than 1300 exhibits, the **Museum of Oriental Ceramics** (Map p166; ☎ 6223-0055; Kita-ku, Nakanoshima 1-1-26; admission ¥500; ⌚ 9.30am-5pm, closed Mon) has one of the world's finest collections of Chinese and Korean ceramics. To get to the museum, go to Yodoyabashi Station on either the Midō-suji line or the Keihan line. Walk north to the river and cross to Nakanoshima. Turn right, pass the city hall on your left, bear left with the road and the museum is on the left.

Osaka's most popular attraction, **Osaka-jō** (Map p166; ☎ 6941-3044; Chūō-ku, Osaka-jō 1-1; grounds/castle keep admission free/¥600; ⌚ 9am-5pm, to 8pm in summer) is a 1931 concrete reconstruction of

the original castle, which was completed in 1583 as a display of power on the part of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. Refurbished at great cost in 1997, today's castle has a decidedly modern look. The interior of the castle houses a museum of Toyotomi Hideyoshi memorabilia, as well as displays relating the history of the castle.

Ote-mon, the gate that serves as the main entrance to the park, is a 10-minute walk northeast of Tanimachi-yonchōme Station on the Chūō and Tanimachi subway lines. You can also take the Osaka loop line; get off at Osaka-jō-kōen Station and enter through the back of the castle.

Just southwest of Osaka-jō, the excellent **Osaka Museum of History** (Map p166; Osaka Rekishi Hakubutsukan; ☎ 6946-5728; Chūō-ku, Ōtemae 4-1-32; admission ¥600; ⌚ 9.30am-5pm) is housed in a fantastic new building adjoining the Osaka NHK Broadcast Center. The display floors of the museum occupy the 7th to 10th floors of the new sail-shaped building.

The museum's displays are broken into four sections by floor; you start at the top and work your way down, passing in time from the past to the present. The displays are very well done and there are plenty of English explanations; taped tours are available.

The museum is a two-minute walk north-east of Tanimachi-yonchōme Station.

## Minami (Shinsaibashi & Namba)

A few stops south of Kita on the Midō-suji subway line (get off at either Shinsaibashi or Namba Stations), the Minami area is the place to spend the evening in Osaka. Its highlights include the Dōtombori arcade, the National Bunraku Theatre, Dōguya-suji arcade and Amerika-Mura.

Meaning 'America Village', **Amerika-Mura** (Map p170) is a compact enclave of trendy shops and restaurants, with a few discreet love hotels thrown in for good measure. The best reason to come here is to view the hordes of colourful Japanese teens living out the myth of *Amerika*. Amerika-Mura is located one or two blocks west of Midō-suji, bounded on the north by Suomachi-suji and the south by Dōtombori-gawa. The heart of Amerika-Mura is a crowded bit of concrete known as **Amerika-Mura Triangle Park**.

**Dōtombori** (Map p170) is Osaka's liveliest night-life area. It's centred on **Dōtombori-gawa** and



**Dōtombori arcade.** In the evening, head to **Ebisubashi**, the main footbridge over the canal, to sample the glittering nightscape, which calls to mind a scene from the sci-fi movie *Blade Runner*.

Only a short walk south of Dōtombori arcade, you'll find **Hōzen-ji** (Map p170), a tiny temple hidden down a narrow alley. The temple is built around a moss-covered **Fudō-myōō statue**. This statue is a favourite of people employed in the so-called 'water trade', or *mizu shōbai*. Nearby, you'll find the atmospheric **Hōzen-ji Yokochō**, a tiny alley filled with traditional restaurants and bars.

If you desperately need a *tako-yaki* (octopus ball) fryer, a red lantern to hang outside your shop or plastic food models to lure the customers, the **Dōguya-suji arcade** (Map p170) is the place to go. You'll also find endless knives,

pots and almost anything else that's even remotely related to the preparation and consumption of food.

## Other Areas

Founded in 593, **Shitennō-ji** (Map p166; ☎ 6771-0066; Tennōji-ku, Shitennō-ji 1-11-18; admission free; 🕒 9am-5pm, closed 28 Dec-1 Jan) has the distinction of being one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Japan. None of the present buildings, however, are originals: most are concrete reproductions, with the exception of the big stone **torii**. The *torii* (shrine gate) dates back to 1294, making it the oldest of its kind in Japan. The temple is most easily reached from Shitennōji-mae Station on the Tanimachi subway line. Take the southern exit, cross to the left side of the road and take the small road that goes off at

## KITA (UMEDA)

### SIGHTS & INFORMATION

American Consulate アメリカ領事館	1	D4
Citibank (International ATM) シティバンク	2	C2
German Consulate ドイツ総領事館	(see 4)	
Media Café Popeye メディアカフェポパイ	3	B1
Umeda Sky Building 梅田スカイビル	4	A2
Visitors Information Center 大阪観光案内所(梅田案内所)	5	C3

### EATING 🍴

Ganko Umeda Honten がんこ梅田本店	6	B2
Gataro がたろ	(see 7)	
Hilton Plaza ヒルトンプラザ	(see 11)	
Kappa Yokochō Arcade かつば横丁	7	C1
Maru 丸	(see 8)	
Pina Khana ピーナカーナ	(see 7)	
Shin-Umeda Shokudō-Gai 新梅田食道街	8	C2
Shinkiraku 新善楽	(see 11)	

### ENTERTAINMENT 🎮

Karma カーマ	9	B4
Windows on the World ウィンドーズオンザ ワールド	(see 11)	

### SLEEPING 🛏

Capsule Inn Osaka/Umeda New Japan Sauna 梅田ニュージャパンスアウナカプセルイン大阪	10	D2
Hilton Osaka 大阪ヒルトンホテル	11	B3
Hotel Granvia Osaka ホテルグランヴィア大阪	12	B3
City Bus Terminal 市バスターミナル	13	B3
JR Highway Bus Terminal 高速バスターミナル	14	B3

an angle away from the subway station. The entrance to the temple is on the left.

Osaka's most important shrine, **Sumiyoshi Taisha** (住吉大社; ☎ 6672-0753; Sumiyoshi 2-9-89; admission free; 🕒 dawn-dusk) is dedicated to Shintō deities associated with the sea and sea travel, in commemoration of a safe passage to Korea by a 3rd-century empress. Having survived the bombing of WWII, Sumiyoshi Taisha actually has a couple of buildings that date to 1810. The shrine was founded in the early 3rd century and the buildings that can be seen today are faithful replicas of the originals. The shrine is next to both Sumiyoshi Taisha and Sumiyoshi-torii-mae Stations on the Nankai tram line. Catch the tram from Tennō-ji Station.

**Osaka Aquarium** (海遊館; Kaiyūkan; ☎ 6576-5501; Minato-ku, Kaizan-dōri 1-1-10; adult/child ¥2000/900; 🕒 10am-8pm) is worth a visit, especially for those who have children in tow. The aquarium is centred on the world's largest aquarium tank, which is home to the star attractions – two enormous whale sharks as well as a variety of smaller sharks, rays and other fish. To get there, take the Chūō subway line to the last stop (Osaka-kō), and from here it's about a five-minute walk to the aquarium. Get there for opening time if you want to beat

the crowds – on weekends and public holidays long queues are the norm.

**Universal Studios Japan** (ユニバーサルスタジオ ジャパン; ☎ 4790-7000; Universal city; adult/child ¥5800/3900; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 9pm Sat, Sun & public holidays) is Osaka's answer to Tokyo Disneyland. Although it wasn't open while we were researching this guide, word has it that the park is a faithful reproduction of the American park, complete with all manner of movie-themed rides, stores and shops. To get there, take the JR loop line to Nishi-kujō Station, switch to one of the distinctively painted Universal Studio shuttle trains and get off at Universal City Station. From Osaka Station the trip costs ¥170 and takes about 20 minutes. There are also some direct trains from Osaka Station (ask at the tourist office for times; the price is the same).

## INFORMATION

**Aprecio** (Map p170; ☎ 6634-0199; www.aprecio.co.jp/namba/index.php, in Japanese; per 30min from ¥200; 🕒 24hr) Internet access.

**Citibank Kita** (Map p168; ☎ 4802-0277; www.citibank.co.jp/en/branch/br025a.html; 🕒 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, ATM 8am-10pm); **Minami** (Map p170; ☎ 6213-2731; www.citibank.co.jp/en/branch/br024a.html; 🕒 9am-3pm Mon-Fri, ATM 24hr) International ATM.

**Kinko's** (Map p170; ☎ 6245-1887; Minami; per 10min from ¥200; 🕒 24hr) Internet access.

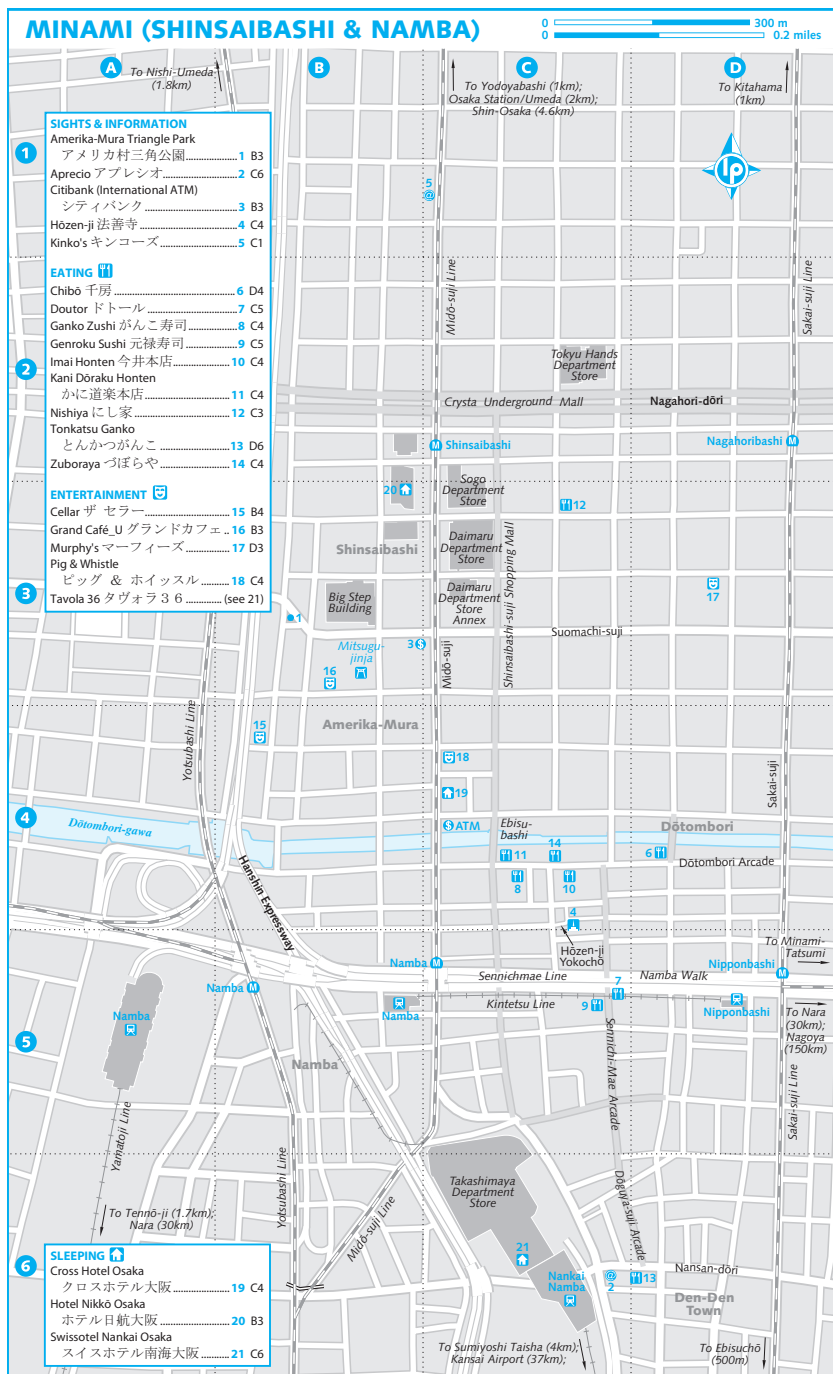
**Media Café Popeye** (Map p168; ☎ 6292-3800; www2.media-café.ne.jp/branch/umedadd/index.html, in Japanese; per 60min from ¥400; 🕒 24hr)

**Visitors Information Center** (🕒 8am to 8pm, closed 31 Dec-3 Jan) Namba Station (Map p170; ☎ 6643-2125); Osaka Station (Map p168; ☎ 6345-2189); Shin-Osaka Station (Map p166; ☎ 6305-3311); Tennō-ji Station (Map p166; ☎ 6774-3077)

The Osaka Station office is the main branch of the tourist association. Many travellers have problems finding it. To get there from Osaka Station, take the Midō-suji exit, turn right, and walk about 50m. The office is just outside the station, beneath a pedestrian overpass. From the subway, take exit 9, and look for the office outside the station, beside the bus terminal. Note that the Osaka Station is presently under construction and there is word that this office might move again.

At any of these offices, you can pick up a copy of the excellent *Osaka City Map* and *Meet Osaka*, a pocket-sized reference guide to current events and festivals.





## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The major festivals held in Osaka include the following:

**Tōka Ebisu** From 9 to 11 Jan, huge crowds of more than a million people flock to Imamiya Ebisu-jinja (Map p166) to receive bamboo branches hung with auspicious tokens. The shrine is near Imamiya Ebisu Station on the Nankai line.

**Doya Doya** Billed as a 'huge naked festival', this event on 14 Jan involves a competition between young men, clad in little more than headbands and loincloths, to obtain the 'amulet of the cow god'. This talisman is said to bring a good harvest to farmers. The festival takes place from 2pm at Shitenō-ji (Map p166).

**Tenjin Matsuri** This is one of Japan's three biggest festivals, taking place on 24 and 25 July. Try to make the second day, when processions of portable shrines and people in traditional attire start at Tenman-gū (Map p166) and end up in the Ō-kawa (in boats). As night falls the festival is marked with a huge fireworks display.

**Kishiwada Danjiri Matsuri** Osaka's wildest festival is a kind of running of the bulls except with festival *danjiri* (floats), many weighing more than 3 tonnes. The *danjiri* are hauled through the streets on 14 and 15 September by hundreds of people using ropes, and in all the excitement there have been a couple of deaths – take care and stand back. Most of the action takes place on the second day. The best place to see it is west of Kishiwada Station on the Nankai Honsen line (from Nankai Namba Station).

## EATING

Restaurants are open during usual business hours (11am to 2pm and 5pm to 10pm) unless otherwise noted.

## Kita

The Kita area is chock-a-block with good restaurants. For a wide selection of different cuisines under one roof, try the Kappa Yokochō arcade (Map p168), just north of Hankyū Umeda Station, or the Shin-Umeda Shokudō-gai (Map p168), just east of Osaka Station (beneath the tracks). For something a little more upscale, try the restaurants on the B1 and B2 floors of the Hilton Plaza (Map p168), opposite Osaka Station. There are also several cafés and restaurants in Osaka Station itself.

**Ganko Umeda Honten** (Map p168; ☎ 6376-2001; Kita-ku, Shibata 1-5-11; meals from ¥800) A giant dining hall serving all the usual Japanese favourites, including sushi. It's a very approachable place where foreign diners can feel comfortable.

**Gataro** (Map p168; ☎ 6373-1484; Kita-ku, Shibata 1-7-2; dinner around ¥3000) This a cosy little spot

that does creative twists on standard *izakaya* themes. Look for the glass front with credit card stickers on the left as you head north in the arcade. Unlike most *izakaya*, this one has an English menu.

**Maru** (Map p168; ☎ 6361-4552; Kita-ku, Shin-Umeda Shokudō-gai, Kakuda-chō 9-26) Maru serves delicious sashimi sets for lunch and proper fish meals for dinner.

**Shinkiraku** (Map p168; ☎ 6345-3461; Kita-ku, Umeda 1-8-16; meals from ¥800) This excellent tempura specialist serves a tasty *ebishio-tendon* (shrimp tempura over rice; ¥880) for lunch and an *osusume-gozen* (tempura full set; ¥2079) for dinner. Take the escalator to the Hilton Plaza's B2 floor, go right and look for the small English sign.

**Pina Khana** (Map p168; ☎ 6375-5828; Kita-ku, Shibata 1-7-2; lunch/dinner from ¥850/3000) This is our favourite Indian restaurant in Kita. The good-value lunch sets usually include a reasonably priced curry, nan or rice, and tandoori chicken. If you go between noon and 1pm, you'll be fighting the salaried men and office ladies for a seat. Look for the Indian flag.

## Minami

The place to eat in Minami is the restaurant-packed Dōtombori arcade (Map p170). The restaurants in this area win no points for their refined atmosphere, but the prices are low and the portions large.

**Chibō** (Map p170; ☎ 6212-2211; Chūō-ku, Dōtombori 1-5-5; okonomiyaki from ¥800) A good spot to sample *okonomiyaki* (literally 'cook what you like'; often called Japanese pancake), one of Osaka's most popular dishes. Chibō's *modan yaki* (a kind of *okonomiyaki*) is a good bet at ¥950.

**Ganko Zushi** (Map p170; ☎ 6212-1705; Chūō-ku, Dōtombori 1-8-24; set meals from ¥1000) Part of Kansai's most popular sushi chain, this is a good place for ample sushi sets and a variety of other Japanese favourites.

**Imai Honten** (Map p170; ☎ 6211-0319; Chūō-ku, Dōtombori 1-7-22; udon from ¥550) One of the area's oldest and most revered *udon* (thick white wheat noodle) specialists.

**Kani Dōraku Honten** (Map p170; ☎ 6211-8975; Chūō-ku, Dōtombori 1-6-18; lunch/dinner from ¥1600/3000) This crab specialist does all kinds of imaginative things with the unfortunate crustaceans. If the main branch is full, there's an annex just down the road.

**Nishiya** (Map p170; ☎ 6241-9221; Chūō-ku, Higashi Shinsaibashi 1-18-18; meals from ¥1200) This rustic Osaka



landmark serves *udon* noodles and a variety of hearty *nabe* (iron pot) dishes for reasonable prices.

**Zuboraya** (Map p170; ☎ 6211-0181; Chūō-ku, Dōtombori 1-6-10; fugu sashimi ¥1800, dinner from ¥3000) The place to go when you've worked up the nerve to try *fugu* (Japanese pufferfish). Look for the giant *fugu* hanging out the front.

**Genroku Sushi** (Map p170; ☎ Chūō-ku, Sennichimae 2-11-4; ☎ 10am-10.40pm) In a busy shopping arcade, this is a bustling automatic sushi place where plates of sushi cost a mere ¥130.

Finally, if you just feel like a Western-style sandwich or a quick cup of (so-so) coffee, drop into the Doutor at the mouth of the Sennichi-Mae arcade.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Osaka has a lively nightlife scene, with lots of bars and clubs that see mixed foreign and Japanese clientele. Minami is the place for a wild night out – you simply won't believe the number of bars, clubs and restaurants they've packed into the narrow streets and alleys of Dōtombori, Shinsaibashi, Namba and Amerika-Mura. Go there on a weekend night and you'll be part of a colourful human parade of Osaka characters – this is one of Japan's best spots for people-watching.

There are also plenty of good bars and clubs in the neighbourhoods to the south and east of Osaka Station.

For up-to-date listings of upcoming club and music events, check *Kansai Time Out* (www.japanfile.com), available at bookstores in Osaka and Kyoto.

**National Bunraku Theatre** (Map p166; ☎ 6212-2531; Chūō-ku, Nipponbashi 1-12-10) Although *bunraku* (puppet theatre) did not originate in Osaka, the art form was popularised at this theatre. Today it is attempting to revive the fortunes of *bunraku*. Performances are only held at certain times of the year: check with the tourist information offices. Tickets normally start at around ¥2300; earphones and programme guides in English are available.

**Karma** (Map p168; ☎ 6344-6181; Kita-ku, Sonezakishinchi 1-5-18; ☎ 5pm-2am daily) A long-standing club popular with Japanese and foreigners alike. At weekends Karma usually hosts techno events with cover charges averaging ¥2500.

**Windows on the World** (Map p168; ☎ 6347-7111; Kita-ku, Umeda 1-8-8; ☎ 11.30am-12.30am) For drinks with a view, head to this bar on the 35th floor of the Hilton Osaka. Be warned that there's a

¥2500 per person table charge and drinks average ¥1000.

**Cellar** (Map p170; ☎ 6212-6437; Chūō-ku, Nishishinsaibashi 2-17-13, B1 Shin-sumiya Bldg; ☎ dusk to late) Live music is often the draw at this popular basement bar on the west side of Nishishinsaibashi.

**Murphy's** (Map p170; ☎ 6282-0677; Chūō-ku, Higashi-shinsaibashi 1-6-31; per person around ¥1000; ☎ 5pm-1am Sun-Thu, to 4am Fri & Sat) One of the oldest Irish-style pubs in Japan, this is a good place to rub shoulders with local expats and young Japanese.

**Pig & Whistle** (Map p170; ☎ 6213-6911; Chūō-ku, Shinsaibashisuji 2-6-14; ☎ 5pm-midnight Mon-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat) As is the case with its sister branches in Kita and Kyoto, the Pig is the place to go for a pint and a plate of fish and chips. Drinks cost from ¥720 and food ¥1100.

**Tavola 36** (Map p170; ☎ 6646-5125; Chūō-ku, Namba 5-1-60; ☎ 11am-midnight) This is where we go when we want something a little swanky. It's an Italian restaurant/bar on the 36th floor of the Swissotel Nankai Osaka. The view is fantastic, and so are the prices: there's a ¥1260 per person table charge after 5.30pm and drinks start at ¥1300.

## SLEEPING

It makes little sense to stay in Osaka when Kyoto's just over half an hour away. If you do want to stay in Osaka, however, there are lots of business hotels and regular hotels in both the Kita and Minami areas. Considering its wealth of dining and entertainment options, Minami is probably the best place to be based.

**Hilton Osaka** (Map p168; ☎ 6347-7111; fax 6347-7001; Kita-ku, Umeda 1-8-8; s/d from ¥19,500/23,500) Just south of Osaka Station, this is an excellent hotel that is at home with foreign guests. The rooms are clean and light, with a Japanese touch, and there's a 15m pool in the fitness centre. The views from the Hilton's 35th-floor Windows on the World bar are awesome and there are two basement floors of great restaurants.

**Hotel Granvia Osaka** (Map p168; ☎ 6344-1235; fax 6344-1130; Kita-ku, Umeda 3-1-1; s/tw/d from ¥16,170/33,495/24,255) You can't beat this hotel for convenience: it's located directly over Osaka Station. Rooms and facilities are of a high standard.

**Capsule Inn Osaka/Umeda New Japan Sauna** (Map p168; ☎ 6314-2100; Kita-ku, Dōyama-chō 9-5; male-only capsules ¥2500) Located in one of Kita's busiest enter-

tainment districts, this is the place to stay if you miss the last train back to Kyoto. It's fairly clean and well maintained, with sauna (from ¥525), Jacuzzi and optional massage services. Note that it's men-only, and if you're more than 180cm tall you won't be able to lie flat out.

**Hotel Nikkō Osaka** (Map p170; ☎ 6244-1111; fax 6245-2432; Chūō-ku, Nishishinsaibashi 1-3-3; s/d from ¥21,945/34,650) The Nikkō is one of Osaka's better hotels, with a great selection of restaurants and bars on the premises. All the rooms here are Western style and very clean, including the bathrooms

**Cross Hotel Osaka** (Map p170; ☎ 6213-8281; fax 6213-8640; Chūō-ku, Shinsaibashisuji 2-5-15; s/d from ¥14,000/18,000) Just a short walk from the Dōtombori area, this is the most reasonably priced hotel (as opposed to business hotel) in Minami. Deluxe rooms, which start at ¥21,000, offer an increase in size and somewhat nicer appointments.

**Swissotel Nankai Osaka** (Map p170; ☎ 6646-1111; Chūō-ku, Namba 5-1-60; s/d from ¥17,325/23,100) This is Minami's most elegant hotel, with stunning views and clean, well-appointed rooms. You can catch direct connections to Kansai airport via the Nankai line trains that depart from Namba Station below the hotel.

## KŌBE

☎ 078

Perched on a hillside overlooking the sea, Kōbe is one of Japan's most cosmopolitan cities, having served as a maritime gateway to Kansai from the earliest days of trade with China. To this day, there are significant populations of other Asian nationalities in Kōbe, as well as plenty of Westerners, many of whom work in nearby Osaka.

Kōbe's relaxed international atmosphere and scenic location make it one of Japan's most pleasant cities. Best of all, it is relatively compact, which means that most of the sights can be reached on foot from the main train stations. Of course, it must be noted that none of these sights are must-sees: Kōbe is likely to appeal more to residents than to travellers. However, it does have some good restaurants, cafés and bars and is a good place for a night out if you just can't face the mayhem of Osaka.

A 20-minute walk north of Sannomiya, the pleasant hillside neighbourhood of **Kitano** is where local tourists come to enjoy the feel-

ing of foreign travel without leaving Japanese soil. The European/American atmosphere is created by the winding streets and *ijinkan* (foreigners' houses) that once housed some of Kōbe's early Western residents. Admission to some of the *ijinkan* is free, while others cost ¥300 to ¥700; most are open from 9am to 5pm.

**Kōbe City Museum** (☎ 391-0035; Chūō-ku, Kyōmachi 24; admission varies; ☎ 10am-4.30pm, closed Mon) has a collection of Namban (literally 'southern barbarian') art and occasional special exhibits. Namban art is a school of painting that developed under the influence of early Jesuit missionaries in Japan, who taught Western painting techniques to Japanese students. Unless you have a particular interest in Namban art, it's probably best to find out what special exhibit is on before visiting; check at the tourist information offices.

Five minutes' walk southeast of Kōbe Station (on the JR line), **Kōbe Harbour Land** is awash with new mega-mall shopping and dining developments. This may not appeal to foreign travellers the way it does to local youth, but it's still a nice place for a wander in the afternoon.

Five minutes to the east of Harbour Land, you'll find **Meriken Park** on a spit of reclaimed land jutting out into the bay. The main attraction here is the **Kōbe Maritime Museum** (☎ 327-8983; Chūō-ku, Hatoba-chō 2-2; admission ¥500; ☎ 10am-4.30pm, closed Mon), which has an extensive collection of high-quality model ships and displays with some English explanations.

**Nankinmachi**, Kōbe's Chinatown, is not on a par with Chinatowns elsewhere in the world, but it is an atmospheric place to meander and have a bite to eat. It's particularly attractive in the evening. See p174 for details on some of the area's restaurants.

Kōbe's two main entry points are Sannomiya and Shin-Kōbe Stations. Shin-Kōbe, in the northeast of town, is where the *shinkansen* pauses. A subway runs from here to the busier Sannomiya Station, which has frequent rail connections with Osaka and Kyoto. It's possible to walk between the two stations in around 15 minutes. Sannomiya (not Kōbe) Station marks the city centre.

The **Luminarie festival**, Kōbe's biggest yearly event, is held every evening from 13 to 26 December to celebrate the city's miraculous recovery from the 1995 earthquake. Check dates with the Kōbe tourist office because they change slightly every year. The streets

## TRANSPORT: KŌBE

### Getting There

Distance from Kyoto 65km

Direction Southwest

**Train** Sannomiya Station is on the JR Tōkaidō/San-yō line as well as the private Hankyū line, both of which connect it to Kyoto. The fastest way between Kōbe and Kyoto is a JR *shinkaisoku* (special rapid train) from Kyoto (¥1050, 48 minutes). The Hankyū line, which leaves from Kyoto's Kawaramachi, Karasuma and Ōmiya Stations, is cheaper (¥600) but less convenient; to/from Kawaramachi Station the limited express takes one hour and requires a change at Osaka's Jūsō or Umeda Stations. Japan Rail Pass holders should also note that Shin-Kōbe Station is on the Tōkaidō/San-yō *shinkansen* (bullet train) line.

### Getting Around

**Train** While Kōbe is small enough to get around on foot, the JR, Hankyū and Hanshin railway lines run east–west across Kōbe, providing access to most of the city's more distant sights. A subway line also connects Shin-Kōbe Station with Sannomiya Station (¥200, three minutes).

**Bus** A city loop bus service makes a grand circle tour of most of the city's sightseeing spots (¥250 per ride, ¥600 for an all-day pass). The bus stops at both Sannomiya and Shin-Kōbe Stations.

southwest of Kōbe City Hall are decorated with countless illuminated metal archways and people flock from all over Kansai to walk around and enjoy the usual festival food and drink.

## INFORMATION

Before starting your exploration of Kōbe, pick up a copy of the *Kōbe City Map* at one of the two information centres.

Outside Sannomiya Station you'll find the city's main **tourist information office** (☎ 322 0220; ☎ 9am–7pm). There's also a smaller counter on the 2nd floor of Shin-Kōbe Station, open from 9am to 5pm.

Behind Kōbe City Hall, there's a Citibank with machines that also accept a variety of cards.

For English-language books, try **Random Walk** (☎ 332-9200; ☎ 10am–8pm), close to Motomachi Station on the JR Kōbe line.

## EATING

Kōbe is most famous for its Indian food and has many places to choose from. There are also lots of trendy café-style spots, including a clutch of restaurants just north of Motomachi Station in the fashionable Tor Rd area. For Chinese food, the natural choice is Nankinmachi (Chinatown), just south of Motomachi Station.

Although Kōbe is more famous for its international cuisine, there are, of course,

plenty of good Japanese restaurants to be found.

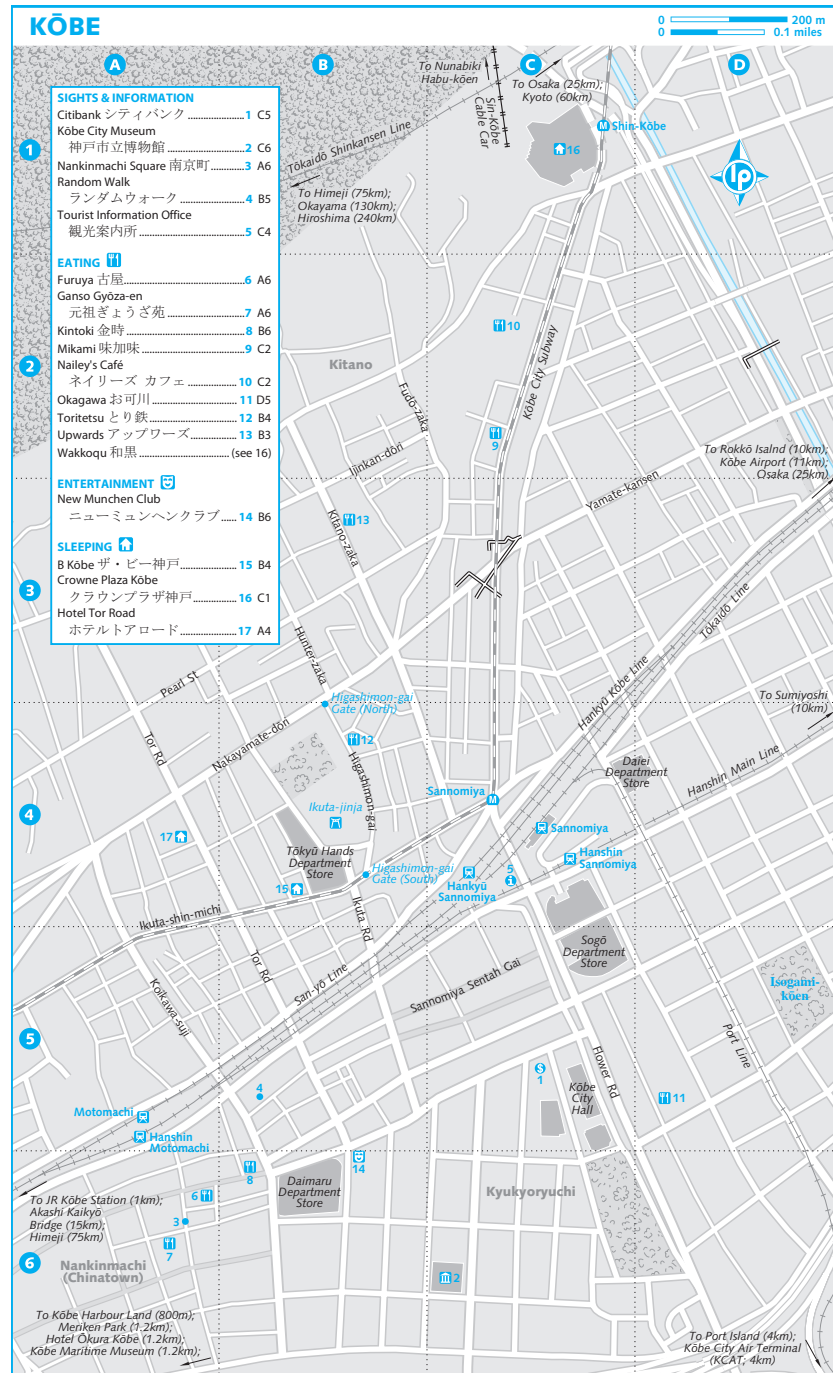
The restaurants in this section are open from 11am to 2pm and 5pm to 10pm, unless otherwise noted.

**Kintoki** (☎ 331-1037; Chūō-ku, Motomachi-dōri 1-7-2; lunch & dinner from ¥500) For a taste of what Japan was like before it got rich, try this atmospheric old *shokudō* (Japanese-style cafeteria/cheap restaurant) that serves the cheapest food in the city. You can order standard noodle and rice dishes from the menu (plain *soba* – thin brown buckwheat noodles – or *udon* noodles cost ¥250 and a small rice costs ¥160) or choose from a variety of dishes laid out on the counter.

**Mikami** (☎ 242-5200; Kitano-chō, 2-5-9; lunch & dinner from ¥400; ☎ 11.30am–10pm, closed Sun & public holidays) Try this friendly spot for good-value lunch and dinner sets of standard Japanese fare. Noodle dishes are available from ¥400 and *teishoku* (set-course meals) from ¥600. There is also an English menu.

**Okagawa** (☎ 222-3511; Chūō-ku, Hachiman-dōri 4-1-11; tempura from ¥1100; ☎ closed Mon) Not far from Kōbe City Hall, this fine tempura specialist is an oasis of calm, clean lines and good service. Hard to spot, it's at the top of a flight of steps above a place called Daiichi (the stairs are on the left – look for the giant black spoon). There is a small English sign on street level and English menus inside.

**Toritetsu** (☎ 327-5529; Chūō-ku, Nakayamate-dōri 1-16-12; dinner from ¥3000; ☎ 5pm–midnight) Almost





opposite the Daiichi Grand Hotel on Higashimon-gai, this bustling *yakitori* (skewers of grilled chicken and vegetables) restaurant is a good place to eat, drink and watch the chefs labour over their grills. The sign says 'yakitori'.

**Wakkoqu** (☎ 262-2838; Chūō-ku, Kitano-chō 1-1, 3F Shin Kōbe Oriental Ave; lunch/dinner from ¥2500/6800) Taking into account the price and ease of entry, this is our favourite Kōbe beef restaurant in the city. It's an elegant place that serves top-quality beef.

**Ganso Gyōza-en** (☎ 331-4096; Chūō-ku, Sakaemachi-dōri 2-8-11; per 6 dumplings ¥380) The best spot in Nankinmachi for *gyōza* (Chinese dumplings), which is about all that is served. Try the wonderful *yaki gyōza* (fried dumplings) or *sui gyōza* (steamed dumplings). Use the vinegar, soy sauce and miso provided at the table to make a dipping sauce. The red restaurant sign is in Japanese only, so you may have to ask someone to point out the store.

**Furuya** (☎ 322-1230; Chūō-ku, Motomachi-dōri 1-6-17; per 8 *gyōza* from ¥320; ☎ 2pm-10pm) We can't quite figure this place out: it's a *gyōza* specialist decorated with skiing, snowboard and *The Sopranos* memorabilia. Above the restaurant look for a sign in English that reads 'Original Gyoza Restaurant'.

**Nailey's Café** (☎ 231-2008; Chūō-ku, Kanō-chō 2-8-12; lunch/dinner from ¥1050/1200; ☎ 11.30am-late, closed Tue) A hip little café that serves espresso, light lunches and dinners. The menu here (available in English) is European influenced and includes such things as pizza, pasta and salads. Coffee starts at ¥430.

**Upwards** (☎ 230-8551; Chūō-ku, Yamamoto-dōri 1-7-16; lunch/dinner from ¥1000; ☎ 11.30am-midnight Tue-Sun) This fashionable eatery in Kitano serves pasta, sandwiches and salads in an airy, open space. It's another good spot for a drink in the evening. There's an English sign.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Kōbe has a relatively large foreign community and a number of bars that see mixed Japanese and foreign crowds. For Japanese-style drinking establishments, try the *izakaya* in the neighbourhood between the JR tracks and Ikuta-jinja. Also bear in mind that a lot of Kōbe's nightlife is centred on the city's many cafés, most of which transform into bars in the evening.

**New Munchen Club** (☎ 335-0170; Chūō-ku, Akashi-chō 47) A decent German-style pub that draws

its share of foreign residents. It's close to Daimaru department store.

## SLEEPING

**B Kōbe** (☎ 333-4880; fax 333-4876; www.ishinhotels.com/theb-kobe/en/index.html; s/tw/d from ¥8400/15,750/13,650; 🏠) The newly renovated and centrally located B Kōbe is a good utilitarian choice if you've got business in Kōbe or just want a clean place to lay your head in the evening.

**Hotel Ōkura Kōbe** (☎ 333-0111; fax 333-6673; Chūō-ku, Hatoba-chō 2-1; s/d from ¥18,480/28,875) On the waterfront behind Meriken Park, this is the most elegant hotel in town, with fine rooms and spacious common areas.

**Hotel Tor Road** (☎ 391-6691; fax 391-6570; Chūō-ku, Nakayamate-dōri 3-1-19; s/d from ¥9450/17,850) A step up from the typical business hotel, this is a good choice for those who want a little more comfort. Beds are larger than normal for this type of accommodation and quite clean. The friendly staff is another plus.

**Crowne Plaza Kōbe** (☎ 291-1121; fax 291-1154; Chūō-ku, Kitano-chō 1; s/d from ¥15,015/26,565) Towering above Shin-Kōbe Station, this hotel commands the best views of the city and has excellent on-site facilities.

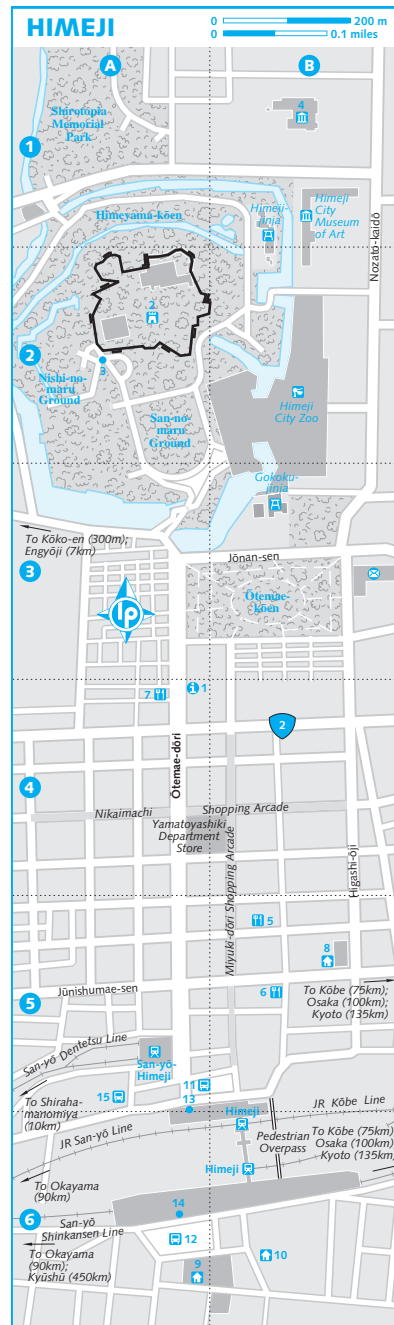
## HIMEJI

☎ 079

Himeji-jō, the finest castle in all Japan, is less than two hours west of Kyoto by train. The castle dominates the pleasant little city of Himeji and is easily visible from the train as you approach from any direction. Particularly stunning against a backdrop of April cherry blossoms, the castle has a graceful beauty that far exceeds that of European castles. Next door, Kōko-en is a pleasant stroll garden that can easily be paired with a visit to the castle. While you can stay overnight in Himeji, it's quite possible to visit it as a day trip from Kyoto, especially if you have a Japan Rail Pass and can use the *shinkansen*.

On the way to Himeji, take a look out the train window at the new Akashi Kaikyō Bridge. Its 3910m span links the island of Honshū with Awaji-shima, making it the longest suspension bridge in the world. It comes into view on the south side of the train about 15km west of Kōbe.

**Himeji-jō** (☎ 285-1146; Honmachi 68; admission ¥600, incl Kōko-en ¥720; ☎ 9am-5pm, last admission 4pm, 5pm in summer) is the most magnificent of the handful



## HIMEJI

### SIGHTS & INFORMATION

Himeji Tourist Information 姫路観光ナビポルト	1	A4
Himeji-jō 姫路城	2	A2
Himeji-jō Ticket Office 姫路城切符売り場	3	A2
Hyōgo Prefectural Museum of History 兵庫県立歴史博物館	4	B1

### EATING

Fukutei ふく亭	5	B5
Len レン	6	B5
Me-n-me めんめ	7	A4

### SLEEPING

Himeji Washington Hotel Plaza 姫路ワシントンホテルプラザ	8	B5
Hotel Nikkō Himeji ホテル日航姫路	9	A6
Toyoko Inn 東横イン	10	B6

### TRANSPORT

City Bus Terminal 市バスターミナル	11	A5
City South Bus Terminal 市バス南ターミナル	12	A6
Himeji North Exit 北口	13	A5
Himeji South Exit 南口	14	A6
Shinki Bus Terminal 神姫バスターミナル	15	A5

of Japanese castles that survive in their original (nonconcrete) form. Although there have been fortifications in Himeji since 1333, this castle was built in 1580 by Toyotomi Hideyoshi and enlarged some 30 years later by Ikeda Terumasa.

The castle has a five-storey main *donjon* (keep) and three smaller *donjons*, and the entire structure is surrounded by moats and defensive walls punctuated by rectangular, circular and triangular openings for firing guns and shooting arrows at attackers.

English-speaking guides are sometimes available and can really add a lot to your tour of the castle. Unfortunately, appointments aren't accepted and it's hit or miss whether one will be available on the day of your visit – ask at the ticket office of the castle and hope for the best. The guide service is free.

The **Hyōgo Prefectural Museum of History** (☎ 288-9011; Honmachi 68; admission ¥200; ☎ 10am-5pm, last admission 4.30pm, closed Mon) is a well-organised museum that has good displays on Himeji-jō and other castles around Japan. The museum also covers the main periods of Japanese history with some English explanations. At 11am, 2pm and 3.30pm you can even try on a suit of samurai armour or a kimono. The museum is a five-minute walk north of the castle.

Just across the moat on the west side of Himeji-jō, you'll find **Kōko-en** (☎ 289-4120; Honmachi 68; admission ¥300, incl Himeji-jō ¥720; ☎ 9am-

## TRANSPORT: HIMEJI

Distance from Kyoto 98km

Direction West

**Train** The best way to get to Himeji from Kyoto is by *shinkaisoku* (special rapid train) on the JR Tōkaidō line (¥2210, one hour and 20 minutes). You can also reach Himeji from Kyoto via the Tōkaidō/San-yō *shinkansen* (bullet train) line and this is a good option for Japan Rail Pass holders.

4.30pm, 9am-5.30pm in summer), a reconstruction of the former samurai quarters of the castle in a garden setting. There are nine separate Edo-style gardens, two ponds, a stream, a tea arbour (*matcha* powdered green tea costs ¥500) and the restaurant, **Kassui-ken**, where you can enjoy lunch while gazing over the gardens.

Himeji's **Nada-no-Kenka Matsuri** festival, held on 14 and 15 October, involves a conflict between three *mikoshi* (portable shrines) that are battered against each other until one smashes. The festival is held about five minutes' walk from Shirahamanomiya Station (10 minutes from Himeji Station on the San-yō-Dentetsu line). You should try to go on the second day when the festival reaches its peak – the action starts around noon.

## INFORMATION

**Himeji Tourist Information** (☎ 285-3792) has two outlets, one of which is at the station, on the ground floor to the right as you come off the escalator. Between 10am and 3pm English-speaking staff are on duty and can help with hotel/ryokan reservations.

## EATING

The food court in the underground mall at JR Himeji Station has all the usual Western and Japanese dishes. It's just to the right as you exit the north ticket gate of the station.

**Me-n-me** (☎ 225-0118; Honmachi 68; noodles from ¥480; ☎ 11.30am-7pm Thu-Tue) They make their own noodles at this homey little noodle joint a few minutes' walk from the castle. There's usually an English sign on the street and English menus inside.

**Len** (☎ 225-5505; Eki-mae-chō 324; lunch/dinner ¥1500/3000; ☎ 11.30am-midnight Tue-Sun, closed holidays) If you find yourself in Himeji in the evening and feel like a good meal of pan-Asian *iza-*

*kaya* fare, then you should try Len. There's a blue sign in English and an English menu available.

**Fukutei** (☎ 223-0981; Kamei-chō 75; lunch/dinner ¥1400/5000; ☎ 11am-2.30pm & 4.30-9pm Fri-Wed) If you want something a little nicer for lunch or dinner in Himeji, try this *kaiseki* (Japanese *haute cuisine*) specialist. From 11am to 2pm, try the mini-*kaiseki* course (¥1400).

## SLEEPING

**Himeji Washington Hotel Plaza** (☎ 225-0111; fax 25-0133; Higashiekimae-chō 98; s/d from ¥5800/11,000) This is the best midrange choice in town. It is pretty much everything that a good business hotel should be: well run and clean, with reasonably sized rooms (for a business hotel, that is).

**Hotel Nikkō Himeji** (☎ 222-2231; fax 24-3731; Minamiekimae-chō 100; s/d ¥10,925/20,700) A stone's throw from the south side of Himeji Station, this hotel has stylish and fairly spacious rooms and is the best choice for those who want something nicer than a business hotel.

**Tōyoko Inn** (☎ 284-1045; Minamiekimae-chō 97; s/d from ¥5880/7980) This new business hotel is well situated if you want to be close to the station. The rooms are serviceable, well maintained and, as usual in a business hotel, fairly small.

## MIYAMA-CHŌ

☎ 0771

Spend enough time in Kyoto, Osaka, Kōbe and Nara and you can be forgiven for thinking that Japan is entirely urban. You might find yourself craving a taste of Japan's quieter rural side – tiny villages surrounded by rice paddies and green hills. If you've got an image of old rural Japan in your mind and want to chase down the real thing, head to Miyama-chō.

Miyama-chō is a collection of rural hamlets spread over a large area of the Kitayama Mountains, about two hours north of Kyoto by car or bus. These picturesque hamlets are home to an abundance of traditional *kayabuki-ya* (thatched-roof farmhouses).

This picturesque area is popular with artists and nature lovers who come here for the excellent hiking and camping. Even if all you do is cruise through by bus or car, we're sure that the soothing country scenes will form one of your fondest memories of your trip to Kyoto.

It is possible to travel to Miyama-chō as a day trip from Kyoto, but it makes a much nicer overnight trip. The Japanese-language *Map Kyoto*, available at the Kyoto Tourism Federation above Kyoto Station (p199), covers the Miyama-chō area.

The quiet village of **Ashiu** sits on the far eastern edge of Miyama-chō. The main attraction of Ashiu is the 4200-hectare virgin forest that lies to the east of the village. Safeguarded under the administration of Kyoto University's Department of Agriculture, this is about the only remaining virgin forest in all of Kansai.

The best way to sample the beauty of Ashiu's forest is to hike up into the gorge of the Yuragawa. Lonely Planet's *Hiking in Japan* guide details a four-day hike up the river. Those with less time can do shorter day trips up the gorge. Hikers should get hold of Shōbunsha's Japanese-language *Kyoto Kitayama* map, part of the Yama-to-Kōgen Chizu series (available at bookshops in Kyoto).

Miyama-chō's star attraction is **Kitamura** (North Village) a hamlet boasting a cluster of some 50 thatched-roof farmhouses. In 1994 the village was designated a national preservation site, and since then the local government has been generously subsidising the exorbitant cost of rethatching the roofs (at an average cost of ¥6 million – more than US\$50,000!).

## TRANSPORT: MIYAMA-CHŌ

There are no train lines to Miyama-chō, so you have to rent a car, hitch or take a series of buses from Kyoto.

Distance from Kyoto 50km

Direction North over a series of mountain passes.

**Bus** To get to Kitamura by bus, take a JR bus from in front of Kyoto Station to Shūzan. At Shimonaka transfer to a Miyama-chō-ei bus to Agake. From Agake, take another Miyama-chō-ei bus bound for Chimiguchi and get off at Kitamura (entire trip ¥2320, 2½ hours).

From Kitamura, you can catch a Miyama-chō-ei bus onward to Chimiguchi, where you can catch another bus to Sasari (for Ashiu get off at Deai and walk the last kilometre into the village). Needless to say, the complexity and cost of this route makes either renting a car or hitching look awfully attractive.

**Car & Cycle** The best road to Miyama-chō is Rte 162 (Shūzankaidō), though there is a lovely (but time-consuming) alternative route via Kurama in the north of Kyoto and over Hanase-tōgei Pass. Serious cyclists should be able to reach the area via either route by pedalling for about five arduous hours.

**Hiking** Another option is to take Kyoto bus 32 from Kyoto's Demachiyagi Station to the last stop, Hirogawara (¥1050, 90 minutes), and hike over Sasari-tōgei Pass. From Hirogawara follow the road to the pass and then take the hiking trail down into Ashiu (you'll probably need a hiking map – see [above](#) for details). The hike notwithstanding, this is probably the easiest route into Ashiu since it involves only one bus.

Those intent on seeing a lot of Miyama-chō without renting a car can combine the two bus routes described above to make one grand traverse of the area. Take the buses all the way to Sasari from Kyoto Station, hike over the Sasari-tōgei pass and return to Kyoto by bus from Hirogawara (or vice-versa). Note that the road over the pass is closed in winter, during which season it makes a great cross-country ski or snowshoe route.

There's not much to do in the village except walk around and admire the old houses.

## EATING

**Morishige** (☎ 75-1086; Miyama-chō, Uchikubo, Taninoshita 15; noodle dishes from ¥630) A thatched-roof place that serves simple but tasty noodle dishes and *nabe* dishes.

**Yururi** (☎ 76-0741; Miyama-chō, Morisato; sets ¥3000) A wonderfully elegant restaurant occupying a fine thatched-roof house. It's about half an hour north of the centre of Miyama-chō by car. Reservations are required.

## SLEEPING

There are a number of interesting places in which to stay in the Miyama-chō area. It's best if you can have a Japanese-speaking person call to make reservations at these places since few lodge-owners speak English. Some owners will pick up guests in Hirogawara, which is the most convenient access point to Miyama-chō.

**Matabe** (☎ 77-0258; Kita-kuwada-gun, Kita Miyama-chō; per person incl 2 meals ¥8000) This quaint *minshuku* (Japanese-style B&B) in Kitamura is in a traditional thatched-roof house.

**Miyama Heimat Youth Hostel** (☎ /fax 75-0997; Miyama-chō, Obuchi, Nakasai 57; members/nonmembers ¥3360/3960) One of the cheaper options in the area. This



simple youth hostel is located in a thatched-roof house and it's on the road to Ōno Dam. Dinner costs ¥1050 and breakfast ¥630.

**Yama-no-ie** (☎ 77-0290; Kita-kuwada-gun, Miyama-chō, Ashiu; per person incl 2 meals ¥7350) The only place to stay in Ashiu – other than camping – is in this impressive lodge. There are no meals served but there are simple cooking facilities. It's a few minutes on foot from the forest trailhead.

**Hanase Suisen-Kyō** (☎ 746-0185; fax 712-7023; www.suisenkyo.com; suisenkyo@mac.com; Hanase Harachi-chō; r per person ¥3200) Located in Hanase, about 15km south of Miyama-chō, this secluded getaway sits alongside a pleasant river. Bookings are by email or fax only. To get here from Kyoto, take Kyoto bus 32 (not Kyoto City bus) from Demachiyanaŕi (at least four daily, ¥930, 1½ hours) and get off at Naka-no-chō (¥930, 1½ hours).