



Northern Honshū (Tōhoku)

POP 9.2 MILLION

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Why Go?

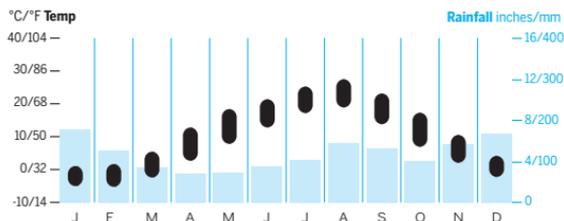
‘The rough sea, stretching out towards Sado, the Milky Way.’
Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1689)

In the days of Matsuo Bashō, the famous travelling poet, a trip to northern Honshū was synonymous with walking to the ends of the Earth. Tōhoku (東北; literally ‘northeast’) is still very much the rugged north, a land of hulking volcanic massifs and remote hot springs, of ancient folk beliefs and unique customs born of centuries of isolation.

In a sense, nothing has changed, and yet everything has changed. In 2011, an enormous earthquake and tsunami (see p7) destroyed a long stretch of coastline. The recovery effort, happening at both government and grassroots levels, faces enormous challenges. This shouldn’t stop you from visiting. The vast majority of northern Honshū was spared significant damage and remains as attractive as ever to those seeking, as Bashō was, an off-the-beaten-track adventure.

When to Go

Aomori



Dec–Feb Siberian cold, but great skiing and *yukimiburo* (snow viewing from an onsen).

Jun–Aug Mild summers come to life with spirited festivals and magnificent greenery.

Sep–Oct A brief but intense autumn is marked by spectacular displays of foliage.

Northern Honshū (Tōhoku) Highlights

- Following the footsteps of the *yamabushi* (mountain ascetics) through the sacred peaks of **Dewa Sanzan**
- Soaking your worries away at rustic **Nyūto Onsen**, in the mountains above Tazawa-ko
- Cycling through the **Tōno** valley, the land that time forgot
- Getting away from the mainland crush on **Sado-ga-shima**, a former island of exile
- Experiencing one of Tōhoku's legendary festivals, like the Tanabata Matsuri in **Sendai**
- Dodging ice-covered trees known as 'ice monsters' at **Zaō Onsen**
- Making a pilgrimage to the mountaintop temples of **Yamadera**, just like the poet Bashō
- Exploring the apocalyptic landscape of Ozore-san on the **Shimokita Peninsula**
- Reliving the glory of **Hirazumi**, the 11th-century Buddhist paradise on earth
- Traipsing around the verdant shores of **Towada-ko**, Honshū's largest crater lake



History

Tōhoku has been populated since at least the Jōmon period, but first entered historical records when, in the 8th century, the newly formed central government in Nara enlisted generals to subjugate the indigenous Emishi people. By the mid-9th century the land, then known as Michinoku (literally ‘the land beyond roads’) was, if only tenuously, under imperial control.

In the 11th century, the Ōshū Fujiwara clan established a short-lived settlement at Hiraizumi that was said to rival Kyoto in its opulence. However it was Date Masamune, in the 17th century, who would bring lasting notoriety to the region. Masamune transformed the fishing village of Sendai into the capital of a powerful domain. His descendants ruled until the Meiji Restoration brought an end to the feudal system, and an end to Tōhoku’s influence.

Though Tōhoku tends to be seen from the outside as a cohesive region, there are historic differences within the area. Blessed with rich alluvial plains, the coast along the Sea of Japan became an agricultural centre supplying rice to the imperial capital and, as a result, picked up more influence from Kyoto. Farming was less productive on the Pacific side, and the coast rocky, wind-battered and difficult to navigate, resulting in a strong culture of perseverance born of hardship and isolation.

National Parks

Sprawling over Fukushima, Niigata and Yamagata Prefectures, **Bandai-Asahi National Park** (磐梯朝日国立公園) is the third-largest protected area in Japan at 1,870-sq-km. The region is defined to the south by the Bandai-Azuma mountain range

and to the north by the holy peaks of Dewa Sanzan.

The **Rikuchū-kaigan National Park** (陸中海岸国立公園) runs 180km along the Pacific coast from Kuji in Iwate Prefecture to Kesennuma in Miyagi Prefecture. It is characterized by sheer cliffs, crashing waves and, to the south, deep inlets and rocky beaches.

Further north, the 855-sq-km **Towada-Hachimantai National Park** (十和田八幡平国立公園) is a vast wilderness area of beech forests, volcanic peaks, crater lakes and alpine plateaus that straddles Akita and Aomori Prefectures.

The UNESCO-protected **Shirakami-sanchi** (白神山地) is a primeval beech forest, also on the Akita-Aomori border. One of the last of its kind in East Asia, it harbours a number of protected species, such as the Asiatic black bear and the golden eagle.

Getting There & Around

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Exploration of the more remote parts of Tōhoku is possible with local train and minor bus connections, but car rental is preferable. Be advised, however, that roads can be severely affected by winter weather.

TRAIN

The JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* (bullet train) line travels as far as Aomori. From there, limited-express and local trains run further north to Hokkaido. The Akita *shinkansen* and Yamagata *shinkansen* branches run through central Tōhoku to the Sea of Japan coast.

The JR Tōhoku main line runs roughly the same route as the Tōhoku *shinkansen*, but with regular local and express trains, and only as far as Morioka, after which private lines take over. A combination of JR and private lines run along the east and west coasts.

ROAD-TRIPPING TŌHOKU

Northern Honshū is a great region to get around by car. You’ll have more flexibility than the established public transportation routes allow, and you can even get off the grid entirely.

In particular, Shimokita Peninsula (p34) and Sado-ga-shima (p54) are two destinations where having a car can make all the difference. There are some stunning vistas here where you’ll want the freedom to linger, and driving those winding coastal roads is just plain fun. Towada-ko (p33) and Tazawa-ko (p38) also make for wonderfully scenic drives.

Tōhoku has a solid network of expressways, signposted in romaji, and well-maintained prefectural roads. Traffic is much lighter here than in central Honshū, though facilities are often few and far between. If you’re travelling between November and April, check in with a nearby tourist information centre (or call ahead to your destination) for the latest road conditions; road closures caused by snow are not uncommon.

FUKUSHIMA PREFECTURE

Fukushima-ken (福島県), Japan's third-largest prefecture, serves as the gateway to Tōhoku. Here the mountains that characterise the north begin to pick up. Come this far, and you've left the Tokyo day trippers behind; the wild, varied terrain of the Bandai Plateau attracts hikers and skiers keen on deeper exploration. Outside of the few cities, the largest of which is the capital Fukushima, development is sparse. Fukushima's top cultural attraction is the medieval capital of Aizu-Wakamatsu – a town with a dramatic, and disturbing, past.

Aizu-Wakamatsu 会津若松

0242 / POP 125,000

Aizu-Wakamatsu is a pilgrimage spot for Japanese history buffs, a former feudal capital with a story to tell. It's a sprawling city, really, but the downtown area, where the sights are, plays up its history well. Nanokamachi-dōri, in particular, has a number of old-fashioned shops selling local crafts. Aizu is also famous for its sake and there are a number of breweries around town that do tours, and tastings, too.

History

Aizu-Wakamatsu was once the capital of the Aizu clan, a reign that came to an end in the Boshin Civil War of 1868, when the clan sided with the Tokugawa shōgunate against the imperial faction. The fall of Aizu is famous throughout Japan on account of the *Byakkotai* (White Tigers). This group of teenage samurai committed seppuku (ritual suicide by disembowelment) when they saw Tsuruga Castle shrouded in smoke. In reality, it was the surrounding area that was ablaze, and it would be weeks before defeat would be final. Yet the White Tigers emerged as a powerful symbol of loyalty and fraternity.

👁 Sights

The main sights in Aizu are conveniently arranged in a ring around the fringes of downtown, and a surprising amount of English signage makes it easy to get around on foot. Alternatively, the retro Classic Town Bus loops around the city.

Tsuruga-jō

(鶴ヶ城; Crane Castle; ☎27-4005; Ōte-machi; museum & tea house admission ¥500; 🕒8.30am-

CASTLE

📍 JR EAST PASS

The **JR East Pass** (www.jreast.co.jp/e/eastpass) offers unlimited rail travel around Tokyo and eastern Honshū (including all of Tōhoku, plus Niigata and Nagano). It's cheaper than the full JR Pass and good for four flexible days, or five or 10 consecutive days. Passes can be purchased in Japan at both Narita and Haneda airports or at major JR train stations. The pass is only valid for foreign passport holders on a temporary visitor visa; you will need to show your passport and visa when you purchase the pass. Note that this pass does not cover travel on JR buses.

4.30pm) The towering 1965 reconstruction of Tsuruga-jō sits among sprawling grounds framed by the original moat and some remaining ruins of the old castle walls. Inside, there is a museum with historical artefacts from battle and daily life, though the real draw is the terrific view from the 5th-floor lookout. There's also an evocative, 400-year-old tea house that was rescued from the castle's destruction by a local family, and returned here in 1990.

limori-yama

MEMORIAL

(飯盛山) On the eastern edge of the city is limori-yama, the mountain where the White Tiger samurai killed themselves. You can opt to take an escalator or walk to the top to visit their graves. There are also some creepy old monuments here, gifted by the former fascist regimes of Germany and Italy, in honour of the samurai's loyalty and bravery.

At the foot of the mountain, the **Byakkotai Kinenkan** (白虎隊記念館; ☎24-9170; 33 Bentenshita, Ikki-machi; admission ¥400; 🕒8am-5pm Apr-Nov, 9am-4pm Dec-Mar) tells the story of the dramatic suicides and houses the personal possessions of the departed samurai.

On the way down, don't miss the **Sazae-dō** (さざえ堂; ☎22-3163; admission ¥400; 🕒8:15am-sunset Apr-Oct, 9am-sunset Nov-Mar), a rare 18th-century wooden hall (that has nothing to do with the White Tigers). It has a fabulous spiral staircase that, Escheresque, allows you to walk up and down without retracing your steps.

Aizu Bukeyashiki

HISTORIC BUILDING

(会津武家屋敷; ☎28-2525; Innai Higashiyama-machi; admission ¥850; 🕒8.30am-5pm Apr-Oct,

THE GREAT EAST JAPAN EARTHQUAKE

At 2.46pm (JST) on 11 March 2011 a magnitude 9.0 earthquake struck off the eastern coast of Tōhoku. The Higashi-Nihon Dai-Shinsai (東日本大震災), or Great East Japan Earthquake, was the most powerful quake to hit Japan since record-keeping began in the early 20th century, and among the five strongest ever recorded in the world. However, it was the tsunami that followed just 20 minutes later that brought the most devastation, levelling coastal communities and bringing the death toll to nearly 20,000.

Travelling in the Region

All of Tōhoku's major tourist destinations are open and accessible. Sendai, the capital of Miyagi, was hit hard on the coast but the downtown looks unchanged; in fact, as the de facto headquarters of the reconstruction effort, the city is booming. Matsushima, the famous bay further up the coast, sustained some damage but is now fine. However, some off-the-beaten track destinations, like the island of Kinkasan, are not yet ready for visitors. Others, like Ishinomaki and Oku-Matsushima, fall somewhere in between; it's possible to visit, but you'll have to work a little harder to get there.

Rail travel remains suspending along some coastal routes; we've given alternate bus routes for effected destinations. For an updated list of JR line closures see <http://www.jreast.co.jp/e/eastpass/index.html>. For closures along the private Sanriku Tetsudō line, which serves the coast of Iwate Prefecture, see www.sanrikutetsudou.com.

Be aware that in some smaller towns along the northeast coast accommodations are routinely filled with construction workers; if you're planning to explore this area, make sure to call ahead.

The Road to Recovery

Areas that were damaged by the earthquake but spared by the tsunami – and the line was stark – were quick to rebound, making the necessary repairs and returning to life as usual. It is a different story for the areas in Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures where the tsunami hit the hardest. Optimistic estimates put recovery at five years, more realistic ones put it at 10 to 15 years – at least. For the most part, the rubble has been cleared, though what to do with it remains a question. The devastation is now more apparent in what is missing: large swaths of coastland populated with nothing but knee-high grass.

It is time to begin rebuilding, but the question is, where? Given the risk of future tsunami, should the coastline even be rebuilt at all? Smaller, more nimble communities have simply opted to pull up their roots and rebuild further inland. Larger ones, with diverse interests, find it harder to reach consensus, and thus harder to move on.

And then, should rebuilding duplicate the past, or aim for something new? Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures were, before the disaster, among the poorest and least developed in the country. Especially among the younger generation there is a push for something new. But what would that look like, and who should decide, the government or the people? These are the kind of questions being raised within the affected communities and, to a certain degree, all over Japan.

For information on volunteering to help the recovery effort, see p16.

The Fukushima Question

Following the earthquake and tsunami, the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant experienced meltdown in three of its reactors, resulting in a Level 7 nuclear disaster, considered to be the worst since Chernobyl. A 20km exclusion zone remains around the plant, which is located on the coast, 58km from the capital city of Fukushima (and 80km from Sendai); however, it has become clear that radioactive contamination exists outside the zone as well. For most travellers, this is the biggest question mark. It's a good idea to look at the maps compiled by Safe Cast (www.safecast.org) an independent group of volunteers with Geiger counters who have been uploading data from around the country, to get an idea of contamination levels in the area. Keep in mind that the risks faced by long-term residents far outweigh those encountered by short-term travellers.

DON'T MISS

THE DELICACIES OF THE DEEP NORTH

Eating in Tōhoku is about simple pleasures: the bounty of the land and sea where and when it exists and, when it doesn't, making the most of what you've got.

Gyū-tan (牛タン; cow tongue), grilled over charcoal and served with a side of tail soup, is much loved by Sendai locals. Apparently the tradition derived from hard times (as so many Tōhoku traditions do). For good times, there's **Yonezawa-gyū** (米沢牛), the premium grade beef of Yonezawa.

You can't leave Akita without sampling its most famous dish, **kiritanpo** (きりたんぽ) – kneaded rice wrapped around bamboo spits and then barbecued over a charcoal fire. More often than not it's served in a chicken and soy-sauce broth with vegetables to make a hotpot called **kiritanpo-nabe** (きりたんぽ鍋). Another Akita specialty is **inaniwa udon** (稲庭うどん), thinner-than-usual wheat noodles.

Morioka is all about noodles: There's the all-you-can-eat noodle extravaganza that is **wanko-soba** (わんこそば) and **jaja-men** (じゃじゃめん), flat wheat noodles topped with sliced cucumber, miso paste and ground meat. When it comes to *rāmen*, the little Fukushima town of Kitakata punches above its weight.

With a coastline that stretches from the Pacific to the Sea of Japan, Aomori Prefecture is known for fresh seafood like **uni** (うに; sea urchin roe) and **hotate** (ホタテ; scallops). The village of Ōma, at the tip of the Shimokita Peninsula, is said to have the finest tuna in the country.

9am-5pm Sat & Sun) On the main street; has an international ATM.

Police Box (☎22-1877, main office 22-5454) In front of the train station.

Tourist Information Center (☎33-0688; ☺9am-5.30pm) Helpful staff and English maps; inside the JR station.

i Getting There & Away

BUS

Highway buses connect Aizu-Wakamatsu and Tokyo (¥4800, 4½ hours).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The **Tōhoku Expressway** (東北自動車道) runs between Tokyo and Kōriyama, while the **Banetsu Expressway** (磐越自動車道) connects Kōriyama and Aizu-Wakamatsu.

TRAIN

The JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* runs hourly between Tokyo and Kōriyama (¥7970, 1¼ hours). Kōriyama is connected to Aizu-Wakamatsu by the JR Banetsu-saisen line; hourly *kaisoku* (rapid) trains (¥1110, 1¼ hours) ply this scenic route.

There are a couple of daily *kaisoku* on the JR Ban-etsu and Shin-etsu lines between Aizu-Wakamatsu and Niigata (¥2210, 2¾ hours); you'll need to change trains at Niitsu.

i Getting Around

The retro **Classic Town Bus** (まちなか周遊バス; single/day pass ¥200/500) departs from out-

side the train station and does a slow loop of the main sights. Bicycle rental is available at several points around town for ¥500 per day; enquire at the Tourist Information Center.

Bandai Plateau 磐梯高原

0241 / POP 4000

The Bandai Plateau is part of the **Bandai-Asahi National Park** (磐梯朝日国立公園) and attracts hikers, climbers, fishing enthusiasts, skiers and snowboarders with its spectacular scenery and vast potential for independent exploration. In the centre is **Bandai-san** (磐梯山; 1819m), a once-dormant volcano that erupted suddenly in 1888, spewing forth a tremendous amount of debris that's said to have lowered the mountain's height by 600m. The force of the eruption destroyed dozens of villages and completely rearranged the landscape, resulting in the vast lake-dotted plateau now known as Bandai-kōgen.

i Activities

Goshiki-numa

WALKING

(五色沼) The area's most popular walk follows a 3.7km nature trail around a dozen or so pools known collectively as the Five Colours Lakes. Mineral deposits from the eruption imparted various hues to the waters – cobalt blue, emerald green, reddish brown – that change depending on the weather.

There are trailheads located at the Goshiki-numa Iriguchi and Bandai-kōgen bus stops, the main transport hubs on the edge of Hibara-ko. This route is serviced by buses that depart from the town of Inawashiro. In April, the Goshiki-numa trail may still be covered in packed snow, and November marks the start of the long Tōhoku winter.

Bandai-san

HIKING

(磐梯山) Bandai-san can be climbed in a day with an early start, and the view from the top takes in the surrounding mountain ranges and Inawashiro Lake to the south. There are six trails up the mountain. The one from the **Ura-Bandai Tozan-guchi** (裏磐梯登山口) is the easiest to reach by public transportation – and the most challenging at seven hours up and back. From Inawashiro Station take a bus to Bandai-kōgen. After a climb through ski grounds, the path meets up with the one starting from **Happō-dai** (八方台), the shortest, most popular route. Pick up a *tozan mappu* (trail map) at the tourist information centre; note that the summit is only accessible from mid-May to late-October.

Inawashiro Ski Park

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

(猪苗代スキー場; ☎0242-62-5100; www.g-jmt.com/inawashiro/eng/index.php; 1-day lift ticket ¥4400; ☀Dec-Mar) The original ski area on Bandai-san, Inawashiro has 16 runs, all but two of which are beginner and inter-

mediate. Wide slopes, a slow-speed lift and scant weekday crowds make this resort particularly suited to novice skiers and families with small children. Seasoned veterans may quickly grow bored with the lack of options, though it's worth pointing out that the signature black diamond run is a 1.5 kilometre-long chute that frequently stages national competitions.

English signage is sufficient, and there are a number of restaurants on the premises. Full equipment rental is also available for ¥3900 per day. The slopes are located in the hills above Inawashiro town. During the ski season, frequent shuttle buses run between Inawashiro Station and the resort.

Sleeping

Urabandai Youth Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(裏磐梯ユースホステル; ☎32-2811; <http://homepage3.nifty.com/urabandai/indexe.html>; camping from ¥1000, dm without/with 2 meals from ¥3600/5100, YHA discount ¥3000/4500; cabin from ¥5000; ☀May-Oct; ♻️📶📶) One of the region's classic mountaineering institutions, this hostel is supremely located next to the Goshiki-numa trailhead, a seven-minute walk from the Goshiki-numa Iriguchi bus stop (there are signs). Choose one of the dorm rooms for a social atmosphere, grab a camping spot if you want to rough it or share a romantic cabin in the woods with your better half.

MATSUO BASHŌ

'Another year is gone, a traveller's shade on my head, straw sandals at my feet.'

Matsuo Bashō, *Account of Exposure to the Fields* (1685)

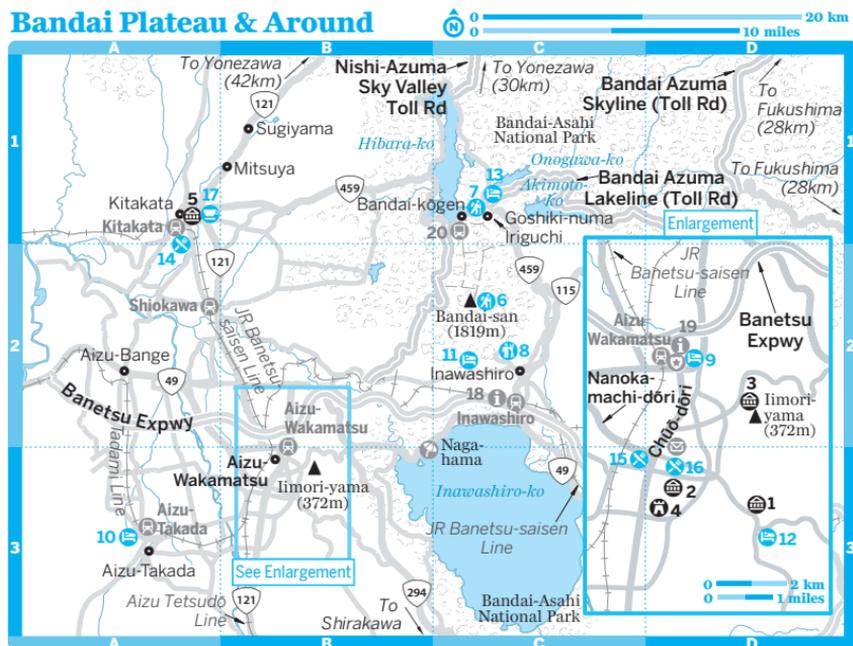
Regarded as Japan's master of haiku, Matsuo Bashō (1644–94) is credited with elevating its status from comic relief to Zen-infused enlightenment.

Bashō was born into a samurai family, and served the feudal lord Yoshitada into his late teenage years. Moving first to Kyoto, and then to Edo, Bashō found success as a published poet, but ultimately found the acclaim to be spiritually unsettling. He eventually turned to Zen, and the philosophy had a deep impact on his work. In fact, comparisons have been made between his haiku and Zen *kōan* (short riddles), intended to bring about a sudden flash of insight in the listener.

Bashō was also influenced by the natural philosophy of the Chinese Taoist sage Chuangzi, and began to examine nature uncritically. Later he developed his own poetic principle by drawing on the concept of *sabi*, a kind of spare, lonely beauty.

When he reached his 40s, Bashō decided to give his career away in favour of travelling throughout Japan, seeking to build friendships and commune with nature as he went. He published evocative accounts of his travels, including *The Records of a Weather-Beaten Skeleton* and *The Records of a Travel-Worn Satchel*, but his collection *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, detailing his journey throughout Tōhoku in 1689, is the most famous.

Bandai Plateau & Around



Bandai Plateau & Around

📍 Sights

- 1 Aizu Bukeyashiki..... D3
- 2 Aizu Sake Brewing Museum..... D3
- 3 Byakkotai Kinenkan..... D2
Sazae-dō..... (see 3)
- 4 Tsuruga-jō..... D3
- 5 Yamatogawa Sake Brewing
Museum..... A1

👣 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 6 Bandai-san..... C2
- 7 Goshiki-numa..... C1
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🏠 Sleeping

- 9 Aizu Wakamatsu Washington
Hotel..... D2
- 10 Aizuno Youth Hostel..... A3
- 11 An English Inn..... C2
- 12 Minshuku Takaku..... D3

- 13 Urabandai Youth Hostel..... C1

🍴 Eating

- 14 Genraiken..... A2
- 15 Mitsutaya..... C3
- 16 Takino..... D3

🍷 Drinking

- 17 Mamemaru..... A1

ℹ Information

- 18 Tourist Information Center..... C2
- 19 Tourist Information Center..... D2
Tourist Information Center..... (see 14)
Ura-Bandai Visitors Center..... (see 7)

🚗 Transport

- 20 Bandai-kōgen Bus Stop..... C1
Classic Town Bus..... (see 19)
Goshiki-numa Iriguchi Bus Stop... (see 7)

An English Inn

(アン・イングリッシュ・イン; ☎0242-63-0101; <http://aei.inawasiro.com>; 3449-84 Osada, Higashi-Nakamaru; r per person with 1/2 meals from ¥6500/8700; ♿) An English-Japanese couple run this pension in Inawashiro, convenient for the slopes. They're happy to

PENSION \$\$

share their local knowledge and help guests arrange their visit. With flowered wallpaper and sloping ceilings reminiscent of attic bedrooms, the Western-style rooms here have a country home feel - with the added bonus of an onsen (hot springs) bath. Ask about family rates.

i Information

Tourist Information Center (☎0242-62-2048; ☀8.30am-5pm) To the left outside Inawashiro Station.

Ura-Bandai Visitors Center (裏磐梯ビジターセンター; ☎32-2850; 1093-697 Kengamine, Hibara; ☀9am-5pm Wed-Mon Apr-Nov, to 4pm Dec-Mar) Near the Goshiki-numa Iriguchi trailhead.

i Getting There & Away

BUS

From outside Inawashiro Station, frequent buses depart from stop 3 for the Goshiki-numa Iriguchi stop (¥750, 25 minutes), before heading on to the Bandai-kōgen stop (¥870, 30 minutes).

TRAIN

Several express *kaisoku* run along the JR Banetsu-saisen line (¥480, 30 minutes) between Aizu-Wakamatsu and Inawashiro.

MIYAGI PREFECTURE

Miyagi-ken (宮城県) is something of a transition zone between the rural hinterlands of the far north and the massive urban development that typifies much of central Honshū. Its capital, Sendai, boasts excellent tourist infrastructure, unique culinary offerings and plenty of cultural attractions to boot. Of course, if you want to escape the urban trappings and get back to the nature that most likely brought you up this way, then don't miss the healing waters of Naruko Onsen and Matsushima, a worthy contender for the title of Japan's most beautiful bay.

Sendai 仙台

022 / POP 1,060,000

Despite being the largest and most commercially vibrant city in Tōhoku, Sendai is fairly compact with well-ordered, tree-lined streets that front a ruined castle. Japanese are quick to associate the city with its samurai benefactor, namely Masamune Date, and its spectacular Tanabata Matsuri, one of Japan's most famous festivals.

Sendai's downtown lies far enough inland to have been spared by the 2011 tsunami; it's as lively as ever, with the best nightlife you'll find up in the north. With good transportation connections, Sendai makes a convenient base for exploring some of the more scenic areas of Miyagi and neighbouring prefectures.

History

Sendai or the city of a 'thousand generations' was established by Date Masamune in 1600. A ruthless, ambitious *daimyō* (domain lord), Masamune turned Sendai, then a fishing village, into a feudal capital that controlled trade routes, salt supplies and grain milling throughout much of Tōhoku. The Date family ruled the Sendai-han until the Meiji Restoration brought an end to the feudal era. Yet Masamune's presence can still be felt: the roof of Miyagi Stadium's west stand is modelled after the unique crescent symbol that the *daimyō* wore on his helmet.

i Sights

It is possible to tour the city on foot, though you'd have to burn a fair amount of shoe leather to hit all the sights. Alternatively, you can take a spin on the Loope tourist bus.

DON'T MISS

TOHOKU'S FAMOUS FESTIVALS

Tōhoku is known throughout Japan for its traditional festivals, which number among the most elaborate, and raucous, in the country. While every town has its signature celebration (or two, or three), these are the 'big three' not to miss. You'll need to plan ahead though: huge crowds ensure that accommodation is booked solidly months in advance.

- ◆ Sendai Tanabata Matsuri (p15) Thousands of coloured streamers around downtown honour a tale of star-crossed lovers.
- ◆ Aomori Nebuta Matsuri (p32) Local artists outdo themselves to create elaborate floats and merrymakers take to the streets in throngs.
- ◆ Akita Kantō Matsuri (p47) Stunning acrobatics are performed with towering bamboo poles hung with lanterns.

Miyagi Prefecture



NORTHERN HONSHŪ (TŌHOKU) MIYAGI PREFECTURE

**Zuihō-den Mausoleum**

HISTORIC BUILDING

(瑞鳳殿; ☎262-6250; 23-2 Otamaya-shita, Aoba-ku; admission ¥550; 🕒9am-4.30pm Feb-Nov, to 4pm Dec & Jan; 🚗 Loope stop 4) Sendai's largest tourist drawcard is the mausoleum of Date Masamune, which sits majestically

atop the summit of a tree-covered hill by the Hirose-gawa. Built in 1637, destroyed by Allied bombing during WWII, and eventually reconstructed in 1979, the present building is an exact replica of the original. It's faithful to the ornate and sumptuous

KITAKATA

喜多方

An old Kitakata saying goes: 'A man is not a man unless he has built at least one *kura* (mud-walled storehouse):

There are literally thousands of these *kura*, constructed between the late 18th and early 20th centuries, scattered around the area; there are dozens within walking distance of the station alone. Some have been turned into tourist facilities, like galleries and souvenir shops; others house ordinary businesses, like drug stores. While each is unique, they share a few common elements, such as thick plaster walls and tile roofs.

Step inside the **Yamatogawa Sake Brewing Museum** (大和川酒蔵北方風土館; 4716 Teramachi; ☀9am-4.30pm) to peak inside a *kura* that dates to 1790 and, until twenty years ago, functioned as a sake brewery. It's a 15-minute walk north of the station.

East of the museum and across the river, Otazukikura-dōri has a cluster of pretty *kura* that are a draw for photographers. **Mamemaru** (豆〇; 2854 Minami-machi; coffee & dessert set ¥600; ☀10am-4pm), once a miso storehouse, is now a cafe that serves sweets (like ice cream and pudding) spiked with the fermented bean paste. Look for the wooden sign on the pale yellow – yes, miso-coloured – *kura*.

Where the quest for storehouses leaves off, the quest for noodles begins: Kitakata is now just as famous for its *rāmen* as it is for its *kura* obsession. Kitakata's signature noodles are thick and curly, and served up in a hearty pork and fish broth that makes use of local spring water, soy sauce and sake. Delicious.

Of the 100-plus *rāmen* shops in town, **Genraiken** (源来軒; ☎22-0091; 7745 Ippongi-ue; bowls from ¥600; ☀10am-7.30pm Wed-Mon) is the most famous, and the oldest. Find it one block north and one block east of the station, with a red facade and a queue.

The **Tourist Information Center** (☎8.30am-5pm), just outside the train station, can provide English maps.

Kitakata can be reached from Aizu-Wakamatsu by frequent trains along the JR Banetsu-saisen line (¥320, 25 minutes). For drivers, Rte 121 runs between Aizu and Kitakata. Bicycle rentals are available across the street from the station for ¥500 per day.

Momoyama style: a complex, interlocking architecture, characterised by multicoloured woodcarvings. Also atop the hill are the mausoleums of Masamune's second and third successors, Date Tadamune and Date Tsunamune.

Sendai Castle Ruins

CASTLE

(仙台城跡; Sendai-jō Ato; 📍 Loople stop 6, regular bus stop 'Sendai Jō Ato Minami') Built on Aoba-yama in 1602 by Date Masamune, and destroyed during Allied bombing, Sendai-jō, also called Aoba-jō (Green Leaves Castle), still looms large over the city. Giant, moss-covered walls, as imposing as they are impressive, are still intact and the grounds offer sweeping views over the city. There's also a larger-than-life statue of Masamune on horseback.

Sendai City Museum

MUSEUM

(仙台市博物館; Sendai-shi Hakubutsukan; ☎225-3074; 26 Kawauchi, Aoba-ku; admission ¥400; ☀9am-4.45pm Tue-Sun; 📍 Loople stop 5) If you're interested in learning more about Masamune, the city museum offers a com-

prehensive account of the samurai's epic life, as well as more than 13,000 artefacts loaned from the Date family. There are plenty of explanations in English, too. Interestingly enough, although Masamune was blind in one eye, which earned him the nickname the 'One-Eyed Dragon', he is nearly always depicted in his portraits as having two eyes!

FREE Sendai Mediatheque

LIBRARY

(せんだいメディアテーク; www.smt.city.sendai.jp; 2-1 Kasuga-machi, Aoba-ku; ☀9am-10pm, gallery hours vary) Housed in an award-winning structure designed by Japanese architect Itō Toyō, this cultural hub includes a library, art galleries and event space; check the website to see if anything is going on when you're in town.

 Festivals & Events

Donto-sai

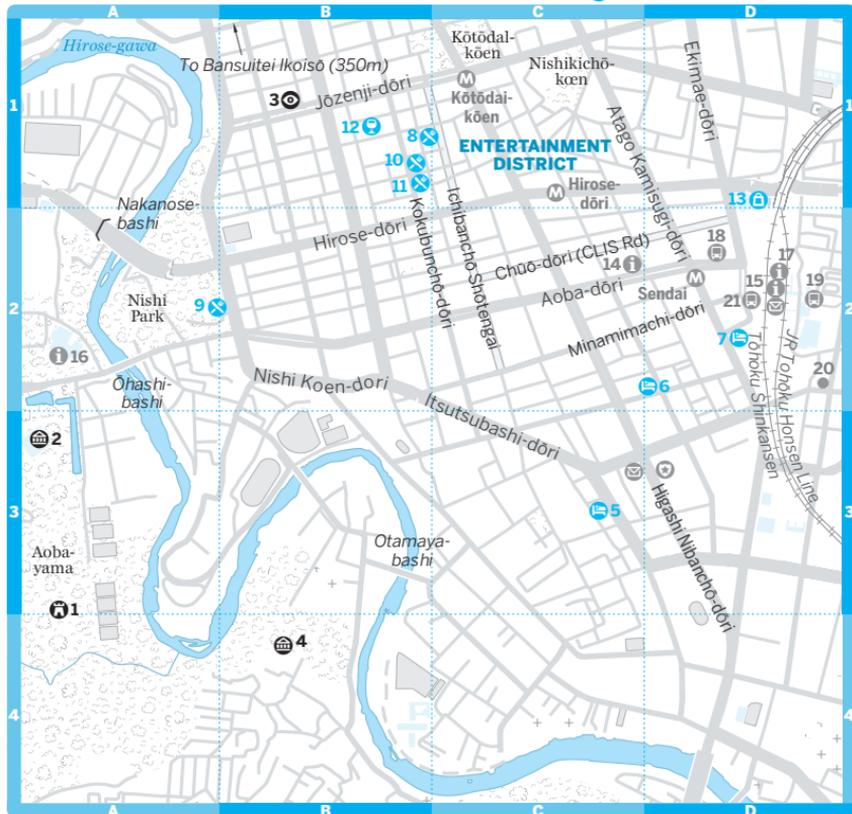
WINTER FESTIVAL

(どんと祭) On 14 January men brave sub-zero weather to don loin-cloths and pray for good fortune for the new year.

Central Sendai



NORTHERN HONSHŪ (TŌHOKU) MIYAGI PREFECTURE



Aoba Matsuri

(青葉祭り; www.aoba-matsuri.com) Following a 350-year-old tradition, dancers and floats take to the streets on the 3rd weekend in May to celebrate spring.

Sendai Tanabata Matsuri

(仙台七夕まつり; Star Festival; www.sendaitanabata.com) Sendai's biggest event, held from 6 to 8 August, celebrates a Chinese legend about the stars Vega and Altair. Vega was the king's daughter who fell in love with and married Altair, a common herder. The king disapproved, so he formed the Milky Way between them. Once a year magpies are supposed to spread their wings across the universe so that the lovers can meet – traditionally on 7 July (on the old lunar calendar). Sendai celebrates in grand style by decorating the main streets with bamboo poles festooned with multicoloured streamers, and holding afternoon parades on Jōzenji-dōri.

PARADES

A million visitors ensure that accommodation is booked solid at this time of year.

Jōzenji Street Jazz Festival

(定禅寺ストリートジャズフェスティバル; www.j-streetjazz.com) During the second weekend in September, 600 buskers from across Japan perform in Sendai's streets and arcades. Book rooms way, way in advance.

LIVE MUSIC

Sendai Pageant of Starlight

(SENDAI光のページェント) Around 600,000 festive lights illuminate Aoba-dōri and Jōzenji-dōri for two weeks from mid-December.

LIGHTS

Sleeping

★ Dōchū-an Youth Hostel

(道中庵ユースホテル; ☎247-0511; www.jyh.or.jp/yhguide/touhoku/dochuan; 31 Kita-yashiki, Ōnoda, Taihaku-ku; dm ¥3750, YHA discount ¥3150;                      

Central Sendai

📍 Sights

- 1 Sendai Castle Ruins..... A3
- 2 Sendai City Museum..... A3
- 3 Sendai Mediatheque..... B1
- 4 Zuihō-den Mausoleum..... B4

🏠 Sleeping

- 5 Aisaki Ryokan..... C3
- 6 Hotel Central Sendai..... D2
- 7 Hotel Metropolitan Sendai..... D2

🍴 Eating

- 8 Aji Tasuke..... B1
- 9 Gengo Chaya..... A2
- 10 Hosoya..... B1
- 11 Jiraiya..... B1

🍷 Drinking

- 12 Gallo..... B1

🎮 Entertainment

- Club Shaft..... (see 10)

🛍 Shopping

- 13 Maruzen..... D1

📄 Information

- 14 IACE Travel..... C2
- 15 Sendai City Information Center..... D2
- 16 Sendai International Centre..... A2
- 17 View Plaza..... D2

🚗 Transport

- 18 Bus Stop 34..... D2
- 19 JR Tōhoku Bus Center..... D2
- Loople..... (see 21)
- 20 Toyota Rent a Car..... D2
- 21 West Bus Terminal..... D2

has cosy Japanese-style rooms, genial managers, bike rental, free internet and a fantastic old cedar bath to soak in. Its only drawback is that it's quite a way south of the city centre. The closest station is Taishidō (¥180, eight minutes from Sendai Station), on the JR Tōhoku line, from where it's a six-minute walk; ask for a map at the station or print one from the website.

Sendai Chitose Youth Hostel HOSTEL \$

(仙台千登勢ユースホステル; ☎222-6329; www.jyh.or.jp/yhguide/touhoku/sendai/index.html; 6-3-8 Odawara, Aoba-ku; dm ¥3855, YHA discount ¥3255; 🍷🍺🍻) For budget digs within walking distance of the city centre, this hostel has snug Japanese-style rooms in a residential area north of the train station. From the east exit walk straight through the bus pool and make a left on the main road, walking 15 minutes until you see a drug store, then make a left followed by the second right onto a narrow street.

Bansuitei Ikoisō RYOKAN \$\$

(晩翠亭いこい荘; ☎222-7885; www.ikoisouryo.kan.co.jp; 1-8-31 Kimachi-dōri, Aoba-ku; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥4725/7350; 🍷🍺🍻) One of the few traditional inns remaining in central Sendai, Ikoisō manages to feel peaceful even within walking distance of downtown. The tatami rooms are spotless and the owners are friendly and accommodating. It's a seven-minute walk from the Kita-yoban-chō subway station.

Hotel Central Sendai BUSINESS HOTEL \$\$

(ホテルセントラル仙台; ☎711-4111; www.hotel-central.co.jp/08englis01.html; 4-2-6 Chūō, Aoba-ku; s/d from ¥7140/12,600; 🍷🍺🍻) As its name implies, Hotel Central Sendai is located smack dab in central Sendai, just two blocks west of Sendai Station. While fairly standard as far as business hotels go, it's a good choice for privacy seekers, and a much cheaper alternative to Sendai's more famous brand-name accommodation options.

Aisaki Ryokan RYOKAN \$\$

(相崎旅館; ☎264-0700; http://aisakiryokan.com; 5-6 Kitame-machi, Aoba-ku; s/tw ¥3990/7350; 🍷🍺🍻) If you're not intimidated by cramped spaces, this budget inn offers simple yet functional Japanese- and Western-style rooms with clean and modern furnishings; cheaper rooms have shared facilities. It's also within easy walking distance of the station. Aisaki is one block over from the main post office; look for the sign indicating the entrance down a narrow side street.

Hotel Metropolitan Sendai HOTEL \$\$\$

(ホテルメトロポリタン仙台; ☎268-2525; www.s-metro.stbl.co.jp/english/index.html; 1-1-1 Chūō, Aoba-ku; s/d ¥12,705/23,100; 🍷🍺🍻) For comfort and convenience, you can't beat the Metropolitan, which is part of the Sendai Station complex. Rooms here are smart, well appointed and comfortably plush.

Eating

Gyū-tan (charcoal-grilled cow tongue) is a much-loved local delicacy.

Gengo Chaya

TEAHOUSE \$

(源吾茶屋; 1-1 Sakuragaoka-kōen, Aoba-ku; snacks from ¥350; ☺ 11am-6pm; ☎) In business for 130 years, this teahouse is known for its *sundamochi*, pounded rice cakes topped with a jam made from fresh soybeans – a Sendai specialty. You can get meals here, too, but the *mochi* alone is incredibly filling. The teahouse is on the eastern edge of Sakuragaoka Park, with white *noren* curtains out front.

Hosoya

BURGERS \$

(ほそや; 2-10-7 Kokubunchō, Aoba-ku; burgers from ¥330; ☺ 12pm-10pm, to 8pm Sun; ☎) This vintage burger counter has grilled over a million patties since opening in 1950, and still serves up old-school soda fountain treats like ice-cream floats. There are a few options, like egg and cheese sandwiches, for vegetarians, too. Look for the English sign out front.

★ Aji Tasuke

JAPANESE \$\$

(味太助; ☎ 225-4641; www.aji-tasuke.co.jp; 4-4-13 Ichiban-chō, Aoba-ku; meals from ¥1400; ☺ 11.30am-10pm Wed-Mon) At this landmark restaurant it's not what you order, but how much. Everyone is here to sample the famous *gyū-tan*, served with a side of pickled cabbage and tail soup. Grab a seat at the counter to watch – and smell – the grilling in action. The restaurant is next to a small torii (shrine gate), and usually has a queue.

Jiraiya

IZAKAYA \$\$

(地雷也; ☎ 261-2164; www.jiraiya.com/pc; Basement fl, 2-1-15 Kokubunchō, Aoba-ku; dishes from ¥1050) Local seafood and sake are the draw here. Seating is elbow-to-elbow at the counter, but the atmosphere is warm and jovial. If you can splurge, try the charcoal-grilled *kinki* (also called *kichiji*, or rockfish), the house speciality. Jiraiya's entrance is on a side street, marked by a giant red lantern. Reservations are recommended on weekends, especially for groups.



Drinking & Nightlife

The Kokubunchō area is Tōhoku's largest entertainment district. It's noisy, slightly chaotic and bright, with everything from hole-in-the-wall bars and British-styled pubs to raging dancing clubs and seedy strip shows. Note that there are a fair number of hostess and host clubs here, as well as seemingly ordinary bars, that levy steep cover charges; it's a good idea to check before ordering.

Gallo

BAR

(http://gallo-bar.jimdo.com; 2-12-23 Kokubunchō, Aoba-ku; cover charge ¥500; ☺ 7pm-2am, closed irregularly) Bucking the trend for flash and brashness in Kokubunchō, this tiny basement bar has a mellow vibe and a retro-pop soundtrack. The menu specializes in fruit-infused spirits from around Japan. Our pick: the lemon and ginger-spiked *umeshū* (plum wine, ¥650). Look for the hand-painted English sign.

VOLUNTEERING IN THE TSUNAMI ZONE

With clean-up mostly finished, local aid groups have turned to helping communities rebuild. This is delicate work that differs from community to community and, for the most part, requires volunteers with a fair amount of Japanese-language skills. However, there are a handful of organisations who have the capacity to work with volunteers with little or no Japanese-language ability. You'll need to apply in advance, and ideally as as possible.

Peace Boat (<http://peaceboat.jp/relief/volunteer>) accepts volunteers for two days or more to work on projects in Ishinomaki or Onagawa. This could mean tying nets to help *hoya* (sea squirt) cultivators get back to work or helping with preparations for a local festival. Work starts on Monday, Wednesday or Saturday after a brief orientation session at the Peace Boat Ishinomaki Center.

O.G.A For Aid (www.ogaforaid.org/en) needs volunteers to work on a farming project that aims to provide a steady stream of fresh veggies and extra income to a community whose fishing industry was completely wiped out by the tsunami. Run by an international, multilingual lot, O.G.A is based in Minami-Sanriku, up the coast from Ishinomaki.

Both organisations can provide volunteers with basic accommodation for a small fee.

AKIU ONSEN

Akiu Onsen (秋保温泉) was the Date clan's favourite therapeutic retreat, with a natural saltwater spring that's said to be a curative for back pain and arthritis. There are dozens of inns here that offer up their baths to day-trippers.

You can also stretch your legs along the rim of **Rairai-kyō** (磊々峡), a 20-metre deep gorge that runs through the village. Pick up maps and a list of bathhouses at the **Tourist Information Center** (☎398-2323; akiuonsenkumiai.com/en/index.html; ☎9am-6pm) at the Akiu Sato Center (two bus stops before the terminus at Akiu Onsen Yumoto).

In the hills west of town is **Akiu Ōtaki** (秋保大滝), a 6m-wide, 55m-high waterfall designated as one of Japan's three most famous waterfalls (Japanese do love those famous sets of three!). View the falls from a scenic outlook or hike down 20 minutes to the bottom.

Buses leave hourly from stop 8 at Sendai Station's west bus pool for Akiu Onsen (¥780, 50 minutes). On weekends, there are two buses daily that continue to Akiu Ōtaki (¥1070, 1½ hours). Otherwise, catch one of the few buses from the Akiu Sato Center for the falls (¥630, 20 minutes).

Club Shaft

(☎722-5651; www.clubshaft.com; 4th fl, Yoshiokaya Dai 3 Bldg, 2-10-11 Kokubunchō, Aoba-ku) This perennial venue spins a shuffled playlist of hip-hop, house and J-pop. You'll have a great time here, and most likely regret it once the hangover kicks in.

DANCE CLUB

☎9am-8pm) English-speaking staff, international newspaper library and bulletin board.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

IACE Travel (☎211-0489; http://www.iace.co.jp; 2-2-1 Chūō, Aoba-ku; ☎10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat, closed Sun) For international travel arrangements.

View Plaza (びゅうプラザ; 2nd fl, JR Sendai Station; ☎10am-7pm) For domestic travel arrangements, including ferry tickets.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Maruzen (丸善; ☎264-0151; 1-3-1 Chūō, Aoba-ku; ☎10am-9pm, to 8pm Sun & holidays) English-language magazines and books.

EMERGENCY

Sendai Central Police Station (仙台中央警察署; ☎222-7171; 1-3-19 Itsutsubashi, Aoba-ku)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Sendai City Hospital (仙台市立病院; ☎266-7111, 24hr emergency hotline 216-9960; http://hospital.city.sendai.jp; 3-1 Shimizu-kōji, Wakabayashi-ku; ☎outpatient services 8.30am-11.30am Mon-Fri)

MONEY & POST

Sendai Central Post Office (仙台中央郵便局; ☎267-8035; 1-7 Kitame-machi, Aoba-ku; ☎ATM 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm Sat, to 7pm Sun) There's also a branch on the 1st floor of Sendai Station; both have international ATMs.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Sendai City Information Center (☎222-4069; www.sentabi.jp/1000/10000000.html; 2nd fl, JR Sendai Station; ☎8.30am-7pm) Pick up English maps and brochures here.

Sendai International Centre (仙台国際センター; ☎265-2471; www.sira.or.jp/icenter/english/index.html; Aoba-yama, Aoba-ku;

Getting There & Away

AIR

From Sendai airport, 18km south of the city centre, flights head to/from Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Hiroshima, Sapporo and many other destinations.

The Sendai Kūkō Access line leaves roughly every 20 minutes from Sendai Station for the airport (¥630, 25 minutes).

BOAT

From the port of Sendai-kō, **Taiheyo Ferry** (☎263-9877; www.taiheyo-ferry.co.jp/english/index.html) runs one daily ferry to Tomakomai on Hokkaidō (from ¥7000, 15 hours), and three to four ferries per week to Nagoya (from ¥6500, 22 hours).

Buses leave from stop 34 at Sendai Station for Sendai-kō (¥490, 40 minutes), but only until 6pm.

BUS

Highway buses depart from outside the east exit of the train station, and connect Sendai to major cities throughout Honshū. Purchase tickets at the **JR Tōhoku Bus Center** (☎256-6646; www.jrbustohoku.co.jp; ☎6.50am-7.30pm), next to bus stop 42.

i SENDAI MARUGOTO PASS

The **Sendai Marugoto Pass** (仙台まるごとパス; adult/child ¥2600/1300) covers two-day unlimited travel on the Loope tourist bus, Sendai subway and area trains and buses going as far as Matsushima-kaigan, Akiu Onsen and Yamadera (in Yamagata Prefecture). Pick one up at JR Sendai Station.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The **Tōhoku Expressway** (東北自動車道) runs between Tokyo and the greater Sendai area.

Toyota Rent a Car (☎293-0100; <http://rent.toyota.co.jp/en/index.html>; 1-5-3 Tsutsujigaoka, Miyagino-ku; ☀8am-8pm) has an office a few blocks east of the station.

TRAIN

There are hourly trains on the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* between Tokyo and Sendai (¥10,590, two hours), and between Sendai and Morioka (¥6290, 45 minutes).

There are several daily *kaisoku* (rapid) trains on the JR Senzan line between Sendai and Yamagata (¥1110, 1¼ hours), via Yamadera (¥820, one hour). Local trains on the JR Senseki line connect Sendai and Matsushima-kaigan (¥400, 35 minutes); make sure to get one going all the way to Takagi-machi.

i Getting Around

The **Loope** (one ride/day pass ¥250/600) tourist trolley leaves from the west bus pool's stop 15-3 every 30 minutes from 9am to 4pm, taking a useful loop around the city in a clockwise direction.

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

Matsushima 松島

022 / POP 15,800

Matsushima's glorious bay, studded with some 260 pine-covered islands, is one of Japan's *Nihon Sankei* (Three Great Views). Over the centuries, the trees have been slowly twisted by the winds, while their rocky bases have been eroded by the lapping waves. The result is a spectacular monument to nature's dramatic powers.

Bashō, who filled his journal with apprehensions about the journey northward, frequently dreamed of moonlit nights over

Matsushima. More recently, locals credit the islands – which served as a natural breakwater – with mostly sparing Matsushima the devastation seen elsewhere along the coast after the 2011 tsunami.

Matsushima is the most popular tourist destination on the northeast coast and can get very crowded, especially on summer weekends. Still, its charms are undeniable.

i Sights

Matsushima-kaigan, where the sights are, is essentially a small village, easily navigated on foot.

Zuigan-ji

TEMPLE

(瑞巖寺; admission ¥700; ☀8am-3.30pm Jan & Dec, to 4pm Feb & Nov, to 4.30pm Mar & Oct, to 5pm Apr-Sep) Tōhoku's finest Zen temple, Zuigan-ji was established in 828 AD. The present buildings were constructed in 1606 by Date Masamune to serve as a family temple. Zuigan-ji is currently undergoing a major restoration project that will last until 2019. As a result, some buildings are closed and others, though it is possible to enter them, are sheathed in tarps. Still open is the excellent Seiryūden (temple museum), which includes a number of well-preserved relics from the Date family, including national treasures.

Kanran-tei

PAVILION

(観瀾亭; admission ¥200; ☀8.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar) This pavilion was presented to the Date family by the *daimyō* Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late 16th century. It served as a genteel venue for tea ceremonies and moon viewing parties – the name means 'a place to view ripples on the water'. Today it's a peaceful spot for sipping a bowl of whisked *matcha* (powdered green tea).

Godai-dō

TEMPLE

(五大堂) Date Masamune constructed this small wooden temple in 1604. Though it stands on an island in the bay, connected to the mainland by a short bridge, it was miraculously untouched by the 2011 tsunami. The temple doors open to the public only once every 33 years (next in 2039). Come instead for the sea views and to see the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac carved on the eaves.

Fuku-ura-jima

ISLAND

(福浦島; admission ¥200; ☀8am-5pm Mar-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Feb) Connected to the mainland by a 252m-long, red wooden bridge, Fuku-

ura-jima puts you right in the bay. The shady trails here, which wind along the coast through native pines and a botanic garden, make for a pleasant hour-long stroll.

Activities

Matsushima-wan

SCENIC CRUISE

(松島湾; www.matsushima.or.jp; adult/child ¥1400/700; ☀9am-3pm) To get a sense of the scale of the bay, and its dense cluster of pine-topped islands that sit like so many bonsai floating in a giant's backyard pond, you need to get out on the water. Cruise boats depart hourly, year-round from the central ferry pier, completing a 50-minute loop. A running commentary, most of which is translated into English, provides trivia on some of the more famous islands. Between April and October, you can opt for a longer course (¥2500, 1¼ hours) that goes all the way to Oku-Matsushima.

Festivals & Events

Matsushima Kaki Matsuri

FOOD

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

Zuigan-ji Tōdō

LIGHTS

(瑞巖寺灯道) The approach to Zuigan-ji is enhanced from 6 to 8 August, when candlesticks are lit along the path for the event, which honours this ancient shrine.

Matsushima Ryūtōe Umi-no-bon

O-BON

(松島流灯会海の盆; <http://uminobon.jp>) In mid-August, the souls of the departed are honoured with the O-Bon (Festival of the Dead) ritual, when lighted lanterns are floated out to sea.

Sleeping & Eating

Bistro Abalon

PENSION \$\$

(びすとろアバロン; ☎354-5777; www.bistro.abalon.com/06/index.html; 26-21 Sanjugari; s/d ¥6300/10,500, r per person with 2 meals ¥12,000; ☎☺☷) This pension looks like a little chalet perched on a hill. Inside, however, are dark wood beams, rattan furniture and bamboo shades. The nicer rooms have balconies and views of the sea. Meals are a feast of locally sourced seafood, beef and produce. The inn is a seven-minute walk up the hill behind Matsushima-kaigan Station.

Hotel Ubudo

LUXURY HOTEL \$\$\$

(ホテル海風土; ☎355-0022; www.ubudo.jp; 5-3 Matsushima-machi; r per person with 2 meals from ¥18,000; ☎☺☷) Fancy catching the sunrise over the bay from your window, or perhaps from the bath? This onsen hotel gets top billing for its fabulous *rotemburo*, which faces out towards the bay; when the hotel's not too crowded, guests can reserve it for private use. The spacious rooms are either Japanese or Western style; the priciest ones come with private baths on the balcony. Meals are lavish *kaiseki* (Japanese haute cuisine) courses that showcase the rich variety of local seafood. The hotel is away from the fray, past the bridge to Fukuura-jima, but still within walking distance of the main sights.

Santori Chaya

JAPANESE \$

(さんとり茶屋; 24-4-1 Senzui; meals from ¥980; ☀11.30am-3pm, 5pm-10pm Thu-Tue) Perennial local favourites from land and sea, like *kaisen-don* (mixed sashimi on rice) and *gyū-tan* (beef tongue), are on the menu here, along with seasonal specialities like Matsushima's famous oysters. Seating is on floor cushions on the second floor; try to catch a table by

OKU-MATSUSHIMA

On the eastern curve of the bay, remote Oku-Matsushima (奥松島) saw far more tsunami damage than Matsushima. At the time of research little had been rebuilt. It is still possible to visit **Ōtakamori** (大高森), a hill in the middle of Miyota Island that offers stunning views of the bay; however, you will have to work to get here. The tourist information centre in Matsushima can help you arrange a taxi there and back for about ¥6000. Otherwise, it's an hour walk from the closest bus stop at Nobiru (¥230, 20 minutes). Cross the bridge in front of the bus stop and head to the coast, turning right on the newly paved road and continuing until you see the sign for the trailhead and a small parking lot. There are no facilities (or street lights) along the way, so pack water and make sure you can make it back before dark. It's a 15-minute walk from the trailhead to the top of Ōtakamori.

the window. The restaurant is in a beige building with an indigo banner and has a picture menu.

i Information

Tourist Information Center (☎354-2263; www.matsushima-kanko.com; ☀9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-5pm Sat & Sun) English brochures, accommodation booking and the latest info on Oku-Matsushima.

i Getting There & Away

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

For drivers, Matsushima can be reached from Sendai via the **Sanriku Expressway** (三陸自動車道).

TRAIN

Frequent trains on the JR Senseki line connect Sendai and Matsushima-kaigan (¥400, 35 minutes).

Due to tsunami damage, rail service is disrupted beyond Takagi-machi (one stop after Matsushima-kaigan) as far as Yamato. A bus runs along this route instead, leaving from Matsushima-kaigan Station and stopping at Nobiru (¥230, 20 minutes), the closest stop for Oku-Matsushima; buy a regular JR ticket at the train station to use on the bus. Trains on the Senseki line for Ishinomaki pick up again from Yamoto.

Ishinomaki 石巻

0225 / POP 152,000

This seaside city's singular tourist attraction is one that matters big to manga fans: **Ishinomaki Mangattan Museum** (石ノ森萬画館; ☎96-5055; www.man-bow.com/manga; 2-7 Nakase; adult/child ¥800¥200; ☀9am-6pm Mar-Nov, to 5pm Wed-Mon Dec-Feb, closed 3rd Tue Mar-Nov). Looking like an otherworldly spaceship, this museum is packed with tributes to influential *manga-ka* (cartoonist) and local hero Shōtarō Ishinomori. Ishinomori is most famous for creating the *Cyborg 009* and *Kamen Rider* series.

The museum, and Ishinomaki, were heavily damaged by the 2011 tsunami. At the time of research, the museum was still undergoing reconstruction but was set to reopen in November 2012. From the train station it's about a 20-minute walk; pick up a map at the **Tourist Information Center** (☎93-6448; www.i-kanko.com; ☀9am-5.30pm) just outside the station. Along the way you'll spot a few statues of Ishinomori's characters, a teaser for what's to come.

Most travellers just come for the afternoon, but if you'd like to spend more time getting to know the city, now in the process of rebuilding, you can bed down for the night at the guesthouse run by Ishinomaki 2.0.

The JR Senseki line, which connects Sendai and Ishinomaki, is currently suspended between Takagi-machi and Yamato. Travellers coming from Matsushima-kaigan should take a bus to Yamato and connect with the Senseki line there for Ishinomaki (¥480, 1½ hours). Direct highway buses leave from stop 33 in front of Sendai Station for Ishinomaki (¥800, 1½ hours) roughly twice an hour.

Naruko Onsen 鳴子温泉

0229 / POP 8500

Come to Naruko Onsen to hear the clipp of *geta* (Japanese clogs) as *yukata* (Japanese robe)-clad bathers saunter between spring-fed baths. Breathe in and smell the sulphurous steam as it rises from street culverts. Stop and soak tired feet in the (free!) *ashiyu* (foot baths), or go for the full wash in one of the town's onsen ryokan. Naruko Onsen is famous for having nine distinct springs, whose waters have different mineral content and thus different healing qualities. Take advantage of the Yumeguri Ticket (¥1200) to visit the baths at several different inns.

Sights & Activities

Taki-no-yu

ONSEN

(滝の湯; admission ¥150; ☀7.30am-10pm) This fabulously atmospheric wooden bathhouse is a sheer delight that has hardly changed in 150 years. Water gushes in from *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) channels, carrying with it various elements and minerals including sulphur, sodium bicarbonate and sodium chloride. This particular onsen is famous for its therapeutic relief of high blood pressure and hardened arteries.

Naruko-kyō

HIKING

(鳴子峡) Northwest of Naruko town, this 100m-deep gorge is particularly spectacular in the fall when the leaves change colour. At the time of research, the trail leading to the gorge from town was closed for repairs. An alternative course, which loops around two bridges in about an hour, can be reached from Nakayama-daira Onsen

ISHINOMAKI

Sure, cachet isn't up there with infrastructure, but it can certainly help a city attract a young, vibrant population. Ishinomaki was devastated by the earthquake and tsunami, but even before that it was on its way to becoming a city of shuttered storefronts.

Ishinomaki 2.0, a collective of creative types from Sendai and Tokyo, NPO workers and local merchants, is working to 'upgrade' the city by taking abandoned, damaged buildings and turning them into something, well, cool. So far they've got a workshop to brand 'made in Ishinomaki' goods, a bar and a guesthouse, where dorm beds costs just ¥2000 a night. Stop by the hub, **Irori** (☎ 0225-25-4953; <http://ishinomaki2.com/v2/english>; 2-10-2 Chūdō; ☀ 10am-7pm; ♿), to see what else is going on; you're welcome to hang out and use their wi-fi for the price of a cup of coffee. It's in the town centre, a 10-minute walk from Ishinomaki Station.

Station (¥180, seven minutes). This path also intersects with a 10km stretch of the old foot highway, walked by the haiku poet Bashō, which is now a hiking trail. Pick up maps and the latest trail info at the tourist information centre.

Sleeping

Yusaya Ryokan RYOKAN \$\$
(ゆさや旅館; ☎ 83-2565; www.yusaya.co.jp; 84 Yumoto; r per person with 2 meals from ¥13,800; ♿) Among the many charms of this country inn is the chance to bathe in three different baths, which take their waters from different springs. The particularly impressive *rotemburo*, which can be used privately, is in an isolated building surrounded by a dense thicket of trees. The main building, which dates to 1936, has tatami-lined sleeping quarters separated from Western-style sitting areas by sliding *shoji* (rice paper doors). Meals are elegant banquets of river fish and mountain vegetables.

Bentenkaku RYOKAN \$\$
(弁天閣; ☎ 83-2461; www.bentenkaku.jp; 87 Kuruma-yu; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥6300/11,025) This homey, though slightly worn, ryokan is popular with foreign visitors. The tatami rooms are plenty comfortable, but best of all are the twin *rotemburo*, set in a landscaped garden fenced off with bamboo, which can be used privately. The inn is at the edge of town, overlooking the Arai-gawa. Call for pickup from the station, otherwise it's a 20-minute walk.

Shopping

Naruko Onsen is famous for its *kokeshi* (traditional wooden dolls). Originally toys for

children, they became a popular onsen town souvenir in the early 20th century.

Kokeshi-no-Ōnuma CRAFTS
(こけしの大沼; 93-1 Yumoto; ☀ 8am-8pm) This father and son team represent the 5th and 6th generation, respectively, in a line of respected *kokeshi* makers. The workshop is behind the store, ask if you can take a peek.

Information

Tourist Information Center (鳴子観光・旅館案内センター; ☎ 83-3441; www.naruko.gr.jp; ☀ 8.30am-6pm) Located just outside the train station.

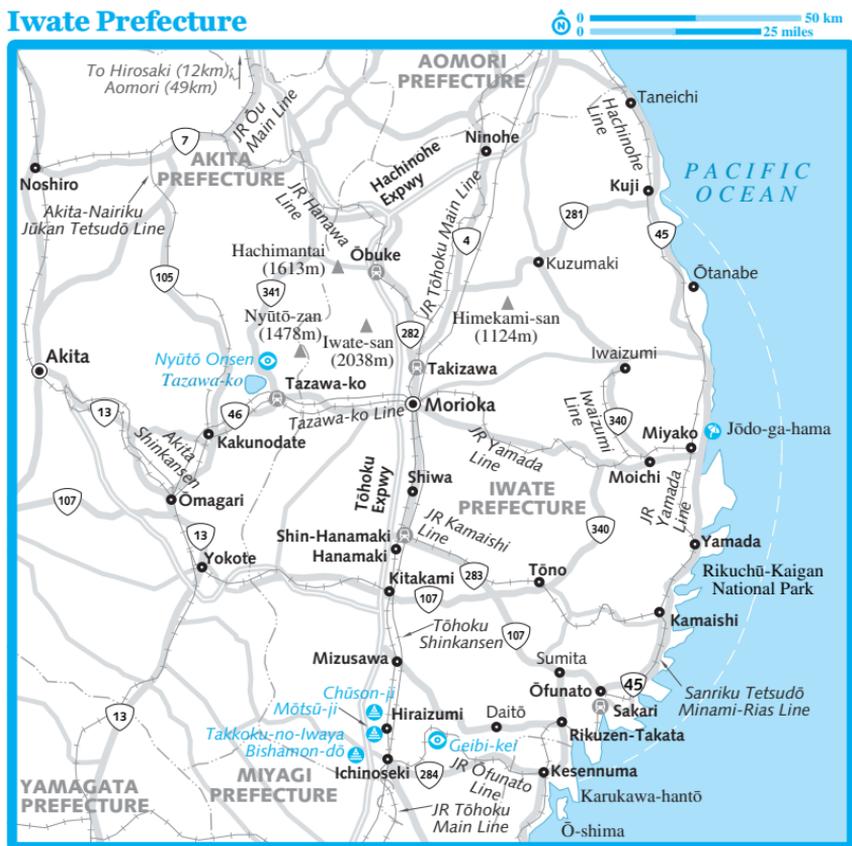
Getting There & Away

There are hourly trains on the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* between Sendai and Furukawa (¥3040, 15 minutes). Hourly trains run on the JR Rikū-tō line between Furukawa and Naruko Onsen (¥650, 45 minutes).

IWATE PREFECTURE

Japan's second-largest prefecture, Iwate-ken (岩手県) is a quiet place, largely characterised by sleepy valleys, a rugged coastline and some pretty serious mountain ranges. Although the region once played host to warring states and feudal rule, there are few remnants of this turbulent past, aside from the magnificent temples at Hiraizumi. Indeed, Iwate feels more provincial – in the best of ways – and stopping in places like the Tōno valley, which influenced a rich collection of folkloric tales, can seem almost like turning back time.

Iwate Prefecture



Hiraizumi 平泉

0191 / POP 8000

‘Summer grass, all that remains of warrior dreams.’

Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1689)

Hiraizumi’s grandeur once rivalled Kyoto. From 1089 to 1189, three generations of the Ōshu Fujiwara clan used their gold-mining wealth to create a living paradise devoted to the principles of Buddhism. However, feudal strife put these ambitions to an abrupt, tragic end. Today only a few sights bear testament to Hiraizumi’s former glory, yet this pleasantly rural town remains one of Tōhoku’s premier cultural attractions. Hiraizumi’s sights were added to the UNESCO World Heritage list in 2011.

History

Hiraizumi’s fate is indelibly linked to that of Japan’s favourite tragic hero, Minamoto-no-Yoshitsune. A great warrior, Yoshitsune earned the jealous contempt of his elder half-brother – Japan’s first shōgun, Minamoto-no-Yoritomo – and fled east, eventually taking refuge at Hiraizumi in 1187. This gave Yoritomo the perfect excuse to attack, resulting in both the defeat of the Ōshu Fujiwara and the death of Yoshitsune. Yet Yoritomo was said to be so impressed with the temples of Hiraizumi that he allowed them to remain, and it was the Kamakura shōgunate who later sponsored the construction of the first wooden hall to protect the Konjiki-dō.

Sights & Activities

★ Chūson-ji

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(中尊寺; ☎ 46-2211; joint admission to Konjiki-dō & Sankōzō ¥800; 🕒 8am-5pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-

4.30pm Nov-Mar) Chūson-ji was established in AD 850 by the priest Ennin, though it was the Ōshū Fujiwara family who expanded the complex in the 12th century – a total of 300 buildings with 40 temples were constructed. Ironically, in the face of their grand scheme to build a Buddhist utopia, Hiraizumi was never far from tragedy: a massive fire here in 1337 ravaged nearly everything. Only two of the original constructions, the Konjiki-dō and the Kyōzō (経蔵; Sutra Repository), remain alongside more recent reconstructions. The sprawling site is reached via a steep cedar-lined avenue.

Konjiki-dō

TEMPLE

(金色堂; Golden Hall; ☀8am-4.30pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-4pm Nov-Mar) With gilding up to its eaves, elaborate lacquer work and mother-of-pearl inlay, the Konjiki-dō was at the cutting edge of Heian-era artistry when it was created in 1124 – and it still impresses today. Beneath the three altars are the mummified remains of three generations of the Ōshū Fujiwara family. Given Hiraizumi's unlucky history, it seems a miracle that the Konjiki-dō has survived thus far. So as not to tempt fate, the pavilion is now behind glass inside a fireproof enclosure. The adjacent treasury (讚衡蔵; Sankōzō) contains the coffins and funeral finery of the Fujiwara clan – scrolls, swords and images transferred from long-vanished halls and temples.

Mōtsū-ji

GARDENS

(毛越寺; ☎46-2331; admission ¥500; ☀8.30am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar) Also established by Ennin in AD 850, Mōtsū-ji was once Tōhoku's largest and grandest temple complex. The buildings are all long gone, but the enigmatic, 12th-century 'Pure Land' gardens remain, which were designed with the Buddhist notion of creating an earthly paradise.

Takkoku-no-Iwaya Bishamon-dō

TEMPLE

(達谷窟毘沙門堂; ☎46-4931; admission ¥300; ☀8am-5pm, varies per season) Located 6km outside of town, this temple built into a cave is dedicated to Bishamon, the Buddhist guardian of warriors. It was first built by the general Sakanoue-no-Tamuramaro in 801 CE after his victory against a local warlord. You can cycle here along a paved path from Mōtsū-ji in about 30 minutes.

FREE Hiraizumi Cultural Heritage Center

MUSEUM

(平泉文化遺産センター; 44 Hanadate, Hiraizumi; ☀9am-5pm) With English explanations throughout, this new museum charts Hiraizumi's rise and fall.

Geibi-kei

SCENIC CRUISE

(猊鼻溪; Geibi Gorge; 90 minute cruise ¥1500; ☀8:30am-4pm) Singing boatmen on flat-bottom wooden boats steer passengers down the Satetsu River, which cuts through a ravine flanked with towering limestone walls. Geibi-kei is 15km east of Hiraizumi. Take the bus from stop 7 outside Ichinoseki Station (¥620, 40 minutes, hourly) or the train from Ichinoseki to Geibi-kei Station on the JR Ōfunato line (*kaisoku* ¥480, 30 minutes).

★ Festivals & Events

Haru-no-Fujiwara Matsuri

TRADITIONAL

(春の藤原まつり; Spring Fujiwara Festival) From 1 to 5 May; features a costumed procession, performances of *nō* (classical Japanese dance-drama), traditional *ennen-no-mai* (longevity dances) and an enormous rice cake-carrying competition.

Aki-no-Fujiwara Matsuri

TRADITIONAL

(秋の藤原まつり; Autumn Fujiwara Festival) A similar festival takes place from 1 to 3 November.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Musashibō

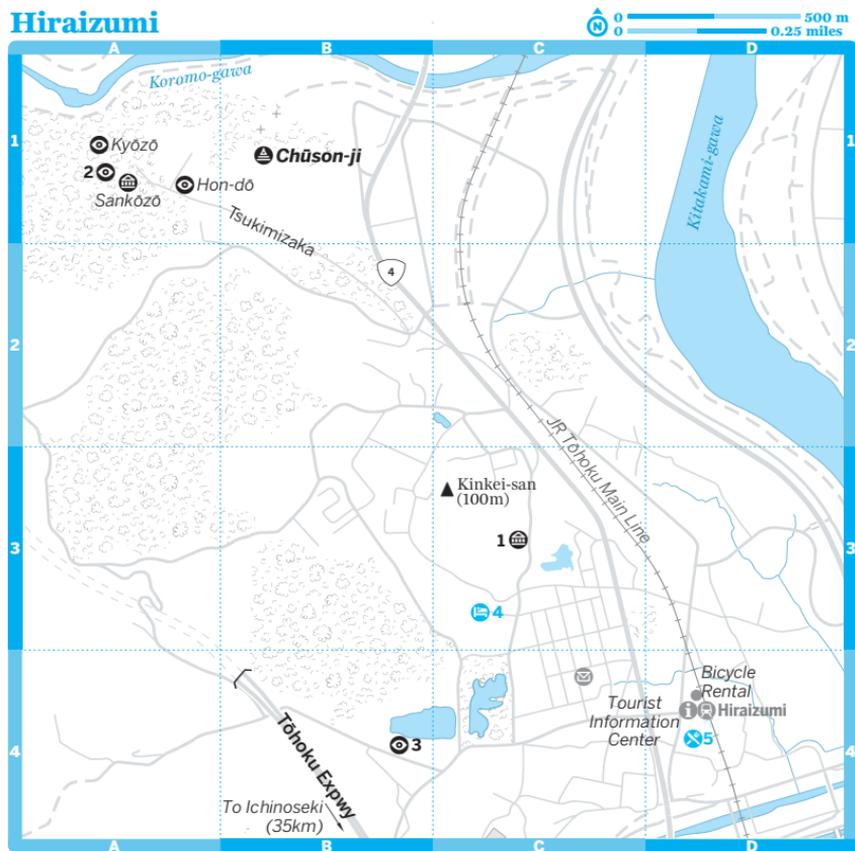
JAPANESE-STYLE HOTEL \$\$\$

(ホテル武蔵坊; ☎46-2241; www.musasibou.co.jp; 15 Hiraizumi-ōsawa; r per person with 2 meals from ¥9600; 📞) The Musashibō is within walking distance of the main sights. Considering that it also comes with spacious tatami rooms, an attractive onsen

i NORTHERN TŌHOKU WELCOME CARD

The **Northern Tōhoku Welcome Card** offers discounts on admission, lodging and even transportation from participating vendors – identified by a red-and-white Welcome Card sticker – in Iwate, Aomori and Akita Prefectures. Print the card from the website (www.northern-tohoku.gr.jp/welcome). Note that its use is technically restricted to foreign travellers staying in Japan for less than a year.

Hiraizumi



bath and formal, sit-down dinners, it's a pretty good deal. From the station, walk straight for 500m and turn right, walk another 500m and look for the hulking concrete building on the left.

O-shokuji-dokoro Sakura JAPANESE \$
 (お食事処さくら; 73-4 Hiraizumi-ya; snacks/meals from ¥100/700; ☎8.30am-7pm) Sakura looks more like a local lunch counter than a tourist restaurant and, fittingly, the menu is full of tasty home-style dishes. The speciality here is the handmade *hatto gozen*, wheat dumplings - try them with the sweet sesame sauce. It's right by the train station; look for the orange awning out front.

i Information

Tourist Information Center (☎46-2110; ☎8.30am-5pm) Next to the train station with English pamphlets. Bicycle rental is available

from the adjacent kiosk for ¥1000 per day, though this service is often suspended during winter months.

i Getting There & Away

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The **Tōhoku Expressway** (東北自動車道) runs between Sendai and Hiraizumi.

TRAIN

Hourly trains run along the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* between Sendai and Ichinoseki (¥3720, 30 minutes). Local trains (¥1620, 1¼ hours), which run about every hour or two, ply the same route on the JR Tōhoku main line and also connect Ichinoseki and Hiraizumi (¥190, 10 minutes).

Ichinoseki is connected to Morioka by the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* (¥3720, 40 minutes) and the JR Tōhoku main line (*futsu*, ¥1620, 1½ hours).

Hiraizumi

Top Sights

Chūson-ji..... B1

Sights

- 1 Hiraizumi Cultural Heritage Center..... C3
- 2 Konjiki-dō..... A1
- 3 Mōtsū-ji..... B4

Sleeping

- 4 Hotel Musashibō..... C3

Eating

- 5 O-shokuji-dokoro Sakura..... D4

Tōno 遠野

0198 / POP 29,300

Tōno is the heartland of some of Japan's most cherished folk tales. A comparatively poor area that has suffered from devastating famines and droughts throughout the centuries, Tōno has always been subject to the unforgiving whims of nature. Superstitious residents in turn developed a healthy mix of fear and admiration for the natural world, which led to the creation of a whole assortment of *yōkai* or ghosts, demons, monsters and spirits.

If you have a vivid imagination, and are longing for some clean country air, then Tōno is a wonderful place to leave behind the trappings of urbanity. Surrounded by

verdant rice fields and dramatic mountains, Tōno speaks to a time when people lived intimately off their land. Here, a bike ride through the woods can transport you to a mythical 'Lost Japan', where the wild things roamed free and were left to their own devices, however devious they might be.

Sights

Tōno Town

Tōno Municipal Museum

MUSEUM

(遠野市立博物館; 3-9 Higashidate-chō; admission ¥310, combined entrance to Tōno Folk Village ¥520; ☎9am-5pm) With its smattering of English text, artefacts of village life and videos depicting some of Tōno's famous legends, this museum provides a good measure of background info and context for what's to come in the valley beyond.

Tōno Folk Village

MUSEUM

(とおの昔話村; Tōno Mukashibanashi-mura; ☎62-7887; 2-11 Chūō-dōri; admission ¥310, combined entrance to Tōno Municipal Museum ¥520; ☎9am-5pm) Housed in the restored ryokan where Yanagita Kunio penned his famous work, *Legends of Tōno*, this evocative museum has audiovisuals of some of the tales and memorabilia pertaining to Yanagita. Several times a day local storytellers regale visitors with *mukashibanashi* (old-time stories); however, given the heavy country dialect, even Japanese visitors may have trouble understanding.

CAUTION: MISCHIEVOUS RIVER IMPS AHEAD

Tōno is reportedly home to the country's largest concentration of *kappa* (河童; literally 'river-child'), which are humanoid creatures with thick shells, scaly skin and pointed beaks. They are responsible for all sorts of mischief and grief, and have a nasty little habit of pulling their victim's intestines out through their bum in order to feed on *shirikodama*, a mythical ball that humans would call a soul and *kappa* would call delicious.

If you're planning on doing any swimming, it's recommended that you throw a few cucumbers into any suspect water source. *Kappa* love cucumbers, even more than human children, so your generosity might earn you a temporary reprieve. Astute connoisseurs of sushi will note that a *kappa-maki* is none other than a cucumber hand roll.

One last thing – if you do happen to come across a *kappa*, remember to bow. Japanese to the core, *kappa* will return the gesture, thus spilling out the water they store in their head, and rendering them temporarily powerless. If you happen to be a compassionate soul (*kappa* can die if not rehydrated), tip your water bottle and give them a refill. *Kappa* will always repay a favour, and happen to be highly knowledgeable in medicine, agriculture and games of skill.

👁️ Around Tōno

The best way to see the countryside is by bicycle, made all that much easier by a fantastic trail that runs alongside the river. The Tōno Valley opens up into some beautiful terrain, particularly if you head far enough to the east.

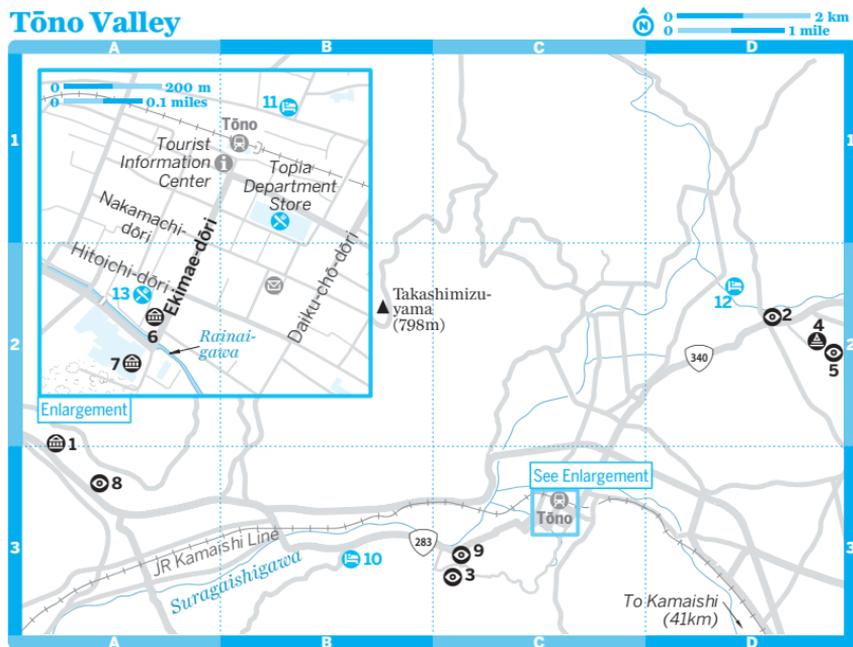
What follows is a rough circuit taking in Tōno's landmark sights to the west and east of the town. This could be completed in a long day or split into two. The valley is fairly well signposted in English, but don't let that deter you from setting off down unmarked roads. Getting lost is part of the fun, and there are many small discoveries to be made if you keep your eyes peeled. Rest assured that it's fairly easy to right yourself, just be

warned that you never really know what manner of creature lies waiting in the hills and streams around you...

About 2.5km southwest of Tōno Station is **Unedori-sama** (卯子酉様), the matchmaking shrine. According to legend, if you tie a strip of red cloth (using only your left hand) around one of the pines you'll meet your soul mate. In the hills above it are **Gohyaku Rakan** (五百羅漢), eerie, moss-covered rock carvings of 500 disciples of Buddha fashioned by a priest to console the spirits of those who died in a 1754 famine.

If you continue west along Rte 283 towards Morioka for around 8km, you'll eventually come to **Tsuzuki Ishi** (続石). A curious rock that rests amidst aromatic cedars, it's either a natural formation or a

Tōno Valley



Tōno Valley

👁️ Sights

- 1 Chiba Family Magariya..... A2
- 2 Denshōen..... D2
- 3 Gohyaku Rakan..... C3
- 4 Jōken-ji..... D2
- 5 Kappa-buchi..... D2
- 6 Tōno Folk Village..... A2
- 7 Tōno Municipal Museum..... A2
- 8 Tsuzuki Ishi..... A3

- 9 Unedori-sama Shrine..... C3

🏠 Sleeping

- 10 Minshuku Magariya..... B3
- 11 Minshuku Tōno..... B1
- 12 Tōno Youth Hostel..... D2

🍴 Eating

- 13 Itō-ke..... A2

LEGENDS OF TŌNO

At the beginning of the 20th century, writer and scholar Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) published *Tōno Monogatari* (遠野物語; *Legends of Tōno*), a collection of regional folk tales. The stories were based on interviews with Kyōseki Sasaki, an educated man born into a Tōno peasant family who had committed to memory more than 100 *densetsu* (local legends). What Yanagita and Sasaki unearthed captured the nation's imagination, bringing into rich focus the oral storytelling traditions of a region hitherto almost completely ignored. The collection has been translated into English and is well worth a read before – or better yet while – visiting.

The cast of characters and situations is truly weird and wonderful, and draws heavily on the concept of animism, a system of belief that attributes a personal spirit to everything that exists, including animals and inanimate objects. Of particular importance to Tōno is the story of Oshira-sama. It begins with a farm girl who develops a deep affection for her horse; eventually the two marry – though not with her father's permission. One night, her father finds her sleeping in the stables and, in an outrage, drags the horse out to the garden and hangs the poor beast from a mulberry tree. Distraught, the daughter clings to the horse's head and together they are spirited up to the heavens, becoming the *kami* (deity) Oshira-sama.

There are also shape-shifting foxes; impish water sprites called *kappa*; *zashiki-warashi* spirits, who live in the corners of houses and play tricks on the residents; and *oni* (ogres) who live in the hills and eat lost humans. Throughout all of the stories is a common theme: the struggle to overcome the everyday problems of rural life.

dolmen (primitive tomb). A short, steep hike rewards you with views across the valley, but take heed as hungry ogres (and bears) are reported to lurk in these parts. One kilometre past Tsuzuki-ishi is the **Chiba Family Magariya** (南部曲り家千葉家; ☀9am-4pm), a grand 200-year-old farmhouse in the traditional Tōno style.

Turning to the other side of town, about 5km east of the town centre is **Denshōen** (伝承園; admission ¥310; ☀9am-4pm), another traditional farmhouse turned into a small cultural museum. The highlight here are the thousand Oshira-sama deities fashioned from mulberry wood.

A few hundred metres southeast of Denshōen is **Jōken-ji** (常堅寺), a peaceful temple dedicated to the deity image of Obinzuru-sama. Behind the temple is the **Kappa-buchi** (カッパ淵) pool, where Tōno's famous water sprites lurk. It is said that if pregnant women worship at the shrine on the riverbank they'll produce plenty of milk, but only if they first produce a breast-shaped offering. The tiny altar is filled with small cloth bags, either red or white, most replete with nipple.

About 5km east of Denshōen is the turn off for **Yamazaki Konseisama** (山崎コンセイサマ), a shrine to the god of birth favoured by women hoping to conceive. If you cycle back to the main road, you can con-

tinue east all the way to the **Yamaguchi Waterwheel** (山口の水車), a nostalgic, thatched-roof structure, from where it's a 12km ride back to town.

★ Festivals & Events

Tōno Matsuri

TRADITIONAL

(遠野祭り) This flamboyant spectacle, held over the third weekend in September and designed for prayers for a bountiful harvest, is deeply connected with the legends of Tōno. There's *yabusame* (horseback archery, in this case a 700-year-old event), traditional dances and costume parades through the city.

🏠 Sleeping & Eating

★ Tōno Youth Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(遠野ユースホステル; ☎62-8736; www1.odn.ne.jp/tono-yh/index-e.htm; 13-39-5 Tsuchibuchi, Tsuchibuchi-chō; dm from ¥3900, YHA discount ¥3300, breakfast/dinner ¥550/1150; 📞🚶🚗🚲) Fronted by rice fields, this remote farmhouse-turned-hostel pays homage to the Tōno of yesteryear. The amicable manager, who speaks a decent smattering of English, is well-versed in the local lore and captivates imaginations with nightly reports on rumoured sightings. Accommodation is in simple dorms that share open-air baths, while meals are built around seasonal

produce and served communally. Bicycle rental is available. From Tōno Station, take a bus bound for Saka-no-shita to the Nita-gai stop (¥290, 12 minutes). From there, it's a 10-minute walk, and the hostel is clearly signposted along the way (look for the small wooden signs at knee-level).

Minshuku Tōno

(民宿とおの; ☎62-4395; www.minshuku-tono.com; 2-17 Zaimoku-chō; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥3500/6500; 📍) There are several convenient places to bed down in Tōno village, but this dignified *minshuku* (Japanese guesthouse) behind the station is the best. It's a quite spot with comfortable tatami rooms, and the owners are keen on serving up their home-brewed *doburoku* (unfiltered sake) in generous portions.

Minshuku Magariya

(民宿曲り屋; ☎62-4564; 30-58-3 Niisato, Ayaori-chō; r per person with 2 meals from ¥8190; 📍) If you came to Tōno to experience rural Japan you wouldn't do much better than this, a 120-year-old farmhouse up in the hills surrounded by apple orchards and woods. At its centre is a large hearth where guests congregate for hearty country cooking. The old-fashioned tatami rooms look like time capsules and when the sun sets and the shadows lengthen, it's easy enough to conjure up images of nefarious *yōkai*. Magariya is located about 3km southwest of the train station off Rte 283 and atop a steep, gravelly path – if you don't have a car, take a taxi (around ¥1000).

Itō-ke

(伊藤家; 2-11 Chūō-dōri; mains from ¥600; ☎11am-5pm) All the standard *soba* dishes are on the menu here, but the one to try is *hittsumi* (ひつつみ), a local dish of thick, hand-cut noodles and chicken in hot broth. The restaurant is in a dark wood, traditional (but new-looking) building adjacent to the Tōno Folk Village; look for the wooden sign over the sliding doors.

i Information

Tōno Post Office (遠野郵便局; ☎62-2830; 6-10 Chūō-dōri; ☎ATM 8.45am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Has an international ATM.

Tourist Information Center (☎62-1333; www.city.tono.iwate.jp; ☎8am-6pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-5.30pm Nov-Mar; 📍) Across from the train station, with bicycle rentals (¥1000 per day), English maps and free internet.

i Getting There & Away

Hourly trains run on the JR Tōhoku line between Hiraizumi and Hanamaki (¥820, 45 minutes). The JR Kamaishi line connects Hanamaki to Tōno (¥1330, one hour), while the JR Tōhoku line connects Hanamaki to Morioka (¥650, 45 minutes).

If you're coming from Sendai, take the Tōhoku *shinkansen* to Shin-Hanamaki (¥5550, one hour) and transfer to the JR Kamaishi line for Tōno (¥1250, 45 minutes). The *shinkansen* line connects Shin-Hanamaki to Morioka (¥2950, 15 minutes).

Morioka 盛岡

019 / POP 300,000

Morioka is an old castle town framed by three flowing rivers and a brooding volcano. Once the seat of the Nanbu domain, it is now the prefectural capital and a regional transportation hub. Though the castle itself is long gone, the park in its place and the surrounding area make for a pleasant stroll. Morioka is also famous for its cast-iron artisan work.

👁 Sights

Iwate-kōen

PARK

(岩手公園) If you head east on foot from the station along Kaiun-bashi for about 20 minutes, you'll eventually come to this landscaped park, where Morioka-jō once stood. All that remains of the castle, completed in 1633 and destroyed in 1874, are its moss-covered stone foundation walls. Still, you can get a sense of its scale.

Rock-Splitting Cherry Tree

LANDMARK

(石割桜; Ishiwari-zakura) A few blocks north of the park in front of the Morioka District Court is this much-loved local attraction: a 300-year-old cherry tree, which sprouted from the crack in a huge granite boulder. Some claim that it has pushed its way through over time and while that's clearly an impossible feat, it's nevertheless a sight to behold.

★ Festivals & Events

Chagu-Chagu Umakko

PARADES

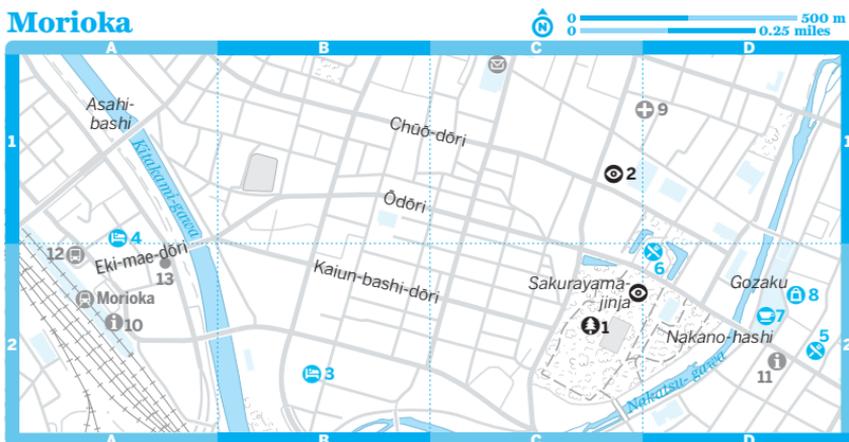
(チャグチャグ馬コ) The second Saturday of June sees a parade of brightly decorated horses and children in traditional dress.

Sansa Odori

DANCE

(さんさ躍り) In Morioka's most famous festival, held 1 to 4 August, thousands of

Morioka



Morioka

📍 Sights

- 1 Iwate-kōen C2
2 Rock-Splitting Cherry Tree C1

🏠 Sleeping

- 3 Kumagai Ryokan B2
4 Morioka New City Hotel A1

🍴 Eating

- 5 Azumaya Honten D2
6 Pairon Honten D2

🍷 Drinking

- 7 Fukakusa D2

🛒 Shopping

- 8 Kamasada Honten D2

ℹ Information

- 9 Iwate Medical University
Hospital D1
10 Northern Tōhoku Information
Center A2
11 Tourist Information Center D2

🚉 Transport

- Dendenmushi (see 12)
12 JR Bus Station A2
13 Sasaki Jitensha Shōkai A2

dancers take to the streets, celebrating the banishment of an evil ogre that plagued the city once upon a time.

Morioka Aki Matsuri

FLOATS

(盛岡秋祭り) During this festival from 14 to 16 September, portable shrines and colourful floats are paraded to the rhythm of *taiko* (Japanese drums).

🏠 Sleeping

Kumagai Ryokan

RYOKAN \$\$

(熊ヶ井旅館; ☎651-3020; <http://kumagairyokan.com>; 3-2-5 Ōsawakawara; s/d from ¥4200/8000; ☺☎☎) Set in a garden and with folk-crafts scattered about, Kumagai has a homey vibe and is very welcoming of foreign guests. The tatami rooms, surprisingly spacious, are well-maintained and there's a wonderful *iwa-buro* (rock bath) for evening soaks; all rooms have shared facilities. The inn is lo-

cated about eight minutes on foot east of the station (behind the large church).

Morioka New City Hotel

BUSINESS HOTEL \$\$

(盛岡ニューシティホテル; ☎654-5161; www.moriokacityhotel.co.jp; 13-10 Ekimae-dōri; s/tw from ¥5670/9800; ☺) Conveniently located across the road from the station, this relaxed business hotel caters primarily for single travellers. Rooms are slightly cramped but more than adequate.

🍴 Eating

Fans of noodles should take note that Morioka has some seriously delicious, and unusual, ways of serving them. *Wanko-soba* (わんこそば), buckwheat noodles served by the mouthful in tiny wooden bowls, is more like a competition between you and the waitress, who tries to refill your bowl faster than you can say you're full. Prefer to savour

at your own pace? Try *jaja-men* (じゃじゃめん), udon-like noodles heaped with cucumber, miso paste and ground meat – mix all this up and add vinegar, spicy oil and garlic to taste.

★ Pairon Honten

NOODLES \$

(白龍本店; 5-15 Uchi-maru; noodles from ¥400; ☎11.30am-9pm Mon-Sat) Loved by locals, this hole-in-the-wall serves up super tasty *jaja-men* and nothing else. Ordering is a breeze: just ask for *shō* (small), *chū* (medium) or *dai* (large). When you're finished, crack a raw egg (¥50) into the bowl and the staff will add hot soup and more of that amazing miso paste. The restaurant is down the narrow lane directly across from Sakurayama-jinja; look for the white *noren* curtains on your left.

Azumaya Honten

NOODLES \$\$

(東屋本店; ☎622-2252; www.wankosoba-azumaya.co.jp; Naka-no-hashī-dōri; wanko-soba from ¥2625; ☎11am-8pm) Famished? Try notching up your noodle-bowl count at this 100-year-old shop famous for *wanko-soba*. Fifteen bowls is a standard serving, but fifty is about average (and a hundred, or two, is not unheard of). You can also order ordinary single-servings of noodles downstairs. The restaurant is in a traditional building two blocks east of the Nakatsu-gawa.

Fukakusa

CAFE

(ふかくさ; 1-2 Konya-chō; coffee ¥350, beer ¥450; ☎11.30am-3pm, 5pm-11pm Mon-Sat, 12pm-5pm Sun) This little hideaway on the banks of the Nakatsu-gawa is the perfect place to stop for a pick-me-up or to unwind after a long afternoon. Look for the ivy out front.



Shopping

Gozaku, the area just east of the Nakatsu-gawa, is the old merchant's district, now home to craft studios and cafes.

Kamasada Honten

HOMEWARES

(釜定本店; 2-5 Konya-chō; ☎9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Morioka is known for its *nanbu tekki* (cast ironware), notably tea kettles. There are some beautiful examples at this venerable old shop, along with some more affordable items, like windchimes and incense holders.



Information

Iwate Medical University Hospital (岩手医科大学附属病院; ☎24hrs 651-5111; http://

www.iwate-med.ac.jp/hospital/index.html; 19-1 Uchi-maru; ☎outpatient services 8.30am-11am, 1pm-4pm Mon-Fri)

Morioka Central Post Office (盛岡中央郵便局; ☎624-5353; 1-13-45 Chūō-dōri; ☎ATM 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-9pm Sat, to 7pm Sun) Has an international ATM.

Northern Tōhoku Information Center

(☎625-2090; ☎9am-5pm) On the 2nd floor of Morioka Station; has English speakers and can help with booking accommodations.

Tourist Information Center (☎604-3305; www.hellomorioka.jp; 1-1-10 Naka-no-hashī-dōri, 2nd Fl, Odette Plaza; ☎9am-6.30pm Apr-Oct, 9am-6pm Nov-Mar, closed 2nd Tue of each month; ☎) Has English-speaking staff and free internet.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Regional buses depart from outside the west exit of the train station, and connect Morioka to Sendai (¥2850, 2½ hours) and Hirosaki (¥2930, 2¼ hours). Night buses for Tokyo (¥7800, 7½ hours) depart from the east exit.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you're driving, the **Tōhoku Expressway** (東北自動車道) runs between Tokyo and the greater Morioka area.

TRAIN

There are hourly trains on the JR Tōhoku *shinkansen* between Tokyo and Morioka (¥13,640, 2½ hours), and Morioka and Shin-Aomori (¥5770, 1¼ hours).

Frequent trains run on the JR Akita *shinkansen* line between Morioka and Akita (¥4300, 1½ hours) via Tazawa-ko (¥1780, 30 minutes) and Kakunodate (¥2570, 50 minutes). The local Tazawa-ko line runs the same route in about twice the time for around half the price; it may be necessary to transfer at Ōmagari.

Getting Around

The charmingly named **Dendenmushi** (one ride/day pass ¥250/600) tourist trolley – *dendenmushi* literally means 'electric transmission bug' – makes a convenient loop around town, departing in a clockwise direction from stop 15 in front of Morioka Station (anticlockwise from stop 16) between 9am and 7pm.

Bicycles can be rented at **Sasaki Jitensha Shōkai** (佐々木自転車商会; 10-2 Morioka Eki-mae-dōri; per hour/day ¥200/1000; ☎8.30am-6pm), near Morioka Station.

AOMORI PREFECTURE

Aomori-ken (青森県), at the curious northern tip of Honshū, is split in the middle by Mutsu-wan, Noheji-wan and Aomori-wan, the bays cradled in the arm of the axe-shaped Shimokita Peninsula. This is a prefecture where having a rental car will really open up some of Japan's most remote and wildly exotic areas. The ethereal volcanic landscapes around Osore-zan are where Aomori's people come to commune with the dead. The old cultural centre of Hirosaki and the verdant nature clinging to the shores of Towada-ko are definitely more rooted in this world.

Aomori 青森

017 / POP 301,000

Aomori, the prefectural capital, is a stop-over point for travellers on their way to Hokkaidō, and a regional transportation

hub. In 2010, the Tōhoku *shinkansen* line was extended to Aomori, giving the city reason to spruce itself up, including new development along the harbour. There are several worthwhile museums scattered around the city, but Aomori's most famous attraction is its Nebuta festival.

Sights

FREE Sannai

Maruyama Site

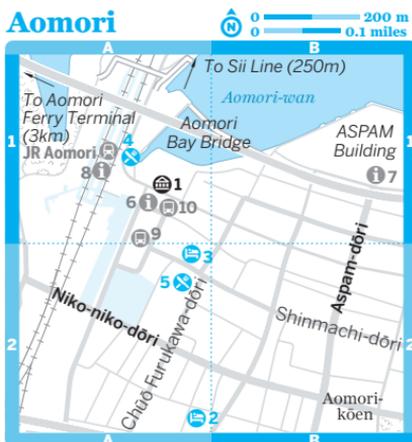
ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE

(三内丸山遺跡; <http://sannaimaruyama.pref.aomori.jp>; Sannai Maruyama 305; ☎9am-5.30pm Jun-Sep, 9am-4.30pm Oct-May; 🚗) Excavation of this site turned up an astonishing number of intact artifacts from Japan's Jōmon era (10,000-2,000 years ago), which are on display at the museum here. The actual archaeological site, along with some reconstructed dwellings, form the grounds out back. Sannai Maruyama is approximately 5km west of Aomori Station. City buses leaving from stop

Aomori Prefecture



Aomori



Aomori

📍 Sights

- 1 Nebuta no le Wa Rasse A1

🏨 Sleeping

- 2 Aomori Center Hotel A2
3 Aomori Grand Hotel A2

🍴 Eating

- 4 A-Factory A1
5 Shinsen Ichiba A2

ℹ Information

- 6 Aomori Station Tourist Information Center A1
7 Prefectural Tourist Information Counter B1
8 Shin-Aomori Station Tourist Information Center A1

🚗 Transport

- 9 Aomori City Buses A1
10 JR Highway Bus Stop A1

6 for 'Menkyō Center' stop at 'Sannai Maruyama Iseki-mae' (¥300, 20 minutes).

Aomori Museum of Art

MUSEUM

(青森県立美術館; www.aomori-museum.jp/en/index.html; 185 Chikano, Yasuta; admission ¥500; ☀ 9am-6pm Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-May, closed 2nd & 4th Mon of month) Artists from Aomori Prefecture feature heavily in the permanent collection here, including pop icon Yoshitomo Nara, master print maker Munakata Shikō and Tohl Narita, who designed many of the monsters from the iconic Ultraman television show. The museum is adjacent to

the Sannai Maruyama Site; city buses leaving from stop 6 for 'Menkyō Center' stop at Kenritsu-bijyutskan-mae (¥270, 20 minutes).

Nebuta no le Wa Rasse

MUSEUM

(ねぶたのいえワラッセ; www.nebuta.or.jp/warasse/index.html; 1-1-1 Yasukata; adult/child ¥600/250; ☀ 9am-7pm May-Aug, 9am-6pm Sep-Apr; 🚗) Even if you missed the festival, you can still gawk at the awesome craftsmanship of the Nebuta floats displayed at this new museum on the waterfront. On weekends there are performances of dancing and drumming here, too.

Munakata Shikō Kinenkan

MUSEUM

(棟方志功記念館; http://munakatashiko-museum.jp/schedule_e.html; 2-1-2 Matsubara; admission ¥500; ☀ 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sun) Situated 3km east of the station is this museum, which houses a collection of prints, paintings and calligraphy by Munakata Shikō (1903-1975), an Aomori native who won international fame in his lifetime. The city shuttle bus stops at the museum (¥200, 20 minutes).

🌟 Festivals & Events

Aomori Nebuta Matsuri

FLOATS

(青森ねぶた祭り; www.nebuta.or.jp/english/index_e.htm) Held from 2 to 7 August, the Nebuta Matsuri has parades of spectacular illuminated floats accompanied by thousands of rowdy, chanting dancers. The parades start at sunset and last for hours; on the final day the action starts around noon. As this is one of Japan's most famous festivals, you'll need to book hotel rooms way in advance.

🏨 Sleeping

Aomori Moya Kōgen Youth Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(青森雲谷高原ユースホステル; ☎ 764-2888; <http://moya.jp>; 9-5 Yamabuki, Moya; dm without/with 2 meals ¥3900/5600, YHA discount ¥3300/5000; 📍🚗📞) This homey hostel lies 12km south of the city on the road to Hakkōda. Rooms are standard but the owners add plenty of personal touches, like garden-fresh herbal tea brewed nightly. Buses for Moya Hills from stops 1 or 4 outside Aomori Station can drop you off at Moya Kōgen (¥590, 40 minutes, last bus 6:40pm on weekdays, 4:30pm on weekends).

Aomori Center Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(青森センターホテル; ☎ 762-7500; www.aomoricenterhotel.jp/index2.htm; 1-10-9-1 Furukawa; s/d from ¥4780/6900; 📍🚗📞) Besides being ex-

cellent value, this individually-owned business hotel is attached to an onsen complex that guests can use for free. Rooms in the brand new *bekkan* (annexe) are the nicest. The hotel (not to be confused with the Aomori Central Hotel) is a 10-minute walk from Aomori Station; rates include breakfast.

Aomori Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$
(青森ランドホテル; ☎723-1011; www.agh.co.jp; 1-1-23 Shin-machi; s/d from ¥6500/10,000; ☺☺☺) A step up from a business hotel, the Grand Hotel is two minutes from the train station and a good bet if you're making an early connection in the morning.

Eating

★ Shinsen Ichiba

MARKET \$
(新鮮市場; Auga Building, Basement fl, 1-3-7 Shinchō; meals from ¥580; ☺5am-6.30pm) Aomori is famous for a number of speciality items including scallops, codfish, apples, pickled vegetables and many, many others that are laid out here, at this seafood and produce market. There are also a handful of counter restaurants where you can get a fresh *sanshoku-don* (rice topped with scallops, fish roe and sea urchin roe) or a hot bowl of *rāmen* (noodles). Open early, it's also a good place to stock up on snacks for the next leg of your journey.

A-Factory

ECLECTIC \$
(1-4-2 Yanagigawa; meals from ¥880; ☺11am-8pm; ☎) Part of the city's new waterfront development, A-Factory is a bright, airy foodcourt serving everything from sushi to galettes. Apple cider is brewed on the premises, and available by the glass or the bottle.

i Information

Aomori City Hospital (青森市民病院; ☎24hr hotline 734-2171; 1-14-20 Katsuda; ☺outpatient services 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Aomori Station Tourist Information Center

(青森市観光交流情報センター; ☎723-4670; www.city.aomori.aomori.jp/contents/english/index.html; internet ¥100/ten minutes; ☺8.30am-7pm) Provides English-language pamphlets, bus schedules and a city map.

Shin-Aomori Station Tourist Information Center

(あおり観光情報センター; ☎752-6311; internet ¥100/10 minutes; ☺8.30am-7pm) On the second floor of the *shinkansen* station.

Prefectural Tourist Information Counter

(青森県観光総合案内所; ☎734-2500; http://en.apinet.jp/index.html; 2nd fl, ASPAM Bldg, 1-1-40 Yasukata; ☺9am-6pm; ☺) Has English-speaking staff.

i Getting There & Away

AIR

From Aomori Airport, 11km south of the city centre, flights head to/from Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and many other destinations. Airport buses are timed for flights and depart from stop 11 in front of Aomori Station (¥680, 40 minutes).

BOAT

Sii Line (シライン; ☎722-4545; www.sii-line.co.jp) ferries depart twice daily for Wakinosawa (¥2540, one hour) from Aomori-kō Ryōkyaku Fune Terminal (青森港旅客船ターミナル).

Tsugaru Kaikyō (津軽海峡; ☎766-4733; www.tsugarukaikyō.co.jp) operates eight daily ferries (year-round) between Aomori and Hako-date (from ¥2700, four hours). Ferries depart from Aomori Ferry Terminal (青森フェリーターミナル) on the western side of the city – it's a 10-minute taxi ride from Aomori Station (around ¥1500).

BUS

JR highway buses connect Aomori to Sendai (¥5700, five hours) and Tokyo (from ¥8500, 9½ hours).

From stop 11, buses depart for Hakkōda (¥1070, 50 minutes) and Towada-ko (¥3000, three hours); bus schedules are highly seasonal and infrequent during winter.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The Tōhoku Expressway (東北自動車道) runs between Tokyo and greater Aomori.

There's a handy **Toyota Rent a Car** (トヨタレンタカー; ☎782-0100; http://rent.toyota.co.jp/en/index.html; 104-79 Takama, Ishie; ☺8am-10pm) outside the west exit of the Shin-Aomori *shinkansen* station.

i THE NIGHT TRAIN TO AOMORI

The JR Akebono sleeper train leaves Ueno Station in Tokyo every evening at 9.15pm and arrives in Aomori at 9.55am the next morning, after passing through Niigata and Akita. The return leaves Aomori at 6.22pm and pulls into Ueno at 6.58am. One-way fare for a basic sleeper berth (called *goron-to-shiito*), without pillows or blankets, is ¥14,160 and is covered by both the JR Pass and JR East Pass; you can pay extra to upgrade to something cushier. One of just a handful of old-school sleeper trains still running in Japan, Akebono books out quickly. Tickets can be reserved up to one month in advance.

TRAIN

The Tōhoku *shinkansen* runs roughly every hour from Tokyo Station, by way of Sendai and Morioka, to the terminus at Shin-Aomori Station (¥16,370, 3½ hours).

Futsū (local) trains on the JR Ōu main line connect Aomori with Shin-Aomori (¥180, 5 minutes) and Hirosaki (¥650, 45 minutes). A few daily Tsugaru limited-express trains run between Aomori and Akita (¥5450, 2¾ hours) on the same line.

Frequent *tokkyū* (limited-express) trains on the JR Tsugaru-Kaikyō line run between Aomori and Hakodate on Hokkaidō (¥5340, two hours), via the Seikan Tunnel.

One daily *kaisoku* express train on the JR Ōminato Line connects Aomori and Shimokita (¥2120, 1½ hours). Otherwise, take a *futsū* (local) train on the private Aomori Tetsudō line and transfer at Noheji for the JR Ōminato Line.

i Getting Around

Shuttle buses (one ride/day pass ¥200/500) circle the city connecting Shin-Aomori Station, Aomori Station, Aomori Ferry Terminal and most city sights. They may be less direct than regular municipal buses, but are the most economical way to get around the city.

Hakkōda-san 八甲田山

017

Hakkōda-san, which translates to ‘many peaks and marshlands’, is a region of intense natural beauty with a dark history. In 1902, a regiment of 210 Japanese soldiers training in the winter weather were caught in a sudden and severe snow storm. All but 11 men perished, carving out a place for Hakkōda-san in the collective Japanese psyche.

Today, most hikers tackle Honshū’s northernmost volcanic range between May and October. Yet the blistery winter months are a great time for skiing and snowboarding. Even if you do catch a chill, take comfort in the fact that Hakkōda-san is home to one of Tōhoku’s best onsens, Sukayu.

👁 Sights

Hakkōda Ropeway

(八甲田山ロープウェイ; www.hakkoda-ropeway.jp; one-way/return ¥1150/1800; ☀9am-4.20pm; 📍) For anyone who wants a taste of the alpine without having to brave the steep ascent, this scenic ropeway quickly whisks you up to the summit of Tamoyachi-dake (田茂滝岳; 1324m). From there you can follow an elaborate network of hiking trails,

ROPEWAY

though purists prefer the magnificent one-day loop that starts and finishes in Sukayu Onsen Ryokan.

🚶 Activities

★ Hakkōda-san

HIKING

(八甲田山) Hakkōda-san’s quintessential hike spans 12km in distance, and can be completed in a gruelling but highly rewarding day. The trailhead is right around the corner from Sukayu Onsen Ryokan. Things start out relatively flat as you wind through marshlands, but eventually the pitch starts to increase in the shadow of Ōdake (大岳; 1584m). The ridge trail continues to Idodake (井戸岳; 1550m) and Akakura-dake (赤倉岳; 1548m) before connecting to Tamoyachi-dake (田茂滝岳; 1326m).

After stopping at the ropeway terminal for a quick pick-me-up, follow the descending trail through wildflower-filled marshes and rolling pastures. Arriving back at Sukayu Onsen Ryokan before nightfall, it’s time to indulge in a post-hike beer and the obligatory muscle-relaxing soak.

Hakkōda Ski Park

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

(八甲田スキー場; www.hakkoda-ropeway.jp; 5-time pass ¥4900; ☀9am-4.20pm) Compared to other ski mountains across Tōhoku and Hokkaidō, Tamoyachi-dake is fairly modest in scope. The plus side is that you can expect frozen fir trees, piles of wet snow and scant to no crowds. There are just two official runs from the top of the Hakkōda Ropeway, both winding intermediate trails. The longer of the two, the 5km ‘Forest Course’, cuts through the tree line, and has a few steep and speedy pitches.

At its heart, however, Hakkōda is a destination for hardcore skiers and boarders: come spring, it’s possible to explore a network of unofficial trails that extend to some of the nearby peaks. Weather conditions can be severe though, and getting lost is easy, so even experienced alpinists should go with a local; most area accommodations can arrange guides.

There are limited goods and services at the ropeway building aside from equipment rental (¥3500 per day).

🛏 Sleeping

Sukayu Camping Ground

CAMPGROUND \$

(酸ヶ湯キャンプ場; ☎738-6566; www.sukayu.jp/camp; per person ¥500, camp site fee from ¥500; ☀late Jun-late Oct; 📍) A good spot to

pitch a tent with clean facilities and rental supplies. It's located at the end of a small access road immediately south of Sukayu Onsen Ryokan.

★ Sukayu Onsen

RYOKAN \$\$

(酸ヶ湯温泉; ☎738-6400; www.sukayu.jp; r per person with 2 meals from ¥10,650, baths ¥600; ☀day bathing 7am-5.30pm; ♿) Plucked right out of an *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print), Sukayu's cavernous bathhouse is a delight for the senses. Look at the dark wood, milky water and steam; listen to the gurgle of the water; feel its penetrating heat or knead tired shoulders with its *utase-yu* (massaging stream of water); and smell the sulphur. On a cold day, relaxing here is hard to beat, though shy bathers should note that the main bath is *konyoku* (mixed bathing), save for a lady's hour in the morning and evening. Rooms in the sprawling old-fashioned inn are simple but comfortable, with shared facilities.

Hakkōda-sansō

LODGE \$\$

(八甲田山荘; ☎728-1512; www.hakkoda-sanso.com; 1-61 Kansuizawa, Arakawa; r per person without/with 2 meals ¥5250/9450; ♿☀) Right at the bottom of the Hakkōda Ropeway, this lodge with Japanese-style rooms caters to skiers and snowboarders. The dining area, with picture windows facing the mountain, does hot lunches, too.

📍 Getting There & Away

JR buses leave from stop 11 outside Aomori Station, stopping at Hakkōda Ropeway-eki (¥1070, 50 minutes) and the next stop, Sukayu Onsen (¥1300, one hour). The same bus continues on to Towada-ko-eki (1½ hours, ¥2020). Bus schedules are highly seasonal, with infrequent departures during winter months.

Towada-ko 十和田湖

0176 / POP 6000

Formed by a series of violent volcanic eruptions eons ago, Towada-ko is a roughly circular caldera lake hemmed in by rocky coastlines and dense forests. Part of the Towada-Hachimantai National Park, it is the largest crater lake in Honshū (52km in circumference).

It is rivaled in beauty by the Oirase-gawa, the winding river that drains Towada-ko into the Pacific Ocean. The recent extension of the *shinkansen* through to Aomori Prefecture put the area within easy striking

Towada-ko 0 5 km
0 2.5 miles



NORTHERN HONSHŪ (TŌHOKU) AOMORI PREFECTURE

distance, yet development around the lake is still sparse, save for the main tourist hub of Yasumiya.

👁 Sights & Activities

★ Oirase-gawa

HIKING

(奥入瀬川) This meandering river is marked by cascading waterfalls, carved-out gorges and plenty of gurgling rapids. Casual hikers can follow its path for a 14km stretch connecting Nenokuchi, a small tourist outpost on the eastern shore of the lake, to Yakeyama, from where relatively frequent buses return to either Nenokuchi (¥660, 30 minutes) or the main tourist hub of Yasumiya (¥1100, one hour). The entire hike should only take you about three hours. Set out in the early morning or late afternoon to avoid the slow-moving coach parties.

Towada-ko

SCENIC CRUISES

(十和田; ☀8am-4pm) To get a sense of the lake's enormous scale, you really need to leave the shoreline. From the docks in Yasumiya, you have a couple of options for scenic cruises, the best of which is the one-hour circuit between Yasumiya and Nenokuchi (one way ¥1400). Boats leave roughly every hour from April to early November. There is also a year-round 40-minute loop-circuit (¥1400).

You can also rent row boats and paddle boats next to the dock. Note that inconsistent water temperatures (warm patches followed by frigid ones) make swimming in the lake dangerous.

Sleeping

Hotel rates can increase dramatically during peak periods such as August and late October, when the leaves blaze red.

Towada-ko Oide Camping Ground

CAMPGROUND \$

(十和田湖生出キャンプ場; ☎75-2368; www.ber.or.jp/towada/camp.html; 486 Yasumiya, Towada-kohan; ¥300 per person, camp site fee ¥200; ☺25 Apr-5 Nov; ☑) Has well-maintained facilities and rental supplies.

★ Towada Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(十和田ホテル; ☎75-1122; www.towada-hotel.com; Namariyama, Towada-ko, Kosaka-machi; r per person with 2 meals from ¥14,700; ☑) The Towada Hotel is a pre-WWII construction defined by its dramatic lobby of hulking timbers that rise to a chandelier-lit cathedral ceiling. The historic main building has elegant, recently refurbished Japanese-style rooms (with and without baths); Western-style rooms in the newer annex are comparatively lacking in character. All rooms have lake views, and there are communal baths looking out over the water, too. A path leads down from the hotel to the lake's secluded southwestern shore. While having a car out here would certainly be helpful, a hotel shuttle (timed for check-in and check-out) runs to and from the bus station in Yasumiya; reserve a seat when you reserve a room.

Oirase Keiryū Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎74-2121; www.oirase-keiryuu.jp; 231 Tochikubo, Oirase; r per person with 2 meals from ¥12,000; ☑☺) This large hotel, which caters to the package crowds, lies near the trailhead for the Oirase-gawa hike. There are both Japanese- and Western-style rooms, in addition to a string of hot springs along the river. The standout feature is the cavernous dining hall, with picture windows edging the forest and sloping eaves of panelled hardwood. The hotel offers free transfer from Shin-Aomori Station (once daily, reserve in advance).

Himemasu Sansō

MINSHUKU \$\$

(ひめます山荘; ☎75-2717; www.aominren.jp/minsyuku/58himemasu.html; 16-15 Yasumiya,

Towada-kohan; r per person without/with 2 meals ¥4400/6500; ☑) A number of the *minshuku* in Yasumiya have seen better days, but not this one. It has eight spotless tatami rooms, an onsen bath and filling spreads of home-cooked food. It's a 15-minute walk from the lake.

Information

Tourist Information Center (十和田湖総合案内所; ☎75-2425; ☺8am-5pm) Next to the bus station in Yasumiya, with English-language pamphlets.

Getting There & Away

JR buses run from Aomori, through Yakeyama (¥2240, two hours) to Towada-ko-eki in Yasumiya (¥3000, three hours); departures are highly seasonal and infrequent in winter.

A limited network of local buses run around the lakeside. Infrequent connections are reason enough to bring your own wheels.

Rte 120 runs south of Aomori to Towada-ko.

Shimokita Peninsula 下北半島

0175 / POP 100,000

Remote, axe-shaped Shimokita-hantō is centred on Osore-zan (恐山; 874m), a barren volcano that is regarded as one of the most sacred places in all of Japan. Osore, which means fear or dread, is an appropriate name given that the peak is the stage for Buddhist purgatory. With flocks of jet-black ravens swarming about, and sulphur-infused tributaries streaming by, it's not too hard to make the metaphysical leap.

Sights & Activities

★ Osorezan-bodaiji

TEMPLE

(恐山菩提寺; admission ¥500; ☺6am-6pm May-Oct; ☑) This holy shrine at the top of Osore-zan is a somewhat terrifying, strangely atmospheric place that attracts people in mourning or those seeking to commune with the dead. Several stone statues of the child-guardian deity, Jizō, overlook hills of craggy, sulphur-strewn rocks and hissing vapour. According to ritual, visitors are encouraged to help lost souls with their underworld penance by adding stones to the cairns. You can even bathe on hell's doorstep at the free onsen to the side as you approach the main hall.

ŌMA TUNA

Ōma, at the tip of the Shimokita Peninsula, may look like the end of the earth, but it's the centre of the universe when it comes to tuna. The frigid waters of the Tsugaru straight off the coast here are said to yield the tastiest *maguro* (bluefin tuna) in Japan. At the peak of the season a prize catch can sell for ¥25,000/kg.

Ōma's fishing co-ops catch fish the old-fashioned way, with hand lines and live bait (and a lot of muscle – these fish are enormous). It's a way of life that sets them squarely against large-scale commercial interests and in favour of greater regulation to protect the bluefin population.

Here in Ōma, tuna is served literally sea-to-table, and you can see the locals barbecuing fish heads on the street. **Kaikyōsō** (海峡荘; ☎37-3691; 17-734 Ōma-taira, Ōma; maguro-don ¥1000-2500; ☀11am-3pm late Apr-early Nov), in the bright green building, does a *maguro-don* (tuna sashimi over rice) with thick melt-in-your-mouth cuts of *akami* (lean red meat), *chū-toro* (medium-grade fatty tuna) and *ō-toro* (top-grade fatty tuna).

Tuna is caught fresh between late August and January, though most shops close up by mid-November when the cold winds turn fierce.

Hotoke-ga-ura

SCENIC CRUISE
(仏ヶ浦) The western edge of the peninsula is a spectacular stretch of coastline dotted with 100m-tall wind-carved cliffs, which are said to resemble Buddhas. Between April and October, round-trip sightseeing boats for Hotoke-ga-ura depart from Wakinosawa at 10.45am and 2.55pm (¥3800, two hours). Services are often suspended in poor weather.



Festivals & Events

Osore-zan Taisai

SPIRITUAL
(恐山大祭) These two annual festivals (held from 20 to 24 July and from 9 to 11 October) attract huge crowds who come to consult *itako* (mediums) in order to contact deceased family members.



Sleeping

★ Wakinosawa Youth Hostel **HOSTEL \$**
(脇野沢ユースホステル; ☎44-2341; www.wakinosawa.com; 41 Senokawame, Wakinosawa; dm ¥3900, YHA discount ¥3300, breakfast/dinner ¥525/945; 📞☎☎) This standout hostel is perched on a hillside at Wakinosawa village, about 15 minutes west of the ferry pier – call ahead for a pickup if you don't have a car. Both Western- and Japanese-style dormitory rooms are available, all of which are adorned with rich hardwoods and country furnishings. While it helps to speak a bit of Japanese, the owners are extremely accommodating. They're also dedicated naturalists who unofficially catalogue the movements of the local Japanese

macaques. With the right bit of luck, they can help you track down a few furry little snow monkeys.

Plaza Hotel Mutsu

HOTEL \$\$
(プラザホテルむつ; ☎23-7111; www.0175.co.jp/plaza; 2-46 Shimokita-chō; s/tw from ¥5500/11,600; 📞@☎) A bit dated, but comfortable enough, this hotel is a two-minute walk from Shimokita Station. Look for the brick-coloured (but not brick) building. Book online for a discounted rate; breakfast is an extra ¥200.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Sii Line (p33) operates two daily ferries between Wakinosawa and Aomori (¥2540, one hour).

Tsugaru Kaikyō (p33) runs two to three ferries daily from Ōma to Hakodate on Hokkaidō (¥2200, 1¾ hours).

BUS

From May to October, there are up to five buses departing from Shimokita Station for Osore-zan (¥750, 45 min). Year-round buses connect Shimokita and Ōma (¥1990, two hours). There are a few buses daily to Wakinosawa from Ōminato Station (¥1800, 70 minutes).

TRAIN

The JR Ōminato Line connects Aomori and Ōminato (¥2120, 2 hours), stopping at Shimokita (¥2120, 1½ hours); you may need to transfer at Noheji.

Hirosaki 弘前

0172 / POP 181,000

Established in the feudal era by the Tsugaru clan, the historic town of Hirosaki remains one of Tōhoku's principal cultural centres. Although it faded in prominence after political power shifted to Aomori, Hirosaki remains elegant and graceful, with many older structures still intact. The town is centred on castle grounds, complete with extant keeps and towers, and highlighted by its beautiful canopies of majestic cherry trees. Hirosaki also serves as a convenient jumping-off point for the spiritual trek up Iwaki-san.

Sights

Hirosaki-kōen

PARK

(弘前公園; ) This expansive public park has been shaped over the centuries by three castle moats, and landscaped by overhanging cherry trees (there are more than 5000 in total) that bloom in late April or early May. It's a 20-minute walk from Hirosaki Station, or take the Dote-machi Loop Bus (¥100, 20 minutes), which stops in front of the park.

Hirosaki-jō

CASTLE

(弘前城; admission ¥300;  9am-5pm Apr-Nov) At the heart of the park lie the ancient remains of this castle, which was originally constructed in 1611. Rather tragically, only 16 years later the castle was struck by lightning and burnt to the ground. Two centuries on, one of the corner towers was rebuilt, and it presently contains a small museum housing samurai weaponry.

Chōshō-ji

TEMPLE

(長勝寺; admission ¥300;  9am-4pm) A 10-minute walk southwest of the castle ruins brings you to an atmospheric temple district redolent of feudal times. The focus here is on Chōshō-ji, the largest temple, which harbours the oldest wooden building in Aomori Prefecture and rows of mausoleums built for the rulers of the Tsugaru clan.

Neputa Mura

CULTURAL BUILDING

(ねぷた村; 61 Kamenoko-machi; admission ¥500;  9am-5pm) Come here to see some of Hirosaki's Neputa floats and try your hand at the giant *taiko* drums. There are also exhibitions on local crafts. It's a short walk from the Bunka Center stop on the Dote-machi Loop Bus.

Festivals & Events

Hirosaki Neputa Matsuri

FLOATS

(弘前ねぷたまつり) From 1 to 7 August, Hirosaki celebrates its Neputa Matsuri, famous for the illuminated floats parading every evening to the accompaniment of flutes and drums. The festival is generally said to signify ceremonial preparation for battle, expressing sentiments of bravery for what lies ahead and of heartache for what lies behind.

Sleeping

Hirosaki Youth Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(ひろさきユースホステル;  33-7066; www.jyh.or.jp/english/touhoku/hirosaki/index.html; 11 Mori-machi; dm ¥3645, YHA discount ¥3045) Tucked away on a side street two blocks south of the outer moat, this hostel is identifiable by the large 'YH' sign on the exterior. Although it lacks personality, the price is right, and you're smack in the middle of the town's main sights.

★ Ishiba Ryokan

RYOKAN \$\$

(石場旅館;  32-9118; www.ishibaryokan.com; 55 Mototera-machi; r per person without/with meals ¥4725/7740; ) With its labyrinthine, late 19th-century wooden building, this ryokan has both the setting and the history to go high-end. Yet the well-maintained tatami rooms, most of which overlook a small garden, are priced reasonably and the owners set a casual, warm vibe. English and French are spoken here, and there are bicycles for rent, too. Inquire about trekking and cultural tours.

Hirosaki Grand Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(弘前グランドホテル;  32-1515; http://breez-bay-group.com/hirosaki-gh; 1 Ichiban-chō; s/d from ¥4300/6980;   ) A very affordable business hotel with good service, free breakfast and moderate-sized rooms, the Hirosaki Grand is within easy walking distance of the castle. It's a fairly nondescript grey building – look for the large 'G' sign.

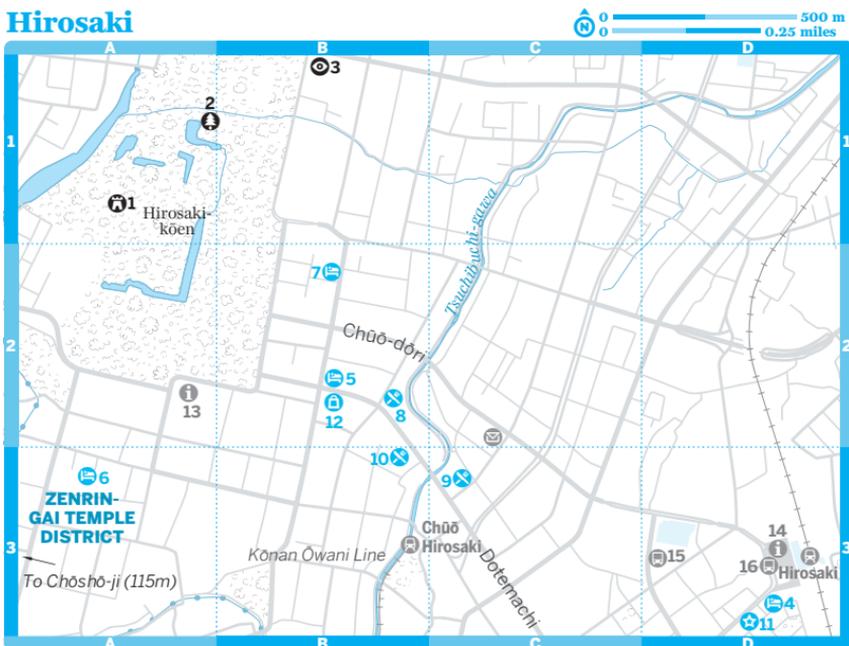
Best Western Hotel

New City Hirosaki

HOTEL \$\$\$

(ベストウェスタンホテルニューシティ弘前;  37-0700; www.bestwestern.co.jp/hirosaki; 1-1-2 Ōmachi; s/d from ¥9000/16,000;   ) Not your typical installment of the international franchise, this Best Western is surprisingly stylish and upmarket. It's also conveniently attached to Hirosaki Station, and has an excellent fitness centre.

Hirosaki



Hirosaki

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🍴 Eating & Drinking

Kikufuji

JAPANESE \$

(菊富士; ☎36-3300; www.kikufuji.co.jp; 1 Sakamoto-chō; meals ¥880-2300; ☺11am-3:30pm, 5pm-9pm) A variety of set meals and a picture menu make sampling the local cuisine a breeze here. There's also an extensive list of Aomori sake, which you can try in an *otameshi* (sampler) set of three. Paper lanterns and folk music add atmosphere with-

out being kitschy. Look for the vertical white sign out front.

★ Kadare Yokochō

FOOD STALLS \$\$

(かだれ横丁; www.kadare.info; 2-1 Hyakkokumachi; ☺11am-2am, individual shop hours vary; ☎) You wouldn't expect much from this nondescript office building (marked by the lanterns out front), yet inside are a dozen food stalls dishing up everything from fried noodles to Nepalese curry. It's a lively local

WORTH A TRIP

IWAKI-SAN & SHIRAKAMI-SANCHI

Hirosaki is the gateway to some of Tōhoku's most remote, and spectacular, nature. Soaring above the city is the sacred volcano of **Iwaki-san** (岩木山; 1625m). In mid-September, area farmers gather for the Oyama-Sankei, an annual group pilgrimage by moonlight up to the peak where they pray for a bountiful harvest.

Tradition dictates that summit-bound travellers should first make an offering to the guardian god at **Iwaki-san Jinja** (岩木山神社). After peaking at the summit, you can follow a different trail down, past the smaller peak of **Tori-no-umi-san** (鳥ノ海山), and eventually to the village of **Dake-onsen** (岳温泉). The entire 9km hike should take you around 6½ hours, which means that you can easily summit Iwaki-san on a day trip from Hirosaki if you get an early enough start.

Southwest of Iwaki-san is the isolated **Shirakami-sanchi** (白神山地), a UNESCO-protected virgin forest of Japanese beech trees. From the bus stop at Anmon Aqua Village, an hour-long trail leads into the woods to the three **Anmon-no-taki** (暗門の滝) waterfalls, the tallest of which measures 42m. This is part of the 'buffer-zone'; the part of the park that is open to the public without permit.

From early April to late October there are up to eight buses daily from platform 6 at the Hirosaki Station bus stop to Iwaki-san Jinja (¥690, 40 minutes). From Dake-onsen, there are up to eight buses daily back to Hirosaki (¥1010, one hour). From May through October, there are two buses in the morning for Anmon Aqua Village (one-way/return ¥1600/2400, 1½ hours), leaving from platform 6 at the Hirosaki Station bus stop; two buses make the return trip in the afternoon.

hangout. **Hinata-bokko** (日向ぼっこ), with the orange *noren* curtains, is particularly recommended; the mother and daughter team here turn out excellent renditions of local dishes like *hotate misoyaki* (grilled scallops in miso; ¥600) and *ikamenchi* (minced squid battered and fried, ¥400).

Manchan

CAFE \$

(万茶ン; ☎35-4663; 36-6 Dote-machi; coffee & dessert sets ¥800; ☺11am-6:30pm) Among Hirosaki's numerous coffee shops, this one has the longest history. In business since 1929, it's said to be the oldest in Tōhoku. Once a hangout for the local literati, it's now a lovely spot to sample another Hirosaki speciality, apple pie. Look for the bifurcated cello out front.



Entertainment

★ Live House Yamauta

LIVE MUSIC

(ライブハウス山唄; ☎36-1835; 1-2-4 Ōmachi; music charge ¥800, dinner course from ¥3000; ☺5-11pm, music at 7:30pm & 9:15pm, closed alternate Mon) Come here to listen to the distinct twang of the thick-stringed Tsugaru *shamisen* (Tsugaru is the old name for western Aomori; *shamisen* is a three-stringed lute). Nightly performances include traditional folks songs and spirited solo improvisation. The dinner course is a good deal, but you can also just sit at the counter with a drink.

There's an English sign out front. Call ahead for reservations – the staff caters well for foreign guests.



Shopping

Tanaka-ya

CRAFTS

(田中屋; www.tugarunuri.jp; Ichibancho-kado; ☺10am-7pm) Tanaka-ya deals in high-grade local artisan work. The prices aren't cheap, but even if you're not looking to buy, it's worth stopping in for a peek at the boldly coloured *tsugaru-nuri* (lacquerware of the Tsugaru region), produced in-house.



Information

Hirosaki Sightseeing Information Center (弘前市立観光館; ☎37-5501; www.en-hirosaki.com; 2-1 Shimo-shirogane-chō; ☺9am-6pm) Inside the Kankōkan (tourism building).

Main Post Office (弘前郵便局; 18-1 Kita Kawarake-chō; ☺ATM services 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) Has an international ATM.

Tourist Information Center (弘前市観光案内所; ☎26-3600; ☺8.45am-6pm; 📶) Offers free internet access.



Getting There & Around

Hourly *tokkyū* on the JR Ōu main line run between Aomori and Hirosaki (¥1460, 35 minutes), and Hirosaki and Akita (¥2520, three hours).

The **Tsugaru free pass** (adult/child ¥2000/1000) covers area buses and trains, including those heading out to Iwaki-san and Shirakami-sanchi, for two consecutive days. Enquire at the Tourist Information Center.

The Dote-machi Loop Bus (¥100 per ride), which makes a circuit around downtown, leaves from in front of Aomori Station.

Bicycle rental (¥300, 9am–4pm) is available at either tourist information centre from May through November.

AKITA PREFECTURE

Japan's sixth-largest prefecture, Akita-ken (秋田県) is shaped by the Ōi-sanmyaku and Dewa mountain ranges. These soaring peaks have long kept the region isolated, and even today development is sparse. Mountains, of course, are good news for hikers and skiers, but also for those with more idle pursuits: Akita's peaks shelter remote, rustic hot-springs that are among the best in the country. Paired with neighbouring Tazawa-ko, Nyūtō Onsen is an unrivalled retreat. At lower altitudes, towns and cities have sprung up in fertile valleys, including the prefectural capital of Akita, and the feudal city of Kaku-nodate, a storehouse of samurai culture. The region is also said to have the most beautiful women in Japan, the so-called *Akita-bijin* (Akita beauties).

Tazawa-ko 田沢湖

0187 / POP 12,900

At 423m, Tazawa-ko is Japan's deepest lake. Its convenient *shinkansen* access makes it a popular summertime escape. The nearby mountains offer excellent views of the lake and four-seasons of activity, including skiing.

Sights

Tazawa-ko

LAKE

(田沢湖) Tazawa-ko has a sandy beach, **Shirahama** (白浜), yet swimming is a frigid proposition outside the balmy summer months. You can rent all manner of boats in the town of Tazawa Kohan during the spring, summer and autumn months. A stroll by the lake at sunset is a treat at any time of year, and is the preferred activity for romance-seeking Japanese couples. On the eastern shore is Tazawa-ko's landmark, a bronze statue of legendary beauty Tatsuko, sculpted by Funakoshi Yasutake.

A 20km perimeter road wraps around the lake, which is perfect for a slow drive or a vigorous bike ride – rentals are available in Tazawa Kohan (¥400 per hour). There are also a few buses daily from Tazawa-ko Station or Tazawa Kohan that loop around the lake, stopping for 15 minutes to admire the statue of Tatsuko.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

AONI ONSEN 青荷温泉

A seriously atmospheric, but seriously isolated hot spring, Aoni Onsen has just one inn. It's the ultimate escape, not just from civilization but also from the present.

Rampu-no-yado (ランプの宿; ☎ 0172-54-8588; www.yo.rim.or.jp/~aoni/index.html; 1-7 Aoni-sawa, Taki-no-ue, Okiura, Kuroishi; r per person with 2 meals from ¥9600, baths ¥500; ☀ day bathing 10am-3pm; ♿), literally 'lamp inn', exists in another time, using oil lamps instead of electric bulbs to light its rooms and wooden corridors. The proprietors here work hard to suspend your reality and transport you back to a simpler age. As the sun goes down and the stars come out over the valley, the effect is magical.

The guest rooms and baths are spread out over several small wooden buildings along both sides of a stream, crossed by a footbridge. There are four baths in all, including a stone *rotemburo*. Winters are snowy, yet particularly ambient (and the cold is nothing that a good long soak can't fix).

Aoni Onsen is located alongside Rte 102 between Hirosaki and Towada-ko. If you don't have a car, you're going to have to work to get out here. By public transport, take the private Kōnan Tetsudō line from Hirosaki to Kuroishi (¥420, 30 minutes, six daily); Kōnan buses connect with arriving passengers for Niji-no-ko (¥750, 30 minutes), from where shuttle buses run to Aoni (free, 30 minutes, four daily). From December through March, the narrow lane that winds down to Aoni Onsen is closed to private vehicles; if you're coming by car, park at the Niji-no-ko bus station and catch the free shuttle bus. Advanced reservations are a must.

Akita Prefecture



Activities

★ Akita Komaga-take

HIKING

(秋田駒ヶ岳) Straddling the border with Iwate Prefecture, this mountainous area is admired for its summer wildflowers, fall foliage and rare prevalence of both dry and wet plant species. If you have two days to spare, you can pursue a 17km-long course that takes in three peaks, overnights in a picturesque mountain hut and finishes up with a rewarding soak in the healing waters of Nyūtō Onsen.

You can access the trailhead at Komaga-take Hachigōme (eighth station) by taking one of seven daily buses (all depart before 1.30pm) from Tazawa-ko Station (¥1000, one hour). From the eighth station, it should take you an hour or two to reach the summit of Oname-dake (男女岳; 1637m).

From here, you should press on to the eastern edge of the oval-shaped pond below, and claim your space at the Amida-ike Hinan Goya (阿弥陀池避難小屋) unmanned mountain hut; it's recommended that you leave a small tip (¥1000). You can also double back for 20 minutes or so and scale O-dake (男岳; 1623m).

On the second day, it will take you about seven hours to descend to Nyūtō Onsen, though not without first summiting Yokodake (横岳; 1583m). The descending trail follows the ridgeline most of the way, and eventually winds through expansive marshlands that harbour all manner of avian life. The circuit ends at the bus stop for Nyūtō Onsen, which signals that your hot bath is just ahead.

Tazawako Ski Park

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

(たざわ湖スキー場; www.snowjapan.com/e/spotlight/tazawako.html; 1-day lift tickets ¥3800; ☺Dec-Apr) Akita's largest winter-sports destination is just a little more than a three-hour *shinkansen* ride from Tokyo. The powder accumulates here over 13 runs that wind down Akita Komaga-take and overlook the nearby shores of Tazawa-ko.

Trails are evenly divided between beginner, intermediate and advanced levels. However, they tend to be a bit on the shorter side with the exception of the 1.6km-long Kokutai and Shirakaba runs. Six lifts do a reasonable job of keeping the queues to a relative minimum, but it can get busy here on peak weekends.

You'll find English-language signs on the mountains and in the restaurants.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

THE LEGEND OF TATSUKO

Rumour has it that a local beauty, Tatsuko, has long inhabited the lake in the form of a dragon. Believing that the spring water would make her youthful looks last forever, she imbibed so much that she was transformed into a water dragon. One version of the story adds another dragon, formerly a prince, as her lover. Their passionate nocturnal antics are said to be the reason that Tazawa-ko doesn't freeze in the winter!

There are three large cafeteria-style eateries serving the usual fast-food-leaning staples in addition to local specialties such as ginger *rāmen* and Tazawa-ko microbrews. Full equipment rental is available for ¥3500 per day.

In the winter months, buses leaving Tazawa-ko Station for Nyūtō Onsen stop at Tazawako Suki-jō (¥530, 30 minutes).

Sleeping

You can also elect to bed down in one of Nyūtō Onsen's excellent ryokan.

Tazawa-ko Youth Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(田沢湖ユースホステル; ☎43-1281; www.yjh.or.jp/yhguide/touhoku/tazawako/index.html; 33-8 Kami-Ishigami; dm ¥3890, YHA discount ¥3290, breakfast/dinner ¥650/1050; 📍) A few minutes walk from the lake, this rambling hostel has clean, functional tatami rooms, an onsen bath and filling, home-cooked meals.

Information

Folake (☎43-2111; ☺8.30am-5.30pm) Inside the train station; tourist information and free internet.

Getting There & Away

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you're driving, Rte 46 connects the Akita Expressway (秋田自動車道) with Tazawa-ko.

BUS

Frequent local buses run between JR Tazawa-ko Station and Tazawa Kohan (¥350, 10 minutes), the tourist hub on the eastern shore of the lake.

Buses also run to Nyūtō Onsen (¥650, 45 minutes). Note that these services terminate after sunset.

TRAIN

JR Tazawa-ko Station is located a few kilometres southeast of the lake, and serves as the area's main access point.

Several hourly trains on the Akita *shinkansen* line run between Tazawa-ko and Tokyo (¥15,240, three hours), and between Tazawa-ko and Akita (¥3280, 55 minutes) via Kakunodate (¥1560, 15 minutes).

Nyūtō Onsen

Nyūtō is one of Japan's choicest hot springs, and a must-visit for any aspiring onsen aficionado. The area is home to no fewer than seven rustic ryokan, each with a different character. All offer healing waters that are great for an away-from-it-all soak. Many also have *konyoku* or mixed-sex baths (when it comes to bathing, the Japanese certainly aren't shy!).

🛏 Sleeping

For a complete list of ryokan in Nyūtō, see www.nyuto-onsenkyo.com/english/index.html.

★ **Tsuru-no-yu Onsen** RYOKAN \$\$
(鶴の湯温泉; ☎0187-46-2139; www.tsurunoyu.com/english.html; 50 Kokuyurin, Sendatsuzawa; r per person with 2 meals ¥8500-15,900, baths ¥500; ☀day bathing 10am-3pm Tue-Sun; 🚻) The most storied onsen in Nyūtō, Tsuru-no-yu has been in the business for almost four centuries. The reason for its enduring fame is the mineral-rich spring containing sulphur, sodium, calcium chloride and carbonic acid, which combine to form a distinctive milky-white colour. According to local lore, a hunter once saw a *tsuru* (crane) healing its wounds in the spring, and reported the fortuitous discovery to his lord. The hot spring was soon designated the official bathhouse of the Akita clan's ruling elite.

Today it's fortunately open to commoners and nobles alike. The mixed *rotemburo* is positively jubilant, though shyer folks can take refuge in the indoor sex-segregated baths. Accommodation is extremely varied, ranging from tiny six-mat tatami rooms that share bathrooms to compartmentalised suites that open up to the forest. Regardless of where you bed down, the evening hours are a nostalgic affair distinguished by hearty meals cooked over the *irori* (sunken hearth) and guests in *yukata* (light cotton kimono) dining and socialising by lantern light. Given the onsen's fame, it is recommended that you book well in advance.

🌊 TaenoyuRYOKAN \$\$

(妙乃湯; ☎0187-46-2740; www.taenoyu.com; 2-1 Komagatake; r per person with 2 meals from ¥12,855, baths ¥700; ☀day bathing 10am-3pm Wed-Mon; 🚻🚿) What Taenoyu lacks in history, it more than makes up for in style. This boutique ryokan specialises in sophisticated refinement: sleeping quarters are framed by rich hardwoods and elaborate furnishings, and locavore meals are built around wild plants foraged on the grounds. Bathing options are comprehensive, including private family onsen, reclining cypress tubs, mixed *rotemburo*, rock-lined springs and indoor relaxation pools.

Kuroyu OnsenRYOKAN \$\$

(黒湯温泉; ☎0187-46-2214; www.kuroyu.com; 2-1 Kuroyuzawa; r per person with 2 meals from ¥11,700, baths ¥500; ☀day bathing 9am-4pm May-Nov; 🚻) At the streamside Kuroyu, you'll easily feel like you've stepped into a Japanese wood-block print. With a bathing tradition dating back more than 300 years, Kuroyu is famous for its hydrogen-sulphide spring that is said to ease high blood pressure, diabetes and arteriosclerosis. Don't miss the waterfall jets, which send cascades of water onto your shoulders and back. Japanese-style rooms are fairly standard, though the forest setting is the stage for a relaxing retreat.

📍 Getting There & Away

Buses run from JR Tazawa-ko Station to Nyūtō Onsen (¥650, 45 minutes).

Kakunodate 角館0187 / POP 13,000

Established in 1620 by Ashina Yoshikatsu, the lord of the Satake clan, Kakunodate is known as 'Little Kyoto', and presents a thoughtful, immersive experience for anyone interested in catching a glimpse of the samurai era. While the castle that once guarded the feudal town is no more, the *buke yashiki* – or samurai district – is splendidly preserved. A veritable living museum of Japanese culture and history, the *buke yashiki* consists of orderly mansions surrounded by cherry trees and manicured gardens.

👁 Sight

There are half a dozen villas open to the public, which line a street shaded by cherry trees a 20-minute walk northwest of the

TAMAGAWA ONSEN

With its remote location in the heart of Hachimantai, Tōhoku's central volcanic plateau, Tamagawa Onsen is a bastion of a different sort of onsen culture. People don't come here to relax and enjoy the mountain scenery; it's a barren, rocky wilderness stained egg-yolk yellow in patches. Instead they come for the purported healing properties of the water – it's the most acidic in the country, with a pH of just 1.1 – and to undergo strict bathing regimens that can last a week, or more. Far from a resort, the **Tamagawa Onsen Ryokan** (玉川温泉旅館; ☎0187-58-3000; www.tamagawa-onsen.jp; Shibukurosawa, Tamagawa; r per person with 2 meals from ¥8300, baths only ¥600; ☀ day bathing 7am-5pm; ⓘ) is downright institutional.

Steam literally rises from the ground here, which is a big part of the draw: in between soaks, bathers (fully clothed) stretch out on reed mats on the rocks heated by the underwater springs and sweat it out under blankets – a natural *ganbanyoku*, or stone sauna. Lying head-to-toe with strangers, breathing in the heady, sulphuric air, you can feel your body temperature gradually rise to near feverish in about half an hour (at which point it is time to take a break).

From late April through November, buses leave from Tazawa-ko Station for Tamagawa Onsen (¥1420, 1¼ hours). You can purchase reed mats (required to use on the *ganbanyoku*) at the ryokan.

train station. The more elaborate ones are set up like mini museums; others are simply left as they were, and are free for visitors to peek inside.

Kakunodate Rekishi-mura

Aoyagi-ke

MUSEUM

(角館歴史村青柳家; www.samuraiworld.com/english/index.html; 3 Omote-machi; admission ¥500; ☀9am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Nov-Mar) The Aoyagi family compound is impressive in its own right, but inside each well-maintained structure is a fascinating exhibition of family heirlooms. The collection spans generations and includes centuries-old samurai weaponry, folk art and valuable antiques along with gramophones and classic jazz records.

Bukeyashiki Ishiguro-ke

HISTORIC BUILDING

(武家屋敷石黒家; 1 Omote-machi; admission ¥300; ☀9am-5pm) Built in 1809, this was the residence of the Ishiguro family, advisers to the Satake clan, and it's one of the oldest buildings in the district. A descendant of the family still lives here, but some rooms are open to the public. In addition to samurai gear, don't miss the weathered maps and the precision scales for doling out rice.

Kakunodate Kabazaiku

Denshōkan

MUSEUM

(角館榊細工伝承館; 10-1 Omote-machi; admission ¥300; ☀9am-5pm Apr-Oct, to 4.30pm Nov-Mar) Inside you'll find exhibits and demonstrations on *kabazaiku*, which is the craft

of covering household or decorative items in fine strips of cherry bark. This pursuit was first taken up by lower-ranking and masterless samurai in times of hardship.



Festivals & Events

Kakunodate Sakura

CHERRY BLOSSOMS

(角館の桜) On the river embankment, a 2km stretch of cherry trees becomes a tunnel of pure pink between mid-April and early May. Some of the *shidare-zakura* (drooping cherry) trees in the *buke yashiki* are up to 300 years old, and were originally brought from Kyoto.

Kakunodate O-matsuri

TRADITIONAL

(角館のお祭り) From 7 to 9 September, festival participants haul around enormous seven-tonne *yama* (wooden carts) to pray for peaceful times, accompanied by folk music and dancing – just as they have for 350 years.



Sleeping

Note that rates rise during peak seasons, such as when the cherry blossoms bloom.

Tamachi Bukeyashiki

Hotel

BOUTIQUE HOTEL \$\$

(田町武家屋敷ホテル; ☎52-1700; www.buke-yashiki.jp; 23 Tamachi; r per person with 1/2 meals from ¥11,125/15,750; ⓘ ⓘ) While it's only been in business for a few decades, you can easily imagine travel-worn samurai passing through the wooden gate here. The structure is designed to resemble a traditional

FARMHOUSE INNS

If you want to get away from the tourist crowds, consider staying in a *nōka minshuku*, a farmhouse inn. **Iori** (庵; ☎0187-55-2262; www.akita-gt.org/stay/minshuku/iori.html; 65 Maeda, Ogata, Kakunodate-machi; r per person without/with 2 meals ¥4500/6000), 3km north of Kakunodate Station, is part of a working family farm. It's a spare building really, which the owners have turned into a comfortable cabin. The look is pure Japanese country, with whitewashed walls and dark wood beams, fresh tatami mats and indigo floor cushions. How much you take part in life on the farm is up to you: Iori can be your base for exploring Kakunodate, a peaceful retreat or a chance to get your hands dirty in the kitchen or fields. It helps to have your own wheels, but you can arrange pickup from Kakunodate Station.

Akita's countryside has dozens of *nōka minshuku*. For a complete list see www.akita-gt.org/stay.

villa, but is fully stocked with modern amenities. Rooms, both Japanese and Western style, are simply elegant with dark wooden beams and paper lanterns; in comparison, meals are luxurious affairs.

Folkloro Kakunodate

HOTEL \$\$

(フォルクローロ角館; ☎53-2070; www.folkloro-kakunodate.com; Nakasuga-zawa 14; s/tw from ¥6615/11,340; ☎☎☎☎) This standard, but nicely-maintained business hotel gets points for its convenient location next to the train station and its free breakfast spread; it loses a few for charging nearly ¥2000 extra for a nonsmoking room.

Eating

Kosendō

NOODLES \$

(古泉洞; ☎53-2902; 9 Higashi-katsuraku-chō; noodles from ¥1050; ☎10am-4pm) Kakunodate's most historic lunch spot is this Edo-era wooden schoolhouse. The house speciality is *buke-soba* served with *takenoko* (bamboo) and tempura-fried *ōba* (large perilla leaf). It's in the middle of the *buke yashiki*; look for the wooden sign above the entrance.

Nishi-no-miyake

Restaurant Kita-kura

SHOKUDŌ \$

(西宮家レストラン北蔵; ☎52-2438; 11-1 Kamichō, Tamachi; meals from ¥1050; ☎11am-5pm; ☎) This sprawling former residence houses a restaurant in a century-old warehouse, towards the back of the complex. Here diners sit under hulking wooden rafters, tucking into classic *yōshoku* (Japanese-style Western food) dishes like *hayashi raisu* (hashed beef on rice) that would have been in vogue when the structure was built. Nishi-no-miyake is halfway between the station and the sightseeing district.

Information

Tourist Information Center (角館町観光協会; ☎54-2700; ☎9am-6pm mid-Apr–Sep, to 5.30pm Oct–mid-Apr) Pick up English maps here, outside the station in a small building shaped like a *kura* (traditional Japanese storehouse).

Getting There & Around

Several hourly trains on the Akita *shinkansen* run between Kakunodate and Tazawa-ko (¥1560, 15 minutes), and between Kakunodate and Akita (¥2940, 45 minutes).

Infrequent local trains also run on the JR Tazawako line between Kakunodate and Tazawako (¥320, 20 minutes), and between Kakunodate and Akita (¥1280, 1½ hours), with a change at Ōmagari to the JR Ōu main line.

Bicycle rentals are available across from the train station for ¥300 per hour.

Akita 秋田

018 / POP 336,000

The northern terminus of the aptly dubbed Akita *shinkansen*, this sprawling commercial city and prefectural capital is one of the region's principal transport hubs. Like most contemporary cities, it was once a castle town, in this case the seat of power of the Satake clan.

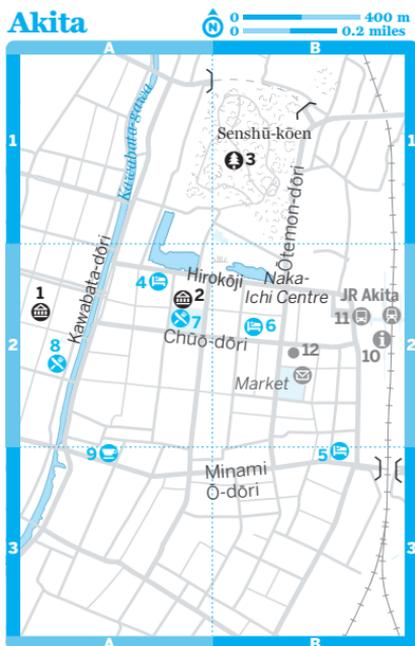
Sights

Akita's few sights are in the city centre near the train station, so you can easily get around on foot.

Senshū-kōen

PARK

(千秋公園) Originally constructed in 1604, Akita's castle was destroyed with other feudal relics during the Meiji 'enlightenment'.



The moat still guards the entrance to this leafy park; though hardly sinister, it becomes choked with giant waterlilies in summer. There are also a few pieces of the castle foundation remaining, along with plenty of grassy patches and strolling paths. A reconstruction of a guard tower in the north corner offers views over the city.

Akita Museum of Art

MUSEUM

(秋田県立美術館; <http://common.pref.akita.lg.jp/art-museum>; free during reopening; ☀10am-6pm) Akita's most famous painting, Tsuguharu Fūjita's *Events of Akita*, is also reputed to be the world's largest canvas painting. It measures 3.65m by 20.5m and depicts traditional Akita life throughout the seasons. In September 2013, this work and others from the former Hirano Masakichi Bijutsukan are slated to move into their sleek new home, this Andō Tadao-designed museum in the Naka-Ichi centre. Until then, visitors can have a peak inside and a rest in the second floor cafe, from where the reflecting pool seems to run directly into the palace moat.

Akarenga Kyōdōkan

MUSEUM

(赤れんが郷土館; www.city.akita.akita.jp/city/ed/ak; 3-3-21 Ōmachi; admission ¥200; ☀9.30am-4.30pm) Once the opulent headquarters of

Akita

Sights

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- 2 Akita Museum of ArtA2
- 3 Senshū-kōenB1

Sleeping

- 4 Akita Castle HotelA2
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Eating

- 7 Kanbun GonendōA2
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- 9 Spica Ryokōsha Cafe & BarA3

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- 10 Tourist Information CenterB2

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- 11 Bus StationB2
- 12 Toyota Rent a CarB2

Akita Bank, this brick Renaissance structure, built in 1912, is now a folk museum. Inside, you'll find fascinating woodblock prints of traditional Akita life by self-taught artist Katsuhira Tokushi.

★ Festivals & Events

Akita Kantō Matsuri

LANTERNS

(秋田竿燈まつり; www.kantou.gr.jp/english/index.htm) From 3 to 6 August, Akita celebrates the visually stunning Pole Lantern Festival. When evening falls on the city centre, more than 160 men skillfully balance giant poles, weighing 60kg and hung with illuminated lanterns, on their heads, chins, hips and shoulders, to the beat of *taiko* drumming groups.

🏨 Sleeping

Naniwa Hotel

HOTEL \$

(ホテルなにわ; ☎832-4570; www.hotel-naniwa.jp; 6-18-27 Nakadōri; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥2625/5250; 📞☺🍷) This small, family-run hotel has a variety of tatami rooms (some teeny tiny; others with private sinks and toilets). It also outdoes itself with extras: a beautiful 24-hour *hinoki* bath, massage chairs and filling meals made with the owners' home-grown rice. Look for the red building with a wooden entrance.

Richmond Hotel**Akita Eki-mae**

BUSINESS HOTEL \$\$

(リッチモンドホテル秋田駅前; ☎884-0055; www.richmondhotel.jp/en/akita/index.php?lang=en; 2-2-26 Naka-dōri; s/d from ¥5600/7800; ☺☺☺) Remarkably stylish for a business hotel, the Richmond also has a convenient location in between the station and the sights. Prices can vary wildly though, so it's a good idea to book ahead online.

Akita Castle Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(秋田キャッスルホテル; ☎834-1141; www.castle-hotel.co.jp; 1-3-5 Nakadōri; s/d from ¥7500/11,000; ☺☺☺☺) It may not look like much from the outside, but this is the classiest hotel in town. If you can lock in a discount rate online, it's not a bad deal either. The rooms got a stylish makeover in 2011; the nicest ones overlook the castle moat.

Eating & Drinking

Kawabata-dōri, lined with restaurants and bars, both classic and seedy, is the city's principal nightlife strip. For a picnic lunch, stop by the supermarket in the new Naka-Ichi centre.

Kanbun Gonendō

NOODLES \$

(寛文五年堂; www.kanbun5.jp; 1-4-3 Naka-dōri; noodles from ¥900; ☺ 11am-10.30pm; ☎) Sample delicate, fresh *inaniwa udon* (thin wheat noodles) at this popular speciality shop. They're particularly refreshing on a hot day served cold with soy sauce and sesame dipping sauces. Vegetarian dishes are available; ask before ordering. The restaurant is part of the Naka-Ichi shopping centre.

Otafuku

JAPANESE \$\$

(お多福; ☎862-0802; http://akitaotafuku.com; 4-2-25 Ōmachi; hotpot dishes from ¥2520; ☺ 11.30am-2pm, 5pm-10.30pm Mon-Fri, 5pm-10.30pm Sat) This upmarket traditional restaurant does good renditions of classic local dishes like *kiritanpo nabe*, a filling hotpot of kneaded and grilled rice (the *kiritanpo*) and vegetables in a chicken and soy-sauce broth. Courses, though pricey, simplify ordering and include Otafuku's famous pickles.

Spica Ryokōsha Cafe & Bar

CAFE

(スピカ旅行社カフェ&バー; http://spica-travel.com/cafe_bar/cafe_bar.html; 5-4-18 Nakadōri; drinks from ¥500; ☺ 11.30am-11pm Tue-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat, to 6pm Sun) By day, this colourful

cafe serves up tasty smoothies and lunch plates. Come night, it morphs into a hip little bar. During happy hour (5pm to 7pm) Heartland beer goes for just ¥390.

Information

Akita Eki-mae Post Office (秋田駅前郵便局; 4-11-14 Naka-dōri; ☺ ATM 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 12.30pm Sat)

Akita Red Cross Hospital (秋田赤十字病院; ☎24hr hotline 829-5000; www.akita-med.jrc.or.jp; 222-1 Nawashirosawa; ☺ outpatient services 8am-11.30am Mon-Fri)

Tourist Information Center (秋田市観光案内所; ☎832-7941; www.akitafan.com/language/en/index.html; ☺ 9am-7pm) Opposite the *shinkansen* tracks on the 2nd floor of Akita Station.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

From Akita Airport, 21km south of the city centre, flights head to/from Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Hiroshima, Sapporo and many other destinations.

Frequent buses leave from platform 1 in front of Akita Station for the airport (¥900, 40 minutes).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you're driving, the **Akita Expressway** (秋田自動車道) runs east from Akita until it joins with the Tōhoku Expressway. The **Nihonkai-Tōhoku Expressway** (日本海東北自動車道) runs south along the coast.

You can pick up a car at **Toyota Rent a Car** (トヨタレンタカー; 833-0100; 4-6-5 Naka-dōri; ☺ 8am-10pm), a few minutes walk west from Akita Station.

BOAT

From the port of Akita-kō, **Shin Nihonkai** (新日本海; ☎880-2600; www.snf.jp) runs ferries to Tomakomai on Hokkaidō (from ¥4400, 10 hours) leaving at 7am on Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

One bus runs at 6.05am from platform 11 outside Akita Station to Akita-kō (¥420, 30 minutes), 8km northwest of the city.

BUS

Highway buses depart from the east exit of the train station, and connect Akita to major cities throughout Honshū.

TRAIN

Hourly trains on the JR Akita *shinkansen* run between the northern terminus of Akita and the southern terminus of Tokyo (¥16,810, four

hours) via Tazawa-ko (¥3280, one hour) and Kakunodate (¥2940, 45 minutes).

Infrequent local trains also run on the JR Ōu main line between Akita and Kakunodate (¥1280, 1½ hours), with a change at Ōmagari to the JR Tazawako line. Finally, there are a few *tokkyū* each day on the JR Uetsu line connecting Akita with Niigata (¥7020, 3¾ hours).

YAMAGATA PREFECTURE

As its name (which literally means ‘mountain shape’) suggests, Yamagata-ken (山形県) is a land of mountains. Its most famous peaks are the three sacred ones that make up Dewa Sanzan, revered by *yamabushi* (mountain ascetics) and hikers alike. But it is also a land of hot springs, like Zaō Onsen, with its a dramatic caldera lake and challenging ski slopes. Yamadera, the temple perched atop a cliff, has been enchanting visitors for centuries, among them the legendary traveling poet Bashō.

Tsuruoka 鶴岡

0235 / POP 136,000

Tsuruoka, in the middle of the Shōnai plain, was established by the Sakai clan, one of feudal Yamagata’s most important families. Today, it’s the second-largest city in the prefecture and the jumping-off point for the mountains of Dewa Sanzan. Downtown is pretty sleepy; if you need a bite to eat or snacks for the road, try the S-Mall shopping centre, a few minutes on foot from the station.

👁 Sights & Activities

Chidō Hakubutsukan MUSEUM
(致道博物館; 10-18 Kachū-shinmachi; admission ¥700; ☀9am-4.30pm; 📄) Founded in 1950 by the former Lord Shōnai in order to preserve local culture, this museum features Sakai-family artefacts, two Meiji-era buildings, a traditional storehouse and a *kabuto-zukuri* (a farmhouse with a thatched roof shaped like a samurai helmet).

The museum is on the southwest corner of Tsuruoka-kōen, the site of the former Sakai castle. You can either walk for about 15 minutes southwest from Tsuruoka Station, or take a bus from stop 1 – frequent buses bound for Yunohama Onsen pass by the Chidō Hakubutsukan-mae stop (¥260, 10 minutes).

★ Festivals & Events

Tenjin Matsuri MASKS
(天神祭) On 25 May, people stroll around in masks and costume serving sake and keeping an eye out for friends and acquaintances. The object is to make it through the festival without anyone recognising you. Manage this feat three years running and local lore claims you’ll have good luck for the rest of your life!

🛏 Sleeping

Narakan INN \$
(奈良館; ☎22-1202; 2-35 Hiyoshi-machi; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥3885/6300; 📄📄) A traveller favourite for years, Narakan has both simple tatami rooms with shared bath and Western-style rooms with bath. The home-cooked meals are filling and delicious. Head five minutes south along the main street leading out from the station; the inn, distinguished by a tall chimney, will be on your left.

Tokyo Daiichi Hotel Tsuruoka HOTEL \$\$
(東京第一ホテル鶴岡; ☎24-7662; www.tdh-tsuruoka.co.jp; 2-10 Nishiki-machi; s/d from ¥8662/12,075; 📄📄) A cut above the other business hotels around the station, this one has comparatively spacious and stylish rooms. Even better is the rooftop onsen complete with sauna and *rotemburo* – perfect for a post-hike soak. It’s the huge, yellow brick building, connected to the shopping centre S-Mall.

📄 Information

Tourist Information Center (☎25-7678; ☀10am-5pm Nov-Feb, 9.30am-5.30pm Mar-Oct) To the right as you exit JR Tsuruoka Station; you can book accommodation here and it has information about Dewa Sanzan.

📄 Getting There & Away

BUS

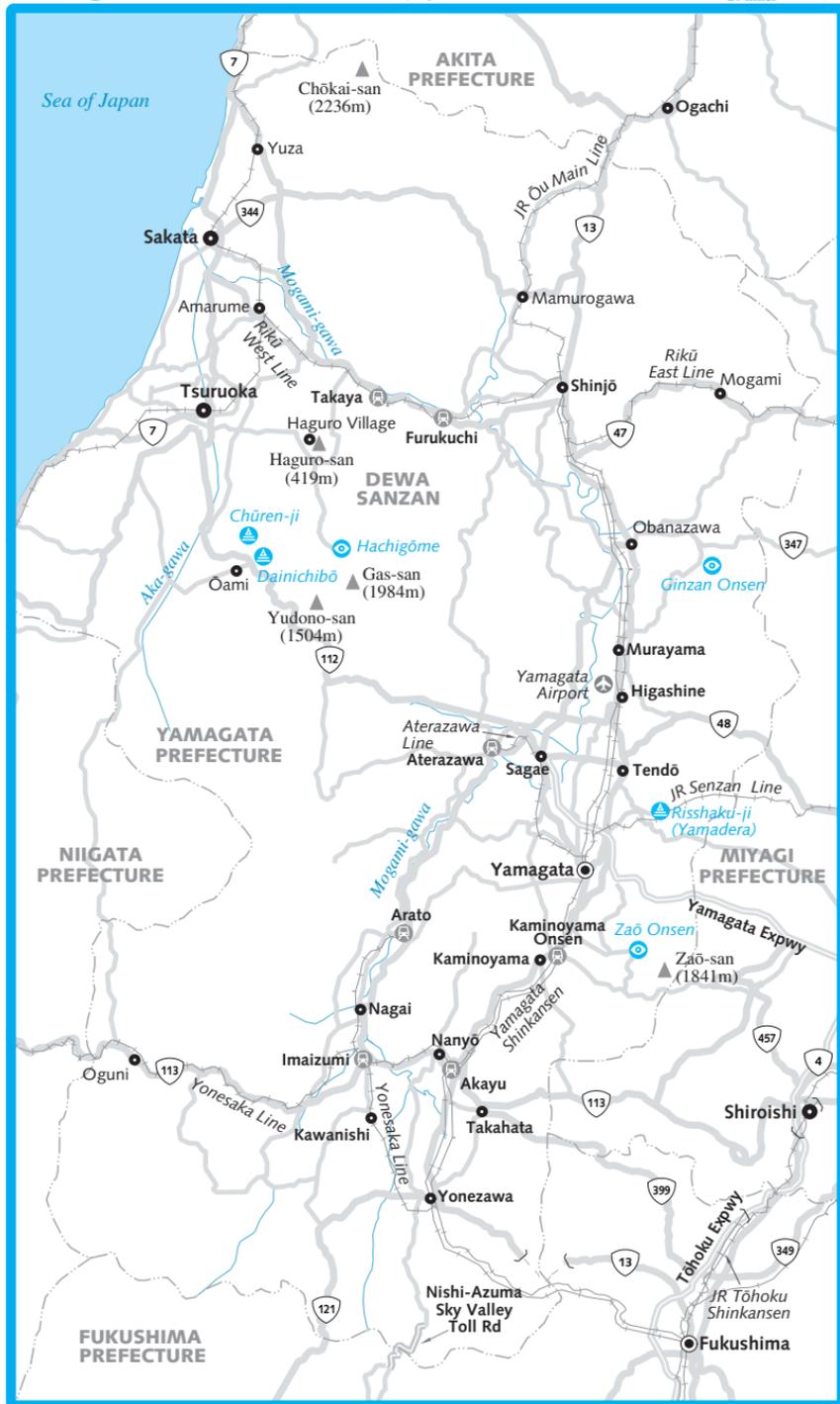
Buses leave from in front of Tsuruoka Station and from the bus depot at S-Mall for Haguro village (¥800, 35 minutes). Pick up a bus schedule at the Tourist Information Center.

There are a few daily buses between Tsuruoka and Yamagata (¥2400, 1¾ hours), though services are often cut back during winter.

TRAIN

A few daily *tokkyū* on the JR Uetsu main line run between Tsuruoka and Akita (¥3820, 1¾ hours), and between Tsuruoka and Niigata (¥4330, 1¾

Yamagata Prefecture



hours). There are also a few daily *futsū* running on the same line between Tsuruoka and Akita (¥2210, 2¾ hours).

Dewa Sanzan 出羽三山

0235

'How cool it is, a pale crescent shining, above the dark hollow of Haguro-san.'

Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1689)

Dewa Sanzan is the collective title for three sacred peaks – Haguro-san, Gas-san and Yudono-san – which are believed to represent birth, death and rebirth respectively. Together they have been worshipped for centuries by followers of Shugendō, a folk religion that draws from both Buddhism and Shintō. During the annual pilgrimage seasons, you can see white-clad pilgrims equipped with wooden staff, sandals and straw hat, and fleece-clad hikers equipped with poles, waterproof boots and bandana.

Of course, it is the *yamabushi*, with their unmistakable conch shells, chequered jackets and voluminous white pantaloons, that keep the ancient traditions alive. Whether stomping along precipitous trails or sitting under icy waterfalls, these devoted mountain men embrace severe ascetic exercises to discipline both body and spirit.

👁 Sights & Activities

Tradition dictates that you start at Haguro-san and finish at Yudono-san. You can do the pilgrimage in the opposite direction, though the ascent from Yudono-san to Gas-san would be painfully steep.

★ Haguro-san

SACRED MOUNTAIN

(羽黒山) The 2446 stone steps to the top of Haguro-san (419m) have been worn smooth and low by centuries of pilgrims. The mountain's easy access makes it the most popular of the three peaks, particularly with day trippers.

At the base of the mountain in Haguro village, the **Ideha Bunka Kinenkan** (いで文化記念館; ☎62-4727; www.tsuruokakanko.com/haguro/kankou/ideha.html; 7-2 Injū-minami, Haguro-machi; ¥400; ☀9am-4.30pm Apr-Nov, 9.30am-4pm Dec-Mar, closed Tue Sep-Jun) has exhibits that cover the history of the mountain and *yamabushi* culture, though there is little in English.

The climb, which begins by passing through the torii gate and over the bridge, takes a leisurely hour. En route you'll pass

Gojū-no-tō (五重塔), a weather-beaten, five-storey pagoda dating from the 14th century.

An ancient teahouse known as **Ni-no-saka-chaya** (二の坂茶屋; tea sets ¥700; ☀8.30am-5pm Apr-Nov) marks the halfway point. Stop in for sets of filling *mochi* and revitalising bowls of *matcha* (powdered green tea). If you detour to the right, you'll come upon the temple ruins of **Betsu-in** (別院), visited by Bashō during his pilgrimage here.

Dewa Sanzan-jinja (出羽三山神社; www.dewasanzan.jp; ☀dawn-dusk) sprawls over the summit of Haguro-san, intermingling with the cedars. At its heart is the **San-shin Gōsaiiden** (三神合祭殿), a vivid red hall that enshrines the deities of all three mountains.

If you're completing the circuit, your only option from here is the bus – most of the old 20km pilgrim trail along the ridgeline to Gas-san was left to grow over after a road was built in the 1960s. Catch one from the parking lot beyond the shrine bound for **Hachigōme** (八合目; eighth station), where the trail to the top of Gas-san picks up again; note that the last bus leaves just after 2pm. Alternatively, you can stay the night at the atmospheric Saikan.

Gas-san

SACRED MOUNTAIN

(月山) Accessible from July to September, Gas-san (1984m) is the highest of the three sacred mountains. From the trail head at **Hachigōme** (八合目; eighth station), the route passes through an alpine plateau to **Kyūgōme** (九合目; ninth station) in 1¼ hours, and then grinds uphill for another 1¼ hours.

Perched on the summit is the tiny, yet deeply spiritual **Gassan-jinja** (月山神社; admission ¥500; ☀5am-5pm, July to mid September). To enter the shrine, you'll first need to undergo a ritual purification: bow your head to receive the priest's benediction, then brush yourself from head to toe with the slip of paper, placing it afterwards in the fountain. Beyond the gate, visitors traditionally make a circuit of the inner shrine; note that photography is not permitted inside.

From here the pilgrimage route presses on towards the steep descent to Yudono-san. This takes another three hours or so, and you'll have to carefully descend rusty ladders chained to the cliff sides, and pick your way down through a slippery stream bed at the end of the trail.

Yudono-san

SACRED MOUNTAIN

(湯殿山) Accessible from May to October, Yudono-san (1504m) is the spiritual culmination of the Dewa Sanzan trek. Coming from Gas-san, it's just a short walk from the stream bed at the end of the descent to **Yudono-san-jinja** (湯殿山神社; admission ¥500; ☀ 6am-5pm, closed Nov-Apr). This sacred shrine is not a building, but rather a monumental rock continuously lapped by water from a hot spring. It has the strictest rituals of the three, with pilgrims required to perform a barefoot circuit of the rock, paddling through the cascading water. Take off your shoes at the entrance and bow your head before the priest for the purification rites; no photos inside.

To finish the pilgrimage, it's a mere 10-minute hike further down the mountain to the trailhead at **Yudono-san Sanrōsho** (湯殿山参籠所), which is marked by a torii and is adjacent to the **Sennin-zawa** (仙人沢) bus stop.

From here, you have a number of options: spend the night at Yudono-san Sanrōsho, catch a direct bus back to Tsuruoka, or take a detour to Dainichibō and Chūren-ji.

★ Festivals & Events

The peak of Haguro-san is the site of several major festivals.

Hassaku Matsuri

HARVEST

Yamabushi perform ancient fire rites on 31 August and 1 September to pray for a bountiful harvest.

Shōrei-sai

RELIGIOUS

On New Year's Eve, *yamabushi* perform similar rituals to those at the Hassaku Matsuri in competition with each other after completing 100-day-long austerities.

🎓 Courses

If you haven't yet found your calling, consider becoming a *yamabushi*.

Autumn Peak

RELIGIOUS

(秋の峰入; Aki-no-mine; ☎ 62-2355; fax 62-2352) At the end of August, ascetics-in-training undergo a week-long course of austerities at Dewa Sanzan-jinja. It's for men only, but women can join a four-day 'shrine maiden' training course (神子修行; *miko shūgyō*) in early September. Neither are for the faint of heart, and some command of Japanese is useful. Reservations begin the last day of May; sign up early to reserve a spot. The course fee is ¥40,000 for men, ¥35,000 for women.

Yamabushi Study Experience

CULTURAL

(山伏修行体験塾; Yamabushi Shūgyō Taiken Jyuku; ☎ 62-4727; kankoshoko@city.tsuruoka.yamagata.jp) For those who are happy being just a *yamabushi* apprentice, the Ideha Bunka Kinenkan (p51) in Haguro village runs a three-day coed mini-course in September that includes fasting, mountain sprints and morning wake-up calls. Phone ahead to enquire about dates and book at least a month in advance. The course fee is ¥29,800.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating

Sleeping options are listed in order from start to finish of the Haguro-san-Yudono-san pilgrimage route; reservations are a must.

★ Saikan

TEMPLE LODGE \$\$

(齋館; ☎ 62-2357; r per person with 2 meals ¥7350; ☑) Located at the top of Haguro-san, this is the most famous *shukubō* (temple lodging) at Dewa Sanzan. The approach skirts past towering trees and through an imposing gate before arriving at a secluded temple. The grounds overlook the grand sweep of valleys below, while the building itself has been weathered by the ages and is imbued with an air of stoic grandeur.

Meals are *shōjin ryōri* (vegetarian Buddhist cuisine) with foraged mushrooms and mountain vegetables. Saikan can also prepare *shōjin ryōri* lunches spreads (¥1,575-3,150); reserve in advance.

Midahara Sanrōsho

HUT \$\$

(御田原参籠所; ☎ mobile 090-2367-9037; r per person with 2 meals ¥7350; ☑ closed Oct-Jun) At the eighth station on Gas-san, this mountain hut is a convenient place to break up the long three-mountain hike. Futons are laid out in one big communal room and there's no shower; but the vegetarian meals are filling and the close quarters conducive for swapping stories. Wake up to catch the sunrise and you'll be on your way to the peak before the tour buses arrive.

Hot dishes, like *soba* and curry rice, can also be ordered here, until around 3pm.

Yudono-san Sanrōsho

LODGE \$\$

(湯殿山参籠所; ☎ 54-6131; r per person with 2 meals from ¥7350; ☑ closed Nov-Apr; ☑) This airy mountain lodge at the bottom of Yudono-san has a hot bath and is full of jovial pilgrims celebrating the completion of their multiday circuit. Meat and fish are on offer in case you've been missing it, as is plenty of beer and sake.

Lunch sets (from ¥1575), with river fish and mountain vegetables, are served here, too.

i Information

Theoretically, if you hiked at a military pace and timed the buses perfectly, you might be able to cover all three peaks in one day. However, this would leave you no time to enjoy the scenery, and the chances of missing a key bus connection are very high. If you want to tackle all three mountains – possible from June through September – it's best to devote two days.

Before setting out, it's recommended that you book accommodation and stock up on maps at the tourist information office in Tsuruoka. Note that transport can grind to a halt once the snow starts to pile up.

i Getting There & Around

Directions are given in the same sequence as the trek.

During the summer climbing months, there are up to 10 buses daily (the earliest leaving at 6am) from Tsuruoka to Haguro village (¥800, 35 minutes), most of which then continue on to Haguro-sanchō (Haguro summit; ¥1150, 50 minutes). Outside the peak season, the schedule is greatly reduced.

From early July to late August, and then on weekends and holidays until late September, there are up to four daily buses from Haguro-sanchō to Gas-san as far as Hachigōme (¥1520, one hour).

Between June and early November, there are up to four daily buses from the Yudono-san Sanrōsho trailhead at Yudono-san to Tsuruoka (¥1770, 1¼ hours), which also pass by Ōami (¥1100, 35 minutes).

Yamagata 山形

023 / POP 255,000

Yamagata is a thriving industrial centre with a sizeable student population, making for a more youthful vibe than in comparable *inaka* (rural) cities. While it's a bit short on sights, Yamagata is an excellent base for day trips to Yamadera and Yonezawa and also serves as a transit point for Zaō Onsen and Ginzan Onsen.

i Sights & Activities

Hirashimizu Pottery District POTTERY DISTRICT (平清水陶器地域) The fiery kilns lining the Hazukashi-kawa (Embarrassed River) turn out beautiful blueish-grey mottled pieces known as *nashi-seiji* (pear skin). In the 19th century there were dozens of workshops here, but now only a few remain. Of them, **Shichiemon-gama** (七右工門窯; 153 Hirachimizu: ☀ 8.30am-5.30pm, pottery making 9am-3pm) is the largest and offers the best chance to see master potters at work.

You can also try your hand at making your own pottery here. Lessons (in Japa-

THE LIVING BUDDHAS OF YAMAGATA

It is believed that there are some 20 *sokushinbutsu*, or 'living Buddhas', in Japan, and that half of them are in Yamagata Prefecture. Becoming a *sokushinbutsu* takes years – or decades – of ascetic determination. It involves extreme fasting, literally lacquering one's insides by drinking *urushi* (the sap of the lacquer tree) and eventually being buried alive to meditate until death. After 1000 days the body – now mummified – is disinterred and enshrined. The practice was outlawed during the 19th century; however folk beliefs still attributes great spiritual power to these 'living Buddhas'.

There are two *sokushinbutsu* near Dewa Sanzan, at the temples of **Dainichibō** (大目坊; www.dainichibou.or.jp; 11 Nyūdō, Ōami; admission ¥500; ☀ 8am-5pm) and **Chūren-ji** (注連寺; www2.plala.or.jp/sansuirijuku/index.html; 92-1 Nakadai, Ōami; admission ¥500; ☀ 8am-5pm). Both can be viewed by the public, though seeing the one at Dainichibō involves first kneeling for a purification ritual. The Dainichibō *sokushinbutsu* is the older of the two by nearly half a century, having entered the earth at age 96 in 1783. Taking photographs is not permitted.

Both temples are in the village of Ōami, off Rte 112 halfway between Yudono-san and Tsuruoka. To get to Dainichibō, walk uphill from the bus stop to the village, turning left at the post office and then left again onto the main road; look for the sign with the red arrow and the temple up the hill on the left. For Chūren-ji, head north from the bus stop and follow the curving road for about 20 minutes, keeping an eye out for the blue-and-white signs on the telephone poles. Buses are spaced about two hours apart, which leaves time to look around, and still make your connection back to Tsuruoka.

nese) are 90 minutes and priced according to the amount of clay you use (¥2000 per kilogram; shipping fee extra); no reservations necessary and kids are welcome, too. Note that finished pieces ship to an address in Japan one month later. Pick up professional pieces in the studio's shop.

Buses bound for Nishi-Zaō or Geikō-dai run hourly or half-hourly from stop 5 outside Yamagata Station to the Hirashimizu stop (¥280, 15 minutes).

★ Festivals & Events

Hanagasa Matsuri

TRADITIONAL

(花笠まつり; www.hanagasa.jp/en) In early August; features large crowds of dancers wearing *hanagasa* (flower-laden straw hats) and singing folk songs.

Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival

FILM

(www.yidff.jp) This biennial event, held next in 2013, takes place over one week in October and screens films from all over the world, along with retrospectives, symposiums and a Japanese panorama.

🏠 Sleeping & Eating

Guesthouse Mintaro Hut

GUESTHOUSE \$

(ゲストハウスミンタロハット; 📞mobile 090-2797-1687; www.mintarohut.com; 5-13 Ōtemachi; s/d ¥3500/6000; 📞📺📶) English-speaking Sato-san turned his childhood home into this comfortable guesthouse just off the northeast corner of the central park. The common area is built around a radiant stove, which ensures a warm and familial atmosphere conducive to chatting with fellow travellers, and the kitchen is stocked with supplies for self-caterers.

Tōyoko Inn Yamagata

Eki Nishiguchi

BUSINESS HOTEL \$\$

(東横イン山形駅西口; 📞644-1045; www.toyoko-inn.com/hotel/00097; 1-18-13 Jōnan-machi; s/d ¥5480/7770; 📞📺📶) Business hotels cluster around JR Yamagata Station, but this one is the best value for money: clean, efficient rooms with complimentary breakfast just minutes on foot from the station's west exit.

Kitanosuisan

IZAKAYA \$\$

(北野水産; 📞624-0880; www.kitanosuisan.com; 2nd fl, 1-8-8 Kasumicho; table charge ¥500, dishes ¥300-1500; 📞5pm-12am) Come here to sample local Yamagata specialties (on the wooden board, with pictures) and sake. Take the first

left outside the station's east exit and look for the blue sign across the second floor.

📍 Information

Tourist Information Center (山形市観光案内センター; 📞647-2266; 🕒9am-5.30pm) On the 2nd floor of Yamagata Station, in a small glass booth.

📍 Getting There & Away

BUS

Buses leave approximately once an hour from stop 1 outside Yamagata Station for Zaō Onsen (¥980, 40 minutes). JR highway buses make an overnight trip between Yamagata and Tokyo (one-way/roundtrip ¥6300/11,500, 6½ hours).

TRAIN

There are hourly trains on the Yamagata *shinkansen* between Tokyo and Yamagata (¥11,030, 2¾ hours).

There are also frequent *kaisoku* on the JR Senzan line between Yamagata and Yamadera (¥230, 20 minutes).

Yamadera 山寺

023 / POP 1500

'Stillness, seeps into the stones, the cry of cicadas.'

Matsuo Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1689)

A favourite destination of the itinerant haiku master, Yamadera is an atmospheric cluster of temples perched precariously on lush and wooded slopes. The town was founded in AD 860 by priests who carried with them the sacred flame from Enryaku-ji near Kyoto, and supposedly the same flame is still alight today. It is believed that Yamadera's rock faces are the boundaries between this world and the next.

👁 Sights

The sights are fairly well signposted from the train station. Souvenir and noodle shops line the main street.

★ Rissshaku-ji

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(立石寺; admission ¥300; 🕒8am-5pm) The 'Temple of Standing Stones', more commonly known as Yamadera, rests atop a rock-hewn staircase that has been weathered over the centuries by unrelenting elements. At the foot of the mountain is **Konpon-chūdō** (根本中堂; admission ¥200), where a small lan-

YONEZAWA

Carnivores should head here to chow down on Yonezawa beef, famous for its tenderness and flavour, and arguably rivalling Kobe's own. Yonezawa (米沢) is also home to the ruined 17th-century castle of the Uesugi clan.

The foundations of the castle now form the boundaries of Matsugasaki-kōen (松ヶ崎公園), an attractive park framed by a placid moat. Inside, there's a shrine and a treasury, the **Keishō-den** (稽照殿; 1-4-13 Marunouchi; admission ¥400; ☀9am-4pm Apr-Nov), which displays armour and works of art belonging to several generations of the Uesugi family.

To really see the feudal era in action, visit on 3 May, when more than a thousand participants in full samurai regalia re-enact the epic battle of Kawanakajima during the annual **Uesugi Matsuri** (上杉祭り; <http://uesugi.yonezawa.info>).

There are dozens (hundreds?) of places in town to try *yonezawa-gyū*. Of these, the hundred-year-old **Tokiwa** (登起波; ☎24-5400; www.yonezawabeef.co.jp/info/eng.html; 7-2-3 Chūdō; meals from ¥4200; ☀11am-9pm, closed Tue) is the most famous. Ask the staff at the tourist information centre in Yonezawa Station to mark the location on a map – it's a bit out of the way.

Yonezawa is a stop on the Yamagata *shinkansen*; alternatively, regular *futsū* trains run on the JR Ōu main line between Yonezawa and Yamagata (¥820, 45 minutes).

tern guards the flame said to have been transported from Kyoto so many centuries ago.

The **San-mon** (山門) gate marks the start of the climb, some 1000 steps that take you past carvings so mossy and worn they appear to be part of the landscape. It's a steep ascent – a sort of walking meditation – but one that makes the views from the top, of the surrounding mountains and bucolic countryside below, that much more spectacular. During the summer months, the electric whir of the cicadas is, true to Bashō's observation, almost overpowering.

Past the **Nio-mon** (仁王門), through which only those with pure souls may enter (be honest now!), the path splits, heading in one direction to the **Oku-no-in** (奥の院; Inner Sanctuary) and in the other to the Godaidō (五大堂). The latter, an 18th-century pavilion perched on the cliffside, has the most arresting views.

For a better shot at a measure of the meditative bliss that so inspired Bashō, visit early in the morning or late in the afternoon. It's possible to visit Yamadera during the winter, though if you arrive just after a snowfall the paths may not yet be shovelled.

Bashō Kinenkan

MUSEUM

(山寺芭蕉記念館; 4223 Yamadera; admission ¥400; ☀9am-4.30pm, closed Mon Dec-Feb) Back down in the village near the train station, this biographical museum exhibits scrolls and calligraphy related to Bashō's famous northern journey.

i Getting There & Away

There are frequent *kaisoku* on the JR Senzan line between Yamadera and Yamagata (¥230, 20 minutes) and, in the other direction, to Sendai (¥820, one hour).

Zaō Onsen 蔵王温泉

023 / POP 14,000

Zaō Onsen is a small hot-spring town with some big skiing. Even bigger are its *juhyo* (ice monsters), which are conifers that have been frozen solid by harsh Siberian winds. Skiing or snowboarding through fields of lurking ice monsters is a surreal experience unique to Zaō. During the rest of the year, Zaō attracts visitors with great hiking and the chance to soak in any number of tubs filled with milky, sulphurous water.

👁 Sights & Activities**★ Zaō Onsen Ski Resort**

SKIING &

SNOWBOARDING

(蔵王温泉スキー場; www.zao-spa.or.jp; 1-day lift tickets ¥4800; ☀Dec-Apr) Zaō is arguably home to the best slopes in Northern Honshū. In comparison to heavyweight Hokkaidō, you shouldn't come here expecting spine-tingling chutes, but rather a huge breadth of beginner and intermediate runs. In fact, it's possible to ski all the way from the highest point of the mountain right down to the base without ever turning down a black diamond or getting stuck in a field of moguls.

WORTH A TRIP

GINZAN ONSEN

With its century-old inns forming mirror images on either side of the peaceful Obana-zawa, Ginzan Onsen (銀山温泉) looks curiously like a movie set. It was – Japanese know it as the setting for *Oshin*, an enormously popular historical drama from the 1980s – but it wasn't designed to be. It's just a fortunate collection of ryokan in the classic Taisho-era style, which adds romantic Western flourishes like turrets and stained glass to traditional wooden structures. It's most popular in the winter, when snow adds a dreamy touch to the wooden eaves and surrounding mountains. Several ryokan open up their baths to day-trippers; pick up a list outside the tourist information centre.

Of course, Ginzan is most romantic in the evening. Should you decide to stay the night, **Notoya Ryokan** (能登屋旅館; ☎ 0237-28-2327; www.notoyaryokan.com; 446 Ginzan Shin-Hata; r per person with 2 meals from ¥18,000; ☎), one of the grandest in Ginzan, is a fine choice. The three-storey structure, complete with balconies, elaborate woodwork and a curious garret tower, dates to 1922, though piecemeal renovations have been completed inside. Make sure you get a room in the main building overlooking the river.

Ginzan Onsen is in easy striking distance from Yamagata. Take the Yamagata *shinkansen* to its terminus in Oishida (¥1890, 30 minutes) then transfer to one of up to five daily buses leaving for Ginzan Onsen (¥690, 40 minutes) from the west exit bus pool.

But don't come expecting boring bunny slopes. On the contrary, Zaō is distinguished by its broad and winding courses, some of which reach nearly 10km in length! With 40 ropeways and ski lifts spanning 14 spidery courses with multiple offshoots, it's almost impossible to swish down the exact same route twice. Of course, you might want to have a second go at the Juhyō Kōgen (樹氷高原; Ice Monster Plateau), which reaches its peak ferocity in frigid February. At this time, blizzards are particularly severe, so dress appropriately.

English signage is excellent, and full equipment rental is available at various locations throughout the village. Zaō Onsen also offers a full complement of bars, cafes, restaurants and onsen, making for a truly memorable *après-ski*. There is nothing quite like the sensation of stripping off your ski-wear, sliding into an onsen bath and uncorking a bottle of microbrewed sake.

Zaō Sanroku Ropeway

HIKING

(蔵王山麓 ロプウェー; one-way/return ¥1400/2500; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Apr-Nov) This succession of cable cars whisks you over the conifers and up **Zaō-san** (蔵王山) to within spitting distance of **Okama** (御釜), a crater lake of piercing cobalt blue. The walk to the lake passes Buddhist statues and monuments hidden among the greenery, before the terrain breaks up into a sunset-coloured crumble of volcanic rock. You can extend the hike (and save money) by taking one of the

other two ropeways, the Zaō Chūō Ropeway or the Zaō Sky Cable, up or down.

Zaō Onsen Dai-rotemburo

ONSEN

(蔵王温泉大露天風呂; admission ¥450; ☎ 6am-7pm May-Oct) Follow the wooden steps down the mountainside to this huge open-air hot-spring pool. The sulphur-stained rocks set the stage for the spectacle that is dozens of complete strangers bathing naked together in joyful unison.

Shinzaemon-no-Yu

ONSEN

(新左衛門の湯; ☎ 693-1212; www.zaospa.co.jp; 905 Kawa-mae; ¥700; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, to 9pm Sat & Sun, closed irregularly) An upmarket bathing option, this modern hot-spring complex has several spacious pools. The nicest are outside, set in stone with wooden canopies.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation abounds, but reservations are essential if you're visiting during the ski season or on weekends in summer.

Lodge Chitoseya

LODGE \$

(ロジッチとせや; ☎ 694-9145; www.lodge-chitoseya.com; 954 Zaō Onsen; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥3675/6090; ☎) Thanks to its budget-friendly prices and delicious, home-style meals, Chitoseya attracts a youthful crowd of skiers and hikers. The tatami rooms are fresh-looking and unfussy; facilities are shared. The lodge is in between the bus station and the Chūō Ropeway.

Pension Boku-no-Uchi

PENSION \$\$

(ペンションぼくのうち; ☎694-9542; www.bokunouchi.com; 904 Zaō Onsen; r per person with/out/with 2 meals from ¥3500/7200; ㊦㊧) This is a skiers' lodge through and through, from the posters on the wall of the sociable dining room to the location right in front of the Chūō Ropeway. The owner is a former member of the Japan national ski team, and speaks English and French. Rooms are Japanese style with communal facilities, including a 24-hour sulphur bath.

Yoshida-ya

RYOKAN \$\$

(吉田屋; 13 Zaō-onsen; r per person from ¥4650, breakfast/dinner ¥800/2000; ㊦㊧) Yoshida-ya has a following among foreign travelers, no doubt because the friendly, helpful proprietress speaks flawless English. It's a modern building, five minutes from the Zaō Sky Cable, with basic tatami rooms, communal facilities and an onsen bath.

★Takamiya

RYOKAN \$\$\$

(高見屋; ☎694-9333; www.zao.co.jp/takamiya; 54 Zaō Onsen; r per person with 2 meals from ¥16,950; ㊦㊧) Among the upmarket ryokan in town, Takamiya is our pick for its emphasis on the classics. After all, it's been in business for nearly three centuries! There are several beautiful baths here, both indoor and outdoor, made of stone or aromatic cedar. Meals are traditional *kaiseki ryōri* (formal banquets served in multiple courses) with top-grade local beef as the headliner. The spacious rooms have tatami sitting areas and fluffy *wa-beddo* (thick futons on platforms).

Oto-chaya

ECLECTIC \$

(音茶屋; http://otochaya.com; 935-24 Zaō Onsen; meals from ¥850; ☺11am-9pm Thu-Tue; ㊦) Oto-chaya is all things for all people (at all hours): hearty stews and casseroles, elaborate Chinese tea sets and a stocked bar. It's also a popular hangout with a mellow vibe. Look for the wooden sign with the teapot, on the main road beyond the Chūō Ropeway.

i Information

Tourist Information Center (☎694-9328; www.zao-spa.or.jp; 708-1 Zaō Onsen; ☺9am-6pm) Next to the bus terminal, with English maps.

i Getting There & Away

Hourly buses run between the bus terminal in Zaō Onsen and JR Yamagata Station (¥980, 40 minutes).

During peak ski season, private companies run overnight shuttles between Tokyo and Zaō. Prices can be as low as ¥7000 return – enquire at tourist information centres in Tokyo for more information.

NIIGATA PREFECTURE

Niigata-ken (新潟県) isn't just the setting for Kawabata Yasunari's acclaimed novel *Snow Country*, it *is* snow country. The prefecture sees some of the of country's highest snowfalls, burying villages and bewitching powder fiends. Top ski destinations include Myōkō Kōgen, Naeba and Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen; at the latter, sultry baths sweeten the deal. For those who prefer to get away from it all, there's the persimmon-peppered island of Sado-ga-shima. While the prefecture technically isn't part of Tōhoku proper, its capital city, Niigata, serves as the gateway to lands further north.

Niigata 新潟

025 / POP 811,600

The prefectural capital of Niigata serves as a transit hub and a springboard to nearby Sado-ga-shima. Japan's longest river, the Shinano-gawa, runs through the centre of the city; if you have time to spare, join the locals for a stroll along the riverbank.

🛏 Sleeping & Eating**Dormy Inn Niigata**

HOTEL \$\$

(ドーミーイン新潟; ☎247-7755; www.hotespa.net/hotels/niigata; 1-7-14 Akashi; s/d from ¥5500/7500; ☺@) While the Dormy Inn skimps on interior design – no carpet in the hallways here – it splurges on its baths, which include a sauna and a *rotemburo*. The rooms, small but well-maintained, fall somewhere in between.

Ueda Ryokan

RYOKAN \$\$\$

(植田旅館; ☎225-1111; www.uedaryokan.com; 2120 Yonnochō; r per person with/out/with 2 meals from ¥3780/7350; @) This pleasant Japanese-style inn occupies a quiet spot just beyond the river's edge.

Pia Bandai

MARKET \$

(ピアBandai; 2-10 Bandai-shima, Chūō-ku; meals from ¥1000; ☺9am-9pm, varies by shop; ㊦) Conveniently located on the way to the Sado Kisen Ferry Terminal, this outdoor complex includes markets and eateries – so you can

Niigata Prefecture

NORTHERN HONSHŪ (TŌHOKU) NIIGATA PREFECTURE



gawk at the bounty of Niigata's coast and sample it, too. Our pick: **Benkei** (弁慶), the upmarket *kaiten-sushi* (conveyor-belt sushi) restaurant that specialises in fish from the seas around Sado-ga-shima.

i Information

Niigata Central Post Office (新潟中央郵便局; 2-6-26 Higashi Ōdori; ☎ ATM 7am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat, Sun & holidays)

Niigata University Medical & Dental Hospital (新潟大学医学総合病院; ☎ 227-2460, after hours 227-2479; http://www.nuh.niigata-u.ac.jp/index_e.html;

1-757 Asahimachi-dōri;

☎ outpatient services 8.30am-11.30am Mon-Fri)

Tourist Information Center (新潟駅万代口観光案内センター; ☎ 241-7914; ☎ 9am-6pm) English maps and information on Sado-ga-shima, to the left of Niigata Station's Bandai exit.

i Getting There & Away

AIR

From Niigata Airport, 13km north of the city centre, flights head to/from Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Hiroshima, Sapporo and many other destinations.

Buses run from stop 5 outside Niigata Station's south exit to the airport roughly every half-hour from 6.30am to 6.40pm (¥400, 25 minutes); a taxi should cost around ¥2500.

BOAT

From the port of Niigata-kō, **Shin-Nihonkai** (新日本海; ☎ 273-2171; www.snf.jp) ferries run at 10.30am daily, except Monday, to Otaru on Hokkaidō (from ¥6300, 18 hours). To get to Niigata-kō, take any bus bound for Rinko-nichōme from stop 6 at the Bandai exit bus pool in front of Niigata Station and get off at Suehiro-bashi (¥200, 25 minutes). A taxi should cost around ¥1500.

Sado Kisen (佐渡汽船; ☎ 245-1234; www.sadokisen.co.jp) runs frequent ferries and hydrofoils to Ryōtsu on Sado-ga-shima. Buses to the ferry terminal (¥200, 15 minutes) leave from stop 5 at the Bandai exit bus pool 45 minutes before sailing. A taxi should cost around ¥1000; alternatively, you can walk there in about 40 minutes.

BUS

Highway buses depart from the **Bandai Bus Center** (万代シティバスセンター), a big yellow building 1km northwest of the train station, and connect Niigata to major cities throughout Honshū.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you're driving, the **Kan-Etsu Expressway** (関越自動車道) runs between Tokyo and the greater Niigata area. The **Nihonkai-Tōhoku Expressway** (日本海東北自動車道) connects Niigata with Akita.

TRAIN

There are several hourly trains on the Jōetsu *shinkansen* between Niigata and Tokyo (¥10,270, 2¼ hours) via Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen (¥5240, 50 minutes).

There are a few *tokkyū* each day on the JR Uetsu line between Niigata and Tsuruoka (¥4330, 2 hours), and between Niigata and Akita (¥7020, 3¾ hours).

For accessing the port of Naoetsu-kō, where you can grab a ferry or hydrofoil to the town of Ogi on Sado-ga-Shima, there are a few *tokkyū* each day on the JR Shinetsu line between Niigata and Naoetsu (¥2720, 1¾ hours). There are also a few buses daily from the Bandai exit bus pool at Niigata Station for Naoetsu (¥1950, 2½ hours). From Naoetsu Station, it's a 10-minute bus ride (¥200) or about a ¥1000 taxi ride to the port.

Sado-ga-shima 佐渡島

0259 / POP 62,000

Despite being Japan's sixth-largest island, Sado-ga-shima is relatively undeveloped, and is characterised by rugged natural

beauty and eccentric reminders of its rich and evocative past. There are more pessimistic trees than people here, and the island's sandy covers are fronted by campgrounds instead of concrete. Crowds peak during the third week in August for the Earth Celebration, headlined by the world-famous Kodo Drummers. Outside of the summer holiday season, it's blissfully quiet.

History

Sado has always been something of a far-flung destination, just not always a voluntary one. During the feudal era, the island was a notorious penal colony where out-of-favour intellectuals were forever banished. The illustrious list of former prisoners includes Emperor Juntoku, nō (stylised dance-drama) master Ze-Ami and Nichiren, the founder of one of Japan's most influential Buddhist sects. When gold was discovered near the village of Aikawa in 1601, there was a sudden influx of miners, who were often vagrants press-ganged from the mainland and made to work like slaves.

★ Festivals & Events

Earth Celebration

ARTS & MUSIC

(www.kodo.or.jp; ☺ mid-August) One of Sado's biggest draws is this three-day music, dance and arts festival held during the third week

DON'T MISS

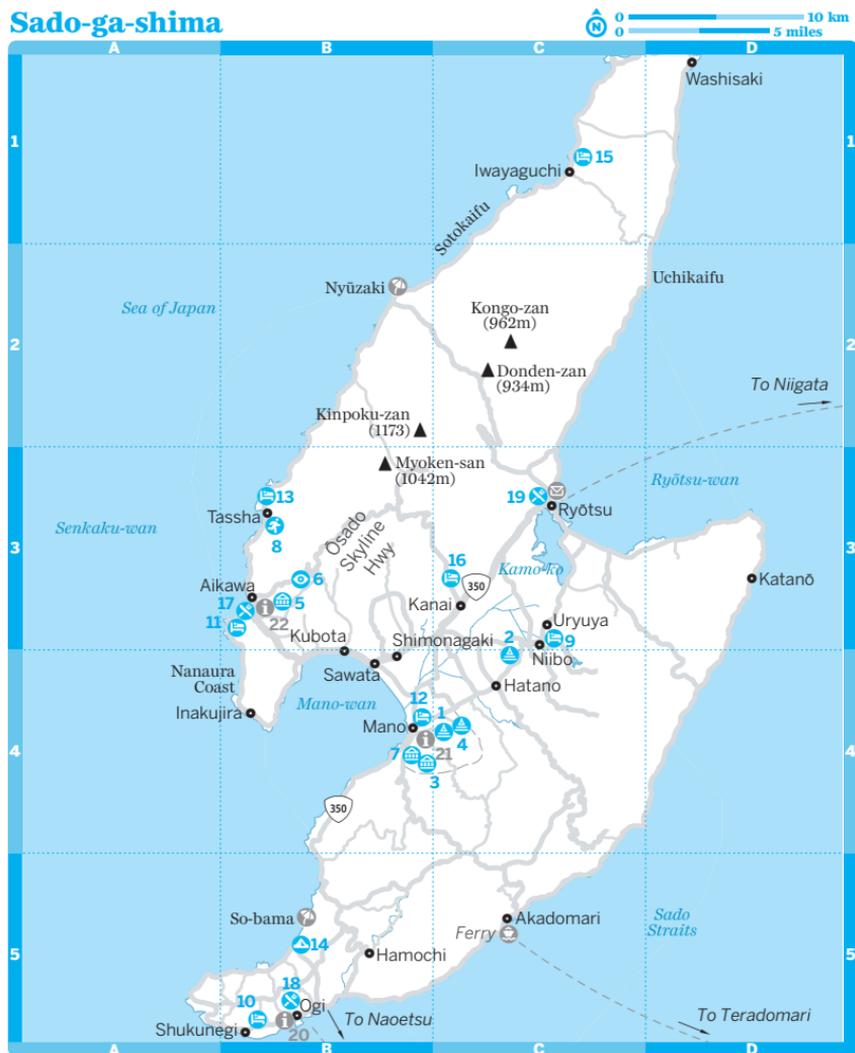
NIIGATA SAKE

Niigata Prefecture is one of Japan's top sake-producing regions, known in particular for a crisp, dry style called *tanrei karakuchi*. The long cold winters produce plenty of fresh mountain snow melt for the valleys below, which translates into delicious rice, and then delicious sake. Tiplers should be sure to treat themselves while passing through.

In March, a mammoth bacchanal in Niigata city, called **Sake-no-jin** (酒の陣; www.niigata-sake.or.jp/index.html), highlights more than 90 varieties of sake from around the prefecture.

Another convenient, and unlikely, place to get a sampling of the local brew is the Echigo-Yuzawa *shinkansen* station; a tasting bar on the 2nd floor lets you sample five different kinds (from a selection of nearly a hundred) for ¥500. *Kampai!*

Sado-ga-shima



in August. The event features *okesa* (folk dances), *onidaiko* (demon drum dances) and *tsuburosashi* (a phallic dance with two goddesses). However, the focal point of the Earth Celebration is the performance of the Kodo Drummers, who live in a small village north of Ogi but spend much of the year on tour across the globe. Considered to be one of the most elite drumming groups on the planet, its members are required to adhere to strict physical, mental and spiritual training regimens. If you're interested in attending, be advised that you will need to buy tickets and arrange accommodation well in advance.

Nō

PERFORMING ARTS

(☺Apr-Oct) Sado stands out for being one of the few places in Japan where *nō* has a strong following. Several different groups perform throughout the warmer months at shrines around the island, often for free. Check the schedule at www.visitsado.com.

i Getting There & Away

Sado Kisen (佐渡汽船; ☎03-5390-0550; www.sadokisen.co.jp) runs car ferries and passenger-only hydrofoils between Niigata and Ryōtsu.

There are up to six ferries (one-way per person/ car from ¥2440/11,460, 2½ hours) and 11 jetfoils

Sado-ga-shima

Sights

- 1 Kokubun-ji..... C4
- 2 Konpon-ji..... C4
- 3 Mano Go-ryō..... B4
- 4 Myōsen-ji..... C4
- 5 Sado Hangamura Museum B3
- 6 Sado Kinzan..... B3
- 7 Sado Rekishi Densetsukan..... B4

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 8 glass-bottom boats B3

Sleeping

- 9 Green Village C3
- 10 Hana-no-ki B5
- 11 Hotel Ōsado B3

- 12 Itōya Ryokan B4
- 13 Sado Belle Mer Youth Hostel..... B3
- 14 So-bama Campground..... B5
- 15 Sotokaiifu Youth Hostel..... C1
- 16 Tōkaen C3

Eating

- 17 Isonoya B3
- 18 Uohara B5
- 19 Uohide..... C3

Information

- 20 Tourist Information Center..... B5
- 21 Tourist Information Center..... B4
- 22 Tourist Information Center..... B3

(one-way/return ¥6340/11,490, one hour) per day, though service is greatly reduced outside the summer months.

From Naoetsu-kō, about 90km southwest of Niigata, there are also up to three daily car-ferry services to Ogi (one-way per person/car from ¥2310/12,360, 2½ hours), which are particularly useful for visiting during the Earth Celebration.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

Cycling is an enjoyable way to move around the towns, but steep elevation changes make long-distance cruising a challenge. Tourist information centres in each town rent electric bicycles for a hefty ¥2000 per day (or ¥500 for two hours). Local shops in Ryōtsu and Ogi rent regular bikes for slightly less.

BUS

Local buses do a good job connecting the main towns. Services to other parts of the island, particularly the coasts, are restricted to two or three a day, and often halted in the winter.

The Minami line connects Ryōtsu with Mano (¥650, 45 minutes). The Hon line runs from Ryōtsu to Aikawa (¥800, one hour), by way of the large hub of Sawata (¥590, 40 minutes).

The Ogi line connects Ogi with Mano (¥800, 55 minutes) and Sawata (¥800, 1¼ hours).

Along the northern coast, a few daily buses run on the Kaifu line between Aikawa and Iwayaguchi (¥800, one hour). The Uchikaiifu line connects Iwayaguchi and Ryōtsu (¥800, 1½ hours).

There's an English-language timetable available at the tourist information centre. The unlimited-ride bus pass (two-days weekdays/

weekends ¥2500/2000) is good value if you plan to cover a lot of ground.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

A car is the best way to access the island's most scenic parts, and a good number of the best accommodation options are situated far from bus stops. Ferries from Honshū can accommodate cars for a substantial fee, though it's usually cheaper to pick one up in Ryōtsu or Ogi. Expect to pay between ¥6000-10,000 per day, depending on size and availability. The tourist information offices in either port can help arrange rentals. Note that gas stations are few and far between outside of the main towns.

Ryōtsu & Around 両津

Sado's main hub, Ryōtsu is a low-key port town. The main street is lined with amenities for travellers, but there is little here in the way of sights. Head inland, however, and the townscape gives way to rice fields sprinkled with wooden farmhouses and ancient temples. With buses running from Ryōtsu to most other areas on the island, this is a convenient area to base yourself.

Sights

Konpon-ji

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(根本寺; 1837 Niibo Ono; admission ¥300; ☉ 8am-5pm; ㊦) This rustic wooden temple, with its thatched roof and pleasant gardens, is where Nichiren was first brought when exiled to Sado in 1271. Any bus on the Minami line from Ryōtsu can drop you off at the Konpon-ji-mae bus stop.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

SADO'S 'OTHER' FESTIVALS

Sado is famous for having more festivals per year than anywhere else in Japan – a testament to the islanders' commitment to a more traditional way of life. For a full list of all the weird and wonderful events on Sado, see www.visitsado.com.

Sado Hon-maguro Matsuri (佐渡本まぐろ祭り; Sado Tuna Festival; ☀ late June) Mid-summer is peak season for catching tuna in the Sea of Japan. Fresh fish is on the menu all over the island, and tuna-cutting exhibitions take place in Ryōtsu.

Wataru from Ryōtsu

Asari-sagashi Dai-kai (アサリさがし大会; Clam Search Convention; ☀ mid-July) My kids love this one! They get to splash around in the ocean while searching for clams. We bring them home, and cook them in a big pot with miso, *dashi* (fish stock) and leeks.

Eriko from Sawata

Sazae Matsuri (さざえ祭り; Turban Shell Festival; ☀ late July) Have you ever eaten a turban shell? We look for them at night while holding flaming torches. Their insides are delicious when grilled with soy and sake, and you can keep the shell as a unique souvenir.

Akira from Ogi

Chinowa Matsuri (茅の輪まつり; Straw Circle Festival; ☀ 30 June) We celebrate summer by passing through a straw circle and casting off six months of uncleanness. Then we eat delicate dumplings made with steamed iris petals.

Akiko from Ogi

Sleeping & Eating

★ Green Village

HOSTEL \$

(グリーンヴィレッジ; ☎ 22-2719; www.e-sadonet.tv/~gvyh/eng/index.html; 750-4 Niibo Uryuya; dm/s ¥3600/4200, breakfast/dinner ¥700/1500; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) One of our favourite lodgings is this adorable little Western-style cottage plopped down in the middle of Sado. The wonderfully accommodating hosts, who speak basic English, can help you arrange all manner of activities, and stuff you full of home-baked apple pie before sending you on your way. Accommodation is in six-person dormitories or a handful of private rooms with shared facilities. From Ryōtsu, regular buses on the Minami line can drop you off at Niibo Yubinkyoku-mae, a hundred yards past the turn off for the hostel.

🍑 Tōkaen

MINSHUKU \$\$

(桃華園; ☎ 63-2221; www.on.rim.or.jp/~toukaen; 1636-1 Otsu; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥4200/8400; ☎ ☎) This rambling *minshuku* has an attractive but isolated location in the middle of the central plains. It's a great escape, especially considering that the owners are avid outdoors folk who know every trail on the island, and will heat up their *shiogama-buro* (salt sauna) for you if you give them a week's notice. Any bus travelling on the Hon line from Ryōtsu can drop you off at Undōkōen-mae, from where it's another 3km north on foot. If you tell the

driver you're going to Tōkaen, they will drop you off a bit closer.

Uohide

SUSHI \$\$

(魚秀; 136 Ryōtsu-ebisu; meals ¥1000-2200; ☀ 11am-2pm, 4pm-7pm) Get a taste of Sado's seas at this counter shop, directly across from the ferry terminal. The *jizakana* (local fish) set is a sampling of the day's catch. Look for the red lobster logo on the front of the building.

Information

Tourist Information Center (☎ 27-5000;

www.visitsado.com/en; 2nd fl Sado Kisen Ferry Terminal; ☀ 8.30am-6pm) There's an excellent selection of English maps and pamphlets here, including walking and cycling guides for all the island's main areas. The helpful, English-speaking staff can help you arrange car rental.

Post Office (2-1 Ryōtsu-ebisu; ☀ ATM 8.45am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) One block behind the main road running in front of the port, with an international ATM. There's another branch inside the ferry terminal, but with shorter opening hours.

Mano & Around 真野

Although Mano was the provincial capital and cultural centre of the island from early times until the 14th century, it has since been dwarfed by the heavily populated administrative capital to the north, Sawata.

Good for Mano, which gets to keep its village feel and main street lined with wooden buildings and weeping willows.

Sights

A peaceful 7km-long nature trail, east of town, winds through paddy fields and past Mano's top attractions. The entrance is near the Danpū-jō bus stop, along the Minami bus route between Ryōtsu and Sawata. From the trailhead, it's a short walk to **Myōsen-ji** (妙宣寺; ☀ dawn-dusk), which was founded by one of Nichiren's disciples, and features a distinctive five-storey pagoda.

From Myosen-ji, it's a ten-minute walk through farmland and up old wooden steps set into the hillside to **Kokubun-ji** (国分寺; 113 Kokubun-ji; ☀ dawn-dusk), Sado-ga-shima's oldest temple, dating from AD 741. Another 3km takes you past marvellous lookout points to **Mano Go-ryō** (真野御陵), the tomb of Emperor Juntoku.

From there, it's a short walk down to **Sado Rekishi Densetsukan** (佐渡歴史伝説館; 655 Mano; admission ¥700; ☀ 8am-5.30pm; ), the island's history museum where tireless animatrons act out scenes of Sado's dramatic past.

Sleeping

Itōya Ryokan

RYOKAN \$\$

(伊藤屋; ☎ 55-2019; www.itouyaryokan.com; 278 Mano Shin-machi; r per person without/with 2 meals ¥5250/8400;  ) At the heart of the village, is the peaceful Itōya Ryokan, just 50m southwest of the Shin-machi traffic signal. This historic house is full of handicrafts from across the island, and evening dishes feature fish and shellfish from the deep sea. Rooms are spotless, the sheets are crisp and there's an inviting *hinoki* bath that's perfect for cool evenings.

Information

Tourist Information Center (☎ 55-3589;

☀ 8.30am-5.30pm closed Wed & Sun May-Oct, closed Sat & Sun Nov-April) In front of the Mano Shin-machi bus stop; can provide information on hikes and temples in the vicinity and rental cycles.

Ogi 小木

Although the area is home to the famed Kodo Drummers, Ogi is little more than a minor port that sees much less ferry traffic than Ryōtsu. During the Earth Celebration,

Ogi does become something of a heaving metropolis, but for the rest of the year it's a drowsy village.

Sights & Activities

For Japanese visitors, Ogi is famous for its *taraibune*, round boats made from huge barrels designed for collecting shellfish in the many coastal inlets. Today they're mainly used by women in traditional fisher-folk costumes giving **rides** (¥450, 10 minutes, from 8.30am to 4.30pm) to tourists. Tickets are available at the marine terminal, to the west of the ferry pier.

If you want to cover a bit more ground, you can take a **sightseeing boat** (¥1400, 45 minutes, from 8.30am to 4.30pm April to November) on a circle tour that runs from the marine terminal to the Sawa-zaki lighthouse and back.

For travellers with their own wheels (two or four will do), the coast west of Ogi is riddled with caves and coves ripe for exploring. There's also the small village of **Shukunegi** (宿根木), 5km from Ogi. A medieval port town that peaked in the early 19th-century, Shukunegi retains its historic atmosphere with weathered wooden merchant houses, narrow alleyways and stone staircases snaking up and down the hillside.

On the other side of the point, the rocky coast gives way to sandy beaches, like **So-bama** (素浜), along Mano-wan.

Sleeping & Eating

So-bama Campground

CAMPGROUND \$

(素浜キャンプ場; ☎ 86-2363; per person/tent from ¥300/600; ☀ May-Oct; ) Right across the road from a tempting stretch of sand and only 6km from Ogi, this campground is an attractive option for festival-goers. During the Earth Celebration, shuttle buses run several times a day between the campground and Ogi.

Hana-no-ki

RYOKAN \$\$

(花の木; ☎ 86-2331; www.sado-hananoki.com; 78-1 Shukunegi; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥5500/9450;  ) To create this enchanting ryokan, the owners painstakingly took apart and reassembled a 150-year-old farmhouse, setting it down among rice paddies along the road to Shukunegi. Accommodation is in Japanese-style rooms in the main building or in detached cottages in the garden. Call ahead for pickup from Ogi.

★ **Uohara**

SEAFOOD \$\$

(魚晴; 415-1 Ogi-machi; meals from ¥1050-3000; ☉ 11am-5pm, closed irregularly) When a restaurant is attached to a fishmonger it's always a good sign. Order at the shop counter then settle onto a floor cushion upstairs while your lunch is prepared from the morning's catch. The speciality here is *awabi* (abalone), grilled as a steak (at market rate) or, more affordably, barbecued with a sweet soy-sauce marinade and served over rice; there's a picture menu. Follow the shop-lined road snaking up the hill behind the tourist information centre for about five minutes until you see a white building with red and blue writing on the side.

i **Information**

Tourist Information Center (☎ 86-3200; 1935-26 Ogi-machi; ☉ 8.39am-5.30pm) English maps and bicycle rentals, a few minutes' walk west of the bus and ferry terminals.

Aikawa 相川

From a tiny hamlet, Aikawa grew almost overnight into a 50,000-person boom town when gold was discovered nearby in 1601. Mining amid some incredibly rough and rugged conditions continued throughout the Edo period, a sufficient length of time to associate Sado with hardship and suffering. Today, the town is dwindling with each passing generation, but the scars of its mining past remain up in the hills.

👁 **Sights**

From Aikawa bus terminal, it's a 40-minute walk (or a much shorter drive) up a steep mountain to **Sado Kinzan** (佐渡金山; ☎ 74-2389; www.sado-kinzan.com/en; 1305 Shimo-Aikawa; admission 1/2 courses ¥800/1200; ☉ 8am-5pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-4.30pm Nov-Mar; 📍), the infamous 'Golden Mountain' that in the 17th century was one of the most bountiful goldmines in the world. Mining here officially stopped in 1989. The main tourist route descends into the chilly depths, where you'll encounter robots that dramatise the perilous existence of former miners. A second route brings you through century-old hauling tunnels, and leads a further 300m up the mountain to the original opencast mine where you can still see the remains of the workings.

It takes around 30 minutes to return on foot down the mountain road to Aikawa. On

the way you'll pass several temples and the **Sado Hangamura Museum** (佐渡版画村美術館; 38-2 Aikawa Komeyamachi; ¥400; ☉ 9am-5pm Mar-Nov; 📍), an old wooden house where local artists display woodblock prints depicting country life in Sado.

🏠 **Sleeping & Eating****Hotel Ōsado**

HOTEL \$\$

(ホテル大佐渡; ☎ 74-3300; www.oosado.com; 288-2 Aikawa-kabuse; r per person with 2 meals from ¥12,750; 📍 ☎) Along the town's southern waterfront is this grand hotel, where you can watch the sun set over the Sea of Japan while you sprawl in the *rotemburo*. Accommodation is in either Western- or Japanese-style rooms, the best of which face the sea.

Isonoya

NOODLES \$

(磯の家; 16 Aizawa Edozawa-machi; noodles ¥350-850; ☉ 11am-8pm, to 1pm Thu; 📍) This little *soba* shop, a few minutes' walk up the coast from the bus stop, is popular for its *isonoya teishoku*, a crisp assortment of tempura with a side of noodles. Turn right in front of the police station and look for the indigo *noren* curtain where the road bends.

i **Information**

Tourist Information Center (☎ 74-2220; 15 Aikawa Haneda-machi; ☉ 8.30am-6pm Apr-Oct) A five minute walk from the bus stop, behind the police station.

Sotokaifu 外海府

Sado's rugged northern coast is a dramatic landscape of sheer sea cliffs dropping off into deep blue waters. Roads are narrow and windy, which lead to harrowing but exhilarating coastal drives. Indeed, this is one area in Sado where having a rental car will make a big difference.

👁 **Sights & Activities**

In order to truly appreciate the beauty of the region, you're going to have to head out into the bay. From May to October **glass-bottom boats** (¥1000; ☉ 8am-5pm) depart every 15 minutes from the village of **Tassha** (達者) on a 15-minute cruise of **Senkakuwan** (尖閣湾).

🏠 **Sleeping****Sado Belle Mer Youth Hostel**

HOSTEL \$

(佐渡ベルメールユースホステル; ☎ 75-2011; http://sado.bellemer.jp; 369-4 Himezu; dm ¥3960,

YHA discount ¥3360, breakfast/dinner ¥760/1260; (P) (☺) This modern hostel is scenically perched near the shore about five minutes on foot from the Minami-Himezu bus stop. It's run by a knowledgeable Japanese family, who can give you some good outdoor tips for exploring Sado's wildest stretch of coastline. Rooms are basic dorms, almost all of which have sea views.

Sotokaifu Youth Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(外海府ユースホステル; ☎78-2911; www.jyh.or.jp/yhguide/hokushinestu/sotokaif/index.html; 131 Iwayaguchi; dm ¥3960, YHA discount ¥3360, breakfast/dinner ¥760/1260; (P) (☺) Tucked away in a tiny fishing hamlet, this cosy hostel may be just the ticket for solitude-seekers. It's in a traditional Sado-style house, complete with central hearth, that has been refitted with shared and private rooms. Filling meals include fresh seafood. The hostel is right in front of the Iwayaguchi (岩谷口) bus stop.

Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen

越後湯沢温泉

025 / POP 8330

If Kawabata Yasunari's famous novel *Yukiguni* (*Snow Country*), set here, is to be believed, Echigo-Yuzawa was once a *louche* hot-spring retreat where *geisha* competed for guests' affection. Then came skiing, and the *shinkansen*. Now most visitors head directly for the convenient slopes of GALA Yuzawa and then back home. Though you needn't pick your pleasure – there are still plenty of onsen inns here, and a long soak is the perfect end to a day on the mountain.

Sights & Activities

GALA Yuzawa

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

(ガーラ湯沢; www.galaresort.jp/winter/english; day lift tickets ¥4500; ☺Dec-Apr) Just 200km north of Tokyo, GALA Yuzawa's claim to fame is its own *shinkansen* stop, right at the base of the mountain. It is entirely possible to wake up early in the morning in Tokyo, hit the slopes after breakfast, and be back home for dinner and a movie. With such incredible ease of access, GALA Yuzawa is predictably packed, especially on weekends and holidays, but you can't beat the convenience.

GALA Yuzawa is divided into three areas (northern, central and southern), which together offer 15 runs. Most trails are intermediate and beginner level, though with the reopening of the southern area in 2012 there are a few more advanced runs. Courses from top to bottom are moderate in length, with the longest stretching for 2.4km. Three quad lifts alongside six triple and double lifts help to thin the crowds, but expect queues at peak times.

Given its proximity to Tokyo, GALA Yuzawa draws all types, though its particularly popular with students and novices. English is everywhere, and you'll see plenty of other foreigners here. Full equipment rental is available for a somewhat pricey ¥4800 per day. Tokyo travel agents can often arrange cheap packages that include lift and train fare, especially if you're planning to head up on a weekday.

Yukiguni-kan

MUSEUM

(雪国館; Yuzawa Town History Museum; 354-1 Yuzawa; admission ¥500; ☺9am-4.30pm Thu-

ECHIGO-TSUMARI ART FIELD

North of Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen lie some of the country's most fertile paddy fields. It's an enchanting scene of brilliant green fields and wooden farmhouses, some still with thatched roofs. It's also typical of agricultural communities everywhere around Japan: as younger generations leave the farms in favour of careers in the city, the region and its way of life are slowly dying.

In 2000, the **Echigo-Tsumari Art Field** (越後妻有大地の芸術祭の里; www.echigo-tsumari.jp/eng) was conceived as a way to bring people back, if only for a day or two. Here, spread out over some 190,000 acres, are a hundred installations by both Japanese and international artists, set as naturally as possible in the surrounding landscape. The area really comes to life during the summer-long **Echigo-Tsumari Triennale** (next up in 2015).

Information is available at contemporary art centre **Kinare** (キナーレ; ☎761-7767; http://kinare.jp/; 6 Honchō, Tōkamachi; ¥1000; ☺10am-5pm Thu-Tue), a few minutes from Tōkamachi Station. The Hokuhoku line connects Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen with Tōkamachi (¥610, 30 minutes) and other stations within the region; however, given the scope, a car is really necessary to get around.

Tue) This wonderful little museum displays memorabilia from the life of Kawabata Yasunari, the first Japanese recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, in addition to interesting displays about life in snow country that bring his classic book to life. From the west exit of Echigo-Yuzawa Station, the museum is a ten-minute walk to the right.

Sleeping

Most visitors are day trippers from the capital, but you can spend the night to take advantage of the hot springs, and aim to be the first one on the slopes the following day.

★ Hatago Isen

INN \$\$

(HATAGO井仙; ☎784-3361; <http://hatago-isen.jp>; 2455 Yuzawa; r per person with 1/2 meals from ¥8400/12,075; ☎) Hatago Isen manages the aesthetic of an old-time travellers' inn – with dim lighting and plenty of dark wood – without skimping on modern amenities. Rooms vary from a humble six-mat space to rest your head to deluxe suites with private *rotomburo*. There's a communal onsen bath, too. Meals make the most of local ingredients and are unusually flexible: you can choose from three different dinner courses and even elect to swap breakfast for lunch, and a later checkout.

Hakuginkaku Hana-no-yoi

RYOKAN \$\$

(白銀閣華の宵; ☎784-3311; www.hakugin.com/English.html; r per person without/with 2 meals from ¥10,500/13,650; ☎☎) Right outside the station's east exit is this traditional ryokan and secluded refuge from the madding crowds. After a day on the slopes, you'll relish the opportunity to soak contemplatively in the brisk outdoor *hinoki* tub or in the indoor marble bath. Dinner is served in the room, so you can stretch your legs out on the tatami.

NASPA New Ōtani

HOTEL \$\$

(NASPAニューオータニ; ☎780-6111; www.naspanewotani.com; r per person with breakfast & lift pass from ¥11,000; ☎☎☎☎☎) This family and foreigner-friendly resort has its own backyard ski park that is particularly suited for beginners and small children. Rooms are Western style and reasonably spacious, and there's a whole range of resort facilities, including an onsen. Free shuttles run between Echigo-Yuzawa Station and the resort in just five minutes.

Getting There & Around

BUS

Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen is connected to Naeba by regular local buses (¥640, 40 minutes). A free shuttle runs between Echigo-Yuzawa Station and GALA Yuzawa.

TRAIN

There are several hourly trains on the Jōetsu *shinkansen* from Tokyo to Echigo-Yuzawa (¥6490, 1¼ hours) and GALA Yuzawa (¥6900, 1½ hours). Trains continue from Echigo-Yuzawa to Niigata (¥5240, 50 minutes).

Naeba 苗場

025

Naeba is a little town with a lot going on. Not only does it (along with adjacent Kagura) offer some of the most challenging skiing and snowboarding in the whole of Tōhoku, it's also the setting for Japan's biggest outdoor music festival, Fuji Rock Festival.

Activities

Naeba Ski Resort

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

(苗場スキー場; www.princehotels.co.jp/ski/naeba; day lift ticket/combined Naeba & Kagura ¥4500/5000; ☺ Dec-Apr) Naeba is an impressive resort with 20 courses fairly evenly divided among the various skill levels. The longest run (4km) starts at the top of the mountain, and winds through birch forests and mogul fields prior to dropping a full kilometre in elevation. The snow tends to be dry and light, and there are plenty of ungroomed areas where you can carve up some serious powder.

Naeba offers a snow park and sledding hill where the little ones can roam free, as well as a freestyle snowboarding course complete with rails, half pipes and kickers. English is everywhere, and you definitely won't be the only foreigner on the slopes. At the bottom of the hill, you'll find the N-Plateau, which is a massive complex complete with a full food court, onsen, convenience store and ski shop. You can also rent equipment here for ¥4300 per day.

Six- and eight-person gondolas do a pretty decent job of keeping the crowds in check at peak times. But if you find the lines a little too long for your liking, you can always jump on the awesomely named Dragondola (トラゴンドラ). Spanning a distance of 5.5km, this is reportedly the longest gondola in the world, and whisks you away to Kagura in just 15 minutes.

Kagura Ski Resort

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

(かぐらスキー場; www.princehotels.co.jp/ski/kagura; day lift ticket/combined Naeba & Kagura ¥4200/5000; ☺ Nov-May) Naeba is an even more attractive winter destination when you consider that it's contiguous with Kagura, an impressive mountain in its own right. Divided into the Tashiro, Kagura and Mitsumata areas, this resort offers up an additional 23 runs that are divided 45/35/20 among beginner, intermediate and advanced.

But don't let the numbers fool you – Kagura has a lax policy on back-country skiing, which means that experienced alpinists can really have an extreme adventure up here. For those who feel more comfortable sticking to the trails, fret not, as one of the courses here reaches an impressive 6km in length. With the combined pass, you can also return to Naeba by the Dragonbola at any time, or alternatively take one of the free shuttle buses that depart from the bottom of the Mitsumata area.

**Festivals & Events****Fuji Rock Festival**

LIVE MUSIC

(www.fujirockfestival.com; ☺ late July) Fuji Rock Festival is three days of musical madness – like Woodstock, only with toilets and less mud (usually) – and up to 100,000 people show up to hang out, listen to great bands and enjoy the party atmosphere. Headliners include top overseas and domestic acts in a variety of genres.

**Sleeping**

Naeba gets its fair share of day trippers. Bedding down here or in Yuzawa Onsen helps you get the most out of your ski holiday.

Prince Hotel Naeba

HOTEL \$\$\$

(プリンスホテル苗場; ☎ 789-2211; www.princehotels.co.jp/naeba; r per person from ¥8000; ☐ ♿ @ ☺) All of the ski action in Naeba centres on this monolithic resort at the base of the mountain. On offer is a range of Western-style rooms and suites that vary considerably in size, amenities and price – check online for specials – in addition to a whole slew of bars, cafes, restaurants and health and fitness facilities.

Wadagoya Mountain Hut

HUT

(和田小屋; ☎ 789-2211; <http://www.princehotels.com/en/ski/mtnaeba/accommodation.html>; r per person without/with 2 meals ¥4500/7000; ☺ Dec-May) The Prince also runs this mountain hut up on Kagura. Sleeping is on futons in

a communal room, but you'll get to cut first tracks in the morning. Note that you have to arrive in Naeba by 3pm in order to catch the sequence of lifts up to the hut.

Getting There & Away

Echigo-Yuzawa Onsen is connected to Naeba by regular local buses (¥640, 40 minutes). Free shuttle buses to the Prince Hotel also run this route, though you need to be a registered guest to take advantage of this service.

During peak ski season, **Seibu Travel** (<http://bus.seibutavel.co.jp/en>) runs a shuttle bus between the Shinagawa Prince Hotel in Tokyo and Naeba (¥3500, 4 hours).

Myōkō Kōgen 妙高高原

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This up-and-coming skiing and snowboarding destination comprises a sprawling collection of powder-rich winter resorts that line the Myōkō mountain range. On the whole, the region is much less developed for mass tourism than neighbouring areas, but this off-the-beaten-path appeal is precisely why you should visit. Myōkō's location near the sea means that it gets snow before anyone else does, upwards of 13m per season.

**Activities****Akakura Onsen****Ski Park**

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

(赤倉温泉スキー場; ☎ 87-2169; www.akakura-ski.com; day lift tickets ¥3900; ☺ Dec-Apr) Akakura Onsen Suki-Jō is one of the more popular resorts, especially among travellers with small children. All but two of the 20 runs were laid out with the needs of novice skiers in mind, and even the black diamonds are little more than short chutes. But the high-quality powder and picturesque setting ensure a good time for everyone. Family restaurants, many drawing inspiration from European chalets, are scattered around the slopes. English signage is generally available.

Dancing Snow

SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

(☎ mobile 090-1433-1247; www.dancingsnow.com/index_e.php) For off-piste excitement, check out these local experts for guided tours through the backwoods terrain, snowshoe treks, as well as personalised one-on-one instruction – all in English. Prices depend on the length and type of the tour, so contact the ski school for more information.

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