KYUSHU

Kyushu, Japan’s third-largest island, is blessed with outstanding natural beauty. Among its attractions are active volcanoes, some of the country’s finest hot springs, grass-covered highlands, intriguing islands and even excellent surf beaches. None of the mountains rise above 2000m, but due to their steepness and thickly forested slopes they offer wide-ranging options for hikers of all abilities. Sparsely populated compared with many parts of Japan, much of Kyushu’s landscape is a sea of green – from wet rice fields, to lush green pastures and dense native forest. Higher up, the barren volcanic wonderlands of Aso-san, Kujyu-san, and the mountains of Kirishima provide striking contrast. Spring brings cherry blossoms, and the high mountains are covered in colourful azaleas through June. Summer is hot and sticky, and Kyushu is often buffeted from the southeast by remorseless typhoons. Autumn produces stunning colours. The mountains of Kyushu offer tremendous hiking opportunities – plus a sense of remoteness and peacefulness long since gone from many parts of Japan.

Kyushu has long been considered one of Japan’s most internationally minded regions. Coinciding with the decline of the samurai tradition, young Kyushu intellectuals of the Meiji Restoration led a reluctant Japan into the modern world. Today the cosmopolitan city of Fukuoka is a major international arrival point. Located in the north of the island, Fukuoka is one of Japan’s main centres of trade, cuisine, fashion, and nightlife. The southern cities of Kagoshima and Miyazaki are known for their balmy climate and for the quality of their shochu, a popular drink distilled from sweet potato or grains.
CLIMATE
Kyūshū, while more southern than much of Japan, has extremes that vary tremendously from season to season. In the winter it can be quite cold, and many of the mountains are snow capped. Spring and autumn produce the most comfortable temperatures, and with them, spectacular flowers in spring and beautiful autumnal hues in autumn. During the rainy season the island is inundated with heavy, often torrential rain, and Kyūshū is pounded by the majority of typhoons that hit Japan from June to October. Travellers should bring layers of clothing and a waterproof rain shell, as it is often too windy to use an umbrella. Summer is hot and humid, but is the time of year when hikers have their holidays.

GETTING THERE & AWAY
There are major airports at Fukuoka, Ōita (Beppu), Kita-kyūshū, Nagasaki, Kagoshima, Kumamoto and Miyazaki. There are also flights to islands off the coast of Kyūshū and to the islands southwest of Kagoshima down to Okinawa. Using one of the JAL or ANA air passes or cheap add-on fares is a cheap way to go (p373).

There are numerous sea connections to Kyūshū from Honshū, Shikoku, Okinawa and Korea. Local ferry services operate between Kyūshū and islands off the northwest and southern coasts.

The shinkansen (bullet train) line from Tokyo and Osaka crosses to Kyūshū from Shimonoseki and ends at Hakata station (Fukuoka).

GETTING AROUND
Major cities in Kyūshū are connected by tokkyū (limited express) train services. The Kyūshū shinkansen is being built to link Fukuoka and Kagoshima, but at the time of research only the section in the south between Kagoshima and Yatsushiro was in operation. Once it's all up and running, it will be possible to travel by shinkansen from Tokyo to Kagoshima.

Kyūshū has an extensive highway bus system, while major cities and offshore islands are served by several domestic airlines.

GATEWAYS
If you’re coming from Honshū by train or bus, your gateway to Kyūshū will probably be Fukuoka. One of Japan’s ten most populated cities, Fukuoka has been an important trading and cultural city for many centuries due to its proximity to the Asian mainland and was chosen by the Mongol invasion forces as their landing point in the 12th century. If you come by ferry, you’ll probably arrive at Fukuoka, Kagoshima, Miyazaki or Beppu. By air, you could turn up at any of the island’s major cities.

Information on many of these gateways is included in the Towns & Facilities section at the end of this chapter, or in the hike descriptions themselves. For more detail, pick up a copy of Lonely Planet’s Japan.