



Nansei-shotō

南西諸島

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hiking into the magical forests of Yaku-shima to stand in awe of the massive 7200-year-old **Jōmon-sugi** (p339)
- Seeing the rhododendron in full bloom among granite monoliths near the peak of **Miyanoura-dake** (p342), the highest point in southern Japan
- Bush-bashing your way across **Iriomote-jima** (p344), Japan's last remaining pocket of true jungle wilderness
- Relaxing and experiencing life Okinawa-style with the laidback locals of **Ōhara** (p348) once you've completed the hike
- Keeping your eyes open for the ever-elusive **Iriomote wildcat** (p347) that everyone has told you about

Say hello to the other Japan! Move over pebble gardens and *bonsai* trees, this is the land of white sand beaches, swaying palm trees and steamy jungles. Despite centuries of mainland exploitation and horrific destruction during the closing months of WWII, Japan is in the midst of an Okinawa boom. Japanese mainlanders, both young and old, are flocking to the islands in droves. And it's not difficult to see why – a year-round balmy climate, plenty of sunshine and a laidback lifestyle make Okinawa and the Southwest Islands (Nansei-shotō) the perfect destination for beachcombers, marine sports-lovers and hikers alike.

The islands themselves are strung out for more than 1000km from the southern tip of Kyūshū to Yonaguni-jima, a little over 100km from the east coast of Taiwan. Administratively, the northern half of the group falls within Kyūshū's Kagoshima-ken; the southern half forms Okinawa-ken, Japan's southernmost prefecture.

This appealing region offers two of the country's least visited and most worthwhile outdoor destinations – the extraordinary islands of Yaku-shima and Iriomote-jima. 60km south of Kyūshū, Yaku-shima was designated as Japan's first World Heritage site in 1993 and is home to 5000-year-old *yaku-sugi* (cedar trees). At the other end of the chain, Iriomote-jima is home to the elusive *Iriomote yamaneko* (wildcat), lush mangrove forests, virgin jungles and alternative lifestyles.

Although long since discovered by Japan's outdoor enthusiasts, the islands remain far off the beaten track among non-Japanese travellers. Anyone who makes the time and effort to reach them will definitely not return disappointed.



CLIMATE

The climate across Nansei-shotō is remarkably varied, from the misty, snow capped peaks of Yaku-shima to the steamy, dense jungles of Iriomote-jima. Yaku-shima's highlands excluded, the islands of Nansei-shotō enjoy a subtropical climate, with the average daily temperature in December a comfortable 20°C, and a very warm 31°C in July. Surrounded by warm ocean currents, Yaku-shima's towering peaks act as rain cloud producing factories, making the island one of the wettest spots in Japan – it's a local joke that it rains 35 days a month!

LANGUAGE

Generally speaking, the further north or south one travels from Tokyo the greater the differences in local *hōgen* (dialects). Kagoshima-ken (Kyūshū) has a notoriously incomprehensible dialect known as *Satsuma-ben*, a localised version of which can be heard on Yaku-shima. Likewise the Okinawan dialects can sound nothing like Japanese at all! If it's any consolation, mainland Japanese visitors often have as much trouble understanding the island dialects as foreigners do.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The northern islands in the chain, including Yaku-shima, are best accessed from Kagoshima by plane or boat.

Naha is the hub for Okinawa with direct flights from major mainland cities. The gateway for Iriomote-jima is Ishigaki-jima and it also has daily flights from the mainland.

WARNING

The hikes on Yaku-shima and Iriomote-jima, in particular the latter, are notorious for people becoming lost. There have been many hapless hikers needing to be rescued from the back-country and, in some cases, never making it out. Be aware of the terrain you are heading into, and attend to all the necessary preparations and precautions. Above all, be sure you are properly outfitted, always watch the weather, and take the recommended map! We strongly suggest you take a mate along with you on both of these hikes, and that you register your intentions appropriately.

An incredible number of boats and planes connect the islands, and it's feasible to go all the way from Kagoshima to Iriomote-jima

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