

Around Tokyo

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If you've never spotted Mt Fuji from Tokyo, it can take your breath away. Japan's tallest peak looms over the distant Tanzawa mountains, hinting at amazing outdoor experiences right on Tokyo's doorstep. In summer, you can climb through forests towards the jagged summit of Japan's national symbol, as pilgrims have done for centuries, or the towns of Hakone or the Fuji Go-ko (Fuji Five Lakes) make for ideal hiking and soaking in onsen (hot springs) anytime of year.

North of the capital, Nikkō's gilded shrines and exquisitely crafted temples are spectacularly set amid verdant woodlands. Further north and west, Gunma-ken is the nation's hot-spring capital, with river-bank onsen, mountain onsen, even onsen with mixed bathing!

South of Tokyo, Japan's ancient capital Kamakura boasts a treasury of temples and sylvan hiking trails. Nearby Yokohama has grown from a blip 150 years ago to Japan's second-largest city, with crackling entertainment districts, shopping galore and longstanding foreign influence.

Continuing south, the Izu peninsula has charming seaside towns, lovely windswept beaches and cliff-top onsen overlooking the Pacific. And you needn't leave Tokyo Prefecture for an island getaway; Izu-shotō are a chain of volcanic peaks tapering to white-sand beaches and lush subtropical landscapes for hiking. The Ogasawara-shotō, 25 hours by ferry, form a pristine national park where you can frolic with dolphins year-round.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Watch the sunrise from the majestic **Mt Fuji** (p208), Japan's highest mountain and national symbol
- Find your spiritual centre while exploring the dazzling temples of **Nikkō** (opposite)
- Recover from the madness of the metropolis at idyllic onsen on **Izu-hantō** (p226) or in **Gunma-ken** (p205)
- Truly get away from it all (except the dolphins) on pristine **Chichi-jima** (p245)
- Relax in a natural seaside onsen while gazing over the Pacific on one of the easily accessible islands in the **Izu-shotō** group (p240)



NORTH OF TOKYO

Resisting the urge to take the *shinkansen* (bullet train) south to Kyoto, you can experience the postcard splendour of Japan's mountains – Nikkō with its amazing shrines and, further north and west, Gunma-ken, home to numerous hot-spring resorts.

NIKKŌ 日光

☎ 0288 / pop 93,000

Ancient moss clinging to a stone wall, rows of perfectly aligned stone lanterns, vermilion gates and towering cedars: this is only a pathway in Nikkō, a sanctuary that enshrines the glories of the Edo period (1600–1868). Scattered among hilly woodlands, Nikkō is one of Japan's major attractions. If there's any drawback, it's that plenty of other people have discovered it too; peak season (summer and autumn) and weekends can be extremely crowded. Although Nikkō is certainly possible as a day trip from Tokyo, try to spend at least one night here so that the following morning you arrive at its World Heritage shrines and temples before the crowds do. Gorgeous natural scenery west of the city merits another night.

History

Nikkō's religious history dates back to the middle of the 8th century, when the Buddhist priest Shōdō Shōnin (735–817) established a hermitage here. It was a training centre for Buddhist monks before it eventually declined into obscurity. Nikkō became famous when chosen as the site for the mausoleum of Tokugawa Ieyasu, the warlord who took control of Japan and established the shōgunate that ruled for more than 250 years, until the Meiji Restoration ended the feudal era.

Ieyasu was laid to rest among Nikkō's towering cedars in 1617, and in 1634 his grandson, Tokugawa Iemitsu, commenced work on the shrine that can be seen today. The original shrine, Tōshō-gū, was completely rebuilt using an army of some 15,000 artisans from across Japan, taking two years to complete the shrine and mausoleum. Whatever one's opinion of Ieyasu, the grandeur at Nikkō is awesome, a display of wealth and power by a family that for two-and-a-half centuries was Japan's supreme arbiter of power.

Orientation

Both JR Nikkō Station and the nearby Tōbu Nikkō Station lie within a block of Nikkō's main road (Rte 119, the old Nikkō-kaidō), southeast of the town centre. From here, it's a 30-minute walk uphill to the shrine area, past restaurants, hotels and the main tourist information centre. From the stations to the shrines, you can take buses to the Shin-kyō bus stop for ¥190. The area north of the Daiyagawa from the town centre is greener but not as well served by public transport.

Information

The *Tourist Guide of Nikkō* has about everything you need, and the bilingual *Central Nikko* shows the small streets. Hikers should pick up a copy of *Yumoto-Chūzenji Area Hiking Guide* (¥150), which has maps and information on local flora and fauna. The small *Guidebook for Walking Trails* (¥150) is useful for short walks.

Kawai i-in Clinic (☎ 54-1125; ☹ irregular hr) On the main road, three blocks southeast of the Kyōdo Centre tourist information office. Has an English speaker; call first for an appointment.

Kyōdo Center tourist information office (☎ 54-2496; internet per 15min ¥50; ☹ 9am-5pm) Has maps and English speakers. You can also arrange for free guided tours in English. There are several computers available for internet use.

Nikko Perfect Guide (www.nikko-jp.org/english/index.html) This website to the city also has a print version available from the Kyōdo Center tourist information office for ¥1575.

Post office On the main road, three blocks northwest of the Kyōdo Center tourist information office. Has an international ATM and currency exchange.

Tōbu Nikkō Station tourist information desk (☎ 53-4511; ☹ 8.30am-5pm)

Sights

The World Heritage Sites around Tōshō-gū are Nikkō's centrepiece. A ¥1000 'combination ticket', valid for two days and available at booths in the area, covers entry to Rinnō-ji, Tōshō-gū and Futarasan-jinja, but not the Nemuri-Neko (Sleeping Cat) in Tōshō-gū and Ieyasu's tomb. Separate admission tickets to these sights are available.

Most sites are open from 8am to 5pm (until 4pm from November to March). To avoid the hordes, visit early on a weekday. Be sure to bring a map, as finding the English signposts to the shrines and temples can be tricky.