Kyūshū has long been internationally aware. It was from here that young intellectuals of the Meiji Restoration carried a resistant Japan towards modernity, closing a long chapter of feudal history and ending the way of the Samurai. Today, burgeoning Fukuoka is a multicultural, street-chic metropolis and significant Asian hub. To the west, picturesque Nagasaki, Japan’s original gateway to the world beyond, offers a message of hope from a tragic story.

Kyūshū’s geothermal core warms a fertile terrain. Rolling hills of lush grasses give way to rugged peaks and the craters of several active volcanoes. Hiking and photographic opportunities abound in Kyūshū’s four national parks. If the otherworldly landscape of the Aso caldera doesn’t tempt, smouldering Sakurajima, looming over Kagoshima, probably will – frequently showering the city with the kind of fine ash put to good use in the pottery towns of Karatsu and Arita.

Coastal Beppu is Japan’s hot-spring mecca, but Yufuin, Kurokawa Onsen and Unzen also promise tranquil forests and a chance to soak. The southern cities of Kagoshima and Miyazaki have a vibe of their own, with glimpses of alternative lifestyles in otherwise structured Japan.

Sadly, Kyūshū’s smaller cities are depopulating rapidly. Young people are drawn to the bright lights of Fukuoka, Osaka and Tokyo, and the risk of losing traditional ways of living in this ancient region is increasing. Some foresight, however, has led to the establishment of galleries and museums in most large towns, sharing centuries of culture and storytelling.

Nationally, Kyūshū is known for its warm climate, friendly people and the quality of the local brew, shō-chū.
History

Excavations near Kagoshima dating to around 10,000 BC indicate southern Kyūshū was the likely entry point of the Jōmon culture, which gradually crept north.

Japan’s centuries-old trade with China and Korea began in Kyūshū. The arrival of Portuguese ships in 1543 initiated Japan’s at-times thorny relationship with the West and heralded the beginning of its ‘Christian Century’ (1549–1650). Over the next few hundred years, Kyūshū had a significant role in the changing face of the nation. With Christianity, the Portuguese also brought gunpowder weaponry, heralding the ultimate decline of the samurai tradition.

In 1868 the Meiji Restoration ended the military shōgunate’s policy of isolation, marking the birth of modern Japan. During the ensuing Meiji Era (1868–1912), rapid industrialisation caused profound social and political change.

Sadly, this historically rich region is best known for one day in history – 9 August 1945, the day Nagasaki became the last city to be decimated by an act of atomic warfare.

Climate

Kyūshū is the largest southernmost of Japan’s four main islands and enjoys a warm, subtropical climate, yet winter in the mountains frequently registers subzero temperatures and heavy snowfalls. During the rainy season the island is inundated with heavy rainfall, and the months of July and August are oppressively hot, humid and best avoided! Although some reasonable swimming beaches are on the mainland, most are polluted or overdeveloped. With the exception of some of the southwest islands, you may be disappointed if you visit the region for summer seaside escapades. Kyūshū’s dramatic volcanic landscapes and historical towns are best enjoyed in the cool of spring, when the wildflowers bloom, or in autumn, as the last of the maples turn.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Centrally located and conveniently linked by subway train, Fukuoka Airport is Japan’s third largest, servicing destinations in Asia and Japan. Smaller Ōita (Beppu), Nagasaki, Kagoshima, Kumamoto and Miyazaki airports all have flights to Seoul, but not always daily.

It’s possible to fly into Hong Kong (from Kagoshima), Shanghai (from Kagoshima, Nagasaki and Kitakyūshū) and Guangzhou (from Kitakyūshū). All of Kyūshū’s airports have limited domestic connections. There are also flights to islands off the coast of Kyūshū and to the southwest islands from Fukuoka (to Amakusa, Gotō-Fukue, Naha, Tsushima), Nagasaki (to Iki, Naha), Kumamoto (to Amakusa) and Kagoshima (to Amamioshima, Kikaijima, Naha, Tanegashima, Yakushima, Kikaijima and Tokunoshima).

BOAT

There are sea connections to Kyūshū from Honshū (Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe), Shikoku (Tokushima), Hokkaido (Muroran via Naoetsu) and Okinawa. Local ferry services operate between Kyūshū and islands off the northwest and southern coasts. A high speed ferry service shuttles between Fukuoka and Busan, in South Korea.

TRAIN

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, and an extensive highway bus system. The Kyūshū shinkansen line between Hakata and Kagoshima is partly operational, scheduled for completion in 2011. If you can afford it, a combination of rail travel and car rental is your best option. It’s easy to drive here, and the satellite navigation systems in most rental cars, although in Japanese, don’t take long to get used to. Without a car, you’ll miss out on many of the best-preserved and least-known of the island’s diverse and most impressive landscapes.

FUKUOKA-KEN

The northern prefecture of Fukuoka is the arrival point for most visitors to Kyūshū. The bland industrial city of Kitakyūshū (population 990,585) is northernmost, but most travellers head straight to Fukuoka.