For more than 1000 years, pilgrims have walked clockwise around Shikoku in the footsteps of the Buddhist saint Kōbō Daishi (774–835), who achieved enlightenment on the island of his birth. Known as the ‘88 Temples of Shikoku’, the 1400km journey is Japan’s best known pilgrimage and its oldest tourist trail.

In the days before guidebooks and reliable maps, pilgrims frequently disappeared forever in Shikoku’s rugged and mountainous interior. Today, hardship is not the factor it once was, with many pilgrims buzzing merrily around the island in air-conditioned vehicles. In recent years, however, growing numbers of people have been striking out on foot along the age-old trails, in search of meaning and self-realisation.

Shikoku is not quite the rural wilderness it’s often made out to be. The northern coast is linked to Honshū by bridges, and the cities of Matsuyama and Takamatsu are vibrant and intoxicating examples of the modern Japanese urban experience. Away from the towns, though, life still moves at a slower pace than elsewhere in Japan. In the countryside, single-carriage trains trundle through rice fields and mountainous valleys, and down by the capes there are (remarkably for Japan) no trains at all.

Relatively few foreigners visit Shikoku, and those who do can expect a friendly welcome. In addition to all the temples and some excellent seafood (and the famous Sanuki udon of Kagawa prefecture), Shikoku offers opportunities for hiking, rafting, surfing and whale-watching, as well as the chance to discover glimpses of an older Japan that can be hard to find among the glitter and fumes of the cities.

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**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Follow time-worn paths along the pilgrimage of the 88 Temples (p656)
- Get off the beaten path in the Iya Valley (p652)
- Take a soak in the historic Dōgo Onsen (p674) in the castle-town metropolis of Matsuyama
- Trek up 1368 stone steps to pay homage to the god of sea-farers at Kompira-san (p676) in the town of Kotohira
- Walk off Japan’s most famous noodles with a stroll through Takamatsu’s exquisite Edo-period garden, Ritsurin-kōen (p678)
History
For most of Japan’s history, the island of Shikoku has been divided into four regions—hence the name shi (four) and koku (provinces). After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the ancient provinces of Awa, Tosa, Iyo and Sanuki became the modern-day prefectures of Tokushima-ken, Kōchi-ken, Ehime-ken and Kagawa-ken. The old names are still in common use.

Despite its proximity to the historical centres of power of Osaka and Kyoto, Shikoku has always been considered somewhat remote. It’s also a rugged land. In the 12th century, defeated Heike (Taira) warriors disappeared into the mountainous interiors to escape their Genji (Minamoto) pursuers after decisive sea battles at Yashima (p681) and Dan-no-ura (p483). Until very recently, the 88 Temples pilgrims returned from Shikoku with stories of extreme hardship that had to be overcome in their search for enlightenment.

Climate
Shikoku enjoys a mild climate, with temperatures typically several degrees warmer than those experienced in Tokyo. Spring and autumn are the best times to come—summers can be stiflingly hot, and typhoons frequently pound the Pacific coast from June until October. Although there is plenty of rain, snow is rare (except in the mountains).

Getting There & Away
Until 20 years ago, if you wanted to get to Shikoku you had to fly or take a boat. Today, there are three bridge systems linking Shikoku with Honshū. In the east, the Akashi Kaikyō-hashig connects Tokushima with Kōbe in Hyōgo-ken via Awaji-shima (Awaji Island). The Seto-ōhashi bridge runs from Okayama to Sakaide, west of Takamatsu. This is the only one of the bridges to carry trains. Towards the western end of the north coast, the Shimanami Kaidō (p476) is an island-hopping series of nine bridges (with bike paths!) leading from Imabari in Ehime-ken to Onomichi near Hiroshima.

As a result of the improved bridge infrastructure, ferry services are on the decline, though there are still boats to a few major ports on Kyūshū and the southern coast of Honshū. Most visitors arrive on the island by train from Okayama or by highway bus from Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo. Air services connect major cities in Shikoku with Tokyo, Osaka and other major centres.

Getting Around
This chapter’s coverage follows the same order that most of Shikoku’s visitors have used to travel around the island over the past 1000 years—in a loop around the island starting in Tokushima and moving clockwise through Kōchi, Ehime and Kagawa prefectures.

For more information on visiting the 88 Temples of Shikoku, see the boxed text, p656.

TOKUSHIMA-KEN 徳島県
The traditional starting point from which generations of pilgrims have set out on their tour around the island, Tokushima-ken is home to the first 23 of the 88 Temples. Notable attractions include the lively Awa-odori Matsuri (Awa-odori Festival), which takes place in Tokushima in August; the mighty whirlpools of the Naruto Channel between Tokushima and Awaji-shima; the dramatic scenery of the Iya Valley; and the surf beaches of the southern coast.

TOKUSHIMA 徳島
☎ 088 / pop 270,000
Flanked by mountains and centred on a palm-lined promenade, the modern city of Tokushima is best known for the Awa-odori festival in August. The city is also a convenient base for exploring the nearby Naruto whirlpools. To pilgrims, Tokushima serves as the gateway to the island, and the jumping-off point for the first group of temples.

Orientation
Tokushima’s main landmark is Mt Bizan (眉山), which dominates the city from the west. The remains of the old castle now form a pleasant park directly behind the railway station. The main road runs from the station to the Mt Bizan cable car, crossing the Shinmachi-gawa (Shinmachi River) on the way. The main entertainment district is across the river in Akita-machi.