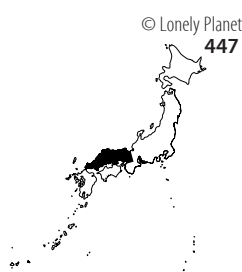


Western Honshū

本州西部



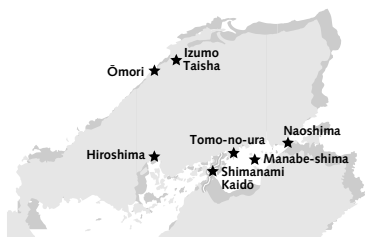
A land of ceramics and mountain villages, Western Honshū has much to offer the traveller. The Inland Sea coasts of Okayama-ken and Hiroshima-ken are dotted with charming villages, attractive islands, and cities with room to breathe. In Kurashiki, elegant 18th-century warehouses line a shady canal. Down the road, Bizen is the proud heir of one of the oldest ceramics traditions in Japan. In Yamaguchi-ken, Shimonoseki is a prime destination for any fan of fresh seafood. The Inland Sea, meanwhile, contains a galaxy of little islands, ringed by the twinkling lights of Honshū and Shikoku.

Shimane and Tottori prefectures, once disparaged as 'the back of Japan', are especially welcoming. Although former gateways for continental culture, they now enjoy a slower pace of life, marked by onsen (hot spring) villages and mountain towns. Highlights of this area include Matsue (the castle town that was Lafcadio Hearn's first home in Japan), and Izumo Taisha, one of the oldest and most important shrines in Japan, where the Shintō gods get together to discuss the state of the world once a year.

The Chūgoku mountain range divides Western Honshū. On the southern San-yō coast (literally, 'the sunny side of the mountains'), the mild Inland Sea weather supports populous cities; to the north, the San-in coast (literally, 'in the shade of the mountains') is on the cooler Sea of Japan, and is much less densely populated.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Enjoy a night out in cosmopolitan **Hiroshima** (p462), and visit the floating Itsukushima-jinja (Itsukushima Shrine) on nearby **Miyajima** (p469)
- Admire stunning sea views from the ancient fishing port of **Tomo-no-ura** (p459)
- Slow down and listen to the waves on **Manabe-shima** (Manabe Island; p476) in the Inland Sea
- Explore the village of **Ōmori** (p495) and the historic Iwami Ginzan silver mines
- Hire a bike and pedal yourself from Honshū to Shikoku over the **Shimanami Kaidō** (p476)
- See where the gods go on holiday at **Izumo Taisha** (p496)
- Have your mind bent pleasantly out of shape at the art installations of Honmura on **Naoshima** (p474)



History

Because of its proximity to the Korean peninsula and China, the Western Honshū region has long been a gateway for continental influences. Buddhism and the Chinese writing system entered Japan through this part of the country in the 6th century. During his Korean peninsula campaigns in 1592 and 1598, Toyotomi Hideyoshi abducted whole families of potters as growing interest in the tea ceremony generated desire for the finest Korean ceramics. The firing techniques brought over all those centuries ago live on in Japanese ceramics today.

Climate

The Western Honshū region is generally mild and comfortable. On the San-in coast by the Sea of Japan the temperatures are cooler than on the San-yō coast of the Inland Sea, and winters can be snowy. The Inland Sea coast is known as the *hare no kuni* (land of sunshine) thanks to its moderate temperatures and low rainfall.

Getting There & Away

The *shinkansen* (bullet train) along the San-yō coast is the fastest way to get around. On the San-in coast, the *shinkansen* is not an option, though *tokkyū* (limited express) trains will limit changes and shorten travel times by up to half. Between the San-yō and San-in coasts it's often quicker to go by bus. The major rail link between the two coasts runs between Okayama on the Inland Sea coast and Yonago in Tottori-ken on the Sea of Japan.

OKAYAMA-KEN

岡山県

Okayama-ken is known for its rural character, and the villa at Hattōji offers one of Japan's great countryside getaways. Kurashiki is popular for its museums and well-preserved historical quarter. Further west, the city of Kasaoka is the jumping-off point for some unspoiled islands in the Inland Sea. From Okayama there are road and rail links with Shikoku via the Seto-ōhashi bridge.

OKAYAMA 岡山

☎ 086 / pop 630,000

The laid-back capital is a major transportation hub, an important regional city, and of interest to travellers as the location of the Kōraku-en,

one of Japan's top three gardens, overlooked by the city's castle. The city prides itself on its connection to Momotarō, the demon-quelling boy hero of one of Japan's best-known folktales, whose smiling face beams out at you all over town. Okayama makes a good base for day trips out to the well-preserved merchant town of Kurashiki, and to the ancient pottery area of Bizen, and for cycle excursions to the countryside of the Kibi Plain.

Orientation

The main street, Momotarō-Ōdōri, leads eastward from the station to the castle and the famous garden, Kōraku-en, about 1.5km away. Trams (¥100 for the castle area) run down the middle of the street.

Information

Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ (☎ 223-9211; 6-36 Honmachi; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) Cashes travellers cheques.

Club Mont Blanc (☎ 224-7050; 6th fl, Dai-ichi Central Bldg, 6-30 Honmachi; internet per 1st 30min ¥290, per extra 15min ¥100; ☎ 24hr) Opposite the station, to the right as you exit.

JTB Travel (☎ 232-3810; 1-7-36 Omote-chō; ☎ 10am-6pm) This travel agency is around by the Kenchō-dōri tram stop.

Maruzen (☎ 233-4640; 1-5-1 Omote-chō; ☎ 10am-8pm) This bookshop is on the ground floor of the Symphony Building. Has a good selection of books in English.

Okayama Central Post Office (☎ 227-2757; 2-1-1 Naka Sange; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat, to 12.30pm Sun) At the corner of Yanagawa-suji and Kenchō-dōri.

Okayama International Centre (☎ 256-2914; www.opief.or.jp/english; 2-2-1 Hōkan-chō; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Has information in English on sights throughout Okayama prefecture.

Tourist Information Counter (☎ 222-2912; 1-1 Ekimoto-machi; ☎ 9am-6pm) In the station, by the entrance to the Shinkansen tracks.

Sights

KŌRAKU-EN 後楽園

Overlooked by the castle and built on the orders of the *daimyō* (regional lord) Ikeda Tsunemasa, **Kōraku-en** (☎ 272-1148; 1-5 Kōraku-en; admission ¥350; ☎ 7.30am-6pm Apr-Sep, 8am-5pm Oct-Mar; ㊄) has enjoyed a reputation as one of the three most beautiful gardens in Japan since its completion in 1700. Unusually for a Japanese garden, most of the park is taken up by expansive lawns, which are broken up by ponds, tea houses and other Edo-period buildings, including a nō