



Okinawa & the Southwest Islands

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Best Places to Stay

- » Sankara Hotel & Spa (p640)
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- » Yakushima Youth Hostel (p640)

Why Go?

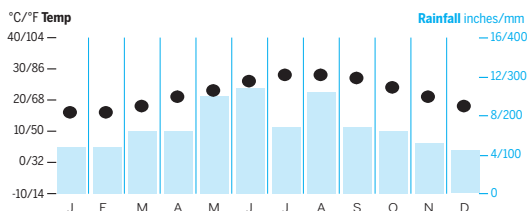
Japan's Southwest Islands (南西諸島; Nansei-shotō) are *the other Japan*: a chain of semitropical, coral-fringed islands that feels more like Hawaii or Southeast Asia.

It's a nature lover's paradise: in the northern Kagoshima Prefecture lush primeval forests hide among the craggy peaks of Yakushima. The starfish-like Amami-Ōshima has fine beaches in its convoluted coastline, and tiny Yoron-tō is basically all beach, with an airport on top. Heading south, the first stop is Okinawa-hontō (沖縄本島), the bustling main island of Okinawa prefecture. Kerama Islands are tiny gems with white-sand beaches and crystal-clear waters. Miyako-jima boasts killer beaches, plenty of sugarcane fields and a laid-back scene. Yaeyama Islands have Japan's best coral reefs, subtropical jungles and mangrove swamps.

But spectacular nature is only part of it: the islands also boast a fascinating, peculiarly 'un-Japanese' culture. Indeed, Okinawa was a separate country for most of its history and the Ryūkyū cultural heart still beats in the Southwest Islands.

When to Go

Naha



May & Jun Travel may coincide with the rainy season; while it's not too intense, sunshine may be scarce.

Jul-Sep This is the best time to enjoy the beaches, but expect some big crowds.

Oct-Mar The water is cooler but swimmable, and you'll have entire beaches to yourself.



Okinawa & the Southwest Islands Highlights

- 1 Soak up the sun on one of the white-sand beaches of the **Kerama Islands** (p657)
- 2 Hike into the mountainous heart of **Yakushima** (p637) to commune with ancient *yakusugi* trees
- 3 Dive with playful mantas off **Ishigaki-jima** (p668)
- 4 Explore the mangrove swamps, jungles and coral reefs of Japan's last frontier, **Iriomote-jima** (p668)
- 5 Take a ferry to a simpler time on the 'living museum' island of **Taketomi-jima** (p670)
- 6 Chill out on peaceful **Yoron-tō** (p647) and its blissful scenery of beaches and sugarcane
- 7 Search the horizon for Taiwan on **Yonaguni-jima** (p671), Japan's westernmost island, and learn about its enormous moths