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 Hawai‘i 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

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<th>Month</th>
<th>Temp</th>
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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.
To Tokyo
To Osaka; Kobe

East China Sea
PACIFIC OCEAN

KAGOSHIMA PREFECTURE

OKINAWA PREFECTURE

OKINAWA ISLANDS
Miyako Islands
Yonaguni-jima
Iriomote-jima

YAELAMA ISLANDS
Kohama-jima
Tarama-jima
Tonaki-shima
Kume-jima
Aka-jima

OKINAWA ISLANDS
Miyakojima Islands
Ishigaki
Yoron-tō
Naha
Nago
Kerama Islands

AMAMI ISLANDS
Kagoshima

Explore the mangrove swamps, jungles and coral reefs of Japan’s last frontier, Iriomote-jima (p668)
Take a ferry to a simpler time on the ‘living museum’ island of Taketomi-jima (p670)
Search the horizon for Taiwan from Yonaguni-jima (p671), Japan’s westernmost island, and learn about its enormous moths

Chill out on peaceful Yoron-tō (p647) and its blissful scenery of beaches and sugarcane

Okinawa & the Southwest Islands Highlights

Soak up the sun on one of the white-sand beaches of the Kerama Islands (p657)
Hike into the mountainous heart of Yakushima (p637) to commune with ancient yaku-sugi trees
Dive with playful mantas off Ishigaki-jima (p668)