



The Japan Alps & Central Honshū

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Why Go?

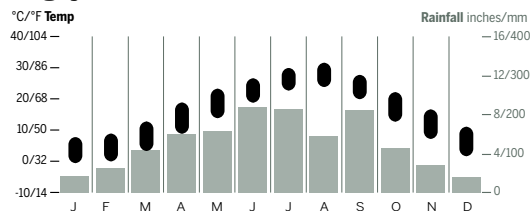
Japan's heartland in both geography and outlook, Central Honshū (本州中部; Honshū Chūbu) stretches out between the sprawling leviathans of Greater Tokyo and Kansai. The awesome Japan Alps rise sharply near the border of Gifu and Nagano Prefectures before rolling north to the dramatic Sea of Japan coast.

World-class skiing, hiking and onsen can be found in the region's photogenic alpine uplands. All but one of Japan's 30 highest peaks (Mt Fuji) are here. Kanazawa oozes culture: temples and tearooms that served lords and housed geisha are beautifully preserved. Takayama's riverside streetscapes satisfy admirers from Japan and abroad. Matsumoto's magnificent castle and alpine backdrop ensure its popularity.

Nagoya, Japan's fourth-largest city, is the gateway to Central Honshū, packing its share of urban delights with excellent transport connections to just about everywhere.

When to Go

Nagoya



Jan–Mar Nagano's slopes satiate snow-starved skiers.

Sep–Nov Kamikōchi and Hida's many mountain onsen offer great spots for autumn's brilliant show.

Apr & May Come for cherry blossoms and the great Takayama Matsuri (festival).

Climate

Central Honshū's climate varies with its landscape. The best times to visit are generally April through May and late September to early November; temperatures are mild and clear skies prevail. Mid-April is the best time for *hanami* (cherry-blossom viewing) in the Alps. Expect heavy rains in the *tsuyu* (monsoon) season, typically a few weeks in June, then sticky summers capped with typhoons as late as October.

Road closures are commonplace in the Japan Alps when the snow sets in from November to March, although higher peaks might remain snowcapped as late as June. Hiking season runs from July to September, until autumn ushers in a brilliant display of *kōyō* (turning leaves), peaking in mid-October.

i Getting There & Away

AIR

Central Japan International Airport (NGO; ☎ 056-938-1195; www.centrair.jp/en), outside Nagoya, is an excellent gateway to the region with a variety of global connections. **Komatsu** (KMQ; www.komatsuairport.jp) and **Toyama** (TOY; www.toyama-airport.co.jp/english) airports to the north service domestic and a handful of intra-Asia routes, while **Shinshū Matsumoto Airport** (MMJ; Map p284; www.matsumoto-airport.co.jp) has daily flights to Fukuoka, Osaka and Sapporo.

TRAIN

Nagoya is a major rail hub on the Tōkaidō *shinkansen* (bullet train) line between Tokyo and Osaka. The new-in-2015 Hokuriku extension of the Nagano *shinkansen* connects Tokyo with Nagano and onward to Toyama and Kanazawa.

i Getting Around

BUS

Bus companies JR, Meitetsu, Nōhi and Alpico operate seasonal services from Nagoya, Takayama and Matsumoto to numerous destinations in Chūbu's mountainous middle.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

While motorcycle rentals are not common, renting a car is well suited for trips to the Noto Peninsula, the Japan Alps and for those wanting to get up high and off the beaten track. Be prepared for slow, steep and winding roads that can be treacherous at times and are not for the faint-hearted; plan your explorations carefully.

The majority of rental cars include GPS navigation systems as standard equipment, an

increasing number of which have English menus and guidance.

TRAIN

Rail access to this mountainous region is surprisingly good.

The north-south JR Takayama and Chūō lines have hubs in Takayama, Matsumoto and Nagano.

The JR Hokuriku line follows the Sea of Japan coast, linking Fukui, Kanazawa and Toyama, with connections to Kyoto and Osaka.

The Hokuriku and Jōetsu *shinkansen* lines open up the nation's alpine interior with quick and easy access to the peaks, from Tokyo, Kanazawa and Niigata.

NAGOYA & AROUND

Understated and under-appreciated Nagoya is the jumping off point for trips to the mountains and the sights of surrounding Aichi and Gifu Prefectures.

Inuyama and the nearby area has some excellent historical attractions, including a wonderful original hilltop castle (p225), while Tokoname is a must for pottery lovers. Almost a suburb of Nagoya, but a city in its own right, lovely Gifu is a good alternative base to Nagoya if you want to be close to the city but not right in the heart of the action.

Nagoya

名古屋

☎ 052 / POP 2.29 MILLION

Home-proud Nagoya, birthplace of Toyota and *pachinko* (a pinball-style game), is a manufacturing powerhouse. Although Nagoya's GDP tops that of many small countries, this middle child has grown accustomed to life in the shadow of its bigger brothers, Tokyo and Kansai.

In contrast to its industrial core, well-maintained parks and green spaces prevail in the inner wards. Nagoya has cosmopolitan aspects including some fantastic museums, significant temples and excellent shopping, and Nagoyans take pride in the unpretentious nature of their friendly, accessible city.

In spite of all this, the city still struggles to shake its reputation among Japanese (many who've never visited) as the nation's most boring metropolis. We're here to disagree.

In a prime spot between Tokyo and Kyoto/Osaka on the Tōkaidō *shinkansen* line, Nagoya is the gateway to Chūbu's big mountain heart and a great base for day trips.