



Okinawa & the Southwest Islands

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ Nanraku (p801)
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- ➔ Yūnangi (p790)
- ➔ Nuchigafu (p790)

Best Places to Sleep

- ➔ Sōyōtei (p775)
- ➔ Sankara Hotel & Spa (p775)
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- ➔ Soraniwa (p802)

Why Go?

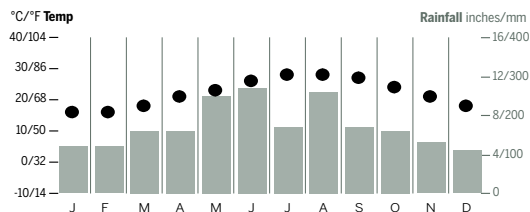
The Southwest Islands (南西諸島; Nansei-shotō) reveal a Japan you may not know exists: a chain of semitropical, coral-fringed islands evocative of Hawaii or Southeast Asia.

They're a nature-lover's paradise: in the northern Kagoshima Prefecture, lush primeval forests hide among the craggy peaks of Yakushima, and the starfish-shaped Amami-Ōshima has fine beaches on its convoluted coastline. Heading south, Okinawa-hontō is the bustling main island of Okinawa Prefecture and jumping-off point for the nearby Keramas, tiny gems with white-sand beaches and crystal-clear waters. Miyako-jima boasts killer beaches and laid-back, retro appeal. And furthest south, the Yaeyama Islands boast Japan's best coral reefs, subtropical jungles and mangrove swamps.

But spectacular nature is only part of it – the Southwest Islands exude a peculiarly 'un-Japanese' culture. Indeed, they made up a separate country for most of their history, and the Ryūkyū cultural heart still beats strongly here.

When to Go

Naha



May & Jun Coincides with rainy season; while not too intense, sunshine may be scarce.

Jul–Sep Best time to enjoy the beaches, but expect some big crowds and occasional typhoons.

Oct–Mar Water is cooler but swimmable, and you'll have entire beaches to yourself.



Okinawa & the Southwest Islands Highlights

1 Kerama Islands (p794)

Soaking up the sun on one of the islands' white-sand beaches.

2 Yakushima (p771)

Hiking into the mountainous heart to commune with ancient *yakusugi* trees.

3 Ishigaki-jima (p802)

Diving with playful manta rays.

4 Iriomote-jima (p808)

Exploring the mangrove swamps, jungles and coral reefs of Japan's last frontier.

5 Taketomi-jima (p811)

Taking a ferry to a simpler time on this 'living museum' island.

6 Yoron-tō (p784)

Chilling out in peace, against a blissful

scenic backdrop of beaches and sugar cane.

7 Yonaguni-jima (p813)

Searching the horizon for Taiwan from Japan's westernmost island, and diving its mysterious underwater rock formations.