

Famous for its pristine coral reefs, blue seas, and colorful marine life, the Keramashoto National Park has long been a legend among the international diving community. But there's more to the place than that: whether you're into nature walks and splendid views, whale-watching or deer-spotting, relaxing on beaches, or absorbing local culture, the park has something for you.

The Kerama Islands is a group of over 30 islands located roughly 40 kilometers west of Naha, the prefectural capital of Okinawa, in the East China Sea. The islands, of which just four—Tokashiki, Zamami, Aka, and Geruma—are now inhabited, were designated a national park on March 5, 2014 because of their outstanding scenic beauty. The park covers an area of around 94,000 hectares, of which 3,520 hectares are land and the remaining 90,475 are ocean. Around 1/10th of the ocean area is a registered Ramsar site under the Ramsar Convention.

An archipelago of sunken mountains

The islands were originally part of a mountain range that extended westward from northern Okinawa. With tectonic movements, the mountains sank into the sea—which is precisely why the islands look like submerged mountain tops protruding from the sea, a phenomenon geologists call a ria coastline. The predominant rock types are sandstone (tan), mudstone (gray) and phyllite (gray to black).

With steep mountains, sheer cliffs, windswept plains, and dense forest, the key note of the Kerama landscape is high drama. Nonetheless, there are plenty of placid bays and beautiful beaches with white sand made from crushed coral and the tiny star-shaped protozoa shells known as foraminifera. And everywhere you look is the famous Kerama Blue, an ever-changing tapestry of clear turquoise and sapphire, cobalt, and sky blue that's the result of the water being continuously purified and filtered by the coral rock, the sand, and by the creatures who live on the reefs.

The reefs provide food and habitats for colorful tropical fish including damselfish and butterfly fish. Sea turtles, who lay their eggs on the islands' beaches, are also found here. There are around 100 diving spots in the park, and you can also snorkel off the beaches to see the marine life from up close. Further out to sea, humpback whales migrate here to rear their young in the winter months, providing opportunities for whale-watching. On land, meanwhile, there is a chance you will come across Kerama deer, a unique insular subspecies of the Japanese sika deer that thrives here.

A Proud Seafaring History

The park also sheds light on the history and culture of the area. Traces of the culture of the Ryukyu Kingdom—when the Keramas flourished as a staging post on the Okinawa to China sea route—still remain. For people interested in military history, there is no shortage of sites and memorials associated with the opening days of the Battle of Okinawa. Meanwhile, from spring to autumn, traditional festivals are held celebrating the islanders' profound relationship with the sea.

Welcome to the Keramashoto National Park. Please help us preserve the beauty of this very special place by treating the natural environment and the animals who live in it with the care and respect they deserve.