

About Okinawa

Okinawa is Japan's southernmost prefecture and its only subtropical region, with pristine beaches, coral reefs that thrive with marine life, and rainforest jungles. It is made up of around 160 small islands, just 47 of which are populated. They stretch over 1,000 kilometers, from just south of the Japanese island of Kyushu to barely 100 kilometers north of Taiwan. Summers are hot and humid, and the islands remain comfortably warm in winter. Strong typhoons often buffet the islands between June and October.

The islands feature some of the world's premier diving and snorkeling destinations. Visitors can also enjoy kayaking and trekking, festivals such as the Naha Giant Tug of War, learning karate and traditional crafts, and viewing cherry blossoms, which bloom much earlier than on the Japanese mainland.

Okinawa's rich cuisine combines an indigenous culinary heritage with ingredients and dishes adopted during centuries of trade with other nations. Some foodstuffs and cooking techniques arrived with Chinese emissaries and gradually permeated the general food culture. Foods originally coming from other countries in East Asia include staples such as pork and varieties of potato. In the postwar period, ingredients and dishes further enriched the area's cuisine.

Okinawan cuisine makes use of many herbs and vegetables believed to have health-giving properties, such as *goya*, a very bitter type of gourd that is rich in vitamin C. Traditionally, local people refer to healthy foods as *kusuimun*, or "something medicinal." This stems from the idea that diet and medicine are equally important for health.

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The History of Okinawa

Okinawa was a proudly independent country known as the Ryukyu Kingdom from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century. In 1429, the first Ryukyu king, Sho Hashi (1372–1439), unified the north (Hokuzan), central (Chuzan), and south (Nanzan) kingdoms of

the late Gusuku period. He located his capital at Shuri (present-day Naha), establishing a dynasty that presided over the Ryukyu Islands during their heyday.

Over the next four and a half centuries, the Ryukyu Kingdom prospered as a trading nation. It paid tribute to China—a relationship that enabled the kingdom to maintain its independence—and enjoyed cordial trading relations with a network of other Asian nations such as Thailand and Korea. It also served as an intermediary between Japan and China. This was symbolized by the phrase *bankoku no shinryo*, or “a bridge between nations,” which was inscribed on a bell that hung in Shuri Castle.

In 1609, samurai from the feudal Satsuma domain in southern Japan (present-day Kagoshima Prefecture) invaded Okinawa, beginning a period of increased mainland Japanese influence. The kingdom maintained its ties with China and other Asian nations over the next two centuries, until the Okinawan islands were annexed by Japan in 1879. This marked the formal end of the Ryukyu Kingdom.

Okinawa was devastated in the last months of World War II, with fierce battles in 1945 resulting in 200,000 soldiers and civilians losing their lives. Twenty-seven years of US occupation followed, leaving a lasting influence on Okinawan life and culture, including its crafts, music, and cuisine. The islands were returned to Japan in 1972.

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Okinawan Culture

Architecture

Five castles, a mausoleum, a stone gate, and two cultural landscapes in Okinawa have together been designated UNESCO World Heritage sites. The castles, known as *gusuku*, have gently curved exterior stone walls that are quite different from the straight walls of other castles in Japan. The nine sites include the remains of Shuri Castle, the historic seat of the Ryukyu Kingdom, located in Okinawa’s capital. Together, the sites offer a window into the society and culture of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the Gusuku period that preceded it.

Traditional crafts

Many of Okinawa's traditional crafts originated during the reign of the Ryukyu Kingdom, including lacquerware, textiles, pottery, and glass. The island's most famous historic pottery center is Tsuboya in Naha city. It was founded by the Ryukyu Kingdom to produce a wide range of items, including everyday utensils and earthenware storage jars. There are other kilns all over the islands, which produce pottery in a number of different styles. In the early years after World War II, glass artisans recycled bottles discarded by the US military and invented a colorful product now known as Ryukyu Glass.

Beliefs

A deep respect for ancestors is fundamental to Okinawan culture. Religious ceremonies take place at family altars in the home, at ancestral graves, and in sacred spaces known as *utaki*. These rituals often feature song and dance to the accompaniment of the *sanshin*, a three-stringed Okinawan musical instrument.

Song, music, and dance

Song, music, and dance feature prominently in Okinawa's social, cultural, and religious life. The banjo-like *sanshin*, which is plucked with a plectrum or fingernail, is Okinawa's best-known instrument. It accompanies the famous Eisa folk dance, which had its origins in Buddhist chants and summer ceremonies for worshipping ancestors. During the twentieth century, Eisa developed into a popular contemporary performance art, involving energetic choreographed routines, elaborate costumes, drums of different sizes, and even pop music.

Martial arts

Okinawa is the birthplace of karate (literally "empty hand"). This unarmed fighting technique was influenced by Chinese martial arts, but took its current form during the Ryukyu Kingdom era, and spread throughout Japan in the 1920s. It is now a sport, and is practiced by millions of people around the world.

Utuimuchi hospitality

Okinawa's renowned hospitality involves the use of food, drink, and music to entertain guests with wordless communication. This goes back to when Ryukyu Kings would welcome honored guests from China, Japan, and other East Asia trading partners. Okinawan hospitality transcends languages and borders, and is deeply ingrained in the culture. In the Okinawan dialect, this hospitality is called *utuimuchi*.