

Welcome to Iriomote, a World Heritage Island

Iriomote Island was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List in July 2021. The island occupies 208 square kilometers, or roughly half of the Natural World Heritage site of just under 427 square kilometers that also includes the islands of Amami-Oshima, Tokunoshima, and the northern part of Okinawa. All four islands are part of the Ryukyu chain that extends southwest from mainland Japan nearly to Taiwan. Because these islands separated from the Eurasian continent millions of years ago, life here has evolved very much along its own path. In explaining the World Heritage selection, UNESCO cited the islands' high biodiversity value with a significant percentage of endemic plant and animal species, many of them globally threatened. The islands are home to an extraordinarily large share of Japan's plant and animal species despite only accounting for 0.5 percent of the country's total land area.

Iriomote itself is the second-largest island in Okinawa Prefecture, with a 130-kilometer-long coastline ringed by coral reefs. Ninety percent of the island is covered with jungle and mangrove forests. Iriomote is home to 70 percent of Japan's mangrove forests, including the country's biggest, on the banks of the Nakama River. Among the rarest and most important animal species on the island are the critically endangered Iriomote cat, with an estimated population of just 100 individuals; the endangered yellow-margined box turtle, a terrestrial turtle with the ability to retract its head and limbs completely inside its shell and shut itself up like a box; and the crested serpent eagle, a medium-sized bird of prey.

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