

## Welcome to the Goto Islands Geopark

### *What is a geopark?*

Geoparks are territories or landscapes with a unique geological heritage that tell a piece of our planet's history. Parks are maintained with the goals of ecological protection, general education, and sustainable development. Unlike national parks, which focus primarily on nature conservation, geoparks take a wider perspective by focusing on the ways natural and cultural histories intersect. They offer the chance to explore the evolution of local identity, history, and material heritage that have developed as a part of a unique landscape. Tourism is crucial to securing the long-term public, political, and financial support to develop and protect these important sites, particularly as climate change and weather-related hazards present new challenges.

### *Where is the Goto Islands Geopark?*

The Goto Islands are part of Nagasaki Prefecture, located at the southwestern end of the Japanese archipelago. The region has some 150 islands, many of them uninhabited, but as the name “Goto” (five islands) suggests, there are five main islands in the group: Fukue, Naru, Hisaka, Wakamatsu, and Nakadori. The government has designated the southern part of the island chain—called the Shimogoto area—as a national geopark. It encompasses Fukue, Naru, Hisaka, and their surrounding smaller islands.

### *What is so special about Goto?*

Both culturally and geologically, the Goto Islands are a bridge to Eurasia. They were the last part of the Japanese archipelago to separate from the continent, splitting off a relatively recent 22 to 17 million years ago. Signs of the tectonic and volcanic forces that shaped them are visible everywhere—from rugged cliffsides to stone-walled farmers' fields—and few places can claim such geological diversity in such a small area.

The islands' proximity to mainland Asia also made them a hub for cultural and economic exchange. In the eighth century, Fukue was the last staging ground for Japanese envoys traveling by sea to China. Many of the ideas they brought back, including Buddhist beliefs, are still central to Japanese culture today. The islands remained an important gateway for maritime trade in the East China Sea through the nineteenth century.

The remote and craggy coastlines of the islands also provided shelter for the so-called “hidden Christians,” who were forced underground when Christianity was outlawed during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Today, this diverse religious history lives on in an eclectic heritage of unique folk dances, Shinto festivals, and Buddhist-influenced Christian practices.

The Goto Islands are also a bridge between ecological worlds, with a mix of temperate, subtropical,

and tropical species. Positioned at the edge of the East China Sea, between the deep Okinawa Trough and the warm waters of the Tsushima Current, Goto is one of the few places where plants and animals from Japan, the Asian continent, and the Indo-Pacific can coexist.