

The Three Villages of Yambaru

Kunigami

Kunigami is Yambaru's northernmost, largest, and most populous village, with some 4,000 inhabitants. It includes Okinawa Island's tallest mountain, Mt. Yonahadake (503 meters), and one of its most striking natural landscapes, the towering cliffs and hollowed surfaces of eroded limestone found on Mt. Hedo near the northern tip of Cape Hedo. The rock formations are typical of the karst terrain that makes up this part of Okinawa Island. Kunigami is the most densely forested of Yambaru's villages, with over 84 percent of its area covered in woodland, but the roads that hug the rugged coast offer many scenic views. For centuries, local residents have made use of the forest resources and managed the production of charcoal, lumber, and Ryukyu indigo. Kunigami has the largest population of Okinawa rail, Japan's only flightless bird. Thanks to protective policies, this species is slowly recovering from near extinction.

Ogimi

The village of Ogimi stretches from the beaches of the western coast to the central mountains. It has a population of around 3,000, and is often referred to as the “village of longevity” due to its high number of centenarians. The heavy rains that fall on Yambaru feed the over 10-meter-high Ta-taki Falls found in the forest of this village. Rock walls built hundreds of years ago to protect the village crops from wild boars are visible in many places along a local hiking path. The production of *bashofu*, a type of woven cloth made from the stems of *itobasho* banana plants, is an ancient tradition practiced by women in the village. It is a rigorous, time-consuming craft, and the result is a highly prized fabric once worn by

Ryukyu royalty and still valued today for its cool feel, even in a hot and humid environment. *Shikuwasa*, a tiny, fragrant citrus now popular throughout Japan, originated as a wild fruit in the limestone mountains of Ogimi, and is still cultivated here. The village accounts for 60 percent of *shikuwasa* production in Japan.

Higashi

Higashi, Yambaru's smallest village in area, has a population around 1,000.

It is located on the southeastern coast of Yambaru and, like its neighboring villages, is mostly lush, forest-covered mountains. It is the location of Okinawa Island's largest mangrove forest, at Gesashi Bay. Mangrove forests grow in coastal intertidal zones, where the land is above the water at low tide and submerged at high tide, creating a unique ecosystem of plants and wildlife. Boardwalks along the edge of the forest and kayak tours through the estuary allow visitors to see the mangroves up close. The people of Higashi traditionally followed the Yambaru practice of harvesting the forests for timber, firewood, and charcoal and shipping them to other, less forested areas of the island. This practice continued into the years after World War II, when such resources helped rebuild infrastructure devastated by the war. Higashi is Japan's largest producer of pineapples, but is also known for other crops, including mangoes and vegetables—as well as for its Agu pork, which comes from pigs raised on a pineapple diet.