

Yamagawa Port: Unassuming Center of Trade, Culture, and Politics

Yamagawa Port is a small cove at the mouth of Kagoshima Bay, where local ferries dock and hundreds of metric tons of fish are farmed each year.

Despite its modest size, the port's location on the southern tip of Kagoshima and its unique geology have made it an important site for trade, culture, and politics for centuries.

Yamagawa Bay is sheltered by a spit of sandy land that gently curves around the inlet like an arm. This sandbar prevents large waves from entering the harbor, ensuring calm waters even in stormy weather. The bay reaches about 2 kilometers inland, and its coast drops off sharply, allowing large ships to dock at the small port.

These fortuitous conditions were created by an underground explosion some 5,700 years ago. The explosion was caused when magma came into contact with groundwater, producing superheated steam and extreme

pressure. The resulting blast left a broad crater. Such craters, called “maars,” usually fill with rain and groundwater to become lakes; here, however, the eastern wall collapsed, allowing seawater to rush in and form Yamagawa Bay.

Historically, this safe harbor has played a significant role in trade, culture, and politics, particularly during the Edo period (1603–1867). From the 1100s to 1868, Satsuma domain (now Kagoshima) was ruled by the Shimazu family. They established Yamagawa Bay as a port for sea trade with the Ryukyu Kingdom (now Okinawa), China, and beyond. These trade routes allowed them to import not only goods but also medical, scientific, and technical knowledge.

In 1546, the Portuguese merchant Jorge Álvares landed at the port of Yamagawa. He was one of the first Europeans to visit Japan. Álvares spent half a year in the area, recording his observations in a log entitled *Report on Japanese Matters*, which was commissioned by the Jesuit missionary

Francis Xavier (1506–1552). Encouraged by the report, Xavier led the first Christian mission to Japan in 1549.

By the 1630s, the ruling Tokugawa shogunate had grown wary of foreign influences, especially Christian missionaries. Over the following decade, shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604–1651) expelled the missionaries and all other foreigners, closing the doors to trade and diplomacy. Yamagawa Port remained open to trade with the Ryukyu Islands, a rare liberty that further enriched and empowered the Shimazu family.

By the mid-1800s, Japan's isolationist policies had begun to erode as foreign powers pressured the country to reopen. Yamagawa Port shifted from trade to defense. Local officials monitored the entrance to Kagoshima Bay for foreign ships, using signal fires to alert the Shimazu in Kagoshima.

Japan was eventually forced to open its borders, kicking off a wave of Westernization in the final decades of the nineteenth century. In 1930, a

shipyard was founded at Yamagawa Port, and cargo ships and ferries were built there for nearly 70 years.

At the same time, fishing was becoming the port's primary industry. The Kuroshio Current flows past the bay, carrying rich fish stocks with diverse species from the tropics. The bonito brought by these waters inspired a manufacturer of dried bonito flakes (an essential ingredient in Japanese cooking) to set up shop at Yamagawa Port in 1909. Today, Yamagawa Port is Japan's top producer of *hongarebushi*, a high-end variety of bonito flakes.

The port is also home to a thriving aquaculture industry. Each year, roughly 370,000 greater amberjack (*kanpachi*) are farmed in approximately 100 net cages. The fish are farmed using eco-friendly practices to protect the environment at this historic port.