Japan Tourism Topics by JNTO Japan National Tourism Organization

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News!

1. The Ancient Capitals of Asuka and Fujiwara Inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site

Ishibutai Mounded Tomb (top)

Fujiwara Palace Site (bottom left), Takamatsuzuka Mounded Tomb (middle), the Asuka Palace Site (bottom right)
©Asuka-Fujiwara World Heritage Council

The Ancient Capitals of Asuka and Fujiwara were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in July 2026, recognized for their outstanding universal value in demonstrating the emergence of Japan's ancient state. The site consists of 19 properties, including palaces and government offices, Buddhist temples, and mounded tombs built during the Asuka period (late 6th to early 8th century). They show how Japan, influenced by the cultures of China and the Korean Peninsula, established its first centralized state system and developed into a fully organized state ruled by laws. At the core are the Asuka Palace Site in Asuka Village, where the Taika Reform, a series of political reforms that laid the foundation for Japan's centralized state, began in 645, and the Fujiwara Palace Site in Kashihara City, which served as the center of Fujiwara-kyo, Japan's first planned capital city. Other components include the Kitora Mounded Tomb, known for its murals of the Four Divine Beasts and celestial charts; the Takamatsuzuka Mounded Tomb, where the vividly colored mural of the so-called "Asuka Beauty" was discovered; and the Ishibutai Mounded Tomb, believed by some to be the tomb of a powerful ruler. The brilliant murals found in the Kitora and Takamatsuzuka mounded tombs are regarded as invaluable heritages that convey the transmission of philosophical and artistic traditions across East Asia. Their discoveries, beginning in the 1970s, sparked widespread public interest and helped fuel Japan's boom in ancient-history studies. As the sightseeing spots across the Asuka and Fujiwara palace sites are spread over a wide area, the recommended way to get around is by rental bicycle, or the "Kame Bus," a loop bus service. Must-see stops include the Takamatsuzuka Mural Hall, the Ishibutai Mounded Tomb (one of Japan's largest square-

shaped burial mounds), Asuka Temple (Japan's first full-scale Buddhist temple), and the sites of the Asuka and Fujiwara palaces.
Ancient Capitals of Asuka and Fujiwara

Rebrand open

2. Rebranded Hilton Takayama Resort Overlooking Northern Alps Opened Sept. 14, Gifu

Gifu Prefecture's first Hilton flagship opened on Sept. 14 as a rebranding of the long-running Hotel Associa Takayama Resort (operated by JR Central Hotels). Set on a hillside overlooking the Northern Japanese Alps, the 283-room resort, including 5 suites, offers mountain-view rooms, and dining that showcases cuisine with local ingredients, especially Hida beef (one of Japan's leading brand beefs produced in Gifu Prefecture). The hotel boasts a hot spring complex named "Tenbo no Yu" with 10 types of open-air baths—including an infinity bath offering breathtaking views of the Alps—along with two indoor baths. Under a renovation themed "Art of Mountain Folk," the hotel will be the ideal base for colorful festivals, morning markets, and scenic Hida Mountains views. The hotel began operations with about 90 rooms and will become fully operational in spring 2027.
Hilton Takayama Resort

Seasonal Topic

3. The Season for Matsuba Snow Crab—Tottori's Winter Delicacy

Crab is a quintessential winter delicacy, prized for its rich flavor and generously filled meat. The San'in area (Tottori and Shimane prefectures), facing the Sea of Japan in the Chugoku region, comes alive with the start of the snow crab fishing season. Male snow crabs are known locally as “Matsuba-gani,” with the fishing season running from Nov. 6 to March 20 under government regulations. The season for smaller, egg-bearing females—known as “oya-gani”—is brief, spanning from Nov. 6 to the end of December. Because oya-gani has such a short fishing season, it was long enjoyed only by locals. Its uniquely textured roe, known as uchiko and sotoko, gives the crab soup a rich flavor that has made it a beloved delicacy with an irresistibly addictive taste. San’in, especially Tottori Prefecture, has one of the highest catch volumes in the country, and visitors there can enjoy the crabs prepared in various ways, such as sashimi, grilled, boiled, “shabu-shabu,” and hot pot, at Tottori City’s Karo Port and Sakaiminato, as well as local hot-spring inns. Following the start of the crab fishing season, the annual Tottori Kani (Crab) Festa is slated for Nov. 14 at Karo Port and its nearby areas. The event offers free crab soup on a first-come, first-served basis, while shops in the surrounding area sell fresh crabs at special prices, and host various game events, attracting visitors from in and out of the area.
Matsuba Snow Crab
Tottori Kani Festa

Seasonal Topic

4. Geibikei Gorge’s “Kotatsu Boat” Cruises Through an Ink-Painting World in Iwate

Iwate Prefecture’s Geibikei Gorge has long been popular for its scenic river cruise. Geibikei is a scenic gorge located along the Satetsu River, recognized as one of Japan’s 100 Landscapes and a nationally designated Place of Scenic Beauty. Towering limestone cliffs more than 50 meters high stretch for about 2 km. The powerful folk songs by the boatmen echo off the gorge walls as they steer the boat using a single pole, creating a magical moment that allows visitors to soak up the changing seasonal beauty. Although boat rides are operated all year round, the “kotatsu-bune,” a boat with heated tables, is available only in the winter. Guests are seated at a warm and cozy table and enjoy hot pot or other menu items, while cruising through snow-covered scenery. An option offering the local specialty “Kinagashi Nabe,” a miso-based hot pot with chicken and vegetables inspired by a meal once eaten by log drivers, is only available for groups, and reservations are required.
Geibikei Gorge

Special Experience

5. Stay at World Heritage-Listed Gokayama House and Enjoy Folklore for a Special Experience in Toyama

©Gokayama Nanto Tourism Organization

An exclusive tour is now available that allows a single party to stay at a traditional farmhouse in the UNESCO World Heritage-listed "gassho-zukuri" village of Gokayama. Guests can enjoy a performance of "Kokiriko," said to be Japan's oldest folk song that has been passed down from generation to generation for about 1,400 years as a prayer for bountiful harvests. After enjoying a Kokiriko performance by the local Folk Song Preservation Society, guests will have the opportunity to play "sasara," a traditional musical instrument made from slats of Japanese cypress, used by the Kokiriko dancers. Located in Nanto, Toyama Prefecture—an area surrounded by mountains and blanketed in deep snow during winter—these gassho-zukuri houses feature large, steeply pitched roofs designed to withstand heavy snowfall. The name derives from the roof's resemblance to the posture of gassho, hands pressed together in prayer. A traditional local dinner is offered to guests seated around the sunken hearth, and breakfast the following morning. Their uniqueness lies in the fact that they form a World Heritage site that remains inhabited by local residents. Gokayama Kokiriko

Cultural Discoveries

6. Takachiho Yokagura Retells the Myth of the Sun Goddess and the Rock Cave in Miyazaki

©Takachiho Tourism Association

Deep in the mountains of Miyazaki Prefecture—the land where, in myth, the gods descended to earth—the town of Takachiho keeps an 800-year-old winter tradition alive. From mid-November to early February, some 20 rural communities take turns hosting "yokagura" (Shinto ritual dance through the night), inviting their local deity into a private home or community hall (kagura-yado). In the event, 33 sacred dance programs, many of them with kagura masks, are offered through the night, retelling the famous myths of

the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami, who hid in Ama-no-Iwato (the Heavenly Rock Cave), plunging the world into darkness. Designated an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property, it's raw, communal, and utterly authentic—visitors are welcomed, though village dates vary and are announced around October.

The grandest performances take place during the Takachiho Kagura Festival of Myths annually on Nov. 22 and 23. For those who missed an all-night village kagura, a one-hour excerpt of four representative dances is performed nightly at 8 p.m. throughout the year at the kagura hall within Takachiho Shrine's precinct (reservation recommended).
Takachiho Yokagura

Cultural Discoveries

7. Enoura Observatory—Where Winter Light Meets Art in Odawara, Kanagawa

©Odawara Art Foundation

Designed by world-renowned contemporary artist Sugimoto Hiroshi, Odawara Art Foundation Enoura Observatory in Kanagawa Prefecture was created as a place where visitors can reflect on their place beneath the sky and return to the origins of art. Overlooking Sagami Bay and surrounded by mikan citrus groves, the observatory combines art, architecture, gardens, and ancient astronomical concepts to form a unique landscape where culture, nature, and the changing light of the seasons come together. Enoura Observatory consists of more than 50 architectural structures and artworks, including a gallery building, an outdoor stage, and a tea house. These facilities provide an overview of the history of Japanese architecture by recreating the distinctive styles and construction methods from various eras. The grounds also feature archaeological and architectural relics collected from historic sites dating from ancient to modern times, as well as the Meigetsu Gate, a restored Muromachi-period (1336–1573) temple gate. One of the observatory's most distinctive features is its alignment with the sun's movement throughout the year. On the winter solstice, the sunlight rising over Sagami Bay travels through the 70-meter Winter Solstice Light Worship Tunnel to illuminate the Circular Stone Stage, while the adjacent Optical Glass Stage catches and reflects the morning light. Visitors can also enjoy sweeping views of Sagami Bay from various points across the expansive site. Winter is an especially rewarding season to visit, when mikan citrus groves add vibrant color to the landscape. Together with the observatory's remarkable outdoor artworks and panoramic coastal scenery, the season offers a memorable experience where art, architecture, and nature exist in harmony.
Advance tickets must be purchased online.
Enoura Observatory

As a follow-up to our previous newsletter on adventure travel, here are three more worth a visit.

Special Feature: Adventure Travel

8. Cycling Around Lake Biwa in Shiga Highlights Metasequoia Turning Copper-Gold in Fall

©Biwako Visitors Bureau

©Shiga Prefectural Government Tourism Bureau

"Biwaichi" is the roughly 200-km National Cycle Route encircling Lake Biwa, Japan's largest lake, and autumn and early winter (October to early December) are among the best times for cycling—cool, dry, and quieter than summer, with lakeside foliage peaking in mid-November. Rental bikes (including E-bikes) and cyclist support stations line the well-marked route, and full-service guided cycling tours can be arranged. Cyclists can stray from the main route onto Makino Metasequoia Avenue in Takashima City, a 2.4-km stretch of about 500 dawn redwood (Metasequoia) trees that turns a striking copper-gold from late November into early December. Ride the flatter, beginner-friendly southern loop for a day trip, or take on the full circuit over several days (experienced cyclists can complete the full circuit in a day), pausing at Hikone Castle, the torii gate of Shirahige Shrine standing in the lake, and old merchant towns, while tasting local food. With the exception of certain sections, the Ohmi Railway operates "cycle trains" that allow passengers to bring their bicycles on board without taking them apart. Some train cars even feature dedicated bicycle spaces.
Biwaichi Cycling

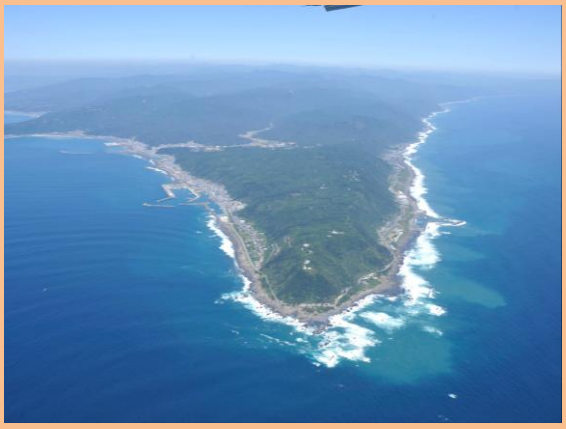
Special Feature: Adventure Travel

9. Visit One of Japan's Largest Subtropical Forests at Yanbaru in Okinawa

Yanbaru, the densely forested north of Okinawa's main island, holds one of Japan's largest subtropical evergreen forests. Along with three southern Japanese islands, the Yanbaru region was inscribed as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site in 2021 for its rare endemic wildlife—such as the nearly flightless, red-billed Yanbaru kuina (Okinawa rail), and the brownish Okinawa woodpecker, both found only in the Yanbaru area—and for its vast subtropical evergreen forests that sustain a rich and resilient ecosystem. Much of this biodiverse region is protected within Yanbaru National Park, and many guided tours at the park are available, including guided trekking, EV bus tours, and night forest walks. One of the must-see spots is Cape Hedo at the northern tip of the main island, which offers sweeping views of both the East China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, along with dramatic limestone cliffs. Yanbaru's subtropical forests host rich plant life and endemic species. Activities include ziplining, kayaking, and guided hikes. The Okinawa Rail Learning Center allows close observation of the rare bird. Gesashi Bay offers boardwalks and paddling tours through 10 hectares of mangroves, while Fukuchi River Seaside Park rents canoes and stand-up paddleboards. Yanbaru's east coast has secluded beaches to explore. The mild, low-typhoon weather of late autumn and early winter makes it an ideal season for jungle activities. Traveling by car is recommended.Yanbaru (VISIT OKINAWA JAPAN)
Yanbaru (Official Tourism Site)

Special Feature: Adventure Travel

10. Global Geopark English-Guided Geotour in Kochi Explores the Planet in Motion



At the tip of Cape Muroto in eastern Kochi Prefecture, the land and the Pacific collide in a rugged coastline of oddly shaped rock layers formed on the seafloor, indicating a planet in motion. It is home to a UNESCO Global Geopark, designated in 2015, where ancient seafloor formations such as striped turbidites, trace fossils, and sand dikes have been exposed and can be observed today. An English-guided walk along the rocky shores and paths of Cape Muroto is available for observing wave-cut platforms, ancient seafloor strata, and subtropical plants. The caves, where Kukai (774–835), founder of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism, is said to have trained and attained enlightenment, can also be seen along the route. Reservations are required at the Muroto Global Geopark Center. For the self-guided cycling course, visitors can rent a bicycle at the center and follow recommended routes that lead over the ridgeline to scenic viewing platforms, down to Murotsu Port, and past a number of local historical sites. Warmed by the Kuroshio Current, Muroto remains mild through late autumn and even in winter, making it a pleasant destination for outdoor exploration well into winter.
Muroto UNESCO Global Geopark

Notes:
・The above details are correct as of the time of publication, and are subject to change.

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