

the japan times

THE BEST OF JAPAN

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Tokyo Skytree with cherry blossoms GETTY IMAGES



Learn about how to enjoy spring in Japan, must-see events and useful travel tips. For more information, visit www.japantimes.co.jp/ads/the-best-of-japan/



IZU



Left: The Aono River is but one picturesque sakura site in the town of Minamiizu, Shizuoka Prefecture. Right: Streetlamps light a cherry blossom-lined pathway to Mishima Grand Shrine in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture.

SAVOR AN EXTENDED SPRING SAKURA BLOOM

As spring unfolds, Japan's cherry blossoms become a symbol of renewal, inspiring travelers worldwide. While sakura can be found across the country, there is one place where the blossoms linger a little longer: the Izu Peninsula.

Just an hour south of Tokyo, the Izu Peninsula boasts a mild climate and diverse landscapes. Thanks to its unique geography, sakura bloom here from early February to mid-April, offering an extended season for visitors to enjoy. This longer viewing period makes Izu a perfect getaway for those looking to stretch out their springtime escape.

Mishima, Izunokuni and Izu Kogen

At the northern tip of the Izu Peninsula, Mishima Grand Shrine offers a captivating cherry blossom experience with approximately 200 trees spanning 15 varieties, including Kawazu-zakura, Shidare-zakura, and the locally significant Mishima-zakura. The shrine's sakura typically bloom from late

March to mid-April, with a special illumination event enhancing their beauty. Visitors can enjoy the seasonal spectacle while exploring the historic shrine, making it a memorable destination.

In Izunokuni, the Nirayama neighborhood is a place where history enthusiasts can enjoy the beauty of sakura from late March to early April near the Nirayama Reverberatory Furnace, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This historical landmark adds a cultural touch to the city's scenic surroundings, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in both nature and history while experiencing the serene atmosphere of the region.

For a quieter sakura experience, head to the resort area of Izu Kogen in Ito, where the sakura bloom from late March to early April. The area's scenic parks and trails provide the perfect setting for peaceful strolls among the flowers. The Izu Kogen Sakura Festival invites visitors to enjoy outdoor activities like hiking and birdwatching

alongside the blooms, offering an immersive experience in the natural beauty of Izu. Whether you prefer a leisurely walk or more active exploration, Izu Kogen provides the ideal environment for relaxation and discovery.

Kawazu, Matsuzaki and Minamiizu

On the southeastern side of the peninsula, Kawazu offers an even earlier bloom with its Kawazu-zakura, a hybrid known for its vibrant deep pink petals. These blossoms appear in early February, attracting visitors to the Kawazu Sakura Festival, where over 800 cherry trees line the Kawazu River. The lively festival atmosphere, with food stalls and traditional performances, adds to the city's charm, creating a vibrant celebration of spring.

On the western coast of Izu, Matsuzaki offers a stunning sakura experience along the Naka River. Approximately 1,200 Somei-Yoshino sakura trees line a 6-kilometer

stretch from the river's mouth to Osawa Onsen, creating a breathtaking tunnel of pink. Typically blooming from late March to early April, the trees are illuminated at night, adding to the enchanting atmosphere. The tranquil setting of Matsuzaki makes it a perfect destination for a peaceful *hanami* (sakura viewing) experience, where visitors can take in the beauty of the blossoms along the river.

The town of Minamiizu is one of the first places to welcome spring. The Minamiizu Sakura and Nanohana Festival runs from early February to mid-March, giving visitors ample time to admire the vibrant sakura and fields of bright yellow *nanohana* (rapeseed flowers). Surrounded by scenic rivers and hills, the area offers a peaceful setting ideal for nature lovers and photographers.

With a range of sakura viewpoints, the Izu Peninsula offers travelers the chance to savor sakura season just a little bit longer, making it the perfect place to experience their full beauty.



A tunnel of sakura awaits travelers at the Izu Kogen resort.



Cherry trees accent a sunlit hot spring in Kawazu on the Izu Peninsula.



Rapeseed and cherry blossoms make for a colorful stroll along the Naka River in Matsuzaki.



The Nirayama Reverberatory Furnace, a World Heritage Site, is covered in pink in Izunokuni.



KAWASAKI



Left: Utagawa Hiroshige's "Kawasaki, Ferry at Rokugo" is part of his "Fifty-three Stations of the Tokaido" series of ukiyo-e. Right: Kiriko is known for its intricate patterns. KAWASAKI UKIYO-E GALLERY; TOKAIDO GLASS



Visitors can make tontoko candy at Kawasaki Daishi temple. KAWASAKI CITY TOURISM ASSOCIATION

RICH HISTORY, CULTURE AWAIT CITY VISITORS

The city of Kawasaki can trace its origins to the Edo Period (1603 to 1868), when its existence began as one of 53 staging posts along the historic Old Tokaido Way, which connected major towns along Japan's Pacific coastline.

At the time of its founding in Kanagawa Prefecture in 1924, Kawasaki had a population of only around 50,000. Today, this bustling economic hub is home to some 1.55 million, ranking it second in the prefecture, surpassed only by the capital, Yokohama. Just 10 minutes from Yokohama and 20 minutes from Tokyo and only 15 minutes from Haneda Airport, its convenient location makes Kawasaki incredibly convenient for shopping and sightseeing.

A powerhouse of Japan's economy situated in the heart of the Keihin Industrial Zone, Kawasaki also boasts a wealth of hidden cultural gems. For visitors eager to explore Kawasaki's rich history, the city offers two English-language tours with local experts, providing a truly immersive way to explore it.

Strolling tour

The Kawasaki City Strolling tour is a four-hour, hands-on experience for up to six participants aged 6 and over. Perfect for those keen to understand the history of Kawasaki, the tour begins with a visit to the Tokaido Kawasaki Shuku Koryukan, where visitors can learn about the origin of Kawasaki as a staging post through intricate dioramas and graphics.

From there, the tour heads to Tokaido Glass, a workshop specializing in *kiriko*, or traditional glass engraving. During this 90-minute activity, participants try their hand at carving their own colorful kiriko glassware. Best of all, they can take their glittering creations home.

The last part of this tour features a visit to the Kawasaki Ukiyo-e Gallery, a museum of woodblock prints highlighting the "floating world" of the Edo Period, with many works relating specifically to Kawasaki. Boasting approximately 6,000 works in its exceptional collection, the gallery offers visitors an insight into Japan's past through the art of the times.

Concluding at Lazona Kawasaki Plaza, visitors are welcome to explore the modern attractions of Kawasaki's shopping area after the tour ends.

Discovery tour

With just the right blend of culture, art and hands-on fun, the Discover Kawasaki tour strikes the perfect tone. Conducted in English, this three-hour tour is open to everyone.

The tour kicks off with a visit to the atmospheric Kawasaki Daishi temple, where visitors can take in the sights and witness the *goma* fire prayer ritual. Renowned for offering protection against calamities, the temple was cofounded by Buddhist devotee HIRAMA Kanenori in 1128. Inspired by a dream, legend has it that the exiled samurai cast his fishing net into the ocean and hauled up a wooden statue of Kobo Daishi, the founder of the Shingon school of Buddhism.

Visitors then have the option to choose

from two activities: *shakyō*, the act of hand-copying Buddhist sutras with brush and ink, or *tontoko* candy making. In making the candy, the artisans' knives knock against wooden chopping blocks, making the evocative "tontoko" sound as they rhythmically shape the candy into perfectly sized pieces. After this performance, visitors are encouraged to make their own candy and take some home to enjoy at the end of the event.

Beyond the vibrant energy of the station area and bustling shopping districts, Kawasaki boasts a wealth of culture and history. Its English-language tours engage all the senses, providing an immersive way to experience it. To discover everything the city has to offer, why not participate in a tour of Kawasaki?

For more information, visit <https://www.his-j.com/japan-tourist/kanagawa/kawasaki/en/>

Kawasaki Daishi Temple

KAWASAKI CITY STROLLING TOUR



Kiriko glass
Learn to make classic glassware
Ukiyo-e



Sutra copying
Hand-copy sutras



Tontoko candy
Make Japanese traditional candy



TRAVEL TO KAWASAKI

the japan times

Destination Restaurants

Hokkaido

- 1 French
Chimikepp Hotel
- 2 Italian
Yoichi Sagra
- 3 Wild game
Elezo Esprit

Aomori Pref.

- 4 Italian
Casa del Cibo

Iwate Pref.

- 5 Japanese
Tonoya-Yo

Akita Pref.

- 6 Japanese
Nihonryori Takamura

Yamagata Pref.

- 7 Japanese
Dewaya
- 8 French
Restaurant Pas Mal

Fukushima Pref.

- 9 Innovative
Hagi

Tochigi Pref.

- 10 French
Otowa Restaurant

Gunma Pref.

- 11 Italian
Ventinove

Niigata Pref.

- 12 French
Restaurant Uozen

- 13 Japanese
Satoyama Jujo

- 14 Sushi
Tokiwasushi

- 15 Japanese
Shintaku

Ishikawa Pref.

- 16 Japanese
Kataori

- 17 Sushi
Mekumi

- 18 French
L'Atelier de Noto

- 19 Japanese
Ipponsugi Kawashima

Toyama Pref.

- 20 Innovative
Cuisine régionale L'évo

- 21 Japanese
Oryouri Fujii

- 22 Japanese
Ebitei-Bekkan

Tokyo

- 23 Italian
Don Bravo

Kanagawa Pref.

- 24 Japanese
Kamakura Kitajima

Shizuoka Pref.

- 25 Japanese
Chakaiseki Onjyaku

- 26 French
Chisou Nishi Kenichi

Yamanashi Pref.

- 27 Innovative
Terroir Ai to Ibukuro

Nagano Pref.

- 28 Japanese
Nihonryori Yukimoto

- 29 Innovative
Restaurant Naz

- 30 Italian
Ca'enne

Mie Pref.

- 31 Chinese
Shibousai Kitagawa

Wakayama Pref.

- 32 Italian
Villa Aida

Nara Pref.

- 33 Japanese
Tsukumo

Hiroshima Pref.

- 34 French
Akai

Nagasaki Pref.

- 35 Innovative
Pesceco

- 36 Italian
Villa del Nido

Oita Pref.

- 37 Innovative
Enowa

Okinawa Pref.

- 38 French
État d'esprit

- 39 French
6 Six

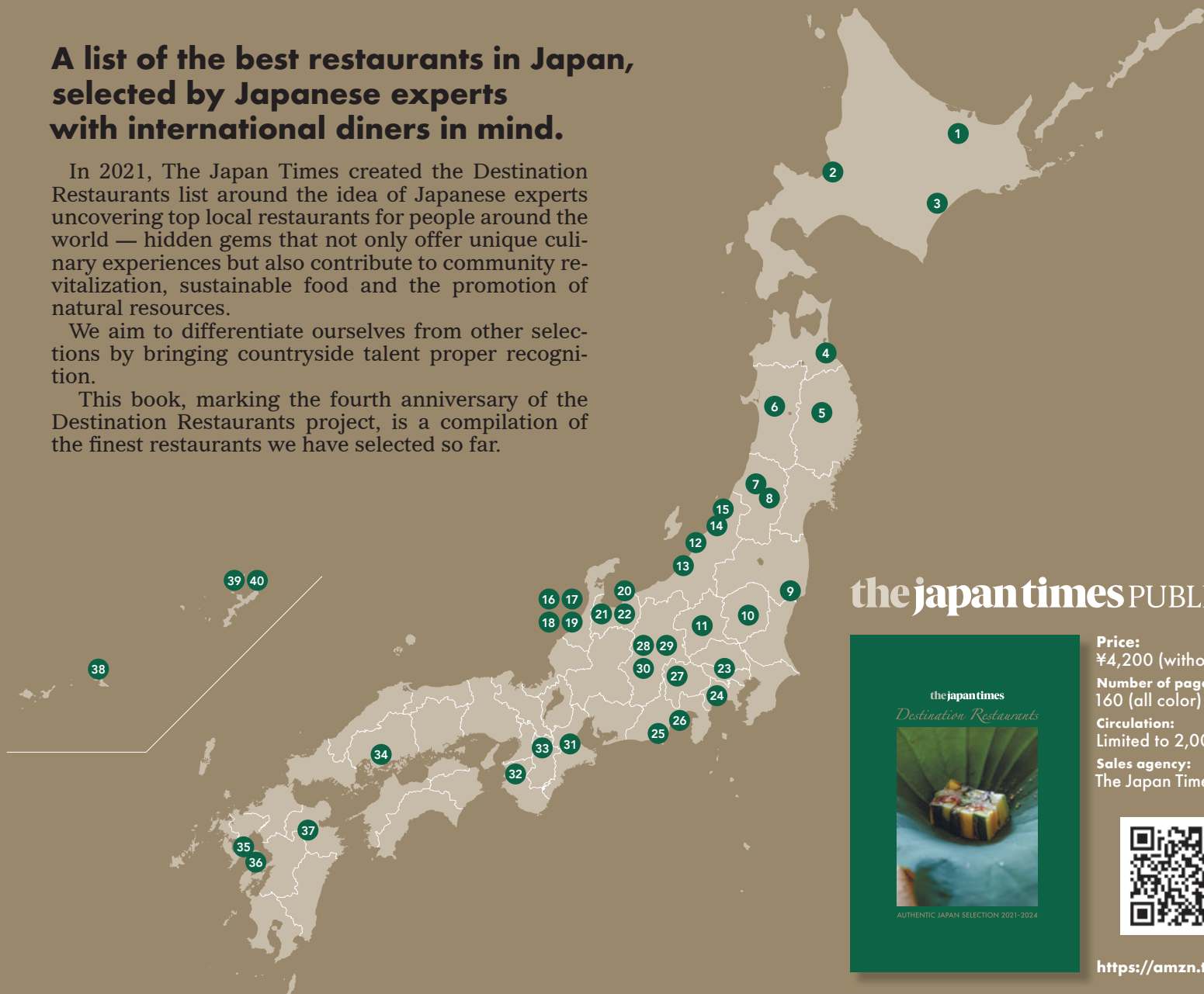
- 40 French
Mauvaise herbe

A list of the best restaurants in Japan, selected by Japanese experts with international diners in mind.

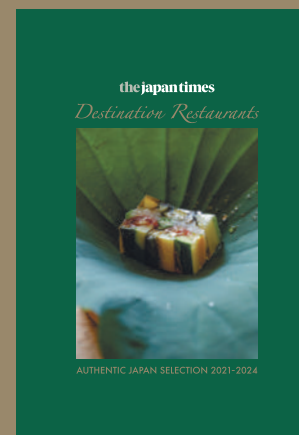
In 2021, The Japan Times created the Destination Restaurants list around the idea of Japanese experts uncovering top local restaurants for people around the world — hidden gems that not only offer unique culinary experiences but also contribute to community revitalization, sustainable food and the promotion of natural resources.

We aim to differentiate ourselves from other selections by bringing countryside talent proper recognition.

This book, marking the fourth anniversary of the Destination Restaurants project, is a compilation of the finest restaurants we have selected so far.



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AUTHENTIC JAPAN SELECTION 2021-2024

CITY OF NIIGATA / SADO ISLAND

(Sponsored content)

WEST SIDE OF HONSHU STEEPED IN CULTURE

Niigata is a historic port city on the west coast of Honshu, about two hours from Tokyo Station by shinkansen. Sado Island, which is about an hour from Niigata by jetfoil and 2 1/2 hours by ferry, also boasts several picturesque ports.

One of these is Ogi port, on Sado's south-western tip. Visitors can enjoy the nostalgic scenery of the small port town and participate in activities that enable them to experience the history and culture of the island.

One notable activity is a *tarabune* (tub boat) ride. The tarabune, a traditional fishing boat that has been in use for over 200 years, is still employed in some areas to catch shellfish like abalone and turban, as well as harvest seaweed. These boats have proven to be highly practical and effective in navigating the intricate and rocky coastline of the Ogi Peninsula.

Rides are available at three locations near the port, including Yajima Taiken Koryukan, which is in a quiet cove a five-minute drive from the port. Reservations are not required.

The leisurely ride offers picturesque views of both the sea and shore, and the cove's waters are so clear that people can see fish and other marine creatures during the ride.

The Sado Island Taiko Center (Tatakokan) offers *taiko* (traditional Japanese drum) lessons for visitors to enjoy. Reservations are required and the standard program is available for ¥3,000 per adult and lasts for about an hour, with the teaching provided by one of the taiko workshop instructors who belong to Kodo, an internationally acclaimed taiko troupe.

In addition to a large collection of taiko of



A woman practices drumming at the Sado Island Taiko Centre (Tatakokan).

various sizes, the Tatakokan boasts two enormous taiko hand-carved from a 600-year-old zelkova tree. Playing these drums allows people to feel the sounds, vibrations and rhythms of nature.

The drummers of Kodo, which can trace its roots on the island to the 1970s, conduct tours around Japan and the world, attracting spectators with their dynamic, disciplined and artistic performances.

The city of Niigata is also renowned for its rich culture, particularly its cuisine, which is characterized by its famous rice, a great variety of sake and ramen, and an abundance of fresh seafood.

The prefecture itself boasts the largest number of sake breweries in the country at 89. Some offer tours or tastings, but several provide these services in foreign languages as well.

The Imayo Tsukasa brewery, just a 15-minute walk from Niigata Station, offers tours in



A tub-like traditional fishing boat known as a tarabune floats along the coast of the Ogi Peninsula.

English for ¥400 per person with two tasting options – the standard plan that offers a seasonal sake and two types of *amazake* (sweet, nonalcoholic sake-like beverages) for free, and a premium plan that covers at least 10 premium sakes for ¥1,000.

At Niigata Station, there is a marketplace named Ponshukan that not only sells Niigata delicacies and sake, but also offers a unique sake-tasting experience. For ¥500, visitors receive five coins and a small porcelain cup at the counter in the tasting room. There, they can put the coins into tasting machines to sample up to five kinds of sake from nearly 100 varieties gathered from breweries across the prefecture.

When it comes to fish, the sushi restaurants in the city offer *kiwami* (ultimate) sets that consist of about 10 kinds of seasonal fish, such as cherry salmon, turban shellfish and black rockfish in spring. While the specific content and presentation may vary slightly from restaurant to restaurant, all ensure that visitors will experience a selection of the finest seafood that Niigata has to offer.

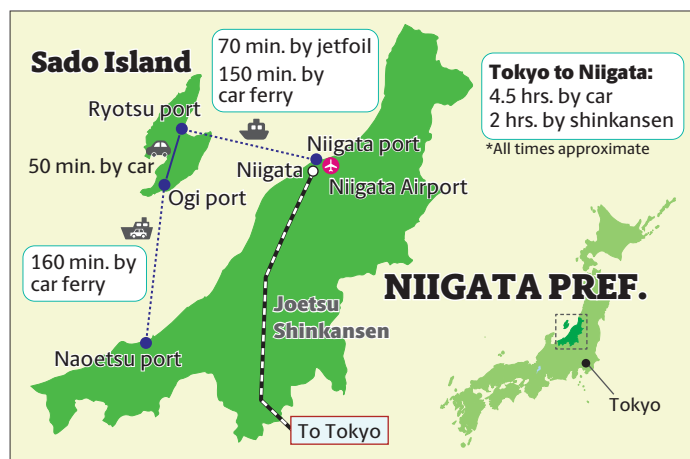
Marui, situated on the opposite side of the Shinano River and about a 10-minute drive from Niigata Station, is one of the restaurants

offering this set. Its president, Norio Yokoyama, also offers sushi-making workshops that require reservations to attend.

For ramen fans, Niigata boasts five different kinds: Niigata *nōkō* miso (rich miso), Niigata *assari shōyu* (light soy sauce), Nagasaki *shōga jōyu* (ginger soy sauce), Tsubame *se-abura* (pork backfat) and Sanjo *karē* (curry). These local specialties can be found at ramen shops throughout Niigata.

The Joetsu Shinkansen Line linking Tokyo and Niigata is covered by the JR East rail pass, which is sold for ¥27,000 and offers unlimited bullet train rides on designated lines for five consecutive days.

This article is sponsored by the Niigata and Sado municipal governments. For more information, visit Niigata's Facebook page (left) or Sado Tourism Navi (right).



Shops in Niigata Station's Ponshukan market offer delicacies from the prefecture.



A wide variety of ramen is available in Niigata.



Niigata boasts some of the best sushi in Japan.

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America vs. China

White vs. Black

Economy vs. Ecology

Wealth vs. Health

Urban vs. Rural

Government vs. People

Dogs vs. Cats

Coffee vs. Tea

Man vs. Woman

Monopoly vs. Share

Privacy vs. Surveillance

Politics vs. Science

Think vs. Do

Reject vs. Embrace

You vs. Me

Argument vs. Dialogue

Where there's division,
there's an opportunity for progress.

#BeyondVS

Dialogue matters.

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TAKAYAMA

HOME TO ALLURING NATURE, CULTURAL BOUNTY

Nestled in the northern reaches of Gifu Prefecture, the city of Takayama, often referred to as Hida-Takayama, extends across an area almost as large as metropolitan Tokyo but with a full 92% of its landscape covered by mountains and forests. Surrounded by the Japan Alps and its soaring 3,000-meter peaks, Takayama captivates visitors with its rich cultural heritage and spectacular natural beauty.

Situated in central Honshu, Takayama has earned a coveted three-star rating in the Michelin Green Guide as a destination “well worth making a journey to visit.”

No matter where you start out, reaching Takayama requires crossing some major mountains. From Tokyo, the trip takes about four hours by bullet train and limited express. But along the route, the stunning seasonal vistas will not only enchant the eye, but also evoke a sense of nostalgia, enhancing your anticipation of arriving in this mountainous wonderland.

Cultural treasures and festivals

Visitors arrive at Takayama Station in the heart of the city. Often the starting point for exploration, the bustling downtown area plays a central role in the lives of residents and boasts a wealth of cultural landmarks, including temples and shrines.

One must-visit locale is Takayama Old Town, a 15-minute walk from the station, which stretches along the city's principal waterway, the Miya River. This area is designated as an Important Preservation District for Groups of Traditional Buildings and offers a glimpse into the city's past as a thriving merchant town surrounding Takayama Castle during the Edo Period (1603 to 1868).

Strolling through this attractive area feels like stepping back four centuries. Visitors can immerse themselves in the travel experience – sampling sake at artisanal breweries, savoring Takayama's signature soy sauce-flavored

rice dumplings known as *mitarashi dango* or exploring well-preserved *machiya* (town-houses) that once served as both homes and shops for merchants.

At the southern end of Old Town is Nakabashi, an iconic bridge known for its red railings. During the biannual Takayama Festival – held from April 14 to 15 in spring and Oct. 9 to 10 in autumn – beautifully decorated festival floats, a testament to the skills of Takayama's artisans, traverse Nakabashi. Depending on the timing of your visit, you can enjoy this spectacle against a backdrop of cherry blossoms or autumn leaves. Recognized as one of Japan's three most beautiful festivals and registered on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List, the Takayama Festival is an incomparable event that embodies the rich traditions of Takayama.

Majestic nature, scenic adventures

After immersing yourself in Takayama's cultural heritage, it's time to embrace the area's immense natural beauty. The majestic Hida Mountains – or Northern Alps – dominate the northeastern horizon with towering peaks such as Mount Yari, Mount Nishihotaka, Mount Kasagatake and Mount Norikura. Designated as part of Chubu Sangaku National Park, these mountains are easily accessible from Takayama, offering breathtaking views and plenty of activities for casual tourists and seasoned climbers alike.

Among them, Norikura is one of Japan's most accessible 3,000-m mountains. Located at the southern edge of the Hida Mountains, its highest peak, Kengamine (3,026 m), is reached via the Norikura Skyline road (open May 15 to Oct. 31) only by bus, taxi or rental vehicles with at least 11 passengers.

From the Tatamidaira Plateau (2,702 m) visitors can enjoy a leisurely 90-minute hike to Kengamine, where they will be rewarded with panoramic views of the Northern Alps, and, on clear days, the unmistakable silhouette



Floats cross Nakabashi with cherry trees in bloom during the Takayama Festival.

ette of Mount Fuji on the horizon – an experience not to be missed.

Further north, Mount Nishihotaka can be reached via the Shinhotaka Ropeway, which ascends to 2,156 m and boasts Japan's only double-decker cable car. From the mountaintop observatory, a stunning 360-degree panorama of the entire Northern Alps unfolds, a spectacle that has earned the area two Michelin stars.

Hot spring rejuvenation

After a day filled with sightseeing, hiking or climbing, what could be more relaxing than soaking in a hot spring? Just an hour from Takayama by bus, at the foot of the Northern Alps, the Okuhida Onsen-go hot spring district is one of Japan's premier *onsen* destinations. Cherished for their healing properties, the area's five spas have long attracted visitors, and legends tell of samurai seeking relief from battle wounds in these very waters.

Comprising the five spa towns of Hirayu, Shinhotaka, Fukuji, Tochio and Shinhirayu, Okuhida Onsen-go boasts the largest number of open-air baths in Japan, and can be explored both on foot or by bus.

Visitors can enjoy a variety of onsen facilities, from *ryokan* (traditional Japanese inns) with private baths to foot baths and day-use outdoor baths, each experience infused with the warm hospitality known as *omotenashi*.

After bathing and enjoying breathtaking mountain views, don't miss the chance to savor the area's local cuisine, featuring Hida

beef, fresh river fish and highland vegetables, all prepared with seasonal flair. It's the perfect way to unwind, offering a truly blissful experience for both body and soul.

Commitment to sustainability

Takayama is a fascinating destination that harmoniously blends astonishing natural beauty, delectable cuisine and deep-rooted traditions. To preserve its charm as a tourist destination for future generations, it is vital for the city to remain attractive for its residents. That's why it is actively pursuing sustainable urban development, guided by the United Nations sustainable development goals. This commitment was recognized in 2024 when Takayama received a Green Destinations Silver Award for its sustainable tourism initiatives.

The award recognizes Takayama's efforts to preserve Old Town and the Takayama Festival and adopt environmental protection measures, such as restricting access and requiring guided tours to sensitive alpine areas. Currently, Takayama is aiming to make even greater strides toward sustainability as it works to achieve recertification in 2026.

With a unique blend of nature, culture and tradition, Takayama invites travelers to explore its timeless beauty and create precious memories that will remain with them long after their visit.

For more information, please visit <https://www.hidatakayama.or.jp/>



Left: Takayama Old Town has many traditional buildings that were once homes and shops for merchants. Right: Hirayu Onsen is one of Okuhida Onsen-go's five famed spas.



Mount Norikura



A TASTE OF TOKYO

(Sponsored content)



Far left: Natsuko Shoji works on a serving of her lobster en croute (left). STYRISM INC.

FANTASTIC EATS AWAIT IN FOODIE PARADISE

Blend of skilled chefs, top ingredients, spirit and imagination make for a culinary journey unlike any in the world

There is a misconception that Japanese food is the same no matter where it's found. One need barely to brush the surface of this notion to discover this isn't true.

Cuisines imported from other countries are commonly altered to fit the tastes of the local population. Often the proprietors of these establishments are not natives of the country whose food they make and care little about preserving the integrity of the original they seek to market.

Tokyo, a city with worldwide visibility and home to an array of sought-after cuisines, is the place to experience authentic Japanese cooking. Within each country, there are both distinct regional dishes as well as variations on common themes. These variations can often be the result of regional delicacies and produce. Japan is no exception. However, the Japanese are known for their dedication to authenticity and innovation. The city's chefs hone their skills to produce consistently reliable results and incorporate new ideas to create sophisticated cuisine of all types.

From sea to table

As the heart of Japan, and with its international bona fides and indisputable cachet, Tokyo is the destination for foodies and chefs alike. With attention to detail and freshness, the gastronomic adventure starts very early in the morning.

Before the hustle of Tokyo gets started, the hidden side of the food experience is underway at Toyosu's fish market. Stepping into the halls of Toyosu is quite an experience. Scents of the ocean assertively greet the visitor, while all around activity bustles. Workers carry containers while carts careen around narrow pathways. Ice and fish scales crunch underfoot as boxes teem with an unimaginable array of commodities appear. Amid this backdrop, some of the freshest *maguro* (tuna) on the planet can be found.

Here, the "King of Maguro," Yukitaka Yamaguchi, is doing what he has done for decades: assessing the day's catch. With deft precision, the fish are sliced, weighed and prepared for shipment. It's clear that he has the trust of his clientele — wooden boards are covered with order slips, with repeat requests from restaurants in Tokyo and across Japan, as well as from overseas. It's an exhilarating predawn experience that makes you realize the care going into every slice of fish.

Quality ingredients are paramount; no chef could make inferior materials shine. Having the freshest and highest-quality raw items is just as important as having a trusting relationship with one's supplier. As the dealing plays out, one restaurant clearly shows it enjoys such a rapport.

Tucked away in the Ark Hills office and residential complex in Minato Ward is the well-awarded and oft-recognized Sushi Saito, run by Takashi Saito. For those only familiar with sushi restaurants outside of Japan, the first surprise may be the lack of soy sauce on offer.

Saito relies on his knowledge of fish, rice and flavorings, creating the perfect taste sensation from artful combinations that need no embellishment. Each morsel carries the



Above: Jun Yajima prepares a decadent shaved ice dessert topped with fruit to follow her top-class ramen (right) for the Artissense cooking event in Shibuya. STYRISM INC.



depths of Saito's years of experience. The precise cut of the flesh, the texture, temperature and amount of rice, the subtle accents of salt, sweet and umami, all integral to the successful whole. It was rated the No. 1 sushi restaurant for years and held three Michelin stars from 2010 to 2019. While reservations are very hard to come by, Saito's expertise and acumen are aspirations for chefs in Japan and beyond, reminding the world of Tokyo's preeminence.

Women in the spotlight

Obviously, sushi is the quintessential Japanese dish, and Tokyo is arguably the best place for the experience. That said, Japanese cuisine is most certainly not all about fish. Since Tokyo is widely recognized as a place where a broad variety of supplies are gathered, its ingredi-

ents are often at the forefront of the city's culinary promotions.

One such event, which combined "artisanship" with "essence," was "Artissense: A Female Chef Collaboration." Held to showcase the city's ingredients alongside its female talent, this exclusive one-day event offered an unparalleled peek into the vibrancy of Tokyo's acclaimed dining scene.

As the number of tourists with sophisticated palates rises, food tourism has become a major travel draw. With culinary influences from around the world, the city has retained Japanese traditions while embracing culinary influences from around the globe, creating a dynamic and ever-evolving food landscape. The Artissense event on Jan. 14 saw a trio of female chefs tasked with teaming up to create

Continued on page B9 →



Far left: Italy-trained dessert chef Mineko Kato gives her sweet creations a satoyama touch. Left: Kato's satoyama flower tart. STYRISM INC.

A TASTE OF TOKYO

(Sponsored content)



Far left: Fresh tuna is displayed at Yukitaka Yamaguchi's shop at the Toyosu fish market. Left: Takashi Saito slices up the day's catch at Sushi Saito in Tokyo's Ark Hills. TABLECROSS INC.

→ Continued from page B8

a unique meal representing "Tokyo Today."

The event was held at the monoma hall and restaurant on the 38th floor of Shibuya Sakura Stage, a new building that has become part of the chic ambiance associated with Tokyo's uptown. Monoma offers a lushly appointed lounge adjoining an intimate dining space, with floor-to-ceiling windows that offer spectacular views of the neighborhood below.

Artissense was designed to showcase Tokyo's wide-ranging culinary landscape by creating a one-of-a-kind menu blending the diverse cooking styles of three of the city's finest up-and-coming talents. This *carte du jour* was described as a gastronomic relay to create a course meal that beautifully displayed both their significant achievements and the dynamic nature of the capital's dining culture.

The evening opened with a display of talent by Asuka Yoshizaki on the koto. Her haunting melodies became an auditory metaphor for the evening's cuisine: lush, accomplished and passionate. It embodied the synthesis of old and new, Western and Japanese, much as hearing music on a centuries-old instrument did while gazing at Shibuya's sparkling skyline.

Natsuko Shoji, an exciting talent on Tokyo's fine dining scene, prepared the opening dishes. Combining her love of art and haute couture with nonpareil pastry skills and French techniques, her food displays an uncommon blend of audacity and elegance. While battling the stereotype that women aren't fit enough to be chefs, she was recognized by Asia's 50 Best Restaurants as best pastry chef in 2020 and best female chef in 2022. Her dishes showcased her intimate knowledge of pastry in combination with uniquely Tokyo-esque ingredients, featuring a delightful lobster *en croute* (baked in pastry). Among her other endeavors is her restaurant *ete*, described as "a unique small paradise in the world with an exclusive dining concept" and "a surreal, imaginative gourmet experience paired with *omotenashi* (Japanese hospitality)." She has recently begun collaborating with her alma mater to train a new generation of successor chefs to implement the U.N. sustainable development goals and resource conservation in their work.

The next offerings were prepared by Jun Yajima, who trained at the famous Mendokoro Honda restaurant and afterward received a Michelin Bib Gourmand as the proprietress of a popular restaurant. Yajima served her delightful and delicate ramen in a broth rich with the wild flavor of Tokyo Shamo chicken, which is raised mainly in the Tama region. The perfectly al dente noodles were graced by tissue-thin slices of Tokyo X pork, an exclusive Tokyo commodity. Her tasty ramen was followed by a scrumptious shaved ice dish, a delight to behold, luscious and decadent with citrus fruit slices and a rich, creamy topping. Yajima recognizes that ramen is considered a "B-dish," and hopes to elevate this cuisine as the wonderfully complex food it is. Currently, Yajima owns and operates Junmugi, an exclusive venue encompassing a tasting menu concept.

The desserts were prepared by Mineko Kato. Her craftsmanship in bread and pastry led her to Italy, where she served as pastry chef at renowned Michelin-starred restaurants. Back in Japan, Kato combines her love of Japanese ingredients with her passion for



Left: A chef prepares to cook up some smoky, open-flame goodies (above) at cozy restaurant Makitori Shinkobe in Akasaka-Mitsuke. TABLECROSS INC.

pastry-making and her abiding appreciation of the importance of forest preservation. The delicate fragrances of Tokyo strawberries blended with Japanese cypress in a dish are intended to remind the diner of the importance of conservationism. The evening's final offering was a *satoyama* flower tart.

Satoyama is a Japanese term that challenges definition. It embodies a concept of land conservation in accord with agriculture, connoting harmony between humans and the land they cultivate. Kato's reverence for this concept was clear in her dish: a lush garden of flowers and herbs planted in a rich foundation mounted on a firm yet delicate pastry. Helming restaurant *Faro*, Kato was named Asia's best pastry chef in 2024.

Artissense showcased up-and-coming female chefs who use their talent to create culinary masterpieces from Tokyo's top-quality ingredients. These gifted chefs are keen to share the city's cuisine with a worldwide audience.

The journey to perfection

Freshness, artisanal skills and diversity are on offer here in Tokyo. How about quality Western food? It would come as no surprise to find a decent hamburger place in the heart of Tokyo's hip and trendy Azabu environs. It might be a surprise to find no condiments on the tables. The biggest one, however, is that the burgers on the star-shaped plates, while having their origins as America's iconic food, stand as a perfect testament to a Japanese chef's dedication to mastering and perfecting the original. At *Aldebaran*, burgers are feats of culinary excellence. It's not just the 100% wagyu, though that's certainly a feature. These creations are a taste phenom worthy of accolades applied to the best sushi: All of the elements are a fusion creating the perfect whole.

The chef's approach strikes a perfect harmonious chord, proving that Tokyo flair can elevate an American classic to five-star fare.

Flawlessness is an abiding goal in many Japanese endeavors. The Japanese also understand that function is only one aspect of any undertaking. Beauty is of equal importance. An example of this incorporation can be seen in *Edo kiriko* (cut glass) at Horiguchi Kiriko. *Edo kiriko* is a valued traditional handcraft of Tokyo (formerly called Edo), with techniques handed down over the years. Glasses are cut with fine detail — the finish is clear and brilliant. Horiguchi's artisans know this and take it as a solemn mission to produce the highest-quality products. Each



Above: The premium ingredients used to make Aldebaran's wagyu burgers give them a taste unlike any other in the capital. TABLECROSS INC.

hand-cut item is a gem, reflecting light in kaleidoscopes. These reflections shift, depending on the level of liquid and the color and texture of the surface. From exquisite beauty to faultless function, what Tokyo gastronomic adventure would be complete without a visit to the capital's premier kitchen gear destination of Kappabashi? This popular area features dozens of shops specializing in anything food-related. The full-to-bursting shops carry pots, knives, tableware, gadgets and even the famous plastic food samples used in many restaurant displays. The area is distinctly downtown, an experience for curious tourists, weekend dabblers, serious hobbyists and master chefs alike.

About 30 minutes south, in the politically cozy entertainment district of Akasaka-Mitsuke, the skill and wisdom of talented master chefs, the superlative components, beautiful table settings and Japan's famed hospitality all come together to create the truly magical at *Makitori Shinkobe*.

The cozy and inviting atmosphere is reminiscent of hearth and home. The scent of woodsmoke curls into the room, inviting visitors to settle around the fire where the chef uses a special pipe to rouse the flames to grill succulent delicacies. Open-flame cooking, while difficult to master, produces magical flavors and textures unattainable with traditional charcoal grilling. The lineup was like a walk through a forest, with tender chicken, mushrooms and root vegetables on offer. The

final dish, candied shine muscat grapes, were presented as if they'd just been plucked from a garden of wildflowers flourishing outside a cottage of fairies.

Together with drink pairings, the meal was a whimsical journey that bucks the idea that yakitori can only be grilled over charcoal, creating a new Tokyo classic.

Foodie paradise

As a dish can only be as good as its components, freshness and quality are paramount. But not even premier raw materials can come together in a tailored whole without the talent, dedication and vision of those orchestrating the final product.

In this Tokyo food scene journey, it's clear the chefs who bring their creations to life are the envy of the food world. Seasoned veterans who've honed their craft for decades as well as fresh up-and-comers are showcased here. There are wonders around every corner, in every neighborhood, in every conceivable genre. The possibilities are only confined by the time available to explore and enjoy what varieties of food this city of cuisine offers.

At the heart of Japan and with its international stature and undeniable prestige, Tokyo's food scene is the pinnacle for gourmets and gourmands alike.

This article is sponsored by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

guntû – a little hotel floating on the Seto Inland Sea.



<https://guntu.jp/>

YAMAGUCHI PREFECTURE



The pagoda at Rurikoji temple in the city of Yamaguchi is one of the most famous in Japan.

SIX OF WEST JAPAN'S HANAMI HOT SPOTS

Yamaguchi Prefecture, situated on the western tip of Honshu, has gradually grown into one of the most stunning places in the country. Modeled on 14th century Kyoto, it became known as “the Kyoto of the West” and is the only Japanese destination included on the New York Times’ list of “52 Places to Go in 2024.”

Easily accessible in 90 minutes by plane or 4 hours and 30 minutes by bullet train from Tokyo, Yamaguchi is famous for its beautiful *sakura* (cherry blossoms). Mixing the prefecture’s history and unparalleled landscapes with the ephemeral beauty of cherry trees in full bloom, Yamaguchi is the perfect place for flower-viewing, known as *hanami*. Below are some of the most scenic locales to visit in the prefecture and its capital from late March to early April.

Rurikoji temple (Yamaguchi)

Rurikoji temple in the city of Yamaguchi is home to one of Japan’s three most famous pagodas. Completed in 1442, it’s the 10th-oldest five-story pagoda in Japan and a designated National Treasure. It commemorates Ouchi Yoshihiro, a member of the powerful Ouchi clan that helped make Yamaguchi the jewel of western Japan. The 31-meter pagoda features a cypress bark roof and elegantly minimal ornamentation. The roof is undergoing a complete rethatching (scheduled to

conclude in March 2026), but the scaffolding sheets should start to gradually come down from this March.

Access: 15-minute bus ride or 30-minute walk from Yamaguchi Station.

Ichinosaka River (Yamaguchi)

The Ichinosaka River, which flows through the center of the capital, is an unforgettable cherry blossom spot reminiscent of the famous Kamo River in Kyoto. During spring, about 200 Yoshino cherry trees bloom along its banks, creating a mesmerizing world of wonder as the pinkish blossoms reflect on the water’s surface. The trees are illuminated at night by electric lights and (from May to June) the ethereal *genji-botaru* fireflies. Preserved town houses in the area add to the Ichinosaka River’s nostalgic yet timeless beauty.

Access: 20-minute walk from Yamaguchi Station.

Shimatagawa Riverside Park (Hikari)

Shimatagawa Riverside Park in Hikari is a can’t-miss spot during a cherry blossom tour of Yamaguchi. The park features vibrant pink cherry trees that pair beautifully with the golden rapeseed blossoms that line the park’s boardwalk to create a colorful symphony of nature. Bird-watchers will enjoy being on the lookout for up to 70 unique species in the area, including petrels and egrets.



Left: The Shimatagawa River in Hikari boasts colorful scenery and unique bird species. Below left: Breathtaking mountain and ocean views are the hallmark of Hinoyama Park in Shimonoseki. Below right: The Ichinosaka River is famed for its fireflies, cherry blossom reflections and night illuminations in the capital.



The park offers a quiet escape into serene beauty in the heart of the city.

Access: 5-minute bus ride or 10-minute walk from Hikari Station.

Kintai Bridge (Iwakuni)

The 210-m Kintai Bridge is one of Japan’s three most famous and a national scenic spot that makes a perfect base for exploring the city of Iwakuni, especially during hanami season. Thousands of cherry trees bloom around the excellently preserved wooden arch structure and nearby Kikko Park, creating a magical world of pink that visitors can enter via a “*sakurabune*” pleasure boat that floats gently down the Nishiki River. Nearby attractions include samurai residences, Kikko Shrine and Iwakuni Castle, accessible via a ropeway that offers breathtaking views of the pink-covered area.

Access: 15-minute bus ride from Shin-Iwakuni Station.

Shizuki Park (Hagi)

Centered around the national historic site of the Hagi Castle Ruins, Shizuki Park is one of Yamaguchi’s premier cherry blossom spots. Around 600 Yoshino cherry trees cover the park in a pale-pink carpet each spring while Midori-Yoshino trees, a designated “natural monument” of Yamaguchi Prefecture, add touches of pure white to the scenery with

their snow-colored petals. At night, the illuminated castle walls allow visitors to enjoy the reflection of these pastel trees in the castle moat. Moat cruises are also available.

Access: 30-minute walk from Higashi-Hagi Station or 5-minute walk from the Hagi-jo-ato/Shizuki Koen Iriguchi bus stop.

Hinoyama Park (Shimonoseki)

Perched atop a 268-m mountain, Hinoyama Park offers one-of-a-kind views of the Seto Inland Sea and Sea of Japan. In spring, 1,000 Yoshino and Japanese mountain cherry trees transform this Shimonoseki mountainside into an otherworldly pink paradise. The park’s other main attraction is a tulip garden with 40,000 flowers that were a gift from Shimonoseki’s Turkish sister city Istanbul and bloom around the same time as the trees.

The breathtaking night scenery enjoyed from the mountaintop park has been described as a “\$10 million view.”

Access: 15-minute bus ride from Shimonoseki Station to the Hinoyama Ropeway bus stop. It’s a 30-minute walk from there.

Getting around: Touring is easier with the Have Fun in Yamaguchi Pass. For more information, see <https://www.klook.com/activity/123797-have-fun-in-yamaguchi-pass-1-week-free-pass/>



Yamaguchi also has wonderful autumn foliage.



HOTEL SPECIAL

(Sponsored content)

Hilton Tokyo Odaiba

Easily accessible from major Tokyo train stations and Haneda Airport, Hilton Tokyo Odaiba is a waterfront hotel overlooking Tokyo Bay and the Rainbow Bridge. A combination of scenic views with large rooms and a selection of business and leisure facilities makes it a destination for all occasions.

During spring, Odaiba's Hilton goes the extra mile with seasonal offerings. In 2025, these will include the Strawberry Afternoon Tea and Strawberry High Tea at the Seascape Terrace Dining restaurant or the Grillology Bar & Grill until April 30.

The Strawberry Afternoon Tea is a feast for the senses featuring nine exquisite strawberry-themed sweets, including strawberry *daifuku* (stuffed rice cake), shortcake, sandwiches and macarons. Hotel-made scones and savory dishes such as fish cutlet sandwiches and meat pies are also available. Through April 30, some of the strawberry desserts



will be changed to cherry or pistachio versions to allow diners to savor the cherry blossom season in style.

The Strawberry High Tea will be available between 5:30 p.m. and 7 p.m., and from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Combining strawberry-inspired desserts and savory dishes, including lamb cannelloni with Bolognese and crab quiche, the menu is designed to appeal to the most discerning palates in a sophisticated and relaxing atmosphere. The high tea plan

on Saturdays, Sundays and national holidays includes free-flowing wine, sparkling wine, beer, highballs and soft drinks.

URL: <https://www.hiltonodaiba.jp/plans/restaurants/7107>
Address: 1-9-1 Daiba, Minato Ward, Tokyo
Tel: 03-5500-5500



Grand Hyatt Tokyo

This spring, Grand Hyatt Tokyo is offering an exquisite selection of fine dining experiences that showcase the flavors of seasonal ingredients. From fine wines to creative desserts, each of these menus offers a taste of spring.

At Keyakizaka, the hotel's sommelier has curated a set of four French wine pairings to complement the restaurant's *teppanyaki* (iron griddle cooking) menus on a journey through Japanese and French culinary culture (available April 1 to June 30). This curated quartet of pairings celebrates the depth of French winemaking and the subtle flavors of Japanese cuisine, from Champagne and foie gras to a vintage Syrah served with wagyu sirloin.

Through May 31, The Oak Door Bar is offering a selection of Japanese gin cocktails, bringing together floral touches with gins from Sakurao Distillery.



The lineup includes the Hanami, which blends Sakurao Rose Gin with raspberry and elderflower, and the Bouquet, a complex creation featuring Sakurao White Herbs Gin, white curacao and fresh fruit. For a twist on a classic, the Japanese dirty martini combines Sakurao Original Gin with a dash of *shiso* (perilla) oil.

Fiorentina Pastry Boutique has also created exclusive dessert selections for spring, from *sakura* (cherry blossom) desserts to Easter eggs and spectacular Mother's Day cakes.

URL: tokyo.grand.hyatt.com
Address: 6-10-3 Roppongi, Minato Ward, Tokyo
Tel: 03-4333-1234

Kanaya Resort Hakone

Steeped in history and the natural beauty of one of Japan's most famous *onsen* regions, Kanaya Resort Hakone is a luxurious hot spring retreat with only 14 guest rooms, each equipped with a private natural spring bath. The tranquil setting, with its pristine surrounding forest, melodious birds, and even the occasional deer, creates a sanctuary of relaxation that truly embodies the Kanaya Hotel Kanko Group's quest for "heartfelt Japanese hospitality."

Another highlight of Kanaya Resort Hakone is the Seiyo Zendokoro John Kanaya dining space. It is the successor to the restaurant of the same name first established in 1971 in Nishi-Azabu, Tokyo, by Senji "John" Kanaya, founder of the Kinugawa Kanaya Hotel. Combining Japanese respect for natural flavors with praise for Western flamboyance and boldness, the Seiyo Zendokoro John Kanaya has come up with innovative dishes best described as "French cuisine that can be eaten with chopsticks."



The imaginative courses feature Soshu beef, the only beef raised on the pastures of Minamiashigara, as well as carefully selected seasonal offerings, including duck, lamb and local fish. The artistic presentation adds to the experience and makes a meal at the Seiyo Zendokoro a healing feast for the soul enjoyed in a tranquil atmosphere reminiscent of an intimate winery cave.

URL: <https://hakonekanaya.com/>
Address: Sengokuhara, Hakone, Ashigarashimo District, Kanagawa
Tel: 0460-84-0888

InterContinental Yokohama Pier 8

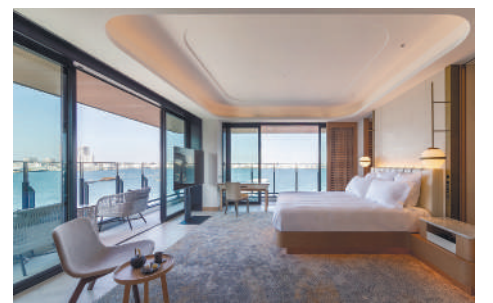
InterContinental Yokohama Pier 8 is a luxurious resort with stunning ocean views. It is the perfect base for exploring everything that Yokohama has to offer thanks to its convenient location close to Chinatown, Yamashita Park, the Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse and other historic locales.

This year, the hotel is offering enticing accommodation plans to celebrate its fifth anniversary such as the Active Stay plan, available until April 25. The plan is specially designed for guests who want to maintain a healthy lifestyle during their travels. The plan's menu includes plenty of smoothies, vegetable dishes and



steamed chicken, as well as soy yogurt. The plan additionally allows for one-time access to the well-equipped Harborview Fitness Club at the nearby InterContinental Yokohama Grand.

Guests with club access also get to enjoy a dedicated reception desk for smoother check-ins and check-outs as well as exclusive food and beverage services. A lounge with private meetings rooms is also available, making Club InterContinental perfect for business and pleasure.



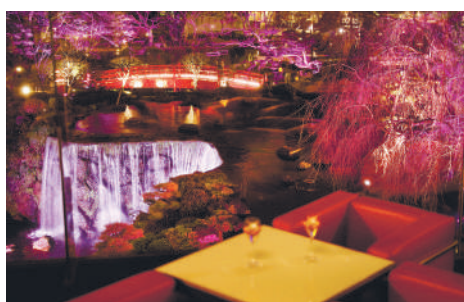
Waterfront beauty and premier experiences at InterContinental Yokohama Pier 8 will create lifelong memories.

URL: <https://www.icyokohama-pier8.com/en/>
Address: 2-14-1 Shinko, Naka Ward, Yokohama
Tel: 045-307-1111

Hotel New Otani Tokyo

The Hotel New Otani Tokyo first opened its doors in 1964 to welcome guests arriving for the Tokyo Olympics. By blending timeless Japanese elegance with modern luxuries, it has since become a celebrated oasis of peace in the very heart of the Japanese capital.

Each spring, the hotel transforms into a *sakura* (cherry blossom) haven offering a variety of themed experiences like sakura-inspired cocktails or rickshaw rides through flower-viewing spots near the hotel. Of note is its Japanese Garden, a 10,000-square-meter paradise dating back over 400 years. The garden is home to 19 different types of cherry trees that bloom at different times, making it the ideal place to enjoy an extended period of cherry blossom-viewing, known as *hanami*, with friends or family.



Through April 19, the Japanese Garden will be illuminated in sakura colors that will transform the landscape into a fantastical scene like something out of a dream.

The Garden Lounge, with its panoramic windows, is the best place to enjoy the illumination, which will last from 30 minutes before sunset to midnight. While admiring the twilight view, guests visiting from March to April will be able to indulge in drinks and tapas and the delightful

Evening High Tea on weekdays, as well as the Super Sweets Buffet (hours extended on weekend and holiday evenings).

URL: <https://www.newotani.co.jp/en/tokyo/sakura/>
Address: 4-1 Kioicho, Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo
Tel: 03-3265-1111

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領域をこえ 未来へ

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