



CULTURAL TREASURES, NATURAL WONDERS

OKINAWA: SUBTROPICAL ISLANDS



Okinawa Prefecture is made up of the Ryukyu Islands, the string of islands that punctuate the southernmost waters of Japan some 2,000 kilometers southwest of Tokyo. About 160 islands, both small and large, are scattered in these waters,

sprawled across an area stretching 1,000 kilometers east to west and 400 kilometers north to south. Okinawa is the area of Japan closest to Southeast Asia and the nation's only prefecture with a subtropical climate.

Photos: Okinawa Times



A manta swims majestically over a coral reef community in the sea south of Iriomote Island.



The Oyama-nagase area off Ginowan is known for dense coral colonies.

NATURE  Okinawa



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In particular, the islands of Okinawa are blessed with stunningly beautiful scenery, with sweeping views of white sand beaches, shimmering turquoise waters and coral-reef shorelines. The crystal-clear waters and reefs they contain are host to colorful tropical fish that dart about below the surface of the sea. Boasting a wealth of diving spots, Okinawa is a major destination for diving enthusiasts.

The Ryukyu Islands have been isolated in the southern waters of Japan and Asia for

tens of thousands of years. It is only natural, therefore, that the islands are home to a diverse slice of wildlife, plants and creatures, which have evolved in their own distinctive ways. The subtropical Iriomote Island is covered with thick mangrove forests that line its estuaries. The rarely seen and critically endangered Iriomote cat, endemic to the island, inhabits the wilds of the island.

The famed Yambaru Forest lies at the other end of the prefecture, in the north of the main island of Okinawa, which is home to



The endangered Iriomote cat, designated as a special national treasure, is endemic to Iriomote Island.



Farmers perform a seed-harvesting festival dance on Taketomi Island.



Rows of houses roofed with conventional red tiles on Taketomi Island.




A flightless bird known as the Okinawa rail—an endemic species living only in the Yambaru Forest in the north of Okinawa Island—was discovered in 1981.

the prefectural capital of Naha. This dense forest is where a variety of precious animal and plant species make their homes. These include such endangered species as the Yambaru long-armed scarab beetle, the largest beetle in Japan, and a flightless bird known as the Okinawa rail.

Apart from its spectacular wildlife, these islands in the southern seas have also fostered a unique culture over time. Shuri Castle and a string of other historic sites and cultural relics around the Ryukyu Kingdom were des-

ignated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2000. The castle, formerly the seat of the kingdom, was almost completely destroyed toward the end of World War II, but was later rebuilt on the original site. Today, the spectacular structure and its grounds remind visitors of the days when the Ryukyu Kingdom thrived as a major player in maritime trade.

 On the Internet

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