

Iriomote

JAPAN'S LAST SECLUDED ISLE

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Known locally as Iriomotejima, this remote Okinawan island is almost entirely covered in virgin subtropical forest and mangrove trees, and is often called “Japan’s last secluded island.” Iriomote is also home to rare plants and animals, such as the Iriomote wildcat, and possesses a singular charm all its own.

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THE Yaeyama Archipelago is comprised of a number of beautiful islands that lie four hundred kilometers southwest of the main island of Okinawa. Iriomote is one of them, and is actually the second-largest island in Okinawa Prefecture. Virgin forest still covers ninety percent of Iriomote.

People have been living on Iriomote since ancient times—the first are thought to have settled around five thousand years ago—and rice has been cultivated here for over five hundred years. The annual Shichi Festival—which is also five centuries old—is a ceremony to give thanks to the gods for a bumper harvest, and takes place in the Sonai and Hoshitate districts.

The islanders have fostered a culture of sustainability, only taking from nature what they need to live. Plants removed while tending to the subtropical forest are made into yarn or cloth, and the islanders always show their gratitude toward nature. When the Ryukyu wild boar hunting season is over, for example, hunters offer a boar’s head to the sea to pray for a successful hunt next year.

“The allure of Iriomote is undoubtedly the overwhelming abundance of nature,” says Harumi Tokuoka of the Iriomote Island Ecotourism Association. “Particularly the mangrove forest, which is Japan’s largest.”

The river that flows down to the sea through dense jungle and the lowland mangrove forest changes from fresh water to brackish in the mangrove swamp, and then to seawater. The roots of the mangrove trees provide the perfect hiding place for small fish, and over four hundred species of fish make their home in the island’s largest river, the Urauchi.



- 1 Iriomote is home to the largest mangrove forest in Japan
- 2 A majestic adult crested serpent eagle
- 3 The spectacular fifty-five-meter Pinaisara Waterfall
- 4 Praying for an abundant crop at a traditional harvest festival on Iriomote
- 5 Made entirely from white coral, Barasujima is a popular photo spot

A river cruise is the best way to see the mangrove forest. Pleasure boats travel up and down the Urauchi River on the north side of the island and the Nakama River on the south. There are also many rambling tours available that combine hiking and canoeing. A popular spot along the way is Pinaisara Waterfall, which cascades from fifty-five meters up. Another hiking tour takes in Mariyudu Waterfall and Kanpirei Waterfall, and is perfect for fledgling hikers, since you take the Urauchi River cruise and walk from the boat's landing point to the falls. More experienced hikers can trek as far as Mayagusuku Waterfall, which Tokuoka describes as "simply magnificent."

The snorkeling on Iriomote is also magnificent. Hoshizuna Beach, at the island's northern tip, gets its name from the star-shaped "sand" there (which actually consists of tiny shells), since *hoshi* means star in Japanese. The sea here is shallow and calm, making it perfect for families.

Along with Hoshizuna, Ida Beach on the island's west side is an excellent, uncrowded snorkeling spot. This pristine beach can only be reached by boat, but are well worth the time and effort. Another spot which has been getting a lot of attention is Barasujima, just offshore from Uehara Port. Known as "The Miraculous Island," Barasujima is formed from white coral and is known as a great photo spot.

You can encounter many kinds of creatures on Iriomote, including stag beetles, a perennial favorite among Japanese children. If you like birdwatching, ask a local guide to take you to see the crested serpent eagles. Another is the rarely seen Iriomote wildcat, a protected species. Since it is a primarily nocturnal beast, take one of the evening tours, such as the starwatching tour, and you may catch a glimpse of one.

Iriomote was showcased in the French travel magazine *GEO* in 2016, and the number of tourists visiting Japan from Europe and other regions is on the rise. Cruise ships anchor at the island of Ishigaki, the main hub of the Yaeyama Archipelago, and airlines from Japan, Mainland China and Hong Kong stop at New Ishigaki Airport.

Since the island's culture grew in tandem with nature, the Iriomote Island Ecotourism Association emphasizes this aspect and runs regular seminars for islanders and guides. "I would love to be able to address visitors to the island and ask for their cooperation in protecting the island's natural wonders," Tokuoka says. "I'd like to impart the mindset of looking after the island to others, and have those who share this vision do the same." **V**

Photos by Elly Sugita