



Feeding time for the cats at the Tashirojima port
Photo: BUCK/PIXTA

CAT ISLAND



A cat takes a stroll along the Tashirojima coast
Photo: Courtesy of Tohoku Tourism Promotion Organization

A Tashirojima cat takes a nap
Photo: Courtesy of Ishinomaki City



Tashirojima is a small island off Japan's northeastern Pacific coast inhabited by over a hundred cats, outnumbering the island's fifty-five human residents. Known widely in Japan as "Cat Island," it is home to cats living a leisurely life, as well as the humans who watch over them.

SATO KUMIKO

TASHIROJIMA is reached by an approximately 40-minute ferry ride from the port of Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture. Visitors are greeted by many cats as soon as they step off the ferry at the island's Nitoda Port. All the cats are used to being around people, and some will come and rub against the visitors' legs.

Tashirojima is a small island with an area of around 2.9 square kilometers and a circumference of 11.5 kilometers. As of September 30, 2021, more than a hundred cats are said to be living there alongside a human population of fifty-five residents.

Tashirojima has a mild climate with virtually no snowfall due to the warm Kuroshio Current that protects it from the bitterly cold winters of the Tohoku region.

The island's reputation among cat lovers not from the island began with a report in the media about fifteen years ago showing cats relaxing however they liked under the eaves of private homes and here and there on the streets. Before long, "Cat Island" had become popular.

In the center of the island is a shrine dedicated to a cat, Neko-jinja (Cat Shrine), which is not common in Japan. The status of cats as revered guardian deities on Tashirojima has to do with the history and culture of the island.

In the days when sericulture was practiced on the island, cats were kept to protect silk worm cocoons from mice. Tashirojima is also blessed with excellent fishing grounds, and fishermen are said to have cherished cats since ancient times, observing their behavior to predict the weather and the size of the fishing catch. A cat once died after being badly injured by a splinter of rock that was sent flying by a fisherman making fishing gear. The heartbroken fisherman built a small shrine where he reverently buried the cat, and ever since then the fishing has been bountiful.

Tashirojima is in northeast Japan, and the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 caused devastating damage to fisheries and residential homes along its coast. Konno Yoshiki of the Ishinomaki City Regional Development Division says, "The island is remote and most of its inhabitants are elderly, so there was uncertainty around whether it would recover. However, I've been told that, thanks to the support of many people, Tashirojima has managed to return to its former tranquility."

In 2018, a second sea-ferry landing facility was constructed near the built-up area, and in the same year, a new car ferry, *Mermaid II*, and high-speed craft the *See Cat* made the island even more accessible.

"We often hear tourists say they are soothed by the sight of the cats roaming freely on the island," says Konno. However, he asks that visitors to Tashirojima respect the rule of not feeding the cats to ensure they remain healthy. Their needs are taken care of by the island's residents and the staff of Shima no Eki, a tourist facility that sells light refreshments and souvenirs.

From mid-April to the end of October, accommodation is available at the Manga Island camping resort, located atop a hill with a fine view. Manga Island has six unique cat-themed lodges, with interiors designed by renowned Japanese manga artists and shared places decorated with the artists' illustrations of cats.

If you ever have a chance to visit Japan's Tohoku region, crossing over to Tashirojima to relax and play with the cats amid refreshing sea breezes is highly recommended. 🐾



Tashirojima cats
Photo: G•G/PIXTA



More Tashirojima cats
Photo: BUCK/PIXTA



Neko-jinja enshrines a cat as the island's guardian deity



One of six cat-themed lodges at the Manga Island camping resort
Photo: Courtesy of Ishinomaki City