



Life in the Inaka

A collection of 'inaka' (rural region) knowledge from past JETs

You've just found out your placement and you have to ask yourself "Where the hell am I?!" You scour the internet for the smallest hint of information and can find nothing. Chances are you got placed in the inaka, and many of you didn't ask for that. No doubt, life in the country can leave you a little jaded at times, but it also has some glorious upsides.

'Inaka' translates to 'countryside' aka 'boonies' or 'middle of nowhere'. While individual town or villages level of inakaness can vary widely, we all share similar bizarre traits in our little inaka lives. Thus,

You know you live in the inaka WHEN . . .

- ...the village PA annoy system wakes you up at 6am every day.
- ...You speak a useless Japanese dialect.
- ...Most of your students are related to each other in some way.
- ...The women are frightening to look at.
- ...People give you cabbages.
- ...Going out on the weekend inevitably means a tiny izakaya and then onto karaoke.
- ...The elementary school kids have bells sewn into their schoobags so that the bears will hear them coming and not attack them in surprise.
- ...You see more snakes on the road than cars.
- ...Your next door neighbor is the mayor.
- ...You look out the windows across acres of nagaimo (or rice, or tea)
- ...All your school enkai's are at the same place. . . . the boe parties are there too. . . . so are the yakuba's.
- ...Your house is massive.
- ...You have met everyone that you are going to meet.
- ...The gene pool is VERY shallow.
- ...You are surprised to see gaijin you don't know by name.
- ...Your choices for where to eat can be resolved with flipping a coin.

Helpful Inaka Tips!

If you haven't got one already, buy a Toyu Stove: 灯油ストーブ。They are one of the most cost effective and widely available means of keeping yourself warm in winter. These are small heaters that run on kerosene.

Kotatsu こたつ are heated tables and an essential part of getting through a Japanese winter. A blanket attached to the table helps to trap heat and keep you surprisingly warm.

Electric blankets (電気毛布 でんきもうふ) are also another worthwhile purchase for the cold winter nights. There's nothing like jumping into a hot bed or futon when it's time to sleep.

Your bathroom might be prone to mold – buy a bottle of something called Kabi

... You can breathe the air.
 ... You actually know and speak to your neighbors.
 ... The loudest things at night are insects.
 ... People two towns away have never heard of your town.
 ... When there is no last train. . . . or first train. . . . or train period.
 ... When the whole town can agree on one day to shut down.
 ... Going to rent a video is a day trip.
 ... People always use each other's given names, because everyone has the same last name.
 ... The local dialect sounds identical to someone choking to death on Natto.
 ... The talk of the town is a half-Korean boy who visited a few months ago, thus proving how international the village has become.
 ... You actually wouldn't mind to have Mr. Rogers be your neighbor.
 ... Your supervisor doubles as the director at the local Mole Museum.

Advantages:

- can be cheaper
- quieter
- greater sense of community
- your Japanese can improve faster
- outdoor/traditional/cultural opportunities
- cleaner
- gifts from random people
- free parking
- beautiful views

Disadvantages:

- loneliness/isolation
- privacy
- no night life
- locals are shy
- gossip
- hard to get things you need
- insects
- things close early

Some common problems & simple solutions

Loneliness/Isolation

No matter where you are, if you are coming into a culture and country alien to you, it can feel very isolating. Realistically, you can expect to feel isolated in the first few weeks of your new inaka life. As time goes on, this will subside – and many factors can help it to subside faster. A few points that you may want to consider: Keep in contact with other JETs, find out where all your amenities are, get involved in a club/sport, think about buying a car so you can get out and explore your area more

Killer カビ キラー
 and spray your disgusting, moldy bathroom, leave for a few minutes then rinse off. It is basically a very highly concentrated bleach.

Make sure you know when your garbage day is – there might be only one each week so you really don't want to miss it.

Although parking is generally quite open in the inaka, if you see this sign 駐車禁止 it means parking is prohibited in that area.

Bear in mind that things can close earlier than you expect in Japan – especially in the inaka. Gas Stations tend to close at around 6pm and ATMs will be largely offline after 7pm (or even earlier) – don't get caught out.

Watch out for animals darting out from the side of the road at night (cats, frogs, deer, turtles, wild boar, etc.)

When looking into getting a mobile phone, make sure the provider you choose (Docomo, AU, Softbank) has sufficient coverage in your area. Coverage in rural areas can sometimes be a bit spotty – in those cases Docomo is usually the best choice.

Pick up the regional magazine – you might find some decent restaurant or bar recommendations that

easily. Be willing to have a wide and varied social circle. If you are teaching Eikaiwa, most of them will be older, but very willing to throw parties with you, have you over for dinner, speak English with you or help with your Japanese.

Make friends with a city JET so you have a place to crash and someone to go out with. If you don't make friends immediately be willing to pay for a hostel or cheap hotel once in a while and the relative big city feel of Kumamoto will help keep you a little sane before you go back to the wilderness. Find your local Young Peoples Association (trust me they exist everywhere and are very involved in the local community).

Take the opportunity to find local snack bars and restaurants and see what you enjoy the most. Some you won't find out about until there is an Eikaiwa held there, but there are plenty hidden that are a great place to relax and meet some other people.

Don't be afraid to get to know some of the other teachers you work with. While they seem like all business at work most of the time, you'd be surprised how often they are interested in getting to know their new foreign co-worker.

Culture Shock

Almost everyone will experience some degree of culture shock during their time here. To counter the effects of culture shock you can do many practical things, other than the more obvious psychological things such as keeping an open mind etc. For example, if you can't stand Japanese TV – look into satellite TV. If you feel cut-off from people back home, get an internet connection. Subscribe to an English language newspaper. If there are specific foods you want and are missing, order them from the Flying Pig (www.theflyingpig.com) or Foreign Buyers Club (www.fbcusa.com/eng/). Know your fellow area JETs and use them for a chance to speak English, rant, etc.

There are also resources such as the CLAIR JET line (M-F 9-18:00 03-5213-1729), National AJET Peer Support Group (Everyday, 20:00-7, 0120-43-7725), and of course your Prefectural Advisor, Area Leader, or Sempai.

Don't view culture shock as something that you overcome by 'becoming' as Japanese as possible – you have more than enough money to make your life as comfortable as you want it, so do so – small creature comforts that make your life more livable are well worth the expense.

Privacy

You will most likely experience some kind of wacky situation regarding invasion of privacy at some point. Something to remember is that, especially in the more rural areas, you might be one foreigner out of

are hiding away in your area.

Starting a new hobby is a great way to meet people – JETs have been known to participate in a bunch of community activities from tai chi to pottery.

If you find yourself spending a lot on gas, try to find a self-service station to fill up each time – they are sometimes quite a bit cheaper than the full service gas stations.

To combat the many insects you'll face you need to get yourself an arsenal of chemicals. Apart from the usual spray stuff, I recommend putting gokiburi poison down at strategic points in your kitchen (they come in different forms, but they are all basically small little containers that let cockroaches eat poison from some central part, to then crawl away and die out of sight). They have really helped to fend off the cockroaches, for me. Easily identifiable at shops through illustrations on the front of the packages.

In the inaka you might find yourself going to onsens more often than other JETs. Remember to bring a towel!

Gossip can travel quite fast in the inaka. Discretion is your friend.

perhaps 4 or 5 that people have met in their entire lives. For that reason people are simply interested in you – you may have to get used to it! If at any time it becomes really intrusive – take steps: talk to your JTE and BOE about it.

Less to do

You may feel that, especially at work, you have less to do than say, a one-shot city JET who is going to a different school every day. This is of course dependent on your JTE and your school. You might find that even if you suggest things that you can do, your JTE or school may reject the ideas. Try creating work for yourself outside of class. Make an English noticeboard. Teach an eikaiwa class. Make a town newsletter. Plan a town cultural even with some other JETs. Study up on your Japanese. Attend other classes at school such as calligraphy, PE, whatever strikes your fancy. Procrastinate with a purpose!

Insects

They are a fact of living in Japan. Thankfully, your local supermarket will have an arsenal of chemical weapons to use against them. Find out which ones are for what type of insect and blast away. Many times the insect they combat are also pictured on the product themselves.

A product you may not think of getting at first is insect repellent powder. It's a gray powder you spread around the perimeter of your house that is effective in keeping the insects out. Keep reapplying as wind/rain wash your powder away.

Also useful are the tatami bombs, which inject repellent directly underneath your tatami – which is a veritable hotbed of insect activity. Keeping your place clean is a very simple solution, but surprisingly uncommon in the JET community. Set traps, have spray on hand, and learn to live with some of the creatures that you don't mind as much. The big spiders serve a wonderful purpose of helping keep the other creepy-crawlies out.

Mental and Physical Health

This sort of falls in with some of the other areas, but we can address it more specifically too. For some yet-to-be-discovered reason, the general rule here is that guys lose weight and girls put it on. While the city offers gyms, yoga, and streetlights for running safely at night, you have to be a little more creative out in the inaka.

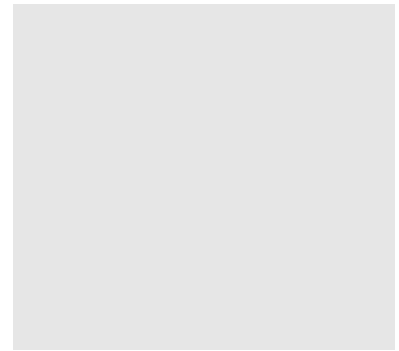
Again, enjoy the clubs at school, they'll love to have you and it may help the students open up to you a little more when it comes time to teach them English. Take up a Japanese martial art – there are usually plenty of local lessons so you can have your choice of martial art, it will help you with your Japanese, you'll get a bit of culture, and you'll be exercising! Find a local team or club. Most places will have some sort of

Escaping the inaka is actually very easy once you know your way around. For anyone in Kumamoto, you can belt it up the expressway and be in the center of Fukuoka city within 2 hours. If you carpool with some friends, it will hardly cost anything, too.

Small villages can be a pretty close community – don't be surprised if students turn up at your house wanting to come inside. You'll know best what to do based on how comfortable you are with your kids and neighbors. Of course, if you are a guy it's probably not a good idea to let female students in and vice versa.

sport or dance or class that goes on periodically though you'll have to ask around. Exercise at home or try to find a small gym to go to.

Buy a bike and ride it. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, you can find some pretty cheap bikes and no one will give you a weird look if it has a basket on it for your school supplies or groceries! Most of all, eat healthy! This is harder than it sounds. Search the internet for recipes or try to pick up a bilingual cookbook for healthy alternatives and cooking ideas using local ingredients.



Inaka points-of-interest for each region in Kumamoto prefecture

Kumamoto has a lot of cool stuff out in the inaka, if you know where to look! Excellent hiking and camping, kabuki theatres, caves, and beaches are just a few of the things you can find in the Kumamoto inaka. Not to mention paragliding, scuba diving, and dirt biking. And Ultraman Land. Fukuoka Prefecture doesn't have Ultraman Land.

A Note on Extreme Sports:

Kumamoto has facilities for almost every extreme sport you can think of, including paragliding, cycling, mountain biking, motorcross, ATV, canoeing, golf, jet-skiing, scuba diving, snorkeling, windsurfing, surfing, go-carting, sailing, rafting, hot air ballooning, and even skiing and snowboarding. Not good skiing and snowboarding, mind you, but hey, it's Kyushu! Facilities are sprinkled all over the prefecture.

More Inaka!! Where to get more info

The prefecture actually has a tourist hotline you can call to get the dirt on any of the above, and more: 096-333-2335. You may consider requesting a copy of the "Kumamoto Guide" a great little booklet jam-packed with stuff to see and do in Kumamoto. Or check out the official prefecture tourism website, http://kumamoto.jp/foreign/index_en.html. You can also ask your friends, fellow JETs, coworkers, etc.

ASO

A huge national park east of the city, centered on the massive, active Aso volcano, Aso is a nature lover's dream. Famous in Japan for its hot springs, spectacular hiking, camping, driving, and paragliding. Home to 100,000 people spread out in inaka villages in and around the 80km wide ancient volcanic crater of Aso. Along with Amakusa, a place you'll want to visit. **A lot.**

Mt. Aso

Five peaks, one huge smoking volcano. Set inside an 80-km wide ancient crater that is unique in the world. One of the best places to hike, camp and drive in all Kumamoto. You can look down into the volcano.

How to get there: Take Highway 57 to Aso. JR train line and buses from the city as well. In addition to regular train service, a vintage steam train (SL Aso Boy) runs from Kumamoto Station to Aso twice daily. Ropeways to the volcano are available from Aso and Ichinomiya Town.

Onsen (hot springs)

Aso onsen are famous throughout Japan, and for good reason. Warmed by hot liquid MAGMA, the waters are known for their therapeutic effects. Most are priced under 500yen.

Kurokawa Onsen Village in north Aso is **rated as the best in Japan**, and features at least 50 onsen of varying styles – some even in caves! Other famous onsen are in Uchinomaki (onsen village in Aso town), Minami Aso (Jigoku is among the best), and Takamori (the one with the waterwheel out front on route 265) offers the best view of Mt. Aso in Aso.

Daikanbo

Aso Town

The highest peak of the ancient Aso crater. One of the best places to view the five peaks of Mt. Aso. How to get there: Take Highway 57 to Aso Town, turn onto Route 212 at Aso Jr High School.

Alternatively take the Milk Road off of 57 in Ozu Town for spectacular views of Mt. Aso on the way.

Yamanami Highway

Aso (and beyond)

One of the prettiest drives in all Japan. Rolling hills, horse ranches, and spectacular views of Mt. Aso and Mt. Kuju. The old highway connecting Aso to the Beppu onsen resort town in Oita Prefecture. The famous Kurokawa onsen town is along the way as well.

How to get there: Take Highway 57 to Aso, turn at JR Miyaji Station

Soyokyo Gorge

Soyo Town

Called the “Grand Canyon of Kyushu.” A 300-meter wide, 100 meter deep gorge with the crystal clear Gokase river at the bottom.

Aso Shrine

Aso

A big shrine with unique architecture and home of the Aso Fire Swinging Festival in March. Come and swing bales of hay on fire for fun! The interesting Nakadori burial mounds where the ancient lords of Aso are buried are nearby.

Azelea 21

Aso

Olympic-sized pool, indoor water slide, and onsen and gym facilities at the base of Mt. Aso.
600yen/day

Aso Restaurants

Many hidden gem おしゃれ restaurants

Komachi

– on Route 57 Uchinomaki area

Famous Aka-gyu beef, pasta, sandwiches, and rice dishes

Open for lunch-dinner. Open late till 10PM

Karin's Café

Route 212 in Minami-Oguni

Cute sandwich and bakery shop

Tashiroya

In front of Aso shrine, downtown Miyaji area

Arguably the best okonomiyaki restaurant in Aso. Manjuu are famous nationwide comes in 黒・白

Taroya

In front of Aso shrine, downtown Miyaji area

Yakiniku restaurant, open late until 3AM. 4 sauces for meat. Horumon Kara-age. Teppan

Many young people gather here for dinner/enkais

Strong Boss & Denory's

Minami-Aso

Very good burgers that use real mayonnaise
Strong Boss also has chili cheeseburgers

Events

October Aso Sola Rave Dance Party*

Huge DJ'd dance party on the Aso volcano in Aso.

*I don't have any actual information on this, just hearsay

October 17ish Country Gold Country Music Festival

Even if you hate country music, you can't miss the 20,000 Japanese country music fans country line dancing in unison. Volunteer to be a "guide" for the foreign bands and get free admission! Held at ASPECTA outdoor amphitheater in Kugino Village, with spectacular views of Mt. Aso behind the stage.

March Aso Fire Festival

One of the major Kumamoto festivals of the year. The hills are alive with the sound of FIRE. Hills are set on fire, fire swinging at Aso Shrine, big kanji on fire in Aso, various other events throughout the month. Not to be missed. Did I mention FIRE? Also wear clothes you wouldn't mind getting seared

AMAKUSA

One of the best areas of Japan. A huge peninsula jutting out into the sea south of the city, Amakusa has some of the finest beaches outside of Okinawa. The nature is incredible, the Christian history is interesting, and the views across the sea are amazing. Plan to visit Amakusa early and often.

Five Bridges of Amakusa

Linking a series of islands, the bridges are famous for the views they afford of the sea and islands below. A lot of the views look like classic ink drawings.

Beaches!

Some of the nicest beaches in Japan, many with views of Nagasaki. Some favorites are Mugushi's Shirahama Beach and Satsuki Beach (Ushibuka) Mogine Beach (Hondo), Shiratsuru Beach (Amakusa Town), Rippleland (Ariake), Himedo Beach (Himedo), Nishime Beach (Matsushima)

Onsen!

There are some amazing onsen in Amakusa, many with great views of the ocean. Some favorites are Alegria (Hondo, sea view), Yasuragi (Ushibuka, peppermint bath), Shimoda (Amakusa Town onsen village), Yurakutei (Oyano, with cave onsen), Rippleland (Ariake), Yumer (Itsuwa), Amuri (Kawaura), Jipangu, Shofukaku, Romankan, Misakitei onsens (various onsens in Matsushima), Kappa Romankan (Sumoto).

Scuba!

A bunch of different places to scuba. Many have lessons available. Captain Boat Scuba in Hondo (0969-24-3035) is one of them. Ushibuka Marine Nature Park is another.

Dolphin Watching

Itsuwa

There are a number of ferries in the Itsuwa area that go out into the Ariake Sea for dolphin watching. They say that the chances you'll see dolphins while out there is around 99% percent. If you happen to be one of the 1% that doesn't get to see them, don't worry, you'll get a free ticket for another boat ride.

Ushibuka Marine Nature Park

Ushibuka

Amazing views with hiking, fishing, and diving/snorkeling areas.

Glass-Bottom Boats

Matsushima and Ushibuka

Glass-bottom boat rides let you see coral and sea life.

Shiro Amakusa Memorial Hall

A museum dedicated to Shiro Amakusa, a 15-year-old boy who fashioned himself as a Christian saint and led a farmer's rebellion against the lord of Kumamoto in the 1600's.

Goshoura Island

Three inhabited islands with tons of nature. Reachable by ferry from Hondo and Minamata.

Yushima Island

A tiny island off of Oyano, it has great views of Nagasaki and Amakusa coasts, a cute shrine, and two ryokan inns. A ferry runs from Oyano Port opposite the Shiro Amakusa Memorial Hall.

Catholic churches

Kawaura and Amakusa Town

Sakitsu Catholic Church in Karaura and Oe Catholic Church in Amakusa Town are interesting symbols of the earliest missionary efforts in Japan.

Events

Haiya Festival

Ushibuka Village

One of the best festivals in Kumamoto. Third weekend in April. Features traditional dance with a samba-like rhythm. Kind of a fishing theme to it.

ARAO-TAMANA-YAMAGA-KIKUCHI

A vast area north of Kumamoto City, home to great onsen, hiking, and interesting historical stuff. Or as interesting as interesting historical stuff can be anyway.

Kikuchi Gorge

Kikuchi City

Without any hint of irony, truly one of the most beautiful places in the world. A gem. Crystal-clear water rapids and waterfalls you can hike right next to. Swimming in the summer, leaves in the fall, and snow in the winter. Lovely.

Onsen!

Famous hot springs in Tamana, Yamaga, and Kikuchi Cities. Famed for giving you soft skin.

Yachiyoza Kabuki Theatre

Yamaga City

A real kabuki theatre built in 1910. You can go backstage and under it to see how the spectacular effects kabuki is known for are produced.

Mitsui Greenland

Arao City

The largest amusement park in Japan. Roller coasters aren't the half of it. Huge.

Tamana Sports Complex

Tamana City

Some of the weirdest, greatest architecture in Kyushu, including a huge concrete egg looking spaceship looking thing you can climb inside of. Also extensive sports and recreation facilities.

Kofun Burial Mounds

Kao Town

Ancient burial mounds where the old lords of Kumamoto are buried. There's a museum with tons of artifacts too.

Events

Yamaga Lantern Festival

Yamaga City

August 15-16ish. One of the big Kumamoto festivals of the year. 1,000 women dressed in white hold the distinctive gold Yamaga lanterns on their head and parade through the city.

Tamana Halloween Party

Every year the Tamana ALTs throw a huge Halloween Party. Bring on the fun.

UTO-MASHIKI-YABE-SEIWA

Located directly to the south of the city from the mouth of Amakusa to the Miyazaki Prefecture border, this area has some nice nature parks and strange white lights that appear over the ocean. Not kidding about the lights.

Ryokusenkyo Gorge

Seiwa Village

Beautiful gorge with hiking and camping

Seiwa Heights Astronomical Observatory

Seiwa Village

At an elevation of 700meters, this facility houses a 50cm reflecting telescope, as well as astronomy related exhibits.

Seiwa Bunraku Theatre

Seiwa Village

One of the great traditional arts of Japan, bunraku puppet theatre is only performed in a handful of places now. The farmers of the village performs the puppet plays in a brand new theatre, employing beautiful puppets with gorgeous costumes.

Tsujunkyo Aqueduct

Yabe Town

One of those images on all Kumamoto tourist literature, this is the stone aqueduct with the water shooting from the middle down into the river below.

Three Thousand Steps of Chuo

Chuo Town

Longest stone stairs in Japan. 3,333 steps made from stone collected from around the world. There's a big step-climbing festival here every year.

Sumiyoshi Nature Park

Uto City

Facing the Ariake Sea, the park has nice forests and hydrangea in the rainy season.

Todoroki Riverhead

Uto City

Oldest drinking water system in Japan, constructed 1690. Spring water is on of the Best 100 Waters of Japan. Nice to walk around.

Misumi Family Land

Misumi Town

Leisure park with athletic facilities, animal park, and fruit orchards.

Okoshiki Coast

Uto City

One of the most beautiful stretches of coastline in Kumamoto

Events

Shiranuhi Lights

Shiranuhi Town

Strange, UFO-like white lights that appear over the ocean near Shiranuhi Town in late August, early September. Not making this up. Call the town office at 0964-33-111 for more info.

Hassaku Festival

Yabe Town

Held September 4-5, features a parade with giant whimsical figures, including dragons and dinosaurs – made from materials found in the surrounding mountains and fields.

ITSUKI-GOKANOSHO

Sandwiched in the mountains between Yatsushiro and the region south of the city, this area is true inaka. Some cool traditional stuff is to be found here.

Heike-no-Sato

Izumi Village

A preserved village from the Kamakura era. The village, located deep in the mountains, was home to the ancient Heike family that was defeated in Kamakura times by the powerful Genji family.

Momiki and Umenoki-Todoro Suspension Bridges

Izumi Village

This area is so remote that the locals had to build suspension bridges as a form of transportation.

Spanning deep gorges, the bridges are located in some awfully pretty inaka countryside. You can walk on them – if you dare.

Events

Itsuki Firefly Festival

Itsuki Vilalge

While it might be a small road trip to get there, the firefly festival in Itsuki is one it is famous for. Happens Mid-June.

YATSUSHIRO-MINAMATA

Featuring some of the prettiest coastline in Kyushu, this area is in the south part of the prefecture.

Ashikita Marine Park Beach

Ashikita Town

One of the finest beaches in the prefecture. An alternative to the beaches of Amakusa, and easily reached via the Kyushu Expressway. This is also the place for Zorbing.

Hinagu Hot Springs

Yatsushiro City

Famous onsen on the Yatsushiro Sea.

Spanish Village

Minamata City

A touch of Spain in Kumamoto. Wine-making workshop, coffee shop, and Spanish restaurant, all in a Spanish villa facing the ocean.

Shohinken Tea House

Yatsushiro City

A beautiful tea house and big Japanese garden constructed in 1688 for the Lord of Yatsushiro Castle.

HITUYOSHI-KUMA

Stuck in the southernmost back pocket of Kumamoto, this region is what I like to call “true inaka.” Not totally devoid of fun stuff however. Close to devoid, but not quite. Just depends on your definition of fun.

Kuma River Whitewater Rafting

Hitoyoshi City/Kuma Village

There are dozens of companies that offer tours though the ones ALTs have actually been with include ABC rafting, and Land Earth. Land Earth has a great website setup in English as well and have many activities besides rafting. (<http://www.landearth.co.jp/en/>)

Kaname Falls

Hitoyoshi City

Voted as one of Japan's “top 100 most beautiful waterfalls,” viewing this fall requires a trek down the side of a mountain to a charming little grove where you can also have barbeques.

Hitoyoshi Castle Ruins

Hitoyoshi City

The castle burned down a long time ago, but the old walls are still there. A nice park for strolling and

looking across the wide Kuma River.

Onsen

Twenty-two different onsen along the Kuma River alone. Every town also boasts some fantastic onsen.

Kyusendo Caves

Kuma Village

Largest limestone caverns in Kyushu and second largest in Japan, 4,800 meters in length.

Ichifusa Dam/mountain

Mizukami Village

A large lake that you can do various watersports on, as well as a surrounding wall of hillside covered in Sakura (cherry blossom) that make this area both beautiful and highly popular with tourists during Sakura season (late March/early April). You can also take the time to climb the mountain. A good 2.5-3 hours up and another 2-3 down. Great view of all of Kuma-gun, and also into Miyazaki on the other side. Not for the weak of heart. This is one of the most difficult climbs in Kyushu and the peak is one of the highest at 1,722meters.