KYUSHU / SAGA · UNZEN · KIRISHIMA · MIYAZAKI · ASO · OITA · 15 DAYS · ROAD TRIP

# Back roads of the fire island: hidden gorges, smoking volcanoes & lantern-lit onsen

Updated October 2026 · Best time: Apr–May · Oct–Nov

Trip planner · tabi-notes.com/kyushu-countryside-road-trip

The big Kyushu cities are easy by train. The best of the island isn't: caldera grasslands, gorges, onsen villages in the forest, shrines on cliffs. Buses to these places run a few times a day, if at all. With a car, they become a relaxed loop.

This road trip starts and ends in **Fukuoka** and goes round the island clockwise: the Saga coast and its onsen towns, Unzen and a car ferry across the Ariake Sea, Kirishima's volcanoes, the subtropical **Nichinan coast**, the myth country of **Takachiho**, the Aso highlands with a night in **Kurokawa Onsen**, and Yufuin. Cities serve as gateways; most nights are in the places where the countryside is at its best.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **15** days | **~1,200** km by car | **9** stops | **Apr–May · Oct–Nov** best time |
| **from ~¥230k** per person* | | | |

*Accommodation and rental car for two, sharing a room. Flights not included.

## The route at a glance

1. **Fukuoka** — Nights 1–2
2. **Karatsu & Ureshino** — Night 3
3. **Unzen** — Night 4
4. **Kirishima** — Nights 5–6
5. **Nichinan Coast** — Nights 7–8
6. **Takachiho** — Night 9
7. **Kurokawa Onsen & Aso** — Nights 10–11
8. **Yufuin** — Nights 12–13
9. **Yabakei & Akizuki**

Night 14




The road trip: about 1,200 km from Fukuoka round Kyushu and back, with one car ferry from Shimabara to Kumamoto.

Prices are per room for two per night. Ryokan prices include dinner and breakfast. ☆ = famous / worth it · ☆☆ = splurge.

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# Stop by stop

## 01 Fukuoka 福岡

Nights 1–2 · Start with ramen & yatai

PLAN

- Arrival: subway from the airport to Hakata (5 min), tonkotsu ramen
- Day 2: Ohori Park, Canal City, Dazaifu Tenmangu, and the yatai stalls of Nakasu in the evening
- No car yet: in the city, the subway is faster

WHERE TO STAY

| | |
|---|---|
| **Hotel Il Palazzo** design hotel by Aldo Rossi, walk to the Nakasu yatai | ¥18–30k |
| **Nishitetsu Hotel Croom Hakata** big public bath, 5 min from Hakata Station | ¥15–25k |
| ☆☆ **The Ritz-Carlton, Fukuoka** high above Tenjin, views over the city | ¥80k+ |

**Good to know** Pick the car up on the morning you leave (day 3) at Hakata Station or the airport.

### ALSO WORTH SEEING

**Fukuoka Tower**
city view over Hakata Bay

**Nokonoshima Island Park**
flower island, short ferry ride

**Ishikura Sake Brewery**
sake brewery in Hakata

### WHERE I EAT

**Nagahama Yatai Dogenya**
yatai street stall

**Hakata Issou**
tonkotsu ramen

**Hakata Ramen ShinShin**
tonkotsu ramen

**Maedaya Motsunabe**
motsunabe hot pot

**博多もつ鍋菊武**
motsunabe hot pot

**Hakataro Nishinakasu**
mizutaki & motsunabe

**Yoshizuka Unagi**
grilled eel

**Daichi no Udon**
Hakata udon

**Hakata Yakiniku Hachi Hachi**
yakiniku

**Hakata Sushi Momonoki (博多鮨桃の木)**
sushi

**A Happy Pancake Tenjin**
soufflé pancakes

**Rec Coffee · Stereo Coffee · Blue Bottle**
coffee

## 02 Karatsu & Ureshino 唐津・嬉野

Night 3 · A sea torii, a castle and silky onsen water

### PLAN

- Day 3: west along the Itoshima coast to Futamigaura's white torii in the sea and the beach cafés, then Karatsu castle above the bay
- Afternoon: Ureshino Onsen, known for 'skin-beautifying' water, green tea and onsen-yudofu (tofu simmered in the spring water)
- Day 4 morning: Takeo's library by the hill, Mifuneyama garden under its cliff, the porcelain workshops of Arita

### WHERE TO STAY

| | |
|---|---|
| ★ **Wataya Besso** big classic garden ryokan with several baths | ¥40–60k |
| **Warakuen** onsen ryokan with a good tea-themed kaiseki | ¥35–55k |
| **Ryokan Omuraya** small, old inn in the centre of Ureshino | ¥30–45k |

**Good to know** Mifuneyama is spectacular in azalea season (late April) and when it's lit up for autumn.

## 03 Unzen 雲仙

Night 4 · Steaming hells on a mountain

PLAN

- Day 4 afternoon: drive up to Unzen (~1 h 30 from Takeo). Walk the Unzen Jigoku hells at dusk, then onsen eggs
- Day 5 morning: the Nita Pass and the ropeway on Mount Fugen, then down to Shimabara: the castle and the streets with carp in the canals
- From Shimabara port, the car ferry to Kumamoto (~30–60 min, book the car slot), then south on the expressway

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Unzen Kyushu Hotel** renovated hotel right on the edge of the hells — ¥50–80k

**Unzen Kanko Hotel** classic 1935 mountain hotel, timber and stone — ¥40–60k

**Unzen Fukudaya** modern ryokan with private-bath rooms — ¥40–70k

## 04 Kirishima 霧島

Nights 5–6 · Volcano plateau & mountain onsen

PLAN

- Day 5: Kumamoto port → Kirishima (~2 h 30 on the expressway)
- Day 6: Ebino Plateau, a walking trail past crater lakes; the red Kirishima Jingu in the cedar forest; Maruo Falls, warm with onsen water
- Option: drive onto Sakurajima. Since the 1914 eruption joined it to the mainland you can reach it by road, and take the 15-minute car ferry over to Kagoshima city

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Wasureno-sato Gajoen** thatched cottages and riverside baths at Myoken Onsen — ¥45–70k

**Kirishima Hotel** historic hotel with huge, varied sulphur baths — ¥30–50k

☆☆ **Tenku no Mori** five villas on a private mountain, one of Japan's most exclusive stays — ¥200k+

**Good to know** Some Kirishima peaks are closed when volcanic activity rises. Check the alert level before hiking Karakuni-dake.

## 05 Nichinan Coast 日南海岸

Nights 7–8 · Palm trees, sea caves & a castle town

PLAN

- Day 7: south-east to Obi (~2 h), a quiet castle town with samurai houses and fried fish cakes
- Udo Jingu, a vermilion shrine inside a sea cave; try to land a clay ball in the ring on the turtle rock

- Day 8: Route 220 along the coast, the moai statues of Sun Messe Nichinan, the jungle shrine on Aoshima island surrounded by 'devil's washboard' rocks
- Eat: chicken nanban, Miyazaki beef, and mango in season (summer)

WHERE TO STAY

**ANA Holiday Inn Resort Miyazaki** beach hotel at Aoshima — ¥20–35k

**Sheraton Grande Ocean Resort** tower by the pine forest north of Miyazaki — ¥30–50k

**Aoshima guesthouses** surf-town stays a short walk from the island — ¥10–18k

## 06 Takachiho 高千穂

Night 9 · Gorges, myths & night kagura

PLAN

- Day 9: north into the mountains (~2 h 30). Takachiho Gorge: row a boat under the Manai Falls (book online, go early)
- Amano-Iwato Shrine and the cave of Amano-Yasukawara, where the gods met in Japan's oldest myth
- Evening: one hour of yokagura dance at Takachiho Shrine, every night at 8 pm
- Day 10 at dawn: Kunimigaoka, for a sea of clouds over the valley on autumn mornings

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Ryokan Shinsen** small traditional inn near Takachiho Shrine — ¥40–60k

**Solest Takachiho Hotel** simple, modern hotel in the town centre — ¥15–25k

## 07 Kurokawa Onsen & Aso 黒川温泉・阿蘇

Nights 10–11 · An onsen village & the world's great caldera

PLAN

- Day 10: stop at Kamishikimi Kumanoimasu, a mossy stair path of lanterns in the forest, and the crystal Shirakawa spring
- Mount Aso: Kusasenri meadow with grazing horses, the Nakadake crater (if open), the Milk Road along the caldera rim to Daikanbo
- Day 11: Nabegataki Falls, which you can walk behind; then onsen hopping in Kurokawa with the wooden tegata pass (three outdoor baths)
- Evening: stroll the lantern-lit lanes in a yukata

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Yamamizuki** ryokan in the forest, riverside outdoor baths — ¥55–80k

**Okyakuya** the village's oldest inn, family-run — ¥40–60k

☆☆ **Sanga Ryokan** secluded, with famous mountain cuisine — ¥60–90k

**Good to know** Kurokawa has only about 30 inns and they fill fast. Book first, then build the rest of the trip around it.

◎ ALSO WORTH SEEING

**Kamishikimi Kumanoimasu Shrine**
mossy forest shrine on the way to Takachiho

## 08 Yufuin 由布院

Nights 12–13 · Highland road, Kunisaki's temples & a ryokan finale

PLAN

- Day 12: the Yamanami Highway over the Kuju highlands (Chojabaru), the 173-m-high Kokonoe 'Yume' suspension bridge, then Yufuin
- Day 13: loop through the Kunisaki peninsula (~1 h): Fuki-ji's 12th-century hall, the stone Buddhas of Kumano Magaibutsu, Futago-ji, and the samurai slopes of Kitsuki
- Or keep the day slow: Lake Kinrin, cafés, a second soak, and the hells of Beppu 30 minutes away

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Yufuin Gettouan** every room is a cottage with its own outdoor bath — ¥60–90k

☆☆ **Yufuin Tamanoyu** secluded garden ryokan, kaiseki dinner — ¥90k+

**Smaller ryokans along the river** simpler inns, many with private baths — ¥35–55k

◎ ALSO WORTH SEEING

**Kitsuki Castle & samurai town**
half-day trip, ~40 min north

**Futago-ji**
mountain temple on the Kunisaki peninsula

## 09 Yabakei & Akizuki 耶馬渓・秋月

Night 14 · Rock gorges, a hand-dug tunnel & back to Fukuoka

PLAN

- Day 14: Yabakei's Hitome-Hakkei viewpoint, eight rock peaks at a glance, brilliant in mid-November
- Ao-no-Domon, a tunnel one monk chiselled through the cliff by hand over some 30 years in the 18th century
- Akizuki, a small castle town of moats, stone bridges and maple-lined lanes, then return the car in Fukuoka (~1 h)
- Day 15: fly out of Fukuoka

WHERE TO STAY

**Hotel Il Palazzo** design hotel by Aldo Rossi, walk to the Nakasu yatai — ¥18–30k

**Nishitetsu Hotel Croom Hakata** big public bath, 5 min from Hakata Station — ¥15–25k

WHERE I EAT

**Hakata Ramen ShinShin (Deitos, at Hakata Station)**
one last tonkotsu ramen

**Maedaya Motsunabe Nakasu**
motsunabe hot pot

**NOOICE Hakata**
breakfast café

## Budget

Estimates for October at ¥150 ≈ US$1 · ¥165 ≈ €1. Ranges, not promises.

| Version | Accommodation (2 people) | + Car (12 days) | Per person |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Value**: business hotels, guesthouses and simpler onsen inns | ≈ ¥330k | ¥130k | ≈ ¥230k |
| **Middle**: first option at most stops, ryokans with dinner | ≈ ¥520k | ¥130k | ≈ ¥325k |
| **+ Splurge**: one night at Tenku no Mori, Sanga or Tamanoyu | + ¥60–200k | | + ¥30–100k |

MY RECOMMENDATION

Take the middle version, **about ¥325k per person**. If you splurge once, do it in Kurokawa or Yufuin.

🚗 Compact car with full insurance, picked up in Fukuoka on day 3 and returned there on day 14: about ¥110–150k for 12 days.

NOT INCLUDED

- Flights
- Fuel and tolls: about ¥35–50k in total (the Kyushu Expressway Pass helps)
- Car ferry Shimabara → Kumamoto: about ¥4–6k for car and driver
- Lunches, and dinners on hotel-only nights
- Boats, ropeways and entrance fees
- Golden Week and autumn weekends: up to +30%

## Booking & practical tips

DRIVING LICENCE

You need an International Driving Permit (1949 Geneva Convention) or, for some countries, an official Japanese translation. See my rental car guide.

EXPRESSWAY PASS

Ask for an ETC card and the Kyushu Expressway Pass for foreign visitors. It covers the long expressway legs: Kumamoto → Kirishima, Miyazaki, and the Oita expressway.

MOUNTAIN ROADS

Takachiho, Aso and Kunisaki roads are narrow and winding. Plan about 40 km/h on average, and avoid driving after dark in the mountains.

VOLCANOES

Aso, Kirishima and Sakurajima are active. Crater areas close at short notice; there's always a second viewpoint.

SEASONS

Azaleas and fresh green: April–May. Rainy season: June. Typhoons: August–September, especially on the Nichinan coast. Autumn colours: Kuju and Kurokawa late October, Yabakei and Akizuki mid-November.

BOOK EARLY

Kurokawa, Yufuin and Takachiho have few good inns. Book those first, about six months ahead for autumn.

## Frequently asked questions

**Why drive in Kyushu instead of taking the train?** −

Kyushu's cities are well connected, but the best countryside (Aso, Takachiho, Kurokawa, Kunisaki, the Nichinan coast) has only a few buses a day. A car turns those into easy, relaxed days.

**Is it OK to drive mountain roads if I'm not used to driving on the left?** −

Yes, with patience. The expressways are easy; the mountain roads are narrow and winding, so plan about 40 km/h on average and drive them in daylight.

**Do I need to book the Shimabara car ferry?** −

It's wise on weekends and in holidays. The ferry is short (30–60 min) and runs often, but car spaces are limited.

**Can I visit Kurokawa Onsen if I'm not staying there?** –

Yes. Buy the wooden tegata pass and try three outdoor baths at different inns during the day. Staying the night, though, is what makes Kurokawa special.

**Are tattoos a problem in the onsen?** –

In many public baths, yes. Book ryokans with private or rentable baths (kashikiri-buro), which is easy in Kurokawa and Yufuin, or cover small tattoos with a waterproof patch.