HONSHU / NORTH HONSHU / TOHOKU · AOMORI · AKITA · 19 DAYS · CAMPER VAN

Home is where the van parks: a camper loop to the top of Tohoku

Updated October 2026 · Best time: early–mid Oct

Trip planner · tabi-notes.com/northern-tohoku-camper-van

Camper vans are still a niche way to travel in Japan, and northern Tohoku is the perfect place to try it. The roads are quiet, the michi-no-eki roadside stations have toilets and local food, and the autumn colours start high in the mountains in early October and roll down to the coast.

This is a **round trip from Sendai**. Picking up and dropping off at the same depot avoids the expensive, unpublished one-way relocation fee and keeps the booking simple. You loop up the central spine to Aomori and come back down on the Akita side, so you rarely drive the same road twice. After the van come two nights at a legendary Fukushima mountain onsen and a finale in Tokyo.

19 days in Japan	**~10** days in the van	**~900–1,000** km loop	**early–mid Oct** best time
~¥420k–595k per person*			

*All-in estimate for two people sharing: camper, trains, three onsen ryokan nights, hotels, food. International flights not included.

Why a Sendai round trip in early October

Starting and ending in Sendai means **no one-way fee** and one simple booking. Going north first lets you chase the autumn colour line: the high peaks (Hakkoda, Towada, Oirase) turn first, and the lowlands and coast follow. Early to mid-October is also cool and dry, with fading typhoon risk, fewer crowds and lower prices than summer.

Alternative timing: the Aomori Nebuta Festival (2–7 August) works with the same loop. Book much earlier, and expect heat, crowds and green rather than golden mountains.

Two things that gate the whole trip

01 · YOUR DRIVING LICENCE

Japan only accepts an **International Driving Permit under the 1949 Geneva Convention**. Licences from Germany, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Monaco and Taiwan instead need an **official Japanese translation** (from JAF or an authorised issuer). Carry it with your original licence and passport. Sort this out for **every** driver before you fly. More in my essentials guide.

02 · BOOK A ROUND-TRIP CAMPER IN SENDAI

Pick up and drop off in Sendai, with no one-way fee. Japan C.R.C. has a Sendai depot (English site, insurance included), and Carstay also lists Sendai vans. Reserve early for October and request the ETC toll card with the van.

The route on the map



The camper loop: about 920 km from Sendai up to Aomori and back, then by train to Takayu Onsen and Aizu. Numbers are the days.

Day by day

DAY	ROUTE	SLEEP
1	Arrive in Tokyo, recover from jet lag	Hotel, Tokyo
2	Shinkansen Tokyo → Sendai, pick up the camper, Matsushima Bay	Camper, Matsushima
3	North to Hiraizumi (UNESCO golden hall Chūson-ji) + Geibikei / Genbikei gorges	Camper, Ichinoseki
4	→ Morioka: wanko-soba challenge, castle ruins	Camper, Morioka
5	Hachimantai alpine drive → Lake Towada	Camper, Towada
6	Walk the Oirase Gorge (9 km) + Lake Towada cruise	🍎 Oirase Keiryū Hotel
7	Hakkoda mountains + Sukayu Onsen → Aomori City	Camper, Aomori
8	Hirosaki: castle park, samurai district, apple-pie trail	Camper, Hirosaki
9	South into Akita: Lake Tazawa + Nyūtō Onsen	Camper, Tazawa
10	Kakunodate samurai town → east toward Naruko	Camper
11	Naruko Onsen Gorge, the top autumn canyon	Camper
12	Back to Sendai, **return the camper**, explore Sendai (gyūtan!)	Hotel, Sendai
13	Shinkansen Sendai → Fukushima, shuttle up to Takayu Onsen	♨ Tamagoyu
14	Onsen day, mountain walks	♨ Tamagoyu
15	Train to Aizu-Wakamatsu: Tsuruga Castle + Ōuchi-juku	Hotel, Aizu
16	Urabandai / Goshiki-numa ponds, or the scenic Tadami Line	Hotel, Aizu
17	Train Kōriyama / Fukushima → Tokyo	Hotel, Shinagawa
18	Tokyo	Hotel, Shinagawa
19	Tokyo, then evening flight home	—

The camper van

Operator	Japan C.R.C. Sendai depot (English website, insurance included), or Carstay vans in Sendai
Van (2-berth)	from ~¥24,200/day, higher on weekends & in high season. No one-way fee on a round trip
Insurance	Take the premium CDW (~¥11,000/day). It waives the NOC fee, which is worth it on a long loop
Tolls	Rent the ETC card (~¥330) + Tohoku Expressway Pass: 5 days ¥10,600 / 6 d ¥12,800 / 7 d ¥14,900 / 8 d ¥17,000
Sleeping	Carstay app (~57 spots in Tohoku, ¥500–5,000) & auto-campgrounds (~¥3,000–5,000/night)
Michi-no-eki	Free overnight REST only: no camping behaviour, no chairs outside, no waste dumping
Driving	Keep LEFT · full stop at every rail crossing · fuel ~¥170/L

⚠ The Tohoku Expressway Pass maxes out at 8 consecutive days. Cover your heaviest driving block with it and pay per trip for the rest.

Signature stays

THE APPLE RYOKAN · DAY 6

Oirase Keiryū Hotel

The only hotel on the Oirase Gorge: deep forest, apple-themed everything (buffet, in-house apple pies), free parking.

~¥25,000–45,000 pp, half-board

MOUNTAIN RYOKAN · DAYS 13–14

Tamagoyu, Takayu Onsen

An inn since 1868 with milky sulphur springs and an iconic thatched-roof open-air bath. Free shuttle from Fukushima Station at 14:30.

~¥11,000–25,000 pp, half-board

FINAL NIGHTS · DAYS 17–18

Shinagawa hotels, Tokyo

15 minutes to Haneda. Mitsui Garden or Sotetsu Fresa Inn, or the Grand Prince for a step up.

~¥18k–43k per night

Alternatives: for an apple bath, KAI Tsugaru (Owani). For a secluded onsen, Onyado Manyōtei or Bandai-Atami (closest to Aizu).

Trains

- Tokyo → Sendai: Tohoku Shinkansen, ~1 h 30, ~¥11,000 pp (reserved seat)
- Sendai → Fukushima: ~25 min, ~¥6,500 pp
- Fukushima / Kōriyama → Tokyo: ~1.5 h, ~¥9,000 pp
- Buy point-to-point tickets rather than a JR Pass. Your train days are weeks apart around the camper loop.

Budget

Estimates for two people over the full trip at ¥150 ≈ US$1 · ¥165 ≈ €1.

Item (2 people)	Estimate
Trains (both, point-to-point)	¥58k–74k
Camper ~10 days round trip (rental, insurance, fuel, tolls, pitches)	¥380k–495k
Apple ryokan, 1 night × 2	¥58k–83k
Tamagoyu, 2 nights × 2	¥66k–105k
Aizu + Tokyo hotels (~5 nights)	¥83k–130k
Food / activities / misc	¥200k–295k
Total for two	**≈ ¥840k–1.2M**

MY RECOMMENDATION

That's roughly **¥420k–595k per person**, before international flights. Book October ryokan rates early.

NOT INCLUDED

– International flights

Booking checklist

1. Sort out your driving licence paperwork, for both drivers
2. Book a round-trip camper from Sendai (Japan C.R.C. or Carstay) + ETC card
3. Lock in your October dates
4. Book Oirase Keiryū Hotel + Tamagoyu, as autumn fills fast
5. Reserve Shinkansen seats + the Tamagoyu 14:30 shuttle, and apply for the Tohoku Expressway Pass
6. Pre-book a few Carstay spots for the camper nights

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Have a wonderful trip through Tohoku!

Frequently asked questions

Where can I sleep with a camper van in Japan?

On Carstay spots and at auto campgrounds. Michi-no-eki roadside stations allow a short rest overnight, but no camping behaviour: no chairs outside, no cooking, no waste.

Is a camper van cheaper than car + hotels?

Not much. Camper rental and insurance are expensive in Japan. You save on some nights, but the real reasons are freedom and waking up next to a lake or a mountain.

How big are the vans?

Most rental campers are compact 2–4 berth vans built on a Toyota HiAce or a small truck. They drive like a large car and fit normal parking spaces.

Do I need a special licence?

No. A normal car licence plus the International Driving Permit (1949 Geneva Convention) or an official Japanese translation is enough for the usual rental campers.

What if it rains or gets cold? –

October nights in northern Tohoku can drop close to freezing in the mountains. Ask for a van with a heater, and treat the ryokan nights as your warm-bath reward.