OKINAWA / TOKYO OR OSAKA · NAHA · KERAMA ISLANDS · ONNA · MOTOBU · YANBARU · 13 DAYS · FLIGHTS & CAR

Okinawa, the other Japan: turquoise islands, castle ruins & jungle roads

Updated November 2026 · Best time: Apr · late Jun–Jul · Oct
Trip planner · tabi-notes.com/okinawa-island-road-trip

You've done Senso-ji at dawn, queued for Fushimi Inari and eaten your way through Dotonbori. This trip is for the next time: **Okinawa**, Japan's subtropical south, where the sea is a colour you didn't know existed, the castles are Ryukyu stone walls instead of white towers, and dinner is goya champuru with a glass of awamori.

The plan is simple. Fly into **Tokyo or Osaka**, whichever is easier from home, and take two or three easy days to shake off the jet lag (with ideas for corners you probably haven't seen yet). Then a short flight to **Naha** and **seven nights on Okinawa**: two in Naha with a boat day to the **Kerama Islands**, then a rental car up the island, from the sacred sites of the south and the sea road to the eastern islands, to the west-coast capes, the **Churaumi Aquarium**, **Kouri Island** and the forests of **Yanbaru** in the far north. At the end you fly back to the city you came from for **two last nights**, and home from there.

13 days	**7 nights** on Okinawa	**5 days** rental car	**Apr · late Jun–Jul · Oct** best time
~¥265k per person*			

*Accommodation (sharing a room), domestic flights, rental car and ferries, middle version. International flights not included.

Tokyo or Osaka: where to land

Both cities have frequent flights to Naha, so pick the one with the better connection from home: the cheaper fare, the shorter journey or the nicer flight times. You fly back to the same city at the end, so a simple return ticket works.

	Fly into Tokyo	Fly into Osaka (Kansai)
Good for	Europe and North America: the most direct flights	Much of Asia and the Middle East; Finnair, Emirates and others also fly here from Europe
Flight to Naha	Haneda: ~2 h 40, a departure about every half hour (JAL, ANA, Skymark); Narita: low-cost carriers	Kansai or Itami: ~2 h 10; Kansai is a Peach hub with cheap fares
2–3 jet-lag days	Neighbourhoods off the first-trip list (see stop 1)	Food, cafés and easy day trips (see stop 1)

FLIGHTS INSIDE JAPAN

Book Tokyo/Osaka ⇄ Naha as one return ticket. JAL's Japan Explorer Pass and ANA's fares for overseas visitors are cheap flat fares (from about ¥12k one way, booked from abroad); the low-cost carriers Peach, Jetstar and Skymark are often cheaper but charge for bags. Allow at least 3 hours between landing from Naha and an international flight, or better, follow this route and stay two more nights.

The route at a glance

1 **Tokyo or Osaka**
Nights 1–3

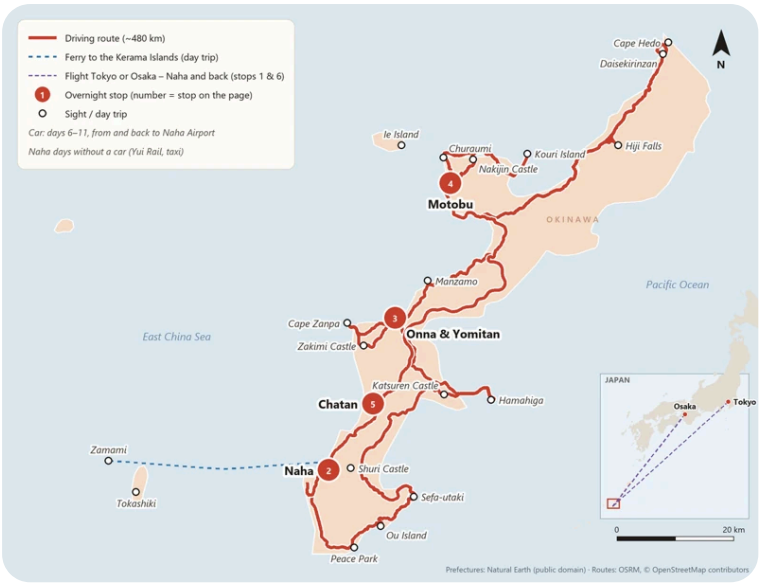
2 **Naha**
Nights 4–5

3 **Onna & Yomitan**
Nights 6–7

4 **Motobu & Yanbaru**
Nights 8–9

5 **Chatan**
Night 10

6 **Back to Tokyo or Osaka**
Nights 11–12



Okinawa by car: Naha → the south and the east-coast islands → Onna & Yomitan → Motobu and Yanbaru → Chatan, with a boat day to the Kerama Islands. The small map shows the flights from Tokyo or Osaka.

Prices are per room for two per night. ⭐ = famous / worth it · ⭐⭐ = splurge. Okinawa's beach hotels cost up to 50 % more in July, August and Golden Week.

Stop by stop

01 Tokyo or Osaka 東京・大阪

Nights 1–3 · Jet lag days, away from the first-trip sights

PLAN

- **Tokyo**: old-town lanes in Yanaka and Nezu, coffee and the garden in Kiyosumi-Shirakawa, vintage shops in Shimokitazawa or Koenji, the green Todoroki Valley, and an evening in a neighbourhood sento
- **Osaka**: cafés in the old wooden houses of Nakazakicho, the izakaya alleys of Tenma, the Nakanoshima Museum of Art, a forest walk to Minoh Falls (~40 min from Minoh Station), Sakai's knife makers and the giant keyhole tombs
- Jet lag works for you: you'll wake at 5 am, the right time for a sushi breakfast at Toyosu or Tsukiji (Tokyo) or a walk through Kuromon Market before it fills up (Osaka)
- Keep the evenings early. Day 4 starts with a morning flight to Naha

WHERE TO STAY

Tokyo: Mitsui Garden Hotel Ginza Premier high floors over Ginza, 5 min to Tokyo Station — ¥30–45k

Tokyo: Hotel Gracery Shinjuku the Godzilla hotel, right in Kabukicho — ¥22–35k

Osaka: Cross Hotel Osaka a few steps from Dotonbori — ¥25–40k

Osaka: Hotel Hankyu Respire Osaka above Osaka Station, easy for Kobe days — ¥18–30k

Good to know Stay near your airport line: Hamamatsucho, Shinagawa or Ginza for Haneda; Namba or Umeda for Kansai and Itami. Book the **same hotel** for stop 6 and leave your winter coat and big suitcase there. Okinawa needs one small bag.

02 Naha 那覇

Nights 4–5 · Ryukyu castle, markets & a boat to the Kerama Islands

PLAN

- Day 4: fly to Naha, then the Yui Rail monorail into town (no car yet: traffic and hotel parking make it pointless here). Kokusai-dori's side streets, Makishi Market for a fish dinner
- **Shuri Castle**: the rebuilt main hall (Seiden), burnt in 2019, opens again from 23 November 2026, at first with timed reservations. Walk back down the old Kinjo-cho stone path
- Day 5, the boat day: the fast boat from Tomari port to **Zamami** (~50 min). Swim at Furuzamami Beach, look for sea turtles at Ama Beach, climb a viewpoint over the Kerama Islands. Back by evening
- **Hidden**: Sakaemachi Market after dark, when the stalls turn into standing bars with live sanshin music; the potters of Tsuboya in the morning

WHERE TO STAY

★ **Hotel Collective** big, modern and right on Kokusai-dori	¥25–40k
Hyatt Regency Naha quiet side of the centre, rooftop pool	¥30–50k
Richmond Hotel Naha Kumoji good value, short walk to the monorail	¥14–22k

Good to know Kerama boats: the Queen Zamami costs ¥3,950 one way (¥7,510 return) and sells out in summer, so book online early. It has maintenance breaks (from 20 October to 3 December in 2026), when only the slower ferry runs (~1 h 30–2 h). For Tokashiki's Aharen Beach take the Marine Liner Tokashiki (~35 min).

ALSO WORTH SEEING

Shuri Castle
the Ryukyu kings' palace, main hall reopens 23 Nov 2026

Tsuboya Yachimun Street
potters' quarter, shisa lions and old kilns

Sakaemachi Market
post-war market that turns into a maze of tiny bars at night

Naminoue Shrine
a shrine on a cliff above the city beach

WHERE I EAT

Makishi Public Market
pick fish downstairs, they cook it upstairs

Yunangi
Okinawan home cooking since 1970

Urizun
classic awamori izakaya, try the dōruwakashi

Shuri Soba
Okinawa soba near the castle, closes when sold out

Pork Tamago Onigiri
Spam-and-egg rice sandwich, Okinawa's breakfast

03 Onna & Yomitan 恩納・読谷

Nights 6–7 · Sacred south, a road over the sea & the west-coast capes

PLAN

- Day 6: pick up the car (rental shuttles from the airport, allow an hour). South first: the **Peace Memorial Park** and its sea of names, **Ou Island** for fish tempura, then **Sefa-utaki** (buy tickets at the Nanjo City Local Products Center, ¥600)
- Afternoon: **Kaichu-doro**, a 5-km road across the shallows, to the quiet islands of Henza, Miyagi and **Hamahiga** with its cave shrine Shirumichu. On the way back, sunset from **Katsuren Castle**
- Day 7, the west coast: snorkel the **Blue Cave at Cape Maeda** early, before the tour boats (book a guide; it closes in big waves). Then **Zakimi Castle**, the potters of **Yachimun no Sato**, and sunset at **Cape Zanpa** lighthouse
- **Hidden**: **Kudaka**, the island of the gods, is a 15-minute ferry from Azama port on day 6, if you'd rather walk than drive. Cycle it, and stay on the paths: much of it is sacred

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Hotel Nikko Alivila** Spanish-style resort on one of Yomitan's best beaches	¥40–70k
Hotel Monterey Okinawa Spa & Resort big resort with its own beach in Onna	¥30–50k
Rizzan Sea-Park Hotel Tancha-Bay good value, long beach, close to Cape Maeda	¥25–40k
☆☆ **Halekulani Okinawa** Okinawa's most elegant hotel, every room faces the sea	¥120k+

Good to know Most of Okinawa's beaches are rocky coral with sharp edges: bring water shoes. Hotel beaches have nets against box jellyfish from June to September. Swim inside them.

ALSO WORTH SEEING

Sefa-utaki
Ryukyu's holiest site, World Heritage

Katsuren Castle
hilltop walls with views over both coasts

Shirumichu
cave shrine of the creator goddess on Hamahiga

Zakimi Castle
curved stone walls from the 1400s

Yachimun no Sato
pottery village with a huge climbing kiln

Cape Maeda
the Blue Cave, Okinawa's easiest good snorkelling

WHERE I EAT

Hamabe no Chaya
café with its feet in the sea, Nanjo

Nakamoto Sengyo Tempura
fish tempura on tiny Ou island

Seaside Drive-In
Route 58 classic since 1967, order the soup

King Tacos Kin
taco rice where it was invented

04 Motobu & Yanbaru 本部・やんばる

Nights 8–9 · Whale sharks, island bridges & the jungle north

PLAN

- Day 8: north along the coast past **Manzamo**, to the **Churaumi Aquarium** (¥2,180; go after 4 pm or right at opening, when the school groups are gone). Walk or cycle the **Fukugi tree road** in Bise next door
- Afternoon: **Nakijin Castle** and the bridge to **Kouri Island**; sunset at Tinu Beach. Dinner at Kishimoto Shokudo, open since 1905
- Day 9, **Yanbaru**: the forest of the far north, World Heritage since 2021. The trail to **Hiji Falls** (~40 min each way), the limestone and banyans of **Daisekirinzan**, the wind at **Cape Hedo**. Lunch in Ogimi. Watch for the flightless Okinawa rail on the roads
- Day 10 morning, **hidden**: the 15-minute boat to flat little **Minna Island** for a swim, or the 30-minute ferry to **Ie Island** to climb its rock peak. Then south to Chatan
- Optional: **Junglia**, the big jungle theme park that opened in 2025 near Nakijin (from about ¥8,000 for visitors from abroad, a full day)

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Hotel Orion Motobu Resort & Spa** next to the aquarium, every room faces the sea and Ie Island	¥40–70k
Hilton Okinawa Sesoko Resort on Sesoko Island, long white beach, sunsets	¥35–60k
Villas on Kouri Island small private villas, some with plunge pools	¥30–50k
Hotel Mahaina Wellness Resort family-friendly, near the aquarium	¥20–35k

Good to know Yanbaru has few petrol stations and no convenience stores beyond Ogimi. Fill up in Nago, and drive the forest roads slowly: rare animals cross them, especially at dusk.

ALSO WORTH SEEING

Churaumi Aquarium
the whale sharks of the Kuroshio Sea tank

Bise Fukugi Tree Road
village lanes in a tunnel of trees

Nakijin Castle
World Heritage walls snaking along a ridge

Kouri Island
a 2-km bridge and the heart-shaped rocks of Tinu Beach

Hiji Falls
a jungle trail with a suspension bridge

Daisekirinzan
limestone pinnacles and giant banyans

Cape Hedo
Okinawa's northern tip, Yoron island on the horizon

WHERE I EAT

Kishimoto Shokudo
Okinawa soba cooked over wood fire since 1905

Yachimun Kissa Shisa-en
tea house in a jungle garden full of shisa lions

Kouri Shrimp
garlic shrimp from a food truck on Kouri

Emi no Mise
longevity lunch in Ogimi, the village of 100-year-olds

05 Chatan 北谷

Night 10 · Sunset by the sea wall, then back to the airport

PLAN

- Day 10: back south on the expressway (~1 h 15 from Motobu; ~¥1,040 with the ETC card)
- Evening in **Mihama**: the colourful streets of American Village, sunset over the sea wall, dinner by the water
- Day 11: last swim or breakfast with a view, return the car near the airport (allow an hour), and fly back to Tokyo or Osaka

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Vessel Hotel Campana Okinawa** on the waterfront in American Village, rooftop bath	¥20–35k
Hilton Okinawa Chatan Resort resort pool, a short walk to Mihama	¥35–55k
The Beach Tower Okinawa tower hotel above Sunset Beach	¥20–35k

> **Good to know** Chatan is 30 minutes from the airport, so you avoid driving the whole island on the morning of your flight. Fill the tank before you return the car.

WHERE I EAT

Zhyvago Coffee Works
speciality coffee by the sea wall

A&W Makiminato
Okinawa's American-era drive-in, root beer and curly fries

Blue Seal
ice cream in beni-imo and salt-cookie flavours

06 Back to Tokyo or Osaka 東京・大阪

Nights 11–12 · Two easy days before the long flight home

PLAN

- Day 11: flight back (~2 h 15 to Tokyo, ~2 h to Osaka). The same hotel as at the start, with your suitcase waiting
- **Tokyo**: a hike up Mount Takao (1 h from Shinjuku), the kitchen shops of Kappabashi, the onsen food hall Toyosu Senkyaku Banrai, or the last sushi counter you didn't get into
- **Osaka**: half a day in Kobe (~25 min), a soak in Arima Onsen, or the gift and snack floors of the Umeda department stores
- Day 13: fly home. Send your big suitcase to the airport a day ahead with takkyubin and take the train with hand luggage

WHERE TO STAY

Tokyo: Mitsui Garden Hotel Ginza Premier high floors over Ginza, 5 min to Tokyo Station	¥30–45k
Tokyo: Hotel Gracery Shinjuku the Godzilla hotel, right in Kabukicho	¥22–35k
Osaka: Cross Hotel Osaka a few steps from Dotonbori	¥25–40k

Osaka: Hotel Hankyu Respire Osaka above Osaka Station, easy for Kobe days ¥18–30k

> **Good to know** Two nights is the right buffer: a typhoon or a full flight never puts your international connection at risk, and you go home rested instead of straight off the beach.

Budget

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

Version	Accommodation (2 people)	+ Flights, car & boats (per person)	Per person
Value: business hotels in the cities and Naha, mid-range resorts	≈ ¥220k	≈ ¥65k	≈ ¥175k
Middle: the first or second option at every stop	≈ ¥400k	≈ ¥65k	≈ ¥265k
+ Splurge: a night at the Halekulani or Hoshinoya Okinawa	+ ¥80–150k		+ ¥40–75k

MY RECOMMENDATION

Take the middle version, **about ¥265k per person**. If you splurge once, do it on the west coast, where the sunsets are.

🚗 Includes the return flight Tokyo/Osaka ⇄ Naha (~¥25–35k), a compact rental car for 5 days shared by two (~¥30k each) and the Zamami fast boat (¥7,510 return).

NOT INCLUDED

- International flights
- Food, about ¥6–10k per person a day
- Fuel and expressway tolls: about ¥8–12k in total
- Churaumi, castles, snorkelling tours and boats beyond Zamami
- July, August and Golden Week: up to +50% on Okinawa

Booking & practical tips

BOOK IN THIS ORDER

Domestic flights and the rental car first (both get expensive and sell out in summer), then the Okinawa hotels, then the city hotels.

LESS BEACH TIME?

Cut Okinawa to 4–5 nights (Naha 1, Onna 1, Motobu 2) and fly Naha → Kagoshima (~1 h 20): Sakurajima, Ibusuki's hot-sand baths or Yakushima's cedar forests, then back to Osaka by Shinkansen (~4 h) or fly to Tokyo. My Kyushu-by-train route covers the south of Kyushu in detail.

SEA SAFETY

Swim at beaches with lifeguards and nets. Currents at the reef edge are strong, the coral cuts, and box jellyfish appear from June to September. Don't touch or take coral or shells from protected areas.

RESPECT THE SACRED SITES

Utaki like Sefa-utaki and the paths on Kudaka are places of worship, not photo spots. Keep to the paths, don't step over rope barriers, speak quietly.

MONEY & CARDS

Cards work in hotels, chains and most restaurants; small soba shops, markets and island ferries still often want cash. Convenience-store ATMs take foreign cards.

EAT

Okinawa soba, goya champuru, rafute (braised pork belly), sea grapes (umibudo), taco rice, jimami tofu (peanut tofu), sata andagi doughnuts, Orion beer and awamori.

Longer on Okinawa

+2–4 NIGHTS · SLOW OKINAWA

1. sleep on Zamami for 1–2 nights instead of the day trip: turtles in the morning, stars at night
2. a night in Yanbaru (Kunigami) with a guided night walk
3. a 3rd night in Motobu for Minna or Ie Island
4. a lazy beach day in Onna

+3–5 NIGHTS · THE OUTER ISLANDS

1. fly Naha → Ishigaki (~1 h): Taketomi's sand-street village and Iriomote's jungle rivers by boat
2. or Naha → Miyako (~50 min): long bridges and some of Japan's clearest water
3. both have direct flights back to Tokyo and Osaka, so you don't need to return to Naha

Car for some days or all of them?

	What it means	For whom
Days 6–11 (this route)	No car in Naha, five days for the rest of the island	Most people: Naha is easier on foot and by monorail, and hotel parking there costs ~¥1,500–2,500 a night
All 7 days	Pick up on arrival at the airport	If you skip Naha's sights and stay on the coast from day 4
No car	Buses, the Yanbaru Express airport bus to Motobu, day tours	Possible for Naha, Kerama, Onna and the aquarium; the south, the east-coast islands and Yanbaru are hard without a car

Rental cars cost about ¥8–12k a day for a compact car with full insurance, and up to twice that in July, August and Golden Week. Book early and ask for an **ETC card**. You need an International Driving Permit (or the official Japanese translation, for some countries). Traffic on Route 58 is slow in the morning and evening rush hour; the expressway is the fast way north.

When to go to Okinawa

Okinawa is warm all year, but the sea, the rain and the typhoons decide when it is at its best. My favourites: **April**, **late June to mid-July**, and **October**.

Months	Weather & sea	Verdict
Jan–Feb	17–20 °C, often windy and grey, sea ~21 °C. Pink Kanhi cherries in late January, whale watching off the Kerama Islands	Good for walking and whales, not for beaches. Cheapest
March–April	22–25 °C, sea warming up to ~23 °C, the beaches open	**Very good**; avoid Golden Week (29 Apr–5 May)
May–mid June	Rainy season, usually from about 10 May to 21 June: humid, with heavy showers	OK if cheap prices matter more than sun
late June–July	Just after the rainy season: clear skies, sea at its calmest and clearest, ~30 °C	**Best for the sea**; school holidays from about 20 July make it busy and pricey
August–September	Hot (32 °C) and humid, peak typhoon season	Book flexible rates and keep a spare day
October	Warm (27 °C), sea still ~26 °C, fewer people	**Very good**; the odd late typhoon
Nov–Dec	Mild (20–24 °C), drier, sea cooling to ~23 °C	Good for culture, castles and Yanbaru, and Shuri's new main hall

TYPHOONS

Most typhoons hit between July and September. A typhoon stops flights and boats for one or two days, and Okinawans close their shutters and wait. That's why this route has two buffer nights in Tokyo or Osaka at the end.

For the rest of Japan, see **Seasons** for the month-by-month overview.

Frequently asked questions

Is a week on Okinawa too long? –

Not with a car. Seven nights gives you a boat day to the Kerama Islands, the south and its sacred sites, the west-coast capes, the aquarium and Kouri, and a full day in the Yanbaru forest, with time left to swim. With fewer days, keep Motobu and Kerama and skip the south.

Do I need a car on Okinawa? –

For most of this route, yes. Naha and the Kerama Islands work without one, and there are buses to the aquarium, but the south, the east-coast islands and Yanbaru are hard to reach by bus. Rent the car only after the Naha days.

Tokyo or Osaka for the city days? –

Whichever has the better flight from home. Tokyo has more direct flights from Europe and North America, Osaka (Kansai) from much of Asia. Both have frequent, short flights to Naha, and you return to the same city at the end.

When is the sea best? –

Late June to mid-July, right after the rainy season, when the water is calm and very clear. April and October are also very good and quieter. Typhoons are most likely from July to September.

Can I swim in winter? –

Rarely. From December to February the sea is around 21 °C and it's often windy. Winter is great for castles, Yanbaru hikes, whale watching around the Kerama Islands and low prices, but not for beach days.