SHIKOKU / SHIKOKU · SETO INLAND SEA · 16 DAYS · ROAD TRIP

Vine bridges, art islands & the last clear river: a slow loop around Shikoku

Updated October 2026 · Best time: Oct–Nov

Trip planner · tabi-notes.com/shikoku-road-trip

Shikoku is the smallest of Japan's four main islands and the one most visitors skip, which is exactly why I love it. In just over two weeks you get world-class contemporary art, deep gorges with vine bridges, the last clear river in Japan, Pacific cliffs, castle towns and Japan's oldest onsen town.

You fly from Tokyo to Takamatsu, start car-free on the art island of Naoshima, then pick up a rental car and drive a one-way loop. It ends by crossing the Shimanami Kaidō bridges to Onomichi, where you hand back the car and take the Shinkansen to Tokyo.

16 days	**~900–1,000** km by car	**8** stops	**Oct–Nov** best time
from ~¥265k per person*			

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

The route at a glance

1. **Tokyo / Haneda** — Nights 1 & 15
2. **Naoshima** — Nights 2–3
3. **Iya Valley** — Nights 4–5
4. **Kochi** — Nights 6–7
5. **Shimanto / Ashizuri** — Nights 8–9
6. **Ozu / Uchiko** — Night 10
7. **Matsuyama / Dōgo** — Nights 11–13
8. **Shimanami / Setoda** — Night 14



The route: about 580 km by car from Takamatsu to Onomichi (plus day trips), the ferry to Naoshima and the flight from Tokyo.

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

Stop by stop

01 Tokyo / Haneda 羽田

Nights 1 & 15 · Arrival and the night before your flight home

PLAN

- Day 1: land at Haneda and stay at the airport
- Day 2: domestic flight Haneda → Takamatsu (~1 h 20 min), ferry to Naoshima
- Day 15: return the car in Onomichi / Fukuyama, Shinkansen Fukuyama → Tokyo (~3.5 h), on to Haneda

WHERE TO STAY

Villa Fontaine Grand Haneda Airport connected to Terminal 3, onsen spa — ¥25–35k

Haneda Excel Hotel Tokyu at Terminal 2, handy for the domestic flight — ¥20–30k

> **Good to know** Book the domestic flight with JAL or ANA (about ¥13k–20k per person). Foreign visitors often get cheaper fares on their visitor deals.

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02 Naoshima 直島

Nights 2–3 · Art islands, no car needed

PLAN

- Naoshima: Chichu Art Museum, Benesse House, the yellow pumpkin, the Art House Project in Honmura. Get around by e-bike or island bus
- Day trip: ferry to Teshima for the Teshima Art Museum, a single drop-shaped space

WHERE TO STAY

⭐ **Benesse House** sleep inside the museum, with art in the rooms and halls after closing	¥60–90k
Minshuku / guesthouse simple, in Honmura or Miyanoura, often with breakfast	¥15–25k
⭐⭐ **Naoshima Ryokan Roka** new luxury ryokan with onsen	¥100k+

Good to know Most museums are closed on Mondays. Chichu needs a timed ticket booked online.

03 Iya Valley 祖谷

Nights 4–5 · Pick up the car in Takamatsu · Konpira-san on the way

PLAN

- Day 4: Konpira-san (785 steps, more to the inner shrine), Sanuki udon for lunch, then drive into the valley
- Day 5: vine bridges, Oboke Gorge boat ride, Ochiai village viewpoint, Nagoro scarecrow village

WHERE TO STAY

⭐ **Hotel Iya Onsen** cable car down to an open-air bath right on the river	¥50–70k
Hotel Kazurabashi cable car up to the hillside onsen, valley views	¥35–50k
⭐ **Chiiori** restored 18th-century thatched farmhouse (Alex Kerr), very remote	¥50–80k for the house

Good to know Narrow single-lane mountain roads. Rent a small car and drive slowly.

04 Kochi 高知

Nights 6–7 · Castle, market & the Niyodo blue

PLAN

- Kochi: Kochi Castle, Hirome Market (bonito seared over a straw fire), Katsurahama beach
- Day trip: the Niyodo River and its famous "Niyodo blue" at the Nakatsu and Yasui gorges (hidden gem)

WHERE TO STAY

⭐ **Jyosei-kan** historic ryokan where the imperial family has stayed	¥40–60k
Sansuien onsen hotel next to the castle, in the former lords' garden	¥30–40k
Richmond Hotel Kochi good city hotel close to Hirome Market	¥15–20k

Good to know The big Kochi Sunday Market is only on Sundays, so plan Kochi around a weekend if you can.

05 Shimanto / Ashizuri 四万十・足摺

Nights 8–9 · The last clear river & the Pacific coast

PLAN

- Shimanto: canoeing on the river and the low "chinkabashi" bridges without railings
- Day trip: Cape Ashizuri, with its lighthouse, cliffs above the Pacific and temple 38 of the 88-temple pilgrimage

WHERE TO STAY

Ashizuri Thermae onsen hotel high above the Pacific — ¥40–60k

Shimanto no Yado close to the river and nature — ¥30–40k

Business hotel in Shimanto (Nakamura) value tip for one night — ~¥12k

06 Ozu / Uchiko 大洲・内子

Night 10 · Castle town & old merchant street, via Uwajima

PLAN

- Uchiko: Yokaichi merchant street and the Uchiko-za kabuki theatre
- Ozu: wooden castle on the river, Garyu Sanso villa, old-town walk

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Nipponia Hotel Ozu Castle Town** restored historic houses spread through the old town — ¥40–60k

Uchiko guesthouses small stays in old houses — ¥15–25k

07 Matsuyama / Dōgo 松山・道後

Nights 11–13 · Japan's oldest onsen town

PLAN

- Matsuyama: the Dōgo Onsen Honkan bathhouse, Matsuyama Castle by ropeway
- Day trip: the UFO Line ridge road and Mount Ishizuchi for early autumn colours
- Festival: Niihama Taiko Matsuri (around 16–18 October), huge drum floats, ~1 h away

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Dōgo Onsen Funaya** one of Dōgo's most famous ryokans, garden & onsen — ¥50–80k

Yamatoya Besso elegant, with traditional Noh performances — ¥50–70k

Dōgo Yaya casual hotel, 2 min from the Honkan — ¥15–20k

08 Shimanami / Setoda しまなみ・瀬戸田

Night 14 · Island-hopping over the bridges to Honshu

PLAN

- Shimanami Kaidō: drive the island bridges from Imabari, with a stop at the Kirosan viewpoint
- Cycling: rent bikes on Ikuchijima and ride part of the route
- Setoda & Onomichi: lemon groves, Kosan-ji temple, the hillside temple walk in Onomichi

WHERE TO STAY

⭐⭐ **Azumi Setoda** luxury ryokan in a 140-year-old merchant house, by the founder of Aman	¥150k+
Yubune Azumi's sister, a modern bathhouse with rooms	¥40–60k
Hotel Cycle (Onomichi U2) design hotel for cyclists in a converted warehouse	¥25–35k

Budget

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

Version	Accommodation (2 people)	+ Car (~12 days)	Per person
Value: guesthouses on Naoshima & in Uchiko, Kazurabashi, city & business hotels, Dōgo Yaya	≈ ¥380k	¥130k	≈ ¥255k–270k
Middle: 1 night Benesse House, Kazurabashi, mixed stays in Kochi, Shimanto & Dōgo, Onomichi U2	≈ ¥505k	¥130k	≈ ¥315k–330k
+ Splurge: Azumi Setoda or Naoshima Ryokan Roka for one night	+ ¥99k–150k		+ ¥50k–74k

MY RECOMMENDATION

Go for the middle version, **about ¥320k per person**. Best splurge: Azumi Setoda on the last night, or Benesse House for both Naoshima nights.

🚗 Small car, full insurance, one-way fee included: about ¥120–140k.

NOT INCLUDED

- International flights
- Domestic flight Haneda → Takamatsu: about ¥13k–20k per person
- Shinkansen Fukuyama → Tokyo: about ¥18k per person
- Tolls, fuel and ferries
- Meals on nights without dinner

Booking & practical tips

NAOSHIMA

Museums are closed on Mondays. Book Chichu tickets online. The Setouchi Triennale runs every three years (next: 2028). Festival years are busier, but some installations only open then.

BOOK SOON

Benesse House, Hotel Iya Onsen, Chiiori and Azumi Setoda have very few rooms. Jalan.net and Rakuten Travel often beat the big international booking sites.

RYOKAN ETIQUETTE

Arrive by ~17:00 for the fixed dinner time. Ask about private baths (kashikiri) if you're travelling as a couple.

CAR

Check your licence requirements before you fly. Ask for an ETC card, and check the one-way fee Takamatsu → Onomichi / Fukuyama when you book.

ROADS

Iya and Route 439 are narrow with cliffs. Drive slowly, honk before blind bends and use the passing places.

TIMING

Kochi Sunday Market runs on Sundays only. The Niihama Taiko Matsuri is around 16–18 October. Peak foliage in Iya and Oboke is in November.

Variation: the reverse loop by car & bike (12 days)

Prefer to start in the west? Fly into Matsuyama and run the island the other way round. Each day below is one line of the itinerary:

1. Day 1: arrive in Matsuyama
2. Day 2: Matsuyama, ideally with a guided city walk
3. Day 3: drive via Uchiko to Ozu
4. Day 4: castle town Ozu
5. Day 5: on to Uwajima
6. Day 6: the Shimanto, Shikoku's longest river
7. Day 7: Kochi
8. Day 8: drive into the Iya Valley
9. Day 9: Iya Valley
10. Day 10: on to Takamatsu
11. Day 11: explore Takamatsu
12. Day 12: day trip to Naoshima

Frequently asked questions

Is Shikoku worth it on a first trip to Japan? –

If you've already seen Tokyo and Kyoto, absolutely. On a first trip it works best as a second half after a few days in the big cities. The art islands, the Iya Valley and Dōgo Onsen are like nothing on the classic route.

Do I need a car for Shikoku? –

For this route, yes. Naoshima and the cities are fine by ferry and train, but the Iya Valley, the Shimanto River and Cape Ashizuri are very hard to reach by public transport. The car is only needed from day 4.

Can I walk part of the 88-temple pilgrimage? –

Yes. Many temples sit right on the route, and walking even a short section between two temples gives you a taste of the henro trail. Pick up a stamp book (nokyocho) at the first temple you visit.

How do I get to Naoshima? –

Ferry from Takamatsu (~50 min) or from Uno on the Okayama side (~20 min). Book the Chichu Art Museum online in advance: time slots sell out.

Can I cycle the Shimanami Kaido at the end? –

Yes. Instead of driving to Onomichi, return the car in Imabari and ride the 70 km across the islands by rental bike, with a night in Setoda. My South Honshu loop explains the bike options.