HONSHU / NORTH HONSHU / TOHOKU · NIIGATA · 18 DAYS · ROAD TRIP

Steam, sake & scarlet maples: 18 autumn days through southern Tohoku and Niigata

Updated October 2026 · Best time: mid–late Oct

Trip planner · tabi-notes.com/tohoku-niigata-autumn-road-trip

If you have already done Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, this is the trip I send friends on next. Southern Tohoku and Niigata have Japan's highest density of great onsen villages, and in the second half of October the mountains turn red and gold. You'll see very few other foreigners.

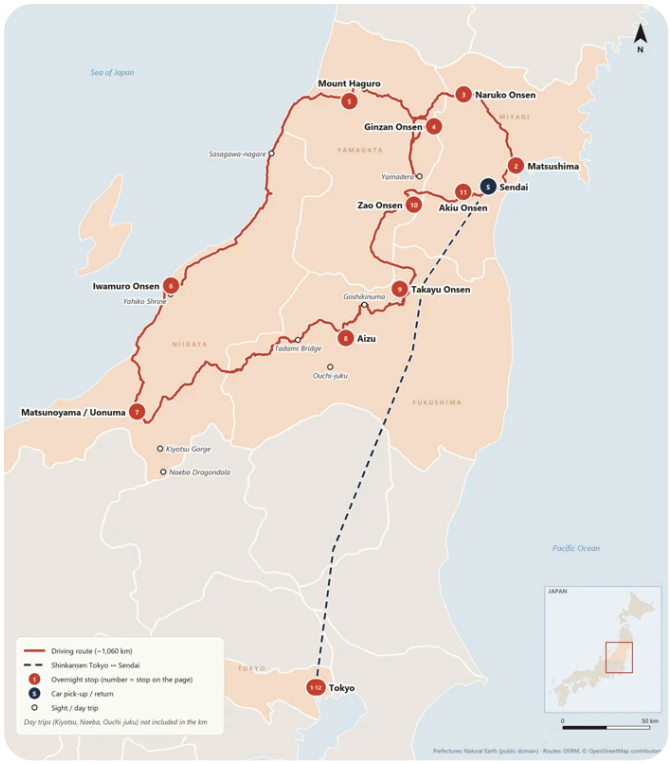
The route is a loop from Sendai by rental car, with the Shinkansen to and from Tokyo. I kept every driving day under about **3.5 hours** and included three 2-night stops, so it never turns into a race. Almost every night is a ryokan with dinner and breakfast, which is the whole point of this region.

18 days	**~1,300** km by car	**12** stops	**mid–late Oct** best time
from ~¥355k per person*			

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

The route at a glance

1. **Tokyo** — Night 1
2. **Matsushima** — Night 2
3. **Naruko Onsen** — Night 3
4. **Ginzan Onsen** — Night 4
5. **Mount Haguro** — Night 5
6. **Niigata / Iwamuro** — Night 6
7. **Uonuma / Matsunoyama** — Nights 7–8
8. **Aizu** — Nights 9–10
9. **Takayu / Urabandai** — Night 11
10. **Zao Onsen** — Night 12
11. **Akiu Onsen & Sendai** — Nights 13–14
12. **Tokyo** — Nights 15–17



The route: about 1,060 km by car from Sendai and back (plus day trips), and the Shinkansen between Tokyo and Sendai.

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

Stop by stop

01 Tokyo 東京

Night 1 · Arrival, near Tokyo Station for the Shinkansen

PLAN

- Day 1: land in Tokyo and have an early night near Tokyo Station
- Day 2: Shinkansen Tokyo → Sendai (~1.5 h), pick up the car

WHERE TO STAY

Dormy Inn Premium Kanda business hotel with onsen bath & free late-night ramen — ¥20–25k

Mitsui Garden Otemachi / Metropolitan Marunouchi right at the station — ¥25–35k

Onsen Ryokan Yuen Shinjuku ryokan feel in the city, rooftop onsen — ¥40–55k

> **Good to know** The trip ends with three more nights in Tokyo. See the last stop.

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02 Matsushima 松島

Night 2 · ~40 min from Sendai

PLAN

- Sendai: pick up the car at Sendai Station (Toyota, Times, Nippon or Orix)

- Matsushima: Zuigan-ji temple, Godaido hall, bay cruise, sunset from a viewpoint

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Taikanso on the hill, big bay view and large onsen, good value — ¥35–45k

Komatsukan Kofu-tei small and elegant, every room faces the sea — ¥50–70k

☆ **Matsushima Ichinobo** luxury on the water, infinity-style garden, excellent food — ¥60–90k

03 Naruko Onsen 鳴子温泉

Night 3 · One of Tohoku's best autumn-colour gorges

PLAN

- Naruko Gorge: viewpoint over the Ofukazawa Bridge, walking trail through the gorge
- Naruko Onsen town: kokeshi doll workshops, the historic public bath Takinoyu

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Ryokan Ohnuma** legendary for its many baths, including private baths and a forest bath — ¥35–45k

Yusaya Ryokan historic wooden building, a registered cultural property — ¥35–50k

> **Good to know** Colours here usually peak from late October to early November.

04 Ginzan Onsen 銀山温泉

Night 4 · Yamadera on the way, and the highlight of the trip

PLAN

- Yamadera: ~1,000 steps up to the Godaido viewpoint. Go early in the morning
- Ginzan: gas lamps at dusk, foot bath, Shirogane waterfall, the old silver mine

WHERE TO STAY

Ginzanso just above the village, large open-air baths, easiest to book — ¥50–65k

☆ **Notoya Ryokan** the iconic Taisho-era wooden building from every photo — ¥55–75k

☆☆ **Fujiya** redesigned by Kengo Kuma, private baths — ¥120k+

> **Good to know** The village is car-free: park outside and the ryokan picks you up. Rooms sell out months ahead, so book Ginzan first.

05 Mount Haguro 羽黒山

Night 5 · Dewa Sanzan & Tsuruoka

PLAN

- Mount Haguro: 2,446 stone steps through ancient cedars, past the five-storey pagoda (a National Treasure), up to the Sanjin Gosaiden shrine

- Tsuruoka: a UNESCO City of Gastronomy. Try the local shōjin ryōri

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Saikan** temple lodging (shukubō) on the summit, monks' vegetarian cuisine — ¥22–30k

Shonai Hotel Suiden Terrasse Shigeru Ban design hotel amid rice fields, onsen — ¥25–40k

Bankokuya (Atsumi Onsen) classic big onsen ryokan by the sea — ¥40–55k

06 Niigata / Iwamuro 新潟・岩室

Night 6 · Coast road south along the Sea of Japan

PLAN

- Coast road: Sasagawa-nagare rock coast, then Murakami (salmon town, old merchant houses). About 3.5 h with stops
- Next morning: Yahiko Shrine and ropeway, sake tasting. Niigata is Japan's sake heartland

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Iwamuro Onsen Takashimaya** historic, registered cultural property, beautiful garden, top food — ¥60–80k

Hotel Okura Niigata on the Shinano River. Eat out for sushi & sake — ¥18–25k

07 Uonuma / Matsunoyama 魚沼・松之山

Nights 7–8 · Rice terraces, art & the Dragondola

PLAN

- Kiyotsu Gorge: the art tunnel with its mirror-pool view of the gorge
- Hoshitoge: rice terraces, best at sunrise with morning mist
- Naeba Dragondola: 5.5 km gondola over autumn colours (peak mid–late October)
- Hidden gem: Echigo-Tsumari art installations scattered through the countryside

WHERE TO STAY

☆ **Hinanoyado Chitose** small, warm, family-run, on one of Japan's three great medicinal springs — ¥45–60k

Ryugon old samurai & farmhouse estate, garden, Koshihikari rice — ¥45–60k

☆☆ **Satoyama Jujo** design ryokan, farm-to-table food, mountain-view onsen — ¥90–130k

08 Aizu 会津

Nights 9–10 · Tadami valley, Ouchi-juku & the samurai town

PLAN

- Day 9: Route 252 along the Tadami River. Stop at the No. 1 Bridge viewpoint (Mishima) to catch a train crossing and the mirror reflections
- Day 10: Ouchi-juku (thatched Edo-era post town, eat negi soba with a leek as your chopstick), To-no-hetsuri rocks, Tsuruga Castle, a sake brewery

WHERE TO STAY

- ★ **Mukaitaki (Higashiyama Onsen)** one of Japan's most famous historic ryokans — ¥40–55k
- **Ohkawaso (Ashinomaki Onsen)** on the gorge, floating stage in the atrium — ¥35–50k
- **Business hotel in Aizu-Wakamatsu** value tip for the 2nd night — ¥12–15k

09 Takayu / Urabandai 高湯・裏磐梯

Night 11 · Five-coloured ponds & a volcano road

PLAN

- Goshikinuma: ~1 h walk past turquoise and emerald ponds below Mount Bandai
- Drive: Bandai-Azuma Lake Line and Skyline through the Jododaira volcanic landscape, down to Takayu

WHERE TO STAY

- ★ **Tamagoyu (Takayu Onsen)** milky sulphur water, thatched bath hut, pure atmosphere — ¥35–45k
- **Urabandai Lake Resort** close to Goshikinuma, lake views — ¥35–50k

> **Good to know** The Skyline sometimes closes because of volcanic activity, so check before you go.

10 Zao Onsen 蔵王温泉

Night 12 · Crater lake & sulphur onsen

PLAN

- Okama: the emerald crater lake via the Zao Echo Line and High Line
- Evening: Zao Onsen Dai-rotenburo, a huge open-air bath on a mountain stream (open until ~November)

WHERE TO STAY

- ★ **Shinzanso Takamiya** traditional, beautiful wooden baths, strongly acidic sulphur water — ¥40–55k
- **Zao Kokusai Hotel** modern ryokan hotel in the middle of the onsen village — ¥35–45k

> **Good to know** High roads like the Echo Line close in early to mid-November. Up there, colours may already be past peak by late October.

11 Akiu Onsen & Sendai 秋保温泉・仙台

Nights 13–14 · Waterfalls, then the city

PLAN

- Akiu: Akiu Great Falls (55 m), Rairai Gorge walk
- Sendai: Zuihoden (Date Masamune's mausoleum), Jozenji-dori, and a beef tongue (gyūtan) dinner
- Day 15: return the car at Sendai Station, Shinkansen to Tokyo

WHERE TO STAY

Iwanumaya 300+ years old, garden baths and private baths	¥45–60k
⭐ **Sakan** one of Japan's oldest ryokans, about 1,000 years of history	¥50–80k
Yuzukushi Salon Ichinobo (Sakunami) river baths, stylish design	¥55–75k
Sendai business hotel value tip for the 2nd night	¥12–18k

12 Tokyo 東京

Nights 15–17 · Shinjuku base · free days to end the trip

PLAN

- Day 15: Shinkansen back to Tokyo (~1.5 h), evening in Omoide Yokocho & Golden Gai
- Days 16–17: free days in Tokyo. Pick your favourites from my Tokyo city guide: neighbourhoods, food, bars, onsen or a day trip to Hakone or Kawaguchiko
- **Option for Pokémon fans:** spend a day at PokéPark Kanto, the permanent Pokémon park inside Yomiuriland (Inagi), ~40 min on the Keio line from Shinjuku. Add the Pokémon Center Mega Tokyo (Ikebukuro) and the Pokémon Café
- Day 18: limousine bus or train to the airport, flight home

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Gracery Shinjuku the Godzilla hotel in Kabukicho	¥25–35k
Keio Plaza Hotel Tokyo big classic hotel, next to the Keio line	¥35–50k
Onsen Ryokan Yuen Shinjuku ryokan feel with rooftop onsen	¥40–55k

> **Good to know** Going to PokéPark? Tickets are for a fixed date and sell out fast, so book as soon as sales open on the official site. The Pokémon Café takes reservations about a month ahead.

ALSO WORTH SEEING

Suga Shrine stairs
the staircase from the film "Your Name"

Shimokitazawa
vintage shops & small cafés, 10 min from Shinjuku

Kabukicho batting centers
late-night batting cages near the hotels

Capcom Store & The JoJo World (Shibuya)
for game and anime fans

WHERE I EAT

Misono Shinjuku
teppanyaki & wagyu

Yakiniku Washino Shinjuku
yakiniku

Wagyu Horumon Waigaya Shinjuku
wagyu offal grill

Ramen & Onigiri Eddie
ramen near Shinjuku Gyoen

Sushiro Kagurazaka
conveyor-belt sushi

The SG Club · The Bellwood · Igu & Peace
cocktail bars in Shibuya

Budget

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

Version	Accommodation (2 people)	+ Car (14 days)	Per person
Value: Saikan, Hotel Okura Niigata, business hotels for 2nd nights in Aizu & Akiu	≈ ¥555k	¥125k	≈ ¥330k–355k
Middle: first option at every stop, mostly ryokans	≈ ¥635k	¥125k	≈ ¥370k–395k
+ Splurge: one night at Fujiya or Satoyama Jujo	+ ¥66k–99k		+ ¥33k–50k

MY RECOMMENDATION

Take the middle version, but book business hotels for the 2nd night in Aizu and Akiu. That comes to **about ¥355k–365k per person**. Best splurge: one night at Fujiya in Ginzan.

🚗 Compact car, full insurance, from Sendai Station: about ¥110–130k for 14 days.

NOT INCLUDED

- International flights
- Tolls & fuel: about ¥50k–66k in total
- Lunches, and dinners on city-hotel nights
- Tokyo trains and activities (e.g. PokéPark tickets)
- Saturday nights & peak-colour days: up to +30%

Booking & practical tips

BOOK SOON

Ginzan, Ohnuma, Mukaitaki and Chitose sell out first. October is peak autumn-colour season.

WHERE TO BOOK

Jalan.net and Rakuten Travel are often cheaper than the big international sites and list more ryokans. Booking direct also works.

RYOKAN ETIQUETTE

Arrive by ~17:00, because dinner is at a fixed time (18:00–19:00). Ask about private baths (kashikiri) if you're travelling as a couple. Tattoos are sometimes not allowed in shared baths, and private baths solve that.

DRIVING LICENCE & TOLLS

Check what your licence needs (see my road-trip essentials). Ask for an ETC card and compare the Tohoku Expressway Pass with the Japan Expressway Pass for foreign visitors.

ROADS

Route 252, the Bandai-Azuma Skyline and the Zao Echo Line are open in October. Check for volcano warnings and early snow.

BEARS

Carry a bear bell on forest walks, avoid dawn and dusk on trails, and follow local warnings.

Frequently asked questions

When exactly do the autumn colours peak? –

On the high roads (Zao, Bandai, Ginzan's mountains) around mid-October; in the valleys and around Sendai in late October to early November. The route is timed for the second half of October, so you see both.

Do I need to speak Japanese for the ryokans? –

No. A booking made online and a smile are enough. Dinner times, bath hours and check-in are usually explained with gestures or a printed sheet in English. Learning itadakimasu and gochisousama goes a long way.

Is the driving difficult? –

Not really. Every driving day stays under about 3.5 hours, traffic is light and roads are well signed in English. Mountain roads are narrow in places and some close after the first snow, so drive them in daylight.

Can I do this trip without a car? –

Partly. Sendai, Matsushima, Aizu and Zao work by train and bus, but Ginzan, Haguro, Matsunoyama and Takayu are slow or impossible without a car. If you can't drive, look at the camper van loop or a rail-and-bus version of the northern half.

How far ahead should I book? –

For late October, book the ryokans five to six months ahead, especially Ginzan Onsen, which has only a dozen inns. Rental cars and Shinkansen seats can wait until two months before.