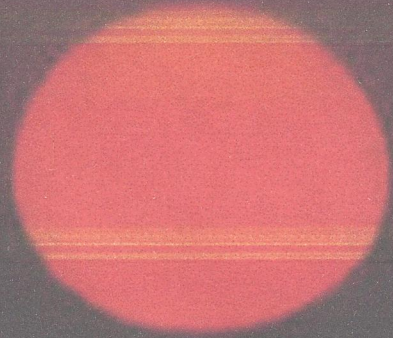


# Tohoku Calling

Japan's less traveled northeast  
Honshu region delights visitors  
with authentic adventures,  
nature's wonders and  
culinary treasures.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER





Only two hours, by bullet train, from the bustling megalopolis of Tokyo lies a reflective, unhurried and culturally rich corner of Japan.

Here on the northeast tip of Honshu, Japan's large central island, is the scenic Tohoku region—six compact prefectures delivering rich history, culture, natural beauty and refined regional cuisine to intrepid travelers.

Japan looks to bring more than 40 million foreign guests this year, as Tokyo hosts the Olympics and Paralympic Games later this summer. For most American visitors heading to the games it will be their first visit to the "Land of the Rising Sun."

Those tackling on a three to five-day visit Tohoku before, or after the games, will be rewarded with an authentic and unfettered Japan experience—magnificent temples, shrines, storied teahouses, family-run sake breweries and warm hospitality found in ryokans—traditional Japanese inns where mineral-rich onsens (hot springs) invigorate the weariest traveler.

Here's what to look for:

#### SENDAI

This city of 1 million is the gateway to the region's splendor. Known as the "City of Trees," for its verdant canopy of lush zelkova trees, Sendai is an ideal base for visitors exploring Tohoku.

Aoba Castle is an auspicious place to begin. High upon a hilltop, the 17th-century fortress constructed by powerful feudal lord Date Masamune, affords grand vistas of Sendai and historical context to the significance of this area. While only a guard tower, and ruins from an exterior stone wall remain a small museum informs with period artifacts, a film and models of the castle reflecting its Edo-period glory. A statue of the warrior Masamune on horseback recalls earlier, more turbulent times.

Splendid gardens found at the Rinnoji Temple feature a three-story pagoda, Koi ponds and fine examples of bonsai trees, secret pathways, stone Zen gardens and benches among the nooks for reflection and meditation.

Spirit enthusiasts find tours, and tastings, at Nikka Whisky's Miyagikyo Distillery provide a fascinating glimpse into Japan's global stature as producer of distinctive malt whiskies. The sprawling facility with its one-

with-nature elegant architecture is situated in a scenic valley, perched alongside a rushing mountain river that is the distillery's water source.

Large pot stills, heated by indirect steam, allow for slower distillation creating softer, more floral notes, that characterize Miyagikyo Single Malt. Nikka's huge onsite shop offers a vast product line, high-end tastings and all manner of Nikka gear.

Contemporary historians know well March 11, 2011, the date the Tohoku region was rocked by the largest earthquake ever recorded in Japan. The magnitude 9.0 quake, followed by a tsunami measured at more than 7 meters, devastated the eastern coastal area flanking Sendai, with hundreds of lives lost and thousands injured and displaced.

Visitors to the four-story Sendai Arahama Elementary School, only 700 meters from the coast, bear witness to the destructive power of the Great East Japan Earthquake. Today, open for public tours, the school that served as refuge for hundreds of students and faculty immediately after the quake and its dramatic story is told by survivors. Part memorial, and part research lab, the school provides lessons learned which are incorporated into national preparedness standards.

#### MATSUSHIMA

A visit to nearby Matsushima is a 40-minute train trip from Sendai. Cited as one of the three most scenic spots in Japan by the Japan National Tourism Organization, Matsushima is a small, walkable, bayside village among a grouping of 260 pine-covered tiny islands.

Best seen from the water, Matsushima is explored by cozy pleasure cruises that circumnavigate the bay, or from atop working oyster skiffs (when in season) such as Oyster Paradise Matsushima. More than 2000 local oyster farmers form a cooperative that raise thousands of tons of Matsushima oysters in the bay. Tourists "help" the farmers check the harvest and (mostly) eat the succulent mollusks straight from the icy waters.

Entsuin Temple, a "National Important Cultural Property," offer visitors a serene contemplative experience of strolling the treasured garden and grounds venerating the Date Clan. Built in the mid-1600s, Entsuin Temple was constructed to house the mausoleum of Date Mitsumune, son of a ruling





feudal lord Date Terumune. The grounds are magical, with a Japanese moss and maple garden, a rock garden, a contemporary western-style rose garden and a cedar grove for meditation, along the temple's rear grounds.

Traditional Japanese refreshment is available at the elegant Karantei Tea House. Sit on tatami (shoes off—of course) where samurai and royalty once dined with their date family hosts. Exquisitely prepared maccha, (earthy Japanese green tea), and freshly baked sweets compliment the awe-inspiring view of the bay.

#### NIIGATA

Though officially part of Japan's Chubu central region, neighboring Niigata prefecture is often visited alongside its Tohoku cousins, particularly by those in search of handcrafted, microbrewery sake. Niigata boasts 89 sake breweries, the most of any prefecture in Japan.

You'll find no finer example of small-batch, multigeneration, family-run sake breweries than Niigata's Takarayama Sake Brewery. Tucked into a small residential neighborhood the brewery dates to the turn of the 20th century and thrives, in large part, to a source of high-quality water, known as the "blessing of Mount Tahou." Visitors are frequently met by the master sake brewer's mother, Yukiko Watanabe, who guides tours and tastings.

Chefs worldwide prize Japanese cutlery,

especially Niigata's Tojiro Knives, which have residence in the finest restaurant and amateur kitchens across the globe. Built on a legacy that extends back to samurai swords, Tojiro prides itself on manufacturing "Ichigo Ichie—once in a lifetime" knives. A visit to the factory's gallery and museum is a must-stop while in Niigata.

#### RYOKANS AND ONSEN

Full appreciation of the Japanese approach to enjoying "resort life" involves a stay at a traditional Japanese inn or ryokan, complete with an onsen (hot spring). Leaving the hustle and bustle of the outside world at the doorstep of the ryokan, visitors remove their shoes, don special slippers and cotton yukata (robes) and relax with family and friends over tea in the gardens, and over leisurely meals.

Visitors enjoy steaming soaks in (gender-separate) hot springs baths, where pleasure is found in the absence of cellphones and the day's tribulations—if only for the duration of one's bath.

The ritual—foreign to most Americans—is second-nature to the Japanese. It involves a thorough body wash at small stations surrounding the public bath before entry, followed by a good soak, rinse and repeat. Many find morning pre-breakfast baths a great start to their day, while others swear by an evening soak to relax before bed and others still opt for both.

Niigata's Yumotoya Onsen Ryokan is a charming example of such a retreat. Built at the base of a hillside and surrounded by beautiful gardens, the ryokan is an oasis of calm and place of retreat. Here, the Japanese concept of omotenashi, a complete and total dedication to hospitality in looking after guests, is in full force leaving patrons pampered and just a bit spoiled.

#### WASHOKU: THE FOOD OF JAPAN

Dining in the Tohoku region is a celebration of the seasons, and the bounty, the area is known for.

Visitors, opting for traditional kaiseki style dining, enjoy the opportunity to fully appreciate the beauty, intricacy and wide range of tastes for which Japanese chefs are known. Kaiseki is the multicourse, small-plate, beautifully presented dishes employing such preparation techniques as pickling, grilling, stewing, sashimi and tempura.

Menus here emphasize seafood, though red meat eaters need not worry as the beef in the region is sublime. Beef tongue is a specialty and while the uninitiated may have pause, adventurous eaters find the tender, flavorful meat grilled over binchotan (Japanese charcoal) delicious.

Vegetarians and vegans find much to enjoy in Japan. Preparation techniques and varieties of tofu number in the dozens. Look for the delicate Hikiage Yuba – soymilk served in a square pot heated table-side, forming thin solidified layers (think pudding skins) skimmed off the top and eaten with soy sauce and yuzu (citrus).

Tohoku calls to foreign visitors with a bit of exoticism that, once discovered, is certain to be embraced. ♦



Yahiko