



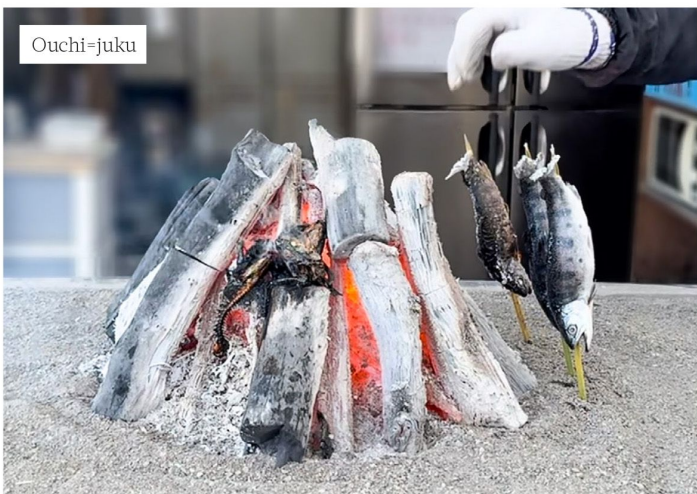
Ashinomaki-Onsen



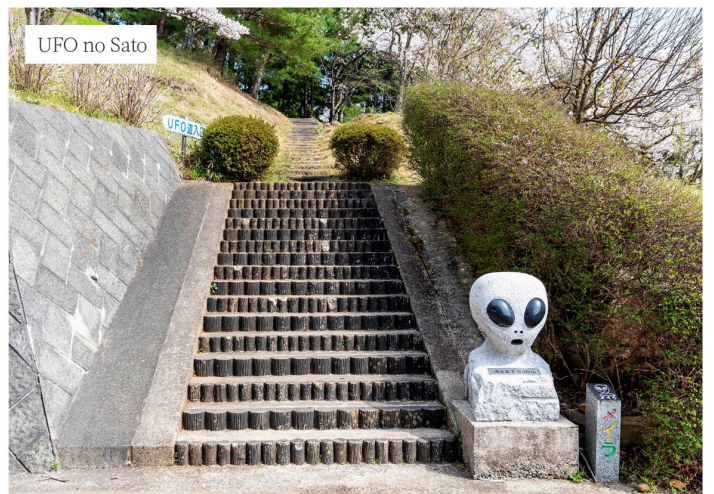
Tsuruga Castle



Hanamiyama Park



Ouchi=juku



UFO no Sato

All images by Emily Lovell

DISCOVERING FUKUSHIMA

This spring, Fukushima became the first destination on Emily Lovell's month-long trip to Japan, lured by the promise of cherry blossom trees, stunning natural scenery, a rich cultural history – and plenty of quirky attractions too!

ON PREVIOUS TRIPS to Japan I've explored many of the popular attractions in the south of the country. So, this time around I was keen to head north and explore a prefecture that is often overlooked by tourists in favour of the well-trodden path between Tokyo and Kyoto.

On March 11, 2011, a powerful earthquake and tsunami hit Japan's Tohoku region, causing a meltdown at Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station and the evacuation of over 150,000 people. The disaster had a lasting impact on tourism, but thankfully Fukushima is now starting to thrive again. You might be wondering whether it's safe to visit, and the answer is a resounding 'yes'. Radiation levels in most areas of Fukushima are now similar to other major cities across the world with less than 3% of the prefecture still restricted.

By adding Fukushima to your travel itinerary, you're not only treating yourself to an adventure off the beaten track, but also contributing to the revitalisation of a region that has shown incredible

strength and spirit in the face of huge adversity.

So join me as I take you on a tour of some of Fukushima's attractions – from soaking up the natural beauty of Hanamiyama Park to encounters of the more supernatural kind at a UFO hotspot, Fukushima will delight and surprise you at every turn.

GET TO KNOW CHANSEY, FUKUSHIMA'S LUCKY POKÉMON

Chansey, known as 'Lucky' in Japan, has been the official support Pokémon of Fukushima Prefecture since 2019. This cute pink Pokémon carrying a healing egg not only serves as a symbol of recovery but has also helped to promote tourism and draw more visitors to the area.

In a joint effort to revitalise the region, The Pokémon Company partnered with Fukushima Prefecture to create four lucky Pokémon parks. I visited the one situated in Kaiseizan Park in Koriyama, featuring a larger-than-life Chansey, and a few other Pokémon friends too! >>>



Chansey in Kaiseizan Park



Hanamiyama Park

HOW DO I GET AROUND FUKUSHIMA?

Consider the 5-day JR East Tohoku Area Pass if you don't have a full JR Pass. This provides unlimited travel around the region on JR trains (including bullet trains) and JR local buses. Renting a car is another option if you're planning on heading to places that are more rural – cars are driven on the left-hand side of the road too, which is handy if you're a UK driver!

>>> You'll find all sorts of other nods to this cute pink Pokémon across the region – from themed manhole covers (otherwise known as Poké lids) to food.

EXPERIENCE FLOWER POWER

You can visit Hanamiyama Park all year round, but spring is the real winner here if you want to experience a floral wonderland like no other.

Head to Fukushima city, hop on one of the Hanamiyama-go buses (500 yen return) outside the station, and as you arrive at the park you'll be greeted by an explosion of colour. A blanket of vibrant yellow flowers stretches out before you and you'll notice the steep hills beyond, peppered with plum, cherry and peach blossom in every shade of pink imaginable.

During the steep but leisurely one-hour walk up Mt. Hanami, breathing in the scent of spring, you'll frequently be rewarded with spectacular views over the surrounding landscape and out to the Azuma mountain range in the distance.

ENCOUNTER THE SUPERNATURAL AT UFO NO SATO

For something a little more out of the ordinary, take a bus from Fukushima city to UFO no Sato in the Iinomachi area. You can't miss the village bus stop – it's the one shaped like a giant flying saucer!

For decades, stories of alien encounters and UFO sightings have emerged from this quiet village in rural Fukushima, many of which centre around Mount Senganmori. It's also home to the only facility in Japan

specialising in UFO research.

There's lots of fun to be had around UFO no Sato; explore the history and mystery of the area at the UFO Museum, pick up an alien-themed souvenir at the gift shop or hike to the top of Mount Senganmori. It's a steep climb, but well worth it for the incredible views, even if you don't have an alien encounter. >>>



UFO no Sato



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>>> ENJOY AIZUWAKAMATSU’S CULTURE AND HISTORY

Aizuwakamatsu is famous for its samurai heritage and the jewel in its crown is the impressive Tsuruga Castle, initially built by feudal lord Ashina Naomori as Kurokawa Castle in the 14th century.

The castle has since been through many transformations, including being rebuilt and renamed by Gamo Ujisato in 1590, and then almost demolished completely in 1874 by the new government. Thankfully Tsuruga was meticulously restored in 1965 using traditional methods and updated in 2011 with 19th century-style red roof tiles.

The castle’s first four floors are brimming with samurai artefacts whilst the top floor offers spectacular panoramic views across Fukushima. You can also relax in the extensive grounds and enjoy traditional matcha and sweets at the outdoor tea-house.

Whilst you’re in the area, I recommend taking a leisurely stroll down Nanokamachi-dori – a lively shopping street in the heart of the city lined with traditional buildings. Soak up the nostalgic atmosphere, sample locally brewed sake and shop for handcrafted souvenirs.

TRAVEL BACK IN TIME AT OUCHI-JUKU POST TOWN

Get a taste of Edo-period charm at Ōuchi-juku, a former post town south of Aizuwakamatsu. During Japan’s Edo

Period (1603-1867), the shogunate strictly controlled travel, granting permission for specific purposes only such as trade or religious pilgrimages. Ōuchi-juku was one of the post towns along the Shimotsuke Kaido highway connecting Nikko to Aizu, set up to provide food, drink and lodging for travellers.

With its 500-metre street of thatched-roof houses the village looks much as it did centuries ago. Browse traditional crafts and feast on tasty local food including *negi soba* noodles (eaten using a green onion) and chargrilled fish on sticks.

MEET A STATIONMASTER CAT AT ASHINOMAKI-ONSEN

If you’re a cat lover, then no trip to Fukushima is complete without paying a visit to Ashinomaki-Onsen station to meet Sakura, the station’s fourth honorary stationmaster cat.

On the day I visited, Sakura was sporting a tiny hat and pink neck-tie, peacefully napping in her cat tree behind the ticket counter. Just before the train left the station, she was taken to the platform bench to reside on a comfy blanket and see passengers off as we enthusiastically waved at her from the train window.

Taking photos of Sakura are strictly forbidden, but you can snap as many as you want around the station itself. If you want a photo of Sakura (or any of the other previous stationmaster cats) you can purchase these at the station shop, along with other souvenirs. >>>

WHAT’S THE BEST TIME OF YEAR TO VISIT?

Fukushima is beautiful year-round, but for mild weather and nature at its finest, visit in April for cherry blossom season or November for fiery displays of autumn foliage.

JAPAN JOURNEYS

Take the stress out of planning your trip and head to Japan Journeys, travel specialists since 2004. From regional to luxury, and even samurai-centric tours, there’s a holiday waiting for you. Don’t forget to check out their manga and game tours too at www.japanjourneys.co.uk.

DISCOVERING FUKUSHIMA



“FROM SOAKING UP THE NATURAL BEAUTY OF HANAMIYAMA PARK TO ENCOUNTERS OF THE MORE SUPERNATURAL KIND AT A UFO HOTSPOT, FUKUSHIMA WILL DELIGHT AND SURPRISE YOU AT EVERY TURN.”

HOW DO I GET TO FUKUSHIMA FROM TOKYO?

Jump on the super high-speed JR Tohoku Shinkansen (bullet train) and you'll get to Fukushima in just 90 minutes. The route is covered by the Japan Rail Pass, which provides unlimited travel on JR trains across Japan for foreign visitors. If you want a cheaper, more leisurely journey then you can take a highway bus from Tokyo instead.

>>> Sakura's schedule is currently Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, ensuring she gets plenty of time off to cat-nap!

UNWIND AT A RYOKAN WITH ANIME APPEAL

With all this exploring under your belt, you're going to need somewhere tranquil to stay. My lodging of choice whilst exploring the Aizu area was Ookawaso – a hot spring resort hotel in the rural town of Ashinomaki Onsen.

Soak in the outdoor baths, sample local cuisine with a multi-course *kaiseki-ryori* meal, and retreat to your traditional room for a restful sleep. You'll wake up to the sound of rushing river water and birdsong, ready for another day of adventure!

As well as being a haven of relaxation, Ookawaso has managed to catch the attention of *Demon Slayer* fans, due to its lobby area bearing a resemblance to Muzan Kibutsuji's Infinity Castle. Instead of being controlled by a lute-playing demon however, you'll be treated to an early-evening shamisen performance on the floating stage. Much more civilised!

Enjoy the sights of Fukushima! ●

