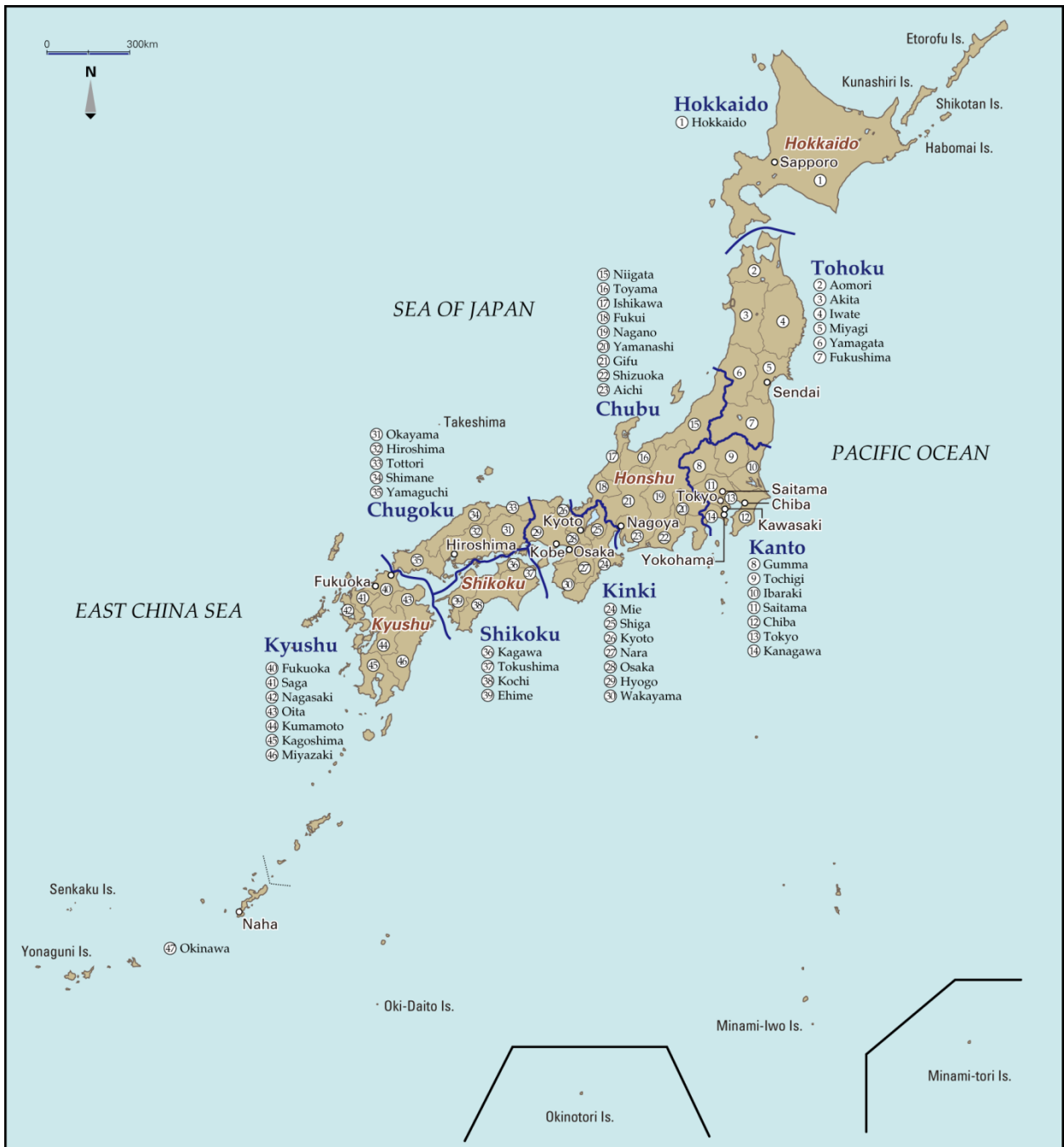




REGIONS OF JAPAN

The fusion of historical divisions and modern administrative needs



The Japanese archipelago consists of mostly mountainous islands that stretch from northeast to southwest about 2,800 km long. In total land area (about 378,000 sq km), it is a bit larger than Finland or Italy and roughly the same size as the American state of Montana. The four major islands are Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. As of November 2016, the total population of Japan is 126.95 million.

Hokkaido Region

This region is formed by Hokkaido Island—the northernmost and the second largest of Japan’s four main islands—and several surrounding islands. This island is separated from Honshu to the south by the Tsugaru Strait (although the two islands are connected by train service via an undersea tunnel). The climate is very different from the rest of Japan. It is generally cooler in the summer and very cold in the winter. Hokkaido is criss-crossed by mountain ranges and is famous for its natural scenery, including virgin forests, active volcanoes, and large lakes. Kushiro Marsh, in the east of Hokkaido, is famous as a paradise for migrating birds such as the Japanese red-crested crane. Part of the Shiretoko Peninsula in northeast Hokkaido was designated a World Heritage site in 2005.

Hokkaido was first settled in the sixteenth century by Japanese who began to trade with the indigenous Ainu people there, but it was in the late nineteenth century that the island’s full-scale development was launched by the Meiji administration.

Fishing and forestry are important parts of Hokkaido’s agriculture and underlie much of the island’s industrial activity, including food processing, woodworking, pulp, and paper industries.

The capital city, Sapporo, is famous for the Snow Festival held in early February, with many large sculptures made of snow and ice on display, forming spectacular scenes. Hakodate, a large city in the south of Hokkaido, is noted for its beautiful night views. Within Japan’s system of prefectures, Hokkaido alone is categorized as a “circuit,” though it is the equivalent of a prefecture.



Snow Festival in Sapporo
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)

Tohoku Region

This largely mountainous region encompasses all of northeastern Japan. Centers of population are found along the coastlines of the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan, and in several basins. The Tohoku region has short summers and long winters, interspersed with beautiful spring and autumn seasons. Shirakami Sanchi, located in south Aomori Prefecture and Akita Prefecture, has a large-scale primeval forest of beech trees; it was registered as a World Heritage site in 1993.

The Tohoku area is primarily agricultural: 65% of cultivated land is rice paddy fields, which account for almost a quarter of all the paddy fields throughout the country. However, it is not rare for a cool summer to damage the crops. Fishing and forestry are also important. Industrial activities include electrical appliances, chemical production, pulp processing, cement, and petroleum refining, with some production of petroleum and natural gas. Sendai is the largest city.

Matsushima, a group of more than 260 small islands in Miyagi Prefecture, is counted among the three most beautiful sights in Japan. Impact and damage in areas around Matsushima resulting from the tsunami caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 was reduced thanks to the area’s unique geological features. Matsushima is about 40 minutes from Sendai by train. Three large, colorful festivals are held each summer in the Tohoku region. They are Nebuta Matsuri, held in Aomori and Hirosaki; Tanabata Matsuri, in Sendai; and Kanto Matsuri, in Akita.

Kanto Region

The Kanto region lies in the southeastern part of Honshu and is dominated by the Kanto Plain, Japan’s largest plain. The climate is generally mild, and the four seasons are sharply delineated. This region, which includes such key cities as Tokyo, Yokohama, Kawasaki, Saitama, and Chiba, is the most populous region of Japan. The hub of the



region—the Tokyo-Yokohama district—is the core of Japan’s commerce and industry. The Keihin Industrial Zone and the Keiyo Industrial Region, extending along the shore of Tokyo Bay, form the largest industrial zone of Japan.

The satellite suburbs, within about a two hours’ commuting distance from downtown Tokyo, are expanding, resulting in the urbanization of a large portion of the Kanto region. Though agricultural activity has decreased in general, it is still thriving in the areas to the east and north, and contributes to the region’s economy.

Tokyo is the capital of Japan. It is home to most large domestic corporations, foreign companies, and the head offices of the mass media. Tokyo is also a center of education.

The city is famous as a center of culture and entertainment. It offers a variety of modern and traditional arts. Classical and popular music are performed at Tokyo’s many concert halls, and there are numerous museums and art galleries. Sightseeing tours of the city by bus have regular scheduled departures. The bus, called *Hato* (pigeon), visits famous spots such as the Tokyo Tower, Ginza, and Asakusa. Asakusa, where many traditional events and festivals are held, still retains the atmosphere of old Tokyo. Metropolitan Tokyo consists of the 23 wards of urban Tokyo, 26 cities, 5 towns, and 8 villages.

Chubu Region

The Chubu region in central Honshu faces both the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan. The climate varies greatly according to the area: while the Sea of Japan side is famous for heavy snowfall, the Pacific side generally enjoys a mild climate throughout the year. Some towns, located on plateaus, are very popular as summer retreats due to their cool climate. The Japan Alps, which has several lofty mountains and is thus called the Roof of Japan, extends from north to south in the Chubu region.

The Chubu region has some of Japan’s longest rivers and one of the largest rice-producing areas, located along the Sea of Japan. It has three industrial areas: the Chukyo Industrial Zone, which is home to the

main facility of Toyota Motors; the Tokai Industrial Region, where Yamaha is based; and the Hokuriku Industrial Region. In addition to rice, agricultural products include tea, mandarin oranges, strawberries, grapes, peaches, and apples.

The most famous landmark of this largely mountainous region is Mount Fuji. It is Japan’s highest (3,776 meters, or 12,388 feet) and most highly regarded mountain, considered sacred by some Japanese. Its conical form has inspired generations of artists and is world renowned as a symbol of Japan. In 2013, the World Heritage Committee decided to inscribe Fujisan, sacred place and source of artistic inspiration on the World Cultural Heritage List. The inscribed property consists of 25 sites which reflect the essence of Fujisan’s sacred and artistic landscape. “Fujisan” has long been the object of pilgrimages and inspired artists and poets. During the climbing season, from July 1 to September 10, it is crowded with climbers. Other sightseeing spots in the Chubu region are the Izu Peninsula in Shizuoka Prefecture, which has a subtropical climate, many beautiful beaches, and a great number of hot springs; and Zenkoji in Nagano Prefecture, a well-known temple that attracts a large number of visitors from all over the country.

Kinki Region

Located in west central Honshu, the Kinki region is Japan’s second most important area in terms of industry. The ancient capital of Kyoto is in Kinki. So, too, are the cities of Osaka and Kobe (one of Japan’s most important ports), which form the center of commerce for western Japan. Rice and citrus-fruit production, lumbering, and fishing are all important to the region’s economy.

Kyoto, once the capital of Japan and the residence of emperors from 794 to 1868, is famous for its temples, shrines, and other historic sites, and is a virtual storehouse of officially designated National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties. As a noted tourist resort, Kyoto attracts millions of

tourists every year, from throughout Japan and the world. The Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto were registered as a World Heritage site in 1994.

Osaka is the financial center of western Japan. It is an industrial center as well, especially for chemicals, machinery, steel, and metal. Both the Tokaido Shinkansen and the Sanyo Shinkansen depart from and arrive at Shin-Osaka station (with the exception of some trains going from Tokyo through to Hakata, Kyushu, or Hiroshima).

Offering yet another of the three most beautiful views of Japan, Amanohashidate is a sandbar in northeastern Kyoto Prefecture. It is noted for the beauty of its more than 5,000 gnarled pine trees.

The term Kansai refers to an area centering roughly on the cities of Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe. While Kinki has well-defined borders and is an official geographical designation, Kansai is used in a cultural and historic context, and in contradistinction to Kanto. People living in this region are said to speak with a Kansai accent, for example.

Chugoku Region

The Chugoku region, encompassing the whole western tip of Honshu, is mountainous, with many small basins and coastal plains. The Inland Sea coast, an important area of industry and commerce, is the most populous part of the region. Large rice-producing areas are concentrated along the plains of the Sea of Japan and the Okayama Plain. The warm, dry climate of the Inland Sea coast is ideal for growing oranges.

The last of the three most scenic spots in Japan, Itsukushima, also known as Miyajima, is an island in Hiroshima Prefecture. Famous for its *torii* gate, which stands in the bay, Itsukushima Shrine became a World Heritage site in 1996.

Two cities in Japan—Hiroshima, in the Chugoku region, and Nagasaki, in the Kyushu region—underwent atomic bombings during World War II. Near the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima stands the Atomic Bomb Dome, which was registered as a World Heritage site in 1996.



**Mount Aso in
Kumamoto Prefecture**

Shikoku Region

Shikoku (the smallest of Japan's four main islands) along with various satellite islands constitute this region, which spreads across the Inland Sea. The high, steep mountains serve as a limit to farming and habitation, and there is little large-scale industry. However, new development has been spurred by completion of two chains of bridges (Seto Ohashi) that link Shikoku with Honshu. The climate on the Pacific side of Shikoku is subtropical.

Naruto Strait, connecting Tokushima Prefecture and Awajishima, in Hyogo Prefecture, is well known for its large whirlpools.

Kyushu and Okinawa Region

Kyushu, the southernmost of the four major islands, and more than 1,400 surrounding islands make up the Kyushu region. Kyushu Island has a mountainous interior, with plains along the coast, volcanoes, and hot springs. The climate is subtropical. Agriculture, stock farming, hog raising, and fishery all flourish. The Kita Kyushu Industrial Zone contains a concentration of heavy and chemical industries.

Kyushu is connected to Honshu by road and rail via a bridge and undersea tunnels. Hakata Station in Fukuoka Prefecture is the terminus of the Sanyo Shinkansen. Major sightseeing spots are Beppu in Oita Prefecture, a resort town famous for its hot springs; Mount Aso in Kumamoto Prefecture; and Sakurajima in Kagoshima Prefecture.

Okinawa Prefecture is a chain of 60 islands located far to the south of Kyushu. Okinawa, once called Ryukyu, was an independent kingdom until the seventeenth century and, as such, developed its own distinct dialect and cultural traditions. After World War II and until 1972, Okinawa was controlled by the U.S. military. Tourism is the main industry. Because of the warm climate throughout the year, marine sports are popular. There are many beautiful islands in

Okinawa, such as Ishigaki-jima and Miyako-jima, known for their coral reefs.