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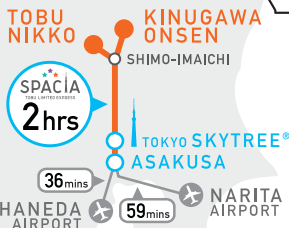
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▲ Nantai-san

● Yaita

NIKKŌ

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Kyūshū

PACIFIC OCEAN

Koshigaya

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● Kashiwa

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# DISCOVER **NIKKŌ**

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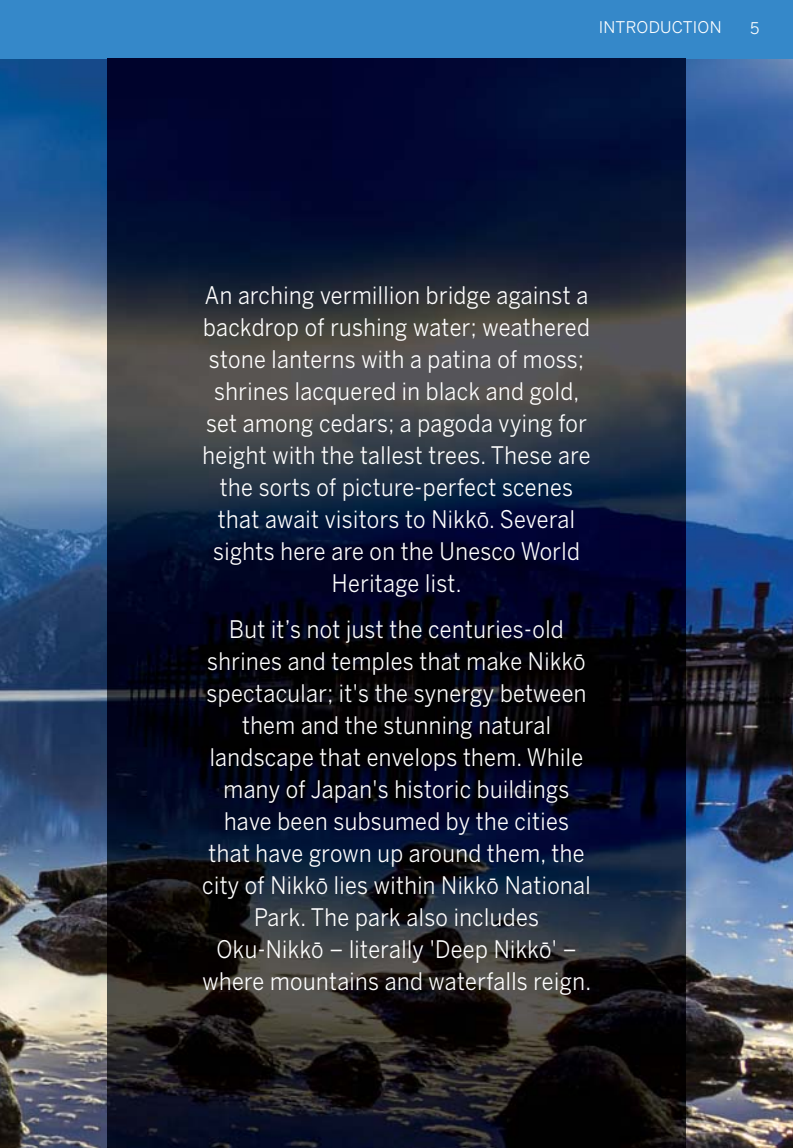
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# DISCOVER NIKKŌ



A scenic view of a river with a stone bridge, surrounded by mountains and traditional Japanese architecture. The image is split into three vertical panels. The left panel shows a mountain range under a blue sky. The middle panel shows a stone bridge over a river, with traditional Japanese buildings and a pagoda in the background. The right panel shows a close-up of a stone bridge structure over water. The text is overlaid on the middle panel.

An arching vermillion bridge against a backdrop of rushing water; weathered stone lanterns with a patina of moss; shrines lacquered in black and gold, set among cedars; a pagoda vying for height with the tallest trees. These are the sorts of picture-perfect scenes that await visitors to Nikkō. Several sights here are on the Unesco World Heritage list.

But it's not just the centuries-old shrines and temples that make Nikkō spectacular; it's the synergy between them and the stunning natural landscape that envelops them. While many of Japan's historic buildings have been subsumed by the cities that have grown up around them, the city of Nikkō lies within Nikkō National Park. The park also includes Oku-Nikkō – literally 'Deep Nikkō' – where mountains and waterfalls reign.



## SHRINES AND TEMPLES

Nikkō's principal attractions are its Shintō shrines and Buddhist temples. Well into the 19th century, Shintō and Buddhism, which was imported from China in the 6th century, were intermingled. Even today, temples exist within shrines and vice versa. At first glance, it can be difficult to tell them apart (here's the secret: only shrines have *torii* gates).

The stars of the show are Shintō shrines Tōshō-gū and Nikkō Futarasan-jinja, along with Buddhist temple Rinnō-ji. While the latter two were founded in the 8th century, all the current structures date to the 17th century, which makes them valuable repositories of the art and architectural styles that were ascendant during the reign of the Tokugawa shoguns. Though the shrines and temples have been repaired and restored over the years, they remain faithful to the 17th-century originals.





## Tōshō-gū

Tōshō-gū is the highlight of any visit to Nikkō. No expense was spared in the design of the shrine, which is the final resting place of the first Tokugawa shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542 - 1616), who founded a dynasty that would last for over 260 years. It is suitably grand, featuring the work

of the most celebrated artists and craftsmen of the day. Ieyasu's grandson famously decided to renovate, at the modern equivalent of \$100 million in manpower alone. The result, with lavish ornamentation, glimmering lacquer and gold leaf, and intricate carvings, is what still stands today.



This compound was designed for gravitas: visitors approach the main buildings along a winding path lined with towering cedars, passing through a succession of ever more elaborate gates, with vividly colored carvings of mythical creatures like dragons, phoenixes and *baku* (a chimera that eats dreams).

Of all the gates, the **Yōmei-mon**, which is listed as a Japanese National Treasure, is the most spectacular. Over 500 carved figures appear on its surface, earning it the nickname 'Sunset Gate' – it's said you could look at it from dawn to dusk and never tire of the sight. The shrines and temples



THREE MONKEYS



SLEEPING CAT

of Nikkō are currently undergoing an extensive, piecemeal restoration (due for completion in 2019); work on Yōmei-mon is set to be completed in spring 2017, and the result promises to be more dazzling than ever.

Two of Tōshō-gū's most famous carvings will also have undergone restoration by spring 2017. One of these, the **Three Monkeys**, illustrates the adage 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' – a tenant

GOJUNO AT TŌSHŌ-GŪ SHRINE  
ONEMU/SHUTTERSTOCK©

of the Tendai Buddhist sect. The other, the **Sleeping Cat**, is an official National Treasure. The small, lifelike cat sits above the entrance to Ieyasu's tomb, dozing on the lintel among peony blossoms.

Ieyasu's tomb itself is less colorful, marked with a *gorintō*: a humble pagoda-like structure created by stacking five pieces of stone. Upon his death, Ieyasu was deified and given the title Tōshō Daigongen, from which the shrine takes its name.



## Shintō Shrines

The Japanese have a saying about Nikkō: 'One temple, two shrines.' The second shrine, after Tōshō-gū, is **Nikkō Futarasan-jinja**. The current building dates to 1619 – making it the oldest among Nikkō's major structures – but its history stretches back another 850 or so years.

The original Futarasan-jinja was established in 766 by the wandering ascetic Shōdo Shōnin, who figures heavily in Nikkō folklore. Shōdo became fixated on the nearby mountain (actually a volcano), Nantai-san, and

eventually built this shrine to it, as well as **Nikkō Futarasan Chūgū-shi**, along the shore of Lake Chūzenji-ko at the base of Nantai-san. When he finally succeeded in scaling the mountain in 782, Shōdo erected a third shrine, **Okumiya**, an unadorned hut at the summit.

The object of worship here is the mountain itself. In Japan's indigenous religion of Shintō, mountains, trees, rivers and rocks were often worshipped as *kami* (gods). Throughout Nikkō and Oku-Nikkō, you can see magnificent trees,



PAPER GARLAND TO IDENTIFY KAMI  
DAVID A. LASPINA/GETTY IMAGES©

hundreds of years old, ringed with paper garlands that identify them as *kami*. The same garlands often hang from *torii* gates, which mark the entrance to the sacred shrine land. In fact, the whole stretch between all of the Futarasan shrines falls under the auspices of the main shrine (making it the second-largest shrine in Japan).

There are also smaller shrines in its orbit, like **Takino'o-jinja**, a little-visited shrine in the hills above Futarasan-jinja. Its *torii* gate is called **Undameshi-no-torii**, which translates roughly to 'try your luck gate.' The top beam has a small hole in the center, through which you have three tries to toss a pebble for luck.

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**PERFECT LOCATION //** The location for Tōshō-gū was chosen by Ieyasu's most trusted geomancer, the Buddhist monk Tenkai, for maximum feng shui. It lies due north of Tokyo, the shogunate's seat of power.





## Buddhist Temples

Nikkō's signature temple is the stellar **Rinnō-ji**, also founded in the 8th century by Shōdo Shōnin. For centuries the temple was a quiet, serious hermitage, attracting ascetics for whom the path to Buddha-hood lay in isolated meditations and mountain pilgrimages.

The compound grew as subsequent monks left their mark: in the 9th century, Jikaku Daishi, a high-ranking abbot of the Tendai Buddhist sect, established the **Sanbutsu-dō** or 'Three Buddha Hall.' Today this is the most impressive of Rinnō-ji's sights, containing a trio of Buddha statues carved in wood and covered in gold leaf. They are Amida Nyorai (Buddha of

Limitless Light), Senju Kannon (a thousand-armed incarnation of the Bodhisattva of Mercy) and Batō Kannon (the Bodhisattva's horse-headed incarnation). Kannon is said to have many forms and is one of the most beloved deities in Japan. Each statue stands around 26ft high and is as old as the original Sanbutsu-dō. (While the Sanbutsu-dō is under scaffolding until 2019, visitors can still enter to see the statues.)

Just as Nikkō Futarasan-jinja has its counterpart in Nikkō Futarasan Chūgū-shi, Rinnō-ji has its counterpart in **Chūzen-ji**, the temple on the lake of the same name. The centerpiece here is a sculpture





said to have been carved by Shōdo Shōnin himself from the trunk of a standing tree: the 18ft-tall, unadorned Tachiki ('Standing Tree') Kannon.

Another important Nikkō temple is **Taiyū-in**, where Ieyasu's grandson Iemitsu (1604–1651) was laid to rest. (Ieyasu was deified, which

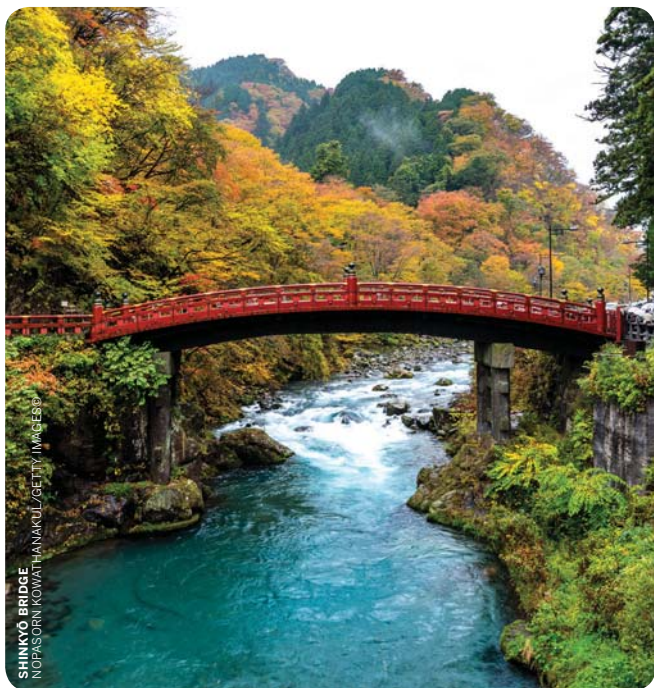
earned him a shrine; Iemitsu was given an 'ordinary' temple burial.) Taiyū-in was completed in 1653 and while at first glance appears simpler, is considered more sophisticated than Tōshō-gū – tastes and techniques in art and design having become more refined in the decades since Ieyasu's passing.

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**HOW TO USE TEMIZU //** The Shintō religion places a high premium on purity, and it is customary to wash your hands and mouth at the *temizu* (font) before approaching main shrines. To do so, dip the ladle in the water and first rinse your left hand, then your right. Pour some water into your left hand and rinse your mouth, then rinse your left hand again. Make sure none of this water gets back into the font!



Nikkō National Park, one of Japan's first national parks, covers over 100,000 hectares. The most accessible part of the park from the sights in Nikkō is the region called Oku-Nikkō. Less than an hour away, this is a land of caldera lakes, sacred mountains and steaming onsen.



SHINKYŌ BRIDGE  
NOPASORN KOWATHANAKUL/GETTY IMAGES®

## The Daiya-gawa River

According to legend, when Shōdo Shōnin (who is a bit of a tall-tale character, if you haven't already noticed) first set his sights on Nantai-san, he found himself waylaid by the rushing torrents of the **Daiya-gawa River**. It was too high for him and his disciples to cross; they despaired – until

the river *kami* (god) rose up and offered two serpents as a bridge. The site of this crossing, the legend continues, is where the glossy red **Shinkyō Bridge** stands today. Originally built in the 17th century (and last reconstructed in 1904), it remains one of Nikkō's most popular photo-ops.

LAKE CHŪZENJI-KO  
UNTOUCHABLEPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES ©

## The Lake Chūzenji-ko Region

The source of the Daiya-gawa River is Oku-Nikkō's crown jewel, **Lake Chūzenji-ko**. The lake was formed 20,000 years ago when an eruption of Nantai-san created a natural dam. Lake Chūzenji-ko, with a circumference of 15 miles, sits pretty at 4000ft right next to the base of the mountain. On sunny days the waters are a brilliant blue and reflect the volcano's perfect cone. To get that postcard shot of the lake nestled among the mountains, you can take the **Akechidaira Ropeway** to an observation platform at 4830ft.

At the turn of the last century, the area around Lake Chūzenji-ko was a popular hill station for the Tokyo elite fleeing the capital's notoriously sweltering summers. Several foreign embassies had villas here. Two remain and have since been opened to the public. The **British Embassy Villa**, which just opened in 2016, is the older one. It's a sleek, black-beamed house originally built in 1896 for the diplomat Ernest Satow (who wrote the first English-language guidebook to Nikkō). The **Italian Embassy Villa**, built in 1928, was designed by



AKECHI-DAIRA ROPEWAY  
PREUKU3/GETTY IMAGES®

Czech architect Antonin Raymond, who was to have a lasting effect on Japanese modern design. The two-story villa is covered in cedar wood shingles and blends beautifully with its surroundings. The sun porch, furnished with period sofas, is the best vantage point from which to view the lake.

Drawing on this historic cache, there are several venerable resorts tucked out of sight in the leafy environs of the lake. There are also a few cute pensions in the small lakeside town (which, admittedly,

has seen better days), though lodging around Lake Chūzenji-ko can feel overpriced. The reason to stay here – in addition to morning strolls around the lake – is to take advantage of the natural hot spring water that is pumped into resort baths in the area. Oku-Nikkō's other lake, the smaller **Lake Yu-no-ko**, is also a hotbed of hot spring activity and has its own little resort town.


 RYŪZU-NO-TAKI FALLS  
 KULTURNAKORN/SHUTTERSTOCK©

## Waterfalls

Oku-Nikkō's mountainous terrain means there are also dramatic waterfalls. The only water that leaves Lake Chūzenji-ko does so through the spectacular **Kegon-no-taki Falls**, considered one of the Japan's best three waterfalls (yes, Japan does love the number 'three'). It plunges straight down, 318ft over the side of a gorge. The best way to see it? Take the elevator down through the bedrock to a viewing platform, misted by spray, near the bottom.

**Ryūzu-no-taki Falls**, meanwhile, is the area's most poetic waterfall: its name means 'dragon's head.'

There is a large rock at the base, which splits the stream in two where it reaches the pool, said to look like a dragon's head. The two streams of water on either side represent the dragon's long, trailing beard – you'll see dragons of this nature on the painted ceilings at Tōshō-gū. Ryūzu-no-taki is a meandering waterfall, following a 689ft path along a magma trail from an ancient eruption of Nantai-san. Oku-Nikkō's other impressive waterfall, **Yu-taki Falls**, which runs down from Lake Yu-no-ko to the Senjō-ga-hara Plains, is a gorgeous, 82ft-wide cascade of white, spider-webby rivulets over rock.



## Mountain Hikes

Nikkō owes its origin story to the mountain **Nantai-san**, which stands 8150ft tall. Nantai means 'male body', and the mountain has a partner, **Nyohō-san** ('female body'; 8080ft) and a child, **Tarō-san** (7770ft). Centuries on, the summit of Nantai-san remains a popular trek (for both spiritual and worldly reasons, like the view over Lake Chūzenji-ko from the summit). It is a challenging hike: the trail itself is only three miles long, but climbs a rocky vertical distance of 3937ft. Along the way, you'll be able to mark your progress by passing through several *torii*, those gates that mark the sacred space of a shrine. At the top, of course, is Okumiya, the final of the three shrines dedicated to the mountain.

## Casual Treks

Oku-Nikkō also has plenty to offer more casual hikers, too. There is a relatively easy, family-friendly trek from the top of Ryūzu-no-taki Falls across the marshy **Senjō-ga-hara Plains**. The name means 'battlefield' as it was here in myth that Futarasan, the god of Nantai-san, fought the god of Akagi-san, a mountain in the neighboring province, for control of Lake Chūzenji-ko. Hiking here is on boardwalks; in the summer, wild

Japanese iris and geranium can be seen from the paths, while in the fall, the grasses turn red and gold. At the far end of Senjō-ga-hara is Yu-taki Falls and Lake Yu-no-ko. A tree-shaded path circumvents Lake Yu-no-ko – perfect if you're more in the mood for a stroll than a trek. Either way, you'll be delighted to end up at Yumoto Onsen, the hot spring town at Lake Yu-no-ko, where you can soak your tired feet.

The Senjō-ga-hara Plains hike, as it covers most of Oku-Nikkō's greatest hits, is the most popular and thus the most crowded (it is also intersected at places by roads, and therefore tour groups). More remote is **Odashiro-ga-hara Plains**, another marshy stretch with boardwalks, from where you can connect to a trail that leads to **Senju-ga-hama Beach**, the sandy western shore of Lake Chūzenji-ko. Traffic to the beach is limited to the twice-hourly low emission bus (no private cars or fuming coaches allowed). Senjō-ga-hara Plains, Odashiro-ga-hara Plains, Lake Yu-no-ko and the Yu-kawa River, known collectively as the Oku-Nikkō Moor, are part of the Ramsar Convention of protected wetlands. Unfortunately, swimming is not allowed at Senju-ga-hama (or anywhere at Lake Chūzenji-ko).



KANMAN-GA-FUCHI ABYSS  
STONEOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES©

## Spiritual Strolls

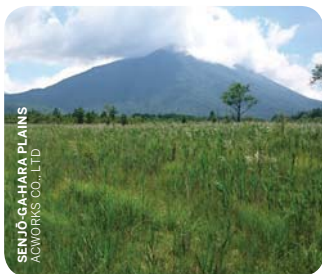
When the big attractions get crowded, it's easy to add a half-day hike or stroll in Nikkō's peaceful surrounding areas. The **Takino'o Kodō**, or 'Takino'o Old Path', traces the path said to have been first walked by Shōdo Shōnin. The narrow trail, paved with stones smooth from centuries of use and framed by cedars, passes by a number of smaller shrines and temples – far less opulent, but weather worn and positively radiating history. Another worthwhile detour runs along the Daiya-gawa River to the **Kanman-ga-fuchi Abyss**, which sounds (and indeed, feels) not quite of this world: it's lined with Statues of Jizō (the Buddhist protector of children and travellers), the total number of which is said to be uncountable.

## Mountain Drive

Nikkō's most iconic route (presently speaking) might just be one that's only accessible by car: The **Iroha-zaka Winding Road** is named after the 'iroha' – the old name for the Japanese alphabet of 48 syllables – because the road has 48 hair-raising hairpin turns. It connects Nikkō to Oku-Nikkō and climbs 1443ft. Japanese manga fans know it from *Initial D*, a popular series about street racing. Most drivers, however, take it slow – the better to appreciate the soaring mountain scenery. If you have your own wheels, you can stop off near the top at the observatory on the **Akechi-daira Plateau** (the same one served by the ropeway).



IROHA-ZAKA WINDING ROAD  
©ALAIN NEE/GETTY IMAGES/©



SENJŌ-GA-HARA PLAINS  
ACWORKS CO., LTD



TŌSHŌ-GŪ SHRINE  
MILOSZ MASTAŃKA/  
SHUTTERSTOCK ©

**NIKKŌ BY SEASON** // Far and away the most popular time to visit Nikkō and Oku-Nikkō is in late fall, when the leaves change color, turning the mountains into a spectacle that rivals Tōshō-gū. This means crowds, especially on weekends. Traffic on the Iroha-zaka Winding Road (which you must take to get to Lake Chūzenji-ko) slows to a crawl. Winter, when there is snow dusting the shrines and temples, can be stunning, but finicky weather can impede travel into the mountains. Spring is lovely, with the first flush of green. Summer has long been the season to visit Oku-Nikkō, as it's cooler in the hills.



## Onsens

Nantai-san hasn't erupted for thousands of years, but there is still plenty of volcanic activity in Nikkō National Park – under the surface. There are over a dozen hot spring resort towns here, including a few within easy striking distance of Nikkō. Water-wise, **Yumoto Onsen** packs the most punch. You can actually see the source, where the water bubbles up to the surface at **Yumoto Gensen**, at the back of the town; the smell of sulphur is unmistakable here. Yumoto's waters are naturally an other-worldly emerald green, but turn milky white when exposed to air – they're said to soften and purify the skin and improve circulation.

Most resort hotels here let daytrippers into their baths for a small fee. There's even a temple here, **Onsen-ji**, with its own bath, which you can visit (its waters are notoriously scalding though – for experts only).

For onsen newbies (or hikers too tired to take off more than their shoes) there is also a footbath, **Ashi-no-yu**. These local hangouts, invite you to sit on benches under a gazebo and soak your feet in shallow hot spring water. They're a fantastic introduction to the Japanese cult of bathing.

The town alongside Lake Chūzenji-ko, referred to as



KINUGAWA RIVER  
MIXA/GETTY IMAGES®

**Chūzen-ji Onsen**, has hot spring baths housed in more lavish surroundings, in the bathhouses attached to some of the resort hotels around the lake. The best bathhouses, like the ones at **Shikisai** and the **Chūzenji Kanaya Hotel**, have *roten-buro* (outdoor hot spring baths) nestled among trees.

Kinugawa Onsen, north of Nikkō and easily reached by train, is a quintessential modern onsen resort town, with big hotels (some Western; some traditional Japanese) flanking either side of a river. Each one is tapped into a ground swell of natural hot water. Travellers visit Kinugawa with only bathing on their mind and plans to

hole up in their hotels to relax. For a break, one might don a *yukata* – the light cotton kimono worn during warmer months and at hot spring resorts – for a dusk stroll to the river, which cuts through a deep ravine.

The waters here are dramatically different from Yumoto Onsen: clear alkaline springs believed to ease aches and pains. There's a free public footbath here too, right in front of the train station, as well as a wonderfully unique footbath cafe. Yes, at **Ashi-yu Cafe Espo**, you can soak your feet while sipping a latte (or a beer) on a terrace with a view over the ravine.



Regional food reigns in Nikkō. From the rivers there is *ayu* (sweetfish), served skewered, salted and roasted over coals, from roadside stands. Nikkō's most luxurious specialty is *yuba*, the thin skin that forms on the top of soymilk; it's milky and delicate, served like sashimi, with soy sauce and wasabi.

### Buddhist Vegetarian Cuisine

One of the highlights of eating in Nikkō is the chance to sample *shōjin ryōri*, the traditional vegetarian cuisine eaten by Buddhist monks. Vegetarians and carnivores alike will be amazed at the many guises bean curd and root vegetables can take. Though flavoring is subtle, it's not at all bland. At **Gyōshintei** (2339-1 San-nai, Nikkō; [www.meiji-yakata.com/gyoushin](http://www.meiji-yakata.com/gyoushin)), you can splash out on multi-course spreads, served on lacquer trays by kimono-clad wait staff, in a dining hall overlooking a manicured garden. Seating here is also traditional: on floor cushions atop tatami (woven reed mats).

### Classic Fusion

The region's legacy as a cosmopolitan hill station in the early 20th century means there are also restaurants here specializing in *yōshoku*. *Yōshoku* literally means 'Western food', but in practice is a curious hybrid of old-fashioned dishes (think beef stew) tweaked for Japanese tastes canonized a century ago. The most famous place to try it is **Meiji-no-yakata** (2339-1 San-nai, Nikkō; [www.meiji-yakata.com/meiji](http://www.meiji-yakata.com/meiji)), a stone villa originally built as a vacation home for an American trader. Now a restaurant, it serves up *yōshoku* classics like *hayashi* rice (hashed beef in demi glaze sauce over sticky rice).





## Tea & Sweets

There are only about a half dozen workshops in Japan that harvest ice the old-fashioned way – from natural freezing waters – and most of them are around Nikkō. Come summer, this means a special treat: *kakigōri* (shaved ice) made from natural ice (connoisseurs insist this makes for fluffier *kakigōri*). Shaved ice specialty store **Shōgetsuhimuro** (379 *Imaichi, Nikkō*), in nearby Imaichi (accessible by train or car), has been in business since 1894; the cotton-candy-like swirls are topped with your choice of fruit syrups and condensed milk. Lots of cafes in and around Nikkō and Oku-Nikkō serve shaved ice, too (though not all with natural ice). Another classic stop is **Yuzawa-ya** (946 *Kamihatsu-ishi-machi, Nikkō*; [www.yuzawaya.jp](http://www.yuzawaya.jp)), a teahouse that has

been operating since 1804 and serves squishy steamed *manjū* (buns) stuffed with sweetened red bean paste. As much for its views over Ryūzu-no-taki Falls as for its line-up of traditional desserts, teahouse **Ryūzu-no-chaya** (2485 *Chūgūshi, Nikkō*) is another must-visit spot.

## Hangout Spots

Locals and visitors alike love **Nikkō Coffee** (3-13 *Honchō, Nikkō*; [nikko-coffee.com](http://nikko-coffee.com)). A hundred years ago, the building was a rice shop; it's since been lovingly restored and refashioned as a hip coffee shop with vintage furniture and reading lamps over every table. Three original house blends (named for Nantai-san, Nyohō-san and Tarō-san) are expertly hand-poured. Nikkō gets pretty quiet in the evening, as nightlife is concentrated in the larger cities in the area, but there is always **Bar Dacite** (1300 *Kamihatsu-ishi-machi, Nikkō*; [www.kanayahotel.co.jp](http://www.kanayahotel.co.jp)), inside the venerable old Nikkō Kanaya Hotel (Japan's oldest Western-style resort hotel). With latticed wooden doors and a stone fireplace, it's got that atmospheric blend of West and East that was fashionable in Japan in the late 19th century. It's menu also includes over 200 kinds of single malt whiskies.

A square icon with a dark purple background. It features a white stylized flag with a diamond-shaped ornament at the top and two snowflake-like symbols on either side. To the right of the icon, the word "FESTIVALS" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font, enclosed within a white rectangular border.

## FESTIVALS

Festivals are a fantastic way to experience Japanese culture. Not just for tourists, these celebrations also give locals a great chance to reconnect with essential elements of local history and tradition.

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### **Tōshō-gū Grand Festival**

This two-day festival held on 17 and 18 May is Nikkō's biggest. On day one there is a demonstration of traditional archery on horseback. On day two, a re-enactment of the procession to deliver Tokugawa Ieyasu's remains (complete with a thousand participants in samurai dress). A similar festival also takes place in autumn, on 16 and 17 October.

### **Yayoi Festival**

This ancient festival (which dates to the founding of Nikkō's earliest shrines and temples) sees fabulous floats decorated with spring colors paraded around town to welcome the new season, on 17 April.

### **Kamakura Festivals**

*Kamakura* is the Japanese word for igloo-type dwellings (made for fun, really, like snow forts). A thousand miniature *kamakura* are carved from mounds of snow and lit from inside during the Okunikko



Yumoto-Onsen Snow Festival, held in January and February. The result is a dreamy (and selfie-ready) frozen landscape. Chūzenji Onsen gets snow huts and snow lanterns too, during the Chūzenji Onsen Kamakura Festival.

## Summer Fireworks

In Japan, summer means two things: fireworks and *kakigōri* (shaved ice). In early August, fireworks are sent over the Daiya-gawa River in Nikkō. Every Saturday in August there are dazzling pyrotechnical displays in Kinugawa

Onsen – made all the more special by spectators dressed in *yukata* (summer kimono).

## Nantai-san Climbing Festival

During the height of summer, from 31 July to 7 August, pilgrims (or just serious hikers) gather at Nikkō Futarasan Chūgū-shi, where drums are beat in preparation for a torch-lit nighttime ascent of Nantai-san. The climb is timed to reach the summit before dawn in order to see the sunrise from the top.



## EXCURSIONS

A trip to Nikkō also puts you in close proximity to a number of great destinations that you can reach with a bit of extra planning. Take a day off from the picture-perfect shrines and streams in Nikkō to go in search of rustic inns, handmade pottery and incredible dumplings.

### Yunishigawa, Kawamata & Okukinu Onsen

If Oku-Nikkō means 'deep Nikkō', then these three spa towns could be categorized as 'deep, deep Nikkō.' Here you'll find *ryokan* (traditional inns) and outdoor baths of stone and cedar, secreted in the wilds. Rustic Yunishigawa Onsen, where you might still see a thatched roof or two, is just a 30-minute bus ride from Yunishigawa Onsen Station, while Kawamata Onsen is a 90-minute bus ride from Nikkō.

Okukinu is the most remote of all: the final stretch of road is closed to regular traffic, as the land is protected. You either stay the night in one of four inns (which will pick

you up in a shuttle van) or reach it the old-fashioned way – on foot. A visit to any of the above earns you serious off-the-beaten-track cred, even by local Japanese standards.

### Mashiko

An hour's drive southeast from Nikkō, along single-lane country highways, Mashiko is known for 'Mashiko-ware,' a style of pottery characterized by earthy colors (think: iron, ash, olive and charcoal) and humble yet striking motifs (like a sketch of a rice husk finger-traced in glaze). There's an excellent museum here that includes outstanding examples from Mashiko's peak (the early 20th century) and a hand-built, sloping kiln from the same era.



YUN, SHIGAWA, ONSEN  
TAKASHI YAGIJI/ASHIYA COLLECTION/RF/GETTY IMAGES©

## Nasu Kōgen

Oku-Nikkō and Nasu Kōgen are the two most popular summer getaways in Tochigi prefecture for Tokyoites (*kōgen* means 'highlands'). Nasu is an hour's drive north of Nikkō, at the opposite edge of Nikkō National Park. Like Oku-Nikkō, there are plenty of hiking opportunities and bubbling hot springs – if you want to dig deeper into the Japanese countryside. Having a car here really helps.

## Utsunomiya

Utsunomiya, the provincial capital, is unremarkable but for one thing: its world-famous *gyōza* (thin-skinned dumplings derived from Chinese *jiaozi*). *Nira* (chives, a popular dumpling stuffer) are grown locally in abundance, and there are some 200 *gyōza* shops here that draw food pilgrims from around the region. Would you take a 45-minute train ride from Nikkō for crisp-skinned, juicy-in-the-middle dumplings? Yeah, we would too.



## GETTING AROUND

Getting around Nikkō is easy, especially in the lower tourist seasons, when traffic is manageable. Buses run between the train station and the shrines and temples of Nikkō, though it's just as easy to walk.



LAKE CHŪZENJI-KO  
SEAN PAVONE PHOTO/GETTY  
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### Public Transit

Tourist buses run from Nikkō to Oku-Nikkō, stopping at Akechi-daira Plateau, Lake Chūzenji-ko and Ryūzu-no-taki Falls, before reaching Yumoto Onsen – so you can cover a lot with public transit (and more with some hiking in between). Tōbu offers discount bus passes, which cover two days of free travel between Nikkō and Oku-Nikkō. Bus stops and schedules are posted in English.

### Car Rental

That said, having your own wheels has its advantages in Oku-Nikkō, as you'll have the freedom to strike out beyond the bus routes. Major attractions in Nikkō and Oku-Nikkō have paid parking lots; smaller viewpoints will have a few free spots. There are outlets of several major car rental companies around Tōbu Nikkō Station. You'll need an international driver's license.



## Discover Nikkō

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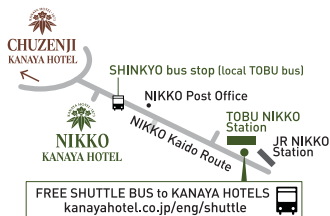
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Founded in 1873, Nikko Kanaya Hotel is a registered Tangible Cultural Properties and the oldest resort hotel of Japan.



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# DISCOVER **NIKKŌ**

Nikkō's World Heritage shrines and temples are among Japan's finest, gilded and lacquered in the decadent style of the 17th century. Their setting is also awe-inspiring: a grove of towering cedars backed by mountains. These mountains, too, beckon, with their deep blue lakes, rushing waterfalls and bubbling onsen.

