

Walking in the Kunisaki Peninsula , Japan

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Where is this Kunisaki Peninsula?



Well , Kunisaki Peninsula (国東半島,) in Japan is a peninsula in northern Oita(大分県), Kyushu (九州), that juts out into the Seto Inland Sea(瀬戸内海). From Hong Kong , one can fly directly to Fukuoka (福岡市), and from there it is about 2 hours' drive .

What so special about this Kunisaki Peninsula ?

This is no Ginza (銀座) or Shinjuku (新宿) . Just the opposite , this is a forgotten corner of old Japan where it feels like time has stood still and the ancient landscape of Japan still remains. I went there for a 7 days walking tour in February 2026 during the Chinese New Year period and did not meet a single foreign tourist other than ourselves during the whole time we were there.



Sounds interesting , but what sort of landscape are we talking about ?

In the middle part of the Kunisaki Peninsula is Mount Futago(二子山, 721m/2,365 ft) with numerous mountain valleys radiating towards the surrounding sea . The valleys are dotted with many quaint villages forgotten by the rest of the world . With the aging population , many farmland and houses were abandoned . In one village that we visited , the villagers put up mannequins on the road side field to welcome visitors. For us from Hong Kong, the sight is so eerie .



This area is famous for its Buddhist temples and statues . Over a thousand years ago , this place was so remote that Buddhist monks who came here found the perfect place to build temples for meditation. As a result , the whole Peninsular is dotted with numerous ancient temples and large number of stone statues. It is said that over half of Japan's stone Buddhist statues can be found here.

But I heard that Japanese Buddhism is like nowhere else on earth ?

Indeed , ever since Buddhism was first introduced to Japan in the 6th century , it has continued to interact with Shinto----- the local ancient religious practice based on ancient nature worship and ancestor worship with no specific doctrines or scriptures, but rites rooted in ancient tradition. . The two began to influence each other and fuse together. In the Kunisaki Peninsula , a unique religious culture slowly developed over the next 1300 years. The temples and the unique culture of these valleys is referred to as Rokugō Manzan (六郷満山). This culture is said to have heralded the appearance of Shinbutsu-shūgō (神仏習合), or the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism.



However, during the Meiji Restoration (1868-1889) , the government decided to promote Shinto as the official religion and separate Buddhism from it. This led to the confiscation of Buddhist temple lands and many temples were destroyed . Fortunately in Kunisaki , as it was so far away from the central government , most of the Buddhist temples were preserved . To this day , one can visit the many ancient temples here and note the presence of Shinto shrines right next to or even within the temple complexes.

A very good example here is the Usa Jingū (宇佐神宮) which is a historic Shinto shrine located in this area as the head shrine dedicated to Hachiman, the god of war and archery . It is well known for its architectural beauty and cultural significance.



Originally , in the same religious location patronized by the ruling emperors , there was also a Buddhist temple called the Myroku-ji and Buddhist monks and Shinto priests once practiced along side each another. The Myroku-ji was subsequently destroyed during the Meiji restoration. Today , the Usa Jingu 's well-kept , quiet , and extensive grounds is really worthy of a visit . It has a serene and peaceful milieu found nowhere else in Japan as far as Shinto shrines go. To this day ,there are still rituals here to acknowledge the ancient syncretism between Buddhism and Shinto.

OK , but what's the accommodation and food like ?

Again , do not expect any ultra luxurious 200,000 Yen /night ryokan in this area . Instead , the ryokans and onsens are mostly rustic ancient wooden houses with unisex communal baths only. It's not luxurious but bona fide authentic ancient Japanese experience.

Indeed, there is nothing like a good soak in the onsen after a full-day's hiking . As to the food ,well , although it's no Michelin starred level , It's good enough .

One ryokan that we stayed in was situated right next to a famous ancient temple --- the Fuki-ji (富貴寺) . Built over 900 years ago , this simple but elegant temple is , in fact , the oldest wooden structure in Kyushu. The priest here was originally a trained chef from the city who subsequently heeded his father's calling to return to inherit the temple ----- yes , Buddhist Temples in Japan are inherited from father to son , and that's exactly the problem because many temples are having difficulties finding an heir to continue the tradition . And----- this is the interesting part ----- the priest doubles as the chef to prepare our delicious dinner at the ryokan next door where we are staying . Then the next day at 7 am , we all went with him into the dimly-lit temple (which happens to be classified as a National Treasure) for a session of Buddhist chanting and meditation which lasted for one hour. A wonderful experience , I must say .



What other activities are there ?

Apart from visiting some local museums, we had opportunities to visit some local artists and their galleries , a 100 years' old ancient tea-house , a local sake brewery and a local Shitake mushroom grower. We also tried our hands on soba making and had our masterpieces for lunch afterwards.