

# OKINAWA:

## Welcome to "The Hawaii of Japan"

*Konnichi-wa! Hello! Welcome to Okinawa.*

*As the only area of Japan that's in the subtropics, you're about to pull duty on a piece of the world that few people ever get to see.*

BY DAVID ROBINSON

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You'll meet very polite people here. The Japanese will add a respectful -san (rhymes with "on") to your name; it's like "sir" or "ma'am" in English. You'll hear English words sprinkled into their language, see many signs and ads in English, and find American music and movies and styles almost anywhere you turn.

You'll see sweatshirts and sportswear decorated with sayings and slogans in English — but when you read them, many won't make sense. "Selfish Style of Best High," says a woman's jacket. "Boys Feel!" proclaims a kid's T-shirt. No matter; it's in English.

Before you settle into your enviable tour of duty on this beautiful and fascinating subtropical isle, you'll need to understand more than the T-shirts. Japan is all islands, and Okinawa is one of them — but half its people think of themselves as Uchinaanchu (oo-chee-non-choo), an ancient name meaning "the people of Uchina," from which the name "Okinawa" was derived. Barely one in 10 think of themselves as primarily Japanese. In some ways, Okinawa is almost like a separate country.

In fact, it was a separate country for centuries as the independent Kingdom of the Ryukyus (ree-yook-yooz). In 1609, the kingdom was seized by invaders from mainland Japan, and the Ryukyu Islands, with Okinawa at their hub, have been part of Japan ever since. Centuries of exploitation followed the conquest, and to forestall unpleasanties, the people were forbidden to own

weapons. So they learned to fight unarmed, and thus developed the Okinawan martial art whose name means "empty hand" — karate.

In 1879, the islands were finally drawn into the Japanese mainstream and made a prefecture, a political division roughly comparable to an American state.

You can glimpse Okinawa as it once was, in collections of pre-war photographs, artifacts, and models at the Japan Folkcraft Museum and the Prefectural Museum in Naha. But the Okinawa you will see today is an island renewed. War memorials and remnants of fortifications dot the island, especially in the south where the fiercest fighting raged. But few visible scars remain from the nearly total devastation of half a century ago.

The ancient Shuri-jo Castle behind Naha and numerous shrines and historic structures have been rebuilt. Shopping malls, tourist attractions, and posh resorts have sprung up where armies once clashed in desperate combat.

Okinawa Prefecture makes up about half of one percent of Japan's land area, but it holds 75 percent of the American bases on Japanese soil.

So take a free on-base course in basic Japanese. Get a Japanese license and learn to think in kilometers and drive on the left side of the road. Take off your shoes if you're lucky enough to be invited into an Okinawan home. Return the bow when someone bows to you. Respect the Uchinaanchu and you'll earn their respect in return and enjoy a great tour of duty in the Okinawan homeland.

And what a homeland it is! Flowers bloom all year, the sea is blue-green and clear as air, and the average temperature is 72F. May and June are the rainy months. July and August are the hot and touristy times, when Japanese visitors from the main islands pour out of jumbo jets to fatten the Okinawan economy with billions of yen (the unit of Japanese currency; it's worth about one U.S. cent). Typhoons threaten in September and October. That leaves you November through April to enjoy the island and its surrounding fleet of islets at their best.

Okinawa lies at the same latitude as Miami and Nassau in the Bahamas, which puts it solidly in the world's resort belt. World-class resorts now welcome visitors not only from mainland Japan, but from foreign countries as well. They loll on sugary beaches, splash in emerald lagoons, kick up rooster tails on rented Jet Skis, and dive and snorkel on some of the finest coral reefs in the world. They hike in lush forests, fish in deep seas, go side-tripping to the smaller islands nearby, and cruise the souvenir shops, water holes, and eclectic eateries along the fascinating mishmash of the Kokusai-dori strip in the capital city of Naha. They stock up on Okinawan specialties, such as the traditional fabrics and pottery — and so can you.

You're not in the States, so look for restaurants that serve treats like Okinawa soba, a noodle soup you can slurp as loudly as you want, or others with a wide selection of local dishes. A server will show you how to wield hashi (hah-shee), the tapered Japanese chopsticks, which are easier to manage than the blunt Chinese variety. You know you've mastered them when you can pick up a single grain of rice.

After a minute or two of practicing with them, you'll be ready for champru, an Okinawan stir-fry of tofu, bean sprouts, garlic, and maybe some canned tuna, cabbage, or goya, a warty cucumber known in English as bitter melon. Pork is popular in the island diet, from mimigaa sashimi — pig's ears cooked, sliced, and marinated in vinegar — to rafuti, ribs simmered in awamori.

Can't read the menu? Just look in the showcase. Japanese restaurants display their fare in delectable arrays of dishes, drinks, and desserts. No preservatives; it's all plastic, and so real you'd swear the ice cream is melting and the bubbles are rising in the sudsy glass of beer. Fake food is an art form, and the best is so expensive that some restaurants can't afford to buy it, so they rent it. Make your selection, pick up your hashi, and go for that grain of rice.



On the map, Okinawa is a ragged shred of land only 60 miles long and 3 to 18 miles wide, a remnant of ancient volcanoes and millions of years of coral encrustation. It's sparsely populated in the north, with 90 percent of its people living in the south. The Okinawa Expressway zooms up the southern half, from Naha almost to the neck of the Motobu-hanto Peninsula that bulges out from the island's midsection. From there the shore road around the northeastern lobe becomes a thin squiggle as it writhes through rugged terrain to connect the few dots of northern towns. From lowland plains to forested hills, from cities in the south to country in the north, Okinawa has more than you can see and do in a full tour of duty.

Make sure your see-and-do list includes the local festivals. Nobody does festivals like the people of Japan, and Okinawa puts on several you won't forget. Colorful dragon boats race in May. And don't miss the Tsunahiki Festival in August, when teams that are more like crowds compete in a tug-of-war with a rope three feet thick.

On base, you'll find just about every hobby, sport, and interest is provided for. There are gyms, ball fields, tennis courts, and workshops. There are courses to take, tours to enjoy, shows and concerts to attend, clubs to join, and a top-notch team of recreation departments to help you choose.

But your best memories await beyond the gate. Get out there as often as you can, and by the time your tour is up, you'll know why they call this fascinating island the "Hawaii of Japan."

