

# Tokyo's Nearest Volcanic Island Getaway

A short hop from the city by sea or air, this unique island location offers some spectacular views, rare landscapes and uncommon dishes.

by Melinda Joe

On a clear day, the view from the placid island of Izu Oshima makes me catch my breath. As we drive along the road between the villages of Nomashi and Mabushi, beyond the verdant slopes to our right that culminate in rocky beaches, a cluster of islands floats on the shimmering surface of the Pacific Ocean. On our left, we pass the striated rockface of the Senba Stratum Section, a sedimentary formation that was created by countless volcanic explosions and stretches for more than 800 meters.

"This is the view on our daily commute," says Masashi Okada of the Oshima Tourism Association Secretariat, gesturing to the surreal stone expanse. "The oldest layer is 20,000 years old."

Oshima is the largest of the Tokyo Islands that stretch south of Sagami Bay and fall under the administration of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. A mere 120 kilometers away from the city center, Oshima is easily accessible—one hour and 45 minutes by jetfoil from Takeshiba Pier, or 25 minutes by plane from Chofu Airport.

The island was designated as a Geopark in 2010, with roughly 97 percent of the area protected under Japan's Natural Parks Act. The unique landscape has been shaped by Mt. Mihara, the 764-meter volcano at the center of the island. One of Japan's most active volcanoes, the mountain was revered in



Oshima is graced with gorgeous views of the other Tokyo Islands and the lush blossoms of camellia trees.



ancient times as *gojinka-sama*, literally "the fire of god." Access to the caldera is restricted, but visitors can trek along the gentle trails that circle the crater's edge.

Behind Mt. Mihara lies one of the island's most striking features—the Urasabaku "desert." Formed by an amalgamation of volcanic ash and craggy scoria rock, its stark, black surface has an austere and alien beauty. According to Toshiro Nakabayashi, a certified guide at Izu Oshima Geopark, wild plants sprout when rain falls—thanks to the porous rocks that prevent seeds from being swept away by the harsh winds that scour the island.

Oshima's complex geography, diverse ecosystems and unique history have given rise to a distinct and fascinating food



The topography of the island is incredibly varied, from volcano craters to this 800-meter striated rockface that borders the coastal road.

culture. People began living on the island around 8,000 years ago. The early inhabitants took advantage of the bounty of the ocean, and by the late Edo period (1603-1868), the port town of Habu Minato was thriving as a fishing hub. While the island is also famous for its pristine sea salt, until the late 1600s most was shipped to the mainland as government tariffs, says historian Takayoshi Tokie, who researches ancient documents.

"Salt was not for ordinary people," he tells me, explaining how the commodity's rarity led to the invention of a fish sauce used to flavor dishes and preserve foods. The technique of preparing *kusaya*, one of Oshima's most iconic fish delicacies, evolved out of the local fish sauce tradition. Typically made with horse mackerel, the fish are steeped overnight in an enzyme-rich brine the color of dark chocolate before being dried on nets and left to undergo lactic fermentation. The process gives the dish its characteristically pungent aroma and intense, umami-dense flavor.

At Zakoya Kiyomaru, a casual eatery on the west side of the island, I sample grilled *kusaya*, along with *bekko-don*, another local specialty. The dish consists of a bowl of rice topped with slices of white fish marinated in local soy sauce spiked with green chilies, which are often used in lieu of wasabi. The name of the dish means "tortoiseshell"—a reference to the speckled, translucent appearance of the fish. I also order *ashitaba*, a vigorous green vegetable that can be found virtually everywhere on the island.

The leaves come briefly blanched, doused in a slightly sweet soy-based sauce and dusted with roasted sesame seeds. Another way the vegetable is served in the region is as tempura—battered and deep-fried in camellia oil, one of the region's most important staples, which is also used as skin and hair moisturizer.

The estimated three million camellia trees on Oshima are valued for more than their oil. The hardy plants flourish in the volcanic earth, protecting the island from strong winds as well as soil erosion. During the camellia festival from late January to the end of March, the more than 10,000 trees that grace Oshima Park and Tsubakihana Garden are in full bloom, electrifying the landscape with sprays of vibrant red, pink and purple blossoms.

"It's one of the best seasons in Oshima," says the tourism association's Masashi Okada, a smile creeping across his face. "The colors are just so beautiful."

From these lovely colors to the monotone, volcanic tones of the heights of Mt. Mihara and the emerald blues of the surrounding Pacific Ocean, there is much more to discover in this land of dramatic landscapes, starry skies and hidden culinary gems.

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Two local food favorites: Grilled *kusaya*, a fermented fish dish (above) and *bekko-don*, a rice bowl of marinated white fish (left).