Beyond Tokyo: Three Ways to Discover a More Authentic Side of Japan in Tochigi



Just north of Tokyo lies Tochigi, a region where the charms of a bygone era still lingers, offering a peaceful escape from Japan's bustling cities. While its famous landmarks are certainly worthy of admiration, the true charm of Tochigi lies in the unique traditions and daily rhythms that still shape its local communities. To experience these local cultures firsthand is to gain a more profound appreciation of Japan, beyond the familiar tourist trail. For the solo traveller, there is a unique joy in setting your own pace and letting your curiosity guide you. These three routes invite you to discover a more authentic side of Japan, each offering a different way to make the journey your own.

Explore the three routes in the videos below:

・【Route 1】Otawara City & Nakagawa Town: A journey through Japan's timeless rural landscapes and thetraditions and ways of life rooted in its local communities.

・【Route 2】Otawara City: An exploration of Japan's cultural heritage through its temples, shrines, traditional craftsmanship and cuisine.

・【Route 3】Nikko City: Discovering Nikko's culture and everyday life through its history, cuisine, sake and natural beauty.

Tochigi Prefecture: A Journey Through Japan’s Timeless

Landscapes and Cultural Heritage



Just an hour from Tokyo by Shinkansen, Tochigi Prefecture is blessed with an abundance of natural beauty, from mountains rising some 2,000 metres to peaceful stretches of countryside. A land steeped in history and tradition, it brings together centuries-old ways of life, venerable temples and shrines, historic townscapes, traditional arts, masterful craftsmanship, and a rich culinary heritage encompassing local cuisine and sake.

Plan Your Tochigi Getaway

As you plan your visit to Tochigi, the websites below offer a wealth of information on accommodation and attractions across the prefecture. Explore the areas that pique your interest and find inspiration and practical advice to help you plan a journey tailored to your interests and travel style.

- Expedia｜Find Accommodation in Tochigi Prefecture
- Agoda｜Find Accommodation in Tochigi Prefecture
- Tripadvisor｜Explore Accommodation and Travel Information for Tochigi Prefecture
- Trip.com｜Explore Accommodation and Travel Information for Tochigi Prefecture

Where to Go in Tochigi: Otawara, Nakagawa and Nikko

Discover three of Tochigi's most captivating destinations, each with a character all its

own.

Otawara City: Timeless Rural Landscapes and the Traditions of Everyday Japan



Nestled at the foot of Mount Yamizo in northeastern Tochigi, Otawara is a picturesque city framed by the clear waters of the Naka River and idyllic satoyama landscapes, rooted in a history that dates back to the Jomon period (14,000–300 BC). Agriculture, particularly rice cultivation, continues to flourish, offering visitors a glimpse into the traditions and rhythms of local life, while the historic temples and shrines of the Kurobane area speak to the region’s rich cultural heritage.

Nakagawa Town: Riverside Traditions and the Richness of Rural Life



Flowing through the heart of Nakagawa, the Naka River is renowned for having some of the clearest waters in the Kanto region. Amid this idyllic landscape of pristine waterways and wooded hills, generations have shaped their lives around the river. The town's culinary traditions are equally rooted in nature's bounty, with delicacies such as wild ayu sweetfish and Yamizo soba among its local specialities. With its tranquil setting and timeless rural scenery, Nakagawa offers a glimpse into the Japan of old.

Nikko City: Where History and Nature Meet in a Sanctuary of Japanese Culture



Photo courtesy of Tochigi Prefecture Tourism & Local Products Association

Home to the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Shrines and Temples of Nikko, the city boasts some of Japan's most treasured historical and cultural landmarks. Magnificent architectural masterpieces, including Nikko Toshogu Shrine, stand amid a breathtaking landscape of mountains and valleys. Beyond its celebrated shrines and temples, Nikko also invites visitors to savor its distinctive culinary traditions, from locally brewed sake to *yuba*, a delicate speciality made from tofu skin.

【Route 1】Otawara City & Nakagawa Town: A Journey into Japan's Timeless Rural Landscapes and Traditions

The first of our three recommended routes takes us away from the bustle of the city to Otawara and Nakagawa, where lush countryside and idyllic rural landscapes endure. Through local agriculture, traditional satoyama life, and the region's rich history, discover a side of Japan far removed from the familiar tourist trail, where age-old customs remain woven into the fabric of everyday life. This is an invitation to experience Japan as it is lived, offering a rare glimpse into the rhythms and rituals of daily life that often go unseen by visitors.

・Experience Otawara City & Nakagawa Town on Video

Location	Description
Agriturismo in Otawara	An immersive rural retreat offering stays at a farmhouse hotel, where guests can experience the beauty of the countryside and indulge in meals prepared with farm-grown ingredients. A chance to discover an authentic side of Japan unlike anywhere else.
Iizuka-tei, a Registered Tangible Cultural Property	A 200-year-old historic residence thoughtfully renovated into a hotel for extended stays, complete with high-quality furnishings and modern amenities.

Tommy Olive (Agriturismo in Otawara): A Farm-Run Hotel Offering a Taste of Traditional Japanese Rural Life and Agriculture









Set within the grounds of a working farm, this charming retreat occupies a beautifully restored traditional Japanese farmhouse. Surrounded by picturesque fields and pastoral scenery, it offers an immersive stay centered on Japan's agricultural heritage and rural way of life. Guests can try their hand at harvesting vegetables, tending the fields, and preparing dishes with freshly gathered produce, gaining a firsthand appreciation of local traditions. Home-cooked meals, lovingly prepared by the farmers with an abundance of seasonal vegetables, are another highlight. With the changing seasons as its backdrop, a stay here offers the rare pleasure of experiencing life in the Japanese countryside as though it were your own.

【Information】

■Address: 1639 Usuba, Otawara-shi, Tochigi 324-0035
■Operating Hours: Check-in from 3:00 PM / Check-out by 10:00 AM the following day
■Transportation & Access: Approximately 8 minutes by car from Nozaki Station on the JR Tohoku Main Line
■Tommy Olive Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/igarashi.olive/
■Agriturismo in Otawara Official Website: https://ohtawaragt.co.jp/agriturismo/en/

Iizuka-tei: A Stay in a Historic Japanese Residence Amid Timeless Rural Scenery





Housed in a beautifully restored 200-year-old residence, Iizuka-tei is a registered Tangible Cultural Property that has been thoughtfully transformed into an elegant retreat, complete with fine furnishings and modern comforts. Designed with extended stays in mind, its spacious accommodations feature living areas, kitchens, and private saunas, making it equally inviting for shorter visits.

Beyond the residence itself, guests are invited to explore the surrounding town through local dining, shopping, and cultural experiences, with opportunities to connect with the community. Seasonal delicacies, from locally grown rice, vegetables, and fruit to ayu sweetfish from the Naka River, can be enjoyed in the privacy of their rooms, with meals catered by local restaurants. A selection of hands-on activities offers yet another way to experience the region's distinctive way of life.

【Information】

■Address: 360 Bato, Nakagawa-machi, Tochigi 324-0613
■Operating Hours: Check-in from 3:00 PM / Check-out by 11:00 AM the following day
■Rates: From ¥16,500
■Transportation & Access: Take a bus bound for Bato Shako from Ujiie Station or Nishi-Nasuno Station on the JR Tohoku Main Line. Get off at Minamimachi bus stop, then walk approximately 1 minute.
■Online Booking Site:

・Expedia

・Trip.com

・Tripadvisor

■Official Website: https://iizukatei.ohtawaragt.co.jp/

【Route 2】Otawara City: Exploring the Roots of Japanese Culture Through Temples, Shrines, Traditional Craftsmanship, and Cuisine

Our second route takes us to Otawara, particularly the historic Kurobane area, where historic temples, shrines, and enduring local traditions offer a window into Japan's cultural heritage. From the artistry of traditional craftsmanship to the distinctive flavors of regional cuisine, this journey traces how Japanese culture has been passed down through generations and nurtured in everyday life. Along the way, discover the skills, wisdom, and customs that continue to shape the local community.

・Watch the Otawara City Video

Location	Description
Kurobanesan Daioji Temple (Soto Zen Buddhism)	A Zen temple believed to have been founded during the Muromachi period (1336–1573). Its serene surroundings provide an ideal setting for zazen meditation, offering a moment of quiet reflection away from the bustle of everyday life.
Kurobane Kanko Yana	A beloved summer tradition along the clear waters of the Naka River. Open seasonally, this riverside destination offers visitors the chance to discover *yana*, a traditional fishing method that uses the river's natural current to catch ayu sweetfish, and enjoy the freshly prepared catch.
Ozeki Kumihimo	A workshop devoted to the time-honored Japanese art of *kumihimo*, or traditional cord braiding. For centuries, this delicate craft has brought together beauty and durability, creating intricately patterned cords that have long adorned everyday life in Japan.
Kurobane Aizome Konya	A workshop keeping alive the centuries-

	old tradition of Kurobane indigo dyeing, an art dating back to the Edo period (1603–1868). Its distinctive use of pine soot in the preliminary dyeing process lends the fabric its characteristic deep, lustrous indigo hue.

Kurobanesan Daioji Temple: Discovering Zen Traditions in a Peaceful Sanctuary







With more than 600 years of history, Daioji is a revered Soto Zen Buddhist temple, celebrated as one of the Kanto region's finest. Seven traditional thatched-roof buildings grace its grounds, each designated a National Important Cultural Property. Within the serene temple halls, visitors can do more than admire the architecture, with opportunities to attend Buddhist teachings, practice zazen meditation, or try their hand at sutra copying, gaining a deeper appreciation of Japan's Buddhist heritage and spiritual traditions.

The temple grounds are equally enchanting throughout the seasons. In spring, more than 100 peony plants burst into glorious bloom before the main hall, giving way to hydrangeas and lotus flowers in early summer, followed by the rich hues of autumn foliage.

【Information】

■Address: 450 Kurobaneta-machi, Otawara-shi, Tochigi 324-0233
■Days Closed: Open year-round
■Operating Hours: 9:00 AM–5:00 PM
■Admission Fees: Temple grounds: Free / Indoor admission: ¥700 for adults (reservation required)
■Transportation & Access: Approximately 20 minutes by car from Nasushiobara Station (JR Tohoku Shinkansen and Tohoku Main Line) or Nishi-Nasuno Station (JR Tohoku Main Line)
■Online Booking Site:

・Trip.com

・Tripadvisor

■Official Website: https://www.daiouji.or.jp/

Kurobane Kanko Yana: A Taste of Riverside Traditions







A cherished symbol of summer along the Naka River, *yana* fishing is a centuries-old tradition that remains an integral part of the region's cultural heritage. The practice of catching ayu sweetfish using these traditional river traps is said to date back more than 300 years. At Kurobane Kanko Yana, visitors can admire the ingenious fishing structures up close before savoring freshly caught ayu.

Also known as the "fragrant fish" for its distinctive aroma, ayu is particularly delicious when grilled over charcoal, a preparation that brings out its delicate flavor. Skilled cooks carefully grill each fish over locally produced charcoal, creating beautifully crisp skin and tender, succulent flesh. The experience offers a delightful introduction to the culinary traditions that have flourished alongside the river for generations.

【Information】

■Address: 1639 Kurobanemukai-machi, Otawara-shi, Tochigi 324-0241
■Operating Season: May 1–November 15
■Days Closed: Tuesdays (open throughout August and on public holidays)
■Operating Hours: 10:00 AM–5:00 PM (last order at 4:00 PM)
■Transportation & Access: From the east exit of Nasushiobara Station (JR Tohoku Shinkansen and Tohoku Main Line), take the Otawara City Bus (Unganji Line) to Kurashi no Yakata bus stop, then walk approximately 3 minutes.
■Online Booking Site:

- Trip.com
- Tripadvisor

■Official Website: https://kurobane-kankouyana.com/

Ozeki Kumihimo: The Art of Japanese Braiding, Woven by Hand









The origins of Ozeki Kumihimo lie in the four-colored braided cords adorning a suit of armor handed down through the Ozeki family, who ruled the Kurobane Domain during the Edo period. Today, Ozeki Shachu keeps this distinctive local tradition alive, recreating the original techniques and offering visitors the opportunity to explore Otawara's history and culture through the art of *kumihimo*.

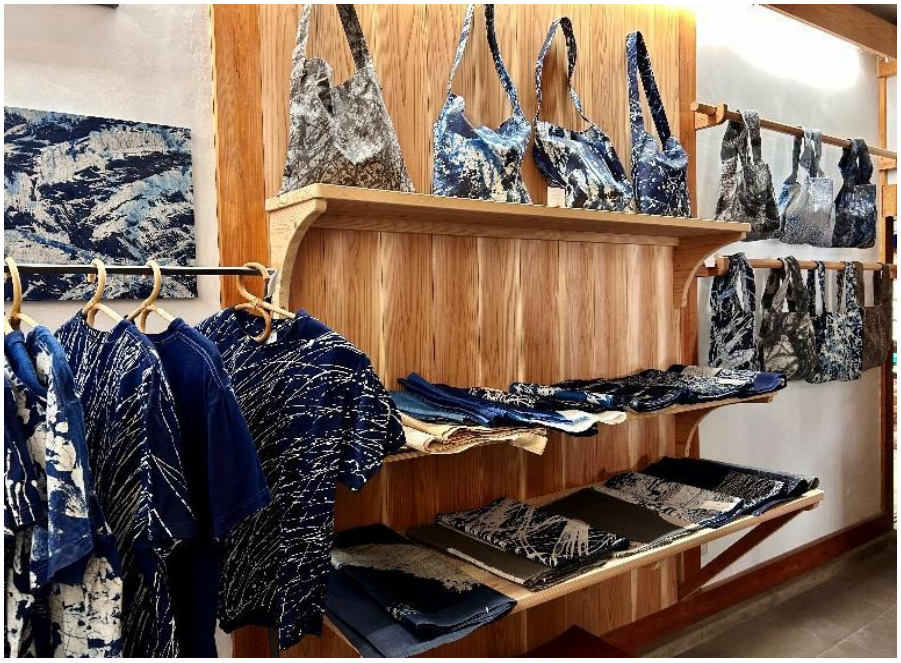
Rooted in the ideals of *bushido*, the samurai code of honor, these intricate braiding techniques offer a fascinating glimpse into Japan's martial heritage. By learning the craft and creating their own braided cords, visitors can gain a deeper appreciation of the artistry and skill involved, while forging a more personal connection with Kurobane's storied past.

【Information】

■Address: 79-7 Kurobanemukai-machi, Otawara-shi, Tochigi 324-0241
■Closed Days: Tuesdays and Wednesdays
■Operating Hours: 10:00 AM–4:00 PM
■Transportation & Access: From the east exit of Nasushiobara Station (JR Tohoku Shinkansen and Tohoku Main Line), take a bus to Mukaimachi bus stop, then walk approximately 2 minutes. Alternatively, get off at Kurobane Post Office (6-minute walk) or Kurobane Branch Office (5-minute walk).
■Official Website: https://oozekishachu.com/

Kurobane Aizome Konya: The Timeless Art of Indigo and the Colors of Japan







Kurobane Aizome Konya is dedicated to the traditional craft of Kurobane indigo dyeing, recognized as a traditional craft by Tochigi Prefecture. Since its founder, Konya Shinbei, first began dyeing fabrics in the late Edo period, the workshop has preserved the art of preparing natural indigo dye vats using time-honored methods for more than 200 years.

While embracing techniques such as yarn dyeing and stencil dyeing over the generations, the workshop has remained committed to natural dyes and materials, creating beautiful, practical pieces for everyday life. The exquisite shades of indigo and the exceptional skill of the artisans make this a wonderful place to appreciate Japan's

traditional craftsmanship and perhaps take home a unique piece to remember your journey by.

【Information】

■Address: 88 Kurobanemukai-machi, Otawara-shi, Tochigi 324-0241
■Closed Days: Wednesdays and Thursdays
■Operating Hours: 10:00 AM–5:00 PM
■Transportation & Access: From the east exit of Nasushiobara Station (JR Tohoku Shinkansen and Tohoku Main Line), take a bus to Shitamachi bus stop, then walk approximately 1 minute.
■Official Website: https://konya.base.shop/

【Route 3】Nikko City: A Journey Through History, Cuisine, Sake, and Nature to Experience the Local Way of Life

Our final route reveals the many facets of Nikko, a destination celebrated for its UNESCO World Heritage sites. Beginning with visits to historic landmarks such as Nikko Toshogu Shrine, the journey ventures into the region's sake-brewing traditions and distinctive culinary culture before continuing into the tranquility of its natural surroundings. Together, these experiences offer a glimpse beyond Nikko's celebrated sights, revealing the enduring connection between its rich history and the lives of those who call it home.

・Watch the Nikko City Video

Location	Description
Shinkyo Bridge	An elegant wooden bridge adorned in brilliant vermilion, Shinkyo is revered as sacred to Futarasan Shrine and stands among the cultural treasures of the UNESCO World Heritage Site “Shrines and Temples of Nikko.”
Nikko Toshogu Shrine	Dedicated to Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, Nikko Toshogu Shrine is a UNESCO World Heritage Site celebrated for its extraordinary architectural splendor. From the magnificent Yomeimon Gate to its exquisitely intricate carvings, these National Treasures embody the finest

	artistry of the early Edo period, offering a glimpse into the grandeur and beauty of Japan's past.
Watanabe Sahei Shoten Sake Brewery	Founded in 1842, this historic Nikko brewery has spent generations refining the art of sake-making, drawing on the region’s pristine water and rice. A tour of the brewery offers a glimpse into its time-honored brewing traditions, culminating in a tasting that reveals the subtle complexities of Japanese sake.
Chodaya	A long-established Nikko restaurant dating back to 1905, offering an extensive selection of Japanese and Western dishes. Its specialties include *yuba* (tofu skin), a beloved local delicacy, alongside a tempting variety of regional flavors.
Kanmangafuchi Abyss	An enchanting gorge where approximately 70 stone statues known as Ghost Jizo stand in quiet procession. A leisurely stroll through the serene natural surroundings invites visitors to admire the subtly differing expressions of these mysterious figures.

Shinkyo Bridge: A Vermilion Gateway to Nikko's Storied Past



Gracefully spanning the entrance to Nikko’s sacred temple and shrine precincts, Shinkyo Bridge is a striking vision in vermilion, revered as sacred to Futarasan Shrine and counted among the treasures of the UNESCO World Heritage Site “Shrines and Temples of Nikko.” Its distinctive appearance dates to 1636, though the bridge itself was rebuilt in 1904 after being swept away by a flood.

Once reserved for sacred ceremonies and visits by the shoguns, this historic crossing now welcomes visitors from all walks of life. As night falls, its luminous vermilion arches emerge from the darkness, lending the bridge an almost otherworldly beauty. Few sights capture quite so elegantly the harmony of history and nature that defines Nikko.

【Information】

■Address: Kamihatsuishi-machi, Nikko-shi, Tochigi 321-1401
■Closed Days: Open year-round
■Operating Hours: 8:30 AM–4:30 PM (April–October); 9:30 AM–3:30 PM (November–March)
■Admission Fees: Adults: ¥300 / High school students: ¥200 / Elementary and junior high school students: ¥100
■Transportation & Access: Approximately 7 minutes by the World Heritage Sightseeing Bus from Nikko Station (JR Nikko Line) or Tobu-Nikko Station (Tobu Nikko Line). Get off at Shinkyo bus stop; the bridge is just a short walk away.
■Online Booking Site:

- Expedia
- Trip.com

・Tripadvisor

■Official Website: http://www.shinkyo.net/english/shinkyo.shtml

Nikko Toshogu Shrine: Exploring Japan's History Through the Legacy of Tokugawa Ieyasu







Among the most celebrated treasures of the UNESCO World Heritage Site “Shrines and Temples of Nikko,” Nikko Toshogu Shrine is dedicated to Tokugawa Ieyasu, the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate. Having brought an end to Japan’s turbulent age of warring states, Ieyasu laid the foundations for some 260 years of relative peace and cultural flourishing during the Edo period.

A magnificent testament to his legacy, the shrine complex encompasses 55 structures, eight of which are designated National Treasures and 34 Important Cultural Properties. The finest artisans from across Japan lent their talents to its creation, adorning the buildings with lustrous lacquerwork, brilliant colors, and carvings of extraordinary intricacy. Yet beyond the sheer splendor of its architecture lies an invitation to contemplate the age in which Ieyasu lived, and the course of Japanese history that unfolded in his wake.

【Information】

■Address: 2301 Sannai, Nikko-shi, Tochigi 321-1431
■Closed Days: Open year-round
■Operating Hours: 9:00 AM–5:00 PM (April–October); 9:00 AM–4:00 PM (November–March). Last admission is 30 minutes before closing.
■Admission Fees (Nikko Toshogu Shrine): Adults and high school students: ¥1,600 / Elementary and junior high school students: ¥550
■Transportation & Access: Approximately 7 minutes by the World Heritage Sightseeing Bus from Nikko Station (JR Nikko Line) or Tobu-Nikko Station (Tobu Nikko Line). Get off at Shinkyo bus stop, then walk approximately 8 minutes.
■Online Booking Site:

・Expedia

・Trip.com

・Tripadvisor

・Agoda

■Official Website: https://toshogu.jp/

Watanabe Sahei Shoten Sake Brewery: A Story of Sake Shaped by Nikko's Water and Land







Founded in 1842, Watanabe Sahei Sake Brewery owes much of its character to the pristine waters flowing from the foothills of Nikko and the crisp winter air descending from the surrounding mountains. Fine rice, pure water, an ideal brewing climate, and the expertise of artisans who have mastered the subtleties of *junmai* sake come together to produce local brews of tremendous depth and character.

Guided by the belief that pure rice sake is the truest expression of a region's brewing heritage, the brewery produces almost all of its sake using the *junmai* method, without the addition of distilled alcohol. Year-round brewery tours and sake workshops offer an opportunity to explore the intricacies of this celebrated Japanese craft (reservations required). Relishing sake shaped by Nikko's distinctive natural environment offers a deeper appreciation of the region's water, culinary traditions, and the enduring relationship between the land and its people.

【Information】

■Address: 450 Imaichi, Nikko-shi, Tochigi 321-1261
■Closed Days: January 1
*Please note that brewery tours are only available from 9:00 AM to 11:30 AM and from 1:00 PM to 4:30 PM.
■Operating Hours: 8:00 AM–6:00 PM
■Transportation & Access: Approximately 8 minutes on foot from Shimo-Imaichi Station (Tobu Nikko Line and Tobu Kinugawa Line) or Imaichi Station (JR Nikko Line).
■Online Booking Site:

・Tripadvisor

■Official Website: https://www.watanabesahei.co.jp/

Chodaya: Savoring the Traditional Flavors of Nikko





Among Nikko's most beloved culinary traditions is *yuba*, a delicate delicacy made by gently simmering soy milk and lifting the thin layers that form on its surface, two at a time. Once a valuable source of nourishment for the mountain ascetics who undertook rigorous spiritual training in Nikko's sacred mountains, *yuba* was prized for its nutritional richness and ease of digestion. Today, it has found its way into a wide variety of dishes, becoming an indispensable part of the region's culinary identity.

At Chodaya, visitors can sample authentic *yuba* cuisine at accessible prices, alongside an enticing selection of dishes showcasing fresh, seasonal ingredients from the surrounding region. Beautifully presented and full of local character, each dish offers a

delicious expression of Nikko’s changing seasons.

【Information】

■Address: 631-3 Kiyotakitanze-machi, Nikko-shi, Tochigi 321-1442
■Closed Days: Thursdays
■Operating Hours: Lunch: 11:30 AM–2:00 PM / Dinner: 5:00 PM–11:00 PM (reservations required)
■Transportation & Access: From Nikko Station (JR Nikko Line) or Tobu-Nikko Station (Tobu Nikko Line), take a bus to Tanze bus stop. The restaurant is just steps away.
■Online Booking Site:

・Tripadvisor

■Official Website: https://www.chodaya.net/

Kanmangafuchi Abyss: A Tranquil Gorge Where History and Legend Endure





Carved from the lava of an ancient eruption of Mount Nantai, Kanmangafuchi Abyss is a secluded gorge where the turbulent waters of the Daiya River surge between rugged volcanic rocks. Long revered as a sacred place associated with Fudo Myoo, a Buddhist deity, the gorge takes its name from the belief that the rushing waters echo the chanting of his sacred mantra, particularly the syllables “Kanman.”

On a great boulder across the river, traces of this spiritual heritage remain: the pedestal of a statue of Fudo Myoo, swept away by a flood, and the Sanskrit inscription for “Kanman.” Amid the ceaseless murmur of the river and the dramatic contours of the gorge, nature, faith, and legend intertwine to create a landscape of singular mystery, evocative of Nikko’s spiritual past.

【Information】

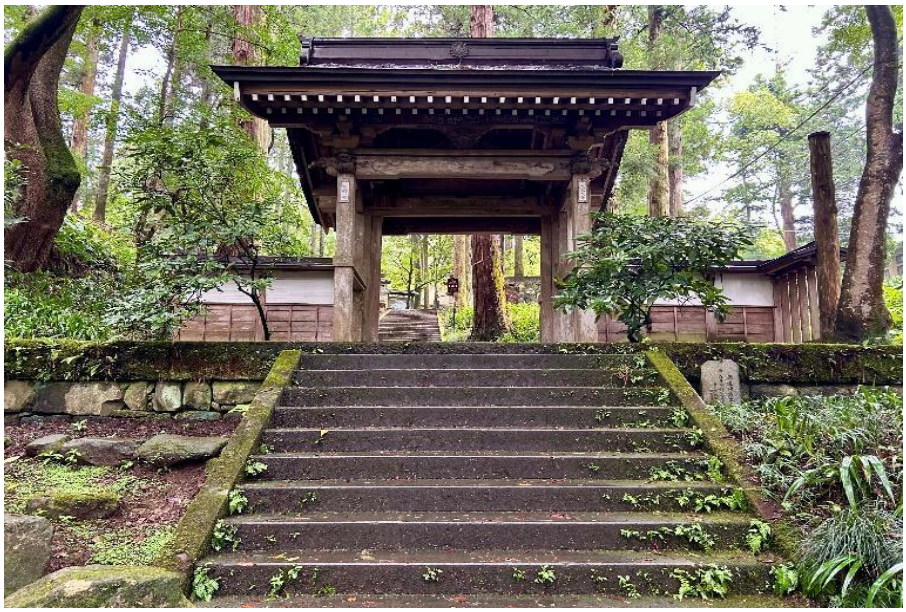
■Address: Takumi-cho, Nikko-shi, Tochigi 321-1433
■Closed Days: Open year-round
■Operating Hours: Open 24 hours
■Admission Fees: Free
■Transportation & Access: From Nikko Station (JR Nikko Line) or Tobu-Nikko Station (Tobu Nikko Line), take a bus bound for Chuzenji Onsen (approximately 8 minutes) to Yasukawa-cho bus stop, then walk approximately 20 minutes.
■Online Booking Site:

・Expedia

・Trip.com

・Tripadvisor

■Official Website: https://www.rinnoji.or.jp/en/spot/12.html



Venture just a little beyond Tokyo, and a different side of Japan awaits, one that reveals itself not merely through celebrated sights, but through the quiet beauty of rural landscapes, the rhythms of local life, and traditions passed down through generations. From the flavors of regional cuisine to the artistry of skilled hands, each carries a story worth discovering.

To uncover these stories is to see Japan in a new light, and to forge a deeper connection with the places and people that give the country its character. So why not venture beyond the familiar and set out in search of a more authentic Japan, one that has been waiting to be discovered?