



# Beauty all year round

## Great for sakura viewing, Hakone makes a lovely side trip from Tokyo

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The journey from downtown Tokyo to our ryokan tucked away in the village of Gora took just less than three hours, but it involved two train rides, three mountain switchbacks, one cute little cable car and a short scenic walk under a shower of snow-white cherry blossoms.

When we planned the route the night before, it was daunting to think of the many transfers (and our many, many bags) but in reality, the trip went as smooth as silk. Hakone, as it turns out, is one region where a tour bus is totally superfluous — a comprehensive network of buses, trains, cable cars, ropeways and ferries means getting around the area is a snap, and English maps and translators make it even easier.

It's a great region to explore if you're

looking to escape the city but don't have a lot of time. The main transportation hub of the area is the Hakone-Yumoto station (don't miss the famous bakery just by the exit) and is reachable in just 85 minutes from Tokyo's Shinjuku Station. From Hakone-Yumoto, the entire Hakone region — home to lots of good hiking trails, historic sites and restorative onsens (hot springs) — is easily accessible.

In spring, when we visited, the cherry blossoms were in full display, and the mountainsides were covered in blooming wild mountain cherry trees — Hakone is a great place for sakura viewing.

But there's plenty to see during the rest of the year, too. Sakura season is swiftly followed by azalea blooms in late spring, and summer heralds the arrival of the hydrangea blossoms — hundreds of the multi-coloured shrubs line the Hakone Tozan railway route, dubbed the "hydrangea train" by locals.

It's later in the year when Hakone really takes your breath away though. In fall, swathes of pampas grass turn the plains and valleys of Hakone into a swaying field of silver and gold — a stun-



The Amazakechaya Tea House along the Old Tokaido Way. PHOTOS: JAPAN NATIONAL TOURISM ORGANIZATION

ning sight that draws travellers from all over Japan. Then as the days grow shorter and colder, the Japanese maples, sumac, gingkos and poplars turn from vibrant green to warm oranges and reds. Due to the large elevation differences in the Hakone region, the fall foliage season can last for more than a month and visitors can often enjoy the reds and golds of autumn well into December.

### A PERFECT COMBINATION

While there is plenty to do in Hakone — where else can one take a ride on a pirate ship, eat sulphur eggs, see Mount Fuji and walk along ancient samurai routes, all in one day — it's the hiking (and onsens) that drew us to Hakone.

Every day, after a sumptuous breakfast, we donned our boots and packs and headed out to explore. During the week that we were there, our hikes took in jaw-dropping ridgetops, active

volcano vents, ancient cedar groves and lush maple forests filled with wildlife.

And every day, after slogging up steep hills and down slick paths, we came back to our ryokan, shed our muddy boots and clothes, scrubbed ourselves clean and sank gratefully into a hinoki (Japanese cypress) tub for a long, sweet soak in the legendary Hakone spring waters.

Hakone has long been famous for the curative properties of its onsen waters — Hakone-Yumoto is the oldest onsen in the region and claims to have opened in 738AD. There are more than 20 kinds of onsen waters in the Hakone region and soaking in the hot water is said to bring relief from many health conditions — including neuralgia, joint pain, poor blood circulation, skin care, chronic dermatitis, among others.

So if you're an avid hiker or if sightseeing just tuckers you out — go to Hakone and check out its hot springs. Your body will thank you — right down to its bones.



### HIKING INFO

Visit [www.hakone.or.jp/english/osusume/hike\\_list.html](http://www.hakone.or.jp/english/osusume/hike_list.html) for trail information and maps. It's advisable to buy a topography map; the popular and reliable Mapple ([yamachizu.mapple.net](http://yamachizu.mapple.net)) versions are available in most major bookstores in Japan.



Catch a view of Fuji-san if you're lucky.

### GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines, All Nippon Airways and Japan Airlines fly daily from Singapore to Tokyo. If you plan on going straight to Hakone, Haneda is a better choice, as Keihin Kyuko operates a direct bus from Haneda to the central town of Hakone-Yumoto twice a day (¥1,900/S\$25.30, [hnd-bus.com/route/hakoneyumoto.html](http://hnd-bus.com/route/hakoneyumoto.html)).

From Tokyo's Shinjuku Station, it's just 85 minutes on the very scenic Odakyu Romance-car (¥2,020, [www.odakyu.jp/english/rc/index.html](http://www.odakyu.jp/english/rc/index.html)) to Hakone-Yumoto station.

### GETTING AROUND

Hakone Navi ([www.hakonenavi.jp](http://www.hakonenavi.jp)) has comprehensive information including directions, schedules, fares and more for getting around the Hakone area. At Shinjuku or Hakone-Yumoto stations, tourists can buy the Hakone Freepass for unlimited rides within the Hakone area on public transportation — with prices starting at ¥3,900 for two days, the pass offers fantastic value.

### WHERE TO STAY

Taiseikan ([www.taiseikan.co.jp](http://www.taiseikan.co.jp)) in Miyanosita is a very traditional ryokan that is accessible only via private cable car. Expect perfect meals, five gorgeous onsens and pretty views — with a price tag to match. For a more affordable ryokan experience, La Laca ([www.lalaca.com](http://www.lalaca.com)) in Gora offers top-notch service and seasonal meals in a modern minimalist setting. It's a good choice if you're shy — there is a private onsen available in the evenings.

### MUST-SEE/MUST-DO

Don't miss the aptly-named Valley of Hell in Owakudani — a valley studded with fumaroles and volcanic vents that is reminiscent of Mordor. Try the "black jewel eggs", a local specialty cooked in the vents that is said to add years to your life. Other highlights include a ferry ride across the scenic Lake Ashi on a pirate-themed ship and a stroll along the tranquil Old Tokaido Way, where you can walk under the ancient cedars just like the samurai used to.

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