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Cultural Treasures of Imari and Arita

A three-day itinerary through the cultural treasures of two fascinating prefectures in Kyushu



The Sueyama Shrine stands out for its torii gate crafted from porcelain and komainu porcelain statues resembling lions

Over 400 years ago, Ko-Imari ceramics captivated Western aristocracy with their exquisite design and unparalleled craftsmanship. Today, Arita-yaki artisans continue to enchant us with their porcelain in Imari and Arita, the birthplace of Japanese porcelain, and Nagasaki, where you will experience a unique blend of Western and Chinese influences for a fascinating trip through Japan’s multifaceted and complex cultural background.

Day 1: Imari’s Hidden Porcelain Village of Okawachiyama





As the cityscape transformed into winding countryside roads, I reached Okawachiyama, the first of many stops to delve into Saga's porcelain history.

Okawachiyama, also known as the "Village of Secret Kiln," traces its origins back to the 17th century, when the heavily guarded village made porcelain often used by Daimyo and Shogun families. This exquisite porcelain, also known as Nabeshima-yaki, was safeguarded to prevent the secrets of its highly sought-after production from being disclosed. Though, to me, the name also felt fitting because of the appearance of this porcelain village tucked against a towering mountainous wall — like one of those mysterious old paintings of misty mountains of the past.

The Nabeshima Clan Kiln Bridge marks the town's entrance with its blue and white porcelain bridge, leading into the adjacent kiln streets. These are the kinds of roads you would want to get lost in, an atmosphere occasionally interrupted by the gentle chimes of porcelain bells during the summer.

Among the many porcelain houses is Hataman Toen, a family-owned maker of exquisite Imari-yaki whose potters inherited the traditional techniques of Nabeshima-yaki, now operating under the leadership of the family's fourth-generation owners. This is also one of the few places that offers behind-the-scenes tours to observe the artisans painting porcelain pieces by hand. More to read

DAY 2: Dive into the History and Future of Saga Porcelain



The following day, I delved deep into the history of Saga's porcelain industry at the Kyushu Ceramic Museum. This expansive museum houses numerous galleries exhibiting the journey of development after the discovery of raw porcelain and the pivotal role played by Arita in supplying porcelain to European nobility, alongside a mechanical clock that opened every 30 minutes to reveal a delightful display of porcelain figurines dancing.

The rich history of Saga's porcelain dates back to the 17th century when two distinct styles emerged: Nabeshima porcelain, crafted exclusively for the Shogun family, and characterized by its bluish tinge and meticulously detailed patterns, and Kakiemon porcelain, distinguished by its delicate overglaze enamel on a background of striking milky white. The burgeoning Arita porcelain industry gained momentum due to trade restrictions imposed on Chinese porcelain, leading Dutch merchants, who previously relied on Chinese porcelain, to turn to Arita porcelain as a viable alternative.

With a better understanding of Saga porcelain under my belt, I next visited Kakiemon, a shop, gallery, and ancestral home of the Kakiemon family, who originated the classic Kakiemon style. In the 17th century, Sakaida Kakiemon perfected the method for creating a translucent white glaze called nigoshide. Today, the 15th-generation Sakaida Kakiemon XV continues the Kakiemon legacy by sketching nature in his notepad wherever he goes, allowing this drawing practice to subtly influence the exquisite designs the Kakiemon name creates today. More to read

DAY 3: Experiencing an Elevated Tea Ceremony Space



Before heading to Nagasaki, I had a one-of-a-kind **tea ceremony space at Ureshino** atop a platform built into a tea field. More to read

Traditional Japanese Hospitality Geisha



To delve further into Kyushu’s diverse history, I journeyed to Nagasaki. Nagasaki's appeal lies in its fusion of Japanese, Western, and Chinese cultures, which originated when the city's ports were opened in 1570. This cultural blend is evident in its architecture and cuisine, making Nagasaki an intriguing and diverse destination to explore.

The first place where I experienced this cultural fusion was through the culinary delights at Shiseki Ryoutei KAGETSU. Adorned with lanterns bearing the restaurant’s name, this over 200-year-old building not only pays homage to this neighborhood's history as one of the three major geisha districts in Japan but also hosts live performances for visitors for a fee. More to read

Heritage of Western Culture



Oura Cathedral（Photo credit:大浦天主堂　© NPTA)

Continuing onwards, I headed to Glover Garden, an open-air museum of nine Western-style buildings, one of which is registered as a UNESCO World Heritage site, built from the end of the Edo period to the Meiji period (1863–1912). They stand as a physical representation of the significant influence of the Western world on Japan's industrial advancement. The garden is named after Thomas Blake Glover, a Scottish merchant who played a crucial role in the Western industrialization of feudal Japan during the Meiji era by establishing the first coal mine in Nagasaki and contributing to developing a shipbuilding company.

The garden is home to an assortment of charming Western-style houses, some adorned with white paint, pink trim, blue ceilings, and light green accents reminiscent of the vibrant hues in tropical regions. Notably, the Thomas B. Glover Residence, Japan's oldest existing wooden Western-style dwelling, is also part of this collection. Despite the sweltering summer temperatures, a refreshing breeze gracefully flowed through each house, offering a soothing respite alongside the stunning vantage point of the city and its port.

Oura Cathedral is yet another site that represents a convergence of cultures in Nagasaki. As the existing oldest wooden Christian church in Japan, this historic landmark is a poignant symbol of the Hidden Christian Sites in the Nagasaki region, linked to the clandestine practices of Christianity during the era of the Shogunate's anti-Christian edicts. The cathedral, designed in the Gothic architectural style, was purposefully constructed for the foreign populace residing in the Nagasaki settlement area and dedicated to the 26 Christians who were martyred in 1597. Entering, I’m greeted by the tranquil beauty of the intricate stained glass and a moment of stillness to contemplate Nagasaki's history. More to read

More info



Kyushu, the Large Island of Southwestern Japan

Kyushu, with its seven prefectures, is a land full of energy, from its vibrant people to its famous volcanoes. Close to the rest of Asia and easily accessible from Tokyo, Kyushu has welcomed new ideas and cultures for over a thousand years. Experience the dynamic landscapes, relax in the many hot springs, and enjoy the warmth of genuine hospitality.

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