

48 HOURS IN SAGA

Words by Annemarie Luck



Torii tunnel at Yutoku Inari Shrine

Eat, drink, and get a taste for the slow life in one of Kyushu's prettiest prefectures



Potter Tatsuya Tsutsui at his Arita studio

You may not be as lucky as we were when you arrive in Saga. It just so happened that we flew in on a day the local seasonal agricultural fair was on the go, its sizeable tent set up right next to the airport. So no sooner had we descended to land – while marveling at the *nori* farm that sprawls out into the Ariake Sea – than we were tucking into steaming fresh ginger tea, sake-flavored pickled *gobo*, and freshly toasted *yakimochi* (warm, sweet rice cakes). A fitting introduction to a prefecture that prides itself on its food, and would go on to offer us 48 hours of not only unique cultural experiences, but also some of the best dining we've had in Japan.

The smallest prefecture on the island of Kyushu, Saga is a delightfully rural place that lies in between Fukuoka and Nagasaki prefectures, with the Genkai Sea to the north and the Ariake Sea to the south. The area produces what's widely regarded as the best seaweed in Japan – in both quality and quantity – and the countryside features an abundance of picturesque terraced rice fields. Nearly 23 percent of the land in Saga Prefecture is

arable, which explains the bountiful produce we encountered at the fair, and 11 percent is protected, which means it has largely remained unspoiled and features a plethora of natural parks.

SAKE, OYSTERS AND ONSEN

After our two-hour flight on Spring Japan from Narita Airport, we rented a car at Ariake Saga Airport, and made our way south towards Kashima City's Sakagura Dori, a windy little street that's home to centuries-old sake breweries. We popped in for a tour at Minematsu Sake Brewery, which you'll find at the entrance to the street. Founded in 1916, it's been remodeled to welcome tourists, and the animated owner, Kazukiyo Minematsu, will enthusiastically show you around the shop as well as the "museum" at the back, which is full of fascinating artefacts collected from the Showa period. There is no charge for the tour or the tasting, so we happily indulged in sipping on the brewery's new fruity Hizenhamashuku sake, which just launched in January, along with a few varieties of umeshu, shochu, and *su* (fruit vinegar).



Inside Saga Castle

As the sun dropped, we made our way to the coast, taking a right towards the town of Tara, where you'll find oyster-grilling huts along the road, and open between December and March (depending on weather conditions). One of the most popular oyster restaurants is Daifukumaru. Here, we took up seats on the wooden terrace overlooking the sea and featuring barbecue tables all set up for a DIY dinner. As the sky turned pink, we grilled fat, juicy oysters, washing them down with salty crab soup.

With appetites sated and cheeks pink from the cold ocean air, we checked in at Warakuen, a traditional Japanese-style hotel located in the center of Saga's famed Ureshino hot spring town. If you're visiting during winter, this onsen haven is a must-visit. Besides the luxurious resorts on offer, one of our favorite things about being here was catching sight of couples stealing romantic moments under the stars while dipping their toes in the free, steaming, streetside foot baths.

THROWING BEANS AND CLAY

There's nothing like an early morning onsen to wake you up. Add to that a strong cup of coffee, and day two in Saga was off to an energetic start. Which was lucky, since we soon found ourselves dressed in kimono, standing on a stage with Buddhist monks, and tossing beans to a seemingly ravenous crowd. Why? It was Setsubun – the day in Japan that marks the beginning of spring and involves a bean-throwing ceremony – and we were visiting Yutoku Inari Shrine. Founded in 1687, the shrine is built on a steep hillside in Kashima City, and boasts multiple tunnels of red torii gates. To rent a kimono, look for Yosooiodokoro Futaba store on the road to the shrine. It's ¥3,500 for the day, giving you ample time to imagine what it was like walking these very streets a few hundred years ago.

If history's your thing, you'll also want to be sure to visit Saga Castle in Saga City. Plagued by fires, the castle has been rebuilt several times since the 17 century, so the current build-

Porcelain torii gate at Tozan Shrine



“ AS THE SKY TURNED PINK, WE GRILLED FAT, JUICY OYSTERS, WASHING THEM DOWN WITH SALTY CRAB SOUP ”

ing is largely a refurbished version. Still, this doesn't detract from its splendor and strong sense of Japan's samurai past as you stroll around its exquisite interior.

After a short stop for lunch at Gallery Arita, where you can purchase some of Arita Town's famed porcelain ceramics and drink from impossibly pretty teacups, we visited the pottery studio of artist Tatsuya Tsutsui. Arita is considered the birthplace of Japanese porcelain, so it's no surprise that Tsutsui has

chosen to base himself here. Besides creating his own works, he also offers lessons, with some pottery enthusiasts traveling from abroad to spend a couple of weeks with him and improve their techniques. As he demonstrated the basics of throwing clay, at one point giving us a turn to try our hand at the wheel, we took a moment to appreciate the creative calm in the room and thought, *Wouldn't it be nice to switch to the delicious slow life in Saga?*



The view while grilling oysters at Daifukumaru

4 MORE THINGS TO DO

1 VISIT THE PORCELAIN TORII
As you climb the stairs up to Tozan Shrine in Arita, you'll catch sight of this torii gate made from porcelain. It was built in 1888 and is full of cracks, but we think this simply adds to its beauty.

2 EAT THE ALIEN OF ARIAKE
This little monster is actually a fish called *warasubo*, but thanks to its less-than-attractive features, it's been nicknamed the "Alien of Ariake." The city even made a short "horror" movie about it: tinyurl.com/ariake-alien

3 TASTE SAKE AT AMABUKI BREWERY
This beautiful brewery makes its unique-tasting sake using yeast cultivated from flowers, and rice grown in pesticide-free paddies where ducks swim freely.

4 JOIN THE BALLOON FIESTA
This annual hot-air balloon festival is held in autumn at Kasegawa Kasenshiki in Saga City, and features over 100 balloons from around the world. If you can't make the fiesta, visit the Saga Balloon Museum, opened in October 2016.