

At the start of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing. Although travelling is basically restrained internationally, and only limited possible within Japan, Nohoho will publish a series of background articles about travelling to Ishigaki and Okinawa. Rather than providing concrete suggestions for shops or companies, the articles focus largely on general, non-partisan information from a broader perspective. Hopefully, it will provide insights to those who plan to travel to Okinawa and Ishigaki once the situation allows, or to those who do manage to travel to the islands within the current situation. All information is the personal view of the author and the author underlines the importance for travellers and locals alike to follow the local guidelines against virus prevention. The second article is about the weather.

Nohoho presents...

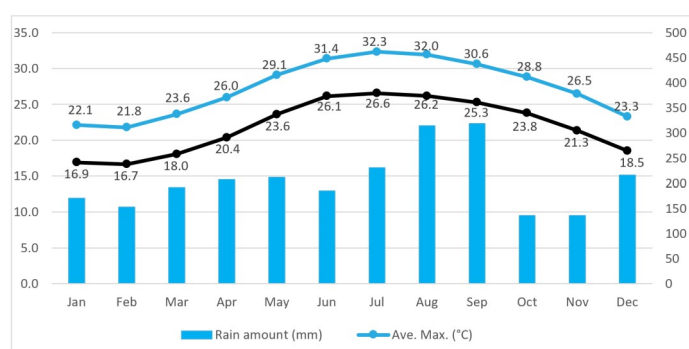
Always a perfect day - the weather in Yaeyama

A question that many travellers to Ishigaki and the other Yaeyama Islands are often asking: when is the best time to travel? A good answer will not simply refer to the month with the best weather. Rather, depending on what you intend to do on the islands, the best season for you might be slightly different. Though tourism promotion material tends to show beautiful blue skies, emerald green or perfectly blue ocean, sandy beaches, amazing sunsets, or night skies dominated by a sparkling Milky Way, you might also want to keep in mind that some days of the year are in fact pretty cloudy, rainy and windy, not to mention the occasional typhoons. Still, rest assured, even on rainy or cloudy days, the Yaeyama Islands have a lot to offer.

The Yaeyama Islands have a **subtropical climate** and most time of the year, they are indeed a tropical paradise. There are in principle four seasons, although spring is a precursor to the summer and autumn is more of an extension of it. On a warm day, a dip into the ocean will be very refreshing during these three seasons. During winter, the weather conditions are different, roughly for the months December to February. One could say that the island has basically only two seasons. Or three, that is, if you add the Okinawan season of **urizun**, a word for the season in the months of roughly February to April

for rainfall in the weather forecast are 10% or less. This rainfall is however a blessing for the island as it is vital for agriculture and the natural environment of the islands. Rainfall peaks in August and September. May and June coincide with the local rainy season, which often starts well scheduled right after the Japanese **Golden Week** holidays (End of April to May 5 depending on the calendar). However, although showers can be quite extreme, the weather in-between the showers is in general quite pleasant. The rainfall in August and September is largely due to the **typhoons** that are common in these two months. Depending on the strength of the typhoon, one might encounter extreme weather for a few days. Before and after the typhoons, there is however perfect summer weather. You just have to be lucky!

Average temperatures and rainfall in Ishigaki 2016-2020



Source: Japan Meteorological Agency, www.jma.go.jp

that is perhaps best translated as early summer. It is slightly different from 'normal' spring, as there is no awakening from a cold winter.

The combination of a subtropical climate, a surrounding ocean, and mountains that reach up to over 500 meters does not only provide the islands plenty of sunshine, but also a fair share of wind, and very often rain. On a hot summer day, a refreshing squall is quite common, even though the chances

In terms of **temperature**, it does not get really cold and days below 10 degrees in January and February are very rare. On the contrary, in summer, temperatures do go up, but thanks to the sea breeze and the green surroundings it does not get as hot as mainland Japan, as one would experience in cities like Tokyo or Osaka. Humidity does play part in the Yaeyama region and might require changing shirts several times a day. However, unlike big cities, a refreshing jump into the ocean just around the corner or a breeze will help to overcome.

So, when to travel? Diving and snorkelling can basically be done year-round, especially if you join a tour using wet suits in the colder months. From November to February, the weather may require postponing tours for several days when it gets windy. If you would like to see **manta rays**, the best season is from September to November. For exploring the **hammerhead sharks**, a famous attraction in Yonaguni island, the best season is from December to April.

Travelling in Ishigaki amid the COVID pandemic

The situation of COVID-19 and countermeasures are continuously changing. As of February 16, 2021, Okinawa Prefecture is asking restaurants and bars in Ishigaki to shorten their opening hours. Many shops, therefore, close at 20:00. Staff in your accommodation and restaurants will generally be able to inform you about the latest status when visiting restaurants, shops and other facilities in Ishigaki. Most establishments are implementing countermeasures to prevent the spread of the virus. Customers are asked to wear masks. Often body temperature is checked and people with 37.5 Celsius body temperature or above are asked to refrain from their visit. Disinfectant gels are commonly placed at the entrance.

For careless **summer fun**, the best timing is from the end of April to the first half of October. This is not only excellent timing to enjoy the **beaches**, but also good for other activities that are partially in the water such as **kayaking** or **canyoning**. The brave ones will also be able to enjoy the sea earlier or later than this period. In Japan, it is common to mark the start of the beach season, and Okinawa is kicking-off first usually on Spring Equinox Day on **March 21**, but recently there are also areas where it is held earlier. This event is called *umibiraki*, or the opening of the beach season. *Umibiraki* often is performed as part of prayers for a safe beach season. Interestingly there is no closing of the season. Beaches that offer facilities like toilets and showers often start operations following *umibiraki*.

The Yaeyama Islands also offer plenty of opportunities for **sightseeing** for which high-temperatures are not a must, or rather, lower temperatures are actually preferred. Think of exploring **Taketomi Island**, enjoying **scenic views** around the islands, or **glass boats** for those who prefer not to get wet and still want to explore marine life. Although wind might play parts, the February to April *urizun* or October and November might be better timing to do sightseeing.

This would also be good timing for casual activities like renting a **bicycle** or going for a **stroll**. For more intense exercise and activities, winter is perhaps the best season in terms of temperature such as **hiking, sports cycling, and running**. Winter also has the advantage of fewer insects and fewer chances for encounters with snakes, in particular the venomous habu snakes. Although these sports activities can be performed year-round, the summer months of July, August, September are perhaps more suitable for those training for **Iron Man**-type of events. For reference, the Yonaguni, Ishigaki, and Iriomote **marathons** are held respectively in November, January, and February. Ishigaki's **triathlon** is usually held in April.

It will be useful to consider the weather not only for daytime activities but also for excursions at night. In the evenings, the

weather conditions are important to consider, especially for those who visit the islands to explore the **night skies** of this so-called **Dark Sky Park**, a recognition from the US-based International Dark-Sky Association (IDA). The sky quality in the atmosphere above the islands and light pollution prevention measures have contributed to the recognition of the **Ishigaki Iriomote National Park** as a Dark Sky Park, the first of its kind in Japan and the second in Asia. **Stargazing** is generally favourable during the summer months when the skies are clearer. You might enjoy night skies after a typhoon has swept away all the air dust, making it crystal clear. Night skies can be viewed in the Yaeyama Island almost anywhere that is out of reach from urban light. However, especially on cloudy days, a stargazing **tour company** will be able to enhance your chances of viewing the stars, as they are most familiar with the local weather and know spots that might just have very clear skies although the rest of the islands is clouded. In summer, visitors can enjoy magnificent views of the **Milky Way**. From late December to June, the **Southern Cross** can be spotted just above the horizon. Depending on the season various constellations can be spotted; out of the 88 **constellations**, 84 present themselves in the Yaeyama skies at some point of time during the year. Should you not be lucky enough to see the night skies, tour companies will help you to explore other secrets of the nocturnal nightlife in Yaeyama, such as its rich **wildlife**. In April and May, one can furthermore enjoy the dancing of countless Yaeyama **fireflies**. The end of June and July is the season to spot the spectacular *sagaribana* **Barringtonia** flowers.

Now, not all things to do in Ishigaki are weather dependent. Explore the many restaurants for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, or some of the **bars** and other establishments for more **night-life** fun. You might just as well sleep a bit longer the morning after in case the weather is indeed bad. For more suggestions on activities on **rainy days**, check the extra textbox. No matter how bad the weather is, the islanders will continue to shine like the **sun**! It is always a **perfect day** in Yaeyama!



Sagaribana Barringtonia flowers



These are the sceneries that you won't see on promotion material and websites...



...yet some sights look actually better in the rain.



Wind...

A day on the Yaeyama Islands without wind is... basically non-existent. Usually, there is a slight breeze. On some days it can get a bit stormy, usually in the winter months when a northern wind will make you forget that you are on a tropical island. Damage is limited when there is a regular wind, but it might spoil your fun a bit. Tours, especially marine-related ones, are likely to be cancelled. Boats connecting some ports on the outer islands might be cancelled. Notorious is Uehara port on Iriomote Island. Still, here a bus connection to Ohara on the other side of the island will secure your return to Ishigaki. Yet for Hatoma Island and Hateruma Island, the existing boat services are the main lifeline for locals and tourists. In summer – apart from typhoons – it is not such a big deal, but during winter the islands might be cut off for days. Visitors who have a flight to catch from Ishigaki or a job to fulfil upon return will benefit to check with your accommodation or the ferry companies before heading to the islands. You will not be the first one to get stuck... Also, when the weather is changeable, it is better to have sufficient cash with you when you travel to the outer islands, as cashless payment options are increasing but remain more of an exception than a rule.

In a nutshell: tips for rainy days in Ishigaki and other Yaeyama islands...

- Outdoor sightseeing - this may not sound logical at first, but sceneries like the jungle of Iriomote, the mountains on Ishigaki have their charm also in the rain. Simply dress appropriately for the relevant activity!
- Indoor sightseeing is limited, but to name a few depending on your interest: Yaeyama folk museum (there are some explanations about the islands' history in English), Yaeyama Peace Memorial Museum (telling the story of the Yaeyama Islands during WWII and malaria victims as a result of the war policies), the planetarium in the ferry terminal (especially those interested in the stars), and caves.
- If handcraft is your thing, several shops offer activities such as making your own seasar guardian, pottery, glass workshops, silk dyeing, traditional minsa weaving, playing the sanshin string instrument, etc.
- Indoor activities include bowling, indoor swimming (public facility), bouldering, or a regular gym (they usually offer non-member one-time usage).
- The Ishigaki City Library is open to the public and has a section with English books, in case you have finished reading your own books, or getting fed-up with reading books on your tablet.
- Unfortunately, there is no movie theatre on the island. The Yui Theatre might have something for you, although it might be in Japanese.
- The roofed Euglena Mall and its surrounding area in down-town Ishigaki are excellent for souvenir shopping on rainy days (as well as on sunny days).
- For those staying in higher-level accommodations, stay inside, read a book (or write one in case you encounter bad weather for a few days in a row) and enjoy the service that you have paid for. A day without sightseeing or activities will give you relaxation. For those, who opt for budget accommodation: restaurants in many hotels are also serving non-staying guests.
- Talking about relaxation, the island offers several massage parlours and beauty spas. Few hotels open their large bath facilities to non-staying guests against a fee.
- Finally, driving on a rainy day! Most of Ishigaki's spots are, of course, most beautiful when it is sunny with blue skies, but spots such as the lighthouses in Hiraokubo and Sakieda will offer dynamic views also when it is windy and rainy. Roads into the forests or jungle will present a sight on rainy days that are both beautiful and mysterious. Do be careful when there is extreme rainfall as water might pill up on the street or cause landslides near hills and mountains...

Typhoons...

There is wind and then there are typhoons. To call a typhoon a storm is an understatement. For those who live in areas prone to typhoons or hurricanes, it is not difficult to imagine what it is like. For those who live elsewhere, it will at least be a fascinating experience! Typhoons combine very strong winds and significant amounts of rainfall. As a result, floods and landslides are no exception, neither are power outages nor limited connectivity for phones and the internet. The good news is, however, that unlike earthquakes, typhoons can be relatively well forecasted, and this allows the islanders to prepare when a typhoon is nearing the Yaeyama Islands. Sometimes, typhoons are created rather suddenly, though current technology generally helps to predict in advance (e.g. the site windy.com). Ahead of the typhoon, locals stock up food, drinks, and water, and prepare alternatives like portable gas stoves to secure cooking. During the typhoon, everyone knows that staying inside is the safest alternative, or occasionally, search shelter in designated locations like schools or community centres. The biggest chances for typhoons are in August and September, but since they have a flexible schedule, they might occur earlier or later. The best way to overcome a typhoon is to act like the locals and accept the situation as it is, staying inside. Staff at your accommodation facility will be able to provide you with updates and advice. If you plan to travel to the outer islands during August and September, it will be better to check before going there as well as during your stay whether typhoons are in-the-making or on their way. Boats are likely to be impacted during and after a typhoon. Air traffic is also impacted during the typhoon, but resumes fairly early, while airlines might schedule additional flights when a typhoon is approaching to get tourists who wish so to get out of the islands in time. Once a weather warning is issued, it usually implies that there are no cancellation costs for flights and hotel reservations.



MEMO

(In case this document is printed why not use the back of the last page for your comments)



Useful phrases when visiting restaurants in Ishigaki, or Japan for that sake

Entering a restaurant....

(Checking for seat availability:) There are two of us...

Futari desu ga...二人ですが・・・。

See the additional box for counting...

Do you have seats available?

Seki ga aite imasu ka.

席が空いていますか。

I am ...(name) and have a reservation

Yoyaku shimashita ... desu.

予約しました・・・です。

Is it possible to also sit outside?

Soto ni demo suwaremasu ka.

外にでも座れますか。

In the restaurant...

Excuse me!

Sumimasen!

すみません！

Do you have an English menu?

Eigo no menu ga arimasu ka?

英語のメニューがありますか。

Do you have a recommendation?

Osusume ga arimasu ka?

お勧めがありますか。

That one please! (the one the staff is mentioning)

Sore o kudasai!

それをください！

This one please!

Kore o kudasai!

これをください！

One beer please!

Biiru o hitotsu kudasai!

ビールを一つください。

I can't eat meat.

Niku ha taberaremasen.

肉は食べられません。

Where is the toilet?

Otearai ha doko desu ka?

お手洗いはどこですか。

Chatting with shop owners and other customers

I am from ...

... kara kimashita.

...から来ました。

Where are you from?

Doko kara kimashita ka.

どこから来ましたか。

Do you have another recommendation for another shop?

Hoka ni osusume no omise ga arimasu ka?

他にお勧めのおみせがありますか。

Payment

The bill please!

Okaikei o onegaishimasu!

お会計をお願いします。

Can we pay at the table?

Teberu de oshiharai dekimasu ka?

It is very common to pay at the cashier instead of the table though. Staff is likely to point in that direction.

テーブルで押し貼りできますか。

Can I use credit card?

Kaado o tsukaemasu ka?

カードを使えますか。

Other

Thank you!

Arigatou gozaimasu!

ありがとうございます。

Dailect: Niifaiyuu!

にーふあいゆー！

It was delicious.

Oishikatta desu.

美味しかったです。

Thank you for the meal.

Gochisousama deshita.

ご馳走様でした。

A standard expression to thank those who prepared and served the meal. Used at the end of the dinner or when leaving the restaurant. Also used towards the persons who pays for the bill.

Of course, you can try to use translation apps, but why not impress your hosts with a little bit of analogue show-off of your skills! Above words are just a selection. Feel free to contact Nohoho if you feel a definitely required sentence is missing!

Counting in Japanese can be quite complicated. The language has a long range of counters (e.g. two persons, three dishes etc.) and they may even change according to one's position (e.g. when talking about yourself as one person (hitori), compared to one customer (ichimei or ichimei-sama). Counters are also different for items, but fortunately there is wording that translates to one thing or item.

1 person:	hitori	ひとり	一人
2 persons:	futari	ふたり	二人
3 persons:	sannin	さんにん	三人
4 persons:	yonnin	よんにん	四人
5 persons:	gonin	ごにん	五人

Beyond this number we definitely recommend a reservation :-)

For Items'

1 hitotsu	ひとつ	一つ
2 futatsu	ふたつ	二つ
3 mitsu	みつ	三つ
4 yottsu	よつ	四つ

5 itsutu	いつつ	五つ
6 mutsu	むつつ	六つ
7 nanatsu	ななつ	七つ
8 yattsu	やつつ	やっつ
9 kokonotsu	ここのつ	九つ