

# ISLAND REPORT - Okinoerabu Island

## Ryukyu's real getaway island

**Boarding a 48 seat propeller aircraft at Naha Airport, you will already get a feeling that the destination of Okinoerabu Island in the southern part of Kagoshima Prefecture is not a tourist hotspot. The majority of the passengers seem to be travellers for work, or locals, who have done their errands in Naha, the nearest large city from Okinoerabu. Indeed, also during the short bus trip from the airport to Wadomari, one of the main settlements, the landscape looks peaceful with not too many people around.**

Travelling from Okinawa, the change of scenery stands out. The buildings have more similarities to houses on mainland Japan compared to those in rural Okinawa. Yet the subtropical vegetation, the sight of sugar cane fields and cattle in an environment, where the ocean is always close, automatically show an obvious link to the Okinawa. Although Okinoerabu is now part of Kagoshima, it is strongly connected to the prefecture located south. Together with the other Amami Islands it is part of the Ryukyu Islands chain stretching from Amami in the northeast to the Yaeyama Islands in the southwest of Japan.

Around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the island fell under the jurisdiction of the Hokuzan kingdom in northern Okinawa. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century Okinoerabu Island – also called Erabu – was absorbed into the Ryukyu Kingdom, until the invasion of the Satsuma troops in 1609. After the surrender of the Ryukyu King, Erabu and the other islands of Amami, except Iotori Island, were all put under the direct control of Satsuma in what is now part of Kagoshima. With this, influences from mainland Japan increased, but the locals have maintained many aspects of Ryukyu culture such as cuisine, music (*sanshin* string instruments or *eisa* drums), and local language. The local language is cate-

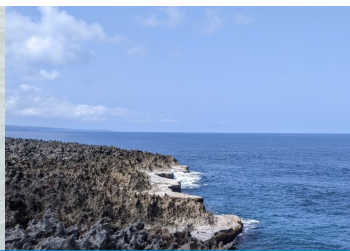
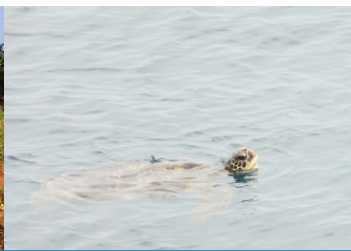
gorized as an Amami language/dialect. This is one out six Ryukyuan languages that UNESCO is identifying as endangered or critically endangered languages. The younger generation is unfortunately not very familiar with the local language, but signs or names referring to words such as *tiida* (sun) or *muni* (language) that are similar to those in the other Okinawan languages.

Observing the beautiful surroundings and breathing the fresh sea breeze, a visitor will be surprised to see so few fellow travellers. When asking the locals, the general answer is that 'Erabu is an island of agriculture'. The island is famous for its potatoes and for flowers, especially its own local Erabu or Easter Lily. Other products include vegetables and sugar cane. Calves are raised on the island and sold to supply cattle farms of the major *wagyu* black beef brands in mainland Japan.

Yet the island is not short of interesting sights and sceneries. More than 160 little bays can be counted along the coast of the island. Not all are suited for swimming due to strong currents, but they are some beaches that well fit a relaxing day including a dip into the ocean. Check with your accommodation or the locals which spots are the best!







## Introducing Okinoeraba Island...

Located in the south of Kagoshima prefecture, it is ca. 550 km south from the prefecture's capital, and ca. 200 km south from Amami Oshima as well as ca. 200 km north of Naha in Okinawa prefecture. Few flights connect the island to Kagoshima, Tokunoshima and Naha, while the island is one of the stops of the ferry that connects Kagoshima and Naha. A population of ca. 12,000 live on an area of less than 100km<sup>2</sup>. For information on access, accommodation, activities please refer to the well maintained English website [www.discoverokinoerabu.com](http://www.discoverokinoerabu.com), or the more detailed Japanese website [www.okinoerabujima.info](http://www.okinoerabujima.info).

The rough coast that is part of the Amamigunto National Park also gives amazing views from the high cliffs. At some spots, you can easily observe huge sea turtles swimming in the ocean. During the first three months of the year, humpback whales frequent the coastline. At some points, the whales are less than 200m out of the shore and visible with the naked eye.

The coast also gives amazing views on sunrises and sunsets. The super clear water with reach up to 40m makes the island an excellent location for experienced divers. Being relatively flat, cycling is one way to explore the whole island. At night, the sky is filled with stars.

One reason for the few fellow travellers could actually be that some of the main attractions of the island are under the earth, i.e. the 200 -300 limestone caves. The Shoryudo cave can be visited with normal clothing and accommodates those who look for a simple way to enjoy. Other caves require tour guides who will also provide the necessary equipment.

After a long day of exploring the island, you will be able to recover in one of restaurants offering traditional local food or Japanese and international cuisine often using local produce. Wood ear mush-

rooms and of course the potatoes, both enjoyed in different styles, are some of the local items to try out. Food may be accompanied by locally distilled *sochu* made from sugar cane. A wide variety of brands exists. Some are only available on the island.

Despite a wide variety of products, the souvenir (*omiyage* in Japanese) business is not that large. According to a bar owner, one reason is that Erabu is usually a destination that is part of island-hopping tours starting in Naha and finishing on Amami Oshima or the other way around. The visitors tend to buy their omiyage at their end destination, as they obviously don't feel like carrying a lot of luggage around during their trip. Yet the choice of unique, local products in cool designs at reasonable prices are definitely good for own use or to give away as original gifts to friends or family. The Okinoerabu Island Tourism Association office has a shop with a selection of products from the island.

Most of all, the island-hoppers probably miss out on some of the lovely sights and people of the island. The authenticity of the island is definitely worth exploring for several days or longer such as through a workcation. It will allow visitors to completely unwind. Four days, three nights was not enough for me. I'll definitely be back.



Facilities around Fucha, the eroded cave along the coast are well maintained yet without unnecessary fences as are unfortunately common at many other sites in Japan.

Okinaerabu hosts more than 160 small bays perfect for relaxing. At some, garbage bins are installed for throwing away drifted litter that visitors have found on the beach.

Ryukyu history is reflected at many sights of the island, and cuisine also has strong Okinawan influences.