

The Whimsical Isle

Niijima Native Art, by Benjamin Freedland

Once an island fortress deemed inescapable to its marooned political prisoners, beautiful Niijima is today accessible within two hours via a jet boat from Takeshiba Sanbashi Pier. While beneath the serene exterior lies an island with a turbulent history and a penchant for the weird and whimsical, it is the island's sublime beauty and relaxed pace that leaves the most lasting impression on visitors—although Niijima's oddball streak always finds a way to shine through.

Japan is an island nation *par excellence*, with over three thousand of them in all. It is therefore somewhat mystifying that, in stark contrast to, say, Greece or Indonesia, Japan is hardly a destination synonymous with islands. While this invariably has much to do with the predominance of mountains, forests, and ultramodern cityscapes among the clichéd images of Japan, there is more to it than this. Japan's far-flung islands have long been viewed with a certain disdain—shunned, exploited, and used as a dumping ground for political prisoners, other undesirables, and, even now, considered somewhat 'other.' To date, with the notable exception of Okinawa, Japan's peripheral islands are among its most overlooked tourist destinations and one of the country's best-kept secrets. But, for the traveler looking to go off the beaten path, islands such as Niijima in the Izu chain, within a stone's toss of the capital, are a wonderful escape, boasting a sublime climate, underrated beaches, and some of the friendliest, most hospitable people anywhere.

A question that is often asked about the so-called 'Izu Seven' islands is why they are referred to as the Izu 'Seven' when there are, in fact, eight main islands in the chain. (In fact there are even more than this but only eight are historically populated.) The reason for this peculiarity is that Niijima and the neighboring Shikinejima constituted a single island before a pair of tsunamis destroyed the land bridge between the two between 1688 and 1704. The island also remains as seismically active as ever, having incurred noteworthy quakes in both 1991 and 2000. Its human history, too, is riddled with turmoil. Shortly after the creation of modern-day Niijima, the island was turned into a penal colony for perpetrators of political crimes under the Edo Shogunate, a system that remained in place until 1871. Some 1,300 prisoners in all were banished to the island, many of whose descendants still live there. Even now, the island and its colorful

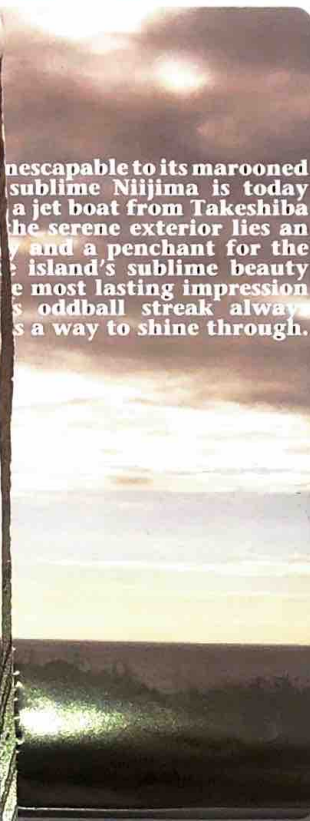
local dialect are rich with ghost lore and tragic tales of misfortune on the high seas.

Contemporary Life

While Niijima's past is characterized by hardship and woe, its modern self is considerably more ebullient. The island's primary industries are fishing, construction, *koga* (rhyolite) mining, and tourism, the latter two of which have been successfully merged in a characteristic Niijima fashion through the fashioning of the island's iconic *moyai* statues. Originally inspired by Easter Island's *moai* statues, the *moyai*—a word that at once hearkens to the *moai* and translates roughly to 'collaborative effort' in the Niijima dialect—became a local craze in the late 1970s and today number over a hundred on Moyai Hill, overlooking the Yunohana and Maehama beaches. A famous *moyai* also stands outside Tokyo's Shibuya Station, gifted to the metropolis in 1980 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Niijima's official designation as a town within Tokyo-to. While the *moyai* are the best-known manifestation of Niijima's artistry, the island is also renowned for its glass art made from the island's iconic rhyolite, a stone indigenous only to Niijima and the similarly volcanic Lipari Island in Italy. An annual glass-art festival has been a notable event on the island's calendar since 1988.

Natural Aesthetics

Aside from its obvious artistic flair, Niijima's main tourist calling cards are its physical features and laid-back island charm and hospitality. Niijima's beaches are justly legendary throughout Japan and Habushi Beach on the east coast of the island hosts a number of surfing competitions in the summer months. The island's crystalline waters also play host to water sports, including sport fishing, scuba diving, and an annual triathlon held every May. The island is also generously endowed with *onsen* (hot springs),



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the most famous being Yunohana, which features an over-the-top garish outdoor bath built in a retro-cock style on a rocky cliff and provides a spectacular sunset view over the ocean. As for hospitality, the central town area features an ample number of *minshuku* (guesthouses) and friendly hole-in-the-wall eateries with décor ranging from fine art to surfing arcana. Shrines and temples dot the island, the best known being Choei-ji, a Nichiren Buddhist temple that hosts an Exiles Cemetery where the remains of many of the island's former political prisoners lie. The Niijima Village Museum, a relatively recent addition that was completed in 1998, is fully bilingual and covers the full span of the island's human history, from the prehistory, through the penal era, to the visiting surf legends of today.

Niijima—Getting There

For an island that was once considered an inescapable fortress for the political prisoners marooned there, Niijima is remarkably easy to access from the mainland. Visitors from Tokyo have three options for accessing the island. Tokai Eisen K.K. operates a long-standing overnight ferry service to Niijima and Shikinejima, with stops at Oshima and Toshima along the way. Sailings depart from Takeshiba Sanbashi Pier at 11pm and arrive at Niijima just after 8am in the morning. A second-class berth costs ¥6,810. For those who fancy a quicker trip, Tokai Eisen also operates a jetfoil craft, which connects Niijima with Takeshiba Pier in approximately two and a half hours and at a cost of ¥10,640 per person. New Central Air Service, which operates out of Chofu Airport, provides regular passenger flights to Niijima on board its trio of Dornier Do 228 turboprop aircraft. The flight takes approximately 45 minutes and one-way air tickets cost ¥13,700 with return tickets going for ¥25,000.

