

Kanazawa

The Kyoto of the Hokuriku region.

Kanazawa, often referred to as 'little Kyoto', is a city steeped in history. The capital of Ishikawa Prefecture on Japan's main island, it is considered the cultural centre of Hokuriku.

During the Edo period (1603-1868), under the rule of the powerful Maeda clan, Kanazawa became one of the most important castle towns in Japan. As a result, its cultural achievements rivalled those of Tokyo and Kyoto. Today, it is an awe-inspiring place celebrated for its art, cuisine, architecture and culture.

One of the city's top attractions is the breathtakingly beautiful Kenrokuen Garden. Known as one of The Three Great Gardens of Japan (alongside Kairakuen in Mito and Korakuen in Okayama), it is the jewel in Kanazawa's crown. Visitors flock to walk the winding paths that circle ponds, moss-covered rockeries and groves of pine and maple trees. Even in busy periods the garden inspires a sense of peace and awe. Indeed, the name Kenrokuen means 'Garden of the Six Sublimities'. It refers to the six attributes in landscape theory that make up the perfect garden: seclusion, antiquity, abundance of water, artificial construction, spaciousness and views.

Part of Kenrokuen's allure is the dramatically different scenes it offers from season to season. In the summer the garden is lush and bursting with plant life; in autumn brilliant shocks of red from the Japanese maples dot the landscape; the snows of winter transform it into a crystalline wonderland and spring, of course, brings the blushing cherry blossoms.

Kanazawa is also famed for its atmospheric historical districts. Having escaped destruction from the World War II air raids, the city boasts impeccably preserved samurai and geisha areas. Nagamachi—the samurai district—lies at the foot of the city's (now partially restored) castle. Here, samurai and their families resided centuries ago. It is a maze of narrow, cobbled laneways, trickling canals and high mud walls behind which sit the ancient residences. Some of the homes now serve as museums offering visitors the chance to immerse themselves in the culture. Scattered throughout are numerous gardens, restaurants and cafes allowing visitors to relax and soak up the atmosphere.

Kanazawa's three *chaya* (teahouse) districts are equally as charming. Higashichaya, east of the city centre, Nishichaya to the west and Kazuemachi showcase peaceful laneways flanked on either side by traditional, Japanese, wooden shop fronts. Once upon a time, inside the numerous old teahouses, geishas would sing and dance to entertain guests.

Some of the teahouses are still in operation and are open to the public. Visitors can enjoy traditional tea ceremonies and watch geisha performances. Other preserved buildings now serve as quaint cafes, restaurants and shops selling beautiful gold-leaf products—one of Kanazawa's specialities. Nishichaya's museum gives visitors intriguing insights into the local history and offers tours of the area.

Kanazawa celebrates the modern just as much as the ancient. This is reflected in the city's streets where relics of the past blend seamlessly with splendid, opulent shopping arcades and high-rise offices. But nowhere is it more apparent than in the famous 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art. The building itself is an architectural delight with its glass-walled, UFO-like design, but inside visitors are afforded an array of unique experiences. Many works by highly acclaimed artists are hands-on and immersive. Leandro Erlich's Swimming Pool, for example, allows visitors to feel as if they are standing underwater, watching those outside.

Owing to its geography, Kanazawa enjoys a superb culinary scene. Bordered by the Sea of Japan to the west, the city has access to a wide range of fresh seafood year-round. Omicho Market is a 300-year-old fish market and a great place to sample the area's freshest fish. Referred to by locals as 'Kanazawa's Kitchen' it has a relaxed eat-as-you-go atmosphere but also offers fantastic dining opportunities in the little eateries tucked away behind the *noren* (shop curtains).

Kanazawa is a magical and culturally rich city. It offers both the beauty of Kyoto and the vibrancy of Tokyo without the crowds. Now, with a direct Shinkansen route from Tokyo, Kanazawa is easily accessible, making it an important addition to any traveller's itinerary.