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In Search of Luxury Experience in Ise-Shima, the "Soul of Japan"



The first in a series of Japan Tourism Spotlight features by JNTO looks closely at the Ise-Shima area in Mie Prefecture, with a focus on luxury travel experiences.

Home to Ise Jingu, the nation's most sacred Shinto shrine, the area offers an attractive combination of unique cultural and spiritual encounters, beautiful coastal landscapes, and local delicacies.

It is where pearl cultivation was successfully achieved for the first time in the world, and where the tradition of free diving by *Ama* (female divers) has continued for centuries, making it a region with a distinctive culture within Japan. It has also become home to super-luxury hotels that promise travelers a "once-in-a-lifetime" experience.

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1. Feel the Soul of Japan at Ise Jingu, Its Most Sacred Destination



The ultimate spiritual environment. All are welcome to enjoy the ancient natural surroundings of Ise Jingu (Ise Shrine) to purify the body and mind.

This is the soul of Japan, and visiting is an invitation to appreciate the essence of Japanese cultural heritage and sensibilities. Experience a one-of-a-kind blend of atmosphere, tradition, and architecture. Like the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, the serenity and grandeur of Ise Jingu can only be appreciated in person.

Dedicated to Amaterasu-Omikami, the sun goddess in Japanese mythology considered to be the ancestral deity of the imperial family, Ise Jingu is central to all Shinto shrines throughout the nation. The main structure features an immaculate hinoki cypress in an ancient Japanese architectural style. The shrine area in total is massive, roughly half the size of Paris city. A total of 125 shrines are here, and more than 1,500 rituals are conducted annually.



This year, the 63rd iteration of the [Shikinen Sengu ritual](#) got underway at the shrine. Every 20 years, for over 1,300 years, almost without fail other than a few periods of war, a new divine palace, identical in dimensions to the existing one, is built at an adjacent site near the main sanctuary. This grand process, which takes about eight years, involves approximately 30 ceremonies, starting with the ritual cutting of trees for the palace. Sacred apparel, furnishings, and divine treasures are remade, and the Holy Mirror, symbolizing Amaterasu-Omikami, is transferred to the new sanctuary by Jingu Shinto priests. This most important ritual, Sengyo no Gi, is scheduled for October 2033. One of the purposes of this ritual process is to hand down the special shrine carpentry skills through generations.

Private guided tours

Exclusive tours with expert guides are organized to learn about the shrine's rich history and enjoy a deeper spiritual experience.

In March, Kagura Salon began providing such tours, in which local guides — specifically trained to convey to tourists the shrine's intangible value and meanings — take visitors through the “modern version of the Ise Pilgrimage.” The tour agency offers two custom-made courses: a one-day visit to Ise Shrine and the shrine museum, and a two-day course that will also guide you through the broader Ise area to take in other local travel delights.

JTB Global Marketing & Travel Inc., which markets “BOUTIQUE JTB” VIP service targeted at wealthy travelers, has a dedicated luxury travel support service for a two-day tour of Ise Shrine

accompanied by an English-speaking tour guide/interpreter who gained firsthand knowledge from the shrine's priests. The tour includes a performance of the kagura ritual dance at the shrine, opportunities to engage with local artisans, and a special dinner by local chefs.

*Arrangements are subject to availability.

[Kagura Salon](#)
[Boutique JTB](#)

2. Indulge in the Luxury of Mie's Prized Gems of the Deep



The pearl culture industry is also one of the area's premier tourism resources. Aside from its well-known history as the birthplace of cultured pearls, you can also find carefully selected travel experiences that combine luxury, exquisite craftsmanship, and legacy.

Mikimoto Pearl Island tour: the birthplace of cultured pearls

No pearl story is complete without visiting the place that began it all: Mikimoto Pearl Island. This is where Mikimoto Kokichi succeeded in the world's first pearl cultivation in 1893. This [special private tour package](#) includes exclusive access to exhibits not open to the public, pearl harvesting, and a chance to join Ama divers and watch them dive up for pearls. Everyone visiting Ise-Shima this summer should get this package for a more focused and intimate tour experience.

[Mikimoto Pearl Island](#)

Harvesting pearls and learning pearl craftsmanship

From the sea to hands, give Ise-Shima's pearls a new home when one takes part in various pearl workshops offered in the region. Pearl Miki offers an exclusive workshop experience. Guests will have the opportunity to experience "nucleus insertion" in pearl culture. Then, they will also have the chance to harvest pearls and turn the best pearls into one-of-a-kind jewelry.

[Unique pearl jewelry experience \(Shima City Tourism Association\)](#)

3. Diverse Forms of “Once-in-Lifetime” Accommodation

Facing Ago Bay, where the pearl industry has flourished, a former pearl farm site has been transformed into a luxurious accommodation.



© Kukuda Pearl

Luxury retreat on former pearl farm site

[COVA KAKUDA](#)

COVA KAKUDA, a luxury retreat — featuring only four guestrooms in three villas on a 40,000 sq. meter site at the deep corner of one of the bay’s winding inlets — is the brainchild of Kakuda George, a third-generation owner of a family-owned pearl farming/processing/sales company, who wanted to revive the traditional ecosystem of Ago Bay, a major production base of cultured pearls.

COVA KAKUDA opened in 2023 by renovating the site used as Kakuda Pearl’s workshop until the 1970s. Each of the villas provides a spectacular view of the sea, while a central building that serves as a lobby, guest lounge, and restaurant has large windows looking out to the boat dock and egress to Ago Bay. Along with the joy of delicious meals featuring locally sourced fresh ingredients prepared by a hometown chef, the resort offers various activities for visitors to experience the local culture and environment, from sea kayaking to visits to a pearl farm and stargazing campfire.

Sustaining the “sato-umi” system key to area’s future

What prompted Kakuda George to revive his company’s former pearl farm as a private luxury resort was his worries that the rich sato-umi ecosystem of his native sea — which has benefited residents and businesses for ages — was weakening due to environmental problems and the area’s depopulation in recent years. He launched COVA KAKUDA as a model project that would hopefully bring back the sustainable cycle by helping tourists experience the local lifestyle and nature.



A key to the natural beauty of Ago Bay lies in the synergy between nature and human beings. Only through human interaction can nature get richer and share its rich benefits with people.

Ensuring sustainability is a major global theme for Kakuda’s mainstay pearl business, as well. Kakuda, who serves as the president of Japan Pearl Exporters’ Association, has long been active in industry efforts in sustainable pearl farming and preserving the natural environment that supports the pearl culture. He has also taken part in the cleanup of Ago Bay beaches by local volunteers and conducted workshops on circular economy.

Cleaning up the various tools once used in pearl farming — and are now scattered in the sea and on beaches as waste — is a pressing challenge for the local pearl industry.

Industry people and volunteer workers are organizing beach cleanup programs, and the exporters’ association led by Kakuda is also involved in the efforts because the sustainability of pearl culture is of crucial importance for the industry’s global business.

Kakuda says that global fashion brands today examine the environmental impact of their in-house production process and also that of their suppliers. For example, they demand to know what steps are being taken to cope with environmental problems in the farming of pearl-producing akoya oysters. It is a responsible business model that Japan’s pearl industry, as suppliers to those international brands, needs to follow.

(Photo courtesy of Kakuda Pearl)

The region has also seen the rise of an array of luxury accommodations — from intimate, traditional ryokans that offer an immersive cultural experience paired with modern comforts, to grand five-star hotels and artistic boutique lodgings showcasing innovative designs. Here are more of those luxurious accommodations.



Luxury modern ryokan style

[Amanemu](#)

One of only six three-star Michelin Key Hotels in Japan, Amanemu is a luxury ryokan-inspired onsen resort located in the heart of Ise Shima National Park, making it a sanctuary for escapism. The focus is the connection to nature and the genuine celebration of local culture. All rooms have private natural hot springs with views of the rich natural

environment. Ago Bay's complex structure, combined with the lush greenery of the islands and the deep blue sea, creates stunning and picturesque scenery.



Private retreat with only 20 rooms

[Ryokan Basaratei](#)

With only 20 rooms, this is a private retreat with luxury. In contrast to the other hotels in the area that hosted international events, serenity can be experienced here. The guest rooms showcase the beauty of wooden architecture, each having a private onsen bath. There are also spacious villa-type suites that offer magnificent views of the Ago Bay

seascape. Even though the Ise-Shima area has so much to see and explore, just staying at the hotel and enjoying the view of the islands in the bay is already a one-of-a-kind experience.

4. Explore the Depths of Tradition with Ama Divers



©Mikimoto Pearl Island

Shima and Toba are home to the largest population of Ama divers in Japan. They keep up the centuries-old practice — dating back at least to the 8th century, when they were mentioned in the renowned Manyoshu poetry compilation — of deep-diving without using modern equipment. In this form of sustainable fishing, the divers take care not to catch too much to preserve the limited maritime resources.

Ama huts are small structures where Ama divers stay to take a break during work. Several huts offer an “Ama hut experience,” a rare opportunity for tourists to mingle with Ama divers and enjoy seafood they have cooked themselves. Visitors will find the huts the best place to find and talk to a real Ama.

[Ama Hut Hachiman](#)

[Ama hut SATOUMI-AN](#)

Learning the ways of Ama divers

Those looking for adventure without compromising comfort may find the Ama Adventure Tour appealing. Kaito Yumin Club offers a unique experience where participants can learn the traditional ways of Ama divers. An Ama diver will accompany the group and demonstrate age-old fishing techniques. Guests wade in the shallows on an uninhabited island to learn how to use the gear and identify shellfish underwater. Then it's time for the challenge to dive and catch sea urchins like a real Ama.



©Kaito Yumin Club

[Kaito Yumin Club](#)

Grandma diver seeks to keep the Ama culture alive



Nomura Reiko, founder of Ama Hut Hachiman, started diving at age 14 and was active as an Ama diver until she turned 80. Now in her 90s, Nomura primarily welcomes and talks with guests in the Ama hut.

Born into the area's coastal community with the highest concentration of Ama divers, and to a mother who was also an Ama, Nomura says she "never doubted" that she would follow in her mother's footsteps. After her husband died young when she was 42, Nomura had to take over the family's construction business — while also keeping up the diver's job — as she raised her three children.

Until Nomura and her son Kazuhiro started accepting tourists to the Ama hut used by her and her colleagues in 2004, men were generally forbidden from entering these facilities. What prompted them to open the hut to tourists was a request from the Toba city office, which was looking for Ama-related facilities that could accept tour groups from overseas.

They complied, thinking that accepting tourists would help people learn more about Ama's way of life. The Ama hut has since grown into a popular tourist destination, attracting thousands of visitors each year from across Japan and abroad. Nomura is credited with opening the Ama divers' huts to visitors for the first time, thus allowing people at large to have firsthand experience of the Ama culture.

Nomura says she gets energized through interaction with visitors to her hut, where more than a dozen active divers currently work. For the tourists, it must be an inspiring experience to meet and chat with powerful women like Nomura.

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