

• Day 3 •

Sado Island, Saké Island

If weather allows, start your day early with a boat excursion to Sado, a remote island off the coast of Niigata. By jet foil, the port of Ryotsu is just an hour away from Niigata City.

Sado is a collection of sleepy farming and fishing villages with a dwindling local population, but the island has a checkered past. It was once an exile for political prisoners, and also a bustling gold-mining town.

Its saké industry, supported by local rice grown on terraces along the mountainous terrain, remains vibrant. The island is deceptively large, so buses, taxis or rental cars are key to getting around.

There are seven breweries on the island, two of which offer tours and tastings to the public. **Obata Brewery**, founded in 1892, is renowned for its delicate Manotsuru-brand saké.

Its top bottling is a vintage 1998 *daiginjo* (a superpremium saké made from highly milled rice) matured in bottle in the depths of the nearby Sado Kinzan, or goldmines. Aged slowly in darkness at cold, constant temperatures, it displays depth and complexity unusual to most *daiginjo*-style sakés.

Hokusetsu Brewery, on the remote eastern side of the island, is another worthwhile visit. Hokusetsu, which started production in 1886, has a fan in celebrity chef Nobu Matsuhisa, who commissioned the brewery to produce his restaurant's line of saké.

Hokusetsu prides itself on using only Sado rice grown with minimal pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

To experience the best of modern Japanese-style luxury, check into **Yahatakan**—a pristine ryokan offering both scenic rotenburo and impeccable dining. The tatami-floored rooms are unusually spacious and feature state-of-the-art massage chairs (heavenly after a long bath).

For dinner, enjoy a feast of seasonal seafood—local delicacies like *buri* (amberjack) from the icy waters of Ryotsu Harbor, and the small, flavorful oysters from nearby Mano Harbor and Lake Kamo.



This page, clockwise from top: Geothermal hot springs warm up snowy winter nights in Niigata; Takeshi Hirashima left a career in journalism to operate his wife's family business, Obata Brewery; Sado's scenic shoreline; Rumiko Obata (Hirashima's wife), fifth generation co-owner of Obata Brewery; seaweed harvest on Sado Island.

