

Miyako Island and the Miyako Islands: Highly Transparent Ocean and Stunning Coastal Scenery



Miyako Island and the Miyako group of seven islands in its vicinity are located in the South China Sea 290 km to the southwest of the main island of Okinawa. Five of the islands in this cluster are connected by sea bridges, so the flow of traffic among them has become easy. Irabu Bridge, which opened in 2015, has greatly changed the complexion of Irabu and Shimoji islands, which it links to Miyako Island. A private airline company now operates regular flights to and from Shimojishima Airport, which used to be a pilot training facility, and numerous hotels and other accommodation facilities have opened on the two islands. Apparently even more are under construction or being planned. Miyako Island itself has seen the number of visitors increase year by year. In the peak summer season it gets more than 110,000 visitors a month, which is more than three times the figures for five years ago. A quay being constructed by Carnival Corporation is scheduled to be completed in 2020, after which 140,000-ton-class cruise ships will be able to dock there. Miyako has a shortage of hotels, and the hotel construction rush seems to be pushing up land prices on the island.

One of the reasons for the popularity of Miyako Island is the beautiful ocean. There are

no rivers on Miyako, so no impurities flow into the sea. A visit to the island reveals that the coast is indeed very beautiful---a rank higher than even the other islands of Okinawa. Visitors can enjoy scenery that really has been sculpted by nature. You have, for example, not only white sandy beaches but also a seashore landscape that changes constantly as the sand is moved en masse every time a typhoon comes and a cape surrounded by rocks and stones swept up by tsunami.

Here I would like to introduce the beaches and other features of Miyako and the Miyako Islands.



Miyako Island (Video: <https://youtu.be/kH80wvF1fI>)



Sunayama Beach

Sunayama Beach is situated in the northwest of Miyako Island, about seven or eight minutes' drive from the urban area of Hirara. From the carpark, which also has showers and toilets, you follow a narrow path and then go down a wide slope covered with sand, which leads to the beach. To the left is a rock arch, which creates a rather unique spectacle. The beach itself is not so large, but the beautiful shoreline and lapping waves are enough to make you feel as if you were in another world. The space draws you in and makes you forget the passage of time.

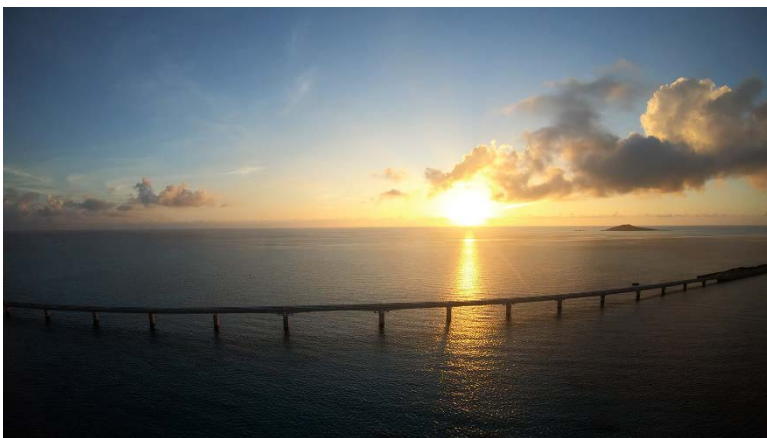


Sunayama Beach (Video: https://youtu.be/X8Ln3q9TH_k)



Ikema Bridge

Ikema Island lies to the north of Miyako, and the two islands are connected by the 1,425-m-long Ikema Bridge. One early summer morning I flew a drone to try and catch the sunrise. A drone has to be more than 30 m away from any means of transportation, so I flew mine from a spot some distance away. Gradually it framed the scenery: Ikema Bridge in the foreground, the beautiful triangular-shaped Ogami Island just beyond, and the rising sun. It gave me a magnificent view of the Miyako seascape.



Ikema Bridge (Video: <https://youtu.be/9U5ShWmByR8>)



Sugarcane Fields

Miyako Island grows the most sugarcane in Okinawa. Sugarcane is considered to be valuable as sugar and livestock fodder. When you drive through the countryside, you frequently see sugarcane fields that seem to stretch as far as the eye can see. Sugarcane plants are tall, and the sight of them swaying in the wind somehow puts you in a carefree mood. I flew a drone from the corner of one sugarcane field. Here and there between the

fields I could see houses---maybe farmhouses. The contrast with the threadlike roads was beautiful. It was a typical Okinawan scene.

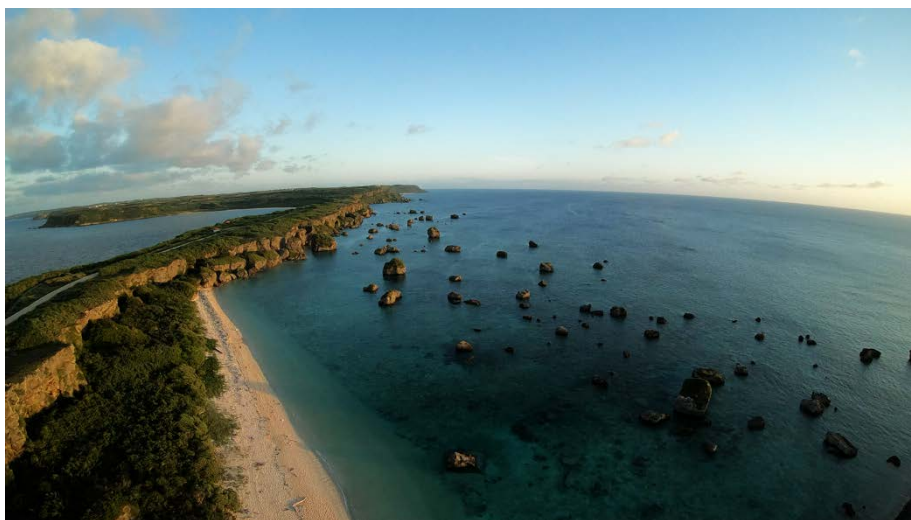


Sugarcane Fields (Video: <https://youtu.be/gbfGKM3NeKo>)



Cape Higashi-Hennazaki

Cape Higashi-Hennazaki is a small peninsula jutting out into the sea at the southeastern tip of Miyako Island. It is 2 km long, 150 m wide, and rises 20 m above sea level. The peninsula is surrounded by numerous large rocks that were swept up by tsunami in the past. It is a nationally designated place of scenic beauty. The cape can be reached in about 40 minutes by car from central Hirara. It is also a popular spot for viewing the sunrise, and many people visit in the semidarkness of early morning. There were a lot of sightseers on the day when I visited too, and especially a lot of young women. Maybe they get a feeling of romance in the southern islands. When the sun rose and shone down on the peninsula, shadows appeared on the rocks in the sea, creating a beautiful contrast. You can also walk from the carpark to the lighthouse at the end of the cape.



Cape Higashi-Hennazaki (Video: <https://youtu.be/913lKqfNHss>)

Ingar Marine Garden Park

The Ingar Marine Garden seaside park is located in the southern part of Miyako Island adjacent to the sprawling Shigira Resort, which includes several hotels, hot springs, a golf course, and other facilities. Utilizing a natural inlet, the park has a promenade enabling visitors to view Miyako's beautiful sea, fish, and other creatures. If you walk a little along the promenade in the corner of the park, the open sea comes into view. It was the most beautifully transparent sea I have ever seen. Probably because of the surrounding reefs, I felt as if I could see the quiet flow of the current right to the bottom of the ocean.



Ingar Marine Garden Park (Video: https://youtu.be/sD_oBrxCLIU)



Nagamahama Beach

To the southwest of Miyako Island, and connected by Kurima Bridge, Kurima is a small island with a population of 160 or so people. Just beyond the tiny hamlet, sugarcane fields spread out, and farm roads twist and turn like a maze. About five minutes' drive from the hamlet, you arrive at the entrance to Nagamahama Beach. The road is not paved here, and the carpark, just a cutting in the thicket really, only has room for about five cars. Nagamahama Beach is famous for its changing scenery, which is different every time you visit. Whenever a typhoon comes, it moves the sand and greatly alters the beach's appearance. It changes with the ebb and flow of the tide as well. I have visited the beach about five times, and for the first two or three times it was so different, I thought I had come to the wrong beach. On this day, luck was on my side, as Nagamahama Beach appeared even more beautiful than ever.



Nagamahama Beach (Video: <https://youtu.be/7RldJ5te9oo>)



Yonaha Maehama Beach

Known to the locals as just “Maehama,” Yonaha Maehama Beach has been chosen as the best of the top 10 beaches in Japan. It is indeed a beautiful beach representative of Miyako and Okinawa. The beach has a carpark, showers, toilets, and also a restaurant, so there is a bit of a resort-like atmosphere to the place. The white sand stretches for 7 km, and there are high-class resort hotels nearby. You can also see Kurima Bridge, and the contrast between the white sand and the cobalt-blue ocean is your typical image of a tropical land.



Yonaha Maehama Beach (Video: <https://youtu.be/FmNwas9tqoc>)



Toguchi Beach

Opened in 2015, Irabu Bridge is the longest toll-free bridge in Japan, with a total length of 3,540 m. Toguchi no Hama Beach lies right at the connecting point between Irabu and

Shimoji islands, which are linked by land. In contrast to the showy image of Yonaha Maehama Beach on Miyako Island, this is a quiet, modest beach. It still gets few visitors, so there is plenty of room on the spacious shore. Since the opening of Irabu Bridge, however, the rush to construct hotels and other real estate has begun, so perhaps it is only a matter of time before crowds descend on this area as well.



Toguchi Beach (Video: <https://youtu.be/TWCbg2a4goI>)



Hirara

In the past Hirara was the central city of Miyako Island, but in 2005 there was a merger of neighboring municipalities creating the city of Miyakojima. People who have lived on the island for a long time still seem to call the area “Taira,” the colloquial reading of the characters. Today Hirara is simply the name of a district, but the area remains the center of Miyako Island. The center of Hirara has many hotels and restaurants and is crowded with tourists.



Hirara (Video: <https://youtu.be/2tvAabrHHbU>)



Miyako Island

These days Miyako Island is facing turbulent times. The number of visitors has increased, and the number of tourists from overseas in particular has doubled, creating a shortage of hotels and rental cars. Land prices are soaring. To construct hotels, it is necessary to ensure accommodation for construction workers, but there is not enough rental housing on the island even for local residents. Compared with five years ago, when I visited for the first time, the atmosphere has clearly changed. The leisurely tropical island seems to be turning into a volatile place. I only hope that the beautiful coastline remains unchanged.

Photos and text: Arata Matsumoto, Sharata and Advise, Inc. (<http://sharata.info/>)

(Sharata supplies 4K videos of outstanding scenery in Japan so that as many people as possible can enjoy it.)